

## **Written Text to the Podcast “Dachau Trials” by Bernat Lleixa, August 2021**

### **Part of the I\_remember – digital lab of remembrance 2021**

Hi everyone and welcome to the podcast about the Dachau Trials, created by the team of the International Youth Meeting Dachau. During the following minutes I will share with you the main aspects and characteristics of the Dachau Trials, which, though you might guess what they were, I am sure that you will realize that you knew pretty more information about the Nuremberg Trials than the ones that took place in Dachau. Keep listening and discover what we have prepared for you: there we go with the podcast about the Dachau trials!

When the Second World War was over, the countries that had won the conflict wanted to judge and prosecute all those citizens that had been involved or had collaborated with the commitment of crimes during the war. The case of Germany is the one in which the prosecution and efforts to reinstate justice were bigger. The German territory had been divided into four regions, one for each winner-country (Soviet Union, United States, France and United Kingdom) and every state decided to implement its own methods in each area. In the case of Dachau (located in the German part under US authorities), military courts were created to prosecute those involved in crimes that had occurred, mainly, in the concentration camp of Dachau and the subcamps that depended on it. The first trial started in Dachau the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1945 and its sentence was published on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 1945, some time before the beginning of the Nuremberg Trials. It was the first set of trials in the American area. In fact, some following processes followed the model of the Trials that took place in Dachau.

The general information that we know about Dachau Trials is the following: they were held between November 1945 and August 1948; the Trials included 489 processes in which 1.672 people resulted accused of one (or some) of the following crimes: war crimes, abuse or murder of civilians or American troops, as well as other troops of US allied countries. A 32-years-old US army lawyer, William Denson, was the Dachau Military Tribunal's Chief Prosecutor.

The set of trials included processes judging not only crimes committed in different concentration camps, but also massacres and war crimes committed by the German military forces during the War. One example of the second category is the Malmedy Process, which we will describe later. Another categorization we can draw from the Trials is the distinction between accused people into three categories: guards and agents of the SS; doctors of the SS; and Kapos.

It is interesting to focus our attention on this last distinction, mainly because the sort of crimes committed by each category is slightly different and helps us understand the profile of every category of perpetrator, as well as discovering some other specific principle or characteristic of them. So we start analysing the SS guards or agents. Looking at statistics, we know that an important number of prosecuted during Dachau Trials were or had been SS guards in Dachau or one of its subsidiary concentration camps. In fact, during the first processes (1945-1946), 85% of the accused could be classified into this category. All of them were considered guilty by the sentence, which included jail, life sentence or death penalty.

Into this category we find soldiers that had responsibilities and other SS guards under their authority and SS agents with no one under their authority. Depending on their position and the crimes they were charged with, they prepared different types of defence in the trials. The ones with less responsibility argued that they had been forced to enter the SS and that the bad labour market situation had given them no other choice than to work in the concentration camps. They argued, too, that they just obeyed what their bosses and supervisors commanded. Another strategy, which was also used by them, but mainly by accused SS members with some authority, consisted in the refusal of what had been explained by eyewitnesses and victims. So, through denial, delegation of

responsibility and victimization they expected to move away from their pity. However, in some cases they were just showing the opposite: some stories accounted by concentration camp interns were undeniable, and their reaffirmed Nazi values did not show an involuntary enrolment in the SS.

As Gabriele Hammermann affirms, “their acts of excess could rather be explained with their strong ideologization, close ties to the commanding officers, group cohesion, a pronounced command-receiving mentality and authority and an increasingly reduced sense of personal responsibility and a pronounced career mentality”, which at all could be considered as mitigating circumstances by the military tribunal.

The second category of accused is the one that includes SS doctors and researchers. In the concentration camp of Dachau there was, like in other concentration camps, a sort of building for ill prisoners. However, this place was not designed just to help prisoners; there were other dark purposes. As said by Michael Bryant: “Concentration camp medicine served four different purposes: (1<sup>st</sup>) to ‘select’ incapacitated patients to exterminate them; (2<sup>nd</sup>) physical abuse and torture of the prisoners under the camp’s disciplinary system; (3<sup>rd</sup>) to supervise executions and (4<sup>th</sup>) to kill patients themselves. (...) A 5<sup>th</sup> purpose could be added: the abuse of prisoners as ‘guinea pigs’ for medical experiments.” We could dedicate a whole podcast or series of podcasts about the kind of experiments. We’ll just say that we can find from some strange epidemics spread in some parts of the concentration camp to the proof of human resistance under water or other adverse conditions. Every case is completely out of any bioethical frame. Some of these doctors were condemned to death penalty.

The third group of accused, the one formed by Kapos, is also present in other trials. A ‘Kapo’ was a prisoner that had become a supervisor in the concentration camp and had some degree of authority over the rest of prisoners. In the Dachau Trials the processes against Kapos took place at the end. Just one was condemned to the death penalty, but others were condemned to jail.

Referring to the three groups of accused, we have focused our attention on the Dachau camp trials. However, the Dachau Trials included other processes: the trials focused on the concentration camps of Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, Buchenwald, etc. and, among others, the previously mentioned Malmedy-Process. Its goal was to depart justice to the 84 American prisoners of war massacred in Malmedy (Belgium), during the Battle of the Bulge, in the Western Front in December 1944. This process took place between 16<sup>th</sup> of May and 16<sup>th</sup> of July. Of 73 soldiers judged, 43 were condemned to the death penalty and 30 let free.

All in all, and just to sum up what I’ve been commenting until now: the Dachau Trials is a wide set of Trials that took place in the city of Dachau between 1945 and 1948. It included 489 processes: some were related to the concentration camp of Dachau and some others to other concentration camps or war crimes, though the military court decided to start them in Dachau, too. All kind of perpetrators and collaborators in the war and Nazi crimes were judged, although at the end of the processes, and due to the configuration of the Cold War, the sentences became softer or in some cases commuted. The extent of the Dachau Trials has usually been replaced by other important trials like the Nurnberg ones, but it is important to remember that they existed, how they were developed and that they were the first ones in German territory under US authority.

With this information I say goodbye to all of you now. It has been a pleasure to share with you the research we have done regarding the Dachau Trials. We hope that this podcast helps to increase your interest in the topic; at least it has done so to us, and that is why in the coming editions of the International Youth Meeting we may offer more activities related to this topic. Before finishing, I would like to thank the rest of the team and especially Steffi and Catharina for their work and

support, and everyone that makes the International Youth Meeting -whether virtual or face-to-face- possible. Thank you and see you soon!