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Daily Life in Bergen-Belsen: Abel J. Herzberg’s Important Diary

Jack Santcross has recently translated Abel J. Herzberg’s diary from Dutch into English. Herzberg was a prisoner in Bergen-Belsen from 11 January 1944 (when he arrived on a transport from Westerbork) to 10 April 1945; fascinatingly, the translator arrived on the same transport and also left Bergen-Belsen on the same day as Herzberg. Because Santcross was interned in the same camp as Herzberg, he possessed special insight into the diary as he translated it.

Abel Herzberg was a lawyer and a writer (in 1974 he received the Dutch prize for literature); his excellent education and writing ability account for the high quality of this diary, which is very insightful, thought-provoking, and analytical. Herzberg’s diary is valuable because it provides a descriptive account of daily life in Bergen-Belsen from 11 August 1944 (when he began the diary) to 26 April 1945. He secretly maintained this diary during his internment in the concentration camp. This fact distinguishes his book from those of other diarists who wrote their histories after their liberation. Herzberg’s work possesses a sense of immediacy that the other diaries (excellent as they are) do not contain. Herzberg writes about actions as they happen! For instance, this Bergen-Belsen prisoner writes about a sudden general roll call, and he, along with other inmates, ponders about the situation. Some speculate about a transport; others hope for an extra ration of cheese; optimists predict that the war has ended. But few answers are to be found. Herzberg learns that the roll call has occurred because a prisoner has been sentenced to four weeks in the bunker for stealing shoes from the warehouse. The confusion of the prisoners is illuminating, for it manifests the lack of information in the camps, how the Nazis skillfully empowered themselves and simultaneously weakened the Jews by keeping them ignorant regarding what was happening.

Herzberg discusses the concomitant proliferation of rumors in Bergen-Belsen and the unreliability of many of them. Some prisoners continuously circulate rumors about the end of the war and their impending liberation. Realizing that the quality of his diary would suffer if he revised it after his liberation, Herzberg refrained from making any alterations; the reader, therefore, learns what goes on in the mind of a concentration camp prisoner as he endures his manifold hardships and as he witnesses atrocities inflicted upon other inmates.

The diarist manifests to the reader the inmates’ preoccupation with food, which was inevitable considering the meager portions of soup, turnip, onions, carrots, bread, and jam that the prisoners received. Herzberg often emphasizes his points by employing repetition. For instance, he says, “The food is abominable. Turnips, with I know not what kind of leaf. Everything is underdone and unpalatable. We struggle through it courageously. An hour after we have eaten, we are hungry again—hunger” (p. 8).

Herzberg does not merely provide descriptions of life in Bergen-Belsen; he also includes insightful commentary and analysis. He talks movingly and poignantly about the deaths of the elderly prisoners who live in the
Altersheim (old people’s home) and the indifference of
the huge Nazi guard who yells at the Jews who place
the dead bodies from the Altersheim into coffins and re-
move them. In this instance, and throughout the book,
Herzberg juxtaposes the suffering of the Jews and the
cruelty of the Nazis—which accounts in part for the ti-
tle, Between Two Streams. Herzberg also discusses in
great depth the Jewish Judicial Council that existed in
Bergen-Belsen. The diarist tells of prisoners stealing
bread from one another and physically attacking one
another. Herzberg’s despair and bitterness in Bergen-
Belsen is compounded by the fact that he and his wife
(Thea) were originally privileged Jews (there were 172
of them) who were placed in the “Sternlager”—the bar-
racks in the camp where inmates were treated well and
spared from work because they were supposed to be ex-
changed for German civilians and relocated to Palestine.
For some reason that Herzberg never discovered, they
were removed from the Sternlager after five weeks and
transformed into regular prisoners. But despite his de-
spair and his questioning of his faith, Herzberg realizes
that he must be grateful that he is still alive. He remarks
at one point, “One will hardly know life if one has not ex-
perienced what we have experienced this morning: the
transportation of 120 Jews from this misery to another
misery, a misery of which nothing is known except that
it is greater than ours” (p. 140). On a few occasions, the
diarist manifests how death affects the lives of the other
prisoners. He mentions that after a prisoner in the camp
dies, others desire his trousers, glasses, and so on (p. 151).
Although Herzberg describes their actions, he is careful
not to judge his fellow prisoners because the conditions
in Bergen-Belsen are so atrocious and the people are so
desperate.

Abel J. Herzberg’s diary is very powerful and illumi-
nating, a significant book for anyone interesting in life in
Bergen-Belsen. But the book teaches the reader a great
deal about daily life in any given concentration camp. Be-
tween Two Streams also provides valuable insight into the
state-of-mind of the inmates, how they dealt with adver-
sity and hardships. It is straightforward, informative, and
provocative.

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