



CAUTION

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Former SMC Professor Shares Memories from Dachau

By Jennifer Wake

More than 100 people gathered in the Saint Mary's College Library on May 1 as part of Holocaust Remembrance Day to listen to former SMC professor Chester Aaron discuss his participation in the liberation of Dachau in 1945.

Dachau was one of the first concentration camps opened by the Nazis during World War II, and served as a prototype for other concentration camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka. From 1933 to 1945, Dachau housed more than 200,000 prisoners. Nearly 36,000 prisoners died in the camp and its sub-camps, yet Aaron noted that since these were only the recorded figures, the actual number is likely much higher.

In 1945, Aaron and his fellow American soldiers came upon Dachau through a gray haze caused by the smoke from burning bodies. The overwhelming odor sickened soldiers as they made their way to the camp.

"I was standing among 10 men, the stench from the smoke burned my eyes and I was vomiting," Aaron said. "Bodies were still burning, bodies and body fragments had been tossed into box cars. They were stuffing them in to be hidden. Body parts were strewn everywhere – arms, legs, heads."

He recalled how the tanks from the 45th Division breached the gates and how American soldiers, so sickened by what they were seeing, killed German guards who were trying to surrender. "As Germans fought and died, other Americans opened the cells," Aaron

recalled. "One friend led a group of soldiers to a barracks and killed all but the head of the SS."

The SS Leader was brought out to the square where he was beaten by prisoners "until his head was mush."

When some order was established, Aaron tried to help.

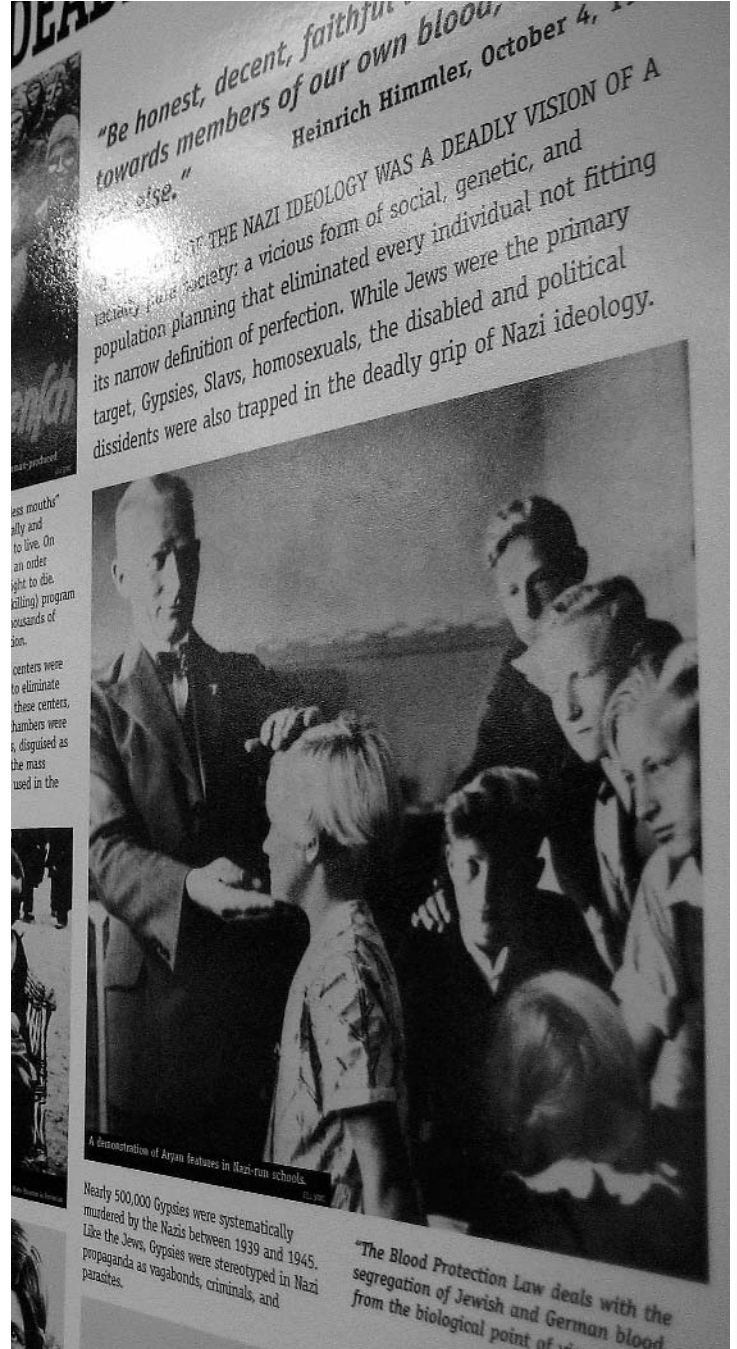
"I spoon fed a girl a bit of rations, and she stared at me as if she forgot how to swallow," said Aaron, his voice cracking as talked. "She swallowed once, twice, then vomited and collapsed. A medic screamed at me that I could have killed the girl by feeding her food."

Although he took photos of that day at Dachau, Aaron said he rarely thought of it for more than 56 years. Then, six years ago, as he was sorting through old paperwork and trying to "get his life in order," he stumbled across the photographs of Americans hauling bodies and body fragments. All of the memories of that day came flooding back.

Although an author of 20 books, prior to that day Aaron had only written one book involving the Holocaust: "Gideon" (1983 Scholastic).

The provocation to write Gideon came from his students. "Their only reference to the Germans and Nazis was from the sitcom, Hogan's Heroes. I knew I had to write a novel about the Holocaust, and it had to be for high school students."

Aaron, 85, says he now dreams about Dachau every night and writes almost exclusively about Dachau. "Everything else is insignificant."



The Saint Mary's College Library is hosting a Holocaust exhibit through mid-May

Photo Jennifer Wake