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Looking Back at a Visit to Berchtesgaden

On April 29, Dr. James F. Rybka interviewed Dr. Ted Rulison at his home in Cameron Park, for background on his 1937 trip to Berchtesgaden, and his photos taken at the end of World War II.

JR: I read over once more, your diary, which was, in fact, written just when you experienced it in 1937 and it has not been modified since, is that correct?

TR: No, that's the good thing about it; I did not do any editorializing of what I wrote in 1937.

JR: Although I'm sure you did not realize it, you were stepping in front of a man who shaped the destiny of so many people in years to come, in fact, we are still not finished with it. Just to recapitulate, I believe you were in medical school at Harvard at the time, and you were taking a summer vacation?

TR: Yes

JR: And you had read about some fellow who wrote up an article in the National Geographic magazine about how he had done a solo-navigation up the Rhine -

TR: The Danube. He went down the Danube all the way to the Black Sea.

Two years before this, in 1935, I had taken a short kayak trip down the Mosel River. So I decided that I wanted to follow this man's - well, I won't say "footsteps" - but his "paddle trip," and go on down the Danube myself. And I started from Salzburg with the Salzach River, which then joins the Inn, and on down to Passau (Germany), where it enters the Danube, and then on to the Black Sea.

JR: And you had an inflatable boat, did you?

TR: You put it together; it was a collapsible boat - very handy, too! You could just throw it into the baggage car and when you get to the river, you just put the boat together and start paddling.

JR: Did you buy the boat in Europe or did you..."

TR: Yeah, I bought it in Munich. It's called a "faltboot," made by the Klepper company. They're quite famous, and they still make them.

JR: I remember myself how those long, 2-month summer vacations we had in medical school invited wanderlust. We looked towards our future and suddenly realized how limited our free time would be during residency, and thereafter in medical practice, so we wanted to make the most of them.

Now you had been in Bavaria before you crossed into Austria at Salzburg so you saw some of the changes that the Nazis had instilled. But at that time, from my reading of it, Hitler then was not nearly considered the villain that he was subsequently. He had just staged the Olympics in Berlin in 1936. There were a significant number of intelligent people (outside Germany) who sided with Germany's efforts to emerge. Am I correct at that, or was he already considered the enemy of the world?

TR: No, anything but. In Germany, he was truly a hero because he had rescued his country from post World War I depression, inflation - enormous inflation - and unemployment. The country had been in desperate condition after World War I and he had brought it back into full prosperity. Everybody had a job. He said that if anybody begs for money it's phony because everybody had a job.

JR: What were some of your impressions as you went through Bavaria before you met him? I imagine that you saw a great groundswell of support for his party, and you also saw the ugly anti-Semitic propaganda going on - maybe military marches?

TR: No. The only two things I remember as being anti-Semitic were some signs outside some of the villages that said, "Jews are not wanted here." And Goebbels' anti-Semitic propaganda which had horrible cartoons of a Jewish profile - you know, a big nose with hairs growing out of it and articles that were very inflammatory. But that was Goebbels' propaganda machinery putting this stuff out.

JR: As you say in your diary, you were not allowed to take any pictures, so when did you capture these photos?

TR: It was eight years later in 1945 towards the end of World War II and we were allowed to take little runs like overnight from where we were. Our hospital (the Sacramento-based, 51st Evacuation Hospital) had been deactivated at that time, and we were waiting for a new location. We had been in the little village of Welzheim, but then moved to the upper floors of the Robert Bosch Krankenhaus in Stuttgart for about a month before the whole hospital was deactivated and sent home, but I was not. I was sent across the river to the 216th General Hospital in Bad Canstadt, and I spent my last month there before I came home. During the time we were active in Welzheim, we were allowed to take these little excursions, and on one of these we went down to Berchtesgaden for an overnight trip, and we were able to see what remained of this mountain getaway that Hitler had lived in for all these years that he was active in office.

JR: Were you wearing a uniform as you visited?

TR: Yes, I was still in the service.

JR: A picture of the guard shows an American GI who is standing on a white board guarding what looks like the shell of what was Hitler's mansion. There is a tree behind him, and that is about the only vegetation that you see on that whole campus which has been all destroyed, I guess, by bombs.

TR: This path behind him is the one that Hitler came down, and in this picture [of Hitler's home] here is the path that I walked down; so he stood here and I walked passed him.

JR: Yes, you can see the meeting of the two paths, one of which serves as Hitler's driveway, going up to his house.

Several times you described Hitler as a "little man" and, I imagine, that from your perspective, that was true because you were over 6 feet tall. But I looked it up and Hitler measured 5 feet 9, which is my height, and he weighed about 175 pounds. I guess he was surrounded by military guards and other big

guys so that they did not help to magnify his own height. When you saw him, he was the only one dressed as a civilian, right?

TR: Yes. He was dressed in a double-breasted, grey flannel suit, and I guess maybe that the double-breasted suit made him look wider and shorter. And then he had a Fedora on which did not add to the impression of his height.

JR: You said that there was a big crowd there, perhaps 500 or so, and these were mostly German citizens?

TR: I assume that they all were.

JR: You say it was fairly tightly controlled by guards. They wanted you to keep moving,

TR: Yes

JR: But he did make some gestures when meeting the children. Otherwise, he carried on no conversations.

TR: Yes.

JR: Did you know of others also living at the compound, like Eva Braun, or Goebbels?

TR: On the hills surrounding. In one picture of the bombed out SS barracks, you can see homes up there on the hill - that was where the other government functionaries, like Himmler, Goebbels and Göring had homes.

And you can see that those have been destroyed too.

JR: The interior of Hitler's house was all burned out?

TR: Yes.

JR: Did you go in it?

TR: Yes. I have one picture taken from what might look like the living room. It was a huge room and had an enormous window looking out over the valley. I don't remember anything that was left of the interior. Now we went through the house itself.

JR: Was there a bunker, or a cellar attached to it which he could have used for hiding?

TR: I'm sure that there must have been, although we stayed only on the main floor, the one floor you see in the picture here.

JR: In 1945 when you returned there, do you remember anything about the attitude of the Germans towards the Americans?

TR: You must realize that we had a "no fraternization" policy, so we had very little contact with the Germans. I did act as interpreter at times for our colonel at the little village of Welzheim near our setup, but we had very little association with the Germans.

Our hospital was located in a field of hay, and during the season after the grass grew, the farmers came out from Welzheim and harvested the grass around our tents, but we really had no social contacts with them.

JR: To continue with your own odyssey in 1937, you left Salzburg and reached the Danube. Then how far down the Danube did you get?

TR: Budapest..

[Dr. Rulison met a group of about eight Hungarian boys also navigating on the river on their way back to Budapest, and he journeyed with them for several days, passing by Vienna and Bratislava. By the time they got to Budapest, the boys convinced him that it would be too dangerous for him to go farther because of growing political events - not only involving the Nazis, but also the nationalist Hungarians who wanted lands back that had been taken from them at Versailles. So he abandoned the rest of his trip at this point.]