

LIFE IN PLACES OF NAZI TERROR

Carmelite Women in Dachau and Berlin

By MARIA-THERESIA SMITH

PLACES CAN HAVE A MEANING, for good or ill. They can radiate a certain something, which cannot be found anywhere else in quite the same way.¹ Dachau, the first concentration camp in Germany, is such a place. So is Plötzensee, the prison in Berlin where more than 2,500 people were executed between 1933 and 1945. In these two places Carmelite women have made their home. What does this commitment to a life of contemplation and intercession in such places mean? What makes them do it? What does it mean for those who suffered there? For those who now come to visit? For the places themselves, in all their grimness?

These are the questions which this article explores. Ultimately, we can never understand these dreadful places. Yet, as Thérèse of Lisieux well knew, the Carmelite contemplative vocation is profoundly bound up with guilt and suffering. These connections speak of hope in the face of evil – a hope that the reader too can share.

The foundation of the Dachau Carmel

The Carmels in Dachau and Berlin owe their existence to two outstanding personalities: Berta Vorbach (1911–1970) from Munich, whose religious name was Sr Maria-Theresia of the Crucified Love; and Ursula Hinricher (1932–1990) from Münster, who was called in the Order Sr Gemma of the Obedient Jesus.

During the Nazi regime, Berta Vorbach was a secondary school teacher. She did not conceal her Christian convictions, and sought to impart Christian values to young people. She had contacts with people in the resistance movement, notably with Fr Alfred Delp SJ whose church in Bogenhausen, a district of Munich, she used to attend.² She sensed the cruel things that were happening in Dachau, and her powerlessness to do anything about them grieved her. In 1946 she entered the Carmelite monastery in Pützchen, near Bonn. For her, this step did not mean a flight from the world. On the contrary, it was an act of responsibility, in the wake of the devastation and destruction, both

visible and invisible, that the war and the Nazi regime had wrought. Very soon Sr Maria-Theresia was elected prioress, an office which she continued to hold, both in Pützchen and in Dachau, until her death.

In 1960 the Munich archdiocese built a chapel at Dachau, in the Lagerstrasse (Camp Street), a massive circular construction dedicated to Christ's death agony. Soon there followed the Protestant Church of the Reconciliation and a Jewish memorial. Fifteen years after the end of the war, the Christian churches were the first to recognize the need and the duty to remember publicly the victims of the camp. Up till that point, there was nothing of the kind. Until the beginning of the 1960s the former concentration camp served as a refugee settlement, and it was only in 1965, the twentieth anniversary of the liberation, that the state made it a place of remembrance.

Mother Maria-Theresia certainly knew about the dedication of the Death Agony chapel, and on New Year's Day 1961 had the idea of founding a Carmel on the site of the former concentration camp. With hindsight, one can see the idea as the fruit of her life in Munich and in Pützchen, but she experienced it as a sudden inspiration, a call coming to her at one specific moment. She waited a year, testing the idea in prayer and letting it mature. On 2 January 1962 she wrote her first petition to the Archbishop of Munich, Cardinal Julius Döpfner:

On January 1 1961 the thought came over me that the former concentration camp at Dachau is the right place for a Carmel (a Carmel of the Precious Blood) . . . We would not be a burden on the diocese. I would start by moving, with some young sisters, into one of the barrack buildings there . . . and then gradually, and on a small scale, build on – a convent suitable for the purpose, with a chapel, but small and poor, catering only for the most basic needs.

The request for episcopal approval rests on this one, simple sentence: 'the former concentration camp at Dachau is the right place for a Carmel'. Obviously Mother Maria-Theresia thought she had evidence enough, and one senses something of the simplicity and clarity of her original vision. This place of evil and cruelty was not to be left to itself: something had to be there to counteract it.

However, the first reaction was a request for further clarification. Thus a few weeks later she produced a letter that serves as a kind of charter for the Dachau Carmel, as well as foreshadowing the Berlin foundation. I quote the most important section:

Throughout the world, Dachau epitomizes the reality that was the concentration camps. Its name will always be connected with the most

dreadful cruelties committed by humanity. A place where such sin was committed, where so many people suffered unspeakable things, must not become a bland memorial, still less a place for tourists. Representative atonement [*stellvertretende Sühne*] must be made through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, and through the associated sacrifice and atonement of human beings joining themselves to this suffering Lord in reparation and obedience. The Carmelite order is called in a special way to the prayer of sacrifice and atonement.³

Mother Maria-Theresia had become involved in the discussions regarding the future of the former camp, making an original contribution out of her Christian conviction. It would not be adequate to the place were it to become just a memorial or a museum. The evil committed, the suffering undergone – these were too real for that. History is not simply a matter of the past. Evil remains, and continues to work, unless people set themselves against it. This requires the power of the unconditional love which filled Jesus, in his life and in his death. Sacrifice, atonement, representation – for the founding prioress these ideas unite the Redeemer inseparably to his followers and vice versa. The language may sound dated and unhelpful, but Mother Maria-Theresia is clearly using it in a context of love and grace; mechanistic, Pelagian conceptions of atonement were far from her mind.

On 24 August 1963 Mother Maria-Theresia wrote a letter to the friends of her monastery in Pützchen. In this, she set out her idea of the task facing the Carmel in Dachau:

‘Dachau’ was the sign of how the order of values set in place by God was overthrown, as a matter of ideological principle. The state was made an idol, humanity was robbed of its dignity, and hatred became the basic motivating force. Our greatest concern now is to make this place ‘Dachau’ a place of sacrifice and prayer, and to do this by making it over to the Redeemer who gave his blood for us. A particular means will be the renewal of the sacrifice of the Cross through daily Mass – the only appropriate atonement. Thus we see it as our task to call down the power of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice, the only salvific power, on ‘Dachau’, on all concentration camps throughout the world, and thus on the systems of violence which they embody. Our purpose in so doing is to overcome hatred through the love of Jesus Christ, and to bring about for the world reconciliation with God, its true peace.⁴

‘Dachau’ in this letter always stands within quotation marks. It refers not to the town (obviously), but to the camp, indeed to all the camps. Dachau was the oldest of them, founded as early as 1933; in Mother

Maria-Theresia's eyes it epitomized the whole harrowing reality. At the time, the full horror of Auschwitz and the Jewish Holocaust had not yet come to public awareness. If, a generation later, we continue to see Dachau as standing for the whole reality of the camps, this is not to imply that the terror was at its worst there – though the typhus epidemics, the appalling conditions and the frequent executions were hellish enough. Rather, from Dachau there began a process which even now we still struggle to acknowledge, let alone fathom. Its culmination was Auschwitz, a horror that brooks no comparison.

The foundation at Dachau ran into difficulties which at first seemed insuperable. The barrack buildings were in such bad condition that they had to be pulled down, and thus Mother Maria-Theresia's initial plan to begin very modestly in one of these was not feasible. Cardinal Döpfner, however, decided that a new convent should be built on the site. Through the efforts of Bishop Johannes Neuhäusler, himself a former prisoner in Dachau, the necessary funds were raised, and on 22 November 1964 the church and the altar could be consecrated. Following Mother Maria-Theresia's initial understanding, expressed in her first letter to Cardinal Döpfner, the new Carmel bore the name 'Carmel of the Precious Blood'. 'Love in the service of reconciliation' – a formula inspired by Colossians 1:19–20 – was to be the rule of life for all who belonged to this Carmel's community. However, Mother Maria-Theresia could only travel this demanding way with her sisters for five years. She died, after a painful illness, on 10 March 1970.

Consolidation

The new prioress inherited the tasks of clarifying the Dachau Carmel's significance and directing the community's way of life accordingly. Ursula Hinricher had entered the Pützchen Carmel, where Mother Maria-Theresia was prioress, as a graduate in theology. In 1964 she became one of the founding sisters in Dachau, and worked very closely with Mother Maria-Theresia over the following years. She was for twelve years prioress in Dachau, until the foundation of the Berlin Carmel. These years were marked by the community's struggle to understand their mission at this unique place, and also by the need to justify their way of life against criticism from outside.

The place itself, the concentration camp, made its demands on the community – demands of which Mother Maria-Theresia was quite aware, and which she had no wish to avoid. Anyhow, they were unavoidable. Very soon after the foundation, for instance, people began coming to speak with one of the sisters, shattered by their visit to the

camp. Often they needed to talk about their own experience of suffering. A total oppression that had deprived them of any human dignity was weighing them down. But when they entered the convent, these people found themselves once again in a place where bars kept people apart. It became clear to Mother Maria-Theresia that in this place the grille was a counter-witness. With the agreement of the sisters and the bishop she opened up the grilles in the parlours, and eventually had them removed completely. In the convent church, too, the grille was opened wide at every liturgy, so that visitors could come into the sisters' choir. This also made the unity of the worshipping community something visible.

The opened grilles symbolized a general attitude, one which the community under Sr Gemma's leadership consistently sustained. Enclosure was adapted to meet the needs of the place. The sisters' spiritual ministry was not just intercessory; it also involved 'sharing' their contemplation through various forms of spiritual direction. It was providential that the foundational period of the Dachau Carmel during the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the ecclesial renewal stemming from Vatican II. Nevertheless, among German Carmelite women, the Dachau community often seemed lonely pioneers. The innovations seemed revolutionary, and they met with incomprehension and rejection.

Sr Gemma was a serious theologian. Given the situation in these decisive, critical years, this was an invaluable advantage for the Dachau Carmel. She developed and articulated the theological basis for what the community was discovering: a Carmelite spirituality, open to God and human beings, and appropriate for a place where human life had been desecrated. In 1970 she published an essay which she saw as articulating the reality of any contemplative Carmelite vocation after Vatican II. I quote two passages, which also reflect the situation in Dachau out of which they were written:

In Christ contemplation is never just a turning of oneself to the Father. For him too, it is only the Father's will and the Father's hour that are decisive, but nevertheless precisely this will of the Father, this hour of the Father, is identical with the service for which he has come into the world. And this service, this 'presence as receptivity, as openness for the Father's will' as Hans Urs von Balthasar once formulated it, finds its end in the folly of the cross, where openness to the Father and service to human beings come together in the deepest possible unity. . . . for all its relationship to the world, Carmelite existence is ultimately a mystery, and therefore accessible at its deepest level only to a

person of faith. The apostolate of Carmel . . . shares in the unfathomableness of Christ's cross, and ultimately can only be understood from there. Nevertheless, our own time requires that this unfathomability be made fathomable – so far as in us lies – through the deliberate giving of witness. This does not contravene the contemplative life, but is rather, in my opinion, what first brings out the fullness of its mission.⁵

There have always been, and continue to be, signs that the witness has been perceived and understood. One example of the friendship between the sisters and Benedicta Kempner, the wife of the assistant prosecutor in the Nürnberg trials, Robert M. W. Kempner. Frau Kempner has worked tirelessly to track down what happened to priests and religious sisters persecuted under Hitler's terror, especially outside Germany.⁶ Again, in 1982, the Catholic Academy of Bavaria awarded Sr Gemma the Romano Guardini prize, with Cardinal Ratzinger present at the ceremony. The conferral speech referred to 'the outstanding witness of a faith-filled, consecrated existence . . . the life-style of a strict contemplative order making itself open, at places of Godforsakenness and human degradation, to human guilt and suffering'.⁷ The prize showed that the general public had seen what the Dachau and Berlin communities stood for, and valued their witness. This was important at a time when their innovations were controversial.

Another rich contract has been with the Archbishop of Szczecin, Kazimierz Majdański. As a prisoner in Dachau, Majdański had been subjected to so-called medical experimentation. A German auxiliary nurse saved his life by secretly injecting him with an antidote. Through the experience of such humanity amid the degradation, Majdański had found the strength to forgive. He was one of the signatories to the letter written by the Polish bishops in 1965, at the end of Vatican II, to their German counterparts, and to the German people as a whole. In it, there is a sentence rich in significance: 'We grant forgiveness and we ask for forgiveness'.⁸ For the sisters in Dachau, Archbishop Majdański opened up a new dimension in their ministry of prayer: that of keeping alive the memory of the good that was also present, if hidden, in the concentration camps. He made them aware of how their life given to a ministry of reconciliation in Dachau could draw on a powerful resource: the seed of love which individuals, beset by the camp's terrors, had nevertheless scattered.⁹

The sisters did not often directly meet with survivors of Dachau or with relatives of the victims, but there were signs that the Carmel had somehow touched them. Unforgettable for me is the little note from a

Frenchman that we found one evening in the little box where people could put their prayer intentions: 'My father was murdered in this camp. Because you are here, I was able to say an "Our Father" in this place.'

Berlin and Plötzensee

Official approval for the Dachau Carmel was slow in coming. There was a real question whether it would be allowed to remain within the Carmelite Order. Both Cardinal Döpfner and his successor, Cardinal Ratzinger, represented the case in Rome. In 1977, the official period of experimentation was extended for a further three to five years. New foundations, however, were deferred. Approval came indirectly with the permission to make a new foundation in Berlin, given in November 1980. Twelve sisters – of whom I was one – left Dachau in 1982 to begin the new community, and Bishop Meisner presided at the inauguration on May 30, Pentecost Sunday.

Both practically and financially, the foundation was difficult. We often had occasion to remember the problems Teresa recounts in her book of the *Foundations*. Another aspect was unusual, even dramatic. While the building was still going on, we learnt through indirect means that there were young women in East Germany who wanted to be Carmelites. Bishop Meisner asked Sr Gemma to make contact. The result was a clandestine 'preparatory' Carmel of the Incarnation, in rented accommodation. Because of the Berlin Wall, the young women could not come to the West, nor could we visit them for any length of time without being suspected of spying. The community of postulants, later novices, was sustained by weekly visits from Sr Gemma, and by others of us in rotation. Eventually they moved into a small house on the property of a Catholic parish, obviously without state permission for a convent. However, when the Wall came down in 1989, they were still not stable enough to be independent. The foundation therefore closed at that point, and those who wanted to remain Carmelites transferred either to us or to other Carmels in West Germany. Nevertheless, we have received many assurances of the effect the little community had in East Berlin; and for us sisters in the main house it represented a valuable challenge, sensitizing us to the needs of people beyond the Wall.

The foundation document of the new community brought out the links with the Dachau Carmel:

Just as in Dachau, so here the sisters wish to give a sign of hope near the former execution place at Plötzensee. They intend to do this

through a life of prayer and intercession in the face of suffering and guilt, both past and present, and in openness to people's needs and questions.

Near Plötzensee prison was an inconspicuous brick building. Already during the Weimar Republic, it had served as an execution chamber. During the Nazi dictatorship more than 2,500 people, from Germany and from all over occupied Europe, were executed there. Most of them had in some way, either alone or in small groups of like-minded people, been involved in resistance against the unjust system that was the Nazi state. The best known are those involved in the failed attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944. Once the conspiracy was uncovered, hundreds of opponents of Nazism, including those who had nothing to do with the attempt, were imprisoned, tortured and executed. For most of them the end came in Plötzensee.

Between 1960 and 1963, about twenty minutes walk from the prison building, a Catholic memorial church was built, dedicated to Mary Queen of Martyrs. For both the church and the convent founded twenty years later, the proximity to Plötzensee is important, and the church itself is the setting for the convent's prayer in choir, which is always open to the public. A small space in the church's crypt has been turned into a choir space and a weekday chapel. A part of this has been made a shrine in memory of the martyrs.

There is an imposing bronze Pietà by Fritz König, with an inscription at its feet:

For all the martyrs who were denied burial,
for all the martyrs, whose graves are unknown.

We know people were murdered during the Nazi period, but for most of the victims there are no graves. The intention was to rob them of their dignity even in death; their memory was to be obliterated.

For the families of victims from the resistance, it is a comfort to find a place of peace at Mary Queen of Martyrs, where they can remember their loved ones. On 20 July each year, the sisters invite people to an ecumenical service of vespers, and then to a reception in the parlour. In the morning there is both a Protestant celebration of the Last Supper and a Catholic mass in the former execution chamber – a practice that began about forty years ago. The separation is painful for those who take part, but the suffering caused by the absence of eucharistic unity can itself be an ecumenical experience.

Ecumenical relations have proved enormously fruitful for our life here, as indeed they already were in Dachau. Since we came in 1982,

we meet monthly in the crypt with our neighbouring Protestant parish to pray for peace. We always prepare the liturgies for special anniversaries – for example 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz – together with the pastors, male and female, from neighbouring Protestant parishes, and celebrate them together in our memorial church. Common to the parishes and the sisters is a consciousness of responsibility. The instinct to forget must not be allowed to prevail. We must be aware of the survivors of Nazi terror, of those among us who witnessed what happened, and open our hearts and ears to them. There are still people who have been living with the trauma of their concentration camp experience for more than fifty years, and are unable to speak about it. There are also the victims' children, who are traumatized by the fate – often unexpressed – of their parents.

North of Berlin lies Ravensbrück, which was the largest Nazi concentration camp for women in Germany. It has become an important place for us, despite the distance. Once we were all able to visit it. In prayer and deep inner solidarity, we accompanied some former prisoners, and some children of former prisoners, who had found the courage to make the journey for the first time, in the hope of finding peace at last. Two of them, a Polish woman and a Dutch woman, stayed with us, and have often returned. The fact that they felt at home in our Carmel was for both of them an important step in their reconciliation with Germans, and perhaps also with God.

The Berlin Carmel is quite near the former execution chamber at Plötzensee, but also far enough away for the connection not to be immediately visible. We have discovered that this makes it easier for people to visit us. It showed political and religious tactfulness that no attempt was made to build the memorial church right next to the execution chamber. We know from a senior cleric in the diocese, the son of a prominent Nazi victim, that he urged the Church to keep its distance in this way. It would have been wrong for Catholics to give the impression of taking the place over. Nor did we have any right to do so. Among the Christians executed at Plötzensee there were more Protestants than Catholics, and there were many who were not Christian at all. It is important that Catholics remember, but it should be done discreetly.

Perhaps too our relatively discreet setting has been one of the factors enabling us to make contact in Berlin with Jews – or rather the other way round. Sr Gemma once told us about the visit of an elderly, frail Jewish man, who had come because someone had told him that here he could at last tell his story: the story of an Auschwitz survivor. He told

it, and went away relieved. Other contacts have led to lasting friendships, to which we owe much. We have learnt about issues connected with anti-Semitism, and about the rich rabbinic traditions of scripture interpretation. We have also, as individuals and a community, had to face the question, 'What does it mean for me, for us, to live a life of prayer and intercession here in Berlin, where the Holocaust was initiated, where the "final solution" was decided upon, where the deportation trains began their journey to the East?' In the end we have no answer to the searing questions, but we do feel that our Jewish friends appreciate our being here, even when we do not know the answer.

In 1989 and 1990 our community had to deal with the mortal illness of our founding prioress, the culmination of her commitment to God and human beings. She died on 4 August 1990. In the text on her memorial card, we tried to express something of what we had understood of the mystery of her vocation:

The more Sr Gemma recognized her vocation of intercessory solidarity with those who suffer, in particular with the victims of Nazism, the more her fundamental attunement to God, God's people, and God's way, was led into the darkness of bafflement. Her life in Dachau and near Plötzensee had shaped her whole existence. We can only guess at the connections between her readiness for suffering and the illness which killed her – an illness which, according to the doctors, took an unusually radical and severe course. As Sr Gemma said . . . 'Perhaps it is indeed the case that we experience nothing of God so strongly as the divine silence . . . From the silence we have suffered and endured there emerge the true questions that bring us closer to the mystery of God.'¹⁰

Carmelite life where Nazi terror reigned: this theme is so powerful that it can obscure everything else. But the women who live in the Dachau and Berlin Carmels are quite normal. As a community and as individuals, they have their joys and sorrows. They try to love: sometimes it works, sometimes it does not. In some ways they are rich; in others poor. But they also experience a source who sustains it all – and a community in touch with this source can make life possible in places where no individual could survive.

I would like to express my thanks to Sr Petra Hagenauer, prioress of the Berlin Carmel. Without our exchanges, her rich experience and her memories of Dachau, this article could not have been written. The English translation was made by Philip Endean SJ.

NOTES

- ¹ Gemma Hinricher, 'Liebe und Wiedergutmachung', *Christliche Innerlichkeit* 19/1 (1984), p 43.
- ² *Ibid.* Berta Vorbach is mentioned in Delp's prison letters: Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4, edited by Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1984), pp 44, 116.
- ³ Information from Gemma Hinricher, *Der Sinn betenden Dienstes der Schwesterngemeinschaft des Karmel Heilig Blut Dachau* (undated information leaflet).
- ⁴ Copy in Berlin Carmel.
- ⁵ Sr Gemma von Gehorsam Jesu, 'Karmelitanische Existenz. Versuch einer Orientierung am Evangelium und am Geist der hl. Theresia' in *Festschrift Teresa de Jesús* (Mariazell, 1970), pp 121–147, here 125, 133–134.
- ⁶ See Benedicta M. Kempner, *Nonnen unter dem Hakenkreuz* (Würzburg, 1979); *Priester vor Hitlers Tribunalen* (Munich, 1996).
- ⁷ Franz Heinrich, 'Preisbegründung und Laudatio zum Romano-Guardini-Preis 1982' in *25 Jahre Katholische Akademie Bayern*, special number 7 (Munich, 1982), pp 16–17.
- ⁸ See Kazimierz Majdański, *Ihr werdet meine Zeugen sein* (Mittelbiberach, 1995), p 204.
- ⁹ While still in Dachau at the end of the 1970s, Sr Gemma had seriously explored the possibility of a German-Polish Carmel at Auschwitz, dedicated especially to the ministry of reconciliation. However, the local bishop, Cardinal Macharski, thought the idea premature. For the last few years a small group of Polish Carmelite nuns have lived in a newly built convent outside the camp boundaries. This foundation is the successor to one made in 1984 within the camp, which led to serious conflict between the Catholic Church and Jewish representatives. See Reinhard Körner, '“Sag mir, was mich leiden läßt!”: Der Streit um das Karmelitenkloster Auschwitz' in *Die menschliche Gewalt* (Edith-Stein-Jahrbuch vol 1 – Würzburg, 1995). There are good contacts between the Carmels in Berlin and Auschwitz, but the inspiration behind the Auschwitz foundation was not directly dependent on Dachau or Berlin.
- ¹⁰ The quotation is taken from an address Sr Gemma gave at the ninetieth German *Katholikentag* in May 1990, less than three months before her death. The title was 'Speaking of God following Auschwitz'.