

'A human witness to inhumanity: Arthur Dodd's account is another important piece of evidence. The first hand witnesses... must be listened to.'
Legion, The Royal British Legion Magazine

SPECTATOR IN HELL

**A British soldier's story
of imprisonment in Auschwitz**

COLIN RUSHTON



SPECTATOR IN HELL

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PROLOGUE

The train ground to a halt and the sliding doors of the carriage crashed open. The two dozen men inside raised their hands to the sun and in turn jumped down from the train. They were met by a chorus of commands from the handful of Wehrmacht guards awaiting their arrival.

‘Bewegen sie! Bewegen! Schnell!’

Falling into some semblance of a formation, the men slowly grew accustomed to the bright daylight after several hours in the dark and took in the scene before them. Their eyes were met by a vision of rural tranquillity. To the right, fields of yellow clay rolled into the distance and to the left was a romantic little copse, a perfect retreat for a courting couple.

There were no factories in sight and no building work was in evidence. From where they stood there was no sign of any industry taking place at all. They had crossed the German border the night before and guessed they were probably now in Poland. Discussing their new location quietly among themselves, the consensus of opinion was that they were destined for farmwork. As prison camp work went, this was good news; they would have plenty of fresh air and there should at least be an abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables to eat.

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Looking down the length of the train, Arthur noticed hundreds of bundles a yard or so from the track. There were trousers, shirts, skirts and shoes, some clearly belonging to young children. Only mildly curious, he thought little of it; he was far too relieved that his worst fears regarding their destination had not been realised.

A short march brought them to a camp and if Arthur felt any apprehension as he entered the gates, it soon disappeared. Inside the perimeter fence were ten wooden huts. The POWs were ushered into the nearest and they were pleasantly surprised by how dry and clean it was. Further investigation revealed central heating pipes running the length of the hut, hot and cold running water at each basin and solid bunkbeds, upon which were clean and adequate mattresses.

For the next two weeks the men settled themselves into what they hoped would be their accommodation for the rest of the war and, in the spring of 1943, it was anybody's guess how long that would be.

A week later, Arthur woke slowly to the noise of guards stomping through the hut's central corridor, banging rifle-butts on doors. Over the past few days the number of British prisoners in the camp had swollen from two dozen to nearer two hundred, but they had been required to do little or no work and had been reasonably well-fed.

The guards were smiling and enjoying themselves, but there was no friendship in it. There was something sinister happening and they were about to find out what it was.

'Der Feiertag endig! Arbeiten sie jetzt!'

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Those who had more than a smattering of the language were asked what was being said and Arthur learned that they were being sent to work. Knowing this moment would come sooner or later, the men shrugged and made their way out to the parade area.

Once gathered into formation, they were marched out of the camp and along a dusty road running through a forest. Arthur, with his mates, was up at the front. On route they came across a group of prisoners working to one side of the road. They were Ukrainian women digging ditches under the watchful eye of several armed guards carrying coiled whips. The fear and tension in the women's eyes was tangible. Prior to their arrival the men had been at Farasabrina in Italy and Arthur had drawn the lowest card and missed out on what turned out to be a fairly straightforward escape bid. He wondered now how much he would regret that.

A few minutes later they came to a factory. To the side of the road was a young girl of about fifteen being severely and brutally flogged with a riding crop by an officer of the SS. Kneeling helplessly in front of him, the young girl was facing the oncoming POWs and presented to them a figure of terror. Her hair had been carelessly shaven and her scalp was cut. Fresh wounds inflicted by the German officer were bleeding and small red rivers ran from her forehead to her chin.

She was naked above the waist and Arthur could see from her ribs and drawn cheeks that she had not been properly fed for some time. The officer momentarily stopped for breath and the young girl looked up. Her eyes were saucer-wide

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as she pleaded to the sadistic monster before her to relent. He laughed out loud and shouted across to two of the guards standing by. Then he carried on mercilessly whipping her across the head and shoulders.

For some of the Tommies watching it was too much. One of the lads tapped Arthur on the shoulder and stepped forward.

‘Come on, lads,’ he said, ‘I’ve had enough of this little bastard!’

Arthur and three others followed him, walking purposefully towards the SS officer. Arthur shouted for him to leave the girl alone. Unused to such a challenge to his authority, the officer was momentarily taken aback, but as they closed in he took the whip into his left hand and reached for his pistol. At the same time, a soldier of the Wehrmacht raised his rifle and aimed it at the men. The soldier’s call stopped them in their tracks.

Anhalten sie! Er werde getut!

Translation was hardly necessary; if they took another step, the officer would shoot them dead. There was no camaraderie between the two Germans. What the soldier was telling them was for their own good.

Zuruchgehen sie!

The men stopped and the officer smiled across to the rifle-bearing soldier. Still holding his pistol, he walked towards the Tommies.

As it was Arthur who had shouted out, he stood in front of him and stared coldly into his eyes. The officer was the prototype of Hitler’s Aryan Adonis: tall, handsome, blond

PROLOGUE

and steely-blue eyed. Arthur dared to stare him out, his own revulsion of the man overcoming the fear he felt. Without dropping his cynical smile, the officer nodded and backed away.

‘Ein anderer Zeit,’ he whispered to Arthur with menace; *‘Another time.’*

Arthur was in no doubt that they would meet again before very long. Orders were barked and the men were ordered back into the column. Marching again, they looked behind them and saw their intervention had done the girl no favours. The officer beat her now with a greater ferocity than ever. Arthur clenched his fists and grimaced. He knew that her only crime was to be Jewish. She would not live much longer.

Arthur woke with a start, his body trembling and sweating. The nightmare was frightening and familiar. It was one of a number he had endured for nigh-on forty years. His wife, Olwen, had long ago become used to his sudden screams in the night. She got up without comment and made her way downstairs to the kitchen. A few minutes later, she came back with a cup of tea and a couple of aspirins as she always did. She held a vinegar-soaked flannel to his forehead and murmured her usual words of comfort.

‘Same old nightmare again, love?’

Arthur nodded, but this was much more than a nightmare. He was reliving an incident from which he had never mentally recovered. In 1943, Arthur had been captured and sent to a succession of prisoner of war camps before being

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interned just outside a small Polish town for nearly two years. When the war was over, he had tried to talk about his experiences, but found it very difficult to describe what he had seen. In any case, he knew that few people would believe him; there were no Tommies there, only Jews.

But Arthur had been there. The camp was near a beautiful village in Upper Silesia known to the local Poles as Oswiecim. The Germans gave it another name, now synonymous with mankind's most perverse and darkest hours.

They called it Auschwitz.

**PART ONE:
ARTHUR'S STORY**



CHAPTER ONE

Arthur Dodd was born and raised in the Castle district of Northwich, a small Cheshire town on the River Weaver. His mother's first husband had been killed in the trenches of France during World War One and she had married his father, a regular soldier in the Cheshire Regiment, just after Armistice Day. Arthur himself arrived on 7 December 1919.

His father was an austere, distant man. He had served in the Boer War at the turn of the century and as a sergeant had been captured during the Great War. As a parent, he was distinctly military and Victorian in his attitude and had little time for Arthur and his younger sister.

At fifteen, Arthur left school and was taken on as an apprentice mechanic at Northwich Transport Company. There he learned to drive and began to understand the mechanics of the internal combustion engine under the watchful, friendly eye of his boss, Harold Isherwood. For his labours he was paid all of ten shillings (fifty pence) a week.

The company owned a Ford People's Popular saloon car, which was used to transport mechanics to broken-down lorries. Arthur fell in love with it the first time he saw it. It was in this car he was taught to drive and, having added a year to his age when completing the driving licence application

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form, he passed his test in the early part of 1935. A year later, he repeated the lie and passed his HGV test.

Those early working days were fun for Arthur. Harold took to the young man and they would often go fishing together in one of the many meres in the Cheshire countryside. Arthur had to serve under the Articles of Apprenticeship for seven years, but when Harold opened his own transport company in 1937, he invited Arthur to finish his time with him.

Tempted though he was, ten shillings a week was hardly conducive to living away from home and Arthur had to decline. Also, his mother was against it, as she was the transport business in general. In those days a driver had to find his own consignments and could be away from home for as long as three weeks at a time.

In Harold's absence, Arthur quickly became bored and began looking for another company to take him on. When he was eighteen he entered the world of scrap, being employed as a driver by Jimmy Caffrey, a well-respected local entrepreneur. Caffrey only had one vehicle and most of the work was sub-contracted from the Middlewich Borough Council. Consequently, Arthur was home every night by tea-time and was paid the quite princely sum of five pounds a week.

Caffrey was a decent man and would often make his lorry available to transport local people to Clatterbridge Hospital on the Wirral. For this extra work, he paid Arthur five shillings, half of what he earned at the Northwich Transport Company for a full week. For many, Caffrey's lorry was the only way they could get to the hospital to visit sick relatives, but he never objected to those who jumped aboard for the day out.

ARTHUR'S STORY

‘Take your mum along,’ he used to say to Arthur. ‘The run will do her good.’

Despite Caffrey’s generosity and kindness, Mrs Dodd was still unhappy about the driving her son had to do and finally persuaded him to join the Weaver Navigation Company. His grandfather had sailed on the Salt Union boats and his Uncle Jack was a foreman there. To please his mother, Arthur had to give up his beloved driving and also take a serious cut in wages. At the WNC he started on just one guinea (one pound, five pence) a week, rising to thirty-eight shillings (one pound, ninety pence) when he was twenty-one.

He gave most of his wages to his mother, as he had done when he worked for Caffrey, so in fact it was she who suffered as much as anyone with his loss of income. She was, though, more concerned with his long term prospects and saw security and advancement in his new position.

For three months, he was employed over at Weston Point, Runcorn, where the building of a number of clay sheds was being completed. He had to ride the 13 miles to work each day on an old ‘sit up and beg’ lady’s bicycle and when the wind was against him the journey could take as long as an hour and a half. Adults were allowed nine pence a day for travel expenses, but Arthur, under twenty-one, received only sixpence. As the return bus fare was nine pence, the road between Runcorn and Northwich was always busy with young lads pedalling their way to work and back.

In 1938, developments in Germany began to look ominous and talk of another war was in the air. Hitler had been in power for five years and in March Germany had annexed

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Austria. Ned Bebbington, a good mate of Arthur's at the WNC, had decided to join the Territorial Army. Arthur was encouraged to do the same, but his mother's response was an emphatic 'No'. Frightened by the ever-increasing probability of war, she knew the Territorials would be the first to be called up and wanted her one and only precious son at home for as long as possible. (As it happened, Ned became a sergeant with the Cheshires and spent the entire war as an officers' mess manager in Northern Ireland!)

Towards the end of the summer of 1938, Arthur was walking two girls along the riverbank near Hartford, in the company of his close friend, Alan Parks.

'I'm joining the Navy, Arthur,' Alan told him. 'Why don't you join up with me?'

Alan was caught up in the patriotic fervour sweeping the country, but Arthur, just short of his twentieth birthday, still needed his mother's permission and once again it was refused. The war was to be a sad time for the Parks family with both Alan and his brother, George, being killed. Alan lost his life aboard the HMS *Repulse* in Singapore, while George was shot down serving in the RAF.

In September of that same year, the governments of both France and Britain were seen by many to be weak in their stand against the growing demands and incursions of Nazi Germany. Hitler won a major concession when allowed to seize the Sudetenland, the Germanic quarter of Czechoslovakia, without resistance.

In the same month, it seemed that the possibility of Arthur taking an active part in any war that might break out had

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disappeared. He was helping to run a boat along its launch ramp when his left foot became trapped between the ramp and a turning wheel. It was some moments before the other members of the working party realised, by which time his foot was nearly severed; attached to his leg only by the sinews of his instep. His Achilles' tendon was severed and his heel severely crushed.

His foot was saved from amputation and stitched back together by a Dr Booth at the Northwich Infirmary, but he was bluntly told, as he endured a slow and painful recovery, that he would spend the rest of his life with a club foot. Each day he suffered a course of painful physiotherapy to stretch the Achilles' tendon and allow him to put his heel fully on the ground. At times the pain was unbearable, but in just six weeks he was fit enough to hobble back into work for light duties as a stocktaker in the company stores.

During the summer of 1939, and despite the efforts of government appeasers, Britain was dragged inextricably towards war. Finally, on 1 September, the German Army and the Luftwaffe invaded Poland in a ruthless and murderous blitzkrieg. There was no room left for negotiation. Hitler was ready for a European war and had thrown the gauntlet down. With nervous trepidation, Britain picked it up.

For Arthur, the first few months of war were a huge disappointment, but this was overtaken by grief in February 1940, when his mother died. She had contracted the influenza bug sweeping the country that winter and died of pleurisy. The linchpin of the family was gone, but she had departed this world happy in the knowledge that Arthur would take no active part in the war.

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Throughout this time, with Dr Booth's assistance, Arthur's treatment continued. Arthur had never conceded that his injuries were permanent. The press was full of the country's urgent need for volunteers and Arthur broached the subject that he might try to join up. The doctor certainly knew that he had no chance of passing a full medical, but believed it was important that Arthur's mental attitude should remain positive.

'It might be a bit soon, Arthur, to be honest,' he told him, 'but why not go along and see? A country can ask no more of its young men than that they are willing.'

At the medical, he was examined by an orthopaedic specialist, a Dr Hay, who watched Arthur carefully as he stripped down to his underpants and walked nervously about the room. Dr Hay made his assessment and handed the report to the recruitment officer, a veteran of World War One who wore a scarlet sash across his chest and had a bushy, grey moustache. He looked over the results of Arthur's medical and slowly shook his head.

'I'm sorry, lad,' he said, 'but we can't take you. You've been assessed as a "B2" and I'm afraid that's not good enough.'

Seeing Arthur's obvious distress, he vainly tried to reassure him.

'Look, lad, this is not a permanent grade. Why don't you keep working at it and have another go in a year or two?'

Arthur looked at the floor and nodded in silence before turning away. He was about to pass through the exit door when the officer called after him.

'Hang on a minute, have you got a driving licence?'