‘There in that place of evil memory’. Early Anglo-Canadian responses to the ‘discovery’ of *Auffanglager* Breendonk

→ Richard Menkis

On 30 September 1944, Matthew Halton of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) recorded his response to a visit to Breendonk, the infamous *Auffanglager* (Reception Camp) in Belgium. Less than a month earlier, British forces had discovered the abandoned camp. In his 9.5 minute report,[1] Halton described the evidence of the atrocities committed there. However, much of the broadcast was also an occasion to reflect on why telling these stories was difficult and necessary. Halton’s report on Breendonk, broadcast in Canada several days after its recording, and the other reports about the camp that appeared in the Canadian press in the Fall of 1944, remind us that the historical understanding of the discovery of the camps is a work-in-progress. Dan Stone, in his volume on the liberation of the camps, begins his chapter on the Western Allies with the discovery of the Natzweiler-Struthof camp in Alsace in November of 1944, because it was the “only such site of horror that the Western Allies had uncovered at that point.” [2] The evidence from the Canadian media suggests otherwise.

INTRODUCTION

Although Breendonk is well-known in Belgian history and memory culture,[3] the camp is scarcely remembered outside its borders,[4] and thus its place in the history of the confrontation of the Allies with evidence of Nazi atrocities largely unknown. While it may be of some interest for the historians to see how some Belgians interacted with Canadian soldiers and media**,** this paper is largely a contribution to the study of allied reactions to the Third Reich and to the historiography of liberation. In order to do so, we can apply questions raised on those topics, [5] and show that the discovery of Breendonk led to a negotiation of these issues month before the liberation of the more famous camps. These questions include: Why and how should atrocities be reported? Did observation of these atrocities foster thoughts about

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(continuation)

postwar reconstruction? As we now study liberation as an encounter which must include the agency of the victims, how should we understand the entangled relations between the "liberators" and the "liberated" at Breendonk? And finally, because historians have pointed out how media subsumed the specific plight of the Jews to the larger tragedy of war: Did a narrative specifically about Jews and Breendonk emerge from the coverage?

OVERCOMING INCREDULITY

Shortly after the Nazis conquered Belgium, they re-purposed the old fortress at Breendonk into a place of incarceration. Officially, it was an "Auffanglager," and was placed under the command of SS. The guards were both German and Belgian. The first prisoners arrived in September 1940, and in its first two years, most of the prisoners were Jews without Belgian citizenship. As of the end of the summer of 1942, most of the Jews were transferred to the new transit camp at Mechelen (Malines), from where they were sent to Auschwitz.[6] Thereafter, the inmates of Breendonk were largely political prisoners. In its four years of operation, it is estimated that there were 3500 prisoners in Breendonk. About 1,800 were sent to camps in the east, and in the summer of 1944 a number were sent to transit camps, such as Vught in the Netherlands. Only 40 percent of Breendonk's prisoners survived the war.[7] Few died in Breendonk, but the torture and hunger had certainly weakened them before being sent elsewhere.

_ Matthew Halton, War Correspondent for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

Image courtesy of David Halton

The Canadian reports on Breendonk came soon after gruesome revelations of Nazi atrocities from the east. In July, the Red Army had liberated the concentration camp and extermination center Majdanek, and Canadian papers and magazines included a number of stories. Some of those stories appeared on the first page, but then receded into the inside pages of the newspapers. The discovery of Majdanek did not get much more coverage, at least in the Anglo-Canadian press, [8] than Breendonk. Given the difference in scope, how could that be? Some historians have suggested that there was a general distrust in the mainstream western media of stories emanating from the Eastern Front. While others have countered that the distrust has been exaggerated,[9] there is still evidence that suspicion existed even in the liberal newspapers. It was only after the discovery of the camps in April 1945 by Western Allies that an editorial in the *Winnipeg Free Press* admitted "The file of these official Russian stories contains nothing more frightful

than the file we are collecting ourselves. There has been no exaggeration in the Russian claims."[10] In other words, the editor acknowledged that they should have been listening all along to the developments in the East with less suspicion.

For the western media, telling the story of Breendonk was less fraught. It was discovered by the Western Allies, it was in an area under the control of the Western Allies, and many of the reporters were very familiar names to audiences in Canada. Matthew Halton, according to his biographer, was at the time at the "pinnacle" of his fame, and "[as] his growing fan mail indicated, many thought of him as a trusted friend, almost a member of the family."[11] Lionel Shapiro, who wrote two articles[12] that appeared in multiple newspapers, was originally from Montreal and another popular "warco", or war correspondent. Even so, editors wanted to highlight the credibility of their reporters in the face of skepticism of atrocity stories. One editorial, published alongside a Shapiro article, emphasized the journalist's trustworthiness: "If they [the details of German atrocities] had not been told by a reliable witness they would be unbelievable. Lionel Shapiro, writer of this article, is reliable. He is a reputable Canadian journalist, formerly with the Montreal *Gazette* and now

– View of the moat and barbed wire surrounding the Breendonck concentration camp. 1944-1945

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photo archives #11284. Courtesy of Paul Hartman. Copyright of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

correspondent for the North American Newspaper Alliance."[13] Also in the *Gazette* was an article by Arthur Blakely, who, again in the words of the editorial, is "a staff member of the Gazette who is now on active service overseas with the RCAF [Royal Canadian Air Force]"[14]

The reporters described, to varying degrees, the methods of torture practiced in Breendonk. but they also drew out why it was important to convince dubious audiences of these atrocities. Halton began his radio broadcast with with an anecdote to demonstrate the power of the witnessing on a soldier, specifically how the experience reminded him of why he was fighting:

> At the village of Breendonk, a few miles north of Brussels, the Germans had a concentration camp for political prisoners. Many Canadian soldiers are visiting it these days. As I entered the prison yesterday, I met a Canadian who had been with a Maquis guide, and he said 'Once or twice in this war, when things were tough, I wondered what I was fighting for. Now I know'.[15]

The journalist/soldier Arthur Blakeley wished that soldiers would see the atrocities, but he was not convinced they would:

> It is unfortunate, perhaps, that the bulk of the troops fighting for us in this war will see little more of this side of the German occupation than their families and friends whom they have left behind in Montreal, Chicago or Birmingham. They will meet, and deal with, enemy resistance in the field, but when they return only will a handful have seen what lies on the other side of the thick curtain which now hides the atrocities committed by Germany in the name of culture in Western Europe.[16]

EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE

But Halton, Blakeley and the other reporters were, above all, writing for the home front. Halton signed off his radio broadcast with "That's a bit of the story of Breendonk, *part of the story of what we are fighting.*"[17] A number of articles, including those that drew from Halton's broadcast, only gave details of the methods of torture used at Breendonk, and the suffering of the prisoners.[18] Discounting sensationalism, the only purpose could be to remind Canadians of the vicious enemy they faced. These stories about Breendonk came at time when the issue of conscription in Canada was incendiary. The Canadian military establishment called for support for its exhausted fighting forces in Europe. At the time, it specifically looked to send conscripted men from the home front to the warfront after they had been promised that it would not happen. Even fearful of the political consequences, the Prime Minister resisted sending more Canadians overseas as long as he could.[19] Reports from Breendonk could leave no doubt as to the viciousness of the enemy, and the need for Canada, with the Allies, to end Nazi Germany's terror.

In addition to the justification for the war, the atrocities of Breendonk led some to reflect on the postwar world. A few were adamant that the suffering inflicted there should lead to postwar prosecutions. Shapiro ended one of his articles arguing that: "There is enough evidence here to make a ghastly re-enactment one day in the Allied tribunals for war criminals."[20] Some were imagining postwar re-education of the Germans, even while recognizing it would not be an easy task. An editorial in the Ottawa *Evening Citizen* called for a "visible education" of Breendonk, and suggested that "[it]should include a documentary film of Breendonk with the crimes of Gestapo cruelty reconstructed. Hollywood cannot make this film. It has to be actual evidence. It should be shown in Germany, too, where many people will want to forget the nation's guilt."[21] Another editorial wholeheartedly agreed with the decision to turn Breendonk into a site of memory: "That museum in Breendonk should serve as an object lesson far into the future, showing not only what is possible in a war, but chiefly what the Germans are, and have been, capable of doing."[22]

Other articles and editorials focused on what non-Germans could learn from Breendonk. The *Windsor Daily Star* used Breendonk to warn that war is not glamorous, but also cautioned that isolationism is not the answer. Perhaps in response to the debates in Canada over sending more Canadian men overseas, or perhaps a retroactive attack against the appeasement mentality of governments in the 1930s, the editorial declared that

> Isolationism fattens on the theory that the people in one country are not concerned with the killing of soldiers in other parts of the world. Even if this were so, humanity cannot remain impervious to brutalities that shame its very name.[23]

Yet another editorial hoped that the suffering of those at Breendonk, and elsewhere, would command not just a measure of justice, but could be a call for a new humanitarianism:

> [The sufferings] of the victims could be saved futility and made of infinite value to the world's future. For the obligation they place on us is not merely to remember their pain in order that we might pursue and punish tormentors. It is the deeper and more enduring obligation to remember their suffering in order that we may save others from experiencing what they went through.[24]

SURVIVORS, REPORTERS AND SOLDIERS

These were the views expressed by Canadians, but the responses were, in fact, the product of an interaction. Liberation studies no longer treat the survivors as passive recipients of "freedom," but rather as complex agents who worked to shape their own destinies. What this historiography has not, perhaps, acknowledged is how different settings could lead to different experiences of liberation. It may seem that the story

of Breendonk cannot be compared to these other camps, as it was empty when discovered by the British. However, Canadian stories recorded with some amazement, and with general approval, how quickly prisoners and others returned to Breendonk to begin commemorations and plans to establish a permanent memorial. More specifically, some of the reporters spoke of personalized tours. A Canadian soldier mentioned by Halton at the beginning of his broadcast had been through Breendonk with Maquis guide. Halton also describes going through Breendonk, with a guide, "a girl of the resistance." L.S.B Shapiro, a Canadian soldier, wrote of how he walked through Breendonk "with a man who spent six excruciating months in this prison." [25]

These encounters served both sides. For the Canadians, and especially for the journalists, the guides were eyewitnesses who gave legitimacy and immediacy to the stories of the atrocities of Breendonk. But the survivors clearly wanted to tell their stories and organize commemorations. The Canadian reporters document an issue discussed by Bruno Benvindo in a detailed and insightful article on the memory history of Breendonk.[26] Already on 22 September 1944, less than three weeks after the discovery of the camp, a "National association of survivors (*rescapés*) of Breendonk" organized a service at the site of Breendonk.[27] When the survivors of Breendonk were telling their stories, occurring at the same time as they were identifying Belgian traitors, they were purging the enemy and honouring their dead. Moreover, by working with Canadian soldiers and the press, there could be additional benefits. Especially in those early days after the liberation of Belgium, it was known that the Western Allies would have some input into the transition back to Belgian civilian government. But would they try to limit the pursuit and prosecution of war criminals? Tours to Breendonk, and reporting on them, could be a way to harden the resolve of the Allies.

Halton refers specifically, as did others, to tours led by the members of the Resistance. In the turbulent months of September and October members of the Resistance wanted to assert their place in the new Belgium, even as Hubert Pierlot and others who had been in exile had no intention to hand over power. Perhaps, by controlling the narrative of Breendonk, by linking the suffering and sacrifice of the prisoners to the Resistance, these members of the resistance expected to raise their own profile in the eyes of the Western Allies and subsequent Belgian politics. [28]

The resistance would certainly have found an ally in Matthew Halton. According the Halton's biographer, "A constant echo in Matt's wartime journalism was the notion that nobility can spring out of what he called the 'ordure of war.'"[29] Matthew Halton discovered evidence of that nobility while visiting Breendonk:

> Breendonk prison is an obscene place, on the whole. But on the walls of many of the cells you can read an inspiring story of human greatness and courage. You can read the words that have been scratched on the wall by tortured and dying men. You can read

> things like this: "Long live England!" "Speed the victory!" "Russia and victory!" "Death to the Flemish traitors." "The dead will be avenged!" "I have been beaten, and bound, and my feet have been tortured. Long live the U.S.S.R.!"
>
> Here are some others: "God save us for peace and revenge!" "Pray to God and all will be given you!" "Long live the Tommies!" "God give me strength." (...). There in that place of evil memory you wonder for a moment if there's any hope for a world which can produce such monstrosities-and then you see those scrawling inscriptions on the walls, carved there by men and women-some of them are those of women-after tortures too hideous to describe-and you know, then, that while there are devils in some men there are gods in others. I have seldom been more moved by anything than by those scrawlings on the walls....[30]

Despite this sympathetic coverage, there is one group who are not featured in these stories. The Jews, who had been incarcerated there in the first two years are scarcely mentioned. Was this narrative suppressed? Matthew Halton does convey, in an almost incidental remark about a Jewish resistance fighter, that he had learned that Jews were victimized:

> The Germans had found [the Jewish prisoner's graffiti] and erased them—*and what they did to the Jew after that one can only guess*. But whatever they did, they had failed to break that Jew, because he had found a place, low down on the wall, hidden by his blanket, and he had carved the whole message again, in neat, even decorative characters.[31]

He also tells a rumoured story of Jews being buried alive at the bottom of a tree. Clearly, Halton had no difficulty emphasizing the victimization of the Jews. According to the historian Benvindo, from the perspective of Belgian memory history, the memory of the Jews was not suppressed in the immediate postwar period, but only somewhat later when it became government-driven, or "official."[32] Nevertheless, it would be unwise to suggest suppression when we do not have solid evidence of whether the reporters heard much about the Jewish phase. Whatever the case, Breendonk had raised awareness of Nazi atrocities, but not of the victimization of the Jews.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary historiography has gone beyond the well-known ghettos, and the well-known camps, and research projects have brought to light literally hundreds of little-known locations. It stands to reason, given the range of size, locations, and functions, that places of incarceration will have not just wartime trajectories that are both distinct and overlapping, but will also have distinct and overlapping experiences of liberation and commemoration. Although the liberated extermination camps in the east, and the well-known concentration camps in Germany such as Belsen, Buchenwald and Dachau have been examined for the impact they had on

Allied soldiers and for the ways in which journalists confronted the revelations, in this paper I argue that the dramatic site of Breendonk, discovered by Western Allies during the liberation of Belgium, already prompted evaluations and re-evaluations of the war, and human atrocities more generally. Although Breendonk was empty on its discovery, the former prisoners nevertheless quickly made Breendonk a site of memory for Belgian postwar political identities, and so it is not surprising that they worked to shape the responses of the Western Allies. Not all journalists showed the same acumen and passion of Matthew Halton, but to a greater or lesser degree the story of Breendonk became a symbol of Nazi atrocities in the two months after its discovery.

The power of that symbol lasted somewhat longer, too. In early 1945, the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) issued a report on German atrocities against civilians in Belgium, which was largely about Breendonk.[33] It includes the recommendation: "It is suggested that readers of this report visit the camp as it is impossible to convey the real atmosphere of this place on paper."[34] In early 1945, there was another flurry of articles about Breendonk, and another broadcast by Halton. He wrote to A.E. Powley, who oversaw the CBC's war correspondents: "Yes, I should do a follow-up on Breendonk, especially as so many people at home said aren't-these-atrocity-stories-all-propaganda."[35] Film footage that was taken at Breendonk became part of the evidence used by the prosecution at the Nuremberg trials.[36] The potency of Breendonk as an indictment of Nazi atrocities was apparent at the time, but largely disappeared from non-Belgian memory as the Western Allies and media encountered Buchenwald, and Belsen, and others like them. This paper challenges that disappearance in order to add nuance to the study of the liberation of the camps and of the western reactions to the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their supporters.

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_ View of prisoner graffiti scratched on the walls of Breendonk concentration camp, 1944-1945

(1) The broadcast is accessible at https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/audio/1.3626943, accessed 10 May 2024 (hereafter: Halton, "CBC broadcast").

(2) Stone, Dan, *The liberation of the camps: the end of the Holocaust and its aftermath,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, p. 65.

(3) See *Getuigen. Tussen Geschiedenis en Herinnering,* 132, 2021, for some recent literature.

(4) James Deem, for example, felt the need for an English-language volume for that reason. Deem, James, *The prisoners of Breendonk: personal histories from a World War II concentration camp,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. For an excellent summary of the history of the camp, based on a contribution entry to a German multi-volume history of the camps, see Markus, Meckl, "Le camp de transit de Breendonk," *Bulletin trimestriel de la Fondation Auschwitz,* 86(1), 2005, pp. 131-147.

(5) The questions are drawn from Stone, *Liberation* and Zeev W. Mankowitz, *The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied German: Life between Memory and Hope*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Feinstein, Margarete Myers, *Holocaust survivors in postwar Germany, 1945-1957,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010 and Celinscak, Mark, *Distance from the Belsen Heap: allied forces and the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

(6) Meckl, "Breendonk," p. 134.

(7) Meckl, "Breendonk," p. 147.

(8) The Canadian Jewish press, in English and especially Yiddish, gave more coverage to Majdanek than the non-Jewish mainstream press. See Goutor, David, "The Canadian media and the 'discovery' of the Holocaust, 1944-1945," *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canandiennes* 1996-1997(4-5), 88-119; for the differences in coverage, see Margolis, Rebecca, "A review of the Yiddish media: responses of the Jewish immigrant community in Canada," in L. Ruth Klein (ed.), *Nazi Germany, Canadian responses: confronting antisemitism in the shadow of war*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012.

(9) Frisse, Ulrich, "The "Bystanders' perspective": *the Toronto Daily Star* and its coverage of the persecution of Jews and the Holocaust in Canada, 1933-1945," *Yad Vashem Studies,* 39(1), 2011, p. 213-243.

(10) From 21 April 1945, as cited in Goutor, "Canadian media," p. 94.

(11) Halton, David, *Dispatches from the front: Matthew Halton, Canada's voice at war*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2014, p. 234.

(12) Shapiro, L.S.B., "Belgian martyrs of Gestapo rule parade to former torture scene," *The Gazette* (Montreal), 27 September 1944, p. 9 and Shapiro, L.S.B., "Camp in Belgium Nazi Sadism Proof," *The Gazette* (Montreal), 9 October 1944, p. 21.

(13) Editorial, *The Winnipeg Tribune*, 17 October 1944, p. 5.

(14) Editorial, *The Gazette* (Montreal), 18 October 1944, p. 8.

(15) Halton, "CBC broadcast".

(16) Blakely, Arthur, "Evidence found in Brussels flats of hidden tortures of Gestapo, *The Gazette* (Montreal), 17 October 1944, pp. 13-14.

(17) Halton, "CBC broadcast." Emphasis mine.

(18) Newspapers in the largest cities (Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver) and smaller centres (e.g. Carbon Alberta) summarized the Halton broadcast, focusing almost completely on his descriptions of the atrocities.

(19) For a brief summary of the issues, in its longer Canadian context, see Iarocci, Andrew and Keshen, Jeff, *A nation in conflict: Canada and the two world wars,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015, pp. 38-40.

(20) Shapiro, "Belgian Martyrs," p. 9

(21) "Editorial," *Evening Citizen* (Ottawa), 17 November 1944, p. 24.

(22) "Editorial," *The Windsor Daily Star*, 5 October 1944, p. 4.

(23) "Editorial," *The Windsor Daily Star*, 5 October 1944, p. 4.

(24) "Editorial, *The Gazette* (Montreal), 18 October 1944, p. 8.

(25) Shapiro, "Belgian Martyrs," p. 9.

(26) Benvindo, Bruno, "Les autorités du passé: mémoires (in)disciplinées du camp de Breendonk, 1944-2010," *Journal of Belgian History* 42(2/3), 2012, p. 48-77.

(27) Benvindo, "Les autorités du passé," p. 59.

(28) Conway, Martin, "The end(s) of memory: memories of the Second World War in Belgium," *Journal of Belgian* History, 42(2/3), 2012, p. 175.

(29) Halton, *Matthew Halton*, p. 212.

(30)Halton, "CBC broadcast" .

(31) Halton, "CBC broadcast, " my emphasis.

(32) Benvindo, "Autorités," p. 57-8.

(33) Headquarters 21 Army Group, *Report on atrocities committed by the Germans against the civilian population of Belgium* (February, 1945).

(34) *Report on atrocities*, p. 11.

(35) Halton to Powley, 6 January 1945, cited in Connor Sweazey, "Broadcasting Canada's War: How the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Reported the Second World War," M.A. thesis, University of Calgary (2017), p. 136.

(36) "Nazi Concentration Camps-Prosecution Exhibit # 230," accessed at https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1000183, 1 July 2024.