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America's Freedom Charter

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America's Freedom Charter The Declaration Comes to Grand Valley

By Ralph Hauenstein

I had an experience while the exhibit was on at the Ford Museum last week. I was with a friend of mine talking about the Declaration of Independence and suddenly a little girl tugging at her mother's dress looked at me and said, "Did he know Thomas Jefferson?"

I didn't know Jefferson... but I sure knew Washington.

Really this is a very exciting opportunity -- to see the Declaration of Independence -- and I hope it will allow us to become acquainted and reacquainted with the Declaration. After all, in a real sense it's your document, your freedom charter, the freedom charter of all of America. We are truly blessed because of that in this country.

I would like to tell you about an experience during the later part of the war -- an incident to show what happens when you lose your freedom.

We had thought that Mr. Hitler was in the town of Berchtesgaden and I was in charge of a team to go up and see if we could locate the man. Well, we got to 31 and a third and not far away was the infamous Dachau concentration camp. We went in to liberate that camp and it was terrible -- you can't imagine.

It was the first of the concentration camps that were built Germany in 1933 and it held, initially, a few political prisoners and others that didn't deserve to be there, only about 8,000 people total. (At one time it held 60,000 people.)

When we liberated the camp, there were 30,000. The people in the camp walked in prison uniforms but had nothing but deep, hollow eyes. I thought when we first got there that they would probably rush out and say "I'm free." But instead they stood around in fear.

As we walked through the camp -- or dashed through the camp sometimes -- we would go to a place, a huge room with hundreds and hundreds of bodies in line. Here some prisoners would take these bodies one by one, put a device down through the mouth of the individual to get gold from his teeth, and then put him in the furnace. They never stopped. They didn't know what they were doing.

They were also prisoners even though they were guards.

No one really knew what freedom was. They had lost it. Innocent people -- these were not men of war or women of war. They were perfectly innocent people who had lost their freedom because they did not know how to protect it.

A man came along, a young man perhaps his early 20's. He had no clothes on. I noticed he was wet and I found out that he had barely escaped from being drowned in a trial. The legal core of Germans would put men under water to test how long they could stay under water, and at what temperature they became unconscious. He had already been placed under water and unconscious twice and he didn't know it, it came out later, but the third time was going to test how long he could stay under before he drowned.

I probably could go on for hours telling you about these things, but the point is when you lose your freedom you don't know what you've lost.

Later, we left [Dachau] and went to another small camp of women. These women were also in an absolutely terrible state of affairs, and I don't think that any of us came away with hands that weren't bleeding. The women were so tight and so gaunt that with their fingernails, they'd scratch our hands and kiss our hands to be liberated. I shouldn't go on with this anymore.

Though this happened nearly three score years ago, it's just as vivid as though it were yesterday to me. It's a reminder that we really cannot take freedom for granted. It is my hope that when you see the Declaration of Independence inside, that your appreciation for freedom will be rekindled and that your patriotic feelings for America are renewed. In the end, our nation's destiny depends upon us here, right now.

I would like to recall a statement made by Benjamin Franklin after he had finished all of his work. A woman had asked him, "Mr. Franklin, what have you men wrought?" And he said, "A republic if you can keep it." I think that challenge made over 200-years ago is relevant today. And I want each of you to take good measure to be sure that it's kept that way.

God bless you all and thank you.



An original Dunlap printing of the Declaration of Independence, made on the night of July 4, 1776, on display at the Seidman House.