

The Wounds of War. A Memory of Thayer Greene: Concentration Camp Liberator, Chaplain and Psychoanalyst¹

By Nick Grabbe²

Private Thayer Greene had just turned 19 when he entered the city of Nordhausen as his regiment's lead scout. It was 11th April 1945. He had already experienced the terror of enemy soldiers shooting at him, and on this day he would witness the horror of mass murder.

He expected to get machine-gunned at any moment. As he carefully entered the city, he saw a man coming toward him in a uniform he didn't recognize. He raised his rifle, but lowered it after seeing no weapon. The man, a walking skeleton, approached, fell to his knees and kissed Greene's feet. "Freiheit! Freiheit! Freiheit!" he cried. That's German for "Freedom!"

Greene had stumbled on the site of a concentration camp that had been abandoned by German soldiers as the Allies advanced. At the time, American soldiers knew nothing about the camps that the Nazis had created all over Europe.

When he died in 2022 at the age of 95, Thayer Greene was one of the last living liberators of concentration camps. When his fellow soldiers entered the camp at Nordhausen in central Germany, they encountered an estimated 1,300 bodies of prisoners who had been shot or starved to death.

"You could smell it", Greene recalled in a 2019 interview. "The shit, the disease and despair. It was the worst, a picture of hell."

Every Memorial Day, Greene remembered the soldiers who didn't make it out of the Second World War alive. In his regiment, the average number of days a soldier was in combat before getting killed or wounded was twenty-eight. Greene survived combat for one hundred days.

"I've visited military cemeteries in Europe, and it shocks me into awareness as I see the rows of white crosses and stars of David", he said. "I'm not among them. I'm alive

¹ The original version of this article was published by the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* on 24th May 24 2019.

² Nick Grabbe had a 40-year career as a newspaper editor and writer. He is retired and lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

and breathing. I've had a wife and kids and several careers. These soldiers' lives and deaths counted because they risked everything to make the world a somewhat safer place. I felt an imperative to make my life count."

Visiting the cemeteries moved Greene to see his life in relation to the soldiers who had died. He asked himself how he could express his own commitment to freedom. "My life journey has been a response to that question", he said.

After the war, Greene attended Amherst College, went to seminary, and became a chaplain at the college and a pastor at First Congregational Church in Amherst. In the early 1960s, he became a psychoanalyst. Into his nineties, he still saw patients.

"My life is a paradox", he said. "At 18, I was trained to kill Germans. In my career as a therapist and healer, I spend my days healing damaged human beings. I am an instrument of life, but for a brief but horrible time I was an instrument of death."

Nordhausen was the site of the Dora-Mittelbau slave labour camp, where prisoners of war were forced to manufacture the V-2 missile. This "vengeance weapon" was fired into London and Antwerp near the end of the war to retaliate for Allied bombing, and caused thousands of deaths.

The prisoners of Dora-Mittelbau died too, while making the weapons. It's estimated that a third of the prisoners died as they toiled in tunnels dug into a mountain to protect the site from Allied bombers.

When American soldiers arrived on the scene of the camp, they took photographs that became among the best-known testaments to Nazi crimes. The soldiers ordered the citizens of Nordhausen to bury the dead. A doctor who stayed to help those who were still alive had a mental breakdown, and his daughter wrote a book about the trauma of camp liberators called "Gated Grief."

Greene was in Nordhausen for only two or three hours, and said he would have had a breakdown too if he had stayed there longer. Instead, his division was called away to join in a pincer movement that resulted in the encirclement and surrender of an estimated 317,000 German soldiers in a battle known as the Ruhr Pocket. The war was nearing an end.

He had vivid memories of his other war experiences, such as running to avoid bullets from machine guns. He remembered thinking, "They're trying to kill me, and they don't even know me!" In one near-death experience, he was in the woods as German artillery fire cut down his fellow soldiers while he curled up in a foetal ball. "There was not an ounce of heroism in me" in that barrage, he said.

Greene also witnessed rape, pillage and murder of civilians by American soldiers. "I looked on the face of evil and saw how profoundly ugly it is", he said.

Did he kill anyone? "The honest answer is yes", he said. "I directed artillery fire on Germans. I never saw them up close, but I saw the shells exploding and bodies dropping."

Still, he saw the Second World War as a just war. He recalled writing to his parents that he hated war even as he was making war, but felt a duty to be there. "I have found something worse than war", he remembered writing.

It's said that there are no atheists in foxholes, and although Greene's father and grandfathers were ministers, he emerged from the war an agnostic. He enrolled in Amherst College, intending to start living a normal life. While there, he went to France for an international exchange, and met a young Prussian count who had a profound impact on Greene's life.

The count's imposing name was Friedrich Werner Erich Rutger Graf von der Schulenberg. As "Fiete" and Greene talked, they realized that they had both fought in a battle in Cologne. "We may well have been shooting at each other, which added energy to our meeting", Greene said.

Back at Amherst College, he convinced the dean to invite Fiete to enrol as a student, as a gesture of reconciliation with Germany. The two friends wound up traveling cross-country together, and Greene came to think of Fiete as a brother. Greene became godfather to one of Fiete's sons.

His friendship with a former enemy made it easier for him to recover from the traumas of war, he said. Although Fiete died at 39, the two men's children graduated from Amherst College in the same year.

Greene was greatly influenced by the chaplain of Amherst College, and while attending attended Union Theological Seminary in New York, he studied under theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. He came back to Amherst to be assistant chaplain at the college and an associate minister at First Congregational Church.

In 1954, he became chaplain at the college and acting pastor at the church, which then had 850 members. He enjoyed working with individuals and groups, but the stress and time commitment became too much. And by 1960, he and his wife Anita had three daughters.

Greene stayed at First Church for nine years and at Amherst College for five. During a six-month sabbatical, he went to New York and was exposed to the work of Carl Jung. He decided to make a career change at 36, and went through five years of training to become a psychoanalyst.

Greene describes Jung's approach this way: "It's an exploration of the symbolic life of the unconscious which, as it becomes conscious, teaches us how to live lives with more self-awareness." Jung famously wrote, "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

It wasn't until the late 1970s that Greene realized that he hadn't fully processed his trauma from the war. He was aware of being frightened by thunder and lightning, which was, like combat, "explosive energy beyond human control", he said. But he hadn't confronted this fear.

By then he had become a practicing psychoanalyst, but that was not the modality through which he finally confronted his time as a soldier.

At a visit to Esalen Institute in California in 1977, he experienced dreams of earthquakes, tornadoes and volcanoes. He realized that he had locked away his terrors. But with expert guidance, he found a safe place to relive the shelling he had survived in the war, screaming, crying and ultimately coming to terms with his feelings of terror.

"It felt like someone had lifted a secret weight off my heart and mind", he said.

He encourages veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to seek help. "Don't put it in a bottle and close it, because it will explode", he said.

Greene felt determined to make a difference in his own life. That meant "transforming darkness into light, murder into healing, fear and terror into joy and laughter, hatred into capacity for intimate relationships", he said.

For fifty-nine years, he helped patients deal with afflictions such as anxiety attacks, rage, inability to be angry, fear of failure and lack of self-assertion. He said he's been able to go much deeper with people than he could have if he had remained a parish minister.

He gave lectures with titles such as "The Many Faces of Hate and Alienation", "Modern Man in Search of Manhood", and "On Being a Couple." He led a workshop called "Satan and Psyche: The Ego's Encounter with the Experience of Evil."

He attended Sunday services at First Congregational Church in Amherst, and gave occasional sermons there, at which he advised parishioners to say “thank you” every day and be “regularly surprised by grace.”

He followed every Boston Red Sox game, and was a fan for seventy years before he saw them win a championship in 2004. He saw patients in his study, which was lined with books such as *The Great Cosmic Mother* and *Pilgrimage of the Heart*. The *Bible* and the *I Ching* stood next to each other.

His wife Anita, also a psychoanalyst, used the same space to see patients.

Asked to describe his view of faith, Greene said, “I feel a deep experience of a transpersonal presence that doesn’t need flesh and blood to have meaning and power and wisdom.”

Greene never had any plans to retire. “Why retire when you love what you do?” he said. “And I’m getting pretty good at it. It keeps me alive, and I feel the creative resources of a fulfilling life, and am stimulated every day.”

Asked how he approaches the end of his long and eventful life, Greene joked that he was keeping all his options open.

Every Memorial Day, Greene remembered his brief time in the war and reflected on how it shaped him. “Once you’re exposed to combat, it’s an experience that stays with you the rest of your life”, he said.