

Fr. Michael Gerard Morrison, S.J. World War 2 Hero of Belsen

by John M. Leonard

During World War 2 (1939-1945) twenty-one Irish Jesuits volunteered to join the British Army to serve as Catholic chaplains. Amongst these brave men was a neighbour of mine from Ballysimon, County Limerick – Fr. Michael Gerard Morrison, S.J.

Although born in Listowel, County Kerry on October 5, 1908 he grew up in Ballysimon – a member of the well-known Morrison family (Morrison's Pub) – the family having relocated to Limerick in the early twentieth century. During his early years in Ballysimon the future Jesuit and war hero attended C.B.S., Sexton Street and Mungret College. As well as distinguishing himself academically he excelled at sport, especially hurling where he won an O'Mara Cup medal with Mungret Junior team in 1923. He later transferred his hurling skills to the famous rugby nursery, Belvedere College, where he taught as a Scholastic in the 1930's.

Having completed his secondary education he entered the Society of Jesus at Tullabeg, County Offaly on September 1, 1925, continuing his Jesuitical studies at Rathfarnham Castle and Milltown Park, interspersed with periods as a Scholastic at both Belvedere College and his alma mater, Mungret College (1933-36).

He was ordained to the priesthood at Milltown Park, Dublin in 1939 and completed his tertianship at Rathfarnham Castle (1940-41). In 1941 he joined the British Army – one of the first to volunteer – and served as military chaplain in Egypt in 1941 with the Eighth Army and he was present at the Fall of Tunis where he met another Irish Jesuit, the tall, lanky Fr. Conal Murphy, S.J. who incidentally taught me Irish at the old Crescent College, Limerick on his return from the war. As well as his normal duties as Catholic chaplain, Fr. Morrison gave counsel to the soldiers irrespective of their religion or creed.

In April 1945, Fr. Morrison was serving with the 32nd Casualty Clearing Unit in Northern Germany when a state of emergency was declared at a concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen, near Hanover. The German troops had called a truce and

handed over the camp to the British, which included Fr. Morrison's unit.

They reached Bergen-Belsen on April 17, 1945 to be confronted with the most horrific and ghastly conditions – indescribable – as if one had entered Hades (Hell). This camp was known as the "Horror" Camp, containing about 60,000 inmates, made up of political prisoners consisting of Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Jugoslavs, Greeks, Romanians, Ukrainians, French, Belgians, Dutch, Italians, Soviets, Jews and others classified as gypsies and homosexuals. Thousands of bodies, dead and dying, littered the ground. The death rate was over 1,000 per day because of starvation, dysentery and tuberculosis. Typhus was rampant and the Germans were unable to handle this disease.

Fr. Morrison's first ten days in the camp were spent anointing the dead and the dying at the rate of 300 a day, with just two short breaks for meals. As Fr. Morrison faced his tasks in the camp nothing but barbarity awaited him and the liberating troops as they arrived to confront a 'living hell'. Lieutenant-Colonel R.I.G. Taylor, the Commanding Officer of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, described the unimaginable landscape:

"A great number of them (the inmates) were little more than living skeletons with haggard yellowish faces. Most of the men wore a striped pyjama-type of clothing, others wore rags, while women wore striped flannel gowns or any other clothing they had managed to acquire. Many of them were without shoes and wore only socks and stockings. There were men and women lying in heaps on both sides of the track. Others were walking slowly and aimlessly about – a vacant expression on their starved faces".

According to another army Lieutenant (Moore) the scenes he witnessed were beyond human comprehension.

For Fr. Morrison, his posting to Bergen-Belsen's "Horror" Camp changed his life radically – he would never be the same again because of the horrors he witnessed. At 37 years of age he displayed incredible



Fr Morrison, S.J.

courage but suffered to the detriment of his health. He returned from the war a broken man, plagued by ill-health, the dastardly acts of war swirling demon-like around his head. He seldom spoke of the distressing trials he experienced at Belsen, it would upset him too much, only sharing his story with those closest to him.

After days of constantly ad nauseam anointing the sick and dying, on Sunday, April 22, Fr. Morrison decided to celebrate Mass for the first time in the camp but a torrential downpour threatened its cancellation. However, the congregation (inmates) would not hear of it. The Mass went ahead and the enthusiasm and vigorous singing of those present was a source of some joy for Fr. Michael, who celebrated Mass each day afterwards.

A Polish priest from Cracow, Fr. Stanislaus Kadizolka, built up a friendship with his Irish Confrère and assisted him in his duties of praying over the dead and dying. The Polish priest was a prisoner of war in the camp.

Those exterminated by the Nazis during the war totalled eleven million – broken down as follows:

European Jews – 6 million
 Soviet Prisoners of War – 3 million
 Polish Catholics – 3 million
 Serbians – 700,000
 Gypsies – 250,000
 Germans (Political & Religious
 dissidents) – 80,000
 Handicapped Germans – 70,000
 Homosexuals – 12,000
 Jehovah's Witnesses – 2,500

After demobilisation, Fr. Morrison was sent by his Superiors to Australia where he taught at Riverview College and St. Aloysius' College, Milson's Point in Sydney and also served in St. Ignatius Church, Richmond as pastoral assistant.

In 1958 he returned to Europe and spent two years as a teacher, again in Mungret College. He then moved to the Holy Name Parish, Manchester for pastoral work where he counselled people who had also suffered in the war. At the end of 1963 Fr. Morrison returned to Ireland and served as College Bursar at Belvedere College until his health declined in 1972.

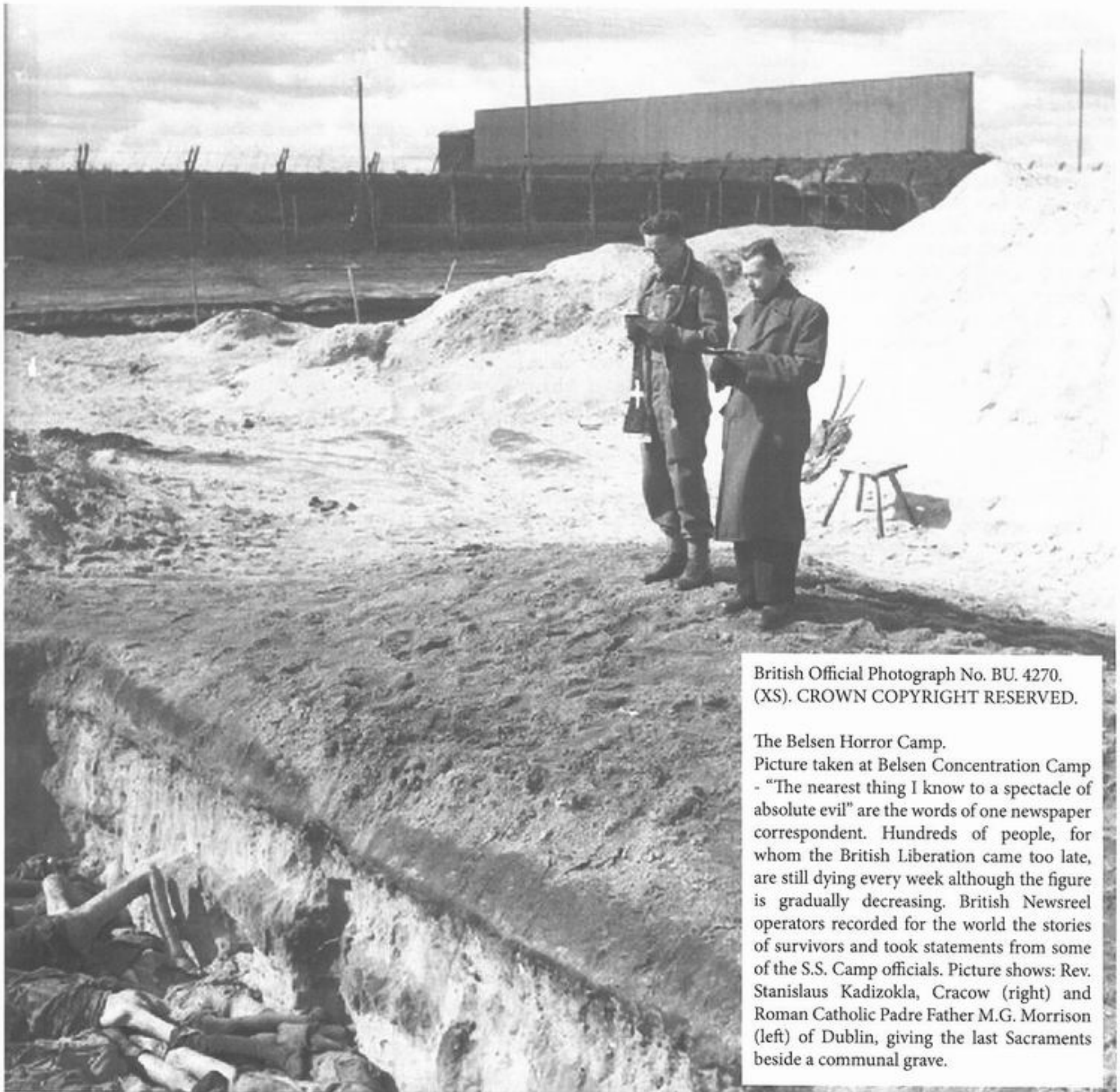
Horrible dictu, he suffered a series of strokes and he sadly passed away in Jervis

St. Hospital on April 7, 1973, aged 65.

Michael Morrison, war hero, saw ministry across three continents and was a man of strong principles. He was loyal to his duties as a Jesuit priest and courageous in his experiences of the horrors of war and, in his early days, a fine sportsman – a hurler of repute who would have been a keen supporter of Limerick hurling during the Mackey era especially.

Finally, I reproduce two letters written by Fr. Morrison:

- (i) to his Jesuit Provincial in Dublin;
- (ii) to his sister Nora Bermingham, Milltown, Ballysimon.



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The Belsen Horror Camp.
 Picture taken at Belsen Concentration Camp - "The nearest thing I know to a spectacle of absolute evil" are the words of one newspaper correspondent. Hundreds of people, for whom the British Liberation came too late, are still dying every week although the figure is gradually decreasing. British Newsreel operators recorded for the world the stories of survivors and took statements from some of the S.S. Camp officials. Picture shows: Rev. Stanislaus Kadizokla, Cracow (right) and Roman Catholic Padre Father M.G. Morrison (left) of Dublin, giving the last Sacraments beside a communal grave.

Letter to his sister, Nora Bermingham in Ballysimon, Co Limerick.

Rev. M. G. Morrison, S.J.,
32 (Br) CCS,
B.L.A.

11-5-45

My dearest Nor,

Just a line to let you know I am still alive, though pretty tired. Since I came here over three weeks ago I have been in one hectic swirl of work. The first ten days I spent anointing the dying, with only short breaks for meals. Some days I think I managed to anoint up to three hundred, but even then I am afraid many died without the sacraments.

I forgot to mention that I am in Belsen concentration camp. There has been quite a lot about it recently on the B.B.C. It has also been very thoroughly filmed and photographed, but I expect the photos would not be published in Irish papers. I have seen some of the photos which appeared in English papers, but they do not reproduce anything like the real horror of the place. When we got here there were some thousands of naked dead bodies lying about the place. In one pile alone there were over a thousand women's bodies and it was quite common to see people crawl on their hands and knees because they were too weak to walk, while others just dropped to the ground and remained there. There were sixty thousand people crowded into an area of much less than a square mile. Some of the huts in which they lived had bunks. It was not uncommon to find three people in one bunk - one or more of whom were dead. Huts which could accommodate thirty were made to hold five to seven hundred.

The death rate for the first few days we were here must have been nearly a thousand a day. Typhus was raging, but starvation accounted for most deaths. The food for the internees was half a litre of turnip a day and a loaf of bread between six once a day.

So far I have buried over fifteen thousand and I have not been able to attend all funerals, as I considered the dying more important than the dead. Those fifteen thousand did not take up much of my time as ten graves held up to five thousand bodies each.

I must finish and write to Birdie, I have not written to her since Lent.

Very best wishes to self and Dave.

Your affectionate brother,

Mick

Dear Provincial,

It is time I gave you some account of my work since I came to Belsen Concentration Camp. This place has been receiving quite a lot of publicity on the B.B.C. and English papers of late. I have seen some of the pictures reproduced in the papers but they fall very short of giving a proper idea of the horror of this place. What we met with in the first few days is utterly beyond description. In an earlier letter I think I mentioned that in my first cursory look round the camp I saw fifteen hundred dead bodies. That was a very much underestimated guess (...)

In the first ten days my work was just anointing the dying with short breaks for meals. I find it very hard to give an idea of how many I did anoint but on some days I must have got close on three hundred. There is still more than we can cope with. A second chaplain arrived about a week ago with a general hospital. We are now setting up hospitals and this C.C.S. which normally has two hundred beds is now looking after seven thousand. The patients are housed in a German military barracks quite close to the concentration camp. When we can get accommodation ready we expect to have fifteen to seventeen thousand patients. A number of German doctors and nurses are being roped in to help but the staff is still absurdly inadequate. Even at present we have more sick than all hospitals in 21 Army Group had at their highest peak point. Add to this the language difficulty and you have some idea of the chaos. We have Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Russians, French, Belgians, Dutch etc.

The work here has been physically the most revolting that I have been called on to do but it has also been the most consoling. Even if I had done no other work since I joined up I consider my four years in the army were worthwhile.

Very best wishes

Yours sincerely in XI

M. G. Morrison

(From Fr. Michael Morrison S.J. to Provincial. Irish Jesuit Archives CHP2/29 (unpublished), 11 May 1945)

John Martin Leonard is a Peace Commissioner and retired company director and is married with five children. He was brought up on a farm at Peafield House, Ballysimon, County Limerick. John was educated at Monaleen N.S., Crescent College, S.J., St. Munchin's College Limerick and University College Dublin and University College Cork. He is interested in politics, world affairs, history, art, travel and sport (especially Limerick hurling and Munster rugby).