

YANK

THE ARMY



WEEKLY

May 18, 1945; page 4

BUCHENWALD CAMP

BUCHENWALD, GERMANY—At Buchenwald concentration camp I saw bake ovens. Instead of being used to bake bread, they were used to destroy people. They were in a most efficient cellar equipped at its door with a sliding board down which victims could be slipped to eventual destruction.

There were various stories about how the victims were knocked out before they were “baked,” and I saw one club which was undoubtedly used for that purpose. There was also a table where gold fillings were removed from the teeth of skulls.

There were long steel stretchers on which the prisoners, often still alive, were rolled into the stinking heat of the ovens. I don't know how far German efficiency went, but I'm sure the heat from so much good coke and so many tons of sizzling flesh could not have been wasted. Perhaps it was circulated through asbestos pipes to warm the quarters of the SS guards.

The Germans were not complete beasts about their bake ovens. They had an inspiring four-line stanza painted on a signboard in the cellar. The stanza explains that man does not want his body to be eaten by worms and insects; he prefers the purifying oblivion of flame.

Before purification the prisoners lived in barrackslike structures about 200 feet long. On either side of the buildings are four layers of shelves about five feet deep and three feet apart. Two-by-fours, spaced five feet apart, cut these building-long shelves into compartments. The final compartment is about five feet wide, five feet deep, two or three feet high.

In each of these compartments, the Germans put six men—or seven when, as was normal, the camp was crowded. And, remarkably enough, there is room for six or seven men. After all, a man whose thighs are no bigger around than my forearm doesn't take up much room.

The stench of such a place became something to dread on a hot spring afternoon. Vomit and urine and feces and foul breath and rotting bodies mingled their odors—the smell of 1,500 men in a single room half again or at most twice as long as one of our model barracks back home—barracks which today are housing many German PWs.

THIS camp is a thing that has to be seen to be believed, and even then the charred skulls and pelvic bones in the furnaces seem too enormous a crime to be accepted fully. It can't mean that they actually put human beings—some of them alive—into these furnaces and destroyed them like this.

But it means just that.

The camp used to be well guarded to keep the townspeople away, but they couldn't have lived in ignorance or innocence of what was going on here. Many of the prisoners worked in the nearby Weimar factories. They collapsed of hunger at their benches and no one asked why. They died along the road on the long walk back to camp and no one expressed surprise. The good citizens of Weimar shut their eyes and their ears and their nostrils to the sight and the sound and the smell of this place.

—Cpl. HOWARD KATZANDER

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