"The Lost Soldiers of Stalag IX-B"

By Roger Cohen
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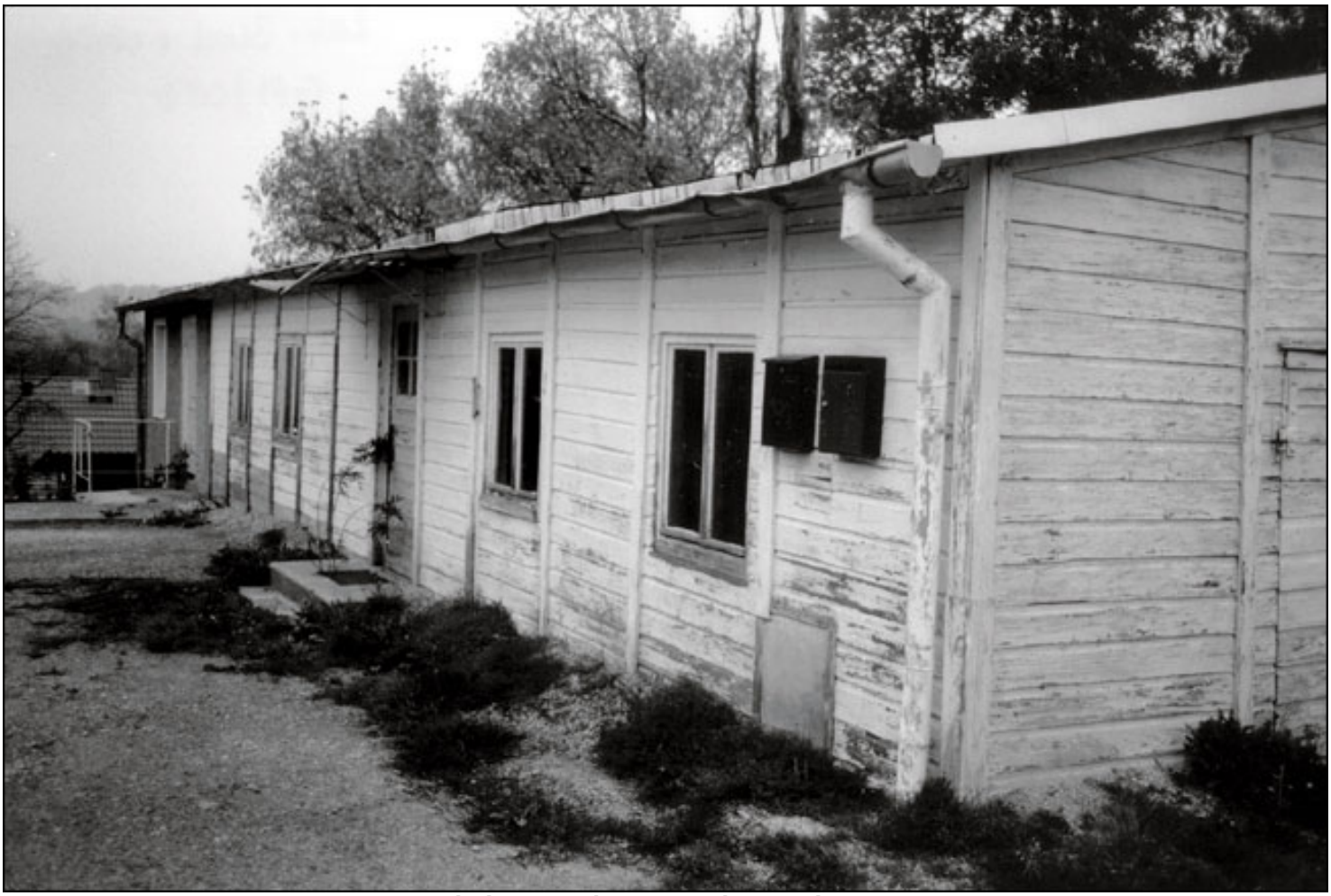
On the European front in the last months of World War 11, the Nazis sent 350 U.S. Army prisoners of war to work in a concentration camp in eastern Germany. First on the list were all, the American Jews they could find.



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Berga Today: The last remaining barracks of the Berga concentration camp, which held 350 American prisoners transferred from Stalag IX-B. Berga appears on a few maps of the time; after the war, the camp's very existence was denied.

Methodical by nature, disciplined in what he eats, William J. Shapiro is a measured man. He keeps his affairs ordered, his body trim. His house, built upon retirement from a career as an obstetrician, is on a Florida golf course, and every now and again a ball comes screening in. But there are few other disturbances. He and his wife, in one of the gated communities that fan out across

Florida. The streets are quiet and secure. In the garages, electric bikes flank sports utility vehicles with global positioning systems. He strives to stay active. At dawn and at dusk, when the heat is not overwhelming, pale figures may be seen trundling in their golf carts through the streets, bordered by lawns of prickly Bermuda grass and hibiscus trees. The journey to this air-conditioned existence beneath the palms and beside the fairways has been long: from the tenements of New York to these plush bungalows, from chicken soup to seared salmon with arugula, from the struggle to make it to the difficulty of spending it. Here, at last, beneath a cloudless sky, all is in order.

But for the last few years, Shapiro, 79, has been having nightmares. By now, they are predictable enough. He is running, trapped, having orders barked at him. When he awakens, his wife asks him, "Are the Nazis still chasing you?" They try to laugh about it. A long time has passed, after all. But for much of that time, the memory was repressed. Dr. Shapiro did not want to think about the experiences of Private Shapiro of the 28th In-fantry Division. He did not want to tell the story~ because to tell it, he would have to relive it.

He was an American G.I. who was captured by the Germans and had a bad break, but that was not a big deal, or so he told himself, and so he told his children when they asked, which they stopped doing after a while because they knew the questions would be met with evasion or silence. To get on with life meant to move forward. That was what he did at war's end. It was possible to push a season in hell so far back it seemed not to have existed. It was possible to forget the name of a soldier found dead beside you one morning. But then a car door slams and it sounds like a rifle shot and one knee is already on the ground, legs moving by instinct. Insects flattened on a windshield summon images of huddled bodies, each with a bullet through the head, scattered on a road to no-where in 1945. His skull throbs. The bitter season's harvest is perennial. It returns now and Shapiro tries, but fails, to stifle a sob.

"There were fights, arguments over food, we were screaming at one an-other, reduced to animals," he says, struggling for composure. "The Nazis made us slaves. You had no pride, couldn't even feel for another person. You could not be moral. The buddy system, all that broke down.

Shapiro sees the G.I.'s, 350 of them, selected by the Germans for extermination because they were Jews, or looked like Jews, or were deemed "troublemakers" or were just grabbed at random because the Nazis needed slave labor late in a lost war, and European Jews were already dead by the millions and those not yet slaughtered were too weak to work; he sees the Americans, in a place they could not comprehend, an ephemeral little hell for which they had no preparation or instruction, a Nazi concentration camp at Berga, in the east of Germany, too small to appear on most World War II maps; sees the bedraggled men, privates in their late teens or early 20's, fighting over crumbs, chewing pieces of wood or charcoal to try to stanch diarrhea, eating snow, coughing blood from throats lacerated by rock shards in the mines where they labored, slipping away in the night without a word. People who die of hunger and thirst die in silence. Either you strangle that memory or it strangles you. The shame of survival is sometimes too much to bear.

The atmosphere is suddenly more brittle in this high-ceilinged Florida room. The ceiling fans still turn. The sprinklers on the golf course still glint in the sunlight. The air-conditioners still hum. But Germany is now present, and the doctor's eyes are filled with tears.

Many Germans clamor for closure on the Holocaust, a final accounting, a resolution, as the 60th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe, in May, approaches. If they do not say, "Enough," they think it. Guilt cannot be inherited, like some family heirloom, even if consciousness of the guilt of their forebears cannot be erased. They bite their lips to stop that word — "enough" — coming out; they know that if they raise their chins even an inch, someone will push them down again.

But is it not reasonable to demand this Schiufistrich, this closure, now that the Nazi perpetrators are already dead or will be soon? It is reasonable. But memory is not linear and reason has little purchase on it. The crimes of the Nazis have taken a tortuous course through the psyches of survivors.

As Primo Levi observed, "The injury cannot be healed: it extends through time." In this moment, such injury inhabits this Florida

bungalow.

Mordecai Hauer is seated at the polished wooden dining table in his modest house in Queens, N.Y. On his arm is an Auschwitz tattoo — A9092. His father, who did not come back, was A9091. His little brother, Emerich, also murdered, was A9094. His mother, Camilla, never got a number. She went straight to the gas when they arrived at Auschwitz from Hungary in the early Sumner of 1944, although for years Hauer refused to accept her death. He looks at me with his big frank pale eyes, as if to say: that is the way life was, once, a long way from this placid out-er New York borough.

At 79, a retired teacher, Hauer is the same age as Shapiro. His obsession has been less with what the Nazis did to him than with the fate of his moth-er. For decades, the thought gnawed at him that he had no photograph, not a single image, of Camilla. So some years after the cold war ended, he placed an advertisement in a local paper of Goncz, Hungary, his birth-place, offering $200 to anyone with a photograph of her and returned to the little town for the first time in more than 50 years. He did not go into his house. What would he say? He had learned to let go. It is important to let go sometimes. Memories can be useless. But they can also devour you. He did not find a photograph of his mother. Nobody had one.

"She vanished without trace," Hauer says. And what, I ask him, of Ber-ga, a concentration camp that did its own disappearing act after the war? What of the camp where Hauer ended up after surviving Auschwitz and encountered, to his amazement, hundreds of G.I.'s in February 1945, Americans lost in the labyrinth of the Holocaust?

"Shabby and small," he says. "It seemed makeshift. Not as permanent as Auschwitz-Birkenau, or even the green transfer blocks at Buchenwald where I had also been, but the same sort of barracks as at the other camps. There were tunnels being mined there in the hill. The drilling work ripped out our insides, but fortunately I was not in the tunnels often; I worked smashing rock."

It was a week after his arrival at Berga that Hauer saw a group of about 50 men in green uniforms being marched across the White Elster River, accompanied by guards. Half of them were assigned to

work inside the tunnels, and two came to work in Tunnel 7, where Hauer was. He soon overheard them speaking in a language he had not heard before, but as-sumed to be English.

"Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" he asked — Do you speak German?

"No Deitsch," said one soldier. Hauer noticed the whiteness of the man's teeth.

"You England?"

"No, America."

Hauer was astonished. America! To him, it was a faraway country, the land of cowboys and Niagara Falls. It had captured his imagination as a child. Yet here in a concentration camp beside a provincial German town were Americans working as slaves for the Nazis.

During the brief lunch break, Hauer sat with the Americans. He noticed that their jackets had zippers rather than buttons; he also noted their leather boots. Some of the European Jewish prisoners had to make do with wrapping their feet in rags. When one of the American prisoners un-zipped his jacket, Hauer glimpsed a small, gold Star of David on a chain.

"Du Ivri?" he asked, using a Hebrew word for a Jew.

"Ivri?"

Hauer tried again. "Dt~ Yid?"

'Tid! Ich Yid!" the American exclaimed, pointing to the star. "Du Yid?" Hauer indicated that he was. He gestured to the concentration camp prisoners around him to convey the idea that most of them were also Jews. At this, he noted an expression of dismay on the American's face.

The Americans initially appeared in better shape than the other prisoners. They had overcoats and field jackets; their skin was

healthier. But with the passing of the days, the Americans spoke less, they dragged their feet, they looked increasingly sick and they sometimes collapsed. What fire does not destroy, it hardens. Hauer and the other European Jews at Berga, more than 1,000 of them, had' been toughened by other camps. But the Americans were not yet' familiar with the inexorable arithmetic of Nazi Vernichtung d~rch Arbeit — destruction through work. When day after day the outlay of energy exceeds that consumed, the body wastes away. Survival comes down to calories — calories and, in some measure, the mysteries of the mind.

BERGA CONFORMED to no pattern. The Nazi concentration camps in Eu-rope were for Europeans, not Americans, for European Jews, not Amer-ican Jews. The leap of imagination required to accept the camp's existence and the systematic killing there was large. In' many ways, over many years and for many reasons, that leap was never made. Berga was liberated by Americans, but its memory was held captive.

Of the 350 young G.I.'s sent there, at least 73, or 21 percent, died in the space of 10 weeks, the highest rate of attrition among American prisoners of war in Europe. Yet on Oct. 24, 1945, five months after the Nazi surrender, Maj. Gen. Edward F. Witsell wrote to a relative of one of the dead, "With re-spect to your desire to ascertain the location of Berga Elster, it has been learned that there was no German prisoner-of-war camp by that name."

This sort of denial set a pattern of obfuscation and concealment that was to last for decades. There were several causes. One was the bewilder-ment of the G.I.'s, few of them students of the Geneva Conventions. Traumatized young men, they were anxious to get on with life; they had no leadership experience and no idea to what extent Berga was an anomaly. Because nobody in the government or the military encouraged these returning privates to talk about their experiences, they brought down a screen on the horror.

Some soldiers were actively discouraged from dwelling on the past. Norman Féllman of the 70th Infantry Divi-sion, who, like Shapiro, was selected as a Jew to go to Berga, was made to sign a "Security Certificate for Ex-Pris-oners of War" on April 24, 1945, almost immediately af-ter his liberation. This stated in its first clause: "Some ac-tivities of American prisoners of war within German prison camps must re-main secret not only for

the duration of the war against the present enemies of the United States, but in peacetime as well." The justification given for the requirement was the need to protect the interests of American pris-oners still in Japanese camps. But for Feilman, the oath meant, in effect, that his country did not want him to talk about the nightmare of Berga.

That soon seemed logical enough, in that West Germany became a piv-otal ally in the cold war and political priorities shifted. "Keeping us quiet was expedient given the desire not to embarrass the German government," Fellman told me. "It was the same reason avowed Nazis who were skilled scientists were brought over here: we needed them. So somewhere in the American government, they decided to deny our existence."

It was not only the West German government that risked embarrass-ment if the murder of Americans at Berga became known. The American government might also have had a difficult time. Questions would have been asked — about intelligence failures and the failure to try to rescue the men sooner. Tough scrutiny might have been directed at the process of Nazi selection of captured Jewish G.I.'s for transport to Berga and how some American military personnel turned a blind eye to the process or even abetted it. "Berga just got tucked away," recalled Joseph Littell of the 106th Infantry Division, a Christian survivor of the camp. "It was shuffled down to the lowest part of the stack, in part because it would have cast an aspersion on some part of the government."

The failure to recognize the camp did not reflect a lack of official inquiry. Berga. which was later absorbed into Soviet-dominated East Germany, was thoroughly investigated in May and June 1945 by an American war-crimes team on the scene. But the resulting documents were long classified. A War Crimes Office investigation into "the discrimination against and segre-gation of American prisoners of war of Jewish faith at Stalag TX-B," the camp where the P.O.W.'s were held before transport to Berga, was shelved. A War Department Report on Stalag IX-B of Nov. 1, 1945, noted that "on Feb. 8, 1945, 350 of the physically fit prisoners were sent to a work detachment in the Leipzig district" but failed to note the overlap between segregated American Jews and this "work detachment," which was in fact sent to Ber-ga, more than 40 miles from Leipzig. The two Nazis chiefly responsible for the war crimes at Berga were identified, captured and tried in an American court in Dachau in 1946 but were free men within nine years.

Only gradually has this shameful story come to light, beginning with a Florida newspaper interview in 1983 of a Berga survi-vor, Bernard Melnick. Since then, the declassification of documents, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the slow eas-ing of repressed trauma among survivors and an intensified focus on the

Holocaust have made a full accounting possible at last. A detail of Hitler's war, a pawn in the cold war, Berga amounts to a small stain on America's conscience. For it was young Americans who gave their lives at the camp and on the winding roads south of it, youths drawn, by a vile Nazi selection process, into a world they could not comprehend, a horror they could not fathom, a system of annihilation that lay beyond the realm of their train-ing, their knowledge or their brittle, and forever darkened, imaginations.

SHAPIRO, ALONG WITH the other 349 G.I.'s selected for slave labor, ar-rived at Berga on Feb. 13, 1945. He was 19. Like most of the rest of the group, he was captured at the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler's last gamble on the western front, one that resulted in the death, injury or capture of 81,000 American soldiers before the Nazi thrust was repulsed. On the first day of the battle, Dec. 16, 1944, Shapiro was knocked unconscious by an artillery shell.

He woke up, vision blurred, at the first-aid station in Clervaux, Luxem-bourg. No bones were broken. Shapiro lay there watching fellow medics carrying wounded men on litters. It seemed quiet outside. But by evening, German machine-gun fire was audible. Shapiro heard somebody say they were surrounded and must surrender.

"I was groggy;" he recalled, "but I also heard someone say, 'If you're a Jewish G.I., throw your dog tags away because there are SS troops here.'"

Shapiro, obeying without thinking, threw his dog tags marked with the "H" for Hebrew into a potbellied stove in the middle of the room. He had never paid much attention to the dog tags. They were worn in the same spirit as Catholics wore a "C" and Protestants a "P." Religions were equally respected; appropriate ministrations to the dead or injured were important. Even now he did not associate destroying them with a sense that being Jewish put him at risk of death in Hitler's Europe.

His father, Jacob, had fled persecution and hardship in Europe, coming to the United States in 1903, from the Minsk area in what is now Belarus. But the years in the Bronx since then had been devoted

above all to assimilation. The past had a name — Europe — and the Shapiros wanted to put it behind them. Like most American Jews, Shapiro had little awareness of the mass murder of European Jews when he was drafted in 1943, despite the fact that in the previous year about 2.7 million Jews had been killed by the Nazis.

Now he walked out of the aid station with his hands above his head. The Germans searched him. They took a gold ring he had been given by his broth-er for his bar mitzvah. Shapiro was left with an International Red Cross card that now, without dog tags, was his only means of identification.

The next morning, he joined a column of American captives trudging into Germany. After three days, they reached the railhead at Gerolstein. Dogs barked as he was piled into a boxcar, his head still pounding. Shapiro listened to other men moan from injury. Pressed against one another like milk cartons in a refrigerator, the G.I.'s shouted at one another as they maneuvered for the best positions. They used the straw in the boxcars for toilet paper until it ran out, and then they used letters from home, smear-ing excrement on the words of their loved ones. It was an introduction to the extremes to which they would be driven by the urge to survive.

The Germans provided part of a loaf of bread one day, a little water an-other. Thirst is worse than hunger, more insistent. Some men tried to drink their own urine, but found they could not.

On Christmas Eve, Allied bombing aimed at preventing German troops from reaching the front seemed to lift the boxcars off the ground and then drop them with a crash, yanking stomachs in and out. In the lulls, Shapiro heard Germans singing Christmas carols.

At last, on Dec. 26, the doors of the cattle cars were opened to reveal the spa town of Bad Orb, about 35 miles east of Frankfurt, a place far enough from the front lines to be intact, a cozy German collection of cobblestone streets and gabled homes: thoroughlygemutlich. The Americans fell in the snow and put fistfuls in their mouths.

Just outside town in the hills was a camp called Stalag IX-B, a

collection of one-story barracks surrounded by barbed wire. It was a prisoner-of-war camp but, for 350 of the American prisoners, it was also preparation for the slave camp of Berga, farther east.

Accounts differ of how Jews were concen-trated and segregated at Stalag IX-B for transport to Berga. In sworn testimony giv-en to the War Crimes Office at Fort Dix, N.J., on Sept. 7, 1945, Arthur J. Homer, a private in the 28th Infantry Division, said he and other prisoners were- given a form to fill out in early January 1945 that included "a questionnaire on religious faith."

Homer, who was not among the 350 prisoners sent to Berga, went on to say that the ranking American officer in the camp at the time suggested that there would be "no harm done if we answered the questionnaire as di-rected." Homer continued: "Soon after these questionnaires had been an-swered and collected by the German camp authorities, prisoners of war who had stated they were of the Jewish faith were segregated in barracks No. 32 in the American compound."

A short time thereafter, Johann Carl Friedrich Kasten of the 106th Infantry Division, the chief "man of confidence" or elected leader of the Amer-ican prisoners below officer rank, was told to advise any Jewish prisoner who had not indicated his faith on the questionnaire to report to Barracks 32 on threat of punishment, Homer testified. Kasten, a proud German American from Milwaukee, refused and was sent to Berga.

This, however, is only one of several accounts of how the Germans identified Jewish prisoners. The prisoners had no calendars, they were often sick and they tried to suppress their memories after the war, so it is not surprising that their recollections do not always coincide. What is not disputed by anyone is that the segregation took place.

Shapiro, for example, recalls no written questionnaire before he was put in what became known as the Jewish barracks. Kasten and Littell remember a muster in late January of hundreds of prisoners on a parade ground. A German commandant stepped up on a platform and said: "Alle Juden, em Schritt vorwdrts". All Jews, one

step forward. When nobody moved, Kasten was beaten by Nazi officers, who then picked men they thought looked like Jews.

Gerald Daub of the 100th Infantry Division told me that about two weeks after his arrival at Stalag IX-B in early January, he was informed by his barracks leader that the Germans wanted to separate the Jews from other prisoners, but that these efforts should be resisted. At a roll call the next morning, none of the Jews identified themselves. Daub's leader, clearly under pressure from the Germans, then instructed the Jews in his barracks that they would have to turn themselves in. "I was very uncomfortable with that," Daub recalled. "The next morning we did step forward."

But some Jews avoided the roundup. Edwin Cornell, of the 28th Division, who had buried his Hebrew Bible in the dirt of Germany before being pushed into the boxcars, said that about two weeks after arrival at the camp, an order was delivered that all Jews were to report to a certain barracks.

"My first thought was Who in hell, why in hell, how in hell do they have to do this to me or any other Jew?" Cornell told Charles Guggenheim in an interview for the documentary "Berga: Soldiers of Another War." "We are American soldiers. We are fighting for our country. It's entirely against the Geneva Conventions."

Cornell had a buddy, Fred Roys, in whom he confided that he did not know how to respond. Roys told Cornell he would be a fool to give himself up; he offered to take his dog tags and hide them. Cornell was persuaded, but had the impression that "the majority" of Jewish G.I.'s complied.

Unlike Cornell, Peter P. Losso, a Christian, was sent to Berga. His view is that the Germans "made an effort to get every Jewish American sol-dier on the work detail" and then took others either picked at random or identified as troublemakers. Losso places himself in the last category. He had confronted an American prisoner profiting from acting as a middle-man for G.I.'s seeking to barter watches for cigarettes. The prisoner, Losso says, "may have said to the Germans, look, this Losso, he's a troublemaker."

No record has been found of any German order to send a group of Americans to Berga. But it is known that by August 1944, an ambitious program with the code name Schwalbe ("swallow") for the construction of underground synthetic-fuel factorys was in place, with the Berga site set as the highest priority. It is also known that the SS had "full authority" to seek workers for this program in German prison camps.

The first European prisoners destined for slave labor arrived in Berga on Nov. 12, 1944, but they were mainly Jewish survivors of Auschwitz and other camps; their state was pitiful. The SS commander of Berga, Lt. Willy Hack, sent many back to Buchenwald. Workers in better condition were required. So it was natural enough for the Nazis to try to gather American Jews from the overcrowded Stalag IX-B, even as they went on bringing European Jews like Hauer to Berga.

On June 15, 1946, Arthur A. Boucher, a prisoner who worked in the American personnel office at Stalag IX-B, wrote: "We received the travel orders for the 350 men, and the Germans insisted that all men of the Jewish faith be placed on the orders. We could do nothing but comply." In the end, roughly a fifth of those sent to Berga were Jews. At the time, Jews accounted for approximately 3 percent of the American armed forces.

On Feb. 8,1945, far weaker than when he arrived just a few weeks earlier at Stalag IX-B, Shapiro and the other 349 Americans marched back down the road to Bad Orb, and were forced into freezing boxcars — the second time in six weeks they were treated like cattle.

For five days they trundled eastward, as countless doomed loads before them had. "Some of the people were from families of European Jewish immigrants," Ernest Kinoy, a Jewish G.I. from the 106th Division, said. "And this was taking them back to what they got out from. And so it had to be alarming in that sense." Shapiro was among those who feared the worst.

Gorinac scarcely had the strength to write.

March 13: Fred from Lansing died today. I was moved to Barracks

No. 2. The infection is getting worse.

March 16: I have an awful sore throat. Tried to stay from work but was driven out.

March 19: Still in Barracks 6. Throat is sore as hell. Another man was brought in this morn-ing. He died hour later. Making it four.

That is the last entry. Shapiro watched the dy-ing up close. When he was not on the food detail, he worked in an improvised dispensary. It was, however, a dispensary with virtually no medicine because the Germans refused to provide any. He watched teeth get loose from lack of nourish-ment. He watched fecal matter accumulate in underwear. He watched as diarrhea, dysentery and diphtheria spread.

Decisions on medical attention, as on all matters relating to the Americans, were made principally by Sgt. Erwin Metz of the Landeschutz, or Na-tional Guard, Battalion 621, headquartered in Bad Sulza, about 35 miles northwest of Berga.

From testimony provided soon after the war. and from the recollections of several survivors, it seems that Metz, ,then 52, was a man of vindic-tive cruelty~ He was educated only to sixth-grade level and began his career as a bank official. But his professional life had been anything but smooth. In 1927, he was convicted of embezzle-ment. This was followed by further convictions, for fraud in 1933, the year Hitler came to power, and again for fraud in 1936. In all, Metz had served close to two years in prison.

It is in the nature of the kind of social upheaval engineered by Hitler and often of war itself to thrust the mediocre to positions of authority, where they can play out every previously frus-trated 'fantasy. Metz's bearing was military, his manner cutting. He supervised about two dozen guards and reported to Capt. Ludwig Merz, 57, of the same National Guard battalion. But ulti-mate control of the camp system lay with the SS, in the person of Lieutenant Hack, who was un-der intense pressure to complete the facility at Berga by Oct. 1, 1945. Prisoners were driven re-lentlessly to this end.

David Young of the 28th Infantry Division, who was beaten with a shovel by a German guard on, Feb. 20, 1945, died at Berga in March. Stanley Cohen of the 422nd Infantry witnessed his death. "I called the Kommandofubrer in and told him Young was sick," Cohen testified on June 1, 1945. He continued: "This Unteroffizier Metz took a bucket of cold water and splashed it over Young."

Ten minutes later, Young was reported dead by Tony Acevedo, a medic from the 70th Infantry Division. Acevedo kept a diary, a slim volume started in March 1945, that amounts to a chilling chronicle of American deaths at Berga. In all, two dozen G.I.'s died there, almost one every two days, before the advancing U.S. and Soviet armies forced the Nazis to abandon the camp on April 5, 1945, and pushed the G.I.'s onto a death march southward.

Otto Rittermann, a German guard, was asked by American investigators on June 4, 1945, why the G.I.'s died.

"They were sick," he said, "because of the poor food and lack of air in the tunnels and effects of the blasting in the tunnels and the extremely heavy work."

Rittermann was also asked how often Metz beat the American prisoners. "Practically every day," he said.

FOR MORDECAI HAUER, after all he had been through in other camps, Berga amounted to hell in a lower key. To be in a town, even as a prisoner behind barbed wire, was reassuring after Ausch-witz and Buchenwald. He could see passenger trains going through Berga a couple of times a day. The food was terrible, but perhaps a little better than at Auschwitz. When local women Occasion-ally slipped turnips, potatoes or apples to the pris-oners, the guards sometimes turned a blind eye.

So it was ,that Hauer, a 19-year-old Hungarian Jew from Goncz, and young American G.I.'s from New Jersey and Wisconsin found themselves in the same little outpost of the Holocaust in the dying weeks of Hitler's war and saw and felt different things because of what they had seen before. To the Americans, the concentra-tion camp was a place of unspeakable horror peopled by eerie shadows

of human beings whose reduction to the state of emaciated som-nambulists was a terrifying mystery, a puzzle only gradually unraveled as their own treatment at the hands of the Nazis opened their eyes to the extent of German barbarism. To Jauer — who knew the Nazi roundup of the Jews in Goncz, the selections of Josef Mengele, the wholesale dispatches of Jews to the gas chamber, hour long nocturnal marches to a mine where he labored, the death of his father, mother and brother, the mass burning of prisoners, a death march from Auschwitz to Buchenwald and its accompanying executions and finally near-death by freezing in a room-size refrigerator where he was held as a punishment at Buchenwald — to this young European, the Berga concentration camp was something better than he had known. In these divergent visions, perhaps, lurked something deeper that presaged the years ahead. On the one hand, there was American ignorance, but also the naïveté of a country with a belief in itself and its power to do good, a nation with enough innocence still to be appalled by horror; on the other, European knowledge, a knowledge carried in the skin and so terrible as to be indelible, an awareness of a kind of collective suicide, a consciousness of having plumbed such depths that faith seems implausible, ambition misguided, power treacherous and healing elusive.

THE RIVER WAS HIGH, swollen with the melted snow of early spring. On north-facing slopes patches of ice lingered, but the grip of winter was broken. It was April 5, 1945. The Americans em-barked on a march to an unknown destination, guarded by aging Germans under the command of Metz and his superior. Merz, who had received the order to move all the Americans southward.

They were being herded away from the Allied advance, but there was no more serious purpose to their movement than there had been to the tunneling that decimated their ranks. The tunnels went nowhere, and now there was nowhere to go; the Allied noose had closed. Driven by Germans obedient to the last, the Americans were wandering without reason in a Europe in ruins.

The men were soon strung out over several hundred yards. Some had swollen feet; they couldn't get boots on. The weakest lay prone on a wagon, first pulled by a horse, later pushed by. the men. After walking all day,' they reached Greiz, about 10 miles south of Berga,

and were lodged in a school., They were provided with straw on which to lie down and they squabbled over how much straw each got. That night, in si-lence, four of them died: Louis Young, Vincent Lonergan, Charles Wilson and Robert Claff.

Shapiro pushed the wagon of the dying. Excrement, he noted, turned green as the Americans were driven to eat grass. On the second day, they trudged southwest toward Muhltroff, about 12 miles, and stopped for a night. The Germans hauled out the corpses in the morning: Ernest Strada, Frank Fladzinski, Joseph Rhlagar, Chester Vincent.

Onward the Americans moved, due south now, toward the village of Dobareuth, a dozen miles away. Israel Cohen collapsed and was loaded onto the cart. Others were tossed on top of him. "He must have died from suffocation be-cause his face was a picture of agony," Norman Martin testified after the war.

Cohen's body was brought to the little village of Gefell on the morning of April 8, 1945, along with the corpses of John Gaines and Clarence Jahr. The G.I.'s were buried haphazardly, without coffins, without grave markers, piled one on the other in their soiled underclothing, some with dog tags, some without, withered limbs intertwined, with no more substance to their corpses than those Hauer saw at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

By April 18, when they were in the village of Seidlersreuth, many G.I.'s had a greenish look; they muttered indecipherably. Dozens were already dead. Shapiro had become an automaton. He lay gazing into space. Three more soldiers died: Leo Best, Milton Rothman and Joseph Greene.

Around the same time, as they passed through the small town of Schonficht, Metz told the guards he wanted to try to locate several G.I.'s who had escaped. He took off on a bicycle and was not seen again. During a two-week march, he had presided over the death of almost 50 Amer-ican soldiers, adding to the twodozen dead at ~he Berga camp. Metz was stubborn and sadistic, an ordinary man for whom tyranny was opportunity. Applied in the blind service of the Führer, his commonplace traits became those of aifhfrderen With

Metz gone, discipline frayed, and by April 23, there were only 169 Americans left in the main group of prisoners. The single—march had become several. Shapiro and Daub were still with the largest contingent. As Daub struggled to save the 49th and last prisoner to die in the march, Jack Bornkind from Detroit, the sounds of battle abruptly drew nearer.

Shapiro still sees the scene: he staggers out of the barn where he and his fellow soldiers are held. He notices the big white star on a Sherman tank. It is very bright — too bright. The glare seems vicious, and people are running back and forth, screaming and waving. Who are these skeletal figures in American uniforms? Somebody fires a shell in the direction of the barn and everyone hits the ground. Shapiro gets to his feet, tottering, and a jeep pulls up. From it comes an American voice: "Climb in, soldier."

Three words, a new universe. The sun is warm. Bleary-eyed, Shapiro looks to the sky. Where am I? His liberator hands him a choco-late bar, a ration. It is familiar to him, but strange, an object from another world. He can't get the wrapping off. Helplessly, he fumbles with the chocolate until at last one of the Americans on the jeep opens it for him.

He is starving but can scarcely eat. He is free but can scarcely smile. He is a young man but scarcely more than a lost child. Who are you? Where have you been? The shoulder patch on his jacket tells the members of the 11th Armored Division who freed him that Shapiro comes from the 28th Infantry Division. But he seems unrecognizable, to them, to himself.

ERWIN METZ, the tormentor of the Americans, was at his home near Berga when American War Crimes Investigating Team 6822, headed by Maj. Fulton C. Vowell, arrested him on June 19, 1945. Vowell interrogated him that day. Dozens of G.I.'s died on the march, Metz con-ceded. Asked why, he said they were weak.

"Were you in Greiz?" Vowell asked, according to a transcript.

"Yes."

“Isn’t there a hospital at Greiz?”

“Yes, there is.”

‘Why didn’t you take them to the hospital?”

“Because I did not have an order.”

“You knew they were dying, didn’t you?”

“No.”

“They did die, didn’t they?” -

“Yes.”

“Do you have to have an order to put a dying man in hospital?”

“Yes.”

When the trial of Metz and Merz opened on Sept. 3, 1946, in Dachau, they both pursued the same line:

they were mere pawns with no choice but to obey orders. None of the Berga survivors were present at the trial to rebuff them — an aston-ishing aberration.

Metz made his last appeal to the court on the afternoon of Oct. 15, 1946. He declared: “In my manner of leading the detail, I followed a saying by Beethoven: ‘Brother is working for Brother. When he can help, he does it gladly.’”

The court adjourned for two hours before pronouncing the death sentence for both men. Despite the shortcomings of the prosecution’s case, it appeared that Metz and Merz would receive the severest punishment. But higher American authorities were to decide otherwise.

Kenneth Royall, the secretary of the Army appointed in 1947, argued that the rapid reindustrialization of West Germany, now on the front

line of the conflict with the Soviet Union, should be a priority and that denazification should not stand in its way. Increasingly, American policy conformed.

It was against this backdrop that the appeals of Metz and Merz went through the review process. In early 1948, Gen. Lucius D. Clay, the United States military governor in Germany, commuted Metz's sentence to life imprisonment and Merz's to five years. Merz walked free in 1951. Metz remained in prison until 1954, when he was released on parole. In the end, he served a nine-year sentence, roughly a year for every eight Americans killed.

One man, SS Lt. Willy Hack, was conspicuously absent from the Dachau trial. The commander of the Berga camp eluded the Allies. But he was spotted in the East German town Zwickau in 1947, and hanged by the Communist authorities on July 26, 1952, in Dresden.

Hack died for his crimes in the So-viet sector, but Metz and Merz were spared by America. This was no more than the logical end to a saga of evasion. History is written by the victors. But the minds of the victors quickly turn to the new worlds they have inherited through force of arms. It is these worlds they want to shape, these struggles they want to engage. With their minds so focused, the past easily becomes just another weapon to manipulate in the cause.

SHAPIRO'S OWN COLD war, his flight from himself and from truth, went on until 1997. That year, at a reunion of prisoners of war from Stalag IX-B, Acevedo showed him the Red Cross armband Acevedo wore in combat. It is a sepia-colored piece of cloth with a red cross at its center. During their time at Berga, Acevedo had asked his fellow medics to sign the armband. There, in the top left corner, was Shapiro's signa-ture, along with his New York ad-dress. The sight of his name pro-voked uncontrolled sobbing.

He had been there. It was as simple as that. Been in the places where his nightmares took him. These were not dreams. They were his past. That past had taken him into the midst of Hitler's assault on European Jews. Another 349 Americans, of all faiths, had been there with him. Shapiro was a Holocaust

survivor. For decades, that fact proved impossible to contemplate in a country that would scarcely avow the existence of Berga. The armband became his talisman. It gave him a new power. To live un-aware is to accept half a life.

In different ways, through different epiphanies, many of the Berga survivors came in their 70's to a new acceptance of the storm that took them in their youth. Changes in the world helped them. Germany was unified and eager to expiate the last of its guilt, so as to live at last as a normal country, at peace at the center of the European continent.

On April 23, 2002, Shapiro received a letter from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. It began: 'We are pleased to inform you that you are approved for payment under the Claims Conference Program for Former Slave and Forced Laborers." Almost a half-century after Metz walked free, Germany admitted that Shapiro and others like him were American slaves of the Reich.

Hauer has been receiving money from the German government for many years, compensation for the murder of many of his relatives.

Recently, I decided I wanted to see Hauer and Shapiro together, the Hungarian Jew from Goncz, them American Jew from the Bronx. Per-haps they brushed past each other at Berga 60 years ago.

We gather at Hauer's winter home in Aventura, Fla. The apart-ment overlooks a golf course and, in the distance, behind the high-rises, lies the ocean. It is a restful view. Both men have had quadruple bypasses in recent years and take drugs for hypertension. Hauer often has a faraway look, as if he is gazing at the world from a lofty perch. "In the last year," he says, "I have grown 10 years older. I am thinking a lot about my parents, whether I might see them again."

Shapiro is very much of this world. He talks intensely, points a finger at Hauer from time to time, tries to draw closer to him. They have no recollection of seeing each other at Berga. There is an odd tension between the two men, one I didn't expect. It seems rooted in a kind of competition over who is more of a victim, one that becomes

apparent when Shapiro speaks of the ersatz coffee at Berga for the third time and Hauer shoots back, "You seem to regard that coffee as the ne plus ultra of suffering." He points out that Shapiro came home to his family while he did not.

This is too much for Shapiro. "You had a terrible time," he says, his finger jabbing. "I am not denying that. I am not saying that everyone has to have the same kind of terrible time. This is not about one-upmanship. We both suffered and did not want to remember that."

Hauer looks out toward the ocean, past Shapiro. His pale blue eyes are distant. Dying begins with a falling away, on the inside, and you step far outside yourself to per-ceive that you have become very small. He knew that feeling, several times, during the war. "Man," he says suddenly, "is a strange animal. I look around me and I think: This, too, shall pass".

Roger Cohen writes~ the Globalist column for The International Herald Tribune. His book "Soldiers and Slaves, "from which this article is adapted, will be published by Alfred A. Knopf .

The Berga Ledger *A list of the soldiers sent to Berga; nearly all of the first 80 names are recognizably Jewish.*

PHOTOGRAPH FROM "BERGA: SOLDIERS OF ANOTHER WAR," CHARLES GUGGENHEIMIGUGGENHEIM PRODUCTIONS

Press Release
March 24, 2005

National Archives Features Book and Film on U.S. POWs in Nazi Germany

Washington, DC. . . On Thursday, May 5, at 6:30 pm, the National Archives will present a special lecture, book signing, and documentary film screening about American soldiers in World War II who were captured and held prisoner by the Nazis. Acclaimed *New York Times* journalist Roger Cohen will discuss his new book, *Soldiers and Slaves: American POWs Trapped by the Nazis' Final Gamble* (Knopf, 2005). Cohen recently adapted an article from the book for the *New York Times Magazine*: "The Lost Soldiers of Stalag IX-B" (February 27, 2005). The author will be available to start signing books at 6:00 pm, and will begin speaking at 6:30 pm. At 7:45 pm Grace Guggenheim will introduce the documentary film, *Berga: Soldiers of Another War* (2003, 85 min.). This documentary was written and directed by her father, the late Charles Guggenheim.

The lecture and film screening will be held in the William G. McGowan Theater. This event is part of the Guggenheim Center for the Documentary Film celebrating its inaugural year at the National Archives, and is free and open to the public. Reservations are recommended via email at reservations.nwe@nara.gov or by telephone (202-501-5000 before April 15, then use 202-357-5000 thereafter). The National Archives is located on the National Mall on Constitution Avenue at 9th Street, NW. Spring hours are 10 am – 7:00 pm. daily.

Background
Both the book and the film tell the story of American GIs captured during World War II Battle of the Bulge who were "classified" as Jewish by German captors, sent to a

slave labor camp, and subjected to Nazi Holocaust atrocities.

Thousands of American GIs, including soldiers in Charles Guggenheim's 106th Infantry Division, were captured by the Nazis during the Battle of the Bulge. In February 1945, 350 of these American POWs were singled out by the Nazis because they were Jews or were thought to resemble Jews. They were transported in cattle cars to Berga, a concentration camp in eastern Germany, and put to work as slave laborers, mining tunnels for a planned underground synthetic-fuel factory. This was the only incident of its kind during World War II. Starved and brutalized, the GIs were denied their rights as prisoners of war, their ordeal culminating in a death march that was halted by liberation near the Czech border. Twenty percent of these soldiers—more than seventy of them—perished. After the war, Berga was virtually forgotten, and the experiences of these Americans were buried.

Uncovering the Story
Charles Guggenheim had remained stateside with a debilitating infection during the final months of the war. After the war, Guggenheim tried to locate a friend from the 106th Division, but discovered he had died in captivity in a German salt mine. The salt mine turned out to be the slave labor camp at Berga, a small town in East Germany, which the filmmaker confirmed in War Crimes Trial documents located at the National Archives in Washington, DC. "The idea of this happening, the suggestion of an American soldier persecuted for being Jewish or looking Jewish or otherwise undesirable, never left my mind," said Guggenheim. After two-and-a-half years of extensive research, Guggenheim found 124 survivors and witnesses. Forty agreed to be interviewed. Many revealed that they had repressed their memories for over 50 years and never talked about their imprisonment, not even to spouses and family members.

While completing the film *Berga: Soldiers of Another War,* Guggenheim faced a heroic battle of his own with terminal cancer. He died six weeks after the film was finished.

About the Author

Roger Cohen writes on foreign affairs for the *New York Times,* where he has worked since 1990, primarily as Paris correspondent, bureau chief in the Balkans and Berlin, and foreign editor. He also writes a twice-weekly column for the *International Herald Tribune*. His book on Bosnia, *Hearts Grown Brutal,* based on his prizewinning coverage of the war there, was cited for its excellence by the Overseas Press Club.

About the Filmmaker

Charles Guggenheim received 12 Academy Award nominations and won 4 Oscars for his films *Nine From Little Rock, Robert Kennedy Remembered, The Johnstown Flood,* and *A Time for Justice*. He also won the George Foster Peabody Award. *Berga: Soldiers of Another War* is written, directed and narrated by Charles Guggenheim and produced by Grace Guggenheim.

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For press information, contact the National Archives Public Affairs Staff at 202-501-5526.

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