

CALENDAR

Wednesday, May 28, 2003

TUNED IN



204897

©National Archives

FINAL FILM: *Charles Guggenheim's documentary tells of captured American GIs who were sent to a Nazi labor camp.*

The untold horror of 'Jewish' POWs revealed

In his last film, Charles Guggenheim creates a chilling account of little-known Nazi atrocities.

By JOSH FRIEDMAN
Times Staff Writer

Charles Guggenheim made more than 100 documentaries during his career, but the only one he narrated in the first person was his last.

Guggenheim, a four-time Oscar winner who completed "Berga: Soldiers of Another War" (9:30 p.m., KCET) shortly before his death in October at 78, had a personal connection to the story, which surely is one reason he was able to create such a stunning account of little-known Nazi atrocities during World War II. The other reason is Guggenheim's straightforward and sure-handed filmmaking style, here seamlessly combining reenactments, archival footage and photographs and interviews with survivors.

Guggenheim often wondered what might have happened to him during the war had he not been left stateside because of a debilitating infection. After the war, he asked about a fellow Jewish soldier he had known. The friend, he was told, died in a German salt mine, and that thought stayed with Guggenheim. He later learned that the mine was a slave labor camp at the town of Berga, and before succumbing to pancreatic cancer, Guggenheim dedicated his last six months to finishing a film about the Jewish American infantrymen who died there, as well as those who survived.

Thousands of American GIs, including soldiers in Guggenheim's 106th Infantry Division, were captured by the Nazis during the Battle of the Bulge. Those deemed Jewish were shipped off to Berga, a satellite of the notorious concentration camp at Buchenwald, where they suffered beatings, starvation and other horrors in defiance of the Geneva Convention.

Through haunting eyewitness testimony, Guggenheim conveys the almost unimaginable.

"I never knew what they did with the bodies. I didn't care. I just didn't care to imagine. I survived, that was the important thing," says Philip Dantowitz from the 28th Division, who must pause and turn away from the camera at times.

"It wasn't me that got up dead in the morning," Dantowitz says. "That's a terrible thing, isn't it, for a person to say that? But it's true. I can't explain it."