

Leisure & Arts



Berga was a German slave-labor camp where 70 GIs suspected of being Jewish died. Dorothy Rabinowitz reviews a documentary on this little-known episode, which airs tonight.

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Television: Prisoners of Another War

By Dorothy Rabinowitz

Documentary filmmaker Charles Guggenheim's last work—airing tonight on PBS, 8 to 10:30 p.m. EDT (check local listings)—about Americans taken prisoner in the Battle of the Bulge reveals a story largely unknown to all but a few war buffs. It's also one that comes at a propitious moment, and not only because we are just past Memorial Day. For, within this bleak history stands a testament to honor and her-

BERGA

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oism all the more potent for its lack of trumpet flourishes. Even in this tale told so somberly it is impossible to miss the quintessentially American stubbornness and idealism it reflects in its down-to-earth way: as though there were nothing out of the ordinary about men who, for the sake of a principle, would defy captors holding the power of life or death.

The story began in December 1944, when thousands of American fighting men taken prisoner during the Battle of the Bulge were marched to a Stalag inside Germany. Some of the Jews among them didn't feel particularly endangered—they were, after all, American G.I.s. Some knew enough to discard their Stars of David and dog tags with the identifying H, for Hebrew, and others were urged by their comrades to do the same. All of the captured Americans had got their first taste of life as POWs when they were crammed, in one immovable, standing mass, into a box car. Thus they rode, without food or water, for four days—the time it took to get to Stalag 9B, Bad Orb, not far from Frankfurt.

Here, where 4,000 Americans were dumped into 15 huts, their elected leader—an authoritative figure by the name of Hans Kasten—would serve as their liaison to the Germans. He was a man with a certain magnetism, one of the survivors of this experience notes—a look that made it hard to take one's eyes off him. Viewers of this work will have no trouble understanding why: especially at the film's end, with its montage of wonderful 1940s photos showing the Americans as they looked in happier times—resplendent in their youth, health and uniforms.

It fell to Kasten to respond when the German commandant ordered the Americans to hand over a list of the Jews among them. The first signs that the Jewish prisoners were to be segregated had come during the interrogations. Everyone sitting behind the desks interpreting was an American, one of the film's interviewees recalls. When the German interrogators asked each man his religion, the Americans at the desk would instruct the Jews that the answer was "Protestant" or "Catholic." Or they would supply the answer "Protestant" themselves.

"The minute the Americans at the desk said we were all Protestants I knew exactly why," one Jewish veteran notes. The Germans required no particulars about his religion or his mother's maiden

name, recalls a former army medic: His name, Shapiro, was enough to tell them all they wanted to know, and to get him assigned to the special section of the Stalag reserved for Jews.

It was an unsatisfactory classification process, the Germans concluded, certain that they had by no means put their hands on all the Jewish POWs. In this they were correct. When they demanded lists of the Jews in their ranks, the Americans in charge refused. The overall leader of the Americans, whose particular resistance on this score infuriated the Germans—as did his name, Johann Karl Friedrich Kasten, which identified him as an American of distinctly German ancestry—would pay a heavy price for his defiance, both at that camp and elsewhere.

Elsewhere turned out to be a slave-labor camp called Berga, the film's central focus, where 70 Americans would perish. As far as the commandant at Bad Orb was concerned, the 350 Americans sent to Berga—a sub-camp of Buchenwald—were mainly Jews. In fact, given no cooperation as to the identity of the Jewish G.I.s (other than that given by a number who chose, out of pride or ignorance of the consequences, to identify themselves), the Germans walked among the ranks singling out Americans who looked like Jews, they thought. Thanks to this standard of selection, they managed to pick 350 slave laborers of whom just 80 were Jewish. But all the Americans shared the fate designed for the Jews—to labor, some to their deaths, their bodies wasted from starvation.

Yet, even in the end, as they try, weak and broken in health, to bury their dead shortly before their own liberation, they still are in the grip of the idea that they are all first and foremost American soldiers. One of them looks stunned, even now, as he recalls how a minister ordered them to remove the comrades they had interred in the church cemetery, when he discovered that some of those the Americans buried were Jews.

All of Charles Guggenheim's signature strengths—the ruthless economy of the commentary, the focus on fact, the impeccably telling images—are here in full flower in this, the last and perhaps the most brilliant of his films, and one he barely lived to finish. To make it, he pursued the impossible-seeming task of finding the survivors of Berga, Americans who had—and this was, for Guggenheim, the main theme—seen the Holocaust up close, as perhaps no others had. The four-time Academy Award winner who made "Nine From Little Rock," "RFK Remembered," "A Time For Justice" (on the civil-rights movement) and "The Johnstown Flood"—one of the most terrifying disaster films ever made—died last year at age 78. "Berga," the only one of his works in which his voice is ever heard—if only briefly—is a fitting final adornment to a remarkable career.

Ms. Rabinowitz is a Journal television critic and member of its editorial board.



Berga survivor James Watkins, after liberation on April 20, 1945.