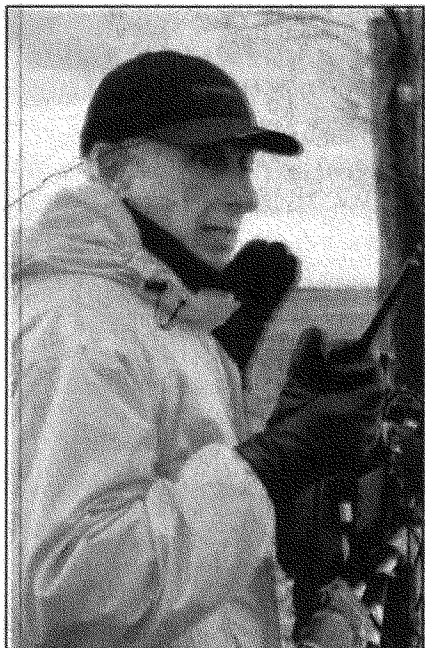


Style

WEDNESDAY, MAY 28, 2003

TV Preview

A Veteran's Heartfelt Salute To GIs Snared in Nazi Web



COURTESY GRACE GUGGENHEIM

Four-time Oscar winner Charles Guggenheim, in Germany filming "Berga: Soldiers of Another War."

By PHIL McCOMBS
Washington Post Staff Writer

In December 1944, thousands of American soldiers captured in the Battle of the Bulge were transported in boxcars to Stalag 9B, a prisoner-of-war camp north of Frankfurt. Shortly after their arrival, an order came down for those who were Jews to identify themselves.

At first, leaders among the POWs refused to pass the order on and at least one of them was severely beaten. Finally, most of the American Jewish soldiers did step forward, and the Nazis went through the ranks grabbing others who "looked" Jewish or had Jewish-sounding names.

In all, 350 American fighting men were "selected" as Jews and

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The Holocaust's American Victims

TV PREVIEW, From C1

sent to a slave labor camp, a satellite of Buchenwald in the little German town of Berga. There, side-by-side with incarcerated European Jews, they were beaten, starved and in many cases worked to death.

Tonight at 8 on Channels 26 and 22, their haunting, terrible story is told in "Berga: Soldiers of Another War," the last film of the great Washington documentarian Charles Guggenheim, who died last October at age 78, just as he finished work on it.

Guggenheim had been haunted

for 50 years by the story, because many of those sent to Berga had been members of his own unit, the 106th Infantry Division. Had he not been left behind in the States with a life-threatening infection when the unit shipped out, Guggenheim realized, he might well have been part of this uniquely American aspect of the Holocaust.

"This film will hit you right in the gut," Guggenheim said in an interview just before he died, and he was right. Of all his documentaries on key episodes of the American experience—he received Oscars for "Nine From Little Rock," "Robert Kennedy Remembered," "The Johnstown Flood" and "A Time for Justice"—"Berga" may be his most unforgettable, and certainly his most personal film.

"An emotional steamroller of an experience," historian David McCullough called it. "I don't think anyone who sees it will ever forget it."

In more than two years of research, Guggenheim and his daughter Grace, who produced the film, interviewed 124 Berga survivors and other witnesses, and shot footage on location in the former East Germany.

"It's clear to me that the core spirit of these guys is what drove Charles to do the film," Grace Guggenheim said yesterday. "They opened up to him with stories that had been locked inside them all these years. It was cathartic. Charles felt a moral obligation to tell the story, for his fellow infantrymen and for his country."

In the film, you see them—one after another—old men telling their story in cadences at once simple and heartbreakingly eloquent. "The older fellows who had families survived," says Milton Stolon. "The 18- and 19-year-old boys went quickly. I knew I had a family at home. I wanted to live. I just wanted to live."

And these, from the liberation sequence:

Sanford Lubinsky: "It got quiet. And then we hear that firing start up again."

Edward Slotkin: "And we look



BY CHARLES GUGGENHEIM

The train station where the American prisoners arrived.

out the front. . . ."

Leo Zaccaria: "And up the road comes this tank. American tank."

Lubinsky: "When I saw that American flag coming down that road, nothing looked so beautiful in all our born days. That American flag, our flag, sure looked beautiful. It's a very beautiful thing when you haven't seen it for a long while. It's a beauty!"

A couple of weeks ago, when Lubinsky was in Washington for a preview of the film, he said: "There were things that happened to us that Charlie didn't put in the film because he wanted to keep it clean. We were starving and the guards would throw potato peels into the latrines, and guys would jump in and eat them—and it killed them. I was down to 87 pounds when we were liberated."

Guggenheim was suffering through the final stages of pancreatic cancer as he finished editing the film in his Georgetown studios, and as his body wasted away he felt in his suffering a kinship with his former comrades-in-arms.

"Does it occur to you," McCullough asked him in an interview just before his death, "that maybe you were spared to make this film?"

"Well," Guggenheim answered, "I felt a deep obligation more after I met the [survivors] than I did before. . . . I said, 'I owe them something.'"

And so do we all.

Berga
Soldiers of Another War

AMERICAN GIs TRAPPED IN
THE TRAGEDY OF THE HOLOCAUST
—AN UNTOLD STORY

A film by four-time Academy Award®
winner Charles Guggenheim

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I don't think anyone who sees it will ever forget it."

—David McCullough

Premieres tonight at 8pm on WETA TV 26.

