

April 27, 1945
Germany

Dearest Folks,

In previous letters I mentioned the fact that I had seen German atrocities – refraining from going into detail about any specific ones. I also said that, at the time, I couldn't describe my work to any great extent. Well – the time has come at last when I can whip out my little black notebook and render in detail the notes I garnered on Buchenwald near Weimar, Germany. Perhaps by this time you've read about it and seen pictures of it – for shortly following its liberation by American troops on the 11th of this month, news and descriptions of the infamous place were made known the world 'round. Margaret Bourke-White – Life Photographer, was there; members of Parliament and Congressmen from the states visited; St. Johns, the radio commentator, broadcasted of it – and last, but not least – we worked there.

It's a phonetic name – Buchenwald – Beech forest – breathes of something stately and beautiful (we liked the scenery around the vicinity). But for those tortured souls who spent four or five years there, the name can bring up only cold chills and terror – haunting memories of purge; of hard labor; of the smell of filth and death. That name can fire the embers of hate and indignance which dying had smouldered into submission in the face of an almost hopeless situation.

I'll tell what I can and please bear with me when I say that words can hardly describe the place. One would have to see it – one would have to really endure it himself.

The first glimpse I caught of the Concentration Camp took in some huge piles of lumber, several watch towers, a few unsightly shacks, and a tall electrically charged (or was when the Boche was there) wire fence at the foot of which were rows of coiled barbed wire. Happy freed "prisoners", some still clad in their thin striped suits, strolled around the yard rummaging in the buildings or lying in the sun. Many were collecting scraps in the nearby forest. I thought they looked emaciated.

Over the main gate reads the inscription "Recht oder Unrecht – Mein Vaterland" – "Right or Wrong – My Country." (The Nazis may have thought they needed a bit of justification for their deeds.)

In the yard itself was a multitude of people – chiefly men and boys – all ages – from four to sixty-five years or more. They were chiefly Polish and Russian although Italians, French, Dutch, Hungarians, and Slavs were prevalent. There was a smattering of German Political prisoners and at one time a small band of English and American soldiers was held there. Over the Russian section hung a gigantic portrait of Stalin and a red flag. Both recently displayed. The Poles wore little streamers of red and white on their lapels. I learned later that the prisoners were identified by a patch of color on their outer garment. "Red" was for political prisoners; "Green" for criminals; "Violet" for Bible

prisoners; "Black" for non-workers; and a "yellow star" for Jewish captives. A tiny boy wore a green patch.

Every soul, as much as it hurt us, "humbled" himself before an American. Stepped aside to make way for us; doffed his cap; saluted; scrambled to get a "souvenir" for us – praised us to the high heavens. Those binoculars I have were pressed into my hand by a seventeen year old Russian kid who secured them from an SS store of such articles. He knew no English, but patted my shoulder and said something like "Ruske and Americans – comrades." He was very short and had close cropped blond hair.

The men were ill-clothed, shaggy, haggard in appearance. All needed a good bath. The lavatories were deep pits on the street – draining, I imagine, into a common sewer.

Most of the captives spoke good German or something approximating it. It was then that I made some use of the bit I had learned at Illini.

They had been fed scantily. Many days one piece of bread (black bread) was divided among six men. In addition, they received a watery gruel – one liter (quart).

In some buildings the bunks were stacked four high and only six or eight inches lay between the top bunk and the ceiling. In a few of the bunks lay dead men. The living relieved themselves in a corner of the room or, if too weak, just lay in bed. In the doorway of one room lay a pile of corpses. Out on the street sprawled a few sick and dying people.

We felt more grief for the living who resembled walking skeletons, than for the dead who had found peace at last.

One of the more ghastly exhibitions was a crematorium near the first court yard I mentioned. It had a tall ominous smoke stack. High board walls surrounded it and within was a cart loaded with fifty or sixty bodies turning green and blue in the sun. The stench was unpleasant.

Down in the basement of this "Nazi graveyard" lay an inscription over the furnace. It was a poem, which translated, says in effect: "I do not want the worms to eat my body; I like the warmth of the flames – therefore burn me and do not bury me." It was a comfort for the proposed victims, no doubt.

Over in a nearly "pathological lab" were bottles of preserved human organs. A few contained tiny shrunken heads. All in the interest of science, I'm sure.

One room in the location was almost pleasant to look at. It was painted a nice white. A guide pointed out some hooks on the wall and explained that prisoners were hung there to strangle with a rope around their neck. We didn't see any such prisoners, however, although there were peculiar heel marks on the wall and place where finger nails (or

some such article) had been dug into the fine, clean white plaster. On the floor was a club whose head was clotted with blood (we guessed at its purpose).

I supposed I could go on at great length – telling weird stories I'd garnered from the prisoners about a 240 mile march thru the snow from the East; about "a man a meter" lost in building a road 5000 meters long; about whippings and beatings; about throwing men, first mercifully clubbed into the incinerator, etc. I didn't see the long march (but I saw black rotting feet); I didn't see 5000 dead (but I saw the road, saw tired staring eyes and bent bodies); I didn't see live men thrown into flames (but I heard such stories from so many I began to wonder).

I'm telling what I can – sparing none of my feelings – because I was so strongly impressed. We all were shocked. We all were awakened and wondered how one human can treat a fellow human so outrageously. It's one thing to read of such a place and another thing to see it. I suppose we shall all forget it more or less – it's a healthy normal process to remember only the more pleasing episodes of our daily experiences. But I hope that the sufferings of those men will not be in vain and that we and the whole world may profit at their loss.

We (our outfit) cared for many to the best of our ability (in most cases). Circumstances were unfavorable – sanitation, "housebreaking", supplies, bedding, medical equipment and so on presented a problem. We had our hands full. Chapman, Caddock, Cook, (etc.) and I felt the experience invaluable – transfusions of glucose and blood, brief diagnoses (on rounds with the doctors), medication of all types, and dressings for many type wounds.

The patients were no more than skeletons in most cases. Half-living, half dead. As one kid put it, "One foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel". Their skins ranged from gray to pale yellow and ghostly white. Many had great running sores. Most had dysentery. A great number were tubercular. All were mal-nutrition cases. Lack of protein in a host of patients caused great edema or swelling of the feet. Those who had shoes had trouble getting into them.

They all had stories of grief. Several had no families remaining. And how many had an "oncle" or "causine" in New York? How many vowed they would come to "Amereeka" after they are recovered? How many will recover? A few died in our building even after we'd cared for them. The first I saw was a little yellow man with soft hair who just fell off in his sleep. Tuberculosis finished him.

A few spoke English. Some had been to America. All grinned and shouted "Guten Morgen" when we came to work in the morning. Over and over they told us how grateful they were for our presence. I felt so ashamed there – felt so darned small. One cried when one of our fellows showed a picture of his wife – forgetting that these starved beings had been homeless for so long. Many wept when telling me of their previous plight.

I might say that they were men though – not babies. Even the boys were like men. Most quickly gained a little color after a day or so of treatment; helped out when they could; smiled all day. They went mad over a piece of chocolate, a cigarette, writing paper, newspapers, and magazines. We brought what we could of such articles.

Amusing details prevailed. Polish doctors were working with us and they spoke little English. Between Polish, German, and broken simple English – the place was a riot at times. We had trouble getting symptoms from some of the patients without an interpreter. I used German chiefly and got along crudely. Methods of treatment and names of medicants differed in some instances. I made rounds with a young Polish M.D. who used Latin fluently – too much so for my benefit.

Well – I'll be lucky if I can get all this into an envelope. I must quit.

It was all interesting – the little stories of sabotage by the captives who worked in a munitions factory – their anxious waiting for liberation by the Allies – the final flight or surrender of the cruel SS guards. I learned, I think, a few things about human nature – about the weakness and the strength of man. I learned that the human body can withstand much and the human soul as well. I learned that there is much cleaning up to be done!

That young Polish doctor I mentioned above – with a twinkle in his eye – told me that Buchenwald is the best concentration camp in Germany. I'd dread seeing the others.

"Buchenwald" – it is a phonetic name, isn't it?

With all my love,

Bud

P.S. In answer to your question, mom – we're in the Third Army.