Witness to Atrocity: A G.I.'s World War II Photography featuring the Buchenwald Concentration Camp

By Randy Jaye

Near the end of World War II (1939-1945), the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi) regime (also known as the Third Reich) was collapsing as Allied forces were bombing German cities such as Dresden and Hamburg into rubble. Allied ground forces were advancing into the heart of Germany destroying both infrastructure and military facilities. The Soviet forces captured the Nazi capital city of Berlin as U.S. and other Allied forces met by agreement at the Elbe River to complete the defeat of Nazi Germany.

The fighting and destruction during World War II were brutal and the human causalities, both military and civilian, are estimated to be between 70 and 85 million, unprecedented in human history.

One of the most horrific experiences that many Allied troops and personnel witnessed during World War II was the infrastructure and human suffering of the Nazi regime's Holocaust (the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of millions of people). The infrastructure included administration buildings, concentration camps, extermination camps, forced labor camps and railway networks. The Nazi's committed various crimes against humanity as they engaged in unspeakable brutal treatment of prisoners, both military and civilian. The Nazi's developed a sinister plan called the "Final Solution" with a goal to exterminate all of the Jewish people. Although Jewish people were the primary targets of the Holocaust, many other victims deemed dissidents of the Nazi regime or perceived as subhuman including gypsies, Catholic priests, mentally ill, physically disabled, political opponents, gays, midgets and military prisoners were also murdered. During the Holocaust, over seventeen million people were systematically mass murdered, six million were Jews (approximately two-thirds of the Jewish population in Europe).

Master Sergeant Earl Stout, a member of the United States Army 281st Engineer Combat Battalion, participated in the defeat of the Nazi regime and the liberation of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Weimar, Germany. What makes Stout's experiences noteworthy was that he was an unofficial photographer who was able to take some graphic photographs of the war's destruction and capture horrendous images of Holocaust cremation ovens, dead and partially cremated human victims from inside of one of the Nazi regime's evil concentration camps.

Fortunately, many of Stout's raw World War II photographs have survived and his family has shared several for this article. Stout's family believes that these photographs were never released to the military or any publication, so it is likely that this is the first time anyone outside of his family has seen them.

The Defeat of the Nazi Regime

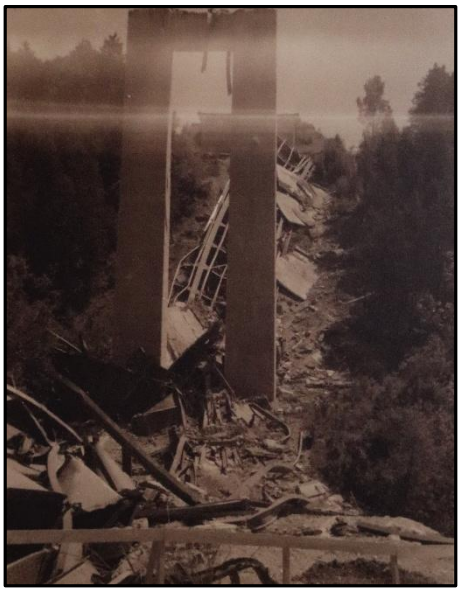
In 1934, Adolf Hitler, chancellor and dictator of Germany, proclaimed the Nazi regime would last

1,000 years. Instead, having started World War II in Europe it lasted less than 13 years as the totalitarian state was eradicated by the Allies during World War II.

In September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded and occupied Poland, which is considered the start of World War II. This invasion set off a string of military victories for the Nazis.

By the end of 1940, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and France all had been invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany.

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, which was the largest and most powerful military invasion force in history. This invasion proved to be one of Hitler's costliest miscalculations of the war as the Soviet forces eventually repelled the Nazi forces, driving them out of Russia, Eastern Europe, and pushing them deep into Germany as well. As a result of Operation Barbarossa, Nazi Germany suffered almost 775,000 casualties and the retreat proved to be a crucial turning point of World War II.



The ruins of a bridge on Germany's Autobahn – ca. 1945. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)

To make things even worse for Nazi Germany, their Axis alliance partner, the Japanese Empire, launched a surprise attack on the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7, 1941. This led Hitler to declare war on the United States, bringing the military powerhouse into World War II. Nazi Germany now found itself fighting World War II against superior military forces which overstretched its resources and drastically limited their strategic options. By this point in the war, other weaknesses of Nazi Germany were being exposed including fragile supply lines, faltering productivity of its war economy in the face of day and night aerial bombings and the lack of competent leadership.

On June 6, 1944, the Allies launched one of the largest amphibious military assaults in history codenamed Operation Overload (D-Day) along France's Normandy coastal region. This invasion resulted in the Allied liberation of Western Europe.

On December 16, 1944, Hitler launched what was to be Nazi Germany's last major military offensive in the Ardennes Forest in Belgium, which is now known as the Battle of the Bulge. The Nazi regime was attempting to split the Allied advancement towards Germany. The grueling six-week battle was fought in freezing weather and resulted in an Allied victory as it paved the way for a massive ground invasion into Germany.

As U.S. and other Allied forces attacked Germany from the west Soviet forces were attacking from the east. The combined Allied forces were taking thousands of prisoners and pounding Germany's infrastructure to ruins as Nazi defense forces were reduced to shambles. The Nazi regime finally crumbled as Soviet forces surrounded the war-ravaged Nazi capital of Berlin prompting its leader Adolph Hitler to commit suicide in his Führerbunker on April 30, 1945.

The ruins of a bridge spanning Germany's Rhine River – ca. 1945.
(Photograph by Earl Stout.)

On May 7, 1945, General Alfred Jodl, representing the remnants of the Nazi regime's High Command, signed an unconditional surrender document in Reims, France which ended World War II in Europe.

Buchenwald Concentration Camp

From 1933 to 1945, the Nazi regime built and operated more than one thousand concentration camps in Germany and in parts of German-occupied Europe.

On March 10, 1933, the Dachau Concentration Camp became Nazi Germany's first. It was established less than six weeks after Adolf Hitler became the chancellor of Germany and acted as a template for many that followed it including the Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

In July 1937, Buchenwald was established and was the largest concentration camp within the borders of Nazi Germany. Prisoners were sent here from all over Europe and the Soviet Union and included communists, Jews, political prisoners, criminals, prisoners of war and sexual "deviants." The camp provided forced human labor for local armament factories, and deliberately murdered thousands. Around 280,000 prisoners were sent to Buchenwald and its 139 sub-camps while in operation and

56,545 of them died.

As the Allied forces were closing in on the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in early April 1945 its commandant, Hermann Pister, ordered the evacuation of tens of thousands of prisoners who were marched on foot to other concentration camps including Theresienstadt and Flossenbürg in an attempt to keep them from being liberated. Thousands died on what was in reality death marches. Many other prisoners were ordered to evacuate to Dachau by train on open box cars. The train was delayed and took until April 27, 1945 to arrive as many of the prisoners were dying of starvation and various illnesses. This infamous train trip became known as the "Death Train."

When the Allied forces arrived on April 11, 1945 and liberated Buchenwald the camp's commandant Hermann Pister had fled.

Buchenwald gained international notoriety after it became the first Nazi concentration camp to be liberated by the United States Army.

The Allied supreme commander, U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, visited Buchenwald's Ohrdruf Subcamp on April 12, 1945, the day after the liberation, and was obviously emotionally and physically shaken by the experience as he later wrote in his memoirs:

> *"I have never felt able to describe my emotional reactions when I first came face to face with indisputable evidence of Nazi brutality and ruthless disregard of every shred of decency. ... I have never at any other time experienced an equal sense of shock. ...As soon as I returned to Patton's headquarters that evening I sent communications to both Washington and London, urging the two governments to send instantly to Germany a random group of newspaper editors and representative groups from the national legislatures. I felt that the evidence should be immediately placed before the American and British publics in a fashion that would leave no room for cynical doubt."*

Interior of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp barracks, photographed on April 16, 1945, several days after liberation. (Source: Wikimedia.)

Contemporary photograph of the gatehouse at Buchenwald Concentration Camp – the clock remains frozen at 3:15 which was the time of day when the camp was liberated. (Source: Wikimedia.)

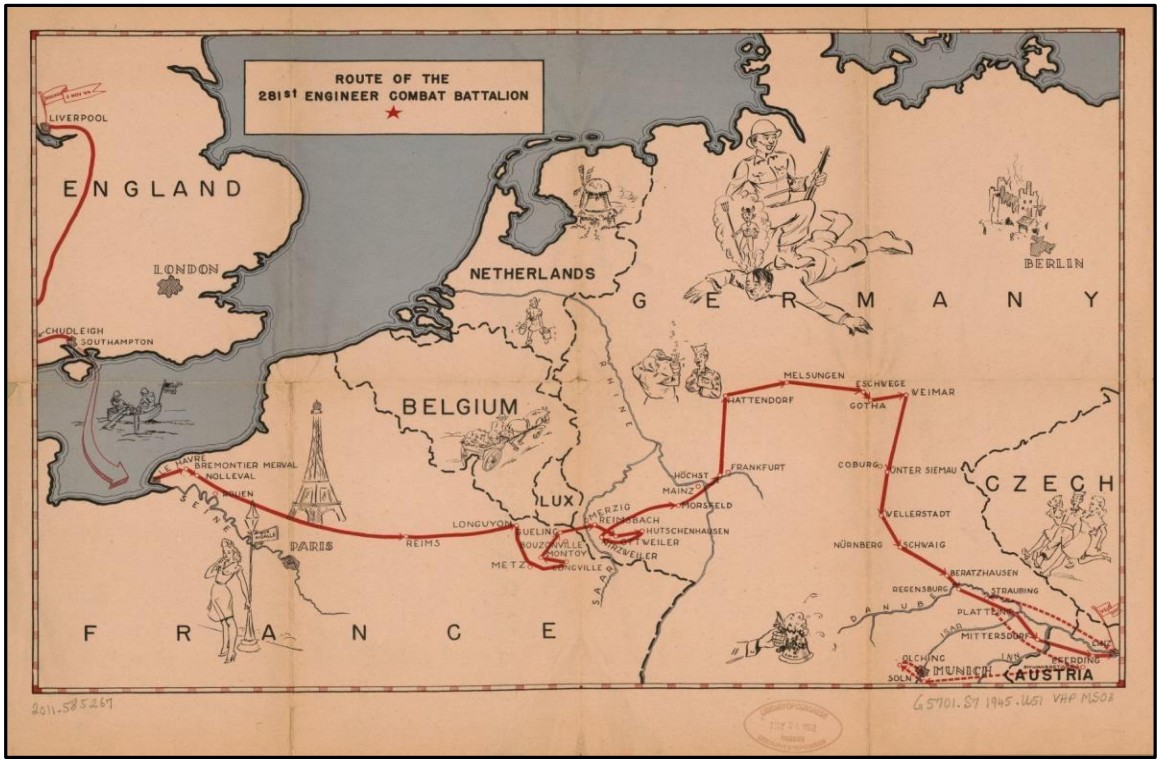
Witnessing the Nazi Holocaust

By the beginning of 1945, it was apparent that the Nazi regime was crumbling, however they maintained their ideology of the Final Solution (the extermination of Jewish people) and kept many of their concentration camps operating up until the time that Allied forces liberated them.

As the Allied forces advanced through German-occupied territory and into Germany they discovered numerous Nazi concentration and extermination camps. The appalling conditions of prisoners, number of corpses and the commercialized Holocaust cremation ovens and other infrastructure designed for the purpose of human extermination was startling and almost beyond belief to most, if not all, who witnessed these senseless atrocities.

Allied troops forced some captured Nazi guards to pick up dead prisoners and bury them in mass graves. Some of the captured Nazi guards were murdered by Allied troops and prisoners, and some were tried at Allied war crimes tribunals and jailed or sentenced to death. Others were able to flee from Europe, or hide in plain sight in Germany, and escape accountability. The majority returned to civilian life and were never punished for their crimes against humanity.

As part of the Allied forces advance, Earl Stout's 281st Engineer Combat Battalion entered Germany from France and assisted in the defeat of the Nazi regime.



The route of Earl Stout's 281st Engineer Combat Battalion – November 3, 1944 to May 8, 1945 - during the final months of World War II. (Source: Library of Congress.)

Following are seven of Earl Stout's most sensational—and shocking—photographs taken at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in April 1945, immediately following its liberation. His photographs capture the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust first hand, and prove that humans from all walks of life are capable of horrendous evil.

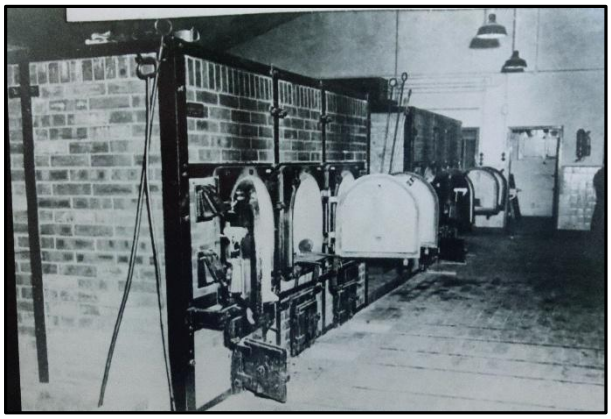
Three dead prisoners laying on the ground awaiting burial at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)

U.S. troops observe many dead prisoners laying on the ground at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, some covered and some naked, all awaiting burial. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)

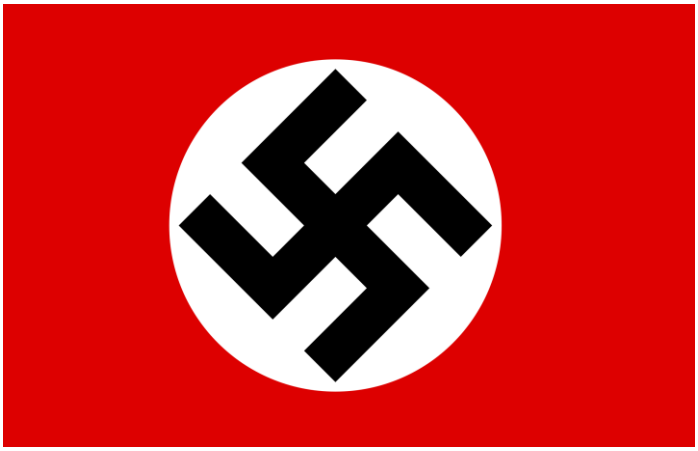
Dead prisoners stacked like logs at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)

Several dead prisoners laying on the ground awaiting burial at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)

A pile of human remains, bones and ashes, in a Crematorium Oven at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)



Six of the Crematorium Ovens at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)



Flag of Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1945. (Source: Wikimedia.)

Justice served? ***Two Nazi guards brutally beaten to death by prisoners, one had a wallet placed on his abdomen, lay on the ground surrounded by U.S. troops at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (Photograph by Earl Stout.)***

Human Skin Artifacts and Shrunken Heads

After discovering human remains, two shrunken heads, a large lampshade that was suspected to be made of human skin, and several pieces of tanned human skin with tattoos in the Buchenwald Concentration Camp's pathology department, General Dwight Eisenhower ordered the items documented and photographed. Local German civilians were marched into the camp to witness these artifacts and other Nazi Holocaust atrocities including the crematorium, starving and dead prisoners, some stacked on one another like logs at a sawmill.

Several pieces of tanned human skin with tattoos were scientifically tested by the Head of Pathology at Seventh Medical Laboratory in New York and by British pathologist Bernard Spilsbury and determined to be actual human skin.

Throughout the years flawed scientific testing of the lampshade claimed it was made from materials such as cowhide, goat skin, plant cellulose and even plastic.

Finally, in 2023, criminal biologist, Mark Benecke, concluded by using modern scientific techniques based on the distinctive grain pattern and distribution of the pores that the lampshade was "certainly human skin."

There were many myths that claimed the Nazis were making human skin lampshades at many of their Extermination Camps. These myths have since been dispelled as the only confirmed human skin lampshade came from the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, making it an isolated phenomenon.

A piece of human skin with a tattoo of a man Wearing a suit, cape and hat leaning to the left. (Source: Buchenwald Memorial.)

A piece of human skin with a tattoo of a man wearing a suit, cape and hat leaning to the right. (Source: Buchenwald Memorial.)

A piece of human skin with a tattoo of a lighthouse. (Source: Buchenwald Memorial.)

Two shrunken heads, human skin lampshade, human organs and various pieces of human skin with tattoos. All displayed for German civilians to witness after being discovered at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (Source: Wikimedia.)

*U.S. soldiers inspecting a human shrunken head in the pathology department at Buchenwald in April 1945. (Source: **Buchenwald Memorial.**)*

*Lampshade made from tanned human skin. (Source: **Buchenwald Memorial.**)*

One of the shrunken heads was presented as evidence by U.S. prosecutor, Thomas Dodd, at the Nuremberg Trials and described as a head from a former Polish prisoner. The shrunken head was used to symbolize Nazi cruelty and barbarism.

From the time the U.S. Army discovered the shrunken heads there was speculation surrounding their authenticity.

In 2023, a forensic expert examined one of the original Buchenwald shrunken heads and determined it was not a human specimen. The hair was identified as being from a horse. The report said the shrunken head was most likely assembled from various animal parts.

Today, one of the shrunken heads is located at the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Silver Spring, Maryland, and the other one is located at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, Germany.

The Two Commandants of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp

The Buchenwald Nazi Concentration Camp was in operation from July 1937 until it was liberated by U.S. forces on April 11, 1945. During its nearly eight years of Nazi control it had two commandants of a sinister nature: Karl-Otto Koch and Hermann Pister.

Karl-Otto Koch: Executed by a Nazi SS Firing Squad

(Left): Karl-Otto Koch in summer dress uniform – ca. 1940.
(Right): Karl-Otto's wife, Ilse, pictured in a prison mug shot – ca. 1947.
(Source: Wikimedia.)

Karl-Otto Koch was born in Darmstadt, Germany on August 2, 1897. In 1916, he volunteered in the Imperial German Army and fought on the Western Front in World War 1. In 1918, he was captured by the British and spent the remainder of the war as a POW. He was awarded several medals including the Iron Cross Second Class.

After World War 1 he worked as an authorized signatory and insurance agent. In 1930, he was arrested for embezzlement and forgery and sentenced to a short-term in prison.

In 1932, he joined the Nazi Party and the Schutzstaffel "Protection Squadron" (SS), and served with several SS paramilitary units.

From 1934 to mid-1935, he was assigned as an officer at several Nazi Concentration Camps including Lichtenburg and Dachau.

On June 13, 1935, he was assigned as commandant of the Columbia Concentration Camp. In April 1936, he was assigned to the Esterwegen Concentration Camp, and several months later became the first commandant of the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. In 1937, he was promoted to the rank of SS-Standartenführer (colonel).

On August 1, 1937, he was assigned as commandant of the new Buchenwald Concentration Camp. During his tenure at Buchenwald he was responsible for many atrocities including corruption and embezzlement, murder of prisoners (including three that were going to testify against him). Approximately 30,000 prisoners died under his watch. In September 1941, the SS high command transferred him to the Majdanek Concentration Camp as he was under investigation for improper conduct and crimes at Buchenwald.

While at the Majdanek Concentration Camp he was arrested by SS-internal police and jailed at the Gestapo prison in Weimar, Germany. An SS court found him guilty of embezzling large amounts of inmate property and crimes against prisoners. On April 5, 1945, Koch was swiftly removed from Weimer Prison and transported to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. In a twist of fate, Koch was promptly executed by a SS firing squad and his body was transported to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp's crematorium and incinerated.

Margarete Ilse Köhler (Ilse Koch) was born in Dresden, Germany in 1906. In 1932, she joined the Nazi Party. In 1934, she met her future husband, Karl-Otto Koch, through social Nazi SS contacts in Dresden. In 1937, the couple sought permission from the SS Office of Racial and Settlement Affairs to marry. After a "fitness for marriage" investigation, where Ilse provided evidence of her Aryan ancestry, they were approved and soon married at the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. Karl-Otto and Ilse had one son and two daughters, all born at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

In 1943, Ilse was arrested by a SS investigatory commission and charged with the embezzlement and concealing of funds and goods at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. At the SS trial in December 1944, Ilse was acquitted and released from the Gestapo prison in Weimar, Germany after being incarcerated for sixteen months.

After Nazi Germany surrendered to the Allied forces, on May 7, 1945, ending World War II in Europe, Ilse became wanted for war crimes. On June 30, 1945, she was arrested by U.S. authorities in Ludwigsburg, Germany after a former inmate of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp identified her.

In 1947, Ilse was placed on trial by an American military court at Dachau and charged with the single crime of "participating in a common design to commit war crimes." She became one of the most infamous Nazis charged with war crimes as she was often accused of selecting Buchenwald inmates for extermination in order to make artifacts such as lampshades and book bindings from their tattooed skins. On August 14, 1947, Ilse was found guilty of war crimes and sentenced to life imprisonment despite the fact that she was pregnant with her fourth child from an unknown father.

On September 16, 1948, the interim military governor of the American Zone in Germany, General Lucius D. Clay, reduced her sentence to four years (a very controversial decision at the time).

Since the American military court at Dachau did not have jurisdiction over crimes against German nationals the U.S. government persuaded West Germany to charge her with additional war crimes.

In 1949, upon her release from the Landsberg Prison she was immediately arrested and charged with "twenty-five misdemeanor counts of grievous bodily harm, incitement to grievous bodily harm in a number of cases, sixty-five counts of incitement to attempted murder, and twenty-five counts of incitement to murder."

During a seven-week trial at Augsburg, Germany, where 250 witnesses were heard, her mental health began to deteriorate and she collapsed in court twice.

On January 15, 1951, she was found guilty of seven misdemeanor counts of incitement to grievous bodily harm, one count of incitement to attempted murder, and one count of incitement to murder. The charges associated with her choosing tattooed prisoners to be exterminated to make artifacts such as human skin lampshades were dropped. She was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The Augsburg court noted that Ilse's demeanor during the trial was "stubborn and irresponsible denial" and she had an incapacity for even the "slightest admission of guilt."

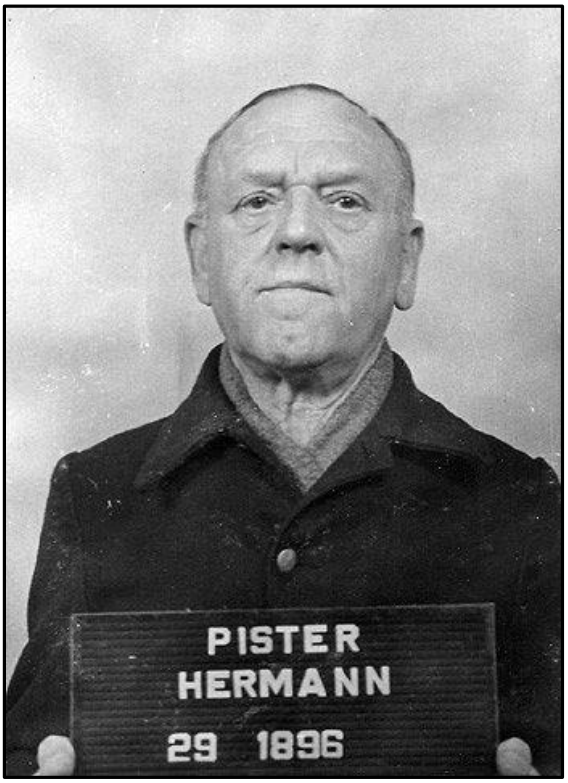
Several attempts at appeals were dismissed and several petitions for a pardon were all rejected.

On September 1, 1967, Ilse Koch, the infamous female Nazi war criminal with many abominable nicknames including "The Beast of Buchenwald", the "Queen of Buchenwald", the "Red Witch of Buchenwald", "Butcher Widow', and "The Bitch of Buchenwald" hung herself with a bedsheet in a cell at the Aichach Women's Prison.

She left a suicide note addressed to her son, Uwe, that stated "There is no other way. Death for me is a release."

Prior to her suicide she had become delusional and fearful that Nazi Concentration Camp survivors would break into her jail cell and torment her.

Hermann Pister: Cheated the Hangman as he Died in Prison Awaiting Execution



A prison mug shot of Hermann Pister – ca. 1947. (Source: Wikimedia.)

Hermann Pister was born in Lübeck, Germany on February 21, 1885, and his life was similar to many other World War II German war criminals prior to the rise of the Nazi regime as he lived a rather regular and unassuming lifestyle. Pister served in the German Imperial Navy during World War I. After Germany's defeat he returned to civilian life and worked as an automobile mechanic, salesman and manager.

In 1932, he joined the Nazi party and the feared anti-Semitic and paramilitary unit Schutzstaffle (SS).

In 1937, Pister was assigned to SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler's motor pool.

Pister's career as commandant of Nazi concentration camps began on October 9, 1939 when he was assigned to command the Hinzert Concentration Camp in Rhineland-Palatinate.

On January 1, 1942, he replaced Karl Otto Koch as commandant of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp where he remained in command until the camp was liberated by Allied troops in April 1945.

After avoiding capture when the Allied forces liberated Buchenwald Pister was identified in an Allied detention camp near Munich in June 1945. He was arrested and charged with war crimes including the violation of the laws and usages of war per The Hague Convention of 1907 and violation of the rights of prisoners of war per the third Geneva Convention of 1929.

On April 11, 1947, he was placed on trial by the American Military Tribunal in Dachau, Germany and was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging.

On September 28, 1948, Pister managed to cheat the hangman as he died from a heart attack in in Landsberg Prison while awaiting execution by hanging.

Buchenwald After World War II

After the Buchenwald Concentration Camp was liberated U.S. investigators began documenting Nazi war crimes committed at the camp. The U.S. Army repurposed the camp to house displaced people.

In July 1945, the camp was transferred to the Soviet Union's military administration (as it was physically located within in the Soviet occupation zone). The Soviet's repurposed the camp into a prison camp known as NKVD Special Camp No. 2. Many Soviet prisoners were mistreated and forced to live under cruel conditions.

From August 1945 through March 1950, NKVD Special Camp No. 2 held approximately 28,455 prisoners which included former Nazis, opponents of the Soviet government and some innocent people who were indiscriminately rounded up and imprisoned for no apparent legal reason. The camp's death rate was abnormally high as 25 percent (7,113) of the prisoners died while incarcerated from various reasons including a lack of proper medical care, malnourishment and social isolation.

The Soviet's did not inform relatives of prisoner deaths and buried bodies in two disguised mass grave sites.

In March 1950, the Soviet's closed NKVD Special Camp No. 2. The majority of the buildings were demolished. A few structures including the concrete watch towers have survived.

In 1993, the names of the prisoners who died at NKVD Special Camp No. 2 were finally released and are now listed on a digital registry. The mass grave sites are now identified and marked.

Today, the Buchenwald Concentration Camp/NKVD Special Camp No. 2 site serves as a memorial and permanent exhibition and museum. The site is dedicated to the memory of the victims of the Nazi regime and the Soviet occupation.

The Buchenwald Memorial Tower and the "Revolt of the Prisoners" sculpture were built between 1954 and 1958. (Source: Buchenwald Memorial.)

Earl Stout before, during and after World War II

Earl Stout, the photographer of several pictures featured in this article, was born on March 18, 1910 in Shrewsbury, New Jersey. He was a direct descendant of Penelope Van Princis Kent Stout who was the first female white settler of Monmouth County, New Jersey.

Around 1930, he started working as a photographer for legal concerns and loan companies and later worked as a foreman at a lumber company prior to his January 28, 1942 enlistment in the United States Army. He was assigned to the 281st Engineer Combat Battalion as a construction supervisor. His military qualifications included 1917 Rifle SS 174, Carbine MM 150 and Rifle M1. His decorations and citations included the American Service Medal, EAME Service Medal and the Good Conduct Medal. Stout said of his World War II photography, "I have many war photographs, but my most prized possessions are those photographs I took while I was with Patton's Third Army when we liberated Buchenwald and Ohrdruf, two of the most infamous concentration camps in Germany." He was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army on October 27, 1945 after spending 2 years, 9 months and 1 day in continental and 11 months and 29 days in foreign service.

After Stout returned to civilian life he became a professional photographer working at Dorn's Photography Unlimited in Red Bank, New Jersey where he was employed for 38 years and retired in 1978. He was a charter member of the River Plaza Hose Company, and a life member of the Red Bank Fire Department and First Aid Squad.

Stout married Delores Gessner (a direct descendant of Ethan Allen, the American Revolutionary War patriot and politician) and had two children; a son Earl Jr., and a daughter Phyllis C. Lorber.

He died in Toms River, New Jersey on April 24, 1993 at the age of 83.

About the Author

Randy Jaye currently resides in Flagler Beach. He recently researched and nominated 5 properties that have been successfully added onto the National Register of Historic Places. He is the author of several recent history books including: *Flagler County, Florida: A Centennial History* (2017); *Perseverance: Episodes of Black History from the Rural South* (2020); *Jim Crow Era Propaganda, Artifacts and Upheavals in Florida* (2022), *Florida Prohibition: Corruption, Defiance and Tragedy* (2024) and *Florida Flashpoints: Extraordinary Moments from Spanish Colony to the Space* Age (2025). He has also written articles for historical journals, local newspapers, magazines, online publications, and has appeared on several radio shows and PBS documentaries. He earned both a Master's degree and a Bachelor's degree from California State University.