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TELEVISION REVIEW

G.I.'s Condemned to Slave Labor in the Holocaust

By NED MARTEL

The Holocaust, with its genocidal mechanisms long hidden from other nations, is now reasonably understood in physical terms. Historians have read the records of who, when, how and how many. What might never be fully understood is the irrational aspect. Why did inhumanity flourish, earn such wide berth, spread like a contagion?

Concentration camp prisoners felt a strange mix of compassion and contempt for the Holocaust's weaker victims, even as they themselves were suffering the same savagery. Interviews conducted for "Berga: Soldiers of Another War," which will be shown tonight on PBS stations, reveal not just the outer horrors of concentration camps but also the inner demons.

Late in 1944 the Battle of the Bulge left 4,000 American soldiers as prisoners of war, and the Germans demanded to know which were Jewish. High-ranking officers in captivity ordered their charges to give only name, rank and serial number, in accordance with the Geneva Convention. When the Germans realized who was giving such commands, Nazi soldiers swung their rifle butts

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"like Babe Ruth" at the head of one American officer, Hans Kasten, who lived to tell of the trauma.

Still, some Americans admitted being Jews and were quarantined. Others denied it but were pulled out of the P.O.W. population for having Jewish-sounding names. Still more, with no Semitic ties whatsoever, were segregated for resembling Jews or being "undesirable" like the battered, stoic Mr. Kasten. Of 350 Americans sent into forced labor, only 80 were Jewish.

In a small riverside town called Berga, the Americans were mixed among gaunt Jewish workers in striped uniforms. Sent each morning into caves, they dug out bunkers for an underground factory. Pushing hand trucks with frigid fingers, they breathed pulverized quartz into their lungs, adding to the gasps of winter colds.

The details of daily existence emerge with sad familiarity. Wind slips through planks to disrupt any available sleep in boxcars and barracks. Lice are plucked from unwashed clothes and squeezed between thumbs. Three-tiered bunks of wood and straw barely accommodate two exhausted skeletal workers on each bed. If one body expired in the night, his bedmate mourns the loss of warmth as much as the loss of life.

Charles Guggenheim, whose documentaries have won four Oscars,

BERGA

Soldiers of Another War

*On most PBS stations tonight
(Check local listings)*

Directed, written and narrated by Charles Guggenheim; Grace Guggenheim, producer; Guggenheim Productions and Thirteen/WNET New York, co-producers; Erich Roland, director of photography; Anny Lowery Meza, editor; Michael Bacon, original score; Skip SoRelle, sound designer.

chose this film topic after a lifetime of wondering if such a harsh fate might have befallen him. A foot infection kept him stateside while those he trained with went on to war. The filmmaker tracked down as many survivors as would talk about this anomalous event in the war's last months.

Even as he was dying of pancreatic cancer, Mr. Guggenheim completed his final film with skill, determination and a reliance on late-in-life insight. Elderly witnesses testify about dark days and dark impulses. Hans Kasten suspects he is being summoned to his own execution and his overwhelming thoughts focused on the jugular of a German he hoped to kill with his teeth as long as he had life left to do so. In another account, a benevolent-looking grandfather tells how, even in the comfort of an Allied field hospital, he clutched his knife, in case his hard-won freedom was

threatened. "I was transformed into an animal," Leo Zaccaria said.

The saddest moment is perhaps the most instructive. Anthony Acevedo tells how he ran out of ink documenting the deaths of his colleagues, and Zaccaria recalls how certain behavior made it clear when someone would be added to the ledger. "Unconnected thoughts would clutter the speech of the near-dead, clouding their communication with others. In their final days, each would suffer sunken eyes, would slink off alone in nonassociative ways. "The 18- or 19-year-old boys went very quickly," one survivor explained. "Older fellows with families survived."

The challenge for Holocaust documentarians is often to find something new, unlike any previous depictions. This film salutes any who admitted their heritage or defended those singled out for religious persecution. Ultimately, however, the fact that a few hundred sufferers did not fit the usual profile in this war seems insignificant, although there is a persistent implication that Americans or gentiles or any other group untargeted for extermination should not take comfort that such harm could never have happened to them. The larger point remains that the loss of millions of lives, even if systematically and identically extinguished, has more insights to yield.