

From a gifted filmmaker, a final program

Your television will quiver tomorrow night as the Public Broadcasting System airs a searing documentary by the late Charles Guggenheim about

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American soldiers that Germany captured in World War II and sent to a slave labor camp.

As the production was in the final stages last

year, Guggenheim suffered from pancreatic cancer. He died in October at 78.

You have seen his films at the Kennedy Library and Ellis Island.

In 1972, when Guggenheim was still making political TV spots, I did a story about him and ads he crafted for Sen. Claiborne Pell. Democrat Pell faced a tough reelection challenge from Republican John Chafee in one of the classiest matchups I ever covered. "The most important thing we do," Guggenheim said, "is make a choice in who we're going to work for."

Pell won. Chafee later would capture the other Senate seat. Ironically, Grace Guggenheim, the filmmaker's daughter, had gone to school with Chafee's daughter, Georgia, and the two women are still friends.

After campaigns morphed into jungles of distortion and attacks, Charles Guggenheim left the ad business. Grace, 44, tells me he'd say, "You can play the piano well in a house of ill repute, but you're still playing in a house of ill repute."

When you watch *Berga: Soldiers of Another War*, narrated by Guggenheim, you'll appreciate his range. It tells of his Army colleagues who fell into Nazi hands at the Battle of the Bulge. A foot

infection had spared him from going overseas. He would be haunted by learning that 350 men — Jews and those the Germans suspected were Jews — were packed into box cars and shipped to a camp in the town of Berga, a satellite of the Buchenwald death factory. They would toil digging tunnels into rock cliffs and endure starvation, beatings, disease, and cold. Many died.

The 90-minute program uses archival films and reenactments — Germans were hired for scenes over there — but its strength is the testimony of Americans who survived.

William Shapiro on the food:

"You would make that piece of bread last for a long time, as long as you could make it last. And just chew it very slowly. And drink the soup very, very slowly, which was really turnip green heads and old rotted potatoes and grass."

Philip Dantowitz on death:

"I never knew what they did with the bodies. I didn't care. It was . . . I just didn't care to inquire. I survived. That was the important thing. It wasn't me that got up dead in the morning. (Pause.) It's a terrible thing, isn't it . . . for a person to say that? But it's true."

Hans Kasten on the Nazi commandant:

"And he, with a great deal of enthusiasm, told me that I was going to be turned loose the next day. Just so the dogs could get me. He said, 'We have to check these dogs to see if they can get you. Well, these dogs are trained to rip you to pieces.'"

Grace Guggenheim, who worked with her father and often speaks of him in the present tense, tells me, "He realizes that we are very fortunate to have men and women who are willing to serve this country, and he realizes he could have been one of these guys and he was saved, maybe, to tell this story."

Guggenheim was Jewish, and proud of it, says Grace, but he doesn't discuss it on this program. His style was to be understated. She says, "He doesn't tell you what to think; he just brings you through events."

This film gives you plenty to think about, and the events make an indelible impression.

Berga airs tomorrow on Channel 2 at 8 p.m. — repeating at midnight — and on Channel 36 on July 28 at 9 p.m.

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