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Summary

Joe Gravencamp was a twenty-nine-year-old Sergeant assigned to Company K of the 5th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, when his unit was ordered into the Gunskirchen Concentration Camp in Austria, near the end of the war. His first vision, as he entered the camp, was piles of mostly naked dead bodies. That vision has stayed with him for the past 50 year; other details were a bit hazy. The prisoners in the camp were mostly European Jews. They had been guarded by SS troops who disappeared as the American Army neared; the guards who were captured were soldiers who had been wounded on the Eastern front and had been assigned this guard duty. There had been some fighting, but soon all had surrendered. Approximately 500 prisoners were milling around in the yard, all were emaciated, their heads shaven and all wearing the striped uniform. There were men, women and some children. Inside the barracks starved prisoners were lying on the floor; had his unit not arrived these prisoners would have died within the next couple of days. As it was, some prisoners died by eating too much food and the soldiers were instructed to limit the inmates' food intake. There were no gas chambers or crematorium in the camp. There also were no real old prisoners, since the strength of the weaker prisoners had given out and they were killed during their lengthy march from Poland into the Austrian camp. Joe had a great advantage since he talked German and was able to converse with some of the prisoners, as well as with the German inhabitants of the nearby town. There, the Germans denied knowing anything about the camp, although the smell of death was noticeable. The unit stayed at the camp for about a week. The German guards were ordered to dig graves for the dead in the nearby forest; if they refused the orders were to shoot them. The GI's were furious enough to do that. Some of the more able prisoners were helped to depart to their former homes.

After the war, nobody wanted to talk about this horror; everyone was glad the war was over. Much later, at a reunion, experiences were recalled. Joe could not understand why the Germans committed these acts. He could never forgive them, or for that matter, the Japanese. He could also not understand those who maintained that the holocaust never happened. He knew that many Germans had escaped justice by fleeing to South America. He was all in favor of the ongoing practice to seek the testimony of those who experienced the war; the Jewish deaths should not have been in vain.