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Summary

Jerry Hontas was a 22-year old Technician-5 (T-5) soldier assigned to the 120th Evacuation Hospital when his unit was ordered to move from Northern France to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in 1945. Along the road leading to Weimar, Germany, Jerry noticed a lot of dead bodies in striped uniforms, like dirty pajamas, lying along the road; he thought they might be refugees since he had not heard of concentration camps. At the entrance of the camp there was a group sitting behind the barbed wire fence in similar clothing. All 30 -40-year-old men looked emaciated, straggly and unshaven. A sickening smell permeated the area. The front gate was open and a group was milling around, all in the same sad shape. They appeared happy of their deliverance by the Americans but could not show much enthusiasm, as they were physically and psychologically traumatized. It was a huge encampment with several thousand inmates, with watchtowers every 50 feet and numerous wooden barracks. In the barracks, prisoners were lying on wooden planks, most too sick to move and suffering from tuberculosis. There was a crematorium with about 100 bodies stacked nearby, ready to be burned. The ovens were still warm - it had been only a few hours since 3rd Army tanks had led the liberation. There was a laboratory and a hospital but Jerry had not entered to inspect those. A large ranch-style barracks was situated near the gate which was the home of the commandant. Inside there were lamps which displayed tattoos, but Jerry had not recognized that the shades were made of human skin. Regardless, the entire scene was too horrible to grasp, it was not rational and made no sense and some sights had stayed with him for the past 50 years. Some of the inmates had made flags, signifying their home country. Jerry spoke Greek, found a Greek flag and conversed with the prisoners who had been shipped from Greece, who told of their hardship, their forced labor and the lack of food – they were hungry and sick.

Jerry stayed near the camp for about two weeks. Most of the medical work was done outside of the camp in the nearby village of Chem, where a hospital was set up for those who could be evacuated by ambulance. Death was no longer shocking, since so many patients just dropped dead and could not be saved.

At one point a group of German civilians was brought into the camp to show them what had happened there. They had all denied knowing anything about the camp, although the influx of prisoners on the access road was clearly visible and some could see inside the camp from the top of a nearby hill.

For Jerry the rules of behavior were shattered. He wanted to get all this out of his mind after the war, but he ended up talking to family and friends about his Buchenwald experience; all who listened were shocked and believed him.