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Summary

William Kerns was a 24-year-old Staff Sergeant, assigned to the 120th Evacuation Hospital when his unit was ordered into the Buchenwald Concentration Camp a few days after its liberation. Along the road there were bodies strewn on the highway, apparently run-over by the retreating Germans. The camp was a total surprise, conditions he had never seen before. A group of prisoners in striped uniform were in the small courtyard. The prisoners were from many countries. The barracks were full of prisoners and there was a complete disorder, many of the prisoners were obviously not going to survive. It was hard to judge how old they were, they all looked the same, just skin and bones. One barrack had been taken-over by French prisoners; the inmates had gone to the nearby city of Weimar and appropriated whatever they needed. Outside of the crematorium were wagons loaded with dead prisoners. The Germans had obviously tried to get rid of the human evidence but did not finish the job. William did not go into the camp hospital where brutal experiments had been conducted, since he did not stay in the camp very long. His unit moved immediately to a nearby small town named Ham where the evacuation hospital was set up and the Ambulance Unit brought patients from Buchenwald and from other area concentration camps for treatment. The situation here was similar as in the camp, many were not going to survive. Here he saw some children but most of the patients were men. A lawyer inmate from Austria became his interpreter who helped him organize, but all conversations were strictly business. William did not speak any other languages, so he had little insight in what the liberated prisoners were thinking. They were obviously happy to be freed but otherwise seemed angry and withdrawn. William had little contact with the patients since he was a supervisor and also was placed in charge of the morgue. Germans were used to cart away the dead. He had no particular feelings about these Germans, but the overall situation was incomprehensible. His duties kept him busy during his 3-4 days at Ham and he had no time to reflect. It was only years later that he was amazed that he had had the inner strength to cope. He really did not want to look back to that time of his life and it bothered him now to think about it.