

---

## **E U R O P E   s p e a k s**

**[Heft 60,]  
27th August, 1945**

---

*[Seite: - 1 -]*

### **Germany**

#### **[Personal Experiences during nine years of Imprisonment in the Concentration Camp Buchenwald]**

The following account of personal experiences during nine years of imprisonment was written by the same comrade whose detailed description of the development of the concentration camp Buchenwald we published in "Europe Speaks" of July 14th, 1945.

"To-day, whenever the subject of the horrors of the German concentration camps is raised the following phrase is echoed from all quarters: 'Oh, if we had only known all this!' My political friends and I, we knew about them and yet we felt we had to carry on doing what we thought right.

This conviction and the activities resulting from it led to my arrest by the Gestapo on January 25th, 1936. On February 6th was my first hearing. 'What do you know about the communists in Cassel?' was the first question I was asked. I answered promptly, and, incidentally almost truthfully: 'Nothing'. Some blows with a whip followed, then more questions about my trade union and political activities and my political friends, always accompanied by blows from the whip. When the first whip was broken, they took a second one. This went on for five hours without any results for my interrogators, after which they took me back to my cell.

Once I was alone I was filled but with a single thought to put a stop to this before I was reduced to a state when I no longer knew what I was saying. I decided to end my life. Life had not offered me many material pleasures, but in my thoughts I had to bid farewell to many good comrades, close and beloved friends, and to many beautiful experiences I had had during my political work. But now more was at stake than my own life: I thought of how I might endanger our anti-fascist work and in what a terrible position I might get our friends. After midnight I cut the veins of my pulse and neck with a razor blade. However, a few hours later I was taken to the country hospital where my wounds were healed.

In August, 1936 my trial took place. Apart from myself there were another nine comrades accused. The court sentenced us in all to thirty six years of imprisonment. I got two and a half years hard labour. All accused conducted themselves with dignity throughout the trial.

The prison was clean and well organised, with a rigid discipline which was, however, applied both to the prisoners and the prison personnel. The prisoners had a right to complain against arbitrary acts on the part of the wardens.

After three months of solitary confinement I was taken to a cell with other prisoners and for half a year I was made an assistant

orderly, a position which had the advantage of giving me a certain amount of freedom of movement. In the spring of 1937 a start was made in using the prisoners for the purposes of German rearmament. Old electric cables, bulbs, telephones, etc. were taken to pieces in order to save the raw material. The work was hard and unhealthy. I lived together with both political prisoners and criminals. Many comrades suffered very much from the physical hardships which we had to undergo. I myself was not subject to prison psychosis. The inner wealth I had stored throughout the years gave a certain richness to my life and I felt fortunate compared with many other comrades. What worried me was that I had to keep all these thoughts and feelings so much bottled up. How often did I envy the political prisoners of earlier times! They could discuss with their comrades, learn together and from one another and thus develop themselves as political personalities. We could not do that; we were forced to keep silent on account of the political naivety of some comrades and the criminal depravity of some of the other prisoners. Placing criminal elements in our midst was the prison management's method of preventing us having political discussions and training. The people who had practiced fraud, forgery, swindle and blackmail were definitely the most dangerous criminals, for their actions were not perpetrated in a fit of passion, but in cold blood. Many a political prisoner had to pay dearly for his lack of realistic imagination as to the depth of human depravity. What precautions were necessary? I want to give one example in answer to this question: In the middle of January were the days on which in former times we held celebrations in memory of Karl Liebknecht[1], Rosa Luxembourg and Lenin[2]. In the prison cell, where I spent January, 1938 we could not mention this occasion, not with a single word, without running the risk of being denounced by the criminal forger who shared the cell with us four political prisoners. I therefore wrote down on my slate some thoughts befitting these days of remembrance and while the Gestapo fifth columnist was sleeping I passed them round to my three comrades to read. We clasped our hands, our thoughts had met, we had understood one another, and the faces of the comrades were lit up with joy and thankfulness.

In thinking over my experiences in prison I am especially struck by one thing: during the whole time I never noticed that either the political prisoners or the criminals felt regret or contrition for their actions; they pretended to do so on occasions to obtain some special facilities through the prison padre or teacher. If, however, a communist or freethinker towards the end of his prison sentence attended religious teaching or service, it was viewed with justified indignation. The attitude of the great majority of the political prisoners was firm and upright.

On July 27th, 1938 I was taken in the 'Black Maria' to the police prison. On July 30th I arrived in the concentration camp Buchenwald near Weimar. After all I had heard about this camp I was prepared for the worst. From the moment of my arrival I felt the tremendous difference between this camp and my quiet prison cell. Apart from the treatment meted out to us by the S.S., we underwent great sufferings due to the change of climate and food. What were our general living conditions? To answer this question one must acquaint oneself with the purpose of these camps.

The concentration camps were run by the S.S. The inmates of the camps had committed a crime against the national socialist community (Volksgemeinschaft) and were therefore expelled from it; they were thus placed outside any legal order. They were not to be educated or reformed, but exterminated, although in a profitable way. Whatever was done to them was not considered an injustice by their guardians. To these S.S.-men, all very young, almost boys, we were all prosecuted as criminals and

they therefore got the idea that it was a special merit to treat us 'roughly'. The S.S.-men competed with

*[Seite im Original:] - 3-*

one another in indulging in the crudest forms of sadism, and the quarters in Berlin set the pace with their decrees.

Thousands of habitual criminals (Berufsverbrecher) and other anti-social elements daily imperilled the lives of the other prisoners. The situation became even more critical when some camp leaders favoured these criminals and played them out against the political prisoners. These criminals always tried to entangle the S.S. in some dirty business and to corrupt them. As a consequence, some S.S.-men became prisoners in the camp themselves, but generally no longer than for half a year.

I do not want to go into any further details about conditions in Buchenwald. I would like only to mention the B.B.C. broadcasts which after the Americans took over the camp informed the world about conditions there. My comrades and myself have listened to them; they told the truth.

The third day after my arrival I was detailed to a S.S.-labour commando. I had to hoe and dig under the scorching sun. After three days I collapsed and had to be carried away. I had lost over ten pounds and only weighed six and a half stones. I was only able to survive thanks to the help of some good comrades who with great efforts succeeded in getting me into a different labour commando. I was sent to the transport column, where twenty to twenty five men had to drag a big case or car filled with tree-trunks, sand or gravel, on ropes. Often we had to do this whilst running. But this was already an improvement for me as compared with the other job. Later I worked as a carpenter. In November, 1938 I was made a clerk in the prisoners' office. In the concentration camp Buchenwald there was a large degree of self-administration by the prisoners and the office was also run by prisoners who had to note down the arrivals and departures, compile lists and card indexes, report changes etc. to the camp management and to the headquarters in Berlin. This office had to inform the kitchen about the number of prisoners to be fed, organise the transports between the various camps, pass on information and messages to other departments and prepare the roll-calls. During the last five years I spent in Buchenwald it was my task to prepare the roll-calls. This job left me with little leisure. I had to prepare two or three roll-calls every day, and had to account for hundreds and thousands of changes. The roll-calls had to be exact down to the last man. At times we had eighty thousand to ninety thousand men, sixty thousand of them working in fifty labour detachments (Aussenkommandos) which were constantly interchanging. It depended to a large degree upon the speed and the exactitude of my work how long each roll-call lasted, a question of life and death for sick people who had to stand in storm and ice in the open yard. If there was a hitch during the roll-call I was ordered to come and often succeeded in settling the matter with a short explanation. This activity of mine brought me in contact with most prisoners in Buchenwald. My job also enabled me to help some prisoners especially in need or in danger. A letter written by Russian comrades, which I have added to this report, may be of interest in this connection. I also enclose my answer to it.

It took many years to achieve a measure of agreement amongst the representatives of the various political movements and of the various nationalities in the camp. Until 1943 the anti-fascists preserved the same stubbornness and orthodoxy as during those tragic years before the Nazis came to power. Only then did they begin to rally behind a

programme drafted by a Social Democratic comrade, H. Brill from Weimar. The relationship between the various nationalities up to 1944 was by no means permeated with a spirit of international solidarity. An exception to this was, however, the prisoners' attitude to the Russian prisoners of war. From 1944 onwards non-German

*[Seite im Original:] - 4-*

nationals were proportionately appointed to take part in the administration of the camp, which proved a success. The approaching military and political crisis of Nazi-Germany made it imperative for us prisoners to discuss common defensive measures against S.S. attacks on the concentration camp. We formed a military committee from amongst all the nationalities and worked out a well-thought-out plan of operation.

We comrades in the prisoners' office had a position which enabled us to have a better insight into the happenings in the camp than most of the others had. This was, however, at the same time a great danger for us, as we had to expect with certainty that in the critical hour of defeat the S.S. would try to liquidate all those who had an intimate knowledge of their crimes. Although we were in some respects in a favoured position we shared with all the other prisoners the daily peril to our lives, and often the general misery, the hunger and servitude.

I want to say a few words about our contact with the world at large, I do not mean the wireless which connected us, although onesidedly, with the whole world; I am thinking of our contact with our relatives and friends. We had permission to write and to receive mail, although the S.S. did everything to put obstacles in our way. But throughout these years we were cared for by our dear ones, whose devotion and loyalty - which often had tragic consequences for themselves - defied the wishes of the Gestapo. From the winter of 1943 onwards we were also allowed to receive parcels and the S.S. were often filled with envy in view of the self-denying care shown by the prisoners' families. A striking demonstration of this was the fact that the number of parcels and letters sent to Buchenwald was considerably higher than of those sent to the town of Weimar. At the end of 1944 the mail service was interrupted. But by then we dared to count the weeks until the defeat of the Nazi regime.

We had prepared for that day. It is difficult to say whether the plan of our military committee would have stood the test, but at any rate, it gave the comrades in charge a feeling of self-assurance and almost power. It was due to this feeling of confidence that the great evacuation scheme of the S.S. was to a large extent sabotaged through procrastination and thus the lives of thousands of comrades were saved. On April 6th, forty six comrades who were politically prominent were ordered to the gates, we knew that they were to be killed because they knew too much. We foiled this plan by hiding them for five days and the S.S. obviously no longer dared to use violence inside the camp. When, on the afternoon of April 11th, the Allied tanks were nearing Buchenwald, the S.S. slunk away.

Nobody could describe our feelings when we realised that our sufferings in the camp were over. Everywhere in the camp one could see men embracing each other, clasping hands and congratulating one another on their liberation. At that time an S.S. special unit consisting of five hundred men was on the march to Buchenwald to annihilate the camp with all its inhabitants. We learnt this at 10.30 in the evening when the police in Weimar phoned to enquire whether the prisoners were still alive. But the murderers came too late, for between Weimar and Buchenwald, there was a wall of American tanks and our own units armed with rifles, machine guns and bazookas.

On the morning of April 12th we held our first Freedom Roll-Call. Under the flags of all the nations, to the sound of their songs, so long forbidden, the former prisoners marched on. After proclamations were read in the main languages the gathering sang the 'Internationale' in thirty five different tongues. A few days later we arranged a solemn gathering in memory of the fifty thousand comrades murdered in this camp. And on a third occasion, on May 1st, we held a demonstra-

*[Seite im Original:] - 5-*

tion in a spirit of unity and enthusiasm which was probably unequalled the whole world. Flags, garlands, banners and illuminations gave the camp an air of great festivity. Then started the great exodus, by cars and planes. 'Au revoir', 'do swidania', 'nasdar', 'auf Wiedersehen' - these greetings were heard a thousand times. We Germans had already during the first days after the liberation formed a committee and had enlarged the basis of the Popular Front Committee which was founded in 1943. Commissions were meeting almost permanently, passing resolutions, drafting manifestos and appeals to the population to fight against the Nazis. The sufferings of the past years had created in our hearts the burning desire for an uncompromising fight against fascism and militarism. Nothing should weaken us in our resolve, for our comrades, starved and tortured to death, remind us: 'The Nazis are no human beings, they only look as though they were!'

We knew what to expect outside the camp: ruins, nothing but ruins, the ruins of our town, our people, our class, the working class which always had to bear the brunt. But we did not despair. We want to start with reconstruction, we want to achieve it in the spirit and with the aid of solidarity."

\* \* \*

### **[Letter of former Russian Political Prisoners in the Concentration Camp of Buchenwald and the answer]**

Letter of a group of former Russian political prisoners in the concentration camp Buchenwald (translated from the Russian).

Weimar-Buchenwald,  
May 11th, 1945.

To the comrade M. **[3]**

Highly esteemed Comrade M.,

We, a group of former Russian political prisoners, who after the liberation from the concentration camp Buchenwald are returning to our homeland, want to express to you our deep feelings for the benefits received from you. You, a German comrade and political prisoner, have cared for us, who have lived under the most cruel hardships of a fascist concentration camp, in a spirit of true international solidarity.

Thanks to your help many Russian comrades escaped being sent to still heavier forced labour and annihilation. You pointed out the possibilities of escape and offered material help to many political prisoners. We know that you proved yourself a convinced anti-fascist and that your political convictions and firmness have not been broken through years of imprisonment in a fascist concentration camp.

At long last we are free and the madness of fascism will not recur. We, together with

you, shall never forget the ordeal and oppression of fascism, shall never forget the darkest time of human history. We Russians hope that the German comrades are like you and will fight hard for the liberation of the whole of humanity.

We are wishing you all the best for your life and for your anti-fascist work among the German people.

With Communist Greetings,

Group of former Russian political prisoners  
in the concentration camp Buchenwald.

Comrade's M.'s answer:

Dear Russian Comrades,

I read your letter and was deeply moved by your words of thanks and appreciation. All I did was simply my duty. I could not help all, and not fulfil all wishes, but what I could do and wanted to do was at least to save some of your best

*[Seite im Original:] - 6-*

people. That I succeeded in this makes me happy. For I, too, owe you thanks. Through you I learnt to know the Russian language, Russian life and people from the Vjatka and Urals, from Kirgistan, from the Dnieper and the Caucasus. And again and again I found that our convictions are the same as regards the demands of justice and honesty. This has very much strengthened in me the belief that I live and work for an ideal which knows no boundaries.

After our liberation we went on fight, each of us in his own sphere, against mental darkness, political slavery and economic exploitation, and through international solidarity liberate mankind of these evils and achieve socialism.

It will be a great joy for me after parting from the place of our common misery and danger to keep in touch with you.

I salute your great homeland which I would like to see and experience myself. I wish all the best for you and full success in the reconstruction and perfection of your Soviet Fatherland.

With Socialist Greetings, I remain for ever,

Your German Comrade M.

\* \* \*

### **[Impressions of a Traveller from Western Europe on his Journey through Territory occupied by Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia]**

The following are impressions of a traveller from Western Europe on his journey through territory occupied by Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The situation in the area East of the Neisse, occupied by the Polish army, is similar to that in the Sudetenland. There too, the country is radically being de-Germanised and all the Germans have to leave their homes at a few minutes' notice. They are being driven to Saxony and other areas. Saxony has for a long time been an overcrowded area, and



the refugees can therefore not be given any help there, especially not as regards food. This they are told immediately on their arrival, by official posters advising them to proceed to less densely populated areas, such as Mecklenburg and Pomerania.

I saw a large proportion of these evacuees, who number nearly a million, literally starving to death on the roadside, children and babies lying dead in ditches, killed by hunger and epidemics, their arms and legs often not thicker than a man's thumb. The evacuees try to pick food out of the refuse from Russian field kitchens. Means of transportation either do not exist at all or are absolutely inadequate.

Occasionally one may observe Russian officers who happen to be present suddenly interfering with the arbitrary measures of the Poles and Czechs. In the Sudetenland the following happened: When Russian units were approaching, the Germans were driven by the Czech militia into the houses, the doors were locked and the Germans ordered not to show their faces. The idea probably was to prevent these Germans from appealing to the Russian army.

Throughout the Russian zone all machines were removed from the factories and transferred to Russia. In some instances the empty factories were blown up.

I spoke to women who had not dared to leave their homes for many weeks for fear of the Russian soldiers. The Russian commandants try, with the aid of a hastily formed field police, to find out the offenders, but they are rarely successful. In some cases Russian soldiers found red-handed were shot by their commander in accordance with military law.

On hearing that I had been granted a free passage many women came to me and entreated me to report all these events to the British and American armies. The trust of these poor folks in the British and American armies' fight for liberty is boundless, honest and sincere, and they cannot understand how all these horrible things are allowed to happen before the eyes of the world.

---

## *Editorische Anmerkungen*

---

1 - *Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919), Rechtsanwalt, Politiker, SPD (seit 1900), MdR (1912-1917), Austritt aus der SPD-Fraktion (1916), Verhaftung nach einer Kundgebung gegen den Krieg (1916, begnadigt 1918), zusammen mit Rosa Luxemburg Initiator des Spartakusbundes (1916), der sich von 1917 bis 1918 der USPD anschloss, Mitgründer der KPD (Jahreswechsel 1918/1919), 1919 Führer des Aufstandes gegen den Rat der Volksbeauftragten („Spartakusaufstand“), zusammen mit Rosa Luxemburg durch Freikorpsoffiziere ermordet (Januar 1919).*

2 - *Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin, Deckname für W.I. Uljanow (1870-1924), russischer Revolutionär und Politiker, Organisator des „Kampfbundes zur Befreiung der Arbeiterklasse“ (1895), Verhaftung (1895), Verbannung (1897-1900) und Exil, u.a. in Deutschland, der Schweiz, Großbritannien und Frankreich (1900-1905, 1907-1917), dort Entwicklung des Konzepts einer revolutionären Kaderpartei, was die Spaltung von der russischen Sozialdemokratie zur Folge hatte (1903), Entwicklung*

*der kommunistischen Staatsdoktrin („Diktatur des Proletariats“, 1917), nach der Oktoberrevolution Vorsitzender des Rates der Volkskommissare, d.h. Chef der Regierung Sowjetrusslands bzw. ab 1922 der UdSSR (1917-1924), Gründung der Komintern (1919).*

*3 - M. Die Initiale konnte nicht ermittelt werden. Es handelt sich um einen deutschen politischen Gefangenen in Buchenwald.*