

187-19.

*Consul Shepherd to Sir G. Ogilvie-Forbes (Berlin).*

Sir,

*Dresden, February 2, 1939.*

I HAVE the honour to transmit for information notes made of conversations regarding conditions in the concentration camp at Buchenwald with German Jews who were sent there after the murder of Herr vom Rath on the 10th November.

I have, &c.

F. M. SHEPHERD.

Enclosure in No. 10.

*Memorandum.*

*Jewish Persecution.*

HERR H.E.B., who is an apparently respectable fur merchant in Leipzig, told me that after the murder of vom Rath in Paris his shop windows were broken, and that when he went home members of the Secret Police were waiting for him outside his house and told him to go with them. His wife protested, but the police said it would be all right and that Herr B. would be back that evening. He was taken to the railway station, and he said that : " I cannot tell you how they treated us there." He was taken to a concentration camp (Buchenwald, near Weimar) where there were about 10,000 Jews confined in wooden barracks fitted with narrow bunks, into which they had to crawl. They were given no coverings and were unable to wash or

from Goethe's Weimar, situated in the midst of a pleasant beech forest, ringed round with barbed-wire fences, guarded by S.S. detachments and machine guns, lies the new City of Sorrow, the concentration camp of Buchenwald.

I was arrested at my home in Berlin at 5 o'clock in the morning of the 13th June, 1938, taken to police headquarters, and there informed that, as a Jew with a previous "criminal record," I was now under preventive detention and would in due course be sent to a concentration camp. In the over-crowded police prison to which I was first taken I recognised many acquaintances among the other prisoners, who were for the most part reputable people, business men and university teachers. Former convictions, the excuse for all the arrests, often dated back to a decade or more, and related to such crimes as breaches of traffic regulations, or childishly unimportant escapades of one kind or another.

More and more prisoners were brought in till the police officials themselves were at a loss to find room for the stream of new arrivals. In the course of these two days, the 13th June or 14th June, every male Jew with any sort of police record was arrested. Some of the prisoners were over 70 years of age and were brought to gaol from the almshouses where they were living.

In Berlin the number of arrests reached about 4,000; for the whole country the figure was probably between 10,000 and 15,000. These prisoners were all sent to concentration camps, Dachau, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. At police headquarters each prisoner was informed that he could expect his release only if and when he should have procured, somehow or other, documents permitting him to leave the country. It is therefore apparent that the arrests were a purely political measure, and that this typically Nazi device had been decided upon with a single view to hurrying along the tide of Jewish emigration, which, in the Nazi view, was flowing too slowly. Nevertheless, the carrying out of the arrests was entrusted to the ordinary criminal police, and not, as might have been expected, to the Gestapo. Hence, the Berlin newspapers reported merely that a "number of Jewish criminals have been taken into preventive custody."

During the night of the 14th June 2,000 of us were transported from prison to the concentration camp. Before leaving the prison we were examined by an extremely youthful doctor, who passed everyone as physically fit for the rigours of concentration camp life, including the septuagenarians and a tubercular prisoner who was continually spitting blood.

The Anhalt Station, from which we left Berlin, was closed to the public at 2 A.M., the time of our departure, and a strong force of police with rifles in readiness was on guard. At about 6 o'clock in the morning on the 15th June we arrived at Weimar, to find a "Death's Head" detachment of the S.S. waiting for us at the railway station. We hardly reached the platform before a hail of kicks and blows from fist and rifle butt drove us along to the subway

leading out to the road. Here we were greeted by the then superintendent of the camp, Rödl, in the following terms:—

"Among you are some who have already been in gaol. What you tasted there is nothing to what you're going to get here. You're coming inside a concentration camp, and that means you're coming into hell. Any attempt at opposing the authority of S.S. guards and you'll be shot out of hand. We've only got two kinds of punishment in this camp, the lash and the death penalty."

The entrance to the camp was guarded by machine-gun posts, and over the gate itself was written the slogan: My Country Right or Wrong! Every prisoner entered the camp by "running the gauntlet" between two rows of guards. More kicks and blows.

Immediately after this reception, which is more or less usual in all concentration camps, our heads were shaved, as is done with all dangerous criminals. Next our civilian clothes had to be given up in exchange for convict uniform. The dress of every prisoner is marked with a special symbol. Political prisoners wear a red stripe, bible students a lilac stripe, the so-called "work-dodgers" carry a black stripe.

Our loose convict jackets were marked with the Star of David in black on a yellow patch: this indicated "work-shy Jew." It is worth mentioning that most of us were independent business men, and the rest workers who had been forced out of their ordinary employment. Our group also included a dentist and several lawyers. Each of us was given a number, sewn into our prison clothes, and henceforward these impersonal numbers were substituted for our names.

After the preliminaries just described, we were led off to our new quarters. While the 6,000 Aryan prisoners were housed in wooden barracks each holding about 140, we were quite literally packed into a number of cattle sheds, 500 in each shed. The sheds contained no tables or chairs. Not even beds. At night we dosed down on the bare floor, unable to stretch out and rest owing to the lack of space. Each prisoner received two thin (and often torn) blankets. There were no arrangements for washing. Not one of us was able to wash during the first week. Afterwards, eight wash-basins were provided for each group of 500. Water had to be fetched from a pump ten minutes' journey away. What was most difficult to bear, however, was the fact that, in accordance with orders given by the S.S., a group of professional criminals was introduced into each shed and charged with the task of "maintaining order." These criminals also under detention in the camp, were set over us as "n.c.o.s.," and were given full authority to punish the other prisoners. The criminal in full charge of our shed was a particularly brutal specimen, who continually and shamefully mishandled us.

We were all too much afraid to try and protect ourselves from these inhuman brutes, as answering back would have been treated

as mutiny and punished by death. A peculiarly horrible incident sticks in my memory. One of the older prisoners had, during the day, while we were at work, been so knocked about by the S.S. guards that, at night, in the shed, he kept up a continuous moaning. The brute in charge of the shed hit this man in the face repeatedly, telling him to stop the noise. By morning the old man was dead.

During the first two days in the camp we were given no food whatever. In spite of that we were exercised hard enough. A whole week was occupied in attending to the various formalities connected with our entering the camp; only afterwards were we assigned to regular work. Among these formalities was the signing of a declaration that we had been taken into preventive custody because we were Jewish "shirkers," unwilling to work. It was printed on the form that this admission was made voluntarily by the person signing. One of the prisoners, a lawyer from Breslau, refused to sign the form. This unhappy man was visited with every punishment in the repertory of our captors. He steadily maintained his refusal to sign the documents. After the fourth day of his torture, already a dying man, his body bruised and broken, only half-conscious, he signed his name. I must now describe some of the punishments inflicted upon us by the S.S. Even slight offences—drinking some water during working hours—were punished with loss of midday meal and with having to stand to attention for four hours during the short "free period" normally allowed on Sundays. But the main punishment was the lash. A public flogging was given for minor offences, for instance, if a prisoner was caught smoking at work. At the end of the afternoon roll-call, the numbers of the prisoners sentenced to be flogged were read out—there would be several every day—and the men were led out and bound fast to the whipping-block. The usual punishment, twenty-five strokes with a raw hide whip on the buttocks, was carried out by two hefty S.S. guards, taking turns with the whip. A third S.S. man held the victim's jaws together to stifle any cries. Some of the older prisoners, unable to work fast, were flogged in this inhuman way for laziness. After the flogging the victim was made to take down his trousers and display his bloody stripes to an S.S. man, whose business it was to judge whether the lash had been strongly enough laid on. Twenty-five strokes was the favourite punishment at Buchenwald, but there were others. The "sweat-box" for example. It often happened that the prisoner was already dead before the "sweat-box" was opened to release him.

Another punishment was that known as "tree-binding," and the guards showed great inventiveness in developing the possibilities of this torture. If only a slight offence had been committed, the prisoners would be bound to the tree in such a way that they stood facing it, and as if embracing it, their hands pinioned together. The straps that bound them would be pulled so tight that they could barely move. The guards would now play "merry-go-round" with them, that is, they would force them to make their way round and

round the tree. If they could not move quickly enough it was usual to help them by kicking their ankles.

This was only the less severe form of "tree-binding." Another form of the same punishment often ended fatally. The victim would be strapped to the tree, facing outwards, his arms pulled back and round the tree trunk and then bound together. The thighs and feet, the latter only just touching the ground, would also be tied, sufficiently tight to stop the circulation of the blood. The prisoner would be left hanging in this position for hours at a time. It must not be thought that these barbaric tortures were exceptional. At Buchenwald these things were of daily occurrence.

A week after our arrival we were set to regular work. Our working day in the concentration camp of Buchenwald was regulated as follows: we were awakened at 3.30 in the morning, roll-call followed from 4.30 to 5.30, then we were marched off to work, which started a little before 6. We worked without a break until noon. At midday there was a half-hour's pause to drink the acorn-coffee that was given us. Work recommenced at 12.30 and continued till 3.45. From 4 o'clock till 5.30 a second roll-call was taken, followed by the public floggings decreed for the day. Between 5.30 and 6 we ate our main meal of the day, and then worked again till 8, when supper was had. The day ended at 9 o'clock. On Sundays we were made to work from 6 o'clock in the morning until 4 o'clock in the afternoon. No festivals were observed in the camp, not even (as I was told by prisoners of longer standing) that of Christmas. We were on our feet seventeen and a half hours a day, rain or shine. This time-table applied to the older as well as the younger prisoners; the sick, in so far as they were able to stand on their feet, as well as the healthy. Dressed in our convict clothes of "substitute cloth" we were forced out into every kind of weather from storm and heavy rain to the burning heat of summer.

Now as to my first day at hard labour—a day which I will never be able to forget as long as I live. Several of the older prisoners in our working party died in the stone quarry on that blazing hot June day. After the morning roll-call we had been divided into labour groups each a hundred strong. To each group a foreman was assigned, chosen almost invariably from the habitual criminals, whose right it was to knock us about as he thought fit. We were accompanied by an S.S. detachment of guards, not one of whom could have been more than 18 years old. They were nevertheless quite competent at manhandling and beating us. Our column, which included several prisoners over 65, marched off, or rather we were hounded along by the S.S. men, all of whom were armed with clubs, till we reached the stone quarry where we were to work. Eighty out of our hundred had never done manual labour before. Nevertheless we were expected to carry stone blocks so heavy that the effort of lifting them would have seemed considerable even to a navvy in good training. Many of the stones were so heavy that it took several men to lift the block on to the shoulders of the man who was to carry it.

These stones had to be carried to the site of a new road, a little over a mile away, which was being built by "convict" labour. The way leading to the new road was fairly steep, and on the last third of the journey we were helped along by kicks and blows from the rifle butts of the S.S. men stationed along the route. The elderly prisoners, who found it physically impossible to fulfil their tasks, came off worst. From the road we went back to the quarry to pick up a fresh load, and then the process would be repeated. The sun rose higher in the heavens, and the day got hotter and hotter, the fast-travelling S.S. cars raised clouds of white dust on the road (it was closed to all but "official" traffic). Close to the quarry was a spring, bubbling with fresh, clear water. Prisoners who tried to approach the spring for a drink were driven away by the S.S. guards. By afternoon thirty out of our original hundred had collapsed, some of them with sunstroke, and not even the brutal onslaughts of the guards were able to bring them back on to their feet to resume work. We had to carry them back in the end to the camp hospital. All but two that had died.

In addition to our work in the quarry, we also had to carry tree trunks from one place to another. No more than eight men were allowed to tackle even the heaviest load. Along the route S.S. men were stationed at intervals. We were continuously under observation. The shout, always accompanied by blows on head and shoulders from the clubs of the guards and kicks from their jackboots, "Move along, blast you, get along"—still rings in my ears. It occasionally happened that a more than usually energetic S.S. man would order us to do knee-bending exercises while we were carrying our load. This was not without danger, for if one or more of us collapsed the heavy trunk was liable to crush the others.

One day, before we were marched off to work, an announcement was made. We were told that "the Jews had been throwing away their bread ration." A measure was therefore to be taken to which no parallel existed, not even the annals of the Dachau concentration camp. Henceforward we were to receive half a litre of soup (all the others received a litre) and 250 grammes of bread (compared with the normal ration of 625 grammes). An unending régime of hard labour was demanded of us, and at the same time our food rations were fixed at the following amounts: a quarter of a litre of acorn-coffee in the morning, half-litre of soup at midday, and 250 grammes of bread with a smear of margarine and a little brawn in the evening. For three successive Sundays, though we were, of course, required to work as usual, we received no food at all.

Relatives were allowed to send money to us from our homes. Parcels of food, however, were forbidden as "everything could be bought in the camp." We will see in a moment how this system worked in reality. For the families of the poorer prisoners, every pfennig sent to the camp represented a real sacrifice. By reason of the mass arrests, it happened that many households had been deprived of their chief breadwinner. A number of instances are also known to me personally in which the Public Assistance Authority refused to

allow or continue relief to a family the head of which was in prison. Those who actually received money were far from being able adequately to supplement their meagre rations. Part of the sum sent would be withheld to pay railway fares in the event of the prisoner's release. This regulation was especially hard on the poorer prisoners, as the whole of a small sum would be "set aside" for this purpose. If more money was sent, it was doled out in weekly instalments of 5 marks. This sum, it is true, could be spent at the prison canteen, where very high prices were charged. The canteen was extremely badly stocked. It was always impossible to buy bread there, and it often happened that the only thing on sale would be lemonade powder. In addition, it must be remembered that we had to buy and pay for soap, tooth paste and the like, out of our own money.

In Buchenwald the number of deaths, both of Jews and of Aryans, was far greater than in any of the other camps. The Aryan death roll was at least one a day. Out of the 2,000 Jewish prisoners that arrived on the 15th June, eighty died in the first four weeks and thirty more in the fifth week. The authorities did all in their power to hush up these figures, and the Committee of the Berlin Jewish Community was officially informed of only thirty-nine out of the 110 deaths.

How did it happen that these men died? A famous phrase—"shot while attempting to escape"—must supply the answer. Here I must give evidence that, at least during the period of my detention, there was no single case of a prisoner being shot in the course of a genuine attempt at an escape.

The camp is surrounded by a wire fence, electrically charged at night. At intervals there are look-out posts with machine guns, manned by S.S. detachments. The prisoners are forbidden to approach the wire. If they do, the S.S. are instructed to fire on them. Newly arrived prisoners were often ignorant of this regulation, and the S.S. men, bored at their enforced idleness on look-out duty, often amused themselves by calling a prisoner over to the fence. New prisoners would obey the order, and, as soon as they approached, the S.S. machine gun would open fire. This form of "joke" was quite frequently indulged in. Every now and again, some prisoner, driven half insane and unable to bear the hellish conditions of the concentration camp any longer, would run like mad towards the fence. The S.S. invariably opened fire, and at once, although they were obviously aware that their victim was crazed, and not trying to break out of the camp.

But most of the prisoners who die at Buchenwald die in the stone quarry. Round the quarry a chain of S.S. posts were also established which it was death to approach. It frequently happened that one of the older or weaker prisoners would be ordered to carry a stone block which it was physically impossible for him to manage, even though he exerted every ounce of his limited strength. The S.S. guard would try again and again to force the prisoner to carry his load. Naturally the unhappy man would fall behind his

companions. After a short while those who had filed past him would hear a shot. The prisoner had been driven out of the line by the guard and over to the S.S. post, who had shot another victim "while attempting to escape." One particularly tragic story deserves to be told. Among the Jewish prisoners was a youngster, 22 years of age, called Erich Löwenberg. He had been cantor in a synagogue, had married young, and his wife was expecting a child two months later. Erich Löwenberg—it happened about the 15th July, 1938—was driven by an S.S. guard on to the highway near the quarry and forced in front of a heavy lorry driven by another S.S. man. An hour and a half later the young man was dead.

The physical maltreatment normally experienced by prisoners sometimes led to apoplexy and death. Cause of death would then be stated by the doctor as "weak heart." Coffins were made by the prisoners themselves in the carpenter's shop. The bodies were usually taken to Weimar crematorium and burnt. Relatives would receive official notification of the prisoner's death by open unfranked postcard from the office of the Camp Commandant.

Many also died because of the lack of medical service in the camp. In the early weeks the ambulance helpers were strictly forbidden to give medicine to the Jews, a ruling which was also responsible for its quota of deaths. Later it also quite often happened that the doctor in charge of the hospital refused to accept Jewish patients. One case is known to me of the doctor throwing out a sick man, declaring that he was faking his symptoms: the man was dead within two hours.

In the sheds at night we had no means of helping a dying companion. We could not even lay our hands on a glass of water, much less obtain any medicine. We were also unable to leave the shed and go for medical assistance, for the S.S. guards were instructed to open machine gun fire on anyone seen leaving the building at night.

Four weeks after our arrival a hospital shed was opened for the Jews. This had to be paid for by the Jews themselves. It lacked even the most rudimentary equipment. There were no thermometers. Not even a chamber pot.

And yet in this hell one came across human beings. There were S.S. men, a very small minority, who did not maltreat us. Some of the S.S. explained to us that they could do nothing about conditions in the camp. They received their orders from "higher up." This higher authority was Herr Standartenführer Kock, infamous as the perpetrator of nameless brutalities at the Kolumbiahaus in Berlin, and at the camps of Esterwege and Sachsenhausen, now in charge of the Buchenwald camp. How many deaths of defenceless prisoners has this man on his conscience?

There were also some among the foremen who, at the risk of their own lives, attempted to help us. Some of them were denounced as "Jew-lovers" by other prisoners, and publicly flogged. Our worst time followed the arrival of a detachment of young Austrian

S.S., who were sent to Buchenwald from Wöllersdorf. The tortures inflicted upon us by those men are beyond the power of any pen to describe.

How is the population of a concentration camp in present-day Germany brought together? From what elements is the camp made up? In Buchenwald there were 8,000 of us, 2,000 Jews and 6,000 non-Jews. It is now proposed to extend the camp and make it, with a population of 25,000, the largest in Germany.

Our 8,000 prisoners included first of all the "politicals" (as, for example, the Communist members of the Reichstag: Neubauer, Saefkow, Weitinski and others), many of whom have been in various concentration camps ever since 1933. Another prisoner was the well-known Berlin defence lawyer, Hans Litten. His leg was broken in the stone quarry at Buchenwald recently. It had not completely healed from an earlier wound. In addition to the genuine political prisoners, there were many poor devils at Buchenwald accused of having spoken abusively of the sacred person of the Führer. Most of these were sent to the concentration camp (under positive arrest) after the expiration of their prison sentences. The period of detention in these cases is left indeterminate.

One of the hellish features of concentration camp imprisonment is precisely this nerve-shattering uncertainty. Protective arrest may mean detention for three months. It may easily mean detention for three years. No rule, no law, determines the length of the sentence.

After the "political," the category of the so-called "work-shy" is the largest. Anyone who imagines that this group has anything to do with tramps and vagabonds is grossly deceived. An example. A business employee lost his position and applied for unemployment relief. One fine day he was informed at the Labour Exchange that he could obtain employment as a navvy on the new motor roads. This man, who was looking for a commercial post, turned down the offer. The Labour Exchange then reported him to the Gestapo as being "work-shy," and he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. Technical workers leaving low-paid employment to seek higher wages often meet with the same fate.

The next group were the "Bibelforscher," a religious sect taking its doctrine from the Bible and having a considerable membership in every part of the country, but proscribed by the Gestapo since its members refuse military service; these unhappy people were almost as badly treated as the Jews.

The fourth category consisted of the homo-sexuals, or at least of those against whom the Gestapo thought fit to bring charges of homo-sexuality. To charge those it dislikes with this offence is a favourite tactic of the secret police. At the time I was there Buchenwald contained no representative of this group.

The last class of prisoners were the professional criminals. From their ranks, as I have said, our "overseers" were drawn. Those of them who were set in authority over us were allowed to manhandle us as much as they wanted to. Many of them tried to curry favour

with the S.S. by maltreating us or by making us "exercise" on Sundays during the rest period or forcing the older prisoners to roll back and forth in the wet mud.

When it happened that a prisoner was actually to be released, he had first to submit to a medical examination, to see if his body still carried the mark of the lash, or was in any way bruised. A prisoner who still bore traces of his beatings was not allowed to leave until every mark was healed. In this way the authorities attempted to prevent any knowledge of the physical maltreatment of prisoners reaching the outside world. That these preliminary and precautionary measures are at all successful is to be doubted. The truth slowly seeps through the barriers.

At the time of my release—I was one of the very few who left the concentration camp without having obtained a visa for abroad—I was warned by a high S.S. official that even a whisper concerning my life in the concentration camp would be punished by death. The actual words of the S.S. leader are worth recording. "National socialism," he said, "has no reason to fear the truth. But it will not tolerate the spreading of fantastic atrocity stories."

After my release I received notice that I had to quit the country within five weeks, and that I should not be allowed to re-enter it.

During those five weeks I would be under police supervision, and would have to report daily, first at the Berlin police headquarters, and then later in my own district. The first time I reported at the police headquarters, something happened that seems to me typical of present conditions in Germany. When I arrived I found myself surrounded by a group of officials of the regular force, who eagerly questioned me about Buchenwald. Remembering the threats that had accompanied my departure from the concentration camp, I at first refused to answer. They showed me their identity documents to allay my suspicions, and again urged me to tell them what conditions in Buchenwald were really like. They would see that no harm came to me. Then I told them of the things I had seen. They were so shocked that they could not help interrupting me. Such conditions, they said, were revolting and a scandal. Frick and Himmler were responsible. No one else. They were at pains to impress upon me that they had no control whatsoever over the concentration camps, where, in fact, the S.S. had supreme and exclusive authority.

I have myself lived and experienced the things that are here related about Buchenwald. I was in the camp for six weeks only, and my account can therefore lay no claim to completeness. I know from trustworthy sources that the majority of those who were arrested in June at the same time that I was are still prisoners, and that the death-roll among them still mounts.

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