

# The Birds of Buchenwald

By Leland L. Johnson, Jr.

I've contemplated writing and submitting this article since the German Exchange group from NESACS visited Buchenwald during our exchange to Jena back in March 2014. I've started and stopped writing this piece in my office, on airplanes while traveling, while in coffee shops or hotels in Boston, San Francisco, San Diego, Los Angeles, Houston, Charlotte, Fort Myers, Tampa, Orlando, Louisville, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Germany, and Caribbean spots.

I arrived in Frankfurt several days before the rest of the group in order to carry out alliance and joint venture discussions on behalf of the clients of my company, Conditas. Those potential partners are, and were, located in valley of the Main River. After I acquired my rental car, I headed for my destination, where I found a quiet cemetery (Friedhof Fechenheim) on the western bank of the Main, shrouded with an early morning fog. I walked and contemplated my next 11 or so days in Germany and Czech Republic.



I listened. I heard birds. I am not an ornithologist. I am not a bird watcher. I am an admirer of birds. The songs of the birds added extra tranquility to this memorial to thousands. The meetings went well, and in a few days, I would be in Prague.

Early on the morning I was to depart Prague to visit the family of a chemist I met during the German Exchange in 2006, I had the pleasure of ascending the streets around Prague Castle. Around 5 am, I couldn't sleep, so I walked the often noisy and crowded streets: Not that morning. Silence. Mostly.

Once again, there were birds singing to each other, welcoming the day to come, and many of those birds would be “early enough” to “get the worm.” Later that day, after training 70 miles to the east, I would be reacquainting myself with old friends and their growing family from Hradec Králové (Queen’s Castle) during my lovely stay. After Prague I joined the American Exchange delegation in Jena.

Months before, the German Chemical Society (GDCh)/NESACS hosts had planned for our delegation to visit the small city of Weimar, former capital of Thuringia, and the focal point of a great deal of German politics and culture, including residents Nietzsche, Goethe and Schiller, many composers, and famously, Walter Gropius and his design philosophy that would become the Bauhaus Movement.

I have opted to briefly describe our day trip from Jena to Weimar, endeavoring to describe a visit to Buchenwald with the group that I will not soon forget. Although I travelled with the group, my visit to the Memorial was quite solitary.



At 3 o’clock, Dr. Elisabeth Kapatsina (our GDCh host while in Jena) and I rallied 10 or 11 of the students on the 2014 Exchange to travel from Weimar to Buchenwald. It was Tuesday, March 25th, and we left Weimar in two taxi vans around 3:15 or so in the afternoon. We all knew the visitor center would close at 4:00, but it was decided that that

particular facet of the visit to Buchenwald was less important than “going” to the site. And so we went.

Reflecting upon her amazing knowledge, poise and grace, Elisabeth was an amazing host on this day (and every day), knowing the range of reactions we might have upon our visit. Her willingness to accompany the group reflects one of the myriad reasons I strongly believe she is the right person to continue the legacy of the exchange program from the GDCh side of the equation.

In the vans from Weimar, we experienced a brief yet intense hailstorm that left rock salt-sized hailstones covering the shaded areas across the Buchenwald Memorial. The student group and Elisabeth gathered outside the camp. I knew that I would be unable to accompany them. I left them to tour at their own pace and in their own way.

Emotionally charged reactions were in my future. I avoided contact with the group for personal reasons. I knew that my own understanding of what occurred at Buchenwald would magnify these reactions. I also knew that concentration camps under Nazi Germany were not reserved for those with a Jewish heritage, but I did feel a connection through my two children, who are Jewish, and through their mother whose great-grandfather was the only sibling to emigrate from Western Europe more than a hundred years ago. He was the sole survivor of his line. I knew that my children’s distant cousins were less numerous or non-existent due to the relentless collection, torture, and extermination of so many souls at Buchenwald and other camps under control of Germany before and during World War II.

I paused as I entered the camp to take a picture from the southern entrance. The sunlight defined the trees, though not beech trees, as “Buchenwald” (Beech Forest ) would suggest.



The main entrance to the camp was visible in the distance (center of image) to the northwest along a barbed-wire enclosure. The shadows and sun caught my eye as I approached, and the scene seemed to correctly approximate my assumptions of what I might find just over the hill and through the gate. I entered at the southeast guardhouse and snapped another picture, peered at my map, curious to connect my own notions to the historical realities surrounding me.

I continued into the camp, walking to the far side of a building to witness the display of a work cart, one that cruelly facilitated the endless duties of those inmates physically able



to push the carts. As it turns out, I framed the picture with the hanging post (left), a ten-foot tree trunk used to hang prisoners destined to spend time in a position much like crucifixion, on display for the masses, “usually resulting in dislocation of the shoulders” (Buchenwald Concentration Camp, Wallstein). Reading the provided captions near the work cart, I found that the cart was used as another final tool to work prisoners “to death,” and the building was in fact, the crematorium. I moved slowly down the slope of the camp, toward the north.



As I approached the Jewish Memorial, Block 22, thoughts of distant relatives entered my mind. I saw the countless stones, set upon the foundation of the Jewish barracks as a commemoration by visitors and as a remembrance of those who suffered there. I picked up three stones of different sizes to represent my family, crudely mimicking what I and others had done at the unveiling of the recently deceased matriarch at her headstone unveiling ceremony. I paused. I read the inscription. "So that the generation to come might know, the children, yet to be born, that they too might rise and declare to their children." And so I promised myself to follow this solemn request at the appropriate time.

After taking that in, I moved to what seemed to be the center of the camp. I turned. I saw the NESACS student group descending northeastward toward the collection center where incoming inmates were processed. I would not visit the processing center.

I completed a 360-degree rotation, taking in the expanse of the inmate camp. Something caught my ear. I heard birds. Not blue jays or robins. Not distinctive bobwhites calling to each other. Meadowlarks? Definitely, I heard meadowlarks of some species. To my knowledge, no live trees remained within the MAIN camp enclosure, so these birds were singing from the edge of the camp, hundreds of meters from where I stood. From that point on, there was a bit of peace on my path. Above the noise of the gravel beneath my feet, I heard the song of the meadowlarks. These were the birds of Buchenwald.

I felt a bit of comfort as I descended north into a glade known as "the little camp." Having two children (then) under six years old, I was quickly crushed to read of the horrors the children and the sick endured in this tiny portion of the camp. Overcrowding and wretched conditions in the little camp usually meant quick, but agonizing death to those who were sent there from the main camp. I was compelled to stay, to study the grounds, to read the walls. To remember. There were collections of rusted cooking sheets, pots, broken ceramic plates, cups, bowls, utensils, and other recovered artifacts from the camp. The memorial that has been set up within the camp is very fitting, remembering all nationalities and all of the known major work camps and extermination camps from that time. I was compelled to look around this opening on the edge of the forest. Nearly surrounded by trees, this opening provided protection for the birds, and they sang in the little camp. I ascended the path back to the main inmate area.

As I left the little camp, one of the students approached. We spoke for a moment and parted ways. He rejoined the group. I did not.

In the Northwest corner of the camp, there was a single, restored inmate block, so I walked around the building. The windows were more translucent than I would have

liked, but it seemed to fit the historical nature of the site. There were bunks and dirt floors with tools for renovations ongoing around and within the structure.



After the barracks, I headed up the hill to the Soviet memorial to the many Communists that died and were killed in Buchenwald; a prominent memorial at the site as Buchenwald and Weimar are in what was East Germany. I could not read the text but I knew what was there in stone. I looked again over the expanse of the camp, toward the east, the largest building, the processing center, and further to the right. I saw basalt markers between the Communist memorial and the southeast entrance, so I went over to read.

When I arrived, I read that this was the memorial to the Roma and Sinti (“Gypsy”) victims of the Holocaust. I found scores of pillars of basalt to be a part of this memorial. Close by, a solitary individual, I imagine him to have been much like me, was mourning those who were lost. I left this stranger behind in his grief.

I then decided to walk along the barbed wire fence along the south of the camp. I approached the main gate, walked around the inmates’ canteen, and knew that my time at



*View to the NW, into the little camp (l). View to the SE, from the bottom of the little camp (r).*

Buchenwald was coming to a close. I could recognize NESACS students who had already exited the inmate camp, so I decided to take one last look around. No picture...just the memories.

As I look back on that surreal afternoon in March, I want to thank NESACS for sending me to Germany, and to thank the overwhelming majority of students on the trip who also visited Buchenwald. The tour allowed each of us to experience, in our own ways, this memorial to history. We have all read about the Holocaust, and heard about it, and perhaps we have visited local memorials to that dark part of human history... this allowed me to see it for myself. And I have been truly affected.



The peace I took from Buchenwald was this: As more and more people visit these sites, and witness the atrocities of a small part in the history of Germany, it will be less likely that the world would allow something like this to happen again. I will remember the trip to Germany, I will remember the birds offering their songs to me while I walked, and I will remember Buchenwald.