

Lernen aus der Geschichte e.V.

<http://www.lernen-aus-der-geschichte.de>

**Der folgende Text ist auf dem Webportal
<http://www.lernen-aus-der-geschichte.de> veröffentlicht.**

Das mehrsprachige Webportal publiziert fortlaufend Informationen zur historisch-politischen Bildung in Schulen, Gedenkstätten und anderen Einrichtungen zur Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Schwerpunkte bilden der Nationalsozialismus, der Zweite Weltkrieg sowie die Folgegeschichte in den Ländern Europas bis zu den politischen Umbrüchen 1989.

Dabei nimmt es Bildungsangebote in den Fokus, die einen Gegenwartsbezug der Geschichte herausstellen und bietet einen Erfahrungsaustausch über historisch-politische Bildung in Europa an.

Topic: CONCENTRATION CAMPS **Title:** Preservation of the Train Station at Buchenwald **Place/State:** Weimar-Buchenwald/Thuringia **Institution:** Youth Encounter Center at Buchenwald Memorial **Authors:** Helmut Rook and Daniel Gaede **Age Group:** 16 to 25 years

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Since 1990 and the reorientation of the Buchenwald memorial site after German unification, the former train station there has been the focus of many youth projects. Young people of different ages and nationalities have excavated and exposed the tracks of the railroad as well as the actual station in the camp. They have documented their work in an exhibition and have placed an informational plaque on the former train station.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES:

- Learning by research at memorial sites
- Excavation and exposure
- Restoration and maintenance work
- Intercultural dialogue
- International youth encounter
- Creating an exhibition

PROJECT TEXT:

Historical Data: The "Buchenwald Railway"

Buchenwald was built in 1937—in expectation of an upcoming war—as a **concentration camp** for German enemies and resistance fighters from the not-yet-occupied European countries. Alongside the camp was a *Waffen-SS* training barracks, and after the spring of 1943, the "Gustloff II" factory complex, where thousands of prisoners were employed in armaments production. The SS considered it increasingly imperative to connect the entire complex to the rail network of the German Reichsbahn. Reich Leader SS **Heinrich Himmler** visited Buchenwald on February 26, 1943 and ordered the start of a train line from Weimar to Buchenwald. Based on the existing initial planning, construction was to begin on March 15, 1943. The ten-kilometer stretch was to be completed only three months later on June 21, 1943. The primary goal was to assist the SS troops stationed in Buchenwald and the Gustloff armaments factories; the transportation requirements of the concentration camp were an ancillary consideration in this decision. This project was implemented with ruthless severity, and many prisoners did not survive the twelve-hour day and night shifts. The tracks were laid at the stipulated date. For the SS men there were celebrations and medals, and the prisoners received their first day off after many weeks. But the stretch was so substandard that the tracks often gave way underneath the trains, and train cars were derailed. With great suffering, the prisoners had to lay the tracks anew [see Document].

Deliveries for the armaments plants and mass transports of people could be sent via this rail-link of the Reichsbahn railroad system. More than 120,000 prisoners arrived at Buchenwald via this train station. Many of them were subsequently sent to "destruction through labor" at one of the many subsidiary commandos or to other concentration camps.

From this station, prisoners were deported to their deaths at **Auschwitz**. Later, mass transports arrived from German concentration camps that had been evacuated as the Red Army approached, thus moving the eyewitnesses to Nazi crimes and also providing additional prisoners as **forced labor** in armaments production. At the beginning of April 1945, shortly before most of the guards themselves fled, the SS forced many Buchenwald prisoners on so-called evacuation transports. These ended as "**death marches**," where an undetermined number of prisoners perished under SS terror shortly before liberation.

The Condition of the Train Station Area, 1993

After the war ended, the train connections were used only occasionally. The train station building had been heavily damaged in a British air raid in August 1944 and had

not been rebuilt. Information is scanty and incomplete about the use of this railroad sector in connection with "Special Camp 2," built by Soviet occupation troops from 1945 to 1950, and later until 1958, in conjunction with the construction of the memorial. The tracks were partly dismantled and shipped out for reparations in the late 1940s. In the years that followed, the remnants of the train station and tracks were forgotten, and a thick carpet of plants overgrew the loading area, track beds, and foundations. The idea of including the train station building as part of the Buchenwald memorial and to also include it in the official tours for visitors was not achieved under the German Democratic Republic, despite the wishes of former prisoners. Even today, the remains of the old sections are largely covered by forest. Large sections of the old installations are on the verge of complete deterioration. The track ties are mostly rotted, metal sections rusted, the remaining walls destroyed by rain and snow, and many paving stones have been stolen.

Uncovering and Preservation Work since 1993

Since 1990, the Buchenwald train station has been the focus of several youth projects. Recommendations by the historians' commission for the reorientation of the memorial have also provided a framework for new approaches in youth education work. In 1991, youngsters of different ages and nationalities in school project groups and work camps began to remove weeds and trash in order to make the terrain visible and passable again. As a result, a considerable part of the former train station has been uncovered.

The task of "Not to Let Grass Grow Over This History" has been implemented literally, thus again offering youth participants and subsequent visitors deeper insight into the complex history of the camp. The youngsters have worked against neglect and further decay and in so doing have come to terms with the German past. An important part of the camp has again become visible because of their work. The experiences gained until now show that direct work at authentic sites has led youth groups to a deeper encounter with the history of the train station and a more intense awareness of historical connections.

The clearing work has not only brought buried artifacts to light, but also has revealed the extent of the disintegration of the facility. The joint efforts of the memorial, the Thuringia district president of the *Reichsbahn* [East-German Railways], the *Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* [German Federation of Trade Unions], and the German Train Workers Union enabled the completion of the preservation work in the fall of 1993

and 1994. More than thirty apprentices from the Neudietendorf substation of the track improvement factory at Naumburg have unearthed parts of the tracks, refilled the track beds, removed most of the rotted track ties, and replaced them with older, but still wellmaintained, ties. Further, the metal segments that had been uncovered were also conserved. The railroad apprentices' work has been supervised by experts and is part of their vocational education. The greatest difficulty of this project has been the task of preserving the original historical elements. Thus, they did not use technology, nor did they cut and reassemble the tracks. The preserved tracks, fastened plates, and other parts of the track bed have remained in their original locations; neither nails nor bolts were replaced by new materials. This is also essential for the protection and preservation of historical sites. Today, two track segments, each 120 meters long, as well as the old ramp and a paved track crossing, have been uncovered. An information billboard with an old photograph of the former train station has been installed, and many of the visitor groups are now taken there to see the last segment of the journey to Buchenwald for more than 120,000 prisoners. The youth education center is also planning future work camps that will care for the preservation of the train station area.

On March 23, 1995, the following text plaque was placed on the former Buchenwald train station for the memorial visitors' information: This track segment was again made visible by many student project groups and international work camps. Young apprentice railway workers completed extensive preservation in the fall of 1993 and 1994 and the wooden ties were repaired. This project has been supported by the German railway president of Thuringia, the Thuringian state chapter of the German Trade Unions, the German Railway Workers Union-Thuringian local, the German Railways, Inc., track unit at Naumburg with the training facility at Neudietendorf, and the youth education center of the Buchenwald memorial.

PROJECT CONTACT INFORMATION:

Jugendbegegnungsstätte der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald Dr. Helmut Rook D- 99427
Weimar-Buchenwald Tel.: +49 (0) 36 43/43 01 90 Fax: +49 (0) 36 43/43 01 00

PROJECT BIBLIOGRAPHY:

"Buchenwald Concentration Camp from 1937 to 1945." Explanatory booklet for the Historical Exhibition, published by the Gedenkstätte Buchenwald in English.

Hilberg, Raul. "German Railroads, Jewish Souls." In "Society" 14 (Nov.-Dec.

1976). pp. 60-74.

Semprun, Jorge. "The Long Voyage." New York: Grove, 1964.

(The autobiographical novel focuses on a 5-day train ride by 120 prisoners being transported from France to Buchenwald and is one of the classic train deportation fiction works about the Holocaust by a survivor.)

PROJECT GLOSSARY:

Auschwitz: A complex of concentration, labor and extermination camps located approximately 40 miles west of Cracow in Upper Silesia (Poland). Established in 1940 as a concentration camp, it became a killing center in 1942. Auschwitz I was the central camp. Auschwitz II, also known as Birkenau, was the killing center. Auschwitz III, or Monowitz, was the IG Farben labor camps, also known as Buna. In addition, there were numerous subsidiary camps. Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviet Army on January 27, 1945.

Buchenwald: A concentration camp opened in 1937 on the Ettersberg hillside overlooking Weimar, Germany. The first German and Austrian Jewish prisoners arrived in 1938; German and Austrian Gypsy prisoners were deported there after July 1938. During the war, nearly 65,000 of Buchenwald's 250,000 prisoners perished; others died in its more than 130 satellite labor camps. Buchenwald was one of the few major camps where prisoners rebelled in the days preceding liberation by units of the U.S. Army on April 11, 1945.

Concentration camp [*Konzentrationslager*]: Abbreviated as KZ. Prison in which political and religious dissidents, ethnic and racial opponents were involuntarily held. Before the end of World War II, the Germans set up several thousand such camps.

Death Marches [*Todesmärsche*]: Forced evacuation marches by foot and train from concentration camps, usually at or shortly before liberation. Prisoners were usually driven westward or southward toward Germany from the eastern camps as they were about to be liberated by the advancing Soviet and other Allied armies. The mortality rates on these evacuations were very high, caused by hunger, exposure, shooting by SS guards, and the chaos of the last months of the war.

Forced labor [*Zwangsarbeit*]: Prisoners from concentration camps and workers conscripted in occupied Poland and the Soviet Union were compelled to work, on

starvation rations, in agriculture, highway building and factories for the German state during World War II. Labor was also viewed as a form of killing by attrition. Forced labor was introduced for Sinti and Roma inside Nazi Germany in 1936, and after 1938 it was extended to German Jews and other concentration camp prisoners. Information from the Nuremberg trials estimated that there were 12 million forced laborers.

Heinrich Himmler (1900 - 1945): Early Nazi activist, participated in 1923 Beer Hall Putsch; acting propaganda leader of the Nazi party during 1920s; joined SS, 1926, appointed Reich Leader SS (RFSS), 1929; member of the *Reichstag*, 1930; chief of the Munich police and the Bavarian political police, 1933; consolidated police forces of all *Länder* under his command, 1933-1934; Reich Leader SS and Chief of the German Police in the Reich Ministry of the Interior, 1936; Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of German Ethnicity, 1939; Reich Minister of the Interior, 1943; committed suicide after arrest by British troops, May 1945.

SS [*Schutzstaffel*]: The SS started as guard detachments formed in 1925 to act as Hitler's personal guard. From 1929 on, under Heinrich Himmler, the SS developed into the elite units of the Nazi party. These Nazi paramilitary, black-shirted storm troops used two symbols copied from Teutonic runes — a parallel, jagged double S usually used as a warning for high-tension wires or lightning. The SS was built into a giant organization by Himmler and provided the staff for the police, concentration camp guards and fighting units [*Waffen SS*].