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BUCHENWALD

BUCHENWALD, German concentration camp on the Ettersberg, near Weimar. Opened on July 19, 1937, it was one of the largest camps in Germany proper with 130 satellite camps and units. Buchenwald was considered the worst of the camps prior to World War II. Its first commander was the notorious Karl Koch, who remained in charge until his transfer to *Majdanek, Poland, on Jan. 22, 1942. He was replaced by Hermann Pister. The camp was divided into three parts: the large camp, the small camp, and later a "tent camp" set up for Polish prisoners after September 1939. Originally erected to house prisoners from several smaller camps that were being disbanded, its first inmates were professional criminals. They were soon followed by political prisoners. When the criminals were found to be stealing, the political prisoners, among whom were several Jews, succeeded in appropriating for themselves such administrative posts as were available to prisoners. That facilitated the beginning of resistance cells. The first whole group of Jews were political prisoners who arrived in June 1938 as a result of an action against "asocial" Jews. In the summer of 1938, 2,200 Austrian Jews were transferred from *Dachau. Later that year, the mass arrests of Jewish men aged 16–60 after the *Kristallnacht more than doubled the number of Jewish prisoners. The 10,000 new Jewish prisoners, quartered in recently built huts, suffered far more than the non-Jews, 244 dying during the first month of their imprisonment. Jews arrested on *Kristallnacht* could still leave the country if they had somewhere to go. Most of the Jewish prisoners were released by the spring of 1939, deprived of their property, and compelled to leave Germany. More than 600 were killed or died, some by their own hand before the war began. The outbreak of World War II brought a new influx of prisoners, most of them stateless people from Poland. As Hitler's armies conquered further territory, the camp's population was swollen by prisoners from the occupied countries. Most Soviet prisoners of war were killed upon arrival, at least until their potential as workers was recognized. Hermann Pister, Koch's successor, remained commander until the camp's liberation in 1945. From the beginning of 1942, Buchenwald, in common with other camps in Germany, became a forced labor camp for war production. The demands of German industry brought transport after transport from all over Europe. On Oct. 17, 1942, in keeping with a general order to transfer all Jewish prisoners in the Reich to Auschwitz, all Jewish prisoners, with the exception of 200 building masons, were transferred to *Auschwitz. After December 1942, the camp received German criminals who had been handed over to the *SS by the prison authorities. Most of them became the victims of the pseudo-medical experiments performed in the camp hospital. After May 1944 Hungarian Jews arrived from Auschwitz and were distributed among the various satellite camps, especially the infamous Dora. On Oct. 6, 1944, the number of prisoners reached a peak of 89,143. This increase in numbers diminished the food supplies, led to a further deterioration in the already dangerously unhygienic conditions, and increased the death rate. From the winter of 1944, and especially after January 1945, the camps in the east were evacuated owing to the approach of the Soviet Army, and thousands of prisoners, among them many Jews, were transferred to Buchenwald. The mass arrival of prisoners, already weakened by what was known as the death marches, overwhelmed the camp, whose facilities could not handle the new prisoners. Among those who arrived were Shelomo Wiesel and his son Eliezer. Exhausted by the march, Shelomo died along with a great numbers of other Jews. At the beginning of April 1945 the SS evacuated several thousand Jews. It is estimated that some 25,500 people were killed during the forced evacuation of Buchenwald and its satellite camps. During the last weeks of the camp's existence an armed underground movement came into being among the

prisoners, which helped slow down the pace of evacuations. The Germans left before the American troops arrived on April 11, 1945, so members of this underground movement were in control and handed over the camp to them. Of the 238,380 prisoners the camp held since it was opened, 43,045 had died there or been murdered. Around 21,000 Jews were liberated, 4,000 of them children. American troops entered Buchenwald on April 11, 1945. General George Patton, who was not known for his love of Jews, ordered the citizens of Weimar marched through the camp. Their visit was filmed. They entered as if they were on an excursion, a picnic. They left gasping for air.

Twenty-one Nazi leaders of Buchenwald were tried by an American court in 1947; two were sentenced to death, four were imprisoned for life.

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