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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.

"What is a Chess Piece Doing in the Latrine?"

Report from Action Reconciliation Service for Peace Summer Camp 1996 in Buchenwald
by Jona König

Shortly before liberation, there were still 48,000 prisoners in Buchenwald Concentration Camp, more than half of them in the so-called "small camp," which represented starvation and mass death. Nevertheless, many prisoners survived the "small camp" and are looking today for traces of their personal experiences at this place.

From 1945 to 1950, Buchenwald Concentration Camp was used as a Russian internment camp (Special Camp No. 2). Afterwards, it was to have been "leveled" or torn down. This plan was carried out except for the prisoners' arrival area, the crematorium, and the prisoner's clothing depot. In the German Democratic Republic, the existence of this special camp and its approximately 7,500 dead was suppressed for forty years. As a result, there are few traces left today of the buildings or of the prisoners' way of life and chances for survival in the "small camp." More than half of the terrain is overgrown with high trees; a new fence to keep wildlife out was built in 1975 directly across from the barracks' remnants; meanwhile, a small section has become a green meadow.

The original plan for the archeology dig of 1996 was to uncover and level the area of the former

"small camp" in order to preserve an easily cared for lawn. After flattening the surface, we hoped to pinpoint the approximate locations of three former barracks and to mark them with wooden posts. These would be placed in the soil five meters apart, so that a half-meter of wood would remain visible.

During the survey and excavation work, we discovered the remainder of the original wooden stakes that had once supported the barracks. No one had expected such a discovery. We had assumed that after the camp was torn down in 1952/1953, nothing but quantities of rubble would be lying in the area of the former "small camp," which could simply be "leveled." We had only been concerned with designating a historical landmark, and now unexpectedly we had located a concrete part of the history with which we had wanted to work: a piece of wood from the "small camp" horse stable, and a piece of a place, 10 x 40 meters, where 2,000 people had once been crowded together.

Should the remains of this place be made a landmark, even though historical material might be destroyed? Is the protection of historical material more important, or is it more necessary to explain the story of the past today? This problem provoked discussions in all the work camps, which included many different points of view. After consulting the history and museum departments of the memorial, we first secured all the artifacts that had been found and brought them to the museum, where they were cleaned, described, sketched, and registered.

At this point, it slowly became clear to us that there had to be more remnants of historic structures than we had previously assumed. Our previous assumption that most of the area of the "small camp" was covered with meters of rubble increasingly proved to be wrong. We began to search between the barracks of the "small camp" for possible remnants of plaster, steps, drainage sewers, streets, and other pieces of the infrastructure.

We discovered parts of a carefully planned and built camp, including an extensive sewage and drainage system on the western side of Barrack 53 in the former tuberculosis zone, and also a part of the street that went to the "small camp." We also worked on uncovering the only official latrine of the "small camp"; sixty meters long and ten meters wide, it served as the only toilet for more than ten thousand people, who were imprisoned here in March 1945.

We also found small things: combs, shaving brushes, toothbrushes, pipe bowls, chess figures, and dominos as well as various hand-carved wooden good luck charms. How did a chess figure get into a latrine?

Until now, we could not with certainty catalog our discoveries, but a 1906 French coin unequivocally indicates the concentration camp. It is still not known whether the latrine or the barracks of the "small camp" had also been used during Special Camp No. 2 from 1945 to 1950. We stumbled onto the complexity of history at Buchenwald. Apart from general historical knowledge, the participants of the work camp got a look at the prisoners' daily lives through these artifacts. Whether in the "small camp" or the special camp, despite brutal circumstances, people attempted to maintain a minimum of individuality and humanity.