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"The Prisoners' New Year's Party."

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By Gerd Treuhaf.

It was terribly cold on the famous and infamous Ettersberg. Yes, famous for the birth place of Germany's greatest literary work, written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. His "Faust" was not only a literary masterpiece of the nineteenth century, but having been translated in to neraly all European languages, it became a standard work for all grammer schools teaching German. How little could Herr von Goethe have foreseen that these forests around Weimar and Erfurt, where he searched for peace and concentration on his walks from his little house in Weimar, would become a century later a place of horror and brutality such as modern history hadn't witnessed since the dark days of the Middle Ages. Herr von Goethe would have turned in his grave if he had been aware of what happened on "his" Ettersberg between the years of 1934 and 1945.

Nobody in the dark forest of Ettersberg ever referred here to Goethe's "Faust". Thousands of prisoners didn't even know that Buchenwald was once a pilgrimage centre for German poets. No, the Third Reich, which boasted a thousand years' tule, had long ago transformed this famous place into an infamous hell, where a plague was created by human beings who destroyed their countrymen for their political beliefs and for their religion. That free thoughts should be suppressed in the same place, where a hundred years ago Goethe was trying with his pen, to fight the oppression of the Napoleonic forces on German soil, seemed really ironical. History certainly didn't move forward in twentieth century Germany.

When I arrived in Buchenwald, I soon realised, that only a miracle could save me. The big notice "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work alone will liberate you") at the entrance to the concentration camp, didn't mean a thing. None of the thousands of prisoners who marched through these gates ever believed that only his work would bring him bakc to freedom. We never thought in those terms. My aim, and that of my fellow sufferers was only to survive from one day to another. That we had to work hard goes without any saying, and I made it my principle to talk as little

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as possible because a movement of the lips seen by an S.S. guard or even by your working foreman could bring you such punishment as hanging on the tree for sixty minutes or twenty-five lashes with an iron whip that may have crippled you for life if ever the gates of freedom were opened for you again.

The winter of 1938/39 started late in these mountains, but once it had set in, you could feel the icy wind through your thin prison clothes. I can't remember the exact number of prisoners who stood every morning at 5.30 a.m. on the large parade ground for roll-call; but there was over ten thousand of us who morning after morning marched in endless columns into the still dark forest. A new day of slavery had started, and you could see from the expressions on our faces, that the regular morning's routine had turned us into modern robots with only one thought "How much longer will we be able to endure the torture..." In the evening another roll-call was staged, and as soon as the first snow fell on the Ettersberg, there wasn't an evening roll-call without fatal accidents being reported such as men frozen to death or shot by the Guard while trying to run away. The last statement from the S.S. Guard to the camp commandant was a lie, no prisoner would have tried to escape knowing that three cordons of S.S. men guarded the forest. A prisoner who once killed his S.S. guard and escaped was only able to do so while working on a special detachment outside the guarded area. Even this prisoner who managed to escape not only from Buchenwald, but from Germany, was handed back by the Hungarian Government when arrested on a murder charge in Budapest. He was escorted back to Buchenwald where a scaffold was erected and he was beheaded in front of over ten thousand prisoners, a week before Christmas, as a warning to us all who ~~MMMM~~ were thinking of planning an escape. I stood 200 yards from the gallows, when the "Lagerälteste" (The prisoner with the longest prison record) Richter put the string around his neck, and a few seconds later an heroic life had come to an end. For two days the dead body was left hanging on the gallow.

At this time, I had finished my ninth months' imprisonment and after having been in the concentration camp of Dachau, before being transferred to Buchenwald, I had witnessed a few atrocities which no normal

human being would ever have believed possible.

During the second week of the last month of the year, I was attached to a new working party. It wasn't exactly a working party in the sense as my previous working parties, such as building roads, huts or working on uprooting trees, no, the new job was completely different. I had to collect corpses from the so-called first-aid hut and put them into coffins ready to be collected for cremation in Weimar. The first aid-hut was nearly at the opposite end to the entrance gate of the concentration camp. Outside the camp about 100 yards from the electric barbed wire was a little shelter where all the coffins were kept until the lorry from Weimar collected them and at the same time delivered new empty coffins.

A ~~random~~ fellow prisoner and myself had to carry the corpses from the first aid-hut to the shelter, where we washed the bodies with a kind of disinfected water, then we wrote with chalk the name and the number of the diseased prisoner on the coffin, on both sides, and stacked the coffins in alphabetical order. Everything had to be done in a precise order. Germans love being methodical and for them there is no difference counting sacks of potatoes or coffins loaded with human bodies. For the first ~~time~~ two days on my new job I shrank from doing it and my fellow-prisoner, who had previously worked in the first aid-hut only laughed, and said "You'll get used to it, and in the same tone, he said jokingly "I wonder what our bodies will look like, before going to Weimar.." I didn't find this remark very funny, but soon I realised that these bodies which I was putting into the coffin were more or less already liberated. Yes, they were free, these people couldn't be tortured any more, they didn't need to be afraid to be condemned to hang on a tree; and when the bitter cold wind whistled round my ears and nose, when the tips of my fingers seemed to have lost all their feeling, I often wished, that I had reached the stage when someone else would do my job and would be his victim. "You don't want to die when you are only 21 years old, " said Heinz, who had already five years of concentration camp experiences behind him, after all we really had a "cushy" job. Yes, our job wasn't a hard one, even the S.S. guard left us in peace; we didn't need to hurry from one to the hospital hut. ~~The guard knew we were more or less grave diggers.~~

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The guard knew we were more or less grave diggers, and they had a respect for the dead; after all, the men I took from one end of the concentration camp to the other side of the camp would not make the journey any more, no more were they enemies of the Third Reich.

When the lorry from Weimar arrived, two S.S. men stood on our side watching the loading and unloading of the coffins. Here and there they opened a coffin just to make sure that no-one tried to escape by hiding in one of them. As soon as the death van had disappeared again, the S.S. men went back to the main gates of the camp.

Being near the entrance gate of the K.Z. (short for concentration camp) we could not only watch the changing of the S.S. guard, but also the coming and going of our fellow prisoners.

Shortly after Christmas there was great activity around the main gate; the coming and going of the "Kapo's" (the name of the foreman of the different working parties) who were all criminal prisoners, attracted my attention. Normally these Kapo's would only come twice a day through the main gate, by leaving for the working place and in the morning and then returning to the camp; but in the last week of December they often came three or four times during the day to the camp, always with some minor excuses, such as taking prisoners to the first aid hut, saying, he had an accident. The criminal prisoners of Buchenwald were a special category of prisoner. They had all already served a long prison sentence of murder, manslaughter or theft in the various prisons of Germany. Often their sentences had ranged from ten to twenty years, and then after they had completed their prison terms, they were sent to Buchenwald to be "reformed" so that they could be good citizens of the Third Reich. For months they had been in charge of the inner administration of the camp. The criminal prisoner Richter acted as close adviser to the S.S. commandant, and naturally his criminal pals had all the key jobs inside the camp, and were in charge of the working parties. This position gave the criminals tremendous power over the lives of thousands of their fellow-prisoners. The so called re-education behind the electric barbed wire for these gangsters was one of the most sinister moves of the Nazi concentration camp policy. Only through the creation of hate and mistrust among fellow prisoners, was the S.S. in a position to control 10 to 20

thousand prisoners with only two S.S. companies. Soon after the 9th November 1938, when the great Jewish purges in Germany had reached its climax, by burning Jewish synagogues, shops and houses all over Germany, these criminals not only showed their real faces, but it became visible even for us inside the concentration camp, how far the S.S. had used these men as their tools. For days and weeks after the persecution a lorry load of Jews arrived every two hours from all over Germany and Austria. As soon as the S.S. guard had dealt with their new victims, the criminals forced them into a special camp which was erected inside the concentration camp of Buchenwald, and then these fellow-prisoners started ~~to~~ robbing them of their last personal possessions. Their wallets were taken from them, watches, rings, even wedding rings, and the gold fillings of their teeth were taken out. Old men who had gold jacket crown in their mouths were knocked unconscious and pushed into an open lavatory where they suffocated. The money, watches, and gold teeth disappeared, no one knew if these criminals had handed them over to the S.S. or were hiding them. The little S.S. guard, who watched these barbarians from the watch tower outside the electric barbed wire certainly didn't interfere, and even if he had wanted to he didn't have the power to do so, it was an internal camp affair. The criminals, who had formed among ~~themselves~~ themselves a powerful organisation, were the complete masters. Even on pay day (we prisoners for a long time were allowed to receive 15 Marks e 7s6d from our relations outside the camp.) the shadows of these prisoners followed us. Next to the S.S. paymaster, a criminal prisoner stood checking up our names and numbers as the S.S. man handed over the money. The criminal made a copy of the list, and as soon as the so called pay-parade was over our criminal colleague asked for his commission. He and his pals were the only ones in the camp, who were able to buy biscuits, chocolate or cigarettes with our money from the S.S. canteen; so more or less, if we wanted any goods for our money, we had to hand the money over to them. Out of our 15 Marks we were lucky, if we got goods worth 5 Marks, the rest went into the pockets of the criminals, who often used some of the money to bribe the

S.S. guard who had a weekly pay of not more than 20 Marks.

As I said before, the activities around the main gates in the Christmas week reached a climax on the last day of the year.

My pal and I saw the Kapo's coming and going several times on this day with their overcoat pockets bulging. These Kapo's were the only prisoners who were allowed to have an overcoat. It wasn't difficult to guess what they were hiding under their coats. They all looked like expectant mothers. The H. Q. of these criminals was block 45. It was the last block which was erected in Buchenwald, and very well situated. On one side, they were surrounded by our little wooden huts, and on the other side the prisoners had a view of the forest, so that the S.S. man from the watch tower outside the electric barbed wire could barely see the movements in block 45.

As the last day of the year is always an important day in Germany, the S.S. guard were anxious to have an early roll-call, and afterwards they could go off duty to celebrate new year's eve.

"Lagerälteste" Richter managed to get the roll-call at 4.30 and all outside working parties were punctually on the parade ground by that time. In less than 30 minutes a roll-call of 20 thousand prisoners was finished. The same roll-call had lasted six hours a week earlier and 60 prisoners were frozen to death. But to-day everything was done in a record time.

Here again the S.S. worked in close collaboration with the criminals. As soon as we arrived in our huts, the hut-leader, another criminal prisoner, was anxious to give us our meal. A piece of bread and a few ounces of margarine. Long before the camp sirens for the second lights out had blared all over the camp we were either fast asleep or still trying to listen to some peculiar noises coming from the outside of our hut. We were used to all kind of shots from happy trigger guardsmen, who often fired over our huts just to frighten us. Sometimes a loud scream of a prisoner who went mad woke us, and next morning we saw his body hanging on the electric wire. No, the noises of this new year's night were different. If the S.S. canteen or a restaurant from Weimar would have been situated near our hut, we wouldn't have given these noises a second thought. It would have been obvious that someone was

celebrating the end of a miserable year and hoping that with laughter, songs a bottle of champagne and plenty of "Schnaps" he could start a new year differently. But in Buchenwald, were at every hundred yards an S.S. guard watched each movements inside the huts even through binoculars and he would raise an alarm or a gun shot if he found a footprint in the freshly fallen snow, after lights out. The thought of party spirits by prisoners would have been an offence, still we could hear loud laughter, and the opening of champagne bottles. "Perhaps the guards had decided to have their own party in the various watch towers which surrounded the camp..." I thought for a second. Yes, this was a very plausible idea to justify the noises around us.

Only when the hut-leader drunkenly crept into his bed in the early hours of the morning did we realise that it wasn't the S.S. guard who had staged a new years' party, but the criminals of Buchenwald, right under the very noses of the S.S. guards. "What a party we had, one hut-leader whispered to the prisoner sleeping next to him, and then he revealed, that he had never seen so much food, Whisky and champagne in all his life. Yes, there was everything in Block 45 only the women were missing. "What about the guards, the hut-leader was asked, and he grinned over the whole of his face. "The guard, well, we gave him 100 cigarettes and a bottle of beer, we felt sorry for the poor soul ...he replied. Next morning once again, the roll-call was taken in record time, and the hut-leader, who had a proper hang-over didn't even bother to appear on the parade ground; he knew that the commandant was much too tired to appear too and of course the S.S. guard, who took the roll-call report knew about the party on the previous evening.

For we humble prisoners the holding of the drinking party was still a riddle. There was no doubt that each time a criminal ~~Kapo~~ Kapo passed through the main gate between Christmas and New Year's eve, he had smuggled one bottle of spirits into the camp under his overcoat.

But why should the S.S. have been so generous in giving these criminals these expensive drinks? Or did they really pay for them with our money?

Suddenly a new S.S. guard appeared outside the electric barbed wire. My pal and I who had got to know every S.S. man who was on duty during the last two month didn't recognise these new faces. A delegation from the Gestapo H.Q. in Berlin arrived exactly one month after

8. the notorious new year's party. What did they want? We asked ourselves. Another inspection? It seemed unlikely, because, only 8 weeks ago Himmler in person had arrived. Twenty four hours after the Gestapodelegation had left the camp, all the criminal prisoners were summoned at 4 a.m. to report to the main gate with their haversacks. It was still dark when these criminals were pushed into two lorries to be sent to Flossenburg, an even worse concentration camp than Buchenwald. Only after their departure did the whole truth behind the fantastic bottle party of Block 45 come to light.

Remember I told you that shortly after the arrival of thousands of Jews in November, these criminals not only robbed their victims of their money, but also of their gold wedding rings and murdered them for their gold teeth. These gold teeth, rings and watches went to the prison smithy, also a criminal, who forged all them into long and small gold bars, which were hidden under the floor board of Block 45. Shortly after Christmas, some of these gold bars were exchanged <sup>for spirits</sup> by the leader of the S.S. canteen. Another S.S. man took these gold bars to Berlin and sold them to a jewellery. Once more German efficiency came into operation. The jeweller gave the S.S. man money for the gold, he also informed the secret police, who didn't take very long to trace the sources of the gold.

When S.S. führer Himmler learned about the great gold robbery, he was not so much concerned the brutality with which the criminals had assaulted and murdered the Jews, but that this gold wasn't delivered to the state. Several S.S. officers were immediately recalled to Berlin, they never appeared in Buchenwald again. The reign of the criminal prisoners over Buchenwald had suddenly come to an end. It was the new year's party which had been their downfall.

Now, the political prisoner Bartels, a former member of the German Reichstag and a member of the social democratic party became the Lagerälteste, and the whole inside administration was taken over by the political prisoners. For weeks and months after the new year's party, the greatest gold robbery inside Buchenwald became the most topical subject in all concentration camps in Nazi-Germany, because no prison camp in any dictator state had ever witnessed such a bottle party as the criminals of Buchenwald had thrown to celebrate the beginning of 1939.....

Gerd Traushaft, ~~Rechenberg III, Kanton/ Miedlx,~~

## POLITICS INSIDE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

JOSEPH GETA

LONG before the Nazi regime came to power in Germany, the Nazi Party had their "Black List" containing the names and addresses of political opponents who might be dangerous to the Nazi regime.

The list included Communists, Socialists, Democrats, Trade Unionists and the leaders of the Weimar regime; even pacifists of the pre-war years of 1914 were added to the list. On the day Hitler seized power in Germany, a special police under the command of Goering, called "FEPO" (Feldpolizei), arrested at night the key men and all leaders of the various German parties opposed to Nazism. Many of them, less well-known to the world outside Germany, were murdered during the night of January 30, 1933.

It was impossible to shoot all the arrested persons; secondly, various connections of prisoners in foreign countries discredited the new regime outside its borders.

Old school-houses and former military barracks were converted into places where these prisoners underwent the most indescribable torture. Then followed the endless Gestapo interrogation under special Jupiter (arc-light) lights.

Four Gestapo men started the interrogation; they were behind a screen, so that the interrogators were invisible to the prisoners.

Before the prisoner was able to reply to the first question, a second and third followed, and the Gestapo wrote on their interrogation sheet "Prisoner confessed" for every unanswered question. This sheet had at the end to be signed by the prisoner. If he refused to sign the prisoner would have to undergo such a torture that he would faint, and then the Gestapo would take hold of his hand, and force his signature to the confession. The relatives of these prisoners were informed that their husbands, sons, or brothers, had been sent to a so-called "Umschulungslager" (in other words, a re-education camp for anti-Nazis). During the first year of the Nazi regime these camps were wrongly compared with the "Ordensburgen," later called "Adolf Hitler Schools for the Hitler Youth Leaders.

To justify to relations and foreign pressmen the action taken against anti-Nazis, confessions of the prisoners were produced to give the impression that this measure was being taken in agreement with the prisoners.

When the truth about these "Umschulungslager" began to spread outside the German borders, the German people were told that these atrocity stories were fabricated by Jews and Bolsheviks in order to throw doubt on the peace-loving policy of the Third Reich. At the same time all prisoners were ordered to write to their relatives saying that they were well treated and were fit and healthy. The Gestapo even went so far as to order those prisoners who had relatives or friends in foreign countries to deny the atrocity reports which appeared in various newspapers. The Gestapo realised here the great value of the political prisoners as a political weapon in Nazi Germany's internal and foreign policy. For weeks the beating up of prisoners in the camps stopped. During the first year of the Nazi regime these prisoners did no work. They sat in their huts, waiting for Gestapo interrogation. Only so-called gymnastic drill every two or three hours, which was in itself a special form of torture, made the prison life like hell. When the S.S. took over from the FEPO these school-houses and old military barracks, they started to build their own concentration camps. Thousands of German anti-Fascists died in the mire of Esterwege. Yet, at that time (1934-35) the German public had not the slightest inkling of the tortures which were going on inside these concentration camps. The relations of a prisoner who was killed in the concentration camp would be called to the Gestapo and informed that their husband or son had died from a heart attack. At the same time they were warned that if they dared to spread any rumours concerning the death of their husband or son, they would be sent to the concentration camp and never see freedom again. For several weeks after, these relatives were closely watched by the Gestapo H.Q., their correspondence underwent a special censor, their phone calls were recorded by the Gestapo and all the persons with whom they came in contact were put on special lists.

The few prisoners, who were released during these days had to sign three papers, in which they had to promise that they would never tell about the things they had seen during their time in prison. These tricks of the Gestapo played an important part in suppressing the truth about German concentration camps during the first two years of the Nazi regime.

As production in German armament factories was stepped up, labour shortage became acute. At the same time other preparations of the Third Reich for the second world war were taking shape. Prisoners-of-war camps had to be constructed, foundations for new munition factories laid down and special training camps and quarters for the German army built. For security reasons, it

was not advisable for the Nazi regime to employ ordinary labour on building prisoners-of-war camps; so the Gestapo found new methods of increasing the numbers of prisoners in the concentration camps. First of all they began transferring those convicted of major and minor offences (cases from murder to drunkenness) who had already undergone their sentence imposed by a German Court, to concentration camps. These transfers took place after the completion of their sentences with the formal excuse to the relations of these prisoners, that they had to be sent to a "Umschulungslager" before final release. Certainly, all political prisoners who had finished their punishment, were transferred immediately to a concentration camp. After the famous June 30, 1934 (The "night of the long knives," which the German public regarded as a homosexual scandal rather than a political affair) a new category of prisoners arrived in the concentration camp—the homosexuals. They were imprisoned, not so much for their sexual perversion, which in Nazi Germany was not regarded as a serious crime, as for the danger of allowing such people to be on intimate terms with all elements of the Nazi clique, from Hitler Youth to Gauleiter. At the same time, another anti-Nazi group arose from the persecution of the Lutheran and Catholic Churches. The followers of Niemöller, Pastor Schneider, Cardinal Faulhaber and the Bishop of Galen, found themselves imprisoned along with the men, mostly Bible students who refused to give the "Heil Hitler" salute or serve in the German army.

In June, 1938, the Gestapo undertook another great action against former law offenders who during the five years of the Nazi regime had avoided joining any party organisation. Among these new prisoners were people who changed their jobs without being directed by the "Deutsche Arbeitsfront," and non-political Jews. The different background of the prisoners inside the concentration camps gave the Gestapo a good opportunity of carrying on their political warfare behind the electric barbed wire. They separated all categories into special "Blocks." In the concentration camp of Dachau a Block consisted of four rooms which, before the war, had 52 prisoners. During the years 1937-39, a political prisoner was in charge of each room. He was responsible to the "Blockleader," who was himself a political prisoner, and who was in charge of 200-250 prisoners. Over the Blockleader were the S.S. men who to a certain extent relied on the Blockleader for cleanliness and discipline in the various blocks. Nearly all these room- and block-leaders were men who had spent the years since Hitler came to power in various prisons and concentration camps. Their outlook on life was influenced by their past experiences, which made them not only very rough, but cruel and embittered against humanity. Their former political ideals had undergone a psychological transformation, which made some of them as brutal and cruel as their oppressors. The only credit which I can give these political prisoners is that their treatment towards their fellow-prisoners was much fairer than that of the criminal prisoners who were, during my stay in Buchenwald, in charge of the camp. The criminals who ran the Buchenwald concentration camp were frequently murderers serving life sentences. Here in the concentration camps, these murderers found a very good opportunity to carry on their dirty job by murdering fellow-prisoners. They were actively supported by the camp authorities.

In a very clever manner the camp authorities found a way to play off the various categories of prisoners against each other. They achieved here two ends. First, it made a revolt of prisoners against the S.S., which would have been in any case a suicidal adventure, impossible; secondly, it made the task of the S.S. controlling the camp much easier. However, in January, 1939, the scandalous activities of these criminal prisoners came to light and the key men committed suicide or were murdered by the S.S. It was the greatest sensation during my imprisonment in Buchenwald when the S.S. dug up the floor of the criminals' Block 45, and found there solid gold bars which had been cast from rings and gold teeth of Jews murdered during the great Jewish purge of November 10, 1938. It is hardly credible but nearly every criminal blockleader had filled the toe-caps of his shoes with real gold. If these prisoners' contacts with high-ranking S.S. officers who supported their robbery had not come to the ears of the Gestapo in Berlin, their powerful position would never have been broken in the lifetime of the Third Reich.

The surviving prisoners were transferred to Nordhausen, where they started to build a new concentration camp, and the political prisoners took over the key positions in Buchenwald camp.

After the great Nazi success at Munich, when Germany was on the way to occupying the whole of Czechoslovakia, the treatment of political prisoners became softer. The Gestapo was anxious that the facts about conditions inside the concentration camps should not leak outside Germany.

The large number of Jewish prisoners gave the Gestapo another opportunity to make a great financial coup by releasing Jews, and giving them permission to leave Germany if they could pay a certain ransom to the Gestapo. The Gestapo speculated that wealthy American Jews would assist their brothers, and their tactics succeeded.

From this it is understandable why so many German and Austrian Jews were released from German concentration camps before the war.

Further, the camp authorities hoped to raise anti-Semitic feeling among non-Jewish prisoners, who had not the slightest hope of being released. But in this part of the plan they failed. After the complete occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Nazi Government started to make eyes at Moscow. The Nazi foreign department saw an opportunity of using Communist and other Left-wing prisoners as a bargaining counter in their forthcoming trade negotiations with Soviet Russia, which finally led to the German-Russian treaty of August 23, 1939. During the period of these secret negotiations, Hitler celebrated his fiftieth birthday which gave the Gestapo the opportunity to release thousands of political prisoners, who had been imprisoned for over five years. These releases were made in the nature of gesture towards the German-Russian negotiations more than a way of celebrating Hitler's birthday.

With the outbreak of war, the whole policy towards prisoners changed. During the first two years of war, the Left-wing

prisoners were given two choices; either to join the army, or spend the rest of their lives in the concentration camps. This was before the attack on Soviet Russia. Many of them joined the Africa Corps, and the whole 99th Corps of the German army, who took part in the Lybia campaign, consisted of former prisoners of German concentration camps. The idea of forming such a brigade was that these prisoners, who were mainly Communists, would willingly fight against British Imperialism. But here the Gestapo made another miscalculation. The whole corps surrendered before it went into action. The political warfare which the Gestapo had conducted successfully before the war inside the German concentration camps, suffered the same defeat as the German armies in the field. A policy of the slow extermination of prisoners began in the various concentration camps. Long before the liberation of Buchenwald the German Air Force bombed the "Block" in the concentration camps, killing all the well-known German political leaders of the Left, who had been behind barbed wire since 1933. They knew too much about Nazi cruelty, and on the eve of the Fall of the Third Reich, these men were dangerous.

This last act of political warfare was supported by the Luftwaffe. The only reason why the camp authorities did not murder all the prisoners in the various concentration camps, was that up to the last minute of the existence of the Third Reich, they clung to the hope that the Allies could be persuaded to make a bargain for the lives of these prisoners, by giving Nazi war-criminals a free passage.

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