

My First Encounter, on a walk
From Ettersburg ----to Buchenwald
(one mile and 200 years long-----)

Walking up the pathway
Through the forest of beech trees,
Leaves April green; the smooth, gray bark
Soft, clean and oh, so manicured,
How could I know what those trees concealed
At the brow of the hill, amidst the beech trees---
the buchenwald,
In that land where Goethe and Schiller,
Lessing and Klopstock wandered in the summer months
At Schloss Ettersburg where we pitched our tents, the aura
of Romantic poetry was intoxicating, heady,
my presence in those lovely woods dominated my thoughts.
But, suddenly, unexpectedly, who are these strange men, dressed
in
their striped nightclothes--
Moving to the side of the pathway as I approach?
I hold my GI Issue carbine ready for any possibility----
I approach them; they stop, a halting tentative progress----
Emaciated, fleshless faces, bearded, unclean;
They stretch out their bony fingers to me like beggars in
some city street---
Yet they seem to want nothing from me. I am bewildered.
There is no hostility here.
They fall to their knees; their hands now clasped together
as if in prayer, Durer-like, yet living, in voiceless
supplication.
They reach out skeletal arms tentatively as I approach, as
if I am the Christ passing by, wearing the clothes of
immortality----
I think, what have I done to, for these four men, a mere soldier
in the service of his country --- a 21 year old soldier from
Massachusetts out for a scouting adventure in the woods
before my assignment to "a camp", as we were told.
Hesitantly, wordlessly, I pass them by, embarrassed because I
must be the good soldier; I must not fraternize.
I did not know them; how could they know me?

Yet I am bewildered; they seem to know me--
They must mistake me for someone else.
But I cannot ignore their glistening, dark eyes, their rapturous
expressions
as I pass them by, their hands still extended, one so feebly
clutching at my calf but his weak hands lose their grip, more
like
a caress.
I recalled pictures of saints at the moment of beatification having
such
expressions on their faces!
I cannot understand what is happening, for no words have been
spoken;
only those bodies, those eloquent, half-living bodies, little more
than skeletons; and those faces, so radiant, rapturous almost,
are
more than I can comprehend. I feel drawn from their presence;
I must not fraternize.
Dutifully, I move on to the fence just beyond
An electrified fence, a double fence, one inside another, with
barbed
wire barriers at the top of each, an impenetrable barrier to me,
so
I walk along the periphery, with the beech trees following
beside
me along the way like friendly companions.
I arrive at the opening to the fence, a towering gateway,
At the top of the gate is an iron inscription---“Jedem das Einem”
I know the meaning---“to each his due”, and I enter the compound
through the gate;
My journey has just begun!

Warren E. Priest