

History of the dental station of Buchenwald (1937-1945): witnesses, archives, statistics

by Doctor Xavier Riaud

The camp in Buchenwald opened in 1934. It was first for the opponents of the Nazi regime. It had been built by the latter. It was populated by very different people (jews, resisting communists, common law criminals, outcasts, Gypsies, Jehovah's witnesses, homosexuals,...) following the conquests of the 3rd Reich. They were freed by the Americans in April 1945. About 60,000 people died there⁵.

As soon as August 8th 1937, the garrison doctor⁹ asked the SS authorities in Berlin for a work contract with a dentist to be signed and for a room in the camp to be allocated to dental treatment. The dental equipment was only provided on December 5th 1937. From 1937 Dr Hunger, a dentist under agreement came to the dental station in Buchenwald to treat prisoners. He would then show his bills to the SS authorities which would pay him according to a preestablished scale. That dentist stopped practising on March 8th 1938. He was replaced by Dr J, the SS Untersturmführer who worked with a dental technician. In April 1938, a second dental technician came to work with the SS dentist. On August 12th 1938, dental treatment was still given to prisoners by 2 SS dentists in a command shed outside the camp. From August 23rd prisoners were treated in one of the rooms in the prisoners' infirmary. On April 12th 1939 dental treatment was given to prisoners by the SS-Unterscharführer dentists J. and C. The latter can remember: "*dental treatment was like this: in the morning, I would take care of prisoners on my own; in the afternoon, I would treat the security teams in the station outside the camp.*"

In the monthly report by the SS garrison doctor⁹ in Weimar dating to March 11th 1938, "*dental prosthesis were made after discussing with the camp commander and the dentist of the SS authorities who would then accept or not*".

In September 1943, that dental station⁹ was composed of 7 dentists, 4 non-qualified dentist and 2 dental technicians. At the end of the war 8 SS dental officers⁵ were registered.

Once that station was created, it was situated in the main infirmary n°1. We mustn't forget that the prisoners who were then treated were German. These facts and figures are extracted from monthly reports from the prisoners' infirmary in Buchenwald⁹. We all know that those reports were often falsified to embroider reality, as things were much different judging from the prisoners' sayings and Buchenwald Chronicles.

On December 31st 1937 there was no dental station^{3,7,8}. Restricted dental treatment was given in the operating theatre, and there were mostly tooth extractions without anaesthesia and with a few old forceps. In some cases ethyl chloride was used. In 1938, a kind of dental surgery^{3,7,8} was created in an annex of the quarantine for typhous prisoners, in the 7th block. Sebastien Engel, an outcast prisoner and a former dental technician was in charge of it and tried to answer people's needs with the bad equipment he had. Only in 1939 was a real dental station built up in the 3rd block. All the instruments came from funds raised among the prisoners (each German prisoner could get from 10 to 15 R.M. per month from his family). Prisoner Arno Liske ran it with two Polish dental technicians. As the Nazis had forbidden practitioners to work in their sector, they introduced themselves as sick prisoners so as to be able to treat their fellows and train prisoners that could then be hired in other commandos. Teaching prisoners turned to be so effective that one of the prisoners with no previous medical qualifications managed to run the dental station from 1939 to 1945. After the liberation of the camp, the latter settled in Weimar and was said to be a very good dentist.

In June 1939 when the dental station was set up in Buchenwald^{4,7,8}, the first dentist who practised there was Corporal Coldewey. Although he had never practised before, he trained on prisoners. He was as sadistic as incapable. He thought he had to punish them before treating them (sit down, stand up, sit down, stand up,...). As he hardly ever managed to extract a tooth, a further operation had to be done. If he found a gold tooth, he would extract it right away claiming that tooth was bad. A real illicit traffic of dental gold started as many prisoners had their gold teeth extracted by dentists or anyone else so as to exchange them for food or cigarettes with other prisoners or even Nazis.

In 1939 there were never more than 6 or 7 patients a day. Prisoner Arno Liske³ said they were from 8 to 10 in 1938. In 1944 they were 130 a week⁷.

In the late 1942, Nazis only checked the monthly supplying of medicine and various equipment. That supplying was very limited. Some prisoners in the SS dental station managed to misappropriate some products that were due to the German dental station. Illicit work became more and more widespread and even though dentures were forbidden to Jews and all those who were not German, some of them got some^{7,8}.

Doctor Karl Abraham¹, an SS dentist who arrived in Buchenwald in May-June 1944 declared on February 17th 1947 that only 3 imprisoned dentists were treating up to 30,000 prisoners, which was far too little. The prisoners' teeth were in a pitiful state, mainly because of lack of vitamins and malnutrition. He said it was his job to check the treatment given by those dentists, as he was in charge of the dental station.

Doctor Werner Gruenuss², an SS dentist who also arrived in 1944 in Buchenwald could clearly remember the orders he had been given by his hierarchy. The latter can be read in his statement dating back to February 21st 1947: *"Everything I undertook to improve the prisoners' dental treatment was severely criticised. I was told to do only what was necessary, which meant only extractions and nothing else. Those extractions were carried out without anaesthetic. Many prisoners had no teeth left. I was not allowed to make dentures for them. As a consequence, many of them could no longer chew properly what they were eating. Consequences were really dramatic: serious stomach and intestine diseases which very often led to death."*

Prisoner Arno Liske³ claimed in his statement on the dental surgery in Buchenwald that *"evidence of dental treatment given to prisoners from March 15th 1943 to March 27th 1945 can be given. Here are a few figures:*

<i><u>Total number of treated prisoners:</u></i>	37,536
<i>Here are the different kinds of treatment given:</i>	
- <i>extractions with anaesthetic</i>	15,298
- <i>extractions without anaesthetic</i>	3,272
- <i>fillings with root treatment</i>	712
- <i>fillings without root treatment</i>	2,798
- <i>surgical operations</i>	446
- <i>X-ray photographs</i>	252
- <i>dentures</i>	218 (2,145 teeth used)
- <i>fixing of prosthesis</i>	654

Some particularly hard cases provoked by accidents in factories or diseases or bad treatment in other camps were solved in the dental station: partial removals of upper and lower jaws, removals of cysts both from the upper and the lower jaw, removals of salivary cysts, extractions of residual roots, extractions of ectopic and inverted teeth. The SS authorities refused to treat scurvy. Anyway, we did it successfully."

Doctor René Maheu⁶, a French Resistance deported dentist came to Buchenwald in January 1944 after he saw a note by the camp authorities asking for dentists. *"I was invited to take an exam and then I went to the dental department of the camp to introduce myself. It was a big well-lit room. The floor was clean. We had to take off our clogs and walk on rags which we used as socks. I was with two other candidates who must have tried their hands at dental practise for the first time in their lives. That dental surgery was sumptuous: there was a big aseptic cupboard containing many well-cared chromium-plated instruments, a washbasin with running water, three armchairs, three Ritter units and in one corner an X-ray camera combining with big appliances of ionophoresis. As we took the exam, we met two important characters: a young handsome SS dentist leader and a German prisoner belonging to the camp aristocracy because of his job. After I washed my hands, I examined the mouth of my patient who was one of my fellow prisoners. He wanted to have another lower premolar tooth extracted as there was a small fistulous hole on the vestibular side of his gums. My examiner rushed towards me holding a syringe full of anaesthetic substance and asked me to have a truncular operation, which I did. Everything went all right. In the meantime the SS dentist was treating two prisoners with his electrical appliances. They acknowledged I was skilled. Anyway I did not get the job as I could not speak German."*

One last word about the recovery of dental gold from the deported's mouths. From the reports made by the camp doctor in Buchenwald^{4,7,8}, between 182 and 504 grams of gold were recovered every month during the whole war.

The Buchenwald concentration camp was freed on April 1945.



Dr Karl Abraham (02/08/1908- ?)



Dr René Maheu (1899-1980)

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