

**Warning:**

**Contains Graphic Images**



**Corporal J. D. Salinger**



**and the**

**Kaufering IV Subcamp**

**April 28, 1945**

*Left to Right: 4th Infantry Division shoulder patch; 12th Infantry Regiment Distinctive Unit Insignia*

## Chapter 11

**Alsen E. J.D. Salinger and the Nazis. Madison Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press; 2018.**

Corporal J.D. Salinger, Counter Intelligence Corps was assigned to the Headquarters Company, 4th Infantry Division, and responsible for the 12th Infantry Regiment. In his postwar writings he referred to being at a subcamp. Professor Alsen identified that was at the Kaufering IV subcamp at the Lechfeld Airfield near Hurlach on April 28, 1945. On April 29, 1945 the [522nd Field Artillery Battalion \(FAB\)](#), attached to the 4th Infantry Division and operating with the 12th Infantry Regiment, arrived at Hurlach and Kaufering IV.

Professor Alsen's details the conditions of Kaufering IV at the time Cpl Salinger and the 522nd FAB were there, corroborating the histories of the 522nd soldiers. That includes their reports of the smell of burning bodies. Kaufering IV was the only subcamp encountered by the 522nd at which bodies were burnt.



# J. D. Salinger and the Nazis

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The University of Wisconsin Press



## Visit to a Concentration Camp

Ten days before the end of the war, J. D. Salinger became a Holocaust witness. In her book *Dream Catcher*, Salinger's daughter, Margaret, reports: "As a counter-intelligence officer, my father was one of the first soldiers to walk into a certain, just liberated, concentration camp. He told me the name, but I no longer remember." Margaret also quotes her father as saying, "You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose entirely, no matter how long you live."<sup>1</sup> Salinger never mentioned this horrifying experience anywhere else, and his only reference to a concentration camp in his fiction is problematic.

After studying maps of the locations of all concentration camps in southern Germany and of the locations of all command posts of Salinger's Twelfth Infantry Regiment as it advanced into Bavaria, I concluded that the camp Salinger walked into was Kaufering Lager IV near Landsberg. This was one of eleven small satellite camps of the main camp at Dachau, located forty-five miles to the east.

I had no idea that there were over 1,600 such small camps in Germany. No one ever mentioned those small camps while I was growing up there. As Paul Fussell explains in his book *The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945*, these small camps were slave labor camps and not "such industrialized killing institutions as Auschwitz-Birkenau." Fussell writes:

The slave labor camps were in Germany proper, and their function was to provide workers, no matter how badly treated, for crucial industries [the prisoners at the Kaufering camps were forced to build two gigantic underground aircraft hangars]. The function of the other kind of camps was quite different. They were not in Germany but all in Poland, as if their operations were admittedly too nasty to be associated with high German

purpose. . . . In short, the function of the death camps was to forward the Final Solution of the Jewish problem . . . by subjecting to Zyklon B gas the men, women, and children from all over Europe who would [otherwise] increase the Jewish population.<sup>2</sup>



Kaufering Lager IV was labeled the *Krankenlager*, the camp for the sick of the other ten Kaufering camps. But it was really an extermination camp because the sick prisoners, most of them Jews from Eastern Europe, did not receive any medical attention. Instead they were left to die from their sicknesses or from starvation.

Soldiers of the US Army's Twelfth Armored Division discovered Kaufering Lager IV around noon on April 27, 1945. At that time some of the camp's buildings were still burning. On the previous day, April 26, the last eight hundred prisoners who were well enough to travel had been loaded onto railroad cattle cars to be transported to the main camp at Dachau. The morning of April 27, just before the SS guards abandoned the camp, they had a tank truck spray gasoline on the roofs of the eight earthen huts that housed the prisoners who were too sick to be evacuated. Then the SS set those huts on fire.<sup>3</sup>

Salinger was not one of the first American soldiers to enter the Kaufering camp as his daughter suggests. The German holocaust historian Anton Posset reports that after Colonel Edward Seiller of the Twelfth Armored Division got a radio message about the camp, he immediately went to see it, and he, together with "officers of the counter intelligence were the first [American] soldiers to come into the concentration camp Kaufering IV."<sup>4</sup> These CIC officers must have been from Seiller's Twelfth Armored Division because Salinger's Fourth Infantry Division was operating about twenty miles northwest of the camp at the time. Salinger probably went to see the camp on April 28, a day after its discovery.

Having examined the written reports of several American soldiers, dozens of photos, and Kaufering movie footage taken by the US Army Signal Corps, I can offer the following reconstruction of what Salinger must have smelled and seen when he walked into Kaufering Lager IV.

For quite some distance before he entered the camp, Salinger would have smelled the stench of burned bodies. Sergeant Robert T. Hartwig remembers that when he and another GI drove their jeep through the village of Hurlach, about a mile from the Kaufering camp, they knew they were "near a camp site because of the sickening odor of burning bodies," and Corporal Pete Bramble reports that "the stench was terrible, especially the burning corpses."<sup>5</sup>



When Salinger came to the gate of the camp, he would have seen a sign on the guardhouse proclaiming in German that nobody was allowed to enter because of *Seuchengefahr*, the danger of infection due to typhus. Entering the camp, Salinger would have walked past rows of dead prisoners on both sides of a central passageway. Here is Colonel Julien Saks's description:

We entered and looked around. We were so shocked at what we saw that we couldn't say a word. I walked down one of the short streets and counted 65 bodies lying in ditches. The bodies were very emaciated, probably weighing no more than 50 to 75 pounds, and had been starved to death. . . . Many of the bodies had sores, as if the skin had contracted and cracked. The smell of death filled our nostrils. It was much worse than any pictures show, because the pictures don't show the odor or the sores on the bodies.<sup>6</sup>

Walking farther into the camp, Salinger would have come upon earthen huts on both sides. These huts were nothing but trenches dug into the ground and covered with roofs about forty feet long and twelve feet wide. The roofs had grass growing on them for camouflage. At one end of each earthen hut there was a window and at the other end was a door. Each hut held between fifty and sixty prisoners.

As Salinger approached the eight earthen huts that the SS had set on fire, the smell of burned flesh would have gotten stronger. Among the still-smoldering rafters, he would have seen and smelled the charred corpses of eighty-six prisoners. Next to the burned-down huts, he would have seen the bodies of prisoners who had crawled out of the burning hovels. As one eyewitness reports: "Many of the corpses were in a crawling posture with wounds both from guns and blunt weapons."<sup>7</sup>

If Salinger had walked through the large break in the barbed wire fence at the east end of the camp, he would have passed a small wooded area where he would have seen thirty-one more dead prisoners. The condition of those corpses was described by Major Charles P. Larson, who performed the autopsies. Larson reports that "examination of these bodies showed that 17 of them had died as a result of gunshot wounds; mostly multiple and probably from machine gun fire as whole extremities were amputated on some."<sup>8</sup>

Most of the dead prisoners in the wooded area east of the camp and near the railroad tracks had not been killed by the SS but were victims of a tragic mistake by the pilots of two American P-51 fighter-bombers. They saw a train parked on the tracks next to the Kaufering camp and assumed that it was a military train because it included a flatcar with two anti-aircraft guns mounted



Charred bodies at the Kaufering concentration camp (US Holocaust Museum)

on it. But the train had just been loaded with some eight hundred prisoners who were to be transported to the main camp at Dachau. The two planes raked the train with their machine guns in three strafing runs. The SS guards abandoned the train and sought shelter in the woods, and the prisoners who survived the attack escaped.

I found out about this tragedy from Anton Posset's article "The End of the Holocaust in Bavaria,"<sup>9</sup> and I learned additional details from two survivors of Kaufering Lager IV. One of them is Friedrich Schaffranek, with whom I conducted a telephone interview. The other survivor is Joseph Hausner, whose article titled "Strafing and Liberation" appears on the website of the Twelfth Armored Division. A filmed interview with Mr. Hausner can be seen on YouTube.<sup>10</sup> The reports of Schaffranek and Hausner make it clear that it was the heavy machine gun fire from the two American airplanes that "amputated" whole extremities of some of the prisoners who died near the railroad tracks. Salinger, of course, could not have known about this tragedy. He must have assumed that those prisoners had also been killed by the SS guards.







Camp Commander Eichelsdörfer among scores of corpses (US Holocaust Museum) <sup>1</sup>

The transcripts of the Dachau war crimes trials supply the most accurate Kaufering death count. According to those figures, Salinger would have seen the corpses of eighty-six prisoners who had been burned to death, plus 274 others of people had died from starvation or typhus or had been shot to death.<sup>11</sup>

The number of dead prisoners Salinger saw at the small Kaufering camp is dwarfed by the thousands of bodies that American soldiers discovered at the



Buchenwald and Dachau camps. But despite the smaller number of bodies, Kaufering Lager IV was just as horrifying as Dachau and Buchenwald because of the stench of the burned corpses.

Footage of the camp can be seen on a seven-minute film that Colonel Seiller of the Twelfth Armored Division commissioned the US Signal Corps to make. It shows some 250 German civilians from the nearby city of Landsberg, whom Seiller ordered to bury the dead prisoners. This film can be seen on the website of the Landsberg citizens association that was formed to document the holocaust in Bavaria.<sup>12</sup>



We would expect that Salinger's horrifying experience at Kaufering IV might have left an explicit imprint in his stories. But his only reference to a concentration camp occurs in the story "A Girl I Knew," and this reference contains an error of historical fact.

In "A Girl I Knew," a CIC sergeant interviews civilians and prisoners of war in order to unmask disguised Nazi officials and members of the SS so they can be put on trial. In addition, Salinger's narrator has a personal agenda. Whenever he comes across Austrians, he asks them whether they know what happened to a Jewish girl from Vienna whom he knew before the war. Near the end of the story, the CIC sergeant meets a Jewish doctor who has just returned from the Buchenwald concentration camp, and that doctor tells him that the girl and her family "were burned to death in an incinerator."<sup>13</sup>

There is a problem with this incinerator remark. The Buchenwald camp was a labor camp and not an extermination camp like Auschwitz. It had five incinerators to cremate the thousands of prisoners who died due to malnutrition and unattended medical problems. Also some four thousand Russian prisoners of war who were murdered outright. But no one at Buchenwald was ever "burned to death in an incinerator." This was established beyond a doubt in *The Buchenwald Report*, commissioned by the US Army and written by former Buchenwald prisoner Albert G. Rosenberg.<sup>14</sup>

I suspect that it was actually not Salinger who wrote the statement about the Jewish family having been burned to death in an incinerator. "A Girl I Knew" was published in *Good Housekeeping*, and I would guess that it was the editors at *Good Housekeeping* who wrote the incinerator line because they also changed the title of the story without asking Salinger for permission. The original title of the story was "Wien, Wien" ("Vienna, Vienna"), which was also the title of a popular prewar song.<sup>15</sup> The change of the title was clearly an improvement because "Wien, Wien" was not something readers of *Good Housekeeping* could relate to. But the incinerator sentence amounts to a falsification of Holocaust

history. This historical inaccuracy notwithstanding, "A Girl I Knew" occupies an important place in Salinger's work because it is his only story in which he mentions the Holocaust, even if only indirectly.



The astonishing thing about Salinger's visit to the Kaufering concentration camp is that it did not result in a change of his nonjudgmental attitude toward the Nazis or in a change of his negative attitude toward the war and the US Army. What he saw and smelled at the Kaufering camp did not make Salinger concede that the US Army had been fighting an evil of horrific proportions.

Instead, Salinger's visit to Kaufering Lager IV triggered a nervous breakdown. Apparently he was unable to push into a dark corner of his mind the sights and smells of so much death. Perhaps it also traumatized him that most of the dead prisoners were Jewish because he had all along tried to ignore the Holocaust.

**<sup>1</sup>Page 86 Photo:**

Kaufering IV camp commander SS officer Johann Baptist Eichelsdörfer was captured in civilian clothes in Hurlach and at the orders of Colonel Edward F. Seiller, 12th Armored Division, posed with the dead Kaufering IV inmates.

In 1946, SS Officer Eichelsdörfer was executed for war crimes.

[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann Baptist Eichelsd%C3%B6rfer](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Baptist_Eichelsd%C3%B6rfer)



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