
Wernher von Braun and Concentration Camp Labor: An Exchange

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The *German Studies Review* 25/1 (February 2002) published an article by Dr. Michael J. Neufeld, “Wernher von Braun, the SS, and Concentration Camp Labor: Questions of Moral, Political, and Criminal Responsibility.” In section 3 of the article, entitled “Post-Arrest Involvement with Concentration Camp Labor: Charles Sadron and the letter to Albin Sawatzki,” Dr. Neufeld describes an event that occurred in Germany in the summer of 1944, and he claims that von Braun’s actions in this event may “implicate him directly in crimes against humanity.”

It so happens that I have direct personal knowledge of von Braun’s thoughts and activities in connection with this event—known among von Braun’s colleagues as “The Story of the French Professor in the Concentration Camp”—which I would like to share with the readers of the *German Studies Review*.

By that time in 1944, production of V-2 rockets was underway at the Mittelwerk underground factory, which had been established and was managed by the SS (Himmler and Kammler). About half of the workers were civilians, another half were inmates of the neighboring Concentration Camp Dora, some of whom had been brought into Dora and Mittelwerk from other concentration camps.

During one of von Braun’s brief visits to the Mittelwerk in August 1944, Mr. Albin Sawatzki, in charge of the technical work at Mittelwerk, suggested to von Braun that the good technical background of several inmates at Mittelwerk and Buchenwald should be utilized for some specific technical development work. Von Braun met one particular inmate, a professor of physics from France who had been taken prisoner as a member of the French underground resistance movement. He worked in Sawatzki’s department for mixing computer testing, and Sawatzki would recommend him as leader of that proposed development group. Von Braun replied to Sawatzki’s proposal in a letter of August 15 (see below). Copies of von Braun’s letter have been in the public domain for years.

Persons who were ordered to pay short visits to Mittelwerk in order to help solve problems in manufacturing (among them von Braun and other Peenemünders) were put under strict orders not to speak at all about what they had seen and heard at Mittelwerk — under penalty of finding themselves wearing the same striped uniform! So von Braun did not share his experiences at Mittelwerk with his coworkers at Peenemünde, except for instances when he was overwhelmed by his shock and just could not avoid making short remarks. I remember well a few moments in August 1944 when he told me of the Sawatzki letter and of a French professor of physics (“a colleague of yours,” he said!) working at Mittelwerk as a prisoner. “That really burns me up, and I will try to do something,” von Braun said; “I even learned that there are more scientists like him at the concentration camp Buchenwald; maybe I can do something for them, too.” Then von Braun described briefly what he wanted to do. Being totally powerless to accomplish anything more general to soften the plight of the inmates, he hoped to achieve some success in this special case by pointing out the specific value to the rocket program if those scientists were employed in a more direct relationship with the workforce at Peenemünde.

Speaking to other people about such matters was extremely dangerous during the war years, so I did not learn more about “The French Professor” at that time, besides a very short remark by von Braun that “it did not work out.” Years later, after von Braun and a number of his coworkers had settled in the United States, von Braun spoke of the story of the French Professor at some length. The plan he had in mind was as follows: First, he would accept Sawatzki’s proposal to form a special working group at Mittelwerk, on a voluntary basis, with the assignment to develop and build test equipment for components of the rocket guidance and control system. Next, he would point out that the group’s work was suffering from the large distance between the group at Mittelwerk and its counterparts in the laboratories and workshops at Peenemünde. Then he would suggest a transfer of the entire group to Peenemünde, away from the Mittelwerk with its unfavorable conditions for technical and scientific precision work. Even as prisoners of war, he would argue, they could easily be housed, fed, and closely controlled under the responsibility of the Peenemünde organization, with no need for the strict concentration camp regulations and regimens. Admittedly, von Braun remarked, that would have helped only a small number of those luckless prisoners, but it would have been the only way he could have provided some help, and this would have been better than leaving them at Mittelwerk and Camp Dora.

To his deep regret, von Braun said, the French Professor did not accept this suggested voluntary transfer to Peenemünde. He just did not want to be treated better than his co-inmates, he replied. “I was really sorry that I could not be of any help to him,” von Braun said, “but I admired and respected him highly for his fortitude.” It must be assumed that the professor, if he had accepted von Braun’s offer, would have been accused by his countrymen of “cooperation with the enemy.”

Dr. Neufeld stated in his essay of February 2002 that the French Professor, Dr. Charles Sadron, wrote a memoir in 1947 in which he mentioned von Braun's visit at the Mittelwerk in 1944. He quotes Dr. Sadron as follows: "I must, however, in order to be truthful, point out one man who took an almost generous attitude toward me. That is Professor von Braun..., who speaks perfect French.... He expresses to me, in measured and courteous terms, his regret at seeing a French professor in such a state of misery, then proposes that I come work in his laboratory. To be sure, there is no question of accepting. I refuse him bluntly.... I will learn later that, despite my refusal, he tried several times to better my lot, but to no avail." (See endnote #31 in Dr. Neufeld's article.)

To my knowledge, Dr. Sadron and Dr. von Braun did not have an opportunity to meet each other after the end of the war while both were still alive.

Ernst Stuhlinger
September 2002

Prof. v. Braun [handwritten]
15 August 1944

Herr Director A. Sawatzki
Mittelwerk Ltd.

vB II 8/8 [initials of Magnus von Braun]

Dear Mr. Sawatzki!

During my last visit to the Mittelwerk, you suggested utilizing the skilled technical background of various prisoners both at the Mittelwerk and in Buchenwald in order to accomplish additional development work as well as to construct sample devices. You also introduced me to a prisoner, a French physics professor who has worked until now in your mixing computer quality control [*Mischgerätekontrolle*] and who would bring the necessary knowledge to the professional direction of such work.

I immediately acted on your suggestion and went with Dr. Simon to find a few other suitable prisoners in Buchenwald and then, according to your suggestion, arranged with Standartenführer [SS Col.] Pister [Buchenwald camp commandant] for their transfer to the Mittelwerk. Furthermore, I have asked Dipl.-Ing. Röhner, to assume responsibility for carrying out the project, and told him to report to you immediately in the Mittelwerk.

Meanwhile, Mr. Röhner has possession of the complete set of documents for construction and preparation of the ground vehicle test apparatus [*Bodenfahrzeugprüfgeräte*] whose readiness before the beginning of our deployment is an especially urgent task. The success of our deployment could be largely dependent on this. From July 28 until today Mr. Röhner has tried to arrange for a suitable work

place in the Mittelwerk. So far he has been given only an area of 10 x 3.90 meters in addition to one which measures 3.70 x 5 meters which, given the task at hand, is absolutely inadequate. His suggestion regarding a small expansion of the space is given in the enclosed sketch, which carries notations by Mr. Seidenstücker.

During my last visit to the Mittelwerk in reference to my renewed request about this, you said that the necessary space for Mr. Röhner could be provided in Hall 28. You also said that the additional area needed by Mr. Röhner was occupied by main bus parts storage [*Hauptverteilerlager*] that, with a "push to the left," could be moved so as to free the necessary space for Mr. Röhner.

I now am asking you, so that we do not lose any further time, and so that the requested ground vehicle test apparatus will be ready on September 1 for all units, to make a personal effort to assist Mr. Röhner in obtaining the necessary space and, if necessary, lend him further support.

I have the impression that a certain rivalry had sprung up between Mr. Seidenstücker and the responsible hall foreman on the one side and Mr. Röhner on the other. They perceive the new workshop as a thorn in their side. In my opinion there is no room for such sentiments given the importance of the task.

I also feel that it is expedient that the intelligent French professor, within the framework of the existing circumstances, be given certain privileges [*Erleichterungen*] (possibly by allowing him to wear civilian clothes) so that his readiness to perform independent work might be increased. Couldn't you perhaps suggest something like this to Sturmbannführer [SS Maj.] Förschner [Dora camp commandant]?

With best wishes and

Heil Hitler!

Sincerely,

B. [signature initial of Wernher von Braun]

Response to Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger

I would like to thank Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger, a distinguished physicist and close associate of Dr. Wernher von Braun, for putting his memories of the Sadron incident on the record. Born in 1913, Dr. Stuhlinger received his doctorate at Tübingen in 1936, working on cosmic rays and nuclear physics until drafted into the German army in 1941. After serving in rear areas of the Eastern Front, he was sent to Peenemünde in late spring 1943 in one of the attempts to reverse the shortsighted manpower policies of earlier years and find technical manpower for important weapons projects. He worked in the guidance field and was selected to be one of the Project Paperclip specialists who came with von Braun to the United States in 1945/46. Working for the U.S. Army and NASA, he rose to the position of chief scientist in von Braun's predominantly engineering organization. He was

closely involved in the first successful U.S. satellite, Explorer I, launched in 1958, and managed and led the scientific aspects of many important manned and unmanned space projects of the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, in the 1960s and 1970s.

In his response, Dr. Stuhlinger focuses on my statement that von Braun's 15 August 1944 letter may "implicate him [von Braun] directly in crimes against humanity" (p. 69, February 2002 issue) while omitting the other half of my analysis—namely that Dr. Charles Sadron's 1947 account of von Braun's intervention on his behalf is "by far the most exculpatory evidence that has yet been found." Only toward the end does Stuhlinger even acknowledge my lengthy quotation of that account. The Sadron incident contains within it all the contradictions and complexities of von Braun's involvement with concentration-camp labor. If we were to give Dr. Stuhlinger the benefit of the doubt, and take his recollections at face value, they would imply that von Braun's motivation was only to help Sadron and other scientists in concentration-camp uniforms, but that would not change the fact that, as his 15 August 1944 letter shows, von Braun went to Buchenwald, talked to the camp commandant, and was probably responsible for a prisoner transfer that took place from Buchenwald to Dora. (This letter has only been in the public domain for years because I discovered it in on microfilm in 1990.) That transfer cannot be definitively proven, but like his November 1943 letter about use of concentration-camp labor at the engine test sites, it would in theory implicate him in crimes against humanity, whatever his intentions—and that was one of my points. A person can have good intentions and still, because of his or her position, share responsibility for the criminal acts of the organization in which he or she is embedded.

Dr. Stuhlinger's recollections at a couple of points are in fact inconsistent with von Braun's letter to Sawatzki—notably that "the French Professor did not accept this suggested voluntary transfer to Peenemünde," when the letter refers only to his heading a special workshop for "ground vehicle test apparatus" in the Mittelwerk tunnels. It may be that, as Dr. Stuhlinger asserts, von Braun had a plan to later move the workshop to Peenemünde, but it would never have been possible to remove them from the status of SS camp prisoners. They could not have been converted into "prisoners of war"—a desire Stuhlinger attributes to von Braun, based on a post-war conversation, although von Braun must have known in 1944 that such a conversion was impossible.

This problem of memory raises all the difficulties of interpreting the kind of evidence presented by Dr. Stuhlinger—the events in question took place nearly sixty years ago, immediate postwar discussions were already affected by the need for self-justification, and more recent memories are even more affected by a need to defend von Braun's reputation in view of revelations about his party and SS memberships and involvement with Dora. Dr. Stuhlinger has been a noteworthy defender of von Braun, having coauthored a friendly biography that appeared in

German in 1992 and English in 1994. While I do not doubt that parts of what Dr. Stuhlinger says are true, the simple passage of time already makes these recollections problematic evidence for any historian to interpret, and that is leaving aside the question of objectivity.

Dr. Stuhlinger also presents a rather romantic picture of von Braun and his Peenemünde colleagues, as if they all felt trapped in an alien Nazi system, weighed down by the threat of repression. It is true that I, like all others who have had the good fortune not to live in totalitarian police states, find it hard to recapture the atmosphere of fear, and it is also true that von Braun had experienced that fear most directly, having been briefly imprisoned by the Gestapo only a few months before the Sadron incident. But Stuhlinger is unable to squarely face all the evidence I have presented of von Braun's earlier willing, if mostly apolitical service to the National Socialist system, as well as all the evidence now available of the ideological enthusiasm of many of von Braun's key friends and subordinates. Stuhlinger, a man inwardly opposed to the regime, tends to see von Braun in his own image, and is unwilling to deal with von Braun's earlier compromises with, and even enthusiasm for, some aspects of the Nazi system. Stuhlinger arrived at Peenemünde in mid-1943—just when von Braun's own alienation began to mount.

Ultimately, how one sees Wernher von Braun now is very much a matter of interpretation, as he presents a complex and ambiguous case, yet the evidence found by myself and others no longer makes it possible, I believe, to deny his direct involvement in the often-deadly exploitation of concentration-camp labor, whatever he thought of it. Von Braun made a Faustian bargain with the German Army and National Socialist regime in order to pursue his long-term dream of exploring space, and late in World War II found out what that bargain meant. His career, however admirable in many other aspects, serves as an exemplary warning of the dangers of the amoral pursuit of science and technology in the twentieth century—and the twenty-first.

Michael J. Neufeld
December 2002