



IMMEASURABLE GOOD OUT OF UNSPEAKABLE EVIL

By John W. Davis

Huge tunnels were bored into the Harz Mountains at a place called Dora-mittelbau, Germany. They were to protect the Nazis' V-2 rocket plant from Allied bombers. The tunnels were also the site of mass murder. To build the rockets, most estimates conclude 20,000 slaves from across Europe were tortured, beaten, and worked to death there. Strangely, some sixty years after the last SS (Schutzstaffel) guard ran away from the advancing U.S. Army, Dora's legacy comes to directly affect Huntsville, Ala.

A seminar at the University of Alabama, Huntsville, is entitled "Dora and the V-2, Slave Labor and the Space Age." It notes an inexplicable reality. Huntsville, the Rocket City, earned its title due to Project Paperclip, which brought captured German rocket scientists to America. They developed our rocket program which resulted in the magnificent trip to the moon and back. For this grand accomplishment humanity will honor them forever.

And yet, is this fair? Is it fair to commemorate men who knowingly used slave labor to produce their first rockets, then brought that science to America? Otherwise stated, is it fair to forget those who were beaten to death, often with sticks and boots like rabid animals, in the production of those flying Nazi bombs?

“Near, but difficult to grasp, the God. But where there is danger, the saving powers also rise.”

J.C. Friedrich Holderlin



Group of 104 German rocket scientists in 1946, including Werner von Braun, Ludwig Roth and Arthur Rudolph. The group had been subdivided into two sections: a smaller one at White Sands Proving Grounds for test launches and the larger at Fort Bliss for research. Many had worked to develop the V-2 Rocket at Peenemünde Germany and came to the U.S. after WWII, subsequently working on various rockets including the Explorer 1 Space rocket and the Saturn at NASA. *Photo courtesy Wikipedia*

Photographs at the Huntsville University Library show dramatic scenes. Some were captured on scraps of paper by those who risked their lives to do so. They reveal beastliness, brutal, inhuman conditions, and macabre death scenes. One scene freezes forever the hanging of several prisoners, their mouths locked shut by sticks and cords. These devices were to prevent them calling out to the assembled slaves, arrayed to see the sight, and tremble.

Slavery. We in this country fought a civil war to end that stain. One speaker at the conference said no memorial should only mourn the dead. No, a democracy's strength is how it can objectively face its past, the better to learn from it. How can we do less in our city? If, due to the horrible death of so many others, our future as the center for space travel began, surely we can acknowledge that fact.

Our Space and Rocket Museum should have a permanent display, perhaps using some of those photos or items on display at UAH. Our city's Big Spring Park, or Von Braun Center, could memorialize those murdered Europeans. UAH could commemorate them, the better to remind young engineers of the future that life's choices have consequences. Science affects the lives of people, not just equipment. We should, after all, have an

ethical awareness of cause and effect. This awareness should inform our actions. We should concretely recognize that while we did not cause the murders, indeed we were the liberators of the slaves, we must do more.

We can honor those murdered by Hitler. Their slave labor led not only to the development of Hitler's weapons of vengeance, but gave us the basis of those wonderful ships which took us to the moon. The world needs to know that these dead too, were as one professor observed, "Rocket Men." Also, as so poignantly observed by one panelist, such recognition would wring immeasurable good out of unspeakable evil. The great German poet, J.C. Friedrich Holderlin said as much when he wrote "Near, but difficult to grasp, the God. But where there is danger, the saving powers also rise." The thousands murdered, those denied every single dignity in the great danger that was Dora, might finally receive an earthly dignity. We of Huntsville have only to recognize them in this, our Rocket City.