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Saturn 5 Scientist

Did U.S. Cast Blind Eye to Nazi's Past?

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WASHINGTON—Last summer, the word started to get around the German community in Huntsville, Ala., that Arthur and Martha Rudolph—after retiring to San Jose, Calif., to be near their daughter and grandchildren—had picked up and moved back to the Old Country.

Ruth von Saurma, who had been their neighbor on Panorama Drive for nearly 20 years, got a birthday card and a puzzling note that they were back in Germany. A few others got brief letters. There was a phone call or two.

Everybody thought it was strange. Arthur was 77. Since he had retired from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and moved to San Jose, he had suffered at least one heart attack. He had undergone coronary bypass surgery. And he was afflicted by a palsied condition that had started even before he moved away from Huntsville.

Left 40 Years Ago

The last thing anybody expected was that, at their age, Arthur and Martha would go back to a country that they had left nearly 40 years ago.

Then, two weeks ago, the news hit Huntsville like a thunderbolt.

Arthur Rudolph, a senior member of Wernher von Braun's rocket team that had launched America's first satellite and designed the rocket that carried astronaut teams to the moon during the 1960s and 1970s, had left the country and renounced his American citizenship rather than face deportation proceedings as a Nazi war criminal.

The U.S. Justice Department's chief Nazi hunter said Rudolph, who had risen to become director of America's Saturn 5 rocket project office for NASA, had "literally worked thousands of slave laborers to death" in a period of about a year and a half while he directed production of Hitler's V-2 rockets.

Use of Slave Labor

Justice Department officials acknowledge that there had been no secret about the use of slave labor at the "Mittelwerk," or the fact that Rudolph was the V-2 production manager there. In his memoirs, top-ranking Nazi official Albert Speer called the conditions "barbarous" and recalled rampant disease, poor sanitation and human degeneracy. An official history of the U.S. Army's Third Armored Division described the discovery at the end of the war of stark evidence of brutality and depravity at the Nordhausen concentration camp,

which furnished laborers for the Mittelwerk:

"Hundreds of corpses," reported the unit history, "lay sprawled over acres of the big compound. More hundreds filled the great barracks. They lay in contorted heaps, half stripped, mouths gaping in the dirt and straw, or they were piled naked like cordwood, in the corners and under the stairways."

During the war crimes trials of managers and SS guards from both Nordhausen and the nearby Dora prison camp, former prisoners described the conditions at the Mittelwerk as inhumane, telling of sleeping in the tunnels for weeks at a time and working in dank conditions with rations barely sufficient for survival.

It was not just another case of the past catching up with a war criminal who had sought refuge in professional, middle-class America.

One of 119 Experts

Rudolph was one of 119 German rocket experts who were slipped into this country by government agents at the close of World War II—many of them kept in the country illegally for years, then secretly escorted to Mexico and guided back across the border at El

Paso to give them legal, but inconspicuous, points of entry. They were part of "Project Paperclip," a top-secret program created at the outset of the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were furiously competing for German scientific and engineering talent.

And the Rudolph case raises troubling questions about whether U.S. intelligence officials closed their eyes to war crimes because of the pressure to bring top German scientists to America and prevent them from falling into the hands of the Soviet Union.

Declassified documents obtained in recent days show that U.S. intelligence had reason to suspect Rudolph as early as 1947, two years after members of the rocket team were brought to this country.

During questioning at that time by an Air Force lawyer at Ft. Bliss, Tex., Rudolph admitted that he had seen slave laborers hanged from an overhead crane in the underground rocket factory, the Mittelwerk, where he had directed the assembly of thousands of V-2 rockets from 1943 to 1945.

Moreover, there was testimony in the war crimes trial of Georg Rickhey, the general supervisor of the arms plant beneath Germany's Harz Mountains, showing that the victims, accused of sabotage, were hanged slowly and that their bodies were left dangling for as long as 12 hours so that all the laborers being used to excavate the tunnels would see them.

When there was a flicker of life in a body taken down from the crane, it was ended by a pistol shot from an SS guard.

Though he admitted witnessing the hangings and was in overall charge of V-2 production in the underground plant, Rudolph maintained that he knew nothing of the deaths of thousands of half-starved laborers, who lived in the underground tunnels where there were no sanitation facilities, where they worked 12-hour shifts with no food but a cup of thin soup, and where they died of malnutrition, dysentery and exhaustion.

Air Force Maj. Eugene Smith, who conducted the 1947 questioning of Rudolph, wrote in a classified memorandum: "Mr. Rudolph im-

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