

## GERMAN POW STILL HAUNTED BY MEMORIES OF THE WAR

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Herald-Citizen Photo/Camille Fliss-Mayberry Former German prisoner of war in Crossville, Gerhard Hennes, speaks to an audience at Tennessee Tech University about his experiences during World War II.

**COOKEVILLE** -- When **Gerhard Hennes** was transferred to a prisoner of war camp in Crossville during World War II, he had no idea that his perspective on life would be changed forever. It was in a movie house in 1945 that he first saw what his fellow Germans had been doing to the Jews during the war.

"We saw the flickering shaft of light, we saw the emaciated bodies and the empty eyes of the survivors. We



saw the mass graves, we saw the ovens where people had been put to death by the thousands. All of a sudden the movie house was very hot. None of us had been aware of the concentration camps, though many of you may find that hard to believe," said Hennes. "On that glorious day in spring in Crossville, Tennessee, in the prisoner of war camp, it was also the day that in one profound transformation, I turned from being a hero to being a villain."

Hennes grew up in Germany and served in the German army from 1939 to 1946. He was taken prisoner

in Africa in 1943, and went through 16 prisoner of war camps in six countries before ending up in Crossville where he remained until the war prisoners were shipped back to Germany. Years later, he moved to the United States, where he now lives in Virginia.

According to Hennes, only a concentrated few Germans knew of the atrocities that were happening to the Jews during the war, however he does not suggest that this fact absolves him of any guilt. Though he did not know about the gruesome deaths of the Jews, he states that he stayed silent on other wrongs of which he was fully aware.

During a recent presentation at Tennessee Tech University, Hennes told the story of how he, as a young officer, had been charged with guarding Russian prisoners of war in a German camp. He decided to inspect the camp. What he saw shocked him. The captives were living in such poor conditions that three to five were dying every day.

"I was shaken because I could not understand why we decent German soldiers would do something like that to perfectly harmless prisoners of war," he said.

When he considered putting a notice down into his log book to call for a superior officer to inspect the camp, a friend protested, telling him that making such a request would ruin his career in the military which was just starting to take off.

"So I remained the coward I had always been. I did not make a report. I did not protest. And, of course, the responsibility sits on me to this very evening," Hennes said.

Though the war is in the past, Hennes is convinced that the events that happened during that time have a

profound parallel to current times. He insists that we, as Americans, must take responsibility for the actions of our government and not be content to just sit back and claim ignorance.

"I am one of the relatively few in my generation that believes in collective guilt. Because I believe in corporate responsibility, I was also responsible for what happened and I did not protest when the Russian prisoners of war were put to death," he said. "I am still struggling with the responsibility. We are responsible for the attitudes and actions of our freely elected government."

Hennes has written three books on his experiences during World War II: "The Barbed Wire", "Hybris" and "Under the Crooked Cross." All three books can be purchased online at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

<http://www.ajlambert.com>