

Billy Wilder

His Secret Work on a Holocaust Myth Movie



Wilder could be your best friend or worst nightmare.

Marilyn Monroe and Ilse Koch. It's hard to imagine two more polar opposites. Yet Billy Wilder worked on scripts for both of them. This article offers evidence of Wilder's involvement in the Psychological Warfare Department's ridiculous foray into filmmaking: The denazification film project documenting the citizens of Weimar on a forced tour of Buchenwald and being shown a table display featuring a supposed human skin lampshade, and being told it was made at the request of the commandant's wife, Ilse Koch. The lampshade myth then blowing back into America and becoming associated with the holocaust for generations of Americans who also laughed at Wilder's screwball comedies like *Some Like It Hot*.



Wilder on right

Not that the lampshade was Wilder's idea. It was probably a PsyWar brainchild (along with two shrunken heads) based on camp rumours which Wilder then adapted for the screen. Wilder, however, would adamantly disagree: his story is that he wasn't even on the continent, let alone at Buchenwald at the time. But we'll show he's lying. First lets examine his account:

Wilder said he didn't direct it

In the book *Conversations with Wilder*, author Cameron Crowe, (the director of *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*) asks Wilder:

Crowe: You've never really discussed *Death Mills*, the documentary you made after the war. What specific memories do you have of the experience?

Wilder: I didn't make it. I just cut it. It was filmed in the concentration camps, the day after the troops came in. All of it. That was cut, only cut. There's not one shot that I made. I just cut it.

Crowe: Some people have written that you directed it.

Wilder: There was nothing to direct. It had to be a natural thing that happened that they were just able to photograph. You cannot have corpses built up in a little funeral pyre. No. [1](#)

Wilder said he wasn't even there

Psychological Warfare's movie featuring the bogus lampshade was shot on April 16, 1945 and according to Wilder he wouldn't even be coming to Europe until 3 weeks after that. In the book *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* by Ed Sikov we read "According to Billy, he was

in New York on VE day (Victory in Europe Day, May 8), where he reported to an office in the Fisk Building." [2](#) He then left the next day, May 9, for Europe.

Evidence #1: His broken alibi

The New York Times described VE Day with a front page article titled "Millions Rejoice in City Celebration." [3](#) And the Fisk Building where Wilder supposedly reported, is downtown. So one would know if one was there on that day or not. Yet even biographer Ed Sikov concedes in a footnote "Wilder was probably already in London by VE Day, since British newspapers reported his presence there as early as April 18." [4](#)

Evidence #2: Accidentally walking in front of the camera

Above: In his life, Wilder never mentioned being at Buchenwald, yet here he is.

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Wilder accidentally walked into a scene while the camera was rolling, and then scooted out quickly. With his trademark glasses and hat, it's unmistakably him. He walks in, and reaches forward to better pose a nearly clothesless inmate (purposely unclothed so that the thinness can be seen on camera). But Wilder changes his mind and backs up, after which we can still see his hands gesticulating for a good 12 more seconds; he then steps back in for another second and we see that he's been talking to the inmate. In other words he's directing. The date on the clapboard is April 15, the day before the forced tour was filmed. The cameraman Ellis W. Carter, like Wilder himself, is a Paramount Studios employee on leave. After Carter accidentally caught Wilder on film, he went on to go film some shrunken heads. Ironically Carter later became the Director of Photography for the Hollywood movie The Incredible Shrinking Man.

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Above: Cameraman Ellis W. Carter, in middle, with two Soviet soldiers. The day after filming Wilder, Carter filmed the lampshade.

Years later, the raw footage reel showing Wilder was put up at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Steve Spielberg film archive website. [5](#)

Evidence #3: The date of his going-away party doesn't fit his departure date.

As a fluke, we know when Wilder's farewell party occurred: March 24, yet his claimed date of departure is May 9. Why the big difference of a month

and a half? Answer: Because Wilder is lying about his departure date to cover being at Buchenwald. We know his going away party date because, unknown to Wilder or Psych Warfare, an FBI spy reported on a German communist in Hollywood, Playwright Bertold Brecht, being at the party and the info got put into an FBI file. [6](#) Biographer Ed Sikov tries to explain why Wilder's friends would throw the party so early: because Wilder's overseas stint was to start at the end of the war, and no one knew precisely when that would be. Yet that explanation doesn't hold up because Sikov himself then tells us that the English newspapers reported on Wilder's presence as early as April 18, when the war was not yet over. So Wilder's stint in PsyWar did start before the end of the war, and not patly, as Wilder describes, the very day the war ended. [7](#)

Evidence #4: Billy Wilder's Qualifications compared to Psych Warfare's lack of qualifications.

The Allied Psychological Warfare Department (PWD) didn't have anyone working in film. This can be seen by looking in the back of the book Sykewar, the cutesy-titled book about the wartime PWD written by a Jewish American PWD Captain named Daniel Lerner. Looking over the list of staff, one sees that hundreds of people, about half the personnel, were involved with radio. [8](#) There were also leaflet writers and newspaper production people (the newspapers were then dropped from a plane into enemy territory.) But of the few hundred people, there's no mention of a single person working in film. The PWD obviously wasn't thinking about operations once they won the war, when film would then be an issue. Presumably that's why they recruited Wilder. A former Berlin screenwriter, a member of Paramount's most successful writing team, and a director of major motion pictures for Paramount. [9](#) No one in Psych Warfare could touch those qualifications. And this was to be a film for a big audience: all West Germany theatergoers, so you needed a professional.

The aborted film project

From what can be pieced together, it appears that the film project at Buchenwald was scotched. Probably because the PWD had no idea they'd find a real horror camp, Belsen, which was overrun by the British the very day Wilder accidentally walked in front of the camera as he was directing an emaciated man on how to act. [10](#) At that point there appears to be a strategy shift to putting a disingenuous explanation on real footage rather than making up stuff.

Belsen had a horrific number of dead bodies that were not made up by propagandists. Overcrowding, lack of food, and a water supply disrupted by Allied bombing, had turned the camp into a catastrophe of disease, starvation, and death. [25](#) In comparison, the PWD's shrunken heads and lampshade looked like stupid trickery. A new project was then envisioned which would take many months time and be called "Death Mills. CBS owner and PsyWar Colonel William Paley wrote in a memo:

"the atrocity film we now have in mind is much larger in scope than the one

originally intended." [11](#)

Of the original project we have script lines put into a front page New York Times article a couple days later, [12](#) and we have a 6 minute Buchenwald piece inside an hour long movie called "Nazi Concentration Camps" shown at the Nuremberg Trial. [13](#) Lastly, there is a 3 minute piece in the 22 minute PsyWar denazification film Death Mills. In other words parts of the original project were minorly used in two other films. And we know this because the lines of film dialogue are nearly the same as lines found in the New York Times article. As an example: The April 18, 1945 front page NYT article referring to the cremation ovens states,

These ovens were of extremely modern design and heated by coke...this concern customarily manufactured baking ovens."

Compare with the narrator for the film Nazi Concentration Camps:

"The ovens of extremely modern design and heated by coke...were made by a concern which customarily manufactures baking ovens."

Of course the "concern" Topf and Sons never made baking ovens but this is the kind of hokey shtick PsyWar thought they had to put forth because they didn't know they'd find a place like Belsen. [14](#) And when PsyWar obtained footage from Belsen, they might have had a change of heart about Wilder: A German Jew who became a Hollywood scriptwriter, was a dubious background for someone given the task of explaining the holocaust to the Germans. And that's not even considering that Wilder's Hollywood scripts had been hardly objective: In his poor-taste comedy, The Major and the Minor (1942), about a Major in the Army who falls in love with a girl he believes is 12 years old but is really a grown woman posing as a 12 year old--a script written before Pearl Harbor, he inserted a pro-war message in the last scene to help convince middle America to get involved in a war with Germany.

Billy Wilder becomes a German audience analyzer

With a Buchenwald-centered film project now aborted, and with Wilder living with the major PsyWar people like Paley in a Bad Homburg compound, his new role was sitting in movie theaters observing German audience reaction to the lies PsyWar was trying to push. One and a half months after the end of WWII in Europe, he and Davidson Taylor, who would soon become a Vice President at CBS, went on a trip around Bavaria and observed German audience reaction to an Allied film called "KZ", the German initials for concentration camp. Taylor reported their observations to the Head of Information Control:

"When the title KZ came on the screen there was a gasp throughout the audience. There were expressions of shock and horror audible throughout the picture. When the title 'Buchenwald' came on the screen, the audience spoke the word almost as one man. The atmosphere was electric throughout the exhibition of the film. There was one completely false note in the film, and a palpable feeling of incredulity ran

through the audience when the narrator said that the wife of the commandant of Belsen had made lampshades from tattooed human skin. We have footage showing this collection of tattoos and why it was not used I cannot say. After KZ all of the audience except three women who looked rather ill waited for the cowboy film. They were much disappointed when the manager announced that was all." [15](#)

In other words, the Psychological Warfare Department (PWD) lured the audience in with a cowboy film, then showed them KZ, studied their reaction, and then didn't even bother to show them the cowboy film. Taylor, a civilian, may not have been aware that his companion, Wilder, inside Davidson's own organization, the PWD, had been involved in creating the lampshade story. Davidson and Wilder's observation that the Germans didn't believe the lampshade story may be why that detail didn't make it into the 3 minute Buchenwald segment in Death Mills which was made for the German audience. Ironically the lampshade part did make it into the film Nazi Concentration Camps, shown to the judges at the Nuremberg trial.

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Above: A vestige of the original project from PsyWar's hokey lie period. Here being presented by the USA Prosecution team as film evidence to the most high-esteemed court in Western history: The Nuremberg Court. The gallantry of Psy Warrior story-telling brilliance: Tattooed skin becomes a scenario of the S.S. painting on blank skin as a canvas, but not regular paintings, obscene paintings.

Giving that 110% to assure German audience acceptance

At one point, Information Control even went so far as to place a German speaking American agent in the theater when Death Mills played. This agent would decry the movie as lies, just to see how the Germans would react to him. Another Wilder biographer Kevin Lally writes:

In January 1946, Death Mills played for one week in all cinemas in Bavaria. A Foreign Office report described the general reaction as "hushed, with many sighs, tears and turnings away. The audience left quietly at the end, and very few who attended appeared to doubt the veracity of what was shown." At one showing, the report noted, an American agent in plain clothes tested the crowd by shouting that the film was nothing but propaganda, and was immediately threatened by his fellow audience members. [16](#)

The irony is that the film WAS propaganda but the only one calling it such was an undercover American agent posing as a German, much to the consternation of the real Germans in the audience.

Lying about a reaction to a lie

In one memorandum Billy Wilder wrote "We are showing them newsreels which carry along with the news a lesson, a reminder, and a warning. A good job has been done, no doubt. Germans on the whole are receptive

and the overall reaction is favorable. Attendance ranges from capacity to satisfactory." [17](#)

But, in 1988, an 83 year old Billy Wilder gave a totally different story to the genuflecting German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff:

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[18](#)

Wilder probably wasn't aware that his own memorandum (if he even remembered writing it) and Taylor's accounts were sitting in obscurity in the National Archives, both saying that the Germans were very amenable to these films. [19](#) The gist of what Wilder says is that the Germans knew the SS killed the Jews but they don't care. They just want free stuff like pencils. For Wilder, it wasn't enough to lie to the Germans about the holocaust myth: He had to go that extra chutzpah mile to lie about the Germans' reaction to the myth.

Even the part that it was Wilder's idea to withhold bread unless the Germans saw the film isn't exactly true. Ed Sikov clarifies:

"Based on the success of the screening, 114 prints of the film were ordered so that Todesmullen (Death Mills) could be exhibited widely beginning in January. Later, the military government in parts of Bavaria did make screenings of Todesmullen mandatory and attached an attendance record to the Germans' ration cards so they couldn't obtain food unless they saw it, but because this practice was strictly against policy it was soon halted. By that point Billy Wilder had been back in Hollywood for several months." [20](#)

What becomes clear when studying Wilder is that he lies about most everything, wherever it may suit him. For instance, Wilder said he went into the army as a Colonel. Serious biographers, including tenured faculty like Dartmouth's Gerd Gemunden then refer to him as "Colonel Wilder" for the rest of their chapter on Wilder's PsyWar days. But biographer, Ed Sikov, is not as gullible. Doing good research he uncovered lie after lie which was probably not his original intention when he set out to write Wilder's biography. Regarding "Colonel Wilder" Sikov writes:

Billy may have been paid and billeted at a colonel's rank, but army documents inevitably refer to him as Mr. Wilder, not Colonel Wilder. Rank is everything in the military."(pg. 235)

And in the footnote Sikov writes:

"Note on Wilder's rank: The National Archives in College Park, Marland, house many boxes of documents pertaining to the Psychological Warfare Division offices at Bad Homburg and Berlin and the activities of PsyWar employees. None of these documents refer to Billy Wilder as an officer of the United States Army. Instead, they refer to him as "Mr. Wilder," in contrast for example, to Colonel William Paley." [21](#)

Looking for Grandma, Wilder's fake story.

The heart wrenching fiction Wilder created is that when he was in Europe he searched for his mother and grandmother but came to conclude they had been killed at Auschwitz. The real story, however, is that Wilder attended parties, bought a Georg Grosz painting from a desperate person for a carton of cigarettes, took great delight in the destruction of Berlin, and described how prostitution had now developed there. He drove a car at high speed through Berlin's main street with other German Jews recently turned into American army officers, almost hitting a Berlin man and making a big joke out of it. Biographer Ed Sikov fell for some of Wilder's lies, but exposed many of them also. For the sad contemplative Wilder Sikov writes:

"Wilder traveled to Vienna at some point that summer and stayed in relative comfort in the Hotel Bristol, but he gained no new facts to anchor him. He learned only that Eugenia Wilder Siedlisker (note: his mother) no longer existed. Her name, along with the names of his stepfather and grandmother, did not appear on any lists of the dead. Genia simply ceased....Based on this scant information, Wilder came to believe that his mother and grandmother returned to Krakow and either died in the ghetto there or were crammed into cattle cars and shipped to Theresienstadt and then to Auschwitz. When he watched those miles of unedited atrocity footage in London and Bad Homburg, that is what he saw. He also found, none too surprisingly, a distinct lack of culpability among the Germans and Austrians to whom he spoke:" [22](#)

But Sikov mentions a different version of Wilder in Germany, based on interviewing his driver:

"Berlin in the hot late summer of 1945 was a bizarre landscape of rubble, Allied soldiers, starving Germans, and cocktail parties. In spite of the mass destruction and the stench of rotting bodies, the conquering Allied armies found a way to have a lot of fun. For the winners, Berlin was an ongoing cocktail party held in the surreal setting of an impromptu and overheated morgue. One of Wilder's assigned army drivers, Richard Deinler, remembers this string of celebrations well. Billy knew many of the German film and theater people, of course, and rather than make his young driver sit in his jeep and wait for him, Wilder generously took Deinler along with him to the parties. 'They were always brown-nosing him,' Deinler notes, not too surprisingly. After all, the Germans were eagerly trying to survive the rehabilitation program Wilder was helping to lead. They were angling for jobs... 'He may have been bitter,' says Deinler, 'but he never showed it.'" [23](#)

So which version is right? One clue is information on Wilder's grandmother, Balbina Baldinger. We have a page of Yad Vashem testimony from her son, Mikhael Baldinger who is Billy Wilder's uncle. Mikhael stated that Billy Wilder's grandmother (Mikhael's mother) didn't die in Auschwitz, but in the town of Nowy Targ, Poland. There was no concentration camp there. Rather it was where Balbina owned a hotel. She died at around 76 years old. Wilder when he visited Vienna could have simply drove to Nowy Targ and easily found out that his grandmother died

there and didn't get deported anywhere. [24](#) In other words, he's lying for sympathy.

Yad Vashem genealogy page filled-in by Wilder's uncle.
Click image to enlarge

The Beautiful Woman

Audrey Young was a beautiful actress/model who must have thought the story of Wilder's grandmother being killed at Auschwitz was terrible. She was born to a Los Angeles family of movie industry craftsmen. Her dad and uncles had built stage sets since the silent movie days. Hired for a bit part in one of Wilder's movies, Wilder eventually married her.



Woman on the right: Audrey Young, Billy Wilder's future wife of 53 years.
Click image to enlarge

Audrey Young undoubtedly believed Wilder's clever lies, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time. Audrey had a first cousin, a little boy, who she got into the above car advertisement photo-shoot. Audrey's little cousin is holding the kite on the left. His name is Bradley Smith. When he grew up he founded CODOH. Committee For Open Debate on The Holocaust.

NOTES

1. Conversations with Wilder. By Cameron Crowe. Knopf, 2001, pgs. 70-71.
2. On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder. By Ed Sikov, Hyperion. 1998 pg. 235.
3. New York Times. May 9, 1945. Page 1.
4. Sikov. pg 608. Note 235.
5. "Buchenwald camp at liberation--the dead and the living." Story RG-60.0001 Tape 1. Wilder enters at 6:36. Enters again at 6:52. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website. Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive. http://resources.ushmm.org/film/display/detail.php?file_num=145
6. Sikov. Page 235.
7. Sikov. page 608.
8. Sykewar by Daniel Lerner. Publisher: George W. Stewart. 1949. The majority of staff working in radio can be seen beginning on page 444.
9. Kay Gladstone has stated that the film Death Mills was directed by Hanus Burger. See:
Holocaust and the Moving Image. Edited by Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman. Wallflower Press. 2005. Chapter 4 is an essay by Kay Gladstone entitled "Separate intentions: the Allied screening of concentration camp documentaries in defeated Germany in 1945-46: Death Mills and Memory of the Camps. pg. 54.

It might be true that Burger directed Death Mills, but Wilder was likely the writer/director for the precursor Buchenwald movie, which may have been titled "KZ." However as Wilder said, with Death Mills there really wasn't any director. There was putting a spin on documentation footage.

Qualifications wise, there's no comparison between Wilder and Burger. The Internet Movie Database entry, (as Hans Burger) is miniscule compared to Wilder's. A couple of the few films that are attributed to him, when clicked on, have no information. A couple others are shorts, like Boogie Woogie Dream (13

minutes). One called "Seeds of Freedom" (1943) appears to be made mostly of existing footage from another film done by Sergey Eisenstein, Potemkin (1925.) Burger wrote two articles in the New York Times about his time in Psych Warfare, where he describes not working in film, but in broadcasting (working in radio, and loudspeaker broadcasting to the enemy) They are "Episode on the Western Front" by Sgt. H.H. Burger NYT 11/26/1944, and "Operation Annie: Now it can be told" NYT 2/17/1946, though Author Daniel Lerner questioned the veracity of the radio article believing it to have overblown the importance of Radio Annie. Burger is listed in the book Sykewar as being in the 2nd Mobile Radio Broadcasting Company (pg. 445).

Kay Gladstone states that Oskar Seidlin is the writer of Death Mills. Again it may be true, but with Wilder writing the original (and then aborted) precursor. Seidlin was a German Jew formerly known as Oskar Koplowitz. He had never written a script, but had written scholarly articles (he had a Phd.) and children's stories. There is also the possibility these two people were stand in stooges to cover Wilder's involvement: Possibly the only two PsyWar staff with enough credentials to be weakly used as such. Seidlin is also listed as being in the 2nd Mobile Radio Broadcasting Unit in the book Sykewar.

Regarding Wilder being part of Paramount's most successful writing team: In the book, "The Film Career of Billy Wilder" by Steve Seidman, Publisher: G.K. Hall. 1977. Page 10 we read, "Secure in his status as one-half of Paramount's most successful writing team.."

10. In the raw footage Wilder was directing, the next scene showed a 4 year old Jewish boy, with cameraman Ellis Carter, setting the light up just right to capture a glint of a tear in his eye as the boy's emotions go from happy to sad. The boy then appears to look at someone to his left to see if he did it right!

11. Sikov, pg. 242

12. "Nazi Death Factory Shocks Germans on Forced Tour" New York Times, April 18, 1945. Page 1. The war wasn't yet over when this came out. For a comparison of newspaper lines and film lines, see my video Buchenwald A Dumb Dumb Portrayal of Evil, episode 19 at www.holocaustdenialvideos.com/buchenwald/

13. Film "Nazi Concentration Camps." Shown at the Nuremberg Trial of the Major War Criminals on Nov. 29, 1945 as Prosecution Exhibit #230. The first 8 minutes can be found here:
http://resources.ushmm.org/film/display/detail.php?file_num=1395

14. See my video: Buchenwald A Dumb Dumb Portrayal of Evil, episode 21.

15. Holocaust And The Moving Image: representations in film and television since 1933, By Toby Haggith, Joanna Newman, Wallflower Press. 2005. Pages 59-60.

16. Wilder Times: The Life of Billy Wilder. By Kevin Lally. Publisher: Henry Holt and Company. 1996. Pg. 155.

17. "The Wilder Memorandum" Reprinted in the book "The Americanization of Germany 1945-1949 (London and New York: Routledge, 1989. Pages 40-41.
18. The interview got made into a DVD called "Billy Wilder Speaks" in 2006. Biographer Ed Sikov points out the lies in this video account. See Sikov pages 241-242.
19. Ed Sikov gives another example of feedback which contradicts Wilder's video excerpt. Sikov writes:

"Still, Wilder and Davidson's report is clear: 'There was standing room only at the performance we attended. The people are extremely anxious to fill out the questionnaires. Many volunteer their names, which are not required. No individual who has been asked to give an interview has declined.'"--Sikov page 241.

Sikov's source is listed on page 608: Holocaust documentary plans: National Archives at College Park. Record Group 260, Box 290.
20. Sikov. page 609, note 241.
21. Sikov. page 608 note 235.
22. Sikov. pg. 243.
23. Sikov. Pg. 245.
24. http://www.eilatgordinlevitan.com/kurenets/k_pages/wilder.html
The Yad Vashem page, mostly in Hebrew, is here:
http://www.eilatgordinlevitan.com/kurenets/k_pix/wilder/112607_13_b.gif
The uncle said Wilder's mother died at the Plaszow camp in 1943. She would have been 58 years old. Plaszow, isn't considered a death camp to holocaust historians, nor is it alleged that there were gas chambers there, and conditions at the camps didn't get extremely bad until February, March, April 1945.
25. After Daybreak by Ben Shephard. Schocken Books. 2005. Pg. 15 "Allied bombing nearby disrupted the water supply."