



## Reagan Believed SS Men at Bitburg Were Murdered by Nazis

Ronald Reagan believed that Nazi SS troopers buried at Bitburg had been murdered by the Nazi regime for trying to save concentration camp victims, according to letters from the former President to WJC Vice-President Kalman Sultanik.

According to President Reagan, "German officials having to do with my visit were the source of this information."

"It is now clear that our President was deceived into going to Bitburg by his German hosts on the basis of a grotesque lie," said Sultanik, a survivor of the Holocaust. The 1989 exchange of three letters between him and Mr. Reagan was obtained from archives of the WJC.

In March 1989, Mr. Sultanik, who served on the Holocaust Memorial Council during the eight years of the Reagan Presidency, wrote the former President to seek clarification from him prior to release of his memoirs on his controversial decision to visit the cemetery where 49 SS members are buried. "You will understand my concerns that the historical memory of the Holocaust not be eroded, a concern which I believe is shared by all lovers of freedom and symbolized by the support your administration gave to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.," Mr. Sultanik wrote.

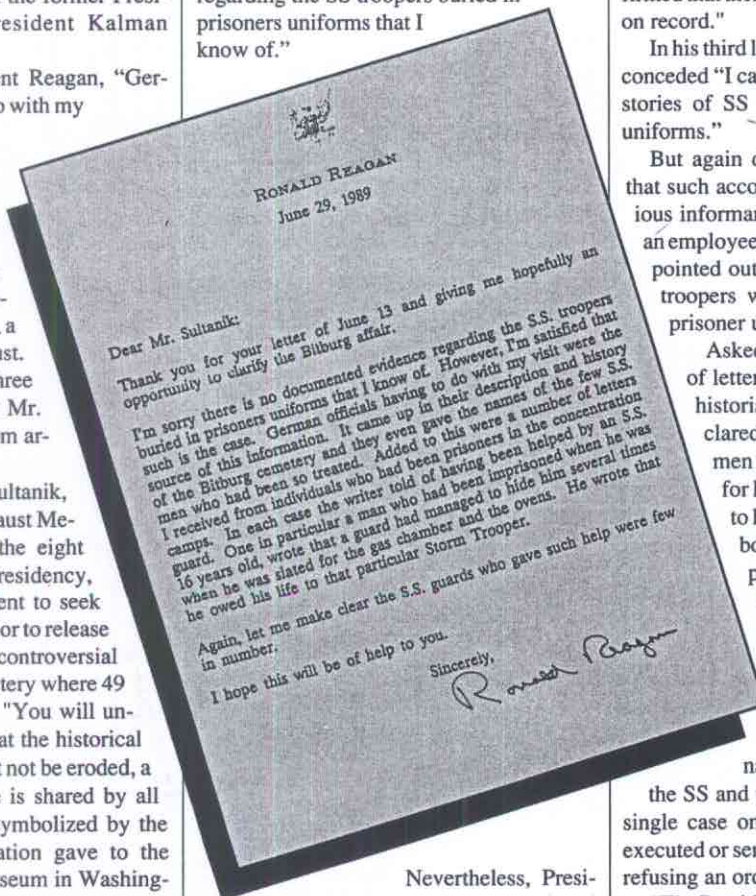
President Reagan responded that he was "dedicated to keeping the Holocaust a living memory so that such a horror can never take place again."

However, he added: "As for Bitburg it-

self, I did some research on my own and learned that, yes, there were some SS troopers buried there, but a number of them were buried in prisoner uniforms. They had been executed for trying to shield inmates from torture and the ovens."

In his second letter, Mr. Sultanik referred to President Reagan's startling reference to the SS men. He wrote: "This claim, a claim not found to my knowledge in any historical literature of the Holocaust, raises a very disturbing issue."

In his next response, President Reagan concedes "There is no documented evidence regarding the SS troopers buried in prisoners uniforms that I know of."



Nevertheless, President Reagan said he was convinced such was the case because his German hosts had so told him: "German officials having to do with my visit were the source of this information. It came up in their description and history of the Bitburg cemetery and they

even gave the names of the few SS men who had been so treated."

Mr. Sultanik then wrote Mr. Reagan suggesting "that this information which you received in good faith, should be treated with considerable reserve." Adding, "In the course of my pursuing all possible sources relevant to this question, I have most carefully checked all known archives, libraries, scholarly writings and other pertinent materials. Not only did I never come across such a case, but I have also checked with specialist historians of these events and other researchers on this specific question, who confirmed that there is no such documented case on record."

In his third letter, President Reagan again conceded "I can't provide any source of the stories of SS troopers buried in prisoner uniforms."

But again declaring himself convinced that such accounts were true, he cited various informants, including one who "was an employee of the cemetery who actually pointed out the headstone of one of the troopers who had been buried in the prisoner uniform."

Asked to comment on the exchange of letters, the preeminent Holocaust historian, Prof. Raul Hilberg, declared skepticism "that several SS men would have been sentenced for having helped prisoners, then to have been executed, and their bodies to have been removed in prisoner garb to be buried in — of all places — a cemetery reserved for men who died in their military or SS uniforms."

A 1986 study by the WJC found after examination of captured records of the SS and police courts that there is no single case on record of any SS member executed or sent to a concentration camp for refusing an order to kill Jews.

"The President of the United States, seeking to act out of good motives, was ensnared by an unspeakable distortion of history by his German hosts. It brings shame on the perpetrators of this deceitful lie," Mr. Sultanik said. □