

Gert Schramm

***November 25, 1928 – †April 18, 2016**

...a contemporary witness, an activist, a role model

Reading about his life “Haus der Spuren”, Bad Langensalza

On July 17, 2026

Read by Karin Gottschling and Petra Monkowius

Senior Citizens' Advisory Council of the City of Bad Langensalza

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, I am pleased that you have found your way to the “Haus der Spuren” today. My colleague Petra Monkowius and I support the “Haus der Spuren” by working to bring forgotten stories about people, including those from Langensalza, whose lives were affected in a special way by World War II / the end of the war, back to light. On April 16, a reading already took place in the Galerie Dryburg, also on the occasion of the 81st anniversary of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Many were unable to attend, so today we want to tell the story of and remember Gert Schramm once more, a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

(Welcome and introduction of a relative of Gert Schramm)

How it all began...

It is June 5, 2009; Barack Obama visits the Buchenwald concentration camp during his trip to Germany. Whether he met Gert Schramm on this day, one of the last survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp, is not documented.

Gert Schramm, born in Erfurt, whose 10th anniversary of death on April 18, 2016, we remember this year, was once the youngest German prisoner in Buchenwald. And he was the only Black person altogether. What do we know about prisoner number 40489—a contemporary witness to the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp?

His story begins in the late 1920s in Erfurt. The engineer Jack Brankson comes to Thuringia; he is to build a bridge on behalf of an American steel construction company. To order a new suit, he enters the men's tailoring shop of Kurt Schramm on the Nettelbeckufer in Erfurt. And there he meets Kurt's daughter Marianne.

To make a long story short—the young people fall in love, and in November 1928, their joint son Gert is born. His parents, the African American man with Cuban roots and the German woman, committed "race defilement" according to the Nazi laws of the time. That will not remain without consequences.

The love between Jack and Marianne must have been strong, because even after the end of the project and his return to the United States, Brankson returns to Thuringia time and again. He wants to be with his wife and his son Gert, who grows up in the care of his grandparents in Witterda. In 1941, Brankson is arrested during a visit to Germany due to the race laws. He is deported to Auschwitz. In the extermination camp, all trace of him is lost.

Childhood

Gert Schramm describes his childhood in the book *"Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann"* ("Who's Afraid of the Black Man") as carefree and protected. There is no racial discrimination in the village. He has children to play with, likes to learn, and has a good class teacher during his first years of school. This teacher is drafted into the Wehrmacht in 1939. His new teacher is a local branch leader (*Ortsgruppenführer*) of the NSDAP, a convinced Nazi. He regards Gert as inferior because of his skin color. The carefree and protected childhood comes to an abrupt end. With exclusion, verbal abuse, and corporal punishment, he harried him. Gert begins to skip school, so the youth welfare office gets involved; he is supposed to go to a home.

His grandmother finally takes him out of the Nazis' line of fire and brings him back to Langensalza. He completes his final compulsory school year there. His career wish to become an "auto mechanic" is denied to him as a non-Aryan. In 1943, he is finally able to start as an unskilled young worker at the Greiner auto repair shop on Tonnaer Straße.

And at this workplace, he is arrested in May 1944, taken into so-called "protective custody" due to endangerment to the people and the state, with reference to his race.

From the biography of Gert Schramm:

“When I heard voices, I peeked from below through the narrow slit between the pit wall and the car. Directly in front of my nose stood four black leather boots with tall shafts. One of the boot wearers yelled at me, 'Are you Gerd Schramm? Get out right this second.' Without any further explanation, I was taken away as if I were a criminal. Without explanation, the guys marched with me wordlessly through the city to the town hall. In Langensalza there was no prison, so I went into police custody. I was pushed into a cell. A policeman locked up behind me; I was alone.

I thought of my family, I hoped my mother was not worrying too much, I felt miserable. Some power had broken into my life and had abruptly and arbitrarily torn me, a fourteen-year-old, out of everything. That danger threatened me through the race laws, I had no idea. I was terribly hungry; I climbed onto one of the beds and looked out the window. After a considerable time, the caretaker discovered me. He knew me and brought me a crust of black bread and malt coffee.”

Gert is initially in police custody in Langensalza, later in the police prison on the Petersberg in Erfurt, in the Gestapo prison in Weimar, and in the forced labor camp at the Weimar railway station.

From his biography — The transfer to Erfurt to the prison on the Petersberg:

“After barely a week, two policemen appeared to pick me up. Then it was 'Hands behind your back', handcuffs were put on me, and we set off. We walked through the busy downtown area of LSZ toward the train station. Until then, hardly any of the passersby had seen a Black boy in handcuffs escorted by two policemen armed with carbines. Some people stopped and stared quite openly at us, but most sought distance as quickly as possible. I noticed a few familiar faces, but had no chance to meet the gazes of acquaintances. As we walked past them, they looked away.”

“We reached the main train station in Erfurt. I had hoped very much that I would be spared a second gauntlet, but this time it was even worse. On the long way down Bahnhofstraße, across the Anger and the Krämerbrücke, up the Domplatz all the way up to the Petersberg, I only looked at my feet. I didn't want to see any more gawkers, any malicious, sympathetic, or even fearful faces. I fought with tears, with absurd thoughts of escape, and with growing fear.”

Buchenwald

On July 20, 1944, he is finally deported to Buchenwald. He is just 15 years old at the time. In the concentration camp, he ends up in the barracks of the political prisoners and works in the quarry for the first few weeks like everyone else. In his memoirs, he later reports that he was exhausted to the point of death after the heavy labor.

He says: "It was my luck that I ended up with the 'Political'. The communists saved me, because I would not have survived the work in the quarry."

Every day there were ten or more dead there, dying from exhaustion, arbitrariness, or shot by the SS while trying to escape. Even the smallest offenses are punished with death in the camp. Anyone who wants to survive must not stand out. But as a prisoner of color, how was that supposed to work?

From his biography:

“In the camp, I got into the barrack of Otto Grosse. He was a communist, around 40. His prisoner number was only three digits; I noticed that immediately. So he must have been in the camp for a long time. A great sense of calm emanated from him. Quietly, he asked me for my name and wanted to know what had happened to me. For the first time since I had been taken from the workshop, separated from my family, and dragged through prisons, I felt treated like a human being again. I was no longer used to such humane treatment, and suddenly I had to cry. Otto Grosse called out to the room senior (*Stubenältester*): 'Bruno, see to it that the boy stays here on A-wing.'”

Gert Schramm is convinced—ultimately, this solidarity saved him. Fellow prisoners protected the dark-skinned boy. The trade unionist and communist Willi Bleicher, responsible for labor statistics, manages to sneak the boy out of the quarry and into another construction detail. He gets light work at food distribution until he regains his strength. The communist Otto Grosse, as

block senior (*Blockältester*), ensures that Gert stands inconspicuously in the middle during roll calls and is protected from the view of the SS by his fellow prisoners.

“We are free!”

Barack Obama's great-uncle Charles T. Payne is one of the American soldiers of the 3rd US Army under General George S. Patton, who advance on the camp in early April 1945 and, through this advance, enable the prisoners to liberate themselves on April 11, 1945.

Wikipedia text: The SS fled. Armed prisoners occupied the camp gate and overwhelmed the last remaining SS men. By around 4:00 PM, they had taken control of the camp. Buchenwald was liberated, from outside and inside. About an hour later, scouts from the 4th and 6th Armored Divisions were the first American soldiers to enter the camp. 21,000 prisoners experienced their liberation on this day, among them Gert Schramm and over 900 other children and youth.

From the biography:

“Then came the morning of April 11. I heard the siren—three minutes of continuous tone—meaning 'enemy alarm'. At the gate building—frenzy. SS bosses fled in heavily loaded cars. The sound of battle was audible in the immediate vicinity. American tanks rolled around the camp; at the same time, armed prisoners appeared as if out of nowhere. SS guards were pulled down from the watchtowers, disarmed, and taken prisoner. Over loudspeakers, we heard the voice of the First Camp Senior (*Erster Lagerältester*), Hans Eiden: 'Comrades! We are free! Maintain calm and order!' It was not the voice that almost knocked me over, nor what was said. You couldn't grasp that in the first moment anyway. It was the word 'Comrades'; it echoed loud and clear across the square. 'COMRADES'... Then an incredible cheer broke out. We embraced each other, laughed, and cried at the same time. It was over. We had made it. We had stayed alive!”

Five days after the liberation, around 1,000 citizens of Weimar are confronted with the piles of corpses on the Ettersberg. Gert Schramm later remembers the faces of the shocked citizens. And their exclamations: "We knew nothing about it!" He did not believe them.

Life Afterward:

In June 1945, Gert Schramm returns on foot from the Buchenwald concentration camp to Bad Langensalza, into a new life. He initially works as an auto mechanic, commutes between East and West Germany, and also lives for several years in the Ruhr area, in Essen. Later he returns to the GDR, working in uranium mining at Wismut.

From 1964 onward, he lives permanently in Eberswalde, Brandenburg, where he builds up a business as a taxi and freight haulage entrepreneur during GDR times together with a former fellow prisoner. He becomes a father of four children, a grandfather, and a great-grandfather. In 2016, Gert Schramm dies in Eberswalde.

What do Gert Schramm and his inhumane experience in the Buchenwald concentration camp stand for?

After the war, and especially after German reunification, Gert Schramm works intensively as a contemporary witness and activist against racism and right-wing extremism. He is never a member of any political party. His time in the Buchenwald concentration camp shaped him; he drew a certainty for his life from it: "One must stand up to evil." ...and he wants to convey this conviction to others. He becomes a board member of the Buchenwald Committee and engages in the Prisoners' Advisory Council of the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorial. He advocates for a living culture of remembrance. He speaks in Thuringian schools, attempting to bring his conviction to young people that one must never allow hatred and indifference, that every human being possesses equal value, and that what happened must never be swept under the rug. But he is also certain that even in the most horrific inhumanity, there can be a sense of responsibility, selflessness, and love. He is convinced that his fellow prisoners protected him in Buchenwald, him, the dark-skinned boy, and with a level of moral courage that he later often missed as a Black German in East Germany. As a member of the volunteer fire department, he repeatedly had to put out incendiary devices after reunification that new Nazis were now throwing at people again. In his home community of Eberswalde, he is an important voice against racism. In 2014, he is awarded the Federal Cross of Merit for this.

Schramm saw a role model and a beacon of hope in America's first Black president: "They had better take good care of him so that the same thing doesn't happen to him as to Kennedy!" If Gert Schramm had met Barack Obama in Buchenwald, he would have thanked him for America's role in the liberation from the Nazis.

His autobiography *"Wer hat Angst vorm schwarzen Mann"* (2011) is his lasting legacy against racism, exclusion, and xenophobia in all social systems.

He writes in it:

"To this day, it is not easy for me to talk about my time in the concentration camp. Each time, I feel transported back anew. But when I look into the faces of the young people who come to me at the events, I feel that I am making a difference as a contemporary witness. It makes me happy that young people from different countries get involved in Buchenwald so that memories are preserved. And I hope that young people understand what a value it is not to be at the mercy of arbitrariness."

To the question of what actually connects him as an old man with youth, he answers in two words: "The future."

Gert Schramm—a role model for us all.

He passed away on April 18, 2016. This year marks the 10th anniversary of his death.

We thank you for your attention.