AUSCHWITZ III-MONOWITZ MAIN CAMP [AKA BUNA]

The Monowitz main camp lay about 6.5 kilometers (4 miles) east of the Auschwitz I main camp, near the Polish town of Monowice. In the neighboring hamlet of Dwory, on a construction site of several square kilometers in area, the German chemical firm IG Farben built a huge chemical complex for the production of synthetic fuels and rubber (Buna), starting in April 1941. Besides access to nearby coal mines and convenient transport connections, the availability of thousands of prisoners played an important role in the choice of this site. Leading managers of IG Farben approached Hermann Göring when they learned of SS plans—part of the Germanization policy—to forcibly resettle the Polish inhabitants and deport the Jewish population from Auschwitz and the surrounding villages. On February 18, 1941, the company persuaded Göring to order Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler to delay the forced migration and to support the building of the Buna plant by providing prisoners from the camp as slave laborers.1 Himmler issued an order in February 1941 to support the plant’s construction, and the following month an agreement was reached between IG Farben and the leadership of the SS. That agreement became a key model for the deployment of concentration camp inmates in the German war industry.

In April 1941, prisoners from the main camp started work as the Buna-Aussenkommando to build the factory for IG Farben. In the beginning, the Buna-Aussenkommando was populated by Polish prisoners; from the spring of 1942 onward, it was reinforced with French Jews. The prisoners had to complete an exhausting march from the main camp to the

---

1. USHMM WS # 91362, COURTESY OF NARA
construction site and back every day. From the end of July, the 1,000 to 1,300 prisoners in the Aussenkommando were transported by rail to conserve their strength. On October 21, 1941, IG Farben proposed to the camp administration that the number of prisoners be raised to between 4,000 and 5,000 prisoners and that they be housed on the factory grounds. Due to a lack of SS guards and resources, the camp commandant, Rudolf Höss, was unable to fulfill that request at the time. The exact timing of the decision to build a subcamp on the Buna site is subject to debate. It is known that construction began in March 1942. With 57 living-quarter barracks, 5 wash barracks, and five latrines, the planned dimensions were extraordinarily large for a subcamp.

By the end of October 1942, more than 2,000 prisoners had arrived at Monowitz. From that point, the camp population grew steadily and, with the introduction of large numbers of Hungarian Jews in the spring and summer of 1944, reached a high point of 11,000. Inside the subcamp, Staatspolizeileitstelle Kattowitz established a so-called work education camp (Arbeitserziehungslager). Five blocks separated with barbed wire were used to imprison about 400 to 500 inmates, the goal being to discipline forced laborers who were uncooperative, came to work late, or attempted sabotage. While the administration lay in the hands of the Gestapo, the SS guarded this camp, which existed until the evacuation of Monowitz.

Eventually, more than 90 percent of the inmates of Monowitz were Jews, who came from Germany, Austria, Poland, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, and Czechoslovakia. The majority of the non-Jewish inmates were citizens of Poland, the USSR, and Germany. About 1 to 2 percent of the camp’s population were “Gypsies” of unknown nationality. In response to successful escapes in the summer of 1943, the SS transferred many Polish and Czechoslovakian inmates to Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, where foreign prisoners’ chances to survive after escaping were much smaller. Due to the mass deportation of the Hungarian Jews in the spring and summer of 1944, their proportion of the camp population increased markedly.

The inmates of Monowitz were almost exclusively male. The exception was a small group of 10 to 20 women who were forced to work as prostitutes. From at least the summer of 1944 onward, and possibly from the end of 1943, they were placed in a separate block surrounded by barbed wire.

The prisoner-functionaries, such as block elders, prisoner physicians, or overseers, were mainly prisoners from Germany, Austria, or Poland. Besides political or personal links, the decisive factor for their nomination was often the ability to understand orders by the SS in German.

The commander of Auschwitz III-Monowitz was SS-Hauptsturmführer Heinrich Schwarz, who was born in Munich in 1906. By the end of 1931, he had joined the SS (No. 19691) and the Nazi Party (NSDAP) (No. 786871). He started his career in the camp SS in September 1939, first in Dachau and later in Mauthausen. In September 1941, he was assigned to Auschwitz, and he became the commandant of the newly designated Auschwitz III camp on November 22, 1943. He kept this position until Monowitz was evacuated. On February 1, 1945, he became the commandant of Natzweiler-Struthof.

By Himmler’s order of November 22, 1943, Auschwitz was partitioned into three administrative units: Auschwitz I (main camp), Auschwitz II (Birkenau), and Auschwitz III (Monowitz and subcamps). From that time onward, the Monowitz headquarters was responsible for the administration of all Auschwitz subcamps. In December 1943, the camp, which until then was named Lager Buna, was renamed Arbeitslager (work camp) Monowitz. In November 1944, the administration was reorganized once again. By order of the garrison senior of Auschwitz, the camp at Birkenau was assigned to the main camp, and the “Monowitz work camp” was renamed “Monowitz concentration camp” and became an independent administrative unit.

On November 22, 1943, the guard units Wachkompanie Buna and the 5th Wachkompnien were subordinated to Schwarz. On May 22, 1944, the SS-Totenkopfsturmbataillon (Death’s Head Storm Battalion) Auschwitz III was established by Schwarz’s order. It was seven companies strong. The 1st Company, under the command of SS-Obersturmführer Paul Heinrich Theodor Müller, was to guard Monowitz, while the other six companies as well as the 8th Company (established later) guarded the subcamps.

The prisoners were exploited by private enterprises and the SS inside and outside the camp as slave laborers. A total of perhaps 100 to 120 prisoners worked inside the camp, in offices, the camp kitchen, the infirmary, and on various maintenance duties. Outside the camp several thousand prisoners had to work for private companies at the construction site. IG Farben put its prisoners to work in its own plant or lent them to subcontractors. The arrangement was profitable for IG Farben since the daily fee the firm paid to the SS per prisoner amounted to roughly one-third less than for labor at the regional wage level. In addition, the firm saved considerable amounts that it normally would have had to spend for such costs as housing, sick benefits, separation compensation,
social welfare, and cultural activities, costs that could amount to approximately 25 percent of the wages of nonprisoner labor. These savings more than compensated the firm for the lower productivity of the emaciated, often diseased camp inmates.

Among the most dangerous details were the excavation Kommando and the transport Kommando, in which the prisoners suffered nearly continuous, brutal beatings. These murderous Kommandos also included the cement Kommandos, in which prisoners had to carry 50-kilogram (110-pound) cement sacks at a run. In other Kommandos, the prisoners had to build underground bunkers or lay cable, carry tree trunks, or even dig up unexploded bombs. The chances of survival were better in the electricians’ Kommando, in which 120 to 180 Jewish prisoners were forced to build electrical power systems and switchboards. As the construction of the factory advanced, the job specifications changed. A growing number of prisoners were deployed as skilled laborers. They had to work as mechanics, masons, carpenters, painters, or welders. During 1943, more and more prisoners were put to work in the assembly Kommandos. And starting in 1944, an increasing number of prisoners worked in production Kommandos, where many of them performed highly skilled work in chemical laboratories, as exemplified by Primo Levi. In the camp administration, prisoners worked as scribes and dealt with correspondence and the camp statistics.

There are no estimates of how many prisoners of the Buna-Aussenkommando died between April 1941 and July 1942. The estimate of the number of prisoners who died and were killed from October 1942 onward, based on survivor accounts, fluctuates between 23,000 and 40,000. Many died at the construction site in work accidents, often because of the absence of safety measures. The majority died of cachexia, as a consequence of malnutrition, overwork, and untreated diseases. At the instigation of IG Farben managers, prisoners were selected for the gas chambers in Birkenau when their work ability decreased and in cases of longer-term diseases or if they became invalids. Routine selections took place in the morning at the gate of the camp when the prisoners marched to work, in the prisoner infirmary, or at the roll-call square. The camp commandant, protective custody camp leader, SS members responsible for labor allocation, the SS camp physician, and according to a surviving prisoner physician, also several civilians from IG Farben all took part in the selections. Selections started in the infirmary as soon as more than 5 percent of the inmates were ill. The average prisoner survived for three to four months in Monowitz.

In the face of everyday destruction, one of the major tasks of the camp resistance was to save lives. To that end, it worked to procure extra food and medication and generally tried to improve the prisoners’ situation. It also conducted political education. An international network, mainly consisting of Poles and Jews from Germany and Austria, led the resistance. They took over important posts in the camp administration from which they could gather information and influence developments.

At the IG Farben factory, prisoners approached civilians, forced laborers, and POWs secretly to exchange information. Sabotage prolonged completion of the factory. The electricians’ Kommando, for example, successfully caused a short circuit of the turbines during a test run. According to Walter Petzold, a former prisoner, the resistance also prevented IG Farben from starting synthetic fuel production during the so-called Day of National Work on May 1, 1943. Three days earlier, prisoners had caused an explosion of the high-pressure station, and in the vehicle park, prisoners destroyed 50 trucks and tractors through looting.

After attempts to escape, the prisoners had to stand for roll calls for many hours as punishment. Prisoners who were captured again faced hanging. The camp inmates were forced to watch the cruel execution scenes.

The first major air raid on factory buildings at Monowitz took place on August 20, 1944, by bombers of the U.S. 15th Air Force. According to Siegfried Pinkus, a prisoner of Monowitz, about 75 inmates were killed, and more than 150 were slightly or severely injured. Nevertheless, many prisoners appreciated the raids, which scared the SS, demolished
war production facilities, and brought their liberation closer. Further air raids followed on September 13 as well as on December 18 and 26, 1944, and the last on January 19, 1945.

On January 18, 1945, Monowitz was evacuated. About 800 to 850 sick prisoners, too exhausted to leave, stayed behind. Many of the approximately 10,000 prisoners from Monowitz were forced to go on the death march. Many thousands died from exhaustion, exposure, and starvation or were beaten to death or shot by the SS when unable to continue to march. The death march west went via Mikolów to Gleiwitz, where the surviving prisoners were loaded on open cattle cars and transported to concentration camps in the Reich. Many ended up in Mittelbau, where they were forced to work underground in German rocket production. The prisoners who stayed back in Monowitz were liberated by the 60th Army of the Red Army’s First Ukrainian Front on January 27, 1945.

The crimes committed at Monowitz were documented in detail for the first time during the U.S. Military Tribunal at Nürnberg in Case 6 from 1947 to 1948, in which 24 top managers of IG Farben were, among other things, accused of plundering and despoliation and of using the slave labor of civilians, POWs, and concentration camp inmates. Five managers were sentenced to terms of between six and eight years for the exploitation and enslavement of camp inmates at Auschwitz. Ten defendants were acquitted. One defendant was released during the trial proceedings for health reasons. Four of the 13 IG Farben managers who were sentenced as war criminals were released immediately, and the others, before they served their full sentences.

Shortly after World War II, several members of the SS were sentenced to death by Allied Military Tribunals for crimes committed in concentration camps. Among them were the former Lagerführer of Monowitz, SS-Obersturmführer Vinzenz Schöttl, in the Dachau trial of 1945, as well as the former camp physicians of Monowitz, SS-Obersturmführer Friedrich Entress and SS-Hauptsturmführer Helmuth Vetter, in the Mauthausen trial in 1946. A French Military Tribunal at Rastatt sentenced the former commandant of Monowitz, SS- Obersturmführer and Rapportführer in Monowitz, was arrested in June 1965 in Spreenagen near Frankfurt an der Oder. Before the Supreme Court of the GDR, he was accused of taking part in selections of many thousands of prisoners. Fischer confessed to the crimes, which several witnesses had confirmed, and was sentenced to death on March 25, 1966. He was executed the same year.

In the first Auschwitz trial, which ran from December 1963 to August 1965 before the court in Frankfurt am Main, the former Sanitätsdienstgrad (SDG) of Monowitz, Gerhard Neubert, was released from trial for health reasons. In the second Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, in 1966, Neubert received a sentence of three and a half years for accessory to murder in 15 selections. In the third Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, in August 1966, Erich Grönke, Heinrich Bernhard Bonitz, and Josef Windeck were accused of murder. Bonitz, former block elder and Kapo in Monowitz, was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment. The former camp elder of Monowitz, Windeck, was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment for murder in 2 cases and attempted murder in 3 cases. The preliminary proceedings, which were opened by the public prosecutor in Frankfurt, against the former camp elder of the hospital (Krankenbau) Stefan Buthner (formerly Budziaszek), in 1966, were closed in 1975 because of the witnesses’ contradictory testimonies.


**NOTES**

1. NI-1240, Göring to Himmler, February 18, 1941.
2. BA-B, R 5/3056, Bl. 480, Reichsbeschadigung Oppeln an Reichsverkehrsherrn, February 28, 1942; IG Auschwitz, Wochenbericht Nr. 33 für die Zeit vom 5. bis 11.1.1942, NI-15109.
7. APK, RK 2910, p. 19, Mildner (Staatspolizeileitstelle Kattowitz) an den Regierungspräsidenten in Kattowitz, February 11, 1943.

VOLUME I: PART A
8. APMO, Oświadczenia, t. 6, s 829, Syg. Osów/Posner/14, p. 6; Wagner, IG Auschwitz, p. 105; report on Auschwitz-Monowitz (Buna) by Curt Posner, n.d.


17. F-B-I, Frankfurt am Main, Landgericht Frankfurt am Main, 4 Js 444/59, Vernehmung von Walter Petzold (Berlin) am 10.2.1960, p. 2.
