The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, Volume I

Megargee, Geoffrey P.

Published by Indiana University Press

Megargee, Geoffrey P.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/82098.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/82098

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3209397

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
BERGEN-BELSEN

Watercolor and ink drawing of the Bergen-Belsen camp gate by survivor Ervin Abadi, 1945. The marginal comment reads: "The main gate of the deportation camp and POW camp in Bergen-Belsen. The only thing missing from it is a sign: 'Lasciate ogni speranza 'Abandon all hope' [signed] Abady, 1945."
USHMM WS # 36742, courtesy of George Bozoki
BERGEN-BELENS MAIN CAMP

The “detention camp (Aufenthaltslager) Bergen-Belsen,” the official name for the camp, established in the spring of 1943, was to fulfill a very specific function within the National Socialist concentration camp system. It was to function as a transit camp for specific groups of Jewish prisoners who (initially) were excluded from the deportation into the extermination camps. They would be held to be exchanged for Germans interned in Western countries, as more Germans had been interned overseas than had foreigners in countries under German control.

Although the Foreign Affairs Office was involved in the initiative to establish the camp, it was, despite its specific function, nevertheless incorporated into the concentration camp system administered by the SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA), a step that would have fatal results in its development. To establish this assembly camp the SS took over from the Wehrmacht the southern half of the Bergen-Belsen prisoner-of-war (POW) camp and its barracks, located on the edge of the largest military training ground in the German Reich.

It is true that the living conditions at first were better than those in other concentration camps. Those prisoners who were to be exchanged were not to know the true conditions in the National Socialist concentration camps. They were not to be in a position where they could report overseas on the conditions or provide evidence of those conditions by their own physical condition. Nevertheless, the living standards in Bergen-Belsen were somewhat worse than in the internment camps. The substitution of the initial name of the camp, “civilian internment camp (Zivilinterniertenlager) Bergen-Belsen” with the name “Aufenthaltslager Bergen-Belsen” on June 29, 1943, was justified on the grounds that a civilian internment camp would in accordance with the Geneva Convention be open for inspection by international commissions.

Even when the exchange prisoners (Austauschhaftlinge) in Bergen-Belsen were granted “privileges” not available to prisoners in concentration camps—for example, they could take their luggage to Bergen-Belsen and wear their civilian clothing in the camp, and the SS was forbidden directly to mistreat the prisoners physically—the exchange prisoners were subject in many respects to arbitrary acts by the SS, including hour-long roll calls and hunger rations.

The Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) issued guidelines on August 31, 1943, establishing criteria for the relocation of the Jewish prisoners to Bergen-Belsen as follows:

1. Jews who are either related to or have other relations with influential people in hostile overseas countries;
2. Jews who are key to an exchange of Germans either interned overseas or held prisoner overseas;
3. Jews who as hostages can be used to exert either political or economic pressure;
4. Key Jewish personalities.¹

These guidelines determined the social structure of the Aufenthaltslager Bergen-Belsen. Disregarding the so-called prison camp (Häftlingslager), a strictly separate area of the camp in which prisoners lived in typical concentration camp conditions, Bergen-Belsen initially held exclusively Jewish prisoners. Until the end of 1944, Jewish prisoners represented the huge majority of the total prisoner population in Bergen-Belsen.

The exchange prisoners were not as a rule individuals. Whole families were deported to Bergen-Belsen with the result that right from the beginning there were a large number of children in all age groups. Men and women were held in separate barracks but could meet each other during the day. Children lived with their mothers in the women’s barracks until they were 15.

The first transport of “exchange prisoners” arrived in Bergen-Belsen in July 1943. However, the planned number of transports only began to arrive from the beginning of 1944. At the end of July 1944, there were around 7,300 prisoners in Bergen-Belsen.

Unlike the other concentration camps, the Bergen-Belsen prisoners did not all live according to the same camp rules. Living conditions varied according to the SS’s view of their legal status and their national origin. They lived in strictly separated parts of the camp.

In the Sternlager (so called because the prisoners had to wear the Jewish star) lived the strictly speaking “exchange Jews” (in 1944 almost 4,400 prisoners) including the Dutch, who had arrived in Bergen-Belsen via the Westerbork transit camp. They were by far the largest group. Even elderly prisoners were forced to do labor in the Sternlager.

Several hundred Jews from neutral countries lived in the Neutralenlager, mostly from Spain, Portugal, Argentina, and Turkey. Unlike the other “camps” within Bergen-Belsen, the prisoners here lived in relatively bearable conditions until March 1945. The prisoners in this camp were not assigned to labor detachments.

In the middle of 1943, 2,300 to 2,500 Polish Jews were deported to the so-called special camp (Sonderlager). They held provisional papers issued by South American states. They also were not assigned to labor detachments. They were strictly isolated from the other prisoners probably because of their knowledge of massacres committed by the SS in Poland. By the middle of 1944, most of these people, after their citizenship had been examined, were deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. Only 350 remained in Bergen-Belsen.

The Hungarian camp (Ungarnlager) was established in July 1944 for 1,683 Hungarian Jews (the so-called Kasztner Group). A small group was released to Switzerland in August and a larger group in December 1944, not as part of an exchange of prisoners but as the result of negotiations between the SS and a Zionist aid committee represented by Reszö
Kasztner in Budapest. Heinrich Himmler had initiated the negotiations with a goal of making contact with the Western Allies via the release of the Jews with a view to finding a potential partner to negotiate a separate peace. The Hungarian Jewish prisoners in this part of the camp wore, as those in the Sternlager, civilian clothes. They were not forced to work. Shortly after the Kasztner Group was released, a new group of Hungarian Jews was brought into this part of the camp. They were also viewed by the SS as exchange prisoners.

The specific living conditions in the Aufenthaltslager Bergen-Belsen in the beginning made possible an astonishing variety of cultural and religious life, which as a rule was only tolerated by the SS and could only take place in secret. By allowing the prisoners in the Aufenthaltslager their luggage, they were given an important material foundation for a cultural and religious life inside the camp—they could bring in books, paper, pens, and a variety of religious ritual objects. There are known to be 30 diaries secretly written by prisoners in Bergen-Belsen—mostly in the detention camp—that have survived. In addition, more than 100 poems (mostly in Dutch and Polish) written in Bergen-Belsen as well as dozens of drawings drawn in the Aufenthaltslager have survived.

Very few prisoners in the Aufenthaltslager Bergen-Belsen were in fact exchanged. Some 222 Jews were able to leave the camp at the end of June 1944, reaching Palestine at the end of the following months; 136, as the result of a German-American exchange of civilian personnel, reached Switzerland at the end of January 1945. And 1,683 prisoners from the Kasztner Group and a few hundred Jews from neutral countries were also freed.

The overwhelming majority of the prisoners remained caught between the hope of freedom and the despair of the ever-worsening living conditions in Bergen-Belsen, conditions that deteriorated from the middle of 1944. The hope of exchange meant that in the following months there was no open resistance and, except for the prisoner camp, presumably no attempts to escape.

Beginning in the spring of 1944, the SS began to relocate other groups of prisoners, who had nothing to do with the planned exchange program, to Bergen-Belsen. This turn of events began with a transport of sick prisoners, most no longer capable of working, from the Mittelbau concentration camp at the end of March 1944. They were exactly 1,000 prisoners who were sent to Bergen-Belsen supposedly to recuperate. There was in fact no medical care worthy of the name for these sick prisoners in Bergen-Belsen. In the following months, the SS sent other transports with sick prisoners from other concentration camps to Bergen-Belsen, all of whom suffered a similar fate as those in the first transport from the Mittelbau concentration camp. In the summer of 1944, 200 prisoners in the prisoner camp were murdered by a prisoner whom the SS called the “senior orderly” (Oberpfl eger). They were murdered with an injection of phenol.

In autumn 1944, a tent camp was built. It bordered on the Aufenthaltslager. Initially, it functioned as a transit camp for transports of females from Poland, who were sent to work in the...
armaments industry. In August and September 1944, three work detachments were established not far from Bergen-Belsen in Hambühren, Unterlüß, and Bonlitz. Here also female Bergen-Belsen prisoners had to work in the armaments industry.

At the end of October/beginning of November 1944, the tent camp in Bergen-Belsen held about 8,000 women evacuated from Auschwitz II-Birkenau. After the tents were destroyed by a storm, the prisoners were squeezed into the already overfilled barracks. It was into this so-called small female camp that a transport from Auschwitz holding Anne Frank and her sister Margot was sent. Both died there in March 1945.

In the face of the Red Army advance, concentration camps close to the front began to be evacuated from the autumn of 1944 in a westerly direction in so-called evacuation transports. Bergen-Belsen, due to its geographical position inside the German Reich, became from the end of 1944 more and more a destination for these evacuation transports. To hold the new transports, the camp had to be expanded. In January 1945, the POW hospital in the northern half of the camp complex was dissolved and became part of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Here was the site of the "large women's camp" (Grosses Frauenlager).

As a result of this change of role for Bergen-Belsen and the rapid increase in prisoner transports, the camp changed from a detention camp, holding hostages for exchange, into a de facto death camp. With the handover of camp command to Josef Kramer, who had been the commandant of Birkenau and who replaced Adolf Haas on December 1, 1944, this transformation proceeded apace.

The numerous evacuation transports that were directed to Bergen-Belsen from the end of 1944 led to a catastrophic overcrowding in the camp. At the beginning of December 1944, there were around 15,000 prisoners in the camp; on February 1, 1945, approximately 22,000; and 41,250 on March 1, 1945.

In the hastily constructed, completely overcrowded, and mostly unheatable barracks there was often no furniture of any description so that countless prisoners had to lie on the ground. Hunger and illness, which the SS took no serious steps to deal with, determined the life of the prisoners in those areas of the camp where the living conditions had once been bearable. Vermin and diseases such as typhus, dysentery, and tuberculosis caused an ever-increasing number of deaths in the confined spaces where there was a complete lack of hygiene and medical care. In March 1945, alone, more than 18,000 prisoners died in Bergen-Belsen. The hunger reached an unimaginable dimension with the result that in the last days before liberation, several thousand male prisoners were transferred to Bergen-Hohne. On the camp grounds and in the barracks in Bergen-Belsen, the British liberators found thousands of unburied corpses. Despite the efforts of the British—within a few weeks 14,000 emergency hospital beds were erected in the barracks complex on the troop training ground—help came too late for many of the liberated prisoners: in the first 12 weeks after liberation, more than 13,000 prisoners died as a result of the effects of their imprisonment in Bergen-Belsen. The total number of victims in this concentration camp is estimated at 50,000.

That the SS was able to destroy almost all the files of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp before the camp was liberated has made it difficult to determine statistical and biographical information not only on the prisoners but also on the SS personnel in the camp.

As in other concentration camps, there was a high fluctuation of SS personnel in Bergen-Belsen. It is known that there were 435 men and 45 women SS personnel. Most of them were transferred to Bergen-Belsen in two waves: one from the Wewelsburg-Niederhagen concentration camp with the first commandant at Bergen-Belsen, Adolf Haas, when the camp was established, and the second as so-called accompanying personnel (Begleitpersonal) with the evacuation transports...
Post-liberation view of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, April-May 1945.

USHMM WS #74356, courtesy of NARA

from concentration camps near the front in the East, some only a few days before Bergen-Belsen was liberated. Female SS personnel in Bergen-Belsen, unlike its subcamps, were only deployed with the arrival of female prisoners from Auschwitz in the winter of 1944–1945.

The specific requirements of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen through a local cease-fire enabled the majority of the SS personnel to withdraw before the camp was taken over by the British Army.

Only around 50 SS men and 20 to 30 SS women remained behind in Bergen-Belsen. They were arrested by the British shortly after the camp was liberated. In the autumn of 1945, 21 of these SS men and 16 of the SS women as well as 11 prisoner-functionaries were tried by a British Military Court in Lüneburg. The commandant Josef Kramer was also tried. Those SS personnel who escaped capture by leaving the camp before it was liberated were not systematically pursued by the British Military government.

As some of the accused had been based in the Auschwitz concentration and death camp, they were tried in Lüneburg for crimes committed there. The Lüneburg “Belsen Trial” is not only one of the earliest war crimes trials but is in fact the first Auschwitz trial.

The court delivered its verdict on November 17, 1945: 11 accused were sentenced to death, 19 received prison terms, and 14 were acquitted. The death sentences were carried out in the middle of December 1945 in Hameln.

In May 1946, a second “Belsen Trial” took place in Celle; 10 defendants were tried, who in the fall of 1945 either were still not situated in British custody or were actually incapable of trial due to illness. Apart from terms of imprisonment, the court issued more death sentences: 4 of the accused were hanged in Hameln in October 1946.


Thomas Rahe trans. Stephen Pallavicini

**NOTE**


**VOLUME I: PART A**
BOMLITZ [AKA BENEFELD]

The village of Bomlitz is located about 25 kilometers (15.5 miles) northwest of Bergen-Belsen, in the rural district of Fallingbostel. The Bergen-Belsen subcamp was in the part of the village called Benefeld, on the so-called Sandberg. For this reason, apart from the common name Bomlitz, this outside detail is also known by the name Benefeld.

Even before 1939, the firm EIBIA & Wolff, Ltd., had established an explosives factory in Bomlitz. This plant consisted of numerous buildings spread across a large wooded area and had its own electric railway for the transport of goods. During the war, EIBIA, including all its factories, became the largest producer of gunpowder in the German Reich, in good part due to the work of thousands of forced laborers.

Source materials on this subcamp are not readily available. However, in the 1979 International Tracing Service (ITS) list of concentration camps and their outside details under the Reichsführer-SS, it is still true that Bomlitz, like the two other Bergen-Belsen subcamps, Hambühren and Unterlüß, is one of those detachments “for which it was impossible to find out to which concentration camp they reported.”

Since 1979, Bomlitz’s link to the Bergen-Belsen main camp has been confirmed. A first hint was given in the 1950 ITS “Catalogue of Camps and Prisons,” in which Bomlitz is named as a Bergen-Belsen detachment. The source for this information came from former inmates. In addition, a survey made by the district of Fallingbostel in 1945 on the use of forced laborers during the war mentions the EIBIA, Ltd., Benefeld. In the survey, “KZ [Konzentrationslager] Belsen” is indicated as the “main labor detail responsible” for prisoners deployed to Bomlitz.
On September 3, 1944, 600 Jewish women from Poland arrived in Bomlitz from Auschwitz. They were accommodated in wooden barracks with sanitary facilities, and each of them had a place to sleep with a woolen blanket. The camp was surrounded by a high electric fence. Zipora Posluszný-Finkelstein writes about the living conditions: “We arrived in a camp called Bomlitz, where we worked in an arms factory. Compared to Auschwitz, the living conditions at Bomlitz were like paradise. Of course the work was hard, but the cleanliness and the overall living conditions relieved us from the nightmare of Birkenau.”

Only a few, short statements from the prisoners exist that discuss the nature of the forced labor: “In July 1944, I was sent on to Auschwitz, where I stayed for only a short time, until I was transferred to Bomlitz near Hannover. There I worked in an arms factory with ‘wet powder.’” The wet powder was a liquid explosive that the plant produced along with other explosives. In addition to the work inside the factory, the prisoners were deployed outside, for example, laying tracks for the factory railway.

The summary of an interview with one Mrs. K., a saleswoman in the factory canteen, exemplifies how the German population perceived the female prisoners in Bomlitz: “Mrs. K. reported that every morning she could observe from her place of work about two hundred Jewish girls and women marching through Bomlitz in formation. The plant manager, however, forbade her after a few days to look at the Jewish women anymore.”

Some women arrived a little later in Bomlitz, directly from Bergen-Belsen. One of these women, Olga Bergmann, was brought from the Łódź ghetto, via Auschwitz, to the so-called tent camp (Zeitlager) in Bergen-Belsen, where she worked in the kitchen:

Bergen-Belsen was halfway bearable. There we could rest and did not work. It was a rather beautiful autumn, and the food was not very bad either. One day I was selected to work in a kitchen where I definitely did not want to go to, because I did not want to be separated from my fellow sufferers. But I was told to do so, and the soldier who had chosen me remarked: “My wife was liberated from Russia, way back when, and now I want to do something for someone.” So I went to Bomlitz, in the district of Fallingbostel, where there was a gunpowder factory. It did not take long until I had to leave Bomlitz again, because after about four weeks, it was bombed terribly, and I had to return to Bergen-Belsen.

I believe that the time in Bomlitz was actually fairly good for me, because I lived with eighteen girls in one room, who all looked very bad, and I brought them as much as I could from the kitchen. They claimed that this helped them a lot to recover. After four weeks, we returned to Bergen-Belsen. There, I was selected once again, and went to Torgau on the Elbe river to a weapons factory called “Elsing” [sic], which belonged to the “Basag” [sic] firm.

Apparently, representatives of the firm EIBIA & Wolff picked out female prisoners in Bergen-Belsen to do work in their factories.

On October 15, 1944, all of the female prisoners in Bomlitz were sent to the Bergen-Belsen tent camp, which most of them entered for the first time. With that, the Bomlitz sub-camp was dissolved after existing for only six weeks. One can only speculate over the reasons for the camp’s closure: perhaps the owners—the Wolff family—did not want to have a concentration camp in the village.

The management of the EIBIA firm never had to stand trial for its deployment of female camp prisoners from Poland. It is true that a report to the British Judge Advocate General of the Second Army reveals that the six directors of EIBIA were kept in custody for a short period of time. It seems, however, that the British Military government did not investigate further.

The EIBIA plant factory buildings were disassembled or otherwise made unusable.

Information about the camp commander and other SS personnel is unavailable. However, Esther Winder mentions in a short report that the SS personnel consisted of men as well as women.

**SOURCES**


No significant collection of documents on this camp exists. Most of the known published or unpublished sources on the Bomlitz subcamp are available at NHStA-H, YV, and PRO London (WO 309/463 War Crimes). Additional testimonies may be found in Mordekhai Tsanin, ed., So geschah es: Zeugnissblätter Überlebender des KZ Bergen-Belsen, trans. from the Hebrew by Gerda Steinfeld, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv, 1995); and in Raimond Reiter, Frauenalltag im Zweiten Weltkrieg in Niedersachsen: Interviews mit Zeuginnen (Hanover, 1999).
The Hambühren-Ovelgönne subcamp was located about 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) south of Bergen-Belsen in the village Ovelgönne, a part of the Hambühren municipality. The subcamp was a little off the track in a wooded area and was also known as Waldeslust.

The first transport probably arrived in Hambühren on August 23, 1944, with 400 Jewish, predominantly Polish women. The women and girls were from the Lodz ghetto and had spent a few days in Auschwitz before being sent to Hambühren. The transport comprised altogether probably about 1,400 women, most of whom were brought to Bergen-Belsen, or to the Unterlüss subcamp, while the remaining 400 went directly to Hambühren. According to Estera Brunstein: "We came to a labour camp in Germany.... We came and soon found out that we were near Hanover in a small village, which was called Hambühren-Waldeslust. ‘Waldeslust’ means ‘joys of the forest’ or ‘lust of the forest.’ And there were four hundred of us placed in barracks." The camp, which was fenced in with several layers of barbed wire, consisted of eight wooden barracks and two stone houses. Isabelle Choko, at the time 16 years old, describes the lodgings in her memoirs as follows: "We arrive in a forest. We walk a bit and discover a clearing with wooden barracks. We are divided up. There is an SS commander there. About forty women are sent to each room, and my mother and I enter our new ‘home.’ There were bunk beds, but nonetheless beds! They each have a straw mattress and a blanket. There is a stove in the middle of the room, a true luxury."

The sanitary facilities were less "luxurious": there were no enclosed latrines but mere holes in the ground behind the barracks, where the women had to relieve themselves, even in the winter cold.

As far as the circumstances permitted, the Jewish women tried to observe their religion: "I only can tell you from the barrack I was in. Every Friday we tried to do Shabbat prayer, if we were not caught."

The Bergen-Belsen subcamp was not the only camp in Hambühren-Ovelgönne. There were labor camps with civilian workers, prisoners of war, and other forced laborers from West and East Europe. These people worked for the Haupt-Munitionsanstalt (main armament factories) of the Luftwaffe or for the Wintershall AG, in oil drilling and mining potash.

In the spring of 1944, the Ministry of Armaments and War Production planned to create a manufacturing plant for the firm Focke-Wulf Flugzeugbau, Ltd., in Wintershall’s potash mine "Prinz Adalbert," which would be safe from air attacks. This plan, code-named "Hirsch" (stag), was never realized but still resulted in an increased deployment of forced laborers and female camp prisoners in Hambühren.

Thus, some of the female prisoners had to work underground to prepare the potash mine for the aircraft factory. The work must have been exhausting because of the high temperatures in the mine, even in winter. SS-Oberscharführer Fritz Branders supervised the women during their work in the mine and often beat them. In 1945, the Hungarian sisters Irán and Edith Grünberger gave an account of a typical day:

The work was done in two shifts. We were part of the night shift. This happened at the request of the camp leader (Lagerführer), because the workers on the night shift were paid more. However, we never saw any of these wages. We got soup in the morning and at midday, and in the evening two hundred grams of bread with some sort of spread. Our working hours lasted from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. At 7:30, we were back in the camp. By the time we received our breakfast, it was 9:00 a.m. Then we were allowed to go to bed. Roll call was at noon. It lasted until 1:30 p.m., then we had lunch and we could rest until 5:00 p.m. At 5:00 p.m., we received our evening meal and then went to work.

The work here was very hard. The salt had to be loaded on small carts. The day shift carried out blasting operations in the salt mine and we had to load the salt at night. Even the Germans would have admitted that such work had never been done by women before. The air was so heavy that we almost choked.

The sisters came from Bergen-Belsen, together with a number of Jewish women from Hungary, at the beginning of December 1944. Choko remembers how horrified the
Hungarian women and girls were on their arrival at the Hambühren camp. At some point in time, a few German Jewish women were also prisoners in Hambühren.

Irma Herzfeld, then the camp elder, observed: “It was the general practice to send all sick women to Belsen in exchange for healthy women.” It is known neither how many women were “exchanged” in this way nor how many women died in Hambühren.

In addition to the work in the salt mine, the women had to carry out other duties. They had to construct barracks for the main ammunition factory, lay cables and pipes, sort pieces of coal, and probably even remove rubble caused by bombing near Hannover.

Some of the prisoners had to work for the building enterprise Hoch-Tief: “We mostly worked on the so-called Hoch-Tief railway, working on the tracks. We built this railroad line for the Germans. . . . We then had to carry stones from one side to the other.”

The forced labor of the female prisoners could not remain unnoticed by the German population. A female farmer from Ovelgönne recalled after the war: “Camp III was the Jewish camp, mainly occupied by women. They also did road work along the road to Oldau, carried stones, and shoveled sand. Some looked very good, even in their prisoners’ uniforms, others bad. . . . The Jewish women that were here worked on the Oldauer Strasse; they unloaded stones and built the foundations for barracks in the excavation.”

The warehouse administrator of the Wintershall company at the time gives an account of taking the bus to work: “Albert Köhler was with me on the bus. . . . And this street ‘Hambühren II’ was being accounted for taking the bus to work: “Albert Köhler was with me on the bus. . . . And this street ‘Hambühren II’ was being

The unanimous statements of the female witnesses from the Hambühren subcamp on Reddehase's numerous maltreatments, however, led to his conviction and execution.

**SOURCES**


No comprehensive collection of documents exists on the subcamp Hambühren. Most of the known sources are cited in the notes. PRO WO 235/154 contains in addition to several affidavits also a few transcripts of testimonies during the trial. Among the British investigation files of the War Crimes Investigation Teams there are further statements in WO 309/433 and WO 309/1698. There is a testimony by Estera Brunstein available at IWM. Some of the testimonies, as well as sources on the history of companies in the area of Hambühren that were involved in the forced labor, are found in Annette Wienecke, “Besondere Vorkommnisse nicht bekannt”: Zwangarbeit in unterirdischen Rüstungsbetrieben. Wie ein Heidedorf kriegswichtig wurde (Bonn: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1996), pp. 114, 155. A sketch of the camp is also published herein. Additional documentation is available in Rainer Schüle, Unruhige Zeiten: Erlebnisberichte aus dem Landkreis Celle 1945–1949 (Münch: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1990).

Bernd Horstmann
trans. Stephen Pallavicini

**NOTES**

1. Interview with Estera Brunstein, IWM, London, Archive of Sound Records, No. 9122/5, Reel 4.
2. Memoirs by Isabelle Choko, “Ma première vie” (cited in German translation), 34, BB, Lohheide.
3. Letter by Irma Freudenreich-Herzfeld, January 17, 1999, BB.
4. Ibid.
5. Proceedings by Irán and Edith Grünberger, recorded on August 21, 1945, in Budapest (in Hungarian, cited from the German translation), YV, Jerusalem, No. 015/2825.
6. Deposition of Irma Herzfeld, 6/7/1945, Exhibit 100, PRO WO 309/1697, No. 1 War Crimes Investigation Team.
7. Sworn statement by Bela Gutman, October 31, 1954, in Tel Aviv BB IRG A1 E.E. Áfik; Interview with Estera Brunstein, IWM; letter by Fay Leder, November 16, 1994, BB.

10. Interview with Paul Schang in Celle, BB, Audio 5.


**UNTERLÜSS [AKA LAGER TANNENBERG OR ALTENSOETHRIETH]**

The firm Rheinmetall-Borsig AG, one of the most important German arms and ammunition producers during the war, had already established a big ammunition factory in Unterlüß, before 1939. In 1944, several camps existed in this area, in which so-called foreign workers (Fremdarbeiter), prisoners of war (POWs), and other forced laborers of various nationalities lived.

The Tannenberg camp, where Italian military internees were housed until the middle of the year, was located in the Altensothrieth section of the municipality of Unterlüß. At this camp, about 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, approximately 400 to 800 Jewish women and girls arrived with a first transport from Auschwitz toward the end of August 1944. Nelly Hronsky and her two sisters were part of this transport. She writes in a letter: "After 2–3 days travel in cattle wagons from Auschwitz we arrived somewhere and marched to the camp. We had no idea where we are. Our transport had about 800 women, better said young girls and very few women. The camp was only for women and all of us were Jews. As far as I can remember, the nationalities were a group of Polish girls; very few from Yugoslavia and our group from Hungary."

Besides these aforementioned nationalities, there were also a few Czech and Romanian women in Unterlüß. Nelly Hronsky’s sister, Ilana, describes the camp in a letter:

The camp was located deep in the woods. As we entered the gate, on our right was a long wooden structure which housed the kitchen. Further up, on the same side where the kitchen was located, was the building of the German Headquarters.

Upon entering the gate, on our left was a fence which divided the part I have described from the barracks of the inmates. There were three barracks called block I, block II and block III. Inside there were bunkbeds and hundreds of us were placed in each of the barracks. I believe block II housed the tiny infirmary which was used only for minor services, such as getting bandages for injuries. Serious health problems were not reported. If they became obvious, the involved persons were taken away and never heard from again. Only after the war did we find out the fate of these girls—they all perished in Bergen-Belsen.

As a rule, the women worked from Monday to Saturday, sometimes also on Sundays. They rose at 5:00 A.M. and received a little bread with some sort of spread before the roll call took place. They then marched, even in the wintry cold, in their convict’s garb and wooden shoes to the labor details, which were up to 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) away. Here they had to build roads, remove rubble, lay rails, or fell trees. In the village of Neulüss they had to build the foundations for a new factory building. Rosalyn Gross Haber recalls: “The first thing we did was to dig and build bunkers near the ammunition factory. The bitter cold was always eating at our flesh. When the bunkers were all built, the next job was to work at the ammunition factory on the night shift.”

A large number of the women had to work in the ammunition factory from 8:00 P.M. to 4:00 A.M. In an interview with seven Hungarian survivors from Unterlüß, Ricsy Sommer speaks about the factory work:

**R.S.** Everybody tried to get out from the ammunition factory, because we filling these schrapnels [sic] . . . they were on a running band and filling it with this hot phosphor.

**Interviewer:** An assembly line?

**R.S.** Yes, an assembly line. We turned red and yellow and orange, whatever it was. But it must have been such a dangerous work, that even the Germans . . . they fed us and have a cup of milk every day.

The contact with the poisonous substances and the inhalation of the unhealthy vapors destroyed their health—and of course a glass of milk was not able to cure them.

German citizens from Unterlüß were well aware of the female prisoners. In 1948, two teachers commented on the miserable appearance of the women with their shaved heads during their daily march to work.

In their free time and on Sundays, the women washed themselves and patched their clothes. Hronsky remembers: “In the evenings we would concentrate on trying to keep ourselves clean. The washrooms had cold water only, but we had access to them and we took advantage of it. We were too exhausted to socialize or engage in any activities. Sometimes on Sundays we would gather in the corner of one of the barracks, sing songs we used to know at ‘home,’ recite poetry and, in general, just to keep our spirits and each other’s from sagging.”

Haber relates that the Hungarian women composed a song about one of the SS women.

As far as the circumstances permitted, the Jewish women tried to observe the religious holidays. Sarah Berkowitz recalls that a few of them fasted during Yom Kippur in 1944. Together with other women in her barrack, Dina Kraus secretly celebrated Seder and said the Haggadah prayer in late March 1945. She had previously written them down from memory in the camp. For a while, Berkowitz kept a kind of...
There are no precise records on how many transports arrived at or departed from the camp and when these transports took place. The reminiscences of Berkowitz and Regina Goshen indicate that a second transport arrived here by September 1944. A report by Rheinmetall-Borsig refers to the “use of eight hundred Jewish women” in September 1944. In the period from October to November, the number was probably around 900 women. It is at least certain that in January 1945, 200 women were sick and therefore no longer able to work were brought to Bergen-Belsen in completely frozen freight cars. There must have been other losses during the winter, as one of the few surviving documents from the commandant’s headquarters at Bergen-Belsen shows that in late February 1945 there were 517 female prisoners still in the Unterlüss subcamp.

During an air raid by Allied troops on the Rheinmetall-Borsig grounds, on April 4, 1945, the ammunition factory was completely destroyed. The village of Unterlüss was hit as well. The SS barred the camp shut, and with that, the deployment of the women came to an end.

On the morning of April 13, 1945, the SS personnel ran from the approaching British troops. When the prisoners became aware of their flight, they seized the food that was in the kitchen. Some women even left the camp. Their freedom was brief, since after a few hours armed German civilians of the Volkssturm (German home guard) arrived and brought the women on trucks to Bergen-Belsen. “Of the original group of 800 out of Auschwitz, perhaps 500 were left alive. The 300 who died, died in Belsen, not Unterlüss.”

Of the 3 female and 18 male SS privates who were responsible for the camp, some were identified through British investigations. One of the block elders in Unterlüss, Irene Glück, describes the guards. According to her, the “relatively harmless” camp commandant (Lagerkommandant), SS-Hauptsturmführer Friedrich Diercks, was not interested in the camp activities. The real power was held by the SS-Hauptsturmführer Rudolf Wandt, except for a three-month break from November 1944 to January 1945. During his absence, the SS-Unterscharführer Hans Stecker, supported by the SS female guard Susanne Hille, implemented more brutal treatment of the prisoners. The prisoners feared her as “the Brown one” (or Nazi). This statement was confirmed by the SS guard private Franz Kalitkowksi, who was not indicted at the Belsen Trial himself; he further blamed the commander of Bergen-Belsen, Joseph Kramer, for all the crimes.

None of the wanted SS staff from the Unterlüss subcamp were brought to trial.


Bernd Horstmann
trans. Stephen Pallavicini

---

**NOTES**

2. Letter by Ilana Hronsky, February 7, 1995, BB (in this letter she also drew a sketch of the camp).
3. Letter by Rosalyn Gross Haber, November 1994, BB.


13. Overview on number and deployment of female prisoners in the Bergen-Belsen holding camp, March 15, 1945, NIOD, C [II] 09/0.3.11.


17. Overview on number and deployment of female prisoners in the Bergen-Belsen holding camp, March 15, 1945, NIOD.

18. Deposition of Irene Glück, November 8, 1945, PRO, WO 309/425 KZ Bergen-Belsen, General Correspondence (see herein also the Wanted Repts. for H. Stecker, R. Wandt, F. Diercks, and S. Hille); Rept. Personalities at Concentration Camps at Belsen and Unterlüß, undated, PRO WO 309/1588, Correspondence re Second Belsen Trial.