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IN THE ANTECHAMBER TO EXTERMINATION: THE FATE OF POLISH AND JEWISH CONVICTS AND “NIGHT AND FOG PRISONERS” IN THE PENITENTIARY SUBCAMP BLACHOWNIA ŚLĄSKA (BLECHHAMMER) IN 1942–1945

PRZEDSIONEK WYNISZCZENIA: LOS POLSKICH I ŻYDOWSKICH SKAZAŃCÓW ORAZ „WIEŻNIÓW NOCY I MGŁY” W PODOBOZIE WIEZIENNYM W BLACHOWNI ŚLĄSKIEJ (BLECHHAMMER) W LATACH 1942–1945

ABSTRACT: The paper examines for the first time the role played by a penitentiary subcamp, that was set up in Blachownia Śląska (Blechhammer) by the penitentiary in Strzelce Opolskie (Gross Strehlitz) in 1942, as part of the Nazis’ plans to “Germanize” the annexed Silesian territories and to eliminate “racial” and political opponents.

KEYWORDS: Nazi penitentiary subcamps; work education camps; anti-Polish and anti-Jewish policies in Silesia; extermination through labor; “Night and Fog prisoners.”

Introduction

The paper explores the scarcely researched field of penitentiary subcamps in the Nazi period. The example of a subcamp established in Upper Silesia by the penitentiary of Strzelce Opolskie (Gross Strehlitz) in Blachownia Śląska (Blechhammer) in 1942 illustrates the crucial role played by such entities in the persecution of political and “racial” enemies by Nazis. It argues that there was an indelible link between detaining Upper Silesians, who had been classified as “Poles,” in penitentiary subcamps for petty infractions and “Germanization” efforts by the

Nazi regime intended to reclaim the ethnically diverse region. The penitentiary subcamp in Blachownia Śląska had special functions in this respect. In addition to supplying a synthetic fuel plant, the *Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke* (OHW), with laborers, it was used as a substitute prison space. In conjunction with a work education camp (*Arbeitserziehungslager* – AEL) on the same site, it also facilitated the transfer of Polish and Jewish convicts to Auschwitz to be “exterminated through labor.” Resistance fighters from Western Europe arrested under the so-called “Night and Fog (*Nacht und Nebel* – NN)” decree were also held there while awaiting trial. During the evacuation of the camp in January 1945, hundreds of these prisoners were massacred, as superior orders to take them to the Rogoźnica (Gross-Rosen) concentration camp had not been carried out in time. The paper investigates these mass killings for the first time. By analyzing a specific subcamp, it seeks to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the system of penitentiary subcamps in the annexed territories, and their role in the anti-Polish and anti-Jewish policies, as well as in the elimination of political prisoners.

Polish historians already included the penitentiary subcamp at Blachownia Śląska in their studies on Nazi crimes from the 1960s.¹ In more recent works with a general focus on the Nazi judicial system and penal institutions, individual penitentiary subcamps or the fate of Jewish convicts were barely touched upon.² The detention of “NN prisoners” in Silesian penitentiary subcamps remains a research gap.³ Similarly, the transfer of Polish convicts to concentration camps via AELs has not been addressed by scholars.⁴ Nonetheless, studies on evacuation

¹ Stanisław Łukowski, *Zbrodnie hitlerowskie w Łambinowicach i Sławięcicach na Opolszczyźnie w latach 1939–1945*, Katowice 1965; *idem*, *Zbrodnie hitlerowskie na Śląsku opolskim w latach 1939–1945*, Wrocław 1978; *Obozy hitlerowskie na ziemiach polskich 1939–1945. Informator encyklopedyczny*, red. Czesław Pilichowski *et al.*, Warszawa 1979.

² Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany*, New Haven 2004; Maximilian Becker, *Mitstreiter im Volkstumskampf: Deutsche Justiz in den eingegliederten Ostgebieten, 1939–1945*, Munich 2014; Sarah Schädler, „Justizkrise“ und „Justizreform“ im Nationalsozialismus: das Reichsjustizministerium unter Reichsjustizminister Thierack, 1942–1945, Tübingen 2009; Helmut Kramer, *Der Beitrag der Juristen zum Massenmord an Strafgefangenen und die strafrechtliche Ahndung nach 1945*, „Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland“, vol. 11 (*Ausgegrenzt: „Asoziale“ und „Kriminelle“ im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem*), Hamburg 2009, pp. 43–59.

³ Lothar Gruchmann, *Nacht- und Nebeljustiz: Die Mitwirkung der deutschen Strafgerichte an der Bekämpfung des Widerstandes in den besetzten westeuropäischen Ländern, 1942–1944*, „Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte“, 29 (1981), pp. 342–396; Kai Cornelius, *Vom spurlosen Verschwindenlassen zur Benachrichtigungspflicht bei Festnahmen*, Berlin 2006.

⁴ Gabriele Lotfi, *KZ der Gestapo: Arbeitserziehungslager im Dritten Reich*, Stuttgart–Munich: 2000; Andrea Tech, *Arbeitserziehungslager in Nordwestdeutschland, 1940–1945*, Göttingen 2003;

marches examined mass killings of political prisoners detained in penal institutions and AELs.⁵

The paper utilizes contemporaneous documents, such as correspondences between penitentiaries and the Ministry of Justice, and transport lists of prisoners.⁶ Details regarding the contract between the penitentiary of Strzelce Opolskie and the OHW, and the ensuing treatment of the convicts in the subcamp were corroborated by company files. These files equally permitted insight into the establishment of the AEL in Blachownia Śląska, which later operated a transit camp for Polish convicts.⁷ Judicial reports from trials and pre-trial investigations between 1945 and 1976 provided evidence on the perpetrators' identities and their crimes.⁸ Survivor testimony by former Polish and Jewish convicts and "NN prisoners" conveyed the harsh realities of the camp, and outlined the mass killings during the evacuation march. These reports were complemented by the perspective of outsider witnesses, like Jewish concentration camp inmates and British prisoners of war.⁹

Wolfgang Franz Werner, „Bleib übrig“: *Deutsche Arbeiter in der nationalsozialistischen Kriegswirtschaft*, Düsseldorf 1983.

⁵ Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide*, Cambridge–London 2011; Sven Keller, *Volksgemeinschaft am Ende: Gesellschaft und Gewalt, 1944–1945*, Munich 2013.

⁶ International Tracing Service (ITS) 9.7.4. 1.2.2.0. 6/0198, Index Record of Prisoners transferred to Blechhammer Prison Camp, Measures for Evacuations of Penal Institutions; Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStAPK) XVII. HA P 371 A, Verzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen von Esterwegen.

⁷ Bundesarchiv (BArch) R 9348/45, 57, 59, 112, Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG Blechhammer.

⁸ Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (AIPN), IPN GK 164/2282, Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer [Ewakuacja Justizstrafgefangenenlager Blechhammer]; British National Archives Kew (NA) WO 309/978, War Crimes Group; BArchB 162/18172, Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer; Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv (HHStAW) Abt. 461, Nr. 37638, Frankfurter Auschwitzprozess; Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz (LHA K) 584,000, Nr. 1735 Verfahren 9Js 19/74, Staatsanwaltschaft Koblenz; Staatsarchiv Würzburg (StAWü) 33–37, Ermittlungsakten; 2012–009, Tötungsdelikte im Zwangsarbeitslager Blechhammer.

⁹ Archives Nationales Paris, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, (AN) dossier AU–16/2 736 MI 3, Blechhammer Kommandos: rapports, témoignages, listes du déportés; The Polish Research Institute Lund (PIŻ); The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University (FVA); Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, 2011, VHA online, accessed via the University of Vienna (VHA); Hans-Werner Wollenberg, „...und der Alltag wurde zum Alptraum“: *Autobiographischer Bericht eines jüdischen Arztes über NS-Zwangsarbeitslager in Schlesien (1942–1945)*, ed. Manfred Brusten, Pfaffenweiler 1992; Imperial War Museum London (IWM) 10/6/1, Private Papers; Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, holocaust-, en genocidestudies (NIOD) 250d, Kampen en gevangenschap.

The establishment of the penitentiary subcamp at Blachownia Śląska

The OHW was meant to become one of the largest synthetic fuel facilities in the Third Reich. Construction works began in summer 1939. The location in Blachownia Śląska, then a German part of Upper Silesia, was chosen for ideological reasons to increase the number of Germans in the region through industrialization. Upper Silesia had a distinct borderland population, known as “Upper Silesians”, with a mixed cultural background drawn from Polish and German influences alike. During the interwar period, Poland and Germany pressed Water Poles into taking on either nationality. From 1933, the Nazi regime endeavored to “Germanize” the approximately half a million Watered-down Poles in the western parts of Upper Silesia, which belonged to Reich Germany since the plebiscite of 1921. This notwithstanding, the Nazis perceived the Watered-down Poles as potential traitors, due to their “fluid” national identity.

In the wake of the invasion of Poland, the formerly Polish parts of Silesia along with newly annexed territories in the Cracow and Kielce districts, as well as Biała, Żywiec, Sosnowiec, Będzin, and Blachownia, were incorporated into the Reich. It was intended to declare another 1.2 million Watered-down Poles living in this area as “Germans,” while up to five million Poles considered unsuitable for “Germanization” were to be deported to western Upper Silesia, or Reich territory. In Upper Silesia, the introduction of a “German National List” (*Deutsche Volksliste*) in March 1941 classified 80% of the population as Germans, or ethnic Germans, by applying a very flexible definition of alleged “Germanness.” Its four categories ranged from “Reich Germans” to “political Poles”.¹⁰ Those not on the list, or in the fourth category, were subjected to the anti-Polish decrees (*Polenerlasse*) Hermann Göring had issued in spring 1940. They received significantly lower wages and food allocations and had to pay a special tax (*Polenabgabe*).¹¹ Members of this

¹⁰ Tooley T. Hunt, *National Identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the Eastern Border, 1918–1922*, Lincoln–London 1997, p. 14; Gerhard Wolf, *Volk trumps Race: The Deutsche Volksliste in Annexed Poland*, [in:] *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany*, eds. David O. Pendas, Mark Roseman, Richard F. Wetzell, Cambridge–New York 2017, pp. 431–454, here pp. 438–445; Adam Dziurok, *Zwischen den Ethnien: Die Oberschlesier in den Jahren 1939–1941*, [in:] *Genesis des Genozids: Polen 1939–1941*, hrsg. von Klaus–Michael Mallmann, Bogdan Musial, Darmstadt 2004, pp. 221–233, here pp. 221–225.

¹¹ Czesław Madajczyk, *Die Okkupationspolitik Nazideutschlands in Polen, 1939–1945*, Cologne 1988, p. 264; Ulrich Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter: Politik und Praxis des „Ausländer-Einsatzes“ in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches*, Berlin–Bonn 1985, p. 92; Archiwum Państwowego

discriminated group were often arrested on trumped-up charges, resulting in long (up to several years) detention in penal institutions or concentration camps. The Ministry of Justice even instructed German judges in the annexed territories and the General Government to hand down biased, “merciless” verdicts on Jews and Poles. The Ministry reiterated that Nazi ideology, with its intrinsic assumption of German superiority, should overrule existing laws.¹²

While the non-Jewish population of Silesia was screened for their suitability to become “Germans,” the Nazis planned to get rid of the approximately 120 thousand Jews resident in the annexed territories from the outset. They were concentrated in ghettos and most of them, except for 25 thousand able-bodied women and men temporarily left alive in labor camps, were murdered in Auschwitz between 1942 and 1943.¹³ Imprisonment in judicial institutions and their subcamps only affected a small fraction of those who had been arrested in the ghettos for criminalized acts, like trafficking food.

The war-related conscription of German workers to the front hampered the Nazis’ efforts to bring more Germans into Upper Silesia, and plants like the OHW increasingly relied on foreign and forced labor. Consequently, numerous barrack camps for workers from Axis States and Nazi-occupied territories, Poles and prisoners of war were established in the surroundings of the OHW factory. An AEL for the temporary punishment of “disobedient” foreign laborers followed in 1942. Blachownia Śląska is most widely known for the forced labor camp for Jews that was set up in March 1942 by the Special Commissioner for the Deployment of Foreign Laborers in Silesia SS *Brigadeführer* Albrecht Schmelt. This camp was taken over by Auschwitz in April 1944 and became its second largest subcamp.¹⁴ The penitentiary subcamp was already established in January 1942 and was not

Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu, Oświadczenia f. 48, Ośw./Kasprzak/1012, No. 198695, testimony of Michał Kasprzak, June 2, 1965.

¹² Yad Vashem Archives M. 54, item 4432316, Amt Krakau, Richter zur Justizreform, fragments of an article on judicial reforms by a German judge, name and date unknown.

¹³ Sybille Steinbacher, *East Upper Silesia*, [in:] *The Greater German Reich and the Jews: Nazi Persecution in the Annexed Territories, 1935–1945*, eds. Wolf Gruner, Jürgen Osterloh, New York–Oxford 2015, pp. 239–266; Landesarchiv Münster Nr. 4883 Verfahren gegen Schmelt, Interrogation of Johannes Hassebroek, June 11, 1965.

¹⁴ Franciszek Piper, *Das Nebenlager Blechhammer*, „Hefte von Auschwitz”, 10 (1967), pp. 19–39; Alfred Konieczny, *Organizacja Schmelt i jej obozy pracy dla Żydów na Śląsku w latach 1940–1944*, Wrocław 1992.

connected to the camp for Jews. Penitentiary prisoners represented about 9% of the plant's total workforce, which averaged 20 thousand.¹⁵

The Nazi regime propagated the commercial use of prison labor to boost national rearmament from the mid-1930s. With the outbreak of war, the exploitation of convicts was intensified. Like the concentration camps, penitentiaries began to set up subcamps adjacent to industrial sites. By 1941, 20% of the total prisoner population in Germany were held in outside detachments.¹⁶ Following the implementation of German jurisdiction in the annexed Polish territories in May 1940, Poles who had arbitrarily been arrested by the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei* – Sipo) for alleged or actual resistance activities in the months before, were handed over to judicial institutions from police custody. As a result, the prisons in the annexed territories were massively overcrowded, and the Ministry of Justice had the Polish convicts transferred to penitentiaries in the Reich and their proliferating network of subcamps.¹⁷

The penitentiary of Strzelce Opolskie, situated in the part of Upper Silesia that had belonged to the German Reich in the interwar period, thus made plans for establishing a new subcamp in Blachownia Śląska to provide the OHW with up to a thousand of prison laborers of “Polish ethnicity” (*polnischen Volkstums*). On January 27, 1942, the plant's director, Karl Riedmüller, signed the respective contract with the Attorney General of Katowice, Dr. Paul Steimer, who was represented by the warden of the penitentiary in Strzelce Opolskie, Bachmair. The subcamp was supervised by Bachmair and administrated by judicial chief inspector Thesinga and his deputy Lange.¹⁸ It was agreed to transfer the first 500 convicts by April 1, 1942. Yet, a mere 314 were accounted for by the OHW at the end of May.¹⁹ Interestingly, at least 250 of these prisoners stemmed from the penitentiary of Sieradz (Schieratz). They arrived in three different transports between March and

¹⁵ BArch Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG Blechhammer, R 9348/23, Strength Reports, 1942–1944.

¹⁶ Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Gefangen unter Hitler: Justizterror und Strafvollzug im NS-Staat*, transl. Klaus-Dieter Schmidt, Munich 2006, revised translation, pp. 247–249, 270–274, 298.

¹⁷ Martin Broszat, *Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik, 1939–1945*, Frankfurt/Main–Hamburg 1961, pp. 128–131; Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons*, p. 300.

¹⁸ BArch R 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942; BArch B 162/18172, Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, October 9, 1973; Becker, *Mitstreiter*, pp. 73, 81. The first names of Bachmair, Thesinga, and Lange were not corroborated.

¹⁹ BArch R 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942; BArch R 9348/23 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Strength Reports, March–June 1942.

April 1942.²⁰ The apparent failure of the penitentiary in Strzelce Opolskie to provide the envisaged number of prisoners reflects a common dilemma of penitentiaries at the time. As the annexed territories gained in economic importance, their penal institutions began to soak up substantial quantities of laborers themselves, while less convicted Poles were transferred to the Reich.²¹ In June 1942, further transports from penitentiaries in the annexed territories, such as Płock (Masovian Voivodeship), arrived, and the inmate population rose to about 900.²²

Only a small fraction of the Polish convicts had committed genuine crimes, such as burglary, murder or assault, and resistance fighters were equally rare. Most convictions were based on violations of the anti-Polish legislation, which criminalized acts not normally considered as offenses. Most prisoners had been sentenced for attempting to obtain extra food in breach of the Nazi regulations for the war economy (*Kriegswirtschaftsverordnung*) that had been introduced in late 1939 to ration goods. Bolesław Meresiński, for example, was arrested by the Gestapo for illicit consumption of pork meat. He was sent to Blachownia Śląska from Strzelce Opolskie in March 1943.²³

The Criminal Law Decree for Poles and Jews of December 1941 and the Prison Regulations for Poles (*Polenvollzugsordnung*) stipulated that Polish nationals, including all Jews having resided in Poland before 1939, should be sentenced to punishment camp (*Straflager*) in penitentiaries. These enactments subjected them to significantly harsher conditions than German prisoners in regular penal institutions. Sieradz was one of three penitentiaries designated to detain male Jewish convicts, besides to Rawicz (Rawitsch) and Wronki (Wronke).²⁴ Sieradz had an additional function as a ghetto for Jews from the Warthegau (Kraj Warty), who were about to be deported to the Łódź (Lodz/Litzmannstadt) ghetto, or Auschwitz. While waiting for their deportation, they were often brutally maltreated.²⁵

²⁰ ITS9.7.4., Doc. IDs 11410758–11410766, Index Record of Prisoners transferred to Blechhammer Prison Camp.

²¹ Becker, *Mitstreiter*, p. 236.

²² PIŻ, witness testimony no. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

²³ ITS 9.7.4.Doc. IDs 11410758–11410766, Index Record of Prisoners transferred to Blechhammer Prison Camp; AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282, Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, Statement of Meresiński, Bolesław, May 1945.

²⁴ Becker, *Mitstreiter*, pp. 220–223.

²⁵ *Todesurteile sowjetischer Militärtribunale gegen Deutsche (1944–1947): Eine historisch-biographische Studie*, eds. Andreas Weigelt *et al.*, Göttingen 2015, pp. 254–255; VHA interview 1753, Kort, Fred.

At least four Jewish convicts were sent to Blachownia Śląska from Sieradz with the transports of non-Jewish Poles of March 18 and April 23, 1942. Altogether, a minimum of six Jews were held in the Blachownia Śląska subcamp. They had been arrested for crimes related to the desperate food situation in the ghettos, like theft and trafficking.²⁶ As Jan Grabowski pointed out, the criminalization of activities necessary to cover essential needs in the ghettos led to the boundaries of criminality becoming blurred.²⁷ Jewish convicts were not visibly marked and their treatment did not differ from that of non-Jews in penitentiaries until late 1942. Owing to their comparatively small numbers, they were often the only Jews among non-Jewish Poles.²⁸

The Blachownia Śląska subcamp was situated in a woodland area in about half a mile distance to the plant. It comprised up to 15 barracks; two thereof housed the camp leader and his staff, and another one served as an administration office. The Ministry of Justice merely provided one-third of the guards, who were largely prison warders from Bavarian penitentiaries, such as Stadelheim near Munich. Initial plans to recruit the rest of the camp personnel from the *Reichskriegerbund* (Reich Association of War Veterans) did not materialize, and the OHW plant eventually made use of a private Silesian security company (*Wach- und Schließgesellschaft*) from Bielsko-Biała (Bielitz). These men, who had been allocated to the security company by employment agencies, were typically unfit for military service with little to no experience in guarding prisoners. A two-week introductory course in the Strzelce Opolskie penitentiary was deemed sufficient to prepare them for their new tasks. By contrast to the green uniforms of the prison warders, the private guards were clad in dark blue.²⁹

²⁶ ITS 9.7.4., Doc. IDs 11410758–11410763, Index Record of Prisoners transferred to Blechhammer Prison Camp; BArch B 162/18172, Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, October 9, 1973.

²⁷ Jan Grabowski, *Jewish Criminality and Jewish Criminals in the Warsaw Ghetto*, [in:] *Lebenswelt Ghetto: Alltag und soziales Umfeld während der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*, hrsg. von Imke Hansen, Kathrin Steffen, Joachim Tauber, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 117–130, here pp. 122–129.

²⁸ VHA interview 28574, Grosman, Paul.

²⁹ BArch R 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942; BArch B 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogations of Johannes Josef Stera, October 9, 1973 and August 19, 1976; LHA K Best. 584,001, Nr. 1735 (Verfahren 9 Js 19/74) Staatsanwaltschaft Koblenz, Interrogation of Andreas K., December 17, 1973 (the archive requires names to be anonymized); AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evakuierung Justizstrafgefangenenlager Blechhammer, Interrogation of Simon Rodis before the Polish War Crimes Commission, September 18, 1946.

Living and working conditions

The prisoners of the Blachownia Śląska subcamp lived in barracks with six chambers (*Stuben*), holding 24 men each. The chambers were equipped with 12 two-tiered bunk beds. However, as the straw mattresses were infested with bedbugs, the prisoners preferred to sleep on the floor or on tables. The convicts wore the same blue and white striped uniforms all year round, without being issued warmer clothes in winter. Their heads were shaven, and they could bathe and change their underwear once every 14 days.³⁰ Since 1940, convicts received the same food allocations as concentration camp prisoners. Following the introduction of the Prison Regulations for Poles in January 1942, imprisoned Poles were only eligible for 80% of the rations distributed to the rest of the Polish population. This equaled about 50% of standard German allocations. The situation was exacerbated when potatoes began to be rationed in 1944. Many Poles were already undernourished upon their arrest due to the insufficient food allocations to the Polish population.³¹ Like in concentration camps, the convicts were handed out their bread ration for the next day on the night before, along with one liter of soup and a spoonful of margarine or sausage. Most prisoners ate their allocation of 400 grams of bread straight away and, consequently, only had some coffee before setting out to work after the morning roll call. At noon, the OHW plant distributed three-quarters of a liter of watery soup.³²

The Prison Regulations for Poles decreed that Polish convicts should work for 13 hours daily, one hour longer than their German counterparts. The Polish prisoners' workload could be increased to 14 hours as a punishment. Prison labor had a two-pronged function: on the one hand, it should support the ideologically motivated German settlement in the east, while on the other, drive the convicts to their physical limits.³³ Penitentiaries were required to charge standard wages to prevent forced laborers from becoming more attractive to entrepreneurs than German workers. The regular hourly rate for unskilled work was 0.56 *Reichsmark* (RM). However, the industrialists circumvented these rules by using reduced

³⁰ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 411, Franciszek Jeske, July 18, 1946; witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

³¹ Becker, *Mitstreiter*, p. 229.

³² PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

³³ *Polenvollzugsordnung*, January 9, 1942, printed in *Deutsche Justiz 1942: Rechtspflege und Rechtspolitik. Amtliches Blatt der deutschen Rechtspflege*, vol. 1 (52), Berlin 1942, p. 35.

output factors as a legal loophole. The reduced output factor for Polish workers was 65%, implying that entrepreneurs merely paid 65% of German standard wages. The respective factor for Polish convicts could not be established, but it is unlikely that it exceeded that of the regular Polish workforce. Moreover, the OHW plant charged the penitentiary in Strzelce Opolskie a daily allowance of 1.50 RM for board and lodging per capita. The remainder of the prisoners' earnings was seized by the penitentiary. Despite the reduced income, penitentiaries still made substantial profits from their subcamps.³⁴ At Blachownia Śląska, camp leader Thesinga and the warden of the penitentiary in Strzelce Opolskie, Bachmair, jointly managed the prisoners' work deployment. The prisoners were guarded by the camp personnel and the plant's foremen during work.³⁵

The OHW deputy director and head of the personnel office, Dr. Heinrich Karl Schlick (Karlsruhe, 1905–Mannheim, 1977), also supervised their work deployment. Schlick, the official Nazi party representative at the plant, was a key figure in monitoring the workforce regarding “nonconformist” behavior. As a “politically reliable” senior executive, he was appointed as the OHW's counterintelligence officer, and leader of the police in the OHW. He frequently briefed the nearest Gestapo branch in Opole (Oppeln) on alleged cases of “sabotage” or “espionage.” Schlick maintained close relations with camp leader Thesinga and was regularly invited to comradeship evenings with the prison warders in the subcamp. In February 1943, Schlick attended a special comradeship evening arranged by Thesinga to celebrate the inauguration of a new refectory for the German workforce, which had been decorated by penitentiary prisoners.³⁶

The convicts were mostly assigned to menial jobs on the OHW construction site, like unloading bricks or cement sacks. Chicanery and overworking were common. For example, at times, four men had to carry 11-meter-long rails, which would normally have required ten men to lift.³⁷ The contract with the penitentiary

³⁴ BArch R 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942; R 9348/57, OHW Circular on Reduced Output Factors, November 16, 1943; *Polenvollzugsordnung*, January 9, 1942, printed in *Deutsche Justiz*, p. 35; Becker, *Mitsstreiter*, p. 238.

³⁵ BArch R 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942; R 9348/57.

³⁶ NAWO 309/978 War Crimes Group, Deposition of Heinrich Schlick, June 1947; BArch R 9348/95 (2) Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, OHW organigram; R 9348/112, Thesinga, Invitation to a Comradeship Evening in the Penitentiary Subcamp, February 2, 1943.

³⁷ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

obligated the OHW to provide protective clothing free of charge.³⁸ As the company failed to do so, the prisoners often sustained avoidable injuries, such as cutting their hands when carrying bricks without gloves. Moreover, a lack of safety precautions frequently caused accidents, like falls from scaffolds or prisoners being crushed by machinery.³⁹

The warders constantly maltreated the convicts during work and inside the camp. They beat them with sticks, rubber truncheons and rifle butts if they did not work fast enough. A warder named Waclaw Miarka from Chorzów (Königshütte) was particularly infamous for his excessive cruelty among the prisoners. One of his victims reportedly died from his injuries after a beating, and Miarka broke another convict's ribs and knocked out several of his teeth simply because he was too weak to lift rails.⁴⁰ A certain *Oberwachtmeister* Großmann likewise hit a prisoner, who had stolen three potatoes, so ferociously that he needed medical treatment.⁴¹

The prisoners were also punished with detention for infractions like smoking or clandestine correspondence by mail. As they were only permitted to send letters once in three months, many convicts secretly exchanged messages with the help of Polish civilian workers. Stanisław Rogulski was put into detention for 14 days for accepting a letter from his sister that was passed on to him by a Polish laborer. The so-called "bunker" consisted of solitary isolation cells in which the prisoners were held in complete darkness. Instead of being sent out to work, they were tethered to the floor during the day with a chain measuring less than half a meter in length that restricted their movements. At night, they had to sleep on plain wooden boards. Soup was distributed only every other day.

Escape attempts incurred drastic collective punishment. All members of an escaped prisoner's detail, usually comprising fifteen men, were subjected to punitive exercises, like squat jumps. Those unable to perform these exercises were viciously beaten by the guards. Caught escapees were beaten and had to stand in front of the entrance gate in shackles as a warning to the others, who marched by on their return from work. However, despite threats by camp leader Thesinga that

³⁸ BArchR 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942.

³⁹ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 411, Franciszek Jeske, July 18, 1946; FVA, HVT-2990, Pierre B. (the archive requires names to be anonymized).

⁴⁰ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

⁴¹ BArch B 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, August 19, 1976.

every escape attempt would be punished with death by hanging, no executions were corroborated.⁴² The guards were nonetheless expected to prevent flights by shooting at runaways. A former guard claimed that he had been charged a penalty of 50 RM for letting three prisoners escape without opening fire at them. Following this incident, the warder allegedly asked to be relieved of guard duties and was transferred to the camp administration. In addition to the physical punishment, unsuccessful escapees were usually taken to the court in Bytom (Beuthen) and sentenced to another six months in the camp. Frequent offenders could be returned to Strzelce Opolskie.⁴³

The convicts were eligible for health insurance – at least on paper.⁴⁴ In Blachownia Śląska, a paramedic tended to the sick in a camp infirmary. He was supervised by a prisoner physician who visited twice a week.⁴⁵ Despite being ill or injured, the convicts were forced to do lighter work, like cleaning riverbeds. Severe cases could be referred to a hospital in Strzelce Opolskie. New arrivals underwent a medical examination and were deloused to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. This notwithstanding, a dysentery outbreak in summer 1943 killed ten prisoners.⁴⁶ The camp administration at first tried to conceal the outbreak and still sent the infected convicts out to the factory. The camp was only put under a four-week quarantine when civilian workers reported the incident to public health authorities out of concern for their own safety.⁴⁷ Most prisoners reporting ill were not even admitted into the infirmary. They often died of exhaustion during work, under the constant beatings of the guards. The dead were buried in a nearby forest. Many developed mental illnesses, leading to high suicide rates.⁴⁸

The Ministry of Justice's instructions to penitentiaries to preserve the convicts' health and capability to work seem more than cynical with regard to the camp conditions.⁴⁹ By early 1944, merely one-third of all prisoners in German penal

⁴² PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

⁴³ BArch B 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, August 19, 1976.

⁴⁴ BArchR 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942.

⁴⁵ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

⁴⁶ BArch B 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, August 19, 1976; LHA K Best. 584,001, Nr. 1735 (Verfahren 9 Js 19/74 Staatsanwaltschaft Koblenz), interrogation of Alois N., December 21, 1973.

⁴⁷ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

⁴⁸ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 411, Franciszek Jeske, July 18, 1946.

⁴⁹ *Polenvollzugsordnung*, January 9, 1942, printed in *Deutsche Justiz*, p. 35.

institutions were still fit for deployment in outside detachments.⁵⁰ The Attorney General of Katowice, Dr. Steimer, permitted Silesian entrepreneurs to send back such unfit workers and have them replaced with fresh ones. In October 1942, the OHW made use of this opportunity by refusing to accept five Polish prisoners, who had just been transferred from Sieradz, due to physical weakness. Replacements were sent less than two weeks later. Transports to return such small numbers of rejected or sick prisoners to penitentiaries had to be arranged and paid for by the entrepreneurs. They deducted the extra costs from the prisoners' wages.⁵¹

A Polish survivor estimated that about one-fifth of the prisoners at Blachownia Śląska perished within the first year of the camp's existence.⁵² At least six prisoners from Sieradz died less than three months after their arrival in spring 1942.⁵³ These numbers reflect the significantly higher mortality of non-Germans in penitentiaries, which averaged at about 14% compared to less than 3% among German convicts. Especially in the annexed territories, the main causes of death were malnutrition, overworking and diseases.⁵⁴

The policy of “extermination through labor” and the role of the AEL

Adolf Eichmann, the head of the Reich Security Main Office's (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) department of “Jewish affairs”, had urged the Ministry of Justice to hand over Jewish convicts to concentration camps for “protective custody” since October 1941. However, it was only after the appointment of a new Minister of Justice that these transfers were realized. Georg-Otto Thierack was invited to a “table talk” by Adolf Hitler shortly after starting his ministerial office in August 1942. Hitler demanded to liquidate prisoners considered “racially” or “socially” inferior by the regime. Consequently, Thierack drew up a directive together with Heinrich Himmler on September 18, 1942, stipulating that Jews, Roma and Sinti,

⁵⁰ ITS 1.2.2.0., Doc. ID 19/0014 Justizministerium Koblenz (Sträflinge), Ministry of Justice, Directive to Penitentiaries, February 24, 1944.

⁵¹ ITS 9.7.4., Doc. IDs 11410767 Index Record of Prisoners transferred to Blechhammer Prison Camp; Doc. IDs 11410678 Return and Replacement of Schieratz Prisoners, October 2 and 15, 1942; BArch R 9348/59 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, Contract Between the Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz and the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, January 27, 1942.

⁵² PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

⁵³ ITS 9.7.4., Doc. IDs 11410743–11410744 Index Record of Prisoners transferred to Blechhammer Prison Camp, List of Valuables of Deceased Prisoners.

⁵⁴ Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons*, p. 280.

as well as Russians, Ukrainians and Poles with sentences exceeding three years should be subjected to the policy of “extermination through labor” (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*) in concentration camps. Individual German and Czech convicts were equally targeted if they served prison terms of more than eight years and had been classified as “asocial”. From October 1942, the first transports headed to Majdanek and Auschwitz. As a matter of fact, many of the convicts were instantly murdered on arrival rather than being slowly worked to death.⁵⁵

The former administration clerk Johannes Josef Stera stated before a German court that the Gestapo had inquired about Jews in the Blachownia Śląska subcamp in 1943. Stera purported that he had attempted to save these prisoners by listing them as “deceased,” and that they had only been handed over to the Gestapo in summer 1944, while he was on a sick leave.⁵⁶ As there are no testimonies by Jewish survivors of the penitentiary subcamp, it is impossible to judge the veracity of this contention. Many lacunae remain regarding the fate of Jewish penitentiary prisoners after their transfer to concentration camps. The few available witness reports indicate that Jewish penitentiary prisoners had a different status than non-convicted Jewish civilians in concentration camps. Before being sent to concentration camps, they normally returned to the penitentiary together with non-Jewish Poles, who had equally been earmarked for “extermination through labor”. The Jewish survivor Paul Grosman became an early victim of this policy. He had been arrested in the Łódź ghetto for smuggling flour and sentenced to nine months of hard labor in a Sieradz subcamp. Shortly before his release was due, he was taken to Sieradz, where he spent another three months before being transferred to Auschwitz in fall 1942. Grosman related that a warder had pitied him when he informed him of the impending transfer, and that several of his non-Jewish Polish comrades awaiting the same fate had hanged themselves before the transport went off. On arrival in Auschwitz, the group had to get undressed and was hosed with cold water throughout the night. In the morning, they received striped prisoner uniforms and were locked into single “model cells”, fitted with clean beds, that were normally used for visits by the International Red Cross. During the day, they were assigned to fabricating wooden ramps that should aid the people on board the

⁵⁵ Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons*, pp. 217–226; Schädler, *Justizkrise*, pp. 274–280; Kramer, *Beitrag*, pp. 43–45.

⁵⁶ BArch B 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, August 19, 1976.

arriving deportation convoys to descent. The prisoners were aware of the ongoing mass murder and of the existence of a *Sonderkommando*. When they started their job in the mornings, the ramp was still cluttered with baggage from the transports, and they searched among these luggage for food. Grosman was sent on to the Auschwitz subcamp Goleszów (Golleschau) after three months.⁵⁷

Bernhard N'at was arrested for resistance activities in the Netherlands under the "Night and Fog" decree and was deported to Auschwitz in late 1943. He was quarantined in Birkenau with non-Jewish Poles, before being tattooed and marked as a Jew by a yellow triangle on his uniform. He remained in the Auschwitz main camp with a Jewish detail, where his physical condition quickly deteriorated. His status as a political prisoner nonetheless protected him during selections. He learned from his block elder that his name had always been taken off lists for the gas chambers, as his trial had not taken place yet.⁵⁸

On April 21, 1943, a secret amendment to the Ministry of Justice's "extermination through labor" act permitted the transfer of non-Jewish Poles with prison terms over six months, not just those with sentences over three years, to concentration camps.⁵⁹ Perniciously, such prisoners were not informed about these changes and still expected to be released after having served their terms. Stanisław Rogulski, a baker who had been arrested for selling wheat bread to Poles, was about to finish his one-year sentence in the Blachownia Śląska subcamp in May 1943 when he was taken to the Rogoźnica concentration camp. Following a month of hard labor in a stone quarry, during which he witnessed emaciated prisoners being killed on the spot, Rogulski was sent to an outside detachment of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Berlin-Lichterfelde, where he remained until the end of the war.⁶⁰ An estimated 60% of the convicts transferred to concentration camps did not survive their internment.⁶¹

The OHW plant's AEL began to play a crucial role in the process of sending penitentiary prisoners to Auschwitz or Rogoźnica. The AELs were the Gestapo's brutal answer to the alleged "lax" work discipline of Germans and especially foreign laborers. Those accused of being "slowcoaches" (*Bummelanten*) or those who evaded from labor conscriptions were subjected to up to six weeks of punitive work

⁵⁷ VHA interview 28574, Paul Grosman.

⁵⁸ VHA interview 23073, Bernhard N'at.

⁵⁹ Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons*, pp. 279–280.

⁶⁰ PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

⁶¹ Wachsmann, *Gefangen unter Hitler*, p. 326.

under the constant supervision of a guard.⁶² The AEL established in Blachownia Śląska on January 5, 1942, was among the first of about 100 AELs under the direct control of the entrepreneurs, not the Gestapo. The main difference was that firms were authorized to discipline their own workers on their premises, rather than sending them to Gestapo-run camps and thus losing them as an urgently required labor force. Göring had initiated the concept of company-led AEL in his own works, *Hermann-Göring-Werke* in Salzgitter, in March 1940. Himmler also favored the “privatization” of Gestapo facilities; however, these camps only began to emerge in substantial numbers in 1944.⁶³

The OHW had vehemently rejected the Gestapo’s initial offer to send their workers to one of their AEL and fought a month-long battle with the Gestapo branch in Opole to be granted a company-led camp.⁶⁴ The OHW deputy director and counterintelligence officer Dr. Heinrich Schlick was put in charge of the AEL at Blachownia Śląska. He reported laborers he intended to intern in the AEL to representatives of the Opole Gestapo branch.⁶⁵ The first camp leader was *Kriminaloberassistent* Schulz of the Opole Gestapo branch. He was replaced by two of his colleagues in February 1944. *Polizeisekretär* Paul Heurich (Winsdorf, Neisse/Nysa, 1905), a police officer who had joined Gestapo Opole in 1938, served as the new camp leader. His deputy was SS *Oberscharführer* Karl Schirmer (Heidenheim, Bavaria, 1887), an SS man assigned to Gestapo Opole. Both were members of the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst* – Security Service). The AEL consisted of three barracks for the prisoners and two for the camp personnel and the administration office. The guards (up to 40) had diverse backgrounds, but all were unfit for military service and were put under Gestapo command. They wore gray uniforms and were armed with submachine guns and pistols.⁶⁶

⁶² Lotfi, *KZ der Gestapo*, pp. 216–218.

⁶³ Tech, *Arbeitserziehungslager*, p. 104; Werner, *Bleib übrig*, p. 179; Lotfi, *KZ der Gestapo*, pp. 220–222.

⁶⁴ BArch R 9348/45 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG Blechhammer, Dr. Heinrich Schlick, Correspondence with *Polizeirat* Lisson (Gestapo Oppeln) regarding the AEL, July 22, 1941; Dr. Heinrich Schlick, Minute of a Telephone Conversation with *Polizeirat* Lisson, August 28, 1941.

⁶⁵ BArch R 9348/95 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG Blechhammer, Dr. Heinrich Schlick, Circular to all Contractors Regarding Work Performances, February 4, 1942.

⁶⁶ HHStAW Abt. 461, Nr. 37638, Frankfurter Auschwitzprozess, Interrogation of Paul Heurich, April 18, 1961; BArch B 162/8866 Registry of former SS members, fo. 968, Karl Schirmer.

An average 300 inmates were subjected to disciplinary measures in the camp per year.⁶⁷ Maltreatment was common, and some were killed by attacking guard dogs.⁶⁸ Several executions by hanging were carried out. The victims were mainly Ukrainian laborers deployed at the OHW. Two of them were sentenced to death by the Opole Gestapo branch for having kicked a Hitler portrait, and two others for murdering a Jewish inmate.⁶⁹ However, in contrast to Gestapo AEL, company-led AELs were not utilized for executions of political prisoners from outside.⁷⁰

The AEL at Blachownia Śląska nonetheless gained an additional function as a transit camp for penitentiary prisoners, many of whom had never belonged to the plant's own workforce, and who were not permitted to work during their internment. Approximately 60 convicts, not only from the adjacent penitentiary subcamp, but also from other penal institutions, were held in the AEL before being transferred to concentration camps.⁷¹ Emil Klossek, for instance, had been arrested in Bujakow in 1940, and served four years in a subcamp of Strzelce Opolskie. At the end of his prison term in June 1944, he was taken to Rogoźnica via the AEL in Blachownia Śląska. He survived a death march to Buchenwald and was liberated in spring 1945. Klossek contracted tuberculosis during his imprisonment.⁷²

There were two political prisoners from the British Channel Island Jersey in the transit camp. Jean Marie Rossi and his son Marcel Fortuné, who both held dual British and Italian citizenship, were deported from the Nazi-occupied island in February 1943, as they had evaded labor conscription. In March 1943, the Rossis and fellow Channel Islanders were taken to a civilian internment camp holding about 500 people in Kluczbork (Kreuzburg). Retaliations against Italian citizens following the Italian armistice of September 1943 led to the Rossis' transfer to a prison in Opole, and then to the AEL in Blachownia Śląska. They stayed there until they were evacuated to the Flossenbürg concentration camp in January 1945.

⁶⁷ BArch R 9348/23 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG Blechhammer, Strength Reports 1944.

⁶⁸ Łukowski, *Zbrodnie*, 52.

⁶⁹ Wollenberg, *Alptraum*, p. 128; BArch B 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, October 9, 1973; IWM 10/6/1 Private Papers, War Diary of G Didcock, entries of February 2 and 22, 1944; NIOD 250d, Maurits Bremer, *Eendag in Blechhammer*, 1947.

⁷⁰ Lotfi, *KZ der Gestapo*, p. 210.

⁷¹ BArch B 162/3990 (AR-Z 72/61) Ermittlungen gegen Josef Nowak, interrogation of Josef Nowak, 1961; HHStAW Abt. 461, Nr. 37638, Frankfurter Auschwitzprozess, interrogation of Paul Heurich, April 18, 1961.

⁷² StAWü, Ermittlungsakten 33–37: Tötungsdelikte im Zwangsarbeitslager Blechhammer, 2012–009, 34, fo. 1066, Statement of Emil Klossek, October 15, 1973.

Marcel Fortuné probably perished during a death march to Dachau, whereas his father was liberated by American troops in spring 1945.⁷³

“Night and Fog prisoners” in Blachownia Śląska

The transfer of “Night and Fog prisoners” (*Nacht- und Nebelgefangene*) to Upper Silesian penitentiary subcamps constituted another step in fusing the regime’s oppression against political opponents with industrial work deployments. On December 7, 1941, Hitler commanded to try residents of Nazi-occupied western European countries, like Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, France, Denmark, and Norway, who were suspected of participating in resistance activities or sabotage, before special courts (*Sondergerichte*) in absolute secrecy. The victims literally “disappeared” overnight, and their next of kin were left ignorant about their whereabouts, or fate. This psychological strategy was intended to have a deterring effect on the rest of the population. The prisoners were kept isolated to prevent them from passing on any signs of life to their friends and families, and they were not informed about their current legal status. The first decapitations took place in August 1942; however, the special courts were slow to hand down verdicts, due to personnel shortages and often also to thin evidence. Despite having been acquitted, or having served shorter prison terms, the NN prisoners were not released, but handed over to concentration camps.

When Allied air raids intensified over western Germany in spring 1943, the Ministry of Justice had NN prisoners in remand custody in Essen and those interned in the penitentiary of Bochum relocated to the notorious Emsland camps in Papenburg and Esterwegen. Prisoners in solitary confinement were taken to the penitentiary in Hameln. The special court in Essen, which primarily dealt with prisoners from the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France, held trials in a camp complex of Esterwegen reserved for NN prisoners three times a week henceforth. The bombing of railroad tracks increasingly complicated the judges’ commuting between Essen and Esterwegen. Therefore, it was decided to transfer the NN prisoners to

⁷³ <https://www.frankfallaarchive.org/people/jean-marie-rossi> (access: May 24, 2018); Gilly Carr, *Defiance and Deportations*, [in:] *Protest, Defiance and Resistance in the Channel Islands, German Occupation 1940–1945*, eds. Gilly Carr, Paul Sanders, Louise Willmot, London–New York–Sydney 2014, pp. 127–152, here pp. 127–136; Piotr Stanek, *Jeńcy wojenni i internowani w Kreuzburgu (Kluczborku) w latach 1939–1945*, „Łąbinowicki Rocznik Muzealny”, 37 (2014), pp. 44–46.

the penitentiary of Strzelce Opolskie, and to establish a special court in Opole. The Minister of Justice, Thierack, signed the respective contract with the Attorney General of Katowice, Harry Haffner, in February 1944. It was agreed that a given number of NN prisoners would be allocated to the penitentiary subcamp in Blachownia Śląska as construction workers.⁷⁴ By spring 1944, penitentiary subcamps equally began to ail from labor shortages. The now prevailing policy to have Polish convicts executed rather than imprisoned further decimated the available workforce. Therefore, penitentiaries were eager to get hold of the hitherto untouched reserve of NN prisoners. Out of the approximately 6600 NN prisoners arrested under the “Night and Fog” decree, 2000 were eventually detained in Strzelce Opolskie and its subcamps.⁷⁵ Young, able-bodied prisoners were predominantly sent to the subcamps at Blachownia Śląska and Łabędy (Laband).⁷⁶

The first transports of NN prisoners arrived from Esterwegen in July 1943, and they continued well into spring 1944. The bulk of Esterwegen inmates was transferred in two large convoys on March 13 and 18, 1944. A transport from Hameln came in on April 29, 1944.⁷⁷ Ahead of the arrival of the March transports, Bachmair reminded his staff that passing on information on the NN prisoners or enabling contacts to their next of kin incurred charges of high treason. All NN prisoners received fresh numbers after their transfer to Strzelce Opolskie, and their names were not even known to the warders. Like concentration camp inmates, they were only addressed by their numbers.⁷⁸ Shortly after the camp in Esterwegen had handed over the prisoners’ personal belongings and valuables to Strzelce Opolskie in May 1944, they were already relocated again to penitentiaries in Brzeg (Brieg), Graz, Sonnenburg (Słońsk), and Wolfenbüttel. Bomb damage to the Ministry of Justice in Berlin in summer 1944 destroyed the central database on NN

⁷⁴ Gruchmann, *Nacht- und Nebeljustiz*, pp. 356–358, 377; Cornelius, *Verschwindenlassen*, pp. 85–95. Harry Haffner replaced Dr. Steimer as attorney general after his death on October 25, 1943. Becker, *Mitsstreiter*, p. 73, 265.

⁷⁵ Becker, *Mitsstreiter*, p. 239; <http://www.euprojekt-zuchthaus-hameln.de> (access: April, 2015).

⁷⁶ AN F/9/5586 Témoignages de déportés au retour des camps, Manouvrier, Paul, 1945.

⁷⁷ GStAPK XVII. HA P 371 A, Nr. 12 Verzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen von Esterwegen, Namensverzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen (Männer) aufgestellt im KZ Börgermoor, 1943–1944; Nr. 13 Namensverzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen (Männer) von Esterwegen, 1943–1944, Nr. 14 Namensverzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen (Männer) von Buchwerk, 1943.

⁷⁸ GStAPK XVII. HA P 371 A, Nr. 14 Verzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen von Esterwegen, Verfügung über die Behandlung der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen, March 28, 1944.

prisoners, and the Ministry requested penitentiaries to pass on lists of all prisoners. When Strzelce Opolskie responded to the Ministry on July 3, 1944, they still had 1301 NN prisoners in detention; 69 had been handed over to the Gestapo, or the Rogoźnica, Dachau and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. Most prisoners had not even been tried, despite having spent a considerable amount of time in German captivity. It took the special court of Opole until October 1944 to deal with the cases of NN prisoners who had arrived in Silesia in spring. The court typically handed down comparatively lenient sentences of up to five years in a punishment camp. None of the 87 male and female NN prisoners put on trial in fall 1944 received death penalty. Meanwhile, the penitentiary in Strzelce Opolskie continued to transfer their NN prisoners to Rogoźnica, Sachsenhausen and Kaisheim (Bavaria). Female NN prisoners were taken to the Ravensbrück concentration camp in several transports between November 1944 and January 1945.⁷⁹

Considerable numbers of NN prisoners nevertheless remained in Silesian penitentiary subcamps. Among them was Pierre B., born in Brussels in 1916, who had fought in the Belgian Army during the German invasion of his country in 1940 until he was captured. After his release, he joined a communist resistance movement in Belgium and was involved in the publication of an underground newspaper. He was arrested and taken to German penitentiaries in Essen, Bochum and Hameln. Following the transfer of NN prisoners to Esterwegen, Pierre B. was sent to the Blachownia Śląska penitentiary subcamp in spring 1944. A few months later, he faced trial before the court in Opole and was interned in a camp in Łabędy. He stayed there until the camp was evacuated in January 1945, and survived two death marches to Buchenwald and Terezín, where he was liberated.⁸⁰ Situated adjacent to a press works in the outskirts of Katowice, the camp at Łabędy served as a surrogate prison that was administrated by the Gliwice police department since November 1942. The camp held approximately 300 male prisoners, among others NN prisoners from France and Belgium, whose labor was exploited by the press works. Like Blachownia Śląska's penitentiary subcamp, the premises of

⁷⁹ GStAPK XVII. HA P 371 A, Nr. 14 Verzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen von Esterwegen, Namensverzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen (Männer) von Buchwerk, 1943, Transport Lists, August–December 1944, Nr. 22 Verzeichnis verstorbener Nacht- und Nebelgefangener, March 30, 1944–January 18, 1945; Penitentiary of Gross Strehlitz to the Ministry of Justice, Index of NN prisoners, July 3, 1944.

⁸⁰ FVA, HVT–2990, Pierre B.

a private company were used to ameliorate the Gestapo's "prison space problems" (*Haftraumprobleme*).⁸¹

The subcamp in Blachownia Śląska held NN prisoners from Belgium and France. A Polish survivor stated that there were also Norwegians among them. The influx of the Western European prisoners increased the camp population to about 1700 men.⁸² Initially, they were detained in a separate barrack of the camp and set out to work with the other prisoners each day. When the camp leadership learned that they had found a way of communicating with their families by passing on messages to French and Belgian civilian workers and prisoners of war at the plant, rather exceptional measures ensued. All NN prisoners were taken to live on a steamboat that had been moored to the banks of the Oder River. They were only permitted to leave the boat to go to work. To prevent contacts to other laborers, they traveled to the plant and back by boat.

The NN prisoners worked 12 hours a day at the OHW and were assigned to menial jobs. They seemed to have received half a liter of soup more than their Polish comrades, as the Prison Regulations for Poles did not apply to NN prisoners. The food allocations to both groups were insufficient, and the NN prisoners swiftly became emaciated. Pierre B. felt so weakened from the hard labor that he tried to be admitted into the infirmary by feigning an illness. However, the physician sent him away without treatment, and he was not handed out his food ration, as he had skipped work. Thanks to the solidarity of fellow prisoners, who each gave him a spoonful of their soup, he did not have to go without any food. This gesture meant a lot to him, but it also made him feel guilty. From summer 1944, the fuel plant became the frequent target of Allied air strikes. Unfree laborers, like the penitentiary prisoners, were prohibited from entering air-raid shelters. The OHW instructed them to scatter in slit trenches or ditches, which offered very little protection against bombs and debris. An exception was made for the NN prisoners, who were extremely vulnerable on their boat. Following an official complaint by one of their warders, they were permitted to use shelters henceforth.⁸³

⁸¹ Archive du Comité International de la Croix Rouge, Report of the International Red Cross, January 14, 1945; *Praca przymusowa Polaków pod panowaniem hitlerowskim, 1939–1945*, eds. Alfred Konieczny, Herbert Szurgacz, Poznań 1976 (*Documenta Occupationis*, 10), pp. 187–188.

⁸² PIŻ, witness testimony No. 224, Stanisław Rogulski, March 5, 1946.

⁸³ FVA HVT–2990, Pierre B.; BArch R 9348/41 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG Blechhammer, Dr. Heinrich Schlick, Personendezentralisierung bei Tagalarm, July 11, 1944.

Penitentiary subcamp in Blachownia Śląska as a makeshift prison for German OHW workers

Due to the war-related decline of the number of German workers, the OHW management persuaded the Attorney General of Racibórz (Ratibor) to try and detain members of their workforce, who had committed crimes, at the factory. Judges from either Racibórz or Koźle (Cosel) were to hold express court trials at the plant once a week. The defendants were usually sentenced to hard labor on the OHW construction site under the supervision of prison warders. They spent the night in a barrack of the penitentiary subcamp. This measure should guarantee high productivity and deter others from transgressing rules.⁸⁴ It could not be established whether similar developments occurred at other industrial sites, or if this was an exceptional phenomenon. The practice indubitably signaled a further radicalization of the long-standing process of “franchising out” the judicial system to the private sector.

The evacuation of the camp and the massacre of prisoners in January 1945

The Ministry of Justice had worked out evacuation routes for their eastern penitentiaries since summer 1944. They nonetheless prioritized the removal of important documents and technical equipment over people. Like the concentration camps, penitentiaries were ordered to remain in the eastern territories for as long as possible to ensure that sufficient manpower was available to the war industry. Consequently, the swift Soviet advance cut off most of the premeditated marching routes. Moreover, as the attorneys general of the respective districts were authorized to organize the evacuations on their own, there was no concerted retreat either.⁸⁵ The penitentiaries and their subcamps apparently received no clear instructions on evacuation routes and destinations. The Ministry of Justice, therefore, had difficulty in tracking down the various treks as they moved westward. The almost total breakdown of communications between judicial authorities, penal institutions and camp leaders further complicated the situation. Unlike concentration camps,

⁸⁴ BArch R 9348/53 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG Blechhammer, Einführung des richterlichen Schnellverfahrens, April 29, 1944.

⁸⁵ Becker, *Mitstreiter*, pp. 252–253.

penitentiaries were not equipped with wireless radios, but had to use public communication services. In January 1945, postal services, like sending cables or operating telephone calls, had become disrupted, or the lines were so busy that messages could no longer be put through. Thus, all the Ministry was able to find out about the trek from Blachownia Śląska by mid-February was that they were “en route with an unknown destination”.⁸⁶

The Attorney General of Katowice, Haffner, commanded all Uppers Silesian penitentiaries to evacuate between January 19 and 20, 1945. The prisoners of the Blachownia Śląska subcamp were marched off on Friday, January 19.⁸⁷ They were taken to the penitentiary of Löbau (Saxony) via penitentiaries in Nysa (Neisse), Dzierżoniów (Reichenbach), Kłodzko (Glatz), and Wałbrzych (Waldenburg). During the last roll call on the morning of departure, camp leader Thesinga informed the warders of Haffner’s orders to shoot prisoners unable to keep up due to “sore feet” (*Fußmüde*) or trying to escape. Immediately after his speech, Thesinga left the camp under some false pretense, and was never seen again.⁸⁸

He was replaced by the deputy leader of the AEL in Blachownia Śląska, who was assisted by Seifert, judicial inspector of the penitentiary subcamp. This surprisingly smooth shift in authority underlines the close collaboration between the company-led AEL under the supervision of the Gestapo and the penal subcamp.⁸⁹ At least 700 Polish and several hundred NN prisoners set out from Blachownia Śląska.⁹⁰ Contrary to the penitentiary of Strzelce Opolskie itself, which had transferred 68 NN prisoners to Rogoźnica on January 17 and 19, 1945, the Blachownia Śląska subcamp took their NN prisoners on the march.⁹¹ Their failure to hand these

⁸⁶ ITS 1.2.2.0. 6/0198, Doc. ID 24/0125/0127/0165 Measures for Evacuations of Penal Institutions.

⁸⁷ Andrzej Strzelecki, *Die Endphase des KL Auschwitz: Evakuierung, Liquidierung und Befreiung des Lagers*, Oświęcim-Brzezinka 1995, p. 142; BArchB 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, October 19, 1973.

⁸⁸ AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, interrogation of Karl Schirmer, May 16, 1945; interrogations of Simon Rodis, May 17, 1945, and September 18, 1946.

⁸⁹ AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, interrogation of Karl Schirmer, May 16, 1945.

⁹⁰ AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, interrogation of Fritz Schnellinger, date unknown. Schnellinger merely referred to the number of Polish convicts, probably because the NN prisoners were detained separately and had not been under his supervision.

⁹¹ GStAPK XVII. HA P 371 A, Nr. 22 Verzeichnis der Nacht- und Nebelgefangenen von Esterwegen, Warden Bachmair, Index of NN prisoners handed over to Gross-Rosen, January 16, 1945.

prisoners over in time resulted in a massacre en route. On January 22, three days into the march, 90 NN prisoners from Belgium and France were shot in a forest.⁹² The next day, the trek from Blachownia Śląska was the first among the evacuated Upper Silesian penal camps to cross the Nysa River, and they reached the penitentiary of Kłodzko on January 26, 1945. The warden of the penitentiary in Kłodzko cabled to the Ministry of Justice that Blachownia Śląska had had to “leave great numbers of prisoners behind by the roadside.” This expression was a euphemism for the superior shooting orders given out by the Attorney General of Katowice. In a different report, Strzelce Opolskie’s chief inspector Balz went into more detail. He stated that 450 Polish and 200 NN prisoners had been killed.⁹³

These figures suggest that out of the 700 Polish convicts, a staggering 64% did not survive the first week of the march. Several warders equally confirmed that no more than 200 Polish convicts had made it to the march’s final destination – Löbau – in February 1945. They admitted to having mistreated and shot those who had become too weak to walk due to the “catastrophic” food situation. Prisoners unable to continue the march were beaten with sticks, kicked or rifle-butted.⁹⁴ A rear guard platoon (*Nachkommando*) was chiefly responsible for shooting stragglers. Its core members were warder Wilhelm Hellmold, who acted as a designated “shooter,” Karl Schirmer and the assistant inspector Fritz Schnellinger. Shot prisoners were simply left on the road.⁹⁵ A Polish survivor of the camp witnessed how a comrade, who could not get up anymore, was viciously maltreated by Fritz Schnellinger. He first dislocated both of his shoulders, then broke his arms, and when the prisoner still did not move, Schnellinger hit him on the head with his pistol and finally shot him dead. Towards the end of the march, Schnellinger and Karl Schirmer bludgeoned three prisoners to death in a school building near Löbau.⁹⁶ Around the same time, they shot two convicts, but only one of them had

⁹² They were exhumed after the war by a Polish War Crimes Commission and laid to rest in a cemetery in Opole. AN dossier AU–16/2 736 MI 3 Blechhammer Kommandos: rapports, témoignages, listes du déportés, Jacques Gavel, date unknown.

⁹³ ITS 1.2.2.0. 6/0198, Doc. ID 24/0125/0127/0165 Measures for Evacuations of Penal Institutions.

⁹⁴ AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, interrogation of Karl Schirmer, May 18, 1945; Interrogations of Simon Rodis, May 17, 1945, and September 18, 1946.

⁹⁵ AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, interrogation of Karl Schirmer, May 18, 1945.

⁹⁶ AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, testimony of Czesław Wroblewski, date unknown.

been killed, while the other pretended to be dead. After a short while, the prisoner got up to catch up with the column. On noticing this, Schirmer fired a bullet through the back of the prisoner's head, which emitted through the nose. The prisoner had died of his injuries when they reached Lengdriessen.⁹⁷

During a postwar interrogation, the former member of Blachownia Śląska camp administration Stera related that he had been delegated to stay behind on the day of the evacuation to load documents onto a handcart. Ten Polish convicts stayed with him to pull the cart, and they caught up with the trek at Nysa (Neisse) at night. Stera purported that on the next day, January 20, the convicts had suggested to run over to the approaching Red Army, and he had let them escape before making his way into Czech territory alone. He denied having witnessed any shootings during the march.⁹⁸ Conspicuously, Stera's report was full of inconsistencies. First, he and the ten prisoners could not have covered the remarkable distance of 40 miles between Blachownia Śląska and Nysa in a single day on foot; moreover, it is equally out of the question that the main body of the marching columns could have reached Nysa in such a short time. In the adverse wintry conditions and due to blocked roads, evacuation treks marched an average eight miles a day. Neither does it seem plausible that Stera caught up with the main body only to continue the march on his own and evade. Apparently, he tried to fabricate an alibi for the period of January 20 onwards, when he must have been part of the march until at least January 24, 1945. He likely intended to obfuscate the fact that he witnessed or even participated in the mass shootings of NN prisoners on January 22, and the killing of stragglers en route.

However, it was not only the prisoners still held in the penitentiary subcamp who were systematically massacred. Evidently, numerous convicts interned in the AEL transit camp at Blachownia Śląska were taken on the evacuation march instead of being transferred to concentration camps. The Gestapo routinely compiled lists of prisoners they considered a security threat, and the AEL were ordered to have them liquidated before the treks advanced further west. Therefore, it is important to equally investigate the evacuation march of the AEL in Blachownia Śląska. The evacuation of all AELs in his district was superintended by the Higher SS and

⁹⁷ AIPN, IPN GK 164/2282 Evacuation of the Penitentiary Subcamp Blechhammer, interrogation of Simon Rodis, May 17, 1945.

⁹⁸ BArch B 162/18172 Mordverbrechen in Blechhammer, interrogation of Johannes Josef Stera, August 19, 1976.

Police Leader of Silesia, Ernst-Heinrich Schmauser.⁹⁹ The leader of the AEL in Blachownia Śląska, Paul Heurich, stated that he was instructed to march approximately 200 inmates west, to the Rogoźnica concentration camp, on January 18, 1945. He did not mention the convicts-in-transit. The trek nevertheless moved 20 miles east towards Gliwice until about January 20, 1945. In a village north of Gliwice called Wielowieś (Langendorf), they rested for up to four days. This detour was possibly taken to circumvent a Soviet vanguard, which preceded a major military offensive by the Red Army. During a court trial in 1961, a local resident accused Heurich of having committed atrocities in this village. Heurich reportedly clubbed prisoners to death with a wooden stake, before he and the other guards shot 400 prisoners, who were clad in striped uniforms. Heurich tried to vindicate himself by claiming that he had visited relatives living in the area on the respective day, and that the witness had mistaken concentration camp prisoners from Auschwitz for shot AEL inmates. Admittedly, thousands of Auschwitz prisoners were evacuated at the time. However, considering that the convicts-in-transit, who marched with the AEL trek, also wore striped uniforms, it is possible that he participated in their murder in the period between January 20 and 24, 1945.¹⁰⁰

A similar massacre took place in the OHW plant's deserted camp complex. The German staff and most foreign and unfree laborers had been taken to the River Oder's western banks in January 21, 1945. By order of the local county leader (*Kreisleiter*) Zahn, senior executives of the OHW, along with 100 employees and members of the works police, were to form a so-called "assault troop" (*Stosstrupp*) on January 23 and return to Blachownia Śląska to recover or destroy compromising evidence before the arrival of the Red Army. They were armed with rifles and automatic pistols.¹⁰¹

The works police (*Werkschutz*) had undergone a profound transformation from plain factory guards to auxiliaries serving in Himmler's security police (Sipo) from 1935 onward. With the rise in the numbers of foreign and unfree laborers, who were perceived as a "security threat" and whose very presence put the idea of a "racial community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*) into question, the Nazi regime

⁹⁹ Lotfi, *KZ der Gestapo*, p. 294.

¹⁰⁰ HHStAW Abt. 461, Nr. 37638, 1. Frankfurter Auschwitzprozess, interrogation of Paul Heurich, April 18, 1961.

¹⁰¹ NAWO 309/978 War Crimes Group, Deposition of Ludwig Hecker, June 1947; Deposition of Herbert Kimmerle, date unknown; Deposition of Karl Kulicke, August 1, 1946. Zahn's first name was not corroborated.

increasingly utilized these men for more radical forms of policing.¹⁰² Following the onset of Allied air raids in summer 1944, the works police was given license to lynch non-Germans for purported acts of “sabotage” or looting. Their commander-in-chief usually was a senior executive who had been appointed as counterintelligence officer. The OHW works police was thus superintended by deputy director Dr. Heinrich Schlick. The leader of the up to 150 men was Kurt Karl Schumann (Lauchstadt, Merseburg, 1903), a baker who had joined the Nazi party in 1933 and also became a member of the SS.¹⁰³

On January 23, 1945, at least 25 Poles were shot for alleged plundering by the assault troop and members of an SS unit who had been delegated the protection of the fuel plant. A British War Crimes Commission investigating the case could never clarify the victims’ identities.¹⁰⁴ A Jewish survivor of the Auschwitz subcamp at Blachownia Śląska witnessed how the OHW works police opened fire at four convicts who had dodged the AEL evacuation march and were searching a British prisoner of war camp for clothes.¹⁰⁵ The death of all four convicts was corroborated by a postwar interrogation of Dr. Heinrich Schlick.¹⁰⁶ It seems that the assault troop was specifically commanded to hunt down these Polish convicts-in-transit who had stayed behind. Possibly, all 25 shooting victims were penitentiary prisoners.

Among the key civilian perpetrators was Otto Stoltzenburg (Katscher/Kietrz, 1890), an engineer employed by the Reich Highway Company (*Reichsautobahn-gesellschaft*) that supervised the construction works of the OHW plant from 1942. In a conversation with colleagues, Stoltzenburg later prided himself on having “finished off looters”. He perfidiously used an Upper Silesian staff member as an accomplice, whose good command of Polish allowed him to pass himself off as a Pole, and whose additional occupation as a gamekeeper made him an experienced shooter. Stoltzenburg pointed out coldly that the executions had been eased by the

¹⁰² Richard Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich*, Oxford 1994, p. 141; Klaus Drobisch, *Der Werkschutz-betriebliches Terrororgan im faschistischen Deutschland*, „Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte“, 4 (1965), pp. 217–247, here p. 221; Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Gehard Paul, *Herrschaft und Alltag: Ein Industrieviertel im Dritten Reich*, Bonn 1991, p. 296.

¹⁰³ NA WO 309/978 War Crimes Group, Deposition of Kurt Karl Schumann, September 25, 1947.

¹⁰⁴ NA WO 309/978 War Crimes Group, Resume by the War Crimes Group, November 28, 1947.

¹⁰⁵ Leo Voss, *Het fluitje*, Rijswijk 1946, p. 258.

¹⁰⁶ NA WO 309/978 War Crimes Group, Deposition of Heinrich Schlick, June 1947.

fact that the victims regarded his accomplice as a friend, allowing the two men to shoot at close range.¹⁰⁷

The manhunt for convicts held in the AEL and their subsequent shootings by a wide array of perpetrators, ranging from executives and civilian laborers to works' policemen, were a ubiquitous phenomenon, which also occurred in western Germany in early 1945. These atrocities epitomize the radicalization of the regime's policies against foreign and unfree laborers, and the delegation of tasks previously carried out by Nazi authorities, such as the SS or the Gestapo, to lower echelon auxiliaries and civilians in the final stage of the war.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

With its multifaceted functions, the penitentiary subcamp in Blachownia Śląska reflects the use of judicial institutions for the Nazi regime's extermination policies towards Jews, Poles and other victim groups, most of whom were criminalized without having committed offenses in the strict sense of the word. The subcamp system in Upper Silesia facilitated the detention of Poles rated unsuitable to become "Germans", while the Nazis played out those who consented to being "Germanized" against their own compatriots. Upper Silesians the Nazis recruited as guards, like Miarka, were often excessively violent. The pressure to prove that they were "good Germans" could result in an exaggerated demonstration that they were "good Nazis".¹⁰⁹

Perniciously, Jews convicted of alleged "crimes" still fared better in the penitentiary subcamp system than those who had been taken to labor camps for Jews. Estimates suggest that, like their Polish comrades, mortality rate among Jewish convicts in penal institutions was 14%.¹¹⁰ By comparison, the forced labor camp for Jews and later Auschwitz subcamp in Blachownia Śląska had a death toll of 87–95%.¹¹¹ Evidently, their status as "criminals" protected Jews even after their transfer to concentration camps.

¹⁰⁷ NA WO 309/978 War Crimes Group, Depositions of Karl Kulicke, August 1, 3 and 16, 1946.

¹⁰⁸ Lotfi, *KZ der Gestapo*, p. 294; Blatman, *Death Marches*, pp. 263–265; Keller, *Volks-gemeinschaft*, pp. 4, 274–291.

¹⁰⁹ Doris L. Bergen, *The Nazi Concept of Volksdeutsche and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939–1945*, „Journal of Contemporary History”, 29 (1994), No. 4, pp. 569–582, here p. 576.

¹¹⁰ Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons*, p. 280.

¹¹¹ StAWü 12012–009, No. 37 Ermittlungsakten, Dutch Red Cross, Die Deportationstransporte während der sogenannten Cosel Periode, 1947; Piper, *Nebenlager*, p. 32.

The transit camp operated by the AEL in Blachownia Śląska served as a central assembly point for convicts from other penal subcamps, who were about to be transferred to concentration camps on the basis of the “Extermination Through Labor” act. This important connection between company-led AELs and penitentiaries has never been addressed by scholarship in the field. More comparative studies would be required to evaluate whether Blachownia Śląska was an exceptional case, or the use of AEL for this purpose had become standard practice.

The arrival of NN prisoners from western Europe and their deployment in penitentiary subcamps epitomizes the close collaboration of entrepreneurs and Nazi authorities. By putting their private camp complex at the disposal of the Gestapo, the OHW helped to ameliorate the overcrowding in prisons, and thus facilitated the continued internment of political prisoners, most of whom had not even been tried. In return for solving these “prison space problems”, the plant’s unfree workforce was strengthened.

Towards the end of the war, soaring labor shortages led to the most extreme form of “privatization” in the judicial field. The OHW plant not merely replaced the courthouse, but it also functioned as a makeshift prison for German employees. Again, more research into this understudied area is necessary to judge how widespread this phenomenon was.

A directive by the Minister of Armaments and War Production, Albert Speer, that the Silesian war economy should be kept running for as long as possible was a decisive factor in the escalation of violence that followed the abrupt evacuation of penitentiary subcamp in Blachownia Śląska in January 1945. Unable to hand over Western European political prisoners and Polish convicts singled out for extermination to the Rogoźnica concentration camp, the prison warders were commanded to shoot them en route. As similar killings were carried out on the evacuation march of the AEL in Blachownia Śląska, and on the OHW area, it may be assumed that these atrocities were the results of Gestapo orders. Their consent to utilize prison labor invariably turned senior executives like Heinrich Schlick, and factory guards, into accomplices in these murders.

STRESZCZENIE / SUMMARY

Na pierwszy rzut oka podobóz więzienny w Blachowni Śląskiej był tylko jednym z wielu w ramach wciąż rozbudowywanej sieci obozów zakładanych przez Ministerstwo

Sprawiedliwości III Rzeszy. Jednakże, oprócz zapewniania robotników pobliskiej fabryce benzyny syntetycznej, obóz odgrywał ważną rolę w nazistowskich planach „germanizacji” Górnego Śląska. Przetrzymywano w nim członków mieszanej, polsko-niemieckiej grupy ludności Śląska, których nie uważano za uprawnionych do uznania za „Niemców”. Ludzie ci po zakończeniu odsiadki byli często osadzani w obozach koncentracyjnych. Wśród więźniów podobozu więziennego w Błachowni Śląskiej byli także Żydzi aresztowani za drobne przestępstwa w łódzkim getcie oraz pochodzący z Europy Zachodniej „więźniowie nocy i mgły”. Stanowi to przykład używania przez władze nazistowskie prywatnych terenów przemysłowych w celu rozwiązania „problemów z przepełnieniem więzień”. Administracja wychowawczego obozu pracy (*Arbeitserziehungslager* – AEL) w Błachowni Śląskiej współpracowała blisko z szeregiem podobozów więziennych w przekazywaniu polskich i żydowskich osadzonych do obozów koncentracyjnych w Auschwitz i Gross-Rosen na podstawie regulacji o „wyniszczeniu przez pracę”. W artykule po raz pierwszy omawiana jest współpraca wychowawczych obozów pracy i instytucji więziennych w tym zakresie. Masakry polskich i zachodnioeuropejskich więźniów podobozu więziennego w Błachowni Śląskiej oraz skazanych przebywających tam w ramach etapu pośredniego przenoszenia do innego obozu, do których doszło podczas ewakuacji placówki w styczniu 1945 r., stanowią typowy przykład eskalacji przemocy pod koniec wojny, a także współudziału cywilów w tego typu zbrodniach.

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