

Auschwitz - Grosswerther - Gunskirchen

A Nine Months' Odyssey Through Eight Nazi Concentration Camps

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On Thursday, March 15, 1945, a freight train stopped on the northwestern outskirts of Nordhausen, a medium-sized industrial town in northern Thuringia, in central Germany. Two hundred and ninety-four Jewish women in shabby civilian clothes stumbled out of the wagons, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted from a three-day journey without any provisions. SS guards from the nearby Mittelbau concentration camp¹ welcomed them in the usual way — with vicious dogs, yelling, beatings, and insults.

The women were marched to Dora, the main camp at Mittelbau, where they were registered and given new prisoner numbers. Immediately afterward, 290 of them were marched again, about 6 kilometers southward, to the village of Grosswerther. There the SS had requisitioned the dance halls of two neighboring village inns situated in the village center in order to set up a new concentration camp — *Aussenkommando* Grosswerther, a sub-camp of Mittelbau. The women were divided into two groups of roughly equal size, and each took up quarters in one of the dance halls.

Of the 294 women, 248 were from Hungary and had been arrested in the course of the mass deportations during the spring and summer of 1944; forty-four were from Poland; one came from France; and one from the Soviet Union. Most of the women were between twenty and twenty-five years old, and many of them had worked in textile manufacturing before their arrest.²

¹For a comprehensive history of Camp Mittelbau, see the author's Ph.D. dissertation, *Das Konzentrationslager Mittelbau in der Endphase der NS-Diktatur*, Clausthal-Zellerfeld (Papierflieger), 1997.

²The data is according to the list of intakes at Mittelbau concentration camp ("Neuzugänge von Arb. Lager Morchenstern vom 15.3.1945"); Main National Archives, Warsaw, microfilm A1, F46-F330; copy at Mittelbau-Dora Memorial, Germany.

They all had started their odyssey through the spectrum of Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz. Prior to that they had survived the murderous “special transports” to Auschwitz, had been lucky enough not to be selected for the gas chamber on the ramp at Birkenau, and had endured the inhuman living conditions — which were worst for the Jewish prisoners — at Auschwitz. They must have known, or at least sensed, that they, too, were destined to die sooner or later, as they were both concentration-camp inmates and Jews.³

The network of Nazi concentration camps had grown rapidly in size and number since the beginning of World War II, as it was extended throughout the territories occupied by Germany. In the course of this expansion, hundreds of satellite camps had been added to the large “main camps.” The entire camp system, too, underwent a functional change — economic exploitation and extermination were added to its original functions suppressing and eliminating the (political) opposition, primarily in Germany.

The concentration camps were integrated into the Nazi system of forced labor. In particular, the satellite camps, established near factories, mines, or building sites, were first and foremost “labor camps.” Their inmates constituted the lowest category of slave laborers in the Nazi empire. However, independently from economic considerations, the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt; Reich Main Security Office) and its Gestapo branch made use of the concentration camps as places for killing “unwanted” persons clandestinely and outside the law. It began with the execution of German felons and war resisters,⁴ continued with the targeted murder of members of the Polish intelligentsia and Soviet prisoners of war, and culminated in the mass gassing of Jews at the Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps.

Auschwitz was the place where, at the beginning of 1942, the major extermination lines followed by the RSHA — and which hitherto had been developing independently — eventually converged: the concentration camp and the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” as the Nazis euphemistically

³ The fact that every *Häftling*, not only the Jewish ones, was bound to die can be deduced from various factors, such as the average food ration provided for concentration-camp inmates. It was fixed so low that a prisoner inevitably had to die in the space of a few months from malnutrition alone.

⁴ See Rudolf Höss, *Kommandant in Auschwitz* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1963), pp. 110-116.

called their project to murder the Jews. Thus, Auschwitz became the paradigm of genocide, and today is a synonym for the Holocaust itself.

Auschwitz was also the starting point for the odyssey of those 294 Jewish women who, toward the end of the war, zigzagged through the Nazi concentration-camp system. When and from where had they been transported? For what purpose? How were they treated during the transports, in the camps, and at the work places to which they were sent? Were there differences in the treatment? When and by whom were they liberated? How many survived? How does their experience fit into the general pattern of the treatment of Jews as described in Holocaust research? This article examines their path through the “galaxy” of Nazi camps⁵ and attempts to answer these questions.

Following their survival of the selection at Birkenau, about 200 were selected, in July 1944, for transfer to Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf,⁶ a small industrial town in southern Silesia about 10 kilometers south of Hirschberg,⁷ at the foot of the Riesengebirge Mountains. There they became inmates of a “forced-labor camp for Jews” (*Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden*)⁸ under the command of the Schmelt organization.⁹ The women constituted a work detail for a weaving mill

⁵“*L'univers concentrationnaire*,” as a French survivor coined it; David Rousset, *L'univers concentrationnaire*, (Paris: Pavois, 1946).

⁶ See “Examination of Vira Gombosova [Gombosová-Oravcová] by Major Fulton C. Vowell, War Crimes Investigating Team #6822, U.S. Army, 18 April 1945, at Nordhausen, Germany,” 1945, p. 5; in United States Army Investigation and Trial Records of War Criminals, United States of America v. Kurt Andrae et al. (and Related Cases), April 27, 1945 - June 11, 1958 (The Nordhausen case); National Archives Microfilm Publication M 1079, Washington 1979, roll 2, frames 377-385. According to the witness, they left Auschwitz on July 20, 1944; *ibid.*, p. 2. Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf now is Mysłakowice, Poland.

⁷ Today it is Jelenia Góra, Poland.

⁸ A (not always reliable) source states that the entire labor camp had approximately 1,000 inmates; see International Tracing Service, ed., *Catalogue of Camps and Prisons in Germany and German Occupied Territories* (Arolsen: International Tracing Service, 1949-1951), p. 639. If so, the work detail in question seems to have had a sub-camp of its own, probably near the factory, and, in the following, “Camp Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf” will refer only to this sub-camp.

⁹ SS-*Brigadeführer* Albrecht Schmelt was Himmler's Special Representative for the Distribution of Foreign Peoples' Manpower in Upper Silesia (*Der Sonderbeauftragte des Reichsführers-SS für den fremdvölkischen Arbeitseinsatz in Oberschlesien*). On Schmelt and his organization, see *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 1093-1095.

("the A.E.G. factory").¹⁰ In the autumn of 1944, the camp was made a sub-camp (*Aussenkommando*) of the Gross Rosen concentration camp, together with twenty-seven other camps of the Schmelt group.¹¹

In comparison with Auschwitz, in Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf the women were granted significantly better living conditions. They had to work hard, in twelve-hour shifts, but the accommodations were far better than at Auschwitz, as the huts they lived in had originally been intended to house German workers. The female SS guards, former factory workers themselves, who had been trained for their new jobs in a four-week course at a SS school in Langenbielau, Silesia,¹² would beat and harass them, and even steal from them at every opportune moment. However, they were fed by the factory, not by the SS, and thus received larger rations of better quality than at Auschwitz. The factory personnel also behaved well toward the prisoners. "From the director on down through the lowest German worker they were good," a survivor reported after her liberation.¹³ The women even had the opportunity to "rustle up" thread, blankets, and warm clothes from the factory. Their footwear, however, was as bad as in other concentration camps — the usual wooden clogs with a piece of cloth across the front.¹⁴

Another group of 1,700 Hungarian Jewish women, some of whom were to arrive at Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf later on, left Auschwitz on August 20, 1944, by freight train. They had been selected for *Reichseinsatz* (slave labor in the Reich). On August 22, 1944, they arrived at the southern outskirts of Frankfurt am Main, where a huge airfield was under construction. They took up quarters in a hut camp that had been established on an "Aryanized" chicken farm some years ago for the German Reichsarbeitsdienst, not far from their work places.

¹⁰ The name of the factory is according to Klara Opitz, former SS wardress, in "Evidence for the Defendant Klara Opitz," in Raymond Phillips, ed., *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others (The Belsen Trial)* (London/Edinburgh/Glasgow: William Hodge & Co., 1949), pp. 379-381.

¹¹ See Alfred Konieczny, "Das Konzentrationslager Gross Rosen," in *Dachauer Hefte*, 5 (1989), pp. 15-27.

¹² Opitz interrogation, in Phillips, ed., *Trial of Josef Kramer*, p. 380. Langenbielau today is Bielawa Dzierżoniowska, Poland.

¹³ "Examination of Vira Gomboşova," p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

The camp, situated in the precincts of the small town of Walldorf, was placed under the command of the Natzweiler concentration camp.¹⁵

The construction project was run by the “Organisation Todt” (OT), the construction department of the Armaments Ministry. The women worked a twelve-hour shift and did the same work as the men on the building site. They moved and unloaded dump trucks, carried heavy cement bags, iron rails, and logs, mixed concrete for the runways, and dug ditches for cables and water pipes.¹⁶ Allied aircraft often attacked the building site. Since slave laborers were strictly forbidden from seeking shelter from air raids, those attacks killed and wounded many prisoners.

Though the accommodations seem not to have been too bad, survivors testified that the food was insufficient considering the heavy work. But first and foremost we find in every testimony severe complaints about the cruelty of the SS personnel, particularly about the camp leader, SS-*Sturmscharführer* Reinhold Loehs, who is reported to have harassed and tormented the prisoners wherever and whenever he could. For example, a survivor testified:

At Frankfurt, a most brutal and wicked SS chief tyrannized us. Reveille was at 4:30 A.M. If somebody did not jump up immediately, the whole block would be deprived of breakfast. He used to slap elderly women on the face if they had not undressed completely in the cold washroom ... Come snow, come rain - we had to go to work dressed in only a frock. If on occasion the labor leader or the OT leader showed pity for us and sent us home, the chief would send us back to the forest to collect wood, as a punishment for having returned home without his prior permission. And that was not simply collecting dry twigs. We had to bring back heavy logs. Twenty grabbed a log, and every time we fainted, the SS man would beat us.¹⁷

¹⁵ Anette Raab-Neff, “Forschungsergebnisse,” in *Magistrat der Stadt Mörfelden-Walldorf*, ed., *Nichts und niemand wird vergessen* (Mörfelden-Walldorf: Magistrat der Stadt Mörfelden-Walldorf, 1996), pp. 10-13.

¹⁶ See the testimonies of Sarolta Mittelmann, Budapest, June 24, 1945, Archives of the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation, Budapest, no shelf-mark; Helena Halperin, given in 1978, in *Nichts und niemand wird vergessen*, pp. 14-16, and Susanne Farkas, given on September 14, 1978, in *ibid.*, pp. 19-22.

¹⁷ Mittelmann testimony, p. 2.

The Waldorf (or Frankfurt) camp was closed down during November and December 1944, and the women were sent by train to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Work on the airfield still continued. It is reported that, after the women left, the camp was occupied by Russian prisoners of war. Though corroborating documents have not yet been found, this assumption seems plausible. It might also give us a clue as to why the concentration camp was closed down. Evidently, from the construction companies' point of view, it was preferable to employ male workers instead of emaciated Jewish women whose performance was regarded as being the lowest of all slave laborers.¹⁸

The women in question arrived at Ravensbrück at the end of November 1944.¹⁹ They were quarantined for ten days in a totally overcrowded tent camp. Afterward they were moved to a filthy block full of lice, where they stayed for another two weeks. Intestinal diseases and the cold, damp weather claimed many lives among them.²⁰ They remained idle until they were selected for work in mid-December 1944. The owner of the Zillerthal weaving mill himself had come to Ravensbrück to choose from among the prisoners.²¹ According to testimonies of survivors, the transport left Ravensbrück around December 20, and arrived at Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf on December 24, 1944.²² The women were “welcomed very respectably,”²³ even being offered fancy cakes and sweets. It seems as if work at the textile factory had come to a standstill. The women who had arrived from Ravensbrück reported after

¹⁸ The performance of Jewish labourers under comparable conditions at the Landsberg and Mühldorf camps was estimated by OT engineers as equal to one-third of a German worker and less than half the performance of a Russian POW; see Edith Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ-Aussenkommandos Kaufering und Mühldorf*, (Landsberg: Neumayer, 1992), p. 126, note 72.

¹⁹ An early document states they arrived on November 27, 1944; cf. testimony of Rózsi Blobstein (Mrs József Klein) and her sister Helena Blobstein (later married, Halperin), given at Budapest, on July 6, 1945; Archives of the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation, Budapest (no shelf-mark), p. 1.

²⁰ Mittelman testimony, pp. 2-3.

²¹ Blobstein testimony, p. 2. The witness says “the owner” (*der Fabrikbesitzer*), but it might as well have been one of the factory’s managers.

²² Dates taken from Blobstein testimony, p. 1, and Mittelman testimony, p. 3.

²³ See Mittelman testimony, p. 3 (*nagyon rendesen kaptunk*).

their liberation that they should have gone to work but did not any more because the looms lay idle.²⁴

By comparing the lists of inmates in the concentration camps of Walldorf²⁵ and Grosswerther, fifty-one certain or near-certain matches of names and personal data can be found. This means that at least fifty Hungarian women were in the transport from Ravensbrück to Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf. If we take into further consideration that 200 women — most likely, all Hungarian Jews — had already been in the camp, we have a total of about 250 Hungarian Jewish women. The difference to 294 (the strength of the detail before the evacuation) very nearly equals the number of the Polish Jewish prisoners²⁶ (a high percentage of prisoners at Ravensbrück were Polish) who must have arrived either by some still-unknown transport or, more likely, together with the Hungarians from Ravensbrück. It thus seems reasonable to assume that about 100 women had been part of this transport — half of them Hungarian, half of them Polish. It is plausible that the Polish women also had started their “concentration-camp careers” at Auschwitz, like their Hungarian comrades. From this point onward, the women of Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf stayed together as a group, apart from those who died en route or who managed to escape.

On January 12, 1945, the Soviets began to launch their large offensive from their bridgehead at Baranow on the Vistula. They overran the German defense lines and soon were approaching the pre-war borders of the Reich. The eastern concentration camps — above all, the huge camp complexes of Auschwitz and Gross Rosen — were hastily evacuated toward the Reich interior. In the middle of February 1945, Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf was evacuated toward Bohemia, supposedly the “safer” side of the Riesengebirge Mountains.²⁷ The prisoners were marched 60 kilometers on foot across the ridge, in the dead of winter, without adequate footwear, along roads and paths covered with ice and snow. It was their first evacuation transport; others were still to follow.

²⁴ See Blobstein testimony, p. 2, and Mittelman testimony, p. 3.

²⁵ Copy at Stadtmuseum Walldorf.

²⁶ The two exceptions may be disregarded in this approximate calculation.

²⁷ The date can be counted back from information given by Opitz, in Phillips, ed., *Trial of Josef Kramer*, p. 380.

A survivor testified four months later:

Food and blankets were loaded on carts, and the sick ones had their own carts, too. There were no horses. By eight [people] we pushed and pulled the carts. Our feet slipped. Uphill, downhill — it was dreadful torture. At night we slept in barns or similarly covered places; one night we spent in the open air.²⁸

A bystander, a German woman, dared to reproach the accompanying SS men for having harnessed women to the carts. She received a curt reply: “Shut up, shut your f***ing mouth, move your ass!”²⁹

No casualties were reported from this evacuation march, although it surely took a lot of the prisoners' physical and moral energies. Maybe the reason was that the distances covered daily did not exceed 10-12 kilometers and that the SS guards obviously were not interested in killing.

Nearly one week later the column reached the Morgenstern camp, another sub-camp of Gross Rosen in the vicinity of Morchenstern,³⁰ a small industrial town in the Sudetenland east of Gablonz.³¹ There the women were sent to work at the Iserwerke, a plant for the manufacture of airplane parts, which produced wings.³² The women stayed there for only three and a half weeks.³³ On March 12, 1945, they left Morgenstern by train.

It is said that the whole factory, together with all its personnel, were to be transferred to *Sperrgebiet* Mittelbau (Mittelbau restricted area).³⁴ Probably the Iserwerke plant was integrated into the Me 262 jet-fighter production line. In the *Sperrgebiet* Mittelbau region, a circle with a radius of 50 kilometers, with the town of Nordhausen at its center, *SS-Gruppenführer*, Dr. Hans Kammler,

²⁸ Mittelmann testimony, p. 3.

²⁹ “Halt die Fresse, halt die Fresse, geh herein [...] hat er ihr gesagt”; interview with Helena Halperin (née Blobstein) int Bnei Brak, Israel, by Herbert Oswald, in 1978; copy from the tape recorded, unpublished manuscript, Stadtmuseum Walldorf, p. 12.

³⁰ Today Smržovka, Czech Republic. The name of the camp is spelled either “Morchenstern,” or “Morgenstern.” The author prefers the latter version as used by the survivors.

³¹ Today Jablonec nad Nisou, Czech Republic.

³² “Examination of Vira Gombosova,” p. 7.

³³ See Opitz interrogation in Phillips, ed., *Trial of Josef Kramer*, p. 380.

³⁴ Testimony of Johann Demange, former SS guard, May 16, 1947, at the Dachau camp; in The Nordhausen Case, roll 2, frames 732-736, p. 3.

Göring's plenipotentiary for "Breaking the Aerial Terror,"³⁵ had concentrated the main facilities for developing, testing, and producing jet fighters and anti-aircraft missiles. These were high-tech weapons with which Kammler hoped to reverse the strategic situation in the European theater at the last minute in favor of Germany.

Let us leave as an open question whether or not the machinery from Iserwerke was moved to the Nordhausen area. In any event, it would not have helped much. Allied aircraft had already paralyzed the German traffic system. The flow of raw materials, supply parts, and energy into and within the region was interrupted to the extent that industrial production had broken down almost completely. Therefore, it is not surprising that the women prisoners at Grosswerther were idle again. There is evidence that, during the entire period, only a single work detail of about thirty women was sent to a factory at Nordhausen.³⁶ No sooner had they begun to work were they interrupted by heavy air attacks by Allied aircraft against the town.³⁷

Camp Grosswerther's provisional character was clearly evident by both its appearance and the living conditions there. From the outside, nothing particular indicated the existence of a concentration camp: no barbed wire, no watchtower, no people in the characteristic blue and grey striped prisoner outfit. Both "blocks," the former dance halls, were situated on the first floors of the inns, accessible to the prisoners only by the fire escapes, narrow flights of stairs that led into the courtyards. These entrances were guarded by the SS. The SS personnel were billeted in neighboring private homes and in the schoolhouse. These included SS-*Oberscharführer* Werner Beest, the camp commander, four SS guards, elderly Wehrmacht soldiers who had been drafted into concentration-camp service, and eighteen female SS guards who

³⁵ *Der Beauftragte des Führers für das Programm "Brechung des Lufterrors,"* appointed on January 21, 1945, by *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring; see Karl-Heinz Ludwig, *Technik und Ingenieure im Dritten Reich* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1974), p. 503.

³⁶ Mittelman testimony, p. 3. The factory is still unidentified.
³⁷ *Ibid.*; Blobstein testimony, p. 2. The air raids were on April 3, 1945, in the afternoon, and on the following day in the morning.

were responsible for “garrison duty.”³⁸ Only the men carried firearms; the SS women had sticks with which they occasionally beat the prisoners.

The detail leader and chief of the SS wardresses was Erna Petermann. “She was a sympathetic but stern woman, hated the Jews in particular, however, but never beat us,” quite in contrast to her alternate, a certain Gertrud Sieber.³⁹

Villagers still tell stories about the orgies the SS women had with men from the neighborhood, probably SS men from the Mittelbau camp.⁴⁰ Such behavior was quite common at that time among the SS in the concentration camps and their friends. In the face of the imminent collapse of their power, they lost all their pride and self-control and followed the motto: *Après nous le déluge!*⁴¹

The prisoners at Camp Grosswerther, however, had nothing to celebrate. In the halls there were neither beds, nor even pallets. The women slept on the bare ground wrapped in their blankets. The stage of one of the halls had been transformed into a sick bay, where an Ukrainian prisoner-doctor, Angelina Kyslenko, took care of her sick comrades.⁴² Sanitary conditions were appalling. There was no water and no toilet upstairs. Provisional toilets had been installed on the edge of the manure pit, and water had to be pumped from a well in the courtyard, which was totally inadequate for so many people.⁴³ There were also no cooking facilities for the prisoners. Every day around noon a lorry would arrive from Camp Boelcke-Kaserne, Nordhausen, one of the big sub-camps of Mittelbau, and would bring food in large, uncovered tubs.

³⁸ Demange testimony, pp. 1-2.

³⁹ “Examination of Vira Gombosova,” p. 8.

⁴⁰ See Paul Lauerwald, “Das Aussenlager Grosswerther des Konzentrationslagers Mittelbau-Dora,” in *Beiträge zur Heimatkunde aus Stadt und Kreis Nordhausen 15* (1990), pp. 26-31.

⁴¹ On Mittelbau, see Neander, *Das Konzentrationslager Mittelbau*, p. 266.

⁴² Testimony of Mrs. Ursula Körber née Schönemann, daughter of the owner of the inn “Zur Weintraube,” March 3, 1988, as quoted by Lauerwald, “Das Aussenlager Grosswerther,” p. 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

“It was kind of a thin soup in which only a few pieces of carrots, potatoes, or turnips were floating. If one of the Jewesses would jump the queue ... she would be beaten on her hands by the SS wardress, her mess tin would be knocked out of her hands, and she would get nothing to eat.”⁴⁴

The thin soup that the German eyewitness remembered so precisely forty-three years later surely was the infamous *Judensuppe* — which was absent of any nutritive value toward the end of the war. It takes little imagination to grasp how badly the women suffered from hunger.

Their terrible suffering, however, apparently did not undermine the prisoners’ morale, or prevent them from trying to supplement their meager rations. Eyewitnesses from the village reported that the women were busy knitting jumpers, gloves, socks and similar articles (most likely from thread they had brought with them from the factory at Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf), which they offered to the villagers in exchange for food. This was not an easy task, as it had to be done secretly, unseen by the SS.⁴⁵

We have also read about prisoners, probably Polish, who used to sing melancholy Yiddish songs in the evening, alone or in a group. These tunes occasionally touched a SS woman's heart.⁴⁶ As the weather was fine that spring, the prisoners were even granted a walk in the open air — under SS guard, of course.⁴⁷

Toward the end of March 1945, the SS staff at Mittelbau was preparing for the evacuation of the entire camp complex — with more than 40,000 inmates — in the face of the steadily advancing American troops.⁴⁸ The *Sperrgebiet* Mittelbau region had not as yet experienced combat. There had been air attacks, indeed, but only minor ones, mostly by small groups of low-flying aircraft. People in the area felt relatively safe from the impact of war.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 28 and 30. Cf. also Demange testimony, p. 4.

⁴⁶ See Lauerwald, “Das Aussenlager Grosswerther,” p. 30, and Helena Halperin interview, p. 12.

⁴⁷ See Mittelmann testimony, p. 3.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of those preparations, see Neander, *Das Konzentrationslager Mittelbau*, pp. 257-328.

However, this suddenly changed when, on the afternoon of April 3, 1945, a squadron of 255 British bombers attacked Nordhausen, followed by a similar raid the next morning. In an area bombardment, a major part of the town was razed to the ground.⁴⁹

The Allied air attack on Nordhausen was probably what triggered the long-planned evacuation of the Mittelbau camps, which began hastily on the evening of the first bombardment.⁵⁰ On April 4, in the morning, the evacuation order from Camp Dora arrived at Grosswerther. From the documents it is inconclusive whether the designated destination was Bergen-Belsen,⁵¹ or some other place in the southern part of the Reich.⁵² But one thing is certain: on Wednesday afternoon, April 4, 1945, the entire Grosswerther camp — 290 prisoners, together with their camp leader, SS guards, and SS wardresses⁵³ — started marching westward.

They were guarded only by camp commander Beest and his four SS men, because guarding a concentration camp, even a women's camp, was men's business, and an evacuation transport was nothing but a "concentration camp on the road."⁵⁴ For the SS personnel, the evacuation march was a flight from the enemy. Therefore they tried to speed up the column. The prisoners, however, physically exhausted and hoping to preserve their minimal energy, tried to slow down. Moreover, they thought Allied troops were very near and hoped to be liberated soon.⁵⁵

After a march of five hours, over a distance of 17 kilometers, the prisoners reached Bleicherode, a small rural town. There they stayed overnight in a

⁴⁹ Among over 8, 000 victims, there were about 1,400 concentration-camp prisoners, inmates of Camp Boelcke-Kaserne; see *ibid.*, pp. 284-288.

⁵⁰ For details, see *ibid.*, pp. 329-477.

⁵¹ See the testimony of SS wardress Ilse Steinbusch at the Belsen Trial, in Phillips, ed., *The Trial of Josef Kramer*, p. 352.

⁵² "Examination of Vira Gombosova," p. 8; and Demange testimony, p. 2.

⁵³ Except a few of them who hitched a ride to Bergen-Belsen with SS personnel from the Kleinbodungen camp, another out-camp of Mittelbau.

⁵⁴ Joachim Neander, "Auf Transport - ou: Le camp de concentration sur roues," in *Souviens-toi* 44-45 (1996), pp. 31-42.

⁵⁵ In fact, the front still was about 100 kilometers away.

schoolhouse, sleeping on the bare ground and receiving no food.⁵⁶ The next day they got only as far as Bischofferode, 12 kilometers away, in the Eichsfeld district. This was a strongly Catholic, rural region, where Nazi ideology had not been able to permeate peoples' minds totally.⁵⁷ The sight of hundreds of emaciated young women who heart-rendingly implored for something to eat must have aroused a sense of pity among the local population.

German eyewitnesses as well as survivors testify that villagers placed a big pot full of boiled potatoes on the roadside.⁵⁸ The SS personnel obviously were undecided as to what to do. There is evidence that some tried to chase the prisoners away with blows from their rifle butts.⁵⁹ One survivor, however, testified that, after discussions among the SS personnel, the women were even allowed to accept bread and sausages from villagers who offered it to them.⁶⁰ Of course, the SS people did not starve. At Bleicherode, the Farmers' Leader (*Bauernführer*) had food brought for them, and, at Bischofferode, they even had a warm meal for breakfast.⁶¹

The prisoners were accommodated in the hayloft of a barn belonging to Hugo Schliesing, a local farmer.⁶² As they had heard from a Ukrainian prisoner of war that "the Americans would be by in about two days," the women decided not to leave the hayloft.⁶³ The SS guards tried in vain to get them out, threatening them with their firearms. Only when a detachment of Wehrmacht soldiers with machine guns arrived did the women give up and leave the barn. They were assembled at the center of the village, "in a triangular plaza," surrounded by SS and Wehrmacht. One of the prisoners, Rózsa Funk, a Hungarian from Kisvárda,

⁵⁶ "Examination of Vira Gombosova," p. 8.

⁵⁷ A similar experience from the strongly Catholic Bavarian "outback" is reported by the Frenchman Richard Ledoux, inmate of Buchenwald, in Pierre Durand, *Les armes de l'espoir. Les Français à Buchenwald et à Dora* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1977), p. 215.

⁵⁸ Helena Halperin interview, p. 14. Cf. also the testimony of an unknown villager, quoted in Ludwig Hotze and Richard Seidenstücker, "Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in Bischofferode," 1969, mimeographed.
⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Helena Halperin interview, p. 13.

⁶¹ Demange testimony, p. 4.

⁶² Hotze and Seidenstücker, "Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in Bischofferode."

⁶³ For this paragraph and the following quotation, see "Examination of Vira Gombosova," p. 8.

told the group leader that the people could not go ahead because they had no food, they were too weak. We arranged for the girls to fall down and feign that they were too weak and not able to go on any more.

We cannot but admire the courage and discipline of those women prisoners who took an extremely great risk by committing this act of overt mutiny. But the SS and the soldiers, instead of opening fire, as one might have expected, gave in. Perhaps the approaching German defeat instilled some fear in them. Perhaps they had some scruples about killing women, especially in broad daylight and in front of the whole village population. Or maybe the girls falling down in front of them, exhibiting this archaic gesture of submission, aroused in them a sense of pity — they had the women stand up again. The Wehrmacht soldiers arranged for a meal (“a warm goulash”⁶⁴) and even for lorries, which brought the whole group to Herzberg, the next railway station. There they arrived on the morning of April 6, 1945.

Many prisoners had taken advantage of the general confusion at Bischofferode to try to escape. There is testimony that a farmer's wife, Agnes Herzberg, found a fugitive prisoner on the border of the village, hid her in a field barn until dusk, and took her into her home at night and hid her there until the Americans arrived on April 10, 1945.⁶⁵ The courageous and humane behavior of Mrs. Herzberg, regrettably, was a rare exception even in those days, when Nazi power was collapsing before everyone's eyes. It is a proof, however,

that possibilities did exist for saving human lives if the German population would only have shown more courage and more humane feelings and less loyalty to the Nazi regime — if only during the last weeks and days of the war.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Helena Halperin interview, p. 13. The witness gives all the credit to an elderly Wehrmacht soldier who, according to her testimony, convinced the SS personnel to treat the prisoners in a humane way; *ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

⁶⁵ Hotze and Seidenstücker, “Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung in Bischofferode.”

⁶⁶ Shmuel Krakowski, “The Death Marches in the Period of the Evacuation of the Camps,” in Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf, eds., *The Nazi Concentration Camps* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984), p. 488.

Vera Gombosová-Oravcová, the camp clerk (*Lagerschreiber*), a “half-Jewess” from Kosice, and six of her comrades had a different experience; namely, with those Germans who showed the usual “loyalty to the Nazi regime”:

In an opportune moment I escaped. Six girls accompanied me. We lay in a hay loft covered by straw. There was a balcony above us about 7 feet high, quite high. I climbed to it but the others could not get up. Some children appeared to play and they spotted the girls. They called their mother who then notified the police. The police took the girls away. The police searched the balcony with a dog called “Sonia” but they didn't find me. I remained there a day. A Russian child found me the next day, a boy of 15 who worked there. He brought me bread every day. On the 10th he appeared and told me the Americans have come.⁶⁷

The fate of the six prisoners “taken away by the police” is unknown. If they were lucky, they were added to some other passing evacuation transport. As a rule, however, fugitive concentration-camp prisoners “were brought to special treatment,” as the Nazis euphemistically used to say. That is, they were killed.

On the arrival of the Grosswerther prisoners at Herzberg station, the SS took a roll call. Thirty-five women were missing.⁶⁸ However, as no casualties have been reported from that period, not even by survivors, apparently all of them had succeeded in escaping. Former Auschwitz staff member SS-*Obersturmführer* Sell, now coordinating the evacuation of the Mittelbau camps was furious at this outcome. He called Camp Leader Beest names and promised him: “You soon will see a prisoners' camp, but from inside.”⁶⁹ The Americans made good his promise by taking him and his SS comrades-in-arms into custody.⁷⁰

Luckily for the SS, at Herzberg station a long freight train had been waiting for departure since daybreak: the “Taifun Express.”⁷¹ It was the next-to-last evacuation transport to leave the main camp of Dora. It had left the night

⁶⁷“Examination of Vira Gombosova,” pp. 8-9.

⁶⁸Demange testimony, p. 5.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹For details of this transport, see Neander, *Die Konzentrationslager Mittelbau*, pp. 349-353.

before, with approximately seventy cars, mostly heavy-goods wagons covered by canvas tarpaulins, wagons that originally had been designed for shipping “V-2” rockets. Everything necessary for the serial production of the “Taifun,” an unguided surface-to-air missile, had been loaded on them. In addition, about a dozen boxcars and carriages were occupied by the personnel of the future plant, among them 350 to 400 prisoners, mostly German nationals. The transport commander was Luftwaffe first Lieutenant Dr. Klaus Scheufelen, who would later become one of America's “Space Heroes.”⁷²

The 255 women who had arrived from Grosswerther were crowded into three box cars connected to the “Taifun Express” immediately behind the engine. This location was purposely chosen. Allied low-flying aircraft, which at that time were continuously attacking German rail links, would aim first at the engine when they assaulted a train. Consequently, the cars behind the engine were most endangered, and, therefore, the SS had set aside those places for Jews or sick prisoners, people whom they cared for least of all.

On April 6, 1945, still before noon, the “Taifun Express” left Herzberg station. The train went around the western edge of the Harz Mountains via Osterode-Seesen-Goslar. The journey was frequently interrupted by air-raid alerts. On April 7, 1945, in the late afternoon, just after the “Taifun Express” had passed through Vienenburg, a small rural town north of Goslar, American fighter-bombers attacked the train. Two bombs fell directly beside the rails. Civilians, soldiers, SS personnel, and Dora prisoners hurriedly disembarked, seeking shelter in the terrain and anxiously waiting for the next wave of attack. The women who were cooped up in their boxcars were, for fear of death, desperately hammering with their fists against the walls and screaming loudly. The fighter-bombers returned. Now they aimed their machine guns at an embankment where they thought the SS people were hiding.⁷³ The cars with the Jewish women were also hit. After the planes had veered off, this brought

⁷² Scheufelen was one of the German missile experts associated with Werner von Braun who, immediately after the war, were brought clandestinely and against the law to the United States by “Operation Paperclip.” See, for example, Linda Hunt, *Secret Agenda* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991); Tom Bower, *The Paperclip Conspiracy: The Battle for the Spoils and Secrets of Nazi Germany* (London: Michael Joseph, 1987); and Rainer Eisfeld, *Mondsüchtig* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1996).

⁷³ Testimony of Karl Feuerer, German prisoner at Dora, undated (probably before 1948), Archives of Mittelbau-Dora Memorial, Nordhausen, shelf-mark 50.3.2. no. 35.

some courageous German prisoners to jump out from behind their cover and, in defiance of the orders of one of the SS non-commissioned officers, run to the cars and open them.⁷⁴ The SS men then fired on those prisoners: one was killed; another severely wounded.⁷⁵ The planes then returned for a third assault. No sooner had the pilots begun to nosedive than they discovered the women prisoners pouring out of the cars. They immediately stopped the dive, dipped their wings, and veered off. The attack had resulted in seventeen dead, among them one Jewish woman, and almost thirty wounded.⁷⁶

The “Taifun Express” continued on its way via Magdeburg - Riesa - Dresden toward the Protectorate. Food rations, for the Jewish prisoners already far below subsistence level, were steadily diminishing. No support was forthcoming from the German population — be it in Germany proper, or in the Sudetenland. But when the train passed through a Czech settlement, people would give abundantly. Only a small fraction, however, would reach the prisoners, because “the SS personnel made sure to get the lion's share of it.”⁷⁷

After passing through Prague, the “Taifun Express” continued its way south toward Austria. On either April 14 or 15, 1945, the train must have reached Linz. Here at last, but probably somewhat earlier, maybe at the Gaisbach junction, the cars with the Jewish women were disconnected and directed toward Mauthausen. They arrived there on April 15, 1945, on which date “221 prisoners from Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp” are documented as “intakes” (*Zugänge*) for the women's camp.⁷⁸ There were thirty-three fewer than had been present at the Herzberg roll call. At least one of the missing had died in the air attack near Vienenburg. The fate of the other thirty-two

⁷⁴The responsible SS NCO was never identified; see United States Army Investigation and Trial Records of War Criminals, National Archives Microfilm Publication M 1079, roll 7, frames 641 ff.

⁷⁵Testimony of German prisoners at Dora Oskar Büschler and Theo Webers, given before a U.S. commission on April 24, 1945, at Leipzig; Nuremberg Document PS-2222.

⁷⁶The number of Jewish prisoners among the wounded, as well as the name of the dead prisoner, is unknown.

⁷⁷Friedrich Kochheim, German political prisoner at Dora, *Bilanz. Erlebnisse und Gedanken* (Hannover: published by the author, 1952), p. 78.

⁷⁸Andreas Baumgartner, “Frauen im Konzentrationslager Mauthausen. Dokumentation, Quellensammlung und Datenbank” (Vienna, 1996, unpublished), pp. 79-80.

women remains unknown. We may assume that some of them died en route⁷⁹ and that the others had managed to escape.⁸⁰

At Mauthausen the prisoners found very harsh living conditions. In the Jewish women's blocks, all inmate supervisors were Gypsies. They treated the Jews badly, pushing them around, insulting, and beating them. The daily food ration consisted of 120 grams of bread, one liter of “soup” at noon, and one-third of a liter of “soup” in the evening.⁸¹ Forty-four women of the Grosswerther group were still put on work details. Presumably, they stayed put.⁸² Those who survived were liberated by the Americans on May 5, 1945. Another woman from Grosswerther, Marie Mauer, who had been registered as “French” at Mittelbau and as “Belgian” at Mauthausen, might have belonged to the group of 231 Belgian *Schutzhäftlinge* who were liberated on April 22, 1945 by the Red Cross.⁸³

Most of the former Grosswerther inmates, however, were marched off at the end of April 1945, toward Gunskirchen,⁸⁴ a sub-camp of Mauthausen about 60 kilometers southwest of the main camp in the Alps. There were several death marches (so-called “evacuation transports” on foot) from Mauthausen to Gunskirchen,⁸⁵ and it seems as if the women who had arrived from Grosswerther did not stay together but were divided among various marches. Sarolta Mittelman, a Hungarian Jew from Ungvár, has given a concise description of the death march in which she participated:

We were marched off together with the men. On departure we got food for one day. We marched off. On the way we had very little to eat. Hunger was terrific. The men plucked out grass and herbs, which we boiled. Sometimes we managed to dig out a few potatoes, but whoever

⁷⁹ A survivor tells about “many dead among us” due to air attacks; Blobstein testimony, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Demange testimony, p. 5.

⁸¹ Mittelman testimony, p. 3.

⁸² Andreas Baumgartner, *Die vergessenen Frauen von Mauthausen* (Vienna: Österreich, 1997), p. 189.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 187. Marie Mauer's fate, however, is also unknown.

⁸⁴ Blobstein testimony, p. 3, Mittelman testimony, p. 4, and testimony of Ilona Sichermann, given at Pocking, Germany, on July 8, 1947; The Nordhausen Case, roll 2, frames 639-640.

⁸⁵ Peter Kammerstätter, “Der Todesmarsch ungarischer Juden von Mauthausen nach Gunskirchen im April 1945,” Linz, 1971 (mimeographed).

was caught was bumped off. Nevertheless we dared it, so badly were we famished. Of course not many could stick it out, and many sat down on the roadside worn-out. The SS officer rode by bicycle all along the road and shot everybody to death who he saw sitting. Once we sat down totally exhausted. The SS man noticed it and pulled his gun on us. Quickly we jumped up, and so he spared our lives.⁸⁶

Four to five days after their departure from the Mauthausen camp, the prisoners arrived at Gunskirchen. The camp was already totally overcrowded, sanitary conditions were dreadful, and food was absolutely insufficient. The whole camp organization was about to collapse. Typhus broke out, and hundreds of emaciated prisoners died every day.⁸⁷ Those who were lucky enough to survive would eventually welcome their American liberators on May 5, 1945. Their odyssey through the gamut of Nazi concentration camps finally had come to an end.

No exact calculation can be made of the numbers of those who survived. If we estimate the number of dead until the arrival at Mauthausen at twenty, and the number of those who died in this camp, on the death march to Gunskirchen, and in that camp to half of the intake, we arrive at about 130 dead. This means that nearly every second woman who had left Grosswerther on April 4, 1945, was already dead four weeks later. Killings during the death march and overt neglect at Gunskirchen took the heaviest toll of human lives. The estimated number matches that arrived at by the late Martin Broszat: about one-third of the remaining camp inmates died in the course of the evacuation of the camps.⁸⁸

The odyssey of these 294 Jewish women may serve as an illustrative example of the migration among the Nazi camps during the final phase of the war. The first transports, from Auschwitz to Frankfurt and to Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf, the transport from Ravensbrück to Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf, as well as the transports from this camp to Morgenstern and from there to Grosswerther, clearly served the purpose of providing manpower for the German war economy. During those transports, the prisoners were treated

⁸⁶ Mittelmann testimony, p.4.
⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Martin Broszat, "Nationalsozialistische Konzentrationslager," in Hans Buchheim, et al., *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, vol. II (Olten and Freiburg i.Br.: Walter, 1965), p. 159.

neither well nor with excessive cruelty. Economic considerations might have influenced this, as a dead person cannot work. A comparison with the transport from Frankfurt to Ravensbrück, where no clear-cut economic objective was given, let alone with the last transport, the death march to Gunskirchen, indicates the difference in treatment.

The fact that this very last evacuation transport did not serve any economic purpose is beyond a doubt.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, this and similar death marches during the phase of the collapse of the Nazi concentration-camp system cannot be attributed solely to an obsessive eliminationist antisemitism on the part of “the Germans.” Seeing the marches' one and only purpose in killing those Jews who had hitherto survived, as has Daniel Goldhagen,⁹⁰ cannot be supported by the facts, or even by a deeper analysis of the non-ideological motives of the SS and of the civilian and military authorities in the regions concerned. Thus, for example, it can be shown that, at that time, evacuation was the method of choice for the SS in the camps. As long as a SS man guarded but a single prisoner, he could shirk military service. Moreover, he would have ample opportunity to choose the right moment to put on civilian clothes and to “dive off,” and thus avoid being taken prisoner and eventually being called to account for his deeds.⁹¹

In regard to the treatment of Jewish prisoners — in the camps, at work, or during the evacuation transports — the example of the Grosswerther women shows a wide variety of behaviors on the part of “ordinary Germans” toward the Jews. It is beyond doubt that in Nazi ideology, concentration-camp inmates, and Jews in particular, had only one destiny — to die. It is also clear that a large fraction of the German population shared this view and behaved accordingly. Nevertheless, our example shows that all Germans cannot be lumped together. Their behavior could range from sadistic treatment in Frankfurt and blunt killing during the death march to Gunskirchen, to relatively

⁸⁹ The author believes that the evacuation transport from Grosswerther to Mauthausen had no economic reasons, whereas Andreas Baumgartner believes it did; see Neander, *Das Konzentrationslager Mittelbau*, p. 440; Baumgartner, *Die vergessenen Frauen*, p. 183.

⁹⁰ Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 160, and chapters 13 to 14.

⁹¹ This matter, and various other possible strategies of the SS, has been discussed in detail in Neander, *Das Konzentrationslager Mittelbau*, chapter 3.6.

decent treatment at the Zillerthal-Erdmannsdorf factory and obvious signs of pity and compassion shown by some at Bischofferode. And finally, we should not forget the German peasant woman who hid the fugitive Jewish prisoner, a highly risky matter for herself and her family. Let us also not forget that those prisoners near Vienenburg, who risked their lives for Jews when they opened the wagon doors during the air raid, were Germans, too. One of them even paid for this humane act with his life. It may sound trite, but it is true: in the spectrum of the camps, “everything was possible.”⁹²

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 28, Jerusalem 2000, pp. 287- 310.

⁹² *Alles war möglich*, is the title of a film about the Dora concentration camp; on video at the Mittelbau-Dora Memorial, Nordhausen/Germany.