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'The Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG and the Auschwitz subcamp of Blechhammer, 1939-1945'

Overview

The dissertation project investigates the intertwining of a 'Four-Year Plan' industrial plant in Upper Silesia with the Nazi genocidal policy of 'annihilation through labour' manifest in the establishment of a camp for Jews in Blechhammer (Blachownia Śląsk).

It is divided into two main parts.

The first part deals with the plant's intended economic and ideological functions, whereas the second parts looks at the different groups of forced labourers with the main focus on the forced labour camp for Jews, turned into an Auschwitz satellite in April 1944.

I will start with giving you a brief overview of the two parts, before delineating the different stages in the development of the camp for Jews.

Part One: OHW

The Upper Silesian Hydrogenation Works (OHW) were founded by the Reich Ministry of Economic Development in 1939 pertaining to the autarky policy pursued by the Third Reich. The plant was intended to produce fuel from coal for the Navy and the Air Force and was, therefore, considered 'crucial to the war effort' (*kriegswichtig*). Situated roughly between Opole and Gliwice in the vicinity of a small town called Kandrzin (today Kedzierzyn-Kozle) on territory attributed to the German *Reich* in 1921, the OHW also formed part of the regime's racial policy of 'Germanizing' Upper Silesia, a region regarded as 'politically untrustworthy' due to its ethnically diverse population made up of so-called Water Poles.

Part Two: Forced Labourers

Industrial plants such as the OHW should import more German workers into the region to form a 'stronghold against Poland'. However, conscriptions of Germans to the front led to their replacement with an increasing number of foreign and forced labourers, prisoners of war and Jewish inmates, who eventually made up over 60 per cent of the total workforce. The use of forced labourers, particularly that of Jewish inmates, invariably linked the industrialists to the Nazi genocidal programme of 'annihilation through labour'.

The Forced Labour Camp for Jews/Auschwitz Subcamp

When the construction of highways had been stopped, the German Motorway Company began to supervise the construction of industrial sites, such as the OHW, and they allocated some of their Jewish workers to Blechhammer. The Motorway Company had a special agreement with Himmler's special commissioner Albrecht Schmelt, who had monopolized the deployment of Jewish forced labour in Silesia since 1941. Representatives of the so-called Schmelt Office forcefully recruited Jewish workers and rented them out to the industry.

In March 1942, a forced labour camp for Jews was established in Blechhammer.

There were three different phases in the Blechhammer camp for Jews: In 1942, it was guarded by the German order police, and in 1943 by Wehrmacht soldiers, while being administrated by the Motorway Company. In April 1944, Auschwitz took over both functions.

The first camp leader was Dr. Erich Hoffmann, a lawyer and civilian employee of the Motorway Company. Born in Breslau in 1897 and executed by Poland in 1948, he has been called a 'beast in human shape' by Blechhammer survivors. Having served two years in prison as an opponent to the Nazi regime, Hoffmann made a remarkable career in the Motorway Company later on. His official task was to manage the food allocation and work deployment of the prisoners. Notorious for his vicious temper, he also actively participated in the maltreatment and murder of inmates as well as in the selections for the Auschwitz death camp.

In the first year, the Schmelt Office provided police guards from Sosnowitz. Next to guarding prisoners, they were authorized to deal out punishments and making selections. Furthermore, the policemen brutally killed inmates by water torture on a daily basis.

The police guards were pulled out of Blechhammer in February 1943 to assist in the liquidation of ghettos. Wehrmacht veterans took over, but did not interfere much with the prisoners. Camp leader Erich Hoffmann was now mainly in charge of the selections and he continued to torture prisoners.

With the takeover, Blechhammer was put under the administration of Auschwitz III, commanded by Heinrich Schwarz. From April to November 1944, the camp leader was Otto Brossmann, followed by Kurt Klipp. As in Auschwitz, selections were now performed by an SS medical orderly, not the camp leader. The maltreatments continued and several prisoners were hanged in the end of 1944 for alleged sabotage.

In the first half of 1942, the inmates exclusively comprised of Jews from Eastern Upper Silesia. During the so-called Cosel period, Schmelt representatives stopped deportation trains from Drancy, Westerbork and Malines in Cosel to pull out up to 9,000 young men for the arms industry. The men were taken to transit camps, while the women and children and the elderly were almost immediately murdered in Auschwitz. About 600 men of these 'double selections' of Cosel, as Serge Klarsfeld calls them, were transferred to Blechhammer between October and December 1942. Many more followed when smaller Schmelt camps were disbanded in 1943 and 1944.

Blechhammer played an important role in the (pre-)selections of the Jewish population of dissolved ghettos when it was used as a transit camp in the summer of 1943. At the height of the ghetto liquidations, whole families from Sosnowitz Środula and Zagórze were held there for several days, until Schmelt representatives came to select those they deemed 'fit for work', while the others were deported to Auschwitz. The Jewish elder of Blechhammer, Karl Demerer, succeeded in rescuing about 40 children between 11 and 16 years from being sent to their deaths by bribing the camp leader Erich Hoffmann. The children remained in Blechhammer as call factors or messengers.

In July 1944, 500 Czech Jewish men were transferred to the camp after the 'family camp' (BIIfb) in Auschwitz-Birkenau had been liquidated.

In the course of 1944, the prisoner population steadily increased to about 4,000-6,000, turning Blechhammer into the second largest subcamp next to Monowitz.

The living conditions during the forced labour camp phase were significantly worse than those in larger concentration camps, such as Auschwitz. Prisoners performed exhausting menial labour on the OHW construction site, lasting 12 hours in the summer and 8 hours in the winter. German civilian overseers frequently maltreated, or even killed prisoners assigned to them.

Food rations were inadequate, often consisting of unwashed spinach and merely 200 grams of bread, or no bread at all. Sanitary facilities were poor and prisoners, unable to wash, were infested with body lice. As a result, typhus and dysentery epidemics broke out. Jewish prisoner physicians supposed to tend to the inmates were barely provided with medical supplies and instruments. There were regular selections in the camp infirmary, and prisoners unable to work for more than 14 days were gassed in Auschwitz.

Under the Auschwitz administration, hygiene and food allocations slightly improved at first, however, the inmates were also subjected to more frequent selections.

Mortality rates ranged between 87 and 95 per cent.

On 21 January 1945, the prisoners were forced on a death march to Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald in which 800 inmates perished.

Survival Strategies: The Artists

My project also highlights different survival strategies applied by the inmates. In the following, I will elaborate on the group of artists in the camp.

There were a number of established artists in Blechhammer who tried to increase their survival chances by making clandestine works of art for civilians, prisoners of war and the SS in return for additional food. Next to the material aspects, camp art equally functioned as a form of 'spiritual resistance' to the Nazis' efforts to dehumanize their victims, as postulated by Lucy Davidowich.

Here are some of the artists:

Walter Spitzer, born in Cieżyn/ Poland in 1927, came to Blechhammer in 1943. After the war he studied arts in Paris and is a sculptor and painter today. Among his works is the official memorial to the round-up of French Jews in the cycling arena of Vel-d'Hiver.

Michel Sima was born in Słonim/Poland in 1912. He went to study sculpture in Paris in 1929 and maintained close relations with artists such as Picasso, Gertrude Stein and Paul Eluard. He was deported in 1942. On his return to Paris, Picasso suggested he should photograph other artists' works-in-progress. He is said to have been the least known photographer who made some of the best known photos.

Bil Spira (he assumed the false identity of Wilhelm Freier when illegally entering France) was born in Vienna in 1913. The left-wing cartoonist fled to Paris in 1938, where he joined a group of other artists in exile around the famous writer Joseph Roth. Following the German invasion, he moved to Marseille and worked for Varian Fry's Emergency Rescue Committee as a forger. In 1942, he was denounced and deported. He later returned to Paris and resumed his work as a cartoonist.

Robert Clary, born as Robert Max Widermann in Paris in 1926, was deported in 1942 and came to Blechhammer in 1944. After the war, he moved to the United States to pursue a singing and acting career. He is probably best known for his role as French POW Lebeau in the popular television series 'Hogan's Heroes'.