

JENS-CHRISTIAN WAGNER

**BITTER TASTE OF THE LIBERATION**

When the Red Army approached Auschwitz, the majority of the prisoners already had been “evacuated,” i.e. transferred to other camps. For many of them, Mittelbau-Dora near Nordhausen became a second hell.

January 27 is a peculiar date. In 1996 Roman Herzog, then president of the Federal Republic, proclaimed it a countrywide day of remembrance for the victims of National Socialism. It was the day when, in 1945, the Red Army had liberated the concentration and extermination camp of Auschwitz, southeast of Katowice.

The great Frankfurt Auschwitz trial of 1963–1965 has made the name of this concentration camp a symbol for the mass murder of the European Jews and, moreover, for the National Socialist crimes in general. More than a million human beings from Germany and all German occupied countries – Jews, Romanies, Soviet prisoners of war, Poles and many others – were killed in the gas chambers, by forced labor or through other means.

But was January 27, 1945, really the “day of liberation”? The rapid advance of the Red Army had indeed put an end to the killing within the Auschwitz camp complex. But Soviet troops could only *liberate* about 8,000 [according to A. Strzelecki\* ca. 7,000 – ed.] people. All the other prisoners had been sent westward earlier by train transports and death marches. They still had remained in the hands of their tormentors.

Torture and killing now did no more take place far away, “in the East,” but in the very middle of the country where, in 1933, terror and crime had started. The crime had returned to the place of its origin: the center of German society.

The evacuation of Auschwitz was carried out in two stages. Already in the second half of 1944, more than 60,000 prisoners were deported to the Reich for forced labor in the armament industry. The majority were sent to Buchenwald near Weimar, Flossenbürg near Weiden (Oberpfalz), and Mittelbau-Dora near Nordhausen at the foot of the Harz mountains. The second wave of “evacuation” – as the SS used to call the death transports and marches – followed between January 17 and 21, 1945. The SS chased about 58,000 [according to A. Strzelecki\* ca. 56,000 on foot and 2,000 by rail – ed.]

prisoners on foot over icy and snowy roads, without provisions and, in most cases, even without any pause for rest. The guards killed everybody who could not keep pace. Sometimes even members of the indigenous German population, who were fleeing from the Russians, participated in the killings.

Probably every fourth prisoner who the SS forced to march off died on the road. Many prisoners were eventually loaded onto cattle cars and carried into the Reich’s interior. Some, however, had to drag themselves on foot to the concentration camp of Gross Rosen in Lower Silesia.

Shortly thereafter, this camp was also evacuated in the face of the approaching Soviet troops. The SS carried the prisoners westward by freight trains. Most of them also arrived at Buchenwald and Flossenbürg. The majority, however, were sent to concentration camp Mittelbau-Dora. Among them there were many who, shortly before, had been evacuated from Auschwitz.

Camp Dora had been established in September 1943. In the beginning, it was a sub-camp of Buchenwald. It is known first and foremost as the site of the production of the so-called “weapons of retaliation,” the cruise missile V 1 and the ballistic missile V 2 that prisoners assembled in a subterranean factory. In October 1944 Dora obtained the status of an independent, main concentration camp. In the spring of 1945, the Mittelbau concentration camp complex consisted of about forty camps that were spread out like a dense net all over the Harz region.

In the beginning of 1945, about 35,000 prisoners were working there as slave laborers. Now another 15,000 arrived, from Auschwitz and Gross Rosen. After endless marches and day-long journeys in ice-cold boxcars, without the slightest provisions, they were in a miserable physical condition. When, at the end of January, the doors of the first trains were opened at the railroad ramp of main camp Dora and at the railway station of Nordhausen, in some wagons there were only stiff-frozen dead and dying people.

This sight apparently aroused blank horror among the inmates of Dora and the other Mittelbau camps. There is hardly a survivor memoir that does not

mention the arrival of the Auschwitz transports. Anton Luzidus, a Greek prisoner who was forced to “unload” the dead and dying, reported after his liberation in May 1945: “These were the most horrible days of my life. I will never forget them. Often arms, legs, or heads remained in our hands when we tried to remove the dead, since the corpses were frozen.”

According to preserved SS documents, at least 464 Auschwitz prisoners were found dead on arrival. It is no more possible to find out the exact number of those who were recovered dead from the wagons or died shortly after arrival at Dora or at the Boelcke Barracks of Nordhausen. There the SS had established a central assembly camp for the seriously ill and the dying Mittelbau prisoners. Since the capacity of the camp crematorium was not sufficient to incinerate all the dead, the SS had pyres made from railroad ties and roofing felt. In several layers, dozens of corpses were burnt on these pyres. Neighbors and survivors later reported that the flames had blazed for several days. In the clear winter weather, the smoke could be seen for miles and miles.

“If Auschwitz had been the hot hell, Dora was the cold hell,” Hans Frankenthal, for many years the president of the International Auschwitz Committee, wrote shortly before his death in 1999. He was one of the few who survived both hells, such as the writer Jean Améry, or the later president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Heinz Galinski, or the later president of the European Parliament, Simone Veil.

Mittelbau rightfully can be seen as the successor of Auschwitz, not only because it took in several thousand prisoners from the evacuated camp and because there the “wind-up bureau” (*Abwicklungsstelle*) of KL Auschwitz was established. Together with the evacuated prisoners, some hundred SS members from Auschwitz arrived at Mittelbau. Among them was the whole staff of the camp headquarters under SS-Obersturmbannführer Richard Baer. He had been the last commandant of Auschwitz and was nominated, on February 1, 1945, the new (and last) commandant of the camp in the Harz mountains.

One of the first things he did in office was to fill nearly all important positions in the camp with SS

personnel from Auschwitz. Former Auschwitz Camp Director Franz Hössler became Camp Director of Dora. Eduard Wirths became the new Garrison Physician, a position that he had held at Auschwitz since 1942. There he had been the superior of many notorious SS doctors, such as Josef Mengele. The important Prisoner Labor Office that coordinated the slave labor was also taken over by “tried and tested” SS personnel. SS-Obersturmführer Maximilian Sell became its new chief. He brought with him several SS members from the Auschwitz Labor Office. Finally, an old *Auschwitzer* became chief of the Political Department, the camp’s Gestapo branch: Hans Schurz was the former chief of the respective Auschwitz department.

The new leadership intensified the terror in the camp. There were days in February and March 1945, when more than thirty prisoners were simultaneously killed by hanging. Once even fifty were hanged at the same time. Most of the victims were Soviet prisoners of war and forced laborers accused of sabotage by the SS and the Gestapo. Nearly always all prisoners were forced to watch the cruel spectacle.

Mass executions were not always carried out at the roll-call place. They took place also in the galleries of the *Mittelwerk* factory where the missiles were assembled. Here prisoners and civil workers had to line up. In front of everybody ropes were laid around the death candidates’ necks. The ropes were fastened at a wooden beam that was gradually hoisted by a crane. The victims were thus slowly strangled.

In all camps, from the beginning, violence and terror was ever present. The indiscriminate mass executions of the last weeks at Dora, however, were an outbreak of the desperate fury of the SS and the Gestapo about Germany’s defeat that even the last fanatic Nazi follower could see approaching. “The [allied] offensive was successful. Proof is the frenzy of our henchmen,” Edgar van de Castelee, a Belgian prisoner, wrote down in 1945.

What is more, for the SS the executions were a means of defiant self-assurance. Everybody could and should see that there were no limits to the power of the regime and its men. They wanted to show – maybe rather themselves than their victims

– that they still were in possession of the means on which their power was based: terror and violence.

From January to April 1945, about 6,000 prisoners have died in the Mittelbau camps: by terror, from exhaustion, and of illness. In the same period of time, at least 1,700 V 2 rockets and more than 6,000 V 1 cruise missiles were assembled. Thousands of civilians in London and Antwerp still fell victims to these terror weapons. Firing missiles against the Flemish city did not stop before the end of March 1945.

When, in the beginning of April 1945, the Americans approached the Harz region from the west, the SS ordered the evacuation of the camps. The same suffering that the prisoners from Auschwitz and Gross Rosen already had undergone in January and February 1945 was now repeated. Hastily and with great brutality, the guards drove the inmates into box and cattle cars. Until April 6, 1945, several trains, each loaded with thousands of prisoners, left the southern Harz region for Bergen-Belsen near Celle, Sachsenhausen north of Berlin, and Ravensbrück on the Havel.

Moreover, many marching columns of exhausted prisoners staggered north-eastward through the Harz mountains, driven by their guards. Particularly in the region north of Magdeburg, where some of the death marches had “stranded,” massacres of prisoners took place. The most brutal mass killing was perpetrated by SS members, Wehrmacht soldiers, and members of *Volkssturm* and the Hitler Youth near Gardelegen on April 13, 1945. Shortly before the arrival of American troops, they burned alive more than 1,000 prisoners from Mittelbau and sub-camps of Neuengamme in the Isenschibbe barn.

More than half of the Mittelbau “evacuees” eventually arrived at Bergen-Belsen. Among them there were thousands who previously had been transferred from Auschwitz and Gross Rosen to the Harz region. Because of overcrowding of Bergen-Belsen, the Mittelbau prisoners were not committed to the main camp, but instead to the adjacent *Kasernenlager* (barracks camp). It was occupied only by prisoners from Mittelbau and can therefore be regarded as the latter’s successor. SS-Obersturmführer Franz Hössler, Camp Director of Dora, was appointed its

commandant a few days before, on April 15 and 16, 1945, the British liberated Bergen-Belsen.

A British military court sentenced Hössler to death in November 1945. A few days later he was executed. Richard Baer, Hössler’s superior at Auschwitz and Mittelbau, hid at the end of the war with a forged identity. He was eventually arrested near Hamburg at the end of 1960 and became one of the main defendants in the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial. In 1963, he died in prison awaiting trial.

The Frankfurt trial lasted nearly two years. It showed the (west-)German people the full scale of the crimes perpetrated at Auschwitz. The wide national and international media coverage of the trial made “Auschwitz” the prime symbol of National Socialist crimes.

At the same time, however, it created a strange “atmosphere of distance.” On the one hand, “Auschwitz” evokes the image of the “Death Factory,” where killing took place – in a certain sense – automatically, without concrete perpetrators. Actually, the great majority of Nazi victims did not die in the gas chambers of Auschwitz or Treblinka, but at the edges of trenches and pits, in execution huts or in the open country. They were hanged, slain, or shot by perpetrators who met them face to face.

On the other hand – and here Mittelbau is a prime example – the great killing did not only take place “somewhere in the East,” at the periphery of the Nazi empire, but also in its center, in the middle of Germany, before everybody’s eyes, already long before the eastern camps were evacuated. Since the turn of 1943, Armament Minister Albert Speer had more and more sub-camps of concentration camps established near factories. A dense net of such camps covered Germany in the last year of the war. Their inmates were used as slave laborers in the armaments industry.

Societal blurring of the boundaries of the Nazi concentration camp system accompanied its topographical blurring. Under an increasing number of pretexts, more and more individuals were committed to the camps. The field of recruitment for camp service also widened successively. About two thirds of the Mittelbau camp guards were not genuine SS men, but Luftwaffe soldiers. Police units and civilian employees were also committed to guard serv-

ice. Eventually the Third Reich's concentration camp system had reached nearly everybody: as a victim, as a perpetrator or his helper, or as a bystander.

After the war, German society did not want to hear about this. It was generally said that the crimes took place somewhere "in the East" (if people talked about it at all), and that the perpetrators had exclusively belonged to "the SS." Maybe the concept of "the crimes committed in the East," since the 1960s symbolized by "Auschwitz," did not have only an exculpatory function. Maybe it was the only possibility for the generation of the witnesses to confront the crimes.

Now, sixty years after the end of the war, time has come to take into account the results of historical research. For instance, that Auschwitz was, indeed, liberated on January 27, 1945, but that, for the great majority of its prisoners, "Auschwitz" did not yet end. It continued to exist hundreds of miles to the west, in the middle of Germany.

\*A. Strzelecki, *The Evacuation, Dismantling and Liberation of the Auschwitz*, Oświęcim 2001

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