

Violence



“From the 3rd floor, where there was a skimpy breakfast, it was 100 steps down to the courtyard, then 100 to 150 metres across the courtyard between the factory buildings, then 50 steps up to the workroom on the 1st floor. Anyone who got away without blows from a rifle butt or a rubber hose could count himself lucky. There was an SS cordon standing along the way between the buildings, and there they also ruled only with rifle butt and rubber hose.”

Max Loock, inmate functionary (report to the works council, 1946)

Violence at the workplace

On the way to work and during their work shifts, the inmates always had to reckon with violence. SS men were stationed along the way, armed with rubber truncheons, and beat anyone who was not fast enough. The guards were equipped with pistols, but usually the inmates received blows with the hand or a tool. Slaps in the face also served as a means of humiliating the prisoners.

The long roll calls before and after work were an additional ordeal for the inmates. There were numerous pretences for administering corporal punishment, for example when an inmate fell asleep at the workplace or forgot to turn off the machines or the light during an air raid. The floggings were announced during the evening roll call and carried out before the eyes of the assembled inmates.

Violence in everyday life

In the Katzbach concentration camp, the inmates and the SS guard unit lived together under a single roof. As a result, inmates always had to reckon with violence. When an SS man entered the room, the inmates had to stand at attention immediately and take off their caps. Otherwise they would be beaten without further ado. The same was true if an SS man disliked an inmate's dirty clothing. There was often neither justification nor any reason for violence against inmates. To be sure, the camp

system had a "camp order" with precise instructions for the administration of punishment in the form of detention or flogging as well as for executions and collective disciplinary measures. It was supposed to look as though punishments were nothing more than a reaction to specific misconduct on the part of the inmates, and strictly regulated. In reality, the SS acted arbitrarily and used any excuse to mistreat and humiliate the concentration camp inmates.

"In no other other camp did I witness such harsh treatment by SS men as in this camp [Frankfurt]. This was facilitated by the fact that the SS were housed in the same building as us, so everyone could give free rein to their sadistic feelings if they felt like it."

Heinz Aber, concentration camp inmate (testimony, 1946)

“Here a burly inmate greeted us, a German. He was wearing a green triangle on his jacket, so he must have been either a thief or a murderer. He enlightened us: “I’m the camp senior, ‘Bobby’”, and showed us his club. He also told us straightaway how many blows were prescribed for disobedience.”

Andrzej Branecki, concentration camp inmate (interview)

“What was new and unfamiliar to us had to do with the ‘criminals’. They were old camp hands who had eaten out of a lot of soup pots and considered us greenhorns. They had brought their depravity and brutality with them and diligently served the SS. I don’t know how it came about that above all the ‘greens’ took on camp functions and became capos. They did something we had never experienced before: they beat other inmates, fellow sufferers.”

Władysław Jarocki, concentration camp inmate (interview, 2005)

Violence by inmate functionaries

The SS sent some 30 guards to the Katzbach camp. The only way these men were able to keep the large number of inmates under control was by making use of selected camp inmates—so-called “Funktionshäftlinge” (inmate functionaries). The latter were responsible for performing functions in the camp administration and serving as guards at the workplaces.

Inmate functionaries ranked between the SS and the inmates. They had a privileged status and better chances of survival. But they had to carry out the orders of the SS. In order to ensure discipline, they were permitted to use violence against other inmates. Katzbach concentration camp survivors report that there were no violent inmate functionaries before the end of January 1945. Then, however, there were German inmates who had “proven themselves” as inmate functionaries by SS standards in other concentration camps. Particularly the camp senior Eduard Behrendt was described by former inmates as violent.

“The moment he’s a capo he no longer sleeps in the same room with them. He’s responsible for seeing to it that they manage the workload, that they’re clean, that the beds are built well. ... In other words he has to goad his men on. The moment we’re not satisfied with him, he’s no longer a capo, sleeps in the same room with his men again. They’ll beat him to death the first night; that he knows.”

Heinrich Himmler, Reich Leader of the SS (speech, 1944)

Blows

In September 1944, the air-raid alarms in Frankfurt began to increase. This placed an additional burden on the inmates. At the Adlerwerke, all inmates were driven into the cellar during air raids; only the sick remained in the infirmary. The concern was with protecting not the inmates' lives, but the lives of the SS men guarding them.

The air raids presented an opportunity to hassle the inmates. They were rushed down to the cellar rooms as quickly as possible. Since the stairway was narrow and the inmates were weak, they were slow. The guards drove them on with blows. The cellar rooms serving as shelters were also used by the residents of the neighbourhood. There were accordingly a large number of witnesses to the maltreatment and acts of violence by the SS.

“The walk, or rather the run, from the third floor to the cellar was no picnic. There was only one staircase. The steps weren't very wide; the men could only go down in twos. But there were 1,200 of us! So minutes passed before everyone had gotten moving. The guards tried to speed up the process. Halfway down each floor there was an SS man with a club or cudgel, beating those running by on the head and back. Everyone wanted to avoid the blow and pass the SS man as quickly as possible. So the running got insanely fast, but in the wooden clogs you couldn't move properly. Some fell, others fell on top of them, bumped into the ones in front of them, who lost their balance and stumbled down to the next landing. That infuriated the SS men and they beat them all the more.”

Janusz Garlicki, concentration camp inmate (autobiographical novel, 2010)

Executions

If an inmate attacked a guard, either in an act of resistance or while trying to escape, the SS were allowed to shoot the inmate to death. Five executions by shooting are documented: Vasil' Jakimov and Semen Nikolaev were killed on 18 February 1945, Adam Golub and Georgij Lebedenko on 14 March 1945, all while attempting to escape. Kazimierz Głowacki was shot to death on 13 February 1945 by an SS man, probably in the camp. Former inmates also told of other shooting executions, but they are not officially documented.

Inmates suspected of sabotage faced the threat of execution by hanging. The executions were meant to serve as a deterrent and the collective humiliation of the inmates. Two inmates were executed by hanging at the Adlerwerke: the 36-year-old painter Władysław Sumara and the 54-year-old merchant Wincenty Bocheński. During a night shift in December 1944, a drilling jig had been damaged. The case was reported to the command staff as an "act of sabotage". It is not known which of the two inmates damaged the drilling jig or what "offence" the second inmate was executed for. The hanging took place on the fifth floor right in the sleeping quarters. All inmates had to be present and watch.

"The two inmates were hanged in the inmates' quarters. Part of the roof had been damaged by bombing, but a number of beams were still intact. The two of them were hanged on one of these beams. A large proportion of the inmates attended the execution. Before the hanging, the camp officer explained to us that the two inmates would be hanged for committing sabotage and that that would be the fate of anyone who committed sabotage. ... As a deterrent, the two of them remained hanging for a time before they were taken down and carried away."

Peter Keimling, inmate functionary (testimony, 1961)

Death

527 inmates of the Katzbach concentration camp died in Frankfurt—that is, approximately one in three. It was primarily undernourishment and forced heavy labour that accounted for the high death toll.

Many completely enfeebled prisoners were no longer able to get up and died in their beds. Yet there were also other causes of death: physical abuse, infections, and accidents at the workplace.

“When the order was: ‘Everyone fall in!’ and a fellow didn’t move, you knew why. A death detachment always made the rounds and looked through the cots. They pulled the men down and the corpses fell on the floor.”

Władysław Jarocki, concentration camp inmate (interview 1990)

[Faint, mostly illegible handwritten text at the top of the page]

[A rectangular stamp with a downward-pointing arrow and the number 722]

[Faint handwritten text below the stamp]

[A large section of dense, illegible handwritten text]

[A smaller section of illegible handwritten text]

[A circular stamp containing a stylized face or symbol]

[Handwritten text and a signature below the circular stamp]

[Faint handwritten text at the bottom of the page]

Letter to the burial services office of the municipal building department, 24 October 1944

The municipal administration was aware of the high number of Katzbach concentration camp victims through the number of cremations.

Source: Institut für Stadtgeschichte Frankfurt am Main, Best. A 67 Nr. 599

Sources

Heinz Aber, statement, 11 November 1946, in: HHStAW, 461/37574, Bl. 68.

Max Loock, report to the works council [1946], in: HHStAW, 461/37574, Bl. 61.

Max Loock, report to the works council [1946], in: HHStAW, 461/37574, Bl. 62.

Peter Keimling, inmate, statement at the Hessian State Office of Criminal Investigations, 28 September 1961, ZStL, Bl.244.

Andrzej Branecki, interview in: Joanna Skibinska: Die letzten Zeugen: Gespräche mit Überlebenden des Außenlagers "Katzbach" in den Adlerwerken in Frankfurt am Main (Hanau, 2005), p. 52.

Janusz Garlicki, Von der Wahrscheinlichkeit zu überleben: Aus dem Warschauer Aufstand ins KZ-Außenlager bei den Frankfurter Adlerwerken (Wiesbaden, 2021), p. 128.

Akhara Jussuf Mustafa (Józef Marcinkowski), Pamiętnik Jasnowidza (Warsaw, 1976), p. 199.

Władysław Jarocki, interview, quoted in: Ernst Kaiser, Michael Knorn: "Wir lebten und schliefen zwischen den Toten." Rüstungsproduktion, Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung in den Frankfurter Adlerwerken (Frankfurt, 1994), p. 209.

Heinrich Himmler, speech on 21 June 1944, quoted in: Karin Orth: "Gab es eine Lagergesellschaft? 'Kriminelle' und politische Häftlinge im Konzentrationslager", in: Norbert Frei, Sybille Steinbacher, Bernd Wagner (eds.): Ausbeutung – Vernichtung – Öffentlichkeit: Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Lagerpolitik (Munich, 2000), pp. 109–133, here p. 110.

Cover:

Zygmunt Świsłak: Blows at every curve of the stairs, drawing, detail.
The complete drawing is on view on the wall over this book.

Zygmunt Świsłak was born in Działdowo (Poland) in 1924 and fought with the Armia Krajowa (AK; Home Army) in the Warsaw Uprising. He lives in Australia.

Source: Zygmunt Świsłak