

## **Life in the Satellite Camp „Colosseum“ – Six Stories of Survival**

“At the meeting of former prisoners of the Nazi concentration camp Flossenbürg I was moved deeply by the great cordiality and frankness extended towards us, the descendants of the Nazi perpetrators, by the victims; it was my very first meeting with survivors and I had been afraid of having to look into hardened faces, full of distrust and scarred for life. Six years have passed since then, and instead of meeting with rejection, I have formed a number of friendships – which have deepened over the years through regular correspondence. When the study group at the EBW (Evangelisches Bildungswerk; Protestant Educational Society) was founded, I did not need to be persuaded to join. The talks between economic and political representatives about the starting of a foundation for the compensation of former forced labourers were stagnating, while at the same time my experiences with the survivors motivated me to speak out for those who had been subjected to forced labour in Regensburg and did not have a lobby.” The historian Sylvia Seifert M.A. is a member of the board of the “ArGe ehemaliges KZ Flossenbürg e.V.” (study group former concentration camp Flossenbürg”) and currently works at a publishing house.

### **Six Stories of Survival**

In July of 1997, Zbigniew Kolakowski, a native of Poland, unexpectedly knocked on the doors of the editorial office of the Regensburg weekly “Woche”, stating that he was one more survivor of the Colosseum.<sup>i</sup>

When we, the members of the ArGe ehemaliges KZ Flossenbürg e.V., heard of this sixth survivor of the satellite camp Colosseum, we were greatly excited, particularly since we had met the Romanian Eduard Lorber at the meeting of survivors in

Flossenbürg in June, only a couple of weeks before the sudden appearance of Kolakowski. Lorber was the only member of an extensive German-speaking Jewish family to survive Auschwitz, who, having been declared able to work, was in March 1945 transported to Regensburg via a number of labour camps.

The accounts of six survivors out of a total of 400 prisoners who had been interned at the satellite camp Colosseum in Stadtamhof - a part of Regensburg located north of the Danube - now make it possible to draw a fairly comprehensive picture of the living and working conditions at the camp as well as of the various reasons that could lead to imprisonment there. And last but not least we are now able to picture how the ultimate liberation and return of the lucky survivors to their home countries came about.

In addition to Zbigniew Kolakowski and Eduard Lorber, we were in the 1990s through intense research able to trace four other survivors:

- Roger Brosseau from France, born in 1918
- Marcel Lherbette from France, born in 1921
- Tadeusz Sobolewicz from Poland, born in 1924
- The Israeli Hersch Solnik, born in 1921 in Poland.

With the exception of Roger Brosseau, who was unable to travel for health reasons, all of these survivors have visited the city of their ill-usage 50 years after their imprisonment ended; Zbigniew Kolakowski and Tadeusz Sobolewicz have been to Regensburg several times.

The isolation of prisoners in various facilities and the exploitation of their manpower were part of the standard repertory of the Nazi government's pseudo-legal prosecution system. Until 1938 the sentences and prison terms had focused on the elimination of political opponents, but after a certain point the insatiable need of the

war-time economy for an ever increasing number of cheap labourers led to a radical change in Nazi policy (cf. the digression).

The construction of so-called satellite camps at strategic (arms) production facilities increased considerably after 1942 and reached its peak in 1944. Thus the concentration camp Flossenbürg alone commanded about 100 satellite camps in an area spanning from Dresden to Plattling and Saal/Donau to Western Bohemia.<sup>ii</sup>

The Regensburg satellite camp Colosseum as part of the extensive network of sub-camps of Flossenbürg was founded fairly late. Regensburg had become increasingly important -not only as home to the central Messerschmitt plant and a busy Danube-port, but also as an important railway hub for the transport of troops and war materials to the occupied countries of Eastern Europe. Accordingly, after 1944, the bombardments of Regensburg by the Allied Forces increased – and the so called “Fremdarbeiter” (foreign workers) interned in several camps in town were no longer able to fill the increasing demand for workers that were needed for clean-up work and reconstruction.

In 2001/02 the City of Regensburg invited surviving “foreign workers” from the Ukraine and Belrussia who shared their memories of this time with us. This is Mr. Scheludko’s account: “I witnessed three major bombardments in addition to a great number of minor ones. When the sirens went off, the Germans ran to the air-raid shelters; they knew where to go. We, on the other hand, were not allowed to use the shelters; accordingly, we took to our heels and hid in the mountains (East of Regensburg; editor’s note). During the bombardments our only hope was that we would be lucky enough to survive.” He adds thoughtfully that to this very day he occasionally hears the whine of the bombs: “All things considered, it is a miracle that I survived.”

Ultimately, the administration of the German railway system, the Deutsche Reichsbahn, was in dire need for additional workers for clean-up and reconstruction work. On March 19, 1945, 400 prisoners of different nationalities and religious backgrounds arrived from the concentration camp Flossenbürg in Regensburg. They were housed on the premises of the Colosseum, a restaurant not far from the Old Stone Bridge.

The dance hall on the first floor was turned into sleeping quarters for the prisoners – wood shavings and straw served as padding on the floor, the windows were boarded; sanitation was poor; the make-shift infirmary under the stairs lacked a doctor; a field kitchen had been installed in the courtyard of the malthouse Hermann across the street – that is what the prisoners saw when they arrived at their new place of abode.

The guard consisted of 50 members of the SS, all of them war veterans or wounded soldiers or “Volksdeutsche” (i.e. people whose language and culture had German origins but who did not hold German citizenship) under the command of the SS-Oberscharführer Ludwig Plagge. They had more comfortable quarters on the ground floor. In his memories “Aus der Hölle zurück” (Back from Hell)<sup>iii</sup> Tadeusz Sobolewicz portrays the regime of the greatly feared commander Plagge whom some of the camp’s inmates had learnt to dread already in Auschwitz.

Sobolewicz’ detailed account of the conditions of work and survival highlights an aspect that has so far received little attention: The work as a assistant cook in the camp’s field kitchen. Every day he and his Polish comrade had to make soup from frozen potatoes or turnips, scrub the two large kettles or make tea from stinging nettles – out of doors and carefully watched over by two SS-guards. Since the kettles couldn’t hold enough soup for all the prisoners, half the men were fed at noon, the other half at night. In addition, Sobolewicz and his comrade were responsible for the distribution of the meager rations of sliced bread – mere morsels for the workers, who

in the evenings returned completely exhausted by their daily chores, after having had to slave in the railway yards, removing rubble, renewing the rails and defusing bombs.

Zbigniew Kolakowski, born in 1925<sup>iv</sup>, gives a moving and detailed account of the work conditions and the daily struggle for survival: “After the morning’s roll call and breakfast we were told outside the building to be extremely careful: every attempt to escape would be punished severely with the shooting of ten fellow inmates, in addition, food rations for everybody else would be shortened. Not for a second did we doubt that they would be true to their word; accordingly we took the warning very seriously. In addition, we had sufficient reason to fear that one or the other of the inmates, who came from various countries, might undertake a suicidal attempt at escape. Any moment might see somebody willing to risk suicide ...

The band of prisoners was marched to the bridge across the mighty river, that, as we somehow were able to find out, was the Danube. After a few more minutes we reached our destination by the railroad tracks at a point about a kilometer from the Regensburg train station. In front of us, we saw an extensive network of rails, many destroyed boxcars and passenger coaches. The entire area was covered with wide and deep bomb craters that bespoke of a heavy air raid. I was amazed to see that outside the railway area hardly anything else was damaged. The allies had worked with the greatest precision. Of course we were delighted and talked on and on about the subject. The allies had cut all hell loose when they showered the area with bombs – and the Nazis deserved every single one of them. This was the second time that I had witnessed a bomb-raid. That ought to teach the Germans a lesson, they finally got what they deserved for their eastward expansion! The more often that kind of thing happened, the greater the chances that the war would finally end. For the first time I witnessed a full-blown destruction of that magnitude: The very soil had been ploughed up – with everything on it, of course. After we had all been told what to do,

a ring of guards surrounded us in a wide circle, which by order of the commander we were not allowed to leave.

Our assignment was to clean up and level the area that had been divided into sections. Our tasks were preordained, everybody went to his station where he was watched over by the Kapos who zealously urged us on and threatened us with blows. We had to collect scrap iron, railway sleepers and the debris of bomb-hit wagons, which the welders tried to cut into smaller segments with their welding torches. The older inmates supervised the progress of work, watching carefully that we did not work too fast and tried to save our strength – but of course only when the Kapos were looking the other way. We were to always pretend to work hard and willingly. To reinforce that impression, we yelled loudly and cheered each other on while we dug up the soil and pulled out the various objects buried by the bombs. For me as a welder things were much easier. With the welding torch that had been handed to me, I cut up what remained of the wagons or rails into little parts that my comrades could remove more easily. Then it was the turn of the next work group to level the cleaned area. A third group had to bring rails and sleepers for the fourth group to lay the rails under the watchful eyes of a number of civilians. Not every sleeper had the same size and hence weight; the switches in particular were extremely heavy, so that four of my fellow inmates had to carry them on poles. That incurred the disapproval of the SS-guards, who forced us to carry the sleepers two men each. Then the hustling started, the Kapos “helped” with cat calls and by beating us for all they were worth. Carrying the heavy sleepers was made even more difficult by the uneven ground, my exhausted comrades stumbled and collapsed, a fact that made the beasts in human shape even more ferocious. Each and every one of us worked to utter exhaustion because we were afraid of their blows.”

**Survival was purely a matter of chance**

The work day started at 6 a.m. and ended twelve hours later. The prisoners, who lacked proper clothing, were day after day driven across the Old Stone Bridge and right through the city center to the railway area; a second group dragged itself across the Wöhrd Island to the Kumpfmühl Bridge. They would return at night, the men pulling those of their fellow prisoners in handcarts who were too exhausted to walk, the wounded or the dying.

The hard work, in combination with the utterly inadequate nutrition, led to illness and death. A list of the city's Funeral Department names 45 dead, who were mostly buried in the Protestant Central Cemetery in the mass grave section XXXI a, row y, No. 2. Others having died at the Colosseum were buried in the Catholic Cemetery. By initiative of the U.S. military administration resp. the Bavarian Compensation Office, a monument was erected there in 1950 and dedicated to the dead. Five years later, when the French and Belgian dead of the concentration camps were exhumed and the corpses transferred to their home countries, the remnants of the other dead were taken to the central memorial at Flossenbürg. The monument on the catholic cemetery in Regensburg disappeared not long after that.<sup>v</sup>

According to the former inmates of the Colosseum, survival was purely a matter of chance. Eduard Lorber told us how a civilian labourer not far from the maintenance hall for locomotives used to secretly slip him slices of bread. During his visit to Regensburg, Lorber regretted never having been able to thank the man for his selfless help. It was this unforgettable memory that had prompted him to return to Regensburg. Unfortunately, we were unable to trace the man who had saved Lorber's life.

Eduard Lorber had planned another visit to Regensburg in the following year – which never came about, alas, because he died on January 31, 1998. Luise Gutman took the money that had been intended for this journey (together with medication for

Lorber) to Romania, where it was spent on a dignified funeral for him.

### **The Death March to the “Alpine Fortress”**

A traumatic memory of which all of the survivors spoke repeatedly was the so-called “Death March”, i.e. the “evacuation” to Hitler’s ominous “Alpine Fortress”.

Only a few days before the surrender of Regensburg to American troops, the exhausted inmates of the Colosseum were forced to leave the city on the night of April 22 to 23, 1945. Only 27 of the seriously ill remained in the city and were taken to a hospital the next day.

The last days before the liberation had been marked by fear and desperation - the exhausted prisoners had nothing to eat and exhausted comrades, who were unable to keep pace with the column, were executed. Again and again prisoners tried to escape, hiding behind bushes, in ditches or holes by the wayside. “The fast march exhausted even the strongest among us. Some of the prisoners managed to escape, others were ruthlessly executed. When the moon was not shining, when the sky was clouded or nightly fog had spread, chances of escape were better. However, when the sky was clear, the guards escorting the prisoners would catch any fugitive rather quickly.”<sup>vi</sup> Thus the concentration camp inmates dragged themselves onward via Landshut, Vilsbiburg, Dorfen, Neuötting, Altötting, Burghausen, Tittmoning to Laufen, where the remaining handful of survivors was freed by American troops on May 2, 1945.

The ArGe ehemaliges KZ Flossenbürg e.V. together with Zbigniew Kolakowski and Tadeusz Sobolewicz organized a tour retracing the route of the Death March. During a reception at the hospital in Laufen and a commemorative event at the memorial of



the city, we obtained valuable knowledge and information. For example Kolakowski and Sobolewicz owe their survival to good-hearted farmers' wives who took care of the emaciated prisoners. The talks with the eye-witnesses were an extremely moving experience for everybody present.

### **Digression: Reasons for internment in a concentration camp**

The Nazis intentionally painted a very one-sided picture of those imprisoned in concentration camps by depicting them as dangerous criminals who were strictly forbidden to talk to German civilian workers. The many interviews with survivors I have led over the past few years and a perusal of the files in the Public Record Office of the city of Amberg show very clearly that there were a number of arbitrary reasons for internment and that they were in most cases not connected with the prisoners themselves.

**Members of a certain religion** (Jews, Jehova's Witnesses) or people of a **certain ethnic origin** (Sinti and Roma) could at any time for no specific reason be committed to a concentration camp and subjected to forced labour unless they were shot without a trial.

**Prisoners of war** were in blatant violation of the Hague Convention of 1899 resp. 1907 transferred from prisoners of war camps to concentration camps where they were then subjected to forced labour. In particular when it came to members of the Soviet Army, commonly accepted legal rules and regulations were ignored.

**"Foreign Labourers"**: After the beginning of the war and after the attacks of the German army had extended to all European countries, an increasing number of forced workers were abducted to Germany. At the slightest offense or the refusal to

work they were transferred to either prison or concentration camp. Often enough, their knowledge of German was inadequate and mostly they lacked the necessary skills, which led to frustration among the employers as well as the workers themselves. The arbitrariness of the punishments, the inadequate hygiene and sanitation in the barracks, malnutrition, psychic stress, plus the fact that they were permanently under guard and had been publicly deprived of their rights (in particular the Eastern European labourers) demoralized many of them. This led to various forms of resistance, as for example acts of sabotage, property crimes or attempts at escape.

The constant and high demand of private or public employers for cheap labour led to an increase of foreign labour. Neither interviews with survivors nor recent research can sustain the oft-repeated claim that enterprises were ordered or even coerced to employ forced labourers. It was the increasing scarcity of labourers as a production factor caused by Germany's military aggression that led to a growing influx of foreign workers into the German labour market (cf. the statistics of the employment agency of Regensburg: As early as 1939, there were only a few, in 1941 hardly any unemployed registered at the agency). The federal employment agencies or else the local agencies distributed the foreign labourers to the individual craft enterprises or weapon factories. In the course of the war, the classical administration lost more and more of its powers while the decisions regarding forced labourers were increasingly transferred to a number of competing agencies, authorities or individuals. Matters of police security or ideological considerations were by and by superseded by pragmatic economic interests.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. WOCHE, July 24, 1997, Günter Schießl, „Zurück zum Colosseum“.

<sup>ii</sup> For the structure of and operating procedures at the concentration camp Flossenbürg cf. Füßl/Seifert/Simon-Pelanda, „Zwangsarbeit“, 2001, ed. by the

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<sup>iii</sup> Sobolewicz, Tadeusz, *Aus der Hölle zurück. Von der Willkür des Überlebens im Konzentrationslager*, 1999, S. 221.

<sup>iv</sup> After the Warsaw uprising of August, 1944, Kolakowski was deported as a forced labourer to the German Reich. Via the concentration camp Sachsenhausen he was taken to the Reichsbahnausbesserungswerk Dresden, a sub-camp of the KZ Flossenbürg. After the Dresden firestorm, Kolakowski was transported to the KZ Flossenbürg, from there he came to Regensburg as a skilled worker.

<sup>v</sup> Simon Pelanda, Hans, *Im Herzen der Stadt. Das Außenlager Colosseum in Regensburg*, S. 159ff. in: *Dachauer Hefte* 12, 1996.

<sup>vi</sup> Sobolewicz, Tadeusz, *loc. cit.*, S. 238.