

## Prisoners of War at Mauthausen

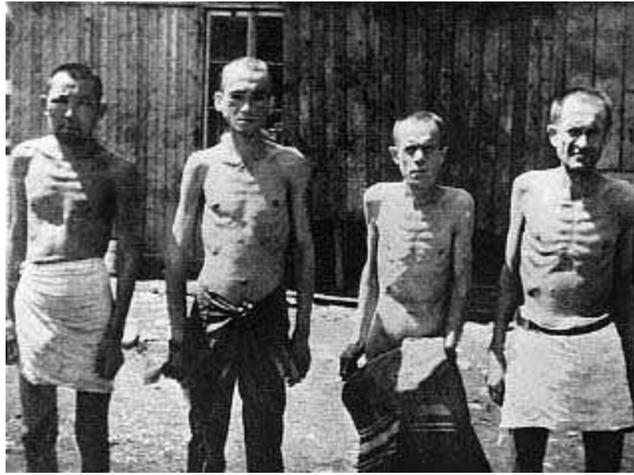
After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, a separate POW camp for captured Russian soldiers was established in 1942 at the Mauthausen concentration camp, south of the the main camp, to the left of the entrance road. This location had previously been leveled so it could be used as a soccer field for the Mauthausen inmates. The POW camp was originally called the Russian Camp, but it later became known as the Hospital Camp. Beginning in the Spring of 1943, this section was used to house sick or exhausted prisoners in the infirmary; prisoners who could no longer work in the munitions factories in Mauthausen and its sub-camps were brought here to recuperate or die.



Prisoners building the Russian Camp, April 1942

Mauthausen was a concentration camp and as such, it was against the 1929 Geneva Convention to hold Prisoners of War there, although the Russian POWs were technically in a separate section. According to the Geneva Convention, POWs were to be held in separate camps and treated according to the rules of the Convention. The Soviet Union had not signed the Geneva Convention of 1929, so the Nazis felt justified in violating the Convention with regard to them.

Before the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler issued the Commissar Order under which all Communist Commissars in the Soviet Army, who were captured in battle, would be brought to the Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen or Mauthausen concentration camps to be executed. Commissars were Communist political officers in the Soviet Army. Thousands of Russian POWs were executed with a shot in the neck in the Mauthausen camp under this order. Others were allowed to live but were forced to work.



Soviet POWs were starved at Mauthausen



Soviet POWs at Mauthausen in the fall of 1944

The Nazis also violated the Geneva Convention when, in early 1944, Hitler issued the Bullet Decree (Kugel Erlass). According to Robert E. Conot, the author of the book "Justice at Nuremberg," the Bullet Decree stipulated that any officer or non-commissioned officer - except British or American - who escaped from a POW camp was to be shipped to Mauthausen concentration camp with the designation "Stufe III" (Third Degree). There they were either to be shot, or speedily starved and worked to death. To questions by the Red Cross or neutral powers, the Wehrmacht was directed to reply that the prisoners had "escaped and not been recaptured."

The Bullet Decree was soon amended to include British soldiers after the "Great Escape" on March 25, 1944 by 80 British, French, Greek, Norwegian, Polish, Belgian and Czech officers of the British Royal Air Force from a POW camp at Sagan in Silesia. It was not against international law for prisoners to escape from a POW camp, and in fact, it was the duty of a POW to try to escape. This was the first successful escape from the Sagan POW camp, although there had been as many as 100 escape tunnels dug in this camp by the prisoners.

According to Conot, each time there was an escape from a POW camp, the Nazis would mobilize 40,000 to 100,000 men of the Landeswacht (home guard) to capture them. There were six million foreign workers in Germany and Hitler's greatest fear was that escaped military officers would organize a rebellion among them. The efforts to recapture the POWs also took thousands of man-hours of work away from the factories. For these reasons, Hitler wanted to stop the escapes from the POW camps, according to Conot.

Conot wrote the following in his book, "Justice at Nuremberg," regarding Hitler's order in 1944 to shoot the escaped Sagan POWs when they were recaptured:

On March 28, the order was issued as an adjunct to the Kugel Erlass. These officers retained by the Gestapo - in principle, though not necessarily in practice, "plotters and escape leaders" - were to be transported to Mauthausen concentration camp. "The camp commandant of Mauthausen is to be informed that the prisoners are being handed over under Operation Kugel."

In January 1946, Jean-Frederic Veith, a French prisoner at Mauthausen from April 22, 1943 until April 22, 1945 when he was taken out of the camp by the Red Cross, testified before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg regarding POWs who were killed at Mauthausen.

The following is a quote from his testimony at Nuremberg in answer to a question by the French prosecutor, M. Dubois:

Certainly I saw prisoners of war. Their arrival at Mauthausen took place, first of all, in front of the political section. Since I was working at the Hollerith, I could watch the arrivals, for the offices faced the parade ground in front of the political section where the convoys arrived. My knowledge of Aktion K [Operation Bullet, referring to orders to execute all prisoners of war discovered attempting to escape, excluding Americans and British] is due to the fact that I was head of the Hollerith service in Mauthausen, and consequently all the transfer forms from the various camps.

According to a book about the escape, entitled "The Longest Tunnel," by Alan Burgess, the recaptured prisoners never reached Mauthausen. Four of them were sent instead to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp where they were held as hostages, but some of the others were murdered.

By April 13, 1944, fifty of the escapees, who had been recaptured, had been shot along the roadside as they were being transported to Mauthausen. Their bodies were taken to the nearest crematorium where they were cremated and the ashes were sent back to Sagan for burial. Their death certificates read "shot while trying to escape." Names of the 50 escapees were posted in the camp as a warning against future escapes.

Under international law, it is the duty of a POW to try to escape, but following this violation of the Geneva Convention by the Germans in the shooting of the escaped Sagan POWs, the British and American governments relieved their soldiers and airmen of the duty to attempt an escape.

Maurice Lampe, a French resistance fighter who was a prisoner at Mauthausen, testified at the Nuremberg IMT about how 47 British, American and Dutch airmen were brought to Mauthausen on September 6, 1944 and executed under the Kugel Erlass. Lampe told the tribunal that he had been assigned to work in the quarry where he witnessed the airmen being murdered by the SS guards.

The following quote from Lampe's testimony at Nuremberg tells the story:

For all the prisoners at Mauthausen, the murder of these men has remained in their minds like a scene from Dante's Inferno. This is how it was done: at the bottom of the steps they loaded stones on the backs of these poor men and they had to carry them to the top. The first journey was made with stones weighing 25 to 30

kilos and was accompanied by blows. Then they were made to run down. For the second journey, the stones were even heavier; and whenever the poor wretches sank under their burden, they were kicked and hit with a bludgeon. Even stones were hurled at them....In the evening when I returned from the gang with which I was then working, the road which led to the camp was a bath of blood....I almost stepped on the lower jaw of a man. Twenty-one bodies were strewn along the road. Twenty-one had died on the first day. The twenty-six others died the following morning....

Jean-Frederic Veith told a similar story. In answer to a question by M. Dubost, the French prosecutor at the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal, Veith testified as follows:

Q. Did you witness the execution of Allied officers who were murdered within 48 hours of their arrival in camp?

A. I saw the arrival of the convoy of the 6th September. I believe that is the one you are thinking of; I saw the arrival of this convoy and the very same afternoon these 47 went down to the quarry dressed in nothing but their shirts and drawers. Shortly after we heard the sound of machine gunfire. I then left the office and passed at the back, pretending I was carrying documents to another office, and with my own eyes I saw these unfortunate people shot down. 19 were executed on the very same afternoon and the remainder on the following morning; later on all the death certificates were marked: "Killed while attempting to escape."

The next day, Veith continued his testimony at Nuremberg, answering more questions put to him by M. Dubost:

Q. Will you give some additional information concerning the execution of the 47 Allied Officers whom you saw shot within 48 hours at camp Mauthausen where they had been brought?

A. Those officers, those parachutists, were shot in accordance with the usual system used whenever prisoners had to be done away with. That is to say, they were forced to work to excess, to carry heavy stones. Then they were beaten, until they took heavier ones; and so on and so forth, until, finally driven to extremity, they turned towards the barbed wire. If they did not do it of their own accord, they were pushed there, or they were beaten until they did so, and the moment they approached it and were perhaps about one metre away from it, they were mown down by machine guns fired by the SS patrols in the miradors. This was the usual system for the "killing for attempted escape" as they afterwards called it.

These 47 men were killed on the afternoon of the 6th and morning of the 7th of September.

Q. How did you know their names?

A. Their names came to me with the official list, because they had all been entered in the camp registers and I had to report to Berlin all the changes in the actual strength of the Hollerith Section. I saw all the rosters of the dead and of the new arrivals.

Q. Did you communicate this list to an official authority?

A. This list was taken by the American official authorities when I was at Mauthausen. I immediately went back to Mauthausen after my liberation, because I knew where the documents were, and the American authorities then had all the lists which we were able to find.

Note that Veith described these POWs as "parachutists" indicating that they were "Commandos" who parachuted into territory that was behind enemy lines with the objective of carrying out sabotage. They were

sent to Mauthausen under Hitler's infamous Commando Order, another example of Nazi barbarity and the disregard of the Geneva Convention.

According to William Shirer in his book "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," the Top-Secret Commando Order, dated October 18, 1942, was one of the documents found by the Allies after the war.

On October 7, 1942, the justification for this order was broadcast by the German Army over the radio, according to Robert E. Conot, who quoted from the broadcast in his book "Justice at Nuremberg":

"In the future all terrorist and sabotage units of the British and their associates who do not act like soldiers but like bandits will be mercilessly exterminated in battle." He (Hitler) directed (General) Jodl to draw up the appropriate order that commandos "regardless whether as soldiers and irrespective of the kind of uniform are to be annihilated to the last man without mercy," since their actions "differ from the basic rules of warfare and [they] thus place themselves outside the rules of warfare." If they gave up, they were to be shot on the spot. "Whoever performs acts of sabotage as a soldier with the idea of surrendering without a fight after the act is successfully completed does not conduct himself as an honorable warrior." Hitler, as he had done in the Commissar Order and similar instances, made himself the unilateral arbiter of the Geneva Convention and declared null and void whatever section was not convenient to him.

In his book, Conot included a quote from the British Handbook of Irregular Warfare, a book that was found on one of the Canadian Commandos who was captured on August 19, 1942 in a battle at Dieppe. According to Conot "Some of the German prisoners taken were handcuffed; and a few, who fell into the hands of the special forces, were trussed up in 'death slings.'" In other words, the German POWs were tied up by the Commandos with a noose around their necks which was attached to their legs, so that if the prisoner stretched out his legs, the noose would tighten and the man would be strangled.

The following quote from the British Handbook is from page 307 of Conot's book "Justice at Nuremberg":

This (book) instructed the commandos "never to give the enemy a chance; the days when we could practice the rules of sportsmanship are over. For the time being every soldier must be a potential gangster...The vulnerable parts of the enemy are the heart, spine and privates. Kick him or knee him as hard as you can in the fork...Remember you are out to kill."

William Shirer mentions the following incident in which British and American Commandos were murdered at Mauthausen, on page 956 of his book, "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich":

Some fifteen members of an Anglo-American military mission - including a war correspondent of the Associated Press, and all in uniform - which had parachuted into Slovakia in January 1945 were executed in the Mauthausen concentration camp on the orders of Dr. Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the successor of Heydrich as head of the SD and one of the defendants at Nuremberg. Had it not been for the testimony of the camp adjutant who witnessed their execution, their murder might have remained unknown, for most of the files of the executions at this camp were destroyed.

One of the US Navy Commandos who was captured after a sabotage mission and sent to Mauthausen under Hitler's Commando Order was Lieutenant Jack Taylor.

Lieutenant Taylor testified about the treatment which he and other American POWs received at Mauthausen. The following quote is from the testimony of Lt. Taylor at the Nuremberg IMT:

In October '44, I was the first Allied officer to drop onto Austria. I was captured December 1st, by the Gestapo, severely beaten, ah, even though I was in uniform, severely beaten, and, and, considered as a non-prisoner of

war. I was taken to Vienna prison where I was held for four months. When the Russians neared Vienna, I was taken to this Mauthausen concentration lager [camp], an extermination camp, the worst in Germany, where we have been starving and, and beaten and killed, ah, fortunately, my turn hadn't come. Ah, two American officers at least have been executed here. Here is the insignia of one, a U.S. naval officer, and here is his dog tag. Here is the army officer, executed by gas in this lager [camp]. Ah...there were...

[Question: "How many ways did they execute them?"]

Five or six ways: by gas, by shooting, by beating, that is beating with clubs, ah, by exposure, that is standing out in the snow, naked, for 48 hours and having cold water put on them, thrown on them in the middle of winter, starvation, dogs, and pushing over a hundred-foot cliff."