

Life in the Dora Concentration Camp

The transport from Buchenwald to Dora was, first of all, led to a bathing and disinfection facility. At the entrance, there were SS men and *kapos* standing everywhere, who kicked, punched and slapped in an utterly uncontrolled manner. That was the “*kabules punim*” [Heb., welcoming ceremony] for the *Częstochowers*. Men stood in groups of fifty, in a long hall, waiting for their turn to bathe.

The SS officer, in charge of the disinfection, called out several times that whoever had money, [foreign] currency, diamonds or other valuables in their possession was to hand them over immediately, because in the other room all would be searched and, whoever was found with the smallest thing, would be sent straight to the crematorium. This time, their threats turned out to be true - items were found on two individuals, and they were sent off to be burnt. The SS man - probably a *Volksdeutsch* – was fluent in Polish and translated the orders to everyone.

In the baths and disinfection, there were foremen, *unterkapos*, *kapos* and *oberkapos*¹ everywhere. Their task was to beat the people incessantly at each and every step. It was only now that they comprehended and felt what *kapo* meant – because, in the *Częstochowa* camps, no one could imagine such things, and a *kapo* did not play any role. It had been quite the contrary - a *kapo* had often received beatings from the foreman, because this or that group had not been at work or for other reasons. The bathing and disinfection - or receiving a beating, to be more precise - took until daybreak. At dawn, the *Częstochowers* were led into two blocks - 15 and 23. They slept on the floor, on sacks of straw with wood wool.

On the following day, everyone's clothes and caps were taken away to the workshops. There, parts of the coats and trousers were cut off. In their place, patches from the prisoners' clothing of a blue-grey or green-grey colour were sewn on. That was the symbol of the Dora camp - a patch on the shoulder and two on the trousers. After receiving clothes, with the Dora symbol (or better said, Hitler's symbol of the new Europe that he wished to establish), a new procedure of being registered in the political department began. The registration entailed being measured and weighed, and determining whether someone had gold teeth in their mouth. They compiled a whole document, with answers to a couple of dozen questions. [The words] “Serious Political Criminal” were printed on the sheet. Everyone was forced to sign this document.

Foremen were designated, who took them to work. The labour consisted of hauling stones, which was really just an excuse to beat them and make them freeze until they fainted. They carried the stones some two or three kilometres. For taking up a stone that was too small, or for walking too slowly, they were given frightful blows. The stones were taken to the camp to pave a road. The area of the camp was large. One hundred and eighty blocks stood there. At the camp's exit was a guard of SS and, each time they went out and back in again, they were

¹ [TN: “For the most part, Kapos were in charge of work gangs, but there were also Kapos for the hospitals or the kitchens. Certain camps even had a hierarchy: Oberkapo, Kapo, Unterkapo. Initially, Kapos were appointed from the ranks of ethnic German prisoners convicted on criminal charges etc. Jews were appointed Kapos only in those camps which were all Jewish.”
(source: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kapo>).]

counted and listed. It was impossible to withstand the murderous beatings and the frost. A “miracle” simply occurred, that the majority of *Częstochowers* were taken to work in the tunnel of the so-called “Sawatzki Works”². At the start, a whole [barrage of] paperwork once more ensued in the Labour Deployment, where fresh questionnaires were filled out. Most of the *Częstochowers* put themselves down as professional workmen, because the unskilled labourers worked in transport, under the direct supervision of the SS and *kapos* - which was the worst thing that one could imagine. The professional workmen were employed at various machines, under the supervision of a foreman. The SS and *kapos* were unable to run about amongst all the machines hitting people - this would have disrupted the work, because one machine served the next.

The *Częstochowers* were divided into teams. Each team had its number and several teams slept together in one barrack. The teams worked in two shifts - day and night. The bedding – sacks of straw - were used day and night. The worst was Sunday night, because then both shifts were in the block and there was no place for everyone to sleep. This gave the block elder and the internal service the chance to beat all those who had no place to lie down.

The writer of these lines was allocated to team 179a in the “montage” [assembly] department. The teams working there were called “the Klein Group”, because the operations manager there was named Engineer Klein. The “montage” department was a new one, where V-3s³ were to be assembled. Previously, the V-1s [flying bombs] and V-2s [rockets] had been produced there. The factory was set up in gigantic subterranean tunnels under tall mountains. Building the tunnels cost the lives of tens of thousands of *Häftlingen* [prisoners] of all nationalities. The overall number of *Häftlingen* [registered] in Dora was over 140,000 but, in reality, there were a little over 30,000. This means that more than 110,000 *Häftlingen* had died in Dora from the hard work, hunger, beatings, shootings and hangings and were burnt in the crematorium there. The term “*Häftling*” means “arrestee”. Every person, who was in a concentration camp, was called a “*Häftling*”.

Every day, the finished production was sent away in large freight trains. Two V-1s fitted inside one carriage, whereas one V-2 needed a whole carriage. The V-3 was a combination of the V1 and V2 - it was larger than the V-1 and smaller than the V-2“, [but] with far greater explosive power. The work in the other departments, where the *Częstochowers* worked, was similar.

The writer of these lines and a large number of *Częstochowers* were in block №134. The block elder and *Stubendienst* [barrack orderly] were Czechs. Although the Czechs in Buchenwald and in other camps were political prisoners and were people with sensibility, emotions and consciousness, these two were criminal offenders, who treated the block’s inmates, which consisted mainly of Jews, Russians and Latvians, brutally and murderously. There was also a large number of gypsies in the camp.

The inmates wore different marks according to their nationalities. In addition, there were two main marks - red and green triangles, that people called “corners”. The red was worn by the

² [TN: Named for German engineer Albin Sawatzki, the head of production of the A4 missile and technical director of the Mittelwerk underground factory.]

³ [TN: The V-3, Ger., “Vergeltungswaffe 3”, or “Vengeance Weapon 3”, was a large-calibre gun working on the multi-charge principle whereby secondary propellant charges are fired to add velocity to a projectile. The weapon was planned to be used to bombard London.]

political prisoners and the green by the criminal prisoners. The green triangles bore [one of] two inscriptions - BV or SV; BV stood for "*Berufsverbrecher*" [career criminal] and SV for "*Schwerverbrecher*"⁴ [serious criminal]. The "career criminals" were former professional thieves, and the "serious criminals" were professional robbers, bandits and muggers. The criminal offenders were the "masters" and leaders in the Dora camp.

The leaders in the Buchenwald camp had been prisoners with red "corners" and the internal regime there was, therefore, completely different and the food rations were also much better. The Dora camp was run by the professional criminals and murderers, who beat everyone and stole the food.

This was the course a "normal" day followed in Dora - the prisoners were awoken at four in the morning. The block elder and *Stubendienst*, at once, beat those who did not get up. Everyone was required to wash immediately - obviously without soap or a towel - and whoever did not stand at the cold water with his shirt off was beaten for it. After washing themselves, each was given his portion of bread and soup - the rations for the entire day - over the course of which they were beaten for not being calm, for wanting a potato in the soup and similar "transgressions". Then the command "*Eintreten!*" ["Fall in!"] was given, and everyone had to stand in front of the block in rows of five. For not falling in quickly, they were Beaten once again. Then the block elder led the prisoners off to the parade ground. On the way, they were again beaten for marching unevenly, for going too slow or too quickly. There was always some excuse to give blows. The real beatings began on the parade ground. Each team had its sign, which consisted of a round stick onto which a board with a number was nailed.

Here, the master was already "*Herr* [Mr] *Kapo*", with *unterkapos* and foremen. People were kicked and pummelled there in such a manner, that half-dead inmates were often taken away from the parade ground to the dispensary or hospital. The grounds for giving beatings on the parade ground were as follows - everyone was half naked, the frost was frightful, as it can only be in the winter, at five in the morning in February. Everybody squirmed with cold, because the cold broke all of them. And that is why the *kapo* thrashed people until drawing blood - for squirming and not standing at ease. The SS officers devised a sadistic game to add to this inhuman tragedy. During the course of the rollcall, an orchestra played a variety of marches, including a specially-composed "Dora March". On one side, the orchestra was playing and, on the other, billows of smoke curled up in the air from the crematorium, which incessantly burnt the bodies of the prisoners. Thus, the rollcall lasted until half past six in the morning, after which the march to work began. The *kapo* marched in front, like a general, and everyone had to march behind him, in time with the music - otherwise, the "guilty party" was beaten to death. SS men stood on either side of the gate, and the *kapo* would order the prisoners to take their caps off as they passed by them.

After they were counted by the SS, the *kapo* was given a note with the number of prisoners. Upon marching into the tunnel, there was a new guard and, once more, the same procedure - "*Caps off!*" etc., and the SS men counted the prisoners, whose number had to match the one written on the first guard's note. Once the day-shift had marched into the tunnel, the

⁴ [TN: According to many other sources, SV stood for "*Sicherungsverwahrte*" (preventive detention prisoners).]

night-shift marched out of it. One shift was not allowed to speak to the other. For speaking – more beatings, and that is how it always went, non-stop. In the work hall, there was another rollcall. The individual German head foremen and foremen, chose their labourers, who were assigned to their work. When the jobs were being designated, more blows fell, because this or that person wanted to go to this or that work.

The tunnel was lit with electric lighting, because daylight never reached there. They got up in the middle [fig.] of the night, marched to work before the bright rays of daylight appeared, and also returned when it was dark.

In the team, where the writer of these lines was (179a, the Klein Group), there was really no work. We were supposed to assemble the V-3s there, but there was nothing to assemble. The work hall was spacious and long, but completely empty. We began to bring in tables, set up machines and perform preparatory jobs. The actual work consisted in cleaning the hall. Every day, 30-40 prisoners from team 179a made brooms out of wood wool and swept the hall. We had to work, otherwise the foremen, *kapos*, head foremen and SS officers, passing through and just common criminals who went about as masters and rulers, gave us terrible beatings. The sweepers split up into groups - one group drove about with water spraying the hall, another spread the sweepings back on the ground, and a third swept - that is how the work proceeded.

Once, the following incident occurred. One of the German foremen was welding a certain iron flap, and the welding apparatus malfunctioned, because the rubber hose was torn in one place. He called the *kapo* and showed it to him. The *kapo* was waiting for just that type of opportunity, for now the “work” of beating everyone without exception would start. In order to give the event greater significance, the *kapo* went off to the SS guardroom and reported an act of sabotage. Two SS men immediately arrived. They checked the hose and “determined” that it had been cut with a small knife. As it was forbidden for the prisoners to have knives, a command was given to search all those who were near the hose. And it happened. The *kapo* made a list and summoned fifteen people. Firstly, the *kapo* treated each of them to ardent slaps for not standing at attention and for not taking their off caps in front of the SS. After that, an SS officer delivered an address and declared that the fifteen workers would be hanged for the sabotage - that it would, therefore, be better if whoever had done it confessed. Among the fifteen was the writer of these lines and also a Soviet captain who had escaped from captivity and, afterwards, when he had been caught, had been brought to the Dora camp as punishment. He declared that even a blind man could determine that the hose was old and thoroughly unsound, and that that was why it had been torn - and not because somebody had cut it. For this declaration, he was assailed by the *kapo* and the SS men, who thrashed him murderously. All the rest [of us] were also beaten and, with that, the story ended.

Besides the German foremen and officials, no one was given any lunch. The inmates received their rations for the entire day - a portion of bread and a portion of soup - at half past four in the morning. We worked until six in the evening, after which there was another rollcall, we were once again counted and waited until the night-shift arrived. We were not allowed to leave the tunnel prior to the arrival of the night-shift.

There was another plague that tormented the prisoners - namely, needing to go to the latrine during work entailed a complicated procedure. One had to report to the scrivener, who took accurate and punctual note of the minutes and gave a "latrine number". A foreman and a *kapo* stood guard in the latrine. For entering without a "latrine number", they thrashed bloodily. Even anyone, who entered with a number but took longer than five minutes, was beaten for it. After returning, the inmate handed in the number and was "deregistered".

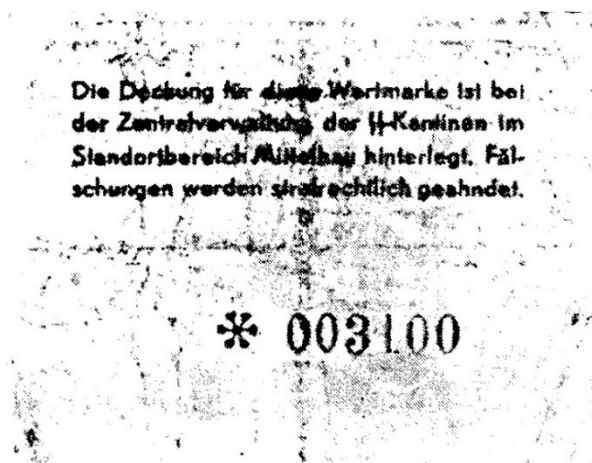
The way back to camp from the day-shift was often bound with tragic spectacles. Very frequently, entire groups of inmates, who were under suspicion of sabotage, were hung, several dozen at a time. Everyone was forced to march by and witness the horrifying ceremony. Coming to the barrack late at night for a bit of rest was yet more hell. The block elder and *Stubendienst* came up with new punishments every day. If one, for example, did not arrange the blanket properly on his sack of straw, everyone had to sleep for three nights in the frosty winter nights without blankets. If a spoon was lost, they took everyone's blanket as punishment. [There were] new scourges every day, like a never-ending diabolical circle.

The shifts changed once every fortnight. Thus, we worked for two weeks in the daytime and two weeks at night. There was one free day or night every fortnight.



Photos №24, 24a and 24b; this is what the camp money looked like

[TN: Text: "SS Site Canteen – Buchenwald; 3 Reichsmark; Token".]



[TN: Back side of token; original text: "Die Deckung für diese Wertmarke ist bei der Zentralverwaltung der SS-Kantinen im Standortbereich Mittelbau hinterlegt. Fälschungen werden strafrechtlich geahndet."]

Translation: "The cover for this token is deposited with the central administration of the SS canteens in the Mittelbau site area. Counterfeiting will be prosecuted."

[TN: Text: "Series E; Mittelbau Labour Camp; Token 0.10 Reichsmark".]



The night shift also went through the same procedure. They rose at four in the afternoon, ate one time before the entire twenty-four hours, reported for rollcall, marched out to work, worked all night long until the day shift arrived and, as additional work, they carried stones from the quarry into the camp. Obviously, not everyone could endure such hell - even if it was a short one (the *Częstochowers* were there for nine weeks).

The prisoners received no wages, because it was forced labour. The firms, for whom the inmates worked, wished to increase the production, so they introduced bonuses in the form of camp money. The size of the bonuses varied according to qualifications - starting from five marks and up to fifteen marks a month.

In the canteen, one could, from time to time, receive beer, potato salad, beetroot, salad and cabbage. When the Jewish prisoners attempted to enter the canteen to buy something for the "money", *kapos* stood there with sticks and beat them murderously. The team *kapos* and foremen took advantage of the situation and, under the threat of beating them, they extracted the money from the Jewish inmates. The money from the Dora concentration camp bore the inscription "Arbeitslager [Labour Camp] Mittelbau".

In the second half of March 1945, the operations manager, Engineer Klein, ordered the *kapo* to call together all the professional workmen for a rollcall, before whom he gave a speech, declaring the following:

“Until now, preparations have been made. But now the real work is about to begin. All those, who have registered themselves as professional workmen - as metalworkers, electro-technicians or mechanics - must be qualified professionals. Otherwise, meaning that should they not perform the work in a precise manner, this will be considered sabotage. Every smallest imprecision will be viewed as sabotage and, two hours later, the worker will be hanged. Whoever cannot commit to performing accurate work, still has the chance to withdraw.”

A group of Jews, and also some Russians, immediately pulled out and were assigned to various unskilled jobs. As it emerged, Eng. Klein had managed to put together a model V-3, which was approved by the military commission. However, nothing was assembled, for the lack of the necessary parts. The transports with parts did not arrive, because of the continuous attacks on the German transportation. The factory worked in two shifts, but the way the “work” looked was pretty much that one foreman made himself a key, and another a lock or a cabinet for clothes. The workers stood at the machines and pretended to be working, because the SS ran about wildly, shouting at them to work. Those employed in transport did work. They hauled crates with parts from one place to another and back again. That is how it was in all the departments - everything was moved back and forth.

[Despite the cruel and brutal Nazi terror, there was, nevertheless, a resistance⁵] movement in the camp, under the leadership of the orchestra’s conductor. They were to blow up the entire factory into the air on a Sunday night, when there was nobody there. But the plan was betrayed. The orchestra director and thirty other orchestra members were hanged. The orchestra played during the execution.

Every prisoner was subordinate to the following persons, who beat him: in the block - the barrack orderly, scrivener, block elder and block leader, who was already an SS officer; in the camp - the *Lagerschutz* (camp police), any *kapo*, any SS man, the camp elder and camp leader, and at work - the supervisor, *kapo*, foreman, head foreman, technician, engineer, operations manager, any SS man and any *Werkschutz*. It is no surprise that hundreds of workers died every single day from the beatings, arduous labour - although nothing was produced - and constant hunger.

During the last three weeks, it would happen that, for five or six days, there was no bread at all and, instead of the bread rations, each prisoner was given three rotting potatoes. The mills and bakeries, that worked for the camp, had been seized by the Americans.

On 31st March 1945, a “block curfew” was declared. No one was allowed outside the blocks. No one went to work either, because there were sirens every couple of hours. There was not even one German - one SS tyrant - who had the guts to shoot at the aeroplanes. They claimed

⁵ [TN: We have taken these words, which are obviously missing from the original, from the author’s subsequent account in the book “Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal” (p.185).]

that attacking the aeroplanes could cause an attack on the factory and they wished to avoid that.

On 2nd April, orders came through the loudspeakers to the effect that every prisoner was to take with him two blankets, a bowl and a spoon, and he would be given rations at the warehouse. The prisoners marched, according to blocks, to the central depot, where each man received a loaf of bread and a can of food.

The evacuation had begun. The Jews and Russians were evacuated first, and then the prisoners of other nationalities.