



Ebensee

The concentration camp at Ebensee was constructed outside the city in a heavily wooded area that hid effectively the tunnels under construction and the projected camp. It was the first camp created to serve the construction of underground facilities, codenamed "Zement" (meaning "cement"). It was a work-camp for prisoners sent from the main camp at Mauthausen. The prisoners would be handed over by the SS to companies involved in construction work and the realisation of planned projects. The companies would make "requests" for labour, on the basis of which the SS would assign them prisoners from the camp, and receive a fee for each worker that would increase according to the professional skills of each prisoner and their work capacity. Three categories existed for this purpose, designated CA (Kapos, prisoners designated to head the work kommandos), FA (skilled workers) and HA (manual workers).

Prisoners sent to this slave-labour scheme would be chosen generally on the basis of age (preferably between 20 and 40 years old) and good physical condition. But their health would rapidly deteriorate due to the appalling living conditions and the extremely heavy work they were forced to undertake. They would work no less than 11 hours on end, usually without the proper equipment, and with no concern for their safety. Badly fed on 250 grams of rye-bread and then carrot or cabbage soup a day, they would be violently punished by the Kapos or the SS for any interruption to the work. Even the ill and the weak would be forced to continue working. Whenever a prisoner was no longer able to work effectively, he would be transported to Mauthausen, where he would either die due to extreme physical weakness or illness, or would be murdered as an unproductive inmate.

"They transported us to Mauthausen in a truck: outside it was 15 degrees below zero. During the trip, two prisoners died. The journey to Mauthausen lasted an eternity.... there were only 17 prisoners, two died during the transport, others were killed. Of those 17 inmates, only two survived, me and a prisoner called Stanislaus Gotbek." (Jan Gaszynski – 18 May 1945).

The first 500 prisoners to be sent from Mauthausen to Ebensee arrived on 18 November 1943, and were set to work for 11-12 hours a day on the camp base, without an overcoat or gloves, and wearing wooden clogs instead of shoes. In January 1944, the first of the barracks was completed. Up until the end of this first phase of the camp's existence, Ebensee was composed of 15 barracks for housing prisoners, scattered higgledy-piggledy amongst the trees. Each barracks had three-storey bunk-beds, and the camp was intended to house 500 prisoners. The camp was progressively extended, and so the prisoner population grew. In July 1944, there were 6,000 inmates, which was still not enough to meet the ever increasing demand for slave-labour. In the final phase of the camp's development, which now held 18,509 prisoners, up to 1,000 people had to find space to sleep in each of the 32 barracks.

The camp

Aside from these barracks (which were little more than huts with a cement floor, walls made out of wooden beams and a cardboard-insulated roof), Ebensee had various administrative buildings, spread out in a semi-circle around the area where the prisoners had to present themselves several times each day for roll-call. The camp was sealed off by an electrified fence. Beyond the fence were the barracks for the guards. The task of surveillance was entrusted to the SS, and from the summer of 1944 also to Wehrmacht troops. Only the camp commander, the Rapportfuehrer ("Report Leader", a mid-level SS officer responsible for roll-call and camp discipline), the SS doctors and the heads of the barracks could enter the camp.

Internal surveillance in the camp was generally entrusted by the SS to chosen prisoners, especially the so-called "Lageralteste", the eldest prisoners in the camp. In general, they would be German-speakers chosen from the common criminal element amongst the prisoners, and they would be given privileges (such as extra rations, clean clothes, regular access to washing facilities and exemption from work duties). Thus, a cruel and underhand system for the "self-policing of the prisoners" was created, with the specific intention of preventing the inmates from developing links and solidarity.

At the end of 1944, over 9,000 prisoners were involved in the construction work of the tunnels and in various buildings outside the camp itself. The work in the "quarry" was especially dangerous and homicidal. There were also 1,000 German civilians working in the building sites devoted to the construction of the tunnels. Each of these could call on the labour of ten or more prisoners who had to follow the orders of these "civilian master builders", overseen by the Kapo, a prisoner chosen by the SS to head the work-battalion. The Kapos (who were nearly always common criminals, and hence wore a green triangle) "encouraged" the slaves with frequent lashes of a whip, or blows from a rubber club, shovels, knotted rope, or iron bars. The violence and the terror was intended not just to extract the most work from each slave, but also to physically and psychologically destroy the prisoners, eliminating any chance that they would band together, or react against their treatment.

"The heavy work in the tunnels, excavating holes and underground rooms in the cold stone, the harsh Alpine climate, the insufficient food, and the inadequate shoes and clothes were primarily responsible for the large number of ill prisoners, until it reached the point that nearly a quarter of all the prisoners were permanently seriously ill". (Hrvoje Macanovic – 6 September 1945)

"Above all, a staircase to the head of the passageway (in the tunnels in factory A) was a serious obstacle for many prisoners to overcome, who despite the fact that they were aged between 20 and 40 years old were no longer able to climb the stairs.... this demonstrated just how far the weakness created by hunger and the work conditions had gone." (Emil Eugen M.)

In spring 1944, faced with the increasing mortality rates, the SS decided on the construction of a crematorium, which began operational on August 4. Since the SS "loved" to write phrases and mottos at various sites in their camps, at the crematorium at Ebensee they wrote "dirty worms must not feast on my flesh, the purity of the flame must take me in one fell swoop; I have always loved heat and light, so please burn me, do not bury me". In the crematorium, four bodies could be burned simultaneously, and in total up to 100 could be consumed each day. It has been calculated that from the start of its operation until the day of liberation, the crematorium was used to burn at least 7,010 bodies. By April 1945, the crematorium could no longer cope with the numbers to be burned, so in complete secrecy, they were buried in two mass graves. Next to the crematorium was the hospital and the so-called "recovery barracks", which in reality did not serve at all to cure the ill, but instead to eliminate – via a stiff selection process – those who could no longer work. The limited chances of getting medical attention and therefore of surviving were dependent on a rapid recovery – almost impossible in reality – and an equally quick return to work.

The racial hierarchy

The conditions of the Jews in the work-battalions were especially harsh: at the "quarry", they were given a particularly long work schedule, and had to carry out all their work at running pace. The factor that would determine whether a prisoner could survive – a chance that was already slim from the outset – was his nationality, and how that fitted into the racial hierarchy of Nazism. Common criminals – and sometime political prisoners – of German descent would be treated better (or to be more accurate, less badly) by the SS compared to prisoners from western or southern Europe. Even worse was the treatment reserved for Soviet prisoners, or those from Poland, let alone those from Italy (who were for

the most part political prisoners who wore the red triangle, and whom the Germans notoriously blamed for "betraying" the Reich). But at the bottom of the scale, the final rung on the Nazi racial hierarchy, were the Jews and Roma of every nationality.

Conditions in the camp continued to degenerate: the barracks did not offer even the most minimal protection against the cold, the rain and inclement weather. The food became more and more insufficient, the clothing inadequate, and the lack of hygiene led to outbreaks of various diseases, usually fatal.

"Snow and rain and then snow again. Dirt and water. We lack shirts, jackets and shoes. The prisoners who go to work almost never have shoes, they are completely soaked through and they have to walk in bare feet." (Drahomir Barta – December 1944).

But once prisoners started to arrive at Ebensee from camps in the East, from January 1945 onwards, and then from Mauthausen (April 1945 onwards), the situation became completely tragic.

"The people who arrived from Gross Rosen were not just completely undernourished, but they also had a terrible thirst, and shouted for some water to drink. The survivors were then examined by doctor Jobst (the camp medic), and divided into groups: those who could work, those who could recover and those not fit for work. These last were taken to a barracks without windows, carrying straw sacks, where they died in miserable conditions without any medical assistance." (Ernst L. – 15 March 1968)

The situation deteriorated even further due to the now almost complete lack of food supplies, which had always been ransacked by the SS before distribution anyway. From January 1945 onwards, the already miserly rations were reduced still further, and sick Jewish prisoners were simply given no rations at all.

"Hunger transformed the prisoners into living skeletons who no longer responded to anything, and who were now behaving like animals (...), they ate grass, leaves, mud or coal". (Drahomir Barta – 17 May 1945)

The camp commander therefore tried to resolve the problem by increasing the death rate, particularly for Jewish prisoners.

"The Jews were by now so weak that they could no longer even walk to the building sites outside the camp, so they were made to stand outside the barracks, for hours on end, most of them were half naked. This way they would catch pneumonia and so their deaths would be speeded up." (Hrvoje Macanovic - 19 September 1945).

The approach of Allied troops gave hope of liberation to the prisoners, and helped maintain a spirit of solidarity and resistance. Prisoners had already started to form themselves into groups, based on national or political ties, which then came together in May 1944 to form an International Committee. This served to prevent the Nazis from exterminating all the prisoners – a fear that was altogether well founded. They were helped in this by a group of guards seconded to the camp from the Wehrmacht. On 5 May 1945, the prisoners, led by Committee members, refused to accept the orders of camp commandant Anton Ganz to go and hide in the tunnels – he had offered the excuse that he did not want them to expose themselves to the danger of Allied bombers. Following the prisoners' refusal, the SS destroyed the camp archive and fled, leaving the task of monitoring the prisoners to local militia and some Wehrmacht personnel.

Troops from the US 3rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, led by Captain Timothy C. Brennan, entered and liberated the camp on 6 May 1945, at 14.50.

"We were waiting, the whole camp was waiting for liberation... it's the 6th of May 1945! Finally, at exactly a quarter to three, there a cry of jubilation: the Americans have arrived! We are free, free!" (Jean Majerus – 1949)

"My company was ordered to move into an Austrian city, and take it. The city's population was gripped by fear and hysteria, which I thought was rather strange, since usually Austrians and Germans have not demonstrated fear in the face of US troops. But I would soon find out the reason for their concern. On the hills outside the city was one of those infamous concentration camps..." (Letter from Captain Timothy C. Brennan to his wife – 16 May 1945).

When the Americans arrived, the situation at Ebensee was indeed horrific. Inside the camp, the US troops found 16,000 prisoners, of whom no less than 6,000 were seriously ill or dying.

"On the day of our arrival, we found 450 corpses amongst the ill prisoners, who had clearly been dead for some time". (report from the director of UNRRA, 1946)

Roughly 700 people died after liberation from the effects of their imprisonment and maltreatment. They were buried in ground along the road to Bad Ischl. In 1952, their bodies were transferred to the current commemoration site, one of the camp's mass graves (it contains 2,167 bodies), where the families of victims of the camp had erected a memorial in 1948. More than 27,000 people were deported to KL Ebensee – more than 8,300 died. There were also more than 1,700 Ebensee prisoners considered unfit for work who were sent to Mauthausen to die.

Around 400 Nazis who had been involved with the camp were arrested by the American military police, and interned in a detention centre at Glaserbach. The majority were released or sentenced to brief spells in jail. The American and French military tribunals sentenced the camp doctor Will Jobst to death, along with Rapportführer Hermann Pribill, head of sanitation Gustav Kreindl and barracks head Hans Buhner, all of them members of the SS. Other SS officers were punished with prison sentences. The commandant of Ebensee, Anton Ganz, managed to disappear without trace, and was only finally sentenced to life imprisonment by a German court in 1972.

"By day, Ganz would spend all his time hunting for men who were not working... Ganz was everywhere. Out of nowhere, he would appear with his whip and start wildly hitting prisoners in the face. Every now and again, he would pull out his revolver and kill one of them". (Jean Lafitte – 1950)

The Ebensee tunnels

The underground complex was developed between 1943 and 1945, roughly two kilometres from Ebensee. The preparations for the construction of the tunnels was undertaken at the same time as the work for the "SS Work Camp Cement", the SS code name for Ebensee. The tunnels were intended to house military works transferred from Peenemünde, where the A4 missile (later known as the V1) was designed, tested and perfected, but which had been partially destroyed by British bombers on 17 and 18 August 1943.

Armaments minister Albert Speer, SS Reichführer Heinrich Himmler and Adolf Hitler decided to transfer the production of the A4 to an underground facility near Nordhausen (known as KL Dora), while the missile development facilities were to be housed in a specially-designed structure at Ebensee, an area of Austria that had good communications with road and train networks, hidden by dense forests, and near an existing stone quarry that could provide the necessary building materials. The task of developing Ebensee was handed to the Waffen-SS on 20 September 1943.

The plans developed by the Fiebinger engineering firm in Vienna called for two complexes in which the development centre and the production facility for the A4 and the inter-continental A9 missile could be carried out. The first, known as "A", would occupy nearly 220,000 square metres, while "B" - which would carry out checks on the missiles – would occupy nearly 77,000 square metres. Both complexes were due to be ready by the end of 1944, but things did not go to plan. The pressing needs of other war industries meant that the facilities in the tunnels would be switched to other products vital to the German war machine.

On 6 July 1944, the decision was taken that the tunnels (one of which measured 482 metres) would serve as home to industries already damaged by Allied bombing. In facility "A", work began on 1 August 1944 to build a petrol refinery which only managed to start producing fuel on 5 February 1945, built with machinery that had been stolen from French, Polish and Italian firms (from Livorno). The camp prisoners were slated for the work of construction and assembly.

When the A4 missiles began landing on London in September 1944 (and Hitler ordered the continuation of the missile programme), the Elektromechanische Werke offered to develop 20,000 square metres of tunnel in facility "B" (that would later become 30,000) and to construct a missile emplacement known as Salamander. But in December 1944, the German Army Rustungsstab (Armament Staff) transferred the production facilities of Steyr-Daimler-Puch AG to the tunnels at Melk (an external sub-camp of Mauthausen) and to those at Ebensee. In tunnels 4 and 5 of Ebensee's "B" facility, over 200 machines for the production of engine parts for lorries and tanks were installed. In tunnels 1 and 2, the Nibelungenwerke (a Steyr-group company) produced brake parts for the tanks.

Italian prisoners in Ebensee

The first Italian prisoners reached Ebensee on 28 January 1944: a transport of inmates from the Carceri Nuove was sent from Turin to Mauthausen, where they were registered and then transferred to Ebensee. Among them was Italo Tibaldi, a 16-year old partisan (prisoner registration number 42307).

For taking part in strikes on 4 March 1944, 480 workers from Prato were deported to the Reich: of these, 300 were sent to Ebensee. Only 17 survived the war.

Mario Limentani (prisoner registration number 42230) was liberated from Ebensee, one of the first Roman Jews to be sent to Mauthausen – after a brief spell at Dachau – on 13 January 1944, from where he had first been sent to Melk and then to Ebensee.

Roughly 1,000 Italians were deported to Ebensee, of whom 552 died. The vast majority of the Italian deportees, 813, were political prisoners, of whom 414 died. 71 Italian Jews also died at Ebensee.

Large numbers of deaths of Italians occurred in May 1944 (57) and February 1945 (57), March 1945 (78), April 1945 (161) and May 1945 (86). Today, there are twenty Italian survivors left alive.

"I remember liberation well. It was Sunday 6 May. I was outside, I was not inside the hospital like many of the others. At midday, an American truck arrived, and I heard someone say "the Americans are here, the Americans are here!", and then it disappeared. Later on, three armoured trucks arrived, and entered the camp. We were liberated at 14.45. The Americans arrived in this armoured truck, there would have been 10,000 people outside, while there were others lying about, sleeping, waiting for death (...) When the Americans opened the truck and got down, they were stunned by what they saw, not scared, but they did not expect to see us in that state. For us, it was by now completely normal, we were used to seeing ourselves all emaciated, but they were standing there in shock". (Roberto Castellani – registration number 57027).

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