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## Reichsautobahnlager Geppersdorf (Upper Silesia), 1940-1942

### Introduction

Marking one of the most terrible twentieth-century reversals of the trend towards the abolition of slavery<sup>1</sup>, forced labor played an important part in Nazi policy, especially during the Second World War. Among the populations employed in this way were over a million Jews, many of whom lost their lives or suffered grave physical or mental harm by the end of the war. As a result of a huge body of research on, and a large number of testimonials about, the concentration camps, the general public has become more knowledgeable with regard to the exploitation of inmates there. In contrast, partly because of the paucity of pertinent Nazi records, forced labor camps outside the concentration camp system have been investigated much less frequently by scholars and are still largely unknown to a wider public. This discrepancy is illustrated by the fact that volumes one through eight of the recently published important reference work *Der Ort des Terrors* deal with the twenty four concentration camps and their approximately 1,000 sub-camps, whereas the concluding ninth volume offers only three relatively short essays on certain groups of forced labor camps for Jews in eastern regions of Europe<sup>2</sup>. The total number of such camps cannot be determined exactly, but it amounts to well over 1,000<sup>3</sup>.

Among the various types of labor camps for Jews, the *Reichsautobahnlager* (RAB camps), which were located in the eastern reaches of the *Reich*, have not been researched by historians until recently. Wolf Gruner was the first to write extensively about this topic, utilizing RAB and other record groups in the *Bundesarchiv Berlin*. He demonstrates that the RAB camps in Silesia were run by the *Oberste Bauleitung Reichsautobahnen Breslau* (OBR Breslau), the regional RAB construction management office<sup>4</sup>. However, he provides varying totals of the number of such camps for Jews in that

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<sup>1</sup> See Seymour Drescher, *Abolition. A History of Slavery and Antislavery*, Cambridge 2009, p. 426-449.

<sup>2</sup> *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, eds. Wolfgang Benz, Barbara Distel, vols. 1-9, Munchen 2005-2009; vol. 9: Mario Wenzel, *Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden in den besetzten polnischen und sowjetischen Gebieten* (p. 125-154); Andrea Rudorff, *Das Lagersystem der 'Organisation Schmelt' in Schlesien* (p. 155-160); Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, *Sonderlager für ungarisch-jüdische Zwangsarbeiter* (p. 218-247).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Wenzel states that about 750 forced labor camps for Jews existed in the area he covers (*ibidem*, p. 125).

<sup>4</sup> Wolf Gruner, *Juden bauen die 'Strassen des Führers' Zwangsarbeit und Zwangsarbeitslager für nichtdeutsche Juden im Altreich 1940 bis 1943* 44, "Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft" 44, 1996, p. 789-808; considerably expanded in Chapters 7 and 8 of his book, *Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Aims. 1938-1944*, Cambridge 2006.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF(UPPER SILESIA),1940-1942

region<sup>5</sup>; also, he lists many sites that were not part of the RAB system, among them Faulbrück (Mościsko), Graditz (Grodziszczce), Markstadt (Laskowice Oławskie) and Mechtal (Miechowice)<sup>6</sup>. According to three statistical surveys cited below, which were issued by OBR Breslau in 1940 and 1942, Jews were imprisoned in the following thirteen camps under its jurisdiction: Auenrode (Osiek Gródkowski), Brande (Prądy), Eichtal (Dąbrowka Górna), Geppersdorf (Rzędziwojowice), Gogolin (Gogolin), Gross Sarne (Sarny Wielkie), Grünheide (Sicroniowice), Johannsdorf (Jaskowice), Klein Mangersdorf (Magnuszowiczki), Niederkirch (Dolna), Ottmuth (Otmęt), Sakrau (Zakrzów), St. Annaberg (Góra Świętej Anny). All of these were located in western Upper Silesia, that is to say, within the *Altreich*. Gruner also establishes that OBR Breslau rented its Jewish laborers from *Organisation Schmelt*, named after *SS-Oberführer* Albrecht Schmelt (1899-1945). This agency, which managed Jewish labor in eastern Upper Silesia starting in late 1940, forced Moniek Merin (1904-1943), leader of the *Zentraler Ältestenrat* (Central Council of Jewish Elders) in Sosnowiec, to come up with the required number of workers for each transport<sup>7</sup>.

In her important book on the “restructuring” of eastern Upper Silesia, Sybille Steinbacher has provided additional information on the RAB camps in Upper Silesia. She was the first scholar to include Polish archival sources in her brief discussion of this topic<sup>8</sup>. For example, she discovered police records held by the State Archive in Katowice which contain information on deportations of Jews from eastern Upper Silesia to forced labor camps in 1940 and 1941. According to Steinbacher about 3,500 Jews from that annexed region were transported to camps administered by OBR Breslau between March and June, 1941<sup>9</sup>. However, like Gruner’s, her list of RAB camps for Jews needs to be corrected<sup>10</sup>. Both scholars cite survivors’ testimonials only occasionally; furthermore, they have not utilized the vast archive of videotaped survivor interviews at the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education (USCSFI). Also, they overlook the fact that for a few years before the Second World War, the regional RAB management centers had set up hundreds of *Reichsautobahnlager* for German workers; as a result, they were accustomed to housing, feeding, and supervising workers by the time Jewish laborers arrived. In the three

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<sup>5</sup> Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor*, p. 212 (six RAB camps in Lower Silesia, six in Upper Silesia), 219f. (nine in Lower Silesia, twenty one in Upper Silesia).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 219 f. Gruner (*ibidem*) also assigns camps to the wrong region. Klein Mangersdorf was not located in Lower Silesia, but in Upper Silesia, and Rostitz was not situated in Upper Silesia, but in the *Sudetengau*. Annaberg and St. Annaberg are the same camp which survivors typically refer to as Annaberg.

<sup>7</sup> On the relationship between *Organisation Schmelt* and OBR Breslau, see Wolf Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor*, p. 217, 220; with regard to the founding of *Organisation Schmelt*, see Bella Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life. Jewish Forced Labor and Survival in the Gross-Rosen Camp System, 1940-1945*, New York 2008, p. 43-49, and Stephan Lehnstaedt, *Coercion and Incentive: Jewish Ghetto Labor in East Upper Silesia*, “Holocaust and Genocide Studies” 24, 2010. p. 407-409. Many Polish Jews had to work for OBR Berlin on the Berlin-Posen (Poznań) RAB; see *ibidem*, p. 196-208, and Anna Zioikowska, *Obozy pracy przymusowej dla Żydów w Wielkopolsce w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej 1941-1943*, Poznań 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Sybille Steinbacher, *“Musterstadt” Auschwitz: Germanisierungspolitik und Judenmord in Ostoberschlesien*, München 2000, p. 145-148. As in Steinbacher’s book, the term eastern Upper Silesia is used here to refer to two regions annexed by Germany in 1939, the “plebiscite” area and territories adjoining it on its eastern flank, the *Oststreifen*, in which Auschwitz was situated (*ibidem*, p. 74-77).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 145, footnote 214.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

statistical surveys of 1940 and 1942 cited below, OBR Breslau designates the camps for Jews as well as camps for its other workers as "RAB-cigene Lager", i.e. camps owned by the RAB organization. By contrast, the term officially used for camps under the jurisdiction of *Organisation Schmelt was Zwangsarbeitslager*, or "Z. A. Lager".

The present paper is the first to concentrate entirely on one of the Silesian *Reichsautobahnlager* for Jews<sup>11</sup>. A history of this camp may contribute to a more differentiated understanding of labor camps in general and the Silesian RAB camps in particular. Ann Kirschner's moving book *Sala's Gift*, which contains the only detailed published recollections by a survivor of *Reichsautobahnlager* Geppersdorf<sup>12</sup>, provided the original impetus for making this specific site the focus of the present study. Since only a small number of extant German government records refer to this camp, statements by survivors from the International Tracing Service (ITS) and the USCSFI Archive are an indispensable source of information on this Holocaust site. As elsewhere in my research, I have also incorporated my interviews with Germans<sup>13</sup> who lived in the vicinity of the camp until their expulsion shortly after the war<sup>14</sup>. Previous publications on the Holocaust in Silesia have largely ignored the memories of these former inhabitants of that region. Most of the ex-Silesians I have talked with experienced the war as children or adolescents. In my experience, many of them appear to have integrated their encounters with the victims of the Nazi regime into a more complex understanding of the history of the region they grew up in. By contrast, their parents and grandparents often focused on their own suffering, clinging to a nostalgic and one-sided view of their beloved homeland, which, after all, was dotted with a very large number of camps.

Overseeing the RAB was one of the responsibilities of the *Generalinspekteur des deutschen Strafenwesens* (Inspector General of the German Road System). Fritz Todt (b. 1891) occupied this position until he died in a plane crash on February 8, 1942. On the following day, Albert Speer became his successor. The Berlin headquarters (*Reichsautobahnen-Direktion*) of the RAB enterprise, which was established on June 27, 1933, directed numerous regional construction management centers, including OBR Breslau. By the beginning of the Second World War approximately 3,300 km of the RAB were open to traffic, including the A 4 from Breslau (Wrocław) to Brieg (Brzeg)<sup>15</sup>. Since

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<sup>11</sup> My paper *From "Reichsautobahnlager" to Schmelt Camp: Brande, a Forgotten Holocaust Site in Western Upper Silesia (Germany), 1940-1943*, "Yad Vashem Studies" 39. 2, 2011, p. 81-119, contains a section on the RAB phase of Brande as part of the complicated history of this camp (p. 86-95).

<sup>12</sup> Ann Kirschner, *Sala's Gift: My Mother's Holocaust Story*, New York 2006, p. 33-129. The book has been translated into Chinese, French, German, and Italian. In 2008 it appeared in Poland under the title *Listy z pudełki: Sekret mojej Mamy*. I thank Ann Kirschner and her mother Sala Kirschner nee Garncarz (b. 1924), daughter of Sosnowiec Rabbi Josef Garncarz and Chana Feldman Garncarz, for much valuable information.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *Buschvorwerk im Riesengebirge. Eine Gemeinde in Niederschlesien von den Kriegsjahren bis zur Vertreibung* (Centaurus Verlag: Flerbolzheim, 2006), p. 28-49, 164-175, 183-184, 187-188, 191; also Weiss, *From "Reichsautobahnlager" to Schmelt Camp*.

<sup>14</sup> The few documents on Geppersdorf (S. 8 / 76) made accessible to me by the Opole branch of the Instytut Pamięi Narodowej (Institute of National Remembrance) contain very little information on this camp. On the challenges and opportunities inherent in utilizing post-war eye-witness testimonies see Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival. Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, New York 2010, p. 3-12, and Zoë Vanja Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation*, New York 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Of the considerable body of publications on the RAB, only a few may be mentioned here: Karl-Heinz Ludwig, *Technik und Ingenieure im Dritten Reich*. Düsseldorf 1974, p. 303-344; Erhard Schütz / Eckhard



one of the tasks of OBR Breslau was to close the 80 km gap between Brieg and the area west of Gleiwitz (Gliwice), it set up RAB camps all along this projected route, including the one in Geppersdorf.

### History of *Reichsautobahnlager Geppersdorf*

The farming village of Geppersdorf, which had 374 inhabitants in 1939, was situated in *Kreis Falkenberg*, the county seat being the small city of Falkenberg (Niemodlin). In turn, *Kreis Falkenberg* was part of *Regierungsbezirk Oppeln* (Opole) in the region of western Upper Silesia, which became Polish in 1945. The camp was set up on the fringe of Geppersdorf, about 200 yards from the Breslau- Gleiwitz section of the "Führer's Road". It was located to the left of an unpaved road, unofficially called *Birkenweg*, that led from the village around Falkenberg to Brande. The camp occupied an expropriated part of a field belonging to Kurt Herzog (1903-1982) and his wife Paula (1902-1945). Just beyond this site, on the opposite side of *Birkenweg* and set back from it, were the farms of the Fach and the Böhm families<sup>16</sup>. According to a Jewish inmate the camp was commonly referred to as *Dorfiager* (village camp) early in its existence<sup>17</sup> - a fitting term considering its proximity to the village.

In November, 1939, RAB construction began in Geppersdorf<sup>18</sup>. According to former residents, the German laborers, many of whom lived in the area, were withdrawn after awhile due to a labor shortage, as was the case throughout Germany<sup>19</sup>. Work in the Geppersdorf area was resumed only when the Jews arrived<sup>20</sup>. Monthly statistical surveys of RAB camps, conducted by the regional RAB administrations, show that on September 25 and October 25, 1940, Geppersdorf was under construction and that a certain Simon had been appointed as *Lagerführer*. While these two surveys do not list Jews for any of the camps run by OBR Breslau, 52 prisoners of war, possibly from Poland, appear under the rubric "other accommodation (RAB)" in the October, 1940 statistics for Geppersdorf<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps these men, who may have been housed in the local inns, set up the camp. Because the site was somewhat swampy, building rubble was used to stabilize

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Gruber, *Mythos Reichsautobahn. Bau und Inszenierung der "Strassen des Führers" 1933 1941*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Berlin 2000; Thomas Zeller, *Driving Germany: The Landscape of the German Autobahn, 1930 1970*, New York 2007. In general, RAB camps for Jews are not discussed in books of this kind.

<sup>16</sup> Regina Becker née Herzog (b. 1934), January 8, 2009; Margarete Schwuchow née Fach (b. 1930), December 2, 2008. Henceforth citations providing only a name and a date indicate telephone interviews.

<sup>17</sup> International Tracing Service Arolsen (hereafter ITS) / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter by Lejbusz Wolf Zmidek (b. 1910), March 28, 1950. The camp discussed here is not to be confused with Geppersdorf in Lower Silesia, sub-camp of Groß-Rosen, which was established in 1945; see Aneta Małek and Hermann F. Weiss, *Geppersdorf (Mieqoice)*, [in:] *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 9, p. 314 316.

<sup>18</sup> Bundcsarchiv Berlin (hereafter BAB), R 4602/6 (report by OBR Breslau for the month of November, 1939).

<sup>19</sup> Claudia Windisch-Hojnacki, *Die Reichsautobahn: Konzeption und Bau der RAB, ihre ds- thetischen Aspekte, sowie ihre Illustration in Malerei, Literatur, Fotografie und Plastik*, Diss., Bonn 1989, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Heinz Pliefke (b. 1928), February 9, 2008; Hermann Arndt (b. 1930), February 10, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> BAB, R 4601 / 1171, fol. 59 (September 25, 1940); R 4602 / 237, fol. 1 (October 25, 1940). Some nearby RAB camps such as Gross Same and Klein Mangersdorf had been readied as early as August, 1939 (BAB, R 4601 / 1170, part 2, fol. 282).



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

it<sup>22</sup>. Former residents of the village agree that the camp was constructed just before the Jews appeared.

No surveys concerning the camps under the jurisdiction of OBR Breslau could be found for November and December 1940, and none are extant for the two subsequent years, except one dated April 30, 1942. For Geppersdorf it lists two *Wohnbaracken* (barracks for the inmates), totaling 344 beds, and a *Wirtschaftsbaracke*, a building containing the kitchen and storage space. Georg Dylus, who passed the camp on his way to school, recalls that the accommodation for the guards was within the camp, close to the gate, and that the *Appellplatz* where roll-calls were held was located between the living quarters of the inmates<sup>23</sup>.

On October 28, 1940, a train carrying approximately 700 Polish Jews from eastern Upper Silesia<sup>24</sup> departed from Sosnowiec and arrived in Falkenberg on the same day. It is not clear whether *Organisation Schmelt* played a role in the selections for this transport, as it did for so many later ones, since it cannot be determined exactly when its headquarters in Sosnowiec became operational. However, this organization may have been involved, since on October 15, 1940, Heinrich Himmler had introduced Albrecht Schmelt as *Sonderbeauftragter des Reichsführers SS für den fremdvölkischen Arbeitseinsatz in Oberschlesien* (Special Commissioner of the Reichsführer SS for the Utilization of Foreign Labor in Upper Silesia)<sup>25</sup>.

In Falkenberg the slave laborers were divided up and marched to the nearby RAB camps Geppersdorf, Klein Mangersdorf and, possibly, Brande<sup>26</sup>. The date of departure and arrival is documented in the brief diary of Sala Kirschner née Garncarz as well as in a certificate issued to her by a Geppersdorf *Lagerführer*<sup>27</sup>. When arriving at the camp, Gunther Neumann from Sosnowiec, who was in this first transport to Geppersdorf, found it to be new, enclosed by barbed wire, and empty except for the SA guards. Moses Chencinski recalls that the Jews had to set up the interior of the barracks, such as the bunk beds and the kitchen<sup>28</sup>. As in other RAB camps, the inmates wore their civilian clothes and the Star of David.

Soon the men began the physically demanding work at the RAB. Since it cut through fertile farmlands, they had to remove the topsoil and spread it over the embankments. The sand underneath was loaded into carts that traveled on narrow-

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<sup>22</sup> Regina Becker nee Herzog, January 8, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> BAB, R 4602 / 394, fol. 5; Georg Dylus (b. 1930), November 15, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> According to Gunther Neumann (b. 1922) and Abram Stone (Blumenstein; b. 1921), the total was 700 or 680 respectively (USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 4986, 277).

<sup>25</sup> Steinbacher, "Musterstadt" Auschwitz, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> As opposed to Abram Stone, Gunther Neumann does not list Brande (USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 277, 4986).

<sup>27</sup> Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 35 37, 128. In his brief description of RAB Geppersdorf. Moses Chencinski indicates the same arrival date (ITS / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter dated May 3, 1950). Dr. Woll Lajtner (1914-1989), who was in this first convoy to Geppersdorf, states in his tape recorded memoirs that it occurred on Sukkot. His daughter, Barbara Feldman, kindly permitted me to cite this testimonial (hereafter Lajtner, audio tape). I am also indebted to his nephew Mel Laytner for much useful information.

<sup>28</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 4986; ITS / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter by Moses Chencinski, May 3, 1950.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

gauge tracks throughout the construction site<sup>29</sup>. Cracking rocks and uprooting tree stumps without heavy equipment was particularly exhausting<sup>30</sup>. Working hours were from 7 to 6 and on Saturdays from 7 to 2<sup>31</sup>. The only extant photo of Geppersdorf inmates, which was probably taken in 1941, shows eight men posing at the construction site<sup>32</sup>. Survivors' testimonials and ITS records contain very few references to German enterprises involved in RAB construction in the Geppersdorf area. One former inmate mentions "Moll", another "Mathis", and two recall a company called "Merlander"<sup>33</sup>. None of these firms could be identified. German engineers and skilled laborers, some of whom brought along their families, lived in the village, for example, in the inn owned by the Arndt family<sup>34</sup>.

The Jewish men were struck with bullwhips and maltreated in other ways whenever the SA guards thought they worked too slowly<sup>35</sup>. Another danger facing them was the fact that their shoes were often wet and would eventually crack<sup>36</sup>. In his brief account of conditions at Geppersdorf, Avner Feldman, who was in the first transport, recalls that after two days of work his fingers were frozen and his hands covered with sores<sup>37</sup>. Once harsh winter conditions made work on the RAB impossible, the men in the Geppersdorf camp had to clear roads in the area. Several former inhabitants of the village remember that on one occasion, in the winter of 1940/1941, the inmates were forced to remove snow on the main street with wash basins. Some farmers complained to the guards about this harassment, and one of them, Paula Herzog, gave the Jews shovels from her family's farm, which were returned to her later<sup>38</sup>. Only a few of the men worked in more protected environments, at least for periods of time. For example, Joseph Schein (b. 1922) from Sosnowiec was assigned to repairing heavy equipment, Sam Seltzer to a surveyor, and Jacques Tisman to the kitchen<sup>39</sup>.

Living conditions were also better for inmates holding secretarial, administrative or other important positions, such as the shoemaker Chaim Kaufmann or the *Judenälteste* (Jewish Elder) Kronenberg from Sosnowiec, who was replaced by someone whose name is unknown. Sala Kirschner felt protected by Kronenberg<sup>40</sup>, but it is not

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<sup>29</sup> Heinz Pliefke, February 2, 2008; Gunther Neumann, Jacques Tisman (b. 1922), USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 4986, 34445 (Gunther Neumann, Jacques Tisman); Sam Seltzer (b. 1925). University of Michigan Dearborn Voice / Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive, interview dated November 29, 1982.

<sup>30</sup> USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 3113, 13798 (Paul Bleicher [b. 1920], Sam Seltzer).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, interview no. 4986 (Gunther Neumann).

<sup>32</sup> Reproduced in Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 148-149.

<sup>33</sup> ITS / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter by Lejbusz Wolf Zmidek, March 28, 1950; 1ST / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter by Moses Chencinski, May 3, 1950; ITS / ANF / FALL T / D 363 039 (2008), letter by Simon Kamerat, December

<sup>34</sup> Hermann Arndt, November 14, 2008.

<sup>35</sup> USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 4986, 13798, 34445 (Gunther Neumann, Sam Seltzer, Jacques Tisman).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, interview no. 277 (Abram Stone).

<sup>37</sup> Avner Feldman. *In the Ghetto and Camps*, [in:] *Zaglebie Memorial Book*, vol. 30, ed. Y. Ra-paport, p. 550 (online English translation at <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Zaglembia.html>, visited on March 1, 2012). Feldman stayed in Geppersdorf for about six months.

<sup>38</sup> Brigitte Bartl nee Arndt (b. 1928), February 6, 2008; Heinz Pliefke, February 9, 2009; Ella Schonbrunn nee Pliefke (b. 1920), February 9, 2009; Regina Becker nee Herzog (b. 1934) January 8, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 51395, 13798, 34445 (Joseph Schein, Sam Seltzer, Jacques Tisman).

<sup>40</sup> For Kaufmann, see Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 46, 74-75; for Kronenberg, see *ibidem*, p. 42, 105. Hellen Israel nee Chaya Galizer (1918-2005), who arrived in Geppersdorf sometime in 1941, speaks of a bad



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

clear how he was viewed by the average inmate. Among the photos she managed to smuggle from camp to camp is one of Kronenberg with the following inscription: "Für meine 'kleine / Wirtin' / HI[srael] Kronenberg / Judenälteste [stamp] / R.A.B. Lag. / Geppersdorf. / 17/XÜ.41." ("For my 'little hostess' ... December 17, 1941")<sup>41</sup>. He probably gave her this photo shortly before being taken to another camp. Until he was transferred to another RAB camp sometime in 1941, Dr. Wolf Lajtner (1914-1989) was in charge of the *Krankenstube* (sick room) at Geppersdorf. Accompanied by a guard he would leave from time to time in order to look after sick inmates in other RAB camps. He also recalled that few medications were available to him. According to Gunther Neumann, Dr. Lajtner led the Geppersdorf inmates in daily exercises<sup>42</sup>.

The last names of a few additional members of the Jewish sub-hierarchy are revealed in a postcard to Sala Garnarcz written by her friend Bernhard Holtz on July 5, 1942. Referring to the closure of Geppersdorf he wonders about the fate of Bornstein, Gebührer and a medic by the name of Offmann, all of whom he had apparently known well during his time at Geppersdorf. Gebührer must have worked in the *Schreibstube* there because Holtz mentions in this postcard that several weeks previously he had asked him for a sheet with guidelines concerning *Kolonnenälteste* (leaders of work details)<sup>43</sup>. Undoubtedly this man is Moische Gebührer from Bielsko, whose reign of terror as *Judenältester* of Brande from late 1942 to the closure of that camp in late August, 1943 is described in Hans-Werner Wollenberg's harrowing memoir. Among the atrocities Gebührer committed was his participation in the murder of *Schieber* Bornstein at Brande. Apparently the conflict between the two men began when Bornstein taught the less well educated Gebührer secretarial skills in a camp, the name of which Wollenberg does not mention<sup>44</sup>. In all likelihood the camp in question is Geppersdorf where Gebührer appears to have fitted into the circle of friends and acquaintances around Bernhard Holtz and Sala Garnarcz, not yet displaying the cruelty which made him so hated and feared at Brande.

Among the inmates at Geppersdorf there was a small contingent of Jewish women. Ala Gertner from Będzin, who was to be hanged in Auschwitz because of her involvement in the October 7, 1944 uprising, arrived with her friend, Sala Garnarcz. Initially the latter worked in the kitchen and assisted in cleaning the camp, and then was the seamstress for the German personnel until the camp was closed. The former was assigned to the office of the *Lagerführer* as typist and translator, as was Chaya Galizer on account of her knowledge of German and bookkeeping. With Chaya Galizer came a young

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*Judenältester* there without mentioning his name. This man, with whom she had an uncomfortable encounter in a Dusseldorf synagogue after the war, may have been Kronenberg's successor (USCSFI Archive, interview no. 21038).

<sup>41</sup> The New York Public Library, Sala Garnarcz Collection, 36. The photo shows a gaunt man, about fifty years old, sitting on a bench. I thank Michael Terry, Curator of the Dorot Jewish Division in the New York Public Library, for providing valuable information on the Sala Garnarcz Collection.

<sup>42</sup> For Dr. Lajtner, see Kirschner, *Sala's Gift*, p. 47, 67, 148 149 (photo); Lajtner, audio tape; USCSFI Archive, interview no. 4986 (Gunther Neumann).

<sup>43</sup> The New York Public Library, Sala Garnarcz Collection, Bernhard Holtz to Sala Garnarcz, July 5, 1942. On July 20, 1942, Holtz again inquired: "Wo sind denn Gebührer und Bomstein/" (*ibidem*, postscript on postcard from Karl Demerer, *Judenälteste* at Blechhammer, to the *Judenälteste* at Gross Same).

<sup>44</sup> Hans-Werner Wollenberg, ... *und der Alptraum wurde zum Alltag: Autobiographischer Bericht eines jüdischen Arztes über NS-Zwangsarbeitslager in Schlesien, 1942 1945*, Pfaffenweiler 1996, p. 99f. On Gebührer at Brande, also see Weiss, *From "Reichsautobahnlager" to Schmelz Camp* p. 106, 109.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

woman who had to work in the office of the *Judenälteste*. Like male members of the Jewish camp hierarchy, the women at Geppersdorf had regular access to extra food rations and heated rooms<sup>45</sup>.

A male German cook by the name of Schwarz directed the kitchen, assisted by Hilde Fiedler (1922-2007) and another woman from the village of Geppersdorf. Apparently foodstuffs were not delivered by Geppersdorf peasants, but brought in from Falkenberg. Margarete Schwuchow née Fach and her sisters Gertrude (1926-2004) and Elfriede (1923-1948) would regularly pick up food waste in the camp kitchen for the animals in their family's farm across the road. The Jewish women working in the kitchen sometimes asked these German girls for toothpaste and toothbrushes<sup>46</sup>.

The residents of the area could not avoid noticing that many of the Jewish men looked malnourished and were hungry, and some of them tried to help. Whereas Joseph Schein received food from Germans with whom he repaired equipment, Paul Bleicher recalls that villagers threw bread to work details, whereupon they were chased away by guards. While planting potatoes adjacent to the camp, Paula Herzog flung some of them over the fence, which led to an altercation with a guard. When working on his fields, Hermann Pliefke (1888—1979) sometimes placed bread in a hidden location close to the RAB construction site, as did Gertrude Fach. She left it there because she had become interested in a young Jewish man. In the course of several furtive and brief conversations he lamented that he had been picked up in his hometown and that he did not know what would happen to him<sup>47</sup>.

In terms of food and emotional support, Sala Garnarcz, the teenage seamstress, was luckier than her fellow inmates. From approximately April to June, 1941, she did her mending in the workshop of Geppersdorf tailor Wilhelm Pache (1881 — 1967) during the day. She was treated like a daughter by him and his wife Anna (1881-1971), and like a friend by their daughter Elfriede (1908-1951). Among the numerous documents which this Jewish girl hid throughout the war is a photo showing Elfriede sitting on a bench. The inscription on the back reads: "7. Juni/ Der lieben kleinen Sala / eine kleine Erinnerung / an Geppersdorf / Ihre / Elfriede Pache ( To dear little Sala / a modest reminder / of Geppersdorf / your / Elfriede Pache )<sup>48</sup>. The Pache family sent money to Sala's increasingly impoverished family in Sosnowiec, who thanked them for their assistance in postcards addressed to Sala Garnarcz. After she was again restricted to the camp, they brought her packages with food and clothing, and when that was no longer permitted, they made one last attempt to contact her. Just before the camp was closed in June, 1942, their son Herbert (b. 1924), who was to die in action in the Soviet Union in 1944, appeared in a *Wehrmacht* uniform and delivered a parcel to Sala Garnarcz which, among other things, contained a photo of Elfriede sitting on a windowsill in her parents' home<sup>49</sup>. German censors and the SA guards must have noticed the relationship between

<sup>45</sup> See Kirschner, *Sala's Gift*, p. 42, 45f.; USCSFI Archive, interview no. 21038 (Hellen Israel).

<sup>46</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 21038 (Hellen Israel); Horst Fiedler (b. 1931), February 25, 2008; Hermann Arndt, February 10, 2008; Margarete Schwuchow, February 12, 2008.

<sup>47</sup> USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 51395, 3113 (Joseph Schein, Paul Bleicher); Regina Becker, January 8, 2009; Heinz Pliefke, November 11, 2008; Margarete Schwuchow, February 12, 2008. Some local schoolboys sold bread and sausages to Jewish slave laborers (Hermann Arndt January 8, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> The New York Public Library, Sala Garnarcz Collection, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 82 89, 129. Due to a transcription error, the name of this family is mistakenly given as "Pachta" in the original edition of this book, but it has been corrected in all translations. In 2008



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

the Jewish girl and this German family but, as far as is known, no bad consequences ensued for those involved.

Contact with their families was an important lifeline for the Jews in the Geppersdorf camp. Soon after its opening, censorship regulations limited mail to postcards written in German. Sala Garncarz occasionally sent and received parcels with food and clothing, and she corresponded with family members and friends throughout the existence of the camp. Amazingly, she managed to hide the letters, postcards and photos she received. Many years later they were to form the basis of her daughter's book, *Sala's Gift*. Other Geppersdorf survivors also recall the arrival of postcards and packages<sup>50</sup>. The small postal substation in the village was run by Helene Pache (1900—1981). According to her daughter, a few Jews, accompanied by a guard, carried the mail to and from the camp. Whenever many parcels had arrived, they were delivered to the camp on a horse-drawn cart<sup>51</sup>. Leaves were probably granted only to a small number of inmates. After having been on a list of applicants for awhile, Sala Garncarz was able to visit her family in Sosnowiec for three days in September, 1941. Similar leaves occurred in other RAB camps as well<sup>52</sup>. For some Jews in the Geppersdorf camp the secret continuation of religious traditions provided a link to the background from which they had been uprooted. According to Hellen Israel, a young man, son of a rabbi, tried to observe dietary laws, and Paul Bleicher recalls that windows were covered when a religious observance occurred<sup>53</sup>.

There are indications that the treatment of inmates became harsher over time. Malnutrition and the number of roll-calls increased. Jacques Tisman remembers that on the day of the German invasion of the Soviet Union (June 22, 1941) the SA guards emptied out the barracks looking for weapons and called the Jews "Bolsheviks"<sup>54</sup>. Since *Lagerführer* Simon is not mentioned by any of the survivors, he must have been replaced early on by Ackermann, an SA member known for his callousness and brutality. At times Ackermann, who could not be identified, ordered the Jewish men to wash with snow or, under the pretext of letting in fresh air, he had them leave the windows ajar during winter nights. Avner Feldman remembers that on one very cold night during the winter of 1940/1941 Ackermann ordered the Jewish men to come out of the barracks naked in order to "bathe" at an outside tap. After standing in line for a considerable time they had to run and sing for an hour, to the great amusement of their tormentor<sup>55</sup>. Also, Ackermann was involved in having escapees killed. Abram Stone, who was in the Geppersdorf camp throughout its existence, had his first experience of murder there. A man going to the latrine wrapped in a blanket was thought by a guard to be making an

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Ann Kirschner met with Elfriede Pache's son Winfried Musch (b. 1947) and his family who had known nothing about their ancestors' relationship with the Jewish teenager. I thank Winfried Musch and other Pache descendants for their assistance. For this photo of Elfriede Pache, see footnote 83.

<sup>50</sup> USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 21038, 277 (Hellen Israel, Abram Stone). For mailing regulations see Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 44, 113, 166f.

<sup>51</sup> Elisabeth Glass nee Pache (1924-2008). February 10, 2008. This family is not related to the Pache family mentioned above.

<sup>52</sup> Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 93-96; Weiss, *From "Reichsautobahnlager" to Schmelt Camp* p. 90, 92.

<sup>53</sup> USCSFI Archive, interviews no. 21038, 3113 (Hellen Israel, Paul Bleicher).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, interviews no. 277, 34445 (Abram Stone, Jacques Tisman).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, interviews no. 3113, 277, 34445 (Paul Bleicher, Abram Stone, Jacques Tisman); Feldman, *In the Ghetto and Camps*, p. 550.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

escape, and was shot. He was buried in the Falkenberg German-Jewish cemetery, where also many victims of the nearby Brande camp were interred<sup>56</sup>. According to Hellen Israel, two men tried to flee but were captured and sent to Auschwitz. When Sam Seltzer arrived at Geppersdorf in March, 1941, Ackermann warned the men in his transport against running away and had them walk look at the washroom where two men who had tried to escape lay dead<sup>57</sup>. A Jewish cook by the name of Mendlowicz confided to his Jewish girlfriend, who also worked in the kitchen, that he planned to escape. She informed German camp personnel about this in order to keep him at Geppersdorf. However, he was so severely beaten that his backside looked like "a piece of red meat"<sup>58</sup>. Villagers witnessed some of the violence. They learned that, on his way to a Falkenberg dentist, a Jewish man was shot dead by the guard accompanying him who alleged that he was trying to escape. German women working in nearby fields reported the incident<sup>59</sup>. Once, when passing the camp on their way back from school, Georg Dylus and his older brother Erwin persuaded Johannes Duda, an SA man guarding the gate, to let them explore the camp. Duda, who had become their mother Clara's lover after her husband was killed in action late in 1941, admonished them to stay nearby. However, as they ventured further they caught a glimpse of three Jews in wooden boxes who were about to be buried behind the camp. Avner Feldman states that two of his close friends perished at Geppersdorf. Szmuel Gertner from his hometown, Slawków, died from malnutrition and Welwel Warszawski was murdered at the construction site<sup>60</sup>. It is unknown how many Geppersdorf inmates became so ill that they died soon after being sent away. One of these was Lajber Brodkiewicz (b. 1908), who returned to Sosnowiec early in 1942 because of bad health and passed away there soon afterwards<sup>61</sup>. Yad Vashem's *Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names* lists three men for RAB Geppersdorf, but it is likely that the number of deaths is higher.

Late in 1941 or early in 1942 Ackermann was transferred to RAB Sakrau, where he maintained his reputation as an insidious and brutal *Lagerführer*<sup>62</sup>. In the April 1942 survey of Silesian RAB camps cited above, a certain Teichmann is listed as *Lagerführer* at Geppersdorf, and a German by the name of Pusch as *Unterführer* (deputy camp administrator)<sup>63</sup>. On June 9, 1942, Pusch signed a certificate for Sala Garnarcz as

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<sup>56</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 277 (Abram Stone); Wei ss. *From "Reichsautobahnlager " to Schmelt Camp*, p. 109. The Jewish community in Falkenberg, which reached its high point around 1880, declined because of migration to major cities. Only three Jews remained there in 1925; see *Heimatbuch des Kreises Falkenberg in Oberschlesien*, ed. by Heimatverein des Kreises Falkenberg O/S, Scheinfeld/Mittelfranken, 1971, p. 87. The Falkenberg Jewish cemetery and its mortuary, which are located just beyond the Catholic cemetery on the road from Niemodlin (Falkenberg) to Nysa (Neisse), offered a picture of total neglect when I visited it in October, 2008. Sometime after 1975 the remaining tombstones had disappeared. In 2010 this site was purchased by a local real estate developer (Mariusz Wozniak, e-mail, October 13, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 21038 (Hellen Israel); Sam Seltzer, *University of Michigan Voice / Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive*, November 29, 1982. Also see Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 47.

<sup>58</sup> Lajtner, audio tape.

<sup>59</sup> Hermann Arndt, February 10, 2008. According to Arndt this guard was arrested.

<sup>60</sup> Feldman, *In the Ghetto and Camps*, p. 550.

<sup>61</sup> Georg Dylus, November 14 and 15, 2008; USCSFI Archive, interview no. 4117 (Pola Fox nee Brodkiewicz). Duda, who did not resume contact with the Dylus family after the war, could not be identified.

<sup>62</sup> Wollenberg, *... und der Alptraum wurde zum Alltag*, p. 66.

<sup>63</sup> BAB, R 4602 / 394, fol. 5 6.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

*Lagerführer*<sup>64</sup>. The identities of these two men could not be ascertained. OBR Breslau probably continued its practice of appointing *Lagerführer* during the war<sup>65</sup>. It also remains uncertain to what extent it was involved in procuring guards for its camps. Survivors and Germans formerly living in Geppersdorf report that the guards there were members of the SA and that they were *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) from eastern Upper Silesia, the same region the Jews were from. Hellen Israel recalls that she had to write letters to their girlfriends since their knowledge of German was limited. Evidently they were viewed as quasi foreigners by the local population. A number of the guards drank heavily, engaged in rowdy behavior and did not pay their bills in the village inns. As a result, some of them were banned from the inns, and girls in the village became wary of them<sup>66</sup>. Only one guard could be identified. Wilhelm Polotzek (b. 1914), who had served at the Brande camp until early 1941, was extradited by U. S. authorities. He was sentenced to death by the appeals court in Cracow for crimes committed at RAB camp Geppersdorf and Auschwitz, and executed on April 12, 1952<sup>67</sup>. Documentation on the fluctuating numbers of inmates in the Geppersdorf camp is very fragmentary. For example, it is unknown whether it ever reached its full capacity of 344 inmates. Abram Stone, who arrived with the first group on October 28, 1940, estimates that there were 280 Jews initially and 170 later on. The RAB camp survey of April, 1942, lists 146 inmates for April 5, 74 for April 15, and 73 for April 25, 1942, with similar declines occurring in several nearby RAB camps<sup>68</sup>. OBR Breslau kept the Jews in its camps at the onset of the winter of 1941/1942 so that they would be available as soon as construction on the RAB resumed Gruner cites an RAB document according to which 3,823 Jews were in camps run by OBR Breslau on November 30, 1941, which amounted to 28% of its workforce<sup>69</sup>. However, on January 17, 1942, Fritz Todt issued an order according to which all major RAB construction was to be stopped throughout Germany<sup>70</sup>. In the course of that year OBR Breslau involved itself in retraining the Jewish workers in its camps for the purpose of building armaments factories<sup>71</sup>. Paradoxically, while Germany was intensifying its efforts to annihilate its Jews in order to make the country *judenrein*, it transferred thousands of foreign Jewish slave laborers into its eastern region.

It cannot be determined whether retraining occurred in Geppersdorf, but in the spring of 1942 some of the inmates there had to work on residual RAB projects such as

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<sup>64</sup> The New York Public Library, Sala Garnarcz Collection, certificate, June 9, 1942. This document is translated in Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 128. The name "Purst" given here is a transcription error, and the document is mistakenly dated June 10, 1942.

<sup>65</sup> See BAB, R 4601 / 1230 for prewar appointment procedures.

<sup>66</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 21038 (Hellen Israel); Hermann Arndt, February 10, 2008; Ella Schonbrunn nee Pliefke, February 9, 2008.

<sup>67</sup> Elzbieta Kobierska-Motas, *Ekstradycja przestępców wojennych do Polski z czterech stref okupacyjnych Niemiec 1946-1950*, vol. 2, Warszawa 1992, p. 184. For a report by Szaja Waldmann on a murder committed by Polotzek at Geppersdorf, see Yad Vashem Archives, M.21.1 / 405.

<sup>68</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 277 (Abram Stone); BAB, R 4602 / 394, fol. 5-6

<sup>69</sup> Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor*, p. 205.

<sup>70</sup> For the first detailed account of Todt's order as well as subsequent modifications by Albert Speer, see Wolfgang Jäger, *Der Generalinspektor des deutschen Strassenwesens und die Reichsautobahnen 1933-1945*, Köln 2012.

<sup>71</sup> BAB, R 2301 / 5827, fol. 7 (Reich audit office, report on audit of RAB activities during 1942, June 1, 1943).



finishing embankments and cleaning up the construction site<sup>72</sup>. Also, three Germans and ten Jews were scheduled to finish a small underpass for a stream next to the nearly completed bridge just outside of Geppersdorf by the end of April 1942<sup>73</sup>. Closing the gap in the RAB between Brieg and Gleiwitz had been an important goal since the invasion of Poland, and as late as October, 1941, OBR Breslau had assumed that work could be completed by the end of 1942<sup>74</sup>. On July 22 1941 shortly after the invasion of the Soviet Union, Fritz Todt gave the order that in the interest of creating a fast connection by road with the Ukraine, the closing of this gap be given highest priority ("Baustufe I")<sup>75</sup>. Ironically, while RAB promoters such as Todt touted the strategic value of the RAB, the German military leadership believed that the railroads were their primary transportation asset<sup>76</sup>.

Except for the first convoy to Geppersdorf on October 28, 1940, no other transports to or from this camp can be dated precisely. Statements by survivors suggest transports from Geppersdorf to the following camps: Auenrode (November, 1940), Brande (fall, 1941), Gross-Sarne (January, 1941), Markstädt (Laskowice Oławskie; middle of 1941), Tamowitz (Tamowice; June, 1941)<sup>77</sup>. Even less is known about arrivals. One group came from Sosnowiec in March, 1941<sup>78</sup>. Mayer Pile (b. 1919) was taken from Klein Mangersdorf through Geppersdorf to Gross-Masselwitz (Maślice Wielkie) in fall, 1941; there he was forced to join a special Jewish unit of *Organisation Todt*, which worked on railroad tracks in the Soviet Union. Dr. Lajtner, the first camp physician at Geppersdorf, accompanied this group and saved the lives of many of its members<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> A total of 568 Jewish slave laborers are budgeted in a listing of minor remaining projects for the Breslau RAB region through May 15, 1942, and 383 for the rest of that month (BAB, R 4602 /689, April 17, 1942); see also the listing of work to be done on some concrete structures, *ibidem*, May 1, 1942.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, R 4602 /689 (RAB Directorate Berlin, April 17, 1942, draft concerning remaining projects for OBR Breslau, project no. 181a). I thank Wolfgang Jager for information from his databanks. For RAB construction during the war, see his paper: Wolfgang Jager, *Die deutsche Autobahn. Spurensicherung der Bauleistungen in den 1940er Jahren*, [in:] *Die Autobahn. Von der Idee zur Wirklichkeit*, ed. Wolfgang Wirth, Köln 2005, p. 117-129.

<sup>74</sup> BAB, R 4602 /115, fol.95 (Fritz Todt to leaders of the industry, September 27, 1939), *ibidem* fol. 105 (Fritz Todt circular, June 6, 1940); R 4602 / 3007 (RAB Directorate Berlin to Supreme Command of the Army, February 25, 1941); R 19 / 184, fol. 7 (Schmelt to Meinecke Ministry of the Interior, July 25, 1941; R 4602 / 98, fol. 15 (RAB Directorate Berlin note, October 14, 1941, referring to OBR Breslau report for September, 1941).

<sup>75</sup> BAB, R 4602 / 285 (Todt to Schonleben). For the upgrading of this RAB section to "Baustufe I" also see BAB, R 4602 / 98, fol. 20 (Ministry of Munitions to OBR Breslau, October 31, 1941).

<sup>76</sup> Schütz / Gruber, *Mythos Reichsautobahn*, p. 88-90.

<sup>77</sup> Auenrode: ITS / HIST / SACH / M 9 Geppersdorf (2008), questionnaire Jechicl Lustiger; Brande: Sam Seltzer, University of Michigan Dearborn Voice / Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive, November 29, 1982; Gross Same: ITS / HIST / SACH / M 9 Geppersdorf (2008), questionnaire Pesl Fuchs; Markstadt: ITS / HIST / SACH / M 9 Geppersdorf (2008), questionnaire Cino Cymbler; Tamowitz: ITS / HIST / SACH / M 9 Geppersdorf (2008), questionnaire Mendel Weissberger. According to an undated diary entry by Sala Garncarz, 120 men left RAB Geppersdorf early in November, 1940; see Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> ITS / HIST / SACH / M 9 Geppersdorf (2008), questionnaire Simon Kamerad; Sam Seltzer, University of Michigan Dearborn Voice / Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive, November 29, 1982.

<sup>79</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 809 (Mayer Pile); Lajtner, audio tape; Bella Gutterman, *Jews in the Service of Organisation Todt in the Occupied Soviet Territories, October 1941 March 1942*, "Yad Vashem Studies" 29, 2001, p. 65 109.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

As opposed to the camps run by *Organisation Schmelt*, RAB camps consisted mostly of Polish Jews. Only one survivor recalls the presence of two Jews from another country at Geppersdorf, namely Holtz from Breslau and another German Jew whose name he does not provide. He is, of course, referring to Sala Garncarz's friend Bernhard Holtz, who worked in the *Lagerführer's* office for awhile and married their mutual friend Ala Gertner in May, 1943<sup>80</sup>.

None of the Geppersdorf survivors, whose testimonials have been used in this paper, report visits by officials of *Organisation Schmelt*. However, while being selected for a transport to this camp in Sosnowiec in March, 1941, Sam Seltzer noticed the presence of SS-Hauptsturmführer Ludwig Knoll (b. 1899), one of Schmelt's most feared associates<sup>81</sup>. Early in November, 1940, Monick Merin's assistant, Franya Czama (1911-1943), appeared at Geppersdorf for an inspection<sup>82</sup>. Little is known about the involvement of local German authorities in the affairs of this camp. Richard Pache (1897-1979), mayor of the village and head of its Nazi party branch, apparently had to inspect it periodically in order to determine that the inmates were treated well. Incredibly, he told his family that food rations were adequate<sup>83</sup>.

In the course of 1942 many Silesian RAB camps were shut down. On June 9, 1942, the closure of the Geppersdorf camp must have been imminent. *Lagerführer* Pusch certified on that day that Sala Garncarz had worked there since October 28, 1940<sup>84</sup>. Also, the photo of Elfriede Pache sitting on the windowsill carries the inscription "Zum Abschied / von / Elfriede / 10. 6. 42" ("Upon your leavetaking / from / Elfriede / June 10, 1942")<sup>85</sup>. On June 10, 1942, or very shortly afterwards, the Geppersdorf inmates were distributed to five camps in Upper Silesia<sup>86</sup>. Most of them were to experience several additional forced labor camps followed by one or more concentration camps. A

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<sup>80</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 277 (Abram Stone); Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 46, 103 106, 165f. By July, 1943, Holtz had become deputy *Judenältester* at ZAL Blechhammer (The New York Public Library, Sala Garncarz Collection, Bernhard Holtz to Sala Garncarz, July 5, 1942).

<sup>81</sup> USCSFI Archive, interview no. 13798 (Sam Seltzer); on Knoll see Steinbacher, "*Musterstadt Auschwitz*", p. 143f.

<sup>82</sup> Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, p. 44.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44; Elisabeth Glass nee Pachc, February 10, 2008. This family is not related to the family of Wilhelm Pache mentioned above.

<sup>84</sup> The New York Public Library, Sala Garncarz Collection, certificate, June 9, 1942.

<sup>85</sup> The New York Public Library, Sala Garncarz Collection, 38; see footnote 49. The photo is reproduced in Kirschner, *Salas Gift*, between pages 148 and 149, but its date is mistakenly rendered as October 1942.

<sup>86</sup> 1.) Blechhammer (Blachownia Śląska): ITS / HIST / SACH / M 9 Geppersdorf (2008), questionnaire Simon Kamerad; ITS / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter by Lejbusz Wolf Zmidek, March 28, 1950; USCSFI Archive, interview no. 3113 (Paul Bleicher).

2.) Brande: USCSFI Archive, interview no. 34445 (Jacques Tisman).

3.) Gross Same; *ibidem*, interviews no. 21038, 4986 (Hellen Israel, Gunther Neumann). For the approximate date of this transport, which included Sala Garncarz, see Kirschner, *Sala's Gift*, p. 128 130. On July 20, 1942, Bernhard Holtz sent greetings to the "Geppersdorfer" at Gross Same (The New York Public Library, Sala Garncarz Collection, postscript on postcard from Karl Demerer, *Judenältester* at Blechhammer, to the *Judenälteste* at Gross Same).

4.) Klein Mangersdorf: ITS / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter by Lejbusz Wolf Zmidek, March 28, 1950; ITS / HIST / SACH / M 9 Geppersdorf (2008), questionnaire Pinkus Jurkowski; Gunther Neumann, SFI Archive, no. 4986.

5.) Tamowitz: ITS / HIST / SACH / VHL Ordner 58a Geppersdorf (2008), letter by Moses Chencinski, May 3, 1950.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

small group of men stayed behind at Geppersdorf. Some of them assisted a German in managing the fish population in nearby Sangow pond. They ate some of the fish he cooked and took the rest to their comrades in the camp. About two weeks later they marched with their suitcases to the Gross Same camp<sup>87</sup>. Former Geppersdorf residents remember that the barracks were taken away soon after the camp was closed. However, even by the war's end the land it had occupied had not been rehabilitated<sup>88</sup>. Today no reminder of RAB camp Geppersdorf can be seen there, except, of course, the E 40 freeway just outside Rzędziwojowice<sup>89</sup>. It had remained unsurfaced until Polish authorities closed the gap between Brzeg and Gliwice in the nineties, utilizing the roadbed, embankments and half-finished concrete structures that Jewish slave laborers had worked on many years before.

### Conclusions

Since eleven of the thirteen Silesian *Reichsautobahnlager* for Jews have not been studied in any detail, future research will be needed to show to what extent the findings of the present paper apply to this entire group of camps. A few of the aspects that need to be addressed may be mentioned here. Steinbacher suggests that there were no Jewish women at the RAB camps<sup>90</sup>. It is unlikely that Geppersdorf was the only camp with a small group of women, since they could be assigned to forced labor as seamstresses or in the kitchen and the camp offices. Then there is the issue of worsening conditions in 1941. At Grünheide, too, the invasion of the Soviet Union was followed by harsher treatment of the inmates<sup>91</sup>, but did this happen in most other Silesian RAB camps as well? According to Steinbacher, mailing privileges ceased in 1941<sup>92</sup>; however, there are indications that mail continued to be sent and received well into 1942, at least at some of these sites<sup>93</sup>. Her claim that the leadership and the guards at these camps belonged to the SS is almost certainly wrong<sup>94</sup>. For example, at Brande the first group of guards were members of the *Nationalsozialistisches Kraftfahrkorps* (National Socialist Motor Corps), who were succeeded by SA men<sup>95</sup>. According to Bachner, the SA men at Ottmuth were vicious, while the policemen guarding Gogolin acted fairly decently<sup>96</sup>. Generalizations about the German personnel at Silesian RAB camps could be made with more confidence once their varied institutional affiliations and their range of behaviors towards the Jewish inmates are known. Also, the issue of German helpers merits further research. In all likelihood, they represent a small minority and few of them would have been as

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<sup>87</sup>Abram Stone, USCSFI Archive, interview no. 277 (Abram Stone). The German looking after this pond lived next to his brother, Wilhelm Pache, in the family's ancient farm house.

<sup>88</sup> Heinz Pliefke, February 9, 2008.

<sup>89</sup> I thank Janusz Oszytko (Opole) and his father for taking me to the sites associated with the Geppersdorf camp on October 13, 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Steinbacher, *"Musterstadt" Auschwitz*, p. 149.

<sup>91</sup> See Ernst Israel Bornstein, *Die lange Nacht. Ein Bericht aus siehen I. agern*. Frankfurt a M 1967, p. 50f.

<sup>92</sup> Steinbacher, *"Musterstadt" Auschwitz*, p. 147.

<sup>93</sup> See Kirschner, *Sala's Gift*, p. 128, also James Bachner, *My Darkest Years. Memoirs of a Survivor of Auschwitz, Warsaw and Dachau*, Jefferson, North Carolina 2007, p. 93, 99, 107f, 113, 122f.

<sup>94</sup> Steinbacher, *Musterstadt" Auschwitz*, p. 148.

<sup>95</sup> Weiss, *From "Reichsautobahnlager" to Schmelz Camp*, p. 92f.

<sup>96</sup> F. Sachner, *My Darkest Years*, p. 91 ff., 103 ff.



Hermann F. Weiss: REICHAUTOBAHNLAGER GEPPERSDORF (UPPER SILESIA), 1940-1942

supportive as the Pache family in Geppersdorf. Apparently a number of Brande inhabitants were among those who helped inmates. While Bachner experienced help from Germans at Gogolin and Ottmuth, Solomon Gross recounts frequent acts of kindness by residents of Sakrau as well as German RAB workers<sup>97</sup>. One wonders whether such contacts occurred at other RAB camps as well.

Finally, the closing of some *Reiehsautobahnlager* and the transformation of others into Schmelt camps, all of which happened approximately in the summer of 1942, needs to be explored more fully. Address and sender information on postcards sent by, and to, Jewish inmates during those months reflects the change from "R.A.B. Lager" to "Z.A. Lager"<sup>98</sup>. While Schmelt camps have attracted somewhat more scholarly attention than the Silesian RAB camps, only three out of a total of approximately 160 have been investigated in detail<sup>99</sup>. Additional studies of this kind would lead to a better understanding of the differences within, and between, these two groups of camps. Gruner and Steinbacher have argued that the activities of *Organisation Schmelt* were not only driven by a racist ideology, but also by economic pragmatism. While an unknown but significant number of Jews perished in the camps run by this SS agency, they offered a chance of survival for many others<sup>100</sup>. Future research may clarify whether the Silesian RAB camps were different from Schmelt camps in this important respect. At this point one can only hypothesize that in spite of generally harsh conditions, injury and death rates were lower in the Silesian *Reiehsautobahnlager*, especially in their early stage.

translated by Katarzyna Hussar

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<sup>97</sup> Weiss, *From "Reiehsautobahnlager" to Schmelt Camp*, p. 91, 93, 116f.; Bachner, *My Darkest Years*, p. 98, 109f.; Solomon Gross, *Silent Sun*, Cranbury, New Jersey 1992, p. 28, 35, 43.

<sup>98</sup> See Weiss, *From "Reiehsautobahnlager" to Schmelt Camp*, p. 98, 100f., 116.

<sup>99</sup> Alfred Konieczny, *Żydowski obóz pracy przymusowej W Jeleniowie z lat 1943 1944*, "Studia nad Faszyzmem i Zbrodniami Hitlerowskimi" 22, 1999, p. 414 426 (on ZAL Gellenau); Weiss, *Buschvorwerk*, p. 157 200 (on ZAL Schmiedeberg); Weiss, *From "Reiehsautobahnlager" to Schmelt Camp*, p. 98 115 (on Brande).

<sup>100</sup> See Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor*, p. 291 293, and Steinbacher, *"Musterstadt" Auschwitz*, p. 277-279.