

History

On April 28th, 1944 there was an extremely heavy air-raid on Friedrichshafen and its armaments industry, which had been set up by *Graf Zeppelin*. This forced the planners of the armaments industry to shift the site of production.

A group of building firms was engaged by the “*Ministry of armaments and war production*” to build galleries in Überlingen on Lake Constance to take in the armament factories. The relatively soft rock there is able to absorb vibrations caused by bomb attacks and thus offers a very effective protection against air-raids.

The companies *Zeppelin*, *Maybach*, *Dornier* and *ZF Friedrichshafen* were to be located there in separate facilities, each with a road and railway connection.

For this purpose prisoners from the concentration camp at Dachau were recruited and had to establish an external branch of the concentration camp near *Aufkirch*, north - west of Überlingen in autumn 1944. About 800 prisoners lived in this concentration camp. And they blasted 4 km long galleries into the rock in less than seven months.

However, before the galleries were finished, French troops reached Lake Constance at the end of April 1945, so that the production of war material never began.

Prisoners

The prisoners were mainly Italians, Poles, Russians, Czechs and Slovenes. In the “3rd Reich” the prisoners were marked by differently coloured pieces of cloth

(triangles) sewn on their clothes. In the concentration camp at Überlingen political (red triangles) criminal (green triangles) and antisocial (black triangles) prisoners were interned.

They were kept under supervision by so called “*Kapos*” who were prisoners themselves. In front of the entrances to the galleries SS-guards with dogs were posted to prevent escapes. The prisoners worked in two twelve-hour shifts. They had to dig holes for explosives into the rock and load the material onto tippers which were then tipped into the lake. (Today there is a campsite on this bank of earth.)

At these blastings there were no safety precautions, so that people were injured or killed rather often. The victims of such accidents were only taken outside at the end of the shift.

Victims

About 180 of the original 800 prisoners did not survive the strain of the work. It is not possible today to trace the exact number of dead and the circumstances of their death. According to the death certificates issued by the doctors, the most frequent causes of death were: General weakness, bowel infections and tuberculosis.

Most prisoners were Italians. They were the weakest and they were treated most badly. The reason for that was the hatred of the Nazis towards their former alliance partners in Italy who had overthrown Mussolini and had tried to change sides.

Initially many dead were taken to the crematorium in Constance. The names of 70

of those dead are known because the registry office kept a record of them.

Later the cremations were stopped because of lack of coal. The dead were buried in a little forest north of Überlingen.

(*Degenhardter Wäldchen*).

When the French military government gave the order to exhume the dead bodies in 1946, an identification was no longer possible. They were put into simple wooden coffins and were buried on the newly established cemetery for victims of the concentration camp (*Birnaue*) after a commemoration on April 9th, 1946. 97 People were laid to rest there.

Escape attempts

Working under inhumane conditions, the thought of an escape was always present with the prisoners. In spite of the strictest guarding there were always attempts to escape. It is said that a Russian prisoner was bitten to death by dogs in the presence of his fellow prisoners after a failed attempt to escape, thus serving as a deterrent for his fellow prisoners.

Only two prisoners – the Austrian *Adam Puntschart* and the Ukrainian *Wassily Sklarenko* - succeeded in escaping to Switzerland in the night of the 21st to 22nd of March 1945.

During their escape they did not contact anyone. They avoided roads for fear of being discovered. They slept in the forest and ate dry apples they

found under trees from the previous autumn. Having no map of the area they had to find their way by the stars and trees which were more moss-grown in the north.

After five days and nights they reached the Swiss border near *Schaffhausen*, totally starved and exhausted. People gave them to eat and to drink and supplied them with new clothes. *Puntschart* had to go to hospital to cure his pneumonia. *Sklarenko* came to a transit camp where he met *Puntschart* three weeks later. After three more days they went their separate ways. *Puntschart* went back to his hometown of *Graz* at the end of 1945 and died there in 1988 at the age of 74.

Wassily Sklarenko still lives in the Ukrainian village of *Iwankowitschi* near *Kiew*.

concentration Aufkirch *camp*

www.stollen-ueberlingen.de



Memorials mentioned in the text:

Memorial Überlingen / Aufkirch, north west of Überlingen, near the hospital.

Cemetery near Birnau - on the B 31 between Überlingen and Uhdlingen.

Memorial near the galleries at Goldbach – in the Obere Bahnhofstraße, west of the entrance to the galleries.

Goldbacher Stollen

and former