‘Saviours’, ‘Business Partners’, or ‘Snobs’? How Jewish Inmates Perceived and Interacted with British Prisoners of War in A Nazi Camp Complex

Susanne Barth *

Posted Date: 25 January 2023

doi: 10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

Keywords: British Prisoners of War; Auschwitz; Holocaust; Jewish Survival Strategies in Nazi Camps; Allied Intelligence Operations in Nazi Camps

Article

'Saviours', 'Business Partners', or 'Snobs'? How Jewish Inmates perceived and interacted with British Prisoners of War in a Nazi Camp Complex

Susanne Barth

Oldenburg University/Department of History, Ammerländer Heerstrasse 122-126, 26122 Oldenburg, Germany; barthsusanne@hotmail.com

Abstract: Between 1942 and 1945, Jewish inmates of a forced labour camp and later Auschwitz subcamp at Blechhammer (Blachownia Śląska, Upper Silesia) worked alongside British prisoners of war on the construction site of a giant synthetic fuel facility, the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke. The paper examines the multifaceted forms of interaction between these two groups, who were situated at the opposite ends of a spectrum ranging from high survival rates to certain death. By reframing the Jewish inmates' perceptions of the POWs, it seeks to shed new light on a controversial debate on the nature of the relationship between them and British prisoners. The paper argues that important aspects have been missing from this debate, as the Jewish inmates were not sufficiently represented and not viewed as active protagonists. The relations between Jews and British POWs were not one-sided, but rather interdependent in complex ways. Both groups used these contacts to gain strategic information on the war and jointly contributed to the Allied resistance effort. The barter with British POWs played a crucial role in the collective and individual survival strategies of Jewish inmates, whereas the British increasingly depended on the Jewish inmates to procure basic foods when German rations ceased to be allocated. An analysis of the effects of British aid giving showed that the actual impact on the physical survival of the emaciated inmates was negligible. However, these humanitarian gestures significantly boosted their mental strength and equally helped them to cope better with post-traumatic stress disorders after the war. Altogether, the British were encouraging symbols of resistance against the Nazi regime in the eyes of the inmates. Negative experiences were rarely corroborated and were often linked to poor English language skills or a stronger identification with other nationalities.

Keywords: British prisoners of war; Auschwitz; holocaust; jewish survival strategies in Nazi camps; allied intelligence operations in Nazi camps

Introduction

The paper investigates the relations between Jewish inmates of the forced labour camp and later Auschwitz subcamp Blechhammer with the members of British working parties held in the same industrial camp complex. By reframing the Jewish perspective, it seeks to add a new dimension to a long-standing debate on the nature of British POWs' aid giving to Jews. An analysis of the complex interactions between these two groups demonstrates that the Jewish inmates were not merely passive recipients of British aid, but actively sought and utilized these contacts as part of their individual or collective survival strategies. It takes a fresh approach at the subject by showing interdependencies, particularly in matters connected to the Allied resistance effort, and the gathering of information on the course of the war and the unfolding Holocaust. It contextualizes British aid within the German camp leadership's pernicious system of blackmail, bribery, and spoliation the Jewish inmates were invariably trapped in. Finally, the negative repercussions of POW–inmate relations will be illuminated, and examples of 'bad encounters' will be discussed.

Discussion

The narrative of British POWs as 'heroic rescuers' of Jewish concentration camp prisoners, which emanated from publications such as John Castle's *The Password is Courage* (1954), has recently been

Preprints (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 25 January 2023 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

put into question.[1] A heated debate on the veracity of POWs breaking into the Monowitz subcamp led to Russell Wallis's highly critical study on the attitudes of British prisoners of war towards Jews.[2] However, the experience of the Jewish inmates remained largely excluded from these works. They were not perceived as actors with the capacity for self-agency, but merely portrayed as passive victims. It is nonetheless essential for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted interactions between Jewish prisoners and British POWs to reconstruct the Jewish perspective.

Sources

The article draws on a wide array of sources ranging from life writing over testimony to contemporaneous documents.[3] The abundance of reports on contacts to British POWs epitomizes the mark these encounters left in the memories of Jewish survivors. The focus on the Jewish inmates is widened by utilizing affidavits and war diaries by British POWs, where appropriate.[4]

Methods

The trauma of the Holocaust often caused repressed or tainted memories, and some survivors developed feelings of guilt for having survived. Lawrence Langer termed such memories "unheroic."[5] Almost none of the testimonies delineating contacts with British POWs fell into this category. Instead, most recounted a "heroic" story of survival they had accomplished through these interactions. Therefore, Henry Greenspan's theory that "heroic" narratives also served to make memories more "tellable" or to integrate the emasculating experience of the Nazi persecution into one's life story, has been considered when judging the impact of British aid on Jewish prisoners' survival.[6]

The Living Conditions of British POWs and Jewish Inmates in Blechhammer

Between March 1942 and January 1945, British prisoners of war and Jewish inmates toiled together on the construction site of one of the largest synthetic fuel facilities of the Third Reich's autarky programme, the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke (OHW) in Blechhammer (today Blachownia Śląska, Upper Silesia, Poland). Founded in summer 1939 as a result of the Nazi regime's 'Germanization by industrialization' policy, the OHW should help to increase the percentage of Germans in Upper Silesia by attracting workers to the region. However, the outbreak of war required the large-scale replacement of drafted German workers with foreign and unfree labourers, who eventually made up over 60 per cent of the plant's workforce.

Blechhammer had several work detachments of British and Dominion prisoners of war. The first 800 POWs arrived from Stalag Lamsdorf (Łambinowice), the largest camp for western Allied captives, in June 1940. The working party was referred to as E3. In the end of March 1942, another 900 men followed, when the two 'Builders' and Workers' Battalions' (*Bau- und Arbeitsbataillone*,

---

[1] Castle, *Password*; Avey, *Man*; White, 'Even in Auschwitz...'; Little, 'No one believed what we had seen'.

[2] Wallis, *POWs*.

[3] Yad Vashem Archives (YVA) O.3; O.33 collection of testimonies; The Netherlands' Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD) collection 250d witness reports; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Leo Young Papers 1992.A0016/RG-10.048*01; USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, VHA online (accessed via the University of Vienna); The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University (FVA); The Jewish Museum Prague (ŽMP); German Federal Archives (BArch) R 9348 Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke; BArch RH 49/24 OKW directives on prisoners of war.

[4] British National Archives Kew (NA) WO 311/268; Imperial War Museum London (IWM) Private Papers; Sound Archive; Australians at War Film Archive Canberra (AWFA).

[5] Langer, *Holocaust*.

[6] Greenspan, *Holocaust*, 15-17.

Preprints (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 25 January 2023 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

B.A.B.) 21 and 48 were deployed on-site.[7] Most of the prisoners had been captured in Dunkirk in June 1940. In July 1942, men taken prisoner in Crete the summer before were transferred to Blechhammer from Greece. For the first time, this included POWs from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Africa, and India.[8] With the fall of Mussolini in July 1943, British servicemen taken prisoner by Italian troops in North Africa were relocated to Silesia. The first 'Italian' prisoners, who came to Blechhammer in September 1943, were held in a separate camp and formed their own work detail E714.[9] There were also Jewish POWs from Mandate Palestine, who had volunteered for serving in the British Army, known as work detachment E207. Captured in Greece in early 1941, they had been taken to Lamsdorf in the autumn, and came to Blechhammer in December 1941.[10] However, this paper will predominantly focus on the relations between non-Jewish British prisoners and Jewish camp inmates.

In violation of the Geneva Conventions' stipulation to allocate standard heavy workers' rations to British POWs in work detachments, the German Army High Command (OKW) advised entrepreneurs to distribute no more than two thirds of the food Germans were eligible for, and to withhold high-quality produce. In the Stalags, average German rations amounted to a mere 1,500 to 1,900 calories daily, and the prisoners constantly felt hungry. Promises of more food were used as a pretext to trick enlisted men into volunteering for labour camps.[11] British POWs in Blechhammer at times were so starved that they licked out the emptied soup bowls of German guards to get some extra nutrition.[12] Therefore, Red Cross parcels were in urgent demand. However, they were not regularly delivered to POW camps until mid-1942. Fortified with vitamins and adding another 1,000 calories, parcel food became essential to the prisoners' diet.[13] 'Luxury' items, such as chocolates, cigarettes, and perfumed soap were readily swapped for fresh bread and vegetables from 'second economy' sources. Barter grew in importance when German rations were stopped entirely on 22 September 1944. Many POWs were forced to sell their clothes and military kit for cigarettes to procure food.[14]

A typical punishment for bartering or other illicit contacts to civilians, or foreign and unfree labourers, was detention. The detention cells at Blechhammer were poorly ventilated dungeons the POWs referred to as 'the black holes of Calcutta'. The detainees only received a glass of water and a slice of bread once in three days. Consequently, many prisoners reprimanded in this way left the cells in a critical state. The conditions slightly improved when the Swiss Protecting Power issued a formal complaint to the German Army High Command in September 1942.[15] Maltreatment by German guards was ubiquitous. However, contrary to Monowitz, there were no reported cases of POWs being mistreated for helping or trading with Jewish inmates in Blechhammer, and most British prisoners

---

[7] OHW quarterly management reports May-July 1940, and January-March 1942, BArch R 9348/6; 7; index of B.A.B.s, BArch RH 49/13.

[8] Affidavit by Marine Frank Riding, NA WO 311/268; Edward Kelly, interview 2071, AWFA.

[9] Private Papers of Edward Charles Stirling, IWM 824699/22/1; Kochavi, *Captivity*, 54-55.

[10] Bleier, Pinchas, interview 45393, VHA; Borrie, *Captivity*, 95.

[11] Levine, *Captivity*, 84; OKW Manual for Commanders of Prisoner of War Working Parties, 1 June 1943, BArch RH 49/24, fos. 22–23.

[12] Kochavi, *Captivity*, 33.

[13] Agence, *Rapport*, 213; Levine, *Captivity*, 85.

[14] Private Papers of G Didcock, IWM 10/6/1; OKW, September 12, 1944, Collection of General Decrees on Prisoners of War, BArch RW 6/273, fo. 40.

[15] OKW Manual for Commanders of Prisoner of War Working Parties, 1 June 1943, BArch RH 49/24, fos. 9–12; Borrie, *Captivity*, 102.

Preprints (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 25 January 2023 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

were willing to take the risk of detention in return for these exchanges.[16] The average mortality of British prisoners of war in German captivity was between two and three per cent, ten times higher than that of Germans and ethnic Germans.[17]

In March 1942, a forced labour camp for Jews was established at Blechhammer. It formed part of a proliferating network of camps under the supervision of Himmler's Special Commissioner for the Deployment of Foreign Labour SS *Brigadeführer* Albrecht Schmelt, which had been introduced in October 1940 to exploit the able-bodied ghetto population of Eastern Upper Silesia.[18] By order of the Ministry of Arms and Ammunitions under Alber Speer, Schmelt stopped deportation convoys from France, the Netherlands, and Belgium before they had reached Auschwitz to extract an additional 10,000 men for his camps in autumn 1942.[19] Schmelt camps operated outside the concentration camp system, but were closely connected to Auschwitz. The Blechhammer camp was administrated by a civilian employee of the Reich Motorway Company (*Reichsautobahngesellschaft*), Dr. Erich Hoffmann, and guarded by members of the order police. The inmates were exposed to very harsh conditions. They received a mere 200 grams of bread and some thin vegetable soup, while being assigned to hard labour on the plant's construction site. Medical care was barely provided, and outbreaks of infectious diseases, like typhus and dysentery, were rampant. Those who fell victim to one of the frequent selections were gassed in Auschwitz. Moreover, numerous inmates died as a result of vicious maltreatment by guards and German overseers at work.[20] It was crucial to the inmates to procure extra food, clothes, or medicines in order to survive, and many took great risks in doing so. Bartering, and the possession of contraband goods, typically incurred punishments like flogging, or penal work. Following the order to liquidate the last ghettos, three quarters of the Schmelt camps were disbanded, and the rest was taken over by the Auschwitz or Gross Rosen concentration camps. Blechhammer was transformed into an Auschwitz satellite in April 1944. With a prisoner population of 4,000–6,000, it became its second largest subcamp.[21] The takeover temporarily seemed to ameliorate the prisoners' living conditions; however, the SS also introduced stricter rules on clandestine contacts.[22] The average mortality of Blechhammer prisoners ranged between eighty-seven and ninety-five per cent. Jewish fatalities were thus thirty times higher than that of British POWs, and three hundred times higher than that of Germans.[23]

Catching the British Lifeline

Countless testimonies by Jewish survivors corroborate British prisoners of war donating food, Red Cross items, or clothes. Their motives for aiding Jewish inmates have been controversially discussed. It is well known that British prisoners equally extended their help to Soviet prisoners of war and civilian *Ostarbeiter*, who endured considerable privations, due to their low status in the Nazi racial hierarchy. The hardships suffered by these groups, and especially by the Jews, were often in

---

[16] Private Papers of G Didcock, IWM 10/6/1. A British POW in Monowitz was rifle-butted for supporting a collapsing Jewish inmate. See, White, 'Even in Auschwitz...', 276.

[17] Kochavi, *Captivity*, 33; Mantelli, 'Wanderarbeit', 63–71.

[18] OHW quarterly management reports, November–December 1941, BArch R 9348/7; on the Schmelt camp system, see Gruner, *Labor*.

[19] Die Deportationstransporte während der sogenannten Cosel Periode, State Archive Würzburg 12012-009, 37, fos. 1128–1131

[20] David Leo W., HVT-1687, FVA; Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 117; Piet Niewes, NIOD 250d/715.

[21] Piper, 'Nebenlager Blechhammer', 24; interrogation of Johannes Hassebroek, 11 June 1965, Regional Archive Munster, 4883.

[22] Hans Bonn, NIOD 250d/445.

[23] Die Deportationstransporte während der sogenannten Cosel Periode, State Archive Würzburg 12012-009, 37, fos. 1128–1131; Piper, 'Nebenlager Blechhammer', 32.

the centre of postwar accounts or life writing by former British prisoners. The POWs themselves typically did not provide an explanation for their actions.[24]

Russell Wallis contends that British aid had not been based on altruism, but rather on a disinclination to throw away the unpalatable German rations. He argues that to the 'affluent' POWs, who lived on Red Cross parcels, passing on food to Jews had merely been a convenient way of discarding of meals they disliked.[25] Admittedly, the British preferred parcel food over German rations. However, it should be taken into account that Red Cross parcels were only distributed in sufficient quantities from mid-1942, and they had to fully substitute the suspended German rations from autumn 1944. Furthermore, inspectors of the International Red Cross found the majority of British POWs in German captivity to be underweight.[26] It is equally important to remember that British POWs donated highly coveted items from their Red Cross parcels, such as cigarettes, chocolates, and perfumed soap, they could have used to procure extra food for themselves. These facts point to a considerable degree of selflessness, and a higher purpose behind their aid giving. In his study on the Monowitz subcamp, Joseph R. White assumed that supporting Jewish inmates had been a form of protest against the Nazi ideology, and the despicable crimes against humanity pertaining to it.[27] Jewish survivors likewise construed British help as acts of compassion and solidarity.[28] French prisoners of war, along with individual foreign and German civilian workers, reportedly aided Jewish inmates for strikingly similar reasons.[29]

Accepting goods from British POWs invariably involved a certain risk of punishment to the Jewish inmates. Flogging was the most common, but it was not unusual that the German guards refrained from making a report, so they could pocket the items themselves.[30] This notwithstanding, most Jewish prisoners felt that the benefits of obtaining extra food by far outweighed the possible dangers. There are no confirmed cases of prisoners being murdered or severely injured for contacts to British POWs for Blechhammer. The British POWs must have been aware of the negative repercussions their aid might entail. However, Russell Wallis's contention that they had passed on food to Jewish inmates with the intention to inflict harm, or even death, as a pernicious variant of anti-Semitism does not seem plausible.[31] The fact that Jewish 'Palestinian' POWs equally assisted Jewish inmates in this way, whose motivation was unlikely based on a hatred of Jews, or indifference to their plight, clearly rebutts this theory. And after all, the Jewish inmates were free to decide for themselves whether to seek these contacts, or not.[32]

The British provided material support to Jewish prisoners in a myriad of ways.

Accidental or regular encounters at the workplace were typically used for handing out goods to Jewish inmates.[33] Occasionally, the starved prisoners were too perplexed to make the right use of the POWs' gifts. The Jewish survivor Leo Weiniger once received a handful of loose tobacco from a British POW. Mistaking it for food, he started to eat the material on the way back to his detail. He

---

[24] See for instance, The Diary of Lance-Bombardier Edward Charles Stirling, IWM 824699/22/1; J. Driscoll, interview 17435, IWM Sound Archive.

[25] Wallis, *POWs*, 104–105.

[26] Kochavi, *Captivity*, 22–28, 34; Levine, *Captivity*, 84.

[27] White, 'Even in Auschwitz...', 285.

[28] Kurt Klappholz, interview 9425, IWM Sound Archive.

[29] Fainzang, *Mémoire*, 61; Koenig, *Vorhof*, 117–129; Joseph, *Number 176520*, 47–53.

[30] SS penal report on Wolf Lesorgen for having accepted cigarettes from a British POW, BArch B 162/8867; Salomon Staszewski, NIOD 250d/864.

[31] Wallis, *POWs*, 104–105.

[32] Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 126.

[33] Simon Overste, NIOD 250d/735; Henry G., HVT-2384, FVA.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

only realized it was tobacco when his comrades scolded him for devouring what could have been made into a cigarette.[34]

Despite the chronic shortage of clothes in POW camps, Jewish inmates also received garments from the British. On a frosty evening in October 1943, seventeen-year-old Israel Rosengarten was handling freight cars. A British prisoner working next to him waited until the German guard had left, and then made signs that he should approach him. The POW handed over a pullover, and quickly disappeared. Rosengarten secretly wore it under his own clothes, and it helped him to stay warmer during the winter. He recalled that he had been very moved by this gift from a stranger and had felt like an extremely 'lucky person'. [35]

At times, personal contacts were avoided, and the recipients remained unaware of the respective POW's identity. Wolf W. laboured in a Jewish detail building embankments in early 1943. Their German overseer not only made them work hard, but frequently had them carry logs back and forth for his sadistic pleasure. One day, British POWs worked nearby. In the evening, Wolf W. picked up his coat he had hung on a fence between the two details, and to his great surprise found his pockets stuffed with English cigarettes, a soap bar, and chocolate. He shared the unexpected presents with his friends, except for the soap he passed on to the Jewish camp policeman, whose calfactor he once had been. The camp policeman was overjoyed and secured himself extra soup rations by giving the soap bar to a female inmate who belonged to the kitchen staff. Following this episode, there was a certain pressure on Wolf W. to obtain more gifts from this miraculous source, but it never happened again.[36]

In a rare case, a German civilian arranged help from the British for a fourteen-year-old Jewish boy assigned to work for him on the construction site. Having lost his own son at the front, the German overseer developed fatherly feelings for the boy. When he sustained a leg injury during an air raid in the summer of 1944, the lack of medical care in the Jewish subcamp caused the wound to turn septic. To save his life, the overseer approached a paramedic among a group of British POWs. He agreed to clean the wound, and regularly changed the boy's dressings, until he had recovered.[37]

It is nonetheless hard to judge the extent to which British donations of food and clothes effectively contributed to the physical survival of Jewish prisoners. Given the limited means available to British POWs, and the rare opportunities for interacting safely during work, it was presumably just a small fraction of Jewish inmates who benefitted from their support. Therefore, the psychological effects must have played a much more pronounced role. Especially Jews deported from the Netherlands, whose mortality soared, considered these connections as a crucial lifeline. They saw themselves at a disadvantage compared to their Polish-speaking comrades, who were often aided by Polish labourers. They thus used their English language skills to establish contacts to British POWs.[38] Occasionally, they managed to build quite intimate, long-term relations to POWs. Twenty-year-old Hessel Goldberg from Amsterdam, for instance, came to Blechhammer in early 1943. Goldberg recounted how he regularly met with a British POW named Tommy, who cared for him 'like a father', and supplied him with cigarettes and chocolates, until the evacuation of the camp in January 1945 separated them.[39]

Hartog Salomon Ereira, also from Amsterdam, made friends with British POW Charlie Wilson, while their details were assigned to decorating houses for German entrepreneurs in 1942. They met when Wilson discovered Ereira's outstanding singing talent. From then on, Ereira regularly performed songs for Wilson, who gifted cigarettes and bread to him. The two even exchanged Christmas presents: Ereira had made a painting for Wilson, and Wilson passed on his tobacco

---

[34] Leo Weiniger, NIOD 244/1486.

[35] Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 142.

[36] Wolf W., HVT-2989, FVA.

[37] Joseph, *Number 176520*, 53.

[38] Joseph Braasem, NIOD 250d/446.

[39] Hessel Goldberg, NIOD 250d/553.

Preprints (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 25 January 2023 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

allocation to him in return. When Ereira learned that Wilson had fallen ill one day, he tried to pass on a letter to him. However, the letter was confiscated by German guards, and Ereira was flogged as a result. He nevertheless made another attempt to contact Wilson, and the two stayed in touch for some time.[40]

In his postwar memoirs, the Dutch-Jewish survivor R. Stoppelman expressed his gratitude to a British prisoner, whose identity remained unknown to him. He stressed that the food donations by that person had not only sustained his brother and himself physically but had encouraged them to go on living.

An English prisoner of war gave me plenty of food. I took half of it back to the camp for my brother, who did the same for me. That was the advantage of working in different details, one time he had something, and another time I did. This was a decisive factor in keeping up our spirits. Many thanks to this Englishman, and the English! I will never forget this! [41]

Notwithstanding the real impact of British aid on the physical and mental state of Jewish prisoners, it apparently offered a feasible explanation for their own survival in the postwar years. The narrative of having outlived the Nazi camps thanks to the assistance of British POWs mitigated the effects of what has become known as 'survivor guilt', or post-traumatic stress disorder. The respective former inmates were thus less likely to reproach themselves for having survived, while others had perished.[42]

Some British prisoners facilitated correspondences between Jewish inmates and their relatives in Britain. These clandestine messages were often the last signs of life their next of kin received from inmates, as in the case of Maurice (Moritz) Young. Originally a Czech citizen, Young had lived in Vienna with his relatives, until the annexation of Austria to Nazi Germany in March 1938 forced them to leave the country. Young emigrated to France, and was deported to Auschwitz in 1942, while the rest of his family fled to the United Kingdom. In Blechhammer, Young encountered J.A. Fox, a British prisoner of E714, who consented to writing a coded letter to his sister asking her to inform Young's family of his whereabouts. Fox's sister indeed contacted the family, but by the time her reply reached her brother, he had already been transferred to another camp. Maurice Young never received his family's message, and apparently made no more attempts to write to them. After the end of the war, Young's relatives were desperate to learn about his fate, and they turned to J.A. Fox, who had just been repatriated. On 23 May 1945, he sent them a letter delineating how they first met:

I saw Maurice with a party digging air-raid shelters. We started a conversation when Maurice asked if I knew Sheffield. You must understand that it was a Jewish lager, so he was not allowed to write to anyone, that is why I had to be careful how I wrote, or else it would not have gone through. I was moved to another lager after 14 days and I made enquiries about some Jews he worked with after receiving my sister's letter. As my sister told you, we were forced to march. I'm afraid that a lot of the Jews weren't strong enough to do it, but I cannot tell you what happened to them. The camp Maurice was in was the Jewish lager Blechhammer O.S. [...] I last saw him in May 1944.[43]

Despite the tragic turn of events, the correspondence nonetheless epitomizes the important role played by British POWs in bypassing the ban on communications the Germans imposed on Jewish prisoners. It also shows how these contacts transcended from the closed space of the Nazi camps into the outside world, uniting both the victim's and the POW's families in their concerted effort to reach out to Maurice Young.

The British as 'Role Models'

Throughout most of their captivity, British prisoners of war lacked new clothes and shoes, as the respective Red Cross parcels were delivered late, or not at all. Opportunities for showers and doing

---

[40] Hartog Salomon Ereira, NIOD 250d/519.

[41] Memoirs of R. Stoppelman, YVA O.33 4272.

[42] See, Bettelheim, 'Trauma', 31–33, also Greenspan, *Holocaust*, 15–17.

[43] Leo Young Papers, USHMM 1992.A0016/RG-10.048*01.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

the laundry were equally rare. The British military authorities nonetheless expected the prisoners to present themselves in a dignified way. In autumn 1943, the British camp leader of Stalag Lamsdorf published a note in the POW magazine *The Clarion* reminding all working parties to maintain a neat outer appearance despite the precarious material and sanitary conditions in camps.

On numerous occasions comments have been made from independent sources on the soldierly bearing and upkeep of prestige which has been noticeable at certain working parties. [...] Such reports are most gratifying and reflect great credit upon all concerned. [...] It is hoped that, when outside Lagers, within view of friends or enemies, all ranks will make an effort to dress and bear themselves in the manner which is traditional of the Britisher.[44]

This measure apparently served a dual purpose. First, it helped to foster the POWs' self-respect and discipline. Secondly, it conveyed a certain air of superiority not only vis à vis their German captors. A Jewish inmate related that the arrival of singing and whistling British working parties in the mornings had been 'uplifting', as they were the only group of prisoners that was 'superbly dressed'.[45] The Jewish survivor Abraham Schaufeld admired that they 'marched in style'.[46] Seeing how British POWs had their boots polished by Germans in return for cigarettes resonated even greater with a young Jewish inmate.[47]

Notwithstanding their impeccable demeanor, what mattered most to Jewish inmates was the fact that the British openly condemned the Germans' atrocious treatment of those labelled 'racially inferior'. In 1944, the SS commanded the approximately forty Jewish children in the Blechhammer subcamp to form a work detail of their own. Whenever British columns passed by the children on their one-hour march to the factory, they protested vehemently. The Jewish survivor Ernest Koenig, who was the minors' adult overseer, recalled how the British POWs' outrage at the German policy to make children work on the construction site had encouraged others to also voice their criticism.

This was an unprecedented sight even in the realm of slaves we lived in. The columns of English and French prisoners of war we encountered on the way called out to the SS 'shame' and 'boches'. All foreign labourers who saw us booed, and cursed the SS. Even the German workers unmistakably demonstrated their contempt for what they saw.[48]

The British POWs equally showered the children with chocolates and sandwiches.[49] This example illustrates the linkage between British material assistance to Jews, and their protest against the Nazi racial ideology. By contrast, Russell Wallis posits that this element had been missing from British aid giving to Jewish inmates.[50]

To the Jewish inmates, the British POWs seemed to be the only prisoner category that was off limits to the Germans, and they became an important symbol of defiance against Nazism in their eyes.[51] At times, they were extolled as almost superhuman beings capable of protecting the emasculated Jewish prisoners against assaults by Germans. In her postwar testimony, Blechhammer survivor Rachel Brukner Frydrych related how, in 1943, she and fellow female inmates were flogged for leaving their nightshift in the kitchen early. The punishment was ordered by the civilian camp leader Erich Hoffmann. The next day, the women were still crying with pain when they encountered British prisoners. They inquired what had happened, and the women told them of the flogging.

---

[44] 'Camp Leader Notices: Dress And Bearing', *The Clarion*, autumn issue (1943), 1.

[45] Kurt Klappholz, interview 9425, IWM Sound Archive.

[46] Abraham Schaufeld, interview 17470, IWM Sound Archive.

[47] Bart, Bernhard, interview 1661, VHA.

[48] Koenig, *Vorhof*, 119–120.

[49] Wollenberg, *Alptraum*, 121.

[50] Wallis, *POWs*, 116.

[51] Kurt Klappholz, interview 9425, IWM Sound Archive.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

Hoffmann left the camp as a result of the Auschwitz takeover in April 1944. However, Rachel Brukner Frydrych erroneously ascribed his removal to the alleged intervention of the British POWs.[52]

In late 1943, the OHW management and representatives of the *Wehrmacht* agreed to exclusively assign British prisoners of war to piecework to circumvent the requirement of adjusting their payment to German standard wages, which had recently been raised. The POWs were thus permitted to leave the factory as soon as a given task had been completed and were granted more spare time instead of a pay rise.[53] Their tendency to finish jobs at a high pace inadvertently impacted on the Jewish prisoners, who normally worked on a time rate. On noticing the POWs' swift work style, German civilian overseers began to press the Jewish inmates to show a similar productivity. This prompted a Jewish Kapo to make a special arrangement with a German master to prove that his men's performance matched that of the British. The deal was to let the detail do piecework and allow the prisoners to rest upon completion of their task. However, when the exhausted inmates laid down to sleep, a German engineer misconstrued the scene, and alerted a guard. Consequently, the inmates and their Kapo were viciously maltreated for being 'lazy'.[54] Experiments like these often proved fatal to already weakened inmates, who died as a result of being overworked. Pertaining to the considerably lower food allocations to Jewish prisoners, piecework consumed their last physical reserves.[55]

Mutual Interactions and Interdependence

Barter

The rationing of goods coupled with the devaluation of money in wartime Germany created vibrant 'second economy' markets outside of formal sectors.[56] The OHW construction site, where thousands of labourers of different nationalities met, became a commercial hub in this respect. Blechhammer's 'second economy' was boosted from 1943 following the deployment of Czech civilian workers, who imported large quantities of products which had been rationed in Silesia, such as eggs, butter, sausages, and alcohol.[57]

As the British POWs' diet mainly consisted of dried or canned parcel food, health problems caused by a lack of vitamins were common.[58] Therefore, fresh bread, fruits, and vegetables were in great demand. And with the stop of German allocations in September 1944, the POWs increasingly relied on procuring their own food.[59] Polish, Czech, and German labourers offered such goods in return for Red Cross items and English cigarettes, both of which were the hardest 'currency' on the market. As these vendours rarely had a good command of English, Jewish inmates stepped in as intermediaries. Some were prompted to negotiate their own trade deals in this way.[60]

To the emaciated, deprived Jewish prisoners, bartering was existential, as it opened access to life-saving basic nutrition, first and foremost bread, but also medicines, shoes, and clothes. A mere three to five per cent of the inmates were able to barter. It required a starting capital derived from money or valuables they had smuggled into the camp, or in extreme cases, from selling parts of their food rations to comrades. Another prerequisite was to work in a place facilitating frequent interactions with other labourers. Bartering invariably posed a greater risk to Jewish inmates than to

---

[52] Rachel Brukner Frydrych, YVA O.3 3664.

[53] Minute of a meeting between the OHW and the Wehrmacht, 25 October 1943, BArch R 9348/45.

[54] Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 136.

[55] Leo Weiniger, NIOD 244/1486.

[56] Bartuschka, *'Zurückstellung'*, 477.

[57] Koenig, *Vorhof*, 122.

[58] Borrie, *Captivity*, 127.

[59] Private Papers of G Didcock, IWM 10/6/1.

[60] Wolf W., HVT-2989, FVA.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

other victim groups. Next to floggings and penal labour, there were collective punishments, like extended roll calls, and 'exercising'.[61] Despite the dangers involved, the Jewish prisoners became indispensable to Blechhammer's 'second economy'. Trading not only provided extra food, but it raised the prisoners' self-esteem, and enabled them to regain a certain level of control over their lives.[62] It was equally connoted with defiance against the Nazis' annihlistic policy towards the Jews. Some Blechhammer survivors thus linked bartering to other forms of spiritual resistance. The term usually refers to attempts to counterbalance dehumanization and degradation in Nazi camps and ghettos through religious, non-religious, cultural, or educational activities.[63] Sigmund W. construed his barter with POWs as 'the ultimate resistance', as it secured his physical survival which, in a next step, enabled him to engage in active resistance, like sabotage.[64] Similarly, Israel Rosengarten drew a line of continuity between fighting the Nazis, and his own survival by way of trading:

Gaining food all by myself was a symbol of my resistance, and it increased my ability to survive. [...] The feeling of triumph was magical. I had outsmarted the monsters who wanted to kill us.[65]

It is nonetheless important to remember that only a small fraction of the inmates had an opportunity to supplement their starving rations with goods acquired through trading. The underlying assumption of solidarity and mutual sharing associated with the concept of spiritual resistance does not sufficiently reflect the sharp social dividing lines inside the camps.[66]

The bartering inmates established a network of trading partners across the wide spectrum of the OHW workforce and drew on these contacts to procure virtually anything the British POWs desired. One inmate specialized in supplying the British with bread rolls, and another delivered onions, for instance. Both spent their earnings on extra bread rations they often shared with fellow prisoners.[67] A British POW's particularly exotic craving for a blancmange was satisfied with the help of Jewish inmate Nathan Prochownik. He persuaded a German worker to buy the requested powder in a local shop in return for a share of the prunes the POW had offered as a remuneration. The transaction was repeated several times, enabling Prochownik to exchange his prunes for a loaf of bread. This incident epitomizes the enormous discrepancies between the two worlds the POW and the inmate were forced to live in. Struggling for sheer physical survival himself, Prochownik found it hard to relate to the seemingly benign concerns of the British POW:

It was a tough blow for him not to have a blancmange while, in a few metres' distance, we were dying like flies, lacking everything.[68]

In parallel to individual trading, large-scale bartering transactions took place under the aegis of the Jewish elder of Blechhammer Karl Demerer.[69] Prohibited from leaving the camp himself, he delegated some of the Kapos to arrange these deals, and they even set the prices for certain goods when trading with civilians or POWs.[70] In addition, raw material from the camp was manufactured into products suiting the British POWs' needs. When the evacuation of Blechhammer was imminent in late 1944, the Kapo supervising the clothes depot thus ordered four inmates to make backpacks

---

[61] Jacob de Wolf, NIOD 250d/946; Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 122, 146; SS penal reports, BArch B 162/8867.

[62] See Bravo, Davite, Jalla, 'Myth', 104.

[63] See, Davidowicz, 'Holocaust Landscape', 25.

[64] Sigmund W., HVT-55, FVA.

[65] Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 122.

[66] See, Gilbert, *Music*, 4–7.

[67] Efraim Roseboom, NIOD 250d/805; Wolf W., HVT-2989, FVA.

[68] Prochownik, *Mémoires*, 109.

[69] Karl Demerer, a merchant born in Vienna in 1901, relocated to Katowice in 1928. He was arrested in Sosnowiec in 1941 and transferred to Blechhammer in spring 1942. He remained Jewish elder until the evacuation in January 1945. Karl Demerer, YVA O.3. 3635.

[70] Gabriel Zvi Lifschitz, NIOD 250d/674; Clary, *Holocaust*, 89.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

from spare garments. They were offered to British POWs starting to prepare themselves for the march west.[71]

Contrary to individual trading, the Jewish elder's barter with British POWs was central to his strategy of gaining moderate control over lower echelon German camp personnel through bribery. As corruption was ubiquitous in ghettos and concentration camps alike, it fundamentally characterized the relations between Jews and German functionaries. Demerer reportedly succeeded in rescuing individual prisoners from being sent to Auschwitz, and at times managed to restrain the guards' violence by way of bribes. This tactic nevertheless could not alter the camp administration's total arbitrariness, nor did it avert the Nazis' genocidal plans.[72] Bribery was also Janus-faced, as the Germans coerced the Jewish elder to pay fixed sums of money under threats of committing further atrocities in the camp. The Nazis thus used corruption as another form of spoliation.[73] Demerer set up a special monetary fund enabling him to respond promptly to the camp leader's recurrent blackmail. All prisoners were expected to contribute money and valuables. A major part of the money and goods stemmed from the barter with other workers on the construction site. Bribery and barter were intertwined in complex ways: bartering was made safer by bribing German guards, and those who bartered paid into Demerer's fund in return. If caught trafficking, the respective inmates often got away without punishment by offering contraband goods to guards. They were especially keen on pocketing highly coveted 'luxury items' the prisoners had obtained from British POWs, which were no longer available in first economy markets.[74] According to Jan T. Gross, corruption is fuelled by these two factors, namely a shortage of goods coupled with a discriminated group offering such goods as bribes.[75] Inadvertently, the British prisoners contributed to corruption, and the items they passed on to Jewish inmates all too often ended up in the hands of German camp personnel.

Intelligence Operations and Joint Resistance Efforts

In February 1943, the Gestapo received a report by OHW deputy director, and counter-intelligence officer Dr. Heinrich Schlick evaluating the potential security threats posed by certain foreign and unfree labourers at the plant. Schlick rated the British POWs as the most dangerous group but stressed that their behaviour was tied to the respective developments in war theatres. In line with Nazi ideology, he purported that the 'Jewish intelligentsia' of the Blechhammer camp incited resistance among the British by spreading war news. He even proposed to stop using Jewish labourers at the OHW.

Due to their intelligence, and close contacts to other foreigners, something which is unavoidable on a giant construction site, they pose a considerable risk in terms of counter-intelligence. Therefore, we are presently contemplating to have the Jews exchanged, especially in view of their low work productivity.[76]

Schlick grossly exaggerated the Jewish inmates' role in briefing the British about the course of the war, while overlooking the intelligence operations run from several POW work detachments under his very nose. Blechhammer had two key operators for Britain's security service MI5. John 'Busty' Brown, a non-commissioned officer of the Royal Artillery interned in camp E3, had deliberately given himself up to be captured in 1940 to spy for MI5 from Nazi POW camps. Following a short membership in British fascist Oswald Mosley's party, Brown started to work undercover for the secret service. His chequered past made him an ideal candidate for pretending to be a German collaborator. He even managed to be assigned to the infamous 'Lord Haw-Haw', the Irish American

---

[71] Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 181.

[72] Karl Demerer, YVA O.3 3635; Friedländer, *Years*, 42; Bajohr, *Parvenüs*, 134.

[73] Jozef Niewes, NIOD 250d/716; Trunk, *Judenrat*, 244.

[74] Samuel Abrams, NIOD 250d/386.

[75] Gross, *Society*, 145.

[76] Dr. Heinrich Schlick, *Beobachtungen im Ausländereinsatz*, 10 February 1943, BArch R 9348/111.

collaborator William Joyce, who broadcast Nazi propaganda to Britain from Berlin, and later appeared as a witness in his postwar trial.

Captain Julius Morris Green from Scotland was a dentist in B.A.B. 21, who had concealed his Jewish identity when captured in 1940. He specialized in working out escape routes. His espionage activity in Blechhammer was discovered in 1944, and the Gestapo transferred him to Colditz. Both men built up a network of operators among the POWs and sent encoded letters with strategic information on the fuel facility to London.[77]

The POWs kept several secret radios in their camps. E3's Fred Neeves of the Royal Corps of Signals listened to the BBC each night and relayed the news to the others.[78] When a new radio was built in 1944, the British turned to a French POW who had befriended a Jewish inmate, inquiring whether he could help them procure a specific electrical part in exchange for a carton of English cigarettes. Jules Fainzang, the inmate in question, was of Polish origin, but had moved to Belgium before the war. Being multilingual, Fainzang used his contacts to a Polish worker, who agreed to buy the part in a store. The part was handed over and smuggled out of the factory in an ambulance by a POW faking an injury. The British passed on the cigarettes to Fainzang through the French POW. Fainzang had hoped to buy proper shoes for the reward but was caught by an SS guard. The guard tried in vain to press him into giving away the POWs' identities. Eventually, the SS man was satisfied with confiscating the cigarettes, and let Fainzang go.[79] The crucial role of Jewish inmates in the barter, and their oft-overlooked contributions to the Allied resistance effort, are exemplified here once more.

Other than Schlick's report suggested, the exchange of news was a reciprocal affair. The British POWs relayed war news received through secret radios to the Jewish inmates, who in turn shared bits of information they had overheard from Germans, foreign labourers, and French prisoners of war. Some inmates tried to peek into newspapers read by Germans on the construction site or collected them from rubbish bins. As they typically lacked the necessary language skills and widespread contacts to workers of various nationalities, the British depended on the Jewish inmates to gather such additional information.[80] Vice versa, learning about major turning points of the war was crucial to keeping up the Jewish inmates' will to persevere. The belief in overly 'optimistic' news of the Allied advance also formed part of a mental survival strategy to escape the grim reality and set hope against hope.[81] Positive prognoses about the military situation evoking the prospect of a timely liberation equally helped the POWs to cope better with their captivity.[82]

The Jewish inmates risked maltreatment, or sometimes even the death penalty for collecting war news.[83] In August 1944, the *Wehrmacht* soldier Ernst Meyer relayed news from a foreign radio station to Jewish Kapo Max Voss, who was caught when he passed on the news to British prisoners. Both were subsequently interrogated by the OHW counter-intelligence officer Schlick who, along with the Political Department of the Blechhammer subcamp, filed a report to the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) in Berlin, via Auschwitz. Similar to his earlier Gestapo dossier, Schlick brought trumped up charges against Max Voss for having undermined the British POWs' morale by strengthening their 'spirit of resistance'. As a result, Voss was sentenced to twenty-five lashes. It

---

[77] Borrie, *Captivity*, 118, 239; Holmes, *Lord Haw-Haw*; Green, *Colditz*.

[78] Borrie, *Captivity*, 88–93; Edward Kelly, interview 2071, AWFA.

[79] Fainzang, *Mémoire*, 89–101.

[80] Hessel Goldberg, NIOD 250d/553; Hermann, Siegfried, interview 38261, VHA; Oto Hostovsky, ŽMP.

[81] Leo Weiniger, NIOD 244/1486; Abram Szeftel, APMO Ośw., f. 48, 5. On the importance of reveries as a survival strategy see, Bravo/Davite/Jalla, 'Myth', 99.

[82] Makepeace, *Captives*, 44–49.

[83] Maurice Moshe Szmidt, YVA O.3 3474; Hermann, Siegfried, interview 38261, VHA.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

remains unclear whether Ernst Meyer was equally punished.[84] The British POWs usually faced no harsher punishment than a temporary ban on camp entertainment.[85]

The United States Air Force operated strategic bombings on the OHW from July 1944.[86] British POWs often knew of impending air raids through their secret wireless radios, or contacts to MI5, and warned Jewish inmates they worked with.[87] As neither the POWs nor the Jews were permitted to use bomb shelters, these warnings were not very helpful. Both groups had to scatter in the open or seek cover in buildings under construction.[88] At least 150 Jewish prisoners, and thirty-four British POWs lost their lives under the bombs.[89]

The air raids were harnessed by Nazi propaganda to stir up hatred against the Jews and the British alike, who were allegedly to blame for the attacks. Both were publicly humiliated by having to do particular types of work connected to the raids. The Jewish inmates were assigned to clearing delay-action bombs from the factory territory, suffering heavy losses. When a dud was stuck in a hut of the British camp E3 in December 1944, they were forced to remove it. The British POWs on their part had to dig out the mutilated bodies of Jewish bombing victims from under the rebel.[90]

Reporting about the Holocaust

Their interactions with British POWs figured prominently in testimonies by Jewish Blechhammer survivors. Curiously, none of these witnesses explicitly stated that they had passed on details about the ongoing mass murder of the Jews to the British. It is hard to judge British and Dominion prisoners' level of awareness of the unfolding Holocaust during their captivity. Most enlisted men presumably knew very little about the Nazis' genocidal plans, or the function of concentration camps, when captured. The British Government only gradually acknowledged the fact that mass killings of Jews were carried out from late 1942, when the World Jewish Congress and the Polish government-in-exile had provided more evidence.[91]

In Blechhammer, the POWs were regularly updated on BBC news of atrocities against Jews, which started to be broadcast more frequently from 1943.[92] It is unclear whether they passed on such reports to their Jewish contacts, as they did with war news. British prisoners evidently gathered information about the Holocaust from other sources as well. Most importantly, they were confronted with the plight of the Jews each day when working on the construction site, and some began to monitor all incidents related to these inmates. Contrary to Monowitz, the Jewish camp was out of sight of the POWs. British POW G Didcock painstakingly noted in his war diary when Jews had been maltreated. He had kept the diary since his capture in North Africa in 1942, but conspicuously only started to make entries on Jewish inmates after the Blechhammer camp had been taken over by Auschwitz in April 1944. Possibly, it was the striped prisoner uniforms the Jews were now required to wear instead of their old civilian clothes that had caught his attention. Interestingly, he also registered four hangings in the Jewish camp he could not have witnessed himself. He must have

---

[84] SS penal report on Max Voss, BArch B 162/8867.

[85] Borrie, *Captivity*, 126.

[86] Bomb Group Mission Reports, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, Md., RG-18, box 2624.

[87] Faerber, Gunter, interview 41847, VHA.

[88] *Personendezentralisierung bei Tagalarm*, BArch R 9348/41; interrogation of Wilhelm Menzel, NA WO 311/268.

[89] Affidavit by CSM Edward John Hobbs, NA WO 311/268; Maurits Bremer, NIOD 250d/448.

[90] Jonas Pampel, NIOD 250d/741; Private Papers of G Didcock, IWM 10/6/1. Hitler decreed that Jewish prisoners should clear unexploded bombs. Piper, *Arbeitseinsatz*, 289.

[91] Celinsak, *Distance*; Terry, 'Signals', 351-396.

[92] Borrie, *Captivity*, 128, 170.

Preprints (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 25 January 2023 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

received the information from a Jewish inmate, but never disclosed his identity.[93] Wallis's assumption that Didcock had derived details of the executions from 'gossip' among the POWs is most certainly erroneous, as none of the other POWs ever referred to these incidents in postwar statements, or life writing. His contention that, due to the POWs' progredient desensitization to violence, the mistreatment of Jews had merely become the topic of 'jocular banter', underrates their genuine efforts to collect information on the Holocaust.[94]

The Jewish 'Palestinian' POWs, who seized every opportunity to speak to Jewish inmates, were important intermediaries in this respect.[95] They equally read Polish underground papers reporting about the death camps. They shared these reports with the non-Jewish British POWs, especially during visits by medical staff to their camp.[96] The arrival of 800 POWs transferred from E715 Monowitz to Blechhammer and Heydebreck in January 1944 intensified the influx of first-hand accounts of the Holocaust. As camp E715 was adjacent to the Auschwitz subcamp, the POWs were able to witness executions inside, and monitored transports of unfit inmates to Birkenau. They passed on such information to the International Red Cross during their semi-annual inspections, but to little avail.[97]

The Jewish cartoonist Bil Spira (Vienna, 1913–Puteaux/Paris, 1999) found a very subtle, yet effective, way of disseminating depictions of scenes from the camp for Jews by selling them to British POW Charles Hayward for cigarettes. As a non-smoker, Hayward was willing to invest his cigarettes in artworks, when he met Spira on a truck taking both Jewish and British working parties to a remote building site in early 1944. Like fellow prisoner artists in Blechhammer, Spira clandestinely made portraits for foreign labourers and certain SS men to gain extra food. The eleven cartoons he drew for Hayward were exceptional, as they had not been commissioned by the POW, and exclusively showed unfree workers. Only two portrayed British details at work, emphasizing the strain of unloading goods under the scrutiny of grim-looking German guards. In the three cartoons featuring Jewish inmates, Spira focused on the violence meted out by Kapos to their comrades, while avoiding to show atrocities committed by Germans. Janet Blatter identified the absence of perpetrators as characteristic of art secretly made during the Holocaust.[98] Spira nonetheless included the theme of working Jewish children in two of the drawings. He must have known that the children caused highly emotional reactions among the British POWs. Similarly, he added female inmates, even though they did not set out to the construction site. It seems that he intended to remind of their normally unseen presence, and suffering. Unlike the portraits he made to earn himself extra food, the cartoons clearly served another purpose: to preserve evidence of the camps for posterity. Spira could not be sure whether he survived, but Hayward had a fair chance of seeing liberation, and presenting his drawings to the outside world. Rolled up in a chocolate tin, the cartoons safely reached London after the war. Sixty years later, they were gifted to the Imperial War Museum, and have been shown in several exhibitions since.[99]

Anti-British Sentiments and Bad Encounters

Among the bulk of testimonies portraying the British POWs in a positive light, there were a few relating negatively connoted experiences. Some reproached the British POWs for not handing over food or cigarettes to them. Such critical remarks were typically made by Jews with no command of English at the time, who might have been less successful in asking for these goods, while competing

---

[93] Private Papers of G Didcock, IWM 10/6/1.

[94] Wallis, *POWs*, 97–100.

[95] Bleier, Pinchas, interview 45393, VHA.

[96] Borrie, *Captivity*, 137.

[97] J. Driscoll, interview 17435, IWM Sound Archive; White, 'Even in Auschwitz...', 271–274.

[98] Blatter, 'Art', 35.

[99] Spira, *Legende*; ART 17120–17129 IWM; interview by the author with Charles Hayward, June 2010.

Preprints (www.preprints.org) | NOT PEER-REVIEWED | Posted: 25 January 2023 doi:10.20944/preprints202301.0435.v1

for attention with English-speaking comrades. Their criticism nevertheless betrays the central importance Jewish inmates attributed to British aid. Occasionally, these ambitions spiralled into a sense of entitlement, and the projection of exaggerated moral expectations onto the POWs.[100]

Especially the francophones showed a stronger identification with French POWs, and often accused the British of being 'arrogant', and less sympathetic. The Belgian-Jewish inmate Leo Weiniger thus excoriated the British for not saluting Jewish columns, like the French did when they passed by. He concluded that the Jews had received more gestures of solidarity from French POWs, as they were subjected to harsher conditions than the British.[101] Drawing on more extreme anti-British stereotypes, two survivors claimed the British had all been 'homosexuals' and had offered cigarettes for sexual favours.[102]

A POW who apparently developed mental health problems after his family had been killed by a German V-rocket, began to attack Jewish inmates. The Polish-Jewish witness assumed that his behaviour had been triggered by Nazi propaganda blaming the Jews for the war.[103] Even though individual British POWs had mild anti-Semitic attitudes, this rare case of aggression against inmates seems to be primarily connected to mental health issues, which were a common side effect of captivity. Theoretically, such POWs could be referred to a psychiatric ward in Stalag Lamsdorf. However, German military physicians were usually reluctant to give their permission.[104]

Like certain German and foreign workers at the OHW, some British POWs played out the vulnerable status of Jewish inmates they bartered with. The former Blechhammer prisoner Nathan Prochownik delineated how the inmates' struggle for survival was ruthlessly exploited at times:

A single thought was on the minds of the immense number of inmates: survive and eat, eat to survive. [...] These people, who lacked everything, were a temptation to guards and workers with outside contacts. And they, too, were driven by a single idea: to make money with them.[105]

Along these lines, young Israel Rosengarten was cheated on by two British POWs. The first British trading partner promised him prunes for making him a beret out of an old battledress, but then simply did not pay, and disappeared. The second one handed over the agreed remuneration in the form of raisins to Rosengarten, who had procured razor blades from Czech workers for him. However, as soon as the exchange had taken place, the POWs' *Wehrmacht* guard entered the scene, rifle-butted Rosengarten, and confiscated the raisins. Rosengarten suspected that the POW had paid the guard for his intervention to regain some of his raisins. Following these negative experiences, he ceased to barter with the British, and assumed that all of them were 'deceivers'.[106]

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that Jewish inmates greatly appreciated any help extended to them by British POWs, irrespective of the possible dangers involved. This aid was considered a crucial survival factor in the perception of Jewish prisoners, even though the psychological impact obviously outweighed the physiological one. The inmates indubitably interpreted the material assistance they received from British POWs as gestures of solidarity intended to restore their status as human beings. The fact that British support was often coupled with protests against the despicable treatment of Jews and other victim groups, and that the POWs usually gifted their most valuable Red Cross articles, refutes the contention that Jewish inmates had merely been the random recipients of unwanted

---

[100] Nathan Ben-Brith, YVA 108-3313F; Prochownik, *Mémoires*, 106.

[101] Leo Weiniger, NIOD 244/1486.

[102] Maurice Mosze Szmidt, YVA O.3 3474; Steiner, *Reflections*, 59.

[103] Berke, Lester, interview 2187, VHA.

[104] Kushner, *Persistence*, 107–133; Borrie, *Captivity*, 169.

[105] Prochownik, *Mémoires*, 108.

[106] Rosengarten, *Overleven*, 157–161.

German rations. Moreover, genuine friendships between Jewish inmates and British POWs developed.

The presence of the British POWs, who represented the western Allied forces, became an important symbol of resistance against the Nazi regime in the eyes of the Jewish prisoners. In a state of extreme emasculation, some inmates even extolled the POWs to their 'saviours' – a role the British were understandably not capable of fulfilling. Perniciously, their admiration for the POWs led some Jewish Kapos to the fatal decision to imitate their fast style of working, which caused the deaths of emaciated comrades in their details.

By reframing the Jewish perspective, it has been possible to open a vista to several hitherto neglected aspects of the relations between British POWs and Jewish inmates. The active role played by Jewish inmates in establishing contacts to POWs should not be overlooked, nor should the reverberations of these interactions be underestimated. As we have seen, barter with the British was integral to the Jewish elder's strategy of rescuing individual prisoners through bribery. British 'luxury' items were simultaneously at the core of the German camp leadership's blackmail against the Jews, and they deliberately used the inmates to obtain these goods. On the other hand, bartering sustained a certain fraction of the inmates, and encouraged them to persevere. Being involved in resistance activities equally strengthened their will to survive. The relations between British POWs and Jewish inmates were also interdependent in complex ways. The British relied on the inmates to collect information for Allied intelligence and on the unfolding Holocaust, and they increasingly required their network of trading partners to procure basic food from autumn 1944. Negatively connoted encounters with British POWs were rarely corroborated by Jewish survivors. Those who blamed the British for being unsympathetic 'snobs' typically had no English language skills at the time, or they identified more strongly with the French. Occasionally, British POWs were insincere trading partners, who aggravated the already deadly circumstances the Jewish inmates had to exist in.

In a Shakespearean sense, it was perhaps not always the 'milk of human kindness' British POWs had to offer to Jewish inmates, but under the extreme conditions, it was at least the 'KLIM[107] of human kindness'. Altogether, these interactions were a significant factor in the inmates' survival. The "heroic" memories of their survival seemingly helped them to cope better with the effects of post-traumatic disorders.

References

1. L'Agence Centrale des Prisonniers de Guerre. *Rapport du Comité Intérnational de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité pendant la seconde guerre mondiale (1er septembre 1939–30 juin 1947)*, vol. 3, Geneva, 1948.
2. Avey, Denis (with Robert Broomby). *The Man who broke into Auschwitz*, London: DaCapo Press, 2011.
3. Bajohr, Frank. *Parvenüs und Profiteure: Korruption in der NS-Zeit*, Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 2001.
4. Bartuschka, Marc. *'Unter Zurückstellung aller möglichen Bedenken...': Die NS-Betriebsgruppe Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring (REIMAHG) und der Zwangsarbeitereinsatz 1944/1945*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011.
5. Bettelheim, Bruno. 'Trauma and Reintegration'. In *Surviving and Other Essays*, edited by Bruno Bettelheim, 19–37. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.
6. Blatter, Janet. 'Art from the Whirlwind'. In *Art of the Holocaust*, edited by Janet Blatter, and Sybil Milton, 20–35. London: Pan Books, 1982.
7. Borrie, John. *Despite Captivity: A Doctor's Life as Prisoner of War*, London: William Kimber, 1975.
8. Bravo, Anna, Davite, Lilia, and Jalla, Daniele. 'Myth, Impotence and Survival in the Concentration Camps'. In *The Myths We Live By*, edited by Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, 95–110. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.
9. Castle, John. *The Password is Courage*, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1954.
10. Celinsak, Marc. *Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

[107] KLIM, 'milk' spelled backwards, was the name of the milk powder in Red Cross parcels.

11. Davidowicz, Lucy S. 'The Holocaust Landscape'. In *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940-1945*, edited by Lucy S. Davidowicz, Tom Freudenheim, and Miriam Novitch, 23-32. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981.
12. Friedländer, Saul. *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews*, New York: Harper Collins, 2007.
13. Gilbert, Shirli. *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
14. Green, Julius. *From Colditz with Code*, London: Robert Hale & Company, 1971.
15. Greenspan, Henry. *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors. Recounting and Life History*, Westport (Connecticut) and London: Praeger, 1998.
16. Gross, Jan T. *Polish Society Under German Occupation: The General Government 1939-1944*, Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979.
17. Gruner, Wolf. *Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis: Economic Need and Racial Aims, 1938–1944*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
18. Holmes, Colin. *Searching for Lord Haw-Haw: The Political Lives of William Joyce*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016.
19. Kochavi, Arieh J. *Confronting Captivity: Britain, the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
20. Koenig, Ernest. *Im Vorhof der Vernichtung: Als Zwangsarbeiter in den Außenlagern von Auschwitz*, Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 2000.
21. Kushner, Tony. *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society During the Second World War*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989.
22. Langer, Lawrence. *Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
23. Levine, Alan J. *Captivity, Flight and Survival in World War Two*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000.
24. Little, Duncan. '"No one believed what we had seen": British Soldiers who witnessed Mass Murder in Auschwitz'. In *Britain and the Holocaust: Remembering and Representing War and Genocide*, edited by Caroline Sharples and Olaf Jensen, 13–30. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
25. Makepeace, Clare. *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in the Second World War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
26. Mantelli, Brunello. 'Von der Wanderarbeit zur Deportation: Die italienischen Arbeiter in Deutschland 1938–1945'. In *Europa und der 'Reichseinsatz': Ausländische Zivilarbeiter, Kriegsgefangene und KZ-Häftlinge in Deutschland 1938–1945*, edited by Ulrich Herbert, 51–90. Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1991.
27. Piper, Franciszek. 'Nebenlager Blechhammer'. *Hefte von Auschwitz*, 10 (1967): 19–39.
28. Ibid. *Der Arbeitseinsatz der Häftlinge aus dem KL Auschwitz*, Oświęcim-Brzezinka: State Museum Oświęcim-Brzezinka Press, 1995.
29. Prochownik, Nathan. *Mémoire Barbelées. Et Après...*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004.
30. Rosengarten, Israel. *Overleven. Relaas van een zestienjaarige joodse Antwerpenaar*, Rotterdam and Antwerp: De Vries-Brouwers, 1996.
31. Spira, Bil. *Die Legende vom Zeichner*, Vienna: Döcker-Verlag, 1997.
32. Terry, Nicholas. 'Conflicting Signals. British Intelligence on the "Final Solution" through Radio Intercepts and Other Sources', 1941–1942, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 32 (2004): 351–396.
33. Trunk, Isaiah. *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation*, New York: Stein & Day, 1977.
34. Wallis, Russell. *British POWs and the Holocaust: Witnessing the Nazi Atrocities*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2017.
35. White, Joseph Robert. '"Even in Auschwitz...Humanity could prevail": British POWs and Jewish Concentration Camp Inmates at IG Auschwitz, 1943–1945'. In *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 15, 2 (autumn 2002): 266–295.
36. Wollenberg, Hans-Werner. *'...Und der Alptraum wurde zum Alltag': Autobiographischer Bericht eines jüdischen Arztes über NS-Zwangsarbeitslager in Schlesien (1942–1945)*, edited by Manfred Brusten. Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlag, 1992.