

“Paprika” Satellite Camp – Gardening in Chains

In May 1942, the Heppenheim satellite camp was established, initially subordinate to the Dachau concentration camp and, from the summer of 1943, to the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp. The benefiting research institution was the “German Experimental Institute for Nutrition and Provisions” (DVA), founded in 1939. This economic enterprise, with an affiliated teaching and research institute was ran by the SS, and aimed to promote the production, distribution, and scientific study of medicinal and culinary herbs in line with a “natural medicine” approach to public health—on the one hand within the framework of a so-called “racial hygiene policy,” and on the other to ensure the health of the population during wartime.

The Heppenheim satellite camp was located near the train station in a former stone-grinding facility. Today, a timber wholesale business stands on the site on Lilienthalstraße. Between 1942 and 1945, up to 60 prisoners were interned in one barrack. Most of them were political prisoners of Eastern European origin, including some juveniles. The prisoners were forced to work both in gardening and plant-breeding experiments at the Southern end of Heppenheim, near the grounds of what is now “Odenwald Quelle GmbH,” and in the “TROKOFA” (dry preservation factory), which was located directly on the camp grounds. A drying facility was also established in the decommissioned stoneworks in Reichenbach. From their barracks, the prisoners marched in typical camp clothes to their respective workplaces, where they worked alternating shifts for 12 hours a day. They were supervised by soldiers unfit for frontline service as well as an SS sergeant.

In the gardens, vegetables, fruits, herbs, and also paprika were cultivated. This is why the camp became popularly known as “Paprika.” At TROKOFA, these products were processed into dried goods, which were used to supply German soldiers and the civilian population. In addition, TROKOFA also served as a site for researching ideologically promoted medicinal herbs intended to replace synthetic medicines and supposedly harmful foreign spices.

Despite dampness and cold in the factory, the prisoners’ living conditions were, overall, better than in many other camps. The prisoners were even able to obtain relatively sufficient and healthy food, as foodstuffs were—illegally—diverted to the prisoners’ kitchen before or after

drying. The proximity to the town and its population, access to medical care, and adequate hygiene facilities such as washrooms allowed for a comparatively bearable existence.

To break the prisoners' resistance, they were threatened with transfer to other camps. Human rights violations were thus present, even if not primarily through executions or corporal punishment.

Corruption and abuse of power by the camp director Brombacher were reportedly not uncommon. One prisoner testified that Brombacher begged in the name of the inmates but then used the acquired goods for himself and his family.

A few days before the American troops entered Heppenheim on March 27, 1945, the camp was evacuated. The remaining prisoners were marched under strict guard to the Swabian Hall camp. While the Jewish prisoners were taken to the Munich-Riem satellite camp, where they were murdered in gas chambers, the other prisoners were transported onward to Dachau. Most of them were liberated by the American forces in April and May.

After the war, there were demands to resume operations of the gardens and drying facilities as quickly as possible, but this was no longer feasible due to differing ownership conditions.

In 2018, a third plaque was added to the memorial for forced laborers on the former clay works site, referencing the satellite camp. After being a taboo subject for a long time, the history of the camp is now increasingly being addressed through various projects and publications.

(Text by David Frey, Emilia Marocco, and Toni Silbermann, all Abitur 2023.

English translation proofread by Leandro Leskona, class of 2027.)