

Tonwerk Heppenheim – Forced Labor Covered in Dirt and Violence

“I report [...] terrible things are happening at the brickworks [...]” – This is what the Jewish forced laborer Berthold Löb said about the working conditions at the Tonwerk Heppenheim.

From 1933 onward, the National Socialists took away regular employment from many Jews, leaving them dependent on welfare payments. Under the pretext of saving state expenses, the regime ordered the compulsory employment of 50,000 Jews in 1938, which in 1939 developed into a general labor obligation for all Jews. In Heppenheim, this work requirement is enforced, among other things, through work at the clay factory. There, alongside other prisoners and regular workers, 68 Jewish laborers were made to work, most of them originating from occupied territories in or near the Soviet Union. During the war, the Tonwerk Heppenheim was the largest roof tile factory in Hesse, producing approximately 14 million tiles per year.

According to the concept of “extermination through labor,” people were forced to work with minimal food and inadequate care in order to keep costs as low as possible. The victims were ultimately murdered through starvation and exhaustion. In this way, the National Socialists even profited from the deaths of forced workers. At the same time, however, the Nazi regime depended on this forced labor. Without it, the economy would likely have collapsed after 1939, since “German” men were serving in the war and therefore unavailable for civilian work.

The pottery is described as an old-fashioned facility with “very tough.” working conditions. The workforce ultimately consisted of 80 to 90% forced laborers and prisoners of war, whose working shifts usually lasted 12 hours. Workers were frequently physically and verbally abused by their supervisors. Jewish workers were treated particularly badly; they were separated from the other workers from the beginning. “I was [...] slapped in the face; this was not the only time I was assaulted. [They] also [...] strangled me by the neck. It was routine to hear: ‘You can rot and die,’” reports Berthold Löb.

Surprisingly, the Jewish workers received a wage. However, it amounted to only 0.53 Reichsmarks, far less than that of “Aryan” workers. In today’s value, 0.53 Reichsmarks correspond to just about 14 cents. With many overtime hours (11 hours a day, 5 days a week), this would amount to only about 30.80 euros per month—barely enough to survive, let alone support a family.

After 1945, the forced laborers unfortunately did not receive the peace they were entitled to, as they were regarded as second-class victims. Even in their home countries, they were often treated almost like collaborators because of their forced service for the Nazi regime.

In the final phase of the war, office equipment and production facilities at the brickworks were damaged. A few days before the American troops entered Heppenheim in March 1945, the management allowed Eastern workers and prisoners of war to leave the factory. When the Americans arrived, 22 workers were still present on the site. After the war, factory owners, managers, and foremen were accused of mistreating foreign forced laborers and prisoners of war in particular. Denazification proceedings were initiated. In May 1948, the clay factory was destroyed by a major fire, but by the 1950s, the factory had been rebuilt and production had resumed. Given the available raw materials in the area, the plant's economic viability was questioned in the 1960s. In 1970, production ceased and the factory was shut down. From 1992 onward, the buildings of the former brickworks were demolished, and the residential area of the Nordweststadt district was developed.

Since 2018, a memorial has honored the forced laborers from Heppenheim, as well as those from other factories in Heppenheim where forced labor was carried out during the Nazi regime.

(Text by Christian Deppisch and Sebastian Nack, both Abitur 2023.

English translation proofread by Carlos Fischer, class of 2027.)