


Police Brutality and Forced Labor

The Ohrbeck
Labor Education Camp

"Two policemen stood
on the stairs with rubber batons
and called out: "Food, food!"
Two others beat us
and said: "Slowly, slowly!"

 Gedenkstätte
Augustaschacht

A.Z.!

If you do something in the German camp
That you are not allowed to do,
Your head gets shaved
And you are sent to A.Z. for punishment.
Arbeitszucht means concentration,
And what it means at this site
Many can no longer tell
Because they died miserably.

Early in the morning the orders ring out,
And if you hesitate for just a moment,
You get hit by a cudgel.
Now and then you are allowed to wash,
And you are given a crust of bread.
But after just two or three weeks
You look like the hideous death.

You have to work long days
In the same lousiness.
You get bread, a small little bit.
And even less watery soup.
If you fall ill, there is no mercy.
One must work in the Reich.
And usually leaves the A.Z.
As a shadow, a ghost, a corpse.

How can it be in this civilized world
That something so repugnant exists.
With these camps, Germany
Has covered itself in great shame.
Grief, worry, a plague of lice
Souring all that creates joy.
The orgy of crime
Culminates in the A.Z.!

¹ Phida Wolff
Osnabrück, February 15, 1945

Als je in het Duitse Lager
Een iets onvertogens doet
Word je aanstonds kaal geschoren
En met het A.Z. beboet.
Arbeitszucht is concentratie
En wat dat daarginder is
Kunnen velen nooit meer zeggen...
Doodgegaan in droefenis.
's Morgens vroeg klinken bevelen
En als je maar even wacht
Worden je een aantal slagen
Met de knuppel toegebracht.
Afen toe mag je je wassen

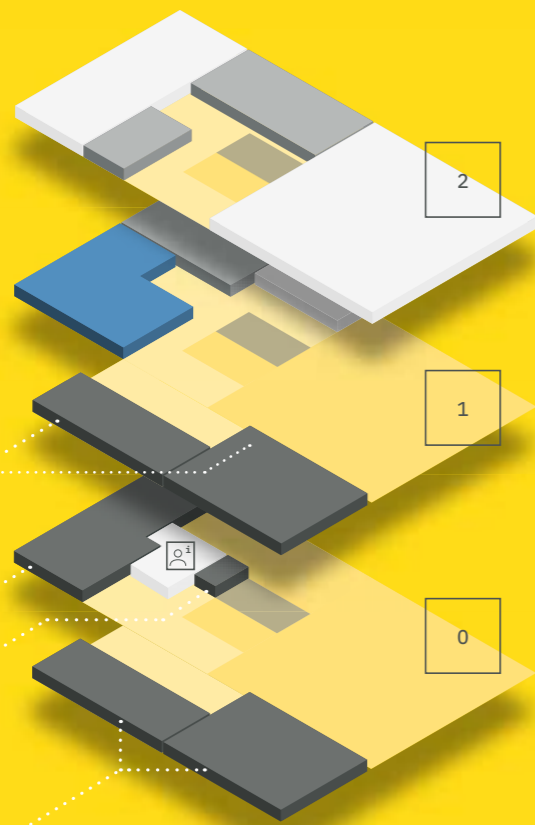
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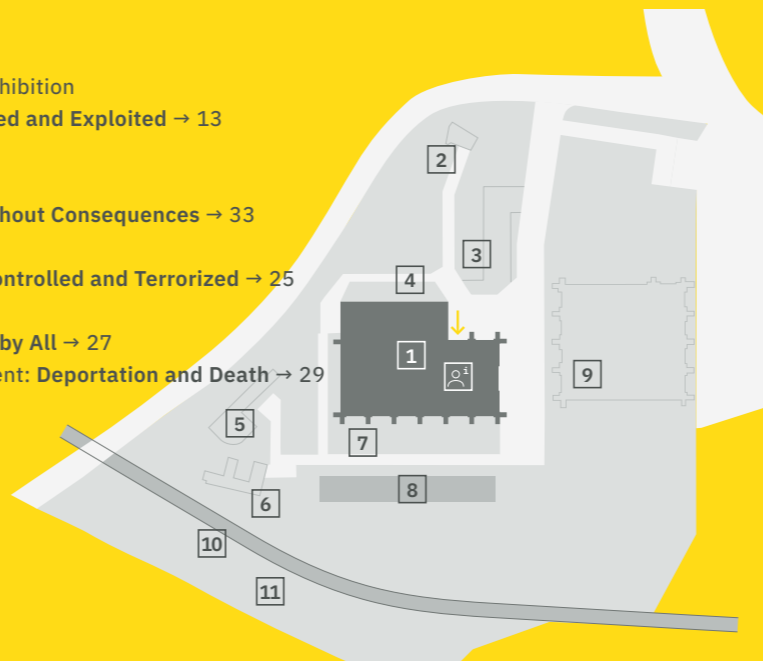
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Police Brutality and Forced Labor The Ohrbeck Labor Education Camp

Millions of people had to carry out forced labor for Nazi Germany during World War II. In the region of Osnabrück alone, there were tens of thousands of forced laborers from all over Europe. Those who tried to evade forced labor were sentenced to the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL). Conditions in this camp, run by the Osnabrück Secret State Police (Gestapo), were perilous.

The exhibition shows how the cruel treatment of prisoners was designed to make them compliant. Accounts of former prisoners testify to the difficulty of surviving in the AEL Ohrbeck. Survivors, the families of prisoners, and the bereaved continued to be affected by the experience of camp imprisonment for a long time. Nonetheless, within German society today the labor education camps remain little known.

The Gestapokeller and Augustaschacht memorials make up a historical ensemble. A joint permanent exhibition entitled “Police Brutality and Forced Labor” is presented at the two locations. The memorials can be visited individually and in any sequence.

View of the shaft building. Photo from 1896.



Button, probably from a French prisoner of war. Archaeological find from 2011.



File card on Stefan Majewski. The Osnabrück Gestapo committed Majewski to the AEL Ohrbeck.



Plastic miniature of a Hanseatic cog, used as a toy. Promotional gift from 1951. Archaeological find from 2010.



Paper figure from the exhibition “HumanImages” by Hiltrud Schäfer, 2003.



Augustaschacht 1874–1939

The Augustaschacht was created in 1874 to pump water from the mine. There had been a steam engine and pump in the shaft building at that time. In the early 1920s, the Klöckner factory removed the steam engine and inserted new ceilings to create an additional upper level.

[H. MÜLLER | DER GEORGS-MARIEN-BERGWERKS- UND HÜTTEN-VEREIN | 1906]

1940–1943

During World War II the Klöckner factory housed its labor force in the shaft building: it was occupied by up to 352 French prisoners of war from July 1940 to October 1942; forced laborers from Eastern Europe were housed here from mid-1942 to late 1943.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

1944–1945

The Osnabrück Gestapo established the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL) in the Augustaschacht in January 1944. It operated the camp in cooperation with the Klöckner factory until April 1945. The Gestapo created file cards on most of the 2,000 AEL prisoners.

[NIEDERSÄCHSISCHES LANDESARCHIV | STANDORT OSNABRÜCK]

1945–2002

After the war, refugee apartments were established in the shaft building. Bombed-out residents, refugees and expellees were housed here until 1968. Afterwards, aside from the pump, the building stood empty. Around 1970 the unused section was bricked up for security reasons.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

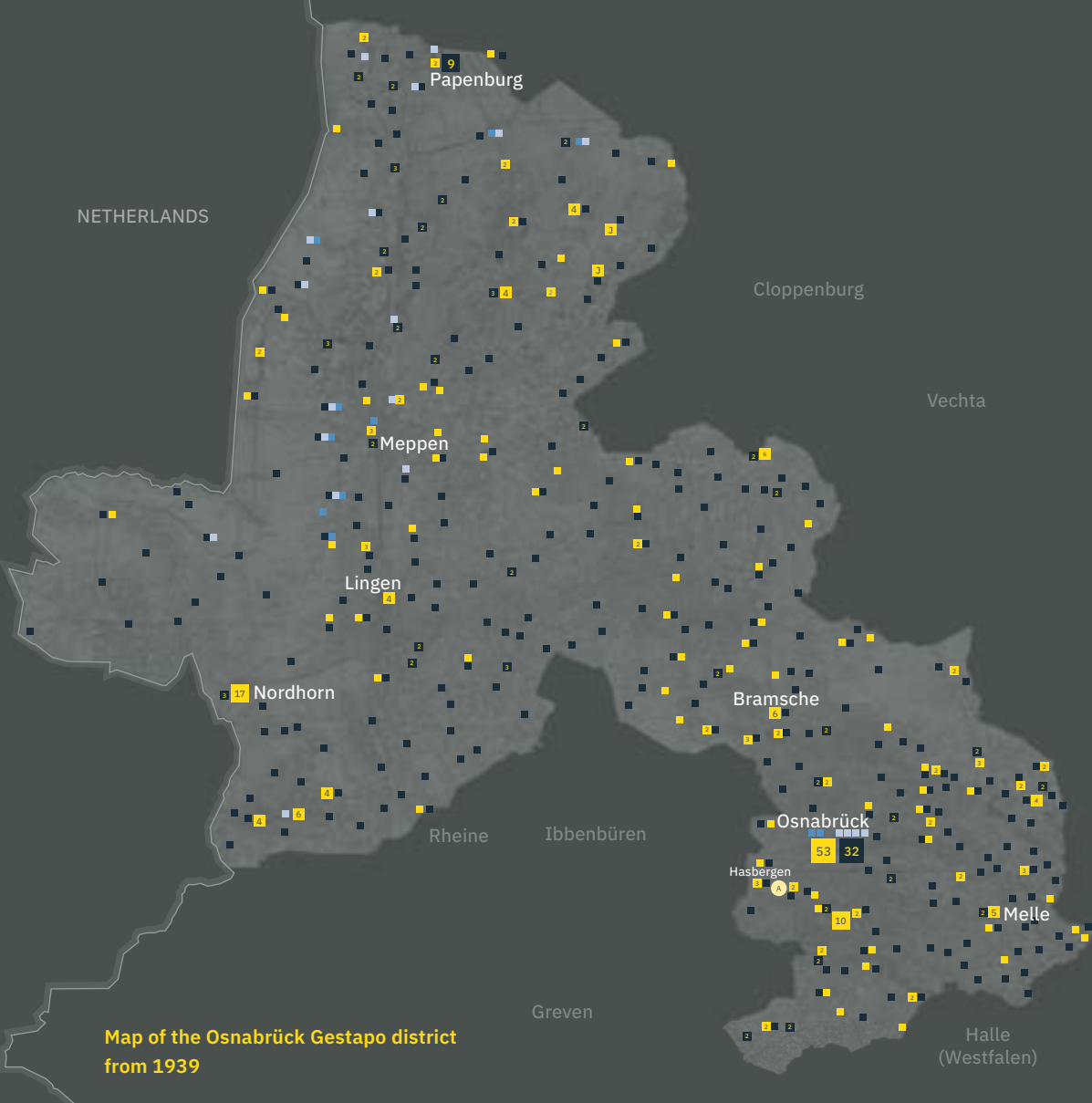
2002–today

The memorial association bought the building in 2002 and made it publicly accessible. As the memorial site was established, excavations were conducted and art projects and exhibitions created.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

1 The Dutchman Phida Wolff came to Osnabrück in 1944 and lived in a camp for forced laborers. He wrote this poem there on 15 February 1945. His information was based on the frightening descriptions from former prisoners of the AEL Ohrbeck. “A.Z.” stands for “Arbeitszuchtlager” (labordiscipline camp).

[VOLKER ISSMER | NIEDERLÄNDER IM VERDAMMTEN LAND | 1998]

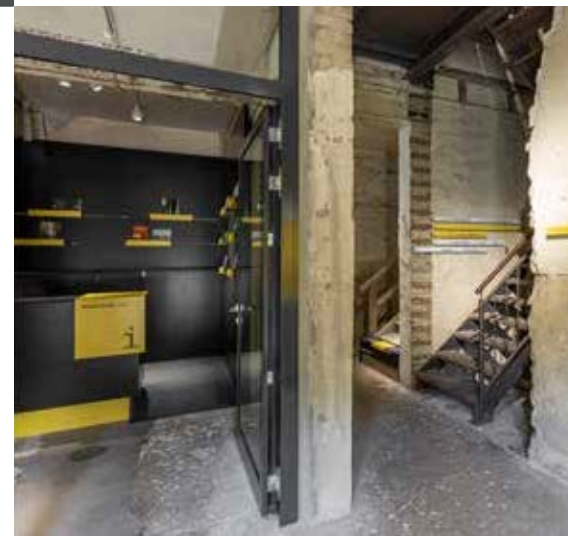


Map of the Osnabrück Gestapo district from 1939

- Prisoner-of-war Camp
- Camp for Foreign Forced Laborers
- Concentration Camp
- Prison Camp
- Special Labor Camp for Jews
- Ohrbeck Labor Education Camp
- 10 Number of Camps at a Site

Entrance

From 1944 to 1945 the entrance served the AEL: one door led to prisoner housing, the other to the rooms of the camp staff.



Labor Education Camp of the Gestapo

During World War II, the Osnabrück Secret State Police (Gestapo) punished thousands of foreign men and women by imprisoning them in labor education camps (AEL). Most had tried to evade forced labor, others had failed to meet the work demands. The idea was to treat the prisoners in the AEL camps so badly that after their release they would perform forced labor without resistance.

The Osnabrück Gestapo had been committing prisoners to the AEL camps of other Gestapo offices, but this was no longer possible by fall 1943. At this time a Higher SS and Police Leader demanded the establishment of new AEL camps. In turn, the Osnabrück Gestapo created its own AEL camp in January 1944. The AEL Ohrbeck was designed to hold 250 male inmates.

The camp buildings belonged to the Klöckner factory in Georgsmarienhütte, which cooperated with the Osnabrück Gestapo. The Gestapo assigned many of the AEL inmates to work in this company that was vital to the war effort.



Labor Education Camps in Europe
Europe with country borders of 1938

- German-controlled Areas 1942
- Labor Education Camp
- Several Labor Education Camps

Camp Gate

In 1944 the camp gate connected the Ohrbeck AEL with the outside world. Prisoners passed through the gate on their way to their worksites and when they returned to the AEL.

Pillars of the War Economy

The AEL Ohrbeck was part of about 280 camps in Europe which the Gestapo used to intensify the brutal use of forced labor for the German war economy. Around half a million men and women, primarily foreign forced laborers, went through these camps.

The AEL camps were under the authority of the regional Gestapo offices. They decided without a court ruling whether a person should be imprisoned. A common reason for imprisonment was attempting to avoid forced labor. When a company accused someone of working too slowly this could also lead to their punishment.

The average sentence in an AEL camp was eight weeks. After their release, inmates had to return to their previous worksites or were assigned by labor management to a new location. Others there saw the poor condition of AEL camp survivors. In this way, the Gestapo was able to spread fear of labor education camps at worksites and in forced labor housing facilities. The Gestapo's intention was to increase work productivity for businesses and the war economy.





Friedrich Kicker, Camp leader

* 1.7.1903 Oesede |
district Osnabrück
† 30.1.1966 Schledehausen |
district Osnabrück

Kicker completed an apprenticeship as a salesman before joining the uniformed police in 1923. He began working for the Osnabrück Gestapo in 1938. In 1944 he was placed in charge of the AEL Ohrbeck. A court sentenced him to eight years in prison in 1948 for killing a Soviet prisoner in the AEL. He was released in 1951 and later worked for a publisher.

Undated (ca. 1938)
[BUNDESARCHIV BERLIN]



Nikolaj Lesnikow, Guard

* 9.5.1910 Olginskaja | Russia
† Unknown

After primary school Lesnikow worked in farming. He worked for the German Security Police during World War II. The Klöckner factory in Georgsmarienhütte hired him as a security guard in April 1944. The Osnabrück Gestapo took him on as a guard in the AEL Ohrbeck in August 1944. He went into hiding in Hamburg after the war. There is no further trace of him after that.

Undated (ca. 1950)
[ITS BAD AROLSEN]

¹ *“He was a very brutal and crude person. He reacted to the most minor triviality with blows.”*

Mathias Bensmann

The Power of the Guards

The staff of the AEL Ohrbeck consisted of a camp leader, guards and administrative clerks. The AEL Ohrbeck was headed by the Gestapo official Friedrich Kicker. His supervisor at the Osnabrück Gestapo was Karl Haas. It was up to the camp leader and guards to decide how much violence to use daily against the prisoners. Prisoners were abused and killed.

The names of more than twenty German and foreign guards are documented. The Germans were mostly older men. Most of the foreign guards came from the Soviet Union and had previously worked for the Security Police. Almost all the guards had worked for the Klöckner factory in Georgsmarienhütte.

The administrative tasks of the camp were handled by two SS men. Additionally, there was an Osnabrück Gestapo employee in charge of registering prisoners, a female typist and a translator. There was also a prisoner who had to provide assistance.

Guards' Room

The staff of the labor education camp used the rooms from 1944 to 1945. The front room was used by the guards; the back room served as an office for the head of the camp.



¹ Mathias Bensmann was held in the AEL Ohrbeck twice in 1944. Both times the Osnabrück Gestapo accused him of not performing his work satisfactorily. On 7 January 1949, in an investigation proceeding against the former Gestapo officials Friedrich Kicker and Karl Haas, Bensmann described Kicker's violent conduct as camp leader.

[NIEDERSÄCHSISCHES LANDESARCHIV | STANDORT OSNABRÜCK]



2

“Two policemen stood on the stairs with rubber batons and called out: ‘Food, food!’ Two others beat us and said: ‘Slowly, slowly.’”

Oleksandr Kolosovskij

1

Oleksandr Kolosovskij was born in 1924 in Bolshoe Salesje, Ukraine. He served as a forced laborer in Hamm. He tried to flee and was imprisoned in the AEL Ohrbeck in May 1944. He worked in the Klöckner factory and was later assigned to a mine in Gelsenkirchen. After World War II he was conscripted into the Soviet Army. He returned to his village in 1950. He married, had two children and worked on a farm. He died in 2014.

Camp Stairs

The AEL prisoners had to use the stairs to reach both their sleeping quarters and the exit. If guards stood on the landing, there was no way to evade them.



1

Oleksandr Kolosovskij after his liberation in 1945 in Gelsenkirchen.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

2

In an interview in 2003, the former AEL prisoner Oleksandr Kolosovskij recalled the beatings carried out before the food was distributed. On orders from the guards, the starving prisoners rushed to the stairs and were beaten.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

Violence and Fear

Violence posed the greatest threat to the inmates of the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL). Prisoners experienced humiliation and abuse throughout their imprisonment. The most minor violation of camp rules was punished indiscriminately by the camp personnel with harsh beatings and the denial of food. The punishments were levied and executed by both the camp leadership and the guards. Prisoners had no way of defending themselves against accusations and punishments.

The guards were ruthless in their use of force against the prisoners, employing violence unpredictably and without provocation. The prisoners tried as best they could to avoid the guards. Survivors had strong memories of the stairs where they were defenseless against the guards' blows. This is where prisoners were beaten to death by the guards.

All prisoners lived in fear of being beaten or killed. Violence was used in the AEL to intimidate the prisoners, force them into compliance, and break their spirit.



1

Reduced to a Number

The prison conditions in the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL) were extremely harsh. The prisoners' daily life was marked by hard labor, hunger, illness, beatings and harassment.

Most of the prisoners were forced laborers and as such their living circumstances were already terrible. Their imprisonment in an AEL, however, fundamentally changed their situation; from this point their lives were in danger. The conditions in the AEL Ohrbeck were similar to the concentration camps.

After arriving in the camp, the prisoners were registered. They received a number that was stamped onto a metal tag. The tags had to be worn around the prisoners' necks. The prisoner number replaced their names.

The inmates had to hand over their personal possessions and clothes upon arrival. They were given worn-out prisoner clothing instead: a cap, gray trousers and a thin jacket. They did not have warm garments for the winter months. The prisoner clothing and numbers were used to control and humiliate the inmates, and to make escapes more difficult.

Equipment Room

After the demolition of the old annex and the addition of upper floors, this half of the annex served as an equipment room. The windows were barred and there were no partitions or stairs.



1 These six prisoner tags were discovered during excavations conducted on the grounds of the Augustaschacht from 2000 to 2010. They were identified as originating from the AEL Ohrbeck in the years 1944 to 1945. It is not known to whom these tags belonged.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]



1

2 “We had to walk to work from Ohrbeck to Osnabrück. We had to retrieve people there who had been killed or maimed by bombs, who had lost legs and arms. We had to throw them onto a wagon: That was our work. The first time I did this, I saw: My God, so much blood, everything – man, man, man! But I’m so young! [The overseer calls:] ‘Raboti, Raboti!’ [cries] The dog has a gun, there was nothing we could do! ‘Faster!’ We found two men – ‘Load them up!’ There was a man lying there – I’ll never forget it, I can still see his face – and I heard: ‘Help, help, help!’”

B. W.

1 At the top right of the photograph, two prisoners from the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL) are seen clearing rubble in Osnabrück in 1944 or 1945. Unexploded bombs made this work very dangerous. The letters “A/Z” painted on their jackets stood for “Arbeitszucht” (labor discipline) and “Arbeitszuchtlager” (labor discipline camp).

2 B. W. spoke about his imprisonment in the AEL Ohrbeck in an interview with Volker Issmer in Almelo in 1995.

[VOLKER ISSMER | DAS ARBEITSERZIEHUNGS-
LAGER OHRBECK BEI OSNABRÜCK | 2000]

[MEDIENZENTRUM OSNABRÜCK]

Perilous Work

The everyday lives of AEL prisoners consisted mostly of carrying out hard labor for the war economy. They worked primarily in the Klöckner factory in Georgsmarienhütte, but also at other sites. Their work conditions were extremely harsh as well as dangerous. They were not protected against the heat of the furnaces or from the damp and cold of construction sites. Additionally, AEL prisoners were harassed and humiliated by the guards and foremen while they worked.

The inmates were undernourished and further weakened by the hard labor. Injuries and accidents occurred frequently. Many prisoners fell ill and were hardly able to work. That this meant routine loss of laborers was accepted by the Gestapo as a matter of course.

The purpose of AEL imprisonment was to punish prisoners and force them into total obedience but the camp was also aimed at intimidating all the forced laborers in the Osnabrück region. They should know what awaited them if they tried to flee or refused to do what was expected of them.

Punished and Exploited

The prisoners of the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL) had to perform extremely hard labor. The Klöckner factory in Georgsmarienhütte reaped the greatest profits from the prisoners’ labor but the city of Osnabrück, the Secret State Police (Gestapo) and a few economic enterprises also benefitted. The forced labor functioned as punishment for the prisoners while also serving the war economy.

Most prisoners worked outside the AEL. They were kept under guard as they were brought by train, truck or on foot to the worksites. Guards searched them before they left the camp and again upon their return.

Work deployment was carried out under harsh conditions and strict surveillance. Prisoners were frequently beaten. Accidents and air-raid bombs caused critical injuries and fatalities.

1 Cups with handles and a bowl made of enameled metal from the time of the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL). Cups and bowls were discovered during excavations in 2011. Former prisoners remembered that items like this were used in the AEL as “food bowls”.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]



“I was never able to wash and was always full of lice and other vermin.”

J. G. Evers,
former Dutch prisoner

“You had to work, whether you were sick or not.”

Rudolf Wolters,
former Dutch prisoner

[VOLKER ISSMER | DAS ARBEITSERZIEHUNGSLAGER OHRBECK BEI OSNABRÜCK | 2000]
[SAMMLUNG VOLKER ISSMER]

Calculated Malnourishment

The AEL prisoners were weakened by a lack of food and water, leaving them without strength to tackle hard labor. The malnutrition, in combination with atrocious work and living conditions, led to illness and death. The camp personnel also used food deprivation as a form of punishment.

Former prisoners described how they suffered terribly from hunger and that food rations were meager: two thin slices of bread in the morning, the same or nothing for lunch, a watery soup consisting of potatoes and vegetable peelings in the evening.

Scant nourishment resulted in symptoms of severe malnutrition in the prisoners, making them vulnerable to diarrhea and subsequent disease. They became emaciated and developed ulcers on their legs.

The inmates’ hunger was so intense that some resorted to eating anything that appeared edible. They ate raw beets found on the side of the road, food scraps from the trash or found amidst rubble. This food was often rotten and caused poisoning.

Made Sick

The AEL prisoners suffered from filth, vermin and disease. The latrine, a building with very basic toilets, was located outside. The prisoners had to use buckets when they were inside the mine building. They were seldom able to wash themselves and then only with cold water. Almost everyone had lice. Prisoners often slept two-to-a-bed in the cold sleeping quarters. This increased the risk of contagion.

Many prisoners fell ill from the lack of basic hygiene, malnutrition and hard labor. Tuberculosis, diarrhea and pneumonia were rampant. Inmates suffered injuries through work accidents and also beatings administered by the camp personnel.

There was no medical care in the camp. Occasionally a sick or injured prisoner was taken to the hospital in Georgsmarienhütte.

A so-called sick room was set up in the AEL Ohrbeck during the final months of the war. Only prisoners who were very weak or unable to work were brought there. Many sick prisoners died there or were killed by guards.

Alfons van de Voorde was born in 1922 in Nieuwerkerken, Belgium. He lived under a false name in Brussels to avoid being sent to Germany to perform forced labor. He was discovered in late August 1944 and deported to Fürstenberg an der Oder as a forced laborer. After an escape attempt, he was imprisoned in the AEL Ohrbeck. He was forced to work in Osnabrück. He returned to Belgium after the war. He died in 2014.



Jules Schenck de Jong, born in 1925 in Rijswijk, Netherlands, was deported to Salzgitter-Watenstedt at the age of 18. He performed forced labor in the Braunschweig steel works until 1945. After he attempted an escape, the Meppen Gestapo sent him to the AEL Ohrbeck. He joined the Dutch military in 1946. Later he studied business administration and became a factory manager. He had three children. He died in Maastricht in 2008.



Giovanni Caserini Giovanni Caserini was born in 1921 in Pieve Fissiraga, Italy. He came to Germany as a prisoner of war in September 1943. He had to work at the Niehues & Dütting company in Nordhorn until April 1944, after which he was assigned to the Klöckner factory in Georgsmarienhütte. The Gestapo admitted him to the AEL Ohrbeck on 21 March 1945 because he had wanted to uphold his rights as a prisoner of war. He survived the final days in the camp where so many prisoners had died.

3



From All Over Europe

More than 2,000 men and youths were imprisoned in the AEL Ohrbeck. Almost all of them were forced laborers deported to Germany by the German occupiers. They came from 17 different countries, but mostly from the Netherlands, the Soviet Union, Italy, Poland and France. The Dutch made up the largest group. Quite a few tried to flee to their homeland. The Gestapo referred to these escape attempts as work contract violations. Forced laborers were imprisoned in the AEL Ohrbeck without trial for so-called work absenteeism as well as other offenses. The average prison sentence was eight weeks long. After serving their time, forced laborers had to return to their previous worksite or were assigned to a new work location by the employment office. There were also men in the AEL Ohrbeck whom the Gestapo had persecuted as Jews, trade unionists, Social Democrats, Communists or Jehovah's Witnesses. These people were quickly transferred to a forced labor or concentration camp.

1

Alfons van de Voorde in Belgium in the 1940s.

[ARCHIVES GÉNÉRALES DU ROYAUME | SERVICE ARCHIVES DES VICTIMES DE LA GUERRE | BRÜSSEL]

2

Jules Schenk de Jong 2008 in the Augustaschacht Memorial.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

3

This information has been taken from the card index of the Osnabrück Gestapo. Information from the Gestapo did not exist for about 700 of the 2,000 AEL prisoners.

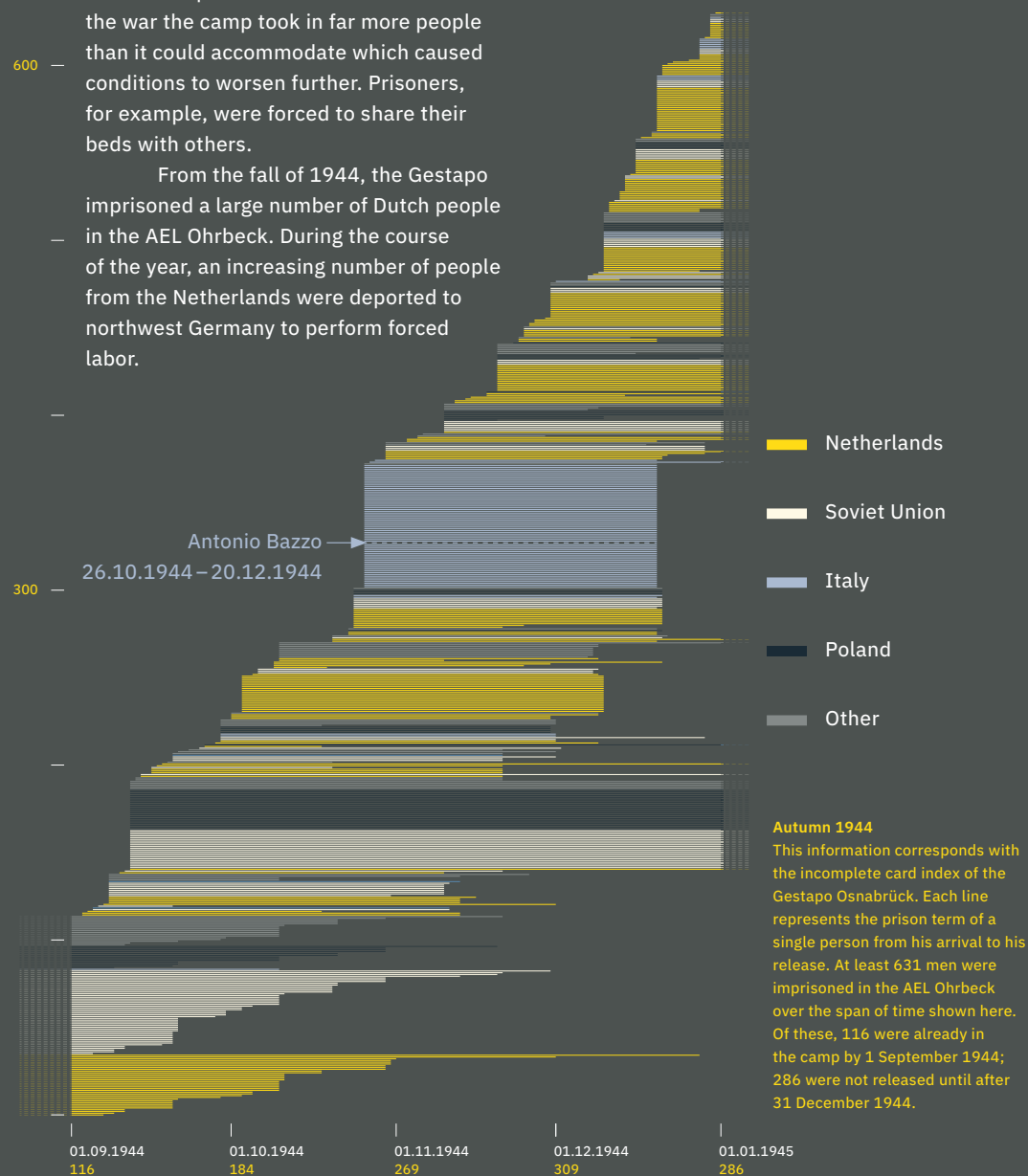
Eight Weeks in Custody

The AEL Ohrbeck was designed to hold 250 inmates at one time. The average prison sentence was eight weeks. This meant that the prisoner population was constantly in flux. The camp personnel did not distinguish much between prisoners from different countries.

A total of at least 2,000 prisoners spent time in the camp between January 1944 and April 1945. Towards the end of the war the camp took in far more people than it could accommodate which caused conditions to worsen further. Prisoners, for example, were forced to share their beds with others.

From the fall of 1944, the Gestapo imprisoned a large number of Dutch people in the AEL Ohrbeck. During the course of the year, an increasing number of people from the Netherlands were deported to northwest Germany to perform forced labor.

The atrocious work and living conditions led many to attempt to flee. Dutch forced laborers from other parts of Germany were also on the run. People caught heading towards the border were imprisoned in the AEL by the Gestapo.



Among Strangers

Most of the prisoners of the AEL Ohrbeck felt isolated. This was a consequence of the harsh treatment and the constantly changing prisoner population. Because prisoners were admitted and released from the AEL individually, not in groups, they had few opportunities to form relationships. Although many worked together or shared the same sleeping quarters at night, they often did not even know each other's names.

Connections were sometimes formed between prisoners who shared the same language, nationality and experiences. Forced laborers who had attempted an escape together or who were accused of the same offense were sometimes admitted to the AEL at the same time. If they were able to stay in contact then they could support each other.

Acts of resistance by prisoners or efforts to organize themselves are not documented. Their isolation and the short prison sentences in the AEL Ohrbeck contributed to the lack of defiance.



The Frenchmen Gabriel Taguet, Joseph Beaurain and Georges Leclerc, as prisoners of war in 1942 (from left to right). The three men served as forced laborers in Sögel, Emsland in 1944. Leclerc came to the AEL Ohrbeck in November 1944; the other two arrived in January 1945. They were accused by the Gestapo of listening to British radio.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT | SCHENKUNG PATRICK BEURAIN]



How to Survive?

Prisoners developed various strategies to survive their imprisonment in the AEL. Very few had someone in the camp on whom they could depend. In general, everyone fended for himself.

The inmates took possession of anything they found that could be hidden from the guards. They traded with each other secretly. The owner of a cigarette stub, for instance, could exchange it for a piece of bread or a potato. Fearing theft, prisoners hid their food and other belongings. To keep warm, some prisoners put on the clothes of deceased prisoners. Others cut up empty cement bags, wrapped them around their torsos and legs, and fastened them with wire.

To avoid the prevailing violence, the inmates tried not to draw the attention of the camp leader and guards. They adapted to the conditions in the AEL and subjugated themselves to the rules. Only a few prisoners tried to flee from the AEL, on their way to or from worksites.

“We traded everything we had on us for food, even the rings on our fingers. We had to, otherwise we would have starved.”

Letter from M. Schop, dated 16 July 1946. In it he describes in detail what he experienced in the AEL Ohrbeck.

[NIOD INSTITUUT VOOR OORLOGS-, HOLOCAUST- EN GENOCIDESTUDIES | AMSTERDAM]

Sleeping Quarters in the Annex

As of summer 1944, the sleeping quarters of the AEL were situated here, with two-story bunk beds made of metal or wood. Sometimes two prisoners had to share a single bed.



1 These razor blades were found wrapped in newspaper in the crack of a roof beam. They were probably put there by an AEL prisoner since the newspaper is dated 3 February 1944. It is not clear why they were hidden and what purpose they were meant to serve.

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

1 *“I worked in the burial commando in the first three weeks. We had a lot to do in this commando, that’s for sure, because we saw people daily who collapsed and were carried away.”*

M. Schop



Willem Johan Bruins in the Netherlands in 1943. He came to Germany as a forced laborer with his brother Johan Willem Bruins. Following an escape attempt, they were both imprisoned in the AEL Ohrbeck where they fell critically ill in March 1945. Willem Johan died in the hospital in the Ohrbeck Cloister on 4 April 1945.

[VOLKER ISSMER | DAS ARBEITSERZIEHUNGSLAGER OHRBECK BEI OSNABRÜCK | 2000]

Infirmiry

In early 1945 a so-called sick room was set up here. Critically ill AEL prisoners were brought here but not treated. Many died.



More and More Dead

Malnutrition, terrible housing conditions and hard labor put the lives of the inmates at risk. They were constantly exposed to the guards’ brutality which grew even worse towards the end of the war. Many died from the effects of this abuse. Other causes of death included exhaustion, illness and injuries at work.

When an inmate died, the other prisoners had to place his corpse in a wooden box, transport it on a handcart to the cemetery in Georgsmarienhütte and bury it there. The death rate increased sharply in winter 1945, in particular among Dutch prisoners. Many were already weak and ill when they arrived at the AEL. In the end, the dead were no longer buried individually, but were instead interred in collective graves.

The exact number of people who died or were murdered in the AEL Ohrbeck could not be determined. At least 100 men did not survive their imprisonment, including 60 Dutchmen.

1

Letter from M. Schop, dated 16 July 1946. In it he describes in detail what he experienced in the AEL Ohrbeck.

[NIOD INSTITUUT VOOR OORLOGS-, HOLOCAUST- EN GENOCIDESTUDIES | AMSTERDAM]



1

“An inspection carried out at six in the morning in the inner courtyard of the camp revealed the mentality of the Gestapo. Although the Ukrainians [guards from Ukraine] could do it too. We had to line up in rows during which they beat us like crazy with a wooden board. Everyday an accused man was presented on a kind of stage and given a thrashing by the men. I am sure someone died there, they did this every day.”

Letter from Johannes Dekker to the historian Volker Issmer, dated 7 January 1996.

[VOLKER ISSMER | DAS ARBEITSERZIEHUNGSLAGER
OHRBECK BEI OSNABRÜCK | 2000]

Roll-call Ground

The AEL prisoners had to stand for roll call between the shaft building and embankment. The grounds were originally nearly twice as wide since the tracks had been farther away



1

A reconnaissance aircraft of the British Royal Air Force took this aerial photograph of the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL) on the afternoon of 24th March 1945. Sunlight streams down on the roll-call ground between the embankment and the shaft building. The area is empty since most prisoners worked outside the camp during the day.

[LUFTBILDDATENBANK DR. CARLS GMBH]

Controlled and Terrorized

Early every morning the AEL prisoners had to line up in rows at the roll-call ground to be counted. This was how the camp personnel checked that all the prisoners were present. The roll call was repeated in the evening after the prisoners returned from ten or more hours of hard labor. Even sick, injured and dying inmates had to appear for roll call. This was one way in which prisoners were degraded and forced into obedience.

How the daily roll call was conducted depended strongly on the mood of the camp leader and guards. They frequently committed arbitrary acts of violence against the prisoners. As a deterrent, guards made prisoners watch them execute corporal punishment. The prisoners were intimidated by the violence and tried not to draw attention to themselves. The guards would count the prisoners for hours if someone seemed to be missing. Many prisoners fell ill and died as a consequence of the endless roll calls, especially during the cold winter months.



„The first time I encountered the KZ up there was when the town said that a KZ had been built nearby. [...] My mother said that we were going to go there and take a look. [...] Then we walked up there. My mother threw a few packets of cigarettes over the fence. A young soldier appeared suddenly and said: “Young lady, leave here immediately or else you’ll find yourself in here tomorrow.” When I saw those people in there, that’s when I realized for first time what was going on there.“

Horst Dransmann

[PROJEKT „KINDER VON DAMALS“ | STICHTING NATIONAAL MONUMENT KAMP AMERSFOORT | 2014]

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This photograph was taken around 1950 from what is today the parking lot. The boiler house that was converted into factory apartments changed very little between 1945 and 1950. In the background on the right, the stable, as well as the gable of the shaft building above the roof, are visible.

[VOLKER ISSMER | DAS ARBEITSERZIEHUNGS-LAGER OHRBECK BEI OSNABRÜCK | 2000]

Boiler House

Four factory worker families lived in the former boiler house in 1944 and 1945. They had a view of the camp grounds from the upper floor and garden.

Seen by All

The Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL) was known to the people in the area. The camp was fenced in by barbed wire and lit up at night. Anyone passing by the Augustaschacht on the road or on the Hütten Rail had a clear view of the grounds. The residents of the boiler house could see and hear the prisoners, the guards and the camp leader.

Children and adults from the area saw prisoners being struck or beaten to death. Even the forced laborers from the two large camps at the Hüggeel witnessed the prisoners’ suffering. The head of the AEL resided for a time at a farm not far from the camp. Some of the guards came from neighboring villages.

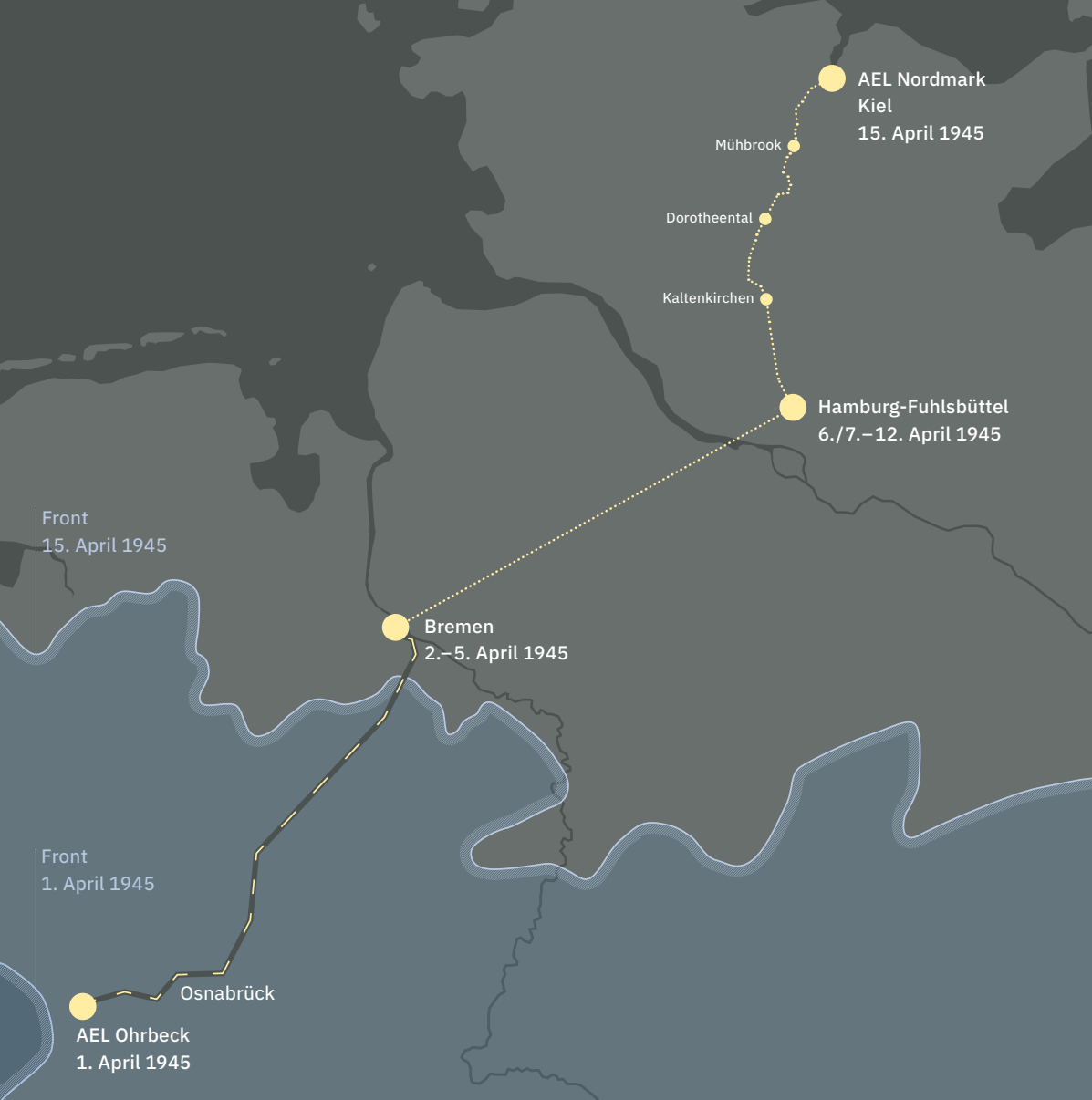
The population reacted in different ways to the AEL. Some people met the prisoners with disdain and hostility, others were scared. A few showed pity and tried to help them, although this was forbidden.



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Horst Dransmann (1944) was nine years old when the Gestapo established the Ohrbeck labor education camp. At that time most of the people in Holzhausen did not distinguish between KZ (concentration camp) and AZ (labor discipline camp).

[HORST DRANSMANN]



Route that the prisoners took from the Ohrbeck AEL to Kiel-Russee. Many prisoners died during transport, on the forced march and in the Nordmark AEL.

Railroad Embankment

The AEL prisoners were also taken by train to the forced labor worksite in the Klöckner factory. They were crowded into freight cars to keep them separate from the other passengers.



Deportation and Death

Shortly before Osnabrück was occupied by the British military, the camp leader received the order to close the Ohrbeck labor education camp (AEL). On 1 April 1945 the camp staff transported a group of prisoners on a train from the Klöckner factory to the Gestapo offices in Bremen. The remaining prisoners were left behind unguarded and without food.

The Gestapo brought the prisoners from Bremen to the police prison in Hamburg-Fuhlsbüttel. Afterwards they were forced to walk more than 100 kilometers, pushed on by the SS men until they reached the Nordmark AEL in Kiel-Russee. They were held there until the British soldiers liberated them on 4 May 1945.

The prisoners who stayed behind in the Ohrbeck camp were sick and weak. A few were helped by families from the surrounding area. People continued to die from the consequences of their imprisonment during the first days of April 1945.

Hendrik Willem Gaertman

*You are not a number
 You are a human being
 You were my father
 You remain my father
 Your bravery
 Your courage
 Your resistance to injustice
 lives in my heart
 You are not a number to forget
 You are a story to remember
 A story to retell
 Your bravery
 Your courage
 Your resistance in fearful times
 Must not be forgotten
 What happened then
 happens again
 People with bravery and courage
 and with their heart in the right place, yield hope.*

The poem about Hendrik Willem Gaertman was written by Pastor Marinus van den Berg in 2018. Prior to this, Gaertman's son had told van den Berg his family's story. The bereaved suffered deeply from the loss of their father who had been a resistance fighter and helped many people.

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How to Go On Living?

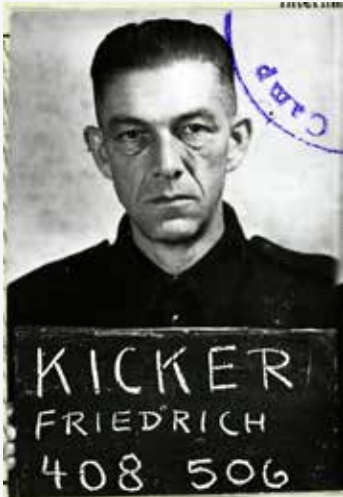
The survivors of the AEL Ohrbeck remained in poor health after the war. Their physical and mental wounds continued to afflict them and their families for the rest of their lives. In 1945, a large percentage of the survivors were between the ages of 20 and 25. Many stressed how important it was to continue living as if nothing had happened to them; helping rebuild societies that had been destroyed in the war, finding work and starting a family were some of the ways they could do this.

Their futures were hindered further by difficulties other than poor health. In their home countries, former forced laborers were often accused of having assisted the enemy by working in Germany during the war. The terrible things they had experienced in the AEL Ohrbeck did not elicit much attention. If survivors received any material compensation at all for their forced labor, either from German companies or from reunified Germany, then it was not until much later.

1 The Dutchman Hendrik Willem Gaertman wore prisoner tag 1312. Following an accident and mistreatment, he died on 8 January 1945 in the AEL Ohrbeck. A friend smuggled the tag out of the camp and gave it to his widow. The family hung the tag on a crucifix.

2 The photo shows Hendrik Willem Gaertman with his son of the same name around 1941.

[WWW.HENDRIKWILLEMGAERTMAN.COM]



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The Camp Leader on Trial

The only trial for a crime committed in the Ohrbeck labor education camp was held in the Osnabrück City Hall on 28 September 1948. Tried before a British military court, the former camp leader Friedrich Kicker was accused of murdering a Soviet prisoner.

Just three former guards were called as witnesses. Former inmates were not summoned by the court. Johannes Lagemann and Friedrich Kühn described how, following a telephone call, Kicker fired two shots to kill the 23-year-old Paul Iwanow. Kicker claimed before the court that he was merely carrying out an order that had been issued to him through his supervisor by telephone.

The court did not exonerate him of responsibility for the act, despite his alleging he was acting on an order. He was sentenced to eight years in prison for committing a war crime. A clemency plea was granted in 1950 and his sentence was reduced to five years. Kicker's sentence was commuted for good conduct and he was released from prison in 1951.



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This sign hung on a barrier at the entrance to the Augustaschacht. The mine building was bricked up for security reasons around 1970. The grounds were also placed off-limits. The building was made accessible again after the memorial association bought it in 2002.

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Friedrich Kicker as an internee. The photo was probably taken in June 1948, shortly before his release from the Staumühle internment camp in the Paderborn district.

[NIEDERSÄCHSISCHES LANDESARCHIV | STANDORT OSNABRÜCK]

[GEDENKSTÄTTEN GESTAPOKELLER UND AUGUSTASCHACHT]

Murder Without Consequences

The latrine was a dangerous place for the AEL prisoners. Sometimes prisoners had to go there at night to empty the buckets from the sleeping quarters. They encountered guards there and were defenseless against their brutality.

On the evening of 31 July 1944, guards noticed that the Soviet inmate Paul Iwanow was missing. They woke up the camp leader Friedrich Kicker, who suspected that Iwanow was in the latrine. He fired his gun into the pit and Iwanow came out and surrendered. Kicker killed him with two shots. His corpse was left next to the latrine for several days as a deterrent. In 1948, a British military court in Osnabrück sentenced Kicker to eight years in prison for homicide. He was granted an early release in 1951.

Many of the 100 or more deaths in the Ohrbeck AEL were the result of violence and abuse. Yet the trial against Kicker was the only one to address a crime committed there. All the other murders and abuse went unpunished.

Three Decades of Silence

Many people in the region of Osnabrück had seen or heard about the AEL Ohrbeck. As early as May 1945 the Osnabrück district chief administrator began collecting accounts of prisoner abuse. Newspapers reported on the trial against the camp leader in Osnabrück that took place in 1948. Other than this, for decades little was spoken about the AEL and the men imprisoned there.

Initial efforts to research the camp history led to the publication of a brochure in 1982. In the early 1990s, Volker Issmer conducted an extensive inquiry into the history of the labor education camp. His detailed documentation was published in 2000.

A monument was erected above the Augustaschacht in 1998 as a first acknowledgment of the people who died in the camp. Two years later, citizens from the city and district of Osnabrück founded the association that opened the Augustaschacht memorial in 2008.