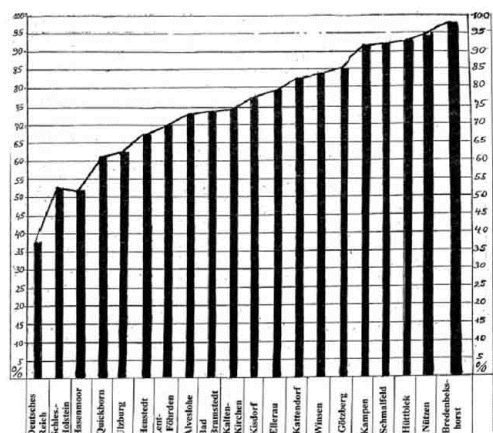


The Former Concentration Camp of Kaltenkirchen

1. Early beginnings of National Socialism in the region of Kaltenkirchen:



In 1932 in the region of Kaltenkirchen the NSDAP (Nazi Party) got 78.7 % of the votes in the parliamentary election. By 1933 the south of Schleswig-Holstein was a Nazi stronghold. The Nazi's nationalistic and racist ideology dominated public life.

Churches, schools and the regional press all contributed to the establishment of the Nazi ideas in the minds of the people, especially the youth (see first page in the exhibition's catalogue "Number of Votes for the NSDAP

for the *Reichstag* (parliament) at the Elections of 31.7.1932").

There was public broadcasting of Hitler's speeches, numerous posters and leaflets in the streets, and songs praising violence and 'German superiority' over other nations sung at all kinds of meetings. Even folklore events such as national holidays, 'German evenings', and 'German dancing' took on a very nationalistic tone. All this made the Nazi ideology and influence present everywhere in daily life.

People who played an important role in the church and community life such as teachers and priests spoke out in support of the Nazi Party. The priest Ernst Syzmanowski from Kaltenkirchen is an example. The support of these influential people made the Nazi Party acceptable and appear trustworthy to the community (see a picture of Ernst Syzmanowski on page 3 of the catalogue).



2. Period from 1933 - 1941

When the Nazi Party seized power in 1933 they swept away all the democratic structures in Germany, including those in the region of Kaltenkirchen. All public institutions that had not previously been directed to follow the Nazi ideology were now required to do so.

Soon the Nazis established concentration camps in Schleswig-Holstein where they illegally imprisoned members of the Communist party, the Social Democratic Party, and any others who were opposed to them. At the same time the civil rights of the Jewish citizens were drastically restricted.

All this happened with the approval and active involvement of a large majority of the inhabitants of the region.

What was said about another small concentration camp in the Rhineland also applies to the situation in Schleswig-Holstein and elsewhere in the German Reich: "Without the commonplace nature of camps such as Osthofen, without the process by which the majority grew accustomed to discrimination and the marginalisation and the destruction of undesirables, because of places like this in the middle of their ordinary everyday world, in the middle of German's everyday lives, Auschwitz would never have happened." (quotation from *Wolfgang Benz of the Centre for Anti-Semitic Research at the Technical University of Berlin about Osthofen Concentration Camp 1933/34*).

The Church, schools and the press spread propaganda to convince people of the necessity of acquiring more land to provide for German needs. They encouraged readiness for the 'big fight', which prepared the path leading to war.

3. Military airport Kaltenkirchen



As early as 1935 the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) became interested in the fields near Kaltenkirchen and in 1938 they began to build an airport. From 1940 prisoners of war and forced labourers were a common sight in all the communities near Kaltenkirchen.

In 1944 a new aircraft -- the first jet -- had been built and the airstrips for takeoff and landing had to be extended. The Luftwaffe was in need of cheap labour, and the SS delivered it: prisoners of the concentration camp *Neuengamme* in the south of Hamburg (see picture of Royal Air force of 25.12.1944, page 9 of catalogue).

4. The camp



The concentration camp of Kaltenkirchen came into existence in late summer 1944. In the beginning the system of concentration camps followed the idea of elimination of political opponents. But during the war there was a shortage of working people; therefore, they needed the camps as a reservoir of cheap workers. The main objective was to 'use people till they died of bad conditions'.

More than 550 prisoners of the concentration camp *Neuengamme* were used for extending the airstrip in Kaltenkirchen. The prisoners came from all European

countries, but most of them came from the Soviet Union, Poland and France. The administration of the camp was the responsibility of two or three SS men. Their commands had to be carried out by some of the prisoners themselves who had the status of auxiliary helpers.

The guard consisted of 85 elderly German soldiers of the air force who could no longer fight at the front (see picture of *Otto Freyer, Commander of the camp, and of Johannes Wehres, appointed 'eldest prisoner of camp', page 13 of catalogue*).

Many of the prisoners died. They came to the camp in poor condition and were expected to die soon. But their labour was needed and the Nazis took advantage of it before they died. Whenever the SS needed new fresh labourers they had just to ask for more prisoners of Neuengamme who were right at hand.

5. Daily life in camp

The characteristics of daily life in camp were bad hygiene, no or insufficient medical treatment, morning and evening roll call that sometimes lasted for hours in cold damp weather, and poor dirty clothing. There were all kinds of humiliations and physical punishments, and food was often withheld. Every day the prisoners had to walk all the way to the airstrips where they had to do physical labour under the supervision of local companies. Many prisoners died due to these poor conditions.



Camp Prisoners in very bad health and mental condition were called '*Muselmänner*', men who are doomed to die very soon. They had lost all their hope and power of resistance. They were either starved to death – mere skeletons – or got bloated by oedema and were covered by abscesses or ulcers (see picture of prisoners at *Wöbbelin, page 18*).

6. Resistance

Some prisoners tried to resist the will of the SS to eliminate them. Examples of resistance were the secret manual of the *Lagerschreiber* Jaskiewicz and the hidden objects that the carpenter Richard Tackx, who was in charge of burying the corpses, put in the graves to identify the dead.

Some prisoners tried to flee, but only a few were successful. The successful escapes were possible due to the help of 3 women who lived on the opposite side of the road and who managed to give shelter and food to the refugees.

7. The dead



The daily load of corpses was transported each morning. The French prisoner Richard Tackx was in charge for this kind of work. Tackx was a carpenter and he had to make the coffins (see *picture of the 3 refugees page 19*).

A wheelbarrow with two wheels was used for the transportation of the corpses. The clothes of the dead had been taken away before. At the burial place the naked bodies were just thrown into a hole. Occasionally French prisoners were buried in a coffin. As to the corpses of Russian and Polish prisoners they were referred to as: "Away with the dirt!"

Burial sites must have been at several places, because there were long, middle and short transportations. Only the burial site at Moorkaten is known today and it has been turned into a memorial site (see *picture of exhumation in 1951, page 21*).

8. Evacuation of the camp

On April 16th, 1945, after massive bombings by the Allies, the camp was evacuated. The prisoners were transported by the AKN (railway company) to the camp of Wöbbelin in Mecklenburg.

Conditions in Wöbbelin were even more miserable than in Kaltenkirchen. "In this camp it was a daily fight for survival. Prisoners were mad from hunger" wrote a former prisoner B. Krajewski from Kaltenkirchen (see *picture of Wöbbelin camp, page 23*).



9. After the war



Until the end of the sixties the camp barracks where the former prisoners had lived were used for housing German refugees from the East. In the seventies all relics of the former camp were thoroughly demolished. At the former camp site now grew a "forest of forgetting".

The inhabitants of the region -- who had known of the existence of the camp -- expelled the memory of the camp from their mind. The memory of the camp and of everything that had made it possible -- the ideology and the crime in which a whole nation had been involved -- was now dysfunctional for daily after-war-life.



The difficult task of remembering started only in 1975 when Dr. Gerhard Hoch began to do research on daily life in the region of Kaltenkirchen during the twelve years of Nazi dictatorship. He came upon the history of the former concentration camp, which had been up to then totally forgotten.

Today's existence of the memorial site of the former concentration camp Kaltenkirchen is entirely due to his efforts.

10. Memorial site

The club "Trägerverein der KZ-Gedenkstätte Kaltenkirchen in Springhirsch e.V." is very active in guiding visitors, working with students and organizing events about NS history on historical ground.



Uta Körby, chair of "Trägerverein der KZ-Gedenkstätte Kaltenkirchen e.V."

Website: <http://www.kz-kaltenkirchen.de>