

Weißer Hölle – Hölle Weißsee Forced Labor at 2.300 meters above sea level

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Abstract

Already during the Habsburg monarchy water power plants were an important topic. In 1913 the first plans were developed to build a water power plant in the Stubachtal. On the contrary 11 km² turned into a national park, in 1921 another 90 km² in the region of the Granatspitzgruppe. Parallel the Austrian Railway Company (ÖBB) built the first dam wall at the Taunermoossee which was finished in 1929.

After Austria's "Anschluss" to the German Reich the Stubachtal turned to be a huge construction area of the German Railway Company – Deutsche Reichsbahn. At the beginning many civilian forced laborers from Poland, Ukraine, France for example had to work here. With the beginning of World War II the first Prisoners of War were forced to work here. Through the whole valley wooden huts were built, miserable shelters for the laborers. The working conditions differed extremely depending on the fact where one was assigned for. The worst case was to be assigned to the area of the lake Weißsee in 2300 meters.

The camp Weißsee turned into a concentration camp in 1943 at was officially an auxiliary camp of Dachau. People from different nationalities were forced to work in this area. They had to do heaviest work. Three huts were used for shelter for 450 inmates surrounded by heavy barbed wire, so noone could flee. People suffered without any chance of getting out of hell on earth. In May 1945 American GIs freed the concentration camp Weißsee.

In Austria, as compared to Germany, the topic "forced labor (Zwangsarbeit) during the Nazi regime" was underrepresented in both scholarly research and in the dialogue taking place in the public sphere for decades. Although an increasing number of historians concentrated on the subject, it is still an unknown chapter of the Austrian past. While research has focused on forced labour in Austrian industry – for example the Hermann Göring Works in Upper Austria – other areas such as the province of Salzburg have been neglected until last year were a three year research project ended and a book was presented.

Though there was no major industry in the province of Salzburg, more than 22 % of all workers were forced laborers during the Nazi-period. In 1943 about 17,000 were foreign civilian forced laborers, concentration camp prisoners and Jews, POWs not included. In Salzburg water for producing energy was very interesting for the Nazis, so two big projects were started. At about 2,300 meters above sea level, dams were to be built to accumulate huge storage reservoirs at the areas of Mooserboden (Kaprun) and Weißsee (Uttendorf). Here the highest labor camp of the Third Reich was set up as an auxiliary camp of Dachau; more than 450 people worked there under terrible conditions.

Agriculture is another sector of economy in which thousands of forced laborers had to work. The drift to the cities of thousands of farm workers during the 1930 's caused huge labor shortage in farming. The situation got worse after the beginning of the Second World War, when young men who had worked as farm hands were drafted. In the province of Salzburg more than 3,500 forced laborers – the majority of whom were Polish and Ukrainian – were forced to work for Austrian farmers.

Soon after the Anschluss the Reichsgau Salzburg created already the first camps. The first victims were Jews and Gypsies who were not only working for big Austrian companies in the city of Salzburg but also in small towns in the middle of nowhere. In 1940 after the first military victories the Nazis added the prisoners of war to the working system and last but not least brought hundreds of thousands of foreign civilians into the Ostmark. To organise the use of laborers the Nazis created a widespread system of camps and a perfect way of distributing the workers. Although parts of this history are well known the research focused on the big concentration camps, such as Mauthausen, Gusen or Dachau but neglected the small auxiliary camps that existed. Even

many small villages had more than one hutted camp, the best example is the community Uttendorf in the province of Salzburg. [1]

The history of huge storage reservoirs did not start with the Nazi-period. Already during the Habsburg monarchy water power plants were an important topic. In 1913 the first plans were developed to build power plants in the Stubachtal. On the contrary 11 km² turned into a national park, in 1921 another 90 km² in the region of the Granatspitzgroup were declared protected. Nevertheless the Austrian Railway Company (ÖBB) built the first dam wall at the Tauernmoos lake which was finished in 1929. After Austria's Anschluss in 1938 the ÖBB were integrated into the German Railway Company the Deutsche Reichsbahn. The Stubachtal turned into a huge construction area. Already at that time many different nationalities worked for the construction companies in the Stubachtal. About 29 % of the workers were foreigners. Until 1941, mainly Italians (13%) as well as many workers from Eastern Europe worked here. Not all of them were forced laborers. With the beginning of the Second World War the first prisoners of war from Slovakia and Poland were forced to work for Austrian companies.

On 22 March 1942 more than 150 people from different nations worked to construct the power plants in the Stubachtal and create huge water storage reservoirs. From now on the number of foreign civilians as forced laborers from Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Yugoslavia, Italy, France and other nationalities increased continuously. Throughout the whole valley hutted camps were installed as the following figure shows.

Lager	Seehöhe	Einsatzort	Baracken	Jahr
Enzingerboden	1525m	Kraftwerk	1	Until 1942
Fellern	976 m	Wasserlauf	1	1939-1945
Scheiderau	1000 m	Kraftwerk	1	1939-1943
Tauernmoos	2100m	Wegarbeiten	3	1939-1945
Weißsee	2300 m	Stollenbau	3	1939-1945
Wiesen	849 m	Wasserlauf	1	From 1939
Wirtenbach	400 m	Kraftwerk	1	From 1939

Camps in the Stubachtal (SLA, BH-Zell am See, HB-Akte 1943, 456-1-1943)

Fig. 1: Hutted camps in the Stubachtal from 1938 to 1945

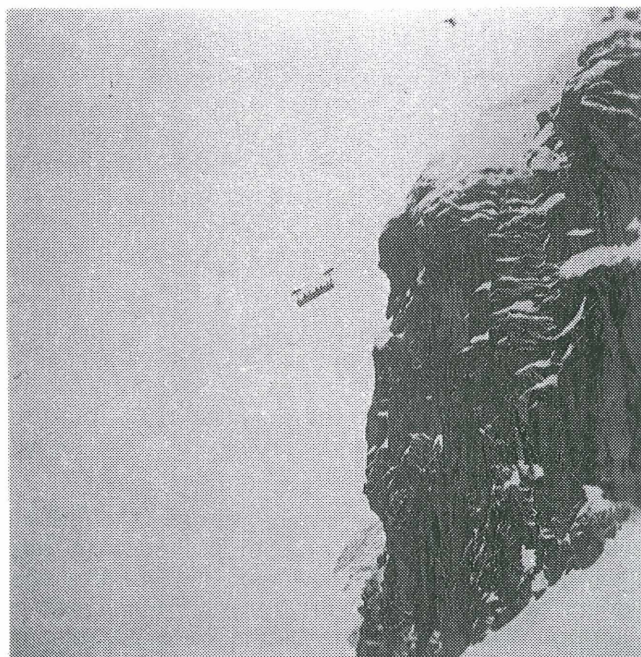


Fig. 2: Transportation of prisoners from Enzingerboden to Camp Weißsee

The working conditions for foreign civilian laborers differed extremely depending on the fact which camp they were assigned for. The worst case was to be sent to area of the lake Weißsee in 2,300 meters. In 1939 the first wooden hut was built to shelter about 100 forced laborers. The camp expanded in 1943, from spring on about 450 people had to work here for the Deutsche Reichsbahn. That time the *Camp Weißsee* turned officially into an auxiliary camp of the Dachau. Prisoners from the concentration camp Dachau were sent by train to Uttendorf under strict guarding. From there they nearly had to walk all the way from the train station up to the *Camp Weißsee*. Sometimes prisoners were transported by cableway from Enzingerboden to the top. The cableway had been constructed and allowed to transport material not people.



Fig. 2 and 3: Camp Weißsee [2]

People from different nationalities were forced to work as slaves. Three huts were used for shelter surrounded by heavy barbed wire, so no one could flee. The prisoners were closely guarded – though not as strict as in the valley - by members of the SS and the Wehrmacht.

The living conditions were the poorest. Up to 150 people in one building, three people in one bed or lying on the floor, only one heater. The prisoners had to wear the same thin prison clothing used in Dachau much to cold for an area in the mountains. Temperatures below zero were normal in summer and the cold wind let it appear much colder. Sometimes if temperatures were too low the guards allowed the prisoners to put a piece of newspaper underneath their jacket, not more.

Every morning the working day started before sunrise with a roll-call at five o'clock. After "breakfast" – bread and watered coffee – the prisoners marched 30 minutes before they could start working. They had to form groups of 10 to 15 workers lead by a German foreman who was responsible to keep work going and punished workers if they were to slow. Some of them had to build a gallery to the province of Tyrol, others worked in a nearby quarry. Ironically the 754 meter long gallery was finished in time but was never used but shut down in the 1950's. The majority of the prisoners were forced to work in the quarry were they had to carry stones heavier than themselves. At noon they could have an hour break but many times it was that cold that they first dug holes to be protected from the strong winds. The day ended after sunset. Some working days lasted 15 hours. The working conditions brought the prisoners to their physical limits and caused a great strain and distress. An eye witness living in the Rudolfshütte remembered that every day some dead bodies were carried back. [3]

Martin Wolff, a prisoner of *Camp Weißsee* described their situation as follows:

In the quarry hell is loose. Starvation, ice and snow, many prisoners break down exhausted. Every day we have got some dead because whoever breaks down is too weak to get back up and freezes to death. Others, physically tortured, try to escape. The guarding here in the mountains is not as strong but you have got no chance to find a way into freedom through ice and snow in the mountains. The refugees would die in this desert of ice and snow, that is clear to me. [4]

How many people died in total could not be clarified but people suffered without any chance to get out of this hell on earth. In May 1945 American GIs freed the concentration camp.

It took until 2005 that the huge amount of work of hundreds of people kept as prisoners and mistreated in the worst way in the *Camp Weißsee* were honoured by the Austrian Railway Company the ÖBB and the by the Government of the province of Salzburg.

References

- [1] Oskar Dohle/ Nicole Slupetzky: Arbeiter für den Endsieg. Zwangsarbeit im Reichsgau Salzburg 1939-1945. Wien: Böhlau, 2004.
- [2] A post card showing the buildings after WW II, used as shelter for hikers and alpinists.
- [3] Dohle, Slupetzky, Arbeiter für den Endsieg, S. 212-221. Interview with Klaus Milster.
- [4] Martin Wolff: 12 Jahre Nacht – Stationen eines Lebensweges.- o.O., o.J., S. 67-77.

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