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RELATIONS OF THE KL AUSCHWITZ STAFF WITH THE CIVILIANS OF OŚWIĘCIM AND THE SURROUNDING AREA IN THE YEARS 1940–1945

Summary. The town of Oświęcim (German: *Auschwitz*) is invariably associated with the concentration and extermination camp that operated in its vicinity in the years 1940–1945. For many people, it comes as a surprise that during the war, in the shadow of the camp, a small garrison town functioned quite normally. It was an unusual town, considering that its original inhabitants – Poles and Jews – had been displaced, and the army that was stationed here was the SS garrison from KL Auschwitz. This paper aims to present the mutual relations between the civilian population (the remaining Poles, the settlers from the Reich, and the *Volksdeutsche*) and the SS men. How did they interact with each other? What restrictions and rules applied to their mutual relations? Why were the SS men not allowed to visit certain establishments? And why did the commandants devote so much attention in their orders to women? I have tried to find answers to the above-mentioned questions (and many more) in this paper. As my source base, I have predominantly used the orders of the commandant's office (*Kommandanturbefehle*), the orders of the garrison commander (*Standortbefehle*), and the statements of civilians and former prisoners of the Auschwitz camp, all of which can be found in the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim.

Keywords: KL Auschwitz, SS, civilians, Oświęcim, World War II

In Polish and Jewish history, Oświęcim/Auschwitz is associated with some of the darkest events in the history of modern Europe. Between 1940 and 1945, a concentration and extermination camp operated near the town, where over a million people lost their lives.¹ Today, the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau

¹ It is estimated that in the years 1940–1945 between 1 and 1,5 million people died in the entire Auschwitz camp complex, of whom between 1 and 1,35 million were Jews.

is the most often visited museum institution in Poland, and the number of visitors from all over the world exceeds two million every year.² The vast majority of these people have never actually visited the town, nor the castle, market square or the synagogue, nor the famous Haberfeld Vodka Museum, nor the park Planty on the bank of the Soła river. Probably many of them do not even know that there is a town outside the museum. It was the same during World War II – apart from KL Auschwitz, there was also the town of Oświęcim, which lived its own life, and about which little is thought today. In wartime Oświęcim, the civilian population lived like people in any garrison town, with all the pros and cons of such a situation. It was not, however, a typical urban centre with a permanent military presence – the garrison consisted of SS members from the nearby concentration camp, and the indigenous population was mostly expelled. It is also worth noting that the case of Oświęcim perfectly fitted into two elements of the National Socialist (Nazi) ideology. It was here, in one place, that the extermination of the Jews was taking place in a simultaneous attempt to Germanise the East and implement the idea of *Lebensraum*.³

This text attempts to show the relations between the SS staff and the civilian population of Oświęcim and its surroundings in the years 1940–1945. The first part of the article presents a short history of the town and the circumstances in which the camp was established. Next, the paper characterises groups of the civilian population that the SS men from KL Auschwitz came into contact with while on duty and in their free time. The groups in question were Poles, *Reichsdeutsche* and *Volksdeutsche*, and civilian workers and women belonging to the above-mentioned spheres. The text is based predominantly on documents from the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.⁴ The most important sources used by the author were the orders of the commandant's office

² This is a number more than fifty times greater than the population of the town.

³ S. STEINBACHER, *Auschwitz, A History*, Munich 2004, p. 3.

⁴ At this point, it should be noted that the above-mentioned documents certainly do not constitute all of the sources in which information about the SS men's contacts with civilians can be found. This is mainly because we currently have only about seven percent of the original records that were created during the existence of the camp. Most of the documents were destroyed or taken to the West by the SS men. A large part of the documents fell into the hands of the Russians and to this day are kept in the Moscow archives. Some documents (for instance, letters from the perpetrators to their families) probably remain in the possession of the families or were destroyed long ago.

(*Kommandanturbefehle*) and the orders of the garrison commander (garrison orders, *Standortbefehle*). A lot of interesting information was found in the memoirs and statements of former prisoners, civilian workers employed by companies involved in the development of the camp, and young women sent by the *Arbeitsamt* to work as domestic workers for SS families. It was also worth looking into the personal files of the SS men, as they also proved to be a good source of information for this text. The introductory part, the history of Oświęcim, was based on several publications describing the history of the town, its inhabitants, and the camp.⁵

Oświęcim (German: *Auschwitz*⁶) was founded under German law in 1270, and within thirty years had become an important town in the eastern part of the Duchy of Cieszyn (Polish: *Księstwo Cieszyńskie*, German: *Herzogtum Teschen*). Thanks to the profits gained from the staple right for salt and lead, and the right to collect tolls from bridges on the Vistula and the Soła river, it was able to develop economically at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century. In 1327, it was incorporated into the German Reich.⁷ In 1457, Oświęcim returned to Poland and remained under Polish rule until the first Partition of Poland in 1772, when it was annexed by the Habsburg Empire and remained part of it until 1918.⁸ After the end of World War I, it was incorporated into the territory of the Second Polish Republic.

After its incorporation into the Kraków Voivodship (1564), Oświęcim underwent complete Polonisation. In the mid-15th century, Jews began to settle in the town, contributing to the development of a local enterprising middle class.⁹ One of the best-known industrialists in Oświęcim was Jakob Habermeld, founder of a distillery that from 1804 produced high quality vodkas and liqueurs.¹⁰ Despite historic upheavals and the fact that the town passed under different rules several times, the Jewish community in Oświęcim grew over the years, and by the interwar period the Jewish population exceeded the Polish population by far. At the brink of the outbreak of World War II, more than seven thousand

⁵ All titles are listed in the bibliography published at the end of the paper.

⁶ The names Oświęcim and Auschwitz will be used interchangeably in the text.

⁷ D. DWORK, R.J. VAN PELT, *Auschwitz. Historia miasta i obozu*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 27–28.

⁸ S. STEINBACHER, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁹ D. DWORK, R.J. VAN PELT, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁰ There is now a Jakob Habermeld Vodka Museum in Oświęcim and a shop selling products based on the historical recipe.

Jews lived in Oświęcim (out of a population of 12 000).¹¹ As for the German minority in Oświęcim, it was very small at the time. According to the census of December 1931, only three per cent of the local population identified themselves as German. There were no German schools, socio-cultural organisations, churches, or newspapers published in German – the influence of this particular minority on life and the town's politics was minimal.¹²

World War II was felt in Oświęcim as early as 1 September 1939. At dawn, Luftwaffe planes appeared over the town and bombed the military barracks and buildings on Kościelna Street. On the third of September, in the village of Rajsko, Polish soldiers clashed with the Germans. The retreating Poles blew up the bridge over the Soła river, which connected two parts of the town located on the left and right banks of the river.¹³ However, the efforts of the Poles were futile – on 4 September the Wehrmacht had captured and occupied Oświęcim, a week later the market square was renamed Adolf-Hitler-Platz, and the town was renamed Auschwitz.¹⁴ The warfare caused many residents to leave the town, heading for the East. However, when it became clear that the Germans were also heading in that direction, and in addition, when the Soviets attacked Poland on 17 September, many of the inhabitants of Oświęcim returned to their homes.¹⁵

When the local warfare was concluded and the authorities in Berlin had carved up the occupied Polish state, Oświęcim found itself among the territories formally incorporated into the Reich. Unlike territories located to the west of the town or in the *Wartheland* (Polish: *Kraj Warty*), Auschwitz was defined as “difficult to Germanise.” This was because the majority of the inhabitants of the town and the surrounding area were Poles and Jews. For Auschwitz to become “truly German” it first had to be cleansed of “racially undesirable elements.”¹⁶ Measures to achieve this objective were taken as early as September 1939, and their pace and intensity were sped up by the decision to establish a concentration camp in the area.

¹¹ L. FILIP, *Żydzi w Oświęcimiu 1918–1941*, Oświęcim 2003, p. 40.

¹² S. STEINBACHER, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹³ L. FILIP, *op. cit.*, pp. 151–152.

¹⁴ S. STEINBACHER, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁵ L. FILIP, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

¹⁶ S. STEINBACHER, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–20.



Fig. 1. SS men on the bridge in Oświęcim
(Source: AABSM photographic collection, negative No. 21983/71)

The idea of establishing a concentration camp in the vicinity of Auschwitz was debated by SS and SD representatives as early as the beginning of 1940. Until April, the area was visited several times and the advantages and disadvantages of this location were discussed. Eventually, following the completion of negotiations with the Wehrmacht, which administered the selected site, the former Polish artillery barracks (the same barracks that had been bombed in September 1939) were taken over.¹⁷ Thus, a few brick-built blocks became the nucleus of the future Auschwitz concentration camp. The first SS men arrived at the site on 30th April 1940. Among them was the first camp commandant, Rudolf Höss (who was officially appointed on 4th May 1940). On 20th May the first prisoners – thirty criminals from Sachsenhausen, who were to serve as *Kapos* and block elders – arrived in Oświęcim along with more SS men.¹⁸ The “official” opening

¹⁷ The history of the barracks dates back to the time of the Partitions of Poland when Oświęcim was a border town, a transit place for numerous economic migrants. The buildings of the future barracks, and later of the Auschwitz camp, were initially intended for those awaiting permission to emigrate from Galicia, D. DWORK, R.J. VAN PELT, *op. cit.* p. 59.

¹⁸ D. CZECH, *Kalendarium wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz*, Oświęcim 1992, pp. 9–12.

date of KL Auschwitz was established as 14th June 1940 – the day of the arrival of 728 prisoners from the so-called first Tarnów transport.

It is estimated that in the period from April 1940 to January 1945 over eight thousand SS men staffed KL Auschwitz. They were both members of the camp administration and the security guard corps (*SS-Totenkopfverbände*, *SS-Totenkopfstandarte*). In May 1940, about 300 SS men served as the personnel of KL Auschwitz. However, in January 1945, there were over 4400 SS men in the entire Auschwitz camp complex.¹⁹ The Auschwitz Garrison consisted of the town of Oświęcim, the camp area and, until 18th January 1941, the village of Neuberun (*Nowy Bieruń*).²⁰

We could say that from May 1940, Oświęcim became a *sui generis* garrison town (whose garrison consisted of SS men from the nearby concentration camp), with all the advantages and disadvantages of this situation. Until April 1941, the SS men were not allowed to visit the nearby urban centre. In this way, Commandant Höss wanted to “shield” his men from contacts with the Jews, who constituted over 50 percent of the town’s population. An order from the commandant’s office dated 18th April 1941 states that Auschwitz had become a *judenrein* town (a town free of Jews) and that SS men were thus allowed to visit it.²¹ At this point it is worth noting that the commandant’s aim was to completely isolate his subordinates from any contact with the Jewish population.²²

¹⁹ Data after: SS garrison, <http://www.auschwitz.org/historia/zaloga-ss/> (access: 20 I 2021). Statistical data on concentration camp staff: A. LASIK, *Sztafety Ochronne w systemie niemieckich obozów koncentracyjnych*, Oświęcim 2007, p. 543.

²⁰ Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (hereinafter: AABSM), Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 8/41 of 18 XII 1941.

²¹ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 5/41 of 18 IV 1941.

²² From September 1939 onwards, Oświęcim residents of Jewish descent were systematically and effectively pushed to the margins of society. At the end of September, the Great Synagogue was burned down. On 26th February 1941, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler ordered the deportation of all Jews from Oświęcim and the surrounding area. The deportation action began on 9th March 1941. Between the 2nd and 7th April, around five thousand Jewish residents of Oświęcim were displaced. They were sent to the ghettos in Sosnowiec, Będzin, and Chrzanów. The fate of these people is easy to guess: between April 1942 and August 1943, the above-mentioned ghettos were liquidated and their inhabitants transported to Birkenau, where most of them died in the gas chambers. After the war, of the seven thousand original Jewish inhabitants, only a few returned to Oświęcim. Most of those survivors emigrated in the 1960s. The last Jewish resident of Oświęcim (officially admitting his origins), Szymon Kluger, died on 26th May 2000. More about the Jews of Oświęcim can be found in the already-cited book by L. Filip.

Bans on visiting the town or restaurants were commonplace. Moreover, Höss forbade the SS men to greet Jews or even to accept greetings from them.²³

The Polish population was also resettled. However, these evictions were not as drastic and systematic as in the case of the Jews. For obvious reasons, Poles living in the immediate vicinity of the former Polish Army barracks (and later also those who lived near the Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp established in the village of Brzezinka) had to leave their homes. Many of these buildings were given to the SS men and their families as their new quarters. The Poles, at least in theory, had the right to appeal against the ordered evictions. At certain office hours, they had the possibility to speak to Commandant Höss or the head of the political department (the camp's Gestapo) SS-Untersturmführer Maximilian Grabner.²⁴

The displacement of a part of the Polish population and all the Jews meant that Auschwitz and the surrounding area was ready for Germanisation. Apart from the SS men and their families, civilians from the Reich and beyond began to arrive in the town.²⁵ Many farms which had previously belonged to Poles were occupied by ethnic Germans brought from the East (i.e., from the USSR and from the Soviet sphere of influence in the Balkans).²⁶ Representatives of the Main Trustee Office for the East (*Haupttreuhandstelle Ost*) arrived in the town and took over the management of former Jewish enterprises.²⁷ Due to the expansion of the camp and the establishment of a synthetic rubber factory under the auspices of I.G. Farben (Buna), many architects (the most famous being Hans Stosberg),²⁸ specialists employed by the chemical industry giant, and ordinary

²³ AABSM, Kommandantursonderbefehle, special order of 7 I 1941.

²⁴ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 4/40 of 22 VI 1940. That was, at least, the theory. In reality, Polish residents of Oświęcim whose houses were attractive to the SS had no choice but to relinquish their property. Many times the evictions took place in brutal and unexpected ways. D. CZECH, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²⁵ Under agreements made between Berlin and Moscow, Stalin consented that the ethnically German population, which as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact found itself in the Soviet zone, could emigrate to areas that belonged to the Third Reich. The agreement applied not only to the territory of the USSR but also to other areas that remained in the Soviet sphere of influence.

²⁶ AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 85, J. Krawczyk, p. 131.

²⁷ For example, the famous Haberfeld's Vodka and Liquor Factory was taken over by German National Herr Handelsmann, L. FILIP, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

²⁸ Civilian architects competed for influence over the redevelopment of Oświęcim with architects from the *Zentralbauleitung der Waffen-SS und Polizei* (the Central Building Office of the Waffen SS and Police). Ultimately, the spheres of influence were divided in the following manner: civilian

foremen and workers came to Oświęcim. Many of them brought their families to Auschwitz.²⁹ In addition, a group of Poles declared German national origin by signing the so-called *Volksliste*.³⁰ In summary, the SS men from the Auschwitz garrison were supposed to have contacts with the following groups of the civilians: their own families living in the camp area, the remaining non-displaced civilian population (mainly of Polish origin), *Volksdeutsche*, *Reichsdeutsche* (mainly civilian workers who were sent to “Germanize the East”), and women from SS auxiliary services (secretaries, telephone operators, and SS supervisors).³¹

The residents of Oświęcim who were not evicted and the settlers arriving in the town soon had the opportunity to see the first SS men. In early June 1940, the first patrols, consisting of a non-commissioned officer and two privates, appeared in the vicinity of the nascent camp and the railway station.³² From this point on, interactions between members of the KL Auschwitz garrison and civilians from the nearby area became increasingly frequent and often had to be regulated by the camp commandant and the garrison commander. These regulations, contained in orders from the camp’s commandant and the garrison commander, principally concerned the SS men. However, in the camp

architects were to rebuild the town, while the SS architects were to develop the area around the camp and the camp itself.

²⁹ In the summer of 1943, the influx of people from the Reich to Oświęcim and the surrounding area increased considerably due to increasing Allied bombing. S. Steinbagger, p. 74. At that time, many SS men also tried to bring their families to Auschwitz from the Reich to ensure their safety. *Vide*: AABSM, personal file of the SS man Gerhard Effinger.

³⁰ The reasons for this decision cannot be stated unequivocally. Some of those who decided to sign the *Volksliste* were spouses of German nationals and did not want to leave their partners. Others, because of their ancestral heritage felt themselves to be Germans and wanted to belong to the German nation. There were cases of people who were left with no choice: either they would sign the *Volksliste* or they would be sent to a concentration camp (signing the *Volksliste* could be a way to be released from the camp, of course, only in the case of prisoners who met the relevant racial criteria and had the right “origin”). A significant number of the *Volksdeutsche* pinned their hopes of social advancement and career on signing the list. These are only the most popular reasons for signing the *Volksliste*, but each case should be considered individually.

³¹ SS supervisors (German: *SS-Aufseherinnen*) were not members of this formation. Only men could serve in the organisation commanded by Heinrich Himmler. Female supervisors, as well as telephonists and stenographers, belonged to the SS auxiliary service (*SS-Gefolge*). They signed a contract with the SS and were subject to SS jurisdiction, but they did not have the status of soldiers or SS service ranks.

³² AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 1/40 of 6 VI 1940.

and the surrounding area (*Interessengebiet des KZ Auschwitz*), the law was made by the commandant and the civilian population entering the area had to obey him unconditionally.

According to Reichsführer SS Himmler, the members of his organisation were to constitute the elite of the new German nation. After the glorious victory over Bolshevism, they were supposed to have the honour of colonising and Germanising the East. The SS men were required not only to be “racially pure,” to be of good repute, and to obey their superiors unconditionally, but also to set an example to the ordinary citizens of the new Germanic empire. However, the new National Socialist “elite” misunderstood their task, as evidenced by the orders issued by the commanders of KL Auschwitz and even by Himmler himself. The most famous action, whose originator was the Reichsführer himself, was the “More kindness” campaign, which reminded the SS men of the need to adopt an impeccable moral attitude and well-mannered conduct in their relations with civilians.³³ The commandants, Rudolf Höss in particular, very often reminded their subordinates of seemingly basic rules of social conduct. The SS men were instructed on how to behave on trains³⁴ and were reminded how to greet women from the SS auxiliary service and members of the *Hitler-Jugend*.³⁵ It was also very important to show an “SS attitude” in their contacts with the civilian population.³⁶ As an example to the public, the SS men could not smoke in public spaces while in uniform³⁷ (the appearance and elements of which were strictly regulated)³⁸ or smoke while riding a bicycle, nor could they talk to civilians while on guard duty.³⁹ Drinking alcohol while on duty was also strictly

³³ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 8/42 of 29 IV 1942.

³⁴ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 15/42 of 20 VIII 1942.

³⁵ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 11/42 of 30 VI 1942.

³⁶ *Vide*: AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 5/44 of 8 III 1944.

³⁷ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 2/42 of 22 I 1942.

³⁸ The commandants of KL Auschwitz paid much attention to the appearance of their subordinates, as evidenced by the number of orders and admonitions concerning the proper way of wearing the uniform. The fullest description of what elements should be included in the statutory uniform and how the uniform should be worn can be found in the AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 4/42 of 26 II 1942. Information on the uniform can also be found in, *inter alia*: AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 7/41 of 30 IV 1941, order No. 10/41 of 28 V 1941 or order No. 1/42 of 3 I 1942.

³⁹ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 1/43 of 2 XII 1943.

forbidden.⁴⁰ There were numerous separate regulations included in the orders, which referred to contact with women. These issues will be discussed later in the text.

The first civilians that the SS men encountered in Oświęcim were members of their own families.⁴¹ Professional members of the SS had the option to live with their relatives in the houses confiscated from the evicted Poles, even in the immediate vicinity of the camp.⁴² Of course, the SS families were directly subordinated to the commandant's orders and by-laws and had to comply with them unconditionally. This meant, among other things, that they were banned from entering the camp without a special pass, even in the company of an SS member. The SS men's wives and fiancés were forbidden to meet with their companions in the camp canteen.⁴³ The only exception to this rule were the so-called *Kameradschaftsabend* (camaraderie evenings), to which the SS men could bring their female partners with the commandant's permission and on his invitation.⁴⁴ Another opportunity to spend time together were concerts of the prisoner orchestra organised by the commandants on sunny Sundays. These took place outside, on a special platform erected between Commandant Höss's villa and crematorium I in the main camp.⁴⁵ The SS men's families, like other members of the garrison, were not permitted to trade with or buy food from Poles. All purchases had to be made in *Haus 7* – a shop intended for the SS men and their families, which also contained a café for social gatherings.⁴⁶ This building (which, *nota bene*, still exists and is used as a private house) was off-limits to civilians other than the SS families.⁴⁷ Employees of *Haus 7* were civilians, especially young German and Polish women assigned to work there by the *Arbeitsamt* (Employment Office).⁴⁸

⁴⁰ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 3/44 of 28 I 1944.

⁴¹ SS men who were not allowed to live with their families had to obtain special permission for their relatives to visit from the commandant. AABSM, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 9/43 of 10 IV 1943.

⁴² For example, the house (still standing today) where Rapportführer Gerhardt Palitzsch and his family lived is less than 500 metres from the area of the former camp.

⁴³ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 4/40 of 22 VI 1940.

⁴⁴ The first such meeting in which the wives and fiancées of the SS men were allowed to participate took place on 16th August 1940, AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 6/40 of 16 VIII 1940.

⁴⁵ AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 55, J. Antonowicz, p. 120.

⁴⁶ AABSM, Sonderbefehl, special order No. 2/41 of 22 IV 1941.

⁴⁷ AABSM, Kommandantursonderbefehle, special order of 7 VIII 1941.

⁴⁸ AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 85, H. Szpakowa, p. 160.



Fig. 2. SS-Hauptscharführer Gerhardt Palitzsch (right) with his wife, daughter, a dog and an unknown Wehrmacht soldier. (Source: AABSM, negative No. 419)

The SS men were “exposed” to encounters with Polish women and men not only in *Haus 7* or in the canteen managed by the Kluge company⁴⁹ (the company was directed to expand the camp and employed Polish workers).⁵⁰ For this reason, already in the very first weeks of the camp’s existence, Rudolf Höss issued a series of guidelines on contacts with the Polish population, which were subsequently reiterated from time to time in the orders of the commandant’s office. At a time when Oświęcim was not yet *judenrein*, it was absolutely forbidden to visit any restaurants or other establishments in the town. Only the *Deutsches Haus* (later renamed *Haus der Waffen-SS*) situated near the railway station was available to the SS men.⁵¹ No conversations in Polish were permitted, except in official situations.⁵² The fact that this order was necessary meant that many

⁴⁹ AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 85, J. Krawczyk, p. 131. The SS men were very quickly prohibited from visiting this canteen by Commandant Höss due to the risk of being in contact with Poles.

⁵⁰ A very interesting topic is contact between Polish workers working on the expansion of the camp or in the camp itself and the camp’s prisoners. Often these workers were the only link to the outside world, providers of food and medicine, and sometimes helped in escapes.

⁵¹ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 1/40 of 6 VI 1940.

⁵² AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 6/40 of 16 VIII 1940.

of the SS men of the KL Auschwitz garrison came from territories that had recently been incorporated into the Reich, and Polish was their second (perhaps first?) language.⁵³ From April 1941, the SS men were allowed to visit the town and local establishments, but the list of these permitted premises was constantly changing. Apart from the *Deutsches Haus*, a casino and a cinema were usually accessible and “racially safe.” However, the ban on contact with Poles was still in force and its violation had to be immediately reported to the commandant.⁵⁴ At the same time, the SS men visiting Auschwitz in their free time were not exempt from the usual discipline. All excesses involving members of the staff were punished and made public. As early as 28th April 1941, the commandant warned that any further behaviour detrimental to the “image of the SS” would result in a ban on visiting the town. The SS men were required to leave the premises 15 minutes before curfew⁵⁵ (which was exactly the time it took to walk back to the barracks from the centre of Oświęcim). Höss’s warning worked, since the only time when the ban on visiting the town and restrictions concerning movement were in force in the camp was during the typhus epidemic.⁵⁶

When analysing the commandant’s office, garrison, and special orders, we see clearly that at the very beginning of the camp’s operation, its first commandant, Rudolf Höss, had to use his authority and power to work out rules for coexistence between his subordinates and the civilians living in Oświęcim and its surroundings, regardless of their national or ethnic origin. Such regulations also appeared in the later years of the camp’s existence, though with less intensity. One may wonder whether this was due to Höss’s character, as his ambition was to manage an ideal camp and to head a disciplined garrison, or whether it was a matter of the SS men and civilians getting used to their mutual presence

⁵³ Among the staff of KL Auschwitz served many SS men who knew Polish and Polish *Volksdeutsche*. The best known of them were Klaus Dylewski, Richard Perschel, Edward Lubusch or Artur Breitwieser.

⁵⁴ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 5/41 of 18 IV 1941.

⁵⁵ AABSM, Kommandantursonderbefehle, order of 28 IV 1941.

⁵⁶ AABSM, Sonderbefehle, special order No. 2/42 of 18 I 1942. The warning that worked for Auschwitz did not work for Stary Bieruń and Nowy Bieruń, to which only the SS men with families living in these towns were allowed to go. AABSM, Sonderbefehle, order No. 5/41 of 12 VIII 1941 and order No. 6/41 of 25 VIII 1941. A list of the establishments that the SS men were allowed to visit from April 1944 can be found in AABSM, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 11/44 of 4 IV 1944.

and developing a kind of *modus vivendi*. Or, perhaps, were there other problems for Höss's successors and a general decline in SS morale in the latter years of the camp's operation?

An interesting group of Poles with whom the SS men from the KL Auschwitz garrison had contact were the young Polish girls sent by the *Arbeitsamt* to work for SS families. In the collections of the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, there are several statements made after the war by women who were employed in this way as teenagers. Their accounts are sometimes surprising, especially in the context of the SS men known for their cruelty towards prisoners in the camp (for instance, Gerhardt Palitzsch, Otto Moll, or Wilhelm Emmerich). Many of them were indifferent to their domestic help, and sometimes even friendly.⁵⁷ There were cases when the girls received presents of food from them or other small gifts.⁵⁸ Behaviour towards the help and their own families clearly shows that many SS men separated their professional life (which was the service in the camp) from their private life. While the prisoners were for them a nameless crowd, even enemies who ought to be eliminated, a young girl known by name would become almost a member of their household, with individual traits and behaviour, being seen as more "human" to the SS men and their families.⁵⁹

Another group of people with whom the SS men came into daily contact were Polish and German civilian workers. They worked for the above-mentioned companies Kluge or I.G. Farben, but also in local workshops, bakeries, the power station, etc. As stated above, civilian workers were not allowed to shop in *Haus 7* or enter the SS canteens. The ban also worked the other way around – SS men were not allowed to go to places intended for civilians. Furthermore, civilian workers who wanted or needed to move around the camp area were required to have special passes, which were carefully monitored by the guards.⁶⁰ This

⁵⁷ For example, Helena Kłys could not believe that SS-Hauptscharführer Palitzsch was the terror of KL Auschwitz who executed prisoners and civilians in the courtyard of Block 11 with a smile. AABSM, *Zespół Oświadczenia*, vol. 82, H. Kłys, pp. 159–162.

⁵⁸ AABSM, *Zespół Oświadczenia*, vol. 85, Maria Gołębiowska, p. 5.

⁵⁹ However, this was not always the rule – for example, Lagerführer Karl Fritzsch was feared by both his wife and Emilia Żelazny, who worked in his house. AABSM, *Zespół Oświadczenia*, vol. 82, Emilia Żelazna, pp. 144–149.

⁶⁰ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 9/42 of 19 V 1942, the appearance of a security pass: Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 6/44 of 22 IV 1944.

applied to both Poles and Germans.⁶¹ It sometimes happened that Polish workers were employed in the camp itself and were under the direct authority of the SS men, and therefore had contact with prisoners.⁶² However, much more frequent encounters with civilians (from the SS men's point of view) took place outside the camp. Usually, the posts (SS sentry) escorted the prisoner labour groups (*Kommando*) to work outside the camp, and there, while on duty, they met civilian workers or foremen.⁶³ This kind of contact took place not only in the vicinity of the camp but also in the numerous branches of KL Auschwitz. It sometimes happened that the German foremen who supervised prisoner workers came into conflict with the SS men because they did not like the fact that the guards abused the prisoners.⁶⁴

The civilian population of Polish origin did not have (and rather did not want to have) the chance to make close acquaintances or socialise with the SS men from the KL Auschwitz garrison. There were, however, such situations – which we could call extreme, because they involved aiding a member of the SS, usually a *Volksdeutsch*, to defect. We know of two cases of SS men – Kohl and Stradomski (both from Lithuania) – who deserted in 1941 and 1943 respectively. Both of them benefited from the help of local people who were involved in helping KL Auschwitz prisoners. Unfortunately for Kohl, this attempt ended tragically, as he was soon caught and shot for desertion; Stradomski's fate is unknown.⁶⁵

The above-mentioned cases of contact between the SS men and Polish civilians are worth mentioning because they are the exception, rather than the rule. Any assistance to KL Auschwitz prisoners by civilians was usually severely punished, including by imprisonment in the camp.

The group of civilians who could enjoy special benefits from the camp's SS were, of course, the *Reichs-* and *Volksdeutsche*. Apart from formal restrictions – the division into civilian and military premises, the security passes necessary to move around the camp and its surroundings, and the holiday passes for the

⁶¹ As one holder of such a pass, Stanisław Krępa-Trojacki, recalls, it entitled him not only to stay in the camp but also to stay outside the house after curfew (from 7 pm to 6 am), AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 22, S. Krępa-Trojacki, p. 1.

⁶² AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 55, R. Grzybowski, pp. 125–128.

⁶³ For example, Wiesław Kielar mentions an SS man from Silesia who, together with a German foreman, fed the prisoners. W. KIELAR, *Anus mundi*, Oświęcim 2017, pp. 29–31.

⁶⁴ AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 55, Cz. Niżnik, p. 183.

⁶⁵ AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 22, J. Kajtoch, pp. 91–92.

SS men – getting into contact with this population group was completely permitted. There were even marriages between the SS men from the KL Auschwitz garrison and local women. A noteworthy example of one such union is Oberscharführer Baumgartner, commandant of the KL Auschwitz sub-camp in Libiąż. He married a Polish *Volksdeutsch*, who nurtured her ties to Polishness and forced her husband to treat the Polish prisoners well.⁶⁶ Of course, from the SS point of view, such a marriage could only be contracted if the candidate met all the requirements regarding race and origin set out in the marriage order of 31st December 1931.

I have singled out the last group of civilians rather artificially, but since many orders issued by the commandants and KL Auschwitz garrison commanders pay special attention to this group, I decided that it should be discussed separately. This group is women. The KL Auschwitz garrison included many young people, for whom such service was, on one hand, an escape from the front, and on the other, the reality in which they had to spend their youth. In Oświęcim, as in any garrison town, the civilian population had to bear with the presence of soldiers, with all the pros and cons of this state of affairs. In this context, particularly interesting seems to be Heinrich Himmler's order No. III/121/42g of 6 April 1942, addressed to all members of the SS and the police. It was entitled *Protection of Female Youth* and concerned the proper conduct of the SS men and policemen towards young female citizens of the Reich. In his own style, the Reichsführer SS spoke about the honour of young women and the protection they deserved. He admonished his men to be serious about their relationships with women. Himmler's whole argument was that the SS men and policemen should not abandon young, unmarried pregnant women whose children they fathered.⁶⁷ Also, marital infidelity, in which one party was an SS man and the other a wife of a Wehrmacht soldier stationed at the front, was condemned.⁶⁸

In the above-mentioned orders, one can repeatedly find information about the prohibition on bringing women into the camp and the canteens⁶⁹ (the same restrictions applied to the presence of children in the camp).⁷⁰ The SS men were

⁶⁶ AABSM, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 22, Z. Sz wajca, p. 50.

⁶⁷ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 8/42 of 29 IV 1942.

⁶⁸ AABSM, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 6/44 of 7 II 1944.

⁶⁹ Women were also not allowed to walk near the posts. AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 25/43 of 11 VI 1943.

⁷⁰ AABSM, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 25/43 of 1(2) VII 1943.

forbidden to visit female telephonists, stenographers, or SS female supervisors in their quarters in the *Stabsgebäude* or to invite them to their own quarters.⁷¹ It was necessary and essential to remind the SS men that the women employed by the SS ought to be addressed with respect, and the bare minimum was greeting the female supervisors, telephonists, and nurses.⁷²

On the other hand, there was a list of brothels in the Oświęcim area that the SS men were allowed to visit.⁷³ All the time, there was information in the orders about “houses of ill repute” where members of the KL Auschwitz garrison were not allowed to go because there was a “risk” that they would meet unsuitable women (for example, Polish women, prostitutes who had not been tested for STDs, etc.).⁷⁴ It is worth noting here that Himmler paid great attention to the health of his SS men,⁷⁵ which was a purely pragmatic attitude: not only could an SS man with an STD infect his wife, but would be unable to father children as a result of these infections. The problem of the growth of the Aryan race was one of the SS Reichsführer’s main concerns.

As can be seen, relationships between the SS men from the KL Auschwitz garrison and local civilians varied, depending on the different groups of the civilian population involved in such contact. However, there was one prohibition that applied at all times, no matter with whom the SS man in question spent his time: the obligation to keep official secrets, i.e., what happened behind the barbed wire of the entire Auschwitz camp complex.⁷⁶ Maintaining silence was particularly insisted upon in the case of the SS men who were directly involved in the extermination and those who worked in the camp administration. Interestingly, the penalties for failure to observe professional secrecy were by no means draconian. SS-Sturmmann Ludwig Damm experienced this when,

⁷¹ AABSM, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 3/44 of 19 I 1944; garrison order No. 19/44 of 14 VI 1944.

⁷² AABSM, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 17/44 of 9 VI 1944.

⁷³ AABSM, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 14/44 of 8 V 1944.

⁷⁴ For example, the ban on visiting houses at No. 5 and 7 Gartenstraße, AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 3/42 of 5 II 1942, and on Schlossstraße, Standortbefehle, garrison order No. 7/42 of 11 II 1942.

⁷⁵ Every SS man’s personal file contains a statement that in the case of contracting an STD through extramarital sexual contacts, he will submit to suitable treatment. For example, AABSM, personal file of Georg Engelschall, p. 2. Engelschall contracted an STD from a local girl while still serving in KL Dachau and following his transfer to Auschwitz had to return to Bavaria to explain the incident, p. 82.

⁷⁶ AABSM, Kommandanturbefehle, order No. 2/43 of 20 XII 1943.

while on leave in December 1942, he discussed his work and the “Jewish matter” with members of the NSDAP and Wehrmacht soldiers. He received only a reprimand.⁷⁷

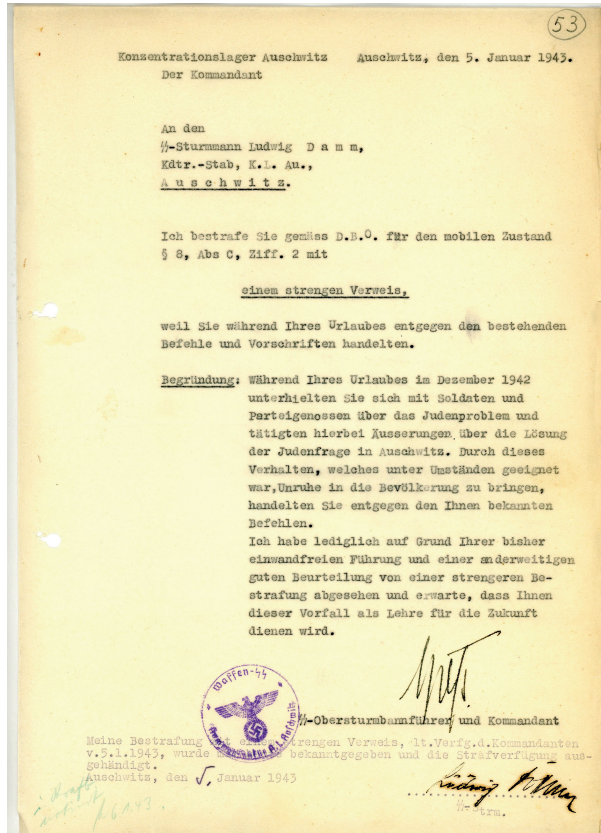


Fig. 3. Information about the reprimand given to SS-Sturmann L. Damm for talking to outsiders about his work in KL Auschwitz (Source: AABSM, SS men's personal files: Ludwig Damm, case file D-Aul-1/43)

The non-indigenous civilians began to leave Oświęcim in October 1944. These were mainly women and children – families of I.G. Farben workers and the SS men. In mid-January 1945, male civilians were evacuated⁷⁸ and the evacuation of KL Auschwitz began. The SS men from the camp garrison headed west alongside the groups of prisoners.

⁷⁷ AABSM, personal file of Ludwig Damm, p. 53.

⁷⁸ S. STEINBACHER, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

This text is by no means exhaustive. My aim was to signal a research problem that in my opinion is quite interesting and to present source material that is little used. In spite of this, one can try to make a few general remarks and draw some final conclusions. As mentioned earlier, in the years 1940–1945, Oświęcim did not cease to be a garrison town; rather, it was the character of the garrison that changed. In the shadow of the concentration and extermination camp, a fairly normal social life, characteristic of a small town, went on. The original inhabitants (Jews and many Poles) were expelled and replaced by settlers and people whose task was to make the area more German (both in terms of population lists and in the character of the town buildings). Instead of Polish soldiers, SS men were stationed in Auschwitz to serve in the main camp and its branches.⁷⁹ Outside of work, these people led quite normal family and social lives. For the most part, they were perfectly able to separate their work in the camp from their role as loving fathers and husbands. Many of them, especially the young, were looking for love and wanted to start families. When analysing the orders of the commandant's office and the garrison commander, we see that the problems caused by the SS men for their superiors were not fundamentally different from the issues faced by commanders of more "traditional" garrisons. Paradoxically, on this basis, one may draw a rather depressing conclusion, which puts humans in a rather bad light. In this case, it would not be a truism to repeat after Christopher Browning that, like the policemen who took part in the extermination of the Jews, the SS men from Auschwitz were also "ordinary people" to whom history had given the opportunity to test their humanity.

⁷⁹ Stationed in the vicinity of Auschwitz were also air defence units (Chelmek). Also, many soldiers of the Wehrmacht passed through the town (either coming from the area or on their way to and from the front).

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