

Reading samples

To give you a small impression of the contents and style of this book several short passages are going to be read. Beginning with reports from the first parts of the book about prisoners of war and forced laborers in Burgdorf.

Between the Gutter and Integration in Families

(Brigitte)

Closely guarded by an armed soldier twenty-three Soviet prisoners of war are taken day in and day out from their quarters in Lerchenstraße 3 to their work assignment at the Waagenfabrik (scales factory) Henckel. Extremely poorly clothed, some just covered in rags, without shoes. Their feet in primitive wooden clogs, wrapped in jute foot cloths or just barefoot. On the way through the Schillerslager Straße the men aren't allowed to walk on the pedestrian walkway. They are forbidden to do that. They have to walk through the gutter. It is made obvious to the inhabitants of Burgdorf, that Soviet prisoners of war are despicable and should be discriminated against. According to National Socialist ideology they belong to an "inferior" race just like the long-time Jewish people of Burgdorf, who also are not allowed to use the pedestrian walkways either. Should a Russian want to pick an apple which was thrown away, the butt of a rifle will help him understand that this is an improper action.

Daily Life of Workers

(Olaf)

At the latest the night for the forced workers and prisoners of war ends at 5.00 am. Shortly after 5.30 am they must climb into the agricultural wagons pulled by tractors, which take them from their quarters to their work assignments in the cultivated fields from the canning factory. The forced workers are guarded and pushed to work faster. If they move slowly or even want to take an unscheduled break the supervising officials force them to continue. Threats and insults are normal. The German supervisors who are to see that the operation runs smoothly and carefully, behave rather roughly, but seldom do they turn to physical violence. The overall responsibility for the work in the fields is the estate manager Hermann Bechle and the agricultural inspector Friedrich Braun, who distinguish themselves through very brutal behaviour. Whenever they appear in the carriage on the fields fearful murmurs go through the group. Wearing riding boots and flared breeches like those worn by officers they stand legs apart behind the toiling work gangs and let their whips crack.

This sound makes the workers flinch. All too often they have experienced how it feels when the whip strikes their backs.

The first Soviet prisoners

(Heidelore)

At 6.45 am the prisoners must line up and march in step along Schillerslager Straße to the Waagenfabrik (scales factory) Henckel. On the cobblestones they cause a deafening noise with the rhythmical clapping of their primitive clogs. Manfred Rehberg, who lives with his parents only 30 metres from the prisoners' camp, does not need an alarm clock to get to school on time. The marching of the wooden clogs is a reliable way to wake him up.

The Russian camp diagonally across the street really appeals to his friends and himself. There is a different world to observe. The boys stand at the fence in the evening and watch the prisoners behind the approximately 3.50 metres high barbed-wire fence. Along Lerchenstraße there's a small open area between the building and the street. In this "open cage" in front of the building the prisoners spend their time after work. They made platforms to sit on from wooden boards, which was from left over wood they probably were allowed to bring from the Waagenfabrik. One of them is playing a harmonica and his comrades are singing Russian folk music. Often the melancholy melodies swell into passionate, yearning singing heard in the whole neighbourhood.

A rather clever way to occasionally provide the prisoners with tobacco was thought out by Manfred Rehberg and his friend Otto Niewerth. Manfred's mother (his father served in the army) hoards cigarettes for bartering. Manfred steals a packet once in a while. When the Soviet prisoners march back to the camp from the Waagenfabrik in the evening, the two boys run in front of the work gang. They divide each cigarette into three pieces. These small pieces of cigarettes are dropped inconspicuously in front of the gang onto the street. The prisoners cleverly bend over as if they are adjusting the footcloth of their clogs and pick up the precious tobacco. Their guard August Springmann marshes at the end of the gang to keep an eye on the prisoners. He is not aware of the tricky things that happen in the first rows at the front. When the prisoners lie on the platforms and enjoy smoking the piece of

cigarette in a pipe, they exchange a mischievous smile with the boys at the fence.

In this way the boys at the camp fence break through the required separation. They do not see the Russians as inferior beings, rather as humiliated, pitiful people. They show a “natural” human reaction at a time where Slavic and Jewish people are called “sub-human creatures, parasites and animals”.

Under the term “Ukrainian Revolt” or “Action Burgdorf” a dramatical and fateful event is reported, which as a consequence 31 forced workers and prisoners of war were hanged at the concentration camp in Neuengamme on August 9th, 1944. Among them were eight men who were assigned to work in Dachtmissen.

Action Burgdorf

(Brigitte)

In the early morning of June 16th, 1944 transport vehicles of the Feuerschutzpolizei (fire protection police) stationed in Burgdorf on Sorgenser Straße turn into Hinterstraße (now Schmiedestraße) and stop in front of the electricity plant. The entire area including the access streets, Hinterstraße, Neue-Tor-Straße and Willersgasse are blocked off. About 80 prisoners must get into the vehicles. They are forced into a provisional sports hall located on the property of city plants by accompanying police and Gestapo officers.

Karl Lange lives with his parents in house number 36 in Hannoversche Neustadt, which is named “Straße der SA” in the Nazi period. He reports that he is on his way to the bakery of his Aunt Lina Schmidt in Klaukengasse to get bread rolls on the morning of June 16th, 1944. He has to go through the Hinterstraße, where the former electricity plant is located and used by the Burgdorf Fire Brigade for years. Two large vehicles of the “fire extinguishers” as the men of the Feuerschutzpolizei in Burgdorf are called stop there. He remembers:

“Prisoners were driven out of the vehicles. Several were covered with blood. If they did not run fast enough they were hit with rifle butts by the uniformed people. I cannot say which kind of people”.

The noise which is caused through violent measures by the Gestapo and the police is heard in the nearby streets. The screams of the prisoners and smacks of the striking tools can even be heard as far away as Hannoversche Neustadt.

The portrayal of life in Camp "Ohio" was a piece of luck because the editorial team had a camp diary from the Ukrainian group available to use. The introduction to part 3 of this book throws light on the situation at the beginning:

Hunger, Hunger, Hunger

(Olaf)

As the Ukraine Wasyl Makota, who lives in Canada later, is asked in September 2012, what the first thing he remembers when he thinks about his time in Camp Ohio, he spontaneously replies, "hunger, hunger, hunger!" Wasyl Makota along with many other young Ukrainians was brought to Germany for forced labour. In Bad Pyrmont he works in a bakery. He stays there after the end of the war. In October 1945 he goes to Camp Ohio for displaced persons in Burgdorf, where the Allied Forces have opened accommodations for hundreds of people from the Ukraine. At the camp he feels secure and protected from a forced return to a sphere of influence of the Soviet Union.

Shortly after their arrival the Western Allies bring the uprooted and homeless people into so-called displaced persons camps, to give them a chance of survival, that is to say to still the hunger of their stomachs and the hunger for a perspective in life. Indeed the camps turn into long term waiting rooms over many years for many of the people accommodated there. But also into waiting rooms where life in freedom and with a perspective can be nurtured.

Repatriation

(Heidelore)

In the middle of July 1945 a total of 162 Soviet officers are working in the Repatriation Commission in the West, 77 of them in the British Zone. Several of them are stationed in Burgdorf. They reside in the barracks of the canning factory called "Kaserne" here between Burgdorf and Sorgensen. Over Camp Ohio the large Soviet star even lighted at night is seen over the barracks. In the eyes of the people in Camp Ohio the symbol of perpetual threat. Fear of repatriation and hate of the Soviet regime are basic dispositions of most of the camp occupants.

The feeling of threat is fueled by the nearby Soviet Repatriation Commission in the "Kaserne".

Also in Camp Ohio in Burgdorf there is the fear of forced return.

Between September 17th and 21st many of the camp occupants write letters for themselves and their families to the British camp commander. In these petitions they clearly express their refusal of being repatriated. They explain why they refuse to return and why they can't return and don't want to. They want to be handled as people without a country to have the possibility of emigrating.

Primary destinations are USA, Canada, Australia, Argentina, Italy and Great Britain.

Throughout this book the meaning of human dignity is basic. The editorial team became increasingly aware of it in the course of its work. Therefore the following text prefixes this book:

Human dignity

(Olaf)

The dignity of humans is a precious good. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany defines it as inviolable. But it is vulnerable. Its recognition can be refused, its rights disputed and trampled on. It can't be taken away. It belongs to the character of human beings.

This book is about the dignity of the women, men and children, who were displaced or ended up in Burgdorf. We should remember their destinies, honor their lives and their suffering and give them a permanent place in the memory of the city.