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Former Soviet prisoner meets relatives of the man who refused to obey SS orders at Dachau 1943: SS order refused at Dachau/Allach nazi concentration camp

By Dietrich Schulze

This is a report of an incredibly intensive moment – one of the most beautiful experiences of my political life, in which a demonstration in 1968 against the war in Vietnam was the first milestone. The following was a happy, yet necessary accident.

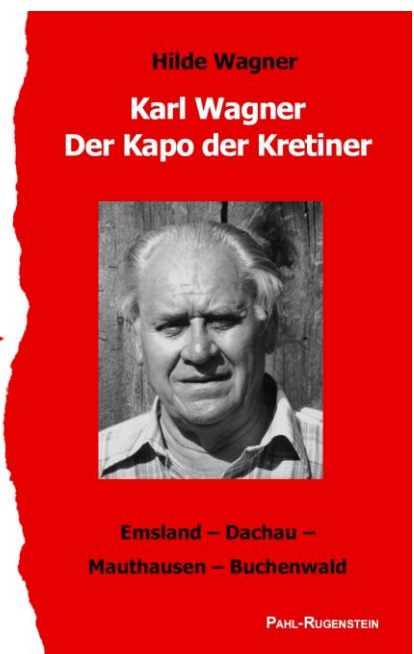
While I was in the archive of the Dachau memorial, discussing with archivist Andre Scharf and holding the book “Der Kapo der Kretiner” in my hands, a group of visitors from California with Nick and George Hope entered the room. George saw the cover photo and exclaimed: “Karl Wagner!” I was thunderstruck. How could this man know my mentor Karl, the brave and immortal Communist resistance fighter, who is hardly known internationally? The subsequent conversation revealed the reason very quickly. 91 year old Nick Hope, born under the name Nikolaj Choprenko, then a Soviet citizen, had been transferred to Allach, a satellite of the Dachau concentration camp, to do forced labor for the armaments production of the BMW factory with the aim of “destruction by labor”. For reasons which will be explained, Karl was the prisoner who had been appointed by the SS as “elder of the camp”. In July 1943, the SS ordered him to beat Nikolai in front of the assembled prisoners. Karl refused the order which the SS camp leader Jarolin had just given him. An outrageous act of insubordination – and its conditions and consequences will need to be explained.

Both Nikolaj and Karl survived the hell of fascism. Nikolaj emigrated to the United States. He visited the Dachau memorial in 2002 for the first time and was interviewed by the head of the archive Albert Knoll. Later, assisted by his son George, he tried to find the man who had not beaten him in 1943. Apparently both of them discovered Karl’s photo, which had been taken in 1979. 72 years after the event, the circle was complete. On several occasions – including Liberation Day 2013 at Karlsruhe [1] – I had spoken about Karl’s resistance and refusal to obey that order. Soon after that, Anna Andlauer requested me to join the Association of Dachau prisoners as Karl’s “adopted son”, which I did very gladly. I had known Anna for a long time from previous visits to Dachau with Karl and his wife Hilde, who had been the author of the book. Karl had died in October 1983, Hilde in April 2002. The deep change of the course of my life,



Nick Hope (left) and Dietrich Schulze
picture: George Hope

Bibliothek des Widerstandes



Cover „Kapo der Kretiner“
publisher Pahl-Rugenstein

with long-lasting effects, as a result of living with Karl between 1972 and 1983, has been described here briefly. [2]

I had come to Dachau on 5 May 2015 to attend the prisoner association's annual meeting. This was the moment when when the circle was complete. After I had reported it briefly at the annual meeting in the presence of Max Mannheimer, I was requested to put down in writing and make available to the public what happened at this intensive moment.

Dachau concentration camp and its satellite at Allach

The following is a brief extract from "Kapo der Kretiner" (p.167-176):

What was the function of the Allach camp? When the Nazi Wehrmacht's advance was halted and reversed, the Fuehrer's headquarter decided in March 1942 that inmates of concentration camps should work for the armaments production. The concentration camps were reorganized for that purpose, with the aim of destroying political enemies and slave laborers by extreme exploitation in this industry, rather than arbitrarily by simply allowing sadism of their guards. The satellite camp at Allach was set up for the armaments production of the BMW auto works. Its commander was the SS hangman Jarolin, a man who continued to use the old methods. In order to be able to accuse prisoners of "sabotage", "laziness" or "theft", he surrounded himself not only with equally-minded SS men, but also willing "function prisoners" who provided appropriate "reports".

But he camp commandant of Dachau, Weiss, understood the new tactics which were now to be employed better. He decided to replace the "camp elder" chosen by Jarolin with a different prisoner. Hilde Wagner describes in her book a series of deliberations of the illegal camp prisoners' organization and Karl's wise behavior vis-à-vis the SS bureaucracy. In the end, he was the prisoner who was chosen for this function. This confronted him with an extremely dangerous, complicated task, which demanded great skill and vigilance. He wanted to protect the prisoners and sabotage armaments. At the same time, the SS wanted him to enforce order at Allach, which meant: ensure smooth armaments production for BMW and the nazis' "final victory".

The first problem which Karl started to tackle was that of "reporting" prisoners. Himmler had ordered in 1942 that prisoners should be asked to trash their comrades, as a brilliant means of infuriating prisoners against "function prisoners". Those who reported others and those who had to beat them were in many cases not the same people. But instead of dividing the prisoners, the point was to establish their unity. At Allach, there was a reliable German comrade, Ludwig Herr from Kornwestheim. They agreed to talk in a friendly manner to those function prisoners who gave higher priority to Jarolin's orders than to solidarity. The idea was to win them for the idea of settling problems between the prisoners themselves and ensuring that the "offence" no longer occurred. They were successful in that this did have a positive influence. The number of "reports" declined. One reason for these had been the prisoners' poignant hunger. Their standard food rations, in many cases reduced and traded illegally by the SS, were hardly sufficient to remain alive, and even less so for people who had to do hard forced labor. Karl's idea was that prisoners should say to the SS, kapos and the company's foremen: "Me work a lot, but have no power". It did not take long and the foremen and the SS were confronted with that slogan everywhere, seeing the emaciated workers, so the slogan did have an effect. BMW was also impressed by the argument and responded, Karl's proposal to Jarolin to demand higher rations for the workers was successful. "Me work a lot, but no power" had become the magic formula for a plate of potato soup. Those who know what hunger is will understand what that meant.

Refusing to obey – "I will not beat"

Step by step, the catastrophic situation at Allach had improved. Many prisoners thought that the replacement of the camp elder was the reason, and feared that Jarolin and his henchmen would not put up with that in the long run. Karl himself knew that. There was no doubt that sooner or later Jarolin would strike back. On the other hand, Jarolin knew that Karl had been appointed by Weiss.

He decided to give Karl the order to carry out the trashing – a plan which, theoretically, could not have failed. If Karl refused to obey, Weiss could not possibly allow such flagrant insubordination. If Karl would unexpectedly trash a prisoner, Jarolin would have forced him to his knees and broken his will.

On a day in July 1943, the commandos returned to the camp after work. But unlike other days, the guards did not hand over their prisoners at the camp gate, but marched with them and the dogs into the camp, to line up on the muster ground. Karl felt that this was the hour when it was going to happen. Jarolin shouted: “Camp elder!”, and all inmates had to repeat the call. Jarolin had given orders to bring and erect the thrashing table. A Soviet prisoner was buckled. Today we know, it was Nikolaj Choprenko.

Jarolin gave Karl the order: “Beat him!” Karl replied: “I will not beat”. Jarolin: “Why don’t you beat?” Karl’s response: “I cannot beat.” Now Jarolin tried the carrot approach: “Try.” Karl again: “I will not beat”. Now Jarolin turned wild. He pulled his gun and shouted: “You are refusing to obey orders, you Communist pig, I knew all the time!” At that

moment, Karl expected to be shot. He took the “camp elder” band from his arm, threw it onto the thrashing table. But Jarolin did not shoot. He only ordered Karl to be taken into the arrest cell.

My interpretation of the incident, based on many discussions with Karl about this (at that time) unique act of insubordination, why Jarolin did not shoot: The SS henchman was psychologically so surprised and irritated by the dialogue and the demonstrative act of returning the “camp elder” band that he did not shoot. A unique incident, unthinkable in the brain of an SS man: a function prisoner degrading himself, giving back a function awarded by the SS. What played a role in the back of Jarolin’s mind, of course, was the fact that Karl had been appointed by Weiss. Nikolaj remembered this historic dialogue 72 years later when we talked about it on 5 May.

Back to Allach. Five days later, Karl was transferred to the main camp at Dachau, into a small dark room. What would happen next? Karl was not willing to be shot like a mad dog in some cloak-and-dagger operation. But how could he fight back? His plan was to reach the roof of the bunker. He knew how to get there – he had been forced, as a “second-time inmate”, to build that bunker himself. From the roof, he would shout words of farewell to his comrades in the camp before the SS shot him down.

But Karl was punished with 25 blows and six weeks of solitary confinement in the bunker. At Allach, the news of his insubordination spread like wildfire, gave courage and inspired others to follow his example. The kapo Hans Biederer from Straubing also refused an order by the notorious SS hangman Trenkle to beat a comrade. The illegal committee’s decision “not to beat”, even if its implementation was very hard, had proved to be correct. They did not give up their fight against Jarolin and his henchmen. They succeeded in replacing the previous kapo in Allach’s camp hospital, who had been on first-name terms with Jarolin, with Michel Rauch, a courageous and humanistically-minded comrade. Michel also fought against the appalling conditions under which sick comrades suffered and died away. After six weeks of confinement in the in dark, the doors of the bunker opened for Karl. He had survived it. After all these weeks of uncertainty, “normal” work in a building commando of the main camp was a relief. Now he was once more embedded in the solidarity and community of his comrades, and contact to the illegal committee could be restored.



Der Bock (Häftlingszeichnung von Albert Kerner)
Source: „Der Kapo der Kretiner“

This is a brief account of a historic event, illuminated in an entirely new way on the 70th anniversary of liberation.

Liberation

Karl himself was liberated in Buchenwald concentration camp. He had been deported from Dachau to Buchenwald with the aim of destruction, but the illegal prisoners' committee there saved his life. The photo on the right shows Karl and his comrades immediately after liberation.

A short bilingual biography with the stages of Karl's resistance – also dealing with the history of Hilde's book – will be found here [3].

As a consequence of what he suffered during his imprisonment at Allach, Nikolaj had to spend three years in a hospital in Munich. He emigrated to California at the end of the 1950s. Our "coincidental encounter" has made it possible that this story of how the destinies of two people were linked at one time can now be made public. This is the first detailed account. George promised to send me more detailed information on the biography of his father.



Eine Gruppe schwäbischer Häftlinge nach der Befreiung in Buchenwald. Letzte Reihe, dritter von rechts: Karl Wagner

Source: „Der Kapo der Kretiner“

A shorter version, with additional details, is planned to appear in the bulletin of the Dachau prisoners' association. The bilingual pdf version of this paper with a Top translation by Lothar Letsche you may find here [4].

Let me close by referring to this year's liberation celebration at Karlsruhe on 10 May, where I referred briefly to what happened on 5 March. The VVN-BdA Karlsruhe website contains several interesting speeches [5], including the one by Silvia Gingold on her father, Communist resistance fighter Peter Gingold, an immortal personality like Karl Wagner.

Sources:

[1] <http://www.nrhz.de/flyer/beitrag.php?id=19043>

[2] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20141003.pdf>

[3] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20150509.pdf>

[4] <http://www.stattweb.de/files/civil/Doku20150524.pdf>

[5] <http://karlsruhe.vvn-bda.de/2015/05/11/befreiungsfeier-2015/>

Dr.-Ing. Dietrich Schulze: born in 1940; after 18 years of research in High-Energy Physics, from 1984 until 2005 (his retirement) Chairman of the Works Council of the Karlsruhe Research Center (subsequently merged with the University to form the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology KIT). 2008 he set up in Karlsruhe - with others - the Initiative against Military Research at German Universities (WebDocu www.stattweb.de/files/DokuKITcivil.pdf). Member of the Advisory Board of the Scientists' Initiative for Peace and Sustainability; active in the initiative "Universities for peace -Yes to Civil Clauses" and through publications. He is member of DFG-VK (German Peace Society - United War Resisters) and of VVN-BdA (German Association of Victims of the Nazi Regime – League of Anti-Fascists) at Karlsruhe.

Translation: Lothar Letsche (improved version)