



## *I had never heard of Nuremberg before*

Female concentration camp prisoners from Auschwitz at the *Siemens-Schuckert* plant - The female SS guards were most brutal



The facts are well known. The author of the company's history *Siemens 1918 - 1945* which had been published in 1995 dedicated 14 lines and 3 footnotes to what happened: *In mid-October 1944 by order of the Reich's secretary for armament and ammunition a group of 500 concentration camp prisoners, all of them Hungarian Jewish women had been taken over from the concentration camp Auschwitz. The prisoners arrived in Nuremberg in poor health and were housed in company compounds at Katzwanger Straße.* The brief description of the firm's historian does not say anything about the circumstances under which the women and girls had to live and work in Nuremberg and the responsibility for them.

In March of 1944, the German Wehrmacht occupied Hungary which had been a German ally up to that time. Thus the last intact Eastern European Jewish community fell to Himmler's henchmen almost immediately. Although the Red Army already stood at the Hungarian borders, the SS killing machine was running at top speed only a few weeks after the German incursion. By January 1945, approximately 365,000 Hungarian Jews had been killed by mass shootings and in extermination camps.

Ruth F., Marketa N., Cecilie P. and Susy Z. with their families were also deported. At that time they were young girls, the youngest among them only thirteen years of age. After their arrival in Auschwitz the mothers of Marketa and Cecilie were murdered instantly in the gas chambers. An SS man took a photograph of Cecilie's mother and her grandson in the queue of the doomed who were headed for the gas: a careworn woman wearing a headscarf, in her arms the little boy sucking his thumb whose looks could break the toughest heart.

The life of the girls was in permanent danger, because in the camp they were seen as *useless mouths to feed*, but their chances to survive were increased by the course of war: The German armament industry which tried to fulfill its production norms despite of the impending defeat, needed workers desperately. Since other sources had been dried up by the allied landing in the West and the Soviet advance in the East, the enterprises exploited the last reservoir of manpower available to the system of terror, the prisoners in the concentration camps.

In October 1944 another selection took place in Auschwitz. The girls knew the proceedings of this terrible ritual in which usually a mere gesture of Dr. Mengele decided about life or death. This time he was accompanied by civilians, who primarily were interested in the prisoners'

keenness of sight and their dexterity. Marketa N. says *I always wondered why but today I know that they needed the little hands of girls for this kind of work.* These gentlemen were representatives of the *Siemens-Schuckert* plant in Nuremberg who made the business trip to eastern Upper Silesia in order to choose the *human material* for the company's production on their own. The four girls were *lucky*, because they were considered fit for the job.

### **In Nuremberg at the *Siemens-Schuckert* plant**

By November 1944, about 550 female Jewish Hungarians from thirteen to forty years of age had arrived by train in Nuremberg. According to the rules of the SS, which also provided the guards, *Siemens-Schuckert* had erected its own concentration camp surrounded by barbed wire at Katzwanger Straße. The slave laborers officially were under the command of the nearby concentration camp Flossenbürg. For each of the women *Siemens* had to pay a daily rate of 4 Reichsmarks to the SS minus 0.65 RM for the food which was to be provided by the factory.

The plan was for the prisoners to assemble relays in a *department 131* which was established within the camp and to keep the prisoners segregated from the regular plant employees. According to the statement of the department's foreman Ferdinand R., *Siemens-Schuckert* had obtained too many women from Auschwitz. Only 250 worked in his department, another 80 at *Siemens'* transformer plant, the rest never became involved in the production process for a lack of capacities. He also confirmed that the *Siemens'* management was in charge of the food and clothing for the women.

The female SS staff, most of all the sadistic supervisor Anna was the women's nightmare. The *SS bitches*, as even the German worker Therese F. called them during her interrogation in 1946, had been enrolled prior to the arrival of the prisoners at *Siemens* and several other plants in Nuremberg. Marketa N., weighing 50 pounds at her arrival in Nuremberg, remembers clearly how Anna forced the insufficiently dressed prisoners to kneel in the icy-cold puddles of the camp area for hours. She herself wore a summer frock which she had been handed at Auschwitz, and the very shoes in which she had arrived there.

### **Cynical Shouting**

Not even on Sundays, when the women and girls had not to work at the plant, did they have a chance to rest. *We won't let you get lazy here*, the SS guards shouted cynically at their victims and marched them to damaged quarters of the city to clear them of rubble or divided them into groups for other work. One Sunday Cecilie P. and other prisoners had to fetch bread for the inmates from a downtown bakery. Despite the threat of draconian punishment the women, tormented by the hunger, tried to smuggle loaves of bread into the camp and were caught. Cecilie P. was beaten so severely by a female SS guard with a big wooden cooking spoon that it broke. When she had no other tool to torment her victim with, she spat into the girl's face. In another case two girls who had stolen raw potatoes in the cooking barrack were shot in their legs without warning. Nobody knows what happened to the seriously wounded girls after that.

Hunger, the freezing temperatures and the much too heavy work for the weakened prisoners took their toll. Ruth F., at that time fourteen years old, fell ill with spinal cord tuberculosis. The only available treatment for the potentially fatal illness was aspirin. After the war had ended Mrs. F. spent several years in hospitals and sanatoriums, but still suffers from the con-

sequences. Marketa N. severely and irreparably damaged her back dragging coal buckets for the stoves in the guards' barracks.

The first two months of the year 1945 with their infernal air raids brought the girls' suffering in Nuremberg to an end. The camp and the manufacturing facilities were leveled during the bombardments of February 20 and 21. The slave laborers languished in the air raid shelter trenches of the camp for days, the dirty snow which covered the area being their only food. Finally they were transferred to the ruins of the schoolhouse at Zeltnerstraße. *Siemens-Schuckert* had no more use for the girls from Auschwitz due to the destruction of the plant. The prisoners were divided and taken to other, less destroyed parts of the Reich. The largest group was shipped by train to the Thuringian town of Mehltheuer, another to Holleischen (Holysov) near Plzen. They were freed there by the Allies on April 16 and May 6.

In August 1946 war crimes tribunal prosecutors questioned employees of *Siemens* in order to get evidence for the so called Flick case against leading German industrialists. One of the subjects was the background of the employment of the 550 Hungarian Jews in Nuremberg. The protocols of the interviews show remarkable lapses in the memory of the high ranking *Siemens'* representatives. The statements of workers who had come in touch with the prisoners show that they did not share the problems of their bosses. The executive manager of *Siemens-Schuckert*, Hans Hilpert, gave the American interviewer a particularly hard time. He had taken the place of his predecessor Knott who had been taken into custody; Hilpert played a cat and mouse game with the interviewer.

## Contradictions

*Question:* What was the impulse for employing concentration camp inmates at the plant? Who had the idea for it?

*Answer:* I do not think that any were employed here.

*Question:* Do you know nothing about the 550 Jewish females in the meter assembly?

*Answer:* We certainly didn't wish them to be with us. We had gotten no use out of them; they probably performed very poorly.

*Question:* What did the company do about the mistreatment of these women?

*Answer:* We were against it. The whole thing was very unpleasant for us.

*Question:* Did the company do anything against such mistreatment of the women?

*Answer:* Who perpetrated such mistreatment?

The department's foreman Ferdinand R. could have helped out his superior not only in this point but also could have dispersed his doubts regarding the lack of productivity. R. described the prisoners as absolutely willing workers. Those who weren't employed often asked for the permission to work. Hans P., chair of the works committee, in his interview provided a very plausible explanation for the weakness of the management's memory: *Before the Americans came to Nuremberg papers were burned here [at Siemens] for two days.* His opinion on the often declared ignorance of management regarding the maltreatment of compulsory workers was clear in 1946 already: *It is very implausible that today they don't want to have anything known about these things.*

## Lifelong Trauma

The four girls from Auschwitz are grandmothers now. They've made it; they have settled down and have families despite the traumatization they had experienced. *Siemens* never cared about them. Marketa N., a TV producer who in February 1999 hosted two highly acclaimed shows dealing with her imprisonment in Auschwitz and Nuremberg, wrote a letter to *Siemens*. She wanted no money for herself, but a gesture beyond press releases. Mrs. N. asked *Siemens* for a donation for a charitable organization to which she was particularly committed. The company answered that it could not accede to her request in view of its support for the Jewish Museum in Fürth, Nuremberg's sister city.

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