



Soviet Prisoners of War 1942 – 1945 in Nuremberg: An Eyewitness Report

Introduction



One of the monuments at Nuremberg's Southern Cemetery commemorating Soviet POWs who died here from 1941 to 1945, 2002

(Photo: Susanne Rieger)

It is particularly hard to obtain relevant and unbiased information about the fate of Soviet POWs during WW2 on a local level. Most of the residents noticed them only as tattered shadows doing the most inferior jobs, thus obeying the strict separation from them which prohibited any kind of contact between those "sub-humans" and the Germans. On the other hand it is

almost impossible to find former POWs themselves due to the extremely high mortality of this group, their almost traceless vanishing after the end of war and language problems.

Facing these difficulties reports as the following by a former forced laborer from Belgium are most valuable. The author himself was deported to Nuremberg in December 1942 where he had to work for the Siemens company until 1945. We would like to thank our very good friend *George John Beeston* for his recollections and the permission to publish them on the internet as a virtual memorial for the nameless men who had to live, work, suffer and die in Nuremberg.

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Eyewitness Report

From a letter of Mr. George John Beeston (Belgium), dated October 28, 2003 (German words used in the original text in italics):

Our *Lager* [camp] in Maiach was located near a battery of heavy anti-aircraft guns and barracks housing Russian POWs who were in the same situation as ours, except that they were even closer than we were. [...]

It was a night air raid [March 8 to 9, 1943], thus more of a target raid which was less devastating than the later carpet bombing raids. In this case the heavy guns sites were being aimed at. As usual some bombs went off course, blowing out windows and doors in our *Lager*. Some of the wooden structure of the barracks was also knocked down. [...]

The raid had not been over long, when in the dark we realized that we had a visitor, a Russian POW. He must have had a very narrow escape, for he was still shaking like a leaf from shock. We helped him to regain his calm, some of us still had cigarettes and he was given one. We also gave him some lumps of bread from our own meager ration which he devoured hungrily.

He slowly regained his calm. We understood that he had to make his way back to the camp without being seen by the guards. He explained in broken German that if he was seen returning to the camp, he would be severely punished. Russian POWs were constantly subjected to ill treatment.

For us luck would have it that *Herr Koehling* [camp commander] was not in the *Lager*. It was strictly forbidden to speak to Russian POWs. To give them food was even more of a crime to the eyes of the Nazis and we knew that *Herr Koehling* hated the Russians for he blamed them for his handicap [Koehling had been severely wounded during the siege of Leningrad].

The Russian soldiers were trustworthy. One day we had the proof of what I write: One of us had given a small piece of bread to a POW. A German guard had caught the man eating the bread which must have been different to the bread the POWs received. The unfortunate POW was taken away for questioning. The following day he was made to stand in the corner of the hall where we were having our midday pompously called 'meal'. The man had been beaten, his face was swollen and blue, he was made to stand to attention. This went on for several days without giving away the person who had pity on him. During those long days of punishment he received neither water nor food. He finally collapsed in the corner and was taken

away. I was told later that he had been executed as an example, but he did not betray his benefactor. He was only a young kid.

A German worker had also been caught giving a piece of bread to a Russian POW. The German who witnessed the gesture of pity from one human being to another, was a big brute which I never saw working, but who used to walk around the factory looking for trouble. Of course he wore the dreaded Swastika badge. The German worker was taken away and never seen again. The Russian POW got away with a beating. The brute had taken an iron bar and started hitting the poor man who whilst trying to protect his face and head, had several fingers broken. Several of us stood there unable to help and scared of being taken to *Herr Grieshammer's* [executive of Siemens-Schuckert company in charge of the employment of forced laborers] office and what came after.

A load of potatoes had been tipped on the snow covered ground near the food store located at the end of the factory. When I say potatoes, I am exaggerating the appearance of the half rotten mass laying on the snow. I later saw in the farm in Bavaria [in 1945 the author worked for a farmer in Lower Bavaria for a couple of months] better potatoes given to the pigs. I stood with the rest of the scrap clearing team (scrap from the bombed old factory) not far from the heap of potatoes. Suddenly a Russian POW appeared out of a nearly bombed building. He started running towards the heap of potatoes. Still running he grabbed with his right hand a handful of the precious food. He started running for cover when we heard the sharp crack of a rifle shot. The Russian POW suddenly halted in his tracks and fell face downwards into the snow. The white snow immediately turned crimson from the blood running from the back of the POW's head. It made me and the other three of the team feel sick. We had witnessed cold blooded murder.

A German guard moved forward towards the fallen figure. He wore the distinctive signs of a *Feldwebel* [sergeant]. I recognized him at once, he was known by all for he hated the Russians and who knows maybe all foreigners. He had been wounded on the Russian front and now walked with a stiff leg. He could not run to catch the 'thief', so he just shot him in the back of his head. The shot was deadly and that of a marksman. He had been trained to kill and felt no remorse, he simply walked past the dead body.

We stood frozen by the enormity of the action. Heinz [German co-worker] was the first to regain his wits. He advised us to leave the area which we did feeling sick and revolted.

The body was left laying for several days, the frozen hand still clutching the coveted treasure. On his back a board had been attached on which one could read in large letters "*Hier liegt ein Rauber*" [a robber is laying here], and that for a handful of potatoes.

The January 2nd 1945 [air] raid was also particularly mortal for the Russian POWs 'surviving' in the camp located somewhere near the Nuremberg railway marshalling yard and the MAN factory. The camp had one air raid shelter, one trench covered with metal sheeting and a thin layer of soil. It was the same type of protection we had in the *Suedfriedhoflager* [forced laborers camp near the southern cemetery]. The drama that happened during the air raid was explained to me by a surviving POW: A petroleum incendiary bomb fell on the center of the trench badly burning some POWs. A number of them ran towards one end of the shelter, the others towards the other end. This is where the most unexpected happened. It does not occur once in a million times, two explosive bombs falling so close to one another and in a straight line. One bomb fell on one end of the shelter, the second bomb falling on the other end of the trench, leaving an horrible carnage of mangled bodies.

The following day the valid and the wounded were forced to come to work escorted by their guards pushing them along. It was a vision of hell: Men walking with self-made crutches, some of them had their wounds covered with filthy rags soaked with blood, the valid helping the wounded.

A Russian POW friend told me that the dead and the dying were incinerated, the dead and the dying being piled up on top of one another. A few days later some of the valid and the non-valid were employed on recovering the German victims from the ruins, others were digging mass graves.

The most dangerous activity Russian POWs were compelled to carry out was to remove unexploded bombs and mines. An extra ration of food was their reward, one may call this "Price of Death". The bombs bedded deep in the ground first had to be cleared. This was the job of a team who was constantly exposed to an explosion. When the bomb was cleared a bomb disposal POW carried out the most critical part of the exercise, that is diffusing the detonator and making the bomb safe for removal. In some cases the bomb had entered a building which made the excavating more difficult.

My friendship with Russian POWs is explained by the fact that as my German became more fluent and the Russians were able to speak some broken German, we became more and more involved in secret conversations. One of the POWs was really a good friend. He came from Kiev and was about twenty. After the January 2nd, 1945 air raid I never saw him again.

Of all POWs, and there were many, the Russians were without the shadow of a doubt the ones who received the worst treatment. For them it was hell on earth, yet they took it stoically. One may tend to call it submission which as I know was not the case. When they were liberated their fate, as we all know, was even worse.