

The Death Marches from the Dachau Camps to the Alps during the Final Days of World War II in Europe

Eliezer Schwartz

Introduction

During the second half of April 1945, only a few days prior to the surrender of Nazi Germany, thousands of inmates were removed from Dachau concentration camp and its satellite camps and forced to march southward to the high Alps of the Tyrol. This occurred at a time when the Nazi regime was suffering from a severe fuel shortage that seriously hampered the operation of the armored corps and the air force and, as a result, the army at the front was at a standstill. What motivated the Germans to assign thousands of Wehrmacht and SS troops, and to allocate trains and fuel, for the transport of thousands of prisoners at this stage of the war? Many scholars have studied the issue of the death marches (*Todesmärsche*) of the war's final days and have offered any number of conjectures to explain them. Yet we still lack a definitive answer to this conundrum.

In his article on the topic, Yehuda Bauer proposes several possible explanations, but none provides a complete answer.¹ One of his conjectures is that the marches were designed to prevent the victims from telling their liberators about the crimes from which they had suffered. Another is that the prisoners were taken to the Alps to construct redoubt fortifications (*Alpenfestung*) from which the Germans could continue to wage war. Yet another hypothesis he offers is that the SS continued to view the camp prisoners as forced laborers who must continue to work. Bauer also posits that the marches might have been instigated by Himmler, who endeavored to negotiate a separate peace agreement with the Western Allies without Hitler's knowledge. Himmler thought, Bauer suggests, that Jewish hostages would constitute valuable bargaining chips. Yet Bauer finds all these rationales insufficient. In the end he concludes that the death marches were simply meant to carry on the mass murder of the camp inmates by other means.²

1 Yehuda Bauer, "The Death-Marches, January-May, 1945," in Michael R. Marrus (ed.), *The Nazi Holocaust: Historical Articles on the Destruction of European Jews*, vol. 9 (London: Meckler Westport, 1989), pp. 491-509.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 499.

At Dachau, on April 26, 1945, according to Roland Kaltenecker, 7,000 prisoners were forcibly marched toward the Alps, where in the Ötz Valley they were to be used to construct large wind tunnels under the mountains.³

In his book *Todesmarsch*, devoted entirely to the death marches from Kaufering and Mühldorf, two of the Dachau camps, Andreas Wagner cites an order issued by Ernst Kaltenbrunner, head of the Reich Security Service, which included the command to transport prisoners of Western European origin in trucks from Dachau to Switzerland, and to lead the remaining prisoners on foot to the Ötz Valley, where they would be eliminated in some way.⁴ Wagner's interpretation of events rests upon Kaltenbrunner's testimony before a Nuremberg war crimes court, in which he stated that Hitler had ordered those prisoners capable of labor to be transported to the Alps where they were to construct fortifications. Wagner assumes that these prisoners were moved southward to work on the German air force's ambitious project to construct wind tunnels in the Ötz Valley.⁵ Wagner also suggests that certain Nazi leaders planned to use the prisoners as hostages (*Geiseln*) in the event of negotiations with the Allies.⁶

Thomas Albrich and Stephan Dietrich refer to Kaltenbrunner's order in their account of the final stage of the Nazi terror as it played out in the Mittenwald-Scharnitz-Seefeld area, in proximity to the German-Austrian border, and in the Inn Valley area, between the town of Telfs and the Ötz River valley.⁷ According to Kaltenbrunner, they note, he issued the order at Hitler's request;⁸ but the authors reject this claim on the grounds that there was not sufficient time for the construction of defensive fortifications, given the proximity of Allied forces to the Alpine foothills.⁹ Also unlikely, they maintain, is the contention regarding the wind tunnels, even though prisoners who had worked on a similar project at the Ottobrunn camp near Munich were also evacuated southward to

3 Roland Kaltenecker, *Operation "Alpenfestung," Das letzte Geheimnis des "Dritten Reiches"* (München: F.A Herbig, 2005), p. 273.

4 Andreas Wagner, *Todesmarsch – Die Räumung und Teilräumung der Konzentrationslager Dachau, Kaufering und Mühldorf Ende April 1945* (Ingolstadt: Panther Verlag, 1995), p. 22.

5 Ibid., p. 23.

6 Ibid.

7 Thomas Albrich and Stefan Dietrich, "Todesmarsch in die 'Alpenfestung': Der 'Evakuierungstransport' aus den KZ Dachau nach Tirol Ende April 1945," in *Geschichte und Region* 6 (1997), pp. 13-50.

8 Ibid., p. 17.

9 Ibid.

construct the wind tunnel in the Ötz Valley. Albrich and Dietrich likewise note that an entry in the work force reports from Dachau's satellite camps states that on April 23, 1945 a contingent of forced laborers known as *Kommando Ötztal*, which numbered 1,755, had been deployed in the Ötz Valley.¹⁰

In the end, Albrich and Dietrich reach the same conclusion as Bauer – the death marches were the continuation of mass murder by other means.¹¹

Daniel Blatman, however, points out the differences between the death marches conducted during January and February 1945 and those that commenced in the war's final month.¹² In the spring of 1945, he shows, as the evacuation of the camps in southern Germany commenced, there was nowhere to which the prisoners could be led. Himmler issued contradictory orders as to the dispersal of the evacuated prisoners; the camp commandants' orders were also muddled. The confusion created the conditions for the murder of the prisoners.¹³ Blatman, too, mentions the possibility that Himmler considered using Jewish prisoners as bargaining chips in negotiations over Germany's surrender.¹⁴

Shmuel Krakowski notes that the evacuation of the camps and the subsequent death marches constituted the last of Germany's organized large-scale crimes, and argues that they are evidence of the Nazi regime's determination to continue the slaughter up to the final moment of the war.¹⁵ Noting the absence of written documentation that might cast light upon the reasons for the transportation of the prisoners, Krakowski acknowledges the difficulty of analyzing the SS's decision-making processes and line of command during this period.¹⁶ He also implies that Himmler may have considered keeping Jewish prisoners alive so that they could be used in negotiations with the British and the Americans.¹⁷

10 Paul Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945: the Official History* (London: Norfolk Press, 1975), p. 218.

11 Bauer, "The Death Marches," p. 499.

12 Daniel Blatman, *Tzadot haMavet 1944-1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010), pp. 281-99. See also Daniel Blatman, "The Death Marches, January-May 1945. Who Was Responsible For What," *Yad Vashem Studies* 28 (2000), pp. 155-201.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 200-1.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

15 Shmuel Krakowski, "The Death Marches in the Period of the Evacuation of the Camps," in Michael R. Marrus (ed.), *The Nazi Holocaust: Historical Articles on the Destruction of European Jews*, vol. 9 (London: Meckler Westport, 1989), pp. 476-90.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 484.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 487.

Krakowski is correct – the paucity of contemporary documentation of the death marches from Dachau and its satellite camps has compelled historians to rely on the later testimonies of guards who accompanied the prisoners and of the survivors themselves. But these two kinds of sources tend to contradict each other and, furthermore, do not address the reasons for driving the prisoners southward.

I propose that the Germans intended to employ the inmates, who constituted a large, skilled workforce, to complete and operate the huge wind tunnels (*Windkanäle*) that were under construction in the Austrian Alps. These installations were crucial to the conduct of research to further the development of innovative fighter planes and other weaponry with which the Germans hoped to tilt the course of the war in their favor. To prove this hypothesis, I will analyze the singular characteristics of the groups of prisoners selected to complete the project and examine the routes along which the prisoners were led. I will also look at the mode of their transport, which involved desperate attempts to evade and circumvent battle theaters in the areas through which they passed, aimed at preventing the liberation of the prisoners prior to their exploitation. Finally, I will address the security installation erected at the opening of the Ötz River valley. The German leadership was convinced that its completion, trial, and operation were so vital that they justified the immense effort invested in it at this time.

The selection of the prisoners for the death marches was not random. Dachau held in excess of 30,000 inmates in April 1945. A further 37,000 were incarcerated in some 160 satellite camps affiliated with Dachau, located throughout Bavaria.¹⁸ Dachau's population had been augmented during February and March of that year, with 5,831 inmates brought in from other camps, among them Bergen-Belsen, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, and Gross-Rosen. In the first two weeks of April, 4,980 additional prisoners arrived from Natzweiler-Struthof's satellite camps, scattered through the southwestern state of Baden-Württemberg, which had already been occupied by the Allies. In all, 10,811 prisoners were brought to Dachau during the last four months of the war, increasing its population by more than half and making life there unbearable.¹⁹ The camp had no facilities for housing and feeding the newcomers, and the appalling sanitary conditions that resulted led to an outbreak of two strains of typhus.²⁰ The

18 Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 219.

19 Teodor Musiol, *Dachau 1933-1945* (Katowice: Instytut Śląski w Opolu, 1968), p. 219.

20 Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 187; Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 19.

camp's clinics were inadequate for treating and quarantining the ill, and as a result some 14,000 inmates perished between January and April 1945.²¹

The inmates feared for their lives, and not just because of the epidemic. With the Allied forces advancing the camps were awash with rumors that the Nazis planned to slaughter the prisoners. Confirmation of these rumors emerged at the Nuremberg trials.²² In mid-April, Kaltenbrunner, acting on behalf of Hitler, instructed the *gauleiter* of Munich, Paul Giesler, to prepare a plan for the eradication of Dachau and the large Jewish labor camps in the area of Landsberg and Mühldorf. Giesler proposed that the German air force bomb Landsberg and Mühldorf in order to kill their inmates, a mission to be codenamed "Wolke A1." The "Wolkenbrand" operation would, in parallel, annihilate Dachau's prisoners by means of food poisoning.²³ In the end, these plans were not carried out. Giesler charged Bertus Gerdes, head of regional administration (*gaustabsamtsleiter*) in Upper Bavaria, with preparing detailed extermination plans,²⁴ but the latter kept coming up with excuses, such as the unfavorable weather, a shortage of airplane fuel, and inadequate ordnance. Faced with Gerdes' equivocation, Kaltenbrunner ordered the transport of all Jewish prisoners from the Landsberg camps to Dachau, where they could be exterminated by massive food poisoning. The Jewish inmates of Mühldorf, he mandated, were to be killed on site by the Gestapo. Kaltenbrunner commanded that the poisoning commence immediately in Dachau. Upon receipt of the order, Giesler instructed the regional doctor, one Dr. Harfeld, to arrange for a supply of poison, but the plan was not implemented.²⁵ Following these two failed attempts at extermination, Kaltenbrunner instructed the Dachau commandant to transport prisoners who were citizens of European countries by truck to Switzerland and to lead the prisoners of other nationalities on foot to the Ötz Valley in the Alps, where they would be exterminated "in one way or another."²⁶

21 Ibid., p. 20.

22 Ibid., p. 14.

23 Ibid., p. 21; Edith Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos Kaufering und Mühldorf* (Landsberg: N. Niemeyer, 1992), pp. 270-1; Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 183; "Todesmarsch von Dachau – Evakuierung oder Vernichtung," p. 3, www.gz-tm-dachau.de/4.1.2.html, accessed Feb. 13, 2011.

24 Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos*, p. 271; Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 183.

25 Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 183; Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 22; "Todesmarsch von Dachau – Evakuierung oder Vernichtung," p. 4.

26 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 22; Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 184; Blatman, *The Death Marches 1944-1945*, pp. 281-3.

The evacuation of inmates from Dachau camp toward the south commenced on April 24, 1945, the same day a group of distinguished prisoners who had been held for only a few days left the camp. This latter party of 136 included General Franz Halder, the German army's Chief of General Staff up to 1942, and his family; Hjalmar Schacht, the former president of the Reichsbank; Kurt Schuschnig, the Austrian chancellor prior to Austria's annexation to Germany and his family; Leon Blum, former prime minister of France; a nephew of Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov; and Peter Churchill, a captured British agent who had survived by claiming, falsely, to be Winston Churchill's nephew. This group was transported southward and, after being joined by another group from the Flossenberg camp, reached Niederndorf in the Austrian Alps on April 28, 1945, where they were subsequently liberated by American forces.²⁷

The departure of these "distinguished captives" (*Ehrenhäftlinge*) caused consternation among the other inmates, who believed it heralded the camp's evacuation or the extermination of its prisoners.²⁸ Indeed, two additional groups of inmates were sent south from Dachau that same day. The first, numbering 6,887, which left the camp on foot, consisted of 1,213 Germans, 4,150 Russians and 1,524 Jews, of whom 341 were women.²⁹ The second group, numbering 1,759 Jews, was transported from the camp by train.³⁰ Both groups included prisoners who had arrived at the camp during April 1945 from the satellite camps of the main concentration camp of Natzweiler-Struthof,³¹ inmates of Dachau's satellite camps in the vicinity of Kaufering and Türkheim,³² and German inmates who had worked for several years in the Präzifix factory that operated within the camp of Dachau itself.³³ In addition to these two groups, prisoners from Kaufering who had not been dispatched to Dachau were taken southward on foot or by train, and Jewish prisoners from Mühldorf were

27 Roland Kaltenbrunner, *Operation Alpenfestung* (München: F.A. Herbig, 2005), pp. 271-5.

28 Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, pp. 184-5.

29 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 26.

30 Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 194; Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 26.

31 Folker Förtsch and Siegfried Huberle (eds.), *KZ Gedenkstätte Schwäbisch Hall – Hesselental* (Schwäbisch Hall, 2002), p. 16.

32 Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos*, p. 273.

33 Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 42-3.

likewise transported to the south by train.³⁴ Other satellite camps of Dachau whose inmates were marched southward included Allach,³⁵ Ottobrunn,³⁶ München-Riem, and München-Giesing.³⁷

The table below lists the groups of prisoners led southward from Dachau and its satellite camps on marches and by train during the final days of April, 1945.³⁸

No.	Camp of Departure	Number of Prisoners Led Southward		Beginning of March or Transport
		On foot	By train	
1	Dachau	7,000		April 23, 1945
2	Kaufering	1,500		April 24, 1945
3	Kaufering	1,200		April 24, 1945
4	Mühldorf		1,500	April 24, 1945
5	Dachau		3,000	April 25, 1945
6	Dachau		2,000	April 26, 1945
7	Dachau		2,600	April 26, 1945
8	Dachau		2,000	April 27, 1945
9	München-Giesing	500		?
10	Kommando Präzifix	180		April 26, 1945
11	Allach camp	2,000		April 27, 1945
12	Ottobrunn camp	300		May 1, 1945
13	München-Riem	1,500		April 25, 1945
	14,180	11,100		
	Total	25,280 prisoners		

34 Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos*, pp. 272-3.

35 "Der Marsch vom KZ Allach," www.gz-tm-dachau.de/6.2.4.html, accessed Feb. 13, 2011.

36 Martin Wolf, *Im Zwang für das Reich* (Ottobrunn: Gemeinde Ottobrunn, 1996), pp. 37-8.

37 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 27.

38 The data in rows 1–8 is based on a document compiled by the US-Document Intelligence Section, Record Branch, dated March 2, 1950, kept in the archive of Dachau Camp Museum, archive no. 737. It was published in Friedrich Hitzer, *Vom*

The death marches and train transports of prisoners from Dachau and its satellite camps that commenced on April 23, 1945 and continued into early May thus encompassed at least 25,280 inmates, including Jews and non-Jews, women and men. Presumably this number does not include prisoners who vanished without trace or groups that were totally annihilated and about whose fate no evidence survived. It seems reasonable, then, to estimate the number of prisoners evacuated southward from Dachau and its satellite camps at 30,000 or more.

Who were the prisoners selected for inclusion in the groups evacuated from Dachau, and what were their common characteristics that qualified them for selection?

Prisoners from the Neckar Camps (*Neckarlagern*)

A large contingent of prisoners included in the first group of evacuees from Dachau arrived at the camp in mid-April 1945 from the camps of Neckarelz, Hessental, and Kochendorf, and the satellite camps of Natzweiler-Struthof. Neckarelz, located near the city of Mosbach, was established in March 1944. Thousands of the camp's inmates worked on the construction of underground facilities, primarily for the manufacture of engines for combat aircraft produced by the Daimler-Benz Motoren GmbH Company. The planned monthly production capacity was 500 new engines of types DB-603 and DB-605, and the overhaul and repair of 350 further engines.³⁹ The predominantly Jewish workforce was employed in transforming existing mine tunnels into production chambers, assembling the machines, performing trial runs of the facilities and in production itself. As the operation progressed the number of prisoners increased, such that in the final months of the war over 4,000 worked there. To move the prisoners closer to their work locations they were divided into groups and housed in seven small camps around Neckarelz.

Six hundred Jewish prisoners were brought to Hessental camp, opened on October 14, 1944. During the months of November and December 1944 their number swelled to 800 and they were employed in a facility engaged in assembling Me 262 jet engines for the Messerschmitt Company. The prisoners were also engaged in repairing the runways adjacent to the facility, which had been damaged in air strikes; constructing roads and access paths to the factory; and working in a quarry that produced paving

Ende und Von Anfang des Zweiten Weltkrieg (Wolfratschausen: VVN – Bund der Antifaschisten, 1985), pp. 70-1. The data listed in rows 9-13 does not appear in this document. Their source is noted below.

39 Jacque Barrau, *Zeichnungen aus einem Lager. Das Konzentrationslager – Außenkommando Neckarelz* (Karlsruhe: M. Schmid, 1992).

material for the roads and runways. The SS and the German air force were responsible for guarding the prisoners.⁴⁰

The prisoners of the Kochendorf camp, opened on September 3, 1944, were employed in transforming the salt mine in the village into a factory for the manufacture of HeS 011 jet engines for the Heinkel Company, setting up the production machines and excavating additional elevator shafts into the depths of the mine, which had only one such shaft originally. Serial production of parts for the jet engines began in February 1945, five months after the group's arrival at the camp.⁴¹

The inmates of the Neckar camps arrived in Dachau and the adjacent Allach camp after grueling marches or transports that emanated simultaneously from several locations. The march from Neckarelz camp was joined by prisoners from neighboring camps, including Heppenheim, Bensheim, Auerbach, and Sandhofen, as well as by hundreds of ill prisoners from Kochendorf camp. In addition, there were separate marches from Kochendorf and Hessental.⁴² In all, 4,980 prisoners reached Dachau from Natzweiler-Struthof's satellite camps during April 1945 by way of marches or train transports. Of these, 1,655 arrived on April 2, 1945 and 3,325 arrived between April 6-8, 1945.⁴³ The majority of prisoners arriving in Dachau from Natzweiler-Struthof's satellite camps joined the marches or the train transports that set out southward from Dachau toward the high Alps at the end of April 1945.

Prisoners from the Landsberg, Kaufering and Mühldorf Camps

The prisoners evacuated to the south during the final days of April 1945 were joined by inmates of Dachau's large satellite camps operating in the vicinity of the towns of Landsberg, Kaufering and Mühldorf. The Germans planned to construct three partly subterranean sites close to these towns, protected from aerial bombing, in which the Messerschmitt Company intended to manufacture 900 Me 262 fighter planes as well as Me 163 fighter jets. There were also plans for the construction of runways at the entrance to one of the sites as well as plants for the production of engines and aircraft components at the Weingut site adjacent to Mühldorf.⁴⁴ Both male and female Jewish

40 Förtsch (ed.), *KZ Gedenkstätte*, pp. 6-14.

41 Eliezer Schwartz, "Military Industry vis-a-vis Final Solution: Jewish Forced Laborers in the German Reich During the Final Stage of World War Two," PhD diss., University of Haifa, Haifa, November 2007, pp. 162-78.

42 Ibid., p. 16.

43 Musiol, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 321.

44 Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos*, p. 102.

prisoners who were brought from Dachau and housed in camps erected adjacent to the work sites were engaged in the construction of the plants. Four such satellite camps were erected for the Mühldorf project, while some twelve satellite camps were established near to Landsberg, Kaufering and Türkheim. From July 1944 onwards some 8,300 prisoners were brought to the Mühldorf camps, while some 30,000 were brought to the Landsberg and Kaufering camps, including approximately 3,000 women.⁴⁵

A total of 10,114 prisoners, predominantly Jews and including 1,093 women, were incarcerated in the Landsberg-Kaufering camps in the last week of April 1945.⁴⁶ Most were evacuated toward Dachau, either on foot or by train. The evacuation proceeded as follows: on April 24, 1945 a group of 1,500 prisoners left for Dachau, at first on foot and then by train; the previous day a group of 1,200 prisoners had left Türkheim camp on foot and joined the group that marched southward from Dachau. Some of the Kaufering prisoners arrived at Allach camp. On several occasions Allied aircraft attacked the trains transporting inmates from Kaufering to Dachau as well as the lines of marchers. In one of these attacks, directed against a military train loaded with ammunition for the front, a train standing alongside it carrying prisoners from Kaufering was hit and hundreds of Jewish prisoners were killed.⁴⁷

On April 25, 1945 there were 5,224 prisoners at the Mühldorf satellite camp, including 295 women. Some 3,600 of them were transported southward by train to the Alps.⁴⁸

Prisoners at the Allach Camp and Präzifix Plant

Some 2,000 inmates were dispatched southward on foot from Allach, near Munich, on April 27, 1945. An important camp for the German air force, Allach was established in February 1943 to provide skilled labor for the BMW aircraft plant, which produced fighter aircraft engines at this location. This camp housed some 5,000 prisoners who were employed in manufacturing the engines and in construction and maintenance work in the facilities. Most of the Allach inmates were skilled metal workers and had been brought to the camp from occupied Western Europe. During 1944 the camp was expanded when the adjoining Karlsfeld camp was annexed to it in order to facilitate the intake of 1,000 male and 1,000 female Jewish prisoners, who were engaged in the

45 Ibid., pp. 147, 148.

46 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 25.

47 Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos*, p. 274.

48 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 27.

construction of an underground bunker that would serve to expand production. In April 1945, subsequent to the evacuation of the Landsberg-Kaufering area prisoners, the number of inmates in the camp swelled to 10,000 or more.⁴⁹ On April 27, 1945 about 2,000 prisoners were removed from the camp on foot and were merged with a body of prisoners that had set out from Dachau the previous day. The two groups met up in Lautstetten and continued southward from there.⁵⁰

Among the inmates evacuated on foot southward from Dachau on April 26 was a group of 180 German prisoners who worked at the Präzifix plant, which operated within the camp.⁵¹ Hundreds of craftsmen, residents of the town of Dachau, worked at this facility every day.⁵² It was one of twelve factories that operated in the town of Dachau and within Dachau camp, and between 356 and 400 inmates were employed in them, producing parts for the German air force's speedy fighter airplanes, as well as performing construction work and skilled maintenance. The German inmates employed in the plant were treated well and given time off on holidays, and some of them developed social relationships with the families of work colleagues who lived in the town.⁵³ To ensure that they did not escape, the prisoners belonging to "Kommando Präzifix" wore civilian clothes that bore special identification marks. On the first day they marched at the end of the column of marchers, closely guarded by Luftwaffe personnel, who wore SS uniforms and carried automatic weapons. The group was given a horse-drawn cart on which they loaded the prisoners' belongings and the meager supply of food that they had received as provisions for the journey.⁵⁴

Prisoners from München-Riem, München-Giesing and Ottobrunn Camps

During the final days of the war, other male and female prisoners incarcerated in two work camps in the eastern part of Munich were likewise evacuated southward on foot. They comprised 1,543 Russian prisoners held in München-Riem and 539 female

49 "Aussenlager Allach," www.hdbg.de/dachau/pdfs/10/10_02/10_02_02/.

50 Wagner *Todesmarsch*, pp. 38-9.

51 See the testimony of Karl Weber in Hitzer (ed.), *Vom Ende und vom Anfang des zweiten Weltkrieges*, p. 90.

52 Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*, pp. 42-3.

53 See Weber's testimony in Hitzer (ed.), *Vom Ende und vom Anfang des zweiten Weltkrieges*, p. 90.

54 Ibid.

prisoners from various countries held in München-Giesing. The München-Riem camp was established in September 1944 on the premises of the SS's riding and driving school, and the Russian prisoners held there were employed in the construction of an airfield that served the central research institute of the German air force at Ottobrunn, southeast of Munich. München-Riem's prisoners enjoyed better living conditions than those at many other work camps. On April 25, 1945 columns of Russian prisoners were photographed as they were marched down the main street of the small town of Grünwald. In the photographs, the prisoners look healthy and vigorous marchers, in no way resembling the prisoners of the Jewish camps who marched along parallel routes.⁵⁵ München-Giesing camp was established in October 1944 at the Agfa-Kamerawerk plant in the neighborhood of Giesing. The female prisoners incarcerated there were employed in fine mechanical work. The camp was evacuated at the end of April when the inmates were marched southward. German prisoners marched along the same route testified that during the night of April 30 they met the women prisoners in a ravine in a forest near the village of Königsdorf.⁵⁶

A total of 337 non-Jewish inmates of Ottobrunn camp, located eight kilometers southeast of Munich, marched southward. The inmates of this camp were engaged in erecting the installations of the central research institution of the German air force, which was established in Munich.⁵⁷ This institute was charged with the task of initiating, collecting and applying new ideas and technological innovations for the development of novel fighter planes equipped with supersonic jet engines for the German air force. Munich was chosen as the site for the research institute since it was considered to be safe from air raids and because of the academic institutions located there, whose scientists were employed on aerodynamic research at the institute. The institute's installations, and primarily the two and three-meter diameter wind tunnels (*Windkanäle*) were constructed adjacent to the village of Ottobrunn, near Munich. A small airfield was also built nearby the village, and the inmates of München-Riem camp were employed in its construction.⁵⁸

55 "Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal," p. 27, www.gz-tm-dachau.de/6.2.1.html.

56 See the testimony of Paul Deumlich in Hitzer, *Vom Ende und vom Anfang des zweiten Weltkrieges*, p. 82; Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 54; "Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal," p. 28.

57 The name of the research institute was Luftfahrtforschungsanstalt München-LFM.

58 Wolf, *Im Zwang für das Reich*, pp. 7-11.

Ottobrunn camp, established in May 1944, initially housed 350 inmates. This number subsequently grew to 900. These were mainly political prisoners from various European countries, but also prisoners of war and inmates evacuated from the satellite camps of the central concentration camp of Natzweiler-Struthof. On May 1 a group of inmates was evacuated southward on foot from Ottobrunn camp. Two days later, before it had got very far, the group was liberated 45 kilometers south of Ottobrunn in the resort town of Bad Wiessee, on the shores of Tegernsee.⁵⁹

The data uncovered thus far indicate that some 30,000 male and female prisoners, both Jews and non-Jews, were led southward in the final days of World War Two in Europe. Some marched on foot while others traveled by train in the area extending from the central Dachau concentration camp, located north of Munich, to the Inn River valley in the heart of Austria's Tyrolean Alps. These prisoners were carefully selected from among the inmates of the Dachau camps, and their common characteristic was that they had all worked on air force projects in the service of large industrial concerns such as Messerschmitt, BMW, Heinkel, and Daimler-Benz, which were all manufacturers of innovative fighter planes.

The Death Marches and Train Transports in Upper Bavaria in Late April 1945

The topography of the area through which the marches and transports passed and the situation on the war fronts affected their routes, their conduct, and the fate of the prisoners. The death marches described in this article took place in upper Bavaria, the southern part of that state, in an area extending from Dachau camp in the north to the Inn River valley in Austria's High Alps, some 150 kilometers (93 miles) as the crow flies. The rural and urban settlements in this region were built around the area's many lakes, and roads ran along their shores. Movement through the high plateaus and the High Alps is possible only along transportation routes constructed through the river valleys and along the shores of the large lakes.

The thousands of weak and famished prisoners who marched southward were confronted with the topographical barrier of Bavaria's high and scarred plateaus and the mighty wall of the High Alps range. In late April 1945 this area experienced extremely harsh weather, with high winds and heavy snowfalls adding to the prisoners' travails, impeding them, blocking their path and slowing their progress. A further factor

59 Ibid., pp. 37-8; "Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal," pp. 28-9.

affecting the passage of the parties southward was the situation on the war fronts. The commanders of the marches sought to keep the prisoners away from the Allied forces advancing from all sides and so prevent their liberation in order to complete the task entrusted to them: to lead the groups of prisoners southward, to the heart of the Alps in the Austrian Tyrol.

During the final days prior to Germany's surrender, as the Allies' three main forces attacked the remnants of the German army from the north, south and west, battles raged on the route along which the prisoners were led southward from Dachau toward Innsbruck in the Tyrol, in southern Germany and western Austria.⁶⁰

The transfer of the inmates, both by train and on foot, was conducted along the main artery connecting Munich in the north through the Brenner Pass to northern Italy.⁶¹ Along this main transport artery heavy battles were waged between the US Seventh Army and retreating German forces desperately attempting to halt the American advance. The battles in this area ceased only once the three Allied armies met up on May 4, 1945 in the center of the Tyrolean Alps.⁶² Up to this point, in the days prior to Nazi Germany's final surrender, the prisoners found themselves in the firing line of the battles being fought around them.

Presumably, the Germans had intended to convey the approximately 30,000 prisoners selected for transportation to the south by train, but this proved to be an impossible task during the final days of the war owing to the lack of railroad cars and locomotives, a lack of fuel to drive the locomotives, the bombing of the tracks by the Allies, and also because the trains were needed to convey military equipment, ammunition, and troops. Prisoners for whom available trains were found were conveyed southward in them, while the remainder were marched on foot under the close guard of SS units. These very soon became death marches.

Prisoners on Foot

At 9 p.m. on April 26, 1945, a group of 6,887 inmates set out from Dachau camp on a march to the south. The group comprised 1,213 Germans, 4,150 Russians and 1,524 Jews. As noted, 341 of the Jewish prisoners were women. That same day 1,759 Jews

60 *Report of Operations, The Seventh United States Army in France and Germany 1944-1945* (Heidelberg, 1946), vol. 3, pp. 814-37.

61 The Brenner Pass is the main thoroughfare through which the principal transport axes between German and Italy pass.

62 *Report of Operations*, pp. 848-51.

were put on trains and conveyed southward.⁶³ At 6 p.m., also on April 26, a group of some 2,000 non-Jews began a march southward from Allach camp, located to the south of Dachau.⁶⁴

The prisoners who set out from Dachau marched in three groups: at the head marched the Russians, followed by the Jews, with the German inmates bringing up the rear. The 9 p.m. contingent marched through the night in pouring rain, passing through the towns of Allach, Passing, and Gauting. At 11.00 a.m. the following morning they arrived at the village of Lautstetten, north of the town Starnberg, where the group was led into a forest which lay along the course of the Würm River. In the forest they met up with the prisoners from Allach, and on the evening of April 27, 1945 these two groups continued together on their way to the town of Starnberg and its lake.⁶⁵ At this point the proximity of Allied forces compelled the Germans to change the route. They decided to lead the prisoners along the eastern shore of Lake Starnberg instead of taking the shorter route along its western shore. The march continued through the village of Percha and then south along the lakeshore to the village of Berg where, for unknown reasons, the group was divided in two. A small number of prisoners continued southward in the direction of Münsing, while the main body passed through the town of Wolfrathausen and, on the morning of April 28, following a long night march, at a point some five kilometers south of the town, they – numbering, it seems, between 9,000 and 10,000 – were taken to a forest near the small village of Bolzwang. The halt in the forest was a long one and altercations between groups of prisoners broke out, as also did confrontations over authority between the SS, Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe officers. Hundreds of prisoners were shot by guards during the course of confrontations between them.⁶⁶

On the evening of April 30 the prisoners were marched out of the forest, leaving behind them 300 exhausted members of their party. The marchers were arranged five abreast in groups of a hundred, with each group accompanied by six armed guards. The Jewish prisoners marched at the front, followed by the German political prisoners, with the Russians in the rear.⁶⁷ The road led southward through the village of Eurasburg in

63 Berben, *Dachau 1933-1945*, p. 194. Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 26; “Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal,” p. 5.

64 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 39.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 41; see also Deumlich’s testimony in Hitzer, *Vom Ende und vom Anfang des zweiten Weltkrieges*, pp. 83-4.

67 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 51.

the direction of Bauerberg. The guards halted the march south of Eurasburg when they received reports that the US army was approaching. They turned the group back toward Eurasburg and then took a road leading east to a farm called Herrenhausen. From there the prisoners were led down into the Loisach River valley, reaching the bridges over the river and the canal beyond it. The German army had booby-trapped the bridges, and were preparing to demolish them in an attempt to halt the American advance. The guards drove the prisoners on so as to move the entire party across the river before the bridges were blown up, but the steep slope along which the road climbed to the hills beyond the canal slowed their progress. As a result, the charges were detonated while some prisoners were still on a bridge, killing and maiming many. The explosion split the party in two: the Jews and some of the Germans had crossed the bridge to the eastern side, while the Russian prisoners and the Präzifix Commando group – altogether some 3,000 individuals – were stranded on the western side. This latter contingent was marched northward to Bolzwang, where its members were liberated by the Americans on May 1, 1945.⁶⁸

The body of prisoners that crossed the bridges prior to their demolition advanced to Herrenhausen, where it was divided into two, one heading north and the other south. The former group marched along the road leading to the hills beyond the Loisach River, turning east through Schwaigewall to the town of Geretstried, and from there southward to the town of Königsdorf. The southern group skirted the village of Bauerberg to the east, from where it, too, marched to Königsdorf.⁶⁹ From there both groups continued southward, passed through the village of Kreut and reached Wolfsöd, close to the Rottach River late in the evening of April 30. That day the first contingent marched a distance of 28 kilometers (17 miles), while the second group covered a distance of 34 kilometers (21 miles).

The SS attempted to liquidate both groups in the Rottach River valley. By means of blows, shouted orders, and shots fired over their heads the prisoners were herded into a deep ravine where, to their surprise, they came across a group of female prisoners.⁷⁰ The ravine was extremely narrow and crowded. The prisoners managed to light bonfires for warmth but the German guards took up positions at the head of the slope,

68 Ibid., p. 51-2; “Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal,” p. 7.

69 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 53. This road was built on a wide swath of marshland, the Waldfilz marsh, to the north of Lake Kochel.

70 Ibid., p. 54.

overlooking the entire ravine.⁷¹ They fired into the bonfires and hit several prisoners. The identity of the women prisoners at the location, their number, their point of origin, and their ultimate fate remain unknown. Many parties of male and female prisoners were on the move in the area; some were exterminated by their guards and remain anonymous. A similar fate was intended for the group in the ravine.⁷² One of the guards subsequently testified that the prisoners had been driven into the narrow ravine with the intention of liquidating them all, and it was only due to the intervention of a German officer, a man by the name of Longin, who threatened the march commander with his gun, that the planned extermination was foiled. Herding of groups of prisoners into deep and narrow river beds in remote areas was the Germans' preferred method of extermination at this stage of the war; a method designed to conceal such atrocities from the local population. In the Rottach River ravine (which the prisoners called *Teufelschlucht*, meaning "Devil's Valley") there was no chance of survival. It had only one entrance, which was well guarded by the soldiers, and the weak prisoners were unable to scale its steep walls to escape.⁷³

The next day, May 1, 1945, the prisoners were taken out of Devil's Valley and, in jumbled, isolated groups, continued to march through the center of Bad Tölz. The weary, exhausted and famished prisoners were shivering from the cold after spending the whole night in the ravine under a heavy downpour that had precluded any chance of sleep. The train of captives passed through the town in extreme disorder and the prisoners began begging the townspeople for food. The guards lost all control and began to shoot prisoners in full view of the locals. The party then proceeded eastwards along the road leading to Lake Tegern (Tegernsee), a mountainous region with peaks reaching a height of 1,500 meters above sea level.⁷⁴ After passing through the villages of Greiling and Reichersbauern, the prisoners were herded into a pit known as *Fuchsloch* (foxhole), in a forest strewn with pebbles. Here they were given a small amount of food but suffered badly from the bitter cold and incessant, pouring rain that drenched them to their bones. Toward morning, on May 1, they were ordered to proceed to Waachkirchen, where they were quartered in warm, dry barns. They

71 Deumlich's testimony in Hitzer, *Vom Ende und vom Anfang des zweiten Weltkrieges*, p. 85.

72 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 55.

73 "Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal," p. 8.

74 The Low Alps serve as a passage between the Bavarian plains to the north and the High Alps (the Karwendelgebirge range) – whose peaks reach a height of 2,700 meters (8,858 feet) above sea level – to the south.

were liberated that same day by American troops.⁷⁵ A further party of prisoners, in all probability comprising Russians who had marched from the München-Riem camp through the town of Grünwald, was liberated the next day, May 2, in Rottach-Egern, on the southern corner of Tegernsee, as was yet another group of 300 prisoners whom American forces encountered in the village of Dürnbach, on the northern corner of the lake.⁷⁶

Hundreds of Jewish male and female prisoners who set out southward on foot from the Kaufering camps toward Bad Tölz reached Buchberg labor camp, some seven kilometers (about 4.5 miles) south of Wolfratshausen, on April 29.⁷⁷ This camp housed Russian and Ukrainian forced laborers as well as prisoners of war who worked in a local factory. Otto Moll, one of the notorious murderers of Birkenau camp, arrived together with the prisoners at the head of a contingent of 43 SS troops. Moll demanded of the camp commander that he hand over to him the newly-arrived Jewish prisoners, claiming that they were all designated for extermination. The camp commander refused, asserting that he had received orders to the contrary from officers of higher rank than Moll. In response Moll took between 120 and 150 male and female Russian prisoners from the camp, led them to a nearby wood, and massacred them.⁷⁸ The camp was liberated by the Americans the day after the massacre, on April 30.

From the outset, the marches from the Dachau camps to the Alps were characterized by considerable cruelty and by attempts to exterminate the prisoners. This is a puzzling phenomenon given the fact that these were selected groups of prisoners who possessed technical skills that were to be exploited for the Reich's war effort. The murderous nature of the marches stemmed from a lack of coordination between the officers of the German air force, who directed the convoys, and the SS units and their officers, who were charged with accompanying them. The contradictory testimonies of the SS guards suggest that they had no clear idea of the purpose of the marches and their destinations, and that they surmised, from their experience, that the ultimate objective

75 "Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal," p. 8.

76 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 58.

77 *Ibid.*, pp. 59-62.

78 The description of the incident and massacre at Buchberg camp rests upon the testimonies of many prisoners as they appear in Wagner's book. See the testimony of Leon Kliegerman (July 14, 1948), Yad Vashem Archive [hereafter YVA], M-1/2439; the testimonies of Keller Erzsébet and Ádám Károlyné (July 22, 1945), YVA, O.15/1491; the testimony of Josef Kohs, YVA, M-1/2469; and testimonies delivered at the trial of Moll, who was sentenced to death. See *ibid.*, pp. 64-6.

of the marches was to exterminate the prisoners in remote locations, in deep ravines concealed from the local residents. The confrontations and incidents between the air force officers and the officers of the guard units during the stopover at Bolzwang and in Devil's Valley, and the grave incident at Buchberg camp involving Otto Moll, lend substance to this explanation.



Prisoners marching through the town of Grünwald on April 29, 1945.

Source: "Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal – Dachauer Dokumente."

Prisoners on Trains

Utter chaos reigned in the battle zone during the final days of the war, which explains the lack of documentation of the movements of the trains that conveyed the prisoners and of the orders issued to the German troops who accompanied the transports and marches and guarded the prisoners. The paucity of prisoner testimonies likewise precludes precise reconstruction of transport routes, dates, and exact estimates of the number and composition of the prisoners conveyed. Yet, despite the lack of records, we know with certainty about two principal transports, each made up of several trains. One of these originated at Mühldorf and the other at Dachau. These two transports met up in Munich, from where they proceeded southward along the same route through Seehaupt-Wolfratshausen to Tützing. From there, Dachau prisoners continued southward by way of Murnau, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and Mittenwald, entered Austrian territory, and reached Seefeld near Innsbruck, in the Inn River valley.

A total of 5,334 prisoners, most of them Jewish and including 295 women, were incarcerated at the Mühldorf camps on April 25.⁷⁹ That evening between 3,600 and 4,000 of these prisoners were put on a train at the local railway station. Two days later they reached the town of Poing, 15 kilometers (9 miles) east of Munich, where they were told that they were free, since the war was about to end.⁸⁰ The prisoners began to disperse in search of food, but shortly thereafter German air force officers and personnel appeared, and with the help of SS troops returned the prisoners to the rail cars and the train continued on its way to Munich.⁸¹ There it was divided into two sections, each of which took a different route. The first traveled through the town of Wolfratshausen to Bichl in an attempt to reach the Tyrol, but for fear of the approaching American army it was redirected northward to the town of Seehaupt. There, on April 29, the train was attacked by American planes and many of the prisoners were killed or wounded. From Seehaupt the train continued northward and the passengers who remained were liberated the next day by the Americans.⁸²

The second train traveled southward from Munich to the station in the town of Kochel on Lake Kochel (Kochelsee) which, because of topographical constraints, was the final station on this railway line.⁸³ The plan was to convey the prisoners further by truck,⁸⁴ but since the trucks failed to arrive it was decided to continue the journey on foot. Those prisoners too weak to walk were put back on the train, which was directed back north along the route it had traveled to Kochel. This train eventually reached Seehaupt, where its passengers were liberated by the Americans on April 30, 1945.⁸⁵

The prisoners remaining in Kochel, whose number is unknown, set out south on an arduous journey by foot. The only testimonies relating to this journey are those of residents who saw the prisoners passing by in several groups of various sizes. Their route can be reconstructed according to these testimonies. The town of Kochel lies on

79 Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos*, p. 274.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 275; Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 79.

81 Ernst Israel Bornstein, *Die Lange Nacht* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), p. 239.

82 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 83.

83 "Kochel (Endstation Isartalbahn)" in "Quellenanalyse Todesmarsch von Dachau – Gedenken in Würmtal," p. 33.

84 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, p. 83; Albrich and Dietrich, "Todesmarsch in die 'Alpenfestung,'" p. 33.

85 Wagner, *Todesmarsch*, pp. 78-82; Raim, *Die Dachauer KZ Aussenkommandos*, p. 275.

the north-eastern shore of Kochelsee, 600 meters above sea level. A steep mountain road winds its way from there to the south in a series of sharp bends toward Walchensee. The exhausted prisoners were obliged to contend with a climb of 200 meters up a steep slope between the two lakes. Further along the route the prisoners marched through the villages of Wallgau and Krün, along the western shore of Lake Isar, and then, on April 29, having covered twenty kilometers, they reached the town of Mittenwald,⁸⁶ which had become a transit point for numerous parties of prisoners flowing into it from all directions.⁸⁷ On the same day the Americans cut the railway line connecting Munich with Innsbruck at a point between Weilheim and Garmisch-Partenkirchen, thereby bringing to an end the train transports of prisoners from Dachau to the Alps. The trains that succeeded in reaching Seefeld could not continue southward since the line had been bombed close to the village of Reith, some three kilometers south of Seefeld, and had ceased to function.

There is no precise record of the number of trains that left Dachau on their way to the south during the last week of April 1945, nor of the number of prisoners transported on them. In his detailed testimony, the prisoner Israel Weiss⁸⁸ spoke of “several thousands of Jews” who left Dachau on April 23 by train for the Tyrol. There is also the testimony of Johann Schöpp, an SS guard on a train that conveyed some 1,800-1,900 prisoners to Seefeld in the direction of the Ötz Valley (Ötztal).⁸⁹ Further testimonies were submitted by survivors of a group of 131 prisoners that left Dachau on April 25 and arrived in Seefeld after a two-day journey.⁹⁰ The SS operative Hugo Lausterer who, according to his testimony, accompanied a prisoner train that arrived at Dachau on April 22 and parked next to the camp for three days without letting the prisoners off, testified that this train carried some 1,700 prisoners. It left Dachau on April 26 and reached Seefeld by way of Garmisch two days later.⁹¹

86 Albrich and Dietrich, “Todesmarsch in die ‘Alpenfestung,’” p. 33.

87 Roland Kaltenecker, *Operation “Alpenfestung,”* p. 274; Christian Hallig, *Festung Alpen – Hitlers Letzter Wahn* (Freiburg: Herder Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989), pp. 23, 26.

88 The testimony of Israel Weiss (June 10, 1947), YVA, 1220/1183, pp. 14-5.

89 Albrich and Dietrich, “Todesmarsch in die ‘Alpenfestung,’” p. 22.

90 Schwartz, “Military Industry vis-à-vis Final Solution,” p. 200; testimony of Tsvi Henig (June 15, 1995), YVA, O.3/8331, p. 46; testimony of Ignatz Serulowitz (July 28, 1945), YVA, O.15/1659.

91 Albrich and Dietrich, “Todesmarsch in die ‘Alpenfestung,’” pp. 23-4.

It would thus appear that the transports that succeeded in reaching the south before the Americans disconnected the track were those that arrived at Seefeld station between April 27 and 28. The Germans continued to strive by all means to bring their prisoners to the predetermined destination between April 28 and May 1. However, once the railway line was cut south of Seefeld and it became impossible to continue the journey, the Germans decided to lead the prisoners toward the destination on foot. But since this, too, proved impossible there was no longer any point in holding the prisoners and the decision was made to return them northward to Bavaria and there to exterminate them. The mountainous area between Garmisch-Mittenwald-Scharnitz-Seefeld and the Isar River valley became a death trap for thousands of prisoners, most of them Jews.

The fate of the Jewish prisoners is described both in the detailed testimonies of survivors and in the testimonies of local residents through whose towns and villages the prisoners were marched. These testimonies enable us to retrace the directions taken by the death marches during the final three days of the war in this area, and they shed light on the fate of many of the prisoners who participated in them.

Israel Weiss's contingent of several hundred prisoners arrived at Seefeld station on April 28 following a journey of several days from Dachau.⁹² Upon reaching Seefeld, the prisoners were removed from the railroad cars and led to an open field east of the town on the bank of the Hagelbach River. Toward evening the prisoners were removed from this resting place and led on a strenuous march to the small village of Mösern, some six kilometers south of Seefeld, which stands at the head of a steep cliff above the Inn River valley. Given their poor physical condition, the prisoners found the ascent to Mösern difficult in the extreme. It took them a long time and many died on the way. Upon arrival at the village some of the prisoners were put up in barns while others passed the night in the open, in the freezing cold. The following day, April 29, the party was led back to Seefeld station, where a short train awaited them, with insufficient cars for the entire group. Some of the prisoners were put on the train, which set out northward to the town of Mittenwald, over the Austrian border. The train then returned and made several trips, until most of the prisoners had been transported from Seefeld.⁹³ The prisoners were taken off the train in an open area between Scharnitz

92 Testimony of Israel Weiss (June 10, 1947), YVA, 1220/1183, p. 15.

93 Ibid., p. 16. The prisoners were conveyed out of Austrian territory upon the order of the *gauleiter* of Tyrol, Franz Hofer, who was apprehensive of involvement in the crime of exterminating Jews in his region in the final days of the Nazi regime. See Albrich and Dietrich, "Todesmarsch in die 'Alpenfestung,'" p. 26.

and Mittenwald where they were ordered to enter the narrow and deep course of the Isar River while the armed guards took up position above them on the river banks. Prisoners who attempted to escape by swimming were shot by the guards.⁹⁴

Israel Weiss described the events of that night in the river channel in detail: during the night a heavy snowstorm created extremely difficult conditions for the prisoners. From afar one could hear the echoes of explosions and the bombardments of the combatants; groups of German soldiers passed by on the road in a disorderly retreat. In the middle of the night a German woman was seen speaking to the guards' commander. The two left the location and, realizing that their commander was not going to return, the guards decided to run away as well. When they saw that the guards had disappeared, the prisoners climbed out of the river bed and began to disperse in all directions, some seeking shelter and refuge in the buildings in the fields of the valley, while others proceeded to the area south of Scharnitz and Mittenwald in search of food. Some wandered aimlessly, or along the road. All this took place amid the tumult of German army units retreating from every direction in the face of American forces. On the day before the Americans arrived numerous prisoners died of hunger and weakness or were shot by Germans passing along the road. Most of the prisoners in this group, however, were liberated by the Americans at various locations in the area on May 1, 1945.⁹⁵

There are testimonies about an additional train carrying 800 prisoners from Dachau that made it to the German army's railway station on the outskirts of Mittenwald. This party of prisoners was seen marching southward in the streets of Mittenwald on April 30, 1945. The prisoners marched five abreast, accompanied by an SS officer and some 30-40 Waffen-SS troops. Christian Hallig described the sight of hundreds of famished prisoners marching in a freezing wind dressed in thin prisoners' garb.⁹⁶ These prisoners were led in a southerly direction, to the islands in the Isar River valley, with the intention of there starving or freezing them to death. The guards of this party likewise deserted their posts on the night of April 30, and the prisoners in this group were also liberated by the US army on May 1, 1945, on the road leading from Mittenwald to Scharnitz.⁹⁷

Other prisoners have offered accounts of the tragic fate of a group that was exterminated almost in its entirety a day before the American forces arrived. This

94 Testimony of Israel Weiss (June 10, 1947), YVA, 1220/1183, p. 16.

95 Ibid., p. 20.

96 Christian Hallig, *Festung Alpen* (Freiburg: Herder Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989), p. 20.

97 Ibid., pp. 31-134, 103.

was a contingent of 131 prisoners that reached Garmisch by train on April 26, 1945, continuing on to Seefeld. The prisoners were taken off the train and lined up in the square in front of the station building. A light, cold rain was falling incessantly and the prisoners crowded along the walls of the building seeking protection from the rain. A detachment of 25 armed German soldiers commanded by an SS officer surrounded the group and everyone waited for instructions regarding the continuation of the journey. After a short while the guards learned that the train could not continue the journey because the line between Seefeld and Innsbruck had been severed.⁹⁸ An SS officer who arrived at the railway station announced to the group that they would proceed from there on foot. The prisoners began to march westward in the direction of Kirchwald. About two hours later, having covered some 3.5 kilometers (2 miles), they arrived at Mösern.⁹⁹ They prepared to spend the night in a large warehouse, lying in their wet clothes on a cold stone floor without mattresses or blankets. The warehouse was, however, well-insulated and kept out the wind, and the villagers provided the prisoners with hot soup. In the morning they were awoken early and forced out of the warehouse into the bitter cold where, with the Inn River valley spread out below them, they prepared to go on.

The Jews lined up three abreast and began to walk. It now transpired that they were being led northward, back to the German border, which they had crossed in the opposite direction only the day before. They crossed the Austrian-German border at the Scharnitz crossing point, and on the evening of April 28 the party reached Mittenwald, stopping on an exposed patch of land in the Isar River course.¹⁰⁰ Twenty-five German guards, commanded by an SS officer, took up positions along the river bank above the prisoners, on both sides of a path leading to the patch on which the prisoners were resting. The guards were equipped with machine guns, rifles, and a large quantity of ammunition.¹⁰¹

Night fell, but the snow on the mountain tops and slopes reflected some light onto the surroundings. The silhouettes of the guards and their posts were clearly visible, as were their movements and the changing of the guards. Later that night the prisoners became aware that the water in the river was rising rapidly and they realized, to their horror,

98 Testimony of Ignatz Serulowitz (July 28, 1945), YVA, O.15/1659.

99 Ibid., p. 45.

100 Testimony of Ignatz Serulowitz (July 28, 1945), YVA, O.15/1659, section 0.15; testimony of Emerich Klein (July 21, 1945), YVA, O.15/1725.

101 Testimony of Eli Berger (July 15, 1945), YVA, M-1/E/1521, p. 7.

that they had been pushed into a death trap from which they had no hope of extricating themselves. The Germans had sealed the dam on the collection lake downstream from the prisoners' position in order to drown them as water filled the channel.¹⁰²

In an attempt to escape, some of the prisoners leaped into the freezing river and swam with the strong current, while the Germans fired shots from time to time over the heads of the remaining prisoners to goad them into the turbulent and icy water. The number of prisoners on the island steadily dwindled, and as the surface area of the island diminished and the distance to the bank grew, the prisoners gradually went under. Silence fell as the gunfire ceased, and eventually the prisoners who remained on the remaining patch of dry land deduced that the guards were gone. The guards seem to have concluded that the extermination project had been completed and chose to make a quick getaway. They shed their uniforms and mingled with the local population so as to pose as innocent civilians, fearing that they would fall into the hands of the soldiers of the approaching US army.¹⁰³

A total of 16 surviving Jews, out of the original 131, reached the nearby village of Krün on the western bank of the Isar River the next morning, April 29. Most of the villagers were working in the fertile fields of the river valley and nothing in the pastoral atmosphere gave an inkling of the atrocity that had been committed close by the previous evening. Two days later, on May 1, 1945 the survivors assembled in a small square in front of the church at the village center to welcome the American troops who liberated them.

This group of 131 Jews was not the only group to make its way on foot from Seefeld railway station to the village of Mösern. Local residents testified that further groups of prisoners arrived at the village on April 28 and April 29, stayed overnight, and continued the next day to the town of Telfs. Telfs is an important junction in the Inn Valley and the American troops penetrated into the heart of the Tyrol along the major transportation arteries that converge in the town.¹⁰⁴ Several groups of prisoners accompanied by guards arrived in Telfs. The largest of these numbered "several hundred prisoners,"¹⁰⁵ but small groups comprising only tens of prisoners that

102 Four testimonies corroborate this description of the death trap in the river bed: Tsvi Henig, June 15, 1995, YVA, O.3/8331, pp. 46-7; Emerich Klein, July 21, 1945, YVA, O.15/1725, p. 3; Eli Berger, July 15, 1945, YVA, M-1/E/1521, p. 7; Eliezer Schwartz, "Military Industry vis-à-vis Final Solution," p. 207.

103 Testimony of Eli Berger, July 15, 1945, YVA, M-1/E/1521, p. 7.

104 *Report of Operations*, p. 841.

105 Albrich and Dietrich, "Todesmarsch in die 'Alpenfestung,'" p. 40.

reached the location from the north via the village of Buchen, west of Mösern, were also observed.¹⁰⁶ The prisoners who descended in groups from the mountains to Telfs passed through the town's main streets, crossed the Inn River by way of the bridge that spans it and reached Pfaffenhofen railway station.¹⁰⁷ There, on May 1, 300 prisoners were put on a train and conveyed to the town of Haiming, 15 kilometers (9 miles) west of Telfs.¹⁰⁸ The fact that this party of prisoners was put on a train and transported westward provides evidence that, after the railway line between Seefeld and Innsbruck had been severed, the Germans attempted to circumvent the stretch where the line had been cut by leading the prisoners on foot through Mösern and Telfs. They still sought to convey the prisoners by train to the west, to the intended final destination. Local residents reported that on May 1 two large trucks carrying 200 prisoners arrived from Mauthausen camp to the village of Thanrain, some six kilometers (nearly 4 miles) west of Telfs.¹⁰⁹ The prisoners, in a dreadful physical state, were put up in the village and on the following day continued westward to an unknown destination.

The prisoners who arrived in Haiming on May 1 continued on foot for three kilometers to the west to Ötztal Bahnhof. On May 3 and May 4 some 2,000 non-Jewish forced laborers and about 300 Jewish prisoners crowded into the village, awaiting the arrival of the Americans.¹¹⁰ The former were Italians, Poles, Czechs and Ukrainians who had worked on construction of a military plant and had been housed in work camps in Haiming and in the village of Riedern, nearby their place of work. The Jewish prisoners were put up in empty railway coaches parked in the station at Ötztal Bahnhof. On the afternoon of May 4, troops of the 44th infantry division of the US army arrived and liberated them.¹¹¹ The American troops had advanced southward from the direction of Garmisch through the Fernpass mountain pass and had penetrated into the heart of the Austrian Tyrol Alps. The American and the French Allied armies met up in the Vorarlberg region, thereby completing the liberation of western Austria up to the Swiss border. The ceremony of unconditional surrender by the German forces in western Austria to the American and French forces was held on May 5, 1945 in Innsbruck Town Hall.¹¹²

106 Ibid., p. 40.

107 Ibid., p. 42.

108 Ibid., p. 45.

109 Ibid., p. 44.

110 Ibid., p. 45.

111 Ibid., p. 46.

112 *Report of Operations*, p. 848.

The Final Destination

Ötztal railway station was the southernmost point reached by Jewish prisoners who were taken south from Dachau and its satellite camps. Building materials for the construction of an important security project for the German air force – the eight-meter-diameter wind tunnel project that was under construction nearby – were unloaded at this station.¹¹³ Thousands of prisoners from Dachau, both Jews and non-Jews, carefully selected by the German air force command for their professional skills, were due to be brought to this location as part of the effort to complete this vital project. The task of building the wind tunnels was assigned to the aerodynamic research institute at Ottobrunn, near Munich. Two wind tunnels were built at the Ottobrunn institute, one of a diameter of two meters, the other of three meters. But these did not meet the requirements of the producers of the Heinkel and Messerschmitt planes, who demanded the construction of wind tunnels of eight meters in diameter for the development of innovative fighter planes.¹¹⁴ It was impossible to construct such large wind tunnels at Ottobrunn because of the immense dimensions of the installations, because of their high consumption of electricity, which could not be provided by the Finsing power station that supplied Munich, and because of the extremely high level of noise they would generate, prohibitive for an urban residential area. It was therefore decided to construct the tunnels in the Ötz Valley.¹¹⁵

113 Wind tunnels (*Windkanäle*) are the most significant and important tool used in aerodynamic trials designed to analyze and forecast the aerodynamic forces affecting scaled-down models of newly-planned aircraft during flight. No way has yet been found to calculate these forces solely on a theoretical basis using the laws of physics. Despite years of experience in producing aircraft, advanced flight projects demand thousands of hours of trials in wind tunnels, as well as a complete series of trials of theoretical models. Wind tunnels enable engineers to perform trials in controlled conditions to produce aerodynamic data and enable accurate forecasting of the singular characteristics and of the achievements and efficiency of innovative aircraft. The models are exposed to air flows of different force and speed artificially generated in the tunnels and the results measured. See Werner Heinzerling, “Windkanäle,” in Ludwig Bolkow (ed.), *Ein Jahrhundert Flugzeuge: Geschichte und Technik des Fliegens* (Düsseldorf, 1990), pp. 304-5; Helmut Trischler, “Aeronautical Research under National Socialism: Big Science or Small Science?” in Margit Szöllösi (ed.), *Science in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p. 84.

114 Horst Boog, *Die Deutsche Luftwaffenführung 1935-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlag – Anstalt, 1982), p. 70.

115 Wolf, *In Zwang für das Reich*, p. 13.

An area of 250,000 square meters (62.5 acres) east of the village of Bahnhof Ötztal at the foot of Mount Amberg was leveled for the construction of such a wind tunnel,¹¹⁶ which would have been the largest installation of its kind in the world at the time.¹¹⁷ The whole of Mount Amberg became a construction site, since the plant required the operation of a power station with a capacity of 88,000 kilowatts, and it was thus necessary to construct a hydroelectric power station nearby that would provide this quantity of electricity. The power station itself was planned for the foot of Mount Amberg's southern slopes. Two work camps were established in the vicinity of the site to accommodate some 2,000 non-Jewish forced laborers. The camps were erected on the outskirts of the town of Haiming and in the village of Riedern in the Inn Valley.¹¹⁸ Roads were laid on the leveled area, together with storage and parking areas; drainage and sanitary and industrial sewage systems were installed, as were lighting, communication, water and heating systems. A branch line from Ötztal station was constructed in order to convey building materials and the parts for the large machinery and extensive equipment that were assembled for the plant. Apart from the facility itself, administration, research and laboratory buildings were constructed on the site, as well as numerous workshops, living quarters for the researchers and professional craftsmen (and their families) who were to work there, and buildings for leisure activities for the plant's personnel.¹¹⁹ Construction of the entire plant was completed prior to the end of the war, but its trial run and operation never commenced because the power station was not completed. Construction of the power station and auxiliary tasks, together known as the Arge Stuibensperre project, were entrusted to two companies, one German and the other Italian. The two companies used large numbers of foreign workers. Owing to the severe shortage of building materials and both skilled and unskilled manpower, the contractors found it difficult to meet their deadlines.¹²⁰

116 The geographic location of the Ötz valley wind tunnel is 47°14'N 10°52'E; see also http://Geheimprojekte.at/t_oetztal.html, accessed Feb. 14, 2011.

117 Heinzerling, "Windkanäle," p. 319.

118 Albrich, and Dietrich, "Todesmarsch in die 'Alpenfestung,'" p. 46.

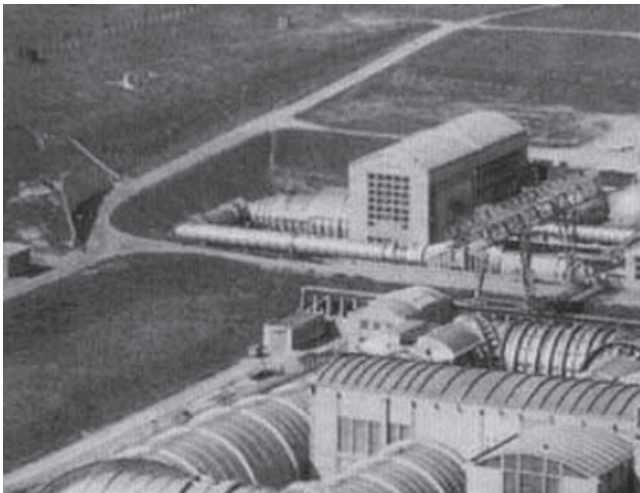
119 H.S. Tsien, H.L. Dryden, and F.L. Wattendorf, "Toward New Horizons, A multivolume report prepared for the AAF" (Dayton, Ohio: Publications Branch Intelligence, 1946), pp. 105-6; Gernot L. Geise, "Geheime Waffen, Geräte und andere Erfindungen im 2. Weltkrieg," www.efodon.de/html/archiv/geschichte/geise/geheimwaffen.pdf, accessed Feb. 14, 2011.

120 Wolf, *In Zwang für das Reich*, p. 11; "Windkanalanlage im Ötztal 1944," pp. 2, 5, www.Unterirdisch-forum.de/forum/archive/index.php/t-3329.html 08.01.2009, accessed Feb. 14, 2011.

The Germans sought to alleviate this manpower shortage by allocating thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners to the project. These workers were carefully selected from among the inmates of Dachau camp and its numerous satellite camps and conveyed southward by all means possible, which meant in practice by rail or on foot. The cruel marches under horrendous conditions soon became death marches. They were engendered by the German air force's desperate attempt to complete construction of the power station, which would have enabled it to operate the huge wind tunnels that had been erected on the Ötztal site. These were crucial for the completion of research on development of fighter planes and innovative weapons of war (*Wunderwaffen*) with which the Germans still hoped, even in its final days, to be able to turn the tide of the war in their favor.



The foundations of the installations for the wind tunnels in the Ötz Valley (Ötztal) in the Austrian Alps, under construction in 1943.
Source: DLR – Archiv Göttingen.



The wind tunnel installations at the entrance to the Ötz Valley (Ötztal) in the Tyrol toward the end of the war.
Source: Gernot L. Geise, "Geheime Waffen, Geräte und andere Erfindungen im 2. Weltkrieg."

Conclusions

Many scholars have considered the death marches during the final days of the war without arriving at a conclusive answer to the central question they present: what were the German objectives that, at such a late stage of the war, justified the complex logistic machinery that sought to move thousands of prisoners out of concentration and labor camps? With the German army in desperate need of manpower and supplies, what led the German command to allocate trains to transport the prisoners and so many troops to guard and accompany them? I have shown that the Germans intended to exploit these experienced slave laborers in order to complete the construction of a special security installation, the operation of which was intended to facilitate the development of innovative aircraft and weapons. My proof rests upon examination of the composition of the groups of prisoners selected for transportation to the south, examination of the routes of the marches and the transports, and identification of the destinations of the transports, as indicated by the most distant location reached by the prisoners.

The parties of prisoners conveyed southward from the Dachau camps were not chosen randomly. They were rather meticulously selected from the tens of thousands incarcerated in camps where they worked on air force projects, or comprised prisoners who were employed by the research and development institutes of the Reich air force. Some 25,280 prisoners were conveyed southward from the Dachau camps between April 23 and early May 1945. They included Jews (more than half the number), Germans, Russians, Poles and prisoners from other European countries; most of them were men and the minority women. Only one third of these prisoners were transported by train; the rest were marched on foot. The prisoners were weak to begin with, received no food throughout the marches, and wore poor clothing unsuited to the harsh weather prevailing on the mountainous Bavarian terrain. Furthermore, brutal guards killed any prisoner who became too weak to continue or collapsed. As a result, the marches became death marches.

Since the railway line near Seefeld was severed by Allied bombing, most of the prisoners who were still alive on April 28 did not reach their intended destination and were stranded several kilometers short of Innsbruck. Only 300 Jewish captives arrived there, on May 4, 1945, together with their American liberators.

Epilogue

At the end of World War II the wind tunnels of Ötztal were the second largest and second most important such project in the entire world.¹²¹ The installations remained intact and fell into the hands of the French army. They had not been damaged in the fighting since the area was taken by the Allies without a major battle. In 1946 the plant was dismantled by a contract company called Firma TLT – Turbo GmbH – Zweibrückern.¹²² The company then reconstructed the installations, machinery, technical equipment, research laboratories, the plant's shell, the site's administrative structures, and all the remaining parts of the facility in the Avrieux valley in the French Alps, which traverses the Savoy Alps and, like Ötztal in the Tyrol, is surrounded by mountain peaks rising to 3,000 meters above sea level. The Avrieux wind tunnels are located near the town of Modane, close to the French-Italian border, midway between Grenoble in France and Torino in Italy.

At the abandoned site in Ötztal only the concrete foundations remain, dispersed among the trees of the forest that has reclaimed the clearing. Nothing else indicates that there, near the confluence of the Inn River with its southern tributary the Ötz, beneath the northern slopes of Mount Amberg, stood wind tunnels that at the time, the end of World War II, were among the largest, most modern and most advanced in the world. Over a wide area on both sides of Mount Amberg one sees the concrete foundations of aqueducts, foundations of buildings and machines, and the foundations of a cable car and conveyors that connected the Ötztal cable car station with the power station constructed on the southern side of the mountain. Still remaining in the bowels of Mount Amberg are remnants of shafts and tunnels hewn in its heart in order to lead the water that was to serve the turbines of the large power plant intended to drive the installations of the wind tunnels.

Translation: Avner Greenberg

121 Heinzerling, "Windkanäle," p. 331.

122 "Windkanalanlage im Ötztal 1944," pp. 2, 5.