

THE EVACUATION OF THE STUTTHOF CONCENTRATION CAMP IN APRIL / MAY 1945 BY SEA TRANSPORT



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ISSN 1392-0588 (spausdintas)

ISSN 2335-8769 (internetinis)

<https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8769.85.3>

2026. 85

SUMMARY. The article examines the evacuation of prisoners from the Stutthof concentration camp by sea transport in April and May 1945, situating it within the rapidly deteriorating German military situation on the Eastern Front and in the Gdańsk–West Prussia region. It reconstructs the decision-making structures involving the Wehrmacht, SS, police, and civilian administration, as well as the implementation of the “Eva” evacuation plan. Particular attention is paid to the transfer of prisoners from Stutthof and its satellite camps to the Hel Peninsula, Mikoszewo, Neustadt, Lübeck Bay, Flensburg, Denmark, and other destinations, with detailed discussion of the transports aboard the vessels “Elbing,” “Zephyr,” “Wolfgang,” “Vaterland,” “Klaus,” “Breslau,” “Ruth,” and Landing Craft F 862.

The article demonstrates that the sea evacuation was not a humanitarian rescue operation, but rather a continuation of the violence of the concentration camp system under the chaotic conditions of the final phase of the war. Prisoners were transported in overcrowded vessels, without adequate food, water, sanitation, or medical assistance; some were murdered en route, others died from exhaustion, disease, or violence, while many perished during air raids or as a result of refused rescue. The author argues that the sea evacuation of Stutthof prisoners should be classified as a maritime form of the Death March, since concentration camp guards, the German Navy, police units, and other uniformed German forces contributed in various ways to the prisoners’ deaths, abandonment, and direct victimization.

KEYWORDS: Stutthof concentration camp, sea evacuation, Death March, Lübeck Bay, “Cap Arcona,” Nazi crimes.

The evacuation of prisoners from the Stutthof concentration camp took place in stages, each prompted by the deteriorating military situation on the German side.

Remarkably, the evacuation was carried out by sea transport. The following article presents the respective ship transports and describes the circumstances surrounding them.

When the region around the mouth of the Vistula became a military operations zone, the regional supreme commander of the German Forces, General Dietrich von Saucken, commanding the 2nd German Army, decided that the prisoners of the Stutthof Concentration Camp posed a security threat and had to be evacuated.¹ Since this measure affected the civilian sector, he had to reach an agreement with Gauleiter and Reich Defence Commissioner Albert Forster, who exercised dictatorial power over the civilian sphere in his military district XX Gdańsk West Prussia (Wehrkreis XX Danzig-Westpreußen).² Forster maintained close contact with Saucken and had stationed his command post railway train on Hel near von Saucken's bunker. Forster was prepared to agree. In 1944, he developed an organizational emergency concept in the event of an immediate threat from enemy forces. This framework was called "Eva" – Plan, "Eva" being short for "evacuation". The framework plan left it up to the heads of certain subordinate executive bodies to flesh out the details.

One of those was SS-General Fritz Katzmann, who commanded all SS and police forces in military district XX (Höherer SS und Polizeiführer im Wehrkreis XX).³ In matters of defence, the commander of the Stutthof Concentration Camp was subordinate to him. The staff of Camp Stutthof was tasked with preparing detailed written orders for evacuation marches, with the destination left open.

Urged by the rapid advances of the Soviet forces, Katzmann ordered on January 26, 1945, the prisoners of the Stutthof camp to be marched to Lauenburg (Łębork) on foot. Other means of transport were no longer at hand. The prepared orders were completed and implemented.⁴ Nevertheless, the preparations were completely inadequate. Around 11,500 prisoners set out on what would become a death march. On the third day, the weather deteriorated, with a snowstorm and severe frost. The plan to house the prisoners in the SS barracks in Lauenburg had to be abandoned because the Wehrmacht had confiscated the property. Mazuw, the

¹ Relevant decrees: "Erlass des Führers über die Befehlsgewalt in einem Operationsgebiet innerhalb des Reiches" and "Erlass des Führers über die Zusammenarbeit von Partei und Wehrmacht in einem Operationsgebiet innerhalb des Reiches", both of July 13, 1944. In *Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegführung 1939–1945. Dokumente Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht*. Ed. Walther Hubatsch. Frankfurt/Main, 1965, 296–300. Hitler had implemented the Reich Defense Commissioners in the military districts in September 1939 and entrusted only Gauleiter (district leaders of the Nazi-Party).

² Forster was arrested by the British army on May 27, 1945, and imprisoned at No. 3 Civil Internment Camp Fallingbomberg, later at No. 6 CIC Neuengamme. He was extradited to Poland, sentenced to death by the Supreme National Tribunal (Najwyższy Trybunał Narodowy) and executed in 1952 – see Schenk, Dieter. *Hitlers Mann in Danzig. Gauleiter Forster und die NS-Verbrechen in Danzig-Westpreußen*. Bonn, 2000.

³ Fritz Katzmann (Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer im Gau Danzig-Westpreußen und im Wehrkreis XX) since April 4, 1943, fled to the island of Fehmarn, adopted a false identity and was never tried in court – see Ruth Bettina Birn: *Die Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer. Himmlers Vertreter im Reich und in den besetzten Gebieten* (Düsseldorf 1986), 338.

⁴ Einsatzbefehl Nr. 3 der Kommandantur des Konzentrationslager Stutthof vom 25.1.1945 (partly reprinted in: Stutthof. *Das Konzentrationslager*, 289).

territorial commander of all SS and police forces in Pomerania (Höherer SS und Polizeiführer im Wehrkreis II), forbade the marching columns from entering the region under his command. This order was ignored. Forced to provide alternative accommodation, he could make only 13 small labor service barracks available.

The consequences were horrible. Only 7,000 prisoners reached their destination. Between 2,000 and 2,500 had died along the way or been shot by the guards.

By March 1945, the military situation of the Germans had deteriorated dramatically. The Soviet forces had encircled Königsberg (Kaliningrad, Russia), reached Gdańsk Bay, and conquered Marienburg (Malbork), 40 km east of Sztutowo. The German-controlled territory was limited to the Hel Peninsula and the Vistula estuary. As that marshy area was unfavorable for armored vehicles, the Soviet Army had refrained from advancing there.

THE VOYAGE OF *ELBING* AND *ZEPHYR* TO KIEL AND HAMBURG

Shortly before the liberation of Gdynia, the prisoners of the city's satellite camp were evacuated by sea.

The vessel "Elbing" carried 250 prisoners and 14 SS-men, including the commander of the subcamp, SS-Oberscharführer Josef Bock, to Hamburg, a trip which took four days.⁵ 239 inmates who were still alive upon arrival were sent to the Spaldingstraße sub-camp of the Neuengamme concentration camp. Later, during the second half of April 1945, the prisoners there were relocated to the POW-camp XB Sandbostel, in which a camp section was cordoned off for roughly 9,000 concentration camp prisoners.⁶ When British forces liberated Sandbostel on April 28, 1945, only a few prisoners from Gdynia had survived.

A second ship, the motor vessel "Zephyr," carried 368 prisoners and 20–30 German guards of the Kriegsmarine. Due to an accident, "Zephyr" left the convoy near Swinemünde (Świnoujście) and, sailing alone, reached Kiel roadstead on March 30.

After waiting for three days, the ship was permitted to enter the port. From there, the 356 surviving prisoners were taken to the Neuengamme main camp. Eight more prisoners died on the way.

During the subsequent evacuation of the Neuengamme concentration camp, the prisoners from the Gotenhafen satellite camp were taken to Sandbostel or onto the ships "Cap Arcona", "Thielbek", and "Athen" off Neustadt. Only a few survived. As is well known, "Cap Arcona" and "Thielbek" were sunk by the British Air Force, one of the world's greatest maritime disasters.

⁵ Grabowska, Janina. K. L. Stutthof: Ein historischer Abriss in Hermann Kuhn, ed.: *Stutthof: Ein Konzentrationslager vor den Toren Danzigs*. Bremen, 1995, 83.

⁶ Internet access <<https://www.stiftung-lager-sandbostel.de/>>.

On April 23rd, 1945, SS-Hauptsturmführer Ehle, Deputy Commander of the Stutthof Concentration Camp, received the order for the final camp clearance. SS-Oberscharführer Enns from the Staff at Stutthof was able to “say this so precisely because I personally answered the call of the 2nd Army”.⁷ SS-General Katzmann provided Ehle a company of gendarmes as auxiliary personnel.

According to a strength report dated April 21st, 1945, there were still 4,538 prisoners in the Stutthof camp.⁸ They were divided into two groups, one of which was marched on foot to Nickelswalde (Mikoczewo), while the other was transported there by narrow-gauge railway. Rail transport was intended for prisoners who were too weak to walk the 12 kilometres to Mikoczewo. Most of this group were Jewish women. On the bank of the Vistula, the prisoners were assigned a meadow as a waiting area.

SKETCH *ERINNERUNGS-SKIZZE*

The waiting area was marked “Lagerplatz des KZ”. To its left was a collection point for sick people, marked “Krankensammelstelle”. On the far left, the tracks and the railway station were drawn in. The SS had assigned a group of physically stronger prisoners to carry those who were unable to walk from the wagons to the waiting area. In the embankment area, SS guards murdered 71 people, including 21 seriously ill Jewish women, by shooting them in the neck.

How and when things would proceed was in the hands of the Wehrmacht’s Hel sea transport hub (Seetransportstelle Hela), headed by Major i.G. Udo Ritgen.⁹ Because anti-aircraft and anti-submarine defense were essential, ships were only allowed to sail in a suitably equipped convoy. These convoys were assembled outside the military harbour of Hel.¹⁰

⁷ Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abt. Rheinland in Duisburg, Ger_Rep_0118_02386, Testimony of Heinrich Enß of July 11, 1974.

⁸ Archive of the Museum of Stutthof (AMS), I-IIIb6. Rapporte über die Zahlenstärke des Lagers (strength reports). In Grot, E.: Evakuierung, unpaginert, footnote 53); Drywa, Danuta. Stutthof in Wolfgang. Ed Benz & Barbara Distel. *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, vol. 6, (Munich 2007), 518.

⁹ Ritgen, Udo. Der Flüchtlingstransport von der Halbinsel Hela nach dem Westen, 12.11.1952. (<http://doku.zentrum-gegen-vertreibung.de/archiv/oderneisse1/kapitel-6-1-1-9-9.htm> – 07.12.2020. Ritgen (19162010) headed the “Seetransportstelle Hela” (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Udo_Ritgen). After World War II, he belonged to the “Organisation Gehlen”, predecessor of the secret service of the Federal Republic of Germany, joined the Bundeswehr and rose to the rank of brigadier. His private papers are kept by the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv at Freiburg (Nachlass N 755).

¹⁰ There were two ports on the mainland side of Hel, one civilian and one military. In April/May 1945, the civilian port was used for landings and the military port for transports.

To transport the prisoners and others to be evacuated from Nickelswalde to Hel, around 20 landing craft (Marinefährrähme) operated a shuttle service. To avoid Soviet attacks from the air, the operation was only possible in darkness.¹¹

After a long wait, the prisoners were herded onto the ships in an inhumanly brutal manner. Due to the mass rush of evacuees, the guards were under time pressure.

SS men and gendarmes shouted at the prisoners and beat them with clubs. Some prisoners fell from the narrow landing stages into the water and were shot. Other prisoners were thrown into the hold and injured themselves and others.

On April 26th, 1945, three tug boats consisting of the inland vessels “Wolfgang” (the tugboat “Adler”), “Vaterland” (the tugboat “Bussard”), and “Klaus” (the tugboat “Danzig”), having prisoners from Stutthof on board, formed a convoy together with 18 other ships. The other vessels were cargo ships carrying civilian refugees, military personnel, or patients of field hospitals. Several warships, mostly armed trawlers, were detailed as escort.¹² The convoy commander, Lieutenant (Oberleutnant zur See) Schaecke, was on board the improvised gunboat (Artillerieträger) AF 31.

Due to bad weather and rough seas, the convoy was unable to stay together. The prisoner transport ships continued their journey on their own.

Landing Craft (Marinefährrähme) F 862 belonged to the 11. Landungs-Flottille, which operated the shuttle service between the Vistula estuary and Hel. On May 27 or 28, the ship’s captain was ordered to take a group of 510 persons on board, among whom were typhoid patients. The group would have to be taken to Świnoujście, and then the ship would have to be cleaned and disinfected before returning. As the commander of the flotilla, Korvettenkapitän Johannes Zaepernik came on board to travel along, it was clear to the crew that there would be no return. The ship was immediately placed under quarantine, and the yellow international quarantine signal flag was set.

On April 29th, 1945, the riverboat “Ruth”, towed by the icebreaker “Pregel”, followed.

THE VOYAGE OF *WOLFGANG* AND *VATERLAND* TO NEUSTADT/LÜBECK BAY

The convoys with the Vistula barges “Vaterland” and “Wolfgang” called at Stralsund, Saßnitz on Rügen, and Lübeck on their way to obtain provisions. This movement failed in Stralsund because the Red Army had advanced and was shelling the city.¹³

¹¹ Hubatsch, Walter. Flüchtlingstransporte aus dem Osten über See. Die letzten Geleitaufgaben der deutschen Kriegsmarine 1945. In *Ostdeutsche Wissenschaft. Jahrbuch des Ostdeutschen Kulturrates*, 9, 1962, 404–427.

¹² Frihedsmuseets arkiv, Copenhagen: Statement of Hans Christian Staub (1946), 22.

¹³ Final note (Schlussvermerk) of the prosecutor of Lübeck in the preliminary proceedings (Reference no.702 Js 2251/84) of 17.7.2015.

In the other ports, the harbour masters of the Kriegsmarine refused to allow them to enter as soon as they realised that concentration camp prisoners were on board.

In the late afternoon of May 2nd, 1945, the first convoy with “Vaterland” arrived off Neustadt. Gendarmerie Captain Otto Schmidt sent Gendarmerie First Lieutenant Thiel on the tugboat “Bussard” to the port of Neustadt to obtain food from the harbour master and to request a larger ship to accommodate the prisoners better.¹⁴

Given the scale of the problem, the garrison commander of Neustadt, senior commander Heinrich Schmidt (Fregattenkapitän), was notified. He prohibited entry into the harbour and ordered the ships to dock at “Cap Arcona”.¹⁵ Thiel returned after about an hour without having achieved anything and conveyed Schmidt’s further order that the guards should come ashore. In retrospect, this instruction, which left the prisoners to their own devices, seems completely inappropriate.

First, Gendarmerie Captain Otto Schmidt attempted to negotiate with the captain of “Thielbek” to allow the prisoners to transfer to the larger ship. The captain put him off until the next day. At around 9 p.m., Otto Schmidt and his subordinates were taken to Neustadt harbour as ordered. At the submarine school, he continued his efforts to negotiate an easier fate for the prisoners, but once again failed to achieve anything with the Kriegsmarine representatives. The administrative officer, who must have been Commander (Korvettenkapitän) Franke, then allowed the gendarmes to spend the night in the naval barracks.

Meanwhile, the Stutthof prisoners turned to the captains of “Cap Arcona” and “Thielbek”, but they refused to take them on board their ships and put them off until the next day.¹⁶ The Norwegian police officers among the prisoners then took the initiative to cast off the inland vessels’ lines, allowing them to drift ashore.

Prisoner Dora Rabinowitz reported: “We arrived at the village of Pelzerhaken at about 4 o’clock in the morning of 3rd of May 1945. The barge had grounded and we had to wade to the shore. I was one of the first ashore and I discovered some small rowing-boats lying on the beach. The three men, with whom I was, rowed the boats to the barge and started taking off those who were too weak to get ashore unaided. Whilst this was happening I went into the village of Pelzerhaken to see if I could find some food.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Deposition of Otto Schmidt, 10.1.1946. In TNA WO 309/851.

¹⁵ Deposition of Fregatten Kapitän Heinrich Schmidt, 6.1.1946. In TNA WO 309/1592. Erwähnt ist nur die “Cap Arcona”, nicht aber die “Thielbek”.

¹⁶ Final note (Schlussvermerk), see footnote 13.

¹⁷ Dora Rabinowitz Deposition, 30.12.1945, Production No 1. In TNA WO 309/851.

ALERTING THE POLICE, NAVY, AND VOLKSSTURM

Between 4:15 and 4:30 a.m., a security guard from the Pelzerhaken Radar Development and Testing Department reported to the barracks camp on Sandberger Weg, woke Lieutenant Commander (Kapitänleutnant) Ziemann up, and informed him that concentration camp prisoners had broken out and were looting heavily and were going to be slaughtered in the fields.¹⁸ Ziemann did not take any immediate action.

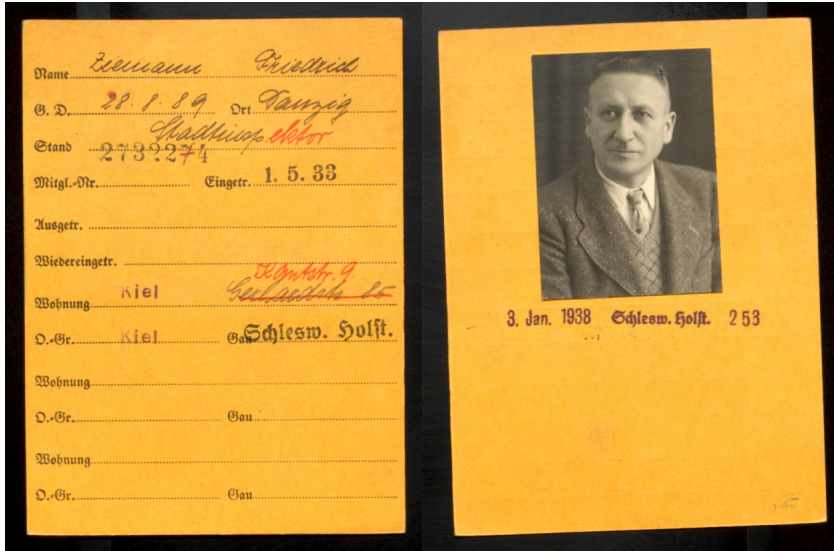


Figure 1. Ziemann (Nazi party membership card (held by the Federal Archive of Germany at Berlin-Lichterfelde)

Ernst Scheel, a “pilot from the pilot house”, telephoned the local police station to report that concentration camp prisoners were roaming around, that he feared an attack on his property, and that he was requesting assistance. Johannes Saß, district lieutenant (Bezirksleutnant), the police chief of Neustadt, was unable to send any officers and reported the matter to the mayor, the higher local police authority. The holder of this office at the time was Ernst Reicher. He turned to the submarine school, the Putlos military training area, the district administrator (Landrat des Kreises Oldenburg/Holstein), and other authorities for help or instructions.

Saß also contacted the leader of the Neustadt Volkssturm militia, Dr. Detlef Käsela, who had an office in the town hall. He ordered his two companies, each 40–50 men strong, to intervene in Pelzerhaken.

¹⁸ Deposition of Paul Schulze, 1.2.1946. In TNA WO 309/1592.

Käselau, a dentist and former captain in the Luftwaffe, called Wehrmacht commander Heinrich Schmidt between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m. to request assistance from the Kriegsmarine in preventing the concentration camp prisoners from advancing into the city centre.

Schmidt, according to Käselau's impression, wanted nothing to do with the matter and refused assistance, saying he had no forces available. In fact, the 12 companies of his school were stationed almost 40 kilometres away at the Putlos military training area. Heinrich Schmidt nevertheless instructed Lieutenant Commander Günther Reeder to work with the captains of the large prisoner ships to find accommodation for the concentration camp prisoners who had gone ashore. Among other things, Reeder sent a Kriegsmarine motorboat out to the steamer "Athen" with orders for "Athen" to moor in the port of Neustadt.

At around 7:30 a.m., Ziemann held the morning roll call on Sandberger Weg and, according to Hans Geist, a sergeant who was present at the time, told his troops that the concentration camp prisoners had already murdered a woman.¹⁹ Volunteers were needed to apprehend the prisoners and bring them to the market square.

Karl-Emil Gravenhorst, another participant in the roll call, also recalled that Ziemann had declared in front of the assembled troops that concentration camp prisoners had broken out and scattered across the countryside. They had already murdered women and children. Saying that the escaped concentration camp prisoners were subhuman and not worthy of life, Ziemann then formed groups to recapture the prisoners. In doing so, he ordered that any prisoner suspected of attempting to escape or offering resistance should be shot immediately. To this end, he had pistols and rifles issued from the armoury.²⁰

At around 8:15 a.m., as Sergeant Geist recalled, approximately 20 men set off in groups.

Prisoner Franz Talaska reported that marines and SS men had appeared on the beach at Pelzerhaken. A naval officer had fired a pistol into the air and then shouted loudly, ordering the prisoners to come forward and gather together. Other marines and SS men had immediately shot every prisoner without reason and without distinction.

Dora Rabinowitz, a prisoner at the Stutthof concentration camp, stated in her testimony that she heard the naval officer and a gendarmerie captain order their subordinates to board the inland vessels and kill the prisoners they found there.²¹

¹⁹ Deposition of Hans Geist vom 5.1.1946. In TNA WO 309/1592.

²⁰ Page 2 of an incomplete synopsis of case by the prosecutor at Lübeck, no date (1948). In 352.4 No. 7348.

²¹ Dora Rabinowitz Deposition vom 30.12.1945, Produthemction o 1. In TNA WO 309/851.

Gendarme Gustav Riehl later testified that approximately eight navy soldiers and SS men on each ship had been involved in these shootings on the shore.²² In its final memorandum of 2015, the Lübeck public prosecutor's office assumed that there were 77 murder victims on the barges.²³ This cannot be confirmed with certainty because the shooters threw the bodies into the water, which meant they could no longer be linked to this crime scene.

INTERVENTION BY THE WEHRMACHT COMMANDER

Back at the town hall, Dr. Käselau refused to be dismissed by the navy officials and turned to Schmidt's deputy, Lieutenant Commander (Kapitänleutnant) Paul Schultze. Now Commander Heinrich Schmidt changed his mind. He agreed to take the prisoners to the barracks sports field and instructed Lieutenant Commander Franke of the administrative department to have food provided for them. Commander Schmidt left the barracks from approximately 9:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. When he returned, he was informed that concentration camp prisoners were being shot on the other bank. The events had been observed from the barracks with binoculars. Heinrich Schmidt then sent Lieutenant Commander Reeder and two other officers to, as he stated, "put an immediate end to this madness by any means necessary, even the use of force". The emissaries drove to the scene of the crime by car and allegedly ended the use of weapons within 10 minutes. However, this can only have applied to a specific small group of perpetrators, as the killings continued in other places. Since the locations of the killings were widely scattered, it was not possible to obtain a uniform overview of the events.

After lunch, Commander Heinrich Schmidt went to the harbour to watch the arrival of "Athen." He then obtained the consent of the ship's captain to take the Stutthof prisoners on board.

Back at the barracks, Gendarmerie Captain Otto Schmidt reported the number of people who had gathered at the sports field: 1,850. Administrative officer Franke was ordered to provide food rations for six days.

²² Deposition of Gustav Riehl vom 2.2.1946. In TNA WO them barracks 09/851.

²³ Final note (Schlussvermerk), see footnote 13.

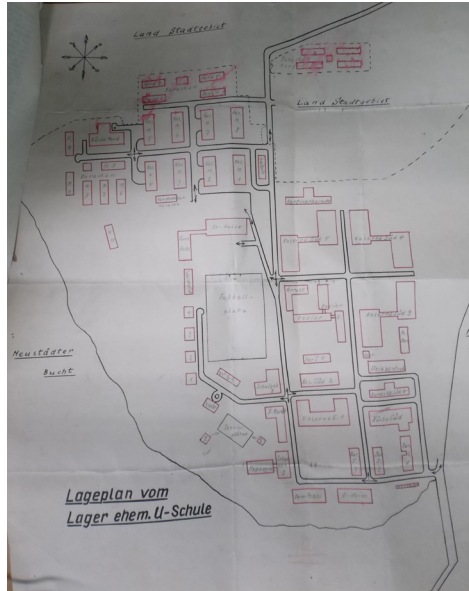


Figure 2. Map of the barracks (a site plan of the naval barracks at Neustadt, TNA WO 309/637)

THE RAF AIR RAIDS

At around 2:30 p.m., British fighter planes attacked the large ships “Cap Arcona,” “Thielbek”, and “Deutschland” off Neustadt. “Cap Arcona” was hit by at least 40 rockets with thermal warheads. The ship, which was carrying approximately 5,000 people, burned out and capsized. “Thielbek” sank within 15 minutes; only about 50 people survived. “Deutschland” was lost without any loss of life, as the ship was not yet occupied.

GERMAN RESCUE EFFORTS AND RESCUE REFUSAL

The rescue efforts were chaotic and lacked sustained commitment. After the surrender, the military harbor master of Neustadt, Lieutenant Commander Hille, confirmed to the Royal Navy that he had received orders from Commander Heinrich Schmidt during the air raid to send ships out on a rescue mission. “Two or three minesweeping boats lying at the other end of the harbor did put out to the rescue”.

The low level of force used is confirmed by the second officer of “Cap Arcona”, Domminget, and Ernst Scheel, a resident of Pelzerhaken who was involved in the rescue efforts himself. According to their recollections, only six ships and five to six

boats had sailed out to the shipwrecks: the tugboat “Aktiv”, three minesweepers, Gauleiter Kaufmann’s yacht “Störtebeker”, and a barge.²⁴

The deployment of such weak forces is surprising, given that Neustadt Bay was a refuge for many warships of the disbanding German Navy.

Several witnesses reported that the bay was still being targeted by Royal Air Force aircraft, whose cannons and machine guns were firing at the rescue vessels and the shipwrecked. There was therefore also reason not to participate in the rescue operation for self-protection.

One of the shipwrecked prisoners saved by the German navy was Grigorij Nikolajewitsch Kulbaka. Holding on to flotsam, he saw a motorboat with young sailors in navy uniforms on board coming nearer. They handed him a boat hook, but he was already so frozen that he couldn’t reach out to grab it. The waves pushed him away from the boat, so the sailors had to come back a few times. They helped him to reach the steps and climb aboard. On the boat, he crawled under a bed to recover. The cold had left his body shaking violently. The boat was already filled with naked people sitting in every corner. All of them were able to disembark at the port.

After a while, probably on orders, the German Navy’s rescue vehicles refused to take on any more prisoners. Only those wearing German uniforms were rescued.

Waldemar Jess, machine operator (Maschinenobergefreiter) on the minesweeper R220, reported: “On the way to the Cap Arcona, I saw many shipwrecked people calling for help. We could see from their clothing ... that they were prisoners, which was reported to the commander. The commander then gave the order not to rescue any prisoners. Some members of the crew were ordered by the commander to arm themselves with firearms and to use them if the prisoners floating in the water attempted to climb aboard using the ropes. I saw that the commander sailed through at low speed without regard for the drifting prisoners and did not respond to their cries for help”.²⁵

Mechanic (Maschinenhauptgefreiter) Reinhardt Schumann, another crew member of the same ship, recalled: “I noticed that hundreds of shipwrecked people were floating in the water, either alone or in clusters. It would have been easy for us to rescue as many as possible. But this did not happen. On the contrary, we continued at low speed without regard for those floating in the water. I often noticed from the jerky movements of the port engine’s revolution indicator that unknown objects were being caught by the port propeller ... When I realized that shipwrecked people were drifting close to the ship’s side, I came to the conclusion

²⁴ Statement by Thore Domminguet, 2. Offizier der “Cap Arcona“, according to Captain J. Warburton’s investigation report.

²⁵ Copy of the Deposition on Oath of Waldemar Jess, 31.3.1946. In TNA WO 309/851.

that some of them had been caught in the suction of the propeller and had been caught by it.”²⁶

ARRIVAL AND INITIAL ACTIONS OF THE BRITISH ARMY

Shortly after the bombing, British troops entered the city of Neustadt. The reconnaissance unit of the 5th Infantry Division, a tank squadron from the 23rd Hussars regiment, and a company of motorized infantry from the 8th Battalion of the Rifle Brigade arrived at Neustadt's market square. 2,000 to 3,000 German soldiers from all branches of the Wehrmacht were gathered there. After some time, a subunit began to lead that large group of prisoners of war out of the city.

The situation in the city was considered chaotic and dangerous. “The town was full of a disorderly crowd of refugees of all nationalities, many hopelessly drunk, and all intent on looting.”²⁷ This obviously does not refer to refugees, but to forced laborers who had left their workplaces.

In the barracks, it continues, the British found marines and SS members who were still willing to fight, and a concentration camp. Two squadrons of the tank unit advanced into the area of the port and the barracks and combed through the area.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Commander Blackler of the Royal Navy, who had accompanied the land forces, had taken command of two tugs and used them to rescue shipwrecked sailors. After dark, the rescued sailors were brought ashore, all in poor condition and many with severe burns.

In the barracks area, the British had come across a “naval hospital”, which was in fact the Wehrmacht's motorized field hospital No. 7. “The hospital staff were obstructionist,” the British troops found.

German statements are available on this. The commander of the British tank unit demanded that a German medical officer report to him immediately. Captain (Stabsarzt) Dr. Ernst Longo asked Navy chaplain Martin Redeker to accompany him. At the Neustadt market square, British soldiers made preparations to shoot the two men. Their companion, Belgian prisoner Pierre Beauprez, a police officer from Ostend, was able to prevent this. He had asked the British to put him up against the wall as well. The British commander, a major, attacked Navy chaplain Redeker with a whip and threatened to beat him. Although he was wearing a Red Cross armband, the German medical officer was beaten and robbed.²⁸

²⁶ Copy of a Deposition on Oath of Reinhardt Schumann, 31.3.1946. In TNA WO 309/851.

²⁷ Prince, A. R. *Wheeled Odyssey. The Story of the Fifth Reconnaissance Regiment*. Royal Armoured Corps, 1946?, 56.

²⁸ Koch, Johann Hugo. *Heimatbuch der Stadt Neustadt in Holstein*. Neustadt, 1967, 239.

The British officer ordered all German military hospitals, which housed approximately 3,000 wounded soldiers, to be cleared to accommodate the wounded prisoners and shipwrecked sailors who had managed to escape from the burning “Cap Arcona” and reach land.²⁹ This demand was averted. The British commander even provided the military doctor with a confiscated car. Beauprez acted as his chauffeur.

In the barracks, the British encountered concentration camp prisoners from Norway who were severely malnourished and housed in appalling conditions. “They were very well off compared with what was found then.” This refers to the remaining Stutthof prisoners: “A large wooden hut, presumably the hall for drill exercises, was visited, which was said to house Jews. By the light of a torch, a mass of humanity crammed together on filthy straw covered with rags ... could be seen. The stench was so foul that it was difficult to avoid being sick. On closer inspection, the inmates were living skeletons, with legs and arms little thicker than hockey sticks. It was quite impossible to do anything for them in the dark, and they were told to stay where they were until daylight.”³⁰

THE VOYAGE OF *KLAUS* RESP. *BRESLAU* TO KLINTHOLM ON *MØN*

The tugboat “Danzig” pulled the ship “Klaus”, which was smaller than “Wolfgang” or “Vaterland”. Therefore, fewer prisoners were on board, a total of 600. On the way, however, the sea became so rough that it was no longer possible to continue. The first lieutenant of the gendarmerie, who was in command, had some seafaring experience and suggested heading for the island of Rügen.³¹ However, the vessel ran aground on the island of Greifswalder Oye south of Rügen.

A locally responsible officer of the Kriegsmarine then arranged for a combat ferry that took the prisoners to Lauterbach, where the local fire brigade provided food.

After being reloaded onto a barge, the prisoners were towed to Saßnitz by a fire department boat. In the Saßnitz roadstead, the prisoners were brought on board the loaded inland vessel “Breslau”. The tugboat “Danzig” established a line connection and towed the barge to Klintholm on the Danish island of *Møn*.

²⁹ Copy of a report of the former Navy chaplain of Neustadt D. Dr. Martin Redecker, later Professor of Theology at Kiel Universität, to Bischof Halfmann, 9.5.1945 in the Circular “Untergang der “Cap Arcona” und der anderen Todesschiffe am 3. Mai 1945 in der Neustädter Bucht” of the History Committee of the Amicale Internationale de Neuengamme. In ANg, Sammlung Günther Schwarberg, 24.1 Cap Arcona I.

³⁰ Price, see footnote 27, 57.

³¹ Testimony of Heinrich Enß, July 11, 1974. In Landesarchivverwaltung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abt. Rheinland in Duisburg, Ger_Rep_0118_02386.

THE VOYAGE OF LANDING CRAFT F 862 TO KIEL BIGHT AND BOOKNIS

Landing Craft F 862 left Hel in the evening of May 28, 1945, in a convoy. As the ships had to sail without lights or navigation lights, they lost contact during the night.³²

The passengers were in poor physical condition. Everyone had brought half a loaf of bread and margarine. On the ship, there was no food or drinking water available. Another serious problem was the lack of toilets.

On the second day at sea, the SS men pushed prisoners from the boat into the water, and these prisoners drowned. The witness Buczek had seen this through an open window in the ship's side.³³

On May 2, 1945, in the morning hours, an unknown aircraft arrived and began firing at the ship, which set fuel reserves on fire. The ship's captain had unofficially loaded additional diesel fuel in barrels. The anti-aircraft gun on deck had not fired as the crew had hidden below deck. Some SS men boarded a lifeboat and left.

A crew member fired a distress flare, and a ship flying a white flag came to help. The remaining SS men and the ship's crew transferred to the rescue ship, as did about 25 prisoners. On the rescue ship, one soldier made a move to shoot the prisoners who had transferred, but was prevented from doing so by another soldier.

Two hours later, a second ship came to the rescue, took all the prisoners who were able to jump onto its deck, and landed them in the port of Kiel. The police, who now wore white armbands, led the prisoners into a building where food was distributed, and doctors treated the sick and injured.

On the same day, the prisoners were taken by boat to a barracks camp flying the Polish white and red flag.

Approximately 80 female prisoners, mostly Jewish women, were admitted to the Kiel Municipal Hospital, which had been relocated to Schafstedt in Dithmarschen.³⁴

One of the patients was Riva Chirurg née Cytrin. Quite likely, the later life of her comrades took a similar course.

After having recovered sufficiently, she rented a room from farmer Peter Peters in Dückerwisch on June 24, 1946. Soon afterward, she joined the Jewish Community at Lübeck. Then she moved to the largest Jewish community in the British

³² Testimony of Ludwig Breisch, former signals petty officer of F 862. In Else Bevendorff: *Gestrandete Jüdinnen vor Bookniseck – ein Nachtrag*. In *Vergessen und verdrängt. Arbeiterbewegung und Nationalsozialismus in den Kreisen Rendsburg und Eckernförde*. Ed. Kurt Hamer, Karl-Werner Schunck and Rolf Schwarz. (Eckernförde, 1984), 246–247.

³³ Übersetzung der Vernehmungsniederschrift des Zeugen Wladyslaw Buczek, 21.6.1974. In LAV NRW, Abt. Rheinland Ger_Rep_0118_2387.

³⁴ Riva Chirurg: *Bridge of Sorrow, Bridge of Hope*. (Berkely/Ca.) 1994, 169–176. The copy of her form of the Resident registration office using her maiden name Riva Cytrin, dob 10.4.1920 in the holdings of the Arolsen Archives DocID 71824586 states that she was staying in Schafstedt as a patient at the Kiel hospital.

zone, in the very large barracks of the Bergen Belsen military training area. Eventually, she emigrated to Palestine and became an Israeli citizen.

The badly damaged and burning naval ferry drifted uncontrollably and ran aground on the beach in the Booknis settlement of Waabs near Eckernförde. During the night between May 4 and 5, 1945, Walter Mentzel,³⁵ deputy chief executive of Eckernförde county, was notified by a representative of the “Military Commander of Kappeln”³⁶ that a ship carrying Jews had been hit by torpedoes or bombs and had stranded near the village of Waabs.³⁷ German forces had debarked as many Jews as possible, and now it would be the task of the county administration to care for them further.

Count Oskar Moltke-Kirsten, owner of the Booknis estate, was woken up and asked for help. He provided a tractor and two trailers to carry some 40 wounded, sick, and emaciated prisoners to Kappeln hospital. The journey of 16 km lasted for hours, and on arrival, any medical help was refused.³⁸ The transport returned to Waabshof. On the way, two prisoners had died.

Next, the tractor-trailer combination halted in front of the home of the acting county governor, Mentzel. First, a lieutenant came in and handed the prisoners over to the civil authorities.³⁹ Mentzel ordered his senior bailiff, Bein, to accommodate the uninjured. Dr. Wicke, head of the county medical authority, was tasked with caring for the sick and injured, and Mayor Loewer of Eckernförde was instructed to organize the burials.

Next, the prisoners headed for the delousing facility at the large local arms workshop “Torpedo-Versuchsanstalt Nord”. At last, the prisoners in need of medical care were taken to the county hospital of Eckernförde. A mass grave was dug on the paddock Broosbyer Koppel. The other survivors were billeted in a tavern and several private houses.

³⁵ Walter Mentzel (1899–1978): 1928 – lawyer at Kiel, 1930 – member of the Nazi-party NSDAP, 1933–1945 – mayor of Kiel, 1941 – Territorial Commissioner for the city of Reval of the authority for the occupied Baltic states (Gebietskommissar Reval-Stadt im Reichskommissariat Ostland), since early 1945 – deputy chief executive of Eckernförde county (Vertreter des Landrats des Kreises Eckernförde), 1946 – member of the far right wing party Deutsche Partei, member of its governing board for Schleswig-Holstein, 1954–1971 – member of parliament at Kiel, 1958–1969 – chairman of the Christian democrat faction and majority leader.

³⁶ Most likely, Mentzel referred to the Seekommandant Schleswig-Holstein. That territorial naval staff for parts of the Baltic Sea had moved from Kiel to the small town of Kappeln in April 1945.

³⁷ Written statement of Walter Mentzel for Dr. Arnold Wicke who published a documentary “Das Schicksal der Heimatvertriebenen im Kreis Eckernförde. Dokumentarischer Bericht über die ersten Notjahre aus der Sicht von Ärzten, amtlichen und freiwilligen Hilfskräften. *Schriftenreihe der Heimatgemeinschaft Eckernförde*, Bd. 4, 123.

³⁸ In 1984 Else Bevendörff had tried in vain to find out whether military or municipal authorities were behind this decision.

³⁹ Up to now it has not been possible to identify that officer and determine whether he belonged to the ship’s crew and whether he has been in touch with the naval authorities at Kappeln.

In the days between September 24 and 29, 1945, the mass grave was opened. A local undertaker reburied the dead victims in individual coffins in the old local cemetery, Friedhof Am Mühlenberg. The memorial stone still stands today, and a plaque with 22 names was added later.

THE VOYAGE OF THE BARGE *RUTH*- TO FLENSBURG

The icebreaker “Pregel” towed “Ruth” to Saßnitz on Rügen. The harbour master of the Kriegsmarine forbade her entry. Both ships had to continue sailing, reached the Fjord of Flensburg on May 3, 1945, and moored at an abandoned jetty in the vicinity of the naval academy of Mürwik.⁴⁰

The night before, Admiral Karl Dönitz, Hitler’s successor after his suicide, had set up his headquarters in this academy and designated it as the seat of his Reich government.⁴¹

On May 4, stronger prisoners buried the corpses of 26 prisoners who had died during the journey on the beach of Fahrensodde.⁴² The regular Flensburg Police became aware of that and exhumed the dead on May 26, 1945. Police medical examinations revealed no evidence of external violence, and the dead prisoners were reburied in the Friedenshügel cemetery.

“Ruth” was permitted to enter the port of Flensburg. On that night, the German surrender in the Netherlands, Denmark, and the northwestern part of Germany was announced and came into effect the following morning.

In addition to the transport of “Ruth”, other large groups of concentration camp prisoners had been brought to Flensburg, namely 500 prisoners of the 5th SS Railway Construction Brigade from Nordenham in Lower Saxony on the steamer “Apollo”⁴³, several hundred prisoners from the Neuengamme’s satellite camp in Wilhelmshaven on the steamship “Olga Siemens”⁴⁴, and two groups of prisoners from the Neuengamme main camp, who had travelled by train or on foot.

The Chief of the Flensburg Police Department, SS-Standartenführer Hinsch, felt overwhelmed by his responsibility for the prisoners and asked the Kriegsmarine for help. Commander (Korvettenkapitän) Hans-Joachim von Ramm had just been

⁴⁰ FO 1061-1842 Franz Basel Diary, 2282; FO 1061-1842 Summary Bruno Rohde, 2385; FO 1060-1841 Examination of Josef Ginther, 919; FO 1060-1841 Examination of Unterscharführer Herbert Karl Holst, 739f.

⁴¹ Kraus, Herbert. Karl Dönitz und das Ende des “Dritten Reiches” (Flensburg 1945). In *Mai ’45. Kriegsende in Flensburg*. Ed. Gerhard Paul and Broder Schwensen. Flensburg, 2015, 12. Steinert, Marlis G. *Die 23 Tage der Regierung Dönitz. Die Agonie des Dritten Reiches*. Extended edition. München, 1978.

⁴² FO 1061-1842 Franz Basel Diary, 2282.

⁴³ Kassenbrock, Karl. *Konzentrationslager auf Schienen. Die Geschichte der 5. Eisenbahnbaubrigade*. Göttingen, 2019.

⁴⁴ Internet access: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%A4ftlingstransporte_mit_der_Olga_Siemers_und_Rheinfels>. See <https://www.nrz.de/staedte/duisburg/west/die-geschichte-des-rettungsschiffes-ms-hombergid212157581.html>; http://politische-bildung-sh.de/wpcontent/uploads/Hintergrund_Ausstellung_Flensburg_01.11_01_RZ_WEB.pdf; <http://harbourofhope.com/new-factsabout-ghost-ship-ms-homberg/>.

appointed military harbour master of Flensburg to organize the 250 warships of the disbanding Kriegsmarine gathered in the fjord.

He sent a team of doctors and nurses and ensured that prisoners requiring treatment were admitted to local hospitals. The Kriegsmarine provided the steamer "Rheinfels" as floating accommodation.

On May 5, the transfer of around 300 prisoners from "Ruth" to "Rheinfels" was carried out.⁴⁵ Hermann Schmalz, skipper of the police boat "Concordia", was involved in this. He had received an order to take the sick prisoners off the barge "Ruth" and bring them into the hospital, and to sink the dead bodies in the outer Foerde. In his later interrogation, he stated: "I went with my boat to the outer Foerde with a prisoner who was a doctor and two other prisoners. The two prisoners threw the undressed bodies overboard after the doctor had ripped up the bodies with a bayonet to prevent them from floating. ...On some bodies I have observed traces of illtreatment, especially in the face. I also had to remove the dead bodies of prisoners from the steamer "Rheinfels". ...The bodies were undressed. I saw that the hands of some of them had been bound on their backs with iron chains. These bodies were sunk in the same way as the others."⁴⁶

Due to the risk of infectious diseases, "Rheinfels" had to leave the harbour and drop anchor in the fjord.

On May 10, 1945, the Swedish Red Cross took over responsibility for the ship. This had apparently been achieved through diplomatic channels, as the prisoners were well aware that the Swedish consul had inspected their ship the day before.⁴⁷

Apparently, the diplomats had demanded on the German side that the non-German concentration camp prisoners be taken to Sweden immediately. The Germans provided the motor vessel "Homberg" to evacuate the non-German prisoners to Sweden. With 1,360 passengers, many of whom were weak and sick, some dying, Malmö was reached on May 11, 1945.⁴⁸

At Flensburg, the remaining German prisoners were loaded onto a railway train, which was parked at the Flensburg-Weiche freight station. The SS guards demobilized themselves, left their weapons behind, and attempted to slip away unrecognized.

Under the code name "Operation Blackout", the German Government under Admiral Dönitz was arrested on May 23, 1945. Tank formations of the British Army helped make this go smoothly. Their task was to drive their tanks through the city centre, making as much noise as possible to divert attention from the seat of government in the Mürwik district.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ FO 1061-1842 Statement of Hermann Schmalz, 2402; Drywa, Danuta. *The Extermination of Jews in Stutthof Concentration Camp 1939–1945*. Gdańsk, 2004, 298.

⁴⁶ Summary of examination of Herman Schmalz, ohne Datum, TNA WO 309/851.

⁴⁷ Bernard Jaszczak to Wilhelm Lange, 3.9.1993. In Neustadt Municipal Archive 1-06-060.

⁴⁸ Rapport Malmö Polis – Kriminalavd. (Hemlig), 26.6.1945. In Stadsarkiv Malmö, Kriminalpolisen i Malmö, Rapportjournaler A2A, s 4530.

⁴⁹ War Diary HQ 159 Infantry Brigade, 23.5.1945. In TNA WO 171/4426.

THE FLENSBURG DEATH SHIP TRIAL, 1946

On September 25, 1946, 12 persons were tried by an Allied Control Council Court in Flensburg for their crimes committed at Mikoczewo and aboard “Ruth”. On October 23, 1946, the judgment was passed. Three death sentences were handed down against SS-Sturmmann Otto Wilhelm Wippermann, SS-Unterscharführer Herbert Karl Holst, and SS-Sturmmann Herbert Walbrecht.⁵⁰ The former prisoner functionary Ernst Bouvier was found “guilty in ill-treatment” and convicted to two years’ imprisonment. The other accused were acquitted.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The conditions of prisoner transports by sea were horrific. The number of victims was high, but the exact numbers cannot be determined with certainty.

The presented facts indicate that the guards and escorts acted cruelly. Uniformed German forces that otherwise had nothing to do with concentration camps committed deadly violence against prisoners. It is therefore justified to classify the evacuation of prisoners by sea as another “Death march”.

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Reimer Möller

Nepriklausomas tyrėjas, Vokietija

ŠTUTHOFO KONCENTRACIJOS STOVYKLOS EVAKUACIJA JŪRŲ TRANSPORTU 1945 M. BALANDŽIO IR GEGUŽĖS MĖNESIAIS

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje analizuojama Štuthof koncentracijos stovyklos kalinių evakuacija jūrų transportu 1945 m. balandžio ir gegužės mėnesiais, ją siejant su sparčiai blogėjančia Vokietijos karine padėtimi Rytų fronte ir Dancigo–Vakarų Prūsijos regione. Tyrime rekonstruojami sprendimų priėmimo mechanizmai, kuriuose dalyvavo Vokietijos kariuomenės, SS, policijos ir civilinės administracijos atstovai, taip pat aptariamas evakuacijos plano „Eva“ taikymas. Pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas kalinių perkėlimui iš Štuthof ir kitų jo stovyklų į Helio pusiasalį, Mikoszewo'ą, Neustadtą, Liubeko įlanką, Flensburgą, Daniją ir kitus punktus, išsamiai aprašomi kalinius transportavę laivai: „Elbing“, „Zephyr“, „Wolfgang“, „Vaterland“, „Klaus“, „Breslau“, „Ruth“ ir F 862, desantinis laivas.

Straipsnyje parodoma, kad jūrinė evakuacija nebuvo humanitarinė gelbėjimo operacija, bet koncentracijos stovyklų sistemos smurto tąsa chaotiškais karo pabaigos sąlygomis. Kaliniai buvo gabenami perpildytuose laivuose, trūkstant maisto ir vandens, nesant sanitarinių sąlygų ir medicinos pagalbos. Dalis kalinių buvo nužudyti pakeliui, kai kurie jų mirė nuo išsekimo, ligų ar smurto, o kiti žuvo per bombardavimus ar nesulaukę pagalbos. Straipsnio autorius pagrindžia, kad Štuthof kalinių evakuacija jūra tiek sunkiomis sąlygomis, tiek pasekmėmis laikytina Mirties maršo forma jūroje, nes ir čia koncentracijos stovyklų apsauga, Vokietijos karinės jūrų pajėgos, policija ir kitos uniformuotos struktūros įvairiais lygmenimis prisidėjo prie kalinių žūties, nepriežiūros ar tiesioginio smurto.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Štuthof koncentracijos stovykla, evakuacija jūra, Mirties maršas, Liubeko įlanka, „Cap Arcona“, nacių nusikaltimai.