

Palestinian Prisoners of War at working party E6 Ehrenforst/Sławięcice

Nearly 20,000 Jewish volunteers from Mandatory Palestine joined the British Army after war was declared on Nazi Germany.

About 750 were captured by German troops in Greece and North Africa in 1941/1942. Despite British assurances that they too were protected by the Geneva Conventions, uncertainty about the treatment of Jews persisted and surrender often took place in a suicidal atmosphere.

Jewish POWs of German origin were interrogated by the Gestapo in Corinth and one group of prisoners was subjected to a mock execution in a transit camp in Wolfsberg, Austria.

German attempts to withhold Red Cross parcels from Palestinian prisoners when they had reached their final destination at Stalag VIII B in Lamsdorf, Upper Silesia (today: Łambinowice in Poland), failed thanks to the solidarity of other British POWs and their representative RSM Sherriff.

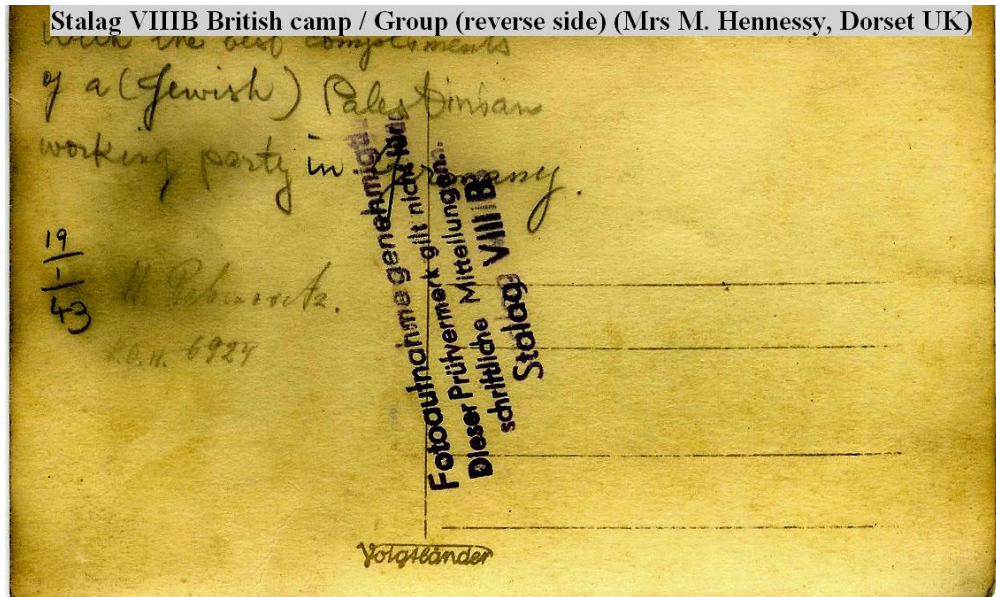
Aside from these incidents, Jewish captives were granted the same status as non-Jewish British prisoners and their overall treatment was more or less in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. It is noteworthy, however, that the Germans carefully avoided classifying them as Jews in public. To admit openly that they were Jewish could even result in punishment on prisoners.

The majority of Palestinian POWs were deployed in outside work detachments connected to the Stalag at Lamsdorf. By contrast to non-Jewish POWs, Palestinians were frequently moved from one work camp to another in intervals of a few weeks or months, possibly to avoid contacts between them and foreign or Jewish labourers.

In December 1941, the first Palestinian detail was sent to Blechhammer, where non-Jewish British prisoners had been working since the autumn of 1940. **The Palestinians were held in a separate camp in Ehrenforst/Sławięcice.** They had a medical officer and were regularly visited by a prisoner dentist and doctor from the British POW camps. Severe cases were treated in field or civilian hospitals and could be seen by German specialist doctors. Those unable to work were returned to the Stalag. The German Reich paid for prisoners' health care, but the Germans only tolerated a daily sick rate of ten per cent.



*Photo (not part of this report) seems to be of the Ehrenforst Working party.
See next page for the reverse side.*



This inscription is written in pencil and says “With the best compliments of a (Jewish) Palestinian working party in Germany”. The date is 19/1/43 and the signature appears to be that of Sergeant Rabinowitz, who was the Working Party’s man of Confidence (leader). Medical Officer Captain John Borrie mentions meeting Sergeant Rabinowitz when visiting this Working Party in 1943 (page 103 of ‘Despite captivity’ by John Borrie). At the time this Working Party was engaged in building a housing estate at a place called Neudorf, for a factory in the Blechhammer complex.

POWs worked on the OHW construction site for up to twelve hours per day during the summer and eight hours in winter. From 1943, a piece-rate system was commonly applied. The OHW was required to provide protective gear and POWs could refuse to work if they had no gloves, for example.

The Geneva Conventions stipulated that prisoners of war should have the same rations as the depot troops of their captors. This was never followed by Germany and British POWs strongly relied on Red Cross parcels to sustain themselves. When German rations stopped in late 1944, food parcels became the sole source of nutrition. Luxury items like chocolate, cigarettes and soap were bartered for fresh produce with civilian labourers.

Unlike non-Jewish British POWs, none of the Palestinians reported cases of maltreatment by German guards. Their main concern was for the Jewish forced labourers they first encountered when the camp for Jews was being set up in March 1942.

Despite German efforts to keep them apart, the POWs found ways of communicating with and, above all, handing out food to Jewish inmates. They passed on news about the course of the war received from self-made radios, while gathering from them all available information on camps, ghettos, and mass killings of Jews. They also had contacts to the Polish underground movement.

Palestinian POWs thus played a crucial role in conveying facts about the unfolding Holocaust to British prisoners, some of whom transmitted coded messages to MI5, the British intelligence agency. During the semi-annual inspections by the International Red Cross, POWs continuously reported about the conditions in Jewish labour camps and gassings in Auschwitz.

Palestinians had the highest escape rate among British POWs and if they were caught the Gestapo usually sent them back to the Stalag for a few weeks of bunker arrest, again ignoring the fact that they were Jews.

During the summer of 1944, hundreds of Palestinians were part of an exchange of wounded and sick or were moved from Lamsdorf to other Stalags such as Hammelburg. There is no evidence that any of the 320 Palestinians left in the Lamsdorf work camps then were deployed in

Blechhammer and none of them took part in the forced march of Blechhammer British POWs to Stalag Moosburg in January 1945. Those still held in Lamsdorf were evacuated along with British and Dominion POWs to the Stalag in Görlitz.

The mortality rate among Palestinian prisoners in German captivity was two per cent, about the same as that of non-Jewish British POWs.

For political reasons, the British insisted Palestinian units should comprise an equal number of Jews and Arabs from Mandatory Palestine. After capture, the Germans separated Arabs from Jews and tried to recruit the former into their ranks.

In this paper, the term 'Palestinian' refers only to Jews; see: Yehuda Bauer, *From Cooperation to Resistance: The Haganah 1938–1946*, in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 2 (1966), 3, 182-210, here 182, 192; Yoav Gelber, *Palestinian POWs in German Captivity*, in: *Yad Vashem Studies* 14 (1981), 89-137, here 110.

An exclusively 'Jewish Brigade' was only formed in September 1944; see:

- Morris Beckman, *The Jewish Brigade. An Army with Two Masters, 1944–1945*, Staplehurst 1998, 42-43.
- Gelber, *POWs*, 94, 96-102, 111; Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, 2011, VHAonline, accessed 2015/16 via the University of Vienna (hereafter VHA), Koenig, Egon, interview 31614; VHA, Bleier, Pinchas, interview 45393.

Non-Soviet Jewish prisoners of war were usually eligible to the same treatment as their non-Jewish comrades and had similar survival rates, especially among western Allied nations. The Germans nevertheless tried to apply their anti-Jewish legislation to Jewish POWs whenever their attempts met no resistance from the respective governments or there was little risk of reprisals.

Jewish POWs were not required to wear the yellow star, but they were to be separated from non-Jews. Vichy France tolerated the Nazi segregationist policy, whereas Britain objected to it. British-Jewish POWs remained together with non-Jews and they were issued two identity tags, one stating "Presbyterian", allowing them to conceal their Jewish identity when captured. Palestinians, like other Dominion troops, were housed in different barracks as they constituted a different 'nationality'.

In rare cases, British prisoners accused fellow Jewish POWs of being "traitors" as they were German speakers.

Rüdiger Overmans, *German Treatment of Jewish Prisoners of War in the Second World War*, in: Anne-Marie Pathé/Fabian Théofilakis (ed.),

Wartime Captivity in the Twentieth Century. Archives, Stories, Memories, New York/Oxford 2016, 45-53, here 45-50; BArch RW 6/270, OKW orders of 16 June 1941 and 11 March 1942, fos. 4, 68; Gelber, *POWs*,

John Borrie, *Despite Captivity. A Doctor's Life as Prisoner of War*, London 1975, 95; 130; Russell Wallis, *British POWs and the Holocaust. Witnessing the Nazi Atrocities*, London 2017; VHA, Bogo, Ralf, interview 11048.

In Lamsdorf, a Palestinian was put in bunker arrest for two weeks when he disclosed he was a Jew. VHA, Kornan, Henry, interview 34328. Susanne Barth: *The 'Visible' and the 'Invisible' Jews* 60

S: I. M. O. N. SHOAH: INTERVENTION. METHODS. DOCUMENTATION. ARTICLE 6 Gelber, 122;

VHA, Bogo, Ralf, interview 11048; VHA, Bleier, Pinchas, interview 45393; Borrie, *Captivity*, 95,

97, 127; BArch R 9348/45.

British POWs were given a similar workload as German civilians based on Article 30 of the Geneva Conventions. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=7C1C1F476E44C713C12563CD0051ACEC>

(13 September 2016); BArch R 9348/45. Stalag Lamsdorf charged the OHW 60 per cent of German standard wages (0.56 RM per hour) minus 1.20 RM daily for board and lodging. Prisoners irregularly received negligible amounts of scrip money.

BArch R 9348/45; Imperial War Museum London (hereafter IWM), 10/6/1, Private Papers of G Didcock.

In 1942, German rations in the Stalags amounted to 1,600 calories per day, with parcel food adding an extra thousand calories, subject to availability: Arie Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity. Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany*, Chapel Hill/London 2005, 34; Alan J. Levine, *Captivity, Flight and Survival in World War Two*, Westport 2000, 84-87; IWM, 10/6/1, Private Papers of G Didcock; Borrie, *Captivity*, 103 and 137.

See for instance: British National Archives Kew, WO 311/268, affidavit by Marine Frank Riding. 10 VHA, Bleier, Pinchas, interview 45393; Nederlands Instituut voor oorlogs-, holocaust- en genocide studies [The Netherland's Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies] (hereafter NIOD) 250d/864, Salomon Staszewski; BArch B 162/8866, fos. 819-820, Oskar Langer.

11 Borrie, *Captivity*, 121; 137-139. ICRC inspectors were informed about the gassing of Jews in showers by British POWs held in Monowitz who maintained contacts to Jewish camp inmates. As the ICRC was never admitted to the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camps, inspectors found themselves unable to uncover the well-kept secret of mass murder. Internationales Komitee vom Roten Kreuz (ed.), *Die Tätigkeit des IKRK zugunsten der in den deutschen KZ-Lagern inhaftierten Zivilpersonen, 1939–1945*, Geneva 1947,

The fact that British and Dominion POWs became first-hand witnesses to the Holocaust has only recently been given more public attention in the United Kingdom. Prisoners' accounts of the Nazi genocide, contacts to Jewish inmates and their attempts to pass on such information to British intelligence were often met with disbelief in the post-war years. This might have contributed to the publication of contentious 'heroic' stories of POWs breaking into Auschwitz. While the active role of POWs in bearing witness has been widely acknowledged, the impact of the facts they provided to intelligence on the Allies' understanding of the Holocaust during the war remains to be investigated; see: Duncan Little, "No one believed what we had seen": British Soldiers who Witnessed Mass Murder in Auschwitz, in: Caroline Sharples/Olaf Jensen (ed.), *Britain and the Holocaust*.

Remembering and Representing War and Genocide, Basingstoke 2013, 13-30; Joseph Robert White, "Even in Auschwitz ... Humanity could prevail". British POWs and Jewish Concentration Camp Inmates at IG Auschwitz, 1943–1945, in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15 (2001) 2, 266-295, here 277-279; Wallis, *POWs*; John Castle, *The Password is Courage*, London 1954; Denis Avey (with Rob Broomby), *The Man who Broke into Auschwitz*, London 2011. Susanne Barth: *The 'Visible' and the 'Invisible' Jews* 61 S: I. M. O. N. SHOAH: INTERVENTION. METHODS. DOCUMENTATION. ARTICLE

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