

The Camp SS

The preparation for a visit
to the Neuengamme
Concentration Camp Memorial

The Neuengamme concentration camp was operated by the members of the SS. At the state level, the administration was actually under the control of the so called Concentration Camps Inspectorate located in Berlin, but it was nevertheless the SS-staff who controlled the camp and the prisoners. The guards dictated the conditions in the camp and they treated the prisoners with utmost brutality – they beat them, tortured them and killed them.



Photo: HSV-Archive

Otto Harder, called Tull, was a successful football player, playing for HSV and the German national team in the 1920s. He joined the SS in 1933. He was the camp leader at the Hanover-Ahlem satellite camp, and as such was directly in charge of the prisoners. The conditions in the camp, for which he was criticized by his deputy during the camp period, were not, according to Harder's statement from 1947, his responsibility:

"As the number of the dead was growing, I did what I could – I sent reports to Neuengamme [...] I could not do more than that: I wrote truthful reports every month."

Benjamin Sieradzki, a Jewish prisoner from Poland, was 17 years old when he came to the Hanover-Ahlem satellite camp. He reports on the work in the tunnel in one of the former asphalt mines:

"The work in the mine was dreadful for most of us. [...] People committed suicides in the mine and we had to take him out of the mine on a wooden stretcher and sing horrible German songs on our way back to the camp. One of the German guards put pebbles into the mouth of one of the dead men, exclaiming: Here, you Jewish pig, have something to eat!"

Benjamin Sieradzki, report, undated
(Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial,
Archives)

What do you think about Otto Harder's statements? What was he trying to achieve with it?

"I thought I was very lucky to have come to a camp which was so easy to manage. It was so well-disciplined, except for the difficulties regarding provisions. Based on what I had known about imprisonment, I believed that the prisoners were happy to be able to do something and not that they worked only because they were forced into it in a gruesome way. After all, they had a lunch break and their 12-hour-day meant merely 10 hours of actual work. And they didn't work so hard – I watched them. [...] It never occurred to me that they came there to die. For God's sake. [...] My work at Neuengamme was pleasant."

Otto Harder, stated on April 26, 1947 before the British Military Court (The National Archives, London)

Compare Otto Harder's statements with the one by Benjamin Sieradzki and think about the differences.

At the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial, beside the main exhibition, there is a research exhibition, which deals with the SS in the camp.

Are there any questions you would like to study in the exhibition?