
The “Family Camp“ (B II b) of the Theresienstadt Deportees in Birkenau - Dr. Margalith Shlain

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On September 6, 1943, a transport with 5,007 Jewish prisoners from the Czech lands left ghetto Theresienstadt, “able-bodied” men with their families; they were chosen by the authorities to be sent purportedly to a labor camp but in fact to the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In the framework of preparations for the visit of a delegation of the International Red Cross in the ghetto, planned for spring 1944, the Germans renewed transports from Theresienstadt as a solution for the overcrowding in the ghetto, after a pause of 7 months. It seems that the idea was to build a camp similar to Theresienstadt, to serve the Nazi propaganda and to weaken the potential for resistance in Theresienstadt (after the Jewish uprising in ghetto Warsaw).

When they arrived in Auschwitz, no “selection” was carried out at the railway platform, families were not separated and none of them was sent to be killed in the gas chambers; their clothes were not changed and their hair not shorn. The men, women and children were housed at the “family camp” (B II b) that was assigned to them in Birkenau, though women and men were in separate blocks. In December 1943 a further 5,007 Jewish prisoners from Theresienstadt joined them and the camp with an area of 150 by 750 meters became quite full. In May 1944 another 7,503 Jewish prisoners from the ghetto arrived and the number of deportees from Theresienstadt in the “family camp” reached 17,517 persons .

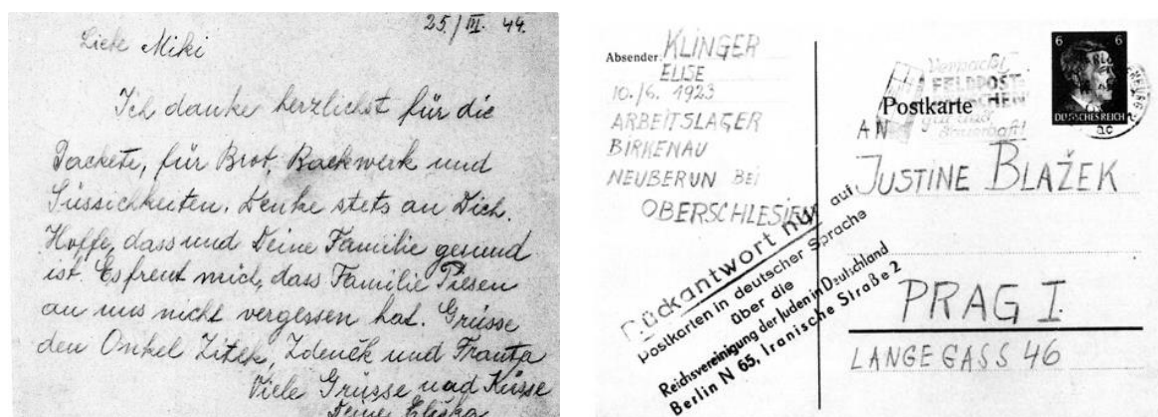
The “family camp” was regarded in Auschwitz as a privileged camp. Though as camp elder Arno Boehm was appointed, a German criminal who mistreated the

prisoners, the internal management of the camp – block elders and their deputies, both of men and women, were Jewish prisoners who succeeded – to a certain degree – to ease the life of their co-prisoners in the camp.

Differently from all other Birkenau prisoners, those from the “family camp” were not sent to work outside the camp at industrial plants, mines or agriculture. They worked at construction, maintenance and road building inside the camp and after these kinds of work were done, the SS guards made them carry out grueling and senseless work, to hurt them in body and mind.

The prisoners of the “family camp” were allowed to write postcards, especially to Theresienstadt and abroad and also to receive letters and food parcels, which supported their basic existence and mainly awoke in them hope for a chance to survive.

This was needed by the Nazi-Germany propaganda to mislead the world and to show that the Jews deported from Theresienstadt are not sent to labor camps and that old people, unable to work are sheltered in the “ghetto for old people”; this was also needed to mislead the Jews in Theresienstadt into believing that the transports from the ghetto are not destined for extermination. Until the beginning of 1945 they did not know that camp Birkenau near Neu-Berun is a part of Auschwitz.



At the registration in the camp, after an identification number was tattooed on their forearm, beside the name of the prisoner was written: “6SB” which supposedly meant the period of quarantine whereas in fact it meant extermination after 6 months. In March 1944, out of 5,007 prisoners who had arrived in September 1943, only 3850 prisoners were living.

“Only” a quarter of them died, including old people and children, but relatively for Auschwitz, where life expectancy was just a few weeks, this was extraordinary!

On March 2, postcards were distributed so they could write to their families and acquaintances and they were ordered to write down the date: March 25, 1944. “because of the censorship, which takes much time”. On March 8, 1944, after 6 months since the arrival of the first transport to the “family camp” the “privilege” they had received, became their doom. 3,792 prisoners of the September (1943) transport – except for a few dozen – were sent to the gas chamber and murdered there.

In the night of April 6 1944, Siegfried (Vítězslav) Lederer, prisoner of the “family camp”, succeeded to escape from Birkenau with the help of the SS-man Viktor Pestek. In mid-April, at night, he returned to the ghetto and came to Leo Holzer, commander of the Theresienstadt firefighters who was horrified by Lederer’s terrible appearance. Lederer related that he had escaped from Auschwitz and how the extermination is being carried out there:

“How our people die – 10,000 , 50,000 and more. He described to us everything that is going on in Auschwitz, how everything is deception, that Birkenau is on the face of it ‘only’ a model camp”.

Holzer alarmed a few of their close friends. They could hardly believe it, they had received postcards from September deportees, which “proved” that they were alive,

even after the date of their annihilation. Holzer and his friends discussed the matter with Karl Schliesser, member of the Czech council of Elders and with rabbi Leo Baeck, who believed them. Because of the danger to the ghetto if this information would become widely known, it was decided not to disseminate it to a wider circle. This position was taken also by the second Jewish Elder Dr. Paul Epstein, when he was informed.

When the bitter truth about the liquidation of the September transport became known in the “family camp”, the camp prisoners who had arrived in December 1943, lived in dread of the fate awaiting them after the “quarantine” of 6 months.

On June 20, 1944, toward the time of the anticipated liquidation, resistance activities were organized by the prisoners. But when the date arrived, the camp was not liquidated. The Germans waited for the visit of the International Red Cross on June 23, 1944, in Theresienstadt. The satisfaction with the delegation’s conclusions had tragic consequences for the Jews in the ghetto of which 18,402 were sent to be killed in Auschwitz in October 1944; and for those who had been deported to the “family camp” (B II b) in Birkenau; after the Germans did not need them anymore.

The “family camp” was liquidated about 3 weeks after the visit in the ghetto, on the 10th and the 12th of July, 1944. This liquidation was different from the previous one in March 1944. Now the “selection” system was applied and those fit for work were sent to labor camps in Germany: Neugraben, Sachsenhausen and Schwarzheide. The remaining prisoners who did not pass the selection, some 6,700 souls, were murdered at the Birkenau gas chambers.

However, the singularity of the “family camp” lies not in the sophisticated and brutal deception, also not the special conditions accorded to the prisoners in this camp. The unique feature was the establishment of the children’s block in the camp, and

the superb educational activity carried out there, near the Birkenau crematoria and smokestacks.

Among the deportees of September 1943 were 274 children up to age 14. After arriving in the camp the children lived in the different blocks and made order and organization in the camp difficult. The heads of the transport – Dr. Leo Janowitz, formerly the head secretary of the council of Elders in ghetto Theresienstadt, and Fredy Hirsch, formerly deputy director of the Department for Youth Care in the ghetto, approached the German camp Elder and proposed to concentrate the children during the day in a separate block, and as a first step, teach them the necessary German orders for life in the camp. The proposal was transmitted, probably to the commander of Birkenau II, Schwarzhuber and he approved the establishment of the children's home, in block 31 and he appointed Fredy Hirsch as block Elder there .

The children's home for ages 6 – 14 existed at the "family camp" from September 1943 until June 1944. In the beginning it was a day-care home for 180 children (younger and sick children remained with their mothers), evenings and at night they were with their parents. After December 1943 some 200 more children were added (out of 353 children who arrived with this transport) and in May/June 1944 there were more than 500 children with 20-40 councilors. Fredy Hirsch who impressed the leading Germans in the camp very much, fought for the survival and education of the children. His main effort was directed toward keeping their physical and mental resilience. He demanded from the children strict adherence to the rules of cleanliness, to keep their health and their lives; he choose councilors who taught from memory, without books and writing utensils, who enhanced the children's horizons by social, informal and fascinating activities: games, stories, singing, decorating the block and scout games. These activities distanced the children, even

if only a little, from camp reality. He established a regular and organized daily schedule for the children which became for them an island of calm after the changes and shocks they had been through. On the threshold of annihilation, Fredy Hirsch and the councilors succeeded to preserve for the Jewish children a little of their childhood and to let them experience something “similar to happiness.”

In the days preceding the liquidation of the September transport, it seems that Fredy Hirsch was involved in attempts of rebellion in Birkenau. He refused to start a revolt so as not to abandon his wards, he tried to kill himself and died together with them in the gas chamber on March 8, 1944.

