
The Heroic Hamburg Capo Willy Brachmann - Dr Anna Hájková

In the survivor testimonies about the Theresienstadt Family Camp in Auschwitz we often find mentions of Willy Brachmann. Most prisoners agreed that, compared to other capos, he was a decent man. According to eyewitnesses, he even saved lives of some Jewish prisoners.

Born in 1903 in Hamburg in a working class family, Willy grew up in difficult circumstances. During the hunger years of First World War he started stealing food to support his mother, like many other German teenagers. He was arrested for the first time at 14 years; his rap sheet was to grow over two pages. He trained as a painter and in 1926, married Luise Henze; one year later, his only daughter Irmgard was born. The Brachmanns had a tough time during the economical crisis, depended on the social support, Luise suffered from tuberculosis, and Willy provided by stealing and concealment of stolen goods. His were petty thefts: he pilfered two kilograms coffee or bucket of coals. In 1933, hoping for a new beginning, he joined the Nazi Party. However, just a year later he was expelled, because he stole bicycles and sold them to his NSDAP colleagues. Brachmann continued moving in and out of prison. That ended in 1938: the Nazis adopted a law about “habitual criminals”, according to which people who were sentenced more than three times, rather than let go, were sent directly from prison to concentration camp. They were the prisoners carrying the black triangle, the “criminals”.

Brachmann went through the Emsland camps, Sachsenhausen, and in August 1940, was sent to Auschwitz. His wife divorced him. In Auschwitz, Brachmann worked in street construction and painter commando. Once, after stealing food for himself and his friends, he was caught and tortured in the infamous punishment block (Bunker). In September 1943, he became capo in the Theresienstadt Family Camp. In the brutal world of Auschwitz, many prisoners

recalled him as helpful, even kind. He brought food to a pregnant prisoner, and recalled how it was when his wife was expecting. Hugo Lengsfeld (later Pavel Lenek), who was part of the Communist group in the Family Camp, recalled that Brachmann knew about their meetings, and covered them.

In the Family Camp, Brachmann met the Brno artist Dina Gottlieb, who decorated the children's barrack with drawings from Walt Disney films. She was also forced to draw portraits of Mengele Romani victims. Gottlieb, who was young and beautiful, became Brachmann's lover; fifty years later she recalled how she grew to love him. She arranged for Brachmann to get dentures; he lost his teeth in the years in the camps. Gottlieb introduced him to the 12-year old Míša Grünwald from Prague, who became Brachmann's runner.

Míša is still alive and lives in Indianapolis as Frank Grunwald. He recalls: "I worked as his messenger and spent most of each day doing errands [...]. On July 6th 1944 the Czech Family Camp was being liquidated and all the prisoners had to go through a physical selection performed and directed by Dr. Josef Mengele. When Dr. Mengele saw me, he directed me to the left side of his table and I was standing in a group of younger (under the age of fourteen) boys. [...] After standing there for a few minutes, Willy Brachmann suddenly appeared and quickly pushed me into an older group of boys [...] that [...] stood about twenty feet from the younger group. Shortly after that, we were instructed to walk to camp B2D (which was a men's camp). In B2D, Willy Brachmann arranged for me to be placed in a barrack which was a clinic occupied by several Polish physicians – two of them being dentists. (The other boys were put into what was called the "punishment barrack" controlled by a very strict and brutal Kapo whose name was Bednarek.) In the clinic, I was under the care of the two dentists and I was much safer there than I would have been in the punishment barrack. I stayed there till the evacuation of Auschwitz, the

second week of January 1945.” Most of the remaining prisoners in the Family Camp, including Grünwald’s brother and mother, were murdered in the gas chamber in the following days.

In fall 1944, Brachmann was sent to Gleiwitz satellite camp, and from here to Groß-Rosen. When he was sent on a death march to Bergen-Belsen, he escaped and returned to his home city of Hamburg, where he was liberated by the British Army. Weeks later, when the 19-year old Kurt Cierer (later Yaakov Tsur) found himself in Hamburg, a fellow survivor told him to look for Brachmann. Cierer called up his old capo, who offered him shelter for a few weeks. “All he could offer me was tea with artificial sweetener,” Yaakov recalled with a chuckle fifty years later.

Willy and Luise remarried. Soon, he ended up in prison again, for theft; his remark about previous convictions said simply “Auschwitz.” Later, he worked again as painter, and when his health started failing, following a heart attack, he applied, without success, for reparations as a victim of the Nazi regime. However, German Wiedergutmachung was reserved only for people who were persecuted for racial, religious, or political reasons. Brachmann testified at the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt/Main against his former tormentors. His daughter emigrated to Australia, where all his three grandchildren live today. Brachmann died in 1982 and is buried in the Öjendorf cemetery.

When we write history of the Holocaust, far too often we forget the little people like Brachmann, who became criminals out of poverty. They were deported, without any legal recourse, to concentration camps. After the war, with broken health, they had no access to reparations. Unlike many other “habitual criminals”, pushed by the perpetrators, Brachmann did not lose his humanity and helped wherever he could. This is why we should recognize his valor. Together with Frank



Grünwald and a colleague from Yad Vashem, I am working on having Brachmann recognized as Righteous among the Nations.