

The report of former forced-labor prisoner Nicholas Livkovsky

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Nicholas Livkovsky took part in the February 19 conference in Slubice, Poland on the history of the Gestapo prison camp "Oderblick", which was located in Schwetig, near Frankfurt/Oder, Germany and Slubice (see accompanying article). Livkovsky was imprisoned there from July to November 1942, and his story speaks for that of tens of thousands who suffered the same fate. He has never received compensation for what he suffered, and in all likelihood never will, because what was done to him does not fulfil the legal criteria entitling him to compensation. Nicholas Livkovsky, now 76 years old, lives in the Polish town Rzepin, not far from the German border. The following is his report on what he experienced:

I spent my childhood in a little village near to Lvov in the Ukraine. At that time, the village was still on Polish territory, but near the border with the Soviet Union.

In 1941—I wasn't even 17 yet—I was deported to Germany along with about 150 other boys and girls. We were transported to Berlin, where we were first kept in a prison camp. It was like a slave market there. German employers from many branches of industry came there to select laborers.

I was selected for hard labor in a tannery in Berlin-Wittenau. Because we weren't getting enough to eat, a friend and I decided to escape. We started out towards home by foot. It was very hard going because we had nothing to eat and there wasn't anything edible in the fields yet. We made it to the border at the Oder River, but then we were caught by the German police. Of course, we didn't have any identification papers. So as not to betray our escape, we said we had been left over from a convoy. They then arrested us and took us to the Gestapo prison in Frankfurt/Oder which was in the same building that now houses the music college.

While we were imprisoned there, in July 1942, we

had to share a small prison cell with about 20 Russian prisoners of war, and didn't get anything to eat the whole time. There was no furniture there, not even a single object, and the floor was under water about 10 centimeters high. We had to stand in water the whole time. Nobody can stand that long. The Russian prisoners of war rolled up their coats and stacked them in the corners of the cell so that we at least had something to sit on. There weren't enough coats, so we took turns sitting on them. Everybody got to sit about five to eight minutes.

After a week we were transferred to the Schwetig camp by the Gestapo. I lived in a barracks room with about 25 men; they were Poles and Russians. During the daytime we either worked at the airbase near Kunersdorf or for farmers in Kliestow, where we harvested potatoes. The food rations were very bad. The daily ration for seven men was 1 kilogram of black bread, 1 cup of coffee with milk and in the evening a plate of cabbage soup, with no meat in it, of course. My impression was that they often made the soup out of grass. We also often got soup made from turnips that were normally used as animal fodder.

We had to run to work at the airbase or the farms, and they always made us run very fast. It was the same on the way back. Sometimes, we also worked in a paper factory or a quarry. Since those were too far away for us to run to, we were driven there in a truck. Once, two young Russian men escaped while we were working at the paper factory, and the Gestapo punished all of us by harassing us all night long. We had to get up and assemble in the camp, run, lie down, jump through a barrel, and so on. That went on until we were so exhausted that we didn't want to live anymore.

Life in the prison camp was very hard. We got up in the dark, and came back to the camp in the dark. We

had to work on Sundays, too, doing things like pulling out weeds in between the railway tracks, because none of the Germans worked on Sunday. We never had a day off. All the time, they forced us to run. When you needed to go to the camp toilet, or on your way back and forth from work, they were always there driving you on. There was never a moment of respite.

We got no peace when we came back to the camp after work, either. First, the SS would search us to see if we had anything prohibited on us, like food or cigarettes, and usually hit us while they were doing it. Then we had to assemble in the camp courtyard in the morning and the evening to be counted. Even people who were so sick they couldn't walk had to be there. We used to carry them out to the roll call from the barracks. There was also a sickroom, but anyone who went there never came back. I can remember about 12 to 14 young people who were brought to the sickroom; I never saw them again.

You were not allowed to bring anything back from work, no potatoes, no apples, no cigarettes—nothing. Once the SS found a small pack of cigarettes on a prisoner. I don't know where he got it from, maybe it was a present from someone. He received 50 blows with a rubber truncheon, and couldn't walk for two to three weeks afterwards. I don't know what else they did to him, or whether he survived. In general, whenever there were any grievances or escape attempts, we were tormented and beaten the whole evening until late at night. The worst of the lot was a little German guard. If he found a cigarette butt on someone in the evening, he gave that person 25 blows with his rubber truncheon.

In November 1942 I was released from the prison camp and transferred to the labor exchange in Frankfurt/Oder. I had to sleep in a barracks next to the exchange because it was already evening. Next morning a farmer's wife, the daughter of my new master, came to pick me up. I was weighed before leaving, and my weight was 40 kilograms; before being deported from the Ukraine I had weighed 80 kilograms. I was given no work documents by the labor exchange, and now worked for the farmer on the outskirts of Frankfurt/Oder. When the farmer died I ran the farm on my own for two more years.

After the war, I was given a vacated farm without livestock or equipment in Rzepin, not far from Frankfurt/Oder.

In 1990 I was no longer able to run the farm because of my health, and left it to the state authorities. Since then, I have been receiving a monthly pension of 400 *zlotys* [roughly US\$100]. As you can see, I am very ill. I did not get any compensation for forced labor, because I can't prove anything without identification papers or other documents.

Once I appealed to the Polish government, but they were of the opinion that my stay at the Schwetig camp could not be compared to the severe prison conditions at other camps for which compensation was paid.



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