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## Slaves for Hitler's war. Polish forced labourers in Salzburg during World War II

### Abstract

Even at the beginning of the Second World War it had to be clear for the German military and economic leaders that it would not be possible to fight or even win a long-lasting war without foreign workers. In the Second World War not only POWs but also civilians and prisoners of concentration camps were forced to work as slaves to continue Hitler's war. In Salzburg, there were no big camps with thousands of slave workers, as existed in other regions of Germany. Mainly the slave workers, who were forced to work for the big power plant projects ("Tauernkraftwerke Kaprun-Glockner", "Kraftwerk Weißsee"), lived in such circumstances.

The first Polish POWs arrived in the Province of Salzburg in autumn of 1939 only a few weeks after the German invasion of Poland. Most of them were not detained in camps. They lived on farms, and their living conditions were better than those for the inmates of camps. Like in the First World War, prisoners of war had to work on farms to replace those men who served in the German Wehrmacht or other military formations.

As mentioned, no big industrial plants for the arms sector existed in the "Reichsgau Salzburg". Foreign forced labourers, POWs and civil workers were deployed to relatively little factories or handicraft businesses. In many cases the situation for this group of slave workers was similar to those, who worked on farms. Already in autumn 1941, the works at the construction sites of the "Reichsautobahn" (highway) around the city of Salzburg

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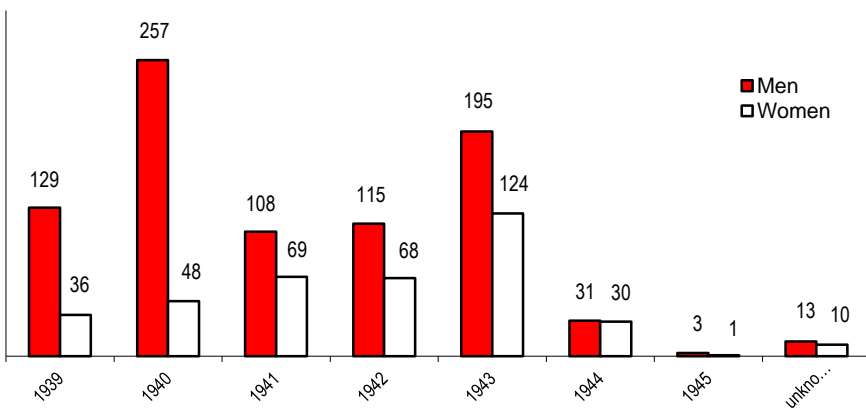
had to be cancelled. At least from spring 1943 almost all building projects, which had no direct context to the “Totalen Krieg”, had to be stopped. The foreign labourers of all kind were transferred to projects essential to the war efforts. Especially buildings for the air raid protection had to become priority.

The living and working conditions for the foreign forced workers, POWs and civil labourers, were very inhomogeneous in the national socialist “Third Reich”. So it was in the “Reichsgau Salzburg” during the Second World War. It could have been horrible and deadly, but also almost acceptable according to the regulations of international law. One point has to be emphasized here, that all of these slave workers, deported against their will from their homelands, were forced to work in the enemy’s land to prolong a criminal war.

**Key words:** Salzburg, Polish forced workers, The Second World War, forced labor, living and working conditions.

## Introduction

Even at the beginning of the Second World War it had to be clear for the German military and economic leaders, that, it would not be possible to fight or even win a long-lasting war without foreign workers. In this case, they had learned their lesson from the First World War. During 1914 and 1918 prisoners of war (POWs) were mainly forced to work, most of them on farms or building new infrastructure, like roads or railways, often near the front line. During the Second World War the situation in the Province of Salzburg, at this time called “Reichsgau Salzburg”, was similar, because no big industrial plants were located in this area. Therefore, most of the forced labourers worked at farms or in little factories.



**Image 1.** Polish civil forced labourers arriving in the “Pongau” region 1939–1945 (SLA, Zwangsarbeiterkartei ...)

**Rys. 1.** Polscy robotnicy przymusowi przybyli do regionu Pongau 1939–1945

The first Polish POWs arrived in the Province of Salzburg in autumn of 1939 only a few weeks after the German invasion of Poland, which marked the beginning of World War II. About the "Pongau" region we have a relatively precise number of civil (not POWs) forced labourers deported from Poland, who came to Salzburg in the years between 1939 and 1945.

## Power plants in the Alps – Kaprun and "Weißsee"

In the Second World War not only POWs but also civilians and concentration camp prisoners were forced to work as slaves to continue Hitler's war. Only a relatively small number of them were inmates of camps. Mainly the slave workers, who were forced to work for the big power plant projects, lived in such circumstances. The everyday life of foreign workers at these construction sites will be the main topic in this article. The camps were mostly situated in high alpine areas in the mountain regions of Salzburg. There existed two big construction areas, both in the part of the province called "Pinzgau". One was near the village of Kaprun (Dohle, Slupetzky 2004: 121) and the second, called "Weißsee" (Dohle, Slupetzky 2004: 212), near Uttendorf. These big facilities for producing electricity had a key role in the long time planning of the national socialists to expand the arms industry of the "Third Reich".

## Tauernkraftwerke Kaprun-Glockner<sup>2</sup>

On 16<sup>th</sup> of May 1938 Herman Göring in his function as "Beauftragter für den Vierjahresplan" (commissioner for the Four Year Plan) opened at a great propaganda ceremony at the construction site near Kaprun the works for the "Tauernkraftwerke Kaprun-Glockner". In July 1938 the "Alpenelektrowerke AG (AEW)", the company which had been founded to carry out the project, started the real works. Even before this, it was evident that this would not be possible without foreign labourers. In a technical report from November 12<sup>th</sup> 1938 the AEW estimated, that they need from 1,400 up to 1,800 workers for Kaprun. In this period before the war, they should come from allied states of the "Third Reich", mainly from the fascist Italy, ruled by the "Duce" Benito Mussolini (SLA, RSTH: 181)

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<sup>2</sup> To the history of this power plant during the NS-era see also: Reiter 2002: 128.



**Image 2. Camp “Limbergalm” in summer 1939** (SLA, RSTH V/3 208, foto: SLA)

**Rys. 2. Obóz “Limbergalm” latem 1939** (SLA, RSTH V/3 208, foto: SLA)

For housing these workers temporary camps had to be built in spring and summer 1938, most of them in alpine areas up to 2.000 m above sea level (Dohle 2014: 9). Because of fair equipment and the lack of opportunity for heating in these barracks, mainly made of wood, these accommodations should only have been used in peacetime in the warmer months but not in winter.

In October 1939 several hundred Polish POWs arrived at the construction site for the power plant. They had to work there also in winter and were accommodated in the existing camps, where the barracks had been surrounded by barbed wire (SLA, RSTH: 208)

In summer and autumn of 1940 after the German victory at the western front, mainly POWs from Belgium and France arrived at Kaprun. They also lived in barracks built before the war. From 1941 until winter 1944/1945, when the works had to be stopped a few months before the end of the war, mainly POWs from the USSR were sent as slave workers to Kaprun (Hutter 1994: 117). Most of them were in a very bad state of health.

The working POWs were not enough for the huge construction site in Kaprun, so foreigners from all parts of Europe worked there. But not all of them were forced to do so. Mainly in the first years of the Second World War until 1943 there were labourers, especially from countries like France, Belgium, Slovakia or Italy, who came more or less voluntarily to the “Third Reich” in order to work.

In contrast, in Eastern Europe, in the countries conquered by German troops, from the very beginning, the occupiers often used brutal violence to force civilians to work for them. Most of these slave workers were sent to big industrial plants in Germany to build new weapons for the war. Hundreds of them came to Salzburg. All of them had to obey hard and often degrading legal regulations, which had an influence on all aspects of everyday life. It is important to see these regulations against the background of the inhumane and, ultimately, deadly national socialist race ideology.

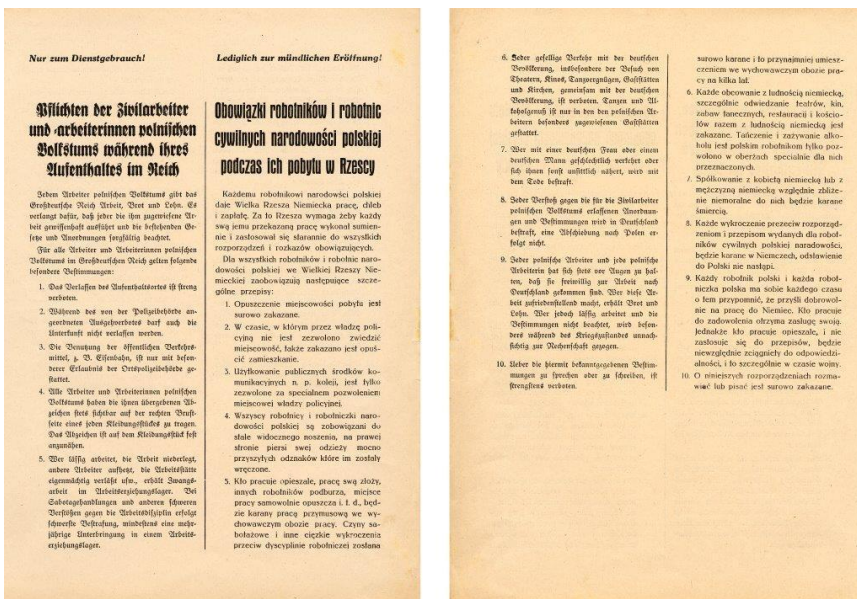


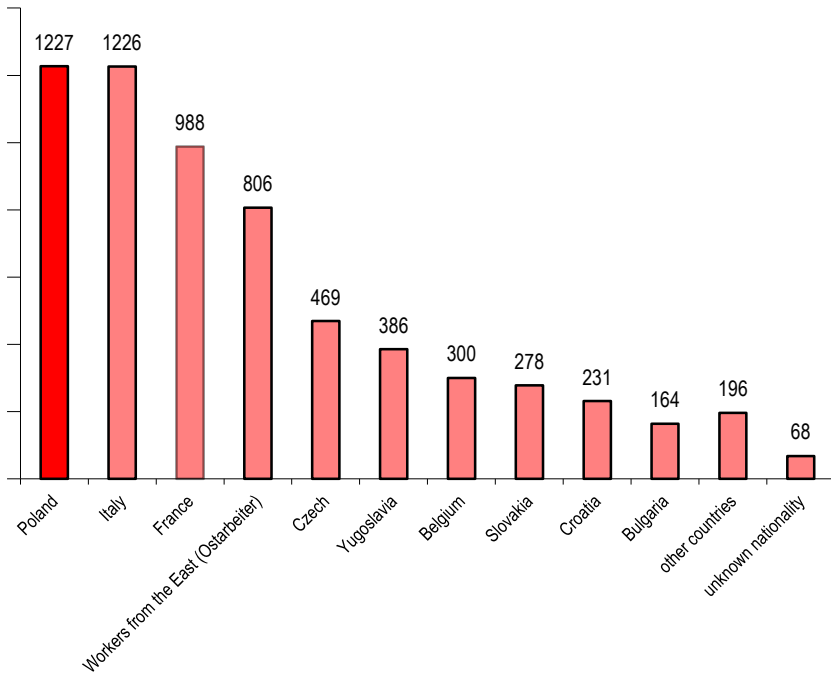
Image 3. Rules for 1943 for civil forced labourers from Poland during their stay in the German Reich (SLA, RSTH I/3 127/1943; foto: SLA)

Rys. 3. Zasady obowiązujące polskich robotników przymusowych w Rzeszy Niemieckiej z 1943 r. (SLA, RSTH I/3 127/1943; foto: SLA)

The brutal recruiting at home and the terrible transport conditions, normally by train in overcrowded cattle cars without enough food and under disastrous hygiene conditions, were also part of the personal history of most of the civilian labourers.

A forced labourer from Ukraine, at the time of deportation eighteen years old, who later emigrated to Australia, described this situation in a letter to the Salzburger Landesarchiv: “All young people were required to register for work. They were given two or three days notice of their

departure. They went to the railway station early in the morning and were loaded into cattle wagons. Mother said it was terrible; all the people, parents and their teenage children, screaming and crying. There were 2,600 young people, boys and girls aged between 17-20. They were given one small ration of salami, bread and water each day of the journey. The train went through Poland where they were showered with disinfectant. The train went to Austria and they arrived in Salzburg on 21-9-42.”<sup>3</sup>



**Image 4. Nationality of the civil forced labourers working in Kaprun 1939–1945**  
(Reiter 2002: 144)

**Rys. 4. Narodowość cywilnych robotników przymusowych w Kaprun 1939–1945**

Naturally, the inhumane living conditions, especially small food rations and hard work even in winter were fatal for the inmates of the barracks in the camps at the construction site in Kaprun. Even though we are unaware of the exact number of the victims, it can be assumed, that there were many casualties among the slave workers, including Polish, who were forced to work there. Even children under fourteen years old had to work there under hard, almost unbearable circumstances.

<sup>3</sup> The original text is reproduced verbatim; SLA, 925/1990-925/2000 and 926/2000-926/2002.



**Image 5. Boy from Poland deported to Salzburg for working as a forced labourer; the “P” sign at his jacket was obligate to wear as identification for civil slave workers from Poland (SLA, Zwangsarbeiterkartei...; foto: SLA)**

**Rys. 5. Chłopiec z Polski deportowany do Salzburga jako robotnik przymusowy; znak “B” na marynarce był obowiązkową częścią ubioru cywilnych robotników przymusowych z Polski (SLA, Zwangsarbeiterkartei...; foto: SLA)**

In 2002 a former forced labourer from Poland, who later lived in the USA, told in a letter, sent by him to the Salzburger Landesarchiv, about living and working conditions in 1944 in Kaprun. In this case, the brother of the writer lost his eyesight at this construction site because of hard work – he had to carry too heavy stones for a boy of his age. As a consequence of the inadequate medical treatment, they offered him just eye drops, he became blind. A surgical operation in 1945 was too late, and so he failed to recover his eyesight. To save the authenticity of the following report, which was made by the brother of the victim as a contemporary witness, it should be not translated into English: *1944 wurden wir in das Arbeitslager Kaprun versetzt. In diesem Lager mussten mein Bruder und ich sehr schwere Arbeit verrichten. So weit mir bekannt ist, diente unsere Arbeit zum Bau einer Kanalisation. Wir mussten Steine aus dem Felsen schlagen, dann die schweren Felsbrocken wegschleppen. Wir mussten also als Kinder von 12-14 Jahren die Arbeit von Erwachsenen ausführen, und das unter den miserabelsten Umständen: Der Unfall meines Bruders ereignete sich demnach*

*auch beim Schleppen des schweren Felsgesteins. Als er unter großen Anstrengungen einen Felsbrocken hochheben wollte, schrie er mir plötzlich zu, er könne nichts mehr sehen. Wir meldeten den Unfall dem Aufsichtsleiter, der aber kein großes Aufsehen davon machte, sondern meinem Bruder nur ein paar Augentropfen gab. Uns Zwangsarbeiter wurde damals ärztliche Hilfe nicht selbstverständlich zuteil. Mein Bruder konnte nur noch Schatten erkennen und der Zustand seiner Augen verschlimmerte sich zusehends, ohne dass ihn ein Arzt behandelte. 1945 wurde er auf eigenen Wunsch in ein Salzburger Krankenhaus eingeliefert, wo man eine Augenoperation an ihm durchführte. Diese Operation verlief aber ohne Erfolg. Er erlangte sein Augenlicht nicht wieder. (SLA ZG: 926/1376-1550, 926/1431-2002)<sup>4</sup>.*

For national socialist Germany the power plant in Kaprun had no significant impact on prolonging the war. Only a small temporary facility was completed by November 1944 (Hutter 1994: 114). But Kaprun and the work of thousands of Hitler's slaves turned out to be very important for Austria and its economic prosperity, which started only a few years after the end of World War II. In autumn 1955 the power plant near Kaprun with its gigantic dam walls was completed (Hutter 1994: 176). As "Mythos Kaprun" (myth of Kaprun) it became a symbol for the Austrian reconstruction and national economic success which followed the enormous devastations of the Second World War.

### "Kraftwerk Weißsee" (Stubachtal) Near Uttendorf

The history of this power plant, which produced and still produces electricity for the railways, now for the Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB), dates back to the First World War. Between 1916 and 1918 POWs from the Russian Empire built a road into the Stubachtal, which

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<sup>4</sup> *In 1944 we were imprisoned in the Kaprun labour camp. In this camp my brother and I had to work extremely hard. As far as I know, we worked on the sewage system. We chipped away stone from the rock face and transported the blocks of stone. As children of 12 and 14 we had to do the work of an adult in inhuman conditions: my brother's accident happened while transporting a very heavy block – while putting huge effort into lifting a heavy block, my brother suddenly cried out that he couldn't see anything. We registered the accident with the supervisor, but he didn't care and gave out some eye drops. Of course, we forced labourers had no medical coverage. My brother could only recognise shadows and his vision just got worse, and no doctor took care of him. At his own demand, in 1945 he was taken to hospital in Salzburg, where he was operated on. The surgery was a failure and he never regained his eyesight.*



was a requirement for a planned new power station. The works for this project, very important for the electrification of the main routes of the Austrian railway, started in 1921 and in 1929 the turbines produced the first electric power (Dohle 2010: 13).

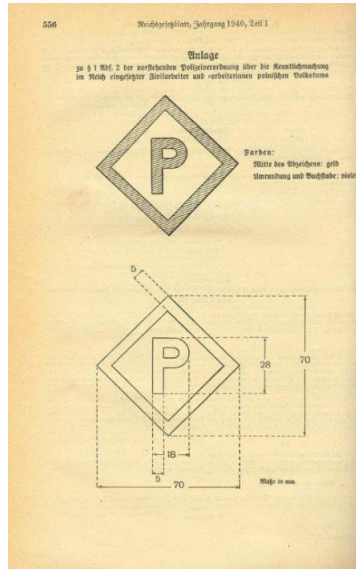
In spring 1938, only a short time after the "Anschluß", when Austria became, as "Ostmark", a part of the national socialist "Großdeutsches Reich" (Greater German Reich), the "Arbeitsgemeinschaft Stubbachwerke", a syndicate of different companies, started the work for a new and more efficient power plant near the Weißsee in the Stubachtal area, a high alpine region. Wooden barracks for camps were erected, and similar to the Kaprun project many foreign workers were employed there, mostly from allied Italy and Slovakia. After the outbreak of the war, in Winter 1939/1940 the first POWs arrived at the building site. In the "Lagebericht" (situation report) from February 4<sup>th</sup> 1940 for the "Landrat" (district authority) Zell am See 75 POWs from Poland were mentioned (Dohle, Slupetzky 2004: 213).

In Summer 1939 the first barrack for the "Lager Weißsee" near the Rudolfshütte, a mountain hut for alpinists, was built at 2,300 m above sea level not far from the glaciers surrounding the "Sonnblick" peak (3,106 m). From the beginning of the war until 1943 three wooden barracks for about 400 inmates, enclosed by barbed wire, were erected there. Most of these foreign workers were POWs from the USSR and civil forced labourers from Poland and Ukraine.

1943, after the defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad, the symbolic turning point of the war, the situation became worse for Nazi Germany. As a part of efforts to prolong the war, they called it "Totaler Krieg" ("total war"). The "Third Reich" mobilised its last economic and personal resources. After the end of the German victories, especially on the Eastern Front, fewer prisoners of war were available as labourers. In this context inmates of concentration camps became more important as slave workers than in previous years.

As a consequence of this personal shortage in the Summer of 1943 prisoners of KZ Dachau, a huge concentration camp near Munich, were sent to the camp near the Rudolfshütte, where the "Arbeitskommando Weißsee" was established in the already existing three barracks. This work crew became a "Nebenlager" (satellite camp) of KZ Dachau. Not only soldiers of the SS, but as an exception, also of the German "Wehrmacht" were deployed as guards there. The main project of these concentration camp prisoners was to build a dam wall ("Staudamm Weißsee")

for the new power plant. Most of the approximately 450 slave workers came from France, Belgium and Poland, but also political prisoners from, at this time former, Austria were forced to build the new power station (Dohle, Slupetzky 2004: 216).



**Image 6.** Legal regulation from the “Reichsgesetzblatt” for the “P” sign, which was obligate to be worn on the jacket as identification for civil slave workers from Poland (RGBl. 55/1940, T. 1; foto: SLA)

**Rys. 6.** Prawnie zatwierdzony wzór znaku graficznego „P” stanowiącego obowiązkową część ubioru cywilnych robotników przymusowych z Polski (RGBl. 55/1940, T. 1; foto: SLA)

At about 2,300 m above sea level the working and living conditions would have been very hard, even in summer and even for normal, well equipped labourers with enough food. For the slave workers in the “Arbeitskommando Weißsee” it was even worst, because they often reached the camp in bad health and malnourished after a long time of imprisonment in the concentration camp. The lack of special equipment, especially shoes and warm clothes for winter time, and the inadequate working security also claimed a lot of casualties among these slave workers. The brutality of the guards, for example after a failed attempt to escape, was also part of the horrible reality in this relatively small satellite camp. Only a comparatively small number of the casualties died right at the construction site or in the satellite camp. Normally they were

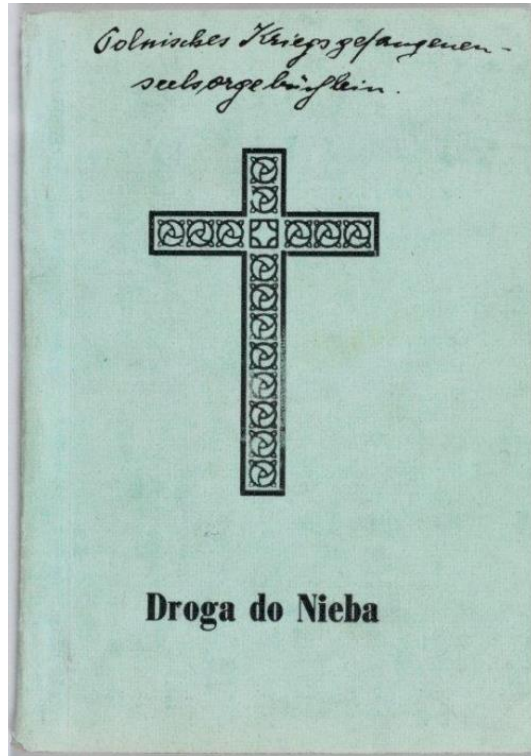
sent ill or injured back to the main camp, in this case KZ Dachau. But often they stayed just a few weeks in Weißensee before they had to return to the main camp. That is the reason why we do not have the exact figures for the death toll at the "Arbeitskommando Weißsee". In the last phase of this satellite camp Germans (and Austrians) were imprisoned there beside slave workers from all over Europe, mainly from Ukraine, Poland, USSR, France, Greece, Czech, Yugoslavia and Belgium. In the morning of May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945 the first US-soldiers arrived in Uttendorf, and by the end of this day they had liberated the prisoners of the "Arbeitskommando Weißsee". The SS-troops in this area had abandoned the site only a few hours before (Dohle, Slupetzky 2004: 217–220). In 2005 a memorial plaque was erected near the Rudolfshütte as a remembrance of all the victims (Dohle 2010b: 15).

The following part describing other fields of forced work is only a short summary, because the situation in the "Reichsgau Salzburg" was similar to the other parts of the "Third Reich" – construction sites for the power plants in high alpine regions were unique to Salzburg. That is why this topic is the main part of the article about Polish slave workers in WW II.

## Agriculture

Like in the First World War prisoners of war had to work at farms to replace those men, who served in the German Wehrmacht or other military formations. Similar to the described situation at construction sites for the power plants, the first Polish POWs, who had to work in agriculture, arrived in Salzburg in autumn 1939. The majority of them were not detained in camps. They lived on farms, and their living conditions were better than those for the inmates of camps.

Unlike in 1914–1918 during the Second World War hundreds of thousands of civil forced labourers, men, women and even children, had to work on farms. Living outside guarded camps made it very difficult to control these foreign labourers. Therefore the Nazi authorities published many legislative prohibitions to regulate and restrict the contact between the native population of the rural areas and this group of foreigners. For instance, sitting together with the farmer's family and eating communal meals was forbidden for a Polish forced labourer (SLA, Zell: 438-38-43).



**Image 7.** „Droga do Nieba”, prayer book for Polish POWs and civil forced labourers published in 1940 by the Archdiocese of Salzburg (foto: archive of the archdiocese of Salzburg)

**Rys. 7.** „Droga do Nieba”, modlitewnik dla polskich jeńców wojennych i cywilnych robotników przymusowych wydany w 1940 r. przez Archidiecezję w Salzburgu (foto: archive of the archdiocese of Salzburg)

For the Catholic Polish participating in the holy mass on Sundays and taking part in other religious ceremonies all over the year was very important. In many churches POWs and civil forced workers were allowed to visit the services on Catholic holy days, but they were forbidden to come into contact with the locals. So they had to take their seats in a separated part of the church. In other cases they had to attend the holy masses which were exclusively celebrated for them. According to the Catholic rite at this time, the masses were read in Latin language, preaching in Polish was forbidden. From 1941 till the end of the war more restrictive regulations became law, and these made it increasingly difficult for these Catholic foreigners to live the religious life to which they were accustomed (Dohle 2010a: 118–122).

Nevertheless, there were equally cases of fanatic Nazis, who mistreated forced labourers in a brutal and inhuman way also in the rural regions. Normally, relatively far away from urban centres, the foreign forced labourers were treated like normal workers on peacetime farms.

## Craftsmanship and trade

As mentioned, no big industrial plants for the arms sector existed in the "Reichsgau Salzburg". Foreign forced labourers, POWs and civil workers were deployed to relatively little factories or handicraft businesses. In many cases the situation for this group of slave workers was similar to those who worked on farms. In Salzburg, there were no big camps with thousands of slave workers, as existed in other parts of the Ostmark, or in other regions of Germany.

## Streets, infrastructure, etc.

Already in autumn 1941, the works at the construction sites of the "Reichsautobahn" (highway) around the city of Salzburg had to be cancelled. At least since spring 1943 almost all building projects, which had no direct context to the "Totalen Krieg", had to be stopped (Dohle, Slupetzky 2004: 148) The foreign labourers of all kind were transferred to projects essential to the war effort. Especially buildings for the air raid protection had to become a priority in this phase of war. Also in Salzburg, in the city and in the province, forced labourers worked in this field. In this case, the situation in Salzburg is comparable with conditions throughout the "Third Reich".

## Resume

The living and working conditions for the foreign forced workers, POWs and civil labourers, were very inhomogeneous in the national socialist "Third Reich". So it was in the "Reichsgau Salzburg" during the Second World War. It could have been horrible and deadly, but also almost acceptable according to the regulations of international law. One point has to be emphasized here, that all of these slave workers, deported against their will from their homelands, were forced to work in the enemy's land to prolong a criminal war.

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## Niewolnicy wojny Hitlera. Polscy robotnicy przymusowi w Salzburgu podczas II wojny światowej

### Streszczenie

W okresie II wojny światowej nie tylko jeńcy wojenni, ale także cywile oraz więźniowie obozów koncentracyjnych byli zmuszani do pracy jako niewolnicy maszyny wojennej Hitlera. W Salzburgu nie było wielkich obozów pracy niewolniczej, jakie utworzono w innych regionach Niemiec, ale w obozach żyli robotnicy przymusowi pracujący przy budowie wielkich elektrowni wodnych w okolicach Kaprun i Uttendorf.

Pierwsi polscy jeńcy wojenni przybyli do prowincji Salzburg jesienią 1939 r., kilka tygodni po niemieckiej inwazji na Polskę. Większość z nich nie trafiła do obozów. Żyli na farmach, a ich warunki bytowe były lepsze niż więźniów obozów. Tak jak w czasie I wojny światowej jeńcy wojenni musieli pracować na farmach w miejsce mężczyzn, którzy służyli w Wehrmachcie i pozostałych formacjach militarnych.

W „Reichsgau Salzburg” nie było wielkich zakładów przemysłu zbrojeniowego. Zagraniczni przymusowi robotnicy byli rozdzielani pomiędzy relatywnie niewielkie przedsiębiorstwa oraz zakłady rzemieślnicze. W wielu przypadkach ich sytuacja była podobna do sytuacji tych, którzy pracowali na farmach.

Warunki życia i pracy zagranicznych robotników przymusowych były w III Rzeszy zróżnicowane. Tak też było w regionie Salzburga. W jednych miejscach bywały straszne i prowadzące do śmierci, w innych niemalże zgodne z regulacjami prawa międzynarodowego. Należy jednak podkreślić, że wszyscy przymusowi robotnicy, deportowani wbrew własnej woli ze swoich ojczyzn, byli zmuszani do pracy w kraju wroga na rzecz prowadzonej przez niego zbrodniczej wojny.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Salzburg, polscy robotnicy przymusowi, II wojna światowa, praca przymusowa, warunki życia i pracy.