

„Camp medicine in the KL Stutthof”

The subject of this doctoral dissertation is camp medicine in the Stutthof concentration camp – a rather separate field that had a huge impact on the lives of the camp’s inmates. This subject has not been so widely and so extensively studied before. The main source base for my doctoral dissertation was the archive documentation of the Stutthof Museum. This included: transport lists, personal files, death certificates, correspondence concerning the hospital's supply of medicines, medical equipment, dressing materials and food, orders of the commandant, hospital statistics and the book of diseases. Thanks to these sources, a picture of the activities of the German doctors and orderlies in the Stutthof concentration camp emerged, as well as the extreme situations the prisoners found themselves in.

Stutthof concentration camp was established by Nazi Germany on 2 September 1939 in a wooded area near the village of Stutthof (Sztutowo), which was a part of Free City of Gdańsk. The camp area was surrounded on all sides by swamps and covered with a dense pine forest, which effectively camouflaged the facility.

The hospital was headed by a chief physician, who was responsible for sanitary and health conditions. The entire hospital staff was subordinate to him, including those in the sub-camps of the main facility. SS doctors were responsible for signing death certificates, treating inmates who were able to work and eliminating inmates who were terminally ill. Their presence was also compulsory for punishments and executions. Medical care was provided by orderlies who had no medical education, they took part in selections and killing of patients.

The hospital was divided into two wards: one for the SS and the other for prisoner patients. In the SS section members’ health was carefully maintained and every effort was made to save life of each injured person. In the case of the prisoners’ hospital everything was different, because its main purpose was to participate in the extermination of inmates rather than to improve their health or reduce mortality among the sick. Physical and psychological violence was used against patients, so they often preferred to stay in the camp rather than go to the hospital - they went to work despite high fever, stomach ache or serious skin disease.

The goal of both – the hospital and the doctors – was to isolate those suffering from infectious disease to prevent epidemics that could endanger the SS crew or the surrounding German civilian population. The hospital was a place from which patients were sent for a lethal injection of phenol or to the gas chamber.

The situation improved in the second half of 1943 due to the activities of Polish doctors who were also prisoners and who from that point made up the majority of the medical staff.

They tried to provide care for the sick, developed their own methods for treating various illnesses and offered support to anyone in need.

The main problem for all prisoners was hunger. Food rations for hard working people were insufficient to sustain basic bodily functions and they were calculated in such way that survival in the camp was possible for only three months. For most prisoners the maximum nutritional value was 1300 calories. The exception was Jewish prisoners, for whom this amount was reduced to less than 1000 calories. Hunger and starvation disease led prisoners to steal food, which only brought further trouble, as any attempt to obtain extra food was punishable by the camp crew. These punishments included ration reductions or complete deprivation of food, which often resulted in death. Malnutrition severely weakened the body and led many prisoners to a slow and painful death.

Diseases further contributed to the weakening of prisoners. Typhus epidemics broke out in the camp several times – for the first time in early 1940 and then regularly returned for various reasons in the form of epidemic typhus, typhoid fever or paratyphoid fever. The primary countermeasure was delousing, but over time it became insufficient. Since 1942 SS staff had started to use injections against typhus on themselves, which were previously tested on inmates to check the quality of the preparations. In April 1943, the typhoid epidemic spread to the neighbouring village of Stegna - a quarantine was then introduced and an order issued requiring everyone to keep personal hygiene, latrines clean and not to drink unboiled water. This epidemic has left an indelible mark on the memory of the prisoners, mainly due to the number of insects that took over the camp. The last epidemic broke out in the fall of 1944 and had lasted until the end of the camp's activities - took lives during the evacuation and subsequently among those who waited for liberation in the camp.

The prisoners' difficult situation had been made worse by the fact that medical experiments such as: sterilization, experiences in phlegmon and various surgical procedures were carried out at the facility. They served the needs of the German army and SS doctors, who gained medical knowledge and practice thanks to them. Many prisoners died as a result of the procedures, those who survived were mutilated for the rest of their lives.

Stutthof concentration camp was the last camp liberated by the Allies, on 9 May 1945. It is estimated that 110 000 people had been deported to the camp in the course of its existence. About 65 000 prisoners died there as a result of starvation, epidemics, extreme labour conditions, brutal evacuations, and a lack of medical attention. 28 000 of those who died were Jews.