



## *A Nazi Camp near Danzig: Perspectives on Shame and on the Holocaust from Stutthof* by Ruth Schwertfeger.

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. 272. ISBN 978-1-350-27403-7.

Review by Catherine Epstein, Amherst College (cepstein@amherst.edu).

This short volume surveys the unusual history of Stutthof, the Nazi concentration camp near Danzig (now Gdańsk). Between 1939 and 1945, some 110,000 prisoners were held there; roughly 65,000 died there. In *A Nazi Camp Near Danzig*, German Literature professor Ruth Schwertfeger (Univ. of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, em.) draws on camp documents, diaries, memoirs, and novels to relate the experiences and later reflections of those whose lives Stutthof touched. Historians will find the monograph both challenging and inspiring. While the text is disjointed, incomplete, and occasionally erroneous, Schwertfeger also deftly enhances it as only a trained literary scholar could. Ultimately, her book is a moving meditation on a camp little known even to Holocaust scholars. Schwertfeger argues that the history of Stutthof should be viewed in a specific manner.

This book embraces a complex of interlocking goals that evolve in the telling of the camp's history. They can best be understood under the motif of "Germandom." By Germandom/*Deutschtum*, I draw on what Robert Koehl described as the "the body of German people, or Germanness, the abstract or the essential qualities of the Germans." (3)

In the interwar period, "Germandom" had a particular valence for Germans in Danzig and West Prussia: they now found themselves beyond Germany's borders, since Danzig was a Free City under League of Nations mandate and West Prussia was incorporated into the interwar Polish republic. For Germans in the Free City, most of whom supported the Nazis, making Danzig and West Prussia once again German was *the* animating motive of their Nazi passions.

Stutthof (founded 2 Sept. 1939) was located in a remote area twenty miles east of Danzig. Surrounded by water on all sides—the Baltic Sea to the north, a lagoon (the Frische Haff) to the south and east, and the Vistula River to the west—the camp's geography made escape virtually impossible. Initially known as a camp for "*Juden und Pfaffen*" (Jews and priests), Stutthof's primary purpose was to strengthen Germandom by eliminating the Polish elites and resistance circles in the Danzig-West Prussia region. In its first years, it was managed by the local SS and the Danzig Security Police. In January 1942, however, Stutthof was integrated into the Reich-wide concentration camp system. Tens of thousands of Poles and Germans—including "asocials," clergymen, Jehovah's Witnesses, common criminals, Communists and other leftists, and Polish nationalists—alongside Jews and many other nationalities passed through the main camp and its 210 sub-camps.

While Stutthof provided prison labor to many companies and military entities, including stone and brick works, armaments and munitions factories, shipyards and railways, military installations and fortifications, its economic importance was largely regional. In mid-1944, however, Stutthof took on greater significance within the Nazi empire. As the USSR's Red Army swept through eastern Europe, the Nazis shut down concentration camps and marched camp inmates westwards. Stutthof's population increased dramatically, with some 46,000 Hungarian and Baltic

Jews arriving between June and October 1944. This was the first time that Jews outnumbered Poles in the camp's history. The final phase of the camp—and the most searing in Schwertfeger's telling—involved chaotic, ruthless death marches as Stutthof inmates were marched westwards in winter 1945. Due to the camp's remote location, the Allies arrived there only on 9 May 1945; Stutthof was the last concentration camp to be liberated.

Prisoners who survived Stutthof often called it a true “hell.” The camp's two commandants, Max Pauly (1939–42) and Paul-Werner Hoppe (1942–45), encouraged a brutal regime. Food rations were abysmal—a typical daily ration included a piece of bread, ersatz coffee, and watery turnip soup. Prison clothing was little more than striped rags. Lice and lice-borne disease were rampant and medical care was virtually absent. Inmates were exposed to all the elements, ranging from extreme heat to freezing cold. Arbitrary shootings, harassment by guards, senseless beatings, and long hours of hard labor were the norm. Yet Schwertfeger carefully shows that the Nazis maintained their racial hierarchy even in the camp. Camp authorities always meted out the worst treatment to Jews, a fact noted by other victims who endured their own share of horrors. By contrast, for example, the privileged “kith and kin” of the aristocratic German conspirators involved in the July 20th (1944) plot to kill Hitler experienced a very different camp; they had to clean their barracks, but were otherwise free to cook for themselves, read books, and receive mail. Still, among the inmates who perished in Stutthof was the mother-in-law of the main July 20th conspirator, Claus von Stauffenberg. Anna, Baroness von Lerchenfeld, misidentified as Stauffenberg's maternal grandmother (112), died in the course of evacuations from Stutthof. By every account, the death marches were harrowing. Fryda Gabrylewicz described how her column of POWs was marched over ice where some had perished enroute. In an effort to escape, she was hiding among corpses when, she recalled, “I heard a cracking noise but did not know what it was. It was the ice cracking. I raise my head and see the ice breaking and corpses sliding into the sea” (147).

In Schwertfeger's telling, strengthening Germanism meant removing Jews and Poles from Danzig-West Prussia. But more than erasure was involved. Schwertfeger neglects the many other ways Germanization was imposed on the population. She briefly mentions the arrival of ethnic Germans to the region and attempts by Albert Forster, the Nazi Gauleiter of Danzig/West Prussia, to declare many Poles living in the area to be “Germans.” But she does not dwell on those processes and how they concerned Stutthof. Nor does she discuss how bricks and stone manufactured by Stutthof prison labor were used to build “German” buildings, or how landscaping practices carried out by Stutthof prison labor were designed to make the area look “German.” These silences are lost chances to explain the megalomaniacal ambitions of the Nazi Germanization project.

Missed opportunities aside, the strength of this monograph is its author's careful selection and elucidation of quotations from memoirs and literary texts. Balys Sruoga, for example, a Lithuanian prisoner, described himself as “emaciated as a church rat, with swollen feet, a rattling heart, quivering thighs ...” (88), who had the good fortune to work for a Sergeant Bublitz, who gave him extra rations from leftover SS meals. Schwertfeger writes that

An emaciated church rat with quivering thighs, eating gourmet meal (relatively speaking) right under the eyes of the SS inserts a level of irony and subtle pathos that instantly engages the reader's mind and heart. We know that prisoners in Nazi camps were generally viewed as lower than vermin, but Sruoga projects on his rat recognizable heart symptoms that elevate the prisoner to a human status, yet he does not sentimentalize the subject.... (88)

Another Lithuanian, Stasys Yla, describes a scene in which an SS Captain, Teodor Meyer, punished a prisoner for failing to take off his cap at roll call:

still maintaining silence, he [Meyer] stopped right next to the prisoner and kicked him with all his might. Only then did the unfortunate man become aware of his negligence, and he had just enough time to cast aside the offending article before he rolled over and died. The cap itself was seized by a sudden gust of wind and carried out of sight.... The depiction of his [the prisoner's] last moments are followed by a haunting detail that directs us to look up, above the ranks of the dead to where the prisoner's cap is carried by a gust of wind "out of sight." Yla's culminating short sentence captures the poignancy and tragedy of a death this is totally senseless and beyond the grasp of the rational mind.... This one segment of the Yla memoir could stand on its own as a hidden gem of Stutthof—its silence and its shame are perfectly captured for one brief moment. The cap may be "out of sight" but the anguish of the anonymous prisoner's death will live on in Yla's prose drama. (101-2)

Schwertfeger's sensitive observations carry on into her reflections on the postwar era. The 1946 public hanging of eleven Stutthof SS guards in Gdańsk was a popular spectacle. Crowds converged on the corpses, eager to cut off pieces of rope or clothing that allegedly brought good luck. Concerned about the forms revenge might take, the Polish government soon stopped such public executions.

For Germans, the shame associated with Nazi crimes still persists. To clarify the wartime dilemmas and choices of Germans, Poles, and Jews, Schwertfeger adduces the fictional characters and life story of Günter Grass, the 1999 Nobel-prize winning German novelist who was born and grew up in Danzig-Langfuhr. In Grass's *Danzig Trilogy*, fleeting mentions of Stutthof evoke sinister connotations. Even Grass, who made a career of such reflections, could not or would not publicly confess for sixty years that he had joined the Waffen-SS as a seventeen-year-old. For Schwertfeger, Grass's late reckoning is emblematic of the troubled layers of loss and guilt stemming from wartime entanglements.

In her judicious retelling of Stutthof's history and memory, Schwertfeger has beautifully captured the horrors inflicted and suffered by human beings, be they commandants or guards, priests or communists, Poles or Jews. More than anything else, *A Nazi Camp Near Danzig* tells a distinctively *human* history of Stutthof.