

## **BISINGEN | Places: Concentration camp and oil shale-works**

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Aerial photograph of the concentration camp and the oil shale-works, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1945, University of Keele/GB. Between the train station and the entrance of the camp the beaten path originating in the prisoners walk to the camp can be seen.

Within few months – from August 1944 to March 1945 – there were a total of 4150 men deported to the concentration camp in Bisingen, among them 1550 Jews. They arrived on several transports from various European countries, having previously e.g. worked at oil shale-works in Estonia or being forced labor at the “Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke” (in Northern Germany), got arrested after the break-down of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 or had just escaped the genocide of Hungarian Jews starting in 1944.

To most prisoners Bisingen was just one station on their long journey of suffering which had brought them to the “Schwäbische Alb” (Swabian hills) via large concentration camps such as Dachau, Auschwitz, Danzig-Stuffhof and Buchenwald.

When the first thousand prisoners were deported from Auschwitz to Bisingen on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the camp did not exist yet. Tents served as poor accommodation. Under the management of “Organisation Todt” the inmates had to build the barracks, watchtowers and the barbed wire fence as well as the oil shale-works in “Kuhloch” (name of the quarry).



Oil shale-works "Wüste 2" in Bisingen,  
around 1945/46, community archives  
Balingen

The prisoners not only worked at "Wüste-Werk 2" in Bisingen but also at the oil shale-works in neighboring Engstlatt ("Wüste 3") and at "Wüste 1" on so called "Höhnisch", an area between Dußlingen, Nehren and Gomaringen. Some prisoners established a water pipe across the town of Bisingen up to the quarry, others were "borrowed" by Keller's shoe manufactory, and others repaired the roof of the church damaged by an airraid or cleared out bombed buildings.

Some locals tried to help the prisoners by depositing food at places which the inmates passed daily. Nevertheless hard work in the oil shale-works and inhumane conditions in the camp especially during the wet autumn and winter in 1944/45 caused many casualties. The prisoners who sank into knee-deep mud and mire died of disease, weakness, hunger and maltreatment. Many were shot dead or hung by SS-men.

The first 29 dead bodies were burnt in the crematorium of Reutlingen; later on two locals had to take the dead to a mass grave by horse carriages where the prisoners were hastily buried. At least 1187 human beings died in the concentration camp out of which 1158 are presently buried on the cemetery. The conditions in the camp were so appalling that even a superior SS-officer reported to Berlin which resulted in an inspection by the head of the "SS-Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamtes", Oswald Pohl, and the dismissal of super ordinate camp leader Franz Hofmann. Yet the SS was more worried about the delaying oil production than about the sufferings of the prisoners. On February, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1945, the first "pile" was ignited. With this highly difficult yet unproductive procedure the oil shale was piled up unto oblong hills and set afire. The heat was meant to smolder oil out of the shale. Only little fuel was produced within the last two months of war.



Dave Fischel, former prisoner of the concentration camp, came to Bisingen on the transport from Buchenwald in March 1945. The photograph depicts him after his liberation by US-Americans, private property

Due to SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler ordering the evacuation of the camp as the Allies drew near, the camp was broken off in April 1945 and 769 prisoners were sent on two transports to Dachau-Allach, the remaining had to walk the "Todesmarsch" headed towards Oberschwaben (Upperswabia) and Bavaria, which many did not survive. The surviving prisoners from Bisingen were liberated in either Dachau, close to Ostrach (council of Ravensburg), Althausen (council of Sigmaringen) or Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

After the end of WW2 the French occupying power ordered the exhumation of the dead thrown into the mass grave in Bisingen and their burial in single coffins on the newly opened cemetery. Inmates of war criminal camps in Reutlingen and Balingen had to dig out the bodies. Former members of the NSDAP (especially teachers, clergymen and former mayors) from all councils under French occupied terrain in Württemberg-Hohenzollern were brought to Bisingen to personally learn about the existence of the concentration camp in Bisingen and its many victims.



Exhumation of the mass grave in 1946,  
private property

Owners of horses from Bisingen and neighbouring villages were obliged to transport the coffins from the mass grave to the cemetery.

“That is how we carried 1100 coffins from “Ludenstall” up to the cemetery in those days. After five years of fighting in the war this was the most embarrassing experience in all my life.” (Written report of an eye witness)

Better view for pictures: look at the original blog side – you can enlarge them by clicking –  
Uta Hentsch