



Owing to the protracted fighting in the Vosges, Natzweiler was not liberated until November 1944, the first patrols of the US 3rd Infantry Division reaching the camp on the 23rd. By then, the SS guards had abandoned the camp and fled. A US Seventh Army documents team entered the camp at 1000 hours on the 26th. *Left:* GIs on the platform of Schirmeck sta-

tion, some 50 kilometres south-west of Strasbourg, The nearby railway station at Rothau was used as a transit point for the inmates. (USNA) The history of the camp and its surroundings has been an on-going project for our author Nigel Smith over a number of years. He found the same iron railing still in place on the Schirmeck platform *(right)*.

NATZWEILER-STRUTHOF CONCENTRATION CAMP

By Nigel Smith, MBE

Names such as Auschwitz, Belsen and Dachau, each with their sad and dreadful litany of human suffering and depravity, are all too familiar, but equally infamous, though less known, is Natzweiler-Struthof located in Eastern France.

In her book *Flames in the Field* (Penguin Books, 1995), Rita Kramer writes that 'the guidebooks describe the picturesque villages in the pleasant resort area of the Vosges mountains in Alsace, the region of Eastern France known as the Bas Rhin, saying that "there is not much to do except rest and take long walks through the pine woods". However, the traveller furnished with Michelin

map No. 87, having followed one of the main roads out of Strasbourg or Colmar, can take the road marked N420 to the town of Schirmeck with its quaint railway station, and continue a few miles south to the village of Rothau. From there it is only a few minutes' drive along the twisting D130 mountain road past deep green forest broken by occasional glimpses of bright blue sky and wind-blown puffs of white cloud until the spot where in the late 1980s a signpost directed motorists and climbers the way "To Bar-Restaurant" and, below that, "To Gas Chamber".

'The bar-restaurant', continues Rita, 'is

inside a small hotel described in the red Michelin guide as "pleasant, quiet, and well-situated". It is across the road from the tiled-roof building that was the gas chamber, before the war a restaurant serving inexpensive meals to skiers. Here in August 1943, inside the former restaurant which had been extensively renovated for the purpose, lethal gas was administered to 87 Jews, 57 men and 30 women, who were selected to be brought here to France from Auschwitz for the purpose of "medical experimentation". A lit-



In the waiting room of Rothau station, a plaque now records its role in history. 'In this place between 1941-1944 came thousands of deportees of all nationalities en route to the Nazi concentration camp of Natzweiler-Struthof. Passers by remember

these martyrs for liberty.' From here it was an eight-kilometre journey to the camp. (Note: Natzweiler-Struthof is often and easily confused with Stutthof, the concentration camp near Danzig in occupied Poland.) (USNA)



the glass panel enabled doctors to observe the reactions of the men and women inside. After gassing, the bodies were kept in three deep tile-lined tanks designed to preserve them until they could be used as cadavers for dissecting by medical students. The skulls and skeletons were to become part of a collection being assembled by SS doctors and professors of the Faculty of Medicine at the Institute of Anatomy in the University of Strasbourg Municipal Hospital.

Just a few minutes further along the mountain road, well marked today and much travelled by cars and by school and tourist buses, is Natzweiler-Struthof. Unlike the nondescript facade of the “maison rustique” that served as its gas chamber, the silhouette of the Natzweiler camp is immediately identifiable to a visitor as that of a concentration camp. “Konzentrationslager Natzweiler”, as it is today identified on the wooden sign above the gate, looks no different from the photographs of other death camps and slave-labour holding pens that dotted the Polish countryside and stood beside bustling towns in eastern Germany. Here in France this one still stands, with its heavy gates and square watchtowers, surrounded by double fences of barbed wire. Inside, at the top of a slope, you can look past the gallows on its stagelike platform, over the site of the razed barracks,

Natzweiler was selected as a concentration camp (with forced labour to be carried out in the nearby granite quarry) by SS-Standartenführer Blumberg of the SS firm Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH (German Mining and Quarrying Company — DEST) in September 1940, and the first inmates arrived on May 21, 1941: 300 German political prisoners transferred here from Sachsenhausen. Two members of the French Resistance mount guard after the liberation of the camp in November 1944.



The present-day gate is a post-war addition. Two of Nigel Smith’s team on guard.

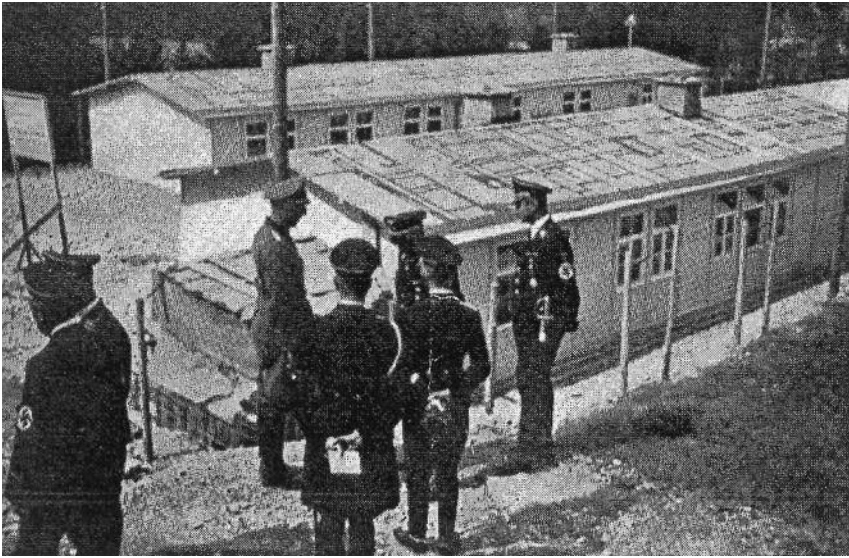
the outlines of their foundations still visible on the ground, down towards the still-standing punishment-cell bunker and the adjacent crematorium with its tall black chimneys.

Beyond the surrounding barbed wire there is a clear view of the magnificent mountains and above them the endless sky with its wind-driven clouds.



The camp was declared an official memorial site on January 8, 1950. This general view shows the gallows in the centre with

the punishment block on the left-hand side and crematorium on the right.



The first camp commander (Lagerkommandant) was SS-Sturmbannführer Hans Hüttig, replaced by Egon Zill in April 1942. He was succeeded in the autumn of 1943 by Josef Kramer (later of Bergen-Belsen fame, see *After the Battle* No. 89). Before that, Kramer had been the camp's Schutzhaftlagerführer — commander of the prisoner section of the camp. The last Kommandant, from May to November 1944, was SS-Sturmbannführer Fritz Hartjenstein. *Left:* In this picture — the



only photograph known to have been taken while the camp was in operation — Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler is seen (centre) being received by Hartjenstein (fifth from right). The latter was tried by a British military court in 1946 for his part in the murder of four SOE women agents and sentenced to life imprisonment. *Right:* A precise comparison is difficult because the original barrack hut was destroyed by fire in 1976 and now a new perimeter fence has been erected behind the camera.

‘Just outside the gates of the camp, on the afternoon of July 6, 1944, a work detail of prisoners digging ditches under heavy guard witnessed an extraordinary thing. A car drove up to the gate and out of it soldiers led four people who were brought within the gates and shortly afterwards led down the stepped path to the prison block. They wore decent clothes and carried personal belongings and were not like the usual prisoners transferred from other camps, starved, emaciated, broken, hobbling, sometimes shoeless, in remnants of civilian clothes or uniforms. That much was unusual. What was truly extraordinary — so much so that, in the few minutes it took for the new arrivals to walk from the gate down the path to the blockhouse, every detail could be remembered clearly years afterwards by those who had witnessed the scene — was that the four were women and members of SOE. That same night they were murdered by lethal injection, and their bodies burnt, like so many others, in the crematorium oven.

‘Natzweiler was a camp for men, held no women prisoners, had no facilities for women, and the 30 women who had been brought there as human guinea pigs and asphyxiated in the gas chamber outside the camp gates had never lived in the camp proper. This was the first glimpse of ordinary women, dressed in ordinary clothes, that prisoners of Natzweiler had seen, some of them for months, some for years.

‘Natzweiler-Struthof was the only extermination camp on French soil. It lay among the wooded ravines of a territory west of the Rhine over which Germany and France had fought repeatedly for centuries and in which loyalties were deeply divided by language and national allegiance. In the Second World War the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were not considered to be an occupied part of a conquered enemy like other parts of France; the victorious Germans considered the area to have been reabsorbed into the Reich, like Austria at the time of the Anschluss.

‘In 1939 the spot on a hill bordering the pine forests of Natzweiler and Barembach, both havens for hikers and mushroom gatherers, had been a popular ski resort. Its north and west exposures brought icy winds all year, and its gentle slopes were covered by the heavy swirling snows of winter. Postcards of the ‘thirties show winter sports enthusiasts in front of the hotel with their wide wooden skis and toboggans. Towards the end of the first year of the German occupation of France, late in 1940, German officials installed themselves in the former Hôtel de Tourisme and asked the local authorities to provide workers to build a road — which would later be known as the “Route du Désespoir” — up to the summit of the Struthof hill from the station at Rothau, so that materials and prisoners could be transported there to construct the camp. Described by a survivor as “walking skeletons in rags”, they carried up on their backs the stones and beams to build their own prison. Only a handful of them were still



The four agents of the Special Operations Executive murdered by lethal injection on July 6, 1944. L-R: Andrée Borrel (code-name ‘Denise’). Born in Paris in November 1919, she was parachuted into France in September 1942 as a liaison agent to the ‘Prosper’ circuit and arrested in June 1943. Vera Leigh (‘Simone’), born Leeds March 1903, reached France in May

1943 and worked with the ‘Inventor’ network. She was arrested in October 1943. Sonia Olschanezky (‘Suzanne Ouvrard’), a Parisien born in December 1923, worked with the ‘Juggler’/‘Robin’ circuits, arrested in January 1944. Diana Rowden (‘Paulette’), a Londoner born in January 1915, was arrested in November 1943 while with the ‘Acrobat’ circuit.



Medical experiments at Natzweiler included using poisonous gasses on 170 inmates (October 42 – September 44); those to find a cure against typhus on 115 inmates of whom 31 died (May 43 – September 44) and against jaundice. In June 1943, 109 Jews, four Russians and two Poles were transferred from Auschwitz to Natzweiler to be used by Strasbourg University



Hospital, who were mainly interested in enlarging their collection of skeletons. Between August 11-19, 1943, 87 of these were gassed in the camp's gas chamber. *Left:* Here, a member of the Resistance points out the autopsy table located in the mortuary in the crematorium block. (USNA) *Right:* Over 50 years later virtually nothing has changed, save repairing the pane of glass!

there when the camp was liberated four years later by the US Seventh army.

The camp existed for the purpose of inflicting suffering and death. It was intended that those who were sent there should disappear, in circumstances as brutal and degrading as possible, after being used to work in the nearby quarries and underground munitions factories until their strength gave out. They were kept on a starvation diet, were barely clothed in the icy winter, received no medical attention except for those who were experimented on, and were constantly subject to the whims of sadistic guards.

The overcrowded barracks were ruled over by prisoners who had been transferred

from the civil jails, many of them those who had been convicted of violent crimes. Prisoners were made to stand at attention for hours in their thin striped uniforms during roll-calls in the freezing pre-dawn or winter evenings, when the outlines of the surrounding mountains and thoughts of life beyond them kept some of them on their feet and drove others mad. Those who dropped were left to lie there. Those who tried to escape were hanged slowly in front of the assembled prisoners; those guilty of other infractions, such as trying to smuggle letters out of the camp or trading food for a pair of shoes, were tied to a wooden rack and beaten with a whip by a fellow-prisoner until they were unconscious, or placed in solitary confine-

ment for up to three days in a cage-like space too small to stand up or lie down in. To amuse themselves, guards might force a prisoner out of the line of march on the way to the quarries, then machine-gun him "for attempting to escape". On occasion they organised hunts, setting hungry attack dogs on prisoners selected for the sport.

Fewer than 100 SS guards were needed to oversee the thousands of prisoners in the camp, since escape past the double high-voltage electrified fencing was next to impossible and since the violent criminals among them were made responsible for maintaining discipline over the rest, weakened by hunger and broken by physical punishment. Most of the specially trained German personnel had vol-



The camp was built to accommodate 1,500 prisoners. The average number in 1943 was some 2,200, rising to some 7,000 by September 1944. In total, between September 1940 and November 1944, 46,000 people were entered into the camp's register, but the total number of prisoners present has been estimated at 70,000. It is believed that at least 25,000 perished, some 10,000-12,000 of these in Natzweiler itself (the others



being sent on to other camps). *Left:* The same Resistance fighter with a stretcher at the top of the steps at the rear of the crematorium. Bodies were taken down to the boiler room below ground for temporary storage. Corpses could then be brought up to the furnace by means of a hand-operated lift. (USNA) *Right:* One of the team contemplates the ghosts of the past at a spot which has remained timeless.



unteered for the concentration camp assignment. It was considered preferable to being at the Russian front. The prisoners themselves were made to perform most of the work, including the loading of bodies into the crematorium. All in all, it was a system designed to meet the needs of Nazi policy, including being economically profitable, and did not vary much from the regime at all the other camps to the east.

'Aside from geography, one thing set Natzweiler in France apart from those other extermination camps to the east. It was not the brutality systematically practised, not the human misery endured, or even the utter hopelessness of those within or the indifference of those outside. Those were the same in all the places designed to carry out German policy of the time, the Nazi doctrine of superior and inferior races. The difference had to do with the prisoner population, with who was sent there to be obliterated and why.

'By 1944, on any given day, among the three to four thousand prisoners crowded three to a bunk in Natzweiler were men, or the shadows of those who had once been men, of every nationality. Most were Poles, Russians, and French; some were Germans, Italians, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, Norwegians and Dutch. At various times there were a few British including approximately 200 Channel Islanders and a handful of SAS and SOE personnel most of whom were murdered in the camp. About three-quarters of those in the camp were political prisoners. Among the rest were civilians from Poland, Russia, and France who had been conscripted for forced labour in Germany, had tried to escape and been recaptured.

'What all of these men had in common was some sense of the reason they were there. Unlike the Jews in Germany and the conquered countries of the greater Reich who had been herded into boxcars and delivered to the killing factories in the East, what happened to these men had at least a logic of evil. The Jews of Europe had done nothing but be what they were born, and could do nothing to influence their fate. Their persecutors looked on them with loathing, with contempt, as less than human.

'The prisoners at Natzweiler, especially the "politicals", knew at least — and it does not minimize their suffering to recognise the fact — that they had done something, committed some act, made some decision they could look on as a moral choice or a spiritual necessity, in some way an expression of their individuality. What had brought them to this was a voluntary act of will. Their tormentors looked on them not with disgust but with hatred. They feared them. And in so doing left them at least their pride, their self-respect.

'In addition to being shaved and disinfected and stripped of all personal belongings on being admitted to the camp, the

Evacuation of the camp began in early September 1944 (due to the Allied armies approaching the Vosges area), large inmate groups leaving for Dachau on the 2nd and 3rd. The evacuation continued for several weeks, many inmates going to smaller satellite camps in south-west Germany: Asbach, Dautmergen, Erzingen, Kochendorf, Bisingen, Echterdingen airfield, Hailfingen, Haslach, Hessental, Leonberg, Mannheim, Unterriexingen, Neckarelz, Neckargartach, Schömberg, Schörzingen and Vaihingen. Many of these 'Aussenkommandos' were as deadly as the main camp, involving work in quarries, mines and underground factories. Left: The lift shaft to the furnace room. (USNA) Right: The wall behind now bears a plaque recording the names of the 107 members of the French Resistance network 'Alliance' who were murdered by the SS during the night of September 1/2, 1944.



The crematorium — preserved as a stark reminder of Natzweiler's horrific past.



Behind the visitor is the plaque, unveiled in 1975 in the presence of the President of France, to the four murdered SOE agents.



The watchtowers from which the armed SS guards monitored the Natzweiler camp each had a balcony with searchlight. (USNA)

prisoners at Natzweiler were classified by the Germanically methodical camp administrators according to various categories. Each wore an identifying symbol, in the case of the largest numbers a green triangle for the ordinary convicts, with a special point on that for dangerous criminals, and a red triangle for the condemned political prisoners, with a letter indicating the prisoner's nationality. The smaller groups were identified by purple triangles for conscientious objectors (Jehovah's Witnesses), pink for homosexuals, and black for "anti-socials", who, along with the greens, were put in charge of the work gangs.

'A special category was reserved for captured maquis partisans and members of other resistance organizations. These prisoners, classified as "NN", were identified by a red cross on the back of their uniforms and red stripes on the trousers and a yellow patch with three black circles making a convenient target over the heart.

"NN" stood for "Nacht und Nebel", or night and fog, a phrase that was the inspiration of a particularly cultured Nazi official fond of Goethe and of Wagner, in whose admired operas he found the appropriate term for those who were meant to disappear without trace. The "NN" prisoner was con-

sidered to have no further rights nor even any longer any legal existence. He was not permitted to receive or send mail or packages, and his name was written in the camp records in pencil, so it could be erased and any memory of him obliterated when he finally disappeared, as was intended, into the night and fog.

'For all prisoners', concludes Rita, 'admittance to Natzweiler was tantamount to a death sentence. Those who were physically strong enough to withstand the slave labour and were not shot or hung could expect to succumb to psychological and moral disintegration, disease and malnutrition. The life expectancy of a prisoner was not worth reckoning. It took a combination of extraordinary will and extraordinary luck to survive.'

This then was the camp of Natzweiler and this the living death which those unfortunate enough to be incarcerated therein had to endure. Today the camp is the National Memorial of the Deported, and to it come thousands of visitors of every nation, every year, some out of curiosity, some making a pilgrimage, and even a few who were themselves victims of the concentration camp system. A moving evening vigil is held every year on the third weekend in June.



Most of the watchtowers still stand, though now with their balcony facades closed. The perimeter fences also remain complete with rows of insulators which once carried the electrified barbed wire.



In 1944, all the barrack buildings save the one on the right-hand side at the top of the slope were burned to the ground to eradicate disease and only the concrete bases remain to be seen today. Unfortunately the sole survivor was almost



certainly destroyed by arson in May 1976 but was rebuilt in similar fashion and now houses the camp museum. The central memorial was dedicated by President Charles de Gaulle on July 23, 1960 (right).