

Schmölln – And everyone is watching

NARRATOR

Schmölln, Thuringia, 1940. At the Mehlhorn & Sohn steam brickworks, German women worked alongside Polish forced laborers. The men were malnourished and emaciated and were forced to sleep in makeshift quarters in the factory attic.

One of the German workers was Elli Hofbauer. She was married and the mother of three children. She regularly brought soup to the Polish forced laborers in the attic. Two other women from the brickworks, Martha Barth and Adelheid Winkler, joined her efforts.

The women are cautious: Elli Hofbauer consulted her husband, who inquired with the police as to whether such assistance is permitted. They told him only that it is his own business.

The situation deteriorated with the introduction of the so-called Polish Decrees in March 1940, which prohibited private contact between Germans and Polish forced laborers. The three women received several warnings, including from the police. Consequently, Elli Hofbauer changed her approach. She began sending her young daughter to bring the soup to the Polish workers.

On November 18, 1940, Elli Hofbauer, Martha Barth, and Adelheid Winkler were arrested. At the same time, the Polish forced laborers Johann Sladek, Franciszek Owczarek, and Antoni Lucki were taken into custody.

NEWSPAPER REPORT

Schmöllner Tageblatt, November 19, 1940

An unprecedented scandal erupted yesterday morning when a police car pulled up in the market square and hauled away three women from Schmölln and three Polish civilians. In an incredibly short time, a large crowd had gathered around them, venting their feelings with loud shouts of “Boo!” and other apt expressions, so that soon everyone knew what was going on.

Six Poles are employed at the Mehlhorn brickworks, where they also reside. Suspicions had repeatedly arisen with the criminal police until they suddenly took action and brought the shameful offense to its just punishment.

One of the three women is the mother of five children; another, of four. All three are married. The husband of one of them serves in the Wehrmacht and has no idea of his wife's shameful activities. (...)

Now the state police have taken up their case and will impose a punishment which, in such cases, cannot be harsh enough. We are reporting this news solely to duly condemn this undignified behavior, which excludes the three women from the German *Volksgemeinschaft* [people's community], and to present it as a warning.

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The three women were taken to prison. During their interrogations by the Gestapo, they learned that they were accused of adultery. The Gestapo accused them of having had regular sexual contact with Polish men. The three women signed a confession of guilt, presumably under duress.

On December 11, 1940, a man walked through the streets of Schmölln ringing a bell. He called the people to the market square and announced that there was something to see there. Rudolf Seyfarth, the principal of a school in Schmölln, also followed the call. He later recorded the events in his diary:

RUDOLF SEYFARTH

Today, the three dishonorable and undignified women (...), who had recently been arrested for having relations with Poles, were publicly expelled from the *Volksgemeinschaft*. They had to walk past their former homes wearing signs on their chests that read "I have been expelled from the *Volksgemeinschaft*." Standing on a podium in the market square, before the eyes of thousands of spectators, their hair—the pride of every German woman—was shaved off. Local Group Leader Oder carried out their expulsion from the *Volksgemeinschaft* with an address delivered over the loudspeaker.

NARRATOR

Following their public humiliation, Elli Hofbauer, Martha Barth, and Adelheid Winkler were deported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. One of them was heavily pregnant at the time. Her child was taken from her after birth. The older children were told that their mothers had died.

The Polish forced laborers Johann Sladek, Franciszek Owczarek, and Antoni Lucki were deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp. About a year later, in December 1941, they were publicly executed in Bechstedt along with nine other Poles. Polish forced laborers from the surrounding area were forced to watch their execution as a deterrent.

Elli Hofbauer survived for five years in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. After her liberation in 1945, she returned to Schmölln. By that time, her husband had already died, and her three children were living with their stepmother. She regained custody of her children and began living with them again. For a time, she even returned to work at the brickworks.

Today, a plaque at the market fountain in Schmölln commemorates the public humiliation of the three women. The execution of the Polish forced laborers is not mentioned.