

Niederorschel – Successfully brave

NARRATOR

Niederorschel is a small village in northwestern Thuringia, at the edge of the Eichsfeld region. It lies within a hilly landscape, surrounded by fields and woodlands. The village's appearance is defined by a Baroque church and half-timbered houses.

In September 1944, the SS established a satellite camp of the Buchenwald concentration camp in Niederorschel. Under the cover name *Langenwerke AG*, the facility was immediately tasked with manufacturing aircraft parts for the Junkers Group.

The production facility was housed in two arched halls of a plywood factory. A neighboring textile factory, the *Mechanische Weberei AG* (Mechanical Weaving Company), was repurposed to serve as a camp. Three-tiered bunks meant to accommodate several hundred prisoners were installed in the weaving hall. A kitchen and infirmary were also constructed there. An electric fence was erected around the entire camp.

In October 1944, several hundred prisoners were transported to Niederorschel from Buchenwald and Auschwitz. A total of over 700 prisoners were deployed there over the course of the war. The majority of them were of Jewish descent.

One of these prisoners is Ivan Ivanji. Much later, in 1995, he returned to Niederorschel once more and recorded his impressions of the camp in a radio feature, "Return to Buchenwald":

IVAN IVANJI

The old half-timbered houses, the Baroque parish church, and the small town square with its modest town hall in Niederorschel are certainly very appealing to me now, at the end of February 1995. But nothing reminded me that I had been there once before, 50 years ago. In vain, I strained to recognize anything.

NARRATOR

Work at the Niederorschel satellite camp was grueling. In unheated factory halls, Ivanji and his fellow prisoners were forced to work 12-hour shifts riveting aluminum

sheets together into wings and landing gear for German fighter planes. Rations were completely inadequate, and abuse at the hands of the SS guards was a part of daily life. At least 19 prisoners died in the few months of the camp's existence. Yet for Ivanji, Niederorschel was still an improvement compared to other camps.

IVAN IVANJI

We weren't marched to work by the SS, because the guards were stationed around the camp and the factory. In winter, the dreaded roll calls didn't take place under a clear, icy sky, but rather in the factory corridor.

NARRATOR

German civilians also worked at the Junkers factory. Among them was the master locksmith Johannes Drößler, a former employee of the *Mechanische Weberei*. Before 1933, Drößler had been a supporter of the SPD. Now, he worked side by side with concentration camp prisoners, bringing him into direct contact with the victims of the Nazis.

Johannes decides to help. Time and again, he secretly supplies prisoners with food. The Hungarian concentration camp prisoner Ervin Cserepfalvi later wrote about Drößler:

ERVIN CSEREPFALVI

On December 14, 1944, I arrived in Niederorschel from Buchenwald together with my father. (...) I was sent to work in the **metalwork shop**. At the time, I could not yet imagine what a stroke of luck this was for me, as my future benefactor, the civilian foreman of the workshop, was Johannes Drößler. To my greatest surprise, he brought me a mid-morning snack from his home the very next day. He did this regularly.

NARRATOR

About two months before the end of the war, Drößler decided to help some concentration camp prisoners escape. He secretly gave them a map intended to show them the way from the camp to his barn.

What we know about Johannes Drößler today is based largely on an account by the former mayor of Niederorschel, Hubert Hoppmann. In the 1960s, he spoke with several eyewitnesses about this story. Hoppmann writes:

HUBERT HOPPMANN

In the barn, he gave his charges strict instructions on how to behave. For example, they were not allowed to enter the courtyard during the day. Holes were cut in the barn door and the wall facing the gardens so that the inmates could keep themselves informed about their situation.

NARRATOR

At first, Drößler provided food for the fugitives on his own. However, as more and more prisoners arrived at the barn, Drößler first confided in his family and later in some of his neighbors.

HUBERT HOPPMANN

His wife and daughters were informed in just a few words. Fear began to take hold of the women, and heated discussions ensued. The mother said, "Will this turn out all right? Aren't you going to bring misfortune upon us all?" Seeking to convince his family members, Master Drößler replied that there was probably nothing more human that one could do than helping these poor souls.

NARRATOR

In the last two months before the end of the war, Drößler helped twelve prisoners escape and hid them in his barn.

In the final weeks of the war, as the Americans continued to advance, the SS evacuated the Niederorschel satellite camp. 135 prisoners were transferred to another satellite camp near Halberstadt, where deadly conditions prevailed. The remaining 527 were sent on a death march to Buchenwald. Only 425 of them arrived nine days later; the fate of the remaining prisoners is unknown.

The prisoners in Drößler's barn were not discovered.

HUBERT HOPPMANN

Mr. Drößler heard the news of the Allied troops' advance on the radio. The hour of liberation was clearly drawing near. Then, finally, the moment arrived. He rushed into the barn and told his friends that the Americans were already in the surrounding villages. The prisoners embraced him and wept with joy, seeing that the end of their ordeal was within reach.

(...) When the prisoners heard the clanking of the tanks' treads, they rushed out of the barn onto the street, overcome with joy. They gathered in front of the house, embraced the entire Drößler family, and hugged and kissed one another.

NARRATOR

Drößler remained at the *Mechanische Weberei* even after the war.

In February 1946, he received a letter from a former prisoner, Hanuš Adler.

HANUŠ ADLER

I am glad to take this opportunity to let you know I am still alive. Amidst all the terrible horrors that surrounded me from 1939 to 1945, I think fondly of you, a person who remained warm and compassionate even in the hell that was created for us. I will never forget how you did everything in your power to help me and others. (...) Unfortunately, I did not find any of my relatives in Prague; my wife was murdered in an Auschwitz gas chamber, and my parents, in-laws, the rest of my relatives, and many of my friends were slaughtered, falling victim to Nazi madness. Nevertheless, I refuse to despair, and I want to figure out how to build a new life for myself. Niederorschel was a ray of light; the last camp I was in, Langenstein near Halberstadt, was a merciless hell.

NARRATOR

In 1947, two years after the end of the war, Drößler received a loyalty bonus for 40 years of service. Shortly thereafter, on August 3, 1947, he died of liver cancer.

Ivan Ivanji, a Buchenwald survivor, also thought of Johannes Drößler upon his return in 1995. In the radio feature, he said:

IVAN IVANJI

(...) I must not forget that the old Drößler himself, who passed away as early as 1947, put his own life and the lives of his entire family at risk. (...) Master Drößler was not only brave—he was successfully brave. He saved people's lives at the risk of his own.

NARRATOR

In 1965, the municipality of Niederorschel erected a stone to memorialize the former satellite camp. In 1998, a street was named after Johannes Drößler. The local history museum has hosted a permanent exhibition on the Niederorschel satellite camp since 2002.

The escape plan that Drößler drew up for the prisoners, which helped them find their way to the barn, is on display at the museum.