

Mittelbau-Dora – Suddenly Enemies

NARRATOR

In July 1943, the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was overthrown. Until that point, Italy had been an ally of the German Reich. Italian and German soldiers fought side by side against the Allies.

In September 1943, the new Italian government under Marshal Badoglio signed an armistice with the Allies. German troops subsequently disarmed around one million Italian soldiers. Anyone who refused to continue fighting on the German side was arrested.

The former allies were given the status of “Italian military internees”—a status created to circumvent the Geneva Convention, according to which prisoners of war may not be forced to work in the arms industry. As “military internees,” the Italian soldiers lost this protection.

More than 600,000 Italian soldiers were forced to work as “military internees.” Starting in October 1943, some of them were transferred to the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp. There, together with other concentration camp prisoners, they were forced to expand a network of tunnels into an underground weapons production facility.

At first, the Italian military internees still wore their military uniforms. This made them stand out immediately. Members of the SS and the Wehrmacht viewed them as “traitors.” At the same time, many other prisoners perceived them as former allies of the Nazi regime.

In mid-December 1943, an incident occurred in the camp. A work detail expressed criticism of the conditions in the camp. According to witness testimonies, the detail was entitled to an additional food ration, which was being denied to individual prisoners. Both Italian and Soviet prisoners complained about the lack of provisions. Only the Italians’ complaint was forwarded to the SS camp command—presumably because they additionally threatened to stop working.

Gherardo Del Nista, a prisoner at the time, recalled later:

GHERRARDO DEL NISTA

The next day, an SS officer ordered all the Italian prisoners to assemble in the roll call square. The work detail involved in the incident and its leader were called forward. Meanwhile, the rest of us watched, not knowing what was happening. The twenty men of the work detail were lined up, and he selected seven of them to be shot. He explained to the rest of us that these prisoners had complained about their food rations being too small. In the twisted minds of the SS and the camp commander, the complaint was viewed as an act of mutiny and sabotage which warranted the death penalty.

NARRATOR

The names of the seven accused Italians were Giuseppe Baccanelli, Erminio Bianchet, Giacomo Denoni, Elisio Flematti, Carlo Mossoni, Ernesto Moz, and Giovanni Scola.

The SS assembled a firing squad. Unterscharführer Wilhelm Rabeneck was also asked:

WILHELM RABENECK

The camp commander, Förster, asked me if I had ever participated in an execution. I told him I hadn't, whereupon Förster said that I could take part in one now. I replied that I suffered from a heart condition and, for that reason alone, could not participate in an execution. Förster accepted this explanation.

NARRATOR

Wilhelm Rabeneck refused. Others, however, did not.

On December 15, 1943, the seven accused Italians were led to the quarry at the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp. Fifty other Italian prisoners were forced to follow them.

GHERARDO DEL NISTA

We were all lined up in groups of five and forced to walk to the execution site to watch the shooting of these poor, innocent people, whose only crime was asking for a little extra bread.

NARRATOR

SS-Oberscharführer Max Preusser described how the execution took place:

MAX PREUSSER

I personally received orders to take part in the execution as a firing squad member. About 16 of us carried out the execution, arranged in two rows; the first kneeling, the second standing.

NARRATOR

Gherardo Del Nista also remembered that moment:

GHERARDO DEL NISTA

The poor fellows weren't shot all at once, but in groups of three. The first group was blindfolded before the execution. In the middle of the second group—I remember this clearly—there was a young soldier who had refused to be blindfolded. The moment the SS unit opened fire for the second time, he opened his jacket to expose his bare chest and shouted loudly: "Mama, I will never see you again." (We all clearly heard what he said). Shortly afterward, the German bullets struck him and he fell to the ground next to the other two members of the group. The last one was killed on a stretcher, as he was suffering from typhus and running a high fever. The officer in charge of the SS unit shot him in cold blood, with two shots fired directly into his front.

After the German officer had finished his deed, he turned to the rest of us, who were powerless, horrified, and stunned, and said, "Let this be a lesson to you Italians."

