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## **PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS IN MACIKAI IN 1941–1948**

There are no wars without prisoners of war (POWs), refugees, and political prisoners of occupied states or otherwise people who suffered reprisals. All of them, very much like soldiers fighting on the fronts, got to know the reality and horrors of war. The war remained deeply etched in the minds of the peoples of Lithuania and other countries. There were as many as 35 million POWs in WWII. During and after WWII, the land of Lithuania was stained with the blood of many people who were killed and tortured. In Lithuania, both occupiers killed POWs of the opposing side, some of them had to face inhumane living conditions, with the result that by the time the war ended there were about 168,000–172,000 Soviet Union prisoners of war and a considerably smaller number, about 5,000, German prisoners of war (1944–1949).

The first POW camps appeared in September 1939 in East Prussia. Later, POW camps were established or liquidated depending on the course of military action on the Eastern Front. After the war, some Nazi Germany camps became places of forced detention for German POWs or USSR political prisoners administered by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the USSR. One such place was on the grounds of the former manor in Macikai Village of Šilutė District in Lithuania. It was the site first of the POW camp of Nazi Germany (1941–1944) and then the POW camp of the Soviet Union (1945–1948) and also the Gulag labour camp (1945–1955).

In 1939, when WWII broke out, the Nazis established several hundred POW camps in Germany and the occupied countries and these were divided according to types. The Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces) were in charge of POW camps. The type of the camp and its sequence number reflected in the name of the camp. The Roman numeral denoted the district; the capital letter of the Latin alphabet denoted the series (or number), which was followed by the name of the geographical area. During WWII the territory of Germany and later the occupied territories were divided into military districts (*Wehrkreis*). There were 17 such military districts. For the purpose of our research the former POW camps of Military District I (*Wehrkreis I, Königsberg*) are most important. Military District I covered East Prussia and later part of occupied Poland and the Royal District of Tilsit-Gumbinnen. The district command headquarters (*Wehrkreiskommando I Ostpreussen*) was based in Königsberg (now the city of Kaliningrad, Russia). The POW camp in

Šilutė (Macikai) was called Stalag I-C Heydekrug (German *Stalag* short for *Stammlager* – ‘base stationary POW camp’) and was the northernmost place of detention of prisoners of war in Nazi Germany.

The exact date of the establishment of the POW camp in Šilutė (Macikai) is not known, but according to the post-war testimonies of German military personnel who served in Macikai camp given to prosecutors of the Federal Republic of Germany, the POW camp in Macikai was established at the start of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, in late June–early July 1941. However the first prisoners of war in the environs of Šilutė appeared earlier, in autumn 1939. These were Polish soldiers captured by the Nazis. They were accommodated in the villages of Pagryniai, Kalveliškiai, Piktaičiai, Šilviai, Pašyšiai, Meišlaukiai and Traksėdžiai. The first information about Poles in Šilutė County is traced by a receipt for a cash transfer (*Ausgabenweisung*) on 15 November 1939 to Šilutė County Construction Board for the works carried out by Polish POWs on 9–31 October 1939 (wages for Polish prisoners) in the amount of 236 Reichsmarks (RM) and 90 pfennig. Polish prisoners of war did some roadworks on the Šilutė (Heydekrug)–Užliekniai (Uszlöknen)–Urbiškiai (now Armalėnai?) road section. The enclosed list of prisoners contained the names of 40 Polish POWs. The surviving documents lead to the conclusion that the Polish POWs doing the roadwork in November 1939 were guarded by German soldiers from Stablack base POW camp (*Kriegsgefangenenstammlager Stablack*). It is very likely that the first prisoners of war were sent to Šilutė County specifically from Stablack POW camp. The archival documents of April 1940 show information about Kalveliškiai (Kallwelischken) POW camp in Šilutė County. It is clear from other documents that the money continued to be paid for roadworks on the Šilutė–Urbiškiai section of the road. It may therefore be concluded that the Polish POWs who did roadworks were held at the POW camp in Kalveliškiai. In June 1940, 52 Polish POW were working on the roads. From mid-summer 1940 there is hardly any information about Polish POWs in Šilutė County.

In summer 1940, more and more prisoners of war from western European countries – the French and Belgians – started arriving at the camps in East Prussia. They were used for agriculture, land reclamation and drainage works. In July 1940, information on the Belgian POWs appears in the financial documents of Šilutė County. They were most likely brought here from Stalag I A (Stablack) camp. Starting from 6 July 1940 Belgians worked on building roads in Pagryniai Village of Šilutė County. The payroll dated 6–23 July 1940 lists 50 Belgian prisoners of war. Belgian prisoners may have replaced Polish prisoners of war, because these are no longer mentioned in the financial documents of the county. Belgian POWs (a total of 68 people) worked in Pagryniai Village in August 1940. According to the data of 11 November 1941, Belgian workmen ate in three locations: Kalveliškiai, Piktaičiai (Piktaten) and Šilviai (Schillwen). The POWs continued to do

construction and repair work in the areas of Šilutė–Urbiškiai (Heydekrug–Bögschen), Verdainė–Pašyšiai (Werden–Paszieszen) and Meišlaukiai (Meischlauken). Polish historian Zygmunt Lietz wrote that 450 Belgian POWs did various jobs in Šilutė County. Owners of the companies and farms where the prisoners worked had to pay the POW camp administration 10 pfennig per each employee per working day or RM 3 RM per month. With the approaching Eastern Front, the Germans collected the French and Belgian prisoners of war who worked for farmers and transferred them probably to POW camps located in East Prussia.

The first official mention of Macikai camp (Stammlager 331 [I C]) was made on 14 August 1941 in Organisational Order No 40 of the Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, OKW). According to the testimonies of German soldiers, the prisoner of war camp in Macikai actually started its operations only after the beginning of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, not earlier than late June–early July 1941. According to the testimony of the former German officer Johannes Schleyer (b. 24 April 1902), he served at Macikai POW camp in Šilutė from around mid-June to mid-September 1941. The commander of the camp was Major C. Petters, while Dr Engelke was an Abwehr officer. Schleyer served at the telephone exchange which was, like the commandant's office, outside the camp in Šilutė. When Schleyer arrived in Šilutė there was as yet no camp, only a meadow fenced with barbed wire. In the first few days of the war between Germany and the USSR, 300 prisoners were brought to the camp. By mid-September 1941, the number of prisoners had increased to 700–800. In mid-September 1941, the commandant's office was relocated to Pagėgiai POW camp and a new administration was to be appointed for Macikai POW camp in Šilutė. According to some authors, Šilutė (Macikai) camp was initially called Stalag 331, but on 12 December 1941 it was renamed Stalag I C. According to other sources, however, Stalag 331 was established on 9 April 1941 and was renamed Stalag I C on 10 October 1941.

In July 1941, the administration of Šilutė prisoner of war camp in Macikai, Stalag 331, increased to 100 staff. The administration was based in the building which was the former home of the well-known German writer Hermann Sudermann located about 500 metres from the camp. Some of the officers from the commandant's office lived in private apartments in Šilutė. Some barracks next to the commandant's office were used to accommodate other camp personnel and guards. When the German-Soviet war broke out, the number of prisoners in Macikai suddenly increased. According to orders and instructions of the German Security Police and Security Service (SD), hostile elements were to be selected and liquidated from among the Soviet prisoners of war – more important Communist Party officials and officials of its branch organisations, people's commissars and their deputies, Soviet intellectuals, political leaders and commissioners of the Red Army, leading employees of economic sectors and Jews. Local Gestapo officials were to select the POWs and

execute them. Specifically the camps in Pagėgiai and Macikai had to be ‘cleared’ by Tilsit Gestapo office staff (a special group of 4-6 Gestapo men led by a senior Gestapo officer). This criminal activity was managed by Tilsit Gestapo Criminal Commissioner Wilhelm Gerke (b. 25 November 1906). According to German historian Alfred Streim, POWs selected by Tilsit Gestapo at POW camps in Pagėgiai, Šilutė (Macikai) and Ebenrode were shot near Pagėgiai in July–August 1941. About 700–800 Soviet POWs were executed. Executions were carried out by the Tilsit Gestapo squad led by Hans Joachim Böhme. It is not known how many POWs from the Macikai camp were killed. In 1958 the court in the city of Ulm sentenced Böhme to 15 years imprisonment.

The Germans despised the Soviet prisoners of war. POWs were starving and did hard work, but worst torture was penalties. On the edge of the camp by the gate there were several cages covered with barbed wire where prisoners were put for the slightest offense. The offender would suffer in a half upright position in the cage for a day or often several days. According to witness Dovydas Stučka around 40 Soviet POWs died every day. At first they were buried near the camp, on the other side of the road. Later the bodies were transported further away to the fields of farmer Koblencas. A particularly high number of Soviet POW deaths were recorded in the winter of 1942–1943. Many prisoners died during the typhus epidemic. They were buried in pits, about 20 bodies in each pit. Detention conditions of Russian POWs slightly improved only in 1944. They started receiving wages for their work and were able to buy tobacco and food products for coupons. As the Soviet POWs died in huge numbers they were replaced by new prisoners from the liquidated POW camp in Priekulė (Stalag 63). In July 1942, around 1,200 Russian POWs were brought to Macikai. It is impossible to estimate (even approximately) the number of Soviet POWs who perished at the POW camp in Macikai. German historian Christoph Dieckmann claims that at least 3,000–5,000 Soviet POWs could have perished. After the Soviets occupied Lithuania, the NKVD officials informed their leadership that 60 pits had been discovered with 20–25 corpses in each; furthermore, around 200–300 single graves had been identified. However, the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission for the investigation of Nazi crimes neither investigated the site of the Macikai POW camp nor exhumed any bodies. No monuments were built in Soviet times to commemorate the POWs in Macikai.

With the increase in the numbers of air force prisoners of the anti-Hitler coalition countries in July 1943, the Germans established Stalag Luft VI camp (*Stalag Luft* [*Luftwaffe-Stammlager*] – a base camp for Allied aircrews). It was intended for airmen of the British, American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand air forces and other Allied aircrews taken prisoner. The requirements of the Geneva Convention were observed in the Luft-type camps. In the first half of 1944, the camp consisted of three compounds A, C and E – for American, British and other POWs. All British POWs were pilots. The camp consisted of 10 brick barracks, each with a capacity of 552

people, and 12 wooden barracks with 54 prisoners in each. So the camp could accommodate a total of 6,168 prisoners. The barracks had triple bunks made from wooden boards, desks, lockers and stools. There was also a laundry room, a barrack, which served as chapel and a theatre. Western POWs were not required to work, unless they wanted to. The POWs had the right to correspond with their family members and relatives. Food was poor, but westerners received both food and clothing from the Red Cross. Before the evacuation, in July 1944, there were 3,623 prisoners in Macikai Stalag Luft VI, including 2,063 Americans. On 1 July 1944, there were 4,051 prisoners, including 2,403 American pilots. In summer 1944, the Wehrmacht began to retreat and it was clear that POWs had to be evacuated. In early July the Soviet Army arrived in Lithuania. Evacuation from Stalag Luft VI started on 14 July 1944 (Friday) and took place in several stages. This was Friday, and took place in several stages. The first batch consisted of 1,100 Americans and 900 Brits. They were taken to Šilutė railway station and transported in several groups to the port of Klaipėda. At the port they were put onto (rather squeezed into) to two ships – Masuren and Insterberg. Within two days they reached Swinemunde. From there, the prisoners were taken to Stalag IV (Gross Tychow) in Poland. The second batch of prisoners, about 3,000 Brits, was transported from Šilutė by rail to the Polish city of Thorn (Toruń), and from there to Stalag 375. According to other sources, the second batch of evacuees was then also taken to Stalag IV where they remained until February 1945. Travel conditions were appalling. There was a shortage of wagons, so people were packed into trains; nor was there any more space on board the ships. People suffocated in the lower decks on barges. Later prisoners joined the main stream of evacuees (the liberated units of Allied Forces). In early May 1945, former POWs of Stalag Luft VI, who were in the depths of Germany, were freed by anti-Hitler coalition units. The fate of the Soviet POWs imprisoned in Macikai is not known. According to witness Emma Pietch, 5–6 days before the arrival of the Soviet Army, the Germans deported prisoners in an unknown direction. For some time the hospital continued to operate in the depopulated Šilutė camp. Later the retreating Wehrmacht brought Dulag 379 from Pskov area in the USSR to Šilutė. The prisoners of this camp were Soviet civilians collected for forced labour.

Towards the end of the war, in spring 1945, the USSR NKVD sent the detained Germans and their allies to Macikai camp – mainly Wehrmacht soldiers and soldiers of other Nazi repressive military-police troops captured after the so-called Courland Pocket battle. Šilutė POW camp 184 was formally established on 1 May 1945 (according to other sources, on 1 April 1945 and the intended capacity was 3,000 prisoners) in Macikai. Three separate camps subordinate to two different USSR NKVD institutions were established here in 1945: the first was called ‘The USSR NKVD 3<sup>rd</sup> corrective labour colony’ and was part of the USSR NKVD Gulag system; the second – ‘The USSR NKVD POW camp 184’ was subordinate to the USSR NKVD Main Administration for

Affairs of Prisoners of War and Internees (Rus. *Glavnoje upravlenije po delam vojenoplennykh i internirovannykh*, hereinafter – GUPVI); and the third – ‘The USSR NKVD special prisoner of war hospital 2652’ was also subordinate to the USSR NKVD GUPVI.

The prisoners worked on rebuilding the towns of Šilutė and Insterburg (from 1946 – Chernyakhovsk, Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia), which had been destroyed during the war, did auxiliary agricultural work, and worked in the supply of food to POWs of the camp and the special hospital. In the production zone POWs produced a wide range of consumer goods and various other products. On average there were 3,000 POWs in the camp. On average, there were 3,000 POWs in the camp. Since there were no industries or other places of economic interest close by where the prisoner work force could be used, in early 1946 Macikai camp was reorganised into a health improvement camp and POWs from all camps in Lithuania with various health conditions were brought to the camp; while patients with very serious health conditions were admitted to the special POW hospital. In January 1947, the independence of Macikai camp was formally abolished; responsibility for the camp was transferred to Klaipėda POW camp 57 and in 1948 – to Vilnius POW camp 195. The POW camp in Macikai was officially closed on 15 July 1948.

It is difficult to determine the exact number of prisoners of war in Macikai in 1945–1948. Almost every month there was movement of prisoners and their redeployment to other camps. Archival sources specify different numbers. The data on prisoners of war in some documents contradict each other. The numbers of prisoners of POW camp 184 and special hospital 2652 were often put together. The number of prisoners was constantly changing as new groups of people were soon moved to other camps in Lithuania and the USSR or repatriated to their countries of origin. In summer 1945, later their number decreased: on 1 July 1946 there were there were 3,436 prisoners in the camp of which 578 were officers; on 21 January 1947 there were 1,495 prisoners. Thus, between 1945 and 1946, 5,757 prisoners left the camp, mostly for other camps in Lithuania and the Soviet Union, while critically ill prisoners were repatriated to their home countries. After the POW camp in Macikai became part of Klaipėda POW camp 57, 1,922 prisoners were recorded and another 1,062 – in the special hospital (a total of 2,984 prisoners) on 28 February 1947. Prisoners of such different nationalities as Romanians, Hungarians, Austrians, Czechs, Lithuanians and others were held in the POW camp in Macikai, although predominantly there were German prisoners. Prisoners of war were guarded by the soldiers of the USSR NKVD-MVD convoy troops (company) or locally hired employees-watchmen (riflemen). In 1945–1946, the technical security system of POW camp 184 was regularly improved. In December 1946, the camp’s protection zones were finally installed: a double barbed-wire fence was erected along the perimeter of the camp. There was particular focus on the protection zone at the entrance gates: guard posts were set up and seven watchtowers were built.

Firearms were used if prisoners attempted to escape and had to be detained. Between 1945 and 1946, a total of 48 prisoners escaped (9 were caught) from the POW camp in Macikai. At the time Šilutė County was one of the most important corridors for war refugees. This meant that the surrounding areas were carefully monitored by the NKVD MVD personnel and policemen and documents of any strangers they came across were checked. On the night of 29–30 April 1946, three prisoners escaped: Herbert Eger, Veiss Schmeizel and Eberg Steiner. It seems that two managed to hide, but Steiner was shot during detention on 1 May 1946. Prisoners were strictly punished for violation of military or work rules: they could have been deprived of the right to correspond with relatives or to use the money they had earned at the camp shop for up to two months, arrested and placed in the punishment room for 20 days or sent to punishment battalions (Rus. *shtrafbat*) stationed nearby or transferred to Russia or Kazakhstan. Relocation from Lithuania was the most severe punishment. The camp administration followed a strict internal regime. Officers were held separately from privates and non-commissioned officers. The camp administration elected one person in each barrack to be a leader (usually an ‘antifascist’ who usually was an agent of the barracks). Personal items of POWs and the barracks were searched every month and sometimes more frequently.

In terms of international humanitarian law, the Soviet Union and the Lithuanian SSR repressive structures essentially observed the requirements of the 1929 Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. The prisoners had the right to correspond with their families, received a salary for their work, they were not starved, they received treatment, had shelter, etc. The highest wages were in the production of consumer goods for daily use of the population.

The authorities of the camp tried to use ‘anti-fascist activity’ in order to sway more prisoners to their side, so they were promoting Soviet Communist propaganda and encouraged operational work. The POW camp in Macikai had an Operational Unit. Its employees were responsible for the surveillance of all POWs and auxiliary personnel of both camps. They recruited agents from among people in the prison who helped reveal or identify dozens of prisoners charged or suspected with atrocities or war crimes. With the help of agents, between summer 1945 and 1 November 1946 the Operational Unit started surveillance of 82 prisoners (criminal case-files were opened on them) and 45 people were arrested. On 1 November 1946, 54 prisoners from the Macikai camp were on the operatives’ files as either being suspected or accused of various crimes. Agents actually reported on their former comrades or personal enemies, some acted from ideological persuasion. All agents expected their faster release and return home in exchange for their services. They collected information that was of interest to the Operational Unit through their acquaintances. In the first half of 1946, the Operational Unit of the camp received 327 reports from agents. By 1 January 1947, 23

war criminals had been identified in the Macikai camp, including Willie Bachman and Aloyse Heil, accused of serious crimes.

Between 1945 and 1948, the autonomous special POW hospital 2562 (with the status of the camp) was located on the site of Macikai POW camp. It was used for treating seriously or hopelessly ill prisoners of war. The death rate at the hospital was very high (almost 500 prisoners died in this hospital), so it is no coincidence that the local residents called it the ‘house of death’. The prisoner-patients suffered from dystrophy, dysentery, pneumonia, tuberculosis, typhoid, typhus and other diseases. Unlike the Nazis, the Soviets did not deliberately starve or execute the German prisoners of war (only war criminals were tried and imprisoned), but due to mass food thefts and embezzlement of property by the camp personnel, prisoners lived under very difficult conditions: they worked hard, were constantly short of food, endured very cold conditions, and many did not have appropriate clothing or bedding during the cold season. The barracks were poorly heated. The most challenging period was between 1945 and 1946 when more than 300 POWs died.

In 1949, the USSR signed the Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War and undertook to protect the cemeteries of prisoners of war and to take care of them and also, if possible, to allow the representatives of foreign countries to visit them. Lithuanian officials who frequently had replaced previous officials of repressive structures pretended to know nothing about the problems of POW imprisonment, burial sites or issues regarding archival documents of the deceased. In 1955, when the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gulag unit was closed, attempts were made to destroy the cemeteries. A land ‘reclamation’ project was prepared. Although this project was never implemented and the cemetery was not levelled, animals were grazing on the site, tractors were crossing it and there was a road there. After the USSR made a commitment to the government of the German Federal Republic to maintain the burial sites of German POWs, in 1958 an inspection campaign of POW cemeteries was initiated by Moscow. The leadership of the LSSR Ministry of the Interior ordered its local officers to inspect the condition of cemeteries.

Between 1945 and 1955, there was also a Gulag unit of the USSR NKVD (MVD) on the site of the POW camp in Macikai. The unit was called the 3<sup>rd</sup> corrective labour colony – later separate unit 3 of the labour camp and unit 3 of the labour camp. It was one of the biggest Soviet labour camps in Lithuania. Between 2,000 and 3,000 prisoners were held at any one time in the camp, a third of them Lithuanians. This unit of the Gulag was established in spring 1945. The first civilian Lithuanian political prisoners (120 men and 80 women) were brought to the camp from Šiauliai prison and held in the small zone of the camp. The majority were convicted under invariably trumped-up political charges. Subsequently, the number of prisoners steadily increased – they included not only political prisoners, but also victims of Soviet economic compulsion – mostly farmers unable to pay mandatory

taxes to the state or donate the required amount of food products. The prisoners also included criminals (thieves, rapists, thugs, etc.) and Red Army soldiers (Russians and Ukrainians who fell out of favour of the political authorities and were convicted). A large number of those imprisoned in the Gulag unit in Macikai were ill and disabled. Women and children under the age of two born in prison or in the labour camp were also imprisoned in the Gulag unit. So the camp had a hospital and the Mother and Child Home.