

Final Days and the Post-War Period

The final days leading up to the termination of tank production, the end of hostilities and the takeover of the plant by the Soviet occupation forces are vividly described in the recollections of different contemporary witnesses. They give a very good impression of the turbulent and catastrophic conditions in the closing months of the war.

Paul Kleinewefers wrote about his visit to the Nibelungenwerk in April 1945:⁶³⁵

»Towards midnight, after crossing the Enns, we arrived at the >Nibelungenwerk<. After having our ID checked and my explanation that I had to have a meeting with the works manager about urgent armaments matters the following day, we were quartered in a small barrack. Bedding was a sack of straw and a blanket.

Next morning, I met with Works Director, Dr. Judtmann, who, like his closest collaborators, was dressed in a black SS uniform and armed...

There was no longer much to do at the Nibelungenwerk. When we listened to the Wehrmacht Report at midday in the executive office, we learned that the Americans had entered Munich...

In the meantime, the Russians stood 60 kilometers away from St. Valentin and the Enns river, which later became the border of their occupation zone. Russian aircraft flew around overhead and occasionally dropped bombs.

Warm farewell from Dr. Judtmann and his team, thanked them for the hospitality and bicycle tires that we so urgently needed. Talked about meeting again some day, >perhaps we can work together on reconstruction<. But, there was never to be a reunion. When the Russian occupied the Nibelungenwerk, Dr. Judtmann shot himself.

Gertrude Koppendorfer made notes about the final months and days:⁶³⁶

»At the end of 44, my husband Hans had to report to Panzer 33 in St. Pölten-Spratzern and, a few days before the war ended,

⁶³⁵ Kleinewefers: p. 168-169

⁶³⁶ MW, Recollections of Gertrude Koppendorfer, May/June 2008

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traveled on a train loaded with tanks through St. Valentin. During the stop at the station, your Grandpa Fredl went up to him and advised him to jump off the train outside the station. He would hide him carefully in his workshop. But, because all bridges, particularly the Enns bridge, had deserters dangling from them who had been hanged as a deterrent, he did not dare. After traveling to Germany and fighting there, he was transferred to American captivity in Plauen. As the area was then occupied by the Russians, he became a prisoner of the Russians, precisely what he had hoped to avoid. He was marched on foot for days towards the East... As my workplace had been destroyed and all the bosses had disappeared, I no longer went to the plant.«

In May 1945, the St. Valentin area became a combat zone. There was a bombardment by American artillery because an SS unit was still offering resistance. On Sunday, May 6, 1945, on the orders of Mayor Ludwig Stenzl, the town of St. Valentin surrendered to the American troops occupying the neighboring village of Ernsthofen. Initially, American troops occupied St. Valentin, but only stayed a few hours before withdrawing back across the Enns river because St. Valentin had been allocated to the Soviet occupation zone.⁶³⁷

In those turbulent days, the now abandoned Nibelungenwerk was also plundered by the local populace. The offices were in a dreadful state. Files had been taken from the cupboards and their contents simply dumped on the floor; the empty binders were then taken home. Piles of paper, documents, records and drawings were scattered everywhere. The floor itself could not be seen for the paper strewn across it. Farmers drove about on the plant site with horse and cart, taking whatever they could find with them. Office furniture, machines, typewriters and even complete office furnishings and fixtures were removed. In the only partially repaired Workshop VII, half-finished tanks stood abandoned. Whereas the Americans were not particularly concerned about the tank assembly plant and the plundering going on there, public access was prohibited immediately the Soviet occupation forces who took over on May 9, 1945.⁶³⁸

Once the Soviet authorities took control, they immediately began to organize the dismantling of the plant machinery and equipment. At the same time, however, they had 45 Mark IV tanks and one Jagdtiger completed. Tank production and plant dismantling were going on at the same time, but were subordinate to two totally different authorities. The one command headquarters was only interested in producing still viable tanks and insisted that all the equipment and machinery

⁶³⁷ Anecdotes of Karl Winninger; WJW, Notes on the air raids, fatalities and the final days of WWII in St. Valentin

⁶³⁸ Anecdotes of Karl Winninger

remain in place. The other authority, by contrast, was striving to remove all the equipment as quickly as possible. They seized every opportunity, particularly when the assembly crews were not paying attention, or were absent. Ultimately, the dismantled machinery and the completed tanks were dispatched together.⁶³⁹

Gertrude Koppendorfer wrote about the return of her husband Hans and about the Soviet management at the Nibelungenwerk:⁶⁴⁰

»...he came home with the 1st repatriation transport on Sept. 18, 1945, a day after our wedding anniversary and stricken with >dysentery<. I was waiting for him at the St. Valentin station. Of course, before we set off home we stopped off at Mitzi's where he was fed apple strudel and elderberry compote. All of us, including your father, sat at his side, amazed at the amount of food he was putting away!...

The plant was taken over by the Russians and all the intact key machines were carted off to Russia. My Papa had to work at the plant and brought our food home with him. Hans also went back to work as a driver for the Russian major who managed the plant.«

Living conditions in the plant residential developments became almost unbearable because of the unpredictable behavior of the Soviet occupation troops. The soldiers would ring the doorbells of the apartment buildings in the middle of the night, making all kinds of demands of the inhabitants. The detached houses of the former plant directors in the Herzograd settlement were now occupied by Soviet executive officers.⁶⁴¹

Many of the former senior executives, including the commercial director Josef Mokry and chief engineer Reimspiess, remained in St. Valentin and helped with repair efforts and the transition to peacetime output of agricultural equipment.⁶⁴² By the end of 1945 already, a workforce of 668 was on the payroll.⁶⁴³ On May 29, 1946, however, the plant facilities were declared „German Property” which, as reparation assets, now transferred to the status of property of the Soviet Union, administered by the USIA (abbreviation for: „Uprawlenje Sowjetskim Imuschestwom w Awstrij” = Administration of Soviet Assets in Austria).⁶⁴⁴

⁶³⁹ Collection Perz, NA Austrian R&A Report No. 22, Steyr-Daimler-Puch, A Major Austrian Industrial Concern, Office of Strategic Services, US Army Research and Analysis, Salzburg, 13 July 1945, p. 11

⁶⁴⁰ MW, Recollections of Gertrude Koppendorfer, May/June 2008

⁶⁴¹ Anecdotes of Gertrude Koppendorfer

⁶⁴² MASTV, Correspondence between the municipality and the committee pursuant to the economic purge law, filed at at the State Labor Office Lower Austria; Anecdotes of Karl Winninger and Gertrude Koppendorfer

⁶⁴³ Collection Perz, History of the Company, Ownership and Descriptions of the Balance Sheets of the Steyr-Daimler-Puch Aktiengesellschaft, 18. April 1947, p. 30

⁶⁴⁴ Collection Perz, History of the Company, Ownership and Descriptions of the Balance Sheets of the Steyr-Daimler-Puch Aktiengesellschaft, 18. April 1947, p. 72

After the end of the war, the guardhouse and the kitchen barrack of the former St. Valentin satellite concentration camp were still occupied.⁶⁴⁵ The tiles of the guardhouse were later used to build a garage in Herzograd. The wooden planks of the various barrack camp walls were frequently used as shuttering panels when building cellar foundations.⁶⁴⁶

All machinery and installation that the Soviet occupation forces considered to be of value in the Nibelungenwerk workshops and in the Viehdorf tunnel system continued to be dismantled and shipped out. Entire freight trains loaded with machines and equipment pulled out of St. Valentin in the direction of the Soviet Union.⁶⁴⁶

Ersatzkarte für Arbeitsbuch Nr. 3648/100 1475

(§ 4, Abs. 2 der 1. Durchführungs-Verordnung zum Gesetz über die Einführung eines Arbeitsbuches vom 16. 5. 1935, § 11 der Anordnung des Präsidenten der Reichsanstalt vom 18. 5. 1935)

Name: Schmid
(Bei Frauen auch Geburtsname)

Vorname: Frau

Geburtstag: 15. 7. 1908

Geburtsort: Tagendorf Bezirk: Ill. a. Ste

Staatszugehörigkeit: Österreich

Erlerner Beruf: Spiegler

Derzeit ausgeübter Beruf: Spiegler

Berufsgruppe und -art: 533

Wohnort: St. Valentin

Straße: Herzograd, KZ Küche Nr. _____

Die Ersatzkarte hat Gültigkeit bis zum 30. März 1949 und ist spätestens bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt dem Arbeitsamt zurückzugeben. Erhält der Inhaber sein altes Arbeitsbuch zurück oder wird ein neues Arbeitsbuch ausgestellt, so ist die Ersatzkarte dem Arbeitsamt **sofort** zurückzugeben.

 den 30. März 1949

ARBEITSAMT
St. Valentin
(Stempel des Arbeitsamtes)

(Eigenhändige Unterschrift des Inhabers)

Replacement card for a work logbook with the address „Herzograd concentration camp kitchen”, issued on 30. March 1949. [Schmid, Reproduction Winninger]

Ultimately, of the around 2 100 machines that were still installed at the Nibelungenwerk at the end of the war, only 200 remained.⁶⁴⁷ Of all the SDP facilities, it was the Nibelungenwerk that sustained the severest level of damage from the combined effects of the air raids and, in particular, the plundering and subsequent dismantling of machinery and equipment.⁶⁴⁸

Workshops III and IV sustained the least damage. There was no further practical use for Workshops I, V, VII, VIII and IX. Workshop IX had anyway been almost totally destroyed during the air raid of March 23, 1945. The steel structural ele-

⁶⁴⁵ Anecdotes of Rudolf Schmid

⁶⁴⁶ Anecdotes of Karl Winninger

⁶⁴⁷ Collection Perz, History of the Company, Ownership and Descriptions of the Balance Sheets of the Steyr-Daimler-Puch Aktiengesellschaft, 18. April 1947, p. 15

⁶⁴⁸ Collection Perz, History of the Company, Ownership and Descriptions of the Balance Sheets of the Steyr-Daimler-Puch Aktiengesellschaft, 18. April 1947, p. 17

ments of Workshops I, V and VII seemed to have been considered the most valuable. The Wiener Brückenbau, a Vienna bridge building company, first began to dismantle Workshop V, and then Workshop VII. Later, when the heat-treatment facility and other operations relocated from Workshop I to Workshop IV, the former was also dismantled. Those steel structural elements of Workshops I, V and VII were to be delivered to Yugoslavia as reparation payments. Workshop II was also badly affected. It served a construction company in Amstetten as a source of building materials, but was later completely rebuilt. The few remaining serviceable machines were initially installed in Workshop IV, where various agricultural machinery such as hay grabbers, cable winches or automatic match-making machines. A dedicated department in Workshop IV, known as the „Barracks Construction”, produced corrugated sheet elements for building barracks that were exported to the Soviet Union. Workshop III initially housed a paint shop. In the fall of 1946, training of apprentices resumed in a new training workshop on the grounds of the building yard. The new apprentices were also employed for the dismantling jobs. As a result of the severe interior damage, Workshop VI could only be used for production purposes much later.⁶⁴⁹ No longer needed, Workshop VIII and the remains of Workshop IX were blown up by the Soviet occupation forces.⁶⁵⁰ In the course of the Soviet occupation, the once biggest and most modern German tank assembly plant was reduced to an industrial ruin.⁶⁵¹



By the time the war ended, it was Workshop IV that was the least damaged. Only the north-west corner had been hit by a bomb. [Doku STV]

⁶⁴⁹ Anecdotes of Karl Winninger; MW, Photo Collection

⁶⁵⁰ MW, Survey of the historical sites am 31. July 2009

⁶⁵¹ MW, Photo Collection



Following the removal of the machines and equipment as reparations, dismantling of Workshop V began. [Doku STV]



After Workshop V, it was the turn of Workshop VII to be completely dismantled. When this shot was taken, the ruins of Workshop VIII could still be seen in the right background. [Doku STV]

Based on an Allied resolution, and at the specific request of the Americans, the Viehdorf tunnel system was to be rendered unusable. The Soviet occupation forces finally blew up the tunnels in September 1947. All houses and farmsteads in the vicinity were cleared and covered. The demolition squad was installed in the cellar of the farmhouse (known as the „Kamper“) belonging to the Hiebl family. The St. Valentin fire brigade stood ready at two different locations. In three or four stages, the tunnel junctions and the entrances were blown up. The hill seemed to literally rise and fall with the blasts of the demolition. The entire demolition operation went off smoothly and there was no noteworthy damage to the neighboring buildings.⁶⁵²

Following the end of the Soviet occupation, the Nibelungenwerk first became state property, but subsequently reverted to SDP ownership. Later, the SDP transferred all tractor production from Steyr to St. Valentin. In the years to come, tractors and agricultural systems from St. Valentin achieved international recognition.⁶⁴⁶



The former Nibelungenwerk, seen from the „Viehdorfer Leit'n“ hill (24.01.2009). [Winninger]

⁶⁵² Anecdotes of Johann Wittibschlager, 10. September 2010

After the liquidation of the SDP, the remaining Nibelungenwerk site transferred to the ownership of the Canadian-Austrian Magna Group. Workshops II, III, IV and VI, as well as the buildings at the main entrance, stand to this day. Workshops II, III and VI are currently leased to the CNH Österreich GmbH group for the purpose of manufacturing tractors.⁶⁵³

The areas around the former Workshops I, V, VII, VIII and IX, which were important departments during the wartime production period, are now in a sorry state. After the war, the SDP did not set up any more production facilities, but rather left these areas to the mercy of the wind and the weather. Nowadays, the overgrown concrete foundations of the former Workshops V and VII are used as storage and parking spaces; parts of the concreted transverse gallery of Workshop VII that collapsed after the dismantling process are still lying around. The beams of Workshop VIII that collapsed when it was demolished were left lying where they fell and are nowadays overgrown with trees and shrubs. Of Workshop I, only remains of the facade clinker and the cellar with its many stalactites



⁶⁵³ MW, Personal recollections and surveys of the author, Survey of the historical sites on 31. July 2009; Anecdotes of Karl Winninger

can be seen. Apart from the overgrown concrete foundations and a firefighting reservoir, nothing remains of the earlier Workshop IX. The former Nibelungenwerk railroad feeder line still partially exists, but is in very poor condition. Only one track leading up to Workshop VI remains. Virtually no movements are undertaken on those remaining former Nibelungenwerk sidings.⁶⁵³



The „Nibelungenwerk” signage was not placed on the gatehouse until the post-war period. [Archive ECS]

Nowadays, Workshop IV is operated by the firm Engineering Center Steyr GmbH & Co KG. Of the facilities outside the plant fence, the drive-through water pit and the concreted running-in track are in the best condition. In the Herzograd Forest, the ruts of the former running-in track and numerous bomb craters are still visible. One of the estate buildings and the forestry lodge are still standing. For a long time after the war, the grounds of the Herzograd communal camp remained untouched once the barracks had been dismantled. Here too, the SDP did not particularly bother about this area that is readily accessible from the adjacent bicycle track and footpath. The concrete foundations of the former barracks and individual concrete anti-fragmentation bunkers remained intact long after the war was over.⁶⁵³ Practically nothing remains of the barrack camps in Langenhart and Herzograd. The open spaces in the Langenhart suburb have since been built-up with private residential housing. The SDP sold the terrain of the former Herzograd communal camp to the firm of Engel Austria GmbH of Schwertberg, who then built their injection-molding machine factory on the site. Apart from the remains of a concrete bunker, nothing more can be seen of the St. Valentin satellite concentration camp and the labor education camp.⁶⁵³