

## Dental practising in the Third Reich camps

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In 1939 the first concentration camp in the SS State Dachau opened. From that on, a world of bestiality in which horror was going to be the only key word appeared. Then what was the use of dental practising in such a tragic and harsh environment where the least gleam of hope was immediately repressed. In fact there were three different kinds of dental practising:

- medico-dental experiments in prisoners 's mouths
- recovery of dental gold and what was made out of it.
- dental treatment given to deported people

### Medico-dental experimentations were:

- *histological*

As soon as convoys arrived, Dr Mengele, an SS doctor had the gypsy children suffering from Noma (= gangrenous stomatitis) put aside. The latter were killed, beheaded and their heads were sent to the SS Hygiene Institute near Auschwitz where histological slides were made and the disease was studied.

- *anthropological*

Professor August Hirt from Strasbourg Medical Faculty had 115 fit Jewish prisoners come from Auschwitz to Struthof-Natzweiler. He had them gased. He then started to work on the corpses so as to extract their skeletons and especially their skulls. He admitted in his letters to Reichsfuhrer Himmler that his goal was to open a museum about the idiosyncrasies of Jewish morphology and anatomy. At Dachau, orders of skulls were often made for Struthof-Natzweiler camp as well. Eventually, at Buchenwald, Nazis engaged in experiments which consisted in reducing heads.

- *pharmalogical*

Dr Rascher, a Nazi doctor at Dachau invented an anti-coagulant called Polygal 10 which was tested in Dachau dental surgery and elsewhere. As he was not pleased with those tests, he started concentrating on bullet injuries.

- *surgical*

Dr Munch, an SS doctor in Auschwitz was convinced that rheumatism originated in tooth cysts. That's why he undertook many tooth extractions from deported people's mouths. He colonised the alveolar ridges which he then used as a centre of culture. He managed to extract from them a filtrate that he injected on prisoners. That experiment was not as successful as expected, it had very bad consequences for those who had been used as guinea-pigs.

Dr Mengele who was studying twinship had all his twins' teeth and plasters checked up in his dental surgery in Auschwitz-Birkenau, so as to find out all their morphological characteristics. Then he had them killed to carry out autopsies on them.

### Recovery of dental gold

It was ordered by SS Reichsfuhrer Himmler on September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1940 and was really implemented on December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1942 with the order stipulating that “dental gold and alloys would be extracted from the mouths of corpses and from those of living people who had such bad teeth that could not be repaired. Dental gold was recovered by prisoners from the dead 's mouths as they were getting out of gas chambers. At the crematoriums' gold foundries, it was put in a bucket of sulphuric acid to get rid of flesh. It was turned into hand-made ingots.

Once a week an SS officer would come to fetch that gold to store it at the camp kommandantur. Once a month or once a year (it depended on the camp) the gold was forwarded to Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen near Berlin. All valuable goods from SS robberies were centralized there. That gold was then led to the SS headquarters in Berlin where it was escorted in the caves of the Reichsbank. The gold was melted into conventional ingots, stamped with outdated stamps dating back to 1935-1937 to make people think they dated back to pre-war time. These securities were then taken onto a Reichsbank account belonging to a fake person called Max Heiliger. Those treasures were regularly driven to Switzerland where they were passed from one room to another in the cellars of Swiss banks, then new currencies were issued, which enabled Nazis to buy the raw materials that were due to the war effort. As a consequence of all that, up to a ton of dental gold is estimated to have been recovered. The victims of the Holocaust got a \$ 750,000 compensation for that. That assessment does not take into account prisoners' bartering to survive and the robberies at every level of the administrative hierarchy of the camps. What can be taken for granted is 25 kilos and up to 500 grams of dental gold have been collected respectively at Mauthausen and Buchenwald during the whole war period.

### **Dental treatment given to deported people**

*Why?*

As soon as convoys arrived in the camps, Nazis started to sort them out. Those who were considered to be the weakest were sent to gas chambers. It was all the more so if they were proved to have Jewish origins. The fit ones could take part in the Nazi war effort and work for them. As a prisoner with a toothache was thought to work badly and less efficiently, the latter could get dental care, only for economical sake.

*Which dental pathologies?*

There were few caries following the diet poor in glucose and sugars. Anyway the caries that started before the deportation carried on decaying and caused many pulpites and abscesses.

The diet caused many cases of vitamin deficiency:

- vitamin B deficiency ( glossitis, "perleches", cheilitis)
- vitamin C deficiency ( loss of bone structure, gingivitis, tooth mobility, loss of teeth)

Eventually, because of the many blows and bites, traumatic pathology was highly developed: broken crowns, broken teeth, fractured jawbones.

*How to get dental treatment?*

At Buchenwald before 1939 a prisoner had to write to the camp authorities to get dental treatment which he had to pay for. After 1939 he could also go and see the "kapo", the shed head who would then give him an emergency voucher or he would add his name on a list of prisoners to be sent to the camp infirmary the next day. He might have been lucky enough to know or meet someone who would give him access. Moreover depending on the context or the layout of the camp, an SS soldier might allow him to get dental care. Eventually, solidarity and illicit work were at their utmost.

*Who would give dental treatment?*

- The big camps were equipped with surgery rooms where SS dentists ( 100 out of 16300 in 1939) worked. Some prisoners who used to work in the health sector were given the hard task of soothing their fellows' toothaches with often precarious means: they were doctors, and of course dentists who had all been deported. Some dental technicians also had to practise. Very often some people who had nothing to do with the health sector took care of patients, which had dreadful consequences for them, as you can guess.
- Commandos did not always have the required staff to provide for all dental needs. In any case, prisoners were always convoyed under escort. They were either led to the

surgery of the great camp, or to a dentist's in a nearby town, or to war prisoner dentists' in nearby stalags or even to an army dentist in a nearby base.

- Some roving committees of dentists used to go from camps to camps. If they were SS, they would extract teeth by the dozen. If they were prisoners, they would try to relieve their co-religionists with the few means what they had at their disposal.

#### *Which treatment?*

Mainly extractions, but also treatment of caries, scaling, drainage of abscess, gum smearing with chromic acid, support of jawbones, a few dentures and certainly most of the time for high-ranking people in the camp (44 cases in August 1943 at the prisoners' surgery in Auschwitz among a population of 100,000 people). Preservative and endodontic treatments were given to prisoners at Buchenwald ( 712 from March 1943 to March 1945) and Auschwitz according to the monthly reports of the surgery there (60 cases in June 1944).

#### *Statistics*

From 6 to 7 consultations a day in 1939 at the prisoners' surgery in Buchenwald  
130 consultations a week in 1944 still at Buchenwald for a population of 63,000 people.  
From 52 to 63 consultations a week for men and from 27 to 34 for women at the prisoners' surgery in Auschwitz in 1944 ( there were 100,000 prisoners at that time)

#### *Extra-note*

I have recently found out that there was a surgery for prisoners at the extermination camp of Sobibor. The Jewish dentist who was in charge of that surgery was allowed to go to the SS areas of the camp, which was surprising. He was the only Jewish prisoner to get that right.

### **Conclusion**

The best-known practise was the collection of dental gold, but despite its anecdotal nature, there is no denying that prisoners have been given dental treatment. Although bucco-dental pathology rarely led to death, it is likely to have created suffering which highly contributed to the prisoners' physical and moral decay. Our deported fellows devoted themselves, and sometimes even sacrificed themselves to try to eradicate that pathology and more general ones. They took great care of their fellows and comforted them: they helped them carry on fighting, they sometimes managed to ease their pain and they were often at their sides as they were dying.

We shall never forget all the deported who died there, and those who were lucky enough to come back. We shall never forget what happened so as to try to prevent such historical events from happening again.