Original Article

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Boxing Fights in Nazi Concentration Camps during World War II: An Outline of the Issue

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Abstract: *Introduction:* The first Nazi concentration camps were established in 1933 within the territory of the Third Reich, and after the outbreak of World War II, also in the occupied countries. Initially, they served as detention sites for the anti-Hitler opposition and individuals opposed to the emerging regime. After the war began, the nature and function of the camps changed dramatically, turning them into places of extermination for several million people. Regardless of time, location, or the tragic circumstances, prisoners engaged in various forms of physical activity. The aim of the study was to identify the forms, roles, and significance of boxing matches in which prisoners of Nazi concentration camps participated during World War II. *Material and Methods:* A source query was conducted in the Archives of Modern Records, the National Digital Archives, the Central Military Archives of the Military Historical Bureau (Warsaw), the National Library (Warsaw), as well as in central and regional libraries. Historical research methods were applied, primarily source analysis and source criticism. *Results:* The source query confirmed the presence of various forms of physical activity among prisoners in most Nazi concentration camps. The most common activities included boxing, football, athletics exercises, volleyball, handball, and even wrestling and swimming. Boxing fights were organized in several camps, most frequently in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen-Gusen, Gross-Rosen, Neuengamme, Mittelbau-Dora, Majdanek, Dachau, and Flossenbürg. They demanded immense determination from the prisoners. The fights were extremely dangerous due to the constant threat to life, the physical exhaustion caused by forced labour, and the lack of sports facilities and equipment. *Conclusions:* The boxing fights undertaken by prisoners in concentration camps had little in common with the fundamental idea of sport – fair play. It quickly became evident that extremely exhausting labour, severe physical deterioration, and limited food rations did not favour engagement in such a demanding discipline as boxing. Nevertheless, boxing found its place in the concentration camps. For the Nazi perpetrators, the fights served as a form of entertainment, while for the prisoners they often represented a chance for survival and an opportunity to secure a better position within the camp hierarchy.

Keywords: boxing, physical activity, concentration camps, Third Reich, sport.

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INTRODUCTION

Shortly after Adolf Hitler and his Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) seized power on 30 January 1933, a network of concentration camps was established within the Third Reich. These camps initially served as prisons primarily for Germans who opposed the new authorities and the emerging public order [1]. The first concentration camp – established on the orders of the acting president of the Munich police, Heinrich Himmler – was created in Dachau on 22 March 1933. Although it was established in primitive conditions, in stone barracks on the grounds of a former gunpowder factory, it came to be regarded as a model for the camps created in the following years. Before the outbreak of World War II, several more concentration camps were established, among them the largest: Sachsenhausen (1936), Buchenwald (1937), Mauthausen (1938), Flossenbürg (1938), and the women's camp Ravensbrück (1939) [2]. The organisation and functioning of the concentration camps were regulated by the decree 'For the Protection of the People and the State' (Verordnung des Reichspräsidenten zum Schutze von Volk und Staat), signed by Adolf Hitler on 28 February 1933. The decree revoked fundamental civil rights – such as freedom of speech, assembly, and the press – guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution, and enabled the police to combat opponents of the Nazi regime by any means necessary [3].

After the outbreak of World War II, both the number and the character of the concentration camps changed. The structure of the camp system was highly developed and relatively complex, and it continued to expand throughout the course of the war. Each main concentration camp operated dozens of smaller subcamps [4], which were sometimes located hundreds of kilometres away – for example, Stutthof and its subcamps in Königsberg, Słupsk, or Police [5, 6]. Some subcamps were transformed into independent camps, while others were dissolved and incorporated into the main camps. As a result, it is not possible to determine a fixed number of camps operating during the war. The main concentration camps established after September 1939 included: Stutthof (1939), Auschwitz (1940), Neuengamme (1940), Gross-Rosen (1941), Kaiserwald (1941), Majdanek (1941), Natzweiler-Struthof (1941), Niederhagen (1941), Hinzert (1942), Hertogenbosch-Vught (1943), Kowno Prowidniszki (1943), Mittelbau-Dora (1943), and Bergen-Belsen (1944) [7].

After Germany's attack on Poland, on 3 September 1939 a decree titled "Principles on Securing the State during Wartime" was published, and in October 1939 H. Himmler issued an order requiring that all individuals who opposed Nazi policy and public order, or who did not work, be placed in concentration camps [3]. In prisoner-of-war camps, the legal status of POWs and the principles governing their treatment were defined by international conventions – the Fourth Hague Convention of 1907, "Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land" [8], and the 1929 Geneva Convention, "Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War" [9]. In the case of concentration camps, the prisoners were protected by no international treaties, despite the fact that individuals of various nationalities were held there [3] – Poles (approximately 25–30%), Yugoslavs, Czechoslovaks, Russians, French, Dutch, Belgians, Italians, Greeks, Spaniards, Norwegians, English, Luxembourgers, Austrians, Hungarians, Romanians, Jews, and Germans (around 5%). They were forced into slave labour, far beyond human endurance, in support of the economic expansion of the Third Reich. Many German industrial enterprises relied on coerced labour drawn from the camps [1]. With starvation-level food rations and the continual physical and psychological abuse inflicted by the guards – the *kapos* –

mortality among prisoners increased with each passing day. Yet the extreme terror imposed by the Nazi regime and the inhuman living conditions did not extinguish the natural human need for physical activity, traces of which could still be observed in most concentration camps during World War II.

The aim of the study was to determine the forms, role, and significance of boxing bouts in which prisoners participated in Nazi concentration camps during World War II, as well as to analyse the prisoners' motivations for engaging in them.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The source query encompassed primarily the Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, the Central Military Archives of the Military Historical Bureau in Warsaw, as well as the National Library, the University of Warsaw Library, the Library of the Museum of Sport and Tourism in Warsaw, and a number of regional libraries.

The question of the origins and development of the system of Nazi concentration camps during World War II, as well as the tragic fate of the nations that suffered the crimes of the Holocaust, has been – and continues to be – addressed by numerous authors. They have examined issues that were, in indirect and sometimes unexpected ways, connected with the history of the concentration camps and their prisoners, such as art [10], orchestras [11,12], literature [13], humour [14,15], sport [16-19], and many others. Scholars' interest in sport, together with the works published on the subject, has demonstrated that in many Nazi concentration camps prisoners engaged in physical activity and practised various sporting disciplines. Unfortunately, this was most often a pathological form of sport, taking the shape of a particular kind of gymnastics [20] that served as punishment for even the slightest infractions committed by prisoners. Nevertheless, there were also instances of practices resembling those undertaken outside the concentration camps before World War II. The most popular were boxing, football, athletics training, and, less frequently, volleyball, handball, and even wrestling and swimming. Among these disciplines, the development of football has been described in relatively detailed studies, particularly with reference to the Gross-Rosen camp [21], but also in relation to other camps [22]. The remaining disciplines have yet to receive comprehensive scholarly treatment, which is why the author has undertaken an attempt to present the evolution of boxing in the concentration camps in order to fill this gap.

Archival documents, memoirs and studies containing any information on physical activity (especially boxing) in concentration camps were analysed. This article uses information that was repeated in several sources, hence its reliability was considered confirmed. In the case of activities mentioned in only one source, their occurrence was questioned. Due to the passage of time, the lack of archival documents and the death of direct participants in the events, it is no longer possible to confirm their reliability. The author used this information because of its substantive value, assuming that the witnesses had no reason to provide false information.

In processing the collected material, historical research methods were employed above all – chiefly the method of source analysis and criticism, as well as the comparative method.

RESULTS

The existence of sport in Nazi concentration camps came as a surprise both to former prisoners [16] and to researchers studying life in the camps. However, considering the size of individual camps and the number of prisoners housed in them

– usually reaching several tens of thousands – it becomes highly plausible that former prisoners were unaware of certain forms of activity, including sporting activities. Memoirs and diaries, as well as academic studies and publications, have confirmed sporting activity among prisoners in several concentration camps. Sport in the camp assumed a character entirely different from that implied by its definition, as even its simplest forms – such as basic gymnastic exercises – were used by Nazi perpetrators as a means of punishment and torment, forcing prisoners to perform them repeatedly for hours [23,24]. "Rolling" on gravel, squats, or frog jumps were part of the daily prison routine [25]. Yet physical activity also fulfilled its fundamental purpose: it satisfied the need for movement, helped maintain or regain health after illness, and counteracted depression and suicidal thoughts [3,26]. It allowed prisoners – even if only for a moment – to detach themselves from the surrounding reality. Sporting competitions, such as boxing fights or football matches, took place fairly regularly, usually on Sunday afternoons. As long as only Poles participated, they were always conducted according to the rules of fair play. Those initiated by the Germans, in which the opponents of the hunger-weakened Polish boxers were healthy and physically robust German *kapos*, served solely the interests of the tormentors, catering to their sadistic inclinations [16]. Nevertheless, the very permission for sport within the concentration camps raises questions in light of the memorandum issued in November 1939 by the Office for Racial Policy of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Rassenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP), which imposed a complete ban on the creation of any associations or organisations by Poles, including sporting ones [27].

The regulations evolved in accordance with developments on the wartime fronts. At the end of 1942, H. Himmler, seeking to reduce mortality in the concentration camps, issued an order that resulted in a certain easing of camp conditions [28]. According to this document, the beating of prisoners was formally prohibited, although this prohibition was not observed in practice. For the prisoners, the possibility of receiving parcels from their families was of particular significance. During parcel inspections, most of the contents were stolen by the Germans, yet a small portion did reach the intended recipients. This was especially important for the boxers who took part in fights, as it allowed them to strengthen their bodies and regain some physical resilience.

Boxing was a highly popular discipline in the interwar period, and its Olympic status further elevated its standing among other sports. However, it was also an extremely demanding discipline, requiring considerable strength and excellent physical condition. It is therefore striking that boxing – alongside football – became one of the most popular sports practised in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Boxing bouts were most frequently held in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mauthausen-Gusen, Gross-Rosen, Neuengamme, Mittelbau-Dora, Majdanek, Dachau, and Flossenbürg. From the analysed documents, testimonies, and memoirs of former prisoners, it emerges that the widest range of boxing activity took place in Auschwitz. This was undoubtedly influenced by the size of the camp and the fact that among the prisoners there were relatively many sportsmen who had practised boxing before the war [7]. These included not only Polish boxers such as Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, Antoni Czortek, Zygmunt Małecki (Photo 1), and Antoni Kolczyński [16], but also representatives of nations subjugated by the Third Reich: among them Salamo Arouch [29] from Thessaloniki, Leone (Lelletto) Efrati [30] from Rome, Hercka (Harry) Haft [31] from Bełchatów, Heinz Levy [32] from Amsterdam, Victor "Young" Perez [33] from Tunis, Jacko (Yaakov) Razon [34] from Thessaloniki, Leendert (Leen) Sanders [35] from Rotterdam, and others. Most of them were of Jewish origin.

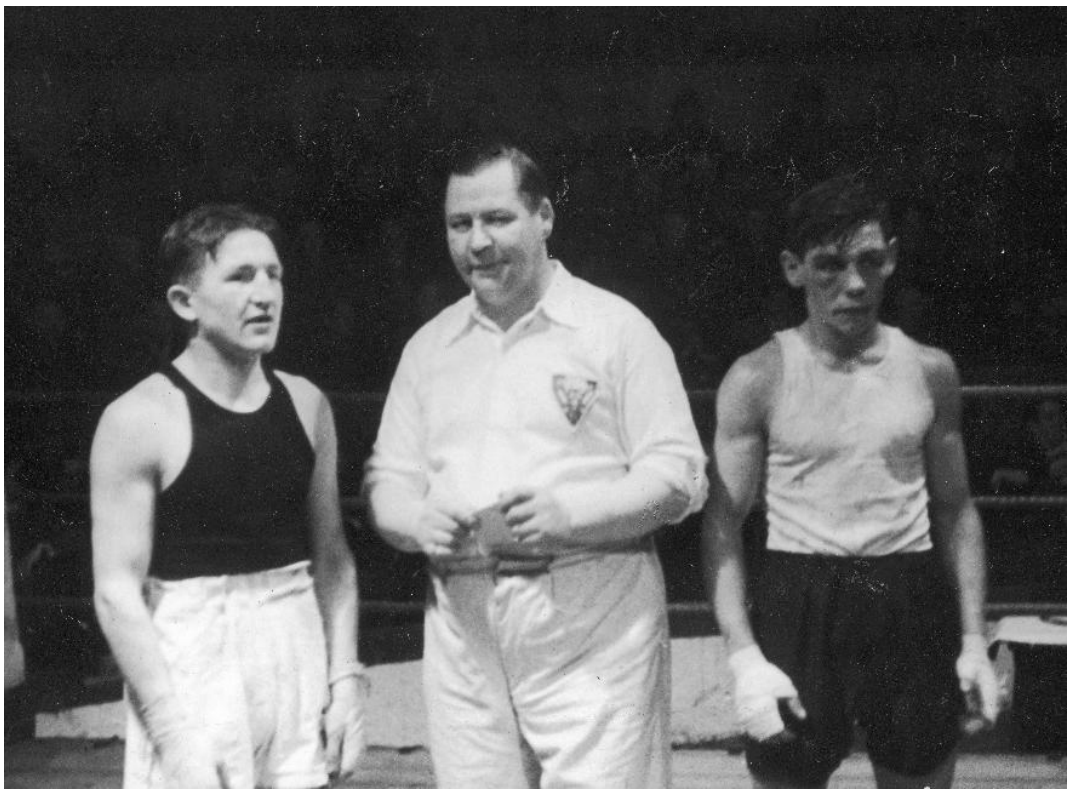

Photo 1. Zygmunt Małecki (left) and Antoni Czortek (right) during the Warsaw Championships in 1939, refereed by Józef Zapłatka; source: National Digital Archives, 3/1/0/14/1773/2

Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, camp number 77, had been the Polish junior boxing champion. He arrived in Auschwitz on 14 June 1940 in the first transport of 728 Poles, mainly political prisoners from Tarnów. Before their arrival, only 30 German criminals had been brought to Auschwitz – men whom Commandant Rudolf Höss transferred from Sachsenhausen on 20 May 1940 to serve as *kapos* [36].

Boxing matches in Auschwitz developed gradually. Tadeusz "Teddy" Pietrzykowski fought his first bout on a Sunday afternoon, 1 March 1941. His opponent was the German *kapo* Walter Düning, the professional German welterweight champion. The fight took place near the camp kitchen on a makeshift ring prepared for the occasion, in the presence of a large number of prisoners as well as Germans. At that time, boxing gloves were not yet used – only simple mitts. The circumstances were far from favourable for Pietrzykowski. He was emaciated, weighing merely 49 kg, whereas his opponent weighed 70 kg. Moreover, it was difficult to predict how the German *kapos* would react in the event of a Polish victory. The fight, conducted under the supervision of a referee, proceeded according to the rules of fair play. Düning himself stopped the fight when the "first blood" appeared on his face, and the course of the contest clearly indicated Pietrzykowski's victory [37].

This was the first of approximately forty bouts that the Pole fought in Auschwitz, more than half of which he won. Particularly important were the fights held in February 1943 against Leendert Leen Sanders, the seven-time Dutch champion, on a ring constructed from tables [17]. SS men and German *kapos* placed large bets on which of the rivals would win. Regardless of who emerged victorious, the winner received additional food rations, which he later shared with fellow prisoners – an act that helped to alleviate hunger. Pietrzykowski lost his first fight with Sanders, but in the rematch, he defeated the Dutch boxer. In March 1943,

"Teddy" was deported to the Neuengamme camp, while Sanders withdrew from further bouts and devoted himself to training young boxers and preparing them for fights against the German *kapos* [38].

In the spring of 1943, transports of Jews from Greece and Western Europe arrived in Auschwitz, among whom were several accomplished pre-war boxing champions. At that time, Heinrich Schwarz – an enthusiast of boxing in Auschwitz and, from autumn 1943, the commandant of Auschwitz III–Monowitz – created a "school of gladiators" composed of boxers and wrestlers. He selected them from the new transports arriving at Auschwitz and organised boxing bouts. These fights most often ended with the death of one of the prisoners, while the other stood a chance of surviving and of helping fellow inmates. By entering the ring, they risked their own lives, yet they were also fully aware that in a concentration camp their survival depended entirely on the whims of the SS men [38].

A Polish boxer and 1936 Olympian, Antoni Czortek – "Kajtek" – camp number 139559 [39], survived the ordeal of Auschwitz. He arrived in a transport on 24 August 1943, was recognised by the Nazis as a boxer, and was forced to take part in boxing bouts. Less than a month after Czortek, another Polish boxer, Zygmunt Małecki [19] – camp number 150489 – from KS Polonia Warszawa, was brought to the camp. Despite the difference in weight categories, the two Poles served as sparring partners for each other. On German orders, they also fought exhibition matches for the entertainment of the SS men [40]. Antoni Czortek's first serious opponent was Salamo Arouch, while Zygmunt Małecki faced Jacko Razon. Both Poles lost their fights on points, but their participation made them known in the camp, which offered them a measure of protection in daily life and granted them certain privileges. Czortek fought 15 bouts in the camp. The most important was against the *kapo* Walter Düning, whom Tadeusz Pietrzykowski had previously defeated. "Kajtek's" victory cemented his position within the camp hierarchy. He also won against August Müller and the German *kapo* Kurt Fuchs, and after one of his victories the Polish prisoners spontaneously sang the national anthem [38].

The rules governing the organisation of boxing bouts changed over the course of the camp's operation. According to former prisoner Tadeusz Borowski, in the early period boxers of all nationalities, including Jews, were allowed to fight, whereas later (1943–1944) such entertainment was reserved exclusively for Aryans. This, however, is doubtful, as other documents confirm the participation of Jewish boxers even after 1943. Boxing matches enjoyed unrelenting popularity, regardless of who was fighting. What mattered most to the prisoners was that someone defeated the Germans. The bouts were held on Sunday afternoons in a ring constructed in the large waiting area of the *Waschraum* barrack. The hall was always filled with prisoners, whose spirits were lifted by the victories of their comrades and whose faith in the imminent end of the war was strengthened [41].

The immense popularity of boxing in Auschwitz was evident from the fact that boxing clubs — mainly Polish and German — were established within the camp and its subcamps. An exceptional bout took place in the summer of 1944, when the two teams faced each other. The contest was held in accordance with official rules, with referees present, on a specially prepared ring. The Polish victory was overwhelming: they won 18:2, with all bouts ending in a knockout of the German opponents [16]. This triumph carried tremendous moral significance, giving the prisoners strength and reinforcing their belief that freedom was within reach. These were probably the last boxing matches held in Auschwitz, as in the autumn deportations of prisoners to other concentration camps within the Third Reich began.

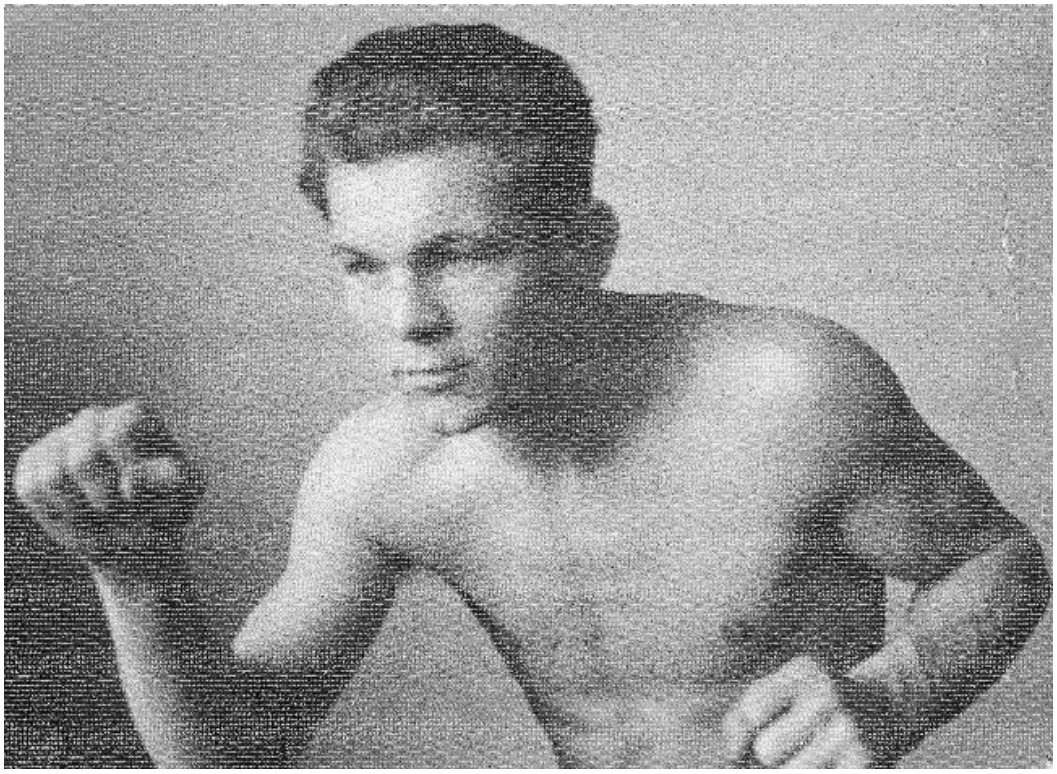

Photo 2. Jan Bianga (interwar period); source: National Digital Archives, 3/1/0/14 /1580

The Mauthausen camp served as the central camp for all camps located in Austria, and the Gusen camp was, in the years 1941–1942, its largest subcamp – larger even than the main camp itself. It was a camp with a specific purpose, designated for the extermination of the Polish intelligentsia. Consequently, among the prisoners were many individuals from academic, artistic, educational, architectural, sporting, and journalistic backgrounds [42]. Boxing as a form of activity appeared in Gusen probably from the very beginning of its existence, as the first transport to arrive at the camp already included well-known pre-war Polish boxers – Jan Bianga [43] (Photo 2), Mieczysław Łukowski and Franciszek Zieliński.

The promoter of boxing in Gusen was the German *kapo* Emil Lipinski, a criminal prisoner who, from 1940, played in the camp football team and devoted considerable effort to organising football competitions. At that time, he learned that the Polish team included two pre-war boxers – Jan Bianga and Franciszek Zieliński – and thus shifted his attention to boxing, spreading claims that he himself was a boxer. In the camp workshops he commissioned a pair of boxing gloves, which were sewn by Stanisław Nawrocki. When the number of boxers increased, he purchased old, worn-out boxing gloves from civilian foremen. He also ordered a canvas punching bag, which camp shoemakers secretly made for an additional payment. Lipinski created conditions that were – as far as a concentration camp allowed – relatively normal for practising boxing. When he was transferred to another camp in 1943, boxing had already become sufficiently established that bouts continued to be organised [44].

In the subsequent transports of 1942, 1943, and 1944, additional Polish boxers arrived in Gusen, among them Władysław Marzec, Franciszek Wolniakowski, Zygmunt Woźniak, Stanisław Mroczek, Jan Żuraszek, Henryk Rychtelski, Franciszek Zieliński and other fighters, as well as the referee Jan Szwed. It soon became clear that among prisoners of other nationalities there were also several distinguished boxers –

the Frenchman Albert Manivel, the Czech Miroslav Kaizer, the Austrian Heinz Karl König, the Spaniard Jose Traverija Tresangel, the Yugoslav Petrović, the German Mayer, and the Spaniard "Paolino". They formed a group large enough to attract the interest of camp dignitaries and received the protection of Karl Rohrbacher (I Lagerältester), Emil Sommer (the *Kapo* of the infirmary), and Rudolf Kokesch (the block leader of Block 7). Polish prisoners who held camp functions – Stefan Jachimski (kitchen *kapo*), Henryk Siejkowski (porter and inspector in the kitchen), and Szczęsny Tyrkalski and Stefan Pręgowski (employed in the *Revier*, i.e. the camp hospital) – became involved in providing care for the Polish boxers [44].

Boxing bouts on a larger scale became popular in Gusen relatively late – only at the beginning of 1944 – which was due to the initially stronger interest in football. When new barracks (A, B, C, and D) were constructed on the roll-call square, where football matches had previously been played, the area was significantly reduced, leaving the players without the possibility of organizing competitions. At that point, the German camp dignitaries shifted their attention to boxing. Creating favourable conditions for boxing training was, of course, not motivated by any concern for the physical development or fitness of the prisoners, but solely by the strong desire of the camp *kapos* for entertainment and for the profit they could draw from betting on the bouts [44].

The conditions for holding boxing matches were difficult, but depending on the season the prisoners changed the locations where the bouts were organised. In the summer, they took place outdoors, usually in the areas between Blocks 6 and 7, 15 and 16, and 23 and 24 or 31 and 32, or in the lane between Blocks 6 and 7. In the winter or during bad weather, the boxing matches were held in the infirmary, usually in Block 31 or in the attic of Block 7. In winter or in bad weather, boxing bouts were organised in the *Revier*, usually in Block 31 or in the attic of Block 7. None of these places could accommodate all those interested in watching the boxing contests, so prisoners often climbed onto the roofs of neighbouring blocks to see the fighters. For some bouts – especially those held in smaller rooms – admission was charged: 5 cigarettes, which were later divided among the competitors [44].

It may be ventured to say that, despite the tragic reality of camp life, boxing in Gusen developed in a systematic manner. This is supported by the testimonies of former prisoner-boxers. In the first stage (1942–1943), not only were boxing matches organised, but relatively regular training for amateur enthusiasts was also conducted. This training was led by Jan Bianga and Franciszek Wolniakowski, who also prepared the bouts, which were usually initiated by the prisoners themselves. In the years 1943–1944, the group of boxers had grown large enough for fighters to pair off according to their mutual assessment of weight and sporting ability. Boxing bouts benefited the Germans, but they also brought certain advantages to the prisoners who took part in them, as they often received extra food rations, were treated more leniently by the *kapos*, and were sometimes assigned more favourable work details. This last situation occurred more frequently among footballers, but among the boxers Jan Bianga was distinguished in this way, being assigned work in one of the camp offices [42].

By the end of 1944, a group of boxers had formed who regularly took part in bouts, which enabled them to maintain an adequate level of fitness. This encouraged the organisers of the boxing community to undertake an initiative that was almost inconceivable under concentration camp conditions: the organisation of a tournament to determine the best boxer in several weight categories. The participants were: Jan Bianga and Miroslav Kaizer, Henryk Rychtelski and Władysław Marzec, Franciszek Zieliński and Albert Manivel, and Czesław Szmytka and Jose Traverija Tresangel. The referee was Jan Szwed. The competition was held in the

square between Blocks 23–24 and 31–32. Although the Frenchman, the Spaniard, and the Czech all possessed rich pre-war sporting experience and achievements, in Gusen all the bouts were won by the Polish fighters. The winners were honoured with medals specially prepared for the occasion [44].

The sporting activity and the respect accorded to Henryk Rychtelski in Gusen may be compared to the position held by Tadeusz Pietrzykowski in Auschwitz and Neuengamme. Rychtelski was born on 27 February 1921 [45], and was therefore a very young man. He was first sent to the camp in Police, a subcamp of the Stutthof concentration camp, and later to Gusen. From the spring of 1943, he was the most active boxer in the camp. He defeated all his opponents – those older than himself, heavier than himself, and professional boxers alike. He had no equal. He was well known and admired in the camp, particularly within the sporting community. He was nicknamed "Baletnica" – "the Ballerina" – because of his graceful build and agile movements. In recognition of his sporting achievements, but also as an expression of gratitude for the moments of joy and pride that his victories gave the Poles at a time when the Nazi tormentors sought to break their faith in eventual triumph, his fellow prisoners prepared a special keepsake for him. It was a commemorative medal in the shape of a circle, 5 cm in diameter. Its makers were probably Leopold Nykel and Zygmunt Gutowski. The medal was produced in the Steyr Works. On the obverse was engraved the profile of a boxer with a raised glove, and on the reverse the inscription: "For the splendidly fought boxing matches, presented as a keepsake by your comrades. 1944." In his memoirs Henryk Rychtelski stated: "It is more precious to me than an Olympic medal." [44].

The Gross-Rosen concentration camp was initially a branch of KL Sachsenhausen (from May 1940 to April 1941), and from 1 May 1941 it became an independent concentration camp. It was intended for "heavily burdened prisoners who were nevertheless still capable of re-education and improvement." [46]. In the memoirs of former prisoners, the camp's purpose was described in stark terms: "They want to extract from us the maximum of strength and then release us, but through that smoking chimney over there." [47].

Elements of boxing first appeared in the so-called "school of gladiators", which was established in 1941 by the *kapo* Juba Herman. These were athletic and boxing displays, the finale of which involved striking a living "punching bag" chosen specially for that day. The title of gladiator was awarded to the man who managed to kill the victim with a single blow. The "school of gladiators" was disbanded in 1942, and from the summer of 1943 prisoners in Gross-Rosen practised boxing. A boxing ring was built in Block 8, where exhibition bouts were initially presented by German prisoners, ready to fight representatives of other nationalities. For the Polish prisoners, this posed a particular challenge – one that was successfully undertaken first by S. Rajski and H. Kobylański, and later by the young J. Kowalewski. The all-weights championship was won by Martynowski from Warsaw [48]. Weight categories, as used in proper sporting competition, were generally not observed when matching opponents [49]. Boxing bouts proved too exhausting for prisoners already weakened by forced labour, and after roughly six months they were discontinued [7].

Boxing was also practised by prisoners in Neuengamme. This was due in part to Tadeusz "Teddy" Pietrzykowski, who on 14 March 1943 was deported from Auschwitz to this camp in a transport of more than 1.000 prisoners [37]. The fame of the undefeated boxer reached Neuengamme together with Pietrzykowski, and the Germans took full advantage of this by organising exhibition bouts against much heavier opponents. "Teddy" did not disappoint – he defeated the Germans Schally Hottenbach [23] and Fiede Thams, as well as the Czech Jimmy Kachta [50]. By order of the camp authorities, Pietrzykowski's fights were organised regularly every Sunday

on a specially prepared ring for the entertainment of the SS men. Yet the bouts brought even greater joy to the prisoners, as the victories of the Polish boxer had immense significance in sustaining the morale of the inmates. Pietrzykowski paid a harsh price for his activity: he was punished with fifty blows of a stick by *Scharführer* Johann Reese and transferred to the Drütte subcamp. There, weakened by pleurisy, he was still forced to take part in boxing bouts. His opponents included, among others, Konstantin Konstantinowow, a champion of the USSR [51].

Pietrzykowski survived the camp, but Johann Trollmann – who had been challenged to a boxing match by the *kapo* Emil Cornelius – paid for his victory with his life. Mocked by the prisoners after losing the fight, Cornelius beat Trollmann with a truncheon a few days later so severely that he died. The pretext for administering the punishment was the boxer's collapse, brought on by exhausting physical labour. Officially, the incident was recorded as an accident [52].

Sport enjoyed relatively strong interest in Mittelbau-Dora. In order to maintain the appearance of good treatment of prisoners, the Nazis proclaimed: "Sport should flourish in Mittelbau!" [53]. Football matches and boxing bouts were especially popular. Each victory of a prisoner – achieved despite all adversity – lifted spirits and offered a glimmer of hope. Such was the case when a small, emaciated Russian named Nikołaj defeated a well-built German *kapo* who was a criminal prisoner [7]. The cheering of the gathered crowd so motivated the slight Russian that, after a dozen or so blows, the *kapo* had to be carried out of the ring [53]. This uneven fight became a form of protest against the hated tormentors and held far deeper significance than mere sport.

No documents confirming the organisation of boxing bouts in the main Stutthof concentration camp have been found, but Henryk Rychtelski – later transferred to Gusen – spent some time in the Police subcamp. In his memoirs he refers to his stay in Police and to the boxing matches he fought there against prisoners of various nationalities – Poles, Czechs, and Dutchmen. Although before the war Rychtelski had completed only basic training for young novices, he fought opponents who were much older and far more experienced. His advantage undoubtedly came from youthful enthusiasm, natural talent, and excellent physical condition, thanks to which he did not lose a single fight in Police [44].

In 1943, in the Dachau concentration camp, a sports field was constructed – after obtaining permission from the camp authorities – using the eastern section of the roll-call square [2]. At that time, prisoners became interested not only in football but also – according to Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz, a former prisoner of several concentration camps – in boxing [7]. Teodor Musioł, the author of an extensive monograph on the Dachau camp, although he wrote about the sporting events organised there and the importance of sport, especially for the younger prisoners, did not mention boxing. This suggests that boxing did not gain greater recognition and was not widely promoted [2].

KL Flossenbürg, according to SS classification, was a third-category camp. It was used primarily for political prisoners whose files were marked with the letters "R.U" (Rückkehr unterwünscht) – return undesirable. Other camps also sent punitive transports to Flossenbürg. These circumstances made Flossenbürg a death camp [54]. In 1944, the camp authorities in Flossenbürg permitted the organisation of boxing bouts. However, this must be considered in the context of the changing situation on the fronts of World War II and the need to divert prisoners' attention away from political matters [7].

At Majdanek, football enjoyed far greater popularity than boxing, and its patron was Peter Birzer [55]. In 1943, boxing bouts were also organised [7]. However, engaging in sporting activity at Majdanek was extremely dangerous, chiefly because

– regardless of the outcome of the contest – the lives of the participants depended on the *kapo*.

For prisoners from numerous concentration camps evacuated in advance of the advancing Red Army, Bergen-Belsen constituted the final camp in which they were held prior to liberation. Among those who arrived there were Tadeusz Pietrzykowski, Salamo Arouch, Jacko Razon, and the Dutch boxers Ben Bril (later a boxing referee), Appie de Vries, and others [38]. However, it is highly unlikely that boxing bouts were organised there. It was, however, unlikely that boxing matches were organised there. The primary reason was the extreme exhaustion of most prisoners following the 'death march'. Moreover, in the final phase of the war, the Germans were no longer concerned with satisfying their amusements but rather with finding ways to evade responsibility before the Allied forces liberating the camps for the crimes they had committed in the concentration camp system.

CONCLUSION

Boxing bouts – especially those won by Polish prisoners – held particular significance in sustaining the morale of the inmate population, as they offered the only possible form of symbolic retaliation for the cruelty and sadism of the Nazis [16]. Despite the surrounding terror and the frequent absence of hope, sporting events such as boxing matches drew large crowds. For some, these were the only displays of normal life they had experienced for several years – and perhaps the last – allowing them, if only briefly, to forget the tragic reality [2]. A former concentration camp prisoner, Ludwik Rejewski, wrote in his memoirs: "A man can be destroyed physically, but his dignity cannot be taken away, nor can the collective consciousness of the prisoners be killed." [56].

The significance of boxing bouts in the concentration camps did not lie in the competition between two sportsmen conducted in the spirit of fair play, nor in the victories achieved, but rather in the very act of fighting – despite everything and against all odds. Prisoners demonstrated time and again that they were capable of resisting Nazism, that they were not merely passive victims or witnesses to German cruelty. The boxing matches and the victories won by prisoners over German boxers became symbols of resistance and of the refusal to accept the loss of freedom and the terror imposed by the occupier.

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