

PLAYING CHESS IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS AN IMMATERIAL AND MATERIAL PRACTICE OF STABILIZATION

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So I began carving in the camp to manufacture chess pieces. Others did the same, and made some cubic figures. These were too cloddish for me. I came up with special forms, which were to indicate the role of maneuvers of diverse chess pieces, for example a pawn that simply moves forward, a rook that only moves straight and edgewise, and a bishop that moves only in diagonal direction. The queen has all rules for maneuvers, but not that of the knight. [...] With these chess pieces, Theo and me competed in many games¹

Willi Dickhut,
prisoner of the concentration camp Esterwegen

Unfortunately, based on this description it is quite difficult to imagine how Willi Dickhut's chess pieces looked. He emphasized how even under the conditions of bondage and slave labor, he wanted to have special chessmen since

¹ Cited as in E. Bruns, *Spielen und Überleben. Das Schachspiel in den Lagern und Ghettos der Nazis*, DIZ Nachrichten. Aktionskomitee für ein Dokumentations – und Informationszentrum Emslandlager e.V., 1998, vol. 20, p. 53–54 (transl. D.L.). Original: "Theo und ich haben miteinander diskutiert und Schach gespielt. So nahm ich im Lager das Schnitzen wieder auf, um Schachfiguren herzustellen. Andere hatten das auch getan und Figuren in kubischer Form gemacht. Die waren mir zu plump. Ich dachte mir besondere Formen aus, die die Zugregeln für die verschiedenen Schachfiguren andeuten sollten, z.B. ein Bauer als einfachen Zug vorwärts, ein Turm nur in gerader und seitlicher und der Läufer nur in schräger Richtung, beim Springer den Sprung. Die Dame bekam alle Zugregeln außer der des Springers angedeutet. Kameraden, die in der Schreinerei beschäftigt waren, besorgten mir die maßgehobelten Vierkanthölzer aus Birke; daraus schnitzte ich an mehreren Abenden die Figuren. Mit diesen Figuren haben Theo und ich manches Spiel ausgetragen".

his colleagues played with “cloddish” pieces. The mere fact that inmates played chess or risked making chess pieces may come as a surprise. The idea that Dickhut distinguished himself from other prisoners by establishing a difference between his and others’ chess pieces requires further exploration. Chess was not only a way to pass the time or escape from the impositions of daily life in the camps², but also carried a three-dimensional aspect. One has to look at chess not only as a game and intellectual competition, but also as a reflection of camp material culture. Dickhut’s statement primarily sheds some light on the complexity of social practices, and secondly opens space to examine the materiality of private life in concentration camps. It points out a key element of social life in concentration camps: where the practices and material culture of prisoners intertwined while adapting to the repressive camp system.

While historiography supports that social relations continued to develop in concentration camps³, the material culture appears to be, if not unknown, at least more or less ignored. Of course, the presentation of original objects in exhibitions or catalogues has always represented the conditions of camp life for posterity. Objects are often considered to be silent witnesses of history, or almost sacred memorabilia of the survivors. It seems to be easy to grasp the poverty and primitivism of a self-made spoon or primitive camp clothes. But discovering the sphere of spiritual value that objects could have had for prisoners is much more difficult. Chess, which is understood as a material and immaterial phenomenon of social practice in concentration camps, makes it possible to reflect on these topics altogether.

This article analyzes the complex series of phenomena that derives from the material and immaterial meaning of playing chess in concentration camps. Chess is to be described as a practice that depended on material and immaterial interactions. Who played chess and in what situations? What situations and (material) forms of playing chess are we able to describe? What did playing chess mean spiritually, but also materially for camp inmates? What impact did

² Vide: *ibid.* or M. Eckardt, *Erlebte Schachnovelle. Georg Klaus (1912-1974)*, [in:] *Belebte Ideen. Sozialisten in Thüringen. Biographische Skizzen*, ed. M. Hesselbarth, E. Schulz, M. Weißbecker, Jena 2006, pp. 259–267.

³ Vide: C. Daxelmüller, *Kulturelle Formen und Aktivitäten als Teil der Überlebens – und Vernichtungsstrategie in den Konzentrationslagern*, [in:] *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, ed. U. Herbert, K. Orth, Ch. Dieckmann, Frankfurt a. M. 2002, pp. 983–1005; M. Suderland, *Ein Extremfall des Sozialen. Die Häftlingsgesellschaft in den nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern*, Frankfurt – New York 2009; W. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, New Jersey 1997. Historiography also agrees that playing has a role in building a world “as if” and therefore has a special importance also for unfree people who could by playing escape the reality: see E. Bruns, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

playing (and winning or losing) have on camp existence? Did ownership and the comparative luxury of chess games influence self-consciousness and hierarchies between prisoners? Finally, is it possible to learn from the intersection of all these aspects in order to gain more knowledge about social interaction in concentration camps?

PLAYING CHESS AS A SOCIAL INTERACTION

Playing chess was not a widespread phenomenon – only small and mostly very privileged groups of prisoners had the possibility of playing chess or were able to either access or make chess pieces. Aldo Carpi, an Italian prisoner of Mauthausen-Gusen, drew a sketch of two prominent prisoners playing chess in an inmates' hospital shortly after the war⁴. This seems to be quite a typical scene. In general, chess is not a topic on which former inmates concentrate while describing camp life. Testimonies about playing chess in concentration camps are often transformed by the post-war patterns of memory. Narrations by survivors about chess were integrated into an overall story of suffering and surviving, which often stressed the importance of resistance in the camp. If chess is not a good topic to depict camp cruelty, it works well in creating a narration about resisting the SS. This is very often what one finds in narratives about chess in the archives⁵. Most narratives come from former functionaries or at least privileged inmates or – as in Sachsenhausen or Buchenwald – were deposited by the GDR communists under conditions of controlled memory. So the picture is neither universal nor free from the interpretation of people who tried to control remembrance. With this in mind, the testimonies have to be read more carefully and the knowledge about chess has to be adjusted to better understand its factual influence.

Chess has a rich history in the countries from which concentration camp prisoners originated, such as Germany, Austria, or the Soviet Union. Especially in the pre-war period, chess became popular in broader circles of society. Workers and political organizations established chess clubs. In the 19th and 20th cen-

⁴ Cf. A. Carpi, *Dziennik z Gusen. Wstrząsająca relacja więźnia zilustrowana grafikami wykonanymi w obozie*, Zakrzewo 2009, illustration 13.

⁵ Polish museums that exist at the sites of former concentration camps often answer that chess as a topic of testimonies occurs rarely and as something evidently less important. In German museums relations can be found relatively more often, some more information I gained from the memorials in Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, Bruns collected broader material on the so called Emslandlager, vide: footnote 1.

turies, chess turned even more into a sport: former understandings and practices of chess as an art or science, or playing chess only in elite circles in clubs, retreated progressively into the background⁶. Chess in concentration camps was based on these developments, which popularized the game also in broader society, for example in political parties and organizations. Players in concentration camps already knew the pattern of chess interactions from their civil life. Inmates often knew the game quite well and treated playing chess as a way of spending free time. Even prisoners, who emphasized how difficult the living conditions in camps were, could remember playing chess. “The conditions and the life in the barracks [...] did not leave me any time for speculative thoughts. [...] We ate, we drank, we slept, much more we couldn’t do; this was the most necessary, but also the most important. [...] In hours free of work – there were few of them a day – we maybe played chess sometimes or read in old hackneyed volume of illustrated magazines [...]”⁷, wrote political prisoner Arnold Weiß-Rüthel about his first months in Sachsenhausen.

Some testimonies of inmates suggest that chess was something quite common. In KZ Esterwegen the SS knew about chess, permitted it, or even more or less participated in prisoners’ free time: “Everywhere in the barracks a crowd of prisoners stood around the chess board, players brooding over the sixty four fields and not less engaged spectators following the maneuvers of the game. Both prisoners and their guards played cards. Only the prisoners played chess. In whole series of tournaments they measured their strength”⁸.

⁶ Vide: J. Petzold, *Das königliche Spiel. Die Kulturgeschichte des Schach*, Leipzig 1987, pp. 209–226/229 and G. Klaus, *Erlebte Schachnovelle*, [in:] *Schwarz und Weiss. Heitere und ernste Begegnungen mit dem königlichen Spiel in der Literatur*, ed. A. Karau, W. Renner, Berlin 1960, pp. 168–173. Both authors are writing from a “communist” perspective, but the phenomenon of chess and its transformation and dimensions seem to be described well.

⁷ Archiv der Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen [AS], D 30 A/25 (Arnold Weiß-Rüthel: Sachsenhausen IX: Block 23, Klinkerwerk und Kayser-Kommando, p. 61 (transl. D.L.). Original: “Die Zustände und das Leben auf den Blocks [...] ließen mir keine Zeit zu spekulativen Gedanken. [...] Wir aßen, wir tranken, wir schliefen, recht viel mehr konnten wir nicht tun; es war das notwendigste, aber auch das wichtigste. [...] In den arbeitsfreien Stunden – es waren nur wenige am Tag – spielten wir wohl auch einmal Schach oder lasen in alten abgegriffenen Bänden illustrierter Zeitschriften [...]”. Weiß-Rüthel from April 1940 on until March 1945 was arrested in Sachsenhausen, his report is from 1946/1947.

⁸ Vide: K.A. Wittvogel, *Staatliches Konzentrationslager VII. Eine „Erziehungsanstalt“ im Dritten Reich*, Bremen 1991, p. 166 and following pages cited in E. Bruns, op.cit., p. 53 (transl. D.L.). Original: “Überall in den Baracken drängen sich Gefangene um das Schachbrett, Spielende, die ernsthaft über die vierundsechzig Feldern brüten, und Zuschauer, die nicht minder ernst den Zügen des Spiels folgen. Karten spielen sowohl die Gefangenen als auch

When it comes to the practice of playing chess in concentration camps it is unfortunately extremely difficult to establish clear distinctions regarding chronology and space on the map of concentration camps all over Europe between 1933 and 1945. One has rather to imagine a very diversified picture, which – in my opinion – cannot be located on a timeline or in a concrete place. There was no logical development of chess playing within the camp system. But there are several presumptions interesting for this topic, which allow to describe some fields of powers and possibilities between the SS and prisoners. In general, playing chess required an elaborate background. A chess board and men had to be organized or manufactured. Even if playing chess was not an entirely illegal activity, it could always be sanctioned or punished by the SS. There is some evidence that playing chess was not forbidden, even if some can claim that it was not allowed in many places and times. The German camp administration – although there were some written principle camp regulations – never adhered to them strictly: The principles of terror in camps were built on the rule that every guard and every functionary prisoner was able to misuse his power. Playing chess was therefore in many cases played despite the risks involved. The fact that prisoners played chess is not to be understood as a possible answer to the question of what was forbidden and what was allowed in camps. It is more promising to explain playing chess as a practice and a reflection of self-understanding of inmates in which they found a field of leisure or even freedom that very much depended on intertwined situations, and not so much on extensive logic.⁹ In general, the SS could punish the inmates anytime they played chess: “But there was a short time, when the SS barrack leaders unmistakably took a stand towards chess. Where they saw a chess board, they scrunched it. We hid our chess boards then and started to play chess again after a break and on the lookout for guards, first without any placards or tables of tournament”¹⁰. For this purpose, inmates played chess in hiding or under the custody of other inmates. But it has to be mentioned

ihre Wächter. Das Schachspiel indessen beschäftigt nur Häftlinge. In ganzen Ketten von Wettkämpfen messen sie ihre Kräfte”.

⁹ Vide: A. Lüdtke, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, [in:] *Alltagskultur, Subjektivität und Geschichte. Zur Theorie und Praxis der Alltagsgeschichte*, ed. Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt, Münster 1994, p. 146.

¹⁰ Archiv der Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen, P 3 Hartmann, Hermann/1 (Bericht zur Freizeitgestaltung im KL Sachsenhausen), p. 53 (transl. D.L.). Original: “Aber es gab auch eine kurze Zeit, wo die SS-Blockführer eine unmißverständliche Stellungnahme zum Schachspielen bezogen. Wo sie ein Schachbrett sahen, zertraten sie es. Wir versteckten daraufhin unsere Schachspiele und fingen nach einer Pause unter Absicherung wieder an, zunächst ohne Aushängen der Wettbewerbstabellen, organisierte Schachspiele durchzuführen”.

that the SS also photographed inmates playing chess for propaganda purposes. The message to German society was to show the educational aims of imprisonment in camps and the good living conditions of prisoners¹¹.

The living conditions in the camps before and especially during the war kept changing and so did the possibility of playing chess. Testimonies of survivors only give some approximate data about the frequency of playing chess. Unfortunately they are not of the same quality from every country, former camps (or today's museum), or the time they are talking about. Probably the best conditions for playing chess were before and during the first years of the war. With the growing quantity and diversity of the inmates, which directly contributed to much harder living conditions, the possibility and simply the physical and mental capacity to play grew smaller. Testimonies about the late 1930s and early 1940s portray a certain picture that shows a quite well-structured society of inmates that organized a social life for quite a big group of prisoners. In Sachsenhausen after 1937, a chess tournament for dozens of prisoners from different barracks took place. In summertime the players organized competitions between different barracks. Hermann Hartmann recalled: "Already in the summer of 1937 there was an interesting tournament between barracks 16 and 5 outside at long tables [...]"¹². Fritz Bringmann describes this scene in a more detailed way: "In the following time of the summer of 1937 and also 1938 when the weather was nice, tables were placed between the barracks, where often more than 30 inmates showed their abilities"¹³. A chess champion of the entire camp was awarded¹⁴. A propaganda picture from Dachau shows inmates playing chess between the barracks¹⁵. The competitions inside one block sometimes lasted several months. Public placards provided information about the results¹⁶.

¹¹ A photograph from Dachau was even published in a propaganda newspaper: „Münchener Illustrierte Presse“ from 16.07.1933, p. 855 under the title *The truth about Dachau* (german original "Die Wahrheit über Dachau"). Also in Mauthausen the SS made a photograph of two inmates playing chess, vide: B. Bermejo, *Francisco Boix, der Fotograf von Mauthausen*, Wien 2007, p. 102.

¹² AS, P 3 Hartmann, Hermann/1, p. 53 (transl. D.L.). Original: "Schon im Sommer 1937 gab es einen interessanten Wettkampf zwischen dem Block 16 und 5 im Freien an langen Tafeln [...]". Hermann's report is from 1979.

¹³ AS, P 3 Bringmann, Fritz/1 (Fritz Bringmann: Erinnerungen an das KL Sachsenhausen), p. 7 (transl. D.L.). Original: "Im weiteren Verlauf des Sommers 1937 und auch 1938 wurden bei schönem Wetter zwischen den Baracken Tische aufgestellt, an denen oft über 30 Schachspieler ihr Können bewiesen". Bringmann was between the years 1936 and 1940 in Sachsenhausen.

¹⁴ Vide: for example G. Klaus, op.cit., p. 175.

¹⁵ Vide: footnote no 11.

¹⁶ Vide: for example AS, Hartmann.

German and sometimes Austrian prisoners organized the first tournaments; other groups soon followed. Again in Sachsenhausen, a prisoner from the Netherlands drew a poster about a tournament in barracks 8a and b on August 8, 1941¹⁷. On the top of the poster a number of chess pieces, (rooks, a bishop, a white queen and a black king among others) with human faces interacted – more in a humorous than a symbolic way, but drawn with great attention to detail. These at least semi-public competitions, which many prisoners and also probably the SS knew of, are very different with attempts of other – less privileged – national groups. The SS distinguished very much between Arian and non-Arian prisoners.

In March 1943 Soviet prisoners in Sachsenhausen organized a séance of simultaneous chess games. From the manufacturing of the chess pieces up to the tournament itself, everything was illegal. Prisoners had to keep guards in front of the barracks in order to protect the players¹⁸. Unfortunately, no testimony of a Polish prisoner – the largest and non-Arian inmate society – describes playing chess in a way which would allow for a comparison with German chess players¹⁹. Drawings that show chess players from Auschwitz²⁰ and a chess game owned by Polish prisoners in Mauthausen²¹ suggest that playing chess was also quite common among them – though again, especially for privileged prisoners. Tadeusz Śliwiński wrote in the late 1970s that in Groß-Rosen during the work-free Sunday afternoons, inmates played chess on boards they got from the writer (Schreiber) of the barrack²².

The situation of Polish prisoners in concentration camps in the Nazi occupied Polish territory was probably quite similar to the situation of German or Austrian inmates in concentration camps in the Reich. They were often able to establish a ‘Polish’ inmates’ society, where Poles had functions and were able to protect themselves more effectively against the terror of the SS. Their free time therefore could be better organized. Chess most likely had the same status for them as it had in other camps for privileged prisoners.

Today’s understanding of chess in concentration camps is based not only on the technical descriptions of former prisoners but also on their interpretations.

¹⁷ Vide: *Zug um Zug. Schach – Gesellschaft – Politik (Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung im Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland)*, Bonn 2006, p. 90.

¹⁸ Vide: J. Gyzicki, *Schach zu allen Zeiten*, Zürich 1967, p. 342, cited in E. Bruns, op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁹ In Polish museums the archives simply could not prepare materials as it was possible in German museums.

²⁰ During a research in the museum’s collection in Oświęcim I saw such a drawing by Mieczysław Kościelniak.

²¹ Collection of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk.

²² Vide: Tadeusz Śliwiński, *Periturus*, Kraków 1979, pp. 141–42.

This interpretation of course reflects a post-war perspective. The aforementioned German prisoners, who inhabited camps already in the years before the war, dominate the memory about chess. They often stressed that, for example, mostly communist inmates played chess²³, that “approximately 50% of the political prisoners more or less played chess well”²⁴ or that “many comrades” [read: communist party members] were good players²⁵. Such stances imply the big influence political prisoners had on chess playing. Knowing the post-war communist explanation that in camps such as Buchenwald resistance organized by communists was very effective²⁶, the connection between chess and resistance is perceived as even more significant.

Surely the assessment of many former chess players that playing chess helped them to build a distance between their prisoner’s fate and their former civil identity is true. Private and cultural activities provided some relief from life threatened by death at every step. Chess undoubtedly played such a role as well. As Barry Spanjaard, a prisoner of Bergen-Belsen, wrote, he was able to sacrifice even food to play chess: “I tried to figure out how to get through the next few days. What could I do to get my mind off food? Then I got an idea; there was a fellow in my barrack who had a chess set. I went over to him and asked him if he wanted to sell it to me. Of course, I couldn’t buy it with money; there wasn’t any, and money was useless here. I managed to talk him into selling me his chess set for two rations of bread, which meant that I wasn’t able to eat bread for FIVE WHOLE DAYS. I had my reasons. I took the set to my bunk, and for the next three days I did nothing but played chess with my friend, Walter. We concentrated on the game so intensely that we forgot our hunger, so the days went by quickly. The other people weren’t as fortunate as I [sic]”²⁷. Spanjaard’s powerful description and his ability to resign from bread to gain immaterial goods leads more than other testimonies to the question about the limits of human perseverance. If he remembers well the

²³ Vide: P. Langer, *Erinnerungen eines Moorsoldaten von Juni 1937 bis September 1940*, Manuskript, p. 19 (Archive of the Emslandlager), cited in E. Bruns, op.cit., p. 53.

²⁴ Vide: AS, Hartmann (transl. D.L.). Original: “Von den politischen Häftlingen spielten schätzungsweise 50% mehr oder minder gut Schach”.

²⁵ Vide: AS, P 3 Wackernagel, Günter/1 (Günter Wackernagel: Die kulturelle und sportliche Betätigung im KLS), p. 277.

²⁶ Vide: *Konzentrationslager Buchenwald. Bericht*, Weimar 1949 or B. Apitz, *Nackt unter Wölfen*, Halle 1958. The report edited by the International Committee of the Camp and also the famous novel are an expression of the domination and “censorship” of historiography of the camp by communists.

²⁷ B. Spanjaard, *Don’t fence me in! An American Teenager in the Holocaust*, 10. Edition 1988, [in:] Niedersächsische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, p. 13 and following, cited in E. Bruns, op.cit., p. 55.

days without food would have been very painful for him, and the more ‘delicious’ was to play.

Already in the camps, chess gained a cultural meaning. Playing chess was a common – and civil – practice that reminded prisoners of normal life. But chess also had a high philosophical impact. Legends about the origin of chess corresponded to the antagonism between rich and poor, powerless and powerful, black and white (pawns and kings)²⁸. A Czech prisoner from Buchenwald wrote after the war that in addition teaching chess inmates, he held lectures about the history and theory of chess²⁹. The fact that prisoners taught others to play and gave them lectures about the history and theory of chess indicates that chess had a special value on inmates’ mental world³⁰.

With the knowledge of such lectures playing inmates also understood the game as a metaphor of reality: chess is considered to be an effigy of the world³¹, its countless possibilities of maneuvers fascinated for as long as the game existed. Getting acquainted with the history of the game, chess players often tried to describe their real life as combinations of chess maneuvers or understood the game as a metaphor for life. A birthday card for an unknown Czech prisoner of Mauthausen demonstrates that inmates already in the camps understood chess in these patterns: A white king is checkmated by a black bishop, a rook, and a queen. A helpless white knight is crying. A poem says more or less that the situation of the prisoner “celebrating” his 30th birthday is hopeless, but in spite of that the colleagues wish that in the next year the situation changes.³² As the chess metaphor is normally used to describe the powerfulness of the lower class against the upper class, in this case the relation is the other way round. The camp structure oppressed the human. But in the game as in real life, the situation could change in the future.

Former Czech Buchenwald prisoner Dionis Polanský shows the strong link that existed between playing chess and resistance networking: “First of all, it brought together different elements: the worker with the intellectual, the old with the young, people of different political orientation, like the middle-class republic [Republic of Weimar] it had formed. In the most convenient circumstances, some spectators gathered around the players. They had conversations about something, which remained a secret and did not attract the attention of the

²⁸ Vide: Petzold, op.cit., p. 7.

²⁹ Vide: Archiv der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald [BwA], 31/28.

³⁰ Vide: SA, Hartmann, p. 53.

³¹ Vide: *Zug um Zug*, p. 12.

³² The postcard dates from 19 July 1944. Vide: *Kunst und Kultur im Konzentrationslager Mauthausen 1938–1945. Katalog zur Ausstellung*, Wien 2007, p. 102.

uninitiated. An SS man could always have come into a barrack, when a lecture, a song or something else would have been suspicious, but playing chess didn't arouse suspicion. In the year 1940 we organized the first 'chess Olympics', the second was in 1942 and the third in 1944. At this time the conditions developed in such a way, that it was possible, and even necessary, to organize a truly international chess Olympics, in which Russians, Germans, Frenchmen, Belgians, Dutchmen, Poles, Italians, Czechs, and other nations participated. Therefore the activity of playing chess completely took a back seat. Even though one sang the chess anthem [...] at the opening, the main issue of the Olympics was the political conspiracy. Results of the games were published on tables in front of the barracks. The uninitiated did not know that comrade Hršel [a Czech prisoner], whose name also appeared on the table, did not participate in the chess olympics in order to meet other members of the camp's active [resistance group]. The international slogan of the chess friends 'gens una summus' (let's stay unified) was especially meaningful under these conditions. So in Buchenwald, playing chess also contributed to the fraternization of nations in the name of international solidarity"³³.

Although many of the facts that Polanský depicted are very logical, the aim of his narration is to convince his readers of a certain version of a camp's history. From his point of view playing chess was subordinated to the conspiracy of political prisoners. While describing the chess Olympics, he argues in the typi-

³³ Vide: BwA, 31/28 (transl. D.L.). Original: "Vor allem brachte es unterschiedliche Elemente einander näher: den Arbeiter mit dem Intellektuellen, die Alten mit den Jungen, Menschen mit unterschiedlicher politischer Orientierung, wie sie die bürgerliche Republik herausgebildet hatte. Der günstigste Umstand war jedoch der, daß sich um die Spieler mehrere «Kibitze» versammeln und so irgendetwas besprechen konnten, was geheim bleiben sollte, ohne daß dieses Gespräch einem Nichteingeweihten auffällig war. Es konnte jederzeit ein SS-Mann den Block betreten, dem ein Vortrag, ein Lied oder ähnliches aufgefallen wäre, das Schachspiel aber erregte nie Verdacht. Im Jahre 1940 wurde die erste «Schacholympiade» veranstaltet, die zweite 1942 und die dritte 1944. Zu der Zeit hatten sich die Verhältnisse bereits so weit entwickelt, daß es möglich, ja sogar notwendig war, eine wirklich internationale Schacholympiade zu veranstalten, an der Russen, Deutsche, Franzosen, Belgier, Holländer, Polen, Italiener, Tschechen und andere Völker teilnehmen. Dabei trat jedoch das Schachspiel als solches bereits völlig in den Hintergrund. Wenn auch bei der Eröffnung das Buchenwalder Schachlied gesungen wurde, [...], so war der Hauptzweck der Olympiade die politische Integration. Die Ergebnisse der Partien wurden auf großen Tafeln vor den Blocks veröffentlicht. Die Nichteingeweihten konnten natürlich nicht wissen, daß der Kamerad Hršel, dessen Namen ebenfalls auf diesen Tafeln erschien, nicht an dem Turnier teilnahm, sondern die Schacholympiade ausnutzte, um mit anderen Angehörigen des internationalen Lageraktivs zusammentreffen. Die internationale Lösung der Schachfreunde «Gens una summus», seien wir einig, war unter den damaligen Verhältnissen besonders bedeutungsvoll. So trug in Buchenwald auch das Schachspiel zur Verbrüderung der Völker und zur internationalen Solidarität bei".

cal style of post-war idealization of the communist resistance movement. Chess brought different people from different nations together. In this way, camp solidarity was formed. This helped in fighting the Germans and SS and lasted even after the war. In the conditions of the Cold War this kind of reinterpretation is not surprising. More surprising is how easily the historiography about chess (and resistance in camps in general) accepts such argumentations and witnesses' understanding of camp life. Of course one can consider some newer conceptualizations upon resistance as hidden transcript³⁴. Chess and other forms of cultural life certainly gave prisoners some relief and helped build some bonds within a group, which was planned to be destroyed by systematic terror. Christoph Daxelmüller claimed that cultural life in concentration was merely the "reconstruction of cultural samples" of a free society, a "re-enactment of the normal life" as a therapy and rebellion³⁵. But are there not some practical aspects of playing chess in addition to rather elusive explanations?

CHESS AND ITS MATERIALITY

Research on chess in concentration camps is very much based on testimonies and an attempt to understand chess as an intellectual and group-forming phenomenon. But revisiting what we know about chess one sees very fast how many material traces survived. This can greatly contribute to our knowledge about the material condition of chess games. Every memorial site of former concentration camps has chess games in its collection – mostly single or complete sets of chessmen but often whole games with all pieces and a board³⁶. In this case as well, the situation in German memorial sites, such as Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Dachau or Ravensbrück seems to be better than in Polish sites in Oświęcim, Rogoźnica, Majdanek or Sztutowo. While Polish museums have single chess pieces and possibly no chess boards in their collections, German memorial sites often have several complete sets. Most likely this situation reflects the harder living conditions in camps on occupied Polish territories.

³⁴ Vide: J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven 1990 or *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Resistance*, New Haven 1985.

³⁵ C. Daxelmüller, op.cit., p. 997.

³⁶ Vide: for example catalogues *Kunst und Kultur*, p. 119 or *Buchenwald Concentration Camp 1937–1945. A Guide to the Permanent Historical Exhibition*, ed. Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, 2. Ed., Göttingen 2010, p. 161. Answers to my questions from the memorial sites in Oświęcim and Rogoźnica confirmed that they are in the possession of parts of camp chess games.

Playing chess was a luxury that required organization, protection, and some vague material stabilization.

The possibility of getting chessmen was hazard. Sometimes prisoners could even get chess sets smuggled from the outside.³⁷ But in most cases inmates had to manufacture chess pieces and boards under camp conditions. Between chessmen and boards, there probably existed a difference both in manufacturing and storage, because it was easier to make boards, but more difficult to hide them. It usually took longer to make chess pieces, but they could be hidden easier (so one can find them in museums' collections to this day). Boards were often made only on the occasion of a single game. For example by scratching them on a table or on the ground, so they could be destroyed easily by one move if a guard or functionary came by. One chess board from Dachau was carved into the bottom of a prisoner's bowl³⁸, and in Sachsenhausen a prisoner made chess boards by painting them on glass³⁹. Unfortunately Wackernagel did not describe where the prisoner got the glass from and what kind of glass it was. Today one can only assume that he stole it from his work place. Though inmates may quite typically say something about manufacturing chess boards, former inmates did not really describe practical aspects of camp life as such. Chessmen from the camp were made out of bread and wood, the latter being a more luxurious edition. The collection of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk contains twenty-seven chess pieces made out of salt. The refinement of some of these handmade chessmen is surprising even today.

Manufacturing chess pieces was – like the game itself – an activity that many prisoners occupied themselves with during their work and free time. Stealing and working on material during work was risky but quite the only way to organize chessmen: “So the prisoners working in the carpenters' workshop had to watch out not to be caught. After this the chessmen had to be smuggled into the barracks [...]”⁴⁰. In their free time prisoners carved: “The carving works were pretty common as a leisure-time activity. We had particularly good material, indeed bog oak was the raw material. Due to its having been stored for thousands or tens of thousands of years in the swamps, the oak gets a deep black gloss after polishing”⁴¹. Polansky recalled that in Buchenwald Czech prisoners made

³⁷ During research in the memorial site in Sachsenhausen, I saw quite many of such sets.

³⁸ *Vide: Zug um Zug*, p. 41.

³⁹ *Vide: SA, Wackernagel*.

⁴⁰ E. Bruns, *op.cit.*, p. 55 (transl. D.L.). Original: “So mußten die in den Tischlereien beschäftigten Gefangenen bei ihrer Herstellung der Figuren darauf achten, daß sie nicht dabei erlappt wurden. Sodann mußten die Figuren in die Baracke geschleust werden [...]”.

⁴¹ *Vide: ibid.*, p. 53 (transl. D.L.). Original: “Die Schnitzarbeiten waren ebenfalls vorbereitet als Freizeitbeschäftigung. Wir hatten dazu besonders gutes Material und zwar den

“perfect chessmen” on a turning machine: “At the beginning chessmen were made out of bread and later from wood, and they were partly very artfully carved”⁴². Another Buchenwald inmate remembered how he carved pieces: “Although we had little free time we played chess and had no chessmen. So the idea came up to carve chessmen, which could be realized at the chamber of prisoner’s wear [...] with the help of the comrades”⁴³. Chess pieces – such as those by Willi Dickhut – were objects a prisoner could be proud of and to which he assigned a lot of value. The role of such effort and their outcome – as a thing you could touch, admire, and own – is very difficult to appreciate to its full extent.

Yet in the end it is not only the chessmen but also the organization of playing chess with all its placards to promote the tournaments, the tables with the results of the tournaments, and simply the places for playing in the sun between the barracks which compensated a little bit for the lack of a free and civil life. Why did prisoners try to reach such a level of material stabilization? Did the immaterial matters of so-called camp resistance not fulfill such a role?

The answer is that human beings define themselves by material things and ownership probably in equal degree or even more than by immaterial values. Until today neither former inmates nor historiography paid much attention to the fact that prisoners tried to gain their own property and that this property was often of high aesthetic value. Prisoners attached meaning to things they used in camps the same way every human being does: the more beautiful things appeared, the worthier they were. And as things of everyday use simply had a practical meaning, chess pieces even had some luxuries impact. Possession and familiar surroundings were as or even more important in a camp as outside the camps. As Hannah Arendt wrote, the things surrounding us have the function to stabilize the human life. If circumstances are changing constancy of things gives to human beings the chance to recover in changing situations. For Arendt the subjectivity of a human being is balanced by the objectivity of material things people themselves create⁴⁴. Prisoners who manufactured things they used themselves, under

Rohstoff „Mooreiche“. Durch die Lagerung von tausenden oder auch 10.000 Jahren im Moor erhält die Eiche jenen tiefschwarzen Glanz nach dem Rohpolieren”.

⁴² Vide: Archiv der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald [BwA], 31/28 (translated by D.L.). Original: “Die Figuren wurden anfangs aus Brot und später aus Holz hergestellt und stellten zum Teil kunstvolle Schnitarbeiten dar”.

⁴³ Vide: *ibid.*, 52–11–734, K. Unverricht (translated by D.L.). Original: “Trotz geringster Freizeit spielten wir Schach und es gab keine Figuren. Es entstand der Gedanke Figuren zu schnitzen, der auf der Häftlingsbekleidungskammer [...] durch die Hilfe der Genossen verwirklicht werden konnte”.

⁴⁴ Vide: H. Arendt, *Vita activa oder vom tätigen Leben*, München 1992, p. 125. It is

extreme conditions of shortage and danger, surely paid great attention to such concreteness. Where neither privacy nor safety or life were self-evident, possession of belongings that marked the prisoners' world and constituted social relations between prisoners marked a very real terrain, which meant some privacy for them. Habits and practices of civil life were transformed in a camp where they changed their material shape but preserved their valance as social interactions.

Yet the material culture of chess contained an element, which somehow amplified the importance of ownership and the semblance of material stability. The conditions in concentration camps as formed by the SS aimed to destroy social relations. Inmates were purposely forced to fight against each other; the rising lack of solidarity is evident in many testimonies, as well as in historical literature. The character of testimonies about chess and the common way to describe and understand chess as a technique to unify prisoners excludes some assumptions one should reflect. So chess was not only a practice unifying prisoners, but it was able to establish serious differences between prisoners playing chess and prisoners who could not play. By owning a chess game or playing chess, these prisoners distinguished themselves in a very important way from other inmates. Maybe they were functionaries (like the barrack's writer from Groß-Rosen) or they had some other influential position. Maybe they were simply lucky and found themselves in a temporary good situation. It is important to pay some attention to the issue of how Dickhut thought about his chess men. Between his men and others existed a difference that distinguished in the end the owner of a chess game from other inmates. As in every social relation, possession was also an expression of power in concentration camps⁴⁵. Such 'power' meant more possibilities to negotiate and influence other prisoners in order to get better living conditions.

Such possibilities were also connected with the pure ability to play chess. If a prisoner could take part in chess tournaments he could hope to gain some goods. A prisoner from Börgermoor, where he was after 1942 comparatively late in the war, wrote: "It was Sunday, when we hungry prisoners got a real feast: pea soup. After eating the delicate meal we dozed off with full stomachs at the long tables in the barrack. I couldn't believe my ears as I heard the voice of the barrack's oldest: 'do we have here any chess players who can really play?'"

U. Gößwald who sees the connections between these thoughts and the subjective importance of things, vide: U. Gößwald, *Die Erbschaft der Dinge. Eine Studie zur subjektiven Bedeutung von Dingen der materiellen Kultur*, Graz 2011, p. 46.

⁴⁵ M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Why we need things*, [in:] *History from things. Essays on Material Culture*, ed. S. Lubar, W.D. Kingery, Washington D.C. 1993, p. 23.

Immediately I thought: if I play, I probably get some more food”⁴⁶. Unfortunately this calculation did not work. After losing the game, the functionary got angry and instead of rewarding the winner hit him with the chessboard.

Georg Klaus – probably the best chess player among all concentration camps prisoners⁴⁷ – wrote about the circumstances of the chess games between inmates and SS personnel in Dachau. He stressed the danger for the prisoners in the event they won the game or made the failure to lose too visible. The SS men could punish them harshly but they could also reward “brave” prisoners with tobacco⁴⁸. These hints about material goods a prisoner could gain by winning chess games are the only ones in the revisited testimonies. For winners of other sports and tournaments in the camps awards were a normal thing, they were often even admired and protected by other inmates. If sportsmen won against SS guards of a camp, they even could get the status of heroes of the inmate society. Often they belonged because of their abilities to a circle of inmates – formed by a national or political key – which distinguished itself from groups of other inmates⁴⁹. A rivalry – especially in a men’s society of a concentration camp – has a second level, where winners and losers are classified by group. It is hard to believe that chess had no impact on the status of a prisoner and his access to material or cultural goods. Good chess players potentially had access to privileges and found respect and protection of an inmates’ group for whose interests they “represented”. Even if testimonies are not too specific about these matters, prisoners remember, for example, the names of chess masters in the camp – who probably enjoyed some status among the others⁵⁰. One prisoner presents himself as the lucky winner of a rivalry: “Already in the summer of 1937 there was an interesting competition between barrack sixteen and five on the long tables outdoor, when my luckily successful game against the better Peter Klues brought a win for barrack 16”⁵¹. Also, without any material award, such a success was meant to bolster prisoners psychologically.

⁴⁶ Vide: E. Bruns, op.cit., p. 54 citing a letter from Hans Drozd (transl. D.L.). Original: „Es war an einem Sonntag, an dem ein für uns ausgehungerte Häftlinge großes Festessen auf dem Programm stand: Erbsensuppe. Nachdem wir dieses delikate Mahl verzehrt hatten, dösten wir mit unseren ungewohnt vollen Mägen an den langen Tischen in der Baracke. Ich vermeinte meinen Ohren nicht zu trauen, als ich plötzlich die Stimme des Blockältesten vernahm: ‘Ist hier ein Schachspieler, so, daß er auch spielen kann?’”.

⁴⁷ Vide: M. Eckardt, op.cit.

⁴⁸ G. Klaus, op.cit., p. 176-178.

⁴⁹ Vide: for general division between inmates in national groups: K. Pätzold, *Häftlingsgesellschaft*, [in:] *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, ed. W. Benz, B. Distel, vol. 1, München 2005, p. 114.

⁵⁰ Vide: SA, Bringmann.

⁵¹ Vide: SA, Hartmann (transl. D.L.). Original: “Schon im Sommer 1937 gab es einen

CONCLUSION

This article provides a discussion on issues which are quite underrepresented in literature about concentrations camps: the intertwining of social practice and material culture among the inmate society. Objects from camps are normally understood more as silent witnesses than as things that had an impact on social practice and prisoner relations. Chess brings together these elements. Its example shows that an analysis of immaterial and material culture sheds some light on contexts, and that the discourse on chess may not be negated, but frequently pushed.

Statements such as: “Distraction wasn’t the primary aim of this simultaneous chess tournament, rather it was about the matter to show that forced labor, maltreatment, and hunger were not able to destroy human beings”⁵² are quite typical. A historian reads the opinion of an eyewitness literally and does not try to reach another level of abstraction. Instead of understanding chess as a complex practice, the concentration lies on the aspect of resisting. Although other matters – such as manufacturing and hiding chess sets or playing itself – are also documented, chess itself is interpreted as an (immaterial) value.

Describing the game of chess on the basis of all its aspects is more compelling. Chess for many prisoners already had a “history” and meaning before they came to the camp. It was a part of their social practices among family, friends or colleagues. Playing chess in camps offered several layers of identification and stabilization. Manufacturing and ownership of chess games established a relation between the prisoners looking for safety in this insecure environment. Chess meant interacting with other inmates on an already known ground, where one could develop a foundation to communicate. Often that communication was later transformed into regular meetings and tournaments. Yet doubts remain over whether prisoners regularly overcame national or political boundaries. Most testimonies show more or less small – and elite – groups playing chess, while international solidarity appears to be a post-war extenuation/narration. Owning chessmen, winning games, and in that way establishing distinctions between prisoners certainly helped prisoners find their place in the inmates’ society.

interessanten Wettkampf zwischen dem Block 16 und 5 im Freien an langen Tafeln, wobei meine glücklich erfolgreiche Partei gegen den besseren Peter Klues den Sieg für Block 16 brachte”.

⁵² *Vide*: E. Bruns, op.cit, p. 55 quoting from Gydzicki (transla. D.L.). Original: “Zerstreuung war nicht das primäre Ziel dieser Simultanveranstaltung, vielmehr ging es darum zu zeigen, dass Zwangsarbeit, Mißhandlungen und auch der Hunger nicht imstande seien, ‘die Menschen zu brechen’”.

Of course chess was not only about boundaries between prisoners. Groups of inmates agreed that chess built some bonds between them. Chess was an occasion to meet in relative privacy and provided a basis for networks of resistance groups. These practices intertwined with the belief of many chess players that chess, per se, is an expression of fighting the powerful by the powerless. Here the camp's perspective also meets post-war interpretation. But latter ones too easily overlook that human condition is not only built on intellect and convictions but very much on practices and material background. It is social practice that determined the success of playing chess in concentration camps. Prisoners could touch their chessmen, they experienced emotions, and they could gain some goods. That in post-war times prisoners coming from Marxist traditions interchanged the famous relation between being and consciousness, is a wonderful example of a self-fulfilling prophecy.