

Klaus Stanjek

Music and murder – a professional musician in Mauthausen

This report is about the professional musician Wilhelm Heckmann. He was my uncle. We used to call him “Willi”. He died in my hometown Wuppertal (Western Germany) in 1995.

The family secret

My report begins with his 90th birthday in June 1987. On this occasion we had a family celebration in my parents’ home. One of Willi’s nieces mentioned casually: *“Willi is a born survivor; after all he survived the ‘camp’.”* and I asked: *“What do you mean: camp?”*

Although I had grown up in the same house with this man, the subject had been completely suppressed until I was 39 years old. Since then (with interruptions) I have been concerned with collecting and correlating information about Willi’s time as a concentration camp prisoner. I have to admit that I also had to overcome the instinctive suppression to which my family was conditioned.

My report is the first public reconstruction of my uncle Wilhelm Heckmann’s concentration camp imprisonment.

His report and awareness in my family

When I asked my uncle and our relatives, they only gave me patchy information:

Until 1936 he travelled as a professional musician from one engagement to the next all over Germany. In 1936 he was arrested by the police for homosexual acts and convicted in court but then released from remand under an amnesty. In August 1937 he was again arrested by the Gestapo and as a “Schutzhäftling” (convicted under Paragraph 175) transported to the Dachau concentration camp. Together with other prisoners from Dachau he was transferred to the Mauthausen concentration camp on September 27, 1939, where he was initially forced to work in the quarry.

He was very guarded and terse when he spoke about his activities as a musician:

“I assembled a trio of musicians and we sang and played for the leaders of the camp and the guards on their birthdays, when important guests came and at other celebrations.”

He said that he always had money, enough to eat, that later on he worked in the “Disinfection Squad” and was sent to the front in 1945.

When I asked my mother, his half-sister, she gave me only very vague additional information – that, for instance, a woman from the Commandant’s headquarters in Mauthausen had looked after him:

“His music saved his life.”

My uncle gave only brief answers to my questions. When I asked him if I could do an interview with him and record it on video so that it could be used for a film later on, he declined. He was against any publications about his life during his life-time.

However, shortly before his death he gave me several revealing objects from his time in the camp: a long letter he wrote on May 11, 1945 while he was still in Mauthausen, an original picture of the camp's Commandant Ziereis, a copy of the transcript of Ziereis' interrogation, a picture of "Kapo" Georg Streitwolf, and a summons by the police in Wuppertal. These objects helped to fill out my rather sketchy knowledge and made further inquiries easier.

Publicly available sources of information on Wilhelm Heckmann

I regard the pictures taken by *SS-Oberscharführer* Kornatz dating from July 1942 as the most important source; they show the prisoners' band marching in front of the wooden cart on



The re-captured prisoner Hans Bonarewitz is taken to his execution, July 30, 1942

which Hans Bonarewitz is being led to his execution.¹ The musicians of the so-called "gypsy band" which are depicted on these three pictures – the photographs have been reprinted many times all over the world – have not to date been identified. In fact, the two accordionists are Wilhelm Heckmann and Georg Streitwolf.

In the existing sources on music in Mauthausen, Heckmann is mentioned briefly a few times – as in an interview by Hans Maršálek with Josef Jira (April 18 and 19, 1972):

"The accordionist and singer [ed.: of the band] was a certain WILLI HECKMANN. The band was reportedly assembled in September or October of 1942 with the help or through the agency of HECKMANN, RUMBAUER and a Czech doctor (...)"

In Milan Kuna's book *Musik an der Grenze des Lebens* (Music on the brink of life, 1993) he is mentioned but wrongly identified:

"The musicians [ed: of the „gipsy band“] just had two violins (...) and an accordion which a German, a 'political prisoner' called Herrmann, played. When the Kapos celebrated a birthday or the SS enjoyed themselves in the brothel, the gypsies were brought in (...)"

Firstly, his name was not Herrmann but Heckmann. Secondly, he was not a political prisoner but wore the pink triangle, and thirdly he was not a "gypsy", neither Sinti nor Roma, but a German by extraction. In other sources he is also called "Heckmann, Wilhelm" or "Heikmann". More detailed material on Wilhelm Heckmann is not available at present.

¹ The Austrian inmate Hans Bonarewitz managed to flee from Mauthausen hidden in a wooden box with the help from another inmate and was loaded on a truck that left the concentration camp, in June 1942. Approximately 18 days later he was recaptured and hung at the *Appellplatz* – in front of all the inmates and the performing orchestra – on July, 30. MARŠÁLEK (2006): S. 333.

My own inquiries in several archives and my interviews with relatives and those who knew him have turned up numerous documents, among them his prisoner's identity card, data by the International Tracing Service, two original letters from the Mauthausen concentration camp, several lists on work squads with his name on them, the "Denazification Records", and court records with his testimonies between 1950 and 1960.

Wilhelm Heckmann in the Mauthausen Concentration Camp

All in all this adds up to the following picture:

- September, 27, 1939: Admission to the Mauthausen concentration camp (from Dachau)/ "Schutzhäft" (remand) according to Paragraph 175
- Prisoner number: 1,212; accommodated firstly in Block 3, then Block 7/ Barrack 2, then Block 9
- Work assignments: quarry "Wiener Graben"; transport company; porters' squad/ Disinfection
- Front 1945; released after liberation in 1945.

Musical Activities in Mauthausen

Wilhelm Heckmann was a trained singer (tenor) and pianist – he had graduated from conservatory in 1923. Until he was sent to the Dachau concentration camp, he had gained wide-ranging professional experience, primarily in the field of light music (as a singer, pianist and accordionist).

In 1987 he told me that he had "*founded a trio*" in Mauthausen. If that is true, it could have been the origin of what was later known as the "gypsy band". Writing on the years up to 1942, Milan Kuna says that Camp Commandant Ziereis had allowed a number of "gypsies" and a German accordion player to perform for "celebrities". There is evidence to suggest that Wilhelm Heckmann had direct and special contact with Ziereis.

On Kornatz's photos (dating from 1942) Heckmann is playing in the middle of the front row, like someone who is directing the other musicians. Next to him on the outside is Georg Streitwolf. Wilhelm Heckmann had much greater musical experience than Streitwolf. The large band began to take shape in the autumn of 1942 – Heckmann played a key role in its founding and performed with it as a singer. Later, up to 1945, there were at least two bands in Mauthausen.

Wilhelm Heckmann's Background and Conflicting Roles

Heckmann grew up in a pub milieu, where an entertainments programme (music, cabaret, film shows) was put on for the benefit of the guests (metal workers from Altena in Westphalia). His father, his three brothers and he himself appeared regularly in the programme. After the First World War Wilhelm completed musical education as singer (tenor) and pianist, then worked as a musician in such cities as Berlin, Stuttgart and Munich.

He himself probably held no pronounced political views in the twenties and thirties. His

family's attitudes tended to be conservative and to some extent German-nationalist. One of his three brothers was an active member of the NSDAP (Nazi Party). The camp's SS administrators and guards will presumably have found him suitable as an entertainer.

Contradictions and Conflicts

Having been interned under Paragraph 175 (prohibition of homosexuality), Wilhelm Heckmann occupied a low position in the camp hierarchy. He was a delicate and sensitive man, and the many occasions on which he witnessed violence must have had a dire impact on him. As a witness he told a court – and he also told me – about several instances of brutality. Performing as a musician for the SS and the guards earned him special privileges but also put him in a highly contradictory and ambivalent position. He worked for the camp authorities that were responsible for atrocities on a daily basis. At the same time he was endowed with a sensitive perception and was forced to witness the intolerable conditions in the camp, the harshness of the day-to-day routine, the work in the quarry, the brutalisation process and so on. As a musician of German extraction he enjoyed certain privileges, but as a homosexual he was despised. His principal benefits were better food, a lighter work regime, and the retention of his personal identity – unlike the majority of his fellow prisoners, who underwent the destructive process of increasing anonymity and the progressive erosion of their identity.

In the course of his “denazification” interrogation by the Americans, Wilhelm Heckmann claimed to have held anti-fascist views. However, he had evidently co-operated with the camp administration. We must assume that both the privileges he enjoyed as a musician and the fact that he could make music at all gave him a certain emotional stability and helped him to survive.

My uncle was sent to Dachau in August 1937 and was held in Mauthausen until May 1945. He thus spent the best part of eight years in concentration camps – and managed to survive. He lived to be almost a hundred but was never really able to deal with his experiences in the camps.

(pc)