

Hildegard Lächert

Origin, education and occupation

Hildegard Martha Luise Lächert was born on March 19th, 1920 in Berlin as the youngest child out of three siblings. She was a child born out of wedlock of widowed mistress Luise Lächert and Otto Bormann¹ who was a locksmith and whom Hildegard had never met.

In the years 1926-1934 she attended an elementary school and since the age of six she was a part of a German gymnastic team. She joined Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM – League of German Girls) and was a part of the group until 1936. In 1934, she started tailoring lessons which she stopped taking just before the exams in 1937. Afterwards, she was called into the service for the Reich. She worked e.g. in the office of National Socialist People's Welfare (NSV). She was also a nurse at the airborne military hospital in Berlin-Tegel. Above all, however, she worked in a German aircraft and ammunition factory in Berlin (Tegel) at the Heinkel Airport and at the Heinkel Aviation Company as part of her compulsory service also in Berlin. Until 1938, Lächert was also a participant in courses that were preparing her to work in German colonies. She had to give it up because of the financial problems.

In that time she became a mother of two children born out of the wedlock. Her son was born on August 28th, 1939, when his mother was eighteen. Her daughter was born April 3rd, 1941. Their father was Hildegard's fiancé: backup air force officer Walter Hinrichs who was declared missing on the front in 1942 and then declared dead. The kids were looked after by Lächert's brother-in-law, SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans-Peter Meister, who was working in Goebbels' Reich Culture Department, and in the Chancellery of the Führer.

Because of shift work in factories, Lächert tried to terminate service obligations and asked his brother-in-law for help with finding a new job. He helped her to get a job in a concentration camp for women in Ravensbrück.

Career in the system of the concentration camp

On April 1st, 1942, Hildegard Lächert was called into the service in Ravensbrück where she wanted to move with her children, but her son stayed with his grandmother. Her daughter became ill and spent 3 months in a hospital in Berlin. In female concentration camp

¹ Or: Otto Burrman, correct spelling is unknown

Ravensbrück, Hildegard Lächert was learning how to perform her new duties, and then she became an overseer of the External Command.

On October 15th, 1942, 22-years-old Hildegard Lächert and nine other overseers (including Elsa Ehrich, the later main supervisor from Majdanek, and Hermine Braunsteiner) were moved to Lublin where she was working in the Alter-Flughafen labour camp (at the old airport). She supervised women's commando hired in the garment workshop that belonged to SS. She was picking up the prisoners, escorted them and guarded them in their work time; she also attended the roll-calls.

During her time in Lublin, she had dysentery and what is more, in 1942 she had typhus fever, so she stayed in military hospital for a few weeks. At the turn of January and February, 1943, she came back to Alter Flughafen camp (at the old airport), but since the end of April she worked only at Majdanek – at the main camp. She was guarding women's commando on V field, as well as supervised prisoners' work in external commando in the area of Lagergut (farm on Felin near Lublin) and in Gärtnerei (camp garden). She also occasionally stayed in the sewing room or camp laundry. Additionally, she took part in roll-calls, during which female prisoners were counted. Lächert did not hold any special position and had no work place assigned; she was recruited there, where a reinforcement of the service was needed.

In Lublin, at least three disciplinary penalties were imposed on her. On August 25th, she did not appear for the report, so the main supervisor asked the camp commandant to punish Lächert. Once she was arrested for 5 days for ignoring the curfew, another time she was locked up for eight days in an acute arrest, as part of the prosecution for the loss of her official pistol.

On September 3rd, 1943, Hildegard was given a temporary leave and on the 30th day of the same month she was released from the post of an SS guard at Majdanek due to her pregnancy. The birth of a child, whose father was probably another unknown man, took place in March 1944 in Berlin, but the child died immediately after birth.

A month later, in April 1944, Lächert was recruited to serve as SS supervisor, this time at Auschwitz. From there, she was first transferred for 2 or 3 months to supervise work in the women's external commando in Rajsko, then placed in the women's camp in Budy where she worked until the autumn of 1944, after which she was released from her duties as an SS supervisor due to illness.

From January to May 2nd, 1945 she was obliged to serve in the Gestapo office in Bozen. She worked in the police transit camp Bozen-Gries in South Tyrol where both

resistance fighters and their families were imprisoned, as well as men and women persecuted on racial grounds.

Lächert's biography after 1945

After several weeks of American captivity, Lächert found herself at her fiancé in Kärnten (Austria), where she spent several post-war months. As Müller-Münch writes, the bride was *'one of many men who for a moment appeared on Hildegard's road to disappear from this road'*. She met this man at Majdanek. Franz Fugger worked at the SS Institute of Aviation Hygiene in Auschwitz and, as we conclude from Lächert's 1947 statement, he wanted to marry her. During her stay in Austria, Lächert worked as a nurse in the American army.

Already in July 1945, she returned to Berlin and worked in an American hospital until October of the same year, after which she got back to Austria, where she returned to the same occupation. On March 30th, 1946, she was arrested by the Austrian police because of her past in the service of the SS. She was transferred to the British occupying authority and then found herself in the internment camp in Paderborn, and on December 19th she was taken to pre-trial detention. A few days later (December 26th, 1946) she was extradited to Poland.

She was accused and prosecuted in Cracow in a trial against forty members of the SS men from Auschwitz concentration camp. The proceedings were primarily directed against commander Liebehenschel and other high-ranked SS officers, Lächert was only a side defendant. She was accused of mistreatment, humiliation, and robbery of prisoners and the accusations concerned mainly the activities in Auschwitz. Her behaviour during her stay at Majdanek in this process was a marginal matter. On December 22nd, 1947, Lächert was found guilty of belonging to a criminal SS organization not only in the camp at Majdanek, but also in the camp in Rajsko and Budy, as well as bullying, mental and moral maltreatment, images of dignity, beating and robbery of food and clothing. Lächert was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment and her stay in pre-trial detention was counted as part of her sentence.

Lächert served her sentence until December 7th, 1956. She was granted an amnesty, after which she received 6,000 DM for alleged captivity – she remained silent about the fact that she was convicted of being an SS woman.

Before Lächert arrived in Germany, she went through a repatriate camp, and then through other transit camps and a refugee camp, where she spent a total of 18 months. Later she settled in Walldorf near Heidelberg and soon in Heidelberg. There she got different activities. She first worked in the American army. With the help of her employer, she brought her daughter and son living in eastern Berlin. As Müller writes, the family was a stranger to

each other: her son had to prove his identity by presenting a small finger, which was characteristic of a hereditary change. Later he immigrated to Norway and got married there, broke up the contact with his mother and he also changed his surname. Her daughter returned to Berlin and married a member of the NVA (The National People's Army in German Democratic Republic). She also had no contact with her mother.

Lächert found employment in a youth hostel and was also active in a remedial centre. She later worked as a cleaner in a public house in Heidelberg. At the end of June 1973, she moved to Ort Reichartshausen, where she took up a job as an assistant in a toy factory. She worked there for only a few weeks, as on August 24th, 1973, she was detained for the first time for explanations in the Düsseldorf trial in Majdanek case. On July 31st, she was released from custody, but she had to return to it on 13th June 1979 on suspicion of possible flight.

In the elections to the European Parliament, Lächert competed as a candidate for the right-wing party *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Nation Europa* (National Action Europe). In addition, as Müller-Münch writes, she was in touch with the German Soldier's Fighting Association focusing on Erwin Schönborn, who organised right-wing extremist propaganda actions during the trial in Düsseldorf. In 1981 in Düsseldorf, Hildegard Lächert was sentenced to 12 years in prison. She died several years after serving her sentence, on April 14th, 1995.

Lächert at Majdanek

According to Lächert, the jury was politically and ideologically influenced during the trial. Lächert claimed that she was not a member of the NSDAP, but only in her youth belonged to the BDM (League of German Girls). Probably she was also not a declared anti-Semitic – her youth friend Lucie Krause who testified in the trial as a witness, for some time kept a Jewish woman in her apartment (against the law). When Lächert became aware of this fact, she did not take any steps to disclose it. Lächert was judged by the judges to be intelligent, but weak in character and thus – emotionally charged. These features, as one can read in the justification of the sentence, had a significant impact on her behaviour at Majdanek – she reacted emotionally to the prisoner's sluggishness or too little, in her opinion, involvement in work. She often tortured victims until they were unconscious on the ground. Like Braunsteiner, Lächert was nicknamed among Polish prisoners and was even mentioned in her documents. It was *Bloody Brigid*.

Lächert aroused fear among the prisoners, and almost all testimonials pointed to her exceptionally frequent use of force and extreme violence. She often used a whip ended with a metal ball, and sometimes set the dogs on the prisoners. Witnesses described her with words

such as *the worst, most terrible, most cruel SS-man*, as well as *the beast, sadist or fear of prisoners*.

According to the accusers, Lächert was particularly unfavourable towards women prisoners of Jewish origin. She prohibited Jewish women to clean themselves in barracks intended for that purpose and persecuted them with particular cruelty, e.g. exceptionally brutally beating them with a whip. Other witnesses testified that Lächert often turned to Jewish women prisoners for *'you're damned, cursed Jewish woman!'*

And yet, according to the jury, Lächert was not one of *the most eager supervisors*. The judgment says that, unlike Braunsteiner, Lächert was not particularly motivated to carry out her work. It is believed that among the guards she had a rather *outsider* position. Her former colleague Hermine Böttcher, who was also tried in the Düsseldorf trial, said that the nickname Bloody Brigid was often used and that Lächert belonged to people exceptionally disliked by prisoners, and by Erna Wallisch (née Pfannenstiel) and Runge she was described as haughty and brutal towards her victims.

According to the prosecutor and the judge, this assessment of female colleagues was based on truth. Not only in the indictment, but also in the final speech, the opinion of her superior, the chief supervisor Ehrich about her is cited, which testifies to Lächert's particular brutality in the performance of her duties and too emotional approach to the women prisoners: *'(...) supervisor Lächert does not make a good impression on prisoners because of her nervous behaviour. As soon as she takes control over the commando, she immediately starts to take over the prisoners.*

Supervisor Lächert had to be given frequent official warnings. In contrary to this, during private meetings with the other guards she was friendly, showed a gentle character and did not give cause for concern (...)'

According to the prosecutor, Lächert had already behaved *'exaggeratedly'* towards the women prisoners in the opinion of her superiors. In Lächert's colleagues' opinion too, the characteristics of a *'monster'* can be read out. All the testimonies of all the witnesses show her as a woman who beat the prisoners for no reason whatsoever.

Crimes at Majdanek

Hildegard Lächert was charged with 17 independent crimes in Düsseldorf, that is, fourteen murders and three complicit killings. She was present at the murders of 1196 people, of which 205 are likely to have been complicit. In these cases, therefore, it is not only the involvement in mass killings, but also a series of individual murders.

Five cases were temporarily suspended, so the judgment concerned only twelve crimes. Lächert was found guilty in two cases, on the basis of which Ryan-Braunsteiner was also convicted. In the other ten points the jury acquitted Lächert. The court in Düsseldorf dealt with the following cases:

Selection of Jewish women in May 1943

In May 1943, Lächert took part in the selection on the roll-calls square of Field V, the so-called women's square. Other SS women also took part in the case, including the caretaker Braunsteiner. Lächert and Braunsteiner were accused of mass murder of at least eighty people, but they denied that they had taken part in the selection.

In the opinion of the judge and prosecutor's office, Lächert was aware of the fact that the selected women would be sent to the gas chamber. According to the jury, the motive for driving the accused to act was the desire for promotion. Lächert was actively carrying out orders and her behaviour was based on a merciless way of being. Lächert's personality as a whole, however, does not rule out the possibility that her behaviour was not due to a lack of mercy, but rather to her inability to communicate with the prisoners.

The evaluation of Lächert's participation in the event was different from that of Braunsteiner, which was considered to be very active in the selection. However, as far as Lächert is concerned, there was no evidence of this. The most important witness in this case was the prisoner Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk, who described both SS women as actively participating in the selection. The judges found this testimony credible. D. Brzosko-Mędryk seemed to remember everything exactly, but on the other hand she could not explain why Lächert and Braunsteiner's participation was perceived in this way. Kruse noted that the previously established credibility of the witness had once again been called into question. Besides, the fact that the witness couldn't precisely describe the selection wasn't taken into consideration. It is also open to question why the testimonies, which in the case of Braunsteiner were sufficient, did not suffice to charge Lächert.

First children action

Lächert fully took part in the so-called children action, which was performed in May 1943. This crime was described in Ryan-Braunsteiner's biography. In this case, Hildegard Lächert faced criminal charges for the murder of at least 102 people. Role of Lächert and

Braunsteiner's was in that case described by the witnesses as technically the same. Both of them faced criminal charges for herding children into trucks and beating them with whips.

Prosecutors were also convinced that Lächert used to throw the children onto the loading surface of the cars. Nevertheless, in the closing argument, the statements of the witnesses were not included due to the fact that their credibility was questioned by the judges. Kruse considers it as a proof for the hypothesis that the judges wanted to sentence Lächert as a helper, not as a war criminal. Also, in that case, the jury regarded her actions not as performed with cold blood, but as performing her duties '*only*'.

Third children action

Lächert was also accused of taking part in another, third action against children. At the end of August or at the beginning of September 1943, all the children from the ghetto in Białystok were murdered. Children were transported to Majdanek during the closure of the ghetto in the first half of August. They were not gassed right away due to the inefficient capacity of people annihilating machines and they were sent to the female area for a couple of days. The selection was led by the current camp doctor, doctor Blancke, and SS members of both genders, including Lächert and Braunsteiner, took part in it. The realization of the third action was similar to the first one, which was described above. In the afternoon the trucks again arrived by the barracks, in which the children were staying. SS took the victims to the trucks.

Some of the witnesses described such deceiving actions as luring children to the trucks, using food and candies. They were running out of time and patience, so SS guards resorted to violent acts, such as beating, kicking and bullying children, which were from 10 to 14 years old, and a few accompanying mothers. After loading the victims, they were transported to the so-called Lagergut (a camp mansion at Felin, close to Lublin) and had to wait there until the evening. This case was also planned as an action aiming to confuse the victims. The children were locked, then the trucks arrived, which transported the children to the so-called bathing barracks, in which they were murdered in gas chambers. On that day at least 100 children were killed there (some people say, that there were 300 of them).

According to the jury, despite very meaningful suspicions, Lächert couldn't have been sentenced for taking part in that crime, due to the lack of sure evidence. Prosecutors had another opinion about it - they mentioned three witnesses, who confirmed and described Lächert's role in that murder in details. The judge was not sure about the evidence confirming these testimonies. The testimony of Polish witness, Mrs Skibińska, was judged only as a suspicion, due to the fact that she admitted in the process that she had problems with

distinguishing Lächert from another guardian, Anna Meinel. Despite the evident claims of the witness, that she was sure of Lächert taking part in "children action", the court could not exclude a mistake. Just like in similar cases, the judge decided to cancel their previous judgment. The personal memory of the male witness was described as right. He claimed, that Lächert took part in this action for sure and Ryan-Braunsteiner probably also did so. There were a few premises which could be considered by the jury as clues confirming Lächert not taking part in that action. The judgment describes the proofs as not efficient and the defendant was released without this charge.

Other selections

In points 9-12 of Lächert's indictment, she was accused of taking part in other selection of Jewish prisoners. In June and July 1943 Lächert probably took part at least in three selections of older Jews. Moreover, there is a high probability of her participation in three mass murders. Prosecutor Ambach in his closing argument, due to those murders, demanded a life term for Lächert. However, her participation once again was not confirmed and the judge did not get rid of doubts. There were not excluded personal mistakes of witnesses, even if their testimonies seemed to be credible (Kruse points out that the testimonies of one of the witnesses, which were included in prosecutor's speech, were not incorporated in the judgment).

In point 12 of the indictment, which was reviewed in Ryan-Braunsteiner's part, Lächert was also released without charges. Murder of at least 1000 people, which she was suspected for, was not proved due to the fact that the judge could not confirm that this murder happened. In that case, the prosecutor applied for a life term for Lächert.

Singular murders

In five other cases, Lächert was accused of committing singular murders, so-called excesses. The inductee was released from any charges due to the lack of evidence material.

In the following part, there is a description of particular cases to implement the psychological image of Hildegard Lächert. In case 59 of her indictment, she is accused of murdering the prisoner working in groundworks nearby the bathing barrack, which happened probably in March 1943. Lächert told him, for no reason, to lean and then she was kicking his head and face and beating him with a whip until he died. Then she told the other prisoners: *Take this shit, this garbage away from here!*

The next crime was the murder of a Polish girl, Władka, working in the so-called *girl commando*, who was in advanced pregnancy. The father of a child could be an SS-man, who, at the same time, had a sexual relationship with Lächert or had some interest in her. Lächert sicced the girl with a German shepherd, which bit the girl and her unborn baby to death, what Lächert explained later as a form of punishment for not executing her order. The other prisoners had to surround the girl and watch this accident.

In both cases, the judge was not sure about the witnesses' testimonies and that is why- in *dubio pro reo*- Lächert was released without any charges, despite mentioning the murders in the closing argument. Prosecutors applied for declaring her guilty of murder.

Three following cases were connected with the supervision of the prisoners from '*Scheisskomando*' (their job was sewage disposal), members of which were cleaning the latrines on field V. This job aimed humiliate Jewish women. One day Lächert threw two Greek Jews, who were disposing of the latrine, from the ladder to the hole full of sewage. The women suffocated to death. Prisoners, who were watching this action, were expelled and the bodies were fished out after a couple of days. Despite many clues, the judge decided to release Lächert from this charge, due to the doubtful proofs.

At least two other women from this commando were also killed or kicked to death by Lächert. It happened out of the camp zone while disposing of the sewage containers. The reason for that was probably the fact that the women could not move the buckets with sewage for the distance ordered by the guards and wanted to dispose the content of the buckets as soon as possible. In these cases, the proofs were also not efficient enough to pass the sentence.

Legal assessment of Lächert's crime

The jury in Düsseldorf passed the sentence, stating that Lächert, likewise Ryan-Braunsteiner, contributed to the realization of planned murders by her participation in these actions but, in opposition to the other defendant, Lächert was assessed as not acting from her own reasons, such as the desire to get a promotion. She had no reason to take part in selections. Although she was the cruellest and the most brutal guard, who terrified the prisoners, the judge could not point out the reasons or motivations, which she followed. She was not under the influence of National Socialists belief. There were no noticed anti-Jewish or racist motivations or her own interests in committing these murders. As a reason for Lächert's actions, the jury pointed her '*small intellectual skills, unstable and emotional character, and inability to humane dealing with the prisoners*'. She executed the orders but showed no own invention. The judge

did not notice any signs of enthusiasm or passion and confirmed that she used to act just like the rest of the SS leadership members. The judges could not exclude that the defendant *'executed the orders she was not convinced to only due to the human weaknesses.'*

There is an unexplained paradox in the justification of the sentence. On the one hand, Lächert was found one of the most brutal guardians. Just a couple lines under, there was a written statement saying that she did not use to act extremely violently. There is an unanswered question why she decided to execute orders to which she was not convinced inside. The judge assumed that Lächert did not accept the planned murder and its performing. However, there is no information in the sentence about her acting against her own will.

Kruse states that the ex-guardian is presented as "the supporter of humane execution of the punishment" which was stressed in the opinion on Lächert's personality, written by the main guardian, Elsa Ehrich. The judge did not take into account the bad relationship with these women or the fact that Lächert's friend, Braunsteiner, was promoted for her similar behaviour. There is a question of if her mental state is an efficient reason for lack of Lächert's own interests in committing the murder.

The judge considered Lächert fully sane, what reduced her possibility of explaining herself with brain disturbances or mental problems. Lächert's unstable and emotional character should not be considered a reason for her abnormal behaviour".

The judge in Düsseldorf sentenced the defendant for participation in the murder of at least a hundred people (taking part in selections) and another nine years for participation in *'children action'*. Lächert was finally sentenced for 12 years.

An interview with Hildegard Lächert

Lächert was ready for a conversation with a journalist, Ebernhard Fechner. He had four interviews with an ex-guardianin which she spoke in details.

They had conversations in prisons with which, as Hildegard said, she always had a brush with. She worked in prison in Ravensbrück and in Majdanek; she felt stalked and terrified of *'being closed'*. After she had been sentenced in Cracow, she spent 10 years in a Polish prison. Since 1973, after seventeen years of freedom in the Federal Republic of Germany, she was in pre-trial detention a couple of times. Then she was sentenced for 12 years. She spent 20 years in prison. All these stages of her life blend in her memory. Her life was reduced to the thesis that prisons and camps are equal injustices.

'It's terrifying, in any prison and in any camp - during the war and after the war. That's why I find prisons and primarily war terrifying'.

At the same time, Lächert experienced disturbances of time perception. While she was in pre-trial detention she took care of drug-addicted girls, who were sent to the same prison. She took care of her "poor things" in their rooms and she complained that they could not undergo therapy and about the fact that their families are ruined. Lächert said:

'In my opinion, any camp or prison is sad and terrible. There are children with swollen bellies'.

We can distinguish from the context that she was describing not the children in Majdanek, but the drug-addicted prisoners.

Lächert was in the same pre-trial detention in Essen as the member of Baader-Meinhof group. Her prison experiences blend with the camp ones:

'Essen was very similar to our concentration camp, the similar actions happened there, this is how it was'.

Lächert felt wrongly chased:

'I spent a year and two months in the camp. That is why I've been sitting here for 16 years (...) they do here what we did there. But just in a more sophisticated way'.

In her observations the role of victims and perpetrators are blended. She presents herself as a victim. She describes herself as a person punished for being neutral.

'Sometimes, I also was scared when someone came and supervised us. And then it all came back to the routine. I was in my place then'.

Lächert found herself a victim of camp facilities:

'You couldn't be human there. There were only orders, no own personality. We couldn't have conversations with the prisoners. (...) It was forbidden. We had to serve our duties standing, no matter if it was raining, cold or hot. You have to imagine yourself standing still for 12 hours. Then, you feel no pain. You don't know what the pain is'.

Lächert said also:

'Imagine thousands of people gathered in one place. There was not enough water and food, no toilet. Smuggling. Among men mostly alcohol was smuggled'.

It sounds like the memories of an ex-prisoner. Lächert aimed for presenting herself as a victim of Majdanek. When Fechner asked, what would have happened if Hitler had won the war, she described the following scenario:

'They would have killed us. Shot to death. We were mediums of secrets. We knew too much. He allowed killing Germans as well'.

Henryka Ostrowska, the witness and ex-prisoner of female camp, described another image of Lächert, who was happy and friendly while conversations with SS men and friends. Lächert confirms that:

'It was a beautiful time, in a way. I met many people'.

The description of her daily routine also presents that her days at Majdanek were not unpleasant, especially her free time.

'We used to spend free time together. We went to the city, to Lublin, for shopping. We visited hairdresser or "Deutsches Haus" cafe. I sent some packages to my family. We got a lot of wares from the shop, for example, vodka. Then I swapped that with Poles for eggs and lard. This is how (...) we used to trade.'

Lächert described her free time:

'Thank God I had an opportunity to visit Felin, the camp mansion, and there we rode a horse. The horses had to be taken for a ride every day'.

However, Lächert must have been aware of what has happened in the camp and it was visible when she was saying: *'I was shocked'* or *'then I found out these were the gas chambers'*. In the trial, she behaved as if she was unaware of anything- mostly due to the fear of being blamed by other defendants.

'If I had been blamed for that, I would have done the same... And when all of them, who were there, start to blame others (...) And I'll start to dig there... No, we shouldn't dig. It becomes smelly (...)'

When one of the ex-guardians, Luzie Moschko, started to dig, Lächert responded rapidly.

She told [Moschko]: 'Oh, these poor prisoners' and she had a mouth full of dead Jews' gold.'

During the trial, the psychosomatic illness of Lächert became more and more visible. *'And that is how it started, with Bloody Lächert, with children, it started suddenly. My body was so itchy! I saw red spots everywhere and scratched my body until the blood appeared.'*

Lächert thought that the reasons for her illness were the wrong accuses mentioned during her trial. There were a lot of facts, arguing that her memory preserved the events from the camp:

'Reminding all these things caused my blood pressure high. All the camp life. Everything. Since the Ravensbrück'.