Alderney - the branch of Hamburg-Neuengamme concentration camp.
(memoir of Sylwester Kukula)

The existence of concentration camps and their branches within the Third Reich and some German-occupied conquered countries such as Poland (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek) is well known. However, few people know that the Germans established an independent branch of the Hamburg-Neuengamme concentration camp on the island of Alderney. This is one of the four Channel Islands, a territory of the United Kingdom. These islands were occupied without a fight by German forces after the surrender of France in June 1940. The occupation of these islands by the Third Reich lasted until the end of the war, that is, until 9 May 1945. Hitler thus occupied part of British territory for five years.

In February 1943 a concentration camp was opened on Alderney named SS Lager Sylt. From March 1943 we were administered by KL-Neuengamme and given new numbers. Mine was 16846, Rysiek's 16850. (Ryszard Muszynski (1919 -2006); I met him in Dachau on the malaria bay and stayed close friends with him until his death.) I remember a few names from about 50 Poles who were there: Marian Filipecki from Warsaw, Jan Baczewski from Warsaw, Stanislaw Karlikowski from Bialystok, Wladyslaw Struck from Puck, Stanislaw Stachowiak from Bydgoszcz, Zygmunt Wajs from Czestochowa, Edward Mrozinski from Zawiercie, Mieczyslaw Ptak from Cracow, Ryszard Klimecki and Wladyslaw Lubecki from Piastow. I do not remember others.

SS-Hauptsturmführer List was the commandant of SS-Lager Sylt. He did not take much interest in the prisoners except for very important matters like escapes, for in spite of a hopeless situation they were tried, not very successfully of course as the sea was all around.

SS-Obersturmführer Klebeck was List's deputy. Up to the end of December 1943 the functions of Lagerführer were in the hands of the hated Germanised Sudeten Czech SS-man Roland Puhr, the same who was murdering prisoners in Düsseldorf. In January 1944 all top commanding positions changed. List, Klebeck, Puhr and others were transferred [back to Germany–ed.YB]. The new Commandant of the camp, SS-Obersturmführer Braun, came from the Reich. SS-Hauptscharführer Högelow, so far the head of the guards, became the Lagerführer. The catering officer was Walther Hartwig, a Volksdeutsch from Brodnica, who knew Polish very well but would not admit it, and many Poles and Russians suffered because of that. The SS corps amounted to 80 men and after the January changeover they included Czechs, Croats, Ukrainians, Serbs and a Pole - Marian Tomasikiewicz from Tarnow (in September 1944 he ran away in Belgium together with two other prisoners). During the SS- Baubrigade I's lifetime SS-Unterscharführer Georg Rebs from Alsace was its Rapportführer, who also knew Polish because he had worked in Lodz in the textile industry before the war. He was of a very unstable character, sometimes good, kind and pleasant and sometimes a violent sadist.

Life and work on Alderney

When we left the ship we could see a church tower and some houses in a distance from the port. We marched for an hour before we saw some huts enclosed with a wire fence and the gate with SS Lager Sylt written on it. As in Düsseldorf, there were only four barracks enclosed and

the SS guards occupied the additional ones beyond the camp. There was another hut within the perimeter, of which one half was the kitchen and food store, the other—the clothes store. I worked and lived in that hut. Once in the camp we started our normal, or rather abnormal, work routine.

The daily schedule looked like this:
5.30 - Wake up call, wash under taps in troughs in the open air as in Düsseldorf; fetch rations of Knorr soup or ersatz coffee.
6.00 - Morning assembly.
6.30 - Departure of work groups.
7.00 - Start of work in particular locations (quarry, rock tunnelling, road construction, ditch digging and some works in the compound); almost the whole island was covered with ditches for laying cables. When the laying of cables was finished, construction of bunkers and bases for heavy guns started, etc.
12.00-13.00 - Meal break. A car delivered the food to the work place. Lunch was a thin soup made of vegetables, sometimes with bits of cabbage or some other vegetable or even an occasional bone in it.
(A delivery group of two prisoners escorted by a NSKK driver and an SS-man was the best work commando.)
18.00 - End of work and return to the camp.
18.30 - Evening assembly.
19.00 - Supper (distribution of bread rations and occasional extras like a piece of sausage or cheese or jelly like jam).
19.30 - 22.00 - Wash and preparation to sleep.
22.00 - Lights out.

With the experience gained in Düsseldorf the SS authorities decided to enlarge the camp.

The camp enlargement went on for a few months. Generally all the huts were being built about a meter and a half into the ground to protect them from the constant gales on the island. On Alderney the Germans extracted from us our last bit of strength. Out of a thousand prisoners there were only 550 left after 16 months of stay. We were repeatedly told that we would be finished on Alderney and if not there then in the camp back in Germany. The high death rate caused a change of SS supervision. The new powers, trying to hide the high death rates from their authorities in KL-Neuengamme, hit on an ingenious idea. In place of a dead prisoner they would ‘borrow’ a Russian or a Ukrainian from a civil camp, giving him the dead man’s number. (I know of this because I was providing them with uniforms with the numbers.) From then on the death rate did not officially get over 2-3 men a month.

When the prisoners finished enlarging the camp and built a new beautiful mountain (Tyrolean style) house for the Commandant in a charming place below the camp on the ocean shore, our life became more peaceful after the evening assembly, except perhaps frequent punishment exercises for offences invented by our Rapportführer G. Rebs. Still very often after supper we would meet up at the table in Hut Four with Poles from other huts to chat and listen to the ocean waves long into the night. We dreamt of the English coming and saving us as it was only 80

kilometres from Great Britain but unfortunately that was not to be even after the invasion of France.

I worked as a washer, and Rysiek was darning and ironing. Until the autumn 1943 we were in a house used as a laundry just outside St. Anne. I remember it well. (I could still find and recognise the house when I came back to Alderney in 2001 and 2008.) We shared it with the OT laundry where French and Moroccan female prisoners worked. The wash was done by hand, naturally. We had a big vat, maybe 200 litres, heated by coal, to boil the water. We had cold water taps and we washed the clothes of Camp Sylt prisoners. They would bring them to our clothes store in the camp for change maybe once a fortnight. We would remove their triangles with the numbers and re-stitch them onto the clean change. The prisoners' clothes were dried on the lines outside, and those of the German officers in a barn across the grassed yard at the back. We were guarded by an elderly (it seemed to us) German, quite kind and good hearted, who liked to spend his time dozing off on a bench near the stove. We tried to make sure he was comfortable... I have quite good memories of that period and especially of Sundays, because we could go to our laundry unguarded (the German guards had their time off) and so venture out onto the footpaths to the east side of the camp, sometimes even get down to the shore.

Rysiek was very good at darning old socks and I suspect our kapo was selling the new ones somewhere because we had to remove the camp pattern of white line from them.

Our kapo at some stage adopted a stray dog that he looked after. We quite liked the dog, too, it was very friendly. Once when the kapo was away, and Rysiek and I got back from the laundry, the others in the hut asked whether we would not like a bite to eat. Never known to refuse anything extra we accepted gratefully and did not ask any questions. While we were chewing happily the others started giggling and barking. At first we did not understand but when we did it was too late. We never saw that dog again and the kapo had to accept later that his dog had gone for good.

Later our laundry was moved to the clothes store in the camp, in the barrack near the gates, and my only 'privilege' was fairly unlimited passage through the little gate (to deliver the German laundry). Once I delivered even to the Commandant's house, when he was away.

We were about a dozen prisoners in our clothes store and we lived there together with our kapo Poensgen. His sleeping area was at the end of the hut behind a thin wall.

The other half of the barrack was the camp kitchen. We would go there sometimes to chat and maybe get a morsel to chew.

On the night of 5-6 June 1944 the whole camp, together with the SS guards, woke up to a big noise. Nobody knew at first what it was about and where it was coming from. In the morning, with daylight, we could see hundreds of planes in groups of six flying overhead towards France and back. That lasted 24 hours. The Luftwaffe anti-aircraft guns on the island were silent. We were not allowed to leave the huts, even to go to the toilet, the SS men brought us buckets similar to those used on the train during transport. The block supervisor would count the

prisoners and report back to the Rapportführer in the doorway. We did not manage to contact our friendly German prisoner Helmut, who worked in the camp office and regularly listened to the BBC. He would prepare short notes to be distributed in secret amongst the trustworthy. The following day, 7 June, only the kitchen staff and other prisoners on duty were allowed to leave for work. That was something!

Helmut let us know that the Allied Forces were landing in Normandy near Caen. We felt we were growing wings on our arms! We were hundred percent sure of our imminent liberation. But there was nothing happening on the island except that we did not go out to work beyond the camp compound anymore. The SS-men dropped their chins down a bit but still remained distant. We started shutting down the camp: making wooden crates to put the store contents in as well as all personal belongings of the SS supervisors. Prisoners who spoke German were employed to make the lists and I was one of them. My kapo Hans Poensgen, a German with a black triangle, and Lagerführer Otto Högelow were supervising. The camp was ready for evacuation on 20 June 1944. We were hoping we would not have to go, planes were circling overhead, dozens of ships on the horizon. Alas!

On 23 June lorries came up and we loaded them with crates, one by one, following their numbers, contents of each detailed in 5 copies: four for the SS and one for kapo Hans. From then on the lorries were guarded and escorted by the SS. They left the camp at dawn on 24 June. We left at dusk, also heavily guarded by the SS, marching off to the port. It was our last march through the narrow streets of St. Anne. It became almost dark. In the port we were lying on the ground waiting for orders to embark. Nobody was talking trying to control his pain and sorrow because liberation did not come. What lies ahead? But the command comes: embark! The ship was called ‘Wilhelm Klaus’ and her usual cargo was coal and cement. The loading took place in dim lorry lights. We walked in single file and the SS-men counted us carefully. We were standing up tightly at the bottom of the boat. At last late at night we moved off, swaying as if drunk, because she was short, so we were bouncing up and down with her. People were being sick, vomiting, moaning, urinating and emptying their bowels. After a few hours the engines stopped. The SS-men opened the hatches and let in the iron ladders. We are leaving the ship. Sunshine and tall trees welcome us and the painful brightness reflected from hundreds of greenhouses. We shut our eyes used to the darkness in the hold of the ship. We are now on Guernsey, another Channel Island. It is Sunday. Crowds of people are looking at us with curiosity, who are the strangers in striped clothes? One could not see any signs of the war there. ‘Bobbies’, English policemen with their characteristic helmets, control the traffic. We noticed women’s smart clothes, beautiful greenery, a palm tree here and there, gardens, flowers, tons of flowers. Wherever we looked there were tomatoes and fruit. Houses, charming cottages. We were walking along a pretty asphalt street lined with mature trees, the branches making a green roof. Initially the islanders were looking at us curiously but with the passage of that procession and exchange of words about who we were we saw sympathy in their eyes, emotion and even two fingers up in the V sign.

We were marched off beyond the town, spending a whole day on a field amongst some mock planes. Around us barbed wire and a few latrines masked with bushes. In the evening we were being marched back to the port, apparently to be shipped to Africa. On the way we passed crowds of strolling people who seemed to know now who we were. They were all smiling at

us – men, women and children, some raising a thumb up and when an SS-man looked, the thumb went down. In the port we were loaded back onto the boat again for a few more hours of torture. The engines stopped. It was still dark when we were back on Guernsey. This time because some English ships, or planes, had been allegedly spotted and we could not continue. In the morning, back onto the familiar field. The islanders were happy, smiling, waving friendlily from their windows and balconies. In the evening though—another march to the port, and nothing—back to the field. The islanders were getting quite enthusiastic. The SS-men were looking grave and even angry but behaved correctly towards us. Yet another day of marching to and fro. On the fourth day we were sailing off. We were sorry to go and hoped to return again. But we did not. At dawn, after a very difficult night, the engines stopped and we were coming out of the hold like rats. The morning was gloomy. We could see large housing blocks, shallow waters of the port basins, some ships and hills behind, a little bit like Alderney. We had landed on the third of the Channel Islands - Jersey, the largest one. Two German prisoners who apparently had been there before the war were saying that it was a real island of flowers. I was not too convinced because I had fallen in love with Guernsey. Moreover, I could hardly see the island, only the walls of the disused prison where they took us into. Three times we went back to the port in the evening and did not sail off. We slept in the old prison. On the first return to it something happened that could have had a serious outcome for me. Hans Poensgen, responsible for placing prisoners in particular cells, allocated a number of straw bales for each block to sleep on (as on Alderney) and appointed me to supervise the allocation. Of course there was a usual bale extra for the Germans. But that was not enough. The German Blockälteste, Hans Wojtas from Gdansk, wanted another two bales to be taken from the Russian block. I tried to explain that the allocation was like that but the German pushed me off wanting to pick up a bale. I got angry, jumped on him and we started to fight. Someone fetched the kapo, who separated us, but Wojtas complained to the Lagerführer that ‘a Pole was trying to beat a German up.’ In the morning I had to report for punishment. As I managed to explain the whole incident to the Commandant without an interpreter, and my kapo Poensgen confirmed my story, I was let off and told not to hit a German prisoner again. I did thank him but wanted some revenge on Wojtas, so I said that he was no German but a ‘Wasserpole’ and when asked what it meant I explained that Wojtas was a Volksdeutsch from Gdansk. He smiled and shook his finger at me and said, ‘Watch out in future’. Then back to work. Wojtas was very angry with me and I avoided him to the end. [Later we learnt that he had escaped in Belgium – ed. YB]

On the third day we were leaving the quay for the last time, direction St. Malo. Nobody thought we would make it, especially as we had some torpedoes on board for the warships at St. Malo. The SS-men, who had become a bit more friendly with us Poles, and especially a Dane who had been the guard in the gardening commando while I was in Dachau, thought the same, but there was no other option but go. Everyone was convinced that a few days later it would have been too late and the island would have been taken, hence the hurry. The last transport was the worst. The hatch on top was covered with boards, screwed down with iron bars and covered with tarpaulin. The SS-men put their life vests on, preparing for the worst, and locked us up in that floating coffin. They were afraid of a rebellion. They also managed to squeeze a few English civilians in. It was thick with bodies and odours. The journey seemed rather long. The convoy consisted of about 15 ships from Alderney, Sark, Guernsey and Jersey, there were wounded from Cherbourg who somehow got to Jersey and now became attached to our

transport. It was around 9 o’clock when we arrived in St. Malo. About a hundred ambulances waited for us. The port authorities did not believe that we would get there alive. It was the first transport since the invasion that had arrived undamaged at St. Malo.

We were again in St. Malo where we had been in February 1943.