

Panel 1: Who is a Perpetrator? The Changing Construction and Interpretation over Time

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“Perpetrators in the Eyes of the Beholders“

Perpetrator documents from the Holocaust provide essential information on when and how things happened. The documents show that the perpetrators were not only people who were desk murderers or field murderers following orders. It is clear that there was a basic element of willfulness in the perpetration, as well as initiative. And the perpetrators were also not only Germans and Austrians. Those who murdered on their own, or who joined the murderers of the Third Reich, are part of the perpetrators as well.

This paper posits five basic points that are not new to this audience: participation in the murder was widespread; participation in the murder was generally knowing and willful; the perpetrators were generally quite normal, even displaying "normal" contradictory behavior; the treatment meted out to prisoners in various contexts did not necessarily have any correlation with their death rate (or survival rate); all the above factors combined dramatically reduced the Jews' chances to discern collectively how they stood the best chance of surviving.

Regarding the widespread participation in the murder, research by many scholars has broadened our perspective. Yehoshua Büchler, Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen, for example, brought to light the participation of many police units in the murder; while Götz Aly pointed to the roles of a variety of middle and lower echelon officials, and Michal Unger, Michael Alberti, Bogdan Musial, and others have laid out the roles of regional and local

officials. And these are just a few examples. When we take into account this research of the last twenty years or so and try to add up the number of people who were willful participants in the perpetration of the Holocaust, the numbers become numbing even if they cannot be ascertained with exactitude. We are clearly talking about hundreds of thousands of people at least.

The perspective of the beholders, who for purposes of this paper are primarily the victims, the Jews, helps provide us with insight into the complexion of the events. I would like to show this with illustrations taken primarily from the Lublin District in Poland and Svencionys in Lithuania, if time will allow.

The first illustration comes from spring 1942 in Lublin.

On March 30, 1942, Richard Türk, who was then the head of the Population and Welfare Department (BuF) in the Lublin District of the Generalgouvernement in Poland, wrote a memo noting that *SS-Obersturmführer* Helmut Pohl had that morning related the following information regarding progress in the Jewish Resettlement Operation (*Juden Umsiedlungsaktion*): 3,400 Jews had been resettled out of Piaski, and 2,000 Reich Jews had been brought there, with another 1,000 on the way; 2,200 Jews had been resettled from Izbica and 4,400 Reich Jews were being brought there; 1,950 Jews from Opole-Lubelski and Wąwolnica had been resettled via the Nałęczów railroad station; and 18,000 Jews had been resettled from Lublin so far. Pohl also reported the impending arrival of two more trainloads of Jews from the Reich and the resettlement of half the Jews from Bychawa and Bełżyce.¹ In all, 25,550 Jews had already been "resettled" from the Lublin District, 6,400 had been brought in from the Reich, with more such "resettlements" impending. This is only one of many similar memos from March-April 1942 in the Lublin District.

¹ Vermark, Türk, March 30, 1942, Wojewódstwo Archiwum w Lublinie (WAPL), Gouverneur des Distrikts (GDL), file 273 (copy in Yad Vashem Archive [YVA], O.53/82).

What story is this bland, factual memorandum part of?

First, it relates the beginning of the systematic deportations and murder of the Jews of the Lublin District, which had commenced on the morning of March 17, 1942. Türk wrote this memo on the second day of a two-day break in the deportations from the Lublin ghetto to Bełżec.

What had actually happened?

In a carefully planned and coordinated operation among the new, special deportation and murder office of Lublin SSPF Odilo Globocnik, the German civilain government on the district, county, and city level, the Lublin SS (KdS), the Lublin police, two to four companies of Trawniki men – mostly Ukrainian renegades from the Red Army who were trained by Globocnik's men – and apparently a unit of Waffen-SS men from Chełm (number of men unclear), hundreds of men from these organizations had gathered in Lublin on the evening of March 16 for briefings on the deportation operation to the new Bełżec death camp that would begin early the next morning. Several SS officers summoned the Lublin Judenrat in the middle of the night, informed them of the impending "resettlement", and ordered them to announce the operation to the Jews and to facilitate its smooth progress. The Trawniki men and the others cordoned off parts of the ghetto, and in a massively violent operation that included beatings, stabbings with bayonets, and shooting, Jews were awakened and rushed off to the gathering point for the deportation.

For the Jews, the violent and murderous roundups were terrifying. Jewish people were caught by surprise and had great difficulty evading the roundups on subsequent days. The fear that the SS and Ukrainians imposed inside the ghetto

was compounded by the fear imposed by the German civilian authorities should anyone try to get out. On March 17, Dr. Hasse of the Lublin District Interior Department ordered Lublin-Land Kreishauptmann Ziegenmeyer to post in all Jewish quarters in his county the names of eleven Jews who had been executed for leaving the ghetto without permission. This was clearly meant to discourage attempts to flee or hide.

During the following four weeks, some 30,000 out of the 40,000 Jews of Lublin were deported to Bełżec, and at least an additional 2,000 were murdered in or near Lublin, while innumerable others were severely injured.

The coordination of this operation and the subsequent deportation operations in the Generalgouvernement reflects the widespread participation in the murder of a wide variety of officials, both uniformed and civilian. Some of this is reflected in the memorandum – Türk and SS men from Globocnik's special unit were coordinating their activities. But what does this memorandum actually tell us about the deportation operations, aside from the numbers?

Clearly, the terror, violence and shooting are absent from the memo, as are how the Jews understood what was happening, what they tried to do, and how Jewish actions impacted on the operation, if at all. We do have records of the impressions that German participants in the operation and Jewish survivors had -- that during the two-day pause in the deportation operation on March 29-30, very many of the remaining Jews went into hiding.

Were violence and murder deliberately built into the deportation program, or were they outgrowths of the atmosphere created by the very fact of such an operation? Was it a cold-blooded operation, or was it a hot-blooded operation in

which many of the perpetrators vented their emotions regarding the Jews? Or was it perhaps all of this together?

The second illustration comes from Svencionys, which was part of Poland before the war and was in Lithuania in 1941. The perpetrators here included a variety of people – Germans and Austrians, Lithuanians, Poles, Belorussians, and others. Karl Jäger's well-known report of December 1, 1941 reporting the activities of Einsatzkommando 3 noted that they had achieved their mission of solving the "Jewish Problem" in Lithuania. His report includes a list of the executions carried out by his unit and indicates that his unit had shot 137,346 Jews. The city of Vilna appears repeatedly on this table, including twice in mid-September 1941, when more than 4,600 Jews were shot. On these operations, fifteen-year-old Yitzhak Rudashevsky wrote in his diary:

A troubled evening approaches. The streets are full of people... Whoever can do so, hides....

The tenants of the house go into a hide-out. We go with them....

We are like animals surrounded by the hunter. The hunter on all sides: beneath us, above us, from the sides. Broken locks snap, doors creak, axes, saws. I feel the enemy under the boards on which I am standing... They pound, tear, break. Soon the attack is heard from another side... the Lithuanians are pounding more strongly against the walls. However, slowly everything calmed down of itself. We understand that they have left. Later we heard a voice from the other side of the hide-out. You are liberated. My heart beat with joy! I have remained alive!²

² Rudashevski diary as cited in *Documents of the Holocaust*, p. 401.

The same Jäger report lists the town Svenciony on page 6, noting that on October 9, 1941, 1,169 Jewish men, 1,840 Jewish women, and 717 Jewish children, a total of 3,720 Jews, had been dealt with.³

What actually happened on that day?⁴

Two weeks earlier, on September 26-27, 6,000-8,000 Jews from Svencionys and eleven nearby towns and villages had been rounded up by Lithuanian police and marched to Poligon, a prewar Polish army training area not far from the town. Among the main figures mentioned by the survivors regarding events during the following days are Kenstavicius, the Lithuanian police chief, Matulevicius, the head of the criminal police, and the Germans Metz, the local SS commander, Teclaw, the local Schupo commander, and Beck, a civilian agricultural official. The Germans were amenable to bribes in order to let people out of Poligon. At one point, Kenstavicius, who had also begun taking bribes, refused to release two Jews for whom a local Moslem, Kubush, intervened with Metz. In the ensuing confrontation between Metz and Kenstavicius, Metz threatened to shoot the Lithuanian “like a dog”. The two Jews, Dr. Benjamin Taraseiski and Peretz Yochai, were released, but after that, no Jews could get out. A local Polish pharmacist (Szymanski) hoarded belongings of Jewish acquaintances, yet he also helped quite a few of them at different times and was ultimately honored by Yad vashem as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. On October 8-9, 1941, the Lithuanian police together with ten men from EK3 shot at least 6,000 Jews at Poligon. All the Jewish testimonies about this murder at Poligon refer to 6,00-8,000 Jews shot in

³ Jäger report in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, eds., *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 46-58

⁴ The account of events in Svencionys is based on the following sources: Survivor testimonies in YVA – Haya and Shimon Bushkanietz, O.71/22; Dr. Benjamin Taraseiski and Jankiel Lewin, O.71/23; Avraham Teitz, O.71/23a; Fruma Hochman, O.71/24; Feivel and Rachel Chajet, O.71/25; Zalman and Raizel Yoffe, O.71/26; Rivka Palant, O.3/2772; Lila Holzman, O.3/3133; Heshl Gurovich, O.33/141; Yitzhak Arad, *The Partisan: From the Valley of Death to Mount Zion* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), pp. 45-49; and YVA, M.21/521, Maculevicius file with 24 affidavits from survivors regarding the murder of the Jews in Svencionys.

an almost exclusively Lithuanian operation. Only 240 Jews remained at that time in the Svencionys ghetto.

A local Moslem and Pole helped Jews, yet the Pole apparently also stole some of the Jews' belongings. German commanders took bribes that ended up saving Jews, on some of whose testimony this story is based, while the same commanders were involved in the murder of thousands of Jews. And Einsatzkommando 3, which had reported the Poligon executions, had only ten men involved in the operation and reported only part of the murder.

Relying on the major German document would give us a piece of the story in this case, but most of the event would remain unknown. And the Jews in the story, who tried fleeing, bribing, and insinuating themselves into the workforce in order to survive, could not know at any time how any of the people around them might behave.

The last illustration that I would like to relate comes from forced labor camps in the Lublin District in 1943-44.

In the interests of time, I will simply note a few points about four of these camps: Budzyn, Krasnik, Poniatowa, and Trawniki.

Budzyn was a forced labor camp whose first commandant (until summer 1943) was Reinhold Feiks, a man who by all accounts was a vicious and sadistic murderer. Much of the forced labor was done under German civilians from the Heinkel airplane company. Feiks was known to torture and murder Jews daily, particularly at the morning and evening appel (roll call). The extent of murder in this camp was significant, and all survivors from it relate to it as a horror.

In contrast, Krasnik was a small camp with approximately 300 Jewish forced laborers. The camp was apparently kept secret from Himmler by the local SS and police, probably so that they could continue to profit by selling the goods that the Jews manufactured or repaired there. The commandant was Alois Gröger, who by all accounts was a calm, non-violent SS commandant, who tended to treat the forced laborers decently and even let some of them bring their families into the camp. He even allowed his little son (6-7 years old) play with the few Jewish children who were allowed to come to the camp.

Poniatowa and Trawniki were camps to which significant numbers of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto were brought in spring 1943, before and during the uprising there. Conditions were relatively calm, food was adequate, and the forced laborers were treated relatively decently by their civilian work leaders and even by the SS guards.

In spring 1943, some Jewish forced-laborers from Budzyn and Krasnik were permitted to visit family and friends in other camps on days off. In one such case, Gröger shot one of these Budzyn Jews to death as he approached the Krasnik camp fence. Feiks came to Krasnik and dressed down Gröger for shooting “his Jew” and threatened to retaliate.

On November 3-4, 1943, all but Krasnik were surrounded by large numbers of SS men and police and the Jews in Poniatowa and Trawniki were all murdered in Aktion Erntefest, while the Jews of Budzyn were spared. Two months later, 18 Jews tried to escape Krasnik, fearing that Germans might kill them as the end of the war approached. Some of the escapees were caught, and Gröger executed approximately twenty people, including Jews who had not been involved in the escape. Shortly after this, Gröger was replaced by Franz Bartetzko, an SS Hauptscharführer who had previously served in other camps,

including the Belzec death camp. He had a reputation for viciousness and murderousness. Yet, the last weeks in Krasnik were remarkably calm by all survivor accounts.

What happened to all these forced laborers? The Jews working in the calm Poniatowa and Trawniki camps were all killed, while some of the Jews in the murderous Budzyn camp survived. The calm and decent Gröger in Krasnik turned out to be a mass murderer who was dressed down by the murderer Feiks for killing a Jew and was replaced by the experienced mass murderer Bartetzko, who then oversaw a calm conclusion to the camp until the summer 1944 transfer of its inmates to camps further west.

Much of the above information is based on eyewitness accounts, mostly by survivors. The three illustrations reflect widespread participation in the murder of the Jews, unpredictable behavior by the perpetrators, and the frequent paradoxes that emerged between conditions in a camp and the rate of survival.

When viewed from the perspective of the beholders, the persecution and murder of the Jews appears not only as a cold-blooded, well organized, and efficient operation, but also as a violent, often chaotic, and vicious operation, whose viciousness both cut across many types of groups in the population and was often unpredictable despite its being a regular feature of the treatment of the Jews.

The Jews themselves could only note all the above, but in most cases they could not hope to make sense of it all to the extent that a Jewish community might discern the appropriate response to the Nazis that might enable them to survive. The very normality and large number and variety of the perpetrators put the Jews' lives in the most precarious state, dependant on luck more than anything else.