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TREBLINKA

TREBLINKA, one of the three Aktion Reinhard death camps during World War II, second only to *Auschwitz in the number of Jews killed. Known until then as a small railroad station between Siedlce and Malkinia, located approximately 62 miles (100 km.) northeast of Warsaw. The Germans built a railway spur that led from the labor camp to the death camp and to the railway station in the village of Treblinka. Heavily wooded, it could be hidden from view. Treblinka became the final destination for transports that brought Jews from the ghettos of the General Government and about ten European countries to their death. The Jews were brought to Treblinka under the pretext of resettlement in former Soviet territories that had been occupied. The actual site of mass slaughter was located approximately 2.5 miles (4 km.) from the station, camouflaged inside a pine forest. On the border of this area was a platform for the train that carried the Jews from the station in consignments of 15–20 cars, which reached the camp on a side track especially built for this purpose.

However, the name Treblinka refers to two camps: the first one (later called Treblinka I), which began operating in 1941, was openly and officially designated as a forced-labor camp for offenses against the occupation authorities; the second camp, located approximately 1 mile (1.5 km.) from the first, and designed for mass extermination, was treated by the German authorities as a state secret, and its name was coded even in confidential letters as T.II.

Treblinka I: For Jews and Poles (December 1941–July 1944)

Unlike Treblinka II, this camp was intended not only for Jews, but also for Poles deported for economic or political offenses. The Poles would remain in the camp for the duration of their punishment, and only part of those charged with political crimes were killed or transferred to concentration camps. Jews were transferred there after roundups or from forced-labor contingents required from the Judenrate, and only in a very few cases would they leave the place alive. Devastated by hunger, overwork in the nearby gravel pit, brutal beatings, and cruel harassment, they died in large numbers. Others perished in occasional executions or were transferred to Treblinka II to be murdered after they lost all their strength. The last execution at Treblinka I took place on July 24, 1944, just prior to the entrance of the Soviet army.

According to the statistical estimates of Judge Z. Lukaszewicz, who conducted an investigation of both camps in 1945 on behalf of the Main State Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, approximately 10,000 individuals had passed through Treblinka I, 70% of whom were either shot or murdered in other ways. In light of the practices for mixed camps, according to which the Aryans benefited from larger food rations and were allowed to receive provisions from their families, it can be assumed that at least 90% of those who perished were Jews. After the war more than 40 mass graves were dug up in the nearby forest and as many as 6,500 bodies were counted. Deeper in the forest were more graves that were not dug up.

The commanding officer of Treblinka I was SS Hauptsturmfuehrer von Eupen. His favorite sport was horseback riding, which gave him the opportunity to trample and kill prisoners. The statements of surviving witnesses from Treblinka I include a particularly gruesome description of

how 30 children brought there during the *Warsaw ghetto uprising were killed with an ax by a Ukrainian from the auxiliary service under the supervision of Hans Heinbuch, an SS man, who was a university graduate and worked as a teacher after the war.

Treblinka II: The Culmination of "Efficiency" in the Extermination of Jews (July 23, 1942–Oct. 14, 1943)

After the beginning of mass slaughter in the *Belzec and *Sobibor camps in March and May 1942, Treblinka II became the third and, in terms of capacity, the largest camp for the death camps of Jews in the General Government. It measured 1,312 feet by 1,968 feet, trees camouflaged the camp, and watch-towers were placed along the fence. The camp was divided into three sections: the reception area, the killing area, and the living area. The living area was used by camp personnel, Germans and Ukrainians. It had storerooms and workshops. There were also barracks for Jews. Construction on the killing center began in May and was completed on July 22. A day later massive deportations began arriving from Warsaw.

The stationary gas chambers installed in the above-mentioned camps used a uniform organizational and technical system based on a common operational center located in Lub lin. The creator and head of this center, the SS and Polizeifuehrer of the district, Odilo *Globocnik, was appointed by *Himmler as a high official in charge of the "Final Solution" of the Jewish question on a European scale. He acted in close collaboration with Reichsamtsleiter Victor Brack, the former chief of the euthanasia program in Germany.

Mobile gas chambers constructed on the model of the lethal sanitary vans tested in Germany were put into operation in the parts of Poland annexed by the Reich (Wartheland) and in some former Soviet territories. The main obstacle to the mass application of these vans was their limited capacity, their frequent breakdowns and the disposal of bodies; in short, they lacked efficiency. Mass shooting of the Jewish inhabitants in the U.S.S.R. by the *Einsatzgruppen* was no less problematic from the Nazi point of view. These massacres caused misgivings in commanding military circles; they caused too much noise and were carried out in broad daylight, and also left too many wounded or unhurt witnesses who could flee the graves. To employ this method on territories near European centers and even to Germany itself was out of the question.

The death camp reversed the process: instead of sending mobile killers to stationary victims, the victims were made mobile – by being placed on a train – and were sent to stationary execution centers, death camps that operated on an assembly line basis. Arriving prisoners had their values confiscated, they were stripped naked, hair was shaven, and then they were murdered in gas chambers, gold was removed from their teeth, and their bodies were burned in crematoria or open pits. The solution was achieved by the division of labor and the coordination of individual sections. The functions of rounding up the victims at their places of residence and their extermination at the place of execution were separated. One of the *Einsatzgruppen* (the notorious *Einsatz Reinhardt*) was to continue to act, but in the framework of Globocnik's camps its activities were connected mainly with deportation. As a result, the transports directed to the camps had fixed quotas. After a fixed number of "heads" and transports had been dispatched from a given place, the *Einsatz* team was free to perform its *Aktion* in another place. This ensured the death factories a regular and plentiful supply of human material.

The services of the railway network of the Reich and the occupied countries comprised a link in this chain. Transport was a difficult matter at a time when all the railways were swamped with military personnel and supplies. In addition, the trains for transporting Jews from Western and Central Europe had to be ordinary long-distance passenger trains in order to prevent the suspicions of the victims and soothe the conscience of some satellite circles. Jews from the Polish ghettos were being "resettled" without such ceremonies. Freight trains and cattle cars escorted by murderers were filled beyond capacity with people designated for death. They were cold in winter, hot in the summer and a bucket was used for sanitation. Jews had to sit in their own excrement prior to arrival. For hours, and sometimes days, these trains would stand on the side tracks allowing other transports to pass, and thus a large proportion of the deportees (mainly babies, the aged, and the sick), lacking water, air, and sanitary arrangements, frequently died before reaching

their destination.

Those who arrived alive were awaited by the third link in the chain – a team of executioners. It was their duty to get the largest possible number of victims through the respective stages of the procedure at lightning speed: to strip them of the last remnants of their possessions including their hair, gold teeth and dentures; to supervise the removal of the corpses; and to sort out the remaining belongings for shipment to Germany.

The large area of Treblinka (32 acres; 13 hectares) was divided into two sectors. In the first, the larger one, the victims were received and classified and their remaining possessions were sorted out and dispatched. In the second were two buildings containing gas chambers and a field of mass graves dug up by mechanical excavators. Three gas chambers (measuring 25 sq. m. each) were located in the building erected earlier, and ten more chambers, twice as large, were in the building erected at a later date. The staff of both sectors consisted of about 30 SS men, 120 so-called Ukrainians (that is, members of the auxiliary services), and about 1,000–1,500 Jewish prisoners who were recruited for the work from among the younger men and, after having been brought to a state of emaciation, were often replaced by men from new transports.

Both buildings had annexes outside. Inside were passages containing narrow, hermetically shut doors to the gas chambers fitted out with small peepholes. On the opposite wall of each chamber there was a hermetically adherent trapdoor that could be opened from the outside. The walls of the chambers were set with tiles and on the ceiling there were openings fitted out with shower heads, to give the obviously false impression that the chambers were showers. The openings in the ceilings were connected to pipes leading to diesel engines located in the annexes. After the engines were started, fumes containing carbon monoxide (CO₁) emanated from the pipes and consumed all the oxygen in the hermetically closed room, causing the suffocation of the people crowded inside. Death in the chambers was calculated to occur within 15–20 minutes, however it sometimes lasted much longer, especially in the larger chambers of the building constructed later on and also when the engines were out of order.

In Treblinka there were also camouflage buildings such as "*Lazarette*" and "train change stations" intended to prevent any self-defending from the victims. The entire procedure was set in motion the moment the vans arrived at the loading platform. After the doors of the vans were pulled aside, a horde of Germans and Ukrainians rushed at the victims, shouting, and beating them. They would throw the victims out of the vans, wounding and injuring them straightaway and causing the miserable people unbelievable shock. Shortly thereafter the *Hoellenspektakel* ("inferno show") would begin. Men and women were separated and families were broken up without being allowed the opportunity for farewells. Men were ordered to undress at the square. While their heads and faces were being whipped, they had to snatch armfuls of clothing and bring them to a large pile to be sorted. A prisoner from the Jewish staff dealt bits of string to men to tie their shoes into pairs. In a nearby barrack another Jewish prisoner would distribute bits of string to women for the same purpose. From the "changing room," women would go over to the "hairdressers," where their hair would be cut off. It would then be used in some industries of the Third Reich.

No pain and no humiliation were spared to those sentenced to death.

Jews arrived on transports from Theresienstadt, Greece, and Slovakia as well as Poland. Jews from Bulgarian-occupied zones of Thrace and Macedonia were sent to Treblinka – but no Jews from Bulgaria itself. There were also Jews from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and the occupied Soviet Union. Some 2,000 Roma and Sinti (gypsies) were also deported to Treblinka.

The victims would be stood in a row – ready for the "chase" – naked and barefoot, even in the worst winter days. Before them stretched a 150-yard path connecting both sectors of the camp, called by the Germans *Schlauch* (tube) or, more "wittily," *Himmelstrasse* ("Way to Heaven"). The condemned ran between the rows of torturers, who shouted, battered them with their whips, pricked them with bayonets. Among the shouts, the barking of an enormous hound (the famed dog Bari who belonged to the principal sadist of the camp, nicknamed "Doll") would be heard. Excited by the cries, the hound would tear chunks of flesh from the victims' bodies. The victims screamed as well, and cursed; some of them calling *Shema Yisrael* or "down with Hitler." All inhibitions

abandoned, even the men howled with pain; children cried, women were frantic with fear. This route to the gas chambers also had its name, *Himmelfahrt* ("Ascension"), in the camp slang.

Perhaps Brack's experts instructed the executioners that if victims arrived at the chambers out of breath, the effect of the gas would be hastened and the time of agony shortened. The condemned were probably oblivious of this aspect, but they would already be hurriedly running and pushing in order to get to their only refuge left in the world after what had happened to them.

After it was ascertained, by looking through the peepholes, that all movement had ceased, the trapdoor was lifted from the outside and a sight unparalleled in its ghastly nightmarishness would be revealed. The corpses "stood" pressed one against the other ("like basalt pillars") and appeared to be staring with the horror of suffocation. The first corpses had to be pulled out with hoops, and after that they fell out in heaps on the concrete platforms. They were pale and damp and bathed in perspiration and the secretions of the last defecation. The buttocks and faces were blue, mouths open, teeth bared, and bloody effusions oozed out from the mouths and noses.

In the corridors, the staff began cleaning and washing the chambers for the next shift, sprinkling the *Himmelstrasse* with fresh sand, while on the side of the graves, men began the run with the corpses, under a storm of blows and threat of pistols, toward the enormous graves. The gravediggers placed corpses in the gigantic cavities head to feet, and feet to head, in order to put in the maximum number. On the way to the graves stood a squad of "dentists" whose duty it was to pull out gold teeth and dentures from the mouths of the corpses. Another group of specialists was to check quickly whether there were any diamonds hidden in the corpse's rectums or in the women's vaginas. From time to time single shots were fired by the guards to increase the zeal of the gravediggers standing in the grave full of blood, pus, and dreadful stench. Whoever was beaten up, had a trace of blood, or a bruise left on his face, was finished off with a bullet after the roll call. And there was also musical accompaniment to the shows of Treblinka; at first *klezmerim* from the surrounding villages and later an excellent chamber orchestra played under the direction of Artur Gold known for his jazz ensemble from Warsaw. In addition there was a choir which every evening sang the idyllic song *Gute Nacht, Gute Nacht, schlaft gut bis der Morgen erwacht* and a marching song composed by one of the prisoners. None of those musicians survived Treblinka. During roll call and on their way to work prisoners were forced to sing the Anthem of Treblinka written by Artur Gold at the insistence of Kurt Franz.

We look straight out at the world,
The columns are marching off to their work.
All we have left is Treblinka,
It is our destiny.
We heed the commandant's voice,
Obeying his every nod and sign.
We march along altogether,
To do what duty demands.
Work, obedience and duty
Must be our existence.
Until we too, will catch a glimpse at last
Of a modest bit of luck.

Yechiel Reichman, one of the very few to survive the camp, described the lives of those who worked there:

We tried to encourage and calm each other. "Leibel," I said to him. "Yesterday at this time my little sister was still alive." And he answered: "And my whole family, my relatives, and 12,000 poor Jews from our city." And we were alive, spectators to this great calamity and we became like stone, so that we could eat and carry with us this great pain.

Acts of Resistance

The greatest number of transports occurred in the late summer and autumn of 1942; in the

summer of 1942 beginning on July 23 and continuing through September 12, at least 265,000 Jews were transported from the Warsaw Ghetto alone. During the winter the frequency and number of transports abated. After the German defeat at Stalingrad and foreseeing the need to retreat from the Eastern front, the Nazi authorities decided to cremate the corpses in order to eliminate the traces of their crimes.

A special corps of Jewish prisoners, coded by the number 1005, was set up on the grounds where the mass graves were placed. After Himmler's visit to Treblinka in February 1943, the monstrous action of pulling the corpses out of the mass graves and burning them on iron grates began. In most of the 1005 squads, the commandants of this difficult task were forced to stop killing the already trained prisoners and their replacement by new ones. This, however, did not lessen the prisoners' belief that they would also be shot and burned the moment their task was finished. That is when plans for rebellion and escape were born and ripened in almost all such groups in the second half of 1943 and in the first half of 1944. Sometimes these plans even partially succeeded, despite losses. The same happened in Treblinka.

Isolated escapes from the camp began as early as the first weeks of its existence. The runaways would escape under the piles of clothing taken from the dead, that is, in the dispatch vans that had been cleared of the victims. There were also acts of resistance, although only a few have been reported because of the limited number of witnesses who survived to tell the story. On Aug. 26, 1942, a young man from the Kielce transport armed with a penknife threw himself at a Ukrainian who had prevented him from bidding farewell to his mother. As a punishment, all the men who had arrived on the same transport were shot. On Sept. 10, 1942, while the selection was being carried out, Meir Berliner, a citizen of Argentina who was caught by the occupation while visiting his parents in Warsaw, lethally wounded an SS man, Max Biel, with a knife.

Among the better known cases was the resistance of a group of men from Grodno who had refused to undress. They had thrown themselves in unison at the guard but only achieved being shot by automatic fire instead of being gassed in the chambers. Statements by a number of witnesses claim that the news of the armed resistance in January and of the April uprising in Warsaw reached the prisoners and influenced the activities of the conspirators. Their aim now was not only to escape and save their lives, but also to take revenge on the murderers.

Such a group had come into existence in Treblinka II toward the end of 1942. Members of the committee were the physician, Dr. Julian Chorażycki; the head of the Jewish squad, engineer Galewski; Shmuel Rajzman (d. 1979); Kurland; a former captain of the Czech army, Zieło Bloch; and others. They began to make efforts to obtain arms, which they had hoped to smuggle in from the outside with the help of bribed Ukrainian guards. However, they paid for these activities with the loss of Chorażycki, who managed to commit suicide when caught with a packet of bank notes. After various failures the conspirators succeeded, with the help of a copied key, in obtaining arms from the camp arsenal and hiding them in a workshop. Contact was established with the second sector in Treblinka II, where the conspirators had only shovels and spades. They set a date and a signal: a shot and the explosion of a hand grenade. The revolt was to begin on August 2 at 4:30.

At the beginning everything went well. On the appointed day, benzine had been substituted for a solution of lysol during the disinfecting of the wooden buildings. Each active member had a task assigned to him and waited for the signal. At 3:40 a shot suddenly resounded in the first sector, followed soon by the explosion of a hand grenade. Only those in the front barrack knew what had happened. Two young boys there had unearthed some hidden money from a hiding place and a Kapo had caught them. Soon the commanders at their observation points caught sight of Germans leading the youngsters at gunpoint for interrogation to the guardhouse. They realized that they had to begin immediately. The first shot heard in the camp killed the Kapo.

Immediately thereafter one of the leaders dashed through the square with a hand grenade that he was supposed to hurl at the SS men's canteen. He realized that there would not be enough time, and, in order not to confuse the signal, he threw it before he reached his target. The prematurity of the outbreak of the revolt had disastrous consequences. They had not managed to remove the Ukrainian staff guarding the machine guns on the turrets (the conspirators had planned to lure

them away with gold); nor had the telephone connections with the outside world been cut.

The leaders of the revolt did not lose their heads. All the barracks were set on fire immediately. They managed to kill one of the main hangmen, Kuetner, cut through the barbed-wire entanglements, and open the way to escape. They tried to kill the Ukrainians operating the machine guns on the guard turret, but did not succeed. Although a few gunners were killed and some wounded, it was impossible for the rebels, with only a few hand grenades and pistols, to lead a systematic struggle under the torrent of machine gun fire from above. Almost all those in command fell. They tried to cover the escape of those who rushed at the wires, but could do little more than die with honor. Apart from the heavily armed Germans and the Ukrainians of the staff, "relief" troops had arrived from Treblinka I. The whole district was alerted by telephone.

Most of the rebels fell while forcing their way through the barbed-wire entanglements. Most of those who escaped (between 300 and 500) from the range of fire were caught in the first weeks of the manhunt and killed or betrayed by the local peasants, who were on the lookout for the riches carried out of Treblinka. There were, however, Poles who gave shelter to the fugitives, either in their houses or in haystacks, dressed the wounded, fed them, and helped them to survive. However, almost a year was to pass before the area was liberated and there were casualties day after day and week after week. Only a total of about 50 survivors, including those who had escaped from Treblinka at an earlier time, could be counted after the liberation. And yet the rebellion and the escape from Treblinka were a great phenomenon in those times: as an act of resistance and revenge and as a bridge to the future struggles of the Jewish nation.

The Aftermath

As a result of interviews and investigations conducted after the liberation, it appeared that although the wooden barracks were burned down, Aug. 2, 1943 was not the last day of activities in Treblinka II. Most of the German and Ukrainian staff remained alive. They completed the burning of the corpses and dealt with some transports, in the main from the General Government, up to September. In October 1943 all buildings were blown up and the entire area was plowed and sown with fodder, in order to obliterate all traces of the crime. According to the data collected by the Polish authorities, apart from Jews from the General Government and Reichskommissariat Ost (Bialystok and Grodno), Jews from several Central and West European countries (Germany, Austria, Bohemia-Moravia, Slovakia, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg) and from Balkan countries (Greece, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria) were murdered there. Coins and identity cards of the citizens of more than 30 countries were found among other exhibits unearthed in the camp grounds. In addition to Jews, a certain number of Poles and gypsies were also murdered there. According to the calculations of Judge Z. Lukaszewicz, the number of victims murdered in Treblinka amounted to at least 731,600. The basis of this calculation was the railway documentation and an estimation of the average number of vans and people. This number, which was published in 1946, must be enlarged and rounded out to about 750,000 on the basis of German documents discovered later on by Jewish researchers.

After the liberation of Poland, a Central Jewish Historical Committee came into existence almost simultaneously with the Main State Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes. It established itself in Lodz and later transferred to Warsaw as the Jewish Historical Institute. The committee pursued the contacts established with a group of 35 survivors of Treblinka. In November 1945 representatives of the Polish Main Commission and of the Central Jewish Historical Committee visited the scene of the crimes; they were assisted by five former prisoners and accompanied by a unit of militia men and representatives of the local Polish authorities. The most explicit evidence of the monstrous crimes that had taken place there were the human skulls and bones scattered all over; they had been unearthed when the local inhabitants and scavengers of a nearby station of the Soviet army, out for gold teeth and other treasures of the murdered Jews, tore up the grounds.

The document that remained after this visit was a memorandum of the Jewish participants to the Central Committee of Jews in Poland appealing for action to prevent further profanation of the place of martyrdom and disaster of close to three-quarters of a million Jews. This appeal remained

unanswered, and only in 1961 was the building of a monument begun on behalf of the Jewish division for the preservation of places of commemoration in Poland, presided over by S. Fischgrund. A pamphlet was published in several languages urging Jews from all over the world to contribute toward this goal.

In 1963 a delegation from Israel arrived in Poland for the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. It also went on a pilgrimage to Treblinka, where a monument and a mausoleum in the form of a symbolic railway and cemetery, designed by A. Haupt and F. Duszenko, had in the meantime been erected. The delegation returned to Israel with a case of remains, and a profoundly moving funeral was held at the Nahalat Yizhak cemetery near Tel Aviv. Since then, the former prisoners of Treblinka have held an annual memorial service there.

In kibbutz *Lohamei ha-Getta'ot, a model of Treblinka planned and executed by the senior of the former prisoners of Treblinka II was erected. The number of former prisoners of Treblinka in Israel amounted to 20 and they remained in contact with the surviving fellow prisoners scattered all over the world.

Three trials directly concerning the crimes at Treblinka were conducted in Germany. The first was of Joseph (Sepp) Hirtreiter (Frankfurt, 1951) who was sentenced for life. The second was of ten defendants from Treblinka II (Dusseldorf, 1965), in which the chief defendant from this camp, Kurt Franz (called "Doll") was sentenced to life imprisonment, while his companions received various sentences up to a maximum of 12 years, one of them being acquitted. The third was of Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka, who was arrested in Brazil and delivered to the German authorities. After a six-month trial he was sentenced to life imprisonment in January 1971. Under extradition agreement this punishment was reduced to 20 years, but in June of the same year he died in prison.

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[Rachel Auerbach /

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