

The Holocaust The Jewish Tragedy

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Martin GILBERT (1987): *The Holocaust. The Jewish Tragedy*, Fontana

There are some things that must never be forgotten. This text, one of the crucial documents of the twentieth century, provides a chronicle of the shameful and inhuman acts perpetrated by the Third Reich and its collaborators during World War II.

In this detailed and harrowing historical study, Martin Gilbert traces the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany from the early fulminations of Martin Luther to the venomous rhetoric of Adolf Hitler. He faithfully details the experiences of those who suffered the horrors unleashed by the murderous forces of Adolph Hitler and his inner circle in a way that ensures future generations will remember a part of recent human history that most would rather forget.

Hitler's first assault upon Europe began in March 1938 when the German army occupied Austria. The 200,000 Jews of Austria immediately forfeited their freedom.

After Kristallnacht, the night when Jewish synagogues and business houses were destroyed by Nazis in November 1938, Hitler further tightened the noose around the Jews of Germany by demanding a collective fine of one billion marks as "punishment" for the damage done, despite the fact that the damage was caused by his own troops and supporters. Twenty percent of the property of every German Jew was confiscated. And all German Jewish children were summarily banned from attending German schools.

Within nine months of Kristallnacht, Hitler signed a non-aggression pact with Joseph Stalin. This cynical act ensured that the Soviet Union would not interfere with Hitler's plans to invade Poland. On 3rd September 1939, the third day of the German occupation of Poland, 21 Jews were brutally executed in the marketplace of Wieruszow, a small border town. Two days later, the SS torched the Jewish sector of the town, indiscriminately cutting down those who fled the flames. This was the first demonstration to the three million Jews of Poland that Hitler meant business. Within two months, over 5,000 Polish Jews had been murdered.

Norway and Denmark were invaded in April 1940. A month later, the German army entered Belgium, Holland and France. By then, the construction of the first concentration camp outside Germany at Oswiecim, or Auschwitz had been completed.

In October of 1940, the 400,000 Jews of Warsaw - a third of the city's population - were herded into a tiny area. In the following months, tens of thousands of Jews from surrounding towns and villages were forcibly removed from their homes and transported to the newly created ghetto. Conditions were appalling. An inmate later recalled: "We ourselves lived 12 or 15 people to a room." Within three months, thousands of Jews within the ghetto were dying of starvation.

The systematic killing of Jews in large numbers began at the time of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. The "operation" was orchestrated by the specially trained Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators. The brutality of these troops defies description. Entire Jewish communities were wiped out by Nazi soldiers and sympathetic locals in Eastern Poland, Latvia,

Lithuania, Estonia and the Ukraine. More Jews were murdered in the first five weeks of the invasion of Russia than had been killed in the previous eight years of Nazi rule. Over the following two months, entire communities of Jews were herded into rail "transports" and taken to the newly constructed concentration camps in Poland and eastern Germany.

By November 1941, the outside world could no longer ignore the immensity and the savagery of the slaughter being carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators. On November 14th 1941, Winston Churchill wrote: "None has suffered more cruelly than the Jew the unspeakable evils wrought by Hitler and his vile regime."

The inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto were further smitten by a supremely harsh winter. Large numbers of men, women and children were dying because of exposure and starvation.

That same winter, the first "trials" of Zyklon B were carried out on 600 Soviet prisoners of war and 300 Jews at Auschwitz. The "success" of this operation was applauded by Hitler's inner circle. It heralded the implementation of one of the most heinous collective actions in human history, the so-called "final solution." Although mass murders had been committed earlier, and tens of thousands of Jews and Gypsies had been gassed at Chelmno in 1941, the cold terror formalised under the supervision of Reinhard Heydrich at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 set into motion a machinery of killing that had never before been seen upon the earth. It took another five months for the British forces to mobilize and begin the first aerial assaults upon Germany. But by that time, hundreds of thousands of Jews had already been gassed and burned.

By August 1942, the genocidal machinery was fully operational. During that month alone, over 400,000 Jews were murdered, mainly by gassing, in German-occupied Europe. By the end of 1942, most of Poland's pre-war Jewish communities had been gassed and burned in the concentration camps at Chelmno, Belzec and Sobibor. In the early months of 1944, the process had reached such a pitch that in the Birkenau camp alone, 12,000 Jews were gassed every 24 hours.

Martin Gilbert's account also details the readiness with which police forces, militias and individuals in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and elsewhere enthusiastically took on the grisly work of the Nazi SS against innocent men, women and children in their Jewish communities. These shocking betrayals reflect the tenuousness of the civility and the thinness of the veneer of sociality that separates so-called normal relations and acts of bestial cruelty towards individuals and groups.

The Allied Forces landed in Normandy in June 1944 at much the same time that the Red Army had massed on the Eastern front in preparation for its movement into Germany. The Soviet forces entered Majdanek in July 1944. There, they encountered a reality too shocking to have ever been anticipated. The Germans had departed hastily. The crematoria were still warm and the charred bones and putrefying remains of thousands of bodies were scattered everywhere.

It took a further ten months for the Nazis to be finally vanquished. Yet even after the Red Army had "liberated" Poland, Adolf Eichmann proudly boasted of the continuing extermination of Jews in Hungary. The murders continued until the very end.

Martin Gilbert's chronicle of the wretched fate of the Jews of Europe during Hitler's reign is painful and harrowing reading. It sears our collective memories with an indelible record of the contradictions embodied in a nation that has birthed both high philosophies and bestial technologies. And it shows that the charade of civility in which humanity takes pride is only wafer thin, barely containing the ferocious animality that even today lies latent within the cones of the short-range and long-range missiles that prop up and support the cynical military operations of powerful nations.

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First steps to iniquity



In 1543, Martin Luther set out his “honest advice” as to how Jews should be treated. “First,” he wrote, “their synagogues should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it.” Jewish homes, he urged, should likewise be “broken down or destroyed.” Jews should then be “put under one roof, or in a stable, like Gypsies, in order that they may realize that they are not masters in our land.” They should be put to work, to earn their living “by sweat of their noses,” or, if regarded even then as too dangerous, these “poisonous bitter worms” should be stripped of their belongings “which they have extorted usuriously from us” and driven out of the country “for all time.”

Luther's advice was typical of the anti-Jewish venom of his time. p 19

In the turmoil of defeat [after World War I], voices were raised blaming ‘the Jews’ for Germany’s humiliation. In Berlin, the nation’s capital, there were clashes between Jews and anti-Semites: “Indications of growing anti-Semitism,” the Berlin correspondent of *The Times* reported on 14 August 1919, “are becoming frequent.”

A manifestation of this anti-Semitism was shown by one of Germany’s new and tiny political parties, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, the NSDAP, soon better known as the ‘Nazi’ Party, after the first two syllables of ‘National’ - *Nazional*. The party’s twenty-five-point programme was published in Munich on 25 February 1920, at a time when it had only sixty members. The essence of its programme was nationalistic, the creation of a “Great Germany,” and the return of Germany’s colonies, which had been lost at the time of Germany’s defeat. p 23

The anti-Jewish sections of the Nazi Party's programme had been drafted by three members. One of them, Adolf Hitler, was number seven in the party’s hierarchy. A

former soldier on the western front, he had been wounded and gassed in October 1918, less than a month before the war's end. On 13 August 1920, Hitler spoke for two hours in a Munich beer cellar on the theme, "Why we are against the Jews." During his speech, he promised his listeners that his party, and his party alone, "will free you from the power of the Jew!" There must, he said, be a new slogan, and one not only for Germany – "Anti-Semites of the World, Unite! People of Europe, Free Yourselves!" - and he demanded what he called a "thorough solution," in brief, "the removal of the Jews from the midst of our people." p 24

The party symbol became the *Hakenkreuz*, or swastika, an ancient Sanskrit term and symbol for fertility, used in India interchangeably with the Star of David, or *Magen David*, whose double triangle had long signified for the Jewish people a protective shield, and had become since 1897 a symbol of Jewish national aspirations. p 24

On 9 November 1923 Hitler tried, and failed, to seize power in Munich. Briefly, he had managed to proclaim a 'National Republic.' He was arrested, tried for high treason, and on 1 April 1924 sentenced to five years in detention.

After less than eight months in prison, Hitler was released on parole. During those eight months he had begun a lengthy account of his life and thought. Entitled *Mein Kampf*, My Struggle, the first volume was published on 18 July 1925. In it, the full fury of Hitler's anti-Jewish hatred was made clear. p 25

On 10 December 1926 Hitler published the second volume of *Mein Kampf*. Once again, anti-Jewish venom permeated its pages. "At the beginning of the war," Hitler wrote, "or even during the war, if twelve or fifteen thousand of these Jews who were corrupting the nation had been forced to submit to poison gas, just as hundreds of thousands of our best German workers from every social stratum and from every trade and calling had to face it in the field, then the millions of sacrifices made at the front would not have been in vain." On the contrary, Hitler continued, "if twelve thousand of these malefactors had been eliminated in proper time, probably the lives of a million decent men, who would be of value to Germany in the future, would have been saved."



These were still the writings of an extremist with no prospect of political influence, let alone power. In 1926 his party's membership stood at seventeen thousand, among them the black-uniformed *Schutzstaffeln*, 'Protection Squad,' or SS, set up a year earlier to provide Hitler and the Nazi leadership with personal protection: a personal security service. It was all on a small, if noisy, scale. pp 28-29

In Berlin on 1 January 1930, brown-uniformed Stormtroopers killed eight Jews: the first Jewish victims of the Nazi era. For the next nine months, Jews were molested in cafes and theatres, and synagogue services were constantly interrupted by these uniformed hooligans, already dignified by the title 'Party Members.' pp 29-30

In the election for President in June 1932, which the incumbent President, Field Marshal Hindenburg, won with 53 per cent of the ballot, the former corporal, Adolf Hitler, came second, winning over 36 per cent of the votes cast. . . .

In further national elections on 31 July 1932, the Nazi Party won 230 seats in the Reichstag. Hitler had now established enough power to form a government in coalition with others. But he declined to accept second place, refusing to agree to a coalition unless he were Chancellor. pp 30-31

A prolonged political crisis led to negotiations, and negotiations led to a compromise. The parties of the centre and the right agreed to accept Hitler as Chancellor, at the head of the coalition in which they would share Cabinet seats and power. Hitler agreed, and on 30 January 1933 was appointed Chancellor. He was forty-three years old.

“I had been skating that day,” a ten-year-old Jewish boy, Leslie Frankel, who lived in the village of Biblis, near Worms, later recalled. “When I got home,” Frankel added, “we heard that Hitler had become Chancellor. Everybody shook. As kids of ten we shook.” p 31

1933: The Shadow of the Swastika



Hitler moved rapidly to establish his dictatorship. An Emergency Decree, passed by the Reichstag on 5 February 1933, expropriated all Communist Party buildings and printing presses, and closed down all pacifist organizations. In the following week, the Stormtroops, now buoyed up by the enthusiasm of the constitutional victory, attacked trade union buildings, and beat up political opponents in the street. p 32

In October 1933, a new disciplinary and punishment code was introduced at Dachau, intended to make the camp a “Model Concentration Camp,” in which absolute compliance with orders would be assured by the strictest of penalties. “Agitators,” the new regulations stated, “are to be hanged by virtue of the Law of the Revolution.” p 40

As 1933 came to an end, the half million Jews of Germany could look back over a year in which thirty-six Jews had been murdered, six killed in the course of “mob outrages,” and three others killed “while trying to escape.” It had also been a year of mass emigration. The Nazi aim was to eliminate Jewish influence from every facet of German life. They had no objection to emigration. In 1933, 5,392 German Jews sought entry, and were admitted, to Palestine. A further thirty thousand German Jews left for elsewhere in Western Europe, for Britain, and for the United States.

In the last week of October 1933, in reaction to the growth in Jewish immigrants to Palestine, Arab rioters attacked public buildings in Nablus, Jaffa and Jerusalem. The British drove back the rioters, leaving twenty-six Arabs dead. Nazi propaganda broadcasts, beamed to Palestine, Syria and Egypt, helped to ensure Arab hostility towards the Jewish immigrants would be kept as high as possible. In its turn, this Arab hostility ensured that the British Mandate authorities would be forced to look again, in due course, at their immigration laws, and to restrict Jewish entry into the Jewish National Home proclaimed in 1917 at the very moment when such entry had become a matter of urgent need. p 41

Towards Disinheritance

Success for the continuing Nazi broadcasts to the Arab world, through Radio-Berlin and Radio-Stuttgart, came on August 3, with the beginning of three days of anti-Jewish riots in the Algerian city of Constantine. In three days, twenty-three Jews were killed, and thirty-eight wounded. But Arab unrest could not staunch the flow of German refugees, either to Palestine or elsewhere. In 1934 a total of 6,941 German Jews were admitted to Palestine. p 44

Of the seventy-five thousand Jewish refugees of 1933, 1934 and 1935, the largest single group, thirty thousand in all, had gone to Palestine. Nine thousand had gone to the United States. Several thousand had gone to Britain, others to South Africa, Canada and Australia. Many thousands more had found a haven in France, Holland and Belgium, in Austria, and in Czechoslovakia.

Inside Germany, at least a quarter of the Jews who remained had been deprived of their professional livelihood by boycott, decree, or local pressure. More than ten thousand public health and social workers had been driven out of their posts, four thousand lawyers were without the right to practise, two thousand doctors had been expelled from hospitals and clinics, two thousand actors, singers and musicians had been driven from their orchestras, clubs and cafes. A further twelve thousand editors and journalists had been dismissed, as had eight hundred university professors and lecturers, and eight hundred elementary and secondary school-teachers. p 47

Comprehensive new laws were announced which elevated random discrimination into a system: the Nuremberg Laws of 15 September 1935.

Two laws, both signed by Hitler personally, defined "Reich Citizenship" and set out the rules for "the Protection of German Blood and German Honour." Under the first law, Citizenship could only belong to "a national of German or kindred blood." Under the second law, all Jews were defined as being not of German blood. Marriages between Jews and German 'nationals' were forbidden; all marriages conducted "in defiance of this law" were invalid. Sexual relations outside marriage were forbidden between Jews and Germans. Jews were forbidden to fly the German flag. pp 47-48

After the Nuremberg Laws

Tens of thousands of Polish Jews sought safety in emigration. By the end of 1936, a record annual influx of Polish Jews - 11,596 men, women and children - had been admitted to Palestine. But even at the rate at which Britain was granting Palestine certificates, such emigration could never be anything but a minor amelioration for three million Polish Jews; and Arab hostility inside Palestine to Jewish immigration was already leading to violent Arab protests and to the decision by the British authorities to seek a drastic reduction in the number of future certificates. p 52

Throughout 1937 the German government increased its military and air strength. "We seem to be moving," Winston Churchill told the House of Commons on April 14, "drifting steadily, against our will, against the will of every race and every people and every class, towards some hideous catastrophe." p 54

The desperate search for safety continued: in 1937 a further 3,601 German Jews reached Palestine, as did 3,636 Jews from Poland. But these figures, so much lower than those for 1936, reflected new restrictions imposed by the British Mandate authorities as the Arab revolt against Jewish immigration continued. For the Jews of Germany, this was an ominous development, reflected in Palestine itself by the deaths, between April 1936 and the end of 1937, of 113 Jews, and by the first Arab deaths, fifteen in all, in Jewish reprisal raids, despite the condemnation of such reprisals by the Jewish National Council in Palestine. p 55

'Hunted Like Rats'

On 30 January 1938, Hitler celebrated the fifth anniversary of his coming to power. For five years he had rearmed Germany, and given repeated notice to the world that he considered himself responsible for German-speaking people wherever they lived, whether in his birthplace, Austria, in the Sudeten mountain borderlands of Czechoslovakia, in the Free City of Danzig, or even in the western provinces of Poland. As yet his growing armies had crossed no frontier. p 57

On March 12 the German army entered Vienna. Independent Austria was no more: absorbed into a new entity, Greater Germany. The 183,000 Jews of Austria, most of them living in the capital, suddenly became a part of the Nazi hegemony. . . .

Overnight, the Jews of Vienna, one sixth of the city's population, were deprived of all civil rights: the right to own property, large or small, the right to be employed or to give employment, the right to exercise their profession, any profession, the right to enter restaurants or cafes, public baths or public parks. Instead they experienced physical assault: the looting of shops, the breaking of heads, the tormenting of passers-by. pp 58-59

Emigration still offered a way out for those Jews of Germany and Austria who were at liberty. More than ninety-eight thousand Jews, nearly half of the Jews of Austria, left for other lands. They were, indeed, encouraged to do so by the Nazis, and a special emigration office, the Central Office for Jewish Emigration, was set up in Vienna for them, headed by a thirty-two-year-old SS officer, Adolf Eichmann. At the same time,

twelve thousand Jewish families were evicted from their homes, almost eight thousand Jewish businesses were 'Aryanized,' and more than thirty thousand Jews were thrown out of their jobs.

On 6 July 1938 an international conference opened at Evian, a French resort town on the shores of Lake Geneva, with the purpose of discussing the future reception of refugees. More than 150,000 Jews had already been taken in from the torments of Germany, and now of Austria. Of these 8,000 had been admitted to Britain, 40,000 to Palestine, 55,000 into the United States, 8,000 into Brazil, 15,000 into France, 2,000 into Belgium, at least 14,000 into Switzerland, several thousand into Bolivia, 1,000 into Sweden, 845 into Denmark and 150 into Norway.

Not all the delegates at Evian were sympathetic to the Jewish plight. "It will no doubt be appreciated," the Australian delegate, T.W. White, told the conference, "that as we have no racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one." p 64

'The Seeds of a Terrible Vengeance'

Zindel Grynszpan decided to send a postcard to his son Hirsch, in Paris, describing his family's travails. The young man, enraged by what he read, went to the German Embassy in Paris, and, on 6 November 1938, shot the first German official who received him, Ernst vom Rath.

As vom Rath lay wounded, Hitler and the Nazis denounced the deed as part of a Jewish-inspired world conspiracy against Germany. On November 8 Wilfrid Israel called at the British Embassy in Berlin to repudiate Grynszpan's act, and to warn of imminent reprisals. By the following day, November 9, vom Rath was dead. From the moment that news of his death reached Hitler in Munich, an unprecedented wave of violence broke over Germany's remaining three hundred thousand Jews. . . .

In twenty-four hours of street violence, ninety-one Jews were killed. More than thirty thousand - one in ten of those who remained - were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Before most of them were released two to three months later, as many as a thousand had been murdered, 244 of them in Buchenwald. pp 68-69

It was not by the killing, however, nor by the arrests or the suicides, that the night of November 9 was to be remembered. During the night, as well as breaking into tens of thousands of shops and homes, the Stormtroops set fire to one hundred and ninety-one synagogues; or, if it was thought that fire might endanger nearby buildings, smashed the synagogues as thoroughly as possible with hammers and axes.

The destruction of the synagogues led the Nazis to call that night the *Kristallnacht*, or "night of broken glass": words chosen deliberately to mock and belittle. From Leipzig, the United States Consul, David H. Buffum, reported that the three main synagogues, set on fire simultaneously, "were irreparably gutted by flames." At the Jewish cemetery in Leipzig the Nazis practised "tactics which approached the ghoulis," uprooting tombstones and violating graves. pp 68-70

In the aftermath of the Kristallnacht, German Jewry was 'fined' for the damage done. The fine, a thousand million marks, was levied by the compulsory confiscation of twenty per cent of the property of every German Jew. This confiscation was promulgated by government decree on 12 November 1938. Three days later, following five days of being pilloried and discriminated against in the classroom, German Jewish children were finally barred from German schools. p 73

The "opportunity offered by Grynspan's criminal act," Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes wrote to London from Berlin on that same day, November 16, "has let loose forces of medieval barbarism." The position of the German Jews was, he commented, "indeed tragic," and he added: "They dwell in the grip and at the mercy of a brutal oligarchy, which fiercely resents all humanitarian foreign intervention. Misery and despair are already there and when their resources are either denied to them or exhausted, their end will be starvation." p 73

Speaking in Berlin on 30 January 1939, Hitler declared that in the event of war: "The result will not be the bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe." p 76

As Nazi rule was imposed on Bohemia and Moravia, the Hungarian government took a further step towards isolating its own five hundred thousand Jews, and those tens of thousands of Jews brought within its borders by the annexation of southern Slovakia and Ruthenia, both formerly parts of post-1918 Czechoslovakia. p 79

On 23 August 1939 the world learned of the signature of a non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Suddenly it became clear that if Hitler were to invade Poland, the Soviet Union would stand aside. This pact was ominous news for the 3,250,000 Jews of Poland. p 82

On the evening of August 31, as German radio poured out a stream of venom against the Polish republic, sixty German Jewish children were traveling with their adult escort in a train crowded with German soldiers from Cologne to Cleve, the only point on the Dutch frontier to which trains were still running. Crossing the frontier, the train proceeded to the Hook of Holland. Overnight, the children crossed the North Sea to the British port of Harwich. There, at dawn on September 1, they learned that Germany had invaded Poland. p 83

September 1939: the Trapping of Polish Jewry

On Sunday, 3 September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany. They could do nothing to halt, or even slow down, the pace of the German advance across Poland. As the German forces advanced, and within hours of their occupation of a town or village, Jews were singled out for abuse and massacre by special SS 'operational groups,' acting in the rear of the German fighting forces. That same Sunday, September 3, a few hours after German troops had entered the frontier town of Wieruszow, one of these SS troops seized twenty Jews, among them several prominent citizens, took them to the market place, and lined them up for execution. Among these Jews was Israel Lewi, a man of sixty-four. When his daughter Leibe

Lewi, ran up to her father to say farewell, a German ordered her to open her mouth for her “impudence,” and then fired a bullet into it. Liebe Lewi fell dead on the spot. The twenty men were then executed. p 85

Entering Piotrkow itself on September 5, the Germans tried to set fire to the predominantly Jewish section of the city, shooting dead those Jews who ran from the burning buildings. After the fires had died down, German soldiers entered a house which had escaped the flames, took out six Jews, and ordered them to run. As the Jews ran, they were shot. Five died violently; the sixth, Reb Bunem Lebel, died later of his wounds.

In the first ten days of the German advance, such onslaughts against unarmed, defenceless civilians were carried out in more than a hundred towns and villages. pp 86-87

In the first fifty-five days of the German conquest and occupation of western and central Poland five thousand Jews were murdered behind the lines: dragged from their homes, and from their hiding places. “On the first day,” Eda Lichtmann has recalled, of the occupation of Pilica, “the Germans took people, especially men, to work, and forced them to clean and collect dust with their hands: Jewish men. They were ordered to undress, and behind each Jewish man there was a German soldier with a fixed bayonet who ordered him to run. If the Jew stopped, he would be hit in the back with a bayonet. Almost all the Jewish men returned home bleeding and amongst them - my father.” Then, a few days later, on September 12, “large trucks appeared all of a sudden,” soldiers jumped off the trucks, then went from house to house, seizing men, irrespective of their age.

Thirty-two Jews were seized that day in Pilica, as well as four Poles. First they were photographed, and their names recorded. Then they were marched into the market place and forced to call out, in German: “We are traitors of the people.” Then they were taken away in trucks. Eda Lichtmann ran after the trucks, with a friend whose father had also been seized. “We ran after them until a small forest. All the Jews were already dead on the ground. My father as well, shot in many parts of his body.” Jews and Poles: all were dead. “I kissed my father; he was as cold as ice.” pp 87-88

Even while these outbursts of confiscation and killing were taking place throughout western Poland, a conference was held in Berlin on September 21 at which the long-term future of Polish Jewry was discussed. The host of the conference was Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of the Reich Central Security Office. . . .



Heydrich told the conference that, as a prerequisite of the “ultimate aim,” Polish Jews were to be concentrated in the larger cities. If possible, large areas of western Poland “should be cleared completely of Jews,” or should at least have in them “as few concentration centres as possible.” Elsewhere in Poland, Jews should be concentrated only in cities situated at railway junctions, or along a railway, “so that future measures may be accomplished more easily.”

This “concentration of Jews in cities” meant the creation of ghettos, such as had not existed in Europe since the Middle Ages. To facilitate this “concentration,” Heydrich noted, orders would probably have to be given “forbidding Jews to enter certain districts of that city altogether.” At the same time, farmland belonging to Jews should be taken away from them: “entrusted to the care” of neighbouring German “or even Polish” peasants. pp 88-89

From the first week of the invasion of Poland, the Germans had established a euthanasia programme for ‘mental defectives’: not only Poles and Jews, but also Germans. The site to which mental patients were sent, and then killed, was in a forest near the village of Piasnica, not far from Danzig. Here, from the middle of October 1939 until the end of the year, several thousand ‘defectives’ were killed: twelve hundred of them being Germans who were sent there from psychiatric institutions inside Germany. Kurt Eimann, the SS officer in charge of the executions, was later accused - at Hanover in 1968 - of having personally shot the first victim in the back of the head, as an example for the rest of his men. p 95

In Lodz, where 233,000 Jews made up a third of the city’s population, daily incidents characterized the fate of Polish Jewry. Mary Berg, who had gone from Warsaw to Lodz, and had begun to keep a diary, recorded how, on November 2, she looked out of her window:

A man with markedly Semitic features was standing quietly on the sidewalk near the curb. A uniformed German approached him and apparently gave him an unreasonable order, for I could see that the poor fellow tried to explain something with an embarrassed expression. Then a few other uniformed Germans came upon the scene and began to beat their victim with rubber truncheons. They called a cab and tried to push him into it, but he resisted vigorously. The Germans then tied his legs together with a rope, attached the end of the rope to the cab from behind, and ordered the driver to start. The unfortunate man's face struck the sharp stones of the pavement, dyeing them red with blood. Then the cab vanished down the street.

The Germans who carried out such atrocities had been exposed for more than six years to the full venom of anti-Jewish propaganda: at school, in the newspapers, in their place of work, in the streets, and in their military indoctrination. “Behind all the enemies of Germany’s ascendancy,” a Berlin anti-Communist magazine declared on November 2, “stand those who demand our encirclement - the oldest enemies of the German people and of all healthy, rising nations - the Jews.” pp 98-97

‘Blood of Innocents’

On 13 November 1939, a twenty-year-old former convict, Pinkus Zylberryng, a Jew, had shot and killed a Polish policeman at 9 Nalewki Street, in the centre of Warsaw’s Jewish district. Although Zylberryng was identified, the Germans arrested all fifty-three male inhabitants of no. 9. On November 22, all fifty-three were executed. But before announcing the execution, the Germans demanded 300,000 zlotys from the Jewish Council. “The levy was to be a ransom for the lives of the men under arrest,” a member of the Council, Ludwik Landau, noted, “but when the representatives of the Council arrived, the money was taken from them, but they were told that the prisoners had already been shot.”

Among those shot in this reprisal action was one of Warsaw's leading gynaecologists, the forty-five-year-old Samuel Zamkowy. "This was the first mass arrest and murder," David Wdowinski later recalled, "and it threw the Jewish population into panic." p 102

In Warsaw, a book had been published in Yiddish that year, describing some of the worst moments in Jewish history: the Crusader massacre of Jews in the twelfth century, the Chmielnicki killings in the Ukraine in the seventeenth century, and the Ukrainian pogroms of 1918 and 1919. "But it did not occur to us," Yitzhak Zuckerman, then a young Zionist in Warsaw, later wrote, "that the poison cup was not yet empty, and that we should have to drain it to its last dregs." p 108

1940: 'A wave of evil'



On February 8 the Germans had ordered the setting up of a ghetto in Lodz, and chose as the site of the ghetto two of the most neglected districts of the city. Of a total of 31,721 apartments in this ghetto area, most of them with a single room, only 725 had running water. The use of electricity in the ghetto was forbidden between eight in the evening and six in the morning.

More than 160,000 Jews were moved inside the ghetto, which was 'closed' on May 1, from which day the German police were ordered to shoot without warning any Jew who might approach the barbed-wire fence which now surrounded it. p 116

While Nazi terror in Poland tightened its grip, Britain and France, at war with Germany since September 1939, had made no military move against Hitler's Reich. These were the months of the Phoney War. In Warsaw Chaim Kaplan noted in his diary on 7 March 1940, "Those who understand the military and political situation well are going about like mourners. There is no ground for hope that the decisive action will come this spring, and lack of a decision means that our terrible distress will last a long time." p 118

War in the West: Terror in the East

In April 1940, German forces occupied Norway, forestalling a British move, and defeating the British, French and Polish exile forces sent against them at Narvik. "Misery over the defeat in Norway," Ringelblum noted. "Our spirits have fallen." In Norway, seventeen hundred Jews, of whom three hundred were refugees from Germany, came under German rule. In Denmark, which German forces occupied as part of their Norwegian campaign, seven thousand four hundred more Jews were now within the Nazi orbit, fourteen hundred of them refugees from Germany, Austria and

Czechoslovakia. But neither the Norwegian nor the Danish Jews were molested, at the insistence of the Danish and Norwegian authorities, who retained certain minimal powers of internal administration. p 119

On May 10, German forces struck at Belgium, Holland and France. The speed and scale of the German advance, accompanied by air bombardment, soon overwhelmed the Belgian and Dutch forces. In north-eastern France, a large British army, trapped at Dunkirk, was forced to evacuate, leaving much of its equipment behind. The Germans then turned towards Paris. p 119

As the German armies drove through Holland on May 15, a further 140,000 Jews, among them several thousand refugees from pre-war Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, had been trapped behind German lines. A few thousand managed to escape southwards through France, travelling on roads crowded by other refugees and constantly strafed by German aircraft: several hundred reached the distant safety of the Pyrenees, and of neutral Spain and Portugal. Others reached sanctuary in Switzerland. p 120

In Poland, the Germans had decided to set up a new concentration camp, organised by SS men with previous experience of similar camps in Germany. The camp was intended to serve as a place of punishment for Polish political prisoners. The site chosen was in East Upper Silesia, a region annexed by Germany: the town, Oswiecim, was known in German as Auschwitz.

The Commandant of the new camp, Rudolph Hoess, had arrived on April 29 with five other SS men. On May 30, thirty more Germans, almost all of them convicted criminals, had been sent from the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, north of Berlin, to serve as barrack chiefs, or Kapos. Then, in the first two weeks of June, three hundred Jews from the town of Auschwitz were brought in to clean the site, a former Austro-Hungarian artillery barracks of the First World War. p 121

To defend their frontier with the Soviet Union, the Germans were constructing a fortified line, the "Otto Line" in south-eastern Poland. Tens of thousands of Jews were sent to the construction sites: to dig anti-tank ditches and artillery dugouts. Of two thousand young men and women sent from Radom to work in the Zamosc region, "almost all of them perished". Of a thousand young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five sent from Czestochowa in August 1940, "almost none survived." Thousands more were brought from independent Slovakia, a state delighted to comply with the German request for labour-deportees. p 123

On 1 August 1940 the first expulsion began from Cracow, with its eighty thousand Jewish inhabitants and refugees. In the first two weeks of August, a third of the Jews of Cracow were driven out to Warsaw and to other Polish towns. By the end of October, fifty thousand had been deported. p 123

Of the 400,000 Jews of Warsaw, more than 250,000 lived in the predominantly Jewish district. The remaining 150,00 lived throughout the city, some Jews in almost every street and suburb. On 3 October 1940, at the start of the Jewish New Year, the German Governor of Warsaw, Ludwig Fischer, announced that all Jews living outside the predominantly Jewish district would have to leave their homes and move to the

Jewish area. Whatever belongings could be moved by hand, or on carts, could go with them. The rest - the heavy furniture, the furnishings, the stock and equipment from shops and businesses - had to be abandoned.

Warsaw was to be divided into three 'quarters': one for Germans, one for Poles, and one for Jews. The Jews, who constituted a third of Warsaw's population, were to move into an area less than two and a half per cent of the total city: an area from which even some overwhelmingly Jewish streets were to be excluded.

More than a hundred thousand Poles, living in the area designated for the Jews, were likewise ordered to move, to the 'Polish quarter.' They too would lose their houses and their livelihoods. pp 127-129

Both Poles and Jews obeyed the fierce decree. Both, Chaim Kaplan noted in his diary on October 22, "curse the murderer with the wish that his world darken in his lifetime, just as he darkened their world by ordering them to do something against their will." p 130

On 15 November 1940 the Warsaw ghetto was officially declared to be in existence. With only twenty-seven thousand apartments available in the area of the ghetto, six to seven people were forced to live in each room. pp 131-132

The four hundred thousand Jews of Warsaw, and the two million and more Jews under German rule in November 1940, had no means of escape. But Jewish refugees from central Europe who had reached Slovakia some months earlier had been able to go by ship down the Danube and, once at the Black Sea, to sail to Palestine. p 133



On November 28, . . . a second anti-Jewish film was given its premiere in Berlin. *Der Ewige Jude*, 'The Eternal Jew,' was to be shown in cinemas throughout Germany and German-occupied Europe. The film sought to explain the part played by the Jews in world history. Scenes of rats and Jews were juxtaposed. The Jews, like the rats, were carriers of diseases, "money-mad bits of filth devoid of all higher values, corrupters of the world."

These images fanned the vicious racism of German propaganda, as they were designed to do. When German soldiers entered the Warsaw ghetto, they treated the Jews as vermin, entering houses at will to steal whatever they could find. "A Jew does not dare to make a sound of protest," Chaim Kaplan noted on December 6. "There have been cases when courageous Jews were shot in full view of their entire family, and the murderers were not held responsible, because their excuse was that the filthy Jew cursed the Fuhrer and it was their duty to avenge his honour." p 134

From Varna, in Bulgaria, a tiny craft of some 130 tons, the *Salvador*, had set out in mid-November with more than three hundred and fifty Jewish refugees crammed on

board. The British government, seeking to prevent their entry in Palestine, urged the Turkish and Greek governments not to allow the ship through the Dardanelles, or into the Aegean Sea. These urgings were unnecessary, however, for on December 12, while still in the Sea of Marmora, the *Salvador* sank: two hundred of the refugees were drowned, including seventy children. Five days later two British officials responsible for refugee policy for central Europe exchanged notes. "If anything can deter these poor devils from setting out for Zion, that story should," wrote one, to which the other replied: "I agree. There could have been no more opportune disaster from the point of view of stopping this traffic."

The 'traffic' did not stop.

p 135

January - June 1941: The Spreading Net



Mass deportations followed from all the towns and villages west and south of Warsaw. Between the end of January and the end of March, more than seventy thousand Jews were brought into the ghetto, raising its population to nearly half a million. "We ourselves," Zivia Luberkin later recalled, "lived twelve or fifteen people to a room." Refugees, she added, were sent to special houses which had somehow been evacuated of their

usual inhabitants. These were "the worst conditions" of the ghetto. . . .

There was no possibility, Zivia Lubertkin added, of separating the sick from the healthy, "and sometimes it was impossible to separate the dead from the living, those who died of starvation, children in the arms of their mothers." p 140

In Rumania, the anti-Jewish hatred of the Iron Guard burst out anew on 21 January 1941, when gangs of Legionnaires, some armed with guns, others with staves, hunted for Jews in the streets. Thousands of Jews were caught and beaten, hundreds of shops and houses were looted or burned, and twenty-five synagogues desecrated. After three days of these manhunts, 120 Jews had been killed. As in German-occupied Europe, these killings were carried out in a repulsive manner: "sadistic atrocities unsurpassed in horror," one of Churchill's Private Secretaries described them, "taking hundreds of Jews to cattle slaughterhouses and killing them according to the Jews' own ritual practices in slaughtering animals." The bodies of many of those murdered were then hung on meat hooks in the slaughterhouse, with placards around them announcing 'Kosher meat.' p 141

In January 1941, two thousand Jews had died of starvation in the Warsaw ghetto. The February toll was just as high. "Almost daily," Ringelblum noted on February 28, "people are falling dead or unconscious in the middle of the street. It no longer makes so direct an impression." The streets themselves were "forever full of newly arrived refugees." p 145

In Lodz the rate of starvation was almost as high as in Warsaw. “Although the ghetto of Lodz was initiated as a mere trial,” a Cologne newspaper commented on April 5, “as a mere prelude to the solution of the Jewish question, it has turned out to be the best and most perfect temporary solution.” A week later, the Germans announced publicly that any Jews leaving the Lodz ghetto would be shot on sight.

Such shootings had already begun.

pp 146-147

On 20 May 1941 the Central Office of Emigration in Berlin sent a circular letter to all German consulates, informing them that Goering had banned the emigration of Jews from all occupied territories, including France, in view of the “doubtless imminent final solution.” This was the first official reference to any such ‘final’ solution, or *Endlösung*. Within two weeks, on June 2, the threat of arbitrary arrest was embodied in a law authorizing the ‘administrative internment’ of all Jews in France, whether French-born, or foreign-born.

p 152

‘It cannot happen!’

Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union launched on 22 June 1941, marked a tragic turning-point in German policy towards the Jews. In the twenty-one months before Barbarossa, as many as thirty-thousand Jews had perished. Of these, ten thousand had been murdered in individual killings, in street massacres, in punitive reprisals, in outbreaks of savagery in the ghettos, and in the labour camps. Twenty thousand had died of starvation in the Warsaw and Lodz ghettos. But in no Jewish community had more than two or three per cent been murdered, while in Western Europe, the Jews had been virtually unmolested.

From the first hours of Barbarossa, however, throughout what had once been eastern Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, as well as in the Ukraine, White Russia and the western regions of the Russian Republic, a new policy was carried out, the systematic destruction of entire Jewish communities. . . . In the advance of the invasion of Russia, the SS leaders had prepared special killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, which set about finding and organizing local collaborators, Lithuanians and Ukrainians, in murder gangs, and were confident that the anti-Jewish hatreds which existed in the East could be turned easily to mass murder. In this they were right.

p 154



The slaughter in the East began from the first day of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Helped by Lithuanian, Latvian and Ukrainian policemen and auxiliaries, the *Einsatzgruppen* moved rapidly forward behind the advancing German forces. An eye-witness later recalled how, at the frontier village of Virbalis, Jews “were placed alive in anti-tank trenches about two kilometres long

and killed by machine guns. Lime was thereupon sprayed upon them and a second row of Jews was made to lie down. They were similarly shot.” Six more times, a new

line of Jews were driven into the trench. “Only the children were not shot. They were caught by the legs, their heads hit against stones and they were thereupon buried alive.” p 155

Wherever possible, Jews tried to resist the killers. But the forces against them were overwhelming. Sometimes the Jews succeeded, if only briefly, in halting the tide of killing. At Lubieszow, Jews armed themselves with axes, hammers, iron bars and pitchforks, to await the arrival of local Ukrainians intent upon murder as soon as the Red Army withdrew, and before the Germans had arrived. The Ukrainians came, and were beaten off. But then, retreating to the nearby village of Lubiaz, they fell immediately upon the few isolated Jewish families living there. When, the following morning, the Jews of Lubieszow’s self-defence group reached Lubiaz, “they found the bodies of twenty children, women and men without heads, bellies ripped open, legs and arms hacked off.” p 157

The ferocity of hatred was not directed only against Jews. Russian prisoners-of-war were also murdered in cold blood by the occupying forces. These Russians were likewise unarmed, defeated, and at the mercy of the conqueror. But the Germans showed them no mercy: by the end of the war, two and a half million Russian prisoners-of-war had been murdered. p 159



No day now passed without Jews being murdered. In Kovno, on Saturday, June 28, Lithuanian police joined with released convicts to hunt through the streets with iron bars, searching for Jews, and beating several hundred to death. On June 29, in the Rumanian city of Jassy, Rumanian soldiers and police went on the rampage, watched by German SS men, killing at

least two hundred and sixty Jews in their homes.



At the same time, five thousand Jews were arrested, marched through the streets while being beaten continuously by Rumanian and German police, shot if they fell, and, at the railway station, forced to lie on the ground while all their money, jewellery, rings and documents were taken from them. Eventually they were put

into sealed cattle trucks, a hundred people and more in each, in two trains, without food or water. . . .

By the time the train had reached Mirteshet, more than six hundred Jews had perished. At Mirteshet, a further 327 had died, or were shot. At the next halt, Sabaoani, 172 bodies were taken out of the train, and at Roman, a further 53. While at Roman, the surviving Jews were taken out of the train, made to strip naked in order to enter a disinfectant bath in a sanitary train, and then forced to spend the night naked on the ground. Fortunately, a local Christian woman, Viorica Agarici, head of the region’s Red Cross, insisted that measures were taken to lessen the torment of the journey, and some Jews were allowed out of the train altogether: but even of these, 143 died in the

coming month. At the next stop, Imotesti, forty bodies were taken out, and at Kalarash, the train's destination, a further twenty-five. The journey from Jassy lasted eight days.

Sixty-nine of the Jews who reached Kalarash were so weak that they did not survive more than a few days in the Kalarash camp. From a second train sent from Jassy on the same day, but in a different direction, 1,194 died: bringing the number of those killed, according to the officially certified Rumanian police reports, to more than two and a half thousand.

pp 161-163



140 SS-Ereutionskommando im Augenblick der Salve. Die Opfer stehen mit gefesselten Händen mit dem Rücken gegen die Schützen.

In the East, throughout July, the first victims were carefully chosen so that the communities immediately lost their natural leadership. In Minsk, within hours of the German occupation, forty thousand men and boys between the ages of fifteen and forty-five were assembled for 'registration,' under penalty of death: Jews, captured Soviet soldiers, and non-Jewish civilians. Taken to a field outside

the city, each group was put into a separate section. For four days all were kept in the field, surrounded by machine guns and floodlights. Then, on the fifth day, all Jewish members of the intelligentsia - doctors, lawyers, writers - were ordered to step forward. Some two thousand did so, not knowing for what purpose they would be needed, perhaps as administrators, as functionaries, or in their professional capacities. Many non-professionals were among those who stepped forward, believing that this group was to be given some privileged work or position, and wanting to be a part of it. All two thousand were then marched off to a nearby wood, and machine-gunned.

p 166

With every day of the German advance into Russia, tens of thousands of Jews found themselves trapped behind the German lines. So rapid was the advance that no one could outrun it. Local units, Lithuanian or Ukrainian, joined in the hunt for victims. Following the first furious slaughter in streets and homes, sites were chosen, such as the Ninth Fort in Kovno, or the empty fuel pits at Ponary, outside Vilna, beyond the view of witnesses.

The first Ponary executions took place on July 8. A hundred Jews at a time were brought from the city to Ponary, to a 'waiting zone.' Here, in what had once been a popular holiday resort for Vilna Jewry, they were ordered to undress and to hand over whatever money or valuables they had with them. They were then marched naked, single file, in groups of ten to twenty at a time, holding hands, to the edge of the fuel pits, and shot down by rifle fire. After they had fallen into the pit, no attempt was made to see if they were all dead. If anyone moved, another shot was fired. The bodies were then covered, from above, with a thin layer of sand, and the

next group of naked prisoners led from the waiting area to the edge of the pit. From where they had waited, the people had heard the sound of rifle fire, but seen nothing.

In the twelve days following July 8, as many as five thousand Vilna Jews were murdered this way. In the smaller towns and villages, whole communities could be killed in a single day. On July 10, in the village of Jedwabne, all sixteen hundred Jews were driven into the market place by the SS, tortured for several hours, then driven into a barn and burned alive. p 170

The speed and scale of the slaughter gave no time for organized resistance. The Germans continued, in every town, to destroy the natural leaders. "By now," reported one *Einsatzgruppe* on July 24, from the town of Lachowicze, "the entire Jewish intelligentsia has been liquidated (teachers, professors, lawyers etc . . .)". Of the professional classes, only doctors had been spared, to remain alive with the survivors in a specially created ghetto. But the numbers killed exceeded by far the intelligentsia of the town: this particular *Einsatzgruppe* reported, with the usual precision, a total of 4,435 'liquidated' in Lachowicze. p 172

Within five *weeks* of the German invasion of Russia on June 22, the number of Jews killed exceeded the total number killed in the previous eight *years* of Nazi rule. The invasion of Russia had provided the Germans with an opportunity hitherto lacking: a remote region, the cover of an advancing army, vast distances, local collaborators, and an intensified will to destroy. The first 'five-figure' massacre ended on July 31, in Kishinev, after fourteen days' uninterrupted slaughter, in which ten thousand Jews were murdered. Similar mass executions were taking place in every city: in Zhitomir more than two and a half thousand had been murdered. p 175

On July 31, Goering had instructed Heydrich "to carry out all the necessary preparations with regard to organizational and financial matters for bringing about a complete solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe." This was Goering's second reference, the first having been two months earlier, on May 20, to a 'complete' or 'final' solution of what the Germans chose to call 'the Jewish question.' p 176

Goering's letter of July 31 made it clear that something drastic was in preparation, albeit at an early phase: a "complete solution," unexplained, yet comprehensive. Meanwhile, in the East, there was to be no respite in the savage, daily slaughter. "It may be safely assumed," Heydrich informed Himmler on August 1, "that in the future there will be no more Jews in the annexed Eastern Territories." p 177

'A crime without a name'

In August 1941, in the village of Kamien Koszyrski, the Chairman of the Jewish Council, Shmuel Verble, was ordered to deliver a list of eighty names. He did so, unaware of the purpose of the list. But when, after handing it over, he learned that the Germans intended to kill all those on the list, he went at once to the local German police post and asked to be included. His request was accepted. He was shot last: the eighty-first victim. p 181

The daily murder of Jews in hundreds of smaller localities continued, unaffected by the establishment of ghettos in the larger towns and cities. On August 15, the day of confinement and apparent safety for the twenty-six thousand Jews in Kovno, six hundred Jews in Stawiski, near Bialystok, were taken to the nearby woods and shot. Only sixty remained alive, as forced labourers. That same day, at Rokiskis, a two-day massacre began, in which 3,200 Jews were shot: men, women and children, together with “5 Lithuanian Communists, 1 Pole, 1 partisan.” On the second day of the Rokiskis killings, an official report drawn up in Berlin dwelt upon the attitude of the Catholic Church in Lithuania. Bishop Brisgys, the report stated, “had forbidden clergymen to help Jews in any form whatsoever. He rejected several Jewish delegations who, approaching him personally, asked for intervention with the German authorities. He will not admit any Jews at all in future.” p 183

To prevent any show of Jewish resistance, the Germans resorted to massive reprisals. After a single German policeman had been shot dead in an ambush, near Pinsk, the Einsatzkommando unit in the area reported that, “as a reprisal, 4,500 Jews were liquidated.” Jewish acts of defiance, however hopeless, were continuous. p 184



Every day in September 1941 Jews were slaughtered by Einsatzkommando units. Even in Vilna, despite the establishment on September 6 of two ghettos, the ‘large’ and the ‘small,’ the killers soon returned, taking to Ponar a further 3,434 Jews on September 12 and 1,267 five days later. Of those murdered, according to the careful statistics of the SS, 2,357 were women and 1,018 were children. Even on the day of the setting up of the ghetto, a day on which it was

intended to lull the Jews into some sense of security, killings had taken place. “When I arrived at the ghetto,” Avraham Sutzkever later recalled, “I saw the following scene. Martin Weiss - a member of the District Commissar's staff - came in with a young Jewish girl. When we went in further he took out his revolver and shot her on the spot. The girl’s name was Gitele Tarlo.” Gitele Tarlo was eleven years old.

pp 194-195

At Kiev, on September 27 and 28, posters throughout the city demanded the assembly of Jews for ‘resettlement.’ More than thirty thousand reported. Because of “our special talent for organisation,” the commander of the Einsatzkommando reported two days later, “the Jews still believed to the very last moment before being executed that indeed all that was happening was that they were being resettled.”

The Jews of Kiev were brought to Babi Yar, a ravine just outside the city. There, they were shot down by machine-gun fire. Immediately after the war, a non-Jew, the watchman at the old Jewish cemetery, near Babi Yar, recalled how Ukrainian policemen:

formed a corridor and drove the panic-stricken people toward the huge glade, where sticks, swearings, and dogs, who were tearing the people’s bodies, forced the people

to undress, to form columns in hundreds, and then to go in the columns in twos towards the mouth of the ravine.

At the mouth of the ravine, the watchman recalled:

They found themselves on the narrow ground above the precipice, twenty to twenty-five metres in height, and on the opposite side there were the Germans machine guns. The killed, wounded and half-alive people fell down and were smashed there. Then the next hundred were brought, and everything repeated again. The policemen took the children by the legs and threw them alive down into the Yar.

That day the watchman witnessed “horrible scenes of human grief and despair.” In the evening, he noted, “the Germans undermined the wall of the ravine and buried the people under thick layers of earth. But the earth was moving long after, because wounded and still alive Jews were still moving. One girl was crying: ‘Mammy, why do they pour the sand into my eyes?’” pp 202-203

After two days of shooting, the Einsatzkommando unit recorded the murder of 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar. The unit’s machine-gunners had been helped by the Ukrainian militiamen. The same Einsatzkommando report also gave details of an even larger slaughter further south, 35,782 ‘Jews and Communists’ killed in the Black Sea ports of Nikolayev and Kherson. p 206

From the end of June 1941 to the end of December, at least forty-eight thousand Jews were murdered at Ponar. After the killings of September 3, six are known to have crawled out of the pit alive, and survived. All of them were women. p 207

On October 4, the Kovno ghetto was raided, and fifteen hundred Jews who had no work permits were taken to the ninth Fort and murdered. But from the hospital in Kovno, no one was taken away, even though none of them had work permits. Instead, the building was locked, and then set on fire. Patients, doctors and nurses were burned alive. “Even now,” Zalman Grinberg recalled three and a half years later, “I can see the blazing hospital. It seems like a bad dream, but, alas, it was true!” p 208

‘Write and record!’

That difficulty [transport] was being overcome. On October 16 the first of twenty trains left Germany ‘for the East.’ By November 4 they had all completed their journey, taking 19,837 Jews to the Lodz ghetto. One of these trains, with 512 Jews, came from Luxembourg. Five trains, with 5,000 Jews in all, came from Vienna, a similar number from Prague, and 4,187 in four trains, from Berlin. Other trains came from Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg Dusseldorf. . . .

The ‘Western European’ Jews protested to the ghetto dwellers that, “somewhere along the line, they had been led astray.” They had been told they were going “to some industrial centre, where each of them would find suitable employment.” Some of them even asked if they could not “reside in a hotel of some sort.” Losing their bearings, they began to feel “small and hopeless.” pp 213-214

To the distress of the Einsatzgruppen, the local population in White Russia, one commander reported, had “not proposed to take part in any pogroms,” a fact which made ‘vigorous’ action by the Germans themselves all the more imperative. It was experienced repeatedly, according to one Einsatzgruppen report, that “Jewish women showed an especially obstinate behaviour.” For this reason, the report continued, “28 Jewesses had to be shot in Krugloje and 337 at Mogilev.” p 217



On October 16 Rumanian and German forces had occupied Odessa, after a two-month siege. Six days later, at 5.35 in the afternoon, an explosion blew up the Rumanian command headquarters in the city. Seventeen Rumanian and four German officers were killed, including General Glogojeanu, head of Rumanian Occupation Command. “I have taken steps,” telegraphed Glogojeanu’s deputy, General Trestioreanu, three hours later, “to hang Jews and Communists in Odessa squares.” By noon on the following day, October 23, as the reprisals gathered momentum, five thousand

civilians had been seized and shot, most of them Jews, of whom at least eighty thousand had been unable to flee before the city was surrounded in August.

The campaign which now ensued against the Jews of Odessa was reported by the Germans who witnessed it. That same morning,, October 23, nineteen thousand Jews were assembled into a square near the port, which was surrounded by a wooden fence; they were sprayed with gasoline and burnt alive. In the afternoon, the gendarmerie and the police rounded up over twenty thousand persons in the streets - again, most of them Jews - and squeezed them into the municipal jail. The next day, October 24, they removed sixteen thousand Jews from the jail and led them out of the city in long columns, in the direction of Dalnik, a nearby village.

When the first Jews reached Dalnik they were bound to one another’s arms in groups of between forty and fifty, thrown into an anti-tank ditch and shot dead. When this method proved too slow, they were pressed into four large warehouses which had holes in the walls. Machine-gun nozzles were pushed into the holes, and in this manner mass murder was committed in one warehouse after another. . . .

Following the massacres of October 23, 24 and 25, a further ten thousand Jews were deported from Odessa to three concentration camps established near Golta: Bogdanovka, Domanovka and Acmececa. There, they were murdered two months later, together with tens of thousands of other Jews who had been brought to these camps from northern Transnistria and Bessarabia. pp 217-219

Throughout the autumn of 1941, methods of mass murder were being devised which were intended to be more efficient, and more secret, than the shooting hitherto employed in the East. On October 25, as news of the previous day’s slaughter in the streets of Vilna reached Berlin, Alfred Wetzel, an official in the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, noted that Dr Viktor Brack, a member of Hitler’s

Chancellery and an expert on euthanasia, had already “coordinated the supply of instruments and apparatus for killing people through poison gas.” This was to be the new method. . . .

To judge from the ‘actual situation,’ Wetzel added, “one need have no scruple in using Brack’s method to liquidate Jews who are unsuitable for work.” In this way, it would be possible to avoid ‘incidents’ such as occurred “during the shootings at Vilna - and these shootings were public, according to the report that I have before me.” Such public shootings “will no longer be possible or tolerated.” p 219

A new policy was emerging: to deport, and to gas, and to do so unobserved by passers-by or curious soldiers: to take the killings off the streets and away from the environs of the towns and cities. It was to take several months before this policy could be put into effect. But with the German army at the gates of Moscow, British forces on the defensive in Egypt, and the United States still neutral, the Germans had time enough. pp 221-222

The evolving plans for murder by gas would ensure that most future killings would be done behind a mask of secrecy, by methods which far fewer people would have to see, and in circumstances which would reduce to a minimum the chance of disgust or discovery. In anticipation of the new method, individual Jews were now refused permission to emigrate, even within regions under German influence. p 222

Rauca continued all day with the selection, clutcing a leather whip with metal tips, drinking coffee, and munching sandwiches, his dog at his feet. One by one, as people stepped forward, his voice could be heard calling, “You left, you right.” For Rauca, recalled Leon Bauminger, “Right was death and left was life.” . . .

Those Kovno Jews who were sent by Rauca to the right could still not believe that they had really been marked out for death. “That morning in Democracy Square,” a Lithuanian doctor, Helen Kutorgene, noted in her diary, “nobody suspected that a bitter fate awaited them. They thought that they were being moved to other apartments.” . . .

Dr Kutorgene added that once the Jews whom Rauca had sent to the right realised where they were being sent:

They broke out crying, wailed, screamed. Some tried to escape on the way there but they were shot dead. many bodies remained in the fields. At the fort the condemned were stripped of their clothes, and in groups of three hundred they were forced into the ditches. First they threw in the children. The women were shot at the edge of the ditch, after that it was the turn of the men. Many were covered while they were still alive. All the men doing the shooting were drunk. I was told all this by an acquaintance who heard it from a German soldier, an eye-witness, who wrote to his Catholic wife: “Yesterday I became convinced that there is no God. If there were, He would not allow such things to happen.”

The massacre had been carried out by German SS men and Lithuanian police. On return from the killing, one of the Lithuanians ‘boasted’ - as a Jew, Alter Galperin later recalled - “that he had dragged small Jewish children by the hair, stabbing them with the edge of his bayonet, and throwing them half alive into pits.” The smallest

children “he just threw into the pit alive, because to kill all of them first was too much work.”
pp 224-226

The number of those murdered was recorded, once again, in the precise statistics of the Einsatzkommando: “2,007 Jewish men, 2,920 Jewish women, 4,273 Jewish children.” There was the added comment, “cleaning the ghetto of superfluous Jews.” Of the total death toll of 9,200 nearly half were children.
p 227



German Jews were also deported to Riga and Kovno. On November 27 the first of nineteen trains left the Reich for Riga: it came from Berlin. Even as this train was on its way from Berlin, the Riga ghetto was the object of a massive raid, during which 10,600 Jews were seized, taken to the pits in the nearby Rumbuli forest, and shot. When the train from Berlin arrived a few days later, most of the thousand German Jews were likewise taken out to

Rumbuli, and killed. Then, in a second, three-day raid on the Riga ghetto, from December 7 to December 9, a further twenty-five thousand Riga Jews were killed, among them the eighty-one-year-old Doyen of Jewish historians, Simon Dubnov. . . .

With this second Rumbuli massacre, eighty per cent of Riga Jewry had been murdered. The few survivors were put into a forced labour camp, ‘the little ghetto,’ the women being imprisoned separately from the men. The Riga ghetto was ready for any further deportees from Germany.
pp 229-230

A further fifteen thousand German Jews were sent to Kovno, principally from Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Breslau and Frankfurt. An eye-witness in Kovno, Dr Aharon Peretz, later recalled how, as the deportees were being led along the road which went past the ghetto, towards the Ninth Fort, they could be heard asking the guards, “Is the camp still far?” They had been told they were being sent to a work camp. But, as Peretz added, “We know where that road led. It led to the ninth Fort, to the prepared pits.” But first, the Jews from Germany were kept for three days in underground cellars, with ice-covered walls, and without food or drink. Only then, frozen and starving, were they ordered to undress taken to the pits, and shot.
p 230

Throughout the late autumn and early winter of 1941, details had filtered through to the West of many eastern executions. On November 14, in a message to the *Jewish Chronicle* on its centenary, Winston Churchill gave public recognition to the Jewish suffering, “None has suffered more cruelly than the Jew,” he wrote, “the unspeakable evils wrought on the bodies and spirits of men by Hitler and his vile regime. The Jew bore the brunt of the Nazis' first onslaught upon the citadels of freedom and human dignity. He has borne and continues to bear a burden that might have seemed to be beyond endurance. He has not allowed it to break his spirit: he has never lost the will to resist.”

Churchill's message continued: "Assuredly in the day of victory the Jews' sufferings and his part in the struggle will not be forgotten. Once again, at the appointed time, he will see vindicated those principles of righteousness which it was the glory of his fathers to proclaim to the world. Once again it will be shown that, though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceedingly small." pp 231-232



Inside the Warsaw ghetto, the deaths from starvation were accelerated by the winter cold. "The most fearful sight is that of freezing children," Ringelblum noted in mid-November. "Little children with bare feet, bare knees and torn clothing stand dumbly in the street weeping. Tonight, the 14th, I heard a tot of three or four yammering. The child will probably be found frozen to death tomorrow morning, a few hours off." Six weeks earlier, Ringelblum recalled, when the first snow had fallen, some seventy children were "found frozen to death on the steps of ruined houses." p 232

The deaths from cold continued: "In the streets," Mary Berg noted on November 22, "frozen human corpses are an increasingly frequent sight." Sometimes a mother "cuddles a child frozen to death, and tries to warm the inanimate little body. Sometimes a child huddles against his mother, thinking that she is asleep and trying to awaken her, while, in fact, she is dead." p 233

The Eastern murders continued throughout November 1941. At Liepaja, however, all such shootings had been forbidden by direct orders from the Reich Commissar for the 'Ostland' region of the Baltic, Hinrich Lohse. asked by his superiors in Berlin why he had halted the executions, Lohse replied on November 15 that "the manner in which they were performed could not be justified." Not moral, but economic reasons, were his complaint: the destruction of much manpower that could be of use to the war economy. Was it intended, Lohse asked, that Jews were to be killed, "irrespective of age, sex or economic factors."

A month later Lohse was informed, by the Ministry of Occupied Eastern Territories, that "as a matter of principle, no economic factors are to be taken into consideration in the solution of the Jewish question." Only a fragment of Eastern Jewry had been kept alive for work purposes. On December 1, the chief of Einsatzkommando 3, SS Colonel Karl Jaeger, reported to Berlin that only fifteen per cent of Lithuanian Jewry remained alive. All of them he explained, were *Arbeitsjuden*, working Jews. p 234

In Kovno itself, Jaeger reported, 'trained' Lithuanians were available "in sufficient numbers." As a result, the city was, as he expressed it, "comparatively speaking a shooting paradise." Jaeger added that in his view "the male work-Jews should be

sterilized immediately to prevent any procreation.” A Jewess who, “nevertheless,” was pregnant “is to be liquidated.”

p 325

In the General Government of Poland, and in Western Europe, it was not the massacres in a nearby ravine, as at Nowogrodek, but deportation to distant sites, as far as a thousand miles away, that was emerging as the plan: with gassing, not shooting, as the method of death.

pp 236-237



On November 24 . . . a ghetto was set up in the eighteenth-century fortress of the Bohemian town of Theresienstadt, to which Jews were to be sent from throughout the Old Reich, and in particular from Vienna, Prague and Berlin. Uprooted from their homes, penniless, deprived of their belongings, ill-fed, overcrowded, thirty-two thousand were to die there of hunger and disease.

p 238

Neither deportation to the eastern ghettos nor deportation to Theresienstadt was the ‘final solution.’ That was still being prepared, brought one step nearer than October, at Buchenwald, when twelve hundred Jews had been medically examined by Dr Fritz Mennecke, a euthanasia expert, and then subjected to “Action 14 f 13” in a clinic at Bernberg, one hundred miles away. “Action 14 f 13” was death by gassing: a method in use since 1939 in the mass murder of tens of thousands of mentally defective Germans in more than a dozen special institutions.

p 238

In Germany, the chief of the Criminal Police Office in Stuttgart, Christian Wirth, an expert in tracking down criminals - took charge of the technical side of a more ‘humane’ method of killing, constructing gas-chambers in which the victim was exposed to carbon monoxide gas, “a device”, one SS officer later explained, “which overwhelmed its victims without their apprehension and which caused them no pain.”

Between January 1940 and August 1941, more than seventy thousand Germans had been killed by gas in five separate euthanasia institutions, by what was called *sonderbehandlung*, ‘special treatment.’ The principal victims were the chronically sick, gypsies, people judged ‘unworthy of life’ because of mental disorders, and, after June 1941, Soviet prisoners-of-war.

On 3 September 1941, at Auschwitz Main Camp, hitherto used principally for the imprisonment and torture of Polish opponents of Nazism, an experiment had been carried out against six hundred Soviet prisoners-of-war, and three hundred Jews, brought specially to the camp. There, in the cellar of Block 11, a gas called Cyclon B, prussic acid initially in crystal forms, was used to murder the chosen victims. The experiment was judged a success.

pp 238-239

On 7 December 1941, as the first seven hundred Jews were being deported to the death camp at Chelmno, Japanese aircraft attacked the United States Fleet at Pearl Harbour. Unknown at the time either to the Allies or to the Jews of Europe, Roosevelt's day that would "live in infamy" was also the first day of the 'final solution.'

p 240

The 'final solution'

The killings in the East were not restricted to Jews. On the night of December 21, the bodies of several thousand Soviet prisoners-of-war were laid out by the Germans along a six-kilometer stretch of road in Minsk. On the previous day most of the Russians had been deliberately frozen to death in a march across the open fields. Some had been shot when, in desperation, they had sought some shelter from the fierce wind. In Vilna, when thousands of Jews were driven from the ghetto to the railway junction after a heavy blizzard, to clear snow from the lines, they found hundreds of Soviet prisoners-of-war shoveling the snow, half-naked, many of them without boots. "Among the Jews," Reuben Ainsztein has written, "was my sister Mania Liff, who saw a Jewish woman give a piece of bread to a Russian. This was noticed by a German guard who at once shot dead both the Russian and the Jewess."

p 246

At Chelmno, the gassing of whole communities was continuing day by day. Gypsies, too, were among the first victims. On January 7, the first of five thousand Gypsies, who had earlier been deported to the Jewish ghetto in Lodz from their encampments in Germany, were taken from Lodz to Chelmno by truck. All were gassed. With them was a Jewish doctor, Dr Fickelburg, and a Jewish nurse, whose name is unknown. They had been working as a medical team in the Gypsy section of the ghetto. They too were gassed.

On January 9, a thousand Jews from the nearby village of Klodawa were deported to Chelmno. Every one was gassed.

The deportation of Gypsies from the Lodz ghetto having been completed, on January 13 the deportation began of ten thousand Jews from the Lodz ghetto, also to Chelmno, at the carefully controlled rate of seven hundred a day. To lull the deportees with a belief in 'resettlement,' they had been made to exchange whatever Polish or other money they had into German marks. They were also told that they could either sell their furniture, or leave it 'for safekeeping' at the carpenters' shops in the ghetto. Before leaving, each deportee was given a 'free distribution' of clothing: warm underwear, earmuffs, gloves, stockings, socks and clogs. They were also given "half a loaf of bread and a sausage for the road."

The Chronicle of the Lodz ghetto recorded with precision the number of deportees: 5,353 men and 5,750 women. The Chronicle only knew that they had been 'resettled,' not that they had been deported to Chelmno, and gassed.

pp 250-251

20 January 1942. The Wannsee Conference

The Wannsee Conference took place on 20 January 1942. The notes which were taken of its deliberations make no reference to the gassings which had taken place at Chelmno throughout the previous forty-four days; a period during which more than forty thousand Jews and Gypsies had been murdered. According to the notes of the Conference, Heydrich began telling the assembled senior civil servants of his appointment “as Plenipotentiary for the Preparation of the Final Solution of the European Jewish Question.” As a result of this appointment, he told them, it was his aim “to achieve clarity in essential matters.” Heydrich went on to tell the Conference that Goering had asked to see “a draft project” of this “final solution.” Such a draft, he added, would require “prior joint consultation” of all the ministries involved “in view of the need for parallel procedure.”

Heydrich then explained that this “final solution” concerned, not only those Jews who were already under German rule, but “some eleven million Jews” throughout Europe.

The figures presented by Heydrich included 34,000 for Lithuania. The other 200,000 Jews of pre-war Lithuania had, though he did not say so, been murdered between July and November 1941 by Einsatzgruppe A, their numbers meticulously listed town by town and village by village in Colonel Jaeger's report of December 1941.

pp 280-281

The senior officials present at the Wannsee Conference were from the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, the Ministry of the Interior, the Justice Ministry, the Foreign Office, the General Government of Poland, the Chancellery, and the Race and Resettlement Office. Also present was the Plenipotentiary for the Four Year Plan, responsible for disposing of Jewish property. All were asked by Heydrich to cooperate “in the implementation of the solution.”

p 281

By the end of 1942, the Germans needed only to establish the apparatus of total destruction: death camps in remote areas, rolling stock, timetables, confiscation patterns, deportation schedules, and camps; and then to rely upon the tacit, unspoken, unrecorded connivance of thousands of people: administrators and bureaucrats who would do their duty, organize round-ups, supervise detention centres, coordinate schedules, and send local Jews on their way to a distant ‘unknown destination,’ to ‘work camps’ in ‘Poland,’ to ‘resettlement’ in ‘the East.’

The officials present at the Wannsee Conference had agreed with Heydrich's suggestion that the “final solution” should be carried out in coordination with Heydrich's own ‘department head,’ Adolf Eichmann.

p 284

In addition to the technical arrangements involving thousands of trains and tens of thousands of miles, a complex system of subterfuge had to be created, whereby the idea of ‘resettlement’ could be made to appear a tolerable one.

All this was done by Eichmann's section, whose representatives were soon active in France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Norway, Rumania, Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. Regular meetings were held in Berlin to coordinate the

complex yet essential aspect of the impending deportations: the despatch of full trains and the return of empty trains. p 284



Most of the deportees were gassed within hours of their arrival, husbands with their wives, mothers with their children, the old, the sick, the infirm, pregnant women, babies; no exceptions were made and no mercy was shown. Later, camps were to be set up at which as many as half of the deportees were 'selected' for

forced labour, but at Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka no such 'selections' were made. In these four camps, between the early months of 1942 and the first months of 1943, many hundreds of Jewish communities were to be wiped out in their entirety: more than fifty communities at Chelmno alone. Yet within a few months Chelmno was to prove the second smallest of the four death camps; a camp at which, nevertheless, at least 360,000 Jews were killed within a year. p 286

From Belzec there were to be no more than two survivors, from Chelmno only three, from Treblinka less than forty, and from Sobibor a total of sixty-four; while from Auschwitz-Birkenau, several thousand Jews were to survive. p 287



In Yugoslavia, in the first week of January, Hungarian soldiers ran amok, killing several thousand Jews and Serbs. On January 23, at Novi Sad, 550 Jews and 292 Serbs were driven on to the ice of the Danube, which was then shelled. The ice broke, and the victims drowned. At Stari Becej, on January 26 and the two following days, a hundred Jews and a hundred Serbs were slaughtered. At

Titel, thirty-five of the thirty-six Jews living in the village were killed. These killings, seen and publicized, led the Hungarian government to charge the senior Hungarian officer responsible for the murder of six thousand Serbs and four thousand Jews: before he could be brought to trial, however, he fled to Germany. pp 287-288

Six weeks after the Wannsee Conference, a second death camp was opened, at Belzec. In those six weeks, in addition to the continuing gassings at Chelmno, tens of thousands of Jews were to die elsewhere: the largest number, 5,123, died of starvation in Warsaw in January. Thousands also died in each of the ghettos in the General Government, and, further east, in White Russia, the Ukraine and Volhynia, of starvation, typhus and shooting. p 288

On January 12 the deportations from the Slobodka 'ghetto' began. Within six weeks, a total of 19,582 Odessa Jews, the majority women, children and old people, had been taken by rail in sealed trucks to Berezovka, and then on to two concentration camps in the Goltas district. . . .

Once the deportees had reached the Golta district, Dora Litani has written, they were sent to two camps, one at Bogdanovka, the other at Domanovka. There they were packed into partly destroyed houses, without doors or windows, and into warehouses, stables and pigpens. "Disease cut short the lives of hundreds of people, for they lay without food or medical care." Those capable of working were sent to farms in the region, some nearby, others some distance away. "They lived like work-animals, but unlike animals they received neither food nor care of any kind."

Within a year and a half, almost none of these 19,582 deportees were alive. Most had died of starvation, severe cold, untreated disease, or in repeated mass executions in which several hundreds would be shot at a time. p 289

This Viennese transport reached Riga on February 10. It was met at the station by Dr Rudolph Lange, one of the Nazi officials who had been present at the Wannsee Conference. Gertrude Schneider later recalled how Lange told these latest arrivals that those who were "unwilling or unable" to walk the seven kilometers to the ghetto could make the journey on trucks which had been especially reserved for them. "In this way," he said, "those of you who ride can prepare a place for those who walk." Gertrude Schneider's account continued:

It was an extremely cold day - forty-two degrees below zero, to be exact - and so the majority of the hapless, unsuspecting Jews from Vienna took his advice and lined up to board the trucks. They did not know that those greyish-blue trucks had been manufactured by the Saurer Works in Austria especially for the implementation of the 'final solution.' These trucks were the famous gas-vans, which were used from time to time despite the fact that the SS did not especially like them because they always had mechanical problems.

At the time of the arrival of this train on February 10, more than five thousand of the twenty thousand Riga Jews who had come from the Reich had already been murdered. pp 290-291

'Journey into the unknown'

Throughout February 1942 the deportations to the death camp at Chelmno continued, systematically destroying the Jewish communities of western Poland. Also throughout February, gas-chambers were under construction at Belzec and Sobidor. But even as these preparations were being made, the Jews of German-occupied Poland and western Russia continued to suffer from the earlier German policies of spasmodic massacre and deliberate starvation. In the Warsaw ghetto, deaths from starvation in 1941 had approached the horrific total of fifty thousand. p 294

On February 12, when three thousand Jews were rounded up in the Ukrainian town of Brailov, to be marched away for execution, the Council Elder there, Josef Kulok,

refused an offer to join the skilled workers who were to be spared, and chose to die with the community.

p 295



In the second week of March 1942, deportations began from central Europe to the region of the new death camp at Belzec. The first deportees were 1,001 Jews from the ghetto at Theresienstadt. Their train, 'Transport Aa,' left the ghetto on March 11, reaching the village of Izbica Lubelska, north of Belzec, two days later. At Izbica they were kept in the ghetto, made to clear rubble, and later sent to Belzec. Of the 1,001 Jews in

the first deportation from Theresienstadt, only six survived the war. . . .

Of the six hundred thousand Jews deported to this single death camp, only two are known to have survived.

p 302

The village-by-village massacres in German-occupied Russia had continued without respite throughout the early months of 1942. No village was too remote, no Jewish community too small, to be overlooked. On the night of March 16 it was upon the 1,816 Jews of the village of Pochep that the execution squads descended. All were 'brutally killed' in an anti-tank ditch just outside the village, as a memorial stone in the local cemetery records.

p 307

At this "monstrous camp," [Belzec] more than six hundred thousand Jews were murdered in less than a year. No selection was made to keep alive those capable of work: only a few hundred were chosen to be a part of a *Sonderkommando*, or 'Special Commando,' some employed in taking the bodies of those who had been gassed to the burial pits, others in sorting the clothes of the victims and in preparing those clothes and other belongings for dispatch to Germany. Eventually, the members of this *Sonderkommando* were also murdered. "The procedure is pretty barbaric," Josef Goebbels noted in his diary on March 27, "one not to be described here most definitely. Not much will remain of the Jews."

pp 308-309

At Belzec, the man in charge of the killings was Christian Wirth, who was also given the task of choosing someone to organize a third death camp, at Sobibor. Wirth chose Franz Stangl, who went to prepare the site at Sobibor, helped by Michel Hermann, formerly the head nurse at the largest of the German euthanasia centres, Schloss Hartheim. Stangl later recalled his first visit to Belzec, by car from Sobibor. "The smell," he said, "oh God, the smell. It was everywhere."

p 311

Throughout Eastern Europe, rumours abounded as to some sinister fate for the growing number of Jews being deported 'to the East.' But the exact nature of that fate was still unknown. Also unknown was the reason: the "final solution," worked out administratively at Wannsee, remained a tight secret. Even so, evidence that the killings were not to be limited to a single region, or to chance, began to be clear to the Jews in Warsaw towards the end of March 1942, with a second messenger with evil

tidings. The first had been Heniek Grabowski, who had brought with him in November 1941 an account of the mass killings in Vilna that autumn. The second was Yakov Grojanowski, who now gave his eye-witness account of the disposal of the murdered Jews and Gypsies at Chelmno. pp 313-314

The Germans were determined to maintain total deception. “The Reichsfuhrer desires,” wrote Himmler’s personal secretary to the Inspector for Statistics on April 10, “that no mention be made of the ‘special treatment of the Jews.’ It must be called ‘transportation of the Jews towards the Russian East.’ Even ‘special treatment’ – *sonderbehandlung* - was understood to be too explicit a term. p 319

In mid-April a new death camp was ready to receive deportees. This was Sobibor camp, in a remote woodland area near the River Bug. As at Chelmno and Belzec, there were to be almost no survivors: the aim of the camp was to kill, not to segregate and preserve for forced labour. pp 324-325

‘Another journey into the unknown’

Unable to conceive of his own death, a man, even when surrounded by the death of others, grasps at any hope or rumour that might distance him from the realisation that he himself might be marked out for death. Any rumour which confirms that death might not be in prospect is acceptable. It was this psychological mechanism, the impossibility of conceiving one’s own death, that gave the hopeful rumours their force, and laid the groundwork for the deceptions that were to come. One might fear the worst, one might dread it, one might be told of it in the starkest terms, but one would not believe it. Even harder to grasp was the pathology of those who were committing the murders.

Not only among the outside world of Allies and neutrals, but among the Jews themselves in the midst of these terrible events, it was impossible fully to conceive that a child could be butchered in the way that so many hundreds of thousands of Jewish children had already been butchered. Yet once it had proved impossible for the Jews who witnessed these horrors to enter into the pathology of their persecutors, then it was possible for hope also to survive, which the full realisation of what was taking place would long before have destroyed. p 333

At Auschwitz, as at Chelmno, Belzec and Sobibor, the Germans set up one of the most hellish aspects of the death camp system, the Sonderkommando, selecting a small number of Jews for a special team, whose job was to dispose of the corpses of those who had been murdered. At the nearby village and birch wood of Birkenau, in the summer of 1942, the task of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando was to dig up the burial pits near the camp, then to drag the corpses from the pits to specially constructed crematoria, where they were burnt to ash. Anyone who refused this work was shot on the spot by one of the SS guards. p 340

'If they have enough time, we are lost'

On May 30, [1942] over Germany, the British launched their first bombing raid with a thousand bombers. Their target was Cologne. Thirty-nine of the bombers were shot down. p 353

On 27 May 1942, SS General Reinhard Heydrich was fatally wounded in Prague by two Czech patriots parachuted into German-occupied Czechoslovakia from Britain. As Deputy Protector for Bohemia and Moravia, Heydrich's name had become a byword for repression. At the Wannsee Conference four months earlier, he had presided over the bureaucratic confirmation of the "final solution."

Following the attack on Heydrich, and even before his death eight days later, SS General Odilo Globocnik began preparations for what was called 'Operation Reinhard,' the deportation of Jews to Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor to their immediate deaths. Two weeks later, a thousand Jews were deported from Prague to death in the East. At the same time, in a reprisal action on Czech soil, 199 Czech men and boys were murdered in the mining village of Lidice. The village was then burned to the ground. . . .



As Operation Reinhard gathered momentum, the deportation of Jews was accelerated from the Reich itself. The background of Heydrich's assassination was not yet clear, wrote Josef Goebbels at the end of May, but "in any event we are holding the Jews to account. I am ordering the arrest of 500 Berlin Jews which I had been planning, and I am informing the Jewish community leaders that for every Jewish assassination and for every attempt at revolt on the part of Jews, 100 or 150 Jews in our hands will be shot." In the wake of the Heydrich assassination, several hundred Jews had already been shot in Sachsenhausen.

"The more of this filth that is eliminated," Goebbels added, "the better for the security of the Reich." pp 363-364

Of the thousand Jews sent from Prague on June 10, as part of Operation Reinhard, the only survivor was a man who jumped from the train during the journey. There were no survivors at all of the thousand deportees from Theresienstadt on June 12. Nor was there a single survivor of a further thousand sent from Theresienstadt on June 13 "to an unknown destination in the East." p 364

Chaim Kaplan noted in his diary on June 9, "there was one mother who fought like a lioness and refused to turn her baby over to the murderers. They immediately grabbed

the baby and hurled it out of the window.” That month in Sosnowiec, Frieda Mazia later recalled, the Germans entered the Jewish hospitals, “took women after childbirth, people after operations; they took all the babies from the children’s ward and threw them from the second floor into large trucks in the street.” All those in the hospitals were supposed to be going “to new settlements.” They were sent, in fact, to Auschwitz, and gassed. p 365

Five young Sosnowiec Jews decided to try to steal weapons from an apartment lived in by a German officer. One of these Jews, Harry Blumenfrucht, was caught. He tried to shoot the German who seized him. This German was known throughout the district as ‘Dog with Dog,’ because he was always with his dog. The dog sunk his teeth into Blumenfrucht's hand, making it impossible for him to shoot.

Under torture, Blumenfrucht refused to betray his four colleagues. As Frieda Mazia recalled:

They put chips of wood under his fingernails and put fire to them. They put him on an iron net and held him there for forty-eight hours, without a stop. And when he screamed, all he said was, “I will not speak. I am dead, in any case.”

They brought his mother and she prayed and begged with him, “Harry, to shorten your torture - you will not come out alive - but just to shorten your torture admit something.” Harry said nothing. He told his mother, “I am doomed. I will not speak.” The Germans kept him, I believe, two weeks. And they admired the boy.

Usually people were hanged in public and Jews were ordered to come and watch. Harry they hanged before dawn, during curfew hours, because they were afraid. They saw there was something unusual in the man.

p 366

‘Avenge our tormented people’

On 7 July 1942 a meeting took place in Berlin, presided over by Himmler. Three other men were also present: the head of the Concentration Camp Inspectorate, SS General Richard Glueks; the hospital chief, SS Major-General, and also Professor Gebhardt; and a leading German gynaecologist, Professor Clauberg. As a result of their discussion, it was decided to start medical experiments in “major dimensions” on Jewish women at Auschwitz. p 373

Auschwitz was now ready to receive Jews from all over Europe: to gas the old, the sick, the infirm and the young, and to ‘select’ the able-bodied for forced labour, and for medical experiments. On July 15 the first two thousand deportees were sent from Holland to Auschwitz. Most of them were German Jews who had found refuge in Holland between 1933 and 1939. p 375

From Warsaw to Treblinka: ‘These disastrous and horrible days’

On July 21 the Germans seized sixty Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, among them three members of the Jewish Council. At the same time, a number of Jews were shot in the

streets, or in their homes. On the following day, July 22, a telegram was received at Treblinka station “informing us,” as the Polish railwayman Franciszek Zabecki recalled, “of the running of a shuttle service from Warsaw to Treblinka with settlers.” The trains would be made up of sixty covered goods wagons. After unloading, the trains were to be sent back to Warsaw. “Our astonishment was immense. We wondered what sort of settlers they were, where they were going to live and what they were going to do? We connected this news with the mysterious buildings in the forest.”

pp 387-388

That same day, July 22, the ghetto walls were surrounded by Ukrainian and Latvian guards, in SS uniforms, armed, and at twenty-five-yard intervals. The round-up and deportation of Jews from Warsaw now began. Adolf Berman, who was responsible for many of the orphanages in the ghetto, later recalled:

On that very day, the first victims were the Jewish children, and I shall never forget the harrowing scenes and the blood-curdling incidents when the SS men most cruelly attacked children - children roaming in the streets; took them by force to carts, and I remember, fully, those children were defending themselves. Even today the cries and shrieking of those children are clear in my mind. “Mama, Mama,” this is what we heard. “Save us, mothers.”



The deportations from Warsaw continued, almost without pause, until September 12. In those weeks, a total of 265,000 Jews were sent by train for “resettlement in the East.” Their actual destination was Treblinka, and its three gas-chambers. Death, not slave labour, was their fate. It was the largest slaughter of a single community, Jewish or non-Jewish, in the Second World War.

No one book, certainly no one chapter, can tell the story of those seven weeks, each day of which saw the murder of more than four thousand Jews. Merely to list the names of the murdered ones, a line for each name, would take nearly seven thousand printed pages.

pp 388-389

On July 28, six days after the deportations had begun, and when it was clear that they were to continue on a substantial scale, young Jews from the pioneer youth movements met to discuss the possibility of resistance. “Various questions were raised at that meeting,” Zivia Lubetkin later recalled. “What can we do? We have no guns. . . .” One idea was to flee to somewhere safe, outside Warsaw. “We rejected this idea. How many Jews can we save that way? Very few. Is there any point in trying to save those few when millions are dying? No, we all will share the same fate and it is our duty to stay with our people until the very end.”

At this meeting of July 28, a Jewish Fighting Organization was set up, known by its Polish initials ZOB, *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*. The meeting decided: "We, the youth, would take all the responsibility on our shoulders." At that moment there were "only two pistols in our entire arsenal." The Jewish Fighting Organization made one of its first tasks to try to link up the different ghettos, to prepare joint schemes, to smuggle arms and individuals, and to pass on messages and funds. p 396

Autumn 1942: 'At a faster pace'

The need for speed had become a driving force behind the daily measures. On July 24 the Under-Secretary of State at the German Foreign Ministry, Martin Luther, warned Ribbentrop of the Italian government's continued resistance to any deportation plans from the Italian-occupied zone of Croatia. The Italian Chief of Staff in Mostar, Luther reported, "has declared that he cannot give his approval to the resettlement of the Jews, all inhabitants of Mostar having received assurance of equal treatment."

No such problems existed in either the General Government, or the Occupied Eastern Territories. p 402

During August 1942, Jews from more than twenty communities in Eastern Galicia, one of the heartlands of the Jewish diaspora, were deported to Belzec, among them more than forty thousand from Lvov, beginning on August 10 and lasting until August 23, turned the city, as one of those present later recalled, "into a city of nightmare and blood."

Among those driven from their homes in the Eastern Galician town of Czortkow in the early hours of August 27 was Zonka Pollak. She later recalled that night, when several thousand Jews were assembled on the square near the Bristol Hotel, "watching the scenes of children being shot to death in their mothers' hands and thrown from the balconies." pp 410-411

'The most horrible of all horrors'

More than four hundred thousand Jews were murdered in German-occupied Europe in August 1942. Neither their suffering, nor their courage, can be adequately conveyed in words. So little is known of the fate and reactions of individuals. Statistics can dull the mind, and examples numb it. Nevertheless, the historian must try, through the records and stories that have survived, to give an insight into the many different ways in which individuals met their death. Those who remembered such stories, and who retold them, did so in order that the fate of individuals would not be forgotten. Rudolf Reder recalled an incident shortly after his arrival in Belzec on August 11:

Soon after my arrival at Belzec, one very young boy was selected from each transport. (I don't know where he was from as we didn't know the origin of the transports). He was a fine example of health, strength and youth. We were surprised by his cheerful manner. He looked around and said quite happily, "Has anyone ever escaped from here?"

It was enough. One of the guards overheard him and the boy was tortured to death. He was stripped naked and hung upside down from the gallows - he hung there for three hours. He was strong and still very much alive. They took him down and lay him on the ground and pushed sand down his throat with sticks until he died.

p 419

Near Auschwitz a new slave labour camp was opened on August 15 at Jawiszowice. In it, one hundred and fifty Jews, sent from the barracks at Birkenau, were used in the underground coal mines of the Hermann Goering Works. Later their number rose to two thousand five hundred. A month earlier, three hundred Jews had been sent from Birkenau to Goleszow, to work in the Portland Cement Factory. Here, too, the numbers were to rise, to one thousand. On October 1, a third camp was opened at Chelmek, in which Jews from the barracks at Birkenau spent over two months clearing ponds needed to provide water to the Bata Shoe Factory in the town. In these camps, and eventually in more than twenty others in the Auschwitz region, tens of thousands of Jews died of the harsh conditions. Those who became too weak to work were often returned to Birkenau, and gassed.

At Auschwitz, gassing was carried out by a commercial pesticide, Cyclon B. At Belzec, Chelmno, Treblinka and Sobibor, the four death camps, Jews were killed by the exhaust from diesel engines: carbon monoxide poisoning. At Treblinka, it was the engines of captured Russian tanks and trucks which provided the exhaust. p 425

Gerstein and Professor Pfannenstiel stayed at Belzec village overnight, the guests of the camp commandant, Christian Wirth. . . .

[Gerstein recalled] . . . SS men pushed the men into the chambers. "Fill it up," Wirth ordered. Seven to eight hundred people in ninety-three square metres. The doors were closed. Then I understood the reason for the 'Heckenholt' sign. Heckenholt was the driver of the diesel, whose exhaust was to kill these poor unfortunates. . . .

The diesel engine started up after two hours and forty-nine minutes by my stopwatch. Twenty-five minutes passed. You could see through the window that many were already dead, for an electric light illuminated the interior of the room. All were dead after thirty-two minutes.

Jewish workers on the other side opened the wooden doors. They had been promised their lives in return for doing this horrible work, plus a small percentage of the money and valuables collected. The people were still standing like columns of stone, with no room to fall or lean. Even in death you could tell the families, all holding hands. It was difficult to separate them while emptying the room for the next batch. The bodies were tossed out, blue, wet with sweat and urine, the legs smeared with excrement and menstrual blood. Two dozen workers were busy checking mouths which they opened with iron hooks. . . . Dentists knocked out gold teeth, bridges and crowns with hammers.

Captain Wirth stood in the middle of them. He was in his element and, showing me a big jam box filled with teeth, said, "See the weight of the gold! Just from yesterday and the day before! You can't imagine what we find every day, dollars, diamonds, gold! You'll see!" . . .

Then the bodies were thrown into big ditches near the gas-chambers, about 100 by 20 by 12 meters. After a few days, the bodies swelled. . . .

When the swelling went down again, the bodies matted down again. They told me later they poured diesel oil over the bodies and burned them on railway sleepers to make them disappear.

Gerstein went on from Belzec to Treblinka, where, on August 21, he witnessed further gassings. Then, on August 22, he took the express train back to Berlin. Also travelling on the train was a Swedish diplomat, Baron von Otter. Less than an hour from Warsaw, the train stopped in open country. "We both got down to get a breath of air," Otter later recalled. "I offered him a cigarette. He refused. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. There were tears in his eyes. And his voice was hoarse when he said, at once, 'I saw something awful yesterday - can I come and see you at the Legation?'" Otter suggested that they talk on the train. Gerstein agreed. "Is it the Jews?" Otter asked. "Yes it is," Gerstein replied. "I saw more than ten thousand die yesterday."

pp 426-428



At Sarny, where fourteen thousand Volhynian Jews were assembled on August 28, two Jews, one a carpenter with his axe, the other, Josef Gendelman, a tinsmith with his tin-cutters, broke through the fence surrounding the ghetto and led a mass escape. Three thousand Jews reached the gap in the fence, and sought to push their way through it. But the Ukrainians were armed with

machine guns, and two and a half thousand Jews were shot down at the fence. Five hundred escaped, but many of these were killed on their way to the woods, and only a hundred survived the war and its two more years of privation, manhunts, and frequent local hostility.

p 436

On September 2 it was the Jews of Dzialoszyce who were marked out for destruction. On September 1 the Gestapo, together with Polish police and Ukrainians, surrounded the town. Rosenblum's account continued:

I have no words to describe the Nazi terror and brutality of that day. They were shooting and burning! There was hell all around us! The horrible things that happened exceeded all imagination. Who could have imagined such brutality and cruelty by human beings. The barbarism of past centuries is pale against what happened that day of deportation. People were shot in the houses, in the streets, in the market square. There were dead Jews all over the town!

. . . . On September 2, that day after I had run away, the Jewish people were all summoned to the market place in the early hours of the morning, with only a minimum of their belongings.

They were kept waiting the whole day, men, women, children, the old, the sick, the invalids, the Gestapo savagely beating and shooting them indiscriminately for no reason. God could not have devised a worse torment in hell than that of standing and waiting there in the market place beneath a blazing sun. Death would have been

preferable to that. At last there came the signal to leave and they were marched to the train station. . . .

In the valley, three large graves were already waiting for them. They had been dug out that same day. The old, the sick, pregnant women and small children, two thousand innocent Jewish souls, were shot and brutally thrown into those graves, one on top of the other. Many of them were still alive! For most of the children they didn't even waste a bullet. They were just thrown in alive. And together with those who were only wounded, finished their lives under the pressure of the human mass. . . .

The larger grave contained a thousand bodies, and the two smaller graves contained five hundred bodies each. We learned of this massacre from the Polish police themselves. They told Moshe Hersh about it in minute detail, because they themselves had taken part in that slaughter.

On the following Sunday, they went to church with their families, as if nothing had happened. They suffered no guilt feelings. After all, they were only murdering Jews, with the blessing of their priests, who inflamed them from their pulpits on Sundays.

One more act in the savage drama had yet to be performed:

Moshe Hersh then told us that the next day, at dawn, we must go up to the cemetery and dig ditches around those mass graves, otherwise the water from the hills would wash out the dead bodies, and they would be left exposed.

And so in the morning, with shovels in hand, we went up to the cemetery. God, O God, what a sight! What we saw there! What a massacre! What a slaughter! I cannot begin to describe that sight. Hundreds of bodies lay exposed, rotting and decaying. The stench of those corpses was intolerable. We threw ourselves on to the graves. We did not want to go on living any more!



Of the ten thousand Jews in Dialoszyce on September 2, two thousand had been slaughtered in the mass graves outside the town. The remaining eight thousand had been deported to Belzec and gassed.

The horrors of the massacres at Dzialoszyce were repeated all over Europe, and with them, many incidents of heroism.

pp 443-446

In the House of Commons on September 8, Winston Churchill referred to the deportations from France during the course of a comprehensive survey of the war situation. The "brutal persecutions" in which the Germans had indulged, he said, "in every land into which their armies have broken," had recently been augmented by "the most bestial, the most squalid and the most senseless of all their offences, namely the mass deportation of Jews from France, with the pitiful horrors attendant upon the calculated and final scattering of families." Churchill added: "This tragedy fills me with astonishment as well as with indignation, and it illustrates as nothing else can the

utter degradation of the Nazi nature and theme, and the degradation of all who lend themselves to its unnatural and perverted passions.” pp 450-451

Neither compliance, nor resistance, could stop the juggernaut of death. At Birkenau on September 5 about eight hundred Jewish women, too weak to work, almost too weak to walk, were gassed. The gassing was watched by Dr Kremer, who described it as “the most horrible of horrors.” Another SS doctor in the camp, Heinz Thilo, commented to Kremer that day: “we are located here in ‘anus mundi,’” the ‘anus of the world.’



Kremer was not to forget the gassing of those eight hundred women. “When I came to the bunker,” he recalled five years later, “they sat clothed on the ground. As the clothes were in fact worn out camp clothes, they were not led into the undressing barracks but undressed in the open. I could deduce from the behaviour of these women that they realised what was awaiting them. They begged the SS men to

be allowed to live, they wept, but all of them were driven to the gas-chamber and gassed. Being an anatomist I had seen many horrors, had dealt with corpses, but what I then saw was not to be compared with anything ever seen before.”

Kremer noted. “Men compete to take part on such actions as they get additional rations – 200 ml. of vodka, 5 cigarettes, 100 grams of sausage and bread.” pp 452-453

Survival had been offered to those with work cards. But their children were not intended to benefit. Samek, a father, decided to carry his two-year-old daughter Miriam past the selection point in a knapsack. First, he gave her a sedative. Then, with his wife, he joined the line. Alexander Donat has recorded the sequel, and the fate, first, of another father and child, as Samek waited his turn:

The column advanced slowly, while up ahead the SS officer grandly dispensed life and death, left and right, *links und rechts*. In the tense silence the wails of a baby suddenly rose. The SS officer froze and a thousand men and women held their breaths. A Ukrainian guard ran out, plunged his bayonet several times into the knapsack from which the criminal sounds had come. In seconds the knapsack was a blood-soaked rag. “Du dreckiger Schweinehund!” “You filthy pig-dog!” the SS officer shouted indignantly, bringing his riding crop down on the ashen face of the father who had dared to try smuggling his child past. Mercifully, the Ukrainian’s bullet put an end to the father’s ordeal then and there. Thereafter it became routine for guards to probe every bundle and knapsack with their bayonets.

p 454

Between September 6 and September 9, more than thirty thousand Jews were deported from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka. On September 10 more than five

thousand were deported, a further five thousand on September 11, and 4,806 on September 12. The deportations then ceased for nine days. p 455

Samuel Rajzman also gave testimony after the war of how the women, on arrival, were “shaved to the skin,” their hair being later packed up for dispatch to Germany. His account continued:

Because little children at their mothers’ breasts were a great nuisance during the shaving procedure, later the system was modified and babies were taken from their mothers as soon as they got off the train. The children were taken to an enormous ditch; when a large number of them were gathered together they were killed by firearms and thrown into the fire. Here, too, no one bothered to see whether all the children were really dead. Sometimes one could hear infants wailing in the fire. When mothers succeeded in keeping their babies with them and this fact interfered with the shaving, a German guard took the baby by its legs and smashed it against the wall of the barracks until only a bloody mass remained in his hands. The unfortunate mother had to take this mass with her to the ‘bath.’ Only those who saw these things with their own eyes will believe with what delight the Germans performed these operations; how glad they were when they succeeded in killing a child with only three or four blows; with what satisfaction they pushed the baby’s corpse into the mother’s arms.

The invalids, cripples and aged who could not move fast were put to death in the same way as the children. The ditch in which the children and infirm were slaughtered and burned was called in German the ‘Lazarett,’ ‘infirmarium,’ and the workers employed in it wore armbands with the Red Cross sign.

p 457

25 September - November 1942: The spread of resistance

From the first days of the war, the destruction of Jewish life in German-occupied Europe had been paralleled by the acquisition of Jewish property. Killing and looting had gone hand in hand. Nor was this the spontaneous looting of armies and soldiers, but the deliberate and systematic search for every type of wealth that could be seized or sequestered. Shops, businesses and factories had been taken first, transferred without recompense to local ethnic Germans or to the German war machine. Furs, jewellery, radios, even pets had been taken next. Almost every week notices were posted up in cities and ghettos announcing some new confiscation. At the end of the path of this deliberate impoverishment of a whole people came the looting of their last meager possessions, their bundles, the clothes they were wearing, even their hair, at the edge of the death pit or on the final approach to the gas-chamber. Nor was that the very end: even from the corpses the last ounce of a gold tooth had to be extracted.

Under the Nazi system, murder had become as profitable as commerce; even more so, for there had been nothing to pay, no bargain to strike, only the point of a gun and the lash of a whip, and the wealth and possessions of many generations lay in the palm of the conqueror. pp 468-469

Among the largest of the Jewish communities destroyed in October 1942 was the community of Piotrkow, where fifteen thousand Jews had lived on the eve of the war. Of these, two thousand had managed to escape eastwards to the Soviet Union in the

first weeks of war. Those who had remained inside the cramped confines of their ghetto were forced to take in a further eight thousand Jews from the neighbouring towns and villages. At two in the morning of October 14 the Piotrkow 'action' began. It was to last for eight days. About a thousand Jews, including many who were too sick to leave their hospital beds, were shot. Also shot in his bed was the baker Yehuda Leib Russak, who refused to abandon his paralysed wife. She too was shot.



More than twenty thousand Jews were deported from Piotrkow. All were sent to Treblinka, and gassed. The convert Dr Shanster, the Turkish subject Jacob Witorz and his family, and the Egyptian subject Kem, and his family, those Jews who had originally been allowed to stay out of the ghetto, were deported with the rest. So too, in the last train, was Rabbi Lau, who, on the eve of his departure, gave a sermon on the theme of *Kiddush*

Ha-Shem, the sanctification of God's name through martyrdom. A witness of the sermon later related that Rabbi Lau spoke "with as much pathos and enthusiasm as he used to do in the good old days, from the pulpit of the synagogue." Lau told the Jews around him: "Better a living death than a dead life. Everyone killed as a Jew is a saint."

Although Lau had earlier received an offer to escape back to his home town of Slovakia, he had declined, calling now upon the Jews of Piotrkow "to fulfill the will of God with joy." He was then deported to his death. pp 481-482

News had begun to reach the West that the Jews deported 'to the East' were being murdered by gas. Most of this news reached neutral Switzerland from Germany, and was passed on at once to London, Washington and Jerusalem. These reports soon found an echo in the speeches and declarations of Allied statesmen. On October 29 a protest meeting was held in London, under the chairmanship of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Winston Churchill wrote to the Archbishop, for those at the meeting: "The systematic cruelties to which the Jewish people - men, women and children - have been exposed under the Nazi regime are amongst the most terrible events in history, and place an indelible stain upon all who perpetrate and instigate them. Free men and women denounce these vile crimes, and when this world struggle ends with the enthronement of human rights, racial persecution will be ended." p 485

'To save at least someone'

The deportations within German-occupied Poland [by November 1942] were almost over: 600,000 Polish Jews had been gassed in Belzec, 360,000 in Chelmno, 250,000 in Sobibor. Treblinka, where 840,000 were gassed, still awaited the German decision about the surviving 50,000 Jews of Warsaw.

Now it was in the forests and labour camps that the killings began. Throughout the winter, Polish peasants took part in raids organized by the Germans to track down Jews in hiding. "The peasants," noted Zygmunt Klukowski in his diary on November 26, "for fear of repressive measures, catch Jews in the villages and bring them into the town, or sometimes simply kill them on the spot." Klukowsky added:

"Generally, a strange brutalization has taken place regarding the Jews. People have fallen into a kind of psychosis: following the German example, they often do not see in the Jew a human being but instead consider him as a kind of obnoxious animal that must be annihilated with every possible means, like rabid dogs, rats, etc." pp 502-503



The deportations to Chelmno, Belzec and Sobibor had almost ended, the majority of Poland's pre-war Jewish communities having been deported and gassed during 1942. It was Birkenau that had become the focal point of mass murder of the Jews from the rest of German-occupied Europe. On 2 November 1942 the head of the Ancestral Heritage Institute in Germany, Dr Soevers, wrote to Dr Karl Brandt, asking for 150 skeletons of Jews. "We have the opportunity," Dr Sievers had explained earlier, "of obtaining real scientific evidence by obtaining the skulls of Jewish Bolshevik commissars, who are the exemplification of the sub-human type, the revolting but typical sub-human type." Each head, Dr Sievers explained, must be detached

from its body, dipped in preservative liquid, and put in a specially prepared hermetically sealed tin.

The corpses were duly provided. Seven months later Eichmann was informed that 115 people had been killed for their skeletons: seventy-nine Jews, thirty Jewesses, four central Asians and two Poles. In this way, mass murder was made to serve the cause of one of the most bizarre, and obscene, forms of 'science.' p 515

One of those who recorded some of the events at Birkenau was a member of the Sonderkommando whose twenty-nine-page notebook was found in 1952 buried near one of the crematoria. He recorded how, at the beginning of 1943:

The gas-chamber was crowded with Jews and one Jewish boy remained outside. A certain sergeant came to him and wanted to kill him with a stick. He mangled him in a brutish manner, blood was dripping on all sides, when all of a sudden the maltreated boy, who had been lying motionless, jumped to his feet and began to regard, quietly and silently, his cruel murderer with his childish gaze. The sergeant burst into loud cynical laughter, took out his revolver and shot the boy.

The author of this notebook also recorded how another of the SS men at Birkenau, SS Staff Sergeant Forst, "stood at the gate of the undressing room in the case of many transports and felt the sexual organ of each woman that was passing naked to the gas-chamber. There were also cases when German SS men of all ranks put fingers into the sexual organs of pretty young girls." p 518

'Help me get more trains'

On February 6, Himmler received a report on the "quantity of old garments" collected from Birkenau and the camps in the Lublin region. The list included 97,000 sets of men's "old clothing," 76,000 sets of women's "old clothing," 132,000 men's shirts, 155,000 women's coats and 3,000 kilograms of women's hair. The women's hair filled a whole freight car. . . .

The Jewish clothing sent to the Reich filled 825 freight cars. In addition, the amount of foreign currency, gold and silver listed was considerable, including half a million United States dollars, and 116,420 dollars in gold.

Clothes, valuables, hair: these were among the spoils of the German war against the Jews. Children and their parents were actually stripped of their pathetic possessions at the entrance to the gas-chamber. pp 539-540

In Italy Mussolini continued to reject all appeals for the deportation of Jews. On February 22, the day of the Thrace and Macedonia deportation agreement with Bulgaria, the German government learned that the Italian military authorities in Lyons had forced the French police chief in the city to annul an order for the arrest of several hundred Jews who were to have been sent to Auschwitz "for labour service." Three days later, Ribbentrop complained personally to Mussolini that "Italian military circles, and sometimes the German army itself, lacked a proper understanding of the Jewish question." p 543



Himmler also visited Sobibor at this time. According to an eye-witness, three hundred young Jewish women, the prettiest that could be found, had been selected on that occasion in Majdanek, and brought specially to Sobibor, where Himmler had watched them, naked, being gassed. Several survivors also recalled how SS Staff Sergeant Hubert Gomerski and another SS man used to amuse themselves by swinging Jewish children by their legs and then flinging

them to their deaths. He who threw a Jewish child farthest won. Eye-witnesses also described how Gomerski would walk past the lines of Jews as they left the cattle trucks and kill those who appeared too weak to be able to walk to the gas-chambers by smashing their skulls with a heavy iron watering can. p 546

Also lucky were forty-eight thousand Jews of Bulgaria: those living within the pre-war borders of the state. At first, it seemed that they too would be deported, as had those from the Bulgarian-occupied zones of Thrace and Macedonia. Following German insistence, the Bulgarian government had indeed ordered the deportation of all Jews from Bulgaria proper, some of whom had already been interned. But the

deportation order led to such an outcry from the Bulgarian people, including many intellectuals and church leaders, that the government rescinded the order, and Jews already taken into custody were released.

In the northern part of Bulgaria, farmers had threatened to lie down on the railway tracks to prevent passage of the deportation trains. It was also said that the King himself had intervened. Despite the fact that he was German, of the family of Coburg, he was known to be opposed to the anti-Semitic measures then in force in Bulgaria, helpless though he considered himself to be in the face of the German might. The release of the Jews, which took place on March 10, came to be known in Bulgaria as the “miracle of the Jewish people.”

p 547

The Bulgarian experience highlights the possibility that was open to certain states in Europe to refuse to allow their Jewish citizens to be deported. There were several other occasions on which this refusal was exercised. By March 1943, Finland, Italy and Hungary had each likewise chosen to refuse, and had refused successfully, the German government’s demands to deport Jews to Germany. Slovakia and Vichy France, however, had complied with the German demands, and had done so with alacrity, as had Vidkun Quisling’s government in Norway. Those countries whose governments agreed to deport Jews also put their local police forces at the disposal of the Germans in the work of rounding up Jews.

p 548



Each act of escape or resistance still led to immediate and massive reprisals. On March 16, in Lvov, a Jew, Engineer Kotnowski, killed an SS policeman who was noted for his cruelty. The next day, as a reprisal, the Germans burst into the ghetto and hanged eleven Jewish policemen from the balconies in the main street of the ghetto. That same day more than a thousand Jews were taken out of the working groups and shot, while in

Janowska camp, nearly two hundred Jews were killed: a reprisal ratio of almost twelve hundred to one.

pp 551-552

Warsaw, April 1943: hopeless days of revolt

The Germans entered the Warsaw ghetto on the morning of April 19. Man for man and gun for gun, their forces were formidable: 2,100 German soldiers, including SS troops, against 1,200 Jewish fighters; 13 heavy machine guns, against which the Jews had no equivalent armament; 69 hand-held machine guns, against which the Jews had none; a total of 135 submachine guns, against which the Jews had 2; several howitzers and other artillery pieces, of which the Jews had none; a total of 1,358 rifles, as against only 17 rifles among the Jews. The Jews had acquired some pistols, about five hundred. But pistols were of little or no use in street fighting. The main Jewish weapons were several thousand grenades and incendiary bottles.

pp557-558

During April 20 the Germans broke into the Czyste hospital on Gesia Street where, as Najberg noted, “They shot all the sick lying on beds.” Among those killed was Michal Gluski, the editor, before the war, of the monthly *Foreign Languages Echo*. “That talented man,” Najberg wrote, “found his tragic death on a hospital bed.” Alexander Donat later recalled: “German soldiers went through the wards shooting and killing all whom they found. Then they set the building on fire. Those patients and staff who had managed to reach the cellars, died in the fire.”

The Germans moved through the ghetto, shelling the buildings from which shots were fired at them, and burning down the apartment blocks, building by building. Several hundred Jews were forced by the smoke and flames to jump from the blazing buildings, and to their deaths. p 560

Despite being outnumbered and out armed, the Jewish fighters continued to engage the German forces. On April 23 Mordecai Anielewicz wrote to Yitzhak Zuckerman, who was seeking help for the uprising on the ‘Aryan’ side: “You should know that the pistol is of no use. We hardly made use of it. What we need is grenades, rifles, machine guns and explosives.” Anielewicz wrote also of the “victory” that only a single man from his fighting units was missing. His letter ended: “Keep well. Perhaps we’ll still see each other. What’s most important; the dream of my life has become a reality. I lived to see Jewish defence in the ghetto in all its greatness and splendour.” p 561

On April 26 the German commander, SS Brigadier General Stroop, reported that the continuing resistance in the bunkers and underground shelters had been “broken, either by returning fire or by blowing up the bunkers.” As the buildings of the ghetto were set on fire, and thousands of unarmed Jews were rounded up and marched to the Umschlagplatz, the battle in the bunkers continued; even the roofs and upper floors of unburned houses gave shelter to Jews with guns. p 561

By the end of the first week of May the last main focus of Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto was a bunker at 18 Mila Street, in which 120 fighters were gathered. This too was attacked by the Germans, on May 8. For two hours the entrance was bombarded, but in vain. Then the Germans began to send gas into the bunker. . . .

Among the hundred Jewish fighters who were killed in the battle for the bunker under 18 Mila Street was Mordechai Anielewicz, “our handsome commander,” Zivia Lubetkin wrote, “whom we all loved.” “We fought back,” she later reflected, “and it made our lot easier and made it easier to die.” Also killed was Berl Broyde, a leading member of the Jewish Fighting Organization, who, deported to Treblinka in January 1943, had managed to jump from the train and return to the ghetto.

The Germans combed the ghetto for any surviving Jews. In all, according to Jurgen Stroop’s calculations, 7,000 Jews had been killed in the fighting, and 30,000 had been deported to Treblinka. Five to six hundred Jews, he added, “were destroyed by being blown up or by perishing in the flames.” A total of 631 bunkers had been destroyed. pp 564-565

On May 16 Jurgen Stroop reported to his superiors that the Warsaw ghetto “is no longer in existence.” The “large-scale action” had ended at 8.15 that evening “by

blowing up the Warsaw synagogue.” Systematically, street by street, the buildings of the ghetto were now destroyed. But small groups of Jews continued to live in the bunkers, and to fight. Leon Najberg was still in hiding on May 19: he and forty-four others, still undetected in what they called their ‘den.’ pp 565-566



Two weeks later, on June 3, the Germans destroyed a bunker on Walowa Street containing 150 people. “Those living in the shelters,” Leon Najberg later recalled, “became harrowingly thin and looked like skeletons. After six weeks in these graves, they looked like ghosts frightened of living.”

them were still alive by September 1943, when they managed to cross into ‘Aryan’ Warsaw. p 567

Najberg’s group lived on among the ruins. But starvation, exhaustion and sickness took their toll. Only four of

‘The crashing fires of hell’

On April 30, two thousand Jews were deported from Wlodawa to Sobibor. On arrival at the unloading camp, they attacked the SS guard with bare hands and pieces of wood torn from the wagons. All of them were killed by grenades and machine-gun fire. p 575

The medical experiments at Auschwitz were veiled in secrecy. . . .



The first experiments, intended to provide evidence about the effects and consequences of sterilization, were carried out on a number of young Jewish girls between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. All were from Greece. First, they were sterilized by X-rays. Then their ovaries were removed. Or, three months after the sterilization, parts of their reproductive organs would be removed and sent to the Research Institute in Breslau. Such experiments were performed two to three times a week. Each experiment would ‘use up’ about thirty women. Hundreds of women, having been mutilated by these experiments, were then sent to Birkenau and to its gas-chambers. p 577

From the moment of his arrival at Auschwitz, Mengele joined the other SS officers and SS doctors, among them Dr Clauberg, and later Dr Kremer, in the 'selection' of Jews reaching the railway junction from all over Europe, with a movement of the hand or the wave of a stick indicating as 'unfit for work,' and thus destined for immediate death in the gas-chambers all children, old people, sick, crippled and weak Jews, and all pregnant women.

Between May 1943 and November 1944 Mengele took part in at least seventy-four such selections. He also took an equally decisive part in at least thirty-one selections in the camp infirmary, pointing out for death by shooting, injection or gassing Jews whose strength had been sapped by hunger, forced labour, untreated illness or ill-treatment by the guards. p 582

One of the few people to speak to Mengele in Auschwitz about his attitude to the Jews was a Christian woman, Dr Ella Lingens. She had been deported to Auschwitz from Vienna three months before Mengele's own arrival in the camp, having been denounced for sheltering Jews, and for helping them escape across the Austrian border into Switzerland. She later recalled how, in Auschwitz, "I was in a triply privileged position, as a German, as a non-Jew and as a doctor." During one of his conversations with her, Mengele "said that there were only two gifted nations in the world - the Germans and the Jews." "The question is," he asked her, "which one will dominate?" p 582



Since early 1943, the advance of the red Army on the eastern front had led to the decision to dig up the corpses of hundreds of thousands of murdered Jews, and to burn them. A former Einsatzkommando chief, SS Colonel Paul Blobel, was appointed to supervise this task. The units operating under Blobel's command were known as the "Blobel Commando" or "Special Commando 1005."

One large-scale Blobel 'action', began on June 15, at the Janowska death pits in Lvov, when hundreds of Jewish forced labourers in Janowska were taken to the nearby mass murder site and forced to dig up putrefying corpses. They were ordered to extract gold teeth and pull gold rings off the fingers of the dead. "Every day," recalled Leon Weliczker, a survivor of the first of the Blobel 'actions,' "we collected about eight kilograms of gold." pp 584-585

'To perish, but with honour'

On July 25, Mussolini was deposed as ruler of Italy. Although he had not allowed Jews under Italian rule to be deported to Germany, his downfall was greeted by Jews under Nazi rule with rejoicing. The end had come for one of Hitler's allies. In

Janowska camp, in Lvov, a Gestapo man accused a young Jew who crossed his path of greeting him with veiled mockery, in celebration of Mussolini's downfall. The youth was sentenced to death. Two SS men carried out the execution: "They hung the youth upside down," the historian Philip Friedman has recorded, "cut off his male organ, and placed it in his mouth, and kicked him ceaselessly in the stomach to make the blood flow to his head. The youth died in terrible agony." pp 595-596

The children deported from Bialystok were taken first to Theresienstadt, where their arrival was noted with concern by the tens of thousands of German, Austrian and Czech Jews being held there. "A train arrives at the ghetto," recalled Josef Polak, "bringing nearly thirteen hundred children aged from six to fifteen years. Nobody is allowed out in the streets, nobody is allowed to talk to the children. Closely guarded by the sentries and the SS, the children walk in a straggling procession, barefoot or in old boots, clad in rags, dirty, nothing but bags of skin and bone, to the delousing station." Polak added: "They are terrified, none of them utters a word, none of them smiles, but when they see the noticeboard with the word 'gas' before the delousing station, they cling to each other, begin to cry, and refuse to enter. They evidently have some experience with gas from the East. But finally they are all bathed and furtively and in secret they tell some of the members of the disinfection group of their fate. At Bialystok the SS 'Death Commando' has shot their mothers and fathers before their eyes."



adults who had volunteered to accompany them.

While in Theresienstadt, the Bialystok children were lodged in houses surrounded by barbed wire, and "several score," as Polak noted, died of disease. Those who were taken ill, he added, were taken to the Small Fortress section of the ghetto by the SS men "and beaten to death." Four weeks later, the surviving children were deported again, this time to Birkenau, where all of them were murdered, together with the fifty-three p 601

The last Jews to reach Treblinka, on August 18, had been Jews from Bialystok. All were gassed. Four days later, a wagon laden with the clothing of the dead left Treblinka for Germany. The camp was ready to be closed down. Parts of demolished huts, large numbers of wooden planks, and quantities of chlorinated lime were taken away, followed by the excavator.

The Jews who were made to dismantle the camp realized that once their work was done they too would be killed. But within the camp, they were always outnumbered by the armed guards. On September 2, however, a group of thirteen Jews killed their Ukrainian SS guard with a crowbar while working just outside the camp wire. The leader, an eighteen-year-old Polish Jew, Seweryn Klajnman from Falenica, put on the

dead man's uniform, took his rifle, and "marched off" his fellow prisoners as if to a new work detail further off, cursing and bellowing at them as they went, as befitted an SS guard. Guided by one of their number, Shlomo Mokka, a carter and horse-trader from Wegrow who knew the area well, they escaped their pursuers and evaded capture.

Later in September the gas-chambers at Treblinka were demolished and the barbed-wire fencing was removed. Then the remaining Jews who had carried out these tasks were deported to Sobibor. The shunting-engines and the armoured cars were then sent elsewhere; and the SS men were transferred to other camps. In all, a hundred goods wagons full of equipment had been seen to leave. Treblinka was no more.

The last of the camp personnel to leave Treblinka for other camps were the Ukrainian guards. Then the site of the killings was ploughed up, a house and farm buildings were built, seed was sown, and Strebel, a German from the Ukraine, himself a former member of the camp staff, moved into the farm, bringing his family to join him from the Ukraine. They were the first true 'settlers,' in a camp where the overriding deception had been that it was for 'resettlement.'

pp 602-603

The reality of extermination was so terrible that the civilised mind of man rebelled against it. "Persistent rumours circulate," wrote Jakub Poznanski, in the Lodz ghetto, on 27 September 1943, "about the liquidation of the ghettos in various Polish cities. In my opinion, people are exaggerating, as usual. Even if certain excesses have taken place in some cities, that still does not incline one to believe that Jews are being mass-murdered. At least I consider that out of the question."

Poznanski's doubts were a sign of the isolation of one ghetto from another. So little was known by the Jews in any one locality of the fate of Jews elsewhere. In the labour camp at Nowogrodek, the two hundred and fifty survivors of the once flourishing Jewish population of five thousand had no idea of the events that had to recently taken place in Vilna, or in Bialystok. All they knew was that their destruction could be ordered at any moment.

p 608

With the destruction of each ghetto, the Germans continued to gather the clothing and belongings of the dead. On September 6 the Lodz Ghetto Chronicle noted a further "twelve freight cars" of used shoes reaching the ghetto. "The old shoe-shop," it added, "will be busy for many months just sorting this vast quantity." Leather shoes had to be sorted from other shoes. Men's, women's and children's shoes had to be separated. Right shoes had to be sorted from left shoes, "whole shoes from half shoes," black shoes from brown shoes, and finally "and this is the hardest job of all," the matching pairs "have to be ferreted out."

The penalty for any theft from this mass of shoe leather brought into the ghetto was execution. In each of the ghetto factories a notice stated: "Every act of theft will be punishable by death." Icek Bekerman, a thirty-four-year-old shoemaker, had already been hanged in the Lodz ghetto in September 13, for taking a few scraps of leather in order to make himself a pair of shoe laces. The ghetto carpentry shop had been ordered to build the gallows, and the entire personnel of the leather and saddlery workshop, and the shoe workshop, were ordered to be present at the execution, together with representatives of each of the other workshops in the ghetto.

Bekerman's wife and two children were not allowed to the place of execution to witness the death sentence. Instead, forced to remain at home, their cries could be heard by all those on the way to the execution. Those cries, recalled the twelve-year-old Ben Edelbaum, "were the most terrifying lamentations I had ever heard." p 610

'A page of glory . . . never to be written'

Courage could be shown in every conceivable circumstance of horror. Every day, Jewish girls who had been selected for the barracks at Birkenau were driven, starving, beaten and naked, to the bath-house. As they were pushed along, SS men and SS women, as a Jewish girl from Poland, Kitty Hart, has recalled, "sniggering and idly flicking their whips," watched them pass. On one such occasion, Kitty Hart recalled, a Jewish girl "deliberately scraped a handful of lice from her body and flung them in the face of a guard who had come too close. She died immediately; but after than the SS were even more careful to keep their distance."

"She died immediately." We do not know her name, nor from what country she came; only that she was a Jewess whose spirit no surfeit of torment had been able to destroy.
p 626

'Do not think our spirit is broken'

On November 17, [1943] of 995 Jews brought to Birkenau from Holland, 531 were taken to be gassed, among them 166 children. At the same time, 164 Poles were brought to the gas-chamber, twelve of these being young women from a Polish underground group. The member of the Sonderkommando whose manuscript was among those discovered after the war, recorded:

A certain young Polish woman made a very short but fiery speech in the gas-chamber, addressing all who were present, stripped to their skins. She condemned the Nazi crimes and oppression and ended with the words, "We shall not die now, the history of our nation shall immortalize us, our initiative and our spirit are alive and flourishing, the German nation shall as dearly pay for our blood as we possibly can imagine, down with savagery in the guise of Hitler's Germany! Long live Poland!"

Then she turned to the Jews from the Sonderkommando, "Remember that it is incumbent on you to follow your sacred duty of revenging us, the guiltless. Tell our brothers, our nation, that we went to meet our death in full consciousness and with pride."

Then the Poles knelt on the ground and solemnly said a certain prayer, in a posture that made an immense impression, then they rose and all together in chorus sang the Polish anthem, the Jews sang the 'Hatikvah.'

The cruel common fate in this accursed spot merged the lyric tones of these diverse anthems into one whole. They expressed in this way their last feelings with a deeply moving warmth and their hope for, and belief in, the future of their nation. Then they sang the 'Internationale.'



At that moment the vans arrived, marked deceptively and mockingly with the symbol of the Red Cross. The tins of gas pellets were taken from the van, and gas was thrown into the chamber. All perished, “amidst singing and ecstasy, dreaming of uniting the world with bonds of brotherhood and of its betterment.” pp 636-637

At Borki the three hundred Jews were ordered to dig. “I was digging with my spade,” Reznik [a former Jewish soldier in the Polish army before the German

occupation] later recalled, “and after removing two or three spadefuls of earth, I felt the spade hit something hard and then I saw it was the head of a human being.”

More than thirty thousand bodies were dug up at Borki, in eight long trenches. All were burned. Then the bones were ground to a powder in a special machine, and taken away in sacks: thirty sacks a day. Most of the corpses were Red Army men, taken prisoner by the Germans in the autumn and winter of 1941; all had been murdered. Some were Italian soldiers, killed after Italy had abandoned the German cause, and they had become prisoners-of-war. Others were Jews, among them children from Hrubieszow.

Even as the graves were being uncovered, new corpses were brought and thrown into them. “One of the graves would remain open all the time for new corpses,” Josef Reznik recalled. “The new corpses would be coming all the time, continuously. A truck would bring warm bodies, which would be thrown into the graves. They were naked like Adam and Eve.” Reznik also recalled how, when one of the mass graves was opened, “we saw a boy of two or three, lying on his mother’s body. He had little white shoes on, and a white little jacket. His face was pressed against his mother’s, and we were touched and moved, because we ourselves had children of our own.” After the graves had been emptied, disinfected, and filled with earth, grass was planted over them. The bodies had meanwhile been placed on massive pyres, a thousand on each pyre. “There were two pyres of bodies going all the time,” Reznik recalled, “and they burnt for two or three days, each heap of the dead.” Today, a small memorial plaque marks the site. pp 639-640

‘One should like so much to live a little bit longer’

The opening months of 1944 saw no pause in the search for victims, or in the cruelties of the slaughter. . . .Of the fate of the women who had been brought to Block 25 that Christmas, Madame Vaillant Coutourier recalled how uncovered trucks were driven up to the block, and then:

On them the naked women were piled, as many as the trucks could hold. Each time a truck started, the famous Hessler ran after the truck and with his bludgeon repeatedly struck the naked women going to their death.

They knew they were going to the gas-chamber and tried to escape. They were massacred. They attempted to jump from the truck and we, from our own block, watched the trucks pass by and heard the grievous wailing of all those women who knew they were going to be gassed.

Perhaps it was these same women whom Rudolf Vrba saw being put on open lorries to be taken to one of the gas-chambers. p 648

Among the most remarkable documents to have survived the war is the manuscript written in Birkenau by one of the members of the Sonderkommando, Salmen Lewental. This particular manuscript was discovered in 1962 in a jar buried in the ground near Crematorium III, where Lewental worked. The gaps in it are words destroyed by dampness which seeped into the jar. Lewental, who did not survive his gruesome work, recalled in his notebook what may have been the same episode witnessed in its opening stages by Madame Vaillant Couturier and Rudolf Vrba.

Lewental's account is headed "3,000 naked people." It reads:

This was at the beginning of 1944. A cold, dry lashing wind was blowing. The soil was quite frozen. The first lorry, loaded brimful with naked women and girls, drove in front of Crematorium III. They were not standing close to one another, as usual, no; they did not stand on their feet at all, they were exhausted, they lay inertly one upon another in a state of utter exhaustion. They were sighing and groaning.

The lorry stopped, the tarpaulin was raised and they began to dump down the human mass in the way in which gravel is unloaded on to the road. Those that had lain at the edge, fell upon hard ground, breaking their heads open [. . .] so that they weakened completely and had no strength left to move. The remaining [women] fell upon them, pressing them down with their weight. One heard [. . .] groans. . . .

. . . They were lined outside the block and later they were led to Block 25, where they were ordered to strip naked; [allegedly] they were to be examined as to their health. When they had stripped, all were driven to three blocks; one thousand persons in a block and there they were shut for three days and three nights, without getting a drop of water or a crumb of bread, even.

So they had lived for three awful days and it was only the third night that bread was brought; one loaf of bread weighing 1.4 kilograms for sixteen persons, afterwards . . .

If they had shot us then, gassed us, it would have been better. Many [women] lost consciousness and others were only semi-conscious. They lay crowded on bunks, motionless, helpless. Death would not have impressed them at all then. . . .

One of us, standing aside and looking at the immensity of unhappiness of those defenceless, tormented souls, could not master his feelings and wept.

One young girl then cried, "Look, what I have lived yet to see before my death: a look of compassion and tears shed because of our dreadful fate. Here, in the murderers' camp, where they torture and beat and where they torment, where one sees murders and falling victims, here where men have lost the consciousness of the greatest disasters, here where a brother or sister falls down in your sight, you cannot even

vouchsafe them a [farewell] sigh, a man is still found who took to heart our horrible disaster and who expressed his sympathy with tears. Ah, this is wonderful, not natural. The tears and sighs of a living [man] will accompany us to our death, there is still somebody who will weep for us. And I thought we shall pass away like deserted orphans. The young man has given me some solace. Amidst only bandits and murderers I have seen, before my death, a man who still feels.”

She turned to the wall, propped her head against it and sobbed quietly, pathetically. She was deeply moved. Many girls stood and sat around, their heads bowed, and preserved a stubborn silence, looked with deep revulsion at this base world and particularly at us.

One of them spoke, “I am still so young, I have really not experienced anything in my life, why should death of this kind fall to my lot? Why?” She spoke very slowly in a faltering voice. She sighed heavily and proceeded, “And one should like so much to live a little bit longer.”

pp 648-652

At Birkenau, one group of deportees had not only been kept alive, but whole families had been kept together in a special family camp. These were some 3,860 Czech Jews, survivors of the 5,000 Jews who had been brought to Birkenau from Theresienstadt six months earlier. At the beginning of March they were visited by a German Red Cross delegation, which was not allowed to see the rest of Birkenau. Then, on March 3, the inmates of the family camp were told to write postcards to their relatives who were still in Czechoslovakia, saying that they were alive, well, and working. They were also made to date the postcards March 25, 26, or 27, and to ask their relatives to send them food parcels.

Four days later, the 3,680 “Czech family camp” inmates were told they were to be resettled at a nearby labour camp, Heydebreck. No such ‘resettlement’ was in fact planned. All 3,860 were to be sent to the gas-chambers only a few hundred yards away from their ‘haven.’ . . .

Themselves deceived, these victims of a wider deception were driven into the undressing room of the gas-chamber. Realising suddenly that they really were about to be gassed, they tried to resist, attacking the guards with their bare hands. The SS were quick to answer back, first with rifle butts and then, when the resistance spread, with flame-throwers. Filip Muller, a member of the Sonderkommando at Birkenau, and one of the few men to survive it, was then on duty in the dressing room. He later recalled how these Czech family camp victims, “heads smashed and bleeding from their wounds,” were driven across the threshold of the gas-chamber. As the gas pellets were released, they began to sing the Czech national anthem, “Kde domov muj,” “Where is My Home,” and the Hebrew song “Hatikvah,” “Hope.”

Of this whole Jewish group of 3,680 men, women and children, only thirty-seven were spared, among them eleven pairs of twins, who were kept alive so that medical experiments could be performed on them by Dr Mengele. pp 657-659

From the occupation of Hungary to the Normandy landings

On 10 March 1944 Adolf Eichmann and his principal subordinates met at Mauthausen concentration camp in order to work out a deportation programme for the 750,000 Jews of Hungary. Eight days later, on March 18, Hitler again summoned the Hungarian Regent, Admiral Horthy, to Klessheim Castle, near Salzburg. Horthy agreed to deliver 100,000 “Jewish workers” for the German war effort, but he was still reluctant to agree to a general deportation. At 9.30 that evening his train left Salzburg for Budapest. Forty-five minutes later, German troops began to move into Hungary.

p 662

A specially built railway spur now brought the trains to the very gates of two of the gas-chambers, only a few yards’ walk away. “When we arrived in Birkenau,” one eye-witness wrote four months later, “such a smell of burning flesh wafted towards us that in the groups arriving at night, who not only smelt the stench but saw the flames rising from the crematoria, many committed suicide at once.”

A Jewess from Hungary, Judith Sternberg, later recalled the moment of arrival at Birkenau:

Corpses were strewn all over the road; bodies were hanging from the barbed-wire fence; the sound of shots rang in the air continuously. Blazing flames shot into the sky; a giant smoke cloud ascended above them. Starving, emaciated human skeletons stumbled toward us, uttering incoherent sounds. They fell down right in front of our eyes, and lay there gasping out their last breath.



With each arriving train from Hungary, selections were made, some men and women from each train were sent to the barracks. But within a few days, twelve thousand Jews were being gassed and cremated every twenty-four hours.

pp 674-675

One eye-witness of the arrival of Hungarian Jews at Birkenau was a German soldier whose account was eventually passed on to British military intelligence. He was a member of the German anti-tank artillery unit, transferred from the Russian front to the west. During the journey, the train on which he and his unit were being transferred had to stop for a few days owing to “jammed railways.” At the place where it stopped, it was shunted on to a side track. The side track was at Auschwitz junction, at the entrance to the spur line into Birkenau.

On the siding, alongside the soldiers’ train, stood a goods train. Its tiny upper windows were covered with barbed wire. The train was guarded by the SS.

The soldier’s account, as sent to London, read:

This train was full of Hungarian Jews brought up for extermination. Nobody was allowed near the train, but some of the soldiers managed to get near all the same, and caught glimpses of what was going on.

The Jews were packed together in the carriages, men, women, children, old people; they were not allowed out and had to obey the calls of nature inside. The carriages were full of excrements, and a putrid fluid was trickling from the carriages.

The captives cried out for water but it was forbidden to bring them any. Some of the soldiers did it all the same, in spite of the SS guards' threats. The Jews offered them valuables, rings, watches, etc., in return, but the soldiers refused. . . .

When night fell after the emptying of the death train, the chimneys began to smoke and the smell of burned flesh filled the air. Also open fires were seen - the corpses being burned on pyres because the crematorium could not deal with the masses of victims. Another crematorium, bigger than the first, was seen under construction nearby. The soldiers - the whole unit witnessed the events - were aghast. They had heard of these things before but could not believe them. They stayed up all night and discussed what they had seen. Even the most diehard Nazis were silent and pale. No action was possible; the guns had been sent ahead, they had next to no arms, and the place was full of SS.

The following day, six carriages rolled out of the death camp and were put on the side track for the night. The soldiers crept into the carriages to inspect the contents. It consisted of the clothes of the Jews murdered on the previous day - all with labels of Hungarian firms - anything from shorts to shirts, men's and women's underwear, to babies' swaddling clothes, shoes, suits, dresses, etc., all addressed to Textilverwaltung, Litzmannstadt (the German Textile Administration in Lodz), which was to use them.

The engine driver said he could hardly hold out any longer at this place, but what could he do? He was scarcely able to eat his meals for disgust. He told the soldiers appalling stories from the camp, especially the treatment of women, which defy description.

pp 679-681

On 6 June 1944 the Allied forces landed in Normandy. The long-awaited second front was in being. In the east, the Red Army was poised to renew its offensive. That same day, on the Greek island of Corfu, the Germans rounded up 1,795 Jews. All were deported to Birkenau, where 1,500 were gassed on arrival. Also on June 6, 260 Jews living on the island of Crete, who had been seized on May 20, were taken, together with four hundred Greek hostages and three hundred Italian soldiers, Germany's former allies, a hundred miles out to sea, beyond the island of Santorini, where the boat was scuttled. All were drowned.

On the Greek island of Zante, not far from Corfu, the Mayor Lukos Karrer and the leading churchman, Archbishop Crysostomos, not only alerted the Jews to the danger, but sent 195 of them to remote villages in the hills. Unfortunately, 62 Jews, all of them elderly, who could not make the sudden journey into the rough terrain, were seized by the Gestapo in Zante and taken to the port. "If the deportation order is carried out," Crysostomos declared, "I will join the Jews and share their fate." But when the boat arrived from Corfu to collect them, it was already so packed with Jews that it did not stop.

pp 683-684

'May one cry now?'



The only children who were not gassed at Birkenau were twins. For more than a year, Mengele, who personally made so many of the selections at Birkenau, had sought to become an expert on the medical and genetic problems of twins. He therefore continued to take out all twins, both children and adults, to a special barracks, and for medical experiments.

More than fifteen hundred Jewish twins were experimented on by Mengele in the eighteen months after his arrival at Birkenau in May 1943. Less than two hundred survived. One of those survivors, Vera Kriegel, recalled, forty years later, the moment when she and her twin sister Olga reached Birkenau. Speaking to a shocked gathering in Jerusalem she described first her arrival at the spot where Mengele practised his selection process, sending people with a flick of his finger either in one direction, to instant death in the crematorium, or in the other, to the labour camp. "Children were having their heads beaten like poultry by SS men with their gun butts," she recalled, "and some were being thrown into a smoking pit. I was confused: I thought that this was some sort of animal kingdom or perhaps I was already in Hell."

Vera Kriegel and her sister Olga were five years old at that moment of horror. Their father was among those sent to his death. The twins, and their mother, survived. They did so because, as Vera Kriegel explained to the court, Mengele "wanted to know why our eyes were brown while our mother's were blue."

Vera and Olga Kriegel were forced to live in a straw-covered cage for ten days, while Mengele performed his experiments. "They injected our eyes with liquid that burnt," she said. "But we tried to remain strong, because we knew that in Auschwitz the weak went 'up the chimney.'" p 687

Not only Jews, but also Gypsies, were the victims of Mengele's perversion of medical sciences. Another survivor, Vera Alexander, recalled in the same courtroom how two Gypsy twins, one a hunchback, had been sewn together and their veins connected by Mengele who concentrated on blood transfusions in many experiments. "Their wounds were infected," she said, "and they were screaming in pain. Their parents managed to get hold of some morphine and used it to kill them in order to end their suffering." p 689

Among those murdered at Birkenau in June 1944 was the former Elder of the Theresienstadt ghetto, Jacob Edelstein. SS Lieutenant Franz Hoessler was present during Edelstein's last moments. An eye-witness, Yossel Roszensaft, recalled a year later:

Jacob was in the same barracks as I was - number 13 - on that Monday morning. It was about nine a.m. and he was saying his morning prayers, wrapped in a prayer shawl. Suddenly the door burst open and Hoessler strutted in, accompanied by three SS men. He called out Jacob's name. Jacob did not move. Hoessler screamed: "I am waiting for you, hurry up."

Jacob turned round very slowly, faced Hoessler and said quietly: "Of the last moments on this earth, allotted to me by the Almighty, I am the master, not you." Whereupon he turned back to face the wall and finished his prayers. He then folded his prayer shawl unhurriedly, handed it to one of the inmates and said to Hoessler: "I am now ready."

Hoessler stood there all the while without uttering a word, and marched out when Edelstein was ready. Edelstein followed him and the three SS men made up the rear. We have never seen Jacob Edelstein again.

pp 689-690

Among those deported in this June 'resettlement' was Mordechai Zurawski. He later recalled how Hans Biebow told them that they would be sent to a labour camp near Leipzig. "For you Jews who work diligently," he added, "it will be good."



Zurawski, who recalled Biebow using these words, also remembered, at the railway station, words written in Polish on the wagons; "You are going in the carriages of death." But no one believed it. A few hours later, the train reached Kolo, and from there the Jews were taken in trucks to Chelmno, and gassed. Zurawski, sent to the 'Forest Commando' to cut wood for the crematorium, recalled how, when the deportees reached Chelmno, they were confronted by signs saying "To the bath house" and "To the physician." Then, having been given a cake of soap and a towel, and told they were being taken

to the shower room, they were put into special vans, and driven off. After three hundred metres, at the entrance to the crematorium, they were dead. "But in some cases," Zurawski recalled, "people still showed signs of life." When that happened, the van's driver, a man called Belaff, "would pull out his pistol and shoot these people." After the bodies had been burned, the bones were ground to a fine powder in a special "grinding apparatus."

On one occasion, Zurawski witnessed an incident when one of the SS guards "threw a living Jewish worker into the furnace."

p 693

Each day saw a new development in the Jewish tragedy; on June 28 the advancing Red Army approached Maly Trostenets camp near Minsk. Russian aircraft attacked the camp itself. That day, the camp guards, Latvian, Ukrainian, White Russian, Hungarian and Rumanian SS auxiliaries, were replaced by a special SS detachment, all German, under German SS officers. This detachment locked all the surviving prisoners, Russian civilians, Jews from the Minsk ghetto, and Viennese Jews who had been brought from Theresienstadt, into the barracks, and then set the barracks on fire.

All those who were able to flee from the blazing buildings were shot. About twenty Theresienstadt Jews managed to escape the blaze and the bullets, and to hide in the forest until the arrival of the Red Army six days later. Taken to Moscow by their liberators, they were kept for two years in a Siberian camp on the Chinese border, before being released, in 1946. p 698

In Vilna, on July 2 and 3, as the city awaited the arrival of the Red Army, there were two thousand Jews working in the Kallis factory, emaciated, but heartened by their imminent liberation. But more than eighteen hundred of them were seized and taken to Ponar, where they were shot. Less than two hundred workers managed to hide, and to remain in hiding until the Red Army entered the city on July 13. In the battle for Vilna, which had lasted five days, eight thousand German soldiers were killed.

p 699



On July 15, as the Red Army approached one of the few surviving ghettos, that of Siauliai, in Lithuania, four thousand local Jews, and a further three thousand from the nearby labour camps at Panevezys and Joniskis, were assembled in Siauliai and taken by train to Stutthof, and other camps in East Prussia. A hundred Jews who remained in Siauliai were killed on the spot. Twelve days later, the city was liberated.

Such was the pattern of those July days in 1944: the Red Army approaching, the evacuation of the last thousands, the murder of the remnants. Those evacuated still had another ten months of war and terror in front of them. The handful who were able to hide, avoiding both evacuation and execution, welcomed their liberators and became survivors. p 705

July-September 1944: the last deportations

On July 24, Soviet forces entered Majdanek. War correspondents from all the Allied armies gazed in horror at gas-chambers, crematoria, and the charred remains of human beings. Photographs of these remains were published throughout the Allied world. Hitler, watching with growing disdain the collapse of his armies, was roused to an outburst of rage, fuming, as SS Brigadier Walther Hewel reported, against “the slovenly and cowardly rabble in the Security Services who did not erase the traces” in time. p 711

Late in the afternoon [August 1944] Dr Mengele arrived, “already,” as Dr Nyiszli noted, “having sent at least ten thousand men to their death,” and ordered the bodies of the father and son boiled in water, so that the flesh could be taken from the bones. The boiling finished, “the lab assistant very competently gathered up the bones of the skeletons and placed them on the same work table, where, the evening before, I had

examined the still living men.” The skeletons were then sent to the Anthropological Museum in Berlin.

In the SS doctors at Birkenau, with their pre-war medical training and qualifications, the transformation from good to evil was complete. The healer had become the killer. The trained, professional saver of life, dedicated to healing, had become the self-taught, enthusiastic taker of life, dedicated to killing. pp 720-721



By the end of August, sixty-seven thousand Jews had been deported from the Lodz ghetto to Birkenau. Among them, Chaim Rumkowski, ‘King of the Jews’ of the Lodz ghetto, their protector and their mentor, was deported with his family, and perished in the gas-chamber together with more than sixty thousand other Jews from the ghetto over which he had exercised so much control, and, as he believed protection.

None of the ghettos and camps in which at least some Jews had been kept alive for their labour, whether in Riga, Vilna, Siauliai or Lodz, was able to avert the final deportation, on the eve of their potential liberation. p 722

However close Germany might be to defeat, the evil ‘selections’ went on. Among the new arrivals at Birkenau in early September were 1,019 Jews sent from Holland who reached Birkenau on September 5, of whom 549 were gassed. Dr Gisella Perl, who watched these Dutch deportees arrive, later recalled “a group of well-dressed, white-bearded gentlemen go by, fully dressed, with hats and gloves and well-cut overcoats. They carried fine plaid blankets and small overnight cases in their hands, like diplomats going to some important conference.” These were “rich people,” Gisella Perl was later told, “who had been able to hide until now, thanks to their money and connections.” Most were gassed. “Only a very few came out of the selection alive,” she later recalled, “dressed in rags like the rest of us.” Her account continued:

A few days later I spoke to one of these newcomers. He worked on the refuse heap near the crematorium. In that short time, the elegant, well-groomed man, who had looked like a diplomat, had become a dirty, lice-infected, human wreck, his spirits broken. He was a Dutchman and he spoke German.

I saw him go over to one of the camp foreman and whisper to him under his breath, anxiously, hurriedly. The foreman looked at him expectantly, and the new prisoner reached under his rags and brought out a small leather pouch, the kind which usually holds tobacco. He opened it with trembling hands and shook the contents into his palm.

Like a million little suns the diamonds shone and sparkled in his dirty, broken-nailed hands. Grinning broadly, the foreman nodded and held out three miserable uncooked potatoes, and the elderly man, shaking with impatience, tore them out of his hand and put them to his mouth, chewing, swallowing, as if every bite gave him a new lease of life. The little pouch full of diamonds already rested in the pocket of the foreman and he kept his hand on it, caressing the stones tenderly.

Here, in this Stock Exchange of Hell, the value of a bag of diamonds was three uncooked potatoes. And this value was the real one. Three potatoes had positive value, they prolonged life, gave strength to work and to withstand beatings, and strength meant life, even if for a short time only. The bag of diamonds itself was good for nothing.

pp 728-729

September 1944: the Days of Awe

In September 1944, shortly before the Red Army entered Przemysl, Yosef Buzhminsky saw, in a courtyard, “a little girl about six years old playing there. Gestapo and SS men arrived, surrounded the courtyard. It was a Polish family consisting of eight people. They began whipping the girl, and then they executed all of them right there in the courtyard.” The Polish family had hidden the Jewish girl. It was for that ‘crime’ that they, and the girl were shot.

On September 9, a group of thirty-nine Dutchmen, one American and seven Englishmen, all of them active in the anti-Nazi underground, were brought to Mauthausen. After spending the night inside the bunker they were driven, barefoot and in their underclothes, to the quarry, “where” as the historian of Mauthausen has written, ‘the 186 steps were lined on both sides by SS and Kapos swinging their cudgels and anticipating a spectacle.’ The forty-seven prisoners were “loaded with stone slabs of up to sixty pounds in weight, and then forced to run up the steps. The run was repeated again and again, and the blows fell faster and faster as the exhausted prisoners stumbled on the uneven steps.” One of the prisoners was a British Jew, Marcus Bloom, who had operated a clandestine radio in Nazi-occupied Europe. He, the historian noted, “was the first to fall.”

Bloom was shot in the head at point-blank range.

pp 732-733

Protectors and persecutors



On October 16 the Germans returned to Budapest. The Nyilas, a Fascist group whose members had been arrested by Horthy in July, were released and armed. They at once began to drag Jews from their houses and made them walk the streets, as Arie Breslauer recalled, “with their hands above their heads.” Then, for ten days, Jews were forbidden to leave their houses. Women in labour could receive no help. The dead could not be buried. No food could be bought and no doctor summoned to attend the sick. At the same time, Nyilas gangs seized a large number of Jewish forced labourers

in the Obuda suburb, drove them across the Margit and Chain bridges linking Obuda with Pest, and, while they were still on the bridge shot them and threw their bodies into the waters of the Danube.

On October 17, Adolf Eichmann returned to Budapest. He at once demanded fifty thousand able-bodied Jews to be marched on foot to Germany, to serve as forced labourers there. All the remaining Jews of Budapest, he wanted to be assembled in ghetto-like camps near the capital. "You see," Eichmann told the Hungarian Jewish leader, Rudolf Kastner, "I am back again. You forgot Hungary is still in the shadow of the Reich. My arms are long enough and I can reach the Jews of Budapest as well." The Jews of Budapest, Eichmann added, "will be driven out on foot this time."

These deportations began on October 20. Even as Soviet troops approached Budapest from the south-east, Jews from Budapest were marching westward, away from the advancing Soviet forces, to dig anti-tank trenches. Beginning on October 22, twenty-five thousand men and boys and ten thousand women and girls were taken, in four days, for this task. As the Red Army drew even closer, thousands of the marchers were shot or died. pp 751-752

There now began the systematic destruction of the evidence. Ten days before the gassings of October 30, two small taxis and a prison car had brought a mass of documents to Crematorium III. These were the files about individual prisoners, death certificates, and charge sheets. All were burned. The destruction of evidence went in parallel with the last weeks of human killing. p 757

By the end of October 1944 the Red Army had driven the Germans from eastern Poland and from most of Hungary. In the recently liberated areas, the surviving Jews emerged from their hiding places and returned to their homes. The thirteen-year-old Icchak Soneson had returned with his parents and his younger sister to the village of Ejszyszki. In 1941, Ejszyszki had been the home of two thousand Jews. Only thirty had survived the massacres of the war. "We kept together," Soneson later recalled, "we took a few flats in neighbouring houses. We did our best to rebuild our lives." But on October 20 disaster struck. Polish Home Army men, known as 'White Poles' attacked the Jewish houses. Soneson's mother and baby brother were killed, as well as two Soviet soldiers. p 759

In another labour camp that winter, at Neumark, were several thousand women, likewise brought from Bikenau. Hundreds of them, too weak to work, were put in a special tent, and told that they were to be deported to Stutthof. No such deportation was in prospect. All were later shot at Neumark. While being kept in the 'Stutthofers' tent, as it was called, their suffering became unendurable. Reska Weiss, who saw them, later recalled:

No one was allowed into the Stutthofers tent. If anyone was caught visiting a mother or a sister, she was never allowed to leave the tent again. The Stutthofers were seldom given food, and on the rare occasions when it was supplied, it was placed on the ground in the dark in front of the tent. Then the strongest of them fetched it and distributed it.

Entering the tent from the blinding snow-whiteness, I could hardly distinguish anything in the semi-darkness, least of all the women lying on the ground. The stench

was overpowering despite the airy tent. After a while my eyes became accustomed to the light, and I was completely overcome by what I saw.

I screamed in horror and shut my eyes to the sight. My knees trembled, my head began to swim, and I grasped the central tent prop for support. It was hard to believe the women on the ground were still human beings. Their rigid bodies were skeletons, their eyes were glazed from long starvation. . . .

For two months the Stutthofers had lain on the ground, stark naked. The meagre bundles of straw on which they lay were putrid from their urine and excreta. Their frozen limbs were fetid and covered with wounds and bites to the points of bleeding, and countless lice nested in the pus. Their hair was very short indeed, but the armies of lice found a home in it. No stretch of the imagination, no power of the written word, can convey the horrors of that tent. And yet . . . they were alive . . . they were hungry and they tore at their skeletal bodies with emaciated hands covered in pus and dirt. They were beyond help. The SS guards denied them the mercy of shooting them all at once. Only three or four were called out daily to be shot.

For days I couldn't swallow even a crumb of bread. The horror I lived through watching this agony will remain with me to the end of my days. Later I saw thousands of my fellow prisoners die from rifle shots, but even that could not compare with the terrible and unspeakable ordeal of the Stutthofers.

pp 764-765

The death marches

Those Jews who returned to what had once been the Warsaw ghetto saw at first glance the meaning of the Holocaust. Whereas the Poles had already begun the slow and painful process of rebuilding their shattered city, and re-establishing their interrupted lives and careers, the Jews could not do so. Firstly there were far too few survivors. Secondly, the former Jewish buildings had been levelled to the ground. Polish Warsaw as able to return to life as the capital of modern Poland. Jewish Warsaw was destroyed forever, and with it the "Jewish Nation in Poland" which had been so vibrant feature of the pre-war Polish state.

The same was true of every city or town in what had once been German-occupied Poland. The Poles and the Jews both mourned their dead: but only the Poles had the numbers and the resources left to repopulate their cities. Unlike the Jews, many non-Jews had never even had to leave their homes. Whereas every non-Jewish family had suffered death and privation, few had been destroyed in their entirety. For the Jews, the vast majority of their families had been destroyed root and branch, so that for most families not a single individual remained alive, to return to claim a stake in the new world.

p 769

None of those who survived the 'death marches' of January 1945 can forget the horror. "On the death march from Auschwitz," one survivor later recalled, "German women heard we were prisoners, and threw boiled potatoes. Those who picked up the potatoes died with a bullet - and a hot potato in their mouths."

Dr Aharon Beilin later recalled how, on the march from Birkenau to Kamienna



Gora, “We started counting the shots. It was a long column - five thousand people. We know every shot meant a human life. Sometimes the count reached five hundred, in a single day. And the longer we marched, the more the number of shots increased. There was no strength, no food.” One night, the four thousand survivors were locked in a concrete bunker, an air raid shelter. “We felt that we had no air, that there as no air in this bunker, and those groups that were far from the door felt it much more

than we did, and the screams, the tragic scenes, began, “Air, air!””

In the morning, a thousand corpses were found in the bunker. “It was death by suffocation,” Beilin recalled, “horrible positions, naked on their knees and with their mouths to the concrete floor. That’s where the last pockets of air were. From the pores of the concrete, they got the last bit of air.” pp 774-775

On January 29 the German Catholic, Oscar Schindler, who had earlier rescued several hundred Jews from Plaszow camp, was told of a locked goods wagon at the station nearest to his armament factory at Brunnlitz. The wagon was marked “Property of the SS,” and had been travelling on the railways for ten days, covered in ice. Inside were more than a hundred Jews, starving and freezing: Jews from Birkenau who had been at the labour camp at Golleschau, Jews who had once lived in Poland, Czechoslovakia, France, Holland and Hungary.

Schindler had no authority to take the wagon. But he asked a railway official to show him the bill of loading, and when the official was momentarily distracted, wrote on it: “Final destination, Brunnlitz.” Schindler then pointed out to the official that the wagon was intended for his factory. Schindler ordered the railway authorities to transfer the wagon to his factory siding. There he broke open the locks. Sixteen of the Jews had frozen to death. The survivors, not one of whom weighed more than thirty-five kilogrammes, he fed and guarded. Schindler was helped by his wife Emilia, who provided beds on which they could be nursed back to life. “She took care of these Golleschau Jews,” Moshe Bejski later recalled. “She prepared food for them every day.”

In all, between 1943 and 1945, Schindler had saved more than fifteen hundred Jews by employing them in his factory, and treating them humanely. He died, in Germany, in October 1974. At his funeral in the Latin cemetery in Jerusalem, on the slopes of Mount Zion, more than four hundred of the Jews whom he had saved paid him their last respects. p 777

The ‘tainted luck’ of survival

A thousand Jewish women, many of them survivors of Auschwitz, had been marched westward and south, away from the advancing Soviet forces. As with so many of the

death marches, they passed through many German towns and villages: on February 28 they were at Bautzen. One of those on the march, Gisela Teumann, later recalled how, “We passed through some German town. We asked for food. At first they thought we were German refugees. The SS man who accompanied us shouted: “Don't give them anything to eat, it's Jews they are.” And so I got no food. German children began to throw stones at us.”

p 784

On April 10, Adolf Eichmann made his last visit to Theresienstadt. There, he was heard to say: “I shall gladly jump into the pit, knowing that in the same pit there are five million enemies of the state.” Three days later, one of the death marches, mostly of Auschwitz survivors, reached the area of Belsen. One of the survivors, Menachem Weinryb, later recalled:

One night we stopped near the town of Gardelegen. We lay down in a field and several Germans went to consult about what they should do. They returned with a lot of young people from the Hitler Youth and with members of the police force from the town.

They chased us all into a large barn. Since we were five to six thousand people, the wall of the barn collapsed from the pressure of the mass of people, and many of us fled. The Germans poured out petrol and set the barn on fire. Several thousand people were burned alive.

Those of us who had managed to escape lay down in the nearby wood and heard the heart-rending screams of the victims. This as on April 13. . . .

On April 14, United States troops reached Gardelegen itself. There, in yet another camp established for the death marchers, they found, in a huge open pit, the still burning logs on which the bodies of the dead had been cremated. pp 792-793



“Men and women, clad in rags,” Colonel Gerald Draper has recalled, “and barely able to move from starvation and typhus, lay in their straw bunks in every state of filth and degradation. The dead and dying could not be distinguished.” Men and women “collapsed as they walked and fell dead.” In order to cope with what they found in “verminous and stinking barracks,” Draper added, the British army doctors “marked a red cross on the

foreheads of those they thought had a chance of surviving.”

p 794

Photographs, films and articles about Belsen circulated widely in Britain by the end of April, making so great an impact that the word ‘Belsen’ was to become synonymous with ‘inhumanity.’ For these were not reports of discoveries by the Red Army in the distant eastern regions of the Reich, but of horrors as seen by men from London and

Manchester, from the Midlands and the north of England, battle-weary soldiers familiar enough with the horrors of war by April 1945, but shocked as they never thought they could be by the sights that confronted them. "There had been no food nor water for five days preceding the British entry," a British army review reported.

"Evidence of cannibalism was found. The inmates had lost all self-respect, were degraded morally to the level of beasts. Their clothes were in rags, teeming with lice, and both inside and outside the huts was an almost continuous carpet of dead bodies, human excreta, rags and filth."

pp 794-795

On the same day that British troops entered Belsen, American troops entered yet another camp at Nordhausen, where hundreds of slave labourers were found, "in conditions," as the United States Signal Corps recorded, "almost unrecognizable as human. All were little more than skeletons: the dead lay beside the sick and dying in the same beds: filth and human excrement covered the floors. No attempt had been made to alleviate the disease and gangrene that had spread unchecked among the prisoners."

p 796

In Berlin, on April 29, Adolf Hitler dictated his political testament. The Second World War, he wrote, had been "provoked exclusively" by those international statesmen "who were either of Jewish origin or worked for Jewish interests." The Jews were "the real guilty party in this murderous struggle" and would be "saddled" with the responsibility of it. Hitler added:

I left no one in doubt that this time not only would millions of European Aryan races starve, not only would millions of grown men meet their death, and not only would hundreds of thousands of women and children be burned and bombed to death in cities, but this time the real culprits would have to pay for their guilt even though by more humane means than war.

The "more humane means" had been the gas-chambers.

He had decided, Hitler declared, to die in Berlin so as not to "fall into the hands of the enemy, who requires a new spectacle, presented by the Jews, to divert their hysterical masses."

On April 30 Hitler committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin.

pp 803-804

Epilogue 'I will tell the world'

The war was over; the systematic murder of six million Jews was also at an end. But its reverberations continue to this day. Too many scars had been inflicted, too much blood had been spilled, for 8 May 1945 to mark the end of the story, or the end of the tragedy for the two hundred thousand survivors of the ghettos, camps and death marches.

p 811

On May 20, Henry Slamovich, one of the Jews from Plaszow who had been saved by Oscar Schindler, returned with about twenty-five other young Jews, all of them survivors, to his home town of Dzialoszyce. "We thought to ourselves," he later

recalled, “we had survived. We are alive, we are going to enjoy freedom.” Even though his own home was now lived in by non-Jews, Slamovich was determined somehow to rebuild his life in his own town. But within a week, four of the twenty-five Jews who had returned were murdered by Polish anti-Semites. The rest of the young Jews realized they would have to leave. “It was sad, very sad,” Slamovich recalled, thirty-five years later, in his home in San Francisco. p 812

The survivors did not expect to be understood. But they did expect to be allowed to live in peace. It was not to be: on August 20 anti-Jewish riots broke out in Cracow, followed by further riots in Sosnowiec on October 25 and in Lublin on November 19. Within seven months of the end of the war in Europe, and after a year in which no German soldier was on Polish soil, 350 Jews had been murdered in Poland. Thousands more faced danger when they returned to their home towns and villages. p 816

The climax of these post-war killings came on 4 July 1946. Three days earlier, an eight-year-old Polish boy from Kielce, Henryk Blaszczyk, disappeared from his home. Two days later he returned, claiming that he had been kept in a cellar by two Jews who had wanted to kill him, and that only a miracle had enabled him to escape. In fact, he had been to the home of a family friend in a nearby village. The friend had taught him what to say after his return.

On July 4 a crowd of Poles, aroused by rumours of Jews abducting Christian children for ritual purposes, attacked the building of the Jewish Committee in Kielce. Almost all the Jews who were inside the building, including the Chairman of the Committee, Dr Seweryn Kahane, were shot, stoned to death, or killed with axes and blunt instruments. Elsewhere in Kielce, Jews were murdered in their homes, or dragged into the streets and killed by the mob.

Forty-two Jews were killed in Kielce that day. . . .

Following the Kielce ‘pogrom,’ one hundred thousand Polish Jews, more than half the survivors, fled from Poland, seeking new homes in Palestine, Western Europe, Britain and the United States, Latin America and Australia. p 819

Between 1939 and 1945 the Germans killed many millions of non-Jewish civilians in Germany itself, and in every occupied country, often in massive reprisal actions or after prolonged torture. The shooting down in cold blood of unarmed, defenceless Greeks, Poles, Yugoslavs, Czechs, Russians, and men, women and children of a dozen other nationalities, all of them civilians who had taken no part in military action, was a feature of Nazi rule throughout Europe. Among those murdered were as many as a quarter of a million Gypsies, tens of thousands of homosexuals, and tens of thousands of ‘mental-defectives.’ Also murdered, often after the cruelties of tortures, were several million Soviet prisoners-of-war, shot or starved to death long after they had been captured and disarmed.

As well as the six million Jews who were murdered, more than ten million other non-combatants were killed by the Nazis. Under the Nazi scheme, Poles, Czechs, Serbs and Russians were to become subject peoples; slaves, workers of the New Order. The Jews were to disappear altogether. It was the Jews alone who were marked out to be

destroyed in their entirety: every Jewish man, woman and child, so that there would be no future Jewish life in Europe. Against the eight million Jews who lived in Europe in 1939, the Nazi bureaucracy assembled all the concerted skills and mechanics of a modern state: the police, the railways, the civil service, the industrial power of the Reich; poison gas, soldiers, mercenaries, criminals, machine guns, artillery; and over all, a massive apparatus of deception. p 824

The stories told in these pages can convey only a fragment of the Jewish suffering, and courage, of those terrible years. With the Allied victory in 1945, the Holocaust became history, increasingly remote, forgotten; a chapter, reduced to a page, shortened to a paragraph, relegated to a footnote. Yet it must still be remembered in each generation for what it was: an unprecedented explosion of evil over good. p 826