

TITLE

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JOURNAL

Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust

DEPOSITED IN ORE

08 March 2018

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Covering Up Chelmno: Nazi Attempts to Obfuscate and Obliterate an Extermination Camp

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Funding: none

Disclosure: no conflicts of interest

Abstract

The centrality of deception and secrecy to the Nazi extermination of the Jews has long been recognised, yet numerous questions remain regarding its significance for the ‘Final Solution’. This article examines Nazi attempts to cover up the first extermination camp established by the Third Reich at Chelmno. It demonstrates that in the Warthegau region of occupied Poland, the Nazis played a shell game to deceive victims and bystanders by pretending that deportees were transferred from the provinces to the Lodz ghetto, or from the Lodz ghetto to the provinces and to Germany. The contradictory cover stories used by the Nazis to obfuscate deportations to Chelmno succeeded for a while, but were eventually seen through. While Nazi deception measures are more vividly recorded in postwar testimonies, this article also shows that Nazi attempts to erase the physical evidence of mass murder through the cremation of the corpses can be documented much more extensively than hitherto appreciated using contemporary sources. Ultimately, both the attempted obfuscation and obliteration of the evidence for extermination at Chelmno failed. (173 words)

Keywords

Chelmno, Warthegau, Lodz ghetto, cremation, deception, cover-up

Covering Up Chelmno

Nazi Attempts to Obfuscate and Obliterate an Extermination Camp

Introduction

The centrality of deception and secrecy to the Nazi extermination of the Jews has long been recognised, yet numerous questions remain regarding its significance for the ‘Final Solution’ and the histories of the Nazi extermination camps.¹ The attempted cover-up of Nazi extermination policies was meant to obscure and obfuscate the reality of mass murder from multiple audiences of victims and bystanders. What did deception and secrecy mean to the perpetrators? How were they implemented and how effective were the cover stories put into place for different audiences? While much evidence that can contribute to answering these questions has been uncovered by historians, Ahlrich Meyer has noted that the phenomenon of deception has found too little attention in Holocaust research.²

This article seeks to redress this desideratum through exploring Nazi attempts to cover up the first extermination camp established by the Third Reich, namely the improvised camp of Chelmno in the so-called Warthegau, located in western Poland on territory annexed to Germany. Beginning operation in December 1941, by the end of 1942 approximately 145,000 Jews and up to 5,000 Roma and Sinti, with nearly half of all victims deported from the Lodz ghetto, had been murdered at Chelmno using gas vans by a detachment of SS and Police, the

¹ As early as 1961, Raul Hilberg emphasised the importance of ‘concealment’ to the smooth operation of the extermination camps. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1961), pp.619-624.

² Ahlrich Meyer, *Das Wissen um Auschwitz, Täter und Opfer der ‘Endlösung’ in Westeuropa* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), p.110.

SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof. Closing for the first time in April 1943, the camp was reactivated in the spring of 1944, when a further 7,000 Jews were murdered, before the site was overrun by the Red Army in January 1945.

While two histories of the camp have appeared in the past decade from Shmuel Krakowski and Patrick Montague, and despite the extensive literature on the Holocaust in the Warthegau and on the Lodz ghetto, much source material remains to be explored and integrated into our knowledge of ‘Hitler’s first death camp’.³ For reasons of space, this article will not examine how news of Chelmno reached the Polish underground and through them, the western Allies, subjects that have been exhaustively explored by Adam Puławski and Michael Fleming.⁴ Instead, this article will focus on two forms of cover-up used by the Nazis to camouflage mass murder at Chelmno. Firstly, it will outline the deceptions used to obfuscate the deportations of Jews from provincial towns and the Lodz ghetto, and contrast these with the deceptions attempted in the camp and village of Chelmno itself. Alongside contemporary sources, numerous post-war testimonies recorded in several West German war crimes investigations are available to help reconstruct the deceptions circulating within the

³ Shmuel Krakowski, *Das Todeslager Chelmno/Kulmhof: der Beginn der Endlösung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), translated as *Chelmno: a small village in Europe: the first Nazi extermination camp* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009); Krakowski’s book originally appeared in Hebrew in 2001; Patrick Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust. The History of Hitler’s First Death Camp* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011)

⁴ Adam Puławski, *W obliczu Zagłady. Rząd RP na uchodźstwie, Delegatura Rządu RP na Kraj, ZWZ-AK wobec deportacji Żydów do obozów zagłady (1941-1942)* (Lublin: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2009), pp.59-157; Michael Fleming, ‘Intelligence from Poland on Chelmno: British responses’, *Holocaust Studies*, 21:3, 2015, pp.172-190.

Warthegau.⁵ Secondly, the article will reconstruct the Nazi attempt to obliterate the physical evidence of mass murder by incinerating the corpses of the victims, using war crimes investigations as well as hitherto neglected contemporary documents drawn from the records of the Lodz Ghetto Administration (*Gettoverwaltung Litzmannstadt*) and the ‘Research Station A Litzmannstadt’ (*Forschungsstelle A Litzmannstadt*), a wiretapping service of the German Luftwaffe.⁶

Nazi uses of deception and cover-up should not be seen in solely practical terms, but also provide important evidence of the meaning of genocide to the perpetrators. Misinformation was only one means of controlling the victims and preventing resistance or panic during deportations or upon arrival at an extermination site. Surprise, confinement, coercion and direct violence also played key roles, and could supersede the need for deception if necessary. When deception failed, as eventually occurred during the summer of 1942, knowledge did not necessarily translate into resistance or escape attempts, whether in

⁵ The investigations were coordinated by the Central Office for the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes at Ludwigsburg, Germany. Alongside the investigation of the Higher SS and Police Leader Wilhelm Koppe and the Chelmno camp staff (AR-Z 69/59), I have drawn on the investigations of Günter Fuchs and Otto Bradfisch of the Lodz Gestapo (AR-Z 69a/59) and the investigation of Helmut Krizons of the Lodz Gestapo (AR-Z 161/67).

⁶ On the Lodz Ghetto Administration, see the pioneering study by Peter Klein, *Die ‘Gettoverwaltung Litzmannstadt’ 1940-1944: Eine Dienststelle im Spannungsfeld von Kommunalbürokratie und staatlicher Verfolgungspolitik* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2009). Records of the *Gettoverwaltung Litzmannstadt* have now been systematically digitised and are available in open-access through the Polish Digital Archive at <http://www.szukajwarchiwach.pl/39/221/0/5.1.10/str/1/100#tabZespol>

the tightly controlled Lodz ghetto or in provincial towns, for a variety of reasons.⁷

Disinformation was not solely aimed at the victims, but also at the ethnic German population of the Warthegau inhabiting the same provincial towns as their Jewish neighbours. Although testimonies given up to thirty years after the events are undeniably problematic, both Jewish survivors as well as ethnic German bystanders recalled similar cover-stories, while ethnic Germans also recall learning of the true fate of deportees. Deception was thus intended to provide an alibi for genocide, not only to restrict knowledge of mass murder among the ethnic German civilian population and local officialdom, but also to euphemise extermination. As this article will show, the deceptions used in the Warthegau frequently contradicted each other, while the attempted cover-up through cremation ended up confirming the crime. The ultimate purpose of deception and cover-up may well have been to mask the transgression of genocide from the Nazi regime itself.⁸

The Shell Game of ‘Resettlement’ in the Warthegau

The deceptions used to obfuscate deportations to the extermination camp of Chelmno undoubtedly owed much to the prolonged debate within the Nazi administration of the

⁷ No armed resistance was able to emerge in the Lodz ghetto, unlike in Warsaw, as is widely discussed. Isaiah Trunk, ‘Note: Why Was There No Armed Resistance against the Nazis in the Lodz Ghetto?’, *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1981), pp.329-334

⁸ Dan Stone, ‘Genocide as Transgression’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 7/1 (2004), pp.45–65

Warthegau over the fate of the Jews from 1939 to 1941.⁹ In November 1939, the Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler had demanded the expulsion of all Jews from the newly annexed territories of western Poland into the Government-General, an order which soon ran aground against practical difficulties.¹⁰ During 1940, officials hoped for an eventual expulsion of the Jews of the Warthegau into the Government-General, even as the need to accommodate ethnic German ‘resettlers’ from the Baltic states and Volhynia placed a greater urgency on the expulsion of the Polish rural population. As late as November 1940, the Wehrmacht in the Government-General was told to expect 330,000 Jews from the Warthegau.¹¹ Yet the abortive ‘third short-range plan’ could only guarantee the expulsion of Poles. Local officials in the provincial counties of the Warthegau hoped to resettle 100,000

⁹ This phase of Nazi ‘Jewish policy’ in the Warthegau is exhaustively covered in among other works, Götz Aly, *‘Endlösung’. Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an der europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1995); Michael Alberti, *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Juden im Reichsgau Wartheland 1939-1945* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006); Gordon J. Horwitz, *Ghettostadt: Łódź and the making of a Nazi city* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); Klein, *Gettoverwaltung Litzmannstadt*; Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi Arthur Greiser and the occupation of Western Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Der Reichsführer-SS als Reichskommissar zu Festigung deutschen Volkstums, Anordnung I/II, Oct. 30, 1939, gez. Himmler, Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (hereafter AIPN), NTN 332, p.10. On the failure of the ‘first short range plan’ and the impact on the Jews of the Warthegau, see Alberti, *Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, pp.126-146.

¹¹ Fernschreiben Militärbefehlshaber im Generalgouvernement Ia Nr 3186/40 geh. an Heeresgruppe B, Ansiedlung der Juden und Polen, Dec. 27, 1940, Tsentral’ny Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony Rossioskoi Federatsii 500-12454-100, p.5.

Jews into the Lodz ghetto, but this was deemed impossible.¹² Contradicting the aim of deporting Jews was the growing importance of Jewish forced labour to the local economy. By March 1941, therefore, officials began to think in terms of parting only with Jews unfit for work, who it was hoped could be deported at a later date further east.¹³ During the summer of 1941, officials in the counties and in Lodz struggled over whether provincial Jews could be concentrated in the 'central ghetto' of Lodz or if Jews from Lodz could be resettled into the countryside.¹⁵ By August 1941, the concept of 'village ghettos' had been rejected, while the transfer of sick and unfit Jews from the provinces to the Lodz ghetto had been forbidden.¹⁶

Artur Greiser's decision to exterminate 100,000 Jews unfit for work in the Warthegau, taken at the latest by the start of October 1941¹⁷, necessitated the working-out of a suitable

¹² Umwandererzentralstelle Posen IV/1 f. Kr./En. Tgb.-Nr. 1080/41, 3. Nahplan, Jan. 6, 1941, AIPN NTN 36, pp.144-5.

¹³ Aly, *Endlösung*, pp.264-5; Klein, *Gettoverwaltung*, p.226.

¹⁵ Alberti, *Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, pp.339-372.

¹⁶ Forschungsstelle A Litzmannstadt, Meldung zu Auswertefragen Nr. 187, Vermerk: Einrichtung v. Dorfghettos, Aug. 15, 1941, Yad Vashem Archive (hereafter YVA) O.51/13, p.212; Regierungspräsident Litzmannstadt, Einweisung kranker Juden aus den Landkreisen in das Getto Litzmannstadt, Aug. 16, 1941, gez. Uebelhör, Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (hereafter AŻIH) 233/44, p.726.

¹⁷ In addition to the monographs cited above, see also the essays by Ian Kershaw, 'Improvised Genocide? The Emergence of the 'Final Solution' in the 'Warthegau', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th Series, 2, 1992, pp.51-78 and Jacek Andrzej Młynarczyk, 'Mordinitiativen von unten. Die Rolle Arthur Greisers und Odilo Globocnik im Entscheidungsprozess zum Judenmord' in: Jacek Andrzej Młynarczyk and Jochen Böhrer

set of cover-stories. In November 1941, Nazi labour officials informed counterparts from other ‘annexed territories’ that the Warthegau was now only a ‘transit station’ and that by the end of March 1942, all Jews other than those fit for work would be ‘deported’, without elaborating further on their eventual destination.¹⁸ Internally, it sufficed within the Nazi bureaucracy to speak intransitively of ‘evacuation’ and remain silent on where the ‘evacuated’ Jews were to go. However, this internal correspondence consistently identified the ‘evacuees’ or ‘resettlers’ as unfit for work.¹⁹ For example, a telephone conversation recorded by the ‘Research Station A Litzmannstadt’ spoke of the ‘resettlement of 16,000 unfit Jews – entire families are involved’ from the Lodz ghetto in January 1942.²⁰

By contrast, the cover-story presented to the victims as well as to the German population of provincial counties was more elaborate. Initially, the SS and Police units carrying out deportations²¹ seem to have referred from time to time to ‘resettlement to the

(eds), *Der Judenmord in den eingegliederten polnischen Gebieten 1939-1945* (Osnabrück: fibre, 2010), pp.27-56.

¹⁸ Vermerk der unter Vorsitz von Herrn MinDir. Mansfeld erfolgten Ressortbesprechung, Nov. 22, 1941, BArch R 22/2057, p.208.

¹⁹ Der Amtskommissar des Amtsbezirks Sluzewo, Betr.: Evakuierung der nichtarbeitsfähigen Juden, Erfassung von Vermögenswerten, Bezug: Verfügung des Herrn Reichsstatthalters vom 1.5.42 – I/13 022-150 g, May 18, 1942, Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi (hereafter APŁ) 221/29667, p.238.

²⁰ Meldung zu Auswertefragen Nr. 244, Betr.: Litzmannstädter Getto, Jan. 16, 1942, YVA O.51/13, p.221

²¹ For overviews of the deportations in the Warthegau to Chelmno, see Danuta Dabrowska, ‘Zagłada skupisk żydowskich w “Kraju Warty” w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej’, *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 13/14, 1955, pp.122-184; Krakowski, *Das Todeslager*

east'. From late September to late November 1941, Sonderkommando Lange conducted a series of mobile killing operations in Konin and Kalisz counties using gas vans, prior to the establishment of Chelmno.²² According to reports reaching the Warsaw ghetto regarding these initial mobile actions as well as the first phase of Chelmno, 'in the second half of November 1941 the news spread in the cities of the Koło district (Warthbrücken district) that the entire Jewish population of this area had to be transferred to the region of Pinsk or to eastern Galicia.'²³ Yet the resort to such deceptions was inconsistent. Polish and Jewish underground reports noted that the deportations were carried out in silence: 'Officially, the purpose of this deportation is not revealed to the deportees, but in private the Germans have launched a different version: a center for the entire district will set up at Chelmno, which will be one stage of the transfer into the region of Pinsk or to Galicia.'²⁴ Michał Podchlebink, one

Chelmno/Kulmhof, pp. 75-104; 'Warthegau Region (Reichsgau Wartheland)' in: Martin Dean (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, Volume II: Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe, Part A* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp.33-130.

²² Alberti, *Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, pp.412-415; Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, pp.32-47.

²³ Wypadki chełmiński, March 1942, in: Aleksandra Bańkowska (ed), *Archiwum Ringelbluma: Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy. 11, Ludzie i prace "Oneg Szabat"* (Warsaw: Wydawn. Naukowe PWN, 2013), p.300.

²⁴ Wydarzenia w Chełmnie nad Nerem, circa Jan. 1942, in: Ewa Wiatr, Barbara Engelking, Alina Skibińska (eds), *Archiwum Ringelbluma: Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy. 13, Ostatnim etapem przesiedlenia jest śmierć: Pomiechówek, Chelmno nad Nerem, Treblinka* (Warsaw: Wydawn. Naukowe PWN, 2013), p.114; a virtually identical remark can be found in the report by the Delegatura from March 1942 on 'mass executions of Jews in

of the few survivors who escaped Chelmno in 1942, testified that German policemen told the Jews being deported by truck from the town of Koło, ‘don’t be afraid, they are going to take you to the Barłogi train station and from there to the East.’²⁵ At the beginning of March 1942, the Jews of Krośniewice were informed that they were to be resettled to Bessarabia, in eastern Romania.²⁶

From a very early stage, such cover stories likely failed to reassure the victims that deportation did not equal death. In January 1942, Podchlebnik escaped together with Shlomo Winer from Chelmno²⁷, and the two fugitives spread knowledge of the extermination camp to a number of ghettos on their flight path out of the region, including the Krośniewice ghetto.²⁸ In Turek county, where Jews had been concentrated into the rural district of Heidemühle, knowledge of Chelmno, situated only 30 kilometers away, was brought by Polish peasants.²⁹

Koło county’. Aneks nr 28 na czas od 16 do 21 III 1942, Załącznik: Masowe egzekucje Żydów w pow. Kolskim, Archiwum Akt Nowych DR 202/III-8, pp.100-102, here p.100.

²⁵ Protokół przesłuchania świadka Michał Podchlebnik, June 9, 1945, AIPN GK 165/271, t.1, p.14.

²⁶ Drugi etap, April 1942 in: Bańkowska (ed), *Archiwum Ringelbluma 11*, p.308.

²⁷ Often identified as ‘Szlamek’, the pseudonym he used after escaping to the Warsaw ghetto. See Przemysław Nowicki, ‘Zanim „przybył z zaświatów”, nazywał się Winer. Krąg rodzinny i konspiracyjny Szlamka, uciekiniera z ośrodka zagłady w Chelmnie nad Nerem’, *Zagłada Żydów*, 2009, pp.162-192.

²⁸ As indicated by a letter sent by Róża Kaplan to the Warsaw ghetto in January 1942. Róża Kaplan, Krośniewice an Her [sic] R. Gelbart, Warszawa, Jan. 21, 1942, in: Ruta Sakowska (ed), *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy. Tom 1: Listy o Zagładzie* (Warsaw: Wydawn. Naukowe PWN, 1997), p. 35.

²⁹ Vernehmung Hersz J., Sep. 14, 1960, BArch B 162/3361, p.194R.

A survivor of the Łask ghetto recalled that Chelmno was known well before the deportation action in August 1942, claiming that ‘as far as Lodz there were rumors that Jews from the entire Warthegau were being liquidated there.’³⁰

Other testimonies of survivors of the provincial deportation actions indicate, however, that such knowledge was far from universal. More strikingly still, ethnic German inhabitants of the same towns testified more often than not to total ignorance of extermination at Chelmno. Both groups of witnesses confirm a pattern of attempted obfuscation of the deportations’ true destination and purpose. Rumors circulated between both groups, especially between native-born ethnic Germans and Jewish personal acquaintances. In Łask, one ethnic German recalled that

For a long time before the big resettlement action the talk was that the Jews would all be taken away. Our house Jew, named Sandmann, also told me about it, and said Herr Hitler would let all the Jews go to Madagascar. It even transpired that the Jews had already packed for this transport. Then it was said that the Jews were being resettled to China, but these were all more or less rumors.³¹

Rumors of gassing thus circulated alongside rumors of resettlement. In Pabianice, an ethnic German ‘resettler’ from Rovno in Volhynia recalled that ‘it was said by way of rumor, the Jews went “all away for gassing”,’³² a rumor that failed to reach some Jewish survivors of the ghetto, who professed ignorance after the war of where the deportees had been taken.³³

By far the most common legend was one that was evidently propagated as a deliberate deception aimed at both victims as well as bystanders, namely deportation not for

³⁰ Vernehmung Szraga N., Sep. 9, 1963, BArch B 162/7418, p.85.

³¹ Vernehmung Oskar Wolfinger, Sep. 17, 1971, BArch B 162/7419, p.30.

³² Zeugenvernehmung Anna B., Nov. 29, 1966, BArch B 162/7439, p.85.

³³ Vernehmung Bluma M., July 5, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, p.326.

‘resettlement’ but for ‘labour deployment’ (*Arbeitseinsatz*). In Wieluń, a deportation to Chelmno of 1,500 Jews deemed unfit for work around Eastertime was passed off as a labour transfer, with survivors being told ‘they will go to other places for labour deployment’, a reassurance that was repeated during the August 1942 final liquidation of the Wieluń ghetto. “We did not then know where the majority of Jews from Wieluń went,” recalled one survivor. “They told us they were going for labour deployment. But we were already assuming that they would all be killed.”³⁴ Ethnic German neighbours had followed the departing trucks during the Easter deportation and returned to say that all had been gassed.³⁵

The decision to select Jews fit for work from the provincial ghettos and concentrate them in the ‘work ghetto of the Gau’ (*Gau-Arbeitsghetto*) in Lodz provided the deportation organisers the perfect cover story to offer to the German inhabitants. The deportation of unfit Jews to what was euphemistically called a ‘supply camp’ in one internal discussion could be obfuscated by pretending that *all* deportees had been sent to Lodz.³⁶ In Brzeziny, ‘it was said at the time that they had all been transported to the Lodz ghetto’, recalled the local administrator, *Amtskommissar* Otto Rösler.³⁷ Theophil Stapel, a Volhynian German ‘resettler’ who had become one of the officials in Rösler’s *Amtskommissariat*, similarly recalled that even though ‘it was generally said that the Jews would be liquidated’, nonetheless ‘a work assignment at another place was indeed promised to the Jews.’ That the Judenrat chairman in Brzeziny did not believe this fiction was increasingly less important than whether local

³⁴ Vernehmung Zenek P., June 20, 1972 (first citation); Isek J., June 27, 1972 (second citation), BArch B 162/7418, pp. 233,284.

³⁵ Vernehmung Martin P., July 3, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, p.317.

³⁶ Meldung zu Auswertefragen Nr. 284/42, Betr. Getto Litzmannstadt, April 22, 42, YVA O.51/13, p.319.

³⁷ Vernehmung Otto Rösler, Aug. 6, 1971, BArch B 162/7423, p.63.

German town dwellers, officials and policemen believed it.³⁸ A policeman stationed in Bełchatów, from where 4,953 Jews were reported as ‘resettled’ by the population registration office³⁹, believed that he had heard that ‘they were brought into the big ghetto in Lodz.’⁴⁰ Even the selection of Jews into an able-bodied group and a conspicuously unfit group of children, elderly and sick could be rationalised away using the claim of a ‘transfer to Lodz’ . A post office worker in Bełchatów believed that the deportees ‘went, as far as we were told, to the Lodz ghetto and most energetic and industrious were to be brought to work in Germany.’⁴¹ Similar stories circulated in Wieruszow. Like his counterpart in Brzeziny, *Amtskommissar* Alfred Ryba claimed not to have been told where the deportation commando from Lodz had taken the Jews. ‘In my opinion they were transported to the Lodz ghetto,’ he stated in 1972.⁴² Returning to Wieruszow in 1943 on leave after his call-up to the Wehrmacht, Johann Rozitski was told by his wife that the Jews were gone. ‘At the time it was said,’ he remembered, ‘that they had all gone to Lodz.’⁴³ While some German bystanders might have internalised the Lodz explanation to repress more unpleasant memories, or might have been influenced by the post-war social consensus in West Germany that the ‘Final Solution’ was kept entirely secret⁴⁴, the sheer repetition of the Lodz story suggests this was

³⁸ Vernehmung Theophil Stapel, June 16, 1971, BArch B 162/7423, pp.48-54.

³⁹ Den Wehrmeldeamt Łask in Pabianice, Belchatow, Sep. 19, 1942, AŻIH 233/43, p.126.

⁴⁰ Vernehmung Paul R., Nov. 2, 1961, BArch B 162/7440, p.107.

⁴¹ Vernehmung Eugenie K., July 23, 1971, BArch B 162/7423, p.103.

⁴² Vernehmung Alfred Ryba, Dec. 13, 1967, BArch B 162/7435, p.42; Jan. 18, 1972, B 162/7423, p.124.

⁴³ Vernehmung Johann Rozitski, Sep. 14, 1971, BArch B 162/7419, p.5.

⁴⁴ See on this Bernward Dörner, *Die Deutschen und der Holocaust. Was niemand wissen wollte, aber jeder wissen konnte* (Berlin: Proyläen, 2007), pp.493-602

indeed the one most frequently heard in 1942 during the deportations from provincial towns in the Warthegau.

How much were the ‘resettlement actions’ discussed among the German inhabitants of these provincial towns? One resident of Bełchatów claimed that ‘at the time not much was said about the fate of the Jews’, a circumspection that helped the half-truth of a transfer to Lodz take firmer root.⁴⁵ By contrast, another Bełchatów resident recalled that the Lodz story was explained ‘in public.’⁴⁶ A resident of Łask thought that nothing was said in the town regarding the deportations, noting that ‘even in private circles we didn’t speak at the time of the fate of the Jews’, as they had ‘much too much fear’ to talk about it.’⁴⁷ In Ozorków, a resident recalled that it had been explained that the deported Jews were to be taken to another ghetto, but that further discussion was stifled by a ‘great curtain of silence.’⁴⁸ By contrast, public disquiet could force officials in other towns to propagate ‘fake news’ publicly. In Poddębice, the brutal execution of the ‘resettlement’, as well as rumours spread from Dabie of gassing reaching the ears of the local forester⁴⁹, led to a townhall meeting to address the murmuring, as one resident recalled after the war:

As the local inhabitants were in an uproar about the deportation of the Jews, a meeting was convened by Landrat Kollmeier. I was also present at this meeting.

⁴⁵ Vernehmung Magda F., July 20, 1971, BArch B 162/7423, p.82.

⁴⁶ Vernehmung Robert Z., Sep. 15, 1971, BArch B 162/7419, p.23.

⁴⁷ Vernehmung Irmgard Sch., Sep. 16, 1971, BArch B 162/7419, p.27.

⁴⁸ Vernehmung Eugenie St., Sep. 21, 1971, BArch B 162/7419, p.41. For other reiterations of the Lodz transfer story by former residents of Bełchatów, see Vernehmung Maria Kl., Sep. 21, 1971; Alma W., Sep. 27, 1971; Alma P., Sep. 27, 1971; Reinhold R., June 28, 1971, BArch B 162/7419, pp.36-37, 45, 47, 90.

⁴⁹ Vernehmung Alfred Dönst, Jan 3, 1962, BArch B 162/7430, p.48.

In the assembly, we were told that the excitement because of the Jews was groundless, since they were only moved to another place and nothing would happen to them.⁵⁰

Overt attempts to reassure the German population such as this were rare, but they strikingly mirror the dissembling of Nazi officials towards the inhabitants of the Lodz ghetto, to which this article now turns.⁵¹

Deceiving the Lodz Ghetto

While the deceptions used to cover the deportations from Lodz to Chelmno are much better known than the obfuscations used in the smaller towns, they take on a new significance when contrasted with the story of a transfer to the Lodz ghetto that circulated in the provinces. Not only did the deceptions used in Lodz contradict those disseminated in the provinces, but the cover stories passed on in Lodz contradicted themselves. On December 16, 1941, the Lodz ‘eldest of the Jews’, Chaim Rumkowski, was first informed of the impending resettlement of 20,000 Jews by the Ghetto Administration. Rumkowski informed the Jewish council that ‘apparently, those to be resettled will be sent to smaller towns in the Generalgouvernement, to centers where food supply will not be as difficult as it is in the large cities.’⁵² This story

⁵⁰ Vernehmung Eugenie W., Jan. 25, 1962, BArch B 162/7430, pp.50-50R.

⁵¹ For overviews of the Lodz ghetto, see Andrea Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt: Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006); Isaiah Trunk, *Lodz Ghetto: A History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Horwitz, *Gettostadt*.

⁵² Sascha Feuchert, Erwin Leibfried, Jörg Riecke (eds), *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt, 1941* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), pp.313; Lucjan Dobroszycki (ed.),

broadly conformed to the contemporaneous deceptions during provincial deportations that emphasised ‘the east’ as the ultimate destination of the ‘resettlers’.

Yet by February 1942, rumours circulated in the ghetto that the deportees from the first action ‘were in Koło county and also in the vicinity of Brześć Kujawski.’⁵³ This shift *westwards* was then ‘confirmed’ in April:

It has now been irrefutably established that the camp is located in the region bordering directly on the town of Koło, now called Warthbrücken. The camp houses about 100,000 Jews, indicating that besides the 44,000 resettled from this ghetto, Jews from other cities have been concentrated in that camp. This gigantic camp was formerly a living site for Germans from Volhynia. Apparently 30,000 people had been living there. They left the barracks in perfectly decent order, and even left their furniture for the Jews to use.⁵⁴

The source of this information was identified as a ‘high officer of the secret police’. This was in all probability *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Hans Bothmann, the new commander of *SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof*, who had replaced *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Herbert Lange in March 1942.⁵⁵ His claim that the Jews resettled from Lodz were now housed in a ‘gigantic’ former camp for Volhynian Germans is a striking example of the continued entanglement of the resettlement of ethnic Germans with the extermination of the Jews. Just as striking is the silence of the Lodz ghetto chroniclers regarding the flagrant contradiction between December

The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto, 1941-1944 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p.96.

⁵³ *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, p.128 (Feb. 1942).

⁵⁴ *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, p.145.

⁵⁵ Alberti, *Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, pp.422-3; Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, pp.53-54

1941's eastward direction and April 1942's news of resettlement to the west.⁵⁶ In May 1942, when German, Austrian and Czech Jews deported in October and November 1941 from the 'Reich' were deported onwards to Chelmno, the news of the 'gigantic camp' near Koło was disregarded, and the talk was once more of resettlement to the east. 'There is a persistent rumor in the ghetto that the first two transports of deportees will be sent to occupied France and the remainder, to Bessarabia,' the ghetto chroniclers noted.⁵⁷ At no time subsequently during 1942 was any other destination officially announced.

Postwar testimonies of survivors of the Lodz ghetto confirm and complicate the picture painted by contemporary sources.⁵⁸ Simon W. recalled that before the first wave of transports in January and February 1942, it had been said that the deportees would be resettled 'in a village that had previously been inhabited by Poles.'⁵⁹ The fact that baggage was left behind in Marysin square after the departure of transports was the first ominous sign that deportation meant death. While survivors frequently testified to learning of Chelmno while still

⁵⁶ As the Lodz ghetto chronicle was an official record of the Jewish council and open to inspection by the German authorities, this silence may have been deliberate. Contributors to the chronicle included the diarists Józef Zelkowicz and Oskar Rosenfeld (from June 1942).

C.f. Hanno Loewy, 'Editor's Introduction' in: Oskar Rosenfeld, *In the Beginning was the Ghetto. Notebooks from Łódź* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p.xxiii

⁵⁷ *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, p.159. On the phenomenon of rumors in the Lodz ghetto, see Isaiah Kuperstein, 'Rumors: A Socio-Historical Phenomenon in the Ghetto of Łódź', *The Polish Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1973), pp. 63-83.

⁵⁸ On knowledge of the fate of deportees in the Lodz ghetto in 1942, see also Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt*, pp.282-291.

⁵⁹ Vernehmung Simon W., n.d. (circa Sep.1961), BArch B 162/3362, p.469.

imprisoned in the ghetto, many do not indicate when they acquired this knowledge.⁶⁰ Only rarely did survivors claim after the war to have heard of Chelmno during the first half of 1942.⁶¹

Knowledge of extermination in the ghetto hardened slowly into certainty after the return of clothing and property plundered from the deportees at Chelmno via a sorting depot set up at Pabianice. The head of the Ghetto Administration, Hans Biebow, sought the approval of the Lodz Gestapo for this, and was told only to ensure that ‘any letters, pictures, certificates etc’ were removed.⁶² This decision, made to rationalise the economic exploitation of plunder, proved to be a colossal breach of secrecy, as the sanitization of such clues was far from complete. While residents of the village of Chelmno were soon informed that clothing was shipped to Lodz⁶³, so too did ghetto inmates swiftly realise from late May 1942 onwards that deportees’ clothing was being returned.⁶⁴ Many claimed to have recognised specific items of clothing or baggage owned by family members.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Vernehmung Abraham K., Dec. 30,1971; Masza Cz., Dec 28,1971; Chaja F., Dec. 27, 1971, Luba B., Jan. 2, 1972; Abraham L., June 23, 1972, BArch B 162/7417, pp.186-7, 191, 193, 198, 254; Vernehmung Dawid P., Jan. 5, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, p.208.

⁶¹ Vernehmung Anny R., June 28, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, p.291.

⁶² 027/1/Lu/Po, Aktennotiz! 87/42, May 22, 1942, APŁ 221/29232, p.176.

⁶³ Protokół przesłuchania świadka Andrzej Miszczak, June 14, 1945, AIPN GK 165/271, t.1, p.51R.

⁶⁴ *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt, 1942*, p.221 (May 22-23, 1942), 248-9 (May 30-31, 1942), 256 (June 1, 1942)

⁶⁵ Vernehmung Hersz J., Sep. 14, 1960; Batia A., Sep. 27, 1960; BArch B 162/3361, pp. 194R, 214; Vernehmung Alek J., 14.11.1961; Siegfried G., n.d. (circa Sep.1961); Simon W., n.d. (circa Sep. 1961), BArch B 162/3362, pp.445-6, 465, 469-70.

The transfer of 17,000 able-bodied Jews from provincial ghettos was another route through which the certainty that deportation meant death, as well as knowledge of Chelmno, spread through the Lodz ghetto.⁶⁶ Many survivors selected for work in provincial ghettos reported only learning of Chelmno *after* their arrival in Lodz.⁶⁷ Less frequently, survivors claimed to have learned of Chelmno from more concrete sources of information. Lillian S., a fourteen-year old in 1942, thought she learned about the extermination camp from radio reports, but had not believed them at the time.⁶⁸ While there were indeed clandestine radio listeners in the Lodz ghetto⁶⁹, and news of Chelmno had been broadcast on the BBC⁷⁰, there is little further corroboration. Henry T. recalled that letters were found in clothing returned to the ghetto for sorting that spoke of gassings in Chelmno.⁷¹ The controversial Gestapo informant David Gertler, the head of the economic section of the ghetto police force, testified that an escapee from Chelmno reached the ghetto in July 1942, so that it was clear to Runkowski and himself from this point on what deportation really meant.⁷² The rabbi of Grabów had written to both the Warsaw and Lodz ghettos on January 19, 1942, conveying

⁶⁶ Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt*, pp.284-285.

⁶⁷ Vernehmung Hanoch Ch., Sep. 16, 1963; Masza Cz., Dec. 28, 1971, BArch B 162/7418, pp.108-9 (Wieluń), 191 (Pabianice).

⁶⁸ Vernehmung Lillian Sh., July 6, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, p.329.

⁶⁹ Trunk, *Lódz Ghetto*, pp.397-8.

⁷⁰ As was noted in the Warsaw ghetto by Emmanuel Ringelblum in June 1942. Jacob Sloan (ed.), *Notes from the Warsaw ghetto: the journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p.295.

⁷¹ Vernehmung Henry T., June 30, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, p.302.

⁷² Vernehmung David Gertler, Sep. 14, 1960, BArch B 162/7447, p.25.

the news of Chelmno brought by Shlomo 'Szlamek' Winer, but whether the letter arrived, to whom it was sent, and whether they passed on the news is unknown.⁷³

The 'Sperre' action of September 1942, during which 15,000 sick, elderly and children selected as unfit for work were rounded up directly by the Gestapo, Police and Ghetto Administration, marked the moment at which certainty regarding the deaths of deportees became near-universal in the Lodz ghetto.⁷⁴ However, some survivors, in particular former members of the Jewish ghetto police, claimed that even after the 'Sperre', they still did not know of extermination.⁷⁵ The ghetto policemen may well have been reluctant to admit knowledge, or have repressed the memory of hearing rumours about Chelmno, out of guilt or shame at their potential complicity.

Despite the brutality of the 'Sperre' action, the Nazi authorities persisted in developing new fictions regarding the whereabouts of the unfit deportees, claiming that they had been taken to 'rest homes' in order to 'raise labour productivity in the ghetto.'⁷⁶ When children's clothing was returned to the ghetto, it was claimed that the deported children had been given uniforms in their new 'care homes'.⁷⁷ In November 1942, the Lodz Gestapo cynically reported that 'the Jews have simmered down about the last evacuation (elderly and children

⁷³ Löw, *Juden im Ghetto Litzmannstadt*, p.285.

⁷⁴ Vernehmung Batia A., Sep. 27, 1960; Julia G., Nov. 19, 1960, BArch B 162/3361, pp.213-214; 232; Vernehmung Regina Z., June 20, 1972; Rose D., June 26, 1972; Ann L., June 27, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, pp.229, 274, 279.

⁷⁵ Vernehmung Simon F., July 3, 1972; Max S., July 6, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, pp.312, 334.

⁷⁶ Vernehmung Jakov König, Oct. 20, 60, BArch B 162/3361, pp.220-221.

⁷⁷ Vernehmung Dr. Leon F., Nov. 21, 1960, BArch B 162/3361, p.236.

under 10 years). The worry over their relatives, of whom there is no news, persists as previously.⁷⁸

It is unclear from the surviving documents and postwar testimonies whether the Nazis expected the shell game of ‘resettlement’ to and from the Lodz ghetto that they orchestrated in front of Jewish victims and German bystanders to last. While many of the nearly 800,000 Germans living in the Warthegau were either fooled or chose to believe the alibi of ‘resettlement’⁷⁹, Jewish survivors increasingly saw through the deceptions, even as the Nazis insisted on adding new embellishments to their dissembling. The contradictory destinations passed off before different audiences at different times may well have made it impossible for the organisers of mass murder in the Warthegau to do more than blankly deny knowledge when interrogated after the war. Ad hoc obfuscations did not generate an actual alibi, as Artur Greiser found to his cost at his trial in Poland during 1946⁸⁰, and as the head of the Lodz Gestapo, Otto Bradfisch, discovered when on trial in West Germany in the 1960s.⁸¹ Neither man spoke of ‘resettlement to the east’ or admitted having heard of Chelmno.

⁷⁸ Der Inspekteur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD Posen, Berichterstattung, Nov. 15, 1942, AŻIH 233/37, p.11.

⁷⁹ At the start of 1942, 774,706 Germans inhabited the Warthegau. Der Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer bei Reichstatthalter in Posen, Stand der Ordnungspolizei im Reichsgau Wartheland (Stichtag 31.12.1941), March 29, 1942, BArch B 162/7656, p.18.

⁸⁰ AIPN NTN 38, p.70 (June 25, 1946). Greiser was spotted visiting Chelmno in its second phase during 1944. Protokół przesłuchania świadka Helena Król, June 14, 1945, AIPN GK 165/271, t.1, p.53R.

⁸¹ Vernehmung Otto Bradfisch, Feb. 29, 1960, BArch B 162/3244, p.255R; Vernehmungsniederschrift Otto Bradfisch, Jan. 17, 1961, YVA TR.19/60, p.104.

Deceptions in the Camp and Village of Chelmno

The deportees' path to Chelmno often passed through churches and synagogues; during 'resettlement' actions in some provincial towns, Catholic churches were a preferred holding-pen. In the first phase of the camp's operations, victims were held in the synagogue at Koło before being taken by truck to the mansion in Chelmno village. En route, the victims left traces of their desperation and conviction that they were being transported to their deaths, smashing out the windows of the church in Pabianice⁸², and leaving extensive graffiti in the Koło synagogue. Alongside names and dates, an unknown victim left the following exhortation: 'Jews, do not wait, you will be here one day, then you will go to the fire – 13th transport.'⁸³ The 'fire' was metaphorical rather than real: at this time, cremation had yet to begin at Chelmno.

Upon arrival at the mansion in Chelmno village, the victims were greeted with a welcome speech delivered by a member of SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof. At least eight members of the Sonderkommando are known to have given the welcome speech.⁸⁴ Kurt Möbius, a member of the police guard assigned to the mansion, testified to one variant of the speech: 'they were told that they would go to a large camp in Austria where they would have to work. But first, they were told, they would have to take a bath, and their clothes would have to be deloused.'⁸⁵ The victims were then invited to undress on the ground floor, and

⁸² Der Landrat des Kreises Welun, Kosten des Judenevakuierung, hier: Verglasung der Kirche, 4.6.1943, APŁ 221/29675, pp.140-1.

⁸³ Protokół oględzin, Koło, June 10, 1945, AIPN GK 165/271, t.6, p.17R.

⁸⁴ In addition to the two commanders Herbert Lange and Hans Bothmann, Albert Plate, Gustav Richter, Walter Burmeister, Alois Häfele, Karl Heintl and Kurt Möbius also delivered the 'welcome speech'. Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, p.77.

⁸⁵ Vernehmung Kurt Möbius, Nov. 8, 1961, BArch B 162/3247, p.877.

taken through a corridor to the ramp, which was in fact a ramp into the back of one of the three gas vans operating at Chelmno in 1942.

The shower/bath deception, copied from the T4 ‘institutes’ of the Nazi euthanasia program, became a standard feature of the extermination camps, and was used in Auschwitz, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka as well as at Chelmno. In 1940 and 1941, the first incarnation of Sonderkommando Lange had carried out euthanasia killings across the Warthegau and in East Prussia at a variety of sites, and the deception routine was probably developed during these actions.⁸⁶ While the hygienic deception did not vary, the promises made to the victims did. These contradicted earlier stories that victims might have heard in provincial towns or the Lodz ghetto. Rather than a site in the ‘east’ or the Warthegau, the victims were now told they would be working in Austria, a labour camp in Germany⁸⁷ or simply taken to an unspecified labour camp.⁸⁸ SS testimonies do not indicate whether this speech was varied if the victims consisted of children, the elderly and the manifestly unfit for work. Nor, unlike the Ukrainian ‘Trawniki guards’ at Belzec and Treblinka⁸⁹, did they note any increase in

⁸⁶ Volker Riess, *Die Anfänge der Vernichtung “lebensunwerten Leben” in den Reichsgauen Danzig-Westpreussen und Wartheland 1939/40* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995); Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, pp.9-32.

⁸⁷ Vernehmung Wilhelm Heukelbach, Nov. 30, 1961, BArch B 162/3249, p.1158. In the 1944 phase of operations of the camp, the victims were more consistently told they would be sent to work in Germany. Vernehmung Ernst Burmeister, Sep. 1, 1960, BArch B 162/3248, p.906.

⁸⁸ Vernehmung Wilhelm Schulte, Dec. 20, 1961, BArch B 162/3247, pp.822-3

⁸⁹ Protokol doprosa Samuil Martynovich Prishch, April 25, 1961; Fedor Yakovlevich Ryabeka, Aug. 4, 1961, Arkhiv SBU Kiev 66437-14-12, pp.1-5, 95-6 (Treblinka); Protokol doprosa Vasili Yefimovich Podenok, Feb. 23, 1965, Arkhiv SBU Dnepropetrovsk, 44-32132-6, pp.82-9 (Belzec).

resistance from the victims over the lifespan of the camp. While some victims proved reluctant to comply, and had to be whipped into the van⁹⁰, only one testimony indicates that they might have known of their impending fate. ‘What you have said to us is untrue,’ Kurt Möbius was told on one occasion by a victim.⁹¹

Not until the second phase of the camp’s existence in the summer of 1944 was any sustained attempt made to persuade or force the victims to write deceptive postcards to relatives. In July 1944, 31 postcards marked on the 19th of the month were received in the Lodz ghetto from recent deportees.⁹² A single testimony from a Lodz ghetto survivor believed that parents of children deported in 1942 received letters by way of deception.⁹³ Given that over half of Chelmno’s victims in 1941/1942 were deported from provincial ghettos, such deceptions might have been seen as unnecessary.

As the exhaustive investigation by Judge Władysław Bednarz in 1945 revealed, it was impossible to fully conceal the operations of Sonderkommando Kulmhof from the local population. Gas vans were sent for repair to Koło, the guards were housed inside the village itself, and only a 2 meter high wooden fence screened the departure of the vans from the mansion to the so-called ‘forest camp’.⁹⁴ In the unanimous opinion of local inhabitants, within a matter of weeks or months, the true purpose of Chelmno became clear to them, despite tentative attempts to obfuscate this earlier. In November 1941, when the camp was first established, the SS told the local *Amtskommissar* Konrad Schulz that they were setting

⁹⁰ Vernehmung Wilhelm Heukelbach, Nov. 30, 1961, BArch B 162/3249, p.1160.

⁹¹ Vernehmung Kurt Möbius, Nov. 8, 1961, BArch B 162/3247, p.878.

⁹² *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt*, 1944, p.447

⁹³ Vernehmung Menik Tänzer, June 29, 1972, BArch B 162/7418, p.295

⁹⁴ AIPN GK 165/271, t.1-9. Parts of the investigation were published as Władysław Bednarz, *Obóz stracen w Chelmnie nad Nerem* (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy, 1946).

up a transit camp for Jews.⁹⁵ Schulz then informed the local schoolteacher, Erhard Michelson. In keeping with the late 1941 cover story of ‘resettlement to the east’, Michelson remembered that ‘the SS men told him that Jews would pass through here on their way to Russia.’⁹⁶ The fiction of a ‘transit camp’ was also maintained towards the county *Landrat* and provincial governor, when two Polish prisoners assigned to the Sonderkommando as labourers became infected with typhus.⁹⁷ Further attempts after January 1942 to pass off the mansion as a transit camp, whether towards local officialdom or residents, are recorded neither in contemporary sources nor in postwar testimonies. At the latest by the summer of 1942 and the onset of mass cremations in the ‘forest camp’, the reality of mass extermination at Chelmno was undoubtedly clear to every inhabitant of the village and surrounding area.

‘The Jews Buried in a Little Wood near Kulmhof’: Cremation at Chelmno

The mass cremation of the victims’ corpses was the ultimate form of cover-up used in the Nazi extermination camps. Although crematoria had been in use in the concentration camps since before the outbreak of war, little thought was given until early 1942 to obliterating the

⁹⁵ Vernehmung Konrad Schulz, April 27, 1962, BArch B 162/3249, p.1290. The SS may have been more open with Schulz than he was willing to admit during his 1962 interrogation. Jan Bąberski, a young Polish resident of Chelmno village, claimed that Schulz indicated to Polish officials that the camp had been set up “to kill people.” Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, p.51.

⁹⁶ Vernehmung Erhard Michelson, April 18, 62, BArch B 162/3249, p.1282.

⁹⁷ Fernschreiben Reg.Präs Hohensalza an den Herrn Reichsstatthalter, Betr.: Zwei Fleckfiebererkrankungsfälle im Kreise Warthbrücken, Jan 9, 1942, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu 299/2111, p.395.

physical evidence of genocide across Eastern Europe. In the spring of 1942, the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA) tasked *SS-Standartenführer* Paul Blobel, the former commander of Sonderkommando 4a and one of the chief organisers of the Babi Yar massacre in 1941, with overseeing ‘Aktion 1005’. This was the codename given to the operation to erase the traces of Nazi genocide through incinerating the corpses of the victims.⁹⁸ The two leading scholars of ‘Aktion 1005’, Jens Hoffmann and Andrej Angrick, have both emphasised fears of discovery within the Nazi regime following the retreat from Moscow at the end of 1941 and the first Soviet accusations of mass murder as a plausible explanation for the initiation of ‘Aktion 1005’.⁹⁹

Intriguingly, the document that may well have bequeathed Blobel’s operation the codename 1005, a response by Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller to an anonymous letter ‘about alleged acts in the solution of the Jewish Question in the Warthegau.’¹⁰⁰ While Müller was dismissive of the letter, only shortly beforehand, Sonderkommando Kulmhof had seen two

⁹⁸ For surveys of ‘Aktion 1005’, see Shmuel Spector, ‘Aktion 1005 – Effacing the Murder of Millions’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5/2, 1990, pp.157-173; Jen Hoffmann, ‘*Das kann man nicht erzählen*’. ‘Aktion 1005’ – *Wie die Nazis die Spuren ihrer Massenmorde in Osteuropa beseitigten* (Hamburg: Konkret, 2008)

⁹⁹ Hoffmann, ‘*Das kann man nicht erzählen*’, pp.82-84; Andrej Angrick, ‘Operation 1005: The Nazi Regime’s Attempt to Erase Traces of Mass Murder’ in: Thomas Lutz (ed), *Killing sites: research and remembrance* (Berlin: Metropol, 2015), p.48.

¹⁰⁰ Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD IV B 4 43/42 gRs (1005) an den Herrn Unterstaatssekretär Luther im Auswärtigen Amt, Feb. 28, 1942, Eichmann Trial Document T/245.

prisoners escape, and other attempts followed.¹⁰¹ The ‘Jewish referent’ of the Lodz Gestapo, Günter Fuchs, recalled having to search the Lodz ghetto for two escaped Jews from Hans Bothmann’s Sonderkommando.¹⁰²

In March 1942, as Blobel returned to Germany after recovering in Kharkov from illness, he was summoned to a meeting in Warsaw by Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the RSHA, and according to his driver’s testimony, afterwards indicated that he had a new task.¹⁰³ After further convalescent leave, Blobel travelled to Chelmno in June or July 1942, together with his driver and several assistants.¹⁰⁴ On July 15, 1942, the SS Cavalry Brigade, then refitting in Debica, was asked to supply a flamethrower unit, safety clothes and gloves to ‘SS-Sonderkommando Blobel.’¹⁰⁵ Blobel’s presence at Chelmno was recalled by several

¹⁰¹ Known escapes from Chelmno are extensively reconstructed in Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, pp.127-141.

¹⁰² Vernehmung Günther Fuchs, May 5, 1960, BArch B 162/3244, p.322.

¹⁰³ Vernehmung Julius Bauer, Nov. 12, 1964, BArch B 162/5858, pp.1837-1847R.

¹⁰⁴ Julius Bauer remembered two members of Sonderkommando 4a, Kriminaloberassistent Tempel and Kriminalassistent Halle, who accompanied Blobel to Chelmno. He also believed that the future 1005 officer Arthur Harder was present there. Harder, however, testified that he was serving in the Caucasus during 1942 and did not reconnect with his former superior Blobel until 1943. Vernehmung Arthur Harder, June 15, 1961, BArch B 162/1325, pp.125-136.

¹⁰⁵ Fernschreiben SS-Obersturmbannführer Fick an SS-Kav.Brig., July 15, 1942, The National Archives, Kew, HW16/20, ZIP/GPD 164. This document was first highlighted in Stephen Tyas, ‘ "We don't know what we have": British Intelligence and decoded radio messages about Sonderkommando 1005, 1942-1944’, paper presented at the International

members of the Sonderkommando, who also remembered some of the experiments in destroying the bodies that he conducted during the summer and autumn of 1942.¹⁰⁶ Both the Sonderkommando Kulmhof member Kurt Möbius as well as the forester Heinz May, who was tasked with supplying the camp with wood for the cremations, remembered experiments with thermite that inadvertently set the woods around the gravesites in the ‘forest camp’ on fire.¹⁰⁷ The commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, who visited Chelmno to meet Blobel there in September 1942, was told of experiments with explosives.¹⁰⁸

Conference Operation 1005: Nazi attempts to erase the evidence of mass murder in Eastern and Central Europe, 1942-1944, June 15-16, 2009, Paris.

¹⁰⁶ Vernehmung Theodor Malzmüller, June 27, 1960, BArch B 162/3245, p.418;

Vernehmung Fritz Ismer, Nov. 9, 1960, BArch B 162/3246, p.418; Vernehmung Walter Burmeister, March 24, 1961; Kurt Möbius, Nov. 11, 1961, BArch B 162/3248, pp.984, 1056.

¹⁰⁷ Vernehmung Kurt Möbius, Nov. 21, 1961, BArch B 162/3248, p.1056; H. May, “Die grosse Luege”. Der Nationalsozialismus, wie ihn das deutsche Volk nicht kennt. Ein Erlebnisbericht, III. Kapitel: Der grosse Judenmord, (1945), YVA M.21/477, p.40

¹⁰⁸ Reisebericht über die Dienstreise nach Litzmannstadt, Auschwitz, den 17. September 1942, gez. SS-Ustuf. (F) Dejaco, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv (hereafter RGVA) 500-1-336, p.69; Rudolf Höss, *Commandant of Auschwitz* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1959), p.211. Blobel retained a base in Lodz through the winter of 1942/43 and assisted the Sonderkommando by arranging the purchase of a diesel engine. Witnesses unanimously agree that the gas vans were powered by petrol engines, so the intended purpose of this engine is unclear. SS-Standartenführer Blobel, z.Zt. Stapoleitstelle Litzmannstadt, Betr.: Lieferung der Firma Motoren-Heyne, Leipzig C 1, Für Zwecke des Sonderkommandos Kulmhof, Feb 3, 1943, APŁ 221/29674, p.56.

Blobel's arrival at Chelmno in June or July 1942 coincided with independent efforts by Bothmann and his subordinates to clean up the decomposing corpses of over 100,000 victims in the mass graves that had been dug in the 'forest camp'. Chloride of lime was used from January 1942.¹⁰⁹ It was sprinkled on the mass graves to combat the smell and was also evidently used in trucks and railway waggons as a cleaning agent. Records of the Lodz Ghetto Administration show repeated and substantial deliveries of chloride of lime, billed to 'Geheime Staatspolizei Litzmannstadt S'.¹¹⁰ This was the same abbreviation to be found on payments to and from Sonderkommando Kulmhof. In May 1942, the Ghetto Administration requested the purchase of a further 50 containers of chloride of lime "for the special action" (*Sonderaktion*), to be shipped to the "Sonderkommando".¹¹¹

By the summer of 1942, however, the SS at Chelmno no longer needed to use chloride of lime to mask the smell of decomposing corpses, which had grown strong enough to overpower the disinfectant, as several witnesses remembered.¹¹² They began to experiment with the burning of the corpses from the mass graves. The burning of bodies was at first carried out in lined pits that in at least some cases used metal grates.¹¹³ While some witnesses such as the forester Heinz May do not mention metal grates¹¹⁴, this suggests either

¹⁰⁹ Wiatr, Engelking, Skibińska (eds), *Archiwum Ringelbluma 13*, p.108.

¹¹⁰ Getto-Verwaltung an die Geheime Staatspolizei Litzmannstadt S, Rechnung No. 010335, May 28, 1942; Rechnung No. 010980, July 7, 1942, APŁ 221/29666, pp.68, 105.

¹¹¹ 027/2/Lu/Po an die Einkaufsabteilung Herrn Hämmerle im Hause, Betr.: Chlorkalk für die Sonderaktion, May 23, 1942, APŁ 221/29216, p.102.

¹¹² Vernehmung Gustav Laabs, Dec. 1, 1960, BArch B 162/3246, p.531; Vernehmung Walter Bock, June 28, 61; Friedrich Maderholz, July 12, 1961, BArch B 162/3248, pp. 1000, 1012.

¹¹³ Vernehmung Fritz Ismer, Aug. 1, 1961, BArch B 162/1332, p.75.

¹¹⁴ May, "Die grosse Luege", YVA M.21/477, p.41.

that early experiments did not use grates or that the witnesses did not get close enough to observe the grates. Large quantities of cement along with iron girders and rails were delivered over the course of the summer of 1942.¹¹⁵ Early, smaller-scale experiments were more likely to escape the attention of local residents, but the onset of large-scale cremation would not. Stanislaw Rubach, a resident of the forest of Kościelec, in between the nearby town Koło and Chełmno, recorded in his diarylike contemporary notes on August 11, 1942 that ‘from mid-July the crematorium was active.’¹¹⁶ Other witnesses concur on mid-July as the start of mass cremation.¹¹⁷

A start date for mass cremation at Chełmno in mid-July 1942 helps make sense of the well-known enquiry sent on July 16, 1942 from Friedrich Wilhelm Ribbe of the Łódź ghetto administration to the Lodz ‘eldest’ Chaim Rumkowski regarding whether a bone mill, either engine-powered or hand-cranked, could be found inside the Łódź ghetto.¹¹⁸ This was not the only request to the Jewish council in Lodz for assistance in pulverising human remains; on August 1, 1942, Rumkowski received the following request: ‘I would like to ask you to

¹¹⁵ Getto-Verwaltung an die Geheime Staatspolizei Litzmannstadt S, Rechnung No. 010865, June 25, 1942, APŁ 221/29667, p.287; No. 010979, July 7, 1942; No. 011690, Aug. 11, 1942, APŁ 221/29668, pp.36, 106; No. 012085, Sep. 18, 1942, APŁ 221/29671, p.297. On July 21, 1942, 5,000kg of cement arrived, ‘for a special action of the SS.’ 027/7/Schi/G. an die Buchhaltung, July 21, 1942, gez. Hämmerle, APŁ 221/30254, p.27.

¹¹⁶ Protokół przesłuchania świadka Stanislaw Rubach, 28.12.1945, introducing and transcribing contemporary diary-note nr 3 with comment dated Aug. 11, 1942, AIPN GK 165/271, t.8, p.767

¹¹⁷ Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, p.115.

¹¹⁸ Published in transcribed form in Artur Eisenbach (ed.), *Dokumenty i materiały do dziejów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce. Bd 3: Getto łódzkie* (Warsaw, Łódź, Krakow, 1946), p.279.

procure a stable container made of strong, at least 5mm thick tin, which is about 50 liters in size and in which brittle material can be crushed into fine powder.’¹¹⁹ A “ball mill for substances” supplied by a firm in Hannover was in use by September 1942. By December, the mill had been sent to Auschwitz for use there, but was returned to Łódź in early 1943.¹²⁰ Multiple witnesses report the use of a bone mill at Chełmno. They describe a heavy machine weighing five and a half tons that was powered by a generator or compressor with a petrol engine.¹²¹ Noises from the mill were heard by Polish residents living nearby.¹²²

While the majority of documents relating to cremation at Chełmno do not explicitly refer to cremation, one source, previously cited by Michael Alberti but not quoted¹²³, offers unique confirmation in a contemporary Nazi document of the cremation of the corpses of

¹¹⁹ 027/2/Ri/Po, Schreiben Nr 10 576, Aug. 1, 1942, APŁ 221/29447, p.141.

¹²⁰ Reisebericht über die Dienstreise nach Litzmannstadt, Auschwitz, den 17. September 1942, gez. SS-Ustuf. (F) Dejaco, RGVA 500-1-336, p.69; Dresdner Bank Filiale Hannover an Staatspolizeileitstelle Litzmannstadt, Betr: Zession Schriever & Co, Hannover, über RM 7.550,--, Feb. 4, 1943, APŁ 221/29674, p.85; 027/1/Bi/Si an die Geheime Staatspolizei Litzmannstadt, Betr.: Ankauf für das Sonderkommando Kulmhof, 1.3.1943, published in: Eisenbach (ed.), *Getto łodzkie*, p.279.

¹²¹ May, “Die grosse Luege”, YVA M.21/477, p.41; Vernehmung Jakob Wildermuth, Dec. 14, 1961, BArch B 162/3247, p.858; Vernehmung Walter Burmeister, March 24, 1961; Friedrich Maderholz, July 12, 1961, BArch B 162/3248, pp.985, 1013; Vernehmung Wilhelm Heukelbach, Nov. 30, 1961, BArch B 162/3249, p.1164; c.f. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, pp.117-8.

¹²² Protokół przesłuchania świadka Aleksander Wóznia, June 16, 1945, AIPN GK 165/271, t.1, p.70.

¹²³ Alberti, *Verfolgung und Vernichtung*, p.432 note 331.

Jewish victims at an extermination camp. In June 1943, the Luftwaffe counterespionage office 'Research Station A Litzmannstadt' reported as follows:

As was already reported in NL 7299 of 25/3/43, the camp Kulmhof, Post Eichstädt, County Warthbrücken, to which mainly Jews unfit for work from the Warthegau, in particular from the Litzmannstadt ghetto, were at that time regularly transferred, was closed on 1/4/43. From a reliable source, the Research Station has now learned that the police guards there later re-exhumed the Jews buried in a little wood near Kulmhof and had to burn them in specially constructed furnaces. After being granted a lengthy leave, these guards were assigned to frontline duty. As is now reported, these forces have as of now been withdrawn in order to be equipped in Graz for a similar deployment in the South-East.¹²⁴

Three days later, the Research Station noted that this report, and another report that is now lost, were to be treated as confidential, but that they had received indirect confirmation from another official, who also noted that the BBC had made broadcasts on the subject of Chełmno:

The information provided by the MzA's Litzmannstadt Nr. 405 and 406 was made known to the Research Station by the employee Riehl, who was informed of them in confidence. This information has been the subject of consultation with the Stapostelle here. The information contained in MzA no. 406 were indirectly confirmed through conversation by RR.¹²⁵ Dr. Rosse. It was noted by Dr. Rosse

¹²⁴ Forschungsstelle A Litzmannstadt, MzA Nr. 406, Betr.: Zur Auflösung des Judenlagers Kulmhof, June 22, 1943, YVA O.51/13, p.260

¹²⁵ Abbreviation for *Regierungsrat*, a civil service rank equivalent to Major.

that the British radio has dealt with Kulmhof.¹²⁶

The first report's phrasing of 'specially constructed ovens' (*eigens gefertigten Öfen*) confirms and is in turn corroborated by Rubach's diary-notes – the crematoria of Chelmno were constructed locally, without any known assistance from a specialist firm of crematorium oven manufacturers like Topf & Sons of Erfurt. This explains why we lack further documents which might offer more details on their exact construction or operation.

The Research Station A report finds further corroboration in a source that serves as an epitaph to the Nazi attempts to surround the extermination camp of Chelmno in secrecy. As the report states, the staff of the camp were to be transferred to the 'South-East', i.e. the Balkans. With the closing of Chelmno, 85 members of SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof were ordered to be transferred to the Waffen-SS 'Prinz Eugen' Division fighting Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia, following a month's leave. Before they departed, Himmler asked the head of the RSHA, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, to remind the men of the need for secrecy: 'The Reichsführer SS asks you to gather the men together again before their deployment and to oblige them insistently to put a line under the period of their Sonderkommando and not to speak of it even in passing.'¹²⁷

The evidence concerning cremation at Chelmno reveals concentric but contradictory layers of secrecy enacted as part of the attempted cover-up. None of the hundreds of Jewish workers forced to exhume and cremate the corpses of the victims of Chelmno during 1942

¹²⁶ MzA Litzmannstadt Nr. 407, Betr.: MzA Nr. 10690, Vorg.: MzA Litzmannstadt Nr. 405 und 406, June 25, 1943, YVA O.51/13, p.259.

¹²⁷ Der Reichsführer-SS Persönlicher Stab Tgb. Nr. 39/110/43g an SS-Gruppenführer Dr. Kaltenbrunner, March 29, 1943, BArch B 162/601, unpaginated.

and 1943 survived to testify after the war.¹²⁸ Yet Polish bystander testimonies as well as the physical evidence left behind at the site all clearly exposed what had taken place there. In 1945 during Władysław Bednarz's investigation as well as subsequently during archaeological excavations, human remains as well as remnants of the blown-up improvised crematoria were found at Chelmno.¹²⁹ The documentary paper trail indicates that cremation was kept tightly secret inside government circles in Lodz, while invoices and correspondence regarding the improvised construction of the 'field ovens' were carefully worded to avoid any direct mention of cremation. Kaltenbrunner's reminder to the SS and Police staff of the camp to remain silent and the transfer of the perpetrators to hazardous antipartisan duty in Yugoslavia were hardly sufficient measures to keep Chelmno secret in perpetuity, especially when news of Chelmno had already long reached the Allies and been publicised. All of this raises the question of who, precisely, the Nazis were trying to fool with their attempted cover-up through cremation. The evidence suggests that the prime target of the cover-up was in fact the Nazis themselves.

¹²⁸ There were two survivors of the 1944 phase of the camp, Szymon Srebnik and Mordechai Żurawski. C.f. Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, pp.149-174.

¹²⁹ For the 1945 excavations, see Bednarz, *Obóz stracen w Chelmnie nad Nerem*, pp.16-17. For the results of archaeological excavations, see Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak, 'Archeological research in the grounds of the Chelmno-on-Ner former extermination center' in: Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak (ed.), *Chelmno witnesses speak* (Konin: Council for the Protection of Memory of Combat and Martyrdom in Warsaw/District Museum in Konin, 2004), pp.42-67.

Conclusion

The ultimate failure of Nazi attempts to cover up their crimes at Chelmno can hardly be disputed, yet the efforts to which the Nazis in the Warthegau went to obscure the true purpose of the camp and finally to remove the traces of mass murder were just as undeniably considerable. The sources presented above represent only part of the evidence available to historians on this subject, but this initial survey can provide us with several conclusions regarding the cover-up of Chelmno.

Firstly, the contradictions in the cover stories aimed at the German and Jewish population of the Warthegau only briefly conformed to the fiction of 'resettlement to the east' that was in circulation elsewhere in Europe during the 'Final Solution'. While 'resettlement' to destinations in the occupied Soviet Union was occasionally invoked, the Warthegau authorities as well as SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof soon began a shell game with fictitious and deceptive destinations within the Warthegau itself as well as, paradoxically, to Germany and Austria. Historians have reached a strong consensus that the decision to exterminate the Jews of the Warthegau was taken locally, while the survival of the Lodz ghetto until 1944 is similarly attributed to local initiatives, due to the interests of Nazi authorities in maintaining industrial production. The unusual patterns of deception also make the Warthegau unique. The significance of local decision-making and relative lack of coordination with higher authorities confirms not only the importance of the 'periphery' in the Final Solution but also the polycratic structure of the Third Reich.

Secondly, both in obfuscating as well as obliterating their crimes at Chelmno, the SS and Ghetto Administration relied to a considerable degree on improvisation. Despite the ideological importance of the 'solution of the Jewish Question in the Warthegau', few resources and relatively little planning were brought to bear on the problem. The ad hoc deceptions were evidently adjusted to different target audiences at different times. The

cremation of the corpses of the victims was carried out in crude 'field ovens' built by non-specialists using locally sourced materials and fuel, after much trial and error.

Finally, the inconsistencies and even occasional ineptitude of Nazi deception and cover-up attempts should not detract from their ubiquity and persistence. As knowledge of extermination spread across the Warthegau and in Lodz, the Nazi authorities and SS cynically came up with new cover-stories, in particular inside the Lodz ghetto. Lying had become so integral to the implementation of the 'Final Solution' that the Nazi authorities may even have *enjoyed* lying to the victims. Yet the Nazis also deceived themselves through the elaboration of the contradictory fictions explaining away deportations regarding the success of their deceptions. A completely consistent cover-story never emerged, nor could one counteract the spread of knowledge among German officials and civilians without an immediate 'need to know' or among Jews and Poles in the region. A combination of official silence and unofficial dissembling also could not counter the publicity given to the news of Chelmno from June 1942 onwards in Allied countries. The legends of 'resettlement' and 'labour deployment' may have enabled some Nazi perpetrators to cope with the transgressive violence of genocide as it unfolded, but ultimately could not provide a credible alibi after 1945 when key decision-makers were put on trial. The effort to erase the traces of extermination through cremation were equally self-deceiving due to their incompleteness. In the end, the attempt to cover up the crime of Chelmno only provided more evidence for the crime.

(7,021 words main text; 10,242 including footnotes)