

SALASPILS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

“Salaspils: A Case Study” deals with the largely unknown history of the camp Salaspils near Riga, Latvia, in the period from late 1941 to about mid-1942, when Salaspils was populated by Jewish inmates. The work analyzes the role the camp played in the general context of the developing Nazi policy vis-à-vis the extermination of Baltic Jewry and the general plan for the annihilation of Western and Central European Jews in the “Ostland” territories and investigates how the overlapping and unclearly demarcated powers and responsibilities, conflicting strategic goals and different economic interests often pitted the Civilian administration of “Ostland” and the Security Police and the Security Service against each other and how this struggle reflected on the growth of the camp, its “designation”, functioning and the fate of its Jewish prisoners.

The thesis also describes all aspects of “life and death” in camp Salaspils as experienced by the Jewish inmates: the living conditions in the camp; the changing modes of behavior of prisoners due to extreme hunger and cold; the camp hierarchy and “self-administration”; escapes; arbitrary and “lawful” executions; legal and illegal contacts with the Riga ghetto nearby and the outside world in general; prisoner labor deployment and its contribution to the German war economy; repatriation of the few remaining survivors to the Riga ghetto and other related topics.

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INTRODUCTION

Almost immediately upon the occupation of Latvia by the Nazi forces in July 1941, shortly after the commencement of an attack by Hitler's Germany on the Soviet Union, the implementation of the "final solution of the Jewish question" was initiated in the territory. Aided by the quickly formed local auxiliary troops, the mobile killing squads of the German Security Police and the Security Service began systematically exterminating all Jews by means of mass shootings, with the campaign in the initial stages focusing particularly on annihilating Jews in smaller provincial towns and in the countryside. The larger urban centers and the Latvian capital Riga were to follow shortly afterwards.

The conquest of the Baltic countries and large stretches of the Soviet Union in general opened previously unimagined possibilities for eliminating the Jews once and for all and spelled doom not only for the local Jewish population, but for thousands of Jews from Central and Western Europe as well. After a series of previous, largely failed attempts at mass deportations of German, Austrian and Czech and Moravian Jews to the East – designs which showed themselves ill devised, badly executed and greatly uncoordinated among the different Nazi agencies responsible for different aspects of the anti-Jewish policy – after the attack on the Soviet Union the attention and plan-making shifted to the Baltic region and parts of Belarus (or "Ostland", as the newly formed administrative territory became known in Nazi Germany) as an area where the Jewish question could be solved.

For a period, Riga became a major center of focus of the continuously developing Nazi plan to eliminate the Jews of Europe. After the large-scale massacres of Latvian Jews in the countryside and almost simultaneously with the almost complete eradication of the Latvian Jews remaining in the Riga ghetto, transports of Jews from the West began

streaming into Latvia. Hundreds upon hundreds of men who arrived with these deportation trains found their ultimate fate in a little known camp called Salaspils.

History of Salaspils is one of the most enigmatic episodes in the, until most recently, greatly under-researched story of the Holocaust in Latvia and the Baltics. This is so probably because of a conspicuous dearth of extant Nazi documentation on the camp, lack of survivors, confusion about why it was created and great ambiguity regarding its true purpose. The goal of this study is thus to fill in, to the extent possible, the large white spots on the map of the little known history of this camp in particular and the Holocaust in Latvia in general.

The body of this work titled “Salaspils: A Case Study” is divided into two major segments, the former more analytical, the latter descriptive. The Nazi way of going about the execution of Hitler’s extermination goals vis-à-vis the Jews is often perceived as something set from the start, on which all participating offices of the Nazi regime consciously cooperated with a commonality and clarity of purpose. The first part of this thesis however shows that finding a feasible way to bring about the “final solution” of the “Jewish question” was a relatively lengthy process, often carried out through “trial and error”.

Among extermination, concentration, labor and holding camps (aspects of all of which Salaspils displayed, without being a clearly defined as any one of them), Salaspils near Riga in Latvia was certainly by far not the biggest and most deadly, at least in the overall number of victims. The camp nevertheless makes a very good subject for a case study which depicts how the various constituents involved in implementing the different aspects and objectives of the Nazi anti-Jewish policy were far from united in the goal of exterminating the Jews. To the contrary, they often clashed, particularly on the local level. Their conflict reached a peak after the deportations of the Reich and Protectorate Jews to

Ostland, when Salaspils de facto came into existence and this fact very much influenced its role and evolution.

Put into the general context of the developing Nazi policy vis-à-vis the extermination of Baltic Jewry and the extirpation of Western and Central European Jews in the “Ostland” territories, the first part of this study thus examines the role the camp played in the larger Nazi designs and investigates the evolution of the camp project itself and how the overlapping and unclearly demarcated powers and responsibilities, conflicting strategic goals and different economic interests often pitted the Civilian administration and the Security Police and the Security Service (these two organizations in particular, even though other ones were involved as well) against each other, hindering the preeminent economic goal of exploiting Jewish labor by the former and to some extent slowing the extermination zeal and objectives of the latter, and how all this reflected on the growth of the camp and the fate of the Jewish men living and dying in it.

While historians’ attention has been paid to differences regarding the execution of the “final solution” among the high echelons of Nazi policy makers, there is relatively little awareness how squabbles among the men “on the ground” – those who were charged with the actual implementation of the “higher orders” influenced the speed and mode of extermination of the Jews. Other divergences among the policy makers that concern camp Salaspils were also at play and are discussed - between the local German Security Police and SD commanders and their superiors in Berlin, etc. Salaspils is a prime example of how such bickering at times led to indiscriminate killings and waste of Jewish life and in other situations offered a temporary, brief “respite” from annihilation.

The thesis also explores the changes and ambiguities of the statute of this camp (proposals for the construction of a large concentration camp near Riga were initially denied and permission was granted only for the establishment of a police prison, even though the

camp was later described under various guises to diverse authorities) and deals with questions such as individual aspirations and intentions of the camp's organizers; conflicts between different arms of Nazi management of the occupied territories (KdS, RSHA, *Einsatzgruppe A*, Civilian administration in Ostland and Riga, etc.) as to who should be responsible for Salaspils and for the Jews imprisoned in it; the economic aspects (profits from labor; looted Jewish property); why were Jews taken there and when and why did Salaspils change from a camp for Jews to a largely political prisoners' penitentiary, etc. All these questions too are connected to the different aims of various arms of Nazi administration of the occupied territories.

The second part of the main body of the thesis describes all aspects of "life and death" in camp Salaspils as experienced by the Jewish inmates: the living conditions in the camp; the changing modes of behavior of prisoners due to extreme hunger and cold; the camp hierarchy and "self-administration"; escapes; medical care; arbitrary and "lawful" executions; legal and illegal contacts with the Riga ghetto nearby and the outside world in general; prisoner labor deployment, its contribution to the German war economy and the pockets of the camp command; repatriation of the few remaining survivors to the Riga ghetto, as well as a number of other related topics.

For lack of other documentation this part relies almost entirely on witness accounts recorded during war crimes trials, testimonies of survivors collected shortly after WWII, survivors' memoirs (often unpublished) and a few oral interviews. Human memory is flawed, but since the vast majority of accounts are remarkably consistent on both the general descriptions and when referring to specific incidents, I believe they can be taken with less than "a grain of salt" – particularly as these accounts come from different times, range from immediate post-war period to relatively recent time, were deposited or recorded at different

locations and their distribution makes it almost impossible the narratives could be mutually “rehearsed”.

It is this second part of the thesis I believe to be most valuable, since a number of the sources used are publicly unavailable and come from my private collection, making this account the most detailed description of the inner workings of the Salaspils camp available to date. The second part of the thesis also enlarges our knowledge of the modes of behavior of man in utterly extreme circumstances and can eventually be a good point of departure for drawing differences or making parallels with functioning of other Nazi camps (or even the Soviet Gulag, to which Salaspils in some aspects bore striking similarities). This ambitious undertaking however needs to wait for now.

Finally, it is befitting to outline also the other limitations of this study of Salaspils. Unfortunately, the scope of this thesis effectively prohibits a detailed discussion of the fate of the bulk of deportees who came from the German Reich, Vienna in Austria and the Theresienstadt ghetto in the “Protectorate” in the occupied Bohemia and Moravia and did not end up in Salaspils. Like for the men in Salaspils, for the overwhelming majority of them the “resettlement” to the East meant death. Either immediate one, when they were taken directly to the mass graves in the woods surrounding Riga and killed (and in some cases possibly also gassed in mobile gas chamber vans), or a temporarily deferred death sentence. These deportees were subjected to terror, hard labor and executions in and around the ghetto of Riga or camp Jungfernhof, which must remain but mentioned *in passim*, and later in a multitude of small labor camps (*Kasernierungen*) attached to various industrial plants, etc. working towards the German “war effort”, as well as the story of Kaiserwald (Mežaparks), the only “proper” concentration camp on the territory of Latvia established for the remaining able-bodied Jews when the ghetto in Riga was liquidated. It is a pity that the constraints of the thesis do not allow for delving into this history, as such an excursion

would be most helpful in putting the history of the Salaspils camp into its proper larger context. However, this study of Salaspils would then inevitably have to at least double in size.

Furthermore, it should be stressed from the beginning that this thesis deals only with the period of late 1941 to approximately mid-1942, when Salaspils functioned as a camp populated by Jews. From the summer of 1942 it started to fill up with political and criminal prisoners, as well as “unreliable” inhabitants of areas with a strong partisan resistance activity (many of these inmates were mere children). While a fascinating topic in itself which certainly deserves more investigation by historians, it is an entirely different chapter of Salaspils’ history, as it no longer concerned Jews (even though the conflicts among the leading Nazi administrators in the territory of Latvia continued into this phase of Salaspils’ existence as well).

The thesis utilizes a variety of primary sources, particularly from Bundesarchiv Berlin in Germany; LVVA archives in Riga, Latvia; the Wiener Library in London in the U.K.; court proceedings with Nazi War criminals from Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Germany; as well as additional archival materials from other archives. Unpublished memoirs and manuscripts written by survivors shortly after the war are also used in the thesis, as well as some oral history interviews. All this data is supplemented by material drawn from the limited range of secondary literature existing on this topic.

While I believe all major and even lesser sources of information have been tapped during the research for this study, it inevitably remains a “work in progress”. There still is a chance of some interesting finds in the vast Russian archives and I have reasons to believe (based on discussions with people who tried to trace their relatives who perished in Riga via the Red Cross) that the soon to open Arolsen archives hold some documents concerning Salaspils, probably name listings of prisoners transferred from the Riga ghetto to the camp.

Once available, these could, if nothing else, greatly help in establishing the number of Jewish victims camp Salaspils claimed.

CHAPTER 1: SALASPILS IN THE EVOLUTION OF NAZI POLICY VIS-À-VIS THE JEWS DEPORTED TO LATVIA

On September 1, 1939, the Second World War broke out – a war that was to enter memory as the greatest and bloodiest conflict in the history of humankind. The Nazi anti-Jewish policies - to this date aimed mostly at isolating, disenfranchising, terrorizing, dehumanizing and pauperizing Jews, as well as forcing them to emigrate - gained a new direction and momentum which soon resulted in the world's most systematic and wide reaching genocide.

After a lightning war campaign and the conquest of Poland by the German Wehrmacht (Armed forces), a territory was to be set aside between the rivers Visla and Bug for Jewish settlement, in accordance with Nazi *Führer* Adolf Hitler's wish.¹ This area was meant to become a temporary concentration point for "all Jewry" that found itself under Nazi power at the time, as well as for all other racially and socially "unreliable" individuals.² The whole inhospitable region was designed to be a veritable dumping ground for human "waste", "reservation" where in consequence of the for life unsuitable conditions, the number of people deported there would keep steadily and quickly decreasing.³ The systematic process of forcible transfer of Jews into the so-called "*Generalgouvernement*" (General Government)⁴ and their concentration and ghettoisation in the local big cities and towns was supposed to be carried out in stages in the course of one year, while the "final

¹ *Führer*: Used to refer to the supreme leader of the Nazi Party until 1933, and thereafter, until 1945, was used as a title for the Chancellor and supreme leader of the German people, Adolf Hitler, *der Führer*.

² Hans-Günther Seraphim (ed.), *Das politische Tagebuch Alfred Rosenbergs. 1934/35 und 1939/40* (Göttingen: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1964), pp. 98-99.

³ Himmler's speech to NSDAP functionaries from 29.2.1940. See: Agnes F. Peterson and Bradley F. Smith (eds.), *Heinrich Himmler: Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen* (Frankfurt/Main: Propyläen Verlag, 1974), pp. 128-129.

⁴ That portion of Poland occupied by the Germans prior to the invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941, that was not administratively annexed to the Third Reich. Its administrative headquarters was in Cracow (Krakow), in southern Poland.

goal” - which would ensue after the completion of these mass transfers – had to remain strictly secret.⁵ The first phase of the project was aimed at “de-Judaizing” of conquered Polish areas incorporated in the German Reich and of adjacent regions. Jews from the Moravian town of Moravská Ostrava (Mährisch Ostrau) and its vicinity in the Protectorate of Böhmen und Mähren (Bohemia and Moravia) - which were now close to the redrawn Reich’s border - were to be included in the plan as well. The deportation experience gained in this initial period would then be utilized in carrying out of far greater and ambitious population transfers. On the October 7, 1939, on Hitler’s explicit demand, Viennese Jews were included into this introductory, “trial” deportation stage.

Words changed into action in the second half of October, 1939 and the first transport with several hundreds Jewish men from Moravská Ostrava left the Protectorate for the occupied Polish territories. The deportation train journeyed to the neighborhood of a small Polish town of Nisko nad Sanem (Nisko am San), close to the river Bug that formed part of the demarcation line between the by Germans and Soviets occupied parts of Poland.⁶ The final destination was located in the easternmost part of the Generalgouvernement, in a harsh countryside full of marshes and swamps, ensuring “a strong decimation of Jews”.⁷ In line with Adolf Hitler’s wish, two transports of Jewish men from Vienna were indeed deported in the context of the Nisko operation as well. Yet two more deportation trains with Jewish men left the Protectorate. One was dispatched, again, from Moravská Ostrava and smaller

⁵ *Faschismus - Getto - Massenmord. Dokumentation über Ausrottung und Widerstand der Juden in Polen während des zweiten Weltkrieges* (Berlin (DDR):, 1962), pp. 37-41.

⁶ This happened following the so called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact - a non-aggression treaty between the German Third Reich and the Soviet Union (signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939 by the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov and the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop). The mutual non-aggression treaty lasted until Operation Barbarossa of June 22, 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The pact included a secret protocol, in which Poland (and other independent countries: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania) were divided into spheres of interest by the two parties. Subsequently all the mentioned countries were invaded, occupied or forced to cede part of their territory to either the Soviet Union, Germany, or both.

⁷ Nuremberg document No. 2278-PS. Quoted in: Miroslav Kárný, “Konečné řešení“, *Genocida českých židů v německé protektorátní politice* (Praha: Academia, 1991), p. 40.

towns and villages in Silesia and the second was sent from Prague and included mostly stateless or Polish citizenship holding Jewish men.⁸

The so-called “Nisko plan” of deporting Jews to a “reservation” in the Lublin district of the *Generalgouvernement* was however quickly aborted. The deportations had to be stopped, as the strategic goals of the uppermost echelons of the Nazi leadership drastically changed. Adolf Eichmann, the Reich Central Security Office (RSHA)⁹ “Jewish emigration” expert, who full of initiative so enthusiastically undertook the planning and the initial stages of carrying out of this (and his) first deportation scheme, could not suspect that the *Führer* in the meantime determined a new priority. Hitler decided that first two districts newly annexed into the Reich, Warthegau and Western Prussia, have to be “cleaned” of Jews and Poles first. The deportation of German, Austrian and Czech and Moravian Jews had to wait a bit. The far-reaching plan calculated with the removal of over a million Poles and Jews from the incorporated territories in the short period until February 1940. The depopulated areas were to be settled with ethnic Germans. The huge scope and speed of the ethnic cleansing project and population exchange excluded the possibility that the Protectorate and Austrian Jews could be included in it, at least at this point in time. The whole plan was in its megalomania and within the given deadlines practically unfeasible. When February 1940

⁸ Most of the deportees were immediately upon arrival chased out over the demarcation line between the Soviet and German occupied parts of Poland into the Soviet held territories. Several hundred selected prisoners, mostly from the first transports from Ostrava and Vienna, began to build a small camp near the village Zarzecze. This camp was however closed down only half a year later and the half a thousand men were – upon the failure of the whole Nisko plan – returned to Ostrava and Vienna. Approximately two years later absolute majority of them were deported again and most perished in extermination camps. For a detailed discussion of this large topic, see for example: Miroslav Kárný, Nisko in der Geschichte der Endlösung, *Judaica Bohemiae*, XXIII, no. 2 (1987), pp. 69-84.; Miroslav Kárný, Akce Nisko. Konec před začátkem, *Židovská ročenka*, 1988/1989, pp. 107-114.; Mečislav Borák, *Transport do tmy* (Ostrava: Moravskoslezský den, 1994).; Lukáš Příbyl, Osud třetího protektorátního transportu do Niska In: *Terezínské studie a dokumenty* (Praha: Academia, 2000), pp. 309-346.

⁹ RSHA Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Main/head Office of Reich Security), was formed in 1939 by the boss of the SS Heinrich Himmler to coordinate and manage the activities of the different police forces: Gestapo (Secret Police), Kripo (Criminal Police) and SD (Security, or Secret service), a subdivision of the SS. This agency was headed by SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich until his assassination in 1942. The organization's stated duty was to fight all "enemies of the Reich" within and outside the borders of the Nazi Reich.

arrived, groups of Jews from Stetten and parts of western Pomerania were indeed already deported to the Lublin district but overall the deportation design turned out to be a fiasco. Most of the “evacuated” in the end remained in Posen and were later literally “scattered” to different places in the Reich.¹⁰

Shifting such vast numbers of people, on such a large scale, was organizationally an extremely difficult and time consuming enterprise which was not well prepared and planned in any way and suffered from total lack of coordination and cooperation among all constituents involved. Furthermore, bitter discord between the Civilian and military administrations ensued (in a way an adumbration of conflicts that were to rage regarding the planning of the Salaspils camp and the deportation of Jews in the Riga ghetto). The situation was generally ill considered and assessed, as the territory could not absorb such a huge figure of people, even temporarily. Chaos in the *Generalgouvernement* was the very last thing the Nazi elites that were preparing for the extensive offensive in the west of Europe could wish for. Calm in the eastern rear could not be secured during such endeavors, which would also tie up an immense amount of transport, material and personnel capacity. The plan had to be postponed. Hitler’s dream of the Reich free of all Jews certainly was not forgotten but after a reality check, momentarily postponed. Once the military operations in the West were over, the deportations would resume.¹¹

The plan changed once again. The German success in Western Europe led to the opening of the second front. The attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 became a breaking point in the evolution of Nazi plans to solve “the Jewish question”. In the year 1941, its “final”, extermination period began. Immediately behind the crack frontline units

¹⁰ Miroslav Kárný, “Konečné řešení“, p. 44. The text of the order to transfer such a huge number of people till February 1940 was published in: *Biuletyn Główniej Komisji Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce*, volume XII (Warszawa, 1970), doc. II, p. 9F.

¹¹ Ensuring “peace” in the East was Hitler’s priority at this time, as he told Hans Frank. See: Werner Präg and Wolfgang Jacobmeyer (eds.), *Das Diensttagebuch des deutschen Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1975).

of the German Army conquering USSR advanced the *Einsatzkommandos* (Special Task Commandos) of the *Einsatzgruppen* (Special Task Groups), special execution commandos of the Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei) and Security Service (SD).¹² Their mission was to, in accord with the so-called “commissar” order, immediately physically liquidate all anti-German resistance, communists, partisans, Jews and Gypsies and “Asiatic elements”. The policy of extermination could show itself in its full scope for the first time in the occupied Soviet lands, as that was where the bulk of European Jewry was concentrated. In tune with Nazi ideology advocating that Soviet Jewry played a pivotal role in the leadership of the Soviet Union, its Communist party and in spreading bolshevism around the world, the “Jewish-Bolshevik threat” as the biggest enemy of Hitler’s Germany, had to be unconditionally, mercilessly and completely liquidated.¹³

In the meantime, almost total social, economic and psychological segregation of Jews from the rest of the population was completed in all of the German-ruled lands. This step-by-step worsening persecution helped to undermine or break any possible resistance against the nearing deportations. Once the above mentioned isolation was absolute, their physical seclusion could be carried out as well (the way it was done in the occupied Polish territories from the beginning). The next step was deporting Jews in the eastern direction, where the whole process of elimination of Jewry from occupied Europe could be “finally solved”. German, Czech and Austrian Jews were supposed to be deported first, to the occupied Soviet territory. However, because of purely logistical reasons this could be

¹² Yitzhak Arad, Schmuel Spector, and Schmuel Krakowski, *The Einsatzgruppen Reports: Selections from the Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads' Campaign Against the Jews, July 1941-January 1943* New York: Holocaust Library, 1989); Peter Klein (ed.), *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42. Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1997); Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges* (Oldenbourg: R. Verlag GmbH, 1980); Ralf Ogorreck, *Die Einsatzgruppen und die „Genesis der Endlösung“* (Berlin: Metropol, 1996).

¹³ There is a wide array of literature that mentions or discusses this order. For one such detailed description, see for example: Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, “Kommissarbefehl und Massenexekutionen sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener“ In *Anatomie des SS-Staates* eds. Hans Buchheim, Martin Broszat, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, Helmut Krausnick Vol. II, (Freiburg: Walter Verlag, 1965), pp. 163–283.

carried out only in two phases: first it was necessary to move Jews to the Polish territories occupied already in 1939, which became a peripheral part of the Third Reich and only later farther to the East, to the formerly Soviet dominions.

In September 1941, the head of the RSHA Reinhard Heydrich began to occupy himself with “partial” evacuation of Reich’s Jews from large towns into the sole ghetto existing on Reich’s territory, to Lodz, or Litzmannstadt, as the city was called in German. Already at the beginning of September SS-Reichsführer and one of the main planners of Nazi anti-Jewish policies Heinrich Himmler discussed the issue of deportations from the “old Reich” and the Protectorate with the HSSPF (Höherer SS und Polizeiführer) ¹⁴ Friedrich-Wilhelm Krueger from Krakow and Wilhelm Kopp from Posen. A little later, in mid-September, Himmler wrote a letter to the district (Gau) leader and Reich’s governor of the so-called Warthegau district, Arthur Greiser, where he stated: “The Führer wishes that the old Reich and the Protectorate were emptied and liberated of Jews from west to east as quickly as possible. I am therefore trying to, if possible still this year, transport Jews from the old Reich and the Protectorate - as the initial step - to eastern territories that fell into the new Reich two years ago, so that I could move them yet farther to the East next spring.” ¹⁵

Himmler requested from Greiser that the Lodz ghetto absorbed another 60.000 Jews from the old Reich and the Protectorate. ¹⁶ Adolf Eichmann, known as the successful organizer of the forced exodus of Austrian Jewry, declared in Berlin that the Lodz ghetto most definitely had the needed absorbent capacity. Still before the end of the month, a week

¹⁴ Senior SS personnel who assumed responsibility for coordinating the activities of the different branches of police, SD and General SS in military administrative districts, established during the war in the occupied areas. The Higher SS and Police Leaders also coordinated the activities of SS with the senior military personnel in the military administrative districts. The SS, under Himmler's leadership, continuously managed to broaden its areas of responsibility relating to policing and security matters. The Higher SS and Police Leaders were responsible for all these functions in specific geographical areas. Their principal tasks were to control the local police authorities, monitor and carry out tasks relating to intelligence and security matters and perform whatever other tasks that they were allocated by Himmler, or by the military authorities in the occupied territories.

¹⁵ Himmler an Greiser, 18.9.1941. Quoted in: Miroslav Kárný, “Konečné řešení“, p. 79.

¹⁶ Martin Broszat, Hitler und die Genesis der „Endlösung“ In *Vierteljahrshäfte für Zeitgeschichte*, 4, (1974), p. 751.

after the letter addressed to Greiser, Hitler announced to Nazi propaganda Minister Goebbels that the first cities to be made completely “Judenrein” (free of Jews) were Berlin, Vienna and Prague.¹⁷

The occupation administration in Lodz felt cheated by Eichmann’s statements about the absorption possibilities of the ghetto and strongly protested against Himmler’s plan. It was trying to prove that the Lodz ghetto was absolutely overcrowded and that in the case of further influx of Jews the Civilian authorities would be unable to prevent large epidemics that would undoubtedly spread beyond the ghetto, to the non-Jewish population as well. The arrival of so many people would also mean a great reduction in the labor-producing potential of the ghetto and limit the manufacturing for the German army – Lodz ghetto directly lacked housing space and a number of current factory buildings would inevitably have to be converted into quarters. Eichmann actually made up most of the information about the real situation in the ghetto. He claimed that the ghetto could be divided into production and residential part for of work incapable people, so that the war effort would not be hampered. Furthermore he wrote that the ghetto had already housed 185.000 people before, as the number of the ghetto inhabitants was about 65.000 Jews higher in the spring. The arrival of the same number and the supplementing the population to the “original” state would thus not bring about any epidemics. However, the Lodz Government President Uebelhör was able to disprove all of Eichmann’s untrue statements. He pointed out that the production facilities were placed all over the ghetto and that an effective division of its territory into different zones could not even be contemplated. He also corroborated that the given figure of 185.000 people never lived in the ghetto and even now it did not house the stated 120.000 only, but full 150.000 people. Himmler and the RSHA boss Heydrich were not really keen on hearing any of his arguments. Their mission was to get rid of the Jews. Eichmann’s

¹⁷ Ibid.

interpretation of the conditions in Lodz was far more to their liking. Uebelhoeber was even criticized by Heydrich that he was, with his irresponsible approach, sabotaging the deportations of Jews to the East and he displayed a lack of “inner bonds” with the SS. The original plan to deport 60.000 Jews to Lodz nevertheless had to be lowered to the more realistic 20.000.¹⁸ Between October 15 and December 3, 1941, five transports of a thousand Jews each were dispatched from Vienna, 5.000 Jews from Prague, 4.000 from Berlin, 2.000 from Köln, about a thousand each from Hamburg and Düsseldorf and approximately half a thousand from Luxembourg (altogether 19.836 persons). Detruncating of the original plan nonetheless did not prevent the always overzealous Eichmann to carry out, “on top of the plan” the deportation of five thousand Roma (Gypsies) from the regions of Gurgeland and Steiermark.¹⁹

The fiery disputes with the Lodz administration that were accompanying the transports of even a relatively limited number of Jews forced Himmler and Heydrich to shift their attention and focus onto another territory, while the area of the *Generalgouvernement* was excluded. On October 2, 1941 they informed Hitler about the situation. One of Führer’s aide de camps noted down: “Himmler reports about the transfer of a foreign race (Jews), he speaks about the situation in Baltic lands and Ruthenia, main points Riga, Reval, Minsk.”²⁰ The mention of the localities in this newly created administrative territory, the so-called “*Reichskommissariat Ostland*”, a unit of the “*Grossdeutsche Reich*” (Greater Germany Reich) created in June 1941 on the territory of the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia and a major part of western Belarus is quite indicative of something – on that territory the above mentioned mobile murder squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) were already

¹⁸ Miroslav Kárný, “Konečné řešení“, pp. 78-79.

¹⁹ See for example: Lucjan Dobroszycki (ed.), *The chronicle of the Łódź ghetto, 1941-1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

²⁰ Gerhard Engel and Hildegard von Kotze, *Heeresadjutant bei Hitler, 1938-1943* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1974), p. 111.

systematically wiping out thousands of local Jewish residents. Based on the meeting and talks with Himmler and Heydrich, Hitler declared four days later: “All Jews have to be removed from the Protectorate, and not to the *Generalgouvernement* first, but immediately farther to the East. This cannot be carried out momentarily only because of the great demands of the army for transportation means. With the Protectorate Jews, all Jews from Berlin and Vienna should disappear as well.”²¹

Himmler became personally acquainted with the situation in the Baltics during his visit of Latvia and Estonia on which he went shortly before, on September 18th, 1941. It is nonetheless not known whether he already discussed the possibility of deporting Jews to the Baltics with the local HSSPF Hans-Adolf Prützmann (or anybody else) already then. The decision to direct further transports of Jews into that region was however certainly made in Berlin shortly after his trip, at the beginning of October. (As in the case of previous deportation designs, the plan to ship Jews to *Ostland* in the end proved more ambitious than reality showed possible.)

The deportations to *Ostland* were supposed to concern also Czech and Moravian Jewry. During a meeting of the highest officials of the occupation administration of the Protectorate, which took place with Eichmann present on October 10, 1941, Heydrich explained to all the participants that due to the problems encountered in Lodz and with regard to the objections of local administrators, 50.000 Jews will be taken to Riga and Minsk in the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* as soon as possible – in accord with Hitler’s wish “to if at all possible get the Jews out of the German area until the end of this year.” In the records from this conference, the following sentence also appeared: “SS-Brif. Nebe and Rasch could accept the Jews into the camps for communist prisoners in the operations area.

²¹ Quoted in: Miroslav Kárný, “Konečné řešení“, p. 79.

This has according to the words of SS-Sturmbaf. Eichmann been already arranged.”²² This statement had for the initiated a clear subtext. Artur Nebe and Emil Otto Rasch, the commanders of the two *Einsatzgruppen* (the murder units of the Security Police and Security Service) were in the area in charge of exterminating the local Jewish population. Furthermore, camps that would have the capacity to take in so many deportees did not really exist there. In one of the reports of Rasch’s *Einsatzgruppe C*, the death of 51.000 people was described: “Executions carried out by the commandos had these motives: Political functionaries, looters, active communists and political ideologues, Jews who by false data wheedled the release from POW camps, agents and informers of the NKVD, persons with false testimony and influencing of witnesses in a crucial manner participated in the expulsion of local Germans, Jewish sadism and vengefulness, undesirable elements, asocial elements, partisans, politruks [political activists], the danger of plague and epidemics, members of Russian gangs, war volunteers, supplying of Russian gangs with foodstuffs, firebrands and instigators, dissipated youth, *Jews generally*.”²³ To suppose that in an area where Jews were “generally” exterminated would be permanently settled by Jews brought from elsewhere is illogical. The participants of the gathering in Prague knew all too well that the deportees from the Protectorate and Germany would meet the same fate as the local Latvian and Belarussian Jews. “Camps for the communists” was just an euphemism for death. The extermination goal of these transports was clear, even though the new plan was in its scope and time horizon similarly impracticable as the original “Lodz” one.

Towards October 1, 1941, there were 88.105 people considered Jewish under the Nuremberg laws in the Protectorate alone.²⁴ When the tens of thousands of German and

²² Ibid.

²³ Emphasis mine. Quoted in: Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges* (Oldenbourg: R. Verlag GmbH, 1980), p. 158.

²⁴ Jüdische Kultusgemeinde in Prag, Tätigkeitsbericht 1941, p. 11. Archive of the Jewish Museum Prague. Miroslav Kárný (ed.), *Terezínská pamětní kniha*. 2 volumes. (Praha: Melantrich, 1995), p. 27.

Austrian Jews are added, despite a total commitment by all the involved institutions, Hitler's wish simply could not be granted on time, until December 31, 1941. In this context the decision arose to remodel the Czech fortress city of Terezín (Theresienstadt) into a ghetto. It was a temporary measure. The Protectorate and other Jews were to be concentrated there till the conditions would allow for their further deportation to the East. The first Jews who arrived to Theresienstadt indeed did not have to wait long for their renewed deportation – Latvia was the destination of the very first two transports to the East.

The history of the Holocaust in Latvia in general, in which camp Salaspils was to play an important, bloody role, is of course predominantly the story of Jewish death and suffering (the second chapter of this thesis extensively deals with this topic). It is however also a story of disputes between all the concerned constituents participating in the administration of this by Nazis occupied eastern territory. As has been extensively shown above, this had been the case even with the earlier deportation schemes. Those disputes were however more prevalent between the policy planners in the center in Berlin and the more pragmatic and reality conscious local Nazi leadership. In Latvia, these conflicts extended to the local level as well. Overlapping and unclearly demarcated powers and responsibilities, conflicting strategic goals and different economic interests often pitted the Civilian administration, the SD and at times even Wehrmacht (German armed forces) against each other. A certain inner “struggle” took place even within these structures.

But while there were sometimes disagreements among the Civilian offices of the *Gebietskommissar*, *Generalkommissar* and *Reichskommissar*,²⁵ they stood united against their “common enemy”, the Security Police and Security Service that were endangering their own goals vis-à-vis the “Jewish question” and their profits. The “solution of the Jewish

²⁵ *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, the Nazi civil administration of the occupied Eastern territories (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, major part of Belarus), was subdivided into smaller administrative units. In case of Latvia it was the so-called *Generalkommissariat Lettland*, responsible only for the Latvian territory and the even more local level the administrative functions were carried out by the *Gebietskommissariat Riga*.

question” was a key confrontational point in an unavoidable, long-term struggle among different organizations almost from the very beginning of the German occupation of this Baltic country. It is thus in order to outline the development and history of these mostly spiteful mutual relations.

In Latvia, compared to other conquered eastern lands, Civilian government was established rather quickly (the territory had previously been ruled by the Wehrmacht (but the Security Police and SD already had very strong powers).²⁶ Shortly after being designated the Civilian governor of Ostland, the *Reichskommissar* Hinrich Lohse began to conscientiously prepare for the job. In the context of these preparations he issued, on June 27, 1941, a decree explaining, point after point, his vision of the strategic goals vis-à-vis the Jewish question. Lohse’s document speaks of a clear effort to concentrate all Jews into closed ghettos and utilize their slave work as much as possible. Nothing in his plan however suggests that he foresaw a complete physical elimination of all Jews in Ostland. Lohse’s concept of using Jewish labor force for advancing the Reich’s war aims and his arguments for their de facto indispensability for the war effort thus got into direct contradiction with the brutal tactics practiced by the Security Police and Security Service from the very beginning of the eastern military campaign – the if possible immediate extermination of all Jews in the East. In a way, the Nazi Jewish policy in Latvia was deeply schizophrenic – the Security Police and Security Service (SD) wanted quick murder and robbery of Jews, while the Civilian administration advocated robbery and prolonged exploitation of Jewish labor. (The Civilian government’s confrontation with the SD also stemmed from competition for material gain – both the Civilian administrators and the SD wanted to claim the Jewish property.) Thus, from the moment of Hinrich Lohse’s appointment as the *Reichskommissar*

²⁶ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941-1944: The Missing Center*. (Riga/Washington: Riga: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996), p. 127.

of the *Ostland*, a bitter feud developed between him (or better, the Civilian administration he represented) and the SD.

The moment officers of the Security Police and Security Service (SD) learned about Lohse's directives regarding the "Jewish question", they attacked him venomously. The worked up commander of the *Einsatzgruppe A* Walter Stahlecker sent out letters to his field commanders from his headquarters in Novosselsk (dated August 6, 1941). In the dispatch he claimed Lohse had "outdated thinking" and completely failed to understand the newly arisen and dynamically developing circumstances in the East, where the opening of a warfront against the Soviets introduced previously unthinkable opportunities for the "final solution of the Jewish question". He also refuted Lohse's claim that Jewish labor was hardly replaceable. According to Stahlecker, in the East slave and wage labor by local non-Jewish populations could suffice. Stahlecker stressed that the individual steps in solving the "Jewish question" should be left fully within the competence of the SD which was best equipped to deal with this complicated task. What these steps were could be insinuated from the by hand scribbled PS: "I consider it advisable to before issuing orders discuss this question once more in person, mainly because it is safer that way and with regard to the fact that this concerns basic orders from higher places to the Security Police, such, that should not be discussed in writing." According to Stahlecker, Lohse's memorandum only copied the previous, obsolete phase of anti-Jewish policy from the *Generalgouvernement*. There and then the need for Jewish labor had possibly really existed but now in *Ostland* the time had come to get rid of the Jews en masse.²⁷ In Stahlecker's eyes, Lohse's plan was in clear contravention to the highest order (the so-called *Führerbefehl*, Hitler's verbal order) to destroy all Jewry in the eastern territories.²⁸

²⁷ For the full text of Stahlecker's memorandum, see: Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 378.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 204. Ezergailis discusses the *Führerbefehl* extensively, as well as refers to relevant literature on the topic.

What Stahlecker forgot in his agitation was the fact that Lohse did only what he himself did, i.e. followed orders and kept to his job description. Lohse was not directly bound by the *Führerbefehl*. The instructions Lohse received from his superior Alfred Rosenberg were of largely economic character, even though he had to use political means to achieve them: to manage the territories, increase the labor productivity in *Ostland* and supply the Army with daily needs and war materiel. From the point of view of the Civilian administration the herding of Jews into ghettos, expropriating of all of their property and exploiting their skills and strength was thus the most rational thing to do in order to fulfill their mission.²⁹ In fact, just a few days after Stahlecker's angry letter, Minister Alfred Rosenberg of the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories wrote to the *Reichskommissar* Lohse on August 20, 1941: "For them [Jews] forced labor is foreseen from the start, and according to circumstances they will be closed into ghettos or brought together in work colonies to repair the damages caused by the war, fix up streets, buildings, etc." ³⁰

In SD, Lohse with his concept of exploiting Jewish labor faced a powerful opponent. When the news of his collection of directives reached Berlin headquarters, the RSHA and SS-Brigadeführer Heinrich Müller reacted quickly. In his letter addressed to the *Einsatzgruppe A* and *B* from August 25, 1941, Müller wrote: "As has been reported to me, the newly appointed Gebietskommissar [Müller by mistake demoted Lohse's rank from *Reichskommissar* to *Gebietskommissar*] in *Ostland* had approached some *Einsatzkommandos* to stop carrying out of communists and Jewish actions. Upon the order

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 239-40.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 136. BA Berlin, R 92/22. Rosenberg's letter to Lohse, 20 August 1941, p. 6.

of the commander of the Security Police and the SD commander these approaches must be denied and immediately reported to us.”³¹

Encouraged by Müller’s supportive words, Stahlecker sent out a new dispatch to his *Einsatzkommandos 1a, 1b, 2 and 3*,³² in which he almost sarcastically wrote: “The measures of the *Reichskommissar*, as they have been planned in the temporary directives, in my opinion, can only be executed in the closest cooperation with the *Sicherheitspolizei*. As long as the battle actions continue, the *Sicherheitspolizei* is unfortunately not in a position to do its part in such difficult measures. Even though, precisely on the Jewish question, complete cooperation with the agencies of the *Reichskommissariat* is taken for granted by us, at this time we must concentrate on the final solution of the Jewish question by measures totally different from those planned by the *Reichskommissar*.”³³ These were ominous statements for the role the Civilian administration hoped to play in regards to the Jewish question.

It is necessary to specify that Stahlecker’s referral to “military operations” was a clear euphemism for the liquidation of provincial Jews which were then in full swing. Despite the acrimonious tone of the memorandum Stahlecker in the end made at least a minimal conciliatory remark when he hinted that he can tolerate Lohse’s directives but again repeated his basic premise that under no circumstances was he in a position to defer from his basic orders and principles.³⁴

Stahlecker later chose more assuaging words because he realized that the process of ghettoisation could only help him in his murderous task. The Jews being concentrated in one

³¹ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 207. LVVA P-1026-1-3, p. 302. Müller occupied a position in the Nazi hierarchy between Himmler, the overall head of the Nazi police apparatus and the chief architect of the plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe, and the SD commanders entrusted with the actual carrying out of the task of annihilation of Jews and others.

³² The *Einsatzgruppen*, were subdivided into smaller units, Einsatzkommandos (Ek). In the case of Latvia, the most active was Ek2.

³³ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 207. LVVA, P-1026-1-3, p. 303.

³⁴ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 207. Ezergailis discusses this issue at length.

place, without an opportunity to escape, made the “hunt” for them and their destruction easier and quicker. His supposition proved to be correct.³⁵

Hinrich Lohse officially took up his position as the *Reichskommissar* on September 1st, 1941. At that time he was – despite the clashes with commander Stahlecker and the SD – still convinced that the responsibility for solving the “Jewish question” in Latvia would be his and of the Civilian administration. Even then it was clear to him that the SD was going to be a serious competitor that could not be made light of. How influential of an opponent the SD really was Lohse had yet to learn. Considering that Lohse’s efforts were in contradiction to the “*Führerbefehl*”, Hitler’s order, the boss of all police forces Heinrich Himmler was certainly not going to take his side. The ultimate result of the duel between the SD and the Civilian Administration was in a sense decided in advance.

This was the background political and administrative situation and atmosphere in Riga in which the plans for a new camp, later to become known as the Salaspils camp, were laid by the SD. The camp too proved to be a point of contention among several parties – again between the SD and the Civilian administration, as well as between the SD and the RSHA (since concentration camps were not under the jurisdiction of the Security Police).

Camp Salaspils was to become a camp with many, often fluid, functions and, in fact, with many often contradictory labels, and was at times presented in completely contradictory terms to various higher Nazi offices and institutions. The arguments over its exact role and specification (concentration camp, enlarged Police camp, through-work re-education camp and so on) then continued to rage even beyond mid-1942, when Salaspils ceased to be a camp populated by Jews and was filled with Aryan inmates. While fascinating, this later history is unfortunately already well beyond the limited scope of this study.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 207.

Dr. Rudolf Lange³⁶ labored to get a construction of a camp near Riga going already for some time, since the chronically overflowing Riga prisons (particularly the Central Riga one) were no longer able to keep up with the increasing SD needs. From the moment *Einsatzgruppe A* (and the *Ek2*) entered Riga on the heels of the German army, they immediately began their bloody work. With the cooperation of different local “self-defense” groups (*Selbstschutzverbände*) and of the quickly formed Latvian auxiliary forces (the so-called *Arajs Kommando*), they instituted a reign of terror. Jews were of course the primary victims, but the mission to search out and destroy all communists and Red Army men, or in fact any possible sources of opposition to German rule, were also very high on the agenda. The prisons filled up very quickly but *Ek2*, which consisted of only seventy men, was overburdened with the number of inmates, particularly as these were distributed even to prisons in provincial cities. Interrogating the thousands of suspects was proving a difficult task and despite the fact that the crowded jails were periodically cleared of no longer needed prisoners and Jews through mass shootings in the forests of Bikerniki and Jugla near Riga, the lack of concentration of prisoners in one place was a serious problem faced by the SD.

Based on Lange’s personal plea to set up a new camp, his superior, commander of the *Einsatzgruppe A* Dr. Walther Stahlecker, requested at the end of July 1941 the RSHA’s permission to establish a concentration camp in Latvia. Addressing the request to ministerial councilor (Ministerialrat) Dr. Siegert, the boss of Office II (Amtschef) of the RSHA, he made sure to list a variety of reasons for the necessity to construct such a camp, noting the terrible hygienic and provision conditions prevalent in the prisons (despite the large-scale physical liquidations of the prisoners). This was necessary, as Stahlecker and Lange were well aware that concentration camps should not be under their authority. He also remarked:

³⁶ SS-*Sturmabführer* in 1941, Lange was the commander of the *Einsatzkommando 2(Ek2)* of the *Einsatzgruppe A* death squad in the Baltic region, mostly Latvia (Riga). He served as commander of the SD and SIPO in Riga.

“Aside that, only then the possibility will arise to sift through the prisoners systematically and separate those who will need to be investigated and interrogated further. ... I consider desirable that the leadership of this CC [concentration camp] is put in exclusive directorship of the Security Police and for guarding the Latvian auxiliary police are taken on next.”³⁷ Stahlecker was also betting on the fact that the planned camp would in the future expand its receiving capacity of about 4.000 prisoners and additionally pointed to the fact that HSSPF (Höhere SS und Polizeiführer; Higher SS and Police Leader) is interested in having labor force at his disposal. Last but not least, he did not forget to request a specialist in constructing such camps.³⁸

A few days later, at the beginning of September, Stahlecker received an answer in which he was refused permission to set up a concentration camp as these did not come under the competence of the Security Police and the SD. He was however allowed to establish “an expanded police prison” and a “work-reeducation camp”. Enclosed he found a Police prison rules of the BdS East, an service rule for a work-reeducation camp in Watensted and decrees for the regulation of provisions for prisoners.³⁹

At the end of September, Lange went searching for a suitable location for a camp. Together with SS-Sturmabführer Alwin Reemtsma, the economic expert of the HSSPF, they found a piece of land they deemed more than appropriate for the purpose. It was positioned in a triangle of territory formed by three cities, Riga, Jelgava (Mitau) and Tuckums. It was sparsely populated, in close proximity to Latvia’s capital city and fitting for an “immediate labor deployment of a larger number of prisoners”. As Lange noted, it was possible “to without difficulty make from one or more of the farmsteads in disrepair

³⁷ Quoted in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 208.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ BdS is an abbreviation of: Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD (Ostland). Subordinate to the HSSPF, the BdS was in turn one step higher in the chain of command than the KdS, which stands for Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD. Quoted in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 209

found there a starting point for a concentration camp. The first prisoner groups have to be employed at construction of dwellings for the prisoners who will arrive later.”⁴⁰ Lange suggested that some prisoners could be put to digging work in peat fields near the camp and others in the numerous little brickworks that would be overtaken by the concentration camp. (He clearly did not give up his idea that the “enlarged Police prison” should in reality be a concentration camp.) He also noted that HSPPF Prützman’s economic officer had a particular interest in this design.

Close to the end of the month of September in 1941, the plans for Lange’s dreamt-of camp were gaining more of a contour. Sturmbannführer Lange, the Office leader II (Referatsleiter) of the staff of the BdS, found a place to establish the camp and defined its purpose in a lengthy note (in which he no longer mentioned the necessity to centrally concentrate the inmates of Riga prisons: “Another aspect which speaks for the establishment of a CC [concentration camp] near Riga is the circumstance, that there are still about 23.000 Jews in Riga. The cramping of Jews into one ghetto can only be a temporary solution. In short time a necessity will arise to free the by Jews inhabited spaces for other purposes. Beside that it is necessary to endeavor that Jewish men as well as Jewish women who till now work only partially for the military forces were compelled to work at 100%. Finally, the ghetto does not offer the possibility to prevent the multiplying of the Jews. Even from another perspective it is necessary to keep a CC, to place long-term prisoners there. The transfer of prisoners to the Reich, to be placed there, is because of difficulties with transport impossible. ... It can be said already that the given site will offer the possibility to concentrate all the Jews remaining in Riga and Latvia in general there. At the same time

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 210.

male Jews have to be immediately housed separately from Jewesses to prevent their multiplying. Children under 14 years of age have to stay with their mothers.”⁴¹

This was an extremely important development, as it clearly indicates Lange was preparing to take over Jews from the Civilian administration which was still in charge of managing the Jewish affairs in Riga and use them to build the camp, beside limiting the powers of the Civilian administration vis-à-vis the SD.

The fact nevertheless was that at this point in time Stahlecker and Lange still did not have the financial resources, nor the needed work force to build the new camp. On October 6, 1941 Stahlecker filed a new, more skillfully worded request to the RSHA for an “enlarged police prison similar to a concentration camp”. The camp was to be in the area southwest of Riga and Stahlecker once more reiterated his plea to be sent a specialist from the Berlin headquarters of the Security Police and the SD who could help with the construction of such a camp, as “the question is because of the advanced season of the year exceptionally pressing.”⁴²

As Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein suggested, Stahlecker’s understanding for Lange’s desire to establish a concentration camp for prisoners and Jews in Latvia and his support for this request might have also stemmed from the fact that *Ek3* in Kovno’s infamous Fort VII and then also in Fort IX operated a similar “concentration camp” for Jews.⁴³

And as usually, an even more important factor was probably the rivalry between the Civilian administration and the BdS (Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD) and their continued tug-of-war over the Jews. The BdS, the local command office of the SD had

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 209.

⁴² Ibid., p. 210.

⁴³ Rose Lerer-Cohen and Saul Issroff, *The Holocaust in Lithuania 1941-1945: A Book of Remembrance* (Jerusalem and New York: Gefen, 2002). Fort IX in particular became the primary site for executions of Jews from Kovno (Kaunas) ghetto and Jews brought to Lithuania from the West.

to - upon the establishment of this Civilian administration - hand over the control of the affairs in the Riga ghetto to the *Gebietskommissariat*, depriving the Security Police of exclusive power over the Jews in the ghetto (and of the associated economic spoils). The organization and coordination of forced labor of Jews was thus directed by the *Generalkommissariat* and not exclusively according to the wishes of the higher SS and Police officers.⁴⁴

In the meantime, the search for the exact camp site continued (as Lange was no longer that satisfied with the original selection). In the end Dr. Rudolf Lange pinpointed the final place for the establishment of the camp, with the assistance of his subordinate Gerhard Maywald, to whom Lange entrusted setting up of the camp. Maywald himself testified about the search during his trial in 1963: “We then overflew Riga and surroundings in a plane of the *Luftwaffe*, it was the FW-Weihe [type of plane], to look for a suitable place that would not only have access to water but also rail.”⁴⁵ The place found was near Salaspils, close to Riga...

In the meantime, things on the ground in Riga really had to gather speed as Reinhard Heydrich’s statements about the shipments of Western Jews to Riga presented Stahlecker and Lange both with an opportunity and a problem: Opportunity to have the deportations help them to push the issue of the Salaspils camp, but also with a massive time problem to get everything ready within this short deadline. At the same time, they had the “thorn” of the Civilian administration in their side, hampering their efforts. The dispatch about the decisions adopted at the previously mentioned Prague meeting of October 10, 1941 – “to take the Jews ... to the camps in the region” was likely immediately passed on to Riga. Already a day later, on 11th of October, the commander of *Einsatzgruppe A* Dr. Walter

⁴⁴ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 209-210.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 211. 141 Js 534/60 der Staw, p.6803. Hamburg, Bd. 41. Account by Gerhard Maywald from 15.11.1963.

Stahlecker visited the *Generalkommissar* for Latvia, Dr. Otto-Heinrich Drechsler, in order to inform him that in compliance with Hitler's "demand" a large concentration camp for Jews from the Reich and the Protectorate will be established in the region. He immediately requested Drechsler's full cooperation in securing the necessary building materials. Drechsler did not find the project particularly exciting and expressed a number of reservations to Stahlecker but nevertheless promised his help. The construction of Salaspils was proving to be another weapon of the SD in the tussle against the Civilian administration – but Hitler's "demand" could hardly be argued with.

On October 21, 1941, Otto-Heinrich Drechsler received a phone call from Dr. Rudolf Lange, the commander of the *Einsatzkommando 2* (Ek2) of the *Einsatzgruppe A* and later the Commander of the Security Police and Security Service (KdS – Kommandant der Sicherheitspolizei und des Sicherheitsdienst) in Latvia. During their conversation Lange informed him that the planned camp will be constructed about twenty kilometers southeast of Riga, near a place called Salaspils, against the flow of the river Dūna (Dvina, Daugava) in the direction of Dünaburg (Daugavpils) and will have a capacity of approximately 25.000 prisoners, under the command of the Security Police and the SD.⁴⁶ Approximately in that location a large camp for about 40.000 Soviet POWs, Stalag 350, was already in existence.⁴⁷ Another camp, similar to the Riga one, was also to be built in Belarus, in the vicinity of the Minsk ghetto.⁴⁸

With all these designs for a new camp, in Riga major tensions and clashes of interests were brewing between the Security Police and the Civilian administration of the *Ostland*. Already during his phone discussion with Lange on October 21, 1941, Drechsler

⁴⁶ YIVO, Occ. E 3-29. Aktennotiz, 20.10.1941, handwritten note from 21.10.1941.

⁴⁷ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 29, p. 4464. Account by Josef Stocker (a German soldier serving in Stalag 350), from 27.9.1962. See also: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 211.

⁴⁸ This camp was Maly Trostenets in the vicinity of Minsk. For probably the most definitive account to date in the territory of Belarus, see: Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: HIS Verlag, 1998).

mentioned that his superior, the *Reichskommissar* for *Ostland* Hinrich Lohse had objections to the construction of the camp and the deportations of Western Jews to Riga. Three days later, on October 24, *Reichskommissar* Lohse and *Generalkommissar* Drechsler expressed their resentment to Dr. Lange personally. They were surprised that designs of such far reaching political and economic consequences had not been consulted with them at all and only presented as a *fait accompli*. Even though the meeting had a relatively calm atmosphere, Lohse threatened to clear up the whole issue in Berlin the next day, in person, as he was leaving for Berlin by plane immediately after the talks (he remained in Berlin till November 10, 1941). Lange tried to calm and appease Lohse by claiming that the decision regarding the construction of the camp could still be changed any moment, as no construction had yet taken place on the territory of the planned camp. As Lange proclaimed, only a few trees were felled in order to clear access to the site and a shed for workers was built. This meeting was also the first time the Riga Civilian government learnt about the first scheduled Jewish deportation train. Lange also informed the Civilian administration leaders that according to Heydrich's order, the first transport from Germany was to arrive in Riga already on November 10, 1941.⁴⁹ The Civilian administration was clearly losing ground to the SD on all fronts.

The quiet duel between the SD and the Civilian administration continued unabated. The "civilians" walked a tight rope with their politics. Their desire was to deprive the Jews of everything but bare lives. However, extinguishing Jewish lives was the very core of the SD's mission. The Civilian administrators were no humanitarians and did not care about the Jews as such, but they needed to protect from the SD execution squads at least the of work capable ones to ensure war-time production with which they were entrusted and in order to fill their coffers. The Jews being so obviously placed out of their responsibility did not fare

⁴⁹ YIVO archives Occ E3-30. Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 352.

well for their goals. Yet, at the same time, the Civilian administration could not accommodate so many Jews even if they were granted reign over them, so it was a rather no-win situation.⁵⁰

If Lohse hoped that a meeting with Lange could lead to some compromise, he was mistaken. On November 8, 1941 Lange informed the *Reichskommissar*, without leaving any room for discussion, that: “According to a dispatch from RSHA in Berlin, 50.000 Jews will be shipped to the East. As has been reported, 25.000 of these Jews will be shipped to Riga and 25.000 to Belarus. Transports come from all the larger cities in the territories of the Reich and the Protectorate. The first contingent of 1.000 Jews will arrive on 10.11.1941 to Minsk. Till 16.12.1941 every second day another transport will be sent to Minsk. The remaining transports will be dispatched in the period between the 10. and 20.1. 1942. The transports to Riga will commence on 17.11.1941. The first transport will arrive there on 19.11. The first transport will arrive there on 19.11. Till 17.12., a transport of 1.000 Jews will arrive there every other day. The remaining transports will be carried out in the period between 11. and 29.1.1942. It is planned that the first five transports destined for Riga will be allocated to the ghetto Kovno (Kaunas). It is still not completely clear whether the schedule will allow the diverting of the first five transports to Kovno or five of the later transports will be rerouted there. I will let you know. The construction of barracks near Salaspils continues with great pace. Considering the many difficulties with obtaining materials and the lack of skilled worker the camp will not be finished by the arrival of the first transports. It is thus intended to provide the first five transports with housing in the former military barracks in Jungfernhof (right of the Riga-Dünaburg road, between Riga and Salaspils).”⁵¹

⁵⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this, see: Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 352.

⁵¹ YIVO archives, Occ E3-31.

The following day, on November 9, 1941, Lohse's political advisor Friedrich Trumpeldach sent an urgent dispatch to the superior ministry in Berlin, to the attention of Minister Alfred Rosenberg: "Please urgently stop the transports, the Jewish camps need to be transferred farther to the East."⁵² This last ditch effort to turn the tables failed. The Riga Civilian administrator did not apparently receive any support from the Rosenberg's ministry and they were de facto told the SD had priority on Jewish matters.

The Civilian administration was nevertheless correct in stating that in November 1941, there was no space where to put the large numbers Jews to be brought from the West. The construction of the Salaspils camp did not really even start and there was a shortage of manpower and material to build it and the Riga ghetto was still crowded with Latvian Jews.⁵³ Complaints and urgent messages by the Civilian administration that Riga (as well as Minsk) completely lacked housing capacity for the arriving Jews were of not much interest to anybody in Berlin. The still non-existent camp in Salaspils nor the barracks in Jungfernhof were fit to accept thousands of deportees, but for the SD their long-term survival was not really an issue. Regarding the ghetto still full of Latvian Jews, the SD was to take care of this problem their own way.

If in the case of planning deportations of Jews to Lodz the SD paid only a minimum of consideration to the wishes, objections and possibilities of the Civilian administration there, then in regards to Riga and protests by the *Reichskommissar* Hinrich Lohse and the *Generalkommissar* Otto-Heinrich Drechsler, the Security Police and SD paid no heed at all. Hinrich Lohse was bypassed by everybody, including his own superiors. He was not present throughout the entire decision-making process and was not even asked for consultations or advice. Till November 1941 he was even given misleading information by the Reich's

⁵² YIVO archives, Occ E3-32.

⁵³ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 353.

Ministry for *Reichskommissariat Ostland* – for example that the planned camp will be in the end relocated from the vicinity of Riga to the surroundings of Pskov (Pleskau). ⁵⁴

Towards the end of the year the transports of Jews really started to leave the “Old Reich” and Austria and the deportations did not elude the Protectorate either. The commander of the Order Police (Ordnungspolizei, Regular German Police Force) Kurt Daluege had already in advance announced to the subordinate offices that in the period between November 1st and December 4th the SD would ship 50.000 Jews to the territory of Riga and Minsk. The Order Police was entrusted with securing the protective accompaniment of the transports. From the Protectorate cities from which trains of Jews were to depart, Prague and Brno (Brünn) were mentioned. ⁵⁵ In reality, only one direct transport left the Protectorate, from Brno to Minsk. ⁵⁶ All the other Protectorate transports were already leaving for the East from ghetto Theresienstadt that had in the meantime become a collection and transfer point on a journey to death.

November 1941 in Riga passed in a tense atmosphere of constantly increasing squabbles among all the constituents responsible for the administration of the territory. In a further blow to the Civilian administration, the current HSSPF Prützmann (he held this position till October 31, 1941) was transferred to Kiev in the Ukraine, where Jews had already been practically fully exterminated. His place was taken up by Friedrich Jeckeln, on direct Himmler’s order issued during the meeting of the two men in Berlin on November 12, 1941. Jeckeln rushed to his new post as fast as he could, arriving to Riga already on November 14th. With tremendous zeal he rose to the task of “clearing” the city and other

⁵⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the topic of the struggle between the SD and the Civilian government than this work allows, see Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, pp. 276-297. (Chapter “Der Lettische Arbeitsmarkt und der Zwangsarbeit der Juden in Riga.”)

⁵⁵ IMG, band 33, document 3921-PS, pp. 534-536. Kurt Daluege, Evakuierung von Juden aus dem Altreich und dem Protektorat, 24.10.1941.

⁵⁶ It left town on the 16th of November and the 1.000 deportees were composed mainly of poor people supported by the Jewish Community of Brno, recent immigrants (particularly from Vienna), families with Polish citizenship and then Jews who were released for the deportation from prisons. From the whole transport, only thirteen persons survived the war.

ghettos in *Ostland* of Jews. He was an exceedingly suitable candidate for this mission, as he was leaving a bloody trail wherever he went. He already proved his murderous ability in the Ukraine, where his *Einsatzgruppe* killed dozens of thousands of Jews and other “undesirables”.

Even though until Jeckeln’s arrival the *Einsatzkommandos* and the local Latvian auxiliary squads managed to kill over 30.000 Jews in Latvia, mainly in the smaller towns and the countryside (these massacres were personally commanded by Dr. Rudolf Lange), HSSPF Prützmann’s relatively “lax”, “passive” approach to executions contravened Himmler’s goals and suited those of the Civilian administration.

The elimination of the Jews in the countryside did not really bother the Civilians, as industrial production was centered in large urban centers, particularly in Riga and despite SD terror there, the Jews there were still alive and working. From the point of view of their opponents, upon closer inspection it was clear that Prützmann did not “prove himself” in his job as the reports about the number of executed Jews in the territory of Latvia lagged far behind the results of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the operational sphere “South”: “In the South, Jeckeln, Rasch, Ohlendorf, and subordinates like Blobel had made giant strides towards resolving the Jewish question.... [In Ukraine] Jeckeln had managed to get the military to cooperate, Civilian authorities were not yet a problem, and the execution totals were far higher. So ... Himmler decided to have Jeckeln replace Prützmann in the Ostland.”⁵⁷ Till October 1941, the murder tempo in Latvia settled on about 1.500 victims per month. With such an average, killing of the remaining Jews in the Riga ghetto would take approximately twenty months. Himmler was certainly not willing to award them that much time.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 208.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

The Riga ghetto closed behind the backs of the thirty thousand Latvian Jews on October 25, 1941. (According to Drechsler's memorandum from October 20, 1941, the number stood at exactly 29.602 people.)⁵⁹

Friedrich Jeckeln set out to work immediately and with Rudolf Lange's help quickly organized and coordinated the activity of an execution unit, composed of his own bodyguards, members of the SD, *Ordnungspolizei* and Latvian auxiliary units (the so-called Arajs commando). On November 30, 1941, the authority over the ghetto passed from the hands of the *Reichskommissar* to the SD. Wittrock, the Civilian ghetto administrator, lost all his power over the ghetto. By mid November 1941, only about 4.000 of work most capable men and about 300 women remained alive in the Riga ghetto. During two large scale extermination actions, the "bloody Sunday" from November 30 and the liquidation from 8th to 9th of December, 1941, most of the remaining Riga Jewry was shot into mass graves dug in a forest called Rumbula near Riga. After the killings, the Civilian administrations control over the ghetto was partially reinstated but the SD influence remained strong, in fact decisive. The Civilian administrators had to start conceding the collapse of Lohse's policy.

Already two days before the first massacre and the arrival of the first deportation train from Germany, the offended, humiliated and pushed aside Lohse issued a decree stated that: "In the future no objections will be raised against any transports from the Reich."⁶⁰ It is necessary to stress, again, that Lohse's initial complaints about the deportations and physical annihilation of the Jews were not motivated by mercy but by purely pragmatic reasons, particularly the lack of available work force in the area. The fate of the already

⁵⁹ YIVO Archives, Occ E3-23. Generalkommissar in Riga, Abt. II am 20. November 1941 an den Herrn Reichskommissar für das Ostland, betr. monatlicher Bericht über Einrichtung von Ghettos in jüdischen Arbeitslagern, Arbeitseinsatz und Behandlung der Juden. Scheffler and Schulle quote the same document, located in the Bundesarchiv: BA (P), F. 18595. See: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, p. 48.; Also, see: Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 343. Topic also dealt with: Wolfgang Benz and Konrad Kwiet, Jürgen Matthäus (eds.): *Einsatz im Reichskommissariat Ostland. Dokumente zum Völkermord im Baltikum und in Weissrussland 1941-1944*. (Berlin: Metropol, 1998), pp. 138 ff.

⁶⁰ YIVO Archives, Occ E3-32.

murdered was of no concern to him and from the extant documents it is possible to draw a conclusion that extermination of Jews in smaller towns and villages, as has already been mentioned, did not interfere with his intention to use Jewish labor in industrial complexes that were mostly concentrated in the large urban centers. Lohse started to vehemently protest only when lives of Jews in the large cities began to be threatened as well.

The construction of the Salaspils camp was only compounding the Civilian administration's frustration, as it was still increasing the SD's monopoly over the fate of the Jews. The Civilian way of "solving the Jewish question" was in shambles - they lost their grip over the Latvian Jews who remained in Riga, yet faced the prospect of not having much to say in the fate of those newly arriving. What's more, the Jewish property was escaping their control – both the possessions left behind by the Latvian Jews in the Riga ghetto and the belongings brought by the Reich and Protectorate Jews. (Another bout of the struggle between the Civilian administration and the SD concerned this property, but a description of this feud is again way beyond the limits of this thesis.)

Hinrich Lohse could not have any doubts about the final fate of the Jews deported to Riga. He knew all too well how the Jews of Latvia were perishing. He was an eye witness to their death, as he himself requested to "take a look" at their execution in Rumbula. To the mass graves and back he traveled in the car of the commander of the extermination operation and his rival in the discord about the use of Jews HSSPF Friedrich Jeckeln (*Generalkommissar* for Latvia, Dr. Otto-Heinrich Drechsler was probably also present at the shootings.) Lohse learned of the doom awaiting the Western Jewish deportees almost immediately upon learning of the plan to ship them to *Ostland*. The fact is – even though it is little known - that already three months before the famous Wannsee conference that took place on January 20, 1942 (a meeting of fifteen Nazi delegates, including Rudolf Lange, convened to coordinate further steps of the implementation of the "final solution of the

Jewish question”), to him superior Ministry for occupied eastern territories (namely referent Dr. E. Wetzel) informed him that the Führer’s office would like to help him in obtaining gassing equipment. V. Brack, an expert in gassing, was even willing to send Lohse his experienced personnel, particularly the chemist Kallmeyer, as it was more effective to assemble the apparatus on location. Wetzel informed Lohse about his conversation with Eichmann, about the plans to deport Jews to Riga and Minsk and about the fact that there are no objections to remove the of work incapable by Brack’s helping devices (“mit den Brackchen Hilfsmittel”).⁶¹ This was however probably interpreted by Lohse as an offer to increase the work output by getting rid of useless mouths to feed, rather than a policy of complete extermination. Nothing came out of this suggestion anyway.

On November 30, 1941, in the morning hours and two days after Lohse’s defeatist decree that the Civilian administration would not put up any more resistance to the deportations, the first train with German Jews arrived to Riga. The Riga ghetto, still inhabited by Latvian Jews was however unprepared for their arrival. Jeckeln decided to “solve” the problem in his own manner. The deep pits prepared for the massacre of Latvian Jews first swallowed the bodies of the Jews from Berlin. Only hours later the Latvian victims began to fill them to the brim. Already before that, in agreement with Lange’s information, five transports of German and Austrian Jews reached the Kovno ghetto. All the deportees without exception were shot by the *Einsatzkommando 3* and Lithuanian volunteers in the notoriously infamous Fort IX.

As far as the transport of Berlin Jews to Riga is concerned, Himmler spoke about it with Heydrich on the 30th of November and at the occasion issued an order that it was not to be liquidated. However, by then all the deportees had already been killed. Himmler then warned Jeckeln: “Unjustified behavior and contravening of directives issued by myself or by

⁶¹ Hans Safrian: *Die Eichmann-Männer*, (Wien, Zürich: Europaverlag, 1993), pp. 144-145.

RSHA as part of my decision how to handle the Jews resettled to the territory of *Ostland* will be punished.” Himmler also called Jeckeln to account personally. Both men met on December 4, 1941. Himmler on that day noted in his notes from the meeting: “Jewish question ... industrial firms.”⁶² Undoubtedly, the topic of the liquidation of the Berlin transport was raised during the conversation. Nevertheless, both Himmler and Jeckeln shared the ideal of eliminating even the able-bodied Jews, in time, but orders to temporarily spare some, once issued, were not to be contravened.

However, in a partial twist of policy, Himmler had to reflect on the fact that regarding the lack of work force in the East, Lohse’s argument was correct. At least a transitory compromise had to be found between the goal of the “final solution” carried out by the SD and the need to preserve the work potential of physically able or in some specialties skilled Jews in the interests of the war effort and raising production.⁶³ Nevertheless, SD’s dominance was clear even from such a temporary bargain struck between the Civilian administration and the SD on January 17, 1942 - negotiations with the *Sicherheitsdienst* were necessary to “retain” any Jews and it had the decisive word. Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich Minister for Reichskommissariat Ostland, wrote Hinrich Lohse the following: “On the instruction of the Supreme Economic Staff East (Wirtschaftsführungsstab Ost) Jewish specialist workers in trade and industry are to be retained I their labor reserves. Emphasis should be placed on their exploitation for the interests of the military economy in particular cases. Negotiations with the local departments of the Reichsführer-SS should be carried out to ensure that they are retained.”⁶⁴

This held true even in the case of German, Austrian and Protectorate Jews, arriving to Riga in their thousands. (Even though, as it soon became clear, they were not particularly

⁶² YIVO Archives, Occ E 3-32. RKO, abt. II a, an die Herren Generalkommissare in Reval, Riga, Kauen, Minsk. This letter also went to the HSSPF and the commander of the Wehrmacht in the Reichskommissariat.

⁶³ Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, pp. 47-48.

⁶⁴ YIVO Archives, Occ E 3-32. Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, p. 48.

appropriate for the needs of the war industry, as there were relatively few skilled artisans among them – unlike among the Latvian Jews). Nonetheless, people incapable of hard labor, the old, feeble and children, were still sentenced to immediate or early extermination.

When the first transports started to arrive to Riga, the Riga ghetto was not yet “tidied up” of all their property and effects left behind (again, as mentioned, the SD tried to get a piece of that as well, which led to further confrontations with the Civilian administration), while the construction of Salaspils did not yet start.

The Jews from four of the first “Western” transports shipped to Riga, from Nuremberg (departed on 29.11.1941 and arrived on 2.12.), Stuttgart (1.12.1941, arrived 4.12.), Vienna (3.12.1941, arrived 6.12.) and Hamburg (6.12.1941, arrived 9.12.) were not sent into the ghetto, as the “evacuation” of the Latvian Jews was not yet completed, but to a camp called Jungfernhof (Jumpravmuiža).⁶⁵ Jungfernhof was located not even two kilometers from the Skirotava freight train station, the point of arrival of the Western transports and approximately six kilometers from the center of Riga, not far from the river Dūna (Daugava in Latvian, Dvina in Russian), on the right hand side of the road leading from Riga to Daugavpils. Jungfernhof was really not a camp but rather an old, half ruined agricultural farm, which was, through work of Latvian Jews from the Riga ghetto and Soviet POWs from Stalag 350 near Salaspils, hastily converted into an impromptu camp. The unheated barns and stables were absolutely unsuitable for housing four thousand people (but still better than the conditions awaiting young men taken from Jungfernhof to construct the nearby camp Salaspils). The death rate was enormous and it is estimated that during the winter of 1941/42, about eight hundred inmates perished. The camp was not fenced in any way, only guarded by Latvian auxiliaries who mercilessly shot anybody who strayed away a

⁶⁵ The transport from Nuremberg departed on 29.11.1941 and arrived on 2.12., the one from Stuttgart left on 1.12.1941 and arrived on 4.12., from Vienna on 3.12.1941 (arrived 6.12.) and Hamburg (6.12.1941, arrived 9.12.). See: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, p. 80.

little farther. The commander of the camp was thirty-three year old SS- Unterscharführer Rudolf Seck, who had originally been a small-time farmer in Holstein. ⁶⁶

At the time of the liquidation of the Latvian Jews in the Riga ghetto and the arrival of the first Western Jews, the first steps to begin the construction of the Salaspils camp in earnest were undertaken. At the end of 1941 and the very first few days of January 1942, the labor force for the construction of Salaspils was recruited from the above mentioned four transports, Nuremberg, Stuttgart, Hamburg and Vienna. Mostly young men were then selected in Jungfernhof and marched off to the site of the future Salaspils camp, where they were given the task of building their own accommodation and of laying the groundwork for the future camp. A few dozen men from Germany and Vienna did not even ever make it to Jungfernhof. They were transferred to Salaspils by the members of the KdS directly, from the Skirotava station, where they were left behind after the arrival of their transports to help load the luggage of the deportees onto trucks. Many of these unfortunates came to the camp literally only with the clothes on their backs and it seems that in the first days of Salaspils, no rations at all were given out to the new prisoners. The winter of 1941/1942 was particularly fierce and the men were forced to sleep outside on the ground or in hurriedly built half-huts, half underground shelters, as there was nothing but a one half-built shed when they arrived. Exposed to the inclement weather and inhuman treatment, the death rate was dizzying and many did not last more than a few days. It was very clear to the inmates that few of them were going to get out of there alive and in their desperation, first attempts

⁶⁶Seck was completely unpredictable. Sometimes he talked to the prisoners in a friendly way, sometimes shot a few of them. He was more or less unsure what to do with the prisoners under his command and often asked Rudolf Lange to help him to get rid of those who could not work. In early 1942, groups of weak and ill Jews were indeed removed from the camp. Approximately 500 people were killed this way. The largest liquidation came in March 1942, when during the so-called „Dünamünde“ action, about seventeen or eighteen hundred Jews from Jungfernhof were murdered. About two hundred women were also transferred from Jungfernhof to the Riga ghetto. Seck then tried to turn Jungfernhof into a model farm, believing he could purchase it after the war and run it with Jewish slaves. In the later stages of the existence of Jungfernhof, the remaining prisoners were being transferred into the ghetto. For more information, see for example.: 141 Js 210/49 der Sta Hamburg, (trial of Rudolf Seck, Kurt Migge, Otto Teckemeier and Rudolf Reese), or summary in: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, pp. 9-13.

at escape occurred. An extant record shows that the first escapees, who ran on December 30, 1941, were apprehended and executed.⁶⁷

There are relatively few witness accounts about this very early period of the camp Salaspils – absolute majority of these prisoners perished and the men who lived throughout the whole existence of Salaspils were often those who assumed the morally ambiguous (if under the conditions understandable) positions of power in the emerging camp hierarchy and did not leave extensive testimonies. While also far from numerous, there are more accounts from people who arrived to Salaspils close to mid January, about a month after the first prisoners from Jungfernhof. These men were picked from the Riga ghetto. In one case (at least), about eighty men from the transport labeled “P” from the Protectorate marched to Salaspils directly from the Skirotava station.⁶⁸

After the ghetto became “ready” to accept transports, Jews from trains coming Köln, Kassel, Düsseldorf, Münster (Osnabrück, Bielefeld), Hannover, Theresienstadt, Wien, Berlin, Leipzig (Dresden), and Dortmund were already directed to the Riga ghetto.⁶⁹ In the second week of January roll calls were organized in the ghetto and hundreds of men selected to be taken to Salaspils.⁷⁰ It is known that in the first half of January 1942, the camp “housed” about one thousand slaves.⁷¹

In a report sent by the BdS East to RSHA in Berlin on February 2, 1942, the speed of the advancing works in the forming camp was described in rather exaggerated terms and the

⁶⁷ BA Berlin, R 58/220: EM 154, 12.1.1942. For a more detailed description see: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, pp. 51-55.

⁶⁸ The remainder of the transport was liquidated upon arrival.

⁶⁹ Ill, old or handicapped people from the transports were sometimes already killed at the station or in the nearby forests, but these were usually relatively small scale killings, with majority of the deportees reaching the ghetto. Bigger liquidation actions came later in the ghetto. This was not true in the case of the second Theresienstadt transport, when eighty men were taken to Salaspils and the rest of the deportees killed, as well as in the case of the third one, when all people on the train were murdered. This fate when all were killed also held true for one transport from Berlin. From two other ones from Berlin, only of work capable men were selected and the remainder killed. For an overview and dates of the transports, see: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, p. 80.

⁷⁰ See the second part of this thesis for details of the first selections.

⁷¹ BA Berlin, R 58/220: EM 154, 12.1.1942. Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „Die Enlösung“, p. 246.

future plans with it were clearly outlined: “On 2.2.1942 the information came that in Salaspils the construction of a large camp for about 15.000 prisoners has been initiated. It will be completed approximately at the end of April and is destined mainly for receiving the from Reich incoming Jews. While part of the camp will immediately serve as an enlarged Police prison [erweitertes Polizeigefängnis], after the transfer of the Jews, which is calculated to happen at the end of the summer, the whole camp will be at disposal as an enlarged Police prison and as a through-work re-education camp.” ⁷²

As has been extensively shown, in the case of Jews the intentions and goals of the Civilian administration and the Security Police often clashed – the Civilian administration was keen on using the labor potential of the Jews to its fullest while the Security Police had its own orders to eliminate the Jews. Salaspils played a role in this ongoing row, but the role of the Jews was predominantly to build it, they were not to inhabit it themselves for long. Their task was to work to the fullest of their capacity and then die or be killed. And while with the passage of time and the ever increasing need for labor the SD was willing to make some compromises with the Civilian administration regarding the immediacy of extermination of the Jews, their long-term survival was nevertheless not considered.

The last specification in the BdS report about the role of Salaspils as a “through work re-education” camp was extremely important, as it showed that the Security Police was preparing to return its original plan of not using Jewish laborers but rather of squeezing the greatest amount of work from the local population, even from those unwilling to provide it – in this case “work shy” Latvian civilians. But again, the omnipresent clash resurfaced. The Civilian administration, now that Jews at their disposal were scarce, was pursuing the same agenda and planned to detain those refusing to cooperate and provide the compulsory

⁷² Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, pp. 246-7. In the following discussion of this topic, I am indebted to Angrick and Klein for their insight – my focus being on Salaspils as a „Jewish“ camp, I did not fully appreciate how much the need for non-Jewish labor influenced the history of the camp.

labor to the local Labor Office (Arbeitsamt) in their own Civilian administration organized camp, by the penal order (Strafbefehl) of the *Gebietskommissar*.⁷³ Once more, Salaspils became a point of contention between the two organizations.

In Latvia (Generalbezirk Lettland), non-Jewish civilians were subjected to compulsory work service (in the Baltics, this held true also for Lithuania and Estonia). With the goal of increasing output for the war effort, labor was required from the unemployed or from people possessing a particular, needed skill.⁷⁴ When the German armies took Latvia from the Soviets, the local population mostly welcomed the Nazi soldiers with open arms as liberators. However, the by Germans instituted work service was in the spring of 1942 already producing strong discontent among the civilian population, not only in Latvia, but Lithuania and Estonia as well.

The Security Police carried out its own investigation about the root causes of the disgruntlement of the Latvians with the labor decrees. The following is a summary of their findings: “The strong discontent reigning mostly regards the methods employed by the Labor Office, when the Latvians are required to take upon themselves, on the basis of the decree of the *Reichskommissar* from August 15, 1941, the requirements asked of the factories important for the war effort. This decree lays down that the Labor Office should appoint suitable labor force for the important and pressing works also to places outside of the place of residence, with suitable compensation. In carrying out this decree, the Labor Office acts with great inconsideration. Also, the labor conditions are perceived by the Latvians as greatly injurious and disgraceful. So for example many skilled Latvians are forced to load freight at the goods train station while in the train cars next to them Jews are working. The remuneration for the forced laborers is very small, since many are deployed

⁷³ BA Berlin, R 91/30: Der Geb.-Komm. Riga-Arbeitsamt, an der Gen.-Komm.-Socialverwaltung., 7.3.1942. Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 247.

⁷⁴ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 247.

independently of age and education as unskilled laborers and they receive 27 Pfennigs per hour of work. Family benefits are not paid out. Shoes and work clothes and also not taken care of.”⁷⁵ It was however not only at the goods train station that the Latvians were refusing to work side by side with Jews and POWs.⁷⁶

The Civilian Administration soon realized that it is unable to enforce the forced labor deployment of the Latvians, even with the help of the *Schutzpolizei* (Protection police), as it proved impossible to forcibly bring those refusing to work to their work places every morning and guard them throughout. At a meeting on March 25, 1942, Hans Donath, the personal clerk (referent) of the *Gebietskommissar* heard from Major Heise from the *Schutzpolizei* (“Protection” police – basically regular police units) that a possible solution would be to lock up the work shy elements in a camp set up by the *Gebietskommissar*. One answer was thus to set up the Civilian administration’s own camp but that seemed rather impracticable. Heise’s other suggestion was to ask the Security Police, greatly experienced in such tasks, for help. Four weeks later Donath, Schmutzler from the Department of Labor Deployment at the *Gebietskommissariat* and Sturmbannführer Lange inspected the Salaspils camp and an almost completed barrack for about 400 people. Already on the following day Schmutzler recommended that work objectors be placed in Salaspils.

In what seemed as a reconciliation, the old conflict over the use of Jewish labor was paradoxically at play here as well – a fact which undoubtedly greatly influenced the decision of the Civilian administration to cooperate with the Security Police. The two clerks (Referent) responsible for Labor deployment at the *Generalkommissariat* and *Gebietskommissariat* already knew (in a rather complicated way, through the commander of the ghetto Krause) that Dr. Lange was planning to take another large transport from the Riga ghetto to Salaspils, where the ranks of inmates had been greatly depleted by the atrocious

⁷⁵ BA Berlin, R 58/221: EM 190, dated 8.4.1942.

⁷⁶ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 248.

living conditions and indiscriminate killings by himself and the camp command. Since these ghetto Jews were employed in many workshops, factories, etc. in Riga which were contributing to the war effort, for the Civilian administration this meant losing hundreds of valuable workers who were, considering the lack of labor in the area, hard or almost impossible to replace: “Considering the exceptional lack of forces in this region this outage would be hard to replace as the Jewish labor forces are deployed almost exclusively at important works in the defense industry and replacements cannot be secured.”⁷⁷ It was preferable to the Civilian administration that Aryan inmates – criminals, political prisoners, work objectors, etc. were placed in Salaspils instead of their Jews, who were mostly good workers.

The old fight for Jews was on again. It was in the interest of the Civilian administration to keep the useful Jews for as long as possible, even though the *Reichskommissar* himself just the previous year accepted that Reich Jews would be at his disposal (largely courtesy of the SD), only temporarily.

The issue was in the end resolved in compromise. On the May 2, 1942, 300 Jews were sent to Salaspils, while other Salaspils Jewish inmates, previously expendable, were returned to the ghetto for recuperation, in order to return them to the work process.⁷⁸ Of course, this agreement was, from the perspective of the SD, just temporary. No Jews was to survive the war. This concession to the Civilian administration by the SD and the exchange of prisoners, in detail described in the second part of this study, nevertheless really meant the beginning of the end of Salaspils as a Jewish camp.

In his report about two week activity written on June 24, 1942, Rudolf Lange stated that 130 non-Jewish men and 145 women were transferred to Salaspils. The total number of inmates of Salaspils to that date stood at 675. Jews continued to be returned to the ghetto.

⁷⁷ Quoted in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 249.

⁷⁸ See the second part of this study for a more detailed description of what this meant for the Jews in Salaspils.

New stage of the existence of the camp began. In the first week of November the number of prisoners stood at 1.800, out of which 12 were Jews, mostly indispensable specialists needed for the upkeep and running of the camp.⁷⁹

After the departure of most Jews, as the place started to fill up with Aryan prisoners, Lange had to start facing questions from Berlin regarding the real purpose of this camp, about its real capacity, which was far below the previously given estimates. The rather fascinating further juggling with definitions of the camp and its history until the advance of the Soviet army is unfortunately well beyond the possibilities/length of this short study. With time, in 1943 the camp also served to imprison people from partisan areas. Many of them were children. In the very end, in 1944, Salaspils even became a local center for special units that had to erase traces of Nazi crimes, opening up the mass graves with tens of thousands of bodies of victims of Nazi atrocities in Latvia and burning the corpses. Closely connected to the history of the camp Kaiserwald, from which Jewish laborers were selected for this grizzly task, this also beyond the scope of this work. Having described the Nazi policy and conflicts that stood behind the creation of Salaspils, it is now time to turn our attention to the inner workings of the camp.

⁷⁹ For an account of one of these few Jews who stayed in Salaspils for the entire duration of its existence, see: Josef Gärtner, "Mums atnema dzimteni, brivibu un dzivibu" In: K. Sausnitz (ed.) *Salaspils Naves Nometne: Atminu kraujums* (Riga, 1973).

CHAPTER 2: LIFE AND DEATH IN SALASPILS

After the transport from Berlin that arrived to Riga on November 30 and was liquidated in its entirety, the territory of Latvia received another twenty four deportation trains from various places in the German Reich, Austria and the ghetto of Theresienstadt in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The history of the German and Austrian transports has already been described in the literature available on the topic of the Riga ghetto and so will not be dealt with here. The scope of this study also unfortunately prevents a more detailed discussion of the virtually unknown history of the so-called transport “O”, which arrived to the Riga ghetto on January 12, 1942. Transport “O” was the very first one that left the newly established ghetto Theresienstadt in the Protectorate. It was shortly thereafter followed by a second one, transport labeled “P”, which was dispatched from Theresienstadt on January 15, 1942. Since the story of the deportees from this deportation train (at least the selected ones) is so closely connected to the history of the camp Salaspils, it is in order to provide a bit more comprehensive account of its fate:

As the Czech Jews from the transport “O” already began to look around the Riga ghetto, in Theresienstadt the preparations for the next deportation were already in full swing. The fortress city was gripped by fear. On January 9, 1942, the very day of departure of the first transport, the *daily order* (denní rozkaz) from the “*Kommandatur*” (commander’s office) read that further trains would leave the Theresienstadt ghetto. Rumor had it there would be four.⁸⁰ That would mean the number of remaining prisoners would decline by

⁸⁰ Egon Redlich, *Zítřka jedeme, synu, pojedeme transportem. Deník Egona Redlicha 1.1.1942-22.10.1944*. (Brno: Doplněk, 1995), p. 84. Record from January 10, 1942 reads: “Yesterday we could read in the daily order, that further transports will leave. It is possible to assume that there will be another four.” In the daily order dated January 19, 1942, the following was written: “According to the order of the camp command, transport O left today for Riga. The departure of further transports to the East has to be counted on. ...” See: Anna Hyndráková, Raisa Machatková, Jaroslava Mílotová: “Denní rozkazy Rady starších a Sdělení židovské

fully two thirds, from six thousand to two thousand. On January 10, 1942, the fragile feeling of ghetto “safety” was dealt another blow – in the courtyard of the Ústecké barracks, nine men were hung for engaging in illegal correspondence. Among those who witnessed the execution were some who soon received the call up for a transport labeled with the letter “P”.⁸¹ When the chosen unfortunates were accepting the order to report for a transport, they could not fathom that an absolute majority of them were just issued a ticket to their own deaths. Only sixteen out of a thousand people on this transport lived to see the end of the war.⁸²

On January 12, 1942, Egon Redlich noted in his diary: “After the days full of suffering every man gets to feel what is freedom, what is the happiness to live. Many acquaintances have been included in the transports. Each one of us hesitates whether he is allowed to take one’s acquaintance out of the transport, even when this acquaintance is a very capable person. Every effort smacks of protektsia [favorable connections] ... The physicians were picking the sick who would not be able to go. They were making fun of the situation. These were truly black humor jokes. My mood was greatly bad today. To pick instead of fate, to determine the fate of others.”⁸³

Already for the second time in the short history of the Theresienstadt ghetto notices with the date of the call up were issued, with an order that the recipients report to the “Schleuse”, i.e. the assembly point for deportation to the East. A few lucky individuals managed to avoid the transport at the very last moment. For example, Miroslav Zeimer claimed his fiancée was pregnant and the couple was “reklamiert” (exempted) from the

samosprávy Terezín 1941-1945” In: *Acta Theresiana* (Praha, Institut Terezínské iniciativy and Sefer, 2003), p.71.

⁸⁰ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. Electronic database of Theresienstadt prisoners and transports. Institute of the Foundation of the Theresienstadt Initiative

⁸¹ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. Electronic database of Theresienstadt prisoners and transports. Institute of the Foundation of the Theresienstadt Initiative.

⁸² Electronic database of the Theresienstadt prisoners and transports, Institute of the Foundation of the Theresienstadt Initiative, Prague.

⁸³ Egon Redlich, *Zíttra jedeme*, p. 85. Record from January 12, 1942.

listing for the transport. The Ghetto elders had to once again leaf through the register of inmates and in a few moments, replacements were found. Shortly after Zeimer's temporary reprieve, Mirek's friend from Prague, the nineteen-year old Ota Urbach, was summoned, together with his parents. To pack for the long journey into the unknown, Ludvik, Berta and Ota Urbach were granted just a few dozen minutes.⁸⁴

Once again, passenger cars were lined up on the railway track in Bohušovice near Teresienstadt, but this time the ride took a bit longer, four days. The train stopped several times along the way, but never at a station, so that none of the deportees could find out where they were.⁸⁵ Ota Urbach recalled: "I only believe we passed through Dresden. And on the fifth day we arrived to Riga, at about eleven A.M. At the station there were SS men who started to shout 'Raus aus den Wagonen!'. So we all climbed out of the railway cars and stood up and the commander said that all men between eighteen and forty had to step out. So I stepped out, together with another seventy-five or seventy-seven men. ... One guy, who must have been about twenty-five at the time, was with his wife. He didn't want to leave her, so he cut his hand and walked over to the SS man showing him he was bleeding, that he was injured. The SS man said, 'it doesn't matter, so stay here'. So they took the guy away together with his wife. ... Then I saw how the SS were beating the women with their rifle butts as they were climbing up onto goods trucks. They chased my Mummy and Daddy up there as well and then they closed the vans and took them away and none of us knew where they were going. We learned everything only when we arrived, after twenty kilometers, to Salaspils. There we were told that they were simply shot, immediately, that it is a common thing, because they [the Germans] only need people who can work.'" ⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

⁸⁵ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt. Benedikt recalled that the transport P passed through the station Radviliskis in Lithuania. That would mean that transport P in the last leg of its journey passed through the Lithuanian cities of Kaunas (Kovno) and Sauliai.

⁸⁶ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

Oskar Benedikt was assisting the elderly to at the Skirotava train station: “Those vans had at the back two wooden steps for the people to be able to mount and I was helping people up. We were under the impression that these vans were closed because it was so cold. And when the van was full, the SS man closest to me took me by the collar and threw me in the snow and they closed the door. ... The van was full of people, mainly women in my particular case.”⁸⁷

The mother of Vilém Schwartz, Marie, might have been among these women as well. It was then that Vilém first stood face to face with Rudolf Seck, one of the German officers skillfully directing the groups of disoriented, newly arrived people. Soon he was to meet him again, already in the camp: “I asked Seck at the station in Skirotava what would happen with the people who are not coming with us and he answered that they would be well cared for, that they would be taken to a ghetto. ... Only later did I learn that it was Seck. I also asked if we would be allowed to be in touch with our relatives, and Seck replied: ‘You swine, you have only arrived and already you would like to correspond.’ He was coming towards me with a stick, so I got lost.”⁸⁸

As was the case with the first Czech transport, SS men ordered the newly arrived people to leave their luggage on a pile in Skirotava, as there was not enough room on the trucks. They were supposed to first go and settle in their new homes and their belongings were to be delivered to them later. This care for the “comfort” of the passengers had only one aim: to more speedily and effectively separate the still living mass of deportees from their last possessions.

When the parents of Ota Urbach were ordered to board the trucks, they were climbing onto a relatively small, about three-ton canvas-covered vehicle. Oskar Benedikt

⁸⁷ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

⁸⁸ Wiener Library (further WL), P. III. i. 1028/a-c EW 13 15922-15932. Witness account by Vilém Schwarz from 26. 12. 1948.

was convinced that among the trucks in Skirotava, there was a gas van ⁸⁹ as well, as he clearly remembered an enclosed, box-like lorry that looked like a moving-van. Originally he thought that such a truck had been brought because of the severe climatic conditions. However, in the Salaspils camp he was later told by some prisoners that “specially” altered vans operated in the area. When their engines started to work, the exhaust gases were led into the hermetically enclosed freight space in the back, causing the human cargo to slowly suffocate to death. When the trucks reached their destination, only the limp, still warm bodies fell out of them. ⁹⁰

After the departure of the vans, selected men were allowed to collect their backpacks. They were then aligned into rows of five. Accompanied by Latvian “*Wachmänner*” (guards) - who made sure to steer and direct the fluid movement of the mass using well placed strikes with their rifle butts - the approximately eighty Czech Jews set out on a march, in biting frost. It was already on this snowy road that the Czech Jewish men were transformed from human beings into expendable slaves. Twice or thrice, the dry crack of a shot sounded behind the back of Ota Urbach but since he was walking together with Bedřich Winter and Karel Piesen at the head of the column, in the second row, no one will ever know for sure whether the bullets pierced the backs of the men stumbling among the last or were fired only in warning. However, judging from the experiences of survivors from other transports, the shots were most likely fired to kill.

It is also not completely clear whether where the eighty men spent the first night. For the two of the still living survivors the Czech transport the memory of the march is covered by later, more traumatic experiences. Oskar Benedikt claimed that his first night in Latvia

⁸⁹ The so-called gas vans, or “S-Wagen” for Sonderwagen (Special trucks) were mobile gas chambers where the exhaust fumes of the truck were channeled into an enclosed space, suffocating the victims. These trucks were extensively used in the Ostland, particularly in and near the Minsk ghetto and Belarus, but it is known they were also operated near Riga – even though in Latvia the more common way for mass murder was by shooting. It is impossible to establish from the extant documents whether gas vans were indeed present during the arrival of the transport “P”.

⁹⁰ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

was spent in a barn at a large farm or estate. Then it would be likely that the men stayed the night at Jungfernhof, which was located about twelve kilometers from Salaspils.⁹¹ Ota Urbach recalled in detail the sensation of falling asleep on the freezing ground of a barn-like building but he could no longer recollect whether it was immediately upon the arrival in Salaspils or yet before, on the way to the camp: “We lied down and I had a sheepskin hat on, sleeping on my rucksack. In the morning we were woken up by a whistle and we were not able to get unstuck [from the ground] because my hair was frozen to my sheepskin hat and the sheepskin hat was frozen to the rucksack and the rucksack was just lined with ice. And we were not able to get up. Only by force did we rip ourselves up, chunks of ice from all sides, because as we were lying on the ground, dampness was emanating from it, creating something like icicles, in a similar way.”⁹²

The remaining witness accounts give the date of arrival of the “P” transport as Monday, January 19, 1942 and the day of arrival of the few dozen of men as January 20, 1942. The approximately eighty men selected at the Skirotava station in the end arrived to a camp located in the woods eighteen kilometers from the center of Riga, not far from the main road and railway track leading to Daugavpils (Dünaburg).

The men from transport “P” entered a camp that was de facto not yet fully in existence. Still in its first phase of construction, only two barracks stood on its territory. The camp housed German Jews from the preceding transports to Latvia and a handful of Czech Jews from the transport “O”, who arrived a very short time prior to their colleagues from the second deportation from Theresienstadt. The welcome prepared for the newcomers was not particularly pleasant. The already rather cynical *Blockältester* (Block Elder), originally from

⁹¹ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt. Considering that the transport “P” arrived mid-day, the selection at the station in Skirotava took some time and the winter days in Latvia are extremely short, it is possible that the men indeed spent the first night in Jungfernhof. Other men, who were in their great majority sent to the Salaspils camp from the Jungfernhof camp or the Riga ghetto all arrived there within a single day.

⁹² Interview of the author with Ota Urbach.

Germany, introduced Salaspils to the “freshmen” rather briefly: “Well, you have come to a nice camp, no one has ever left here alive. This is a so-called Aussterbenlager.” That meant a camp in which one was only allowed to toil till his physical strength lasted and to die when it was spent.⁹³

Josef Gärtner had come with a number of other Czech Jewish men from the transport “O” just a little earlier than the about eighty men from the second Theresienstadt deportation. The *Lagerälteste* Einstein explained “the ropes” to them in very similar terms: “I hope ... that you realize, where you are. You will work in a concentration camp, building. From today, you are prisoners and you will be treated thus. With the exception of a ‘*Kolonne*’ (march or work detail) no one is allowed to leave the barrack to a distance more than fifty meters. Otherwise, the guard will shoot without a warning. For the slightest misbehavior you will be punished mercilessly. There must be steel-like discipline. To attempt an escape is utterly senseless, everyone will be caught and executed without mercy. There is no drinking water and there are no latrines. You are allowed to drink only the black coffee that is made every morning in the camp kitchen. Everybody will get one liter of fluids daily. The ration of bread isn’t big, so you shouldn’t eat it all in the morning, otherwise in the evening you’ll go to sleep without food. Whoever behaves well and works diligently need not fear. Remember this, dismiss.”⁹⁴

Herbert Ungar summed up the “introductory” lecture simply: “The penal codex was simple. Nothing what is commonplace for normal people was allowed, one had absolutely no rights and there was only one punishment: death.”⁹⁵

At first, the newly arrived inmates could not grasp all the terror awaiting them. It seemed that a tragic mistake must have happened, a cruel joke, that everything was a big,

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 44.

⁹⁵ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 45.

absurd nonsense: “We didn’t even have time to feel anything. I was in some kind of a strange shock, because there were suddenly so many unpleasant matters, terrible cold, absolute ignorance, because we had never even heard about anything like this before, had never seen anything like that ... Probably it must have been some kind of inner defense that we, on the other hand, did not really want to know anything. We wanted to survive and so we couldn’t, mustn’t have taken in much what was happening.”⁹⁶

Soon the rumor that the rest of the transport “P” was murdered spread among the prisoners but no one could and wanted to believe such news. To the contrary, the men were first consoling themselves by the hope that their loved ones surely must be doing better in some other place. But the information brought to Salaspils by new prisoners from the nearby ghetto of Riga that no Czechs had arrived to there dashed the inmates’ hopes. And when the prisoners saw the huge piles of clothing and pieces of luggage left by people who were disappearing in the woods surrounding Riga, the last remnants of optimism slowly dissipated: “Within two or three months, when transports from Germany were arriving and from those we got only suitcases and clothing ... we saw what was going on - that our people must have died in a similar way. ... We still wanted to believe, that maybe they were working somewhere, but sometime around April we realized that from those seventy-five or seventy-seven men about half had already died from frostbite. And if these young people were dying, our parents could have hardly survive it. ...”⁹⁷

The men deported with the transport “O” knew that their families were indeed in the Riga ghetto, as they parted with them there, but it was soon clear to them too that the deep woods around Riga were hiding the bodies of thousands of murdered people: “With the help of the Latvian laborers, Pepik Vogel exchanged two beautiful sweaters for foodstuffs. At the same time he found out that when the transports arrive to Latvia, they stop near the forest

⁹⁶ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

⁹⁷ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

and the SS shoot them there. One of the two even named the places where these atrocities take place. So it was from there that the trainloads full of luggage and clothes were coming. As the clothes were not bloodied, it was clear to us that those unfortunates had to strip before being shot. Pepik did not want to believe it. Is it really possible? He said, if there is God, how can he keep looking at this.”⁹⁸

As opposed to the men from the transport “P”, most of the Salaspils prisoners did not arrive to the camp directly from the trains, but via the Riga ghetto or the nearby camp Jungfernhof, which was destined for the German Jews from the very first transports to Latvia. Considering the dizzying death-rate at Salaspils, it was necessary to fill in the empty spaces on the bunk-beds and the work commandos with reinforcements from the ghetto, so that the work on the construction of the Salaspils camp could continue without a hitch. The selections of the able, work capable men were first conducted by the commander of the Riga ghetto SS-Obersturmführer Kurt Krause and by his driver and assistant Max Gymnich, and in Jungfernhof by SS-Unterscharführer Rudolf Seck and SS-Scharführer Robert Nickel, who became the commander of Salaspils. Later, men for Salaspils also had to be selected by the Jewish boss of the “Headquarters of labor deployment of the Jewish self-administration of the Riga ghetto” Herbert Schultz, as well as by to him subordinate leaders of the different groups from different transports (Prague, Düsseldorf, Köln, Wien, etc.). In the case of Czech Jews the man in charge was Oskar Steuer.⁹⁹ The decisions of the Riga Jewish *Arbeitseinsatz-Zentrale* were then consulted with the chief physician of the ghetto Dr. Hans Aufrecht and other doctors (the ghetto self-administration quickly organized a poorly equipped “ghetto hospital” and several first aid stations), who absolved the most feeble of the men from the transport to Salaspils – this was however in many cases a sentence of

⁹⁸ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 53.

⁹⁹ Interview of the author with: Hannelore Spiegelová-Temel, Hilde Kleinová-Boyko, Alice Bocková, Gustav Bock, Gerta Katscherová-Ehrlichová, Viktor Loheit, Ota Urbach, Oskar Benedikt, Nelly Stahlerová-illing, Irena Popperová-Racková, Alžběta Bergmannová-Bendová, and other sources.

death as well, as these inmates of the ghetto were then usually the first who were selected for “work elsewhere”, i.e., taken out of the ghetto and shot by the Nazi camp command, since their contribution to the war effort was deemed too small to justify their “feeding”.

The first Czech Jews who arrived - Josef Gärtner was among them - were sent to Salaspils by the Riga ghetto commander Kurt Krause just two or three days upon arrival to Latvia: “After an hour we will supposedly have to set out for work in Salaspils. Quickly, we got ready. My mother wanted to give me along everything we still had. I did not take anything superfluous as they told us that we would have to walk about twenty kilometers. Women were told by the Germans that we would be often allowed to go ‘for vacations’ into the ghetto and the moment we complete ‘the construction’, they will bring us back. When we were parting, I was calming my Mother, saying we will meet soon. ... That day I saw her the very last time.” ¹⁰⁰

The prisoners learned very quickly about the massacres of Latvian Jews and Herbert Ungar, who arrived to Riga alone, without family, felt no reason to stay. With certain naivety he thought it could hardly be worse elsewhere: “I went to the *Appell* [roll-call] without resistance and let myself be taken to Salaspils. I wanted to earn my right to live through work, it was not my intention to cringe [from work]. I wanted to get out of the ghetto, where blood stuck to the ground and walls.” ¹⁰¹

Already the march to Salaspils showed even the most optimistic among the men that nothing positive was awaiting them. Josef Gärtner wrote down after the war: “Despite the warning, some took heavy suitcases but soon had to discard them. Our column advanced

¹⁰⁰ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 54. The first prisoners from the transport O set out for Salaspils probably already on January 14, 1942, five days upon their deportation from Theresienstadt (9.1.) and two days upon their arrival in the Riga ghetto (12.1). Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 50.

¹⁰¹ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p., 44. Later Ungar saw his mistake: “Others were smarter. They were hiding and won, because there were hardly any young men in the ghetto. There were a few artisans, a few who worked in the leadership of the ghetto and then only women. The few men who stayed had it good.”

along the road leading to Daugavpils. I was tortured by thoughts what will happen with us further, where and why we are going. Someone fell. We ran to help him but the policeman pushed us back with the butt of his rifle. The one who fell could not get up. The policeman hit him several times with the rifle butt and swore at him roughly. But even then he did not get up. The policeman thus calmly aimed and fired. Innocent blood spilled onto the road. With terror we realized our situation but we were completely powerless. Our friend ended up on the icy asphalt. Who will be next? Soon another one started to lose his balance, but his neighbor did not let him fall, another ran towards him too and they literally dragged the tired man all the way to Salaspils. A shot rang out in the back again and then one more. That was the beginning of murdering. It was already afternoon when we turned left from the Daugavpils road. On that side of the Salaspils station we crossed the railway track and set out through a narrow path in a young forest. Soon we stopped on a large clearing. ... We saw two barracks, one finished and inhabited and one still only half-constructed. More couldn't be seen. Sand and snow, snow and sand. The wind was howling and our faces were lashed by icy hail.”¹⁰²

In the group of Czech Jews from transport O was also Egon Klein, who testified: “Already on the first day we found about 30 dead, wrapped in rags, who, according the information from the prisoners all died of frost and hunger, because – as the German Jews told us, they haven't received any food for a week.”¹⁰³

Dr. Herbert Ungar, who initially wanted to leave the Riga ghetto - that was still bearing the bloody marks of the extermination of Latvian Jews - never forgot the trauma of arrival into the camp and the sobering experience of meeting the German Jewish inmates, some of whom had already been in Salaspils for several weeks: “The first glance at the

¹⁰² Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 43. Herbert Ungar and others described the first murders on the way identically. Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 45.

¹⁰³ WL, P. III. i. No. 1028/b. Witness account by Egon Klein from 30.11.1948.

inhabitants of Salaspils was terrible. Hanging heads, drooping shoulders, dragging walk of old men, eyes of a sacrificial animal condemned to death. They looked at us as on those who are condemned to death. We had a chill running down our spines. We also arrived after a very sad scene. Several people were shot as a deterrent measure.”¹⁰⁴

The newcomers were immediately stripped of all valuables. Josef Gärtner wrote: “An SS man walked out of the barrack, later we learned that it was Seck, the commander of Jumpravmuiza. He had a large and strong frame, rough features, he was harsh and merciless, a typical murderer. We had to line up in a row and tell our number and the label of our transport. In the meantime two of our comrades were ordered to carry a table, a chair and an old box out of the barrack. In the box we had to place all our valuables. They notified us that those who don’t obey will be executed. They also ordered us to hand over all documents and money. I handed over only my old wrist-watch and kept everything else. Even the passport with the ‘Evacuated’ stamp. ... Beside that, there were three gold rings and a new lighter sewn into the lining of my coat.”¹⁰⁵ Herbert Ungar who arrived together with Josef Gärtner, was inclined to turn the valuables in: “I almost did. I was brought up that way. But next to me stood a jaunty guy from Prague, furrier by profession, rather vulgar but cunning and witty, who said: ‘You are crazy, you aren’t going to give those dogs your watch, are you?’ ‘If you don’t dare, give it to me.’ And I gave it to him.”¹⁰⁶

In the spring of 1942, “refill” transports kept leaving the ghetto for Salaspils more and more often. After the departure of the first Czechs, the next selection of workers for

¹⁰⁴ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 45.

¹⁰⁵ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 43. In case of some earlier deportations to Salaspils, valuables were already confiscated along the route to the camp. For example Josef Katz remembered the column of deportees had to stop in an open space about three kilometers from camp Jungfernhof and hand over all the jewels there. Josef Katz came to Latvia on a transport from Hamburg on 9.11.1941. First he was imprisoned in camp Jungfernhof, from which he was after a few days transferred to Salaspils. See: Josef Katz, *Errinerungen eines Überlebenden* (Kiel: Neuer Malik-Verl., 1988), p. 37. Similar stories of being deprived of valuables on the road to Salaspils were also relayed by Artur Kann or Sally Simons, who were deported from Köln. Both first spent a couple of days in the Riga ghetto and were then taken to Salaspils. 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 73. Witness account by Artur Kann from 12.12.1967, pp. 11769-11777. Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 61. Witness account by Sally Simons from 15.11.1965, pp. 9807-9812.

¹⁰⁶ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), pp. 45, 46.

Salaspils took place already in one month. Leon Freier from Leipzig was also among the chosen: “February 15, 1942 was the next *Appell* for Salaspils. ... Krause was walking among the rows and according to who was his favorite was selecting people he would send there. Simultaneously he was explaining: ‘Salaspils is a new camp that needs to be finished through your diligent work! Your wives will join you later.’ ... That day the temperature was 30 degrees below zero, we left at ten in the morning and at 5 PM we reached our destination. The transport was accompanied by Latvian SS. There were many older men among us. ... They remained lying on the road and the guards led them to the nearest woods and shot them. The welcome was very tense, the SS guards fired numberless bullets over our heads. ... In the camp stood three barracks, construction of which was not yet finished. ... My first impression was as follows: People who can only be described as skeletons attacked us, hardly able to speak: Hunger-hunger-bread-bread.”¹⁰⁷

The vast majority of the prisoners already present in the camp came from German transports that mostly arrived to Riga before the two Czech ones.¹⁰⁸ Most of them were first brought to another camp called Jungfernhof (Jumpravmuiža) which was located about twelve kilometers from Salaspils. From there, young men were selected, either upon the German order by the newly formed Jewish camp hierarchy or by the Germans themselves (particularly Gerhard Maywald), to go and build the camp in Salaspils.¹⁰⁹

It can be estimated that approximately 1.000 men were thus transferred from Jungfernhof to Salaspils at the turn of 1941/1942. When the first men came to the camp site,

¹⁰⁷ P. III. h. No. 1006/i EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account by Leon Freier. Undated.

¹⁰⁸ There was a third Theresienstadt transport dispatched to Riga from Theresienstadt on August 20, 1942. The exact fate of it is unknown. No deportees from the train ever arrived to the Riga ghetto nor Salaspils. It is most likely that all the Jews from this deportation were killed immediately upon arrival.

¹⁰⁹ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 42, pp. 6934-6936. Account by Gerhard Maywald from 28.11.1963. Also see for example: 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 63, pp. 10125-10134. Witness account by Wolf Hirsch from 10.5.1966. Also see: 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 42, pp. 7311-7311a. Witness account by Ludwig Gutmann from 25.2.1964 For an overview, see: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Buch der Erinnerung an die ins Baltikum deportierten deutschen, österreichischen und tschechoslowakischen Juden* (München: K. G. Saur Verlag, 2003), pp. 9-13.

there was literally no shelter at all and they had to sleep outdoors in the freezing conditions and later in makeshift shelters. For the first few days, they also received no food. From the beginning, the mortality rate was terrifying.¹¹⁰ At the beginning of January 1942, there were probably not more than two half-finished barracks and the *Kommandatur* [Commander's headquarters] which still lacked a roof.¹¹¹

The "old-hand", experienced inmates who survived the first few weeks in the camp could not assist their new colleagues who arrived later with anything by a piece of advice: "We looked at these people with sadness and compassion, probably the same way the prisoners from the first German transport looked at us when we showed up in Salaspils. ... We revealed to thee new inmates the secrets of the camp. We taught them to sleep in all the clothes they had, if they did not want to freeze to death. We explained to them, what the first whistle means, what second and mainly, how to avoid the clubs of Seck and other SS men."

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The selections for Salaspils were conducted repeatedly in dependence on the mortality in the camp and the need for fresh work force until May 1942. Gradually, even married men, fathers of families and older people started to be taken from the ghetto. Only experts and economically most important specialists working on "*Kommandos*" outside the ghetto were exempted from the selections. It is hard to imagine the fear of the rows of lined up men and also the dread felt by their loved ones. The selection could mean the chosen men would have to face the feared and rumored about unknown terrors of Salaspils or even worse, complete disappearance: "There were *Appells* for men and these always took place

¹¹⁰ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, pp.9791-9798. Witness account by Artur Sachs from 11.11.1965.

¹¹¹ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 43, p. 7281. Witness account by Heinz Trühe (Leiter der Abtl.I/II beim BdS Ostland), from 18.2.1964. After the arrival of the Jewish workers, Soviet POWs were no longer used in the camp. See: 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 29, p. 4464. Witness account by Josef Stocker (Wachsoldat des Lschty.-Btl. 529 im Stalag 350 Salaspils) from 27.9.1962. Also cited in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 260. Interestingly enough, I could not come across any testimonies that would mention any fence at the camp at the time of their arrival. Directly asked, witnesses claimed there was no fence – only testimonies that recalled building it in the spring. There is no exact record of what the timing of the construction works was, so it is difficult to establish such facts.

¹¹² Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. s. 50.

on Sunday mornings, when we did not go to work, when some *Kommandos* did not work. ... At six or seven in the morning they had to line up and they were selecting them for Salaspils. The *Appell* lasted about six or seven hours and us women were at home almost dying of fear.”¹¹³ Gustav Bock relied on a contrivance and managed to avoid the menace of Salaspils: “On those *Appells* you never knew whether they would be selecting for work or somewhere else ... As those SS men were walking around, I heard the word Salaspils and concluded that they are really choosing people for there, and not those incapable of work, to kill them somewhere. That was my reasoning and when the SS man approached me – every one had to say, healthy, not healthy – I said, well, I suffer from multiple sclerosis ... this way I managed to get out of it.”¹¹⁴

The fear of being transported to Salaspils was omnipresent but trying to avoid going to the *Appell* was to no avail, as the punishment meant being included in such a transport for sure. The ghetto police thus warned: “Further we are letting the Groups know that persons who will not come to the *Appell* in order to avoid the draft will be considered as selected for Salaspils.”¹¹⁵ Incidentally, this large roll call to select three hundred men for peat digging work in the dreaded camp was the last one to leave the ghetto, on May 4, 1942.¹¹⁶

But that was later. At the end of January 1942, there were only three unfinished barracks standing in Salaspils. The camp had not been fenced in yet. There was really nowhere to run anyway and the Latvian guards and the thirty degree frost took care that no escapee would get far. Barbed wire fences and guard towers started to be erected only later. There are no known figures giving the precise numbers of prisoners but it can be estimated

¹¹³ Interview of the author with Alice Bocková.

¹¹⁴ Interview of the author with Gustav Bock. Periodically, there were transports with children, feeble and ill, etc., out of the ghetto. No one in the ghetto ever saw them again. Gustav Bock feared similar “disappearance”. All the people taken out of the ghetto were killed.

¹¹⁵ LVVA, P 132-28-18. Anweisungen Dortmund. Record from 25.4.1942.

¹¹⁶ LVVA, P 142-28-18. Anweisungen Dortmund. Record from 4.5.1942. Originally, six hundred men were to be sent away but such a large number could not be assembled and had to be cut in half.

that the average number of inmates, at least during the time when Central and Western European Jews were held there, stood at about 1.500 men.¹¹⁷

The prisoners were “housed” in unbelievably cramped conditions, on narrow bunks made of unshaven wood stinking of dampness and mold dirt, in several layers above each other. Herbert Ungar graphically described the overcrowded conditions: “The barracks were full of bunk beds, two narrow corridors led between them from one front wall to another. There was only one entrance. The berths resembled box compartments in the urn hall of a crematorium. The inhabitants of a barrack could under no circumstances be in the aisles all at the same time because we were squashed as sardines in there, lying next and over each other. When somebody wanted to leave the berth, he had to first wait until the aisle under him emptied up a bit. When one stuck out one’s head from the berth, you could see a wild swarming of pushing and shoving people. When someone was moving out of the bunk, the dirt from his shoes was falling onto the hair, faces and behind the collars of men walking in the aisle below. When someone in the aisle was eating his soup or carrying food, dirt was falling into their bowls with every movement of the inhabitant of the bunk above. The dirt was also falling through the gaps between the planks. The planks were hard and cold.”¹¹⁸

Each berth was about 1,5 meter high, about half a meter high and housed three to four men who slept huddled next to each other. Ota Urbach remembered: “Between the bunks there was a difference of about 45 centimeters or half a meter. In any case, one could move in there only with great difficulty. We agreed with Beda Winter that it would be much smarter to stay on the lowest bunk as we did not have to climb anywhere. ... Of course, no one took anything off, I still had the padded coat from my Dad on me with

¹¹⁷ My estimate is in agreement with the conclusion of Klein and Angrick, who put the number at 1.000 prisoners in early January and about 1.500 – 1.800 throughout the existence of Salaspils as a Jewish camp. The figures given by survivors, as they correctly note, ranged widely from 750 to 5.000. Majority of survivors’ testimonies however gave a figure between a thousand and two thousand. See: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 260.

¹¹⁸ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 47.

marten and a sheep-skin hat, gloves, and we went to sleep that way.”¹¹⁹ Ota and Bedřich however soon moved “up”. They realized that the lowest bunk was the last station of the hopeless cases, those men who no longer could pretend to be healthy and strong and climb higher. With heat rising, the lowest bunk located just above the clammy earth was the coldest and furthermore, the men sleeping there were constantly disturbed from sleep by colleagues who were climbing down when their bodily needs called. Many, ill with dysentery, did not manage to get down on time and the ones lying the lowest suffered the most from the dripping liquid feces.¹²⁰ Ending up on the lowest bunk in itself increased apathy, subverted the will and resolve to live and survive and in most cases meant the end of the struggle for life. What followed was only the so-called “*Revierstube*” [sick room] with a pile of half-living, half-dead bodies wallowing in their own dirt and the final merciful liberation which came in sleep, delirium or from the barrel of a rifle or a pistol.

Those of the freezing prisoners who during the morning roll call could not bring themselves to spend another day on a work detail were allowed to stay in the barracks to “rest”. However, since they did not work, the already almost inexistent ration was cut in half for them. There was no separate sick bay in the early stages of existence of the camp and only a few places on the lowest two bunks in the corner of each barrack were reserved for the ill. There were physicians among the prisoners and a few even held this position “officially” and belonged among the camp “elite”, because they did not have to work outside in the freezing conditions. The doctors however had no medicines or dressing materials at their disposal, except when obtained clandestinely from the luggage of the deportees. Their care was thus limited to administering charcoal against the runs, water

¹¹⁹ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

¹²⁰ The ordeal of the prisoners was furthermore compacted by the fact that the latrine was located outside of the barracks but at night the inmates were only allowed to use it with permission and only go there in groups of ten. The first ones thus had to wait for the others to join them and all too often, the wait proved too long. Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 60.

made of melted snow to quench the burning thirst of the feverish and a few words of solace. At the same time, the doctors themselves claimed there was no disease in the camp that could not be cured with food.

According to Josef Gärtner, some of the Czech inmates tried to help their fellow prisoners to the best of his ability: “One prisoner took care of the sick. With our transport, the medical student Emil Seidemann from Brno got into the camp. With Seck’s permission he took over the care for the ill in the hospital section, helping the prisoners any way he could. The living skeletons from the first transport were beyond help. The sick did not wash, shave, were covered with a layer of filth, full of various boils and festering sores. ... The camp was expanding but people died one after another. Ambulance-man Emil Seidemann had his hands full with work. In the precious free moments we helped him any way we could. We were treating them mainly by hope, calm, a kind word. We had no other medicine. From the first, so called German transport, there was hardly a soul left.”¹²¹ Another man who was later allowed to temporarily help the sick was Herbert Ungar, also from Brno.¹²² People who could not go on anymore did not even attempt to commit suicide. That was unnecessary, it was sufficient to lie down in the evening and simply not get up in the following day. “And in the morning when you woke up the person on your right was dead and the person on your left was dying and the person behind you did not get up and you were very surprised that you were still around, that you were still functioning relatively normally, relatively normally, relative to the conditions in which you got up and went down and lined up on the Appell and stood in the subzero temperatures for an hour or so before you went to work.”¹²³

¹²¹ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 58.

¹²² Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 60.

¹²³ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

With the last transport from the ghetto in May arrived also the physician MUDr. Wiener from Vienna, “about sixty years old, ill and nervous person. We made him an acceptable room in the third barrack, about six square meters large, right next to the hospital section. Doctor without medicine they called him. It is necessary to admit that Doctor Wiener really tried his best, but it wasn’t helping much. ... Spring came, the sun was pleasantly warming us, but the sick withered away ever more. Their eye lids swell so that their eyes could not even be seen. The head was covered with boils and rash. Large scars appeared on the skin.”¹²⁴ Whoever found himself in the “*Lazarett*” section of the barrack was really in death’s antechamber, where the inevitable end was just a matter of time: “They were accepting death as liberation from this terrible life, from unspeakable suffering and hunger. Every day, several dead were brought out of the hospital section.”¹²⁵

Ota Urbach related: “To report to the barrack was dangerous, because we knew that those who are ill are the ones most vulnerable. As a matter of fact, really just a few of the older men from Germany or Austria reported sick. They just lied there ... whoever got sick there, died. Also, I will never forget how once I was on duty as *Arbeitsdienst* inside the barrack and Obersturmbannführer Lange came. He just walked around having a look and sometimes asked what and whatever and he came into the section where the *Lazarett* was, where the sick lied. He looked at the first one and said: ‘Er geht ein’ [literally, he “will wither”; “he will go”]. I will never forget that.”¹²⁶

From time to time, a “transport of the sick”, the so-called “*Krankentransport*” was dispatched from the camp and the camp police was responsible for the fact that all the ill left

¹²⁴ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 58. Two dentist technicians also practiced in the camp in the later stages of its existence, Herrman from Bohemia and Schloschower, probably from Vienna. They however served only the SS men.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 48. Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 55. Since the punishment for being caught with “illegal” medicines was death, these were really obtained by the doctors only for close friends or relatives, or mostly by relatives of the sick.

¹²⁶ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

without shoes and coats. For most the bullet awaiting them was a true deliverance.¹²⁷ “The doctors did not even have a syringe to help these people out of this world, because they were to die anyway. Simply, you were not meant to survive there.”¹²⁸

The departures of these transports were accompanied by heart-wrenching scenes: “A truck again came, like every two or three weeks, to load the sick and bring them to Hochwald [Tall Forest – place of executions]. Beforehand, one SS man, the *Barackeältester* and the doctors wrote down the ill. Among them was also one Zinner from Prague, who broke his leg in the barrack. He was a favorite of the *Blockältester* because he was a wonderful cook – he had had his own restaurant in Prague and the *Prominenten* wanted to unconditionally save him. He was already on a stretcher when they quickly pulled him down and threw someone else on the truck instead. But the despair of that man, when he was begging and pleading that they can’t send him away, is indelibly engraved in my mind. One has to imagine how he felt when all good pieces of clothing were being ripped off his body, his shoes and then they threw him onto the car. He already knew what was up.”¹²⁹

The very first “*Krankentransport*” (allegedly back to the ghetto, into which the selected however never arrived) was organized by Rudolf Seck, the commander of Jungfernhof in January 1942, when he was in charge of the camp while Richard Nickel was on a furlough. How many of these transports left the camp and what was the total number of people who were no longer capable of work and who were disposed of this way remains unknown.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga and Continuance. A Survivor’s Memoir* (New York: 1998), pp. 105, 114. Allegedly, there were five such transports. See: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, p. 57. At the end of the spring 1942, at least two transports of the sick left for recuperation in the ghetto and were not killed.

¹²⁸ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

¹²⁹ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), pp. 4-5.

¹³⁰ There were at least three transports, but likely more. Herbert Hirschland from Hannover recalled three, with about 120 to 130 victims. 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, pp. 254-255. Witness account of Herbert Hirschland from 23.1.1950.

The high mortality rate was not surprising, considering the cold, lack of food, hard work and absolutely appalling hygienic conditions: “In all those months we did not have a chance to wash, not once. Firstly, there was no water, that we made from melted snow and secondly ... maybe I am not expressing myself well, but at thirty five degrees below zero, when you are completely thin and you haven’t had anything to eat, you surely forget you should wash. ... Ok, certainly, someone could have brought a little water in a cup to the barrack and warm it up, but I never saw anyone. Also, no one shaved. You had nothing to shave with and there was no water. As I say, we didn’t even have a toothbrush, I couldn’t brush my teeth for months. I only took a mouthful of snow and that was all I could do. ... What we did was squashing lice. When we went to sleep in the evening, we took off what we could take off and then we went to the oven, everyone sat down and at the stove we de-loused ourselves.”¹³¹ Oskar Benedikt confirmed: “And when I speak of lice, I don’t speak of the little things that live in your hair, I speak of lice the size of an average cockroach that live in your clothing when you can’t wash and can’t change your clothes for months on end.”¹³² Only those prisoners who had “better” jobs, i.e. were sheltered from the cold, could keep at least some semblance of minimum hygiene. Among these more privileged was also Josef Gärtner, who held the position of the camp mechanic: Every day I carefully washed. I rinsed my mouth with the ‘coffee’ and shaved twice a week. ... I noticed that those who didn’t wash and shave soon became tired, both physically and mentally, became sick and died. I was firmly decided to endure throughout.”¹³³

After their completion, the barracks were after their completion equipped with round stoves, “because they wanted people to work and since they did not give them anything to eat, they had to at least provide them with a little bit of warmth, since it did not cost them

¹³¹ Interview of the author with Ota Urbach.

¹³² Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

¹³³ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 49.

anything.”¹³⁴ Firewood was brought in by prisoners who worked in the woods and at the saw-mill, but even then there was a scarcity. The barracks were also warmed up by the heat of hundreds of unwashed bodies, from which steam rose in the semi-darkness of the wooden structures, but even then the temperature was barely above freezing. Of course, “the air was not very good there, because people had diarrhea and when they were on bunk number five, before they got down and to the latrine, they did it all inside. And the latrines were outside of the barrack. Those were only big holes with such poles in front of them, to which one could hold onto and do one’s necessity.”¹³⁵ “And the plank obviously was dirty and infected with typhus and dysentery and so was the ladder that you climbed to get to the place where you were sleeping. After an hour you knew you must stay away from the ladder so as not to infect yourself, because you did not wash, you just rubbed your hands in snow in the mornings.”¹³⁶

Even before the prisoners from the Theresienstadt transports could become acquainted with bunk-bed Darwinism, the sick bay and the rules of life in the barracks, they got to know the camp hierarchy. By the time the Czech Jews arrived in Salaspils, the great majority of the “privileged” positions had already been taken up by the experienced inmates from the first German transports and the newcomers were left with mostly “*Aussen-*” (outside), “hungry” work *Kommandos*. The highest position among the prisoners was that of the *Lagerältester* (camp elder), who picked the individual *Blockälteste* (block elders). Those in turn chose the chief of *Stubendienst* (room service) who made up a group of men for the barrack cleaning duty. The *Prominente* (privileged) were marked with an armband. In the camp there were also several camp policemen, who, with the camp commander Nickel’s permission, were chosen by the *Lagerältester* Einstein. Basically all were men deported

¹³⁴ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

from Germany, as Einstein was distrustful of all others.¹³⁷ Beside kitchen duty, the dream of every inmate, among the sought-after works were all those that had to be carried out under the roof and in the context of which prisoners did not have to leave the camp on outside work details. First, these prisoners were more protected from the cold and could better economize with their physical strength, but were also more “out of the way” which decreased the chance of being shot for some alleged misdemeanor against the camp rules – or simply on some SS man’s whim. The dead were daily written off the camp records by the Jewish “*Schreiber*” (secretary) who was in charge of the camp bureaucracy.

Lagerälteste Einstein, selected for his position by the camp commander Nickel, was deported to the East from Stuttgart. He arrived to Riga with a transport on November 4th, 1941. Former prisoners judged him mostly negatively: “he lived like a count and was healthy as a beet”.¹³⁸ But considering his uneasy position, it is difficult to blame him. However, more often than Einstein the witness accounts mention “*Oberpolizist*” Siegfried Kaufmann. Kaufmann, who survived the war, arrived to Riga on December 13, 1941 from Kassel, Germany. Already at the railway station in Skirotava he was picked with another forty men to come to Salaspils. In January Kaufmann was named a “Jewish police boss” and ordered to assemble a “police” force.¹³⁹ Harshly critical voices were heard against this chief of camp police too. Ludwig Shoenberg was more forgiving. “Siegfried Kaufmann. Well, he did the best he could under the circumstances but like always with these things, some people hated him and others realized that he was just as handicapped as we were. And naturally, he was more interested to save his own life than anybody else’s. Under the circumstances it was a natural thing, but under normal circumstances, in normal times like now, nobody can

¹³⁷ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 54.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

¹³⁹ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 264. They give the number of men at Kaufmann’s disposal at eighty five, but this rather high figure does not seem to be substantiated by the majority of the witness accounts.

understand that. ... Of course his food was much better than the ordinary prisoner's but as I say it was a matter of self preservation and whether you can blame him for that or not is a matter of personal opinion. And yes, sure, some people behaved better than others and many things happened which under normal circumstances would not have happened with regards to the behavior of people to each other. But nobody should forget that the slightest piece of bread was worth killing somebody for or some people got killed for a slice of bread, because the hunger was indescribable..."¹⁴⁰

Alfred Winter - who worked in the burial detail that was among the most feared by the prisoners – was far more critical towards the privileged "*Prominenten*": "A Siegfried K. was in charge of the camp police and was neither hot or cold. He did very little to prevent the suffering of other inmates. The majority of the camp police were good fellows and helpful, but we also had some real rotten fellows in this group. The worst of the whole gang was a cattle dealer and treated every fellow in the camp like cattle. Instead of a Star of David, he should have worn a swastika. Even the fellows who worked for them were more helpful. ... One thing is for sure, no one in the camp police, kitchen, and administration was undernourished or got sick."¹⁴¹

Winter's harsh assessment was echoed by Herbert Ungar: "While people were literally dying of hunger and cold, these functionaries did not know what to do out of gaiety. They organized feasts, drank real bean coffee, ate rice, roasts and poultry. They kept a lively business with the best things from the suitcases, suitcases that were to be sorted and deposited in warehouses for the SS. ... Only one small layer of criminals was allowed to live, gorge, guzzle while the other ones had to croak."¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Interview of the author with Ludwig Shonberg.

¹⁴¹ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 110. Allegedly a livestock dealer by original profession, "he walked around with a club, hitting the unlucky subordinates like that cattle." Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 55.

¹⁴² Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 55.

Among the “best” work details was the camp warehouse which was the center of a whole clandestine economy: “A bit farther from the other building a new barrack was completed. ... It seemed they were building some warehouse. That was the ‘shopping center’ of Salaspils, as we later called it. A few train cars with luggage arrived to Salaspils. They sent us there, opened the cars and ordered us to carry the suitcases to the newly built barrack. Sometimes we managed to open one of the suitcases. We searched for foodstuffs and often we found them. Many prisoners were caught in the act of ‘stealing’ by the SS men and shot on the spot, but hunger was stronger than fear of death and the searching of suitcases continued. In the meantime long bars with coat-hangers and shelves were established in the ‘shopping center’. Textile experts were sought. Paul Feldheim volunteered. He was made the head of that clothing barrack...”¹⁴³

Except for the fact that they did not have to toil outside in the freezing temperatures, the gang from the “*Kleiderkammer*” could stealthily exchange their lice-infested clothing, put on a fresh shirt every day that used to belong to a now most likely dead person. In the piles of things cans, biscuits and other durable provisions could also be found. Paul Feldheim from Dortmund, the leader of the *Kleiderkammer Kommando*, was very close friends with the Czech Jew Josef Gärtner: “What wasn’t there... Piles of photographs, nails, soles for shoes, all kinds of office supplies, dictionaries, technical literature, doctors’ diplomas, new and used clothing, photo cameras, theodolites, small counting machines, logarithmic slide-rules, all kinds of medical instruments, the equipment of a watch-maker’s workshop, dentistry tools, even a whole dentist chair with the appropriate hand and electric drills, gramophones with records and then also really useful things: linen, outer garb, footwear and food. The last item interested us the most.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

When the provisions from the luggage ran out, the possibility to secretly take clothing and valuables allowed for the existence of a flourishing black market, thanks to which the workers from the *Kleiderkammer* could obtain supplies and which was also helping other inmates to survive. The work in the “shopping center” was relatively easy: the clothing - checked for hidden jewels, sorted according to kinds and quality and stripped of the sewn on Jewish stars - was then packed into large bundles, tied by rope. From time to time, lorries came for the large piles of bundles so that the shipment could be sent to Germany. The men from the *Kleiderkammer* however had to take great care not to be caught in the act of stealing during the unexpected visits by SS men who often came there to “resupply” themselves. For example, when an SS man desired a pair of shoes, he only mentioned the color and size and the slaves of Salaspils got them ready for him. “Nickel came there every day and oversaw the contents of this ‘shopping center’. This shopping center was to become the payless shopping center of the SS masters and other ‘chosen ones’ of the Third Reich.”¹⁴⁵

Every prisoner desperately wanted to be chosen as an assistant in the kitchen, where one could get another portion of soup, a piece of bread or a frozen potato and thus to several extra hours of life. The camp galley was under the direction of Gustav Kusiell from the Stuttgart transport and his several assistants. Alfred Winter from the burial detail did not find many favorable words for Kusiell: “Kusiell [correctly Kusiell] the chief of the kitchen did not get much food for the camp, but he did not give a hoot if it was cooked or prepared for all the inmates. As long as he and his cronies in the camp administration had enough to eat, the rest could go to hell. There were only a few decent fellows in the kitchen. Sorry to say that the camp administration under Einstein did not help either. The Germans never counted the work groups and it would have been easy to report more healthy people in order

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

to give the sick a chance for a full ration. All those who were sick and taken out of the camp were picked out by the camp administration with exception of the first transport. Everybody in the camp knew that the sick ones would be killed, because shoes and overcoats and sometimes jackets were removed before they were taken out and on and off, the clothing came back in the camp. Those people could have died a peaceful death instead of a bullet in the head if the administration only wanted it and tried not to please the Germans. To make matters worse, Nickel saw and heard a fellow complaining in the kitchen while receiving his soup, that the ladles were different sizes. For that he got hit over the head with the ladle. Nickel ordered new ladles of uniform size and Kussiel was so mad that he ordered his people in the kitchen to take the soup from the top of the kettle. This way many did not even receive a piece of potato or cabbage. They just had pure colored warm water.”¹⁴⁶

Later the handful of prominent prisoners was joined by a linguistically well equipped man with his son, who came to Salaspils with the last transport: “The interpreter Pinkasovich also showed up in the camp, a Pole by nationality, who arrived to Riga with the Viennese transport. He knew German, Polish and Russian well. Pinkasovich came with his ill son, who did not work but managed to endure all the difficulties of the camp. Pinkasovich was delegated a little room of his own in the newly built hospital barrack. He lived there with his son. Of course he did not manage with the camp food only. He successfully did business with the camp site foreman Kačerovskis and his friends and more often than not also with prisoners who still had something to sell or trade.”¹⁴⁷

From the Theresienstadt deportees – with the exception of the medic and dentist – a more prominent position was held only by a few men. One of them was Harry Stein, a boxing champion known both from the ring and the silver screen: “He had an exceptional

¹⁴⁶ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, pp. 114-115.

¹⁴⁷ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 54. This was confirmed by Erich Pisk, who remembered Pinkasovich well from the ghetto in Riga. Interview of the author with Erich Pisk.

position. He never went to work, because the SS man saw a boxer in him. ... I think he trained with him. Stein was his name. He had such a broken nose, a relatively small guy. In the end he also perished.”¹⁴⁸ How privileged the position of the boxer really was is clear from the fact that, according to the testimony of Herbert Ungar, his death sentence was once commuted in Salaspils. Unfortunately, someone else had to pay the price: “I think he was once even a German champion in middle weight and he was caught and denounced during some exchange business. Since there was no chance to avoid an execution, they simply took one Viennese sixteen year-old boy who was then tied up in the Blockältester’s booth in our barrack no. 3 and the Blockältester let a rumor circulate that the SS leadership of the camp had received a letter requesting that the youth be hanged for a previously committed crime – and he was hanged. I will never forget those hours. That day I knew I would not be able to bear the sight of the execution and I used the position of my sleeping berth - which was directly under the roof on the highest bunk – to hide. Before each execution, the barracks were searched. If I had been found, it would have been all over for me. But I simply could not go. As all others had to wait outside for the execution, I was lying without a sound in my berth and had to listen how the poor youth was galled. With indescribable hypocrisy he was questioned and consoled, while some were already arguing who would get his shoes, pants and who his coat. Not to wear them, for that they were too fine, but to sell them. My heart was literally turning in my body but I could not say anything, otherwise I would hang next to him. I was not present at the execution but I did see him hang, for everyone was hanging there for three days, on a spot where we had to assemble in the mornings and evenings, where we were issued our rations, where we had to go to get water, to the side, shortly,

¹⁴⁸ Interview of the author with Ota Urbach.. Harry Stein for example played himself in the movie *Liebe im Ring* (1930), directed by Reinhold Schünzel, together with the boxing superstar Max Schmelling. Incidentally, Kurt Gerron, who was to later direct an infamous German propaganda movie about Theresienstadt, played Max’s manager. For a New York Times review of the film available on the Internet, see: http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?title1=Liebe%20im%20Ring&title2=&reviewer=MORDAUNT%20HALL%2e&pdate=19300811&v_id=137873

whenever we left the barrack. And every day the body seemed to lengthen, just the sight made one sick.”¹⁴⁹

The Viennese teenager was likely executed with the help of the already mentioned Wolf Besen, another of the privileged persons in the camp. Besen came on the second Theresienstadt transport and at the Skirotava station he lost his wife Antonia and daughter Herta. In Salaspils, Besen, allegedly a wrestler before the war, became the executioner. And while all extant witness accounts confirm he was indeed the camp executioner, details about who Besen really was differ. The most detailed account about Besen come from the pen of Gertrude Schneider, whose father was also one of Salaspils prisoners. She just remembered his first name incorrectly, calling him Karel: “...now in his middle thirties, he was tall and massive, and his appointment as hangman was brought about in a most unlikely way. He told the story often and totally matter-of-factly: On his third day at the camp, another Czech Jew was hanged by a Latvian SS man who was very, very clumsy and thus prolonged the agony of the unfortunate victim. Besen, standing in the second row – all inmates had to watch the gruesome spectacle – began to grumble. The deputy Kommandant of Salaspils, Migge, heard him, turned to look at him and said sharply, ‘Maybe you can do a better job?’ Besen stepped up to the gallows and, in his own words, “helped the rope to work faster.”¹⁵⁰ He was later known in the ghetto as the “hangman from Salaspils” but this did not seem to bother him or his partner.¹⁵¹ Besen was nevertheless probably a somewhat unsavory

¹⁴⁹ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, pp. 56, 57.

¹⁵⁰ Gertrude Schneider, “The Hangman of Camp Salaspils” In *Muted Voices: Jewish Survivors of Latvia Remember* (New York: Philosophical Library Inc, 1987), pp. 137-138.

¹⁵¹ There seems to be contradictory information on Besen’s ultimate fate. According to Otto Windmüller, who claimed he had to take Besen’s body away, the executioner from Salaspils died in 1943 in the camp Kaiserwald near Riga, possibly during an attempt to escape. Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd.72, pp. 11601-11615, particularly page 11610 (Title: “Ein Teil meines Lebens“). Witness account by Otto Windmüller from 19.3.1952. However, according to the information collected for the listings of deportees to Riga by Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, according to the records of the Stutthof memorial Besen was admitted as a prisoner in the Stutthof camp on October 1, 1944. That would mean he survived Kaiserwald and the evacuation of prisoners from Latvia and perished only between October 1944 and the end of the war. See: Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, p. 496. Schneider incorrectly states that he had a

character, as Dr. Herbert Ungar wrote down in his memoirs that Wolf Besen had already been caught stealing from another prisoner in Theresienstadt.¹⁵²

Of course, when Besen stepped out of the row of men to shorten the suffering of his fellow prisoner, he could not have known that he was destined to continue with this grisly work – a task he doubtlessly had to perform if he wanted to keep or at least prolong his own life.¹⁵³ The terrible, truly existential situations and choices faced by the prisoners were, if reported at all, noted only in a detached, cool manner by the German Security Police: “Latvia: In the last days three Jews, taken from the Reich to Riga, were captured as they escaped from the ghetto or the barrack camp. These Jews were in the presence of the inhabitants of the ghetto or camp shot or hanged. The hanging was in both above mentioned cases done by Jews who carried out this work without resistance.”¹⁵⁴

Josef Gärtner was also a high-up prisoner. The armband stating he was the “camp mechanic” allowed him to move about freely and awarded him an increased level of security: “One day the typewriting machine at the *Kommandatur* broke. When Einstein was looking for a mechanic, he was running from barrack to barrack but could not find one. So I volunteered. Nickel had me immediately called in to the *Kommandatur* and I could have a look at the typing machine. Then I went to the ‘shopping center’, got a small pouch from Feldheim and put in it little pincers, tweezers, screwdriver and a small bottle with oil. I quickly returned to the *Kommandatur* and set to work. Towards the evening the machine

wife in the ghetto. She must have been his ghetto “wife”, the union being one of the “ghetto marriages”, as his lawful wife perished upon arrival as no women from the transport P were selected to come to the ghetto.

¹⁵² Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 41.

¹⁵³ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 264. Gertrude Schneider, *Journey into Terror*, p. 64. At least in one case, Wolf Besen was “lent out” from Salaspils to perform his duty in camp Jungfernhof as well. One prisoner of Jungfernhof (originally from Würzburg), by the name Henry Kaufmann was caught bartering and sentenced to death by Rudolf Seck as a warning to others. See: 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 39, p. 6347. Witness account by Alice Wolf, née Weil from 12.9.1963. Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 69, p. 11185. Witness account by Rosa Hausmann from 6.6.1967. Rosa Hausmann was Kaufmann’s fiancée and according to her, Henry was hanged on 13.6.1942.

¹⁵⁴ LVVA, P 70-5-37, pp. 108-109: Der BdS Ostland, Abtl. III. Tgb. Nr. 8/42, 6.3.1942. An den RKO, Gauleiter Lohse, and den HSSPF Ostland, SS-Ogruf. Jeckeln. Betr.: Aus den Tagesmeldungen der Einsatzkommandos, i. V. Stüber. Quoted in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 265.

was working. Nickel wrote down my name and released me. ... I was named to be the camp mechanic. Einstein ordered that I was built in the receiving room of Doctor Wiener a small workshop with a desk, clamp and a chair. The SS men also wanted me to fix watches. ... From Feldheim I got two big suitcases with optical lenses, glasses and special spectacles for examining glass. And so I also became an optician. I knew that in the barrack C 3, the Viennese watchmaker Holz was dying of hunger. At an opportune moment I asked Nickel to allow him to work with me. I couldn't handle by myself anymore. Nickel agreed, released Holz from construction work and named him my deputy. Holz was the one who introduced me to the secrets of the clock-making craft. Other tasks posed no problem for me, because I had worked for ten years in the largest Prague mechanical factory. Unfortunately, we could not work together with this watch-making master for long. One day Holz fell ill and soon after he died. I worked alone again.¹⁵⁵

The high mortality rate and executions in the camp allowed, with time, for a certain degree of "career advancement" and so later Urbach and Benedikt, for example, switched from hard outside labor to tasks performed under the cover of a roof. Ota Urbach in April 1942 started to work in *Stubendienst*, the cleaning of the barracks and Benedikt became an assistant saddler in one of the smaller Salaspils workshops.¹⁵⁶ However, only a relatively minor number of Jews were involved in handicraft production. Larger workshops, like tailoring and cobblers, started to develop only later, in the period when remaining Jews already started to be taken to the Riga ghetto and were being replaced in Salaspils with political prisoners.

The main function of the Jewish inmates of Salaspils was the construction of the camp itself and clearing the forest to make room for at least forty barracks. The building

¹⁵⁵ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁵⁶ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

works were supervised by *Baukontor* Janis Irbe who had a long-term agreement with the Security Police to provide needed materials and building expertise.¹⁵⁷

There were relatively few experienced professionals among the Jews, even though many were improvising, claiming to be artisans they truly were not, but in distress they taught themselves quickly. Glaziers or electricians had the advantage that they could at times play hooky from work and save their energy. Even though the unfinished barracks were very cold, at least they did not have to wade through the snow that was often as high as half a meter and carry heavy loads. They could also have contact with civilian population, as there were also free Latvian experts and laborers assisting the building of the camp and working at the sawmill. They only had to be careful as not to cross the path of one of the SS men or, in particular, Dr. Rudolf Lange on one of his frequent forays into the camp.

The men working on felling trees in the forest, at the sawmill, carrying of logs and planks for the construction of the barracks and mainly during chopping out of timber stuck in the ice of the frozen Daugava river or carrying of water for the camp kitchen had it the worst. Ludwig Shonberg was a member of the *Kommando* bringing logs from the river. “The logs for sawing were usually shipped during summertime down river and we had to cut them out of the river ice and drag them out to the saw mill and whoever fell, and quite a few did slip off the ice and whoever fell into the water was dead within seconds because the water was just freezing. He fell and came up again just like a piece of ice. ... There was no sympathy from our guards. And as far as I am concerned, their cruelty was far worse than of the Germans. The Germans could have learned from them with regards to cruelty. Which many of them did.”¹⁵⁸

Herbert Ungar survived the ordeal: “Then I saw what a man in such a bad condition can still withstand. One of the SS wantonly pushed me, like many others, into Dūna.

¹⁵⁷ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 25, p. 3937. Account by Gerhard Maywald from 3.5.1962.

¹⁵⁸ Interview of the author with Ludwig Shonberg.

Completely soaked in the freezing water I had to still work for many hours before I could return with my *Kommando* to the barrack. And even then I had nothing dry that I could put on. I didn't get no cold, no pneumonia, nothing.”¹⁵⁹

The machines at the sawmill were mostly manned by Latvian convicts, some of whom were criminal and some political prisoners. While also not free and under guard, their situation was incomparably better than that of the Jews, since they were not beaten (at least in front of the Jewish inmates), were better fed and much better clothed. They behaved differently towards the Jews – at times they traded with them, sometimes they behaved reasonably well to the Jews, but occasionally they beat one of the exhausted Jews mercilessly: “All of them were very whimsical, they knew how to be kind and friendly and in the next moment beat someone furiously to death. Change of mood was as easy with them as with children. They even had the appearance of fat round children.” However, the Czech prisoners largely had their respect: “We Czechs soon had a special position. Already leaving the camp Salaspils we lined up all together and marched at the front. The first sight of Salaspils made an indelible impression on us and we thus did not want to drag our feet and have our heads and shoulders drooping. We marched with even step, sang Czech songs and that the convicts on Dūna [Daugava, Dvina] river liked. Czechoslovaki – Czechoslovaki – that's how they called us and hardly touched us.”¹⁶⁰

Despite the best intentions of the prisoners, the hard labor soon took its toll and the resolution to keep heads high could not be kept for long. Herbert Ungar himself started noticing his quickly deteriorating state, both that of the body and of mind: “I started to decline physically. ... I lost faith I would survive. I was so maudlin, sentimental that at any

¹⁵⁹ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

emotional moment, be it a recollection of home, death of a friend, whether good or bad piece of news from the theater of war, I immediately had tears in my eyes.”¹⁶¹

Dozens of people succumbed to exhaustion. First the hunger caused the inmates to feel a thud in the head and hear humming in the ears, then it became difficult to stand up straight and all movement required more and more effort, each individual step becoming a self-contained objective, until the prisoner finally gave out to fatigue and remained lying in the snow. Young men could, to a degree, get used to the hard work and adapt to the terrible conditions but middle aged and older intellectuals, totally unused to physical strain and hardship, were literally dropping like flies, many lasting a few days only. Not more than a handful of them got out of Salaspils alive.

“At that time there were plenty of guys who froze to death. For example when you went from the camp to the sawmill, that could be I guess about two or two and a half kilometers, I saw one guy in front of me who pulled out his hand out of a glove, started to do something with it and I saw that he could not put it back into the glove because the hand was completely frozen. Through and through, it was like glass. So we took him and put snow on his hand but of course he lost all the fingers. And then he dropped.”¹⁶² Dr. Ungar described the feeling of powerlessness, witnessing such deaths: “When I for example think of the poor Lustig from Prague, who because of a scratched frozen finger was dying three week in that damp, dark bunk, how that frozen finger - which could not be amputated because of a lack of instruments and doctors – gradually poisoned the whole body. The poor soul, whom I knew as a good-hearted man, was lying impotently in dirt, robbed and betrayed by his surroundings – his neighbor sold his fur hat by Düna river [Daugava, Dvina] right in front of my eyes and I could not even jump at his throat. Only fate avenged him for this theft in death too, but only after many months. When I think of this, it still hurts me.”

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁶² Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

¹⁶³ Benedikt remembered: “The next stage of frostbite is gangrene. Gangrene leads to blood poisoning and it takes about a week to kill you. Imagine a situation where two thirds of the people in the barrack have got gangrene, in other words, their live bodies are decomposing. This is something that used to give me nightmares for thirty years after the liberation. That atmosphere of decay and despair.” ¹⁶⁴

The men were fighting frostbite any way they could: “We did the so-called ‘stove’ and that meant that twenty or twenty five of us were holding onto each other in a circle and in the middle there was a fire and that’s how we were warming ourselves. And since we always most suffered from the terrible cold to our feet, we all put our shoes forward towards the fire. Then I still had these high ‘Canada’ boots from Javůrek in Prague and those saved my life because they had a thick sole and then, if I put newspaper paper in them, they kept warm. Unfortunately, after two months the shoes were gone. As I always put them towards the fire, the soles started to peel, they were burned through. And I remember that once I could no longer wear these boots, there were wooden clogs, like the Dutch ones and we wrapped our feet in rags – first rags, then paper, then rags again and that we put into the clogs and in that we went on the *Kommando*.” ¹⁶⁵

In Salaspils, people were mostly dying of frostbite, hunger, dysentery, but also often through a bullet or rope. Daily - or more appropriately said - nightly “natural” mortality in Salaspils was staggering. Every day the prisoners dragged out of the barrack the emaciated bodies of several of their fellow sufferers. The corpses were laid out next to each other and the second layer was then put cross-wise. When the stack of carcasses reached the height of about a meter or more, a lorry came, the corpses were thrown onto the body of the truck and

¹⁶³ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 59.

¹⁶⁴ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

¹⁶⁵ Interview of the author with Ota Urbach.

taken to a mass grave.¹⁶⁶ Lowest on the imaginary scale of desirability of work was the burial detail. The men from that *Kommando* had to be present at the majority of executions and their mission was to “clean up” the camp of the stiff torsos of those who died during the night or of the cooling, blood still oozing bodies of the executed. About thirty men, mostly from the Moravian city of Brno, who came to Salaspils with the second Theresienstadt transport, were put in this *Kommando* in January 1942. The life expectancy of men who had to carry out this gloomy and extremely hard work was slight. They were constantly exposed to the whims of the weather, they never had a chance to change their clothing soaked and soiled with the last excretions of human bodies and were dependent only on the less than meager camp rations as they had little opportunity to come into contact with the Latvian civilians.

In the deeply frozen soil it was almost impossible to dig graves. The burial squad that was excavating the first large mass grave unknowingly chose the same spot where a common grave of Soviet POWs was located, unearthing bodies of which the majority had a bullet hole through the nape of the neck. In the beginning all the dead bodies had to be temporarily stored on a field next to the camp. Whenever someone approached them, flocks of clamoring crows lifted off the pile. Herbert Ungar recalled: “When I think of the first classmate of mine whom I had to carry to the cemetery, without a coffin, without a blanket, without a sheet – there was nothing of the sort. In the first days of our stay in Salaspils one SS man noticed that we covered a dead body with a sheet – this was immediately forbidden, since it was a waste of matériel. We carried him as he was and did not place him into a grave but simply laid him on a pile of other hundreds of victims of Salaspils who were in the winter months laid to rest, waiting for the spring when explosives made huge holes. This schoolmate showed me how fast and easy dying in Salaspils is. Just half an hour before we

¹⁶⁶ Interview of the author with Ota Urbach. Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 58.

were talking together about Brno and the happy old times and now I was carrying him away – outside.”¹⁶⁷

In the end, the ditches for the mass graves had to be made with the help of explosives. A member of the burial detail recalled that at the end of January 1942, “an SS NCO approached us and told us to dig thirty-six holes below the frostline, because he would blast a hole in the ground for a mass grave. He showed us where to dig the holes and told us in case we had any questions that we had to stand at attention and address him as ‘Herr Oberscharfuehrer Dunker’ (Staff Sergeant). His accent was not unlike that of a person from the Ruhr district. Digging the holes was a slow process and Dunker hit some people with a spade to make them work harder. Two days later the holes were ready and we had to place ten bags of explosives in six hole at one time. He then gave us six fuses of different lengths and told us to place the fuses into the explosive charges. The longest fuse went into the hole which was to be blasted first and each of the shorter fuses into the other holes. If you made a mistake, you would not know about it. Dunker then gave us a lighter to light the fuses and then walked away. We lit the fuses and had to run, which was difficult because of the snow. Also the cold and the hunger made it difficult to breathe. To the pleasure of the NCO, some people were hit by flying dirt and received minor injuries. He (Dunker) said: ‘Here you can see lazy Jews. They don’t even run when their life is at stake.’”¹⁶⁸

As the ground started to thaw, new graves were dug. Later the *Kommando* led by Kurt Winter was also ordered to dig up the bodies of Russian POWs from various pits into one mass grave.¹⁶⁹ Kurt’s brother Alfred described the work of the burial detail: “At the end of March 1942, the order came to place all the bodies in the mass grave. In charge of

¹⁶⁷ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 59.

¹⁶⁸ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, pp. 108, 109.

¹⁶⁹ Hilde Sherman, *Zwischen Tag und Dunkel. Mädchenjahre im Ghetto* (Frankfurt am Main: Mönchengladbach, 1989), p. 57. The foreman of the burial detail in Salaspils Kurt Winter was Hilde Sherman’s first husband.

this work commando was Kurt Winter from the transport Duesseldorf. His main job was to count all bodies that were put in the mass grave and report to Teckemeier. We had two rows of bodies in it and then throw a layer of quicklime on top. The whole process was repeated until there were ten layers of bodies. In three days we placed 850 bodies into the mass grave. Teckemeier watched us and made sure that everything was done according to his orders. We were not allowed to say a prayer for the dead. Several days later, we were ordered to dig up the bodies buried in single graves and place them into the mass grave. These people were buried without a casket between early December 1941 until the middle of January 1942. A dozen inmates were selected for this job with the same work commando leader. It was a gruesome task and the work was terrible as the warm weather had set in. The snow was melting and the graves filled with water as we dug. Some of the bodies were partially decomposed and the smell was beyond description. We were watched by Latvian SS guards so to flatten the grave and say the body was removed was impossible. We had wounds on our hands due to frostbite we had received earlier and they had not healed. We attempted to protect ourselves from infection because no rubber gloves were issued to us. Unfortunately, our best efforts to protect ourselves failed. The leader of the work commando became infected with tetanus and died on April 27, 1942. He was just one more body for the mass grave. Shortly thereafter, the burial detail was disbanded.”¹⁷⁰ Other, smaller work details were also extremely important for the camp, for example the so-called *Scheisskommando* (shit commando) that kept the latrines in some sort of order, or the water carriers who supplied the camp kitchen.

The food, if it could be called that at all, was handed out after the morning and evening roll calls (in the case of the latter, ‘afternoon’ would be more appropriate, as the sunset came very early). As extant photographs from the camp show, in the early stages of

¹⁷⁰ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 118.

the camp a field kitchen was used to cook the meals or at least to distribute them. The rations were given out outside: “Food was received in this way: we lined up in a long queue until we came to the cauldron, were given a ladle of the slop and that we ate in the cold. It made no sense to go to the barrack, because as I had already said, when one was in the aisle, dirt from the boots was falling into the bowls of others and when climbing into the berth, one spilled a bit of the meager food and had to eat lying down on one’s stomach, in dampness and darkness.” ¹⁷¹

In the morning the prisoners received “coffee”, which was a mildly sweetened brown drink, resembling warm water in density. The evening ration consisted of a thin slice of low-quality bread weighing approximately between a 100 and 200 grams and about a liter of mostly cabbage or potato soup (both however only made of rotten cabbage or of unwashed, frozen or spoiled potatoes or potato peels). ¹⁷² Sometimes the soup was also made of fish heads and other scrapings from a can factory. There was a dire scarcity of water. Josef Gärtner described how, when this “soup” was poured into his bowl during his first day in the camp, he could not bring himself to eat it: “Already looking at this grey liquid was making us sick. With my best will I could not swallow a spoonful. As I was investigating this mush, a boy of about nineteen from the first German transport approached me, looked at me in a supplicant way and said: ‘you can’t eat it? You will have to get used to it, otherwise you will die of hunger. But if you really can’t, give it to me, I am terribly hungry’. I poured the whole content of my bowl into the boy’s kettle and washed my bowl with snow. My stomach was squeezed by hunger and it was freezing more and more. ... For dinner we again got black coffee and nothing more. One thing was clear – that we were destined to die of hunger here.

¹⁷¹ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 49.

¹⁷² Interview of the author with Ota Urbach. Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt. Interview of the author with Ludwig Shonberg. See for example: 141 Js534/60 der Staw. Hamburg., Bd. 2, pp. 250-252. Witness account by Helmut Fürst from 23.1.1950. According to him the worst time in Salaspils was between Christmas and the New Year 1941/42, when because of high snow it was impossible to bring supplies. During that time the prisoners got only watery soup, no bread. Later the inmates got about 300 or 400 grams of bread a day.

We went to Einstein to complain, but he rudely scolded us.”¹⁷³ Dr. Herbert Ungar understood this from the very beginning: “There were many who did not touch it [the food] the first few days. I ate from the very beginning. I wanted to make it through and I knew that I cannot give up even a drop of nourishment.”¹⁷⁴ Necessity taught all the prisoners not to give up anything even remotely edible. The tin cups or bowls the prisoners had were usually carried fastened onto the men’s belts, together with spoons. There was nowhere to wash them, “only some were allowed to take a little bit of water from a barrel which stood next to the kitchen barrack but even that was guarded and only friends and acquaintances were permitted to take some water.”¹⁷⁵

In Salaspils, a piece of bread made the difference between life and death. Some ate their slice immediately, some kept it overnight and consumed it in small pieces. Theft among the inmates occurred relatively infrequently, but when the culprit was caught, whether red-handed or later, he could not expect any sympathy or mercy. The camp justice was pitiless and in Salaspils, there was only one punishment. Ota Urbach never forgot how one German Jew, almost driven mad by hunger, stole a ration from one of the Czech Jews, Kohn.¹⁷⁶ “And he simply started to scream that someone stole his bread and the one who stole it did not eat it, so he had two breads. So they beat him to death, right then and there.” Ludwig Shonberg could recall similar incidents.¹⁷⁷

Whoever did not possess the possibility, ability and daring to undertake some “illegal” activity, whoever was unable to obtain even a minimal amount of food over the ration could not keep himself alive for more than several weeks. “*Organizing*” - as stealing, exchanging and generally getting extra food was called in the prisoners’ slang – was an

¹⁷³ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 46.

¹⁷⁴ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 49.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Kohn was allegedly a former editor of the Communist daily *Rudé právo*.

¹⁷⁷ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. Interview of the author with Ludwig Shonberg.

extremely risky activity but the alternative was even worse and so it was necessary to undergo this danger.

In the daily life and death roulette, victories were scarce and losses a rule. Whoever was found with any amount of edibles that did not originate from the rations was executed almost without exception. Some men were handy, clever and crafty at stealing or bartering right in front of the Germans' or Latvian guards' noses (or even with them) but those formed a minority.

Ota Urbach and Oskar Benedikt described the death of one of the many who lost in this life-extension lottery. Benedikt related the incident in the following words: "We were told that a train was brought to a railway siding about two or three kilometers from Salaspils campsite, which we were to drag through the snow into the camp. ... When we were taking out that luggage from the railway carriages, we tried to drop it in such a way that the luggage burst open and that we could find something to eat in the luggage. And while I was there picking up one of the suitcases, and while I had salami hanging in one trouser leg and a packet of biscuits in the other trouser leg, out of the woods stepped Dr. Lange and approached us unloading the train. The man next to me, who was a Viennese Jew, I do remember, was made to drop his trousers and he obviously also had something in his pants, was made to kneel down and Lange put his revolver to his neck and executed him half a meter from me, whereupon I took my suitcase and turned round and walked away with the group of the other prisoners that were walking back into the camp. On the way from the railway siding, dragging that suitcase I was following two German Jews, each of them dragging a suitcase through the snow and arguing, obviously both of them lawyers, at which stage this luggage seized to be the property of the victims and at which stage, legally speaking, the luggage became the property of the German state." ¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

An identical or a very similar case was described also by Alfred Winter, Helmut Sander and Alex Salm. Salm in his testimony wrote: “We starving people were ordered to unload a transport of luggage (6 train cars) with backpacks and suitcases of Viennese Jews who were not in the camp. The luggage contained mainly foodstuffs and we had to drag it to the camp. We did what was in such a situation most natural: we ate this food (bread, etc.). Suddenly Dr. Lange came, together with the Lagerältester Einstein and out of the train car pulled one of us, who indiscreetly hid a piece of bread in a bag. After he ordered him to empty the bag, he shot our friend. Then he went to the next car and reached out for another friend, Aaronsohn from Hamburg. He shot him after he first had the Lagerältester announce the following: ‘Einstein, announce that now the second one will be shot!’” His third victim was Heinz Freund, born in this region and deported from Rheydt. His death also had to be first announced by Einstein. Unlike the death of the first comrade, these last two shooting I saw myself.”¹⁷⁹

An equally dangerous way of obtaining something to eat was barter. When working on outside commandos, the prisoners exchanged gold and valuables with Latvian civilians, and at times even with some members of the Latvian guard detail. This trade required good personal connections to the men who were in the camp warehouse in charge of sorting the vast amount of things brought in the luggage of the deported and these articles could be – as long as one was not caught and shot in the process of taking them and smuggling them out – swapped for food. That task was already taken up by reliable men from among friends in the

¹⁷⁹ WL, P. III. h. No. 1006/1 EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of Alex Salm from 18.5.1949. Alfred Winter wrote: “Suddenly we heard some shots and when we looked out of the boxcar, we saw Lange and Maiwald with pistol in hand and three bodies in the snow. I do not know who did the shooting. It may have been Lange by himself since we had seen him kill quite often. One of the dead was a Heinz Freund from Wegberg near the Dutch border.” Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 110. Max Bunzl from Prague described the death of three men but noted, that beside Lange there was also Teckemeier present. He does not mention Maywald, only the “escort” of the first two. WL, P. III. h. No. 1023 EW 8 8685-8691. Witness account of Max Bunzl from 31.8.1948. Helmut Sander described that four people were shot, even though it is not clear whether he talks only about one incident. P. III. h. No. 1006/e EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of Helmut Sander from 15.7.1949.

outside work details. They had to be trusted that if apprehended by an SS man, they would not talk and betray their friends. The members of the outside labor units then had to hand over part of the obtained food to their suppliers, sometimes with orders for particularly sought after goods. Who did not have friends in the *Kleiderkammer* had a much decreased chance of survival. Josef Gärtner commented: “I used to go to Feldheim every day in order to get some piece of clothing to sell or barter as I myself had nothing left. And Paul never left me empty-handed. Without his help I would not have left that hell alive.”¹⁸⁰

The Latvians from nearby hamlets and villages were happy to engage in these business dealings. The prices were greatly favorable. For half a loaf of bread one could easily obtain a golden ring or a watch. There was not much haggling: the inmates knew that if they wanted to buy an extra day of life, they had to accept even offensively low counter-value. The unwritten rules of this barter were more or less kept but sometimes some of the farmers succumbed to the seduction of their own avidity. The prisoner bore the greater degree of risk and the possibility of appeal was nonexistent. In extreme cases the villagers simply got rid of the Jew. For example, one of the Czech Jews lost his life this way, when he stealthily left the sawmill where he was working and attempted to trade a pair of shoes in the nearby house. The Latvian kept the boots and denounced the inmate to a guard for “trying to escape”. The Jew was publicly hanged.¹⁸¹

Bartering however took place even with the Latvian guards, as the they did not have access to the warehouse and could not obtain the things it contained directly. When the prisoners found someone among the guards who “could be talked to”, his wishes had to be granted quickly, sometimes even by fooling the largely uneducated Latvians: “When we

¹⁸⁰ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 54.

¹⁸¹ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. It is very close to impossible to establish how many prisoners lost their lives because of their attempts to obtain extra food, as well as their names. Klein and Angrick attempted to make at least an extremely partial listing: Luis Roseboom (Berlin), Günther Neuwald (Prag), Günther Falk (Hannover), Heinz Samuel (Hannover), Arno Zierer (Hannover), Berger (Dortmund), Kaumann (Köln), Löwenstein (Hannover), Margulies (Wien). See: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 263.

could see that some Latvian guard was willing to exchange something, we tried our best. Clothing they were not interested in, but money, I mean golden coins, or rings, things like that, yes... And we could get a piece of bread. One of them asked one day if we could get him some perfume or a cologne. So we searched around and I managed to find a little empty bottle from 4711 [cologne] into which we put water and someone had a little bit of cologne, so we poured it on top and around the bottleneck and he smelled it and took it and we got a half a loaf of bread.”¹⁸² Needless to say, the Latvian guards too were unpredictable and many of similar attempts at exchange with them ended up in the death of the Jews involved when the “deal” did not work out or the Latvian guard felt cheated or was not satisfied with the value of the goods obtained and chose to report the prisoners.

Sometimes during work groups of Jewish prisoners from Salaspils sometimes during work met with labor details made up of those Soviet POWs who were still alive in the nearby camp. They resembled shadows dressed in ragged uniforms with painted white stripes and huge letters SU on the back. They showed the Jewish prisoners: “... something which eventually became quite important to us. Under the snow, there were berries growing which you could find and which gave you not only nourishment but also vitamin C. The berries were called in Latvian dzerveny. Dzerveny is a red berry that grows only to about five six centimeters off the ground and was covered up with snow. That was very valuable information that we got. The Russian POWs in that camp, as a matter of fact, were dying even faster than we were.”¹⁸³ Despite their terrible situation, some Russian POWs managed to imbue their Jewish colleagues with a bit of optimism, like in the case of Josef Gärtner: “I sidled up to them and in half-Russian, half-Czech asked them how it was going with the

¹⁸² Interview of the author with Ota Urbach.

¹⁸³ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt. Alfred Winter also remembered the terrible state of these POWs: “A group of people had to carry lumber from the sawmill into the camp and passed close to the Russian POW camp and every day they saw POWs throwing bodies of their deceased comrades onto trucks. It was a sickening sight, because the living looked like moving skeletons.” Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 106.

war. The approached one smiled widely and said: Budet charascho [It will be good.]. That was not much, but we were grateful even for that. Two words and so much hope.”¹⁸⁴

Alongside “natural” deaths from hunger, frost and diseases, executions in Salaspils were also the order of the day – whether they were almost theatrically staged, on the scaffold in front of the lined up prisoners or carried out simply, purposefully and quickly, often without witnesses, mostly by a bullet in the nape of the neck. SS-Unterscharführer Robert Nickel was appointed as the camp commander. When the first Czech Jews arrived to the camp in mid-January, Nickel was however on vacation and the commander of nearby Jungfernhof SS-Unterscharführer Rudolf Seck temporarily took his place. Seck constantly beat the prisoners and liked to order public beatings, mostly twenty five lashes with a rod. The condemned man had to count them himself, in a loud and clear manner and the beating was administered to their friends by selected individuals from among the prisoners. Seck was also always ready to use his own strength. Josef Gärtner was one of those who felt his club on the body: “Whoever could not keep up with the fast work tempo was helped by SS men’s batons. Once I stopped only for a second to rub my in the cold numb hands when I felt a strong hit across my back and another one over the shoulder. Seck was shouting behind my back, start moving you pig, or I’ll shoot you. There were black and red circles spinning in front of my eyes, but I clenched my teeth and bent down for a new plank so I could carry it on the hurting shoulder farther to the construction site. I could not sleep for several nights because of the pain.”¹⁸⁵ Despite this abuse, Seck’s regime was considered more “gentle”, at least if the number of executions is taken into consideration, than the rule of Robert Nickel and later also his deputy Otto Teckemeier. But Rudolf Seck was a murderer too. For example on January 16, 1942 he personally shot the ill prisoner Andreas Mendel from Düsseldorf. The gravely sick Mendel managed to walk out of the barrack only

¹⁸⁴ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 49.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

thanks to the help of his son Kurt and other friends. Supported by two men, the from dysentery weak Mendel was dragged to the roll call when stopped by Seck, who told him: “You are not going to go to your wife anymore.” Andreas Mendel had to lie down and Seck shot him, right in front of his son.¹⁸⁶ Josef Gärtner mentioned other cases, when Seck “only” ordered the killings: “One night suddenly the alarm sounded. Whistling, curses, swearing. Seck was whistling and Einstein shouted: Everybody out of the barracks. Everybody out of the barracks. It turned out that two prisoners disappeared. An order was given to carry out checks. Seck called two other prisoners and ordered that the SS shoot them as a warning. What’s more, we were not given any food for twenty four hours.”¹⁸⁷

The camp commander Nickel and mainly his deputy Teckemeier terrorized the prisoners even more than Seck, but most feared were the visits in the camp of Dr. Rudolf Lange from the Riga SD headquarters. For this undoubtedly intelligent man shooting a Jew was a kind of sport and the Czech inmates used to say, with quite a bit of black humor, that he comes to Salaspils as to a Konopiště pheasantry, to practice shooting on a live target.¹⁸⁸

“We were very scared of Lange, because each of us knew how brutal he was. He used to come to Salaspils almost always only on Saturdays. About 500 meters from the camp there was a railway crossing. Whenever Lange was on his way, he honked there. We all knew his signal and tried to hid in the most remote corners of the camp. We all knew that whenever Lange comes, he again feels the need to shoot one or more Jews. I myself carried water in Salaspils for the prisoners’ kitchen, from where we could oversee almost the whole camp. The kitchen was between Block 1 and 2. One day we walked out of the kitchen so we would, like every evening, after we got our bread, bring in water for the morning coffee. To

¹⁸⁶ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 4., p. 41. Witness account by Kurt Mendel from 19.7..1949. 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 1., p. 369. Witness account by Jakob Dahl from 27.3.1950.

¹⁸⁷ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 49.

¹⁸⁸ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. Konopište is a famous castle in Bohemia where tens of thousands of hunting trophies are on display.

our great surprise we saw Lange strolling in front of Block 1, out of which a Jew suddenly walked out. When Lange noticed him, he called him. The Jew had a bowl in his hand on which there was a piece of meat (200-300 grams). Lange asked: ‘What do you have on that plate?’ ‘A piece of meat, Mr. Sturmbannführer.’ Lange further asked: ‘Where do you have the meat from?’ The Jew answered: ‘It was given to me by one Latvian, Mr. Sturmbannführer.’ Lange answered: ‘Do you also know that a Latvian never gives anything to a Jew?’ The Jew answered: ‘Certainly, Mr. Sturmbannführer, but I did get it.’ Lange asked him: ‘What do you want with it?’ The Jew answered: ‘Cook it, Mr. Sturmbannführer’. Lange said: ‘Well, if you got the meat and want to cook it, go ahead.’ When the Jew turned around and was walking away, Lange pulled out a handgun out of his holster and shot him dead in cold blood. Lange lit a cigarette and walked away towards the Kommandatur and soon disappeared. The whole camp sighed a sigh of relief when this bloodthirsty man left again.”¹⁸⁹

A similar incident was witnessed by Wolf Hirsh, who in January 1942 labored as a worker in the camp smithy. His about eighteen year old colleague was just roasting a piece of fat in the furnace when Lange suddenly showed up there. Hirsch was at that moment on the roof, where he was affixing a pipe to the chimney of the furnace and could thus involuntarily observe the whole cruel spectacle. The youth was taken out of the smithy and had to kneel down, then a shot in the scruff of the neck followed and the lifeless body slumped into the snow that quickly assumed the color of blood.¹⁹⁰

Countless numbers of prisoners were shot because they wanted to warm up a little or were caught with “illegal” food. Lange also had a habit on making “witty” remarks during his murderous sprees. One man from a transport from the south of Germany, Württemberg, was shot by Lange with the words: “Come, I will take you somewhere where it’s even

¹⁸⁹ WL, P. III. h. No. 1006/e EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of Helmut Sander from 15.7.1949.

¹⁹⁰ WL, P. III. h. No. 1006/f EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of Wolf Hirsch from 14.7.1949.

warmer.” – just because the man was warming up his numb hands over a fire during the construction of the barracks.¹⁹¹ On another occasion Lange ordered the head of a commando to point to the laziest Jews. When he did so, Lange shot him, saying: “Even the best Jews need to be exterminated.”¹⁹²

The shot in the nape of the neck was Lange’s specialty, even though often he just injured the condemned man and left him to die in agony.¹⁹³ The “mercy bullet” was then sometimes fired by Nickel. When Lange was shooting Jews, it was actually the only time he looked straight at them. Otherwise whenever speaking to them he was habitually turning his head a bit to the side.

Max Bunzl from Prague remembered another from the dozens of executions: “Once Lange came to the camp and the camp policeman Besen ran towards him and reported: ‘Sir, I have a *Strafregister* here’ and brought a youngster. Lange uttered: ‘You know what to expect.’ The boy replied simply: ‘I ask for mercy.’” Lange disliked pleas, they spoiled his fun. He only told the boy: “take off your coat” and ordered Besen: “To the *Kleiderkammer*”. The prisoner had to kneel down and Lange shot him in the head. The bullet passed through the eye. Besen rang after Lange, shouting: “He is still not dead.” In the meantime, Nickel approached, pulled out his pistol and with three bullets finished the boy’s suffering.¹⁹⁴

A comprehensive listing of all Lange’s murders is impossible to compose. There were dozens of nameless victims and most witnesses of these killings did not survive the war themselves. Egon Klein from Prague himself saw him shooting six Jews, Ota Urbach could observe – from the window of a barrack where he was working in *Stubendienst* duty – the death of several others. Vilém Schwarz, another Czech Jew, in mid February 1942

¹⁹¹ WL, P. III. h. No. 1006/d EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of Walter Baruch from 5.4.1949.

¹⁹² WL, P. III. h. No. 1006/b EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of Elias Spielmann from 6.5.1949.

¹⁹³ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 48. “Lange never visited Salaspils without shooting somebody. He shot the concerned on his knees without putting in the effort to aim right. Nobody was allowed to provide any help to the wounded, nor a medic, nor a doctor. He had to bleed to death in the freezing winter, had to peg out like shot game.”

¹⁹⁴ WL, P. III. h. No. 1023 EW 8 8685-8691. Witness account of Max Bunzl from 31.8.1948.

barely escaped doom himself. He saw how Lange shot three Jews in front of him, but in his case, Lange chose to just hit him on the ear with a fist.¹⁹⁵ From the Czech prisoners, for example Adolf Pollak or [Salomon] Goldberger from Prague were thus senselessly shot by Lange.¹⁹⁶

The Latvian Jew Ijuscha Gleser worked in the Riga ghetto, on a Latvian Jewish commando which was from time to time sent on a work mission to Salaspils. During one of these visits he witnessed how Lange personally shot about eleven or twelve Jews who were already too weak to continue working. Since the Jewish men from Gleser's commando were dressed in civilian clothing unmarked with Jewish stars, Lange assumed they were free Latvian artisans and even conversed with them: "He told us that 'those dirty Jews are a damnable element in the healthy German nation and as such have to be destroyed.'" ¹⁹⁷ The fact that Lange did not attempt to hide his murders of Jews in front of Latvians in any way is also confirmed by the account of one Latvian worker, Fricis Wildgangs (who himself later became, in 1943, a prisoner of Salaspils): "I worked as a free worker in the building of the central *Kommandatur* of the Gestapo in Riga on Reimerstrasse 1 ... In the summer of 1942 I came to Salaspils as a laborer with a truck loaded up with wooden planks. We stopped by the German *Kommandatur* to ask where we should offload them. From the distance of about twenty meters I could see how Lange walked out of the building, approached two Jewish prisoners and started to yell at them. Shortly afterwards the Jews had to turn around. Lange pulled out his pistol and shot them with a shot in the neck (Genickschuss). After that he stepped into his car and left. The executed remained lying on the ground and we left to offload the planks." ¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ WL, P. III. i. No. 1028/a-c EW 13 15922-15932. Witness account of Vilém Schwartz from 26.12.1948.

¹⁹⁶ WL, P. III. h. No. 1006/c EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of V. Jánský from 31.8.1948.; WL, P. III. H. No. 1023 EW 8 8685-8691. Witness account of Max Bunzl from 31.8.1948.

¹⁹⁷ WL, P. III. H. No. 1006/K EW 8 8442-8464. Witness account of Iljuscha Gleser from 5.4.1950.

¹⁹⁸ WL, P. III. i. No. 1028/a. Witness account of Fricis Wildfangs from 1.2.1949.

Sometimes groups of prisoners from the ghetto were brought into Salaspils to be killed. Those were shot by an execution squad composed of Latvian guardsmen. Oskar Benedikt and Max Bunzl described one of such cases almost identically: “In May 1942 Lange brought 12 men from the ghetto on a lorry. All had to jump down from it upon Lange’s order, strip off their clothing, including shoes and kneel down. 12 men of the Latvian commando adopted a firing position and fired a salvo. One of the prisoners was not hurt at all. Lange and Teckemeier pulled out their pistols and shot at the lying on the ground. Then came the Friedhofskommando and carried the bodies away for burial. As they did not die instantly, their heads were swollen and completely shredded, because they were shot with DumDum bullets.”¹⁹⁹ Herbert Ungar also probably referred to this incident, only he put the number of men at thirteen: “...they shot them. They simply wildly shot at them till they, on the ground, gravely injured, twitched in their own blood. I knew some of them well, they came from Prague, I traveled on the train with them, I spent a night in Riga in one room with them and as I read what I have written, I tell myself: How can one describe in words what something like this looks like.”²⁰⁰

It is sometimes impossible to distinguish whether witnesses refer to the same incident or separate repeated ones, however all accounts are consistent in describing the atmosphere of horror and senseless murder omnipresent in the camp. The Latvian Jew Joseph Berman was also one of the workers at the Gestapo headquarters on Reimerstrasse 1. In 1942 he was employed in the garage. He testified how he saw fifteen “Western” Jews, who were caught smuggling food into the ghetto, brought to one of the recently completed new garages and locked up there. To the great surprise of the Latvian Jews, one of them, a man called Heppy, had to join the condemned, probably for some trespass he committed:

¹⁹⁹ WL, P. III. h. No. 1023 EW 8 8685-8691. Witness account of Max Bunzl from 31.8.1948. The so-called DumDum bullets have a sawn off point, making them burst upon impact, causing maximum damage to the tissue.

²⁰⁰ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 57.

“Those sixteen people were held overnight at Reimerstrasse and then the whole Gestapo in Riga came to have a look how they were being taken to Salaspils on a truck, a Renault. I still remember its license plate, Pol. 91088. They were liquidated in Salaspils in front of the prisoners of the camp.”²⁰¹

The plain where roll calls were held contained a gallows, where the hanged bodies, as a warning to others, remained hanging there for three days as a rule. In cases when several people were sentenced to hang at the same time, the next in line always had to wait for the person in front of him to die. Only when the burial detail took the lifeless body down, the next one could put his head into the noose. The executions by hanging were prepared as a huge brutal spectacle, which had to be watched by all the inmates of the camp. Those who were caught avoiding the sight were executed as well.

For the SS this was entertainment: “Each such execution was a celebration for the SS. They came by cars from Riga and before the execution, when the sentenced one was standing on the scaffolding, they discussed the method of the execution, demonstrated grips, shortly, enjoyed themselves very much. They took photographs, filmed and we had to stand there and look on and woe to the one who dared to turn his eyes away from the gallows, the result was deadly. It is easy to write and easy to listen to, but one has to see it, stand there, feel the suffering, the disgust, the fear and the fury we felt.”²⁰²

Once three men were hung only so that friends of Dr. Lange who were inspecting the camp could take photographs of an execution. The prisoners had to wait with a noose on their necks until the officers got their cameras ready to capture the fleeting moment when life changes into death. Only when the laughing Nazis called out “go” was the stool under the feet of the prisoner kicked, the body stretched one last time in life, the spine snapped and

²⁰¹ WL. P. III. i. No. 1031 EW 13 15936-15938. Witness account of Joseph Berman from 16.2.1949.

²⁰² Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 57.

the shutter releases of the cameras clicked.²⁰³ The undernourished men were however sometimes so light that they were dying slowly and in pain, swinging and contorting on the rope. The men from the burial detail could give a first-hand confirmation of this, as they had to take down the bodies: “One day we noticed that the eyes of a hanged man were red and that the blood vessels in the eyes had burst. When we asked a doctor about this, he told us that the hanged person had been strangled on the gallows and that his neck had not been broken. The drop was not enough to break the neck of the victim.”²⁰⁴

A number former prisoners of Salaspils well recall the escape of Arnošt [Ernst] Ballon from Brno. Their descriptions of the affair are very similar and differ only in minor details. Since the escapee was never caught, another prisoner had to die for him. Max Bunzl described the incident in the following words: “Major Lange said that if Baloun [correctly Ballon] is not brought back within three days, ten men will be shot. After three days passed and Baloun was not found, Dr. Lange came to the camp and all had to assemble by the gallows. One prisoner was just being hanged and Lange asked who of the lined up prisoners is from Brno. From those who volunteered he picked ten and those had to kneel in front of the gallows. The first one then had to take off his pants and Lange ordered that he was given 25 lashes with a stick. Every hit was so strong that his behind was black and blue. We thought that with this punishment this whole affair would be over but Lange had the hung prisoner removed from the gallows, the beaten one had his hands tied behind the back and then they hanged him. Lange was directing this, shouting at the executioner, ‘noose to the ear’”.²⁰⁵

Alex Salm, Leon Freier, Herbert Ungar and Ota Urbach did not mention whether a body of a previously hanged man had to be taken off the gallows but described the

²⁰³ WL, P. III. h. No. 1023 EW 8 8685-8691. Witness account of Max Bunzl from 31.8.1948.

²⁰⁴ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 116.

²⁰⁵ WL, P. III. h. No. 1023 EW 8 8685-8691. Witness account of Max Bunzl from 31.8.1948.

execution of Ballon's replacement virtually identically. All also claimed that the ten men had to be, upon the commander's order, selected by another prisoner. Urbach narrated: "They told the *Blockältester* to choose ten people, that they would be shot or hung for Baloun's [Ballon's] escape. That was a terrible moment for that *Blockältester*, and for us all, because he could have just as picked me as he picked the one next to me. When he finally chose those ten people, the commander came up with an idea to ask where Baloun came from. And somehow they found out that from Brno. So they asked who of the ten was from Brno and one volunteered, unfortunately I no longer remember his name. So they let the nine go back and the one was given twenty five lashes and then they hung him, we all had to watch it."²⁰⁶ The name of the unfortunate man who paid with his life for Ballon's escape is unknown. Dr. Herbert Ungar unfortunately did not mention his surname, only wrote that he was slightly younger than himself, a doctor of law and that his father died in Salaspils just a few days prior to his son's execution.²⁰⁷

Escapes from Salaspils were extremely rare but there was a precedent for this kind of spectacle. On the November 30, 1942, two youngsters, the eighteen year old Erich Hanau and the sixteen year old Kurt Hirschowitz from Hannover ran from the camp. They were soon apprehended and on the January 2, 1942 executed in front of all the inmates of the camp, by a firing squad, in Lange's presence. It was then announced to the freezing and terrified prisoners that if other escapes were to follow, a hostages would be killed for each of the escapees.²⁰⁸ This might be the incident that Herbert Ungar referred to: "The first hanging that I was forced to watch took place soon after our arrival in Salaspils. One young

²⁰⁶ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. There might have been another prisoner who escaped with Ernst Ballon, probably Erich Kahn from Köln. Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 263. However, none of the Czech prisoners, who all remembered Ballon's escape very well, recalled that there would be another escapee.

²⁰⁷ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 58.

²⁰⁸ Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein discuss this escape in more detail, quoting a number of documents from various archives and testimonies from different war crimes trials. See: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 262.

man, driven by longing after his relatives, escaped from Salaspils through the deep snow of the Latvian countryside into the Riga ghetto. There he was apprehended at his parents'. Bloodily beaten, he was brought back to Salaspils and he was hanged in front of the lined up inmates. On a scaffolding a gallows were erected, a stool put up, an executioner was found – an old acquaintance – it was Wolf Besen, who was the first one to commit a theft from a friend in Theresienstadt. In Salaspils, this is no laughing matter, but rather stuff for tears, he became a police boss and for extra bread and cigarettes he also became a hangman. With hands tied behind his back, the condemned was brought. In the icy cold with a whistling northern wind, without clothes, without a vest, pullover, coat. He walked erect, did not say a word, did not cry, did not moan, he stood on the stool and had the noose put around his neck, then the little table was thrown away and he hung there – without a sound. I think very few war criminals went to their death the way the maltreated and despised Jews in Salaspils did. The next one I saw hanging was one handsome boy from Prague, Neuwirth.”²⁰⁹

From Czech prisoners, it is known that at least Josef Freund from Prague and Karel Gans were also hanged on Lange's orders on the occasion of his visits in the camp. Whenever Lange arrived, he was given a report what happened in the camp since his last visit and trespassed against the rules in some way. Lange had the man concerned brought back from work and all had to come back to assemble in front of the gallows and the execution was conducted immediately. During such executions, Lange or Nickel liked to hold a speech or at least was the “sentence” read out loud, probably to give it a semblance of twisted “legality”. This was usually done by Einstein, Kaufmann or one of the Jewish policemen. Lange was usually present at the carrying out of the sentence. The *Oberpolizist* of Salaspils Kaufmann himself recalled: “The camp inmates had to go a roll-call. I then had to read out the announcement. That mostly read: ‘On the order of the commander of the

²⁰⁹ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 54.

Security Police and the SD, Dr. Lange, the Jew X is sentenced to death for bartering.’ This is the exact wording. The hanging was carried out by the prisoner Besen with another prisoner. Besen was a wrestler by profession. Both were delegated for this role by the commander.”²¹⁰

Josef Gärtner remembered one of these addresses that followed the death of four condemned men: “After the execution of the punishment Einstein stepped forward. He read a speech composed by Nickel, which sounded approximately as follows: ‘The food in the camp improved and is *almost* equal to that received by the German soldier who has to daily fight and risk his life for the benefit of the *Vaterland*. Therefore, barter is not necessary and the lovers of indulgence will meet the same fate as the four. I thought in my mind, if it is true that the German soldier on the front does not have better food than we here, then war will be over soon.”²¹¹

The commander of the Salaspils camp Richard Nickel knew Rudolf Lange already from his service in Berlin, where he worked for him as a driver.²¹² Nickel, who based on the conclusions of post-war investigation disappeared at the end of the war in Berlin, was according to the memories of the prisoners a bit less cruel, or at least did not present his brutality with such glee as his deputy Otto Teckemeier or Rudolf Lange. More “lax”, he more often than not resorted to punishment by public flogging, rather than choosing to report the case to Riga. Of course, Nickel was still present at all the executions, he personally ordered a few and also often “finished off” the men that Lange only mortally injured, but was still considered more lenient than the other madmen of Salaspils.

²¹⁰ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 3, p. 338. Witness account by Siegfried Kaufmann from 3.3.1950. Nickel’s deputy Teckemeier in particular clearly thought important that all serious incidents in the camp were “properly” reported to Riga, from where then the execution order came.

²¹¹ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 59.

²¹² Wolfgang Scheffler and Diana Schulle, *Erinnerungsbuch*, p. 57.

Nonetheless, as Max Bunzl said, “no one knows how many people he killed because he murdered without witnesses.”²¹³

SS-Rottenführer Otto Teckemeier became Nickel’s deputy in the spring of 1942. Originally a street sweeper by profession, he joined the SS and NSDAP already in 1932. Teckemeier quickly became the scourge of Salaspils prisoners. Always armed with a thick stick, Teckemeier had a talent of suddenly appearing when least expected, throwing himself with unrestricted bestiality upon some unfortunate prisoner who committed a – real or imaginary – transgression against the camp rules. The speed, ferociousness and devastating deadly effectiveness of his attacks soon earned him the nickname “Stuka” after the famously frightening German dive bomber Junkers Ju-87.²¹⁴ Teckemeier himself later testified: “I admit to have hit Jews in Salaspils. Nickel noted to me that it was better to give people a few slaps behind the ears than to make a report, as only this way we would prevent loss of labor force. ... In how many cases I hit I cannot testify. Mostly I gave them a few slaps with my hand behind the ears, occasionally I hit them a few times with my walking stick across their lower back.”²¹⁵

Teckemeier constantly strolled through the camp, always on a lookout for new victims. To be caught by him often meant a death sentence – but his killing method of choice was not a bullet or public hanging, but beating to death. Egon Klein, who came to Latvia on the first Theresienstadt transport labeled “O”, escaped Teckemeier only with great luck: “I was sick, with a fever of 39 degrees Celsius but I still went to work because I knew that otherwise I would be, as sick, murdered. In the morning before reporting for work I was warming up a little bit in the sun, when suddenly Teckemeier swooped on me and beat me in such a way, that I remained lying on the ground, unconscious. I would have certainly

²¹³ WL, P. III. H. No. 1023 EW 8 8685-8691. Witness account of Max Bunzl from 31.8.1948.

²¹⁴ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 53.

²¹⁵ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hambrug, Bd. 3, pp. 214-219. Witness account by Otto Teckemeier from 16.12.1949.

been executed, because we in the mornings were not allowed to stay outside without reason, if the head of our group did not put me into another *Kolonne*, so Teckemeier couldn't find me.”²¹⁶ Alfred Winter wrote that Teckemeier's favorite slogan was: “Nobody is cold here.” It was because he used to ask prisoners if they were not cold and whenever one of them made the mistake of admitting the fact, Teckemeier ferociously descended on him, beating him with his indispensable stick and chasing him around for so long, until the unfortunate prisoner was drenched in sweat and dropped from exhaustion.²¹⁷ For example Heinz Rosenhain was in June 1942 beaten to such a degree that he literally could not stand up for two weeks and only by chance was not liquidated as “of work incapable”.²¹⁸ A number of prisoners were personally shot by Teckemeier, while some were handed over to be executed by the Latvians from the guard unit. Karel Dub from Prague was allegedly shot behind the camp by Teckemeier and the Latvian guards as well.²¹⁹ Despite his above mentioned statement, beating was really reserved only for “minor” misdemeanors - he was extremely conscientious about reporting more serious prisoners' “crimes” to the SD headquarters in Riga, which then issued the death sentences.

Dr. Herbert Ungar wrote about the continuous prisoners' effort not to be noticed by the SS and the guards: “One had to constantly be on guard as not to be noticeable, because conspicuousness meant death. ‘Conspicuousness, what an ugly word, how many northern German words were foreign to us. Conspicuousness meant to in some way arouse the attention of a supervisor or guard. Whether by clumsiness or slowness. I was grateful to the time when I [manually] worked in Prague. Thank god I learned to handle a shovel and spade, not to forget hands in pockets and always put on an air of being busy even when I did

²¹⁶ WL, P. III. i. No. 1028/b. Witness account of Egon Klein from 30.11.1948.

²¹⁷ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 113.

²¹⁸ WL, P. III. h. No. 1023/b. Witness account of Heinz Rosenhain from February 1948.

²¹⁹ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

nothing. When some SS leader came to Salaspils and someone brought attention to himself, he was lost.”²²⁰

The perimeter of the Salaspils camp was guarded by two units of the Latvian members of the Sicherheitsdienst, from the so-called Arajs commando, that were alternating on duty. In January 1943, when there were (with a handful of exceptions) only political prisoners in the camp, the tally came to 189 men. Later a unit called Madona, led by Alberts Vidušs, was stationed in the camp to guard its interior parts.²²¹

The extreme conditions of Salaspils, hunger, grime and death developed in the prisoners a degree of egotism needed for bare survival: “You are in such a state of health and of mind, you don’t care about anybody else, you only care for yourself, your own survival. And you don’t tell anybody what might happen or will happen or what you are going to do. Because nobody is interested in you and you are not interested in anybody else, under those circumstances only one thing, yourself, but nothing else. Its cruel, it is very hard to say, but it is the truth.”²²²

Time gained a completely different dimension. Only the present was important: You think of today and you hope to be there tomorrow. And nothing else matters. You don’t think what might happen next year. ... Under those atrocities, you are not a normal person, forget that, you are like an animal. You only think of today, of tomorrow and of survival, of nothing else. You don’t give a damn if it is your brother next to you, it is only you. And that’s the only thing, the only way you can survive. Because you can’t help anyone and nobody is going to help you. Nobody can help you.²²³

“Generally speaking, an extermination camp has the effect, and this is what Salaspils produced in me, of ceasing to behave as a consequence of a thinking process. You stop

²²⁰ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 48.

²²¹ Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, p. 193.

²²² Interview of the author with Ludwig Shonberg.

²²³ Ibid.

behaving in a human way. You teach yourself through circumstances to react to your environment intuitively the way a cornered animal reacts. ... It is a reduction to the urge for survival and unless you could produce this mentality successfully in yourself and unless you were lucky not to fall victim to one or the other of the diseases, there wasn't a chance. ... What you devoted yourself to was finding a spot in the sun where you could stand in the sun for a little while, without being observed. On that you concentrated while this opportunity was afforded you. ” ²²⁴ The little conversation the prisoners had in the beginning of their ordeal usually concerned their lives before the war: “During work we mostly spoke of the old times. We made no plans for the future. Future was not talked about. This was also the worst time, the period of unstoppable advance of the German armies.” ²²⁵

Under these circumstances, almost everyone became completely individualistic. Ota Urbach described the situation: “There it was important that no SS man caught you doing some act that was not allowed, because there was always the danger you would be shot, so everybody tried – to have everything swept up and clean in front of the bunk where he lived, or better, slept, so no SS man could find a pretext. ... There, everyone was responsible only for and to oneself. There were no *Kameradschaften* [friendships] or anything like that. Maybe only with Beda Winter, with whom we went through the whole Salaspils, we shared something or tried - when someone got some potato somewhere or something like that - to divide that. But I cannot recall any communes and such things, that they would exist at all.”

²²⁶

Oskar Benedikt also had to rely mostly on himself, but like Ota Urbach, he too had a buddy with whom he occasionally shared: “I only had a fairly close relationship to a person whom I knew from Brno and that was Petříček, Petr Müller. And we stuck together occasionally ... and I remember as if it was yesterday an occasion when we found, under the

²²⁴ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

²²⁵ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 51.

²²⁶ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

straw, in the barracks, on one of the shelves, some bread. Somebody must have been hoarding a slice or two of bread and when there wasn't anybody coming back to it in the evening, we took this bread which was green from mold and we put it into a tin and boiled it with snow, put snow and bread into a tin and boiled it and somewhere we got hold of a bit of salt, if I remember right and when this had boiled and all the green scum was on the surface of that brew, we scooped the mold away and we let the kasha cool down and ate it. That I remember doing with Petr. ²²⁷

Food was almost the exclusive topic of conversation among the prisoners. Only rarely was it otherwise. Alfred Winter related that, "On and off there was a little entertainment in the barracks. We had a cartoonist named Heinz Sternberg from the transport Duesseldorf in the barracks. From time to time he tried to entertain the fellow inmates. Also some accordion players were in the barracks who tried to give a concert. Most of the inmates made so much noise that he music was drowned out." ²²⁸ Other former prisoners of Salaspils however did not recall even these short moments of "entertainment": "Everybody was so exhausted and frozen that nobody had much desire for amusement. There was no culture there, no singing choirs or musical instruments as in Theresienstadt. Nothing of the sort." ²²⁹ There was a bit of humor, but that humor was black. One day, when the from frost numb men where lining up in the snow for a roll call, "Honza Wollner came and said: 'Guys, spring is here.' We were puzzled, looking at him, how did he come up with this. 'Cause it is only 36 degrees bellow zero.' And it was." The temperature was known to the prisoners, as there was a thermometer in front of the *Kommandatur* building. Wollner survived Salaspils and perished only at the very end of the war in Magdeburg. ²³⁰

²²⁷ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

²²⁸ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 119.

²²⁹ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Unlike the highly assimilated Czech Jews, among the prisoners from Germany there were also people strictly adhering to tradition. There was no rabbi in the camp and an attempt to organize Friday Shabbat prayers at the barracks failed. In the desperate conditions of Salaspils there was no room for religion.²³¹ Czech Jews did pray for life, but not to God. Despite this, Oskar Benedikt recalled one instance when during an execution a number of prisoners recited the basic Jewish prayer of Shema Jisroel: “While the preparations for the execution were taking place, the assembly of the prisoners was standing around in a U shaped formation facing the platform with the gallows. And while they were reading the accusation, from that assembly of Jews rose a quire of the Shema. And that kept being repeated, first as a prepetiating demand on God, than the same was repeated as a plea for mercy and in the end it was repeated as an accusation of a God who stood by and let it happen. ... There must have been religious people among the inmates, because I remember the chorus of the Shema and this is one of those memories that I will take to my grave. ... That must have been started by somebody, by a group of people but in Salaspils I could not identify that group, which barrack they were from or whether they had anything to do with each other.”²³² These moments of a common solidarity were rather rare, but Herbert Ungar recalled another one, among the group of Czech prisoners, on the three-year anniversary of the takeover of the Czech lands by the German armies: “...march to work on March 15, 1942. It was a freezing clear winter day and as I had said, snow lay there till the end of May. We sped up our step so that we left the other group way behind us, then we remained standing and sang the national anthem, while tears streamed down our cheeks – that was March 15, 1942.”²³³

²³¹ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 119.

²³² Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

²³³ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 52.

Even though Salaspils seemed to be located on another planet, completely cut off from the outside world, a few men nevertheless managed to establish a connection with the ghetto and some of the prisoners from Germany with the nearby camp Jungfernhof. From time to time, work details – mostly working for the Wehrmacht - passed by the camp and managed to smuggle out a note with a few lines with a message to the ghetto inhabitants. But of course, there was no regular information exchange.

While “supplementary” transports kept turning up, there was at least the one way contact with the ghetto. The newly arrived prisoners brought some news about the ghetto and from relatives (this concerned only the prisoners from the Czech transport “O” and the German and Viennese transports, as the families of the men from the Czech transport “P” had been murdered) and sometimes even some foodstuffs. Josef Gärtner wrote: “There were about two hundred and fifty or three hundred new prisoners. They brought news from the outside world and the Riga ghetto. After a while some man from Prague sought me out and gave me a letter from my mother and a small package. My beloved mother was worried about me, that I would have frostbitten hands and legs. The letter written in ink pen was soaked through with tears. She begged me to keep strong and wrote that we should be soon replaced by fresh workers, at least that was the rumor in the ghetto. ... There was very little left of the things she took with her and the little she had she sent to me. Bitter tears were flowing down my cheeks. From the little package I unpacked a little bit of tea and sugar, salt, a piece of bread and cheese. That was a whole fortune. I wanted to give the cheese to the one who brought it to me but he did not accept it.” Josef Gärtner was able to receive one more message from his mother. Then, he only learned she was taken to an unknown place during one of the “actions” in the ghetto: “Another transport came from the ghetto, about three hundred men. Again I got a letter from my mother, warm gloves, tea and a piece of bread. Mother wrote she had little food and she lost a lot of weight. I am afraid for you.

Please, at least you should hold out, I can't take this much longer. I was very sad. How could I help? I did not find an answer. After a few day again a transport from the ghetto arrived, this time only about hundred and fifty men and fresh news. In this transport was also a brother-in-law of my Prague friend Pepik Vogel. In the evening he told me that many old people were taken away out of the ghetto, men and women. Mrs. Scheuer sent a word to me that they also took my mother, no one knew where. Instinctively I felt my mother was no longer among the living.”²³⁴

In a few unique cases several of the men managed to even establish contact with home, particularly if they had Aryan girlfriends. “Illinka, [the Aryan girlfriend] of Erich Neumann - no one could understand how this was possible - sent through some railway worker a suitcase with warm clothing and food. That railway man somehow managed to deliver it to a commando [working] outside in the woods, where Erich worked. Erich then brought this into the camp, into the barrack and we saw how he opened the suitcase, all the jewels one could imagine. For us this was paradise, this was a feast.”²³⁵

Not all were as successful as Erich Neumann. One such case was described by Alfred Winter: “One day Krause, the Ghetto Commandant, and Lange came into the camp and we were ordered to line up for roll call. A fellow from the transport Duesseldorf was called out and had to stand in front of Krause. Here we found out that he had written to his girlfriend in Germany and had received mail from her. With this letter or card his girlfriend had unknowingly sentenced this man to death because we were strictly forbidden to make contact with the outside. Anyone caught doing so would be shot. He was ordered to turn around and then Krause killed him with a shot to the back of the head.”²³⁶ Execution for contacting the men in Salaspils was a threat in the ghetto as well. Still on July 31, 1942,

²³⁴ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 51.

²³⁵ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

²³⁶ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 117.

towards the end of existence of Salaspils as a “Jewish” camp, the ghetto police received and order from the SS ghetto commander Krause that “all written contact (packages) with the camps Salaspils and Jungfernhof as well as with outside commandos housed in ‘*Kasernierungen*’ is most strictly forbidden. In the future, such transgressions will be punished by death.”²³⁷

When the very first prisoners arrived to the camp site, there was literally almost nothing standing but towards the end of spring of 1942 Salaspils started to visibly change. “The building of the *Kommandatur* was near the finish. SS men came and inspected it together with the designer of the camp and works foreman Kačerovskis and the head of the camp Nickel. The *Kommandatur* was a nice building near the gate to the camp. Until then the camp was not fenced in, now they started to dig holes for concrete pillars. They were constructing a building for guards, for the Latvian fascist security police. Lots were measured out for a number of other barracks as well. ... In the middle of the camp they built a tall wooden tower, where they placed machine gunners and overseers with binoculars. Around the fence they built smaller towers. There, guards also stood.” Also, “specialized” barracks were built as well: a “hospital” barrack, sewing workshop, artisan workshop, etc.

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On May 4, 1942, the last group of men from the ghetto was dispatched to Salaspils.²³⁹ Probably only a day later another transport of “old”, of work incapable prisoners was taken out of Salaspils. However, to the great surprise of all these men were not stripped of their shoes and clothes and no shots could be heard beyond the camp.²⁴⁰ No one was sure what manner of death was prepared for those inmates and thus the prisoners were extremely surprised when these men returned to Salaspils in a while, after a short convalescence in the

²³⁷ LVVA, P 132-28-18, Anweisungen Dortmund, record from 31.7.1942.

²³⁸ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 54.

²³⁹ LVVA, P 132-28-18, Anweisungen Dortmund, record from 3.5.1942.

²⁴⁰ Alfred Winter, *The Ghetto of Riga*, p. 120.

ghetto. In the diary of the Dortmund ghetto police, a record of an order of one of the members of the *Headquarters of labor deployment* Blättner could thus appear: “Young people who returned from Salaspils will not be delegated to any commando and to no work. These people are here for recuperation.”²⁴¹ The care awarded the Salaspils men was, under the conditions of the ghetto, truly exemplary. It must have been extremely difficult painful for the Salaspils prisoners on a furlough to return there, but these groups only had till May 29 and June 3 to “enjoy” the more favorable conditions in the ghetto. Then they had to return.²⁴²

This change of policy on the part of German authorities was necessary. While at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, thousands were massacred or allowed to perish because of the atrocious conditions, a shortage of workers started to be felt, both by the Civilian administration using the Jews of the Riga ghetto for a multitude of works all around the city of Riga, as well as by the Security Police and Security Service. The Latvian political and other prisoners have not yet been placed in the camp and the planned reinforcement of 500 men that were to be sent to Salaspils from the ghetto after a selection on May 1, 1942 had to be limited to 300. It was thus essential to better preserve the pool of workers already in Salaspils and be less “wasteful” in regards to their lives. It is nevertheless not surprising that the prisoners themselves found this hardly believable and absurd: “...till yesterday Jewish lives were exterminated by all means and today they will send us to recuperate.”²⁴³ At first, men were trying to hide, expecting the transport to be another one of the *Krankentransporte* from which no one ever came back.²⁴⁴

In the late spring and during the summer of 1942, several more or these “convalescent” trips for men very close to death were organized. First they were placed in a

²⁴¹ LVVA, P 132-28-18, Anweisungen Dortmund, record from 7.5.1942.

²⁴² LVVA, P 132-28-18, Anweisungen Dortmund, records from 29.5.1942 and from 1.6.1942.

²⁴³ Josef Katz, *Erinnerungen eines Überlebenden*, p. 54.

²⁴⁴ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 3, p. 307. Witness account by Siegfried Kaufmann from 3.3.1950.

quarantine, where they were given care and treatment unthinkable of in Salaspils, of which the following ghetto police is an evidence: “To all groups: Notify us please till tomorrow by 10 o’clock the names of two women, whose husbands are in Salaspils. These women will be placed in Riga in the barracks to which 120 men from Salaspils will come. Only childless women can be taken into consideration. The women have to report to the Kommandatur on 21.5. at 8 o’clock and have to be equipped with a bucket, broom and brush on a shank, such as needed to clean a building containing 140 people. From personal effects, quilts, food bowls, cutlery and drinking cups need to be taken. Rations for one week will be provided by the *Zentrale*. Signed Blättner.”²⁴⁵ The return transports from Salaspils arrived to Riga also on May 29 and June 1, 1942 – at least, those dates are known. The men were allowed to get better, however already on June 8th the first Salaspils returnees had to report to be put to work in the ghetto. Another group of former Salaspils inmates was included in the “work process” five days later and gradually, all the others as well. When the Arbeitseinsatz-Zentrale of the individual groups announced on June 13, 1942 that the returned men have to report for work, one of the Christians in the ghetto (Jews of Christian faith), Hilde Schneider who had a habit of making notes on the pages of her Bible, scribbled next to the verses no. 5 and 6 of the 88th Psalm only the date and the word “Salaspils”.²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the era of Salaspils as a “Jewish” camp was nearing its end and the place soon started to fill up with political prisoners.²⁴⁷

Among the relatively few men who managed to endure the trials of Salaspils was also Ludwig Shonberg: “I was extremely lucky that after about four month of my stay in the camp there was a sort of amnesty. They brought us back to the ghetto. None of us could

²⁴⁵ LVVA, P 132-28-18, Anweisungen Dortmund, record from 19.5.1942.

²⁴⁶ Hartmut Schmidt, *Zwischen Riga und Locarno. Bericht ueber Hilde Schneider, Christin juedischer Herkunft, Diakonisse, Ghetto- und KZ- Haefling, Gefaengnisppfarrerin* (Berlin: Wichern-Verlag, 2000), p. 140.

²⁴⁷ LVVA, P 132-28-18, Anweisungen Dortmund, records from 29.5.1942, 1.6.1942 and 8.6.1942.

hardly walk. And personally I was lucky, I still found my parents in the ghetto who nursed me back to health.”²⁴⁸ The men’s happiness that they were awarded another lease on life in the ghetto was nonetheless mired by the fact that many found out that while they were in Salaspils, their families and friends disappeared from the ghetto without a trace. With the experience of Salaspils behind them, they knew what that most likely meant – death in the forests around Riga. Several also found their places beside their wives taken up by the handful of the male Latvian Jews who were spared during the massacres of local Jews. Their contacts among the local population and greater ability to procure material help greater facilitated the day-to-day survival of the lonely women in the ghetto, most of whom had not heard from or of their husbands and boyfriends for months. None of the men who managed to endure Salaspils found it easy to answer the questions of the ghetto inhabitants about their relatives and friends. In hundreds of cases the answer had to be that there was no chance these men would ever be coming back, because they died of hunger, frostbite, disease, were beaten to death, shot or hanged.

Just before the return transports to the ghetto started, in Salaspils it became clear to the remaining men that changes in their situation could be expected. As Ota Urbach said: “Then, when we again finished one of the barracks that remained empty we managed to somehow ask one of the SS men why we kept building these since there was now more than plenty of room for us and he replied that the camp was going to be liquidated and we were to be sent to the ghetto. Only that in the beginning we did not know whether we would really be sent to the ghetto or we were to be shot.”²⁴⁹ According to Josef Katz, the first Salaspils prisoners left for the ghetto on April 20, 1942 and he was able to receive the news that all the men indeed arrived there.²⁵⁰ The *Oberpolizist* Siegfried Kaufmann left on the

²⁴⁸ Interview of the author with Ludwig Shonberg.

²⁴⁹ Interview of the author with Ota Urbach.

²⁵⁰ Josef Katz, *Erinnerungen eines Überlebenden*, p. 54.

first truck with the sick and came back safely.²⁵¹ That was however no reassurance to the men in the camp – most did not trust him and also, because of his position he was unlikely person to be liquidated. Herbert Hirschland recalled that they agreed with the men on the truck that if they got into the ghetto, they would wipe off a chalk mark made onto the truck. When the car returned to Salaspils, the chalk was gone.²⁵²

The initial distrust of the prisoners was most understandable. Even in the very last days of Salaspils as a “Jewish camp”, executions were carried out. In its report on its activity between May 23 and June 18, 1942, KdS noted that in Salaspils there were still 675 “for work useful” prisoners and that in the Riga region, 29 Jews were put to death – some of them undoubtedly also came from Salaspils.²⁵³

The gravely ill Herbert Ungar volunteered for one of the return transports from the “*Revierstube*”: “I heard the announcement downstairs that a car for the sick will get here, that a transport will go to Riga for recuperation. That was on June 2, 1942. I volunteered. My friends were trying to dissuade me, the doctors too. Nobody believed we would go to Riga. ‘Hochwald’ was the common opinion. To me, it was all the same.”²⁵⁴

Josef Gärtner was one of the very few Jews who remained in the camp even after the arrival of the political prisoners: “In the camp the first transport of local inhabitants showed up, citizens of Latvian and Russian nationality. They placed them into a newly built barrack. After the arrival of the new prisoners, the camp started to be feverishly enlarged. The barracks grew like mushrooms after a rain. All contact with the newcomers was strictly forbidden to us. We were greatly interested how they would behave towards us. Soon we found out that these were political prisoners, towards communism inclined people. In the

²⁵¹ 141 Js 534/60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 3, p. 307. Witness account by Siegfried Kaufmann from 3.3.1950.

²⁵² 141 Js 534-60 der Staw. Hamburg, Bd. 2, p. 255. Witness account by Herbert Hirschland from 23.1.1950.

²⁵³ USHMM, RG 15.007, reel 16 [RSHA – Material from Warsaw]: Der KdS Lettland. Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 23.5.-18.6.1942, from 24.6.1942. Quoted in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Entlösung*“, p. 269.

²⁵⁴ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 7.

beginning they behaved towards us with a bit of diffidence, but very correctly. ... They sent first imprisoned women into the camp. Most were Latvian, others Russian. ... The prisoners of non-Jewish nationality, even the women, were treated equally roughly in the camp. I noticed that as punishment they were often ordered to perform various exercises, for example they had to throw themselves on the ground with a lightning speed and stand up equally fast, fall again and stand up again, and so on and on. Such and similar ‘exercises’ were most favored by the SS at times of rain, when there was most mud. Everybody can imagine how those unfortunates looked afterwards. The imprisoned people from the Soviet land and foreigners nevertheless met, even though it was strictly forbidden. First contacts between the two groups of prisoners appeared. In the beginning we were greatly careful as Teckemeier, when he saw the prisoners together, beat them head over heels. With the armband of a camp mechanic I could freely stroll throughout the camp. I knew how to use this privilege well. The newly imprisoned informed me about the outside world, mainly about the front. I in turn informed other comrades. Most pleasant for me was my cooperation with the imprisoned artisans, among whom were both Latvians and Russians. They worked in the newly built workshop barrack, into which my workroom was also moved from the ‘shopping mall’. In the artisan workshops worked shoemakers, tailors and saddle-makers. Among them I felt good.”²⁵⁵

At the end of July, 1942, there were still about 400 Jews in the camp.²⁵⁶ Paradoxically, the first ones to be released from Salaspils were those who spent the least amount of time there. The names of the still living men from the transport “P” who came to the camp directly were unknown in the ghetto and so all others were recalled earlier. Ota Urbach’s and others’ from his transport turn came only in August 1942: “First left those

²⁵⁵ Josef Gärtner, *Mums atnema dzimteni*, p. 57.

²⁵⁶ RGVA, 504-2-8, Lange’s report to the RSHA, II C 3, from 21.7.1942, p. 192. Cited in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, „*Die Enlösung*“, p. 269.

who came last, so they were there only a couple of weeks. Oskar Steuer requested that those people come back, because he of course knew them but we of course first did not know whether they were not taken away and simply shot. They said to them they would be going to the ghetto, but at first we could not ascertain this. But then when the trucks were coming, there was one helper or worker, one of the inhabitants of the ghetto and he told us, ye, I just came from the ghetto and you will go there too. This has been decided long ago.”²⁵⁷

Oskar Benedikt stood on one of the open truck and remembered how: “When we arrived in the ghetto, that truckload of leftover Jews, they looked at us as if we were ghosts. Not only because our appearance was pale, so ghostly, but they knew in the ghetto about the existence of the camp in Salaspils, but during the whole time that Salaspils was functioning they had never seen anybody come out of it alive. So they looked at us with total disbelief.”

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The appearance of the men from Salaspils was so terrible that some of the men initially were not recognized even by their loved ones. In ragged, for months unwashed and unchanged clothing, with empty, half-crazed eyes they looked only as shadows of themselves from the times before the deportation. Egon Klein lost half of his body weight and his own wife did not recognize him, with his skeletal appearance and face changed by suffering.²⁵⁹ Many returnees were already beyond help and shortly after their arrival to the ghetto succumbed to the aftereffects of privation and malnutrition. Vilém Schwarz and Egon Klein shared a bunk in Salaspils with two friends, Alfred Wodák and Franz Spitz. Spitz survived till the trip to the ghetto, but died there on June 20, 1942.²⁶⁰

Ota Urbach described the arrival into the quarantine in the following words: “They placed us in some building that looked a bit like a school or kindergarten and we were

²⁵⁷ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

²⁵⁸ Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt.

²⁵⁹ WL, P. III. i. No. 1028/b. Witness account by Egon Klein from 30.11.1948.

²⁶⁰ WL, P. III. i. No. 1028/a-c EW 13 15922-15932. Witness account by Vilém Schwarz from 26.12.1948.

guarded by the ghetto police. ... So I told one of them if he would be so kind and asked about my school mate Jiří Epstein, who was in the ghetto with his father Hugo and his mother. That was during the day, maybe before noon and in the afternoon Jirka Epstein came running and I see it like today, he brought a tiny saucepan and in it were six potatoes and spinach. For me this was a paradise meal because I had not seen anything like that for eight months. They kept us in the quarantine for a week and every day Jirka brought me food they had, they also did not have much. There was a pump and during the quarantine we could wash but I think it was only on the fifth or sixth day that we could go into showers and wash ourselves properly in hot water. I no longer know whether we were given fresh clothing by the administration of the ghetto or whether I got it from Jirka Epstein and his father, I no longer remember that detail. Then I lived with the Epsteins.”²⁶¹

Herbert Ungar could describe the quarantine very well: “The truck stopped in Jägerhof, in the Riga ghetto. Jaegerhof, an old, decrepit one floor building surrounded a large square of an uneven, cobble-stoned paved courtyard. It was set up as an emergency lazaretto and nurse from the ghetto hospital expected us with grit gruel and a piece of bread with butter. They kindly welcomed us, particularly those who had nobody in the ghetto. I did not have anyone and did not expect anyone. When we got a little bit stronger and recovered somewhat, those who could walk were taken to the Prague Group for delousing. An inhabited little house was set up as a bathing room, buckets with hot water stood there. On one side next to the room was a space for putting away of things and on the other side a space for getting dressed.”²⁶²

A fragmentary record about the quarantine is also preserved in the records of the ghetto police of the Dortmund group: “On the sanitary courtyard of the Hannover group the backpacks and clothing handed over by the returnees from Salaspils will be deloused and

²⁶¹ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach.

²⁶² Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 1.

prepared for handover on Tuesday 14.7. at 17 hours. ... For this purpose all groups to which the returnees from Salaspils belong have to report by the given time with carts and assisting personnel at Jägerhof of group Hannover. According to the order of the office the mattresses, bedding and clothing need to be properly shaken out and brushed. Furthermore, the mattresses need to be aired out for 24 hours.”²⁶³

After Salaspils, the extreme hardship of life in the Riga ghetto seemed to the returnees as a veritable paradise. Herbert Ungar described his feelings thus: “I was as happy as a child by a Christmas tree, unconditionally happy. I was pleased by the greenery of grass, the blue of the sky, pleased by the kindness of people and I was happy to be alive. I could not even understand that there were still so many nice people, after all the dreariness, iniquity and hostility reigning in Salaspils.”²⁶⁴

In the fall of 1942, in September, Salaspils camp consisted of fifteen out of the forty five planned barracks and was now to serve as “Polizeihaft- und Arbeitserziehungslager” (custody a work-education camp) for Security Police prisoners of non-Jewish origin. The exact number of victims the camp claimed is difficult to establish. What is sure is that the numbers of the Soviet commission for the investigation of Nazi crimes on the territory of Latvia is greatly inflated. The figure given in Soviet sources – 53.000 victims (or in some propaganda materials even hundreds of thousands) is simply too high.²⁶⁵ According to modern Latvian sources, the total number of prisoners who passed through Salaspils stands at around 12.000 people.²⁶⁶ How many Jewish lives it claimed is practically impossible to establish, but the death rate was extremely high. According to witness accounts, for example from the approximately eighty men selected in Skirotava to go directly to the camp, about

²⁶³ LVVA, P 132-28-18, Anweisungen Dortmund, record from 14.7.1942.

²⁶⁴ Herbert Ungar, Unpublished memoir, (Archive of the author), p. 4.

²⁶⁵ Particularly the Soviet propaganda pamphlet “Daugavas Vanagi – Who are they” alleges these absolutely staggering figures. See E. Avotins., J. Dzirkalis, V. Petersons, *Daugavas Vanagi – Who are they?* (Riga: Latvian State Publishing House, 1963), p. 29.

²⁶⁶ Heinrihs Strods, *Salaspils koncentrācijas nometne (1941. Gada oktobris – 144. Gada septembris)* In: *Latvijas Okupācijas Muzeja Gadagramata*, (Riga: 2000), p. 155.

two thirds perished in Salaspils. Only sixteen men survived till the end of the war.²⁶⁷ Beside the unknown number of Jewish victims, the camp claimed the lives of two to three thousand non-Jews, particularly of children and youngsters brought to Salaspils from the so-called “*Bandengebieten*”, villages in areas in which partisan resistance to German occupation was particularly fierce.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Interview of the autor with Ota Urbach. Interview of the author with Oskar Benedikt. Electronic database of Theresienstadt prisoners and transports. Institute of the Foundation of the Theresienstadt Initiative.

²⁶⁸ Heinrihs Strods, *Salaspils koncentrācijas nometne (1941. Gada oktobris – 144. Gada septembris)* In: Latvijas Okupācijas Muzeja Gadagramata, (Riga: 2000), p. 155.

CONCLUSION

In the course of the past few years, the WWII story of the Nazi designated territory of “*Ostland*” – the administrative unit composed of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and parts of Belarus - has finally come to the fore of attention by historians, after a rather long period of relative neglect (possibly with the exception of Lithuania, which has been studied a bit more). Our knowledge of the history of extermination of the Jews, both local and those deported to the region from Central and Western Europe, now keeps steadily increasing. Through the efforts of a number of authors working on uncovering the histories of the individual areas of the “*Ostland*” and on particular incidents, a much clearer view of the Nazi annihilation policies in the East has begun emerging.

The recent works also point to the tremendous importance of studying both the Nazi “official” strategies, aims and designs vis-à-vis the Jews and the “local” facts on the ground, as plans and reality regularly differed. The actual execution of Nazi intentions was often far from centrally planned and set in stone, but an evolving matter and frequently a result of collisions of contradictory actions by different arms of the Nazi administration. It would thus be a mistake to consider only the “high-end” extant documents and materials without careful reconstructions and analysis of local realities, as such an approach could end up in a distorted history of *Ostland*. In this context, works focusing on relatively “small-size” topics – for example that of the Salaspils camp - are of significance. These studies, while limited in scale, are like pieces of a puzzle that, once put in place, help to create the larger picture of the history of annihilation of the Jews.

The task of piecing all these smaller and bigger, but nevertheless partial studies into a coherent whole depicting the general history of Nazi “*Ostland*” still remains unfulfilled and has unfortunately not yet been taken up by any historian, but I believe it is just a

question of time. I thus hope my work on the history of the Salaspils camp can serve as a very modest contribution to this future effort.

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