

Jews in the Service of Organisation Todt in the Occupied Soviet Territories, October 1941– March 1942

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The sealed cars of German trains have become a hair-raising symbol of the Holocaust era. The clattering of their wheels still reverberates in survivors' ears, and the sight of sealed freight cars speeding toward the extermination camps in the East remains engraved in the collective memory. However, German trains were also among the main causes in the difficulties involved in conducting Operation Barbarossa. And, much to their misfortune, a small group of young Jews became involved in attempts to alleviate this problem.

This mysterious affair, perhaps a marginal event in the overall historical picture, has yet to be studied. The conscription of young Jews from eastern Upper Silesia—prisoners in forced-labor camps for Jews under the auspices of Organisation Schmelt,¹ disguised as employees of Organisation Todt (OT)²—for the task of rehabilitating the Soviet railroad system is extremely

¹ Organisation Schmelt had been established by Himmler as an autonomous agency directly subordinate to him; its full name was “Bureau of the Chargé for Labor Forces of Members of Foreign Peoples in Upper Silesia” (*Dienststelle des Sonderbeauftragten des RFSS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei für fremdvölkischen Arbeitseinsatz in Oberschlesien*). In most official documents, the Germans preferred to abbreviate this as Organisation Schmelt, after the senior commander who had been named its chief administrator, *SS-Brigadeführer* Albrecht Schmelt. The Jews in eastern Upper Silesia were not acquainted with this high-ranking officer. They encountered the second echelon only—chiefly Heinrich Lindner, Henschild, and Knoll—for which reason they called the agency that exploited their labor in the ghettos and imprisoned them in labor camps “Der Sonder.” In the opinion of Wolf Gruner, at least some of these camps had been established even before Organisation Schmelt came into being and may have been transferred to its supervision. Not all of the existing camps were subordinated to this organization. Gruner suggests that several camps established in the autumn of 1940, belonged to the Reichsautobahn administration and that, in late 1941, about 8,000 Jews were employed by the Reichsautobahn as slave laborers; see Wolf Gruner, “Juden bauen die ‘Strassen des Führers,’ Zwangsarbeit und Zwangsarbeitslager für nichtdeutsche Juden im Altreich 1940 bis 1943/44,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (1996), Heft 9, p. 807.

² Organisation Todt, headed by Dr. Fritz Todt, carried out large-scale construction projects. He subsequently became inspector-general for road construction and minister for Armaments and Munitions; following his death in a plane crash, he was succeeded in all his functions by Albert Speer. Todt began his rise to prominence shortly after Hitler became chancellor. Hitler complained that the German road system was unsound, and, at his behest, the Reichsautobahn Project Establishment Law was passed in June 1933. The law was meant to encourage the development of a road system that would create jobs; Todt was named the inspector-general of roads in Germany. The project developed rapidly; thousands of kilometers of new roads were built. This work was suspended in May 1938, as the emphasis

puzzling. Schmelt's long arm reached not only across Germany and the Polish areas annexed to the Reich but also, by means of this group of Jewish prisoners, to the snowy vastness of the Soviet Union.

It was a bold experiment on the part of the Reichsautobahn³ administration and the OT directors, who urgently sought manpower that could be transferred to the East, in conjunction with the directors of Organisation Schmelt, who sought additional sources of income. The labor campaign, at a location near the German front, in the autumn of 1941, became a tragic event in the lives of the 350 young people from Zagłębie⁴ who participated in it. These Jews were interned in Reichsautobahn forced-labor camps for non-German Jews; the Schmelt organization provided the Reichsautobahn with the Jewish forced laborers.⁵

The Jewishness of the 350 young men was concealed from everyone around them. They underwent hasty, semi-military training, were issued uniforms, and were attached to a transport of laborers and engineers. Their story has been buried in the testimonies of the few who survived the frozen inferno and the labor and concentration camps to which they were sent after they returned from the front. This article probes the background to this transport—why Jews from eastern Upper Silesia were sent out in the guise of German employees of OT, and how they were associated with Operation Barbarossa. The transport of these Jews attests, above all, to the basic contradictions that

shifted to building the Atlantic Wall. The OT steadily expanded until it employed more than a million workers, slave laborers, war prisoners, and camp inmates.

³ The Reichsautobahn was responsible for road and rail infrastructure.

⁴ Zagłębie is in a mining and industrial area in southwestern Poland. After the Germans occupied the area, they annexed it to the Reich. This increased the Reich's Jewish population by 65,000, and the intention was to deport them to the *Generalgouvernement* at once. However, after several small-scale deportations under the Nisko plan, the banishments were halted. This was due to the intervention of powerful officials with interests of their own, such as Governor-General Hans Frank and army commanders who needed the Jews' labor, and due to the impression of *Reichsführer*-SS Heinrich Himmler that he could amass wealth and influence by exploiting this labor force.

⁵ For further details, see Bella Gutermann, *A Narrow Bridge to Life: Jews in the Gross-Rosen Network of Labor Camps (1940–1945)* (Hebrew), Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 1996; Alfred Konieczny, "Die Zwangsarbeit der Juden in Schlesien im Rahmen der 'Organisation Schmelt,'" *Beiträge zur Nationalsozialistischen Gesundheit und Sozialpolitik: Sozialpolitik und Judenvernichtung, Gibt es eine Ökonomie der Endlösung* (1983), vol. 5; Alfred Konieczny, *"Organizacja Schmelt" i jej obozy pracy dla Żydów na Śląsku w latach 1940-1944* (Wałbrzych: Państwowe Muzeum Gross-Rosen, 1992). There is no documentary evidence basis for the transport to the East other than survivors' testimonies, which agree on the main points.

riddled the Nazi administration's decision-making process, especially with respect to Jews.

It took many months to plan the war against the Soviet Union, but even though the preparations lasted until early 1941, it became clear after the war broke out that the strategic planning had been flawed in many ways and that many crucial elements had been overlooked.⁶ The difficulties in managing the various fronts, the Soviet army's scorched-earth policy, and the Soviets' successful reorganization in the midst of retreat were three of the factors that braked the German offensive. Facilities were detonated, food repositories were torched, and cattle were slaughtered or transported to the East.

Meanwhile, autumn rains in the middle of October brought on the "mud season"; the weather worsened over the last three weeks of that month, and winter came early. Fuel consumption increased because motors needed to be heated in order to keep them from freezing; consumption of ammunition rose because soldiers had to conduct an unabated defensive engagement against Soviet forces and partisans who ambushed the supply convoys. At this point, difficulties in moving supplies became one of the German command's most serious problems. In December, as the temperature fell to -31°C, soldiers had to huddle at night in wooden shacks and other provisional shelters that were still standing. Their wretched condition made a grim impression:

At the large farms, we saw burnt stables and granaries and abandoned houses that lacked any sign of life. To navigate more easily in the endless spaces, we flew along the railroad track, along which almost no train passed during the flight. Only sooty fragments of burnt station buildings remained. Most of the workshops and garages near them were razed to their foundations.... Here and there, a road came into sight in the white wasteland, but it, too, was empty of vehicles. The route continued infinitely, the depressing expanses enveloped in deathly silence.⁷

OT Participation in the War Campaign

⁶ Allen Clark, *Operation Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1965), pp. 24-25.

⁷ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, p. 189.

The eruption of joy that followed the swift and easy victory, the sight of the retreating Soviet soldiers, and the conquest of vast territories led to a sense of euphoria. However, the German tanks that rumbled almost unimpeded across that vastness marked a menace that no one had yet noticed—the bad roads. The Wehrmacht commanders quickly realized how urgent it was to revitalize the Soviet railroad system, as logistical difficulties—in food and ammunition, auxiliary services, maintenance of motor vehicles, and so on—caused momentum to flag after the initial military successes.⁸

Fritz Todt paid special attention to Operation Barbarossa, and his extensive experience in the Reichsautobahn project between 1933 and early 1941, in conjunction with the organization bearing his name, transformed him and the OT into an economic entity with military attributes.⁹ Now Todt instructed Xavier Dorsch, one of his senior officials, to prepare for the operation. Dorsch moved swiftly and, by early 1941, had worked up a plan for stationing mobile OT units across the territory to be occupied. The plan was code-named Operation Jacob.¹⁰ The Wehrmacht high command issued the appropriate order on June 6, 1941: “For the imminent battle operations of the summer, the Wehrmacht requires units of skilled roadbuilders that will be ready for action at any time. The formation of these units was tasked to the inspector-general for road construction.”¹¹

The OT accompanied the Wehrmacht to the occupied countries and stayed closely in contact with its technical units. Membership in the OT crews, ordinarily restricted to age groups that had received military training during World War I, was limited to those born in 1909–1911, who had taken refresher courses over the years, and who carried arms against surprise attack.¹² Todt himself was quoted as having said, “Now I need engineers who do not sit in offices but are at the center of events. I need technicians who are leaders.”¹³

⁸ Clark, *Operation Barbarossa*, p. 52.

⁹ Alfred Vagts, *Hitler's Second Army* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal, 1943), p. 117.

¹⁰ Xavier Dorsch, a close associate of Albert Speer, was the de facto director of the OT.

¹¹ Franz W. Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt, Bauen für Staat und Wehrmacht, 1938–1945* (Koblenz: Bernard and Greafe, 1987), p. 88.

¹² Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, Evaluation and Dissemination Section (Counter Intelligence Sub-Division): *Basic Handbook*. Washington, D.C., 1945–1947.

¹³ Vagts, *Hitler's Second Army*, p. 124.

However, the OT, short on manpower because of the military mobilization, had to search for appropriate personnel. According to guidelines from Fritz Todt, of the 20,000 workers to be assigned to the occupied eastern territories, 5,000 would be allocated to this task by the Reichsautobahn, 10,000 from munitions plants, and 5,000 from the labor forces of miscellaneous enterprises.¹⁴ In September 1941, the workers began to be gathered in three collection camps (*Sammellager*), where they were trained in building roads, railroad tracks, and bridges.

The logistical preparations were very complex. In order to collect motor vehicles for transport to the East, allocations to OT units on other fronts had to be reduced. Some 2,000 motor vehicles were taken from OT units that had been posted to France. Administrative manpower was to be obtained from the managements of enterprises that worked for the inspectorate-general of road construction in Germany.¹⁵ The core units for Operation Jacob were composed of actual OT staff members, as it had been decided to minimize stationing near the front lines attached crews and equipment belonging to the companies that would do the work and to place mainly OT people there instead.

When the war with the USSR broke out, twenty OT task forces (*Einsatzkommando*), subordinate to the various army groups, were made available to the Wehrmacht and were ready to move. Seven units were stationed in the south, eight on the central front, and five on the northern front. An OT liaison office was established next to each unit; it would maintain regular contact with the Wehrmacht by means of the *Frontführer*, as the commanders of the OT task forces were called. It was also stipulated that the doctors who were annexed to the forces and the motor-vehicle department heads would also maintain regular contact with corresponding army officers. Until March 1942, these liaison units were answerable not to the commander of the OT task force but to the head of army headquarters, and their function was to attain a maximum of coordination with the army.

¹⁴ Hans Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn in Ostfeldzug* (Neckergemünd: Scharnhorst Buchkameradschaft, 1960), p. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Each OT task force was made up of many units; each basic unit had eight working groups led by a *Bauführer*. This structure was maintained even after Fritz Todt died in a mysterious plane crash on February 8, 1942. His successor, Albert Speer, gave Xavier Dorsch vast powers in the course of the reorganization.

Participation of the Reichsautobahn in the War Campaign

Although the German road and railroad system was assigned a special role in the Wehrmacht's logistical preparations and in the prospects of success in the military operations in the Soviet Union, overland transport in the occupied countries was considered even more important. In October 1940, at an early juncture in the planning phase, the Wehrmacht issued the railroad administrations with detailed guidelines about preparing the Ostbahn railroad stations and tracks for a heavier volume of traffic; they were to have the rail system ready by May 10, 1941. The plan was code-named "Otto Programm."¹⁶

By the end of November 1940, the OKH (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, or Army High Command) applied to the Ministry of Labor in Silesia for an allocation of Jewish workers, as part of the Otto Programm, in order to prepare the task force for the East. However, since such workers who were fit for the task were not found, the OKH considered the use of war prisoners.¹⁷ In order to provide the labor forces, the Reichsautobahn management established slave-labor camps for non-German Jews. The Otto Programm included the expansion of railroad stations where locomotives were exchanged switched in the round-house, construction of new stations in the East, and the installation of additional signals, switching facilities, and electricity and telephone systems. The managers estimated that 30,000 people were needed to lay the ground for this complex infrastructure.

The organization and transport to the East of a labor force of such magnitude, along with large quantities of raw materials and equipment, amidst ongoing

¹⁶ Gruner, "Juden bauen die 'Strassen des Führers,'" p. 800; Pottgieser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p. 21. Some 1.2 billion zloty was spent on the Otto Programm, 60 percent by the Reich and 40 percent by the Ostbahn. The preparations were to be completed by June 15, 1941.

provisioning of the fighting forces, placed a heavy burden on the Ostbahn administration—which was also tasked with roadbuilding, construction of airports, and movement of supplies. The administration found it difficult to meet the schedule, as the severe winter of 1940/41— which forced it to set aside at least 10,000 men for the essential task of clearing snow from the path—caused a considerable lag.¹⁸

Since the rapidly approaching deadline ruled out meticulous work, the supervisors had to improvise provisional methods in order to be ready at least for the beginning of the thrust into the USSR. Therefore, the new tracks were inadequately reinforced, and their construction was completed only later on.¹⁹

Ostensibly, this was a correct decision, since 220 trains were heading east from the administrative centers in Warsaw, Kraków, Königsberg, and Danzig each day, up from the eighty-four that had left daily until then. This explains how the Germans were able to move 141 divisions into the Soviet interior within a five-month period. Here, however, the Germans also first encountered logistical problems that perturbed everyone involved in the war effort in the East, from senior command echelons to ordinary soldiers.

After storming through those vast areas, the Germans discovered that their intelligence agencies had provided grossly inaccurate information on the state of the Russian railroads: none of the estimations about the haulage of supplies over the Russian railroad system was realistic. Due to the organizational failures and a shortage of raw materials and equipment, the Germans became totally dependent on supplies delivered in the small number of local trains that the Wehrmacht had at its disposal. Also, in contrast to the Western front, where ample and varied alternatives to rail transport were available, in the East freight transport by rail was of decisive importance in keeping the army provisioned. Alternative overland transport could not be found.

In Russia, in view of the great distances from supply bases in the Reich and the small number and poor condition of the roads, reliance on rail transport was the only option. However, the tracks in Russia were in poor condition, and only several main junctions had modern facilities and electrical propulsion

¹⁸ Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt*, p. 96; Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p. 24.

¹⁹ Clark, *Operation Barbarossa*, p. 132; Seidler, *ibid.*, p. 97.

systems. The Wehrmacht's rapid successes at the beginning of the campaign forced the Reichsbahn (railroads' administration) to allocate a large share of its manpower for duties in the East. In July 1941, workers were gathered in temporary camps and transported to the eastern occupied territories. There the commanders were stunned to discover that the Russian railroad gauge was 8.9 centimeters wider than the West European standard. Thus, it would be impossible to move cargo directly from the Reich to the front.²⁰

Albert Speer, who visited the East in November 1941, realized that the Germans were facing severe disruptions in overland transport to these areas, which were compounded by demolition actions by retreating Red Army units. The soldiers had destroyed Russian railroad facilities so thoroughly that quick repairs were out of the question. Even when restored to functionality, they would be usable only as far as the large rivers, since the Soviets had blown up the bridges. It was clear to Speer that, in the euphoria that marked the beginning of the campaign, insufficient thought had been given to the repair of this equipment.

Even Hitler had shown no willingness to consider logistical solutions to problems that would surface with the advent of winter. Senior Reichsbahn officials and Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe generals often complained about difficulties in obtaining supplies. Speer advised Hitler to urgently send 30,000 of the 65,000 German construction workers presently employed in Reich building enterprises, along with the engineering staff, to repair the railroad facilities.²¹ However, Hitler withheld his decision for two full weeks. Only on December 27, 1941, did he finally give his consent.

Reports from the front prompted questions about how the problem of moving crucial supplies to the front lines could be solved. In fact, a choice between two proposals had to be made. According to one proposal, all supplies, including war matériel, ammunition, and motor vehicles, should be taken to the eastern border in German railroad cars, unloaded there, and reloaded onto the few Russian trains that had been captured. According to the second proposal, the Russian tracks should be narrowed in a swift, special operation, after which the German trains could continue rolling on through the occupied

²⁰ Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt*, p. 97.

²¹ Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, pp.184-185.

territories. Dr. Todt favored the latter proposal and pressed the commander of the Wehrmacht overland transport department to adopt it. His insistence stemmed from the fact that the Wehrmacht did not have enough Russian railroad cars to solve the current logistics' problem satisfactorily. Even this solution, however, did not respond to the difficulties that had surfaced.²²

On January 4, 1942, when Hitler finally issued an order to begin preparing for an operation to recondition the railroad system in the eastern territories, he was actually giving *post facto* approval to the activity of the OT, which had already deployed in the field and was seeing to the practical work. According to his order, the crewmen needed for this task were to be “taken from the Reichsbahn ... all matters of food supply and housing for the crews shall be arranged with the consent of the head of the army housing department.” In the third paragraph of the order, which listed the sources of manpower for the assignment, Hitler stated, “The labor force needed to develop the rail system shall be composed of the construction units of the Reichsbahn, the army, [and] Organisation Todt, Speer’s construction staff, and other project-level units, in accordance with the plans of the [local] railroad administrations.”²³

According to Paragraph 4 of the order, to build and develop the railroad system and to manage overland transport, the Reichsbahn management was to allocate all requisite machinery, equipment, and raw materials from its regular stocks and to make up any shortfall on its own. For this purpose, the Reichsbahn was given special quotas, approved by the Reich Minister for Economic Affairs. Thus, the completion of this construction work had been assigned a very high level of urgency.

Todt’s proposal to narrow the Russian gauge to the European standard was approved, and the Reichsbahn management began to establish a special railroad administration called *Sofortprogramm Ostbau* (Immediate Building Plan—East) that was to complete the work by March 15, 1942.²⁴ In order to carry out the project, large labor forces were transported from the Reich to the Soviet interior. Therefore, Hitler’s January 4 order stipulated the labor forces that would be used to build the railroads, including the OT task forces that

²² Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p. 35; Seidler, *ibid.*, p. 98.

²³ Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt*, p. 97; Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, pp. 38-39.

²⁴ Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p. 33.

were already in the final-preparation stages and, in some cases, had already reached the eastern territories.

The operation of the railroads and the repair of the facilities--foremost, water installations and repair shops for rolling stock--began in January 1942. In late 1941 and early 1942, the Reichsbahn management sent a group of railroad workers to Army Group Center, headquartered in Minsk. In December 1941, a staff was established under Professor Giesler, including 2,000 laborers who were removed from the labor forces that were redesigning Munich in order to operate the railroads on the northern front. The task forces for the reconstruction of the railroads in the north were termed Eisenbahneinsatz Riga (Railroad Track Task Force Riga), and the management of the group established its headquarters in Pleskau (Pskov in Russian). German civilian building companies worked alongside the OT laborers and Speer's construction staff, and local civilians were mobilized for the dreary tasks of clearing snow and unloading cargo.²⁵

Thousands of skilled workers and professionals from Germany, as well as auxiliary workers who were liable for labor service in the Reich construction enterprises, were assigned to these staffs in the first few months of 1942. In consolidating these units, OT deviated from its conventional practice of concentrating and organizing the workers at the enterprises to which they were assigned. Here, OT assumed responsibility because it was too dangerous to place civilian workers in labor groups that were scattered across vast expanses near the front, especially since the first partisan groups were operating there.²⁶ The civilian enterprises were unable to cope with a situation that required large guard and security forces, which were unavailable in any case.

However, even after the decision was made and after the large task forces were assembled, the work did not progress at the required pace. The tracks could not be adjusted in the middle of winter blizzards, because the mounting snow drifts had to be removed before the rails could be torn up and repositioned. The stock of local rails also proved inadequate. Supplies of new rails from Germany were not arriving with the expected celerity, and switching

²⁵ Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt*, p. 97.

²⁶ Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt*, p. 98.

and signal devices had to be delivered at great distances and were in short supply. To haul these items to the places where they were needed, a special staff was established at Reichsbahn headquarters in Berlin. The task of supplying food, clothing, and other necessities for the workers was passed, on a nonprofit basis, to the army's service centers (*Heeresverpflegungsdienststellen*). A special center for supplying equipment, machinery, and tools, and for assuring housing for the workers was established by the Operation Jacob staff. The OT had already set up a special staff (*Einsatzstab*) for the routine supply of building materials, tools, and motor vehicles.

Another grave problem that beset the Reichsbahn management was the unsuitability of German locomotives for the cold in Russia. Since the exposed parts, pipes, and pumps of the locomotives froze and ruptured, the technicians had to contrive quick solutions, cover sensitive parts, and sometimes even place locomotives on piles of cinders to thaw them out.²⁷

The deadline for the rehabilitation of the railroads by narrowing the gauge, installing new rails, and assuring efficient shipments of supplies was, as stated, March 15, 1942. On December 6, 1941, an order was given to cancel the vacations of all railroad workers and mobilize them for the task. The day Hitler's order was issued—January 4, 1942—the German transport minister, Dr. Julius Dorpmüller, visited the districts of Minsk, Kiev, and Brest-Litovsk to inspect the state of the tracks. On April 18, 1942, he visited Pleskau, and in July he went to Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk, and the Crimea. Concurrently, Reichsbahn officials whom he had deputized set out to check the extent of progress made in rehabilitating and building the tracks. However, since the logistical organization, which began only after Hitler's approval was received, was very complex and time-consuming, the beginning of the work lagged unexpectedly, and the stormy weather further encumbered the operation.

It quickly transpired that the estimates given for the time needed to finish the job were overly optimistic. Only after they reached the work locations themselves could they realize that the water and coal-supply facilities for the Russian locomotives had been demolished, that the railroad stations were

²⁷ Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p. 35.

very far apart—making it necessary to build interim stations quickly—and that the signal facilities had been damaged, giving the German railroad workers reason to fear that they could not control the rail traffic safely. For this reason, traffic on the Lemberg-Kiev-Dnepropetrovsk line, for example, was limited to eight trains per day in February 1942. The realization that the deadlines were unrealistic left those tasked with the operation dejected:

The task of rehabilitating the railroad system facilities is proving much more difficult and complicated than we had imagined. The Russians demolished all the interim stations and left behind no repair garages, no frost-proof water tanks, and no switching systems in more or less sound condition. Extremely simple things, such as obtaining nails or boards for the construction work, which in Berlin could be arranged with one call, have become a grave problem here that is giving the crewmen sleepless nights.²⁸

Hitler himself took up the matter on September 30, 1942, when, in a speech in the Reichstag, he reviewed the achievements of the Russian campaign:

Unfortunately, there are no roads, but only fragments of roads. So we have to build roads, too. The first main roads are now being placed in use by our Organisation Todt. In several areas, there are roads that have to be paved over marshy soil. These are areas where it had once been believed that no overland transport could be pushed through.²⁹

Another difficulty stemmed from the fact that the railroads were being rehabilitated very near the front, at danger to the workers' lives. By early 1942, partisans had begun to engage in sabotage, and the OT camps suffered from recurrent lethal assaults and schemes. However, even this obstacle did not halt the work. The involvement of leading German officials and the ceaseless flow of raw materials brought the Sofortprogramm work to completion in April 1942, thereby enabling the Wehrmacht to continue deploying in order to complete the occupation. In the meantime, a plan for the second stage of railroad work, to be completed by October 1942, was elaborated under the

²⁸ Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, p. 190.

²⁹ Vagts, *Hitler's Second Army*, p. 126.

name "Ostbahn 1942." Building materials, ties, signals, switching equipment, lumber, and rails were delivered in shipments under the code-name "Peter."³⁰

Organisation Schmelt's Jews in Operation Barbarossa

A group of 350 bewildered Jews, aged seventeen to twenty-two, found themselves mired in this terrible situation. To their surprise, they were removed from the Reichsautobahn *Judenlager* (camps for Jews), where Organisation Schmelt had interned them, and transported over vast distances to the Russian front as part of the task force that the OT had mobilized for the revitalization of the Russian railroads. This was evidently the only group of Jewish prisoners culled from the forced-labor camps in eastern Upper Silesia. Organisation Schmelt, originally meant to exploit the labor of Jews in eastern Upper Silesia, steadily expanded and was given exclusivity over assigning Jewish forced-laborers to government organizations and private enterprises. Its commander became influential and gained the support of many leading figures in the local and central German administration. The organization's sphere of activity also expanded quickly, and forced-labor camps for Jews were established not only across Upper Silesia but in Lower Silesia and the Sudetenland as well. The organization amassed power and generated handsome profits that were deposited in a separate account of the *Reichsführer*. These profits were gained by assigning Jews to hard labor, such as repairing roads that had been damaged in bombardments, building new roads, deforestation, and construction. On September 13, 1940, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, HSSPF (The Higher SS and Police Leader) in Upper Silesia, reported that "the *Reichsführer* SS gave instructions yesterday that an effort must now be made to concentrate Jews and jobless Poles in closed camps and to put them to use in quarries and roads."³¹

In the aftermath of this directive, some of the forced-labor camps for Jews were established as RAB *Lager-Reichsautobahnlager*—camps in which the

³⁰ Pottgieser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p.44; even after October 1942, plans to complete the railroad construction work by 1944 were drawn up.

³¹ Konieczny, "Organizacja Schmelt," p. 23.

prisoners worked for the Reichsautobahn.³² Although the young men in these camps were put to hard physical labor, nothing they did there could have prepared them for the fate that awaited them in the East. After a short time, companies and enterprises from the Reich began to reach the area and took over other plants. They, too, profited from the Jews' slave labor and made prodigious efforts to increase their quotas of workers.

The orders to allocate German labor forces from the OT and Speer's construction administration and to transfer German railroad employees of the Ostbahn prompted the management of these and other agencies involved to seek additional sources of manpower. This was so as to reduce the number of German workers who would be removed from the Reich, which, in any case, was declining steadily, as mobilization calls preceded these demands. From 1939 on, German citizens were discharged from the OT, inducted into the Wehrmacht, and replaced by "volunteers" from the occupied countries, or civilians from Germany's satellite allies. By early 1940, it was clear that the OT had lost most of its German workers to the Wehrmacht or the war industry; in August 1941, only one-fifth of its labor force was German, and most of these employees served as supervisors.³³

It is difficult to know whether the idea of appealing to the directors of Organisation Schmelt, which, at this stage, supplied manpower for Reichsautobahn projects, the Wehrmacht, the OT, and various enterprises across Upper Silesia, was initiated by those who used this manpower, or by Albrecht Schmelt and his coterie of assistants. Under Himmler's inspiration, the latter were seeking additional sources of income and thought that much could be accomplished here. A confluence of interests seems to have occurred. The decision to attempt to use Jewish workers to revitalize the Russian railroads was considered and examined since prisoners in Organisation Schmelt camps were, in any case, working for the Reichsautobahn in laying tracks in Upper and Lower Silesia.

This hypothesis may be supported and the dispatch of Jews to the Soviet Union may be explained by noting that, in other cases, too, Jewish forced

³² I sabell Sprenger, *Gross-Rosen, Ein Konzentrationlager in Schlesien* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Bohlau Verlag, 1996), p. 245.

³³ Vagts, *Hitler's Second Army*, p. 132.

laborers were assigned to Organisation Schmelt through the mediation of the Reichsautobahn main construction administration in Breslau, the OBR (*Oberste Bauleitung der Reichsautobahnen in Breslau*). For example, the OBR mediated between Luranil, a subsidiary of I.G. Farben, and Organisation Schmelt in the assignment of labor forces to the Luranil construction area in late November 1942 and thereafter.³⁴ To build the east-west railroad system, the RSHA gave the Reichsautobahn authorities special permission to place Jewish slave laborers in camps within the old Reich, provided that they be non-German Jews. The Reichsautobahn transferred the management of these camps, in contrast to the closed camps in which German Jews were interned, to Organisation Schmelt, with which it concluded special collective agreements in respect to their employment.³⁵ Organisation Schmelt also leased Jewish slave laborers to various enterprises, including OT and the Reichsautobahn itself, which operated the camps.

As the shortage of manpower worsened, OT frequently insisted that various industrial firms and enterprises set aside several workers and some equipment for its projects. Sometimes the OT even took over an entire plant, including its personnel and equipment, especially if such a plant belonged to a construction company.³⁶ We have no documentation concerning the deal concluded between the OT and Organisation Schmelt and the Reichsautobahn administration. Thus, we cannot be certain whether the transport was meant to be a pilot venture, in which the potential utility of employing these young Jews would be tested, or whether it was an individual transport placed at the OT's service at a critical period in the winter of 1941/42. It is possible that the Jews' labor was no longer needed in the spring, when the first phase of rehabilitating the railroads was completed, since, in the meantime, there had been a decision to make greater use of the occupied population. In view of the conditions under which these young men worked, human attrition seems not yet to have been at the forefront of the employers' concerns. An examination of the utility of assigning them to this labor did not justify the special preparations that were necessary to put them

³⁴ Sprenger, *Gross-Rosen*, p. 245.

³⁵ Gruner, "Juden bauen die 'Strassen des Führers,'" p. 800.

³⁶ Vagts, *Hitler's Second Army*, p.130.

to work—especially the extra effort needed to assimilate them among the OT people and camouflage their Jewish identity.

Gathering the Jewish Prisoners at the Gross-Masselwitz Camp

Jewish slave labor, as we know, involved various forms of oppression, but the story of this unique transport of 350 Jews from the Organisation Schmelt camps to the distant front near Leningrad is a puzzling episode in which, to this day, more is unknown than known. The few survivors of the difficult operation attempted, as best they could, to describe what happened to them and to their comrades who did not return. However, they were young men, some in their teens, perplexed and confused, not fluent in German and Russian, and therefore unable even to read the signs along the route. They could hardly keep track of their surroundings and, beset by severe cold and hunger, increasingly retreated into themselves.³⁷

It was clear to them that they had been chosen for this task because of their youth and physical strength, and they heard that, after their return, no additional transports were dispatched from the camps for forced labor in Upper Silesia. They were pawns in the hands of influential people who suddenly materialized in the camps, marked them, dressed them in OT-like uniforms, and sent them out with technical crews, German workers, and thousands of foreign slave laborers to make sure that the railroads were in a condition that would allow the Wehrmacht to escape the snare of the Russian winter and continue fighting the war.

Evidently, it was decided to choose young men from four camps—Sakrau, Brande, Eichtal, and Aunrode, all of which belonged to the Reichsautobahn. The prisoners from these camps had already been tested in building the Silesian road and rail infrastructure, and the Reichsautobahn administration was prepared to use Jewish prisoners for work in the East. This matter is reflected in a memorandum sent to the construction units on January 15, 1942, as an appendix to a detailed order from the administration, issued on

³⁷ An examination of written testimonies in the Yad Vashem Archives (YVA) and interviews with two survivors indicate that they were born between 1919 and 1924.

October 31, 1941, concerning the employment of Jews. According to the appendix, all arrangements with regard to the employment of Jews for Reichsautobahn projects applied to the eastern areas as well, and, in any case, care should be taken to place the Jews in labor units only in groups and to keep them separate from other crews.³⁸

The *Judenälteste* at the Sakrau camp was Julius Siegel, an Austrian army officer in World War I, who circled the camp in a green uniform and riding breeches, wearing gleaming boots and a monocle, a whip in his hand. It was Siegel whom the Organisation Schmelt executives chose to assemble the *Osteinsatz*—the transport to the East—and the camps that worked for the Reichsbahn were asked to allocate a certain number of prisoners for it.

The candidates were concentrated at the Gross-Masselwitz camp near Breslau, where massive warehouses issued essential equipment for the campaign in the East and where thousands of sleighs and hundreds of thousands of pairs of skis had been gathered for shipment. *Sturmbahnführer*-SS Heinrich Lindner, Schmelt's deputy, visited the Brande camp and conducted a *Selektion* among the prisoners, at the end of which 200 young men were chosen and, like the others, taken to Gross-Masselwitz. Henschild, known among the camp prisoners as the "limper," or the "horse trader," visited the Eichtal camp as part of his function as examiner and selector of prisoners for assignment to various plants.

All the selected prisoners were taken by truck to Gross-Masselwitz, where they were housed in two barracks and separated from the other prisoners in this camp.³⁹ That night, they were given food in a quantity and of a quality to which they were no longer accustomed. They were not sent out to work the next morning, and in the afternoon again they received unusually generous rations: a thick, rich soup. For the next few days, various German committees visited the camp, examined the men, and performed an additional selection. During this time, the men were isolated from the other prisoners and pampered in a way that piqued their curiosity:

³⁸ Circular from the Reichsbahn administration, YVA, 051/66; *Verzeichnis der Haftstätten unter dem Reichsführer SS, 1939–1945, Konzentrationslager und deren Aussenkommandos sowie andere Haftstätten unter dem Reichsführer SS in Deutschland und deutsche besetzten Gebieten* (Arolsen: 1979), p. 398.

³⁹ Testimony of Avraham Timberg, YVA, 03/8211.

First of all, regardless of anything else that happened—it improved the state of mind. If you have what to eat, that comes first.... We were given semolina soup with milk and sugar. We thought they had gone mad, we did not believe such a drastic change could happen...but we did not know what was awaiting us.⁴⁰

One day, the men were taken to the parade yard, where *Hauptsturmführer*-SS Knoll, another Schmelz representative (it seems that most of the organization's executives were involved in preparing the transport), selected the 350 healthiest and strongest men, many of whom stood out for their fair hair. They were lined up in ranks of five and made to perform military-order drills under the baton of Julius Siegel. They even practiced leaping off moving trains. Some of these drills were carried out at night, "as if we'd been drafted into the army: marching drills, cap on, cap off, and it had to be done in one smack so they'd hear it when we placed the caps on our legs, and in the main, we walked back and forth."⁴¹

The next day, they were given new clothing, quasi-uniforms of thick dark-green fabric, including pants, a short jacket, a black overcoat without a lining, an armband on the right sleeve bearing the inscription *Arbeitseinsatz der Reichsbahn—OT* with an embossed swastika underneath. They were given dark blue berets (some survivors remember the berets being black) and new shoes made of thick cloth, punctuated with laces, and wooden soles.

We didn't know what was going on. Suddenly Jews with armbands with a swastika and the Reichsbahn. We did not know what was happening here. Those who returned from work looked from afar, unable to believe their eyes when they saw us, as if it were Purim, and some of us were even proud.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.; the testimony of Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/ 1646, provided a similar account, both in his written testimony and in an interview with the author in November 1997. Pinhas Gleitman, YVA, 03/3810, mentioned in his testimony that the men were given inoculations and work permits, but the other survivors make no reference to this.

As a supplement, each prisoner received three blankets, which he rolled in army fashion, and a rucksack. After receiving the clothing, they spent another day in the barracks, idle and well fed. They were told several times that they were about to leave for security work that would enable Germany to advance on the eastern front, and they had the feeling that those dispatching them were making sure that their national identity would remain unknown. They discovered that the German press at that time carried reports about volunteers who were heading for labor in the East, and the matter was coupled with a vigorous advertising campaign. They were repeatedly told, “You’re no longer Jews but a German labor unit,” although the official who said this, sensing that he was getting carried away, hurriedly corrected himself: “You’re Jews, but not like those Jews in the camps.” He even noted, “Today you’re getting supplies just like those of the Wehrmacht.”⁴³ On innumerable occasions, the men were told emphatically that they were about to take part in defeating the Russians and/or were threatened with death if they dared to reveal their nationality and identity to anyone. As part of the camouflage, the outer indication of their Jewish identity—the “lice path” marked on their heads—was also cared for. During their stay in Gross-Masselwitz, all their hair was shaved so that it would grow back fully.

This thorough attention to detail and the camouflaging of identity indicates that the need to employ Jews did not inspire the OT administration to overlook ideology and racial doctrine; the men’s identity was masked in order to conceal the decision to include Jews in the task force in the East. This pathetic endeavor violated Fritz Todt’s earlier policy:

It is out of the question to assign Jews to Reichsautobahn construction sites. However, there is no objection to assigning labor forces indirectly related to roadbuilding in the Reich to related enterprises, such as stone and gravel quarries. In that fashion, they may free up German labor forces for the road work.⁴⁴

Thus, the men spent two full weeks doing nothing but drills.

⁴³ Testimony of Avraham Hornung, YVA, 03/6441.

⁴⁴ Gruner, *Juden bauen die ‘Strassen des Führers,’* p. 789.

Two weeks later, in the autumn of 1941 (apparently in November), a senior representative of Organisation Schmelt came and announced—according to the testimonies—that they were to march “*von Westen nach Osten, von Moskau nach London*”; that if they did their work for Germany well, the Jews would be given Palestine at the end of the war, and that those who failed to perform well would be punished with death. He repeatedly stressed the need for proper behavior.

Julius Siegel turned to the Schmelt representative and issued a solemn and innocent request that attests, more than anything else, to the confusion and vagueness that prevailed at this time among the Jews of eastern Upper Silesia who were interned in the camps. The request was to take care of the departing men’s families. At the end of the roll call, with the Germans’ consent, Siegel ordered the prisoners to sing Hatikvah.⁴⁵ This surreal occasion—a group of Jews festooned with swastikas, standing and singing the Jewish national anthem in the presence of saluting Wehrmacht soldiers—thrilled the men, but also filled them with dread. After all, they were marching toward a threatening and unknown future.

The strangeness gave some of the men ominous premonitions. Several young camp inmates slipped out of the chosen groups and subsequently blessed their good fortune when they heard what had become of their comrades.⁴⁶ Even Julius Siegel, who had prepared and trained the men for the departure, did not join the transport. One of the departees was Dr. Leitner, the group’s physician, who would play a role of the highest importance in determining the men’s fate.⁴⁷

After the roll call, the German officers left, and the group of Jews was surrounded with *Volksdeutsche* guards armed with heavy machine guns and escorted by dogs. One guard was posted for every ten Jews. With this

⁴⁵ The identity of the organization’s representative is not clear. Some believed that it was Schmelt himself; others identified him as Knoll, a senior official in the organization, who frequently visited the camp to conduct inspections and select slave laborers for various other camps.

⁴⁶ Testimonies of Yitzhak Eichenbaum, YVA, 03/9852; Shlomo Freiman, YVA, 03/4594; and Elyakim Warszawski, YVA, 03/9079.

⁴⁷ Dr. Leitner, who was placed in the group to be its physician, played a key role in determining the men’s fate. Before he headed to the East, he had served as a physician at the Eichtal camp, where he was not overly liked by the prisoners because of his strictness and reticence in offering assistance. By virtue of his devoted care for the men in the transport, the Jews in the camp were grateful to him.

accompaniment, and under orders to avoid all contact with the surroundings, they marched out of the Gross-Masselwitz camp in military fashion to Breslau (Wroclau), 12 kilometers away. As the men passed through the streets of Breslau en route to the railroad station, passers-by stopped, gazed at them, and took an interest in where they were going. In the main, however, they were puzzled about the marchers' identity because of their unusual, intriguing appearance—uniformed men with swastika armbands, whose heads were shaved and who marched under heavy guard.

The men thought that the military order of the procession had a purpose: We marched like soldiers; after all, we had been trained to do so. They wanted the townspeople to think that we were volunteers heading for work to the Soviet Union, volunteers...and we did not think anything. We wanted to know how it would turn out, where they were sending us after the nice words, what they wanted of us.⁴⁸

The Trip to the East

A military freight train was waiting at the station. The men were locked in separate freight cars, thirty to forty men per car. Benches had been installed in the cars but were too few for all the prisoners. Many had to crouch on the floor next to the latrine bucket, which—since the doors of the cars were not opened for the first five days of the trip—quickly overflowed. The other cars were reserved for OT engineers and skilled crewmen, Polish forced laborers, and Wehrmacht soldiers.

Even during the trip, the young men's guards took an antagonistic attitude toward them. Most of the guards were Romanian soldiers from Bukovina; a few of them spoke Yiddish, identified the Jewish prisoners, and informed them that they had formerly worked for Jews and now intended to seize the opportunity to avenge themselves for their erstwhile employers' "exploitation." They frequently beat and abused the men during the trip.

On the way, the train made brief stops on the sidings, but the men were not allowed to leave the cars and were not always given food. They could not

⁴⁸ Testimony of Avraham Hornung, YVA, 03/6441.

identify the landscape that they crossed; only by asking railroad employees did they discover that they were traversing eastern Prussia.

The trip took about two weeks. They traveled via Königsberg and were first allowed to step out of the cars in Kovno (Kaunas), where they used the opportunity to bathe in the snow. A few of them had hoped to flee upon reaching Soviet territory, but, by now, they realized that their unfamiliarity with the language and the topography precluded a successful escape.⁴⁹ The cars were unlocked after Kovno, and the train stopped in Vilna (Vilnius), too. As they crossed the occupied territories, the men saw devastation and desolation everywhere.

Toiling for the OT

After two weeks of travel, as the men were increasingly affected by the severe cold under the white sky of the winter nights, the convoy reached its destination. The train stopped at Sebezh, a town 200 kilometers from Leningrad, where OT had set up a collection, transit, and staff camp.⁵⁰ In Sebezh, the Wehrmacht people requisitioned fifty men from the transport and ordered them to transfer cargo from the German train to a local train. Soviet war prisoners, en route to POW camps in the Reich, were placed aboard the German train.

From the moment they arrived, the Jewish laborers were put to work clearing snow and laying rails, because, in the absence of suitable tracks, the Wehrmacht commanders had to use sleighs in order to move supplies from the German train to the front. The rest of the men in the transport continued eastward on a local train until they reached Chikhachevo.

Every day they had to walk 5 or 6 kilometers to work in their painful new shoes, the deep snow clinging to their soles. The work was performed in labor details and had to be done quickly. One detail removed snow from the tracks, another cleared the accumulated ice off the ties, a third dismantled the rails, a fourth re-installed them at the proper gauge, and the last detail fastened them with metal spikes that could be driven only with sledgehammers. It was

⁴⁹ Testimony of Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646.

⁵⁰ Testimonies of Avraham Timberg, YVA, 03/8211, Shimon Balicki, YVA, 03/1246, and Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/646.

Sisyphian labor, since the areas cleared of snow were often blanketed with new snow.

The cold and the brutal labor soon began to take a toll on the prisoners, and many of them simply sat down and let themselves freeze to death. The doctor of the transport, Leitner, pleaded with them to keep moving at all times in order to maintain blood circulation, since only intensive physical effort could spare them from freezing.⁵¹

As the work progressed, the large group stopped in Idritsa, formed labor details, and began to work along the track—heading eastward toward Mayevo and Trigucha, not far from Welikiye Luki.⁵² The group that had been taken to Idritsa, where the OT concentrated incoming transports from the West, heard from the supervisors that they were the first group and that their contribution would determine whether there was reason to remove additional groups of Jewish slave laborers from the Organisation Schmelt camps.⁵³

As they toiled, the members of the transport encountered local Jews who had also been assigned to the work. They identified these Jews as such because each wore a white armband with a Star of David. However, their attempt to engage the locals in conversation failed, because the local Jews were deterred by the sight of the uniforms and swastikas and because no one was allowed to approach them. The transport men called out, “*Gut shabbes*” and “*Shema Yisroel*,” to no avail. One of the transport men did converse with a local young woman who was unloading gravel; she told him that all the Jews had been removed from the town.

As they progressed along the track, the men came to a town whose population had obviously been deported very shortly before their arrival. They entered homes that had *mezuzot* on the doorposts and prayerbooks on the tables. On a table in one home, they found a bundle of letters from a son serving on the Leningrad front; in a doctor’s home they found leftovers of food that had just been prepared. For lack of choice, the men in the transport used

⁵¹ Testimony of Avraham Timberg, YVA, 03/8211.

⁵² Two survivors mentioned Trigucha. In accordance with the path that the work followed as it progressed, they may have been referring to a town named Gorushki, near Sebez; see attached map.

⁵³ Testimony of Alexander Weinreich, YVA, 03/3810.

furniture that they found to stoke the fireplace and ease the chill to some extent.

Many German enterprises operated in the area, moving machinery and equipment to the occupied territories in Russia. Teams of engineers and white-collar workers were also brought in as part of the OT task forces, and the young Jews worked alongside them and under their supervision. One of the survivors recalled the name of *Bauführer* Hanke, a German engineer about sixty years old who abused them from the very first day. Their national identity was no longer a secret, and the fact that Hanke allowed himself to beat them and call them “a lice-infested bunch” indicates that no one tried to maintain the charade any longer. The Jewish prisoners were treated more severely and subjected to greater abuse here than in the camps in Silesia. However, not all the OT people were insensitive. Many engineers treated the prisoners decently and even availed themselves of a Jewish prisoner who worked near the fuel pump. They turned to him to fill their cigarette lighters because the supply problems had caused a severe shortage of fuel, and he did not inform on them even when he was interrogated about the dwindling stocks of fuel in the tank.⁵⁴

The men were housed in freight-train cars that advanced along the rails as the track was laid and the gauge narrowed. They were placed in the cars farthest from the locomotive and, thus, could not even benefit from the heat it emitted as temperatures outside fell to -36 ° C. They were given scanty rations, and the bread was so hard that they had to slice it with a saw, or smash it with an axe. In the afternoon, the men were given a half-hour break, during which they were fed a soup that also froze as soon as it was poured into the bowls. The survivors noted that the other workers were no better off and that everyone in the area—soldiers, civilians, and slave laborers—suffered from similar conditions.⁵⁵

In one respect, however, the young Jews were treated differently. The fact that they were housed in the rear cars of the train, as described above, was calculated. Contrary to what could naturally be expected, the supervisors

⁵⁴ Testimony of Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646.

⁵⁵ Testimonies of Yosef Anzel, *ibid.*; Avraham Hornung, YVA, 03/6441; and Avraham Timberg, YVA, 03/8211.

placed the locomotive at the *end* of the train and not at the front. Thus, the Jewish workers were at the front of the train as it progressed along the track. This decision was the result of cynical but practical thinking. At that time partisans had begun launching attacks along the tracks, terrorizing the helpless Germans in their vicinity at night. The partisans would appear at night and reposition switches or move the special sign that marked the end of the track that had been laid each day. Thus, on many occasions, the locomotives would move ahead in the morning in the direction of the misleading marking, overturn, and drag cars after them, injuring workers and damaging machinery. Once the supervisors placed the locomotives at the back of the train and the Jewish members of the transport in the front, no one was upset any longer when these cars derailed and overturned. However, the snows of “General Winter” came to the Jewish workers’ assistance more than once, by breaking their fall as they were thrown from the overturning cars.

The labor forces moved eastward and northward as the track-laying work progressed. Often they heard echoes from shelling from the front nearby, and German soldiers appeared among them in white uniforms, passing them noiselessly on their skis. Sometimes the convoy and the workers were subjected to aerial bombardments; as the German workers hurriedly sought places to hide, the Jewish transport men plunged deep into the snow and, unsheltered, watched the members of the “master race” scamper frantically.⁵⁶ During their four months in the East, the young men were unable to bathe or change their clothes; on Sundays they were able to wash only their armbands. All contracted frostbite; even those who owned gloves had to remove them because they stuck to the rails and impeded the work. They had to work with exposed hands, causing their skin to peel. They suffered bleeding wounds and frostbite on their noses, fingers, and toes, and were exposed to various diseases. To treat their frostbitten limbs in the absence of medical instruments other than a first-aid kit that one of the men had brought from the Eichtal camp, they removed necrotic skin with scissors.

They worked from dawn to dusk, including Sundays, and were locked in the cars at night. They often cried during those nights. Some lost their sanity, and

⁵⁶ Ibid.

many succumbed and froze to death.⁵⁷ They were allowed to visit the latrine only as a group, and at night they relieved themselves in their sealed cars, causing filth, lice, and disease to spread. Only a few brave men stepped out regularly to shake the lice off their clothes and plunge into the deep snow for a “bath.”

They were continually hungry, because their rations, which were always frozen, were composed of 1 kilogram of bread every three days and a bowl of cold soup as a supplement. This wretched diet was not reserved for them alone; the soldiers encamped nearby were not fed more generously. As most of the young Jews had the advantage of not being addicted to smoking, they were able to swap their rather generous allotments of cigarettes and tobacco for bread and cooked potatoes from Russian women who worked nearby and from elderly peasants who yearned for tobacco more than anything else.

The few survivors have vague recollections of the short hours of rest that they were given. Each man sank into his corner and attempted to warm himself as best he could; no one was predisposed to conversation, or any kind of cultural or religious activity. The survivors recall only one exception: when they took the opportunity one day to crowd into a railroad-station building that had a working heater, one of them suddenly recalled that, as he calculated it, that day was Purim. This prompted them to begin sharing memories of home and various anecdotes about the festival—but nothing more.⁵⁸

As the work advanced eastward, the prisoners were delivered in trains, at about eighty men per car, to a location near Welikiye Luki, where they were quartered in abandoned wooden barracks and went to work on foot. From there, as stated, they moved northward to Chikhachevo, near Pskov, where they received better treatment, because the entire task force—soldiers, civilian workers, forced laborers, and Jews—shared the same living conditions. The terrible winter blunted the antipathy, and the anti-Jewish abuse stopped. Only those who did sloppy work were punished.

The living and working conditions that the OT provided throughout the occupied territories where the transport men worked were a consequence of the Russians’ scorched-earth policy. As the tracks snaked through fields and

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646 and Shimon Balicki, YVA, 03/1246.

forests, only charred ruins could be seen where settled localities had been. Partisans' attacks and sabotage against the OT work mounted with each passing month. Aerial strafing often forced the labor groups to abandon their work places in panic and leave behind equipment and tools, and the supervisors had to assign numerous OT employees to sentry and guard duty. The guards often outnumbered the workers.

Typhus Epidemic

As a result of the harsh living conditions, terrible cold, scarce food, overcrowding, filth, and poor sanitary conditions, the prisoners contracted various illnesses. The most debilitating was a typhus epidemic that broke out among the Jews. A young man from Kłubock was the first victim. However, his illness was not diagnosed at once since his symptoms resembled colds and influenza, which were routine matters. Several days passed before Dr. Leitner made the correct diagnosis. He then decided to conceal the information from the Germans, and buried the now-deceased victim in the snow.⁵⁹ When another prisoner, from Sosnowiec, came down with the disease, Leitner tried to move him to a hospital in Idritsa, claiming that he had come down with pneumonia. The German supervisors acceded to Leitner's request and assigned another prisoner to escort the patient. As they made their way in a military truck, the patient died, and his comrade buried him at the side of the road.

The escort went on to Idritsa and reported his arrival to the German supervisor at OT headquarters, but concealed the information about the epidemic. The supervisor decided to keep him there and annex him to a labor force of Polish workers, also employed by the OT, that was about to set out toward Sebezh. In the meantime, the commander decided to house him for several days in an empty room ordinarily occupied by OT men. Only the commander knew that he was Jewish. Two days later, the young Jew was placed with the force of Polish workers, but they discovered his identity and, unlike the German commander, refused to let him stay with them in the truck.

⁵⁹Alexander Weinreich was a relative of Dr. Leitner's who assisted him as an orderly. Yosef Anzel remarked in the interview with the author that he had watched Dr. Leitner being collected in a sleigh in the mornings and taken to patients in the vicinity.

He had to ride on the roof of the vehicle, and he did so for a full day until, frozen and ill, he returned to Sebezh.⁶⁰

There he encountered several members of the small group that had been separated from the others at the beginning of the trip. Horrified at the sight of his serious condition, they hurriedly gave him hot tea and rubbed his frozen body. When he recovered, they gave him an account of what had been happening to them. In the meantime, the rest of the group from Chikhachevo had been taken to Sebezh, and the entire party was housed in the barracks' hall. Many from the Chikhachevo group had contracted typhus, and, within a few days, some of them began dying in Sebezh as well. Dr. Leitner did his best to stem the epidemic and separate the sick from the healthy. He placed the patients behind a partition at the end of the hall, but the disease took such a toll and spread so rapidly that half of the group was no longer fit for labor.

The camp commander, an OT official, threatened to shoot them all if they did not report to work, considering their behavior an act of evasion and attempted sabotage. This is when Dr. Leitner earned his place in heaven in the prisoners' eyes. The prisoners had not cared much for Leitner when he was an inmate in the slave-labor camps in Silesia, but, on the journey to the East, he had proved to be the transported men's defender, an uncrowned leader who toiled indefatigably to aid and treat the ill. Even the OT supervisors, whom he also treated frequently, appreciated him.⁶¹ Here, however, he labored with empty hands, for he was given no medications.

As his men continued to die, he summoned the chief military physician and described the situation to him--albeit without disclosing everything. His intention was to ask the military physician to persuade the commander to return the men to Germany. Leitner prepared for the physician's visit by placing the less ill at the front of the hall and the serious cases at the back, hoping that the physician would not reach them. He also tried to remove the filth and stench that pervaded the area. The military physician realized at once that an epidemic was at hand and agreed to recommend that the men be sent back to Germany. However, the camp commander vehemently opposed this idea and threatened to shoot them all.

⁶⁰ Testimony of Alexander Weinreich, YVA, 03/3810.

⁶¹ Testimony of Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646; and Alexander Weinreich, YVA, 03/3810.

The Trip Back

The rumor about the epidemic that had broken out in the Jewish transport eventually caused panic among the local supervisors and Wehrmacht people in Sebezh, and the prisoners heard from workers that the sector command had ordered the healthy prisoners to be returned to the authority of Organisation Schmelt in Silesia. An OT representative came the next day and ordered Dr. Leitner to prepare to evacuate the healthy workers and to abandon the typhus patients to their fate: *Die ganze Scheisse zurück nach Deutschland, aber nur die Transportfähige* (“All the s...t back to Germany, but only the travel worthy”). Dr. Leitner protested this order to the commander, reminding him that when the task force had left for the East, OT representatives had promised that the men would be under military authority and within a military framework. Therefore, he argued, all of them, sick and healthy alike, must be returned to Germany. His request was met.⁶²

An episode of extraordinary resolve, devotion, and mutual assistance ensued that night, as the transport was organized and the feverish typhus patients were half-led, half-dragged by their healthy comrades—who were also frail and affected by the cold to varying extents—to railroad cars that stood on a siding 3 or 4 kilometers away. They repeated this trek several times, until all of the ill were delivered, amidst contemptuous and derisive remarks from soldiers who stood and watched them. The healthy men, driven by a sense of responsibility for the patients’ lives, dragged their comrades under their armpits and marched in this fashion, limping and covered with strips of sacks and tattered blankets.

At the railroad station, after receiving small quantities of bread and jam, they were taken to the cars. The healthy men were skeptical. Fearing a trap, they did not believe they would be returned to Germany and repressed all hope until the train actually began to move. In the cars, Dr. Leitner arrayed the men in pairs, one ill and one healthy, and warned them that they must continue to conceal the epidemic from the Wehrmacht soldiers who escorted the transport. As they traveled, they were given cold but edible food, which

⁶² Testimony of Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646.

sufficed for the healthy men since the ill were unable to eat. The trip westward was no less difficult than the trip eastward. The cars were sealed; the men became increasingly thirsty and pleaded for water at stations where the train stopped. Even though compassionate civilians and soldiers were sometimes helpful, more prisoners died during the trip, and their bodies remained in the cars. Whenever the surviving men were allowed to step out, they mixed jam with snow and fed it to the ill and buried the dead in the snow.

Their first stop was Vilna, where the authorities decided to take them to a large disinfection facility used by the Wehrmacht. Here, too, they had to conceal the fact that they were carrying typhus, and Dr. Leitner ordered all of them, including the ill, to stand for a roll-call. They were led to the disinfection center in groups of fifty, to the astonishment of the team of Jewish doctors and nurses there, who did not expect to find Jews in a Wehrmacht facility. The men were given devoted care; for the first time in more than four months, they bathed in hot water and had their wounds dressed and their frostbitten limbs treated. An attempt was made to remove the swarms of scalp lice they were carrying.

After the disinfection, they were led back to the freight train and retraced the route to Germany via Kovno and east Prussia. In Kovno they underwent another disinfection—a superficial one—and took cold showers. The freezing and dying resumed. The cars were unlocked on the trip and at each stop the healthy prisoners were given permission to step out and stretch briefly. At a demolished railroad station in Lithuania, they were allowed to open the steam pipe of a locomotive and take hot showers.⁶³

The guard regimen slackened. The Romanian guards were not annexed to the trip westward, and the men's only escorts were a few elderly Wehrmacht soldiers. They even showed them a circumscribed sympathy and, as the epidemic continued to claim casualties in the course of the trip, allowed them to toss decomposing bodies out of the cars. On the fifth day they reached Königsberg. Representatives of the small Jewish community that still existed there came to the train station with a small truck, loaded fifty corpses aboard,

⁶³ Ibid.

and promised to have them buried.⁶⁴ As the men waited at the station, they experienced an extraordinary gesture: civilians who were waiting for a train carrying German wounded, which was late in arriving, handed the Jewish prisoners generous portions of food.

In March 1942, after a ten-day trip, 120–150 men—fewer than half of those who had set out—returned to their point of departure in Breslau.⁶⁵ The train stood at the station for a full day, but no one gave a thought to the prisoners who were locked inside the cars. “The OT people have rid themselves of us; they’ve delivered the goods,” is how they felt.⁶⁶ The next day, several trucks pulled up and drove the men back to Gross-Masselwitz. Upon their arrival, the other prisoners stared at them in astonishment, finding them shaggy and bearded, dehydrated and pale. They were quarantined in a stone building and made to lie in bed for several days, no one taking any interest in their fate. The epidemic flared again, as the feverishly ill wallowed in their sweat and the disease spread among the camp prisoners and the Germans.

Several days later, the transport men were placed aboard a train and taken to the Annaberg camp, where they found their relatives’ last letters. All other Jews had already been removed from this camp, and Dr. Leitner demanded that additional doctors be brought in to help eradicate the epidemic. Several days later, Dr. Shmuel Mittelman was delivered to the camp from Sosnowiec. As Mittelman explained it, one day in the spring of 1942, he was summoned to the Judenrat building in Sosnowiec, and Moshe Merin, head of the “Zentrale” (Zentrale der Jüdischen Ältestenräte in Ostoberschlesien, Central Office of the Jewish Councils of Elders in Eastern Upper Silesia), escorted him to Heinrich Lindner of Organisation Schmelt. Lindner asked him, “You’re a doctor? In Annaberg I have people who have come down with the flu; they have to be cured. You will go there today, under guard. Do you know the meaning of Auschwitz?”

After being allowed to return to his home to pack some clothes, Mittelman went to the railroad station under the escort of a SS man, who arrested a Jewish passerby in the street and ordered him to carry the doctor’s suitcase.

⁶⁴ Testimony of Alexander Weinreich, YVA, 03/3810.

⁶⁵ The survivors mention March or April 1942, as the time they returned to Silesia.

⁶⁶ Testimony of Avraham Timberg, YVA, 03/8211.

Reaching Annaberg, Dr. Mittelman was nonplussed to find a clutch of feverish men who were hardly able to stand. He realized at once that they were ill with typhus, not influenza, and felt the weight of the responsibility he had been given: “As a physician, I was horrified by the fact that an epidemic had erupted in the very heart of Silesia.”⁶⁷

Dr. Mittelman went straight to work. He had no medicines and, apart from Dr. Leitner, no medical personnel. Quickly he dispatched Dr. Leitner to the sanitation department of the Judenrat in Sosnowiec to ask for assistance, and he decided to tell the camp commander, an OT official, the truth about disease. The area was quarantined, and several medics and nurses arrived from the ghetto. Several days later, a committee of high-ranking officers from Oppeln reached the camp but did not enter, lest they be infected. Having disclosed the disease, Dr. Mittelman was now subordinated to the Oppeln district physician, with whose mediation patients’ blood samples were taken and sent to an institute in Bytom. The patients were disinfected again, pails of boiled water were brought in for those who were thirsty, and the healthier men administered the water to the weaker. Drugs were difficult to obtain, even with the money the Judenrat provided in order to buy them, but Dr. Mittelman was given permission to buy drugs at a pharmacy in town.

Despite the difficulties, Dr. Mittelman managed to save most of the patients within four weeks. The twelve who died were given a full Jewish burial at a nearby cemetery. After a month the young men had recovered to such an extent that they were able to slip into the camp warehouse and pilfer potatoes that were rotting there. As they convalesced, they were assigned to undemanding labors under the guard of superannuated Wehrmacht soldiers and members of the auxiliary police. They stayed in Annaberg until Henschild arrived in July 1942, conducted a roll call, observed the order drills that they were required to perform in the yard, and informed Dr. Mittelman, “Yes, I am satisfied, but you’re staying with me, and now the young men will be sent to work again.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Testimony of Dr. Shmuel Mittelman, YVA, 03/2646. Dr. Mittelman was subsequently sent to Auschwitz and liberated in Dachau.

⁶⁸ Ibid; Henschild posted Dr. Mittelman to the Jewish hospital in Sosnowiec; Dr. Leitner and the team of medics remained in the Annaberg camp. Dr. Leitner survived and emigrated to the United States after the war.

At the end of the roll call, Henschild dispersed the men among three camps: Greiditz, Marktstädt, and Bunzlau.⁶⁹ The reputations of the surviving members of the transport preceded them, and in each camp they were treated with esteem and amazement. “Were you part of the ‘Osteinsatz’?” they were asked, and efforts were made to give them easy work, as befitting the survivors of such an arduous campaign.⁷⁰

However, their glory was short-lived. After they were returned to the status of prisoners in Organisation Schmelt camps, they were doomed to the fate of all Jews in eastern Upper Silesia who were interned in slave-labor camps. When Organisation Schmelt was disbanded in 1944, they were transferred to the auspices of Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen and became nameless concentration-camp prisoners.

Conclusion

As has been described above, there is no available documentation on the decision-making process that led to the annexation of men from the RAB-*Lager* to the transport. Also lacking is documentation on how the Reichsautobahn, the OT, and Organisation Schmelt finalized the transaction. It cannot be determined from the documentation whether there was a plan to send additional transports of Jews from the camps in Silesia. The survivors themselves had the impression that “It was an experiment. We knew that more people were supposed to come. We were the first; they decided to test us [to see] whether we would do this work successfully.”⁷¹ At a subsequent phase, “We knew they were thinking about sending us back to Germany, that they had not been successful with this transport.”⁷² Another survivor reported confidently, “We found out that after us they would send no more Jews to work in the East.”⁷³

⁶⁹ Testimonies of Josef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646; Gustav Izkovitz, YVA, M-49/498; and Aharon Urbach, YVS 03/5251; Hans W. Wollenberg, *...Und der Alptraum wurde zum Alltag, Autobiographischer Bericht eines Jüdischen Arztes über NS-ZAL in Schlesien (1942-1945)* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlag, 1992), p. 66.

⁷⁰ Testimonies of Avraham Hornung, YVA, 03/6441; Yosef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646; and Alexander Weinreich, YVA, 03/3810.

⁷¹ Testimony of Avraham Hornung, YVA, 03/6441.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Testimony of Josef Anzel, YVA, 03/1646.

Be this as it may, the policy of employing Jewish forced laborers from Organisation Schmelt underwent a substantive change in the spring of 1942. It was decided to shut down and disband the camps that were run directly by the Reichsautobahn administration and to transfer the Jewish laborers to new camps, under the direct supervision of Organisation Schmelt. These had been built near or on the premises of munitions and war-production enterprises. Himmler, circumventing the ideological aspect, gave these Jews top priority for assignments to building projects and service on behalf of the war economy. After he issued a directive to this effect, the camps grew and expanded, and the organization developed a procedure by which to assign slave laborers to various enterprises and to transfer them from place to place at the enterprises' behest.

Regarding the identity of the workers it mobilized, it was the OT practice to set clear rules and to allow only German citizens to wear uniforms. There were two purposes in dressing German workers in uniform: the military nature of the OT; and the need to give the workers a sense of uniqueness. The organization's public-relations official explained the latter issue:

Since the foreign labor forces in the organization are increasing and German workers may infer that they are only slightly better, if at all, than war prisoners and foreign workers, they should be given their own uniforms.⁷⁴

Apart from the core group of Germans in OT regalia, certain foreign workers (*Frontarbeiter*) who were allowed to take the oath of allegiance to the *Führer* carried the OT emblem on their berets, lanyards from their epaulettes, and an armband with a rank on their left sleeve. Additional groups of foreigners, defined as *Einsatzarbeiter*, were recognized as fit to work for the OT only after they passed a three-month trial period. They were placed on a volunteer status, assigned to special units, did not carry the emblem on their berets, wore brown armbands, and were not required to pledge allegiance to the *Führer*. This group, among all OT workers in the East, seems to have been the closest to the definition of the Jewish transport, which was unique among OT groups in terms of its uniform-like attire.

⁷⁴ Vagts, *Hitler's Second Army*, p. 129.

A similar status was given to auxiliary workers of various non-German nationalities—*Hilfsarbeiter*—whom OT mobilized for labor. However, the *Hilfsarbeiter*, mainly Poles and Czechs, were put to work as temporary employees of the OT. They did not receive a trial period, did not wear uniforms, were not sent to the front, and were not recognized as *Einsatzarbeiter*. The OT also hired Germans who were unfit for military service; they wore civilian clothing and brown armbands with the inscription “*Arbeit für OT.*”⁷⁵ All workers were required to have an OT labor permit, but the Jewish survivors do not recall having received documents of any kind.

The strenuous effort that was invested by the Organisation Schmelt management in medical care for the men who survived the transport is also noteworthy. Especially when we compare this to the simultaneous deportations of the Jews of eastern Upper Silesia and of the sick and frail Jewish forced-laborers in all the organization’s camps. The medical team from Sosnowiec that treated the transport men in the Annaberg camp also expressed its amazement about the thorough care they were given. It was exceptional to return Jewish typhus patients to the Reich and give them medical treatment, including medicine. By this time, it seems, the Germans were too short on manpower to forgo the services of young men who had returned from the East after withstanding the rigors of labor there. Perhaps, ironically, the Germans’ decision also reflects a circumscribed admiration for those who had been included in the task force along with German soldiers and civilians.

In April 1942, when the second phase in revitalizing the railroad and bridge system got underway, the Reichsbahn management had to assign 50,000 workers to continue the rail infrastructure work. This time the Reichsbahn did not avail itself of annexed labor forces, and, in a directive on May 18, 1942, the railroad administrations in the occupied areas were instructed to make sure to use local workers and to give them only jobs of importance to war needs. This would make it possible to release German workers and return them to the Reich.⁷⁶ This was also one of the reasons for Albrecht Schmelt’s success in obtaining full control over some thirty *Judenlager* in which, until

⁷⁵ Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt*, p. 171.

⁷⁶ Pottgiesser, *Die Deutsche Reichsbahn*, p. 50.

then, the Reichsautobahn had employed the inmates—an action saliently reflected in the name given to these camps, ZALfJ—*Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden*.⁷⁷ From this time on, the Jewish slave laborers of Organisation Schmelt were assigned to munitions and industrial enterprises that took part in the war effort. In the East the intention was to use the local labor force for subsequent stages of roadbuilding and trackbuilding—even though the employment of the local population proved very problematic, as local workers and members of the occupied peoples began to flee from the work sites and join the partisans.⁷⁸

The building projects in the East were exorbitantly expensive. In 1942 and 1943, 20 million Reichsmarks were spent on jobs in the East, and the total cost of the OT work—keeping its people supplied, and the other expenses for the implementation of Operation Jacob in 1943/44—reached 1,400,000,000 Reichsmarks.⁷⁹ Speer, dissatisfied with the pace and cost of the work, expressed his displeasure on June 22, 1942, when he remarked severely, “The Reichsbahn has no reason to boast of its achievements.”⁸⁰

The first and only attempt to expedite work in the East by bringing Jewish prisoners from Organisation Schmelt labor camps failed. The hundreds of kilometers of track that they laid claimed a high price from the young men who perished and were buried in the snow and from their brethren who survived the transport to the East, only to await further suffering in the Organisation Schmelt camps and the labor camps of Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen.

Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood.

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 29, 2001, pp. 65-109

⁷⁷ Gruner, *Juden bauen die ‘Strassen des Führers,’* p. 803.

⁷⁸ Seidler, *Die Organisation Todt*, p. 100.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 100.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.