

## The Death Marches of Hungarian Jews Through Austria in the Spring of 1945

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### The Deportations of Hungarian Jews to Austria

Deportations of Hungarian Jews to Austria began immediately after Hungary was occupied by the Wehrmacht in March 1944. Together with anti-fascist intellectuals, politicians and public opinion leaders, up to 8,000 Jews were detained.<sup>1</sup> These Jewish prisoners included victims of random arrests, as well as influential people from the political, economic and cultural spheres.

These prisoners were either interned in Hungarian camps or sent over the Austrian border to the Gestapo prison in the Rossau barracks and to the *Arbeitserziehungslager*<sup>2</sup> of Oberlanzendorf outside Vienna. Some of these prisoners were later transported either to the Mauthausen camp near Linz, or to other concentration camps, such as Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hilberg gives the figure of 8,142 Jews; Varga 8,225. See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Revised and Definitive Edition, vol. 2 (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Ltd., 1985), pp. 832; László Varga, "Ungarn," in Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Dimension des Voelkermords. Die Zahl der Juedischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Oldenburg, 1991), p. 341.

<sup>2</sup> These "work training camps" were in reality slave labor camps that the Nazis claimed were to train "social misfits" to work.

<sup>3</sup> Szabolcs Szita, "Ungarische Zwangsarbeiter in Niederoesterreich (Niederdonau) 1944-1945," in *Unsere Heimat. Zeitschrift des Vereines fuer Landeskunde von Niederoesterreich*, vol. 63/1 (1992), p. 31. In 1945, the Gestapo official Karl Kuenzel, commandant of the Oberlanzendorf labor camp, stated: "With the commotion over Horthy in Hungary, I got 200 Hungarian Jews that were sent to the camp. These were mainly from industrial and political circles.;" written report by Karl Kuenzel, December 25, 1945, Landesgericht fuer Strafsachen (LG) Wien als Volksgericht (Vg) 1 Vr 4750/46 against Karl Kuenzel, in Archives of the Austrian Resistance (Dokumentationsarchiv des Oesterreichischen Widerstandes, DOW) E21.341/A, vol. I a. Landesgericht fuer Strafsachen Wien als Volksgericht. After the war special courts, the so-called Volksgerichte (People's Courts), were installed to try Nazi crimes. They were located with the Landesgerichte (district courts) of the four occupation zones in Austria (Russian zone: Vienna; British zone: Graz; American zone: Linz; and French zone: Innsbruck). On April 25, 1944, fifty-three "members of the Hungarian nobility as well as politicians and industrialists from Budapest" arrived in Mauthausen; see Hans Marsalek, *Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen* (Vienna: Oesterreichische Lagergemeinschaft Mauthausen, 1980), 2nd ed., p. 126.

Between May 14 and July 9, 1944, more than 430,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz by means of Eichmann's SS-Sondereinsatzkommando Ungarn (SEK). The SS were assisted by the Hungarian rural police under Major László Ferenczy, with the tacit connivance of the Hungarian puppet regime.<sup>4</sup> Some 75 percent of those who were deported to Auschwitz were sent to the gas chambers either immediately or soon after their arrival. Of those selected for labor, 8,000<sup>5</sup> were deported to the Mauthausen concentration camp and its satellites between May 28 and June 19, 1944, followed by several thousand more after the final evacuation of Auschwitz in January 1945. The subsequent fate of these two groups of deportees to concentration camps will not be discussed in this article.

With the loss of the Eastern territories, the reservoir of so-called "Eastern workers," i.e., civilian workers who had come to the German Reich more or less "voluntarily" for deployment as laborers, also disappeared. In Austria, this led to a catastrophic labor shortage that was felt not only in the war industries but also in agriculture, civilian industry, and trade. The Jews who were crammed together in the Hungarian ghettos waiting to be deported to Auschwitz were an obvious replacement for the Eastern workers.

When 289,357 Jews were shipped out from the Carpatho-Ukraine, northern Transylvania, and the formerly Yugoslavian Bacska between May 4 and June 7, 1944,<sup>6</sup> several of the trains did not proceed to Auschwitz. Instead, they were rerouted to Gaenserndorf on the northern railway line near Vienna. There, at the station, some 3,000 strong young women and men were pulled from the freight cars and forced into slave labor in agriculture and forestry. Some were also assigned to work in large and small industrial firms in the Lower Danube *Gau*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dieter Wisliceny, a key associate of Eichmann's in Hungary, stated after the war that by July 1944, some 458,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported to Auschwitz, with about 108,000 deployed in slave labor; Randolph L. Braham, *The Destruction of Hungarian Jewry. A Documentary Account* (New York: World Federation of Hungarian Jewry, 1963), doc. 440, p. 928. According to László Ferenczy's notes, a total of 434,351 Jews were deported. The Reich Plenipotentiary in Hungary, Edmund Veessenmayer, indicated the number of those deported was 437,402; Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 606 f. László Varga arrives at a figure of 444,152 deportees; Varga, "Ungarn," p. 344.

<sup>5</sup> Marsalek, *Mauthausen*, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Varga, "Ungarn," p. 344. Bacska, the present-day Serbian province of Vojvodina, was annexed from Yugoslavia by Hungary in April 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Gau Niederdonau covered the area of present day Niederoesterreich (Lower Austria), Burgenland, parts of Southern Moravia, and the westernmost parts of Slovakia.

Administratively, they were still under the overall control of Eichmann's SEK, and thus were not absorbed into the concentration-camp system. Rather, they were "distributed" out to employers directly by the labor-exchange offices. The employers were responsible for their housing, food, and detention. Those left in the trains were transported to concentration camps, presumably Auschwitz.<sup>8</sup>

This deployment of Jewish slave laborers in the Lower Danube *Gau* occurred between the end of May and the beginning of June 7.<sup>9</sup> On June 7, 1944, the mayor of Vienna, *SS-Brigadefuehrer* Karl Blaschke, sent a request to the head of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA), Ernst Kaltenbrunner, to provide workers for Vienna. *Regierungspraesident* Delbruegge of the Vienna *Gau* administration had already submitted a similar request to the RSHA in Berlin. On June 30, 1944, Kaltenbrunner informed Blaschke that four evacuation trains, with some 12,000 Hungarian Jews, would be arriving soon.<sup>10</sup> In actual fact, some 15,000 from the ghettos in Szolnok and Debrecen arrived in Strasshof an der Nordbahn at the end of June.<sup>11</sup>

The deployment of these Jews as slave laborers was not only the result of requests to the RSHA for workers by the *Gau* Regional Administration offices (*Gauleitung*) in Vienna and Lower Danube, but was also connected to the efforts of Reszoe (Rudolf) Kasztner, assistant managing director of the Budapest Relief and Rescue Committee, to bargain with Adolf Eichmann for Jewish lives in exchange for deliveries of goods from the West.<sup>12</sup> In the course of these

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<sup>8</sup> See the testimony by Emil Tuchmann in the trial against Siegfried Seidl, LG Wien Vg 1b Vr 770/46, and of Viktor Schwarz in the preliminary investigation against Emil Tuchmann, LG Wien Vg 3e Vr 1955/45. See also Eleonore Lappin, "Der Weg ungarischer Juden nach Theresienstadt," in Miroslav Kárny, Raimund Kemper and Margarita Kárná, eds., *Theresienstaedter Studien und Dokumente 1996* (Prague: Academia Theresienstaedter Initiative, 1996), pp. 52-81; for reports of eyewitnesses and survivors, see pp. 57 f.

<sup>9</sup> Viktor Schwarz testified in 1945 that he had been deported on May 26, 1944, from the Bacska and was deployed in forced labor along with 700 other Jewish prisoners in Lower Austria; testimony by Viktor Schwarz, August 23, 1945, LG Wien Vg 3e Vr 1955/45 against Emil Tuchmann. On June 22, 1944, rural police headquarters in Grosshollenstein reported to the administrative district office in Amstetten regarding the labor deployment of eleven "eastern Hungarian" Jews who had arrived at their workplace on June 8, 1944; DOW E 19.829.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from RSHA Chief Ernst Kaltenbrunner to the mayor of Vienna, *SS-Brigadefuehrer* Blaschke, June 30, 1944, doc. 3803-PS, in *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal*, vol. 33 (Nuremberg, 1949), pp. 167-169.

<sup>11</sup> On the numbers for those deported to Strasshof, see Szita, "Niederoesterreich," pp. 34 f. Strasshof an der Nordbahn was a small city and major junction northeast of Vienna on the main rail line north to Brno in Moravia (and on to Prague and Theresienstadt).

<sup>12</sup> See "Report of the Jewish Rescue Committee, Budapest 1942-1945," presented by Dr. Reszoe Kasztner (Kasztner report), Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), B/7-3; Yehuda Bauer, "The

negotiations — which will not be dealt with in greater detail here — Eichmann had made Kasztner an offer on June 14, approximately two weeks after the first Hungarian Jews had been removed from the deportation trains to Auschwitz and sent as slave laborers to eastern Austria. Eichmann's proposal was to "bring 30,000 Jews into Austria and to put them 'on hold' there"<sup>13</sup>; half of these would originate from Budapest, the other half from the provinces.<sup>14</sup> Eichmann promised Kasztner that if the negotiations yielded concrete positive results, he would free these Jews.

At the same time the deportation trains left Debrecen and Szolnok for Strasshof, the so-called "Palaestinatransport" also left Hungary. The fate of this deportation transport was clearly a signal to the Western powers of SS readiness to cooperate. The prisoners were sent initially from Austria to the special camp attached to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, but were finally released to proceed across the border into Switzerland.<sup>15</sup>

The 15,000 deportees from Debrecen and Szolnok were also not absorbed into the camp system. With the help of the labor-exchange offices, they were allocated to firms in Vienna, Lower Austria, Burgenland, and southern Moravia. There they were put to work at heavy manual labor and frequently had to live under very difficult conditions. Nonetheless, they were not under SS supervision but, rather, under the jurisdiction of personnel from their respective firms. The employers paid specified amounts for their labor to the Vienna-based "Aussenkommando Hungary" headed by Hermann Krumei, which had organized this scheme of labor deployment.<sup>16</sup> The firms deducted the costs for

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Negotiations between Saly Mayer and the Representatives of the S.S in 1944-1945," in Rescuers Attempts During the Holocaust (Jerusalem Yad Vashem, 1977), pp. 44; idem, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Braham, *Politics of Genocide*, pp. 932-976; Eleonore Lappin, "Ungarisch- Juedische Zwangsarbeiter in Wien 1944/45," in Martha Keil and Klaus Lohrmann, eds., *Studien zur Geschichte der Juden in Oesterreich*, vol. 1 (Vienna: Boehlau Verlag, 1994), pp. 140-165.

<sup>13</sup> Kasztner Report, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Since, as will be shown below, the Budapest Jews were not deported, only 15,000 "Jews from the provinces" were sent to Austria.

<sup>15</sup> The release of the deportees in the "Palaestinatransport" into Switzerland took place in two stages. On August 21, 1944, 384 persons crossed the Swiss border; in the early hours of December 7, 1944; they were followed by another 1,368 individuals. See also footnote 12.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann Krumei was the second-ranking functionary of the SEK in Budapest. Siegfried Seidl, Wilhelm Schmidtsiefen and several subordinates in the SEK came together with him to Vienna. *Aussenkommando* was the term for an outlying subcamp or satellite of a concentration camp or POW camp.

accommodations and food for the family members unable to work from the “wages” of the workers.<sup>17</sup>

These Hungarian Jews were *also* an SS bargaining chip — a kind of human collateral — in their negotiations with the Western powers. No selections were carried out in Strasshof among the arriving deportees. Therefore, employers were assigned entire families intact. A sizable proportion of the family members consisted of children, the old, or the infirm. Since able-bodied males had often been conscripted into the labor brigades of the Hungarian army, this group made up only a minority among the deportees. The workers who had already come to Austria in June were integrated into this system, sharing the fate of the Strasshof deportees.

Hungarian Jews were deployed mainly in agriculture and forestry, as well as in construction (mainly clearing rubble) and industrial firms. The Vienna municipality was the largest employer in the Vienna *Gau*, where approximately half of the deportees lived.<sup>18</sup> Despite the harsh living and working conditions, the survival prospects for the slave laborers remained good until shortly before the end of the war.<sup>19</sup> From March 1945 on, these forced laborers were evacuated to Theresienstadt on foot or by rail so as not to fall into the hands of the approaching Red Army.<sup>20</sup> The train deportations to Theresienstadt came to an end when, on March 26, 1945, the station at Strasshof an der Nordbahn was heavily damaged during an Allied bombing raid.<sup>21</sup>

The major proportion of deportees remaining in Vienna and the Lower Danube *Gau* were then transferred to Mauthausen: some were loaded onto trains; but

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<sup>17</sup> Order on the Employment of Jews, issued by President of the *Gau* Labor Office and the Reich Trustee for Labor for the Lower Danube *Gau* Alfred Proksch, June 27, 1944, DOW E 19.829.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Balaban, who had been in charge of the card catalog of deployed Jewish workers located in the SEK central office in Vienna, testified that some 8,000 Hungarian Jews were employed there. An undated list from the Vienna camps indicates just under 6,000 internees; see LG Wien Vg 1 Vr 770, against Siegfried Seidl. The discrepancy in the figures can be explained by the fact that, depending on economic needs, Jewish forced laborers were frequently transferred.

<sup>19</sup> On the organization of labor deployment, see LG Wien Vg 1 Vr 770/46, against Siegfried Seidl; LG Wien Vg 3e Vr 1955/45, against Emil Tuchmann; Kasztner Report, p. 164; Lappin, “Zwangsarbeiter Wien”; idem, “Theresienstadt.”

<sup>20</sup> On March 8, 1945, evacuation transport IV/16 left Vienna with some 1,070 persons, arriving in Theresienstadt that same day; Kasztner Report, p. 164; H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945. Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft. Geschichte, Soziologie, Psychologie* (Mohr Tübingen, 1955), p. 198; letter by H.D. to the author, September 22, 1995; Lappin, “Theresienstadt,” pp. 66 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Josef Neidhart, *Strasshofer Heimatbuch* (Strasshof: Eigenverlag Herbst, 1989), pp. 213 f.

frequently they were herded together and force-marched to the Mauthausen camp on murderous treks during which thousands perished.<sup>22</sup> Some of the deportees succeeded in escaping.

In July 1944, fearful of a coup by the Hungarian right and under pressure from abroad, the Hungarian Regent Miklos Horthy ordered a halt to further deportations of Jews from Hungary.<sup>23</sup> At this point, there were still some 200,000 Jews living in Budapest, along with approximately 80,000 Jewish “labor service conscripts” in the Hungarian army.<sup>24</sup> Jews were permitted to serve in the army only in the “supplementary reserve” and were barred from regular military service. The Jewish “labor conscripts” were deployed as an adjunct to the engineering corps in the Hungarian defense forces and engaged in construction work and clearing land mines on the eastern front or in Hungary itself.<sup>25</sup>

When Horthy declared an armistice between Hungary and the Soviet Union on October 15, 1944, the fascist Arrow Cross (Nyilas), led by Ferenc Szalasi, seized power, aided by the German troops stationed in Hungary. On October 17, 1944, Eichmann returned to Budapest in order to complete the “Final Solution,” which, for all practical purposes, had come to a standstill in Hungary after Horthy had forbidden further deportations on July 7. However, by this juncture in mid-October, the machinery of annihilation in Auschwitz had already been disrupted and shut down. On October 7, 1944, prisoners in the Sonderkommando had destroyed at least one of the gas chambers. A short time later, gassings were halted, and Himmler gave the order to tear down the gas chambers and crematoria. This was carried out in November and December 1944.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, Hans Kammler, head of the construction department in the WVHA (SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt; the Economic-

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<sup>22</sup> The death registration rolls of the Jewish Community in Vienna contain the names of fewer than 600 Hungarian Jews who died between the beginning of June 1944 and early May 1945 in the greater Vienna metropolitan area and were buried at the Vienna Central Cemetery, Fourth Gate. According to Braham’s calculations, some 25 percent of those deported to Strasshof (thus, at least 4,000 individuals) lost their lives; see Braham, *Politics of Genocide*, p. 654.

<sup>23</sup> On the background to this decision, see *ibid.*, pp. 708-716.

<sup>24</sup> Varga, “Ungarn,” pp. 344, 348.

<sup>25</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, pp. 808 ff.; see also Randolph L. Braham, *The Hungarian Labor Service System 1939-1945* (Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1977), pp. 59-139.

<sup>26</sup> “Auschwitz,” in Yisrael Gutman, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1990), vol. 1, p.115

Administrative Main Office), urgently needed workers for the construction of subterranean production facilities for fighters and V-2 rockets.<sup>27</sup> Along the border between Hungary and the German Reich, work had also begun, in early October 1944, on construction of the so-called Southeastern Wall (*Suedostwall*),<sup>28</sup> a system of tank ditches and heavy fortifications intended to halt the Red Army in its advance toward Vienna.<sup>29</sup>

On October 18, Hungarian Interior Minister Gabor Vajna declared his readiness to provide the German Reich with 50,000 Jewish men and women as slave labor. Since there were not enough trains, the Jews forcibly recruited in Budapest were marched, at the end of October, toward the border to Hegyeshalom. Between November 6 and December 1, 1944, the fascist Arrow Cross handed over 76,209 Jews to the Germans “on loan” until the end of the war. After this, deportations were not halted, but the counting of Jews “on loan” to the Germans was.<sup>30</sup> However, since the Budapest Jews who were marched from Budapest to Hegyeshalom by foot suffered such murderous ordeals on their journey, they reached their destination in such a weakened condition that they were hardly able to work. The deportations were therefore later carried out by rail.<sup>31</sup>

In Hegyeshalom — today the border crossing on the Hungarian-Austrian frontier — the Hungarian guards handed over their “Jews on loan” to the SS. The SS brought them to Zurndorf, from where many were shipped on to concentration and labor camps in the Reich.<sup>32</sup> The remaining men and women were distributed by the SS units under Rudolf Hoess to Austrian industrial enterprises,

<sup>27</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, pp. 934-935; see also Ulrich Herbert, *A History of Foreign Labor in Germany, 1880-1980* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 175 ff.

<sup>28</sup> The Southeastern Wall (*Suedostwall*) was also called the Reich Protective Fortifications (*Reichsschutzstellung*), or the Eastern Wall.

<sup>29</sup> Leopold Banny, *Schild im Osten. Der Suedostwall zwischen Donau und Untersteiermark 1944/45* (Lackenbach: Eigenverlag Leopold Banny, 1985), p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Report, Rural Police First Lt. Ferenczy, in Varga, “Ungarn,” p. 349.  
<sup>31</sup> Telegram from Edmund Veesenmayer to the German Foreign Office, November 21, 1944, in Braham, *Destruction of Hungarian Jewry*, doc. 242, pp. 532 f. Regarding the forced marches from Budapest to the Reich frontier, see Szabolcs Szita, “Die Todesmaersche der Budapester Juden im November 1944 nach Hegyeshalom-Nickelsdorf,” *Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 22 (1995), pp. 124-137.

<sup>32</sup> Under interrogation in Nuremberg after the war, Dieter Wisliceny testified that a small number of the first 30,000 workers were immediately sent on from the Austrian frontier to Flossenbuerg and Sachsenhausen; see Braham, *Destruction of Hungarian Jewry*, doc. 440, p. 928. On November 26, 1944, the Mauthausen concentration camp recorded 495 Jews from Budapest as new arrivals; see Marsalek, *Mauthausen*, p. 127.

but mostly to camps along the frontier. There, together with German and Austrian civilians, Hitler Youth, foreign workers, and POWs, they were forced into hard labor, digging trenches and excavations for the Southeastern Wall.<sup>33</sup>

The Hungarian-Jewish trench-diggers were under the command of the Lower Danube *Gauleiter* Hugo Jury and the Styrian *Gauleiter* Siegfried Uiberreither, who, in their capacity as Reich defense commissioners (Reichsverteidungskommissare), were responsible for the construction of the Southeastern Wall. From November 1944 on, Hungarian-Jewish construction laborers were deployed in the area of Sopron and Koeszeg, as well as in the Lower Danube *Gau*. From Christmas in 1944, groups of Jewish labor conscripts were also sent to work in the *Gau* of Styria.<sup>34</sup>

The SS continued to have a certain influence on the deployment of Jewish slave laborers. They thus remained “Schutzhaeftlinge” (under Gestapo jurisdiction) and their labor deployment was organized by Rudolf Hoess, the former Auschwitz commandant.<sup>35</sup> The numbers of the Jewish forced laborers had to be regularly reported to the Gestapo.<sup>36</sup>

Living conditions in the western Hungarian and Austrian labor camps were, for the most part, absolutely inhuman. Szabolcs Szita states that approximately one-third of the 35,000 Hungarian-Jewish forced laborers in the Lower Danube *Gau* died during deployment as a result of starvation, sheer exhaustion, and epidemics, or were murdered by guards.<sup>37</sup> When a typhus epidemic broke out in February and March 1945 in camps in *Gau* Styria, the infected were systematically shot by order of the *Gau* Regional Administration by the SS and Volkssturm — at times with the assistance of the Hitler Youth.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Szabolcs Szita, “The Forced Labor of Hungarian Jews at the Fortification of the Western Border Regions of Hungary, 1944-1945,” in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *Studies on the Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 175-193.

<sup>34</sup> The *Gau* Steiermark (Styria) consisted of what are today Styria and the southern half of Burgenland.

<sup>35</sup> Telegram from Edmund Veesenmayer to the German Foreign Office, November 21, 1944, in Braham, *Destruction of Hungarian Jewry*, doc. 242, pp. 532 f.

<sup>36</sup> Austrian Interior Ministry, Group State Police Sec. 2C, transcript recorded with Rudolf Stanz on October 22, 1964, in Graz, Austrian State Archives, Archives of the Republic (AdR), Interior Ministry (BuMinI) 54.370-18/70.

<sup>37</sup> Szita, “Forced Labor,” p. 179.

<sup>38</sup> See AdR, Justice Ministry (BuMinJu) 60.942/61, trial against Dr. Siegfried Uiberreither; official recollection, August 8, 1961; AdR BuMinJu 68.306/64, trial against Dr. Siegfried Uiberreither; inquiry 1, files Dept. 10; AdR BuMinI 54.787-18/67, proceedings against Eduard Meissl; Public Record Office London (PRO) War Office (WO) 310/144, statement by Anton Rutte, May 25, 1946; LG Graz Vg 7c Vr 869/45, against Josef Stampfer and others. The



## The Organization of the Death Marches of Hungarian Jews Through Austria, Spring 1945

At the end of March, with the approach of the Red Army, the order was given to “evacuate” the camps along the “Southeastern Wall.” The Jewish trench-workers were to be transported to Mauthausen. These marches were organized by the *Gau* Regional Administrations, which also provided most of the guard personnel. The transports were escorted by members of the Volkssturm, who were changed at the respective regional borders. In addition members of the Hitler Youth and the rural police were used as guards. In contrast with evacuations from concentration camps, the SS or Gestapo provided only a small number of personnel in charge of running the evacuation operations. These men accompanied the column of prisoners for the entire journey, or at least for substantial stretches. It should be noted that their inhuman living and working conditions had completely exhausted the slave laborers prior to their departure. If means of transport were available they were put on trains or ships. In most cases, however, they were forced to travel at least part of the way on foot. The daily routes and their lengths, as well as the composition of their escorts, were determined beforehand.

A written “Secret Order” (*Geheime Dienstanweisung*), dated March 22, 1945, for the Fuerstenfeld *Kreis* in eastern Styria, given by the *Kreisorganisationsleiter*, the district party organizational manager, has been preserved and provides us with a good description of the planning and organization of these marches.<sup>39</sup>

The order stated that, in the event of an alarm, which indeed was sounded six days later, Jewish slave laborers in the Fuerstenfeld district were to be assembled on the first day of the march in two camps — in Strem and in the Buchmannmuehle camp near Poppendorf. They would then be marched on foot the following day to an assembly camp in Bierbaum. The escort was to be composed of Volkssturm members, and the march was to be supervised by local Nazi party leaders (*Ortsgruppenfuehrer*). The latter had been in charge of

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Volkssturm was a paramilitary unit set up in October 1944, as one of the last-ditch defenders of the Reich. Virtually all men between sixteen and sixty were conscripted and organized in their local districts.

<sup>39</sup> Geheime Dienstanweisung no. 24, Kreis Fuerstenfeld, March 22, 1945. PRO Foreign Office (FO) 1020/1063.

the “subsection” of the “Southeastern Wall” within the area of their jurisdiction. After the alarm they were responsible for the removal of the Jewish laborers from their subsection to the next assembly point. The local *Kreis* organizational manager was responsible for organizing the work of fortification and worker coordination in this *Kreis*, in addition to planning evacuation.<sup>40</sup> He received his orders from the local district party chief (*Kreisleiter*), who reported directly to the *Gauleiter* in his capacity as Reich defense commissioner.

In *Gau* Styria the “Southeastern Wall” was subdivided into two sections (sections V and VI), each of which was under the jurisdiction of a *Kreisleiter*. Thus in section VI, located in *Kreis* Oberwart and *Kreis* Fuerstenfeld, the *Kreisleiter* of Oberwart, Eduard Nicka, had chief responsibility.<sup>41</sup> Section V, *Kreis* Feldbach and *Kreis* Mureck, was under the supervision of the Feldbach *Kreisleiter*, Anton Rutte.<sup>42</sup> The *Kreis*-level leadership responsible for the construction of the Southeastern Wall thus also planned and organized the evacuation marches, while the *Gau* Regional Administration gave the immediate orders for starting the march.<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, there is no indication whatsoever in these instructions that the SS was involved in the evacuation of Jewish fortification workers. This does not mean, however, that the SS had no hand in the operations; they had overall supervision of the “evacuation” transports in the same way as they had kept control over the labor deployment of the Hungarian Jews. During this labor deployment, members of the Volkssturm, Hitler Youth, the SA, and so-called “political leaders” (Nazi party functionaries) had been the guard personnel. In *Gau* Styria, Croatian *Waffen*-SS men were also deployed as guards for the Hungarian Jews.<sup>44</sup> The *Waffen*-SS also had their own leadership and were not under the jurisdiction of the party or the SS. That separation of competence areas was largely maintained on the evacuation marches.

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<sup>40</sup> Transcript of statement by Rudolf Stanz, October 22, 1964, in Graz, AdR BuMinI 54.370-18/70, regarding Eduard Meissl and others.

<sup>41</sup> LG Wien Vg 11g Vr 190/48, against Stefan Beigelboeck and others.

<sup>42</sup> Statement recorded on May 25, 1946, from Anton Rutte, PRO, WO 310/144.

<sup>43</sup> Investigation Report, Criminal Police Graz, July 5, 1945, PRO WO 310/155; interrogation of Siegfried Uiberreither by Lord Schuster on March 5, 1946, regarding responsibility for the murder of 7,000 Hungarian Jews in April 1945, in Styria, DOW 12.697.

<sup>44</sup> These were members of the *Waffen*-SS divisions “Handschar,” “Kama” and “Prinz Eugen.” Report of the Head Security Office for Upper Austria to the Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen in Ludwigsburg, (ZStL) ZI 9AR-Z 85/61, November 6, 1962, Archives of the Republic (AdR) BuMinI 457-13/57.

Surprisingly, this juxtaposition of SS, Gestapo, and *Gau* Regional Administration personnel, each with their own leadership echelon and chains of command, led in only a few instances to clashes, encroachments, or quarrels over who was in charge and where. While the SS made up but a small core group, most of the guard units consisted of members of the local Volkssturm. These Volkssturm men, and the Hitler Youth members, who sometimes reinforced them, were not subordinate to the SS, but rather to their own commanders. In turn, they were under orders from the local party leadership, which was also responsible for organizing food and housing. As a rule, the prisoners had to sleep out in the open. The still low temperatures and damp weather sapped their strength, as did the constant lack of food.

The order to evacuate the Jewish forced laborers was issued by *Reichsfuehrer*-SS Heinrich Himmler to the *Gauleiters*. According to all the statements of the participants in this discussion, Himmler, sometime around March 28, 1945, in Vienna, is supposed to have ordered the *Gauleiter* of Lower Danube and Styria to proceed with an “orderly” evacuation.<sup>45</sup> While an orderly evacuation meant that Jewish lives should be protected if possible, such an order left itself open to highly arbitrary interpretation. Perhaps it was intentionally meant to be ambiguous.

Just how little the actual implementation of the evacuation had to do with Himmler’s order, is illustrated by the evacuation of Hungarian-Jewish forced laborers from the Southeastern Wall construction section Bruck an der Leitha in the Lower Danube *Gau*. The man in charge of the section, Alfred Waidmann, gave the following testimony at a police interrogation in 1947:

*Gauleiter* Hugo Jury had given the order to treat the Jews as decently as possible and to provide them with sufficient food for several days on the road. Stretchers were to be prepared to carry the sick Jews, since the Jews were to be transported in a special train separate from the foreigners [foreign laborers]. I

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<sup>45</sup> Interrogation of Siegfried Uiberreither by Lord Schuster on March 5, 1946, regarding responsibility for the murder of 7,000 Hungarian Jews in Styria in April 1945, DOW 12.697; and statement by Franz Ziereis, Mauthausen commandant, May 25, 1945, as quoted in Peter Kammerstaetter, “Der Todesmarsch ungarischer Juden vom KZ Mauthausen nach Gunskirchen, April 1945. Eine Materialsammlung mit Bildern,” unpublished, Linz 1971, p. 8, DOW 6733. Interrogation of the witness Tobias Portschy, February 5, 1960, LG Graz 13 Vr 20/60, against Oskar Reitter; and Kasztner Report, YVA, B/7-3, p. 170.

was not informed about the destination. The evacuation was to be carried out by the SS, to which the Jews were subordinate. Since no trains arrived, the order was changed: the Jews were to be assembled at the dock in Deutsch-Altenburg where they would be put on ships and sent on. So the Jews were gathered together for that purpose in Deutsch-Altenburg.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the *Gauleiter's* supposedly unambiguous instruction to treat the Jews "as decently as possible," numerous murders were committed during the night of March 29-30, 1945, in the course of the evacuation of the Engerau camp (today Petrzalka, a district of Bratislava) that belonged to this section. Before the slave laborers departed for Bad Deutsch-Altenburg, all those sick or unable to walk were brutally shot or stabbed to death in their quarters.<sup>47</sup> The guards, who had been given several liters of wine before leaving, murdered 102 persons during the march. In contrast to the murders which took place during this march, the "evacuation" of other camps in the Bruck an der Leitha section were executed without atrocities. All the prisoners of this section were assembled in Bad Deutsch-Altenburg and loaded onto barges. Approximately 2,000 prisoners were given neither food nor water. When the ships arrived in Mauthausen on April 6, many of the prisoners, now suffering from total exhaustion, were only able to crawl ashore. The weakest among them were thrown immediately into the Danube by the SS guards who took over the evacuation group in Mauthausen upon its arrival.<sup>48</sup>

While the routes and relief of the escort personnel were carefully planned and organized, the most basic provisions for the prisoners were not, as in the case of the evacuation of slave laborers from the section of Bruck an der Leitha, and

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<sup>46</sup> Transcript of testimony by Alfred Waidmann on March 8, 1947, LG Wien Vg 1a Vr 10/50, against Alfred Waidmann. Bad Deutsch-Altenburg lies east of Vienna on the Danube and was formerly on the steamer line between Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest.

<sup>47</sup> Testimony of Rudolf Kronberger, July 9, 1945, LG Wien Vg 2b Vr 564/45, against Rudolf Kronberger and others. The exact number of these victims was not established; the section head in charge, Alfred Waidmann, claimed he had heard about sixty deaths; LG Wien Vg 1a Vr 10/50 against Alfred Waidmann.

Honig, recorded on August 15, 1945, LG Wien Vg 1a <sup>48</sup> Testimony of Ignaz Blau and Ernoe Vr 1125/45, against Josef Entenfellner and others. The so-called Engerau murder trials occupied the Austrian courts for almost a decade. The first of these trials was in August 1945; the last in July 1954. Nonetheless, it was impossible to establish just who had actually given the murder orders.

elsewhere. The Jewish death marchers were forced to go hungry for days on end during their exhausting ordeal.

In his 1946 interrogation by the head of the British Legal Division in Austria, Lord Claud Schuster, Siegfried Uiberreither, former *Gauleiter* in Styria, explained how he had interpreted Himmler's order to bring the Jewish slave laborers from the Hungarian-Austrian border to Mauthausen "in an orderly fashion"<sup>49</sup>:

I mean by that that they [the Jews] were supposed to arrive in Mauthausen, taking into consideration all the difficulties of transportation and communication, which had been disrupted at the time, in such a manner that they could be housed properly and suffer no damage.<sup>50</sup>

According to the interpretation of the leading Nazi functionaries, of which Uiberreither's testimony is an excellent example, the murder of thousands of Hungarian Jews during the evacuation was due to war-related "difficulties of transportation and communication". Yet in actual fact, the murders immediately before and during the death marches were perpetrated on the basis of clear and uniform orders. The shooting of the sick and those unable to walk was commonplace in concentration-camp evacuations. It was now also applied in evacuation operations for the Hungarian Jews from the Southeastern Wall. Furthermore, there was another order that had been a longstanding practice for the SS and Waffen-SS: Jews near combat zones were to be shot. These instructions were passed on by the *Gau* administrations and local *Kreis* head officers to their subordinates, i.e., the guard units attached to the evacuation transports of Hungarian Jews. These were the Volkssturm, rural police, and Hitler Youth.<sup>51</sup> The murders were thus blueprinted in advance; some

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<sup>49</sup> Uiberreither stated that the discussion between Himmler and the *Gauleiter*, as well as the Mauthausen camp commandant, Franz Ziereis, had taken place on March 28, 1945. He claimed to have personally passed on the order for the "orderly" evacuation to the responsible local *Kreisleiter*; interrogation of Siegfried Uiberreither by Lord Schuster on March 5, 1946, regarding responsibility for the murder of 7,000 Hungarian Jews in Styria in April 1945, DOW 12.697. The marches from the Austrian camps along the Hungarian border started on March 29. The camps in western Hungary had already begun to be evacuated on March 23, 1945.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Orders given to the rural police assigned to the evacuation columns probably came from the Gestapo.

circumspect commanders of transport appointed burial squads even prior to the beginning of the march.<sup>52</sup>

Before departure, the sick and those who were unable to walk were frequently liquidated in order to avoid having them fall into the hands of the rapidly approaching enemy forces. The murders in the Engerau camp were no isolated incident. In March 1945, at the Ziegelofen camp in Koeszeg, the only gas chamber on Hungarian territory was installed. It was put into operation on March 22-23, 1945, in order to liquidate sick inmates from the Koeszeg camps Ziegelofen and Brauhaus.<sup>53</sup> When the last Koeszeg slave laborers were loaded onto rail cars and transported toward Styria on March 25, 1945, and the camps were finally dissolved, there were still a large number of sick prisoners left behind. These prisoners were then brutally shot by the guards and SS, or, according to the testimony of one of the murderers, hanged in order to leave less incriminating evidence.<sup>54</sup>

In several camps, the sick remained behind after the evacuation. Thus, on March 30, the doors of the school in Kloech in Styria, where the sick who were unable to walk had been herded, were simply nailed shut when the others departed. After local residents discovered the inmates who had been left boarded up inside, some women looked after them and brought them food. But five days after the evacuation column had departed, an SS commando unit showed up in Kloech and proceeded to execute these sick prisoners in a nearby forest.<sup>55</sup> Already several weeks earlier, Jewish forced laborers with typhoid fever had reportedly been shot by guards on orders from the local *Kreisleiter*.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> That occurred, for example, on the stretch from Gaberl to Trieben in Styria; AdR BuMinJu 68.763/55, regarding the criminal cases against Albin Grossmann, Viktor Abschner, Valentin Gries, Matthias Mitter and Johann Woehry.

<sup>53</sup> Braham, *Politics of Genocide*, vol. 1, p. 343; cf. the speech by Pal Bacs before the monument to victims of the Ziegelofen camp, March 23, 1990; copy in Institut fuer Geschichte der Juden in Oesterreich (IGJ). See also LG Wien Vg 1 b Vr 1018/45, against Johann Zemlicka.

<sup>54</sup> LG Wien 1a Vr 1010/45, against Johann Hoelzl; and LG Wien 1 b Vr 1018/45, against Johann Zemlicka.

<sup>55</sup> Kloech School Report 1944/45; copy in IGJ.

<sup>56</sup> Investigations regarding murders of Jews in the Kloech area, PRO WO 310/167; testimony by Anton Rutte, May 25, 1946, PRO WO 310/144; LG Graz 13 Vr 2924/60, against Anton Rutte and others. Those found guilty of shooting the twenty-six sick prisoners were sentenced by a British military court in Graz in November 1947. The murders by the SS of sick laborers who had been left behind were never clarified.

During the evacuation of the forced-labor camp for Hungarian Jews in Balf in western Hungary on March 28, 1945, some 200 sick inmates were left behind together with several nurses.<sup>57</sup> On March 31, an SS unit rounded up the sick and shot 176 of them, tossing them into a tank ditch. The massacre took place only hours before the Soviet forces captured Balf. Since the SS carried out the murders in haste, there were several survivors who later were able to describe what had taken place.<sup>58</sup>

The forced laborers who were evacuated when the camps were disbanded were also extremely weak as a result of the severe regimen of labor and their appalling living and working conditions. As a rule, they were forced to walk at least a portion of the way to Mauthausen. Many evacuation columns from the camps near the border in Styria were marched solely on foot through eastern Austria. During these death marches, the inmates went without food or water for days and had to spend the night out in the open. All guard units, whether members of the Volkssturm, Hitler Youth, rural police, or SS, were given strict orders to shoot prisoners trying to escape and anyone unable to continue the march. This gave ample opportunity to satisfy the bloodlust felt by many guards; again and again, they shot Jews who had stooped down to defecate or who were merely begging for a scrap of food. However, most of the murders were committed out of a mix of blind obedience combined with disregard for the lives of Jews. Exhausted marchers or stragglers would initially be brutally prodded to go on, and if they did not comply, they were then executed.

Since the evacuation was to proceed in an “orderly” fashion, massacres were not permitted once the march was underway. To shoot anyone unable to walk was considered a measure necessitated by the war, while massacres were regarded as overstepping the bounds. However, the fine distinction between authorized and unauthorized murders apparently was rather unclear even to high party functionaries. This is why the murders of prisoners who were fully able to walk were generally neither prevented nor later punished. When a large evacuation column numbering some 6,000-8,000 Hungarian Jewish men and

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<sup>57</sup> Testimony of Simon Sacharia and Avraham Blechner to the Israeli police, First Interim Report, January 1, 1970, to the Zentrale Stelle, Ludwigsburg, ZStL, 502 Ar-Z 108/1967, against person or persons unknown, submitted to the State Prosecutor's Office Stuttgart (StA), Stuttgart 16 Js 209/67, in AdR BuMinl 55.086-18/70.

<sup>58</sup> Testimony of Josef Zwickel, July 11, 1967, *ibid.*

women crossed the Praebichl Pass near Eisenerz on April 7, 1945, men of the so-called “alarm commando”, a SA unit from Eisenerz escorting the evacuation in the framework of the Volkssturm, fired at random into the marching column, murdering more than 200. They had been given instructions to open fire by the Leoben *Kreisleiter* Otto Christandl. However, the SS transport chief intervened in the massacre, demanding an immediate cessation of fire, and filed a formal complaint with his superiors in Graz. Ludwig Krenn, the commander of the “alarm commando,” was briefly taken into custody. Yet just two days later, on orders from the local *Kreis* head office, he was again assigned to duty with another evacuation group.<sup>59</sup> In this instance, the SS transport chief had heeded the order stipulating an “orderly” evacuation — which did not preclude the shooting of exhausted marchers on the way to Eisenerz — while the local party leadership had not.

The main culprits in mass murders of Hungarian Jews in areas near the front lines were units of the Waffen-SS. As mentioned above, groups of Jews from the “Strasshof evacuations” were also forced to march to Mauthausen toward the end of the war, often guarded by the police. In Hofamt-Priehl in Lower Austria, a transit camp for such deportees had been set up in April. During the night of May 2-3, unknown members of the Waffen-SS murdered 223 inmates of this camp. It was impossible to determine who had perpetrated these murders, and so their motives could not be clarified. They may have acted based on general standing orders (no Jews in areas near combat zones), but without any direct order from superiors.<sup>60</sup> The Waffen-SS also massacred prisoners from the “Strasshof evacuations” in Goestling and in Weissenbach an der Triesting.<sup>61</sup>

The National-Socialist organizers of the evacuation marches had planned and ordered both the mass deaths and murder of the exhausted prisoners. Yet

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<sup>59</sup> The murders in Praebichl were investigated and dealt with in minute detail in three criminal proceedings before the General British Military Courts in April and October 1946. For a summary of events at Praebichl, see Advice on Evidence of Theodore Turner, February 20, 1946, p. 3, PRO FO 1020/2056. Cf. also PRO FO 1020/2034. The Praebichl Pass (1227 meters) south of Eisenerz is the main pass between Leoben and Hieflau in the Eisenerz Alps in Upper Styria, and is located about 40 km. northwest of Bruck an der Mur.

<sup>60</sup> LG Wien Vg 3c Vr 2488/45, against person or persons unknown.  
<sup>61</sup> On Goestling, see LG Wien Vg 1 b Vr 2092/45, against Ernst Burian and others; Klaus-Dieter Mulley, “Nationalsozialismus im politischen Bezirk Scheibbs 1930 bis 1945. Versuch einer Regionalgeschichte,” diss., Vienna, 1981, pp. 299-304; on Weissenbach an der Triesting, see *Neues Oesterreich*, September 7, 1947; LG Wien Vg 5d 6267/47, against person or persons unknown.



“excesses” — such as massacres of prisoners who were able to walk, or firing at random into moving columns — were regarded at least as undesirable. In postwar court proceedings, leading Nazi functionaries tried to disprove their share of the responsibility by making repeated reference to Himmler’s order regarding an “orderly” evacuation. In April 1945, Jews who were already in the process of being pulled back from the Burgenland-Hungarian border were forced into slave labor once more on entrenchments at Lassnitzhoehe near Nestelbach in Styria. By this point, a number of the Jewish prisoners were so weak they could no longer work. The commander of the Volkssturm battalion there, Oskar Reitter, handed over the sick, who, on his orders, had gone without food or drink for days, to members of a Waffen-SS unit also stationed there. They then proceeded to liquidate these prisoners. After the war, eighteen bodies were exhumed.<sup>62</sup> Reitter was not prosecuted until 1960; Tobias Portschy, the former deputy *Gauleiter* of Styria, testified as a witness for the defense. He stressed it was impossible for Reitter to have given an order to murder Hungarian-Jewish forced laborers, since in his capacity as a high ranking functionary of the *Kreis* (*Kreisamtsleiter*) he had to know:

...that on orders from the *Reichsfuehrer-SS*, the Jews were to be brought or transported if at all possible unscathed [*unversehrt*] to the concentration camp in Mauthausen.... So if there were any shootings of Jews at Easter 1945 ... these must have been instances where subordinate bodies had overstepped the bounds.<sup>63</sup>

The trials in the British military courts in 1946 and 1947 against various Styrian *Kreisleiters* — such as the first murder trial in Eisenerz dealing with the above-mentioned massacre at the Praebichl Pass, or the trial on the shooting of Jews sick with typhoid fever in Kloechn<sup>64</sup> — had proven that even when the immediate perpetrators were “subordinate bodies,” the murder orders had come straight

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<sup>62</sup> Exhumation report of the rural police office in Nestelbach to the LG Graz, March 23, 1946, LG Graz Vg 1 Vr 821/46, against Jakob Rappold and Johann Grobbauer.

<sup>63</sup> Interrogation of the witness Dr. Tobias Portschy, February 5, 1960, LG Graz 13 Vr 20/60 against Oskar Reitter. Reitter was acquitted because witnesses for the prosecution had a remarkably poor recollection in 1960 of the events of April 1945.

<sup>64</sup> See PRO WO 310/144; and PRO WO 310/167.

from these local party leaders. The testimony given by members of the Volkssturm and Hitler Youth as defendants and witnesses in the numerous trials before special Austrian People's Courts after the war (see below), also left no doubt that the orders to shoot stragglers or "prisoners attempting to escape" had been issued by the local Nazi party bosses. For the SS, this approach had long been the standing practice in evacuation marches from concentration and labor camps. But the Waffen-SS evidently also had general orders to murder, at least when it came to Jews near the front lines. From the end of March 1945, Austria was indeed at the front. When the orders regarding the treatment of Jews during evacuation marches were passed on to the Volkssturm, Hitler Youth, and the rural police at the end of the war, they were largely accepted, precisely because they came from the highest authorities.

### The Death Marches Through the Lower Danube *Gau*

As early as February 1945, large groups of Jewish labor conscripts of the Hungarian army were transferred to camps in western Hungary. After a short stay there, they were shipped out to camps in present-day Austria or, in frequent cases, transported by rail to Mauthausen. The final evacuation of Jewish forced laborers from the western Hungarian camps commenced on March 23, 1945.<sup>65</sup> There were still some 10,000 Jewish forced laborers deployed in the Sopron area<sup>66</sup> and about 8,000 in the Koeszeg region.<sup>67</sup> While the forced laborers from the Sopron camps were marched on in the direction of Lower Danube, the evacuation from Koeszeg and the more western Hungarian camp (further to the

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<sup>65</sup> Andreas Veith and Karl Kohn were conscripted into the labor service in October 1942, serving in Bistrica, Szombathely, and Papa. They were sent to a camp in Sopron in January 1945. In February 1945, they were transported in cattle cars to Windisch Minihof, in the *Gau* of Styria, where they cut wood for the construction of the Southeastern Wall. At the beginning of April, the death march began for them, leading through Styria to Mauthausen and Gunkirchen. See testimony recorded from Andreas Veith, n. d., PRO WO 310/143. See also the testimony of M. Kolar on the death march (part by rail) from Fertoerakos in late January 1945, via Loretto and Enns, to Mauthausen, recorded in Bet Dagan, Israel, October 17, 1969, ZStL, II Ar-Z 347/77, Mauthausen-Gunkirchen. In contrast, Mordechai Levay and Shlomo Tal-Or, who had been brought about that same time to Fertoerakos, were not sent to Mauthausen by train until the beginning of April; ZStL, 502 Ar-Z 108/1967, against person or persons unknown, submitted to StA Stuttgart 16 Js 209/67, in AdR BuMinl 55.086-18/70.

<sup>66</sup> Final report, *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Szita, "Forced Labor," p. 6.

south) Bucsu proceeded through Styria. Rechnitz was the first assembly point for evacuees in the *Gau* of Styria.<sup>68</sup>

The Jewish forced laborers from the ten Sopron camps<sup>69</sup> were escorted along Neusiedlersee via Breitenbrunn to St. Margarethen, the first large assembly point in the Lower Danube *Gau*. There they met up with evacuations from the northern Burgenland camps Donnerskirchen and Schattendorf.<sup>70</sup> In addition to the routine shooting of prisoners who were unable to walk, two massacres occurred in the course of this evacuation. The SS first perpetrated a large-scale bloodbath in the stone quarry at St. Margarethen by rolling down stones onto the prisoners resting below.<sup>71</sup> Eighteen victims of this massacre, whose bodies were later exhumed, are buried in Eisenstadt.<sup>72</sup> In a second incident, six Jews in a small group of stragglers were shot on a farm near St. Margarethen.<sup>73</sup>

From St. Margarethen, the route went on via Eisenstadt and Stotzing to Loretto, where additional evacuation groups joined the columns. These had probably been directed there from Hungary as well, following the route through Hof and Au. The columns did not reach Loretto until after nightfall. There they encountered a formation of SS men, who began to beat the marchers furiously, killing many.<sup>74</sup> A survivor from the Schattendorf camp passed through Loretto unscathed, but he and his comrades saw the bodies of the massacre victims

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<sup>68</sup> On Koeszeg, see interview with Judith Hruza, MD, Zuzanek collection, copy in IGJ; testimony by Naftali Berkowits, April 12, 1947, Friedmann collection, copy in IGJ. On Bucsu, see testimony of Wolf Gancz in preliminary investigations on the Eisenerz murder trial, June 22, 1946, PRO FO 1020/2056. According to Gancz, 3,500 Jewish workers came in from Bucsu and were added to the evacuation column that was marched via Graz, the Praebichl, and the Enns valley to Mauthausen. On Bucsu, see, further, the statement of the camp committee of the DP camp Bad Gastein, as recorded with testimony by Otto Ickowitz, April 20, 1947, Friedmann collection, copy in IGJ; interview with Zvi Bar-Niv, January 1992, Zuzanek collection, copy in IGJ.

<sup>69</sup> Fertoerakos, Agfalva, Sopron, Sopronbanfalva, Balf, Harka (present-day Magyarfalva), Kophaza, Nagycenk, Hildegseg, and Ilonamajor.

<sup>70</sup> On Donnerskirchen, see testimony of Andort Frankfurt recorded on August 9, 1945, LG Wien Vg 8e Vr 1322/49, against Nikolaus Schorn. On Schattendorf, see statement by Avraham Mayer to the Israeli police, November 2, 1969, ZStL, 19 AR-Z 347/77.

<sup>71</sup> Szita, "Forced Labor," p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> Hugo Gold, *Geschichte der Juden in Burgenland* (Tel Aviv: Olamenu, 1970), p. 45.

<sup>73</sup> LG Wien Vg 11 Vr 3117/45, against Karl Unger and others.

<sup>74</sup> Statement of Mendel Fruchter to the Israeli police, First Interim Report, January 1, 1970, to ZStL, 502 Ar-Z 108/1967, person or persons unknown, submitted to StA Stuttgart 16 Js 209/67, in AdR BuMinl 55.086-18/70. Neither in Szita "Forced Labor," p. 32, nor in this statement is it possible to determine whether the perpetrators were members of the general SS or the Waffen-SS.

lying at the edge of the road.<sup>75</sup> The route then continued on via Seibersdorf to Gramatneusiedl, where the marchers, by then totally exhausted, were crowded onto freight cars and shipped off to Mauthausen. The trip by rail to Mauthausen took just under three days. During this time the prisoners were given little or no provisions.<sup>76</sup>

### The Death Marches Through the *Gau* of Styria

The evacuation of the Jewish forced laborers from the camps in Koeszeg to the German Reich, present-day Austria, was usually by rail. Once in Austria, the prisoners were generally forced to trek the remainder of the long distance to Mauthausen, on foot through what are today Burgenland, Styria, and Upper Austria. On these marches, they were consolidated together with evacuation groups from camps in the *Gau* of Styria. Wolf Gancz participated in such a death march from Eberau, and was among approximately 6-8,000 men and women forced laborers who crossed the Praebichl Pass on April 7, 1945, at the time of the notorious massacre there that claimed the lives of more than 200 prisoners. Among other things, Gancz described how his column, reported to have numbered 3,000 persons when it left Eberau on March 30, 1945,<sup>77</sup> was consolidated with evacuation columns from the camps of Strem, Feldbach, Heiligenkreuz, Jennersdorf, Fehring, Schachendorf, Neumarkt a.d. Raab, Bucusu, and St. Anna am Aigen.<sup>78</sup> As will be shown below, there were also forced laborers from the Koeszeg camps among the “evacuees” in the transports.

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<sup>75</sup> Statement by Avraham Mayer, November 2, 1969, ZStL, 19 AR-Z 347/77, and testimony of survivors to the Israeli police, Third Interim Report, June 14, 1970, ZStL, 502 AR-Z 108/1967, against person or persons unknown, submitted to StA Stuttgart 16 Js 209/67, in AdR BuMinl 55.086-18/70.

<sup>76</sup> See testimony of Andort Frankfurt, recorded on August 9, 1945, LG Wien Vg 8e Vr 1322/49, against Nikolaus Schorn; statement of Mendel Fruchter to the Israeli police, First Interim Report, January 1, 1970, to ZStL, 502 Ar-Z 108/1967, person or persons unknown, submitted to StA Stuttgart 16 Js 209/67, in AdR BuMinl 55.086-18/70; and statement by Susanne Wenzel, October 11, 1968, *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Statement by Josef Klein, May 6, 1946, PRO FO 1020/2059; Klein had likewise been interned in the Eberau camp.

<sup>78</sup> Statement by Wolf Gancz, June 22, 1946, PRO FO 1020/2056.

The data given by Gancz does not appear to be completely reliable, since the route he indicated does not correspond to the one in the Secret Order of March 22, 1945.<sup>79</sup> Thus, his figure for “evacuees” is probably also not exact. Nevertheless, it does permit us to assume that there were more than 10,000 individuals<sup>80</sup> who were brought in this evacuation alone from the Hungarian-Austrian border to Graz. During the trek from Eberau to Graz, the prisoners were given no provisions aside from half a loaf of bread.<sup>81</sup>

Judith Hruza came from Koeszeg to Rechnitz on March 23 from where she was marched in the direction of Graz on March 28. She, too, survived the Praebichl Pass massacre on April 7, 1945.<sup>82</sup> The camp in Buscu was dissolved on March 28, 1945. The forced laborers interned there crossed the Austrian border near Rechnitz. On April 7, they also were caught in the mass shooting at the Praebichl Pass.<sup>83</sup>

Some of the forced laborers from Koeszeg and Bucsu had already been brought to Rechnitz and Burg several days before by rail, presumably in order to be deployed as laborers in *Gau* Styria. Although hundreds of sick forced laborers in Koeszeg had been murdered before the “evacuation” left,<sup>84</sup> there were still some 220 workers unfit for work who arrived in Burg on March 24. These sick prisoners were then taken out and shot near Rechnitz in the early hours of March 25.<sup>85</sup> Sick prisoners from the group from Bucsu are also reported to have been murdered in a wood near Rechnitz.<sup>86</sup> As Judith Hruza testified, the Jewish

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<sup>79</sup> Gancz indicated the following route: Eberau, Heiligenkreuz, Fuerstenfeld, Gleisdorf, Graz. In the Secret Order of March 22, 1945, another route was planned for the first two days of evacuation from the Eberau camp: Eberau, Strem, Guessing, Sulz, Rehgraben, Neusiedl, Deutsch Kaltenbrunn, and Bierbaum (see footnote 36). The fact that we have no evidence for an evacuation column passing through Fuerstenfeld also tends to speak against the picture sketched by Gancz (according to information from Dr. Franz Timischl, Fuerstenfeld).

<sup>80</sup> Strem, 5,000; Feldbach, 400; Heiligenkreuz, 400; Jennersdorf, 200; Fehring, 150; Schachendorf, 600; Neumarkt an der Raab, 300; Bucsu, 3,500; and St. Anna am Aigen, 200; statement by Wolf Gancz, June 22, 1946, PRO FO 1020/2056. Another witness gave the figure of 2,000 for the number of workers that left Bucsu; statement of Otto Ickowitz, April 20, 1947, Friedmann collection, copy in IGJ.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Eberau in eastern Burgenland is on the Austrian-Hungarian border, a distance of some 100 km. from Graz.

<sup>82</sup> Szita, “Forced Labor,” p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> Statement by Wolf Gancz, June 22, 1946, PRO FO 1020/2056.

<sup>84</sup> Braham, *Politics of Genocide*, vol. 1, p. 343; cf. the speech by Pal Bacs before the monument to victims of the Ziegelofen camp, March 23, 1990, copy in IGJ, and LG Wien Vg 1 b Vr 1018/45, against Johann Zemlicka.

<sup>85</sup> LG Wien Vg ad Vr 2059/45, against Eduard Nicka and LG Wien Vg 2f Vr 2832/45, against Franz Podezin and others.

<sup>86</sup> Statement of Otto Ickowitz, April 20, 1947, Friedmann collection, copy in IGJ.

forced laborers brought from Koeszeg to Rechnitz and housed there in two camps were treated relatively well, until they were forced several days later to continue on their trek through Styria and Upper Austria. Their route led from Rechnitz to Markt Neuhodis, Markt Allhau, and Hartberg,<sup>87</sup> where they met up with the evacuation column from Deutsch-Schuetzen.<sup>88</sup>

This evacuation column had been heavily decimated even before departing on March 28, 1945, since eighty Jews, even though fit for the journey, had been shot by three members of the Waffen-SS “Wiking” division and five military policemen. On orders from their unit commander Alfred Weber, the boys from the Hitler Youth who had been assigned to guard the Jews after the SA men previously guarding them had fled, brought the victims from the camp and handed them over to their murderers. Together with men from the Waffen-SS, members of the Hitler Youth were also assigned to escort the column. During the march they murdered more exhausted prisoners. On the first day, the evacuation column traveled over minor roads through St. Kathrein, Kohfidisch, Kirchfidisch, and Mischendorf to Jabing. From there it continued on the following day to Rotenturm a. d. Pinka, Oberdorf, Litzelsdorf, Wolfau, and Hartberg. In Sebersdorf, the Hitler Youth handed over the column to members of the Volkssturm, who then took it on to Gleisdorf, presumably via Ilz and Gnies.<sup>89</sup> The men from the “Wiking” division most probably accompanied the evacuation transport to Graz.<sup>90</sup>

Another column of some 4-5,000 prisoners assembled in Rechnitz was marched via Hartberg and Grosspesendorf to Gleisdorf.<sup>91</sup> Numerous prisoners escaped during this stretch of the march. In the small Styrian village of Kalch, at least fourteen Jews were hidden by villagers and rescued.<sup>92</sup> In the vicinity of Prebensdorf, the Volkssturm, on orders from the local *Kreis* party leadership, pursued escaped prisoners and tracked down eighteen persons, who were then

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<sup>87</sup> LG Graz Vg 1a Vr 6401/46, against Johann Schiller and others.

<sup>88</sup> LG Wien Vg 2d Vr 2059/45, against Franz Dobesberger and others, and LG Wien Vg 8e Vr 661/55 and LG Wien 20a Vr 661/55, against Alfred Weber. The grave in Deutsch-Schuetzen was not rediscovered until August 1995, and was then marked as such and fenced in; *Der Standard*, August 25, 1995, and August 26-27, 1995.

<sup>89</sup> LG Graz Vg 11 Vr 3434/46, against Franz Peischl.  
<sup>90</sup> *Neue steirische Zeitung*, July 7, 1945.

<sup>91</sup> Statement by Naftali Berkowits, April 12, 1947, Friedmann collection, copy in IGJ.

<sup>92</sup> Communication from Alois Grauper to the IKG Vienna, August 30, 1989, DÖW E 21.224.

executed by members of the “Wiking” division men between April 7 and 11, 1945.<sup>93</sup>

Returning to the evacuations from Koeszeg on March 24, thirteen members of the Hitler Youth, under the command of their leader Anton Strasser, took over between 1,000 and 1,200 Jewish forced laborers from Koeszeg with orders to escort them to Strem.<sup>94</sup> Some of these youngsters, aged sixteen and seventeen, were armed for the very first time and had been given orders to shoot any prisoner unable to walk. In 1992, one of the former Hitler Youth who had been assigned the task of bringing Jews from Burg to Moschendorf described his experiences:

One day in March we were ordered to appear the next morning in uniform at the post office. Strasser was there too. We drove by tractor to the customs house in Strem. We didn't know what was really going to happen. We went and got carbines. We came to the train station in Rechnitz [most probably Burg, E.L.]. We were told there that a train with 1,300 Jews was arriving. We were supposed to transport the Jews (on foot) to Strem, Moschendorf, and so on. There was a square there, the Jews were divided into two groups: those able to walk and those who couldn't. About 300 said they were unable to walk. They thought they'd be transported on trucks. Some were beaten to the ground right off. We were assigned a hundred Jews for the two of us. You just have to imagine that: you could've shot three or four maybe, but I mean you've had it if you're surrounded by a hundred of them and all you got is the carbine. There were only men, between 25 and 40 years old, a few old men. They were hardly able to walk even though they sure wanted to. My buddy from Feldbach was out in front. I brought up the rear. We were told: if somebody couldn't go on, we were supposed to shoot him and throw him in the ditch next to the road. A truck would come to pick up the bodies.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> LG Graz Vg 13 Vr 4566/46, against Gerhard Rach and comrades.

<sup>94</sup> LG Graz 1 Vr 9122/47, against Isidor Fellner and others.

<sup>95</sup> Franz Timischl, *Fuerstenfeld und Umgebung von 1930-1950. Ein zeitgeschichtliches Forschungsprojekt der Volkshochschule Fuerstenfeld* (Fuerstenfeld: Landesverband der steirischen Volkshochschulen, 1994), p. 202.

The consequence was that a number of murders were perpetrated by young members of the Hitler Youth and their leaders along the route in Eisenberg, Hoell, Gaas, Maria Weinberg, and Edlitz.<sup>96</sup> During the trek, members of this evacuation were also left behind in Eberau and Moschendorf, where Jews were already deployed as laborers. The last group was marched from Strem to Heiligenbrunn and Reinersdorf. Already on March 28, the forced laborers in these camps were evacuated deeper into Austria. In accordance with the Secret Order of March 22, inmates from the camps in Eberau, Moschendorf, Strem, and Reinersdorf were gathered together in Strem.<sup>97</sup> The next day they were marched from Strem, to Guessing, Sulz, Rehgraben, Neusiedel, and Deutsch-Kaltenbrunn to Bierbaum, where they met up with the evacuation columns from the camps in Inzenhof, Heiligenkreuz, and Pependorf. Their first assembly point had been the Pependorf camp, from where they were then marched via Rudersdorf to Deutsch-Kaltenbrunn and Bierbaum. From Bierbaum the column, which had in the meantime swelled to many thousands, proceeded along the route mentioned — via Ilz and Gnies to Gleisdorf.

The Jewish forced laborers from Kloeck were taken via Huerth, Ratschendorf, Jagerberg, St. Stefan im Rosenthal, and Kirchberg an der Raab to Gleisdorf. From St. Anna am Aigen, the route most likely proceeded through Poppendorf and Gnas to Gleisdorf.<sup>98</sup> Gleisdorf was the assembly point for all evacuation columns before being marched on to Graz, where the prisoners were divided and assigned to various camps.<sup>99</sup> The Jewish laborers, whose columns had left the Hungarian-Austrian border between March 28 and 30, were given their first meal in Graz. The one or two day rest period provided an opportunity to regroup the columns for the further trek to Mauthausen.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> LG Graz Vg 1 Vr 900/45, against Paul Schmidt and others. See also Eleonore Lappin, "Rechnitz gedenkt der Opfer der NS-Herrschaft," in *Jahrbuch des Dokumentationsarchivs des oesterreichischen Widerstandes* (1992), pp. 50-70.

<sup>97</sup> PRO FO 1020/2063.  
<sup>98</sup> Report on the Eisenerz March, War Crimes Investigators, Graz, to ADJAG, BTA, February 23, 1946, PRO WO 310/143; police post chronicle, St. Stefan im Rosental, DOW 13.114 a; letter from IKG Graz to the Jewish Concentration Camp and Gravesites Investigation Committee, November 12, 1948, YVA, 05/13; interview with Anna Hinterholzer, Kloeck no. 25, Franz Josef Schober collection.

<sup>99</sup> There were five camps for forced laborers in Graz: Graz-Liebenau, Graz-Andritz, Graz-Steinfeld, Graz-Wetzelsdorf, and Graz-Sued. It is likely that all of these served as transit camps for the evacuation columns of Hungarian-Jewish forced laborers.

<sup>100</sup> A survivor stated that his column only spent the night in Graz before being marched on toward the Praebichl; see statement by Naftali Reich, April 12, 1947, Friedmann collection,



The large evacuation column of some 6-8,000 Jews that became victims of the murderous attack by their escorts at the Praebichl Pass on April 7, 1945 left Graz on April 4.<sup>101</sup> The Jewish prisoners were marched in three columns on both sides of the Mur headed toward the town of Bruck an der Mur. It is known that, in the case of one of the evacuation columns, three Gestapo agents, Ukrainian Waffen-SS, and Volkssturm men took over the job of guarding the prisoners sometime after they had left Graz.<sup>102</sup> Other evacuations of varying sizes, though smaller than that of April 4, left Graz at a later date. Thus, some 1,500 persons were marched through Gratwein on April 12, 1945.<sup>103</sup> A column of approximately 500 Hungarian Jews is reported to have left Graz for Leoben only on April 26 or 28.<sup>104</sup>

In all these evacuations the guard units — made up of Gestapo and SS men, police, and members of the Volkssturm — murdered numerous exhausted prisoners. Some twenty members of the column that left Graz on April 4 attempted to escape near Eggenfeld, not far from Gratkorn. Men from the “Wiking” division temporarily stationed there apprehended them in the forest near Mt. Eggenfeld and then herded them in a gully, where they were shot. One of the “escapees” had hidden in a hayloft but was also discovered by an SS man. He kept the prisoner locked up for two days in a stable and then shot him.<sup>105</sup>

In general, however, the death marchers were already too run-down physically and emotionally for there to be any attempt to escape. The chronicle of the rural police post at St. Peter Freienstein near Leoben describes the misery of these forced marchers:

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copy in IGJ. Wolf Gancz testified that he remained in Graz two days; statement, June 22, 1946, PRO FO 1020/2056.

<sup>101</sup> Investigative report of the Graz Criminal Police, July 5, 1945, PRO WO 310/155.  
<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Report, Rural Police Post Gratwein to the State Rural Police Office for Styria, July 19, 1945, PRO WO 310/155; and Report, “A” Detachment 22, Section SIB, C.M. Police, BTA, to DAPM, 77 Section SIB, C.M. Police, BTA, September 9, 1945, PRO WO 310/155.

<sup>104</sup> Report, Officer IC War Crimes Section, JAG Branch, HQ BTA, CMF, February 12, 1946, PRO WO 310/143.

<sup>105</sup> On July 3, 1945, on the slope of Mt. Eggenfeld, the remains of eleven bodies were removed from a mass grave; another was exhumed from a single grave, the last prisoner shot trying to escape. Another mass grave, with “four to six bodies, located at the peak of Mt. Eggenfeld and in accordance with sanitary requirements, was not opened due to the difficulties of transport and recovery that entailed”; evidence at the scene of the crime, Graz Criminal Police, July 3, 1945, PRO WO 310/155, and Investigative Report of the Graz Criminal Police, July 5, 1945, PRO WO 310/155.

At the beginning of April several evacuation columns of Jews marched on through here. The largest contained 6,000 Jews. They were coming from digging work along the Hungarian border and were supposed to march on to the concentration camp at Mauthausen. The Jews were so emaciated they could hardly walk. In Unteren Tollingrabben, nine Jews died in a single night and were buried there.<sup>106</sup>

Josef Juwanschitz was able to rescue two Jews from a column passing through St. Peter Freienstein on April 8. He hid the two prisoners, suffering from extreme exhaustion, in his house until the end of the war, even though several SS men were also quartered there.<sup>107</sup>

On April 7, with the massacre at the Praebichl Pass, the slaughter reached a horrible high point. In the later, smaller evacuation groups that passed through, the guards continued to murder those slave laborers who were sick and exhausted. The prisoner columns were marched on from Eisenerz via Hieflau, Lainbach, and Grossreifling to St. Gallen. Along this stretch, according to survivors' testimonies, the guards committed numerous murders and acts of brutality. The civilian population also behaved with barbarity.<sup>108</sup> However, even in this area there were civilians who found a way to extend a helping hand. Maria Maunz was thirteen years old when some 1,500 prisoners set up camp on her parents' meadow near Landl. Her mother gave food to a Jew, even though the local Nazi party chief had forbidden such acts under penalty of death. A neighbor attempted to pour some milk into the mouth of a young prisoner about seventeen years old who was suffering from severe exhaustion. "He died and was buried right on the spot," reported Maria Maunz.<sup>109</sup>

After passing through St. Gallen, the evacuation columns headed north into the Upper Danube *Gau*, present-day Upper Austria. Between April 10 and 13, 1945, Upper Austrian rural police and Volkssturm recruits assumed guard duties for

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<sup>106</sup> DOW 13.114a.

<sup>107</sup> *Wahrheit*, April 19, 1946.

<sup>108</sup> Testimony of Tiberiusz Glass, UNRRA DP camp Admont, April 4, 1947; testimony of Zoltan Koffler, UNRRA DP camp Admont, April 7, 1947; and testimony of Elias Kohn UNRRA DP camp Admont, April 8, 1947; Friedmann collection, copy in IGJ.

<sup>109</sup> Waltraud Neuhauser-Pfeiffer and Karl Ramsmaier, *Vergessene Spuren. Die Geschichte der Juden in Steyr* (Linz: Edition Sandkorn, 1993), p. 131.

the Jewish forced laborers in Kleinreifling, escorting them to Kastenreith or Dipoldsau.<sup>110</sup> Those too weak to walk were transported on carts. Nonetheless, there was a large number of shootings along this stretch as well, “carried out in the main by mobile SS and Wehrmacht units, especially involving prisoners no longer able to walk.”<sup>111</sup> One of the evacuation columns reached Grossraming on April 13, where the prisoners were given food at the Enns power station. Men from the SS *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) and the Gestapo tossed some of the sick into the Enns River.<sup>112</sup>

Although there were more SS men among the guard units attached to the death marches through Upper Austria than in Styria, they were not the only ones who murdered Hungarian Jews along the way. As a trial in 1962 in Bonn proved, orders for murder were given to the Volkssturm by the local *Kreis* party leadership.<sup>113</sup> After the last evacuation column had left Reichraming, headed toward Losenstein, the commander of the local Volkssturm and his deputy came across a Jew who had been left behind. On orders from his superior, the deputy commander shot the exhausted man and threw him into the Enns. As the culprit later testified in court, he still saw an enemy even in the exhausted Jewish prisoner because of being subjected to years of Nazi propaganda. Moreover, he said he assumed his superior’s orders had come from up above: “He knew only that the orders had basically come down via the Party to the local Nazi Party chief or via the SA unit Steyr to H., the local SA leader [and Volkssturm commander].”

Although H. had testified in a court interrogation in Austria that he had given no such order and that a similar order had likewise not been issued by superiors — rather, he had been assigned the task of providing food for the Jews — the court ruled otherwise:

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<sup>110</sup> LG Linz Vg 6 Vr 541/46, against Josef Bruckner and others. The defendant Josef Deutsch mentioned four evacuation columns that were escorted along this segment of the route by rural police from the post at Weyer Markt. He himself had been assigned to serve as an escort on April 10, and again on April 13, 1945.

<sup>111</sup> LG Linz Vg 6 Vr 541/46, against Josef Bruckner and others.

<sup>112</sup> Neuhauser-Pfeiffer and Ramsmaier, *Vergessene Spuren*, p. 132.

<sup>113</sup> LG Bonn 8 Ks 1/62 13 UR 3/61, case against Hermann Mair, April 11, 1962, in the verdicts handed down from November 21, 1961 to January 10, 1963, nos. 523-547, vol. XVII, *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen. Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Toetungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, comp. Irene Sagel-Grande, H.H. Fuchs and C.F. Rueter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1978).

The court considers the statement of the witness S. in his interrogation on that same day important. He stated there that he was not familiar with any order for shooting Jews who had remained behind. Yet a member of the NSDAP *Kreis* leadership in Steyr had pointed out to him that in the coming weeks, there would be evacuation columns of Jews moving through the Enns valley. He added that officials in public office and Party functionaries would have something to see and remember when more than 2,000 Jews would arrive in Steyr (the transport groups actually reached some 4,000). In actual fact, many Jews were indeed later killed by members of the Volkssturm. Given this state of affairs, it is likely that H. — and following him, the defendant as well — allowed themselves to be guided by the idea that no straggling Jews should be permitted to live.<sup>114</sup>

In the proceedings referred to by the German court, Adolf Klaus-Sternwieser, Volkssturm commander in Losenstein, was accused of having ordered his subordinates to shoot any Jews unable to walk. The intention was to ensure that as few Jews as possible reached Mauthausen.<sup>115</sup> Sternwieser's subordinates were convinced he was acting on instructions from the local *Kreis* leadership. Nonetheless, most of them disregarded the order to kill.<sup>116</sup>

Yet many men from the Volkssturm, the SS, and the rural police did follow the orders and perpetrated numerous murders as the columns of exhausted prisoners dragged themselves through the Enns valley. There were also acts of random murder by guards. While a column was camped in Losenstein, on April 14, the guards gave the prisoners permission to gather wood for fires. One of the men gathering wood was then shot by a member of the Volkssturm.<sup>117</sup> (In February 1946, in Ternberg, the bodies of thirty victims were exhumed.<sup>118</sup>) The columns finally arrived via Garsten in Steyr and were then marched through Sierning and Hargelsberg to Enns, and subsequently on to Mauthausen.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> LG Linz Vg 3577/47, against Adolf Klaus-Sternwieser.

<sup>116</sup> LG Linz Vg 6 Vr 868/47, against Franz Kreil.

<sup>117</sup> LG Linz Vg 6 Vr 541/46, against Leopold Lehner and others.

<sup>118</sup> Jewish Community of Steyr to the State Prosecutor's Office Steyr, February 22, 1946, Subject: exhumation, DÖW 14.792.

<sup>119</sup> Neuhauser-Pfeiffer and Ramsmaier, *Vergessene Spuren*, p. 130.

Another route probably went through Gleink to Dietachdorf, Stadtkirchen, Kronsdorf, and Enns.<sup>120</sup>

An additional transport column containing some 1,000 to 1,200 persons was marched from Graz to Voitsberg. It was then routed through Koeflach and on to Salla and the Gaberl Pass (Stubalpe). The columns then passed through Weisskirchen and Judenburg. After leaving Judenburg, this route continued on via Poels, Moederbrugg, and Trieben to Liezen. The Volkssturm of Fohnsdorf and Poels provided guard personnel.<sup>121</sup> When men from the Fohnsdorf Volkssturm took over the column on April 9, at the Gaberl Pass, in order to escort it on to Liezen, their commander ordered them to execute anyone unable to walk.<sup>122</sup> Since he anticipated a large number of victims, he put together a burial squad, which marched to the rear of the column and buried the dead.

The column arrived in Liezen on April 13, and continued on the following day.<sup>123</sup> In Upper Austria, the route took the death marchers over the Phyrn Pass to St. Pankraz,<sup>124</sup> through Kirchdorf an der Krems, Schlierbach,<sup>125</sup> Neuhofen an der Krems, St. Marien,<sup>126</sup> and on to Mauthausen.

Once they reached Mauthausen, the suffering of those who had survived the death marches was still far from over. Since the concentration camp Mauthausen was overcrowded, they were housed initially in a tent camp in Marbach.<sup>127</sup> In order to make room for the newcomers, new foot marches of Hungarian Jews were organized on April 16, 26, and 28, from the tent camp to

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<sup>120</sup> LG Linz Vg 6 Vr 1218/46, against Josef Huber; and LG Linz Vg 8 Vr 1218/46, against Josef Hinterleitner.

<sup>121</sup> Report, Controller Military Government Courts Branch to Director, Subject: Atrocities Cases, South East Styria and Judenburg Area, June 6, 1947, PRO FO 1020/2063.

<sup>122</sup> Proceedings of the General Court, British Military Government, Graz, September 25, 1947, against Albin Grossmann and others, in AdR BuMinJu 68.763/55, Subject: cases against Albin Grossmann and others, LG Graz Vg 1 Vr 2841/46.

<sup>123</sup> LG Graz Vg 1 Vr 2116/49, against Otto Maessing and others.

<sup>124</sup> Letter from the Historical Jewish Documentation, Linz, to the Jewish Concentration Camp and Gravesites Investigation Committee, Vienna, March 31, 1948, YVA, 05/89.

<sup>125</sup> Inquiries regarding Hugo Zemanek, AdR BuMinJu 20.304/2-A/63.

<sup>126</sup> Letter from the Jewish Historical Documentation, Linz, to the Jewish Concentration Camp and Gravesites Investigation Committee, Vienna, March 31, 1948, YVA, 05/89.

<sup>127</sup> On April 20, 1945, there were more than 5,435 male and 367 female prisoners in the tent camp, yet its maximum was 10,000 persons; see Hans Marsalek, *Mauthausen*, pp. 135 and 88. See also Peter Kammerstaetter, *Der Todesmarsch ungarischer Juden vom KZ Mauthausen nach Gunskirchen, April 1945. Eine Materialsammlung mit Bildern* (Linz: unpublished, 1971), p. 8, DOW 6733.

the satellite camp in Gunskirchen.<sup>128</sup> The debilitated prisoners were forced to trek from Mauthausen back to Enns and Asten and from there, to drag themselves via St. Florian, Ansfelden, Weisskirchen, Schleissheim, Thalheim, and Wels to Gunskirchen. The number of victims on this last 55 km stretch of the march was horrendously high. On the first four kilometer alone, between Mauthausen and the railroad bridge close by, a reported 800 prisoners were shot. This was done in an attempt to get rid of the weakest and slowest right from the start.<sup>129</sup> The exact number of victims on this death march cannot be determined, but estimates run up to 6,000.<sup>130</sup> The numerous memorial sites along this stretch attest to the inhumanity and brutality of this march.<sup>131</sup>

The Gunskirchen camp was also overcrowded, and typhoid fever was rampant. In the final days of the war, the system that should have sustained and fed over 20,000 inmates broke down completely. When the camp was liberated on May 5, by American troops, most inmates were not just undernourished but seriously ill. There were thousands who survived only a few days or weeks after liberation. We can only estimate the total number of Hungarian Jews who were murdered or died of exhaustion during the death marches. If Szita's calculation that one-third of the 35,000 Jews who were deployed in the Lower Danube *Gau* died even before the camps were dissolved is correct,<sup>132</sup> then one can assume that more than 20,000 Jewish entrenchment workers were forcibly marched from there toward Mauthausen. The number of Hungarian Jews deployed at slave labor in Styria is not documented, but more than 10,000 prisoners in various transports were marched through the Styria and Upper Danube *Gaus* to Mauthausen. Added to these were the Jews in the "Strasshof transports" mentioned earlier, who also suffered thousands of victims on the marches to Mauthausen.

At the end of the war, some 20,000 prisoners were liberated in Gunskirchen. To this number the survivors in the concentration camps of Mauthausen and

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<sup>128</sup> Kammerstaetter, *Todesmarch nach Gunskirchen*, p. 18. The camp at Gunskirchen was located about 5 miles southwest of the city of Wels near the River Traun.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>131</sup> The location of the memorial stones and the number of victims buried there is given in Kammerstaetter; see also Erich Fein, ed., *Die Steine reden*, Arbeitsgemeinschaft der KZ-Oesterreichs (Vienna: Europa-Verlag, 1975).

<sup>132</sup> Szita, "Forced Labor," p. 179.

Ebensee have to be added, though it is impossible to determine how many of them had participated in death marches. The Jewish Concentration Camp Gravesites Investigation Committee (Juedisches KZ-Grabstaetten-Eruierungskomitee), which had been set up in 1948 and organized numerous transfers of victims' remains from poor, makeshift graves in Austria to dignified reburial in Hungary and Austria, estimated the number of Hungarian-Jewish victims of death marches in Austria at 23,000.<sup>133</sup>

After the Allies liberated Austria, "People's Courts" (*Volksgerichte*) held numerous trials involving cases of capital crimes against Hungarian Jews. The first such trial in Austria (held August 14-18, 1945, in Vienna before the District Court in session as a People's Court) dealt with the death march of Hungarian Jews from the Engerau camp to Deutsch-Altenburg, during which 102 persons had been murdered.<sup>134</sup> The trials against the murderers and torturers of Hungarian Jews were numerous, because these crimes had been committed in the final phase of the war, and the evidence was still fresh. In addition, many perpetrators were local citizens known by name and therefore could be tracked down. The situation was different when it came to the SS members involved in murders because their names and units were not known. Only in rare cases was it possible to apprehend and prosecute them.

Most of the cases were tried in the period between 1945-1948, after which, public, political, and judicial interest in punishing National-Socialist crimes waned. This was also manifest in the dwindling echo in the press. Likewise, the severity of the penalties imposed lessened in later sentences, though there were some exceptions. Thus, the defendant in the last Engerau murder trial, held in July 1954, was sentenced to life imprisonment — of which he served more than nineteen years.<sup>135</sup> Nonetheless, the sentences handed down by the People's Courts in the late 1940s and 1950s were markedly more lenient, and the

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<sup>133</sup> Report, Jewish Historical Documentation, November 19, 1951, YVA, 015/36.

<sup>134</sup> LG Wien Vg 1a Vr 564/45, against Rudolf Kronberger and others; interrogation of Siegfried Uiberreither by Lord Schuster on March 5, 1946, regarding responsibility for the murder of 7,000 Hungarian Jews in Styria in April 1945, DOW 12.697 and statement by Franz Ziereis, Mauthausen commandant, May 25, 1945, quoted in Peter Kammerstaetter, "Der Todesmarsch ungarischer Juden vom KZ Mauthausen nach Gunskirchen, April 1945. Eine Materialsammlung mit Bildern" (Linz: unpublished, 1971), p. 8, DOW 6733. Interrogation of the witness Tobias Portschy, February 5, 1960, LG Graz 13 Vr 20/60, against Oskar Reitter, and Kasztner Report, YVA, B/7-3, p. 170.

<sup>135</sup> LG Wien Vg 1a Vr 194/53, against Peter Acher.

number of acquittals rose. In one example, in 1946, the People's Court in Vienna sentenced five members of the Hitler Youth found guilty of involvement in the murder of Jewish forced laborers in Deutsch-Schuetzen, to imprisonment ranging between fifteen months and three years. The sentence took into consideration the young age of the defendants.<sup>136</sup> In 1955, the Hitler Youth unit commander Alfred Weber, who had given the orders in Deutsch-Schuetzen, was tried but acquitted due to insufficient evidence.<sup>137</sup>

After the People's Courts were disbanded in 1955, the prosecution of National-Socialist capital crimes passed to the jurisdiction of district courts, with trial by jury. In these cases the juries' readiness to hand down guilty verdicts was minimal. The murder by the Waffen-SS of Jews unfit for work in Nestelbach was mentioned above. In 1946, two members of the Volkssturm who had been in charge of guarding and providing food for the Jews there were sentenced to ten and two years' imprisonment, respectively, for complicity to murder and excessive cruelty. Acting on the orders of their superior Oskar Reitter, they had refused to give any food to those Jews doomed to die.<sup>138</sup> Reitter, the former Volkssturm battalion commander and a local high-ranking *Kreis* functionary of the greater Graz region, was suspected of having instigated the murders. Not prosecuted until 1960, he was acquitted due to insufficient evidence.<sup>139</sup> In both cases, the courts had established in their verdict that those later acquitted had instigated the crimes. However, these acquittals were also due in significant measure to the testimony of those convicted earlier, who now were no longer willing to testify against their former superiors.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> LG Wien 2d Vr 2059/45, against Franz Dobesberger and others; see also footnote 48.

<sup>137</sup> LG Wien Vg 8e Vr 661/55 and LG Wien 20a Vr 661/55, against Alfred Weber.

<sup>138</sup> LG Graz Vg 11 Vr 812/46, against Jakob Rappold and Johann Grobbauer.

<sup>139</sup> LG Graz 13 Vr 20/60, against Oskar Reitter.

<sup>140</sup> On the trials for violent crimes against Hungarian Jews, see also Eleonore Lappin, "Prozesse der britischen Militaergerichte wegen nationalsozialistischer Gewaltverbrechen an ungarisch-juedischen Zwangsarbeitern in der Steiermark," in Rudolf G. Ardelt and Christian Gerbel, eds., *Oesterreichischer Zeitgeschichtetag 1995* (Vienna: Studienverlag Innsbruck, 1997), pp. 345-350; idem, "Die Ahndung von NS-Gewaltverbrechen im Zuge der Todesmarsche ungarischer Juden durch die Steiermark," in Winfried Garscha and Claudia Kuretsidis, eds., *Keine Abrechnung* (Leipzig and Vienna: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 1998), pp. 32-53; idem, "Opfer als Zeugen in Gerichtsverfahren wegen nationalsozialistischer Gewaltverbrechen: Ein unterbliebener Opfer-Taeter-Diskurs," in Gertraud Diendorfer, Gerhard Jagschitz and Oliver Rathkolb, eds., *Zeitgeschichte im Wandel. 3. Oesterreichischer Zeitgeschichtetag 1997* (Vienna: Studienverlag Innsbruck, 1998), pp. 330-336.



In 1946 and 1947, the General British Courts of the British Military Government in Styria tried a number of cases involving capital crimes against Hungarian Jews committed during the course of the death marches. The British verdicts were harsher than the Austrian; and the courts endeavored to conduct trials that could be regarded as models for a democratic system of justice. While the British courts succeeded in convicting a number of local *Kreisleiter* for incitement to murder, Austrian courts usually dropped such accusations even before bringing charges. They convicted high-ranking National-Socialist functionaries solely because of the high-ranking position they had occupied within the Nazi hierarchy. Although some of the sentences handed down were also severe, the convicted were later able to present themselves in the public eye as persons convicted for “political” reasons — not criminal ones — and thus to play down the seriousness of their actions.<sup>141</sup>

*Translated from the German by William Templer*

**Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 28, Jerusalem (2000) pp. 203- 242**

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<sup>141</sup> Lappin, “Ahndung von NS-Gewaltverbrechen,” in Garscha and Kuretsidis, eds., *Keine Abrechnung*, pp. 32-53.