

From the Testimony of Hildegard Henschel about the Factories Deportation in Berlin, 27 February 1943

...On 26 February 1943, the chairman of the community was called to Burgstrasse. He noticed that hundreds of officials, who were not usually employed there, were running around awaiting orders.... After waiting several hours he received the following orders: The community was to prepare office supplies for 5-6 small offices, including typewriters and other equipment. It is to have secretaries ready to present themselves on short notice at places, which are to be indicated, as early as the following morning. The hospital should prepare a staff for 5-6 first aid stations. They should be equipped with medicine and supplies, and are to present themselves the following morning. When asked for what medical treatment they should prepare, the Gestapo answered: this is a matter of the Gestapo only'.

...All these orders indicated that a large-scale evacuation of Jews was being planned and that a new assembly camp would be prepared. The community officials did not trust the Gestapo promises about food, and therefore secretly gave an order to the community kitchen staff and supply store. They secretly recruited a large number of women from the old age home and psychiatric asylum to peel potatoes and clean leeks.

27 February began like any normal work day. The music hall at the nurses dormitory of the Jewish hospital was empty. In every corner sat a doctor and two nurses with cases of medicine and supplies, waiting for what was to come. There was nervousness and restlessness in the air. People hardly spoke to each other. Between 9 and 10 a.m. the phones started ringing: Oranienburger street [the community offices] reported that all community officials had been arrested at their work places all over. People were loaded onto SS trucks and brought to four assembly camps (the "Clou" concert hall, two military camps and the building at Rosen street). Large teams of aides and medical staff were taken there. Treatment was to be given around the clock. Oranienburg Street was ordered to have the community staff come and

present themselves with all necessary equipment. They also nominated certain people to be the Jewish commanders of each such camp. It was now known what had happened, but it was yet unclear how it happened.

...I just want to state that this action was executed with terrible cruelty and no human consideration. The people were quickly loaded onto the SS trucks. The women came straight from work, in their work clothes, with no coats, no breakfast. These were all left in the factories' changing rooms. Naturally, the community staff's families felt paralyzed. They did not act until the first suicide case was brought in. People jumped from the windows, threw themselves under cars, swallowed Veronal and cyanide. Careful people always carried poison with them. It was hard, almost impossible, to find out where people were. There were as yet no lists of the people detained in the camps. All telephone lines at the factories were occupied by the SS, and one could not call to find out information about the whereabouts of relatives. There was absolute chaos everywhere. In addition, there were manhunts in the streets and house to house searches. Meanwhile it was noon. The Gestapo did not provide food. The community people got permission to supply the camps with food. The Gestapo did not ask where the food for 8,000 people came from. The food was available, but there were many logistical problems...and the supply went slowly. But eventually all these problems were overcome, and each person received something to eat. Before nightfall, the [community] clothing store handed out as many blankets as possible. The supply was minimal compared to the demand, and it is very difficult to describe the hardship and sadness. The people in the camp were worried about their relatives, and community workers looked for these relatives in other camps. The Jewish camp officials did their best, but in many cases relatives could not be traced. There was exceptional worry about the small children who had remained behind at home, some of them locked in the apartments. Since it was Saturday, the parents knew that they would finish work at 2 p.m. and had left their children at home and did not send them to the day-care center or kindergarten. Some were with neighbors or a grandmother who had not yet been deported. The Gestapo informed the camps to accelerate the evacuation

of the Jews. Only people with yellow passes could stay at home or were released from detention. They also separated those who declared they were Aryans and sent them over to the camp at Rosen Street, where they awaited decision in their matter. Those who could prove they had the right to be sent to Theresienstadt [a ghetto in Czechoslovakia where elderly and prominent Jews from Germany were concentrated] were separated from the others. Only in a few cases were people with such privileges overlooked because of the chaos. The question of the children left at home, and luggage that had been prepared and left there, caused a great deal of worry and needed a solution. During the night between Saturday and Sunday, all of the Community social service workers and nurses went all over Berlin to the addresses given to them to pick up the children and bring them to their parents who were detained in the camps.... Starting Sunday the luggage was brought. In some cases it was too late, but almost all received their belongings....

The first transport left on Monday, although there were still families in all the camps that were separated and had not yet been united with their relatives. As always, the community staff was at the railway station with medical staff and food supplies, and they all helped as much as they could. In spite of their efforts, the workers returned after dark, desperate, exhausted and crushed. They did not say much, but from their remarks one could conclude that the Gestapo and SS exhibited all their anger and rage while preparing the transports. People were loaded on opened cattle cars. They did not refrain from using their whips. In short, it was much worse than previous deportations. The Jews were to be deported to Zossen, near Berlin. It was said they would be put in an empty camp of Russian prisoners of war at Wuensdorf. It was such an incredible idea that no one believed it. But no one could imagine Auschwitz, to which the people had probably really been sent.

There were heavy air raids on Berlin during the night of 1 to 2 March 1943. There was extensive damage and many casualties, among them many Jews...

The Gestapo wanted to evacuate the camps quickly and so the healthy people were taken away. The sick were brought to the Jewish hospital, where they spent some more time.

People who were caught in the manhunts in the street were concentrated at the camp in Grosse Hamburger street. The people to be sent to Theresienstadt were assembled at Gerlach Street. The incredible pace at which the transports were prepared caused some confusion, and in some cases people intended for Theresienstadt were sent to the East...

The Gestapo did not stop at concentrating 8,000 people of those caught in the street and arrested at home [or at their work] in the camps. They added a new method to their undertaking in order to hasten up the evacuation.

The community was notified that every person with a star was likely to be arrested in the street. The community therefore had to supply a list of all its workers who lived far from work. People who worked for the community were given a red ribbon with a Gestapo stamp. People wearing it would not be arrested. Thus a grotesque sight could be seen on public transportation – people wearing a yellow star on their left side and a red armband with a number and a stamp.... Several days after the ribbons were distributed the ration cards lost their validity and Jews were given new ones. This was a cruel plan. Every Jew who came for his ration card not wearing a red armband, was immediately arrested, taken to the police station where he waited until he was taken to camp or was loaded onto an SS car waiting near the shop and taken to the assembly camp at Grosse Hamburger Street. The SS trucks waited near the ration card distribution points and transferred the arrested people to the camp at Grosse Hamburger Street. Here the person could ask the community official to have his family members and luggage brought over....

Transports followed one after another. The assembly camps emptied with the exception of the camp at 2 Rosen Street. This was where all the people who claimed they belonged to the Aryan race were concentrated. People had not

yet been deported from this place. It was terribly crowded and the conditions were harsh. People were awaiting a decision. Their cases were examined by the Gestapo according to their rules and regulations.... Those deported from this camp were sent during the month of March, and the others returned to their regular lives.

The operation ended on 7 March. The new assembly camps were now empty.... In June 1943 the Jews had to hand in the red ribbons and the community was informed that the yellow passes had lost their validity. It was clear to the Jewish community and Reichsvereinigung workers what was about to happen and they prepared for new transports.

On 9 March, they started to take the [Reichsvereinigung] officials from their homes and on 12 March a transport left for the east. A smaller transport went on 16 March to Theresienstadt. Now the people exempted from the transports so far faced very difficult problems: they were crushed by the events, suffered from insufficient nutrition, exhausted from hard work, had had their apartments looted, and suffered from the air raids. The so-called “Aryans” who had not been evacuated and who until that time had not been active in Jewish Organizations, quickly found a place in all the jobs that had been vacated by the deportations. Thus the organizations continued their operations without problems....

Few transports left in April 1943, and starting with 7 May, several large transports went to the east and to Theresienstadt. Among those evacuated were hundreds of community and Reichsvereinigung officials from Kant Street.

On 29 May 1943 300 patients were taken from the mental asylum that was managed by Mrs. Rebecca Oberland and sent to Theresienstadt. At the same time they started to prepare the sick – those who were bed-ridden and those able to walk – to be “transferred” from the hospital. These transports were of course accompanied by nursing personnel....

Now everyone knew that the Jews who had stayed behind, those with Jewish blood, had only a short time before they too would have to leave. No one was surprised, therefore, when on 10 June 1943, at 10 a.m., the Gestapo notified the head of the community at 29 Oranienburg street that the Jewish community of Berlin would cease to exist and that all its workers who were not considered Aryan were to be detained. The same announcement was made at Kant Street 18.

The people were detained and brought to the assembly camp at Grosse Hamburger Street. There they stayed until 16 June, and were treated well by those Aryans who stayed behind. On 16 June, the familiar picture repeated itself. A moving truck transferred people from sunrise to the railway station at Puttlitz Street. There they and the sick from the hospital were loaded on the train. The train left Berlin in the evening with 500 people, 300 of them sick people from their beds.

We, the people of transport 96 from Berlin, continued our struggle to survive at Theresienstadt. Only few of the people of that transport survived.

Source: Yad Vashem Archive 0.1/52