

BLOODLANDS

EUROPE BETWEEN HITLER AND STALIN

Timothy Snyder

BASIC BOOKS

A MEMBER OF THE PERSEUS BOOKS GROUP

New York

Of the Nazi utopias, only the elimination of the Jews was realized, although again not exactly as the Germans had planned. In Belarus, as elsewhere, the Final Solution was the one atrocity that took on a more radical form in the realization than in the conception. Soviet Jews were supposed to work themselves to death building a German empire or be deported further east. This proved impossible; most Jews in the East were killed where they lived. In Minsk, there were a few exceptions: those Jews who escaped and survived, often at the price of partaking in the descent into mass violence; and those Jews kept for labor, who died a bit later than the others, and sometimes further from home. In September 1943, some of the last Jews of Minsk were deported west to occupied Poland, to a facility known as Sobibór.⁶³

There they encountered a death factory of a kind unknown even in Belarus, where, one might have thought, all earthly horrors had already been revealed.

CHAPTER 8

THE NAZI DEATH FACTORIES

About 5.4 million Jews died under German occupation. Nearly half of them were murdered east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, usually by bullets, sometimes by gas. The rest perished west of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, usually by gas, sometimes by bullets. East of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, a million Jews were killed in the second half of 1941, in the first six months of the German occupation. Another million were killed in 1942. West of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, Jews came under German control significantly earlier, but were killed later. In the east, the most economically productive Jews, the young men, were often shot right away, in the first days or weeks of the war. Then economic arguments were turned against the women, children, and elderly, who became "useless eaters." West of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, ghettos were established pending a deportation (to Lublin, Madagascar, or Russia) that never came. Uncertainty about the final version of the Final Solution between 1939 and 1941 meant that Jews west of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line were put to work. This created a certain economic argument for their preservation.

The mass murder of Polish Jews in the General Government and in Polish lands annexed to Germany was initiated after more than two years of German occupation, and more than a year after Jews had been consigned to ghettos. These Polish Jews were gassed at six major facilities, four in the General Government and two in the lands annexed to the Reich, functioning in one combination or another from December 1941 through November 1944: Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz. The core of the killing campaign west

of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line was Operation Reinhard, the gassing of 1.3 million Polish Jews at Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka in 1942. Its last chapter was Auschwitz, where about two hundred thousand Polish Jews and more than seven hundred thousand other European Jews were gassed, most of them in 1943 and 1944.¹

The origins of Operation Reinhard lie in Himmler's interpretations of Hitler's desires. Aware of the successful gassing experiments performed on Soviet prisoners of war, Himmler entrusted the creation of a new gassing facility for Jews to his client Odilo Globocnik on about 13 October 1941. Globocnik was the SS and Police Leader of the Lublin district of the General Government, which was a crucial testing ground for Nazi racial utopias. Globocnik had expected that millions of Jews would be deported to his region, where he would put them to work in slave labor colonies. After the attack on the Soviet Union, Globocnik was charged with the implementation of Generalplan Ost. Though this grand design for exterminatory colonization was generally tabled after the Soviet Union failed to collapse, Globocnik actually implemented it in part in his Lublin district, driving a hundred thousand Poles from their homes. He wanted a general "cleansing of the General Government of Jews, and also of Poles."²

By late October 1941 Globocnik had chosen a site for the new gassing facility: Belzec, just south and east of Lublin. The changing plans for the use of this place reveal the shift of Nazi utopias from exterminatory colonization to extermination as such. In 1940 Globocnik had established a slave labor site at Belzec, where he imagined that two million Jews would dig anti-tank ditches by hand. He harbored such fantasies because an early version of the Final Solution had involved the deportation of European Jews to his Lublin district. In the event, Globocnik had to settle for a labor force at Belzec of no more than thirty thousand Jews. He finally abandoned his defense project in October 1940. A year later, having spoken to Himmler, he imagined another way to exploit the site: for the extermination of the Jews.³

Globocnik would seek, and find, a way for Germans to kill Jews west of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, where they lacked the personnel for mass shooting campaigns, and where they were unwilling to arm Poles as auxiliaries. The facility at Belzec would require just a few German commanders to operate. The basic labor would be provided by Jewish slaves. The facility would be guarded



and operated chiefly with non-Germans chosen from the training camp at Trawniki, in the Lublin district. The first Trawniki men were captured Red Army soldiers taken from the prisoner-of-war camps. The Trawniki men were largely Soviet Ukrainians, but included representatives of other Soviet nationalities, including Russians and the occasional person of Jewish origin—chosen, of course, by accident. The Germans preferred Soviet Germans, when they could be found.⁴

The changing mission of the Trawniki men, like the changing use of Belzec, revealed the transformation of Hitler's utopias. In Globocnik's initial scheme, these men were to serve as policemen, under German command, in the conquered Soviet Union. Since the Soviet Union was not in fact conquered, the Trawniki men could be prepared for another special task: operating the facilities where the Jews of Poland would be gassed. The Trawniki men knew nothing of this general design when they were recruited, and had no political or personal stake in this policy. For them, Poland was a foreign country, and its Jews were a foreign people. They presumably had a strong interest in keeping their jobs; their recruitment rescued them from a likely death by starvation. Even if they somehow had the courage to defy the Germans anyway, they knew that they could not safely return to the Soviet Union. In leaving the Dulags and Stalags they had stamped themselves as German collaborators.

In December 1941 the Trawniki men, wearing black uniforms, assisted in the construction of a ramp and a rail spur, which would allow communication by train to Belzec. Soviet citizens were providing the labor for a German killing policy.⁵

Belzec was not to be a camp. People spend the night at camps. Belzec was to be a death factory, where Jews would be killed upon arrival.

There was a German precedent for such a facility, where people arrived under false pretences, were told that they needed to be showered, and then were killed by carbon monoxide gas. Between 1939 and 1941 in Germany, six killing facilities had been used to murder the handicapped, the mentally ill, and others deemed "unworthy of life." After a test run of gassing the Polish handicapped in the Wartheland, Hitler's chancellery organized a secret program to kill German citizens. It was staffed by doctors, nurses, and police chiefs; one of its main organizers was Hitler's personal doctor. The medical science of the mass murder

was simple: carbon monoxide (CO) binds much better than oxygen (O₂) to the hemoglobin in blood, and thereby prevents red blood cells from performing their normal function of bringing oxygen to tissues. The victims were brought in for ostensible medical examinations, and then led to "showers," where they were asphyxiated by carbon monoxide released from canisters. If the victims had gold teeth, they were marked beforehand with a chalk cross on their backs, so that these could be extracted after their death. Children were the first victims, the parents receiving mendacious letters from doctors about how they had died during treatment. Most of the victims of the "euthanasia" program were non-Jewish Germans, although German Jews with disabilities were simply killed without any screening whatsoever. At one killing facility, the personnel celebrated the ten-thousandth cremation by bedecking a corpse with flowers.⁶

The declared end of the "euthanasia" program coincided with Globocnik's mission to develop a new technique for the gassing of Polish Jews. By August 1941, when Hitler called the program to a halt for fear of domestic resistance, it had registered 70,273 deaths, and created a model of deceptive killing by lethal gas. The suspension of the "euthanasia" program left a group of policemen and doctors with certain skills but without employment. In October 1941, Globocnik summoned a group of them to the Lublin district to run his planned death facilities for Jews. Some 92 of the 450 or so men who would serve Globocnik in the task of gassing the Polish Jews had prior experience in the "euthanasia" program. The most important of them was Christian Wirth, who had overseen the "euthanasia" program. As the head of Hitler's chancellery put it, "a large part of my organization" was to be used "in a solution to the Jewish question that will extend to the ultimate possible consequences."⁷

Globocnik was not the only one to exploit the experience of the "euthanasia" crews. A gassing facility at Chełmno, in the Wartheland, also exploited the technical experience of the "euthanasia" program. Whereas Globocnik's Lublin district was the experimental site for the destructive side of Himmler's program for "strengthening Germanhood," Arthur Greiser's Wartheland was the site of most actual deportation: hundreds of thousands of Poles were shipped to the General Government, and hundreds of thousands of Germans arrived from the Soviet Union. Greiser faced the same problem as Hitler, on a smaller scale: after all the movement, the Jews remained, and by late 1941 no plausible site for deportation was evident. Greiser did manage to deport a few thousand Jews to the

General Government, but these were replaced by Jews deported from the rest of Germany.⁸

The head of the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) in Greiser's regional capital Poznań had proposed a solution on 16 July 1941: "There is the danger this winter that the Jews can no longer all be fed. It is to be seriously considered whether the most humane solution might not be to finish off those Jews not capable of working by some sort of fast-working preparation. This would be in any event more pleasant than letting them starve." The "fast-working preparation" was carbon monoxide, already used in the "euthanasia" program. A gas van was tested on Soviet prisoners of war in September 1941; thereafter gas vans were used in occupied Belarus and Ukraine, especially to kill children. The killing machine at Chelmno was a gas van, operated under the supervision of Herbert Lange, who had gassed the handicapped in the "euthanasia" program. As of 5 December, Germans were using the Chelmno facility to kill Jews in the Wartheland. Some 145,301 Jews were killed at Chelmno in 1941 or 1942. Chelmno was operative until the Jewish population of the Wartheland was reduced, essentially, to a very functional labor camp inside the Łódź ghetto. But the killing paused, in early April: just as the killing in the Lublin district was beginning.⁹

Belzec was to be a new model, more efficient and more durable than Chelmno. Most likely in consultation with Wirth, Globocnik decided to build a permanent facility where many people could be gassed at once behind walls (as with the "euthanasia" program), but one where carbon monoxide gas could be reliably generated from internal combustion engines (as with the gas vans). Rather than parking a vehicle, as at Chelmno, this meant removing the engine from a vehicle, linking it with pipes to a purpose-built gas chamber, surrounding that gas chamber with fences, and then connecting the death factory to population centers by rail. Such were the simple innovations of Belzec, but they were enough.¹⁰

The Nazi leadership had always understood the Polish Jews to be at the heart of the Jewish "problem." The German occupation had divided Jews who had been Polish citizens into three different political zones. As of December 1941, some three hundred thousand Polish Jews were living in the Wartheland and other Polish lands annexed to Germany. They were now subject to gassing at Chelmno. The 1.3 million or so Polish Jews on the eastern side of the Molotov-

Ribbentrop line were subject to shooting from June 1941, and most of their number would be killed in 1942. The largest group of Polish Jews under German occupation were those in ghettos in the General Government. Until June 1941, the General Government held half of the prewar population of Polish Jews, about 1,613,000 people. (When a Galicia district was added after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the number of Jews in the General Government reached about 2,143,000. Those half-million or so Jews in Galicia, east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, were subject to shooting.)¹¹

When Himmler and Globocnik began, in March 1942, to kill the Polish Jews of the General Government, they were undertaking an unambiguous policy to destroy the major Jewish population of Europe. On 14 March 1942 Himmler spent the night in Lublin and spoke with Globocnik. Two days later the Germans began the deportation of Jews from the Lublin district to Belzec. On the night of 16 March, about 1,600 Jews who lacked labor documents were rounded up in Lublin, shipped away, and gassed. In the second half of March 1942 the Germans began to clear the Lublin district of Jews, village by village, town by town. Hermann Höfle, Globocnik's lieutenant for "resettlement," led a staff that developed the necessary techniques. Jews from smaller ghettos were ordered to larger ones. Then Jews with dangerous associations, suspected communists, and Polish Army veterans, were shot. In the final preparatory step, the population was filtered and younger men and others deemed suitable for labor were given new papers.¹²

West of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, the Germans arranged matters so that they did less of the actual killing themselves. The institutions of the ghetto, its Judenrat and Jewish police force, were turned toward its destruction. Globocnik's staff would begin an action in a given town or city by contacting the local Security Police, and then assemble a force of German policemen. If the Germans had at their disposal a Jewish police force, as they did in communities of any size, Jewish policemen were then required to do the bulk of the actual work of assembling their fellow Jews for transports. In cities, the Jewish police far outnumbered the Germans from whom they took orders. Since they had no firearms, they could only use force against fellow Jews. Sometimes *Trawniki* men were also available to help.¹³

The German police ordered the Jewish police to assemble the Jewish population at a given assembly point by a certain time. At first, Jews were often lured

to the collection point with promises of food or more attractive labor assignments "in the east." Then, in roundups that took several days, the Germans and the Jewish police would blockade particular blocks or particular houses, and force their inhabitants to go to a collection point. Germans shot small children, pregnant women, and the handicapped or elderly on the spot. In larger towns and cities where more than one roundup was necessary, these measures were repeated with increasing violence. The Germans were aiming for daily quotas to fill trains, and would sometimes pass on quotas to the Jewish police who were responsible (at the risk of their own positions and thus lives) for filling them. The ghetto was sealed during and also after the action, so that the German police could plunder without hindrance from the local population.¹⁴

Once the Jews reached Belzec, they were doomed. They arrived unarmed to a closed and guarded facility, with little chance of understanding their situation, let alone resisting the Germans and the armed Trawniki men. Much like the patients at the "euthanasia" centers, they were told that they had to enter a certain building in order to be disinfected. They were required to remove their clothes and discard their valuables, on the explanation that these too would be disinfected and returned. Then they were marched, naked, into chambers that were pumped full of engine exhaust (which contained carbon monoxide). Only two or three Jews who disembarked at Belzec survived; about 434,508 did not. Wirth commanded the facility through the summer of 1942, and seems to have excelled in his duties. Thereafter he would serve as general inspector of Belzec and the two other facilities that would be built on the same model.¹⁵

This system worked nearly to perfection in the Lublin district of the General Government. Deportations to Belzec from the Cracow district began slightly later, with similar results. Jews from the Galicia district suffered from the overlap of two German killing methods: beginning in summer 1941 they were shot; and then from March 1942 they were gassed at Belzec. Galicia was to the east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, and so Jews there were subject to shooting; but it had been added to the General Government, so its Jews were also subject to gassing. Thomas Hecht, a Galician Jew who survived, recounted some of the ways Jews might die in Galicia: two aunts, an uncle, and a cousin were gassed at Belzec; his father, one of his brothers, an aunt, an uncle, and a cousin were shot; his other brother died at a labor camp.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Globocnik's staff and his Trawniki men built another death facility on the Belzec model in the Lublin district: at Sobibór, just northeast of

Lublin. Functional from April 1942, it killed, in exactly the same way as Belzec, some 180,000 Jews, with only about forty survivors. Globocnik and his men had mastered the necessary procedures for the core of the operation: roundups in the ghettos, carried out by Höfle's men, German police, and locals; order in the camps, as maintained by a crew of Trawniki men, a few Germans, and a large Jewish workforce; and the mass murder itself, carried out by asphyxiation by exposure to engine exhaust.¹⁷

Having achieved mortality rates of 99.99 percent at Belzec and Sobibór, Himmler ordered on 17 April 1942 the construction of a third facility, this time in the Warsaw district of the General Government. A crew with "euthanasia" experience, accompanied by Trawniki men, was dispatched to a site near the village of Treblinka, where construction of the death factory began on 1 June 1942. The laborers were Jews from the region, who were killed when the project was complete. The man who oversaw the construction was, like the commanders of Belzec and Sobibór, a veteran of the "euthanasia" program. Unlike Franz Stangl (at Sobibór) and Christian Wirth (at Belzec), however, Irmfried Eberl was a medical doctor rather than a police chief. He had directed two of the "euthanasia" facilities.¹⁸

Eberl seemed delighted at his latest assignment. "It's going very well for me," he wrote to his wife during the construction of the death facility at Treblinka. "There's lots to do and that's fun." As the camp neared completion, he was "pleased and proud of this accomplishment." He was happy that Globocnik's Lublin model would be extended to Warsaw.¹⁹

Home to much of the Polish educated classes and to Europe's largest society of Jews, Warsaw was a metropolis that had no place in the Nazi worldview. As of spring 1942, more than 350,000 Jews were still alive in the Warsaw ghetto.

Warsaw was the largest city in the General Government, but not its administrative center. Hans Frank, the general governor, preferred to rule from Cracow, taking over the ancient Polish royal castle and presenting himself as latter-day racial royalty. In October 1939, he had stymied attempts to resolve the Jewish "problem" by transporting Jews into the Lublin district of the General Government. In December 1941, Frank told his subordinates that they "must get rid of the Jews." He had no idea, even then, how this could be achieved. But by spring 1942, Frank knew. Lublin had something to offer Frank: it was no longer the district that would attract more Jews to the General Government, but

the place where Jews who already lived in the General Government could be murdered. This was welcome. Trawniki men arrived in Warsaw in February and April. In summer 1942 Frank ceded control of Jewish employment, and then the ghettos themselves, to the SS.²⁰

The assassination of a very prominent SS commander provided the pretext for the next escalation. After Hitler and Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich was the most important architect of the policy to exterminate the Jews. He was also a typical example of the Nazi tendency to entrust several offices to one person: already the head of the Reich Security Main Office, he was placed in charge of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the Czech lands annexed to Germany in 1939. On 27 May 1942, he was injured in an assassination attempt by a Czech and a Slovak employed by British intelligence, and died on 4 June. Hitler and Himmler were annoyed with him for travelling without a security detail, which Heydrich believed he did not need because of his popularity among Czechs. In the Czech lands the Germans pursued no repressive policies comparable to those in occupied Poland and the Soviet Union; Heydrich had made a special point of favoring the Czech working class.²¹

Heydrich's assassination meant the loss of a planner of the Final Solution, but the gain of a martyr. Hitler and Himmler met and spoke on June 3rd, 4th, and 5th 1942. Himmler gave the eulogy: "Ours is the holy duty to avenge his death, to take up his labor, and to destroy the enemies of our people without mercy or weakness." One Czech village, Lidice, would be totally destroyed as retribution for the assassination of Heydrich. Its men were shot on the spot, its women sent to the German concentration camp at Ravensbrück, and the children gassed at Chełmno.²²

The Nazi policy of the complete elimination of Polish Jews in the General Government now took the name "Operation Reinhard," as a tribute to Heydrich. The reference to the assassination made victims of the Germans, and allowed the mass murder of Jews to be presented as retribution. Within the Nazi worldview, the assassination of Heydrich in May 1942 played a role similar to that of the American declaration of war in December 1941: it gave rise to a feeling of righteous solidarity among the ostensibly attacked Nazis, and it distracted attention from the true sources of German predicaments and policies. Heydrich became a prominent "victim" of the supposed international Jewish conspiracy that was responsible for the war.²³

Jews were killed because Hitler had defined this as an aim of the war. But even after he made his desires known, the timing of their death was conditioned by German perceptions of the war's course and associated economic priorities. Jews were more likely to die when Germans were concerned with food shortages, and less likely to die when Germans were concerned with labor shortages.

Hitler announced his decision to kill all the Jews not long after he had announced his decision that Soviet prisoners of war should be used as labor rather than killed. In early 1942 surviving Soviet prisoners of war were integrated into the labor force in Germany proper, while Hans Frank succeeded in organizing a colonial Polish economy in his General Government. With labor supplies momentarily assured, food became the primary concern, both in the Reich and in occupied Poland. Göring had to announce cuts in food rations for Germans in the Reich in April 1942, and the average consumption of calories in the Reich did indeed decline considerably that year. Frank, for his part, was concerned with the improvement of food supplies to his Polish working class.²⁴

Thus in summer 1942 economic concerns, as understood by the Germans, hastened rather than hindered the plan to murder all of the Polish Jews. When food rather than labor was the primary anxiety, Jews became "useless eaters," and even those working for the benefit of the German economy and the Wehrmacht were in danger. By the end of 1942, Hans Frank again wanted labor more than he wanted food, and thus wanted remaining Jews to be kept alive. By then, most Polish Jews were already dead. The German economy was like a razor tightrope that Jews were forced to walk, barefoot, blindfolded, and without a net. It was all that was between them and death, it was bloody and treacherous, it was certain to fail them.²⁵

The death facility at Treblinka was completed on 11 July 1942. Eight days later, on 19 July 1942, Himmler ordered the complete "resettlement of the entire Jewish population of the General Government by 31 December 1942." This meant, before all, Warsaw.²⁶

In Warsaw on 22 July 1942, Globocnik's "resettlement" specialist Hermann Höfle and his group of SS ghetto clearers briefed the local Security Police in

Warsaw, and then paid a visit to Adam Czerniaków, head of the Judenrat. Höfle told Czerniaków that he would have to present five thousand Jews at a transfer point, or Umschlagplatz, the following day. Czerniaków, who knew of the earlier ghetto clearings in the Lublin district, seemed to grasp what was afoot. Rather than accept responsibility for a part in the coordination of the murder of his people, he killed himself. With Czerniaków dead, the Germans then turned to deception, ordering the Jewish police to hang signs promising bread and marble to those who would appear at the Umschlagplatz. The first transport of about five thousand Jews departed Warsaw for Treblinka on 23 July. As Bluma B. recalled, people who were starving would do anything for a bit of food, "even if you know that you're going to be killed."²⁷

Thus began the operation in the Warsaw ghetto that the Germans called the "Large Action." Höfle and his crew installed themselves in the ghetto, at Żelazna 103. As they had done in other cities and towns in the Lublin, Cracow, and Galicia districts of the General Government, they and the local Security Police now turned to coercion. With the help of a few hundred Trawniki men and about two thousand Jewish policemen, the Germans organized roundups in the Warsaw ghetto almost every single day for the next two months. After the very hungry were gone, the Jewish police next took groups who seemed helpless: the orphans, the poor, the homeless, prisoners. The old and the young had no chance whatsoever. Children under the age of fifteen disappeared entirely from the ghetto. The Germans shot very young children, the sick, the handicapped, and the aged on the spot.²⁸

At first, the Jewish police were able to carry out the task with little German supervision. After a few days of deporting the hungry and the helpless, the Germans applied the same technique in Warsaw as elsewhere: the surprise blockade of an apartment building or part of a street, the verification of papers, and the deportation of all Jews not deemed necessary for labor. The Jewish police, supervised by the German police, carried out the first blockade on 29 July 1942. The Germans decided which areas were to be cleared at what times; the Jewish policemen would open at dawn a sealed envelope with instructions about which areas were to be cleared on that day. In general the Germans carried out two actions each day, aiming to fill a quota.²⁹

Selections for labor kept some individuals alive, but undermined any collective spirit of resistance. Although the Germans were far from precise in their observation of the difference between documented laborers and others, selec-

tion created a crucial social division between those Jews who had papers and those who did not, and brought a general preoccupation with personal security. People tended to believe that they and their families could remain in the ghetto with the right jobs and the right papers. This privatization of hope was doom for the collectivity. Available energy was spent in the hunt for documents, rather than in the coordination of resistance. No one tried (as yet) to wrest the monopoly of force within the ghetto from the Germans and the Jewish police. So long as there was no Jewish group willing to resist the Jewish police, the roundups and deportations could continue, with German oversight but quite limited German personnel.³⁰

By August 1942 the Germans required that Jewish policemen each produce five Jews a day for deportation, or else see members of their own families deported. This had the effect of removing those who could not defend themselves. The major orphanages were emptied on 5 August. The famous educator Janusz Korczak led his children to the Umschlagplatz. He held two of them by the hand and walked with his head high. Among the 6,623 people deported that day with him were the educators and caretakers of the ghetto's orphans: his colleague Stefania Wilczyńska and many others. Policemen took the old and the young to Umschlagplatz on carts. Jewish policemen took a small girl from her home when her mother was away running an errand. Her last words before deportation to Treblinka were recorded: "I know that you are a good man, sir. Be so kind as to not take me away. My mama left for just a moment. She'll be back in just a moment, and I won't be there, be so kind as to not take me away."³¹

In the first two months of the Large Action, some 265,040 Jews were taken to the Umschlagplatz, and another 10,380 or so killed in the ghetto itself. Perhaps sixty thousand Jews remained. They were predominantly fit younger males.³²

Each stage of the mass murder of the Warsaw Jews was so dreadful that it gave rise to hopes that the near future might at least be better than the immediate past. Some Jews really did believe that labor in the east would be better than life in the ghetto. Once assembled at Umschlagplatz, Jews could be forgiven for believing that embarking on trains would be better than indefinite waiting under the hot sun without food, water, and sanitary facilities. The supervision of Umschlagplatz was assigned to the Jewish police, who occasionally freed people

they knew, or people who could afford to bribe them. As the historian Emanuel Ringelblum recorded, the Jewish police sometimes demanded, in addition to cash, payment "in kind," which is to say sex with the women whom they saved.³³

In the trains, illusions faded. Although assured that their destination was a labor camp "in the east," some Jews must have suspected that this was false: after all, people with labor certificates were precisely the ones who remained in Warsaw. If work was the goal, then why were the very old and the very young sent first? The trains were accorded the lowest priority in the railway system, and often took days to reach a destination that was in fact rather close to Warsaw—Treblinka was only about a hundred kilometers to the northeast. The Jews were given no food or water, and died in large numbers on many of the transports. Children licked each other's sweat. Mothers sometimes threw small children from trains, guessing that they would be more likely to survive in the wild than wherever the train was going. Some parents explained to their very small children, born in the ghetto, what could be seen through windows or cracks in doors. The very youngest had never seen fields or forests before. Nor would they again.³⁴

Poles would yell at the trains going by. The gesture of a finger across the throat, remembered with loathing by a few Jewish survivors, was meant to communicate to the Jews that they were going to die—though not necessarily that the Poles wished this upon them. Some Poles called for money; others, perhaps more merciful, perhaps with other needs, asked for children. Yankiel Wiernik remembered his own transport, an early one from Warsaw: "My view took in everyone and everything, yet I could not take in the enormity of the misfortune." No one could.³⁵

Each transport was assembled from fifty-seven to sixty train cars, or about five to six thousand people. Upon arrival at the rail station nearest Treblinka, the train stopped. Then, sometimes after a wait of hours or even days, another engine pulled up, and moved nineteen or twenty of the cars—1,700 to 2,000 people—to a rail spur inside the Treblinka death factory. The second engine pushed rather than pulled these cars, so that the engineer was going backward, and never himself faced or entered the facility.³⁶

The Jews who were still alive were then forced from each car by Trawniki men brandishing guns and cracking whips. The Jews deported to Treblinka died, almost all of them, in these first few weeks, but not as smoothly as at Belzec and

Sobibór, and not as the Germans intended. The regular and massive transports of Jews had overwhelmed the small gas chambers at Treblinka very quickly, and so the Germans and the Trawniki men had to resort to shooting. This was not the task for which the Trawniki men had been trained. They did it badly, but they did it. By August the rail spur inside the Treblinka death factory was surrounded by piles of corpses.

Oskar Berger, who arrived on a transport of August 22nd, remembered "hundreds of bodies lying around." Yankiel Wiernik recalled his arrival on 24 August: "The camp yard was littered with corpses, some still in their clothes and some naked, their faces distorted with fright and awe, black and swollen, the eyes wide open, with protruding tongues, skulls crushed, bodies mangled." A Jew who had arrived the day before, 23 August, had just avoided joining that pile. He was chosen for labor, which chiefly meant the disposal of human remains. He recalled how the killing was done in those early weeks of Treblinka: "After we left the wagon the Germans and Ukrainians, whips in their hands, drove us into a courtyard, where they ordered us to lie down with our faces to the ground. Then they walked through and shot us in the back of the neck." Adam Krzepicki, who arrived on 25 August, recorded a similar impression: "Corpses of people of different ages, in different positions, with different expressions on their faces the moment they breathed their last. All around, just earth, sky, and corpses!" The next day, 26 August, was remembered by Edward Weinstein: "And I looked out, and I saw Hell. Bodies, as high as the windows on the cattle car, on the ramp." Franz Strangl, the German (Austrian) police officer who commanded the death factory at Sobibór, was called in to investigate the chaos of Treblinka. He was, presumably, not a man who was easily overwhelmed by death, and unlike the arriving Jews he had some idea of what to expect. Nevertheless he was shocked by what he found: "The smell was indescribable; the hundreds, no, the thousands of bodies everywhere, decomposing, putrefying."³⁷

Imfried Eberl, the German (Austrian) medical doctor who commanded Treblinka, had hoped to prove his worth. He wanted his kill rates to exceed those of the other death facility commanders, the police chiefs at Belzec and Sobibór. He continued to accept transports in August 1942 even as the number of people to be killed far exceeded the facility's capacity to asphyxiate them. Death then radiated outward, from the gas chambers to the waiting area in the courtyard, and from the courtyard to the trains waiting at the station, or on the tracks, or somewhere far away in occupied Poland. The Jews died all the same, almost all

of them; but now a few escaped from the trains, which had very rarely happened during earlier transports to Sobibór and Belzec.³⁸

Escapes from the trains made their way back to the Warsaw ghetto, often with an idea of what they had been spared. The disorganization also drew the attention of onlookers. Because of all the delays, trains conveying German soldiers to the eastern front were more likely to pass or to be caught behind one of the death trains; a few onlookers took photographs, others vomited from the stench. Some of these soldiers were on their way to southwestern Soviet Russia to take part in the offensive at Stalingrad. Those German soldiers who saw the Treblinka transports knew, if they wanted to know, just what they were fighting for.³⁹

Ebel was removed from his post for incompetence, and in August 1942 Stangl took command at Treblinka. Stangl, who later said that he regarded the mass gassing of Jews as his "profession" and that he "enjoyed it," quickly put Treblinka in order. He called a temporary halt to transports, and had the bodies buried by Jewish laborers. When the death facility was opened again in early September 1942, it functioned much more like the machine that it was designed to be.⁴⁰

Stangl commanded with the help of a particularly vicious assistant, Kurt Franz, whom the Jewish laborers called "the Doll" (for his vanity and good looks). Franz liked to watch Jews box, he liked to watch his dog attack Jews, and he liked to watch animals in general: at one point he had the Jewish laborers construct a zoo. The Germans were assisted by a few dozen Trawniki men, who served as guards, and performed a few essential functions within the facility, such as herding Jews into the gas chambers and releasing the carbon monoxide gas. The rest of the labor was performed by a few hundred Jews, spared from death only in order to carry out tasks associated with mass killing and plunder, and doomed themselves to a quick death if they showed any sign of weakness. Like Belzec and Sobibór, Treblinka was designed to function on Jewish labor, such that the Trawniki men had to do little and the Germans next to nothing.⁴¹

As rumors of Treblinka spread, the Germans engaged in propaganda. The Polish government, in exile in London, had been passing on to its British and American allies reports of the gasings, along with other German killings of Polish citizens. Throughout the summer it urged the British and the Americans to take retributive actions upon German civilians, to no effect. Officers of the Polish resistance, the Home Army, considered an attack on Treblinka, but did not carry one out. The Germans denied the gasings. The chief of the Jewish police in

Warsaw and the official "resettlement commissioner," Józef Szeryński, claimed that he had received postcards from Treblinka. There was indeed a postal service inside the Warsaw ghetto, which functioned even during these weeks. The postmen wore caps with bright orange bills so that they would not be seized in the roundups. But they brought, of course, no news from Treblinka.⁴²

The transports from Warsaw to Treblinka began again on 3 September 1942. The last transport of the Large Action, on 22 September 1942, included the Jewish police and their families. As the Jewish policemen neared the station, they threw from the windows their hats and any other markers of their former mission or social status (Jewish policemen often came from prosperous families). This was prudent behavior, since Jewish policemen could meet a hard reception from fellow Jews in a concentration camp. Yet Treblinka was no camp. It was a death facility, so their actions made no difference. The policemen were gassed like everyone else.

Within a few months, Stangl had changed the appearance of Treblinka, and thereby increased its lethal functionality. Jews who arrived at Treblinka in late 1942 disembarked not to a simple ramp surrounded by dead bodies but inside a mock train station, painted by a Jewish laborer to resemble a real one. It had a clock, a timetable, and ticket counters. As Jews stepped from the "station," they could hear the sound of music, played by an orchestra led by the Warsaw musician Artur Gold. Those Jews who limped or hobbled or otherwise revealed themselves to be weak at this point were taken to a "clinic." Jewish workers with red armbands helped them to a building marked with a red cross. Behind this building the sick Jews were shot in the back of the neck over a ditch, by Germans dressed as doctors. The chief executioner was August Miete, whom the Jewish laborers called the Angel of Death, *Malach Ha-Mavet*. Those Jews who could move themselves took a few steps forward into a kind of courtyard, where the men and the women were separated: men to the right, women to the left, as they were told in German and Yiddish.⁴³

In the courtyard, the Jews were forced to strip naked, on the pretext that they were to be disinfected before a further transport "to the east." Jews had to bundle their clothes neatly and tie their shoes together by the laces. They had to surrender any valuables; women were subjected to cavity searches. At this point a few women, in some of the transports, were selected for rape; and a few men, in some of the transports, were selected for labor. The women then shared the

fate of the rest, whereas the men would live for a few more days, weeks, or even months as slave laborers.⁴⁴

All the women went to the gas chambers without their clothes, and without their hair. Each woman had to sit before a Jewish "barber." Religiously observant women who wore wigs had to surrender them. Even at this very last moment before death, people reacted differently, individually. For some women, the hair-cutting was confirmation of the "disinfection" story; for others it was the proof that they were about to be killed. The women's hair was to be used to make stockings for German railway workers and to line the slippers worn by German submarine crews.⁴⁵

Both groups, first the women and then the men, naked, humiliated, and helpless, were forced to run through a tunnel. It was a few meters wide and about a hundred meters long: the Germans called it "the road to Heaven." At its end Jews might see a large Star of David in the gable over the entrance to a dark room. A ceremonial curtain hung with a Hebrew inscription: "This is the gateway to G-d. The righteous shall pass through." Probably few enough of them noticed these details, as they were forced roughly inside by the two guards posted at the entrance, both of them Trawniki men. One of the Trawniki men held a piece of pipe, the other a sword, and both yelled and beat the Jews. Then one of them closed and locked the door, and called for "Water!"—the very last element of the deception, no longer necessary for this doomed group, now sealed in a gas chamber, but for whoever else might be waiting. A third Trawniki man threw a lever, and a tank engine pumped carbon monoxide into the chamber.⁴⁶

After twenty minutes or so the Trawniki men opened a rear door of the gas chamber, and Jewish laborers removed the bodies. As a result of feverish struggles and death agonies, the bodies were twisted together, limb through limb, and sometimes very fragile. As the Treblinka laborer Chlil Rajchman recalled, they underwent "an atrocious metamorphosis." Their corpses were covered, as was the chamber itself, with blood, feces, and urine. The Jewish laborers had to clean the chamber, so that the next group would not disbelieve the disinfection lie and panic upon entering. Then they had to separate the bodies and lay them face up on the earth so that a crew of Jewish "dentists" could do their work: removing gold teeth. Sometimes the faces were entirely black, as if burned, and the jaws clenched so tightly that the "dentists" could barely open them. Once the gold teeth were removed, the Jewish laborers dragged the bodies to pits to

be buried. The entire process, from disembarkation of live Jews to the disposal of their bodies, took no more than two hours.⁴⁷

In the winter of 1942–1943, the Germans began to separate the Jews not into two but into three groups: the men, the older women, and the young women. They sent the young women into the gas last, because they liked to look at their naked bodies in the cold. By then the corpses were burned rather than buried. The pyres were huge grills made from railway rails laid upon concrete pillars, some thirty meters across. By spring 1943, fires burned at Treblinka day and night, sometimes consuming the corpses of decomposed bodies exhumed from the earth by Jewish laborers, sometimes the bodies of those who had just been asphyxiated. Women, with more fatty tissue, burned better than men; so the laborers learned to put them on the bottom of the pile. The bellies of pregnant women would tend to burst, such that the fetus could be seen inside. In the cold nights of spring 1943, the Germans would stand by the flame, and drink, and warm themselves. Once again, human beings were reduced to calories, units of warmth. The burning was to remove any evidence of the crime, but the Jewish laborers made sure that this was not achieved. They left whole skeletons intact, and buried messages in bottles for others to find.⁴⁸

It was very difficult for the victims to leave any other sort of trace. Chlil Rajchman had come to Treblinka with his sister. As soon as he saw the facility, he put their suitcases down. His sister did not understand why. "It's no use" were his last words to her. He was chosen to be a laborer. Sorting through clothing, he "came upon the dress that my sister was wearing. I paused. I took the dress, I held it in my hands, contemplated it." Then it had to go and he had to go on. Tamara and Ita Willenberg left their bundles of clothes next to each other. Their brother Samuel, a Jewish laborer, chanced to find the clothes clinging together "as if in a sister's embrace." Because the women had their hair cut, they had a last few moments in which they could speak to fellow Jews, who might, just possibly, survive them and remember their words. Ruth Dorfmann was able to accept from her barber the consolation that her death would be quick, and to cry with him. Hanna Levinson told her barber to escape and to tell the world what was happening at Treblinka.⁴⁹

Only with much forethought could Jews control their possessions, even in such small ways. In general, their instinct was to keep their portable wealth (if they had any) on their persons, in the hopes of later bartering or bribing.

Sometimes Jews, when they grasped what awaited them, threw their money and valuables from the train, so that they would not enrich their persecutors. Usually this was near Treblinka. Within the death factory, it was the job of Jewish laborers to seek valuables, and of course they pocketed some. They gave these to the Trawniki men, who had the right to come and go, in exchange for food from nearby villages. The Trawniki men gave the valuables to local women and to prostitutes, who apparently came from as far away as Warsaw. Having thereby contracted venereal diseases, the Trawniki men consulted Jewish doctors among the laborers. Thus the special closed circle of the local economy, which one witness recalled as a bejeweled and degraded "Europe."⁵⁰

Through such connections, Jewish laborers alive in 1943 knew something of the outside world and the course of the war. Trawniki men could usually read Russian, and managed to get their hands on Soviet propaganda and the Soviet press. They were among the millions of Soviet citizens laboring for the Germans in one capacity or another, and so heard gossip. They knew, and so Jewish laborers learned, about the German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943. The laborers could see for themselves that the transports slowed in 1943, and feared, quite rightly, that their own reason for being was coming to an end. By then the tremendous majority of Polish Jews were already dead. Guessing that their facility was soon to be closed, some of the Jewish workers rebelled on 2 August 1943, seizing weapons and setting parts of the facility on fire. A few hundred laborers ran through a hole in the fence; a few dozen survived the war. Chai Rajchman and the other laborers who wrote memoirs of Treblinka were among them.⁵¹

The facility was indeed closed on 17 November 1943. Its last victims were thirty remaining Jewish laborers who did the work of dismantling it. At the very end, they were shot in groups of five, with the remaining Jews cremating each group. Trawniki men cremated the final group of five. At about the same time, the Germans undertook a mass shooting action against other Jewish laborers, those still at work in concentration camps in the General Government. Some forty-two thousand Jews were killed in this operation, known as "Harvest Festival."⁵²

One of the fifty or so Treblinka survivors, Saul Kuperhand, understood that at Treblinka "numbers ruled." The 265,040 Warsaw Jews deported in the Large Action were carefully counted. In some fourteen weeks, between 4 August and

mid-November, at least 310,000 Jews of the Radom district of the General Government were gassed at Treblinka. In sum, about 780,863 people were killed at Treblinka, the vast majority of them Polish Jews from the General Government. Most of the Jews of the General Government who were not gassed at Belzec or Sobibor were gassed at Treblinka. In all, Operation Reinhard claimed the lives of some 1.3 million Polish Jews.⁵³

The purpose of Treblinka was ever clearer as the war continued: to rid a shrinking racial empire of its Jewish population, and so to claim a thin victory and its grisly fruits. A body can be burned for warmth, or it can feed the microorganisms that make soil fertile. Even human ash fertilizes. After Treblinka had been dismantled, the Germans used the bricks of the gas chambers to make a farmhouse, and turned the killing fields into a farm. A couple of the Trawniki men agreed to stay on as farmers. In this lay a darkly literal rendering of the Nazi fantasy of redeeming the land by destroying the Jew. The corpses and ashes of Jews were to fertilize the soil for crops to be eaten by Germans. Yet no harvest ever came.⁵⁴

Once Treblinka was no longer functioning, the center of the Holocaust shifted west, to a very special facility in the annexed territories of Poland added to the Reich, at Auschwitz. This was a camp established in 1940 in a territory that Germany had annexed from Poland. Auschwitz was in operation as a concentration camp almost a year before Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and more than a year before Hitler had clarified just what the Final Solution would mean. Unlike the death factories at Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec, which were established for the single purpose of killing the Jews of Poland, the complex at Auschwitz evolved as German policies toward Jews and others changed. The development of the Auschwitz facility illustrates the transformation of a dream of eastern colonization into a program of Jewish extermination.

The German camp established at Auschwitz in 1940 was meant to intimidate the Polish population. After the attack on the Soviet Union in summer 1941, Soviet prisoners of war joined Poles, and the camp was used as an execution site for both. Himmler wished for Auschwitz to become an example of the SS colonial economy, in which the captured lands of an enemy nation could be given to a German firm, which would exploit slave labor to manufacture goods needed

for the German war economy. Because Auschwitz was well supplied with water and well connected by rail, Himmler saw it, as did the upper management of IG Farben, as an ideal site for the production of artificial rubber. Himmler sought Jewish laborers in Slovakia, whose leaders were happy to be rid of them. Himmler made the case in October 1941; within a year Slovakia had deported 57,628 of its Jewish citizens. Almost all of them would die.⁵⁵

In 1942 a second major facility was added, and Auschwitz became a death factory as well as a concentration camp and execution site. Rudolf Höss, its commander, was a veteran of the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald, not of the killing facilities of the "euthanasia" program. Under his command Auschwitz became a special sort of hybrid, a labor facility with a death factory attached. Non-Jewish laborers continued to arrive, and to work in awful conditions. Jews were now selected for labor when they arrived at Auschwitz, with those deemed unusable (the substantial majority) immediately gassed. In 1942, the approximately 140,146 Jews not selected for labor were gassed in chambers known as Bunker 1 and Bunker 2 in Auschwitz. After February 1943 most of the murdered Jews were killed in new gas chambers constructed in nearby Birkenau, and their bodies burned in attached crematoria. In the Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chambers, pellets of Zyklon B would sublimate on contact with air, producing a gas that would kill at a ratio of one milligram per kilogram of body weight. Cyanide kills at the cellular level, interfering with the ability of the mitochondria in cells to produce the energy that sustains life.⁵⁶

Like the other five death factories, Auschwitz was located in occupied Poland. It served, however, as the main extermination site for Jewish populations from beyond Poland. Though some Jews from beyond Poland were killed in the five other death factories, the vast majority of their victims were Polish Jews. Auschwitz was the only death factory of the six where Polish Jews were not the majority of the victims. It became a killing facility at about the same time that German exterminatory policies moved beyond occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union, to embrace other populations of European Jews. Within the Reich Security Main Office, Adolf Eichmann and the men in his Jewish section organized deportations from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands in 1942. In 1943 Eichmann organized the transport of Jews from Greece and from occupied Italy. Fascist Italy had not sent its Jews to Hitler so long as Mussolini was in power and Germany and Italy were allies. But after the Americans, British,

Canadians, and Poles landed in southern Italy and the Italians capitulated, the Germans occupied the northern part of the country, and deported Jews themselves. In 1943, some 220,000 Jews were gassed at Auschwitz.⁵⁷

In 1944, shooting Soviet Jews was no longer possible because the Germans had been driven from the Soviet Union, and the Reinhard facilities were closed due to the approach of the Red Army; that year, Auschwitz became the preeminent site of the Final Solution. Almost all of the six hundred thousand or so Jews killed by the Germans in 1944 died at Auschwitz. Most of them were Hungarian Jews. Hungary, like Italy, had not sent its Jews to the death facilities so long as it was a sovereign country and a German ally. (As a rule, Jews fared less badly in countries allied with Germany than in countries occupied by Germany.) After the Hungarian leadership attempted to switch sides in the war in March 1944, the Germans installed their own government. A new Hungarian fascist regime began in May to deport its Jews. About 437,000 Hungarian Jews arrived at Auschwitz in eight weeks. About 110,000 of them were selected for labor, many of whom survived; at the very least, 327,000 of them were gassed. Over the course of the war, about 300,000 Polish Jews were shipped to Auschwitz, of whom some 200,000 were killed. Taken together, Hungarian and Polish Jews account for the majority of the Jewish victims of Auschwitz.⁵⁸

Auschwitz was the climax of the Holocaust, reached at a moment when most Soviet and Polish Jews under German rule were already dead. Of the million or so Soviet Jews killed in the Holocaust, fewer than one percent died at Auschwitz. Of the three million or so Polish Jews killed in the Holocaust, only about seven percent perished at Auschwitz. Nearly 1.3 million Polish Jews were killed, usually shot, east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line. Another 1.3 million or so Polish Jews were gassed in Operation Reinhard in the General Government (more than 700,000 at Treblinka, roughly 400,000 at Belzec, 150,000 at Sobibór, and 50,000 at Majdanek). Another 350,000 more were gassed in the lands annexed to the Reich (besides the 200,000 at Auschwitz, about 150,000 at Chełmno). Most of the remaining Polish-Jewish victims were shot during the ghetto clearings (about 100,000) or in Operation Harvest Festival (42,000), or during the many smaller actions and in individual executions. Many more died of hunger or disease in the ghettos or as laborers in concentration camps.⁵⁹

A considerable number of the mortal victims of Auschwitz, more than 100,000, were not Jews. Some 74,000 non-Jewish Poles and some 15,000 Soviet

prisoners of war also died at Auschwitz: either executed or worked to death. With the exception of the Soviet prisoners of war who were experimentally gassed, these people were not sent to the gas chambers. But Roma and Sinti were.

Though never pursued with the same energy as the Jews, the Roma and Sinti ("gypsies") were subjected to a killing policy wherever German power extended. They were shot by Einsatzgruppen in the occupied Soviet Union (about 8,000 documented cases); included in the killing orders for reprisal actions in Belarus; shot by police in occupied Poland; shot in reprisal actions along with Jews in Serbia; killed in a concentration camp of Germany's puppet ally Croatia (about 15,000); ethnically cleansed from territories conquered by Germany's ally Romania; and gassed at Chełmno in January 1942 (about 4,400) and then at Auschwitz in May 1943 (about 1,700) and August 1944 (about 2,900, after many more had died of hunger, disease, or mistreatment). At least a hundred thousand Roma and Sinti, and more likely two or three times that number, were killed by the Germans.⁶⁰

Although no one survived the gas chambers of Auschwitz, more than a hundred thousand people survived the concentration camp known by the same name. That name would be remembered after the war, a dark shadow behind an iron curtain, a hint of the greater darkness to the east. Fewer than one hundred Jewish laborers saw the inside of a Reinhard death factory and survived. Yet even Treblinka left a few traces in the air.

Prisoners sang at Treblinka, at German orders, but also for themselves. "El male rachamin" was chanted for the Jews killed each day. SS men would stand outside and listen. Trawniki men brought with them from the east, as one of the Jewish laborers recognized, a "strange gift" for "wonderful song." It was less elevated music, popular Polish songs, that reminded Treblinka laborers of life outside the camp, and helped give them the courage to prepare their escape. Those songs recalled love and foolishness, and so life and freedom. A few weddings were celebrated at Treblinka, between laborers and the women who handled domestic chores for the Germans.⁶¹

The Jewish barbers, who cut the hair of thousands of women, remembered the beautiful ones.

CHAPTER 9

RESISTANCE AND INCINERATION

The night of 21 June 1944 belonged to the Soviet partisans of Belarus. Three years earlier the Wehrmacht had quickly overrun Belarus on its way to Moscow—which it never quite reached. The Soviets were now advancing toward the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, and onward toward Warsaw and Berlin. Army Group Center of the Wehrmacht was back in Belarus, but in retreat. Red Army commanders had planned a massive summer offensive, beginning on the third anniversary of Operation Barbarossa, timed to remind the Germans of their own disastrous ambitions. The Soviet partisans had laid thousands of explosive charges on rail lines in Belarus. When Soviet soldiers attacked, German troops could not be reinforced, nor could they quickly retreat. So the day of 22 June 1944 belonged to the soldiers of the First, Second, and Third Belarussian Fronts of the Red Army. They and two other army groups assembled well over a million troops, more than twice as many as the Wehrmacht's Army Group Center could muster. The offensive, Operation Bagration, delivered one of the most important Soviet victories in the war.¹

Two weeks earlier, the Americans had joined the battle for Europe. Having gained mastery over the Japanese fleet in the Pacific, the United States opened a major European front in the war on 6 June 1944. The US Army landed (along with the British and other western Allies) 160,000 men on the beaches of Normandy. Yet American power was also on display in the depths of Belarus, where motorized Soviet units, equipped with American trucks and jeeps, encircled