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[L.1] Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War

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Conversations were conducted by the researcher Petrov

Transcribed by Kraus

Lviv

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Oskar Kempel, a librarian, born in 1896, a Jew.

The Germans came to Lviv on June 30, 1941. The next day they took all the Jews and sent them to work. They were grabbed right on the street and thrown into jail. The Germans spread rumors that when the Soviets left, everyone in prisons was killed, and that this was done mainly by Jews. Therefore, Germans killed Jews in prison too. This was the case for the first three days. Only 10 thousand Jews were killed then. After that the Germans started eliminating Jewish apartments and belongings. They came, gave Jews just five minutes to get ready, and kicked them out of their houses. There were also cases when people bathed a child, then the Germans threw the child out into the street together with the water. Jews were not allowed to take anything with them.

In early November, there was an order for Jews to live only in a certain part of the city, which was located behind the bridge. Moreover, the Gestapo people were standing on the bridge, and the bridge itself was called “the bridge of death”, since whoever passed across this bridge – be it the elderly, children, or the sick – meant that these Jews were being led to death. All Jews wore an armband with a six-pointed star.

On November 6, a decree was issued that all Jews had to be in the ghetto. But Jews collected a ransom and received permission to have an open ghetto so that they could freely go to work from there. Everyone had to work, otherwise a person would be shot. Then there were already concentration camps in Lviv and in Yanovka, and all around Lviv.

In April 1942, they started a resettlement campaign, i.e. they said that there were a lot of Jews in Lviv and therefore they needed to be resettled to the east. Therefore, people who had to leave came home, took the necessary things. In general, the Germans organized all this in such a way that people felt that they were really getting ready for a trip. In Lviv, they were gathered in one school – the Sobessky School on Zamartsinovskaya Street. When people had to go to the train, they were ordered to leave all their belongings in this school, and then people realized that they were going to certain death.

The next action was on July 29, 1942, and then on August 13. This was the largest action, which lasted 3 weeks, and then they took 50 thousand Jews, and each action was organized by them in a special way.

The first action required a certificate of work; the 13 August action required a special armband [L.1 the reverse side] with the “A” sign, i.e. “Arbeiter”, a worker. In recent actions, it was necessary to have a special SS stamp, and whoever did not have such a stamp, they had to go to death. We ourselves saw how people were thrown as things, and children were thrown onto tram platforms in sacks. Ukrainian policemen stood around and beat the old and the young. And at night, only screams were heard, the cries of small children who were lying on the platforms on top of each other in these sacks.

Mikhail Shapiro. Deputy Manager of the Restaurant Trust.  
Born in 1903, a Jew.

On September 6, a closed ghetto was organized, from there you could only go to work, but you could not go home, etc. Jews walked only under police escort, in the middle of the street.

At the end of November 1942, Jewish workers were to receive the sign “W” - Wehrmacht – military unit and “R” – Ristung – i.e. a plant that worked for some military unit. The Jews who worked in civic organizations were killed. Children were just grabbed by the legs and their heads were smashed on the corner of a house. The Germans also threw grenades into the ghetto; sometimes there was shooting at night.

In the ghetto, 10 people could be accommodated in one room, they slept right on the ground, laid down whatever they had. Moreover, each organization where Jews worked had its own house, its own apartments. Jews left for work at half past five in the morning and came back at half past five in the evening. On both sides were two Gestapo men, usually they were drunk. At that time, there were 24 thousand Jews in the ghetto who went to work. People walked by 4 in a column. If a Gestapo guard did not like something, he just fired, or if a Gestapo guard felt cold, then in order to warm up, he also opened fire on the column, so no one ever knew whether they would be alive or not. We didn't get paid for our work. And at the place of work we were given 100 grams of bread a day and some watery soup. They didn't give anything in the ghetto. Sometimes we managed to buy something through the Poles who worked there, but it was dangerous because when they came to the ghetto, the Germans searched us and if they found anything, they took everything away.

Kempel fled from work with the help of a Pole he knew. It was in February, it was already dark, the Pole's wife brought him a coat and a hat to work, and he left. His wife was shot dead in August. She worked, but before the action she did not receive an SS stamp, they took her on the street and took her to Belzets, where she was shot among others, and some people were burned. The same fate befell his brother, sisters, mother and father. They were burned at Treblinka. And he himself lived with the Polish woman Yanka Starskaya.

I worked before the last action in the Wehrmacht. We all had apartments at the military base itself, not in the ghetto. We lived in barracks that were specially built for

us, and they fed us relatively well. We were engaged [L.2] in transporting ammunition by trucks and in general we also performed hard work. I worked at Beutesamlager, i.e. in the management of spoils of war, we brought spoils and sorted them.

On March 1, 1943, when I was walking from work to my apartment, this military base being on another street, - and there were 10 of us – the Germans took us, as there was an order that Jews should go in convoy. We got to the camp. We arrived there at night and we were standing in the field the whole night. Then, the next morning, a Gestapo man came and took us to a house, where they took all our documents and in general everything that we had. We were left without a penny. They shaved our heads, yellow stripes were inserted into our clothes from top to bottom, so that everyone knew that this man was in a work camp. In addition, everyone who worked in the camp had a yellow triangle on the left side to show that it was a Jewish worker.

The camp was located on Yanovskaya Street. There were a lot of people. From the very beginning there were 8 thousand people, and there were not only Jews, but also Ukrainians and Poles, only they were in a special position, they ended up in the camp for some crime and were there for a certain time, and the Jews were there all the time.

All the people were divided into groups. There were groups that worked in the camp itself, made premises for example for garages, etc. There were a number of groups that worked in the city, because when people were taken away from the military base, the camp itself then assigned people to work there, but at night all the Jews working in the city had to come back to the camp. Some groups worked in more comfortable conditions, they met with other people and could get something.

I worked in the camp together with 30 other people. Then we worked in the city. We returned late, not at night, we unloaded transport, and trains arrived late. We unloaded wood, iron, bricks. In general, all the people who worked in the city additionally worked at night on unloading transport. And if someone wasn't able to run, as it was necessary to run from the station to the camp, whoever fell, they were shot. It was the same in the camp – we couldn't get sick, because if it was found that someone was sick, that person was immediately killed.

There were also actions in the camp itself. People were lined up in columns and everyone had to run, leaving the camp, and on the way, the Gestapo people put their feet out to make us trip, and if someone stumbled and fell, they no longer got up – the guards killed him.

The camp commandant was a certain Wilhaus, i.e. Untersturmführer. He also lived in the camp, where he had his own palace. For fun, he, his wife, his son, and his foreman sometimes fired into this crowd of people who were returning from work in columns. His son was 6 years old, and the more Jews they killed, the more they were happy. He also had his own dog, which was specially trained, and when it heard the word "Jude" – a Jew – it charged at the person and tore his throat, it was a big black dog.

[L.2 the reverse side] There was a factory next to the camp, only Jews worked there – there were all kinds of workshops and carpentry, and locksmiths, and all sorts of other facilities. These were military workshops. They were called Deutsche

Ausrüstungswerke. After the liquidation of the ghetto, all the Jews who remained in the camp worked only there. The chief there was Obersturmführer, the captain in our words, Gebauer – he was the first to organize the camp, he was a specialist in strangling people. He took the one who did not work well by the throat and the latter immediately fell dead.

Lately, women had been also working in the camp. They were also treated very cruelly, they were severely beaten, they were stripped naked for the slightest crime, everyone else was summoned and they were given 25 whips. The whips were pre-soaked in salt.

There was a case that happened to me with this Wilhaus. I was in town and worked with three people. We were returning to the camp. There was the Jewish internal police in the camp. Wilhaus was driving behind us and asked a policeman where we were going. The latter said that we were leaving work, and it was still half an hour before the end of work. He asked him the number – 238, and wrote it down. Then he left. The next day we went to work again. A roll call took place, people got arranged in columns. When we were leaving the camp, the brigadier of the Gestapo was standing there, while Wilhaus himself very rarely was present during the roll call. But on that day he himself took the report from the brigadier. I reached him and started talking, but he forgot my policeman's number and decided that this policeman was in the first brigade, which had already left. He ordered them to return, and there were nine people there, and he fired a burst from his machine gun – all nine people dropped dead.

Then there was such a small fact. In general, for the slightest crime, people were imprisoned. When a large number of Jews gathered in prison, they were taken away and driven to Peski, where they were shot, and their corpses were burned. And so one Jew was indignant and shouted – why was he being taken to prison, he was innocent! Then he was hanged as a punishment. The whole camp was gathered and he hung by the legs and pieces of his body were cut out while he was still alive.

We were beaten every day, beaten to death, the Gestapo guards beat us with sticks and beat us for so long that they killed people. And people were happy to be killed on the spot, as they were afraid of greater torments.

Then there was such a specific occasion. Two old Jews were brought from the province – one was 60 years old, the other one was 80 years old. One still had black hair, and the other one was completely gray. When the columns were marching in the camp, music was played, the musicians were also Jews – a special orchestra was put together. There was also a special platform on which these two old Jews were to dance. Once some guests came to Wilhaus and he showed them this “performance”. These two Jews came out first and reported: one of them was a worker, and the other was a foreman, then they started dancing. When all the brigades were marching, they retreated to their place. And for this, Wilhaus promised an easy death to them. He ordered them to look back, bend down, and at that time they were shot.

On November 19, 1943, the camp was liquidated. It was liquidated because there were very few people. Only [L.3] two thousand people remained and they were not

taken anywhere, but finished off right in the camp. Usually people were taken to Peski. And at that moment in the camp a struggle began between the Gestapo guards and the Jews. The Jews killed several Gestapo guards with weapons that had been taken from the Gestapo people. One of the cruelest Gestapo men, Heine, was also killed. He alone killed 46 people for fun. Just before the liquidation of the camp, I fled along with five other Jews. It so happened that I was sent to carry hay from the station with an SS man. And he suddenly told me that if I wanted to run, then that was just the time. Moreover, recently Jews were allowed to walk under the escort of Gestapo guards. I then told him not to follow me, since a Gestapo man was responsible for the person to whom he had been assigned. I wanted to go with that Gestapo man who was terribly angry, so that he would get punished for me if I managed to escape, and if I failed, they would still kill me.

We were putting hay on trucks. The driver was a Pole. When I got into the truck, I told him to go slower on one street. It was November, it was getting dark early, and we jumped out of the truck. And one of our people took us to where we could stay. At first there were 8 of us. Four went to one place, and 4 to another one. Those four were caught the next day, and our four hid, we made a hole and were sitting there. This was outside Lviv, at one Polish woman's place. There was a hay stack, we made a secret trench for ourselves under this haystack and stayed there for 9 months. This Polish woman fed us. Moreover, the trench was so cramped that one had to lie on top of another one. And at one time there was a part of the German army, and the Germans walked on this hayloft.

Of those people who were sentenced to death, the Germans made up the "death brigade", which worked on digging up the corpses of Jews who were shot by the Germans during their first time in Lviv. It was important for them to hide their traces, i.e. dig up these corpses and burn them all. This is what they forced this "death brigade" to do. Moreover, these Jews were made drunk, and they worked drunk. They laid the corpses like firewood and then burned them. The bones remained intact and therefore another team was given the task of grinding the bones in special mills, they had to remove jewelry that could accidentally remain on the dead, remove gold teeth, etc. These bones were ground and blown away in the wind so that no traces remained. There was a terrible smell in the city at that time since a very large number of corpses were burned. It was in the summer of 1943.

And therefore, no one believed the Germans that Russians had killed Polish officers in Katyn, and besides, they called the names of such officers, whose wives said that they were alive and well, and their wives received letters from them, since some of them were in Russia, some in Germany, and others stayed at home.

When the Red Army's reconnaissance came, the house where we were in turned out to be between the Reds and the Germans, and the Germans were in such a bad position that they mistook their own for the Red Army [L.3 the reverse side] and opened fire on them and the latter were killed. As soon as the Red Army arrived, we came out and went to Lviv. There were still some street battles in Lviv.

When we were staying under cover, we were terribly worried that the front stopped at Tarnopol. And when I saw the Red Army men, I simply could not believe my eyes that they were in Lviv, since Lviv had been taken in a very short time. [...]

[L.5] One person came to us from Belzec. He fled from the town's camp, but then Belzec no longer existed and all the people from the camp were transferred to Majdanek, and he escaped along the way.

In Lviv, the camp was on Yanovskaya Street, this man got right there, and he told me what he had seen in Belzec. People were put in "teplushka" railway freight cars and were told that they were going to work. They allegedly would come to a station. The cars were driven into a dead end, all the servicemen left and the SS men took over. People were taken out of the cars and they were told that they had to go to the bathhouse to wash up and then undergo disinfection. People undressed, folded their clothes and went as if to the bathhouse. There was an electric room and a gas room there, in which people were killed with electricity and choked with gases. Up to 2000 people could fit in one room – this was a gas chamber, and up to 1000 people could fit in the electric one. In the gas room, the execution took place within five minutes, and in the electric room – within 3 minutes.

All the people working there were divided into teams – some had to remove the corpses, others had to burn them. And the man who told me about this in the camp on Yanovskaya burned his wife and his child by himself.

In total, there were 130 thousand Jews in Lviv earlier, and now there are 800 people left.