‘All that remained was silence’
German Slave Camps for Jews near the Tatra Mountains

Józef Nyka

According to the census of 30 September 1921\(^1\) in the geographical borders of Podhale (literally ‘under the mountain meadows’) north of the Tatra Mountains there lived approximately 3,500 Jews, of whom 1,340 resided in Nowy Targ (16.6 per cent of the total town population); 535 in Zakopane (6.1 per cent of the town population) and 340 in Czarny Dunajec (13.1 per cent of the population). By 1940 these numbers had increased substantially (in some cases they had doubled). Henryk Jost puts the number of Jews in Zakopane alone at 3,000\(^2\) which is probably an exaggeration. In the historical literature on Podhale we still lack a full, properly documented description of the cruel annihilation of these Jews. The Germans deliberately destroyed the entire documentation and after the war no one interviewed the eyewitnesses in a timely manner. The last living witnesses of these crimes are dying off without telling their stories. Several thousand people (in the Podhale region alone) were condemned by Germans for annihilation – now, in addition, history condemns them to deletion from memory.

Slave Labour Camps

The history of the Shoah in Podhale still has other blank pages – one of these is the story of the slave labour camps inside the German arms industrial plants in the northern foothills of the Tatra Mountains. These camps are listed in German registries; however, due to lack of information, they provide little help in reconstructing the past. Polish sources also lack detailed information. For example, in a very valuable book edited by Janusz Berghauzen\(^3\) information about those camps is limited to a few lines and is factually incorrect (although many current historians cite this source). In the six hundred page-long book about Czarny Dunajec, only ten lines are devoted to the ‘Hobag’ camp.\(^4\) In other publications, Jewish commandos are omitted entirely. For example, a large monograph of Zakopane contains only one brief remark that ‘Jews were exploited by the company “Hobag”, which owned a sawmill’\(^5\).

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\(^2\) Henryk Jost, Zakopane czasu okupacji (Wspomnienia), 2\(^{nd}\) Edition (Zakopane 2001).
\(^4\) Feliks Kiryk (ed.), Czarny Dunajec i okolice. Zarys dziejów do roku 1945 (Kraków, 1977). Page 448 contains following (incorrect) description of camp ‘Hobag’: ‘Beginning with 1940 Podhale saw the first labor camp for Jews. In Czarny Dunajec such camp was opened in September 1942. Jews lived in the barrack behind train station near the road to Nowy Targ. On average camp held around 90 Jews, who came from Jordanów, Limanowa, Mszana Dolna, Nowy Targ, Ochotnica and Szczawnica. The Jews worked in the lumber mill “Homage”. One person died, 22 were shot on spot, and the rest was transferred to the camp in Płaszów, near Kraków. Labour Camp in Czarny Dunajec was liquidated in May 1943’.
\(^5\) Renata Dutkowa (ed.), Zakopane czterysta lat dziejów, 2 volumes (Kraków 1991).
A light has appeared at the end of this dark tunnel. In 2012, the historians at the
Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (IPN) began to show an interest in the labour camps for Jews
in the Tatra foothills and they began to seek out and interview witnesses and collect the
few documents which have survived. There is thus the possibility that the Holocaust as a
whole in the Podhale region will finally be the subject of scholarly research and will be
appropriately popularized.

At the present, however, only a handful of old men remember that in Podhale at
the beginning of 1940 there existed four large industrial complexes specializing in wood
products and owned by the company ‘Hobag Holzbau AG’ Breslau (now Wroclaw),
which became a supply base mostly for the Luftwaffe. Documentation about these
complexes cannot be found either in Germany or in Poland. They were under the
surveillance of the Rüstungskommando Krakau (Kraków Armmaments’ Command) and
the name ‘Hobag’ existed on the shameful list of the companies of the Third Reich
authorized to use the slave labour of Jews, Poles, Romany people and Soviet prisoners of
war. In Podhale Jews were employed by the ‘Hobag’ from the fall of 1940 until the end
of May 1943 – almost three years. In the beginning they worked while still free, under
police surveillance, but from late August 1942 they were interned inside the plants in the
slave labour camps for the Jews (Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden).

In the ‘Hobag’ company vocabulary these work brigades were listed not as
Judenlager (Jewish camps) or Judenkommandos (Jewish Commando) , but as Jewish
work crews. In the contemporary German registry some labour camps are identified by
the numbers: Nowy Targ 2861, Czarny Dunajec 2615. In Zakopane (nr 3078) the
situation was different. The Jewish population was deported much earlier (according to J.
Zborowski) mostly between 1939 and 19406 and the men able to do hard work –
including also those transported from Nowy Targ, Jordanów, Maków, Szczawnica – were
initially settled in barracks under the mount Krokiew and later moved to the labor camp
in Pardalówka, from where they walked to ‘Hobag’ company plants, mainly to the
‘Stuag’ quarries (Strassen und Tiefbauunternehmug AG) at the foot of the mount
Krokiew. During 1940–1941 the prisoners could visit their families on Sundays (or
sometimes every other Sunday) . Pardalówka was a sub-camp of Krakau-Płaszów, a
higher status camp compared with the internal ‘Hobag’ barracks.

Polish literature lacks any data on the Podhale ‘Hobag’ camps (as well as on the
‘Hobag’ company itself), while there are some references in scholarly literature to the
Pardalówka camp (for instance, in Zborowski cited above) which provide contradictory
and often only general information. We lack a fuller historical description of this camp.
In the words of the historian Józef Kasperek: ‘Unfortunately we do not have information
on how many prisoners were in the camp and what kind of work they performed.’7

In the neighboring region of Nowy Sącz district some other ‘Hobag’ factories
existed, with Jewish ‘brigades’. Jan Kucia in 1978 published a paper about labour camps
in the Nowy Sącz district8 – strangely the author failed to mention some camps,

same in Pisma podhalanńskie (Kraków,1972) v. II, 208–241. It has good number of details
about Pardalówka, but lacks basic information. According to this article, on 1 January
1940, in Zakopane there remained 593 persons of Jewish descent. In February this
number was 100.
7 Józef Kasperek, Podhale w latach wojny i okupacji niemieckiej 1939–1945 (Warszawa
1990).
8 Jan Kucia, ‘Obozy pracy na terenie byłego powiatu Nowy Sącz w okresie okupacji
mentioning only Rytro, which he noted without its name (p. 251). Besides Rytro, in the Nowy Sącz district there existed other ‘Hobag’ factories, which exploited Jewish slave labor and participated in the Jews’ gradual extermination. Ten additional ‘Hobag’ plants existed in the eastern Beskidy Mountains of General Government (GG) – with a central office in Lwów (Lemberg, now L’viv). Fortunately, these establishments have fuller documentation relating to Jewish brigades (including lists of names).

Memory and Notes

As a teenage worker in ‘Hobag’ Czarny Dunajec, I remember well the history of this company and the fate of its ‘Jewish brigade’. In addition I have an important source, namely my own diary, in which I wrote each day the dates and descriptions of events. This naïve youthful diary, written in fear, partially in local dialect, contains not much of importance, and only half of it survived. Despite these shortcomings, it paints an authentic picture of that time, written in the heat of the moment; not about numbers and paragraphs, but rather about real incidents – individual human fates – seen through the eyes of a simple farm boy who had received only two years of secondary school education. Because the other ‘Hobag’ Jews camps were organized identically, the case of Czarny Dunajec reflects in many details the criminal procedure which took place in all or nearly all of the factories of this company in the General Government and which affected more than one thousand Jewish workers.

For clarity I divide working crews into ‘German’, ‘Jewish’ or ‘Polish’, the way Germans described them, despite the fact that assimilated Jews were regarded as Poles and spoke mainly only Polish. In my notes, the abbreviation SS includes Gestapo, Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service) (SD) and Sicherheitspolizei (Security Police) (or Sipo). At that time we did not look at the structures of these formations; they all simply had a common symbol – the skull on the cap. In my quotations from the war diary the numbers are usually from other sources and as such may be inclined to – as was often the case with data from the war years – round off to higher numbers than reality.

According to the ordinances of General Governor Hans Frank of 26 and 31 October and of 14 December 1939, obligatory labour was introduced for Poles aged 14–60 and Jews aged 12–60 in the entire General Government. All employment offices strictly enforced this decree. When I was just 15 the Arbeitsamt (Employment Office) issued a work order directing me to the ‘Hobag’ factory as a worker (Platzarbeiter). ‘Hobags’ in Czarny Dunajec and Nowy Targ (at this time Neumarkt/Dunajec), like that in the area of Nowy Sącz (Neu Sandez), for almost two years employed crews which consisted of Jews who were not compelled to live in the factory in slave labour conditions. In Nowy Targ they walked to work from their homes9 (the sawmill was located near railroad station), while to Czarny Dunajec they commuted by rail (most of them from Nowy Targ). Only a few lived in the neighbouring villages. In my papers I was able to save a unique list of the Jewish work crew from 12 November 1940. It consists of 38 names, which I cite in order to commemorate the identity of at least this handful of people.10 In the plant Jews worked mainly on the railroad ramp, unloading

9 The information repeated in literature (also Jewish) about the ghetto in Nowy Targ is not accurate. Until the ‘Endlösung’ there was no specific part organized as ghetto. The Jewish Council (Judenrat) was responsible for the Jewish community.
railroad cars with raw materials and loading complete construction parts. Part of the crew was trained to do basic tasks like operate simple machinery and assemble wall panels and bays. They worked inside, and not as hard as the workers on the ramp or ‘Holzplatz’ (lumberyard). Jews were also used for ‘dirty’ work (e.g. to soak wood in troughs) which was injurious to their health and also stained their clothing yellow. A Polish foreman (Vorarbeiter) Józef Piechocki commanded the railway crew and Germans nicknamed him ‘Judenkönig’ (Jewish King). Jews working in production were added to the Polish crews and the German Hermann Barufke was their foreman. They worked under the supervision of the Polish technical department chief, who also, surprisingly, supervised all German specialists. In Czarny Dunajec the chief was master carpenter Paweł Pezacki. Jewish workers did not have numbers nor did they wear prison uniforms. They dressed in their own clothing and – since everybody knew each other – the armbands and stars of David were not strictly enforced. Working outdoors they suffered from a lack of warm clothing, especially during the winter. Much worse was the situation with footwear, since they bartered their better shoes to local workers in exchange for food. Similar to Polish and German crews, their working day was 11 1/2 hours with two breaks for meals (45 minutes total). Commuting daily from Nowy Targ they brought for their Polish work colleagues small purchases. During the railroad trip they endured the aggression of German sadists, which escalated during attacks directed from outside. On Monday 8 June 1942 I noted: ‘It appears that Jews in Nowy Targ will be deported today; 150 were taken to the cemetery to be shot, and our people were afraid to return home (…). On Saturday in Nowy Targ one German railroad worker locked our Jews, who were commuting to work, in a cattle wagon for forty minutes, then let them out and forced them to clean the wagon with their own hats, after which he put their heads forcefully into a bucket full of water and proceeded to beat them terribly. Two of them did not make it to work, so severely were they injured.’

In the plant an evil spirit hated by all was the commandant of factory guard (Werkschutz) J. Walaski – a young Nazi who, afraid of being drafted to the front, was overbearing in his duties. The Jews nicknamed him ‘Kogut’ (the Cock). I have written in my diary about his escapades outside of the plant. In order to stay in shape he went every morning on lengthy horseback rides. On 20 May 1943 he ventured to the village Stare Bystre (see map) where he scared two people, who ran away from one house. The man escaped, but Walaski caught a woman running in a nightgown and recognized her as Jewish. He took her to the Gestapo in Czarny Dunajec and in the afternoon went back with the Gestapo to Stare Bystre to show them the house and settle matters with (i.e. kill) the Polish farmers who were hiding this Jewish couple. They did not wait for the Germans and ran away; still, the Gestapo murdered them some time later.11

Work and Extermination


11 Stare Bystre. This incident is probably identical to the one described in literature about the arrest and killing of Franciszek Ligas (Kasperek, 159).
The extermination of Jewish population in Podhale began in May 1942. On 14 May the Gestapo in Czarny Dunajec murdered three people, the first being the merchant Józef Lehler, who was shot by Franz Maiwald. Maiwald had requested that ‘Hobag’ make three coffins from flat timber – two of them came back to the Gestapo stained with blood. ‘Drei Juden sind gestorben,’ – three Jews have died – said Hermann Barufke to Pezacki – ‘and it will continue every week.’ In the summer of 1942 the final extermination (Endlösung) began. Germans working in Hobag knew about this plan ahead of time, as proven by Barufke’s words and my notes in the diary for 7 August 1942. Director’s wife (Hedwig Sacher) told the Polish accountant Kopczyński that Jews aged under 16 and over 35 would get bullets in the head. Not only Germans knew about these atrocious plans. In the middle of July 1942 in Czarny Dunajec the Highlanders met with Waclaw Krzeptowski.  

‘In three months not a single Jew will remain here’ – said the leader of the ‘Goralenvolk’ – ‘and then Podhale will be just for Podhalans and the mountains only for Highlanders.’ Beginning in the spring, the news of massacres came from Nowy Targ. In my notebook dated 7 August I wrote that ‘according to unverified news’ during the night and on Thursday Germans murdered approximately 120 Jews. In Czarny Dunajec, the Gestapo went on a rampage on 24 August. It was no longer a question of an abstract ‘hundreds of victims’ but concrete people, neighbours, the beautiful girl Rasza. I wrote in my diary: ‘The old Balicer grandparents were murdered in their bed, while their son, who was aged around 45 was killed in the entrance to their house. Their grandson, who works in the sawmill is totally changed in appearance, pale and sad.’

On 30 August 1942 2,500 Jews from the town Nowy Targ and its far vicinity carrying bundles were driven to the square near railroad station in Nowy Targ to be loaded into the railroad cars. Paralyzed by fear they were forced to stand in the sun for several hours; those who fainted were killed instantly by the SS. My sister Jadwiga, who lived in a neighbouring building watched this scene from her attic window. ‘I remember’ – she said – ‘when young Highlanders were transported to forced labour in Germany. The railroad station was full of shouts, wailing, turmoil, fights between the old daring Highlander women and the policemen. But on that hot day in August silence reigned, we heard only the policemen’s shouts, dogs barking and isolated single shots. We did not even hear children cry.’

From this human mass, Germans selected workers for ‘Hobags’ – usually people previously employed in these areas. Lumber mills in Nowy Targ and Czarny Dunajec got approximately 50 workers each, all of them young men. I wrote in my diary: ‘Bloody Sunday (….). Beginning at 5 a.m. 3000 Jews from Nowy Targ were forced to the stadium. Men age 16–35 were assigned to lumber mills and other factories. Germans checked the teeth of these Jews and took them. We got 90 people. At lunchtime 25 cattle wagons loaded each with 80 people, sealed, took the Jews somewhere to the gas slaughter-house. In addition, four heavy trucks carrying altogether 500 Jews squashed like sardines took them to the cemetery, where they were shot with machine guns.’

12 Waclaw Krzeptowski (1897–1945) a Góral from Zakopane, leader of the collaborationist pro-fascist Góral movement in the Tatra mountains created by the Germans. The Germans took the view that the Górale had ‘German blood’ and called them the ‘Goralenvolk’ – the Goral people, which they believed had its origin both [in?] Polish and in German settlers in the region in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The leadership of the Komitet Góralski (Goral Committee) manifested antisemitic tendencies. The whole German attempt to foster a pro-German ‘Goralenvolk’ did not have significant success.
data comes from oral communication and could differ from the factual data). J. Kasperek claims that at the end of August 1942 (the same time period I describe) from the camp ‘Stuag’ in Zakopane ‘approximately 22 Jews were sent to the lumber mill in Czarny Dunajec’ (p. 156). I do not remember this transfer – maybe they went to company ‘Fluβkies’, which retrieved boulders from the bottom of the Czarny Dunajec river and cooperated with ‘Stuag’.

From that time on the Jewish slave workers became prisoners; however, in the plant they were treated in the same manner as before. A separate barrack, located in the north-western corner of the plant territory, had been built beforehand, surrounded by wooden fences. Barbed wire covered the fences, but otherwise the residents could move freely through the entire plant area. German guards were absent during the working hours. Elderly soldiers from the Werkschutz (Industrial Guard) with long rifles guarded the entire plant, looking especially for thieves. In those years the guard consisted of eight soldiers. The Jewish prisoners mostly loaded the railroad cars on the open rail ramp, outside of the plant fences with a scenic view of the Tatras evoking the dreams of freedom. Only a few tried to run away – I remember only two or three attempts. The lumber crews worked also during the nights.

[The Jews had their own leader (‘starszy’) nicknamed by the polish workers ‘the Rabbi’. For a long time] ‘the Rabbi’ was Pacanower, aged forty-plus; from September 1942 onwards this function was assumed by the somewhat younger Traustein (or Trautenstein). Jews were kept on a starvation diet in the morning and evening, and for their midday meal they received a watery soup. All food was prepared by the plant kitchen, which also served a similar midday meal to Polish workers. Work in the rain, snow and frost was exhausting; some parts for bridges and hangars weighed 600 pounds and the plant did not have any cranes. Workers were undernourished and hungry, yet they did not resemble the ghost-like figures from concentration camps. I wrote on 1 September 1942: ‘Jews were fainting today from hunger.’

They tried to get food by all means possible, even when it involved pain and injuries. I wrote about Polish kitchen helper Leon going to the storage to get some potatoes: ‘One of the Jews sorted potatoes there, under lock and key. A few other Jews squeezed behind Leon, threw themselves on the potato pile and started packing them into their pants and other places. Others went inside, and Leon tried to push them out, but they fell to the floor and continued to grab potatoes. A soldier of the Werkschutz (guard) came in and, according to Leon, hit one Jew with the rifle butt-end, another with the barrel, and others with the bayonet; he threw all of them out but, behind the door, was a long line of others waiting.’ Janusz Berghauzen wrote that in the Hobag camps ‘typhoid epidemics decimated (…) prisoners’ (pp. 24–5). This is not true. Thanks to the efforts of prisoners themselves, there were no large epidemics in Czarny Dunajec or Nowy Targ, although weakened people suffered numerous illnesses – the most difficult cases of which, especially injuries, were treated in the Nowy Targ hospital. Despite difficult conditions the prisoners put a lot of effort into personal hygiene. Even during cold days the Werkschutz guards organized group bathing in the Czarny Dunajec River located one kilometer away. Here is my note of 24 November 1942: ‘They bathe in Dunajec every day.’ Lice infestation was a calamity, and difficult to control because of the lice infestation among local workers.

The plant submitted financial reports to the SS, which exclusively dealt with Jewish employment; a day of work cost six zlotys minus food expenses not higher then 1.60 zlotys (a litre of butter from a peasant woman cost five zlotys). The ‘Hobag’ office in Kraków processed the summary data for each internment day, with the local plant accounting unit handling only general cash.
As a consequence of the deportations and murders, the SS controlled a large amount of formerly Jewish property. The sawmill in Czarny Dunajec before the war was owned by a Jew, Izydor Landau. On 6 May 1942, I noted that the ‘Hobag’ office received from Zakopane (that is from the Commander Weissmann of the Gestapo) the order to provide a plan of the plant on a scale of 1:500 showing buildings had formerly been owned by the Jewish firm of Izydor Landau. Undoubtedly the central office of ‘Hobag’ had to account to the SS financially for taking over these establishments.

Two or three times unexpected inspections of the Jews’ camp by the men from the Zakopane Gestapo occurred. They conducted an investigation of the personnel of the camp and closely inspected the barrack. Some members of the Polish crew secretly helped Jewish prisoners, even though such help was strongly prohibited. In May 1942, I wrote: ‘P. caught a Jew, who bought from a Pole a loaf of bread in exchange for 20 “Egyptian” cigarettes, and took him to the Director. Tomorrow the Jew is supposed to identify who sold him bread.’ The seller turned out to be Mr. Grzanowicz – one of the drivers of the horse-waggons. The Director punished him by withholding his bread ration for an entire month. Some workers had their own ‘charges’ to whom they tossed pieces of bread commonly wrapped in newspaper. I remember Ignac Bauman asking us to use a newspaper (usually the Krakauer Zeitung) with a current date, not a few weeks old. All hoped for the collapse of the Eastern front, and the Jews especially waited for such news.

Two tailors worked in a special workshop, serving mainly the Germans. My notes of 7 November 1942: ‘Jewish tailors produce clothes for Miss Kruber (Elfriede, Frida, the daughter of the manager). Where else will she have such a life?!!’ Next to the garage was the workshop of a Jewish shoemaker, who repaired shoes for the entire crew, including Poles and Germans. His name was Chmielnik and he was convinced that as an indispensable craftsman he would survive. His 16 year-old son Benie was an enfant terrible – on 25 February 1943 he took from a garage the plant Director’s Mercedes and drove to the main square, from which he was unable to return. The Director flogged him and the office workers pushed the car under the roof.

13.80 zlotys and the Handkerchief

Neither in Czarny Dunajec nor in other ‘Hobag’ camps there were no Polish prisoners and there were no Romany or Russians. The members of the German crew treated Poles more or less properly – but they treated Jews as animals. I remember that once during the night shift the German carpenter Gebler pushed one of the Jews in anger toward the large combine-harvester, which caused a cut in his back. Some other time I wrote in my diary:

16.X.1942. Friday. (…) In the afternoon the manager Kruber, Lakwa, Gebler and the Werkschutz commandant Walaski searched the Jewish barrack. They were looking for money and something else… All drunk, they hit the sick and behaved abominably… They took the better clothing and money, everything they found.

Physical duress occurred daily and it led to severe beatings. My note of 12 May 1942: ‘Today the Lagerführer was beating a Jew on the road who may have been Bauman. He hit his face, and as the Jew moved away, the German pointed a finger downwards commanding as if to a dog “come back to my leg”. The Jew had to stand up and the German hit his face repeatedly and finally kicked him with all his might as a punishment for sitting too long in the lavatory.’ I need to add here that the Lagerführer was a social guardian of German crew and had no authority over the Polish and Jewish workers. His attack on the Jewish prisoner was his own personal amusement. Another, more drastic
note: ‘Sunday, November 15 1942. The church is closed. (…) During the night one Jew escaped. As punishment eight people received death sentences. SS caught the fugitive in the morning in Nowy Targ. The Werkschutz guard Wirstiuk took from the lumber mill six of his relatives and colleagues, brought them to the SS local post and left them there. Around 7 pm they were shot. (…) SS confiscated from them and left in the “Hobag” office 13.80 złotys and a handkerchief (…). What a life, what a fate!’

It occurred sometimes, that the undernourished and depressed Jews suffered accidents working with machines. All injuries were reported to the Gestapo in Zakopane. This was an excuse to liquidate groups of people. When a 15 year-old boy lost part of his hand in a rotary wood cutter, commandant Robert Weissmann from Zakopane issued a command: ‘There are too many of them – shoot 10 people.’ The next day I wrote in my diary: ‘29 November 1942, Sunday: at 10 o’clock two Werkschutz guards brought eight Jews to the SS; two others in the hospital will be killed in Nowy Targ. In this group apparently, two young Jews wanted to run away, but Walaski caught them and beat them up.’ This group had some youngsters who were ‘almost children (…) 15 years old’, including the talkative Szaulewicz, who the day before asked me about the situation on the front. Sunday evening came. ‘At 9 o’clock sharp [21 h.] I left home, the wind was howling and snow was falling all the time. Snowstorm. From the direction of the city square I heard five deafening shots within a minute – the Jews…’ And the next day: ‘Monday, 30 November 1942. Wind and snow, one cannot see anything. (…) Our Maciaszek had to bury these Jews last evening. They were forced to take off their coats and lie on the ground face-down, and they shot them from behind. A student from Dunajec helped him with this burial…. Gonet watched this execution, since he was the key keeper of the local prison…[the student was presumabley a prisoner] 3 December 1942 a telephone call from the hospital in Nowy Targ: your two Jews regained health. The manager responded that “The Gestapo will pick them up”.’ ‘They will go from the hospital straight into the bullets’ – I wrote. Despite the general callousness we were deeply affected by the brutality, especially since we knew the victims well and it was no secret that the Poles were next in line for extermination.

Living in constant fear, the Jews behaved apathetically and passively. ‘65 year-old Werkschutz soldier Wirstiuk leads six young people to a certain death; the distance is about one kilometre and they go through unpopulated places; his only weapon is a long Mauser. Nobody tries to escape.’ Earlier, the underground organization helped two Jewish non-commissioned officers to escape; after three days they came back of their own will. They were shot immediately. However, there is an example of a different attitude. 16 October 1942, 22-year-old Korngut Leib ‘showed disobedience and refused to work.’ ‘Our R. D. (Reichsdeutsche) and Gestapo tortured him and announced that he would be shot’ (I wrote, ‘He wants to be shot.’). After 12 days I write again: ‘28 October 1942. The morning was frosty and cold. During the night, the young Jew Korngut Leib, who was mortally beaten and supposed to be shot, has died.’ Unfortunately the banality of evil affected more primitive members of the crew and many people viewed such things without feelings.

Such companies as ‘Hobag’ or ‘Stuag’ have been accused of making a profit from slave labour. As one can see from my notes, they carry a much greater blame; they are guilty of participation in the physical extermination of the Jews. Probably in all ‘Hobags’ Jews were not only starving and doing slave labour, but also were downtrodden, beaten,

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13 Foreman Stefan Maciaszek, manager of lumber mill section. In 1944 non-comissioned officer in Lampart battalion of I Pułk Strzelców Podhalańskich (Polish Underground Army), pseudonym ‘Sęk’.
humiliated and for the smallest reason – or without any reason – deprived of life. Physical duress was an everyday occurrence. The Germans who committed these acts of violence were the same Germans who were known otherwise as kind carpenters or guards. They must have acted on the directives from above, because these excesses occurred in waves. The Gestapo did the shooting, but border police (Grenzschutz) also participated. The Polish ‘navy-blue’ police did not participate in any form whatsoever. Plant managers reported incidents to the Gestapo Headquarters in Zakopane which were used as excuses to kill – work accidents, attempted escapes, and one time (perhaps there were more), the desperate act of Korngut Leib.

In the previously cited book by Kasperek, we find on page 159 the claim that the Jewish commandos in German plants in Podhale were active until the spring of 1943: ‘Finally in May 1943 all Jews living in this district were murdered.’ In fact, during this phase, the murders stopped. After all, these were highly qualified workers whom the Germans needed more and more. In my diary I conclude the question of slave labour camps for Jews with a large note from the end of May, 1943 – when the ‘Hobag’ name ceased to exist and the workshops were taken over by a new firm called ‘Delta’.

Tuesday, 25 May 1943. Attention! At 2:30 pm two SS men arrive at the lumber mill, one a police officer and the other unknown. They caught me in the hallway and demanded to see Hermann (Barufke). They order all Jews to stand in front of the barrack. Each one was hit several times on the head with a rubber stick. After a while a big car enters the plant, 10–15 Ukrainians get out, load their guns and surround the plant. I wanted to leave the barrack, but one of them says: Where are you going?’ I went back and the next time they did not let me out. (…) The Jews were loaded into the car with their bundles. They were beaten with rifle barrels and rubber sticks. Snow-like feathers flew in the air from a torn featherbed. They loaded seventy Jews into one car.

The Ukrainians threw chairs and a kitchen boiler upon the heads of people. A full truck drove off and dead silence fell on the square. Frightened Polish workers started to come out between the stacks. ‘When will they do the same to us?’ It had been raining since morning; the day was dark and gloomy. The asphalt was covered with the feathers from the featherbed of shoemaker Chmielnik. This was the end of the slave labour camp in Czarny Dunajec (and the end of the Jewish story in my diary). The same scenario repeated itself in Nowy Targ and in the other ‘Hobag’ plants in the district of Nowy Sącz.

We were convinced in the beginning that the trucks were going to Auschwitz. At that time, no one knew very much about this place – except the fact that no one came out of it alive. As we learned, instead of Auschwitz, the prisoners went to a slave labor camp in Krakau-Plaszow, and in Spring 1944 from there were transported to Gross-Rosen and farther west.

In the meantime, the silence that engulfed the square in front of the garage lasted not just hours, but days, years and an entire half-century. Years went by; new books devoted to Podhale constantly appeared. The subject of slave labour camps was never mentioned in all those books, just as the subject of ‘Hobag’ plants was totally forgotten. At the end of January 1945 all the relevant documents were burnt. The workshops were destroyed by the frontline destruction commandos. In Czarny Dunajec on 26 January, three days before the sawmill was burned, all its records were heaped up and burned. The retreating Germans were still in a position to destroy all traces of their criminal activity. Thus if today, someone would read all those lavishly issued volumes, he could rightly ask, ‘Did anything like this ever actually happen?’
It never occurred to me – not then nor later – that after half a century this issue would have a surprising continuation.

It’s me, Jehuda Stein

In the last few years I found out that although the political system has changed, very few people are interested in Shoah in Podhale. Official history watches the demise of the last eyewitnesses, and in order to prevent a total dissolution of the events of those years into nothingness, I have to rescue at least what I remember and what I wrote in my youthful diary.

I tried to check if German archives contain anything on the subject, so I checked both paper documents and the Internet. The results were minimal save for one sensational finding. I learned that a few people had survived the camps in ‘Hobag’, Płaszów and the even crueler concentration camps in Germany, including two prisoners from Nowy Targ and Czarny Dunajec. By strange coincidence, two brothers – Gershon (Jerzyk) and Jehuda Stein – had survived separately. The first had worked in the “Hobag” plant in Nowy Targ, and after the war immigrated to Israel; the second, after events full of drama, almost like in the movies, was able to reach Switzerland resembling a skeleton of a man.\footnote{Jehuda Leib Stein, born 5 February 1923 in Kraków. Since 1941 he and his family lived in Nowy Targ, later worker in ‘Hobag’ in Czarny Dunajec, from August 30, 1942 in the labour camp in the same plant. Since the end of May 1943 in concentration camps in Krakau-Płaszów, Gross-Rosen (Commando Wüstegiersdorf), Flossenbürg and finally railroad brigade working on the repair of railroad tracks destroyed by bombs. On 21–23 April 1945 he made a dramatic escape to Switzerland. In 1946–54 he completed university studies and received a doctorate. Until 1988 he did research in the food industry and was also court translator in Polish and active member of Jewish organizations. Among his books are: Juden in Krakau. Ein historischer Überblick 1173–1939 (Konstanz 1997); Die Steins. Jüdische Familiengeschichte aus Krakau 1830–1999 (Konstanz 1999); Jüdische Ärzte und das jüdische Gesundheitswesen in Krakau. Vom 15 Jahrhundert bis zum Schoah (Konstanz 2006). Jehuda died on 18 June 2009 and his wife Frymeta (Frymka) half a year later, on 8 February 2010. When writing this account I did not know his book Die Steins.} There he was cured of TB and completed his studies. He published some books, including a history of his family and devoted a comprehensive chapter to the months in the slave camp of Czarny Dunajec. This discovery put me in a state of shock. I called the publisher in Constanz and the office of Jüdische Rundschau in Zurich. From there I was put in touch with someone ‘who knew Mr. Stein personally’. I received an address and wrote a letter to Switzerland. After a few days the phone rang and I heard a voice full of emotion: ‘It’s me, Jehuda…’ After 60 years, the roads of two teenagers, today old men, cross again, as in a banal story. A storm of memories…back to life come the silhouettes…names and surnames. On both sides memory is no longer the same, so we only recollect a few people.

Jehuda, who speaks and writes Polish very well, without the trace of an accent, does not remember many things. For several decades he tried to free himself from memories too difficult to bear.

‘During those years,’ he says, ‘we focused exclusively on how to survive the day – how to fight the hunger and the beatings from Germans and their boys.’ Alas, one cannot forget the painful memories. ‘Life does not walk, it runs,’ he reflects. ‘The past harasses me constantly in my stormy dreams, which I cannot get rid of, despite medical
help.’ Jehuda has positive memories of the Polish foreman Józef Piechocki: ‘I remember him fondly, because he treated me well, despite the “local circumstances”….’ He also expressed a favourable opinion of the chief German foreman, Hermann Barufke – severe in his manner, but human in relation to Jews.

Memories from different camps are superimposed in his recollections. He only briefly mentions communal executions. After nightmarish experiences in concentration camps in Płaszów, Gross-Rosen and Flossenbürg, he remembers ‘Hobag’ as a ‘fairly good command post’ with a reasonable regime.

Jehuda’s younger brother Gershon (Jerzyk) was assigned to ‘Hobag’ in Nowy Targ. Until the end of August 1942 he walked from home to the lumber mill. During the Gestapo action on 30 August he was sent to the same plant, and was imprisoned there. The Jewish crew of 40–50 people lived in a separate barrack, guarded by the Werkschutz. The plant’s organization was similar to Czarny Dunajec. Foremen Beker and Gruszka treated Jewish prisoners decently. Gruszka led the debarking crew. Emek Langer was the Jewish supervisor (starszy) who also survived the Holocaust and later settled in Israel. Jerzyk remembers only a few friends such as Katz, Samek Grassgrün, and Bronik Morgenstern. Jews worked in the lumber mill and on the railroad loading parts from barracks and hangars to railroad cars. Several were trained on the assembly line. As free workers they received weekly paychecks similar to Polish workers (0.60 zloty an hour) and a food ration, which was very important for the family. For Christmas they received additional food and vodka. All this ended after they were imprisoned. He does not remember shootings – which does not mean that they did not occur in Nowy Targ. The Jewish camp was liquidated 25 May 1943.

Not long ago I found on the Internet one more name: Robert Mendler, originally Roman Reibeisen, a US citizen (Latrobe, Pennsylvania). He worked in ‘Stuag’ in

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15 Gershon (Jerzyk) Stein, born 1 March 1924 in Kraków, lived with the family in Nowy Targ from January 1941. He was ordered to work in ‘Hobag’ Nowy Targ. On 30 August 1942 he was imprisoned there and on 25 May 1943 sent to the camp in Płaszów, where he met again with his brother. On 12 April 1944 he was transferred to concentration camp in Gross-Rosen and on 25 February 1945 to Flossenbürg in Bavaria. There the brothers were separated once again. Jerzyk was liberated together with Dachau concentration camp. Since Switzerland refused to admit him, he traveled illegally to Israel and in 1948 he arrived in this country together with his wife Ela Färber. He took part in the War of Independence, and in 1956 in the Syrian campaign. He worked many years as a hydrological engineer, and now lives with his wife in Haifa.

16 Robert Mendler (Roman Reibeisen) born on 6 July 1925 in Nowy Targ where he grew up. As a young boy he skied in Tatra Mountains. From September 1939 he was a housekeeper for a Gestapo man. Beginning November 1940 he was in ‘Stuag’ in Zakopane. Later – according to his recollection – he was moved to Czarny Dunajec and was employed by Flusskies und Stein.

He also remembers ‘Hobag’ in Czarny Dunajec. From May 1943 he moved through Płaszów and several other concentration camps (he lists 10, including Auschwitz). On 2 May 1945 US soldiers liberated him. After the war he immigrated to USA. For many years he read in schools,
Zakopane, and also in ‘Hobag’ in Czarny Dunajec. He survived the annihilation and for many years has lectured on the topic ‘I am a Holocaust Survivor’. His accounts – often quoted by journalists and the public – differ from the actual facts, because he tries to meet the public’s expectations.

When I try to reconstruct the events I rely on my notes and on my memory, which holds these recollections alive, because they were so dramatic and tragic in nature. My diary supports my memory and helps to organize events, whereas memory left to itself may wander into dangerous meanderings.

Jewish forced labour camps in ‘Hobag’ plants form a separate chapter in the Holocaust in Podhale, a chapter much more tragic because they are totally erased from memory. All documents were destroyed in the planned liquidation of the lumber mill by fire in January 1945. There are no publications, mass graves remain unmarked, and none of the streets bears the name of the hero Korngut Leib. Is his martyrdom remembered by anybody except me and the small yellowing page in my diary? One can only hope that this topic will be investigated by the researchers of the IPN and that their findings will be published. ‘What is not described and published will go into oblivion, as if nothing has ever happened,’ writes Professor Erhard Roy Wiehn in Jehuda Stein’s book. I hope that my memories – as a witness and participant of those events – will restore a piece of memory and that the fragments of what could have been lost will came back to life. Each crumb of a large and painful history – even the smallest one – is worth salvation.

My sincere thanks to my late friends Jehuda L. Stein from Breingarten and Toni Janik from Kraków for their friendly advice and corrections. I also thank Jerzyk Stein from Haifa, who enriched the article with his memories from the camp in Nowy Targ. Mr. Jean-Jacques Didisheim was kind enough to provide important dates in the lives of the Stein brothers.– J.N.

17 A few comments for historians. When after half a century I look at my notes from 1940–1945, which I have never read before, I find with surprise that my active memory differs in parts from my notes. The facts retained in my memory have a different course of events and they connect with different people, they concern different subjects, and two or three events are remembered as one. If I were called as a witness, I would probably rely on my memory, with the caveat that facts described years ago, are inexorably different. This puts into doubt the value of testimonies of so-called eyewitnesses. My diary is a rare example of the confrontation between memory and written facts.