An Incident in World War II: The Destruction of the Jews in Ostrow-Lubelski

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ABSTRACT

Part 1 of this paper describes the events in a small town in Poland, Ostrow Lubelski, during the Second World War, ending in the liquidation of the Jewish community and many deportees to the town, on 11 October 1942. The materials for this part of the study have come from many sources, including Yizkor [remembrance] books with chapters by survivors; a letter from a deportee from Poznan [German: Posen] describing conditions there; and testimony of two non-Jewish residents during those events. The results show Ostrow Lubelski to have been a microcosm of the methods and techniques used by the Germans for the genocide, including starvation, working to death, random murders, and, finally, deportation to the death camps. Part 2 is an attempt to recognize and define the sources of the Nazi ideology. It appears that the Nazis added nothing new to ideas and trends that existed from at least the nineteenth century on. These include, the industrialization and urbanization of Germany; Jewish emancipation; the Eugenics movement, not confined to Germany alone; anti-semitic attitudes; a mystical racism with an Aryan mythology; a sense of an existential threat from an alien race and the consequent demonization of the Jews; and, finally, the practice genocide in Southwest Africa in the early 1900s. The sources of Nazi thinking, in short, were a complex mixture of all of these. One-dimensional thinking about sources is neither appropriate nor sufficient.
“[The Germans] knew the moment the Americans entered the war they’d lost. Before then, even. They may be mad, but they’re not fools. What they’re doing goes far beyond the war. Something unparalleled in human history. The ultimate achievement of civilization. Just think about it. How do you annihilate so many people? You need contributions from so many quarters. Scientists to prove Jews are inferior; theologians to provide the moral tone. Industrialists to build the trains and the camps. Technicians to design the guns. Administrators to solve the vast problems of identifying and moving so many people. Writers and artists to make sure nobody notices or cares. Hundreds of years spent honing skills and developing techniques have been necessary before such a thing can even be imagined, let alone put into effect. And now is the moment. Now is the time for all the skills of civilization to be put to use.”

Part I. Ostrow Lubelski

Introduction

World War II was the bloodiest period of the twentieth century, perhaps of any century thus far. The Holocaust, battles, resistance movements, bombings, these all resulted in the deaths of tens of millions of both military and civilians. Statistics alone do not take us very far in comprehending the incomprehensible nature of many of these events. For this we must turn to examining individual events, or, as Miller (1990) has put it as the title of her book, “One by One by One.” One casualty was Reuven Zylberkant, a devout Polish Jew, living in a small town in Eastern Poland, in the area not incorporated in the Reich, known as the Generalgouvernement, and murdered for the sole reason that he was a Jew. Zylberkant was shot on 11 October 1942. Reuven Zylberkant was my grandfather.

The literature on the war and the Holocaust is enormous, and I make no claim to be familiar with even a small part of it. My discussion will be limited to what can be learned from the case of one of the many small towns in eastern Poland occupied by the Germans during World War II. What happened in Ostrow Lubelski, however, was simply one example of a widespread German policy aimed at the total destruction of European Jewry. But it is well to put a human face on these events. I will also note here that in the areas occupied by the Germans after the invasion of the Soviet Union conditions and events were even more horrifying than those described here.

There is also an interest in that few studies of small towns (Ostrova’s pre-war population included about two thousand Jews) have appeared in professional journals, though there are a great many Yizkor (Memorial) books from small towns, written by survivors of those towns. Pohl (2000, p. 97), speaking of towns with populations of the order of thousands, notes that the history of these smaller Jewish communities remains extraordinarily poorly researched. I am hopeful that this study provides at least a small contribution to such a study.
The official name of the town is Ostrow Lubelski. There are more than one Ostrows in Poland, differentiated by the administrative or regional district in which they are located. Ostrow Lubelski is located in east central Poland, not too far from the current border on the Bug River, and not too far from the border point of Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. Ostrova, as my parents and their fellow townsmen always referred to it, and as I will refer to it in the following, was tied geographically and through family relationships to the border town of Wlodawa, and the intervening hamlet of Sosnowica, and these names will also recur in the following narrative.

One thing that is missing here are testimonies by the Germans garrisoned here during that time. To that extent the description given here is incomplete.

I wish to emphasize one caveat. Throughout this paper I have often said that “Germans” id this or that. I have done this because of the overwhelming evidence that the majority of the German public during the Nazi period had become convinced that there was indeed an existential threat to their existence, that they were in fact racially superior to many other groups, and thus were justified in enslaving these other groups. The majority of the German population of that period then were complicit in what was done, either actively or passively. The attitudes were similar to European theories of the “white man’s burden” of civilizing the “inferior” natives. Europeans, hopefully, are wiser today. And we must remember that the present majority of Germans, the grandchildren of the perpetrators of those atrocities, do not share those attitudes. This generation carries a heavy burden of history – we need not, nor should we, make it heavier by assuming that they share the attitudes of their grandparents.

**Historical Background.**

The classic history of the Jews in Russia and Poland is that of Dubnow (1916, reprinted 1946). A more recent study is that of Weinryb (1973). A succinct recent summary is given by Rosenzweig (2006). Reports, some legendary, of merchant contacts are from the tenth century. Significant immigration came from Jews fleeing the Crusaders in Western Europe, leading to permanent settlements from the 12th century on. Immigration, presumably from trading contacts, also came, to a lesser extent, from the south, the Middle East.

The area where Ostrova now is was, in the 12th century, near the eastern border of the Polish Kingdom. (This and the following history of Ostrova, unless otherwise noted, is taken from Last, 1987). The Mongol invasions of the 13th century destroyed most of the settlements then existing, and normal life did not return until the 15th century. The existence of Ostrova then is known from the building of a church soon after 1442. In 1548 Ostrova was granted the status of a town, including such privileges as that of the right to hold fairs on Saturdays. The nearby town of Lubartow, important in this history, was founded in 1543. Parczew, not far north of Ostrova, was then an important town, serving as the seat of the Polish parliament sessions, and of important negotiations.
between Poland and Lithuania. An organized Jewish community existed from the early 16th century in Parczew, with a population of about 60 Jews in 1566. A reasonable assumption would put the beginning of Jewish life in Ostrova as coming from migration of Jews from Parczew at this period, the end of the 16th or beginning of the 17th centuries. Ostrover Jews were relatively prosperous during this period and later, even through the time, 1648, of the Chmelnicki massacres of Jews during the efforts of these Cossacks to obtain independence for the Ukraine. During the 17th and 18th centuries additional rights were granted to the merchants of Ostrova, reflecting the growth of the town as a local trade center. The first census of Jews in Ostrova listed 60 Jews. Wars continued to ravage the area. The war between Russia and Sweden resulted in severe damage to the area, so that by 1718 only four Jews remained in Parczew. Ostrova, however, was not hurt by the war, and it is a fair assumption that some number of Parczew Jews had fled to Ostrova. The Jewish community grew rapidly in the 18th century, with a population of as many as 344 in 1765, a growth which apparently roused the anxieties of the Polish authorities, resulting in restrictions on the liberties of Ostrover Jews. In 1795 the third and final partition of Poland resulted in Ostrova becoming a part of the Austrian Empire, then, after the defeat of Napoleon’s army by Russia, a part of the Russian Empire, a rule which continued until 1915. Under Russian rule Jews could settle in Ostrova, and did. In 1856 there were 851 Jews there, 33% of the population of 2579. By 1897 this had grown to 3221 Jews, forming a majority, or 53%, of the total population of 6079. By the beginning of the First World War the population had grown to about 8000. (www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~pollubel/plubar/lubar4J11.html = “rootsweb”). In the summer of 1915 Ostrova was occupied by German troops, an occupation lasting until 1918, when the new Polish state came into being (Last, 1987). By the end of the war the population had declined to 4648, but in 1920 the town was attacked by the Red Army, who destroyed much property and looted the town (rootsweb). By 1921 the population had declined further to 3813, including 1267 Jews, 33% of the total. If one were to include several of the neighboring villages, the total Jewish population of the Ostrova area at the time would have been 1414 (Last, 1987). The population recovered to 4879 by 1930, with a high proportion of Jews working in trades and crafts, the remainder consisting of Polish peasants. Prior to the Second World War the Jewish population was 2110 (Memorial Book, 1987, “Documents from the Ostrover Ghetto,” [in Yiddish], 213-232, at p. 222). As of this writing, following the depredations of World War II, the population is about 2500 (rootsweb -- internet), with only one Jew living there when we visited in 1993.

German policy towards Jews

Germany’s racist policies under the National Socialist regime inaugurated in 1933 have been fully described in many publications. Here I give only a few aspects, sufficient to illuminate activities in Ostrova during the war. The regime early on decreed the concept of “civil death” applying to Jews – they no longer had any rights at all (Müller, 1991, pps. 115f). Thus in 1935 a court upheld the refusal of a member of a Nazi organization to pay a Jewish merchant’s bill. Contracts between Jews and “Aryans” were declared null and void. Jewish tenants were refused renewal of their leases, and leases could be broken at any time without notice. Employment contracts were often similarly terminated. Jews
were dismissed from all civil service positions. These and other examples are given by Müller (1991).

In 1939 the policy was slightly relaxed, but even here German sadism prevailed:

"Finally, let us look at the employment situation of Jewish workers. From 1933 onward, Jews had been gradually deprived of all opportunities for work. With the emergency requirements of 1939, there was a slight reversal of policy, and a small number of physically fit Jews were put to work. A special decree covering their employment specified that they had to accept any work, were debarred from benefit of protective regulations, were to be paid subsistence wages only, and were preferably to be assigned to menial tasks in strict separation from other workers. Severe punishment was threatened if anyone, including employers, violated these rules. The period of legalized employment of Jewish workers was relatively brief. When the turn of military events drove the regime to ever more desperate measures, the gain to be derived from the employment of some Jewish workers was subordinated to a more effective prosecution of the regime's extermination policies."

(Bry, 1960).

Whatever restraints may have been present before the war disappeared completely after the conquest of Poland, and the setting aside of a "Jewish reservation" in those parts of Poland which had not been incorporated into the Great German Reich. Jewish property could be, and was, looted and confiscated at will, books were burnt, homes were destroyed, and Jews could be beaten and murdered at will for no reason at all. It was, for example, decreed that a Jew had to get off a sidewalk if a German was walking there. On one occasion, at least, a Jew, coming into town for a purchase, and preoccupied with his thoughts, neglected to get off the sidewalk as a German approached. He was immediately shot and killed by the German. Many similar incidents have been described. Germans, in short, were invited to indulge their most sadistic instincts against defenseless Jews.

**Ostrow Lubelski in the Second World War.**

In the year or two immediately preceding the war Jewish economic life was deteriorating. Fascistic and anti-semitic activity had increased and legislation restricting Jewish activity had been passed. Ostrova and surrounding towns had been much affected by this activity. The Paris office of the American Joint Distribution Committee sent on to the main office in New York, on 10 February 1939, who then sent on to the Ostrova Landsmannschaft (community organization), an appeal from a charitable organization in Ostrow Lubelski for help, with comments from the Warsaw office (JDC-NY Collection, 1933-1934, file # 862). In part, the appeal included:

“The town of Ostrow Lub. Is situated in a fertile area rich in fruit – gardens. The local Jewish population consists of petty traders, craftsmen and truck-gardeners. The Jewish shopkeepers gradually loose [sic] their peasant clientele owing to many non-Jewish cooperative shops newly established in almost all the
neighboring villages; the traveling village merchants have been entirely deprived of source of livelihood and are compelled to seek other employments. The situation of the Jewish artisans worsened, too, in connection with the establishment of cooperative stores selling ready made goods, as clothes, boots etc. The applications for credit to the G. Ch. Kassa [Gemulith Chessid Kassa] being the only Jewish credit institution become more numerous and the G. Ch. Kassa can scarcely meet the credit needs of the impoverished Jewish population.”

German troops began the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. (Material in this paragraph, unless otherwise noted, is taken from Last, 1987) Ostrova did not suffer from any air bombardments, nor, initially, did the German troops reach the town. On 17 September 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Poland, and by 22 September had crossed the Bug River, which had been agreed on as the future border between the Soviet and German forces in the secret agreement between the two countries. Soviet troops continued for some distance beyond the Bug, but not as far as Ostrova. Ostrova was occupied by the Germans at the end of September. From the very beginning of this occupation Jews were persecuted and deprived of all rights. Ostrova began to be used as a collection point. In November 1939 Jews from Lubartow, to the west, were moved to Ostrova and to Parczew, a town to the north of Ostrova. These Jews were later, for a time, allowed to return to Lubartow. German policy was to move all Jews to what was to be a Jewish reservation in this region. The plan was abandoned in the summer of 1940. Physical destruction of Polish Jews in the Lublin region, which included Ostrova, began in February 1942. Lublin Jews, for example, were sent to the death camp at Belzec on March 16. In April 1942 two trainloads of Slovakian Jews were sent to Lubartow, and 330 of these were immediately sent on to Ostrova. In the beginning of May 1942 preparations for the removal of Jews from small towns in the Lublin district were secretly sent to local police commanders. We do not possess later orders. On 11 October 1942 the ghetto in Ostrova was liquidated, and a Jewish presence in Ostrova ended.

Despite the fact that there were active resistance movements in the area near Ostrova, it seems doubtful that there were any contacts between the Jews in Ostrova and these movements. Most of these movements were communist led, at least after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, and were based in the Parczew forests, several kilometers from Ostrova. In any event these units were formed or became operational after the Ostrova ghetto had already been liquidated. After beating off a German assault in November 1942 a partisan unit captured and temporarily occupied Ostrova on 17 December 1942 (see also Pazan, 1974, p. 82. for a description of the battle; and http://wolnapolska.boom.ru/index-GL42.html ). A Jewish partisan unit was formed in the spring of 1943, too late to help the population of the Ostrova ghetto, operating mainly in the Parczew forests together with the existing partisan unit (see also Werner, 1992, on this partisan unit, and the attack on Ostrova in 1943, at p. 186-187, see also [Shapira], 1987, p. 267-270 (in Yiddish) for some reminiscences of the leader of this group, Chiel Grynszpan). In the second half of 1943 and the beginning of 1944 the communist Armia Ludowa controlled Ostrova. The Germans recaptured Ostrova after a short battle in April 1944. The Soviet advance reached Ostrova on 22 July 1944.
The ghetto in Ostrow

The use of a site for concentrating Jews began not long after the German conquest of Poland. At the beginning of November 1939 the majority of Jews from Lubartow were deported to three neighboring towns, including Ostrova, carrying only some personal possessions and small amounts of money. The Germans allowed 818 people to remain to work for them. The Lubartow Jews were later allowed to return to Lubartow in September 1940 (see, for example, www.deathcamps.org/occupation/lubartow%20ghetto.html).

Lubartow itself was both a collection point and a transit point. At the end of 1940 1000 Jews from Ciechanow, which was in the area incorporated into the Reich, were sent to Lubartow. Id. At the beginning of 1941 many Jews, mostly very poor, were deported from Lublin to Lubartow, and in April and May of 1942 over 2,000 Slovakian Jews were sent to Lubartow, many of these then being sent on to Majdanek, Id., a death camp in the outskirts of Lublin. Several days later the Slovakian Jews were sent to three other towns, including Ostrova. Id. (For statistics on the deportation of the Slovakian Jews, and the final death camps to which they were sent, see www.jewish-guide.pl/slovakia/39. Thus by October 1942 the Jewish population of Ostrova included, besides the original inhabitants, Jews from Poznan, Ciechanow and Mlawa, from areas that had been incorporated in the Reich, and Slovakia (see, e.g., email, 4 April 2008, from Robert Kuwalek, historian in the Research Department of Majdanek State Museum to the author). These deportations increased the population to between 4000 and 5000, without any additions to existing housing, resulting in significant deterioration in living and sanitary conditions (testimony of Stanislaw Misiuk and Ludwik Borowka (1974), Bundesarchiv, Ludwigsburg (Germany), File BArch, B 162/16064).

Life in the ghetto

German brutality began immediately, leading many to flee. One survivor ([Damav], 1987, p. 237) said:

“Towards the end of the year 1939, I was certainly among the last Jewish youths who still remained in the town. The great majority had fled, since we soon knew what troubles and pains would come with the brutal Hitlerite occupier. After the Germans had taken Ostrova, they immediately installed a brutal regime of force, murder and suppression. Jews were afraid to go out in the street, even for an hour, even if this was permitted. Also, the local Poles used the difficult position of the distressed Jews at every opportunity to demonstrate their anti-semitic instincts.” [my translation from the Yiddish]

On one cold, rainy day the door opened, two armed Germans entered. Finding no men there they had her collect all the books in the house, bring them to the town center, and add them to a bonfire of burning books. Two days later she left Ostrova for the Soviet side. It seems likely, in view of the few survivors, that her use of the term “youths” who
fled Ostrova included only those who were unattached, and those with family and children remained.

A survivor from Ostrova, who had crossed over to the Soviet side in September, and had returned in December, describes the situation then (Eckhaus, 1987; there are some minor differences between the English and Yiddish versions of his account):

“The town looked very different from that which I had left. It was desolate, the shops were empty, and broken doors, window and pieces of glass were strewn about the streets. Two days before my arrival home, the local Poles, armed with pitchforks and axes, had attacked the Jewish shops, destroying them and looting whatever they could. In order to remain alive, all the Jews had fled the city, and my parents told me that they had never seen such ferocity. I knew then that I had made a big mistake, that I should have listened to my Bronya [his future wife] who had tried to dissuade me from making this trip.”

“During the few days that I remained in Ostrow-Lubelsk I did not go out during the day for fear that some Pole might inform the police that the former socialist was in town. My parents hurried to arrange things so that I could leave Ostrow-Lubelsk as soon as possible.”

“On Saturday morning [presumably that of December 17], early, the Germans brought a carload of Jews from Poznan to Ostrow-Lubelsk. They broke our hearts with the stories of their sufferings on the journey to Ostrow-Lubelsk. As the trains did not reach our town, these Jews had been made to walk the remaining ten kilometers on foot. The road was very rough and all those men, women and children who for some reason couldn’t walk were shot by the Germans. Those who had the privilege of reaching our town were worn-out from the beatings, hardly caring what happened to them. When the Gestapo arrived, a few Poles pointed out the wealthier Jews and helped to ‘organize’ a contribution of money, jewellery [sic] and other valuables.”

By December 1939 Germany had incorporated the western areas of Poland as an integral part of the Greater German Reich, and began a campaign of Germanization, which involved the expulsion of all Jews and Poles. Gilbert (1990) gives a date of 14 December 1939 for the decree providing for this expulsion. Browning (1992) states that on 28 November Heydrich ordered the deportation of 80,000 Poles and Jews from the newly annexed district of Warthegau, which included Posen (Poznan). Browning then notes: “In a frightening display of brutality, the Warthegau Nazis exceeded this quota, deporting 87,833 people in 80 trainloads by December 17.”

This railroad carload of Jews, noted by Eckhaus (above), is presumably the one that included Gertrud Brandt, a cousin of the noted psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. A number of her letters written from Ostrova, during 1941, are extant (Funk, 2005). Brandt, a cultured, German-speaking native of Posen (Poznan), daughter of a renowned Talmudic scholar, was deported from Posen to Ostrova in December 1939 as part of the policy of ethnic
cleansing of the newly incorporated areas. She describes, a little over a year later, writing in response to a question by one Lisa Jacobs, who had sent a package to her, (Funk, 2005, letter of 27 January 1941), her reactions to the new life:

“Moreover, your questions interest me. I am pleased with people who penetrate in depth and endeavor to get to the bottom of things. To find clear answers to clear questions is naturally full of difficulties. How very much a community decomposes into individual existence, how the “common” exists only as an idea, besets everyone who wants to report on a collection of people and the effect of events on them, if he is serious about truth.”

“We are resettled here from Posen – more than a year ago placed in this rustic little town populated by Jewish-Polish inhabitants. We were all frightened by the shock of a completely altered lifestyle. Everything was so astonishingly different, that shipwreck survivors upon a distant island, could not be more astonished: the climate, the people, the dwellings, the food – everything was fundamentally different.”

“The first disquieting aspect was the different climate. We came in unprepared for the hard, unaccustomed frost, hip-deep snow, icy storms, most people completely unprotected against the cold, because a grotesque final scene deprived us of most of our luggage.” This was the sad and still lingering overture: that our luggage, which had been authorized for us, which we had felt thankful for, was plundered (during the transport over the approximately 20 km from the railroad station to here) by the local population together with those who shared our own travels and destiny. We thereby lost almost everything which had not been carried in rucksacks and hand luggage. As an example: I was left with, for three persons, a small compartmented suitcase, which I had not let out of my hand, since it contained all our documents, whereas my sick husband and ailing youngster could not participate in carrying anything.

All the themes of the later tragedy were already proclaimed and prepared in this overture. Whoever knew how to listen, he knew. We in our need came to people in need, among whom the frightful words of despair erupt: “Save yourself, whoever can!” This loss of belongings was and remained disastrous. Our bed rolls, which we had been allowed to bring along, and which almost everybody carried with them, would have been a great protection for us. Many of our first sacrifices of human life, which the first hard winter caused, originated in these losses.”

“Up to then, our experiences were in common. But already during the earliest days, people divided into those who were inclined to act, and those whose daily activities were to bewail what was lost and to accuse God and the world. We came to a sort of billeting to the Jewish people. I must say thankfully, although these are absolutely not ideal persons, our dear Ostrovers all have endured the burden decently enough, and still so endure it. However much a complaint,
naturally, is held against tradespeople, I do not hesitate to declare that western Jews would surely have behaved worse. Even we Poseners, who had taken in Jewish emigrants from Germany in the past year, did indeed do relatively more in terms of money, but as to personal sacrifices -- giving up one’s own convenience, even sacrificing one’s own bed for months – that was not done. I find that it is a point of honor for us to acknowledge this and always to keep this in mind, if we quarrel with the people here.”

“Living together with people naturally gives many difficulties. They are basically compassionate and good-natured. But they are to so much of a greater degree miserly about money that much of the goodness of their nature is nullified. Here we have the husbanding of assets by all peasants, who acquire cash only with difficulty (our Jewish population universally has something of a farm, a small piece of land or a cow, at least some geese and chickens), combining with the miserliness of Jewish merchants, who for generations have been accustomed to see cash savings as salvation in their hardships from persecutions, accusation, expulsion. They are industrious, striving to earn for their families (with, as luck would have it, many children), skilled as craftsmen (tailor, cap makers, haulers, shoemakers, many tanners and furriers) but notably non-intellectual.”

“Nothing of the intellectual Judaism of the big city seems to be hinted at here. Only the elderly study Talmud; others have neither a Hebrew or Yiddish nor a general education. Not even on the Sabbath is a book taken in hand. There are visits by the neighbors, and conversation, except for a little gossip, does not go beyond everyday doings, concentrates again largely on money.

This extraordinary miserliness is also the deeper reason for the indescribably primitive dwellings, and the resultant filthiness, since no one is inclined to make even the slightest expenditure for an acquisition or for cleanliness. The small houses, built of wood, grouted with clay, and blue gray whitewash outside, look so much alike, that we all initially believed, that we would never be able to differentiate among them. They all have only one floor, with as a storeroom, under the roof an attic which can be reached by a ladder from outside. The home has a lengthy large kitchen and a small room. Here three generations often live: the grandparents, the young married couple, and the growing children. Under the kitchen is the potato cellar, which can again be reached only by a ladder through a trapdoor.

No protective front structure,, as in peasant homes, holds back the cold and the street dirt; one comes directly from the street into the kitchen, unlatches the door without knocking (if one knocks, one is certainly a stranger) and brings in clumps of snow on the shoes, or entire water puddles. Because of this the kitchens (oh logic!) are not scrubbed in the winter. Often they are even unfloored, then it is even sadder to see. Everything is completely without ornaments and joyless in the dwellings. Even the wealthy, generally, scarcely have curtains at the windows.
No kitchen cabinet has a friendly appeal, indicating a housewife who is a proud housekeeper. Where then are the dishes, the household utensils? They have almost none. At first I didn’t believe this, even supposed that they hid them from us; but they really didn’t have them. A family, which had earlier earned well, and even now is still secure, has not even one plate per head. If some of them have eaten the plates are immediately washed for the others. Since the housewife, in an unlovely way, never eats at the table even on Friday evening, she must wash up after every course, that is, pour a little cold water over them, since there is no wash basin.”

“The housewives are very active and very efficient householders. Every week they all bake the bread in the house, and this day is the glorious day for the children, since some goodies are baked alongside potato puffs baked in the baking oven, and from the simplest noodle batter, “Mazzele” [little matzos]. This gives a very biblical impression, for the unleavened cakes that Sarah prepared for her guests were surely no different. The washing of the laundry, as it is practiced here, was already described by Homer. The laundry is brought to the pond, and there beaten with a wooden board with a handle, for hours. For doing the laundry one borrows the necessary utensils; I know no housewife here who possesses all of the necessary utensils herself.”

“A clothes closet I have seen only at the wealthiest homes. By contrast everywhere there stand ugly gigantic trunks/wooden chests. Otherwise only the simplest beds, tables, stools. The kitchen stoves, like the room heaters, are of brick, the stoves generally also have a wall which simultaneously heats the room; some – heated with wood and peat – heat excellently. But also here is the wretched thrift. There are not a few families who heat the oven only for cooking, which is so primitive that it goes out very quickly.”

“Into these dwellings we were placed. They were too small for their own requirements – and now the spoiled refugees! It was very difficult for both parties. A separate bed for each was impossible. Many slept for months on straw – on straw which is so dangerous in regard to vermin. We battled against the vermin plague, but unfortunately those in dwellings full of lice did not always vanquish the vermin. This is the saddest chapter. If one here is healthy and young, or at least able-bodied, then it is entirely bearable – but the elderly and the sick! And those with no will, who do not energetically defend themselves against uncleanness!”

“The problems which met the helpful here were very, very numerous: with much effort and much personal sacrifice the worst emergencies were disposed of by our “Help committee”. Immediately steps were taken to provide emergency shelter; but a mass camp has proven to be unconducive to hygiene. Soup was cooked from the beginning, and, when possible, also the available bread ration distributed. Fortunately the “Joint” (Jewish welfare organization) stepped in fairly quickly on our behalf, so that a soup kitchen could be established, which worked well. Beds
were built so that gradually at least the elderly could get their own beds. An “elders room” was established, the children were provided with as much care as possible. Mr. Neumark worked with us from hour one, his optimistic approach, for which there was no “impossible,” was especially valuable for us. Things did indeed come from the “Joint,” but these were in no way sufficient. Private aid helped us tremendously! How marvelously the Jewish families behaved cannot be praised enough. Friends, whom we had not seen for years, made themselves known. This helpfulness was our salvation. For the packages with underwear and clothes were not only the necessary clothing for us (and how indescribably important changes of underwear and clothing are as protection against uncleanness), but also nutrition and heating and everything which we need, because we could exchange these things for food and other stuff, given the great shortages among the rural population.”

“Therefore it is vital for us, to find sympathetic friends, who will help us. If you can just send something for the needy and for those others who have no one who can help them, then we are deeply thankful to you. Very few of our group here have found an occupation by which they can help themselves. Again it is the craftsmen who have the advantage: several tailors and carpenters have found good work, dentists and physicians have found a group of patients and are allowed to practice. The rest of us – you can surely not imagine this -- are dependent on the help of others.”

“I had a nice, and, for several months, even paid occupation: “Centos,” a child care organization, established a child feeding center, and the children are kept busy during the time between breakfast and lunch. I had the pleasure of running this. Sadly, because of the lack of financial means, the feeding has been cancelled. Meanwhile, however, a school has been established, which was a great need. Because of this a number of teachers among us have now been employed.”

(translation from the German by myself and Stephen Tauber)

Two Polish residents at the time later described conditions in Ostrova (testimony of Stanislaw Misiuk and Ludwik Borowka (1974), Bundesarchiv, Ludwigsburg (Germany), File BArch, B 162/16064; all translations from the German in the following are by myself, with editing and corrections by Brownlow and Doris Speer )

“I lived during the entire occupation period in Ostrow Lubelski. In Ostrow Lubelski there was no so-called ghetto. The Jews in Ostrow, almost till the end of 1941, had complete freedom of movement in the entire village. They were, to be sure, not permitted to carry on trade or business. In the year 1942 the Jews were assigned to an area where they could live and within which they could continue to move freely. This area comprised the city center, since most pre-war Jewish housing was located there. The area that had been marked out for the ghetto was not fenced in, though the Jews could not leave it, and they were also concerned to obey this prohibition, since those Jews who left the area would be killed by the
Germans. The Jewish guards served to keep order in the ghetto. The German Gendarmes Arn and “Cygan” had overall supervision. Whether these were the given names or family names of the Gendarmes I do not know. “Cygan” had a mastery of the Polish language. Both stayed in rooms in the house where the pharmacy was. The female owner of this house is no longer alive. The Jews suffered great distress, since because of the prohibition of work they had no means of earning. Until 1939 approximately 2000 Jews lived in Ostrow. After the outbreak of war only a few families left Ostrow. In the course of time the Germans brought to Ostrow Jews from the region of Posen and from Czechoslovakia, so that in the year 1941 the level of the Jewish population in Ostrow increased to about 5000 people. The living and sanitary conditions where the Jews lived were very difficult because of the overcrowding. The mortality was likewise great, Jews died from starvation, and were also decimated by a typhus epidemic. From hearsay, the Jewish Council, at least once a month, received an order from the Germans to provide a fixed amount of money. Medically the Jews supplied their own domain. There were some doctors there. I cannot say for certain whether they were permitted to keep any drugs in the pharmacy. The Gendarme “Cygan” was a cruel person. No day went by in which he did not murder at least one Jew on the basis of some flimsy guilt. “Cygan” was young, about 21 years old, black hair. Arn could have been about 40 years old. He was large, corpulent, blond and already somewhat bald. I know that Arn perished in the neighborhood of the village Jamy.” (Misiuk)

“I lived in Ostrow Lubelski during the whole occupation period. In Ostrow Lubelski there was no so-called ghetto. Until almost the end of 1941 the Jews resident in Ostrow could move completely freely in the whole city. They were not permitted, to be sure, to trade or carry on a business. In the year 1942 an area was allocated to the Jews where they could live. This area embraced the city center, because most of the Jews lived there. The area was, however, not fenced in; the Jews who crossed this boundary, however, were killed by the Germans. I know that keeping order in the Jewish areas was provided by Jewish guards, supervised, however, by German Gendarmes who were stationed in Ostrow, as well as by the Polish dark-blue police. Since the Jews were forbidden to earn money, they suffered distress. Until 1939 2500 Jews lived in Ostrow. After the outbreak of war only a few Jewish families left Ostrow, and again and again the Germans brought into Ostrow Jews from the regions of Posen, Germany and Czechoslovakia, so that the total Jewish population in Ostrow rose to 4000. The living and sanitary conditions in the Jewish district were on account of the overcrowding very bad. The mortality among the Jews was high. Almost daily the German with the Pseudonym “Cygan” – given name and family name not known –, who mostly stayed in Ostrow, killed several Jews, who, in his opinion, had broken some law. He began these crimes at the Jewish cemetery, about 1 km distant from the city center. I do not know if “Cygan” was a German, he spoke, however, good Polish. It occurs to me, at the moment, that his given name was Hans, since the other Germans so called him.” (Borowka)
The end of the ghetto

Arbitrary murders of Jews without any judicial process had been carried out from the beginning of the conquest of Poland, but these had been sporadic. Most Jews were concentrated in ghettos under conditions which made survival difficult, with deaths from starvation and medical neglect. This was a deliberate program of decimation, but not of direct physical destruction. A systematic policy of murder of Jews, Communists and other “undesirable” elements began with the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. There are indications that here too there was some confusion as to whether ghettos should be set up, but as the war progressed events soon became those of simple killing. Some six months later, in January 1942, second level bureaucrats were brought together at a conference at Wannsee, a resort in a suburb of Berlin. Here the orders for the “final solution” of the Jewish problem were ordered. Preparations for industrialized mass murder were already far advanced, and the death camps set up. In March 1942 or thereabouts the ghettos began to be systematically liquidated, the inhabitants, except for a few utilized for labor of one sort or another, sent on to the death camps for immediate annihilation. I do not know what determined the order in which the individual towns were chosen.

These actions were carried out by the Order Police, often together with auxiliaries of Ukrainians recruited from prisoner of war camps, volunteers from the Baltic States, and so-called Volksdeutschen – people of ethnically German origin whose families had been living in the Baltic states, the Ukraine or other parts of the Soviet Union for centuries, many of them no longer even speaking German, but considered to be so by the racial ideology of Nazi Germany, the “Trawniki” units.

The police establishment in Germany had been unified under Heinrich Himmler (for a description of the organization see Browning, 1992, 1998; Pohl, 1993). Himmler had divided the security police into two branches. The Security Police, headed by Reinhard Heydrich (wounded by assassins in Czechoslovakia on 27 May 1942, dying of these wounds on 4 June 1942), consisted of the secret state police, the notorious Gestapo, dealing with political concerns, and the criminal police, for other non-political matters. The second branch, the Order Police, included the city or municipal police, the Gendarmerie (rural police), and the town or village police (Browning, 1992, chapter 2). After the war began larger units of about 500 men each were formed into battalions. Thirteen of these were stationed in the General Government in Poland, and later used as mobile deportation and killing units. The total strength of the Order Police at the end of 1942 was about 15,000 men with slightly less than that number of Polish police under their supervision (Ibid.). There were also some units of Ukrainians. It is clear from these numbers that the garrison between 1939 and 1942 in a small town such as Ostrova could not have been very large. It is not known precisely which units operated in Ostrova prior to and during the liquidation. One of the units stationed in the Lublin district, which included Ostrova, was the Reserve Battalion, comprised of ordinary men, whose history is described by Browning (1998) and by Pohl (193), though it is not known whether they were involved specifically in Ostrava or not.
I do not know the population of the ghetto at the time of its liquidation. At the end of
June 1941 there were 3,329 Jews, compared to a pre-war population of 2,110
([Documents], 1987, p. 222, in Yiddish). At that time the population was broken down
into the following categories (pre-war numbers in parentheses): tradesmen, 12 (350);
craftsmen, 40 (160); workers, 829 (40); free professions, 10 (2); and without an
occupation, 2,438 (1,558). Id. These are interesting numbers. They indicate, possibly, that
those whom the Germans thought might be useful to them, in terms of skills, tradesmen
and craftsmen, had already been transferred to other locations, and that many able bodied
people had been transferred to slave labor camps. Alternatively, these groups may have
been already murdered as part of the German policy of destroying the intelligentsia and
other potential leaders. The number of presumably unskilled workers was considerably
increased, as was the number of those listed as without occupations. These latter may
have been mostly women and children, their fraction of the total population being about
the same both pre-war and in 1941.

The liquidation of the ghetto in Ostrova took place on 11 October 1942. The inhabitants,
together with the local priest and the local Polish schoolteacher, were marched to
Lubartow. Any who fell out along the way were immediately shot. (conversation of the
author in 1993 or 1994 with two former partisans in Ostrova). Jews from Lubartow, Firlej
and Kamionka had also been collected there. Of those gathered there, 300 were executed
in the Jewish cemetery there (Szwabe, 1993, p. 26, in Polish). There is some uncertainty
as to the subsequent final destination of the remainder. It seems most likely that all or
most of the remaining Jews were sent to the death camp at Treblinka. Kuwalek (historian
in Research Department, Majdanek State Museum, Poland, email 4 April 2008) states
this on the basis of an interview, in the U.S. Holocaust Museum, with Chiel Reichman, a
survivor of this deportation to Treblinka. There appears also to be some evidence that a
few were sent to Maidanek. My Polish partisan informants stated that some were sent to
the Warsaw ghetto, the remainder to Treblinka.

Two Polish witnesses, Stanislaw Misiuk and Ludwik Borowka, to the liquidation of the
ghetto reported:

“In the late autumn of 1942 all Jews, with the help of the Jewish Council, and on
the order of “Cygan” and Am, on a siren signal, had to leave Ostrow and march in
the direction of Lubartow. The Jews marched under Jewish guard on foot to
Lubartow. Jews who because of their poor health, were not able to walk,
assembled in the synagogue. On the following day they were, apparently, all shot
by “Cygan.” I was an eyewitness at the beginning of the execution, but ran away,
since I could no longer watch this. The next day, after the Jews had been ordered
to leave Ostrow, I went with my father in a carriage towards Lubartow, and saw
the streets strewn thick with the corpses of Jews, who, in my opinion, had been
shot by “Cygan,” since he had traveled by bicycle with the Jewish columns to
Lubartow I was with my father at the railroad station in Lubartow and saw Jews
from Ostrow there; I saw them get into the railroad cars, and how the Germans
pushed them in, and beat them with rifle butts. In which direction they travelled I
do not know.” (Misiuk, ibid.)
Some Germans, passing the marching column in an auto, shot at them from their auto (Borowka)

Not all Jews were fit enough to leave their dwellings:

“Jews, who because of poor health could not walk, assembled in the synagogue. The next morning I appeared with my horse wagon in front of the synagogue by order of the mayor. Likewise my neighbor Tomasz Drozd and two others whose names I no longer remember. I drove there, but stopped at some distance from the synagogue, and thanks to this circumstance, did not need to take away any Jews. I was an eyewitness, how “Cygan” ordered the Jews present in the synagogue, to get in the three vehicles standing there. The vehicles were so densely packed, that the horses could not begin to move. “Cygan” then drew his pistol, and with it went from one wagon to another, slowly fired at the Jews sitting in the wagon. The Jews neither fled nor cried out. After these shootings nine or twelve Jews were left alive. Today I remember no more exactly. Those remaining alive, on order of “Cygan,” together with the vehicles, had to bring the corpses of their dead comrades to the Jewish cemetery and bury them.” (Borowka)

Even this was not the end of the matter. Apparently some few Jews managed to be hidden. These were hunted down:

“Towards the end of 1942 I was an eyewitness to the shooting by the Gendarme “Cygan,” at the Jewish cemetery, of two men whom I had earlier seen him lead out of the house of the family Skulimoski.” (Misiuk)

Final thoughts on the end of the Jewish community in Ostrova

Gertrud Brandt, meditating on her life in the last postcard she wrote before the liquidation of the ghetto said: “Every anxiety before any change has left me. I have lived a full, rich life, and whether this now ends with a long loop, or is cut short, I find rather unimportant. As long as I can be useful, I will be so. And who is to say that under different circumstances I could do it again or even more so?” [my translation from the German]

It was at the time of the liquidation that my grandfather, Reuven Zylberkant, was one of the three hundred shot, the corpses left in the open, ([Doman], 1987) in the New Jewish Cemetery in Lubartow. That my grandfather was one of these three hundred was what my older sister, Sara Kramer, who was more in touch with the Ostrover Society, a fraternal organization of Jews who had immigrated to New York from Ostrova, had heard. My wife and I visited the cemetery in Lubartow in 1993. It is now a small park. Almost all of the headstones had been destroyed. The Poles, after the war, had collected all the remaining pieces of the headstones and put them together as a memorial at one end of the park. The names of those who were shot is not documented.
A more complete picture of what happened in Poland is given by the fragmentary information available about my own family. My grandfather was not the only one of my relatives murdered in the course of the war. There is, however, no documentation that I can find of how, where or when the others were killed. But let me at least note something about them. Of the many in my father’s family, the Zylberkants (the family name in Poland), of those who lived in Poland in 1939, only one cousin survived. He and his brother crossed the Bug river (the border between the German and Soviet sections of divided Poland), into Soviet territory. He told me that they had decided to cross over when a German vehicle carrying a machine gun drove down the main street (where the housing was mostly occupied by Jews) shooting randomly at both sides of the street. After some time they ended up in a town not far from the border. At one point his landlady’s daughter became angry with him, reported him to the police for illegal trading, and he was sent off to the Urals. Eventually he was able to join the Polish army formed in Russia, and fought with them as far as Stettin, in what was then northern Germany, where he was wounded. He eventually made his way to the United States. His brother, living in the border town, was presumably killed when the Germans invaded Russia in June 1941. My father had come to the United States in 1914, my mother, caught by the war, came in 1920. Another Zylberkant also left Ostrova in 1914, went to what was then called Lemberg, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, eventually ended up in Soviet Russia. When emigration became possible that branch spread out, with family members now in Russia, the United States and Israel. I only discovered their existence a few short years ago.

My grandfather, on my mother’s side, lived in Warsaw in 1939. I have no idea where, when or how he died, but he certainly did not survive the war. According to my mother her brother, and only sibling, also lived and worked in Warsaw, had a wife and seven children. None survived the war. Many of my mother’s family came to the United States in 1905 and after from a small town, Malorita, in what is now Belarus. The Yad Vashem listing of Holocaust victims includes many Korenbaums from Malorita. I know of one who survived and ended up in Israel. There may have been one or two others, but I don’t know for sure.

A large database, in Bad Arolsen, Germany, which for some reason was kept private for many years is being transcribed and released only now. I may be able to get some information when this database is made available in a searchable form.

What happened in German-occupied eastern Europe was throughout an efficient and thorough murder of Jews and some other chosen ethnic and social groups. Very few of the 2,750,000 – 2,900,000 Jews in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union survived the war. In addition to those murdered by the Germans it is estimated that some 120,000 – 180,000 died in various battles as soldiers in the Soviet army, and another 80,000 – 85,000 were shot in German POW camps (the foregoing estimates are taken from Arad, 1991, and are not definitive). The fate of Jews in Ostrow Lubelski represents just one small microcosm of the entire picture. That only one of my father’s numerous family in
Ostrava survived demonstrates the scope of the murders, and the efficiency of the murderers.

**Discussion**

What happened in Ostrova was not unique. The theoretical justification for state-sanctioned murder can be traced back at least to 1895, in a book by Adolf Jost, who argued that it was the state, that is, the social organism, that should control the death of the individual. The state must kill in order to keep the community alive and healthy (Lifton, 1986, p. 46). The question of what to do with the aged had been raised earlier in, for example, England, and served as the theme of Anthony Trollope’s novel *The Fixed Period*, published in 1882, in which he posited an English colony in the South Pacific in which those reaching a certain age were to be euthanized. Trollope, however, clearly did not agree with this concept – the book ends with British warships arriving and putting a stop to what was to be the first person euthanized. (For a discussion of this book, see Silverman, 2004)

In Germany the concept was enhanced in 1920 by a publication by a jurist, Karl Binding and a professor of psychiatry, Alfred Hoche. They introduced the concept of “life unworthy of life,” that is, such groups as the incurably ill, the feebleminded, and retarded and deformed children. They noted, for example, the tremendous economic burden on society involved in the care of these individuals. (Lifton, *Ibid.* Experimentation and application of methods of destruction of unwanted minorities had begun shortly after the Nazis assumed power in 1933. Lifton quotes a speech by the Bavarian commissioner of health, Professor Walter Schultze, at the opening ceremony for a state medical academy, in which he stated that psychopaths, the mentally retarded, and other inferior persons must be isolated and killed. Schultze further stated that the policy had already been initiated in the concentration camps. Subsequently euthanasia of “undesirables” became open government policy from 1938 on. In that year, for example, an SS officer, speaking to a national meeting of government psychiatrists and administrators, said: “the solution of the problem of the mentally ill becomes easy if one eliminates these people.” *Ibid.*, p. 50. A thorough description of the policy is given in Lifton’s book. We may also note, at this point, the Nazi framework of the Aryans (= Germans) as a master race, and Jews and others as sub-humans, inferior races, alien entities threatening the German people, who should be destroyed, a framework drummed into every segment of the German population (see, for example, for the case of the armed forces, Wette, 2006).

Foreshadowing what happened in Ostrova, and setting an example, was the policy, from 1934 on, of encouraging mental hospitals to neglect their patients. Each year funds were reduced, standards were lowered to the point of being eliminated. Courses were given to justify the policy, originally to government officials and functionaries, and after 1938 to members of the SS, party leaders, police, prison officials and the press, showing the most grotesque features of the mentally ill, thus justifying the elimination of these classes of society. (Lifton, *id.*, p. 48). The purpose of the neglect was clearly to accelerate the deaths of the individuals. Similarly, the brief relaxation of employment for Jews in Germany in 1939 included deprivation of any benefits, and a requirement that they were
to be paid subsistence wages only (see above, citation from Bry, 1960). This was the policy of decimation, meant to lead to death by starvation, the absence of medical care, and, as much as possible, debilitating living conditions. The resulting weakened state of the inhabitants would mean less and weaker resistance to subsequent more stringent measures, and fewer Jews. In Konskowola, for example, some 1,500 to 2,000 Jews had been collected by early October 1942, when the ghetto there was liquidated (Browning, 1992, p. 115-116). There had been an epidemic of dysentery and many could not even walk to the assembly place. These were shot in their beds or in the streets. There were forty or fifty people in the makeshift hospital suffering from dysentery. All, or almost all, of them suffered from malnutrition and were extremely emaciated. These were shot in the building. At the assembly point some men, and possibly some women as well, were taken to be shipped to work camps. Many of these were too weakened to walk the five kilometers to the train station, and were shot en route. The remaining Jews, the elderly and the women and children were taken to a site in the woods and shot there (Ibid.).

German policy in the occupied territories was from the beginning designed to lead to the control and subsequent annihilation of Jews. Heydrich, chief of the Security Police, gave secret instructions to the special groups of the Security Police on September 21, 1939, soon after the conquest (Arad et al., 1981, p. 173-178). These included the setting up of Judenrats (Jewish councils) to be fully responsible “for the exact and prompt implementation of directives already issued or to be issued in the future.” Thus the Jews were to be collaborators in their own destruction. The measures were to be taken in the closest consultation and cooperation with the German civil and military authorities, from which we see that the perpetrators were not only the SS, but also the entire German establishment. Certain areas, such as those of Poznan, were to be speedily cleared of Jews. Surveys of the numbers of Jews were to be carried out. The compulsory wearing of the Jewish Star of David was promulgated in a decree of November 23, 1939 (Ibid., p. 178). Forced labor for Jews was introduced by a regulation of October 26, 1939, and Jews could not change their place of residence without permission, by an order of December 11, 1939. Jews were forbidden to be out on the streets between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. without permission. Contravention of these orders was to be punished by prolonged hard forced labor. But local German authorities could impose even stricter regulations (Ibid., p. 179). Jews changing their residence without permission were to be sentenced to death, as well as anyone knowingly giving shelter to such Jews (Ibid., p. 181). Jews were not allowed to use the railroads, by an order of January 26, 1940 (Ibid., p. 182).

A bizarre aspect of German policy was the “Madagascar Plan.” Following the conquest of western Europe in the first half of 1940, and the consequent weakening of the position of England, the Germans expected an early final victory and a peace treaty. As part of this plan was proposed that all Jews (including those of non-combatant countries) were to be removed from Europe and settled in Madagascar, which was to be transferred from French to German control. The Jews were to remain hostages in German hands to insure the good behavior of American Jews (Arad et al., 1981, p. 216-218). But the British were not defeated, and in the invasion of the Soviet Union the German advance was finally stopped at the gates of Moscow by December 1941. An early peace was clearly no longer possible. Hans Frank, governor of the General-Government in Poland (executed in 1946
for war crimes), in a speech on December 16, 1941 stated that “we must finish off the Jews. … the Jews will disappear … We must destroy the Jews wherever we find them, and wherever it is at all possible … We cannot shoot these 3.5 million Jews, we cannot poison them, but we will be able to take measures that will lead somehow to successful destruction, and this in connection with the large-scale procedures which are to be discussed in the Reich.” (Ibid., p. 247-249). A month later at a pleasant villa with a view of a scenic lake at Wannsee, the second level of bureaucracy, who would be responsible for the implementation of policy, attended a conference devoted to the “final solution,” the physical destruction of the Jews.

What happened in Ostrova is a microcosm of this policy. In December 1939 a pogrom by the Poles (probably incited by the Germans) destroyed Jewish shops and stores, with all their possessions. Shortly thereafter deportees from Poznan arrived and were billeted in already overcrowded housing – no provision was made for any additional housing or furnishings for these and later deportees. Able bodied men, of those who had not already left for the Soviet side, were taken for heavy work on roads and other such projects, machines for the remaining artisans were not available. Some medicines were supplied by the American Joint Distribution Committee, but all help from this source stopped after the declaration of war against the United States. Books were confiscated and destroyed. All of these measures were clearly designed to destroy both the physical, intellectual and spiritual life of the Jews.

The pogrom in Ostrava is, at first sight, somewhat puzzling. The Germans had arrived in mid-September, and this would have been a likely time for a pogrom on Polish initiative. Why then wait two months in Ostrova? Furthermore, Poles also suffered under many restrictions, though less than the Jews – they had, for example been expelled from areas annexed to the German Reich, as had the Jews (Arad et al., 1981, p. 183). Could they have acted without the permission or agreement of the German occupying force? According to one survivor it was the shops which were destroyed and looted. Why not Jewish homes, property and lives also? It is an easy inference that the pogrom was initiated by the Germans, though carried out by the Poles, perhaps even under compulsion.

There is evidence to support this hypothesis, and to show that the initiation of pogroms was a tactic that had been used before and after that in Ostrova. The well-known event of Kristallnacht on November 10, 1938, following the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a Polish Jew follows this pattern. A telegram sent by Heydrich, the head of the secret police on November 10, at 1:20 a.m. to the State Police and secret service throughout the country provides instructions on how the riots are to be managed (Arad, et al., 1981, p. 102-104). Heydrich states that demonstrations against the Jews are to be “expected” but they are to be conducted in such a way that German lives or property are not to be endangered – synagogues are to be burned down only where there is no danger to neighboring buildings; palaces of business and apartments belonging to Jews may be destroyed but not looted; on commercial streets non-Jewish businesses are to be protected from damage; archives in synagogues and Jewish communities are to be seized; as many Jews – especially the rich – are to be arrested as can be accommodated in existing
prisons; healthy young Jews are to be detained and sent to concentration camps. The importance of involving the local population may be noted here.

The same tactics were used following the invasion of the Soviet Union. Stahlecker, head of Einsatzgruppe A, reported from Lithuania that “within a few hours of our entering the city, local anti-Semitic elements were induced to engage in pogroms against the Jews, despite the extremely difficult conditions. … It was thought a good idea for the security police not to be seen to be involved, at least not immediately, in these unusually tough measures, which were also bound to attract attention in German circles. The impression had to be created that the local population itself had taken the first steps of its own accord as a natural reaction to decades of oppression by the Jews and the more recent terror exerted by the Communists. … [E]very attempt was made from the outset to ensure that reliable elements in the local population participated in the fight against the pests in their country, that is, the Jews and the Communists.” (Klee, et al., 1991, p. 24). These reliable elements were also meant to later be a permanent source of assistance to the security police. It was assumed that the Baltic populations would themselves “render harmless” their enemies. “The task of the security police was to set these purges in motion and put them on to the right track so as to ensure that the liquidation goals that had been set might be achieved in the shortest possible time. It was equally essential to create an established and provable fact for the future that the liberated population had taken the hardest measures against their Bolshevik and Jewish adversaries of their own accord without directions from German authorities being discernible.” In Kaunas in the first pogrom, June 25/26, the Lithuanians eliminated 1,500 Jews, burned down or destroyed several synagogues, and about sixty Jewish homes were burnt down. On the following nights 2,500 more Jews were “rendered harmless.” (Ibid., p. 27). These pogroms were followed in the following months by shootings of Jews by smaller units of Germans, the Einsatzkommandos, so that by 1 December 1941, in a report by SS-Standartenführer (Colonel) Karl Jäger, he could proudly proclaim that there were no more Jews in Lithuania, other than a small number of Jewish workers and their families, needed for the German war effort (Ibid., p. 54) Jäger had intended to kill the workers as well, but was stopped from doing this by strong protests from the civil administration and the army.

The Jäger report gives a detailed listing of the number of those killed, as well as where and when they were shot by his unit, totaling 133,346 from 4 July to 25 November 1941.

Similarly, an Einsatzgruppe report of July 3, 1941 (Arad et al., 1981, p. 2), less than two weeks after the invasion notes that Poles, in those areas which had been annexed to the Soviet Union, could be expected to be anti-Jewish and anti-Communist. Therefore, in carrying out the ethnic cleansing of the region, “[i]t is obvious that the cleansing activities have to extend first of all to the Bolsheviks and the Jews … It is therefore obvious that such Poles need not be included in the cleansing action, especially as they are of great importance as elements to initiate pogroms and for obtaining information.” On July 5 another Einsatzgruppe report (Arad et al., 1981, p. 6) noted that in Riga, Latvia, “[p]ogroms have been started.” Similarly, in a report of July 6 (Ibid., p. 10) the writer reported that “[p]ogroms are being initiated.” In Poland and formerly Polish territories the process was made easier by the series of anti-semitic laws enacted by the Polish government before the war. In those territories which had been part of the Soviet
Union prior to 1939 these tactics were not as effective. SS squads found it more difficult to incite the local populations. Reporters with the SS in Ukraine frequently complained that “carefully planned attempts to incite pogroms against Jews have unfortunately not shown the results hoped for.” (Brown, 2003, p. 208).

The policy of using one ethnic group against another also had a practical aspect. Himmler, in a secret memorandum to Hitler on May 25, 1940 stated, that in the East, “we shall have to endeavor to recognize and nurture as many individual peoples as possible; that is, in addition to the Poles and Jews also the Ukrainians, the Byelorussians, the Gorals, Lemcos, and the Cashubes. And if there are any other splinter peoples to be found anywhere, then these too. … we have the greatest interest in not uniting the population of the East, but, on the contrary, in dividing it into as many parts and splinters as possible.” (Arad et al., 1981, p. 198). It is interesting to note that at this time emigration (e.g., the Madagascar plan) was still seen as the preferable method for making Europe free of Jews – in the same memorandum he states “this method is the mildest and best if, out of inner conviction, we reject the Bolshevist method of physical destruction of a people as un-Germanic and impossible.”

A fuller description of the intermingling of various ethnic groups in the pre-war border region between Poland and Ukraine is given in Brown, 2003 (see also, Spector, 1990). Similar intermingling of ethnic groups were present in the border region between Poland and Belarus. Werner (1992, p. 19), for example, notes that the population east of Parczew was mostly Ukrainian, speaking a mixture of Ukrainian, Russian and Polish, called Hachlacki. The people were very nationalistic and hated the Poles and the Polish language.

In Ostrova the garrison appears to have been from the Gendarmerie, one branch of Himmler’s police, as were the SS-men and the Reserve Police Battalions, who probably later carried out the deportations. One survivor noted that once a week SS-personnel had come to collect able young men for slave labor. Another survivor noted that immediately after the Germans occupied the town a brutal regime of force, murder and suppression was instituted. Treatment of the deportees from Poznan in December 1939 was similarly harsh – they were made to walk the several kilometers from the train station to Ostrova over rough roads in winter conditions, their belongings, other than what they carried with them, on a separate railroad car, were stolen, no separate housing was provided, they were installed in the already crowded housing of the local inhabitants.

The loss of all their belongings other than what they could carry, as reported by Brandt, was not an isolated incident. For a transport of unsuspecting Viennese Jews in June 1942, being taken to the death camp at Sobibor, three baggage cars were turned over to an SS official at Trawniki, on the way to Sobibor (Browning, 1992, p. 28). In the actions in the Soviet Union in 1941 and thereafter the victims were made to undress completely before being shot, so that their clothing and valuables could be recycled to Germany (Klee, et al., 1991, passim). While all property was supposed to be turned over to the State, there were certainly incidents where individual soldiers helped themselves to the property of those they were about to kill. One witness stated that many of the shooters “wanted
money and gold. Don’t let’s kid ourselves, there was always something up for grabs during the Jewish actions. Everywhere you went there was always something for the taking. The poor Jews were brought in, the rich Jews were fetched and their homes were scoured.” (Ibid., p. 76).

The execution of my grandfather, probably in his eighties at the time, at the collection point for deportation in Lubartow, was also part of standard procedure. A document detailing a deportation in September 1942 from Lemberg [now Lviv, Ukraine] notes that on September 8 “some 300 Jews – old and weak, ill, frail and no longer transportable – were executed.” (Browning, 1992, p. 32). In an earlier resettlement action from territories annexed to the Greater Reich one Police reservist stated:

“During the early period we endeavored to fetch all people out of the houses, without regard for whether they were old, sick, or small children. The commission quickly found fault with our procedures. They objected that we struggled under the burden of the old and sick. To be precise, they did not initially give us the order to shoot them on the spot, rather they contented themselves with making it clear to us that nothing could be done with such people.” (Browning, 1992, p. 46).

By October 1942 the shooting on the spot of the old, frail or sick, and of infants, had become standard procedure (Browning, 1992, p. 115).

The German army was fully complicit in the genocide. For many years after the war the German military and government promoted the myth that the SS was responsible for all the atrocities, and that the regular army had “clean hands.” This myth was finally destroyed in the 1990s (for a full discussion see Wette, 2006) and subsequently, though the actual facts were available long before that. The Einsatzgruppen reports often note the complete cooperation of the army in their murder operations. For example, an operational report of July 5, 1941 states: “Excellent cooperation with 10th Army Headquarters. Smooth integration with advance groups possible. Security measures, in agreement with the Wehrmacht, have been taken against Russians in hiding and armed Communists.” (Arad et al., 1989, p. 6). Similarly, in an operational report in August 1941, which noted the killings of many thousands, the report noted: “The unit of Einsatzkommando 8 which is stationed in Baranovichi is particularly successful in its cooperation with the relevant units of the German Army.” (Ibid., p. 71) There is no question about the willing complicity of the army in the atrocities which were committed. Furthermore, since the army consisted largely of conscripts, it is a fair inference that the overall population of Germany had knowledge of what was going on. What happened in Ostrova was but one small, but representative, part of the picture.

Part 2. Sources of Nazi ideology

Genesis and roots of the Holocaust

The concepts and methods of genocide did not arise full-blown in the Nazi implementation of the Holocaust, but developed from a confluence of existing trends
evident in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The groundwork for the genocide commonly known as the Holocaust, applied most efficiently to Jews, but also applied to Sinti and Roma (Gypsies), physically deformed, mentally ill, homosexuals and political enemies, among others, was not a creation of the Nazis after they came to power, but was foreshadowed, most explicitly, in the period from 1900 to 1920. Factors I identify at this point include: rapid industrialization, urbanization, emancipation of the Jews, colonial expansion, social Darwinism, scientific investigation into differences between peoples (Galton, etc.) and the concept of superior and inferior races, thus eugenics, all of these in the nineteenth century, development of a romantic mythology of an early, pre-Roman superior Germanic, Aryan civilization, in the period from about 1900 to 1914; and a demonization of Jews as a powerful enemy of the Germanic peoples who must be totally destroyed root and branch, leaving no seed behind to be resurrected, this concept developing after the defeat of Germany in World War I, and the communist revolutions in Russia, Hungary, Bavaria, perhaps other places as well, in which emancipated Jews (Trotsky, Bela Kun, Rosa Luxembourg) played a very visible role (not necessarily the same as a prominent role – these were taken by, among others, such as Lenin, Stalin and the Red Army generals), and other Jews were very visible in the Weimar republic (Walter Rathenau, for example). This latter led to the two words “Jewish” and “Bolshevik” becoming one in the Nazi lexicon.

**Industrialization, urbanization, Jewish emancipation.** The nineteenth century was, for Europe, a time of rapid industrialization. With this process came urbanization. This can be seen from the growth of Berlin’s population: in 1709, 57,000; 1750, 113, 289; 1800, 172,132; December 3, 1849, 418,733; December 1, 1900, 1,888,848; and a few years before the beginning of World War I, December 1, 1910, 2,071,257. (Wikipedia, based on figures from the Berlin State Statistical Office from 1840ff). Thus in the nineteenth century the population of Berlin increased by a factor of ten, while in the previous century it had increased by a factor of three. The increase in Berlin’s population was presumably also due, in part, to the political unification of the German states under Prussian rule, with an accompanying importance in the status of Berlin. Industrialization undoubtedly also brought changes in the relative importance of a number of professions, some old, some new: journalists, physicians, lawyers, scientists.

The population of Vienna showed a similar growth due to industrialization and immigration from other parts of the empire in the nineteenth century. Thus in 1800 the population was 271,800; in 1850, 551,300; in 1900, 1,769,137; and in 1910, 2,083,630. (Wikipedia),

Jews in Prussia obtained citizenship in 1815, and full equality in 1850. The Jewish population in Berlin grew accordingly. In the mid-eighteenth century the Jewish population was 2,000. By 1850 there were 9,500 Jews in Berlin, mostly involved in finance, commerce and transportation. By the turn of the century there were more than 110,000 Jews in Berlin. (Jewish Virtual Library, Internet) It seems reasonable to expect that Jews, with emancipation, moved into the professions in which opportunities had opened up with industrialization. Certainly it is true that Jewish doctors, lawyers, journalists and scientists became more visible over this period. Concurrent with this
increased visibility came a growth of anti-semitism in Germany and Austria. By the 1870s Germans involved with the folk-movement described themselves as anti-semites, perceiving Jews as an alien race which could not be properly assimilated into German society. This folk-movement attempted to have Jewish citizenship revoked, but failed, and in the 1912 elections were defeated. (Wikipedia) Nevertheless, as the First World War developed into a stalemated trench warfare, despite the fact that a higher percentage of Jews fought than any other ethnic, religious or political group in Germany, anti-semitism in the military became more pronounced. In 1916 the German Military High Command carried out a census of Jews in the military because of accusations of lack of patriotism among German Jews. The census showed the opposite, but was not made public, and thus allowed for an intensified anti-semitism, and a postwar belief of a Jewish stab-in-the-back responsible for Germany’s defeat.

Race improvement, eugenics. In the mid-nineteenth century Charles Darwin’s book, *On the Origin of Species*, led to two trends important for this survey. One was a focus on differences between groups of humans, or races. The second was what became known as social Darwinism – natural selection as a driver for the evolution of species, coupled with the concept of the survival of the fittest. It was then an easy step to move to the idea of superior and inferior races (=peoples), and a justification for colonialism as the “white man’s burden,” as a superior race, to bring civilization to colonial indigenes as inferior races. Another aspect of this type of thinking was that of improving the race, or, in the Nazi lexicon, racial hygiene.

A leader in these matters was Francis Galton (1822 – 1911), a cousin of Charles Darwin, and a polymath, with significant contributions in several fields. Galton was much occupied with the subject of what he called “Race Improvement,” in connection with which he invented the term “Eugenics.” Galton proposed breeding a superior race by voluntary marriages between those of superior capabilities. But Galton also proposed compulsory restraints on the propagation of “undesirables.” In his memoirs, published a few years before his death, he stated:

“I think that stern compulsion ought to be exercised to prevent the free propagation of the stock of those who are seriously afflicted by lunacy, feeble-mindedness, habitual criminality, and pauperism, but that is quite different from compulsory marriage. How to restrain ill-omened marriages is a question by itself, whether it should be effected by seclusion, or in other ways yet to be devised that are consistent with a humane and well-informed public opinion. I cannot doubt that our democracy will ultimately refuse consent to that liberty of propagating children which is now allowed to the undesirable classes, but the populace has yet to be taught the true state of these things. A democracy cannot endure unless it be composed of able citizens; therefore it must in self-defence withstand the free introduction of degenerate stock.” (Galton, 1909, p. 311)

“Man is gifted with pity and other kindly feelings; he has also the power of preventing many kinds of suffering. I conceive it to fall well within his province
to replace Natural Selection by other processes that are more merciful and not less effective.”

“This is precisely the aim of Eugenics. Its first object is to check the birth-rate of the Unfit, instead of allowing them to come into being, though doomed in large numbers to perish prematurely. The second object is the improvement of the race by furthering the productivity of the Fit by early marriages and healthful rearing of their children. Natural Selection rests upon excessive production and wholesale destruction; Eugenics on bringing no more individuals into the world than can be properly cared for, and those only of the best stock.” (Ibid., p. 323)

These attitudes led, in several countries, including Sweden and the United States, to statutory compulsory sterilization of certain classes of the population deemed undesirable. As one author put it (Hyatt, 1998): “Frenzied and over-zealous eugenicists in Sweden and the United States attempted to warn humanity of what they saw as its impending self-destruction in the early part of the twentieth century … “ In Sweden the concept of a Nordic race and enthusiasm for eugenics and the possibility of creating a model Swedish system, including forced sterilization for the mentally unfit, resulted in the creation of the first state institute for racial biology in 1921, and a eugenics institution in 1922. The idea of sterilization of the least advantaged members of society not only took root in Sweden, but led to an international trend for this (Id., p. 481). Germany followed with the establishment of the Berlin Institute for Racial Hygiene. From the 1930s to 1976 Swedish citizens could be involuntarily sterilized “on the grounds of having undesirable racial characteristics or otherwise "inferior" qualities, such as very poor eyesight, mental retardation, or an "unhealthy sexual appetite," as described by authorities at the time (Id. p. 477). In the United States the first sterilization bill was passed in 1907 in Indiana, and from then until 1970 nearly 100 statutes were adopted by various state legislatures (Id., p. 490). The Indiana statute “provided for the prevention of the procreation of ‘confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles and rapists.’” Over the periods in which these statutes were utilized some 63,000 people in Sweden, and 61,540 in the United States were sterilized.

Eugenics in Germany: Race improvement by elimination of mentally and physically impaired. The Eugenics movement in Germany prior to World War I was moderate, involving what amounted to encouragement of breeding by superior classes of the population. After the war one segment of the movement argued for the racial superiority of the Nordic or Germanic peoples (Friedlander, 2002, from which much of the following discussion is taken, see also Biesold,1999), a viewpoint which became prevalent under the Nazis after 1933. Proponents of this view included many eminent professors at distinguished universities and research institutions. The major targets in Germany were Jews and “Gypsies” (more correctly, the Sinti and Roma). The next targeted group was disabled people. A few months after assuming power, on July 14, 1933 a law, the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases, was promulgated allowing for the sterilization of people with a variety of physical and mental disabilities. An entire legal structure was set up to implement the law. Among the categories subject to sterilization were congenital feeblemindedness, hereditary blindness or deafness, severe hereditary
physical deformity or alcoholism. From the beginning of 1934, when the law took effect some 375,000 Germans were sterilized.

A 1935 amendment allowed for abortions designed to prevent the birth of children with disabilities. A month after the Nuremberg laws were passed in September 1935, which prohibited marriages or sexual contact between Jews and other Germans, a similar law, the Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German Nation, was enacted applying to the disabled. With the coming of war in 1939 the government began a program for the murder of disabled German nationals. These began with infants and young children who had been born with mental or physical disabilities, including those with congenital blindness, deafness or dumbness. The murders were carried out by professionals, physicians and nurses, and continued in the children’s wards throughout the war. Later the killing of disabled adults was added.

As the numbers increased killing centers equipped with gas chambers and crematoria were set up. Before cremation gold teeth were extracted from the corpses, as well as body organs for research. Subsequently the researchers began choosing victims to be murdered specifically for their brains. The methods, equipments and techniques developed in these murders were later exported to the death camps in Poland.

As a result of pressure from the Catholic and Protestant church leaders and relatives of the disabled, Hitler, on August 24, 1941, ordered the end of the gassing of the disabled. About 80,000 people had been murdered by then. The killings did not stop, however. Disabled in Poland and the Soviet Union were murdered without the need for consideration by any groups in the local population. In Germany, while the killing centers had been dismantled and sent to Poland, killings continued in selected state hospitals through starvation, drug overdoses or injections. As the war progressed killings became more arbitrary. In one state hospital those unable to work were added to the list of those to be murdered, as well as patients “who increased the workload of the nurses, were deafmute, sick, or disobedient.”

Thus, German professionals during the National Socialist period, followed one of the logical pathways open to the eugenic concepts of race improvement: simply murdering those who could be defined as deleterious to racial purity.

**Impact of colonialism: German Southwest Africa, 1904-1907: a small genocide.** In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European and American settlers were busy carving up the world into colonies, protectorates and spheres of influence without regard to the possible rights of indigenous peoples. Germany had come relatively late to this process, and was left with less desirable portions of the world’s land mass. Initially the process was driven by commercial interests, but then developed into colonization efforts by European surplus population, involving the replacement of indigenous populations. Today the process is being reversed. As the native population in Europe and the Americas declines, and as advances and treatment in medicine become more widespread, the surplus populations are now in Africa, Asia and the original inhabitants of the Americas. Thus Muslim populations in Europe are now demanding that their customs and
laws become accepted in the countries they have migrated to, Hispanic groups in the United States become a recognized force, and indigenous peoples in Latin America and elsewhere demand rights and privileges hitherto restricted to Europeans.

In Africa Germany gradually took possession of what was then called South West Africa, now the independent nation of Namibia. In the early 1880s the German presence in South West Africa consisted of a small number of traders, missionaries and prospectors (Bridgman, 1981; Drechsler, 1980; material here on the genocide of the Hereros is taken from these books). The German presence gradually increased, and by 1893 the German government considered it to be German land. Settlers came and took over lands which had been used by the Herero tribe (one of several groups in South West Africa) for grazing their cattle. Confiscation of Herero cattle led to a small war of a few weeks in 1896, resulting in the execution of several eastern Herero chiefs, and the disarming of their peoples. Gradually the Whites took over more and more of the Herero lands and cattle, until finally a full scale revolt broke out. The Hereros, armed often with antiquated weapons, but knowing the land and how to survive on it, were faced with much superior German artillery, machine guns and rifles, and increasing soldiery. In the end the Hereros lost their land, their possessions, and most of their population, the survivors were reduced to a quasi-slavery as forced laborers. Parenthetically we may note that Heinrich Goering, father of the German head of the Air Force in World War II, Herman Goering, was sent out to South West Africa as an Imperial Commissioner in 1885 (Bridgman, 1981, p. 41; Drechsler, 1980, p. 31, 60 n. 92).

For the purposes of this study, however, what is of interest are the tactics used and the attitudes shown by the Germans. To begin with, there was the attitude that the Hereros were an inferior race, subject to the “paternal care” of the Germans (Drechsler, p. 133). The indigenous people were deprived of all rights. German crimes against natives, who were described as “baboons,” were treated as minor incidents. Not a single case of rape, for example, was tried in a court before the uprising (Ibid.). Crimes against natives, even if brought into court were often dismissed because all the witnesses were natives, and the courts did not attach much credibility to their accounts (Ibid., p. 135). Germans who raised their voices against such treatment were ostracized, and, at least in one case, even tried, convicted and sentenced to hard labor for a period of years (Ibid., p. 136). Here we find the same approach to “inferior” races which reached fruition under the Nazis.

At the beginning of the uprising the attitude among colonial officials was that the rebellion needed to be put down with severity, that punishment needed to be very severe, and, as the commander of a German gunboat put it: “The only way to restore calm and confidence among the whites is to disarm the rebels completely and to confiscate all their land and cattle.” (Ibid., p. 145) A report to the Imperial Colonial Office by another official proposed that, after the uprising all surviving natives should be disarmed; anyone found with a rifle should be sentenced to death; anyone not in government service should be hired out to individual farmers, merchants, etc. to perform labor in return for food; all headmen to be executed and their families deported to another colony; and natives who were not free to be placed in closed settlements near their place of work and supervised by fellow-tribesmen who would provide the police with information. In short, the natives
were to be completely subjugated to the dominant German minority, to be deprived of all rights and possessions, and to be used as cheap, forced labor.

The acme of this German approach came with the arrival of General Lothar von Trotha to take charge of the German forces. His aim was to end the uprising as quickly as possible, and he believed that this, and future German control of the area, involved the total extermination of the Herero people. Von Trotha wrote: “I know enough tribes in Africa. They all have the same mentality insofar as they yield only to force. It was and remains my policy to apply this force by unmitigated terrorism and even cruelty. I shall destroy the rebellious tribes by shedding rivers of blood and money. Only thus will it be possible to sow the seeds of something new that will endure.” (Drechsler, p. 154) In an order dated 2 October 1904 General Trotha clearly stated his aims: “The Herero people will have to leave the country. Otherwise I shall force them to do so by means of guns. Within the German boundaries, every Herero, whether found armed or unarmed, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall not accept any more women and children. I shall drive them back to their people – otherwise I shall order shots to be fired at them.” This order was to be read to the troops. In this order Trotha began by stating that they were no longer considered to be German subjects – though they never had been. But by making this statement, and by assuming that the land was now a part of Germany, he was depriving them of any rights or protections whatsoever. The parallel with the Nazi laws depriving Jews of German citizenship is obvious.

Trotha’s procedure for the annihilation of the Herero people was straightforward. The men were to be shot by his military. His military forces would surround the Herero encampments, leaving only one direction with light forces which would allow a breakout by the Hereros to the desert region, where all the women and children would die of starvation and thirst. Pursuit of the Hereros in the desert would drive them away from any water holes. The tactics were successful – there were few survivors, and the Herero tribe, at least that part within the boundaries of South West Africa, was destroyed. Those few survivors were then put to forced labor. Because of missionary pressure Berlin ordered some moderation of Trotha’s policy by telling him to place the surviving Hereros in concentration camps.

The tactics used to subjugate and exterminate a group considered to be inferior, and an enemy, were also applied during World War II: first register, disarm and concentrate the group. Use them for forced labor with only subsistence means – put them into an environment such that they will die of starvation and thirst without medical attention. Shoot all the men so that in the natural course of events the group will die out. The war against the Hereros in South West Africa was thus a practice run for the genocide which came later.

In the 1930s, on visits to Bayreuth, noted the lack of memory of earlier genocides: “As he had already done in Mein Kampf, Hitler used to state in company that great political objectives – the kind that brought power and renown – could only be attained by force, one example being the slaughter of thousands of Saxons by Charlemagne. These days,
nobody gave a thought to all the genocidal atrocities perpetrated in the name of Christianity.” (W. Wagner, 1994, p. 46).

The Aryan mythology. Prior to the First World War a mythology of a great pre-historic Germanic civilization developed among a small group of mystics. This Aryan civilization was claimed to have conquered and ruled over the heartland of Europe and Asia. This civilization was, however, overcome by inferior races. What was needed was to re-establish this earlier superior race, to breed a new pure Aryan race, which was to resume the mastery of inferior races and to exterminate them, except for a portion which would serve as slave laborers. (For a description see Goodrick-Clarke, 1992). For the present purposes I note only the proposals, in about 1905, by one Lanz von Liebenfels (Goodricke-Clark, 1992, p. 97). Women were to be breeders of the new race, subject entirely to their Aryan husbands. The inferior races were to be exterminated by a program, among others, of sterilization and castration. Other methods included “deportation to Madagascar; enslavement; incineration as a sacrifice to God; and use as beasts of burden.” (Ibid., p. 97) Himmler apparently used these concepts as a blueprint for the elite SS. Recruitment into the SS was by supposedly racial characteristics: blond, blue-eyed men. Breeding camps were set up for these “Aryan” men and women to develop a pure race. The Madagascar plan for deportation of all European Jews to a reserve on that island had a short history in 1940. Decimation of “inferior” races by starvation and the elimination of medical care was planned and instituted. Forced, slave labor was used for the “inferior” races. And they were incinerated in the crematoria of the concentration camps.

Himmler also set up a research institute which included expeditions to far away places (Tibet, for example) to locate the presumed sites of the glorious Aryan civilization, and to define racial characteristics. One of these latter studies, during World War II, involved the selection of young healthy men and women carefully selected from concentration camps, measurements made on them while alive, then murdering them and removing the flesh so the skeletons and skulls could be sent to an appropriate museum. For a description of Himmler’s institute, the Ahenenerbe, see Pringle, 2006.

Demonization of the Jews. As noted earlier, anti-semitism had existed in Europe for centuries, perhaps millennia. Originally this was rationalized on religious bases. In the 1890s, however, the Russian Czarist police produced a fiction, deriving originally from an attack on Freemasons, entitled “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” This forgery purported to report a Jewish conspiracy for world dominion, and set the stage for what was seen as a life and death struggle against Jewry. Parenthetically I note that the Protocols, though discredited, maintains a vigorous life today. In 1960 I saw, for example, copies prominently displayed in bookstore windows in Mexico City and the Andean village of Huancayo in Peru. In recent years Arab potentates have handed out copies to visiting dignitaries as an accurate portrayal of Jewish intent. And only a year or two ago a multiple part TV series based on the Protocols was produced and shown throughout the Arab world. There was thus in pre-World War I Germany the seeds for demonization of the Jews.
The view of the Jews as an existential enemy of the Germans was apparently widespread among right-wing elements in upper class German society. Winifred Wagner, newly married to Siegfried Wagner, son of the composer Richard Wagner, describes her first Christmas at Bayreuth in 1915 (Hamann, 2005). An anti-semitic piece written by Hans von Wolzogen, the editor of the journal *Bayreuther Blätter*, based on a story of Grimm, “The Jew in the Thorn Patch,” was read. In the story “a rich Jew with a long quivering beard” is, in the happy ending, hanged, instead of the young servant who had tricked him. As Hamann puts it (*id.*, p. 25): “Read out in wartime and under the Christmas tree, the story was meant to inspire confidence that the supposed ‘war of survival’ against the Jews would end with the death of the adversary.”

In the search for a scapegoat for the German defeat in that war, and the harsh conditions imposed by the Allies, right wing groups, noting the prominence of Jews in the Weimar republic and in the communist uprisings throughout central and eastern Europe, delineated a Jewish conspiracy to rule the world. As Hamann (2005, p. 36), writing about the situation in Bavaria and the thinking in the Wagner household, writes:

“The ‘stab in the back legend’ began circulating in Bayreuth at this time, as it was throughout Germany. It asserted that the revolution, the ‘worm at the core’, the ‘red’ and ‘Jewish’ ‘enemies of the Fatherland’, had treacherously fallen upon the rear of a German army that was ‘still undefeated on the field of battle’, and for selfish and cowardly reasons had destroyed the German Reich in order to gain power themselves. Anti-Semitic propaganda made a great deal of capital out of the fact that many of the leaders of the revolution in Bavaria were Jews. It was at that time that Siegfried [Wagner] wrote to a Jewish woman acquaintance in Berlin: ‘It must be painful for all right-minded Jews to know that the people who have brought this misery of revolution upon Germany are members of your race.’ For Cosima [Wagner, Richard’s wife] , too, there was no room for doubt ‘that as always and everywhere it is the Semitic element that is responsible for agitation and subversion. My son jokes that Robespierre and Marat were really called Rubinstein and Marx.’ After all, hadn’t the revolution in Russia also been the work of Jews?”

Taken together with the concept of a superior Aryan race and an inferior Jewish race, these conceptions confirmed the idea of a war for the very existence of the Aryan race, and a consequent need to destroy, root and branch, the Jews. Hitler’s conclusion that this war was one for the very existence of the “Aryan” race became a certainty while he was in a hospital in Pasewalk, just after the armistice in November, 1918, recovering from a temporary blindness brought on by being gassed at the front. It was here that he concluded that for Germany to exist, the Jews had to go, and had a vision of himself as the liberator of the Germans (Amelan, 2009).

Hence, in the end, “the final solution” – the attempted physical extermination of the entire Jewish population in all areas under German control. The process had begun with Hitler’s becoming Chancellor of the state on 30 January 1933. As Friedelind Wagner, of a family, descendants of the composer Richard Wagner, which had been closely
associated with Hitler from the 1920s on, reported, at that moment “The only clear impression was that something terrible was about to happen to the Jews.” (F. Wagner, 1945, p. 82). On April 1 a boycott of Jewish businesses, enforced by armed members of the Nazi party began (Ibid. p. 84, 90) It was still possible to show opposition to such a policy then – a performance of Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* conducted by a Jew and with a Jew in a leading role, brought spontaneous applause and cheers from the audience (Ibid. p. 87).

Some at least, who felt protected by important Nazis, displayed an inconsistent attitude to Jews. Winifred Wagner, for example, a good friend of Hitler, “believed in a vague theoretical anti-semitism ,, but in her private life she never gave it a thought; she bought in Jewish shops as usual, went openly to her Jewish tailor for fittings and enjoyed poling fun at the local party leaders.” (Wagner, 1945, p. 154) Her daughter, Friedelind, on one occasion, in 1936, went to a Jewish doctor in Berlin for treatment while wearing her labor service uniform which included a swastika arm band (Ibid., p. 163). Over the years, however, such activities became more and more dangerous, especially in the later phases of the war, when it became obvious that Germany would lose the war. At that time the police became more sensitive to “defeatist” talk. Karlrobert Kreiten, for example, a young Dutch pianist, on a concert tour of Germany, stayed with an old friend of his mother’s in Berlin. In the course of a meal, only the two of them present, he made some provocative remarks about Hitler, and about the war being lost. His hostess reported him to the Gestapo, he was arrested, and executed on the night of September 7-8, 1943 (Müller, 1991, p. 147; Oleschinski, 1996, p. 31). For a study of the “process by which racial beliefs came to shape the outlook of the ordinary Germans on whose cooperation Nazi policies depended,” see Koonz (2003), from which this quotation is taken. For a study of how the picture of the demonic Jew was reinforced during World War II and the Holocaust, see Herf (2006).

Dan (1993, p. 61) has suggested that the perception of Jews as Satan’s people derived from Gnostic influences during the Middle Ages, and that this may have been one of the foundations of anti-semitism not only in the Medieval period but in the modern era. In the Gnostic ideology the creator of the world is an evil force, as opposed to the good god. Satan having then chosen, according to the Bible, the Jews as the chosen people, they are the servants of Satan. Dan then notes: “It would appear that by this one can explain the profound and prevalent belief in the Middle Ages about the satanic powers of the Jews, their excellence in sorcery, and the perception of their commandments as being meant to serve Satan. We do not have a detailed study of this, but it would appear that Gnosticism (in spite of the possibility that its source is Judaism) established one of the most stubborn and steadfast foundations for the violent anti-Semitism in Europe, both in the Middle Ages and in the modern era.” I add to this that one of the important influences on Aryan mythology, Lanz von Liebenfels, in his early years, had been a Cistercian monk, and may very well have imbibed the demonic perception of Jews from his religious studies. Lanz’s detailed knowledge of the Bible is evidenced in his book, *Theozoology*, (1905) full of copious biblical citations. The influence of a church background on the Nazi leadership, as far as I know, has never received study.
Conclusions for this section. The underlying character of the Nazi ideology may be simplified (perhaps over-simplified is a better term) in the following manner. There is a unique, separate race of Aryans, superior to all others. It is essential to maintain the purity of this race by eliminating all alien blood. Purity is of the essence. The inferior races, to the extent they are not needed as slave labor, are to be exterminated. This is especially the case of the Jews, who because of their conspiracy to establish world dominion, are an existential threat to the master race.

All of these concepts were not original with the Nazis, all existed prior to the First World War, and formed and defined Nazi thought. The Nazi contribution to the implementation of these ideas was the industrialization of mass murder.

Conclusions

The Holocaust was a unique event in world history. Other attempts at genocide or the destruction of particular sects or groups can be found in history. The German attempt at the total destruction of Jewry included all of the more classical methods of destruction. The Germans contribution to such attempts was to industrialize mass murder. The German genocide of the Jews is unique in one other aspect. If one looks at earlier historical illustrations they differ in that an individual could avoid physical destruction by accepting submission to the conqueror in one way or another. Thus a Jew tried by the Catholic Inquisition in Spain could continue to live by accepting Christianity. In the destruction of the Cathari (Albigensian) movement in France in medieval times an individual simply had to accept the dominant form of Christianity to avoid being killed. But under Nazi ideology the Jew was condemned simply on a racial basis – his heredity alone was sufficient to condemn him, there was no escape. Friedlander (1993, p. 82), citing Hannah Arendt’s statement that what distinguished Nazi crimes from others is that they tried to “determine who should and who should not inhabit the world,” argues this aspect as characterizing the uniqueness of the Nazi’s genocidal attempt.

As one examines the course of the genocide one can define certain stages. Initially there was the denial of any civil rights and the confiscation of Jewish property by one means or another, then the decimation of the population by allowing only sub-subsistence levels of food, medicines, housing and other means of survival, then physical destruction by shootings and the use of gas vans, then the industrialization of mass murder using poison gas in the death camps, and, finally, Jew-hunts, to catch those few who had escaped by hiding or by taking to the woods.

German policy and tactics began as soon as the Nazis obtained power in 1933. Any group seen as either “undesirable” or antithetical to the regime was immediately removed from positions of influence in the government, or incarcerated in concentration camps. Justifications for the murder of certain segment of the population, like the mentally ill, were developed, and the means for their elimination, such as vans pumping carbon monoxide as part of exhaust gases to their interiors, were experimented with. During the thirties reducing the means of subsistence of targeted groups by eliminating their ability to obtain work, by confiscating their possessions, by introducing a policy of neglect for
those in institutions, all of these were instituted. Also in the thirties, the general population was involved by creating boycotts of, for example, Jewish stores, and in Kristallnacht in 1938, by inciting the general population to the burning of synagogues, to the destruction and looting of Jewish apartments, and to the incarceration of Jews, first in prisons, then in concentration camps. Up to 1939 and the beginning of the war on September 1, efforts were made to keep secret the more drastic methods, such as the murder of the mentally ill. As the war progressed the number of men in the armed forces grew considerably. Wette (2006) gives a figure of almost 20 million men serving in the Wehrmacht in the years 1939-1945. Many of these served in the east and witnessed personally or were otherwise aware of the atrocities being committed. There seems to be no doubt that word got back to their families about what was going on, nor does it seem unreasonable to believe that a significant amount of looted Jewish property found their way back to families in Germany, despite the official policy that all such property belonged to the state, and was to be distributed to deserving soldiers after the war. The resulting consciousness of guilt is evidenced by the evasion of punishment of the perpetrators of the atrocities by the German governments after the war. Very few of these perpetrators were actually tried or found guilty. Some even achieved high positions in postwar administrations. Kurt Waldheim, an Austrian officer in the Balkans, privy to many atrocities, even achieved the position of United Nations Secretary General.

We can hope that in future such attempts shall be judged immoral, though events subsequent to World War II provide little optimism that this will occur soon. Nevertheless we must continue to study such events in the hope of uncovering hints of how we can prevent such actions in the future. What happened in Ostrow Lubelski, a small town in eastern Poland is a microcosm of German policy and tactics, and thus worth studying within the larger context.

Clearly we must develop ways of preventing such happenings in the future. Despite such occurrences as the attempted genocide in Rwanda, and the ongoing attempt in Darfur in the Sudan, we must somehow find hope. And perhaps, with Gertrud Brandt, writing from Ostrova on September 17, 1941, not long before the liquidation of the ghetto and, presumably, her death, to say: “Isn’t it priceless to know: that man is nevertheless good? And isn’t it even better to hold this beautiful thing before us than to moan? … In me is the strong certainty that this love which I receive, and will again give, that this goodness will be effective as a living force.” [my translation from the German]

There remains the question of whether we can understand (without defining the term) these events. I would like to present the following as a speculative hypothesis. There was a strong current of anti-Semitism in German culture. For example, two Nobel Prize winning German physicists, Lenard and Stark, were known for their anti-Semitic attitudes. Earlier, in the last half of the eighteenth century, another eminent German physicist, Zöllner, published a good many anti-Semitic writings. Within this general atmosphere there was a mystical branch. Goodrick-Clarke (1992) and Brennan (1974), and perhaps others, have written on the occult underpinnings of the ideology of the Nazi leadership. Hitler, Himmler and others were, prior to taking power, at least in touch with, perhaps members of, secret societies which were strongly anti-semitic, and espoused
Aryan racial superiority. In these groups Jews were seen as the basis for the destruction of the pure Aryan culture, and as demonic adversaries threatening the very existence of Germany. Thus the Jews, as existential adversaries, could only be dealt with by their total destruction. No remnant could be left, because history had shown that from any seed the Jews would rise again. But what was most interesting about these mystical groups were the proposals made to deal with this “Jewish question.” Lanz-Liebenfels, founder of a group called the Order of New Templars, called for the sterilization of “inferior races”, and for their elimination by starvation and forced labor. He also called for setting up breeding colonies to procreate the “master race.” All of these proposals were utilized or tested (on sterilization see, e.g., Lifton (1986), chapter 1).

People have a need to belong to a community. That need is often utilized by those seeking power by inventing a threat to the community, presenting that threat as one to the very existence of the community. Those outside the community are labeled as subhuman, and therefore not subject to any moral restraints. Thus the existential threat and the absence of restraint are used to justify genocide. The methods of carrying out genocide are ancient methods, updated with modern technology. It is the task of our and future generations develop methods and techniques to not allow such attitudes to take hold, to prevent power-seeking individuals from convincing society that such existential threats are real, if they are not, and, if they are, of finding methods of meeting them without genocidal extremes. Otherwise, mankind need not fear global warming or other such catastrophes – we will destroy ourselves by ourselves.

**Towns:**

Some basic information about the towns noted in the paper.

**Firlej:** Geographic Coordinates: 51°33’ N, 22°31’ E. In the province of Lublin, District of Lubartow. Prior to World War I part of the Russian Empire. Firlej is 21 miles N of Lublin, 6 miles NW of Lubartow, 15 miles from Ostrow Lubelski, 17 miles from Parczew, 22 miles from Majdanek, and 24 miles from Sosnowica. Present population of Firlej and surrounding villages, 6500. Firlej is a suburb of Lubartow.

**Kamionka:** In the province of Lublin, District of Lubartow. Present population of Kamionka and surrounding villages, 6700. Kamionka is a suburb of Lubartow.

**Lubartow:** Geographic coordinates, 51°28’ N, 22°37’ E.

**Ostrow Lubelski:** Geographic coordinates: 51°30’ N, 22°51’ E, 94 miles ESE of Warsaw. In the province of Lubelski, district of Lubartow.

**Parczew:** Geographic coordinates: 51°38’24” N, 22°53’59” E. In the province of Lubelskie. The district of Parczew presently has a population of 39,000. Sosnowica is part of the Parczew district. The Gmina of Parczew has a population of 16,000. The region is well known for its forests.
Wlodawa: Geographic coordinates: 51°33’ N, 23°31 E. In the province of Lubelskie, district of Wlodawa. The eastern border is also part of Poland’s border with Ukraine, at the Bug River, and near to the border of Belarus.

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