The Warsaw Ghetto and Pawiak

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The Pawiak NCOs and the Jews

The prelude to the extermination of the Jews were the ghettos the Germans created in all the larger Polish towns. So a ghetto also came into being in Warsaw, where, in a relatively small area, around half a million Jews were thrust; they lived under horrendous conditions: destitution, poverty, constant threat of death.

In the center of the ghetto lay the Gestapo’s prison – Pawiak.

The Pawiak guards often went into the ghetto, in order, as they said, to ‘entertain and amuse’ themselves with the Jews. On the street, they went up to those who were chatting and walking by, beat them with cowhides, spat at them, kicked them or shot them, pleased at the sight of the obvious manifestations of fear, the screams, the fallings over or the running away. They even often took photos of their ‘achievements’. The guards Bleifuss, Wilhelm Wolf, and then Burkl had several such photos. For example, one photo I saw shows several prostrate Jews whom Bleifuss is kicking, at the side, a pistol in his hand, stands Wolf laughing like mad.

In March 1942, the Warsaw Gestapo made a terror attack at night on the ghetto. For their own personal pleasure, several of our guards joined them, among others, Burkl, who later bragged that he himself had shot to death sixteen Jews. Apartments were broken into, entire Jewish families murdered. The starting point for the Gestapo was the prison on Pawiak.

Later, on account of a spreading epidemic, the Pawiak guards were not permitted to roam around the ghetto, and so now they arranged for themselves those ‘games’ with the Jews only in Pawiak.

At Easter in 1942, Burkl suddenly waxed sentimental. He called together the Jewish policemen and ordered them to bring music to Pawiak. Shortly thereafter several musicians were dragged in from various parts of the ghetto and a concert was arranged. Burkl wearing a white jacket, sprawled out on an arm-chair in front of the prison, among the guards, was enraptured and thrilled. This time, when the concert ended, he allowed everyone to leave quietly. At other times similar concerts ended tragically for the performers.

From March 1942, the ‘games’ with the Jews were larger scale, and were repeated more and more often.

Usually, a terrified group of Jews, consisting mainly of bearded, old, sick people, was brought in from the ghetto. They were ordered to run, and when their strength failed them, the German and Ukrainian guards ‘helped’ them by chasing them on with sticks, cowhides and kicking them all over. They often preyed like beasts on a victim who fell and could not get up.

After that, the Jews were instructed to frog jump, which brought with it new slurs and new outbursts of idiotic pleasure from the guards. Then followed a game: boxing in pairs. Laughing, the guards ‘taught’ them the appropriate ways in which blows should be
given to jaws, or stomach, and which ones were not permissible. I probably don’t need to add how awful those who were boxing looked.

Finally, the exhausted and barely alive were made to dance and to sing in Yiddish.

Once, when one of the Jews was dancing too slowly, he was flogged and shot to death by Burkl. After this event, Burkl wrote a report to his superiors, saying that at the time he was patrolling the streets near the prison, he had stopped a suspicious Jew who was contacting prisoners. At the time his identity was being recorded, the man had pulled out a big shoemaker’s knife. So, in ‘defense’ of his own life, he, Burkl, had used a weapon, turning the criminal into a corpse on the spot. Although these were times in which the ghettos and Jews were not yet openly liquidated, it could happen without being reported.

The highlight of these games was the shaving with a machine of hairy faces and heads. To this end, a prisoner-barber was called in from the area who shaved half a beard, half a moustache, and the hair off one half of the head off all the Jews, leaving the rest untouched. The shaved part of the face and head was very precisely smeared with the black ink used to mark the owners name on underwear. In this fashion, as the guards said, the maltreated were made into half-Jews and half-Negros. Those painted were tied up in pairs with wire, the shaved parts of the heads in the middle. Having accomplished all of this, the prison gate was opened and they threw them back into the ghetto, shooting at them from behind.

The guards sneered with particular pleasure at converts, saying that a Jew, even a baptized one, would always be a Jew, and for that reason they often organized for themselves ‘baptisms’ for the Jews. These games most frequently took place by the prison’s entry gate where the guard Albrecht Muller, along with Thomas Wyppenbeck, Karl Brockmann, and others were on duty. The Jew released from the prison, or captured in the ghetto, was asked whether he was a Jew. After receiving an affirmative answer, the Jew was ‘baptized’. The German guard, pretending to be praying, mumbled through his nose incomprehensively, swore up a blue streak, and ruffled the victim’s hair. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian guard brought several buckets of water. After ‘prayers’ the entire bucket of water was thrown on the victim’s head. A Jew who covered himself was kicked and thrashed with canes. If he had a beard, he had to experience additional torture, it was set on fire and putting out the burning hair was not allowed. Such a ‘baptized’ and completely abused Jew was thrown with great pomp out of the prison gate.

By the prison gate where the German guard Albusch Muller was on patrol stood three cages of trained, fierce, wolfhounds which brought into the above-mentioned’s mind, an idea for new entertainment. He pushed Jews who, in his words, were loitering around, into one of the cages and watched with pleasure as the terrified man struggled with the animal which was ripping his flesh.

Opposite the prison stood Jewish houses. There were often occasions when Jews who were looking out of the window or sitting on the balcony were shot. Burkl, Schuhmaker, Wyppenbeck and Hopfner did so with great skill. I, myself, witnessed Burkl shooting his gun at a Jewish woman on a balcony whose family, screaming loudly, pulled back into their room.

The German guards were particularly entertained by Jerzy Bombel, imprisoned in Pawiak for more than two years, a figure the prisoners and the guards knew well.

When he arrived in Pawiak, the German guard, looking him in the face, asked:
‘Bist du Jude?’
‘Nein! Ich bin Pole!’ he replied.
For this he got a thorough beating. From that point on he was often asked if he
was a Jew.

In Pawiak, he fulfilled the function of shoeblack and translator on section VII. He
manifested such skill in cleaning shoes, performed the job so magnificently, that the
guards utterly swamped him with work, even bringing in shoes of the Gestapo
Kommendant himself.

Everyday, before noon Bombel came to the guards’ quarters and to the
chancellery in order to clean their shoes. On entering, he reported he was
‘Schuchputzer’. Laughing, the guards always asked him:
‘Bombel! Bist du Jude?’
‘Jawohl!’ he’d reply earnestly, standing straight.
‘Gut, Bombel!’

At this point, the cleaning of shoes began. When he was bent over his work, the
guards came up and hit him on his lower back. Bombel would turn around with a pained
expression, and the Germans grinned innocently, as though nothing had happened. They
often shot their guns by his head or between his legs, delighting at his fear. So, also, they
set the wolfhound on him, shouting:
‘Rolfi! Jude!’

Attacked by the dog, Bombel, screaming, ran off like mad, to the great delight of
the guards.

They often ordered him to squat and count to a hundred, laughing when he got
sweaty and his legs shook. So, too, another time they ordered him to run, shooting at him
as he did so in order to ‘inspire’ him.

Guard Hopfner’s ‘Zug’ organized a special game with Bombel.

They once called him into the chancellery, and the guard, Hopfner, holding in his
hand some piece of paper, informed him that he had been sentenced, and that sentence
had to be fulfilled.

‘Was fur ein Urteil habe ich?’ Bombel asked.
‘Bombel du wirst erschossen!’

Bombel looked each of them in the face to see whether they were joking. All of
them, however, had serious expressions. They ordered him to stand by the wall.
Trembling, Bombel went to the appointed place and waited. Zugfuhrer Hopfner took out
his gun, aimed at his head, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot and the scream of Bombel rang out. At that same moment
the guard standing, at that time to the side threw in his face a ball of hard paper soaked in
red ink. The guards roared with pleasure when Bombel rubbing his face with his hand –
glanced down at his ‘bloodied’ hand and started to scream in terror.

The guards yelled:
‘Bombel ist erschossen!’

Sick and shaking with fear, Bombel returned to his cell. Sat in a corner of it and
wept, saying that he would not survive all of this.

That change then resulted in them playing with toy pistols like kids. When
Bombel returned from cleaning shoes, the guards were lurking in the corridor, and started
shooting at him from all sides. Bombel stood petrified, then ran away. They started to
chase him screaming and, constantly shooting. In addition to this, the wolfhound Rolf also often took part in this ‘game.’ After this ‘game’ his calves were injured and his face had been burned.

Poor Bombel had assumed that by doing his job – cleaning shoes -- carefully and precisely he would be indispensable and would save his own life. He was not, however, spared. On 24 April, 1943 he was sent to Treblinka with a transport of Jews. As I later learnt, he escaped from the train. I doubt, however, that he managed to survive that enormous campaign against the Jews.

The Liquidation of the Ghetto

All of this was just a prelude to the actual emptying of the Warsaw ghetto, which took place from the 22nd of July until the 12th of September, 1942. This action was headed, by among others, Untersturmführer SS Brandt, the director of the Jewish Warsaw Gestapo, having under his disposition a whole staff of assistants, like Mende, Birkholz, Ruhrenschop and others. In this action, apart from the Gestapo, the Schutzpolizei and Ukrainian collaborators, took part, the help of the uniformed Jewish police was also made use of.

The contingent of people to be removed from the population was, at first, 10,000 a day, and later, 14,000. The Jewish community was to provide that number of people. Many people committed suicide, among others on the day of 24 April 1942, Adam Czerniakow, the head of the Jewish community, took his own life.

On the streets of the ghetto lay heaps of emaciated bodies. Countless numbers of victims were buried in the cemetery, finally, when there was no longer any room there, the corpses were burned along with the buildings or on piles in particular places.

Victims were captured in houses and on the streets and sent to the Umschlagplatz, to the loading station which was on Stawki.

The Germans announced to the Jews that they were taking them as colonists and that in those places they would be able to work peacefully and live freely. The trains, however, went to extermination camps, to Treblinka or Majdanek, where the victims were robbed and then gassed.

After this action it was calm for a while. The ghetto area grew smaller, at the end of March, 1943, there remained alive around 60,000 inhabitants.

On the day of 19 April, 1943—the day of the beginning of Holy Week, the armies of the Waffen-SS under the direction of the police chief of the Warsaw district, SS general Jürgen Stroop, came into the ghetto in order to carry out its complete destruction. The Jewish Combat Organization grabbed weapons. Despite the heroic endeavour, the insurgents succumbed to the Hitlerites great force. At the time of the ongoing battles, German divisions armed with machine guns, fire-arms and grenades surrounded buildings and dragged out of cellars the men, women and children who were hiding there. Those who came out alive, those not killed on the spot, were transported to extermination camps.

In the event that some of the half-million Jews might be hiding somewhere in there, the ghetto buildings were systematically burned down. Above the ghetto rose trails of dark smoke and flames of fire.
At three in the afternoon, Unterscharführer Brandt came to the prison accompanied by the Gestapo and the Schutzpolizei, bringing with him 61 Jews in navy-blue hats—collaborators in the ghetto police as well as two women. The policemen were ordered to stand in two rows. Then, an order was given out to the divisions that none of the prisoners should roam around the prison.

A moment later, the Gestapo and the Ukrainians brought the policemen out one by one, and finished them off in the buildings by 25 and 27 Dzielna Street by shooting them in the back of the head.

The first were shot in the shop at 25, and the remainder at the gates and apartments of both houses. When the policemen realized they were in a hopeless situation and started to whisper among themselves, they were ordered to lie face-down on the ground and stay silent. Two of the armed Schutzpolizei walked among them and stood guard. At the very end, the two women were shot.

After this execution two houses opposite the prison were burned down. The fire erased all traces of the crime.

The ghetto was completely destroyed. In the place where sometimes life had pulsed, there remained only burned, smashed, walls, scattered bricks, piles of rubble and, here and there, protruding cast iron.

From then the ruins of the ghetto were the place of execution of the prisoners of Pawiak.

**The last victims**

After the elimination of the Jewish quarter a period began of an diligent search for Jews on the Aryan side. A whole contingent of Jewish and Polish stool pigeons and flunkies roamed around town in service of the Gestapo, like Lubraniecki and others who recognized and gave into the hands of the police the last of the survivors.

And in the burned down ghetto, searches continued, and from time to time in some deep cellar or bunker were found emaciated, worn out and now half indifferent victims.

I remember that in the middle of December, 1943, Helena Szyldkret was brought in, a terribly thin, ragged sixteen year-old Jewish girl who, by some miracle, had hidden herself in the ruins, feeding herself on kasza, various scraps and water. She ate all of this raw, afraid to light a fire and to move further away lest she fall into German hands. She survived for nine months in these dreadful conditions, until, by chance, she was discovered in a cellar and shot to death.

At the end of 1943, in one of the gardens by Grojecka Street a bunker-apartment was discovered under the glass works, consisting of a room, kitchen and bathroom. In this place several Jewish families were hiding, 36 people in all. They were all arrested and brought to Pawiak, and then shot to death in the ghetto. Two Poles were also arrested for hiding these Jews, a gardener and his assistant who met up with the same fate.

The wealthier Jewish population in the Warsaw area gladly sought help at the Hotel Polski on Długa Street. A number of Jewish families who had foreign passports lived there, and on top of that, all of those who wanted, for money, to get a passport from some non-European country went there. A passport like that could be gotten at a price of 100 to 500 dollars.
The Gestapo was fully aware of such transactions, since they were the organizers of the whole affair, and, therefore, several times raids were carried out here. On 13 July 1943 the hotel was surrounded and all of those inside, amounting to 424 people were arrested and taken to Pawiak.

Here, in the prison yard, under the direction of Untersturmführer SS Brandt, a precise segregation of the arrested started. Personal documents and passports were checked, and in the end 262 people were found not to have valid passports. These people were taken in groups to section VII, where they underwent a thorough search, all their valuables and money were taken away, and then they were put in the cells of section VIII. The guards did remarkably well out of this. Among those arrested were Jewish families deluding themselves that they could acquire an American passport and along with it the right to live in a camp for internees.

That group, in which there were many women and children, was dealt with quickly. On 15 April, 1943, they were taken out in small groups to a house at 27 Dzielna Street and there, shot to death.

The rest, that means 162 people, were then sent to the women’s department for interned foreigners, and already on 17 April transported out to the extermination camp in Bergen.

As I later got wind of it, a short while later a selection took place there, too, and all the foreign Jews who did not have Palestinian passports were sent to the concentration camp in Auschwitz and finished off there. And so, of those 424 arrested people, very few indeed managed to stay alive.

The Jews in Pawiak were particularly harassed. In the first period, they were placed in the same sections as other prisoners. After the SS had taken up office in November, 1940, they were isolated, moved to a large cell on section V which, before the war, had been the place of prayer for Jewish prisoners. The following year, they were moved into the cellar and placed into a large, damp, perpetually overcrowded cell. From there they were taken to hard labor.

The Jews working in prison workshops were first located in neighboring quarters, and then in two large cells in Section IV.

From the beginning of 1943 right to the end, Jews captured in town were brought to Pawiak and located in the so-called Umsiedlungs-Judenzelle on section VIII. This was a Jewish death cell. Here, they were thoroughly searched, everything of any value whatsoever was taken away; those placed in the above-mentioned cell were noted down solely with a scream as + (plus). These were nameless prisoners. They remained in Pawiak for a very short time – one or two days, if, however, the group was sizable, it was taken by car to the ghetto, murdered there, and the corpses burnt.

Initially, the execution of these victims was undertaken by the Schutzpolizei, and then by SS-men and the Ukrainians in Pawiak under the direction of the older guard Alberts. The Schutzpolizei oversaw the burning of the corpses, using to this end young Jews.

Jews were also searched for among the newly arrived prisoners. There were many occasions when a prisoner was ordered to take off the lower part of his clothing in order to check whether he had been circumcised. That same task was undertaken by, among others, the doctor of the ambulance convoy who examined each newcomer. The
ambulance convoy who, to the degree they were able, endeavored to hide such cases, had a hard nut to crack since very often a German guard assisted at these examinations. When the Germans found someone who was circumcised, the guard brought a card with the man’s name on it to the prison office in order to give inform the officials of this fact. This amounted to a death sentence. The case, however, was not as yet completely sealed, because the prisoner fulfilling the function of head clerk snatched and destroyed such cards, thus saving the lives of many people.

When, however, despite everything, a Jew was discovered by the Gestapo, he was very quickly, and craftily, interrogated, and then assigned to the Umsiedlungs-Judenzelle as + (plus) to be done in. I must mention, that arrested Jews were sent to concentration camps only until the end of 1942, after that they were taken care of on the spot, in the ghetto.

In the prison’s large tailoring and shoemaking workshops, a number of Jewish experts were used. Among them, worked 30 Jewish craftsmen, so called volunteers, since they were not prisoners, but people who had voluntarily reported for work, after which, in the evening, they returned home.

For what they did, they only received a small amount of food from the prison pot. Their fate was not to be envied. Everyday, they came from the Ghetto to Pawiak, everyday when they said goodbye to those closest to them, they did not know whether they would return to them again.

In the group of those tailors from freedom were Szymon Borenstajn, Szymon Hochman, Julek Haber and others. Under threat of their lives they brought to Pawiak, news, medicines, cigarettes, and even conspiratorial papers. They also smuggled notes from the arrested and their families.

The conveying of news happened in various ways – by telephone, by messengers, by throwing a card with information on it over the ghetto wall where, on the Aryan side, friends were waiting. News was also forwarded by Jews who went out to work on the Aryan side. That state of affairs went on for quite some time.

When on 22 April, 1942, the Germans began to liquidate the ghetto, the tailors from freedom were kept permanently in Pawiak. After that, connections with the ghetto were lost. In the fall of 1942 those Jews were shot at the second gate by Lubecka Street. The Schutzpolizei came for them to the prison, ordered them to strip themselves naked, and then to lie down in the truck in layers, one on top of another. That is how they were taken to the place of execution.

The Germans very shortly started to complain about the shortage of craftsmen, and, therefore, they were instructed not to shoot the arrested Jewish tailors and shoemakers but to use them in prison workshops. Despite this, however, when a lot of working Jews had been gathered, on the 14 July, 1944, NCO Fruhwirth again began a new ‘purge’ he shot 42 of the, in his opinion, ‘dispensable’ Jews.

Finally, altogether 80 Jewish prisoners worked as tailors, shoe-smiths, locksmiths, and in various other trades, and 15 Jewish women worked in the underwear factory. The Germans not wanting to lose good tradesmen, these were spared at the time of the liquidation of Pawiak on 30 July, 1944 and – temporarily placed in the grounds of the concentration camp in the ghetto by Gesia Street. During the Warsaw Uprising, on 5 August 1944, a group of soldiers from the ‘Zoska’ battalion burst into the grounds of the
camp, killed the guards and freed the Jewish prisoners. Not all of them, however, lived to enjoy freedom, since a lot of them perished during the Uprising.

Translated from the Polish by Alicia Nitecki