

Palmnicken and further questions

The reports and accounts of the massacre in Palmnicken, East Prussia, at the end of January 1945, in which approximately 3,000 Jews were killed, describe the gruesome end of a chapter of Jewish forced labor in East Prussia. The victims included mainly Polish Jewish women, but also Jews and Jewish women from Hungary, Germany, Latvia and Lithuania. However, if one takes the trouble, beyond the synopsis of research literature and reports, to review survivors' accounts before the Jewish Historical Commission (Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna) between 1944-1947 (now accessible at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw under: Records Group 301), further reports located in the Stutthof Museum in Sztutowo, and reviewing corresponding interviews from the Visual History Archive of the Shoa Foundation (<https://vhaonline.usc.edu/>), a number of further questions or research desiderata finally emerge. They undoubtedly correlate with the conclusion of Shmuel Krakowski, the historian of Yad Vashem, who published the first major essay on this topic in 1994 under the title Massacre of Jewish Prisoners on the Samland Peninsula. In it Krakowski sums up, "It is quite clear that the documentation in our possession is quite incomplete. Further research and additional sources are vital in order to bring to light all aspects of the massacre on the Samland Peninsula." (Krakowski 1994: 351).

Briefly, it should be noted that Martin Bergau, a contemporary witness from Palmnicken, published a book in 2006 after his account of his experience, which appeared in 1994 (Bergau 1994), in which he summarized collected memoirs of the former German inhabitants as well as reports of some survivors (Bergau 2006). The historian Andreas Kossert, who assisted him in this publication, had shortly before published an essay of his own in which, expanded by reports from the Ludwigsburg archive, he had embedded the events in the context of the region. (Kossert 2004). In these two publications, the focus was primarily on the crime in Palmnicken itself. However, it seems necessary to broaden the focus of the research, to ask new questions and to obtain additional sources.

On the one hand, the importance of Königsberg and East Prussia as a site of forced labor (and Jewish forced labor), to which prisoners of war and recruited civilians were conscripted, has received too little attention so far, for which numerous reasons could also be cited, but these will not be discussed here. The places of forced labor in the city of Königsberg probably included the "gypsy camp" in Königsberg at Contiener Weg and the labor camp "Bertha" on Berliner Straße just around the corner, the Schichau shipyard, the Steinfurt wagon factory, which had been partially converted into a munitions factory, and other places not documented so far. The living conditions of the forced laborers should also be taken into account. According to contemporary witnesses, Jewish forced laborers were quartered in barracks on the grounds of the demolished Lindenstraße synagogue, for example (Drober 2015: 39). In addition, the region developed into a gathering place for people from many different countries. For example, Michael Wieck reported Russian, Polish, and French laborers working with him in the soap factory (Wieck 1989: 137) and Sheva Kopolovitz mentioned Belgian guards in the labor camp, but also Ukrainian guards (YVA: O.33 / 8569).

Secondly, the process of evacuation from the individual camps subcamps of the Stutthof concentration camp, from Steindorf near Heiligenbeil (today Mamonowo), Jesau (Juschny), Seerappen (Ljublino) and Gerdauen (Zheleznodorozhnyj) and from Schippenbeil (Sępopol) has not been sufficiently documented and analyzed so far. Reports and interviews such as those

by Ruth Widder or Lucie Cytryn-Bialer show that at this stage prisoners fled or developed strategies to leave the prisoner column (VHA: 3485 and Cytryn-Bialer 1998: 42ff, respectively). Likewise, there seem to have been possibilities to leave the group in Königsberg, as Magdolna Kögel reports (VHA: 18391). Apparently there was little supervision in Königsberg in some of the properties where the prisoners were housed, as Sheva Kopolevitz recalls (YVA O.33 / 8569). The elaboration of escape strategies depended very much on the momentary physical condition, coincidences and personal encounters. Kögel and Widder survived in Königsberg, each with a fake identity. Chance encounters and assistance from French and Italian forced laborers played an important role in such schemes. Cytryn-Bialer and the women accompanying her met Polish prisoners of war who offered them shelter. Since too little documentation is available on the deployment of forced laborers in the Königsberg area, localization and classification are difficult. It is clear from the reports that the presence of many Polish forced laborers in the Königsberg area provided an opportunity for the Jewish prisoners to declare themselves as belonging to them as well, since many of the young women came from Lodz or Cracow. On the other hand, Poles in particular reacted dismissively to Jews, and prisoners were often warned by third parties not to identify themselves as Jews to the Polish forced laborers, which is mentioned in many reports.

Thirdly, the locations of the prisoners' temporary quarters in January 1945 prior to the death march to Palmnicken have not been fully clarified: these include the Steinfurt wagon factory on what was then Arendt Street (today: ul. Wagonstroitel'naja), the former twine factory on what was then Contiener Weg / Berliner Straße (today: ul. Transportnaja/ ul. Suworowa), and barracks that have not yet been defined.

Fourth, according to numerous reports, on the occasion of the concentration of Jewish prisoners in Königsberg, there were many deaths, as in the twine factory (VHA: 18391) Also Sasha Friedenstein, who had to work in a munitions factory in Königsberg, had terrible memories of piles of corpses in Königsberg (VHA: 55269). Before the death march to Palmnicken was assembled, it is said that there were still killings on the premises of the Steinfurth Works, where, among others, those who were not able to march were shot.

Presumably, the locations of these burials, mass graves of Jewish victims, can no longer be elucidated. It can also be assumed that several mass graves were laid out along the road from Königsberg to Palmnicken. In the spring of 1945, at the instigation of investigation commissions of the Red Army, protocols were drawn up on the finding and exhumation of mass graves in the Königsberg-Palmnicken area. With the help of these documents it should be possible even today to locate sites of mass graves.

Fifth, the question of the names of the victims is raised again and again today. On the one hand, it is assumed that there were exact lists of persons in the prisoner groups, but unfortunately this is not the case. According to current knowledge, the last lists of persons exist from the time before the evacuation of the subcamps. Already on the transport to Königsberg there were numerous casualties as well as during the stay in the city. It cannot be stated with certainty which persons set out on the death march. In addition, the reports of contemporary witnesses hardly contain any names. At most, relatives such as sisters, sisters-in-law, cousins or a close friend are mentioned by name. Even when interviewers ask for names, there are hardly any answers. This is not due to forgetfulness, but above all to the circumstances of the time, in which everyone had to concentrate on their own survival. For example, the survivor Sasha Friedenstein tells that he spent more than 24 hours in a hiding place in Palmnicken with two other men, but did not know their names (VHA: 55269). Quite obviously, such information had no relevance in these situations. Ruth Widder, who left the group on the march from Schippenbeil to Königsberg with four other young women who were hiding together in a prisoner-of-war camp in a barrack with typhus patients, did not know any

more about these fated companions. She could only say that they spoke Yiddish among themselves, while she spoke German (VHA: 3485).

As a result, few names of victims can be gleaned from survivors' accounts. Thus, only one last source remains: the exhumation reports of the Red Army. In a first exhumation report of April 17, 1945, it says about the find in a mass grave near Germau: " On the left sleeves of the clothing of each body was a number and a six-pointed star. All the numbers, with the exception of one - 82113 - had been erased and could not be deciphered." This mentioned number on the prisoners' clothing was the camp number from Stutthof. In addition, most of the female prisoners wore a tattooed number on the inside of their forearm, which they had received at Auschwitz. According to contemporary witness Magdolna Kögel, the women from the Hungarian contingent did not possess such a tattoo, as they had previously been imprisoned in Birkenau. (VHA: 18391). On the basis of the report, the question arises as to who, and for what interest, had attempted to erase the camp numbers? The number can be traced back in the Stutthof prisoner file to Gitla Fogelmann from Łódź, born August 12, 1919. (<https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/>) A comparison with the Shoah name database (<https://yvng.yadvashem.org/>) results in multiple mentions of a presumably murdered Gitla Fogelmann from Łódź, but with the birth year 1914. These differences in the age information could be due to a clerical error or deliberate misstatement. It cannot be determined with one hundred percent certainty whether Gitla Fogelmann was actually shot before Germau. On the other hand, it is quite possible that exhumation reports, which have not been known so far, contain details through which the identities of victims can be determined in retrospect.

Sixthly, it is necessary to read the existing reports of different provenance side by side and subject them to a common analysis. For example, Krakowski reports on the account of a survivor Yehezkiel Vitkin, who testified to the Red Army (YVA M-1/E-698/587). He is one of the few persons from whom only one statement is available and who apparently did not give an interview later. This person could be the master weaver Chatzel Witkin, who came from Kaunas, was registered in the Stutthof concentration camp under number 72579, and was recorded as a DP in Germany in 1946, noting his desire to emigrate to Palestine.

Kossert is the first historian to mention in his text the survivor Walter Falkenstein, who took part in the death march but then managed to hide with Germans. (Kossert 2004:18). He had discovered Falkenstein's statements in the Ludwigsburg files (BA. Außenstelle LU, AR-Z 299/1959). Bergau, on the other hand, included in his volume a recollection by a grandson of a German forestry worker that discusses the rescue of two male Jews, one German and one Latvian or Lithuanian (Bergau 2006: 113-117). It can be assumed that these two men were Falkenstein and Vitkin/Witkin.

The analysis of the reports of Falkenstein and Vitkin/Witkin could possibly also shed light on whether one of the two was in hiding together with the already above mentioned Sasha Friedenstein, i.e. was one of the men with whom Friedenstein had spent at least one day and night without knowing a name.

In addition, testimonies and memories, especially those of survivors, were added in later years. For example, the memoirs of the survivor of the massacre, Sheva Kopolevitz (née Levi), were only received by Yad Vashem in 2011.

It can be said with certainty that a synopsis of documents, reports and interviews from the various archives will bring further insights to light.

Addressing all the questions mentioned in this brief outline can help to complete the knowledge of the history of the Holocaust and forced labor in the region and create other forms of commemoration of the victims.

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Yad Vashem Archives O.33 / 8569 SHEVA KOPOLEVITZ.