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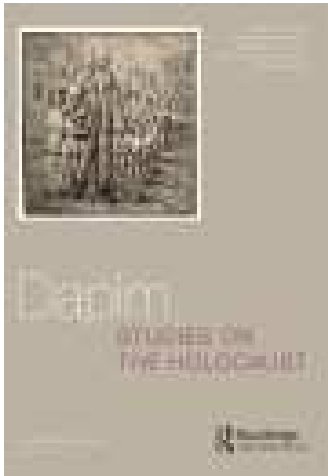
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Labor and Extermination: The Labor Camp at the Dęblin-Irena Airfield Puławy County, Lublin Province, Poland – 1942–1944

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This article describes in detail the labor camp at the Dęblin-Irena airfield located in the Puławy County, part of the western region of Lublin province in Eastern Poland, from 1942 to 1944. This labor camp, which was actually a family camp that operated until the end of the German occupation in July 1944, stands out among all the labor camps located in this district, which were dismantled by November 1943. The singular history of this camp among the labor camps in the region, and perhaps in occupied Poland as a whole, presents an interesting test case of the general phenomenon of forced labor imposed on the Jews, and of the reciprocal relations that could evolve between the Jews and their persecutors. This article examines the options and limits of response on the part of the Jews, the factors that impacted them, and the manner in which these relations and the changing conditions affected the Jews' prospects of survival. In seeking to answer these questions, I first provide a brief historical introduction that demonstrates the link between Jewish forced labor and the extermination of Jews in Puławy County and in the town of Dęblin-Irena in particular. Proceeding from these contexts, I focus on the inner lives of the residents of the Dęblin-Irena airfield camp, tracing their everyday lives, the internal structure of the camp, its social fabric and internal hierarchy, the living conditions that pertained therein and its educational and religious activity, among others. These spheres are examined through testimonies, memoirs, remembrance books, diaries and letters in an endeavor to understand how hundreds of Jews in this camp survived, whereas a mere handful survived the other labor camps in the district.

Keywords: Holocaust; Jewish labor camps; Dęblin-Irena; airfield; Luftwaffe

Historical introduction

Forced labor vis-à-vis extermination in Puławy County

With the establishment of the Generalgouvernement headed by Dr Hans Frank in the occupied Polish territory on 26 October 1939, Poland's lands were divided into four administrative provinces: Warsaw, Radom, Cracow and Lublin. The province of Lublin was subdivided into 10 districts that constituted separate administrative units. Among these was the Puławy district, which lay in the western part of the province and covered an area of 2200 square kilometers. On the eve of the war some 26,000 Jews lived in the county, in 14 towns, the largest of which were Puławy (3500 Jews, comprising approximately 30% of the population), Opole (4000 Jews, approximately two-thirds of the population) and Dęblin-Irena (3300 Jews, constituting 67% of the population).¹

¹The following towns were also included in the district: Baranów nad Wieprz, Wąwolnica, Józefów nad Wisłą, Łysobyk, Michów, Markuszów, Nałęczów, Kazimierz Dolny, Końskowola, Kurów and Ryki. See

Immediately following the German occupation, the Jews who resided in the county's towns were coerced into working by army and Schutzstaffel (SS) units. This was generally effected through brutal kidnappings on the streets and physical violence. The *Judenrats*, which began to operate at that time as assistance committees, engaged with the Germans in an attempt to put an end to the random kidnaping of Jews in the streets and to regulate the forced labor, which took the form of odd jobs such as the cleaning of streets and buildings, drawing water from wells, various excavation jobs, and the removal of rubble. In general, they had no productive function and instead constituted a means by which to do moral and physical harm to Jews. Subsequently, once the civil administration was set up and Frank issued an edict on October 26 whereby all Jews aged between 16 and 60 were expected to participate in forced labor, the *Judenrats* provided forced laborers who undertook various tasks in the towns of the district. The poorest Jews were compelled by the *Judenrats* to undertake the hardest labor, whereas people with means secured exemptions from working in return for payment.²

Between 1940 and 1942, the Jewish forced laborers were generally employed on various projects and in determined places of work. During these years, the SS authorities and the civil administration competed for control over Jewish forced labor in Puławy County as well as in Lublin province and the entire Generalgouvernement, given that it was a source of economic profit, power and prestige. This competition was manifested in the different, and at times conflicting, instructions received by the *Judenrats* in towns throughout Puławy County from the local SS command, on the one hand, and from the local civil authorities, on the other.³ From July 1940 until March 1942, the employment bureaus of the civil administration were in charge of the employment of the Jews, and through them various employers were able to exploit cheap Jewish labor. Among these were private firms, farm owners, the police and the army.⁴ When

Tatiana Brostin-Bernstein, 'Gerushim vi an der daytsher farnikhtungs-politik legabey der yidisher bafelkerung', in *Bleter far geshikhte*, vol. III, E 1–2 (January–June 1950), table 9; Avraham Wein (ed.), *Pinkas ha-qehilot, polin, mehozot lublin, kielce* [The Community Books of Poland, Lublin and Kielce Provinces], vol. 7 (Jerusalem, 1999), pp. 64, 116, 139, 165, 258, 284, 297, 315, 320, 471, 480, 485, 550; David Silberklang, *Ha-shoah be-mahoz lublin* [The Holocaust in Lublin Province], PhD diss., The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2003, p. 16; Bogdan Musiał, *Deutsche Zivilverwaltung und Judenverfolgung in Generalgouvernement: Eine Fallstudie zum District Lublin 1939–1943* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999), p. 398. In the summer of 1941, Eastern Galicia was added to the Generalgouvernement as a fifth province.

²Sebastian Piątkowski, 'Żydzi Janowca, Kazimierza i Puław w latach wojny I okupacji (1939–1945)', in: Filip Jaroszyński (ed.), *Historia i kultura Żydów Janowca nad Wisłą, Kazimierza Dolnego i Puław Fenomen kulturowy miasteczka – sztetl* (Janowca, 2003), p. 201; Kalman Paris, 'The Destruction Of Jewish Demblin', David Stokfish (ed.), *Demblin-Modzjitz Book* (Tel Aviv, 1969), pp. 515–518; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Ya'akov Eckhaiser (Polish, 1966), pp. 6–13; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Yehezkel Tantsman (Hebrew, 1996), pp. 19, 25; YVA, 0.3/3554, testimony of Baruch Roizman (Yiddish, 1972), p. 4; YVA, 0.3/12362, testimony of Ya'akov Katz (Hebrew, 2003), pp. 6–7; Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (ZIH), 301/1444, testimony of Yosek Rosenblum (Polish, 1946), p. 2; Shmuel Edelstein, *Nisharti yahid* [I Alone Remained] (Netanya, 2004), p. 22.

³See, for example, the relations between the representatives of the head of the county and the gendarmerie in Dęblin-Irena against the backdrop of control over the Judenrat: YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, p. 33; YVA, 0.3/12362, testimony of Katz, p. 6; Paris, pp. 517–518; Meir Eichenbrenner, 'The first half year of horror', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 463; Tzvi Eichenbrenner, 'Thus Was Jewish Demblin Destroyed', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 336; Binyamin Shtemler, 'Be-darkam ha-ahrona' [On Their Final Journey], in David Stokfish (ed), *Sefer Demblin-Modzits (Demblin-Modzjitz Book)* (Hebrew and Yiddish version), p. 429; On the general phenomenon in the province, see Silberklang, p. 62.

⁴Felicia Karai, 'Ha-imut bein ha-rashuyot ha-germaniot sviv mahanot ha-avoda la-yehudim be-generalgouvernement' [The Confrontation Between the German Authorities Concerning the Jewish Labor Camps in the Generalgouvernement], *Yalqut Moreshet* 52 (April 1992), pp. 108–110; Dieter Pohl, 'Mahanot avodat ha-kefia le-yehudim be-generalgouvernement' [The Jewish Forced Labor Camps in the Generalgouvernement],

the extermination of Polish Jews commenced, responsibility for those who remained as forced laborers for the time being was passed to Krieger, head of the police and the SS in the Generalgouvernement. Accordingly, in June 1942, the Generalgouvernement administration gave orders that, from that moment on, employment of Jews had to be approved by the head of the SS and the police in each province. Yet as the civil authorities were losing their power, the Wehrmacht became increasingly involved and interested in Jewish forced labor and opposed the sweeping and indiscriminate deportation of Jewish forced laborers, citing the need for manpower to increase production, which became critical following developments on the eastern front and the subsequent rout in Stalingrad in March 1943.⁵

The Jews of Puławy County were exterminated in three waves during the course of Operation Reinhard. During the first period of deportations in March and April 1942, between 5000 and 6000 Jews were transported to the Bełżec death camp, while a few were retained to work in small camps throughout the county. The second wave of extermination of the Jews of the county of Puławy took place when Sobibor was turned into an active extermination camp. Between 6 and 12 May 1942, 16,822 of the county's Jews were deported to Sobibor and murdered there following a widespread roundup of Jews in all the towns of Puławy. This was the first systematic roundup in the province of Lublin to cover an entire county and be conducted on orders of the head of the county Alfred Brandt.⁶ During the course of these two initial waves of murder and immediately thereafter, in April and May 1942 nine transports totaling 9000 Slovakian Jews arrived in Puławy County. They were placed in labor camps and on farms in the region and in the Opole, Końskowola and Dęblin-Irena ghettos, which were the last that remained in the county. The transport of the Slovak Jews was part of a comprehensive operation during which 39,000 Slovak Jews were deported to the extermination camps or to ghettos in Lublin province that served as transit stations (*Durchgangs-Ghettos*) prior to their deportation to the death camps.⁷

The third wave of extermination in Puławy County occurred in October and November 1942, when the three remaining ghettos in the county were dismantled and the number of forced laborers in the camps was reduced through an organized operation of execution by shooting in light of Himmler's orders to complete the extermination of the Jews in the Generalgouvernement by the end of 1942. On 3 and 4 November 1943, some 44,000 Jews who resided in labor camps in the province of Lublin were murdered in an operation called the 'harvest festival'. In Puławy County, hundreds of Jewish workers in all the remaining labor camps were murdered,

Be-shevil ha-zikaron 37 (2000), p. 11; Yeshayahu Trunk, 'Ha-poliarkhia ha-natsit u-matsav ha-yehudim be-shetahim ha-kvushim' [The Nazi Polyarchy and the Situation of the Jews in the Occupied Territories], in *Dapim le-heqer ha-shoah veba-mered*, collection B (Tel Aviv, 1973), p. 10; Edward Dziadosz and Józef Marszałek, 'Więzienia i obozy w dystrykcie lubelskim w latach 1939–1944', *Zeszyty Majdanka* III (1969), pp. 63–65; Silberklang, pp. 77–81; ŻIH, 210/318, Social Assistance Committee of the Judenrat in Dęblin-Irena to the Joint, letter dated 21 November 1940.

⁵Sarah Bender, *Be-erets ovey* [In a Hostile Land] (Jerusalem, 2012), pp. 236–239; Karai, 'Ha-imut bein ha-rashuyot', p. 114, pp. 120–121; Silberklang, p. 221.

⁶ŻIH, 211/528, Yona Lustig to Self Help Cracow, letters dated 31 March 1942, 9 April 1942; Tobe Katlazsh, 'Un dokh bi zir geblichen lebn', in Moyshe Grosman (ed.), *Yizkor Buch Koriv* (Tel Aviv, 1955), p. 314; Shmuel Chanisman, 'Churban koriv on di iberlebenishn fun shmuel chanisman', in *Yizkor Buch Koriv*, pp. 245–247; See, too, undated and untitled letters written in March of that year, which describe the massacre and evacuation of the Jewish population of Wąwolnica, ŻIH, ARG 24 Ring I 262; ARG 34 Ring I 317; ARG 38 Ring I 1220 39; ARG 512 Ring I 1052 (report dated 26 March 1942). YVA, 0.53/83, report by Brandt to the Population and Welfare Section, Lublin Province, 12 May 1942; Yitshak Arad, *Mivza Reinhard, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* [Operation Reinhard, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka] (Tel Aviv, 1988), pp. 508–509; Silberklang, pp. 187–189; Bernstein, p. 72, table 9.

⁷Yehoshua Bichler, 'Gerush yehudei slovakia le-mahoz lublin be-shenat 1942' [The Deportation of Slovakia's Jews to Lublin Province in 1942], *Yalqut Moreshet* 50 (1981), p. 121.

except those in the Dęblin-Irena camp, which was attached to the Luftwaffe and continued to operate until the end of the German occupation in July 1944.⁸

The extermination of the Jews of Dęblin-Irena – May–October 1942

Between 1940 and 1942, most of the town's Jews were employed at various nearby locations. Some 500 mostly local Jews were put to work at the Luftwaffe airfield adjacent to Dęblin-Irena. Additional Jews were employed in various jobs for the Wehrmacht, both in the town and in the nearby castle that served as a military base. From June 1941 onward, approximately 300 Jewish men and women from Dęblin-Irena worked for the Reich's Eastern Railway (*Ostbahn*) at the town's railway station, under Schultz, a German company. The work consisted of laying down tracks, loading wagons and building warehouses as part of the construction of a dual-track railway line to the east. Working conditions on the railway were extremely harsh. The workday was at least 12 hours long, and the laborers experienced threats and violence at the hands of the Ukrainian guards, who regularly abused them and punished them with death.⁹

The extermination of the Jews of Dęblin-Irena was effected by means of two extensive operations. The first took place on 6 May 1942, when 2500 Jews were deported to Sobibor. Early that morning, goods wagons arrived at the town's railway station, and at around eight o'clock, in the presence of head of the county Brandt and his officials, German and Ukrainian troops surrounded the ghetto. Announcements made through loudspeakers ordered all the Jews to assemble in the market square at eight o'clock. Once they had done so, the Germans conducted a selection process: the men were separated from the women, and all were divided into groups of five. The square was crowded with people who were wailing and screaming, and the Germans beat the Jews and shot a number of them. One official from the county chief's office was noted for being especially rough when it came to beating the Jews: 'He beat [people] inhumanely ... someone whose suitcase fell from his hands and who tried to lift it was beaten with a whip on his face until he hit his eye and the eye was hanging from his face ...'¹⁰ The scenes at the time of the operation were termed 'horrific'.¹¹

The Jews employed at the town's airfield and railway remained lined up for hours in their separate groups in the market square. That evening, the group of deportees, which consisted of 2500

⁸Ryszard Gicewicz, 'Obóz Pracy w Poniatowej (1941–1943)', *Zeszyty Majdanka X* (1980), pp. 88–94; Karai, p. 114, pp. 120–121; Arad, p. 455; Czysław Rajca, 'Lubelska Filia Niemieckich Zakładów Zbrojeniowych', *Zeszyty Majdanka IV* (1969), pp. 242, 246, 249, 266; YVA, TR.10/1291, interrogation of Hantke, 7 April 1964, p. 28/4964; YVA, TR.17/221; Commission of Inquiry into the murder of the Jews of Markuszów labor camp; Jarosław Bator, *Zarys Historii Żydów Puławskich* (Puławy, 2011), p. 61; Bernstein, p. 73, table 9; Silberklang, p. 189, pp. 195–196, 221, 237; Christopher Browning, *Anashim regilim* [Ordinary People] (Tel Aviv, 2009), pp. 152–155; ŻIH, 301/4420, testimony of Bolesław Jilinsky (Tsitrin) (Polish, 1950), p. 4; ŻIH, 301/6384, testimony of Władisław Kruppe (Polish, 1967), p. 1; Haim Gutman, 'Yarn fun umglik un shoiyder', in David Stockfish (ed.), *Sefer yizkor kehilat kuzmir de'lublin* (Tel Aviv, 1970), p. 522; Chanisman, pp. 246–247; Malka Knaplich-Stern, 'Tamir erev toit', *Yizkor Buch Koriv*, p. 415. During the course of this murder spree, the Jews of Opolo were sent to Sobibor, while the Jews of Końskowola were shot dead on the spot. The labor camps that were dismantled were Markuszów, Kazimierz Dolny and Kurów.

⁹Dziadosz and Marszałek, pp. 86–87; YVA, M.49. E/4488, testimony of Steinbuch (no first name noted) (Polish, 1945), p. 2; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, 36–7; Mendel Shteinbach, 'From Camp to Camp', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 452; Edelstein, pp. 26–27.

¹⁰ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Isaac Fishfeld (Polish, undated), p. 6.

¹¹In his diary Avraham Levine records the impressions of a girl who escaped from Dęblin-Irena to Warsaw following this operation: Havi Ben-Sasson and Leah Preiss, 'Dapim alumim mi-yomano shel avraham levin' [Hidden Pages from the Diary of Avraham Levine], in *Yad Vashem – Qovets Mechqarim* (Jerusalem, 2005), p. 38.

people, predominantly the elderly, women and children, was lead to Dęblin-Irena's railway station, located some two and a half kilometers from the town. On the way, they were severely beaten, and anyone who exhibited difficulty walking was shot on the spot. The road to the railway station was thus littered with the bodies of the murdered Jews. At the railway station, the Jews were crowded into the waiting wagons. Late that night, once all the deportees had boarded the wagons, and the Germans were satisfied with the number present, the remaining Jews, who were still lined up in the market square, were permitted to return to their homes in the ghetto. Those who returned to the empty ghetto related that 'there was a darkness in the soul'.¹² Every family in Dęblin-Irena lost someone in the deportation, and the ghetto was shrouded in gloom. In the wake of the deportation, approximately 1200–1400 Jews remained in Dęblin-Irena, most of whom had worked at the airfield, the castle and the railway station.¹³

On 13–14 May 1942, about a week after the first operation, two transports of Jews from Slovakia, numbering in 2080 people in total, many of them women, children and elderly individuals, arrived at Dęblin-Irena's railway station and were placed in the homes of the local Jews who had been evacuated a week earlier. The men were sent to work at the railway station and the airfield, while the women and children worked on farms in the vicinity of the town.¹⁴ These Slovakian Jews were quite healthy and brought with them a lot of food, but very soon the prevailing conditions and the arduous labor left their mark, as one of the survivors recalled, 'The people [the Slovak Jews] changed so dramatically in a short space of time that it was difficult to recognize them.'¹⁵

On Thursday, 15 October 1942, the second operation was conducted, with 2000 Jews sent from the town to Treblinka extermination camp. At 2:30 pm that afternoon, gendarmes, Ukrainians and some 150 air force troops from the nearby airfield surrounded the Dęblin-Irena in preparation for playing an active role in the deportation and murder. The Judenrat was ordered to inform the entire Jewish population that they were to gather at the meeting place at 3:00 pm, and the Jewish policemen began to go from house to house to convey the order. Since they had not experienced the previous deportation and did not appreciate its significance, the Slovak Jews took their time packing their belongings. Very soon, Ukrainians and German gendarmes entered the houses and began shooting everyone they encountered who had not yet gone to the meeting place. During the course of the roundup, some 500 Jews were murdered in the streets of the ghetto and in the houses. The descriptions of the massacre are shocking by any standard. The streets of the ghetto were strewn with bodies; the soil was stained with blood and in some cases, entire families were shot. That afternoon some 2000 Jews were transferred to Dęblin-Irena's train station and transported to the Treblinka death camp.¹⁶

¹²YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 13.

¹³Unknown., 'The Destruction of Jewish Demblin in Numbers', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 17; Esther Apeloim, 'From Warsaw Ghetto to the Demblin camp', *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 440; Malka Lederman-Felk, 'The 6th of May, 1942', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 484; T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 359–360, 365; YVA, 0.3/3537, testimony of Akiva Kuperman (Hebrew, 1971), p. 2; YVA, 0.3/8717, testimony of Chaya Giertsman (Hebrew, 1995), pp. 4–5; YVA, 0.3/8717, testimony of Ida Brant (Hebrew, 1990), pp. 9–10; YVA, M.49-E/4488, testimony of Steinbuch, p. 3; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 12; YVA, 0.3/12362, testimony of Katz, p. 8; ŻIH, 301/1443, testimony of Maria Rosenzweig (Polish, 1946), p. 1; ŻIH, 301/1444, testimony of Rosenblum, p. 1.

¹⁴T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 373–376; Pesa Kanner, 'My Father's Vow', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 447; YVA, 0.3/6303, testimony of Shoshanna Klafus (Hebrew, 1990), p. 7; Bichler, 124.

¹⁵T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 374–375; YVA, 0.48/267.3, Józef E. Lueński, 'Martyrologia Żydów Dęblinskiich 1939–1945' (1989), p. 12 (unpublished booklet).

¹⁶Moreshet Archive, D.1/6271, letter smuggled out to Slovakia by Adolf Reich (undated, probably written in October 1942, immediately after the deportation of the Dęblin-Irena Jews to Treblinka), p. 3; YVA, 0.3/12362, testimony of Katz, p. 13; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 17; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony

At the time of the deportation, many Jews tried to reach the gate of the airfield camp in the hope of hiding in the camp and joining its workforce, and some even succeeded. The following day, hundreds more Jews who had managed to hide and avoid being deported came to the airfield gates in a desperate attempt to enter.¹⁷ By the next day, only some 200 Jews remained in the town. Among them were members of the Judenrat and the Jewish police and others who had managed to hide. The Judenrat was instructed to clean up the place so as to prevent the spread of disease. To do so, it appointed two individuals who began to load the corpses onto a wagon and collect them in a storeroom. From there they were transferred by wagons belonging to local farmers for mass burial. Collection of the corpses lasted a few days longer, and when completed, on 28 October 1942, a final deportation took place, and the remaining 200 Dęblin-Irena Jews, including the laborers who had worked at the castle up until then, were deported to Końskowola ghetto, which then became the last functioning ghetto in the county. Only Jews who had not resided in labor camps were allowed to stay there.¹⁸

Just over 1400 of the town's Jews remained in its three labor camps: some 1000 resided at the airfield, which was turned into a closed labor camp following the extermination of Dęblin-Irena's Jews; about 120 Jews resided in a camp located at the railway loading station; and another 300 worked in a second camp, adjacent to the passenger station. In June 1943, the two railway camps were dismantled, and the Jewish laborers were transferred to Końskowola and to Ponia-towa. They were subsequently murdered in these camps during the 'harvest festival' operation in November 1943.¹⁹

The last Jews to remain in Puławy County – the labor camp at the Dęblin-Irena airfield

The building of the camp 1940–1942

Prior to the German occupation, the airfield at Dęblin-Irena, located about two kilometers from the town, was one of the largest in Poland. Following the outbreak of war, the Luftwaffe renovated the airfield and began to use it. From the beginning of the German occupation, during 1940 and until 1942, some 500 Dęblin-Irena Jews worked on its renovation and operation. These laborers were paid wages for their work and returned to their homes in the town each

of Tantsman, p. 52; YVA, M.49.E/139, testimony of Israel Shapira (Yiddish, undated), p. 3; YVA, 0.48/267.3, Lueński, 7, 10, 16; ŻIH, 301/1444, testimony of Rosenblum, p. 2; *ibid.*, 301/3682, testimony of Zalman Bar (Polish, 1948), p. 3; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, p. 12; T. Eichenbrenner, p. 382; Kanner, pp. 447–448; Apelboim, p. 441; Shteinbach, p. 455.

¹⁷T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 378–380; Kanner, p. 448; Apelboim, pp. 441–442.

¹⁸ŻIH, 301/1444, testimony of Rosenblum, p. 2; ŻIH, 311/1168, testimony of Meir Meltsman (Polish, 1945), p. 3; Moreshet, D.1/6271, p. 5; YVA, 0.3, testimony of Tantsman, pp. 55–57; YVA, 0.48/267.3, Lueński, p. 20; Ignatz Bubis, *Ich bin ein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens: Ein autobiographisches Gespräch mit Edith Kohn* (Köln, 1993), p. 57; Zehava Amitz, 'The second Expulsion', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 477; Chaya Shilkroit, 'The Destruction of My Home Town', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 418; Moshe Melaver, 'The Story Of Moshe Melaver', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 407; Chana Goldberg, 'My Road Of Torments from Demblin to Dachau', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 428; T. Eichenbrenner, p. 382; Kanner, p. 448.

¹⁹A further three small camps operated in Puławy county. The Jews housed there worked on laying railroad tracks. These camps were erected in 1942 and operated during 1943 in Goląb, where 200 Jews worked, in Puławy, with 200 inmates, and in Naleczów, with 40 prisoners. See Daziadosz and Marszalek, pp. 86–87; YVA, M.49.E/4488, testimony of Steinbuch, p. 2; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, pp. 36–37; Edelstein, *Nisharti yehid*, pp. 26–27; Stempian Fidelis, 'Yehudei demblin be-yemei ha-kibush ha-germani' [The Jews of Demblin at the Time of the German Occupation], *Sefer Demblin-Modzjitz*, pp. 346–347; 'The Destruction Of Jewish Demblin In Numbers', p. 17; Shteinbach, p. 452.

evening.²⁰ In May 1941, as part of the preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union and its conversion into a combat airfield, the construction work was intensified, and the Luftwaffe's construction unit (*Bauleitung*) was appointed to refurbish the airfield. It commissioned Autheried, a Viennese construction company, to undertake the project, and the latter recruited Jewish manpower for it. This recruitment was carried out at the town of Opole, and most of the Jews who volunteered for the work, primarily to escape the crowded and harsh living conditions in the town, were refugees from Vienna who had been deported to the town in February 1941.

In May 1941, 200 Jewish men arrived at the airfield from Opole and began to build what would later be called the 'first camp', or the 'volunteers' camp', although this was actually a place of work rather than a labor camp since the laborers returned to the Dęblin-Irena ghetto each evening. Additional Jews from Dęblin-Irena and from the Lipova 7 camp in the city of Lublin were recruited to work on the camp. The work at the airfield included laying roads, building walls, protective covers for bombardment and earthen ramparts, and leveling runways. The Jewish laborers worked 12 hours per day and received relatively decent meals. Survivors relate that the Luftwaffe personnel, German and Austrian soldiers, treated them relatively well. Adjacent to the airfield, a number of barbed wire-enclosed barracks, in which many craftsmen worked, were erected. In 1941, some 600 Jews and 500 Poles worked at the airfield. In the fall of 1941, the Jewish laborers were divided among a number of workplaces in the vicinity of Dęblin-Irena, probably because the construction project at the airfield had been completed. The outbreak of typhus in the town and the camp may have also played a part in dispersing the laborers.

A few Viennese Jews remained at the camp and formed the core of what was termed the 'second camp', erected in late December 1941, which served as a Jewish labor camp from October 1942 until July 1944. The 'second camp' began functioning when Jews received permits to undertake various tasks in the camp, including building a gas station and transporting sand and gravel. Many of the permits were fictitious and were issued following bribery by the Dęblin-Irena Judenrat, which tried to create the impression that many laborers were employed at the site. The Autheried construction company erected several additional residential barracks in the camp. Three hundred Jews were employed in the 'second camp', fewer than in the first camp because the construction work in the camp had already been completed.²¹ Following the first deportation from Dęblin-Irena to Sobibor on 6 May 1942, some additional Jews managed to find work at the airfield, in some cases through bribery. Some of them continued to reside in the camp, such that up to the final dismantling of Dęblin-Irena ghetto in October 1942, the camp housed 543 Jewish forced laborers.²²

Hermann Wenkart

Research suggests that the living conditions in the camp and the fact that so many of its Jews survived may be attributed to Hermann Wenkart, the camp leader among the inmates (*Lagerälteste*),²³ and his comportment vis-à-vis the German and Austrian command. The son of a rabbi

²⁰YVA 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 9; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, pp. 32–33, 36–37; T. Eichenbrenner, p. 343; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, p. 3.

²¹YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, p. 36; YVA, 0.3/8717, testimony of Giertsman, p. 11; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, pp. 3–6; Hermann Wenkart, *Befehlsnotstand anders gesehen: Tatsachenbericht eines jüdischen Lagerfunktionärs* (Wien, 1969), pp. 45–46; T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 355–356; Shteinbach, p. 454.

²²See 'Dapim alumim miyomano shel avraham levin', p. 39; Wenkart, pp. 52, 54.

²³Wenkart wrote that he was the camp commander (*Kanzlei-führer*). He was also referred to as such in testimonies, although he naturally carried no such rank, yet he may well have been accorded this unofficial title

and a lawyer by profession, he was deported in February 1941 from Vienna to Opole in Puławy County together with his wife Klara, his mother-in-law, brothers-in-law and his three-year-old niece Ruthy. In May 1941, the harsh circumstances of the Jewish refugees in Opole led him to volunteer for labor that turned out to be construction work at the Dęblin-Irena airfield. Eight days after his arrival, he came across an Austrian officer by the name of Eduard Bromofsky, who was stationed at the airfield. Wenkart and Bromofsky had served together during World War I, and Wenkart had saved Bromofsky's life. Following their chance encounter, Bromofsky urged the airfield commander, Hönig, to promote Wenkart and arranged a meeting between them. As a result, Hönig ordered Wolfram, the treasurer of the base, to promote Wenkart, who was then appointed leader of a group of 100 Jews working for the Autheried company. Among other tasks, Wenkart was responsible for distributing wages to the laborers and for ordering food and medicines.

Subsequently, when the 'second camp' began to operate, Wenkart was appointed *Lagerälteste* of the airfield, where Jews themselves were responsible for administrative matters and work assignments. Bromofsky was later sent to serve at the front, but the close relationship that Wenkart had cultivated with the German command continued to stand him in good stead, and he became a dominant figure with considerable influence in matters pertaining to the Jewish laborers in the camp. For example, Wenkart used his connections with the camp staff to bring his family and other Viennese refugees from Opole to Dęblin-Irena. In this, he was assisted by one of the cruelest gendarmes in the town, who had a reputation for abusing and murdering its Jewish residents.²⁴

It appears that by this point some of the Jewish laborers in the camp had already developed feelings of antagonism to and become critical of Wenkart, whom they considered arrogant and a tool of the Germans, someone who communicated well with them and even exploited his position for his own benefit and that of his associates.²⁵ Indeed, most of the administrative staff in the camp comprised Viennese Jews: Grossman, Wenkart's deputy; Polyak, who was in charge of supplies; Walter Appel, who was responsible for matters relating to bathing and laundry; Meir De-Mayo, in charge of work allocation; and Rudi Engel, commander of the Jewish police force, which numbered about 10 men. A camp survivor described Wenkart as follows:

tall and broad with a long red narrow nose upon which sat thick glasses. He had a very sharp tongue, he could tear the world to pieces with that tongue ... for each German even those who didn't demand it he would stand straight at attention ... The Germans themselves couldn't have asked for more ... he formed a Jewish command structure with Jewish police, although none of the police were forced into that role. The majority of them were just heartless youth, without a spark of humanity, without shame and without conscience. they would flatter Wenkart like dogs ...²⁶

Wenkart's wife Klara was put in charge of the kitchen, which was considered relatively light work that offered certain benefits.²⁷

among the Jewish laborers. See, for example, Kanner, p. 447; T. Eichenbrenner, p. 343; Paris, p. 520; Wenkart, p. 45.

²⁴Wenkart, pp. 34–42, 45–46; ŻIH, 301/1444, testimony of Rosenblum, p. 1.

²⁵Chaya Goldfarb-Rozenberg, 'Survived With My Daughter', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 495; Bubis, p. 77; Goldberg, p. 430; ŻIH, 301/1298, testimony of Sochodolsky (Polish, 1946), p. 2; Stanley Hochman, *Mr. Fate: My Personal World War II Memories* (Totonto, 1998), p. 69.

²⁶T. Eichenbrenner, p. 343.

²⁷Wenkart, pp. 45, 61–62, 68; YVA, 0.3/10540, testimony of Sophia Zuckerman (Hebrew, 1997), pp. 12, 19; Paris, 522; Yisrael Bubis, 'The Year 1942', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 529 (hereafter, Yisrael Bubis); T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 370–378; Moreshet, A/525, testimony of Arie Klotman (Hebrew, 1964), p. 3.

Opposition to Wenkart among the Jews of Dęblin-Irena grew stronger when the ghetto was closed down on 15 October 1942. The town's Jews then began to stream toward the camp en masse. Its gates were locked, and on Wenkart's order, the camp's Jewish police refused to allow a single person in. Ignaz Bubis, for example, recalls that Wenkart refused his father entry and yelled at him to go away. The father was subsequently murdered, and Bubis blamed Wenkart for his death. Additional testimonies cite cases in which Wenkart refused entry to the camp to Jews, including young children who were shortly thereafter captured and murdered, while other camp functionaries, both Jews and Germans, placed themselves at risk and allowed Jews to enter the camp at the time of the ghetto's dissolution.²⁸ Could Wenkart have acted differently at that time and allowed Jews to enter the camp in order to rescue them? The answer is probably yes, although one must examine carefully whether such a move would have entailed some risk at that time.

In his postwar memoirs, Wenkart relates his version of events: on the day of the deportation, the commander of the gendarmerie in Dęblin-Irena warned him that if the camp was found to have one more Jew than the 543 who resided there, all of its residents would be exterminated, and the responsibility for this would be placed squarely on him.²⁹ In other words, given the circumstances, it is certainly possible that had Wenkart permitted additional Jews to enter the camp and had the gendarmerie then found them there, all of the camp's inmates would have been put to death. In this case, Wenkart was obliged to make a considered decision, bearing sole responsibility for the camp residents vis-à-vis the gendarmerie. At the same time, Wenkart took steps to obtain work permits for 400 additional Jews, mostly the wives and children of camp laborers, and these were indeed secured by paying a bribe to one of the Germans in charge of labor on the farms in the vicinity of the camp. This German official justified the permits by claiming that the women and children were an essential auxiliary workforce on the farms. Thus, shortly after the dismantling of the ghetto, the number of Jews who legally resided in the camp was doubled.³⁰

The choice between rescuing a handful of Jews while risking the lives of all and abandoning this handful for the sake of rescuing all the others, as he was accused by his opponents, weighed on Wenkart throughout the existence of the camp and fueled antagonism toward him. In summer 1944, for example, a group of young men in the camp conspired to obtain weapons and escape. A Pole who was privy to this plan informed the gendarmerie of it and divulged the first name of one of the organizers. The gendarmes came to the camp and ordered all the young men with that name to report to them. These men were severely tortured, and eventually the organizer of the escape was apprehended and murdered after Wenkart pressed the man's mother to turn him in because he feared that the gendarmes would carry out their threat to execute 10 other Jews in his stead.³¹ Handing Jews over to the Germans certainly stoked antagonism toward Wenkart. One group of survivors testified, 'He tortured us, worse than the SS',³² while another witness spoke of several cases of Jews being handed over to the Germans, saying, 'The only reason for their imprisonment was Hermann Wenkart ...'³³

²⁸Goldfarb-Rozenberg, p. 495; Bubis, p. 56; Goldberg, p. 430; Yisrael Bubis, p. 529; YVA 0.3/6303, testimony of Klafuss, p. 13.

²⁹Wenkart, pp. 51–52, 55.

³⁰T. Eichenbrenner, p. 368–369, p. 377; Goldberg, p. 430; Schildkroit, p. 420; YVA 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 14; Wenkart, pp. 34–41, 45–46, 51–52, 55.

³¹Shavtai Perelmutter, 'Jewish Resistance in the Ghetto And the Camp', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 502; Yosef Daitsher, 'I Don't Have The Strength To Describe Everything', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 482; Paris, p. 522; Hochman, p. 70.

³²ŽIH, 301/1298, testimony of Sochodolsky, p. 2.

³³YVA, M.49/4488, testimony of Steinbuch, p. 1.

In contrast, on other occasions Wenkart managed to mitigate punishments, as in the winter of 1944 when a number of Jewish laborers escaped from the camp armed with weapons that they had stolen from their places of work. Their escape was reported to the Dęblin-Irena gendarmerie, which threatened to execute a hundred people in turn. Wenkart managed to prevent this with a bribe that he collected from the camp inmates and handed over to the gendarmes.³⁴ It appears that in cases in which Wenkart thought it possible to negotiate with or bribe German functionaries, he did so, and in cases in which this was impossible, he was obliged to make decisions on his own, some of which entailed turning Jews in to the Germans.

Furthermore, it appears that when Wenkart believed that the entire Jewish camp community could be at risk and the matter had not yet come to the attention of the Germans, he preferred to involve figures who were respected by the general camp public, such as former members of the Judenrat originally from Dęblin-Irena, the town from which most of the camp residents hailed, in a joint decision-making process. One may interpret this course of action either as a management tactic designed to gain legitimacy for his behavior or as a genuine desire to make decisions based on a broad consensus, which would thus lend them moral authority. For example, following one such collective deliberation in the winter of 1943, Wenkart allowed a group of Jewish partisans to enter the camp to seek refuge from persecution by the Armia Krajowa (AK).³⁵ He took a similar course of action on another occasion, in the winter of 1944, when he suspected that a number of the camp's residents were planning to assassinate him as well as the German camp commander. One night he convened a meeting with several influential Jewish residents of the camp and told them about the plot. He impressed upon those present that the plotters were endangering the camp's children and proposed that they be handed in to the Germans. The participants refused to inform on other Jews, but promised to preempt any such assassination attempt.³⁶

In contrast to the abovementioned opposition to Wenkart that emerged within the camp, there were also those who viewed him in a positive light, as a decent and good man who did not exploit his position and who managed to mitigate impending punishments and prevent executions. These survivors believed, above all, that the survival of the camp so long into the war could be attributed in part to Wenkart's relations with the Germans.³⁷

Historian David Silberklang found that relatively decent living conditions in Jewish forced labor camps did not necessarily correlate with greater likelihood of survival, and vice versa. The factors that impacted the survival of Jews in forced labor camps in the Lublin area prior to the 'harvest festival' operation of November 1943 were associated with German military interests or with the interests of individuals who sought financial gain from the Jewish labor force. Following the 'harvest festival' operation, the probability of surviving through work rose.³⁸ Therefore, this paper explores the links between Wenkart's comportment and the survival of the camp residents independently of the living conditions that prevailed in the camp.

³⁴Paris, p. 522; Perelmuter, p. 502; Daitsher, pp. 482–483; YVA 0.3/9295, testimony of Hannah Topolsky (Hebrew, 1996), p. 17; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, pp. 23–24; Hochman, p. 70.

³⁵YVA 0.3/9295, testimony of Topolsky, p. 17; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, pp. 23–24; Daitsher, pp. 482–483; Perelmuter, p. 502; Wenkart, pp. 60–61.

³⁶Perelmuter, pp. 503–504. There is no supporting evidence for this specific event, although other witnesses have maintained that Wenkart feared that his enemies in the camp would take revenge on him. Bubis wrote that a Jewish camp inmate who possessed a weapon openly threatened to kill Wenkart. See Goldberg, p. 430; YVA, M.49 E/4488, testimony of Steinbuch, p. 2; Bubis, p. 63.

³⁷ŻIH, 301/1447, testimony of Motek Sygmunt (Polish, 1946), p. 2; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, p. 10; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Avraham Weingarten (Hebrew, 1991), p. 18; YVA, testimony of Esther Neumann (Hebrew, 1995), pp. 18, 24; YVA, 0.3/9295, testimony of Topolsky, p. 16; Moreshet, A/525, testimony of Kloiman, p. 4.

³⁸Silberklang, pp. 265–266.

It may be instructive to examine the connection between Wenkart, his mode of operation, and his personal relationships with the German command and the longevity of the camp by way of comparison to a Jewish camp located in another airfield in the Lublin province. Between 1941 and 1943, a Jewish labor camp operated at the airfield adjacent to the town of Zamość in the southern part of the province. It, too, was run by the Luftwaffe's construction unit and employed between 400 and 800 Jews at different periods. The two camps were very different, as the Zamość camp was commanded by an SS officer named Walter Reupert, who displayed considerable cruelty toward the inmates in the form of executions and abuse on a daily basis. At Zamość, the Luftwaffe command was not directly involved in overseeing the Jewish laborers nor did it have shown interest in them. The Jews engaged solely in construction work. One may assume that at some point the construction projects reached completion, and there was then less need for Jewish labor. Accordingly, the camp was closed in May 1943, and the Jewish laborers were transported to Majdanek concentration camp.³⁹

The situation in Dęblin-Irena was different altogether, since throughout its existence, the camp was under the direct control of the Luftwaffe. After the extermination of Dęblin-Irena's Jews, however, and from early 1943 onward in particular, the SS increased its supervision of the Jewish forced laborers. This was an ongoing bone of contention between the local SS command, which sought increasing control over the Jews, and the camp authorities, which needed the Jewish labor force and sought to maintain it intact. The clash of interests manifested itself on the ground, as the survivors recall. Wenkart was closely involved in many matters and had, as previously mentioned, cultivated close relationships with the camp command.⁴⁰ The fact that the Luftwaffe itself administered the camp was significant, as was the employment of the Jewish workforce not merely in construction, but also in various other fields and in ongoing tasks on the airfield, proving that throughout the camp's existence the Jewish laborers were genuinely needed for the war effort.

One may assume that Wenkart's personal connection with the German command and his orderly and punctilious style of management accorded with the interests of the base commander, who needed laborers to promote the war effort and was, in return, receptive to employing the camp's Jews in all lines of work at the airfield. One of the camp's survivors described this as follows: 'The wise politics of the camp leader [Wenkart] was to impress on the minds of the Germans the notion that the Jews were irreplaceable.'⁴¹ Even Wenkart's foes admitted that his connections with the German command had played a part in keeping the camp in operation for so long.⁴² In contrast, the Zamość camp, as noted, was administered by the SS, whose ideological considerations were dictated from above. On the eve of the camp's closure, the SS focused primarily on murdering the Jews at Zamość. Furthermore, it appears that the local Zamość SS command saw no benefit to continuing to operate the camp, whereas the Dęblin-Irena airfield command relied upon Jewish workers and thus sought to keep them in place.

³⁹Two further forced labor camps for Jews attached to the Luftwaffe operated in Zamość County. This paper discusses the camp located in the town of Zamość itself. The two other camps were closed at different times prior to November 1943. See Adam Kopciowski, *Zagłada Żydów w Zamosciu* (Lublin: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005), pp. 143–145, 148; YVA, M.1.E/1287, testimony of Baruch Wilder (Yiddish, 1947), p. 9; USC (University of Southern California) Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education, 5816, testimony of David Makler (Hebrew, 1995).

⁴⁰YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 20; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, p. 21; Bubis, p. 59; Wenkart, p. 48.

⁴¹ŽIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, p. 10.

⁴²See, for example, Bubis, p. 64.

To address the question of whether Wenkart, and his personal contact with the German command, played a part in the relatively benign living conditions at the Dęblin-Irena airfield camp, it is once again worth examining it in comparison to other camps. In her study of the forced labor camps in the region of Kielce in the Radom province, historian Sarah Bender found that the living conditions of the Jewish residents were jointly impacted by the German commander's personality, the personality of the *Lagerälteste* who sought to protect the Jews, and the nature of the relationship between them, rather than by the orders issued from above.⁴³ This was the case in the labor camp at Ludwików⁴⁴ plant, which engaged in steel casting for the German army, and in the camp at Hasag Granat plant, which produced ammunition, including for the army.⁴⁵ At the Budzyn SS labor camp, located in the western part of the Lublin province, for example, the *Lagerälteste*, who regularly protected the Jews, was unable to improve their conditions because of the cruelty of the German commander.⁴⁶ The Jewish *Lagerälteste* at the Zamość airfield labor camp, Negus, treated the Jews cruelly, as did his deputy, Ya'akov Meisner. Combined with the harsh treatment of the Jews on the part of the commander, Reupert, it is clear that life in that camp was grim, as is evidenced by the fact that the mortality rate in the camp reached 40% during the winter of 1943.⁴⁷

The Dęblin-Irena airfield camp differed in this respect as well. Mention has already been made of Wenkart's personal relations with the German high command, and it would be no exaggeration to say that these relations were based on trust and respect and impacted Wenkart's working relations with the lower level German command, which was directly in charge of the camp. One may assume that to some extent these connections also shaped the attitude of the other members of the command toward the residents of the camp. For example, the camp's first commander was Sergeant Major Kattengel, who strode about the camp armed with a whip and accompanied by an Alsatian dog. Neither the camp's inmates nor Wenkart trusted him because he sought to exert his power over them and was unstable. Moreover, he allowed the gendarmerie to enter the camp at will. Nevertheless, he neither beat Jews nor abused them. Survivors later reported that a intimate relation between Kattengel and a Jewish girl in the camp had a positive impact on his treatment of its Jewish population.

In March 1943, Kattengel was replaced by Sergeant Major Dusy, who treated the camp's Jews well, according to survivors. Dusy refused to give the gendarmerie access to the camp, did his best to prevent executions and took the Jewish laborers under his wing. When a hidden stash of money was found among the possessions of Dr Kestenbaum, the camp physician, Dusy saved his life by stating that the money belonged to the camp residents' cash fund. Yet Dusy had his negative

⁴³Bender, pp. 265–266.

⁴⁴See *ibid.*, pp. 239–246. The plant was Polish owned prior to the German occupation and was then nationalized and leased to a Polish firm under German supervision. The camp employed 300 Jews in production according to the military's orders, under the supervision of the munitions division at Radom. The camp operated from the closure of Kielce ghetto on 30 May 1943, until 1 August, when it was dismantled and its residents deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

⁴⁵See *ibid.*, pp. 253–263. The plant was owned by the Hasag concern, and the camp began operation in late 1942. From 30 May 1943, upon the final liquidation of Kielce ghetto, the camp's population grew to 500. In August 1944, the camp's residents were evacuated to Częstochowa.

⁴⁶The camp operated from summer 1942 onward and housed 3000 Jews who were employed at the Heinkel plants, repairing airplanes. The camp was administratively annexed to Majdanek in October 1943, yet its laborers were not murdered during the 'harvest festival' operation. In February 1944, it was converted into a concentration camp and was dissolved in the spring of 1944, when the Jewish laborers were transferred to other camps in the west. See Silberklang, pp. 224–233, 250–252.

⁴⁷Kopciowski, pp. 143–144.

qualities, too. He would get drunk from time to time and enjoyed firing into the air, probably executing a Jew on one occasion. He served in the camp for about one year.

During the camp's final two months, its commander was Sergeant Major Rademacher, who was similarly remembered by survivors as having treated the Jews decently. For example, Esther Neumann was badly wounded in a work-related accident on the runway and was taken to a German hospital for an X-ray. She later testified that Rademacher had arranged for her medical treatment, consoled her, arranged for her medical supervision until she recovered and continued to show concern for her up until the evacuation of the camp. Kozak, an engineer for the Autheried company, used to give the Jews food, and they recalled that he treated them well, as did Ringel, an agronomist who administered a farm. A local ethnic German by the name of Wiszniewski, who had previously been a postman in Dęblin-Irena, was the overall foreman of the Jewish forced laborers, and the survivors were not critical of him. In various workplaces at the airfield and beyond it, troops supervised the Jewish laborers, and according to survivors, they, too, generally treated them reasonably well. By contrast, some of the Polish supervisors abused and beat Jews, and the Ukrainian guards who supervised Jewish laborers on the railway were particularly cruel. While certain functionaries were remembered as being overtly hostile, in general within the camp itself, the Jewish laborers received relatively decent treatment.⁴⁸

Living conditions and daily life in the camp: October 1942–July 1944

Among the noteworthy characteristics of the Dęblin-Irena airfield camp were its living conditions, the high proportion of women and children among its population, and its educational activity.

From the day of the dissolution of the Dęblin-Irena ghetto (15 October 1942), the workplace at the airfield became a closed labor camp for Jews, operating as such until July 1944. Some 1000 Jews⁴⁹ – Polish, most of them from Dęblin-Irena, Slovak and Viennese – resided in the camp: women, men and about 100 very young children. Although the Viennese group numbered a mere 40 or so individuals, it constituted a dominant minority. It appears as though these three groups did not mingle much, and this cultural mosaic was manifested in a rather complex social life. The Slovak contingent was united, and its members derived moral strength and encouragement from their cohesiveness. Esther Neumann later related that her friends in the camp were all Slovaks, as did Avraham Weingarten.⁵⁰ The Slovakian Jewish prisoners formed a committee that distributed aid brought by emissaries from Slovakia from the special assistance committee in Prešov. These deliveries helped them survive the camp and reinforced their sense of solidarity. The Slovakian Jews were suspicious of their Polish counterparts in the wake of cases of theft of clothing, soap and money, which led on occasion to arguments and disputes between these two groups.⁵¹

⁴⁸Wenkart, pp. 40, 48, 59–60; YVA, 0.48/267.3, Lueiński, pp. 36–37; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, pp. 20–21; YVA, 0.3/5717, testimony of Giertsman, p. 11; YVA, 0.3/12362, testimony of Katz, pp. 11–12; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaizer, p. 20; YVA, 0.3/9077, testimony of Neumann, pp. 26–28; Bubis, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁹The number ranged between 970 and 1000.

⁵⁰YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, pp. 20–23; YVA, 0.3/9077, testimony of Neumann, pp. 17, 25.

⁵¹Ahron Katshka, 'From Demblin to Bergen-Belsen', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 422; T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 369–370; Schildkroit, p. 420; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Eckhaizer, pp. 20, 63; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, pp. 17, 20–23; YVA, 0.3/9077, testimony of Neumann, pp. 17, 25; YVA, 0.3/3029, testimony of Esther Kaminska (Polish, 1967), p. 14; Moreshet, A/525, testimony of Kloiman, pp. 3–4; Wenkart, p. 48; Bichler, p. 124.

Each morning a wake-up clarion call sounded at six o'clock, and following roll call, the laborers were sent to engage in various jobs at the airfield, such as leveling runways, loading bombs onto airplanes and maintenance work. At the nearby castle, they were given cleaning jobs and maintenance and kitchen duties. Farm work was primarily the responsibility of women and children. Some of the camp's residents were put to work on the railway through the Schulz company, even though there were two camps located near the railway that operated until June 1943. The Jewish forced laborers were sent from the camp to augment the workforce at the railway and were mostly given the task of loading coal. The camp workday lasted 12 hours, and the laborers were employed 7 days a week, with a day off every second Sunday, when some of them were permitted to visit the town. Jewish laborers received wages for their work until the end of 1942: a regular laborer earned 65 groszy per hour, while a skilled laborer received 80 groszy. Two zloty⁵² were deducted from wages for food, 70 groszy for accommodation and 30 groszy went to the camp fund, which was used to purchase medicine and extra food. Each laborer was given a prisoner number, and it was stamped on a piece of metal and attached to his clothing.⁵³

The commanders resided outside the camp, which was administered by the Jews themselves. The Jewish police were responsible for security within the camp, while Luftwaffe troops guarded the outside. Enclosed by a razor-wire fence, the camp covered an area of 1300 square meters. It comprised five areas of barracks. The first area contained the women's barracks, additional barracks, two storerooms and a bathing room. The Jewish police lived in areas 2 and 3; area 4 was a residential area that included children's barracks, a clinic, a surgery, an office, an assembly hall and Wenkart's room. Area 5 contained family residences. Men and women were officially separated, but a room was set aside for relations between childless couples, and another for married couples. The camp streets were given names by the inmates: the road that led to the rooms for relations was named the Boulevard of Love, while the main street was called Wenkart Street. A cobbler's shop, a tailor shop and a salon operated in the camp, providing services for payment. A communal hall served as a meeting place for women and men, and occasionally a special event was held there, such as on New Year's Eve 1944. Inmates slept on two-level wooden bunks cushioned with sawdust in barracks that were usually heated. Each barracks housed 280 individuals.⁵⁴

The food offered in the camp was decent and comparable to that in other camps, such as Budzyn.⁵⁵ Residents were given three meals a day, which were prepared in the camp kitchen and included soup, bread and sometimes horse meat and fats. Twenty grams of jam and two cigarettes were handed out once a week. Products were delivered from the Wehrmacht base at the castle adjacent to the town. The Jewish police distributed lunch at the various work locations. Laborers could supplement their portions of food at their workplaces. Women who worked in agriculture, for example, were allowed to take potatoes and vegetables. Some received food

⁵²It appears that these were weekly deductions, although no explicit reference to this is available.

⁵³T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 370–372; Apelboim, p. 442; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, pp. 8–10; Moreshet A/525, testimony of Kloiman, p. 4; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, pp. 14, 22, 24; YVA, 0.3/4286 testimony of Genya Rosenblum (Hebrew, 1989) p. 19; YVA, 0.3/9295, testimony of Topolsky, p. 16; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 18.

⁵⁴See the map of the camp in Wenkart, p. 47; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, pp. 10–11; Moreshet A/525, testimony of Kloiman, p. 5; YVA, 0.3/3029, testimony of Kaminska, p. 13; YVA, 0.3/5717, testimony of Giertsman, p. 12; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 19; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, pp. 16, 23; Apelboim, p. 442; Goldberg, p. 429.

⁵⁵In some other contemporary camps, such as Kraśnik, the food was equally satisfactory; see Silberklang, p. 232, 256.

that Polish colleagues smuggled in for them. Each camp resident carried a ration card on which each meal, or additional food, was marked.⁵⁶

A clinic operated in the camp, staffed by several doctors and directed by Dr Raphael Kestenbaum, who began working at the airfield following the dissolution of Ryki ghetto⁵⁷ in May 1942. The doctors were not permitted to charge for their treatment, and they had the authority to release people from work. Dr Kestenbaum and his team treated Jewish laborers who fell ill or were injured at work. At the clinic, Jews were vaccinated against typhus, with vaccines purchased by the camp fund. There was a bathing room and a laundry room in the camp. Laborers were required to bathe once a week and to wash their clothes. The attention to hygiene paid off, as the camp remained free of outbreaks of diseases. The Jewish laborers wore their own clothes and received additional clothing and shoes from Majdanek camp.⁵⁸ These living conditions, including hygiene and sufficient nourishment, were made possible and supported by the camp authorities, who believed that the laborers' productivity would increase if their living conditions were decent. Special attention was paid to hygiene because they were particularly concerned about disease outbreaks. And thanks to Wenkart's efforts, which included bribery, the camp was supplied with coal for heating.⁵⁹

Some 100 children resided in the camp, half of them very young. At least one birth occurred during the period of its operation. The camp commanders were naturally aware of the presence of the children, but the danger lay in the surprise inspections conducted by the SS, which did not know about the young children. Obligated to hide whenever an inspection of the camp took place, all the children, including the very youngest, who were a year and a half old, became used to hiding and remaining completely silent. Aware that Ida Milgroim was a teacher by training, Wenkart released her from working at the railway station and put her in charge of the young children, who remained unattended when their parents went out to work. Thus, in effect, a kindergarten was created in the camp. Marishia Leberboim originally from the town of Ryki aided Milgroim in caring for the children. The two women taught them Yiddish songs to prepare them for the SS's surprise inspections:

Sha, shtil, makht nit keyn geruder
 S'iz in lager a kontrol vider
 Sha, shtil, makht nit keyn gevald
 der kontrol kumt aher bald
 Un az di kontrol kumt, iz dokh vey un vind
 mean darf in lager nit zen keyn kind
 Sha, shtil, makht nit keyn gevald
 die kontrol kumt aher bald.

⁵⁶Wenkart, 47; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, pp. 7–10; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, p. 66; YVA, 0.3/5717, testimony of Giertsman, p. 10; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, p. 20; YVA, 0.3/12362, testimony of Katz, p. 14; Bubis, pp. 62, 64–65.

⁵⁷The ghetto in the town of Ryki, some 10 kilometers from Dęblin-Irena, was dissolved on 7 May 1942, the day after the first operation in Dęblin-Irena. During the operation, a selection took place, and a group of laborers was sent to the Dęblin-Irena airfield camp. See ŻIH, 301/1298, testimony of Sochodolsky, p. 1; YVA, 0.3/9935, testimony of Avigdor Ravid (Hebrew, 1997), p. 4; T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 366–367.

⁵⁸YVA, 0.3/9077, testimony of Neumann, pp. 22, 26–28; YVA, 0.3/3029, testimony of Kaminska, p. 12; YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, pp. 22, 24; Wenkart, pp. 46, 48–67; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, pp. 10–11; Daitsher, pp. 478–479.

⁵⁹Wenkart, pp. 48–52; Eckhaiser, p. 19.

*Shush, quiet, don't move, another inspection in the camp, shush, quiet, don't make a noise, the inspection will be here any moment, and when it comes it is painful and terrible, because they shouldn't see a single child in the camp, shush, quiet, don't make a noise, the inspection is coming.*⁶⁰

The children were also taught to read and write in Polish, and they celebrated Hanukkah and Purim and put on performances for their parents.⁶¹ They occupied themselves and invented games. Avigdor Ravid later related that he and the other children ran about in the camp and even ventured to the open areas beyond its boundaries. They would sometimes light bonfires in the camp as part of their games. He himself was burned in one such game, and the German camp commander (probably Dusy), who noticed his injury, tended to it and bandaged it.⁶²

The presence of a relatively large number of very young children in the camp throughout its existence is a remarkable phenomenon, which as far as we know was not replicated anywhere else, certainly not after the 'harvest festival'. We do know that children resided in the SS labor camp at Kraśnik in western Lublin province up until the summer of 1944, but there were only 12 of them (among 225 adults, in July 1944), and we have no knowledge of any younger than age 9. The children were permitted to join their parents because the authorities believed that their presence would improve the parents' productivity. Similarly, this outlook led them to maintain decent living conditions relative to other camps. The camp commanders had a personal stake in enhancing the laborers' productivity, since they produced items like furniture and tools, whose proceeds, once sold, went into the pockets of the German functionaries.⁶³ The difference between the two camps lies in the number and ages of the children. In Kraśnik, both the small number of children and their ages indicate that, unlike the Deblin-Irena airfield camp, this was not a family camp authorized by the Germans.

A further example of the way in which Wenkart's connections with the German command impacted living conditions in the camp was the free religious practice granted to camp residents. Wenkart allowed observant Jews to be exempt from sanitary work on holidays and on the Sabbath, and communal prayers were held regularly. There was a Jewish burial society (*hevra qadisha*) in the camp, which conducted burials according to the stipulations of Jewish law. As regards relative religious freedom, most striking, perhaps, was the Passover Seder held in the camp and attended by all its residents. Shortly before Passover of 1943, a group of Jews approached Wenkart with a request to allow its members to consume kosher food during the week of Passover. Wenkart gave the initiative his blessing and decreed that funds be raised from the camp's residents. Each of the 80 Jews who had participated in the request paid 120 zloty to have kosher food provided during the eight days of the festival. A week before the holiday, Wenkart released two people from their usual work so that they could make the kitchen kosher, and two days before, people were put to work baking *matzot* and preparing

⁶⁰See the original Yiddish song: Ida Milgroim-Tzitrinboim, 'Wie azoi mir haben gelernt, dermutikat on geratevet yiddische kinder fon demblin', in *Sefer Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 415.

⁶¹Aba Bronspigel, 'I Was Born In 1938', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 466; Esther Shapiro-Tenenboim, 'The Russians Liberated Us', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, pp. 473–474; T. Eichenbrenner, pp. 370–372; Aida Milgroim-Tzitrinboim, 'How We Taught, Gave Courage and Saved the Jewish Children of Demblin', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, pp. 389–391; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, p. 10; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, p. 63; YVA, 0.3 V.T./ 5445, video testimony of Rosa Rabinowitz (Hebrew, 2005); YVA, 0.3/3029, testimony of Kaminska, p. 13; Wenkart, p. 52.

⁶²This was probably Dusy, although the witness did not mention his name. See YVA, 0.3/9935, testimony of Ravid, pp. 9–10; T. Eichenbrenner, p. 370.

⁶³Silberklang, pp. 253–262.

beetroot soup.⁶⁴ On the eve of the holiday, following the evening prayer, some 80 people sat around the festive table, while the entire population of the camp sat behind them and participated from afar: ‘The entire audience shouted, “slaves we were” and began to weep bitterly.’⁶⁵

Escape, punishment and the dismantling of the camp

Despite the relatively benign conditions in the camp, this was, after all, a forced labor camp in which Jewish laborers had no freedom and were punished for every transgression, however trifling. This led to constant fear among the inmates, as did the threat that the camp would be dissolved and its residents would be deported. The decent conditions notwithstanding, there were several escape attempts by camp residents, even though those planning them could not be certain they would survive outside its walls. Most fell into the hands of the AK, the local population or the gendarmerie, were murdered or even returned to the camp. Even in forced labor camps in which the Jews experienced relatively decent living conditions, some attempted to escape. In Krašnik camp, for example, most escape attempts occurred following the ‘harvest festival’ operation and stemmed from the fear that the camp would be closed down.⁶⁶

As noted above, the gendarmerie attempted to impose collective punishment in order to prevent the recurrence of escapes and to strike terror and fear in the hearts of the camp residents. For instance, the gendarmerie would often pay a visit to the camp upon learning of the absence of a laborer from his or her place of work outside the camp, such as the railway station, where Rudolf, the sadistic camp commander, was known for reporting every case of absence of a Jewish laborer to the gendarmerie. During Kattengel’s time as commander, for example, a gendarme came to the camp in search of a young man who had been accused of being absent from work, beat him cruelly, shot him in the back of the head and mutilated his body in full view of the residents. On a different occasion, the commander of the railway camp and a gendarme appeared at the camp and shot two laborers whose work failed to satisfy them.⁶⁷ On another occasion, the gendarmerie executed nine Jews after a fire broke out in one of the barracks at the airfield. Accused of starting the fire, these nine Jews, who had worked at the site the previous day, were executed by a firing squad in the nearby Ryki forest, even though it was proven that the fire was an accident.⁶⁸

The airfield police took similar action from time to time to impose the prohibition on holding foreign currency and stealing equipment and food from the camp, which were punishable by death. Executions were performed by hanging, on gallows placed at the entrance to the camp. This was the fate of three young Jews who were found with bread; on another occasion, a youngster caught stealing a piece of soap was hanged at the entrance in the presence of his father, and his body was left there for three days as a warning to the other residents. From time to time, the

⁶⁴S. Perelmutter, ‘Ha-pesah ha-rishon be-mahane demblin’ [The First Passover in Demblin Camp], in *Sefer Demblin-Modzjitz*, pp. 446–447; Wenkart, p. 52; T. Eichenbrenner, p. 343.

⁶⁵Perelmutter, p. 447.

⁶⁶YVA, 0.3/9295, testimony of Topolsky, p. 17; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, pp. 23–24; Daitsher, pp. 482–483; Perelmutter, p. 502; Wenkart, pp. 60–61; ŽIH, 301/1447, testimony of Zygmunt, p. 1; On Krašnik camp, see Silberklang, p. 256.

⁶⁷YVA, 0.3/6715, testimony of Weingarten, pp. 21–22; YVA, 0.3/9077, testimony of Neumann, p. 21; Wenkart, pp. 56–59.

⁶⁸T. Eichenbrenner, p. 376; Daitsher, p. 482; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 22; Wenkart, pp. 55–56.

airfield police would conduct searches among the camp population, including humiliating examinations of the genitals of the women and girls.⁶⁹

While the punishment meted out at the Dęblin-Irena airfield camp was admittedly cruel, it appears that it was imposed less randomly and less frequently than at other camps. Whereas at other camps, such as Zamość and Budzyn, severe punishments were routinely imposed at the random whims of the various functionaries, at Dęblin-Irena and at Kraśnik punishment was only rarely dispensed. Furthermore, there was generally some rationale to the punishment, however cruel and disproportionate it may have been, and random sanctions were seldom imposed, usually by the gendarmerie. It appears that in this sphere, too, the camp authorities, often in response to Wenkart's intervention, kept the number of cases of punishment in check, particularly when they had failed to inform the gendarmerie of an escape of Jews and wanted to prevent it from entering the camp with the intention of abusing its residents.⁷⁰

In the summer of 1944, on the eve of the German retreat and the arrival of the Red Army, all the forced labor camps in the Lublin province were evacuated to camps further west.⁷¹ As part of this operation, the Dęblin-Irena airfield camp was evacuated to Częstochowa. This move and the ensuing events put Wenkart's leadership further to test and elicited even more harsh criticism of him.

On 14 July 1944, Wenkart was summoned to the camp treasurer who told him that because the Russian front was advancing, the Jewish camp would be evacuated to Częstochowa, and assured him that the camp residents would be treated fairly in the new camp. Wenkart expressed his misgivings with regard to the fate of the children, but once he realized that the decision was final, he insisted that the group carry a letter signed by Hönig, the commander of the airfield, assuring the safety of the children in the new camp. That evening, Wenkart convened the camp's Jewish residents to tell them of the imminent move, and the audience reacted hysterically. The following morning, a list of the evacuees was received, which, according to Wenkart, had been compiled by Wiszniewski, the foreman. Not a single resident agreed to travel in the first batch of evacuees to Częstochowa, and those who were registered to do so demanded that Wenkart join them. At the same time, those who were to remain and be sent in the second transport demanded that Wenkart stay with them.⁷²

On 17 July 1944, the first batch of 200 residents set out from Dęblin-Irena to Hasag camp at Częstochowa. Some have testified that for the most part this group comprised single Jews, women and children who lacked status and ties in the camp,⁷³ including 15 young children, apparently between the ages of 3 and 6. Upon the order of the *Werkshutz* commander at Hasag, Bartenschlager, the 15 children were immediately taken away and shot dead in a nearby pit.⁷⁴

On 22 July 1942, the second transport departed for Hasag. It comprised all the remaining camp residents, including Wenkart, his family and 33 young children, and was accompanied by the German camp commander, Rademacher, who carried with him the letter of protection

⁶⁹Goldberg, p. 429; YVA, 0.3/3029, testimony of Kaminska, p. 13; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 20; YVA, 0.3/9935, testimony of Ravid, pp. 9–10; Moreshet, A/525, testimony of Kloiman, p. 4; Hochman, p. 71.

⁷⁰Ibid., 301/1447, testimony of Zygmunt, p. 1; On Kraśnik camp, see Silberklang, pp. 253–263.

⁷¹Silberklang, p. 263. See the text of the order issued on 20 July 1944 by the commander of SIPO and the SD in the Generalgouvernement regarding the procedure for evacuating Jewish prisoners, in Felicia Karai, *Harmavet be-tsahov, mahane ha-avoda Skarżysko-Kamienna* [Death in Yellow, the Skarżysko-Kamienna Labor Camp] (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 127.

⁷²Wenkart, pp. 74–76.

⁷³YVA, 0.3/5668, testimony of Brandt, p. 13; YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 24.

⁷⁴Devorah Reznik, 'We Saw The Children No More', in *Dęblin-Modzjitz*, p. 398; Goldberg, pp. 431–432; Apelboim, p. 442.

provided by Hönig. During the course of the evacuation and the loading of belongings, about 50 Jews escaped from the camp and made their way to the forest. Most were murdered by the AK, while others retraced their steps and were sent to Częstochowa.⁷⁵

On the morning of 25 July 1942, the group arrived at the gates of the plant and was greeted by Bartenschlager, the guard of the plant's commander, and Wenkart handed him Hönig's letter. Bartenschlager responded by telling Wenkart that the children would be taken away and that only his own daughter could stay in the camp. Wenkart objected vehemently and later claimed that he declared that he was prepared to die, for trusting a German officer.⁷⁶ The matter remained unresolved, and Bartenschlager ordered that the children be separated from their parents and temporarily placed in barracks near the entrance to the camp. The Jews then set upon Wenkart, accusing him of failing to keep his promises. Additionally, the Jews of Dęblin-Irena from the first transport had told those of the second group about the fate that awaited their children.

Ida Milgroim, the children's teacher at the Dęblin-Irena camp, was permitted to join the children in the barracks and later testified as follows:

They [The parents] went through unbelievable suffering, feeling sure that their sons and daughters were just waiting to die, it went on that way for days. I was the only adult among the children ... I was able to talk two of the Jewish policemen into allowing the children, one by one to say good-bye to their parents. Although this was an activity that could have meant death for all three of us, the policemen organized it so that each mother separately, was able to come to the gate, and I sent her child there and they fell into each other's arms, hugged and kissed, and then the child had to come back immediately. Even the littlest one knew how to act ...⁷⁷

While they were awaiting their fate, food was brought to the children, but they did not touch it even though they were hungry, fearing that this was an attempt to poison them. Only once Milgroim had tasted the food did they consent to eat. After three days, the children were reunited with their parents and settled in the camp. When the parents of the first transport, whose children had been murdered, found out that the other children had been saved, they caused a commotion, fell upon Wenkart and in their moment of despair threatened that they themselves would kill the children who had been allowed to live.⁷⁸

It appears that the children who arrived on the second transport were saved by virtue of tough negotiating with Bartenschlager. It is likely that when the second transport arrived at Częstochowa, a rumor spread among the deportees that Bartenschlager's wife was undergoing a high-risk pregnancy, having suffered a number of miscarriages, and that Bartenschlager was seeking a midwife or doctor. Among the newly arrived Jews were the midwife Sonia Leberbaum and Dr Kestenbaum from Ryki. According to one source, Dr Kestenbaum treated Bartenschlager's wife, and the commander declared that should his wife give birth to a healthy child, the children would be saved. This indeed came to pass, and the children were thus forced to wait several days for their fate to be decided. Another source maintains that the midwife Leberbaum was summoned

⁷⁵YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 25; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, pp. 66–67; ŻIH, 301/4400, testimony of Tsvi Tsederbaum (Polish, 1949), p. 1; ŻIH, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, p. 12; Wenkart, pp. 72, 77; Goldberg, p. 430.

⁷⁶Wenkart, p. 81. Wenkart's testimony is supported by Samuel Harris. See Samuel R. Harris and Cheryl Gorder, *Sammy: Child Survivor of the Holocaust* (St. Louis: Bluebird Publishing, 1999), pp. 36–37.

⁷⁷Milgroim-Tzitrinboim, p. 392.

⁷⁸Wenkart, pp. 80–83; Milgroim-Tzitrinboim, p. 392; Chaya-Brocha Rosenberg-Urbach, 'Tragic Fate of a Jewish Demblin Family', in *Demblin-Modzjitz*, p. 451; Goldberg, pp. 431–432; YVA, 0.3/9295, testimony of Topolsky, p. 19; YVA, 0.3 V.T./5445, testimony of Rabinowitz; interview with Henri Rosen (Ramle, January 2011).

to the wife and entreated her to persuade her husband not to harm the children. Others have claimed that Mrs Bartenschlager intervened in the wake of a dream that she interpreted as a warning that if her husband harmed the children, her baby would also be harmed. Even Wenkart, who generally tended to claim credit for the protection of Dęblin-Irena's Jews, gives credence to this version, although he maintains that Bartenschlager attributed the saving of the children to Wenkart himself and to the forceful words he uttered when the party arrived at the camp. Perhaps the payment of a bribe to Bartenschlager also played a part in saving the children.⁷⁹ It would seem that each of the above versions has some truth to it, and they fit together well. The Dęblin-Irena Jews were dispersed among the four Hasag plants, and in January 1945 some of them were deported to Buchenwald and to Bergen-Belsen, while others were freed from Częstochowa.⁸⁰

As described previously, some of the Jews believed that Wenkart was responsible for the evacuation of Dęblin-Irena camp to Częstochowa, since he feared that his enemies in the camp would seek retribution at the time of the liberation. This interpretation demonstrates just how powerful Wenkart was in the Dęblin-Irena camp and how the Jews believed that he enjoyed considerable freedom of action and was in control of every situation. Wenkart himself maintained that he was very fearful of a bloodbath that the AK and the local population were liable to carry out once the Germans left, and he had grounds for such fear. Nevertheless, the decision to leave the camp was clearly not his and was instead part of a general redeployment by the occupation authorities on the eve of their withdrawal.⁸¹

The murder of the children at Częstochowa inflamed the residents of Dęblin-Irena camp against Wenkart. Those sent on the first transport and whose children were murdered blamed him and refused to reconcile themselves to their cruel fate: 'We begged him [Wenkart] not to send us [to Częstochowa] ... but he didn't listen ... when we arrived in Częstochowa they took our children away from us ... and we never saw the children again ... cursed shall be Wenkart the Jewish murderer ...'.⁸² The parents of the children of the second transport, on the other hand, regarded Wenkart as the person responsible for saving their children.⁸³

Many questions pertaining to Wenkart's actions remain unresolved: why did Wenkart and Rademacher (who accompanied the second group) fail to join the first group that was dispatched to Częstochowa with the letter of protection? Was the initial list of evacuees indeed randomly compiled, or did it comprise the weak segment of the camp population, which was sent off first without any support? One should nevertheless keep in mind that, as a Jewish leader during the Holocaust whose hands were tied and who did not make the final decision, all that Wenkart, who was himself a victim of the same circumstances, could do was to try to proceed and survive as best as he was able. The fact that he survived the Holocaust and was able to share his version of the events is unusual and important, since it helps to shed light on the decision-making and motives of Jewish leaders during that period. Throughout his book,

⁷⁹YVA, 0.3/9295, testimony of Topolsky, p. 19; YVA, 0.3/3029, testimony of Kaminska, p. 17; YVA, 0.3/9935, testimony of Ravid, p. 11; the Rosen interview; Wenkart, p. 82.

⁸⁰The Hasag plants to which the Jews of Dęblin-Irena were sent were Raków, Warta, Czestochowianka and Pelcery.

⁸¹YVA, 0.3/2951, testimony of Eckhaiser, p. 25; YVA, 0.3/8868, testimony of Tantsman, pp. 66–67; ŻIH, 301/4400, testimony of Tsederbaum, p. 1; *Ibid.*, 301/112, testimony of Fishfeld, p. 12; Wenkart, pp. 72, 77; Goldberg, p. 430.

⁸²Reznik, p. 398.

⁸³Bubis, p. 77. Disagreement about Wenkart can be found even within the same family. Bubis, as noted, blames him for the death of his father, while Bubis' uncle felt he owed Wenkart the life of his young son, who was sent to Częstochowa on the second transport and saved.

Wenkart makes every effort to explain that his main objective was to maintain an orderly and calm work camp in order to keep it operating as long as possible. He tried to act as wisely as possible in his dealings both with the camp commanders and the Jewish residents. However, his *modus operandi* gave him no insignificant number of enemies and generated harsh accusations regarding the immorality of his decisions. Yet when assessed based on the end result, one must acknowledge that while very few Jews from towns in Puławy County survived the Holocaust, hundreds of the Dęblin-Irena camp residents did.⁸⁴ This conclusion, however, must be qualified by taking into account that particular circumstances and fortuitous elements played their part here as well. Had the camp been evacuated to Auschwitz-Birkenau, for instance, things would have played out very differently.

Conclusion

The vast majority of the Jews of Puławy County were murdered between March and October of 1942, during the course of three waves of deportation to the death camps, while only a few were left in work camps in the county. Although those left behind after the deportations had some chance of surviving since they were employees of the German Reich, most were exterminated during the course of two murderous operations: the first conducted in October and November 1942 and the second, the ‘harvest festival’, on 3–4 November 1943. The Dęblin-Irena airfield camp was singular and unusual in every respect, since it was a family camp that operated until the liberation of the county in July 1944, and the Jews who were held there lived and worked under relatively decent conditions, which included sufficient nourishment, attention to health and hygiene, freedom of religious worship and the presence of children. These conditions were secured by virtue of the personalities of the German commanders and of Wenkart, the *Lagerälteste*, and his functional relations with his German superiors. Wenkart also succeeded in minimizing the imposition of harsh punishments on the Jews and in fact rescued a number of them, despite generating considerable controversy and giving rise to trenchant moral questions in the wake of accusations leveled against him of having abandoned Jews.

One of the reasons that the camp’s Jews were kept alive until the end of the occupation is that the Luftwaffe, under the supervision of the SS, administered the camp. This policy was apparently linked to Hitler’s assumption, which he upheld until the very end, that the war could take a turn and that the air force would play a major role in this development.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, no other case can support this generalization; several other camps in Lublin province that were attached to the Luftwaffe airfields were dissolved earlier. The Jewish laborers in the Biała Podlaska camp were murdered during the course of the ‘harvest festival’,⁸⁶ while the three air force camps in the region of Zamość were closed down by November 1943.⁸⁷ From this we may infer that the infighting between the SS and the army with regard to exploitation of the Jewish labor force prevented the Luftwaffe from articulating a consistent policy pertaining to the fate of its Jewish laborers. Still, while at other camps such as Zamość neither the Luftwaffe nor the SS had a stake in keeping the Jewish laborers alive, at Dęblin-Irena these laborers were vital to their respective fields of employment. Hermann Wenkart impressed their essentiality upon the German command, thereby impacting their prospect of survival.

⁸⁴ŻIH, 301/1298, testimony of Sochodolsky, p. 2; ŻIH, 301/1447, testimony of Zygmunt, p. 3; ŻIH, 301/1168, testimony of Meltzman, p. 4; YVA, M.I.Q, anonymous testimony (Yiddish, 1947), p. 3.

⁸⁵Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, Nemesis: 1936–1945* (Tel Aviv, 2011), pp. 521–531.

⁸⁶Silberklang, p. 249.

⁸⁷Kopciowski, pp. 146–148.

This conclusion, however, is valid only for the specific circumstances and conditions that pertained to the Dęblin-Irena airfield camp. Had any element of these conditions been different – a different airfield commander, a change in the SS's control of the camp, evacuation of the camp to a location other than Częstochowa, among others – things may well have turned out very differently. In the end, luck played a significant part here, and the Jewish residents of the camp had no way of predicting their fate or of influencing it. Hundreds did indeed survive Dęblin-Irena by virtue of their labor, yet the overwhelming majority of the county's Jews who were sent to labor camps did not live to witness the day of liberation.

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