

Operation Reinhardt (17 March 1942 – 17 November 1943)

We must give the voice back to the witnesses. Only they – the few who managed to survive – are able to give testimony to the series of events spanning from March 1942 to November 1943, and known as „Operation Reinhardt“.

First image. Early morning, armed German troops surrounded the ghetto. The citizens had no choice. Several minutes had to suffice to pack the remnants of their possessions – the last evidence of their identity. As long as what was left of one's strength allowed them to still feel human. Soon after, all of them were driven to any place that could accommodate a mass of people: to a square, a marketplace, a train station. They had to wait their turn – literally and metaphorically – for hours. Concurrently with the liquidation of small ghettos in the General Government and directing Jews to larger centres, the action of deporting Jewish population „east“, „into the unknown“ gained momentum. One of the eyewitnesses, Gustawa Jarecka, said: „Resigned people marched uncoerced, believing that somewhere on the way, they will begin to live anew, in a harsh, but still, some kind of a reality,“. She probably sensed what awaited her compatriots because she summed up her impressions in the following way: „And so they marched on their own into the depths of hell....“. Probably still with a remnant of illusory hope. So when the train finally rolled up, the passive attitude of the condemned disappeared. Under the pressure of time and strong blows, the events were gaining momentum. The railcars were soon filled up. This is how Marek Edelman summed up the activities of Nazi services: „The last moment, the plugging of last gaps – a mother is shoved into a not yet fully packed car, her child won't fit in, so it is torn away from the woman wailing in pain and placed further, in the next car,“. The dramatic scene described by Edelman closes with the following description: „Slowly and with difficulty the door closes. The dense mass is packed in with rifle butts – it is so crowded. Finally. The train departs“. Towards death camps...

Second image. Distances. Small. From several to slightly over a hundred kilometres. Trackways

from all „Jewish” centres in the GG led to Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. The last and final place of destination. Right before the arrival, there was a change of the train crew. Poles were replaced by Germans. Forty, fifty, at peak times even sixty cattle cars, wrapped in barbed wire were taken to a ramp directly neighbouring the camp. A sign was given to open the cars: the victims were descending from the world still of life into the world of imminent death. A “checkout counter” served as the border. Rudolf Reder recalled: „In the window of a wooden booth, you had to give away documents, watches, and jewellery. One by one, people were deprived of their names”. They were losing the remnants of their dignity. They had to undress: „Such a person ceases to be a human being, ceases to be the master of one’s fate,,, assessed Samuel Willenberg, „In this moment, you want to run as fast as you can, run away from this place, no matter where“. In the camp nomenclature, it was called “the road to heaven”: „,[The victims] were beaten and shoved with rifle butts,,, reported Jankiel Wiernik, „And so every person, crying out and trying to avoid the blows, threw themselves into the arms of death and ran into the chamber. The stronger push the weaker. The noise does not last long. The door closes with a thud. The chamber is full. They start the engine, connect the inlet pipes,,, All it took was less than a quarter of hour. The sentence was executed. They all had to die. For their wrong, Jewish origin...

Third image. Efficiency of murdering depended on the pace of removing the corpses. And the corpses – Abraham Krzepicki recalled – were omnipresent: „Bodies arranged in different positions and facial expressions. As if they just let out their last breath. The sky, the earth, and the corpses. A gigantic factory manufacturing corpses,,, The process of mass murder was followed by another procedure. Selected people, the young and strong, were set to work. Their life was extended for the sole purpose of (temporary) work to meet the camp’s needs. „Another slaves,” as Richard Glazar called them, “reach for this naked, greyish and lilac-tinted product squished into one mass,,, They carried countless naked bodies to large mass graves, located near the „shower chamber”. „From all sides, continued Glazar, death will be looking at them from thousands of open eyes and mouths. It will penetrate them with its choking, sweetish scent,,, The omnipresent death, executioners’ ruthlessness, the burden of work as people were pushed to the breaking point, and the necessity to fight for one’s life desensitized to the suffering of others. Kalman Taigman was a „burrier” in Treblinka: „What did I feel [then]? I felt nothing. I became a machine. I had no thoughts,,, He added, however: „If hell exists, I saw it,,, It was the worst, but not

the only type of camp „craft”. Hejnoch Brener was a „hairdresser”. He cut women’s hair. Years later, he confessed: „I had to cut my wife’s hair,,. Other specialists – the so-called „dentists” – pulled out gold teeth from the dead. After all these activities, the „service” had only to „powder” the corpses with lime, cover them with a thin layer of dirt, and wait for the next transport...

The basis for the extermination activities was supposed to be ideological. That is, in theory. In practice, the Germans reaped sizeable benefits from Jewish slave work, as well as robbing their property. When it became clear that the Nazi state is on the verge of collapse, its authorities ordered to implement “Action 1005” – remove all traces of the crime: exhume and burn the corpses, scatter their ashes on the nearby and faraway fields, and restore the places of murder to their natural state. They were probably convinced that the committed crimes can be hidden and erased from memory.

Without background. The slaughter that took place as part of Operation Reinhardt ended in November 1943. The Germans killed – in the ghettos, on the way to places of mass murder, and in the death camps themselves – nearly 2 million Jews. 470,000 in Bełżec, 180,000 in Sobibór, 870,000 in Treblinka. They were helped by Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Latvians who served in auxiliary corps; Polish, Russian, and Belarusian people also took part in the murders... The majority of victims came from the General Government (around 1.3 million). These are only numbers and places. Statistics. How differently could we treat them if we restored names to the numbers...

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