

## Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetuation

GERHARD REMPEL\*

*Abstract:* Building on earlier discussions of Mennonites and National Socialism, this article examines several direct connections between Mennonites and the Holocaust in Europe, Russia and America. Mining recent scholarship and new evidence the author presents a sobering view of Mennonite collaboration with the German Schutzstaffel (SS) in carrying out the “final solution” and their extensive ties to the concentration camp at Stutthof near Danzig. It also exposes Mennonite participation in the massacre of Jews at Zaporozhia, the region around the Mennonite colonies of Chortitza and Molochna, and concludes with a close analysis of the activities of two Mennonites, Jack Reimer and Heinrich Wiens, who were accused of committing war crimes.

“It can be demonstrated that . . . people of Mennonite heritage . . . most likely did not participate in the atrocities and denunciations committed at Stutthof.”<sup>1</sup> Horst Gerlach, a prolific German Mennonite writer who was born in Elbing, Poland, drew that hopeful conclusion nearly forty years ago. The Stutthof concentration camp—located not far from Elbing and just a few miles east of Danzig—was the first camp to be constructed outside of Germany. Along with its numerous outlying slave labor camps it was initially intended, according to Polish scholar Janina Grabowsky, as “a camp of political terror against Poles.” In the course of time, however, “it became a major cogwheel in the German machinery of destruction against the people of Europe, at the end—and above all—against the Jews.”<sup>2</sup>

---

\* Gerhard Rempel is a professor of history emeritus at Western New England College. The author would like to thank John D. Roth, Harry Loewen, James Urry and Christoph Wiebe, all of whom made helpful suggestions and assisted generously in the preparation of this article. Special thanks go also to Hans-Jürgen Goertz for his encouraging comments about my research efforts. Goertz broached this difficult topic some time ago in his “Nationale Erhebung und religiöser Niedergang: Mißglückte Aneignung des täuferischen Leitbildes im Dritten Reich,” *Das schwierige Erbe der Mennoniten, Aufsätze und Reden* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 121-149.

1. Quoted in Diether Götz Lichdi, *Mennoniten im Dritten Reich: Dokumentation und Deutung*, (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1977), 248.

2. Hermann Kuhn, ed., *Stutthof: Ein Konzentrationslager vor den Toren Danzigs*, 2nd ed. (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2004), 6. The historical half of this book was written by a Polish scholar, Janina Grabowsky, and the other consists of brief accounts by survivors from a variety of European countries. The most recent and comprehensive account of the Stutthof Concentration Camp is now to be found in the nine-volume series edited by Wolfgang

Stutthof was also located in an area with the highest density of Mennonite residents of any place in the world. Based on interviews with former Mennonites from the area, Gerlach argued that Mennonites, among others, actually tried to prevent the erection of the camp in 1939 and that they sought to “moderate” conditions for many inmates, to the degree that such influence was possible within the context of a dictatorial regime. As current scholarship has demonstrated, however, Gerlach’s claim that the Stutthof concentration camp and the killing process that occurred within its guarded walls remained a well-kept secret to the public, including local residents, is not plausible. Already in the early 1980s Meir Buchsweiler was certain that most native Germans in the Ukraine—home to another very large settlement of Mennonites—“knew what was being done to the Jews” and that thousands most likely participated in “the killing actions.” Indeed, many Russian Germans received a portion of the clothes and property stolen from the victims.<sup>3</sup> If Mennonites in South Russia knew that a genocide was happening around them, then certainly their cousins in the Vistula delta of Poland, the motherland of Russian Mennonites, knew and understood that they were in the midst of the Holocaust and could not avoid involvement in one way or another.

This essay traces a painful story of the Mennonite participation in the Holocaust, moving from a pattern of collaboration in the Danzig Lowlands to direct perpetration of genocidal acts in the Caucasus with a significant part of the story occurring at the midpoint between these two regions in the Russian Mennonite settlements of Chortitza and the Molochna.

#### SOVIETS, MENNONITES AND GERMAN IDENTITY

As the final tragic event in the concluding phase of the Mennonite sojourn in Russia, the Holocaust has not yet been fully examined as part of Mennonite history either in Russia or in Europe as a whole. The roots of that story begin with the painful events of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent civil war. Driven by fear and the predation of violent anarchists, many Mennonites in South Russia set aside their

---

Benz and associates: Wolfgang Benz und Barbara Distel, eds., *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, Band 6: Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof (München: C. H. Beck, 2007).

3. Meir Buchsweiler, *Volksdeutsche in der Ukraine am Vorabend und Beginn des Zweiten Weltkriegs—Ein Fall doppelter Loyalität?* (Gerlingen: Bleicher Verlag, 1984), 383. See also Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Gellately argues that most Germans, despite continuing claims of mass amnesia, had a fairly clear picture of the extent of the atrocities and the activities of the Gestapo and SS in the course and conduct of the Holocaust.

pacifist tradition and formed self-defense units to protect their homes and families against bandits and even the Red Army. Since many had earlier joined the counterrevolutionary forces of former tsarist generals Mennonites now found themselves on the losing side of the conflict as enemies of the new communist government. To be sure, Lenin's New Economic Plan, introduced in 1921, did partially restore the private ownership of land and enabled diligent Mennonite farmers to bring about a remarkable short-lived economic recovery. But these conditions also created a new class of prosperous entrepreneurs, later known as kulaks, who were opponents of collectivization and stalwart defenders of capitalism. In 1928, in an effort to contain threats to his social and economic policies, Stalin introduced the first Five Year Plan—a fierce collectivization and industrialization campaign enforced by dekulakization and deportation, which tore apart Mennonite colonies and broke up nearly every family by sending fathers and sons into prisons in the far north gulag.<sup>4</sup>

The 1930s were a time of famine and terror. Policies of oppression, especially against religious groups, brought Mennonite settlements to a point of annihilation and destruction, at least for those who could not avail themselves of the brief opening for emigration in 1929, following huge demonstrations in Moscow.<sup>5</sup> The Great Terror, as the period was known, affected every Mennonite household and brought their very identity as a distinct religious and ethnic group into question. Historian Peter Letkemann, who has studied this period intensely, estimates that approximately 8 to 9 percent of Mennonites were arrested during the *Yezhovshchina*, double the ratio put forward by Robert Conquest for the general Soviet population (7 million arrests = 4.3 percent), and more than five times the number suggested by archival K.G.B. sources (2.5 million arrests = 1.5 percent).<sup>6</sup>

Mennonite ministers and teachers, who maintained the religious and moral infrastructure of the community, were always the first to be denounced as kulaks and the first to be arrested and deported. This was to be expected from a regime that was not only anticlerical and aggressively atheistic but was also actively organizing counterreligious

---

4. Colin Neufeldt, "Separating the Sheep from the Goats: The Role of Mennonites and Non-Mennonites in the Dekulakization of Khortitsa, Ukraine (1928-1930)," *MQR* 83 (April 2009), 221-291.

5. Colin Neufeldt, "The Flight to Moscow, 1929: An Act of Mennonite Civil Disobedience," *Preservings* 19 (Dec. 2001), 35ff.

6. Peter Letkemann, "Mennonite Victims of the 'Great Terror,' 1936-1938," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998), 33-58; quote on page 37.

networks called the League of the Godless. Lenin himself told Maxim Gorki that “every religious idea, every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God, is unutterable vileness . . . of the most dangerous kind, ‘contagion’ of the most abominable kind.”<sup>7</sup> Religious groups—both the formerly official Orthodox church as well as the dissident outcrops like Baptists and Mennonites—represented more than the opiate of the masses; they were regarded as a dangerous enemy to the Marxist materialism of the Soviets.<sup>8</sup>

While the Mennonites welcomed the official separation of church and state early in the regime, they had immediate trouble with the subsequent laws, which legalized antireligious propaganda, permitted the government seizure of church property and abolished the legal status of church organizations. Other restrictive measures soon followed: religious instruction in school was forbidden; teachers who had taught religion were dismissed; and the police were allowed to censor sermons.<sup>9</sup> Sundays and holidays soon became mandatory workdays. Religious associations were forced to register with the government and important organizations like the Commission for Church Affairs [K.f.K] soon lost their legal status. Church buildings were confiscated for nonreligious purposes and ruinous taxes were imposed on those churches that still existed.<sup>10</sup> Local officials tried to isolate religious leaders from their congregations, while promoting blasphemous demonstrations and distributing antireligious literature. The so-called Stalinist Constitution of 1936 allowed the practice of religion and the propagation of antireligious ideas, but prohibited purely religious propaganda and suppressed all missionary work and public preaching.<sup>11</sup> Although the fire of faith remained alive in the hearts and minds of many individuals and in secret worship celebrated in private homes, the relentless

---

7. Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 199. See the rest of his chapter on “The Churches and the People” (199-213) for an early and still useful view of the Soviet antireligious campaign and policy.

8. For a full discussion of the broad range and depth of Soviet religious policy see the excellent compendium *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. Philip Walters, “A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy,” 3-30. One of the important issues this book analyzes is the process that sought to turn Soviet society into one dominated by atheism. Also note the important chapter by Walter Sawatsky, “Protestantism in the USSR,” dealing mainly with the postwar period.

9. Neufeldt, “Separating the Sheep from the Goats,” 224-225.

10. *Ibid.*, 254.

11. C. F. Klassen, “Die kirchliche Entwicklung in Russland,” Jan./Feb. 1949; Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, C. F. Klassen Papers, File 12; J. A. Neufeldt, “Die Religion im heutigen Russland,” Feb. 7, 1951, Archives of the Mennonite Church–Newton [hereafter AMC-N], S.A. I 100.

government propaganda had taken a clear toll.<sup>12</sup> “As a German-speaking, religious minority that had prospered under the tsarist regime,” writes historian Colin Neufeldt,

Mennonites were an obvious target for Stalin’s “secularization” campaign—a process to purge the countryside of an undesirable class through extraordinary measures that included expropriation, arrest, imprisonment, exile and execution. Mennonites were among the first Soviet citizens to be dekulakized in the late 1920s and early 1930s, often in greater percentages than their Ukrainian neighbors. Most Mennonites who were subjected to this process saw themselves as victims; at the same time, many Mennonites (especially those in North America) identified Ukrainians and Russians as the perpetrators of the dekulakization measures in Mennonite communities.<sup>13</sup>

Even so, a surprising number of Mennonites agreed to serve in Stalin’s regime as representatives of the Soviet local government or the Communist Party hierarchy, in effect supporting the forces of oppression and persecution. Several even submitted lists of local kulaks to the authorities, including the names of Mennonite church leaders hiding among the poor populace. “There were false brothers in some villages,” commented one observer in Osterwick, “who played the terrible role of Judas, betrayed their brothers, and told outrageous lies to authorities.”<sup>14</sup>

By the mid-1930s the religious and social fabric of Mennonite communal life, along with its ethical and moral fiber, was disintegrating; the public expression of religion and the physical existence of the Mennonite church in Russia had been nearly erased. Young people in particular were vulnerable not only to the spreading atheism but, more importantly, to a kind of moral and lawless indifference to the inner voice of conscience and restraint. A decade later this trend blinded many to the inherent evil of the carriers of National Socialism who came to Communist Russia in German uniforms as purported liberators.

This was the larger context of the Mennonite participation with the Holocaust. Although more research remains to be done, this essay summarizes the evidence of Mennonite collaboration in two settings: the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig, Poland, and the murderous

---

12. Neufeldt, “Separating the Sheep from the Goats,” 238.

13. *Ibid.*, 221-222.

14. Quoted from the original story in *Der Bote* in *ibid.*, 272, 291.

activities of several Mennonites who participated in the elimination of Jews in the region around Zaporozhia in the Ukraine.<sup>15</sup>

#### MENNONITES AND THE STUTTHOF CONCENTRATION CAMP

While Horst Gerlach sought to minimize the horror of the Stutthof concentration camp, rendering it as innocuous as possible, he did acknowledge that at least two Mennonites were known to have served as guards,<sup>16</sup> that many Polish Mennonite farmers used inmates as cheap labor under the oversight of SS guards, that a major Mennonite factory was constructed largely with concentration camp labor,<sup>17</sup> and that most Mennonites in the area were not all that upset or even curious about what went on at Stutthof behind the wall of official secrecy. Gerlach emphatically denies, however, that any gas chambers ever existed at Stutthof, despite ample evidence to the contrary.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, his optimistic estimate that only 9,000 people were killed at Stutthof is a huge miscalculation—the most recent research concludes that at least 65,000 victims died at Stutthof. Finally, Gerlach consistently emphasized that Mennonites treated the inmates of Stutthof generously, citing the example of a Polish laborer on his own father's estate near Elbing who was condemned to Stutthof for unspecified reasons.<sup>19</sup> As we shall see, such claims overlook a good deal of evidence to the contrary.

The Stutthof concentration camp, located near Danzig, was established in 1939 by the Waffen-SS (*Schutzstaffel*), an armed unit of the Nazi Party under the direct control of Heinrich Himmler. Since Danzig was an early stronghold in the Nazi revolution, some 6,000 members of

---

15. For the broader context of this problem see the balanced survey by Edgar Deibert, *Sowjetdeutsche zwischen Hitler und Stalin: Deutsche in der UdSSR 1900-1950* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2009).

16. Following the war, SS *Scharführer* Heinz Löwen was sentenced to a five-year prison term and SS *Unterscharführer* Johannes Görtz to an eight-year term. Given the frequent transfers and reappointments, a guard list recorded at any particular moment is bound to be incomplete. However, there were several other guards with apparent Mennonite names. See also Kuhn, ed. *Stutthof*, 95ff. This part of the book consists of personal recollections by former inmates that describe the shady character and cruel behavior of the guards in moving detail.

17. Gerlach, "Stutthof und die Mennoniten," 244. "The Holocaust Chronicle," <http://www.holocaustchronicle.org/index.html>; <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?ModuleId=10005197>; [http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v16/v16n5p-2\\_Weber.html](http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v16/v16n5p-2_Weber.html).

18. Pictures of the gas chamber at Stutthof can be seen at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Web site and the Polish Stutthof Museum site. Current Holocaust deniers go so far as to suggest that the gas chambers at Stutthof were no more than de-lousing rooms. See Jürgen Graf and Carlo Mattogno, *Das Konzentrationslager Stutthof und seine Funktion in der nationalsozialistischen Judenpolitik* (Hastings: Castle Hill Publishers, 1999), passim; see also the backside dust cover of the English translation (2003).

19. Gerlach, "Stutthof und die Mennoniten," 237.

the SS were stationed within its environs as early as 1933. A significant number of them had been recruited and trained in the Reich proper. The Berlin Gestapo maintained a secret department within the Danzig criminal police force that spied on Polish associations and business establishments, making lists of individuals to be arrested when the opportunity arose. When Himmler visited the city clandestinely early in 1939, he decided that the SS presence was too weak and gave orders to expand it by creating the so-called "SS-Heimwehr Danzig" and the "SS-Wachsturmbann Eimann." The latter was to develop plans for prison camps to accommodate anticipated arrests. The commanders selected an isolated and secluded spot surrounded by water and swamps close to the village of Stutthof near the East Prussian border. In August of 1939 inmates from the Danzig prison, just a few miles to the west, began to build barracks and on September 2 the first 200 prisoners arrived. These Polish inmates were forced to build more barracks and expand the facilities, so that by January 1940 Stutthof held 4,500 prisoners, with guards and a command staff under SS-Obersturmbannführer Max Pauly housed in their own comfortable separate facilities.<sup>20</sup>

Eventually, the Stutthof complex included over 200 outlying camps (*Aussenlager*) and external commando units. Among its victims were prisoners from twenty-five different countries including Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, White Russians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Czechs, Slovaks, Finns, Norwegians, French, Danes, Dutch, Belgians, Germans, Austrians, English, Spanish, Italians, Yugoslavs, Hungarians and even Gypsies. Many of the prisoners were Jewish. During their incarceration amid appalling sanitary conditions, prisoners suffered malnutrition, disease, and mental and physical torture. Victims died as a result of the living conditions and the slave-like work; they were also executed by shooting, hanging, gassing, lethal injection, beatings and torture.<sup>21</sup> In June 1944, nearly a year before its liberation on May 9, 1945 by troops of the Soviet Army, Stutthof was converted from a slave labor camp<sup>22</sup> to an

---

20. Hermann Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2003), 516-518. Descriptions of the Stutthof camp that follow draw heavily on Kaienburg's important work.

21. Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS*, 516-529, 752-760, 916-921. Janina Grabowska, "K.L. Stutthof: Ein historischer Abriß," in Kuhn, *Stutthof: Ein Konzentrationslager vor den Toren Danzigs*, 8-94. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/stutthof.html>.

22. On the differences between a slave labor camp and a killing center see the fascinating new book by Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

extermination center with outdoor furnaces constructed to dispose of corpses.

That Stutthof began as a camp for civilian prisoners demonstrates convincingly that the SS was determined to profit from the incarceration of political opponents and social minorities. Since no one in the SS organization was willing to provide financial support for expansion, the command staff built its own infrastructure using inmate labor. Thus the camp dedicated more than 60 acres of land to grow vegetables. Inmates built structures for horses, pigs, cows and even angora rabbits, and they erected workshops to support the construction of additional barracks and service facilities. Stutthof soon had its own machine, carpenter and shoe shops, a stone and brick works, a laundry facility, and a roofing and plumbing industry. Not only did the camp quickly become self-sufficient, but it also began to engage in local trade and to generate profits. To further strengthen its financial footing, the command began to lease out inmate workers to public and private enterprises throughout the region, establishing subcamps and special command units in the process. Nearly all economic activities at Stutthof and other camps became SS-specific enterprises.

Over its lifetime, Stutthof grew in size: from 1.2 acres in 1939, to 14.8 acres in 1942, and finally 296 acres in December 1944. The numbers of inmates also increased rapidly: from 650 in December 1941, to 1,855 at the end of 1942 (including 322 women), to 6,000 at the end of 1943. By 1944 Stutthof had become the destination of numerous transports from other camps and from those arrested after the Warsaw uprising, so that the camp held over 33,000 prisoners. If the outlying subcamps are included, the total number of prisoners reached 57,100—36,400 women and 20,700 men. On January 1, 1945, the camp employed 1,056 SS staff and guards.<sup>23</sup> An estimated 110,000 to 120,000 prisoners passed through Stutthof between 1939 and 1945.

On October 1, 1941, Stutthof became a work education camp (*Arbeitserziehungslager*)<sup>24</sup> and as such was subordinated to the Gestapo of Danzig, which designated it as an SS Special Camp. However, SS Oberabschnitt Weichsel, the General-SS authority in the region, was not yet willing to give up this lucrative source of funding. Thus, the camp continued to be maintained and managed by Oswald Pohl, the commander of the Main Business Administration Office (*Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt*) of the SS. Theoretically it was a political prison—a

---

23. <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/stutthof.html>.

24. Wolfgang Benz und Barbara Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, Band I: Die Organisation des Terrors*, ed. Angelika Königseder (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2005), 13ff.

forced labor camp for various industries owned by the SS or other government agencies while supplying inexpensive labor to private and municipal business firms.

Even after some 25,000 Russian prisoners were transferred in 1941, the camp remained primarily a political prison. By January 1942, however, with the arrival of a growing number of other nationalities, Stutthof had become a part of Himmler's regular concentration camp system (*Inspekteur der Konzentrationslager*) on the Mauthausen and Flossenbürg model.<sup>25</sup> During the following year, the SS established an extensive system of subcamps to absorb the rapid growth of prisoners coming from Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Latvia and elsewhere. In 1944 a shipment of 75,000 prisoners from Hungary and Poland arrived, mainly Jews. Another contingent of Jews came directly from Riga.

Thus, in accordance with Himmler's plan, Stutthof became part of a general expansion of the entire camp system, now understood as an SS industrial and settlement project with the addition of POWs as a huge new labor source. In practical terms, this meant that some 400,000 concentration camp inmates were working as slaves in the German war economy.<sup>26</sup> As Himmler himself argued: "No one gives me the money as a present; it must be earned, and it is earned by putting the scum of humanity, the inmates, the habitual criminals, to work."<sup>27</sup>

During the summer of 1944 Stutthof began a new phase of building and expansion: a special section of barracks, the *Judenlager*, was designed to house Jewish men and women who had been transferred from eastern camps overrun by the Soviet Army. The structures were merely walls with no internal furnishings—suggesting that the inmates were sent almost immediately to the gas chambers. By the fall this enormous new barracks complex, including some 146 outlying camps, held 47,000 Jews. The death toll from starvation, mistreatment, random violence, inhuman living conditions and crowding was extremely high.<sup>28</sup> East of the camp massive buildings were erected for the construction of war implements

---

25. Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS*, 518-519. Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 183. For forced Jewish labor outside SS control see Wolf Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor Under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Aims, 1938-1944* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3-102.

26. Wolfgang Benz, et al., *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 1: *Die Organisation des Terrors*, 39.

27. Allen, *The Business of Genocide*, 140; Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS*, 519-520.

28. Wolfgang Benz, et al., *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 1: *Die Organisation des Terrors*, 38.

and a new enclosure was opened in an isolated section of the camp for the condemned conspirators in the July 20, 1944 plot to kill Hitler.<sup>29</sup>

Recent scholarship has focused on the significance of economic considerations behind the Holocaust. Despite some debate on definition, Holocaust scholars have tended to use the terms “forced labor” and “slave labor” interchangeably. In general, writes Jonathan Wiesen, slave labor has come to “include all Jews who worked in death camps, concentration camps, and other work camps in Nazi-occupied Europe. In most cases, industry’s use of slave laborers was in keeping with the SS’s intention to eventually work these particular Jews to death.” Forced laborers, on the other hand, included anyone “who was compelled to leave his or her home in order to work for Nazi Germany.”<sup>30</sup> In any case, compulsory physical labor (i.e., pushing human beings to the outer limits of what they are capable of doing, under brutal conditions and vicious psychological and physical torture) was no less deadly than mass murder by gas or poison pellets. The statistical results of prisoners who were “worked to death” at Stutthof and comparable camps like Dora, which contained the underground V-2 factory, demonstrate this fact conclusively.<sup>31</sup> The only difference was that in forced labor camps the victims lived a little longer to be exploited by SS and private German businessmen who profited from war production.

Eventually, Stutthof acquired its own gas vans and crematoria. Initially, the crematoria were justified as way to eliminate dead bodies, but after 1944, Stutthof had become a killing center. In addition to those executed by gas van the harsh treatment of inmates led to an additional 75,000 to 80,000 inmates dying from secondary causes like hunger, disease, exhaustive work, deprivation and beatings. Many were simply worked to death.<sup>32</sup>

---

29. Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS*, 521-524; Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 477-529.

30. Jonathan Wiesen, “German Industry and the Third Reich: Fifty Years of Forgetting and Remembering,” *Dimensions: A Journal of Holocaust Studies*, 13:2 (2000), n1. See also S. Jonathan Wiesen, *West German Industry and the Challenge of the Nazi Past, 1945-1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Allen, *The Business of Genocide* and Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS*, especially 516-528, 753-760, 916-919.

31. Yves Beon, *Planet Dora: A Memoir of the Holocaust and the Birth of the Space Age*, ed. Michael J. Neufeld (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

32. Peter Lande, “A Major New Source of Data, Valuable Yet Frustrating,” *Avotaynu*, 13 (Summer 1997), 299-305. The new data in question is a huge collection of information about inmates, guards, administrators and history of the camp contained on 305 reels of microfilm obtained by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum from the Stutthof Museum. See also Grabowska, “K.L. Stutthof: Ein historischer Abriß,” 8-94; Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*; and Janina Grabowska-Chalka, *Historischer Wegweiser Museum Stutthof* (Danzig-Stutthof, 2004).

The first concentration camp to be built outside of Germany, Stutthof also turned out to be the last camp to be liberated. When Paul Werner Hoppe, commander at Stutthof, ordered the dissolution of the camp on January 25, 1945, the inmates were forced to begin a death march to the west to avoid liberation by the advancing Soviet troops. At least a third—some reports claim one-half—of the surviving inmates lost their life due to exposure, starvation and deliberate shootings.<sup>33</sup>

### STUTTHOF – THE MENNONITE CONNECTION

At the time of the war, Danzig and its environs was home to more Mennonites than any other place in the world.<sup>34</sup> Some fifty-six Mennonite families lived in the small village of Stutthof itself, so it is not surprising that a number of Mennonite names show up in the records as being closely associated with the prison camp.

Among the apparent Mennonite names that turn up on lists of former camp guards during postwar war crimes trials are the following: Johannes Görtz, eight years imprisonment; Heinz Löwen, five years imprisonment; Johannes Wall, five years imprisonment; Fritz Peters, death sentence.<sup>35</sup> I have not been able to find any additional information about these individuals thus far, nor is it confirmed that all of these people were practicing the Mennonite faith at the time or maintained active membership in Mennonite congregations. But for purposes of showing Mennonite participation in the Holocaust the relevant individuals need not be religiously active; they were Mennonite by virtue of ethnic heritage and upbringing.<sup>36</sup> Yet another Mennonite,

---

33. Kaienburg, *Die Wirtschaft der SS*, 524-525; Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 499-502. This section on the killings at the camp is entitled "Sonderaktionen." For a comprehensive account of all the death marches see Benz, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 1: *Die Organisation des Terrors*, 296ff; and an independent essay, Daniel Blatman, "Rückzug, Evakuierung und Todesmärsche, 1944-1945," in Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, 3:298ff. and his forthcoming book, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

34. For an excellent survey see Peter J. Klassen, *A Homeland for Strangers: An Introduction to Mennonites in Poland and Prussia* (Fresno, Calif.: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1989).

35. The Stutthof Museum in Sztutowo has kindly provided information about these former guards. I am grateful to Anna Chinc and especially to Danuta Drywa for their cooperation and assistance.—Danuta Drywa to Gerhard Rempel, "Nasz znak: DD-4371/10," Feb. 22, 2010. There could have been many more Mennonites on duty at Stutthof or one of its numerous subcamps, whose names and religion were not recorded given the revolving nature of guard assignments.

36. Even Horst Gerlach accepts these individuals as Mennonites, on the basis of their family name alone. According to his 1977 report on Stutthof, an unnamed SS officer from

Heinrich Wiens, served in the ranks of the SS-Wachsturm Eimann, a special security unit that Himmler used to form the initial command at Stutthof. Wiens immigrated to Danzig from Muntau in the Molochna and made a career for himself in the 71. General SS Regiment (*Standarte*)<sup>37</sup> led by Max Pauly, the first commander of Stutthof. As we shall see, Wiens was to become the most notorious Holocaust perpetrator from a Russian Mennonite background.<sup>38</sup>

Mennonites also served as guards outside of the central camp. The longest-lasting Stutthof auxiliary slave-labor camp, known as Hopehill-Reimannsfelde (Nadbrzeże), was situated between the city of Elbing and a freshwater lagoon. It had the reputation of being the “worst” of all the camps on account of the raw climate, demanding work in the brick factory, primitive conditions and, most tellingly, the “extremely brutal way the guards handled the inmates.”<sup>39</sup> The SS owned the factory and the guard contingent was made up largely of a group of ordinary criminals and rowdies, many of them recruits from ethnic German communities in Croatia, Lithuania, Poland, Rumania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. But the worst characters were from Germany itself, among them two Mennonites. One was SS-Unterscharführer Kurt Janzen, who served as *Blockführer* and leader of the labor detachment. The other, Heinz Löwen, was one of the few guards actually tried after the war in Danzig and given a relatively light sentence of five years.<sup>40</sup>

---

the Stutthof command staff informed his British Army captors that he was a Mennonite, but no one was able to disprove his claim that he was not involved in any atrocities or maltreatment of prisoners. Gerlach also found out from some of his Mennonite interviewees that two additional unnamed Mennonites had served as prison guards. One of them requested a transfer to front line duty because he was bored with guard duty and soon died in combat. The other guard transferred to the guard contingent at Stutthof in order to be near his ill father. No charges were filed against him after the war.—Horst Gerlach, “Stutthof und die Mennoniten,” 246-247.

37. In 1939, before the creation of the Waffen-SS, or military wing of the SS, there was only the civilian SS spread all over the country in regional and local units like the party organization made up of *Gaue* and smaller designations. The civilian SS, dressed in black uniforms and carrying special rank designations with militaristic titles, was initially an internal party police force designed to protect leaders and enforce discipline. When Himmler became national police chief in 1936 he gradually combined the SS with all other police forces in Germany.

38. Grabowska, “K.L. Stutthof: Ein historischer Abriß,” 12.

39. Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 653. The information on which the quotation is based comes from Marek Orski, *Czesi, Slowacy I Ugosłowianie w KL Stutthof*, (Gdansk: n.p., 1997), 82-86; cf. Marek Orski, HOPEHILL Filia obozu Koncentracyjnego Stutthof w Nadbrzeżu (Stutthof: Museum of Stutthof, n.d.).

40. Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 653-656; Browning, *Remembering Survival*, 270ff. It is quite amazing that only about 2 percent of the total guard contingent of 3,000 was actually brought to trial. See Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 657, n. 13 and Kuhn, *Stutthof*, 93. The size of the guard contingent changed with the number of prisoners held at any one time.

Another likely Mennonite, a man named Schröder, turned up in the personnel records of the Stutthof outlying camp at Malken. Schröder was one of twenty SS guards notorious for their brutal treatment of 1,000 Jewish women assigned, among other tasks, to build dykes and bring in the beet harvest. Most of the women were shot outright when they could no longer work. Schröder, the SS guard, was tried after the war for murder along with a number of his colleagues, but the case was dismissed because the accused could not be interviewed.<sup>41</sup> A positive report about a Mennonite guard came from the camp at Gotenhafen-Adlershorst. The forced labor crew was guarded by an SS contingent commanded by SS-Rottenführer Johannes Wall. Witnesses at a court trial testified to his kindly treatment of prisoners. He had allowed them to visit with family and friends. But in 1942 Wall was transferred to the Dachau Camp, where his behavior was less benign. A district court in Gdansk found him guilty, ordering a five-year prison term and suspending his citizenship rights for five years. He died in prison in 1948.<sup>42</sup>

At least one woman, possibly a Mennonite, also participated in this ghastly business. Emilie Harms served as a work supervisor of young Jewish inmates from the Groß-Rosen concentration camp. They were assigned to perform dangerous work in the *Dynamit-Action-Gesellschaft*, formerly Alfred Nobel & Co., at the outlying camp in Christianstadt near Breslau. While some of the women below her behaved brutally, there is no evidence of any complaints against Harms herself.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the direct involvement of Mennonites as guards, it has also become clear that Mennonite farmers and businessmen exploited the available inexpensive labor provided by Stutthof prisoners, without any apparent moral compunction. Since Stutthof was largely a slave labor camp for much of its history, the Mennonite connection became important in terms economic interests. One gets the impression from Gerlach's anecdotal interviews with several native Mennonite farmers in the Vistula delta that most of them took advantage of the temporary labor of Stutthof inmates—Jews and non-Jews, male and female—to perform hard work during harvest time and for other duties on their farms. No one paid them any salaries, although they generally appear to have been fed fairly well and housed in hay barns or even farmhouses.

---

41. Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 691-693.

42. *Ibid.*, 623.

43. Isabell Sprenger und Walter Kumpmann, "Groß-Rosen – Stammlager," in Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 271.

In some cases the camp staff brought food to the inmates at their places of work, especially if this was some place other than a farm. To be sure, the farmers had to pay the camps for the use of inmate labor—probably at a rate considerably less than the going rate of RM 0.50 per hour for unskilled labor. But even though some Mennonites then and today are not quite willing to admit that fact, the thought that this kind of compulsory work was anything less than slave labor is absurd.<sup>44</sup>

A Mennonite builder, Gerhard Epp, for example, not only leased 300 Jewish slave laborers at Stutthof to build a new factory near the camp but also served as some sort of general contractor to the SS in assuming responsibility for the construction of all buildings on the premises. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that a Mennonite built the barracks for the first concentration camp on non-German soil.<sup>45</sup> Even more Mennonites were implicated in the forced labor operations of Stutthof in the approximately 200 outlying camps and special purpose work commands related to the Stutthof concentration camp system. According to two comprehensive studies, written by historians Janina Grabowska and Danuta Drywa, a significant percentage of the deaths occurred in these outlying camps, which were to be found in nearly every city and village of the Vistula delta and the whole region stretching from Königsberg in the east to Stolp in the west.<sup>46</sup> The population in this region was therefore fully exposed to the slave labor of Stutthof inmates; and business owners and farmers made full use of the opportunities to exploit cheap labor, while the SS administration reaped huge financial benefits. Surveying the evidence from the outlying camps, the degree and depth of Mennonite involvement with forced labor extracted from the inmates and their role in the genocide that followed becomes clearer.

A camp at the town of Barendt, for example, held several inmates who worked for a farmer, Franz Penner, between June 29 and November 14, 1939, at which time they were returned to the main camp at Stutthof.<sup>47</sup> A

---

44. Wolfgang Benz, et al, *Der Ort des Terrors*, vol. 3: *Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2006), 494. Wolf Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor Under the Nazis*, 33, n10.

45. Grabowska, "K.L. Stutthof: Ein historischer Abriß," 30.

46. *Stutthof: Ein Konzentrationslager vor den Toren Danzigs*, ed. Hermann Kuhn (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2004); and Benz und Distel, eds., *Der Ort des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, vol. 6: *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*. Danuta Drywa wrote the Stutthof part of this volume ("Konzentrationslager Stutthof"). Drywa is the professional historian at the Stutthof Museum and has all the camp records at her immediate disposal. The brief descriptions of all the outlying camps attached to this study depend heavily on an important study in Polish: Marek Orski, *Filie obozu koncentracyjnego Stutthof w latach 1939-1945* [*Die Außenlager des Konzentrationslagers Stutthof in den Jahren 1939-1945*] (Gdansk: n.p., 2004).

47. Drywa, "Konzentrationslager Stutthof," in *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 534. Penner also employed Stutthof laborers at the Marienau property he owned. See *ibid.*, 693.

fairly large camp in Zeyersvorderkampen employed some eighty Jewish women as field hands as well as numerous craftsmen who were transferred from Stutthof between November 1939 and June 1940. Kornelius Fast, the Mennonite council chairperson (*Vorsteher*) of the town, oversaw the project and was therefore in a position to furnish slave workers requested by all the farmers and the town administrators in the area.<sup>48</sup> Several outlying camps, usually housed on large farms, also existed in the village of Grenzdorf B, one of them run by two German farmers, Wilhelm Thiessen and a man named Preiskorn. Thiessen, the Mennonite in this partnership, reputedly handled his cheap workers “more brutally” than did Preiskorn.<sup>49</sup> SS-Scharführer Fritz Friese, the Mennonite owner of the largest estate in the Grenzdorf B area, was a member of the General SS and an even more vicious offender. Friese personally selected the fieldworkers from his camp inmates and worked them so ferociously that he was known as the “Lord of Death and Life.” Stutthof did not bother to send any of the usual SS guards since Friese himself held SS rank. A Polish inmate reported that Friese:

beat the Poles. . . . Frequently he threatened me with his revolver. He wanted to shoot me. He accused me of stirring up the others to work less hard and causing losses. He was so awful that even the Germans were afraid of him. When they saw him at lunchtime they threw away their food and went back to work. He demanded an insane work pace. We had no guard but Friese was lord of life and death. He could shoot any one of us without any consequences. The sailors who worked for him passed out during work.”<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, Fritz Friese had imitators elsewhere. A Mennonite farmer named Otto Froese received a contingent of inmate workers from the camp at Störbuderkampe, but the guard who came with them was unsatisfactory to Froese, who had him replaced with a tougher character.<sup>51</sup>

Other Mennonites associated with the Grenzdorf B auxiliary camps—including Walter Friese, Johann Heidebrecht and a farmer named Reimer—were apparently kinder in their treatment of inmate laborers.<sup>52</sup>

---

48. *Ibid.*, 791.

49. *Ibid.*, 631-632.

50. *Ibid.*, 633.

51. Mennonite farmers apparently had a much higher work ethic than that displayed by Polish inmates.—*Ibid.*, 764-765.

52. Whether this is the same “Landwirt Eduard Reimer” who shows up in 1943 as a major user of prison labor is not clear. See *ibid.*, 633, and Grabowska, “K.L. Stutthof: Ein historischer Abriß,” 54.

And two Mennonite estate owners named Wiens and Funk reportedly treated their forced laborers from a Stutthof outlying camp in Jankendorf quite well, even though they housed them in barns with the cattle and in shed closets with machine tools. Kurt Funk had one of the largest estates in the area, with forty cattle and using seventeen horses to raise grain, raps and sugar beets. A group of SS officials even paid a special visit to his place during an inspection tour.<sup>53</sup> Two Loewen brothers, who farmed near Simonsdorf, also apparently treated a small contingent of Stutthof inmates in the fall of 1939 more kindly.<sup>54</sup>

The outlying camp of Neuteicherhinterfeld—probably an offshoot of the large camp in Danzig, housed in the Viktoria-Schule—contracted with Stutthof to supply workers to various farms in the fall of 1939, including that of a man named Schröder, likely a Mennonite farmer.<sup>55</sup> In the fall of 1939, a Mennonite, P. Epp, the mayor (*Ortsvorsteher*) of Herrenhagen, employed forced laborers from Stutthof.<sup>56</sup> The former village of Tiegenhof also contained a camp housing Stutthof inmate laborers. There a farmer with the Mennonite name of Riesen contracted for the labor of some twenty inmates who did field work in July and August of 1943, later valued at 420 Reichsmark, paid to the SS administration in Stutthof.<sup>57</sup> In Klein Lichtenau, two Mennonite farmers, K. Wiebe and Erich Claassen, contracted for forced labor in the fall of 1939.<sup>58</sup> Their treatment of prison-laborers is not noted in this instance, which usually means they were treated fairly well—without brutal punishment or deliberate starvation. Another Mennonite farmer, Johann Wiebe, who lived near Schönsee, also employed several inmates from Stutthof in the fall of 1939.

A story recounted by Werner Klaassen from the Mennonite village of Tiede illustrates the more typical attitude of Mennonite farmers. In 1943 or 1944 a freight car from Stutthof took 120 female prison inmates to Tiede and scattered them among various farms to help bring in the oil seed rape harvest by the use of the old-fashioned sickle. Each group of workers had a concentration camp Kapo as guard and disciplinarian. In this case the Kapo was a German Jew who promptly informed the farmers that there was to be no socializing or common meals with the inmate workers. When Klaassen's father began by giving the workers breakfast before they were sent out to the fields, a huge argument

---

53. Drywa, "Konzentrationslager Stutthof," in *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 658.

54. *Ibid.*, 759.

55. *Ibid.*, 708.

56. *Ibid.*, 650.

57. *Ibid.*, 753.

58. *Ibid.*, 665.

exploded. The Kapo threatened to send Klaassen himself to the camp or at least receive no more workers if he insisted on his friendly treatment of the workers. When the Kapo beat a woman who had taken a brief rest in the shade of a tree, Klaassen complained and was told that this was none of his business. Although some Mennonites are likely to tell the story to emphasize Klaassen's kindness, the deeper message confirms that this was slave labor pure and simple.<sup>59</sup>

Businessmen and industrialists in the region also took their full measure of profit from the slave labor of Stutthof. While some prisoners had always worked in SS-owned business enterprises such as the German Equipment Works or the various brickyards located around the camp, in 1944 the SS decided to build a Focke-Wulf airplane factory right in the main camp. Approximately 105 of the subcamps were networked into the enterprise to fully exploit the available slave labor. It is not surprising that Mennonites who owned factories and plants in the region made use of this slave labor supply as well. As we have already seen, a Mennonite businessman, Gerhard Epp, used 300-500 Stutthof inmates to build his machine factory two kilometers from the camp. In the mid-1970s Gerlach interviewed Epp's stepson Hans-Joachim Wiebe to gather information about this industrial enterprise.<sup>60</sup> According to Wiebe, the inmates marched the two kilometers to the building site every morning and back again at night. Meals were delivered to the site from the camp kitchens. Today Epp & Wiebe GmbH in Preetz is a thriving business in the field of heating and air conditioning equipment. But the past is not completely buried and forgotten. Along with 3,500 other German companies, this Mennonite firm is a participant in the Slave Labor Compensation Fund designed to "assist former forced laborers and others who suffered particular hardships at the hands of the Nazi regime."<sup>61</sup> While this gesture is laudable in terms of compensation, it

---

59. Gerlach, "Stutthof und die Mennoniten," 242-243. The best recent study of this phenomenon is Marek Orski, [*Prisoner Slave Labor in Stutthof Concentration Camp in the Years 1939-1945: Organization and Exploitation of the Labor Force*] (Gdansk: Wydawnictwa Gdanskie, 1999). This has not yet been translated from the original Polish.

60. Gerlach, "Stutthof und die Mennoniten," 244. Wiebe apparently spoke freely about the family firm when Gerlach interviewed him in the town of Preetz, where Epp had moved both family and business after the war.

61. For a list of companies and description of program see <http://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/js/Holocaust/germanco1.html>; for the larger issue of restitution and compensation from a religious point of view see [http://religious-tolerance.org/fin\\_nazi.htm](http://religious-tolerance.org/fin_nazi.htm). For a deeper examination of the issue see Allen, *The Business of Genocide*.

should be remembered that it was done quite pragmatically to stop seemingly endless lawsuits from former inmates or their relatives.

Documents from the archives at the Stutthof Museum provide an unexpected window into the involvement of other Mennonite firms in the operations at the concentration camp itself. Most firms were there to participate in the expansion of the camp itself—the erection of various facilities, and the production of clothing and shoes and other important items for daily living—or, more importantly, to produce armaments and equipment for the war effort. One document—dated October 2, 1943, from the head of the administration at Stutthof to the head of the SS Main Business Administration Office at Oranienburg—lists various private and SS-owned companies who were in arrears for payment of their lease charges for inmate forced labor at factories and facilities at Stutthof, one of its numerous outlying auxiliary camps or a branch of a company at Stutthof located in some other town or city. Among the fifteen derelict firms owing money for work or service performed by prisoners during the month of August were four companies owned by Mennonites: Peter Neufeld of Pillau, 270 RM; Heinrich Wiens II of Kalteherberge, 1,308 RM; Eduard Reimer of Roschkenkampe, 2,804 RM; and Gerhard Epp of Petershagen, 460 RM. The average salary in the free market for unskilled labor was 4 RM per eight-hour day. That is how the SS assessed the “lease,” but most farmers and factory owners worked their slaves for up to twelve hours a day, thus getting much more from their laborers than they were entitled to given their payments to the SS administration at Stutthof (2 RM per day for each worker). Keeping these figures in mind one can estimate the size of the contingent of forced laborers these Mennonites likely used on a regular basis.<sup>62</sup>

We know from other sources that in addition to these four Mennonite firms—which appear to have done business with Stutthof throughout the existence of the camp—the barrel factory of Otto Jost of Danzig and perhaps the sawmill of Peter Janssen in Tiegenhof also made frequent use of forced labor from Stutthof, at least in earlier years, along with Fabrik Dierksen, Fabrik Fast, Ernst Neufeld Baugeschäft, Heinrich Otto Penner Baugeschäft, and Robert Wiens Baugeschäft.<sup>63</sup> Heinrich O. Penner, of Danzig, seems to have employed some 70 prisoners in his construction firm from 1942 to 1943; Gerhard Epp’s machine factory in the village of Stutthof was certainly the largest Mennonite employer of slave labor. Epp had endeared himself to the regime by building a home for the Hitler Youth in Tiegenhof. His main factory employed some 500 prisoners from at least 1942 to the end of the war, and focused on the

---

62. Grabowska, “K.L. Stutthof: Ein historischer Abriß,” 54.

63. *Ibid.*, 30, 54.

production of various kinds of armaments such as small firearms. Epp's factory, along with others, evacuated machinery and stock supplies to the West in order to continue producing armaments in a place safe from the advancing Russian Army.<sup>64</sup>

#### THE "MASSACRE AT ZAPOROZHIA"

In the years following the war a number of Mennonite World War II veterans were accused of war crimes and prosecuted by the U.S. Justice Department and its Canadian counterpart. Several Mennonite memoir writers and non-Mennonite historians have provided further evidence that individuals of Mennonite background were part of Himmler's machinery of death, including the notorious *Einsatzgruppen*, operating as killing squads behind the German lines in Ukraine and other parts of occupied Russia.<sup>65</sup>

Our inquiry concerned a conversation involving three Mennonites in the Felsenkeller, a Leipzig beer hall in early April 1944. John Kroeker, errant son of a beloved Mennonite writer and theologian, was meeting two German soldiers—Heinrich Janzen of the SS and Peter Dietrich Wiebe who had just arrived from Litzmannstadt—shortly before he embarked on a trip to the Warthegau.<sup>66</sup> Janzen had served "under the death head"—a euphemism for the Waffen-SS—and had a remarkable tale to tell about his recent experiences. Starting east of the Mennonite settlement of Zaporozhia in the Ukraine and moving all the way to the Warthegau in Poland, Janzen and his fellow SS soldiers had traveled for three months. Their job had been to "clean out" the Ukrainian localities near the front and remove the Russian partisans. The SS men would visit homes at 5 o'clock in the morning and order everyone out of the locality by 8. The military unit then forcefully removed all those who were still

---

64. *Ibid.*, 52-55. Drywa, "Konzentrationslager Stutthof," in *Natzweiler, Groß-Rosen, Stutthof*, 511-512, 517. See also James D. Yoder, *Black Spider over Tiegenhof* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1995), a novel about the Hitler Youth in a Mennonite town.

65. See the writings of these authors: Anna Sudermann, Helen Wiens, Alexander Rempel, Martin Dean, Steve Schroeder, Karel Berkhoff, John D. Thiesen, B. H. Unruh. To be enthusiastic advocates of National Socialism and not be complicit in the genocidal actions of its agents such as the *Einsatzgruppen* is no longer plausible today. The SS was condemned as a criminal organization at Nuremberg. Many Mennonites were members of the SS, having joined one or the other branch of this elite killing machine.

66. Kroeker, whose family lived in Newton, Kan., was working for Himmler's Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle in Berlin at the time. Right after the end of the war, in the summer of 1945, he attempted to help Russian Mennonites escape repatriation to Russia and Siberia by Soviet occupiers. The author is doing research on Kroeker for a book on Russian Mennonites, "Dove and Swastika: Russian Mennonites under Nazi Occupation."

there at that time, especially since many seem to have frozen in place “when they saw the sign of the death head on the uniforms.” The troops had standing orders to shoot (“give them the bullet”) anyone who showed the least little bit of resistance. “Furthermore, Ukrainians who had served the leaders of the unit to the end, were killed . . . those Ukrainians who moved ahead during the withdrawal were done away with (*dahingemacht*), so that some of these people no longer exist.”<sup>67</sup>

West of Nikopol, Janzen continued in his account, the roads were clogged with long treks of ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*), who were endangered by hungry marauding bands, who called themselves partisans in order to justify their robbery and murder. These desperadoes attacked and murdered the German refugees, frequently destroying bridges in order to prevent people from escaping. The SS units were ordered to chase down the bandits and shoot all they managed to catch.

In another instance Kroeker noted that his informants told him that whole villages abandoned during the military retreat were destroyed. “The trees were cut down, thrown on a pile and burned—the water sources were stopped up and civilians who resisted the destroyers were killed.”<sup>68</sup> To what degree Janzen and Wiebe were active participants in murder or only observers of associates who actually pulled the trigger is unclear. Janzen, in any case, was not concerned to distance himself from the perpetrators. As a rule few members of an SD killing squad were allowed to avoid active participation.<sup>69</sup>

During his first visit to the Warthegau, Kroeker heard two other reports from Mennonites who had observed mass murder, but apparently had not actively participated. A manager in the office of a district commissar in Posen, reputedly a Mennonite, told him that he had been drafted by the Red Army in Zaporozhia and later made a POW by the German Army. On the way to this prison camp he observed how undernourished and exhausted Russian prisoners were clubbed to death or simply shot when they could no longer walk. In the camp itself “untold numbers died every day.”<sup>70</sup> During Kroeker’s second visit, a certain Maria Penner in the town of Plotha (Warthegau) told him another

---

67. John J. Kroeker, random note, April 4, 1944, Kroeker Papers, Ms. 501, Box 14, AMC-N.

68. *Ibid.*

69. “Nonshooters” did exist but had no effect on the efficiency of killing operations.—Christopher R. Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 169. The SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) was the security service arm of the SS.

70. John J. Kroeker, report from Camp Tschianowsky, Dec. 21, 1944, Kroeker Papers, Box 14, AMC-N.

horrifying story. When she and a few other elderly Mennonite refugees fled westward in the fall of 1944, they confronted a dreadful sight on the Polish-German border.

Herds of Jews, mothers, old people, women and girls were driven along the road. A few soldiers were employed as drivers. They clearly were attempting to escape from the Warthegau. Other soldiers marching toward the front spoke to them and said that it must be difficult to serve as drivers for these people. They replied that they would rather drive cattle than these people. The marching soldiers then asked what was being done with these people. The reply was: "they are driven into granaries and shot."

The poor Jews looked awful. It was at the end of January and snow was everywhere; the road was muddy, the clothing amounted to rags and bits of cloth; a few had some dirty blankets hung over their shoulders. No one had normal clothes. Shoes were torn; many walked barefoot, covered with mud. It was a pitiful sight. Haggard, tired and weak, they were completely exhausted. They sat down on the side of the road to rest; they could not go on. That was the picture of the moment.

What can one say about this? Moving, appalling, painful. And who, one asks oneself, is responsible? Is the guilt immediate or of long duration, or is it tooth for tooth? Revenge for revenge? Can we expect more evil deeds to follow? Can no one control these things? As parents raise their children, thus they will act in later life.<sup>71</sup>

Nearly all the Mennonite individuals I encountered in my research also mentioned treatment of Jews in their experience. Some attempted to explain the nature of atrocities that they observed or heard about from those that did.<sup>72</sup> The most honest and conscience-stricken was probably the Mennonite teacher Anna Sudermann, who had attended a secondary school of commerce largely populated by young Jewish women and had

---

71. Maria Penner story, Kroeker notes, Sept. 10, 1945, Kroeker Papers, Box 14, AMC-N. Although this account does not deal directly with Mennonite complicity, it does demonstrate that Mennonite refugees, themselves in dire straits, were capable of seeing the Holocaust in operation during the horror-filled death marches in the end. They may have been collaborators with the Nazis earlier, but they came to understand the corrupting influence and inherent evil in that association. Maria Penner did bear witness and was not afraid to say so.

72. Omer Bartov has recently called attention to the much neglected Boder interviews in his "Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide," *The Journal of Modern History* 80 (Sept. 2008), 557–593. David Boder found two Mennonite refugees at the Funk Barracks in Munich and interviewed them about their knowledge of persecution and genocide: Anna Braun and Julius Kliewer (Klüver) from the Old Colony. See <http://voices.iit.edu/index.html>.

pleasant memories of meeting her father's Jewish business associates on their estate. But not all her experiences with Jews were pleasant. When she was under secret police surveillance, following her brother's arrest, for example, she noted that the informants and interrogators were Jews. Once, on an unlit nighttime train ride near Halbstadt, Sudermann recalled that racist taunts were exchanged between a group of young German and young Jewish passengers. During the German occupation, Jewish merchants she knew in Chortitza were hiding from the Germans and living in daily fear of arrest, but she did not report—nor did she assist—them. Sudermann later expressed regret about having done nothing for them at the time. She also reported in her autobiography how she observed Jewish citizens being rounded up and marched out of town to be murdered en masse. She knew that that was their fate from reports by neighbors and friends. Sudermann described the upheaval and her regret:

It did not take long for the Jewish problem "to be solved." Today, the more I think about those times, the more a feeling of guilt overcomes me. How disturbing my judgment was at that time, with regard to the treatment of Jews by the National Socialists!<sup>73</sup>

We sensed a great uneasiness in reference to Jews since the very first day of the occupation. On the second day we discovered that the pharmacist Vogel and his wife had poisoned themselves before the occupation of Chortitza. He died but his wife survived. Many Jews had fled, but the pharmacy couple had apparently missed an opportunity to flee. Many longtime Jewish residents, who had always lived among Mennonites, who were never unfriendly toward us during Soviet times or revealed any discriminatory behavior, remained in their Chortitza homes, as did the old shoemaker Aron with his wife, hoping that nothing would happen

---

73. Cf. Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The Escape of Two Sisters from South Russia during World War II* (Winkler, Man.: Heritage Valley Publications, 1976), 19. She wrote: "We were governed by the Germans for almost two years. Their army advanced far into Russia: the Caucasus, the Volga and to within 12 kilometers of Leningrad. They were sure victory was theirs. But how mistaken they were. In 1946-47 Germany was laid low, and will never rise again. How could such a system last? We observed the Germans in Russia, and saw their treatment of the Jews. They shot thousands upon thousands. It seemed incredible to us. We were forbidden to help any Jews. In the village of Nickolaidorf, a Jewish girl had managed to escape execution. We thought, surely, this girl would be spared. She was not. The S.S. commander came to investigate. 'There's a Jewess left somewhere in this area.' She was soon apprehended. After a brief release, she was again taken. She was brought to a trench on the outskirts of the village. There she was shot to death, her body tumbling into the trench. Though she had been pleading that her life be spared, she was shown no pity. We were terribly upset by this incident. How we grieved for this girl, who grew up among us, and was now so brutally murdered. Many met the same fate. Could such a system survive and be blessed? Germany did fall. Unbelief reigns in Germany."

to them. But all Jews lived in great fear and withdrew from public view, quietly awaiting events. I remember exactly how I felt when I once met the wife of the pharmacist, my co-worker in the hospital, where she worked as a laboratory technician. She was always correct in her behavior toward me, which was not a matter of course, since my class origin and politically tainted reputation made such things unnatural. She helped me find another job when I had to resign my position at the hospital. The nurses at the hospital had taken her in and helped her to avoid all but absolutely necessary and dangerous appearances in the street. I met her once in passing behind our garden. Our eyes met silently as we moved on. A creeping sense of guilt invaded my feelings. I should have talked to her.

One day we saw how Jews, about 50 men, women and children, were marched down the street. They were all shot outside the village, including half-Jews. A Russian mother with her half-Jewish child is supposed to have gone along with the child to her death. The rural constabulary was ordered to carry out these actions.<sup>74</sup>

With horror I write these lines today. This event was a heavy burden for all of us to bear. Inconceivable it is today and will never be understood by people who did not experience these times with us how we could accept these inhuman deeds without open protest. I would like to mention the following facts, not to make excuses, but only to make understanding of our behavior possible: under the Soviet regime we lived through a great deal of inhumanity, and also were aware of the prominence of Jews in the economic and political life of the country. At the top of the GPU we noticed many Jews and the interrogating judges were also Jews.<sup>75</sup> Millions of people

---

74. "In southern Ukraine the remaining Jews were also 'liquidated' by the summer of 1942. In Kamenka, Cherkassy district, the local police participated in the shooting of more than one hundred Jews in March. On 29 May 1942 in Stalindorf, Kherson district, the remaining elderly Jews and Jewesses were rounded up and shot, after their men folk had been sent to work on the Dnieperpetrovsk-Zaporozhe highway in April. In the *rayon* town of Ustinovka the *Gebietskommissar* issued orders in June 1942 for about 30 Jews from the surrounding villages to be arrested and brought in to the local police station by the *Gendarmerie* and local *Schutzmannschaft*. Another 30 or so Jews were brought in from the nearby town of Bobrinets. . . ." —Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust*, 83. For the fascinating story of the half-Jewish child see Harry Loewen, ed., *Road to Freedom: Mennonites Escape the Land of Suffering* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2000), 61-62; John Sawatzky, *One Out of Three: How my Family and I Survived Russian Communism* (Mountain Lake, Minn.: John Sawatzky, 1996).

75. Anna Sudermann, *Lebenserinnerungen: 1893-1970* (Winnipeg, Man.: Mennonite Heritage Center, 1970), 349-352. In these pages Sudermann gives her detailed and

disappeared and died in the “silent camps.” We knew what life was like in a totalitarian state. Our concepts of law and justice had been confused. In Germany we saw the opposite of Soviet Russia, that is to say something better. At that time we still revered Hitler. If he had decided upon such a solution of the Jewish question, than the Jews apparently were endangering the political security of Germany. In this manner I tried to justify the inhuman treatment of Jews. In this lies my great guilt, which cannot be expiated by any means. I can only hope for forgiving mercy. It is not particularly easy to confess this guilt. I see this admission in my memoir as a kind of public confessional, at least on paper.<sup>76</sup>

This extraordinarily revealing passage from Anna Sudermann’s memoir is rare in the Mennonite literature on the subject. Alexander Rempel, son of a prominent Mennonite bishop who disappeared in Stalin’s Gulag and a relative of Sudermann, offers another expression of remorse. For over forty years Rempel carried a horrible secret in his head of an event that took place one spring night in Einlage near Chortitza in occupied Ukraine. The few Mennonite leaders with whom he shared the secret rejected it out of hand—it was too awful to contemplate. In 1984, the year before his death, Rempel wrote a jumbled letter, couched in the form of a research article, addressed to the archivists at the Winnipeg Mennonite Heritage Center. In it, Rempel revealed what he called the “Massacre of Zaporozhia” with Mennonite participants as perpetrators, and he charged Mennonite leaders with a conspiracy of silence.

The massacre occurred in the region of Chortitza, the Mennonite capital of the Old Colony on the Dnieper River. Historian Michael Gesin has provided a succinct overview of the events:

When in October 1941, the Germans occupied the city of Zaporozhe itself, they immediately ordered the Jews to form their own government of ten German-speaking people to whom they would transfer all future orders. The next day, the registration of all Jews in the city began. All Jews were ordered to wear on their left arm a Star of David sewn with yellow thread onto a white band. At the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, 150 Jews were ordered to gather in the center of town to be transported to their new workplace. On January 3, 1942, they were all killed. After this event, the procedure became more orderly with the killing of thousands

---

insightful description and analysis of her own arrest and interrogations. This passage rivals anything I have seen on interrogation methods utilized by the Soviet secret police, or the Gestapo for that matter. One wonders who learned from whom when it came to inhuman and terrorist techniques.

76. *Ibid.*

within a month. On March 29, 1942, all the remaining Jews were ordered to stay home and await further instructions. They were told to take clothing and food to last for three weeks for their resettlement in Melitopol, and at ten in the morning, the process of herding Jews into the police headquarters began. On April 1, they were all transferred to the outskirts of the city and shot.<sup>77</sup> Over time all the remaining Jews were killed, whenever and wherever they were found. The killings continued until the autumn of 1943. In all, more than 44,000 Jews were murdered in the Zaporozhe oblast.<sup>78</sup>

For Rempel, Mennonite complicity in the massacre was associated both with his own experiences as well as his recollection of an evening conversation in the spring of 1942 with several Mennonite participants “as they celebrated the completion of the extermination of Jews for the region of Zaporozhia.” “My recollection of the killing of Jews in this district,” Rempel noted “coincides with the German documents in the case.”<sup>79</sup>

Rempel supplemented his description with further details. After spending time with his exiled father in his last days in Siberia, Rempel escaped GPU (Soviet Secret Police) surveillance and crossed the front line somewhere near Kiev. For a period of time he worked as a translator for a German divisional staff; then he made his way to Einlage, where some relatives lived. There, in October of 1941, he observed the semiclandestine events in the Chortitza area. On October 3, the Wehrmacht had occupied the city of Zaporozhia ending seven weeks of bombardment during which the Einsatzkommando 6, subunit of the infamous Einsatzgruppe C assigned to Army Group South, had already

---

77. The Melitopol site has been graphically confirmed by the interviews with witnesses conducted by Father Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), 75ff.

78. Michael Gesin, “Holocaust: The Reality of Genocide in Southern Ukraine” (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 2003), 259-260. See also Michael Gesin, *The Destruction of the Ukrainian Jewry during World War II* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006). The last figure for the entire Oblast of Dnepropetrovsk matches closely the number of killings claimed in the Einsatzgruppen reports. Gesin arrived at it by adding up totals for the various cities and towns found in the documents of the Extraordinary Commission. According to Gesin an independent researcher named Semyon Orlyanski came pretty much to the same conclusion. Alexander Rempel, with much less evidence to work with, also arrived at a total number pretty close to the Gesin figure.—Alexander Rempel, “Ein Protest gegen die Judenvernichtung,” appendix, map 3.

79. Alexander Rempel, “Ein Protest gegen die Judenvernichtung, Untersuchungen zur Frage nach der Beteiligung von Volksdeutschen aus dem Schwarzmeergebiet in der Ukraine an der Judenvernichtung während des II-ten Weltkrieges” (Winnipeg, Man: Mennonite Heritage Center, 1984), MHC, vol. 3440: 3.

completed its work. Between the middle of August and September 1941 EK 6, commanded by E. Kroeger, had been headquartered at Krivoy Rog. From there Kroeger sent an advance commando to Chortitza, part of the large area in the Dnieper bend, incorporating the cities of Dniepropetrovsk, Dnieperodserzinsk, Zaporozhia and Nikopol, in which they “processed,” as these killer squads euphemistically characterized their work, all the Jews they could lay their hands on. Since the region included an estimated population of 1.2 million people, the small commando teams were totally inadequate and had to be enlarged by recruiting assistant policemen. These assistants wore the SS *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service), or SD, uniform and were recruited from the local residents willing to help the commandos in their gruesome work.<sup>80</sup> According to Rempel, commando EK 6:

had won the cooperation of some young Mennonites and a Lutheran man—altogether about one to two dozen persons—mostly from Chortitza and Rosenthal who voluntarily joined the commando. They had marched across the Dnieper on October 3-4, 1941, added 50 to 60 Russian and Ukrainian volunteers to their ranks, and were then given control over the city administration and the area around the city, under the leadership of the men of EK 6.<sup>81</sup>

At the end of November, Robert Mohr replaced Kroeger, and moved his staff from Dnepropetrovsk, taking a detour from Krivoy Rog to Zaporozhia. The Wehrmacht appointed a Mennonite named Wiebe as the temporary mayor of Zaporozhia, although he seems to have worked under the close supervision of a German commissar, sent from Germany, probably by the *Ostministerium*. On December 8 Mohr reported to his superiors in Berlin that “in Zaporozhia we were successful in filling the most important positions in the administration with ethnic Germans, Ukrainians and Russians, . . . the city government, supplementary police. . . .”<sup>82</sup> Left unsaid is the fact that key positions were filled with ethnic Germans who controlled the minor positions occupied by fully-vetted Ukrainian and Russian collaborators.

As for the identity of the alleged Mennonite supplementary policemen who participated in the massacre south of the former German village of Schoenwiese, a southern suburb of the city, Rempel makes a plausible argument. They had to come from the Chortitza villages, he

---

80. Helmut Krausnick, *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen: die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges, 1938-1942*. (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985), 166-167.

81. Alexander Rempel, “Ein Protest gegen die Judenvernichtung,” 7.

82. SD “Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 143 vom 8. Dezember 1941,” copy in Mennonite Heritage Center (“Alexander Rempel fonds,” vol. 3781). Also available online and at the U.S. National Archive.

reasons, because there were no other available ethnic Germans.<sup>83</sup> The Mennonite villages of Schoenwiese and Hochfeld (north of Zaporozhia) and the Lutheran village of Katharinendorf had been “evacuated” to Siberia. A man from Katharinendorf, who had worked in one of the factories of Chortitza, was surprised by the rapid arrival of the tanks belonging to the 9th Panzer Division and could therefore not return home since it remained under Russian control for the following seven weeks. In his idleness he decided to sign up with EK 6 as a supplementary policeman and put on the SD uniform. Ethnic Germans from other villages could not meet the requirement that they be familiar with the local landscape.

In the current state of Holocaust research in the area of the Black Sea new evidence has emerged that confirms Rempel’s accusations that Mennonites participated in significant ways in the massacre at Zaporozhia and in other Holocaust atrocities in the region. In a recent unpublished memoir, Wilhelm Janzen, a Mennonite from Osterwick, declared categorically that “all the Jews were being herded together to a particular spot and summarily executed by the German Army. Not one escaped this purge.”<sup>84</sup> Although Janzen assigned responsibility to the German Army, calling it a mere “purge,” his report nonetheless clearly refers to the general massacre at Zaporozhia.

This sort of stark evidence from memory is further confirmed by recent scholarly research. Two different Einsatzgruppen (C and D) overlapped in Zaporozhia, which was also located in the middle of a region where Einsatzgruppe D had already massacred 35,782 Jews by the end of September 1941. Shortly after October 4, 1941, both Old Zaporozhia and Novo Zaporazhia, including Chortitza, were firmly in

---

83. Bits and pieces of evidence, which support Alexander Rempel’s argument, show up in unusual places. James Urry for example, recently scoured through the research files of Frank H. Epp again and found a little gem—replicas of three Einwandererzentralstelle identity cards of a kind John Kroeker examined in Litzmannstadt. One of them identifies a certain Jakob Ediger, born May 29, 1917, at Millerovo. He listed himself as a “mechanic” by trade and also gave the date of his naturalization by the Einwandererzentralstelle, April 13, 1944. “From November 1941 to 1943 he was with the Sicherheitspolizei und Sicherheitsdienst Saporoshje as a Hilfspolizist, and from 1943 to March 1944 with the Einsatzkommando 6B as a SS Mann. Picture available, (Einwanderer Zentrale).” —Conrad Gebel College Archive, University of Waterloo, Frank H. Epp Papers, Hist. Mss. 2.26.7 M. Exodus Res. Chap. 26.

84. Wilhelm Janzen, “A Refugee Travels from Russia through Germany over Paraguay to Canada,” an unpublished memoir (Winnipeg, Man.: Mennonite Heritage Center, n.d.), 52-53. Connie Braun, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia: A Mennonite Memoir* (Vancouver, B.C.: Ronsdale Press, 2008), 217f.; Helen Wiens Franz, *My Memoirs* (Abbotsford, B.C.: Memoirs Publishing, 1996), 15.

the hands of Mennonite administrators, appointed by the Wehrmacht. In Old Zaporozhia, Heinrich Jakob Wiebe, a bookkeeper and veteran administrator from Bolshevik times, was firmly in control, having staffed his administration with fellow Mennonites and reliable Ukrainian and Russian allies. Isaac Johann Reimer was put in charge of Novo Zaporozhia. Both were subordinate to a city commandant supplied by the Wehrmacht since this front line area was still under army jurisdiction and not German civilian control. Both Wiebe and Reimer responded directly to the "Jewish Question" by compelling all remaining Jews to wear the infamous armband with the Star of David. When asked by the Wehrmacht security division inspector about the Jewish situation, the Mennonite mayors and their subordinates were utterly circumspect, virtually admitting that since most Jews had been killed recently there was no problem with the remnants—100 in Novo Zaporozhia held in a ghetto and 4,000 Keraims in the old city. The Keraims, a Jewish sect, were exempt from the massacre by official order from SS headquarters in Berlin. Since the mayors spoke to inspectors only two weeks after the first massacre, it can be assumed that both were fully aware of the ongoing Holocaust and knew that Mennonites as auxiliary policemen were involved in the killings. Scattered comments in the Mennonite memoir literature suggests that such matters could not be hidden from the village grapevine for long.<sup>85</sup>

When Wiebe discussed the population figures of 75,000 Jews, believing that some 12,000 of those who had fled from the Germans would soon return, he simply ignored the fact that the remaining 43,321 Jews had totally disappeared and not only by flight. Indeed, during the month of October alone, some 3,000 Zaporozhian Jews had been killed. Wiebe did not hesitate to report that all former Jewish properties had been confiscated by the city and would be used to meet the financial shortfall.<sup>86</sup>

---

85. Dr. Kieling, Wehrmacht Field Command 676, "Report about the Inspection of the Administration in Zaporozhia," 2.11.41, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG-11.001M, Reel 92, Osobyi Archive Moscow records, 1932-1945; Franz, *My Memoirs*, 15. While she does not refer to the "Zaporozhia Massacre" per se, she certainly was aware of it. Her claim that it happened in all the villages is confirmed by Stumpp's village reports, which faithfully record the number of Jews present before the invasion and the lack of any Jews after the invasion. There are two situation reports by the Einsatzgruppen that apply here: Reichsicherheitshauptamt, Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 135, especially the section reporting on the actions of Einsatzkommando 6 starting on Oct. 5, 1941, and covering the area of the Dnieper bend, including the city of Zaporozhia; and Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 143, section entitled "Allgemeine Lage in Saporshje." Originals are in the Bundesarchiv, but paper copies can be found in the Mennonite Heritage Center, vol. 3423.

86. Dr. Kieling, "Report about the Inspection of the Administration in Zaporozhia"; Alexander Kruglov, "Jewish Losses in Ukraine, 1941-1944," in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History,*

Victor Klets, a graduate student at the University of Dnepropetrovsk, has recently identified three Mennonite men who were members of the local gendarmerie, frequently used as executioners in the Holocaust: Ivan Frantsevich Jantsen of Dnepropetrovsk; Peter Jakovlevich Penner of Novo-Vitebsk, who served as a policeman in Friesendorf (Stalindorf), and then in the gendarmerie in Pyatikhatkakh; and Peter Frantsevich Dick, a member of the German gendarmerie of Orlovo in the Nikolayev region who, according to a witness, "beat up Soviet citizens and transported them to the shooting site." Klets also found a native of Chortitza named Wiens who served as chief of the Dnepropetrovsk Schutzpolizei school that supplied guards for the concentration camp of the city.<sup>87</sup> The names of these men were extracted from the so-called "infiltration files" not readily available to Western scholars and may only indicate the tip of the iceberg in terms of Mennonite involvement with the Holocaust.<sup>88</sup>

#### JACK REIMER AND THE ART OF SURVIVAL BY METAMORPHOSIS

On August 12, 1998, the U.S. Justice Department brought an early war crimes case against Jack Reimer, a Russian Mennonite born in the Molotschna town of Halbstadt, then living in Carmel, New York. The charges focused on Reimer's dishonesty about his wartime activities in order to get past immigration officials. The nature of his actual offense was determined more precisely than in some previous cases in Canada. According to the charges, Reimer:

---

*Testimony, Memorialization*, ed. Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2008), 279, 284.

87. Viktor Klets, "The Ukrainian Mennonite Population Under Nazi Occupation," paper presented at the "Molochna 2004: Mennonites and Their Neighbours, 1804-2004" (Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, June 2-5, 2004). Viktor Klets kindly provided a copy to the author. For a report on this conference and an assessment of this paper see Peter Letkemann, "Molochna 2004," *MQR* 79 (Jan. 2005), 109-120.

88. "So-called filtration (*fil'tratsionnye*) files consist of the extensive records involving repatriation verification after the Second World War (1944-1949) of individuals in enemy-occupied territories, those who were taken to Germany for forced labor, or ones who were incarcerated in concentration or displaced-person camps. This group of materials also includes extensive 'trophy' Nazi records or reports and analysis thereof, which were prepared after the war in connection with the campaign against alleged Volksdeutsche or other suspected Nazi sympathizers. Other groups of records include extensive files and reports on former imperial high officials, prerevolutionary police and penal officials, and White Army officers."—International Institute of Social History Web site, ArcheoBiblioBase: Archives in Russia: C-6, Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Federal'noi sluzhby bezopasnosti RF (TsA FSB Rossii), <http://www.iisg.nl/~abb/rep/C-6.tab3.php>.

was captured by the Germans in the summer of 1941 and kept in a prisoner of war camp where at least a truckload of soldiers a day died from the cold or starvation. Being of German descent, he was transferred to the SS Training Camp at Trawniki, Poland, where he allegedly helped to train men whose job it was to assist the SS in killing European Jews.<sup>89</sup>

While at Trawniki in the winter of 1941-1942, Reimer was “accused of having taken part in the mass murder of a group of Jewish prisoners in the woods near the camp. He [was] also accused of taking part in the deportation of Jews from ghettos in Czestochowa and Lublin in 1942 and Warsaw in 1943.” Reimer’s defense attorney, a former attorney general of the United States, Ramsey Clark, maintained that Reimer was a normal POW who had nothing to do with the alleged crimes. The Office of Special Investigations at the Justice Department earlier established that he had lied to immigration officials about his actions as a sergeant at Trawniki when he came to the U.S. in 1952. In 1992 he told justice officials that another man was sent to take him to the pit where Jews were being killed. He said he “shot toward a man in the pit full of murdered Jews after the man pointed to his head in what Reimer said was a request for a mercy killing.” In essence this was the Reimer story at the time of his death, but more recently the entire historical landscape of this curious saga has changed with the painstaking research of Eric C. Steinhart.<sup>90</sup>

Jacob Reimer first showed up after the war at the Mennonite Central Committee refugee station at 12a Viktoria Luise Platz in Berlin, headed by John J. Kroeker. Neither the court nor the Office of Special Investigations at the Justice Department knew that Kroeker and the Dutch M.C.C. representative, T. O. Hylkema, were instrumental in providing Reimer with a “Menno Pass” that facilitated his escape into Holland and eventually to the U.S. under the Displaced Persons Act passed by Congress. The suspicion harbored by some scholars that M.C.C. was consciously running some kind of escape route for Mennonites complicit in war crimes is doubtful.

In a letter to Pastor Hylkema, Kroeker enclosed a sample identity document—made out to a “Mr. Jacob Reimer, born October 24 in Halbstadt . . . a Mennonite of Dutch origin”—for Hylkema’s approval.

---

89. Shofar FTP Archive file consisting of a Reuters news story, “Accused Nazi collaborator testifies that war is evil,” 08.12.98; <http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/people/ftp.py?people/r/reimer.jack/press/war-is-evil.980812>.

90. Ibid. Eric C. Steinhart, “The Chameleon of Trawniki: Jack Reimer, Soviet *Volksdeutsche*, and the Holocaust,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23 (2009), 239-262, especially 241ff.

The document, signed by Hylkema and the commander of the Dutch Frontier Guard, was to provide safe passage to those who could not come to Berlin but somehow managed to get to the West and cross over the border into Holland. The bearer would be delivered to one of the Mennonite refugee camps run by the Dutch Mennonite Church and prepared for emigration to Canada or the U.S. Thus Hylkema and Kroeker, probably unknowingly, became part of the underground machinery facilitating the escape of those involved with SS atrocities in one way or another.<sup>91</sup> Whether or not Kroeker and Hylkema or any other M.C.C. official was aware of Reimer's background is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that Kroeker was aware that many Mennonites had been in the SS. In a letter to Benjamin Unruh he complained that:

the American CIC [Secret Police] put everyone through a rigorous sieve. They put me in prison for two days, because I violated military law by dragging 192 people to Berlin. We are always under observation in the camp. We do have in our midst several people who were drafted into the Wehrmacht and SS and this costs us a lot of problems about why and how.<sup>92</sup>

The Reimer case illustrates an important aspect of these Mennonite perpetrators and participants in the Holocaust—namely the tension between the demands of survival and the tug of a moral conscience below the surface embedded in the Mennonite heritage and religious upbringing. In Reimer's situation we now have an interesting study that examines the phenomenon. Eric C. Steinhart probes Reimer's motivations and suggests that he was compelled by circumstances to metamorphose in order to fit into every new environment. By becoming nearly invisible he survived thanks to his chameleonic malleability. This was a special talent that Mennonites and others cultivated as members of a "mobilized ethnic diaspora."<sup>93</sup>

---

91. Kroeker to Hylkema, March 7, 1946, Kroeker Papers, Box 14, AMC-N; U.S. Dept. of Justice, "Government Moves To Deport New York City Area Man For Involvement In Nazi Mass Murder Of Jews," May 2, 2005. E-mail from James Urry to Gerhard Rempel, March 20, 2006.

92. Kroeker to Unruh, "Lieber Onkel Benny," April 11, 1946, Kroeker Papers, Box 14, AMC-N. The judges and lawyers involved with the thirteen-year legal saga of Reimer's case were not aware of the Kroeker angle.

93. Steinhart, "The Chameleon of Trawniki" and Terry Martin's review of David G. Rempel with Cornelia Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789-1923* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), in *Journal of Modern History* 78 (March 2006), 271-272.

What emerges from Steinhart's careful examination of Reimer's various personal profiles and military careers during the course of World War II is a portrait of Mennonite survival.<sup>94</sup> Reimer was a child of collectivization, whose parents had been dekulakized, making him persona non grata everywhere he went. Initially, Reimer fled to the Caucasus, where he attended school and enlisted in the Red Army. Along the way, he joined the Komsomol and the Communist Party, and quickly pushed to get to the front units of the 447<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Within a year and a half he received a commission as a second lieutenant, and was in the process of creating a new persona as a soldier loyal to the Soviet cause. Invading German troops, however, devastated his unit, and Reimer soon found himself in a Stalag as a prisoner of the SS. Conditions in the camp were atrocious. Russian POWs were systematically starved, exposed and maltreated. Reimer knew it was time to reinvent himself by erasing his Soviet past and gradually revealing his heritage as an ethnic German who could be useful to the SS, now engaged in a campaign to form self-defense units with Russian-German recruits.<sup>95</sup>

In the town of Trawniki, near Lublin in Poland, the SS was organizing a camp to train SS auxiliaries by using Soviet turncoats and ethnic German noncommissioned officers to command ethnically non-Russian POWs. They intended this allied SS sub-army to assist them in the Holocaust operations in occupied eastern countries. Without any difficulty he became a German citizen since Hitler had issued a decree making this possible for ethnic Germans serving in the Wehrmacht. Then, by wangling an appointment to Trawniki, Reimer found a perfect way to prove his ethnic German status and suppress his Soviet past. According to Steinhart, Reimer thrived in his new role.

Since they exploited Trawniki as a manpower pool, the SS assigned its erstwhile POWs and their Volksdeutsche NCOs to a variety of roles in Poland, ranging from guarding strategic railway crossings to clearing ghettos to operating death camps. Reimer himself not only trained hundreds of Holocaust perpetrators, but—according to the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Special Investigations (OSI)—he also had been an active mid-level leader entrusted by the

---

94. As one Mennonite refugee told C. F. Klassen's coworker, Peter J. Dyck, after the war, when service in the Waffen-SS threatened to sabotage his application for a visa to Canada, "naturally we Mennonites always speak the truth if it is convenient."—Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescued and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona, Man.: Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council, 1962), 419.

95. Steinhart, "The Chameleon of Trawniki," 242-243; "Trawniki," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.—<http://ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007397> (accessed Feb. 5, 2010).

Nazi regime to carry out the Final Solution in Poland. Between the spring of 1942 and early 1943 Reimer took part in the deportation of Jews . . . to death camp(s) . . . [and] helped in the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. . . . [He] was implicated in the mass shooting of Jews. . . . Reimer and several other Volksdeutsche NCOs led a group of twenty to thirty Wachmänner on an operation to murder Jews . . . [in a] wooded location some fifteen kilometers from the edge of Lublin. [He] escorted small groups of Jews to a shooting pit, [where] . . . SS officers and Volksdeutsche NCOs, including Reimer, clubbed their 200 to 300 victims into a mass grave and gunned them down at close range with submachine guns.<sup>96</sup>

Knowing that after the Battle of Stalingrad the tide was turning against Germany, Reimer began initiating the next step in his transformation. As the Red Army overran Trawniki, forcing its personnel to withdraw into Poland, Reimer read the handwriting on the wall and reinvented himself once more. This time he sought a convenient camouflage for the postwar world in the form of a girlfriend who could help him hide his dangerous associations with the SS killers at Trawniki. Ludmila Davidovics, a young ethnic Russian Jewess serving as a cook, along with her mother, enabled him to transform into the next role. Traveling with the two women made him less suspicious to the Russians and the Germans. When the war ended, Reimer, Davidovics and her mother merged into the polyglot mass of homeless and stateless refugees. Once again his ingenuity helped him to find a job, this time with the occupying American troops, who helped him to emigrate as a displaced person to the United States. His girlfriend preceded him and served as a witness to his “clean” record for immigration. In order to accomplish this he actually had to marry her, but the marriage was dissolved once they both established themselves as American citizens.

For the next two decades Reimer lived quietly in the U. S. until the Office of Special Investigation found him and began court proceedings.<sup>97</sup> In September 2002, Judge Lawrence M. McKenna of the Federal District

---

96. Steinhart, “The Chameleon of Trawniki,” 245, fn. 70-74.

97. *The New York Times* followed the case carefully and published some thirteen major articles on the case in the dozen years. The final report, by Dan Barry, is a melodramatic account (“About New York: A Face Seen and Unseen on the Subway”), revealing how the “unassuming, unremarkable” Jack Reimer escaped deportation to Germany at the last minute by having the temerity to die a natural death. Barry evokes an ethos that would have reminded the informed reader of Hannah Arendt’s theory of the “banality of evil.” — *The New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2005.

Court in Manhattan revoked Reimer's citizenship.<sup>98</sup> In 2005 the U.S. Court of Appeals determined that Reimer had misrepresented his background in war crime episodes, and he was officially deported.<sup>99</sup> Before he could be extradited, however, Reimer died at the age of 86.

#### HEINRICH WIENS AND THE MASSACRE AT THE GLASS FACTORY

Reimer's story is relatively well known. Recent study has revealed another, even more shocking, account of war crimes committed by the son of a prosperous Russian Mennonite farmer and merchant. Heinrich Wiens was born on March 22, 1906, in the village of Muntau, a southern suburb of the capital, Halbstadt, in the South Russian Mennonite settlement of Molochna. In Mennonite circles Muntau was known mainly for its excellent hospital along with its numerous professionals, wealthy merchants and estate owners, who preferred the town for the greater security it provided over their isolated country manor houses.<sup>100</sup> During World War I, Wiens and his family were interned by the Russian Army since they all were still German citizens, suggesting a late resettlement from the Danzig region or Prussia.<sup>101</sup> He attended the village elementary school, graduated from an agricultural secondary school and finished a one-year pedagogical seminar. Between 1926 and 1930 he appears to have been trained and employed as a dairy inspector in various localities in the Ukraine, leaving for Danzig in 1930 with the goal of starting his own "association of dairy inspectors."<sup>102</sup>

---

98. Ronald Sullivan, "U.S. Moves Against Man It Links to Death Camp," *The New York Times*, June 25, 1992. See also subsequent articles in *The New York Times* for July 10, 1993; Aug. 2, 1998; Aug. 4, 1998; Aug. 9, 1998; Aug. 13, 1998; Aug. 14, 1998; Aug. 18, 1998; Aug. 19, 1998; Aug. 20, 1998; Aug. 23, 1998; and June 9, 2006. Two ragged pages of a German soldier's diary written at the time at Trawniki were also inconclusive in terms of the evidence against Reimer. It was established that Reimer was present at Trawniki at the time of the massacre, but what he actually did there at the noted concentration camps remained in doubt. This may have been enough for Judge McKenna.

99. The newspaper stories announcing this at the time did not specify the country to which he had been deported. It could have been Ukraine, Germany or Poland. The case was appealed but the lower court's decisions was upheld with an opinion written by current Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor. U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second District, *United States v. Jack Reimer, aka Jakob Reimer*, Jan. 27, 2004.—<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data2/circs/2nd/026286p.pdf>.

100. James Urry in e-mail to Gerhard Rempel, March 20, 2005.

101. On internment and late-nineteenth-century migrations from Prussia see Hans Harder, *Das sibirische Tor: Vier Jahre Orenburger Zivilgefängenschaft, 1914-1918* (Stuttgart: Verlag von J. F. Steinkopf, 1939).

102. George C. Browder, notes taken at the Berlin Document Center/Bundesarchiv Berlin in 1990 on Wiens files in both the "SS Officers" and the "Race and Settlement Main Office" collections. I am grateful to Prof. Browder for providing me with his notes on Heinrich Wiens. See his book, George C. Browder, *Hitler's Enforcers: The Gestapo and the SS Security Service in the Nazi Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). This is now the acknowledged standard work in the field.

Within a year Wiens joined the Nazi Party in Danzig and received a fairly low membership number (633,222), dated January 10, 1931, the year after the first electoral success of the National Socialists in the Reichstag and in various provinces. On January 12, 1931, he also joined the SS (membership number 22,914) followed by a fairly rapid rise in rank from staff sergeant (*Scharführer*) in 1933 to captain (*Hauptsturmführer*) in April 1939. From the start he appears to have been meticulous in complying with standard SS personnel policy in that he declared his Mennonite heritage. But he also described himself as *gotgläubig* (believer in God), the ruse Himmler allowed for those who wanted to retain some element of personal faith, while otherwise spending their entire life within the confines of an officially atheistic SS family. At some point after 1931 he left the Mennonite church, or at least he told the SS ideological watchdogs that he had canceled his membership. In a sign of confidence and trust in Wiens's commitment, the SS transferred him in 1937 from the 71. General SS Standarte of SS Abschnitt XXVI to the elite Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst*),<sup>103</sup> a special internal party intelligence agency and external spy service that competed with the Army's Secret Service (*Abwehr*).<sup>104</sup>

There Wiens served initially in the personnel department of the civilian SS unit in the Danzig District and became a fulltime personnel director in 1939, when he received his first medal for good service and a recommendation for promotion. As soon as the war began he served in SD units in the occupied eastern territories, where he received the *Ostmedaille* in 1941 along with several additional war-related medals in subsequent years. His otherwise spotless record was slightly blemished by an internal field mail service court, which punished him for losing a secret courier package he had been charged to carry from the police commander in Kiev to the police commander in Simferopol. The judgment was not made until 1944, but the incident appears to have occurred in 1942 and may have had something to do with his transfer to Einsatzkommando 12 of Einsatzgruppe D, headquartered at the time in Simferopol. At least this is what Wiens's record in the Berlin Document Center files indicates. Recent research by Adrej Angrick, however,

---

103. On the reason for the creation of this unit see *Stutthof: Ein Konzentrationslager vor den Toren Danzigs*, ed. Hermann Kuhn, 2nd ed. (Bremen: Temmen, 2004), 12. Heinrich Wiens appears to have been under the direct command of SS Sturmbannführer Max Pauly, later the first commandant of Stutthof Concentration Camp. In fact Pauly and Wiens were both transferred from the 71. SS Standarte to the special SD unit at this time. Wiens's rapid advance in the SS could have been partially due to Pauly's positive evaluations.

104. Browder notes, Berlin Document Center/Bundesarchiv Berlin.

suggests that Wiens was active as deputy commander of EK 10a in Simferopol as early as November 1941. Thus, his entire career in the East may have transpired within the Einsatzgruppen rather than as a regular urban SD officer in Kiev and other cities. After the German retreat began following the defeat at Stalingrad, Wiens was transferred to the 14. Galician SS Division as an intelligence (Ic)<sup>105</sup> officer, where he was entrusted with the political monitoring of the Ukrainians who were serving in this volunteer Waffen SS division. The records suggest that his service was indispensable and that the division “could not have functioned without him.”<sup>106</sup>

In November 1941, about the same time that Mennonites were being recruited to serve in the role of auxiliary policemen for Sonderkommando 6 of Einsatzgruppe C in the villages of Chortitza, “SS captain (*Hauptsturmführer*) Heinrich Wiens of Muntau in the Molochna” was leading a section of Einsatzkommando 10a for Einsatzgruppe D in Simferopol. At some point, Kurt Christmann, the commander of EK 10a and a major perpetrator of genocide in Ukraine, sent him to the Crimean capital to arrange for a new headquarters for Einsatzgruppe D. The military situation in the Crimea had been stabilized and Otto Ohlendorf, commander of Einsatzgruppe D, wished to move his staff deep into the Eastern front line region in order to send out his murdering teams—known as action commandos (*Einsatzkommandos*)—right behind the Wehrmacht. Sometimes the EKs actually moved into army positions thereby forcing regular soldiers to collaborate in the rounding up of Jews and commissars. As a member of one of these partially intact commando units (EK 10a) Wiens searched through the building formerly occupied by the Soviet secret police in Simferopol. He sequestered a comfortable set of rooms for his chief, gathered material about German POWs who had been murdered by the Soviets, and recruited all the necessary technical personnel to assist in a functioning headquarters for

---

105. “Ic” in a military unit stands for the third general staff officer in charge of enemy intelligence and defense for the unit.

106. Bundesarchiv Berlin/BDC/SSO and RuSHA files and Browder notes on same; Andrej Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord: Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941-1943* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003), 324. Angrick did not use the Berlin Document Center material on Wiens in his book but has since generously provided me with biographical information based on the latter’s biography. Angrick has specific details from Einsatzgruppen activity reports and postwar court trials of the major perpetrators, including Heinrich Wiens. There is, however, no information about Heinrich Wiens’s life after his transfer to the 14. Waffen-SS Division in January 1945. This division was engaged in some last-minute military actions in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and especially Budapest. If Wiens was still with the division in these suicidal actions, he could have died in any of them or been captured by Soviet troops; or he might have survived them all, escaped west and went underground. It would be hard to trace him in any of the postwar Displaced Persons Camps, especially if he changed his name and identity papers.

Ohlendorf's Einsatzgruppe D. This was an important activity entrusted to Heinrich Wiens, since the capital of the Crimea soon became a major administrative center for the German military formations on the southern front as well as a strongpoint for the SS. Ohlendorf served as Himmler's mouthpiece from this location.

Early in 1942 Wiens appears to have been still with EK 10a under Christmann, probably stationed at Krasnodar.<sup>107</sup> Krasnodar is one of the cities cited in the court records of Helmut Oberlander,<sup>108</sup> where a major atrocity took place, perpetrated by EK 10a.

---

107. The Krasnodar trial records mention his name ("Winz").—*The People's Verdict: A Full Report of the Proceedings at the Krasnodar and Kharkov German Atrocity Trials* (New York: Hutchinson & Co., 1944), 8. The first trial was held July 14-17, 1943, before the military tribunal of the North Caucasian front. The defendants were I. F. Kladov, I. F. Kotomtsev and others. Proceedings in the second trial were held Dec. 15-18, 1943, before the military tribunal of the 4th Ukrainian front. The defendants were Reinhard Retzlaff, Wilhelm Langheld and others. The only Mennonite name mentioned in the document is "Winz." "Retzlaff" may also have been a Mennonite, although there is no specific evidence as such. Alexander Rempel appears to have seen a copy of this book. The relevant passage reads as follows: "The Sonderkommando SS-10a was a punitive unit of the Gestapo, numbering about 200 men. The head of this Sonderkommando was Colonel Christmann, a German, Chief of the Gestapo. His immediate assistants in the work of exterminating Soviet citizens were the German officers: Rabbe, Boss, Sargo, Salge, Hahn, Erich Meier, Paschen, Winz and Hans Münster, the German Army Surgeons in the prison and the Gestapo, Herz and Schuster and also officials of the Gestapo, the interpreters Jakob Eicks and Scherterlan" (8). For an excellent analysis of these Soviet trials and their propagandistic purposes see Alexander Victor Prusin, "'Fascist Criminals to the Gallows!': The Holocaust and Soviet War Crimes Trials, December 1945-February 1946," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17 (Spring 2003), 1-30. When Alexander Rempel makes reference to this trial, and to the fact that a Mennonite was involved, he was obviously on the right trail.

108. Helmut Oberlander is a Canadian who was tried for war crimes in Canada after extraction from the U.S. but never convicted and deported. See Peter Worthington, "Citizenship at Risk," *Toronto Sun*, May 4, 2006. Oberlander was an ethnic German (probably not a Mennonite) from the vicinity of Zaporozhia and had served with Himmler's SD from 1941 to 1944. SK 10a, writes Worthington, was composed of over 100 men "responsible for annihilating all persons in its areas of operation who were considered 'undesirable' by the Nazi regime, particularly the Jewish and Sinti and Roma (so-called Gypsy) inhabitants. . . . In one report to Berlin, Einsatzgruppe D declared that 'the Jewish problem has been solved' in the area in which Special Detachment 10a was then operating. In January 1943, Oberlander was awarded the War Meritorious Service Cross Second Class for his service in Special Detachment 10a." The Canadian Minister of Immigration presented more details in his summary of facts and evidence in the Oberlander case than was provided in any other war crimes case, probably because he had access to the rich collection of documents available to the U.S. Department of Justice—the documents unearthed for the Nuremberg trials. Thus the court knew that "Mr. Oberlander was born in 1924 and raised in the town of Halbstadt, as it was known before the Second World War to the local community of *Volksdeutsche*, that is persons of German descent, in southeastern Ukraine. His forebears had lived there for more than 250 years, having originally come to settle there as members of a German Mennonite [!] community."—U.S. Department of Justice, "Accused Nazi Murderer Is Expelled from the United States," May 9, 1995; [http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/Pre\\_96/May95/261.txt.html](http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/Pre_96/May95/261.txt.html).

At some point in the summer 1942 Wiens was transferred to EK 12, another subunit of Einsatzgruppe D and given more leeway in organizing his own killing operations. Commanded by Erich Müller between February and October 1942, EK 12 moved rapidly into the Caucasus region—as the main German military force advanced on Stalingrad—and set up headquarters in Pjatogorsk at the end of August 1942. One of several resort towns in the northern Caucasus, Pjatogorsk was hardly touched by the war. Most of its cultural institutions and its food supply were left intact, along with the essential infrastructure, when the Red Army withdrew rather hastily on the approach of German tank forces. Shops remained open, making a black market unnecessary, while opera and stage theater performances continued on schedule. But the normal benefits of mineral baths and other health facilities were not available to all people in this mixed population of the region. Large numbers of GPU prisoners, sick with syphilis and scabies, vegetated in the cellars of the prisons, where Wehrmacht officers were eager to keep them isolated.<sup>109</sup>

Soon after their arrival at the end of August 1942, EK 12 dealt with the Jewish population of Pjatogorsk and neighboring towns in the “established manner” according to their “resettlement” procedures. SS-Standartenführer Müller left the planning and actual implementation of the anti-Jewish measures to his deputy, SS-Hauptsturmführer Heinrich Wiens, not only because Wiens had a record of efficient methods in this ghastly business, but probably also because Müller was intent on enjoying the unforeseen advantages of residing as lord in a wealthy and undamaged resort region. For his tasks Wiens had the advantage of using “gas vans,” newly arrived from the manufacturer of “murder implements” in Berlin.<sup>110</sup> As in all massacres by the Einsatzgruppen the 800 to 1,000 Jewish people in the area were first “registered,” which took

---

109. Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, 613.

110. “The development and production of the gas van constituted an intermediate stage between the mobile firing squad procedures of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Russia and the stationary gas chambers of the death camps in Poland in the Nazi attempt to murder the European Jews. The ancestry of the gas van, in both technology and personnel, traced back to the euthanasia program aimed at mentally and hereditarily ill Germans that had been ordered by Hitler in 1939. The motive behind developing the gas van sprang from the desire to alleviate the psychological burden upon the firing-squad murderers, many of them middle-aged family men who were disturbed most of all by the endless shooting of women and children. And the most effective use of the gas van was in stationary camp settings—above all, Chelmno (Kulmhof) in the Warthegau but also Semlin near Belgrade and Trostinez near Minsk—presaging the more sophisticated factories of assembly-line murder at the major death camps such as Treblinka and Auschwitz.”—Christopher R. Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (Teaneck, N.J.: Holmes & Meier, 1991), 57. See also Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 127, 175-178.

eight days. Then came the command to start the killing process. Jews from the city itself and the surrounding localities of Gorjatshevodskij, Svoboda, Novo-Pjatigorsk and Krasnaja Sloboda had until September 5, 1942, to report to the cavalry barracks in Pjatigorsk. At the barracks they were told that they would be resettled and were to prepare themselves for travel. Then they were transported in trucks a short distance to a gravel pit guarded by the members of EK 12 and a battalion of "Caucasians" commanded by a Wehrmacht officer named Kehrer. As each truckload of Jews arrived they were ordered to disembark, deposit their valuables on spread-out blankets and then told to remove all their clothes. They were then forced to climb into the "gas van," which drove back and forth several times before it finally stopped on the edge of the pit. There several Jewish prisoners were compelled to pull the bodies from the truck and throw them into the pit on the promise that they "would be saved" from such a fate. None of the Pjatigorsk victims survived, including the prisoners unloading the corpses of their fellow Jews, who were killed when their grisly work was done. Now Pjatigorsk was also "free of Jews" as the activity reports of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) euphemistically referred to these massacres.<sup>111</sup>

Subsequently, members of EK 12 began to destroy the Jewish population in the neighboring resort towns of the region. For Heinrich Wiens, Kislovodsk became the next moment of truth. A Mennonite settlement, Tempelhof, was located in the immediate vicinity of Kislovodsk.<sup>112</sup> Templars from the Molochna village of Gnadenfeld had originally settled the town—hence the name—followed by a large contingent of Mennonites. By 1942 few Mennonites were still there, thanks to emigration and Soviet deportations. Wiens likely had no idea of the history of his fellow pacifists so near his field of genocidal activity. The people of Kislovodsk appear to have received the men of the EK 12 now with open arms, an ominous sign for the Jewish population, many of whom had fled to this resort in the hills from the Crimea, the Donbas and Rostov and had no personal contacts in Kislovodsk. The town's German commandant, along with Wiens and Strohschneider, the two section leaders of EK 12, ordered the formation of a Jewish Committee, led by Moses Belinsch, which had to follow the instructions of the German administration. Starting on August 18, 1942, the committee was

---

111. Müller was not satisfied. He told his fellow Einsatzgruppen commanders during a social gathering at the officers' casino that he preferred shooting Jews to the cumbersome method of gas van killings. — Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, 614-615.

112. William Schroeder and Helmut T. Huebert, *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg, Man.: Springfield Publishers, 1996), 119.

to register and identify all Jews in the region. The Belinsch Committee was first compelled to confiscate all valuables held by Jews with the promise that they might thereby save their lives.<sup>113</sup> After several weeks of forced labor the Jewish population was ordered to assemble early in the morning of September 7, 1942 at the railroad freight depot for immediate "resettlement to sparsely populated areas of Ukraine." The order, signed by "the city commandant's office Nr. 12," was clearly issued by the Wiens/Strohschneider team and not a German Army officer.<sup>114</sup>

Early in the morning of September 7 some 1,800 Jews appeared at the freight depot where they were separated into groups in front of twenty freight cars. Once everyone was loaded into the cars, the train, guarded by the men of EK 12, moved off into a northeasterly direction. It traveled past the resort town of Mineralnyne Vody, where several Wehrmacht units were headquartered, and came to a halt in an open field. This time the act of genocide was not secret. Administrative staff members from the 17th German Army and the 1. Panzer Army were present to observe the ghastly events. The SD Einsatzkommando officers did not challenge the presence of the Wehrmacht officers because theoretically the SS men were subject to the jurisdiction of the Wehrmacht in respect to tactical matters.

The EK 12 guards, under Wiens's command, surveyed the field with binoculars, but found the area inadequate for the size of the execution planned. So the train returned to Mineralnyne Vody, where it came to rest on a side rail near a glass factory. Roughly a kilometer away there was a large tank trap, which Wiens had personally selected as the appropriate place for the massacre.<sup>115</sup> The method of execution was the same as it had been for the Jews of Pjatigorsk. Around fifty Jews at a time were forced into the gas van, which then drove around the field until all the passengers had been asphyxiated by the carbon monoxide piped into the van via a grate on the floor of the truck bed.<sup>116</sup> The van then stopped

---

113. The stolen treasure was estimated to amount to five million rubles at current market prices.

114. Jews who had converted to Christianity were included in the order, but *Mischlinge* and families falling under category 1 and 2 of the *Deutsche Volksliste* (DVL) were cynically informed that they could resettle later on their own volition.—Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, 617.

115. Soviet sources suggest that this had been the place intended as the execution site for the Jews of Kislovodsk as it had been for the Jews of Pjatigorsk from the start and that the train had been stopped because the guards needed to orient themselves in the region first, since the approach by train was different from that of the land route.—See Munich court records as cited in Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, 614-615.

116. There is a technical yet gruesome description of the van in *The Peoples' Verdict*, 8-9.

at the edge of the tank trap and other Jewish prisoners were compelled to pull the bodies out of the van and throw them into the huge ditch.<sup>117</sup>

Following the massacre of the Jews of Kislovodsk, Wiens's EK 12 team members moved on to "deal with" the Jewish population of the town of Jessentuki and other resorts. Already on August 11, 1942, the Wehrmacht commandant of Jessentuki, Oberstleutnant von Beck, had anticipated the work of EK 12 by forming a "Jewish Committee" in the town and used it to register and rob the Jewish families of any valuable possessions. Shortly thereafter, 1,500 Jews from Jessentuki joined the Jews of Kislovodsk in the mass grave at the glass factory. A similar fate awaited the Jews of Georgijevsk, who were driven to the place of execution by a particularly brutal detachment of Caucasian auxiliaries employed by the leadership of EK 12.

A Soviet investigative commission for the war crimes trials conducted after the area had been reconquered by the Russian troops claimed to have disinterred some 6,300 people at the glass factory near Mineralnyne Vody. While this may be an exaggeration, designed to impress the Russian people at the "show trial" at Krasnodar, the massive grave at Mineralnyne Vody near the former Mennonite settlements of Templehof, Suvorovka, Olgino and Terek remains forever associated with the name of Heinrich Wiens.

"Jewish life and the testimony of Jewish culture in the foothills of the Caucasus," concludes historian Andrej Angrick, "was irretrievably wiped out."<sup>118</sup>

## CONCLUSION

What might have been the motivations behind these genocidal deeds of Mennonites like Jack Reimer, Heinrich Wiens and other less well-known cohorts, such as the dozen or more volunteers who, according to Alexander Rempel, joined as SD auxiliaries in the massacre of Zaporozhia? The Lutheran from Katharinendorf appears to have joined the killer group out of sheer idleness and boredom. Others probably found attractive the idea of exercising power—in uniform and with a gun—over their perceived enemies. Mennonites who had survived the Stalinist purges were strongly inclined to admire Hitler, the anti-Stalin, and were often quite willing to join any Nazi organization as a kind of reflexive passionate action. Much the same motivation was undoubtedly

---

117. Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, 617-618.

118. Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord*, 619-620.

behind the comparatively large number of Mennonite volunteers for the Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht, as well as their participation in various police forces. Many Mennonite survivors of the Stalinist terror and anti-kulak and deportation campaigns expressed virulent hatred for both Jews and Communists as equivalent evils. Mennonites generally resented, envied and despised Jews because so many of them seem to have been found in the ranks of the Soviet secret police and the Communist party cadre, as well as among the supervisors and managers of collective farms and local government agencies. Anna Sudermann, for example, reported that she encountered them all too frequently in the judicial system, in the role of interrogating judges and states attorney and police chiefs. Hence, it was easy to regard Jews as part of the Soviet class enemy on whom raw revenge could now be exacted under the guise of official "police" work, since few Mennonites were probably keen enough to distinguish between normal policing and outright murder committed under the auspices of the Einsatzkommando. But how they ultimately justified their actions of murder against innocent civilians, women and children among them, is a dark mystery that cries out for a deeper explanation.

If Jack Reimer became a perpetrator in the Holocaust in order to survive, Heinrich Wiens did it to advance his lifetime career in the SS. Perhaps he was seeking to make up for the slight blemish in his service record. He may also have been assigned to an Einsatzkommando as a form of punishment and thus felt that he had to redeem himself in the eyes of his superiors—not that his job in other SD activities would have been any less rewarding or implicating. If Reimer and Wiens were the worst of the known perpetrators, the dozen or more volunteers as auxiliaries in Zaporozhia were only slightly less culpable. Most probably they participated for reasons of opportunism and prestige. For them a kind of mob psychology was also at work since many of them felt compelled to talk about their bloody feats, perhaps in self-conscious embarrassment and guilt. By sharing their morbid recollections they diffused and removed some of their secret individual remorse, assuming, that is, that some small element of their moral upbringing as Christians had been retained.

Then what are we to make of the Mennonite mayors of Zaporozhia and Novo Zaporozhia, as well as Chortitza or Osterwick, all of them appointed by the Wehrmacht, who were in power when the massacre at Zaporozhia took place? They stand at the top of hundreds of Mennonites who joined the German Army, the Volkssturm, or worked for the Ostministerium, the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, the Organisation Todt, the Hitler Youth, Sonderkommando Stumpp, Sonderkommando Rußland and a host of the other German-Nazi agencies. None could

really deny that they were at least witnesses to or observers of the Holocaust. But how much responsibility or guilt should they have to assume? In 1942, the mayor of Osterwick, my hometown, reported to German authorities a fellow townsman who happened to be a Jew married to a Mennonite woman. This Jew, who had spent his whole life with Mennonites and even spoke Plautdietsch, was arrested and killed. For a few months my own family lived in the house of this family. It was known as the *Judenhaus*. Recalling that experience fills me with the same ominous feeling Anna Sudermann expressed when she discovered the free clothing she received from the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle distribution center that came from the Jews killed at Babi Yar in Kiev. How much guilt and condemnation is shared by those Mennonites who witnessed and observed or benefited from the Holocaust in their midst?

This brings us back to the concentration camp at Stutthof and the numerous Mennonite farmers, estate owners and businessmen who profited and benefitted from the cheap labor they received by leasing forced laborers from the SS administrators of the camp. Of course, the use of slave labor is, in itself, morally repugnant. But were they not also collaborators with the Nazi regime, the war effort and the racist campaigns to cleanse European civilization of the Jews, considered a blight on that civilization? Many of the business firms owned by Mennonites engaged in the manufacture of various types of armaments. This should have been particularly odious to people who were still pacifist by heritage, although the doctrine of nonresistance had long been surrendered in favor of nationalistic loyalty to the fatherland. What made them especially morally vulnerable was the fact that these activities all supported one of the most evil elements within the Nazi system—the murderous organization of the SS, the main perpetrator of the Holocaust. As for the young men of Mennonite families who became guards at Stutthof and its many outlying camps, their guilt is unquestioned, although the few who were tried after the war for murder received little punishment. Many—at Stutthof, Zaporozhia and the Caucasus—escaped judgment entirely. Only one SS guard with a Mennonite name, Fritz Peters, appears to have been executed. Justice did not prevail; nor did a clear sense of moral judgment emerge from the overall postwar trials of Holocaust perpetrators.

