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"WALDLAGER": A CONCENTRATION CAMP IN NAZI-OCCUPIED BOBRUISK 1942-43

"Waldlager" was a Nazi concentration camp, but of a special kind, or it was NOT a concentration camp at all, that depends on the definition. It was no part of the concentration camp system that was administered by the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt Inspektorat der Konzentrationslager*, but it was a Nazi slave labor camp. All inmates were Jews, and the camp was located right outside the Bela-russian city of Bobruisk, where it operated from June 1942 to late September 1943.

The "Waldlager" was located inside a huge SS military base, the *Nachschenkommendantur der Waffen-SS und Polizei Russland Mitte Bobruisk – Waldlager Kisseliwitschi* which was established in a forest area at the compound of what had in Soviet times been a barracks for the Red Army armoured forces, and before that for the tsarist cavalry. The SS and police forces had one such base for the *Heeresgruppe Nord* area located in Riga, one for the *Heeresgruppe Süd* in Dnepropetrovsk, and this one in Bobruisk which served the SS and police forces that covered the *Heeresgruppe Mitte* front and rear areas.

"Waldlager Bobruisk" was the largest of the three bases. It served as temporary quarters for the SS and police as well as Wehrmacht and collaborator auxiliary units that moved to and from the front, and around the vast *Heeresgruppe Mitte* rear area. Some of the worst genocidal units of the Eastern territories were accommodated in the "Waldlager Bobruisk" for shorter or longer periods. Its many buildings served as temporary accommodation, and also held an *SS Truppenwirtschaftslager* that included vast storage facilities for vehicles, equipment and munitions, provisions etc., as well as a number of repair shops. It even served as a training center for new recruits to the Waffen-SS and police forces.

Its function as a training center is the reason why I took interest in the "Waldlager", for amongst the troops that were trained in Bobruisk were Romanian "*Volksdeutsche*", but also

collaborators from Estonia and Holland -- as well as the *Freikorps Danmark* which consisted of volunteers recruited in Denmark.

This unit was established in Summer 1941 as a "Germanic legion" attached to the Waffen-SS, mostly recruited among members of the small Danish Nazi party and its youth organization. In the Summer of 1943, it was disbanded, and its volunteers integrated into ordinary Waffen-SS units. Of around 3.000 *Freikorps Danmark* volunteers, some 800-1.000 belonging to the *Freikorps Danmark Ersatzkompanie* received their military training at the "Waldlager Bobruisk", and this is what moved my colleague Dennis Larsen of the Danish National Museum and me to a research project on this facility and the German occupational rule at large in the Bobruisk region, which resulted in this book titled SCHOOL OF VIOLENCE which was published in October last year. What I am going to present to you here are selected results of our research.

At a huge military base like the "Waldlager Bobruisk", there was an awful lot of manual work to be done: repair of buildings that had been damaged during the June 1941 Battle of Bobruisk, development of the infrastructure of the base and a vast system of defence installations meant to provide protection against Soviet partisans which in the course of time grew very strong in the region of Bobruisk; the handling and storage of provisions, munitions etc. also demanded extensive manpower, as did the repair shops -- and the normal way for the German military in the occupied Soviet areas to cover its demand for manpower was by conscription of forced labor, primarily among the Jews. Now, while in the 19th century, the majority of the Bobruisk population was Jewish, by 1939, their share had fallen to one third of the city's 85.000 inhabitants, as Bolshevik industrialization had brought primarily non-Jewish labor immigrants from Russia and Ukraine to the city.

By July 1941, a massive flight wave during the first days of the Barbarossa campaign had left only some 14.000 Jews in Bobruisk, almost all of whom fell victims to a number of mass killings that took place in Autumn 1941, including two large two-day long massacres on November 5-7, and December 30-31, 1941 that left practically no Jews alive. So while the German army, SS, and civilian administration bodies erected numerous slave labor camps for Jews throughout the occupied Soviet areas, by the time they realized that they needed them as a labor force in Bobruisk, they had already killed all Jews in the city and its wider surroundings under horrendously brutal circumstances.

The option of forced recruitment of local non-Jews was frequently used by the German forces throughout the occupational period, too, but from early 1942 on it was a less viable solution.

Because at this time, the newly appointed German "Labor dictator" and Plenipotentiary for Labor Recruitment Fritz Sauckel was just starting up his campaign to recruit millions of workers from "the Eastern territories" for the armaments industry in the German Reich by way of conviction as well as – primarily - coercion. So while thousands of male and female workers were leaving Belarus for Germany, and no local Jews were alive anymore, the SS had to look elsewhere for the manpower it needed, and turned its eye at Warsaw, where the largest ghetto in occupied Europe was just in the process of being emptied of Jews who were taken to the Treblinka annihilation camp in daily transports and murdered upon arrival by poison gas. The decision to put up a concentration-camp-like Judenlager in the "Waldlager Bobruisk" appears to have been taken in Berlin, and a couple of SS officers were sent from the *Inspektorat der Konzentrationslager*, i.e. the central administration of the KZ system, to establish it. Its commander, SS-Obersturmführer Otto Söldner, had held a rather high post as leader of the *Arbeitsdienst* at Hamburg's concentration camp Neuengamme, that is the responsible officer for the exploitation of the prisoners' slave labor. His "right hand" in Bobruisk, SS-Untersturmführer Kurt Klebeck, came from a post as *Sachbearbeiter* at the IKL head-quarters, and returned to Germany after he had helped establish the Judenlager in Bobruisk. Klebeck – together with SS-Obersturmführer Waldemar Wilhelm, who was soon promoted to officer of the notorious Dirlewanger SS-unit – travelled to Warsaw, and selected the first transport of some 1.000 Jews who left the Warsaw Ghetto on May 29th, 1942 destined for Bobruisk. The selection took place at the ghetto *Umschlagplatz*, and the two officers had travelled all the way to Warsaw in order to do it themselves, as they did again a month later, when another transport was put together in order to provide "their" camp in Bobruisk and a similar camp in Smolensk with an additional 500 Jewish slave laborers each.

At the arrival in Bobruisk, Klebeck and Wilhelm were again present, as the Jews were unloaded, and became extremely angry as the arriving prisoners - who had been on the train for several days with no food and no water under unimaginably bad hygienic conditions – turned out to be so weakened they could barely stand nor walk the short distance of some 2 kilometres to the Judenlager. So at the very first roll call, they announced that whoever wanted to be transported back to Poland again, should step forward, which around one hundred of the new arrivals did – only to be ordered to undress and be taken to a nearby ravine where they were executed by shooting. Amongst the victims of this first of what became a long sequence of massacres (large and smaller), were a substantial number of

teenage boys, who had originally been imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto prison for trying to smuggle food to the starving population in the ghetto.

The sources to the history of what became one of the most horrific of the entire German slave labor camp universe are mostly court proceedings and police investigations conducted during the 1960'ies and 1970'ies in West Germany, Denmark and other countries, as well as testimony from some of the few survivors of the camp, whereas no camp documents have been found. Since the camp was disbanded already in early Autumn 1943, more than half a year before the Red Army liberated the Bobruisk area, the Germans had plenty of time to erase the paper traces of their crimes. Researchwise the Judenlager Bobruisk has been only briefly touched upon by Christian Gerlach in his major study of the Nazi occupational rule in Belarus which does, however, provide some important context.

The total number of prisoners in the Judenlager Bobruisk is estimated to have been 1.500 Jews arriving on the mentioned two transports in May and July 1942 (although some sources suggest substantially larger numbers). At the time the camp was evacuated in late September 1943, all sources agree, only 91 inmates were still alive. The whole rest had been murdered in a number of small and larger killing operations as well as individual killings. So the death toll was more than 1.400 prisoners in the course of sixteen months equalling some 90 a month or an average of three deaths a day. Most fell victims to group shootings that followed the frequent selections on Sundays and random work days, some were killed by guards in sophisticated brutal ways be it as a means of punishment for poor work or minor violations of the camp regulations (which were copied from the standard concentration camp set of rules that was developed by Theodor Eicke in Dachau in the mid-thirties). And quite a substantial number of prisoners seem to have been tortured to death for the sheer perverse pleasure of the guards on duty and other SS personnel that would visit the Judenlager during their leisure time with the sole purpose of seeing the extreme violence that was characteristic to this camp or joining in.

Food was extremely scarce in the "Walldlager Bobruisk", even compared to regular German concentration camps. So in the course of a few months, most prisoners were reduced to the state of emaciated *Muselmänner*. At least once a week, the SS would conduct selections in the huts that served as the prisoners' quarters or at the roll call square, and take those deemed unfit for work to be shot at a nearby execution site. At one such site six metres long, four metres wide and three metres deep mass graves were excavated that had stairs carved into their clay sides, and were left open for weeks with only a thin layer of sand to cover the

murdered until they were filled up with dead bodies. The Jews would be forced to undress and descend into the mass grave where they would have to lie down facing down in a row on top of the dead bodies from earlier killings; SS officers and guards would then take position at the rim of the grave, shoot them, and then descend into the grave in order to search the murdered for valuables and break whichever gold teeth they had out of their jaws. Such killings happened once, twice or more frequently every week, and the perpetrators would speed up the movement of the doomed by random violence. Two Jews – mocked by the Germans as "the Abraham brothers" - would serve as "grave diggers", and do the transportation of those prisoners who died in the course of the day or night to the same mass graves. One of the execution sites was located only 300 metres from the neighbouring village of Kisselewitschi, so that locals observed what was going on, and were able to testify about it in front of the Soviet war crimes investigation commission after Bobruisk had been liberated on June 30th, 1944.

The inmates of the Judenlager Bobruisk worked mostly in restoration and development of the infrastructure of the *Nachschenkommandantur*, which was subject to constant extensions: construction of new huts for the SS, police, and Wehrmacht, the digging of water ditches, construction of roads, and development of the defence system. Smaller work details worked at the SS and police storage facilities and repair workshops for uniforms, equipment, motor vehicles, confiscated peasants' panje-waggons and horsedrawn sleighs. In general, work was hard and heavy, and the guards would punish or even kill the prisoners at the work site if they felt like it, or take down the numbers of those who did not work or look entirely to their liking, and then hand them over to punishment by the commanding officer upon the return of the work details to the camp at night.

At one point, a smaller number of prisoners – maybe one hundred – were moved to a subcamp which was erected next to the *Truppenwirtschaftslager* where they worked, and here the regime appears to have been less harsh than in the main Judenlager, so that some fifty prisoners of the smaller "Aussenlager" managed to survive until the entire Judenlager complex was evacuated in September 1943 — even if the smaller subcamp, too, had its examples of extreme, excessive violence.

Work hours were long, and the slave labor mostly took place outside, so that the prisoners were exposed to hot weather in the Summer, and extreme cold during Winter. One short "lunch break" where a starvation diet much like the one of ordinary concentration camps was served, was the only opportunity to relax during the 12-14 hours working day. So the

prisoners were only able to maintain their work ability by "auto-cannibalism": i.e. using up all fat depots, their muscle mass and – in the end – their brain tissue. A number of prisoners actually fled the Judenlager, causing collective punishment to be imposed on their co-prisoners; but most fugitives were caught and hanged at a gallows that had been erected at the roll call square, or in a tree close to it. Most prisoners would soon descend to a stage of apathy caused by the extreme hunger — which the death of some of the hungry did not alleviate, as provisions were cut accordingly. In the Summer of 1942, some twenty prisoners worked in the camp kitchen with the preparation of the meager rations, in Summer 1943, only one was left to cook for the few remaining prisoners: Izchak Wasserstein, whom Dennis Larsen and I had the privilege of interviewing in Munich shortly before he died in 2013.

It would be tempting to consider the "Judenlager Bobruisk" just one more example of the many slave labor camps for Jews that the Nazis erected throughout the occupied Polish and Soviet territories, mostly organized by the Wehrmacht to cover acute local demands for manpower. But the Judenlager Bobruisk - established and run by the SS – should most likely be seen in a larger perspective: Heinrich Himmler was working with Hitler's full support to broaden the authority of the SS in the occupied Soviet areas. His mobile *Einsatzgruppen* and far more numerous Police Battalions were given close to unlimited powers, and eventually – as their objective of killing all Jews except for a few thousand "*Arbeitsjuden*" had been reached – transformed into the core of a stationary German police system that would precede the rule of these areas by civilian German authorities. In Germany, the establishment of a concentration camp system had been one of Himmler's important power resources, and there is good reason to believe that he – at one point - followed the same strategy in trying to establish an "Eastern concentration camp system" in the occupied Soviet territories. At least, the establishment of a slave labor camp for Jews inside the largest SS military base of this area by means of "imported" Polish Jews seems to point in that direction, as does similar camp projects in Smolensk and Vitebsk, highlighted by Jörn Hasenclever. And so does the aborted construction of a major annihilation camp in the neighboring city of Mogiliov (a project described by Christian Gerlach), as well as the experimentation in mass killing techniques that were conducted in this same region. The fact that prisoners were taken from the *Generalgouvernement* across two borders through the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* to the *Rückwärtiges Heeresgebiet Mitte*, and that specialists from the *Inspektorat der Konzentrationslager* headquarters were sent to Bobruisk to help establish the Judenlager speaks for the central role of Berlin and wide-ranging objective of the SS. The fact that this

camp ended up by gradually killing almost all prisoners, as if the work they were assigned to, didn't matter much after all, on the other hand indicates that priorities – in Bobruisk as well as in the larger perspective – changed at some point between the opening of the "Judenlager Bobruisk" in June 1942, and its closing down in September 1943. Probably, what started out as part of one of the Reichsführer-SS's grand visions, ended as a rudimentary enterprise much alike the numerous Wehrmacht-run local camps, and for that reason had to be dismantled in connection with the liquidation of the more Western-located work camps for Jews and remaining ghettos in the wake of the Jewish uprisings in the Sobibor and Treblinka annihilation camps and ghettos like Warsaw and Białystok.