

# Labour camps

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## Summary

The Germans used free Jewish labour from the first days of the occupation. Over time, only the forms of organisation of that labour changed. What remained constant was the element of terror that was always involved, as well as the primacy of ideology over economic calculation. Jewish forced labourers were employed in workshops, factories, offices, etc., located in the cities where they lived or in closed forced labour camps in distant places, where they were forcibly brought. First such camps were built in May 1940 in the General Government. Their expansion was related to the occupier's attempt to exploit the conquered territories, as well as preparations for war with the USSR and strengthening the defence potential of the Reich. Documents collected in this volume illustrate the working and living conditions in the camps, mainly in the years 1940–1942. Most of the surviving documents were written in the districts of Lublin and Warsaw –this fact reflects the intensity of German plans of land reclamation and development in these areas.

The majority of testimonies presented herein refer to places where Warsaw Jews worked. These testimonies were written by them personally or recorded based on their spoken accounts and then edited by collaborators of the “Oneg Shabbat”, including Salomea Ostrowska, Daniel Fligelman, Szymon Huberband, and Hersz Wasser. To a lesser extent, the issue is illustrated by official German and Jewish documents preserved in the ARG: the latter include statements and reports made by official delegates of the Jewish Social Self-Help (ŻSS) and the Joint (documents 16, 17, 26, 28) and the Warsaw Jewish Council (for example document 69), who visited the camps. Most testimonies come from the complex of temporary camps: Bełżec (documents 28–33), Chełm–Włodawa (documents 36–42), Kampinos (documents 55–56, 63–65), Wilga (documents 75–78), Łowicz (documents 69–72) and Drewnica (documents 57–59). These are the camps that took the bloodiest toll.

In July 1940, the Germans began implementing the “Otto Programm” – modernisation and construction of transport routes on a large scale, related to preparations for war with the Soviet Union. The “Otto Programm” entailed building new sections of

thoroughfares (north-south and eastward) in the General Government near the border with the USSR, as well as an antitank trench along the demarcation line with the USSR. It was the construction of antitank fortifications that led to a network of labour camps for Jews to be established in Bełżec and the surrounding area (see documents 28–33). The Bełżec camp complex, one of the earliest and largest, was supervised by Commander Hermann Dolp – it was because of him these camps were also the bloodiest. Haunting descriptions of life and work in these camps can be found, for example, in the testimony written by the writer Percec Opoczyński (document 31) and the report of the Joint inspector named Goldman (document 28).

As far as road construction camps are concerned, the volume presents testimonies from labour camps in Frysztak (documents 12, 23), Strzyżów (document 21) and Wojaszówka (document 23), established due to the modernisation of the Krosno–Strzyżów route. In the spring of 1941, more than 1,400 Jews worked building roads in that area, mostly from the Warsaw ghetto. The camp in Mordy (document 73) was part of a larger project to build routes on the east side of the river. In the so-called “winter camps” in Końskowola and Milejów (document 45), the entire administration and management of the camp was in Jewish hand, which made the living conditions slightly more bearable.

Most of the documents in this volume were written in camps established by the General Government authorities in order to provide labour for the enormous project aimed at adapting the water circulation system. The four-year program (developed in the winter of 1940) entailed regulating mountain streams and non-navigable rivers, completing the dam in Rożnów, reclamation of wasteland, and so on. In large part, these projects were a continuation of the pre-war Polish economic plans, for example in the vicinity of Chełm and Włodawa (camps in Ujazdów and Krychów). During the war, most of the works were done by the Jews in forced labour camps (documents 36–42). Descriptions of dramatic events can be found in testimonies from the camps in Narty and Piekło (documents 55–56, 63–65), where the Jewish prisoners worked on drainage of the Kampinoska Valley. Particularly poignant is the testimony by Rabbi Chitowski, recorded and edited by Rabbi Szymon Huberband (document 63), describing not only the extremely difficult working conditions, but also the circumstances of the shooting of brothers Szmuel and Zelman Adler in the camp.

The vast majority of testimonies speak about the inhumane living and working conditions. There are recurring complaints about the lack of even modestly adapted dormitories, the lack of basic sanitation, hunger, cold, rampant disease and lack of medical care, but also the sadism and ruthlessness of camp guards, serving in various formations (document 1) or in the SS. In most of the camps, torture and shooting the prisoners were a daily occurrence (including mass executions of sick prisoners, for example in Osowa near Włodawa, documents 40–41). Such events are clearly described in interrogation reports of prisoners who managed to return from the camps in the district of Warsaw (documents 55, 56).

The conditions in farming labour camps were equally harsh (documents 61, 62), although the Jewish workers directed to such work hoped for better food and more dignified living conditions than in the Warsaw ghetto. They were encouraged to volunteer to work in such camps by organisations such as Warsaw’s Toporol.

A special category is the collection of documents from the labour camp in Pustków (documents 17, 18), established near the great military camp, where the command of the nearby SS training ground stationed. To build the camp, the Germans used hired workers, prisoners, and POWs. The camp was administered by the SS, and the number of Jewish workers murdered in Pustków is estimated at approximately 2,000.

The responsibility for the organisation of forced labour was entirely imposed by the Germans on the Jewish councils, which were held accountable not only for effective and timely delivery of workers, but also for taking care of them in the camps and their families back at the ghetto. Documents collected in volume show that in the public perception this organisation was an additional source of anguish and the aid they received was by far insufficient. These documents describe step-by-step the horrific ordeal of Jews during subsequent stages of deportation to the camps, starting with testimonies about roundups (documents 5, 6), examination by a committee of doctors (Doc. 7), stay at the so-called “stage point” (document 6), to aid for people returning from the camp (document 9). A document of a particular significance is the Memorial of the Warsaw Jewish Council concerning labour camps in the Lublin region, which is a detailed account of the dramatic albeit insufficient struggle of the Jewish community to secure aid for the camps (Doc. 27).

There are no surviving accounts from the District of Galicia, annexed to the General Government on 1 August 1941, which is probably due to the fact that first camps were established there relatively late (in October 1941), as well as the fact that there were no Jews from Warsaw there. There are no reports about camps at arms factories, either – first such camps were established in the summer of 1942, and they were de facto strictly isolated concentration camps. One exception is the testimony from the plant “Wapnorud” in Rudniki near Czestochowa (document 54), where Jewish prisoners were forced to work making lime.

Another unique document is the comprehensive diary of Pola Mordkowiec (document 19), a young girl deported from Łódź at the beginning of 1940. In her diary, she describes her family’s life in exile as they were subsequently deported to various cities in the General Government (Limanowa, Niepołomice, Kraków, Sochaczew). The diary also features poems written by the author at successive stages of her exile (document 20).

The volume is composed of two main parts: Part One features documents about the early stages (roundups, medical examination before deportation to the camps, etc.) or general issues, while Part Two contains descriptions of individual camps (arranged in the administrative and geographical order). Documents from outside the General Government are presented separately.