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DEPORTATIONS OF HUNGARIAN JEWS TO AUSTRIA (1944/45)

As the historian Raul Hilberg pointed out, a striking feature of the Holocaust in Hungary is that it was implemented at a time when the German perpetrators knew that the war was lost. The looming defeat was presumably the reason for the second specialty of this process, the speed with which it was carried out: Between May 14 and July 9, 1944, more than 430,000 Jewish men, women and children were deported from the Hungarian countryside to Auschwitz. Another reason for the rapid implementation of the deportations was the expertise of the German unit that was in charge of the implementation of the “final solution of the Jewish question in Hungary.” The Sondereinsatzkommando der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in Ungarn, the SS-Special Commando Hungary, counted only approximately 200 staff members including secretaries. Its core were a few dozen veteran German and Austrian deportation experts like Hermann Krumey, Franz Novak, Dieter Wisliceny, Theo Dannecker, Franz Abromeit and Siegfried Seidl who for years had already organized and overseen deportations of Jews, Slovenians and Poles from different European countries. That Eichmann came to Budapest as head of the Special Commando rather than remain in Berlin and direct the deportations from there is a clear sign of the importance and urgency of the action. The smooth execution of the deportations was also made possible by the collaboration of the Hungarian puppet-government that passed the necessary legislation, and by the Hungarian gendarmerie that rounded up the Jews, drove them into ghettos and later into deportation centers as well as loading and escorting the deportation trains to the Hungarian-Slovak border in Košice (Kassa).

A considerable number of Hungarian Jews were not deported to Auschwitz but to Austria. During the big deportations, in June 1944, more than 15,000 Jews were sent to Vienna and Lower Austria for slave labor. When the Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy ordered a temporary stop of the deportations on July 6, he saved the approximately 200,000 Jews living in Budapest. Furthermore, the Hungarian army had drafted 80,000 Jewish men for Labor

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1 Raul Hilberg, Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 2 For details of the careers of the members of the “Sonderkommando,” see: Hans Safran, Eichmann’s Men (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press 2010)
2 For details of the careers of the members of the “Sonderkommando,” see: Hans Safran, Eichmann’s Men (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press 2010)
and not handed them over to the Germans. In November 1944, after the putsch of the Arrow Cross (Nyílas), deportations to Austria were resumed. A second, even larger, group of Jewish deportees was sent to build fortifications along the Austro-Hungarian border, the so-called Südostwall that was supposed to stop the progress of the Red Army towards Vienna and Graz.

In this paper I am going to focus on the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Austria. I will try and answer three questions: 1. Why were they deported to Austria rather than Auschwitz or other concentration camps? 2. Who was in charge of their labor deployment? and 3. How did this influence their living and working conditions as well as their chances of surviving the war?

The Occupation of Hungary

When the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944 there were almost 800,000 people who were considered Jewish according to the Hungarian racial laws. Hungary's Jewish population had been discriminated against by law and thousands of Jewish men had died in the Jewish Labor Service of the Hungarian army. Nevertheless, the Jewish communities in the country were still intact and Hungary had been a safe haven for its Jewish population as well as for thousands of Jewish refugees as the government had resisted German pressure and — with a tragic exception in 1941 — had refused to deliver its Jewish citizens to the German Reich. With the German occu...
DEPORTATIONS OF HUNGARIAN JEWS TO AUSTRIA (1944/45)

The deportation of Hungary in March 1944 drastically changed the situation. Although Miklós Horthy, Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary since March 1920, remained head of state, and some of the newly appointed ministers had already served in former governments, they condoned the deportation of the Jewish population. Jewish leaders who turned to them for help were told to obey the instructions of the SS. The Hungarian state and population also profited from the deportations as they received the Jewish property that was left behind. However, the SS also tried to get its share of the loot. With the occupiers came Kurt Becher, confidant of Reichsführer-SS (Reich Leader of the SS) Heinrich Himmler. Officially, Becher was head of the “Ausrüstungsstab der Waffen-SS,” the SS armament staff, and in charge of procuring horses for the SS and the Wehrmacht, the German army. But Becher did much more than this. He was a master of extortion, particularly of rich Jews whom he helped leave Hungary and go to a neutral country. His biggest deal was the acquisition of the Manfréd Weiss works, Hungary’s biggest military industrial complex. In exchange he allowed 38 members of the families of the owners, the Weiss, Chorin, Kornfeld, Heinrich and Mauthner families, to escape to Portugal. This was the biggest, but by no means the only deal the SS made with wealthy Jews. Furthermore, Kurt Becher was not the only member of the SS to extort ransom money from desperate Jews. In March and April 1944, numerous wealthy Jews were arrested and incarcerated either in Hungary or deported to Mauthausen concentration camp and the Oberlanzendorf labor camp in Austria. Many of them were set free after their relatives or their communities had paid hefty sums of ransom money. These early extortions and liberations gave rise to the hope of the Hungarian Jewish leadership that they might be able to save the Hungarian Jews with the help of negotiations and bribes. The German defeat was close and the SS was obviously corrupt. This latter assumption was strengthened by Dieter Wisliceny, member of the Special Commando, who shortly after the occupation presented a “letter of recommendation” from the leaders of Slovak Jewry suggesting that the Hungarian Jewish leadership should enter negotiations with him “on an economic basis.” Although Wisliceny was a notorious liar, and the majority of Hungarian Jews were deported and killed, these desperate attempts to save Jewish lives with the help of bribes and negotiations produced some positive results, as will be shown in this paper.

Due to the speed of the deportations, the Jewish leadership acted under immense pressure. They turned to Hungarian politicians, opinion leaders,

11 For a detailed description of Becher’s negotiations, see: Bauer, Sale, pp. 196-238
13 Kasztner, Bericht, p. 24; Bauer, Sale, pp. 62-101
church dignitaries and representatives of neutral states like Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the Vatican. They had some success – Horthy ordered the stop of the deportations due to the pressure of neutral diplomats and Hungarian church representatives –, but for hundreds of thousands it came too late. Horthy’s proclamation did, however, save many of the Jewish inhabitants of Budapest.

Wisliceny, Hermann Krumey, Adolf Eichmann and other members of the Special Commando entered negotiations with representatives of the Va’adat Ezra ve-Hatsala (Relief and Rescue Committee), a Jewish organization made up of Zionist and Orthodox groups that had so far engaged in the aid for Jewish refugees in Hungary and in illegal emigration to Palestine. The reasons why they entered into negotiations were diverse and reflected the fact that some were willing to make some compromises in their Jewish policy in return for concessions on the part of the Western Allies, even though the imminent defeat led some members of the SS to speed up the annihilation process. The most important factor in this gamble was Heinrich Himmler, who was trying to enter negotiations with the Western Allies for a separate peace. He hoped that saving some Jews would open the doors to the American government and give him an alibi for the postwar period. Some of his collaborators, like Kurt Becher – who was not a member of the Special Commando – and Hermann Krumey – who was Eichmann’s deputy in the Special Commando – were willing to go along with Himmler in this scheme. Adolf Eichmann obeyed Himmler’s orders and entered the negotiations, but he also did his best to send as many Jews as possible to Auschwitz. The precarious military situation of the Third Reich and the greed of the SS could at the same time both work in favor of and against the Jews. It could speed up the process of annihilation and it could help save Jewish lives. Therefore an evaluation of the success or failure of the negotiations between Jewish leaders and the SS is difficult.

On April 5, 1944, Rezsó Kasztner and Joel Brand from the Va’adah handed over the first of many payments of large sums of money and valuables to high-ranking members of the Special Commando. They interpreted the fact that many different members of the Special Commando took money from them as a sign that their negotiations were “official” and not a ruse of SS-men who wanted to line their pockets. On April 15 and again on May 5, Adolf Eichmann called Joel Brand and offered him a surprising deal: He was willing to liberate one million Jews – this means all Hungarian Jews – in exchange for 10,000 trucks and other goods to be delivered by the Western

14 See footnote 9
DEPORTATIONS OF HUNGARIAN JEWS TO AUSTRIA (1944/45)

On Eichmann’s order Joel Brand went to Istanbul on May 17 to convey this proposal to representatives of the Western Allies. It soon became clear that the Western Allies were not interested in a separate peace treaty with the SS (,), i.e., Heinrich Himmler, which was quite obviously supposed to antagonize the Soviet Union. Neither were they willing to supply Germany with goods that would strengthen the Wehrmacht and lengthen the War. Brand’s mission failed, and he was arrested by the British.

The deportations had started already two days before Brand had left Hungary. Nevertheless, all parties were interested in keeping the talks going. In the light of the deportations Kasztner understood that he could not save all Hungarian Jews. Therefore he started to negotiate the release of certain groups of Jews. In the beginning of May Hermann Krumey agreed to let 600 holders of Immigration Certificates for Palestine go there. He also permitted another 100 Jews to leave in exchange for a ransom of $100 per head. As will be shown below, after weeks of negotiations and considerable ransom money the so-called Palestine Transport left Budapest at the end of June with close to 1,700 passengers. It did not, however, head for Palestine but for Switzerland via the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Eichmann had made it clear that he would not allow Jews to emigrate to Palestine. Therefore Kasztner suggested letting Jews go to Spain for a ransom of $100 per head. On June 11, he proposed that Eichmann keep 100,000 Jews in Hungary rather than have them deported to Auschwitz. This was the number of Jews the Germans had promised to release as soon as their negotiations with the West produced tangible results. Eichmann refused, but on June 14 he suddenly offered to put 30,000 Jews “on ice” in Austria. 15,000 Jews would come from the countryside and 15,000 from Budapest. What was most remarkable about this offer was that Eichmann’s monetary demands were modest, because the Jews were supposed to work in Austria while waiting for their final release.

Deportations to Gänserndorf and Strasshof an der Nordbahn

The idea to deport Hungarian Jews to Austria rather than Auschwitz originated in Vienna. With the loss of the Eastern territories, the German Reich not only lost its most important reservoir of slave laborers but also had to
step up the production of munitions and move many production sites under­ground to protect them from allied bombings. The situation was aggravated by the approaching harvest season, and the concomitant need for more slave workers. On June 7, the Viennese mayor, SS-Brigadeführer Hanns Blaschke, wrote to Ernst Kaltenbrunner, head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Central Reich Security Office), requesting slave laborers for Vienna. With this letter, he followed the example of the Gauleitung of Nieder­donau that had already earlier successfully applied for Hungarian Jewish workers. In the end of May, deportation trains from Bačka and possibly also from Carpathian Ruthenia stopped in Gänserndorf near Vienna and a few hundred strong and healthy men and women were selected for work; the others continued to Auschwitz. The number of trains that stopped in Gänserndorf is unknown, as is the number of slave laborers taken out for work in Austria.\(^{23}\) The date of arrival can be reconstructed based on the fact that, at the beginning of June, several dozen Jews who had died on the deportation trains were buried at the Jewish cemetery in Vienna.\(^ {24}\)

The selected Jews were handed over to the Gau labor exchange (Gauar­beitsamt) that placed them with municipalities, farmers and firms in Lower Austria and Southern Moravia. On June 8 the Gauernährungsamt, the Gau Food Agency of Nieder­donau, informed the district councilors (Landräte) and mayors about the size of meat rations for Hungarian Jewish families who would be deployed for slave labor in the near future.\(^ {25}\) This innocuous document shows that the Reich’s Security Main Office in Berlin had already agreed to send a few thousand Hungarian Jews to Nieder­donau rather than Auschwitz a week before Eichmann made his offer to Kasztner to put 30,000 Jews “on ice” in Austria. It may be assumed that Himmler, when he was in­formed of the plan to send Hungarian Jews to Austria, decided to use them as pawns in his negotiations. Therefore, Eichmann presented their labor deployment as a “sign of good will.” This was, however, not a mere ruse. The SS did not hand the Jews over to the Gauleitungen but kept them under the control of the Special Commando that established an External Detach­ment in Vienna (Außenkommando Ungarn), which was under the command of Hermann Krumey. Hermann Krumey was arguably Himmler’s most important negotiator from the staff of the Special Commando. His second in command was, however, Siegfried Seidl, who belonged to the antise­mitic hardliners. By keeping the Jewish slave laborers under its command,

\(^ {23}\) Testimony of Dr. Emil Tuchmann, 1.10.1946, WStLA LG Wien Vg (Vienna City and Provincial Archives, Vienna Provincial Criminal Court as People’s Court) 1b Vr 770/46 against Siegfried Seidl; testimony of Viktor Schwarz, WStLA LG Wien Vg 3e Vr 1955/45 against Dr. Emil Tuchmann; report of H. D.; 22.9.1995, Archive of the Institute for Jewish History in Austria, St. Pölten (Injoest)

\(^ {24}\) “Gruppenbücher” (burial records) of the New Jewish Part of the Central Cemetery (Gate 4)

\(^ {25}\) Der Reichsstatthalter in Nieder­donau, Landesernährungsamt Abt. B, gez. Ober­regierungsrat Lebeth, IV c-1945-VII/4-VI/12, Zf 55/1945, Kt. 1771, Niederösterreichisches Landesarchiv (Provincial Archives of Lower Austria, NÖLA)
the Special Commando also benefited economically as it cashed in on the “wages” the employers had to pay their Jewish workers. To recapitulate: the reasons for the deportation of Jews from Hungary to Austria rather than to Auschwitz were the pressing labor shortage and the Gauleiters’ requests for slave laborers (addressed to the Reich’s Security Main Office in Berlin) for slave laborers. Himmler agreed to send these Jews to Austria and Eichmann presented this to Kasztner as a “sign of good will.” As Himmler considered these Jews his pawns he was interested in keeping them alive while they were working in Austria. As such, this arrangement was also advantageous for the deportees.

On June 30, Kaltenbrunner notified Hanns Blaschke that approximately 12,000 Hungarian Jews were on their way to Vienna. However, Eichmann kept his word and sent 15,000 Jews from the ghettos of Szolnok, Szeged and Debrecen to Strasshof an der Nordbahn, a big railroad hub northeast of Vienna. Adjacent to the railway station there was a large transit camp where the Jewish families stayed until they were registered and had undergone a medical check-up. A few days after these trains had arrived in Strasshof, Horthy stopped the deportations. Therefore, no Budapest Jews were sent to Austria.

The Palestine Transport left Budapest as the Strasshof Transports left the countryside ghettos. The negotiations for the release of this transport had started in May with 600 holders of immigration visas to Palestine. When the train left Budapest, only a minority of the 1,684 passengers held Palestine certificates and its final destination was Switzerland. The Zionist organizers of the transport had tried to send representatives of the different religious, political and social strata of Hungarian Jewry with the transport. In order to be able to pay the high ransom the SS demanded for this transport, a fair number of “paying passengers” were also included. In addition, Becher placed fifty persons who had given him particularly high sums of money for safe conduct papers to travel to a neutral state. The train took the group to the Ungarnlager, the Hungarian Camp, a special camp for “exchange Jews” in the complex of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. There, the living conditions were better than in the rest of the camp and the inmates did not have to work. More importantly, however, the members of the transport were released to Switzerland in two groups in August and in December 1944.

26 Kasztner, Bericht, pp. 28-62; Löb, Rezsö Kasztner.
28 Bergen-Belsen had been established as a camp for “exchange Jews” in 1943. Later a so-called “recuperation camp” where sick inmates of concentration camps were interned, was added. At the end of 1944 the regular concentration camp was added. See: Wolfgang Benz, Barbara Distel (eds.), Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, vol. 7: Wetwelsburg, Majdanek, Arbeitsdorf, Herzogenbusch (Vught), Bergen-Belsen, Mittelbau-Dora (Munich: C.H. Beck 2008).
29 For the negotiations see: Bauer, Sale, pp. 196-221
Slave Laborers in Vienna and Niederdonau

Were the more than 15,000 Jews who had been deported to Gänserndorf and Strasshof privileged “exchange Jews” or simply slave laborers for Austria’s agriculture, trade and industry? The simple fact that they were sent to Austria rather than Auschwitz was a “privilege” as it considerably increased their chances of survival. As most men of military age were serving in the Labor Service of the Hungarian army, the majority of these deportees were women, children and elderly persons – people who would have had no chance to be selected for work in Auschwitz and would have been sent directly to the gas chambers. In Auschwitz, three quarters of the deportees were gassed on arrival, while roughly three quarters of the deportees to Strasshof survived. The fact that a quarter of them perished during the ten months of their labor deployment to Austria reflects how tough living and working conditions were, even for “privileged” Jews.

Another advantage enjoyed by the Strasshof Transports was that families were kept together. This allowed for badly needed mutual support. The Jews had to do work that was new and often much too hard for them. The Nazi authorities and employers showed little consideration for their physical condition. The only extant list of camps in Gau Wien shows that 29% of the inmates were men, 54% were women and 17% were children. Although almost three quarters of the deportees were women and children and although the majority of men were either boys or elderly, 68% of them were working. This high percentage of workers could only be reached because children above ten years had to work. Elderly people often volunteered for work because those who stayed in the camp received less food. As such, old and sick people were left with the choice of starvation or death by exhaustion. Therefore, they were the largest group of victims.

The SS-Special Commando was interested in keeping as many Jews as possible at work because it received their “wages.” The Gauleitungen, too, tried to get as much work as possible out of their slaves. Hanns Blaschke, mayor of Vienna, had asked for Jewish slave laborers in Vienna. And indeed, the municipality of Vienna was among the biggest beneficiaries of their deployment. First of all, it was the

30 Gänserndorf is the village adjacent to Strasshof. The Jewish men and women who were selected form the trains in Gänserndorf were then taken to Strasshof transit camp for registration and medical check-up. They were also put under the control of the Außenkommando Ungarn established by the Special Commando in Vienna.


33 List of Camps, undated, WStLA LG Wien Vg 1b Vr 770/46, also: Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes, Vienna (Austrian Resistance Archive, DÖW) 9543

34 Records of the Jewish Community, Vienna (Matrikenamt)
biggest single employer of Hungarian Jews. They had to work at the municipal agricultural estates, for the electrical power station, the gas plant and in the workshop for trams. Furthermore, almost half of the Jewish families were housed in buildings of the municipality, mostly former schools that had been turned into camps and were now sublet to the SS-Außenkommando Ungarn. The living and sanitary conditions in these schools were usually better than in the primitive camps provided by the employers. However, the camp commanders, who were employees of the municipality, had orders to force the inmates to work because the SS paid more for “rent” and food for Jews capable of work than for those who were incapable.35

Firms and farmers crammed the Jewish families into small, primitive and often dilapidated buildings. The camp described below is a representative example for the housing of agricultural workers:

The camp is an old apartment, very small for ten people. The people lie on straw on the floor. In the camp the many fleas and flies are conspicuous. As the inmates lie so closely to one another it is hard to clean the camp. In front of the camp is a dung heap with slurry.36

Industrial workers were offered slightly better conditions. Their living quarters were more solid and in winter they worked indoors with machines that kept them warm. In Vienna and other cities women and children were forced to clear rubble after air raids. This work involved climbing into damaged buildings and looking for corpses and valuables – a particularly dangerous and bleak job.37

During the first weeks, food rations were particularly meager. On August 28, 1944, a few weeks after their arrival in Strasshof, Dr. Theodor Friedlander described the physical conditions of the inmates of a camp:

The inmates used as agricultural laborers have to work hard for 10 to 12 hours a day. They receive their legally prescribed rations, but considering the hard labor they would need extra rations especially of flour, bread and fat. The weight loss of these people during the past weeks was five to ten kilograms.38

By the end of the summer, food rations improved slightly, but the workers were still constantly hungry. A surprising privilege was that children received a small amount of milk. Those who had to walk to work from their camp

36 Report of Dr. Heinrich Werner, doctor of the Jewish Health Service in Vienna (Kontrollarzt des jüdischen Gesundheitswesens), 23.8.1944, WStLA LG Wien Vg 1b Vr 770/46
38 WStLA LG Wien Vg 1b Vr 770/46
had a chance to beg for food. Others received some help from “Aryan” colleagues, although this was strictly forbidden. In the countryside, farmers often allowed Jews to gather fruit and vegetables in their free time. Begging was an essential survival strategy.

As “Aryan” doctors were not allowed to treat Jewish patients, there was a Jewish health service for the few thousand “Non-Aryans” that were still living in Vienna after the big deportations of 1941/42. When another 7,000–8,000 Hungarian Jews arrived in Vienna in July 1944, the SS permitted seven additional Jewish Viennese doctors to be hired to visit the camps and treat most of the patients there. Only the most serious cases were transferred to the Jewish hospital. Bigger camps also had a doctor from among the inmates, who was often also appointed Jewish camp commander, or “Jupo” (Judenpolizist, Jewish Policeman). A number of Hungarian Jewish doctors and nurses also worked in Jewish hospitals in ambulances. In Niederösterreich, where no Jewish Health System existed, a few hospitals were ordered to reserve special rooms for Hungarian Jews who were treated by “Aryan” doctors with the assistance of Jewish doctors from among the deportees. The SS also tried to place Jewish doctors in all bigger camps in Niederösterreich. Nevertheless, health care for Hungarian Jews in Niederösterreich was far less efficient than in Vienna.

As another “sign of good will” the SS allowed the Red Cross to supply the Jewish health service with medications and the camps with badly needed shoes and clothes. This was also in the interest of the SS, because in the winter many Jews could no longer work outdoors for lack of suitable clothes, particularly shoes.

In November 1944, when the harvest was finished, some of the deportees were no longer needed. Therefore 2,200 Jews were deported from Strasshof to the Ungarnlager in Bergen-Belsen in the end of November. They arrived in the camp just after the second and final group of the Palestine-Transport had gone to Switzerland on December 6 and moved into their barracks. Until the catastrophic breakdown of the food supplies and the murderous typhoid epidemics in the spring of 1945, living conditions were bearable: they were supposed to survive and – possibly – be “exchanged” like the Palestine trans-
port. Although the negotiations between representatives of Jewish organizations and the SS continued practically until the end of the war, no exchange was carried out. Despite the obvious unwillingness of the Western Allies to make any concessions towards the Germans, Himmler ordered Kurt Becher, Herbert Krumey and other SS-men to continue the negotiations and make a good impression on their Jewish and American “partners” in order to have something to show in their favor in the postwar period. This strategy worked best for Kurt Becher. Thanks to Kasztner’s favorable testimony in Nuremberg he was never put on trial and his actions as an officer for the Waffen-SS in areas of Jewish mass-murder or his extortions in Hungary were never investigated.\textsuperscript{43} Becher became one of the richest merchants of post-war Germany. It may be assumed that at least part of his start-up capital came from Hungary. Hermann Krumey was put on trial only in the 1960s and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1969.\textsuperscript{44}

The majority of the Strasshof transports worked in Austria until the spring of 1945. The SS had planned that, should the Red Army approach, they would be moved to a concentration camp in order to prevent their liberation by the enemy. As the Jews from the Strasshof Transports had some political value, the Special Commando wanted to send them by train to Theresienstadt, where conditions were better than in any other concentration camp. However, on March 26 allied bombs destroyed the Strasshof railway station. Therefore, only about 4,000 Hungarian Jews could be deported to Theresienstadt.\textsuperscript{45} On March 28, in a meeting with the Gauleiters of Vienna, Niederdonau, Oberdonau and Styria as well as with the commander of Mauthausen concentration camp and members of the SS-Special Commando in Vienna, Heinrich Himmler gave the order to immediately deport all remaining Hungarian Jews in Austria to the Mauthausen concentration camp. He also ordered that this “evacuation” should be “orderly” and that the life of the Jews should be spared – if possible.\textsuperscript{46} This order was not easy to fulfill if one followed prevailing Nazi logic. On the one hand, means of transportation like trains, ships or trucks were scarce and many railway tracks had been destroyed, so that the “evacuated” Jews had to march at least part of the way to Mauthausen. On the other hand, there was a standing order that no prisoner was allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy alive. Therefore, Himmler’s order to “spare” Jewish lives, which applied to the Strasshof Transports as well as to the fortification workers (whose fate will be discussed below), was open to divergent interpretations by the organizers of the

\textsuperscript{43} Bauer, Sale, pp. 206–212
\textsuperscript{44} Proceedings of the High Provincial Court in Frankfurt/Main against Hermann Alois Krumey and Kurt Alexander Becher 1 Ws 391/61, 4/4a Js 586/56 (LG Ffm.)
\textsuperscript{45} Transport Lists, Archives of the Terezín Initiative, Prague
\textsuperscript{46} Interview of Lord Schuster with Sigfried Uiberreither, Nuremberg, 5.3.1946, DÖW 12.627; Testimony of Franz Ziereis, 24.5.1945, quoted in: Peter Kammerstätter, Der Todesmarsch ungarischer Juden vom KZ Mauthausen nach Gunskirchen, April 1945. Eine Material­sammlung mit Bildern (unpublished, Linz 1971) p. 8, DÖW 6.733; Kasztner, Bericht, p. 170
marches. While the fortification workers were driven through Austria in infamous death marches, the guards of the Strasshof Transports were much less murderous and tried to follow Himmler’s order of an “orderly” evacuation. That there still were hundreds of victims from among the Strasshof Transports was due to attacks by retreating units of the Waffen-SS or even those still fighting the Red Army. These units were not in charge of the Hungarian Jews but acted in accordance with standing orders that in areas of fighting Jews had to be eliminated. Thus, hundreds of men, women and children on their way to Mauthausen, or even still in their camps, became victims of brutal massacres by the Waffen-SS. The last and biggest attack was committed in Hofamt Priel near the Danube River. On the night of May 2 and May 3, more than 200 inmates of a transit camp were murdered.47

„Loan Jews“ for the German Reich

Horthy’s temporary stop of the deportations in July 1944 saved many Budapest Jews and gave them a more than precarious “normality” until the middle of October.48 The Germans as well as parts of the Hungarian government demanded their deportation, while the representatives of the neutral states put increasing pressure on Horthy to leave them untouched. What finally saved the majority of them was Himmler’s prohibition of any further deportations on August 25. The resultant decisions of the Hungarian government to deploy Budapest Jews between 14 and 70 years of age for forced labor in Hungary and to resettle those unable to work somewhere outside of the city failed due to technical difficulties.49

Another large group that had been spared deportation from Hungary were the Jewish men serving in the Labor Service of the Hungarian Army. Since 1939, Jews were considered unfit for armed service but were drafted for forced labor. They had to do construction work or search for mines and often suffered under antisemitic commanders. Already before the German occupation, 42,000 Labor Service Men had either been killed or been taken prisoner-of-war.50 After the German occupation, the Hungarian minister of defense, Lájos Csatay, negotiated a deal with the Germans to the effect that 150,000 Jewish men should not be deported but remain in Hungary for forced labor. The Hungarian army did not succeed in drafting the full number of Jews, but it managed to save 80,000 men from deportation.51

48 László Varga points out deportations also took place after Horthy’s stop. At this time 437,402 Jews had been deported, a number that rose to 444,152 deportees until the Nyílas putsch on October 15. Varga, „Ungarn,” p. 344
49 Ibid., pp. 346–347
50 Braham, Politics, pp. 321–325; Varga, „Ungarn,” p. 336
51 Braham, Politics, p. 326–327, pp. 338-343
On October 15, Miklós Horthy announced an armistice with the Soviet Union. This attempt to extricate Hungary from the war was followed by a coup d'état of the Nyílas, the fascist Arrow Cross party led by Ferenc Szálasi, who with the help of the Germans took over power on the same day. Eichmann, who had left Budapest in August after Himmler had forbidden any further deportations, returned because the new political situation promised to give him a last chance to bring the “final solution of the Jewish question in Hungary” to an end. As the killing machinery in Auschwitz no longer worked, other ways to annihilate the Hungarian Jews had to be found.

At about the same time the Germans had started the construction of the so-called Südostwall, a system of trenches and fortifications along the Austro-Hungarian border that was supposed to stop the Red Army from entering Austria. Despite the great strategic importance of the Südostwall, hardly any machinery was used for its construction. Instead, tens of thousands of Austrian and Bavarian civilians, Austrian Hitler Youth, foreign civilian and forced laborers, prisoners of war and Croatian Waffen-SS were used as fortification workers. The overall responsibility for the construction of the Südostwall lay in the hands of the Gauleiter of Niederdonau, Hugo Jury, and of Styria, Sigfried Uiberreither, where the Südostwall was situated. They were in charge of the supply of construction materials and the organization of the work force, their housing, provisions, etc. The Gauleiter of Niederdonau, Hugo Jury, who had already received 7,000–8,000 Hungarian Jewish slave laborers from the Strasshof Transports once again tried to get a few thousand Hungarian Jewish workers to build fortifications. He was part of the German team of negotiators who after the successful coup d'état put pressure on the new Nyílas government to support the German war effort by supplying Jewish workers. The Germans claimed that the Jews should be sent to the Reich on “loan” and only for the duration of the war. Many Nyílas were only too happy to rid themselves of the Jews. On October 18, the new minister of the interior, Gabor Vajna, agreed to send 50,000 Jewish workers to the Reich. However, the new head of state, Ferenc Szálasi, wanted to exploit Jewish labor within Hungary. He used the need to build fortifications on the outskirts of Budapest as a pretext to reduce the number of “loan Jews” to 25,000. On October 20, 1944, forced recruitment of Jewish men in Budapest started and by October 26, 25,000 Jewish men and 10,000 Jewish women were already building trenches. As the draft had taken them by surprise, they were ill prepared, without the necessary cloths, shoes and food. The Nyílas guards brutally mistreated them. Their deployment found a rapid end when the Soviet troops reached the outskirts of Budapest in the beginning of November. When the fortification works

53 Gauleiter were the highest party officials and therefore the highest authority in their province (Gau)
54 Braham, *Politics*, p. 838
stopped and the Jews were pulled back, Szálasi agreed to hand them over to the German war effort.\textsuperscript{55}

In the following weeks 30,000 Jewish men and women from Budapest, regardless of their physical condition and age, were marched to Hegyeshalom.\textsuperscript{56} In addition, thousands of Jews who had been drafted for work in factories were taken to the border with the Reich, i.e. with Austria. During this march, thousands of Jewish men and women died from hunger, cold and exhaustion or were killed by Nyílas guards. At the border they were taken over by an SS-unit under the command of Dieter Wisliceny from the Special Commando and Rudolf Höss, former commander of Auschwitz and now in charge of the “labor deployment of Jews in Niederdonau” (\textit{Leiter des jüden­ einsatzes im Niederdonau-Gebiet}).\textsuperscript{57} Wisliceny and Höss were highly dissatisfied with the poor physical condition of the Jews, many of whom were unfit for work. They protested to the Hungarian government and demanded able-bodied workers.\textsuperscript{58} At the same time, diplomats from neutral countries like Sweden, Switzerland and the Vatican also protested against the horror of the marches and the brutal treatment of the Jewish men and women. At the beginning of December, Szálasi finally stopped the marches and ordered the Jews to be transported only by train.\textsuperscript{59} At this point most of the Jews had already been delivered to the Germans.

Labor Service Men were usually sent to the border by train. These train journeys, however, were also brutal. The Jewish men were cramped into cattle wagons without water and food, not all of the deportees survived this ordeal. Many of these soldiers had already spent years of debilitating service at the Eastern front, others had been working on construction sites in Hungary before they were put on trains and sent to the Reich. A substantial part of the Labor Service Men had been pulled back to Budapest with the approach of the Soviet army. Although these men were not armed, Nazi officials considered them a possible threat during the foreseeable Soviet siege and wanted to remove them before the city was closed in. Therefore, between November 27 and 29, 17,000–20,000 Jewish Labor Service Men were rounded up in Budapest, put on trains and taken to Western Hungary and Austria for fortification work.\textsuperscript{60} By December 1, the Hungarians had handed over not only 50,000, but 76,209 Jewish men and women to the SS.\textsuperscript{61} About half of them were sent to the Südostwall, some had to do forced labor in Austrian

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{57} Varga, “Ungarn,” p. 349.
\bibitem{58} Kádár, Vági, \textit{Self-Financing Genocide}, p. 221.
\bibitem{60} Gerlach, Aly, \textit{Das letzte Kapitel}, p. 363
\bibitem{61} Varga, “Ungarn,” p. 349
\end{thebibliography}
factories, the rest was deported to concentration camps in the Reich. The number of Jews handed over to the Germans after December 1 is not known. This last group of deportees consisted primarily of a few thousand Labor Service Men who were sent to Styria for fortification work.  

**Deportation from Budapest to Bergen-Belsen**

In November 1944, when Eichmann and his collaborators tried to complete the “final solution” by deporting the remaining Jews from Hungary to the Reich and the German and Hungarian armies were getting ready for the siege of Budapest, the negotiations between the SS and representatives of Jewish organizations at the Swiss border seemed to develop new and positive dynamics. On November 5, Roswell McClelland, representative of the American War Refugee Board, entered the talks and promised Kurt Becher five million dollars for the purchase of goods in Switzerland. On November 21, after protests by the British and Soviet Allies, the War Refugee Board reneged on this promise, but Himmler ordered his men to continue the negotiations now that they finally had an American official to talk with. On November 26, Kurt Becher even announced in Budapest that Himmler had forbidden any annihilation of Jews. As Himmler quite obviously was anxious to keep the talks going, Kasztner was able to convince two SS-negotiators in Switzerland, Theodor Horst Grell und Herbert Kettlitz, to wire the false information to Berlin that the Americans had put the five million dollars at their disposal. Due to this telegram the second half of the passengers of the Palestine Transport was allowed to go to Switzerland on December 6.

On the night of December 2-3, Nyilas gangs attacked three houses in Budapest that stood under the protection of the Zionist Organization (Kolumbusz utca), Switzerland (Pozsonyi út 32) and the Vatican (Pozsonyi út 30) and closed them down. As the Zionist Andras Biss writes in his memoirs, he instantly approached Theo Dannecker, Otto Hunsche and later Adolf Eichmann from the Special Commando and tried to prevent the closure of the protected houses. He warned the SS-men that this step might jeopardize the positive developments of the negotiations on the Swiss border. Biss had received a copy of the Grell-Kettlitz wire, which he now presented to lend credibility to his claims. Eichmann insisted that due to the threat of a siege, all Jewish men of military age had to leave Budapest. However, as a compromise, 2,000 former inhabitants of these protected houses as well as Jew-

62 Braham, Politics, p. 844. The total of Jewish workers in Gau Styria was 7000. Many of them were transferred there not from Hungary but from other camps in Niederdonau and Western Hungary.

63 Kasztner, Bericht, p. 144

65 Andreas Biss, Der Stopp der Endlösung. Kampf gegen Himmler und Eichmann in Budapest (Stuttgart: Seewald 1966), p. 257
ish Labor Service Men, who were in possession of Schutzpässe (safe conduct papers) of a neutral state were sent to Bergen-Belsen and, together with the 2,200 members of the Strasshof Transports mentioned above, put into the Hungarian Camp. The others were either moved into the Budapest ghetto or were deported to the Südostwall.

The treatment of the inhabitants of the closed down protected houses in Budapest reflects the divergent interests within the SS and even within the Special Commando: While Eichmann and likeminded SS-men strove to complete the “final solution in Hungary,” others were already thinking about acquiring an alibi for the postwar period by saving a few thousand Jews. Whatever their position, the Germans were preparing themselves for a possible defeat. This is also reflected by their nervousness in the light of the Soviet siege of Budapest.

Fortification Work on the Austro-Hungarian Border

In Hegyeshalom, at the Austro-Hungarian border, the Hungarian guards handed the Jews over to members of the SS-Special Commando, who sent them by train to Zurndorf in Austria. From there, they were either transferred to the Südostwall or to concentration camps. Due to the round-up and deportation of the 17,000–20,000 Labor Service Men from Budapest the camps in Niederdonau and particularly in Western Hungary were soon overfilled. Therefore, most of the Budapest women stayed on the Südostwall only a short period of time before they were removed and sent to concentration camps in the Reich. In December, the Gauleitung Niederdonau established a concentration camp for 2,500 Jewish women in Lichtenwörth.

Due to the fluctuation in the camps the number of Hungarian Jews deployed to the Südostwall can only be estimated: 10,000 Jewish men and women were building fortifications in villages near Sopron, 10,000 in the area of Köszeg and Bucsu and 9,000–10,000 Jewish men and women worked in Niederdonau, i.e. between Bratislava (Petržalka, Engerau, Pozsonyligetfalú) and Deutschkreutz in today’s Burgenland. In Styria there were about 7,000 fortification workers. As their work assignment started only in the end

66 List of transports that arrived in KZ Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen, 25.9.2005
67 Testimony of Ms. J. Kemény, neé Eva Fiala, 8.7.1945, DEGOB Nr. 641; Testimony of Rudolf Kohn, 3.7.1945, DEGOB Nr. 850; Testimony of Zoltán Pollak, 21.8.1945, DEGOB Nr. 2314, all: DÖW E 21.959
of December and the majority of the workers were Labor Service Men, there were hardly any women in this group.

On the Südostwall, the Hungarian Jews were no longer under the control of the SS but of the Gauleitungen. Therefore, Gau administrative agencies determined their living and working conditions. They stipulated the amount of work they had to do, the size of their food rations and the quality of their housing. The camp commanders and guards were also usually members of formations of the Nazi party like the SA (storm troopers), the Volkssturm (homeguard) and the Hitler Youth or lower ranking party functionaries (politische Leiter). The treatment of the fortification workers was much worse than that of the Strasshof Transports and the number of casualties were considerably higher. There were several reasons for this difference in treatment. First of all, the fortification workers had no political value as pawns in a political gamble of Heinrich Himmler. Despite the agreement between the Germans and the Hungarian government that these Jews were only handed over "on loan" for the time of war, they were sent to the Südostwall under the assumption that many of them would die. Their "camps" were no more than shacks, barns, stables, and brick factories, cellars and attics, only sometimes farmhouses, school-buildings or barracks. These buildings were usually far too small for the number of people they had to house, most of them were dilapidated so that wind, snow and rain entered and they could not be heated. A big proportion of the casualties on the Südostwall froze to death in their barracks. In winter, when the wells froze, the workers could not wash themselves or their clothes for months. Their food rations were insufficient and there was no medical care to speak of. However, the Nazi functionaries in charge had expected the Jewish workers to arrive in good health and to be able to do heavy work at least for some time, before they were exhausted and sick. To their dismay, many of the Jews were already sick and worn out when they arrived. The Budapest men and women were exhausted from digging trenches near Budapest and from the brutal death marches. Many of the Labor Service Men came to the Südostwall after years of forced labor for the Hungarian army and a strenuous pullback from the Eastern front. They had filthy, lice-infested, torn clothes and many were exhausted and sick. Only a part of the deportees were young men in good physical and mental shape, but even they were soon starved and overworked and often fell victim to epidemics. The camp commanders were under pressure to get a certain part of the fortifications built in a given time. Therefore they forced the Jews to work regardless of their physical condition. The weaker they were the more brutal was their treatment. Sick and exhausted Jews were not only "Untermenschen" but also useless eaters who had no right to live.

70 In Styria also members of the Organisation Todt (construction troops) and Croatian Waffen-SS were used as guards and camp commanders.

71 An illustrative example for this treatment of fortification workers is the trial against the commander of the camp in Donnerskirchen, Nikolaus Schorn: WStLA LG Wien Vg 1a Vr 3701/45 against Nikolaus Schorn, Hans Ortlieb and Josef Bareiner; LG Wien Vg 1a Vr 1322/49 against Nikolaus Schorn.
Filth, hunger and exhaustion as well as crowded quarters and horrendous sanitary conditions led to epidemics. The only 'medical treatment' for the sick was isolation in tents or even more dilapidated buildings where they were left to die with almost no food. Many sick decided to drag themselves to work rather than be transferred to a “sanatorium” from where nobody returned. In February and March 1945, Franz Steindl, in charge of the construction of the Südostwall as substitute of the Styrian Gauleiter, ordered the shooting of “terminally” sick workers. Consequently, hundreds of Jews were murdered by their guards.\textsuperscript{72}

The Liquidation of the Camps and Death Marches

On March 28, Heinrich Himmler ordered the “evacuation” of all Hungarian Jewish slave laborers to Mauthausen concentration camp. The Jewish workers from the Sopron camps and from Gau Niederndonau were removed swiftly because when the Red Army entered Austria in Klostermarienberg on March 29, 1945, it was clear that it would first march towards Vienna and only later towards Graz. Therefore the workers from the northern parts of the Südostwall were pulled back to Mauthausen faster than those in the south. The workers from the northern-most section between Bruck/Leitha and Bratislava were marched to Bad Deutsch-Altenburg where they were put on ships that took them to Mauthausen.\textsuperscript{73} The inmates of the other camps in Niederndonau and in the Sopron area had to march to Gramatneusiedl near Vienna where they were loaded onto trains and also taken to Mauthausen. In many camps the sick were left behind and killed by their guards or — more often — by Waffen-SS. During the marches stragglers were shot. Additional dangers were the frequent air raids, which forced many convoys to march at night. Passing Waffen-SS units fired randomly at marching groups of Jews and attacked them when they were resting.\textsuperscript{74}

The workers from the Kszeg area and the Styrian camps had to march approximately 400 kilometers to Mauthausen. They were escorted by home-guard, Hitler Youth, SA, Nazi party functionaries, gendarmes, and police. A small, permanent group of SS-men or members of the Gestapo had the overall command over the transports. Between Graz and Leoben, Ukrainian


\textsuperscript{74} Eleonore Lappin, “Ungarische Juden in Niederösterreich 1944/45” in Idem, Uslu-Pauer, Wieninger, Niederösterreich 1944/45, pp. 95–102
Waffen-SS also served as guards. They were particularly brutal and murderous. Other members of the Waffen-SS, although not directly involved in the death marches, murdered single and groups of escapees along the route. However, most murders were committed by the home guard, usually elderly or handicapped men unfit for regular army service. They had strict orders to shoot stragglers and fugitives. These orders resulted in thousands of murders. Many more Jews died of exhaustion, cold and sickness.\(^{75}\)

When the survivors arrived in Mauthausen, the camp was overfilled. Therefore, thousands of Hungarian Jews were marched to Gunskirchen concentration camp, on April 16, 26 and 28. The death toll on these 55 kilometers is estimated to be a shocking 6,000 people.\(^{76}\) In Gunskirchen, the prisoners were not only mistreated and murdered by their guards. The food and water supply broke down causing thousands to die of hunger, exhaustion, and disease, particularly typhoid, before and during the first weeks after their liberation by American troops on May 5. The number of Hungarian Jews who died in Austria is estimated to be 23,000.\(^{77}\)

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\(^{76}\) Kammerstätter, Mauthausen nach Gunskirchen, p. 6

\(^{77}\) Bericht der jüdischen Historischen Dokumentation vom 19.11.1951, YVA 015/36