

Organized Mass Killings of Hungarian Jews deported to Kőszeg, Rechnitz and surrounding East Wall Forced Labor Camps 1944/1945

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Abstract

Organisierte Massenmorde an ungarischen Juden, die 1944/45 nach Kőszeg, Rechnitz und in benachbarte Zwangsarbeitslager am Südostwall deportiert worden waren

Dank der Gedenkinitiative R.E.F.G.I.U.S. ist »das« Rechnitz-Massaker an 200 Opfern der Palmsonntagnacht international bekannt. Seit einigen Jahren wird jedoch im wissenschaftlichen Diskurs argumentiert, dass dort mehrere Massenmorde stattgefunden haben müssten und Primärdaten erforderlich seien.

Für diese Arbeit wurden in einem Greenfield-Ansatz 201 DEGOB-Berichte von 256 Überlebenden, 175 Verhörprotokolle von 53 Angeklagten und Zeugen in Rechnitzer Gerichtsprozessen, Akten anderer Gerichtsverfahren und Luftbilder von Flügen der Alliierten analysiert, um Zahlen und Fakten zur Opferprovenienz zu erheben, Verbrechen und mögliche oder wahrscheinliche Orte von Massengräbern zu rekonstruieren und Handlungsstrukturen der Täter herauszufiltern.

Die Daten belegen den stetigen Zustrom jüdischer Deportierter in die ungarischen Zwangsarbeitslager in Kőszeg, Bozsok und Bucsú und in die steirischen Lager des Abschnitts VI/Oberwart. Während des fünfmonatigen Festungsbaus wurden in den ungarischen Lagern 60 Prozent der Deportierten in einem Regime von Hunger, Entbehrung, Seuchen, Zwangsarbeit und Gewalt zu Tode gebracht, während SS-Kama Einheiten im Rechnitzer Wald offenbar regelmäßig Gruppen Deportierter aus Ungarn sowie Häftlinge aus Schachendorf und Schandorf ermordeten. Dies entspricht dokumentierten organisierten Morden geschwächter jüdischer Häftlinge in anderen steirischen Bauabschnitten durch die SS-Kama; das Ausmaß der organisierten Verbrechen bei der Auflösung der jüdischen Zwangsarbeitslager, als sich die Gehfähigen nach Mauthausen aufmachten, war jedoch bislang unbekannt.

Zwischen dem 23. und 29. März 1945 konnten zwölf dokumentierte Verbrechen mit über 500 Opfern in den Lagern in Kőszeg, Bozsok, Bucsú und Deutsch Schützen rekonstruiert werden, sowie in Rechnitz fünf große Massenverbrechen mit etwa 1.000 Opfern und neun Verbrechen an kleineren Gruppen mit insgesamt mindestens 450 Opfern; keine Spur gibt es von 1.500 Männern aus einem Barackenlager im Wald. Mehr als 600 Männer derselben Opferpopulation wurden laut Überlebenden-Angaben auf den ersten Marschetappen nach Mauthausen getötet.

Die Verbrechen wurden von eigens hierfür angereisten SS-Einheiten organisiert und mit lokaler SS und SA ausgeführt. Die Marschunfähigen wurden erschossen und Versuche unternommen, Häftlinge mit Nervengas zu töten. Alle dokumentierten Massenmorde in Rechnitz

weisen die standardisierte Vorgehensweise von SS-Einsatzgruppen auf: Die Opfer wurden, meist unter einem Vorwand, selektiert und mit Zügen und Lastwagen zu Tötungsorten transportiert, wo Häftlinge Gruben ausgehoben hatten oder ausheben mussten; Mordstätten wurden vom sogenannten Volkssturm und SA abgesperrt, während SS-Kommandos die am Rand aufgereihten, häufig nackten Opfer in die Gruben schossen. Häftlingskommandos mussten die Gruben zuschaukeln, bevor sie ihrerseits getötet wurden. Die Kleider der Opfer wurden unter ihren Kameraden verteilt.

Die Massenmorde waren in etablierte Genozidstrukturen eingebettet, die eine SD-Infrastruktur, SS-Einsatzkommandos und Befehlsketten umfassten, die vom Rechnitzer SD-Chef Podezin, über Gauleiter Uiberreither, die Einsatzgruppe F mit BdS Geschke und Eichmann-Stellvertreter Dannecker in Sopron bis zum obersten Entscheidungsträger Kaltenbrunner reichten. Dieser verfügte in der Endphase über tausende brutalisierter SS-Männer, um auf heute österreichischem Gebiet Personal in jüdischen Zwangsarbeitslagern, Eskorten auf Todesmärschen und SS-Einsatzkommandos zu besetzen. Während die bestellten Täter Teil der SS waren, zeugen Spuren schwerer Misshandlungen an den Leichen von typischen Endphase-Verbrechen durch mitwirkende SA und Volkssturm Angehörige.

Es ist das Zusammenspiel etablierter, reichlich dotierter genozidaler Strukturen einerseits und die Bereitschaft radikalierter Partei- und Zivilpersonen, Endphase-Verbrechen zu begehen andererseits, die eine Basis bilden für die zweite Phase des Völkermords an ungarischen Juden zwischen Oktober 1944 und den allerletzten Tagen des Zweiten Weltkriegs.

0 Introduction

Thanks to the memorial initiative R.E.F.G.I.U.S., »the« Rechnitz massacre of 200 victims on Palm Sunday night in 1945 is internationally known. For some years, though, scientific discourse has argued that several mass murders must have taken place there and vocalized demand for primary data.

In a Greenfield approach, 201 DEGOB records of 256 survivors, 175 interrogation records of 53 defendants and witnesses in Rechnitz Court trials, files of other court proceedings as well as aerial photographs of Allies' flights were analyzed for this paper to establish facts and figures of victims' provenance, reconstruct crimes, localize possible or probable sites of mass graves, and filter out action structures of perpetrators.

Data shows a constant inflow of Jewish East Wall deportees to Hungarian forced labor camps in Kőszeg, Bozsok and Bucsu and to the Styrian camps of section VI/Oberwart. During the five months of fortress construction, 60 percent of the deportees in the Hungarian camps were brought to death in a regime of starvation, deprivation, plagues, hard labor and violence, while groups of deportees arriving from Hungary, and prisoners from Schachendorf and Schandorf were killed in

the Rechnitz forest by SS-Kama, apparently on a regular basis. While this fits in with documented organized killings of enfeebled Jewish prisoners by SS-Kama in other Styrian construction sections, the sheer dimension of crimes upon the closure of Jewish forced labor camps, when the able-to-walk set out for Mauthausen, has so far been unknown of.

Between March 23 to 29, 1945, twelve documented crimes with over 500 victims on site in Kószeg, Bozsok, Bucsu and Deutsch Schützen were reconstructed, and five large mass crimes in Rechnitz with some 1,000 victims and nine crimes of smaller dimension with at least 450 victims, while no trace is left of 1,500 men billeted in a forest barrack camp; according to survivors, more than 600 men of the same victim population were killed on the first stages of the march to Mauthausen.

Crimes were organized and executed by specially sent, non-local SS who were assisted by SS and SA camp staff. Prisoners unable-to-march were shot, and attempts undertaken to kill the sick with a nerve gas. All documented killings in Rechnitz were carried out in a standardized manner indicative of SS-Einsatzgruppen: Victims were selected, often under pretense, transported with trains and lorries to killings sites, where prisoners had dug pits; sites were cordoned off by the Volkssturm and SA, while SS-killing squads shot the lined up, naked victims into the pits. Prisoner burial squads had to close the pits before they, in turn, were killed; clothes of victims were distributed among their comrades.

These mass crimes were embedded in established structures for genocide involving SD infrastructure, SS-EKs and chains of command, encompassing head of Rechnitz SD Podezin, Gauleiter Uiberreither, Einsatzgruppe F with BdS Geschke and Eichmann deputy Dannecker in Sopron, and the ultimate decision maker Kaltenbrunner, who, in the ›Endphase‹, had thousands of brutalized SS-men at his disposal to staff personnel in Jewish forced labor camps, escorts on death marches and EKs on (at this day) Austrian territory. While perpetrators were SS-men, the Volkssturm and SA participated in these crimes; mutilated corpses in mass graves give proof of typical Endphase crimes.

It is the very interplay of elaborated and abundantly staffed structures for genocide and the preparedness of radicalized party and civil people to commit Endphase crimes that makes a basis for the second phase of the genocide against Hungarian Jews between October 1944 and the very last days of WWII.

1. State of Research, Data Base and Context

The present paper is complementary to »Organized Mass Killings in a Forest Near Sopron of Hungarian Jews Deported to East Wall Forced Labor Camps, 1944/45« by the author.¹ While the

¹ Krizanits, Joana: Organized Mass Killings in a Forest Near Sopron of Hungarian Jews Deported to East Wall Forced Labor Camps, 1944/45, ZfG, vol 2, 2023.

Some Jews came to us in a very deficient state, others came in very good clothes. Jewish laborers were treated by a surgery primary from Budapest [...] In Rechnitz were several hundred Jews and certainly more than a dozen medical doctors [...] The offices in charge provided shoes in the hundreds, I believe.

I believe, the first Jews came [to Rechnitz] only a few days before. Whether this was on Palm Sunday I cannot say. Jews were only here for a few days.⁶⁶

In a similar way, Hans Schachenreiter, in charge of alimentary supplies for section VI/Oberwart, made contradictory statements:⁶⁷

As far as I remember, no Jews were engaged for fortress construction [...] Around mid-February until March, some 300 Jews were employed in fortress construction.

Ludwig Groll, in charge of work force supply, testified:

I repeatedly ordered such [Jewish] laborers in Szombathely [...] altogether 4,000 [...] 500 were in Rechnitz and 1,500-2,000 in Schachendorf.⁶⁸

The first Jews came from Hungary around January or mid-December. Most of these people were in a very poor condition [...] Other than in the castle, Jews were not quartered [...] I heard that Jews were also employed in woodwork and that they were housed in barracks. Where these barracks or this barrack were, I do not know though.⁶⁹

In different interrogations section VI/Oberwart leader Eduard Nicka said:

At the time of the persecution of the Jews in Hungary, several treks of Jews came over from the border region. On behalf of the Gauleiter I had to put them to work. On behalf of the Gestapo, the guarding of these people was taken over by the SS-unit Muselmanen [...] they were given clothes, shoes in particular. These Jews arrived from Hungary in a completely run down, very poor condition [...] it is known to me that Jews died, maybe more than among other laborers.⁷⁰

Of mistreatments or killings, I have only learnt in one case. This concerned [...] the SS-division Handschar (Muselmanen) from Bosnia. This guard unit was employed in Rechnitz castle [...] In March 1945, foot treks of Jews from Hungary came to District Oberwart; they were in a very poor condition [...] these Jews were equipped as far as possible and put to work in subsections Rechnitz 1, Burg and Deutsch Schützen.⁷¹

Some mistreatments happened. Above all, there was a Kama, Handschar division, in charge of guarding the Jews and the Ostarbeiter. With these were Bosnians and Croats [...] I believe, the first Jews came to us in March.⁷²

⁶⁶ July 1, 1948, County Court Vienna, interr. of Dr. Leo Wiltshcke, (fn21) dc 083-089.

⁶⁷ March 6, 1947, District Court Villach, interr. of Hans Schachenreither, (fn16) dc 027-029.

⁶⁸ October 10, 1947, District Court Wolfsberg, interrogation of Ludwig Groll, (fn17) dc 093-098.

⁶⁹ June 29, 1948, County Court Vienna, interr. of Ludwig Groll, (fn21) dc 030-044 (here: 036).

⁷⁰ May 15, 1946, District Court Leibnitz, interr. of Eduard Nicka, (fn22) dc 058-060.

⁷¹ February 4/26, 1947, County Court Vienna, interr. of Eduard Nicka, (fn18) dc 037-045 (here: 038).

⁷² July 2, 1948, County Court Vienna, interr. of Eduard Nicka, (fn21) dc 115-124 (here: 117).

He also testified that in view of ongoing mistreatments by SS-Kama, he intervened repeatedly with Uiberreither to have the unit withdrawn.

Defendant Hilde Stadler, former teacher, secretary to Podezin, who was responsible for handing out work equipment tools, testified:

It is known to me that a larger number of Jews were working on the fortress construction.⁷³

[We had] interned Jews during the last weeks. They were transferred in several transports from Hungary and handed over to camp commands in Deutsch Schützen, Burg, Schachendorf and Rechnitz. A few weeks before the Russian invasion, some 600 Jewish men and 40 women arrived. They were recorded in lists by name, age, profession, place of birth [...] quartered in the castle and assigned to work in the following days.⁷⁴

These Jews likely should have arrived mid-February and were in good health at the time. Other transports of Jews had arrived before, though not to Rechnitz but to Burg, Schützen and most of all to Schachendorf. In Rechnitz, only the 640 were stationed, the men in the castle, and the women on the first floor of the castle. [...] I have not known about any other transports of Jews.⁷⁵

While she probably mixed up the women with those 40 who left Rechnitz on March 28, a Rechnitz mayor after the war, also testified that 600 Jews were employed in fortress construction, among a work force of 6,000.⁷⁶

Rechnitz teacher Annemarie Vitzthum, engaged as telephone operator in the fortress construction office, testified, that in February 800 Jews, after an 80 kilometers' march, were registered in the castle yard:⁷⁷

In February 1945 a transport of 800 Jews arrived from North, namely from Engerau or Oberpullendorf, which was meant for Rechnitz, Schandorf, Schachendorf and Burg. The people came to the castle yard and had to show their identity papers; a table was put up, and [...] I had to record the personal details.

Franz B., paymaster in Oberwart management team also mentions these 800, 500 of whom allegedly stayed in Rechnitz.⁷⁸

About three weeks before breakdown of the Hitler regime, some 800 Jews [...] had to line up in the castle yard for registration. Ca. 300 were led on to Burg the same day or the day after.

Finally, a Rechnitz citizen reported that he brought a deceased Jewish forced laborer on his cart to a common grave in December 1944.⁷⁹

⁷³ January 30, 1946, District Court Bruck, interr. of Hildegard Stadler, (fn14) dc 181-182.

⁷⁴ May 20, 1947, County Court Vienna, note of Hildegard Stadler, (fn16) dc 090-095.

⁷⁵ June 28, 1948, County Court Vienna, interr. of Hildegard Stadler, (fn21) dc 006-023.

⁷⁶ March 20, 1946, Rechnitz, Burgenland Security Director, recording with Emmerich C., (fn14) dc 266-268.

⁷⁷ March 21, 1946, Rechnitz, Burgenland Security Director, recording with Annemarie V., (fn14) dc 282-283.

⁷⁸ March 23, 1946, Rechnitz, Burgenland Security Director, recording with Franz B., (fn15) dc 004-005.

⁷⁹ Franz: Maßnahmennummer 34062.20.01, see (fn12) pp. 21-22; at the indicated place – the junction of a field path running east and another running south of the Remise – a structure is visible on aerial photographs GX 07197 5940 No 81 of around March 3 and on NA7E16-128-No 85 of August 6, 1945.

In Summary, a common testimony regards 500 or 600 officially registered Jews who, in mid-February were billeted in Rechnitz castle and guarded by a Kama-unit in town. Several statements concern arrivals of Jews, many in a very poor condition, in mid-December, January, February and March, who were either led on to other villages or stayed in Rechnitz forest. They were housed in the barrack camp and had their own medical doctors.

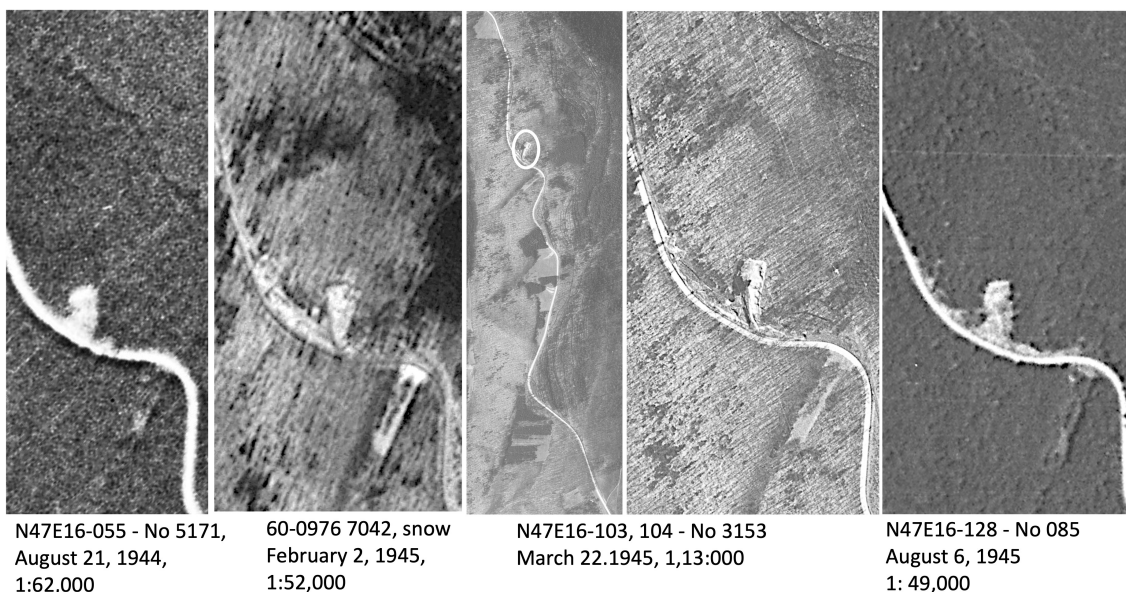
While there is no trace of Jews who came to Rechnitz before those from Kőszeg on March 23, there is some evidence that Jews were killed 1) in an organized manner in Rechnitz forest by SS Kama, 2) personally by Podezin and staff in town.

Evidence of Organized Killings

Major evidence is the statutory declaration of Hendrik Oberländer, Jewish deportee to Schachendorf:⁸⁰

Presently, a pastor lives in Rechnitz who told me personally, that he had himself been present in January 1945, when 200 Jews and 50 Czechs were shot into a common grave.

Aerial photographs show a conspicuous structure by the road halfway between Rechnitz and the top of mount Geschriebenstein (Iröttkö); it appears as a clearance in August 1944, as a rectangular structure with a diagonal elevation under snow on February 2, 1945, as a clearly delineated rectangular structure on March 22, and enclosed by vegetation again in August 1945 (see Figure 6). Whether this huge structure is a mass grave, and if so, of how many, cannot be asserted. It being situated right by the road, trucks could have transported large numbers of emaciated victims from Rechnitz town, Schachendorf and other places to this site.



⁸⁰ June 29, 1945, Jewish Historic Documentation Office, statutory declaration of Hendrik Oberländer, (fn19) dc 117, 119.

Figure 11: Status of Fortified Military Positions Around March 3, 1945, and Excavation Measures Undertaken 1989 – 2021.

Military positions here consisted of a large anti-tank ditch and numerous trenches. Anti-tank ditches were 3,50 – 5 meters wide, the walls descending at an angle of at least 55 degrees to the 3 – 3,5 meters deep sole; trenches were usually 1 – 1,6 meters wide and 1,8 to 2 meters deep. For reasons of camouflage and to give free view to the infantry, excavation material was to be dispersed on the adjacent areas to produce a light slope on the side pointing to the enemy and an evened out shelter on the other side. Before excavation material was moved, the humus layer of adjacent areas was taken off, and later spread on top of the dispersed material.¹³¹ After the war, ditches and trenches were filled with material from adjacent areas again.

Numerous methods were employed in the search for the mass grave/s (area excavations, geophysical prospection, ram core probing, drone flights analyzing vegetation, and more); no graves, but only remains of military structures were found in the examined areas. A 1993 report says: »The zigzag trenches shown in the plan were found and marked out. They are 1.30 meters deep«. In 2021, a former trench of 1,6 m wide running west to east to the anti-tank ditch was located some 100 meters south of the Kreuzstadl; it protruded some 45 cm into the soil after removal of about 30 cm of humus.¹³² Obviously, the layer of dispersed excavation material plus humus was of different thickness in different places: 50 – 70 cm in the first instance and 1,1 cm to 1,3 meters in the second.

In Rechnitz »the soil consists of a very thin layer of humus and a very compacted lime-loam-clay mixture. This ground is so solid that it seemed impossible to dig a mass grave in [...] relatively short time«. ¹³³ Any pit or cave dug into this ground and filled in later must have left traces; all methods employed to localize the mass grave/s aimed at detecting changes »in the natural, untouched soil« below the humus layer.

However, if pits or depressions were dug in the loose embankment material [...], then these grave pit(s) would no longer be recognizable today, because immediately after the end of World War all the trenches used for military purposes had been filled in [with this material].

While the authors of the 1997 prospection studies conclude: »But that means that the mass graves that only existed for a short time would now have to be in the anti-tank ditches«, ¹³⁴ their thesis would also imply that corpses had been filled into the ditches and that this would have gone unnoticed or unsanctioned by the Soviet occupation forces. Most likely, though, the Soviets had

¹³¹ Oberkommando des Heeres, Merkblatt 57/5, Bildheft neuzeitlicher Stellungsbau vom Juni 1944; Banny, Leopold: Schild im Osten, Eigenverlag Lackenbach: 1985, p. 54f.

¹³² Holzinger, Gregor: Die Suche nach dem Massengrab in Rechnitz bis zum Jahre 2007, in: FÖ Band 56 Fachgespräch (fn12) p. D19, Franz: Maßnahmennummer 34062.21.01, see (fn12), pp. 27, 28, Fig. 59, 60.

¹³³ Holzinger: Die Suche, see (fn132), p. D19, see also: Letter of the office of the Burgenland County Government to the BMI (Austrian Ministry of Interior), October 25, 1993, BMI GZ. 5.500/146-IV/4/93.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. D21, see also: Projektdokumentation Archeo Prospektion Rechnitz/Bgld., BMI GZ. 33.905/32-IV/4/97.

graves emptied before having the ditches refilled. This is also reported by subsection leader Josef Muralter from Oberwart, who said in court:

I only learnt in July or August that a few hundred Jews had been excavated in Rechnitz.¹³⁵

Concluding from the prosecution's criminal complaint of April 15, 1946, more graves were obviously exhumed later; in referring to the series of 21 graves, it stated: »The majority of the exhumations were carried out by the District Court of Oberwart on December 17 and 18, 1945«. In response to a letter from the wife of a victim, then Rechnitz mayor in 1985 wrote that the Jews who »found death a mass grave [...] were exhumed after some years [...] and buried in the Jewish cemetery in Mattersburg, Burgenland«. The Austrian Black Cross, however, stated those reburied from Rechnitz had all been Wehrmacht soldiers; allegedly, Burgenland municipalities were not informed of such reburials.¹³⁶ A Rechnitz citizen reported that after the war, that Count and Countess Batthyány had ceded lots in the area of the Schweizerhof and surrounding fields on condition that remains of murdered Jewish forced labourers were removed from the property. According to this witness, bodies had indeed been dug up and taken to a place 2,6 km east of the Kreuzstadl as the crow flies, a few dozen meters from the Hungarian border.¹³⁷ Possibly, court investigations, early excavations and the media coverage contributed to wild reburials.

¹³⁵ February 17, 1947, County Court Vienna, interr. of Josef Muralter, see (fn15) dc 162-168.

¹³⁶ Holzinger, Gregor: Die Suche nach dem Massengrab. In: Das Drama, see (fn12), pp. 20-24.

¹³⁷ Franz, Nikolaus: Maßnahmennummer 34062.20.01, see (fn12) pp. 31-32.

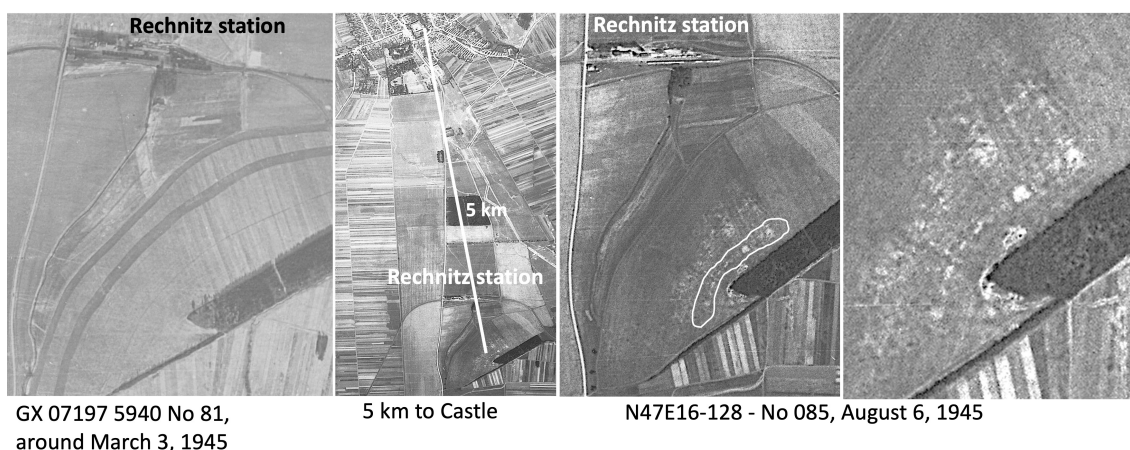


Figure 14: Possible Site of Graves South of Rechnitz Station of 100 Victims Killed on March 24, 1945 at Station Burg-Eisenberg.

Probably perpetrators had planned to murder all victims close to Rechnitz station, which would explain Podezin's repeated drives to and from Schachendorf on Saturday late afternoon. Here, the 100 killed at Burg-Eisenberg station may be buried; maybe, by some misunderstanding, perpetrators had the ditch closed after their burial and this is why Podezin, after a phone call, on short notice, had graves dug at the Kreuzstadl shortly after 11 pm.

3.3.4 March 25, Morning: 200 Men from the Castle Camp Killed in an Open Field

Judit Hruza, who marched from Kőszeg to Rechnitz on 23 March and was billeted in the castle, reports:

I have very good memories of the first two days, then something terrible happened. We all had to line up with backpacks, and then about 200 men had to climb on a truck and take spades with them. Two hours later, while we were still standing roll call, the trucks came back without the prisoners. The guards threw the backpacks down and we then knew that our comrades had been killed.¹⁵⁵

Their killing is described in the report of April 5, of the Soviet officers who had their graves opened, saw the mutilated corpses, and recorded testimonies of citizens, that the victims had had to dig their own graves. Their report also said that 21 graves, each constructed at an angle, were arranged longitudinally, an information confirmed in the report to the prosecution of September 1945.

Pits of this form were also described by farmer Josef He. who was working in his field the next morning:¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Binder, Johannes Daniel/Kramer Johannes/Rajal Elke: Lebensgeschichten von Opfern der Massaker beim Rechnitzer Kreuzstadl 1944. In: Das Drama, see (fn12) pp. 92-101.

¹⁵⁶ September 26, 1945: note E. Nr. 465, see (fn121); December 17, 1945, District Court Oberwart, interr. of Josef He., (fn14) dc 155-156; March 22, 1946, Rechnitz, Burgenland Security Director, recording with Josef He., (fn14) dc 296; July 1, 1948, County Court Vienna, interr. of Josef He., (fn21) dc 090-091.

As it later turned out, the SS had ordered that we should all be shot after half an hour of walking.¹⁹⁹

One-armed Schachendorf camp unit commander Neiss was suspected to have killed sick in Schachendorf, though:

Neiss said that whoever wanted to, could stay behind, if he thought he couldn't go; the Russians would come in in 2-3 days [...] We decided not to stay, he caught up with us about 2-3 km away and told us that a Russian grenade had hit one of the buildings, there were 150-200 injured and several dead. We could see from this that he had killed the Jews there.

3.4 Killings During the First Stage of Marches to Mauthausen

Only one DEGOB protocol comes from a man who was brought from Kőszeg to Burg-Eisenberg with the transport of 1,000 on March 26; he reports:

We were taken to Eisenberg-Burg in freight wagons, followed by a 30 km march, we marched day and night, our leaders were Hitler Youth children; those who could not march were shot, about 250 of them had the misfortune [...] We finally arrived in Moschendorf.²⁰⁰

Of the big trek that had marched west through Rechnitz on March 27, more men were reported killed by SS: »Once they drove us into a forest where they shot 100 of us with machine guns.²⁰¹

Those who had left Kőszeg on March 27 in northern direction, marched five days to Gramatneusiedl; again »the sick and those who could not walk were told to stay behind and they would then be brought after us by car. Many came forward and these were allegedly slaughtered by the SS«.²⁰²

A man from the foot trek that left Rechnitz in the morning of March 29 reports that »270 people had already been shot dead at Schandorf«,²⁰³ nine kilometres from Rechnitz.

In Graz, marching groups were reassembled; on April 7, 10,000 humans in marching units of 500 to 1,500 passed mount Präbichl of the Eisenerz mountains. Literature speaks of 200-250 victims of »the« Präbichl massacre, while about 100 DEGOB protocols report mass killings, addressing about 15 different contexts with a victim toll of between 120 and 500 humans each:²⁰⁴ on an ascending road, at pass height during change of guards, from ambushes in woods, at corners in serpentines, shootings into the ranks marching by, at places passed in goose march, in deep snow, during downhill chases in rows of 3, in rows of 5; perpetrators were SS, SA, Volkssturm.

¹⁹⁹ DEGOB 800.

²⁰⁰ DEGOB 2690; this high number of deaths may seem unlikely, it was a marche de force though. Moschendorf was not a death camp.

²⁰¹ DEGOB 204.

²⁰² DEGOB 1804/6.

²⁰³ DEGOB 1323.

²⁰⁴ Figures are difficult to interpret – as groups marched by, the toll of victims changed for a same place.

The massacres were eventually stopped by a commission arriving by car, which had been called together by an SS.²⁰⁵

Deportees from Inzenhof, Körmend, Klösch and Kőszeg, who were marching in different groups report two different mass executions by a single SS with a half arm, who obviously was Neiss.²⁰⁶ Survivors report he was arrested and assumably shot;²⁰⁷ investigations for a court file in Stade were later abandoned, because the searched for could not be found.

4 Perpetrators

4.1 Categories of Perpetrator Ship

Command levels in all Jewish forced labor camps along Südostwall were staffed by SS or high-ranking SA from the Sopron, today Lower Austria-, and Vienna-areas, sometimes by Bavarians; middle management ranks were staffed by political leaders or other SA, and SS, often Ethnic Germans from lost territories in Hungary, Croatia, the Banat, Transylvania.

Evidence considered here points to three categories of perpetrator ship: 1) individuals sticking out for their brutality and a general regime of unrestrained violence, 2) Endphase dynamics with outbursts of excessive violence, and 3) purposefully established structures for genocide.

Brewery commander Bauer, a Bucusu camp unit leader named Buchner, Gestapo-Chief Podezin, his workforce leaders Matthiaschitz, Muralter and one-armed SA Neiss in Schachendorf stick out as murderers in survivors' reports. Groups from lower hierarchical levels are also addressed, such as Juveniles from Hitler Youth or Arrow crossers, and Croat and Ethnic Germans from the wider Sopron and Vienna areas. Some men though, by their behavior demonstrate that perpetrators did not act under constraint of higher orders but made their personal choice: the young officer in a Bucusu camp, the deputy head of a brick factory camp unit, and residents, who were often benevolent and supportive in small Styrian camp villages.

End of March 1945, plans were being worked out for the evacuation of the entire Oberwart district, while roads were congested with retreating troops and refugees, and Soviet troops approaching by the hour. Works on the fortress line continued to the very last minute, the entire area was ploughed by trenches that could never be staffed, while the absurdity of the entire enterprise had been evident from the very start. In the Hungarian camps, thousands of Jews had been the visible epitome of a hopeless situation. With killings committed in public, and the odds they would never be brought to justice, a lawless space spread entailing a spiral of unbridled

²⁰⁵ DEGOB 638, 3027, 3578.

²⁰⁶ DEGOB 381, 2554/3, 2972, 1892; see testimonies of Naftali Reich, Otto Ickovitz, Hedwig Glauber, Elias Kohn in: Friedmann, Benedikt: Iwan, see (fn193).

²⁰⁷ DEGOB 3578, 2731, 2350; file number Stade/9a Js 25/75 / I.

atrocities and murders. Against this background, many atrocities and killings can be classified Endphase crimes.

Other than in Schachendorf – from where most deportees do not report violence – Jews had not been visible to the public in Rechnitz; witnesses generally could not remember having seen any before March 23. Yet, that Endphase-dynamics with brutal excesses of violence were in effect here too, is documented by the mutilated corpses of those killed in broad daylight on the morning of Sunday 25, and by the savage Präbichl massacres participated in by Volkssturm and SA, some of whom obviously were from camp staff in Schachendorf.

Evidence also points to other actors, though, to purposefully established structures of violence and, in fact, to fundamental processes of genocide: the nature of the crimes described, their sheer dimension, killing-methods characteristic Einsatzgruppen, central decision making, forward planning and logistics involved when SS-squads were sent to sites of mass killings days before the crimes, a clandestine, top-secret status of SS-killer squads combined with open terror.

4.2 Structures for Genocide

Section V commander Anton Rutte, claimed after the war, that Franz Steindl, assigned by Uiberreither with supervising Styrian East Wall construction, had ordered himself and Nicka to have Jews terminally ill with typhus shot.²⁰⁸ While Nicka denied in court to have known of such an order, Groll said:

I do not know on whose orders these shootings were carried out. I firmly believe that the shootings were carried out at the instigation of Gauleiter Uiberreither.

Likewise, a government official, in 1948, said:

These orders can only have been issued by the Gauleiter [...] the elimination of sick with spotted typhus was discussed under strict confidence in the responsible party offices.²⁰⁹

Organized killings – not only of »terminally ill« – but of emaciated Jewish laborers in general, took place frequently, if not regularly in section V/Feldbach and section VI/Fürstenfeld where Croatian Waffen-SS from SS-Kama »provided murder squads in several camps, that liquidated sick Jews and Jews unfit for work in agreement with the sub-section leaders«.²¹⁰

Evidence collected here indicates that in section VI/Oberwart similar crimes were committed on a regular basis in Rechnitz forest. While widely unnoticed by residents over months, they became public end of March, when thousands of emaciated Jewish forced laborers were too feeble to set out for Mauthausen.

²⁰⁸ Lappin-Eppel: Ungarisch-jüdische, see (fn34) pp. 321f., 341f.

²⁰⁹ March 23. 1948, Police Direction Graz I, recording with Dr. Josef Tieber, cited in Lappin-Eppel: Ungarisch-jüdische, see (fn34), p. 338w.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 341f, see pp. 309-367 for documented crimes.