The Scroll of Treblinka

HUMAN REASON will never make peace with the reality of Treblinka. The human mind cannot accept the soulless rationale of this "scientific" enterprise. We can understand pogroms, explosions of religious fanaticism, of nationalist, political or racial hatred, incited mobs running amok — all these things, albeit terrifying, are human. But the cold, prearranged carnage, without passion or hate, planned and organized by a modern government in the heart of Europe, and followed by a "civilized" nation in a fit of collective rabies — this is beyond human comprehension. No wonder that a weird fascination hovers above this Polish hamlet which became the graveyard of over a million Jews not only of Warsaw but also of 150 other cities and towns, in ten European countries.

It is incredible. And still, it did happen, we know it did. It happened in our time, in the time of Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud and Max Born. How did it happen? Let's refresh our memory by a terse summary of the series of events that led to the transmutation of the unthinkable into the commonplace. It started with the rise of Adolf Hitler, the new leader of Germany, a wicked and demented man. He decided that the people who had given Moses, Jesus, Spinoza and Marx to humanity, were the worst enemies of the nation of Goethe, Schiller and Beethoven. Germany would never be free and happy, said he, until and unless the kin of Heinrich Heine were eradicated from its midst — men, women and children. And when this German Führer unleashed a predatory war against other peoples, he called together his faithful and issued the order: "Now, under the cloak of wartime secrecy, while our adversaries are busy defending themselves against the blows of our powerful cohorts, is the time to obliterate the tribe of Judah." His henchmen: Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, were put in charge of this nefarious task, to which they gave the name "The Final Solution of the Jewish Problem." They sought to slaughter the Jews and to inherit their possessions and their place beneath the sun.
Special schools for murderers were organized in Germany. Hand-picked hangmen were trained in the art of killing, and a new, modern technology was adapted for the manufacture of death. Several basic methods were used by the Nazis to bring about the “Final Solution.”

The earliest technique consisted of pogrom-like massacres and lootings of entire Jewish neighborhoods and communities by Einsatzgruppen, mobile killing squads that followed the fighting troops, waging their own dastardly war on defenseless men, women and children. In May, 1940, the police schools in Pretsch-on-the-Elbe, in Dünen and in Schmiedeberg were utilized to organize the four Einsatzgruppen, A, B, C and D, and prepared them for the mass murder of Jews in the occupied territories. They claimed over a million victims, mostly in the parts of Poland and U.S.S.R. invaded by the German troops. But soon Himmler became unhappy with the results of this technique. The massacres had caused misgivings not only among some old-fashioned Wehrmacht generals, but even Wilhelm Kube, the cruel Generalkommissar of Byelorussia, who was later killed by partisans, protested against the slaughters. They undermined, he claimed, “the honor of our Reich and our party,” and he asked that “whatever had to be done should be done in a humane form.” The “chaotic killings” were carried out in broad daylight and could not be kept secret. Some of the victims might survive as unwanted eyewitnesses and — perhaps most important — this procedure did not guarantee a total expropriation of Jewish property.

Accordingly, the Einsatzgruppen pogroms gave way to institutionalized murder schemes, carried out in two stages: first, locking up the Jews in ghettos, and then extermination in death camps expressly set up for this purpose. These camps borrowed their techniques — and their technicians — from the Nazi euthanasia program (code-named T-4.) This euthanasia operation had killed over 100,000 mentally-ill, crippled, incurably-sick Germans whom the Nazi regime had ruled to be “not worthy to live.” It had to be discontinued in August, 1941, due to heavy pressure from the Church.

The command to adopt this new way of killing came from no less a source than the Führer’s Chancellery itself. Philip Bouhler, the chief of Hitler’s personal Chancellery, discovered Christian Wirth, the specialist in gassing, and Wirth did his work so well that he became known as “the technocrat of destruction.” His method of
killing was amazingly economical and horribly efficient. The advantages of gassing versus shooting became obvious: it was not only technically “tadellos” (perfect), but also, as Martin Broszat, the head of the Munich Institute of Contemporary History, puts it: “Asphyxiation by gas was technological genocide without a pogrom mood, without feelings of religious, nationalist or racial hostility on the part of the perpetrators...”! And what was no less important: it was ideally suited to the Nazi aim that the murderers should inherit all the possessions of their victims. The Polish judge Z. Łukaszkiewicz, who after the war conducted an investigation of Treblinka on behalf of the Polish government, explains: “In addition to its political objectives, the systematic destruction of the Jewish people was simply meant to fulfill certain economic aims. Their liquidation was a very good source of income.”

It is generally assumed that the Wannsee Conference (January 20, 1942) was the official start of the “Final Solution.” Historical facts seem to indicate that Wannsee was simply an official rubber stamp on a fait accompli rather than a beginning of a new era. Göring’s order to Heydrich was dated July 31, 1941 (six weeks after the start of the war against Russia, and six months before Wannsee), and it read:

“Complementing the task that was assigned to you on January 21, 1939, which was to solve the Jewish problem by emigration and evacuation in the most effective manner in accordance with the conditions of that time, I hereby charge you with making all necessary organizational, practical and financial preparations for bringing about the final solution of the Jewish problem in the territories within the German sphere of influence in Europe.”

And so the orders were given and the executions began. It was all on a strictly business basis. A commercial deal was concluded between Eichmann and the German Ministry of Transport: 4 pfennig per kilometer of railroad track per person. Children under ten at half rate, those under four traveled free. The rate was cut in half if at least 400 people were being shipped in one transport. The minimum charge per transport was 200 reichsmarks, with no charge for the return of the trains after they had been emptied of their human cargo. A cargo of 1,000 deportees per train. But for the Jewish Sonderzüge the norm of deportees was raised to 2,000, and to 5,000 for short hauls, as within Poland. Cargo space was less than two square feet per person. It was good business. That is why there never was a shortage of trains for Jewish transports.4
Christian Wirth's first step was to organize a pilot extermination camp at Chelmno-on-the-Ner, in Western Poland. Early in December, 1941, the first transports of Jews began to arrive in Chelmno. They were killed in hermetically-sealed mobile vans by exhaust fumes of the vans' own engines fed into the inside through pipes. (In the Ukraine the population nicknamed these vans dushegubki, "soul destroyers.") From December 5, 1941, until the end of its existence Chelmno killed (according to Dr. Richard Korherr, Hitler's official statistician) no less than 145,000 Jews (according to other sources, 325,000), and about 5,000 Gypsies, mostly from the Polish territories annexed by the Reich. Only four Jews survived.

The next step was "Einsatz [Operation] Reinhard." In the spring of 1942 Reinhard Heydrich, the mastermind of the "Final Solution" and at the same time the Nazi governor of Bohemia and Moravia, was assassinated by Czech patriots. To honor his memory the execution of the "Final Solution" in the Generalgouvernement was code-named "Operation Reinhard." It was placed under the overall command of SS Brigadeführer (Brigadier General) Odilo Globocnik, the SS and Police Chief of Lublin. Christian Wirth became the organizer and inspector of "Operation Reinhard." The "Operation" comprised three camps: Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, which were responsible for more than two million Jewish lives.

These camps differed from the dual-capacity concentration camps of the Auschwitz and Maidanek type in one important respect: Auschwitz and Maidanek were not just death camps and were not intended only for Jews; they were also an inexhaustible reservoir of slave labor for the surrounding industrial complexes. Even though more than two and one-half million Jews perished there as a result of outright murder, there were many who survived. The "Operation Reinhard" camps were strictly death camps for Jews. No forced labor, no Gentiles, no survivors. That is why Auschwitz and Maidanek were under the jurisdiction of the SS-WVHA (Main Office of Economic Administration), while "Operation Reinhard" camps under Globocnik were subject directly to the Führer's Chancellery.

The first of the "Operation Reinhard" camps was Belżec. This camp was in operation from March to November, 1942. At least 390,000 victims died there during this period; according to Polish sources the total was 600,000. There was one survivor.

Sobibór was opened in April, 1942, and was active until the uprising of the inmates on October 14, 1942. The total number of vic-
tims, according to the expert Dr. Wolfgang Scheffler, confirms the estimate submitted by Judge Łukaszkiewicz: 250,000. There were fifty survivors.

Treblinka, the largest of the “Operation Reinhard” camps, entered the annals of Jewish martyrdom on July 22, 1942. On July 7, 1942 Dr. Imfried Eberle, the constructor and first commandant of Treblinka, had notified the commissar of the Warsaw Ghetto, Dr. Heinz Auerswald, that Treblinka was ready to accept “resettlers.” On July 22, 1942, SS Sturmbannführer (Major) Hermann Hoefle appeared at the office of Adam Czerniakow, the Jedenälteste in Warsaw, and notified him that the “resettlement” of the Jews of Warsaw “to the East” had begun. He ordered him to deliver a quota of 6,000 Jews on that very day and for each day thereafter. Six thousand destitute and homeless Jews were gathered from the refugee centers and prisons, and the first Treblinka-bound train left the Warsaw Umschlagplatz that very evening. It arrived in Treblinka at 9:30 the next morning, July 23, 1942. Despite some initial apprehensions, most of the Jews of Warsaw really believed that this was no more than a bona fide resettlement. This belief was enhanced by the fact that at one point every Jew who volunteered for “resettlement” received three kilograms of bread and one kilogram of marmalade. People were starved and desperate, and 20,000 hungry souls appeared of their own accord. But after a while dark forebodings awoke in the minds of the people. The few fortunate who managed to escape from Treblinka had tales of horror to tell. Zalman Frydycz, an underground activist with “Aryan” looks, contacted Polish railroad workers and with their help was able to follow one of the transports. When he reached Sokółów, not far from Treblinka, he learned that the trains went to Treblinka crammed with people but returned empty. He also learned that no food had ever been shipped there. Finally he learned the whole terrible truth from two escapees. On his return to Warsaw he told the facts about Treblinka in Oif der Vakh (On Guard), the clandestine publication of the socialist Bund. Even though some details of the report were not entirely accurate, the total picture was clear: Treblinka was not a resettlement camp but a death camp. “Resettlement” was merely a Nazi euphemism for death. Unfortunately, the publication did not appear until late in September, 1942, and by that time the Aktion in which over 310,000 Warsaw Jews had been deported to their death had been completed. In addition, the circulation of the paper was very limited. Still there is no doubt that
the impact of the news and the revelations of Abraham Krzepicki and other escapees contributed to that change of mood in the Warsaw ghetto which made armed resistance possible in January, 1943, followed by the uprising in April-May, 1943. From January to May, 1943, 19,000 additional Jews from Warsaw were deported to Treblinka, so that Treblinka became the grave of 329,000 Warsaw Jews. Subsequently, Jews from other Polish cities also arrived; they came from Kielce, Międzyrzec, Białystok, Tomaszów, Grodno, Łuków, Włoszczowa, Sędziszów, Częstochowa, Łochów, Kozienice, Radom, Węgrów, and many, many others, not only from Poland but also from nine other countries.

The estimates of the total of Treblinka victims vary. According to the official German court expert, the director of the Munich Institute for Contemporary History Dr. Helmut Krausnick, at least 700,000 — including the 329,000 Jews from Warsaw — died there. At the second Treblinka trial, another expert, Dr. Wolfgang Scheffler, raised this figure to 900,000 victims. The official Polish figure as given by Z. Łukaszkiewicz is 800,000; Rachel Auerbach puts it at 1,074,000. Franciszek Ząbecki, a Pole who was traffic controller at the Treblinka railroad station and on behalf of the Polish Home Army (AK) kept a daily record of all train transports, insisted that it could not possibly have been less than 1,200,000, “beyond the shadow of a doubt.” The most convincing evidence was given to me personally by Samuel Rajzman, the senior of the Treblinka survivors: he had been eyewitness to an SS party celebrating the one-millionth arrival in Treblinka. That party was held long before the end of the camp’s operations.

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Treblinka was the reign of ultimate undiluted evil, the mesmerizing dread of unmitigated terror, combined with masterly delusion and camouflage. Let us meet the protagonists of this eerie drama. There are the hangmen: Kurt Franz, nicknamed “The Doll” because of his physical beauty behind which hid a beast in human disguise. He remembered Treblinka as “the best years of my life.” His dog, Barry, was expressly trained to maul the genitals of the helpless inmates. Franz Stangl, who was sober enough to realize that behind the smokescreen of propaganda and racist mystique there was no sacred mission but only naked greed (“all they wanted was their money”). Yet, though he knew all this, he was a willing accomplice to one of the most abominable crimes in the annals of
mankind. And, of course, Christian Wirth, nicknamed “Christian the Terrible,” the roving bestial inspector of “Operation Reinhard,” who had nothing but the most abusive epithets for the hapless victims, and who went out of his way to see that not one Jewish child should survive.

And then there are the victims who rose from the depths of despair and dehumanization to the height of selfless devotion and heroism, the leaders and fighters in the conspiracy and in the incredible revolt of the downtrodden wretches of Treblinka. Says Rachel Auerbach: “Under conditions of a terror exceeding even the terrors of Maidanek or Auschwitz, in a place where psychic depression was harder to withstand than anywhere else on earth—a plan of revolt was conceived and successfully carried out. This was perhaps the only instance of this dimension in any camp in the entire area under German occupation.”

We see them all in their grim, macabre heroism: the physician from Warsaw, Dr. Julian Chorążycki, the heart and brain of the revolt, who unhesitatingly offered his life when he was discovered by Kurt Franz; the Lodz engineer Galewski who fell in combat; Zev Kurland, the tragic kapo of the lazaret, to whom the plotters made their vow of secrecy and who, every night, under cover of darkness, tearfully recited the mourner’s Kaddish for the countless victims of the day; the heroic Czech officers Zelo Bloch and Rudolf Masarek, the military brains of the conspiracy who gave their lives in the revolt; the agronomist Sudowicz, and the 14-year old boy Zalcberg who did not live to see the day of freedom.

Finally, there are those few who survived: Jankiel Wiernik, Samuel Rajzman, Shalom Kohn, Tanhum Grinberg, Samuel Willenberg, Richard Glazar, Karel Unger, the brothers Oscar and Zygmont Strawczynski, and others, who lived to bear the unbearable burden of remembrance, and fell heir to the duty to tell the unbelievable tale of Treblinka.

One million souls entered the gates of Treblinka. Only one thousand were still alive on that memorable August 2, 1942 when they inscribed the name of Treblinka in the book of Jewish heroism. Two hundred of them broke through the barbed-wire fences. Only three score survived.

This book is their story. It consists mainly of the authentic eyewitness accounts of six survivors—undramatized, unadorned, without fabrications and hollow verbiage. The nightmare of Treblinka’s hell is portrayed in simple words. Most of the material ap-
pears here in English for the first time. Nothing can give a truer picture of Treblinka than Samuel Rajzman’s conclusion: “In writing about the Holocaust, we don’t need authors with great imaginations. We need people who can depict the reality as it was. It was so overpowering that the facts speak for themselves.”

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On the site where for 400 ghastly days the blasphemy of Treblinka tormented human history there is now a monument. It shows in the center an enormous rock topped by a menorah to symbolize the 300,000 martyred Jews of Warsaw. This rock is surrounded by huge slabs of concrete from which rises a forest of thousands of granite pillars of varying shapes and sizes, representing cities, villages, and shtetlach lost in the Holocaust. On 150 of them are carved the names of the localities from which the murdered Jews came. The massive pillars bear the names of the countries of the victims’ origin.

There is yet another monument to Treblinka not confined to stone or to geographical site. It lives in the hearts of millions of Jews, the people with the longest historical memory. It shall remain forever in our remembrance, from family to family, from generation to generation, in all our habitations.

For Jews, Treblinka is more than an unforgettable page of their thorny history. But for the non-Jewish world, it is an apocalyptic disaster. In spite of the Nazis’ frenzied endeavors, the infamy of Treblinka can never be obliterated from German history. It is an indelible symbol of the bankruptcy of European civilization and of two thousand years of Christian teachings.

As a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto, I feel an affinity for Treblinka. My family and I were condemned to share the fate of Treblinka with our Jewish brothers and sisters in Warsaw. By miracle we escaped this horrible fate, but in spirit I consider myself a Treblinka survivor, and I dedicate this Scroll of mourning and anger to the memory of the men, women and children who became the ashes of Treblinka.

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1. A. Rückerl, p. 11.
2. Z. Łukaszkiewicz, p. 42.
5. R. Auerbach, *see* p. 59 of this volume.