

“Endlösung on the *Amber Shore*”:  
*The Massacre in January 1945*  
on the *Baltic Seashore*—  
*A Repressed Chapter of East Prussian History*

BY ANDREAS KOSSERT

For many Germans East Prussia has served as a myth, a product of collective memory. This has been especially true since 1945, when this isolated eastern province was lost to Germany. The fondly preserved image has been of a land of forests and lakes—the material of a rural idyll seen through the distorting lens of nostalgia and loss. In West Germany during the Cold War, the only trauma acknowledged for the region was the German population’s mass exodus at the end of the Second World War. There has been far less willingness to acknowledge the fact that large portions—although as will be indicated certainly not the entirety—of that population, part of the Nazi Reich, had demonstrated full solidarity with the Nazi state.

Despite this broad repression of historical reality, a massacre of Jews in January 1945 on the Baltic seashore of the Samland close to Königsberg generated a great deal of public interest several years ago.<sup>1</sup> This was a belated response to the publication in 1994 of a memoir covering the war years by Martin Bergau, a former Hitler Youth member from the small town of Palmnicken—where the massacre was to reach its tragic climax—who had witnessed the crime at the age of sixteen.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the massacre he had been taken prisoner by the Soviets; after his release he had not been allowed to return to his home in East Prussia. Until Bergau’s account finally broke down the wall of silence, the region’s expellees had defined themselves exclusively as victims. Until the 1990s, very little was known of Nazi rule in the eastern provinces in general—Pomerania, East and West Prussia, and Silesia—whereas due to many excellent studies the situation was very different for regions that became part of the Federal Republic after the war.

<sup>1</sup>See Michael Wines, ‘Russians Awaken to a Forgotten SS Atrocity’, in *The New York Times*, 31 January 2000, pp. 1 and 4; Reinhard Henkys, ‘Endlösung am Bernsteinstrand. Das größte NS-Massaker in Ostpreußen fand noch Ende Januar 1945 statt’, in *Die Zeit*, no. 45, 2 November 2000, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup>See Martin Bergau, *Der Junge von der Bernsteinküste. Erlebte Zeitgeschichte 1938–1945*, Heidelberg 1994. I would like to thank Martin Bergau for his assistance and his commitment to establishing a lasting memory of the massacre, as well as for entrusting me with his unpublished manuscript *Endlösung am Bernsteinstrand oder Dann fiel das Grauen über uns*, which includes numerous previously unpublished documents.

This article is intended as a reconstruction of the Samland massacre, based on the available historical sources, with a focus on the last days of the German province of East Prussia in early 1945.<sup>3</sup> Around 7,000 people, mostly Jewish women, died on a death march through the province that ended in mass murder on a Baltic beach. Many German civilians, who shortly afterwards fled their homeland before the arrival of the Soviet army, helped the SS. This recent chapter of German history provides a markedly different perspective on the former eastern regions from the one cherished for many decades after the war. As there are no known relevant documentary sources from the last phase of the war in East Prussia, the sources used are the testimonies provided during court hearings held in the public prosecutors' office in Ludwigsburg during the 1960s. 108 personal accounts of the Samland massacre were collected during these legal proceedings, including those from some of the few survivors living in Israel. This material has permitted a vivid reconstruction of the events.

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East Prussia was the eastern province of Prussia and also of the German Reich. Its capital was Königsberg, home of Immanuel Kant and the most celebrated intellectual centre of the Baltic Sea area. Already by the end of the nineteenth century, the unique Baltic seashore and both the Frische Nehrung and Kurische Nehrung, with their dune landscape were drawing visitors from all over Europe. The Samland region was a special tourist attraction because of the famous baths at Cranz, Neukuhren, Rauschen and Brüsterort.

<sup>3</sup>Despite the journalistic attention the massacre would eventually receive, a full historical description of the events and their context has until now not been published. This lacuna was already noted by the Israeli historian Shmuel Krakowski around the same time as the appearance of Bergau's account, and Krakowski, who has published crucial relevant documents from various Soviet archives, has thus far been the only professional historian to address the events—or at least to do so in an accurate manner. See Shmuel Krakowski, 'Massacre of Jewish Prisoners on the Samland Peninsula. Documents, Introduction', in *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 24 (1994), pp. 349–387; here pp. 350 and 351. The events are first mentioned in *idem*, 'The Death Marches in the Period of the Evacuation of the Camps', in Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (eds.), *The Nazi Concentration Camps. Proceedings of the Fourth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference – January 1980*, Jerusalem 1980, pp. 480–482. Both the refugee organisation of former Königsbergers and the writer Reinhard Henkys are notable exceptions to this pattern of denial and repression: the former published the latter's reports on the massacre in its newsletter and took up the issue itself in several articles, directly appealing to eye witnesses to speak up about what they had seen. See Reinhard Henkys, 'Endlösung'; *idem*, 'Verdrängen, Vergessen, Verschweigen' in *Gegen Vergessen—Für Demokratie*, no. 26 (September 2000), pp. 16–18; *idem*, 'Wieder eine jüdische Gemeinde in Königsberg', in *Königsberger Bürgerbrief*, no. 52 (1999), p. 75, and readers' responses to these appeals, *ibid.* (excerpts from the responses are located in Bergau, *Endlösung*); Reinhard Henkys, 'Geschehen—1945 an der Ostsee', in *Königsberger Bürgerbrief*, no. 54 (2000), pp. 80–81. One Polish monograph has focused more on the death march to Pomerania from the main camp of the Stutthof concentration camp complex: Janina Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci. Ewakuacja piesza więźniów KL Stutthof i jego podbozów. 25 stycznia—3 maja 1945*, Gdańsk 1992. For an inaccurate brief account cf. Eberhard Jäckel, Peter Longerich and Julius H. Schoeps (eds.), *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust. Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden*, 3 vols., Berlin 1993, vol. 3, p. 1114. Incorrect information is also noted in Martin Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust*, 1st edn., New York 1988, London 1982, p. 217. See also Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, *Die jüdische Minderheit in Königsberg/Preußen, 1871–1945*, Göttingen 1996 (Schriftenreihe der Historischen Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 56), pp. 359–360. Schüler-Springorum bases her findings solely on survivors' reports in the Yad Vashem Archives, which have been partially published by Shmuel Krakowski.



Beach near Palmnicken and Sorgenau

The Samland, and Palmnicken in particular, was and still is the world's largest supplier of amber. The region's amber was used in the decoration of the famed Amber Room in St. Petersburg, and again in its reconstruction in 2003. As "Baltic gold", amber thus became the symbol of East Prussia. Palmnicken developed the world's only industrial surface mine for this precious commodity, exported throughout the world. After 1945, a Soviet amber collective took over production and Palmnicken was given the Russian name *Yantarny*—amber.

Until recently, Jewish life in East Prussia before and during Nazism was more or less passed over by historical scholarship;<sup>4</sup> at the same time, there has been little work done on the role played in the region by the Nazi Party, exceptions tending to emerge from the domain of ecclesiastical and regional history.<sup>5</sup> In fact, because of

<sup>4</sup>See Aloys Sommerfeld, *Juden im Ermland—Ihr Schicksal nach 1933*, Münster 1991 (Zeitschrift für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands, Beiheft 10). For the modern history of the Königsberg Jews see Schüler-Springorum.

<sup>5</sup>See Reinhard Henkys, 'Noch wenig erforschte Zeitgeschichte: Ostpreußen zur Hitlerzeit', in *Gegen Vergessen*, no. 29 (2001), pp. 14–15; Gerhard Reifferscheid, *Das Bistum Ermland und das Dritte Reich*, Cologne–Vienna 1975 (Zeitschrift für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands, Beiheft 1); Christian Tilitzki, *Alltag in Ostpreußen 1940–45. Die geheimen Lageberichte der Königsberger Justiz*, Leer 1991; Andreas Kossert, *Preußen, Deutsche oder Polen? Die Masuren im Spannungsfeld des ethnischen Nationalismus 1870–1956*, Wiesbaden 2001 (Deutsches Historisches Institut, Warschau. Quellen und Studien, vol. 12). For the conflict between church and state, see Hugo Linck, *Der Kirchenkampf in Ostpreußen 1933 bis 1945. Geschichte und Dokumentation*, Munich 1968; Manfred Koschorke (ed.), *Geschichte der Bekennenden Kirche in Ostpreußen 1933–1945. Allein das Wort hat's getan*, Göttingen 1976. There is an abundance of Polish research on National Socialism in East Prussia; the works of Bohdan Koziello-Poklewski are especially noteworthy: *Narodowosocjalistyczna Partia Robotnicza w Prusach Wschodnich w latach 1921–1933*, Olsztyn 1995; *idem*, 'Przyczynki do działalności służby pracy w Prusach Wschodnich w latach 1931–1935', in *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, vols. 137–138, no. 4 (1977), pp. 391–402. One study has appeared in Polish on the East Prussian institution for the disabled in Kortau bei Allenstein: Stanisław Piechocki, *Czyściec zwany Kortau*, Olsztyn 1993.

overwhelming electoral successes in the region before 1933, Hitler incorporated the notion of his being the ‘saviour of East Prussia’ into his patriarchal image.<sup>6</sup> From 1928 onwards, Erich Koch, who later attained notoriety as the brutal *Reichskommissar* for the Ukraine, held East Prussia firmly in his grip as a Nazi party *Gauleiter*. According to a decree by Hitler issued on 8 October 1939, the northern Polish territory became a part of East Prussia; it was united with the administrative district of Ciechanów (Zichenau) on 26 October 1939. In addition, East Prussia acquired the Polish districts of Suwałki and Augustów, which enabled Erich Koch to expand the province by 12,000 square kilometres. These regions were home to 800,000 Poles, 80,000 Jews, and around 15,000 Germans. The crimes in the Ciechanów district have been investigated mainly by Polish historians; regrettably, the research has to a great extent been wanting.

#### A SUPPRESSED CHAPTER OF EAST PRUSSIAN HISTORY: CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN EAST PRUSSIA

Hardly anything is known about the East Prussian concentration camps. At the beginning of the Second World War, many prisoners of war and forced labourers from various European countries were sent to East Prussia. In addition to those workers assigned to agriculture, political prisoners – above all those from Poland – were sent to so-called labour-education camps. One of these was in Hohenbruch (Lauknen) in the district of Labiau in Großer Moosbruch, where mainly Polish political prisoners were used to drain the swampland.<sup>7</sup> In 1944, a punitive work camp for Polish prisoners was created close to the Palmnicken amber mines, the prisoners being employed in the surface mining of amber. Over the course of time, ‘undesirable’ German prisoners were transferred to Palmnicken from the courthouse prison in Königsberg.

In Soldau (Działdowo), which, as part of the Versailles Treaty, had been surrendered by Germany to Poland in January 1920 without a plebiscite, a camp to simultaneously serve transit, prison and concentration purposes was built in February 1940 on the site of former barracks. Pro-Polish Masurians, together with members of the Polish intelligentsia (particularly the Catholic clergy), Jews and the mentally ill from the East Prussian institutions at Allenburg, Kortau, Tapiau and Carlshof, were all imprisoned in Soldau. Between 21 May and 8 June 1940, 1,558 physically handicapped East Prussians and 300 mentally ill people deported from Poland were murdered in a mobile gas chamber at Soldau. All in all, around 200,000 people passed through the Soldau camp; at least 10,000 of these were murdered there,<sup>8</sup> but the only concentration

<sup>6</sup>On Hitler’s success among the Masurians in the southern part of East Prussia see Andreas Kossert, *Preußen*, pp. 181–190.

<sup>7</sup>Concerning the forced labourers, especially in Hohenbruch, see Bohdan Koziełło-Poklewski, *Żagranicznicy robotnicy przymusowi w Prusach Wschodnich w latach drugiej wojny światowej*, Warsaw 1977.

<sup>8</sup>For the crimes of euthanasia committed in Soldau, see the fragmentary remarks of Ernst Klee, *‘Euthanasie’ im NS-Staat*, 2nd edn., Frankfurt am Main 1983, pp. 190f.; Ewa Korc and Antoni Sołoma, ‘Z badań nad hitlerowską eutanazją w Prusach Wschodnich’, in *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis*, no. 923. *Studia nad Faszyzmem i Zbrodniami Hitlerowskimi*, vol. 12, Warsaw 1987, pp. 189–199. For a more detailed approach to the Soldau camp, see Janusz Gumkowski, ‘Obóz hitlerowski w Działdowie’, in *Biuletyn*

camp to gain international notoriety was the Stutthof camp, located in West Prussia east of Danzig.<sup>9</sup> In the second half of 1944, Paul-Werner Hoppe, its infamous commandant, gave carefully-prepared orders to kill Jewish prisoners by lethal injection, poison gas, or a bullet through the base of the skull.<sup>10</sup>

Less well known is the existence of several Stutthof sub-camps (*Aussenlager*), established in the summer of 1944. After the Baltic ghettos had been evacuated, particularly those in Riga and Kaunas (Kovno), the number of prisoners sent to Stutthof increased considerably; new accommodation needed to be found. Hence during the second half of 1944, *Aussenlager* were created in co-operation with the SS and the administrative departments, following a special directive from Hoppe and as agreed on with the SS.<sup>11</sup> The inmates of these East Prussian sub-camps were mainly from the ghettos in Kaunas and Riga, and had been transported to Königsberg by sea. Each commandant of the camps originally came from the SS troops of the Stutthof concentration camp. All in all, there were six camps in East Prussia, part of a network of around 30 Stutthof *Aussenlager*: Seerappen, Jesau (18 km south of Königsberg), Königsberg, Schippenbeil, Gerdaunen and Heiligenbeil. Of these, almost all were used for slave labour to expand the airport; they were under the control of the *Luftwaffenbauamt* [airforce construction authority] *Königsberg Pr.* The camp at Königsberg was established in August 1944; its last commandant (from 4 October 1944), SS-*Oberscharführer* Fritz Weber, was responsible for the Palmnicken death march.<sup>12</sup> The camp was built at the site of the Steinfurt rail-coach factory, one of the most important East Prussian industrial concerns, located in Königsberg-Ratshof (near the *Nordbahnhof*). The Königsberg Jewish entrepreneur Fritz Radok had run the factory until the Nazis came to power.

Living conditions in the East Prussian *Aussenlager* were as inhumane as those in other Nazi concentration camps. There are testimonies from several former inmates. In 1963, Ester Frielman stated that towards the end of 1944 she was transferred from

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*Główniej Komisji Badania Żbrodni Hitlerowskich*, vol. 10 (1958), pp. 57–88. On the camp structure, see Gabriele Lotfi, ‘SS-Sonderlager im nationalsozialistischen Terrorsystem: Die Entstehung von Hinzert, Stutthof und Soldau’, in Norbert Frei, Sybille Steinbacher and Bernd C. Wagner (eds.), *Ausbeutung, Vernichtung, Öffentlichkeit. Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Lagerpolitik*, Munich 2000 (Institut für Zeitgeschichte. Darstellungen und Quellen zur Geschichte von Auschwitz, 4), pp. 209–229. One detailed German monograph on the city of Soldau does not mention the camp’s existence, but simply bemoans the “unfortunate end ... of the German city of Soldau” in 1945. See Fritz Gause, *Geschichte des Amtes und der Stadt Soldau*, Marburg 1959 (Wissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte und Landeskunde Ostmitteleuropas, 38, republished as Sonderschriften Verein für Familienforschung in Ost- und Westpreußen, 95, Hamburg 1998) p. 364.

<sup>9</sup>Marek Orski, ‘Organisation und Ordnungsprinzipien des Lagers Stutthof’, in Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth and Christoph Dieckmann (eds.), *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager—Entwicklung und Struktur*, vol. I, p. 285–308; Karin Orth, *Das System der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Eine politische Organisationsgeschichte*, Hamburg 1999. See also the following memoirs: Renata Yesner, *Jeder Tag war Jom Kippur. Eine Kindheit im Ghetto und im KZ*, Frankfurt am Main 1995 (Wolfgang Benz (ed.), *Lebensbilder. Jüdische Erinnerungen und Zeugnisse*, vol. 12770, Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus); Josef Katz, *Erinnerungen eines Überlebenden*, Kiel 1988 (Katz was working at the Schichau shipyard in Danzig which was also a Stutthof sub-camp).

<sup>10</sup>See Orth, *System*, p. 294.

<sup>11</sup>Danuta Drywa, *Żagłada Żydów w obozie koncentracyjnym Stutthof: wrzesień 1939–maj 1945*, Gdańsk, 2001, p.181.

<sup>12</sup>*ibid.*, p. 197.

the Belzec ghetto to the camps at Budzyn and Auschwitz, then to Stutthof, and finally to Steindorf, near the town of Heiligenbeil. In Stutthof and Steindorf, she witnessed the daily death of a great many people as the direct consequence of hunger, cold and physical abuse.<sup>13</sup>

There are highly contradictory statements on the number of Jewish inmates in the East Prussian camps. Shmuel Krakowski states that there were around 20,000, ninety per cent of whom were women from the Lodz ghetto, Hungary or Lithuania; the male inmates were mainly from the Baltic region.<sup>14</sup> Many of the prisoners were later transferred to different areas, or had already been killed by the time the last camp statistics were taken on 24 January 1945; the population of the East Prussian *Aussenlager* was then recorded as 4,685 (934 men and 3,751 women).<sup>15</sup>

### EVACUATION OF THE EAST PRUSSIAN *AUSSENLAGER*: THE DEATH MARCH FROM KÖNIGSBERG TO THE SAMLAND

The Red Army began its offensive on 12 January 1945, attacking the German 5th Army from the rear. By 30 January, the Red Army, now not far from Palmnicken, were fighting units of the 28th Army Corps. Having established a bridgehead at Memel, they pushed on across the Kurische Nehrung into the Samland. Soviet units now completely surrounded the province of East Prussia.

On 26 January 1945, Soviet forces reached Neukuhren and became engaged in a ferocious battle with the German defences. On the afternoon of 29 January Soviet troops overcame Königsberg-Cranz and forged ahead into the western Samland. On Friday, 2 February they reached the Baltic Sea at the western shore of Groß Sorgenau south of Palmnicken and at Warnbicken and Georgenswalde in the north. As the result of heavy fighting on 3 and 4 February they were then pushed back by the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>16</sup> Terrified by the much-publicised brutality of the invading Soviet forces—Nazi propaganda had focused on the atrocities committed by invading

<sup>13</sup>Bundesarchiv-Außenstelle Ludwigsburg (henceforth BA Außenstelle LU), AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944–. Untersuchungsstelle für N.S. Gewaltverbrechen beim Landesstab der Polizei Israel. Tel Aviv, 20 March 1964. Testimony: Ester Frielman (in Yiddish), Tel Aviv 30 December 1963. Zwischenbericht Nr. 3. Betr. Vernehmung von Zeugen im Vorermittlungsverfahren wegen der Ermordung von Juden in Palmnicken/Ostpreußen im Jahre 1945. Bezug: Schreiben der Zentralen Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen in Ludwigsburg vom 14. Nov. 1963 – 7 Ar-Z 299/59 [hereafter Zwischenbericht]. As a result of the aforementioned letter from the Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen the following witnesses were also asked to give evidence in its offices:

- (1) Frau Pola Zwardon, née Mondschein, born 26 June 1909 in Lubaczow, resident of Ramat Itzhak, Israel.
- (2) Frau Bluma Lonicki née Landgarten, born 30 December 1917 in Cracow, resident of Holon, Israel.
- (3) Frau Ester Frielmann née Fischbein, born 11 June 1925 in Markosow, resident of Petach Tiqva, Israel.
- (4) Frau Dina Hertzberg née Blachmann, born 10 December 1926 in Lodz, resident of Ramat Gan, Israel.

<sup>14</sup>Krakowski, p. 349.

<sup>15</sup>Drywa, pp. 234–235.

<sup>16</sup>See Klaus von der Groeben, *Im Dienst für Staat und Gemeinschaft. Erinnerungen*, Kiel 1995, pp. 273–277.

Soviet soldiers in the East Prussian village of Nemmersdorf in October 1944—civilians fled their homes in panic.<sup>17</sup> *Gauleiter* Koch had long refused any form of orderly evacuation of East Prussian civilians, as this was considered “treason”. But with the Red Army offensive of January 1945, those East Prussian civilians who could do so headed for the already overcrowded seaport of Pillau in the hope of being evacuated to the west across the Baltic Sea. For more than 5,000 refugees who left Gdingen (Gotenhafen) on the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a steamer formerly assigned to the German Labour Front’s elaborate *Kraft durch Freude* (“strength thorough joy”) leisure-time programme, this escape route led directly to death. On the evening of 30 January 1945, just off the Pomeranian coast, a Soviet torpedo struck the *Gustloff*; in less than an hour, the icy sea had swallowed the ship. Remarkably, at exactly the same time, the inhabitants of Palmnicken were witnessing the last and largest SS massacre in East Prussia.

Many films and books have documented the *Gustloff*’s senseless fate and so have solidly anchored the refugees’ deaths in the German psyche.<sup>18</sup> As already suggested, the massacre of several thousand Jewish women chased into the freezing Baltic Sea amidst salvos of machine-gun bullets has received substantially less attention. Although 108 witnesses were interrogated in Ludwigsburg during preliminary investigations in the early 1960s, those accused of the crime died before proceedings could begin in Lüneburg, and the case was eventually dropped. Yad Vashem has carefully preserved the statements of the few survivors, copies of the protocols made during the interrogations, and the reports written by Soviet military and secret services, who had investigated the events in April and May 1945. These Soviet documents, however, have never been made public.

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When the Soviet offensive began, the SS had rapidly dismantled the Stutthof *Aussenlager*. In extremely chaotic circumstances, and at the very last minute—the Soviet troops were close behind—efforts were then made to remove all traces of the East Prussian concentration camps and their evacuation. The evacuation march of those Jews imprisoned in East Prussia thus needs to be seen in the context of the many death marches from Nazi concentration camps from January 1945 onwards. On 20 and 21 January 1945, the prisoners of the camps at Seerappen, Jesau, Heiligenbeil, Schippenbeil and Gerdauen were marched to Königsberg. Some were sent to the Steinfurt rail-coach factory and herded together with the prisoners already there; others were sent to the twine factory at Reichsstraße 1; and some to the barracks in Kalthof. Ester Frielman reported the following on the death march to Königsberg after the Heiligenbeil camp had been evacuated:

<sup>17</sup>For the Soviet attack on Nemmersdorf, see the study by Bernhard Fisch, *Nemmersdorf Oktober 1944. Was in Ostpreußen tatsächlich geschah*, Berlin 1997.

<sup>18</sup>This tragic incident has now achieved broader fame through Günter Grass’s best-selling novel *Im Krebsgang*, Göttingen 2002; (English transl., *Crabwalk*, New York 2003). On the German response to this novel see Robert G. Moller, ‘Sinking Ships, the Lost *Heimat* and Broken Taboos: Günter Grass and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany’, in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2003), pp. 147–181.

We were led into a big cellar, where we found many Jews who had already been herded together. We were in this cellar for about six days. Hans, the SS woman and the Ukrainian guards came daily, shot at us and killed many people this way. They also threw stones at us and injured many. The whole six days we did not get any food and many died of hunger. The living then ate the flesh of the dead. ... [There had been] 10,000 women and 2,000 men.<sup>19</sup>

At the last roll call in the Königsberg *Sammellager*, Danuta Drywa mentions around 7,000;<sup>20</sup> and there were yet more camps not included in the statistics. In its final report, the public prosecutor's office in Ludwigsburg still assumed the Königsberg *Sammellager* had held around 6,500 people at the beginning of the death march to Palmnicken.<sup>21</sup>

On 26 January 1945, after several days in Königsberg, the Jews who had been herded together from across all of East Prussia began their march towards the Samland.<sup>22</sup> When the prisoners were led out of the Königsberg factory early that morning, there were no longer any overland routes to the Reich. Many of the prisoners were shot in the city of Königsberg, their corpses left on the streets. The prisoners whom the SS herded to Palmnicken went without food or warm clothes. They were marched there on byways across Metgethen, Drugehnen, Muhmehnen, Polemmen, Kirpehnen and Germau. Hundreds of East Prussians witnessed the events that unfolded as the prisoners marched to their deaths.<sup>23</sup> In a letter to Martin Bergau, one survivor of this death march, Maria Blitz (née Salz), recalled:

We were wrapped in dirty, threadbare blankets and on our feet we wore crude wooden clogs, which made moving forward on the snow and ice—in addition to our constant mortal terror—pure torture. Our clothing consisted of rags and paper, which we had tied together with wires to protect ourselves from the cold. Anyone who could not go on or fell over was shot immediately or beaten with a rifle butt. My sister Gita could not go any further—she had violent diarrhoea and collapsed. We tried to get her back on her feet, but she asked us to leave her lying there, she wanted to go to her mother—whom we had already lost in Auschwitz. She was shot.<sup>24</sup>

Many of the inhabitants of Königsberg also remembered the march. Rose-Marie Blask witnessed it on a very dreary and cold afternoon:

I was 14-years-old back then. ... I saw a procession of people on the other side of General-Litzmann-Strasse [the former Fuchsberger Allee]. I stood near a tree, it was

<sup>19</sup>BA Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944–: Untersuchungsstelle für N.S. Gewaltverbrechen beim Landesstab der Polizei Israel. Tel Aviv, 20 March 1964. Testimony: Ester Frielman (in Yiddish), Tel Aviv, 30 December 1963. Zwischenbericht.

<sup>20</sup>Drywa, p. 235.

<sup>21</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944–: Abschlußbericht Staatsanwaltschaft Ludwigsburg. Ludwigsburg 27 May 1964.

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.* The public prosecutor's office proceeded on the assumption of a starting date of 23 January, which is, however, impossible, as final rolls were still being taken in each *Aussenlager*. Staatsanwaltschaft Lüneburg, 16 June 1967, Hoenisch, Staatsanwalt, Abschlußverfügung.

<sup>23</sup>See witness reports in Bergau, *Endlösung*

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.* p. 14. Maria Blitz only felt free to talk about her experiences following the appearance of the *New York Times* article by Michael Wines.





Maria Blitz (née Salz) in 1940, aged 22

*By courtesy of Maria Blitz*

already getting dark, the air full of snow, and no one could see me. Then I saw in horror that the SS were driving a long procession of prisoners in front of them.

Again and again, an SS man raised his arm and a person fell in the snow, though I could not hear a gunshot. I don't know how long I stood there, as if frozen. At any rate, I saw a lorry following on behind. The dead were lifted out of the snow and thrown into the back of the lorry.<sup>25</sup>

And Gert Herberg, *Luftwaffenhelfer* in the *Flak-Batterie* at Goldschmiede near Königsberg, saw “the long procession of wretched creatures, wrapped in rags, marching wearily towards the Samland. Every 20 or 30 metres, some of those who could not walk anymore and were falling exhausted into each other's arms were shot down with machine guns by the SS guards”.<sup>26</sup>

The soldiers directing the march consisted of three SS-*Unterführer*, 22 members of the SS, as well as 120 to 150 members of the notorious *Organisation Todt*, which included Ukrainians, Belgians, Dutchmen, Lithuanians and Frenchmen. Fritz Weber, the SS-*Oberscharführer*, and Otto Knott, the SS-*Unterscharführer*, were the commanders-in-chief.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Reader's letter to the editorial office of the *Königsberger Bürgerbrief*, Dortmund, 27 March 2000, cited in Bergau, *Endlösung*.

<sup>26</sup>*ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944-: Angaben aus dem vorläufigen Abschlußbericht der Staatsanwaltschaft. Staatsanwaltschaft Lüneburg, 16 June 1967. Hoenisch, Staatsanwalt, Abschlußverfügung.

It is highly likely that this death march was ordered by the commander of the Gestapo head office, an SS-*Sturmbannführer* only referred to as Gormig.<sup>28</sup> He had been informed by Gerhard Paul Rasch, head of the state amber works in Königsberg, that Palmnicken, with its amber surface mining and the Prussian Mining and Iron and Steel Works Association, Königsberg Division, would be the ultimate destination of the march. In his testimony to the court in Ludwigsburg in 1961, Rasch denied any role in the preparations for the massacre.<sup>29</sup> The public prosecutor's final report, however, concludes that Rasch had in fact given the state police the idea of using the Anna Grube, a disused mine shaft in the Palmnicken amber mines: Jewish prisoners were to be driven into the shaft and the entrance closed.<sup>30</sup> Drywa confirms that the decision by the *Gauleitung* to murder the Jews was made in agreement with Gerhard Rasch.<sup>31</sup> The plan was to seal the victims in the abandoned mine and Kurt Friedrichs, who was both the Palmnicken mayor and the regional Nazi Party group leader, was counted on to co-operate, as was the management of the regional amber mine. Neither quarters nor provisions had been provided for the prisoners—or, for that matter, for their murderers.<sup>32</sup>

#### THE ARRIVAL IN PALMNICKEN OF THE JEWISH PRISONERS

The distance from Königsberg to Palmnicken is approximately 50 kilometres. During the march, the guards shot around 2,000 to 2,500 prisoners who had collapsed from sheer exhaustion; they left the corpses on the side of the road. The *Begleitkommando* then went on its way, leaving an SS man nicknamed the *Genickschußkommissar* (“the shot-in-the-neck commissar”) behind to murder any fleeing Jews.

Only 3,000 of the approximately 6,500 to 7,000 original prisoners arrived in Palmnicken, most probably on the night of 26–27 January 1945. Two hundred to three hundred corpses were found on the morning after their arrival, between Palmnicken and Sorgenau, a distance of about two kilometres.<sup>33</sup> The district's population awoke to gunfire—for weeks, the front had been approaching the Samland, and the inhabitants of Palmnicken were thus living in fear of the invading Soviet Army. Martin Bergau recalls that

<sup>28</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>“I had already heard in Palmnicken of the rumour that I had caused the Jews to be brought to Palmnicken; only in Hamburg did I hear that I had also been informed of the reason and destination for this Jewish march.” BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bd. II, Bl. 261–390: Palmnicken. Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen. Testimony given in Hamburg, 20 June 1961 by Gerhard Paul Rasch, born 27 May 1905 in Rüdigsheim, now Hamburg.

<sup>30</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944–: Abschlußbericht Staatsanwalt. Ludwigsburg, 27 May 1964.

<sup>31</sup>Drywa, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, vol. II, Bl. 261–390: Palmnicken. Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen. Testimony given in Winsen, 23 June 1961 by Kurt Friedrichs, born 8 July 1883 in Königsberg.

<sup>33</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944–: Angaben aus dem vorläufigen Abschlußbericht der Staatsanwaltschaft. Staatsanwaltschaft Lüneburg, 16 June 1967. Hoenisch, Staatsanwalt, Abschlußverfügung

One night, it must have been around three o'clock, I was torn from sleep by shots. My first thought was that the Russians had landed on the coast. ... My father, who had also heard the shots, called after me to remain in the house. I saw a female figure trying to enter the garden gate. When she noticed me she turned immediately and staggered back into the street. Shots rang out, the woman collapsed. Still drowsy, I noticed an endless column of ragged figures in the dark, continually pushed forward by gunfire. I also noticed that again and again individuals were breaking away from the column and being shot down. But I also noticed that some were managing to escape.<sup>34</sup>

In circumstances marked by extreme chaos, the SS encountered an unanticipated obstacle on the procession's arrival at the amber mine in Palmnicken: awoken in the middle of the night, the mine-director, referred to by Bergau and in the testimony only as Landmann, refused to open any of the mine-shafts intended for the mass murder. After all, he argued, the mine was needed for the Palmnicken water supply.<sup>35</sup> Instead, he allowed the main gate be opened so that the exhausted and freezing victims could be housed in the mine's large workshop. The guards were permitted to sleep in the offices and corridors. The next morning, estate-manager Hans Feyerabend arrived; he was responsible for the three regions controlled by the amber mine—Dorbnicken, Palmnicken and Gross-Hubnicken. *Oberscharführer* Weber was now more or less forced to relinquish his command. Feyerabend's statement has been duly documented: as long as he was alive, the Jews would be fed and none killed; Palmnicken was not to become a second Katyn. He ordered straw, peas and bread and had cattle slaughtered. The factory canteen had to cook for the exhausted women.

Feyerabend was a highly respected man in the region. In the First World War he had been a reserve major; he was now commandant of the Palmnicken *Volkssturm*. He represented an insurmountable obstacle for the realisation of the planned murder, and it is very likely that mayor Friedrichs and *Oberscharführer* Weber engineered his removal:<sup>36</sup> Friedrichs had been a Nazi Party member and political leader since 1 February 1932. On 1 February 1936, he came to Palmnicken and assumed the full-time office of mayor, a position he would hold until mid-April 1945. Feyerabend seems to have received a threat from the *Sicherheitsdienst*, the intelligence branch of the SS in Königsberg. This was accompanied by an order to strengthen the *Wehrmacht's* defences near Kumehnen with a hundred *Volkssturm* members.<sup>37</sup> On Tuesday, 30 January, these men marched out to join an army unit that had neither requested their support nor knew what to do with it. It appears that Feyerabend, who had entrusted the care of the Jewish refugees to his deputies, realised he had fallen into a trap with no way out. His comrades found him dead, his own gun in his mouth. It seems that there was no investigation as to whether he had committed

<sup>34</sup>Bergau, *Der Junge*, pp. 108–110.

<sup>35</sup>Bergau, *Endlösung*.

<sup>36</sup>Henkys, 'Endlösung'.

<sup>37</sup>See BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, vol. I, Bl. 1–260: Palmnicken. Zentrale Stelle. Testimony given in Düsseldorf, 24 January 1961. Record of proceedings of Rudolf Johann Folger. BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, vol. II, Bl. 261–390: Palmnicken. Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen. Testimony given in Winsen, 23 June 1961 by Kurt Friedrichs.

suicide or had actually been murdered.<sup>38</sup> Danuta Drywa speaks of Feyerabend's murder on 30 January 1945.<sup>39</sup>

### MASS MURDER ON THE BALTIC SEASHORE

On that Tuesday evening after the *Volkssturm* unit had left, Friedrichs sent for a dozen armed Hitler Youth members, welcomed them at the municipal office, gave them substantial amounts of liquor and then sent them down to the shore, together with three SS-men, to the disused Anna mine.<sup>40</sup> Martin Bergau was one of these Hitler Youth members. Friedrichs also prompted the same young men to ask civilians if they had seen fleeing Jews, as well as to search the woods for any in hiding. They could, he indicated, either shoot the victims immediately or hand them over to Friedrichs. Bergau recalls:

When we left the municipal office with the SS-men, it was already quite dark. We walked in silence towards Franneks-Höh. When we reached the northern part of the town, we turned left and went down the path to the closed Anna mine. We reached the squalid buildings, situated at sea level. I noticed a group of around forty to fifty women and girls. They were captured Jews. A diffuse source of light sparsely illuminated what seemed a ghostly scene. The women had to line up in twos, and we were instructed by the SS-men to escort them. Around six to eight SS-men might have belonged to the command. I could not tell whether they were Germans or foreigners, as their commands were extremely terse. Once the line-up was complete, two women at a time were led around the side of the building by two SS-men. Shortly afterwards two pistol shots rang out. That was the sign for two more SS executioners to take the next two victims to the building, which was shrouded in twilight, and shots soon resounded there again. I had had to position myself pretty much at the end of the long line. A classmate stood right across from me with a cocked rifle, watching over the women on the other side. One woman turned to me and asked in good German if she could move two places forward; she wished to walk this last path with her daughter. In a voice nearly choked with tears, I granted this brave woman her request. ... Then I accompanied a mother whom I will never forget to her daughter.<sup>41</sup>

Several former inhabitants of Palmnicken suspected of helping in the Jewish prisoners' murder were investigated in Ludwigsburg.<sup>42</sup> Kurt Friedrichs managed to escape over the Frische Nehrung to the West on 15 April; he was imprisoned by the British authorities in Neuengamme a month later, and released on 15 October 1947, after which he was granted a West German pension. His initial response to interrogation in Ludwigsburg in 1961 was as follows:

One morning, it must have been towards the end of January 1945, the director of the amber mine, Assessor Landmann, called me and informed me that during the night a

<sup>38</sup>See *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>Drywa, p. 238.

<sup>40</sup>Bergau, *Der Junge*, p 111; BA, Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944-: Abschlußbericht Staatsanwalt. Ludwigsburg, 27 May 1964.

<sup>41</sup>Bergau, *Der Junge*, pp. 111–114.

<sup>42</sup>BA, Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944-: Abschlußbericht Staatsanwalt. Ludwigsburg, 27 May 1964.

column of several thousand Jewish prisoners had arrived in Palmnicken. ... This took care of the matter for me. I did not concern myself any more with the prisoners, and I also did not hear anything more about them afterwards.

Upon being pressed by the prosecutor, he first indicated that “I personally cannot remember this incident. ... I did not see any shootings, nor did I hear the shots. I also did not see any shot prisoners lying anywhere”, before then confirming, when pressed again, that

It is correct that Landmann called me and informed me that a column of several thousand Jews had come from Königsberg and had arrived in Palmnicken during the night. He was very angry and mentioned that Rasch was responsible. We discussed what should be done with the Jews. I decided to drive straightaway to the amber mine. On my way there I saw perhaps three corpses lying near the train station.

Finally, on being pressed even further, Friedrichs corrected his account as follows:

It is correct that I knew that the Jews were originally supposed to be driven into the disused shaft of the Anna mine so that they could be eliminated [beseitigt] in this manner [auf diese Art und Weise]. Feyerabend objected strongly to this, so that initially the murder of the Jews could be prevented. ... I simply continued to press for the Jews’ removal.

I also knew that this plan was not carried out only because Feyerabend used his authority to prevent it. Of course I was aware that the SS had not given up their plan to liquidate the Jews. After Feyerabend’s death, when I went to the SS-leader and told him he should get rid of the Jews no matter how [auf irgendeine Art und Weise wegschaffen] and after he assured me it would be taken care of in the morning, I naturally was aware that this departure would be followed by liquidation. There was thus no need for the SS-leader and me to discuss the matter further.<sup>43</sup>

When on Wednesday 31 January 1945 a horse-drawn carriage with Hans Feyerabend’s body arrived in the town, his staff was greatly discouraged, since the fate of the remaining 3,000 prisoners now lay in the hands of the SS.<sup>44</sup> For its part, the SS now opted for a different approach. On Wednesday evening the prisoners, under the pretence that they were being taken to safety from Pillau to Hamburg by ship, were led out of the factory’s northern gate on the quickest route to the sea, from where they were forced to march south along the icy Baltic seashore. The seashore and the town thirty metres above were separated by a broad strip of park and woodland. Therefore only a few of the inhabitants of Palmnicken saw what happened that night. The SS machine gunners gathered together the widely dispersed column from the back, and, each time separating the last group from the rest, chased their victims onto the ice and into the water under machine gun fire.

In the darkness and haste, the SS could not murder all of the Jews systematically, in spite of their use of flares. Many Jews were initially only wounded, some not even hit. Some fainted and froze to death, or became trapped between ice floes and

<sup>43</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, vol. II, Bl. 261–390: Palmnicken. Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen. Testimony given in Winsen, 23 June 1961 by Kurt Friedrichs.

<sup>44</sup>Bergau, *Endlösung*, for remaining testimony in this paragraph see Celina Manielewicz, YVA 03/1108.

drowned. Others died on the beach after days in agony. During the following days, many local people, among them Martin Bergau, saw corpses wash ashore along the west coast of the Samland.

Let us now look at two accounts of survivors of the massacre, and a corroborating account by a local resident, that have contributed to this historical reconstruction. The first account, centred on survival, was offered in Israel in 1961 by Zila Manielewicz, born in 1921 in Ozorkow :

When we arrived on the shore, it was already darkest night. ... Suddenly I was hit on my head with a rifle butt and I and I fell into a precipice. I gained consciousness in the water. At this time, dusk had already fallen. The shore was full of corpses and the SS men were still hovering over them. .... Towards morning the SS men disappeared. Around this time we became aware that about 200 of us were still alive. We got up and climbed onto the beach. The path we had taken that night was itself full of corpses and the seawater was red from the victims' blood. Together with two other Jewish women, I dragged myself to the closest German village; we entered the first house we reached. It turned out that the village of Sorgenau was close to Palmnicken. The house we entered belonged to a German family named Voss. ... Voss came later and led us to the attic. During this time, the first units of the Russian military were approaching Palmnicken. After these units had been beaten back, Voss chased us from the attic and said that he did not intend to feed Jewish women. ... After Voss left, another German came up to us; he turned out to be Albert Harder, and he told us he would hide us. First somebody hid us in some room and later in a storeroom over the chicken coop where we could only lie down. We hid in this room for about a week; later many German refugees from the Memel area arrived. Around that time Harder took us to his apartment, his wife drew us a bath and gave us new clothes. They burned our camp clothes themselves. From then on, we lived in the apartment of the Harders and remained there until liberation by the Red Army.<sup>45</sup>

The second account, centred on the mass execution itself, was offered in the same year, and also in Israel, by Pnina Kronisch, a Russian Jew born in 1927 in Belzec:

Then they threw the murdered Jews into the water by kicking them. As the seacoast was covered with ice, the murderers pushed their victims into the icy water with their rifle butts. Since I was at the front of the column with my sister Sara, we were the last in line to be shot. I was also laid down on the seacoast together with my sister, though I was not killed by the shot that was aimed at me but only wounded in my left foot, and my face was soaked in the blood of the murdered Jews lying next to me. During this time my sister was killed. I did not wait until the Germans threw me into the sea—I threw myself in and remained lying next to the ice floe, which already was caught up in the water and hit by the waves. The Germans believed I was dead, and since I was alone, to my good luck, and last in line to be murdered, the Germans got into their sleds and drove off. Before dawn I scrambled out of the sea and hid in the coal store of a German farmer who did not live far from where these events occurred.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bd. III, Bl. 391–499: Palmnicken. Testimony: Zila [sic] Manielewicz, Jerusalem, 10 Oct. 1961 (in Polish).

<sup>46</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bd. III, Bl. 391–499: Palmnicken. Testimony: Pnina (Pola) Kronisch. Gerzlja, 4. Oct.1961 (in Russian). Pnina Kronisch had originally been imprisoned in the Bedzin concentration camp. She then spent periods in the camps at Wieliczka, Plaszów, Auschwitz and Stutthof before being finally sent to Heiligenbeil.

A thaw set in and the snow that had hidden the signs of murder soon melted; bloodstained puddles filled the ditches along the roads.<sup>47</sup> Confronted with the evidence of the atrocities, the psychological burden on the local population must have been intense. This is suggested by one former resident of Palmnicken, Helene Zimmer, in her account to the Ludwigsburg court:

Then we went back to Palmnicken on foot, along the shore instead of along the completely congested road. It was a very painful march taking several hours. ... Just before Palmnicken, actually between Nodems and Palmnicken, we suddenly saw countless corpses lying on the shore, and also heard desperate screams still coming from the water. As far as I could see, those lying on the shore were all dead, and every now and then we could hear desperate cries coming from the water. ... The water along the shore was partly frozen and ice floes floated around, between them were the seriously wounded or dead people. Many of them were dressed in the same striped clothes. There were also many women among them. ... I was so shaken at the sight that I covered my eyes with my hands. ... We then quickly went on walking because we could not stand the sight.<sup>48</sup>

Some survivors managed to escape to the houses of neighbouring Germans. Doctors and nurses in the Palmnicken hospital offered protection to a severely wounded girl. Those who performed such actions were ordinary people—among them Loni and Albert Harder, a couple from Sorgenau who sheltered three Jewish women. A Dr. Schröder from Germau operated on Maria Blitz after her escape, removing her tattooed prisoner number.<sup>49</sup> Two Polish forced labourers—Stanislawa und Romualdo Zbierkowski—also helped save the surviving Jews.

In any event, only a tiny group of men and women survived the death march and subsequent massacre. It must be emphasized that this was improvised murder under chaotic circumstances; in a context of heavy military fighting, no records were kept, and most survivors had other concerns than offering detailed accounts of the events. For these reasons, we can only estimate the total number of those who survived as approximately fifteen of the original group of 7,000 individuals. The crime was reported to the Soviets when they captured Palmnicken ten weeks later. Krakowski mentions four statements from surviving Jewish women; these are stored in the Yad Vashem Archives. He had access to six other such statements, stored in the central archive of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation in Podolsk near Moscow, where they have been off limits to researchers for decades.<sup>50</sup> Previous publications have not indicated that a German Jewish man was among the survivors, namely Walter Falkenstein, born 1899 in Hochneukirch, in the district of

<sup>47</sup>Bergau, *Der Junge*, pp.110.

<sup>48</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, vol. IV, Bl.500–748: Palmnicken. Landeskriminalamt Baden-Württemberg. Sonderkommission—Zentrale Stelle—Testimony given in Werdohl, 3 July 1962. Vernehmungsschrift. (“Having been summoned, the married housewife Helene Zimmer, born in Grossdirschkeim on 9 April 1902 and now living in Werdohl, Westphalia, appeared on 3 July 1962 in the offices of the police station Werdohl/Westphalia.”).

<sup>49</sup>Bergau, *Endlösung*.

<sup>50</sup>Testimonies of Celina Manielewicz YVA 03/1108, Dina Hertzberg YVA 03/2279; Frida Kleinman YVA 03/2348; Yehezkel Vitkin YVA M-1/E-698/587. See also Krakowski, ‘Massacre of Jewish Prisoners’ pp. 363–366 (witness report of Dora Hauptman).

Grevenbroich, who had also endured the death march from Königsberg to Palmnicken, but had used the chaos in Palmnicken to escape from the mine workshop before the others were led to the sea. Falkenstein himself hid with German civilians until the Red Army's arrival.<sup>51</sup>

### CONFRONTATIONS WITH SUFFERING: WOMEN FROM PALMNICKEN AND JEWISH MASS GRAVES

On 15 April 1945, the 32nd Division of the Red Army captured Palmnicken. On 17 April, an investigation began into the massacre, under the supervision of Major General Danilov. Contrary to fears widely held by the town's population, the victors did not seek revenge, even though the mutilated victims discovered in the many mass graves were classified as Soviet civilians. Instead, they tried to find those responsible for the atrocity—efforts that proved fruitless, since with the exception of a small number of Hitler Youth members, the perpetrators had fled after the Soviets' brief retreat from western Samland in February. At Pentecost, a sort of final rite took place, with around two hundred girls and women from Palmnicken being forced to unearth 263 corpses with their bare hands. The bodies had been buried in a thirty metre long trench near the Anna mine—204 women and 59 men. Then German witnesses to the crimes were forced to explain in public and in front of the unearthed corpses when and how the Jews had been killed. In his account at Ludwigsburg, Rudolf Folger, whom the remaining inhabitants of Palmnicken elected mayor soon after the Soviets arrived, offered details furnishing a sense of the circumstances they now faced:

After the bodies had been exhumed, they were laid out in an open area in two rows next to each other, and the women from Palmnicken, who had been assigned to dig them out, had to stand behind the corpses. The Russians had set up two machine guns and aimed them at the women. Afterwards a Russian major—a Jew—gave an address in German in which he expressed the view that the Russians could [but would not] now do the same thing to the women that had been done before to the Jews.<sup>52</sup>

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If the results are weighed by the number of convicted persons, the investigation into the massacre by the public prosecutor's office in Ludwigsburg turned out largely to have been in vain. Although more than a hundred witnesses were heard, the guilt of

<sup>51</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, Bl.944–: Bericht, Hochneukirch, 4 February 1964. ("Having been summoned, the worker Walter Falkenstein, born 29 October 1899 in Hochneukirch, living in Hochneukirch, district Grevenbroich, appeared in the Hochneukirch police station.").

<sup>52</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, vol. I, Bl. 1–260: Palmnicken, Zentrale Stelle. Testimony given in Düsseldorf, 24 January 1961. Record of proceedings of Rudolf Johann Folger. See also the memoirs of Palmnicken's Protestant pastor, Johannes Jänicke, *Ich konnte dabeisein*, Berlin 1984. Jänicke served his flock until 1947; he was one of the few residents of the town to directly mention the massacre. Cited from Martin Bergau, *Endlösung*.



the individuals charges could not be legally proven. Presented with black and white photographs, the Israeli witnesses were asked to clearly identify SS members who had participated in the massacre. But in January 1945, after more than five years of Nazi brutality, much of this time spent in various camps and ghettos, how could the starved, half-frozen, and terrified Jewish women inscribe individual SS-men into their memories? Nevertheless, the leader of the death march and the main person accused of the crime, SS-*Oberscharführer* Fritz Weber, was incarcerated on 11 January 1965, pending trial, thanks to a committal order issued by a local court in Kiel. But on the night of 20–21 January 1965—precisely 20 years after the start of the death march—Weber committed suicide in his cell.<sup>53</sup> As indicated, Kurt Friedrichs was compelled to testify at Ludwigsburg; the teenage Hitler Youth members he had controlled and numbed with drink were imprisoned in Soviet detention camps, where several would succumb to starvation and typhoid fever.<sup>54</sup>

### THE BELATED COMMEMORATION OF A REPRESSED CRIME

In 1945 Palmnicken became part of the Soviet Union; after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1992, it became part of the Russian Federation. As is well known, Königsberg was renamed Kaliningrad after the war. The fate then suffered by those Jews murdered in the city's environs has been described by Rabbi David Shvedik, a present-day resident of the city, as follows: "The victorious Soviet Union closed the book on Nazi atrocities once it seized Königsberg from the Germans at the end of World War II. Thousands of Germans were deported in rail cars to be replaced by Russian immigrants. Jewish Holocaust victims were reburied as 'Soviet heroes', stripped, here and elsewhere on Soviet soil, of religious identity".<sup>55</sup>

Accordingly, after the exhumation of the Jewish corpses, their reburial, and the Red Army's investigation, all memory of the massacre and the events surrounding it was officially and *de facto* erased.<sup>56</sup> The mass grave in the Anna mine disappeared into a sand dune. In the 1960s, the corpses would finally be unearthed—by amber excavators. The corpses were thought to be those of Soviet soldiers murdered by the Germans, and a memorial stone was duly erected, bearing the inscription 'Eternal Glory to the Heroes'. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union the *Komsomolzen* laid wreaths every year at the site and organised parades. Following the collapse—in 1994—it became possible for Martin Bergau to convince the regional authorities that the bodies lying at the site were in fact Jewish. In 1999, with the support of the

<sup>53</sup>BA. Außenstelle LU. AR-Z 299/1959, vol. VI, Bl. 944–: Oberstaatsanwaltschaft, Kiel, 22 January 1965.

<sup>54</sup>One such person eventually obliged to testify to the German authorities in 1962 was Horst Scharnowski. On 23 June 1945 he was arrested together with other teenage colleagues and taken to Königsberg, from where, in 1946, he was transferred to the Tapiaw prison and then to an internment camp in Eylau, where he was tortured by the Soviet secret police. Charged with participating in the *Judenaktion* in Palmnicken, he was convicted *in camera* on 15 May 1948 by at a session of the military tribunal in Königsberg and sentenced to 25 years forced labour along with two other youths. He served his sentence in several camps in the Urals from 1948 until his release on 17 December 1953. See Bergau, *Endlösung*.

<sup>55</sup>Cited from Wines, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup>See Henkys, 'Endlösung'.

German Foreign Ministry, the *Völkbund Deutscher Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (German National Alliance for the Care and Preservation of War Graves) and the Russian organisation *Memorial*, the grounds were restored by young Germans and Russians. On 31 January 2000, the 55th anniversary of the massacre, the Jewish community of Königsberg/Kaliningrad consecrated a memorial stone for the victims in Russian and Hebrew. A monument made up of boulders was also set up close to the former Anna mine. Along the Samland's amber shore, the monument commemorates the largest Nazi massacre to have taken place in East Prussia.

#### THE PALMNICKEN MASSACRE: AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT

Soviet atrocities in East Prussia, the evacuation of German civilians and the sinking of the *Gustloff* have been the subject of many accounts whereas for a long time the death march from Königsberg to Palmnicken and the subsequent mass execution on the Baltic shore was allowed to pass into oblivion. This fact is closely tied to the German mythology of flight and expulsion, a mythology playing an important role in the German public's perception of Soviet Communism during the Cold War. The stark reality of a massacre of Jews in East Prussia did not correspond to the basic approach towards the "Eastern regions" encouraged in the postwar years of the German Federal Republic.

The reality of what transpired in the last days of German East Prussia is as complex as it is painful. It is clear, for a start, that military orders had by then become chaotic and the SS had begun to act independently. Its plans to murder the death march's survivors met with the resistance of at least one influential local representative, Hans Feyerabend, with his suicide—or his murder—itsself testifying eloquently to a confused chain of command. In Feyerabend's fight with the SS, that organisation was to triumph. Towards the end of January 1945, a large percentage of East Prussia's civilian population had taken flight; at the time of the massacre, large parts of northern and southeastern East Prussia had been seized by the Soviets. The SS clearly imagined that icy temperatures, the ubiquitous roar of guns, and the presence on the roads of hundreds of thousands of civilians and soldiers would help cover up its crime. Nevertheless, as many testimonies confirm, at least hundreds of civilians observed the death march as it proceeded through the centre of Königsberg and across open country. In the small coastal town of Palmnicken, the arrival of several thousand Jewish prisoners led to direct, personal contact with the local population. Workers in the amber mine, regional officials, as well as many civilians witnessed the horrendous events that took place in the town; many participated in the events in one way or another. In the face of these atrocities, of piles of corpses on the streets and beaches, and with the mortal terror experienced by East Prussians in Nemmersdorf still fresh in communal memory, panic spread quickly. But despite such panic, some inhabitants of Palmnicken were willing to help the few Jews who had managed to survive the SS mass murder, some even hiding Jewish refugees for months. In this respect, the range of behaviour manifested by the residents of East Prussia did not differ from that evident in other segments of the German population. Perhaps more characteristic for the East Prussian and other refugees from

Germany's former eastern regions is the widespread vanishing, in the postwar period, of any strong sense of guilt for a broad complicity in Nazi crimes, and the replacement of any such self-reckoning with an increasing internalisation of the victim's role. This attitude no doubt reflected the experience of flight and expulsion, as well as bitterness at the loss of social status within the former Federal Republic.

The East Prussian death march and the massacre at Palmnicken represent the last chapter in the murder of European Jews. Whilst fires ravaged East Prussia and its inhabitants fled the Soviets for dear life, others who longed to be rescued by the Soviets died shortly before their army reached the amber shore.