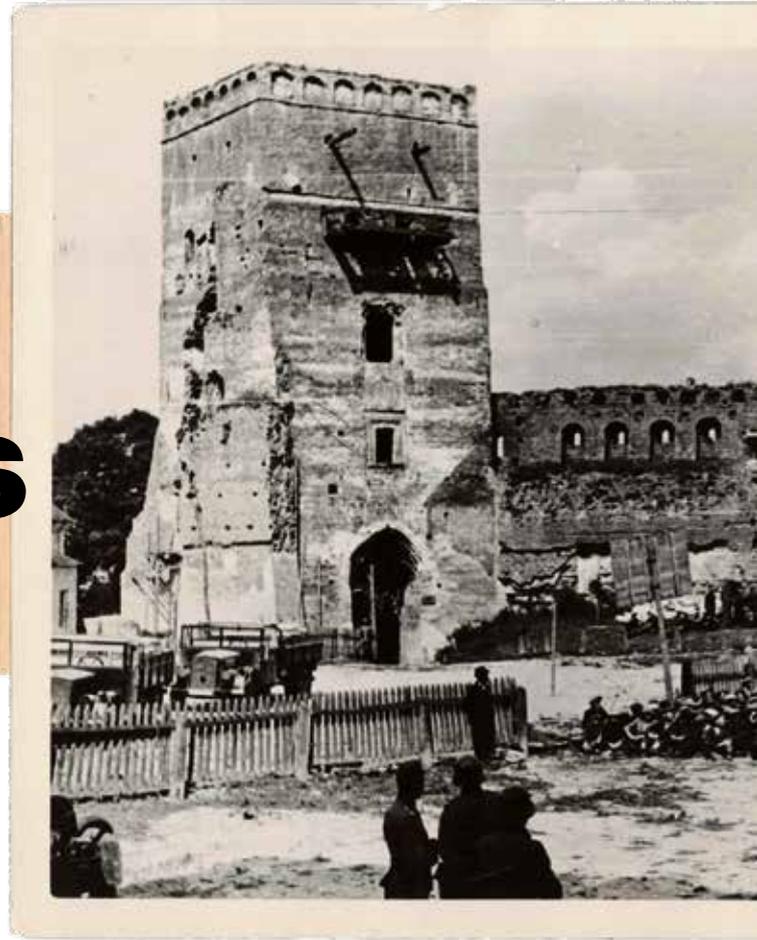


# Traces of Jewish life. In the eyes of the German soldiers

by **Peter Handberg**

The photo albums from German soldiers during WWII have, 75 years after the war's ending, increasingly been auctioned off at internet auctions. Several photo albums contain traces of Eastern Europe's Jewish life and how this is suddenly set against the rapidly emerging terror. Throughout many of the images, the photographer's gaze is on something that is seen as inferior, laughable, exotic, war tourists' motives worth documenting to show them at home: Eastern European Jews.

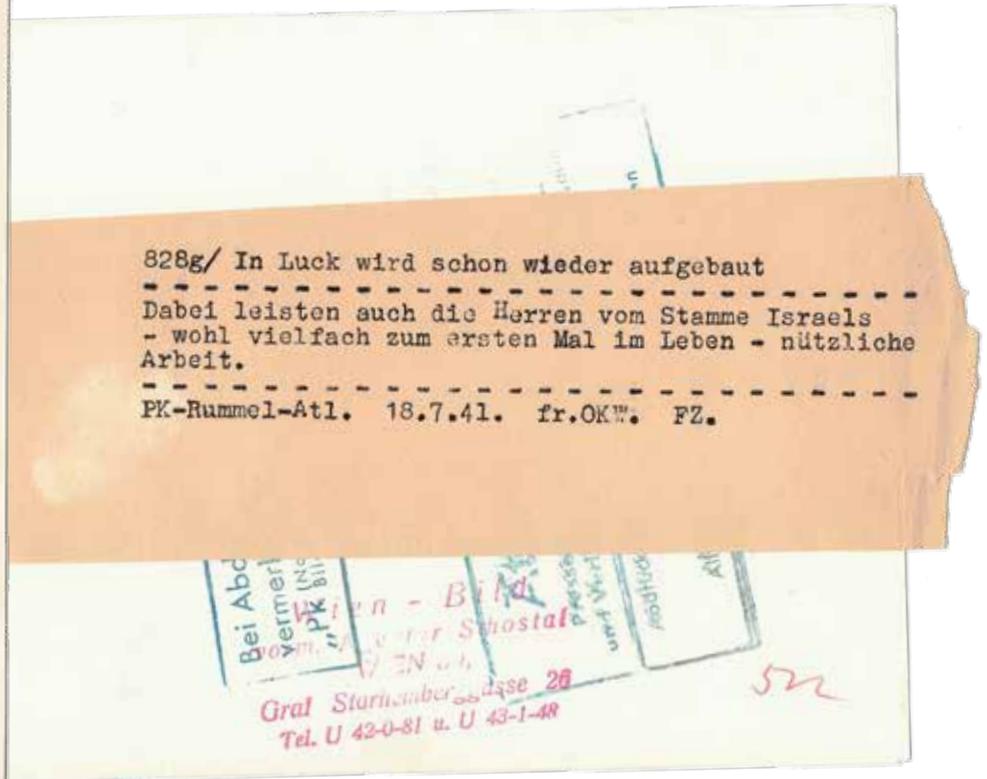


**D**uring the bad weather, I continued my journey on the Web. I paid virtual visits to German and Austrian homes and second-hand photo dealers selling artefacts passed down from soldiers, civil servants and others who served, in various capacities, as cogs in the machinery of the “German order block”, as travel guide writer Oskar Steinheil described the Germans’ brutal reorganization of Poland in his Baedeker guide *Generalgouvernement* from 1943. “Judaica” is a specific category in the online auctions. Photographs from World War II represent a significant part of this category.

A photograph that I purchased in an online auction was sold with a typewritten label affixed to the back:

**Rebuilding work in progress in Lutsk  
Here Jewish men can be seen doing useful work – many of them no doubt for the first time in their lives.**

The photograph shows hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Jewish men sitting in front of Lubart's Castle in Lutsk in north-west Ukraine, many of them holding tools, guarded by German soldiers. The picture was taken on June 18, 1941 by a photographer



"Rebuilding work in progress in Lutsk", photo taken by the propagande company 1941.

from a so-called propaganda company. "Rummel", is written also on the label. Possible a name on a company, the photographer or another person at the company? "Rummel" also has the meaning "rubbish" or "debris" or even "leftover from the war" – could this refer to the Jewish men and be a subheading? In addition one can read "OKW" standing for *Oberkommande der Wehrmacht*, or the High Command of the Wehrmacht (armed forces), under whose authority the propaganda companies worked, as did the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda which was headed by Joseph Goebbels from 1933.

**SEVERAL MASSACRES** had occurred on this exact spot just a few weeks before the photograph was taken. On July 2, 1,160 Jews were shot inside the castle walls. On July 4, 3,000 were shot in the same place. Prior to this, the Ukrainian people's militia had instigated a pogrom. Such pogroms took place in several places in Ukraine, purportedly in retaliation for the NKVD's massacre of Ukrainians, which the Jews were blamed for even though many Jews were among the victims of the massacre. The year before, thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing from German-occupied

Poland had been deported to Siberia. In a macabre twist of fate, this proved the salvation of many of them.

Lutsk, the largest city in the district of Volhynia (known as Lodomeria under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy), was almost half Jewish in population. The city quickly became overrun with brutality, mass murders and violence after the arrival of the Germans on June 26, 1941. More than 25,000 Jewish men, women and children were shot on Górká Połonka hill alone. The ghetto was gradually emptied of inhabitants. When the ghetto, which had effectively been transformed into a labor camp, was to be finally closed in December 1942, the Jews barricaded themselves inside armed with axes, pickaxes and spades. The Germans responded with artillery fire and burned down the buildings; anyone escaping from the burning buildings were mowed down with machine gun fire.

**WHEN THE RED ARMY** rolled into Lutsk on February 2, 1944, roughly 150 Jews were found who had survived by hiding in cellars and underground holes. One of them was 14-year-old Shmuel Shilo, who miraculously managed to survive by hiding during three separate raids. On the first of these occasions, he hid in the

basement of a Jewish pharmacy for three weeks together with his own and other Jewish families. Every evening, he recounts, Germans and Ukrainian police would come down and shine their flashlights around the cellar. The beams passed above their heads while they held their breath: "It was like the angel of death was touching you," he says. They breathed with their mouths wide open to avoid making any noise, while the guards' voices seemed as loud as thunder. Then one day they heard people speaking Yiddish. Jewish prisoners had come to gather the murdered Jews' property and load it onto trucks. The square, which used to be full of people on market days, was deserted: "Broken windows were flapping in the wind. We knew they were all dead. To this day I can't stand hearing a window flapping in the wind. The ground was littered with doors, feathers, blankets, clothes ... Our whole Jewish world was gone."

**SHMUEL'S FATHER** Avraham, who had owned a small brewery that served a popular kvass, was among those who were shot dead at Lubart's Castle on July 2. His older brothers Bereley and Mickey were deported to a work camp, while his sister Necha was given refuge by a Polish family. Shmuel and his mother Devorah were relocated to a smaller ghetto, which after ten days was surrounded by German and Polish police and military. They were marched to the castle by guards in a long column. Then the Jews were taken in groups to Górká Polonka hill to be shot. There, at the castle, Shmuel saw his mother for the last time. He managed to hide under a floor plank for four days. The floor was torn up but he wasn't discovered. Then he crawled out and escaped through a window. He wandered for a long time in the outskirts of the city and the forests, not knowing where to go. He sought out one of his father's friends, who offered him refuge for a few days. For a long time he hid in a hole in the ground. When he eventually walked back to Lutsk to search for his sister Necha, he was captured and transported to a work camp where he was reunited with one of his brothers. They began planning to escape. But soon this camp was also dissolved by Ukrainian police and German military and police. His brother was killed during the uprising that ensued, but Shmuel hid under a pile of peat. He jumped out through the window during the night and eventually joined the partisans. And he found his sister Necha. After many twists and turns, they eventually emigrated to Israel after the war. Shmuel Shilo would go on to found a *kolkhoz* and a theater, and became a highly popular actor.

**IN 2011 HE RETURNED** to Lutsk with his son Avi, and their journey was filmed.

The time is high summer. At the market, the stalls are brimming with colorful fruits and succulent vegetables in long rows. This is the place where the ghetto was once located, where clothes and blankets littered the ground, feathers eddied through the air and one of his brothers told him:

"This is a sight you must never forget."

And he never did. Now he buys tomatoes and apples, stopping to chat with Ukrainian pensioners.

The old pharmacy where they hid is still a pharmacy today. They go down into the cellar. They walk over to the castle and into the building where he hid under the floor. Then, amid tearful moments, they continue up to Górká Polonka hill where his mother and all his relatives, friends and schoolmates were shot.

"What do you miss the most?" Avi asks quietly.

"What I miss most is my friends. Boys and girls. I still see them in my dreams, and in my daydreams too. And I miss the Jewish atmosphere." He cries: "There's no God! The children were shouting: 'We want to live!'"

They visit the classroom where he was in fourth grade when the Germans occupied the city. After the liberation by the Red Army, Shmuel searched the city for relatives and friends. He found none, except his sister. He went to the school, to his classroom, where nothing had changed except that all the students were gone:

"Of the whole class of thirty children, not one survived. I was the only one. And I asked myself: 'Why?'"

He sat down at the desks, one by one, and lifted up the desktops: "This is where Bozian sat, this is where Sheindele sat, this is where Musiel sat... I didn't want to go on living. I rushed down to the river and wanted to throw myself in. But then I ran away from there like a demon, in order to defeat death."

Six weeks after revisiting his beloved childhood city of Lutsk and a brutally crushed Jewish world where all his relatives were exterminated along with most of their fellow Jews, Shmuel fell ill back home in Israel. He passed away at the beginning of Yom Kippur in late September. At the end of the film, he is seen in a photograph sitting with his wife, four children and nine grandchildren. The film has ended, just like his life: "May his memory be a blessing."

**TWO PHOTOGRAPHS.** *One* photo is full of love, showing a united family that wouldn't have existed if a young boy hadn't miraculously survived. The film of Shmuel's journey to his childhood Lutsk conveys the enormous love and respect his son feels for him, and there is every reason to believe that his other three children and nine grandchildren feel the same way.

The *Other* photo is full of hate, taken by a propagandist from a propaganda company whose task was to portray the Jewish people as the Germans' deadly enemy, as "snipers" waiting in the shadows for the Germans, as enemies who could be treated in any way you wanted: as labor or slaves under unspeakable conditions; as exotic figures to be taunted, heckled, photographed and be photographed with; or ultimately as vermin to be exterminated.

Another photograph from a propagandist company, taken on September 18, 1939 somewhere in Poland, depicts Jewish men

**"OF THE WHOLE CLASS OF THIRTY CHILDREN, NOT ONE SURVIVED. I WAS THE ONLY ONE. AND I ASKED MYSELF: 'WHY?'"**

carrying brooms and being led away by German guards. On the typewritten label affixed to the back, the propaganda company's short caption reads:

**Genuine Polish kaftan Jews, whose activity so far has consisted in inciting violence against ethnic Germans in the most detestable and conniving manner. The time for behaving in this typically Jewish way is over. Now they are being put to work, which may seem unusual but is considerably more useful than their activities up till now.**

The propaganda companies were established and trained beginning of 1938. At their peak they employed 15,000 soldiers, equipped with guns, cameras, typewriters, pens, and megaphones and loudspeakers installed on car roofs or at town squares. The propaganda was particularly active in the final weeks before the start of the war, when propaganda against Poland was blasted out in daily newspapers and on the radio. Poles, especially Jews, were blamed for "duping ethnic Germans"; Jews were accused of participating in "acts of violence against ethnic Germans". In late August, dramatic headlines appeared daily: "Pregnant ethnic German woman tortured to death!"; "...ethnic German child beaten to death with rifle butt"; "Incitement against the German nation and ethnic Germans in Poland"; "The terror in Poland continues"; "Ethnic German woman trampled to death"; "Plague will decimate the Germans"; "Ethnic German refugees shot down at river Warthe [on the German border]".

**A PHOTOGRAPH FROM** the same photo agency mentioned above, Atlantic, which became a propaganda company during the war, shows a young girl from the *Bund Deutscher Mädel*, the Nazi organization for girls aged between 14 and 18. Her arm encircles the shoulders of a little girl while an even younger girl sits on her lap. The picture was taken at the Anhalter Bahnhof railway terminus in Berlin on 31 August 1939, the day before the Germans began the invasion of Poland and Hitler gave the famous radio address in which he said "Since 5.45 a.m. we have been returning the fire". The railway terminus was later severely bombed, and was demolished after the war.

The customary typewritten label on the back of the photograph says:

9444d / League of German Girls helps refugees from Poland  
Girls from the BDM Obergau Berlin are assisting the National Socialist railway staff at Berlin's long-distance railway stations by affectionately caring for the Polish refugees as they pass through.  
Atlantic, 30.8.39 / Ba.

According to German estimates, more than a million ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) lived in Poland. In addition, many inhabitants in Poland and Ukraine who were considered suitable



9444d/BDM hilft Polen - Flüchtlingen.  
Auf den Berliner Fernbahnhöfen ist jetzt der FS-Bahnhofsdienst durch Mädel des BDM-Obergaus Berlin verstärkt worden, die sich der durchreisenden Flüchtlinge aus Polen liebevoll annehmen.  
Atlantic, 30.8.39./Ba.

"League of German girls helps refugees from Poland", photo taken by the propagande company 1939.

candidates were requested, or ordered, to apply for ethnic German status, subject passing an examination for racial suitability. These ethnic Germans played an important role in implementing the new German order, including the Holocaust. Ethnic Germans in Poland were organized in "self-defense militias" (*Selbstschutz*) which persecuted Jews either with or without superior orders. They were idealized and celebrated by the propaganda companies and in Nazi propaganda.

The photographs bear the stamps "Atlantic" and "Wien-Bild, formerly Agentur Schostal". The latter was one of the foremost photo agencies during the 1930s, supplying photographic material to magazines around the world. Many of the agency's photographers were Jews, such as Else Neuländer, who was murdered in Majdanek in 1942, Madame d'Ora, who managed to remain in hiding in France during the occupation, and Lotte Jacobi, who fled to the United States where she became known for



Jewish inhabitants leaving the city of Malyn.

her portraits of, among others, Marc Chagall, the English poet W.H. Auden, Polish-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, Thomas Mann, scientist Max Planck and author J.D. Salinger. Her most famous portrait, however, is that of Albert Einstein.

When Austria was annexed, the owner of the photo agency, Robert Schosthal, escaped from the country and eventually emigrated to the United States, where the Schosthal family was reunited. The agency was “arianized” and its name changed from “Agentur Schosthal” to “Wien-Bild, photography for press and propaganda”. It would gain an important role in the propaganda companies.

And their role in the Holocaust cannot be underestimated. They actively worked with negative reports and images from Jewish environments and ghettos, with the aim of convincing readers that “the Jews got exactly what they deserved”, namely marginalization, exploitation and death. They actively instigated pogroms, including the one in Lviv in Ukraine where 3,000 people died. They distributed anti-Semitic material to the local population and drove around in cars with loudspeakers disseminating anti-Jewish propaganda and celebrating German victories. Even the SS had a propaganda company, SS-Standarte Kurt Eggers, in which five Swedes worked as volunteers. The head of the company, Gunter d’Alquen, was the only person from a propaganda company to receive any punishment after the war: a ten-year prison sentence.

Many culture and media figures who later rose to prominence in the Federal Republic of Germany had served in propaganda companies. Some examples are the publisher Ernst Rowohlt of

the eponymous publishing house; Lothar-Günther Buchheim, author of *The Boat*, which later became a famous film; Henri Nannen, publisher of *Stern* magazine; Kurt Blauhorn, editor of *Der Spiegel*, and diplomat and CDU politician Rudolf Vogel, also a former member of the SS.

And the list goes on. The GDR also has a long list of such figures, including well-known film director Heinz Thiel (also a Nazi Party member), and writer Horst Mönnich, who served in Eastern Europe. After the war, Mönnich was a member of the renowned writers’ organization “Gruppe 47”, which counted Günther Grass and Peter Handke among its members. According to their motto, “genuine artistry was always the same as the opposition to Nazism”.

**SOMETIMES THE AUCTIONEER** provides misleading information. The caption on one photograph says “Jewish refugees, women, children, Malin, Poland”. The photograph shows around a dozen people carrying young children and claimed to be refugees. The caption on the back is partially obscured by scraps of paper from the album in which the photograph was pasted, rendering only part of the caption legible: “Outside Malin 31/7 194... | ... ish refug...”. Judging by the light, the photo was taken early in the morning, or possibly late in the evening. My guess is that the year is 1941 and that the caption says “Jewish refugees”.

But something is not right. Malin, now located in Poland about 10 km north of Wrocław, was then called Breslau and located in Germany. The German name for Malin was Mahlen, and it is unlikely that the German infantryman who took the

photo would have written the town's name in Polish. Moreover, other photographs are on sale from the same album and from the same period, late July 1941; all of them show battles, vehicles destroyed by gunfire, burning houses and exploded bridges: "Malin near Breslau", "Ruins, battle, attack, Malin, Poland" are given as descriptions for some of the photographs by the seller. But no violent battles occurred in the areas around Breslau in July of either 1941, '42, '43 or '44. Soviet forces did not reach the area until the winter of 1945.

The seller, a woman living in France, seemed puzzled by my questions and objections. She had sorted through the album, removed the photographs and put them up for auction; that was all the information she gave me. Her knowledge of World War II history seemed limited. Instead, I embarked on my own research.

There was a place called Malyn in western Ukraine: the village of Český Malín 20 km southeast of Lutsk. On 13 July 1943, the village was surrounded by German forces following the murder of ethnic Germans in neighboring villages. It was claimed that the perpetrators were to be found here, something that has never been proven. The villagers, mostly of Czech origin, were locked inside houses and outbuildings, and the buildings were then set on fire. Hundreds of people died, as well as all their livestock.

Is it from this village that the people in the photograph are fleeing in July 1941? No, since the Germans had already occupied the area by that time and the fighting was over, as shown by the propaganda company's photograph from Lutsk on July 18 of that year. Furthermore, the people in the photograph do not look like rural farmers, but more like bourgeois or upper middle class Jews from a large or medium-sized city. The city in question is undoubtedly Malyn (Малін) about 100 kilometers northwest of Kiev. It had a sizeable Jewish population, 4,000 people or a third of the city, or perhaps even more and an even larger proportion; the figures vary. Violent battles took place here in late July before Kiev was finally defeated in September. By then, almost all of Malyn's Jews had been shot in a number of massacres outside the city. There are also mass graves in the city's Jewish cemetery. An auctioned photograph with the caption "German graveyard for fallen heroes near Malin" shows rows of simple wooden crosses with the characteristic German steel helmet laid in front of them, with each soldier's rank and name written on the vertical wooden panels.

**PROBABLY, NO ONE KNOWS** the individual fates of the people in the photograph. But the infantryman who took the photo was wielding a camera instead of a rifle, at least for that brief moment. A small girl walks first in the line. She clasps a bag in her hand. Only two of the people in the picture are men. The refugees carry little with them except a few household goods. It is not clear whether others are following behind them in the bushes, nor whether anyone is in front of them. The girl at the front would be around ninety years old today. The young children being carried

would be in their early eighties. There is a possibility that they lived to tell their grandchildren about how they fled from Malyn and hid in the forest. They may have built underground holes in the forest, as many did, and they may have survived in this way. Or they might have been offered a hiding place by some courageous and compassionate acquaintance. However, it would be more than two years before the Germans were driven out of the city following new violent battles ...

It is difficult to draw any conclusions on the basis of their interaction with the German soldier behind the camera. The mother walking third in the line carrying a child in her arms could be looking worried, and the older women behind her could be smiling. The two girls behind them seem to have an expressionless or perhaps listless gaze. But the armed photographer, who is probably accompanied by other soldiers, has not made them stop or change direction. He (or they) has not made them turn around. They are all walking determinedly towards their unknown fate.

**A SOLDIER FROM** the 125<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division has also pasted images of battles into his album. But among them is a photo with the following caption written on the card underneath the photo: "Jews in Zloczow", which is the city's Polish name; today it is called Zolochiv and is located 60 kilometers east of Lviv in western Ukraine.

A large group of soldiers stand at the edge of a mass grave, along with civilians and children. They appear carefree as they watch the workers digging what will probably be their own grave. Many of the onlookers have their hands in their pockets. Some appear to be conversing. What more information is available about the

picture? I write and ask the seller. He replies that the photo was part of an album page and sends me a photo of the whole page. Now, looking at the album page together with the other severed pictures by the same photographer, a clearer context emerges. The page contains several photos from the "Battle of Zloczow", which took place on June 30, 1941. The photograph of the digging Jews is surrounded by photographs of massacred bodies, with the caption "Murdered Ukrainians" underneath.

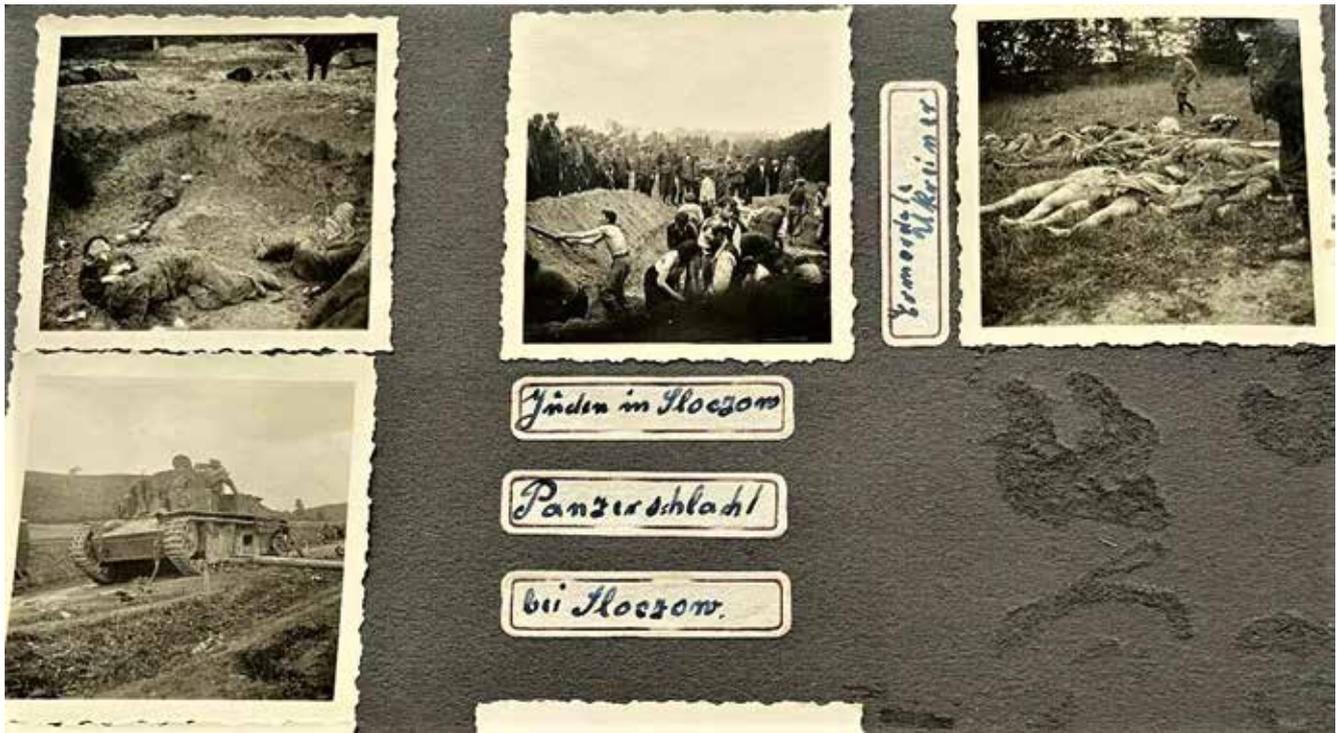
As in Lviv and Ternopil and a number of other Polish and Ukrainian cities, violent pogroms erupted shortly after the Germans took the city. The NKVD had murdered numerous Ukrainians, for which the Jews were blamed.

A Dutch volunteer infantryman from the SS Regiment Westland wrote in his diary on July 2, 1941, from Zloczow:

**The sun was shining and we were strolling around in shorts. The First Company made use of their free time by shooting Jews who had fought as partisans. There is no other solution for these animals. ... The sharpshooters joined in and [the Jews] were shot in pairs. They fell down into the graves they had dug themselves.**

Infantryman Jan Olij from the same company also kept a diary.

**"THEY ARE  
ALL WALKING  
DETERMINEDLY  
TOWARDS THEIR  
UNKNOWN FATE."**



A German soldier's photo album.

On July 3 he wrote:

Hundreds of Jews are being killed. They were forced to dig out the murdered victims [Ukrainians] with their bare hands and were then immediately shot in the same graves. Everything is blood, blood, gunfire.

Jewish Doctor Solomon Altmann, who survived the pogroms and massacres in Zolochiv, wrote after the war:

The first German patrols arrived in Zloczow on July 1. Local Ukrainians and others from surrounding towns flocked to the city to welcome the Germans. [...] Within 24 hours, the crowd began looting Jewish property. Rumors started circulating that Jewish women were being raped and Jewish men brutally beaten. Soon there were dead bodies lying in the city center. [...] Many German officers witnessed the pogrom with cold cynicism while clicking incessantly on their cameras."

Finnish historian Lars Westerlund writes in a book about Finnish SS volunteers:

at least 25 Finnish SS volunteers ... observed the massacre [in Zolochiv] of the local Jews. SS soldiers captured Jews, forced them to dig graves, and then shot them or threw them into the river.

But according to Westerlund and several other sources, the Finnish volunteers also actively participated in the massacres and pogroms in Zolochiv. Like the volunteers from neighboring Norway and Sweden, they were members of the SS Panzer Division Wiking, who reportedly took part in their first massacre in Zolochiv.

The same frenzied violence prevailed everywhere, and the most cynical contempt conceivable was shown by occupying Germans and civilians alike. The first pogrom took the lives of 2,500 Jews. Perhaps even more. And the photography, the documentation, the curious observation of these events – as if they were unforgettable moments, which of course they were, although they would soon become commonplace – which nobody wanted to remember after the war except as atrocious army tales.

AND NOW, 78 YEARS LATER, a distant relative can make a killing from their grandfather's cold gaze and obedient trigger finger by selling the entire album to a collector, who will subsequently plunder the album and sell its contents individually for an even greater profit.

The outcome of the auction? The winning bid brought in almost 23,000 Swedish kronor, or 2,200 euro. ✘

Peter Handberg is a Swedish author and translator of numerous titles. The text published here is an excerpt from a coming book based on travels in Poland 2020.