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MARIO WENZEL, *ARBEITSZWANG UND JUDENMORD. DIE ARBEITSLAGER FÜR JUDEN IM DISTRIKT KRAKAU DES GENERALGOUVERNEMENTS 1939–1944* (FORCED LABOUR AND THE MURDER OF THE JEWS: LABOUR CAMPS FOR JEWS IN THE CRACOW DISTRICT OF THE GENERAL GOVERNORATE, 1939–1944), BERLIN: METROPOL-VERLAG, 2017, 340 PP.

It is estimated that between 1939 and 1944, the German administration, police, military, and SS established between 900 and 1,000 forced labour camps in Poland and the occupied territories of the USSR.¹ These camps played a significant role in the persecution and extermination of the local population, mostly people of Polish and Jewish descent. Prisoners were subjected to forced labour in various sectors of the Third Reich's economy, including work for the Wehrmacht and SS. The first forced labour camps – designated for Jews (*Zwangsarbeitslager für*

¹ M. Wenzel, *Arbeitszwang und Judenmord. Die Arbeitslager für Juden im Distrikt Krakau des Generalgouvernements 1939–1944*, Berlin, 2017, 327 pp.

Juden, or Julag) – were established around the turn of 1939–1940. Their gradual liquidation occurred between 1942 and 1944. According to Józef Marszałek, by 1940, 68 such camps were already operating in the Lublin District.² According to Marszałek’s estimates, between 1939 and 1945, as many as 792 forced labour camps operated in the General Governorate, 491 of which were designated exclusively for Jews.³ More recent findings by Karolina Trzeskowska-Kubasik suggest that the actual number may have been even higher.⁴

The book reviewed here by German historian Mario Wenzel, published in 2017, is a pioneering case study about German forced labour camps for Jews established in the Cracow District. The title may seem somewhat misleading, as not all camps located in the Cracow District were designated exclusively for Jews. Among the forced labourers were also Poles, Russians and even Belgians. Drawing on extensive and varied research in Polish and German archives – including the Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung at TU Berlin, Staatsarchiv München, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Freiburg im Breisgau), the Institute of National Remembrance, the Jewish Historical Institute, the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, and state archives in Lublin, Radom, Rzeszów, and Przemyśl – the author examined the operation of 28 selected labour camps. Particular attention was given to camps in Rozwadów, Przemyśl, and Mielec, where SS Oberscharführer Josef Schwammberger served as commandant between 1942 and 1944, as well as to the three camps established by the Germans in Kraków-Płaszów: Julag I, Julag II, and Julag III.

The publication under review is structured around four main chapters, organised both chronologically and thematically: I. *Die „Judenpolitik“ und die Arbeitslager für Juden im Distrikt Krakau bis zum Frühsommer 1942* (“Judenpolitik” and the Labour Camps for Jews in the Cracow District up to Early Summer 1942); II. *Die*

² J. Marszałek, *Obozy pracy w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie w latach 1939–1945*, Lublin, 1998, p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

⁴ “According to the findings of the author of this article, there were at least 29 camps of various types operating in the Kreishauptmannschaft Busko: prisoner-of-war camps, construction service camps, penal camps, fortification camps, as well as forced labour camps for Poles and Jews. Józef Marszałek gives the number of 21 camps, and the publication *Obozy hitlerowskie na ziemiach polskich 1939–1945* (Nazi camps in the Polish territories 1939–1945) lists 14 of them” (K. Trzeskowska-Kubasik, “Działalność niemieckich obozów w latach 1939–1945 na terenie Kreishauptmannschaft Busko [dystrykt Radom],” *Almanach Historyczny* 25 [2023], p. 332).

„Aktion Reinhardt“ 1942/43 im Distrikt Krakau (“Aktion Reinhardt” in the Cracow District, 1942–1943); III. *Die Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden im Distrikt Krakau 1942/43 als Teil der „Aktion Reinhardt“* (Labour Camps for Jews in the Cracow District in 1942–1943 as Part of “Aktion Reinhardt”) IV. *Die Zwangsarbeitslager ab Herbst 1943* (Labour Camps from Autumn 1943 Onwards). The publication concludes with a set of final observations and an appendix listing labour camps for Jews that operated between 1940 and 1943 – a valuable resource for researchers. Table 1 presents camps established in 1940 and 1941, while Table 2 covers those founded in 1942 and 1943. The author provides statistical data exclusively on Jewish prisoners; however, the appendix lacks a brief introductory note and, where feasible, an additional column indicating the total number of prisoners. Such data would allow the estimation of the proportion of Jews among the camp populations. Notably, both tables share the strength of precisely identifying German and Austrian companies and industrial plants that exploited slave labour (including Rheinische Hoch- und Tiefbau, Daimler-Benz Flugmotorenwerke, STUAG A.G., and Siemens-Bauunion). This enables the tracing of specific firms involved in crimes against both Jewish and non-Jewish populations.

As stated in the introduction, the book aimed to highlight the significance of forced labour camps for Jews during various phases of persecution and extermination, and to illustrate the gradual changes in their character and living conditions throughout the war. Wenzel also sought to describe the formation of the “prisoner hierarchy, daily routines within the camp, and the food and sanitary conditions.” Another objective was to examine the attitudes and behaviour of German foremen (“der deutschen Meister”) and Polish foremen (“Vorarbeiter”), as well as the treatment of prisoners by camp guards – although the author devotes the most attention to the camp commanders.

The chapters of the monograph correspond to four phases of the German occupation policy of repression and persecution related to the establishment of forced labour camps in the Cracow District. The author begins by examining discriminatory and isolationist anti-Jewish measures, including ghettoisation and forced labour – particularly in road and railway construction (Chapter I) – which characterised the functioning of the first 20 camps in the district. To a lesser extent, until 1941, forced labourers were also employed in land improvement

projects and in the expansion of military infrastructure. The next phase (Chapter II) was devoted to the analysis, organisation, and development of the camps, their subcamps and smaller factory camps (including ZAL Plaszow) in accordance with the needs of the Third Reich and the implementation of Operation “Reinhardt” (Chapters II and III). The third phase was marked by the liquidation of ghettos and the transfer of Jewish workers to forced labour camps under the SS control. One must agree with the author that conditions in the Cracow District were better in the early phase of the camps’ operation due to the aid provided by the Jewish Social Self-Help Organisation (ŻSS), later transformed into the Jewish Aid Agency in the General Governorate (*Jüdische Unterstützungsstelle für das Generalgouvernement*, JUS). The aid reached Plaszow (German name for Płaszów) camp and its subcamps in Prokocim, Bieżanów and Kabel directly via Michał Weichert, the president of this institution, whose headquarters were located in occupied Cracow. In addition, communication between prisoners and representatives of the ŻSS-JUS, including its chairman, took place daily and established new networks of contacts. During the war, Michał Weichert was able to move freely around the Plaszow camp and its branches, as well as other places under the care of the ŻSS-JUS.

In the third part, the author also provides a detailed account of the functioning of ZAL Plaszow, which was transformed into a concentration camp in January 1944, along with its subordinate subcamps: Julag I (in Płaszów, on Wielicka Street), Julag II (in Prokocim, on Cmentarna Street), and Julag III (at the “Kabel” factory). He focuses on the conditions of camp life and the work performed by prisoners in both small and large factories and industrial plants, including the Julius Madritsch factory (relocated to the Plaszow camp on 14 September 1943), the “Optima” factory, the metalworks on Lwowska Street, Ernst Kühnpast’s box factory, and the Progress metal goods factory. The author also addresses the conditions prevailing within ZAL/KL Plaszow itself. He mentions the arbitrary shootings of prisoners carried out by Commandant Amon Göth as a distinguishing feature of the Plaszow camp, although such violence occurred in other labour and concentration camps as well. In my view, what characterised the Cracow Julags was a network of connections and dependencies rooted in shared interests, smuggling, and trade – often shaped by family relationships and ties, as many Jewish families from Cracow and

the surrounding area were imprisoned in the Plaszow camp.⁵ In the course of his deliberations, the author does not address this distinctive characteristic of the Cracow camp. Another issue I consider particularly significant is that functional roles within the Plaszow camp – such as kapos, block leaders, and orderlies – were assigned to prisoners selected by the Germans, primarily from the Jewish Order Service, especially from Cracow, and later also from surrounding towns.⁶ Unlike the author of the reviewed monograph, in my research I refer to them as “Jewish functionary prisoners” rather than as members of the “Ordnungsdienst” or “OD-männer.” Wenzel uses the latter two terms, which were commonly used by the prisoners themselves both during and after the war. A significant part of their tasks, as the author mentions, consisted of supervising the forced labour performed by Jewish workers, and therefore involved maintaining order in the roll call square, residential barracks, latrines and workshops.

As the author rightly observes, the culmination of the German forced labour camp system was marked by the intensified exploitation of Jewish prisoners shortly before their planned extermination – particularly in camps located in Mielec, Rzeszów, Dębica, Czarny Dunajec, Huta Komornicka, Biesiadka, and Stalowa Woła. Wenzel also highlights the role of the Jewish Social Self-Help Organisation and the Judenräte (Chapter III), which sought to intervene with local authorities (including the Kreishauptmanns) to improve the prisoners’ living conditions. This part also describes the participation of Jewish prisoners in the Third Reich’s infrastructure and armament projects and the role of camps managed by German companies in these activities (including Heinkel in Daimler-Benz and Debag Ostwerke GmbH). The author examined the functioning of the forced labour camp in Czarny Dunajec, known as “HOBAG,” located on the premises of a sawmill, where, from the autumn of 1940, the Poles working there were joined by about 40 Jews commuting daily from Nowy Targ. In 1942, the camp area was fenced off with barbed wire.

The final chapter of the book (Chapter IV) focuses on the functioning of forced labour camps from autumn 1943 onwards, when they became an entrenched component of the Third Reich’s armaments policy. The subordination of several

⁵ R. Kotarba, *Żydzi Krakowa w dobie zagłady (ZAL/KL Płaszow)*, Cracow–Warsaw, 2022, p. 419.

⁶ A. Jarkowska, “Wybrane formy kolaboracji w obozie Płaszów. Charakterystyka zjawiska,” *Krzysztofory. Zeszyty Naukowe Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa* 38 (2021), p. 157.

camps – including Płaszów – to the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office (SS-WVHA) facilitated the more systematic exploitation of prisoner slave labour for the Nazi war economy. The author rightly underscores the worsening living conditions of the prisoners and the role of guard personnel within the camp hierarchy. However, his discussion of the latter remains limited due to insufficient source material. Wenzel offers a noteworthy account of the deployment of Jewish slave labour in the Third Reich, particularly during the final phase of the war. He traces the transfer of prisoners to camps such as Flossenbürg, Bremen-Blumenthal, the Augsburg-Pfersee subcamp (affiliated with Messerschmitt AG), and the Leonberg subcamp of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp near Stuttgart. A striking example is his description of Jewish prisoners working in Hersbrück on the expansion of tunnels near the village of Happurg in northern Bavaria, where production of BMW aircraft engines was relocated. Messerschmitt AG also employed Jewish prisoners to assemble wings for the Me 262 jet fighter.

Wenzel's monograph offers a valuable analysis of the operation of forced labour camps in the Cracow District, which were shaped by the Third Reich's genocidal and armament-driven objectives. By examining several dozen such camps, the study provides insight into the scale of crimes committed against the civilian population and the systematic plundering of property during World War II. Further research into the seizure of Polish and Jewish assets by German and Austrian entrepreneurs, the Wehrmacht, the Luftwaffe, the SS, and state-owned enterprises would be particularly illuminating. Special attention could be given to beneficiaries such as the Deutsche Reichsbahn, including the Generaldirektion der Ostbahn (General Directorate of the Eastern Railways), headquartered in Cracow, and the Ostbahnbetriebsdirektionen (OBD), the so-called Operational Directorates of the Eastern Railways. However, this seems to be a topic for a separate book.

To conclude, Wenzel's book unquestionably merits special recognition within academic circles. Drawing on Polish, German, and Jewish sources, the author has skillfully reconstructed events and provided particularly thorough documentation of the camps in Szeged near Jasło, Kraków-Płaszów, Mielec, Przemyśl, and Rozwadów.

I recommend additional literature for those interested in the subject, as it complements the author's narrative with further insights. Notably, the works of Polish

scholars published around the same time as the reviewed monograph, or in subsequent years, are particularly valuable. These include Witold Mędykowski's *Macht Arbeit Frei? German Economic Policy and Forced Labour of Jews in the General Government, 1939–1943* (2018), and Ryszard Kotarba's *Żydzi Krakowa w dobie zagłady (ZAL/KL Płaszow)* (The Jews of Cracow During the Holocaust [ZAL/KL Płaszow], 2022). In 2023, Michał Wachuła successfully defended his doctoral thesis entitled *Ocalić od zapomnienia. Wybór i opracowanie relacji więźniów obozu pracy przymusowej przy Fabryce Kabli w Płaszowie (edycja krytyczna)* (To Rescue from Oblivion: A Selection and Compilation of Testimonies from Prisoners of the Forced Labour Camp at the Cable Factory in Płaszów [Critical Edition]).⁷ The thesis provides valuable insights into the functioning of the ZAL/KL Płaszów subcamp referenced in the title.

⁷ Thesis defended at the University of the National Education Commission in Cracow, available at the UKEN archives, https://rep.up.krakow.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11716/8303/MWachu%c5%82a_praca_doktorska_part_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 1 June 2025).