

THE EXECUTION OF ESTONIAN JEWS IN THE LOCAL DETENTION INSTITUTIONS IN 1941–1942

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Before the Soviet occupation begun, there were about four and a half thousand Jews living in Estonia. About half of them, 2,200 – 2,300, lived in Tallinn, and there were larger groups also in Tartu (about 1,000) and in Valga and Pärnu (about 250 people in both towns). The rest were living in smaller communities all over Estonia. During the Soviet occupation in 1940–1941, some of the Jews supported the Soviet authorities, which made it easier to instigate hostility against them during the German occupation. At the same time the 14 June deportation in 1941 was a serious blow to the Jews – ca 400 Jews were deported to Soviet Union.¹

The Jews remaining in Estonia after the arrival of the German troops lived mostly in Tallinn, Tartu, and Pärnu.² Anton Weiss-Wendt has thoroughly delineated the planning of the repressions that befell the Estonian Jews, as well as the application of the respective policies by the *Sonderkommando 1a*, placing it in a comparative framework with anti-Jewish actions elsewhere.³ The aim of the present paper is to clarify further, on the basis of the archive sources available in Estonia, how and to what extent it would be possible to establish the circumstances of the execution of the Jews particularly: the number of the executed, the place of execution, as well as the time and the malefactors, be it individuals or institutions. In the course of work, a considerable amount of the investigation records of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (hereinafter NKVD) and State Security Committee (hereinafter KGB) and concerning the former *Omakaitse* members and prison guards of Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu was researched in the hope of discovering new facts.⁴ At the same time, the ideological background of the investigations had to be taken into account, and therefore the approach when drawing any conclusions had to be extremely critical.



Jewish synagogue in Maakri Street, Tallinn. Photographed early 20th century (Estonian History Museum)

TARTU

Before the war, there had been ca 900–1000 Jews living in Tartu.⁵

The number remaining there after the departure of the Soviet troops is not known. According to Eugenia Gurin-Loov, 159 Estonian citizens of Jewish nationality living in Tartu were murdered in 1941–1942,⁶ but this does not necessarily mean that the murders did indeed happen in Tartu. According

1 Küüditatud, 1941: üldnimestik Tartu Instituudi arhiivis ja arhiiviraamatukogus (Torontos) ning Eesti Represseeritute Registri Büroos (Tallinnas) leiduva andmestiku põhjal seisuga 24. veebruar 1993 (Deported, 1941: general list based on the materials in the Tartu Institute archives and archive library (in Toronto) and the Estonian Bureau of the Registry of Repressed People (in Tallinn) as of 24 February 1993). Compiled by Vello Salo. Toronto 1993. P. 8.

2 Gurin-Loov, Eugenia. Suur häving. Eesti juutide katastroof 1941. Holocaust of Estonian Jews 1941. Tallinn 1994. P. 214.

3 Holocaust of the Estonian Jews, 1941–1942. Sonderkommando 1a and the Problem of Collaboration. Presented to the Faculty of the Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University. In Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts by Anton Weiss-Wendt. New York University Spring 1999; hereinafter used: Weiss-Wendt, Anton. Weiss-Wendt, Anton. Sonderkommando 1a ja juudiküsimuse lõplik lahendamine Eestis (Sonderkommando 1a and the Final Solution to the Jewish Question in Estonia). Manuscript in the possession of NGO S-Centre. Tallinn 2001 (hereinafter A. Weiss-Wendt).

4 E. g. the investigation file of Isup Gerhard a. o. Department of the Estonian State Archives (Eesti Riigiarhiivi Osakond, hereinafter ERAF) 129-4474; The investigation file of Linde O. a. o., ERAF 129-1243.

5 Riigi Statistika Keskbüroo. Rahvastikuprobleeme Eestis. II rahvaloendusi tulemusi. Vihk IV (State Central Bureau of Statistics. Population problems in Estonia. Results of the 2nd Census. Volume 4. Partly in French: Problèmes de la population. Résultats du recensement de 1. III 1934). Tallinn 1937. P. 24.

6 E. Gurin-Loov. Op. cit. P. 214.



Jewish synagogue in Tartu. Photographed early 20th century (Estonian History Museum)

to the 1941–1942 report of the German Security Police and SD in Estonia, drawn up in summer 1942, 53 Jews had by that time been subjected to special treatment (i.e. executed),⁷ this is a much smaller number than the one in Gurin-Loov's list. At the time when the report was drawn up, a few unarrested Jews could have been left, but in general, the Jews had been arrested already in autumn 1941 proceeding from the currently available data, it is impossible to explain the difference in numbers amounting to 106 persons. The archive sources concerning the events in Tartu investigated in the course of the current research⁸ merely corroborate that there were also Jews among those executed, but there is no additional data concerning their number or exact time of execution.

The first German military arrived in Tartu on 10 and 11 July 1941, and the arrests of the Jews started fairly soon. During the battles, fires broke out in the city, and in connection with the allegedly Jewish incendiaries, including also “children with Molotov cocktails”, this seemed to be a convenient excuse for arresting the Tartu Jews. On 12 July, the leader of the forest brothers in Southern Estonia Major Friedrich Kurg ordered all the local Jews to be arrested and on the orders of Field Commandant Major Hans Gosebruch they were to be locked up in Kuperjanov barracks, where a concentration camp was soon established. On 15 July the 2nd Branch Commando of Sonderkommando 1a led by SS-Obersturmbannführer Dr Martin Sandberger arrived in Tartu. The

Branch Commando was led by SS-Hauptsturmführer Fritz Carsten, later by SS-Obersturmführer Fritz Reichert. The police authorities in town were subordinated to Major Walter Scheichenbauer from 817th Field Commandantur (probably the Commander of a military police (Feldgendarmarie) unit) this time and he did not agree to yield any task neither to the Branch Commando of Sonderkommando 1a nor to any other agency. The Estonian police force established in Tartu was subordinated at the time to Field Commandant Major Gosenbruch and the Leader of Southern Estonian forest brother units Major Kurg.⁹

Of the people shot in Tartu on 5 and 16 August 1941, four were Jews.¹⁰ By 19 September 1941, 405 people had been shot in Tartu, 50 of them Jews. According to Security Police and SD, by that time there were no detained Jews left in Tartu.¹¹ Proceeding from the cases of Juhan Jüriste,¹² Olev Linde and others¹³ it can be said that mostly, in Tartu Concentration Camp men were executed already in July or August, women and children at the end of August or in September. /ristviide Västriku Tartu KZ/

At first, the arrested Jews were kept in the common barracks with ordinary detenus, which mostly housed detenus with milder punishments, who were to some extent allowed to communicate with the outside world (e.g. to receive parcels). But soon they were transferred to the “death barrack” or to the special Jewish temporary custodial institution at Pargi Street. At the end of August, the Tartu concentration camp moved to a new site – to the former barracks of the Kuperjanov Battalion of the Estonian Army. Also there, Jews were kept in the barrack for the condemned.¹⁴ According to the report quoted above, there could not have been many Jews left in the camp by September.

When trying to identify the persons connected with the execution of Jews, there is a problem that can also be extended to other sites in Estonia. The problem is that also here, earlier investigations have only in isolated cases considered the nationality of the detained/executed. According to the testimony of Jüriste, the first commandant of the Tartu camp,

7 Jahresbericht der Sipo und SD July 1941 – 30 June 1942. Estonian State Archives (Eesti Riigiarhiiv, hereinafter ERA) R 819-1-12. P. 99.

8 The interrogation minutes of the former officials of the Tartu Concentration Camp. ERAF, files in holdings no. 129 and 130.

9 Vormarschstrecken der Einsatzgruppe A. Einsatzgruppe A. Gesamtbericht bis zum 15.10.1941. U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives L-180; Tartu ülestõus, Tartumaa (Tartu Uprising, Tartu County). In: Metsavennad Suvesõjas 1941 (Forest Brothers in the Summer War of 1941). Ad Fontes 13. Tallinn 2003. Compiled by Tiit Noormets. P. 248; published Overview of the Activities of Tartu County *Omakaitse*, ERA R 358-1-17. Pp. 50–100; A. Weiss-Wendt. Op. cit. (He is referring to the written testimony of Fritz Reichert given under oath on 9 February 1948. U. S. National Archives M895/R-27).

10 A. Weiss-Wendt. Op. cit.

11 Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und SD. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 88. 19. September 1941. German Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv, hereinafter BA) R 58 / 217.

12 The investigation file of Jüriste, Juhan a. o. ERAF 130-28195.

13 The investigation file of Linde a. o. Op. cit. Vol. 1. P. 171.

14 The investigation file of Jüriste, Juhan a. o. Op. cit. Vol. 1.

there was no court whatsoever in the camp in July-August 1941. The special department of the camp also sentenced people to death by shooting,¹⁵ although these sentences still had to be approved by the Field Commandant's Office or the German Security Police and SD. (Västriku ristviide Tartu)

Roland Lepik, to whom also the commandant of the camp was subordinated, had already in the second half of July 1941 been appointed the chief of the Special Department of the Tartu Concentration Camp's Commandantur.¹⁶ In a couple of days, Lepik also became the commandant of the camp. Yet the actual commander was Fritz Giessen, a Senior Sergeant Major (*Oberfeldwebel*) of the Field Commandantur. In the camp there was an officer with special mission Captain Aleksander Koolmeister, whose actual subordination had been unknown also to the first camp commandant Jüriste. It was Koolmeister's task to compose the shooting commandos and instruct them during the actual executions. After Tallinn had been conquered by German troops, both Lepik and Koolmeister were transferred to Tallinn.

The first camp's commandant Jüriste described the preparations for execution as follows. In late afternoon, the officer with special tasks Koolmeister arrived at the concentration camp and instructed about 8–10 guards on the square. After some time, a closed truck drove up to the death barrack. The guards led by Koolmeister, as well as Lepik, Chief of the special department, also arrived. The door of the death barrack was open. Lepik stood at the door with a list, as did one of the guards who were at the disposal of the special department. Lepik read the name of a detenus, and the guard standing beside him stepped behind the detenus. This way, all the 8–10 detenus were brought out of the barrack, their hands were tied with a rope and they were placed in the truck. Before they were brought out, the people to be executed had been undressed in the barrack, they were brought to the truck in their underclothes and without shoes. After an attempted escape, the executees were also tied together with a rope.

Most often, the antitank ditch by the Tartu-Riga road has been mentioned as the site of execution. In this so-called "Jalak line" executions took place until February 1942. Most of the bodies left there were burnt in 1943 and 1944. Later, at the time when the Jews were officially executed already, part of the

shootings were allegedly also conducted in the vicinity of the Jewish cemetery. Yet Elmar Glück, who testified to the case of Herman Ehrlich, a guard of the Tartu concentration camp, claims that Ehrlich himself had participated in the execution of Jewish women and children at the Jewish cemetery at the end of September or beginning of October in 1941.¹⁷ The Soviet investigation discovered four bodies there.

There was no permanent shooting commando at the Tartu camp. The commando was always composed by Lepik or Koolmeister of the guards that were off duty at the time. According to Jüriste, no one was forced to join it. In the course of this research, a list of persons who probably participated in the executions has been drawn up on the basis of the sources used. The list is based on the records of the investigations conducted by the KGB and earlier Soviet state security institutions, and should therefore be subject to critical approach. Therefore, in most cases, we are unable to draw any conclusions as concerns provable guilt. The possibility to connect any particular persons to the execution of Jews, who were comparatively few in Tartu, is even smaller. It is irrevocable that at the time when the executions of Jews took place in Tartu, Roland Lepik and Aleksander Koolmeister played the main part there. On the basis of the research conducted so far, also the abovementioned Herman Ehrlich,¹⁸ as well as Karl Mark, who was also accused of murdering children, can be connected to the execution of Jews. In both cases, we are dealing with indirect evidence. (Västriku ristviide Tartu)

The following people connected to the Tartu concentration camp have been accused of participating in executions by shooting:¹⁹

A(a)rda, Leks Bergman, Evald Eelmets, Herman Ehrlich, Juhan Jüriste, Keerak, Nikolai Kiima(Klima), Martin Kiviväli(Kivijärv), Alfred (Karl?) Kolberg, Aleksander Koolmeister, Harri Koppel, Aleksander Kroon, Käärik, Kütt, Ants (Hans) Laats, Olev Linde, Karl Linnas, Karl Mark, Endel Matto, Roland Lepik, Savi, Ernst Suits, Enn Sügis, Sügiste, Villem Talvik, Karl Trossek, Tõnismaa.

Summarising the so far identified data on the executions in Tartu in summer and autumn 1941, we are in the position to conclude that they were conducted under the direct, albeit covert instructions of the German Security Police and SD and the

¹⁵ The investigation file of Jüriste, Juhan a. o. Op. cit. Vol. 1. P. 42.

¹⁶ Tartu Main Local Office of the Estonian Security Police. An Explanation. Chief of the Special Department of the Commandantur R. Lepik. 22.7.1941. ERA R 60-2-404. P. 1.

¹⁷ The investigation file of Linde a. o. Op. cit. Vol. 1. P. 171.

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 171.

¹⁹ The investigation file of Ain-Ervin Mere, Ralf Gerrets and Jaan Viik. ERAF 129-28653. Vol. 17; The investigation file of Linde a. o. Op. cit. Vol. 1.



Tomb in the Jewish cemetery in Tartu. Photographed by Lembit Odres 1960 (Estonian History Museum)

military authority in Tartu, Field Commandantur No. 817. Roland Lepik and Aleksander Koolmeister, who were also responsible for finding the camp guards for the executions, organised the carrying out of the sentences under German supervision. Both the Jalak line and the Jewish cemetery are probable as sites of execution. The number of the Tartu Jews executed in Tartu is not known.

EXECUTION OF THE PÄRNU JEWS

Proceeding from the data of the archive and Gurin-Loov, 137 Jews of Estonian citizenship were executed in Pärnu in 1941–1942. They were executed in two parties – the first ones in July 1941, and the rest in the end of October and beginning of November. This will be summarised by the following table, based on the data from Gurin-Loov,²⁰ the list of persons executed in the area of operation of the chief of the political police of the Pärnu Prefecture,²¹ as well as the files of the cases against Edmund Kuusik, August Reinvald, Julius Viks and Teodor Kaldre.²²

The anti-Jewish policies were systematically put to practice in Estonia until 10 September 1941, when the respective orders were given by *SS-Sturmabführer* Dr. Martin Sandberger, Commander of *Sonderkommando* 1a and later Chief of the German Security Police and SD in Estonia. All male Jews over 16 years of age were to be arrested; but in Pärnu only Jews capable of work of both sexes were to be arrested.²³

On 10 September 1941, there were no Jewish men left in Pärnu. The orders concerning Jews capable of work actually meant the arrest of women and probably also children. Gurin-Loov states that children were separated from mothers taken to execution and were executed later in the Pärnu synagogue.²⁴ This is corroborated by the table indicating that there are no children among those executed on 30 October 1941, neither are they mentioned in the investigation files.

On the basis of the records drawn up on 7 February 1947 by the “Committee for identifying the crimes of the fascist conquerors and their underlings of Pärnu”, the German called Gebe, who was the commandant of prison “Betty’s Barn”, and Dessen, the Military Commandant of Pärnu, were considered guilty of the crimes committed in Pärnu.²⁵ Unlike the persons who participated in the executions of the Jews in Tartu, the culprits in Pärnu can be identified with some more certainty. This is possible owing to the records of the trial held in 1962, where all four defendants, Eduard Kuusik, August Reinvald, Julius Viks and Theodor Kaldre were charged with the executions in Pärnu and sentenced to death.²⁶ It is a disadvantage that both in the course of investigation and in court the victims were mostly named as “Soviet people”. The prosecutors paid no attention to the nationality of the victims, and only the interrogated persons have in some cases mentioned Jews.

Yet certain discretion is needed as regards this trial. It should be taken into consideration that it was preceded by two other showcase trials in 1961–1962, which also had dealt with the investigation of crimes against the peaceful population during the German occupation those were the Ain-Ervin Mere, Ralf Gerrets and Jaan Viik trial and the Karl Linnas, Juhan Jüriste and Julius Viks trial, where all culprits had also been sentenced to death. The trial records were published in English and used in the propaganda against the expatriate Estonians. /ristviide Jägala ja Tartu laager/

As new facts had emerged, a new criminal investigation concerning the executions in Pärnu was begun in 1962. Already the earlier investigations had established that a special commando consisting of 30 men, led by Captain Villem Raid and Arkadi Valdin, had been formed in Pärnu for carrying out

20 E. Gurin-Loov, op. cit. P. 18.

21 Jews sentenced to execution before October 6, 1941. ERA, R-64-1-100, P. 1-2.

22 The investigation file of Edmund Kuusik, August Reinvald, Julius Viks and Teodor Kaldre. ERAF 129-28668.

23 Prescript of the German Security Police to the Chief Constable in Rakvere. 11 September 1941. ERA R-89-1-1. P. 2; published in: E. Gurin-Loov. Op. cit. Pp. 24–25; Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und SD. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 111. 12. Oktober 1941. BA R-58 / 218. Pp. 144–146.

24 E. Gurin-Loov. Op. cit. P. 18.

25 The KGB investigation of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Estonia. Overview of the KGB files from the years 1964–1990. ERAF 133-1-19. Pp. 12–21.

26 The investigation file of Edmund Kuusik, August Reinvald, Julius Viks and Teodor Kaldre. Op. cit.

Table 1. Execution of the Pärnu Jews

Date	Men	Women	Children	All	Execution site
13 July / 6–7 August	20		2	22	Papiniidu station
17 July	1			1	
26 July / mid-August	20	2		22	Reiu forest
1 August	2			2	
14 August	1			1	
12 September	2			2	
29 October			1	1	
30 October / October	25			25	Rae forest
2 November		33	28	61	Reiu forest and the synagogue

the death sentences issued by political police. It had also been established that most of the executions were carried out by the commando mentioned above, not by the Germans. According to the list in the State Archive,²⁷ 494 people, including 140 Jews, had been shot in Pärnu by the resolution of the political police from 12 July to 12 December 1941. Several members of that commando, e.g. the political police officials Orgussaar, Koop, Kadak, who had issued death sentences, as well as the commando Raid and Valdin escaped to Germany in 1944. Three of the executioners were sentenced to death: H. Targu, K. Leetsi and K. Lilleste. Some of the suspects lived in Estonia, some of them had been punished, but with lesser charges (service in the *Omakaitse* and the German Army): Edmund Kuusk, August Reinvald, Teodor Kaldre, Julius Viks, Aleksander Jaaniste.²⁸

Reading the minutes of the interrogation of the Kaldre, Kuusik, Viks and Reinvald, it seems probable that during the German occupation, the arrested were shot in Pärnu by Estonians, officials of the political police, who were accompanied by two German NCOs. It seems that the number of the *Omakaitse* members connected to the shootings is relatively larger, of whom Captain Heinrich Kubu, Arkadi Valdin, Veljo Teder and the Prefect August Orgussaar played the leading roles.²⁹ Considering the aforementioned doubts about the objectivity of the trial, it would not be feasible to use the materials as a basis for drawing conclusions of each man's personal role in the events. Yet there is no ground to presume the culprits to have been blameless.

The above interrogation minutes establish firmly the participation of at least two men in the execu-

tion of Jews. Both Kuusik and Viks testified that they had recognised Jews from Pärnu (men) among the people taken to execution. Kuusik remembered Kahn, Goldberg and Kuschner and Viks remembered Kuschner, Bub and Hirsfeldt (first names missing).³⁰ Comparing these data with the list of Jews executed in Pärnu from the State Archives, it can be stated that both men participated together in the execution of Jews on 26 July 1941.³¹ The actual role either of them played in the execution can not be identified. In court, Kuusik testified that on the execution he had only given the order "Fire!" and had not actually shot anyone. Viks claimed in court that he had only shot four "Soviet people", differing from the indictment where the number was claimed to have been "over forty".³² It is not evident from the existing documents, whether, when, or who of the possible executioners had particularly been executing Jews in Pärnu.

TALLINN

As in Tartu and Pärnu, also in Tallinn the arrests of the Jews started immediately after the conquest of the city by the German troops. The lists of the individuals to be arrested, including Jews, were prepared in Tartu already prior to conquering Tallinn.³³ Within three days from the conquest of Tallinn on 28 August the *Omakaitse* had already arrested 42 "Jewish communists", 182 members of the destruction battalions, and 150 "other suspicious persons".³⁴ Most likely the orders of arrest had been issued by the German military authorities and not by the Security Police and SD. These orders made the Estonian policeman responsible for the arrest of the

²⁷ It remained unclear in the course of the work which specific list was considered. ERAF 133-1-19. Pp. 1–10.

²⁸ On the existing incriminating materials on persons who were active assistants and participated in crimes in Pärnu and other places during the German occupation. ESSR KGB, 1961. ERAF 133-1-19. Pp. 1–10.

²⁹ The investigation file of Edmund Kuusik, August Reinvald, Julius Viks and Teodor Kaldre. Op. cit.

³⁰ Ibid. Pp. 118, 202.

³¹ Jews sentenced to execution before 6 October 1941. ERA R 64-1-100. Pp. 1–2.

³² The investigation file of Edmund Kuusik, August Reinvald, Julius Viks and Teodor Kaldre. Op. cit. Supervision report. P. 155.

³³ Personen aus der Fahdungsliste Ost. In Reval zu verhaftende Personen. Handzettel. 23 July 1941. ERA R 60-1-11. Pp. 75–78.

³⁴ Tallinn-Nõmme *Omakaitse*. Activity report. ERA R 358-1-13. Pp. 2–20.

male Jews. The male Jews were first sent to the political police or to the local police station. Already then they were kept separately from other prisoners. After some days the prisoners were transferred to the Tallinn Central Prison. In the course of the transfer, the Jews were separated from the Estonians and placed in separate cells.³⁵

The arrests of Jews continued in Tallinn also at the end of August and beginning of September before Sandberger issued his orders from 10 September. Those arrested need not have had any relation to communism, and this was no longer even used as a formal accusation.³⁶

Extensive anti-Jewish policies were launched in Estonia after 10 September 1941, when the respective orders were issued by Sandberger, Chief of the German Security Police and SD in Estonia. All male Jews aged over 16 were to be arrested. Initially it was planned to gather all the Jews remaining in Estonia to Tartu concentration camp, later to Harku camp in the vicinity of Tallinn. All female Jews capable of work in the age between 16 and 60 were to be taken to the recently built Harku prisoner camp.³⁷

According to the preserved list of the Political Police, 202 Jewish men from Tallinn and Nõmme, as well as 2 women, were executed in Tallinn before 6 October 1941.³⁸ In 1941–1942, 518 Jews from Tallinn and Nõmme were executed, according to the data of Gurin-Loov.³⁹ The preserved documents of the Political Police give a much larger number for the Jews executed in Tallinn. According to these documents, by the turn of the year, 640 had been executed in Tallinn, 640 death sentences had been issued, and all in all 645 Jews had been arrested.⁴⁰ By summer 1942, the number of the executed was 643.⁴¹ The identity of more than one hundred Jews remained unknown. They may have been transferred to Tallinn from other areas of Estonia.

In order to throw some light on the events of autumn 1941 in the Tallinn Central Prison and in the Harku prisoner camp, the records of the investiga-

tions conducted by the NKVD after the war in Estonia had to be used.

The Political police official Jaak Lääts testified that *Omakaitse* had participated in the arrests of the Jews in Tallinn at the end of 1941 and in the beginning of 1942, whereas the arrests were organised and led by the political police.⁴² Also the witness Riho Sammalkivi (a former criminal police official) testified that the Jews had been arrested in Tallinn by Security Police and SD at the end of 1941 and in the beginning of 1942.⁴³ According to the former Security Police official Herbert Ant, he had been aware of the orders of the German Security Police to arrest the Jews in autumn 1941, although he himself had not seen the respective decree.⁴⁴ The time of arrests given in the above testimonies – end of 1941 and beginning of 1942 – does not match, but it should be considered that the testimonies were made twenty years after the actual events described.

At least the majority of male Jews in Tallinn had already been arrested, this is also corroborated by the preserved Security Police list of the Jews sent to execution before 6 October 1941.⁴⁵ Lääts says in his testimony that he did not know how many Jews were arrested. But he had heard that the Jews had been kept in the Harku camp, where they later had been shot. Part of the Jews stayed in the Tallinn Central Prison, whence they were later taken to Männiku forest (at the border of Tallinn near the Lake Ülemiste) for executions.⁴⁶

The further fate of the Jews arrested in Tallinn is a matter that still remains comparatively obscure. Different researchers accept the view that local male Jews were executed in Tallinn or in its close neighbourhood. But where, when, and by whom? The documents of the German and local authorities of German occupation have not answered these questions so far. According to the Security Police and the SD *Ereignismeldung* no 111 and post-war statements of Sandberger the Jews of Tallinn were executed under the supervision of *Sonderkommando 1a* by the members of the Estonian *Omakaitse*.⁴⁷

35 A. Weiss-Wendt. Op. cit.

36 Prescript of the German Security Police to the Prefect in Rakvere. Op. cit.

37 Ibid.; Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und SD. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 111. Op. cit.

38 Jews sentenced to execution before 6 October 1941. Op. cit.

39 E. Gurin-Loov. Op. cit.

40 Estonian Security Police and the SD in Tallinn. Daily and weekly reports of Department B-IV. Statistical table. 29 December 1941. ERA R 64-1-48. P. 13.

41 Jahresstatistik 1941/1942 über die Tätigkeit der Sicherheitspolizei (Gestapo Abt. IV) in Estland. Anlage 11. In: Jahresbericht der Sipo und SD July 1941 – 30 June 1942. Op. cit. P. 99.

42 Interrogation of Jaak Lääts. Transcript. In: The investigation file of Ain-Ervin Mere, Ralf Gerrets and Jaan Viik. Op. cit. Vol. 4. Pp. 107–109.

43 Interrogation of Riho Sammalkivi. Transcript. Ibid. Pp. 206–207.

44 Interrogation of Herbert Ant. Transcript. Ibid. P. 226.

45 Jews sentenced to execution before 6 October 1941. Op. cit.

46 Interrogation of Jaak Lääts. Op. cit.

47 Ibid.; Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und SD. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 111. Op. cit.; Martin Sandberger. Urteil und Urteilsbegründung. Ohlendorf case No. IX, 8. April 1948. Militärgerichtshof II. BA (Koblenz), Rep 501 XXVII ZB 1. P. 186.

The investigation files from the Soviet period considered in the course of the current research do not provide an unequivocal answer either. Confusions may spring from the fact that neither in 1944–1945 nor in the 1960s the interrogators paid no attention to the nationality of the arrested or executed, all of them were called “Soviet patriots, Soviet citizens”, etc. Only in case of Jews brought from elsewhere in Europe their nationality has been emphasised. The issue of nationality has been somewhat more closely regarded on the interrogations held in the 1960s, but also then it remained a side issue. Thus we must presume that executions of the prisoners were carried out in the same manner, independent of the nationality of those to be executed.

According to the former prison guard Karl Tagasaar, the more massive executions of the prisoners kept in the Tallinn prison started at the beginning of September 1941, when about 200 prisoners were taken to execution.⁴⁸ The investigation files say nothing of the prisoners’ nationality.

In the investigation files there are several descriptions of the preparations that the prisoners condemned to shooting had to undergo, and the descriptions are alike. In brief, the following routine was followed when preparing the condemned for shooting in the Tallinn Central Prison.⁴⁹

The documents concerning the condemned were sent to the Tallinn Central Prison from the political police. In the evening, the camp commandant⁵⁰ or his deputy Mihkelsoo (Mihkelson) handed the respective lists over to Gerhard Isup, the deputy of the chief of guard of the camp, who ordered Sergeant Major Richard Mitt to gather the prisoners included in the list into the special death cell. Simultaneously, Isup informed the senior prison guards who had to participate in the operation, of the preceding task. The rest of the staff were prohibited to have any information of the executions, only the participants knew of it, as well as the guards who were posted to the main gate. In the small hours, the special commando (also called the special commando of the political police) arrived with the representatives of the political police, and the prisoners sentenced to death were handed over to them. Also Ervin Viks, who served as the chief of political police of the Tallinn-Harju Prefecture from 29 October 1941, had been one of those receiving the

condemned in autumn 1941. At first, Isup claimed on the interrogations that the executioners were from Gestapo, but he changed his testimony later. The team was comprised of the members of political police and the *Omakaitse*. At the end of 1941, the execution commando was led by Koolmeister, who had earlier had the same task in Tartu. Later, he was replaced by Luha.

After the arrival of the commando, the senior guards brought the prisoners into the room of the prison’s on-duty-officer, where their identity was checked. Following that, the guards and the officer-on-duty ordered the condemned to remove all clothes except underwear. Their hands were tied behind their back and they were tied together in groups of 10–15. Following another check of identity by Isup, the prisoners were handed over to the Chief of Commando from the political police. The condemned were driven out of the city on trucks and shot there. The following places have been mentioned as sites of execution: Männiku, the antitank ditch near Tallinn, probably in 1943–1944 also Kalevi-Liiva. On the basis of the records researched, Männiku seems the most probable site of execution for the local Jews in Tallinn (testimony of Lääts), but there is no irrevocable evidence of this.⁵¹

These testimonies provide no ground to assume when or how many times any of the individuals participated in executions, and which their particular task was. The prison commandant’s chauffeur Vilosius is the only one whose personal file has been found in the archives. According to his own testimony, he participated once in transporting the condemned to Liiva in 1942; this is irrelevant to the theme of the current research. He has later admitted his repeated participation, but this throws no light on the fate of the Jews.⁵²

The interrogated prison officials were only able to name four of the people who had been taken to execution: Markov, Konstantin Is(e)bik(?), Aleksander Nessel(r)man, Epstein. In two latter cases, the prisoners were indeed of Jewish descent, the Epsteins are also included in the Security Police and SD lists⁵³ and in Gurin-Loov’s list.⁵⁴

Allegedly, none of the prison officials participated in the executions. According to Isup’s testimony, about 1,500 political prisoners (including the Jews

48 Interrogation of Karl Tagasaar. The investigation file of Isup Gerhard a. o. Op. cit. Vol. 1. P. 64.

49 The investigation file of Ain-Ervin Mere, Ralf Gerrets and Jaan Viik. Op. cit. Vol. 1–18; The investigation file of Isup Gerhard a. o. Op. cit. Vol. 1–2.

50 The following persons served as chiefs of the Tallinn Central Prison: autumn 1941 the acting chief was Karl (Kaarel) Tarendi, then Karl-August Vergi and August Ilves and from 1943 Aleksander Laak.

51 Interrogation of Jaak Lääts. Op. cit. P. 107.

52 The investigation file of Heinrich Vilosius. ERAF 129-6352.

53 Jews sentenced to execution before 6 October 1941. Op. cit.

54 E. Gurin-Loov. Op. cit.

and the Roma) were sent to execution like that from the Tallinn Central Prison from September 1941 to September 1944. The execution of the Jews brought to Tallinn Central Prison from other European countries after the execution of Estonian Jews was carried out by a commando consisting of Germans under the leadership of *Unterscharführer* Witt(e).⁵⁵ Only criminals were executed in the prison itself (by hanging), the political prisoners were shot outside the prison.⁵⁶

It is generally accepted that the Jewish women and children from Tallinn were concentrated to the Harku camp. *Einsatzgruppe A* had calculated on imprisoning approximately 500–600 Jewish women and children in the camp, on 15 October 1941 there 400 of them in Harku camp.⁵⁷ There is no concrete evidence on their fate from then on. The statements of witnesses differ, but it is most likely that those 400 Jewish women and children were sent to Pskov, where they were later executed.⁵⁸ It is also possible that they may have been executed in small numbers on the spot. Also Chief of the German Security Police and SD in Estonia Sandberger said he knew of a certain Jewish burial site near Harku.⁵⁹ The option that they were taken to Pskov prevailed both in the legal proceedings against members of the *Einsatzgruppe's* at the so-called Ohlendorf trial in 1948 as well as in the investigations held against Heinrich Bergmann and other officials of the German Security Police and the SD in Estonia in the 1960s in the Federal Republic of Germany.⁶⁰ According to Sandberger he did not favour the total annihilation of Jews. Head of *Einsatzgruppe A SS-Brigadeführer* Dr. Franz Stahlecker had demanded that the Estonian General Commissariat were immediately turned “*judenfrei*”. Therefore, Sandberger acknowledged, he had given orders to send Jewish women and children to Pskov, to the rear area of Army Group “Nord” outside the borders of Estonian General Commissariat in the hope that they will escape execution there.⁶¹ Pskov was under the control of the branch commando of the Security Police and the SD subordinated to Sandberger. Allegedly the Jews in Pskov were executed at the orders of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Jeckeln, Chief of the SS and Police of



Jewish cemetery in Tallinn. Sher Lewinowitsch's mausoleum in the centre. Photographed early 20th century (Estonian History Museum)

Ostland, who discovered them there in the beginning of 1942 and ordered their execution.⁶² The execution was most likely carried out by the German *Schutzpolizei* unit located in Pskov under the supervision of the Head of the Branch Commando *SS-Obersturmführer* Otto Bleyemehl subordinated to Sandberger. A young *SS-Untersturmführer* standing close to Jeckeln had promised that the Jews “would soon be relocated to underground” (*würden alsbald unterirdisch angesiedelt*).⁶³

To check this theory, the Jews who had been executed before 6 October 1941, were excluded from the list of Gurin-Loov, which in general also matches the lists of the Security Police and SD in Estonia (929 and 921 executed individuals respectively). As a result, 192 women and 36 children (aged under 16) or all in all 228 Jews, who theoretically could have been sent from Harku camp to Pskov, remained. Considering also that some were executed on the spot, the maximum number could have been about 200. The materials examined in the course of this research include the testimonies of the former political police official Jaak Lääts given at the interrogation. From those it is evident that the Jews from the Harku camp were also shot locally (obviously, close vicinity of the camp has been meant). Yet he also states that “a great number of Jews, who had been arrested in Tallinn, were sent to the Jewish ghetto in Riga,

55 Interrogation of Gerhard Isup. Transcript. The investigation file of Ain-Ervin Mere, Ralf Gerrets and Jaan Viik. Op. cit. Vol. 5. P. 265.

56 The investigation file of Viitpoom. ERAF 129-2799. P. 51.

57 Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und SD. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 111. Op. cit. P. 146; Einsatzgruppe A. Gesamtbericht bis zum 15.10.1941. Op. cit. Anlage 5. Tabelle: Gefängnisse in Estland.

58 See: Longerich, Peter. Politik der Vernichtung: eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung. München, Zürich 1998. Pp. 299–302; A. Weiss-Wendt. Op. cit.

59 Sandberger's interrogation. 29.12.1948. In: Rautkallio, Hannu. Finland and the Holocaust: The Rescue of Finland's Jews. New York 1987. P. 149.

60 Martin Sandberger. Urteil und Urteilsbegründung. Ohlendorf case No. IX. 8 April 1948. Op. cit. Pp. 183–187;

Bergmann u. a. Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltung zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen. Bundesarchiv-Aussenstelle Ludwigsburg (hereinafter ZStL) AR-Z 246/59.

61 Martin Sandberger. Urteil und Urteilsbegründung. Ohlendorf case No. IX. 8 April 1948. Op. cit. Pp. 183–187.

62 Eröffnungsrede für den Angeklagten Martin Sandberger von Rechtsanwalt Dr. Kurt Mandry vor dem amerikanischen Militärgerichtshof Nr. II in Nürnberg in dem Verfahren gegen Ohlendorf und andere (Fall IX). 5 October 1947. BA (Koblenz), Rep 501 XXVII U 1. Pp. 6–7.

63 G. Reitz'i ülekuulamisprotokoll, 1. juuni 1960; Martin Heymuth'i ülekuulamisprotokoll 13. juuni 1960. Landeskriminalpolizeiamt Niedersachsen, Merten'i ülekuulamisprotokoll, ZStL AR-Z 246/59. Vol. 2. Pp. 252–260, 287–292, 369–374; G. Reitz'i ülekuulamisprotokoll, Schwurgericht Hamburg. ZStL AR-Z 246/59. Vol. 3. P. 857.

which had specially been established for the annihilation of the Jews from the Baltic Soviet Republics.”⁶⁴

It has not been specified whether the Jews who were possibly sent to Riga had been men or women. Considering other data (the lists of the executed from Security Police and the SD)⁶⁵ it could have been Jewish women and children, because most of the men had been executed in Tallinn even before 6 October 1941. Soviet state security authorities did not clarify this question. Neither have any data corroborating this theory emerged in the course of the current research, and thus the question remains unanswered.

It must be taken into account that several testimonies were given nearly twenty years after the events themselves. At the time of these events, Jaak Lääts was in Tallinn, in the service of the political police, and it is therefore believable that he may have been informed of the named events, although this is not sufficient for proof. The testimony of the executions of Estonian Jews in Pskov is based on circumstantial evidence, have been given by several people and allow to believe in this version. The differences in the testimonies, however, do not permit to clarify the details of the executions.

In spite of the execution of last Estonian Jews in Pskov the German Security Police and the SD considered in their *Ereignismeldung* no 155 from 14 January 1942 Estonia “judenfrei”. They supposed that people believed the Jews had been just relocated to other areas.⁶⁶

SUMMARY

The question of the reliability of the evidence given on the NKVD, NKGB, MGB and KGB interrogations inevitably cropped up in the course of the research. After having examined a considerable amount of interrogation minutes of the former officials of the Tallinn Central Prison, it can still be believed that there should be no distortions of the basic facts. It is, though, often obvious where the witness’s testimony ends and the epithets inserted by the interrogators begin.

As a result, the specific role of some individuals could indeed have been distorted, but not so the

principal matters. The former prison officials who were being interrogated had no motive to conceal the Germans’ major role in the execution of prisoners. They had no need to consider Germany’s indignation. On the contrary, this only served to reduce the possibility of the members of the prison or camp guard teams being accused of participation in the shootings.

On the interrogations and trials conducted in 1944–1945, just after the beginning of the Soviet occupation, the NKVD did not lay such heavy emphasis on “ideological theatre”, as could have been common in the 1960s. Yet at that time, violence was a widespread means for obtaining testimonies. From the viewpoint of the current research, the problem with the interrogations and trials of 1944–1945 is that if a person was caught, his guilt was considered to be proven – independent of whether it actually was the case or not – and he was sentenced to death. Yet in the interrogation minutes, many individuals have only been mentioned by surname, and when the witness had already been executed, it proved rather a complicated task to conduct any further investigations afterwards. E.g. the abovementioned Isup, the deputy chief of guard of the Tallinn Central Prison, was executed in 1945. A comparatively large number of investigation minutes have been left of him, but in those, main attention was focused on the network of informers he had created among the prisoners, not on the executions. It is clear that he must have been much better informed than the minutes reflect. The current research only succeeded in unearthing the personal file of one individual allegedly connected to the executions in Tallinn (Vilosius). Also the fact that several persons connected to the executions had left Estonia (Ervin Viks, Ain-Ervin Mere).

Roland Lepik, the Inspector of Estonian Political Police from end of October to 8 December 1941, had been arrested by Germans. According to the directors of the Estonian Self-Government, he had been accused of corruption and excessive brutality, and executed two months after that.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Lepik remained under Gestapo supervision in Tallinn Central Prison at least until November 1942⁶⁸ and there is no factual evidence about his fate after that.

In the course of investigation it became evident that part of the culprits had already earlier been pun-

⁶⁴ Interrogation of Jaak Lääts. Transcript. Op. cit. P. 107.

⁶⁵ Jews sentenced to execution before 6 October 1941. Op. cit.

⁶⁶ Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und SD. Ereignismeldung UdSSR Nr. 155. 14. Januar 1942. BA R 58 / 220.

⁶⁷ Angelus, Oskar. Tuhanda valitseja maa, Mälestusi Saksa okupatsiooni ajast 1941–1944 (The Land of a Thousand Rulers, Memoirs from German Occupation Period 1941–1944). 2nd Edition. Tallinn 1995. Pp. 173–176. Oskar Angelus was in 1941–1944 the Director for Internal Affairs of Estonian Self-Government.

⁶⁸ Roland Lepik. Correspondence and Appeals. From 22 April to 23 November 1942. ERA R 294-1-169. Pp. 5p–6; Security Police B V Tallinn-Harju request to the Tallinn-Harju Political Police for the interrogation of Roland Lepik. 5 August 1942; police commissar of Tallinn 1st Division to Department IV of Security Police. Request for the interrogation of Roland Lepik. 11 August 1942; KdS Estland. A V permission to interrogate Roland Lepik. 24 September 1942. ERA R 294-1-152. Pp. 277, 292, 493.

ished for other, smaller offences, of which they confessed their guilt. The cases of Kuusik and Viks in Pärnu were clear examples of this. And certainly, some of the culprits escaped punishment just because of the same scheme. For instance, there is no additional data whatsoever (no given name, initials, or date of birth) about Luha, who had become the chief of the execution commando in Tallinn after Koolmeister. Searching for other possible suspects of the same name a person was discovered who had been accused of having been mobilised to the German Army in 1944. From his daughter's letter added to the file years later, the latter says that as far as she knew, her father had served in the German police and had also been to Germany for training (in a police school). Whether this might be the same person can not be established in the course of current research. Similar suspicions were also awakened in some other cases, but in those cases the ties were not as obvious.

The conclusions about possible culprits have been presented above. In addition, the role of Roland Lepik and Aleksander Koolmeister should be emphasised; it is clear that they were personally involved and had a leading role in the execution of Jews both in Tallinn and in Tartu from July to December in 1941. We know the fate of Roland Lepik, and Weiss-Wendt has expressed opinion that this way, the German Security Police had an opportunity to free themselves of an over-informed witness of the executions of the communists and Jews, but it can not be proved.⁶⁹ The data discovered on Captain Aleksander Koolmeister so far indicate that the man was about fifty years old. After December 1941 he obviously left Tallinn; at least, no witnesses have been able to say anything of his further activities.

Stahlecker, commander of the *Einsatzgruppe A*: "The (German) Security Police had to launch the self-purification process and to lead it to the right tracks, so that the established goals of purification would be achieved as soon as possible. It is of no less importance to be bale to prove later as if the liberated population itself had, on its own initiative, taken strict measures against the bolshevist and Jewish enemies, without any perceptible orders from the German authorities. [...] They (Jewish men), except doctors and elders of the Jews assigned to a post by *Sonderkommando (Juden-Älteste)*, are to be executed under the supervision of *Sonderkommando 1a* by members of Estonian *Omakaitse*."⁷⁰ Also the Nürnberg international tribunal at the Ohlendorf trial maintained the same position.⁷¹

The Estonian political police cannot be considered as an independent institution that would have pursued some "policy of its own". They fulfilled the orders of the German authorities under the immediate control of the representatives of these authorities. The actions of the members of the *Omakaitse* and the prison (camp) guards should be considered from at least two aspects. First, they fulfilled orders coming from the German military and police authorities. At the same time, members of the *Omakaitse* and policemen were the only ones who were allowed to carry weapons besides Germans. In situations of crisis, people appear any time and anywhere who are prepared to do anything and kill anyone with gun in hand, no to mention cases when they will be paid for this or given free liquor. In addition, also the motive of revenge for the relatives and friends, killed, arrested or deported by Soviets, must be considered.

69 A. Weiss-Wendt. Op. cit.

70 Einsatzgruppe A. Gesamtbericht bis zum 15.10.1941. Op. cit. Pp. 21, 31.

71 Martin Sandberger. Urteil und Urteilsbegründung. Op. cit. Pp. 183–187.