

## Summary

### **The First Deportation of the European Jews. The transports to Nisko nad Sanem**

In a park near the offices of the Regional Authority in Ostrava there stands a modest memorial featuring the shape of a seven-branched candelabrum, a menorah. The western part of the park used to be the city's Jewish cemetery, and the bones of Ostrava's Jews still repose under the earth, lawns and flowers. However, the memorial commemorates the fate of the nearly 8,000 Jews from Ostrava and the surrounding areas whose bones were laid to rest far away, scattered around the world by war, and those whose bones were destroyed in the crematoria of the extermination camps. In October 1939 it was just a short distance away, at Ostrava's former riding school, that the Gestapo summoned Jews for the first transport in the history of the Holocaust. The train left Moravian Ostrava for the eastern regions of newly occupied Poland, giving the city an unwanted place in world history. Under the supervision of the SS, the Ostrava Jews were to build a concentration camp in Nisko nad Sanem which was to become a destination for subsequent transports from Ostrava, Vienna and Katowice.

The outbreak of war offered the Nazis new opportunities to 'cleanse' the German Reich of its Jewish population by expelling them to territories that were not administratively part of the Reich. On 21 September 1939 Heydrich, the head of the Sicherheitspolizei and Sicherheitsdienst, informed his subordinates that the Führer had approved a plan to deport Jews from those territories that had been annexed by the Reich. Further meetings held by Heydrich specified that the destination for the deportations would be in the eastern part of former Poland, where the region around Lublin was to be the site of a Jewish 'reservation'. The first local governor to request the deportation of Jews from Upper Silesia was Wagner, the Gauleiter in Katowice (Kattowitz). On 6 October 1939 the head of the Gestapo, Müller, issued an order to expel 70,000–80,000 Jews from the Katowice region to the lands in the east; documents show that Jews from the Moravian Ostrava region were also to be included in these deportations. On 7 October, Heydrich met Hitler and it was decided to expel the Jews from Vienna. The coordination of the entire process was entrusted to Adolf Eichmann, who immediately began personally to plan the transports from Katowice, Vienna and Ostrava. Just ten days later, the first transport was ready to depart.

The Jews were to build the concentration camp themselves, and were also to pay the costs of their internment. Under Nazi supervision, Jewish engineers from Ostrava drew up plans for the camp, Jewish companies supplied building materials and provisions, while Jewish communities transferred the necessary funds to the Gestapo. To the general public, the operation was meant to look like a voluntary initiative by the Jewish communities, sending their members for 're-education' through work. In reality, the camp was guarded by an SS unit, and the commanding officer on the first transport was the head of the Ostrava Gestapo Gerhard Wagner.

Jews from the Ostrava and Frýdek areas were summoned to report to the Ostrava riding school on 17 October 1939 under threat of severe penalties for non-compliance. At this stage the deportations only applied to men, but it was planned that future transports would also include women and children. Even old and sick people were deemed fit for transportation by the German doctors. The deportees were searched and their valuables confiscated, especially gold and silver items. The Jews were then taken by bus to the cargo terminal in the Přívov district of the city, where passenger carriages awaited them. Freight wagons had already been loaded with timber and other materials. The train stood at the station until the following morning, but nobody was allowed to disembark.

On Wednesday 18 October at around 8:30 in the morning, the first transport train left Ostrava via Bohumín, Dzierżycze, Oświęcim (Auschwitz), Kraków, Tarnów, Rzeszów and Przeworsk for its final destination, Nisko nad Sanem. The train contained 901 Jews. Although the deportation had been kept a secret from the general public, the Nazi authorities reported protests by Jewish women and local people when the train departed. The first transport from Katowice left on the morning of 20 October and contained 1,029 Jews from the Katowice, Chorzów and Bielsko regions; before departure, they had been assembled at a gymnasium near the railway station. Other police reports

state that only 875 Jews were on this transport. The Ostrava Jewish Community supplied several wagons of timber and other materials for the Katowice train. The first transport from Vienna left the Aspangbahnhof station at 22:00 on 20 October and contained at least 912 Jews. It stopped at Ostrava on the way to receive extra wagons carrying timber, food and equipment.

A week later, the second set of transports left. The train from Ostrava left on the evening of 26 October carrying around 400 Jews, mainly prisoners of Polish origin previously held by the Brno Gestapo, refugees from Austria and Germany, and Jews from Ostrava who had managed to avoid the first transport. In Katowice the train was attached to the local transport, which contained around 1,000 Jews from Upper Silesia including some from the Těšín/Cieszyn/Teschen area, who were taken to Bielsko. There they were loaded into covered freight wagons and attached to the transport, which arrived at Nisko in the late evening of 27 October. The second transport from Vienna also departed on 26 October and contained at least 669 people.

The third transport departed from Ostrava. It contained 322 prisoners in 10 goods wagons, who had been taken mainly from Prague. They were mostly Jews of Polish origin who had been in police custody for a long time; the transport was intended as a punishment. The train left Ostrava on the morning of 1 November, but never arrived at Nisko. The river San was in flood, and had destroyed the temporary bridge that provided the only access to the camp, and so the transport was diverted to Sosnowiec in Upper Silesia. The prisoners were placed in the care of the local Jewish community, which set up an improvised concentration camp for them. They were to be taken to Nisko as soon as the situation allowed; however this never happened.

According to Gestapo reports, the total number of Jews deported to Nisko nad Sanem was around 5,000. However, only about 500 remained in the camp near the village of Zarzecze near Nisko nad Sanem – one tenth of the total number of Jews on the transports. The SS guards saw to it that the only deportees who remained at the camp were builders, doctors and tradesmen who were of use in the everyday operation of the camp; most of the camp inmates were taken from the first Ostrava transport. The prisoners soon built the prison huts, storehouses, outbuildings and a command post for the guards. Although the camp was surrounded by a barbed wire perimeter fence and guarded by SS-men, there are no reports of guards killing or torturing inmates, as later became common in the Nazi concentration camps. One of the camp commandants, who introduced a harsher regime and tolerated ill-treatment of inmates, was removed from his post (along with the guards serving under him) following a complaint by the camp's administrative committee. The prisoners' work included building the camp, repairing roads and bridges over the river San, and ensuring the smooth day-to-day running of the camp, including supplies of timber for fuel and drinking water. They were able to send and receive letters and packages from home, and thanks to their families back in Ostrava they were well supplied with food, clothing and items for health care.

At the end of March 1940 the SS and police in Kraków decided to stop construction work and dissolve the camp; the remaining inmates were to return home. According to official reports, on 13 April 1940 a total of 516 people returned home, of whom 301 went to Ostrava, 18 to the Těšín area and 197 to Vienna. The Ostrava Jewish Community lists around 450 returnees from Nisko, as the register includes deportees who were driven away from the camp and managed to return home on their own. The returnees were assigned to forced labour duties in the Ostrava area. Along with the other Jews in the city, the vast majority were taken to the ghetto at Terezín (Theresienstadt), in Bohemia, in September 1942 and died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Only around 60 survived, mostly in mixed marriages. In early 1940 the camp in Sosnowiec (containing the deportees from Ostrava on the third transport) was also dissolved. Around 60 inmates were released to stay with families in Kraków, and around 250 were taken to the concentration camp in Vyhne, Slovakia. From there, some of them managed to emigrate; the remainder were deported to extermination camps or stayed at Vyhne, which was transformed into a labour camp. Only a few survived the campaign of terror which followed the unsuccessful Slovak National Uprising.

A tragic fate awaited over 4,000 Nisko deportees who were driven out of the camp. Only 300 Czech and 200 Viennese Jews remained in the camp itself, mainly from the first transport. The remaining deportees were driven away by the SS guards to the north, towards Lublin and the new

frontier between the Reich and the USSR, where they were left to their own devices. They were strictly forbidden from returning to the camp or going home, but many attempted to return anyway. Others tried to settle in Lublin and the surrounding area, but living conditions there were harsh. The majority were forced by the SS guards to cross the river Tanew and enter the Soviet Union illegally. Exhausted by their long journey through a hostile region, often robbed of all their property, the refugees tried to settle in Lvov and the surrounding area. Many of them managed to settle and make a living, but starting in June 1940, they were deported (along with much of the local population) to Siberia. Others were arrested immediately after crossing the border and sentenced to several years in labour camps or imprisoned as spies and enemies of the state. For the majority – especially for the old and sick – the gulags meant certain death. Only around 350 Jews from the Ostrava transports were released from the Soviet camps as a result of an amnesty, and joined the Czechoslovak army in the USSR in 1942. These recruits were involved in fierce fighting on the eastern front, and only 123 of them survived to reach home – with 90 returning to Ostrava. The number of survivors in the Polish army in the east was even lower. Jews from the Vienna transports had no such means of rescue, so most of them died in the gulags; in 1957, less than a hundred had returned home to the Austrian capital. The Nisko deportees who had managed to avoid being sent to Siberia and the gulags were almost all murdered when the Germans invaded Ukraine, as were those who remained in the Lublin area.

To this day, it is a matter of discussion among historians what led the Nazis to stop the Nisko transports, and what role Nisko played in the history of the Holocaust. On 17 October 1939, the day before the departure of the first transport from Ostrava, Hitler held a meeting which marked a radical change in the original resettlement plans. The deportations were not stopped, but there was a change of priorities. The new Reich provinces – Warthe and West Prussia – were given priority in the deportation of Jews and Poles to the General Government (occupied Poland); these new provinces were to become the home of ethnic Germans from the Balkans and eastern Europe. The deportation of Jews from the Reich, the Protectorate and Austria was temporarily suspended; instead, urban ghettos were to be created for them. The transports to Nisko should never even have departed, but the operation nevertheless went ahead in order not to damage the prestige of the police force. Eichmann, Brunner and the other organizers of the first Jewish deportations thus gained valuable experience which they soon implemented in the transports to the extermination camps.

Although at the start of the war the Nazis were still not planning a genocide of the Jews, the case of Nisko represents an example of their attempt to use the method of ‘extermination through expulsion’ (‘Vernichtung durch Aussiedlung’). The vast majority of the deportees had no opportunity to earn a living; without food and shelter, they were left at the mercy of fate in an inhospitable, even hostile environment. The huge number of deaths among the Nisko deportees confirms this opinion.