

### Part III

## The Kaiserwald Concentration Camp in Riga

### I.

The name Mezaparks, or Kaiserwald, is familiar to every inhabitant of Riga. At one time it was for us the embodiment of the best and most beautiful things, for all of us had spent wonderful times there. Today Kaiserwald will remain in the memory of not just the Riga Jews but also many other European Jews who were taken there. For us, Kaiserwald is a large cemetery, a cemetery without graves.

Directly next to the railway that separates Kaiserwald from Sarkandaugava, in a large sandy plain and surrounded by a double fence of barbed wire, stands a new small town. Its name is: Kaiserwald Concentration Camp.

Two worlds stand face to face here. The first has magnificent villas, and everywhere happy voices are heard; but only screams and painful weeping are heard coming from the second. And when the new inhabitants of the Jewish villas, who inherited all our possessions, walked past us and saw our gray faces, they felt no sympathy whatsoever. They simply did not want to understand us.

The Kaiserwald concentration camp was the headquarters for all the large and small barracks camps in Riga and outside it. Because all the barracks camps had been transformed into concentration camps, all of them were dependent on Kaiserwald. Thus representatives and guards from Kaiserwald could be found everywhere.

All of the barracks camps could now be located only outside the city, for in Riga itself people were supposed to know absolutely nothing about even the existence of the Jews.

For this reason, the large Gestapo barracks camp was also moved into the Lenta factory compound on the other side of the Daugava.

The work crews of the Kaiserwald concentration camp worked only in various factories and construction sites in the area.

The central labor-deployment office and the large card file, which contained the names of tens of thousands of prisoners, were also located in Kaiserwald and were managed by a German prisoner named Schlitter. For assistance he had the German Jew Bernhard, who felt genuine sympathy for the Jewish cause. He did good whenever possible. There was a special section of the card file for the names of those who were to be transferred from Kaiserwald to the SD. These people's SD cards meant simply that they would be sent to the base. The work at this base consisted of covering up the traces of all the murders, that is, digging up the corpses and cremating them. Afterwards those who had done this work were themselves eliminated. They were chained together, and none of them ever managed to return alive.



## II.

Kaiserwald was built in March 1943. To build it, five hundred Aryan prisoners were brought in from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The Jews from the nearby Wolf & Döring barracks camp were sent to assist them in the daytime. The Aryan prisoners had to work very hard under wretched conditions, so their numbers shrank rapidly. When the Jews came to Kaiserwald, only 300 of the Aryans were still alive. The Jewish prisoners' numbers began with 501. The newly founded concentration camp was headed by the trained SS *Obersturmbannführer* Sauer (a brother-in-law of Professor Max Albert of Berlin). It was said that in civilian life he had owned a construction business. To assist him he appointed equally experienced murderers who had already been working for years at this "trade". All of them had thousands of human lives on their consciences.

Their names are: SS man Sorge ("Iron Gustav", a specialist in shots to the back of the neck), *Oberscharführer* Bruener (work deployment), Dr. Wiesner and Dr. Kreßbach (notorious for the "children's action"), Huck, Hirsch (from Bavaria), Meisel, Blatterspiegel, Greschel, Triebel (of the Estonia action), Schiller (from Siebenbürgen, i.e. Transylvania), Hoffmann (a notorious murderer), Schibbel, Schimmel, Laris, Fischer and others.

Our guards consisted of nearly a whole regiment of the "most efficient" SS people; most of them were natives of Transylvania. The ones whose presence we felt most harshly were the SS men Prater, Summer, and Schwarz.

In the women's camp there were subordinate *SS-Mädels* (SS girls): Kova (from Bavaria), a woman named Emma and a Latvian woman named Maria.

The German prisoner Rosenmeyer was the first to be appointed as the camp representative; later he was replaced by the political prisoner Hans Brunns.

## III.

After coming to the Kaiserwald concentration camp, we were no longer called Jews but prisoners. We also lost our names and received only numbers on our chests and trousers, like criminals. We also wore the same number on the left trouser leg. Here the star, through which so many had lost their lives in the ghetto, was no longer used. Beside the numbers we also wore colored triangles on the left side of our chests. The Jews wore a yellow triangle, the Aryan political prisoners a red one, and the criminals a green one. There was also the BV sign, which stood for *berufsverbrecher* (professional criminal).

In my time there were only seventy Aryan prisoners left in Kaiserwald, mostly Poles and Ukrainians. The German Aryan prisoners had a special status: they were the block representatives or held other official positions. Moreover, they lived in a barrack that was separate from the others and received additional rations. The camp representative was responsible for the camp's internal affairs. He was in charge. The first camp representative, Reinhold Rosenmeyer, showed his true colors from the very beginning. Later on he changed and became a veritable friend of the Jews. By contrast, the second camp representative, the political prisoner Hans Brunns, was sadistic in all his actions.



The second most important role in the camp was played by the notorious professional criminal Mister X. He was a good-looking slim man, and everyone in the camp trembled in fear of him. When he went off with a work crew as their foreman, he regularly brought many dead or half-dead men back with him. This elegant criminal had countless murders on his conscience. Consequently, he too came to a bad end: just before the liberation of Stutthof, where he was deploying work crews after the evacuation of Riga, he was murdered by the prisoners.

His co-workers Vilsinger and Hannes were no better. The latter also died in Stutthof, on the electrified barbed wire. Just like Vilsinger and Hannes, the Polish foremen also showed us what they were capable of: they killed hundreds of prisoners, and for this reason the names Juzek and Bolek will remain unforgettable for us.

Because the Aryan prisoners wore striped suits we called them "zebras". The prisoners who held an office in the camp (camp representative, Mister X etc.) wore blue suits, round blue caps and high boots.

They wore numbers and triangles like all the others. They always made an effort to look especially elegant in order to appeal to the women in the women's camp. But in most cases they won the women's favors by exploiting their hunger and giving them food. There were some Aryan women among the prisoners in the women's camp, and they also wore striped suits and a headscarf.

The sole authorities in the Kaiserwald concentration camp were the truncheon and the fist: nobody was allowed to complain about it. The system of regulations was the same as those of the notorious Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen concentration camps.

#### IV.

The Kaiserwald concentration camp was divided into three parts. The first was the official part; then came the men's camp and the women's camp. At the entrance to the official part of Kaiserwald stood a large barrack for the guards. There the leaders of the work columns had to report their work crews. They were counted and in response to the order "Caps off!" they marched through the gate five abreast. The rules called for us to press our arms tight against our bodies, so that we looked like marionettes and were called "figures". We were no longer regarded as human beings.

In the official part of Kaiserwald stood the headquarters of the commandant, *Sturmbannführer* Sauer, and his entire staff. Across from it stood the SS kitchen and the guards' barrack. Jewish women and men worked in the SS kitchen. There was a special barrack that served as a clothing depot; it was headed by an SS man, and a large staff of Jewish women and men worked there. Because they sometimes found valuables sewn into the clothes that had been taken away from people, they were better off. The SS people took the good items from the clothing depot for themselves or sent them to their relatives in Germany.

The SS men had their own barber; his name was Fonarow. Many women and men worked at the work stations (shoemakers' and tailors' workshops). There was even a mechanical workshop with a radio division (headed by the Itrow brothers). How often these men risked their lives by using an opportunity to listen to the radio so that they could cheer our despairing hearts with positive news reports!



## VI.

The transfer of the first Jews from the small ghetto and the German ghetto to Kaiserwald began in the second half of summer 1943. The liquidation of these two ghettos was apparently due to the revolts in the Warsaw and Bialystok ghettos and other ghettos. The decision-makers in the murderers' headquarters had decided to gradually phase out all the ghettos and house the Jews in concentration camps. There they came into the hands of trained SS people who made sure they were exterminated according to a predetermined program.

The closing of our ghetto in Riga was certainly accelerated by the weapons incident (see the chapter on the small Riga ghetto). People said that the SD, who were in fact the "hosts" of the German ghetto, and the area commissar, who had the command over us Latvian Jews, had not wanted to give up these "tasty morsels" under any circumstances. They, of course, were entitled by law to the wages we earned, as well as all our belongings.

For this reason the struggle between the SD and the area commissar's staff on the one side and the SS on the other lasted a long time. The SS won.

But before the final decision in this struggle was made, *Obersturmbannführer* Sauer came one day to the small ghetto. He brought with him several hardened criminals (zebras), headed by Mister X. They "organized" (stole) the tools from the ghetto workshops and took them to Kaiserwald.

The Jews marched in long rows from the ghetto to Kaiserwald. In extremely hot weather the women, men, and the few remaining children were driven along the streets of Riga from the Moscow suburb to Kaiserwald. Although many people fell by the wayside, nobody helped them. Each person was allowed to carry only a small bundle. The large items were transported from the ghetto by our drivers in either trucks or wagons. In addition to the guards, Commandant Roschmann personally accompanied the first large transport of the Jews to Kaiserwald. When they arrived, the rows of Jews went into the concentration camp, but the luggage brought by the trucks and wagons was unloaded in a large barn in front of the gate. The Jews never saw it again. So they were left with only their small bundles, and that only temporarily.

The zebras came out to receive the "new guests". They slapped the new arrivals' faces for every small infraction of the rules.

The registration was done in the official part of Kaiserwald. Each person received his own card in the card file. After being ordered to hand over their valuables immediately - if they did not, the guards threatened to shoot them - the people were also searched thoroughly. Many were even forced to undress. Whether they were men or women didn't matter.

The SS men, who were watching all this closely, jeered at the prisoners and beat them at will. Then the prisoners were led into the bathhouse for delousing.

The delousing procedure had certainly been precisely worked out by the "higher-ups", for it was the same in all the concentration camps I was in. The bathhouse, which was located in the women's camp, consisted of three rooms. The first was for undressing. All the clothes had to stay there and one could take along only one's boots and a razor, but only during the initial



period. In the second room there was a piece of soap. It was produced by the notorious RIF company, which stood for *reines jüdisches Fett* (pure Jewish fat). We were allowed to wash ourselves with this soap, which was manufactured in the Danzig soap factory from the bones of our co-religionists. In the washroom there were only showers. These would not have been bad at all if we had been able to wash there, but we were only driven through them and beaten with truncheons on our naked bodies. We were then driven only half-soaped into the third room, which was for getting dressed.

While the women were washing themselves, high-ranking SS men appeared in order to see them naked. Often these sadists selected victims to beat up. Once I witnessed how several women with a small child were brought in from Pleskau. The SS men beat the defenseless women terribly. Even the desperate weeping and screaming of the child didn't stop them. In a word:

A bathhouse - a pleasure!

There was no such thing as drying oneself; we had to dry off in the air. Then came the distribution of "new clothes and underwear". The "new" clothes and underwear consisted of tattered old rags. Foot-rags were not always provided, so one had no choice but to stick one's bare feet into shoes or wooden clogs. Nothing was handed to us; everything was thrown at us. You had to put on whatever you got. It didn't matter whether the trousers, skirt or underwear were short or long, tight or loose. In a word, one came out of there looking like a total caricature.

When we looked at our comrades the laughter stuck in our throats. Before we could return to the barracks, there was still the procedure of painting us with white or yellow oil paint. Each person received a large cross in the front and back, and a stripe on the trouser legs and under the arms. In a word: suddenly you had the rank of a general.

Don't think about your clothes any more, they'll be taken immediately to the clothing depot to be deloused. If you've sewn something valuable into your clothes, don't worry about it; others will certainly take care of it.

## VII.

In Kaiserwald the day began at midnight. We were awakened at four in the morning. A whistle from the block representative meant "wake up". Totally exhausted, lacking the sleep we needed, bitten by lice that had tormented us all night, we had only a few minutes to get dressed. It was still half-dark in the barrack, so you had to be an artist to find your own clothes. Quarrels broke out: one person was missing one thing, another something else.

The zebras came and roughly pulled out the prisoners who had to bring the coffee for the men's and women's camps from the kitchen. Those who refused were beaten with truncheons. Everything happened within minutes. Whether you had found all your clothes or were only half-dressed was disregarded. People ran to wash themselves in the small washroom, but not everybody did so. Many people whom one remembered as well-groomed and elegant men in the good old days had already deteriorated to such an extent that they no longer found it necessary to wash, and even slept in their dirty work clothes. Others avoided the washroom because they wanted to stay out of the truncheons' way.



The coffee arrived! Each person received it in a bowl that was often none too clean. A few minutes later a bell rang, which meant "Assemble for the morning roll call!"

We ran through the narrow barracks door and lined up in front of our block, always in rows of five. Everyone had to come out, even the small children. Those who had fallen ill during the night and were unable to walk to the infirmary were carried out and laid on the ground. Sometimes a child slept through the bell and stayed wrapped in his blankets. So all the plank beds were inspected closely.

The block representative was already looking over his block before the SS people came. "Eyes right, eyes left, and move! Caps off, caps on!" At this we had to click our heels together. Everything had to be done flawlessly, and woe to him who did it wrong. The truncheon was then put to use and blood would flow.

My block representative, a German BV (*berufsverbrecher*, or professional criminal) named Vilsinger, was a great "artist" when it came to ordering us around. He had many victims on his conscience, for he tormented us more than most. Finally came the announcements about work assignments due to various decisions made about the barracks etc. The prisoners no longer had names now, only numbers, so we were always called out by our numbers.

To end "the parade", the clerk made his report. We counted off; in the morning this roll call was done quickly so that the people could be released as soon as possible to go to work.

The bell rang again: roll call was over. The sick people went to the infirmary and the others to work.

In the women's camp there was the same procedure, the same blows, the same screaming.

## VIII.

The work crews lined up on the large sandy square: the women in front, the men behind, everyone in rows of five abreast so that they could march on.

The prisoners were chosen for the individual work crews not by the labor-deployment headquarters but by column leaders who had been specially appointed to these work crews. The column leader would make sure he received the necessary number of people. If he didn't want a certain person, he selected another one to take his place. The German prisoners accompanied the larger work crews as their foremen. The murderers Mister X, Hannes, Vilsinger and others made sure they brought back victims.

Once when a group of prisoners were working at a sawmill directly on the Daugava River, the elegant Mister X simply threw some Jews from the work crew into the water. As they were drowning he beat them with a wooden beam.

The work crews left the concentration camp. "Caps off, caps on!" We had to count off; a new group of guards joined the old one and the column would disappear behind the barbed wire, marching toward its work station. From the distance one could hear only the singing of Vilsinger's commando. That was the only work crew which was forced by this murderer to sing German songs.



The inhabitants of Sarkandaugava, past which the column marched, already knew the ragged and "singing Jews", who no longer made any impression on them at all.

Only the sick and those who worked in the camp remained there during the day.

## IX.

The work crews from Kaiserwald were initially deployed at the NSKK, the *Luftwaffe* (air force) stations I and II, the Ilguciems cement factory and various sawmills along the Daugava. There were also two privileged work crews made up of specialists. The first one consisted of dentists and dental technicians. They worked at a dental clinic in the city. The other one consisted of mechanics, all of them specialists, who worked in the Vairogs factory. The column leader for the dental clinic was Dr. Noim, the column leader for Vairogs a German Jew. The dentists and dental technicians did not come into direct contact with the public, because they worked exclusively on a great variety of technical tasks. They received their meals at their work station. It was also possible for them to trade quite extensively. They came to Kaiserwald only to sleep, and they had a special sleeping area in the barrack. We Jews had only benefits from this commando, for their food could be distributed to hungry comrades. Before Kaiserwald was liquidated, the column leader Dr. Noim escaped directly from his work station. Thus he escaped the hell that we still had to go through.

Besides these, there were various other large and small work crews. The prisoners who remained in the concentration camp worked there on construction work, carpentry, in workshops and so on.

A work crew consisting of former lawyers could be seen in the painters' workshop. They had to paint the prisoners' numbers onto cloth. Yet another work crew included a certain Izke, who had to remove all the garbage (and was therefore called the "garbage chief"). The Jews who were not in any work crew hid in the barracks, latrines or washroom. They tried to avoid the SS people's notice at any cost. Woe to him who was discovered: his life was immediately on the line!

When sick and weak people came to Kaiserwald from the Dundaga barracks camp and elsewhere and there was no more room for them in the infirmary, they too would linger in the barracks. They looked like their own shadows. Later a recuperation block was opened for them, where they were supposed to recover. Here they were handed over to the Polish Aryan prisoner Bolek, who made sure they "recovered". He "cured" them very quickly by moving them from this world to the next.

The Aryan prisoners worked on the trucks that brought sand from the nearby hills to the camp but Jews also helped to do this work.

During the day the smaller children - there were many of them in Kaiserwald until they were taken away to Auschwitz - also loitered in the blocks or ran around in the kitchens in order to pilfer things. They were most interested in potatoes, but also in wood for heating the small block stoves.



These little birds cooked not only for themselves but also for their fathers or mothers, who would come back hungry from a work crew. If they were seen cooking by an SS man who happened to enter the barrack, the SS man would throw away the food, unmoved by the wretched weeping of the four- or five-year-old boys. The SS man would shout at them. The boys would jump over the plank beds and search everywhere for a *maline* (hiding place).

Things would disappear, and so every prisoner made a large bag for himself to hold all his possessions, and he carried it with him always, even when he went to the latrine.

Before noon, Jews had to drag back to the camp the large field kettles that were used to bring dinner to the work crews outside the camp.

In these kettles, the things pilfered and traded by the work crews would then be smuggled into Kaiserwald. Lots of trading took place at the work stations. In the mornings people would take along various items of clothing from the concentration camp to trade for bread or something else. The Aryan foremen, for example Hannes or Mister X, had good connections with people at the clothing depot, and at the work stations they traded the items for brandy and other good things to drink, not only for themselves but for the camp representative as well.

The camp representative was a notorious drunkard and was finally destroyed by his vice.

Twelve o'clock: a bell signaled noontime!

We ran out of all the workshops into the barracks, where the food was distributed. Everyone raced in from the individual camp work crews, including the large Anode women's crew, as though they expected something special. We lined up in long columns with our bowls in our hands to receive our "meal". In my time, at the end of 1943, the rations were very bad. At noon we received a ladleful of turnip or cabbage soup that was always full of sand. Finding a potato in it was a special treat. But we rushed to line up for seconds without giving the slightest thought to the bad quality of the food. We were so starved that we even took in stride the blows we received as we stood in line.

Even as we ate, the bell was already ringing one o'clock: "Back to work!"

Because of the total inadequacy of the rations we were almost hungrier than before. In this condition, and weak and tired besides, we would go back to work.

## XI.

After five o'clock the work crews deployed outside the camp began to return. Those who had not had dinner at their work stations outside Kaiserwald now went directly to the kitchen to get it there. The kettles containing the now totally cold food were put out on the street. Everything was eaten standing up, and then everyone went to his block.

The workers were sometimes searched as they came in through the gate of the concentration camp. For this reason, the things they had pilfered or traded had to be well-hidden. But we had already gained a great deal of experience in this skill through our time in the ghetto. Nonetheless, it did not always work. Those who were caught hiding anything were beaten brutally and thrown into the bunker of the women's ghetto. The punishment was always a



beating with truncheons on the lower part of the body. Whether the prisoner was a man or a woman didn't matter.

A bell rang: six o'clock! Assemble for the evening roll call! The same procedure as in the morning, except that now there was not so much hurry. Sometimes it lasted hours, and it didn't matter to the guards whether we were standing in the rain or the cold of winter.

There was always something out of order, either in the men's ranks or the women's. We were constantly being counted. People died like flies, but even this bothered nobody. Every day it was the same.

Those who died, died! The same fate for everyone! Finally things were "in order". The bell rang again: the roll call was over!

## XII.

Now everyone ran and rushed into the barracks to "eat" and "rest". Everyone sat down in his assigned place at the narrow table. The table representative, who had received the rations from the block representative, distributed them according to a list. The ration for the whole day was 200 to 250 grams of bread with a bit of margarine or soft cheese. Once a week, on Sundays and holidays, we received a spoonful of sugar or syrup. Everything was washed down with hot black coffee, which was sometimes sweetened. Of course on such rations we could barely stand upright, much less work.

Those who had pilfered or traded something during their work now started to trade with it. In most cases it was only a couple of potatoes, bread, or other small items. Even bone marrow and similar waste products brought back by the slaughterhouse work crew were very much in demand. Everything was spread on bread. Others bought items of clothing to trade at their work stations the next day.

But finally we had to go to sleep. The regulations called for us to take off our clothes, but not everyone did so. The clothes we had taken off were put on the dining table. Our shoes had to stand in a straight line parallel to the plank beds. Woe to him who didn't do this properly! Sometimes there was a foot inspection. But it was very difficult to have clean feet. How could feet covered with torn shoes or wooden clogs, which had to run around in filth constantly, stay clean? In any case, when dirty feet were discovered there was only one punishment: beatings on the naked buttocks.

Now began the battle with the lice. We would sit on our plank beds, pick them off and throw them directly at our neighbors, who did the same to us. We scratched our skin bloody, so our bodies were not only bitten but also scratched up. This torment went on until we fell asleep. Each one of us would have been happy to fall asleep forever. The women were no better off.

That is what a day in Kaiserwald was like.