

**TREBLINKA II THROUGH THE WRITTEN, ARTISTIC,
AND ORAL TESTIMONIES OF SEVEN JEWISH PRISONERS**

**TREBLINKA II ATRAVÉS DOS TESTEMUNHOS ESCRITOS,
ARTÍSTICOS E ORAIS DE SETE PRISIONEIROUS JUDEUS**

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Abstract: Of the three *Aktion* Reinhardt camps (Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka II), Treblinka II is the extermination camp in which the largest number of Jewish victims were murdered (between 870,000 and 925,000 Jewish men, women, and children). The harrowing and heartbreaking testimonies of the few Jewish prisoners who managed to escape are an invaluable source for Holocaust research. In this paper, I present the three *Aktion* Reinhardt camps (highlighting the high number of Jewish victims and the low number of survivors), making a clear distinction between Treblinka II (extermination camp) and Treblinka I (labour camp) while describing the three ‘sections’ of Treblinka II (reception area, camp 1, and camp 2 – where the gas chambers were). I rely on the historiography of Treblinka and, above all, on the written, artistic, and oral testimonies of seven Jewish prisoners who were forced to work in Treblinka II (Jakub Krzepicki, Eliahu Rozenberg, Richard Glazar, Abraham Leib Bomba, Chil Rajchman, Kalman Teigman, and Samuel Willenberg). Moreover, I discuss the problems we may encounter when using the testimonies of victims and survivors, arguing that these testimonies are a priceless and an invaluable source for both Treblinka and Holocaust research.

Keywords: Treblinka II. *Aktion* Reinhardt. Jewish prisoners. Jewish *Kommandos*. Shoah. Survivors. Victims. Testimony.

Resumo: Dos três campos da *Aktion* Reinhardt (Belżec, Sobibór e Treblinka II), Treblinka II é o campo de extermínio no qual o maior número de vítimas judias foi assassinado (entre 870.000 e 925.000 homens, mulheres e crianças judias). Os testemunhos angustiantes e pungentes dos poucos prisioneiros judeus que conseguiram fugir são uma fonte inestimável para a pesquisa sobre a Shoah. Neste artigo, apresento os três campos da *Aktion* Reinhardt (destacando o elevado número de vítimas judias e o baixo número de sobreviventes), fazendo uma distinção clara entre Treblinka II (campo de extermínio) e Treblinka I (campo de trabalho), ao mesmo tempo que descrevo as três ‘secções’ de Treblinka II (área de recepção, campo 1 e campo 2 – onde se encontravam as câmaras de gás). Baseio-me na historiografia

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de Treblinka e, acima de tudo, nos testemunhos escritos, artísticos e orais de sete prisioneiros judeus que foram forçados a trabalhar em Treblinka II (Jakub Krzepicki, Eliahu Rozenberg, Richard Glazar, Abraham Leib Bomba, Chil Rajchman, Kalman Teigman e Samuel Willenberg). Além disso, discuto os problemas que podemos encontrar ao usar os testemunhos das vítimas e sobreviventes, argumentando que esses testemunhos são uma fonte inestimável e de valor incalculável tanto sobre Treblinka quanto sobre a Shoah.

Palavras-chave: Treblinka II. *Aktion* Reinhardt. Prisioneiros judeus. *Kommandos* judeus. Shoah. Sobreviventes. Vítimas. Testemunho.

Introduction

Claude Lanzmann stated in 2013 that, given that there are no photographs of the extermination process inside the gas chambers, the testimonies of Jewish prisoners who were forced to work in the gas chambers of the extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*, also called death camps, *Todeslager*) are indispensable and highly valuable.¹

Of the three *Aktion* Reinhardt camps (Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka II –all of them extermination camps), Treblinka II was the most ‘efficient’ (around 900,000 Jewish victims were murdered). The extermination camps were exclusively designed to annihilate the European Jewry (‘all’ the European Jewish men, women, children, and babies). During the Shoah, there were six extermination camps: Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka II, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek (Birkenau and Majdanek were hybrid camps, i. e., extermination camps and concentration camps –it is important to stress that some historians do not consider Majdanek as an extermination camp). The distinction between extermination camp (*Vernichtungslager*) and concentration camp (*Konzentrationslager*), as well as the distinction between Jewish victims and non-Jewish victims, is crucial for understanding the Shoah (a turning point in history, philosophy, and theology, an unprecedented genocide and the greatest catastrophe): the systematic, meticulously planned, state-sponsored murder by Germany (and its collaborators) of six million European Jewish men, women, and children.

Aktion Reinhardt was the code name for the annihilation of all the Jewish men, women, and children from the *Generalgouvernement* (more than 2,000,000), which included the

¹ “Il n’y a pas d’archives de l’extermination proprement dite. Il n’y a pas une seule photo de ce qui se passe à l’intérieur d’une chambre à gaz” [There are no records of the extermination itself. There is not a single photo of what happens inside a gas chamber] (LANZMANN, 2013).

districts of Kraków (*Distrikt Krakau*), Warsaw (*Distrikt Warschau*), Radom (*Distrikt Radom*), Lublin (*Distrikt Lublin*), and, following Operation Barbarossa (June 22, 1941), the district of Galicia (*Distrikt Galizien*) with Lwów as its capital.

Although the vast majority of the victims of Treblinka II were Polish Jewish men, women, and children, some 30,000 Jewish victims from Germany, Austria, Bohemia and Moravia, Belgium, France, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Slovakia were also murdered in the gas chambers of Treblinka II.

Random killings of Jewish men and women had already been carried out by the Germans (and ordinary Poles) since the invasion of Poland,² and the *Einsatzgruppen* massacres (targeting mainly Jews) had begun somewhat haphazardly just after June 22, 1941.³ *Aktion Reinhardt* began to be planned in the fall 1941. The first gassings (in gas vans) began on December 8, 1941, in Chełmno. Then, the short and ‘cozy’ meeting (*Besprechung*) at Wannsee quickly discussed some small details of the already organized and coordinated annihilation of ‘all’ European Jewish men, women, and children via *Vernichtungslager*, i. e., through gassing.

The *Aktion Reinhardt* camps (in which exhaust fumes of Russian trucks or tanks murdered the victims in gas chambers) worked with efficiency and speed and annihilated all the Jewish communities of the *Generalgouvernement*. The last victims murdered in Treblinka II came from the Białystok district –*Bezirk Bialystok*.⁴ “Treblinka is a symbol of the extermination of Polish Jews.” (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 2022, p. 110).

How did each of these 900,000 Jewish men, women, and children perish in Treblinka II? We will never be able to grasp the disturbing, dreadful, and heartbreaking killings that took place in Treblinka II (by gassing and by shooting); nevertheless, the written, artistic, and oral testimonies of the few Jewish prisoners who were kept alive to help run this death machine can bring us a little closer to understanding these macabre events. Although for a better understanding of the catastrophe, the testimonies must be complemented with theory, these testimonies are an invaluable tool for understanding (even if only a little) the horrific extermination process that took place in Treblinka II.

² “Already during the first few months of the occupation, thousands of Jews were murdered ..., synagogues torched, often with people praying inside” (ARAD, 2018, p 9).

³ “The mass extermination of the Jews of occupied Europe ... began ... on June 22, 1941 (...) Four SiPo and SD especial SS *Einsatzgruppen* advanced with the front units of the German army, and one of their ‘special tasks’ was to murder Jews” (ARAD, 2018, p. 17). The *Einsatzgruppen* used mainly bullets to massacre Jewish men, women, and children; they also used gas vans as a method of extermination.

⁴ “The last transport arrived [to Treblinka II] on 23 August 1943 and consisted of 39 wagons. All the deportees were Jews from Białystok” (Muzeum Treblinka, Treblinka II–Liquidation of the camp).

In this paper I have used the written testimonies and memoirs of Abram Jakub Krzepicki,⁵ Richard Glazar,⁶ Eliahu Rozenberg,⁷ Chil Rajchman,⁸ and Samuel Willenberg,⁹ and the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive oral testimonies of Richard Glazar (in German)¹⁰ and Abraham Leib Bomba (in English),¹¹ as well as their testimonies in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*¹² (including some outtakes). Moreover, I have used the USHMM testimony of Glazar (in English),¹³ the USHMM testimony of Bomba (in English),¹⁴ the testimony of Eliahu Rozenberg (in Hebrew),¹⁵ the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive testimony of Chil Rajchman (in Yiddish),¹⁶ and the testimonies of Chil Rajchman (in Spanish), Kalman Teigman (in Hebrew and English), and Samuel Willenberg (in Polish and Hebrew) of the documentaries *A pesar de Treblinka*,¹⁷ *Death Camp Treblinka: Survivor Stories*,¹⁸ and *Treblinka's Last Witness*.¹⁹

In the first section of the present paper, I describe the reality of the Jewish prisoners of Treblinka II and the thin line of separation between those who worked in camp 1 and camp 2. In the second section, I provide a description of the *Aktion Reinhardt* camps, focusing on the high number of Jewish victims (almost two million Jewish men, women, and children) and the low number of survivors (fewer than 150). In the third section, I make a clear distinction between Treblinka II (extermination camp) and Treblinka I (labour camp). In the fourth section, I analyze Krzepicki's testimony. The fifth section is dedicated to Rozenberg's testimony. In the sixth and seventh sections, I delve into the testimonies of Glazar and Bomba. The eighth, ninth,

⁵ KRZEPICKI and AUERBACH, After 26 December 1942. Warsaw ghetto, testimony [A man has escape from Treblinka ... conversations with the returnee], recorded and edited by Auerbach and with her introduction, in *The Ringelblum Archive. Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto*. Volume Five (2021, pp. 158-251).

⁶ GLAZAR, *Die Falle mit dem grünen Zaun: Überleben in Treblinka*, 2017.

⁷ ROZENBERG, Testimony, Ela Rozenberg, experiences in the Treblinka extermination camp, EHRI Project.

⁸ RAJCHMAN, *Je suis le dernier juif. Treblinka (1942–1943)*, trans. from the Yiddish Gilles Rozier, 2009.

⁹ WILLENBERG, *Surviving Treblinka*, ed., Władysław T. Bartoszewski, trans. from the Hebrew Naftali Greenwood, 1989.

¹⁰ Glazar's testimony (16 tapes of 30 minutes each, plus a final shorter tape including family photographs) was filmed on February 5, 1996, in Prague. The interviewer is Albert Lichtblau.

¹¹ Bomba's testimony (7 tapes of 30 minutes each, the last of which includes family photographs) was filmed on August 14, 1996. The interviewer is Louise Bobrow.

¹² *Shoah*, directed by LANZMANN (1985).

¹³ GLAZAR, Oral history interview with Richard Glazar, interviewed by Bonnie Gurewitsch, October 26, 1981 (2 tapes, each lasting almost an hour), USHMM.

¹⁴ BOMBA, Oral history interview with Avraham Bomba, interviewed by Linda G. Kuzmack, September 18, 1990 (4 tapes, each one hour long), USHMM.

¹⁵ ROZENBERG, Survivor Testimony About Treblinka Death Camp, Yad Vashem.

¹⁶ Rajchman's testimony (7 tapes of 30 minutes each) was filmed on October 24, 1994. The interviewer is Carol Stullberg.

¹⁷ *A pesar de Treblinka*, directed by STAWSKY (2002).

¹⁸ *Death Camp Treblinka: Survivor Stories*, directed by GEILINGER (2012). Featuring historians David Cesarani and David Silberklang.

¹⁹ *Treblinka's Last Witness*, directed by TOMLINSON (2014). Featuring Yehuda Bauer, Christopher Browning, Michael Berenbaum, and other historians.

and tenth sections are dedicated to the testimonies of Rajchman, Teigman, and Willenberg. In the Conclusion, I discuss the problems we may encounter when using testimonies of victims and survivors, arguing that these testimonies are an indispensable source for Holocaust research in order to avoid falling into a historiography based solely on the perpetrators.

1. The Jewish prisoners of Treblinka II

When the transports loaded with Jewish victims arrived in Treblinka II, only a tiny number of Jewish men (sometimes Jewish women as well, although on far fewer occasions) were told to join the so-called Jewish *Kommandos* (work *Kommandos*).²⁰ These very few prisoners who were not gassed or shot in the so-called ‘Lazarett’²¹ upon arrival usually survived just for a few weeks or a few months.²² Some, seeing their spouses and children butchered, committed suicide; others, like Abraham Leib Bomba, vowed to survive against all odds. Prisoners who had been working in Treblinka II for more than a week were considered veterans: “every day they changed the people that worked there. If somebody worked in Treblinka a week, he was an old worker ... because he survived a week” (BOMBA, 1990).

Treblinka II was divided into three main ‘sections.’ The Jewish prisoners who were forced to work in camp 2 (called by the prisoners ‘*Totenlager*’) were the ones doomed to do the most horrendous jobs: untangling the bodies of the victims following their gassing, removing the victims’ bodies from the gas chambers, cleaning the gas chambers, searching the victims’ bodies for valuables, burying the victims and burning the corpses. Often these prisoners found members of their own families among the dead. This work was similar to that of the *Sonderkommando* members of Auschwitz-Birkenau;²³ however, in Treblinka II this clear line

²⁰ “*Un petit nombre d’hommes jeunes (quelques femmes aussi) furent extraits des convois à leur arrivée pour constituer les «Kommandos de travail», encore appelés «Kommandos juifs», pour traiter cette masse considérable de biens et corps»* [A small number of young men (and some women) were separated from the transports upon arrival to form the «work *Kommandos*», known as «Jewish *Kommandos*», to process this considerable mass of goods and bodies] (WIEVIORKA, 2009, p. 23).

²¹ “Close to the entrance area there was the so-called ‘Lazarett’ ... which was camouflaged by a Red-Cross-sign (...) [all the] victims who were considered as a potential hindrance (...): old, sick, handicapped people as well as parentless children [were shot] (...) Two SS-men [Miete and Mentz] were ... responsible for the executions” (BUDDLE, HANSEN, and SOKOŁOWSKI, 2015, p. 11). Ukrainian guards also shot victims at the ‘Lazarett’.

²² “*Die Deutschen verschonten dort nur die wenigen Häftlinge zeitweilig, die ihnen bei der Beraubung der Opfer und der Beseitigung ihrer Leichname helfen mussten*” [The Germans only temporarily spared the few prisoners who had to help them rob the victims and remove their bodies] (LEHNSTAEDT, 2025, p. 6).

²³ In Birkenau, the *Sonderkommando* members “were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria (...) They cut the women’s hair (sometimes doing this after the gassing). Others removed the corpses from the gas chambers, removed gold teeth and fillings, and transferred the bodies to pits or to the crematoria” (Yad Vashem,

of separation between prisoners who worked removing bodies and burying/burning them (in camp 2) and those who worked sorting the possessions of the victims and cutting the victims' hair prior to their gassing (in camp 1) was not so clear, since sometimes prisoners from camp 1 were ordered to work in camp 2.

It should be emphasized that in Treblinka II (as well as in Chełmno, Bełżec, and Sobibór) there was no '*Selektion*' upon arrival as in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek; thus, the very few victims who were neither gassed nor massacred in the 'Lazarett' upon arrival were forced to carry out various (horrific) types of tasks, organized in several *Kommandos*: "there were different *Kommandos* of mainly young people who had been taken out of the transport" (GLAZAR, 1981). It is crucial to bear in mind that most of the Jewish prisoners worked in various *Kommandos*.

The *Sortierungskommando*'s work consisted "in sorting the clothes" (GLAZAR, 1981), "six, seven storeys high" (BOMBA, 1996); this was done in a very organized way: "cotton with cotton, silk with silk" (BOMBA, 1996). The so-called '*Goldjuden*' *Kommando* had "to assemble all the money, all [the] jewels" (GLAZAR, 1981); they were forced to search jewels inside the victims' bodies prior to their gassing. In camp 2 there was the *Kommando* of "the people who were working straight in the gas chambers and around" (GLAZAR, 1981). The *Tarnungskommando* had "to camouflage the fences, the barbed wire" (GLAZAR, 1981) of the '*Schlauch*' ['tube'] (the path with barbed-wire camouflaged fences leading to the gas chambers).²⁴ According to Bomba, the '*Schlauch*' was about 50-60 meters long; according to

Sonderkommando). The *Sonderkommando* members "lived at the very bottom of hell ... before being killed or replace by others" (FRIEDLÄNDER, 2008, p. 507). Although the *Sonderkommando* members "were forbidden from warning the incoming victims of their fate" (USHMM, Sonderkommandos), sometimes (very rarely) they told the truth to the victims; in Birkenau, "Hungarian Jews asked the *Sonderkommando* members whether they were being led to their deaths. When told that they were, they told [a *Sonderkommando* member]: 'You must revenge our bloodshed, you must live, we understand you'" (CZECH, 1998, p. 373). As one Birkenau *Sonderkommando* member once said: "[we] are like the rest, just much more unhappy" (CZECH, 1998, p. 374). Indeed, all the *Sonderkommando* members were victims among the victims. And since the *Sonderkommando* members were the prisoners who knew all the extermination process, they were regularly shot or gassed. At Chełmno, the gravediggers/pitworkers were killed by bullets immediately after each gassing (the gassing in Chełmno took place inside gas vans): "the sound of anguished screams, desperate sobs and banging at the door came inside the van. They lasted about 15 minutes" (...) The gassed people were thrown out of the vehicle and piled like rubbish. They were grabbed either by their legs or hair (...) As usual the eight 'pit-workers' were killed" (PAWLICKA-NOVAK, 2004, pp. 106, 103, 110). The testimonies of the *Sonderkommando* members of Birkenau are priceless: Filip Müller (Sered', January 3, 1922–Mannheim, 2013), David Olère (Warsaw, 1902–Noisy-le-Grand, 1985), Dario Gabbai (Thessaloniki, September 2, 1922–Los Angeles, California, March 25, 2020), Shlomo Venezia (Thessaloniki, December, 29, 1923–Rome, October 1, 2012) and his brother Morris Venezia (Thessaloniki, February 25, 1921–Palm Springs, California, September 2, 2013).

²⁴ "Victims were forced to run naked along this path to the gas chambers, deceptively labeled as showers. Once the chamber doors were sealed, a large diesel engine installed outside the building pumped in carbon monoxide exhaust" (USHMM, Treblinka).

Arad, it was 150 meters long.²⁵ Glazar worked in the *Tarnungskommando*; this was the only *Kommando* that was allowed to go outside Treblinka II to look for tree branches (knowing the surroundings of Treblinka II was crucial to have the slightest chance of staying alive after the Treblinka uprising –August 2, 1943).

Among the few prisoners who worked in camp 1 were the ‘Blue’ and the ‘Reds’. The prisoners with blue armbands had “to take out the people from the train and ... take them to the main undressing place” (BOMBA, 1996); they also had to clean the cattle wagons. The prisoners with red armbands “had a chance to live better, to eat better and to live longer” (BOMBA, 1996); their task was to prepare the victims for the gas chamber, “how to undress, what to do with their clothes, what to do with their shoes, with the belongings” (BOMBA, 1996).

The *Kommando* of *Friseurs* (about 14–16 barbers, according to Bomba) cut the women’s hair prior to their gassing. At the beginning they had to cut the hair inside the gas chambers, in camp 2: “when I was assigned as a barber to cut the women’s hair in the gas chamber, was the beginning (...) then I found out what it is and how it was” (BOMBA, 1996).

Krzepicki worked in the *Sortierungskommando* and buried bodies; Rozenberg worked in the *Sortierungskommando*, pulled out bodies from the gas chambers and burned them; Glazar worked in the *Sortierungskommando* and the *Tarnungskommando*; Bomba cut the women’s hair prior to their gassing, worked in the *Sortierungskommando*, and accompanied victims to the ‘Lazarett’; Rajchman worked as a barber, extracted gold teeth, and burned bodies; Teigman worked in the *Sortierungskommando* and accompanied Jewish children to the ‘Lazarett’; Willenberg sorted the victims’ belongings, cut women's hair –at least on one occasion, and accompanied victims to the ‘Lazarett’. The work of the prisoners was, indeed, horrendous: “The life expectancy of the *Arbeitsjuden* was a few weeks, a few months at the most. A lot of them committed suicide” (Cesarani in GEILINGER, 2012).

Almost all the prisoners in Treblinka II were Jewish men. However, there were about 50 Jewish women, who played an indispensable role in the Treblinka uprising.²⁶ Bronka Sukno was one of the very few Jewish women who survived. She was deported to Treblinka II with her family on January 18, 1943; her parents and four siblings were murdered upon arrival. She

²⁵ The ‘*Schlauch*’, “which connected Camp [2] with the extermination area, was a narrow passageway, about 3 to 4 meters wide and 150 meters long. Through here the victims were driven into the gas chambers located at the end of the ‘tube’” (ARAD, 2018, p. 57).

²⁶ See GIBBS, 2025.

made aliyah and testified at the Treblinka trial held in Düsseldorf (1964–1965). Unfortunately, neither the USC Shoah Foundation nor the USHMM recorded her testimony.

Before delving into the testimonies of Jakub Krzepicki, Eliahu Rozenberg, Richard Glazar, Abraham Leib Bomba, Chil Rajchman, Kalman Teigman, and Samuel Willenberg, it is necessary to outline the scope of *Aktion* Reinhardt and to draw a clear distinction between Treblinka II and Treblinka I.

2. Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka II: Almost 2 million Jewish victims and fewer than 150 survivors

The annihilation of the Polish Jewish men, women, and children of the *Generalgouvernement* was carried out through the *Aktion* Reinhardt, which began on March 17, 1942.²⁷ Belżec, Sobibór and Treblinka were “devoted solely to gassing” (NIEWYK and NICOSIA, 2000, p. 20). Three months before the first gassings at Belżec, Chełmno had begun to murder Jewish victims in gas vans. Stationary gas chambers that used exhaust gas as a method of extermination was something new.²⁸ These death camps “were not meant to have any function other than mass murder” (Cesarani in GEILINGER, 2012).

In Belżec the Germans murdered 434,500–600,000²⁹ Jewish men, women, and children (and a few hundred Roma and Sinti men, women, and children). Belżec had several gas chambers (most likely six) and operated from March 17, 1942, until June 1943: “The full-scale extermination of Jews in Belzec began on March 17, 1942, with the onset of the deportation of the Jews of Lublin. This date marks the actual start of Operation Reinhard” (ARAD, 2018, p 105).

²⁷ “*Der Massenmord an den Juden aus dem Distrikt Lublin –und vereinzelt aus Galizien und Krakau– begann in Belżec am 17. März 1942, getarnt als «Umsiedlung nach Osten»*” [The mass murder of the Jews from the Lublin district –and a few from Galicia and Krakow –began in Belżec on March 17, 1942, disguised as a ‘resettlement to the East’] (LEHNSTAEDT, 2023, p. 36).

²⁸ *Aktion* T4 used gassing installations with pure carbon monoxide in canisters. At Chełmno the victims were murdered in gas vans with exhaust fumes; in Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka II, the victims were murdered in gas chambers with exhaust fumes; in Birkenau the victims were murdered in gas chambers with Zyklon B; in Majdanek the victims were murdered in gas chambers with both Zyklon B and carbon monoxide in steel canisters (there was also a gas van that went back and forth from the Lublin castle to Majdanek). “The most striking fact about the killing center operations is that, unlike the earlier phases of the destruction process, they were unprecedented” (HILBERG, 2019, p. 555).

²⁹ “Jewish losses by location and/or murder method, 1939-1945: Belzec: 434.5 thousand” (VAN PELT, 2017, p. 126); From March to December 1942 about 450 thousand people were murdered there, most of whom were Polish Jews as well as the Jewish deportees from Germany, Austria, Czechia and Slovakia,” (Muzeum–Miejsce Pamięci w Belżcu. History of the camp); “The estimated number of Jews killed in ... Belzec [is] 500,000” (BAUER, 2001, p. 229); “In total, 600,000 people ... were murdered at Belzec” (Yad Vashem, Belzec).

In Sobibór, 167,000-250,000³⁰ Jewish men, women, and children were murdered in several gas chambers. It operated in two periods: from May to July 1942 (in April there was an isolated ‘experimental’ gassing) and from October 1942 until the Sobibór uprising –October 14, 1943.

Treblinka II was “the last and deadliest of the ‘Aktion Reinhardt’ camps” (FRIEDLÄNDER, 2008, p. 431). It operated from July 23, 1942 to August 23, 1943 and murdered almost one million Jewish men, women, and children³¹ (a few thousand Roma and Sinti victims, likely between 2,000 and 3,000 men, women and children, were also killed, but most perished in Treblinka I or were shot in the forest).

There were fewer than 150 survivors of the three *Aktion* Reinhardt camps.³² According to Willenberg, only 67 Jewish prisoners survived Treblinka II. “The fact that anybody survived means that they went completely against the odds (...) 50, 60, 70 people out of 850,000–900,000 were killed” (Silberklang in GEILINGER, 2012).

3. Treblinka II (extermination camp) versus Treblinka I (labour camp)

The historiography of Treblinka does not make a clear distinction between Treblinka II and Treblinka I; this fact contributes to creating a great deal of confusion. For understanding the reality of Treblinka II it is crucial to separate both camps.

Treblinka I (summer of 1941–July 1944) was a labour camp. Most of the prisoners were forced to work in the gravel pit; others worked on a farm. In total, some 10,000 Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners perished there. Glazar was once in Treblinka I as part of the

³⁰ “Jewish losses by location and/or murder method, 1939-1945: Sobibor: 167 thousand,” (VAN PELT, 2017, p. 126); “About 250,000 Jews were killed at Sobibor. The Germans constructed Sobibor as a rectangle–1,312 by 1,969 feet. A barbed-wire fence, woven with tree branches, surrounded the perimeter of the camp (...) The gas chambers were sealed once the maximum potential of victims were inside. Poisonous gas was then piped in. Within 20-30 minutes, all those inside were dead. Jewish work teams – known as *Sonderkommando* removed the bodies, pulled out any gold teeth, and buried the dead. The whole process, from arrival to burial, took only two or three hours” (Yad Vashem, Sobibor).

³¹ “Martin Gilbert [provides] 850,000 [Jewish victims], Yitzak Arad [,] 850,000 ... Manfred Burba [,] 912,000 [and] Ryszard Czarkowski [,] 1,582,000 (...) The information board in front of the entrance to the camp states that 800,000 people died at Treblinka” (Muzeum Treblinka, Treblinka II – Number of Victims); “In total, approximately 870,000 people were murdered at Treblinka” (Yad Vashem. Treblinka, p. 1); “Jewish losses by location and/or murder method, 1939-1945: Treblinka: 925 thousand” (VAN PELT, 2017, p. 126); “From late July 1942 through September 1943 ... an estimated 925,000 Jews [were murdered] at the Treblinka killing center [also] an unknown number of Poles, Roma, and Soviet POWs (USHMM. Treblinka).

³² “*Bełżec, Sobibór und Treblinka überlebten insgesamt weniger als 150 Menschen. 2019, über 70 Jahre nach der Befreiung, sind sie alle tot*” [Overall, fewer than 150 people survived Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka. In 2019, more than 70 years after the liberation, they are all dead] (LEHNSTAEDT, 2003, p. 9).

Tarnungskommando: “there was another Treblinka camp not ... far away from Treblinka extermination camp ... it was a force labour camp, a small camp. Once I was brought with my *Kommando* there just to bring sand and stones to Treblinka [II]” (GLAZAR, 1981).

Treblinka II was situated about 2 km from Treblinka I and about 4 km from the village of Treblinka (between Warsaw and Białystok).³³ The transports (of 50-60 cars each) stopped first at the Małkinia railway station, where 20 “cars at a time were detached from the train and brought into the killing center” (USHMM, Treblinka). Today, the closest station to the Treblinka Memorial is Małkinia Górna (8 km away): “17,000 stones [symbolizing] *matzevot* ... commemorate the 900,000 victims of the Holocaust whose final resting place is Treblinka” (The Memory of Treblinka Foundation, Treblinka—A Place of Remembrance). On 221 of these stones, “names are gravestones of localities from which the Jews were brought” (KOPÓWKA, 2019, p. 6), from Adamów to Żelechów.

Treblinka II “was built by prisoners of the forced labour camp Treblinka” (BUDDLE, HANSEN, and SOKOŁOWSKI, 2015, p. 7) and covered an area of 17³⁴–24³⁵ hectares: it was “surrounded by two [2.5 meters high] fences of barbed wire ... with watchtowers in between” (BUDDLE, HANSEN, and SOKOŁOWSKI, 2015, p. 8). The barbed wire was covered and hidden with leaves and branches. Willenberg recalls: “The camp was surrounded by two rows of barbed wire, but also by anti-tank barriers” (WILLENBERG, 2011).

Aside from the commandant’s office and the perpetrators’ barracks (German and Ukrainian men), a barrack for Polish and Ukrainian women who cooked and cleaned for the perpetrators, a grotesque small zoo,³⁶ and a valuables sorting yard, Treblinka II was ‘divided’ into three main sections or *Lager*.

The upper camp or camp 2 was where the gas chambers were located; it had a barrack for the approximately 300 Jewish prisoners who were forced to work in camp 2. Glazar states: “the second part of the camp was called *Totenlager*, the camp of death, because there was where the gas chambers stood” (GLAZAR, 1981).

The lower camp or camp 1 was where the *Arbeitsjuden* from camp 1 (some 700–800) ‘lived’; this camp was called by the Germans *Wohnlager* [residential camp].

³³ “The Germans picked a site near to an old labour camp on a spur line that branched off the local Malkinia–Seidlce railway that, in turn, connected with the main Warsaw–Białystok railroad” (CESARANI, 2017, p. 503).

³⁴ According to Muzeum Treblinka, Treblinka II—Topography of the camp.

³⁵ According to Lehnstaedt: “*Das Lager in Treblinka kam dafür mit einer Fläche von 24 Hektar aus*” [The camp in Treblinka had an area of 24 hectares] (LEHNSTAEDT, 2025, p. 6).

³⁶ “There were forest animals, such as roe deer, foxes, pigeons and two peacocks” (Muzeum Treblinka, Treblinka II—Topography of the camp).

At the ‘*Auffanglager*’ [reception camp], the Jewish victims were separated (men to the right, and women and children to the left). To the left there was the huge undressing barrack for women and children: “the women and the small children were lead to [a] very large barrack and [they] undressed over there. But the men ... undressed [outside and waited] in groups [before entering] the gas chambers” (BOMBA, 1996). Death in the gas chambers was horrifying. The Jewish victims screamed desperately, recited the Shema, and bled, urinated, and defecated uncontrollably. The gassing process lasted about 20 minutes, although death occurred within a few minutes.

The exact location of the ‘Lazarett’ is not known. Bomba describes the ‘Lazarett’ as “a very huge pit where they killed people” (BOMBA, 1996). Besides being the final destination of all the elderly, sick, people with disabilities, and children who arrived alone in Treblinka II, the ‘Lazarett’ was also the place where the few prisoners who were kept alive and ‘committed an offense’ or succumbed to sickness were shot.

Next to Treblinka II there was a sign that read ‘Ober Majdan’ (a made-up name) to deceive the victims: “At the ramp, there was a large barrack where the belongings of victims were sorted. This warehouse looked [like] a railway station from the side of the ramp and tracks; [it] had a fake ticket window and a fake clock painted on top” (Muzeum Treblinka, Treblinka II–Topography of the camp). According to Bomba, there were “between two and four transports a day” (BOMBA, 1996).

The ‘*Schlauch*’ was 50-60 meters long. The Germans sarcastically referred to it as the ‘*Himmelstrasse*’ or ‘*Himmelweg*’ [pathway to heaven]. The Jewish victims were pushed hastily and with utmost brutality toward the front door of the gas chamber and, once gassed, their corpses were taken out by the Jewish prisoners through the back door of the gas chamber. As a rule, men were gassed first, followed by women and children.

The gas chambers operated with carbon monoxide concentrated in exhaust gas generated by engines: “The extermination area included a brick building that housed three gas chambers. A diesel engine ... produced the carbon monoxide, which fueled the chambers. The gas flowed through pipes attached to the ceiling of the chambers, ending in what looked like showerheads” (Yad Vashem, Treblinka). According to Arad, there were “three gas chambers, each 4 by 4 meters and 2.6 meters high (...). A room attached to the building contained a diesel engine, which introduced the poisonous carbon monoxide gas through pipes into the gas chambers” (ARAD, 2018, p. 65). According to Buddle, Hansen and Sokolowski, in the beginning “there were three operating gas chambers. Later, in a newly erected building there

were 10 gas chambers in which up to 5,000 victims could be killed at a time” (BUDDLE, HANSEN, and SOKOŁOWSKI, 2015, p. 13). According to Cesarani (2017), in the beginning, “Treblinka had three gas chambers, each 4 by 4 meters and nearly 3 meters high. However, after several weeks, these proved too small and two more were added” (p. 503); after some months, “a new gas chamber was opened with eight or ten cells of larger dimensions but lower in height” (pp. 503–504).

The personnel was very small in number: “a camp like Treblinka which [killed] close to a million people within one year [had] a staff of 20 SS men, about 100–120 Ukrainian guards and about 800 work Jews” (Browning in TOMLINSON, 2014).

Treblinka II did not have *Krematoria* like Birkenau: “Initially, the murdered were buried, then burned on grates (...) To cover up the traces of the crime, a method of burning the bodies with petrol and diesel oil was introduced, and ashes mixed with sand were buried” (Muzeum Treblinka, Treblinka II–Topography of the camp). Glazar asserts that the capacity of murder in Treblinka II was huge: “Treblinka maybe had a bigger capacity than Auschwitz” (GLAZAR, 1981). Treblinka II was neither “a working camp [nor] a concentration camp, [but an] extermination camp, from [where] nobody [came] out alive” (BOMBA, 1990).

4. Treblinka II through Jakub Krzepicki’s testimony

Abram Jakub Krzepicki (Praszka, 1915–Warsaw, 1943) was deported from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka II on August 25, 1942. He was forced to bury bodies and sort the victims’ clothing: “Abram witnessed the extermination of his nation” (Muzeum Treblinka, Abram Jakub Krzepicki–T2 prisoner). He was in Treblinka for 20 days and managed to escape on September 13, 1943, reaching Warsaw at the end of September. In the Warsaw ghetto, he told Rachel Auerbach (Rokhl Oyerbakh –a Jewish journalist, member of Oyneg Shabes, and one of the only three survivors of Oyneg Shabes) what he had witnessed. It is thanks to Auerbach and the Oyneg Shabes Archive (the Ringelblum Archive) that we have Krzepicki’s testimony. Even if Krzepicki’s testimony is invaluable, it is important to keep in mind that the text was written and edited by Auerbach (in Yiddish) and not by him; therefore, we have to take into account that this testimony is, in some way, filtered.³⁷

³⁷ Krzepicki’s testimony was recorded from December 28, 1942, to March 7, 1943, and written in Yiddish on three notebooks by Auerbach – ARG II 382 (Ring II/299). It is ‘organized’ in six chapters. ARG II 382 also contains an Introduction by Auerbach, a photograph of Krzepicki, a map of Treblinka II, and two addresses of two of

Krzepicki was deported from Warsaw to Treblinka II in a packed cattle car: “More than a hundred people were crammed into our freight wagon” (KRZEPICKI and AUERBACH, 2021, p. 175). Some people “began to recite the mourner’s Kaddish [קדיש]” (p. 176). Krzepicki states: “It’s impossible to imagine the horrors of that closed, airless freight wagon (...) Everybody was pushing towards the windows, where there was a little air” (p. 176). He describes the filth and the stench: there was “human excrement ... in every corner” (p. 176). Men, women, and children fainted from thirst. Krzepicki describes the arrival: “We were now on the grounds of the slaughterhouse of Treblinka” (pp. 179-180). The doors were opened by Ukrainian guards. German-SS were “standing around with whips in their hands” (p. 180). Krzepicki saw a huge pile of clothing: “So many clothes! But where are the people?” (p. 180). He recounts the undressing and the victims’ howls: “The women all went into the barrack on the left and, as we later learned, they were told at once to strip naked and were driven out of the barrack through another door, along a narrow path lined on either side with barbed wire” (Krzepicki is referring to the ‘*Schlauch*’). “After a mere few minutes, we could hear their terrible screams, but we could not see anything, because the grove of trees blocked our view” (p. 181).

Krzepicki and others ran into a barrack: “There were many dead bodies lying in the barrack, and we could see that they had all been shot” (p. 181). These victims were Jewish men, women, and children from Kielce. A German told the standing victims who were petrified: “*Habt keine Angst* [Have no fear] (...) Everyone will get work and bread” (pp. 182, 183), which was, of course, a lie, since minutes later everyone, without exception, was gassed.

Krzepicki was taken to work in a pit: “Countless dead bodies lay there, piled upon each other (...) perhaps ten thousand bodies” (KRZEPICKI and AUERBACH, 2021, p. 182). The scene was horrifying: “Most of the bodies had horribly bloated bellies; they were covered with brown and black spots, swollen and ... crawling with worms (...) Many of the dead still had their eyes open” (p. 184). An excavator was digging ditches: “There were various kinds of ditches ... At a distance, running parallel with the outermost camp fence, were three giant open mass graves, in which the dead were piled on top of each other. Closer to the barracks was a somewhat smaller ditch” (p. 185). The pits were monstrously huge: “These graves were 60–70 [meters] long [and] ... very deep (...) The graves remained open through the night and the next

Krzepicki’s relatives to notify his fate in case of his death (Roza Krzepicka in Tel Aviv, Eretz Israel, and Abram Krzepicki in Port Louis, Mauritius). The translation into English is in *The Ringelblum Archive. Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, Volume Five: The Last Stage of Resettlement is Death. Pomiechówek, Chełmno on the Ner, Treblinka* (pp. 158-253).

day more bodies were piled into them. While I was in Treblinka, only the small pit to the left ... was covered over” (p. 192).

Krzepicki’s *Kommando* consisted of 60 men divided into three groups. Since he knew German he became the leader of his group. Krzepicki worked in several *Kommandos*: cleaning the cattle wagons, sorting the clothing, and burying the dead. He recalls an infant of about one year old who was alive among the corpses; he tried to hide him under the rags, but the “next morning they found the child dead, and threw [the] body into the pit” (p. 188).

The thirst was absolutely terrible: “Not once in the three weeks that I was in Treblinka did I ever really manage to quench my thirst” (p. 194). Krzepicki was killed in the Warsaw ghetto uprising (most likely on April 22, 1943).

5. Treblinka II through Eliahu Rozenberg’s testimony

Eliahu (Ela) Rozenberg (occasionally written Rosenberg) (Warsaw, 1924–Israel, date of death unknown) wrote his testimony (in Polish) in 1945:³⁸ “My father was murdered by the Germans in 1940. In August 1942, I was deported from the [Warsaw] ghetto to Treblinka along with the rest of my family, we were packed 100 to a wagon” (ROZENBERG, 1945, p. 1). He was deported alongside his mother and his three younger sisters (they were all murdered upon arrival): “I saw the Małkinia station through the little barred window, at that moment the Germans started detaching groups of 15 wagons that went on a special side-track leading to the camp, and when the wagons stopped, they started shouting ‘raus, raus’” (p. 1). When he arrived to Treblinka II he saw fake signs pointing to Białystok and Przemyśl: “Women and men were separated, [I said] good-bye to my mother and sister” (p. 1); he recalls the deceit: “the Germans ordered us to sit on the ground, telling us that ... when we are bathed then everyone would be reunited with their family, would get new clothing and we would travel on further to where we would be working” (p. 1). A German picked out 30 young men and took them to a “big yard where there were huge piles of clothing, suitcases, men’s and women’s shoes, baggage, money, and mounds of other things” (p. 1). At that time he recognized someone who arrived to Treblinka four days before him and asked him where the men and women were: “with tears in his eyes, he told me just one [sentence]: ‘you don’t have [a] mother or sister anymore’” (p. 1).

³⁸ Preserved at the Centralna Biblioteka Judaistyczna, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny. The English translation can be found at EHRI Project. Early Holocaust Testimony, Ela Rozenberg, experiences in the Treblinka extermination camp.

When Rozenberg went to the barracks, the Germans beat all the men and shot some of them: “We pushed against each other like sheep, and when I fell to the ground, I was hit on the fingers with a bayonet” (p. 1). The next day, a German came and took some fifty men: “[they] took us through the whole yard to some gate, and when we went through that gate my blood froze, I saw a heap of dead people lying on the ground” (p. 1). Boys covered in blood were “grabbing corpses by the hands and legs” (p. 1). Rozenberg took the stretcher to carry the recently gassed victims to the pit: “on the way to the gas chambers they hit us with whips, shouting: ‘faster, you dogs’ (...) The Germans began to torture us mercilessly, they threw me to the ground and kicked me in the head” (pp. 1-2). He describes horrific scenes: “coming closer to the pit I saw another tragic scene, in the pit I saw only a huge puddle of blood and when the corpses were thrown into the pit, they sunk into the blood” (p. 2).

In his oral testimony (in Hebrew), Rozenberg recalls how the victims went through the ‘*Schlauch*’ while the Germans and Ukrainians stood there with dogs biting them. He explains that the gas used in Treblinka II was not Zyklon B as in Birkenau, but the exhaust gas that came out from the engine of a Russian tank that choked the victims within 25 minutes. The children were screaming: “*Mame, tate, mame tate!*” [‘mother, father’, in Yiddish] (ROZENBERG, n. d.). Müntzberger, a perpetrator, listened impassively to the agony of the victims, and when the screams ceased, he shouted: “*Aufmachen* [open]; *Alles schläft* [all asleep]” (ROZENBERG, n. d.). With tears in his eyes, Rozenberg recalls how the dead (Jewish men, women, and children) were standing and fell like a block when the door of the gas chamber opened. He took the bodies out and dumped them (through a ramp); then the bodies were taken on stretchers. Between the gas chambers and the pits, the ‘dentists’ (carrying bowls of water) extracted the victims’ gold teeth. In the pits the bodies were burned on ‘grills’. They burned all night long. “I pulled out corpses for 5 months” (ROZENBERG, 1945, p. 2). In February 1943, they had to “dig out all those corpses and burn them” (p. 2). Three diggers went into the pit and were forced to pick “the pieces of flesh and bones” (p. 2) and burned them. Rozenberg states that they burned 8,000 corpses a day. After the war, he made aliyah and testified at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem (April 11–December 15, 1961).

6. Treblinka II through Richard Glazar’s testimony

Richard Glazar (Goldschmid) (Prague, November 29, 1920–Basel, December 20, 1997) was deported to Theresienstadt in September 1941, and over a year later to Treblinka II (on

October 8, 1942): “*Es waren normale Vagons, Personenwagen*” [They were normal wagons, passenger cars] (LANZMANN, 1985). After two days, he saw the sign of Małkinia and also saw a Pole making the death sign by sliding his finger across his throat.

According to Glazar, Treblinka looked like “a big farm” (GLAZAR, 1981) with green fences. In *Shoah*, he recalls how the ‘mass’ of Jewish people wept: “*das war eine Masse*” [it was a mass]. The prisoners with red and blue armbands wore “civilian clothes” (GLAZAR, 1981) and spoke Polish and Yiddish. Glazar undressed and minutes later an SS told him to put on his clothes again: “They pulled out some 18 people out of these 1,000 people” (GLAZAR, 1981). The other prisoners told him: “we [are] in a extermination camp called Treblinka ... all [the] people who came with [you] and went to the ‘baths’ [are] dead already” (GLAZAR, 1981). The SS and Ukrainian guards had whips: “they beat us all the time” (GLAZAR, 1981). The work of the *Sortierungskommando* “consisted in sorting the clothing (...) Everything was so perfectly organized” (GLAZAR, 1981).

Glazar states that the same transports arriving at Treblinka filled with Jewish men, women, and children left Treblinka filled with the victims’ belongings.³⁹ He asserts that “the main product of Treblinka was ‘nothing’ ... [it] was the people who were put in the gas chambers, who were burned on ... a pyre (...) there was nothing but ash. And ‘nothing’ was the final product of Treblinka” (GLAZAR, 1981). Glazar took part in the Treblinka uprising and managed to escape: “the whole revolt was not a heroic one in my view ... it was just an act of desperation” (GLAZAR, 1981). To survive outside Treblinka was exceedingly difficult because the Poles were “mainly antisemites” (GLAZAR, 1981).

Glazar’s parents had been deported from Prague to Łódź in 1941. His father perished; his mother survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Glazar married after the war and had a daughter and a son. He stated that “after Treblinka, it is impossible to be religious” (GLAZAR, 1981). On December 20, 1997 (at the age of 77), thirteen days after the death of his wife Zdena, he committed suicide by throwing himself out of the window. He left unfinished a model of Treblinka II.

7. Treblinka II through Abraham Leib Bomba’s testimony

Abraham Leib Bomba (Bytom, June 8, 1913– Broward County, Florida, February 19,

³⁹ “*Alle Wagons an der Rampe sind voll beladen (...) Die Wagons mit Menschen nach Treblinka wechseln sich jetzt ab mit Wagons mit Sachen aus Treblinka*” [All the wagons at the ramp are fully loaded (...) The wagons with people to Treblinka now alternate with wagons with things from Treblinka] (GLAZAR, 2017, pp. 45–46).

2000) was trapped in the Czestochowa ghetto in 1941 (where he worked as a barber). He was deported to Treblinka II on September 25/28, 1942, along with his wife Reizl and his four-week-old son Berl: “from Czestochowa 50,000 ghettoized Jews were sent to Treblinka in a single brutal Aktion lasting two weeks” (BROWNING 2012, p. xxxvi).

In *Shoah*, Bomba recalls the hunger and thirst inside the cattle car: “People were not only starving, they were choking (...) It was hot like hell.” The ride “was ... horrible; people were screaming” (BOMBA, 1996). According to Bomba, Polish Jewish men and women already knew what awaited them: “I saw many trains coming back but the trains were without the people” (LANZMANN, 1985). Before his transport arrived at Treblinka, he saw “over 60 trains with about 6,000 people ... they disappeared, two hours, came in” (BOMBA, 1990). When the doors opened, many of the victims locked in the freight car were already dead.

“When we came into Treblinka we didn't know who the people were. Some of them had armbands ... red ... blue, Jewish *Kommandos*” (Bomba in LANZMANN, 1985). They were told: “‘Women to the left and men to the right.’ We had no time even to look [at] each other, because they started hitting [us] over the head (...) All you heard was crying” (LANZMANN, 1985). “My wife, the kid, and my mother went ... to the left side” (BOMBA, 1990). Bomba’s wife and baby child were both murdered upon arrival, along with Bomba’s mother (Touba Feijl Bomba, née Kozuch),⁴⁰ his younger brother Judah,⁴¹ Bomba’s sister-in-law (his wife’s sister, who was pregnant), and other relatives. His older brother Jacob had been deported to Treblinka II and murdered alongside his wife and child three days earlier.

To understand the magnitude of the tragedy and the disproportion between the Jewish victims who went straight to the gas chambers and the Jewish people who were temporarily spared death, Bomba’s testimony is indispensable: “From 18,000 people, they took out five” (BOMBA, 1996) (Bomba refers to three transports of 6,000 men, women, and children each). He and his cousin were among those five: “From this day we were in Treblinka in the ... working *Kommando*” (BOMBA, 1996). He asked a ‘Red’ what was happening: “be happy you are here, because they are finished” (BOMBA, 1990). That same night, inside the barrack, some prisoners said Kaddish.

Bomba was assigned first to the *Sortierungskommando* and later to the *Kommando* of barbers: “the women were all naked (...) and we had to do our job” (BOMBA, 1996). He recalls a Jewish girl, Sarah Levinson, who told him: “‘Try to escape from here and let the world know

⁴⁰ “A lovely, nice looking woman (...) she was the real Jewish mother ... *Yiddishe Mame* ... she did everything for her children ... she could make from potatoes and water ... a meal like for a king” (BOMBA, 1996).

⁴¹ “My brother ... undressed ... went to the gas chamber” (BOMBA, 1996).

what's going on'" (BOMBA, 1996); Bomba then adds: "That's exactly her words, and that's how long it took cutting her hair" (BOMBA, 1996). The victims sat in benches; the 'job' had to be done in the blink of an eye: "it was very painful ... some of the barbers recognized their dear ones, like wives, mothers, even grandmothers" (BOMBA, 1990).

Bomba confesses that the assumption that the Jewish people went 'like sheep to the slaughter' hurts him deeply: "People are not sheep" (BOMBA, 1990). He asserts that "the way the Germans organized to get the people killed [was very effective]" (BOMBA, 1990). Following ghettoization, theft, humiliation, degradation, and starvation, little by little "the people ... lost the will to fight and even the will to live" (BOMBA, 1990). During the deportations to the extermination camps, some people thought that things would improve just because they simply could not get any worse. But even if they were wrong, this does not mean that the victims went 'like sheep to the slaughter,' states Bomba. According to Bomba, Polish Jews from Warsaw already knew about Treblinka; a few victims jumped into a water well upon arrival to avoid death by gas.

Bomba describes one gas chamber: it "was all concrete, there [were] no windows" (BOMBA, 1990). It had two steel doors. In the ceiling there were some wires which "looked like the water is going to come out" (BOMBA, 1990). The victims were pushed with their hands raised (so that there would be more room) and "on top of that they [threw] in kids, two, three, four-year old kids" (BOMBA, 1990). Bomba states that the killing process took between five and seven minutes; then "from the other side, the group, people [working] in Treblinka number 2 [camp 2] ... took out the corpses, some of them dead and some of them still alive [and] dragged them to the ditches" (BOMBA, 1990). Bomba cut the women's hair inside the gas chamber "a little more than two weeks" (BOMBA, 1990); after that period of time, he cut the women's hair inside the undressing barrack.

Bomba slept in a barrack alongside 100–120 prisoners; they had to sleep "on the floor ... on the ground" (BOMBA, 1996). The day started at 5 AM. At the *Appell*, they had to stand "like soldiers" (BOMBA, 1996). The 'breakfast' consisted of coffee with bread or just coffee; the work lasted 12–14 hours, sometimes 18: "when a transport came at night, we had to stay at night" (BOMBA, 1996). Besides his work as a barber and in the *Sortierungskommando*, Bomba also had to accompany victims to the 'Lazarett': "that was the hardest job" (BOMBA, 1990).

Bomba asserts that the Poles knew what was happening in Treblinka II: "They could smell it, because of the bodies they were burning" (BOMBA, 1996). At the 'Lazarett', the bodies of Jewish men, women, and children were burned together with the garbage. The brutal manner in which the Jewish victims were systematically murdered in the gas chambers and the

monstrous way in which the dead were treated are truly sinister. Certainly, humanity cannot sink any lower than this.

Bomba managed to escape in January 1943 (along with his cousin and a friend). He returned to the Częstochowa ghetto and spoke of the horrors of Treblinka II, but nobody believed him: “nobody did believe that something like that had happened” (BOMBA, 1996). In the ghetto, he met Regina Hamburger (born in Łódź); they married and took part in the Częstochowa ghetto uprising (June 1943). Bomba states that nobody helped them: “The Polacks were not interested on our survival” (BOMBA, 1996). The few Jewish people remaining in the ghetto fought with a couple of guns and Molotov cocktails; the Germans burned the few remaining houses and the Jewish people perished in the bunkers.

After the Częstochowa ghetto uprising, Bomba and Regina were deported to a labour camp, HASAG (Hugo Schneider Aktiengesellschaft), “one of the big factories of ammunition in Germany” (BOMBA, 1996). At first, he did not try to escape because there was “no place where to escape. If you say escape, you got to go somewhere (...) To be outside [among] the Polacks was even worse than to be [with] the Germans” (BOMBA, 1996). However, he escaped one day before the ‘liberation’. After the war, Bomba and his wife Regina lived in Częstochowa, Bytom and Falkenstein. In 1951 they immigrated to the US and lived there for 28 years. On September 17, 1978, they made aliyah: “my daughter decided for me (...) I like Israel, love Israel” (LANZMANN, 1979). Bomba was a Zionist before the war. It appears, though, that they later returned to the US. They had a daughter, Bonnie, and three grandchildren. Bomba testified against Hirtreiter in 1951 and was a witness at the Treblinka trial held in Düsseldorf (October 12, 1964–1965): “Seeing the people in trial ... is difficult. You see the man [who] went around all day long with a gun killing people and he says he is not guilty, he didn’t do anything (...) He [just followed] orders” (BOMBA, 1996).

8. Treblinka II through Chil Rajchman’s testimony

Chil Rajchman (Łódź, June 14, 1914–Montevideo, May 7, 2004) was deported from his *shtetl* (from the Lubartów train station) to Treblinka II along with his 19-year-old sister Rivke (who was murdered upon arrival). He cut the hair of the Jewish women prior to their gassing, extracted gold teeth, and burned bodies: “tuve que cargar [a] los muertos” [I had to carry the dead] (STAWSKY, 2013).

During the deportation, the thirst was unbearable inside the cattle wagon, but Rajchman was ‘fortunate’ because a Ukrainian sold him a bottle of water for 100 zlotys. He recounts the arrival at Treblinka II: “*nous entrons dans un bois (...) Par la lucarne du wagon nous découvrons un tableau terrifiant, une image de mort. Des monceaux de vêtements. Je réalise que nous sommes perdus. C’est fini*” [We enter a forest (...) Through the wagon window we discover a terrifying picture, an image of death. Mounds of clothes. I realize we are doomed. It is over] (RAJCHMAN, 2009, p. 33).⁴²

Rajchman states that when the victims run naked across the ‘*Schlauch*’, the sand pathway was covered with blood due to the blows. He mentions the ‘*Schlauch* brigade’: Jewish prisoners who had to clean the pathway before new victims were to walk through it. According to Rajchman, at the end of the ‘*Schlauch*’ there was a white building (in which there were ten gas chambers) marked with a Magen David. In his 1994 oral testimony (in Yiddish), Rajchman recalls how the victims fell en masse when the gas chamber door opened. In their barrack, the prisoners recited Kaddish in tears. Rajchman angrily told them that after such an atrocity God could not exist.

Rajchman, Teigman, and Willenberg are featured in Gerardo Stawsky’s documentary *A pesar de Treblinka* (2002). Rajchman apologizes to his Jewish sisters: “Yo pido perdón a todos [sic] mis hermanas [a quienes les] cortamos los pelos minutos antes de la cámara de gas” [I apologize to all my sisters whose hair we cut minutes before the gas chamber] (STAWSKY, 2013).

9. Treblinka II through Kalman Teigman’s testimony

Kalman Teigman (Warsaw, December 24, 1923–Tel Aviv, July 27, 2012) arrived to Treblinka II on September 4, 1942, and worked in the *Sortierungskommando*. In *A pesar de Treblinka* he states (in Hebrew) that in Treblinka there was no ‘*Selektion*’ like in Birkenau: people left the cattle wagon and went directly to the gas chambers (only some Jewish prisoners were kept alive to help run the death factory). In *Death Camp Treblinka: Survivor Stories* (where the last two survivors of Treblinka II, Teigman and Willenberg, recount the horrors of

⁴² The first translation of Rajchman’s memoir (originally written in Yiddish in 1945) was published in French only in 2009 as *Je suis le dernier juif. Treblinka (1942–1943)*, five years after his death (the Spanish translation appeared in 2010 and the English one in 2011). His memoir is dedicated to those who could not tell their story.

Treblinka), he recalls (in English): “The journey was terrible (...) You couldn’t breathe (...) No water, no food” (GEILINGER, 2012). Upon arrival, many people from his transport were already dead. Teigman and his mother were immediately separated; a German or Ukrainian beat him; “and when I [stood] up, I saw her. She is going in the barrack with other women and children” (GEILINGER, 2012). Teigman’s mother was 39 years old.

Besides working in the *Sortierungskommando*, Teigman accompanied children to the ‘Lazarett’; he recalls with sadness how the children were thrown into the pit of the ‘Lazarett’ and burned alive. Teigman took part in the Treblinka uprising: “there were flames, smoke, explosions, gunfire” (Cesarani in GEILINGER, 2012). He states: “the swastika was burning” (GEILINGER, 2012). Teigman stopped believing in God after Treblinka. He made aliyah in 1946/1948 (after being held in Cyprus by the British) and testified at the Eichmann trial.

10. Treblinka II through Samuel Willenberg’s testimony

Samuel Willenberg (Częstochowa, 1923–February 19, 2016, Udim, Israel) was deported to Treblinka II in the fall of 1941 upon the liquidation of the Opatów ghetto.⁴³ After having been in Treblinka II for nearly two years, he managed to escape following the Treblinka uprising.⁴⁴ He later took part in the Warsaw uprising (August 1–October 2, 1944) and made aliyah in 1950. His father was Jewish and his mother was a Russian Orthodox convert to Judaism.

Willenberg sorted the possessions of the Jewish victims and, in one occasion,⁴⁵ cut the women’s hair. Ruth Dorfman, who was nineteen or twenty years old, asked him as he cut her hair how long would it last (the gassing); Willenberg told her: ten minutes. Many years later, “he recreated her face in his sculptures” (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny). Willenberg crafted 15 sculptures as a testimony of the horrors of Treblinka II: “My artistry is my memory –my ability to remember what my eyes saw ... I remember pictures. I see the pictures from ‘there’, even today” (WILLENBERG, 2011). He stated: “When you see my sculptures –you see

⁴³ “At the age of 19, he was rounded up with the Jews during the liquidation of the ghetto in Opatow in southern Poland, and sent to Treblinka” (MILLER, 2016).

⁴⁴ According to Willenberg, less than 100 prisoners managed to escape, and only 67 escapees survived the war. “Many died trying to get to the fences or on the fences,” states Yehuda Bauer in *Treblinka’s Last Witness*. The Treblinka uprising took part on Monday, August 2, 1943 (Monday there were no transports). In *Treblinka’s Last Witness*, Willenberg confesses that they thought they would succeed, but in reality the uprising was a tragedy.

⁴⁵ “I was not a ... barber; there was a group of barbers but I was not one of them. Suddenly a big transport arrived, so ... the SS-man ... grabbed some of us to help” (WILLENBERG, 2011).

Treblinka” (WILLENBERG, 2011). One of his sculptures portrays a father taking his son’s shoes before entering the gas chamber: “This is what happened right before they went to the gas. This is what the whole history of the Shoah looks like” (WILLENBERG, 2011); the boy is holding a string for tying his shoes together.⁴⁶

For Willenberg the most difficult sculpture was the one that he ‘did not’ do: “It’s the sculpture of when I discovered the truth about my sisters” (WILLENBERG, 2011). While sorting the possessions of the victims, he found their clothes (a coat –with lengthened green sleeves– and a navy with blue stripes skirt). His sister Tamara was five years old and his sister Itta was twenty-three years old. In *Treblinka’s Last Witness*, he confesses (in Polish) that when he saw his sisters clothing he couldn’t cry (he only felt hatred); but after the war he only wept.

When he arrived at Treblinka II, “mothers [were] embracing sobbing children, crying people [were] seeking one another out” (WILLENBERG, 1989, p. 39). In *A pesar de Treblinka*, Willenberg describes (in Hebrew) a fearful mass of people (some 2,000 Jewish men, women, and children) who were “herded to an open gate in the middle of the fence” (WILLENBERG, 1989, p. 39), guarded by few Germans and Ukrainians. He describes the work of the ‘Reds’: “A group of some fifteen Jews, all with red armbands, ordered us to sit on the ground, take off our shoes and tie them together by the laces” (p. 40). Following Alfred Boehm advice, Willenberg told the Germans he was a bricklayer, a builder; in the chaos, he saw the victims (naked Jewish men and women) being “pushed brutally through an opening in the fence. The yard was emptied” (p. 41). Boehm (who was later killed in the Treblinka uprising) told him: “This is an efficient, well-oiled death factory” (p. 41). After the victims are gassed, “the bodies are thrown into deep pits, and when one pit is filled, they dig new ones. They’re buried town after town” (p. 41). In *Treblinka’s Last Witness*, Yehuda Bauer asserts: “The burial performed in Treblinka was ... huge holes with huge numbers of bodies. This is totally unprecedented (...) The whole thing took less than two hours.”

Willenberg recalls the arrival of several transports of Greek Jewish men, women, and children from Thessaloniki in the spring of 1943: “The Germans fed them the old refrain about the necessity of being strict about ... disinfecting ...; the storerooms bulged, the gas chambers worked overtime, and pillars of fire continued to consume the tortured bodies” (WILLENBERG, 1989, p. 114). He recounts the arrival of violinist and composer Arthur Gold, who with other two prisoners was forced to play: “The trio of musicians began to play popular

⁴⁶ The ‘Reds’ “directed the victims, relayed the German orders to undress, and distributed string for tying shoes together so they could be easily reused in the future without having to sort them” (ARAD, 2018, p. 144).

pre-war tunes, which ... left us depressed and sore of heart. The Germans were pleased with themselves: they had succeeded in organizing an orchestra in the death camp” (p. 115). In *Treblinka's Last Witness*, Berenbaum states: “The juxtaposition of music with the macabre nature of the killing process was part of ... the degradation, the demoralization of the victims.” Willenberg recalls that the three violinists were forced to dress in circus coats and big bowties, which made them look grotesque.

In *Treblinka's Last Witness*, Willenberg states (in Polish) that he shall be gone, but his books and sculptures will remain and speak on. He also argues that before Treblinka there was a God, but that after Treblinka God ceased to exist; in *Death Camp Treblinka: Survivor Stories*, he states (in Polish) that God must have been on holiday.

Besides his sculptures, Willenberg made several drawings and maps of Treblinka II. He married Ada Lubelczyk. Their daughter Orit Willenberg-Giladi is an accomplished Israeli architect. Willenberg died in Israel in 2016, aged 93; he was the last survivor of Treblinka II.

Conclusion

The written, artistic, and oral testimonies of the Jewish prisoners of Treblinka II are an invaluable source for researching Treblinka II. Nevertheless, we have to have in mind several factors. In the case of Krzepicki's testimony, we must take into account that it was not written by him but by Rachel Auerbach, who edited it and organized it into chapters. In the case of translated written testimonies there is the problem of translation (reading a translation is not the same as reading the original, since translations always contain slight distortions). The testimonies of Holocaust survivors written several years later (as well as late oral testimonies) face the problems of time and memory. Moreover, the survivors' memories may sometimes be distorted due to later readings about the extermination camps and the Shoah.

At first glance, testimonies from the 1940s may seem more reliable; however, it must be kept in mind that many survivors retained throughout their lives a vivid and clear picture of the horrific events they witnessed. The harrowing experiences through which the Treblinka II Jewish prisoners underwent and the harrowing tasks they were forced to carry out undoubtedly left an indelible mark on them; hence, we can assume that most of their testimonies are accurate: dates and numbers may be erroneous, but the horrifying events (which are, after all, the truth) are (almost certainly) specific, precise, and concrete.

Only on very rare occasions these testimonies are contradictory; for instance, Bomba claims in an outtake of *Shoah* that during the deportation, inside the transport, “99% of the people ... didn’t know [they were going to be murdered]” (LANZMANN, 1979); on the other hand, in his 1990 and 1996 testimonies, he asserts that the victims already knew they were going to be murdered. However, overall, all the testimonies discussed in the present paper are highly reliable.

Willenberg’s sculptures are unique artistic testimonies that vividly capture suffering and death in Treblinka II: the sculpture of the half-shaven girl prior to entering the gas chamber, or the one of the Jewish *Kommando* carrying a corpse from the transport describe to perfection the horrors of Treblinka II.

Although Langer (1991) wonders: “To whom shall we entrust the custody of the public memory of the Holocaust? To the historian? The critic? The poet, novelist, or dramatist? To the surviving victim?” (p. 39), it is quite clear that the most important voices are those of the survivors: of those who were there and witnessed the horrifying events.

Some historians argue that “using testimony is problematic” (LAWSON, 2010, p. 299). I disagree. The use of testimonies in Holocaust research may be *challenging*, but never *problematic*. Holocaust historiography that focuses mainly (or only) on perpetrators rather than victims is highly problematic. So is the historiography that seems to forget the victims and survivors: this is a historiography that misses their unimaginable suffering, their murder, their deaths, their survival against all odds, and their voices. And since the Jewish victims who were gassed and massacre in Treblinka II cannot speak, the testimonies of the Jewish prisoners (besides telling their own history of survival) somehow speak for the victims as well, and give an expression to those silenced voices. And even if these testimonies are challenging, they are utterly valuable and crucial.

With the oral, artistic, and written testimonies of the Jewish prisoners of Treblinka II, we can approach the Shoah from the perspective of the victims, understanding the unique dimension of the Shoah in history, philosophy, and theology. Through these testimonies, the Jewish victims are not mere numbers, but real people of flesh and blood who suffered, screamed, prayed and died under the most appalling conditions. Death inside the gas chambers of Treblinka II was absolutely horrific. This cannot be forgotten; nor must we forget that thousands of victims were shot to death in the so-called ‘Lazarett’.

Can we know all the reality of Treblinka II solely by the testimonies of survivors and victims? No. In order to know the terribly gruesome reality of Treblinka II, both theory and testimony are essential (they complement each other and absolutely need each other). Theory

is paramount (rigorous Holocaust research is extremely important), but we can never put aside the voices of the Jewish victims and survivors; otherwise, we contribute to a historiography written only with the voices of the perpetrators. Philip Friedman criticized historians for mainly using German documents while neglecting the testimonies of the survivors. In the aftermath of the Shoah, very few historians “were confident that survivors should be accepted as viable witnesses for the Holocaust.”⁴⁷ This was clearly a tremendous mistake. The voices of the victims and survivors are extremely important and of utmost value; they are, without a doubt, an invaluable source for Holocaust research.

To conclude, the testimonies analyzed herein (those of Krzepicki, Rozenberg, Glazar, Bomba, Rajchman, Teigman, and Willenberg) are among the most valuable ones for approaching the unimaginable horrors of Treblinka II and the Shoah. They can bring us a little closer to understanding what exactly Treblinka II was: an industrial death factory, the final destination of most of the victims of the Warsaw ghetto (Jewish men, women, and children), the largest Jewish cemetery in Poland and the second largest extermination camp in the history of humankind.

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⁴⁷ Boaz Cohen, Holocaust Testimonies and Historical Writing Debates, Innovations, and Problems in the Early Potswar Period, *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 45: 2 (2017): 170.

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