

Josef Holzberger's youth

After the World War I the area inhabited by a majority of Ukrainians becomes a part of the new Czechoslovak Republic. Josef Holzberger is born on 6.2.1921 in Deutsch-Mokra - now Nemecká Mokrá in Slovakian - as the son of a forestry worker. Josef himself also becomes a woodsman. Early on he joins the youth association of the "Sudeten German Party", which initially acts as the representation of the Germans in the Czechoslovak Republic. With the financial and organizational support of the NSDAP, the racist and anti-Semitic wing of the party prevailed until the party finally subordinated itself to the NSDAP in October 1938. In 1939, after the break-up of Czechoslovakia, Hungary annexed Carpathian Ukraine. Josef Holzberger now joins the National Socialist-oriented "Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn".

Certainly Josef Holzberger knows Jews - perhaps also from the neighbourhood or school. In any case, there is a Jewish community in nearby Königsfeld. The former Jewish cemetery is said to be covered by a beech forest today. It is not known, however, whether he himself maintains close relations with Jews. In the Sudeten German Party from 1937 and then in the Volksbund der Deutschen in Ungarn, aggressive anti-Semitic propaganda is carried on. In 1941, Holzberger is to be drafted into the Hungarian army, which as an ally of Germany takes part in the war of aggression against the Soviet Union, while in Hungary itself the minority rights of the Germans are increasingly restricted. From July 1, 1941, the 45,000-strong Hungarian "Carpathian group" advances to Galicia and occupies the south of eastern Galicia with Stanislau, Kolomea and Horodenko. In August, the Hungarian army withdraws as agreed, not without removing many usable assets and facilities. In general, the Hungarian armed forces are less aggressive towards the Jews than the German occupying forces which then follow. However, Hungary took the opportunity to reduce its "Jewish problem" and expelled Jews with "unclear citizenship" (Jews who had fled from Germany, Austria and Poland) from Carpathian Ukraine to eastern Galicia.

After the Hungarian retreat from eastern Galicia, nationalistically minded young men from Deutsch Mokra and neighbouring communities who did not want to serve in the Hungarian army decided at the end of October 1941 to move to Stanislau in the Galician district some 180 km away and look for work there. Josef Holzberger and his brother are also in this group. After their arrival, the ethnic Germans are accommodated in a building that was part of a larger, militarily secured complex, which also houses the Gestapo prison. The understaffed Gestapo asks them to serve as guards for the Gestapo. Most of the ethnic Germans from Deutsch-Mokra follow this request, including Josef Holzberger, while his brother refuses.

At the Gestapo in Galicia

Holzberger is trained as a security guard and deployed in this Gestapo-run building complex, especially in the Gestapo prison itself. Initially, like the other volunteers, he wears the uniform of the Ukrainian auxiliary police, until in spring 1942 he is dressed in the service uniform of the SS with the SD symbol on his sleeve. He personally

receives a "Walther" type pistol and a Gestapo identity card; his rank is that of a simple SS man. In addition to his duties in Gestapo prison, he is later accused of the following crimes in a trial:

1. participation in a total of 25 actions against Jews in Stanislau (12/41-04/43): rounding up the victims, guarding at the collection points and during transports, securing the shooting sites, shooting at least 61 Jews by hand (See list of actions in the appendix)
2. participation in the liquidation of the ghetto in Drohobycz (06/43): forcible evacuation of the ghetto, guarding at the assembly point and in about 10-20 truck transports with 35-40 Jews each to the place of execution in Bronica Forest
3. participation in three deportations from the Stanislau ghetto to extermination camps (15.10.1942 to Belzec; spring 1943 to Sobibor or Majdanek): house searches, rounding up the victims, guarding the marching columns to the loading place, penning them into the too small wagons. Number of deportees: at least 6,000 Jews
4. aiding and abetting the murder of inmates of the Stanislau Gestapo prison in six cases
5. participation in two actions with partly indiscriminate arrests and deportation of about 400 people to the Reich for forced labour
6. participation in four individual actions (raids, arrests) in Stanislau and its surroundings, affecting 26 people

In mid-1942 Holzberger applied in vain for admission to the Waffen-SS; his motives are not known. He is probably rejected because, although he willingly obeyed all orders, he himself showed no particular zeal: "*The accused - seen as a whole - carried out his service in the Gestapo guards in accordance with the instructions given; he was neither particularly praised nor reprimanded.*" (DDRJuNSV Vf. 1026, p. 689).

Josef Holzberger and other members of the Gestapo in Stanislau describe the advantages of working for the Gestapo in Deutsch Mokra and the surrounding area to retarded ethnic Germans: easy work behind the front, good earnings and food, a nice uniform, etc. In this way they persuade other ethnic Germans from Carpathian Ukraine to enlist in service with the Gestapo in 1943.

In 1943 the military situation for Germany deteriorated and partisan activity in the occupied territories increased: on 1 July 1943 Holzberger was admitted to the Waffen-SS after all. He took part in fights in the Soviet Union and France until he was taken prisoner by the Americans on May 8, 1945.

In 1944, before the approach of the Soviet army, most ethnic Germans had been resettled from Carpathian Ukraine to Thuringia to work in industry.

After the war in Thuringia

In June 1946 Holzberger is released from American captivity. He was lucky: if he had still been in Carpathian Ukraine, he would have been deported to Siberia or the

Donbass in 1945/46, as many ethnic Germans were. In August 1946 Holzberger moves to relatives in the district of Nordhausen (Thuringia) and works there as a lumberjack for several years until he had to stop in 1954 for health reasons. He then applies to the German People's Police of the GDR without stating his affiliation to the Gestapo and Waffen-SS. From August 1954 he is employed as a Volkspolizist in the industrial security department of VEB Kali in Bleicherode. *"He served his duty properly until he was invalidated in September 1973."* (DDRJuNSV 1026, p. 690). He is married, has three children and is a member of a "block party" and various associations.

On 30.10.1973 Holzberger is remanded in custody. In fact, his premature departure from active police service and his arrest are connected to another trial. On July 5 and 6, 1973, the forest workers Peter Zauner and Stefan Zepezauer were arrested in the Nordhausen district - both, like Holzberger, were from Deutsch Mokra and joined the Gestapo in Stanislau in the summer of 1943. During the investigation they name Josef Holzberger by name, who is then questioned as a witness in their trial. On 20.12.1973 the two accused were sentenced to ten and twelve years imprisonment respectively (GDRJuNSV Verf. 1039).

The trial in Erfurt

The proceedings against Josef Holzberger had thus already been initiated in the summer of 1973 by the investigation against Zauner and Zepezauer, but did not end with a verdict until almost two years later. It is known from comparable proceedings that the interrogations and trials in the GDR did not comply with the rule of law - but a corresponding investigation of these proceedings has not yet been carried out. However, there is no doubt about the essential result of the factual findings. In contrast to the jurisdiction in the Federal Republic at the time, which required proof of individual involvement in individual offences, in the GDR even membership in an organisation declared criminal under the statutes of the Nuremberg Trials was punishable. His individual participation in a large number of individual offences is also undisputed. The grounds for the judgement itself correspond to the propagandistic canon customary in the GDR. Thus, any mitigation of the accused's sentence is excluded with the following words: *"No personal circumstances and motives - such as youthfulness and fascist influence at the time, current illness or positive work performance after 1945 - are capable of reducing the extent of the accused's guilt. The imposed punishment should at the same time show the determination of the workers' and peasants' power to hold all those guilty of fascist crimes accountable and to do everything possible to ensure that a war of conquest never again starts from German soil."* (DDRJuNSV Vf. 1026, S. 692)

Sources: DDRJuNSV serial no. 1026, 1039; Pohl: Ostgalizien; Sandkühler, Endlösung; Kuwalek: Belzec

Map: Map of Carpathoruthenia, situation from 1920 (Treaty of Trianon) to 1939 (Annexation by Hungary), with German annotations. Wikimedia CC-BY-2.5, Martin Proehl (source: Carpathoukraine.svg), 2006