

Biography Horst Petri: Notes on person and historical background

After the war

After his release from American war captivity in May 1945, the graduate farmer Horst Petri returned to his birthplace Pfuhsborn near Apolda. He quickly adapted to the conditions in the Soviet-occupied zone. He became a member of the bloc party LDPD (Liberal Democratic Party of Germany) and a member of the FDGB (Free German Trade Union Federation). In 1957 he joined the Association of Mutual Farmer's Aid (VdGB). Petri took over leading functions in the training of agricultural cadres: one particularly striving cadre among many, behaving in conformity with the system. The turning point came in 1957, when his son fled to the Federal Republic of Germany. From then on, he was under intensive observation by the GDR's state security service (Stasi). The Stasi opened his mail and collected material to be able to charge him with "anti-state activities". In 1961 Petri was arrested and his house searched. Little was found to substantiate the charges. But a guest book and photos were found from **Grzenda**, the SS estate in Galicia, which Horst Petri had run. Senior officers of the SS, police and Wehrmacht, as well as the wife of the SS and police leader of Galicia, Fritz Katzmann, had enjoyed spending time at the Grzenda estate. The public prosecutor's office in Erfurt now changed its mind: instead of the accusation of anti-state activities, which had stood on shaky ground, they were now investigating and accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In August 1961 Erna Petri, his wife, was also arrested. On 10 September 1962, the criminal proceedings against both of them began at the Erfurt District Court.

SS estates in the occupied territories and Jewish forced labour

Shortly after the conquest of Galicia by the Wehrmacht, the civil administration assigned 21 agricultural estates to the SS- und Polizeiführer (SSPF) Friedrich Katzmann. For example, at the end of August 1941, the 430-hectare property Uhersko, 5 km north of Stryj, was established as SS property; Felix Landau was responsible for Jews used as forced labourers there. (Sandkühler, p. 309). The SS estates were to be a first step towards the "**Germanisation**" of the Generalgouvernement, which was to be implemented over a period of fifteen to twenty years. The tasks of the SS estate administrators included supplying the military and occupation administration in the district, delivering food to the Reich, "securing" the agricultural production of the surrounding villages and collecting the "contingents". "*If these were not fulfilled, or only insufficiently fulfilled, then the SS farmers could impose... draconian punitive measures on entire villages.*" (Heinemann, p. 391f.). They were also given police tasks and the fight against "partisans".

The SS man Horst Petri came to the SS estate **Lipica-Dolna** (ukr.: Nyzhnya Lypytsya), 60 km north of Stanislau (Iwano-Frankiwsk) in summer 1941 as an employee. Only a

short time later, he was appointed as operations manager on the SS estate **Unterbergen** (ukr. Pidhirne; 17 km east of Lemberg). The superior SS-operation group under Bofinger had its headquarters in the neighbouring **Weinbergen** (ukr.: Wynnyky, pol.: Winniki). In the summer of 1942 he took over the SS estate **Grzenda** (ukr.: Hryada, pol.: Grzęda), 14 km north of Lemberg, as the manager of the farm. His wife Erna, who had continued to live in Thuringia with their three-year-old son, moved with him into the Grzenda manor house. Petri became advisor for 18 other SS estates in the districts of Galicia and Krakow. He was assisted by two other SS men, **Gebhardt** and **Frank**. At first only Ukrainians and Poles from the surrounding area worked at Grzenda: rural people who were obliged to perform labour services or were sentenced to forced labour. In 1942 many Ukrainians and Poles were then forced to work in the Reich. *"With the spring harvest of 1942, a central concern of economic policy, the use of East Galician Jews in agriculture also expanded. The real estate administrations and the SS estates urgently needed manpower ... Some of them had been assigned by the Jewish Councils or had come voluntarily, while others had been captured in raids. The barracking of Jewish workers on the large estates became more and more common."* (Pohl, Dieter; Eastern Galicia, p. 200). On Grzenda up to 150 Jews from Radziechów were deployed. They had to sleep in the stable and received only soup as food.

The terror of the Petris in Grzenda in the light of the Erfurt trial

The "**Berlin Wall**" was erected on 13 August 1961. The wall was intended to prevent the inhabitants from fleeing the GDR, which was punishable as "illegal border crossing". The GDR leadership officially called the Wall an "**anti-fascist protective wall**" and suggested a "fascist threat" from the West. Four weeks later the trial of the Petris was opened. The construction of the wall was not the reason for the trial to start at that time, but it increased the pressure to justify it, which was also expressed in the choice of words in the verdict. *"Although the accused became a member of the LDPD in 1946, of the FDGB in 1947 and of the Vdgb in 1957, he remained a fascist and an opponent of socialist construction in our workers' and farmers' state ... After the smashing of fascism, both defendants have not learned any lessons from their criminal past. They still stood for the re-establishment of militarism and fascism and saw their future in the development of West Germany."* The proceedings against Horst and Erna Petri in 1962 at the district court of Erfurt showed considerable violations of constitutional principles, which Wendy Lower pointed out in detail due to her intensive research (Lower, German edition p. 242-251). The prosecution based its prosecution on 17 witnesses; mostly former Ukrainian and Polish workers on the estate, and on the sometimes very detailed confessions of the defendants. Horst Petri was acquitted of some of the charges due to lack of evidence. The reasoning with which Petri, in his unrestricted position of power, was acquitted of the accusation of sexual coercion is strange: it could not be established that *"the accused acted with violence or by threatening current danger*

to life or limb when he asked the two Ukrainian citizens to come into the forest with him and have sexual intercourse. According to the result of the hearing of evidence, they gave themselves up voluntarily."

The judgement of the BG Erfurt of 15.09.1962 (I Bs 8/62) and of the OG of 12.10.1962 (1 b Ust 185/62) is documented in GDR-Justiz und NSV, current no. 1073a and b.

With all due caution with regard to the investigations, the conduct of the trial and the propagandistic formulations in the reasons for the judgement, the following crimes of Horst Petri are well evidenced:

- numerous mistreatments of Ukrainian and Polish rural dwellers described in detail, often for the most trivial reasons, with great brutality and permanent damage to health
- Three Ukrainian peasant women were sent to the Janowska camp because they did not want to come to work. Petri expected that the three women would be killed in the camp.
- Participation in driving hunts for Jews who had fled from deportation trains and shooting of caught Jews (1942 transports to Bełżec, from 1943 Majdanek or Sobibór)
- Several murders carried out by himself and participation in further executions of apprehended Jews
- Participation in the shooting of 15 Ukrainian peasants who were said to have supplied partisans with food and failed to deliver agricultural products. Crime scene: SS estate Wiesenberg
- Bombardment of the Ukrainian village of Sashkov with grenade launchers on suspicion of supporting the partisans: 7 dead

Horst Petri was sentenced to death on 15.9.1962. The Supreme Court of the GDR rejected the appeal on 12.10.1962 - the convicted was executed.

Extermination actions in Grzenda and Jewish resistance

Because no Jewish witnesses were sought and questioned at the trial, further mistreatment and murder of Jews could not be dealt with at this trial - only the deeds reported by Ukrainian and Polish witnesses. Thus, the liquidation of the forced labour camp for Jews at the end of 1942 was not discussed at all. The growing use of Jews in agriculture had met with the unwillingness of the SS leadership; after the 1942 harvest was brought in, most of the forced labour camps for Jews in the countryside were liquidated. Thus, after the harvest in autumn 1942, the approximately 150 Jews from Grzenda were also transported to the Lemberg-Janowska forced labour camp and the Belzec extermination camp. Horst Petri as the manager of the SS estate and his SS helpers were certainly involved in the preparation and execution - but this was not dealt with in the criminal proceedings in Erfurt or was not known.

Shortly after the liquidation of the forced labour camp for Jews on Grzenda in

autumn 1942, Jews started working on the estate again: in summer 1943 there were about 30 Jewish forced labourers. In September 1943 they were told by Poles from the village that they would be deported and replaced by "Aryan" day labourers. Some prisoners started to build earth bunkers and hiding places. The braver ones formed a combat group under the leadership of Abraham Schindler; they wanted to resist their deportation and murder. On 10 October 1943 a large unit of SS and police surrounded the building where the Jews lived. Some of the young Jews attacked the besiegers. In a police report of 27 October 1943 it was stated: "*During the resettlement of the Jews, they resisted and were shot. Three policemen fell and ten were wounded. The survivors were put into a camp from which they cannot escape.*" (DALO 37-2-148, quoted from Honigsman, p. 278). This final liquidation of the Jewish forced labour on Grzenda, in which Peter must have been involved, was not mentioned in the Erfurt trial either. The resistance was ultimately unsuccessful, but refutes as one of many examples the claim that all Jews surrendered to their fate without resistance. There was a heroic Jewish resistance, which often fought in hopeless situations and caused victims under the occupying forces.

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Note: All quotations are translations from the German editions