

(Rough Translation- Interrogation of Erna Petri, BStU)

19 Sept 1961

Start of Interrogation: 8:00, 14:00, and 15:30

End of Interrogation: 13:30, 17:45 and 21:45

Interrogation Report of the Accused

Petri, Erna

Born. 30 May 1920

Occupation: None

Address:

Concerning the Matter:

Question: In several testimonies of Soviet witnesses, which have been presented by the investigative agencies, it appears that you not only shot Jewish men but also Jewish children. Please explain yourself regarding this.

Answer: I admit that in the summer of 1943, about in September, I shot 6 Jewish children with my own hands.

Question: Where did these children come from?

Answer: From where exactly, I do not know where the children came. I assumed that these children were the ones who had broken out of the railway cars in the train station at Saschkow. I came to this conclusion because at that time all Jews residing in the area were placed in several camps and from there they were transported to the extermination camps. In these transports frequently Jews tried to break out at the railway station Saschkow and tried to save themselves. These Jews were all naked, so that they could be differentiated from the local Ukrainians and Poles, and would be better recognized.

The Jewish children whom I shot with my own hands were dressed only with rags on their bodies, and were otherwise naked, so I came to the view that these must be Jewish children who had broken out of the transport wagons.

Question: How old were these children?

Answer: The ages of the children were difficult to determine, since they were so poorly clothed and emaciated. As far as I can recall, the children were between 8 and 12 years old.

[....]

Question: Why did you take these children to the SS-Manor Grzenda?

Answer: I took these children with me because in those days all Jewish people who (through whatever means) had escaped the transports and showed up in the area were to be captured/trapped and shot. So that these children would also be shot, I took them with me to the SS Manor Grzenda.

[...]

Question: How did you come to the idea that the Jewish children should be killed with a bullet to the neck?

Answer: During a conversation, which was being led by my husband with his SS colleagues, I heard one time how they spoke about the shooting of Jewish persons and they revealed that in this case/task, that it was best to do the shot in the back of the neck, since the persons were immediately dead through this kind of shot. For this reason I shot all children in the back of the neck.

Question: How did the children behave as you shot them?

Answer: When I shot the first 2 children, they were in the first moment shocked and immediately began to cry. Then they stopped crying and started instead to wimper/wail. However I did not allow myself to be moved by this and shot the others until they all lay in the gully. None of the children attempted to run away, since, as I could see from their appearance, they had been in transit for several days and were totally exhausted.

[...]

Question: Why did you shoot the Jewish men and children?

Answer: In those days, when I carried out the shootings, I was only 23 years old, still young and inexperienced. I lived only among men, who were in the SS and carried out shootings of Jewish persons. I seldom had contact with other women, so in the course of time I became more hardened. Not wanting to stand behind the SS men, I wanted to show them that I, as a woman, could conduct myself like a man. So I shot 4 Jews and 6 Jewish children. I wanted to prove myself to the men. Besides in those days in this region, everywhere one heard that Jewish persons and children were being shot, which also caused me to kill them.

Question: How was it possible that you, yourself a mother of 2 small children, could shoot innocent Jewish children?

Answer: I am unable to grasp at this time how in those days I was in such a state as to conduct myself so brutally and reprehensibly- shooting Jewish children. However earlier I had been so conditioned to fascism and the racial laws, which established a view toward the Jewish people. As was told to me, I had to destroy the Jews. It was from this mindset that I came to commit such a brutal act.

- Made available through Wendy Lower, Ph.D.
John K. Roth Professor of History and George R. Roberts Fellow
Claremont-McKenna College

Essential Unit Question: *How do individuals respond in the presence of extraordinary circumstances?*

Previewing the Text:

1. What are the features of this text?
2. Where does this text come from? Why is this important?
3. What do the dates and times tell readers?
4. How is the text constructed?
5. How do the ellipses, which represent gaps in the testimony, potentially affect the conclusions a reader might draw?

Guiding Questions:

1. How does Erna say she identified the children as Jewish?
2. What rationale does Erna provide for bringing the children to Grzenda and then killing them?
3. How does Erna say she was conditioned to shoot the Jewish “men and children?”

Text Dependent Questions:

1. How does the absence of visual and auditory information affect the reader’s understanding of the testimony?
2. How do Erna’s words betray her biases and motivations? What leads you to this conclusion?
3. What does the intent of the questioner appear to be? How does the phrasing of the questions or choice of words reveal the questioner’s intent?
4. How does Erna Petri’s interrogation complicate our understanding of the events and people of the Holocaust?

Reserve Police Battalion 101

From Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior, Chapter 7

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Who were the perpetrators? What kind of person massacres civilians? Slaughters old people? Murders babies? To find answers to such questions, historian Christopher Browning studied interrogations made in the 1960s and early 1970s of 210 men in Reserve Police Battalion 101. The battalion was originally formed from the German equivalent of city policemen and county sheriffs. After 1939, it and other Order Police battalions also served as occupation forces in conquered territory. Battalion 101 was assigned to the district of Lubin in Poland.

Like the National Guard in the United States, battalions were organized regionally. Most of the soldiers in Battalion 101 came from working and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Hamburg, Germany. They were older than the men who fought in the front lines. The average age was thirty-nine with over half between thirty-seven and forty-two. Most were not well-educated. The majority had left school by the age of fifteen. Very few were Nazis and none was openly antisemitic. Major Wilhelm Trapp, a 53-year-old career police officer who rose through the ranks, headed the battalion. Although he became a Nazi in 1932, he was not a member of the SS, although his two captains were.

The unit's first killing mission took place on July 13, 1942. Browning used interrogations to piece together the events of that day:

Just as daylight was breaking, the men arrived at the village [of Jozefow] and assembled in a half-circle around Major Trapp, who proceeded to give a short speech. With choking voice and tears in his eyes, he visibly fought to control himself as he informed his men that they had received orders to perform a very unpleasant task. These orders were not to his liking, but they came from above. It might perhaps make their task easier, he told the men, if they remembered that in Germany bombs were falling on the women and children. Two witnesses claimed that Trapp also mentioned that the Jews of this village had supported the partisans. Another witness recalled Trapp's mentioning that the Jews had instigated the boycott against Germany. Trapp then explained to the men that the Jews in Jozefow would have to be rounded up, whereupon the young males were to be selected out for labor and the others shot.

Trapp then made an extraordinary offer to his battalion: if any of the older men among them did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out. Trapp paused, and after some moments, one man stepped forward. The captain of 3rd company, enraged that one of his men had broken ranks, began to berate

the man. The major told the captain to hold his tongue. Then ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well. They turned in their rifles and were told to await a further assignment from the major.

Trapp then summoned the company commanders and gave them their respective assignments. Two platoons of 3rd company were to surround the village; the men were explicitly ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. The remaining men were to round up the Jews and take them to the market place. Those too sick or frail to walk to the market place, as well as infants and anyone offering resistance or attempting to hide, were to be shot on the spot. Thereafter, a few men of 1st company were to accompany the work Jews selected at the market place, while the rest were to proceed to the forest to form the firing squads. The Jews were to be loaded onto battalion trucks by 2nd company and shuttled from the market place to the forest.

Having given the company commanders their respective assignments, Trapp spent the rest of the day in town, mostly in a schoolroom converted into his headquarters but also at the homes of the Polish mayor and the local priest. Witnesses who saw him at various times during the day described him as bitterly complaining about the orders he had been given and “weeping like a child.” He nevertheless affirmed that “orders were orders” and had to be carried out. Not a single witness recalled seeing him at the shooting site, a fact that was not lost on the men, who felt some anger about it. Trapp’s driver remembers him saying later, “If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans.”

In describing the massacre, Browning notes, “While the men of Reserve Battalion 101 were apparently willing to shoot those Jews too weak or sick to move, they still shied for the most part from shooting infants, despite their orders. No officer intervened, though subsequently one officer warned his men that in the future they would have to be more energetic.”

As the killing continued, several more soldiers asked to be relieved of their duties. Some officers reassigned anyone who asked, while others pressed their men to continue despite reservations. By midday, the men were being offered bottles of vodka to “refresh” them. As the day continued, a number of soldiers broke down. Yet the majority continued to the end. After the massacre ended, the battalion was transferred to the north part of the district and the various platoons were divided up, each stationed in a different town. All of the platoons took part in at least one more shooting action. Most found that these subsequent murders were easier to perform. Browning therefore sees that first massacre as an important dividing line.

Even twenty-five years later they could not hide the horror of endlessly shooting Jews at point-blank range. In contrast, however, they spoke of surrounding

ghettos and watching [Polish “volunteers”] brutally drive the Jews onto the death trains with considerable detachment and a near-total absence of any sense of participation or responsibility. Such actions they routinely dismissed with a standard refrain: “I was only in the police cordon there.” The shock treatment of Jozefow had created an effective and desensitized unit of ghetto-clearers and, when the occasion required, outright murderers. After Jozefow nothing else seemed so terrible.

In reaching conclusions from the interviews, Browning focuses on the choices open to the men he studied. He writes:

Most simply denied that they had any choice. Faced with the testimony of others, they did not contest that Trapp had made the offer but repeatedly claimed that they had not heard that part of his speech or could not remember it. A few who admitted that they had been given the choice and yet failed to opt out were quite blunt. One said that he had not wanted to be considered a coward by his comrades. Another – more aware of what truly required courage – said quite simply: “I was cowardly.” A few others also made the attempt to confront the question of choice but failed to find the words. It was a different time and place, as if they had been on another political planet, and the political vocabulary and values of the 1960s were helpless to explain the situation in which they found themselves in 1942. As one man admitted, it was not until years later that he began to consider that what he had done had not been right. He had not given it a thought at the time.

The men who did not take part were more specific about their motives. Some attributed their refusal to their age or the fact that they were not “career men.” Only one mentioned ties to Jews as a reason for not participating. Browning therefore notes:

What remains virtually unexamined by the interrogators and unmentioned by the policemen was the role of anti-Semitism. Did they not speak of it because anti-Semitism had not been a motivating factor? Or were they unwilling and unable to confront this issue even after twenty-five years, because it had been all too important, all too pervasive? One is tempted to wonder if the silence speaks louder than words, but in the end – the silence is still silence, and the question remains unanswered.

Was the incident at Jozefow typical? Certainly not. I know of no other case in which a commander so openly invited and sanctioned the nonparticipation of his men in a killing action. But in the end the important fact is not that the experience of Reserve Battalion 101 was untypical, but rather that Trapp’s extraordinary offer did not matter. Like any other unit, Reserve Police Battalion 101 killed the Jews they had been told to kill.

Christopher R. Browning, "One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder" in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 174-175.

Essential Unit Question: *How do individuals respond in the presence of extraordinary circumstances?*

Previewing the Text:

1. What are the features of this text?
2. Where does this text come from? Why is this important?
3. How is the text constructed? What are the indented sections?
4. How might the back-and-forth of information and quotes affect us as readers?

Guiding Questions:

1. Even though he is visibly uncomfortable, what specific things does Major Trapp tell the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in order to justify the orders?
2. What "extraordinary offer" does Major Trapp make to the men?
3. According to the text, what were the orders that Major Trapp's men were to carry out?
4. People that observed Major Trapp later in the day reported that he continued to be upset. What rationalization did he offer for assigning the men their duties? What does he say later that reveals his personal feelings?
5. How do these observations and quotes reveal the inner conflict of Major Trapp?
6. What evidence does the author provide that would indicate that the men had a great amount of difficulty carrying out these orders?
7. How did the actions of the men at Jozefow make carrying out orders that came *after* this "not so terrible?"
8. Browning wrote, "***Most simply denied that they had any choice.***" In the text, what were the different ways that the men, during their interviews, explained that they did not feel as though they had choices?

Text Dependent Questions:

1. How does the author first portray the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101? What image and/or emotionally rich words does the author use that affects our perceptions?
2. What is Browning's premise in this article? How do you know this?
3. How does Browning complicate our understanding of the people and events surrounding the Holocaust? What rhetorical devices and/or language does Browning use?

“Bigger Picture” Question:

Both the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101 and Erna Petri had choices that could have been made when confronted with whether to shoot individuals. Based on the testimony provided in both passages, what conclusions may a reader draw about the motivation to engage in violent actions and the perceived pressures of society? What role does anti-Semitism seem to have played?