

295th Infantry Division

Report on events in Bjelaja Zerkoff on 20.8.1941.

On 20.8 at around 4 p.m., the two division pastors came to me and reported that in the town some 90 Jewish children have been confined in a building without food and water for the last 24 hours. Following information given by the pastor of the military hospital, they had decided to go and inspect the situation. Conditions were unbearable, the attempt to get the Town Commandant to intervene yielded no success. The division pastors stated that the situation needs to be urgently addressed because numerous soldiers visit the building and the sanitary conditions there must inevitably pose a threat, an impression confirmed by a senior doctor at the military hospital.

On the basis of this report, I proceeded to the building at 4:30 p.m., accompanied by the aide-de-camp, First Lieutenant Spoerhase, the division pastor, Dr Reuss, and the interpreter, specialist officer Rischak. Situated in one of the town's side streets, the building lay some 50 meters back from the street. The building was visible from the street, the whimpering of the children could be heard. Around 20 NCOs and men were in the yard. There was no guard in front of the building. A few armed Ukrainians were standing around the yard. Children were lying on the windowsills, the windows were not opened. A Ukrainian guard was standing in the corridor on the first floor, he immediately opened the door to the rooms where the children were put up. Another Ukrainian guard with a rifle was in the three interconnecting rooms. The rooms were filled with around 90 children and several women. In the rearmost room, where almost solely infants lay, a woman was cleaning. In the other rooms an indescribable squalor reigned, rags, nappies, refuse lay everywhere. Countless swarms of flies covered the children, some of whom were naked. Almost all of the children were crying or whimpering. The stench was unbearable. A German-speaking woman claimed that she was completely innocent, that she had never cared for politics and was not Jewish. Meanwhile, a SS platoon leader of the Security Service (SD) had entered, and I asked him what was going to be done with the children. He stated that the parents of the children had been shot and the children were also to be eliminated. Without any further comment I headed directly to the local garrison headquarters and demanded an explanation from the commander. He explained that he was not responsible, that he has no influence whatsoever on the measures of the Security Service, which he knows of, and he suggested to discuss the matter with the Field Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Riedl. Accompanied by the garrison commander and the O1 I set off. The Field Commander stated that the leader of the special

unit (Sonderkommando) had been to see him, reported to him on his mission, and is carrying this out in the full knowledge of the field commander. He has no influence on the orders of the senior First Lieutenant (Obersturmführer). I asked the Field Commander if he believed that the order to also eliminate children came from the highest level, because this is something that I am not aware of. The Field Commander replied that he is convinced that this order is correct and necessary. I thereupon demanded that the vicinity around the building be cordoned off so that the troops could not observe these procedures, which had already led to considerable criticism amongst them, because the soldiers billeted nearby would have heard the whimpering of the children the whole night long. I also demanded that transportation to the execution site be carried out without attracting any attention. I declared that I was willing to make troops from the division available should the guard squad from the field commander's headquarters need assistance. I also declared that I would be informing the Army Group (Heeresgruppe) immediately so as to accelerate a decision on whether the execution of the children is to continue. (The Field Commander had stated that a number of children had already been eliminated the day before, namely by the Ukrainian militia following Security Service orders) The Field Commander agreed to this procedure and emphasised that the division commander was the garrison commander (Standortältester) and can therefore issue all the required orders. He intends to "adjourn" the carrying out of any further measures until the Army Group makes a decision, but urgently demands a written order. I had reservations about interrupting the measures because I imagined that the transport of the children would first take place in the evening and by then a decision from the Army Group would be known. I was fully aware that stopping the measures would have consequences with the political authorities and wanted to avoid this at all costs. But the Field Commander stated that the transport would be taking place shortly. In response, I ordered the Field Commander to tell the leader of the special unit to delay transportation until the Army Group makes a decision. I myself did not contact the leader of the special unit so as to be able to establish contact with the Army Group as quickly as possible. I was of the view that the Army Group, given the fundamental importance of this decision, needed to be informed immediately and that the division could not make a decision on its own. The Army Group contact I could speak to immediately declared that the matter had to be handled by Field Army Command 6. It took a long time to reach the 1a there. He could only obtain a decision from the Commander-in-Chief in the evening. Meanwhile, SS First Lieutenant (Obersturmführer) Haefner, the leader of the special unit, had turned up and demanded confirmation of the order given to him by the division. He requested a written order. I refused this, remarking that a definitive decision could be expected shortly. In an unmilitary tone he stated that he had to report this order to his superior authority. He has a clear order to carry out the measures. I explained that I had to insist on my order and if necessary would ensure its enforcement. I again expressly stated that I was aware of the directives issued by the political authority, but that in the interest of maintaining troop discipline I had to

demand that the measures be carried out in an appropriate manner. The decision of the Army has to be waited for.

By 7 p.m. I reported the incidents and the measures hitherto taken to the division commander, which met with his approval.

Towards 8 p.m. the Army decision arrived, ordering the suspension of further action. Meanwhile a truck had been loaded with children in the late afternoon and was now parked in front of the building. The Field Commander was informed immediately by the O1, the First Lieutenant was summoned by the O1 to the division headquarters, where he was told of the Army decision. An officer of the division staff controlled the cordoning off, meanwhile ordered by the Field Commander. Some armed Ukrainians without ID tags were deployed in the cordon. This use of Ukrainians to block German soldiers was remedied. The Field Commander had meanwhile seen to it that the children be provided with bread and water.

On 21.8 at 11 a.m., Captain Luley (intelligence officer, Field Army Command 6) arrived at the meeting demanded by the Army, accompanied by SS Colonel (Standartenführer) Blobel and First Lieutenant Haefner. The meeting took place at the field commander's headquarters. Before arriving at the division, Captain Luley had inspected the site without however entering the building and the accommodation of the children.

I presented the demands of the division and emphasised that the division's intervention was solely because of how the measure was being carried out. The Colonel and First Lieutenant admitted technical problems and stated that, as things now stand, it is imperative to bring the matter to a swift conclusion. He no longer sees himself in a position to still carry out the intended execution. The Field Commander added that the first report on the conditions came from the division pastors. Here Luley remarked that, although himself a Protestant, he would consider it preferable if the pastors worried about providing pastoral care for the soldiers. From how and what they expressed, it was clear from the remarks by the Field Commander and Captain Luley that they, firstly, question the credibility of the pastors, and secondly, they regard the matter as "snooping around to find something". They consider the report to be nothing but exaggeration and nosy meddling by the division pastors. The SS Colonel said nothing. Together with the O1 I rejected these outrageous suspicions, because at first the division pastors must have believed that the conditions were caused by the Ukrainians acting alone, whose actions in Zloczów have already necessitated that the division intervene. For the rest of the meeting the Field Commander attempted to shift the matter onto the ideological level and start a discussion about fundamental issues. He stated that he considers the extermination of the Jewish women and children to be absolutely necessary, regardless of how this is to be done. He emphasised repeatedly that the actions taken by the division have unnecessarily delayed the elimination of the children by 24 hours.

The SS Colonel agreed with this view and added that it would be best if the troop which “snoops” around performs the execution itself and that the commanders delaying the measures take charge of this troop. I calmly rejected this demand, without however offering an opinion because I wanted to avoid any trace of personal scorn. During the discussion of the measures to be taken, the SS Colonel stated that the Commander-in-Chief recognizes the necessity of eliminating the children and wishes to be kept informed since these measures in the present case have already commenced. The accuracy of this statement by the Commander-in-Chief had already been confirmed to me by the Ic of Field Army Command 6.

Following this, the details of carrying out the execution were settled. The shootings shall take place on the evening of 22.8. I no longer took part in these discussions. My demand that the troops be kept away was adhered to.

Captain Luley then gave the division commander an account of the meeting’s outcome.

Concluding statement:

1.

The troops are trained by their leaders to possess a sound soldierly attitude, to avoid inflicting violence and brutality on a defenceless population. They fully appreciate the need to intervene remorselessly against franc-tireurs. In the present case however, measures have been taken against women and children that are no different from the atrocities of the enemy, about which the troops are constantly informed. It cannot be prevented that accounts of these situations reach home and that there a comparison will be made to the horrors of Lemberg. The troops expect that their officers intervene. This is particularly the case for older married men. An officer is therefore forced to intervene in consideration of his troops when such incidents are played out in public. To maintain discipline, it is absolutely necessary that all similar measures be carried out away from the troops.

2.

The carrying out of the shootings could have taken place without causing any kind of stir if the Field Commander and the Town Commander had taken the necessary measures to keep the troops away. The incidents were caused by the complete failure of both commanders. At the negotiations, the impression was that the executions are the result of a request put forward by the Field Commander. The shooting of the whole Jewish population of the city necessarily brings with it the need to eliminate the Jewish children, above all the babies. This should have been done immediately with the removal of the parents so as to prevent this inhumane ordeal. Alternative accommodation for the children was declared impossible by the Field Commander and the First Lieutenant, whereby the Field Commander repeatedly stated that this breed has to be exterminated.

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