

Report on Kovel Project

Since 2012, Werkstattfilm has been working on a project to bring attention back to the memory of a criminal trial against two Nazi war criminals, which took place before a court in the town of Oldenburg in the Lower Saxony region of Germany. Subject of the trial was the crimes of the German occupants against the Jewish population in the Ukrainian town of Kovel during the Second World War. The main aim of the project is to promote the memory of the Holocaust and keep the memory of the lives and fates of the victims alive.

The main foundation our project is based on is the court files from the trial against the two defendants, the local head of Government (Gebietskommissar) Erich Kassner and the head of police (Polizeimeister) Fritz Manthei. These files, located at the state archive in Oldenburg, were examined over the course of the last twelve months, and we are still in the process of summarizing and evaluating these sources. They contain statements of more than 180 witnesses of people who were directly or indirectly involved, from Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of the town of Kovel, members of the German army and employees of the German railways and other companies that were active in Kovel during the German occupation, and experts and scholars who testified during the trial. These historical documents give a detailed insight into an as yet unexplored chapter of the Nazi genocide.

A contemporary perspective on the trial can also be found in the reports of the local newspaper, the Nordwest-Zeitung. We found numerous articles in the copies of the paper kept at the Oldenburg state library which document the proceedings of the trial and from which one can gain a good impression as to how the trial was perceived by the public. Additional articles we gathered from foreign press releases, especially from Poland and Israel, give an impression of the international perception of the trial as well as the course of the criminal investigation.

During our research on the main Jewish witnesses, we soon found out that there are still Jewish survivors from Kovel alive in Israel today. We established contact with these survivors and planned a two-week trip to Israel, which took place in the autumn of 2013. We met survivors and conducted interviews, in which they spoke about their individual experiences in a highly impressive manner. Meanwhile, these interviews have been transcribed and translated. We also used our stay in Israel to conduct research in the Holocaust memorial institute "Yad Vashem" and "The Ghetto Fighters' House" (Beit Lohamei Ha-ghetaot) in the regional council of Mateh Asher. We are greatly indebted to Roland and Hiltrud Neidhardt, who helped us immensely during our stay in Israel with their excellent knowledge of the country and of Hebrew.

Furthermore, we had the opportunity to conduct an interview with the son of a doctor who worked in a field hospital in Kovel. During the war, he wrote to his wife in Germany in coded letters about his daily experiences. These letters gave the court a detailed outline of events in Kovel, which made him an important witness. After we had established contact with his son, we arranged a meeting in Berlin during which we had a highly informative interview.

In the spring of 2014 we undertook a journey to Ukraine to film the original sites of the events examined during the trial. We came to find out that there is no public memorial of any kind for the crimes committed against the Jewish population of the town. On a piece of wasteland we found broken and withered Jewish gravestones, some of which had been used for road building. Some buildings, such as the former synagogue, have remained intact, but have been converted to other uses without any sign denoting their former function. However, we did receive valuable help from local people, who are personally engaged in keeping the memory of the murder of the Jewish population of the town alive.

Additionally, we have managed to collect a selection of impressive photographic material about Kovel. We particularly would like to mention the survivors and their relatives who have allowed us to use their private photo collections for our project, as well as the "The Ghetto Fighters' House", from which we obtained permission to use all of their archived photographic material. Another source to find material were auctioning sites on the Internet.

We have meanwhile mostly concluded our factual research. We are currently working on evaluating the large quantities of material we have gathered and are preparing it for further use in our project. After this task is completed, we will secure the material for further use in the form of a documentary film, an exhibition, and a book that will for the first time contain the most important documents in their historical context in publicized form. This information can then be used as the basis for further research and presentations of the topic by scholars, schools, or research institutions anywhere. We plan to complete our project in 2015.

To successfully complete our project, we are currently lacking adequate funding. Despite many positive reactions from the public, we have not yet been able to secure sufficient project funding from any institution. We are, however, in contact with potential sponsors and supporters and are optimistic that we will eventually raise the necessary funding.

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