GG Matters

2 Research Corner
Pamela Weisberger

7 In Memoriam
By Shelley Pollero and Pamela Weisberger

29 Gesher Galicia Renewal Form

31 Web News
Janice M. Sellers

32 Gesher Galicia Board of Directors

32 Key Staff Volunteers

Feature Articles

8 Preservationist’s Corner
Marla Raucher Osborn

11 Austrian Census Returns 1869–1890, with an Emphasis on Galicia
Jonathan Shea, A.G.

13 All Things Come to Genealogists Who Wait: The Tarnopol 1910 Jewish Census
Pamela Weisberger

17 Surnames Extracted from the Tarnopol 1910 Jewish Census
Ann Harris and Renee Steinig, list creation
Pamela Weisberger, introduction

22 Galician Record Images are Online
Mark Jacobson

24 Turner? Your Name Must Have Been Changed!
Steven S. Turner

26 The Man Who Stood in His Own Grave—Twice
Waitman W. Beorn

Total-Ausweis: Über die von den galizischen Kreisämtern den hierländigen jüdischen Heurathslustigen im Militäer Jahre 1807 ertheilten Heurathsbewilligungen (*Complete record of marriage licenses granted in military year 1807 by Galician district offices to local Jews wishing to marry*)
(for an explanation see page 4)
Leon Wells was born Leon Weliczker in 1925 in the small town of Stojanów, Poland, approximately 50 miles northeast of the prominent Galician city of Lwów. His memoir, The Janowska Road, contains the incredible story of his survival of the Holocaust in Galicia, which claimed more than half a million Jewish lives. The Nazis' machinery of death tried to devour Leon when he was 16, but against all odds, he fought to outlive it.

Not infrequently, the writing of scholarly Holocaust history has been divided between works examining high-level policy decisions and outcomes by Nazi leadership and other equally scholarly works focusing on the Jewish experience of the Shoah. Both are invaluable in helping us understand the nature of one of the greatest calamities of the 20th century. In this short piece, I try to situate Leon's experience of the Shoah in Lwów within the larger framework of the Holocaust in eastern Galicia, for in many ways, unlike so many of his friends and family, Leon can speak as a witness to many of these events.

After the German occupation of Poland in 1939, the Soviet Union claimed Lwów and much of eastern Galicia as part of the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact and subjected the region to repression of various kinds. Soviet authorities targeted Polish and Ukrainian nationalists whom they believed (rightly) would oppose the redefinition of their homeland as a new Soviet territory. Many Poles and Ukrainians were murdered outright or deported to gulags deep in the Soviet Union. Most Jews chose to follow a policy of neutrality, supporting neither Polish nor Ukrainian nationalist ambitions, as neither would have accepted them anyway. While many were quite happy to see the Red Army and not the Wehrmacht occupy Galicia, Jews were not spared from Soviet deportations and violence. Soviet authorities also nationalized property as they began to convert Lwów into a Soviet-style economy.

In 1933 Leon Wells and his family had moved to Lwów, where his father designed, built, and managed an apartment complex. When the Soviets arrived, he remembered his father being fortunate enough to be named "superintendent" of the building he owned, though later he lost this job to a "more trustworthy" person. In addition, his family was forced to share their apartment with Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis in western Poland. Nightly arrests became more frequent, so Leon and his family often hid in the basement, unsure if, as building owners, they were capitalist enough to be deported. Still, Leon and his sister were accepted to attend university in Moscow beginning in the fall of 1941, and they were very excited.

On 22 June 1941, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union and reached Lwów just over a week later, on 30 June. Nazi killing squads known as Einsatzgruppen began shooting Communist officials, Polish nationalists, and Jewish leadership before advancing further into the Soviet Union. Elements of Einsatzgruppe C executed "enemies of the state" and fomented anti-Jewish pogroms in the city. The Soviet secret police, the NKVD, made this task easier, having shot hundreds of Poles and Ukrainians in the jail in Lwów before fleeing. Jews made excellent scapegoats, as a powerful element in anti-Semitism in Europe was the idea of a so-called Judeo-Bolshevism, wherein the Jews controlled Communism in an attempt to drain resources from the "native" populations. The worst of these pogroms in Lwów was named the "Pogrom Days" massacre. As Leon remembered, "For, beginning as mere rumors, and gradually assuming authority, has come the dreaded news that persecution of the Jews has begun in the city; they are being beaten, arrested, murdered. House-to-house interrogation has begun; whole families have been taken out; the pogrom is, apparently, being carried out by Ukrainians."

While Leon and his family attempted to avoid the somewhat spontaneous outbreaks of violence by the Ukrainians and the more regular impressment for forced labor by the Germans, the Nazis themselves struggled with what to do with the Jews of Galicia. Officially, this region of eastern Poland was included as part of the General Government under the control of Hans Frank on 1 August 1941. The last thing Frank wanted, however, was more Jews when he was already trying to rid himself of those he had in the parts of Poland annexed in 1939. The SS also did not want to create a permanent concentration of Jews in Lwów, as they planned by the fall of 1941 to murder all of Europe's Jews. As a result, Nazi authorities did not seek to accumulate more Jews, but to reduce their numbers through labor, leading to the creation of numerous slave labor camps, including the road camps on the Durchgangstrasse IV, but most importantly the creation of a concentration camp at Janowska on the western outskirts of Lwów.

Leon found himself arrested and sent to Janowska while covering for his father, who was too ill to work. On the advice of the Jewish secretary who registered him, he declared...
Meanwhile, decisions were being made about the future of the Jews in Galicia. The construction of the first of the Operation Reinhard killing centers at Belzec had begun in October 1941, and the SS authorities in Lwów began preparations. In November, a ghetto was officially established in Lwów. In the process of moving Jews to the ghettos, thousands were killed, including Leon’s father. Repeated “selections” and issuing of work cards in Lwów accompanied the resettlement of Jews into smaller and smaller ghettos.

Increasingly, those Jews incapable of working were taken to Janowska and shot, while able-bodied Jews were forced into labor. As a result of the overcrowding and lack of sanitary facilities in the camp, typhus ran rampant. Leon, who had been in the camp since March 1942, fell ill and, unable to stand, was selected to be executed. At the last moment, while he was standing in the shooting pit at Janowska, Leon was ordered to return to the camp in order to drag another body back that needed to be buried.

When he had returned to the camp and was dragging the body back to the execution site, he summoned his last strength and ran from the Ukrainian guard who was escorting him, blending in with the large crowd of workers returning for lunch. Leon was worried that if his escape was reported his family would be executed, so he hid in his old workshop until the next roll call. At the roll call he was announced as dead, so the guard apparently had not reported his escape. Knowing that he was “officially” dead in the pit, Leon walked out the front gate of Janowska, and the guards there assumed he was on one of his many jobs to install glass in the houses of SS men in Lwów. He then fled back to the countryside, to Stojańów, where his sisters were living with relatives.

In March 1942, large transports began rolling out of Lwów toward the gas chambers of Belzec. More than 15,000 were killed in just two weeks. Many of these groups stopped for a final selection in Janowska before proceeding to the Kleparow train station. A similar “large action” took place in August 1942. Meanwhile, in the countryside, Leon’s sisters hid with an uncle and he worked in the nearby town of Byszów. He soon received word from refugees from Lwów that his mother had been transported during the August action.

As the Nazis had now embarked on the wholesale murder of Galicia’s Jews, they sought to differentiate the remaining population into three groups: skilled laborers, unskilled laborers, and those incapable of work. The latter category was immediately selected for “resettlement”, which meant death at Belzec or in the Piaski sands behind the Janowska camp. In the late summer and fall of 1941, the Nazi extermination process had expanded to include the liquidation of ghettos and Jewish populations in outlying areas. Sometime in September 1942, an action occurred in Stojańów, taking Leon’s three sisters, Rachel, Judith, and Bina. They had been hiding with a local Ukrainian family, who had...
turned them over to the Germans. By the time Leon was able to return to his birthplace, his sisters were gone, leaving only his grandfather and his uncle’s family.

Leon returned to Lwów in early 1943 and found his two brothers. By this time, Nazi authorities had reduced the Lwów ghetto even further, redefining it as a Judenlager (Jewish camp). In June, Leon, his two brothers, and many others from the Lwów ghetto were arrested as the Nazis once again separated the nonworkers from the workers. He found himself again in the Janowska camp that he had escaped the year before. This time, the camp claimed his two brothers. From then on, it would continue to serve as a labor camp but even more as a place of execution for the remnants of the Jewish population of Lwów.

By November, the overwhelming majority of Jews, including the skilled laborers in “vital” war industries, had been either deported to Sobibor or shot at Janowska. Leon now found himself assigned to Sonderkommando 1005, whose task was to unearth the bodies of the Nazis’ victims and destroy the evidence of their crimes. In this way, the Holocaust had nearly run its course in Lwów. And in this way, sometime in the late summer of 1943, Leon found himself counting skulls in a newly excavated grave from 1942—which was one skull short: his. This greatly aggravated the SS men responsible for matching the numbers on their list with bodies in the grave.

Leon Weliczker succeeded in escaping the “Death Brigade” and was hidden by a Pole along with 21 other Jews in a basement in Lwów until liberation by the Soviets in July 1944. Thus, Leon was present at virtually all the vital stages of the evolution of the Holocaust in Galicia: “spontaneous” pogroms, extermination and selection through labor, the “second sweep” through the countryside, the eventual liquidation of Lwów, and finally, the Nazi attempts to erase the evidence of their crimes.

Eventually, Leon immigrated to the United States. He earned a Ph.D. in engineering and testified as a witness at several Nazi trials, including those of Fritz Gebauer and Adolf Eichmann. He recalled that he wanted to stop being a witness but felt it was his duty. Leon also wrote several books on his experiences. As he wrote in 1961, “I feel, now, that I have fulfilled my mission. The last wish of my people, each as he died, was to let the world know what had happened. They felt and hoped that the world cared about them and their fate.” Leon died in Fort Lee, New Jersey in 2010. He requested that he be cremated, saying that “his people had gone that way.”

Endnotes

2. Ibid., 28.
4. Wells, The Janowska Road, 36.

Dr. Waitman Wade Beorn is the Louis and Frances Blumkin Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies and Assistant Professor of History at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and earned his Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His first book, Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus, focuses on the local participation of the German Army in the Holocaust in Belarus. It will go on sale in December.

Waitman is currently working on a major project on the Holocaust in Lwów and the Janowska camp. He would greatly appreciate any stories, testimony, or other information that members of Gesher Galicia are willing to provide. He can be contacted at wbeorn@unomaha.edu.

From 1944 Soviet Extraordinary Commission research at Janowska concentration camp and mass graves adjoining the camp (from Wikimedia Commons)