

Excerpts from the Diary of Captain Wilm Hosenfeld (1942)

Abstract

Wilm Hosenfeld (1895-1952) held the rank of captain in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War and served in Nazi-occupied Poland. He is most famous for his efforts to hide and aid in the rescue of several important Polish Jews. Most well publicized is Hosenfeld's rescue of Władysław Szpilman, a renowned Jewish pianist and composer, during the final clearing of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. After the invasion of Poland by the Soviet Red Army, Hosenfeld was taken prisoner and died in a labor camp in the Soviet Union 1952. His legacy is that of a complex man who was proudly patriotic, but often deeply skeptical of the means by which Nazis' carried out their racial war and genocide. On 25 November 2008, Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust memorial, recognized Wilm Hosenfeld as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations."

These excerpts, taken from his wartime diaries, reveal Hosenfeld to be a complicated and, yet, ultimately heroic figure. From the start, Hosenfeld rejects what he sees as the barbaric and insidious methods that were undertaken during the French and Bolshevik Revolutions of the late eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries respectively. It is clear that he sees the National Socialist project and revolution as meaningfully different. But, as his diary entries progress, his witnessing of the round-ups and deportations in Warsaw move him in a deep way. His writings reveal his anxieties over the lack of honor that comes from participating in what to him are cruel and inhumane practices. And his contempt for his superiors is quite striking as he witnesses their greed and privilege on display at a dinner party the day after the final deportations to Treblinka

Source

Diary entry (Warsaw,) c. January 18-22, 1942

The National Socialist Revolution bears the stamp of half-measures in everything. History reports from the French Revolution cruel facts, shocking inhumanities just as the Bolshevik overthrow let the animal instincts of hateful subhumans commit horrible atrocities against the ruling class. From the human point of view, one may deeply regret and condemn both, but one must recognize the unconditional, the resolute, ruthless and irrevocable. There is no forging pacts, no pretense, no concessions. What these subversives do, they do completely, purposefully and without regard to world conscience and morals and conventions. The Jacobins as well as the Bolsheviks slaughter the ruling upper class and execute the royal families. They break with Christianity and wage a war of extermination against it with the goal of its total eradication. They are obsessed with their [ideas?], thus not only fanatical; they succeed in involving the people of their nation in wars, which they fought with verve and enthusiasm, then the revolutionary wars, today the war against the Germans. Their theories and ideas of overthrow exert a tremendous power beyond national borders.

The methods of the National Socialists are different, but basically, they too pursue the same idea, the extermination of those who think differently. Occasionally, they shoot so and so many, even members of their own people, but they cover it up and conceal it from the public, they lock them up in concentration camps, let them slowly decay and perish there. The public learns nothing about it. If one seizes enemies of the state, one must also have the courage to brand them before the public and to hand them over to the court of public opinion.

[...]

Hitler offers peace to the world while he rearms the country in an unbelievable manner. He announces to the world that he is not thinking of annexing other peoples to the German state, of depriving them of their right to statehood, but what is to be done with the Czechs, the Poles, the Serbs? Especially in Poland it would not have been necessary to deprive a people in a closed settlement area of its sovereignty. And if you look at the National Socialists themselves, how far they live the National Socialist principles, for example "the common good comes before self-interest." They demand it from the little man, but they themselves do not think about it. Who is the enemy – the people, not the party. Now people with physical handicaps are conscripted into the army, and in the party offices and the police force one sees the straightest, healthiest young people doing their duty far from the front. What are they being saved for? Poles and Jews are deprived of their property in order to appropriate it for themselves and enjoy it. They have nothing to eat, they starve and freeze, and they feel no shame about taking everything for themselves and squandering it.

Diary entry (Warsaw,) September 26, 1942

Invited to dinner at von Schoene's last night. Dr. Stab[enow] was also there with his mistress, and the Countess Larotzka. The conversation was conceivably superficial, everyone takes themselves very seriously, they tell each other flatteries. St[abenow] feels like the powerful man, the lord of the ghetto. He speaks of the Jews as if they were ants or other vermin. He speaks of "resettlement," that is, mass murder, as he does of extermination of bedbugs from a house. His lady is dressed in the most precious way; all that she wears on her body surely comes from there [the ghetto, eds.]. These people feel nothing of the dreadfulness of the war, of sacrifices, deprivations and suffering. They enrich themselves, whore and gorge themselves. But am I not complicit in all this? Why do I eat at the sumptuous table of the rich, when all around there is great poverty and the soldiers are starving? Why do we remain silent and do not protest? We are all too cowardly and comfortable, too false and rotten, that's why we all have to go along with the downfall into doom.

Diary entry (Warsaw,) July 25, 1942

If what is told in the city by credible people is true, then it is no honor to be a German officer, then one can no longer take part. But I can't believe it. – This week, 30,000 Jews are said to have already left the ghetto, somewhere to the East. What will be done with them is already known, despite all secrecy. Somewhere, not far from Lublin, there are buildings with electrically heated rooms, which are heated by high voltage current, similar to a crematorium. The unfortunate people are herded into these heating chambers and then burned alive. Thousands can be killed in one day. One saves the shootings and the digging and covering with earth for the mass graves. The guillotine of the French Revolution cannot keep up with that, and in the Russian G.P.U. cellars such virtuosity in mass murder has not been achieved either.

But this is all madness, it cannot be possible. One wonders why the Jews do not defend themselves. Many, the vast majority, are so weakened by hunger and misery that they are unable to offer any resistance and surrender dully to their fate; others again may be glad that the torment has come to an end. One can imagine the terrible scenes of despair taking place. Instead of the German police, Ukrainian and Lithuanian policemen are supposed to be deployed there. I think this is foolish and stupid. Everything is supposed to be kept secret, but these people don't keep quiet. They are probably taking advantage of the valuables and such left behind and are being paid in this way for their executioner services. I could not imagine that German policemen would be able to go along with this. – At the commandant's office yesterday I met a businessman who pointed out to me that everything was now available in the ghetto, and very cheaply. Watches, rings, gold, dollars, carpets and what not. Another gentleman who met me on the street, that is, we met and talked briefly and parted. Then he came after

me again and asked if I had heard the thing about Sweden and Turkey. He also told me about the Jewish atrocities and was outraged beyond measure. For the Führer's birthday Himmler is said to have reported the liquidation of 50,000 Jews in the Generalgouvernement. A nice birthday present. All of this is being said; how much of it may be true? In any case, the Jews disappear. How they are exterminated is a secondary question.

Diary entry (Warsaw), September 6, 1942

Today is the closing event of the Wehrmacht combat sports week. As enjoyable as all this is, my thoughts are often not with it. I see deeper. Those participating in the competition here are almost all former sportsmen who come out of inclination, the SS men also still participate out of ambition. Officers and commanders, especially those from the OFK [Oberfeldkommandantur], have no interest in sports competitions. Last Sunday, at the opening ceremony, the commander had himself represented, the chief of staff also made excuses; at last, an old major was found who had to do it. It will be no different at the award ceremony. The general is on vacation. His deputy, Count Bothmer, is indisposed; some colonel who has nothing to do with the matter will have to do it. I am not surprised by this. The officers are senile, nervous, dissatisfied. They do their duty, they work their hours, but then they want to be left alone. Public life is none of their business. They see themselves put in second place everywhere. As officers of what was once the proudest army, they no longer have any significance or prestige in the purely administrative service of the rear. They feel offended in their honor in view of the outrages committed by Himmler's agents against the Poles and, more recently, against the Jews. They have to keep silent about all these monstrous atrocities, and yet they know that in case of emergency and the inevitable response they will have to share the responsibility for all this and fight with the soldiers. They do not understand that the Wehrmacht is completely among itself during this week of combat games and that it had the opportunity to represent itself as a powerful whole for once. Some fail to understand it out of indifference, disgruntlement, comfort, others out of blindness and thoughtlessness.

Source of original German text: Wilm Hosenfeld „*Ich versuche jeden zu retten.*“ *Das Leben eines deutschen Offiziers in Briefen und Tagebüchern*. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2004, S. 574-576; 657-658; 630-631; 652-653.

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