

*The Activities of Wachmann Iwan Demjanjuk (1940-1952)*

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide insight into the whereabouts and the activities of *Wachmann* (guard) Iwan Demjanjuk (born on 3 April 1920), of Ukrainian origin and trained as a camp guard in Trawniki near Lublin.

This is of importance in connection with the case against Demjanjuk, who will shortly stand trial in the German Federal Republic, for being an accessory in the murder of tens of thousands of Jews from the occupied Netherlands, from the *Generalgouvernement* (Occupied Poland) and from the Soviet Union in the extermination camp Sobibor in the months of April up to and including September 1943.<sup>1</sup> Just as Treblinka extermination camp this camp was razed to the ground in the autumn of 1943, in order to eliminate all traces of the crime.<sup>2</sup> In the Belzec death camp killing operations were stopped in December 1942. Most, but not all, of the documents drawn up by the perpetrators were also destroyed at that time, in the autumn of 1943.<sup>3</sup>

In this article the emphasis is not on the judicial niceties of the numerous lawsuits in which Demjanjuk has been involved since 1977, and has also involved himself. From February 1987 up to April 1988 Demjanjuk stood trial in Israel under enormous interest from the media. He was accused of having been the feared Ukrainian guard “Iwan the Terrible” in Treblinka. On 25 April 1988 Demjanjuk was sentenced to be hanged for his role as “Trawniki man” in the service of the *Waffen-SS*, as “Iwan the Terrible” in Treblinka and as a guard in Sobibor.<sup>4</sup> He appealed and was acquitted. It appeared that he had not after all been “Iwan the Terrible” in Treblinka. After his release, after seven and a half years imprisonment, he flew back to the United States on 23 September 1993.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with *Oberstaatsanwalt* (Senior Public Prosecutor) Dr Kurt Schrimm in: *Die Welt* (internet edition, 19 June 2008; *Der Spiegel*, 2008, no. 41, 7 October 2008, 38-40; Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen - Der Behördenleiter -, Statement to the Press of November, 10, 2008, Preliminary Investigation against John Demjanjuk finished. For the Jews murdered during Demjanjuk's time in Sobibor, see: Jules Schelvis, *Vernietigingskamp Sobibor*, Amsterdam 2008, 245, 258-259, 263-265.

<sup>2</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research*, Chicago 2001, 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Evidence for the Implementation of the Final Solution* [2000], [www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/GENOCIDE/browning5.htm](http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/GENOCIDE/browning5.htm) [Website Genocide Documentation Centre, compiled by Dr. Stuart D. Stein].

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Demjanjuk2.html>, 11. See also Asher Felix Landau, *The Demjanjuk Appeal – Summary*, 29 July 1993; <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA>.

<sup>5</sup> The question of the identification of Demjanjuk by survivors is extensively discussed in: William Albert Wagenaar, *Het Herkennen van Iwan. De identificatie van de dader door ooggetuigen van een misdrijf*, Amsterdam/Lisse, 1989. Wagenaar acted as an expert witness for the defence during the trial; Gitta Serenyi,

For many people this case demonstrated the “fragility of survivor eyewitness testimony”. But during this trial it also appeared that the accused, who reacted “almost mechanically” (“*I have never been in Treblinka, Sobibor or Trawniki. I was a prisoner of war of the Germans.*”), found it difficult to speak the truth, wrote the world famous investigation journalist Gitta Serenyi.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the intention here is not to provide a legal essay, but a historical reconstruction and contextualization of his role in the period from 1940, when he was called up for duty in the Red Army, until February 1952, when he emigrated to the United States. The evidence for this is provided by the judgement of the American Judge Paul R. Matia of 2002, which was based on authentic written sources from various archives, which came from the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) of the American Department of Justice. The authenticity of this evidence was contested by Demjanjuk and his associates, but has been declared proven.<sup>7</sup> Further this article is based on the most recent specialist literature (which is not available on internet). The judicial dimension – after all Demjanjuk’s extradition forms the reason for this article – is discussed at the end.

It is his whereabouts and activities during the years 1940-1945 about which Demjanjuk has since 1948 made varying statements to different bodies. Further on in this text these statements will be considered. Thus my two pivotal questions are: where was Demjanjuk exactly and what did he do and see there? And what has he later said about these various whereabouts?

## II. *Youth in Dubovi Makharinstsi (1920-1939)*

Iwan Demjanjuk was born on 3 April 1920 in Dubovi Makharintsi (Russian spelling: Dubovye Makharintsy). This lies in the Kozjatyn region, in the Vinnytsya (Russian: Vinnitsa) oblast. His father’s name was Mykola (Russian: Nikolaj).<sup>8</sup> In this village there was also a cousin of Iwan’s, who was also called Ivan and was about a year younger, and a cousin Mariya.

Shortly before his birth fighting was regularly taking place in Koziatyn, which numbered 26,000 inhabitants in 1970, and around 1920 many less. Late in 1918 there was fighting between Ukrainian rebels and the German army. In February 1919 the “Sich Riflemen Corps” fought the Red Army and in the

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“The Case of John Demjanjuk”, in: idem, *The German Trauma: Experiences and Reflections, 1938-2000*, London 2000, 345, 355.

<sup>6</sup> Serenyi, *John Demjanjuk*, 309-310, 313.

<sup>7</sup> This was not a criminal law trial, but a civil law trial. In the United States it is customary in civil law procedures that both parties present their Findings of Fact to the judge and that the latter makes a choice from them in the pronouncement of his judgement. Judge Matia (see the following note) has as a rule considered the material submitted by the American state (the OSI) to be authentic and the truth. These documents were not available for my perusal when I wrote this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Judge Paul R. Matia, United States District Court, Northern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, *US of America vs. John Demjanjuk, Findings of Fact* [2002], Government Exhibit 3, Trawniki identity card in the name of Iwan Demjanjuk, no. 1393.

summer of 1919 the Ukrainian-Galician army fought the Soviets during the advance on Kiev.<sup>9</sup>

The Vinnytsya oblast (26,500 sq. km) had been Polish territory up to 1793 and was then annexed by the Russian Empire,<sup>10</sup> but had retained the character of a frontier area. The noted American historian Amir Weiner has written a monograph about this area, in which he showed that the process of partly forced Sovietisation only took place in this oblast during the Second World War.<sup>11</sup>

The first drastic event in the life of Demjanjuk will have been the famine in the Ukraine in 1932-1933. According to Ukrainian historians this was a question of genocide with seven million victims, while authoritative Western historians such as Robert Conquest, Stephen Wheatcroft and Michael J. Ellman proceed on the assumption of 3 to 3 1/2 million victims. The Ukrainians hold the Stalinist regime personally responsible, while the consensus in the West – Wheatcroft is the pre-eminent expert – is that a number of explanatory factors played a part: bad harvests (with the exception of 1930), political blunders (no reserve stocks), the impossibility of grain purchases in the USA, the high rise in the population, the growth of the qualitatively improved livestock and Stalin's overestimation of the level of grain production in 1926. The mortality resulting from the famine rose steeply in Kiev, but afterwards also south of Kiev, as the Kiev authorities requisitioned grain there.<sup>12</sup>

The Great Terror of 1937-1938 will have formed a second radical experience in the life of Iwan Demjanjuk. In the town of Vinnytsya (German: Winniza), just as everywhere else in the Ukraine, thousands of citizens were executed. It was not so much these executions, as the widely publicised disinterment of the skeletons and the disclosure by the German authorities in May-July 1943, which made Vinnytsya known far beyond the Ukraine. A total of sixty-six mass graves were opened and shown to the world, including a forensic expert from The Netherlands. The total number of dead amounted to at least 9,270 men and 169 women (in a town with a population of some 100,000 people, although people from surrounding areas were also among the victims). Before they had been able to open all the graves, the German troops withdrew.<sup>13</sup>

### III. Soviet Army and Prisoner of War Period (1940-July 1942)

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<sup>9</sup> Headword Koziatyn, in: Vlodymyr Kubijovyc (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, Toronto Buffalo London 1988, vo. II, 652.

<sup>10</sup> Headword Vinnytsya, in: Danylo Husar Struk (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, Toronto, Buffalo, London 1993, vo. V, 608.

<sup>11</sup> Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War. The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Princeton/Oxford 2001, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Lecture by Stephen Wheatcroft in the CHGS, 3 October 2008, followed by connected paper by co-speaker Michael J. Ellman, see *De Volkskrant*, 11 October 2008, supplement *Kennis*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> M. Stakhiv, headword Vinnytsya Massacre, in: Danylo Husar Struk (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, Toronto Buffalo London 1993, vol. V, 609-610.

In 1940,<sup>14</sup> when there was not yet an immediate threat of war, the authorities called Demjanjuk up for the Red Army. Just as hundreds of thousands of other Ukrainians, he had to comply with the call-up.

If he had not done so, he would have been arrested and very severely punished, possibly even with a death sentence. This call-up was a breaking point in his young life, for Demjanjuk was a tall young man (1.75 m.), who was handy and skilful with vehicle engines. Nobody knows what his level of ambition was at that point, nor presumably does he himself any longer know, but if his level was to be a tractor driver, then he was fully successful at an early age. According to his own words he had at that time obtained the (highly desirable) function of “*Traktorist*” (tractor driver) and was thus the driver of the (probably the only) tractor of the kolhoz. He thus belonged to the youngest of the village worthies, naturally subservient to the management of the kolhoz.

Demjanjuk was taken prisoner of war by German troops at the battle of Kerch in the Crimea in May 1942, which ended in a crushing defeat of the Red Army on 18 May 1942. He was imprisoned in a POW camp in Rivne in the Ukraine, together with many tens of thousands of other comrades.<sup>15</sup> If he had then thought that the Soviet regime belonged to the past, and for good, then this was not an inconceivable idea. What was then to become of a “*Traktorist*”, who could not possibly return to the village of his birth?

In general the Soviet POWs were exceptionally badly treated by the German troops. In this connection the pre-eminent expert Karel C. Berkhoff wrote of a “genocide” inspired by racist motives on the POWs who were regarded as “Russians”.<sup>16</sup> They suffered starvation. The number of victims of this genocidal policy amounted in the winter of 1941-1942 alone to two million.<sup>17</sup> After this the Germans treated them better, and the number of deaths decreased.<sup>18</sup>

There is no reason to believe that this phenomenon of mass deaths did not occur in Rivne; one source reports cannibalism amongst the Soviet POWs there in 1941,<sup>19</sup> thus before Demjanjuk was there. For a time, in 1941, Ukrainian POWs were released, but around the time that Demjanjuk was taken prisoner, this had been cancelled at the personal order of Adolf Hitler.<sup>20</sup> Demjanjuk will have heard this, and he will also have seen quite a lot of misery around him in Rivne, even though the number of deaths was less massive than in 1941.

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<sup>14</sup> Kurt Schrimm (note 1) spoke of 1941, but I adhere to the finding of the court in Ohio.

<sup>15</sup> Matia, *Findings of Fact*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair. Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*, Cambridge/London 2004, 90, 112-113.

<sup>17</sup> Berkhoff, *Harvest*, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Berkhoff, *Harvest*, 90. Berkhoff speaks here of a genocide which lasted to “at least the end of 1942”. On the other hand the Trawniki guard I.T. Danilchenko in his statement of 1985 (Schelvis Archive, NIOD) makes no mention of hunger.

<sup>19</sup> See: [www.cwporter.com/sovcan.htm](http://www.cwporter.com/sovcan.htm); Berkhoff, *Harvest*, 103

<sup>20</sup> Berkhoff, *Harvest*, 106.