

AFTER THE BATTLE

GARDELEGEN MILITARY CEMETERY

HERE LIE 1016 ALLIED PRISONERS OF WAR WHO WERE MURDERED BY THEIR CAPTORS.

THEY WERE BURIED BY CITIZENS OF GARDELEGEN WHO ARE CHARGED WITH RESPONSIBILITY THAT GRAVES ARE FOREVER KEPT AS GREEN AS THE MEMORY OF THESE UNFORTUNATES WILL BE KEPT IN THE HEARTS OF FREEDOM-LOVING MEN EVERYWHERE.

ESTABLISHED UNDER SUPERVISION OF 102 D INFANTRY DIVISION UNITED STATES ARMY. VANDALISM WILL BE PUNISHED BY MAXIMUM PENALTIES UNDER LAWS OF MILITARY GOVERNMENT.

FRANK A. KEATING
MAJOR GENERAL, U.S.A.
COMMANDING.

GARDELEGEN MILITAR - FRIEDHOF

HIER LIEGEN 1016 ALLIIERTE KRIEGSGEFANGENE, DIE VON IHRER WACHE ERMORDET WORDEN SIND.

DIE EINWOHNER VON GARDELEGEN HABEN SIE BEGRABEN UND DIE VERPFLICHTUNG ÜBERNOMMEN DIESE GRÄBER EBENSOFRISCH ZU BEWAHREN, WIE DAS GEDÄCHTNIS DER UNGLÜCKLICHEN IN DEN HERZEN ALLER FREIHEITSLIEBENDEN MENSCHEN BEWAHRT BLEIBEN WIRD.

ERRICHTET UNTER AUFSICHT DER 102-TEN INFANTERIEDIVISION ARMEE DER VEREINIGTEN STAATEN. JEDGLICHE SCHÄNDUNG DIESER FRIEDHOFES WIRD GEMÄSS DEN VERORDNUNGEN DER MILITAR-REGIERUNG MIT DEN SCHWERSTEN STRAFEN GEAHNDET WERDEN.

FRANK A. KEATING
GENIT. U.S.A.
KOMMANDEUR



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Front cover: The sign at Gardelegen, in former
East Germany, proclaiming the massacre which
bears its name. (Karel Margry)

Centre Pages: The cemetery at Gardelegen
where local civilians, acting under American
orders, buried the victims in 1945. (Karel Margry)

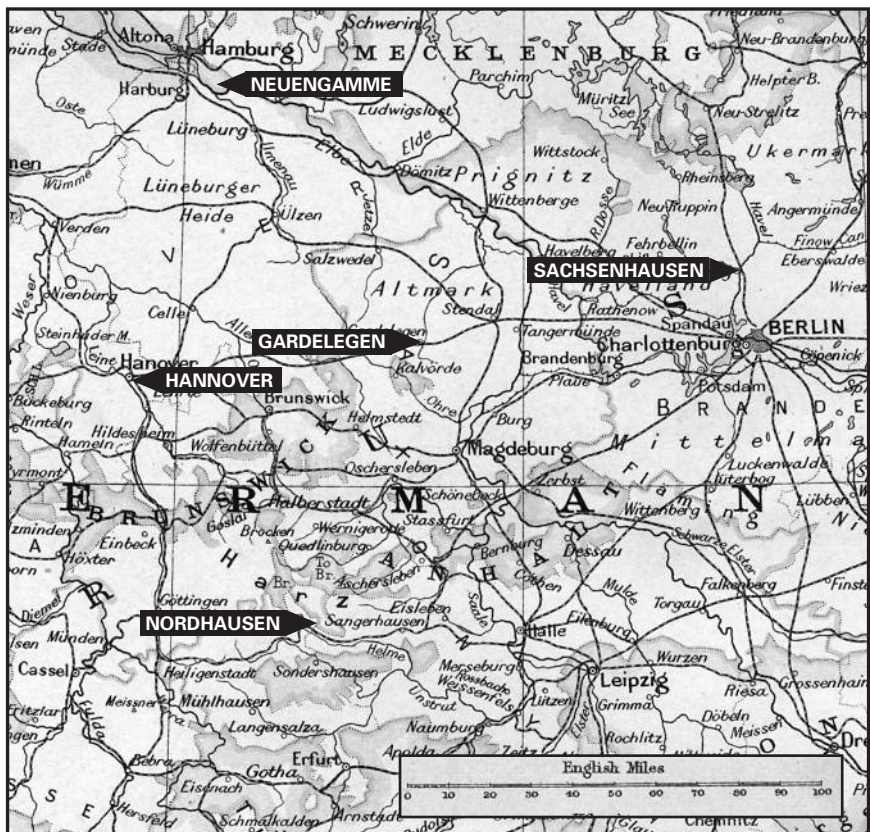
Back cover: The first of the specially designed
memorial plaques for 'Firemen Remembered'
was erected on the wall of Henry Cavendish
School in Balham exactly 60 years after the
incident which killed 13 personnel at what was
in November 1940 Sub-Station 86W.

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primarily based on the US War Crimes Investiga-
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Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, Amster-
dam; USNA — US National Archives.



The Isenschribbe barn stood in open fields just north-east of Gardelegen town. The prisoners marched there from the Remonte-Schule barracks on Bismarker Strasse. This is a contemporary annotated plan from the US War Crimes Investigation Team's file. We have added the position of the school and barn.



Most of the prisoners murdered at Gardelegen came from slave-labour camps of the 'Mittelbau' complex around Nordhausen, 120 kilometres to the south of Gardelegen, with others coming from Hannover-Stöcken, a sub-camp of Neuengamme, 120 kilometres due west of Gardelegen.



On April 15, 1945, soldiers of the US 102nd Infantry Division patrolling outside the small German town of Gardelegen discovered the site of what was perhaps the most horrendous of all Nazi atrocities. Two days before, on April 13, SS concentration camp guards and Fallschirmjäger soldiers had locked over a thousand camp prisoners of the Reich in a big barn and set it on fire, throwing in hand-grenades and firing

Panzerfaust rounds into the interior. Anyone trying to escape from the burning, smoke-filled building was shot. As a result a total of 1,016 men died. Although unparalleled in cruelty and horror, the murder action at the Isenschribbe barn was not an isolated case as there were several other instances of mass shootings of prisoners in the Gardelegen area during the same week. (IWM)

THE GARDELEGEN MASSACRE

By Karel Margry

On the morning of April 15, 1945, soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 405th Infantry, of the US 102nd Infantry Division were engaged in a routine search of the area around the Luftwaffe airfield at Gardelegen, a small recently-captured town 50 kilometres north-west of Magdeburg in northern Germany, when they discovered evidence of a recent Nazi atrocity. At the top of a small hill overlooking the airfield and the town, they found a big masonry harvest-storage barn. Several bodies wearing striped prison garments lay in the green spring wheat nearby, riddled with bullet wounds and showing peculiar burns. Taking a closer look at the barn, the GIs saw five more bodies sprawled through a jagged hole in the brick-work. When one of the barn's great wooden doors was pushed open, there emerged a cloud of smoke and a revolting stench of burned flesh. Overcoming their nausea, the soldiers explored the interior. There they found, heaped in every conceivable contortion of agony and death, the charred and smoking bodies of hundreds of men. The Americans had discovered the site of what would become notorious as the Gardelegen massacre.

The 1,016 unfortunates who were found murdered at the barn at Gardelegen were all inmates of Nazi concentration camps —

some of them Jews, most of them political prisoners. They had been marched to the barn from the Remonte-Schule (Remount School), an army school for training cavalry horses on Bismarcker Strasse in Gardelegen town. Its official name since 1936 was Wehrkreis Reit- und Fahrschule (Military District Riding and Driving School). The Remonte-Schule barracks was itself no concentration camp but had only become a reception centre for wandering groups of camp prisoners in the few days preceding the massacre. These prisoners had arrived in the Gardelegen area by train at two different places: Letzlingen, 12 kilometres south of Gardelegen, and Mieste, 12 kilometres west of the town. For clarity, it is best to follow the events as they unfolded at each of these arrival points in turn, but first we must describe the general background that led up to the massacre.

In early 1945, faced with the unstoppable advance of the Soviet army on the Eastern front, the Germans began evacuating the concentration and extermination camps in the East. In exhausting foot marches the starved and weakened inmates were driven westwards. Those unable to keep up the march tempo were ruthlessly shot by their SS guards, their bodies left by the wayside. The

aimed destination of these 'death marches' were the concentration camps in central Germany, mostly Bergen-Belsen, Neuengamme, Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen, Dachau and Mauthausen. However, as the Allied advance from East and West continued, many camps inside Germany itself became threatened too, and their inmates were hurriedly moved off in turn on foot or by rail to other destinations.

One of the installations evacuated in early April 1945 was 'Dora-Mittelbau', the complex of camps and sub-camps housing the slave labourers for the underground factories around the town of Nordhausen which produced the V1 flying bomb and V2 rocket and others of Germany's secret weapons (see *After the Battle* No. 101). Preparation for the evacuation of the 40,000 inmates then surviving in the 'Dora' main camp and its various satellite camps began on April 1. Between April 4 and 7, all camps were emptied, groups of inmates departing by train to destinations in northern Germany — Bergen-Belsen, Neuengamme, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück — or marching out to the north and east.



The small station of Letzlingen, 12 kilometres south of Gardelegen, where the train evacuating about 1,100 slave workers from the 'Mittelbau' camps of Wieda, Osterhagen, Nüxei and Mackenrode came to a halt on April 11. The SS guards, indecisive on what to do next, first allowed the prisoners to run away, then opened fire on them with automatic weapons. Most of the survivors were rounded up, with a total of about 185 being marched to Gardelegen, some of which would end up in the murder barn two days later. Few of the survivors from this train knew the name of the station where their rail journey had ended. Hence, Letzlingen was hardly mentioned in any of the survivor statements collected by the US Army war



crimes investigators after the atrocity. Some survivors thought they had alighted at Zienau, a station on the main Hannover-Berlin line three kilometres south-east of Gardelegen; others mentioned a place called Ortschen or Ochen; some — probably because they had heard where the other train had stopped — even named Mieste. Only one man named Letzlingen. In their final report, the US investigators concluded the train had stopped at Zienau. Although this was mistaken, the name stuck and many historians since have said that at least some of the atrocity victims came from the station there. The Letzlingen line was lifted in the 1970s, and the station now lies disused.

THE LETZLINGEN TRAIN

The first of the 'Mittelbau' evacuations that would end up at Gardelegen consisted of the inmates of the small satellite camps at Wieda, Osterhagen, Nüxei and Mackenrode, housing the slave workers of SS-Bau-Brigade 3. On April 6, the men from the latter three camps were first marched to Wieda. From there, on the 7th the assembled prisoners, numbering about 1,135, set off northwards through the Harz mountains, in two march groups of 400; the 335 men too sick to walk were put on a narrow-gauge train. The walking groups spent the first night together under the open sky in an open field in the forest between Braunlage and Elend, the second night in an empty labour camp at Wernigerode and in a small munitions factory just before that town respectively. Here they were reunited with the sick inmates who had travelled there by rail. On the morning of the 9th, the whole group of 1,130 was put on a train consisting of closed freight cars which set out from Wernigerode northwards. So far, the evacuation had been led by SS-Untersturmführer (2nd Lieutenant) Kurt Merkle, the deputy commander of SS-Bau-Brigade 3, but he left at Wernigerode, leaving SS-Stabscharführer (Staff Sergeant) Kemnitz as Transportführer (convoy commander).

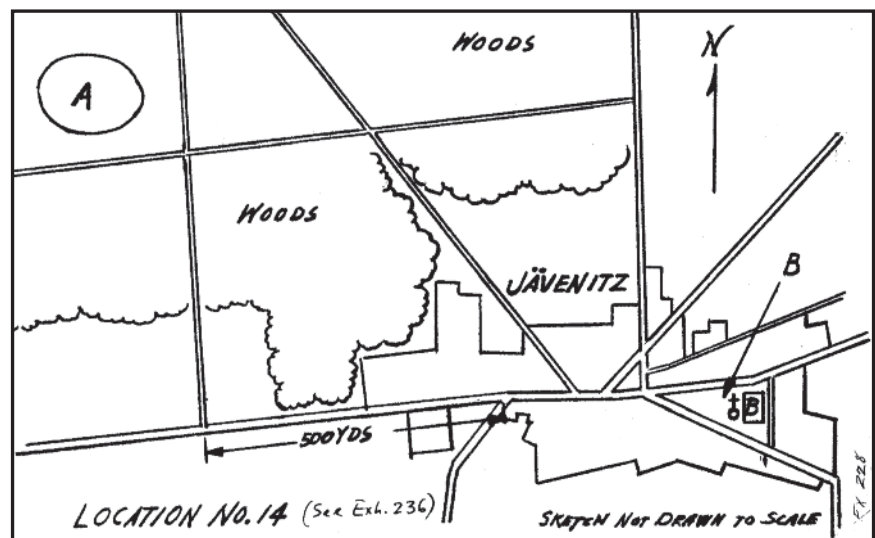
The train made a wide detour to the north-west, making long stops at various stations and stopping for the night at Jerxheim. Late on the 10th it reached the western suburbs of Magdeburg, which had just suffered an Allied air raid and where Allied fighter-bombers strafed the train. American ground forces were already in the southern outskirts, and all Elbe bridges in the city had been blown, so the train had no option but to go north. Continuing via secondary lines through Gross-Ammensleben, Neuahaldensleben and Wanefeld/Roxförde, at around 1730 hours on the 11th the train rolled into the small station outside the village of Letzlingen, 12 kilometres south-east of Gardelegen.

The train was shunted on to a side track, its last wagon — carrying the convoy kitchen, food supplies and the luggage and bicycles of

the SS guards — was unhinged, moved to another line, and unloaded. Artillery fire of the approaching Americans could be heard in the distance. Clearly the SS were deliberating what to do next. Transportführer Kemnitz was overheard saying: 'What shall we do with them? Let them go or shoot them?' Several of his men took the opportunity to change into civilian clothes and take off.

Shortly after, there occurred a confusing situation when Allied fighter-bombers passed over the train at low level. Apparently, Transportführer Kemnitz told some of the prisoners to run away and this, combined with the panic caused by the air attack, resulted in a mass escape by the prisoners. Throwing open the unlocked doors, hundreds of men jumped from the wagons and ran off,

most of them towards the woods to the west. They had not gone far when the SS guards opened fire on them with machine pistols and mowed down a great many of them. Of those that kept running, a few made good their escape, but many were recaptured, not a few being shot on the spot. (The bodies of 33 prisoners were later found at Letzlingen, 10 at Wanefeld, and another 23 at Roxförde.) About 165-185 were surrounded and rounded up by Luftwaffe soldiers at Neue Mühle near the hamlet of Polvitz, five kilometres to the north-west. They were marched off to Gardelegen, a first group of 125 setting out at 2130 hours and arriving at the Remonte School before midnight. A second group of 40-60 left after midnight, reaching the Remonte-Schule at 0700 on the 12th.



A group of 125 prisoners from the Letzlingen train was marched out of Gardelegen eastward early on the 12th. Next morning, April 13, two SS men and two Luftwaffe soldiers led them into a wood just west of the village of Jävenitz and opened fire on them, killing 31. They were buried in 17 makeshift graves. This sketch showing the site of the murder action and graves [A] comes from the file on the Gardelegen case prepared by the US Ninth Army's war crimes investigators in April-May 1945. (NIOD)

Of these two groups from Letzlingen, only the second one would end up as a victim of the Gardelegen massacre. The first contingent of 125 would narrowly escape it. Early on the 12th, about the time that the other group came in, they were marched off again, towards the east. They spent the night in a big farm barn near the village of Jävenitz, seven kilometres on from Gardelegen. Next morning, April 13, the group was taken into the forest. There arrived two SS-Unterscharführers with two Luftwaffe soldiers, who ordered the ethnic Germans among the prisoners to step aside, and then opened fire with machine pistols on the remainder, killing 31. The others made a run for it, scattering in the surrounding woods. Armed parties of Volkssturm (home guard) and Hitlerjugend teenagers began a man-hunt of the area, searching farms and woods for the escapees. Four men were shot by a Hitlerjugend boy at the neighbouring village of Hottendorf. By noon, most of the fugitives, about 96, had been recaptured and assembled at Jävenitz.

At 1930, an order arrived that these prisoners were to be taken back to Gardelegen. Luftwaffe soldiers quick-marched them to the airfield there, but by the time they arrived, about 2000 hours, smoke was already billowing up from the massacre barn on the horizon, and they were told to return to Jävenitz. Later that night, Erich Matthies, a civilian who owned a tractor with two trailers, was told to bring the prisoners to the Remonte-Schule. He left at midnight, but when he reached the barracks, it was empty of prisoners and the sentries at the gate told him: 'You have come too late. We don't want any prisoners'. Matthies took the 96 men in his custody back to Jävenitz. The burgomaster, Fritz Matthies (Erich's brother), hid them in a barn near the village for two days, providing them with hot food and coffee. On April 15, the 96 were liberated there by the Americans.

After the mass escape and the subsequent round-up, there remained some 700 prisoners at the Letzlingen railway station, guarded by the few remaining SS guards and by Volkssturm men. Most of them never got near Gardelegen, but were marched off the following morning (April 12) in the general direction of the Elbe. One small group of only 30 marched south-east towards Colbitz, 15 kilometres away, where they were liberated by troops of the US 30th Division on the 13th.

A much larger group of some 570 set off along a secondary road due east. Convoy commander Kemnitz had requisitioned 16 trucks and horse-drawn carts from the local population to carry the sick and invalid. They brought them as far as Dolle, the first next village ten kilometres on. From there, all were required to walk. Some 66 prisoners were killed, those too feeble to walk being shot by the guards and others, caught escapees, being clubbed to death by civilians. The rest marched on to the next village, Burgstall, where they camped for the night. Here the NSDAP-Ortsgruppenleiter (Nazi party local leader), Kurt Möhring, and a local lawyer, Hermann Pretz, prevented the guards from another mass shooting by producing a fake 'counter-order'. Thus saved, this group of 500 was liberated by troops of the US 35th Division that afternoon, April 13.

Yet a third group, about 100 strong, set off due east, guarded by SS and armed Kapos (prisoners with authority over other prisoners). They actually crossed the Elbe river in small boats, marching on to the town of Brandenburg and then north-east, aiming for Sachsenhausen. During their two-week trek, about half of them died of exhaustion or were shot by the guards. Others managed to escape, the lucky ones being finally liberated by the Soviet Army in the last days of April.



The spot in the woods where the prisoners were murdered and buried.



The 31 victims of the massacre in the woods were recovered by the US Army on May 13, 1945, and re-interred at the Jävenitz village cemetery — [B] on the sketch. The recovery and reburial was supervised by Captain Luther E. Gowder and a detail of the 381st Field Artillery Battalion of the 102nd Division. Picture taken by Army photographer Tech/5 Philip R. Mark of the 168th Signal Photographic Company. (NIOD)



The Jävenitz cemetery today. The individual crosses have gone and the memorial on the grave plot, placed there in GDR times, states the number of dead buried there as 28.



Mieste station, 12 kilometres west of Gardelegen, end of rail journey for some 1,400 inmates evacuated from the 'Mittelbau' camps of Rottleberode, Stempeda, Ilfeld and Ellrich, and for the 300-400 living skeletons evacuated from the Hannover-Stöcken sick bay. Their respective trains arrived at Mieste shortly after one another on April 9. After languishing in the railway yard for nearly three days, and with the American army coming ever nearer, the prisoners were marched away to the east on the

11th, most of them to meet their end in the murder barn at Gardelegen. Army photographer Tech/5 Philip E. Mark took these pictures of the abandoned evacuation trains on May 11, precisely a month to the day after the death march from the station began. The prisoners' train is the one on the track closest to the camera. On the left is the cement factory where turnip soup was handed out to the starved prisoners on the second day — for many their only meal in over a week. (NIOD)

THE MIESTE TRAIN

The second Nordhausen group to end up at Gardelegen was made up of inmates from the 'Mittelbau' satellite camps Rottleberode, Stempeda, Ilfeld and Ellrich, with inmates from Nordhausen's main camp 'Dora' and a few stragglers from one or two other camps being added in.

On the evening of April 4, the some 1,500 inmates of Rottleberode and nearby Stempeda were assembled and marched off to the railway station of Niedersachswerfen, 18 kilometres away. They left in two groups — one of 400 led by the Lagerführer (deputy camp commander) of Rottleberode, SS-Hauptscharführer (Sergeant Major) Erhard Brauny, and one of 1,100 led by the camp commander of Stempeda, SS-Unterscharführer Hermann Lamp. It was a harsh night march, in cold rain and over the muddy slippery roads of the Harz foothills.

Brauny's group of 400 reached Niedersachswerfen on the morning of the 5th, but the prisoners had to wait until afternoon before a train became available for them. It was made up of some 15 open boxcars, of which ten turned out to be already filled with some 600 inmates from other 'Mittelbau' camps: 300 from Ilfeld, the rest perhaps from main camp 'Dora', perhaps from the overflow camp at the Boelcke Barracks in Nordhausen town.

The 300 Ilfeld inmates had left their camp on foot at 0900 that morning led by the deputy camp commander, SS-Unterscharführer (Sergeant) Hermann Rose, and had reached Niedersachswerfen, six kilometres on, at 1030. They were kept separate from the inmates of other camps, being loaded in six cars: one for their 13 SS guards, one for the baggage and four for the prisoners.

Brauny's 400 were ordered to climb aboard the remaining six cars, but the train did not leave as Brauny waited all day for the other Rottleberode column to arrive. Finally, driving back there on a motor cycle, Brauny learned that Lamp's group had taken



The same view today. The new tracks for the Intercity Express super-fast train were added in the 1990s.

another route. He decided to go without them, but it was past noon on April 6 before the train finally left Niedersachswerfen. It only drove to Ellrich station, seven kilometres on, where it stopped again.

Late in the evening another five open-topped boxcars were hooked on, and in these, during the night, were loaded some 400 inmates from Ellrich-Bürgergarten, the satellite camp housing slave workers of SS-Bau-Brigade 4: all of the camp's 200 sick inmates, plus 150-200 Jewish prisoners from camp Mackenrode who had been shoved off to Ellrich on March 26. This group was accompanied by 15 guards under SS-Oberscharführer (Quartermaster Sergeant) Locke. A few inmates from Woffleben camp and Russian prisoners from 'Dora' are said to have boarded the train here too.

The whole train, now 20 cars long and carrying some 1,400 prisoners and 100 guards, left Ellrich early on the 7th with Brauny as senior Transportführer. It travelled west to

Herzberg, then north to Osterode (some sources say that the 300 Ilfeld inmates boarded the train here, but that is not correct). For food, each prisoner had received a loaf of bread and a small tin of meat paste. To protect their weak, emaciated bodies during the cold ride in open wagons, they had only their thin camp garments and a few blankets. Each car contained 60 to 100 persons. They had no room to sit or lie down and had to sleep on top of each other. During the journey numerous men died from hunger or cold. Their dead bodies lay squeezed among the living in the wagons.

Just outside Osterode, at the village of Lasfelde, the train was attacked by American fighter-bombers. The locomotive was heavily damaged and three SS men (the SS from Rottleberode travelled in the wagon behind the locomotive) and five prisoners were killed, and several others wounded. Two Russian prisoners were shot by an SS guard as they tried to open the wagon containing



Above: A further 17 boxcars stood abandoned just east of the level crossing, as shown in this shot looking the other way. There is still some unclarity about how many prisoner evacuation trains ended up stranded at Mieste. There is no doubt about the one from 'Mittelbau' and the one from Hannover-Stöcken. The former had about 20 waggons, and the latter eight, making a total of 28. However, the American sketch indicates a total of 54 boxcars in the station. The additional cars

may well have arrived with other cargo (some of the cars on the right-hand track in the previous shot certainly look like they carried ordinary freight), or after the prisoners left, but they also leave the possibility that other prisoner transports did end up in Mieste as well. Some accounts mention a train with inmates from Neuengamme arriving on the night of April 10/11, but there is nothing in the survivor testimonies to substantiate this. (NIOD) *Below:* Looking east from Mieste railway station today.

the food. The SS and local medics took care of the German casualties, leaving the prisoners to bury their dead in a common grave beside the track. In the panic caused by the air attack, numerous prisoners jumped from the train but it is not known how many succeeded to flee or how many were shot while doing so. The SS guards, helped by Volkssturm and Hitlerjugend from the village, started rounding them up as soon as the air raid was over.

A new locomotive was arranged and the train continued its journey, only to stop for another air raid alarm at Badenhausen, four kilometres on. No aircraft appeared, but again there were escape attempts, followed by man-hunts, and escapees being shot. After this, the train continued north via Seesen, Salzgitter and Braunschweig to Gifhorn, where it turned east on the main Hannover-Berlin line towards Oebisfelde, where it stopped for the night of April 8/9.

The man in charge at Mieste was SS-Hauptscharführer Erhard Brauny, the senior convoy commander of the 'Mittelbau' train. Born on October 17, 1913, Brauny had joined the Hitlerjugend in 1930 and become a member of both the NSDAP and the SS in 1932. In September 1939 he was posted to Buchenwald camp, becoming a Kommandoführer at the Tondorf-Erfurt sub-camp in January 1940, and guard leader at the Cologne sub-camp in August 1941. In August 1943, he was assigned to camp 'Dora' at Nordhausen, where he served as roll-call leader and block leader. In November 1944, he became deputy commander of the Rottleberode sub-camp. In all of these positions, he gained a terrible reputation for beating, killing and starving prisoners. On April 4, 1945, he led the evacuation of Rottleberode, beginning an odyssey that would bring the inmates to Mieste, and eventually to death in Gardelegen.



(Other sources say it already turned east at Braunschweig, going to Helmstedt, then



north again on secondary lines via Marienborn and Weferlingen to Oebisfelde.) Whatever its precise route, the shift to the east was apparently caused by an order which Brauny had received on the 8th to change the train's destination from Neuengamme in northern Germany to a camp in the east, probably Sachsenhausen.

In the early morning of April 9, the train came to a final halt at the railway station at Mieste, 12 kilometres west of Gardelegen, its further journey to Stendal blocked by destruction of the rail tracks at Solpke, six kilometres ahead. (Some sources state that the 300 inmates from Ilfeld already got off at Bergfriede, a station ten kilometres west of Mieste, but this is not correct.) The locomotive was uncoupled and driven off, leaving the train stranded in the railway yard. The three convoy commanders — Brauny from Rottleberode, Rose from Ilfeld, and Locke from Ellrich — conferred on what to do next. Brauny telephoned the SS main office in charge of concentration camps at Sachsenhausen for instructions, but the authorities there apparently told him to make his own decisions.

Situation sketch of Mieste station prepared by the US investigators. (NIOD)

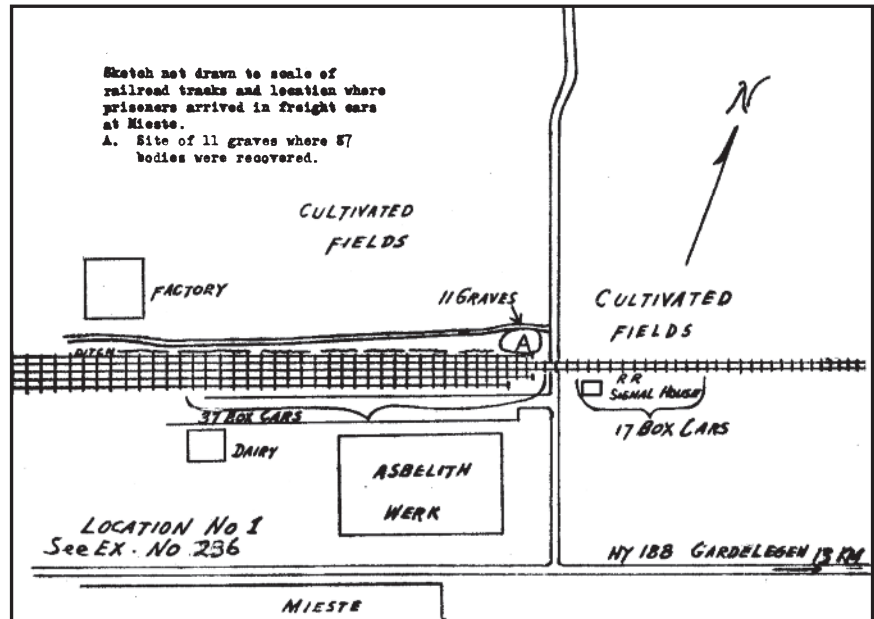
Shortly after, another prisoner evacuation transport rolled into Mieste — bringing with it the third main group that would end up at Gardelegen. It did not come from 'Dora-Mittelbau' but from the slave labour camp at Hannover-Stöcken, a satellite of Neuengamme concentration camp housing the slave workers for the Accumulatoren-Fabrik AG in Stöcken which produced batteries for U-boats and torpedo engines. The majority of its inmates had left for Bergen-Belsen on the 6th, but 600 sick prisoners had been left behind in the camp hospital. Early on the 8th, they were all perched into eight cattle cars. Many of them suffered from dysentery, quite a few were naked. There was no place for any patient to lie down, no water, and only a few loafs of bread thrown in before departure. The train had no guards and, during a stop in Hannover station, 150 prisoners escaped. At 0600 on the 9th this train reached Mieste station and was shunted behind the 'Mittelbau' train. When its doors were opened, many of the 300-450 men inside were too weak even to crawl out. Several had died on the journey. The SS guards of Brauny's train shot the weaker survivors and took over guarding the others. (When Brauny's train arrived at Mieste there already was another stranded train standing in the station yard but it appears that this was not a prisoner evacuation transport.)

With two prisoner trains stranded at Mieste the combined number of prisoners there now amounted to some 1,500-1,800. By now, the starved prisoners had had nothing to eat for days. Some were lucky to find a few raw potatoes. Others ate grass taken from the railway embankment. The only drinking water was from a ditch alongside the track. Civilians who felt pity for these unfortunates and wanted to give them some bread or milk were reproved by others or chased off by the guards. Burgomaster Adolf Krüger of Mieste refused to distribute food to the prisoners, but on the 10th — on orders of Landrat (region commissioner) Dr Daue — Oberleutnant Fritz Hesse of the Oebisfelde gendarmerie arranged for a meal to be cooked, ordering the supply of 130lb of meat, 2,500lb of potatoes, 1,200lb of turnips and 6lb of coffee. This meal, cooked in the cement factory beside the track and handed out by the guards, was totally inadequate to feed all. Many prisoners were too feeble to be able to stand in the food line. Others fought each other for what food they got, watched by laughing guards. While at Mieste some 60 men succumbed to hunger and thirst, most of them from the Hannover-Stöcken group.

The SS guards left the task of guarding the trains mostly to the Kapos, arming some of them with rifles, while they themselves got drunk in the local cafes. To reinforce the guard, members of the local Volkssturm, Hitlerjugend, and soldiers from Luftwaffe units stationed in the area took up position around the railway yard.

Late on the 9th a group of Luftwaffe soldiers led by a lieutenant shot eight prisoners who wanted to get some corn from a nearby grain storage. Obergefreiter Franz Unvertorben, a guard from Ellrich, killed three prisoners who had collapsed from hunger with a bullet through the head. Even prisoners who wanted to relieve themselves in the cement factory were shot. In all, some 25 men were killed by guards at Mieste. Prisoner details carried the dead to a spot beside the track where they could be buried. A total of 86 bodies was later recovered from here.

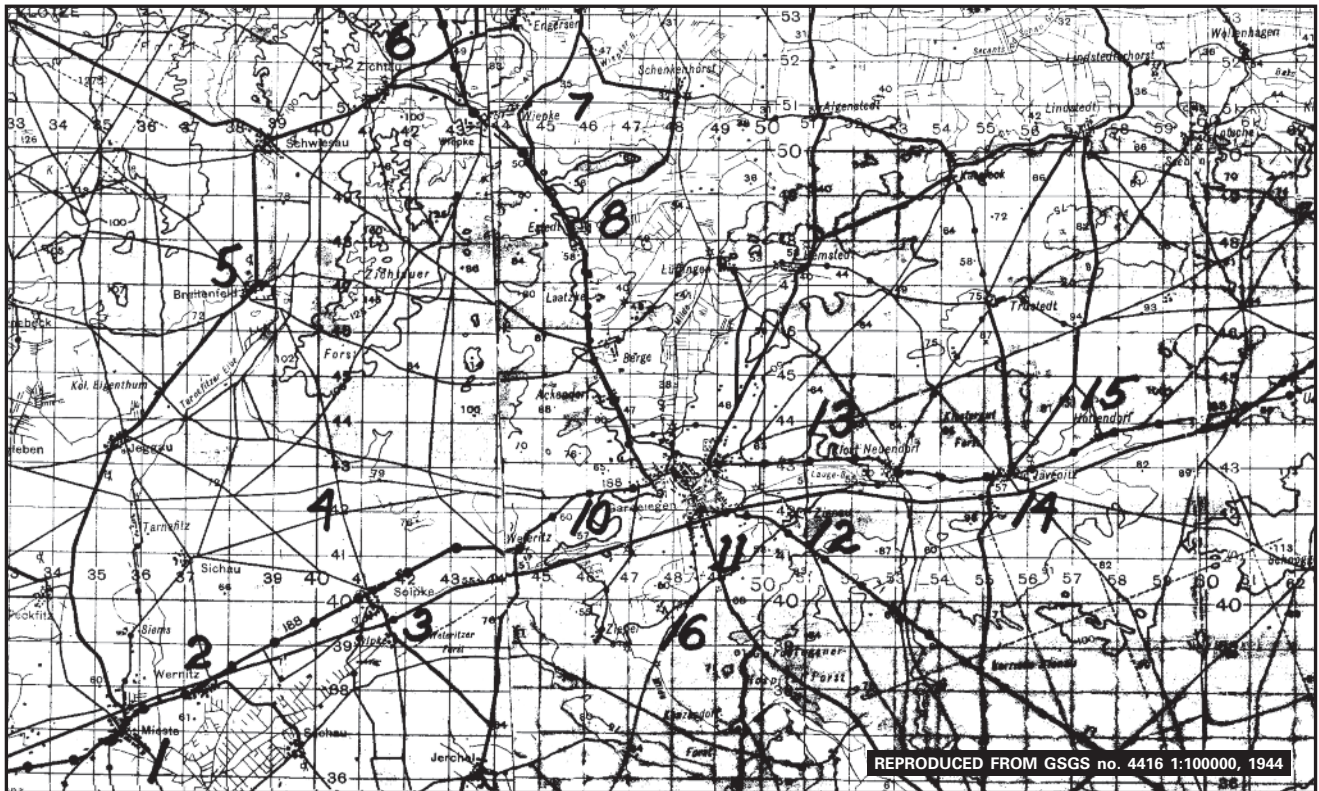
On the morning of the 11th, Allied fighter-bombers attacked the train and one bomb fell on the railway yard, causing everyone to scurry in all directions. In the mêlée, some 17 prisoners were shot by the guards, a few managed to escape.



About 50-60 prisoners had died from hunger or exhaustion, either during the train journey or during the three days at Mieste. Another 25-30 were murdered by the German guards, either because they had collapsed or were looking for food or because they ran away when Allied aircraft strafed the station on the 12th. Prisoner details buried a total of 86 dead prisoners in a plot beside the level crossing. Directed by Lieutenant Colonel Edward E. Cruise, one of the officers investigating the Gardelegen case, Tech/5 Mark pictured their disinterment on April 11. (NIOD)



The same plot today, now a weed-filled gravel pit.



The master map from the US Army war crimes file shows all the major locations around Gardelegen, except Letzlingen. The routes of the death marches from Mieste to Gardelegen can be traced on them as well. [1] Mieste. [2] Wernitz. [3] Solpke.

[4] Forest intersection where guards shot 15 prisoners. [5] Breitenfeld. [6] Zichtau. [7] Wiepke. [8] Estedt. [10] Gardelegen. [11] Lindenthal. [12] Zienau. [13] Kloster Neuendorf. [14] Jävenitz. [15] Hottendorf. [16] Ipse. (NIOD)

At 1130, Transportführer Brauny received word that the Americans were only 13 kilometres away and rapidly approaching. He ordered that all prisoners be marched off to the east. Before departure, each prisoner received three or four potatoes. The prisoners left in three groups of different size. Those unable to walk, about 200-300, were transported on 21 horse-drawn carts requisitioned by burgomaster Krüger. The column was followed by a detail of 10-20 prisoners who had orders to bury anyone who died or was shot on the way.

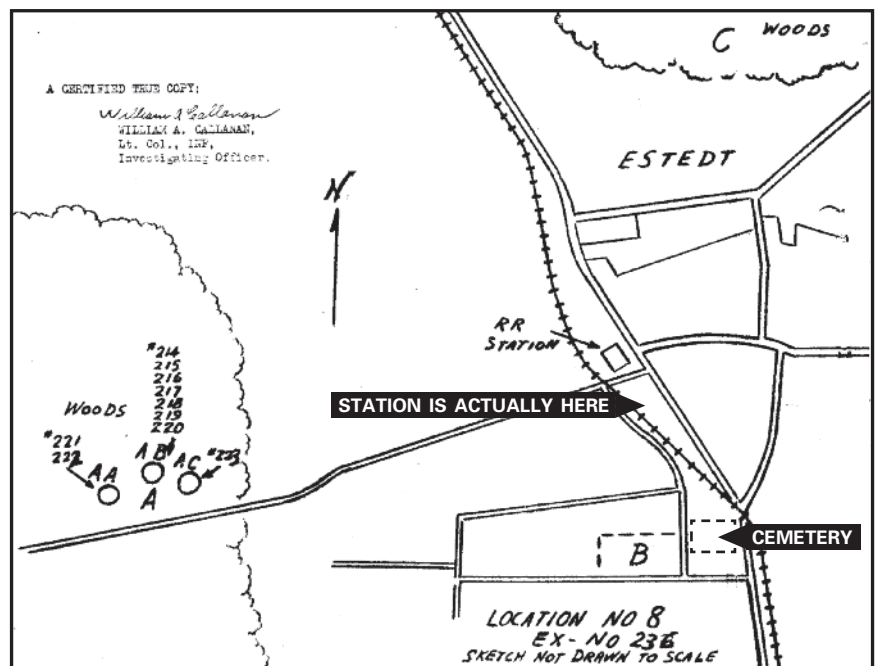
The first group, which left around noon, initially marched east along the R188 main road towards Gardelegen. At Wernitz, only two kilometres further on, Fallschirmjäger lined up 25 of the weaker prisoners along the side of the road and killed them with machine pistols. At Solpke, about halfway to Gardelegen, the group began a wide detour to the north through the woods. When they reached an intersection in the forest, the guards allowed them to rest but about 15 prisoners who were too exhausted to go on were shot and buried on the spot. Passing through Breitenfeld, the remainder reached Zichtau at 2200, where they rested for an hour before turning south again following the R71 main road through Wiepke and Estedt to reach Gardelegen and the Remonte-Schule at about 0530 hours on the 12th.

The second group initially marched north-east along secondary roads through the woods towards Breitenfeld. Just after leaving Mieste, the column was strafed by Allied aircraft. Armed townspeople helped to round up the scattered prisoners. From Breitenfeld, the column cut due east and reached the village of Estedt where they turned north on to the R71 towards Wiepke. Shortly before dark, a German officer passing on a motorbike shouted to the guards that American tanks were coming towards them. The SS men quickly ordered the column to about face, beating them and firing their weapons to make them obey. Shortly after, the SS

men fled. The prisoners, now free, stopped to camp for the night at Grauen Busch, a copse to the east of the main road between Wiepke and Schenkenhorst.

A few hours later, Fallschirmjäger troops took over the guarding of this dwindling group. (Gardelegen was the main depot of Germany's Fallschirmjäger troops, and there were many paratroop units stationed in the area. By 1945 they were mostly made up of

redundant Luftwaffe personnel assigned to the Fallschirmjäger army.) Between April 11-13 these Fallschirmjäger exercised a ruthless reign of terror, shooting most of the prisoners that came into their hands. One of the largest executions took place on the morning of the 12th at a locality known as Sandkuhle, in the woods just west of the Estedt railway station. On orders of NSDAP-Ortsgruppenleiter Fritz Korts, a



The second-largest mass murder in the Gardelegen area (after that at the barn) took place at the village of Estedt, seven kilometres north of Gardelegen. Here, on April 12, Fallschirmjäger soldiers executed 104 prisoners in a wood behind the village railway station, burying them in three large pits and two smaller ones. (NIOD)



Left: A month later, German civilians recovered the remains of the victims under American supervision. This pit, [AA] on the



sketch, contained 60 bodies. (NIOD) Right: The same spot in the woods today.



The presence of the mass graves in the forest remained unknown to the Americans until May 9, 1945, when a freed Polish worker reported them to 1st Lieutenant Kenneth L. Russ, commander of 2nd Platoon, Battery D, 548th Anti-Aircraft Artillery & Automatic Weapons Battalion, which had been assigned Military Government duties at Estedt. Russ warned



higher authorities and next day Lieutenant Colonel William A. Calannan, one of the officers investigating the Gardelegen war crimes, instructed him to have the bodies recovered and properly buried. Russ informed the burgomaster to have all the able-bodied men out on the morning of May 11 to carry out the task. This pit, [AB] on the sketch, contained 30 dead. (NIOD)



A GI watches while the corpses are put on the cart. (NIOD)



Nothing remains to mark the massacre that took place here.

group of six Fallschirmjäger commanded by Oberleutnant Helmut Hockhauf told local civilians to bring prisoners, both dead and live ones, thereto on horse-drawn carts. Six Polish forced labourers and three German civilians were ordered to dig two big trenches. The prisoners arrived in five cartloads — three of 30-35 men each, one of 10, and one of 4. The dead prisoners were thrown into the grave pits. Those still alive were made to kneel on the edge and killed by the paratroopers with a neck shot. The prisoners from the second cart had to cover those of the first with a layer of sand, before they too were shot and pushed into the same hole. One Pole kissed the shoes of one of the soldiers, begging not to shoot him, but he too was killed. The soldiers were enjoying themselves, callously joking and smoking cigarettes while they carried out the mass murder. A total of 104 dead were later recovered from this spot, plus another six from individual graves around the town.

That same afternoon, a group of some 120 prisoners who had become separated from the main column at Grauen Busch, and had spent the night without guards, was overtaken near Estedt by nine Fallschirmjäger in a car who again took them prisoner and led them into a wood (probably the same one where Oberleutnant Hockhauf's men had just shot the others). The prisoners were told to undress, and six of them were ordered to dig a trench. At the last moment, a messenger arrived in a car with an order from the Gardelegen chief of police that the prisoners were to be taken to the Remonte School at Gardelegen. The messenger was Hans-Joachim Korts, son of Ortsgruppenleiter Korts. After shooting those prisoners that had fainted on the spot, the Fallschirmjäger sent the men on their way, without escort, south to Gardelegen, where they arrived at the Remonte-Schule about 2200 hours on the 12th.

The remnants of the group camping at Grauen Busch, about 80-100 men, were transported to Gardelegen on horse-drawn wagons in the afternoon of the 13th. They too would become victims of the barn massacre.

By then, the third group from Mieste — the carts carrying the weak and the ill, with a column of marching prisoners in front — had long since arrived at Gardelegen. Guarded by only two SS men, it had followed the first group to Solpke. Here 23 of the prisoners were shot. The rest of the column stayed for the night in a farm barn at the village. Next morning, April 12, they made a small loop south across the railway to Solpke-Süd, recrossing it three kilometres further on at Weteritz before turning east onto the R188 main road again to reach the Remonte-Schule about 0500.

All along the various routes from Mieste, hastily-dug graves marked the places where prisoners had been shot or died from exhaustion: 33 at Wernitz, 23 at Solpke, 20 at Breitenfeld, 10 at Zichtau, 110 at Estedt, 8 at Berge.

The reaction of the German population to the sight of these columns of pitiable creatures passing their farms and villages showed the entire spectrum of human behaviour, varying from outright hatred . . . to total indifference . . . to compassion and help. Too often, citizens assisted the henchmen by denouncing prisoners for taking away a few beets or potatoes, by pointing out where escapees were hiding. Many who ventured to offer food or drink to the famished prisoners were chased off by guards. A handful risked their lives giving shelter to escapees. Farm milker Karl Stegert from Weteritz helped three prisoners hiding in a hay loft, providing them with food and civilian clothes for three days until liberation. Vicar Friedrich Franz of Gardelegen and his wife hid four Dutch prisoners in their stable and cared for them until the arrival of the Americans.



The 104 bodies recovered from the wood were buried in the Estedt village cemetery together with six more prisoners, murdered by the Fallschirmjäger, whose remains had been found in single graves in and around Estedt. (NIOD)



The same plot in Estedt cemetery today. The individual crosses have gone, and the large central cross has been moved to a corner of the plot. (The position of the cemetery [B] as given on the sketch is not quite accurate, so we have added the correct position.)



A formal funeral ceremony was held on May 12, with Lieutenant Russ' platoon of the 548th AAA & AW Battalion furnishing the Guard of Honour. The wood visible on the horizon is where the mass murder had taken place. (NIOD)

Even as they entered Gardelegen, the men in their striped prison garments were not safe from persecution. Throughout the 12th and the 13th, murder squads from the SS and Fallschirmjäger soldiers on motorbikes roamed the streets, opening fire on prisoners straggling behind a column or spotted without escort. Four were shot in Bahnhofstrasse, two in front of the St Spiritus Hospital, two near the Salzwedeler Tor, and four on Marktplatz. At least 12 persons were thus killed in the town. Their corpses were taken to the town cemetery and buried in common graves.

Thus, by the afternoon of Friday, April 13, a large number of camp prisoners — well over 1,000 — was assembled at the Remonte-Schule. The order to concentrate them in one place had been given by Gardelegen's acting burgomaster, Karl Lepa, on Tuesday the 10th after he saw the first groups of prisoners passing through his town. Initially they had been assembled at the Schützenhaus hall in the centre of town but when this became too crowded (and also because the citizens feared that the prisoners might make the hall dirty) they were transferred to the military barracks. The rumour quickly spread in the area that Gardelegen had been declared a hospital town and all prisoners there would be handed over to the Americans without a fight. This made even some prisoners who had already escaped come out of hiding and report in to Gardelegen voluntarily.

At the Remonte School the prisoners were put in two big stables and in the open-air riding ring. They received bread and soup, for many the first food since their evacuation from the camps began. The Remonte School commander, Oberstleutnant Hilmar Hubertus Freiherr von Seherr-Thoss, had left for Seethen on the 11th (he was taking most of the school horses there) leaving the Remonte-Schule in charge of Rittmeister Rudolf Kuhn, assisted by Seherr-Thoss's adjutant, Hauptmann Peter Freise.

To make up for the guards that had taken off, the SS convoy commanders again looked for new recruits among the prisoners, asking the ethnic Germans among them to volunteer. Twenty-five stepped forward, not just Germans but also a few Poles, a Czech, etc. Rittmeister Kuhn had them issued with German military uniforms.

Meanwhile, local Party and military leaders were conferring on what to do with the prisoners. To them, the situation was getting acute. The Americans were approaching rapidly and it was only a question of hours before they would reach Gardelegen and liberate the detainees. The Germans were well aware that the concentration camp inmates constituted damning evidence of the Nazis' criminal regime. In their minds, distorted by years of racial ideology, camp inmates were all criminals or subhumans, who needed to be eliminated.

The driving force behind all this was the acting NSDAP-Kreisleiter (Nazi party district leader) of Gardelegen, 34-year-old Gerhard Thiele. In early April, Thiele had attended a meeting at Dessau called by Gauleiter Rudolf Jordan of Gau Magdeburg-Anhalt. On April 6, Thiele himself had called a meeting of the Ortsgruppenleiters and other officials of his Kreis at one of the Spilner restaurants in Gardelegen. Here, he issued an instruction 'on orders of the Gauleiter' that any prisoner who looted, tried to escape, offered resistance or was found wandering without proper papers was to be shot on the spot. Around this time, Thiele mentioned a subject he was to stress over and over again that week until the Volkssturm and many of the people of Gardelegen were well acquainted with it. He told of how the forced workers at Kakerbeck, a village 16 kilometres north of Gardelegen, had escaped before the Ameri-



Last stop before mass murder. The Remonte-Schule on Bismarker Strasse in Gardelegen, where the various groups of prisoners trekking through Kreis Gardelegen were assembled on April 10-13. A training establishment for cavalry horses, the Remonte School had carried out its normal function until right before the prisoners arrived, most of the horses only having been evacuated on April 11.

cans arrived, looted the homes and raped the women and children. He emphasized that he would not let that happen at Gardelegen. His attempts to alarm the people were successful in that, by the 13th, many believed that while killing the prisoners was horrible, it was necessary for the safety of the town.

Things came to a head with the arrival, and halt, of the two evacuation trains at Mieste on the 9th and Letzlingen on the 11th. On the 11th, Thiele for the first time voiced his intention to kill all the prisoners then being assembled at the Remonte-Schule. On the 12th, on receiving news of the mass escape at Letzlingen, he issued the order that escaped prisoners were to be hunted down and shot when caught.

During Wednesday the 11th, Thursday the 12th and Friday the 13th there were constant conferences — in person and by telephone — between Thiele and members of his Kreisleitung staff on the one hand; and Rittmeister Kuhn at the Remonte School; the SS convoy commanders Brauny, Locke and Rose, also at the Remonte barracks; the commanders of the two Volkssturm battalions in Kreis Gardelegen, Hans Debrodt and Rudolf Kampe; the Luftwaffe airfield commander, Oberst Walther Milz; and the

Fallschirmjäger depot commander, Oberstleutnant Cord von Einem on the other hand. Few of them voiced any protest at Thiele's announcement that all prisoners were to be killed.

His first idea was to shoot them all in the grounds of the Remonte-Schule, but when he told Kuhn and Brauny this about 1730 on the 12th they objected to this because of the school's close proximity to the town. Thiele's next proposal was to kill them all at the Isenschribber Scheune, the big barn of the Isenschribbe farm estate which stood isolated on top of a small hill two kilometres north-east of the town. It was a big masonry barn with a tile roof, about 45 metres long, 18 metres wide and seven metres high, with four big double sliding doors, two in either long side. Used for storing the products of the harvest, it was now empty save for a knee-deep covering of straw on the floor.

At 2100, Thiele telephoned Rittmeister Kuhn at the Remonte-Schule and told him to inform Brauny that the prisoners were to be shot at the barn. Kuhn could not find Brauny so he passed the order to the latter's elderly assistant, SS-Hauptscharführer Friedrich Teply, advising him to get the order confirmed in writing. Apparently, Brauny did



Kreisleiter Gerhard Thiele, the man chiefly responsible for the Gardelegen atrocity. Born in Stettin on April 29, 1909, Thiele joined the Nazi party in January 1931. He began work as a teacher in April but was fired in November because of his NSDAP membership. In 1932 he took command of the Deutsche Jungvolk (the predecessor of the Hitlerjugend) in the Finkenwalde district. Reinstated as a teacher after the Nazis came to power in 1933, he switched to the Hitlerjugend rising to become a Bannführer in 1937. In 1937 he became director of the Gebietsführerschule (School for Hitlerjugend Region Leaders) for the Mittelbe region at Thale in the Harz. He was in the army in 1939-41 and 1942-43 serving in France and Russia and reaching the rank of Oberleutnant der Reserve, returning to the Hitlerjugend School at Thale in between. Recalled from the front as 'indispensable' in April 1943, he attended the NSDAP cadre school at Sonthofen and in May 1944 was appointed acting Kreisleiter of Gardelegen. (MGG)



The Isenschubbe barn — site of the largest and most-horrific single mass murder of camp prisoners committed by the Nazi regime in the final weeks of the war. This is the southern facade of the building, pictured by US Army photographer Tech/5 Philip R. Mark on April 16, one day after the Americans

discovered the atrocity. The 1,050 prisoners had been herded into the barn through the door on the left. The small shed on the left was where the Kapo guards who assisted the SS in the murder action stored the drum of petrol; some of them used it as a place to sleep during the night of the massacre. (USNA)

not like the order and notified Volkssturm battalion commander Debrodt at the Kreisleitung of his reservations. When Thiele telephoned Debrodt from his home around midnight and heard of Brauny's unwillingness, he reacted angrily: 'If the convoy commander won't do it, hang him'.

Throughout the next day — Friday, April 13 — preparations for the massacre continued. At 1100 Debrodt, who was Thiele's most fanatical supporter, telephoned Kuhn at the Remonte-Schule and, on learning that the execution order had still not been carried out, cursed both Kuhn and Brauny for the failure. Brauny was still not available so Debrodt then spoke to Teply and apparently convinced him, for when the SS man laid down the receiver he said to Kuhn: 'It must be done'.

Shortly after, Brauny asked the 25 newly-recruited Kapo guards which of them could handle a rifle. Seven said they could not, and they were told to step out of the group and stay in the barracks. The other 18 were issued with rifles and ammunition. Hauptmann Freise told them they were now free and would get food, schnapps and cigarettes if they would assist with shooting the other prisoners.

Debrodt called again at 1500 hours, urging

Kuhn to take over command of the prisoners, but Kuhn declined saying he had nothing to do with them. About 1630, Walther Pannwitz, one of Debrodt's company commanders, telephoned Kuhn to ask for soldiers to guard and shoot the prisoners. Kuhn replied he had none. Pannwitz then tried Oberst Milz at the airfield, but he too said he had no one available for this task.

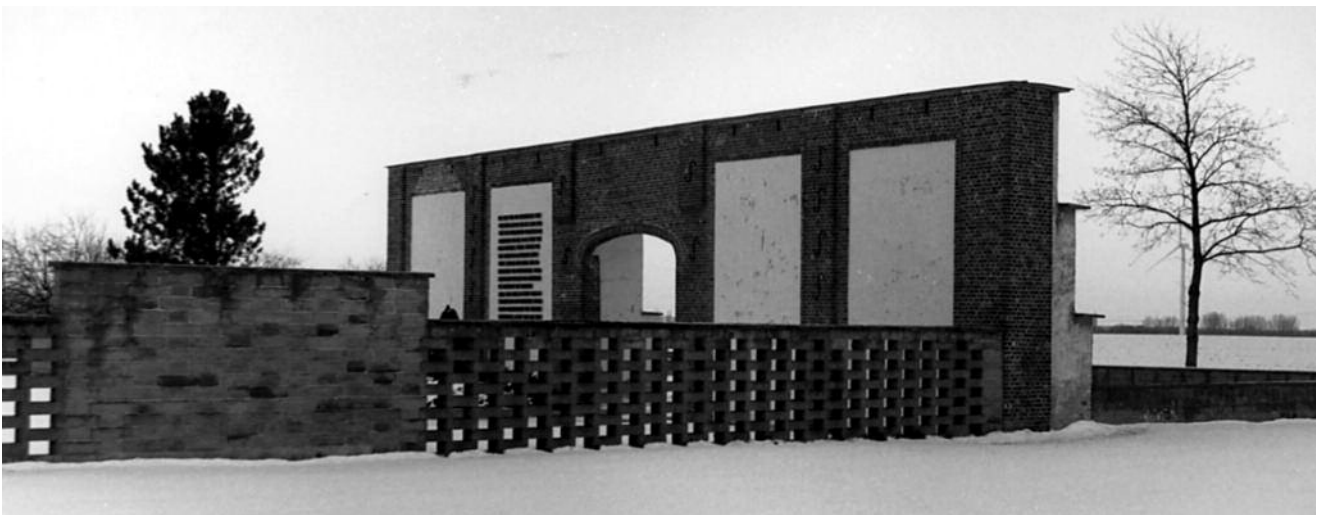
About 1600, the guards at the Remonte-Schule formed up the some 1,050 prisoners in groups of 100 and columns of five. Then, in the late afternoon, they marched them out of the gate and up the road to the north in three large groups of about 300. Those too weak to march — about 100 — followed in three carts and trailers drawn by horses and tractors. Somehow, the Germans had assembled some 80 guards: 30 SS men, some of them with dogs; the 18 Kapo guards; half a dozen members of the Volkssturm and of the Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labour Service); and 30 Luftwaffe soldiers from the nearby airfield. The march column was commanded by SS-Hauptscharführer Teply; Transportführer Brauny did not go to the barn (he disappeared from the Remonte-Schule sometime during the 13th); what his colleagues Rose and Locke did is unclear.

None of the prisoners had any inkling of

the fate that awaited them. Rumours had it that they were being marched out to be handed over to the Americans. Guards told some of them that they were going to spend the night in a barn because of lack of space in the barracks.

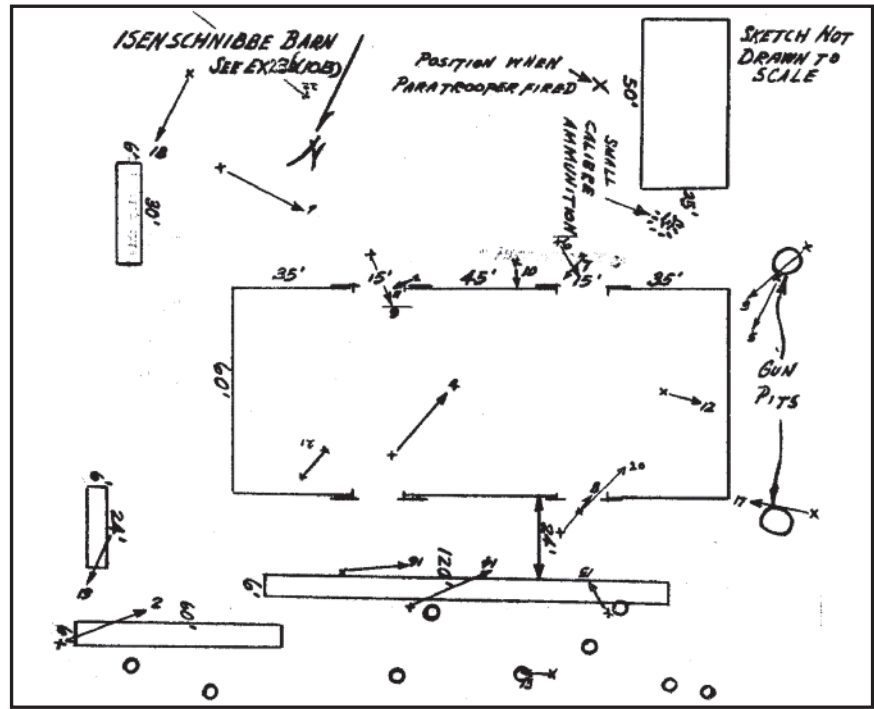
It was less than two kilometres to the barn. When halfway, the column stopped on the road for about an hour. A tractor passed by with several cans of petrol and a case of ammunition. From afar, prisoners saw some of the load being carried inside the barn.

The last group of 300 arrived at the barn around 1900 hours. It was still daylight. Here, the 80 guards were joined by some 20 Fallschirmjäger, two of them on motorcycles, who arrived carrying Panzerfausts, machine pistols, hand-grenades and flare pistols. The prisoners on foot waited outside the barn for the carts with the sick to arrive, who were put inside first. An Allied aircraft was at that moment circling overhead, so when Unterscharführer Braun (one of the Ilfeld NCOs) ordered the others to move inside as well, many thought it was because of this. As the guards herded them in, a Fallschirmjäger soldier fired his machine pistol into the group to make them move faster, wounding one man. All entered through the south-west door. It was now 2000 hours.



Today only a section of the southern wall of the barn has been preserved as a memorial. (H. Becker)

Sketch of the murder barn prepared by the US Army war crime investigators, showing the spot from where a Fallschirmjäger fired his machine pistol to make the prisoners move into the barn faster; the positions of the two machine guns that covered the doors; the spot near the small shed where a pile of spent ammunition was found; and the four ditches where the Germans buried about half of the victims on the morning after the massacre. The small circles indicate positions where dead prisoners were found who were killed escaping from the barn. The numbered arrows refer to pictures taken by the Signal Corps photographers as exhibits for the case file. Note that the sketch is drawn looking north to south. (NIOD)



Once inside, many immediately noticed the strong smell of petrol, but contented themselves with the thought that the barn must have been used as a garage or to store fuel. The prisoners were ordered to sit down. The four big doors were closed and wedged fast on the outside with stones.

A few minutes later, the door on the south-west side opened and two soldiers entered. One of them — identified as Braun by some — set fire to the straw with a match at several places. As soon as they had gone out, the prisoners rushed up and frantically put out the flames with their blankets, clothes and bare hands. Then they pushed all the straw to the middle of the barn. The soldiers re-entered and again ignited the floor by discharging the signal flares into the straw. Several times, the prisoners managed to put the fires out but finally the soldiers prevented them by throwing hand-grenades, shooting Panzerfausts, and firing machine pistols and rifles into the frantic masses through the south-west door. The men inside reeled back. Others rushed sideways, pressing themselves against the barn wall to find protection against the bullets. A group of some 50 or 60 Russians rushed to the opposite side of the building. The north-west door

was broken open and the prisoners started to run out. The Fallschirmjäger mowed them down with machine pistols and rifles. Two machine guns had been placed on the west side of the barn, one covering the northern and one the southern doors. Several of the armed prisoners — notably Kazimierz Drygalski, a Pole, and Adolf August Pinnenkämper, a German — joined in the killing, as did the crew of a nearby Flak battery, Hitlerjugend teenagers led by Wachtmeister Georg Bensch, who came running up with machine pistols.

Soon dead and dying men were piling up at all the doors. Cries of pain and panic rung

inside the dark building, as others were trampled. To escape the rain of bullets, some men feigned death or hid under the dead bodies of others. By now the fire was completely out of control. The inside of the barn began to fill up with a suffocating smoke. Chaos and panic was complete. Men were swearing, crying, pleading, praying, shouting 'Vive la France!' and 'Long live Poland!' — several even broke out singing their national anthem. Men were being roasted alive. Human torches ran around until they dropped to the ground dead. Others suffocated or were killed by the exploding hand-grenades and Panzerfausts.



Left: Bullet-riddled bodies of prisoners piled up against the south-east door. This is where three prisoners — Geza Bondi, Aurel Szobel and Stanislaw Waleszynski — escaped by digging a hole underneath the door. The man on the left tried to crawl out too, but he was shot at close range by one of the guards stand-



ing outside — as evidenced by the bullet hole in his right temple. The wooden doors, locked throughout the killing action, were only opened by the Volkssturm the next morning. (NIOD) Right: The south-east door is the only one left standing today. Careful comparison of the stonework confirms the location. (H. Becker)

The north side of the barn, where the doors were rammed by the Russian prisoners. The sliding doors were blocked on the outside with stones, but pressure from the men inside caused them to hinge upwards. This created openings left and right through which prisoners ran out, only to be met by a rain of bullets. As far as is known, only three men escaped alive on this side: Mieczystan Kotodzieski and Fedor Dugin through the north-east door after dark, and Stanislaw Majewicz through the north-west one pictured here, after it had been blown open by an exploding hand-grenade. In the foreground is one of the trenches dug by the Volkssturm to bury the victims. (USNA)



Unbelievably, some men managed to survive this holocaust. Mieczystan Kotodzieski, a Pole, was in the barn with his father. They were among those who tried to get out through the north-west door, which the Russians were trying to push open. The father was killed there, but the son got out. However, when he saw a German shooting the men outside with a pistol, he scurried back into the barn. Every time he or others approached the door, the Germans fired. Finally, he went to the north-east door and managed to crawl out there after dark, escaping to the woods in the south-east.

Fedor Dugin, a Russian, also got out through this same north-east door and he too hid in the woods.

By then, the north-west door had been blown open by the exploding hand-grenades. Stanislaw Majewicz, a Pole, escaped through here. His friend Zdzislaw Klipacki, who was running a few metres behind him, was caught by SS men and shot. Majewicz dropped to the ground and lay still, pretending to be dead. Later he managed to creep away.

Another Pole, Włodzimierz Wozny, dug a hole near the south-west door to get fresh air. He tried to get out, was shot at and ran back. A hand-grenade wounded him above the left hip and in the back. After dark, he tried again. Flat on his belly, he worked his way out, keeping close to the barn wall. Leaping up suddenly, he tried to barge his way through the string of guards. A dog grabbed him. Guards came running, beating him up and firing their rifles, but Wozny shouted in German to stop shooting. The brief confusion allowed him to escape in the dark. He hid in a barn.

Another Pole, Romuald Bak, took advantage of the consternation caused by Wozny's action to make good his own escape. Lying close to where the latter made his bid for freedom, and with the guards in front of him vacating their post to grab Wozny, Bak saw a gap appear in the cordon and, rolling his body on the ground, managed to get through unnoticed.

At least three more men — Witold Modzelewski, a Pole; Dimitri Pietrov, a Russian; and Amaro Castellvi, a Frenchman — crawled out over the bodies through this south-west door, then made for the woods to the east.

Three prisoners — Geza Bondi and Aurel Szobel from Hungary and an unnamed Pole — escaped by digging a hole underneath the south-east door. Scraping away at the door's concrete foundation with a table-spoon and bare hands, they found it consisted only of a thin layer. The stones underneath could be removed by hand. They clawed for an hour before they had an opening big enough. By then it was getting dark so they hoped they could get away unseen. The first to go out was the unnamed Pole. Just as he reached the corner of the building, a guard dog came sniffing by. The Pole tried to simulate death, but the beast howled and a guard came running and shot the man. Szobel and Bondi



Behind the memorial wall a low wall delineates the contours of the barn. (H. Becker)



A close-up of the north-west door, with burned, half-burned and trampled bodies piled up in a heap. One can picture the horror: as one man fell hit, his comrade who followed stumbled and fell over him, those coming behind adding to the heap until it formed a wall of bodies which then further trapped those inside. A few prisoners owed their life to it, using it as shelter against the bullets and flames. Note the bullet marks on the wall. Looking across the inside of the barn, one can also see the hole in the west wall caused by a Panzerfaust being fired right through it. (USNA)

waited until the dog and its master had gone to the other side of the building before crawling out and away through the grain fields, finding refuge in a damaged building near the airfield.

Possibly, the unnamed Pole was Stanislaw Waleszynski; if so, he was not killed. Waleszynski scraped a hole with a tablespoon together with two others (whom he remembered as another Pole and a Frenchman) also underneath the south-east door. All three went through, crawling on their belly to the south-east corner. Waleszynski heard a dog barking, and some Germans shout 'Don't shoot!' at the other end of the barn. (This was again the consternation caused by Wozny's break-out.) With the guards and dogs thus distracted, Waleszynski struck east for the woods.

Boris Mamajow, a Russian, crawled out this same south-east door with another Russian after dark. A German came along with a dog and a flashlight but they were not discovered. After crawling 300 metres, they got up and made for the woods, but here they were discovered by German soldiers who threw hand-grenades at them. Mamajow's comrade was killed and he himself wounded in face and back. He crawled on through the woods for another two kilometres finding a hiding place in a bomb-damaged building.

Yet another Russian, Ivan Matwego, escaped through this south-east door after dark. He was spotted by one of the Kapo guards, Ludwig Juchocki, who hit him with his rifle and told him to go back in the barn. Matwego ran away and, laying himself down, feigned death. As he lay there, he saw Juchocki shoot three other prisoners. Later, he was able to get away.

Several men climbed up one of the barn's wooden support posts to escape the flames, bullets and explosions below. After ascending with a friend, Frenchman Armand Dureux urinated on his woollen cap and held it over his nose against the smoke. He could



The south-west door. Despite the hail of bullets fired at it, five men — Włodzimierz Wozny, Romuald Bak, Witold Modzelewski, Dimitri Pietrov and Amaro Castellvi — managed to escape through here. The corpses lying in the foreground may be in the position where they were shot trying to escape, but more likely they were pulled out of the barn by the Volkssturm when these laboured to cover up the crime afterwards. The man lying on the left has lost a foot, no doubt blown off by one of the hand-grenades thrown into the barn. (USNA)

breathe better air through a hole in the roof. His friend was hit by a bullet and fell down, so he dropped down too to comfort him in his last minutes. After dark, he rushed out through the north-east door. Though struck by a bullet behind the ear, he managed to crawl away unseen, and hide in a barn two kilometres away.

Edward Antoniak, a Pole, held on to a roof beam, but after a few hours, half-fainted from the smoke, fell down too. Shrapnel wounded him in the head. Clambering over masses of charred corpses he made his way to the north-east door. A guard fired at him, so he dropped down, feigning death. After midnight, he sneaked out and escaped.



Left: The interior of the barn, looking down the long axis toward the west wall. This picture clearly shows the roof support posts up which Armand Dureux and others climbed to escape the flames and bullets. Note the hole in the far left



corner caused by the Panzerfausts. Many of the bodies had already been taken out of the barn when this picture was taken. (MGG) Right: Looking down the empty shell of the roofless barn today. (H. Becker)



A scene from Dante's Hell. One of the victims still in the position where he collapsed from smoke inhalation after the Germans set fire to the straw on the floor. Picture taken by Sergeant E. R. Allen of the 168th Signal Photo Company on April 16 and approved for release by SHAEF on the 19th. (USNA)

These men who got away all stayed in hiding until the arrival of the Americans. Others managed to remain alive in the burning smoke-filled barn. Herman Pranden, a German prisoner, dug a hole in the ground and lay down in it. He fainted during the night, but did not die.

Mieczyslaw Lawnicki, a Pole, crawled up against a pile of dead near the door to find protection against the smoke and flames. Other men who did the same pushed him further and further away until he lay virtually outside the barn. There he remained, just a few metres away from the armed cordon, pretending to be one of the dead. A guard shot at one of the wounded on the pile and this man's blood and brains splattered all over Lawnicki's face. He kept motionless, remaining in this position all night.

Georges Crétin, a Frenchman, crawled to one of the doors to breathe. He saw two of his comrades, Jean Desvignes and Jean Paris, be killed by the bullets trying to get out. Hit in his left thigh, he was buried under the bodies of other men while the deadly flames crept near. Despite a rain of bullets fired at him from the outside, he managed to free himself, taking cover behind a pile of dead. Hours later, withdrawing deeper inside the barn, Crétin lay down among the smouldering corpses and fell asleep.

One of his compatriots, Guy Chamaillard, took shelter under the bodies of men hit. As more men were killed, the pile of corpses grew to a height of five feet. Covered in blood but unhurt, Chamaillard stayed in this position all night without losing consciousness. Later, he too moved away from the door and went to sleep among the corpses.

Eugenius Siradzki, a Pole, kept alive by keeping his mouth to a small hole in the wall near the ground for air, and covering his body with blankets. He fainted, but did not suffocate. He too was completely covered with bodies which protected him against the flames.

Yevgeni Kateba, a Russian, was thrown to the north end of the barn by an exploding hand-grenade and covered by about ten corpses of men killed by the explosions. Unable to move, he remained in this position all night.



None of the prisoners locked in the barn stood any great chance of survival, but those who stood absolutely no chance at all were the sick, weak and elderly. Numbering about 100, they were brought to the site on horse-cart and trailer and were carried into the barn and put in a corner. Unable to get up or move away from the flames, they burned to death where they lay. Coming two days after the discovery of Nordhausen, and on the same day as the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, Gardelegen received the same massive publicity given to these horror camps, its gruesome images shocking the free world and damning the Nazi regime. (IWM)

Two more Russians — Leonid Maistrov (who had his clothes blown off him by the explosions) and Wasel Momochuk — managed to stay alive, sheltering under the piles of cooling, then calcifying, stinking bodies. The exact total number of prisoners who survived the massacre has never been established but appears to be around 25.

The murder action continued well into the night, with German troops and Kapo guards watching the doors and walls for any escape attempts. In all, some 50 hand-grenades were

thrown into the barn. Around 2100 hours, the Fallschirmjäger went back to their depot to get a new supply of ammunition and Panzerfausts. They fired the Panzerfausts into the barn through the west wall and the southwest door. About midnight, the paratroopers received an alert and left.

Shortly after, Kreisleiter Thiele, who had been present from about 2200 (he had been conferring with Oberst Milz at the airfield before that), returned to the Remonte-Schule with Unterscharführer Braun and



Despite the horrible effects of burning, this victim could still be recognised as being of the negro race. The US investigators at first assumed that he might be the only American citizen imprisoned at 'Dora'. Surviving camp inmates interviewed by them spoke of a black prisoner they had met at Rottleberode camp and later at the Remonte-Schule who had claimed to be an American airman shot down over Magdeburg. He spoke English and had the letter 'A' sewn on the left side of his prison coat and on his right trouser leg. At Rottleberode he had worked as a camp doctor. However, some prisoners who themselves spoke English and had talked to the man, found his mastery of the language only fair and guessed he was French-African rather than American. Later investigation revealed that the American who had been a prisoner at 'Dora' had still been alive two weeks after the Gardelegen atrocity. This is one of a series of pictures taken by Pfc Larry R. Darcy of the 168th Signal Photo Company on April 19 under the specific direction of Lieutenant Colonel Edward E. Cruise, the chief investigating officer of the Gardelegen war crime case. (NIOD)

ordered four of the Kapo guards left there (from the seven who had said they could not shoot) to collect a drum of petrol at the Kreisleitung garage and bring it to the barn so as to complete the incineration of the bodies. Once there, the men were told to stay on as guards.

The important thing for the Nazis now was to eradicate any sign of the atrocity that had taken place before the arrival of the Americans. From midnight until about 0230 Thiele and Debrodt were on the phone at the Kreisleitung headquarters, mobilising local organisations to help with burying the dead and clearing up the site.

The first to arrive, at 0430 on April 14, were 50 Volkssturm men from the neighbouring village of Kloster Neuendorf, joined later in the morning by 15 men of the Gardelegen fire brigade, 15 from the Technische Nothilfe (technical emergency service), and 90 from the Gardelegen Volkssturm. In all, some 170 persons were at hand. Few of them had been told beforehand what to expect.

The SS men and armed Kapos were still at the barn doing their dirty work. Thiele, having returned there, ordered all survivors to be shot. Opening the doors and entering the still-smoking building, the SS men and Kapos called out that they were ready to give out medical aid to anyone who was still alive. However, this was a trick, as survivors who made their presence known were killed on the spot with a bullet through the head. This went on until 0830 when the last of the SS men and Kapos returned to Gardelegen.

Meanwhile, the Volkssturm men had begun to dig four grave trenches, two metres wide and two metres deep — two long ones on the north side of the barn and two smaller ones on the east side. Many of the bodies were totally charred, and the workers used hooks and pronged forks to pull individual



Geza Bondi, one of the handful of men who survived the massacre, shows US soldiers how he managed to escape, digging a hole underneath the south-east door and crawling away after dark. Bondi, a 38-year-old bank employee and musician from Budapest, Hungary, and a former 1st Lieutenant in the Hungarian Army, had been arrested on November 12, 1944. He was first imprisoned at Flossenbürg concentration camp, later moved to 'Dora', and then to Ifeld, being put to work making fuel pumps for aircraft. He was in the train to Mieste, and arrived at the Remonte-Schule early on the 12th. After escaping from the barn, he hid for two days, reporting in to the Americans on the 15th. (USNA)

corpses from the smoking piles of dead. As they worked to empty the building the men found prisoners who had survived the carnage. Some of them were so horribly wounded that they begged to be shot.

Hermann Hohls, the Volksturm company commander in charge of the work; Gustav Palis, one of his men; and Paul Schernikau, the fire brigade chief, each shot a prisoner to put him out of his misery.



Two Polish survivors tell their stories to Allied war correspondents. Włodzimierz Wozny (centre), a 22-year-old medical student from Lvov, was arrested in November 1942 for issuing medical unfitness slips to Polish POWs being sent to Germany. He was imprisoned at Lublin, Buchenwald, 'Dora', and finally Wieda, being evacuated with the train to Letzlingen. He escaped through the south-west door by barging his way through a cluster of German guards. Eugenius Siradzki (right), 33, a painter from Sosnowiec, was arrested there in November 1944 for black market activities. He was imprisoned at Myslowice concentration camp before being sent to Gross-Rosen, then 'Dora', then Rottleberode. He remained inside the barn throughout the massacre night and the subsequent cleaning operation by the Volkssturm, not leaving the scene until the morning of the 15th. The GI on the left translating for the Poles could be either Tech/4 Henryk Postrosny of the 327th Engineer Combat Battalion, 102nd Division, or Pfc Emil J. Schirl of the 113th Evacuation Hospital, both of whom acted as sworn-in interpreters for the Poles interviewed by the American war crimes investigators. (IWM)



One of the four known French survivors. Georges Crétin from St Claude was rounded up in February 1943 in a reprisal raid after the killing of a German officer. He was seriously wounded in his left thigh as he tried to break out of the barn, but survived under a pile of bodies. Lying among the hundreds of dead in the centre of the barn, he was not discovered by the other survivors until two days later. He was pictured at the hospital on Gardelegen airfield while recovering from his wounds and the effects of starvation. (IWM)

On April 18, following orders from the Supreme Allied Commander General Eisenhower, the burgomasters and other prominent citizens of Gardelegen and the surrounding villages were brought to the Isenschibbe barn and made to view the scene of the mass murder. Here Colonel George P. Lynch, the 102nd Division's Chief-of-Staff, tells them what they are about to see. (USNA)

Some of the workers objected to the horrible task and could not stand the shooting and the cries and moans of the wounded. A few of them left the scene in defiance of orders. Schernikau refused Thiele's order to sprinkle the petrol over the corpses, and left at 1000 taking the drum with him. Hohls sent a runner back to the Remonte-Schule to say that the Volkssturm men were unable to shoot the surviving prisoners. The runner came back with an Unteroffizier and five other soldiers. The Unteroffizier shot five prisoners in a most cold-blooded manner. A Russian prisoner who came walking out of the barn naked was grabbed, forced to kneel on the edge of one of the trenches, and killed with a neck shot. Among the piles of dead, the few survivors not yet found — Crétin, Chamailard, Lawnicek, Siradzki, Kateba, Maistrov, and a handful of others — kept deadly still, knowing that the slightest motion would betray them.

It must be said that not all those that came out of the barn were executed. When two workers grabbed his foot with a hayrack, Wasel Momochuk turned around and said: 'I am not dead'. The Volkssturm men ran away scared and Momochuk followed them out. Though wounded, he was allowed to sit in the sun. Herman Pranden, when he came to, walked out too. They and two other survivors were not harmed but given sandwiches, then put on the fire brigade truck and taken to Jävenitz where they joined the other prisoners that were assembled there.

Only about half of the victims had been buried when, at 1730, the work was broken off because of the approach of American forces.

Around 1700 hours on April 14, the US 102nd Infantry Division reached the town of Gardelegen. The division was advancing eastward from Hannover to Stendal as part of US Ninth Army's grand sweep towards the Elbe. The 2nd Battalion of the 405th Regiment approached the town from the north. After negotiations with the town commander, Oberst Milz, who would only surrender to a full colonel, the German garrison formally capitulated at 1900 hours. Some 500 troops were taken prisoner.

Meanwhile, Chamailard and the other survivors still languished in the barn. Too weak, too wounded or too dazed to move away from it, they had stayed inside. Three of them — Siradzki, Kateba and Maistrov — hid on the rafters in case the Germans returned. Later they climbed down, warming themselves beside the still-burning corpses, only going to the door to see if anybody was coming. Another night fell. The following morning, April 15, three escaped Russian prisoners of war found the barn. From them, those inside learned of the arrival of the Americans the evening before. Searching the barn, they found Crétin who until then had lain undiscovered among the corpses. The Russians helped the survivors reach the Luftwaffe barracks on the nearby airfield, now in American hands. Here they were given food and medical treatment. A few hours later, the patrol from the 2nd Battalion stumbled on the Isenschibbe barn by accident, uncovering the atrocity.

The Americans were shocked by the ghastly crime and made sure that it was immediately made known to the world. Over the next few days, dozens of Allied war correspondents, cameramen and photographers



Watched by grim-looking GIs, Colonel Lynch (in foreground) shows the Germans the burial trench near the north-west door, already filling up with ground water. (USNA)

visited the barn to report on the atrocity and document the gruesome sight. Numerous American units sent truckloads of GIs to Gardelegen to let them see for themselves the crimes committed by the Nazi regime they were fighting. They explored the barn with wet handkerchiefs pressed to their faces to overcome the awful stench.

The commander of the 102nd Division,

Major General Frank A. Keating, ordered that the burgomasters and prominent citizens of Gardelegen and all neighbouring villages be conducted to the barn to see the horrible sight. On April 18, under supervision of divisional troops, the German dignitaries viewed the still-smouldering victims of the mass murder, and were formally charged with telling their communities the sordid tale.



Three of the Germans view the body of a victim inside the barn. (USNA)



Left: Between April 18-24, all able-bodied men of Gardelegen were compelled to help remove the corpses from the barn and burial trenches and re-inter them. The citizens were ordered to assemble on Marktplatz with spades and shovels. This picture



was taken on April 22 when each man was also given a white cross to carry. Picture taken by Tech/5 Josef E. von Stroheim of the 168th Signal Photo Company. (USNA) *Right:* The Deutsches Haus on Marktplatz is still an inn today.



Ready to march off to the Isenschnibbe barn. (USNA)



Marktplatz today, with the Rathaus on the right.



Left: The column of citizen workers march down the Stendaler Strasse, escorted by a Sherman tank of the 701st Tank Battalion, 102nd Division. The Isenschnibbe barn is up the road on the left, then named the Alte Heerstrasse. (USNA) *Right:* The Alte Heerstrasse (Old Army Road) was renamed Strasse der Opfer des Faschismus (Road of the Victims of Fascism) in GDR



times. Today one can no longer get to the barn via this route, nor via the other route from Bismarker Strasse, both old roads having been cut by the new bypass road around Gardelegen which was opened in December 2000. To replace them, a new road has been built which leads to the memorial from a point north of the bypass.



Watched by GIs of the 327th Engineer Combat battalion, the civilians remove the bodies from the long trench on the north side of

the barn. Another picture from the series taken by Pfc Darcy under Lieutenant Colonel Cruise's direction on the 19th. (NIOD)

General Keating also directed that every available male citizen of Gardelegen be required to help disinter the victims and give them a proper burial. On the morning of April 18, some 250-300 men assembled on the market square with shovels, spades, bed-sheets and pieces of rope. Formed up in columns of five, and escorted by GI guards and Sherman tanks, the civilians were marched to the barn. There, while men of the 327th Engineer Combat Battalion stood by with fixed bayonets, they dug up the dead from the thinly-covered mass graves and carried out the bodies that were still in the barn.

The American guards were in a foul mood and used rifle butts to drive unwilling workers into the barn. The Germans had to move the dead with bare hands and no one was allowed to wear gloves. At one point, there was even a fake execution, a large group of Germans being put against the barn wall and a firing squad of GIs taking aim. Freed camp inmates were brought to the site to point out men they knew to be implicated. The Americans had trouble preventing the former prisoners from lynching those Nazis that were recognised. Freed Polish forced labourers and Russian prisoners of war beat and kicked the Germans and called out to the GIs to kill them all.

The Americans initially decided to bury the victims in common graves and accordingly the German workers began digging seven long trenches just south of the barn on the 18th. However, after two days, the 102nd Division received the order issued by the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, that victims of Nazi



The Americans purposely instructed that the citizens in white-collar suits were to carry the corpses — with their bare hands — assigning the task of digging to the others. Ironically, the workers included many who, only a week earlier, as members of the Volksturm, had dug these same trenches and thrown bodies in them in the last-minute attempt to erase all traces of the atrocity. (NIOD)



After recovery, the bodies were laid out for identification. These ones lie between the two pits to the north-west of the

barn — see the sketch on page 14. Picture taken by Pfc Darcy on the 19th. (NIOD)



Two GIs stand silent watch at corpses removed from the smaller pit on the east side of the barn. (NIOD)



Disinterred victims await reburial. In the background the civilians are filling in the emptied long trench to the north of the barn.



Bodies taken from this same trench are laid out along the barn's western wall. (NIOD)



atrocities were to be buried in individual graves. So work on the trenches was halted and those victims who had already been buried in them dug up again.

A final resting place was laid out according to the regulations for US military cemeteries about 150 metres south-west of the barn. Lieutenant Colonel William R. Douglas, CO of the 102nd Quartermaster Company, and 1st Lieutenant George A. Carlson of 1st Platoon, 3046th Graves Registration Company, supervised its construction which began on the 21st. The citizens of Gardelegen dug the graves, interred the bodies, erected either a cross or Star of David over each, and surrounded the entire site with a white fence.

On April 22, each man assembled in the town square was in addition given a white

The 102nd Division initially decided to bury the victims in mass graves, ordering the Germans to dig seven parallel trenches just to the south of the barn. This picture is looking east, towards the Luftwaffe airfield which begins immediately beyond the dirt road in the background. (IWM)

wooden cross to carry. The exhumation and burial took until the 24th. A total of 574 corpses were recovered from the grave pits and 442 from the barn — adding up to a total of 1,016 victims. Of these, only 4 could be identified by name, another 301 merely by their prisoner number. The unidentified totalled 711. Nationality could be established of only 186 bodies: among the dead were 60 Poles, 52 Russians, 27 Frenchmen, 17 Hungarians, eight Belgians, five Germans, five Italians, four Czechs, four Yugoslavs, two Dutchmen, one Mexican and one Spaniard.

A number of them were Jews. (After the war, a few more victims were identified from the recorded prisoner numbers.)

At the entrance to the cemetery, a big sign was erected with a text in English and German: 'Here lie 1,016 Allied prisoners of war who were murdered by their captors. They were buried by the citizens of Gardelegen, who are charged with the responsibility that these graves are forever kept as green as the memory of these unfortunates will be kept in the hearts of freedom-loving men everywhere.'



Freed prisoners were asked if they could identify victims and also to pick out implicated Germans from among the conscripted workers. Here, a Pole cries out for justice beside the body of a comrade. (IWM)

Below: Looking from the memorial grounds to the former airfield. (H. Becker)





Above: On the 20th a general instruction from SHAEF stipulated that victims of Nazi atrocities were to be buried in individual graves, so work on the mass graves was halted and the civilians were put to work constructing a proper cemetery. Laid out according to the rules for US military cemeteries, the cemetery had four large square plots separated by two crossing lanes. The total number of victims buried in the cemetery was 1,018 — the 1,016 murdered at the barn plus two escaped prisoners from the Letzlingen train who had been caught and executed by members of the Kloster Neuendorf Volkssturm at the Lindenthal forest lodge, just south-west of the town, on April 13. In this picture taken on the 22nd the cemetery is taking shape. While the first rows of graves have already been closed on the left, others are still being worked on. SHAEF had

ruled that each victim was to be individually buried by a specified German, whose name was registered at the town hall and whose family was required to maintain that grave in perpetuity. Should the family die out or move away, the burgomaster was responsible for appointing a new caretaker for the grave. This picture by Tech/5 Mark also clearly illustrates how close the Isenschribbe barn was to Gardelegen town which can be seen in the distance. The Remonte-Schule, where the prisoners were assembled before the massacre, is the tall building standing out between the two spires on the right. The doomed prisoners came marching up the hill to the barn along the tree-lined road on the left. (USNA) Below: The trees and bushes which have grown up around the cemetery obscure the view today.





On Wednesday April 25, the entire population of Gardelegen was ordered to attend the formal dedication of the new cemetery. In 1945, the town had a population of 13,000. (USNA)

General Keating ordered that the entire population attend a formal funeral ceremony which was held on the afternoon of April 25. Local families were impressed with the responsibility of forever caring for the graves of these victims of the Nazi regime, each being assigned one grave. To ensure that these instructions would be followed in later years, records were left with the city officials. The divisional Chief-of-Staff, Colonel George P. Lynch, communicated the feelings of his soldiers when he told the townspeople: 'You have lost the respect of the civilised world'.

The Americans immediately started a thorough investigation of the war crime. On April 17, Lieutenant Colonel Edward B. Beale, the Judge Advocate of the 102nd Division, made a preliminary inspection of the murder barn and interviewed a number of freed prisoners at Gardelegen. Between April 19 and May 22, Lieutenant Colonels Edward E. Cruise and William A. Callanan and Captain Samuel G. Weiss, investigating officers of the Ninth Army War Crimes Branch, collected sworn statements from 99 survivors, implicated Germans, and other eyewitnesses. Among those arrested by the Americans were Brauny (discovered in a POW camp) and one SS guard; Debrodt, Hohls, Pannwitz and six other Volkssturm members, Rittmeister Kuhn; Oberstleutnant von Einem; four members of Thiele's Kreisleitung staff; burgomaster Krüger of Mieste; and ten of the Kapo guards. The Germans and Kapos suspected of having actually killed someone were confined at Ninth Army Detention Camp No. 92 at Ziegenhain. Several of the implicated Germans committed suicide before they could be arrested, among them Volkssturm company commander Waldemar Schumm and one of Gardelegen's three Ortsgruppenleiters, Otto Palis.

Taps is sounded, while the Guard of Honour stands by to fire another rifle volley.



Colonel Simmons, Protestant chaplain of the Ninth Army, speaks to the assembly at the funeral service. The roof of the murder barn can just be seen on the right above the audience. (USNA)



On July 1, 1945, in accordance with inter-Allied agreements, the US Army handed over the province of Sachsen-Anhalt, which included Gardelegen, to the Soviet Military Administration. As the scene of crime was now in Soviet hands, it was now up to the Soviets to pursue the matter. A year later, on July 25, 1946, the Americans turned 21 of the implicated men over to the Russian authorities, together with a copy volume of all their documentation on the case, and on August 6, the US Army formally closed their own file. The Soviets sentenced most of the 21 to long years of incarceration or assigned them to long internment in one of their 'special camps' in Germany.

One man was not handed over to the Russians. Erhard Brauny was tried at the Nordhausen War Crime Trial which was held before the US Military Court at Dachau in 1947. He was sentenced to life, probably only escaping a death sentence because he convinced the judges that he had not been present at the barn when the murder action took place. He died from cancer in Landsberg prison on June 16, 1950. Brauny's assistant, Friedrich Teply, was a witness at Brauny's trial but he was never tried for his own part in the massacre. None of the other implicated SS commanders — Rose, Locke or Braun — were ever found or tried.

Kreisleiter Gerhard Thiele, the man chiefly responsible for the murder action, was never apprehended. Thiele fled from Gardelegen at 1800 on April 14. The day before, Major Stobbe, the chief of the local Wehrmeldeamt (recruiting office), had provided him with a Wehrmacht identity card and paybook with false personalia. Thiele was last seen saying goodbye to his wife outside his home on Stendalerstrasse 89 and wearing a civilian suit instead of his usual Party costume. His wife was interrogated, but disclosed nothing (she lived in the GDR until her death). Persistent rumours that Thiele had found refuge in the Western Zones, later the German Federal Republic, led prosecution offices in both East and West to begin investigations into his case in the 1960s, none of them with any official result. Only in 1997, after reunification, was the Sachsen-Anhalt criminal police finally able to confirm the rumours. Thiele had been in the West since 1947, living under a false name in Düsseldorf from 1951 until his death as an 85-year-old pensioner on June 30, 1994.

Despite East-West relations deteriorating into the Cold War, work brigades of local firms and factories kept the cemetery at Gardelegen in perfect order. This practice continued after Gardelegen became part of East Germany in 1948. In September that year, the remains of 34 dead of French nationality were exhumed and transferred to the French National Cemetery at Tegel in

Five Polish survivors of Gardelegen during a visit to the cemetery on April 13, 1965, the 20th commemoration of the massacre. L-R: Tadeusz Moderski, who evaded during the march from Mieste to Gardelegen, thus escaping the massacre; Edward Antoniak, who reputedly escaped from the barn after climbing up into the rafters; Witold Modzelewski, another escapee from the barn; Josef Pamuta, one of the prisoners who volunteered to act as armed guard during the massacre (as there had been no evidence that Pamuta had actually killed anyone, no charges had been brought against him in 1945. When he showed up in Gardelegen in 1965, nothing of all this was known locally, and Pamuta was able to pose and get fêted as a survivor from inside the barn. Antoniak, who introduced him, must have known the truth but, for some reason, chose to say nothing); and Franek Krawczyk, who escaped at Letzlingen. (MGG)



The sign put up by the 102nd Division at the entrance to the cemetery. (MGG)



In 1953, the massacre site was made an official memorial by the East German authorities, one section of the barn wall being preserved. Text and sculpture were added later.

the French sector of Berlin. (When this cemetery was dissolved in 1951-52, most of the 34 were repatriated to France.)

With the scarcity of building materials in the immediate post-war years, bricks and tiles from the burned-out Isenschribbe barn were carried off to be re-used elsewhere. In 1950, work began to turn what remained of the building into a memorial. Part of its front wall was renovated, a text added to it, and bushes were planted. The new memorial, formally dedicated in April 1953, became a venue for Party and State ceremonies. A permanent exhibition on its historical background was opened in the Gardelegen town museum in 1963. In 1965, as an additional reminder of what had hap-

pened in the region, the routes of the death marches to Gardelegen were indicated by stone markers. That same year — as a gesture of political protest against the US involvement in the Vietnam War — the big sign erected by the Americans at the cemetery was taken down.

In 1970, the status of the massacre memorial was raised to that of a regional Mahn- und Gedenkstätte (Remembrance and Memorial Site). It was re-landscaped according to the strict guidelines laid out for all East German memorials, with flag-poles, flaming urns and a speaker platform. A bronze sculpture by Jochen Sendler was added in 1971. Even more than before, the site became a place for state-organised, anti-Fascist mass meetings.

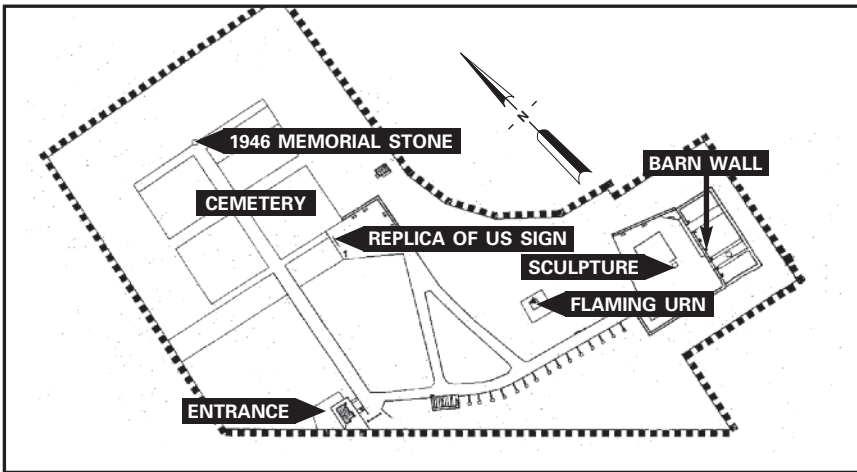




Left: The American sign erected at the cemetery in 1945 was removed by the East German authorities in 1965 and unceremoniously re-used as part of the wall of a shed in the communal cemetery, something which few people outside the cemetery workers knew. It was only after this picture, taken illegally by a young East German, Karl-Heinz Reuschel, reached the US and was published there — and then brought to the notice of the East German authorities by their embassy — that action



was undertaken. Fearing an international uproar, the GDR authorities ordered that the sign be replaced at the cemetery but when it was extracted it was found to have badly deteriorated. The original was put in store at the town museum while the authorities ordered a replica to be made. However, wood and paint had to be allocated and the fall of the GDR came before the duplicate was ready. (K. H. Reuschel) Right: The replacement was finally put up in 1990.



The memorial site today. (MGG)

All this ended with the demise of the GDR in 1989. One surprise after reunification was the discovery of the original sign put up at the cemetery by the Americans. After it was taken down in 1965, it had been stored away at the town cemetery. It was later used as a

side wall of an open tool shed and so survived through the years. When a secretly-taken picture of it surfaced in the West in 1988, the GDR authorities, fearing a scandal, ordered it to be re-erected. However, the sign was in poor condition, so plans were made to replace it with a replica instead. Reunification came before this materialised



Another GDR legacy: stone markers still mark the route of the main death march from Mieste to Gardelegen via Zichtau. The red triangle was worn by political prisoners in Nazi concentration camps.



and the replica was not finally erected near the original spot until 1990. The original sign is now safely stored at the town museum.

Since 1989 the Gardelegen Memorial, like the other sites dedicated to the memory of victims of Nazism in former East Germany, have worked to correct the one-sided political slant of the information available to visitors. In 1991, the exhibition in the town museum was closed. New information tables were erected at the memorial itself in 1995, but plans for a new documentation centre to be built there were shelved in 1999. Today, authority over the memorial lies with Gardelegen municipality, with financial support from the province of Sachsen-Anhalt.

On April 13, 2000 — the 55th commemoration of the massacre — a delegation of veterans of the 102nd 'Ozark' Division presented a bronze plaque 'to the citizens of Gardelegen who have observed and supported General Keating's directive of 1945'. The plaque text continues: 'May this memorial be a "cry for freedom and peace" by the victims of this massacre, their homelands and our two countries'. L-R: Frau Hannelore von Baehr, mayoress of Gardelegen; Sylvia Henk, interpreter; Ernest Smith and Jim Hansen, presenting the plaque on behalf of the Ozark veterans. Jim Hansen was the lieutenant leading the patrol which first discovered the barn on April 15, 1945. (MGG)