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Initiation to Mass Murder: The Józefów Massacre

IT WAS PROBABLY ON JULY 11 THAT GLOBOCNIK OR SOMEONE ON his staff contacted Major Trapp and informed him that Reserve Police Battalion 101 had the task of rounding up the 1,800 Jews in Józefów, a village about thirty kilometers slightly south and east of Biłgoraj. This time, however, most of the Jews were not to be relocated. Only the male Jews of working age were to be sent to one of Globocnik's camps in Lublin. The women, children, and elderly were simply to be shot on the spot.

Trapp recalled the units that were stationed in nearby towns. The battalion reassembled in Biłgoraj on July 12, with two exceptions: the Third Platoon of Third Company, including Captain Hoffmann, stationed in Zakrzów, as well as a few men of First Company already stationed in Józefów. Trapp met with

First and Second Company commanders, Captain Wohlauf and Lieutenant Gnade, and informed them of the next day's task.¹ Trapp's adjutant, First Lieutenant Hagen, must have informed other officers of the battalion, for Lieutenant Heinz Buchmann learned from him the precise details of the pending action that evening.

Buchmann, then thirty-eight years old, was the head of a family lumber business in Hamburg. He had joined the Nazi Party in May 1937. Drafted into the Order Police in 1939, he had served as a driver in Poland. In the summer of 1940 he applied for a discharge. Instead he was sent to officer training and commissioned as a reserve lieutenant in November 1941. He was given command of the First Platoon of First Company in 1942.

Upon learning of the imminent massacre, Buchmann made clear to Hagen that as a Hamburg businessman and reserve lieutenant, he "would in no case participate in such an action, in which defenseless women and children are shot." He asked for another assignment. Hagen arranged for Buchmann to be in charge of the escort for the male "work Jews" who were to be selected out and taken to Lublin.² His company captain, Wohlauf, was informed of Buchmann's assignment but not the reason for it.³

The men were not officially informed, other than that they would be awakened early in the morning for a major action involving the entire battalion. But some had at least a hint of what was to come. Captain Wohlauf told a group of his men that an "extremely interesting task" awaited them the next day.⁴ Another man, who complained that he was being left behind to guard the barracks, was told by his company adjutant, "Be happy that you don't have to come. You'll see what happens."⁵ Sergeant Heinrich Steinmetz* warned his men of Third Platoon, Second Company, that "he didn't want to see any cowards."⁶ Additional ammunition was given out.⁷ One policeman reported that his unit was given whips, which led to rumors of a *Judenaktion*.⁸ No one else, however, remembered whips.

Departing from Biłgoraj around 2:00 a.m., the truck convoy

arrived in Józefów just as the sky was beginning to lighten. Trapp assembled the men in a half-circle and addressed them. After explaining the battalion's murderous assignment, he made his extraordinary offer: any of the older men who did not feel up to the task that lay before them could step out. Trapp paused, and after some moments one man from Third Company, Otto-Julius Schimke,* stepped forward. Captain Hoffmann, who had arrived in Józefów directly from Zakrzów with the Third Platoon of Third Company and had not been part of the officers' meetings in Biłgoraj the day before, was furious that one of his men had been the first to break ranks. Hoffmann began to berate Schimke, but Trapp cut him off. After he had taken Schimke under his protection, some ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well. They turned in their rifles and were told to await a further assignment from the major.⁹

Trapp then summoned the company commanders and gave them their respective assignments. The orders were relayed by the first sergeant, Kammer,* to First Company, and by Gnade and Hoffmann to Second and Third Companies. Two platoons of Third Company were to surround the village.¹⁰ The men were explicitly ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. The remaining men were to round up the Jews and take them to the marketplace. Those too sick or frail to walk to the marketplace, as well as infants and anyone offering resistance or attempting to hide, were to be shot on the spot. Thereafter, a few men of First Company were to escort the "work Jews" who had been selected at the marketplace, while the rest of First Company was to proceed to the forest to form the firing squads. The Jews were to be loaded onto the battalion trucks by Second Company and Third Platoon of Third Company and shuttled from the marketplace to the forest.¹¹

After making the assignments, Trapp spent most of the day in town, either in a schoolroom converted into his headquarters, at the homes of the Polish mayor and the local priest, at the marketplace, or on the road to the forest.¹² But he did not go to the forest itself or witness the executions; his absence there was

conspicuous. As one policeman bitterly commented, "Major Trapp was never there. Instead he remained in Józefów because he allegedly could not bear the sight. We men were upset about that and said we couldn't bear it either."¹³

Indeed, Trapp's distress was a secret to no one. At the marketplace one policeman remembered hearing Trapp say, "Oh, God, why did I have to be given these orders," as he put his hand on his heart.¹⁴ Another policeman witnessed him at the schoolhouse. "Today I can still see exactly before my eyes Major Trapp there in the room pacing back and forth with his hands behind his back. He made a downcast impression and spoke to me. He said something like, 'Man, . . . such jobs don't suit me. But orders are orders.'¹⁵ Another man remembered vividly "how Trapp, finally alone in our room, sat on a stool and wept bitterly. The tears really flowed."¹⁶ Another also witnessed Trapp at his headquarters. "Major Trapp ran around excitedly and then suddenly stopped dead in front of me, stared, and asked if I agreed with this. I looked him straight in the eye and said, 'No, Herr Major!' He then began to run around again and wept like a child."¹⁷ The doctor's aide encountered Trapp weeping on the path from the marketplace to the forest and asked if he could help. "He answered me only to the effect that everything was very terrible."¹⁸ Concerning Józefów, Trapp later confided to his driver, "If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans."¹⁹

While Trapp complained of his orders and wept, his men proceeded to carry out the battalion's task. The noncommissioned officers divided some of their men into search teams of two, three, or four, and sent them into the Jewish section of Józefów. Other men were assigned as guards along the streets leading to the marketplace or at the marketplace itself. As the Jews were driven out of their houses and the immobile were shot, the air was filled with screams and gunfire. As one policeman noted, it was a small town and they could hear everything.²⁰ Many policemen admitted seeing the corpses of

those who had been shot during the search, but only two admitted having shot.²¹ Again, several policemen admitted having heard that all the patients in the Jewish "hospital" or "old people's home" had been shot on the spot, though no one admitted having actually seen the shooting or taken part.²²

The witnesses were least agreed on the question of how the men initially reacted to the problem of shooting infants. Some claimed that along with the elderly and sick, infants were among those shot and left lying in the houses, doorways, and streets of the town.²³ Others, however, stressed quite specifically that in this initial action the men still shied from shooting infants during the search and clearing operation. One policeman was emphatic "that among the Jews shot in our section of town there were no infants or small children. I would like to say that almost tacitly everyone refrained from shooting infants and small children." In Józefów as later, he observed, "Even in the face of death the Jewish mothers did not separate from their children. Thus we tolerated the mothers taking their small children to the marketplace in Józefów."²⁴ Another policeman likewise noted "that tacitly the shooting of infants and small children was avoided by almost all the men involved. During the entire morning I was able to observe that when being taken away many women carried infants in their arms and led small children by the hand."²⁵ According to both witnesses, none of the officers intervened when infants were brought to the marketplace. Another policeman, however, recalled that after the clearing operation his unit (Third Platoon, Third Company) was reproached by Captain Hoffmann. "We had not proceeded energetically enough."²⁶

As the roundup neared completion, the men of First Company were withdrawn from the search and given a quick lesson in the gruesome task that awaited them. They were instructed by the battalion doctor and the company's first sergeant. One musically inclined policeman who frequently played the violin on social evenings along with the doctor, who played a "wonderful accordion," recalled:

I believe that at this point all officers of the battalion were present, especially our battalion physician, Dr. Schoenfelder.* He now had to explain to us precisely how we had to shoot in order to induce the immediate death of the victim. I remember exactly that for this demonstration he drew or outlined the contour of a human body, at least from the shoulders upward, and then indicated precisely the point on which the fixed bayonet was to be placed as an aiming guide.²⁷

After First Company had received instructions and departed for the woods, Trapp's adjutant, Hagen, presided over the selection of the "work Jews." The head of a nearby sawmill had already approached Trapp with a list of twenty-five Jews who worked for him, and Trapp had permitted their release.²⁸ Through an interpreter Hagen now called for craftsmen and able-bodied male workers. There was unrest as some 300 workers were separated from their families.²⁹ Before they had been marched out of Józefów on foot, the first shots from the woods were heard. "After the first salvos a grave unrest grew among these craftsmen, and some of the men threw themselves upon the ground weeping. . . . It had to have become clear to them at this point that the families they had left behind were being shot."³⁰

Lieutenant Buchmann and the Luxembourgers in First Company marched the workers a few kilometers to a country loading station on the rail line. Several train cars, including a passenger car, were waiting. The work Jews and their guards were then taken by train to Lublin, where Buchmann delivered them to a camp. According to Buchmann, he did not put them in the notorious concentration camp at Majdanek but in another camp instead. The Jews were not expected, he said, but the camp administration was glad to take them. Buchmann and his men returned to Biłgoraj the same day.³¹

Meanwhile, First Sergeant Kammer had taken the initial contingent of shooters in First Company to a forest several kilometers from Józefów. The trucks halted on a dirt road that

ran along the edge, at a point where a pathway led into the woods. The men climbed down from their trucks and waited.

When the first truckload of thirty-five to forty Jews arrived, an equal number of policemen came forward and, *face to face*, were paired off with their victims. Led by Kammer, the policemen and Jews marched down the forest path. They turned off into the woods at a point indicated by Captain Wohlauf, who busied himself throughout the day selecting the execution sites. Kammer then ordered the Jews to lie down in a row. The policemen stepped up behind them, placed their bayonets on the backbone above the shoulder blades as earlier instructed, and on Kammer's orders fired in unison.

In the meantime more policemen of First Company had arrived at the edge of the forest to fill out a second firing squad. As the first firing squad marched out of the woods to the unloading point, the second group took their victims along the same path into the woods. Wohlauf chose a site a few yards farther on so that the next batch of victims would not see the corpses from the earlier execution. These Jews were again forced to lie face down in a row, and the shooting procedure was repeated.

Thereafter, the "pendulum traffic" of the two firing squads in and out of the woods continued throughout the day. Except for a midday break, the shooting proceeded without interruption until nightfall. At some point in the afternoon, someone "organized" a supply of alcohol for the shooters. By the end of a day of nearly continuous shooting, the men had completely lost track of how many Jews they had each killed. In the words of one policeman, it was in any case "a great number."³²

When Trapp first made his offer early in the morning, the real nature of the action had just been announced and time to think and react had been very short. Only a dozen men had instinctively seized the moment to step out, turn in their rifles, and thus excuse themselves from the subsequent killing. For many the reality of what they were about to do, and particularly that they themselves might be chosen for the firing squad, had

probably not sunk in. But when the men of First Company were summoned to the marketplace, instructed in giving a “neck shot,” and sent to the woods to kill Jews, some of them tried to make up for the opportunity they had missed earlier. One policeman approached First Sergeant Kammer, whom he knew well. He confessed that the task was “repugnant” to him and asked for a different assignment. Kammer obliged, assigning him to guard duty on the edge of the forest, where he remained throughout the day.³³ Several other policemen who knew Kammer well were given guard duty along the truck route.³⁴ After shooting for some time, another group of policemen approached Kammer and said they could not continue. He released them from the firing squad and reassigned them to accompany the trucks.³⁵ Two policemen made the mistake of approaching Captain (and SS-Hauptsturmführer) Wohlauf instead of Kammer. They pleaded that they too were fathers with children and could not continue. Wohlauf curtly refused them, indicating that they could lie down alongside the victims. At the midday pause, however, Kammer relieved not only these two men but a number of other older men as well. They were sent back to the marketplace, accompanied by a noncommissioned officer who reported to Trapp. Trapp dismissed them from further duty and permitted them to return early to the barracks in Biłgoraj.³⁶

Some policemen who did not request to be released from the firing squads sought other ways to evade. Noncommissioned officers armed with submachine guns had to be assigned to give so-called mercy shots “because both from excitement *as well as intentionally* [italics mine]” individual policemen “shot past” their victims.³⁷ Others had taken evasive action earlier. During the clearing operation some men of First Company hid in the Catholic priest’s garden until they grew afraid that their absence would be noticed. Returning to the marketplace, they jumped aboard a truck that was going to pick up Jews from a nearby village, in order to have an excuse for their absence.³⁸ Others hung around the marketplace because they did not want to round up Jews during the search.³⁹ Still others spent as much

time as possible searching the houses so as not to be present at the marketplace, where they feared being assigned to a firing squad.⁴⁰ A driver assigned to take Jews to the forest made only one trip before he asked to be relieved. "Presumably his nerves were not strong enough to drive more Jews to the shooting site," commented the man who took over his truck and his duties of chauffeuring Jews to their death.⁴¹

After the men of First Company departed for the woods, Second Company was left to complete the roundup and load Jews onto the trucks. When the first salvo was heard from the woods, a terrible cry swept the marketplace as the collected Jews realized their fate.⁴² Thereafter, however, a quiet composure—indeed, in the words of German witnesses, an "unbelievable" and "astonishing" composure—settled over the Jews.⁴³

If the victims were composed, the German officers grew increasingly agitated as it became clear that the pace of the executions was much too slow if they were to finish the job in one day. "Comments were repeatedly made, such as, 'It's not getting anywhere!' and 'It's not going fast enough!'"⁴⁴ Trapp reached a decision and gave new orders. Third Company was called in from its outposts around the village to take over close guard of the marketplace. The men of Lieutenant Gnade's Second Company were informed that they too must now go to the woods to join the shooters. Sergeant Steinmetz of Third Platoon once again gave his men the opportunity to report if they did not feel up to it. No one took up his offer.⁴⁵

Lieutenant Gnade divided his company into two groups assigned to different sections of the woods. He then visited Wohlauf's First Company to witness a demonstration of the executions.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Lieutenant Scheer and Sergeant Hergert* took the First Platoon of Second Company, along with some men of Third Platoon, to a certain point in the woods. Scheer divided his men into four groups, assigned them each a shooting area, and sent them back to fetch the Jews they were to kill. Lieutenant Gnade arrived and heatedly argued with Scheer that the men were not being sent deep enough into the woods.⁴⁷

By the time each group had made two or three round trips to the collection point and carried out their executions, it was clear to Scheer that the process was too slow. He asked Hergert for advice. "I then made the proposal," Hergert recalled, "that it would suffice if the Jews were brought from the collection point to the place of execution by only two men of each group, while the other shooters of the execution commando would already have moved to the next shooting site. Furthermore, this shooting site was moved somewhat forward from execution to execution and thus always got closer to the collection point on the forest path. We then proceeded accordingly."⁴⁸ Hergert's suggestion speeded the killing process considerably.

In contrast to First Company, the men of Second Company received no instruction on how to carry out the shooting. Initially bayonets were not fixed as an aiming guide, and as Hergert noted, there was a "considerable number of missed shots" that "led to the unnecessary wounding of the victims." One of the policemen in Hergert's unit likewise noted the difficulty the men had in aiming properly. "At first we shot freehand. When one aimed too high, the entire skull exploded. As a consequence, brains and bones flew everywhere. Thus, we were instructed to place the bayonet point on the neck."⁴⁹ According to Hergert, however, using fixed bayonets as an aiming guide was no solution. "Through the point-blank shot that was thus required, the bullet struck the head of the victim at such a trajectory that often the entire skull or at least the entire rear skullcap was torn off, and blood, bone splinters, and brains sprayed everywhere and besmirched the shooters."⁵⁰

Hergert was emphatic that no one in First Platoon was given the option of withdrawing beforehand. But once the executions began and men approached either him or Scheer because they could not shoot women and children, they were given other duties.⁵¹ This was confirmed by one of his men. "During the execution word spread that anyone who could not take it any longer could report." He went on to note, "I myself took part in some ten shootings, in which I had to shoot men and women. I

simply could not shoot at people anymore, which became apparent to my sergeant, Hergert, because at the end I repeatedly shot past. For this reason he relieved me. Other comrades were also relieved sooner or later, because they simply could no longer continue.”⁵²

Lieutenant Drucker’s Second Platoon and the bulk of Sergeant Steinmetz’s Third Platoon were assigned to yet another part of the forest. Like Scheer’s men, they were divided into small groups of five to eight each rather than large groups of thirty-five to forty as in Wohlauf’s First Company. The men were told to place the end of their carbines on the cervical vertebrae at the base of the neck, but here too the shooting was done initially without fixed bayonets as a guide.⁵³ The results were horrifying. “The shooters were gruesomely besmirched with blood, brains, and bone splinters. It hung on their clothing.”⁵⁴

When dividing his men into small groups of shooters, Drucker had kept about a third of them in reserve. Ultimately, everyone was to shoot, but the idea was to allow frequent relief and “cigarette breaks.”⁵⁵ With the constant coming and going from the trucks, the wild terrain, and the frequent rotation, the men did not remain in fixed groups.⁵⁶ The confusion created the opportunity for work slowdown and evasion. Some men who hurried at their task shot far more Jews than others who delayed as much as they could.⁵⁷ After two rounds one policeman simply “slipped off” and stayed among the trucks on the edge of the forest.⁵⁸ Another managed to avoid taking his turn with the shooters altogether.

It was in no way the case that those who did not want to or could not carry out the shooting of human beings with their own hands could not keep themselves out of this task. No strict control was being carried out here. I therefore remained by the arriving trucks and kept myself busy at the arrival point. In any case I gave my activity such an appearance. It could not be avoided that one or another of my comrades noticed that I was not going to the executions to fire away at

the victims. They showered me with remarks such as “shit-head” and “weakling” to express their disgust. But I suffered no consequences for my actions. I must mention here that I was not the only one who kept himself out of participating in the executions.⁵⁹

By far the largest number of shooters at Józefów who were interrogated after the war came from the Third Platoon of Second Company. It is from them that we can perhaps get the best impression of the effect of the executions on the men and the dropout rate among them during the course of the action.

Hans Dettelmann,* a forty-year-old barber, was assigned by Drucker to a firing squad. “It was still not possible for me to shoot the first victim at the first execution, and I wandered off and asked . . . Lieutenant Drucker to be relieved.” Dettelmann told his lieutenant that he had a “very weak nature,” and Drucker let him go.⁶⁰

Walter Niehaus,* a former Reemtsma cigarette sales representative, was paired with an elderly woman for the first round. “After I had shot the elderly woman, I went to Toni [Anton] Bentheim* [his sergeant] and told him that I was not able to carry out further executions. I did not have to participate in the shooting anymore. . . . my nerves were totally finished from this one shooting.”⁶¹

For his first victim August Zorn* was given a very old man. Zorn recalled that his elderly victim

could not or would not keep up with his countrymen, because he repeatedly fell and then simply lay there. I regularly had to lift him up and drag him forward. Thus, I only reached the execution site when my comrades had already shot their Jews. At the sight of his countrymen who had been shot, my Jew threw himself on the ground and remained lying there. I then cocked my carbine and shot him through the back of the head. Because I was already very upset from the cruel treatment of the Jews during the clearing of the town and was completely

in turmoil, I shot too high. The entire back of the skull of my Jew was torn off and the brain exposed. Parts of the skull flew into Sergeant Steinmetz's face. This was grounds for me, after returning to the truck, to go to the first sergeant and ask for my release. I had become so sick that I simply couldn't anymore. I was then relieved by the first sergeant.⁶²

Georg Kageler,* a thirty-seven-year-old tailor, made it through the first round before encountering difficulty. "After I had carried out the first shooting and at the unloading point was allotted a mother with daughter as victims for the next shooting, I began a conversation with them and learned that they were Germans from Kassel, and I took the decision not to participate further in the executions. The entire business was now so repugnant to me that I returned to my platoon leader and told him that I was still sick and asked for my release." Kageler was sent to guard the marketplace.⁶³ Neither his pre-execution conversation with his victim nor his discovery that there were German Jews in Józefów was unique. Schimke, the man who had first stepped out, encountered a Jew from Hamburg in the marketplace, as did a second policeman.⁶⁴ Yet another policeman remembered that the first Jew he shot was a decorated World War I veteran from Bremen who begged in vain for mercy.⁶⁵

Franz Kastenbaum,* who during his official interrogation had denied remembering anything about the killing of Jews in Poland, suddenly appeared uninvited at the office of the Hamburg state prosecutor investigating Reserve Police Battalion 101. He told how he had been a member of a firing squad of seven or eight men that had taken its victims into the woods and shot them in the neck at point-blank range. This procedure had been repeated until the fourth victim.

The shooting of the men was so repugnant to me that I missed the fourth man. It was simply no longer possible for me to aim accurately. I suddenly felt nauseous and ran away from the

shooting site. I have expressed myself incorrectly just now. It was not that I could no longer aim accurately, rather that the fourth time I intentionally missed. I then ran into the woods, vomited, and sat down against a tree. To make sure that no one was nearby, I called loudly into the woods, because I wanted to be alone. Today I can say that my nerves were totally finished. I think that I remained alone in the woods for some two to three hours.

Kastenbaum then returned to the edge of the woods and rode an empty truck back to the marketplace. He suffered no consequences; his absence had gone unnoticed because the firing squads had been all mixed up and randomly assigned. He had come to make this statement, he explained to the investigating attorney, because he had had no peace since attempting to conceal the shooting action.⁶⁶

Most of those who found the shooting impossible to bear quit very early.⁶⁷ But not always. The men in one squad had already shot ten to twenty Jews each when they finally asked to be relieved. As one of them explained, "I especially asked to be relieved because the man next to me shot so impossibly. Apparently he always aimed his gun too high, producing terrible wounds in his victims. In many cases the entire backs of victims' heads were torn off, so that the brains sprayed all over. I simply couldn't watch it any longer."⁶⁸ At the unloading point, Sergeant Bentheim watched men emerge from the woods covered with blood and brains, morale shaken and nerves finished. Those who asked to be relieved he advised to "slink away" to the marketplace.⁶⁹ As a result, the number of policemen gathered on the marketplace grew constantly.⁷⁰

As with First Company, alcohol was made available to the policemen under Drucker and Steinmetz who stayed in the forest and continued shooting.⁷¹ As darkness approached at the end of a long summer day and the murderous task was still not finished, the shooting became even less organized and more hectic.⁷² The forest was so full of dead bodies that it was difficult to find places

to make the Jews lie down.⁷³ When darkness finally fell about 9:00 p.m.—some seventeen hours after Reserve Police Battalion 101 had first arrived on the outskirts of Józefów—and the last Jews had been killed, the men returned to the marketplace and prepared to depart for Biłgoraj.⁷⁴ No plans had been made for the burial of the bodies, and the dead Jews were simply left lying in the woods. Neither clothing nor valuables had been officially collected, though at least some of the policemen had enriched themselves with watches, jewelry, and money taken from the victims.⁷⁵ The pile of luggage the Jews had been forced to leave at the marketplace was simply burned.⁷⁶ Before the policemen climbed into their trucks and left Józefów, a ten-year-old girl appeared, bleeding from the head. She was brought to Trapp, who took her in his arms and said, “You shall remain alive.”⁷⁷

When the men arrived at the barracks in Biłgoraj, they were depressed, angered, embittered, and shaken.⁷⁸ They ate little but drank heavily. Generous quantities of alcohol were provided, and many of the policemen got quite drunk. Major Trapp made the rounds, trying to console and reassure them, and again placing the responsibility on higher authorities.⁷⁹ But neither the drink nor Trapp’s consolation could wash away the sense of shame and horror that pervaded the barracks. Trapp asked the men not to talk about it,⁸⁰ but they needed no encouragement in that direction. Those who had not been in the forest did not want to learn more.⁸¹ Those who had been there likewise had no desire to speak, either then or later. By silent consensus within Reserve Police Battalion 101, the Józefów massacre was simply not discussed. “The entire matter was a taboo.”⁸² But repression during waking hours could not stop the nightmares. During the first night back from Józefów, one policeman awoke firing his gun into the ceiling of the barracks.⁸³

Several days after Józefów the battalion, it would seem, narrowly missed participation in yet another massacre. Units of First and Second Company, under Trapp and Wohlauf, entered Alekzandrów—a so-called street village composed of houses strung out along the road twelve kilometers west of Józefów. A

small number of Jews was rounded up, and both the policemen and the Jews feared that another massacre was imminent. After some hesitation, however, the action was broken off, and Trapp permitted the Jews to return to their houses. One policeman remembered vividly "how individual Jews fell on their knees before Trapp and tried to kiss his hands and feet. Trapp, however, did not permit this and turned away." The policemen returned to Biłgoraj with no explanation for the strange turn of events.⁸⁴ Then, on July 20, precisely one month after its departure from Hamburg and one week after the Józefów massacre, Reserve Police Battalion 101 left Biłgoraj for redeployment in the northern sector of the Lublin district.