

JEWISH FORCED LABOR IN THE GERMAN ARMAMENTS INDUSTRY:
A CASE STUDY OF THIL AND KOCHENDORF (1944–1945)

Eliezer Schwartz

By the spring of 1943, the cities of the Reich were *Judenfrei*, and the factories within Reich territory had no Jewish laborers. At that point, the German Air Force had lost its superiority and German military industrial installations were subjected to severe aerial attacks. It was therefore decided to shift the Reich's factories underground, by widening mine tunnels and converting them into factory spaces. In order to carry out these projects, laborers were needed in large numbers. The Reich leadership was forced to recognize the importance of Jewish manual and professional labor for the armaments industry, and Hitler was forced to revoke the ban he had imposed on the employment of Jewish workers within the Reich's boundaries. Thus, at this late stage of the war, large numbers of work-ready Jews began to be transferred for labor in German factories and in the construction of subterranean factories within Reich territory.

This article focuses on the fate of a group of five hundred Jewish skilled workers and professionals, who in June 1944 were transported from Birkenau to an iron mine in France, and from there to a salt mine in Germany, in order to convert the mine galleries into armaments factories. During the last month of the war these workers were led in a brutal death march to Dachau concentration camp and from there south to the Austrian Alps, where most of them were murdered, just a few days before the end of World War II in Europe.

The fate of these five hundred Jewish workers is similar to that of many other groups, who labored and perished in similar circumstances all over German occupied territory in the last phases of the war. They were victims of a satanic policy of *vernichtung durch arbeit* (extinction through work). As the war neared its end, and further exploitation of work-ready Jews became impossible, the Nazis no longer saw any purpose to their existence.