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# Social Contact and Personal Relations of German Catholic Peasants and Polish Workers (POWs, Civilian, and Forced Laborers) in Bavaria's Rural War Economy, 1939-1945

by John J. Delaney

Hitler's wars for living space sent millions of Germans abroad and aggravated a severe labor shortage at home. German authorities recruited or forcibly transported over twelve million foreign workers to the Reich from 1939 to 1945. A great many of these civilian workers, POWs, and slave laborers came from Poland, the Ukraine, and western areas of the Soviet Union, that is, homelands the Nazi regime stigmatized as particularly «inferior». Nazi racial thinking and wartime security concerns produced an extensive set of discriminatory measures aimed at Slavs' subjugation and strict control. Nazi edicts required Poles and so-called Eastern Workers (*Ostarbeiter*) to wear a purple «P» or «Ost» badge on their outer clothing. Restrictive measures limited allowable movement to their immediate area of residence and work. The regime also imposed a system akin to apartheid. Racial law thus prohibited unnecessary social contact between members of the so-called master race and their «racial inferiors».

Throughout the war many an Eastern European experienced the regime's terror, debilitating labor, dangerous working conditions, and humiliation on a daily basis. The handful of major studies centered on Nazi racial policy and foreign labor provide insightful analyses of the legal and administrative policies of the regime. Common to them is a portrayal of the harsh treatment accorded foreigners by Nazi overlords, especially within Germany's industrial war economy<sup>1</sup>. Their largely macro-historical

Portions of the three opening paragraphs are taken from J.J. DELANEY, *Racial Values vs. Religious Values: Clerical Opposition to Nazi Anti-Polish Racial Policy*, in «Church History: Studies in Christianity & Culture», 70, 2001, pp. 271 f.

<sup>1</sup> U. HERBERT, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich*, New York 1997; E.L. HOMZE, *Foreign Labor in Nazi Germany*, Princeton NJ 1967. A shift to confined and geographically focused studies is rapidly emerging

approach provides both an excellent overview and national perspective of developments from the top on down. The most brutalized workers landed in concentration camps, labor education camps, the mining sector, heavy industry, and manufacturing<sup>2</sup>. The number of Poles among Germany's foreign workers almost reached 1.7 million<sup>3</sup>. Over 70 thousand Polish men, women, and even children spent their war years in Bavaria<sup>4</sup>. Most of them worked as agricultural laborers on small and medium-sized family farms. Farms and villages dominated the agricultural landscape in that largely agrarian state and Poles comprised the largest contingent of agricultural laborers placed there during World War II<sup>5</sup>.

Polish workers placed in agriculture often fared far better than their compatriots laboring elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. To be sure, Polish agricultural laborers were not free, received artificially low wages, worked long tough days, and knew rough rural life first-hand throughout the war. Yet unlike Eastern Europeans in other economic sectors, many Polish farm hands in Bavaria did experience less control, enjoyed some liberties, ate far better, and even forged strong personal relationships within the peasant communities where they lived and worked. The above-mentioned conditions and

as the literature on foreign labor grows. Several regional and municipal studies have appeared in recent years. See for example the rich and detailed study of forced laborers in Munich's war economy by A. HEUSLER, *Ausländereinsatz: Zwangsarbeit für die Münchner Kriegswirtschaft, 1939-1945*, München 1996.

<sup>2</sup> U. HERBERT, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 298.

<sup>4</sup> C. ŁUCZAK (ed), *Potżenie polskich robotników przymusowych w Rzeszy: 1939-1945* (Die Lage der polnischen Zwangsarbeiter im Reich 1939-1945; documents chiefly in German; introduction also in English, German, and Russian), Poznan 1975, p. lxxiv.

<sup>5</sup> Over 90 percent of farms in Bavaria were 20 hectares or less in size in 1933. See I. KERSHAW, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945*, Oxford 1983, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> «[I]n der Landwirtschaft ging es ihnen in der Regel erheblich besser als in der Industrie, und auch dort waren die Unterschiede in der Behandlung und der Ernährung eklatant, vor allem seit Ende 1942»; U. HERBERT, *Einleitung*, in U. HERBERT (ed), *Europa und der «Reichseinsatz»: Ausländische Zivilarbeiter, Kriegsgefangene und KZ-Häftlinge in Deutschland, 1938-1945*, Essen 1991, p. 12; Lutz Niethammer's comments in M. ARNING, *Viele waren keine zwölf Jahre alt*, in «Frankfurter Rundschau Online», 18 February 2000; T. BAUER, *Nationalsozialistische Agrarpolitik und bäuerliches Verhalten im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Eine Regionalstudie zur ländlichen Gesellschaft in Bayern*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, pp. 161-172, and (my doctoral dissertation, SUNY/University at Buffalo) J.J. DELANEY, *Rural Catholics, Polish Workers, and Nazi Racial Policy in Bavaria, 1939-1945*, Ann Arbor MI 1995, pp. 220-294.

developments could be the topics of several articles. The emphasis here is on the development of positive social relations between Germans and Poles in the Bavarian countryside. It is important to recognize these positive social relations, whose patterns are illustrated by specific examples elicited from the context of everyday rural life. The examples and type of behavior they point to reveal the degree to which the regime fell short of stigmatizing the Poles as separate race deserving of pariah status in rural Bavaria.

The causal factors at work in this case are many. In general, the arrival of Polish POWs, civilian workers, and forced laborers fulfilled a pressing economic need of crisis proportions. Even prior to the war, German peasants desperately wanted farmhands and milkmaids regardless of a worker's national origin. In short, wartime Polish laborers fit a pre-existing need that worked in the economic self-interest of their German employers. Most of the Poles were rural folk like the Bavarian peasants themselves. A great many of the Poles knew how to farm and handle livestock. These essential skills, again, addressed pressing peasant needs that operated in the economic self-interest of the German employers. Bavaria's many isolated communities and scattered family farms were largely semi-autonomous and home to independent households. Remote hamlets and private homes were exceedingly difficult to monitor and control, which left rural folk positioned to make decisions based more often on self-interest than the regime's dictates and expectations. In addition, the Poles were Catholics, as were most Bavarians. The strong confessional identity within both groups meant that culturally, they had much in common. Influential and authoritative rural clergy successfully conveyed that fact by word and deed<sup>7</sup>. In short, because the Poles were fellow Catholics, peasants were well armed in theory and through repeated practice, to reject racist claims that Poles were «sub-humans».

What follows examines areas of association and a range of illicit social relationships forged by Catholic Bavarian peasants and Poles. These included gathering together at mealtime, involving Poles in family celebrations or social events, forging strong friendships, caring for Poles in need, standing up for Poles, integrating them into everyday family life, and even making individual Poles actual members of the family.

Nazi propaganda failed to convince Bavaria's Catholic peasantry that Poles were a untrustworthy lot who posed a «racial threat» on either a cultural

<sup>7</sup> J.J. DELANEY, *Racial Values vs. Religious Values*, pp. 271-294.

or biological level. Limited contact between the two groups, resulting in personal interaction, proved more revealing for peasants and Poles than propaganda proved 'enlightening'. Goebbels' pronounced disadvantage lay in the possibility of comparisons that came with the introduction of actual Polish people. Meeting POWs and hiring Polish workers put peasants in the position to make meaningful comparisons of the abstract and the real. By the powers of their own trusted personal observation, they easily noted the qualities of people they encountered. Personal attributes stood in stark contrast to the frightening and horrid images of racial and war propaganda. Face-to-face encounters enabled individuals to determine for themselves if stereotypes conformed to the men and women with whom they worked. A trait as simple as an individual's concern for personal hygiene was capable of wiping away the false filth of hateful propaganda. Most importantly, the Poles were largely an unassuming rural folk, and Catholics, like the peasants themselves. For these reasons, reality quickly exploded the social myths of racial propaganda.

The first manifestation of this broad range of behavior appeared as simple fraternization. Early forms included taking Poles along to the local inn. In this way, Bavarians and Poles who worked together relaxed together. Acts of discrimination carried out against Poles by publicans or local Nazis could provoke strongly worded retorts. Adam Staab, for example, declared his solidarity with both the Pole he knew and the decency he preferred when he stated that «places his Pole was not allow to frequent, he could not allow himself to frequent»<sup>8</sup>. Acts of inclusion were also tied to birthday celebrations. Such was the case of a farmer's son who invited all those in his work crew, including its Polish worker, to join him at a pub<sup>9</sup>. On other festive occasions, such as feast days and holidays, farmers elsewhere invited POWs out to the local inn for food or drink<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> As passed on by a Sicherheitsdienst (hereafter SD) official, his statement reads: «Staab ... erklärte ... 'daß da, wo sein Pole nicht verkehren dürfte, er auch nicht verkehren könne'»; Staatsarchiv Würzburg (hereafter StAW) Gestapo 14819, SD Außenstelle Aschaffenburg, 15 January 1940.

<sup>9</sup> StAW, Gestapo 7596, 10 July 1940.

<sup>10</sup> For the April 1940 Good Friday invitation extended in Großlellenfeld (Dinkelsbühl County), see H. WITETSCHKE (ed), *Die kirchliche Lage in Bayern nach den Regierungspräsidentenberichten 1933-1943*, II: *Regierungsbezirk Schwaben* (Veröffentlichen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte. Reihe A: Quellen, 14), Mainz 1971, p. 348. For Binsbach, Karlstadt County, see H. BOBERACH (ed), *Meldungen aus dem Reich: Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1938-1945*, Herrsching 1984, Nr. 83, 29 April 1940, 4: 1081, and StAW, SD 25, Abschnitt Würzburg, 24 April 1940, 2.

Other such gatherings were reported as having taken place behind closed doors. A January 1940 memo by a County Prefect to the Gestapo seeking an investigation of a peasant woman in Bad Aibling suggests her social life with area Poles, both male and female, was quite active. Those whom she knew worked in various surrounding villages and she openly accompanied them to nearby towns. The local police reported that her farmhouse was a site of drinking, music, and dancing; this news provoked even more official suspicion and led to her denunciation<sup>11</sup>.

Gatherings of another sort point out that it was possible in some rural pubs to simply ignore altogether the regime's regulations seeking separation of Germans and Poles. In such cases, several months pass before the accused innkeeper comes to the attention of the authorities.

An SD report from Lower Franconia written in June 1940 identified the principle source of rural fraternization, a range of behavior it produced, and pointed out the ominous direction in which it was headed<sup>12</sup>. According to the SD, area Catholics were deeply impressed with the reputed piety of the Poles. Among the native Catholics, many were opposed to both the Nazi party and state. These two positions found expression in demonstrative acts of sympathy for Poles in need. Bavarian peasants went out of their way to provide Poles with excessive amounts of small necessities such as clothes, washcloths, and the like<sup>13</sup>. Tobacco, a treasured commodity, they quietly passed on. Disturbing too, from the perspective of the regime, was a noticeably low level of area national pride. According to the author of a 1940 SD report, this was exhibited in many areas of the region's rural social life. For example, Bavarian lads in Ochsenfurt County were observed playing soccer with Polish farm hands. A similar example of poor conduct in the countryside was that provided by a Village Peasant Leader in Königshofen County. He openly stated that he looked upon his Polish agricultural workers just as he did his German farm hands. Word arrived from Großlangheim that German farm hands, a clergyman, and a Pole all slept in a common room. Also, the daughter of a Dettelbach farmer visited the family's Polish worker in Kitzingen's hospital<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Staatsarchiv München (hereafter StAM) Arbeitsämter 0880; in that same file, see also a copy of a memo written by Bad Aibling's County Prefect, which is addressed to the Gestapo and dated January 31, 1940.

<sup>12</sup> StAW, SD 9, Einsatz polnischer Gesindekräfte, 27 June 1940.

<sup>13</sup> StAW, SD 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> StAW, SD 6. For another such incident in Upper Bavaria, see StAM: Landratsamt (hereafter LRA) 29766, Gendarmerie Posten (hereafter GP) Berchtesgaden, Nr. 1859, 10

This section of the SD report, whose opening stressed the influence of a common religious identity and political disaffection, closed its treatment of fraternization in rural Lower Franconia by focusing the reader's attention on even more fundamental, intimate, and festive forms of association: area families, it had been observed, included Poles in their feasts and drinking bouts<sup>15</sup>.

This development signified the shift of fraternization from a casual to a more inclusive form of association. The assignment of individual Poles to family farms played an important role in this development. Small and medium-sized family farms, in fact, predominated throughout the Bavarian countryside. This fundamental feature of the state's rural economic life resulted in unlimited opportunities for a sustained household contact to unfold between Poles and the Catholic peasantry<sup>16</sup>.

Writing only a bit earlier, Mühldorf's County Prefect identified a similar combination of 'problematic' attitudes and structural occasions for fraternization in his southern region of the state. Using information offered by his county agricultural expert, local mayors, and rural policemen, he described the treatment accorded Polish farm workers in early 1940 as «völlig unbefriedigend» or entirely unsatisfactory<sup>17</sup>. His initial, hard-edged, observations expressed much disappointment with the reigning state of affairs but these were coupled with an expressed determination to alter them<sup>18</sup>. Put simply, the peasants would have to be induced, and if necessary, forced to alter their behavior toward the Poles.

Yet within a month, this Prefect's determined tone gave way to rising vexation and scorn. The peasants, he claimed, were not used to such

December 1942. Nazis, it is worth noting, sought to introduce social separation even in hospitals. As reported by Würzburg's SD, the chief doctor at a large Catholic hospital there declared such a measure unnecessary because the German (Catholic) patients had not voiced any complaints about the presence of Poles in hospital wards; see StAW, SD 29, Abschnitt Würzburg, 22 July 1940, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Subsequent examples of drinking bouts include an especially revealing one from Lindflur, which is described in StAW, SD 27, Abschnitt Würzburg, 28 November 1940, 2.

<sup>16</sup> From Lower Franconia, there is the following example: «... die kleinen häuslichen Verhältnisse der mainfränkischen Landwirte, tragen außerdem noch dazu bei, daß die Polen weniger als Fremde, sondern als Hausangehörige angesehen werden»; see StAW, SD 26, Abschnitt Würzburg, 1 July 1940, 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> StAM, LRA 135113, Monatsbericht des Landrats (hereafter MB d LR), April-May-June 1940, II/1.

<sup>18</sup> StAM, LRA 135113, MB d LR, February-March 1940, II/2.



*Gesinde* or «riffraff»<sup>19</sup>. The Poles were being treated far too well. The other half of the problem, as he described it, was the inevitability of association inherent in the widespread household placement of Poles on individual farms. By way of illustrative contrast, this Prussian-born Prefect highlighted preferable and restricted arrangements found elsewhere.

«The introduction of the Poles into the large estates of northern Germany has been carried out correctly and without fuss because in that area migrant workers have been used for several decades. Here, with our small scale businesses and individual farms the experiences are anything but encouraging»<sup>20</sup>.

Bavaria's structural features, which necessitated Poles' placement with its Catholic farming families, thus encouraged the very fraternization the Nazis feared, hated, and prohibited, but could not stop.

In a separate report of October 1940, the SD also pointed to the significance of daily contact but underscored it with an analysis centering on the role of peasant economic self-interest<sup>21</sup>. The SD concluded that lax enforcement of recently introduced prohibitions governing social relations and treatment of Poles was tied to the peasantry's desire to avoid mistrust and discord at home. To that assessment one should add the role of potential exhaustion, which served as a deterrent to carrying out governmental directives. Fulfillment of the many responsibilities inherent in the regime's 1940 decrees and its many instruction sheets would have required constant surveillance and supervision of the Poles working and living with peasants. Such an unending task would have been an unrealistic undertaking on a truly broad scale. Even if accomplished, the practice would have bred discontent between farmer and worker. Peasants needed laborers and they knew it was not in their own self-interest to alienate them<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, they also needed laborers they could trust in their homes and with their livestock<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> StAM, LRA 135113, MB d LR, April-May-June 1940, II/1.

<sup>20</sup> StAM, LRA 135113, MB d LR, April-May-June 1940, II/1: «Der Einsatz der Polen ist in Norddeutschland auf den großen Gütern richtig und ohne weiteres durchführbar, weil dort der Sachseingänger seit vielen Jahrzenten eingespielt ist. Bei unseren Kleinbetrieben und dem Einzelhofsystem sind jedoch die Erfahrungen alles andere als ermutigend».

<sup>21</sup> StAW, SD 4, Außenstelle Ebern, «Polizeiverordnungen: polnische Gesindekräfte», 5 October 1940. Report of the Ebern office reproduced, underscored, and forwarded within the SD's network in: StAW, SD 27, Abschnitt Würzburg, 10 October 1940, 7-9.

<sup>22</sup> See StAW, SD 27, Abschnitt Würzburg, 14 October 1940, 4-6.

<sup>23</sup> See also StAW, SD 26, Abschnitt Würzburg, 5 September 1940, 5.

It is important to note as well that «strict handling», a Nazi euphemism for discriminatory and inhumane treatment, was not a goal that originated in the Catholic countryside. It came out of Nazi ideological circles. It was thus a policy that was bureaucratically imposed on a disinterested and stubborn peasantry. It was, in sum, an unwanted as well as an impractical goal. In that sense, racial policy undermined its own objective. Pre-existing independent forces also worked against it. Peasants preferred their own customary forms of management. Unlike the Nazis' radicalism, peasant ways were both proven and traditional. For that reason they were preferable.

Among the most important of all considerations was the fact that the peasants largely remained masters of their own homes and farms. The organizational weakness of the party in rural Bavaria kept it from penetrating many a farmhouse. The largely independent farmers also resented being told what to do. In exercising their prerogatives and choosing their preferences they stubbornly stuck to their preferred way of life. Harmony, or at least household accord, was preferred to discord. Pursuing accord was also a practical way of insuring retention on one's much-needed worker<sup>24</sup>. Thus in many cases, confessional influences, the weight of tradition, practical considerations, and the peasants' retention of their own powers of decision making combined with the result that many Poles were treated in the customary ways that were usual for hired hands be they *Knechte* or local milkmaids.

So it is understandable why, for performing the tasks of departed German farm hands, Poles were generally treated like their predecessors. The Party's call to banish Poles from household meals was largely, if not overwhelmingly, ignored<sup>25</sup>. One former Polish POW recalled, with emphatic appreciation, the reasoning and forceful expression of the farmer for whom he worked during part of the war. Within his own four walls the farmer declared to his assembled household: «Those who work on my farm, eat at my table»<sup>26</sup>. By extension, the spirit of those words reigned

<sup>24</sup> StAW, SD 26, Abschnitt Würzburg, 22 July 1940, 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> «Viele Gefangene, auch Polen, werden als zur Familie gehörend angesehen und auch entsprechend behandelt»: StAW, SD 13, Außenstelle Bad Kissingen, 1941.

<sup>26</sup> Author's August 1991 interview with former Polish POW Dembetski. The following SD entry, which originated in its Stuttgart office, is comparable: «[Die Kriegsgefangenen] dürfen mit dem Bauern am gleichen Tisch sitzen, bekommen ebenfalls ihren Most, trinken oft sogar mit dem Bauern aus einem Krug. Wird auf dem Bauernhof ein Familienfest gefeiert, z.B. Taufe, Konfirmation oder Hochzeit, so nimmt meistens der Kriegsgefangene

within that household generally. By necessity however, defiance was coupled to pretense. A spare table was situated elsewhere for instant use in the event a distrusted visitor appeared<sup>27</sup>.

*Tischgemeinschaft*, or meals eaten in common, was something easily undertaken, was in accord with tradition, and quite capable of being hidden from Nazi observers. Despite repeated urgings and declarations for its cessation, the practice continued from war's opening through its end<sup>28</sup>. Small peasants especially, the SD reported, were not inclined to alter the mealtime practices in place. The introduction of a foreigner brought with it no change of habit. The food, cooked and placed in a common bowl, was set at the center of the one table. Within this simple arrangement, everyone took a portion from a common bowl<sup>29</sup>. Proof of such violations of racial policy occasionally reached the desks of the authorities<sup>30</sup>. Evacuees from the city sometimes denounced farmers out of a feeling that foreign workers received better treatment than they themselves did<sup>31</sup>. Ordinarily, however, a farmer's own four walls remained largely impenetrable and communal meals went unrecorded.

Instances of meals in common were accompanied and followed by *Hausgemeinschaft* situations in which individual German families and Polish laborers within one house lived as a community, often under one roof.

The following example conveys the impression contemporaries received upon witnessing the warmth and affection shared by a particular Polish

darán teil und wird dabei als gleichwertig angesehen. 'Wer bei uns schafft, der soll es auch gut haben, der soll bei uns am gleichen Tisch sitzen und unsere Feste mitfeiern,' das ist eine weitverbreitete Ansicht». H. BOBERACH (ed), *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, in *SD-Berichte zu Inlandsfragen* (Blaue Serie), 15 November 1943, 15:6015.

<sup>27</sup> Author's Dembetski interview.

<sup>28</sup> This was equally true in the case of French POWs who worked on family farms. See, for example, StAW, SD 13, Außenstelle Bad Kissingen, 1941.

<sup>29</sup> Es werde sich beispielweise in vielen Fällen weder durch Aufklärung noch durch Erziehung abstellen lassen, daß der Bauer mit der ausländischen Arbeitskraft zusammen an einem Tisch sitze. Gerade bei kleinbäuerlichen Verhältnissen sei es nun einmal so, daß ... jeder, der auf dem Hof arbeite, greife zu, wobei vielfach noch aus derselben Schüssel gegessen werde. H. BOBERACH (ed), *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, Nr. 339, 30 November 1942, 12:4518.

<sup>30</sup> StAW, SD 43, Verhalten des Bürgermeister Ludwig Büttner in Wülfershausen, October 1943.

<sup>31</sup> StAM, LRA 135119, Beschwerde gegen den Bauren Michael Feckl in Pointvogel, 1 October 1943.

worker and his Bavarian farmer, both of whom were denounced in the city of Miltenberg.

The sawmill there was a new work assignment for 10 Poles who previously lived and worked in Kirchzell for at least one agricultural season. As reported by a city policeman in late January 1943, the Poles and their farmers had repeatedly sought each other out in the wake of an early December transfer<sup>32</sup>. His mention of multiple visits by several different farmers suggests the general failure of the Nazi policy of apartheid in the farming communities around Kirchzell. The farmers had obviously gone out of their way to maintain contact with transferred foreign laborers with whom they had worked, come to know, and like.

One might point to one or two possible motivators to explain such visits. Each assumes a pronounced degree of calculation, self-interest, even cynicism. The first is associated with the timing of the behavior: the visits unfold precisely during the defeat at Stalingrad. One could argue that significant numbers of Germans quite rightly anticipated Germany's eventual defeat, feared post-war repercussions, and thus modified their behavior accordingly. There is general merit to the 'anticipation' explanation for the relations of some people elsewhere, but not in this case.

Absent here is any suggestion that farmers reversed their behavior or dropped indifference and suddenly assumed a caring and personal disposition *vis-a-vis* Polish workers. On the contrary: according to one Pole singled out in this case, Bavarian farm life as he had known it, was so preferable that if not returned to his farmer he would seek to make his way back to Poland<sup>33</sup>.

Genuine closeness, not social distance, marked this particular relationship. Among the deeds termed reprehensible or *verwerflich*, and hence criminal, was that, «the peasant Mehl greeted the Pole in manner exceed-

<sup>32</sup> «daß verschiedene Bauern schon wiederholt hier in [dem] Betrieb gewesen wären und diese ihre Polen besucht haben ...»: StAW, Gestapo 7251, Schutzpolizei Miltenberg, Nr. 75, 20 January 1943.

<sup>33</sup> StAW, Gestapo 7251, Schutzpolizei Miltenberg, Nr. 75, 20 January 1943. His desire was not exceptional. Other foreign workers, temporarily assigned to family farms during a harvest, later fled their barracks and the armaments industry to which they had been reassigned. According to Upper Bavaria's Governor, one case involved at least six such Eastern workers (Ostarbeiterinnen) who made their way back to their peasant employers. See StAM, LRA 106695, 10 December 1943, 8.

ing that of a father to his son»<sup>34</sup>. Added to that was the claim that over the holiday season the farmer had delivered *Kuchen*, or baked goods. A search of the Pole revealed his possession of photos – presumably of their memories shared – and of apples he had received that very day. It is not unreasonable to suspect that this same farmer did not deliver apples and cakes to the local Nazi party leader. When asked where he had obtained the fruit, the bluntness of the Pole's answer set forth what was for him the obvious, «von Bauer [sic]»<sup>35</sup>.

Thus the restrictions observed at the sawmill to which former Polish farm workers had been assigned contrasted glaringly with the relative absence of boundaries in the conduct of personal life back in the rural community of Preunschen near Kirchzell. In a revelation passed on to the police by the mill owner, the Pole allegedly remarked that he and his farmer shared and wore the same clothes from day to day<sup>36</sup>. Each one helped himself to whatever was clean. This commune-like existence bespeaks a way of life far removed from Nazi mentalities. Even Himmler, Göring, and their racial policy experts did not anticipate its practice for they did not address such eventualities directly. Clothes swapping appears in none of the restrictive Reich laws or decrees pertaining to Poles and German-Polish relations issued between 1940 and 1945.

In any event, the city policeman did his best to influence the subsequent handling of the case. Although not well versed enough to know exactly which laws had been broken, he was sure in his Nazi mind that some crime had been committed. In editorial comments that sum up his findings and position, he found it abominable that a German farmer would deliver apples and *Kuchen* to a «Polack» when German children in the cities went without. Worse still was the degrading act of greeting his former laborer like «a long-lost and found son» («einen verlorenen und wiedergefundenen Sohn»). At the report's conclusion he urged Miltenberg's mayor to use his influence for the harshest of measures to be applied in this case. His aim was that the peasant be held up as an example. His

<sup>34</sup> «... der Bauer Mehl den Polen in einer Weise begrüßt, wie ein Vater seinen Sohn nicht besser und inniger begrüßen kann»: StAW, Gestapo 7251, Schutzpolizei Miltenberg, Nr. 75, 20 January 1943.

<sup>35</sup> StAW, Gestapo 7251, Schutzpolizei Miltenberg, Nr. 75, 20 January 1943.

<sup>36</sup> « ... [der Pole] habe so lang er bei seinem Bauer gewesen sei, mit dem Bauer die gleichen Kleider getragen, es wäre alles gleich gewesen, soll der Pole erklärt haben, ob der Bauer sein Hemd und Hose angezogen habe oder umgekehrt»: StAW, Gestapo 7251, Schutzpolizei Miltenberg, Nr. 75, 20 January 1943.

reasoning was that only thus would bad habits and such foolishness be knocked out of the head of the average German<sup>37</sup>. The mayor took his cue from the policeman and dutifully passed on the information, which made its way to the Gestapo.

In little over a month the farmer who had been guilty of being friendly with a Pole found himself sitting in the Kirchzell police station. There he made every attempt to deny or at least explain away anything he could. He was instructed to sign a statement declaring that he would break off all contact with the Pole. Failure to live up to that declaration would bring about internment in a concentration camp for an unspecified period of time. Mehl's name does not re-appear in the records of the Würzburg Gestapo. One can safely assume that terror in this case succeeded, at least in altering his behavior, where Nazi propaganda and edicts had failed to either inspire him or revolutionize his values.

Other examples from the Würzburg files of the Gestapo also point to cases in rural life where pre-existing values were not revolutionized. From Mülhausen in Lower Franconia it was learned that in two separate cases, Germans and Poles were sleeping in the same room. By order of the regime, such arrangements were prohibited and were considered beneath Germans. One of the cases involved the local Village Peasant Leader. In accounting for his actions he pointed to a lack of space in his home. In any event he added, «it wasn't so bad»<sup>38</sup>. Had he not been confronted, his unassuming practice would have continued. Both of the accused admitted to their actions and were warned by the Gestapo in no uncertain terms<sup>39</sup>. What is perhaps most striking about such cases is that they surface so rarely from rural settings, where news traveled fast and secrets were exceedingly rare. In short, the cohesive nature of rural communities discouraged acts of denunciation when it came to matters of associating with Poles.

A similar case was pursued in Kitzingen in February of 1943. A German widow and a young Polish girl who had worked for her as far back as 1939 came to the attention of the Gestapo because they slept, as a matter of course, in the same room. When questioned by the police, the woman

<sup>37</sup> «Es müssen in solchen Fällen die aller strengsten Maßnahmen ergriffen werden, denn einmal müßte doch der deutsche Michel auszutreiben sein»: StAW, Gestapo 7251, Schutzpolizei Miltenberg, Nr. 75, 20 January 1943.

<sup>38</sup> StAW, Gestapo 873.

<sup>39</sup> StAW, Gestapo 873.

revealed that her husband had died in the room. That fact left her fearful and she sought comfort from the presence of the young Polish girl. The widow tried to rationalize her behavior and lessen the severity of the situation by providing a favorable account of the young Polish girl's industrious ways and neatness of appearance. Neither the police nor the Gestapo had any sympathy for the frightened widow's need for assurance, companionship, and human contact. For her misdeeds, she was warned by order of the Gestapo and threatened with the removal of the Polish girl should such behavior occur again<sup>40</sup>.

Intimate contact easily resulted in friendships and those were expressed in bestowals of gifts. The Nazis hated this. Charitable acts offered up as donations and care packages incurred both fines and serious threats. A Catholic priest and his rural-constable cousin faced Gestapo justice on this score in January 1941 following their denunciation by a local Nazi group leader from the neighboring Protestant community of Ebersbrunn outside of Kitzingen<sup>41</sup>. A similar case involving a care package from April 1943 case brought one Frau Elise Michel before the police<sup>42</sup>. She like others who found themselves in such a position, described the Pole with whom she had associated as a hard-working individual. That excuse carried little or no weight. Before leaving the station, she signed the official warning issued by the Gestapo that promised the severest of measures should she assist Poles in that manner anytime in the future<sup>43</sup>. Yet another case reveals up to eleven care packages sent by an Alzenau county peasant to his former Polish farmhands, who had been transferred to industrial jobs near Duisburg<sup>44</sup>. According to the Nazis, such deeds were nothing less than criminal acts. Although exceedingly rare, communities and individuals did openly express their solidarity with, or sympathy for, Poles victimized or harassed by local Nazis.

<sup>40</sup> StAW, Gestapo 17439.

<sup>41</sup> StAW, Gestapo 9035, NSDAP Ebersbrunn, 14 January 1941. For a more detailed account of this case, see J.J. DELANEY, *Religious Values vs. Racial Values*, pp. 289 f.

<sup>42</sup> StAW, Gestapo 7645, Giebelstadt, Nr. 508, 27 April 1943.

<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that this was in fact at least the second time that she appeared before the police. The previous occasion was in 1938 after she demonstrated her support for her faith and its struggle with the state by hanging out prohibited Church flags. That was the traditional manner in which area Catholics celebrated Corpus Christi; StAW, Gestapo 7645, GP Giebelstadt, Nr. 1582, 8 July 1938.

<sup>44</sup> StAW, Gestapo 941, Gestapo Aussendienststelle Duisburg, 11 February 1943. For a detailed account, see J.J. DELANEY, *Racial Values vs. Religious Values*, pp. 290 f.

In Pusselsheim, a local farmer and his wife were reported to Gerolzhofen's County Prefect following an outburst leveled against a local Nazi. The insult was the outcome of a conflict that began with the Nazi's harassment of the young Pole who lived with them. The couple's behavior was especially objectionable because the insult was delivered in the young Pole's presence. Both the insult and the accompanying manifestation of solidarity came much to his delight<sup>45</sup>. Noted too, were many liberties enjoyed by the young Pole. He was free to come and go, enjoyed unlimited access to a bicycle and, according to the police, was the «adopted son» of the childless Hartmann family<sup>46</sup>.

There is also the case of an especially unfortunate Pole with the curious name of Mannsfeld. Assigned to the Upper Bavarian village of Pähl in Weilheim County, this man's undeserved fate stirred an entire community to censure the Nazi Party's Village Peasant Leader. The story unfolded during the winter of 1940 in the shadow of the Alps where the nights are especially cold and dangerous. Throughout Pähl it was rumored that the Peasant Leader, in a cruel act, locked the Pole out of the farmhouse. As a result, Mannsfeld suffered severed frostbite and subsequently lost both of his feet.

The events leading to the tragedy are unclear. Whether due to flight or cruelty, Mannsfeld did wander the area for three days and nights and incurred the frostbite while sleeping in haystacks. Desperation finally forced his return, whereupon he was sent to Weilheim's hospital and there both feet were amputated in order to stave off gangrene. A significant and established fact is that many in the community believed the rumor. They assumed the worst about the Nazi party's Village Peasant Leader. An outcry followed.

The problem from the perspective of the regime's *Gendarme* was not the plight of the Pole. Rather it was the unrelenting rash of so-called rumors. Eventually they produced a condemnation, sparked a village meeting called by an angered and defensive *Ortsgruppenleiter* (Nazi Party Local Leader), and produced among some locals the goal of ousting the village

<sup>45</sup> «Der Pole, der gut deutsch versteht und der auch den Ausdruck seines Dienstherrn wohl verstanden hat, grinste seinem Herren Beifall»: StAW, Gestapo 463, GP Obereuerheim, Nr. 483, 5 December 1941.

<sup>46</sup> «Hartmann und seine Ehrfrau, die keine Kinder haben, lassen sich von dem Polen mit Mutter und Vater anreden»: StAW, Gestapo 463, GP Obereuerheim, Nr. 483, 5 December 1941.



peasant leader from her position in no small part because the injustice done to the Polish worker<sup>47</sup>.

Within Bavarian society, remote arenas of public life had largely survived Nazi attempts to transform them. In some places, intermittent outward conformity was achieved. But even where Nazis dominated public space, private life still enjoyed hegemony due to the demands of individual farming and the ease with which one could withdraw from public to private life. In short, when it came to matters of fraternization, private life held the upper hand.

From the time of its introduction, the Nazi system operated within a framework of inherited regional conditions. In the Bavarian countryside, Nazi ambitions were dependent on Bavarian peasants who largely remained masters of home and *Hof* (barnyard). The Nazis advocacy and attempted imposition of a radical social system upon the conservatively minded and hard-necked rural folk was unrealistic in itself. The peasants needed and wanted the Poles at work on their farms. The two shared a common faith, which the Nazis were largely hostile to. Nazi bumbling thus made it even easier for devout members of the two groups to value each other. The intrusive demands and duties the Nazis sought to impose on those in the state's Catholic countryside were largely resented and capable of being ignored. Household contact of peasants and Polish laborers was indeed widespread throughout Bavaria. The conduct of private life easily rendered that contact close, even intimate in nature. Many Bavarians and Poles ate the same food, gathered at the same table for meals, socialized together at home, slept under the same roof, and in one documented instance even shared the same clothes. Theirs was a life of close inter-human relationships. In the most mundane sense, what unfolded in the Bavarian countryside during the war year was no different from times past. If such developments and circumstances were found in some contemporary society, the conclusion would be that they were very commonplace. The difference here, of course, is that the Nazis and their racial policy were both exceedingly ambitious. They demanded fundamental changes in a well-established and preferred way of life. In many cases their policies failed to take root. That was a defeat for the regime and should be registered as such. This is an instructive story about the role of self-interest and the staying power of pre-existing values even when facing a monolithic power such as the Nazi regime. In the end, the Nazis

<sup>47</sup> StAM, LRA 192201, GP Pähl, Nr. 282, 28 March 1940.

had no choice but to resort to police intervention and Gestapo terror in a bid to enforce behavior that ideology, propaganda, and legal measures had failed to instill among a large percentage of rural Bavarians.