

**Marek Bem**

**Sobibor**  
**Extermination Camp**  
**1942 – 1943**

*Copyright © 2015 by Dr Marek Bem*

*All rights reserved*

*This publication was made possible with the support of  
Stichting Sobibor and the Province of Gelderland*

*Translated from Polish to English by  
Tomasz Karpiński  
Natalia Sarzyńska-Wójtowicz*

*English language consultant  
Jack Dunster*

*Cover design by  
Anna Butryn*

*Graphics design by  
Renata Mozołowska*

*Typeset by  
Jacek Drózdź*

*Printed and bound by  
Drukarnia BIGA-DRUK, C. Wałachowski, J. Leszczyński s.c.  
26-600 Radom, ul. Tartaczna 16/18*

First Edition

**ISBN 978-83-937927-2-6**

Stichting Sobibor  
Amsterdam 2015

**Evil, the embodiment of which is Sobibór, did not commence either the moment the Sobibór gates threw open or finish the moment the camp was liquidated.**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER I</b>	
<b>THE PLAN OF THE ‘FINAL SOLUTION TO THE JEWISH QUESTION’ AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION. THE ORIGINS OF THE GERMAN EXTERMINATION CENTRE IN SOBIBÓR. ....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>CHAPTER II</b>	
<b>THE CREATION OF THE EXTERMINATION CENTRE.....</b>	<b>45</b>
1. The construction of the extermination centre.....	45
2. Extension.....	64
3. Explanations concerning the demarcation of the boundaries of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór.....	106
<b>CHAPTER III</b>	
<b>THE CAMP PERSONNEL.....</b>	<b>109</b>
1. The role and the functions of the German personnel.....	109
2. SS guard units.....	119
3. The looting of Jewish property.....	134
4. Corruption.....	137
<b>CHAPTER IV</b>	
<b>TRANSPORTS. THE TOTAL NUMBER OF VICTIMS .....</b>	<b>139</b>
1. Deportations.....	139
2. Reception of transports.....	148
3. Transports from the Netherlands.....	153
4. Transports from France.....	154
5. Transports from Germany and Austria.....	156
6. Transports from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and from Slovakia.....	157
7. Transports from the Soviet Union.....	158
8. Deportations of Gypsies.....	159
9. Transports from the General Government. The total number of victims of the German extermination centre in Sobibór.....	161
<b>CHAPTER V</b>	
<b>PRISONER-LABOURERS.....</b>	<b>183</b>
1. The life and work of the prisoner-labourers.....	183
2. Punishment, sadism, torture and executions.....	194

3. Kapos.....	196
4. Music and singing in the camp.....	199
<b>CHAPTER VI</b>	
<b>EXTERMINATION.....</b>	<b>203</b>
1. On the railway ramp .....	203
2. From the railway ramp to the gas chamber .....	208
3. The gas chamber.....	213
4. The disposal of the bodies of murdered Jews.....	216
5. The Lazaret – the camp’s ‘field hospital’.....	226
<b>CHAPTER VII</b>	
<b>PREPARATIONS FOR THE UPRISING. THE REVOLT AND THE</b>	
<b>PRISONER ESCAPE .....</b>	<b>237</b>
1. Escapes and spontaneous forms of prisoner resistance .....	237
2. The revolt and the prisoner escape .....	263
3. The consequences of the revolt and the prisoner escape.....	277
<b>CHAPTER VIII</b>	
<b>REACTIONS AND PUNISHMENT .....</b>	<b>303</b>
1. Trials of war criminals from Sobibór .....	303
2. The public understanding of knowledge about the German extermination centre in Sobibór .....	321
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>337</b>
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>361</b>
<b>SOURCES AND LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>419</b>

## INTRODUCTION

In the extermination camp in Sobibór, built during World War II, the Germans were implementing the immediate genocide of Jews. Over a quarter million Jews from Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and the Soviet Union were gassed there by means of exhaust fumes in special chambers. While considering the tragedy that happened in the camp, it is necessary to bear in mind not solely the calibre of the crimes committed there, but also other aspects of the matter. Evil, the embodiment of which is Sobibór, did not commence either the moment the Sobibór gates threw open or finish the moment the camp was liquidated. That kind of extermination has revealed a completely different aspect of modern civilisation: if large-scale industrialised murder could happen once, it can happen again because mankind is capable of performing it. Anxiety about a possibility of genocide happening again does not allow one to forget about either Sobibór or all the other places of extermination; this anxiety warns people against diminishing the significance of those places. However, nobody is capable of reconstructing the full tragedy of over a quarter million human beings who were killed in that camp. The whole knowledge about it, which has been recorded in books and stored in archives and libraries, seems to be highly inadequate. The reason for this is that the tragedy of Sobibór constitutes a whole network of manifold phenomena, not only perceivable ones, but also those that were going on in the minds of the victims - their physical and mental suffering. Sobibór was the most mysterious of all extermination camps. Moreover, very few official camp documents have survived. Most of them were destroyed<sup>1</sup>. According to Jules Schelvis, a historian who deals with Sobibór, very few documents from Sobibór and other death camps have been preserved. After the Sobibór prisoners had successfully rebelled and escaped on 14 October 1943, Odilo Globocnik wrote to Heinrich Himmler that all the evidence connected with the camp should be destroyed as quickly as possible. Consequently, nearly all the documents were burnt soon afterwards<sup>2</sup>.

The aim of this book is to describe a unique phenomenon – Sobibór, a Nazi German centre of summary extermination which existed between 1942 and 1943. The Sobibór camp (centre) of extermination (*Vernichtungslager* in German) was a specific kind of German camp set up for the purpose of the physical extermination of Jewish people confined within its limits. In rare cases, the prisoners were first used as slave labour force before meeting their death. To this day, this subject has not received a thorough examination. Although the present work is not aimed at being this kind of detailed description, it attempts to embrace this subject in terms of the present state of knowledge and scientific research. On the one hand, the historical analysis included in this work is focused on re-creating facts (the description of the camp itself, the extermination procedures, etc.). On the other hand, it concentrates on

---

<sup>1</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Z popiołów Sobiboru* [From the Ashes of Sobibór], Włodawa, 2003, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor. A History of a Nazi Death Camp in Sobibór*, Washington, 2007, p. 2.

portraying emotions, experiences and attitudes of people who were part of the camp realities. Chronologically, the time period concerns the construction and functioning of the camp as well as its liquidation, that is, the years of 1942-1943. Only Chapter I is an exception: putting anti-Semitism, Nazism and the pre-war Nazi German policy into historical perspective, it centres upon events which directly led up to the building of the German extermination camp in Sobibór. In terms of territory, the work is concerned with the placement of the camp, which was constructed next to the local railway station of Sobibór, near to the village of Sobibór in Poland, in the Lublin Province in the Włodawa commune on the Bug River.

The history of the German death camp in Sobibór can be analysed from various points of view: psychological, sociological, legal and theological. The present treatise offers the point of view of both a historian and cultural anthropologist. It is based on an analysis of the currently available materials as well as relevant literature which is being published all over the world. However, the aim of this work is to partially fill the gap in literature concerned with the camp in Sobibór: there has appeared no detailed synthetic publication about the history of the Sobibór camp for over ten years now. The material included in this publication is the outcome of the latest research, most of which is both the effect of my own study as well as those of countless scientists and researchers (historians, archaeologists, geophysicists) who worked under my guidance. The book presents issues which so far have only been mentioned in literature as general statements, fragmentary examples, frequent mistakes, speculation or even literary fiction. These include problems concerning the construction of the camp itself, its infrastructure and principles of internal functioning, the position of prisoners who worked in the camp area and the role of individual members of the camp personnel. Also, the book attempts to present the history of the prisoners' armed uprising and their escape on 14 October 1943. The uprising and the following escape portray Sobibór as a place of confrontation between violent crime and following one's heart, between self-preservation instinct together with ideals of charity, hope, faith and resigned despair. While a whole lot of issues concerning the camp in Sobibór have been published, they often fail to take account of the full scope of postulates and scientific questions.

In Chapter I, my focus is upon selected aspects of the broadly understood policy implemented by Hitler and the Third Reich, the purpose of which was the absolute physical annihilation of Jewish people. Consequently, the chosen aspects of that policy evidently explain the reason why extermination camps were brought into existence at all. In the section devoted to the organisation of the extermination centre in Sobibór, I pay special attention to issues connected with the very beginning of its building and functioning as well as the continuous attempts to extend the camp, interrupted by an armed uprising and escape of the prisoners. In effect, the camp was liquidated by the Germans. Identifying the particular stages of the camp construction and extension is of special significance with regard to analysing practically the only sources of knowledge about the history of the camp, i.e., eyewitness accounts (ex-prisoners, members of the camp personnel, Ukrainian guards or outsiders). The

general characteristics of the particular stages of the camp extension makes it possible to 'fathom' the descriptions of the camp given by the aforementioned eyewitnesses. Chapter III is devoted to the camp personnel, and, above all, it includes a description of its function and role in the process of exterminating Jews in Sobibór.

In the part of the dissertation concerning deportations and the number of victims, I make an attempt at verifying the present state of research into the subject. The advanced historical research into the number of victims of the Sobibór extermination centre from outside the General Government has been conducted in great detail. The extremely precise results of that research have been widely accepted in the world. However, highly uncertain are estimates of the number of camp victims from the territory of pre-war Poland. My own analysis of evidence extremely relevant to the matter, such as Korherr's report, Höfle's telegram and other numerous, hitherto unknown, accounts, descriptions of witnesses' recollections of World War II and of the extermination of the Jews, may have a tremendous impact upon estimating the total number of Sobibór victims (a detailed description seems to be completely impossible in the light of the present state of currently available knowledge). Taking advantage of ex-prisoners' accounts of their life in the camp, who worked there and then managed to escape, I attempt, by generalising their descriptions, to present an outline of the typical day in the camp (Chapter V). The whole of Chapter VI is devoted to the actual process of extermination, which was carried out in the camp for about a year and a half. In this way, the reader gets a very detailed picture of the basic purpose of that centre through descriptions of transports full of victims the moment they arrived at the camp ramp and were selected for labour, through camouflaging the real purpose for which Jews were brought there and deprived of their belongings, and, finally, through analysing methods of mass extermination and getting rid of victims' bodies.

On 14 October 1943, an armed rebellion of prisoners broke out in the camp. About 40 prisoners were killed during the fighting that ensued inside the camp and on the mine fields surrounding it. Over 275 of them managed to escape, but most of them were later captured by the Germans during the chase, and murdered. 61 fugitives from Sobibór survived the war. Preparations for the rebellion, its course and consequences are described in Chapter VII. The final chapter describes post-war trials of murderers from Sobibór and discusses the degree of knowledge (in the world, Europe and Poland) about the Sobibór camp in operation, and the degree of post-war knowledge, which is the result of investigations and scientific research.

Sobibór historiography can be divided into two periods of time: the first – between the years 1944-1993, and the other – from 1993 until the present. In 1993, in the Netherlands, Jules Schelvis published a book entitled *Vernietigingskamp Sobibór*, which was the first ever attempt to write a monograph about the history of the camp in Sobibór. The author of that monograph was a Dutch Jew. He and his family were deported to Sobibór on 1 June 1944. After a selection at the ramp, Schelvis, together with several dozen Jews from the transport, was sent to the labour camp in Dorohuczka. From there, he was later transported to other German camps, and, finally, he was liberated at a camp in Veihingen near Stuttgart in 1945. In 2005, an

English version of that book was published in the USA. Apparently, that publication concludes a period of more or less successful scientific research and study into the Sobibór camp. Admittedly, a great deal of that work makes a substantial contribution to the overall research into the history of the camp. Unfortunately, most of those efforts have centred only upon selected aspects of the subject, disregarding other important issues in terms of critical and comparative analysis.

The first monograph about the death camp in Sobibór appeared in the summer of 1944 in the periodical *Czerwona Gwiazda* [The Red Star] in an account by W. Grossman 'W miastach i wsiach Polski' [In Polish Cities and Villages]. A more detailed description of the camp and the uprising was brought out in September 1944 by *Komsomolska Prawda* [The Komsomolska Truth] in a report entitled 'Fabryka śmierci w Sobiborze' [The Death Factory in Sobibór]. In reply to that report, Aleksander Peczerski sent in a letter, published in the same newspaper dated 31 January 1945, in which he provided a detailed account of the uprising. Shortly before the end of the war, in Rostov-on-Don, the home city of Aleksander Peczerski, his book *Powstanie w Sobiborskim obozie* [The Revolt in Sobibor] was published in a limited edition. In 1945, in the periodical *Sztandar* (No. 4) [The Standard], the article 'Powstanie w Sobiborze' [The Uprising in Sobibór] by P. Antokolski and W. Kawierin was published, which was later incorporated into *Czarna Księga* [The Black Book] – a collection of documents about the extermination of Jews who had lived on the German-occupied Soviet territory. The book was ready to go to print already at the beginning of 1946. Even though the editors tried hard to get the book published, *Czarna Księga* found itself blacklisted in the Soviet Union for nearly fifty years. It was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union that the book was printed for the first time. Curiously enough, not in the Russian Federation, but in Ukraine in 1991.

In 1945, in Poland, there was printed a report by Salomea Hanel, a Jew from Ustrzyki Dolne, who had been imprisoned in the camp from 17 January to 14 October 1943. Her report was published in the collection *Dokumenty zbrodni i męczeństwa* [Documents of Crime and Martyrdom]. Two reminiscences by Sobibór camp ex-prisoners appeared in print in 1946 in Volume I of *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce* [Documents and Materials from the Times of the German Occupation in Poland]. Further recollections of Sobibór camp ex-prisoners kept appearing in Israel and other countries in so-called *Yizkor-Buch* [Yizkor Books] – visitors' books of Jewish communes in Poland. The first Polish analytical work (a summary of the investigation into crimes committed in the Sobibór camp, carried out by the Central Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland) was an article by Z. Łukaszewicz, a lawyer, published in 1947. In 1957, Tatiana Berenstein wrote an article on the extermination of Jews in the Lublin District, which was the first publication about the fate of Jewish people from the Lublin Region.

In the 1960s, in the Jewish Historical Institute, preparations were made to start and compile a monograph about the death camp in Sobibór. In 1968, Adam Rutkowski published an article on the resistance movement in the Sobibór camp. That publication was supposed to be part of a monograph that was, in fact, never

completed because its author emigrated to France in March 1968. At the same time, there appeared in print another summary of the results of the hitherto completed studies and investigations into the extermination of Polish Jews in death and concentration camps. Sz. Datner, J. Gumkowski and K. Leszczyński published a collection of source materials, such as documents, eyewitness accounts and judicial reports on extermination and concentration camps. Also, Artur Eisenbach, Czesław Madajczyk and Zygmunt Mańkowski mentioned the Sobibór camp and its role in murdering Jewish people. In the second half of the 1960s, two works based on court proceedings from Hagen were written in Germany about the functioning of the Operation Reinhardt extermination camps<sup>3</sup>. The co-authors were A. Rückerl, E. Kogon and H. Langbein. In Israel, at the beginning of the 1970s, *Księga Pamięci Włodawy* [The Włodawa Remembrance Book] (*Yizkor Buch*) was published, which contained reminiscences by Jews from Włodawa and its environs. There can be found a great deal of crucial information about Sobibór in the book. In 1974, in London, Gitta Sereny published an extended interview with Franz Stangl, who was the commandant of the camp in Sobibór, and then in Treblinka. In 1978, Miriam Novitch got a collection of Sobibór survivors' accounts printed. In 1982, in the Modern History Unit of UMCS (Maria-Curie Skłodowska University), an MA paper by W. Z. Sulimierski was issued, which was the first Polish monograph about the history of the German extermination camp in Sobibór. Simultaneously, another monograph was prepared by Yitzhak Arad, an Israeli historian, who made an analysis of German decisions concerning the extermination of Jews, and, consequently, the construction and functioning of the camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka.

The beginning of the second period of Sobibór historiography concerns scientific research into the history of the camp, which is closely connected with the creation of the Museum of the Former Nazi German Extermination Camp in Sobibór. The official opening ceremony of the museum took place on 14 October 1993, in the former camp area, to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the armed revolt of the Sobibór prisoners. The museum started to operate as an individual institution.

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Einsatz Reinhardt' [Operation Reinhardt] – the code name of an action whose aim was to exterminate Polish Jews in the General Government and in Białystok. The code name itself was coined in memory of SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, the coordinator of 'Endlösung der Judenfrage' [The Final Solution to the Jewish Question], who had been killed by the Czech underground resistance in May 1942. The name 'Operation Reinhardt' was revealed for the first time in a radio message captured on 15 September 1942 by British Intelligence. According to the message, WVHA allows permission to KL Auschwitz to dispatch a car to Łódź for the inspection of an Operation Reinhardt station which dealt with camp ovens - on the basis of Berndt Rieger, *Odilo Globocnik, Twórca nazistowskich obozów śmierci* [Creator of Nazi Death Camps: The Life of Odilo Globocnik], Replika, 2009 and Stephen Tyas, 'Brytyjska Intelligence Serwis: odszyfrowane wiadomości radiowe z Generalnego Gubernatorstwa' [British Intelligence Service: Deciphered Radio Messages from the General Government], (in); Dariusz Libionka, ed., *Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* [Action Reinhardt: The Extermination of the Jews in the General Government], Warszawa, 2004.

From the very beginning, it began to implement various scientific projects on its own, and in collaboration with many different institutions and individuals that were concerned with the Holocaust and the history of World War II. The main aim of those projects was to accumulate more knowledge about the camp in Sobibór. To that end, first of all, archaeological and geophysical research commenced in the former camp area. The next step was to get in touch with all living ex-prisoners of the camp, and then to translate and compile their memoirs, diaries and reminiscences (T. Blatt, F. Białowicz, D. Freiberg, S. Szmajzner, K. Ticho, E. Raab, R. Zielinski, K. Wewryk). A whole number of archival inquiries, conferences, workshops and seminars were held. Besides, for the first time in history, a temporary exhibition entitled 'From the Ashes of Sobibór' was shown in European museums. What is more, a lot of booklets and brochures were issued on the subject of the Sobibór Site of Remembrance.

All forms of remembrance projects carried out by the museum made an invaluable contribution to publicising Sobibór issues in Poland and abroad. A tremendous growth of interest in the Sobibór camp produced, in many cases, some unexpected scientific results. It was at around that time that, in Poland, discussion was brought up again about establishing the real number of victims in the various death and concentration camps. As a result, a conference was organised in Chełm in 1993. Shortly beforehand, Józef Marszałek wrote an article about the Home Army intelligence service which located the death camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka. Other crucial Sobibór-related works by that author are monographs concerning losses in the population of Jewish people in Poland during World War II, and also, the role of Sobibór as an extermination centre for Jews from abroad. In 1992, there was printed (in): *Zeszyty Majdanek* [The Majdanek Notebooks] an article by Joanna Kielboń about the deportation of Jews to the Lublin District, and also to the Sobibór camp. Stanisława Lewandowska and Teresa Prekerowa dealt with the issue of uprisings in extermination camps.

From that time, two articles by M. Tregenza are noteworthy: they concern the figure of SS-Obersturmführer Christian Wirth – Inspector of the camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka. Owing to their revealing references to the history of Sobibór, I consider works by the following authors to be very exceptional: Dieter Pohl, Elżbieta Rączka, Bartłomiej Krupa, Sara Berger and Johannes Houwink ten Cate, including reports of archaeological research carried out in the area of the former camp by SUB TERRA Archaeological Research Company from Chełm (Poland). In the 1990s, further important monographs about the Sobibór camp appeared in print. They were: a re-edition of a collection of documents, compiled by the Institute for the Documentation of Nazi War Crimes in Haifa *Sobibór. Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der „Aktion Reinhard“* as well as footage of reminiscences by former prisoners and external witnesses – shot by USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education (Los Angeles),

The latest publications on the subject of the Sobibór camp include:

- S. Wileński, B. Gorbowicki, A. Tieruszkin eds, *Sobibór*, Moskwa, 2008, [Собибор, С.С. Виленский, Г.Б. Горбовицкий, Л.А. Терушкин, Москва 2008].

- D. W. De Mildt, C. F. Rüter, eds, *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, Amsterdam, 2009.

These materials come from the Archives of the Foundation for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes (Stichting voor wetenschappelijk onderzoek van national-socialistische misdrijven, Amsterdam), compiled on the basis of materials from the archives of the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in Ludwigsburg (Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg) – they concerned court trials of the Sobibór personnel.

- Ad van Liempt, *Selma. Kobieta, która przetrwała Sobibór* [Selma – The Woman Who Survived Sobibor], Laren, 2010. [Ad van Liempt, *Selama de vrouw die Sobibor overleefde*, Laren 2010].

- S. Wileński, B. Gorbowicki and A. Tieruszkin, eds, *Sobibór. Powstanie w obozie śmierci*, Moskwa, 2010. [*Собибор. Восстание в лагере смерти*, С.С. Виленский, Г.Б. Горбовицкий, Л.А. Терушкин, Москва 2010].

- footage of the project ‘Długi cień Sobiboru’ [Long Shadow of Sobibór] (9 interviews with former prisoners of Sobibór, and 22 interviews with family members of camp victims) – prepared by Prof. Selma Leydesdorff, made by Sobibór Foundation [Stichting Sobibor] from Amsterdam in 2011.

- my own publications as the author, co-author or editor of the following: *Sobibór*, Warszawa, 2010, *Sobibór. Niemiecki ośrodek zagłady 1942-1943* [Sobibór. A German Extermination Centre 1942-1943], Włodawa, 2011, *Sobibór. Archeological research conducted on the site of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór 2000-2011*, Warszawa, 2012, *Sobibór. Bunt wobec wyroku* [A Rebellion against the Death Sentence], Warszawa 2012, *Sobibór. Exodus 14 października 1943* [Sobibór. Exodus 14 October 1943], Warszawa, 2013, *Powstanie w Sobiborze. Świadectwa ocalonych z niemieckiego obozu zagłady* [The Sobibór Uprising. Testimonies of Those Who Survived a German Extermination Camp], Radom, 2013.

- Lew Simkin, *Póltorej godziny zemsty* [An Hour and a Half of Revenge], Moskwa, 2013, [Лев Симкин, *Полтора часа возмездия*, Москва 2013].

- Aleksander Peczerski, *Szturm w nieśmiertelność. Wspomnienia* [The Break into Immortality. Reminiscences], Żydowski Instytut Historyczny [the Jewish Historical Institute], Warszawa, 2013. [А. Печерский, *Прорыв в бессмертие*, сост: И.Ю. Васильев, Москва 2013].

- Sara Berger, *Experten der Vernichtung: Das T4-Reinhardt-Netzwerk in den Lagern Belzec, Sobibor und Treblinka* [Experts of Extermination: The T4-Reinhardt Network in the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka Camps], Hamburg, 2013.

Alongside the past and present historiography, this book displays the author’s research based upon archival sources which were obtained in the years 2001-2013. Also, their analyses and descriptions have not been published before. Those materials have been obtained through the author’s research, among other places, in private collections of former Sobibór prisoners, family archives of camp victims and the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish

Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation, the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in Ludwigsburg, Yad Vashem the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, the Ghetto Fighters' House in Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot, the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, USC Shoah Foundation - the Institute for Visual History and Education, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Describing the history of the German extermination centre in Sobibór proved to be an extremely difficult task for a number of important reasons:

1. no German documents available on the subject <sup>4</sup>
2. too general, not precise enough and superficial materials of the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland
3. the source materials are widely dispersed
4. not enough attention was paid to camp survivors and outside eyewitnesses. They were treated only as eyewitnesses at court trials. Not a single project was ever implemented for the purpose of writing a scientific monograph about those people's knowledge of this subject. Even as early as three years ago, it was a great problem to definitely estimate the number of Sobibór camp survivors.
5. not enough attention was paid to so-called outside eyewitnesses who survived the war, which is a pity because their jobs, places of living, contacts, particular life circumstances or coincidences enabled them to catch 'a glimpse' of the camp.
6. family members of Sobibór camp survivors did not take any interest in their knowledge of the camp realities. This is especially true of a so-called second generation. Reminiscences, confessions, private family archives, etc., are always an important source of information.
7. no analytical description of court evidence from trials which took place after the war in the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union against members of the camp personnel. These are the only available testimonies, statements and accounts of the camp personnel.
8. no complex interdisciplinary scientific research into the history of the camp (preliminary archive research, archaeological and geophysical research, comparative analysis, for example, of the Operation Reinhardt camps)
9. no interdisciplinary research into the real number of people who were killed during World War II in all kinds of German extermination centres

One of the main aims of this book is to 'go back to the roots' and make a classification of the historical documents into four basic categories in order to get a full description of the history of the camp. These are:

- accounts, reminiscences, testimonies, diaries, statements by camp ex-prisoners
- accounts, reminiscences, testimonies, interviews and statements by members of the camp personnel

---

<sup>4</sup> The author has not come across any information, clues, or even traces of the existence of such documents in archival resources and various scientific publications on the Holocaust.

- accounts by ‘outside eyewitnesses’ who happened to watch the camp or hear about it
- accounts by people who can be called Sobibór prisoners because they either escaped from transports which were on their way to the camp, or they were selected on the Sobibór camp ramp and then transported to other places where they survived the war.

It must be admitted that, virtually, there exists no archive of source materials which would be able to explain the history of the construction of the extermination centre in Sobibór, its functioning and liquidation. With the exception of a few railway letters (concerning transports of Jews, belongings stolen from them, and prisoners from Treblinka who were supposed to dismantle the Sobibór camp), German authorities’ orders to turn the extermination camp into a concentration camp, reports of pursuits after escaped prisoners, Höfle’s telegram, or documents indirectly related to the camp (e.g., identification documents of the camp personnel), Sobibór historiography does not mention the existence of any sort of direct source material. At this juncture, a basis for reconstructing the history of that extermination centre could be, exclusively, accounts, testimonies, reminiscences and memoirs of ex-prisoners who survived the camp uprising and were later liberated, various kinds of accounts by outside eyewitnesses as well as court evidence from investigations and trials against members of the camp personnel. Only some of them (external eyewitnesses’ accounts and a Ukrainian guard’s account) were written down while the camp was still functioning. All other accounts are dated from 1944 onwards. An important contribution to the subject of Sobibór are materials from family archives of the second and third generation of Sobibór victims’ descendants.

It is the first time that most of the aforementioned accounts have been included in Sobibór historiography published in Poland. All of those, undoubtedly unique, materials appeared at different times. Some of them come from as early as 1944, the latest ones from 2013. They were written down by survivors themselves, or by people who talked to them or questioned them under different circumstances. In the years 1944-1945, the Central Jewish Historical Commission and the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland registered first accounts by: Salomea Hanel, Salomon Podchlebnik, Zelda Merz and Hersz Cukiermann. In the years 2003-2008, there were published reminiscences (re-editions and translations alongside first editions) by: Regina Zieliński, Tomasz Blatt, Filip Białowicz, Kurt Ticho and Kalmen Wewryk. All those who survived the camp were Jewish – citizens of Poland, the USSR, the Netherlands, France and Czechoslovakia. Soon after the war, they emigrated to the USA, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, Israel, Brazil, Venezuela and Canada. Seven of them returned to the USSR. Only Leon Cymiel remained in Poland; he settled in Warsaw, where he lived until his death. After the war, very few participants of the uprising took the trouble to find out which of the comrades was still alive, what each of them did for a living and where. Between ten and twenty of them kept in touch with one another, especially those who lived in Israel and the USSR. From time to time, they gathered together in small groups, mostly to commemorate the next anniversary of the uprising. They knew very little about one another until the 1960s. Nearly all of them were located and summoned

by the court in Hagen to testify against Sobibór war criminals who had been brought to trial (1965-1966). From that time, public interest in the Sobibór survivors and their life stories began to grow. Even so, hardly anybody was able to reach all of the living ex-prisoners. Curiously enough, in Sobibór historiography, there is no agreement whatsoever as to how many camp ex-prisoners actually survived World War II. Various estimates have been suggested, some of them very surprising.

The abovementioned accounts constitute part of a bigger collection, expanded and selected by the author of this work in the so-called Sobibór Archive. That resource is composed of various archive materials connected with the extermination camp, which have been obtained in Poland and from abroad. On a worldwide scale, the collection is the first comprehensive and multi-section archive on the subject of Sobibór history in existence.

It can be divided into separate thematic groups: documents, testimonies, accounts, trial records, reports, maps, sketches, plans, films, photos, radio recordings; scientific, popular scientific, non-fiction literature and press materials. In the Sobibór Archive, there can be found reminiscences, testimonies, statements, interviews and various kinds of descriptions by people who found themselves in the camp even for a moment (some of them, on arrival, were selected for labour in other places). The Archive also comprises accounts, mostly court testimonies, given by members of the camp personnel, and also descriptions given by outside eyewitnesses who had something to do with the camp or had at least a smattering of knowledge about it. Sometimes, these are very short remarks. However, those testimonies, statements, diaries, memoirs, letters or interviews provide an invaluable basis for describing camp realities. They have been supplemented by TV, radio and press communications, various notes taken down while ex-prisoners were telling their stories at conferences, school lessons or lectures. The accounts have been translated from English, Russian, Hebrew, Czech, German, Slovak, French and Yiddish, without disrespect for the original records. It is worth mentioning that, all materials which have been included in the bibliography of the present dissertation can be found in the aforementioned collection. At this juncture, the Sobibór Archive is a sort of private collection of the author. By the end of 2014, the Sobibór Archive will have become widely available in the form of a web portal, a script with a systematised list of resources as well as a copiable electronic version.

While analysing accounts given by former prisoners of the German extermination camp in Sobibór, one must realise the fact that those 'mental pictures' were too subjective. That is why, it is of vital importance that each of them should be interpreted in their unique context, especially because materials such as these were created at different times and in different places. However, it should be borne in mind that they are all unique in the sense that they were written down for different reasons, purposes and needs, but their main focus is the German extermination camp in Sobibór. Even though all of them described the very same place, their individual perception of Sobibór was different and filtered through their own tragic experiences. The authors of those accounts were not mere bystanders; they could not have behaved in this

way, and did not want to. Since they were victims themselves, they could not have just looked on. Actually, they had lost their relatives, friends and acquaintances. In the first place, their minds were set on saving their own lives and the lives of their relatives, rather than observing or analysing particular events.

The state of constant threat to their lives had a direct influence on their way of observing particular events or interpreting them. Therefore, witness accounts cannot be free of mistakes. Another problem may have been witnesses' inability to tell the difference between events that they experienced themselves and events they only heard about, which may have happened in specific, singular cases. Each of the prisoners tried to adjust to living in the camp, and, at the same time, seeking ways of survival. After a quick assessment of the camp realities, each of them followed their own specific line of behaviour. For the prisoner, the general camp routine became a picture of camp life that they memorised. The prisoner had to make an instant and precise appraisal of the situation in order to be able to 'adjust' to the camp circumstances. Only then could they stand a chance of staying alive. They knew that straight from the beginning – it was better to remain in the background and make no bad impression. Individual witnesses of those events perceived them as much differently as they were able to recall and reconstruct details of particular people and places. Additionally, witnesses differed in terms of their individual inner-self ability to distance themselves from other people and places around them, or to articulate things that hurt them most deeply.

An important aspect of a possible analysis of those relationships is the fact that witnesses often 'fabricated' their accounts in the presence of a certain number of people. The scope and degree of individual perception is heavily dependent, among other things, on one's mood, concentration, personal needs and cognitive expectations. Jewish prisoner - labourers who were often under mental pressure and in constant fear of losing their lives, in the first place perceived events that happened directly to themselves, and only then, events that happened to their relatives, friends and acquaintances. It was only later that they could pay attention to events not involving them personally. Their cognitive attitude was shaped by the context of persecution, which could have meant that they saw something that, in fact, never existed. Disruptions in perception may result from the fact that one usually perceives a course of events in the form of 'snapshots'. Consequently, unconscious 'mental blanks' which occur in such cases may be complemented with completely different experiences. Fear, shaping all affectiveness of the Jews, enhanced their interest in their camp experiences, which, as a result, often led to the highest degree of inner tension. Also, fear narrowed down their consciousness, which may have been the direct reason why their perceptive abilities decreased. This happens because events are usually multidimensional and are composed of numerous events which occur parallel and simultaneously. The abovementioned factors cause witnesses to memorise only the essence of affective experiences, disregarding details at the same time. People's ability to remember can develop in a variety of ways. On the one hand, there exists short-term memory; on the other hand, there is long-term memory.

Contrary to the common belief that short-term memory is usually considered as better developed and stronger, elderly people's short-term memory is limited, and it is long-term memory that functions more efficiently. An event retained in long-term memory is remembered as essentially clear and easy to interpret. In the course of time, mental blanks in memory, as much as blanks in perception, may be complemented with other experiences.

Naturally, witnesses also differ in terms of their individual ability to reconstruct what they perceived. Persons with a limited ability of reconstruction frequently fail to retrace what they really saw. For example, accounts provided by persons with a full ability of reconstruction contain occasional distortions and confabulations. It is especially clear in perpetrator-victim and witness-defendant relationships, where strong emotions, like hatred and fury, are exposed. Experiencing such strong feelings usually makes it more difficult for witnesses to distance themselves; statements and recollections by ex-prisoners are, understandably, characterised by an excessive tendency to make accusations. While comparing a few accounts by the same person, it was very frequently discovered that, in the course of time, they became more and more 'expanded'. The reason for that was not only the passage of time between the actions and the actual occurrences, but especially the fact that witnesses more and more often admitted that, in their earlier testimonies, they had provided biased or incorrect information against particular persons. Some of the witnesses, before or after court trials, would testify before many individual people and in institutions, completely unconnected with each other, but would relate the same events (both in form and content) in a completely different way. As a consequence, a great number of such accounts, testimonies, articles, essays, novels, tape recordings or letters were produced.

While attempting to understand the nature of those accounts, it is absolutely essential to examine the earlier and later versions of testimonies provided by the camp victims and to acquire sufficient knowledge about the various situations described there. It is crucial to mention that witnesses who gave their testimonies during Sobibór trials provided assurances instead of taking an oath. Many times, they articulated those so-called assurances (in their own and in other people's cases, thus trying to help their former fellow prisoners) when they claimed compensatory damages in court. The problem concerned the presentation of evidence in suitable compensatory offices. However, it should be emphasised that some Jewish witnesses claimed compensation solely by maintaining that they themselves were imprisoned in the Sobibór camp. In fact, only very few of them would submit information that was generally known about the camp. Their information was, for the most part, contradictory or untrue. However, the court displayed some understanding about the fact that the witnesses did not speak the truth because they were supposed to prove their war experiences in public, without reference to any solid evidence. The court also made allowances for the fact that, in some cases, due to communication problems, or in an attempt to help their former fellow prisoners at all costs, those witnesses made false (even legally punishable) statements. Unreliable though the

majority of the witnesses surely were, the value of their accounts cannot be completely rejected, in spite of the abovementioned doubts and reservations. Undoubtedly, those accounts constitute genuinely unique and unprecedented evidence of the time. In this so-called 'going back to the roots', as suggested by the present work, the author's intention to take an objective attitude to the subject matter is not the only concern. Above all, the aim of the descriptive and educational values of this work is, through reporting 'what it was really like at that time', to make an attempt at explaining the essence of the extermination camp as an occurrence in the history of mankind. I hope that all the various available sources depicting the Sobibór camp will allow me to use accurate description as a convenient tool for historical explanation, which will expose the essence of what kind of place Sobibór really was. Hopefully, these sources will prove to be a useful instrument for further historical research in order to present this extermination centre as an exclusively unique and unprecedented phenomenon in the history of humankind.



## CHAPTER I

# THE PLAN OF THE 'FINAL SOLUTION TO THE JEWISH QUESTION' AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION. THE ORIGINS OF THE GERMAN EXTERMINATION CENTRE IN SOBIBÓR.

The 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' (*Endlösung der Judenfrage* in German) was the term used during World War II by the Third Reich authorities, which meant the extermination of all the Jewish people in Europe. The Nazis planned to eliminate, from the political, social and economic life, all the Jews living in the Third Reich, its satellite countries as well as the German-occupied lands. This, in fact, means that they wanted to sentence to death all the members of the Jewish community irrespective of their age or sex.

The Holocaust should be understood as a planned mass murder of almost 6 million European Jews, which was organised institutionally and carried out systematically by the Germans and their allies. It could be said that the Holocaust was the outcome of a unique encounter between factors that were absolutely ordinary and common in character. This led to the situation where the functionalism of a state which was liberated from any control became dominated by the monopoly on the use of violence and brutal social engineering<sup>1</sup>. The Nazi policy of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' evolved from the forced emigration of the Jews from the Third Reich to their mass extermination.

However, there remains a contentious debate over who and when gave the order to exterminate Jews (in fact, it is not certain whether such an order was ever given). The genesis of the mass murder of the Jewish community should be sought in the policy pursued by the Germans since the 1930s. Also, the centuries-long discrimination and persecution of the Jews in Europe, especially the rise of many aggressive nationalisms in the 19th century, had certainly paved the way for the Holocaust. Thus, it was not Hitler or the Nazis that invented anti-Semitism and hatred towards Jews. Neither were they the first to launch attacks on the Roma and Sinti or on those who had officially been pronounced disabled. Similarly, that widespread deeply-rooted hatred alone did not lead to the Holocaust.

When Raul Hilberg, an American historian of Jewish origin and a prominent researcher into the Holocaust, was once asked why the Germans had done it, he answered: "[...] *They did it because they wanted to do it* [...]"<sup>2</sup>. To achieve this, they only needed a proper leader and the presence of appropriate political will. They only

---

<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Nowoczesność i Zagłada* [Modernity and Genocide], Kraków, 2009, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Dujardin, *Rozważania o Holokauście* [Reflection on the Holocaust], *Znak*, Nos. 419-420 (4-5/1990), translated by Anna Turowiczowa.

had to manipulate people's feelings in such a way as to increase the level of their hostility to that of organised killing. German society was meant to accept certain social groups as the legitimate target of attacks so that it could participate in them or tolerate them.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the implementation of the Holocaust required not so much the mobilisation as the neutralisation of the typical feelings which the Germans harboured towards the Jews. The Nazis had to ignore the feelings of the general public and remain immune to the influence of the society's traditional attitudes towards their future victims. All this was fostered by the general feeling of social dissatisfaction evoked by Germany's defeat of 1918, the world economic crisis, and Hitler's anti-Semitic obsession<sup>44</sup>. Hitler presented his views on that particular matter in his book *Mein Kampf*.

It is still quite amazing, however, how Hitler managed to become so politically successful through his anti-Semitism in a country where the Jews constituted only about 1% of the German population. Professor Christopher Browning, an eminent expert on the issue of the Holocaust, is of the opinion that, from the political point of view, it was easy, at that time, to draw public attention to the Jews since they symbolised left-wing politics, capitalist exploitation, avant-garde cultural experimentation, and laicisation<sup>5</sup>. At first, however, right after his seizure of power, Hitler avoided resorting to radical forms of repression against the Jewish community. The reason behind this was that he wanted to create a positive image of his policy, particularly among the foreign public. At the same time, he focused all of his attention on the rapid reconstruction of the German economy as well as his re-armament programme<sup>6</sup>.

The victory of the Nazi party in the 1933 elections to the Reichstag, together with Hitler's assumption of the position of Reich Chancellor (and, in 1934, that of President) marked the beginning of the Holocaust tragedy. In fact, the fate of the Jews was sealed the moment the Nazis took over power in Germany. Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer SS, opened the first concentration camp in Dachau already in 1933. In 1935, the Nazi government passed the Nuremberg racial laws which deprived Jews and Gypsies of their German citizenship. As a result, more than 10,000 Jews holding Polish citizenship were expelled from Germany to Poland in 1938. Later that same year, there took place a wave of pogroms against German and Austrian Jews during the so-called 'Crystal Night'. In January 1939, Hitler gave a speech in which he announced that the future European war would involve the annihilation of the Jews. Clearly, all of these determined the direction of the then Nazi policy. Before the outbreak of World War II, Nazi Germany issued more than 120 decrees which

---

<sup>3</sup> Doris L. Bergen, *Wojna i ludobójstwo* [War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust], Poznań, 2011, pp. 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination. Nazi German and the Jews, 1939-1945*, Harper Collins Publisher, 2008, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution, The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*, Yad Vashem, 2004, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Mit Hitlera* [The Hitler Myth], Zakrzewo, 2009, pp. 23-233.

aimed at depriving Jewish citizens of their rights. Raul Hilberg points to another, very important, aspect of the German policy of that time. He emphasises the role of the bureaucratisation of this anti-Jewish policy, which made it possible for the Third Reich to pursue it on such a huge scale that it consequently led to genocide. The result of this bureaucratisation was that almost all the German governmental structures and an enormous number of Germans who, very intensively and aggressively, enforced the process of arysation, became involved in anti-Jewish activity.

Due to this, Hitler's war against Jews took the form of a nationwide undertaking<sup>7</sup>. All sorts of people like civil servants, soldiers, business people or members of the party, were engaged in the actions aimed against Jews. After the war, a former Sobibór extermination camp guard gave the following testimony in court: "*It is clear to me that people were murdered in extermination camps. And I assisted in those murders. If I were to be sentenced for that, I will consider it appropriate. Murder is murder. In judging someone's level of guilt, one should not, in my view, pay attention to the function they served while in the camp. All of us are guilty irrespective of the position we held back then. The camp operated as a chain of various functions. The lack of one link in the chain stopped the whole procedure [...]*"<sup>8</sup>. The beginning of 1933 foreshadowed the fate of European Jewry, when a civil servant formulated the first written definition of the term 'non-Aryan' for the state authorities to use. At that point, Jews found themselves in a trap with absolutely no way out. They could escape from their Judaism by converting to a different religion, but there was no escape from their Jewishness<sup>9</sup>.

The turning point in the implementation of the 'Final Solution' was 1 September 1939. The German invasion of Poland began the concluding and fundamental stage of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. In September, German troops rapidly moved deep into the Polish territories. As early as on 8 October, the Poznań, Kalisz and Łódź districts were annexed to *Reichsgau Wartheland* (the Warta Land). Four days later, a decree was issued which established the General Government constituted by the Warsaw, Radom, Cracow and Lublin Districts. Already three weeks after the German invasion of Poland, SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich – Director of the Reich Main Security Office – gave special orders which tentatively defined different stages and methods necessary in the implementation of the 'Final Solution', and which the chiefs of all the Special Units of the Secret Police received. The main purpose of Heydrich's instruction was to inform his subordinates that the planned actions and their ultimate goal must be kept top secret. He also wanted to make them aware of the difference between that ultimate goal, whose implementation required a longer period of time, and all its particular stages, which were transitory in character.

<sup>7</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Chicago, 1961, p. 1044.

<sup>8</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Sprawcy, ofiary, świadkowie. Zagłada Żydów 1933 – 1945*. [Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders. The Jewish Catastrophe 1933 – 1945.], Warszawa, 2007, pp. 40-46.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Korzenie totalitaryzmu* [The Origins of Totalitarianism], Warszawa, 2008, p. 127.

Heydrich's instruction said, among other things, that "*the first prerequisite for the achievement of this goal is the resettlement of the Jews inhabiting rural areas to concentration points located within larger cities. The completion of this task is a matter of urgency. In order to facilitate the introduction of subsequent measures, it is necessary to create as few of such concentration centres as possible. These should be located either in close proximity to railway junctions or at least next to railway lines. All the Jewish communities consisting of fewer than 500 people should be dissolved and resettled to the nearest concentration points*"<sup>10</sup>. According to the original plan aimed to solve the 'Jewish Question', the Germans intended to create a Jewish reservation in the area stretching between the Vistula and the Bug rivers. Therefore, as early as in October 1939, they sent their first transports of Jews removed from the territories annexed to the Third Reich as well as from Vienna and Ostrava. In this way, the Germans commenced the implementation of the so-called 'Nisko-Lublin Plan'.

On 7 October 1939, Hitler appointed Heinrich Himmler Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of German Nationhood, and ordered him to organise the repatriation to the Third Reich of all the Volksdeutsche who lived abroad. Himmler was assigned the task of eliminating all the 'foreign elements' from the Third Reich and evacuating them to the territories of occupied Eastern Europe. The Volksdeutsche that would be coming back to the Third Reich were to take their place. Initially, it was planned to resettle about 600,000 Jews from the territories annexed to the Third Reich. This would have increased the Jewish population in the General Government from 1.4 million to 2 million<sup>11</sup>. However, the plan was implemented only partially since only 128,000 Poles and a few thousand Jews were deported from the Warta Land to the General Government. Their own dwellings were to be handed over to Volksdeutsche from Estonia, Latvia and Volyn<sup>12</sup>. Yet, as soon as the action began, it turned out that the Third Reich was not organisationally prepared for the implementation of such a grand-scale operation. As a result, the 'Nisko-Lublin Plan' was abandoned already at the beginning of 1940.

Another idea behind the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' was the creation of ghettos. Heydrich's plan to concentrate Jews in larger cities and in proximity to railway lines, which he explained in the aforementioned instruction, was diabolically cunning. From the administrative point of view, ghettos were a much cheaper

---

<sup>10</sup> 21 September 1939, Berlin – Telephonogram from the Director of the Reich Main Security Office R. Heydrich to commanders of the Security Police Task Forces informing them about successive stages and methods of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' (in): T. Berenstein, A. Eisenbach and A. Rutkowski, eds, *Eksterminacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* [Extermination of Jews in the Polish Territories During the Period of the Nazi Occupation - A Collection of Documents], ŻIH, Warszawa, 1957, pp. 25-9.

<sup>11</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction...*, p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Aly Gotz, *Final Solution. Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews*, London, 1999, pp. 59-87.

‘institution’ than concentration camps. There was no need to build any barracks or to install sanitary, lighting or water facilities, and it was easier to keep watch over ghettos. The concentration of Jews within a limited area made it easier for Germans, before sending Jews to certain deaths, to rob them, to provide them with food supplies at the starvation level, and to make them exchange their last possessions for food. Heydrich was perfectly aware of the fact that, in the later period, the selection of Jews from a larger number of ghettos would be much more complicated and time consuming. Ghettos were separated and, most frequently, enclosed areas. Therefore, those who were closed in ghettos had no possibility of going out unless they received a special permit. All things considered, the construction of ghettos, where a great number of people were forced to live within a relatively limited area and had to survive on extremely scarce food rations, facilitated the extermination of Jews.

Ghettos were created in Ukraine, Belarus, the Check Republic and Hungary. Most of them, however, were established in the territories which, before the outbreak of World War II, had belonged to Poland (about 400). These included, among other cities, Białystok, Częstochowa, Kielce, Cracow, Lublin, Łódź, Radom and Warsaw. The first ghetto in occupied Poland was set up on 8 October 1939 in Piotrków Trybunalski. Typically, the construction of ghettos followed, under the inspiration of the Germans, anti-Jewish excesses which simultaneously took place in 1940 in different European countries. This caused among the Jews a sense of horror and threat on the part of the surrounding people. It also made them convinced that they would be safer if surrounded by the walls and barbed wire of their ghettos. At the same time, the Germans spread rumours among non-Jews that, by creating ghettos, the authorities wanted to prevent the Jews from spreading infectious diseases among local inhabitants.

With time, ghettos became one of the many tools used in the extermination of Jews. The inhumane conditions were meant to gradually lead to the extinction of the inhabitants of those separated-from-the-rest-of-the-world places. Terrible living conditions, high population density, a lack of medical care, hunger, a lack of hygiene, and debilitating forced labour caused various epidemics to spread fast there. In the Warsaw ghetto, almost 20 per cent of the population had died of hunger or different diseases even before the Nazis began deportations to extermination camps<sup>13</sup>. Ghettos were a perfect way of the concentration of Jews, which was later meant to contribute to the efficient removal of the Jews to the ‘East’. By the end of December 1941, as a result of ghettoisation, practically all the Jews from the annexed and occupied territories had been forced to live in ghettos. Soon, approximately 290,000 people were sent from the Warsaw ghetto to their death in Treblinka, and about 45,000 to Majdanek. From the Łódź (Litzmannstadt) ghetto, about 160,000 Łódź ghetto inhabitants, 20,000 Jews from Germany, the Check Republic, Austria and Luxemburg and 20,000 Jews from the Warta Land small ghettos were sent to be exterminated in Chełmno-on-Ner or in *KL Auschwitz*<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction...*, p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.

In organising deportations of Jews from ghettos to extermination centres, the Nazis adopted a particularly efficient method by carrying them out in stages. The Jews who stayed in the ghettos came to the conclusion that it was necessary to sacrifice few in order to save many. Also, they did not feel threatened by the widespread extermination because social stratification in their ghettos, which regulated their daily functioning, differentiated the chances of their survival<sup>15</sup>. During 'Operation Reinhardt', especially in its initial stage, the Lublin District was characterised by the existence of so-called transit ghettos, which the Germans established in small towns, and near railway lines that led to extermination camps like Bełżec, Sobibór or Treblinka. The first ghettos of this type were created in Piaski and Izbica, later to be followed by ghettos in, among other places, Gorzków, Krasnobród, Rejowiec, Kraśniczyn, Bychawa, Bełżyce, Lubartów, Puławy, Siedliszcze and Zamość. These ghettos were meant, above all, for the Jews who had been deported to the Lublin District from abroad. In the summer and autumn of 1942, Polish Jews were brought there as well. The functioning of those ghettos was strictly connected with the development of 'Operation Reinhardt'. Obviously, they were not the destination places of Jews deported from abroad to the Lublin District. They only served as temporary concentration points for Jews before their ultimate extermination. Thus, railway stations enabled the Germans to quickly move the Jews to particular extermination centres to kill them there. During the first stage of 'Operation Reinhardt', such temporary detention of thousands of foreign Jews in transit ghettos was a very important part of the German propaganda whereby those people were later to be resettled to new places<sup>16</sup>.

The turning point in the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' project was Hitler's preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union. The final decision on the total annihilation of the Jewish population was made in 1941, and the beginning of the last stage of the Third Reich's anti-Jewish policy dates back to the summer of 1941. However, no documents have survived which would provide the exact date when the decision to exterminate both Polish and European Jews was made. In view of the above, there exist two opposing approaches to this issue. So-called Intentionalists claim that the plans for the extermination of the Jewish population came as a result of Hitler's views which he presented already at the beginning of the 1920s. Supporters of this approach emphasise the persistence of the Nazi anti-Jewish policy and the logical results it produced. Functionalists, on the other hand, consider that the Holocaust was the result of various, frequently contradictory, conflicts of interest within the German government.

The chaotic political system of the Third Reich led to the situation in which the final decision of the extermination of Jews was dictated by the need of the hour and was the result of the escalation of certain events, like the first failures of the German

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1042.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Kuwałek, *Getta tranzytowe w dystryktie lubelskim* [Transit Ghettos in the Lublin District] (in): Dariusz Libionka, ed., 'Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie' [Operation Reinhardt, the Extermination of the Jews in the General Government], Warszawa, 2004, pp. 159-160.

war plans in the East, and the uncoordinated decision-making process in which each decision led to a crisis requiring an even more radical decision. The most obvious example of such an escalation was the provisions crisis in the Łódź ghetto in the summer of 1941, which made one of the German dignitaries pose the question of whether it would not be more humane to finish off all the weak, unfit-for-work Jews using some sort of fast-acting means<sup>17</sup>.

With respect to the research into the Holocaust, one can find a common point in these two theories - the persecution and extermination of European Jews was only a secondary effect of the realisation of the fundamental assumptions of the German policy, which were directed at completely different targets. Among the most important ones were Germany's efforts to create a completely new economic and demographic equilibrium in occupied Europe. In order to achieve this, the Nazis planned to kill surplus population, to resettle and exterminate it, which would enable them to colonise Eastern Europe. They also planned the systematic plundering and the nationalisation of Jewish property in order to allow Germany to cover the war costs without having to impose too heavy a fiscal burden on German society<sup>18</sup>. However, the moment when the Germans came to their final decision to begin the extermination of all the Jews cannot be boiled down to one decision only. First, they needed years of making small changes before they could take the final decisions to construct gas chambers and 'factories of death'.

In the second half of 1941, the term 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' was meant to be crystallised for the sake of those directly engaged in its planning and organisation. The 'territorial solution', which involved the settling of Jews in the former Soviet territory, and whose planned consequence aimed at their gradual extinction, was no longer taken into account. Now, the only option left was a quick physical annihilation of all of Europe's Jewry. Therefore, knowing that the chances of deporting Jews to the Soviet Union were diminishing, the Germans began to consider the territories of occupied Poland as an ideal place for their extermination programme. Since the collapse of the USSR was being delayed and other possible solutions could not catch up with the increasing scale of the Jewish question, Himmler, on 1 October 1941, gave the order to definitely suspend any emigration of Jews on account of the fact that a different, more effective method of implementing the plan to get rid of Jews, had been adopted. The Nazis chose physical extermination as the most practical and the most effective means of achieving their original, albeit already-extended, purpose. The rest was just a question of cooperation between different sectors of the state bureaucracy, careful planning, the use of appropriate technology and equipment, the allocation of the budget as well as the calculation and the gathering of the necessary resources. Thus, the choice of physical extermination as an appropriate way of implementing the plan of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish

---

<sup>17</sup> Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz, Naziści i „ostateczne rozwiązanie”* [Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'], Warszawa, 2005, pp. 17-18.

<sup>18</sup> Feliks Tych, *Długi cień Zagłady* [The Long Shadow of the Holocaust], Warszawa, 1999, pp. 158-161.

Question' just remained a matter of the effects produced by routine bureaucratic procedures<sup>19</sup>.

The rationality of the Holocaust was the result of an exceptionally effective German bureaucracy<sup>20</sup>. It is likely that the first decisions about *Endlösung* might have been taken as early as in July 1941. This is implied by the directive of the Director of the Reich Main Security Office, Reinhard Heydrich from 21 July 1941<sup>21</sup>, Himmler's order for the SS units in Belorussia from 30 July<sup>22</sup>, Himmler's order to the commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp Rudolf Höss to adapt Auschwitz to the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' (summer 1941)<sup>23</sup>, and Göring's mandate to Heydrich (31 July), which went as follows: "[...] *In addition to the tasks I assigned to you on 24 January 1939, with regard to the plans to solve the Jewish question by managing the Jews' emigration and evacuation in the most appropriate way possible, I hereby commission you to make all the necessary preparations concerning the organisational, technical and material aspects of the final solution to the Jewish question within the German sphere of influence in Europe [...]*"<sup>24</sup>.

On 31 July, Heydrich obtained approval to draw up a general plan for preparing preliminary organisational, practical and financial measures with a view to implementing the intended 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. This foreshadowed the beginning of a larger and politically more complex process of the extermination of all Jews in Europe. Many historians consider this document as the one which definitively authorized Germany to take steps to implement the industrialised form

---

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Browning, *The German Bureaucracy and the Holocaust* (in): "Alex Grobman, Daniel Landes, Sybil Milton, Genocide. Critical Issues of the Holocaust", Los Angeles, 1983, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> Szymon Datner, Jan Gumkowski and Kazimierz Leszczyński, *Einsatzgruppen (wyrok i uzasadnienie)* [The Einsatzgruppen (the court verdict and its justification)], *Biuletyn GKBZHwP* [The Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland], 1963, No. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Paweł Chmielowski, *W sprawie genezy i organizacji Einsatzgruppen działających na terenach ZSRR okupowanych przez Niemców* [On the Genesis and Organisation of the Einsatzgruppen Acting in the Soviet Territories Occupied by the Germans], *Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny* [The Military Historical Review], 1971, No. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolf Hoess, *Relacja o zagładzie Żydów w obozie oświęcimskim spisana podczas śledztwa w więzieniu krakowskim w 1946 r.* [A Report on the Extermination of Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp Written Down during the Investigation in the Cracow Prison in 1946], *BGKBZHwP* [The Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland], 1951, vol. 7, p. 223.

<sup>24</sup> 31 July 1941, Berlin – H. Göring's order to the Director of the Reich Main Security Office R. Heydrich to devise a general plan of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' (in): T. Berenstein, A. Eisenbach and A. Rutkowski, eds, *Eksterminacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* [The Extermination of Jews on Polish Territory during the Nazi German Occupation, A Collection of Documents], ŻIH, Warszawa, 1957, p. 261.

of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. Clearly, such historically important events as the Holocaust must somehow be reflected in irrefutable documents. Nonetheless, this 'key' document could also be interpreted as the Nazis' intention to continue their previous policy, which combined deportations of Jews with their decimation, rather than the preliminary to an undertaking intended on a completely different scale.

The resolution of this question is made difficult by the Nazis' intentional use of terms like: the final solution, evacuation, resettlement – euphemisms they used to camouflage the genocide<sup>25</sup>. The decision-making process, as a result of which the planned and well-prepared extermination of Jews was started, lasted from July to October 1942. In the first weeks following the outbreak of the war between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, the German military command was certain about Germany's quick victory. This must have influenced Hitler's radicalisation of his policy towards the Jews. In mid-July, Hitler had a meeting with Göring, Bormann, Lammers, Rosenberg and Keitel, at which he made it clear that there was an urgent necessity to murder all those who were the Reich's enemies. As a result, already on 19 July, *Waffen-SS* divisions and Police Battalions launched pacification operations in the East Front while the *Einsatzgruppen* intensified their activity - as of August, they began to murder Jews in Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus and Ukraine. On the first days of August, Himmler and Heydrich (acting as Göring's representative) commenced working on the details of the future mass murders of the Jewish population. In this way, the fate of all the Jews living in the East Front areas, was sealed<sup>26</sup>. At the same time, Jews from the General Government were to be resettled to Polesie marshes and forced to drain them.

In all likelihood, already in September, it became clear to Hitler and his entourage that the plans of mass deportations and of the total extermination of European Jews in the conditions resulting from Germany's military actions were unrealistic. Back in August, Hitler had not been sure yet what to do with the Jewish population from the Third Reich. However, between 14 and 18 September, he changed his mind and gave his permission to deport them to the East. Originally, the term evacuation did not refer to immediate extermination, but with Germany's new vision of Jewish future, most probably it did. It cannot be excluded that as early as in the second half of September, the plans to build 'factories of death' became so realistic that, conceivably, Hitler's entourage managed to reinforce his views that there existed a real possibility of an immediate annihilation of European Jews. Therefore, it was then that the decisions concerning the methods of extermination in *KL Auschwitz* were made, and it was at that time that the building plans of the extermination camps in Chełmno-on-Ner, Bełżec and Sobibór were drawn up.

On 10 October (in Prague), Heydrich announced the commencement of the deportations of Jews from Western Europe to the East. It seems that Christian Gerlach

---

<sup>25</sup> Michael Burleigh, *Trzecia Rzesza. Nowa Historia* [The Third Reich: A New History], Kraków, 2010, p. 663.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Origins...*, pp. 309-315.

was right when he claimed that even in December that year the fate of the German Jews had not been sealed yet, which might contradict the general conviction that the 'Final Solution' plan had by that time been worked out in detail<sup>27</sup>. Quite possibly, the Germans were not entirely sure about the potential of the planned extermination centres. On the one hand, however, this can be questioned by the project (set up for 9 December - the date of the Wannsee Conference) to exterminate practically all the European Jews. On the other hand, in 1942, all the extermination centres were indeed being extensively restructured in order to increase their previously misplanned efficiency of mass murder.

The second half of September or late September and early October was when the plans of the final stage of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' took concrete form, and their implementation began. The tasks outlined in detail for the *Einsatzgruppen*, *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen-SS* and auxiliary Police Battalions in the conquered USSR areas, were now put to force. The resulting escalation of mass murder was not the consequence of one particular order but of a precise, albeit general, order which gave those troops a licence to kill<sup>28</sup>, so their particular units had a lot of freedom in the implementation of those plans. Yet, their actions were being verified by the new experience gained through action. In consequence, the range of their coordination and control was extended. The SS and police command were slowly taking over the role of coordinator as well as the decision-making centre for planning the extermination of Jews<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, it is impossible that such large-scale plans to annihilate Jews came as a result of only one decision, or one or several orders. It was a long-term precisely-developed process, whose details were constantly being refined. This is clearly visible in the preparations and the establishment of extermination centres with stationary gas chambers.

On 15 August 1941, Heinrich Himmler personally participated in a mass execution in Minsk which finished off the campaign on the Prypiat river. He wanted to watch the execution himself to get an idea what it was really like. According to the testimony of his personal adjutant Karl Wolff, Himmler had never seen an act of killing a human being before. The execution was carried out the following morning in a suburban forest in the open air, where two burial pits had previously been dug. The executioners were soldiers from *Einsatzkommando 8* under the command of Otto Bradfisch, and members of Police Battalion 9. Bach-Zelewski, SS general and the chief of SS and the Criminal Police in the *Russland-Mittle* area, testified

---

<sup>27</sup> Christian Gerlach, *Konferencja w Wannsee. Los niemieckich Żydów a polityczna decyzja Hitlera o wymordowaniu wszystkich Żydów Europy* [The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler's Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews] *Biuletyn ŻIH* [the Jewish Historical Institute Bulletin], 1999, No.185/186, pp. 2-40.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Origins...*, pp. 213-215.

<sup>29</sup> Andrzej Żbikowski, *U genezy Jedwabnego. Żydzi na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej, wrzesień 1939 - lipiec 1941* [The Genesis of Jedwabne. Jews in the North-Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic, September 1939 – July 1941], Warszawa, 2006, pp. 191-211.

after the war that all of the executed convicts had been partisans or their helpers, and that between about a third and a half of them were Jewish. However, this was contradicted by Bradfish, who claimed that this execution of Jews had neither been meant to eliminate the elements that posed a threat to the German army nor to pacify areas behind the front line. It was just a matter of the elimination of Jews<sup>30</sup>. After the execution, Himmler went to a prisoner-of-war camp (near Minsk), which Bach-Zelewski used to call 'a small loony bin' because for him the POW's kept there were seriously mentally retarded. Himmler gave the order to kill them all.

But then, there arose a question how to do it. Himmler stated that that morning's experience had made him realise that executing people by shooting was not too humane. He was disheartened by the mental state of his soldiers, their fatigue and frustration resulting from the mass shooting of their victims. Therefore, to bring them relief, he soon gave the order to prepare a plan to work out a different method of mass murder<sup>31</sup>. He ordered SS- Gruppenführer Arthur Nebe, commander of *Einsatzgruppe B*, to think the matter over, collect relevant data and submit a report. Later, Bach-Zelewski maintained that Nebe had asked permission to carry out an experimental execution of a group of sick patients by means of dynamite. He later testified that both him and Wolff had opposed the idea, arguing that patients could not be treated as guinea pigs, but Himmler ignored them and gave his permission for the experiment. His suggestions aimed at working out and 'industrialising' impersonal techniques of murder.

In Germany, such pilot experiments with an impersonal way of murdering people by means of medical technology had been conducted earlier. In autumn 1939, Führer's Office initiated a secret programme undertaken by Victor Brack<sup>32</sup>. On the day World War II broke out, Hitler gave the order to launch an action code-named 'T-4'. The document specified the details of the genocide programme and put the programme into effect. Right before the Nazis made the decision to implement 'Operation Reinhardt', they began, in accordance with its assumptions, to plan the extermination of persons considered mentally and physically unable to function within society. The action was code-named 'T-4'. The name referred to Tiergartenstraße 4, the street at which the action's headquarters were located. The action also functioned under the name the 'Euthanasia Programme'.

'Action T-4' was carried out from August 1939 to August 1941 in six centres: Brandenburg, Bernburg, Grafeneck, Hadamar, Sonnenstein and Hartheim. In consequence of this criminal activity, more than 70,000 people lost their lives. It was the first Nazi mass murder programme and as such was a kind of prototype of the 'Final Solution'. It must be mentioned that the 'Euthanasia Programme' and the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' had some elements in common. One of them was the death camps personnel, whose core constituted members of the

<sup>30</sup> Richard Rhodes, *Mistrzowie śmierci. Einsatzgruppen* [Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust], Warszawa, 2007, pp. 224-228.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Origins...*, p. 362.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Rhodes, op. cit., pp. 227-229.

‘T-4’. All the commandants of the death camps were recruited from ‘T-4’: Irmfried Eberl (Treblinka), Franz Stangl (Sobibór), later Treblinka), Christian Wirth (Bełżec, next – inspector of ‘Operation Reinhardt’ camps), Gottlieb Hering (Bełżec) and Franz Reichleitner (Sobibór). Also, both the ‘Euthanasia Programme’ and the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ utilised the same methods and means of extermination<sup>33</sup>.

In September 1941, Nebe carried out an experiment with dynamite in Minsk. For that purpose, he brought from Germany Albert Widmann, a chemist at Berlin’s Institute of Criminal Technology. In a conversation with his deputy, Paul Werner, Nebe justified himself by saying that he could not expect his soldiers to shoot at incurably sick people. He commanded Widmann to put some dynamite in a reinforced concrete bunker, put a group of mentally sick Russians inside and detonate the dynamite. The experiment failed because the dynamite blew to pieces not only the Russians but also the bunker, scattering human remains around the area. As a result, the experimenters themselves had to remove people’s arms and legs off the nearby trees. The next day, Nebe continued his experimentation in a mental institution in Mohylev, this time with carbon monoxide. However, since pure carbon monoxide was too expensive to commit mass murder on an industrial scale, Nebe decided to produce a poisonous gas coming from the exhaust fumes of car engines.

After the war, Widmann described this incident during his trial as follows: “[...] *In the afternoon, Nebe gave the order to brick up a window (in the hospital’s room) and just leave two holes for hoses which would feed in exhaust fumes. When we arrived at the place, one of the hoses was already connected to one of the holes, and its other end was fixed to the exhaust pipe of a coach bus. Installed in the wall were pieces of pipes so that it was possible to connect the hoses to them. After five minutes, Nebe went outside and said that nothing seemed to be happening. Eight minutes later, he still couldn’t see any effects and asked us what to do about it. We came to the conclusion that the engine must have had too little power. So, Nebe gave the order to take the other hose and connect it to the exhaust pipe of a police transport vehicle. After a few minutes, the convicts were unconscious. Both cars were left with their engines running for about ten more minutes [...]*”<sup>34</sup>.

Most probably, Nebe informed Himmler about the results of his experiment and in the same month, i.e., September 1941, Walter Rauff, responsible for technical maintenance with the Reich’s Security Main Office, turned to their transportation service, asking them whether it would be possible to convert vans into mobile gas chambers. Later, in his post-war testimony, he justified it by saying that in this way he wanted to bring relief to people who would otherwise be exposed to stress if

<sup>33</sup> Patricia Heberer, ‘Ciągłość eksterminacji. Sprawcy „T4” i „akcja Reinhardt”’ [Continuity in Killing Operations: ‘T-4’ Perpetrators and the ‘Aktion Reinhardt’] (in): Dariusz Libionka, ed., *‘Akcja Reinhardt’. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* [‘Action Reinhardt’ – the Extermination of the Jews in the General Government], Warszawa, 2004, pp. 69-71.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Rhodes, op. cit., p. 231.

forced to carry out executions by shooting. The Germans used a new type of van, in which carbon monoxide was replaced by exhaust car fumes to carry out executions, which was confirmed in Poltava (the south of Ukraine), in November 1941.

The same method of murdering Jews was applied in the Chełmno-on-Ner extermination camp. The victims were forced into hermetically-sealed van compartments, into which were directed car exhaust fumes coming from the vans' engines. Next, the victims were driven away to a special area with previously dug pits. Everyone was dead within half an hour. On 8 December 1941, the first 'gassings' took place, under the command of SS-Hauptsturmführer Herbert Lange, as a result of which at least 152,000 Jews from the Warta Land were killed. Police units took men, women and children from cities and villages to assembly points, where the Jews were informed that they were going to be resettled for work. Afterwards, the vans drove them to a place right behind the church in the village of Rżuchów. The place was called 'the palace' and was fenced off in such a way that it remained unseen from the road. On arrival, the future victims were told that their clothes had to be disinfected. Therefore, they had to go inside, undress, go down to the basement where they saw an inscription which read 'bathroom this way'. Instead of being taken to the showers, though, the victims were directed through the side door straight to the vans. At that point, there was no way back for them. After all the people were forced into the van, the engine was started, and the exhaust fumes were pumped inside by a pipe. Carbon monoxide killed the victims within a dozen or so minutes. When the van had covered a distance of about 6 kilometres, it stopped at the edge of a forest, where a group of Jewish prisoners unloaded the dead bodies and threw them into huge pits. The vans drove to and fro between five and ten times a day. At a time, they carried from 50 to 70 people, depending on the size of a van<sup>35</sup>.

Despite all these complex procedures which the Germans followed, it turned out that killing people in specially adapted vans was too troublesome and time-consuming. Also, vans themselves frequently failed<sup>36</sup>. In his book, Browning provides extensive quotations coming from a memo written by one of Willy Just's experts, which concerns technical improvements necessary for the conversion of vans into mobile gas vans. Just suggested that the van assembly company should reduce their loading space. Models produced so far could not cope with the difficult Russian terrain. So, if loaded to the full of their capacity, too much of carbon monoxide had to be pumped in to fill the free space and, as a result, the whole procedure had to be prolonged, which made it less efficient, therefore: "[...] *A shorter, fully-loaded van could work a lot faster. The shortening of the back part would not have a negative effect on the vehicle's stability. The front axle would not be overloaded because "in principle, the adjustment in the load distribution occurs automatically: the load which, throughout the procedure, is trying to move towards the back door, usually crowds right there". Since the pipe which pumps exhaust fumes and which comes in contact with 'fluids' rusts quickly, the fumes have to be pumped inside from the*

<sup>35</sup> Jules Schelvis, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 34.

top, and not from the bottom. In order to facilitate the clean-up of the vehicle, it is necessary to make a hole, 20-30 cm large, equipped with a flap which would open from outside. The floor should slope a little, and the flap should have quite a fine strainer. Due to this, all the 'fluids' would flow to the middle. 'Watery fluids' would flow outside during the operation itself, while 'thick fluids' could later be washed off with a hose [...]"<sup>37</sup>. Obviously, the fact that, from the technical point of view, the load consisted of people who were to be gassed, during which time they would lose control over their physiological activity, did not matter here at all.

At the same time, the Nazis conducted research on more direct methods of murder. For this reason, Eichmann went to Auschwitz and, together with Höss, decided that only gas chambers would be suitable to effectively carry out the task which Führer had imposed on them. In their view, the 'advantage' of murdering prisoners in gas chambers was that a lot fewer people would have to be engaged in this process in comparison with methods used previously. In September 1941, in *KL Auschwitz*, a special gas was used to kill a group of people. This was a group of Russian prisoners of war who were taken to the basement of a building, whose door was shut tightly, and 'Zyklon B' was fed inside. The 'operation' proved successful. As a result of further experiments, the Germans improved this 'method' of murder and had special gas chambers built.

On 25 October 1941, Dr Erhard Wetzel, the director of the Central Advisory Office on Questions of Racial Policy at the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, in his letter to the Reich's Commissar for the Ostland - Heinrich Lohse (which was later called 'the gas chamber letter'), suggested building a permanent extermination centre on the territory which remained under Lohse's control. In this way, it would be possible to utilise all the experience gained and skills displayed by the experts from 'Action T-4'<sup>38</sup>. Christopher Browning claims that, perhaps, the first buildings which housed gas chambers existed as early as in September 1941 in the forests near Bełżec. These were former peasants' cottages which had been adapted especially for that purpose. Later, the site provided a basis for the future extermination camp<sup>39</sup>. However, Browning's conclusions need to be further verified as they differ fundamentally from those implied in Robert Kuwałek's recent study on the history of the Bełżec extermination camp<sup>40</sup>. At the same time, the Nazis carried out many different types of experiments on other methods of extermination.

In October 1941, Dr Pokorny, a specialist in skin and venereal diseases, wrote a letter to Himmler, which read as follows: "[...] *Bearing in mind that our enemy must not only be defeated but also exterminated, I feel obliged to call your attention, you being Reichsführer zur Festigung des deutsche Volkstums, to the following facts:*

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Browning, *Fateful Months. Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution*, New York, 1992, pp. 64-65.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Heberer, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Origins....*, pp. 364-365.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Kuwałek, *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu* [The Extermination Camp in Bełżec], Lublin, 2010, p. 38.

*Dr Madaus has just published the results of his research into a treatment causing the sterilisation of animals, based on the extract from a plant called 'Schweigrohr' (calcium seguinum, american arum). If, on the basis of this research, it is possible to develop an effective method which will, after a relatively short time, effect 'eine unbemerkte Sterilisierung' (an imperceptible sterilisation) on man, we will be armed with a new weapon in this way. The mere thought that three million Bolsheviks who are held in German captivity at the moment could be sterilised and thus deprived of the possibility of procreation but remain useful to us as labour force, opens up new possibilities [...]*<sup>41</sup>.

However, further research was suspended because 'Schweigrohr' could only be found in North America, which made it difficult to obtain a supply of this plant. Although the Germans managed to multiply its seeds, this proved to be too time-consuming if carried out in greenhouses<sup>42</sup>. Yet, the Nazis had another weapon up their sleeve: X-ray sterilisation. On 28 March 1941, Victor Brack wrote to Himmler from Führer's office: "[...] *A practical solution could be to line up an appropriate group of people in a row along a counter, keep them there for two or three minutes and, during that time, ask them different questions and make them fill in several forms. Meanwhile, the office worker at the counter could push a button which would activate two X-ray tubes as radiation has to come from two sides. In this way, it would be possible to sterilise about 150 or 200 people; twenty such irradiations could sterilise from 3,000 up to 4,000 people [...]*"<sup>43</sup>.

When the Euthanasia Programme was abandoned by the Third Reich in August 1941, the 'T-4' headquarters had at their disposal a sufficiently large number of well-qualified doctors, male nurses, and specialists in the construction and operation of gas chambers in extermination centres. The first 'T-4' group came to Lublin already in late October 1941<sup>44</sup>. Most probably, it was Odilo Globocnik, leader of 'Operation Reinhardt', that decided on the location of the Sobibór extermination camp (just as it was in the case of the Bełżec and Treblinka death camps). Globocnik had a degree in Building Construction and was quite skilled in economic issues. With time, he became a man in whom Himmler placed his trust. Odilo Globocnik came from Trieste and spent his early years in Austria. In 1931, at the age of 27, he joined the NSDAP, and in 1934 – the SS. He became a liaison between Hitler and the Austrian Nazis. After the annexation of Austria into the German Third Reich, he was promoted from SS-Standartenführer to the rank of Gauleiter of Vienna. Soon afterwards, Globocnik was sentenced to one year in prison for foreign exchange speculation and, as a consequence, demoted to a mere SS member. During the Polish September Campaign (1939), he already held the rank of SS-Brigadenführer. Finally, he was promoted to the SS and Police Leader in the Lublin District. He was appointed the task of resettling hundreds of thousands of Jews from ghettos and labour camps

<sup>41</sup> Jules Schelvis, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Origins...*, p. 362.

to extermination centres. In developing ‘Operation Reinhardt’, the Germans also had another specific purpose in mind – the utilisation of property stolen from the murdered.

The whole concept of extermination camps as well as the extermination methods were developed by the Nazis who had directly been connected with ‘Action T-4’, which lasted between 1939-41. The head of the headquarters organised by Globocnik became SS-Sturmbannführer Herman Höfle, former head of Department IV B at the Reich Main Security Office, a specialist in Jewish matters. It was his responsibility to bring into operation the death camps, staff them by appropriate personnel and organise deportations to particular camps. Christian Wirth, notorious for his brutality, became Höfle’s collaborator. Having previously been the organiser and director of the euthanasia institutions, first, in Hartheim near Linz, and then in Hadamar, Wirth gained ‘proper’ qualifications and a lot of experience with killing people. At first, Wirth was the commandant of the Bełżec camp; later he was appointed inspector of all the three extermination camps, namely Bełżec, Treblinka and Sobibór.

In accordance with the tasks and duties assigned to him on 1 July 1941, Heydrich planned a conference which aimed at *“formulating a uniform policy by all the central authorities which cooperate in the final solution to the Jewish question”*<sup>45</sup>. The Reich Main Security Office called a conference on the extermination of Jews for 9 December 1941. It had to be postponed, however, due to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Therefore, it finally took place on 20 January 1942 in Wannsee, in a villa on the outskirts of Berlin. The most important and the highest-ranking participant in the meeting was Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of the Reich Main Security Office. The other conference attendees were: Dr Josef Bühler – State Secretary of the General Government, Adolf Eichmann – Chief of the Jewish Affairs Department at the Reich Main Security Office, Dr Roland Freisler - State Secretary of the Reich Ministry of Justice, Otto Hofmann – representative of the SS Race and Settlement Main Office, Dr Gerhard Klopfer – State Secretary of the NSDAP Party Chancellery, Wilhelm Kritzinger – Deputy Chief of the Reich Chancellery, Dr Rudolf Lange – Deputy of the Commanding Officer of Security Police and Security Service, Dr Georg Leibbrandt – representative of the Reich Ministry of the Occupied Eastern Territories, Martin Luther – representative of the Foreign Office, Dr Alfred Meyer – representative of the Reich Ministry of the Occupied Eastern Territories, Heinrich Müller – Chief of the Gestapo in the RSHA (Reich Main Security Office), Erich Neumann – representative of the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Four Year Plan, Dr Eberhard Schöngarth – representative of the Security Police and the SD, and Dr Wilhelm Stuckart – representative of the Reich Ministry of the Interior. The purpose of the Wannsee conference was to confirm Nazi readiness to launch the implementation of the ‘Final Solution’ plan, and to coordinate all the efforts necessary to be made in order to complete it.

From then onwards, anything connected with the implementation of the ‘Final

---

<sup>45</sup> Artur Eisenbach, *Hitlerowska polityka zagłady Żydów* [Hitler’s Policy of Extermination of the Jews], Warszawa, 1961, p. 291.

Solution' was given absolute priority<sup>46</sup>. The conference only lasted about one hour and a half, and its protocol was merely 15 pages long. Reinhard Heydrich informed all those present at the conference that the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' in Europe required joint and parallel action, and that all the levels of authority engaged in its implementation should treat the issue in a proper way. He said that the military operations prevented Jewish emigration and therefore, instead of emigration, the German authorities would launch a plan to 'evacuate Jews to the East'. Having said that, Heydrich presented a list of all the European Jews, i.e. those who had directly found themselves under German occupation, those who lived in countries allied with Hitler, yet still independent (Italy, Croatia, Vichy France and Hungary), and those living in neutral countries, like Sweden, Portugal, Switzerland and Spain. Jews from England, Ireland, North Africa and the Soviet Union were also put on the list. In all, the total number of the people on the list was 11 million.

During the conference, Heydrich aimed both to gain support for the previously-made decision to annihilate Jews, and to remove any potential obstacles in the state administration, which could somehow matter in the completion of the project. Heydrich's task was to coordinate the preparations for the *Endlösung* and to ensure that the general agreement was reached in this case. None of the participants raised any objections. Now, it might seem that such a pointless enumeration had, as Saul Friedländer claims, a deeper sense because it made all those present realize that each European Jew, no matter where he or she lived or which country they came from, would sooner or later be captured, and none of them would manage to slip away. Physically fit and strong Jews would be sent to hard labour to be gradually decimated while elderly people, veterans and the disabled would be put to 'old people's ghettos'. Heydrich made it crystal clear that Jews who would not have died, i.e. those who would still be able to work by the time they arrived in the East, must be 'treated accordingly'<sup>47</sup>.

In general, the language of the conference protocol was not fully comprehensible. The reason was that Heydrich was careful not to sound too literal in his choice of certain terms and expressions. For example, the expression 'treated accordingly' might be interpreted in a variety of ways, but the only reasonable conclusion is that, in this case, it referred to extermination. The provisions of the Wannsee conference began a new and final chapter of the extermination of Jews. The whole of the German bureaucratic apparatus became engaged in this carefully planned genocide. The programme of the extermination of Jews expanded its range across Europe. At this point, it had already become obvious that the most common method of mass killings would be through gas in gas chambers.

---

<sup>46</sup> Protocol of the conference held at the Reich Main Security Office organised to discuss the planned murder of the European Jews (in): T. Bernstein, A. Eisenbach and A. Rutkowski, eds, *Eksterminacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* [Extermination of Jews in the Polish Territories during the Period of the Nazi German Occupation, A Collection of Documents], ŻIH [The Jewish Historical Institute], Warszawa, 1957, pp. 273-6.

<sup>47</sup> Saul Friedländer, op. cit., pp. 409-413.

Between 1940 and 1941, the character of the war which the Germans waged against Jews underwent radical change as the Nazi ‘territorial solutions’ gave way to the mass extermination of the Jewish nation. The Germans began to reach beyond the borders of Germany and Poland in order to capture and kill all the European Jews. By launching a military campaign against the Soviet Union, the Germans found the final missing piece of their racial ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ project, which had not been developed since the end of the war with Poland. In 1941, Hitler revealed a much stronger determination in removing local populations from the occupied territories. In order to take possession of the new colonies, the Germans had permission to take all necessary measures, above all shootings and evacuation<sup>48</sup>.

When, at the turn of 1941 and 1942, Germany managed to survive the winter military crisis, and when, in the spring of 1942, resumed its offensive actions against the Soviet Union, deportations of the Jewish population were also recommenced. The General Government again became involved in Jewish deportations as the construction of the extermination camps in Bełżec and Sobibór had already been completed. However, this time the genocidal mechanism no longer followed the scheme: evacuation – resettlement – forced labour. During 1942, it was gradually becoming apparent that the primary purpose of the ‘Final Solution’ was the extermination of the Jews<sup>49</sup>.

At the time when the Wannsee conference was taking place, the Nazis, for over a month, had already been killing Jews by means of car exhaust fumes in the extermination camp in Chełmno, and the *Einsatzgruppen*, for six months, had been displaying their exceptional murderous activity by shooting more than a million people. ‘Operation Reinhardt’ was soon to become one of the most horrifying non-military extermination activities of World War II. In its atrocities, the scale of the operation outdid the organised genocide committed by the *Einsatzgruppen* in the Soviet Union.

Still in the summer of 1939, the High Command of the Land Forces held talks with the Director of the Reich Main Security Police and Security Office Reinhard Heydrich, which ended with general agreement. The talks became the basis for the order issued on 31 July 1939, which specified in general that the major task of the Security Police Special Action Units would be to combat all elements hostile towards the Third Reich and those anti-German in enemy countries at the rear of the front. The general character of this order gave those units far-reaching freedom to act. The major tasks of those units, which were meant to act as the logistics support for the front line, included the extermination or isolation of political and ideological enemies of the Third Reich in the operational rear of the military front. The task was completed by means of ruthless terror and the mass extermination of active anti-German and anti-Fascist activists.

In Poland, the fulfilment of this task took an extremely radical form; therefore,

---

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Browning, *The Origins...*, p. 309.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Życie i śmierć w Trzeciej Rzeszy* [Life and Death in the Third Reich], Kraków, 2010, p. 273.

from the outside, the actions performed by the police and SS forces might in fact have seemed to be brutal wilfulness. The *Einsatzgruppen*'s primary duty was to exterminate Jews. The executioners made sure that the local inhabitants of given areas, like Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland or Belarus, joined their murderous actions. When Germany was preparing for the aggression against Poland in mid-1939, eight operational groups were formed to assist particular armies taking part in the occupation of Poland. In early 1941, in the light of the planned attack against the USSR, Germany began to form other operational groups. They were meant to be large units subordinate to particular army groups.

Each such group consisted of several subgroups (*Einsatzkommando* and *Sonderkommando*) which acted in support of particular armies or over particular areas. The Nazis began to create these units before Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union (May 1941) in a police school in Pretzsch, Saxony. Four *Einsatzgruppen* labelled A, B, C and D were formed. Each of them consisted of 600 to 1,000 SS men, members of the SD, the Gestapo, the Kripo, policemen from the 9<sup>th</sup> Police Battalion, and elite secret police unit *Leitende Dienst*<sup>50</sup>. The commanders of those units were given the order, among other things, to murder all the Jews, Gypsies and communist functionaries in the territory of the USSR. In accordance with Reinhard Heydrich's order, those groups were assigned the task of murdering professional staff of political apparatus, party and trade union activists, political officers of the Soviet Army, representatives of state administration, economic executives, Russian intellectuals, Jews, all sorts of political agitators or fanatic Communists. The operation was to take place with the participation of local populations.

Reinhard Heydrich issued a special directive which required that for the outside observer, all this should seem as if it was the local population itself that reacted in such a natural way as a result of tens of years of their oppression at the hands of Jews, and the reign of terror created by the Communists<sup>51</sup>. The countless acts of cruelty committed by the *Einsatzgruppen*, Ordnungspolizei units, the military police, collaborators, military units, Reichsführer-SS and Waffen-SS commandos contributed to the death of about 1,3 million Jews. On 29/30 September 1941, the record number of Jews was killed in Babi Yar near Kiev, where the *Einsatzkommando 4a* and two police 'East' units shot, at one time, 33,771 Jews<sup>52</sup>.

After the Wannsee conference, the only thing for the Germans to do was to finish the construction of the death factories in Bełżec and Sobibór, and to extend the Majdanek concentration camp in Lublin. The German policy of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' was planned to take place in the General Government. SS-Gruppenführer Odilo Globocnik, SS and Police Leader in the Lublin District, became the instigator of the whole project, and the headquarters of 'Operation Reinhardt' were located in Lublin, the place where Odilo Globocnik had his office,

<sup>50</sup> Helmut Krausnick, *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen. Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges* 1938-1942, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, p. 360.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

<sup>52</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction....*, p. 277.

too. At present, the time frame of ‘Operation Reinhardt’ can easily be specified. The operation was launched during the night of 16/17 March 1942, when the Germans started the action to liquidate the Lublin ghetto, and to send Jewish transports to the extermination centre in Bełżec<sup>53</sup>. At the same time, similar ‘actions’ were commenced in small towns and villages of the Lublin District. As early as in mid-March 1942, the Nazis resettled thousands of Jews from Izbica, Piaski, Biskupice, Trawniki and Kraśniczyn. In April, deportations took place in Kraśnik and Zamość.

All the deportees were sent to Bełżec and killed. They were replaced by thousands of Jews from Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, whom the Germans resettled to Izbica, Piaski and Zamość. After several weeks or months, both foreign and Polish Jews were deported to the extermination centres in Bełżec, Sobibór or to the Majdanek concentration camp to be killed in the gas chambers<sup>54</sup>. In consequence, the death toll for that operation amounted to: 500,000 Jews in Bełżec, approximately 300,000 in Sobibór, about 800,000 in Treblinka, and 60,000 at Majdanek.

The final element of ‘Operation Reinhardt’ was the so-called ‘hunt for the Jews’ (*Judenjagden*) in which the Germans combed areas of the previously-liquidated Jewish residential quarters or carried out round-ups in the parts of cities inhabited by the Christian population, or in fields and forests. As mentioned by Christopher Browning, during the German occupation, the ‘hunt for the Jews’ became a very popular and common phrase used by the Germans. They became accustomed to using the term so much that, during post-war court trials, they saw nothing improper in their still using this phrase before the prosecutors<sup>55</sup>.

During the night of 16/17 March 1942, the Germans undertook the action to liquidate the Lublin ghetto, and to send transports of Jews to the Bełżec extermination camp. This opened ‘Operation Reinhardt’. The closing date, on the other hand, is considered to have been 3 November 1943, when, in Operation ‘Harvest Festival’ (‘Aktion Enterfest’), the Germans murdered all the Jews at the Majdanek camp and in the Poniatowa and Trawniki labour camps. As a result of this well-planned mass execution, more than 42,000 Jews were killed<sup>56</sup>. It should be noted that

<sup>53</sup> Zygmunt Mańkowski, *Hitlerowska koncepcja “rozwiązania” kwestii żydowskiej: problem decyzji i mechanizm zagłady* [The Nazi German Concept of ‘Solving’ the Jewish Question: the Problem of Making the Decision and the Mechanism of Extermination], *Biuletyn. Kwartalnik Radomski* [Bulletin. The Radom Quarterly] 1998, vol. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Zygmunt Mańkowski, *Strategiczne znaczenie Lubelszczyzny i polityka represyjna okupanta* [The Strategic Role of the Lublin Region and the Occupant’s Policy of Repression], *Zeszyty Majdanek* [The Majdanek Notebooks], 1969, vol. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Engelking, Jacek Leociak and Dariusz Libionka, eds, *Prowincja noc. Życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim*, [The Provinces, Night. The Life and Extermination of the Jews in the Warsaw District], Warszawa, 2007, p. 70.

<sup>56</sup> Dieter Pohl, „Znaczenie dystryktu lubelskiego w ostatecznym rozwiązaniu kwestii żydowskiej” [The Role of the Lublin District in the Genocide] (in): Dariusz Libionka, ed., *Akcja Reinhardt, Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* [‘Aktion Reinhardt’ – The Extermination of the Jews in the General Government], Warszawa, 2004.

approximately half of all the Jews murdered by the Germans and foreign auxiliary units between 1939 and 1945 lost their lives in 1942 alone, the most tragic year of the 'Final Solution'. First, in 1941, over 1 million Jews, especially of Russian descent, were killed. A year later, more than 2,6 million Jews from Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, France, the Netherlands and Belgium faced the same fate. The years 1943–1944, on the other hand, were marked by the operation of 'clearing' Europe of the remaining still-living Jews. The last major action of the 'Final Solution' was the detention of over 437,000 Hungarian Jews in the spring and summer of 1941, i.e., more or less at the same time the Allied Forces landed in Normandy<sup>57</sup>.

The 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' operation was planned by the highest state authorities of the Third Reich. However, the chain character of its implementation caused that those who decided upon the fate of the Jewish community did not have to look their victims straight in the eye. What is more, they did not even have to bother to think that their decision concerned human beings. The bureaucratic character of the *Endlösung*'s task assignment made the planning and implementation of this human extermination project seem just an ordinary task meant to be completed by some bureaucratic machine. Those involved in each subsequent level of this extermination machine only focused on the meticulous fulfilment of the appointed tasks, in this way losing sight of the human aspect of the undertaken action.

The Nazi plan to exterminate all the Jews was not a centralised project. The authorities did not create any separate agency that would deal with Jewish matters, nor did they allocate any separate funds for this particular purpose. All the actions aimed against Jews were carried out by civil servants, military forces, business people and Nazi party members. In short, all the elements of the German organised public life became engaged in the project. All the possible specialisations and all the social classes took part in this mass manhunt for Jews<sup>58</sup>. Structurally, the machine of the destruction of the Jewish nation did not differ from the organisation of German society. It was just one of the roles that German society was supposed to play<sup>59</sup>. The mere fact that there existed a group of specialists in Jewish matters boosted the bureaucratic efficiency of the German policy towards Jews. Still in 1942, after the deportations and mass murder began, there came into force regulations forbidding German Jews to keep domestic animals, to go to Aryan barber shops and hairdressing salons, or to receive sports badges. German bureaucrats did not need any orders; the mere possibility of doing their job was sufficient for them<sup>60</sup>.

The final link in the extermination chain were those who dealt directly with their Jewish victims. However, a typical Nazi perpetrator was by no means any special type of German. Any member of the Order Police could become a ghetto guard or an armed guard accompanying transports which deported Jews to concentration or death

<sup>57</sup> Peter Fritzsche, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>58</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Sprawcy, ofiary...* [Perpetrators, Victims...], p. 40.

<sup>59</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction...*, p. 994.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Browning, *The German Bureaucracy...*, p. 147.

camps. Likewise, any lawyer working in the Reich Main Security Office could be considered the right candidate to become commander of mobile killing squads. There was also a possibility that a financial officer of the SS Economic and Administrative Main Office could, at any moment, be called to serve in an extermination camp. Thus, all the necessary operations were conducted with the help of personnel that was available at any given moment<sup>61</sup>.

These people's moral reservations vanished the moment the following three conditions were met either simultaneously or successively: firstly, their growing awareness that the orders to be executed came from centres authorised to give them; secondly, the formalisation of procedures and the exact task assignment; thirdly, the dehumanisation of victims through appropriate ideologisation and indoctrination. A typical German civil servant's point of honour was to be able to carry out their superiors' orders as conscientiously as possible.

Franz Stangl, the person who symbolises the genocide committed during World War II, under whose command more than 1 million Jews were murdered in the extermination centres of Sobibór and Treblinka, wondered after the war whether he had really taken part in any criminal actions. During the war, he solved this emotional problem of having to confront what he did by simply distancing himself from it, just like the commandant of *KL Auschwitz* did<sup>62</sup>. So, he would look away from the scenes of crime, avoid approaching them, or focus on completely different duties.

When asked if he had ever managed to get used to 'liquidating' people, he answered that it took him some time before he did: "[...] *Several months passed before I could look any of them in the eye. I bottled my emotions up by trying to focus my attention on different activities. I created gardens, built new barracks, new kitchens, everything had to be new. I employed barbers, tailors, shoe makers and carpenters. There were hundreds of ways to get away from it all, and I tried them all. But, in the end, the only effective method proved to be alcohol. Each night, I went to bed with a large glass of cognac in my hand. Of course, all kinds of thoughts raced through my mind. I tried to push them away and concentrate on doing my job, just my job. When, many years later, I went on a trip to Brazil, it so happened that the train I was travelling by suddenly stopped near a slaughter house. At the sound of the approaching railway carriages, some farm cattle ran up to the farm fence and stared at the train. The animals stood close to my window, jostling each other and staring at me through the fence. Then I thought to myself... yes, this was the way those people in Poland looked like, so trusting, exactly the same as those animals that were about to end up in food cans. Afterwards, I couldn't eat canned meat. Those big eyes... which kept staring at me...not knowing that, in a moment, they would fade away... A load. They were just a load. I rarely perceived them as individual human beings. They were always a huge mass to me [...]*".<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction...*, vol. 3, p. 1011.

<sup>62</sup> Harald Welzer, *Sprawcy. Dlaczego zwykli ludzie dokonują masowych mordów* [Perpetrators. How Do Ordinary People Become Mass Murderers?], Warszawa, 2010, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> Gitta Sereny, *W stronę ciemności. Rozmowy z komendantem Treblinka* [Into That Darkness.

In his police school, Stangl was taught that there was no crime without four elements: the subject, the object, the action and the intention. Therefore, he believed that in case any of these elements was missing, a criminal offence was simply out of the question. In his view, in the extermination of Jews, the German government was the subject, Jews were the object and gassing was the action. He was convinced that in his case, the fourth element was missing, i.e., the intention. He claimed that, personally, he had nothing against Jews, and that in his actions, he was guided neither by his personal likes nor prejudices. The context of mass extermination was something external for him. As the commandant, he did not tolerate any irregularities. Stangl cared most about what he did, and not about what he was<sup>64</sup>. The job Stangl did in Sobibór never provoked in him any moral dilemmas because he could put his job in the reference system for which he took no responsibility<sup>65</sup>. Stangl behaved in accordance with the then German social standards. Generally, the need to be perceived as a person following the German code of morality and sense of duty could be observed in all the members of the Sobibór staff, irrespective of their education, intelligence or their place in the social hierarchy. They thought of themselves to be law-abiding citizens. Therefore, in their opinion, the only fault they could be accused of was that they did their ‘work’ diligently.

---

Gitta Sereny's Conversations with the Commandant of Treblinka - Franz Stangl], Warszawa, 2002, pp. 174 – 5.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.



## CHAPTER II

### THE CREATION OF THE EXTERMINATION CENTRE

#### 1. The construction of the extermination centre

In the autumn of 1941, Globocnik created a department which later came to be known as the ‘Operation Reinhardt’ Headquarters in the Higher SS and Police Commander Office in Lublin. After he had appointed SS-Hauptsturmführer Hermann Höfle ‘Specialist in Jewish matters’, Globocnik ordered him to organise a team for coordinating deportations of Polish Jews with the functioning of civil and military authorities as well as of local police units. The second department, later known as the SS Inspectorate for Special Task Units (*Inspektion der SS-Sonderkommandos*), was created under the command of *Kriminalsekretar* Christian Wirth, and its personnel were the ‘Action T-4’ members. Wirth supervised the building of three extermination centres: Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka<sup>1</sup>. On 1 October 1941, Globocnik wrote to Himmler about a pressing need for the urgent, radical and complete eradication of ethnically foreign elements in the Lublin District, and for their germanisation<sup>2</sup>. On 13 October 1941, Friedrich Wilhelm Kruger<sup>3</sup> and Globocnik visited Himmler’s commanding headquarters<sup>4</sup> in East Prussia to talk to the Reichsführer about the role of Lublin in ‘the final solution to the Jewish question’. They also discussed the issue of building a camp in Bełżec, the evacuation of Poles from the Zamość district and germanisation. Himmler ordered to build a camp in Trawniki, where personnel (mostly Ukrainian) was trained for doing service in the death camps. On the same day in Berlin, Hans Frank met Alfred Rosenberg, the Reichsminister for

<sup>1</sup> Peter Black, ‘Prosty żołnierz „Akcji Reinhardt”’. Oddziały z Trawniki i eksterminacja polskich Żydów’ (in: Dariusz Libionka, ed., *Akcja Reinhardt, Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* [A Common Soldier of ‘Operation Reinhardt’. Troops from Trawniki and the Extermination of Polish Jews] (in: [Operation Reinhardt, the Extermination of the Jews in the General Government], Warszawa, 2004, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Brendt Rieger, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Kruger, cf. – Sources and Literature/Internet resources: born on 8 May 1894 in Strasburg, died on 10 May 1945 in Gundertshausen in Austria – the Higher SS and Police Commander in the General Government (1939-1943), the secretary of state security in the General Government and SS-Obergruppenführer. He was Heinrich Himmler’s representative for consolidating German Folkdom in the General Government.

<sup>4</sup> Katrin Himmler, *Himmler i jego bracia. Historia niemieckiej rodziny* [The Himmler Brothers. A German Family History], Warszawa, 2006: Heinrich Himmler (born on 7 October 1900 in Munich, died on 23 May 1945 in Lüneburg). One of the chief leaders of Nazi Germany, co-founder and Chief of the SS (since 1929), of the Gestapo (since 1934), of the Police (since 1936), Home Secretary (since 1943).

the Occupied Eastern Territories. The conclusion of the meeting was that ‘unwanted subjects’ of the Reich and occupied France, that is, among others, Jews, Gypsies and Sintis should be transported eastwards<sup>5</sup>. On 17 October in Lublin, Globocnik was present at a meeting with Hans Frank and Ernst Zörner<sup>6</sup>, who was commissioned to ‘evacuate’ 1,000 Jews from Lublin over the Bug River<sup>7</sup>. Bogdan Musiał thinks that the meeting was a prelude to committing mass murders by the German state<sup>8</sup>. The cryptonym ‘evacuation over the Bug’ came from the autumn and winter of 1939, when Jews were indeed dispatched from the General Government ‘over the Bug’ to the Soviet-occupied east of Poland. At the time, the cryptonym ‘the Bug River’<sup>9</sup> could have meant ‘the River Jordan’, and ‘going over the River Jordan’ was the German metaphor of death.

On 18 December 1941, Hitler and Himmler met in the main headquarters – *Wolfsschanze* (the Wolf’s Entrenchment) in East Prussia, where they both discussed the Jewish question. Himmler made a note: “*they will be annihilated like partisans*”<sup>10</sup>. It seems then that it really was the beginning of the ‘final solution’<sup>11</sup>. Now, it is not possible to determine precisely when and in what circumstances the decision to build an extermination centre in Sobibór was actually made. That decision may have been influenced by German plans for the deportation of Slovak Jews to the General Government. It turned out later that Slovak Jews were the most numerous group of all the other Jews from abroad who had been deported to Sobibór in 1942. In all, they amounted to about 28,000 people, 10,000 of whom were transported (1-15 June 1942) to Sobibór direct.

The choice of the location for the Sobibór camp appears to have been carefully thought-out and perfect because of:

a very convenient location by a railway station, well-suited for handling a large number of carriages, cattle and goods trucks and, at the same time, for operating current train traffic

---

<sup>5</sup> Brendt Rieger, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Klee, *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich*, S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2003: Ernst Emil Zörner (27 June 1895 in Nordhausen, died ?) an NSDAP member. The Mayor of Dresden. From 23 September to January 1940 the City Governor (*Stadthauptmann* in German) of Cracow. On 22 February 1940, he was appointed by Hans Frank chief of civil administration in the Lublin District. From February 1942, he was the Governor of the Lublin District. He gave the order to create a ghetto for the Jews in Lublin. On 22 April 1943, he was transferred to the Reich.

<sup>7</sup> Brendt Rieger, *op. cit.*, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> Bogdan Musiał, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> With reference to the extermination centre in Sobibór, this term was used, among other things, in communications concerning the deportation of 16,822 Jews (6-12 May 1942) from the Puławy area.

<sup>10</sup> Bogdan Musiał, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Dieter Pohl, *Von der „Judenpolitik“ zum Judenmord. Der Distrikt Lublin des Generalgouvernements 1939-1944*, Frankfurt am Main, 1993, p. 109.

- good railway and road connections with places where ghettos were built
- a suitable placement in an area where most of the cities, towns and villages were planned to be 'free of Jews'
- very peaceful and friendly-looking surroundings which had a calming effect on prisoners and provided a good camouflage for the camp

From the beginning of construction (probably October-November 1941) until August 1942, the German extermination centre in Sobibór came under the direct authority of the 'Operation Reinhardt' Headquarters. Because of the continuously growing range of tasks for 'Operation Reinhardt', Odilo Globocnik decided to coordinate the functioning of the death camps by means of the separate administrative structures of his headquarters. In collaboration with the 'T-4' headquarters and the Reich Security Head Office, Globocnik created, in August 1942, the Inspectorate for Special Commands of 'Operation Reinhardt', which meant 'the inspectorate for the death camps' (*Inspekteur f.d. Sonderkommandos 'Einsatz Reinhardt'* in German). The head of the Inspectorate was Christian Wirth, the commandant of the extermination camp in Belżec at the time, who from then on was the one to decide about the general internal structure of the camps, the appointing of camp commandants and their deputies, the number of camp personnel members, and the transferring of officers, non-commissioned officers and privates from one camp to another. However, the most important task of all was supervising the organisation of extermination. Wirth was also the one to execute orders concerning personal belongings of people murdered in the camps. Little is known, however, about structural links between the Inspectorate with the headquarters of that operation. It is not exactly known whether or not the headquarters were under his direct command, or perhaps, it was an autonomous structure because of its connections with the 'T4' headquarters<sup>12</sup>. The German extermination centre in Sobibór was also under the authority of the section for euthanasia in the Führer's Headquarters, directed by Philip Bouler, as well as the 'T4' headquarters with Viktor Brack as its head and his deputy – Werner Blankenburg. Philip Bouler was the chief of the Führer's Chancellery, and Viktor Brack was his deputy.

The third level of authority over the Sobibór camp was the Reich Security Head Office, which comprised the IV B 4 Office for Jewish matters, directed by Eichmann, who made decisions about exterminating Jewish people. At his disposal, he had the structures of the offices of the Higher SS and Police Commander in the General Government (headed by Wilhelm Kruger), SS and Police Commanders in the particular districts of the General Government, Security Police commandants and local security police posts. Involved in the mechanism of extermination was also the General Government administration, its clerks, district governors, mayors and order police. The head of the camp was a commandant. The first one in the extermination centre in Sobibór (from 28 April till August 1942) was SS-Hauptsturmführer Franz

---

<sup>12</sup> Józef Marszałek, 'System obozów śmierci w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie i jego funkcje (1942-1943)' [The System of Death Camps in the General Government and Its Functions (1942-1943)], *Zeszyty Majdanek* [The Majdanek Notebooks], 1996, vol.17, pp. 22-23.

Stangl. He was replaced by SS-Obersturmführer Franz Reichleitner, who was the camp commandant until its liquidation in December 1943. In the summer of 1942, Christian Wirth (as the inspector) created in the ‘Operation Reinhardt’ camps the position of a deputy commandant. In Sobibór, the deputy commandant was Johann Niemann. Under the authority of commandants came heads of individual sub-camps<sup>13</sup>. In the selected camp structures (Camp I, Camp II, Camp III, Camp IV under construction, the administration and provisions office in Camp II, the arsenal, the camp guards) the following non-commissioned officers were on duty:

1. Frenzel Karl – SS-Oberscharführer, Camp I.
2. Weiss Bruno – SS-Scharführer, Camp I.
3. Wolf Franz – SS-Scharführer, Camp II.
4. Wolf Josef – SS-Scharführer, Camp II.
5. Groth Paul – SS-Unterscharführer, Camp II.
6. Michel Hermann – SS-Oberscharführer, Camp II.
7. Schütt Heinz-Hans – SS-Scharführer, Camp II.
8. Beckmann Rudolf – SS-Oberscharführer, Camp II.
9. Bauer Erich – SS-Oberscharführer, Camp III.
10. Bolender Kurt – SS- Oberscharführer, Camp III.
11. Gomerski Hubert – SS-Oberscharführer, Camp III.
12. Gotzinger Anton – SS-Oberscharführer, Camp III.
13. Hodl Franz – SS-Unterscharführer, Camp III.
14. Ittner Alfred – SS-Oberscharführer, Camp III.
15. Grömer Josef (Ferdl) – SS-Scharführer, Camp III.
16. Dachsel Arthur – SS-Scharführer, Camp IV.
17. Dubois Werner – SS-Oberscharführer, the arsenal.
18. Graetschus Siegfried - SS-Oberscharführer, guard commander.
19. Lachmann Erich – SS-Scharführer, guard commander
20. Schafer Herbert – SS-Scharführer, guard commander<sup>14</sup>.

The location of Sobibór in the border region between the General Government and the occupied territory of the USSR greatly increased the camouflage effect. Sobibór was supposed to look like a transit camp on the way to work in the East. On three sides, the area of the future camp was surrounded by a thin pine forest, which partly grew north and west of it. The natural borders of the area was the Bug River from the east (3-4 kilometres away) and Bug marshes, and a wide belt of marshes by the Włodawka riverside from the north and the west. The area was open only from the south. Soon after the Germans declared war on the Soviet Union, in the autumn of 1941, a group of SS-men repeatedly visited the area neighbouring the Sobibór railway station<sup>15</sup>. They

<sup>13</sup> Józef Marszałek, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>14</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór. Zapomniane Powstanie* [Sobibór. The Forgotten Revolt], Włodawa, 2003, pp. 63–65.

<sup>15</sup> Andrzej Wawryniuk, *Powiat Włodawski, historia, geografia, gospodarka, polityka. Monografia miejscowości* [The Włodawa Province. Its History, Geography, Economy and

made measurements of the terrain near the rails and the forest on the eastern side of the tracks. They came along three times to do it. After some time, possibly as early as 1941, or at the beginning of 1942, trains carrying building materials made a stop at the Sobibór station. Jan Piwoński, a pointsman at the Sobibór station, recalled the Germans having transported by train a heavy solid door insulated with rubber bands on all sides. Those transports aroused curiosity in railwaymen, employees of the forestry division and inhabitants of nearby villages. Soon came first transports carrying people. In the early winter of January or February of 1942, the Germans arrived at the station from the direction of the Chełm-Włodawa line, and brought Jews with them.

According to the accounts by Polish railwaymen working at the Sobibór station, the Jews took up quarters in a barrack built near the forest, close to the rails, and were supposed to continue building the camp. A significant piece of information about the beginnings of the construction of the camp is provided in his account by Z. Krawczak, who had been a prisoner in the labour camp in Krychów (a dozen or so kilometres away from Sobibór) since June 1941. Krawczak, an astute observer, was chosen by the camp commandant to do office work. After his escape from Krychów (in the summer of 1943), he emigrated to Switzerland, where he wrote down an account of his war stories. With reference to the information included in that account, concerning the construction of the Sobibór camp in particular, I claim that Krawczak is mistaken in claiming that April was the beginning of the camp construction. Probably, he described events until April, not since April. Given the context of that piece of information, it may be in the final months of 1941 that the first building works started in the camp. Even though he gives a number of detailed pieces of information, he never mentions Richard Thomalla<sup>16</sup>, who took over camp building supervision and general camp functioning, and the kind of the works he describes were mostly efforts to obtain building materials and supplies. Krawczak provides information that a few SS-men under the command of Strumph (an ex-commandant of the camp in Sawin near to Chełm) arrived from the labour camp in Osowa (7 kilometres west of Sobibór). They came together with a group of 120 Jews from Chełm, who actually began to build the camp in Sobibór. The building material organised by the *Deutsch Horst* company had been transported from the camp in Krychów, and directly from the Chełm railway station. The organisation of those supplies came under the authority of the Water Management Inspector, based in Chełm – Engineer Franz Holzheimer (from the Hanover area). The overall

---

Policy. A Monograph on the Province Places], Włodawa, 2010, pp.504-520: Sobibór – a village in Poland, situated in the Lublin Region in the Włodawa district, in the Włodawa commune, on the Bug River. In the years 1867-1933, it was the seat of the Sobibór commune. In the years 1975-1993, it belonged to the Chełm province. 4 kilometres east of the village, in the middle of a forest, there is a railway station near which the German extermination camp functioned in the years 1942-1943.

<sup>16</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 42: Richard Thomalla (born on 23 October 1903 in Annahof, died on 12 May 1945 in Jičín) - an SS-Hauptsturmführer, the architect and constructor of three extermination camps: Treblinka, Belżec and Sobibór. In all probability, he was the commandant of the three camps when their construction began.

construction of the camp was supervised by Moser, a building architect, based in Chełm at the time, and later transferred to *Technische Hauptamt* in Cracow.

It may be assumed that by the time Thomalla arrived in Sobibór, the area of the future camp had already turned into a building site. The scope of essential works to be planned and done there was so great that construction plans must have started to be implemented as early as in the autumn of 1941, notwithstanding the old building and the communication infrastructure that was fully used. Checking the topography of the area, marking borders, planning internal communication, organising necessary building materials, felling trees, laying on electricity, a network of phone lines, sewage pipes and providing water supply - all these tasks had to be done by Inspector Moser and his personnel. According to Krawczak's account, the personnel could have been made up of Inspector Holtzheimer, Nelkowski – an architect from *Technisches Hauptamt Zamość*, two SD commanders stationed in Chełm – Hugo Raschendorf and Rudolf Theimer, Dolmer from Vienna and Willi (surname unknown) from Ostrava in Moravia, SS-Scharführer Joseph Napieralla from Oppeln - the commandant of the camp in Trawniki, and low ranking Gestapo and SS officials. In all probability, Architect and Building Inspector Moser represented the SS Building Management in Chełm. From November 1941 to January 1942, the Lublin branch of *Zentralbauleitung* had three building managements: in Chełm, Zamość and Lublin. Each management was composed of four departments – three technical and one general – a building office for running and managing organisational, administrative and financial matters. The technical departments had exactly the same structure as their respective counterparts in the Central Management, except that their task was rather to prepare detailed documentation. In practice, as far as minor building sites in Lublin were concerned, they were not expanded according to original plans because, among other things, there was a shortage of money and specialists to be employed there.

Presumably, for investments connected with building the extermination centres and some of the labour camps in the Lublin region (considered as top secret), the SS and Police Central Building Management in Lublin organised individual *Sonderkommandos*, which built those centres themselves, even though they were controlled and supervised by the Building Management. The area around Sobibór was at the time visited by SS-Hauptsturmführer Naumann, the director of the SS and Police Building Office in Lublin<sup>17</sup>. It is possible that in the autumn of 1941, when the first measurements and planning works were commenced in the area of the future camp, Moser and his team were based in the camp in Osowa. They commuted to the Sobibór railway station in horse-drawn carts. The Jews who were the first to begin constructing the Sobibór camp had been transported from Osowa as well. In the area planned and allotted for the future death camp, there were: a building - the seat of the Sobibór Forestry Division, a forester's farmland, a steam saw-mill and a chapel. The abovementioned objects had been there since at least 1930. On a forest map from

<sup>17</sup> Józef Marszałek, 'Centralny Zarząd Budowlany SS i Policji w Lublinie' [The SS and Police Central Building Management], *Zeszyty Majdanka* [The Majdanek Notebooks], 1972, vol. 6, p. 12; Jan Piwoński, interrogation record, Lublin, 29 April 1975.

1930, the borderlines of those institutions are clearly marked<sup>18</sup>. Along the rails, near the station, the farthest place to the south was the saw-mill with an approximate surface area of 30 metres by 60 metres, whose longer side ran parallel to the rails. The seat of the saw-mill was adjacent to a plot of land (15 metres by 30 metres) with a wooden building on it, housing offices of the Sobibór Forestry Division and a postal agency. The western side of the forestry division land's fence adjoined the fence of the eastern side of the forester's farmland, which had a similar area to that of the forestry division land, and whose longer side was placed to the east and west. The southernmost place was the chapel situated by the road. That arrangement of land development is confirmed by military aerial photos from 1940<sup>19</sup>. Access to all of those places was possible thanks to a road running parallel to the rails, which made up, together with a fragment of the rails, the edge of the western borderline of the area of the future camp. About 70 metres north of the chapel, the road turned east and ran in the direction of the villages of Żłobek and Okuninka, where it joined the Chełm-Włodawa road.

Comparing the infrastructure arrangement that the Germans met around the Sobibór railway station in the autumn of 1941 with the plans of the already functioning camp, it is clearly evident that, in large measure, the planners of the extermination centre took full advantage of the already existing features of that area. The confiscated area of the saw-mill was chosen and partitioned in such a way as to make its southern limits the camp borderline at the same time. It was an empty space which was easy to develop, where timber was stored, and which was also used for building the camp later. The existing main road was a natural communication line inside the camp. Part of the saw-mill area together with the land and the building of the forestry division constituted the future Fore-camp. The forester's farmland was wholly used for purposes of the future so-called Camp II. The farmhouse was used by camp administration offices, the barn was used as a store of shoes which remained after victims. The pigsty, the stables and other outbuildings still served their original purposes. The whole area of Camp II was surrounded by a tall board fence so that it would not be possible to see from outside what was going on inside the camp. The central part of Camp II was a large yard where prisoners were gathered after they left a 'luggage barrack'. On the walls of Camp II and under the shelters adjoining it, there were railway timetables and all kinds of posters which appealed to keep the place clean and tidy. The whole road from the ramp to Camp II was lined with signs which gave directions to the showers. Both the map from 1930 and the aerial views from 1940 show that the farmland is divided into two parts. The southern part with a farmhouse and a garden was separated by a fence from the farmland's northern part with outbuildings. The farmhouse and the garden were used by the Germans as an administration back office of the future camp. The house was a big wooden building with a porch all along the front façade. Later, the house was used as a store for

---

<sup>18</sup> A map of the tree stand of the State Sobibór Forestry Division (Scale 1:15 000), Sobibór, 1930, copy of the original map from Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>19</sup> An aerial view, Lb. St. 1, F 911a/44, 10 May 1940, copy of the original photo from Marek Bem's private collection.

money, gold and valuables. A Jewish goldsmith worked there, whose job was to sort the valuables and prepare them for transport. There was also a medical store in the same building, where a prisoner – a Jewish pharmacist sorted medicines, perfumes and cosmetics. The building faced the yard where there had previously been the forester's outbuildings. That area had been developed into a yard where prisoners got undressed before they followed the 'road to heaven' that led to the gas chamber. A large part of that yard, as the extermination centre went on functioning, was also partly used for its original purposes. There was a vegetable garden, a stable, a hen house and a pigsty. By the northern part of the yard wall, sorting barracks had been built. Before the war, along the northern wall of the forestry division land, there had been a road leading to the forester's farmland. Later, victims in massive numbers followed that road from the ramp to Camp II. It may also be presumed that the road that ran out of the forester's farmland to the north east to the forest was used for the future connection to the gas chamber. The empty space east of the seat of the forestry division and south of the forester's farmland was meant for the future area of Camp I.

The Sobibór railway station was composed of: the main railway, a siding track which enabled two trains to pass each other at the same time while moving from opposite directions as well as the ramp tracks. Along the main tracks that ran parallel to each other, on the eastern side, at the same level as the forester's house, there functioned a freight siding which allowed unloading freight during the regular train traffic. At the Sobibór station, there were two loading tracks, one of which was used by the Germans as an internal ramp to handle the upcoming transports of Jews. The western loading track was mainly used for loading timber, the distribution of which was dealt with by the forestry division on the other side of the station<sup>20</sup>. This is, in a way, confirmed by Czesław Sójka, who, in one of his testimonies he gave at the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin in 1968, admitted that he had seen that the siding had been extended well into the camp area<sup>21</sup>. Having done that, the Germans were then in a position to handle transports carrying prisoners without disrupting the regular timetable of ordinary passenger trains. By the timetable, two passenger trains were to stop at the station during the day, and freight trains that collected timber from the nearby forester's workshop could arrive at different times of day and night, also for the purpose of delivering timber for the camp. The siding ran south – north from the direction of Chełm, parallel with the other main tracks, and then about 155 metres inside the camp just behind its outer eastern wall (built between the siding and the main railway), where it finished with a bumper block right inside the camp (the 'block' has been standing in the same place to this day). Along the siding, a 120 metre long ramp was erected at which a locomotive and eleven trucks could stop. Practically, it seems impossible to exactly estimate, on the basis of various accounts and testimonies, how many people were unloaded from trucks at a time and, consequently, how many of them were rolled to the camp siding at a time.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> Czesław Sójka, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 22 January 1968, MPŁW Archives. Muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego (the MPŁW) [The Museum of The Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District] in Włodawa.

Considering the number of the camp personnel members, the division of duties and the procedure of dealing with prisoners from the moment they were unloaded from the trucks until they were locked up in the gas chamber, it cannot have been a group of more than 600 people. In 1984, the court in Hagen appointed a group of Polish geodetic experts to establish the length of the siding in the inner part of the Sobibór camp. They estimated that the distance to the bumper block was 155 metres. With the siding parallel to it, the loading ramp was 120 metres long. Both figures may give an idea about how many trucks could be brought into the camp area. Without the length of the locomotive, the remaining distance for the freight trucks was 110 metres. The average length of a truck at that time was about 10 metres from buffer to buffer. On the basis of this information, it can be estimated that eleven trucks could roll inside the camp at a time<sup>22</sup>. A typical train from the General Government, the occupied territories, *Reichskommissariatu Ostland* and *Reichskommissariatu Ukraine* was composed of about 50 freight trucks with 100 Jews in each, together with two passenger carriages (one at the back, one at the front of the train) with about 30 escorts. They were mostly Germans – SS and police officers, but also Ukrainians and Lithuanians<sup>23</sup>. The steam locomotive staff: a locomotive driver, his assistant and, occasionally, a stoker were Poles. Trains from Western Europe were composed mainly of carriages from those countries. Usually, one transport carried 1,000 people. A typical train was made up of 30–40 carriages, including two second-class ones for usually 25 escorts, third-class (sometimes fourth-class) passenger carriages for Jews, and 5–10 freight trucks for luggage<sup>24</sup>. Assuming that carriages from Holland and other countries from the west of Europe carried from 50 to 70 people, and in transports from Poland even up to 90, there seemed to be no problem with rolling to the ramp a suitable number of freight trucks with around 600 people on board. This information was provided by witnesses who mention that from 5 to 20 trucks were rolled to the ramp at a time. The maximum number of people who could have found themselves at the ramp and then in the changing room would be about 600, which equals the number of people that could have been squeezed into the gas chambers (some of the arrivals were taken to the camp hospital, and some were selected for labour).

The existing infrastructure that was taken over by the Germans was wholly used as a camp supply base. It is clearly evident that the choice of a place for building a future camp had been carefully planned and thought-out. By the time Richard Thomalla arrived, there must have been prepared technical plans of the construction of the camp, the scope of supplies and some of the preliminary building works. The most laborious and time-consuming activity must have been: setting the camp's borders, felling trees in the area where a so-called Camp III was planned to be, drilling wells and making timber out of felled trees. According to the aerial views from 1940, the whole area where the gas chambers were built, pits for corpses were dug and the sector for *Sonderkommando* prisoners was separated, had been completely wooded.

<sup>22</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>23</sup> Czesław Bakunowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Sonderzüge nach Auschwitz*, Mainz, 1981, p. 127.

That area had required a thorough clearing of the trees growing there, together with their roots. Among other works done in the autumn of 1941 and the winter of 1941/42, there was also the cutting down of the nearby forests for timber. According to accounts by inhabitants of the village of Sobibór, the tree felling was also performed just behind the railway station of Sobibór, which is confirmed by comparisons of the aerial views of the Sobibór environs from 1940 and 1944. The tree stand that was growing there at the time was of exceptionally high quality. From the autumn of 1941 until March 1942, Moser and his team used local people for works on the territory of the future camp. It cannot be stated for certain whether or not Jews really did forced labour. Also, it is unknown to what degree Polish peasants were forced to deliver building materials as a levy, or whether or not they were at all paid for doing works ordered by Moser. Jan Piwoński claimed that the first group of Jews arrived in Sobibór as early as in January or February 1942. They were quartered in the area of the future camp and forced to do building works<sup>25</sup>. For specialist works, which required suitable equipment and skills, and above all, for unloading, the Germans hired local inhabitants of nearby villages. The Germans carried on those activities until the most important building works were completed and the systematic, mass-scale extermination of Jews started (mid-April 1942). Through local *Judenrats*, more and more groups of Jews were sent to forced labour in Sobibór<sup>26</sup>.

By the end of March 1942, the territory of the camp and building works were supervised by patrol soldiers from the Włodawa post. In November 1941, SS and Police Commander for the Lublin District Odilo Globocnik gave an instruction to the commander of patrol soldiers in the Lublin district - Ferdinand Hahnzog to assist in the construction of the camp in Sobibór. Globocnik gave the instruction in person at a meeting to which Hahnzog had been invited to Lublin. During his visit,

<sup>25</sup> Zygmunt Białucha, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD-058/67, Włodawa, 17 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Jan Piwoński, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD-058/67, Włodawa, 16 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Jan Piwoński, transcript of an interview conducted by Cloude Lanzmann, DVD recording, USMM Archives, file ref. No. 60. 5031, Israel, 1985, translated from English by Marek Bem; Czesław Sójka, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD-058/67, Włodawa, 22 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Irena Sujko, witness interrogation record, (file ref. No. – missing), Lublin, 1 February 1968, MPLW Archives; Irena Sujko, witness interrogation record, file ref. No. Ko. Kpp. 91/67, Biała Podlaska, 8 July 1967, MPLW Archives; Kazimierz Piwoński, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD-058/67, Włodawa, 15 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Józef Sowa, copy of a fragment of Sowa's statement (origin unknown), MPLW Archives; Jan Piwoński, witness interrogation record, ZStL-643/71-4-441, Lublin, 29 April 1975, MPLW Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Transcript of a document from the Museum of the Chełm Region archives, copy from Marek Bem's private collection: *Die Stadtverwaltung, Der Stadt Cholm, Cholm den 30 April 1942 j. An der Herrn Stadtkommissar in Cholm. Ich teilemit, dassam 29.04. 1942um 16 Uhr folgende judischen Arbeiter durch die SS von der Arbeit in der Deustchestrasse festgehalten und mitgenommen worden sind: Grinberg Lejzor, Sztern Szaja, Rubin Moszko, Gutharc Joel, Weberszpil Chil, Sarna Hersz, Szwarecbir Mordko, Sarna Szloma, Grynberg Chil Nach Auskunft des Judenrates sind obenerwahnnten Juden zum Lager in Sobibor ueberfuhr Wordem?*

Hahnzog was familiarised by Globocnik with a “*young SS commander who had been commissioned to have a camp constructed in Sobibór*”. That event undoubtedly confirms the fact that the construction of the German death camp in Sobibór began as early as in 1941<sup>27</sup>. From March 1942, Sobibór became a closed area watched by guards from Trawniki, and supervised by Commandant Thomalla<sup>28</sup>. From that time onwards, the Germans took to building places connected with the process of extermination. They started constructing a gas chamber, ‘the road to Hell’, digging pits for burying dead bodies of victims and organising the camp administration buildings and the Commandant’s office<sup>29</sup>. At the time of the erection of the camp in Bełżec, Thomalla had gained much experience, which made works at the Sobibór camp faster and more effective. Krawczak recalls great interest caused by information about putting up a strange building without windows in the area of the camp. It was probably noticed in April 1942 by local people. In the pronouncement of the court verdicts given in 1966 in a trial against members of the personnel of the German extermination centre in Sobibór, the court in Hagen ruled that Gustaw Wagner might have stayed in Sobibór since March 1942 and participated in constructing it. Such a thesis seems to be justified. Wagner’s participation in the building of the camp at the start of the construction of the gas chamber sounds very logical, considering his two-year experience in that matter (he had gained experience in the euthanasia centre in Hartheim). Christian Wirth, who supervised the erection of the camps in Bełżec and Sobibór, got to know Wagner very well in Hartheim. In the middle of 1940, Wirth became the inspector of all euthanasia centres in Germany and Austria, whose aim was to kill people. Wirth was also appointed managing director of the euthanasia centre in Hartheim. Wirth’s adjutant, Josef Oberhauser, was also a specialist in euthanasia, and a crematorium employee in the Grafeneck centre.

All went according to plan, accepted and thought-out in every detail by Odilo Globocnik<sup>30</sup>. At the time when Richard Thomalla arrived in Sobibór, in the early

<sup>27</sup> Bogdan Musiał, ‘Przypadek modelowy dotyczący eksterminacji Żydów. Początki „Akcji Reinhardt” - planowanie masowego mordu Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie’ [A Case Study of the Extermination of the Jews. The Beginnings of ‘Operation Reinhardt’ – Planning the Mass Murder of the Jews in the General Government] (in): Dariusz Libionka, ed., *Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* [The Extermination of the Jews in the General Government], Warszawa, 2004, pp. 35-36.

<sup>28</sup> Franciszek Parkoła, witness interrogation record, (file ref. No. - missing), Lublin, 5 May 1967, MPLW Archives; Jakob Engelhardt, witness interrogation record, Leningrad, 21 August 1975, NIOD Archives; Józef Cholewa, witness interrogation record, (file ref. No. - missing), Lublin, 18 May 1967, MPLW Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Stanisław Kowalewski, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 15 January 1968, MPLW Archives.

<sup>30</sup> Berndt Rieger, *op. cit.* - Odilo (Otto) Lotario Globocnik: (born on 21 April 1904, died on 31 May 1945) – an activist of the NSDAP and the SS, Commander of the SS and Police for the Lublin District in the General Government, an SS-Obergruppenführer. Born in an Austrian family of Slovenian origin in Trieste, Globocnik first worked as a salesman. From 1922, he was an active member of Carinthian pro-Nazi paramilitary organisations. In

spring of 1942, the Włodawa *Judenrat* was instructed to dispatch 150 Jews to do building works, which lasted for about two months, by the railway station in Sobibór.

No one knew the purpose of those works. The first information about them reached Włodawa only when two ragged and starving labourers from the group that had been sent to Sobibór got through to the Włodawa ghetto after the building works ended. They were Abraham Szmajs and Fajwel Cukierman's son-in-law. Without delay, they talked about a so-called 'bath' built in Sobibór, which in fact turned out to be a gas chamber, and where all the labourers had been directed after the end of the works. Nobody would believe them at first<sup>31</sup>. No one really knew why the Germans were developing that area. At that time, rumour had it that there was going to be a labour camp there. Among those employed for the building works, Józef Cholewa recognised a few acquaintances from Uhrusk.

While the building works were in progress, the Jews were constantly harassed, hurried and hit. Józef Cholewa witnessed Germans shooting at labourers. Among the killed was one of his acquaintances from Uhrusk by the name of Baum. A few days after Thomalla had arrived in Sobibór, the first unit of guards from Trawniki reached the place. That could have happened even in March, or between March and April. It has to do with an eleven person unit of guards under Jacob Engelhardt's command. According to witnesses, about 20 'Askaris' arrived by train from Chełm, too. They were wearing green uniforms with black collars and caps. They spoke mostly Russian, but some of them also spoke Polish. One of them talked to Józef Cholewa, and told him that his name was Bieliński, and that he came from the Lvov area. Richard Thomalla organised a meeting with the Polish railwaymen at the saw-mill, where he generally informed them that "*something will be built*" there, and instructed everybody, under the threat of death, to keep law and order in the area.

The Germans quickly had the allocated area for the camp surrounded by a fence, partly including the former area of the saw-mill, the forestry division offices, the post

---

1931, he joined the Austrian NSDAP, and the SS in 1934. In the years 1933-1935, he was arrested four times by Austrian authorities for activity in the NSDAP (illegal at the time), and for treason. Overall, he spent 11 months in gaol. Extremely energetic and dynamic as he apparently was, Globocnik, an ordinary NSDAP member, quickly got a promotion. As a result, he became one of the leaders of Austrian national socialists. Also, he actively supported a military coup which deposed the Austrian government, thus making *Anschluss* possible (joining Austria to the Third Reich). In acknowledgement of his support, on 22 May 1938, Adolf Hitler appointed Globocnik Gauleiter of Vienna. On 30 June 1939, Globocnik was suspended in his duties. On 9 November 1939, Globocnik was nominated Commander of the SS and Police in the Lublin District of the General Government. On 13 October 1941, Globocnik received a verbal order from Heinrich Himmler to immediately commence the construction of the first extermination camp in the General Government, which was supposed to be located in Bełżec. Globocnik was responsible for the death of over 1,5 million Jews, Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, Dutch and French people, Russians, Germans and Austrians in the extermination camps of 'Operation Reinhardt', which he organised and supervised.

<sup>31</sup> Ephraim Tilip, 'Zniszczenie Włodawy' [The Destruction of Włodawa] (in): Sz. Kanc, ed., *Życie i upadek Włodawy. Księga Pamięci Włodawy* [The Włodawa Remembrance Book], Tel Aviv, 1974, translated from English by Albert Lewczuk vel Leoniuk.

office, the forester's house and the chapel. The view inside the camp was screened by means of pine branches which were woven into the barbed wire of the camp fence. Later, at the main gate, a wooden watchtower with a machine gun post was raised. From that period of time, the Polish railwaymen remembered trains loaded with bricks that arrived in Sobibór. The Jews present there had to unload the bricks running. Eyewitnesses confirmed cases of Germans killing Jews who were too exhausted to labour any further. For their quarters, the Germans had confiscated the one-storey house of the forestry division and the forester's farmland. Then they started to put up new barracks, using material reclaimed from the demolition of houses which had been deserted by Ukrainian locals in the village of Sobibór. Poles could merely glimpse at the front of the fenced camp. The SS-men warned everybody not to come near to the camp, look into it or otherwise take an interest in it<sup>32</sup>. The building works, supervised by Thomalla, were progressing very fast. At the beginning of May, all had to be prepared so that the centre could regularly accept transports with people doomed to extermination. In the existing incomplete archives of the SS Central Building Management, not a single trace can be found of the building documentation of the Sobibór camp. However, it seems obvious that the camp plans and its documentation must have existed.

At the end of April 1942, Franz Stangl together with over ten non-commissioned officers set off for Lublin. They were to be the new personnel of the extermination centre in Sobibór. Stangl was appointed the new camp commandant. In Lublin, he met with Globocnik, who instructed him to supervise the building of the camp in Sobibór. Globocnik stressed the need for a quick finish of works there. He thought they were going on too slowly, and therefore, it was necessary to rely on someone who would properly do work management. He suggested that Stangl should see Wirth, who would let him into the details of the whole undertaking<sup>33</sup>. A few days before Stangl arrived in Sobibór, Ermfried Eberle, a medical doctor, appeared in the camp. In all probability, he worked together with Stangl in order to gain the necessary experience in organising and managing an extermination centre. He was soon to become the commandant of the extermination camp in Treblinka. The evidence of his presence in the camp is a letter he sent to Brenburg<sup>34</sup>. Stangl spent the first night in the officers'

<sup>32</sup> Janina Prokopiuk, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD- 058/67, Włodawa, 15 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Jan Piwoński, witness interrogation record, Lublin, 29 April 1975, MPLW Archives; Zygmunt Białucha, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD-058/67, Włodawa, 17 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Jan Piwoński, transcript of an interview conducted by Claude Lanzmann, DVD recording, USHMM Archives, file ref. No. 60. 5031, Israel, 1985, translated from English by Marek Bem.

<sup>33</sup> Erich Bauer, witness interrogation record, 350 Ss 4155/62, Berlin, 13 December 1962, NIOD Archives; Erich Bauer, interrogation record, 350 Gs 4155/62, Berlin, 10 December 1962, NIOD Archives; Erich Bauer, interrogation record, 45 Js 27/61 St A Dortmund, Berlin, 20 October 1962, NIOD Archives; Kurt Bolender, interrogation record, Abt. III a/8K, Munich, 5 June 1961, NIOD Archives.

<sup>34</sup> Copy of the letter from Marek Bem's private collection – available courtesy of the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom in Treblinka.

quarters in Lublin. The following morning, he was driven to Chełm by car. In Chełm, he was supposed to meet with Moser, who was responsible for supplying building materials to the Sobibór camp. According to Stangl, Globocnik gave him a clear order. The Sobibór camp was to be a supply camp for the army. From Chełm, Stangl and Moser were driven to the Sobibór railway station, stopping by at the labour camps in Krychów and in the village of Sobibór. They did not reach the camp under construction on that day, though. They stayed the night in the village of Sobibór, and it was only the following day that he could see his workplace. He spent little time in the camp. The same day, he returned to Chełm for the night, and the following day, he went to Lublin. He returned to Sobibór three days later in the company of six men, among whom there was a good friend of his – Michel (with whom he had cooperated in Hartheim). From that time, Stangl could recall that by the station, in the place where the camp was to be completed, there were only three buildings: a station building, a forester's lodge and a barn. He met there a few acquaintances from the 'Euthanasia Programme'. A group of Polish workers was hanging around on the building site. Stangl immediately noticed that they made the impression of being continuously apathetic and drunk. After two or three days, he organised for himself a special work squad composed of 25 Jews and a few Ukrainian guards from the nearby training camp in Trawniki. Stangl claimed that during the first weeks of his stay in Sobibór, he had no creature comforts at all. He had to start from scratch. All the personnel slept in one house, which was the house with offices of the local forestry division. It was only after three days that Michel turned Stangl's attention to a strange building in the forest. It was a new building made of brick with three 'rooms', 3 metres by 4 metres. It immediately struck Stangl that the building looked exactly like the gas chamber in Hartheim. In spite of that, he had no idea what it could be used for<sup>35</sup>. Stangl's testimonies, accounts or interviews, which are informative of his several months' service in Sobibór, give an impression of being deeply thought-out. Moreover, they conceal the real reason for his stay in Sobibór and the character of that place. They are full of information about his numerous journeys to Globocnik, arguments with Wirth, the never-ending construction, general uncertainty about the function he had to perform, wishes to give up and leave Sobibór, and also care about his family. However, they do not make a single mention of commencing the total extermination of the Jews on a hitherto unknown mass scale.

The gas chamber building utilised for killing Jews deported to the German extermination centre in Sobibór was built at the end of March and the beginning of April 1942, or earlier in April 1942. In the autumn of 1942, that building was partially or wholly knocked down or renovated, extended and enlarged. As a result, a new gas chamber building was erected in its place. Since none of the prisoners working in Camp III (where the gas chambers and the mass graves were located) survived the camp, Sobibór historiography has to rely on camp ex-prisoners' descriptions of that building, full of accidental observations and speculations, very 'succinct' testimonies given by ex-members of the camp personnel (German and Ukrainian

<sup>35</sup> Gitta Sereny, *op.cit.*, pp. 94-95.

guards), and accounts by inhabitants of nearby villages, railwaymen and forestry members. In the justification of the sentence in the court case against Karl Frenzel, the jury in Hagen prepared a description of the gas chamber. On the basis of the several dozen very different, often too general and imprecise descriptions<sup>36</sup> that are available, I consider the Hagen jury's description of the Sobibór gas chamber to be adequate to match a possible appearance of the chamber at the time. It is a highly general description, but it includes the most crucial matters, and suitably takes into consideration observations provided by eyewitnesses, whose testimonies were and still are the only descriptions of that building: “ [...] *About 500 metres west of that chapel, the preliminary works squad put up a building with a gas chamber inside it, a small massive construction on a concrete foundation. Inside the building were three separate gastight chambers of 4 metres by 4 metres, parallel with each other. Each chamber had an insulated door in the opposite empty walls, with one door serving as the entrance to the chamber, and the other as the exit - for taking corpses out. The building team had had all fittings installed and a special annexe built by the back gable wall. In the annexe, there was an engine which fed exhaust fumes to kill the Jews. The gas chamber building was situated in the so-called Camp III, which was a fenced yard. It had its own separate fence made of barbed wire. The building with the gas chambers in it was located in the southernmost part of that area. The annexe with the engine was beside the building with the gas chambers. The exhaust pipe of the huge engine 'Otto' was connected to the system of cables which ended in the shower nozzles on the ceilings of the particular gas chambers. The engine received specifically calculated settings for the carburettor, and the number of revolutions. With the gas chamber doors locked, it was possible to create such a high degree of concentration of poisonous exhaust fumes from the engine inside the chambers (carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide) that the people trapped inside suffocated in agony for about 20-30 minutes. In time, the gas chambers turned out to be too small, and the 'efficiency' of the Sobibór camp proved to be too low. The old building with the gas chambers was partially torn down by the Lublin headquarters building crew under Lambert's technical guidance. It was replaced by a new massive building with twice as many chambers. Each of them had an area of 4 metres by 4 metres and a height of 2,20 metres. They were positioned on both sides of the corridor or formed just one row. Each of the chambers could hold about 80 people, if they were tightly squeezed. Since then, after the building works that lasted only for a few weeks, in the six chambers about 480 people could be killed at the same time. The old chambers proved to be impractical also due to too small an exit door, which*

<sup>36</sup> Descriptions of the gas chamber building are provided in testimonies, accounts and reminiscences by former camp prisoners, members of the camp personnel and outside witnesses: Jan Krzowski, Józef Maliński, Franciszek Parkoła, Jan Piwoński, Kazimierz Piwoński, Irena Sujko, Jakob Engelhardt, Erich Bauer, Kurt Bolender, Emanuel Henrykiewicz Szulc, Michaił Affanasewicz Razgonajew, Erwin Lambert, Ignat Terentiewicz Danilczenko, Iwan Michajłowicz Karakas, Wasilij Nikołajewicz Pankow, Kurt Ticho, Hersz Cukierman, Leon Feldhendler, Josef Frajtag, Eda Lichtman, Siemion Rozenfeld.

*was used for taking corpses out of the chamber. During the renovation, the door was replaced by a broader 'pendular' one. Since then, the working squad of Camp III could more easily get out of the chambers tightly huddled corpses, often extremely dirty, standing next to each other or twisted together, and then transport them to the pits along the narrow-gauge tracks. A special squad of prisoners in Camp III was to clear the chambers of blood and excrement as quickly as possible, before the next group of victims got inside [...]*<sup>37</sup>.

One of the questions about the gas chamber in the German extermination centre in Sobibór is the method of building the foundations of such a building. Assuming that the gas chamber building was built of brick, the foundations were supposedly made of ground beams. Considering the speed of the renovation of the old chamber (or building the new one), the ordering of timber in a saw-mill near Warsaw by the chamber builders (it may have been a special order if there were no attempts to find timber in the Włodawa area), and given the suitable sandy ground on the camp territory, it seems quite possible that the foundations of the gas chamber in Sobibór were composed of ground beams. Such a system meets the criteria of cheap foundations made of durable and easily available materials. Obviously, the commandant of the camp, and the heads of 'Operation Reinhardt' in particular never considered building a structure which would function very long. On the contrary, they knew that all that was being constructed at the camps would be knocked down within a few months or so. Moreover, time was a very important factor. The camp could not stop functioning for too long. Taking advantage of wooden ground beams is one of the options to save time, money, work and materials<sup>38</sup>. Lambert and Hackenholz, SS experts on building and renovation works, who were engaged in the projects and construction of the gas chambers in all three 'Operation Reinhardt' death centres, were well aware of all those advantages. It was, too, clear for them that the system could be made more quickly than standard solid concrete or brick foundations. If the building construction had been knocked down, there would not have been, in the first place, deep fireproof foundations to be laid and then destroyed. The only problem was the size of timber to support the wall in the system of ground beams, which required good technological knowledge and experience.

The soil in Sobibór is sandy, and this kind of ground is perfect for bearing weight. It does not expand in volume when it is wet, and, what is more, it is characterised by good friction and compression. All those features are essential to build a strong ground beam, and to provide a safe distance between poles so that the stretching of the beam loaded down with a wall can be reduced to a minimum. This can be achieved by using square beams which are broad in diameter.

---

<sup>37</sup> *Sobibor. Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der „Aktion Reinhard“*, Institute of Documentation For Investigation of Nazi War Crimes in Israel, Haifa, 1998, p. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Fiset (Director Building Materials and Wood Technology, 126 Holdsworth Natural Resources Center University of Massachusetts), *Grade Beam System of Construction of the New Gas Chamber*, Amherst, 1998. Translated from English by Marek Bem, copy from Marek Bem's private collection.

In Sobibór, the renovation of the old gas chamber could have taken a short time without having to dig and erect a concrete or brick base. It would mean that after knocking that building down, its only remains would have been small areas of mixed earth in the places where poles supported the foundations, or fragments of such poles together with remnants of the foundations.

A lot more questions like these can be asked. To a very limited degree, the only possible chance to find answers to these questions is through archaeological research. I am of the opinion that the excavations made in the spring of 2011 have, beyond doubt, shown the route of ‘the road to Heaven’ in its final stage, which ‘ushered’ victims into the gas chamber. Such findings increase chances of locating the remains of the gas chamber. Getting to know the place where the chamber was built offers a chance for a thorough analysis of its framework. Consequently, such an analysis enhances the probability of a factual description of its ground part and ways of functioning.

An extremely significant issue to discover (inextricably connected with the construction of the whole building) is how the chambers in Belzec, Sobibór and Treblinka were cleansed after each gassing of victims. There was no practice of throwing out of the building all sorts of waste matter (which had to be washed off the walls and the floor) that remained after victims were gassed. Supposedly, waste matter trickled down under the floor, which necessitated using a special floor and a special construction of the foundations in the building. The problem of cleansing determined the building of the chamber on raised foundations or over a special pit, a ‘basement’, which enabled waste matter to soak and accumulate in the soil. That kind of construction also enabled waste matter to be systematically removed. A few witnesses<sup>39</sup> describing the construction of the gas chambers in Sobibór pay attention to the fact that they were built in a pit, or that access to them was over a special bridge.

***[On 8 September 2014, the archaeologists unearthed remains of red brick walls. All the indications are that these are the remains of the gas chamber. The excavated area lies between the (so-called) ‘road to heaven,’ the crematorium, the remains of the barrack which, at the time when the camp was operational, belonged to the special commando unit, and the well. A panel of experts from the Museum of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi German Concentration and Extermination Camp have officially confirmed the find. Undoubtedly, this remarkable discovery will be of vital importance in further research into the Holocaust because it might enable researchers to, firstly, arrive at a more accurate estimate of the Sobibór camp’s victims, and, secondly, to obtain more precise information as to the exact way in which the victims were murdered].***

Comparing testimonies by Jakob Engelhardt, Erich Fuchs and Franz Stangl also reveals a few inconsistencies connected with the date of the first trial gassing of Jews in

<sup>39</sup> A report by K. Schnierstein – the District Court Prosecutor in Lublin from 23 November 1945, (No. I Dz. 1438/45) to the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, Cracow, 41 Straszewskiego St. to Examining Appeal Justice Józef Skorzyński in Radom, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0017 and Jakob Engelhardt, interrogation record, Leningrad, 21 August 1975, NIOD Archives, file ref. No. 21/57.

Sobibór. On the basis of an account by Stangl, who arrived in Sobibór at the end of April 1942, the first trial gassing of Jews took place a few days after he had arrived in Sobibór.

Considering all goings-on connected with the camp organisation and construction, that date is certainly not the time when the first victims were gassed to death in the Sobibór camp. Analysing the testimonies by Erich Fuchs (who must have been mistaken about the personnel who, together with him, participated in the trial gassing) in which he mentions that the camp commandant was Thomalla. Analysing the number of gassed people he gives, and the general description of the actual time of the trial gassing, it must be assumed that the first trial of the gas chamber (without Stangl or Wirth taking part) took place much earlier – even at the beginning of April. Jakob Engelhardt's account confirms this fact. There were several such trials. The one described by Stangl may have been one of the last ones, if not the very last one. Stangl considered the experiment he describes as very important probably because of the presence of Christian Wirth. It seems highly improbable that the first trial start of the gas chamber engine was performed in the presence of, among others, Floss, Bauer, Stangl, Friedl, Schwarz and Barbl, during which the first several dozen people were gassed (Fuchs mentions 30-40 Jewish women). Such an attempt must have occurred much earlier, though. Stangl came to the Sobibór camp on 28 April 1942. Supposedly, the gas chamber had been prepared for use a few weeks earlier. Wirth, who had been supervising the construction of the camp, could have dispatched his subordinates (as early as in March or at the beginning of April) from the Bełżec camp to observe works at the Sobibór extermination camp under construction, or taken them with himself to Sobibór for inspections. Those subordinates were probably Fuchs (because of the necessity of transporting and installing the gas chamber engine) and Josef Oberhauser. The presence of the latter at the Sobibór camp was never recorded in the documents. In his court testimonies, he himself denied having ever been to Sobibór. However, one of the Sobibór guards remembered seeing him at the camp in the spring of 1942. According to an account by Jakob Engelhardt, the commander of the first group of Ukrainian guards, the first experiments with gassing Jews in the Sobibór gas chambers were carried out in the presence of the staff responsible for building the camp, and not the permanent camp personnel. In all probability, Christian Wirth was also present at that trial, and he criticised the quality of the gas chamber doors used for getting corpses out. His conclusion was that they were too small and should, therefore, be replaced with bigger ones.

In a way, it is arguable what kind of engine was used in the gas chambers of the extermination camps. A theory that a Diesel engine was used in Bełżec may result from wrongly interpreted accounts by Kurt Gerstein who (which he admitted himself) did not see the engine, but only heard it. Hence this thread of using the Diesel engine in the historiography of the death camps. Rudolf Reder, who survived the death camp in Bełżec, testifies that he brought 4-5 canisters of petrol into the annexe with the engine inside it, next to the gas chamber. His testimonies were confirmed by a Polish electrician, Kazimierz Czerniak, who assisted in building that room in 1942. He described a 200 and over-horsepower petrol engine, from

which fumes were fed into the gas chamber through overground pipes<sup>40</sup>. As far as Sobibór is concerned, three ex-members of the camp personnel – Erich Bauer, Erich Fuchs and Franz Hodl, who worked at the engine placed behind the gas chamber, confirmed in their testimonies that it surely was a petrol engine (Bauer and Fuchs were car mechanics by profession). During their court trial, they disagreed with each other only about whether it was a Renault engine or a Soviet tank engine. They also discussed the method of ignition (whether the ignition was the starter or the inductor) – in other words, details that concern only petrol engines. The Diesel engine in Sobibór was used as an electric power generator. Maybe that fact was a source of misunderstandings about the real purpose of the petrol engine.

Camp III, where the gas chamber was located, was under special German supervision all the time. Whenever Germans finished their guard duty, Ukrainians took over. Up the watchtower in the middle of Camp III, there were always two guards with a heavy machine gun. At night, Camp III was brightly lit with reflectors from the watchtower. Electricity was provided from Camp I. There was no electric generator in that part of the camp. The light was on all night long. During the night, guards patrolled the area all around Camp III, surrounded by two barbed wire fences with a path in between. Patrols went along that path day and night. The entrance to Camp III was a single gateway, where soldiers stood guard all the time. Patrols went up and down the path, and usually consisted of three soldiers. Whichever of the camp personnel wanted to enter Camp III, they had to give a special password which was changed every day<sup>41</sup>.

Camp III was located in the north western part of the extermination centre. Two main roads led to it from Camp II. The camp personnel used the southern gate to get inside. It may have been the bigger gateway, through which narrow-gauge tracks were used for moving prisoners who could not move from the ramp on their own. Such victims were transported as close to the edges of the pits as possible, where they were shot, thrown into them and, finally, covered with lime and sand. A separate entrance to Camp III was meant only for victims - 'the road to heaven', at the end of which was the gateway, and a few metres behind it was the entrance to the gas chamber. It is quite possible that to Camp III also led a gateway in the eastern fence, next to the chapel. That entrance could have been used for bringing in provisions, and prisoners to be shot in Camp III. Installing that gateway in the vicinity of the main camp road could have offered convenient access to that part of the camp. At the end of April and the beginning of May 1942, the whole area of the camp was already surrounded by a single row of two-metre high barbed wire. There was no other fence around the place at the time. Beyond the barbed wire was the forest. In the fence, perpendicular to the tracks, two entrances were made of barbed wire. One was used for train traffic and was closed with a wooden gate each time a train rolled into the camp siding. The other entrance, parallel with the 'railway' one, was used as

---

<sup>40</sup> Gas chambers – cf. Sources and literature, Internet resources.

<sup>41</sup> Hubert Gomerski, interrogation record, StA.Do-XI'65-710/711, Hagen, 30 November 1965, MPLW Archives.

the entrance for the camp personnel and all sorts of vehicles. That entrance was also closed with a wooden gate. Both camp entrances were closely watched by guards who were Volksdeutsche. All the buildings inside the camp were separated from one another by means of a system of barbed wire fences, and all the passages in the fence were heavily guarded as well.

At the beginning of May, the German extermination centre was already prepared for the admission of huge systematic transports with victims<sup>42</sup>. Franz Stangl was in command of all those actions. On the first days of May, Sobibór was again inspected by Wirth. During a briefing for the camp personnel, he gave a speech in which he categorically stated that all Jews who would badly perform their duties connected with building the camp were to be immediately 'eliminated'. He added that if any of the personnel should oppose the idea, they might as well leave Sobibór, adding towards the end: "[...] *But underground, not overground* [...]"<sup>43</sup>.

## 2. Extension

The construction of the German extermination camp in Sobibór had three stages. The first stage was the period of the proper construction of the camp, which lasted from the autumn of 1941 until the end of April 1942. The first wave of extermination in Sobibór lasted for three months and took a death toll of nearly 77,000 Jewish victims, excluding Jews deported from Slovakia (according to estimates by Yitzhak Arad)<sup>44</sup>. There is a common conviction among historians that at the end of July 1942, mass deportations to Sobibór were stopped due to repairs to the railway between Lublin and Chełm. I think that the decision to temporarily suspend the functioning of the Sobibór extermination centre was influenced by recurring problems (already since June 1942) with decomposing corpses, which were piled up in deep pits after they had been taken out of the gas chamber. The need arose for making a decision to unearth and burn the corpses afterwards. On his visit to Sobibór in July, Heinrich Himmler could have made a decision like that. At the time, he also planned to extend and modernise the camp. The experiences from the first months of the functioning of the camp brought out the existing shortcomings. It is possible that all those problems had to do with plans of the complete closure of the extermination

---

<sup>42</sup> Martin Gilbert (map of deportations to Sobibór - May 1942, copy from Marek Bem's private collection) tried to estimate the number of Jews murdered in Sobibór in May 1942: May 6 - 2, 500, Dęblin; May 7 - 2, 500, Ryki; May 7 - 1, 000, Józefów; May 8 - 1, 500, Baranów; May 8 - 3, 500, Końskowola; May 9 - 800, Lubartów; May 9 - 1, 500, Markuszów; May 10 - 2, 500, Michów; May 12 - 2, 750, Turobin; May 12 - 1, 000, Żółkiewka; May 14 - 1, 200, Gorzków; May 18 - 1, 000, Siedliszcze; May 21 - 4, 300, Chełm; May 23 - 2, 000, Włodawa; 1, 000, Wysokie; 3, 000, Opole; 500, Wąwolnica; 3, 500, Puławy; 500, Łysobyki. In total - 36, 500 people.

<sup>43</sup> Gitta Sereny, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>44</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *Bełżec, Sobibor, Treblinka. The Operations Reinhardt Death Camps*, Indianapolis, 1987, p. 80.

camp in Bełżec (which actually happened in mid-December) as well as expected deportations of Dutch and French Jews to Sobibór. The stage of camp modernisation (the extension of the gas chamber, taking out and burning corpses, the preparation of field crematoriums, the modernisation of the camp infrastructure) lasted from the end of July until October 1942. Deportations and killings re-started in Sobibór at the beginning of October 1942. By that time, repairs to the railway between Lublin and Chełm had been completed. In October and at the beginning of November, nearly 28,000 people were deported from the Lublin District to Sobibór. In the winter of 1942/43, transports with Jews from the District of Galicia began arriving there<sup>45</sup>.

On 19 July 1942, the day before 'Great Operation' against Jews from Warsaw, Himmler visited Sobibór. On the same visit, he went to the SS training camp in Trawniki, where he had a few photos taken. He finished his visit at the Operation Reinhardt headquarters in Lublin, where he ordered SS and Police Higher Commander Friedrich Wilhelm Kruger to complete the deportation of all Jews from the General Government. Soon after Himmler's inspection, great changes started to be implemented in Sobibór. The camp began changing its appearance. The first priority was extension and modernisation. Therefore, barracks and other new buildings were being hurriedly put up. During the next few days, a lot of building material was brought to the camp. In those transports, there were also elements and semi-finished products for building a big barrack. From the newly arrived transport of victims to be exterminated, over a hundred of them were selected for assembling the new big barrack. Some of them were joiners and carpenters – real experts in their field. However, most of them knew very little about that trade or nothing at all.

Assembly quickly began. Each person who was not good enough at working was immediately sent away to Camp III to the gas chambers. A huge building was being erected, over ten metres in height, and with only one door in it. The windows had been installed earlier, but they would not open at all. Inside, a number of partition walls were raised, by means of which a few separate rooms were created. There was a kitchen at the back. Other rooms were used as lodgings for women. Another part of the barrack was reserved for kapos. As a result, all the rooms were allotted for specific purposes.

The assembly of similar barracks was also started in Camp II. They were to be used as stores for victims' personal belongings. There was such a great variety of those that the store had to be divided into sections: clothes, blankets, shoes, tinned food, glasses, etc. Soon after the barracks had been raised, the Germans selected from the next transports the strongest men to work in the sorting barracks. Later, also women were chosen. It was the biggest group of 80-120 camp labourers, divided into a few subgroups. That crew also did jobs around the yard of Camp II, where victims' clothes and belongings were piled up soon after they undressed and just before they hit 'the death road'. The main task of the crew was picking up clothes and personal belongings of victims, checking and sorting them, tying them up in bundles of 10-25 items in each category, preparing them for transport as well as loading them on trucks. First, clothing

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 131-137.

was searched through not only for hidden documents, photos, money or valuables, but also for yellow Stars of David or any other signs that proved Jewish ownership. If found, all such signs were to be removed. Even the crew's slightest negligence in this respect, or failure to remove all Jewish signs was equal to a death sentence.

Between the sorting barracks and the chapel, in the empty yard between Camp II and Camp III was a little shed with an iron stove (of the 'pot-bellied' type) in which there were burnt all 'papers', documents and photos that remained after Jews who had been murdered at the camp. Those 'papers' were brought from the sorting barracks after the segregation of victims' luggage and personal belongings. The Germans were particularly concerned about destroying all traces after people who were transported there. Meier Ziss, who came to Sobibór in one of the first transports, did that job for a long time. When he began work in the incinerating place, it was just an ordinary pit in which he made a bonfire to burn all that was brought to him by the sorting crew. At the time when the extension of the camp started, a new incinerating place was installed in the shed with the iron stove<sup>46</sup>.

From the very start of the functioning of the camp, there operated laundries, ironing rooms and a sewing room at the camp supply base. Women working there were to wash, disinfect, iron and mend clothes, underwear and uniforms of the German camp personnel and of all the guards. The washing room for German clothes was located in the Fore-camp, in the vicinity of the bath room and the shower room of the German personnel, and the German clothes and uniform store. In the store, there was also a sewing room and a knitting room. In the sewing room, young women mended and ironed clothes of the Germans, which had previously been washed and boiled. In the knitting room, other women prisoners knitted sweaters and gloves for the German army. Only a few women worked in the laundry (Regina Zielinski mentions four), and they handed washed clothes and uniforms over to the sewing room. In that store, there worked over ten women who mended, ironed and stored clothes and uniforms of all the German personnel. Each of the Germans had their own closet and shelves marked with their initials. Sometimes, the number of the sewing crew was multiplied by women prisoners who did special orders.

In spring, in about mid-April 1943, the knitting crew was dissolved and sent back to the barracks to share them with the other prisoners. They were transferred to work in the laundries and sorting rooms. After some time, some of them returned to the sewing room to do further orders for the Germans. Other duties of the women prisoners included the preparation of presents which the SS-men took for their partners and families when they went away on leave. The most common job was sewing monograms on handkerchiefs and adjusting the sizes of underwear to the sizes of the Nazis' wives. The Germans in Sobibór did not use ordinary underwear, all had to be made of silk, mostly shirts and trousers. For that purpose, they brought parachute silk to the sewing room and ordered one of the tailors to sew for them particular articles of clothing. All those jobs were performed by the needlewomen in

---

<sup>46</sup> Meier Ziss, interrogation record, a trial in Hagen, file ref. No. 20/346, 18 October 1965, NIOD Archives.

complete discretion so that other SS-men would not know the details of individual orders of their colleagues. The other laundry (connected to the ironing room) used for washing clothes of the guards and of prisoners working in the craft workshops was also located in the Fore-camp, but in its southernmost part between Camp I and Camp II in the close vicinity of the women's barrack. At first, the washing and cleaning of clothes of over a hundred guards was done by only three women prisoners. After the camp had been extended, a special barrack was allocated for a laundry for the Ukrainians and the craftsmen, approximately in the same area of the Fore-camp as the other laundries. More washerwomen were brought in for that work, and spaces for ironing were prepared<sup>47</sup>.

Several dozen metres away from the barracks in Camp I, there were latrines. It was a deep-dug long cesspit. Specially made boards-handrails for support were put in the ground. All, regardless of sex, had to do their business there. Extreme caution had to be taken to avoid falling into the cesspit. After some time, the Germans saw that the latrines had been made wrongly. When it was hot weather and the wind blew the latrine smells away, the odour was all over the camp. Therefore, the Germans ordered prisoners to fill in the latrines and build wooden closed toilets<sup>48</sup>.

In the camp administration building in Camp II, a pharmacy, or rather, a pharmacy store was organised, whose purpose was to accumulate and sort medicaments and cleaning articles found in transports. Most often, they were typical pills from home medicine cabinets (above all, painkillers and stimulants), medicines for treating various illnesses, bandages, dressings, personal hygiene articles as well as soaps and powders. From time to time, some German pharmacists and doctors came to Sobibór in order to take away some of the supplies from the pharmacy store. They paid special attention to morphine for injection. Some of the supplies from the pharmacy store were also used by the camp personnel, who repeatedly took various pills and cleaning articles from it. Before going on leave, each of them ordered a special package with specific medicines to carry away. Just like the rest of the personal possessions left behind by victims, medicaments were exclusively at the disposal of the camp

---

<sup>47</sup> Icchak Lichtman, 'From Zolkiewka to Sobibor. Testimony of Itzhak Lichtman' (in): Miriam Novitch, *Sobibor. Martyrdom and Revolt*, New York, 1980, pp. 80–85; Regina Zielinski, interview transcript, DVD recording/Disc 1, Tricht 1983, copy from Marek Bem's private collection; Andrew Zielinski, *Conversations with Regina*, Włodawa 2003, Chapters 4 and 5, translated from English by Marek Bem; Regina Zielinski, interrogation record, Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Sydney, Sydney, 5 April 1963, NIOD Archives; Eda Lichtman's account Vashem Archives, Holon/Israel, 29 December 1960, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Eda Lichtman, transcript of an interview (audio-video) conducted by Claude Lanzmann with Eda Lichtman, USHMM Archives, file ref. No. 60.5023, Israel 1985; Lea Białowicz (nee Reisner), an interview/an account, DVD recording/Disc 1, Tel Aviv, November 2007, original from Marek Bem's private collection; Eda Lichtman, interview transcript (audio-video) conducted by Claude Lanzmann with Eda Lichtman, USHMM Archives, file ref. No. 60.5023, Israel, 1985.

<sup>48</sup> Eda Lichtman, DVD recording/Discs 1-4, USHMM Archives, RG – 50.120 0091, 22 May 1992.

personnel. Prisoners working in the pharmacy store who were caught giving away to fellow prisoners soap, sanitary towels or painkillers put themselves in danger of being immediately sent away to Camp III<sup>49</sup>.

In Camp I, another new barrack was under construction, which was later divided into two sectors inside. One of them was allocated for a mechanical workshop, the other one for a carpentry shop. Only the best experts in carpentry and cabinet-making were selected for work in it. Their job was to make furniture for the Nazis. In the next 'recruitment' four shoemakers and as many tailors were selected. Kurt Ticho thought that there were six tailors who sewed uniforms and coats for the Germans, and also mended their clothing. Even there, there was a division into services for the Germans and for the Ukrainians. The tailors who did jobs for the Ukrainians had a separate workshop erected so that they would not mix with those who worked for the Germans. There were two shoemaker's shops at the camp. Also in 'shoe' matters, the Germans would stick to divisions of rank and function. Therefore, there were two shoemaker's shops at the camp: one doing orders exclusively for the SS-men, the other for the lower rank personnel, who had no right to order shoes with specialists working for the officers. Only Wagner and Frenzel had the right to order the tailors which of the personnel they were allowed to service. The prisoner-tailors produced made-to-order shoes not only for men, but they also made special orders for the wives and children of the camp personnel. The Germans took those shoes with them when they went away on leave. Moreover, the tailors also made running shoe repairs for the Germans and the Ukrainians. Five tailors made up a permanent crew who worked in the shop for the officers. In the other shop, which was for the non-commissioned officers and the Ukrainians, there worked 6-8 tailors. They were only allowed to make running shoe repairs for the guards.

A few days later, four new cooks were selected for work in a bakery, which was installed in a separate building. There existed three kitchens at the camp. First of all, there was the officers' kitchen for the Germans, where Moshe Bahir and one kitchen help – a Jewish girl worked for a long time. The supervisor of the kitchen was Bredow, a German, who was also responsible for it. The kitchen for the Ukrainians was run by Krunka (Krupka?). Three Jews worked there, among others, Abraham Margulies, who worked in it for some time. The third kitchen was for the Jews. Herszel and Josef Cukiermann from Kurów, a father and his son, worked there – the only Jews who had been at the camp from the very beginning, and who luckily made it through to the outbreak of the uprising on 14 October 1943. They escaped from Sobibór and survived the war. The bakery was separated from the kitchen. For some time, a Dutch Jew worked in it as a master baker. The manager of the bakery was Johann Klier, a German.

In this way, in order to service the camp, over 500 Jews were selected from transports arriving in Sobibór (July and August 1942). Their death was postponed because the Germans took advantage of them to fulfil their needs. For better control and administration, the prisoners were divided into so-called 'blocks'. In Block 1

---

<sup>49</sup> Symcha Białowicz, transcript of a DVD recording/Disc 1-4, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0027, 13 May 1992.

were tailors, shoemakers and carpenters. A tailor by the name of Mundek was the commander of their block. In Block 2 were goldsmiths, washerwomen, cooks, bricklayers, cleaners and bakers. Stanisław Szmajzner, a goldsmith, was the commander of that block.

Suddenly, the functioning of the camp radically changed. A strict military-like discipline was imposed. Early in the morning, at six or seven o'clock, the prisoners had to stand in camp assembly file. Jobs for the day were administered. In the presence of Wagner, the block commanders counted the Jews and then reported the number of all the block prisoners to the assembly supervisor, a German. In the event of any absences unaccounted for, the block commander was given 25 lashes as a punishment. Counting the number of prisoners was also done during lunch, then at the time when the prisoners came to the yard in Camp I, and finally, in the evening after work was finished. All the prisoners had to be drilled. Exercises were performed at the end of the working day when everybody was already tired, hungry and thirsty, even though they naturally needed rest, food and water. While exercises were in progress, nobody was allowed to show even the slightest sign of weakness. At the level of classical military drill, the prisoners were taught how to form files and columns, change their positions and march properly. Every mistake was punished by prisoners having to do extra exercises, such as lying down and getting up at a tempo dictated by a kapo, crawling or goosestepping. Besides, while marching, they had to sing German songs out loud. Naturally, marching out of step was punished in some way.

As far as the modernisation of Camp I is concerned, new barracks were erected for carpenters, mechanics and blacksmiths. The mechanical workshop, created in 1942, was a combination of a blacksmith's shop and a locksmith's one. Stanisław Szmajzner, who officially stopped working as a jeweller, was responsible for preparing it and making it well-equipped. The Germans tried very hard to conceal his jobs as a goldsmith. Notwithstanding that, he had permission to make special jewellery orders for the Germans, but he made them in secrecy in the new mechanical workshop. Fifteen Jews worked there, and they did all the building and running repairs. Apart from that, they were engaged in assembling narrow-gauge rails and the production of landmines that the Germans placed along the southern fence of the camp. Even though they had a lot of duties to do, 'the mechanics' also had to find time for doing special orders for the camp personnel.

One of the first barracks was knocked down in order to expand the area of the assembly yard. Then, diggers were brought to Camp III for digging out corpses to be burnt. Next to the building of the administration office in Camp II were stables. The Germans kept horses, which were attended to by a little 13-year old Maks, nicknamed 'Fips' by the Germans. He gave the horses water to drink, food to eat, and cleaned them. Beside the stables were the stores and a hen house behind them, where geese were fattened. Pigs were fattened in a pigsty for the German camp kitchen as well as for making ham and pork fat. Those products were taken home by the Germans when they went away on leave<sup>50</sup>. There also existed a vegetable garden to

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Lerer, record of an interrogation in the case against K. Frenzel, Hagen (LS –

supplement the German diet. The gardeners were, among others, Szaje from Chełm, Abram from Izbica, Helka Weiss and Haim Lejst. The garden was very well-tended. The flower beds together with an alley of sunflowers growing just behind the fence of Camp II were supposed to make the camp look like a model farm. It was one of the many elements which made it possible to camouflage the real purpose of the camp, not only for victims, but also for German transport escorts. Haim Lejst worked there as a gardener. In Camp II, an extra barrack was built for a Diesel engine to generate electricity. Consequently, they had an electric installation laid on for the lighting of the whole camp. Upon Wagner's command, Stanisław Szmajzner installed all the electric cables that connected the generator to the different sectors of the camp. A technician was selected from one of the transports, and his task was to complete the installation of electricity in Sobibór. He was assigned an assistant, and after long days of hard work, an enormous Diesel engine started working. As a result, light penetrated every nook and cranny of the camp – the mechanical workshops, the assembly yard, the railway station, all the barracks and the camp fence. Thanks to those undertakings, the level of protection of the camp dramatically increased, and from then on, the existing camp conditions made it possible for the Germans to receive night transports.

In the Fore-camp, in the German section, a special canteen was built for the officers, who organised frequent carousals to mark victories of the German army. All the carpenters had been mobilised to construct it. A German Jewish woman was appointed head of the canteen kitchen. She was a real expert in cuisine, and, apparently, she cooked her favourite specialities for the Germans. Two boys were also selected to be waiters - to serve the Germans food and drink as well as keep the canteen clean and tidy.

Jakub Biskupicz also remembered building a bowling alley for the Germans, which was right in the centre of Camp I. A few carpenters would go on special journeys to neighbouring villages to dismantle selected former Jewish peasant cottages in such a way as to use the reclaimed building material for constructing the planned bowling alley. According to Biskupicz, the bowling alley was an accursed place. Every evening, after the fun was over, the next Jewish 'positioner of bowls' was sent off to the camp hospital by the Germans<sup>51</sup>. One of the prisoners by the name of Lajbała had carved in oak bowls and so-called 'bottles' for playing<sup>52</sup>.

In Camp I, near to the siding, a barrack with the inscription 'doctor's surgery' was prepared. That place had been chosen for a reason. Jews arriving in transports, especially from abroad, were to immediately notice that they could also rely on

---

S43/75), 12 October 1977, NIOD Archives; Samuel Lerer, record of an interrogation in the Case 45 Ja 27/61 Dortmund, New York, 17 May 1963, NIOD Archives.

<sup>51</sup> Dov Freiberg, transcript of an account, DVD recordings, Discs 1-2, Ramla/Israel, 21 October 1995, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska, copy from Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>52</sup> Abraham Margulies's account, Yad Vashem Archives, File 03/7019 (the date and place of the account unknown), translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

medical assistance at the camp. Of course, it was one of the many elements of camp camouflage. In practice, the surgery was used by the camp personnel. No Jewish prisoner had the right to take advantage of medical care in the camp. The medical and dental surgery was equipped with best quality instruments (brought to Sobibór by Jewish doctors and dentists from all over Europe). In the surgery worked, among others, a dentist from Płock - Bresaler, who was, at the same time, the general practitioner for the Germans and the Ukrainians. He had two assistants to help him - dentists from Czechoslovakia and Austria.

A hairdressing salon was also organised for the Germans. To service Stangl and his personnel exclusively, only one hairdresser was selected. His name was Józef. Since the salon was reserved only for the Germans, another salon was built for the Ukrainians. At the same time, the ramp and the yard in front of it were improved, which expanded their areas. A barrack was also built for Jews to have their hair cut. It was situated between Camp II and Camp III. Hair cutting took place there just before the Jews entered the gas chamber.

The assembly of narrow-gauge tracks began. The tracks ran from the ramp along the railway through Camp II from its northern fence as far as Camp III towards the pits for burying corpses of victims. The whole necessary building material was quickly unloaded in the various places of the camp where rails were to be joined together. Sleepers and rails were assembled day and night. Little rectangular waggons used on the tracks and pulled by prisoners were used for carrying luggage left behind at the ramp after the arrival of transports, and also for carrying dead bodies of those who had died during the journey. A separate additional stretch of narrow-gauge rails was also assembled in Camp III, between the gas chamber and the crematoriums. The narrow-gauge waggons were then used for transporting corpses taken out of the gas chamber to the area of the crematorium pits. The commander of the group assembling the rails was SS Unterscharführer Vallaster.

Also, a new group of prisoners was organised, the so-called *Waldkommando* (a forest unit). It was composed of 40 men who were sent to the forest to labour over tree-felling. Wood was used as firewood for heating and cooking, but, above all, it was meant to be used in the crematorium ovens. That is why, the surrounding forests were mercilessly destroyed. Chopped wood was transported on lorries (cutting down trees took place even as far as six kilometres away from the camp) to the ramp, from which the narrow-gauge waggons took it to Camp III.

Moreover, *the Bahnhofkommando* (a railway unit) was created. Those who were selected for it dealt with unloading the incoming transports. They emptied the newly-arrived trucks, took corpses of sick people and of those who had died during the journey, put them into the narrow-gauge waggons, and pushed them to Camp III. In this way, all the newly-arrived trucks were completely cleared, and no trails were left behind. The trucks, empty and clear, were then ready for loading things from the barracks that stored personal possessions of the victims. About 20-25 strong Jewish boys were chosen to labour in those units. They wore blue overalls and caps.

On Sunday, the prisoners worked for only half a day. That day was meant to be the cleaning and resting day. In the afternoon, each of them was busy cleaning in the barracks in which they lived. The Germans often controlled those places. When the Germans, together with Wagner, entered a barrack, some prisoners were still busy cleaning, others sat on their bunk beds or outside the barrack. Very often, commands were given to the prisoners to take their belongings with them to the assembly yard. The people were afraid to take all their things with them. Therefore, they left some of them in the barrack or tossed them on the ground, mainly gold rings and money. The Germans walked among the prisoners, checking each thing, sometimes catching a prisoner in the act of tossing something away. Then, such a prisoner received a beating and was commanded to stand aside. The Germans went into the barracks to search them through carefully. Another group of Germans passed from one prisoner to the next, searching each of them from head to foot. Prisoners who were caught having forbidden things with them had to stand aside, which meant that their fate depended solely upon the murderers' mood. Those standing aside were usually given 25 lashes or sent away to Camp III for being shot<sup>53</sup>.

After a few months of the functioning of the camp, the Germans made a decision to redevelop the gas chamber. The new gas chamber building was to be bigger and more solid. The modernisation included the improvement of the badly-structured door, which slowed down the process of gassing. The redevelopment of the gas chambers took place between June and September 1942. SS-Unterscharführer Erwin Lambert became the supervisor of those undertakings. “[...] *As I mentioned at first, I stayed at the Sobibór extermination camp for about fourteen days to three weeks. However, I can't specify the exact time. At that time, I got an order from Wirth to have the camp gassing equipment extended. I was supposed to provide equipment like the one in the Treblinka camp. So then, I went to Sobibór with Lorenz Hackenholt, who was staying in Treblinka at the time. Together with Hackenholt, I first went to a saw-mill in the Warsaw area. Once there, he ordered a big delivery of timber for redevelopment works in Sobibór. In the end, we both returned to Sobibór, where we reported with Reichleitner, the camp manager. He gave us the necessary clues about the structure of the gassing equipment. Before I arrived at the camp, it was already open with the gassing equipment in working order. Probably, I had to do the restructuring because the old equipment wasn't big or heavy enough. Now, I can't tell who assisted in the restructuring. Anyway, they were Jewish prisoners and so-called 'Askaris' (Ukrainian volunteers for work). No transports with Jews arrived while the restructuring was under way. Extermination was suspended for a time. In answer to the question, I repeat that I don't know the particular functions of the camp*

<sup>53</sup> Based on an account: Dov Freiberg's letter to Goldman, Yad Vashem Archives, 1961 (the precise date of the letter unknown), translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska, copy from Marek Bem's private collection; Dov Freiberg, interview, DVD recording, Disc 1, Marek Bem's private archives, Ramla/Israel, 21 October 1995; Stanisław Szmajzner, *Hell in Sobibor. The tragedy of a teenager Jew*, Brazil, 1979, translated from English by Marek Bem; Stanisław Szmajzner, interview, DVD recording /Disc 1, Hagen 1983, copy from Marek Bem's private collection.

*personnel. Likewise, I can't tell who was in Camp III then. The interrogated camp officials showed me a map of the Sobibór camp. However, I'd like to add that during my stay in Sobibór, I was only in the Fore-camp and in Camp III. I was living in the so-called Fore-camp, and slept in the lodgings for the camp personnel. During the day, I worked at the gas chamber in Camp III. After the building works were over, I returned to the camp in Treblinka. Later, I was in Sobibór one more time. I went there from the labour camp in Dorohusk. I stayed there for the night, and on the following morning, I went back to Dorohusk. Also, during my second stay there, I didn't find out anything about the functioning of the extermination camp. I'd like to stress again that I wasn't involved in exterminating Jews in the Sobibór camp. The interrogated officials showed me a photo album. I could, in large measure, confirm the identity of the people in the photos. However, I can't provide any new clues [...]*<sup>54</sup>.

Since the late autumn of 1942, the camp must have been a much extended and well-functioning structure. Since it became obligatory to burn corpses, procedures connected with removing traces of manslaughter had already required a number of extra activities: unloading waggons with corpses, the precise placing of the corpses layer upon layer on the grate of the crematorium, providing wood for interleaving layers of corpses, continuous control over the efficiency of burning, burning down badly cremated body parts, providing firewood for making a fire in the crematorium, taking out burning remains, crushing such remains in grinders, packing the ashes periodically into casks and sacks, as well as transporting the ashes to the pits to be buried and hidden there. Constant supervision, division of functions and work effectiveness had to be precisely correlated with each other. Huge flames and heat coming out of the crematorium, and earlier, the stench of gases and fluids permeating the pits, caused by the decomposing corpses, and clouds of oily smoke, pervaded the landscape of Camp III. It is hard to imagine how efficient must have been the organisation of labour by the prisoners from Camp III, and how unbelievably exhausting those actions really were if they managed to 'conceal' traces of the existence of a few hundred thousand people.

In the summer of 1942, the camp began changing its appearance. New neat buildings were appearing. The officers' canteen was built in the first place. It looked like a city café with terraces. The roads were covered with shiny white gravel on one side, and paved with black stones on the other. Lawns were made, flower beds with flowers and gardens with sunflowers just by the board wall behind which victims got undressed. There were erected new lodgings, storehouses, barracks and a canteen for the Ukrainians. Jewish artists carved beautiful ornaments and painted pictures to decorate the German rooms and the canteen. There were professionally painted signs put up by the paths to show directions in the camp area. All those jobs were done by Jews. The camp itself displayed exemplary standards of cleanliness. All the barracks, lodgings and stables were cleaned and washed every day. From one barrack to the next ran paths covered with yellow sand. The camp made the impression of a well-prospering estate.

<sup>54</sup> Erwin Lambert, interrogation record, 2 October 1962, NIOD Archives, file ref. No. 804/49/143.

The third stage connected with the functioning of the death camp in Sobibór was the period between July and October 1943, that is, until the liquidation of the camp. In that period of time, Himmler's first decisions and commands intended to turn the Sobibór extermination centre into a concentration camp. Finally, it was decided that the existing character of the camp would be unchanged, but that it should be extended for the purpose of creating an arsenal in a new separated part of the camp. It was the so-called *Nord Lager* (the North Camp or Camp IV)<sup>55</sup>. The construction of the North Camp began after Himmler's directive from 5 July 1943 to transform the camp in Sobibór into a concentration camp<sup>56</sup>. According to that directive, it was necessary to build storing places for captured Soviet weapons, and repair/disassembly shops to service them. Himmler's inferiors suggested to him that there should be a place allocated for storing captured Soviet weapons in the camp area, without changing the primary function of the Sobibór camp. Himmler gave his consent on 24 July 1943. Shortly afterwards, Camp IV (North) began getting constructed by Sobibór prisoners.

In July 1943, the prisoners saw a lot of movements in the camp, which was connected with its extension. Building materials kept arriving by train. Earlier, the prisoners had spotted high-ranking German officers walking around the camp with maps and plans. They had been highly respected and obeyed by the German camp personnel. The prisoners considered those speedy goings-on at the camp as a sign of a possible liquidation of the camp. They became concerned that most of them would not be needed any more and, therefore, killed. That moment had great significance in the planning of an escape and a collective rebellion by the prisoners. Before the end of works, Russian weapons were being brought to the first storehouses. A new working unit of prisoners (50 women and 60 men) was created for sorting, cleaning, disassembling and segregating those weapons. At that time, building works in Camp IV were still going on. According to witnesses' testimonies – ex-prisoners who worked in Camp IV, it is certain that even on the day of the revolt – on 14 October 1943, a unit made up of Soviet prisoners was working there.

Camp IV was the area where Aleksander Peczerski was dispatched to labour just after arriving at the camp – on 23 September. Already on 24 September, 80 Russian Jews selected from the transport (including Peczerski and an unknown number of Polish, Czech and Dutch Jews) carried on with building works in Camp IV. Some of them did woodworking, the others cut down trees. Aleksander Peczerski claimed that at that time 9 barracks had already been raised. Yechuda Lerner, who had been brought to the camp a few days earlier than Peczerski, also worked in that part of the camp. However, he does not mention the barracks, but underground arsenals of weapons

---

<sup>55</sup> Józef Maliński's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/5372, Warsaw, 13 December 1945; Jan Krzowski, witness interrogation record, case file OKL/DS./1/67, Lublin, 30 November 1967, MPLW Archives.

<sup>56</sup> Tuwiah Friedman, ed., *Sobibor. Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der „Aktion Reinhard“*, Haifa, 1998, pp. 82–84.

captured from the Russians<sup>57</sup>. Stanisław Szmajzner<sup>58</sup>, Hersz Cukiermann<sup>59</sup>, Mordechaj Goldfarb<sup>60</sup> and Jakub Biskupicz<sup>61</sup> also recall that those underground stores were more like bunkers or shelters. For the hardest labour - preparing a space for Camp IV, planned in the wooded area neighbouring the northern part of the camp fence, a special penal unit of prisoners was dispatched (*Strafkommando*). The Germans were in a great hurry to build that sector of the camp, thereby carrying out Himmler's order. Those works lasted throughout the summer of 1943, during which working prisoners were being 'replaced' with others. The Germans were concerned about having healthy, strong and well-rested Jews to work. That is why, every day a few labourers were transferred from the groups working in Camp IV to Camp III, and their replacements were dispatched to Camp IV from newly-arriving transports. Even as late as at the end of September, new deliveries of building materials kept arriving<sup>62</sup>.

However, those building works were left unfinished. Leon Cymiel remembers that he was engaged in assembling narrow-gauge tracks which were to run from the ramp to *Nord Lager*. Waggon on those tracks were used for transporting 'goods' unloaded at the ramp, which were meant for storage in the North Camp. Also, a road started being built which connected Camp II to the newly-organised Camp IV. The road was to make access to work easier for prisoners who went there to work every day. Erich Bauer, an ex-SS member, confirms that fact in his testimonies. So does Tomasz Blatt, who participated in building the road<sup>63</sup>.

The fate of that building project as well as that of the whole camp was heavily influenced by events leading up to the prisoners' rebellion and the liquidation of the extermination centre. Nevertheless, in the finished camp parts, first attempts were made at storing, cleaning and sorting ammunition being brought to the camp. As Aisik Rottenberg recalls, (he worked as a bricklayer in the North Camp), the first trucks with weapons arrived already at the end of summer. They got unloaded in Camp IV, cleaned and stored<sup>64</sup>. A unit of about fifty women worked at cleaning the

<sup>57</sup> Yechuda Lerner, transcript of a dialogue from a film by Lanzman *Sobibor; 14 octobre 1943, 16 heures*, copy from Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>58</sup> Stanisław Szmajzner, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>59</sup> Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944.

<sup>60</sup> Mordechaj Goldfarb's account, Haifa/Israel, 5 April 1960, MPŁW Archives.

<sup>61</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, transcript of a DVD recording/Discs 1-8, USHMM Archives /RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

<sup>62</sup> Aleksander Peczerski's account: *Wspomnienia z obozu śmierci Sobibór* [Reminiscences of the Death Camp Sobibór], IPN Archives Lublin, file ref. No. - the date and place of the account unknown; Leon Cymiel, interview, DVD recording/Disc 1-3, the archives of USC Shoah Foundation Institute For Visual History and Education, file ref. No. 29630, 26 March 1997; Interrogation of witness Erich Bauer in a case against Becker, the District Court Tiergarten, Berlin, 10 December 1962, NIOD Archives.

<sup>63</sup> An interrogation of witness Erich Bauer in a case against Becker, the District Court Tiergarten, Berlin, 10 December 1962, NIOD Archives; Tomasz Blatt, *From The Ashes ...*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>64</sup> Aisik Rottenberg, 'Z Włodawy do Sobiboru' [From Włodawa To Sobibór], (in): Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-106.

incoming weapons and ammunition until the very last day of the functioning of the camp. Those women prisoners also participated in preparations for the uprising. They were to steal away hand grenades from the storing places and then smuggle them into Camp I<sup>65</sup>.

Since Camp IV (North) was being under construction, the whole of the camp became extra protected. German aerial views of the former Sobibór camp territory from March and May 1944 show clearly visible contours of an unidentified object neighbouring the western fence of the former camp area. Archaeological ground surface research (2010 and 2011) has confirmed the presence of concrete rubble, barbed wire, personal things and everyday utensils in that place. To this day, there exists a road that runs in that direction. It overlaps with the road that can be clearly seen in the aerial views from 1944, and it leads from the free space between Camp I and Camp II. Jakub Biskupicz<sup>66</sup> and Hersz Cukiermann<sup>67</sup> mention that place in their accounts. Biskupicz says that at the end of the functioning of the Sobibór camp, another camp sprang up in the neighbourhood – for *Wehrmacht* soldiers. He claims that it had nothing to do with the extermination centre, and that it was a large camp for reserve Ukrainian soldiers. Those guards took active part in chasing the escaped prisoners who had broken free during the uprising. Iwan Karakas (a Ukrainian guard) explains the character of that camp (on a camp map made by himself) and calls it ‘Camp V’, which was meant for sixty ‘Ukrainians from the west’, brought to Sobibór to protect the new part of the camp. He also says that those soldiers did not have any contact with the ‘main camp’<sup>68</sup>. Kurt Bolender marks on his own camp map (in the ‘space’ that coincided with the location shown in the abovementioned aerial photos) the barracks for the ‘Ukrainian squad’. Supposedly, he saw and knew the barracks just after the uprising and the following escape of the prisoners. It was then that he was transferred to Sobibór again. He served there for the first time from April to July 1942.

In his memo dated 7 October 1943, a Soviet partisan - Zachar Filipowicz Popławski informed a representative of the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brest Oblast that when he served in Woroszyłow and Żukow-named partisan groups, he found out about more crimes committed by the Germans. Through official channels,

---

<sup>65</sup> Eda Lichtman’s account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/2352, fragments of a conversation between Eda Lichtman, Icchak Lichtman, Dov Freiberg, Abraham Margulies, Symcha Białowicz and Jakub Biskupicz, in the presence of Olga Barniczowa, PhD, in Tel-Aviv in September 1963.

<sup>66</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, transcript of a DVD recording, Discs 1–8, USHMM archives, RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Jakub Biskupicz, interrogation record (in a case against Bolender), file ref. No. 13/112, Tel-Aviv/Israel, 17 May 1961, NIOD Archives; Jakub Biskupicz, interrogation record, file ref. No. 13/97, Tel Aviv/Israel, 6 June 1962, NIOD Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Hersz Cukierman’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944.

<sup>68</sup> Zachar Filipowicz Popławski’s memo to a representative of the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brest Oblast about an account by Iwan Michajłowicz Karakas on the death camp in Sobibór, 7 October 1943, copy from Marek Bem’s private collection.

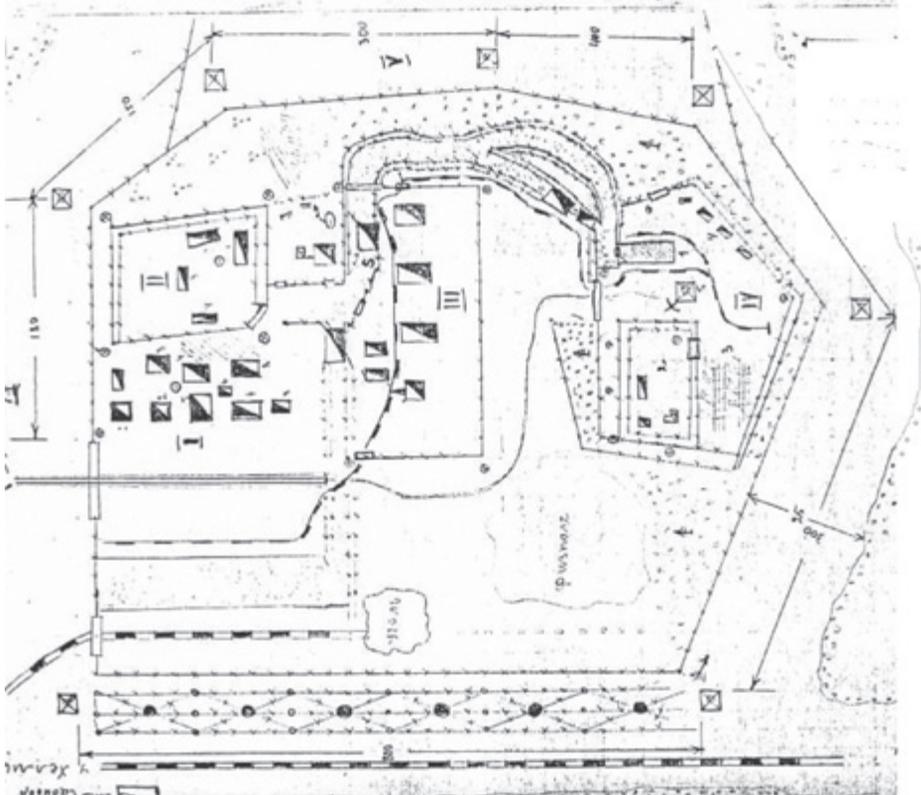
reports by a few partisans reached the political officer of a Soviet Woroszyłow-named partisan group. Three men wrote about that: Eiberg (the political officer of company I of the Woroszyłow-named unit), Captain Abdułalijew and a partisan - M. Żukowski (Bukowski). They each reported about a death camp which was located near the railway station in Sobibór along the Brest – Chełm railway line. They described an ‘oven – bath’ composed of 8 chambers with “*a capacity for 500 people*”. In the summer of 1943, Popławski was also informed about the camp and the working gas chambers by partisans who had crossed the Bug River from the opposite bank to join the Żukow-named group.

Also, inhabitants of the village of Tomaszówka confirmed that information to partisans. The locals said that the Germans were bringing to Sobibór a tremendous number of Jews from the east. Furthermore, they were concerned that on certain days they could not leave their houses because the odour of burning corpses was unbearable in the whole area. The abovementioned Captain Abdułalijew informed Popławski that there was an eyewitness from the Sobibór camp in his group, an ex-guard, who escaped from Sobibór in the summer of 1943, got through to Soviet partisans, and then wrote a very detailed report about the Sobibór camp for his new superiors.

His name was Iwan Michajłowicz Karakas, (a Ukrainian) - a Komsomol member with a secondary education. He had the rank of a sergeant in the Red Army. In the course of the war, he was taken captive by the Germans. After two months’ schooling in Trawniki, he began his duty as a guard in the German extermination centre in Sobibór. After 28 days of service, probably in July 1943, he escaped from the camp. In that same month, he joined the Żukow-named Soviet partisan group (where he became a platoon commander after some time) and submitted to his new superiors a detailed report of his service in the Sobibór extermination centre. Part of the report was a drawn map of the camp<sup>69</sup>. Indeed, the sketch makes the impression of being drawn shortly after his stay at the camp. The map contains a lot of details which prove the fact that its author might have been a camp guard. It is clearly evident in the accurate and detailed way of drawing the signs in the Fore-camp, the fence system, the placement of the watchtowers and guard booths, the inside gateways, and the internal communication system. The drawing is a sketch with no scale, but external sizes of the camp are provided as well as distances between particular lines of the external fence. The picture contains practically all elements of the camp infrastructure that can be found on the other available maps, sketches and drawings in Sobibór historiography. The placement of the camp wells is amazingly precise (this kind of detail may prove to be a precious clue in archaeological research), and so is the narrow-gauge line inside the camp. In the chronology of evidence and primary sources concerning the history of the Sobibór camp, this is the first map which actually shows it<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*. **That escape could have happened after 5 July, at the time when (after Himmler’s decision to extend the camp), the building of the arsenal had already begun – the so-called Camp IV (North). Karakas’s plan already contains elements of that part of the camp.**

<sup>70</sup> In archive resources, there are available maps, sketches and drawings showing the



*Photo 1. A camp map drawn by an ex-guard at the Sobibór camp – (Karakas? Mrakasz?) Iwan Michajłowicz. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.*

**Legend: The Sobibór camp was composed of five main camps; I, II, III, IV, V. Camp I was composed of:** 1. Guard building, 2. Medical section, 3. Kitchen for the Germans, 4. Canteen for the Germans, 5. House for the Germans to live in, 6. Arsenal, 7. Barrack for the Ukrainian policemen to live in, 8. Barrack with camp duty officer and club, 9. Canteen for the Ukrainian policemen

The number of the Germans at the camp – about 27

The number of the Ukrainians at the camp – about 80

The weaponry: All the Ukrainians were armed with Russian rifles (120 pieces). The Germans were armed with SWT firearms (2 pieces), 3 automatic guns, the others had Russian rifles. In the arsenal, there were: 1 Diegtiariew machine gun, 1 light automatic rifle, 1 Czech light automatic gun, 1 Russian heavy machine gun, 1 Polish heavy machine gun, 30 German grenades, about 5, 000 pieces of ammunition.

---

topography of the camp (or parts of it), made by the following witnesses (ex-prisoners, Ukrainian guards, members of the German personnel): Bahir Mosche, Białowicz Symcha, Biskupicz Jakub, Blatt Tomasz, Cohen Alex, Engel Chaim, Hanel Salomea, Kornfeld Mojsze, Kurt Ticho, Lichtman Eda, Lichtman Icchak, Menche Chaskiel, Peczerski Aleksander, RaabEsther, Schelvis Jules, Szmajzner Stanisław, Weisspapier Arkadii, Bauer Erich, Bolender Kurt, Hodl Franz, Ignat Danilzenko, Emanuel Szulc, Karakas Iwan.



“[...] Apart from this, there is one more map of the camp in the files, made by former camp prisoners while the camp was still functioning, sent by the Central Jewish Historical Commission. The place where, on examination, rubble was found generally agrees with the location of the gas chamber, marked on that reconstruction map [...]”.

The Historical Commission at the Central Jewish Committee in Poland had been collecting survivors' accounts already since 1945 and trying to find all the documents that described the extermination of the Jews. I suppose that the map shown below (most probably, the whole documentation of the Sobibór investigation conducted by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland has not been preserved as a complete unit) is the one mentioned by Zbigniew Łukaszewicz. I found a copy of that map in Dutch archival resources attached to Nachman Blumental's study entitled 'Obóz śmierci – Sobibór' [The Death Camp – Sobibór] from 1946. A very detailed description of the road from the ramp to Camp II, a detailed drawing of Camps I and II, and an exceptionally great number of details concerning the part of the camp with the sorting barracks, and a rather less precise, very general drawing of the infrastructure of Camps III and IV, may prove the fact that this is the sketch mentioned by Z. Łukaszewicz. It was prepared on the basis of information imparted in the years 1944-1946 by Jewish survivors (at the time, testimonies and accounts were given, by those who worked in Camp I and II, among others: Cukierman, Podchlebnik, Freiberg, Zeldia Metz, Salomea Hanel, Samuel Lerer, Lichtman Eda and Icchak, Menche Chaskiel, Leon Feldhendler, Powroźnik).

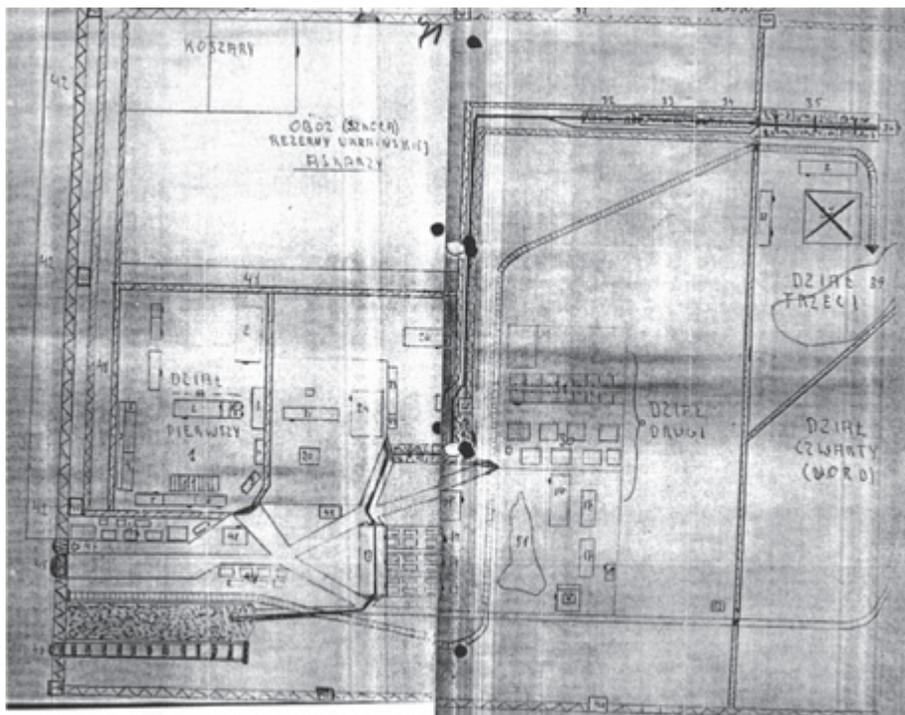


Photo 3. A sketch of the German extermination camp in Sobibór; probably made in 1946 by the Central Jewish Historical Commission. From Kurt Ticho's private collection.

“[...] Explanations to the map ‘The death factory in Sobibór’

1. Assembly yard, 2. Barracks for men, 3. Barracks for women, 4. Locksmith’s workshops, 5. Carpenter’s workshop, 6. Tailor’s shop, 7. Kitchen, 8. Bowling alley, 9. Bakery, 10. Laundry, 11. Eating tables, 12. Bathrooms, 13. Hand luggage barrack, 14. Barracks for sorting hand luggage, 15. Store for valuables, 16. Store for hair and other things, 17. Temporary tailor’s shops for repairing clothes from transports, 18. Stove for burning documents and old things, 19. Toilets, 20. Main watchtower, 21. Store for shoes, 22. Store for high-quality tinned food, 23. Store for gold, precious metals and money, 24. Old shed, 25. Porch where Germans made speeches, 26. Pigsty, 27. Power plant, 28. Counter, 29. Men’s yard for undressing, 30. Sorting tables for clothes and underwear, 31. Main store for clothes, 32. Women’s barrack for taking off shoes, 33. Women’s barrack for undressing (dresses and underwear), 34. Barrack for cutting women’s hair, 35. Gas chambers, 36. Motors hall, 37. Crematorium, 38. Workshop, 39. Former graves, 40. Guards’ watchtowers, 41. Ditch with water, 42. Mines, 43. Various residential and administration buildings for Germans, 44. Residential barracks for Ukrainian crew, 45. Main gateway, 46. Gate for loading ramp, 47. Guard building, 48. Arsenal, 49. Jeweller’s shop, remelting precious metals, 50. Platform, 51. Litter pit filled in after building stove (see No. 18 on the map), 52. Chapel [...]”.

The sketch of the camp attached to the sentences passed by the court in Hagen during criminal trials against members of the German extermination centre in Sobibór (1965-1966) was regarded by the judges as a significant help in interpreting evidence materials. The map was made from memory by a witness in that trial – former SS-Oberscharführer Erich Bauer (already sentenced in 1950), a German ex-guard in the Sobibór camp. Ever since it was drawn, Erich Bauer had continuously been a member of the German personnel of the camp in Sobibór. Having been sentenced for life, he had not the slightest reason to give an untrue picture of the situation. Obviously, the drawing is unprofessional, and was not made in a suitable scale. Unfortunately, the remaining part of the map is missing, which probably presented a sketch of Camp III as well. That map was constantly being analysed and compared at the main trial in Hagen. It was submitted both to the accused and to witnesses. A blow-up of the map was hanging on a wall while witnesses were being interrogated and the accused were testifying in Frankfurt-on-the-Main and Hagen in the 60s and the 80s. According to most former camp prisoners, that map reflected the camp reality very well. In the opinion of the court, the whole map turned out to be perfectly correct because it precisely shows the placement of the camp beside the railway as well as the placement of the buildings and the individual parts of the camp<sup>73</sup>.

---

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*.

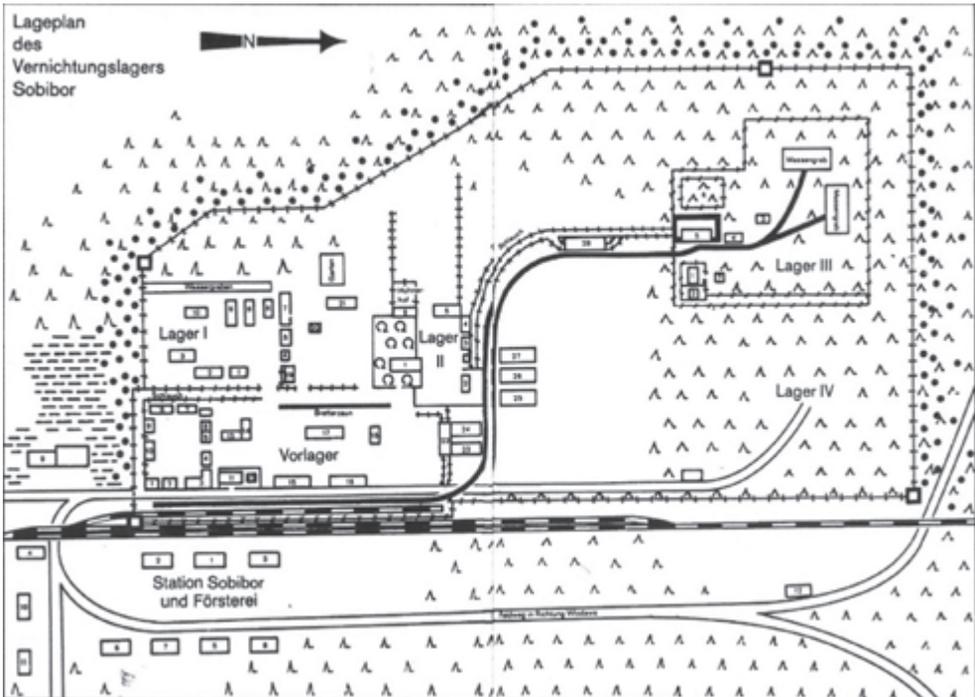


Photo 4. A map of the German extermination camp in Sobibór, specially prepared for the trial in Hagen (1965/1966) (in): Rückert A., *NS-Vernichtungslager im Spiegel Deutscher Strafprozesse*, München 1977.

**The Fore-camp:** 1. Guard building, 2. Dentist for SS men and gaol for Ukrainian guards, 3. Kitchen for SS members, 4. Garage for Erich Bauer's lorry, drying room upstairs, 5. Old pigsties and barber's, 6. Bathrooms for SS men, 7. Laundry for SS men, 8. SS men living quarters, 9. Gomerski's living quarters (among other things), 10. Supply store for SS men, 11. Former post office building and SS men living quarters, 12. Arsenal, 13. Quarters (barracks) for Ukrainian guards, 14. Quarters (barracks) for Ukrainian guards, 15. Quarters (barracks) for Ukrainian guards, 16. Kitchen and dining room for Ukrainian guards, 17. Quarters (barracks) for Ukrainian guards, 18. Quarters (barrack) for Ukrainian guards commander, 19. Bakery, 20. Laundry and ironing room for SS men, 21. Sorting barrack (for Jewish shoes from transports), 22. Temporary barrack (for storing luggage), 23, 24. Barracks for storing Jewish suitcases and luggage from transports, 25. Sorting barracks, 26, 27. Sorting barracks for Jewish clothes, 28. Barracks for cutting Jewish women's hair.

**Camp I:** 1. Tailor's shop, 2. Shoemaker's shop, 3. Carpenter's and locksmith's work shops, 4. Shoemakers for Ukrainian guards, 5. Tools store, 6. Kitchen for prisoners of Camp I, 7. Barracks for Jewish prisoners (women), 8, 9. Barracks for Jewish prisoners (men), 10. Painter's studio.

**Camp II:** 1. Former forester's house, camp administration, quarters for SS

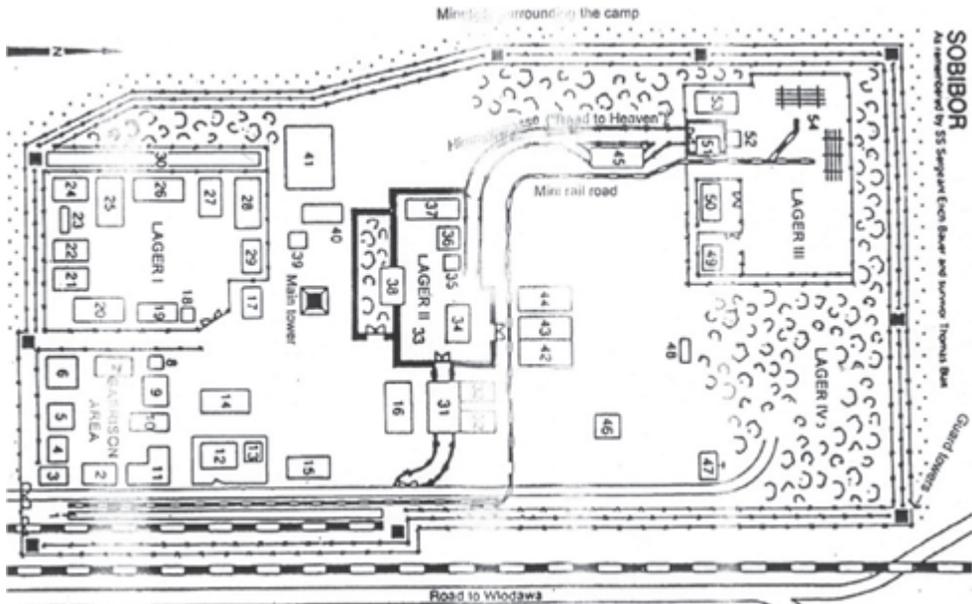
men and store for valuables, 2. Store for food products from transports, 3. Shed, 4. Store for silver and place for electric power generator, 5. Stable and blacksmith's shop, 6. Pigsty and hen house.

**Camp III:** 1. Barracks for Jews working in Camp III, 2. Kitchen and barracks for prisoners working in Camp III ('dentist's'), 3. SS office, 4. Room for engine, 5. Gas chamber, 6. Enclosed workplace, 7. Watchtower with machine gun and reflector.

**Camp IV:** The construction of that camp was never completed. Captured Soviet weapons and ammunition were to be converted there.

**The other buildings:** 1. Railway station, 2. Railwaymen's house, 3. Utility room at railway station, 4. Post office, 5, 6, 7, 8. Peasant farms, 9. Saw-mill, 10, 11. Peasant farms, 12. Railwayman's house.

That map was widely used in their descriptions (often changing various details, depending on their memory or current research) by Yitzhak Arad, Tomasz Blatt, Jules Schelvis, Alex Cohen, Martin Gilbert, Eugon Kogon, Billy Rutheford, Michael Tregenza. Unfortunately, most of those descriptions, except Tomasz Blatt's, Jules Schelvis's and Yitzhak Arad's maps, have not been brought up to date in terms of detailed interpretation of the camp structure.



*Photo 5. A map (No. 1) made by an ex-prisoner of the Sobibór camp – Tomasz Blatt. From Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*

1. Platform, 2. Dental surgery for SS men, 3. Guard building for Ukrainians, 4. Supply store for SS men, 5. Living quarters for SS men, 6. Living quarters for SS men, 7. Laundry, 8. Well, 9. Bathroom and barber's for SS men, 10. Garages, 11. Kitchen and canteen for SS men, 12. Quarters

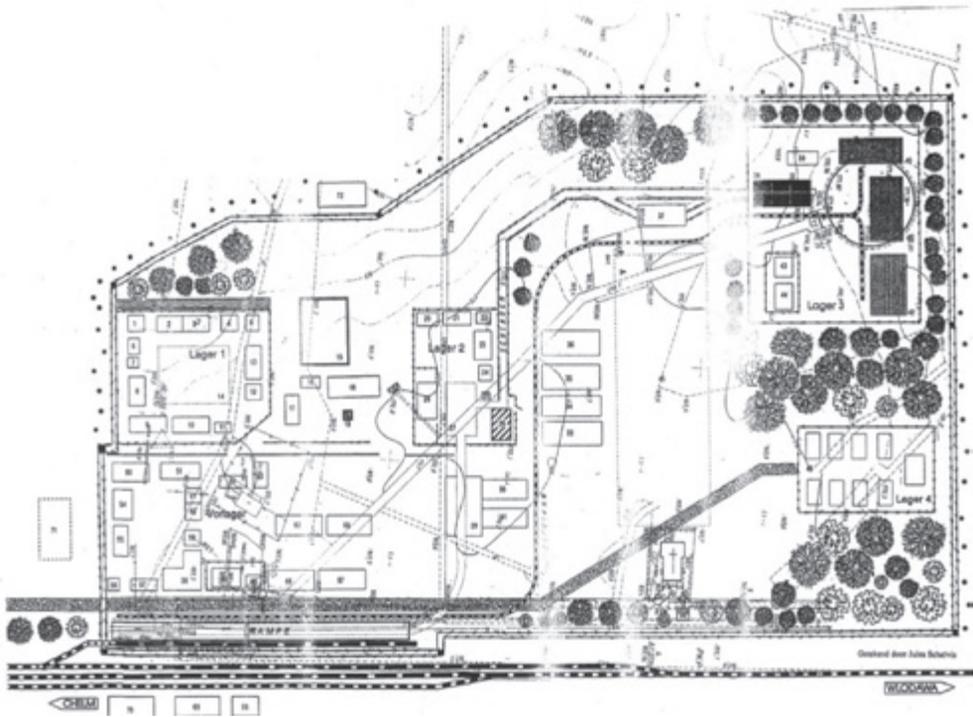
of camp commandant, 13. Arsenal, 14-16. Barracks for Ukrainian guards, 17. Bakery, 18. Clinic, 19. Tailor's shop, 20. Shoemaker's shop for SS men, 21. Locksmith's workshop, 22. Carpenter's work shop, 23. Shoemaker's shop for Ukrainian guards, 24. Painter's studio, 25-26. Barracks for prisoners, 27. Kitchen for prisoners, 28. Barrack for prisoners (women), 29. Latrines, 30. Ditch with water, 31. Temporary barrack for Jews to place their hand luggage, 32. Barracks, sorting barracks for hand luggage, 33. Yard for victims to undress, 34. Food store, 35. Counter where Jews submitted their money, jewellery, etc. before taking 'heavenly alley', 36. Power generator (engine), 37. Stable, pigsty, hen house, 38. Camp administration building and store for 'valuables', 39. Ironing room, 40. Store and sorting place for shoes, 41. Garden, 42-43. Store and sorting places for hand luggage, 44. Store for sorted clothing, 45. Barracks for women to undress and to have their hair cut, 46. Shed with stove for burning documents, photos, personal documents, books and worn-out clothing, 47. Chapel, 48. Latrines, 49-50. Barracks and kitchen for prisoners working in Camp III, 51. Gas chamber, 52. Annexe with engine that produced gas fed into gas chamber, 53. Enclosed yard or barrack, 54. Mass graves, 55. Camp crematorium.



Photo 6. A map (No. 2) made by an ex-prisoner of the Sobibór camp – Tomasz Blatt. From Tomasz Blatt's private collection.



*Photo 7. A model of the German extermination camp in Sobibór made by Tomasz Blatt. It is on display in Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust.*



*Photo 8. A map made by an ex-prisoner of the Sobibór camp – Jules Schelvis (in): Vernichtungslager Sobibór, Hamburg/Munster 2003, pp. II-III.*

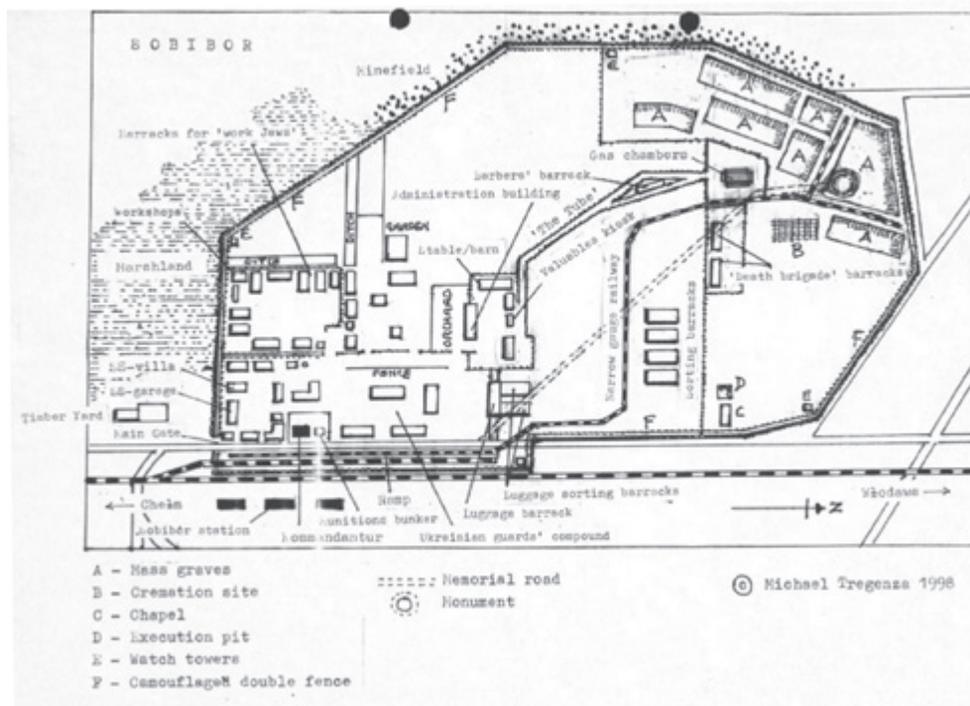


Photo 9. A map drawn by Michael Tregenza. From Michael Tregenza's private collection. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.

**Bahir Moshe, was born under the name of Szklarek** on 19 July 1942 in Płock. He came to the camp from Zamość on 24 May 1942 in one of the first transports of over 2, 000 people. Soon after his arrival, he found himself in a group of 50 men selected for labour. Over the first three months, he worked in the *Bahnhofkommando*. Then he worked in the food store, and next as a 'barber'. After the war, he emigrated to Israel, where he wrote a lengthy report from his stay in Sobibór, meant for the kibbutz of ghetto rebels - *Beit Lohamei Hagetaot*.

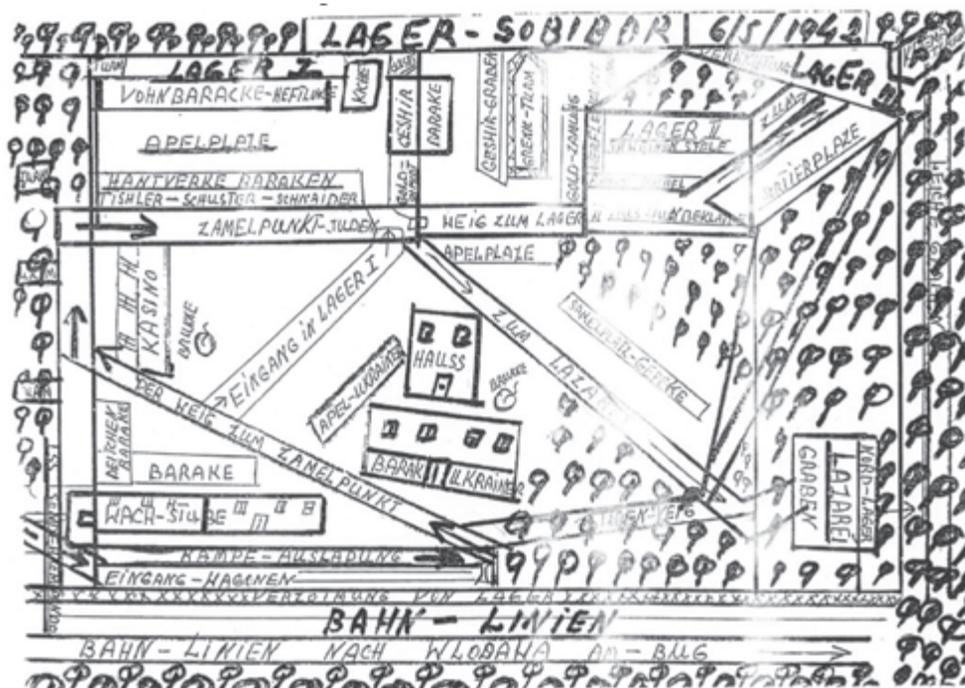


Photo 10. A map made by an ex-prisoner of the camp in Sobibór – Moshe Bahir<sup>74</sup>.

#### “[...] Five camps in Sobibór

There were five separate camps in Sobibór: Camp I served as the assembly place for all those who were brought to the camp. Once there, the men were separated from the women and children. Also there, strong and healthy men were selected for work. All waited there until they were taken to Camp II, where, after thousands of people had been brought in there, Oberscharführer Hermann Michel did a census of the people, counted them all, and gave a speech in which he promised that when all formalities were completed, they would be dispatched to Ukraine to work there until the end of the war. He also added that, as a matter of course, they would have to smarten up and clean themselves. That is why, they were ordered to undress and were taken to Camp III. Earlier, they had deposited all their valuables, gold and silver with the Germans, who had registered each item with absolute precision. Camp III was composed of gas chambers.

Camp IV was the place where the Germans and the Ukrainians lived.

Camp V was built later, towards the end of 1942. It was the place where the ‘prisoners squadron’ lived – the infamous forest brigade (Strafkommando). It dealt with cutting trees down, cleaning the area and preparing it for building a store for ammunition there. The commandant of that part of the camp was Hubert Gomerski.

Camp III was separated from the Sobibór prisoners on all sides. Because of bunches of pine trees surrounding that part of the camp, no one could have a look

<sup>74</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Gedachten en reacties op de bomenlaan en de plattegronden van Sobibor*, Amstelveen, 2003.

inside to see what was going on there. The only thing we could discern was the roof of the 'bath' which towered above the tree line [...]"<sup>75</sup>.

**Chaim Engel**, a former prisoner of the Sobibór camp, did not leave any map of the camp. He only enclosed in his reports a small outline of Camp I, the road connecting it to Camp II, a fragment of the narrow-gauge line from the ramp towards Camp III and the yard with the sorting barracks of Camp II. Chaim Engel worked as a sorting man. Therefore, it can be assumed that the placement of those objects may be right. That information may be an important clue in reconstructing the real arrangement of the camp infrastructure. Archaeological research, completed in the autumn of 2011, connected with establishing the route of the 'Himmelfahrtstrasse' led to the identification of its eastern and northern end. The details marked by Chaim Engel may be a clue in a possible future archaeological exploration of the area of Camp II and its closest neighbourhood.

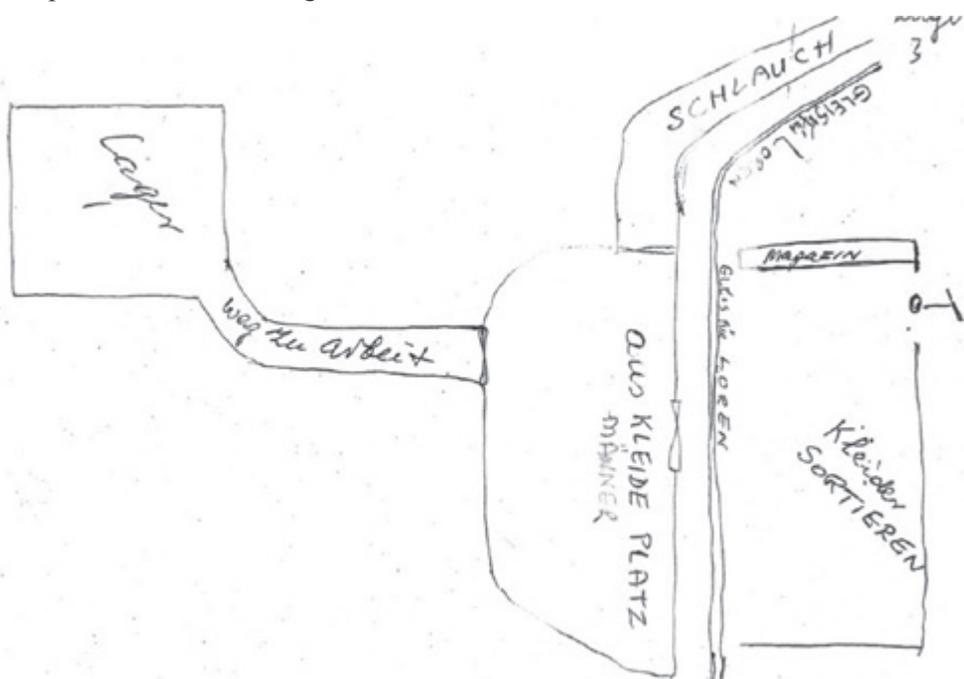


Photo 11. A map made by an ex-prisoner of the camp in Sobibór – Chaim Engel.  
From Kurt Ticho's private collection. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.

**Kurt Ticho** was born on 11 April 1914 in Brno (The Czech Republic at present). As a result of a 'resettlement' action, he was transported in April 1942 from Terezin to Trawniki. From there, he was sent to the ghetto in Piaski, where, on 6 November 1942, he found himself in a transport of 3,000 Jews to Sobibór. At first, he worked in a sorting barrack and then as *Sanitater* (a paramedic), he attended the sick. After a lucky escape from Sobibór on the outbreak of the revolt, he went into hiding

<sup>75</sup> Moshe Bahir, 'The Revolt. Testimony of Moshe Bahir' (in): Miriam Novitch, *Sobibor. Martyrdom and Revolt*, New York, 1980, pp. 139-163, translated from English by Albert Lewczuk vel Leoniuk.

from 19 October 1943 till August 1944 on Stanisław and Anna Podsiadły's farm. In August 1944, he got via Kamieniec Podolski through to Sagadury in Romania, where he joined General Ludvík Svoboda's Czechoslovak Army Corps. Kurt Ticho managed to start legal proceedings against Gomerski and Klier, which took place in Frankfurt-on-the-Main. Later, he emigrated to the USA, where, in 1948, he applied for American citizenship. He left behind a lot of written reports and reminiscences. He died on 8 June 2009.

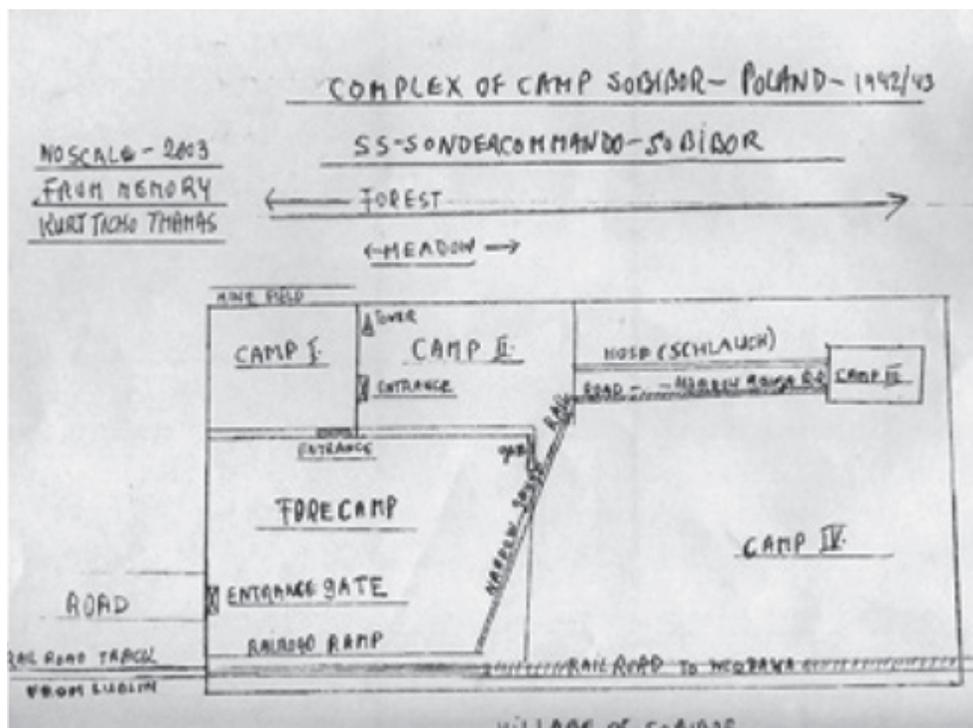


Photo 12. A map made by an ex-prisoner of the Sobibór camp – Kurt Ticho<sup>76</sup>.

### A description of the map made by Kurt Ticho:

“[...] **Camp I** was a spacious, rectangular yard enclosed by a high barbed wire fence which was next to a meadow on one side. We slept on three-tier wooden bunk beds in barracks made of half-products. In the yard, there was a kitchen, latrines, a washing basin and a deep well. Another barrack was divided into two parts. In the first part, there was Buegelstube, where young women darned and ironed clothing which had previously been washed and boiled in pots. In the other part, there was Strickstube, where another group of women knitted sweaters and gloves for the German army. They used yarn from the luggage of the victims. When I arrived at the camp, the men and the women lived in the same barracks; there were only separate entrances. One of the prisoners, Eda Lichtman, volunteered to be ‘den mother’. The other women accepted that. Men were not allowed in the women’s quarters. We

<sup>76</sup> Kurt Ticho, *My Legacy, Holocaust, History and Unfinished Task of Pope John Paul II*, Włodawa, 2008, p.79.

were guarded by three kapos, who would beat us with heavy steel rod whips covered in leather. One day, Moishe, the chief kapo, on impulse, hit me on the arm with the wooden stick that we used for taking water out of the well. The stick -10 centimetres in diameter- got broken. Even today, my right hand is not fully operational. When I came to Sobibór, the camp was made up of three parts, named Camp I, II and III. In the corner of Camp II, by the tall fence bordering on Camp I, stood a tall wooden watchtower, from the top of which we were guarded by armed Ukrainian policemen. The living quarters and the objects that I have already mentioned were in Camp I, together with all the craftsmen's workshops, the laundry and the bakery. Forced labourers were compelled to form cuts, make clothes and shoes for the SS. When the SS men went away on leave, they took with them complete products back to Germany. After each 42 days of murderous work, the SS men had the right for 18 days' leave. The Ukrainian guards were less privileged. They were only allowed to have their clothes darned and shoes mended in the workshops. No new clothes were sewn for them. Among the buildings of Camp I was also a carpenter's workshop with a staff of 30. There, they made furniture which the SS men sent to their homes later. After some time, a painter's studio was created, where a Dutch artist – Max van Dam painted portraits of the SS officers. Professor Schwarz-Waldeck from The Vienna Art Academy painted rustic landscapes, and Alfred Friedberg, an amateur painter from Frankfurt painted still lifes. There was also a woman painter, but I never saw her pictures. Max once complained: - Kurt, I've been painting Frenzel's portrait. I sit down to painting it half an hour every day. I should depict not only his likeness, but also his soul, which is impossible for me. – About 20 SS- men were stationed in Sobibór. They lived in Vorlager (the Fore-camp), which was between the ramp and Camp I. On one side, the Fore-camp extended as far as Camp II. The living quarters of the SS- men were neat little bungalows made of half-products, and looked after by Jewish women. The Ukrainian barracks and Waffenkammer (the arsenal) were also in the Fore-camp. The whole complex, composed of four separate camps in total, went by the official name of Sonderkommando Sobibor. It was a state within a state, ruled by the SS. The SS members performed the duties of judges, jurymen and executioners. For their own benefits, they ran the camp ruthlessly. Of course, the intimidated prisoners were deprived of all rights. It was up to the SS to decide who was to live and who was to die. They not only maltreated us or stole things from us, but also, they stole valuables which were supposed to be dispatched to Germany. They got rich by stealing jewellery, gold coins, cash, various kinds of priceless family heirlooms, or anything else that had any value at all.

**Camp II** was adjacent to Camp I. In Camp II, there were hen houses, stables, a pigsty and a vegetable garden. There was also a big three-storey house there, a former Jewish property, dismantled in some town, transported to the camp and put up again. It was the administration building for the SS. Next to that building, there was a sorting barrack where Jewish luggage was segregated and stored. Among the craftsmen in Sobibór, there were bricklayers, goldsmiths, roofers and other specialists who took care of the camp supply base. To protect the Sobibór camp

against possible attacks, and to prevent escapes of prisoners, the Wehrmacht planted mines on the meadow on the forest's side, bordering on a tall barbed wire fence.

The narrow-gauge line, which began at the Sobibór ramp, ran through Camp II to Camp III. Whenever a transport arrived, a group of Jewish labourers wearing blue caps - *Bahnhofkommando* (the Railway Squad) stopped working in order to load the dead, sick and weak into waggons, which they rolled directly to Camp III. To the duties of the Railway Squad also belonged cleansing and disinfecting cattle trucks. The narrow-gauge line was also used to transport food for the Jewish labourers from Camp III, as well as to bring empty containers to the ramp, from which prisoners took them to the kitchen [...]<sup>77</sup>.

**Szmajzner Stanislaw** was born on 13 March 1927 in Puławy, died on 3 March 1989 in Goiania (Brazil). He arrived in Sobibór from Opole on 12 May 1942 in a group of 2,000 people. Over the first few months, he worked at the camp as a goldsmith. Among other things, he made gold signet rings and other jewellery for the SS-men. Most of the gold and silver came from gold teeth of Jews who had been murdered at the camp. Later, he became the 'foreman' of the maintenance commando, thanks to which he had access to all parts of the camp, with the exception of Camp III. Also, he was a member of the committee that organised the uprising in the camp. After the war, in 1947, he went to Brazil. In 1968, his book about Sobibór was published in Portuguese, entitled 'Hell in Sobibor. The Tragedy of A Teenager Jew'.

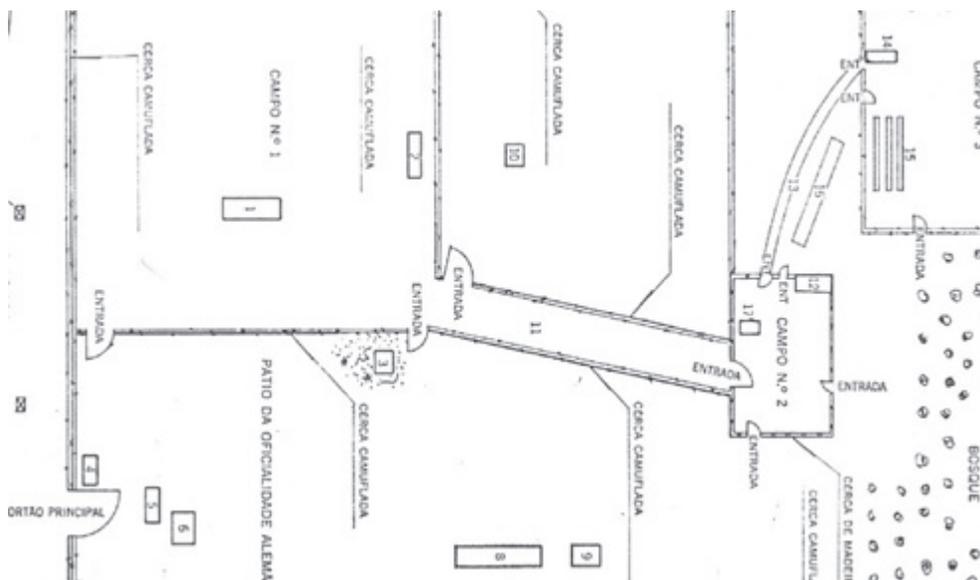


Photo 13. A map of the camp (in 1942) made by an ex-prisoner of the Sobibór camp – Stanisław Szmajzner<sup>78</sup>.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 80-83.

<sup>78</sup> Stanisław Szmajzner, *Hell in Sobibor. The Tragedy of a Teenager Jew*, typescript, MPŁW Archives.

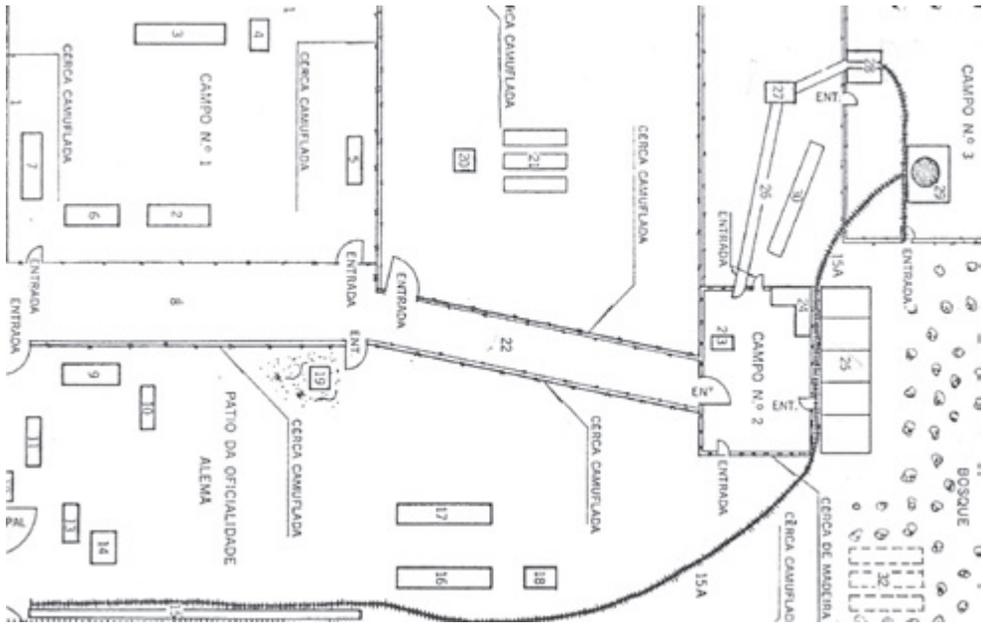


Photo 14. A map of the camp (in 1943) made by an ex-prisoner of the camp in Sobibór – Stanisław Szmajner<sup>79</sup>.

**Aleksander Peczerski** made a few sketches of the camp in July 1974, following a motion of the court in Frankfurt. It can no doubt be assumed that Peczerski was well familiar with the topography of the camp (even though he was there for only 22 days). He spent a lot of time preparing the revolt. Unfortunately, his sketches do not contain too many details. In the first sketch (Photo 14a), two details are noteworthy: two roads connecting Camp II to Camp III. It is possible that apart from the road to the gas chamber, Peczerski also paid attention to the path running from Camp II to a place that is also marked on a few other maps (Bolender, Blatt, Schelvis, the map from the trial in Hagen) and is mostly called the 'enclosed labour place' or the 'barrack'. Unfortunately, none of the witnesses who marked that object on their maps or sketches described the details of its purpose or the way of communication of that place with the rest of the camp infrastructure.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*.

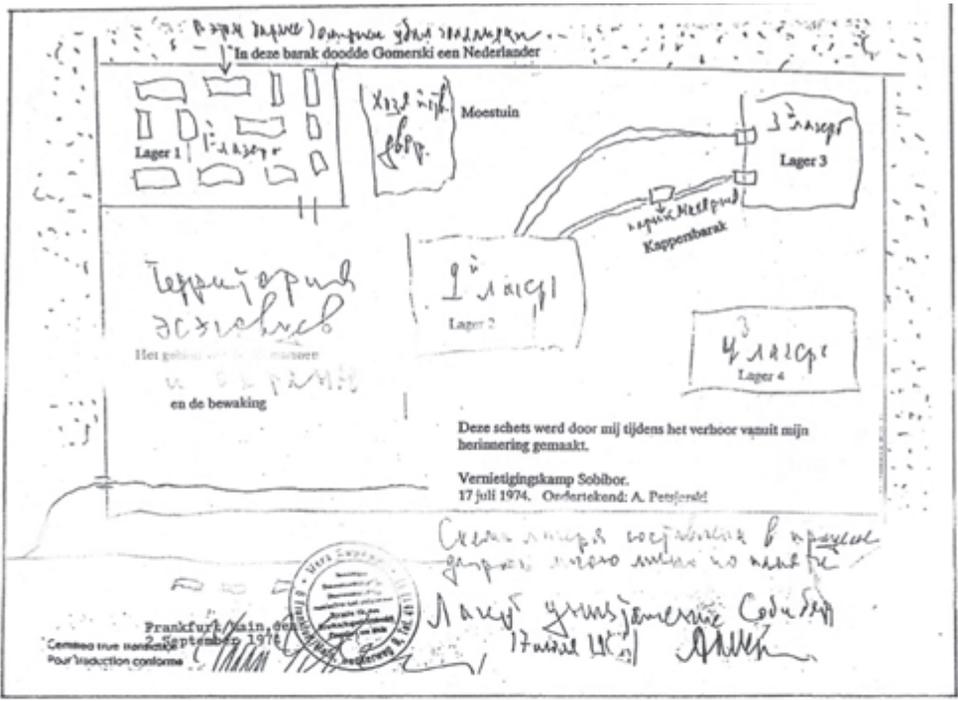


Photo 15. A map made by an ex-prisoner of the Sobibor camp – Aleksander Peczerski. A copy from Marek Bem's private collection.

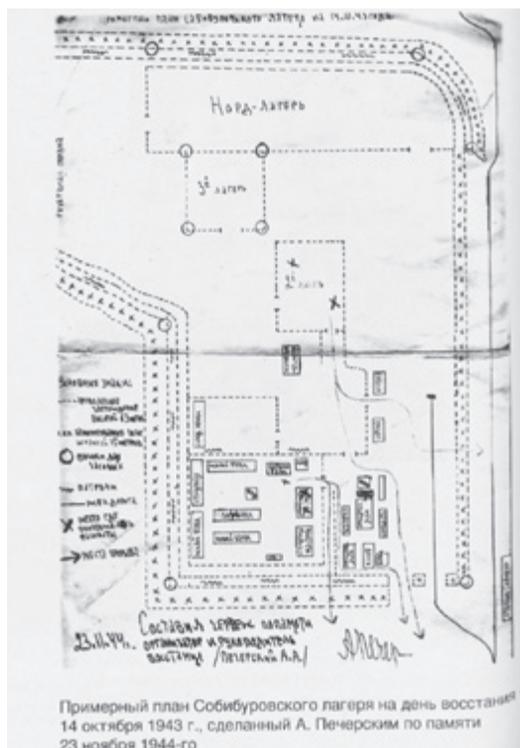


Photo 16. A map made by an ex-prisoner of the Sobibór camp – Aleksander Peczerski. A copy from the ŻIH archives in Warsaw.

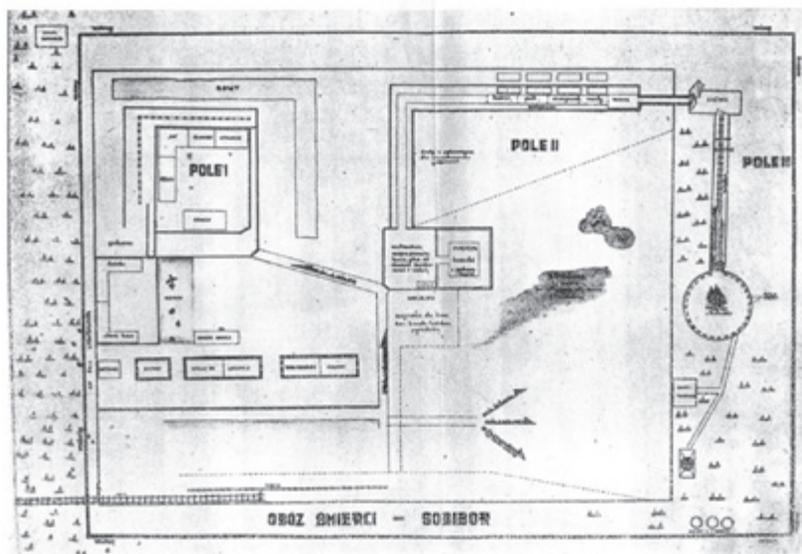
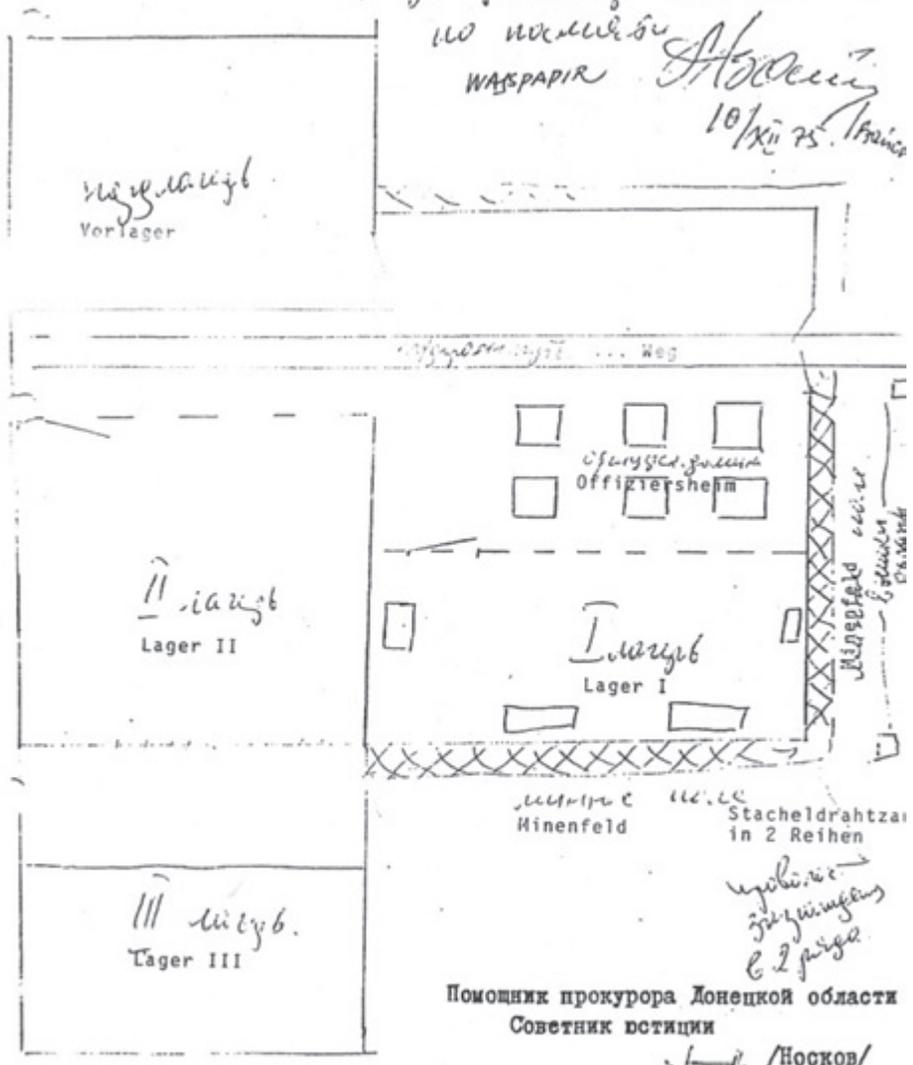


Photo 17. A trial reconstruction of the death camp in Sobibór, made by Bolesław Ołomucki. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Gerszon Taffet and Philip Friedman, eds., *Zagłada żydostwa polskiego* [The Extermination

IN DES TODESLAGERS "SOBIBOR"  
gefertigt aus der Erinnerung

Всё на память  
создан. События совладельца  
по памяти  
WASSPAPIER  
10/XII 75. /Krause



Помощник прокурора Донецкой области  
Советник истины

/Носков/

Копия верно:  
Прокурор отдела  
прокуратуры Союза ССР



/Колесникова/

Photo 18. A sketch drawn by an ex-prisoner of the camp in Sobibór - A. Weisspapier. A copy from the MPLW archives. Muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego (the MPLW) [The Museum of The Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District] in Włodawa.



### **Kurt Bolender:**

“[...] I made a sketch of the camp as I remember it. The sketch doesn't agree with the actual scale and may not reflect the exact placement of the buildings. The lines at the bottom show the railway from Chelm to Włodawa. Above the railway is the camp. It was bounded by double barbed wire with short and long tree branches woven into it in such a way that it was impossible to look inside the camp. I can't give the precise area of the camp. From above, the width may have been 150 metres. The distance of the gateway to the ditch – 350 metres. In the bottom left-hand corner, I drew the siding and the ramp. It was the place for unloading transports of Jews. Above, I sketched the gateway and the guard building. The guards could have been on duty more to the left of the fence. On the right of the guards, I drew the arsenal, the Ukrainian quarters, the dining place and the quarters in which I stayed myself during my service in Sobibór. I've just completed the sketch and drawn the house which I gave Number 10. That house had been there before the camp was built. Stangl lived in it. In the upper left-hand corner, I marked a certain part of the camp and wrote 'Workshops of the Jews'. That part of the camp had already been there when I arrived. They were barracks with a tailor's, a shoemaker's, a goldsmith's and other workshops in them. The part that I described was Camp I. On the right, there was Camp II. I gave Number 4 to the administration. The camp administrator lived there. In the right-hand corner of my sketch, I marked the tree stand. Behind it, I marked off Camp III, in which there was a graveyard, the big barrack for the Jews, the machine gun stand and the gas chamber (Number 5). Between Camp III and the camp administration building was the landing strip and the drill yard. From the administration building to the gas chamber, I drew a winding line, which I called Number 7. It was the so-called Schlauch. As far as I can remember, no more than 10 trucks were rolled to the siding. After the train stopped, the gateway was closed and the train was surrounded by Ukrainian guards. I don't know the process of unloading. I imagine that the Jews left the train. Next, they were led to the yard beside the administration building. When I stayed in Sobibór, there were no barracks for the Jews to undress. They had to undress right in the yard, men separately from women. I saw the whole process only once. Michel gave a speech to the Jews, before they began undressing. He told them they had arrived here to work and to settle. It was required that they should earlier take a bath and undergo disinfection to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. After the speech, as many Jews undressed as the gas chamber could hold. By my estimates, one gas chamber could hold up to 40-50 people. After they got undressed, they were led through the so-called Schlauch, which was a one-and-a-half-metre wide passage surrounded by barbed wire. And they were led only by Ukrainians, never Germans. There were three gas chambers in the building (Number 5 on my sketch). In the front of it, there was a little annexe with a Russian T 34 tank engine in it. However, I don't know that exactly because I never saw it. We just heard about it. After the Jews entered the gas chambers, the Ukrainians closed the door. In answer to your interrupting question, I say that I never saw Germans taking part in the process. As far as I could see, only armed Ukrainians did that. The engine which produced gas was worked by Ukrainians, specifically by one Ukrainian whose first name was Emil, and a German lorry driver by the name of Bauer. I know that the Ukrainian, later in Italy, joined the partisans. I don't know what happened to him. Bauer came from Berlin, or rather, he came from Berlin as a lorry driver. I didn't see him in Italy later. After the gassing was

over; the door was opened, and the Jewish work squad took the corpses out of the gas chamber. The corpses had their gold teeth knocked out. Behind the gas chamber building lay the narrow-gauge line, which ran to the graveyards. The Jewish work squad placed the corpses on square boarded waggons, and rolled them to the mass grave, which was 60 metres long, 20 metres wide and 6-7 metres deep. Its side walls were slanted in such a way as to form an escarpment to prevent the danger of a landslide. My answer to your interrupting question is that during my stay at the camp, corpses were not burnt. I know that for sure. When I was in Sobibór, corpses were placed layer upon layer so that one grave could hold as many as possible. Later, I heard that corpses were transported by means of diggers and then burnt. Bones were crushed and mixed with sand. That mixture was covered with earth, upon which a grove was planted. When I was at the camp, removed clothes were stored in the open air. I didn't have the knowledge about what happened to them. I can't tell anything about the whereabouts of gold teeth, deposited decorations and jewellery, either. Those things were not the subject of my interest [...]"<sup>81</sup>.

### Franz Hödl's sketches:

An Austrian, SS-Unterscharführer Franz Hödl served in Sobibór from October 1942 until the uprising in October 1943. Together with Bolender, he worked the combustion engine for gassing prisoners. He made sketches of the Sobibór camp in 1966 and 1974. The marked details concerning Camp III are particularly noteworthy.

Like Bolender, he also marked the 'open territory', which served as a runway and landing strip for planes.

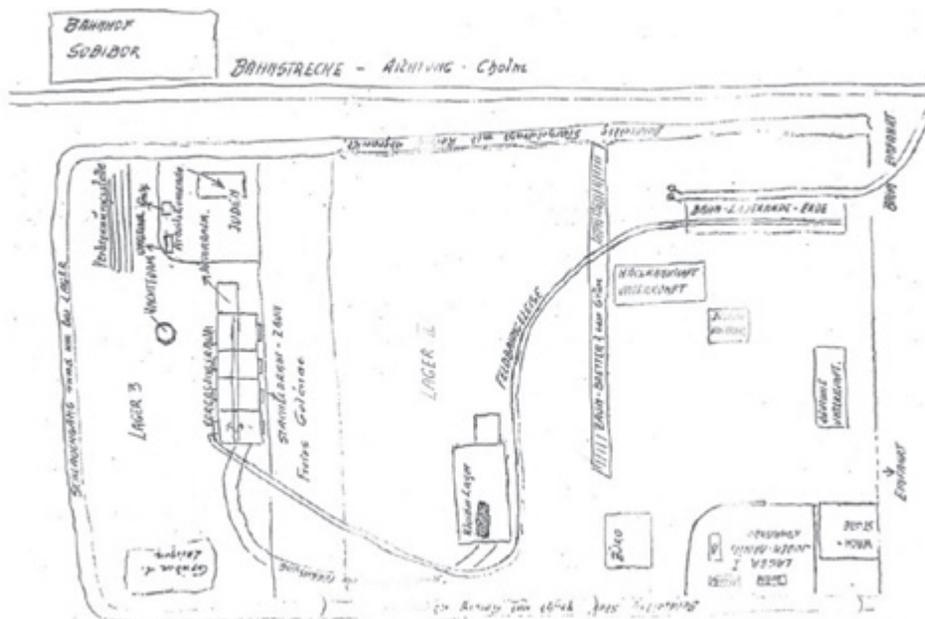


Photo 21. A sketch drawn by an ex-member of the German personnel of the camp in Sobibór - SS-Unterscharführer Franz Hödl. A copy from the MPŁW archives.

<sup>81</sup> Kurt Bolender, interrogation record, the Criminal Police National Court, Munich, 5 June 1962.





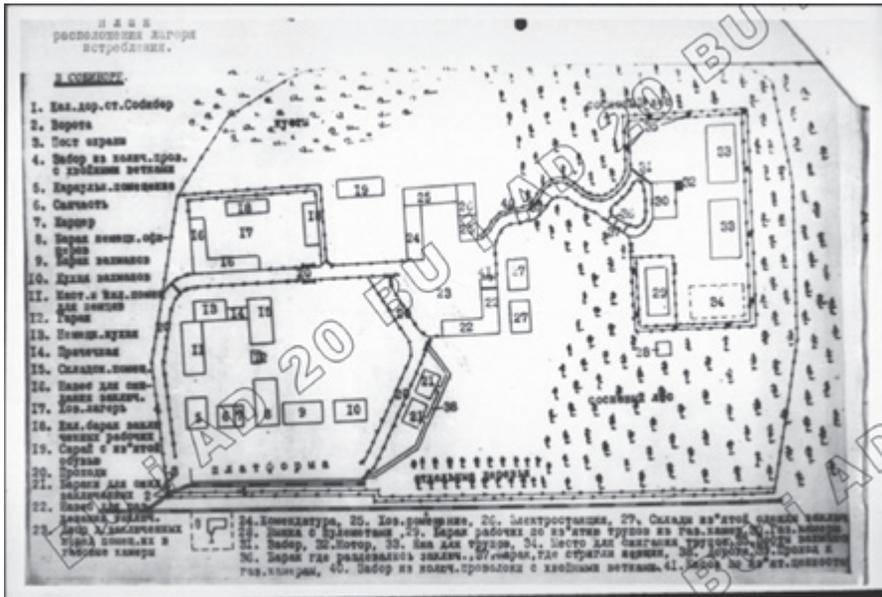


Photo 24. A map of the camp in Sobibór; probably made during judicial inquiries and prosecutor's proceedings at the beginning of the 1960s by KGB investigators of the Soviet Ministry of Justice against located Sobibór camp ex-guards who were living in the USSR. A copy from the IPN archives in Lublin, Lu 1-9-46-0065.

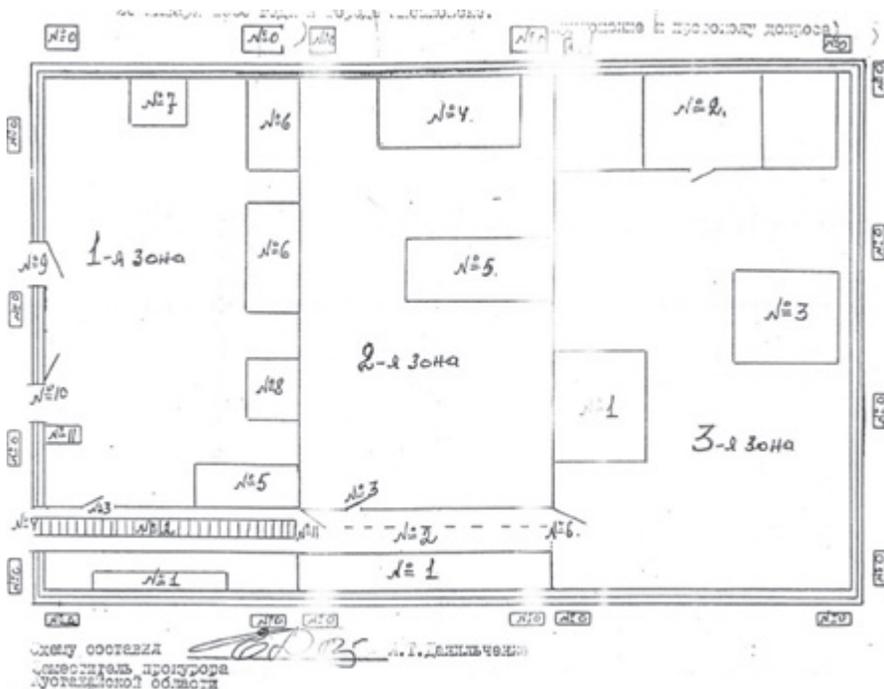


Photo 25. A sketch drawn by a former guard of the camp in Sobibór – Ignat Danilczenko. A copy from the MPŁW archives.

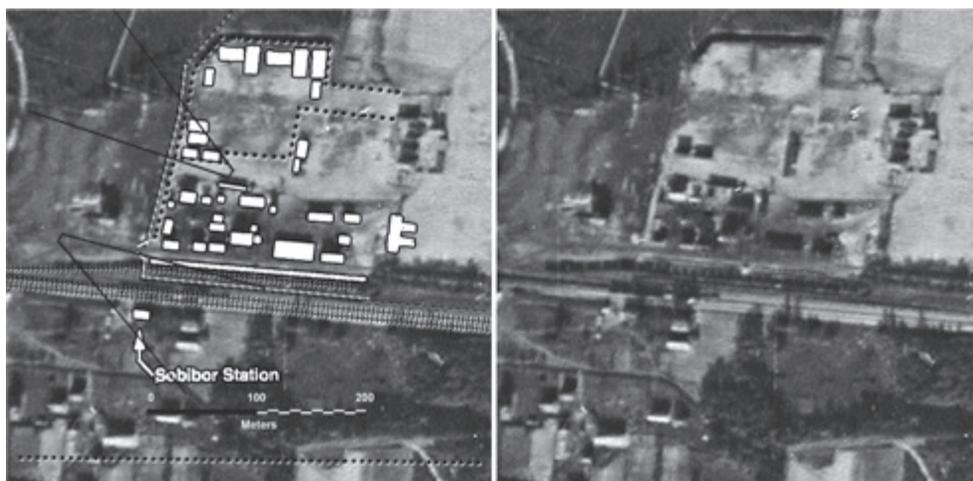
Each time a further attempt is made at reconstructing the topography of the former extermination centre in Sobibór, particularly further planned archaeological research, it is essential to have a prior analysis of the existing aerial photos of that territory from World War II, which may provide unique comparative materials. The most useful instrument for analysis seems to be a stereoscopic reading of the aerial photos. Combining that standard technique of photo interpretation with precision may bring very good results. The advantage of the technique is that it does not only offer a three-dimensional view, but it also brings out details by analysing two views simultaneously. Taking advantage of those photos, through GPS readings during the latest archaeological research, proved to be very helpful. It also confirmed assumptions about several marks clearly visible on all those photos (among other things: the location of the so-called object 'E' and the road leading to it, the route of the '*Himmelfahrtstrasse*'). It may turn out to be extremely helpful to compare photos taken at different times of the year. Luftwaffe reconnaissance missions in the Sobibór environs lasted from March to May 1944. The earlier and later aerial photos of the territory of the former extermination centre in Sobibór were taken on 28 March 1940, on 28 and 30 May 1944 (GX – 168 – SK – 98-124, GX – 5081 – 8-9, GX – 8102 – SK – 187, GX – 19265/713,714, 719)<sup>82</sup>. It may be supposed that a bird's eye view does not guarantee many chances for identifying marks useful in the reconstruction of the camp. However, it would be wrong to assume that, for example, the constructions without foundations leave no traces after being dismantled. In actual fact, there remain a lot of visible marks which point out to the former existence of the fence, the barracks and the roads, as well as the places in which pits were dug to hide victims' corpses and ashes. Many of the constructions which had been razed to the ground before the reconnaissance flights were made can still be identified in the photos. When the buildings in Sobibór were being demolished, the rubble was burnt in one place, which left a trace in the form of bright sandy earth with a black charred patch in the middle. Such traces are particularly well visible in the areas of the former Camps I, II and III. In other places of the camp, if the rubble was taken away and burnt somewhere else, traces of the previous use of the ground were preserved. Traces like that are often very clear because the vegetation of a patch takes time to fully regenerate, especially when such constructions required to be razed to the ground. That process caused the earth surface to turn into a soil stratum deprived of organic fertility. In Sobibór, like in the other camps of 'Operation Reinhardt', the sandy soil preserved traces of the fence especially well. The digging of holes in which poles were set up rendered the barren subsoil less solid. When the poles were dug out and discarded, barren places were left there, on which grass and other plants could hardly grow again. In the aerial pictures, that phenomenon can be observed in the form of evenly spaced white points. The different uses of the ground leave visible traces as well.

---

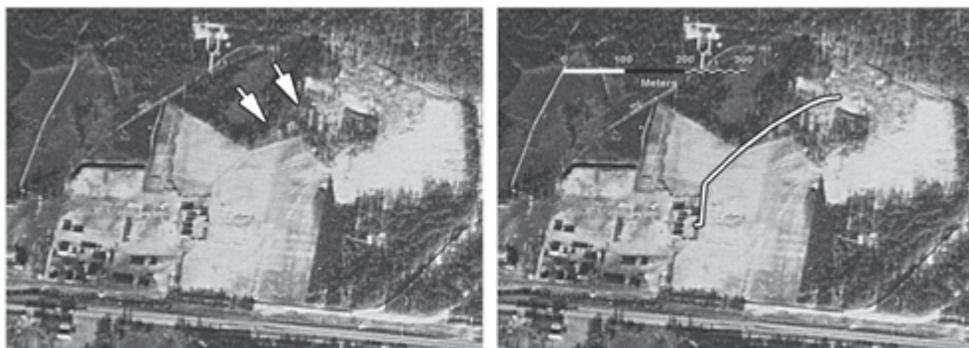
<sup>82</sup> Copies of the photos in Marek Bem's possession.



*Photo 26. An aerial view of the territory of the former German extermination camp in Sobibór – 1944. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.*



*Photo 27. An aerial view of the territory of the former camp – 1944. The marked places - a trial reconstruction of the location of the barracks of the Fore-camp, Camps I and II. The author – Yoram Haimi. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.*



*Photo 28. An aerial view of the territory of the former camp – 1944. The road to the bogus 'hospital' has been clearly marked. The author – Yoram Haimi. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.*



*Photo 29. An aerial view of the territory of the former camp – 1944. The objects which exist today have been marked: the forestry tower; the museum building, the chapel, the residential building (the camp commandant's house – during the functioning of the camp), the railway station building. The author – Yoram Haimi. A copy from Marek Bem's collection.*



### **3. Explanations concerning the demarcation of the boundaries of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór**

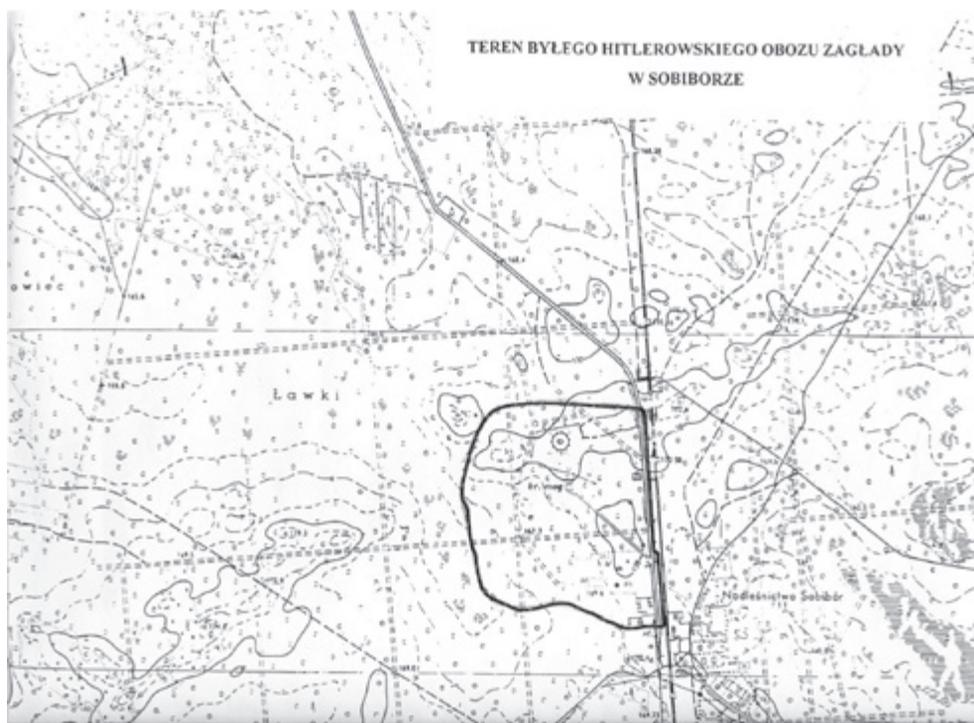
During the archaeological research carried out on the territory of the former extermination centre in Sobibór in 2001 and 2004, among various other works, attempts were also made at locating trees with remains of barbed wire on them. The scope of those works was completed and later verified by means of the comparative analysis of maps, sketches and accounts provided by former prisoners of the German extermination camp in Sobibór, members of the German camp personnel and 'indirect witnesses'. Locating that sort of traces allowed the researchers to make first attempts to delineate a supposed external boundary of the camp. During the abovementioned research, trees were found with remains of barbed wire, which enabled the researchers to demarcate several lengths. Linked to each other and completed on the basis of the abovementioned maps, those links provided a visible outline of the camp boundary line.

The map prepared in this way is only a theoretical record which is supposed to be in agreement with the historical truth. During the search for trees, conducted at the end of July and at the beginning of August 2004, some of the trees were found with barbed wire, and identified as relics of the camp fence. It was possible not only to locate and tag the trees from the first research conducted by an expedition from Toruń University (2001), but also to discover more barbed wire in new trees. Fragments of barbed wire appeared in the form of a few characteristic shapes: as multiple rolls grown into the bark of a tree, as single wire ends sticking out of the tree bark, as wire remains sunk into the bark to be located only by means of a metal detector, or as lying trees with remains of barbed wire. The searching for trees with traces of wire was conducted from the area of trees situated north of the mound commemorating the victims of Sobibór westwards and then southwards. There were found nearly all trees that had been located in 2001.

Moving along the southern fence eastwards, the researchers came across another 14 trees in the area between the last tree found in 2001, and the southern corner of the water ditch (dry at present) surrounding Camp I from the west. The fourteen trees are located on the extension of the earlier discovered boundary line, deviating a little to the south east. At the eastern end of the boundary line, about 15-16 metres south of the water ditch, a single birch was found which probably has no fragments of wire in it (no reaction from the metal detector). However, there are characteristic scratches on it, which may reflect several levels of barbed wire hanging there once. Further east, there are no more trees, and probably there were no trees growing there when the camp was functioning.

A search for the remains of the northern part of the camp fence also turned out fruitless because only two trees without wire were found with anomalies like twisted trunks, and one tree with loose wire around it, situated near three long pits. In that place, there was perhaps a normal fence made up of posts and wires. Summing up

the results of searching for the external camp fence, it must be stated that, thanks to them, it was nearly possible to complete the southern fragment of the fence as well as to discover two relics of the fence east of the rails, in the northern zone of the camp and its surroundings. The northern fragment of the fence was probably rested against growing trees, while further east, there was perhaps a board fence and barbed wire entanglements that made it impossible for anybody to look inside Camp III. The western length of the fence is visible, even with three rows of entanglements in places, which was already proved by the research in 2001<sup>83</sup>. On the basis of the abovementioned research, I have made a topographical map of the territory of the former German extermination centre.



*Photo 31. Possible boundaries of the former German extermination camp in Sobibór. A copy from Marek Bem's collection*

The boundaries suggested and delineated by myself may not include part of Camp IV (northern). The exact area of that part of the camp is unknown. Demarcated in this way, the boundaries of the former extermination centre in Sobibór delineate its territory of 31, 27 hectares.

<sup>83</sup> Wojciech Mazurek, *Wyniki badań archeologicznych na terenie byłego hitlerowskiego obozu zagłady w Sobiborze koło Włodawy, woj. lubelskie w 2004 roku* [The Results of Archaeological Research in the Area of The Former Nazi Extermination Camp in Sobibór near Włodawa, the Lublin Province, in 2004], Chełm, 2004.



## CHAPTER III

### THE CAMP PERSONNEL

#### 1. The role and the functions of the German personnel

During the eighteen months in which the Sobibór extermination centre was in operation, about 100 German soldiers served in the camp. At the same time, approximately 25-30 permanent staff members 'worked' in Sobibór<sup>1</sup>. However, the personnel of the three 'Operation Reinhardt' death camps (Sobibór, Bełżec, Treblinka) frequently moved from one camp to another. In April 1942, the camp was ready for the arrival of the camp personnel. In late April, the core of the personnel went into service in Sobibór, among others: Michel, Wagner, Fuchs, Groth, Schütt, Fritz Rewald, Gomerski, Bauer, Frenzel, Vallaster, Karl Steubl, Bolender, Ittner. Franz Stangl was appointed the commandant of the Sobibór extermination centre. It should be mentioned that all of these individuals had gained considerable experience in gassing people in places like Bernburg, Branderburg, Grafeneck, Hadamar, Hartheim and Sonnenstein. Before their arrival at the camp, they went to Lublin, where they were sworn in and obliged to observe professional secrecy.

The need to keep 'Operation Reinhardt' secret, similarly as in all operations conducted within Action 'T-4', required that the number of the people engaged was as small as possible in order to achieve the best possible results with the minimum number of employees, and at the lowest cost. Anyone included in 'Operation Reinhardt' was made to sign a special written obligation to observe professional secrecy. In total, 92 former proven assistants of the 'Euthanasia Programme' (corpse-burners, drivers, escorts assisting in transports, office clerks) were first sent to Lublin. Almost all the extermination camps' personnel, together with their commandants and their deputies, had been involved in 'T-4'. Moreover, all the commandants, with no exception, i.e.: Irmfried Eberl (Treblinka), Gottlieb Hering (Bełżec), Franz Reichleitner (Sobibór), Franz Stangl (Sobibór and Treblinka), as well as Christian Wirth (Bełżec, later appointed the Inspector of the 'Operation Reinhardt' camps), were veterans of 'T-4'<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, the vast majority of the Sobibór personnel had previously cooperated with each other in, among other places, Hartheim. These were: SS-Hauptsturmführer

<sup>1</sup> Josef Herszman's testimony report, Tel Aviv, 14 June 1962, NIOD Archives.

<sup>2</sup> „Umowa dotycząca zobowiązań osoby posiadającej szczególne pełnomocnictwa przy pracach związanych z przesiedlaniem Żydów w ramach „Akcji Reinhardt” przy Dowódcy SS i Policji w dystrykcie lubelskim”. [Agreement concerning the obligations of a proxy involved in the duties connected with the resettlement of Jews within 'Operation Reinhardt' under the command of SS and Police Commandant of the Lublin District]. Copy of the document that is available at the Museum of the Former Nazi-German Extermination Camp in Sobibór (permanent exhibition).

Franz Stangl, SS-Hauptsturmführer Franz Reichleitner, SS-Oberscharführer Gustaw Wagner, SS-Rotenführer Heinrich Barbl, SS-Oberscharführer Rudolf Beckmann, SS-Scharführer Erich Josef Vallaster, SS-Oberscharführer Anton Gotzinger, SS-Sturmmann Josef (Ferdl) Groemer, SS-Unterscharführer Paul Groth, SS-Unterscharführer Franz Hodl, SS-Scharführer Kurt (Karl) Richter, SS-Scharführer Paul Rost, SS-Scharführer Franz Schemmel.

It should be noted that between 1940 and 1944, 30,000 people were killed in the Renaissance-style Hartheim castle located at Alkoven, Upper Austria. At first, the victims were the disabled, as well as the mentally sick found within the Third Reich. Later, they were also prisoners of concentration camps, Mauthausen, Gusen and Dachau in particular, as well as forced labourers from Eastern Europe who were considered incapable of work. The Hartheim castle became the first 'mass-gassings institution'. Later, most methods of mass-killing used at Hartheim were transferred to the Sobibór extermination centre. It was the Hartheim institute personnel that introduced the conducting of fake 'medical examinations' of the future victims (meant to calm down their 'patients' in order to prevent them from putting up any resistance and to camouflage the institution's real activities), as well as the notion of pulling out the victims' gold teeth. The bodies of those killed in the gas chambers were first incinerated in Hartheim's crematorium, then the cremated remains were crushed in special mills, driven away and dumped into the Danube river<sup>3</sup>.

The functionaries of 'Action Euthanasia' who, within 'Operation Reinhardt', were sent to Lublin, became officially accepted as members of the SS; from then onwards they were allowed to wear grey and green *Waffen-SS* uniforms. Each of them was promoted to the rank of Unterscharführer or higher. However, those who had not officially been admitted to the SS prior to their arrival in Poland, had no right to wear the SS rune collar tabs<sup>4</sup>.

The German officers and ordinary soldiers serving in Sobibór were supplied with the same types of weapon, i.e. German *Walter pistols*, Russian *Nagant rifles* and standard issue infantry rifles. Non-commissioned officers were equipped with sub-machine guns but they did not carry them every day. The Ukrainian watchmen, on the other hand, were at first armed with weapons captured from the Soviet army. Later, they additionally received issue German rifles. The German personnel were also obliged to carry whips with them. Therefore, Franz Stangl had a few Sobibór Jewish prisoners make a decorative whip especially for him<sup>5</sup>.

The Sobibór personnel were directly subordinate to Globocnik although, formally, they still remained the office staff of 'Action T-4'<sup>6</sup>. Officials from *Tiergartenstrasse 4* in Berlin were responsible for all the personnel matters of the newly-admitted functionaries of 'Operation Reinhardt', including remuneration issues and functional allowances. Indeed, every week, a special courier came from

<sup>3</sup> Michael Burleigh, *op. cit.*, pp. 417-419.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Heberer, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> Erich Bauer's testimony report, Berlin, 10 January 1962, NIOD Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Heberer, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

the ‘T-4’ headquarters so as to bring pay packets and correspondence for the former ‘Euthanasia Programme’ functionaries. The ‘T-4’ authorities were even responsible for their functionaries’ time-off. Each member of the Sobibór extermination camp personnel received three-week holidays at three-month intervals. As part of their special bonuses, the Germans who had previously worked for the ‘Euthanasia Programme’ could, as well, spend their leaves with their wives at the holiday resort in Weissenbach, in Austria, run by the ‘T-4’ Central Office. In caring for their employees, the ‘T-4’ Central Office had decided to create a recreation *Haus Schoberstein* facility in the small town of Weissenbach located about 50 kilometres away from Salzburg, at the Attersee Lake. Before the war, the *Haus Schoberstein* used to belong to a Jewish family. Several photographs have survived which show members of the mass extermination ‘Operation Reinhardt’ programme relaxing amidst the breath-taking Austrian landscape<sup>7</sup>.

More or less half an hour before a new transport’s arrival at Sobibór, the camp commandant usually received a phone call informing him about the exact number of train wagons and people expected to arrive<sup>8</sup>. Next, the local civilians were told to keep away from the railway station. When the arrival of the transport was announced, the commandant summoned the Oberscharführer who, at that time, was responsible for the daily supervision of the camp. The other SS men addressed him as ‘*der Spiess*’ – an informal phrase used to show respect and which was similar in meaning to ‘sergeant-major’. Most of the time, it was Gustaw Wagner that held this position. Wagner, in turn, ordered Otto Weiss (later Karl Frenzel) to gather all the SS men and Ukrainian watchmen. The SS men had to give up the tasks they were performing at that moment, and come to the railway unloading ramp. While approaching the ramp, they would share jokes and make a mockery of the upcoming Jewish transport by saying ‘*Es kommt wieder Salat!*’ [“Here comes more muck!”]. Normally, each camp SS man was assigned precisely defined tasks, but when a new transport of Jews was coming, they gave up their activities, and each SS man was obliged to assist in a particular stage of the extermination process. In other words, all the camps’ Germans were involved in processing the new transports.

Out of all the Germans involved in this ‘job’, Gomerski distinguished himself by exceptional cruelty. Most often, he was responsible for transporting, by narrow-gauge wagon, the sick and the disabled, to Camp III, where they were immediately shot dead. After the war, some surviving former camp prisoner-labourers stated that they assumed that he might have also been personally involved in gassing Jews. In testimony, they put forward that they had frequently (almost every day) seen him going towards Camp III, but they could not confirm whether he had actually ever entered the Camp III area.

During the unloading of the newly-arrived transports, Gomerski would dress himself in a white doctor’s coat. Moreover, he would tell those who were to go by

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Frenzel’s testimony report, 10 October 1966, Hagen, StA.Do-Gom-Handakten-3, MPEW [Museum of the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District] Archives.

narrow-gauge railway that he was a doctor and was taking them to the so-called Lazaret (field-hospital) where they would undergo medical treatment. In his perfidy, he went as far as to help several of them to enter their wagons. After the war, some of the witnesses testified that Gomerski used to shoot at the prisoners on the ramp. What is more, they recalled that any time a new transport was due to arrive, Gomerski would go to the camp armoury and bring guns from there. Selma Engel, for instance, witnessed situations in which Gomerski threw the sick and the disabled to the wagons “like some objects”. She also claimed that sometimes he had shot victims even before they reached the gas chambers. Moreover, she stated that Gomerski and his colleague Wagner would entertain themselves by having a contest in which they grabbed small children’s legs and threw them as far as possible towards the narrow-gauge wagons<sup>9</sup>.

Another SS man called Ludwig frequently accompanied the selection of the new arrivals on the ramp. This time, however, prisoners had a high opinion of him. He always tried to select for work as many of the newcomers as possible. What is more, it was said that, thanks to him, a few prisoners managed to escape. Also, he brought bread for the prisoners from the shoemaker’s workshop. To be on the safe side, he always reminded them that, “in the event they were caught having that bread,” they should say that the bread they had been given was “mouldy and good-for-nothing.” However, once a rumour spread that the Germans had arrested Ludwig, and from then onwards, nothing was ever heard of him.

Bauer was directly engaged in gassings. His closest companions were Bredow and Groth. All of them caused constant fear among the prisoners who did the sorting. Karl Müller, another staff member, never left the camp with his commando to go to work in the forest until he had injured a few prisoners by throwing an axe or a large hammer over their heads. He then passed them over to Schulz, who was in charge of the penal commando. All the prisoners of that commando had to work at a frantic pace regardless of what physical condition they were in, and, very frequently, after a whole day’s work, the commando came back to its barracks diminished by 10-15 people. Some of them died of exhaustion, others were finished off by Schulz. The Germans would also organise ‘special physical exercises’ for their prisoners. They would line up, with a group of Ukrainian watchmen, to form a lane along which they drove prisoners, who were forced to carry buckets filled with water, wooden boards or wooden beams. As the prisoners ran the cordon, the guards kept lashing at the running prisoners or would beat them with their batons. Most often, it was Gomerski who organised such ‘exercises’. When the ‘exercises’ were over, the prisoners were ordered to create an elegant military formation and go back to the camp, singing.

Bauer was another important SS man of the Sobibór camp. According to former prisoners, he held the rank of a non-commissioned officer. Bauer was an SS member,

---

<sup>9</sup> Hubert Gomerski’s court trial, grounds for the judgement, Frankfurt am Main, 22, 23 and 25 August 1950 (in:) Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966, eds.: W. De Mildt, C. Ruter, Amsterdam 2009, Lfd.Nr.233, LG Frankfurt/M. 500825, LG Frankfurt/M. 831010, LG Frankfurt/M. 770708, BGH 800118, OLG Frankfurt/M. 840509.

and wore a garrison cap with a glistening peak with the symbol of death in his cap, a skull. He had the same symbol on his ring that he wore. He hardly ever spent his time in Camp I or Camp II. Prisoners only occasionally saw him there, mainly on Sundays. He spent most of the time in Camp III because he was in charge of the gas chamber. After the war, some of the camp survivors denied that Bauer had only been the camp driver (in fact, it was one of the Jewish prisoners), although several times, Bauer was seen to be transporting by car some ammunition from the railway ramp to Camp IV. Apart from that, Bauer operated, in Camp III, an excavator with which he dug up, from the burial pits, the decomposing bodies which the Germans had to burn. All the prisoners of the Sobibór camp associated Bauer's name with the gas chambers.

Unterscharführer Siegfried Greatschus acted as the supervisor of the Ukrainian guards, who had their own separate barracks, kitchen and canteen. Greatschus trained the Ukrainians and organised military exercises for them. Prisoners had an impression that he derived pleasure from bullying the Ukrainians. Every day, for example, he administered drills for them. The Ukrainians had to fill their military backpacks with sand and, in full gear, had to run around, jump and crawl. This did not suit all of them; therefore, some made attempts to escape from the camp. After one of such escapes, the Germans decided to introduce strict discipline within the Ukrainian guard platoons. Additionally, the Ukrainians had to undergo extremely tiring military drills every day. Wagner himself organised exercises for the Ukrainians and very frequently used them to do exhausting building work<sup>10</sup>.

When Oberscharführer Hermann Michel served in Sobibór, he was forty years old. He was a tall, thin man with delicate features, highly skilled at giving speeches. Due to the fiery speeches he made to the new arrivals, he got the nickname 'preacher'. Whenever a new transport arrived, Michel deceitfully assured the newcomers that Sobibór was just a transit camp where they would only undergo selection and disinfection, and that later they would be taken away to do labour in Ukraine, where they would stay till the end of the war. Each of his speeches raised the listeners' confidence and even aroused enthusiasm among them. Frequently, they spontaneously started clapping, dancing and singing. Yet, just a few minutes later they were pushed into the gas chamber. In his camp house, Michel managed to gather a great number of objects which newly-arrived Jews had brought with them, like silver, gold, rings, watches, jewellery and other valuables. Actually, it could be said that Michel was 'the camp's treasurer'. Hermann Michel dealt with all the transports. He made a selection of the newcomers, told them to undress and instructed them how to arrange their items of clothing so that they could 'get them back' after having a shower in the 'bath house'. Next, he would take the people to the road leading to the 'friseur's' [barber's, hairdresser's] in Camp II, from where he led them to the gas chambers.

One day, there arrived a new German at the Sobibór camp. The uniform he was wearing was black, and not green, which was the colour of the uniforms of the Germans

<sup>10</sup> Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg Archives, file ref. No. 45 Js 27/61, Case No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959.

the prisoners had met so far. He was an Untersturmführer officer and his name was Schwartz. All the prisoners had by that time become accustomed to 'their' (as they used to call them) Germans. Therefore, whenever any German 'appeared on the horizon', they knew they had to be prepared for the worst. But Schwartz was different. Once, Dov Freiberg's group (Dov Freiberg was one of the prisoners) got the task of carrying rails from one place to another. When he saw this new German approaching, he put on his shoulders as many rails as he managed to lift and, as it was normally expected, started running with the load. But Schwartz stopped him and asked why he had taken so many parts at one go. Freiberg thought it was a trap of some sort, and therefore was afraid to take off any of the rails he was carrying. The German told him to take off part of the load and he himself took a few rails off Freiberg's shoulder. What is more, he told him that he did not have to run. So, Freiberg started walking slowly with his small load on his shoulders. All the time he was expecting some bad consequences, yet nothing happened. Quite the contrary, while Freiberg was doing his job, the German told him to take a rest, and gave him a cigarette. At once, Untersturmführer Schwartz became a living legend: an 'insane' German who did not beat anyone, did not shout at the Jews, and treated them like human beings. The presence of such a man in the camp made everyone genuinely puzzled. Several weeks later, however, Schwartz came to the prisoners' barrack and said that he was leaving the camp the next day, and that he just came to say goodbye. He also said that when he had been assigned to the Sobibór camp, he did not realise what kind of place he would end up in. He added that he could no longer stay in such a place<sup>11</sup>.

Paul Bredow, a male paramedic from Silesia, was the opposite. He stayed in the Sobibór camp from the moment of its establishment until the spring of 1943. He was in charge of, among other things, the so-called 'Lazaret', the execution place of the Jews who were unable to walk on their own to the gas chambers. Bredow became notorious for his cruel 'shooting practice' - which he used to call 'target shooting'. There were times when, in this way, he managed to kill up to fifty persons a day. He also served in the Treblinka death camp. There, he was the head of the storehouse where the clothes of murdered Jews were sorted. Later, he was sent away to Italy, to a place in the vicinity of Trieste. After the war, Bredow worked as a carpenter. In December 1945, he died in an accident in Göttingen.

Franz Reichleitner was born on 2 December 1906, in Ried, and died on 3 January 1944. In 1936, he joined the NSDAP, and in 1937 - the SS. He began his career as a criminal secretary (*Kriminalsekretar*) of the Gestapo in Linz. He later moved to Hartheim, the euthanasia centre for the disabled and mentally sick. Here, he took the position of the centre's chief supervisor within 'Action T-4'. In September 1942, Reichleitner became the second Commandant of the Sobibór camp (the first having been Franz Stangl), and held this position till the end of its functioning. In February 1943, Reichleitner was promoted to the rank of SS-Hauptsturmführer soon after Heinrich Himmler came to make an inspection of the camp. It is said that Reichleitner was rarely seen within the area of the camp, but still he managed it with

---

<sup>11</sup> Dov Freiberg, *To Survive Sobibor*, Jerusalem 2007, pp. 44-45.

a lot of energy and determination. During the post-war court trials, the surviving witnesses pointed to his obsessive anti-Semitism. He was an alcoholic. At the time of the Sobibór prisoners' revolt, Reichleitner was not present in the camp. After the liquidation of the camp, he was transferred to Italy where, in the Free State of Fiume, he fought against partisans and took part in the persecution of the local Jews. Reichleitner was killed in a skirmish with Italian partisans in January 1944. He was buried at the German War Cemetery in Costermano near Verona<sup>12</sup>.

Without doubt, the most feared and hated figure of the camp personnel was Gustav Wagner, the non-commissioned officer addressed by his equals as '*Spiess*' ('*Sergeant*'). It was him who created a formidable penal commando (*Strafkommando*). Wagner was not only the most brutal but also the most cunning and the most intelligent SS man in Sobibór. He made regular inspections of the prisoners' barracks. Indeed, he even had the prisoners remove the barracks' floor planks to check whether they had hidden there any weapon or whether they were digging a tunnel to prepare an escape. He was always very observant. Unlike the other SS men, Wagner was completely unpredictable, and sometimes he would beat prisoners for no earthly reason. Like most of his 'colleagues' from the Sobibór camp, Wagner had become experienced at murdering, gassing people and burning their bodies at Hartheim, having been engaged in the German euthanasia programme as a specialist in cremation. In March 1942, Wagner was transferred to Sobibór in order to supervise the construction of the death camp. In September 1943, Himmler promoted him to the rank of SS-Oberscharführer and awarded him the Cross of Valour. It was at Hartheim that Wagner met his future Sobibór superior – Franz Stangl.

In the spring of 1942, both of them were delegated to the extermination camp in Sobibór. Stangl was made the camp Commandant, while Wagner became the Chief of Staff. Dressed in a characteristic cape and white gloves, Stangl often walked around the camp. He used to tell prisoners his tall-tales about what a comfortable life those who had already gone to Ukraine lived because they were given a piece of land, which made their situation much better than that of most of the Germans. He also promised the prison-labourers that with the termination of transports, they would receive special documents, and, as 'executives' they would go away to join their families, where they would be guaranteed good jobs. However, after a few-week stay at the camp, all the prisoners knew exactly what the whole truth was, but they still had to nod to him and pretend that they did not understand anything. In August 1942, Stangl was transferred to the extermination camp in Treblinka to become its commandant. Wagner, on the other hand, served in Sobibór until the end of its existence. At the time of the prisoners' revolt, he was on holiday leave. After the liquidation of the Sobibór camp, Wagner was moved to Italy, where he met Franz

<sup>12</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 260; Moshe Bahir's testimony, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 03/2353-1733/159, Tel Aviv, 12 August 1960, translated into Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Moshe Bahir, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 03/2353, Tel Aviv, 3 March 1964, translated into Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

Stangl again. When the war came to an end, both of them escaped to Austria.

The German personnel of the Sobibór camp was made up of people representing the lowest layer of the middle class. Before World War II, they were ordinary merchants, artisans, photographers, farm workers, mid-level medical personnel or low rank policemen. Before the outbreak of the war, almost all of them were already members of the Nazi Party, the SS or the SA. Some of them had joined these organisations even before Hitler came to power, others did it later. They were just ordinary people. The fact, however, that they proved to be able to commit terrible acts of violence did not result from any special features of character that they possessed. When the Sobibór camp was operational, they carried out the mass extermination of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children. By doing so, they wanted, in their view, to remain absolutely loyal to the policy of their own state, and therefore they never asked themselves any questions. What is more, they even displayed initiative in their attempts to improve the extermination process. In the course of their service, as a rule, they were cruel towards their victims, and many of them went as far as to introduce innovative methods of bullying prisoners, which they treated as a form of entertainment.

With time, these ordinary people turned into monsters. They did no longer feel any empathy towards other people's suffering, they did not remember what sympathy or grief meant. For them, Jews were gradually becoming a sort of commodity to get rid of. The personnel of this German extermination centre simply considered themselves to be experts at the job they were supposed to do. Without doubt, all this presents the remarkable phenomenon of the specific social awareness of the Germans of those times, for whom the order became the secondary function in relation to the need to diligently perform their job. Those employed at the Sobibór extermination centre treated their place of work in exactly the same way they would have treated any other work-place. Their lives were meant to resemble the ordinary life of other people, and, what is more, it absolutely was not to be considered as being depressing or gloomy due to the specificity of the place. Quite the contrary, above all, the camp had to be clean and well-cared for, at least in the personnel's living quarters. They had, at their disposal, the camp mess-hall offering a wide variety of different alcohols. In the camp, there even was a bowling alley where the staff spent their free time. In the yard built for the Germans there was also a canteen for the officers. From the moment it was built in the camp, it became a place where the German officers drank and ate, and, generally, entertained themselves. Many a time they held their real alcoholic feasts whenever they wanted to celebrate any victories won by the German army in the front. On such occasions, they sang and drank until the early morning hours, all the time making a great noise<sup>13</sup>. Also, not far from the Sobibór camp, by Perepsza Lake, the Germans built for themselves something like an officers' 'country club'. They spent there their weekends, went there to do some fishing or just gave parties where alcohol poured down their throats in torrents.

---

<sup>13</sup> Stanisław Szmajzner's testimony report 18/208, Goiânia/Brasil, 24 January 1966, NIOD Archives.

In February 1943, Himmler paid his second visit to Sobibór. Two days before the scheduled inspection, the camp personnel began meticulous preparations. Several days later, rumour had it that Himmler's visit had aimed at 'commemorating' the annihilation of a million Jews in Sobibór. On this occasion, commandant Reichleitner received from Himmler a high-ranking distinction as a token of his appreciation for his work efficiency. In order to celebrate Himmler's visit, the personnel brought a group of a few hundred Jewish women to Sobibór from the camp in Trawniki. The women were taken to the gas chambers to be killed, and their bodies were incinerated in the crematorium in order to show Himmler and his comrades all the successive stages of the extermination process. All this was done to prove the effectiveness of the Sobibór camp. After the inspection, everyone went to the canteen where they found lavishly laid tables beautifully decorated with flowers. The carousal lasted a few hours, and Himmler left the camp on the very same day. He seemed to be satisfied with the way the camp was functioning.

After Himmler's visit to Sobibór, a few SS non-commissioned officers were promoted, but one Jewish prisoner – Johanna Koch from Frankfurt – a cook making meals for the German SS men, lost her job. Evidently, Himmler must have considered her as a threat to the German officers in that she could easily poison the food she prepared for them. Perhaps it was this particular incident with the Jewish cook and the former sex scandals involving some Germans staff members (which meant the defilement of the German race), as well as too frequent sexual relationships between some Germans and Jewish women who looked after their living quarters, that led to the decision to stop employing Jewish female prisoners to work within the German part of the camp.

In 1943, to the camp in Sobibór, there came a group of young Russian girls, the USSR citizens, who were employed as washerwomen and cleaners. They washed the SS men's and the Ukrainian guards' clothes, and they cleaned the Germans' rooms. A former camp watchman, Raznogajew, testified later that these women, about twenty of them, had belonged to the camp's administrative services<sup>14</sup>. Zelda Metz, a Sobibór survivor, also recalled a group of young and healthy Ukrainian girls brought to the camp especially for the SS men. The girls lived within the camp. They came from Dnietropietrowsk<sup>15</sup>. Another former Sobibór prisoner, Stanisław Szmajzner, also mentioned the presence of those women in the camp<sup>16</sup>.

Czesław Wasilewski, an inhabitant of the village of Orchówek near Włodawa, gave an account in which he mentioned that, on his premises, a Russian woman had spent three days in hiding after she had escaped from the Sobibór camp. However,

---

<sup>14</sup> Michaił Affanasewicz Razgonajew's testimony report, the Department of Interrogation at the Ministry of State Security in the USSR of the Dniepropietrowsk Oblast, Dniepropietrowsk, 20 September 1948, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>15</sup> Zelda Metz's testimony report, Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany, Philadelphia/USA, 14 March 1966, NIOD Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Stanisław Szmajzner's testimony, Rio de Janeiro/Brazil, 9 February 1961 (for the World Jewish Congress), NIOD Archives.

Wasilewski's account does not state clearly whether she escaped during the prisoners' revolt or some time before. Wasilewski testified that she had had a one-and-a-half-year-old child with her and that she told him that, back in the camp, she used to do the cleaning<sup>17</sup>.

Whenever any artist came to Sobibór in a new transport, the SS men selected them for labour and told them to do paintings for the decoration of their houses or of the officers' club. Their artistic tasks involved painting a huge portrait of Führer, making portraits of their SS 'clients' or making enlarged copies of postcard drawings. Later, the SS men sent some of those portraits to their families in Germany. Apart from that, the artists had to paint different inscriptions, like 'Barber's', 'Club' or 'Canteen'. When the artists were ready with their works, they were sent to the gas chamber.

Max van Dam was one of thousands of Dutchmen who came to Sobibór in numerous transports from Westerbork. He was selected to work in one of the barracks of Camp I, where there was an empty room occupied by two other painters. One of them was a professor by the name of Schwarz-Waldeck. He came from Vienna, where, most probably, he had been a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts. He specialised in painting landscapes.

The other of van Dam's room-mates was an amateur artist, who, before arriving at Sobibór, had been employed in a shoe factory in Frankfurt am Main. His name was Alfred Friedberg. He was a man in his early fifties and he wore large dark glasses. Friedberg, unlike van Dam, painted still lifes. In the camp, his fellow prisoners gave him the nickname 'elephant', when, on an SS man's order, he started to teach them the 'camp' song „*Jumbo war ein Elephant, der im Urwali wohl bekannt*”. Friedberg considered himself an amateur, so he treated painting as his hobby.

Max van Dam specialised in painting portraits. After the war, Kurt Ticho, a Sobibór survivor, mentioned two of his paintings that had stuck in his mind. One of them was Frenzel's portrait. When van Dam was working on the portrait, Karl Frenzel would come to the artists' barrack to pose to him. Sometimes, this lasted more than an hour. There were five or six sessions like that. Kurt Ticho recalled that Max van Dam had complained to him how much difficulty he had in capturing Frenzel's image, because, as a portraitist, he paid attention not only to his object's physical appearance but also their internal characteristics. Another painting which van Dam had to do, this time on Wagner's order, was a copy of a postcard presenting a soldier kneeling in front of a lady seated on a chair. The soldier was leaning his head against the lady's lap. Beneath, there was an inscription which said something about that soldier's coming back home. The woman was meant to symbolise his mother or his homeland. She had a sad look, and her plaited hair was hanging down her shoulders. She looked like a typical German woman. Most probably, the picture in the postcard symbolised a tired-looking soldier who was coming back home, but whose posture hardly betrayed any signs of victory. Van Dam got the task to enlarge the picture from the postcard to an ordinary oil painting. Ticho claimed that

---

<sup>17</sup> Czesław Wasilewski, witness hearing report, case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 17 January 1968, MPLW Archives.

this picture had alluded more to the symbolism of defeat rather than victory, yet, it remained a secret why Wagner had chosen that particular postcard to be copied. Perhaps, in summer 1943, he began to understand that Germany might lose the war.

The painters had at their disposal anything they needed to continue their work. However, interestingly enough, Max did not maintain any contact with anyone else. He was more of a loner. Now, it is not known whether it was Max van Dam that secretly made the pictures which presented the camp life. Likewise, it remains a mystery whether he was killed during the camp revolt or earlier. Aleksander Peczerski claimed that van Dam had died before the outbreak of the revolt, sometime in September 1943. It is known, though, that once Frenzel saved his life by dragging him, at the last possible moment, out of a group of 72 Dutchmen sentenced to death by shooting. He only did that to enable van Dam to finish doing the painting Frenzel had commissioned him to paint. Kurt Ticho, on the other hand, maintained that Max van Dam had got killed together with those who did not manage to escape from the camp during the revolt<sup>18</sup>.

After the liquidation of the extermination centre in Sobibór, the SS men who did not get killed on the day of the prisoners' revolt on 14 October 1943 (the list of those killed in the uprising is as follows: Niemann, Josef Wolf, Beckmann, Graetschus, Vallaster, Steffl, Gaulstich, Ryba, Konrad, Nowak, Stengelin, Bree), were sent to Trieste. They were assigned the task of finding all the still-living Jews on the Isle of Aibe near Rijek and in Abatia, put them in the camp in Suszak, and to ensure that they were processed in the extermination centre located in *Risiera di San Sabba*. They also fought against partisans who decimated German army units and who did not use to take any captives. These partisans managed to shoot, among others, Chrisitan Wirth - the inspector of the extermination camps in Treblinka, Sobibór and Bełżec, as well as the commandant of the Sobibór camp, Franz Reichleitner. At the end of the war, the Nazi-German authorities began to worry that those camps' personnel might survive to testify against their former commanders. Therefore, they mostly sent them away to dangerous places, where many of them were actually killed.

## 2. SS guard units

The auxiliary formation of the Nazi-German extermination centre in Sobibór was made up of the camp's guards who came here right after the completion of their training at the SS training camp in Trawniki<sup>19</sup>, or were delegated to the camp within the extermination camps' staff turnover project. The administration of the Trawniki centre was responsible for the coordination issues, such as which successive extermination camps a given guard was supposed to serve in, and for how long. Officially, guards were members of the Guard Units of Reichsführer SS and Chief of the German Police's Plenipotentiary for the Establishment of the SS and Police Bases in the New Eastern

<sup>18</sup> This information is based on Kurt Ticho's letter to Jules Schelvis from 9 December 1985, copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>19</sup> Trawniki – a village in Poland, Trawniki commune, the Lublin Province, Świdnik district.

Area, and, as of March 1942, they were members of SSPF [SS and Police Leader] Guard Units for the Lublin District<sup>20</sup>. The Trawniki guards were frequently called ‘Askaris’. That used to be the name attached, before World War I, to units composed of natives who served in the German colonial administration in German East Africa<sup>21</sup>. During World War II, the Germans also called them ‘Trawnikimänner’ or ‘Hiwis’ (‘Hiwis’ was an abbreviation of the word *Hilfswilliger* meaning ‘ready to help’). They were also frequently referred to as ‘Blacks’ on account of the black colour of their military uniforms, or ‘Wachmans’, which was the German word for ‘watchmen’.

In places like Chełm, Równe, Biała Podlaska, Białystok, Żytomierz and Grodno<sup>22</sup>, Karl Streibel, commander of the camp in Trawniki or, which is more likely, one of his representatives<sup>23</sup>, recruited candidates for extermination training, but the number of newly-recruited people was not always the same.

It is possible that one recruitment did not exceed the number between 50 and 100 men from one POW camp<sup>24</sup>. The recruitment followed Himmler’s instructions, as well as those given by the Chief of Security Police and SD. According to these, it was necessary to select, from among the Russian POWs, “persons making an impression of being particularly loyal, and therefore suitable for the work of the reconstruction of the occupied Soviet areas”<sup>25</sup>.

Streibel and his people visited POW camps and recruited Ukrainian, Latvian and Lithuanian ‘volunteers’, who were then ‘sifted’ on the basis of their anti-communist views, physical fitness and health condition<sup>26</sup>. In return, the Germans offered them an opportunity to escape inevitable death from hunger, and they promised them that they would not have to fight against the Soviet army. In certain cases, the desire to get out of the POW camp was, perhaps, a sufficiently strong motivation for them to join the German army. After the Eastern campaign, thousands of the Red Army soldiers found themselves in the German captivity. Usually, the Soviet POWs were very badly-treated by the German army and, as a result, they massively died of hunger. The total number of this anti-Soviet genocidal policy brought about two million deaths in the winter of 1941/42 alone. Later, the Germans started to treat

---

<sup>20</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 107.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, London 2001, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> David Rich, *Reinhard’s Foot Soldiers: Soviet Trophy Documents and Investigative Records as Sources* (in:) *Remembering the Future. The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, (ed.): John Roth, Elizabeth Maxwell, London/New York 2001, vol.1, p. 690.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

<sup>26</sup> This is the opinion of David Rich, one of the OSI historians, who, in 2001, wrote a short scientific article on this group of Ukrainian guards. He based his article on the content of thousands of pages of various documents which a KGB archivist made available to the United States Justice Department – information obtained from Prof. Johannes Houwink ten Cate from the University of Amsterdam.

Russian POWs better, so the number of the resulting deaths decreased. There is even a resource which mentions cases of cannibalism which took place among the Soviet POWs in 1941<sup>27</sup>.

From the very beginning of Nazi-Germany's war against the USSR, the German authorities adopted the policy of developing close relations with the Ukrainian populace. Especially between 1941 and 1942, they coquetted the Ukrainian nationalists by making them believe that there was a real possibility of forming an independent Ukrainian state. Germans began spreading rumours that in Ukraine, a new national government was being formed. Therefore, they claimed that "the duty of each decent Ukrainian is to continue merciless fight against bolshevism and Soviet imperialism"<sup>28</sup>. The Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), which was particularly active in the western part of Ukraine, always used anti-Semitic rhetoric in its propaganda, claiming that communism had been brought to Ukraine by "Jews, Soviets and Poles"<sup>29</sup>.

Another Ukrainian organisation, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) used the same rhetoric to spread their nationalistic propaganda. Roman Szuchewycz, commander-in-chief of the UPA, gave his subordinates the following instructions: "[...] *Jews are to be treated in the same way as Poles or Gypsies: they must be killed mercilessly and none of them is to be spared [...]*"<sup>30</sup>. The involvement of Ukrainians in 'Operation Reinhardt' was militarily significant to Germans, because, in this way, Germans could send hundreds of their own soldiers to the front, instead of sending them to work in concentration or extermination camps.

The moment any new recruits arrived at Trawniki, they first provided their personal data, and they had an ink impression of their thumb taken. Also, a photo of them was taken to be attached to their identity card. Next, each of them received an identification number valid throughout their service in the Trawniki 'system'. The new recruits were then obliged to fill in a special form in which they declared, under oath and both in German and in Russian, that they had no Jewish ancestors and that they were not a member of the Soviet Red Army or Komsomol. Beyond this, the newcomers had to sign a separate document in which they committed themselves to doing their service "throughout the duration of the war" and to comply with any "terms and conditions of service and disciplinary rules"<sup>31</sup>.

The camp in Trawniki (thirty kilometres south-east of Lublin, lying next to the Lublin-Chełm railway line) was a training camp. In total, from July 1941 onwards, about 5,000 young Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Latvians received instruction there.

<sup>27</sup> Karel Berkhoff, *Harvest of the Despair: Life and Death in the Ukraine under Nazi Rule*, Cambridge / London 2004, pp. 89-103.

<sup>28</sup> B. N. Kovalev, *Okupacja nazistowska i kolaboracjonizm w Rosji 1941-1944*, [Nazi-German Occupation and Collaborationism in Russia 1941-1944], Moskwa 2004, p. 253.

<sup>29</sup> B. N. Kovalev, *Okupacja nazistowska i kolaboracjonizm w Rosji 1941-1944*, [Nazi-German Occupation and Collaborationism in Russia 1941-1944], Moskwa 2004, p. 253.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

The training involved military drill and practising how to keep guard. It also took the form of instructing the recruits, in practice, how to capture and then how to oversee the captured Jews.

The establishment of the full composition of the watchmen that went through the Sobibór camp is impossible on account of the fact that no source materials have survived. Therefore, due to this lack of full documentation of the Sobibór personnel, it is difficult to precisely determine the total number of the guards who served in Sobibór. All that can be said is that throughout the functioning of the camp, several large groups of watchmen were sent to work there. The composition of the guards kept changing and, therefore, often had to be complemented. It can only be assumed that, in general, approximately 400 watchmen were members of the Sobibór guard units. The Sobibór guards made up a guard company which was divided into platoons. The company remained under the command of a German SS man. Each platoon, on the other hand, was usually commanded by a Volksdeutsche who had first undergone training in Trawniki, and who had been a former POW. For the German command, it was of vital importance that they could speak both German and Russian.

The Sobibór guard units were organised in a completely different way than the typical SS structures, and were more similar to those of the German police. The highest possible rank was *Oberzugwachmann* (deputy company commander), followed by *Gruppenzugwachmann* (platoon commander) and *Zugwachmann* (team commander). The lowest was the rank of *Wachman* (watchman). During one shift, about half of a platoon stood guard around the camp area. At the same time, members of the second platoon were off-duty or were fulfilling other assigned tasks. The commander of the third platoon divided his people into two units. One had to wait for the oncoming transport and to deal with the trains that had brought in new victims. The other unit got a furlough, together with the permission to go to unwind in the nearby villages<sup>32</sup>.

Interestingly enough, the Trawniki units had neither the same type of weapon nor uniform. The first platoons which underwent training were made to wear Polish military uniforms which had previously been dyed black. The next trainees wore earthy-brown Belgian army uniforms. There were even cases in which some watchmen were partly dressed in one type of uniform and partly in another<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, the camp commandant himself tried to do something about this quite a bizarre situation. Thus, Kurt Ticho, who, on arrival at the camp ramp, immediately volunteered to work as a specialist in the “production of fabrics” said, after the war, that he had once been given the order to make unitary uniforms for all the Sobibór watchmen. His task was to dye black a few tens of re-made Russian uniforms<sup>34</sup>. All the guards were supplied with rifles and live ammunition. Most often, these were captured Russian rifles<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> David Alan Rich, *op. cit.*, p. 693.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>34</sup> Kurt Ticho, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-111.

Sobibór watchmen's primary duty was to keep guard over the whole area of the camp. They also had the task of escorting both prisoners working within the camp area and those working outside. In addition, watchmen had to 'receive' transports. The procedure was that they secured the railway ramp, secured and supervised the newly-arrived prisoners during their unloading procedure, kept a close watch on the prisoners gathered on the ramp, and, finally, escorted each successive group of Jews in their march towards the gas chambers. The watchmen were obliged to fulfil all their superiors' orders. They dealt with any 'current duties', including those directly connected with the extermination of Jews. They meted out punishment, tortured prisoners and carried out executions. The Germans also used watchmen to do most of the physical work. These included, for example, the building and carpentry work connected with the current functioning of the camp and its extension.

Most of the guards were young uneducated men of peasant origin. It is likely that, before coming to Sobibór, they had not been properly informed about the character of their future service in the camp, and they only learnt about it on arrival. Yet, the majority of them very quickly adapted to the extermination process and soon carried out orders with great zeal. They became notorious for their cruelty and brutality towards Jews<sup>36</sup>. It can be said that the Ukrainian guards' cynicism was in no way inferior to the SS men's premeditation<sup>37</sup>, and, like all the Sobibór SS men, each of them committed criminal acts. After the war, however, they all emphasised that they had only carried out their orders. They also claimed that their awareness of the possible consequences of any refusal to execute those orders had made them realise they had no other choice but to obey them.

The Ukrainians remained under constant pressure resulting from the way the mass genocide was committed, as well as from the fact that they had to make sure that the whole process ran smoothly, quickly and with no disruptions. On order, they had to be firm, brutal and ruthless. On the other hand, there were watchmen who exhibited extreme aggression, not because they had been ordered to do so, but because of their personal attitude towards Jewish people in general. Sometimes, the Ukrainian guards were also used to capture Jews from the nearby ghettos and organise their transports to Sobibór<sup>38</sup>. In certain cases, for exceptionally well-

<sup>36</sup> Prokofij Businnij's testimony report, file ref. No. StA.Do-WZ-V-610, Kiev, 8 August 1975, NIOD Archives: "*Whenever the Jews broke any of the camp's laws, they were killed either by the officers themselves or by us, if we were told to do so. The old, the weak and the sick were also killed. The camp's commandants didn't even have to give any special order to shoot whenever new transports arrived. It was normal procedure to kill such prisoners*".

<sup>37</sup> Abraham Margulies, *From Warsaw to Sobibor. Testimony of Abraham Margulies* (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 62–65.

<sup>38</sup> Mikołaj Matwijkenko's testimony (in:) *Sobibór*, eds.: S. Wileński, B. Gorbowicki, A. Tieruszkin, Moskwa 2008, p.78; Czesław Wasilewski, witness hearing report, case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 17 January 1968, MPŁW Archives; *Getto włodawskie widziane oczyma mieszkańców naszego miasta* [The Włodawa ghetto as seen by the inhabitants of our town], Henryk Osypiuk's conversation with Mieczysław Bajuk, 7 October 1980, and

performed duty, Ukrainian watchmen were adequately rewarded by their German superiors. An example of such a dutiful watchman was Fiodor Jaworow, who was considered as the one ‘particularly worthy of’ a reward for his two-year service in the camps of Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka. His impressive ‘achievements’ earned him the highest recognition among the German personnel. Whenever a Ukrainian guard happened to die while on duty, he was buried with full military honours at one of the German cemeteries<sup>39</sup>.

There were cases, however, when certain watchmen did not accept what was happening in the camp, and therefore refused to co-participate in the extermination process. They tried to be as little brutal as possible, and entered into personal contact with prisoners, especially when this involved organising both inner-camp and outer-camp illegal trading. Moreover, they helped prisoners to get hold of or spread various pieces of valuable information. Sometimes, they even cheated the Germans, supported prisoners in the preparations of their escapes from the camp, escaped themselves or made such attempts in cooperation with prisoners. All in all, however, the only way for the Ukrainians to refuse to carry out the Germans’ orders was to get away. Most attempts were made in 1943. Some of these decisions were also based on the general situation in the military front, especially when the Ukrainians were getting more and more information about the Germany’s defeat at Stalingrad, and that different partisan groups were becoming more and more active.

Members of the German personnel of the Sobibór extermination centre kept their distance from the Ukrainian guards because they mistrusted them. They were very demanding towards the Ukrainians, often treating them brutally or even punishing them. Whenever possible, they routinely transferred them away to other places in order to avoid situations in which the watchmen’s everyday routine, habits, built-up contacts or good knowledge of the surrounding terrain would enable them to act against the Germans by, for instance, escaping from the camp. In case a watchman was caught red handed, escaping or preparing for an escape, the Germans punished them with three-month arrest<sup>40</sup>. Once, commandant of the Trawniki camp, SS-Sturmbannführer Streibel, had to organise a special meeting with Wirth in Sobibór on account of his watchmen’s insubordination. During the meeting, they both considered sending some of those irresponsible Ukrainian guards back to the training camp in Trawniki. “[...] *I had to agree with him when he said that he should detain the irresponsible Ukrainians to harshly deal with them. I had no power over Wirth or the Ukrainian guards [...]*”<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless, desertions among

---

with Leokadia Chorąży, 10 January 1981, MPLW Archives; Ephraim Tilip, *op. cit.*; Motek Kauffman, witness hearing report, the District Jewish Historical Committee in Lublin, 20 January 1947, MPLW Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>40</sup> Wasilij Nikołajewicz Pankow’s testimony report, Interrogation Department at the Ministry of Defence in the Stalino Oblast, Stalino, 18 October 1950, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Tregenza, *Christian Wirth: Inspekteur der SS-Sonderkommandos, Action*

the Ukrainian guards were relatively rare in Sobibór because the fear of the possible consequences deterred most of them.

Irrespective of the role the Ukrainian watchmen played in the Sobibór camp and how they were treated by the Germans, their attitude to the camp situation was greatly influenced by material living conditions, which involved weekly earnings, board and lodging. Their weekly earnings were similar to those which their *Waffen-SS* counterparts received, and so were their food rations. In accordance with the decision of the SS Chief Command Office from December 1941, each watchman received half a Deutsche mark every day. Later, in 1943, every month, they were paid three cash payments in zlotys, the equivalent of 45 Deutsche marks. Generally, the incentives included: board and lodging, health care and uniforms. Moreover, as members of the auxiliary formation of the German Order Police, they had the right to apply for a family allowance as a recompense for the loss of other possible ways of earning money. Applications for family allowances were submitted to the local German authorities by the Ukrainian watchmen's family members. The authorities, in turn, turned to the Trawniki command in request to issue a certificate confirming those Ukrainians' service in Sobibór. Next, the appropriate district authorities stated the basis for the calculation of a given allowance, depending on the family's needs, while the local authorities determined the final height of the allowance. Apart from this, the Ukrainians had the right to go on holiday leave<sup>42</sup>.

Part of the camp's infrastructure and the range of work done by a selected group of prisoners guaranteed the Ukrainian guards quite a comfortable life. For example, a separate kitchen and a laundry were prepared especially for the guards. What is more, in their free time, they could entertain themselves in different ways, which frequently involved bullying prisoners. In addition, specially-appointed prisoners had to clean their quarters. In the camp, the guards had access to valuable things. For this reason, they would steal whatever they could or would trade valuables for money with the prisoners who had access to those valuables. Generally, the Ukrainian guards' conviction of their own impunity, the necessity to carry out German orders, lack of any reaction on the part of the outside world to what was happening in the camp, led most of the guards to a high level of demoralisation.

Officially, they were forbidden to come into contact with prisoners or the local population. They had no right to appropriate the property that had been taken away from the camp's victims. Additionally, they were forbidden to leave the camp area on their own account. However, very often, after having gone off duty, they tried to sneak out of the camp at least for a short while. With the money, valuables or items of clothing stolen from the camp, they bought, from the local population and specially-organised 'trade' groups, food and alcohol above all. Also, in the nearby villages and in 'befriended' households, they gave all sorts of dance and alcohol parties. They also 'visited' some women whom they paid for their sexual services.

Most often, the Ukrainian guards got money or valuables from prisoners working in the camp's sorting barracks. The Jews who were assigned to these commandos

---

Reinhard, „Zeszyty Majdanka“ [The Majdanek Notebooks] 1993, vol. 15, p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

managed to steal and smuggle all sorts of valuables and pass them, under certain conditions, on to Ukrainian watchmen, who smuggled them further to areas outside the camp. Surely, the Germans did everything possible to prevent such things from happening. It was of vital importance to them that as little information on what was happening in the camp as possible got out of the camp.

Therefore, those who stole anything within the camp area or made an attempt to escape, were punished the moment their 'offence' was proved. One of the preventative measures were regular inspections which the Germans carried out in the Ukrainian barracks. When they did find something considered to be 'illegal', they meted out punishment to the culprits by whipping, the same type of punishment used in the case of Jewish prisoners, i.e. 25 lashes. Despite all the above, however, the Ukrainian guards kept smuggling money or valuables, and they kept in touch with the local population throughout the time the camp was operational. Furthermore, it was frequently the case that watchmen who managed to escape came in contact with the nearby partisan groups. Understandably, a lot of significant information about what happened in Sobibór came from the Ukrainian guards themselves.

In March 1942, when the construction of the extermination centre in Sobibór was gathering momentum, the first group of Ukrainian guards came from Trawniki. It was a small twelve-man unit whose major task was to protect the camp's building site. The commander of this platoon was Jakub Engelhardt. The guards were equipped with submachine guns, rifles and automatic rifles. Engelhardt also served as the commander of all the camp's guards. During this unit's stay in Sobibór, the first watchtower was built. After the war, Engelhardt recalled that he had dealt with the installation of the necessary watchtower equipment. The permanent elements of this equipment was a machine gun and grenades. At that time, only a few Germans stayed in the camp, including Richard Thomalla, who supervised the building work.

During the initial Sobibór construction work, no Jewish deportees were used to do any work. Instead, the Germans used local inhabitants, who received payment for their employment. Even when the gas chamber building was made ready, and the first trial gassings of Jews were carried out, no regular transports bringing Jews for extermination arrived. So, it was Engelhardt's watchmen who removed the dead bodies from the gas chamber and carried them to the burial pits. In total, Engelhardt's guard unit spent about two months in the camp. It was later replaced by a forty-man unit under the command of another German (his name remains unknown). The group was accompanied by an interpreter – a German from Privilzhsky District, who had spent some time in the Trawniki camp. His name was Gljassner ('Geusler', 'Gojzler', 'Glassner'). Engelhardt's platoon left the Sobibór camp in exactly the same vehicle which their replacements arrived by.

In all probability, before Franz Stangl arrived at the camp to gain his position of Sobibór Commandant, i.e. in late April 1942, the two platoons which had replaced Engelhardt's unit, were supported by an additional platoon of Ukrainian guards from Trawniki. One of Engelhardt's soldiers was Emanuel Henrykowicz Szulc. Presumably, this indeed took place before Stangl's arrival because, in his post-war

testimony, Szulc claimed that Josef Oberhauser had been the commandant of Sobibór at that time. Szulc's information of this sort seems highly plausible, bearing in mind the fact that, during the construction of the camp, Christian Wirth, whose 'right hand man' was considered to be Oberhauser, made frequent visitations to the camp. It is possible, then, that during such 'visits', Oberhauser was responsible for or, rather, had to keep a watchful eye on the guards who had come from Trawniki to Sobibór. At the same time, Oberhauser was a member of the Belżec camp personnel, where he was in charge of its guards, and as such remained responsible for them. Szulc served in Sobibór until November that year, after which time he was posted to Treblinka.

In the same testimony, Szulc mentioned a German called Geusler (Gojzler) who, in the Sobibór's headquarters, supposedly 'took care of' the property and valuables which had been taken away from the Jews exterminated in Sobibór. It cannot be excluded that this German was the same one who came to the camp to replace Engelhardt. To sum up, then, before Stangl's arrival at the camp, there were three guard platoons in Sobibór, made up of men who had come from Trawniki<sup>43</sup>. Most probably, in May 1942, a fourth platoon of watchmen came from Trawniki to Sobibór, which, this time, was organised directly by Stangl. He brought these guards with him from Trawniki, while on the way back from one of his visits to Lublin.

Michail Razgonajew, in May 1942, finished an SS training course in the Trawniki camp, achieving the rank of a 'Wachman'. Afterwards, he was posted to Sobibór. According to Raznogajew's post-war testimony, the major task of the watchmen from Trawniki was to do guard duty. He also testified that during his service in Sobibór, i.e. from May 1942 to July 1943, building works had still been under way in the camp, and that Ukrainian watchmen had also been made to participate in them. His own platoon was engaged in the building of the men's and women's 'changing area' in Camp II, the clothing storehouse and the watchtowers. He also stated that, sometimes, watchmen had been sent out of the camp to collect and bring back building materials. Each platoon consisted of about twenty guards, with its commander being either a guard or a senior guard – a Volksdeutsche who spoke good German.

Outside the camp area, behind the barbed-wire fence, there were built sentry houses (for two guards) located at a distance of about 200 metres from one to another. From these, the whole camp area remained under the guards' constant surveillance. In this way, the watchmen could keep in touch with each other both verbally and visually. The major task the guards were assigned was to make sure that no one from outside could find themselves in close proximity to the camp area, as well as to

---

<sup>43</sup> Jakob Engelhardt's testimony report, Leningrad, 21 August 1975, NIOD Archives, Emmanuel Henrykowicz Szulc's testimony report, the KGB Investigations Department at the Ministry of Defence in the USSR, Winnica, 27 April 1961, IPN [The Institute of National Remembrance] Archives, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0050; Emmanuel Henrykowicz Szulc's testimony report, the KGB Investigations Department at the Ministry of Defence in the USSR, Kiev, 6 September 1961; Emmanuel Henrykowicz Szulc's testimony report, the KGB Investigations Department at the Ministry of Defence in the USSR, Kiev, 7 September 1961, IPN Archives, Lu/1/9/46/0050.

prevent any escape attempts<sup>44</sup>. In order to improve the efficiency of the protection of the camp area, the Germans had watchtowers built in each corner of the camp. The watchtowers were occupied by the watchmen day and night. Additionally, the camp was under constant surveillance from inside. In each part of the camp, separated from each other, there were guards who watched so that none of the civilians who were brought into the camp or that none of the prisoner-labourers escaped from the camp. If anyone wanted to go from one part of the camp to another, they had to go along a special passage covered by barbed wire. The passage itself was heavily guarded by both Ukrainian guards and German soldiers. Apart from such barbed-wire passages, all the camp buildings were also guarded by watchmen.

Following 'Operation Reinhardt' posted regulations, guards working in extermination camps were frequently made to change their places of service. Also, the camp personnel had to abide by extremely strict rules. According to Raznogajew, the Sobibór Ukrainian guards took active part in the mass murder of Jews. However, neither the Germans nor the Ukrainians were allowed to enter the 'changing area' in Camp II. This was reserved for kapos only. Since the SS men were afraid of resistance on the part of the newcomers, the guards were placed behind the barbed-wire fence, along all the passages leading to the camp, from the 'changing area' up to the 'bathhouse'. All this was meant to prevent potential escape attempts made by the Jewish victims who were being driven towards the gas chambers. Raznogajew also claims that, apart from gassing, the perpetrators used shooting as one of their methods to kill some of the prisoners of the Sobibór camp. Soon after the unloading of a new transport, all the weak, sick, disabled as well as those who were unable to walk on their own, were taken by some prisoner-labourers to a barrack called the 'Lazaret'. They had to stay there until all those who could walk on their own had been gassed in the gas chambers. The number of this 'Lazaret' group of people varied between 30 and 50, and depended on how many trains had arrived at the camp on that particular day. Next, all the sick, who were told that they were staying in the camp 'hospital', were taken, naked, to previously-dug pits and shot dead, from a short distance, by Ukrainians and Germans alike.

The Commandant of the Sobibór camp himself gave orders and decided which of the guards would participate in executions by shooting. In May and in June 1942, Raznogajew took part in the shooting of two groups of people. In May, it was a group of 50 sick and disabled Jews. The execution squad consisted of about 10 Ukrainians and Germans. Raznogajew claims that he shot no more than 5 persons then. For the second time, in June 1942, he participated in the execution of about a 25-person Jewish group. This time, again, he claims that he killed no more than 3 people. In December 1942, for his loyal service for the German SS unit, and for his good work as a carpenter, Raznogajew was promoted to the rank of a senior watchman (*Oberwachman*). In total, he served in the Sobibór camp until July 1943<sup>45</sup>.

---

<sup>44</sup> Czesław Wasilewski's testimony report, case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 17 January 1968, MPLW Archives.

<sup>45</sup> Michał Affanasewicz Raznogajew's testimony report, the Department of Interrogation

In August 1942, a new platoon of 30 SS guards came to serve in Sobibór. Among them were Nikolai Antonewicz Pawli and Prokofij Businnij. The former had, from as early as November 1941, served in the Bełżec camp, while the latter had come to Sobibór right after completing his training in Trawniki. Businnij spent more than a year in the Sobibór camp. Prior to that, right after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, Prokofij Businnij had been conscripted into the Red Army. Two months later, he was taken captive and put in a POW camp, where the living conditions were terrible. A limited group of POWs, those stronger and healthier, were made an offer to join the German military service and were promised better-quality food and a new set of clothes. Businnij agreed, and his group was soon sent to the training camp in Trawniki. After the completion of his training course, Prokofij Businnij was delegated to serve in the *SS Sonderkommando Sobibor*. In his post-war testimony, he said he did not remember exactly when he had arrived at the camp. As a matter of fact, it was 1942 and the weather was warm.

This new group of guards that came to Sobibór was made up of 30 men, and they had been preceded by other Ukrainian watchmen. When Businnij came to Sobibór, there were 15 German soldiers in the camp. They lived in a house which used to belong to the local head forester. The house was quite big, with at least five rooms. In addition, there were some barracks next to it. One of them was occupied by Businnij and the rest of the watchmen from his platoon. The German officers kept warning the Ukrainian guards never to tell anyone about what was happening in the camp. They threatened to shoot them if they did otherwise. Also, the guards had no right to talk to the Jews who had come in new transports. However, it so happened one day that Businnij took a letter from one of the newly-arrived Jewish women and promised her to send it to the address she indicated. Somehow, the SS officers learnt about that. Therefore, they took the lady and ordered her to point out the guard that had taken the letter from her, and organised a special assembly of all the watchmen. The woman was told to select from among them the one who had wanted to help her. Businnij avoided his punishment only because the lady could not recognise the ‘culprit’.

One of those more important duties the Ukrainian guards were obliged to perform was to secure the railway ramp at the time new transports arrived. Immediately after the unloading of a new transport, they had to surround all the Jews gathered on the ramp so that none of the newcomers could escape. Apart from this, the guards had to keep watch over the Jewish commandos [working units] working outside the camp. Additionally, their task was to escort narrow-gauge wagons which took some of the newly-arrived prisoners from the ramp to the ‘lazaret’. Businnij claims that most of the guards had no possibility of seeing what was happening within the gas chamber area. However, sometimes, they could see a group of prisoners being driven towards the gas chamber and, after some time passed, they saw the dead bodies being taken out of the chamber.

The Ukrainian guards were frequently controlled by their German superiors. Such controls were repeated any time they had gone off duty outside the camp area.

---

at the Ministry of State Security in the USSR of the Dniepropietrowsk Oblast, Dniepropietrowsk, 20 September 1948, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

Most frequently, the watchmen were punished for falling asleep while on duty. Every day, before going on duty, each guard received, from a senior guard, a precise number of bullets, i.e. 5. All the weapons and bullets were kept in a special storage building located right next to the commandant's house, and the guards did not carry their guns with them all the time. Indeed, they were only given their weapons when their shift was about to begin. Perhaps this was caused by the fact that the Ukrainians drank a lot of alcohol and regularly got drunk, which was, naturally, strictly forbidden. Also, they stole items of personal property confiscated from the camp's victims kept in the clothing storehouse, and exchanged them for alcohol in the nearby villages. However, the Germans also drank a lot, perhaps not as much as the Ukrainian watchmen, but still frequently. In other words, they were sober less often than they were drunk. To sum up, if a watchman was caught committing any of the afore-mentioned misdemeanours, they could be punished by being moved to a different place of service.

Wasilij Pankow served in the Sobibór camp from 1 January to 27 March 1943. Until mid-1941, he had worked at the technical control department in the Josef Stalin Machine Building Plant in Krematorsk. On 23 June 1941, in Krematorsk, Pankow was conscripted to the Soviet Army and posted to the 305th battalion of the military formation of the Red Army, where he served as a military intelligence soldier. On 29 July 1943, in the vicinity of the city of Bogosław, the whole battalion was taken captive by the German army. As a result, Pankow stayed a few days in the POW camp in Biała Cerkiew. From here, he was moved to the POW camp in Chełm. He stayed there till October 1941. Like all the other POWs in the camp, Pankow was not yet assigned any work. It was only in October 1941 that, together with a group of other 100 POWs, he was sent to work in the German furniture factory in Lublin. One October day of 1942, to the place where the Lublin factory workers lived, there came a German SS officer, together with his German interpreter. They gathered all the workers, and then, at their own discretion, selected 40 men, including Pankow. The interpreter informed the selected group of POWs that they had just been chosen to serve in the Security Police and that they would be taken away to a training camp in Trawniki, where they would undergo military training. None of the men raised any objections, which was tantamount to consent. The group of these 40 selected Ukrainians was then taken to the Trawniki camp.

On the day of their arrival at the camp, each of them was called to come to the camp's headquarters so that the Germans could fill in special forms with different questions about their personal data, and to have photos of them taken. Each time, when a given Ukrainian's form had been filled in completely, he had to sign it. Next, the Germans took their fingerprints and attached these to the form. Following this, each Ukrainian had to sign a statement in which they committed themselves remaining loyal in their service in the German army. After this registration procedure, each of them was promoted to the rank of an SS watchman. They were given German military equipment and weapons. Now, their training could start. SS watchmen were taught how to keep guard over the captured civilians and about the requirements of guard service in general. In his post-war testimony, Pankow confirmed his having

been trained in Trawniki, above all, to do military muster, to shoot from a rifle, and to keep guard over the prisoners of concentration camps. Simultaneously with being trained in the Trawniki camp, Pankow served as a guard there.

On 1 January 1943, Pankow was posted to Sobibór. According to him, when he arrived, there were 40 Ukrainian SS guards and about 12-15 Germans. Under Oberstrumführer's command, the guards surrounded each new transport and compelled the newcomers to immediately leave the train. Next, while constantly guarding them and threatening them with their weapons, the Ukrainians force-marched them to the building which was called a 'changing area'. When all the prisoners had undressed, the guards herded them towards the 'bath house'. Pankow claimed that the Ukrainian guards would shove the prisoners along the 'Road to Heaven' towards the gas chamber, while the Germans stood along both sides of the road in order to keep order. This was later confirmed by Iwan Kozłowski, who had served as a watchman in Sobibór from December 1942, or January 1943, to April 1943<sup>46</sup>.

On 27 March 1943, "*84 guards from Trawniki were sent to Sobibór*"<sup>47</sup>. It remains unclear, however, why those 84 "*guards from Trawniki*" were sent in late March 1943. The most plausible explanation seems that the camp was in need of an influx of new labour force, since there had never been any mention of problems like desertion or revolt that had happened at that time. Most probably, they knew in the Trawniki camp that the arrivals of transports at Sobibór from occupied Holland were going to continue<sup>48</sup>. This group of guards was sent to Sobibór after the last of

<sup>46</sup> *Sobibór*, (ed.): S. Wileński, B. Gorbowski, A. Tieruszkin, pp.79–80: Iwan Kozłowski was born in 1919, into a poor peasant's family in Pskowszczyzna. He completed seven forms of his primary education and he worked as a grazier in his local kolkhoz. Kozłowski was conscripted into the Red Army in 1939 and served in Ukraine. At the outbreak of World War II, his unit was stationed outside Lvov, hence it started to withdraw towards Kiev. In the neighbourhood of Zwienigorodsk, his unit was surrounded by German troops. On 5 August 1941, he was slightly injured in his neck and captured by Germans, who took him to the POW camp in Chelm. In November 1941, a group of SS officers came to the camp to select some of the prisoners to (as they said) work with the civilian population that had been imprisoned in camps. They selected a group of 200 men, whom they put onto military lorries and drove to the site of the former Trawniki factory. Here, the Germans made them the offer to join the German military service. Those who refused were shot. The training lasted two months. Every day, the trainees had classes in German, in mustering, in the structure and the handling of weapons, as well as physical education. After completing their training, they were all given German military uniforms and weapons (German rifles). In March 1942, Kozłowski was driven to the Bełżec extermination camp to serve as a guard. In December 1942, he was transferred to the camp in Sobibór, where he served for 4 months. From Sobibór, he was moved to KL Auschwitz. After the war, Iwan Kozłowski remained in hiding for a few years. He was arrested as late as in March 1949. The Soviet military tribunal sentenced him to 25 years of imprisonment. As a result, he spent the rest of his life in an ore mine in the Karagandyjski Oblast.

<sup>47</sup> SSPF Lublin -Trawniki Training Camp to SS-Special Detachment. Sobibor. Act of Transfer, 26 March 1943, RG K-779, 16/312 'e', vol. 411, pp. 174–175, copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>48</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

four Jewish transports from France had arrived. This came to Sobibór on 25 March. The transport brought 1008 deportees, out of whom only two survived the camp, one of them being Josef Duniec. This is how he described his arrival at the camp: “[...] *As soon as we arrived, the Ukrainians drove us down onto the ramp. They beat us severely. Many people died as a result of this unloading*”<sup>49</sup>. From 5 March 1943 onwards, transports from Holland began and kept coming – one transport a week<sup>50</sup>. It is possible that the afore-mentioned new group of watchmen did not serve in the Sobibór camp when the fourth transport, from 26 of March, arrived.

Ignat Danilczenko, most probably, served as a watchman in the German extermination centre in Sobibór from March to September 1943. During his post-war court trial, he testified that the Sobibór Ukrainian watchmen had kept guard over the newly-arrived prisoners from the moment the trains were unloaded, until they had been closed inside the gas chamber. The watchmen were to prevent escape attempts and eliminate any potential risk of the outbreak of panic or chaos among the newcomers. The armed guards stood along both sides of ‘*Himmelfahrtsstrasse*’, ready to shoot at any smallest sign of resistance on the part of the prisoners.

The ultimate group of guards who served in the Sobibór camp was no larger than 120 men. These were divided into 4 platoons with 30 men each. The commander of such a company was always a German soldier. Similarly, the platoons remained under the command of German, not Ukrainian, guards. According to Danilczenko, the platoons were formed on the basis of the height of the soldiers. For instance, only guards who were minimum 180 centimetres tall could serve in the first platoon. Iwan Demianiuk was one of them. He came from the Winnica Oblast, and, like all the other Ukrainian guards, had undergone training in the SS training camp in Trawniki. While in Sobibór, Demianiuk held the rank of Private SS guard and wore a black SS uniform with a grey neck. Whenever he went on duty outside the camp area, he received, like other guards, an automatic rifle and some ammunition. He was frequently seen with his rifle in situations when, together with other watchmen, he kept guard over prisoners in all the sectors of the camp, from the unloading rail ramp to the entrance to the gas chamber. Demianiuk escorted Jews to the very door of the gas chamber. Generally, he was considered to be an experienced and efficient guard. That is why, the Germans sent him to round-ups of Jews from the local ghettos and to bring them by horse-cart to the camp. Danilczenko testified that Demianiuk had often been sent on guard duty to Camp III. Also, he was often granted holiday leave on account of the fact that he always fulfilled the Germans’ orders conscientiously<sup>51</sup>.

Iwan Michajłowicz Karakaszy ended up in the Sobibór camp with a group of several dozen new watchmen (who had, most probably, got there directly from

<sup>49</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 245.

<sup>51</sup> Ignat Terentiewicz Danilczenko’s testimony report, the Ukraine Interior Ministry and the Department of Interrogation at the Ministry of State Security in the USSR of the Dniepropietrowsk Oblast, Dniepropietrowsk, 7 March 1949, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

Trawniki) in April 1943. In July the same year, he escaped from the camp, together with nine other watchmen. On 19 July 1943, he joined the Zhukov Soviet partisan group. Here, he wrote down a special memo for the commander of his unit, which contained information about his stay in the Sobibór extermination camp. Through official channels, his report got to the plenipotentiary for the Communist Party of Belarus. According to Karakas, out of 80 guards with whom he had arrived at Sobibór, only 51 were left only one month later. This was caused by various reasons. As punishment, six of the watchmen were sent away to another camp, seven of them were sent back to their POW camps, while four others were executed by shooting for having stolen some items from the camp's sorting house. Karakas also claimed that the German personnel had been made up of 27 people.

In total, there were approximately 80 watchmen who went on duty every day. They were all armed with Russian rifles (there were 120 rifles in the camp's armoury). Some of the Germans, on the other hand, had at their disposal 2 light calibre guns (*SWT*) and 3 machine guns. The rest had Russian rifles. In the armoury there were also: 1 Diegtiarew heavy machine gun, 1 light machine gun, 1 Czech hand rifle, 1 Russian heavy rifle, 1 Polish heavy rifle, 30 German grenades, and about 5,000 rounds of ammunition. One shift consisted of 27 people. The guard duty was organised in a two-shift system. Each Ukrainian's duty lasted 3 hours. The camp area was surrounded by 7 watchtowers, in which only one watchman served his duty in daytime. He was armed with a rifle and 15 rounds. Moreover, each part of the camp had its separate protection system. Additionally, during the night, specially appointed areas surrounding the camp were patrolled by 3 Volksdeutsche. There was also one German who was on duty non-stop<sup>52</sup>. On 11 April 1943, the Sobibór guards "[...] received support by the arrival of 50 men who had undergone training in Trawniki [...]"<sup>53</sup>, and, on 2 August 1943, "[...] 17 guards from Trawniki came to Sobibór [...]"<sup>54</sup>. Finally, on 16 September 1943, "[...] Another hundred guards came to Sobibór from Trawniki [...]"<sup>55</sup>.

---

<sup>52</sup> Zachar Filipowicz Popławski's memo to the Plenipotentiary from the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brest Oblast, which concerns Iwan Michałowicz Karakas's report on the Sobibór death camp. 7 October 1943, copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>53</sup> TsA FSB Moscow; SSPF Lublin/Trawniki Training Camp to SS-Special Detachment, Sobibor, Act of Transfer, 11 April 1943, vol. 410, p. 277, copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>54</sup> Lublin/Trawniki Training Camp to SS-Special Detachment. Sobibor, Act of Transfer, 2 August 1943, p. 92, copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>55</sup> Trawniki Training Camp/Detachment Lublin to SS Labour Camp Sobibor. Act of Transfer, 16 September 1943, vol. 411, pp. 112-114, copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

### 3. The looting of Jewish property

The moment the headquarters of 'Operation Reinhardt' were granted absolute power over the Jewish populace, who began to be deported to various death camps, they gained the right to utilise the property which had been left behind by the camps' victims. In so-doing, they dealt with the taking over, the segregating and the handing of the property over to Globocnik's SS Main Economic and Administrative Office. Globocnik, as well as the current commandant of the extermination centre in Sobibór, were obliged to act under two instructions. One of them, dated 26 September 1942, was issued by August Frank from the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, while the other was issued on 9 December 1943. The former, marked as "concerning the command, a matter of secrecy", was drawn up in only six copies. It included some general guidelines about how to manage moveable and immovable property of 'resettled' Jews, which, the instruction said, was to be referred to in any future directives as the 'property of thieves, fences and profiteers'<sup>56</sup>.

The latter, issued on 9 December 1943, by Oswald Pohl, Chief of the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, was the one which Globocnik made a reference to in his report on the development of 'Operation Reinhardt'. The instruction required the application of regulations which were binding in the state economy and accountancy in cases where revenues and expenses were connected with the administration of Jewish property. Accordingly, it was possible to make expenditures on condition that they were directly connected with a given 'action'. Moreover, any cash deposits had to be made as accurately as tax payments, and all the bank transfers were to be made via the Reichsbank in Berlin<sup>57</sup>.

In order for the moveable property to be properly managed, Globocnik created two 'organisational units'. Therefore, in one of these units, he made SS-Sturmbannführer Georg Wipperfurth responsible for money, foreign currency, valuable bullion, jewellery and other valuables, with SS-Untersturmführer Huber as his deputy. Additionally, Wipperfurth kept a record of confiscated valuable things. Hermann Höfle, coordinator of 'Operation Reinhardt', was made responsible, as the chief of the other unit, for keeping a record of confiscated clothes, shoes and personal belongings. Apart from keeping a central record of confiscated goods, the two units were obliged to keep similar detailed records in death camps.

When the Sobibór camp became operational, a special courier, Erich Fettke, an SS man in civilian clothes, came regularly to the camp from Lublin in order to collect all confiscated valuables and money. Initially, he took away, once a week, two padlocked metal chests with an attached label which said: 'Express delivery'. All his travel documents and his special SS passport were signed by Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler himself. Erich Fuchs frequently drove Fettke in his car to the railway station either in Bełżec or in Lublin. In Lublin, a special warehouse was

<sup>56</sup> Stanisław Piotrowski, *Misja Odyla Globocnika. Sprawozdanie o wynikach finansowych zagłady Żydów w Polsce* [The Mission of Odilo Globocnik. An Account of the Results of the Financial Ruin of the Jews in Poland], Warszawa 1949, pp. 14-16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

created so as to store huge amounts of confiscated things. In Belżec, on the other hand, they were piled inside the railway station locomotive shed and around it, while in Sobibór, they were stored in several barracks<sup>58</sup>.

During the first few weeks of the functioning of the extermination centre in Sobibór, the luggage of the newly arrived Jews stayed on the railway ramp until all of them had been taken away to the gas chamber. Later, a special group of people who had been selected from the same transport, had to carry the luggage to a square adjacent to Camp II, where a preliminary selection was made. Most of it was destroyed, burnt or buried in pits. Indeed, some of the Sobibór survivors' accounts from that particular period of time mention "*mountains of unsorted luggage piled up in the area between barracks*". Very soon, however, a new system of sorting the victims' belongings was introduced. New barracks, so-called 'sorting barracks', were built, and a new group of prisoner-labourers was formed – the 'sorting commando'. Every now and then, the set of train cars which departed Sobibór to collect another batch of Jews, did not leave empty, as they were filled with everything the camp's victims had left behind<sup>59</sup>. One of the well-preserved railway consignment notes of one of the trains departing from the Sobibór camp contains a list of confiscated items which is as follows:

*SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor*

*An die Bekleidungswerke*

*Lublin, Chopinstrasse 27*

*Sobibor , den 16 April 1943.*

*(Am 16.04.1943 wurden an die Bekleidungswerk, Lublin, Chopinstrasse 27, zum Versand gebracht).*

*16,800 tablespoons, 9,000 teaspoons, 7,700 forks, 5,200 knives, 6,400 pairs of scissors, 9,650 brushes, 12,800 pairs of glasses, 5,000 combs, 2,600 shaving brushes, 1,000 toothbrushes, 2,000 hair shavers, 5,000 rubber hot water bags, 4 chests full of needles, 3 chests full of hair rubber bands, 3 chests full of gloves, 5 chests full of shoelaces, 20 chests full of wool, 27 chests full of yarn, 13 chests full of sewing threads, 1 sack full of shoe polish, 310 first class wool blankets, 530 second class wool blankets, 1 chest full of medical tools, 51 chests full of medicine, 6 chests full of shaving cream, 3 chests full of toilet soap, 5 chests full of ordinary soap, 5 chests full of toothpaste, 1 chest full of alum, 3 chests full of soap dishes, 1 chest full of electric hair shavers, 1 chest full of manicure tools, 1 chest full of pencils, 2 sacks full of pencil rubbers, 3 chests full of face cream, face powder and brilliantine, 1 chest full of smoking pipes, 1 chest full of earlaps, 4 chests full of mirrors, 2 chests full of handbags, 1 sack full of hair wigs, 1 chest full of medical tools, 2 chests full of brown shoe polish<sup>60</sup>.*

<sup>58</sup> Michael Tregenza, *Christian Wirth a pierwsza faza realizacji Akcji „Reinhard”* [Christian Wirth and the First Phase of Einsatz 'Reinhard'], *„Zeszyty Majdanka”* [The Majdanek Notebooks] 1992, vol. 14, p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> Dov Freiberg, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Copy of the original document – MPEW Archives, translated from German by Marek Bem.

All of these items were first sent to the Lublin *Flugplatz* camp, whose prisoners sorted them for the second time. The items selected for future use were sent on to the ‘Operation Reinhardt’ warehouses at 27 Chopin Street, Lublin. Most of the items were later handed over to the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, which sent them away to German families that had suffered the consequences of the war. Valuables and foreign currencies, whose collection and dispatch were carried out in a different way, were finally deposited at the Reichsbank in Berlin. It was often the case that the luggage left behind by the victims (especially the luggage of the Jews from western countries) contained items of exceptional value, like gemstones, gold and platinum watches set with diamonds, as well as rings, earrings, unusual-shaped necklaces, as well as millions-worth-of sums of money in all possible currencies.

In various labour camps in Lublin, in the warehouse at Chopin Street and in many other places in Lublin, in addition to the Majdanek concentration camp, thousands of Jews sorted, mended, disinfected and packed anything from underwear and bedclothes, to watches and money. They could not miss a single item. Women’s hair (which, among other places, came from Sobibór) was shipped to Germany, where it was used to make tricot felt jackets for railway workers, socks for submariners crews, and insulation material for German submarines. Dental gold coming from the teeth of gassed Jews was melted and sent to the Reichsbank. The warehouse at Chmielna Street, which was located in the former ophthalmology hospital, now housed the main warehouse for valuables and money taken away from the victims of the death camps.

In early 1943, a special exhibition of jewellery was held in Lublin to celebrate Himmler’s arrival there. According to Ignacy Wieniarz, the only surviving member of the Jewish commando that worked in the warehouse, “[...] *It was the best and the largest exhibition of Jewish jewellery in the whole of occupied Europe* [...]”<sup>61</sup>.

Two other places involved in the process of looting and sorting Jewish property in Lublin were the labour camp located at the Lublin sports stadium (*Sportplatz*), and the building which, before the war, used to be a cosmetics factory owned by a Jewish manufacturer from Lublin – Roman Keindl. Now, these cosmetics, medical equipment and medicine, which had once belonged to Jews but were taken away from them, were sorted there<sup>62</sup>.

At present, it is impossible to calculate the real economic value of ‘Operation Reinhardt’. It is known that Globocnik routinely sent his reports on ‘Operation Reinhardt’ in which he summed up the results of the looting of Jewish property. Two such documents have survived, together with the annexes attached to them: one is from 4 November 1943, the other – 5 January 1944. They both contain reports on the development of ‘Operation Reinhardt’ during the period between April 1942 and 15 December 1943. One can easily presume that these are just a part, perhaps a tiny part, of the total sum of Jewish property looted within this operation<sup>63</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> The economic aspects of ‘Operation Reinhardt’, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>63</sup> Stanisław Piotrowski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

## 4. Corruption

As a result of mass murder of Jews in Sobibór, a huge amount of Jewish valuables was gathered in the camp. As might be expected, this led to a very dangerous situation which had a very corrupting effect on the camp personnel. Therefore, it became completely normal practice that the SS men involved in ‘Operation Reinhardt’ stole what they were otherwise obliged to secure for the Third Reich. However, neither the risk of death penalty nor other most severe sentences of imprisonment deterred them from continuing this practice<sup>64</sup>. Likewise, for the German Sobibór personnel any break in the mass murder process offered them a possibility to smuggle home valuables left behind by the murdered Jews.

In total, Odilo Globocnik handed more than 100, 000 000 Deutsche marks over to SS financial institutions. At the same time, however, he managed to amass an immense personal fortune, part of which was secured by the British soldiers who arrested him in May 1945. An American intelligence report which followed his arrest mentioned thousands of silver and gold coins (roubles, pounds, francs, marks, ducats, dollars), as well as 2 kilos of pearls, diamonds, more than 3 kilos of silver wedding rings, 217 kilos of scrap platinum<sup>65</sup>. Kurt Bolender’s wife [Kurt Bolender was a member of the Sobibór personnel], Margarete Bolender, testified, during one of the court trials in Hagen, that her husband used to bring home a lot of gold teeth, as well as the dental bridge-work of the murdered Jews whenever he came home on holiday leave<sup>66</sup>. Also, when Walter Nowak’s [Nowak – another SS man from Sobibór] family house near Prima was searched, a vast number of gold watches and necklaces were found. These had evidently been confiscated from the Sobibór camp’s victims.

The Sobibór camp personnel had all they could dream of. For instance, they completed their daily victualling with food they had stolen from the murdered victims. Additionally, they selected for work the best tailors, shoe makers, cooks, dentists and mechanics who, due to their exceptional skills and the items they made for the SS men, enabled the Germans to enrich themselves. Some of the SS men ordered, for their own children, whom they had left behind in Germany, bicycles to be made from Jewish children’s prams. Others got richer by stealing their victims’ valuables. SS men going on their holiday leave took with them suitcases and parcels full of items which had once belonged to Jews. At the same time, the Ukrainian guards stole from the newly-arrived Jews money and valuable things right after their transport had arrived at the camp.

The omnipresent corruption and theft among the Germans involved in ‘Operation Reinhardt’ led to the criminal investigation launched by Schutzstaffel (SS) orders,

<sup>64</sup> Alfred Ittner’s testimony report, RLKW/NW (15 December), Kolumbach, 17 July 1962, NIOD Archives.

<sup>65</sup> Gold of the SS - ‘Operation Reinhardt’, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>66</sup> Margarete Bolender’s testimony report from 15 August 1966, NIOD Archives 804, file ref. No. 46/220.

and run by judge Konrad Morgen. For this purpose, he came to Lublin in 1943. As a result of his investigation, several Nazis from the Majdanek concentration camp, including its commandant, Hermann Florstedt, were arrested. Morgen analysed 800 cases of corruption and murder, and his investigation led to the pronouncement of 200 sentences. It has to be remembered, though, that the range of his interest during the investigation was only limited to illegal crimes committed for personal gratification and the desire to enrich oneself. The ‘normality’ of the ‘Operation Reinhardt’ procedure of mass murder and looting of Jewish property did not raise any moral doubts in him<sup>67</sup>.

---

<sup>67</sup> Michael Tregenza, Christian Wirth, *Inspekteur...*, pp. 18-25.

## CHAPTER IV

### TRANSPORTS. THE TOTAL NUMBER OF VICTIMS

#### 1. Deportations

The ‘special trains’ which brought the Jews from all over Europe to the German extermination centre in Sobibór so as to be murdered within its gas chambers, were allocated and their movements planned on the basis of a cooperative agreement between the Reich Main Security Office [the RSHA] and *Deutsche Reichsbahn*. Indeed, one of the more important decisions taken during the Wannsee conference with respect to what was deemed the ‘evacuation’ of Jews from almost all over Europe to Sobibór and other points of ‘Final Solution’, was the selection of *Deutsche Reichsbahn* as the main carrier.

Through this agreement, all such matters were dealt with by so-called ‘Department 21’, also known as ‘Mass transport’. This office operated within Department E II (*Betriebsabteilung*). The Third Reich’s Railway, in turn, fulfilled the orders of Department IVB4 – the department for Jewish affairs (*Judenreferat*) – managed by way of the RSHA, and headed by Obersturmbannführer SS Adolf Eichmann. *Deutsche Reichsbahn* also coordinated these ‘special trains’ with their counterparts from Slovakia and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (which had the status of independent carriers), as well as with the French and the Dutch railways, and with the organisation known as ‘Ostbahn’ in the General Government (enterprises which remained ‘under supervision’). In addition, under the auspices of the General Eastern Railways in Cracow, a counterpart to “Department 21”, so-called ‘Department 33’, was controlled through an office termed ‘Group – Special Trains’. When Ostbahn was given the property of the former Polish State Railways (PKP), it also took over the commuter and narrow-gauge railways formerly belonging to PKP<sup>1</sup>. This group cooperated with Eichmann’s IVB4 Department.

One of more competent of Eichmann’s employees was Franz Novak, who had already worked, since 20 December 1939, for the Reich Main Security Office as a full-time transport officer. On 20 April 1940, Novak was promoted to the rank of SS-Untersturmführer, and on 20 April 1941 – to that of SS-Obersturmführer. The department to which he was assigned operated under a meaningful name – ‘D IV Evacuation’. Here, he dealt with technical and transport matters, which

<sup>1</sup> Czesław Bakunowicz, *Wykorzystanie kolei w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie do deportacji Żydów* [The Use of Railways in the General Government for the Deportation of Jews], „Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej” [The Bulletin of the Chief Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes against the Polish Nation, the Institute of National Remembrance], 1993, vol. 35, pp. 82–85.

meant arranging for trains to be made available for transports, informing appropriate institutions about their arrival, providing these transports with guards, making sure they ran in accordance with regional and national train timetables, and, above all, informing appropriate institutions about their intended destinations.

It is highly likely that Franz Novak was the only ordinary Third Reich citizen who was fully aware of the real range, development and efficiency of the Final Solution. This assumption is based on the fact that through his work he knew the numbers of deportees, he knew exactly where they were to be 'evacuated', and he booked the actual trains, as well as the return shipments of the looted Jewish property from both concentration and extermination camps alike. Additionally, Novak drew up reports for Eichmann, informing him about the proceedings of this 'evacuation' project. Moreover, he received the relevant data on those who were listed for deportations, and he determined the number of train wagons they would have to be put into. Finally, he allotted suitable stopping places for particular trains.

From 1942 onwards, the major destination places of 'his' transports were the extermination camps. It has to be mentioned that the transports themselves were a hellish-enough experience for the deportees. This was caused by the fact that, frequently, the trains carrying them were forced to run at a slow pace either because the wagons were so much overcrowded or because their trains had to be passed by other, fast, trains. Frequently, it happened that the trains were stopped on the sidings for full days at a time, and the deportees, locked inside the goods cars, were refused any food or drink. In general, the travelling conditions were so terrible that, sometimes, those who finally unlocked the wagon doors were genuinely surprised to find any 'living souls' inside. However, Novak, who knew perfectly well where and for how long each particular train would be stopped, never attempted to deal with these difficult situations or to prevent them in any way. Therefore, in winter the deportees froze inside the unheated freight cars, while in summer, they suffocated in the scorching heat, as they were packed in like sardines.

After the war, during the court trial against him, Novak claimed that, back then, he had only been interested in the technical aspects of Jewish transports. What is more, during his hearing, he insisted on using the euphemism "location camps" to refer to the extermination camps to which all transports were to terminate. Moreover, he stated that his major task had been to prepare suitable railway routes, and to arrange for the allocation and routing of these special trains (which did not run according to the official timetable) along railway tracks heavily overloaded by military trains (for obvious reasons, military transports had priority over other types of transport).

It has to be mentioned that, between 1942-44, Novak hardly ever left Berlin. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, a court in Vienna pointed out his personal responsibility with regard to the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question'. Furthermore, in pronouncing its verdict, the court stated that it was absolutely sure that Novak had been perfectly aware of what had happened to the Jews in the East. Therefore, they charged him with the intention to commit mass murder<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Berndt Rieger, *Zawidowca śmierci* [The Stationmaster of Death], Zakrzewo, 2009, pp. 160–192.

Yet his was a shared responsibility. Most probably, in preparation for *Endlösung* [the Final Solution], in July 1942, the then Secretary of State at the Reich Ministry of Transport, Dr Wilhelm Kleinmann, stepped down (officially on account of his poor health), to be replaced by the former chief of the Central Traffic Directorate (*Hauptverkehrsdirktion*) in Połtawa, the 36-year-old Dr Eng. Albert Ganzenmüller. In one of his first documents bearing his signature, i.e. the one from 23 July, Ganzenmüller informed the SS-Reichsführer's Personal Chief of Staff, SS-Obergruppenführer Karl Wolff, that transports from Warsaw to Sobibór via Lublin had to be suspended, until October 1942, due to the extension of that railway line. However, the current state of knowledge about the deportations to Sobibór cannot provide any credible explanation as to which particular transports the document referred to.

On 17 March 1942, a transport departed from Lublin towards the extermination camp in Bełżec. This marked the resumption of 'special transports' within the General Government. Soon, other transports followed: in May 1942 – to Sobibór, and on 23 July 1942 – to Treblinka. A typical local 'special train' was made up of about 50 freight cars, with 100 Jews packed into one wagon, as well as two passenger wagons – one in front and the other at the back of the train. The escort usually was a group of German policemen and SS men, in addition to a Ukrainian guard detachment from Trawniki, while the typical railway crew consisted of an engine driver, a fireman, and, sometimes, a brakeman. Trains coming from Western Europe, on the other hand, had a smaller number of wagons. As a rule, one such transport carried approximately 1,000 people, and the train consisted of 30-40 wagons, including two second-class wagons for the escort, third- or fourth-class passenger wagons for the Jews, and several goods wagons for the luggage. From time to time, however, typical long-distance passenger wagons were used to 'evacuate' Jews from Western Europe.

The average speed at which a special train ran, was, including frequent stops, 18 kilometres per hour. This meant that, within 24 hours, such a train could cover a distance of 400 kilometres<sup>3</sup>. The Reich railway regulations stipulated that the station masters of each particular railway station located on the route of Jewish transports had to be informed beforehand, by means of telegraph, that a special train would be passing through their part of the line. It can be assumed that these traffic signals were the same as the surviving one which informed about another train arriving at Sobibór from the Reich, via Cracow, i.e. telegram No. 39, from *Generaldirektion der Ostbahn (Gedob)* in Cracow. It said that train No. DA 102, carrying a transport of the resettled, departed during the night of 30/31 March 1943, from the Reich, towards Sobibór, according to a special schedule (No. 567 from 26 March). It also said that the train contained 98 axes, and weighed 571 tonnes<sup>4</sup>.

Although the majority of Jews being 'resettled' by way of the Sobibór extermination centre were transported in cattle wagons or in freight cars, the German railway charged a specific sum of money for each 'settler'. Thus, an adult ticket,

<sup>3</sup> Czesław Bakunowicz, *op. cit.*, pp. 94–96.

<sup>4</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

discounted in the case of a group ticket, cost 4 pfennigs per person per one kilometre. In addition, the price of a ticket for a child aged between four and ten was reduced by half, while the transport of a child below 10 years of age was free of charge. The company which dealt with the financial matters of special train transports, was, on the order of the German Railways, a German travel agency “*Mitteleuropäische Reisebüro*”. So, it was this tourist agency that issued invoices for the Reich Main Security Office for these transports by special trains<sup>5</sup>.

As has been calculated by some experts in the field of ‘Operation Reinhardt’, in total, the Third Reich authorities earned the equivalent of 100,000,000 euros on the deportations of Polish Jews alone. The problem is, however, that the current German Railways (*Deutsche Bahn*) do not, in any way, consider themselves to be the successor to the Third Reich Railways. In the late 1940’s, the property belonging to the Third Reich Railways was taken over by the state, and *Deutsche Bahn* was created afterwards. Without doubt, however, the German Railways are co-responsible for the Holocaust. The money earned in this ‘work’ was later invested in the rebuilding/extension of the railway infrastructure in Germany<sup>6</sup>.

It has to be mentioned that documentary evidence concerning the rail transports of Jews to the Sobibór extermination centre are scarce, and what survives mainly contains information on deportations from Holland, France and Germany. Thus, a full register of the rail transports themselves, or the total statistics with respect to the activities surrounding these transports, have yet to be discovered. Still, with regard to transports going to Sobibór from the General Government, one such document has survived. It is a letter of acknowledgement, issued on 21 July 1942, which confirms the departure, towards Sobibór, of a small transport of 69 Jews from Ryczywół, within the Radom District. This telegram confirms that, indeed, documents of this type were drawn up by the occupation authorities in Poland.

Undoubtedly, both the Reich Main Security Office and the headquarters of the German Railways must have been in possession of the data which confirmed the number of the deportees being carried to the extermination camps. Unfortunately, such documents have either been intentionally burnt or unintentionally destroyed, or are still hidden amongst the national archives. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the precise number of transports which ran from Western Europe or from the General Government, to Sobibór (with the exception of those from France and Holland), or the frequency with which they were arranged. On the other hand, several of those who survived their deportation to Westerbork testified, after the war, that the commandant of the Westerbork camp had not really bothered to prepare detailed lists of passengers of the trains sent to Sobibór or to create any files or ‘evacuation’ statistics<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Piotr Jendroszczyk, Piotr Zychowicz, *Zyskowne transporty Hitlera* [Profitable Hitler’s Transports], cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>7</sup> Elias Isak Cohen for Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 1947. Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

In general, the German administration cared more about the property of the deportees than the deportees themselves. That is why copies of lists of those held at Westerbork were sent, above all, to the Property and Pensions Management Institute in the Hague, in order to obtain more information about the property that was to be stolen away from them<sup>8</sup>. So, whenever there was any transport about to depart from France or Holland, first, an appropriate notification was prepared, concerning the time of departure and the presumed time of arrival at a given destination place. Hence, any time a new transport left the Westerbork deportation camp, prior to this, its commandant always sent telexes to the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Amsterdam, to the Reich Commissar for Occupied Netherlands – Seyss-Inquart in the Hague, and to Department IV B 4 in Berlin. Similarly, with any new transport leaving from Westerbork for Sobibór, relevant information was sent to Cracow and to Globocnik in Lublin, who, in turn, notified the Sobibór Commandant about the upcoming transport. Fortunately, the list and the register of the telephonograms sent from Westerbork have survived, yet the telegrams themselves have never been found. As can be assumed, these were similar in content to two telexes sent from Paris, and which notified about the departure of transports towards Sobibór on 23 and 25 March 1943<sup>9</sup>.

With time, western Jews somehow managed to ‘get used to’ receiving information about the first massacres in the East, about the executions and the mass murder of the Jewish population therein that was instituted as Nazi-German policy. However, they found it much harder to come to terms with any news on the liquidation of the ghettos within the General Government area or the first reports about the existence of German extermination camps. Yet, as of early-1942, news reached the ghettos of western occupied Europe, which mentioned these extermination camps and the liquidation of whole Jewish communities. Indeed, it seems that, by mid-1942, this information had become so widespread, so certain and so clear that many Jews could easily foresee the fate which the Germans had prepared for them. Many other Jews, however, lived in denial of what was awaiting them. Therefore, there were ghettos whose Jewish inhabitants were sure that death was near. On the other hand, there were places where only some of the Jews knew the truth, while the rest only had a mere sense of foreboding about the upcoming events. Obviously, there must also have been towns whose inhabitants knew nothing about the real destination places of the departing transports. Such an approach seems to have been typical of the inhabitants of those ghettos which were liquidated first. On the other hand, there were places where the destination place of the departing transports was obvious and clear. Presumably, in such cases, whenever the Jews foresaw any slightest chance of survival, they tried to avoid being put into the transport trains<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Ursula Stern for Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 1947. Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>9</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>10</sup> Chajim Bergdorf’s testimony, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 034145, Tel Aviv, March 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

Thus, they tried to hide somewhere, they left or hid their valuables, or attempted to, sometimes, successfully, place their children under the care of the inhabitants of the Aryan [non-Jewish] side. At the same time, they wanted to believe in anything that would bring them a spark of hope. Therefore, they looked for some employment which gave them the feeling that they did not just wait passively for their death to come. They believed that, in this way, they would save their lives because they would prove that they were needed, even indispensable. The Jews interpreted and spread, by word of mouth, every single piece of news which gave them any hope. For this reason, even the shortest break in the scheduling of transports aroused hope in them that this ‘transport storm’ was perhaps over. A human defence mechanism is to reject any ‘uncomfortable’ information. Therefore, even after each new ‘action’ [in which Jews were captured and deported], they lived in hope, against all knowledge and the bare facts, that the deported neighbours and members of their families were still alive.

Obviously, the Jews did not want to believe that they had been sentenced to death. They grasped at even the slightest chance of warding off their intended fate, and they attempted to interpret their otherwise hopeless situation in a more positive light. To such self-deception, they stuck to with all their hearts. Many truly believed that there was always some positive explanation to the diverse news, whether genuine, or propagandistic, that reached them. If this ill-information came from one person, there was always a possibility of accusing that person of lying, exaggerating the facts or simply having the wrong interpretation. In such cases, a typical reaction was to reject the sad truth and to form new ones instead. For instance, Władysław Szpilman wrote in his post-war memoirs that no one in his ghetto had wanted to believe the information that “Jews had been gassed to death” in Lublin and Tarnów. Instead, they preferred to believe in any rumour which, at that time, seemed more plausible to them. One of such rumours, which brought the Jews some hope, was that the Germans simply planned to transfer those within the Warsaw ghetto somewhere to the East, in transports amounting to 6,000 people a day<sup>11</sup>.

Yet this defence mechanism could work for only a limited time. When the Jews gained more and more information about the brutal liquidations of ghettos coming from places located closer and closer, they could no longer ignore it. But even then they sought such explanations, which, despite the acknowledged existence of gas chambers, would enable them to feel safe. One of these was that genocide was a phenomenon local in character, which, for some reason, affected these and no other ghettos. For some Jews, there was always room for the hope that no deportation action would occur in their town or city. Other Jews believed that, to the Germans, their existence was indispensable in some places and profitable in others.

The main reason why some Jews were convinced that the Germans would abstain from carrying out ‘actions’ in their own towns or cities was that, without them, such

---

<sup>11</sup> Władysław Szpilman, *Pianista. Warszawskie wspomnienia 1939 – 1945* [The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man’s Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945], Kraków, 2001, p. 78; Dov Freiberg’s letter to Goldman from 1961 (the precise date of posting this letter remains unknown). Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

towns and cities would not be able to function. That is why they were certain that the occupiers' rationality and pragmatism would save their lives, and that the total liquidation of all the ghettos was pointless - because this would mean the liquidation of all free labour. Therefore, their interpretation was that, if some of the ghettos had indeed been liquidated, that was because they had not brought the Germans any profit. In their view, the ghettos whose factories and workshops produced goods for the Germans were safe from deportations. The general conviction was that only those whom the Germans needed for some purpose, would stay on in their ghettos. As a result, the Jews from all over the General Government were seized by a frenzy to work hard and profitably for the Germans. They were ready to work twelve or sixteen hours a day, and with no payment, so as to be allowed to stay in their ghettos. The fact that the Jews strongly believed in the rationality of the German policy towards them and the hope that it would be based on an economic calculation, induced many of them to stay in their ghettos, or, to return there after spending some time in hiding. This was because they wanted to believe till the very last moment that their work would save them their lives.

Another self-defence mechanism which allowed so many Jews to be conveniently herded together was their conviction that they belonged to a particular group which would not be affected by any 'action'. They would keep on repeating, "[...] *This does not concern us, carpenters... This does not concern us, skilled men... This does not concern us, rich people* [...]"<sup>12</sup>. In this way, they removed from their consciousness, any thoughts which would bring about frustration, suffering or pain, and hence the absence of this enabled them to function somehow. To those, however, who knew there was no escape from being deported, the last ray of exploited hope was their belief that they would still go to a labour camp. They thought that, perhaps, their future life outside Warsaw, for instance, and in a well-organised labour camp, would prove better than their dying slowly in the ghetto. What is more, they constantly believed that they would manage to survive till the end of the war. As a result, any scraps of news arousing the hope of the imminent defeat of the Nazi regime spread rapidly from person to person.

In my view, however, the predominant feeling was that of constant fear and of how to survive another day. The Jews pushed away any visions or conjectures as to what the next day would bring, and, even when their situation seemed hopeless, and they sensed that the worst was yet to come, they pretended that nothing was going on, and so they pushed into the background any self-deliberation of their future<sup>13</sup>.

Generally, in their everyday struggle to survive, the Jews tried to focus solely upon their current affairs alone. Indeed, I believe that they were constantly haunted

<sup>12</sup> Całek Perechodnik, *Spowiedź. Dzieje rodziny żydowskiej podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce* [Confession. The History of a Jewish Family during the Nazi-German Occupation in Poland], Warszawa 2004, pp. 36-37; Szlomo Alster's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/4442, 1977, translated from Yiddish by Anna Szyba.

<sup>13</sup> Moshe Bahir's testimony, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 03/2353, Tel Aviv, 3 March 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

by so many worries that they simply had no time for thinking of their future. Clearly, extreme hunger, which, with time, turned into hunger disease, was one of them. Whenever the disease reached a certain level, the person suffering from it thought about food so obsessively that they could not think of anything else. Therefore, understandably, those who were focused on overcoming their everyday difficulties, on struggling to bring home a slice of bread for their children, or simply on keeping merely an elementary existence, were unable to think about anything that would go beyond the immediate.

Along with the Jews overpowering feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, it was hard for them to believe that the unspeakable cruelty exhibited by the German occupiers was at all comprehensible. Therefore, they tended to oppose anyone who spoke the truth with respect to their imminent fate. Moreover, those who warned of the upcoming liquidation of the Jewish nation, were accused of spreading panic<sup>14</sup>, because the Jews found it hard to believe, till the bitter end, in all the atrocities which were happening around<sup>15</sup>.

It follows, from the example reactions of the Jewish population mentioned above, that they managed, for a very long time and against all the facts, to remove from their consciousness, thoughts of their imminent demise. This mechanism seems to have worked stronger in situations in which the Jews could not, in any way, influence their own fate. Therefore, they rejected any information about the danger they were in for as long as possible. Moreover, when this was not possible any more, they tried to interpret their situation in such a way as to preserve (at least) an illusion of safety. Yet, sometimes, reality broke through and even this approach failed, and that was when the Jews could no longer doubt what their real fate was to be like. In this case, the only way to cope seemed to have been the avoidance of thinking about their future.

Yet the Jews who found themselves on board many of the deportation trains often threw letters or notes through the train windows in hope that someone would find them. Most of these letters and notes were found and were sent to the appropriate addresses by those, who, in this way, wanted to show their sympathy towards the fate of the deported. One of the deportees who managed to write and throw out, on 8 June 1943, such a note, was a person named Estella. Unfortunately, her real identity has never been established. The note implies that she had no idea that her transport was taking her to Sobibór. On Estella's train, there were many children, most of them in the company of their mothers<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Cywia Lubetkin, *Zagłada i powstanie* [In the Days of Destruction and Revolt], Warszawa, 1999, pp. 57-60.

<sup>15</sup> Leon Cymiel, DVD interview/records 1-3, USC Shoah Foundation Institute Archives For Visual History and Education, file ref. No. 29630, 26 March 1997; Chaim Engel, video interview transcript, Wentworth Films Inc, Holocaust, Chaim Engel, USHMM Archives, 12 February 1992, translated from English by Marek Bem; Chaim Engel's testimony report from 21 November 1965, NIOD Archives, file ref. No. 14/173, Hagen; Chaim Engel's testimony report from 8 January 1974, NIOD Archives, file ref. No. 14/183, Frankfurt.

<sup>16</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

When it comes to the Westerbork camp, there were some inmates there who noticed that some of the wagons of the transports which had been sent to the East, were often returned to Westerbork. Therefore, two Sluijzer brothers – Levie (born on 3 November 1916) and Mozes, decided to take advantage of this fact. So, when Levie was deported to the East, he wrote, during his transport, about the experiences he had, and, as had been agreed with his brother, he hid the notes in a certain place underneath his wagon. His brother, Mozes, who had stayed behind in Westerbork, found these notes in the wagon his brother, Levie, had been travelling by. It has to be mentioned that the transport went to Sobibór. Mozes reported later, “[...] *The transports departing from Westerbork, in spring 1943, were running in an unknown direction, which, for obvious reasons, attracted our attention. Therefore, I paid close attention to the wagon my brother was in, and I wrote down the wagon’s number. The train returned about a week after that transport had left, and, indeed, my brother’s notes from his journey were hidden underneath the very same wagon [...]*”.

Levie Sluijzer arrived at the Westerbork camp on 16 March 1943, whence he was deported to Sobibór on 6 April 1943. From among the 2019 people who were in this transport, only two women survived the Sobibór camp experience<sup>17</sup>. Levie made his notes in the worst possible conditions, and in a wagon that was packed to its full capacity. Still, Levie managed to hide his notes in the agreed place. Fortunately, no one found these notes but his brother, who had stayed in Westerbork<sup>18</sup>. However, Sluijzer’s letter contains some issues which remain unclear. For example, it follows from his note that the deportees were being carried by passenger cars. Also, it says that the benches were very hard; it mentions the toilet and the fact that the passengers had to help the sick to get up from whence they lay. Levie also writes about two cases of death, and that the bodies were moved to the luggage wagon. These facts, however, are contradictory to what two deportees from the 6 April transport, and who survived Sobibór, claimed. According to Selma Engel, the transport was carried in freight cars, not in passenger cars<sup>19</sup>. Also, she claimed that she could not recall any cases of death during that transport.

Another problem concerning the above-presented discrepancies is that, according to Selma Engel, there were about 3,000 deportees on that train, while, in reality, there were 2,000 of them<sup>20</sup>. This, of course, by no means diminishes the credibility of her testimony, because in the situation she found herself in, it must have been difficult for her to be able to specify the exact number of the deportees. As to the type of wagon used in this transport, all the doubts have been dispelled by two photographs taken in Westerbork. These are photographs of the freight cars,

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>18</sup> This account comes from the Westerbork Museum’s collection. Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>19</sup> Selma Engel’s testimony report, ZStL-251/59-6-880, Zwolle, 29 August 1949, MPLW Archives, as well as Ursula Stern’s testimony report, StA.Do-WZ-XVI-391, Ashkelon, 16 September 1971, MPLW Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Selma Engel’s testimony report, Zwolle, 14 August 1945. Copy in the MPLW Archives.

which, on Commandant Gemmeke's order, had been rebuilt so that they could, to a minimal extent, perform the function of passenger cars. Therefore, carpenters had made benches which were fixed to the wagons' floors. Also, springs were fixed, by means of chains, to the roof of each wagon so that the sick could lie there as if in a hammock. Furthermore, in one of the corners, there was a primitive toilet made, separated by a curtain, where the passengers could relieve themselves, at least minimally isolated from the rest.

Thus, it is highly likely that Sluizjer was put to this type of wagon, while Selma Engel (Wijnberg), though deported by the same train, ended up in a plain freight car<sup>21</sup>. Still, anyone following the post-war testimonies could easily get the false impression that the Dutch were transported by Pullmans wagons, and in full luxury. In reality, however, one of the most luxurious wagons which ran to Sobibór was the one that Sluizjer had travelled by. It is also possible that the alterations to such wagons had more to do with a German experiment with transporting wounded soldiers rather than with an attempt to make the travelling conditions more bearable for the deportees. It should be noted that many of the Sobibór survivors describe, in their memoirs, in what way and in what conditions they were deported to Sobibór.

## 2. Reception of transports

Pre-war Polish railway workers were incorporated into *Ostbahn's* railway endeavours. Therefore, Poles often crewed the locomotives that pulled these transports. Likewise, Polish railway men were station-masters, rail traffic controllers and track-workers and they worked with 'death' transports.

The Sobibór camp was situated right next to a small railway station in the village of Sobibór. Before the outbreak of World War II, two passenger-goods trains ran from Włodawa station (which belonged to Vilnius DOKP [the Regional Directorate of State Railways]), via Sobibór and Chełm, to Lublin (122 km), as well as to Luboml (89 km). In Włodawa, there was a bus which ran from the town centre to the railway station six times a day. With regard to the freight turnover in Włodawa, this consisted mainly of timber and items made of wood. It was also in Włodawa that the regional railway sleeper treating plant was situated.

At the beginning of September 1939, the German air-force bombed the bridges and the railway station in Włodawa. On 8, 11 and 13 September, there took place air raids on Chełm, mainly on its railway station and shunting yards, as a result of which, the engine house was demolished. By November 1939, only one passenger train ran along the Chełm-Włodawa route. It had its final stop at the Bug Włodawski station, which was situated in the location of contemporary Włodawa<sup>22</sup>. From October 1937 to October 1939, Franciszek Parkoła was the station-master at Sobibór. In 1939, his deputy was Czesław Sójka, whose wife, Irena, leased and ran the station's buffet.

<sup>21</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op .cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> *130 lat kolei na Ziemi Chełmskiej* [130 Years of Railways on the Chełm Land], cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

In 1939, Czesław Sójka gave up his job at the railway station, and, until Poland was liberated from the German occupation, he helped his wife.

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, Sobibór had ‘technically’ been closed, which means that it was not fully staffed. Thus, apart from the station-master, his deputy, the points-man (at that time it was Jan Piwoński), as well as the track-walker, Włodzimierz Byczek, no one else worked there. When, in October 1939, the station began to formally operate, the staff was supplemented by a rail traffic controller, Ludwik Faferek, and another points-man. However, none of the then station employees remembered this last man’s name because he worked at the station for only a month, and, right after the German troops entered the territory, he disappeared and it is not known what happened to him. It was only in February 1940 that Franciszek Petlak was employed in his place.

After the German troops fully occupied Włodawa District, the Regional Directorate of Eastern Railways posted, from Lublin to the Sobibór railway station, a new full crew, i.e. five German railway-men, whose names remain unknown. At the same time, the Polish staff were still employed. Around this time, Franciszek Parkoła and Ludwig Faferek were appointed to the post of points-man and ticket-master respectively, while Jan Piwoński and Franciszek Petlak still worked as points-men (as of 1940). Similarly, Włodzimierz Byczek maintained his position as a track-walker responsible for the Sobibór-Stulno section. The German railway men were lower in rank and less experienced in their job than their Polish co-workers - so much so that, according to Parkoła, they could not cope with managing the station, and, as a result, they were dismissed and replaced by three other German railway men, who came in May or in early June 1940. These were:

Franz Sobotka – station-master of the Sobibór railway station,

Richard Bürger – gate-man of the German railways,

(?) Küttelsmann – gate-man of the German railways,

With the change-over, the Polish staff kept their jobs. Ludwig Faferek stayed on as the section’s rail traffic controller, but, sometimes, was made to work as an interpreter. However, he gave up his job at the Sobibór station at the beginning of 1941, and was replaced by Józef Cholewa, who had been transferred there from Uhrusk. Józef Cholewa, like his predecessor, worked both as a rail traffic controller and interpreter. In early 1941, two new workers were employed - a track-walker, Jan Krzowski, who was made responsible for the Bug Włodawski-Sobibór section, and a rail apprentice, Zygmunt Białucha. They both worked for two years. After that, in January 1943, Zygmunt Białucha was posted to the station in Chełm, while Jan Krzowski was moved to the Bug Włodawski station, where he worked as a points-man until 20 July 1944<sup>23</sup>.

Franz Sobotka worked, before the war, for the German State Railways (Frankfurt am Main district) as a station-master’s assistant in Bebra. In October 1939, he was posted to the Lublin region, and worked as a station-master in Zemborzyce. At the

<sup>23</sup> Franz Sobotka’s witness testimony report from 19 October 1962, Bad Hersfeld (file ref. No. – none), NIOD Archives.

end of May, or at the beginning of June 1940, Franz Sobotka was transferred to the Sobibór railway station, where he was in charge of the so-called 'iron' railway section from Chełm to Sobibór. As all the stations along this railway line were staffed by Polish station masters, Sobotka's duty was to oversee and control them, as well as all the operations of the branch-line. Sobibór station, therefore, became the so-called *Leitbahnhof* i.e. the guardianship station of the other stations located along the Bug-Włodawa-Chełm section. Since Franz Sobotka's main office was located at the Sobibór station, he also worked as its station-master.

The German members of the station crew lived in Franciszek Parkoła's house, which was located in close proximity to the railway station building and the head forester's house. These three were the only buildings that were situated right next to the railway tracks (from the eastern side). Sobotka, Bürger and Küttelsmann worked in Sobibór till the end of October or the beginning of November 1941. They were then removed from their posts by Schulz, who was a representative of the German railways council, and who worked as a personnel officer at the Regional Directorate of Eastern Railways in Lublin.

From that time onwards, the station-master of Chełm took over the administrative supervision and control of the Chełm-Włodawa section. Its supervisor became the station master from the Chełm station – an inspector of the German railways by the name of Kies. At the same time, the staff at the Sobibór railway station answered to the Regional Directorate of Eastern Railways in Lublin. Moreover, it has to be mentioned that German customs officials were directly connected with the Sobibór railway station as well. By the River Bug, for example, there were stationed, every ten kilometres, customs supervision units. One of these commandeered a household in the village of Sobibór. Approximately, fifteen persons were employed there.

The nearest police station which was responsible for the village of Sobibór, was situated in Włodawa. After Sobotka, Bürger and Küttelsmann left the Sobibór station in November 1941, the personnel that stayed to continue their service were Polish. Thus, Franciszek Parkoła resumed the position of station-master, Józef Cholewa was made the rail traffic controller, while Piwoński and Petlak continued work as pointsmen. Cholewa stayed in Sobibór until June 1942. At this time, the Sobibór death camp was already operational. Cholewa ran away because the Ukrainian watchmen who were on duty, pulled him behind the camp's gate and beat him up. Most probably, this was their revenge on him for selling them a hen whose meat turned out to be spoilt. Cholewa was saved by a German staff-member who recognised him and told the Ukrainians to let him go. Cholewa was replaced by another railway man called Jarocki. Parkoła, Jarocki, Petlak and Piwoński served at the Sobibór railway station until the end of the war<sup>24</sup>.

The regularity at which transports ran into the Sobibór death camp, varied. After the war, Parkoła testified that these had come the most frequently in June and July or

---

<sup>24</sup> Jan Piwoński, witness hearing report, file ref. No. Ko. 11/66, Włodawa, 26 February 1966, MPLW Archives; Franciszek Parkoła, witness hearing report, KBZHWP Archives, (file ref. No. - none), Lublin, 24 September 1966, MPLW Archives.

July and August, 1942. During that period, two or three trains arrived at the station daily. These were not only composed of goods wagons (usually of about 37 freight cars), but were also made up of passenger wagons (of lesser numbers), which were usually used to carry Jews from abroad. The transports were accompanied by the railway service police, and also by armed convoy escorts of military policemen or SS men who made sure that no one from outside had any access to the transported Jews.

One of Parkola's duties was to 'meet' the upcoming transports on the railway platform, and to dispatch the departing trains. Therefore, standing about 20 metres away from these transports, he could see, through the hatches in the upper part of the freight cars, the men, women and children of all ages, who were crammed inside. Some of them, using gestures, asked for some snow or water, by, for example, pointing to their lips. The Jews in the passenger wagons, on the other hand, looked a lot better, and they were decently dressed.

Inside the Sobibór camp, only small transports fitted entirely into the siding. In the case of larger transports, the locomotive pushed some of the wagons to the camp's ramp, waited until they had been completely unloaded, pulled away the empty wagons, and then shunted another batch of wagons to the ramp side<sup>25</sup>. Franciszek Parkoła testified that, sometimes, when he had looked at the freight cars which had already been unloaded in the camp, he saw holes cut out in their walls and floors. The Germans tried to "somehow wire up and mend" the holes before the wagons were sent away from the camp. Obviously, this reveals that some of the transported Jews tried to get out of their trains, and that they struggled hard to get as much fresh air as possible. Parkoła also claimed that, from time to time, the Germans would send away, from the camp, box-cars full of so-called 'post-Jewish clothes'. He added that the Polish railway men, taking advantage of the fact that the wagons were shunted away from the camp and held at the other side of the station, would take out through the access hatches, items such as blankets, clothes, etc. Therefore, there were cases when the Sobibór railway station officers received complaints detailing the loss of inventoried items found missing at their destinations.

Katarzyna Grodzicka (born in 1909) lived during the German occupation in the village of Osowa, situated in the vicinity of Sobibór. In her testimony, she clearly remembered when the Sobibór extermination camp was operational. She testified that she frequently helped her father, who was a forester, in his varied forest chores, and while so-doing, she was able to observe what was happening in the neighbourhood of the Sobibór camp. Also, she recalled her husband and her brother-in-law saying that they had once managed to exchange a few words with the Jews closed in the wagons of a train which had made a short stop at the Wola Uhruska railway station. The two men knew what was awaiting those Jews, and they were all the more surprised at the enthusiasm the Jews exhibited, being convinced that they were approaching the button factory they claimed they had been posted to<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Franciszek Parkoła, witness hearing report, (file ref. No. - none), Lublin, 5 May 1967, MPEW Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Katarzyna Grodzicka, witness hearing report, file ref. No. OKL/Ds. 1/67, the Regional

Aurelia Jaworska tells a similar story in her memoirs. At the time of the war, her husband was a railway man employed at the Ruda Huta railway station, on the Chełm-Włodawa route. Most probably, it was from him that she learnt about a conversation between a group of soldiers escorting a transport which stopped at Ruda Huta. The soldiers were asking the station-master about Sobibór and the alleged button factory. When they got the answer as to what the factory looked like and why those people were being carried there, they left, looking confused, and, while going back to their wagon, they kept quarrelling with each other for a long time<sup>27</sup>.

Jadwiga Sieciechowicz, also describes in her memoirs, stories concerning the ghetto in Sawin. In these, she noted that she witnessed a few cases in which small groups of Jews were being force-marched to Sobibór. According to her, each time this happened, the Jews were persuaded that they were going to a button factory where they would fill positions prepared especially for them<sup>28</sup>. In addition, other, elderly inhabitants of the villages of Zbereże and Sobibór, still remember the time when the Sobibór camp was in operation, and will recollect seeing the many groups of Jews who, under the escort of only one or two German soldiers, came from the direction of Chełm, Sawin or Krychów towards the camp in Sobibór. They note that these Jews were calm and disciplined, and, so as to avoid putting themselves at risk, they would refuse proffered food from the peasants working on the nearby fields - because they were certain that they would soon be given something to eat when they got to the button factory they were going to work in<sup>29</sup>.

Those who were responsible for escorting the transports to the Sobibór camp came under the supervision of the Reich Police. Before these transportations commenced, however, Oberstgruppenführer Kurt Daluge had prescribed what kinds of weapon the escorts were to be armed with and what kinds of equipment they were supposed to be supplied with. Thus, on account of the 'uncertain' conditions of transports while inside occupied territories, each escorting party, apart from the personnel's individual weapons, their 30 rounds of ammunition, and their several hand grenades, had to have in their possession, electric torches, flares and two machine guns or two machine rifles. Moreover, during the winter season, the guard who had to be on duty, whenever the train stopped at a railway station or in the open air, had two pairs of felt boots at his disposal. Additionally, each escort, apart from his winter uniform, had at his disposal two woollen blankets and a spirit burner in case the train lost heat while the locomotive was being changed. Each escort also received a ration of food

---

Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes in Poland, 5 October 1978, NIOD Archives.

<sup>27</sup> Aurelia Jaworska's account, file ref. No. 302/119, ŻIH Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Jadwiga Sieciechowicz, *Wspomnienia z Sawina* [Memoirs from Sawin], cf. - Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>29</sup> Katarzyna Grodzicka, witness hearing report, file ref. No. OKL/Ds.1/67, the Regional Commission for the Investigation of Hitlerite Crimes in Poland, 5 October 1978, NIOD Archives; Aurelia Jaworska's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 302/119; Jadwiga Sieciechowicz, *op. cit.*

sufficient for six days, and they were allowed to drink alcohol in small amounts<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, the commanders of transport units were obliged to draw up reports on the transports they were escorting. One of such reports has survived. It detailed a transport from Vienna to Sobibór, and its report was made by an Austrian by the name of Josef Frischmann. Frischmann - a Schuttpolizeilieutenant, i.e. a lieutenant of the Reich Police, who was responsible for the transport of a thousand Jews on 14 June 1942.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Transports from the Netherlands

In 1939, the Germans established a camp in Westerbork, a town in the north-eastern part of Holland, to detain who they deemed illegal – illegal immigrants, Jews found without national identity-papers, as well as Jews of the Netherlands. Another camp was created in Vught, in the south of the Netherlands. Here, initially, some of the country's Jewish citizens were also incarcerated. In early January 1942, what Jews remained outside the ghettos were expelled from the province and were concentrated mainly in Amsterdam. From April 1943 onwards, the Jews were allowed to only live in designated areas within Amsterdam, in Westerbork or in Vught.

The place of gathering from whence the Jews from Amsterdam were transported to the Westerbork camp was at the *Hollandse Schouwburg* (Dutch Theatre) in Amsterdam's Jewish quarter. Here, at a time, more than 1,000 people could be gathered. Eventually, Westerbork became the main transit camp in the Netherlands, and its commandant was, by September 1942, Sturmbannführer Deppner, later replaced by Obersturmführer Dischner, and, finally, by Obersturmführer Gemmeker (who was in charge of the camp between late 1942 and 1944).

The first commandant of the Vught camp, officially called *KL Herzogenbusch*, and originally created as a Schutzhaftlager for Netherlander political prisoners, was Hauptsturmführer Chmielewski. Later, his successors were: SS-Sturmbahnführer Adam Grünwald and SS Hauptsturmführer Hans Hutting. With the exception of two transports which went straight to *KL Auschwitz*, trains from Vught were first sent to the Westerbork camp. On account of the shortage of police personnel, members of the SS-Wachbattalion 'Nordwest' provided security in both of these camps.

It has to be mentioned that the Germans carried out their plan to exterminate Jews in cooperation with the municipal governmental organs, and with the help of the ordinary Dutch citizenry. With few courageous exceptions, the municipal administration, the railways, as well as the police personnel – all of these contributed to the roundups and deportations of Holland's Jewish population<sup>32</sup>. Over the period between 2 March and 8 June 1943, fifteen trains, i.e. one train a week, left for Sobibór. However, after 8 June, there was a two-week break which lasted until 29 June, during which no transports

<sup>30</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-74.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>32</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-165.

were sent from Westerbork. After that, there were four more transports, the last leaving on 20 July 1943. To sum up, altogether, there were nineteen transports from the Netherlands, which carried 34,313 Jews to their deaths<sup>33</sup>.

The total number of transports coming from the Netherlands was as follows: 2 March – 1,105 people; 10 March- 1,105; 17 March – 964; 23 March -1,250; 30 March – 1,255; 6 April – 2,020; 13 April -1,204; 20 April -1,166; 27 April – 1,204; 4 May – 1,187; 11 May -1,446; 18 May -2,511; 25 May – 2,862; 1 June – 3,006; 8 June - 3,017; 29 June – 2,397; 6 July – 2,417; 13 July – 1,988; 20 July – 2, 209.

**In total - 34,313 people<sup>34</sup>.**

#### 4. Transports from France

When, in the early summer of 1940, the Germans invaded France, its territory was inhabited by approximately 300,000 Jewish citizenry. At the end of 1940, however, this number had increased up to almost 330,000. Later, between 1942 and 1944, the Germans deported around 76,000 Jews from the area of France they controlled. Meanwhile, at the beginning of the war, the collaborationist Vichy French authorities took the decision to protect French-born Jews, so non-French Jews became the first to be deported from their territory. With time, governmental protection was rescinded.

With regard to the Jewish Question, the *Vichy* government cooperated closely with the German occupation authorities that were responsible for the deportations of its Jewish population. The thirteen transports which left France in 1943, carried 17,069 people away to *KL Auschwitz*, while four trains went to the Sobibór camp. All the transports left from the transit camp in Drancy, outside of Paris.

This camp was operational from August 1941 to August 1944. The camp buildings, situated in the new quarters of Drancy “*Cité de la Muette*”, had originally been meant for labourers. However, the camp infrastructure was not ready when the Germans took over the premises after their occupation of France. Eventually, Drancy would play a major role in their planned net of transit camps for the Jews who were later meant to be sent away to extermination camps.

There were three commandants of the Drancy transit camp: Theodor Dannecker (from July 1942), Heinz Rothke (until June 1943) and Alois Brunner (until the liberation of France). Similar camps were also established in Royallieu, Pithviers, Beaune-la-Rolande, and in Gurs. Most probably, the reasons why some of the transports from Drancy were sent to Sobibór instead of *KL Auschwitz* were a change of plans (in late February and in early March 1943) concerning the decision to hasten making Berlin *Juden-frei* (together with making Norway the same) by prioritising their transportation to *KL Auschwitz*, the protracted construction of crematorium II there, as well as a threat of an un-contained outbreak of typhoid fever<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Selma Engel, interview transcript, DVD recordings /DVD's 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0067, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem.

<sup>34</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-165.

<sup>35</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, p. 174; Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz*, Paris 1983, p.320.

Thus, the first train from Drancy to Sobibór left on 4 March 1943. Among the 1,024 deportees were 377 Poles, 268 Germans, 99 Austrians, 91 Russians, and 30 Netherlanders. The rest of them (159 persons) were, probably, citizens of France. The official destination place for that particular transport No. 50 was Chełm. In reality, however, it was the extermination centre in Sobibór, where, upon the deportees' arrival, the Germans immediately selected 40 men to be taken to Lublin, and then sent the rest of them directly to the gas chambers. Later, four of those selected men found themselves in *KL Auschwitz*, where they survived to see the liberation of the camp<sup>36</sup>.

The next transport, No. 51, went from Drancy to Sobibór on 6 March 1943. This one carried 770 Jews (transferred, on 2 March, from Gurs to Drancy) and then had 150 Jews from the transit camp in Nexon added to it. This group of deportees was comprised of 926 men between 16 and 65 years of age, most of whom were between 37 and 45. Moreover, the transport included 73 other persons who had been interned in Drancy, i.e. 39 women and 4 men. Again, transport No. 51, as in the case of transport No. 50, was sent to Chełm, and then to Sobibór.

In 1945, only six persons from that transport were still alive. Two of them, Mendel Fuks and Maurice Jablonsky, testified after the war that after they had arrived at Sobibór, they were selected, together with a group of young men, for 'very hard' labour, and that they were sent straight back to Majdanek, without even having entered the Sobibór camp's area. The other selected Jewish men were transferred to *KL Auschwitz* or to the labour camp in Budzyń<sup>37</sup>.

Transport No. 52 left from Drancy for Sobibór on 23 March. Here, the procedure was exactly the same as in the previous cases. Officially, the train was to go to Chełm, but, in fact, its destination place was Sobibór. This transport was made up of 640 men and 360 women, more than half of whom, i.e. approximately 700, had French citizenship. Many of these deportees had been arrested during the 'cleaning up' of the Old Port in Marseilles, which took place between 22 and 24 January 1943, on Himmler's orders. The action aimed at removing the so-called 'undesirable elements', i.e. Jews, thieves and prostitutes. Many of the people rounded up came from French North Africa. By 1945, not a single person from this transport had survived<sup>38</sup>.

On 25 March, transport No. 53 left from Drancy for Sobibór. Among the 1,000 deported Jews were 580 Frenchmen, 114 Poles, 56 Hungarians, 49 Russians and 29 Germans. Most of these Jews found themselves on this transport after the January round-up action in Marseilles, while some of them had been arrested during a round-up in Paris which took place on 11 February 1943. There were also a few dozen Jews from Lyons who had been detained on 9 February. Thirteen people from this transport managed to escape during the journey, three of whom survived the war<sup>39</sup>. When the train got to Sobibór, 15 of the deportees were selected for labour in the camp. Later,

<sup>36</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 176-177.

two of them managed to survive the camp and World War II. These were Antonius Bardach, who came from Lvov, and Lucien Dunietz (Dunicz, Duniec)<sup>40</sup>.

## 5. Transports from Germany and Austria

Following the Wannsee conference, in early March 1942, Eichmann's office issued a directive to no longer send most of the deportation trains from the Third Reich to Minsk or Riga, but rather to send these straight to the ghettos and camps in the Lublin District. Without doubt, this order was connected with the launching of the mass-murder of Jews in the extermination camps of Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka.

Peter Witte, in his research, managed to establish that, by 15 June 1942, 25 transports had left from Germany for the Lublin District, four of which went to the ghetto within the village of Piaski. As a result, with time, approximately 4,000 Jews from these transports were killed in the Sobibór camp, where they arrived on 22 June 1942 and 6 October 1942. One of these trains, with about 1,000 people on board, got to Sobibór, via Bełżec, on 11 May 1942, while the people from ten other trains found themselves in the transit ghettos in Izbica and Kraśniczyn. From among the Jews who were carried by these ten transports, around 7,000 people were later killed in the Sobibór camp.

The next transport went to Zamość, and, from among 1,000 deportees, 500 were eventually murdered in Sobibór. The next nine transports were sent to the Lublin District, at least four of which (about 4,000 people) went straight to the Sobibór camp, while the remaining five (3,000 people) were sent to the other extermination camps in the region.

Peter Witte assumes that, in total, roughly 17,500 German Jews were killed in the Sobibór camp. According to his data, three transports, in February and in March 1941, were sent from Austria to the Lublin District. One of these carried about 1,000 people to a ghetto in Modliborzyce, near Kraśnik. In October 1942, the people from this transport were killed in Bełżec. The other two trains went to Opole, whence at least 1,700 people were deported to Sobibór in May 1942. During the period between April and May 1942, seven trains were sent from Austria to the Lublin District, with 7,000 Jews on board. One of these went straight to Sobibór, as did the next, but this made an initial stop at Włodawa.

Police report No. 152, made in Vienna on 20 June 1942, described the first of these transports in detail<sup>41</sup>. The other five transports left for the ghetto in Izbica, from where about 3,700 Jews were then eventually deported to the Sobibór camp. Witte claims that the total number of Austrian Jews murdered in Sobibór was 6,000, and that the total number of the Sobibór victims coming from Austria and Germany amounted to 23,500.

<sup>40</sup> Józef Duniec, *From Paris to Sobibor. Testimony of the widow of Joseph Dunietz* (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, p. 70; Józef Duniec's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/4, September/October 1944.

<sup>41</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp.179-184; Yitzhak Arad, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-140.

## 6. Transports from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and from Slovakia

After the German forces entered, on 1 October 1938, the Sudetenland, the Slovak Parliament, on 14 March 1939, established a new independent state – Slovakia, which became a close ally to Hitler’s Reich. On the next day, the German troops entered the territory of Bohemia and Moravia, and established a protectorate, with Von Neurath as its *Reichsprotector* – (Protector). Later, on 27 September 1941, Von Neurath was succeeded by Reinhard Heydrich, who, on 4 June 1942, died as a result of wounds incurred during an assassination carried out by the Czechoslovak resistance.

Following the Munich conference agreement, the Germans divided Czechoslovakia into two separate states - the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and the Slovak State. In November 1941, the Germans commenced the deportations of 74,000 Jews from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, to the ghetto in Terezin. Out of the 13,000 people who were not deported to Terezin, 7,000 survived the war. As of May 1942, the Terezin ghetto was repopulated by Jews from Germany, Austria and the Netherlands. Most of them found themselves among 88,000 people who were later deported to different places in the ‘East’ between January 1942 and October 1944.

On 10 June 1942, one transport carried, from Prague to the Eastern territories, a group of ‘criminal’ prisoners arrested in retaliation for the assassination of Heydrich. On the way, the train stopped for a while in Lublin, where the Germans selected, for labour, a few men between the ages of 13-50, and then it left in the direction of Chełm. There, the selected prisoners were made to do different jobs connected with land reclamation. Some of them were later moved to Ujazdów, near Hańsk. Here, many Jews from Germany and Slovakia laboured. However, after the outbreak of typhoid fever, most were sent to the Sobibór gas chamber. Meanwhile, a small group of the prisoner-labourers was transferred to nearby Krychów, but later, they too were killed in Sobibór.

On 19 May 1942, there was a transport which ran from Terezin to Lublin. The next train, on 28 July, transferred 1,000 people to Baranowicze. Later, all of them ended up in the Sobibór camp. On 19 March 1942, another transport carried Czech-born Jews to Terezin. Two weeks later, around 1,000-2,000 people were sent to Trawniki, whence, on foot, they were force-marched to the ghetto in Piaski. By and by, all the Jews from the Piaski ghetto ended up in Sobibór, too.<sup>42</sup> According to Schelvis and Witte, there are still doubts as to whether there really was any transport that went from Terezin or Prague, straight to Sobibór. There is every likelihood, however, that two transports were sent to Sobibór after a first selection which was carried out in Lublin.

To sum up, Peter Witte provides a figure stating that, roughly, a total number of 10,500 Jews from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were killed in the Sobibór

<sup>42</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166; Kurt Thomas, interview, DVD recording/DVD’s 1-5, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.549.02 0048, 19 – 23 June 1997.

camp<sup>43</sup>. He claims further that, out of the 14,000 Jews from this land deported to the Lublin District, 2,000 were sent to the Majdanek camp, 1,000 to Zamość (later to be killed in Bełżec), while about 500 people from different ghettos and camps were sent to other places.

From Slovakia, the Germans sent nine transports which carried 18,746 Jews to *KL Auschwitz*, and thirty-eight transports which deported 39,006 people to the Lublin District. The deportations of Slovak Jews began on 25 March 1942. Moreover, the Slovak government undertook to arrange, for the Germans, 20,000 young healthy Jews to do labour in the East. Slovak Prime Minister Tuka also negotiated the terms of an agreement in which the Slovak government was obliged to pay the Germans 500 Reichsmarks for each deported Jew. The Germans, on the other hand, agreed that the Jews would not come back to the territory of Slovakia, and that Germany would not claim any right for the property left behind by the deported Jews.

Slovak Jews deported to the Lublin District were, in most cases, sent to different ghettos and made to do forced labour. With time, however, all those people shared the fate of their predecessors: they either died in the ghettos or in the gas chambers of Treblinka, Sobibór or Bełżec. By 26 June 1942, the Germans had deported 53,000 (out of 89,000) Slovak-born Jews. By the end of that same year, the number had increased to 57,752. The last train left Slovakia on 20 October 1942, carrying away 1,000 people, including the disabled and the terminally ill. After the war, Scheffler, in his report from 20 September 1966, drawn up for the court in Hagen, came to the conclusion that, in total, the number of Jews deported from Slovakia to the General Government was 39,006. Additionally, he calculated that 24,478 people were killed in the Sobibór camp. Peter Witte, on the other hand, assumes the total number of deported Jews to have been the same, i.e. 39,006, but, in his view, about 26,000 people were killed in Sobibór<sup>44</sup>. His calculation is as follows:

The number of deportees:

from Lublin and the neighbouring area – 2,462

from Chełm – 6,967

from Puławy – 8,452

from Krasnystaw – 1,372

in 10 transports – 9,031

The total number of Jews deported to the Sobibór camp – 28,284.

Peter Witte holds the opinion that about 2,000 people died of hunger or were killed in some other manner before reaching Sobibór.

## 7. Transports from the Soviet Union

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the formerly independent nations of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, as well as the western part of Belarus (together with

<sup>43</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-167.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 167-174.

Minsk) were incorporated into *Reichskommissariat Ostland* (Reich Commissary for the East). Following this, between 1941 and 1942, the *Einsatzgruppen* murdered the majority of the Jews in those territories. By June 1943, the surviving Jewish population was around 72,000<sup>45</sup>, and were concentrated mostly in the ghettos of six cities: Vilnius, Kovno, Szawle, Riga, Minsk and Lida.

On 21 June 1943, Himmler issued the order to liquidate all of these ghettos. Accordingly, Jews who were able to work, were to be sent to the labour camps, while those considered ‘useless’ or unable to work were to be ‘evacuated’ to the ‘East’. Arad claims that, in total, 13,700 people from *Reichskommissariat Ostland* were deported to the Sobibór camp. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence as to the exact number of transports which ran from Minsk to Sobibór. Arad assumes that about 6,000 – 8,000 Jews from the Minsk ghetto were deported to Sobibór in three or four transports.

Prior to the occupation, records indicate that the registered Jewish population of Vilnius was around 57,000, but by the time of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto, which took place on 23 - 24 September 1943, its population was approximately 11,000 – 12,000 inhabitants. Most of them were, between July and November 1941, shot in the village of Ponary outside of Vilnius. During the final action of the liquidation of Jews, all the Jews were forcibly taken out of the ghetto and marched to Rossa Square, where the men were separated from the women and their children. The men and the women who were still able to work were then selected and sent to concentration camps – the men to Estonia, the women – to Latvia. During the last days of September 1943, between 4,300 and 5,000 elderly women and children were sent directly to Sobibór.

In total, 2,700 Jews were deported from the Lida ghetto to Sobibór<sup>46</sup>, and Yitzhak Arad assumes that, at least, 13,700 Jews from *Reichskommissariat Ostland* were murdered in the gas chambers of Sobibór. Other authors (Jules Schelvis, Peter Witte and Thomas Blatt) share Arad’s opinion in this respect<sup>47</sup>.

## 8. Deportations of Gypsies

Regarding the deportation of Gypsies, there is extremely scarce information, and this only exists in the form of the testimonies of two former Sobibór prisoners, as well as three external witnesses. All of these mention that Gypsies had been encountered, and hence, subsequently murdered in the Sobibór camp. However, it is difficult to unanimously determine whether this really happened. The witnesses’ accounts do not exclude such a possibility, yet it cannot be stated for sure whether

<sup>45</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 135-136.

<sup>47</sup> Jules Schelvis, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-179; Yitzhak Arad, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-137; Tsiporah Singer, interview transcript, DVD recording /DVD’s 1-3, USC Shoah Foundation Institute Archives For Visual History and Education, file ref. No. 28429, 9 March 1997, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska.

groups of Gypsies were sent to Sobibór, and if so, it is impossible to determine how large those groups were and where they came from.

In November 1942, during one of the ‘resettlements’ of Jews from the Chełm ghetto, witnesses claim that, among the people forcibly gathered in a square at Kopernika Street, was a large group of Gypsies. They were placed in front of a column which set off on a march towards the railway station, where they were to be loaded onto a train whose destination place was the camp in Sobibór. The witnesses related that many of the Jews and Gypsies caught putting up resistance were shot on the spot, and their dead bodies were left lying on the square until they were carried away in horse-drawn carts by some Jews from the ghetto. The remaining Gypsies were then force-marched to an awaiting train, carrying all their possessions on their shoulders (though, on their way, they had to discard them anyway). During the march, the same witnesses state, the Jews were calm and self-composed, but the Gypsies kept crying - just weeping and moaning. They were subsequently forcibly shoved into freight cars, which were then sealed, and carried away to Sobibór.

One of the witnesses, Mrs Stawska, used to live, at the time of the war, in the railway station building, situated right next to the railway track. Therefore, she had opportunity to watch these ‘transports’ come and go. In her testimony, she added that, sometimes, the Germans had ordered large groups of people to undress before they were forced into the trains. Most probably, she thought, they wanted to prevent any escape attempts<sup>48</sup>.

Czesław Sójka, another witness, ran, with his wife, between 1939 and 1943, a buffet at Sobibór’s railway station. After the war, he recalled conversations he had had with the railwaymen. In these, they mentioned that Gypsies were deported to Sobibór<sup>49</sup>. Two of Sobibór survivors, Samuel Lerer and Dov Freiberg, also mention in their post-war accounts, the deportations of Gypsies. However, their recollections in this respect were terse statements, like, “[...] *Poles and Gypsies were also killed in Sobibór* [...]”<sup>50</sup>.

Józef Klauda, from the village of Wytyczno, on 22 February 1942, together with another twenty-five residents of Wytyczno, was imprisoned within the labour camp in Krychów for not fulfilling his obligatory agricultural quota. At the end of March, he states that he began preparations to escape, but, suddenly, on 4 April 1942, most of the Poles detained in the Krychów camp were released. Józef Klauda believes that this came about because of the arrival at the Sobibór camp, “[...] *of an enormous transport of Belgian Jews and a huge transport of Gypsies* [...]”<sup>51</sup>. In all likelihood,

<sup>48</sup> Jerzy Ficowski, *Cyganie w Polsce. Dzieje i obyczaje* [The Gypsies in Poland: History and Customs], Warszawa 1989, pp. 41-42.

<sup>49</sup> Czesław Sójka, witness hearing report, case file No. DSD 058/67, Włodawa, 22 January 1968, MPLW Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Lerer’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/104, 1945; Dov Freiberg’s letter to Goldman from 1961 (the exact date of the letter is unknown). Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>51</sup> Józef Klauda, *Wspomnienia więźniów z pobytu w obozie pracy w Krychowie* [Memoirs

with the transports being so huge, the German authorities could not accommodate all the deportees in Sobibór, and, therefore, they held many of them inside the Krychów labour camp. Due to this, all those previously incarcerated were set free. Klauda adds that a few days later, some Gypsy women were seen in the neighbouring villages, walking from house to house. Apparently, they had sneaked out of the Krychów camp to earn some money. Klauda remembers, however, that as quickly as the Gypsies appeared in Krychów, they equally quickly disappeared. Most probably, they were taken on to Sobibór<sup>52</sup>.

## **9 Transports from the General Government. The total number of victims of the German extermination centre in Sobibór**

It has to be mentioned that the majority of accounts, whether scholarly, popular or fictional, or even commemorative, maintain the general conviction that the Germans murdered about 250,000 Jews in Sobibór. This, however, is the number which was established as a result of an investigation conducted, between 1945 and 1946, by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland. Following this, in 1947, Zbigniew Łukaszewicz published, in the “Bulletin of the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland”, an article entitled “The Extermination Camp in Sobibór”, in which this figure first appears. To this day, this figure has stayed in contemporary historical awareness, as that which reflects the truth about Sobibór. Yet, the range of scientific research into this question shows how rudimentary our current knowledge is of the number of victims of this extermination camp.

It must be stressed that the great merits in this field should go to such figures as Jules Schelvis, Peter Witte, Yitzak Arad, Thomas Blatt and Wolfgang Scheffler, who, for many years, have been working on the analysis of the number of Sobibór victims and yet have constantly considered the outcome of their research unsatisfactory. The reason is that, the generally accepted information about 250,000 Jews murdered in Sobibór provided by judge Łukaszewicz in 1947, has always been an important reference point for any research.

The first official results of an investigation carried out by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland provided the number of, roughly, 2,5 million victims. Wolfgang Scheffler, on the other hand, during the court trial of the Sobibór camp personnel who were facing justice, as an expert called by the judges for the purposes of the indictment, estimated the number of Sobibór victims to have been 150,000 people. Obviously, there are diverse numbers provided by

---

of the Prisoners of Their Stay in the Krychów Labour Camp], transcript of the interview made by Henryk Osypiuk, 25 October 1980, MPLW Archives; Czesław Sójka, witness hearing report, case file No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 22 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Samuel Lerer’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/104, 1945.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

other people and institutions that have undertaken research into the history of the German extermination camp in Sobibór. These are as follows: Józef Marszałek – 190,000<sup>53</sup>, 150,000<sup>54</sup> and 130,000 (after a final verification)<sup>55</sup>, Miriam Novitch – 250,000<sup>56</sup>, Yuri Suhl – 600,000<sup>57</sup>, Leon Poliakov – 300,000<sup>58</sup>, I. Erenburg and V. Grossman – 500,000<sup>59</sup>, the Jewish Historical Institute – 350,000<sup>60</sup>, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC – 167,000<sup>61</sup>.

Information about the extermination camp in Sobibór began to be gathered the moment the Lublin Province was liberated in 1944. These actions aimed, above all, at gathering as much information as possible about the crimes committed in Sobibór, and at estimating the total number of the camp's victims. At that time, two institutions undertook this task. The Historical Commission at the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (henceforth, the HCCCJP) collected the survivors' accounts and searched for all documents, whether indirect and direct, in any way connected with the functioning of the camp. The other was the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (henceforth, the CCIGCP) - which launched, amongst its other activities, an official investigation into the crimes committed in Sobibór.

The investigation, conducted between 1945 and 1946 upon the request of the CCIGCP, was commenced on 28 September 1945, by the Prosecutor of the District Court in Lublin, Kazimierz Schnierstein, and was carried out under the auspices of Judges Józef Skorzyński, Urban and Zbigniew Łukaszewicz. The investigators working under their supervision gathered and analysed any written information about Sobibór, they also collected survivors' accounts, heard external witnesses, and conducted an inspection of the area wherein the Sobibór camp had been in operation. An interim report prepared by Judge Zbigniew Łukaszewicz was published in 1947, in the *Bulletin of the CCIGCP*.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Józef Marszałek, *Obóz zagłady Sobibór 1942 – 1943* [The Sobibór Extermination Camp 1942-1943], typescript, Lublin, 1962. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>54</sup> Józef Marszałek, *Stan badań nad stratami osobowymi ludności żydowskiej Polski oraz nad liczbą ofiar obozów zagłady w okupowanej Polsce* [The Current State of Research into the Death Toll of the Jewish Population in Poland, As well as Into the Number of Victims of the Extermination Camps in Occupied Poland], „Dzieje Najnowsze” [Current History], 1994, Chapter 26, vol. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Józef Marszałek, *System obozów śmierci...* [The System of Death Camps...], p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Yuri Suhl, *Ed essi si ribellarono. Storia della resistenza ebraica contro il nazismo*, Milano, 1969, p. 66.

<sup>58</sup> Leon Poliakov, *Bréviaire le la Haine*, Paris, 1979, p. 387.

<sup>59</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, Vasily Grossman, *The Black Book*, New York, 1981, p. 443.

<sup>60</sup> IH, letter 303/60/ sent to the Regional Prosecutor in Lublin, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/4/0317.

<sup>61</sup> Sobibor, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>62</sup> The full text of Prosecutor Schnierstein's report on the investigation into the extermination camp in Sobibór was published in 1960, by Sz. Datner, J. Gumkowski and K. Leszczyński

Zbigniew Łukaszewicz's interim summary contains a description of how the camp operated, as well as a calculation of the number of victims of the extermination centre in Sobibór. He based his knowledge on the testimonies of Jewish survivors, of Polish railway workers employed at the time of the German occupation on the Chełm-Włodawa railway line, and of the accounts of other external witnesses. In his calculations, he followed the principle that each transport carried approximately 3,000 people, and that, in total, within the period between June 1942 and October 1943, 84 transports brought to Sobibór 250,000 Jews<sup>63</sup>.

The number presented by Zbigniew Łukaszewicz is an important turning point in the investigative work of the CCIGCP. However, his figure may come as a surprise because the materials collected during the Commission's work, above all the official report issued by the prosecutor conducting the investigation, presented completely different suggestions in this respect.

The initial report of M. Rozegnal, who was the delegate/correspondent of the CCIGCP (for Wola Uhruska), and which was sent on the 22 September 1945 to the District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Włodawa, put forward that the number of Jews killed in the 'Sobibór Execution Camp' was around 1,5 million<sup>64</sup>. However, the data in the possession of the Municipal Court in Włodawa, which was obtained by way of a 'Questionnaire about Camps' and prepared, in 1945, by Jan Skulski (the then Sobibór Commune Administrator), established the number of the victims of the Sobibór extermination camp at 3 million people<sup>65</sup>. Another questionnaire on the course of World War II military operations, as well as on the German occupation, which was drawn up, in 1945, by the Commune Office in Wola Uhruska for the CCIGCP, mentions hundreds of thousands of people murdered in Sobibór<sup>66</sup>. Yet another, the report of the Regional Court Prosecutor in Lublin (A. Schierstein), from 23 November 1945, prepared for the same agency and for Chief

---

in their study *„Zagłada Żydów w obozach na ziemiach polskich”* [The Extermination of Jews in the Camps in the Polish Territories].

<sup>63</sup> Zbigniew Łukaszewicz, *Obóz zagłady w Sobiborze* [The Sobibór Extermination Camp], „Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce” [Bulletin of the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland], 1947, vol. 3, III, pp. 49-58.

<sup>64</sup> Report of the Delegate/correspondent of the Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes (Wola Uhruska), M. Rozegnal, sent to the District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Włodawa, Wola Uhruska, 22 September 1945, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0004.

<sup>65</sup> Judge A. Sobieszek, of the Municipal Court of Włodawa, heard, on 20 November 1945, the Sobibór Commune (the Włodawski District) Administrator by the name of Jan Skulski, 52, an inhabitant of the Kosyń village, a summary of his prepared 'Questionnaire about Camps'. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>66</sup> The Commune Office in Wola Uhruska, Sobibór, Włodawski District. The questionnaire on the course of the World War II military operations, as well as on the German occupation. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

Justice Józef Skorzyński, estimates this number to have been 2 million Jews<sup>67</sup>. What is more, while the CCIGCP conducted its own investigation, Nachman Blumental, a Jewish historian and a member of the Central Jewish Historical Committee, and, from 1947 to 1949, the director of the Jewish Historical Institute, wrote “*that the number of the Sobibór victims may be established to have been around a million*”<sup>68</sup>.

Further to this, a trial of the personnel of the Sobibór Extermination Centre commenced in September 1965, in Hagen, and ended in December 1966. Herein, the prosecution based its case on, among other information, a statement which put forward that at least 152,000 people had been killed in the German extermination camp in Sobibór. In presenting the grounds for its verdict, issued on 20 December 1966, the court in Hagen noted that the report drawn up by the Polish Judge, Zbigniew Łukaszewicz, differed from the analysis made, at the request of the court in Hagen, by an expert, Dr Wolfgang Scheffler<sup>69</sup>.

As previously stated, Zbigniew Łukaszewicz based his interim study on the results of the testimonies of Sobibór survivors, as well as external witnesses, including, above all, those of Polish railway-workers, as well as all the documentation that was found at the time. Hence, the court in Hagen was of the opinion that the discrepancy between Dr Scheffler’s expertise and Judge Łukaszewicz’s report followed from, among other reasons, the amount of evidence both researchers had found. According to the court, Zbigniew Łukaszewicz’s estimates partially disagreed with information of a degree of credibility that could be justified on the basis of more recently obtained concrete facts. For example, with further research, it was unambiguously demonstrated that, on average, the transports from France, Germany, as well as from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia only accommodated around 1,000 people. The court further expressed its criticism towards Zbigniew Łukaszewicz’s estimates of the number of transports originating from the ghettos established in the territory of the General Government.

With regard to this last, in the court’s view, the number of deportees in one transport, as provided by Judge Łukaszewicz, i.e. 3,000, might have been too low. According to the witnesses heard by the court, these transports had been much larger than had previously been thought. They claimed that trains arriving at Sobibór had brought in roughly 4,000 to 5,000 people at a time, especially if the deportees came from different ghettos. However, the court concluded that it was still impossible to determine the exact number of the people deported per individual train.

<sup>67</sup> The Report of the Regional Court Prosecutor in Lublin, A. Schierstein, from 23 November 1945, (No. I Dz. 1438/45) sent to the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, Kraków, Straszewskiego 41 [41 Straszewskiego Street] sent to Chief Justice Józef Skorzyński, in Radom, ul. Żeromskiego 63 m. 1 [63 Żeromskiego Street, Flat 1], IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0017.

<sup>68</sup> Nachman Blumental, *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce. Obozy* [Documents and Materials on the Time of the German Occupation of Poland. Camps], Łódź 1946, vol. 1, 1946, pp. 199-214.

<sup>69</sup> *Sobibor. Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der „Aktion Reinhard, Institute of Documentation in Israel. For Investigation Nazi War Crimes*, Haifa, 1998, pp. 54-60.

On the other hand, there are indications that certain transports were initially meant to go to *SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor*, but it is by no means certain whether they actually got there or whether they were, together with some other transports, sent to the other ‘Operation Reinhardt’ camps. The court, thus, had some doubts in this respect, which arose from the realisation that the deportation headquarters in Berlin had sometimes changed the route of certain transports. In addition, they noted that some of the transports had been kept for some time in KL Auschwitz, but afterwards were sent on to Sobibór.

What is more, the court in Hagen noted that the extermination centre in Sobibór had been in operation only during certain months of the years 1942 and 1943. Thus, in 1942, these were May, June, October and November, while in 1943, the period was between March and July. This came about because during much of September 1942, and at the end of 1942, as well as at the beginning of 1943, the extermination process was suspended. The reason for this was that, in September 1942, the original gas chambers were demolished to be replaced by new ones. Moreover, during the summer of that same year, there were some technical problems with transports going to Sobibór, as is implied by the correspondence exchanged between Wolf and Ganzenmüller in the summer of 1942.

Following the witnesses’ testimonies given during the main trial in Hagen, the court concluded that it was necessary to also take into account the fact that a significant number of deportees had been brought to Sobibór in lorries, horse-drawn carts, or through forced-marching. Additionally, after hearing the non-conflicting testimonies of former Sobibór prisoners, the court came to the conclusion that, in summer 1943, there had been at least one, or perhaps more, transport(s) of hundreds of people brought to Sobibór from the territories of the USSR. Furthermore, the court was faced with doubt and controversy with respect to the fact that it was hard to confirm indications of transports coming from Belgium.

It must be stressed here that the court in Hagen concluded, on the basis of premise rather than concrete evidence, that it could not be precluded that there was a difference between the figure for the number of victims as adopted by the court and the true number, and that this discrepancy might amount to around 100,000 people. The court, therefore, assumed that at least 150,000 Jews had been murdered in Sobibór, with this figure being based on the expertise provided by Dr Wolfgang Scheffler, who, as a historian, had been dealing with the ‘Operation Reinhardt’ question for many years. Clearly, he had considerable experience in this field, and always used, reputedly, any German or foreign sources available. Therefore, the court did not have any reason to doubt his report, so elaborately compiled, on the number of Sobibór victims, especially because his data agreed more or less, with the statements given by the heard witnesses, and with the testimony given by the defendants.

The court in Hagen stated that it in no way wished to undermine the results of the Polish research from 1947. Hence, it treated the figure of 152,000 Jews having been murdered in the Sobibór camp as being the minimal, and, therefore, it did not claim the right to accept this number as complete from the historical point of view. Thus, it interpreted any doubt to the benefit of the defendants. From this point of view,

Scheffler's expertise cannot be treated as complete. This is because it is not a study of the number of both Polish and foreign-born Jews killed in Sobibór. Rather, the expertise given is judicial and evidential, and is not strictly scientific in character<sup>70</sup>.

In an attempt to resolve the question as to the total number of victims of Sobibór, it is of vital importance to refer to a study from 1957. This is Tatiana Berenstein's work on the extermination of the Jewish population in the Lublin District. Indeed, her paper is the first analysis to describe the plight of the Jewish populace in Lubelszczyzna (the Lublin Region) during the occupation, and, even to this day, na this has been one of the major sources of knowledge about the extermination of the Jews within this region. With respect to the issue at hand, Tatiana Berenstein's article also contains some very important data concerning the deportations to the camp in Sobibór<sup>71</sup>.

In addition to the previously mentioned work, in the early 1960's, the Jewish Historical Institute launched a project to prepare a historical monograph about the Sobibór camp, with Adam Rutkowski undertaking the task<sup>72</sup>. As a result, in 1968, he published an article on the resistance in the camp. Unfortunately, the political turmoil of the late 1960's, as well as Rutkowski's subsequent emigration to France, prevented the work on the monograph from being continued. However, in 1960, Adam Rutkowski had prepared, on behalf of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, a treatise entitled 'About the Nazi-German extermination camp in Sobibór', for the Deputy Regional Prosecutor in Lublin. In this, he states that in the Sobibór mass extermination camp, the Nazis murdered 350,000 people, 'the vast majority of whom were Jews, and there were also some Poles and Gypsies'<sup>73</sup>.

In 1962, Józef Marszałek authored a study entitled 'Sobibór – Extermination Centre', which was another attempt to ascertain the number of victims. This study, however, was not published, and it has only survived in the form of a typescript. His estimate of the figure for Sobibór's victims amounted to, approximately, 190,000 people. In his subsequent publications, Marszałek continued his work. This time, however, he changed his estimate to about 150,000 people. In deriving this figure, he assumed that the Sobibór camp was an extermination camp meant mainly for foreign-born Jews, who, according to the author's calculations, constituted 68 per cent of the number of the camp's victims. Two years later, he refined his estimate down to about 130,000 people<sup>74</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>71</sup> Tatiana Berenstein, *Martyrologia, opór i zagłada ludności żydowskiej w dystrykcie lubelskim* [The Martyrology, Resistance and Extermination of the Jewish Population in the Lublin District], „Biuletyn ŻIH” [ŻIH Bulletin], 1957, No. 21.

<sup>72</sup> Adam Rutkowski, *Hitlerowski obóz masowej zagłady w Sobiborze* [The Nazi-German Extermination Camp in Sobibór], „Ziemia” [The Globe], 1965, vol. 1; A. Rutkowski, *Ruch oporu w hitlerowskim obozie straceń Sobibór* [Resistance in the Nazi-German Sobibór Death Camp], „Biuletyn ŻIH” [ŻIH Bulletin], 1968, Nos. 65-66.

<sup>73</sup> The information of the Jewish Historical Institute (303/60/S.G.) for the deputy provincial prosecutor in Lublin, T. Kamiński, Warszawa, 18 March 1960, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/4/0317.

<sup>74</sup> Józef Marszałek, *Obóz zagłady Sobibór 1942 – 1943* [The Sobibór Extermination Camp

The late 1960's marked a general decline in the interest of Polish historians with regard to the German extermination centre in Sobibór. This came about as a result of the anti-Semitic campaign from 1968 which forced many Polish-Jewish historians to emigrate. Consequently, this led to a period of stagnation in the scientific work on the question of the Holocaust<sup>75</sup>. In the 1970's, but especially in the 1980's and 1990's, however, the Holocaust received a lot more attention on the part of historians from Israel, Germany, the USA and the Netherlands. As a result, further research into the estimated number of Sobibór victims was resumed. Particularly valuable proved to be the utilisation, in certain studies, of the resources which were made available due to the investigations and court trials against Sobibór's German personnel. Also, important were the conclusions presented by Yitzhak Arad, Peter Witte, Jules Schelvis, and Thomas Blatt.

Yitzhak Arad's analysis, presented in his book, 'Bełżec, Sobibor, Treblinka. The Operation Reinhard Death Camps'<sup>76</sup>, of the number of those murdered in Sobibór, was carried out on the basis of, above all, the accounts of former Sobibór camp prisoners, the testimonies of SS men, external witnesses, Polish and foreign academic works, as well as historic materials made available in Israel, Poland, Germany and the USA. However, for other historians, Arad's number for transports to Sobibór is often considered to be too high. The figure he provides is 98,150 Jews, yet he assumes that this number might be even higher, and might amount to 140,000. According to him, in 1942 alone, 90,000 Jews from the Lublin District were killed in the camp.

The Archives of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (but also Kurt Ticho's and Thomas Blatt's private collections) are in possession of copies of two documents which provide authentication for the true number of transports of Jews from the Lublin District to Sobibór. These documents correct the data previously

---

1942-1943], typescript, Lublin 1962. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection. Józef Marszałek, *System obozów śmierci...* [The System of Death Camps...], p. 34.

<sup>75</sup> For a long time after the end of World War II, the former extermination camp in Sobibór was a deserted and poorly-known place, and throughout that period, no initiative had been taken in order to learn the history of the place or to commemorate it. Indeed, the idea of commemorating those murdered in this camp of immediate extermination, came about only in the mid-sixties. In 1965, the Polish Board for the Protection of Monuments of Combat and Martyrdom made a decision to place, next to the entrance to the former camp, a commemorative stone tablet with an information plaque. The text engraved on this stone plaque forcibly conveyed the needs of the then historical politics binding in Poland at that time: "At this site, between the years 1942 and 1943, there existed a Nazi death camp where 250,000 Russian prisoners of war, Jews, Poles and Gypsies were murdered. On 14 October 1943, during the armed revolt by the Jewish prisoners, the Nazis were overpowered and several hundred prisoners escaped to freedom." In the forest, in the place where, supposedly, the gas chamber had once stood, a sculpture by Mieczysław Welter was erected. The statue depicted a dying mother with a child in her arms, while an obelisk symbolised the gas chamber. Close by, a mound-mausoleum was built, designed by Romuald Dylewski.

<sup>76</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *op. cit.*, pp. 390-391.

presented through legal expertise by Dr Wolfgang Scheffler, as well as that in Yitzhak Arad's publication. With respect to the work of Wolfgang Scheffler, one of them corrected Scheffler's list prepared for the court in Hagen, and it was supplemented with those transports about which Scheffler had had doubts during the Hagen trial, and therefore could not use them as the body of evidence. In accordance with this document, the total number of Jews from the Lublin District killed in Sobibór between 1942 and 1943 was 91,950 people, 83,650 of whom were murdered in 1942<sup>77</sup>. The other list is a study which contains a revised sum of the number of Sobibór transports as suggested by Scheffler and Arad<sup>78</sup>. This list puts forward, however, that the total number of Jews from the Lublin District killed in Sobibór was 96,950, 88,650 of whom were killed in 1942. The list was complemented with new information that gives a figure of 20,000 for those transported from the District of Galicia in the period between December 1942 and June 1943, and incorporates a group of 13,700 Jews from the USSR killed in Sobibór in September 1943.

Jules Schelvis presents in his latest publication new data about deportations to Sobibór from outside the General Government, i.e. the Netherlands, France, Slovakia, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Germany and the USSR. His study is based on his own research, and built upon Peter Witte's calculations, as well as Yitzhak Arad's original data. The 2005 English re-edition also contains data which differs from that provided in the original<sup>79</sup>. The final version of his calculations is as follows: the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia – 10,000 people, Germany – 17,500, Austria – 6,000, Slovakia – 26,000, the Netherlands – 34,313, France – 3,500, the USSR – 13,700<sup>80</sup>. All these numbers totalled 111,013 Jews murdered in the Sobibór camp. To sum up, Jules Schelvis's full list, together with the territorial list of the deportations of Jews to Sobibór is:

1. The Lublin District – 109,000
2. The District of Galicia – 20,000
3. The USSR (Lida, Minsk, Vilnius) – 10,000
4. The Netherlands – 34,000
5. France – 3,500
6. Germany and Austria – 23,500
7. Slovakia – 26,000.
9. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia – 10,000

**The total number – 236,000.**

---

<sup>77</sup> A copy of this document, which the author received from Kurt Ticho, is available in the author's private collection. Another copy is available in the collection of the Museum at Westerbork.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>79</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Vernichtungslager Sobibor*, Amsterdam, 1993.

<sup>80</sup> In the first edition of his book, Schelvis mentioned 10,000 people. In the 2005 English edition, this number was changed into 13,700. In this publication, the remaining figures are the same as those provided in the first edition of his book.

Jules Schelvis claims that it would be possible to accept a much larger figure for the number of Jews deported from the Lublin District, one close to 130,000. If this can be confirmed, then the total number of Sobibór victims is about 257,000 people<sup>81</sup>. Therefore, Jules Schelvis's calculations from the English 2005 edition of his book (originally published in Dutch in 1993) comes as a surprise. By completely changing the way in which he carried out his calculations, Schelvis establishes in this text that the figure for the number of Sobibór victims is 170,165. In arriving at this, with reference to the year 1942, he based his calculations on the data coming from the so-called 'Korherr's report', as well as Höfle's telegram, and this time he determines the total number of victims from 1942 to have been 101,307 people<sup>82</sup>. He did preserve the 1993 data concerning the deportations from the General Government area in the 2005 version of his book, but he puts forward that the total number of victims from the 1943 transports from the General Government is about 14,900. In his earlier editions, he claimed that from the District of Galicia 'alone', in 1943, approximately 20,000 Jews were murdered. In the later text, he complements his original data with one transport from Skopje (2,382 people), and with transports from the Netherlands, France, the USSR. This results in a total number of 68,795 people murdered in the Sobibór camp in 1943<sup>83</sup>.

Thomas Blatt does not put down in his publications any detailed analysis of the data about transports from Germany, France, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Slovakia, the Netherlands, the Soviet Union or the District of Galicia. Instead, he presents his own figures for those transported from the four remaining districts of the General Government, to Sobibór. According to his list, between 1942 and 1943, a total of 120,924 Jews were deported from the General Government to Sobibór, while 114,918 were sent in 1942 alone<sup>84</sup>. Broken down, these figures are:

1. The General Government (excluding the District of Galicia) – 120,924
2. The District of Galicia – 25,000
3. The USSR (Lida, Minsk, Vilnius) – 13, 700
4. The Netherlands – 34,313
5. France – ?
6. Germany and Austria – 10,000
7. Slovakia – 24,378
8. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia – 6,000

**The total number – 234,315.**

In 1942:

1. The General Government (excluding the District of Galicia) – 114, 918
2. The District of Galicia – 0
3. The USSR (Lida, Minsk, Vilnius) – 0

<sup>81</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Vernichtungslager...*, p. 272.

<sup>82</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 198.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 198-226.

<sup>84</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 49-53.

4. The Netherlands – 0
5. France – ?
6. Germany and Austria – 10,000
7. Slovakia – 24, 378
8. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia – 6,000

**The total number – 155,296.**

If we consider Scheffler's, Arad's and Blatt's lists, and complement these with Jules Schelvis's data about the number of Jews deported to Sobibór from outside the General Government, the figures are:

a/. Wolfgang Scheffler (list No. 1 – from the trial in Hagen):

the total number of people murdered between 1942-1943 = 191,700

the total number of people murdered in 1942 = 123,500.

b/. Wolfgang Scheffler (list No. 2):

the total number of victims – 222,650

the total number of people murdered in 1942 = 143,150.

c/. Wolfgang Scheffler (list No. 3 – revised using Scheffler's and Yitzhak Arad's data):

the total number of victims – 227,650

the total number of people murdered in 1942 = 148,150.

d/. Yitzhak Arad:

the total number of people murdered between 1942-1943 = 233, 850

the total number of people murdered in 1942 = 149,500

The suggested, alleged total number of victims – 275,700.

e/. Tomasz Blatt:

the total number of people murdered between 1942-1943 = 256, 624

the total number of people murdered in 1942 = 174, 418.

Now, if we accept the credibility of the afore-mentioned figures of the people deported to Sobibór from outside the General Government between the years 1942 and 1943, then problems arise in reference to the data concerning the General Government. The above figures coming as a result of the calculations made by Wolfgang Scheffler, Peter Witte, Jules Schelvis, Thomas Blatt and Yitzhak Arad vary between (if we round down the figure) 97,000 and 140,000 people, excluding the District of Galicia.

In regard to a figure for the number of victims that came from the District of Galicia, these authors solely use an estimation of 25,000 people. In general, Yitzhak Arad provides the highest estimates for victims originating from the General Government (165,000), while Jules Schelvis and Peter Witte maintain<sup>85</sup> that the number was perhaps 150,000 people, and Thomas Blatt puts forward that this figure is, roughly, 121,000 people, but maintains that this is undervalued.

In hindsight, the assertions made by these authors are fully justified. The resulting register of daily transports evidently demonstrates the lack of data concerning the

<sup>85</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Vernichtungslager...*, p. 271.

District of Galicia, and the undervaluing of the number of victims from the first month, i.e. April 1942, when the camp was in operation. Taking into account Engelhardt's testimony, as well as the information provided by the witnesses – survivors of Sobibór who arrived at the camp in the first transports in May, I have come to the conclusion that the first mass gassings of Jews in Sobibór took place at least in mid-April that year. This means that, at that time, a lot more people were killed than it could be presumed on the basis of the studies published so far. Such an assumption can be strengthened by an excerpt from Engelhardt's testimony which read: "[...] *During the trial period of the gas chambers, thousands of Jews were killed within twenty days. For the successive several weeks when the camp was operational, Jews from the Lublin region were being exterminated [...]*"<sup>86</sup>.

Similarly, the accounts of former prisoners, camp personnel, Ukrainian guards and external witnesses cast doubt on the existing estimates of the deportations to Sobibór that took place in the last quarter of 1942 (the period following the 'modernisation' of the camp), the period between late-1942 and early-1943, i.e. the period until Bełżec ceased to operate, as well as the last two months that Sobibór was operational (September and October 1943).

In any study into the German extermination camp in Sobibór, in view of the possible and much needed further discussion or research into the number of victims of Sobibór, one cannot omit two sources, i.e. the 'Höfle telegram' and Kohrerr's report. These are of vital importance, both as factographic and comparative material. Due to them, we have some access to the detailed numbers compiled by the Germans themselves, and this provides information about the mass-murder committed in 1942 in the extermination camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, as well as in the Majdanek concentration camp.

Höfle's telegram was discovered among the materials which came into possession of the British state archives. It contains two, partly intact 'strictly confidential' cable messages sent on 11 January 1943, from Lublin. The other of these two messages was broadcast five minutes later. The addressee of the first message was SS Lieutenant-Colonel Eichmann at the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin, while the other message was addressed to SS Lieutenant Heim, the deputy chief of the Security Police and the SD in the General Government in Cracow. Both messages were sent by SS Major Höfle, the Chief of Staff and the Deputy Commander of the Police in the Lublin District and the 'Head of the Jewish Office – Special Operation Reinhardt'. It must be noted that, within the General Government, Höfle's office coordinated all activities related to the Holocaust.

Höfle's cable telegram provides a summary of the number of those killed in 1942, within the 'Operation Reinhardt' extermination camps. The text of the telegram, however, does not contain the full names of the camps. Instead, Höfle uses abbreviations like L, B, S and T. Obviously, the letters B, S and T refer to the camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, respectively, while the letter L stands for the Majdanek concentration camp in Lublin.

<sup>86</sup> Jakob Engelhardt, hearing report, Leningrad, 21 August 1975, NIOD Archives.

Unfortunately, the information from the telegram is not easy to interpret, especially with respect to Sobibór and Majdanek. Moreover, although the number referring to Bełżec seems precise, it is much lower than the number provided by most historians, with the exception of Wolfgang Scheffler, who established the minimal number of the Bełżec camp victims at 441,442 - which comes close to the number from Höfle's telegram. As for Treblinka, it is generally accepted that 713,555 people were murdered there. Höfle's telegram, however, mentions only 71,355 victims. Most probably, this figure leaves out a number and was an error made while writing or deciphering the text. This can be shown through the following equation: if we subtract the number of victims of the Lublin, Bełżec and Sobibór camps from the established total number of 1,274,166 people, then we get the correct number of the Treblinka camp victims, i.e. 713,555. In all likelihood, the '5' digit was mistakenly omitted. This can be confirmed by the similar numbers which most of the historians provide in their studies.

The still-unanswered question is who were those 24,733 victims sent to 'L', more than half of whom (12,761) were murdered during the last fortnight of 1942. Were they prisoners of the concentration camp killed in its gas chambers, or, perhaps, they were prisoners who had not been registered there before? Where did they come from? Were they really killed in Majdanek, and if so, how? We simply do not know. Also, in all probability, Höfle's information about the number of Majdanek victims during the final weeks of December 1942 refers to a completely different time period<sup>87</sup>. This, again, reveals how difficult it is to interpret the content of Höfle's telegram. Therefore, the full deciphering of the statistical data presented in the telegram requires more research. Hopefully, this will occur and will contribute towards finding more detailed information in this respect<sup>88</sup>.

Höfle's telegram provides detailed information about the scale of murders committed during the last fourteen days of the year 1942. The number written next to Sobibór is 515 people. However, if we look at this number, doubts are raised by the fact that, during this period which incorporates the dramatic escalation in the 'evacuation' of Jews from the General Government (yet, when the camp in Bełżec was no longer operational), the extermination camp in Sobibór, already modernised and extended (including the enlarged gas chamber), was not optimally used.

What is more, the figure of 515 forwarded with respect to the registered prisoners who arrived at Sobibór during the final fortnight of December 1942 is at odds with the survivors' accounts. Indeed, several of these people were from this transport, and according to them, they were taken in horse-drawn carts to Sobibór, from the labour camp in the village of Staw. These survivors are four women (Eстера Raab<sup>89</sup>, Zeld

<sup>87</sup> Tomasz Kranz, *Zagłada Żydów w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku* [Extermination of Jews at the Majdanek Concentration Camp], Lublin, 2007, pp. 73-74.

<sup>88</sup> P. Witte, S. Tyas, *A New Document on the Deportation and Murder of Jews during "Einsatz Reinhardt", 1942*, "Holocaust and Genocide Studies", 2001, vol.15, translated from English by Albert Lewczuk vel Leoniuk, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> Eстера Raab, interview, DVD recording/DVD 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0184, 30 April 1990.

Metz<sup>90</sup>, Hela Weiss<sup>91</sup>, and Regina Zielinski<sup>92</sup>), and they took part in the prisoners' revolt in October 1943, and all of them survived World War II. In their post-war accounts, they testified that there had been at least 800 people in their transport.

This number is cited in most analyses of the Holocaust activity in Sobibór (for example, Dr Scheffler uses it in all of his reports). If we take into account the transports which most researchers have frequently omitted, i.e. the December transports from Dubeczno (650 people)<sup>93</sup>, Krychów (800 people)<sup>94</sup>, Biała Podlaska (3,000 people)<sup>95</sup> and Dębica (around 6,000 people)<sup>96</sup>, we get a total number of 11,250 people. This, in turn, makes it possible to arrive at a more reliable analysis of the actual number of the victims of this camp, as well as the role it played in the final stage of the extermination of the Jews from within the General Government territories in 1942, and in the successive ten months of 1943<sup>97</sup>.

Höfle's radiotelegram from 11 January 1943 also contains a report in which Himmler establishes the deadline by which all the Jews, except for forced labourers and their families, within the territories of the General Government, were to have been murdered. I am of the opinion that Höfle's telegram is the annual balance sheet of the completion of this task, which presents the numbers of victims who were of

<sup>90</sup> Zeld Metz's account (in:) *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce* [Documents and Materials on the Time of the German Occupation of Poland], Łódź, 1946, compiled by N. Blumental, Part I, Camps, Chapter V Sobibór, pp. 207-214.

<sup>91</sup> Hella Fellenbaum-Weiss, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD 1, Tricht, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Zielinski, *op. cit.*, Chapters 4 and 5, translated from English by Marek Bem.

<sup>93</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 49-53; Yitzhak Arad, *op. cit.*, pp. 390-391.

<sup>94</sup> Z. Krawczak, witness's account, Switzerland, 1943, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 033/425.

<sup>95</sup> Tatiana Berensten writes that, on 17 December 1942, in Biała Podlaska, 231 Jews were shot. It cannot be excluded that this figure is a reference to activities within the 'Vinieta' camp. It is not clear, however, whether they were the last prisoners of this camp before it was terminated. Moreover, Dominik Sobol claims, in his study *Zagłada obywateli pochodzenia żydowskiego w regionie bialskopodlaskim w latach 1939-1944* [The Extermination of Citizens of Jewish Origin in the Bialskopodlaskie Region between 1939 and 1944] („Goniec Terespolski” [Terespol Messenger], No. 81, 2/2011), that about 40 Jews from this camp were actually shot on the site, while the remaining ones were taken away to an unknown destination.

<sup>96</sup> Bronia Oling-Burg, *Wyskoczyłam z pociągu do Belżca* [I Jumped Off the Train to Belzec] (in:) *Sefer Dembitz*, ed.: Daniel Leibel, Tel Aviv, 1964, translated from Hebrew by Jerrold Landau, translated from English by Ireneusz Socha, pp. 170-172; *The Murder of the Jews of Dembitz* (in:) *Sefer Dembitz*, (ed.): Daniel Leibel, Tel Aviv, 1964, pp.141-147.

<sup>97</sup> *Eksterminacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* [The Extermination of Jews in the Camps in Polish Territories]. A collection of documents compiled by T. Berenstein, A. Eisenbach and A. Rutkowski, Warszawa, 1957, p. 296 (Himmler's order to Krüger, Higher SS and Police Leader of the General Government, formally establishing the final date for "cleansing" the General Government of the Jews).

Polish origin but it ignores the number of Jewish victims from abroad. It is common practice in the administration or in the armed forces that the headquarters require that they receive regular reports on whether their orders were carried out at the appointed time. Therefore, we might assume that Himmler expected the SS and police units involved in the extermination of Jews in the General Government territories to send him such reports. It might be possible, then, that Höfle was also ordered to prepare a report on what he himself was responsible for. Thus, it is highly unlikely that he was supposed to prepare reports on the proceedings of the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish problem’.

Himmler also had reports prepared by Adolf Eichmann and Richard Korherr. One of such reports, which is known to have been received by Himmler, comes from a German statistician, Dr Richard Korherr. This report was compiled due to Himmler’s order from 18 January 1942, which concerned “the final solution to the Jewish question”. Beforehand, Himmler had informed Korherr that the Reich Main Security Office would provide him with all the necessary materials. However, Himmler was dissatisfied with Adolf Eichmann and his Department 4B’s compilation of the statistical data, because they did not meet, in his eyes, German standards of precision. Consequently, Eichmann was removed from office on account of his incompetence, and was replaced by Dr Richard Korherr, who was a professional in this field. Dr Richard Korherr was accompanied by two assistants, and they worked in Eichmann’s former office. Korherr’s resulting statistical report covered the period between 30 January 1933 and 31 December 1942. It was sent to Himmler’s office on 23 March 1943. In Chapter V of the report on the “evacuation of Jews”, Korherr provides the following statistical data:

(evacuation) From the Old Reich and the Sudetenland – 100,516 Jews

From Austria (Ostmark) – 47,555 Jews

From the Protectorate – 69,677 Jews

**In total – 217,748 Jews.**

The above-mentioned register also includes the number of Jews ‘evacuated’ to the Terezín ghetto (*Theresienstadt*) meant for elderly people. All the resettlements from the Third Reich, including the Eastern territories and the later areas of the German zone of influence in Europe, which took place between October 1939 (or later) and 31 December 1942, can be presented as follows:

1. The evacuation of Jews from Baden and Palatinate (*Pfalz*), to France – 6,504 Jews.
2. The evacuation of Jews to the East, from the Third Reich, including the Protectorate and the Białystok District – 170,642 Jews.
3. The evacuation of Jews from the Third Reich and the Protectorate, to Terezín (*Theresienstadt*) – 87,193 Jews.
4. The transport of Jews from the Eastern provinces, to Eastern Russia – 1,449,692 Jews,

The number of Jews who spent some time in the General Government camps – 1,274,166,

The number of Jews who spent some time in the Warta Land (*Warthegau*) camps – 145,301.

5. The evacuation of Jews from other countries, i.e.:

France (the territories occupied before 10 November 1942) – 41, 911 Jews,

The Netherlands – 38,571 Jews,

Belgium – 16,886 Jews,

Norway - 532 Jews,

Slovakia – 56,691 Jews,

Croatia – 4,927 Jews.

In total, 1,873,549 Jews were ‘evacuated’ - if we include Terezín (*Theresienstadt*) and special programmes; while 1,786,356 Jews were ‘evacuated’ - if we exclude Terezín (*Theresienstadt*).

6. Additionally, according to the Reich Main Security Office, beginning from the Eastern Campaign in the Soviet territories, including the former Baltic states, 633,300 Jews were ‘resettled’<sup>98</sup>.

Korherr’s numbers for the Jewish victims of ‘the General Government camps’, precisely correspond to the total number provided in Höfle’s telegram. In my opinion, the figures refer to Jews from the General Government territories. In relation to the data about the extermination centre in Sobibór, which mention 101,370 victims, it would be difficult to assume that this number, in view of Kohrerr’s report, concerns all the people killed in the Sobibór camp by the end of 1942. Thus, again, I consider that this data refers to Polish-born Jews only.

Kohrerr’s numbers relating to Jews from outside the General Government’s territory who were killed in the four camps within it, are not written separately because they are included in the total numbers which refer to particular territories and states in points one, two, three and five of Chapter V. As Kohrerr’s list is a statistical sum of separate independent five thematic points, it would be hard to assume that certain elements were counted twice in such an otherwise precisely prepared list. Similarly, it would be equally hard to assume that an analysis of this report can settle, in relation to particular transports, the problem of their ‘ultimate destination’.

At this stage of the war, it was common knowledge that the numerous train transports were first sent on to different destinations than those which were supposed to be the ultimate. For this reason, it seems highly unlikely that in preparing the deportations to Sobibór, the initial routing orders and the specified consignment notes of any particular transport made their way to their final destination. Such lists were probably made inside the ghettos, and, optionally, they were sent to the local SS units which dealt with deportations. Still, it is also doubtful whether such consignment notes were made at all.

Yet, in order for Höfle and Kohrerr to be able to fulfil their tasks, they must have known how many Jews from abroad were first deported to the appropriate ghettos, and how many of them were to be later sent on to the Sobibór camp. However, this

<sup>98</sup> Korherr’s report, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

assumption is very difficult to justify. First of all, the German statisticians might have used the routing orders and consignment notes of foreign-based logisticians, and these may have contained information about places of departure and interim or final destination. However, it is possible that they had actual lists which verified the place of 'ultimate destination' (in situations where these transports did not go straight to Sobibór) of the people from particular transports. This, however, is doubtful.

Accepting the thesis that Höfle's telegram provides a true number for the murdered Jewish citizens of pre-war Poland (in Kohrerr's report they are referred to as 'Jews from the Eastern provinces') might prove useful in verifying the number of people killed in the extermination camps of Treblinka and Bełżec, where the relevant data provided by analysts differ from the data presented in Höfle's telegram and Kohrerr's report. Indeed, various historical studies give the number of Jews from abroad who were killed in Sobibór, in 1942, as around 59,500 (according to Schelvis and Witte). This figure can be broken down to the following: Germany and Austria - 23,500, Slovakia - 26,000, and the Protectorate - 10,000. It has to be mentioned that these are not the numbers mentioned in point 4, Chapter V, of Kohrerr's report. Theoretically speaking, then, if such a possibility was taken into account at all, this would mean that, by the end of 1942, 41,870 people had been killed. However, this has never been confirmed by any credible research into the totality of those murdered in Sobibór, and these figures are in conflict with all the reports and studies that have been produced so far.

The above-presented summations are, so far, the only lists (Scheffler, Witte, Schelvis, Blatt, Arad) of transports of Jews murdered in the gas chambers of Sobibór. Moreover, they reveal that the number of victims from the General Government territories killed in 1942 amount to almost 100,000, i.e. the number which can be found in Höfle's telegram. In my view, this should, too, be treated as being an incomplete estimate, especially if we take into account the first months in which this camp was in operation, i.e. April and May 1942, as well as its activities in December 1942 (Höfle's telegram sums up the data covering the period until mid-1942).

In studying the question of deportations of Jews to Sobibór, attention must be paid to the various accounts of Sobibór's survivors, and of survivors coming from the places from where transports left in the direction of the camp. The reason is that these accounts contain information which could combine the fate of the Jews deported from different parts of Europe, with the operations within Sobibór. Therefore, this information must, in the future, become a starting point for further analysis, which might, perhaps, contribute to the uncovering of the truth of the so-far mysterious fate of those transports about which we only know that they took place, but we do not know what really happened to them.

In my opinion, Peter Witte's, Jules Schelvis's, Thomas Blatt's, Wolfgang Scheffler's and Yitzhak Arad's lists of particular transports of Polish-born Jews from the General Government territories to Sobibór correspond with Höfle's and Kohrerr's data. It seems to me, however, that they are incomplete. The reason for this is that, with regard to the Jews of pre-war Poland murdered in Sobibór between 1942 and 1943, it cannot be excluded that the real number is much higher, as it might include other

deportations which the above-mentioned authors have not taken into account<sup>99</sup>.

Thus, the summary of the deportations to the German extermination centre in Sobibór which I present, should be treated as comparative material of the summaries made by Dr Wolfgang Scheffler, Yitzhak Arad, Thomas Blatt, Martin Gilbert and Józef Marszałek<sup>100</sup>. It must be noted, however, that the report of exceptional importance is Wolfgang Scheffler's study, as this was prepared as legal expertise for the court in Hagen, which was then pursuing a lawsuit against the surviving Sobibór personnel<sup>101</sup>. This is because, while using the materials gathered by the CCIGCP, and by Z. Łukaszewicz and T. Berenstein, Scheffler had an opportunity to carefully analyse the investigative and legal materials.

The documentation gathered by the court in Hagen is a unique collection of the accounts and testimonies of former prisoners and their family members, external witnesses, and camp personnel. Dr Scheffler considered his derived figure for those killed in Sobibór (i.e. 152,000) as a minimal number. Moreover, he disclaimed any right to interpret the number as complete from the historical point of view. It has to be added that, apart from the number of victims (152,000) provided in his list of daily transports, Scheffler's report also contains a listing of a dozen or so transports which are dated, but in which the number of deportees is not provided (this information was part of the material incriminating the defendants – the surviving camp personnel).

The court in Hagen, on the basis of Scheffler's report, put forward their belief that the actual number of people murdered in Sobibór might have been higher by more than 100,000. The authors of the successive treatises on Sobibór, i.e. Arad, Blatt, Gilbert and Marszałek, used Scheffler's work, verified this and complemented this with the data resulting from their own research. In my view, calculations based on those presented by Jules Schelvis, which make reference to the deportations to Sobibór from outside the General Government territories, represent the current state of knowledge concerning this issue<sup>102</sup>. When it comes to the analysis of the Sobibór camp's victims, there are also other studies which provide the number of the alleged victims of the camp, but none of which is comparative in character or refers to, in its interpretation, to the characteristics of the other ones. This is because, in providing only a figure for the maximal totality of people deported to Sobibór, their authors do not provide a breakdown of their figures by individual transports, by date, or by precise number of deportees.

The list of deportations I propose in this dissertation can be treated as the current state of research into the question of the extent of the operations within Sobibór. I state

---

<sup>99</sup> cf. Appendices/appendix No.2 – the list of deportations to the German extermination centre in Sobibór – the author's research hypothesis.

<sup>100</sup> cf. Appendices/appendix No.1 – the list of deportations from the General Government to the German extermination centre in Sobibór between 1942 and 1943.

<sup>101</sup> Dr Wolfgang Scheffler's report, Berlin, 20 September 1966, 11Ks 1/64, StA Hagen. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>102</sup> cf. Appendices/appendix No.3 – the list of deportations to the German extermination centre in Sobibór from the District of Galicia and from outside the General Government.

this because the Polish historiography lacks a qualitative comparative study into the issue of Sobibór victims. Moreover, none of the previous studies give adequate explanation as to the sources from which the particular data concerning particular deportations have been taken from (Tatiana Berenstein's work is the exception in this respect). Moreover, Zbigniew Łukaszewicz's and Wolfgang Scheffler's lists of transports merely imply that their analysis was based on witnesses' testimonies and accounts, including, above all, those provided by Sobibór survivors and those presented by external witnesses.

The authors of these studies extract, from all the transports they discuss, deportations arising from outside the General Government territories, but they fail to take into account the possibility of there being a double counting of a certain number of people 'evacuated' in such transports. Indeed, it is difficult to evaluate, even by making an estimate, how many Jews, out of the total number of Sobibór's victims, came from the District of Galicia. Hence, in generating their figures, the above-mentioned authors use estimations ranging from 15,000 up to 25,000 people, yet do not give any detailed explanation for their derivations.

Clearly, my list of transports to the Sobibór camp should be treated as requiring further verification - because it is neither complete nor final in character. I feel that it is notably necessary to evaluate particular daily transports in terms of definitely attributing them to Sobibór as their final destination, as well as determining their number. Thus, a singularly difficult comparative task is to evaluate the number of particular transports, and to remove double counts.

What is more, we cannot rule out the possibility that, in considering a particular transport, when it arrived at the Sobibór railway ramp, a certain number of prisoners was selected and then sent to other camps, for example, to Dorohuczka, Osowa or Krychów. Hence, the possibility of making a cumulative error arises when we add the people deported to these labour camps, to the list of Sobibór's victims. However, the evaluation of this type of statistic is an extremely difficult task, and seems to be impossible to fulfil.

Furthermore, to my mind, accepting the thesis that all, or the majority, of the prisoners from particular labour camps (especially those located in the neighbourhood of Sobibór) came only from selections made in the Sobibór extermination camp, is too much a definitive approach. However, such an assumption cannot, as an a priori condition, eliminate the fact that there were also deportations from such labour camps to the Sobibór camp. In addition, it must be assumed that it was an exception rather than a rule that Jews from Sobibór were selected for work inside Sobibór itself. Even more seldom were the cases in which prisoners from Sobibór were selected for work in other camps located in the neighbouring area.

Nevertheless, such situations did take place, and, therefore, the possibility of making a statistical mistake has to be taken into account. Similar errors, in working out the total number of Sobibór's victims, might occur if we take into account testimony regarding the transports from the towns and villages which were acknowledged as the departure points from which those transports were thought to have left straight for Sobibór, but which, in real fact, went on to other places (like the local ghettos or transit ghettos) whence trains to Sobibór also departed.

A listing of the number of deportations to the Sobibór camp is, without doubt, of limited value, and depends on the organisational potential of the camp at any particular time. However, following the way in which Blatt, Scheffler, Arad and Schelvis conducted their studies, i.e. by constant complementation and continuation of their research, it will be justifiable to presuppose (which has been confirmed by the authors themselves) that, in the future, it will be necessary to take into account additional new information concerning the deportations to Sobibór.

Yet, with regard to the above-mentioned list, we should not expect too much prospective complementation to it, but still, there are sources (including, above all, World War II survivors' accounts) which relate to the future research I have suggested above. These include descriptions referring to other transports (not mentioned in the table provided above) which were perhaps sent to Sobibór, or transports which, undoubtedly, got to Sobibór, but about which we lack the information on the number of deported people. Additionally, there are transports for which the Sobibór railway station should only be treated as being the alleged destination point, but this needs further attention and analysis.

It is no coincidence that most of these sources refer to the periods of time when the operation of Sobibór was suspended or when the number of deportations was low. However, there are some justified assumptions that the situation in those periods of time was quite the contrary. This concerns, above all, the first months when the camp was operational<sup>103</sup>, i.e. April and May 1942, the last quarter of 1942 (taking into account the role which the camp was to play in the last stage of the extermination of Jews from the General Government territories in 1942)<sup>104</sup>, as well as the two last months when Sobibór was in operation. These sources contain a lot of information which might combine the fate of deported Jews from many parts of Europe, with activities undertaken within Sobibór. Thus, this information should be viewed as the beginning of a future analysis which will, perhaps, contribute to resolving the so-far mysterious fate of those transports, about which we only know that they left towards a certain destination, but about which we lack the information as to what really happened to them. Following these lines, then, this group of the still-undocumented deportations to Sobibór should be complemented with the following type of information:

<sup>103</sup> The list of deportations, based on the data gathered by Blatt, Marszałek, Arad and Scheffler, contains two April transports. On the basis of Jakob Engelhardt's testimony, the information provided by the former prisoners who got to Sobibór in the first May transports, as well as the accounts made by external witnesses, I conclude that the first mass gassings of Jews took place in Sobibór as of, at least, mid-April. As a result, a lot more people were killed at that time than what can be assumed following the data presented in the studies produced so far. Indeed, Engelhardt in his testimonial, stated, „[...] *During the trial period of the gas chambers, within twenty days, thousands of Jews were killed. During the next six weeks of the functioning of the camp, Jews from the Lublin region were being exterminated [...]*” (Jakob Engelhardt, hearing report, Leningrad, 21 August 1975. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection).

<sup>104</sup> On 19 July 1942, Himmler ordered that the resettlement of all the Jewish population of the General Government territories was to be completed by 31 December 1942.

**Włodawa** – message of the AK Commander of the Włodawa district, Romuald Kompf (pseudonym ‘Rokicz’), in which he states that approximately 5,000 Soviet Prisoners of War kept in the Włodawa prison camp, were executed in Sobibór.

**Dorohusk** – information concerning the liquidation of the labour camp in Dorohusk, and the resulting transfer of the last Jews to Sobibór<sup>105</sup>.

**Biała Podlaska** – the unexplained fate of the prisoners of the Biała Podlaska - Hola Forest camp<sup>106</sup>, and the Biała Podlaska – Vinieta camp<sup>107</sup>; the prisoners might possibly have been sent to Sobibór.

**Transport to Sobibór and to the labour camp in Krychów** (whose place of departure and the number of deportees remain unknown) – 4 (?) April 1942. The lack of any comparative data or of detailed information about the functioning of the Krychów labour camp makes it difficult to interpret the description of the transport which Józef Klauda talks about<sup>108</sup>. Moreover, the author neither provides the name of the place nor the number of people that arrived in this transport. However, the possibility of identifying the transport he mentions as either the transports from Rejowiec (2 April) or from Kazimierz (31 March), is highly unlikely; hence, there is a possibility that this was a hitherto unknown transport to the Sobibór camp. Assuming that Klauda could have mixed up the nationality of the deported Jews (that they were Jews from Holland, not from Belgium), the transport he mentions might have something in common, perhaps, with a story recounted by Jules Schelvis, “[...] *An alternative destination to Dorohuczka – for those who were selected for labour after arriving at Sobibór – was labour camp Osowa, situated nearby. A railwayman confirmed that Jews from the Netherlands had also been sent to Osowa, where they*

<sup>105</sup> Dorohusk, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>106</sup> The prisoners of this camp might also have been deported to Treblinka. However, Jerzy Doroszuk and Jerzy Sroka do not preclude the possibility that it could just as well have been the camp in Sobibór (*Zbrodnie na jeńcach wojennych* [Crimes Committed against Prisoners of War] (in:) Jerzy Doroszuk, Czesław Remesz, Ryszard Sielski, Jerzy Sroka, *Zbrodnie hitlerowskie w regionie bialskopodlaskim 1939-1944* [Hitlerian Crimes Committed in the Bialskopodlaskie Region 1939-1944], Lublin, 1977, pp. 229-230).

<sup>107</sup> Tatiana Berensten claims that, on 17 December 1942, in Biała Podlaska, 231 Jews were shot. It is likely that these people were from the ‘Vinieta’ camp, yet, it has not been made clear whether they were the last prisoners of this camp prior to its termination. However, in this incident, Dominik Sobol, in his study, *Zagłada obywateli pochodzenia żydowskiego w regionie bialskopodlaskim w latach 1939-1944* („Goniec Terespolski” [The Extermination of Citizens of Jewish Origin in the Bialskopodlaskie Region between 1939 and 1944] („Goniec Terespolski” [Terespol Messenger], No. 81, 2/2011), claims that only 40 Jews from this camp were actually shot on site, and the remaining ones were driven away in an unknown destination.

<sup>108</sup> Józef Klauda, *op. cit.*: „[...] *Meanwhile, no one escaped because, at that time, there came an enormous transport of Belgian Jews and a huge transport of Gypsies. They couldn't accommodate them in Sobibór, so they separated some of the Gypsies and put them in the Krychów camp. For this reason, all the peasants who were kept there for failing to have provided their produce quota, were released [...]*”.

were put to work on draining the swampy land. In addition, Dutch Jews are known to have been made to work on a drainage project, alongside German and Slovakian Jews, at *Arbeitslager Ujazdów*, fifteen kilometres to the south-west of Osowa, on 15 June 1942. How they ended up there, more than eight months before the first 'officially recorded' Dutch transport to Sobibór (on 2 March 1943), has never been resolved [...]"<sup>109</sup>.

**Warszawa** – Albert Ganzenmüller, who was the Under-Secretary of State at the Reich Transport Ministry and the deputy of the General Director of the Reich State Railways, wrote, on 28 July 1942, to SS-Obergruppenführer Karl Wolff, a member of Hitler's private staff, that, "[...] permission has been granted for transports from Warszawa to Sobibór (near Lublin) via Lublin to be suspended for as long as the works on this railway section continue (around October 1942). This has been confirmed with the SS and Police Leader of the Lublin District [...]" On 19 July 1942, the day before the 'Great Action' against Warsaw Jews, Himmler visited the Sobibór camp. Now, there arises a question – did the large-scale modernisation of the Sobibór camp, Himmler's visit and Albert Ganzenmüller's letter have anything in common with possible transports of Warsaw's Jews to Sobibór? Also, did Albert Ganzenmüller mean the suspension of the transports which were already underway or the transports that were planned ahead?

**Zamość** – transport of children from (Zamojszczyzna) the Zamość area – February 1943, approximately 500 children<sup>110</sup>.

**Rejowiec** – 10 October 1943 – information on the deportation of 2,000 Jews from Rejowiec. This is provided by Zdzisław Kalinowski in his *Pamięć o ofiarach zagłady* [Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust], Rejowiec, 2009.

**The District of Galicia** – in the winter of 1942/43, as well as in spring and summer of 1943, it is known that transports of Jews from the Lvov District were sent to Sobibór<sup>111</sup>. Thomas Blatt, Eda Lichtman and Leon Feldhendler also make mention of these transports in their publications. Likewise, information about the increased train traffic to Sobibór is provided by Tadeusz Borowski<sup>112</sup>, and in a report of the Soviet partisan group which was operating over the Nadbużański (Bug River) region in July

<sup>109</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor ...*, p. 124, translated from English by Marek Bem.

<sup>110</sup> Jan Piwoński, witness hearing report, file ref. No. Ko. 11/66, Włodawa, 26 February 1966. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection; and the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, the Polish Board for the Protection of Monuments of Combat and Martyrdom, *Obozy hitlerowskie na ziemiach polskich 1939 – 1945* [Nazi Crimes in Poland 1939-1945]. *Informator encyklopedyczny* [Encyclopaedic Guide], PWN, Warszawa, 1979, p. 460.

<sup>111</sup> Filip Friedman, *Zagłada Żydów lwowskich* [Extermination of the Jews of Lvov], „Wydawnictwa Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej przy Centralnym Komitecie Żydów Polskich” [Publishing Houses of the Central Jewish Historical Commission at the Central Committee of Polish Jews], No. 4, 1945.

<sup>112</sup> Borowski Tadeusz, interview from April 2008. The original of the interview is in Marek Bem's private collection.

1943<sup>113</sup>. It cannot be excluded that the transports that Aleksander Peczerski mentions in his diary were from the District of Galicia, i.e. from: 27 September 1943, 29 September 1943, 2 October 1943, 8 October 1943, 11 October 1943. However, the current state of knowledge makes it difficult to estimate the number of Jews from the District of Galicia who were deported to Sobibór to be killed, after the camp in Bełżec had ceased to operate. Most often, this number is estimated as being between 15,000 and 25,000 people.

Beyond the previous information, we also have the testimonies of the survivors of Sobibór. Yet, clearly, it is difficult to treat their information in regard to the number of murders they witnessed while in the camp as the data fully analytical in character. Yet, their mentioned figures convey the state of their emotions back then, as well as the drama and the scale of tragedy which happened in Sobibór. Thus, Kurt Ticho claims that, in the Sobibór, the Germans killed 800,000 Jews<sup>114</sup>, Moshe Bahir – 1 million<sup>115</sup>, Szmul Leder – 1 million<sup>116</sup>, Jakub Biskupicz – 500,000<sup>117</sup>, Chaim Engel – 1 million<sup>118</sup>, Josef Frajtag – several million<sup>119</sup>, Samuel Lerer – 3 million<sup>120</sup>, Eda Lichtman – several million<sup>121</sup>, Icchak Lichtman – 1 million<sup>122</sup>, Zeld Metz – 2 million<sup>123</sup>, Salomon Podchlebnik – 1 million<sup>124</sup> Aleksij Wajcen – 5 million<sup>125</sup>.

---

<sup>113</sup> Zachar Filipowicz Popławski's memo to the Plenipotentiary from the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brest Oblast, which concerns Iwan Michałowicz Karakasz's report on the Sobibór death camp, 7 October 1943. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>114</sup> Kurt Ticho, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-222.

<sup>115</sup> Moshe Bahir's account, (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-163.

<sup>116</sup> Samuel Leder's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/4140, 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

<sup>117</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

<sup>118</sup> Chaim Engel, Sub-Mission War Crimes Investigation Zwolle, 7 July 1946, MPLW Archives.

<sup>119</sup> Josef Frajtag's testimony, ŻIH Archives, Włodawa, October 1945.

<sup>120</sup> Samuel Lerer, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/104. Kraków, (?), December 194(?).

<sup>121</sup> Eda Lichtman, Holon/Israel, testimony, May 1959, MPLW Archives.

<sup>122</sup> Icek Lichtman, *Moje okupacyjne przeżycia* [My Life under the German Occupation], ŻIH Archives, Kraków, (date unknown), file ref. No. (none).

<sup>123</sup> Zeld Metz's account (in:) *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce* [Documents and Materials on the Time of the German Occupation of Poland, Łódź, 1946, (ed.): by N. Blumental, Part I, Camps, Chapter V Sobibór, pp. 207-214.

<sup>124</sup> Salomon Podchlebnik's testimony, Lublin, 15 September 1944. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>125</sup> Aleksij Wajcenj, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-2, USC Shoah Foundation Institute Archives For Visual History and Education, file ref. No. 4412, 14 September 1995, translated from Russian by Wiesława Leśniewska.

## CHAPTER V

### PRISONER-LABOURERS

#### 1. The life and work of the prisoner-labourers

Each prisoner-labourer in Sobibór was subject to the same camp rules irrespective of whether they laboured in one of the barracks, mended or sorted clothes and shoes, cultivated the vegetable plots or made gold jewellery for the SS men. Moreover, anyone who violated any of these camp rules received extremely severe punishment. German personnel, however, applied their own ‘camp law’, and so each of them freely made up different regulations. An example of such a violation of the camp law was when a prisoner was caught smoking cigarettes or stealing items of property previously confiscated from the newly-arrived Jews. This type of crime was punished by flogging, starving, or with particularly heavy work, torture, death by shooting or by being sent for death in Camp III.

During the selection following the arrival of new transports, the Germans tried to get hold of, for work, the younger and healthier individuals out of those who declared that they could do certain jobs. However, the appalling sanitary conditions, the omnipresent lice, the meagre food, the hard work, as well as the extreme stress and psychological breakdown, soon ensured that most of those prisoners fell ill with different diseases, and then were despatched. Indeed, their chronic vitamin deficiency, the sores all over their bodies, together with their respiratory tract and skin infections, obviously influenced the efficiency of the prisoner-labourers, and thus frequently sealed their fate in the camp<sup>1</sup>. After the war, Frenzel testified that anyone sick who was discovered to be unable to do any work at the pace demanded, was immediately killed<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the new transports constantly coming to the camp brought prisoners-labourers who replaced those already worn-out, and so the camp maintained ‘fresh labour force’. For this reason, the Germans did not care whether the sick prisoners from their camp would return to health or not<sup>3</sup> and this is why the camp’s Jews did their best to hide any minor ailments and wounds or injuries for as long as possible<sup>4</sup>.

In late 1942, the SS men changed their policy towards sick prisoner-labourers, by issuing a rule that the sick had the right to three days’ rest. Obviously, this did

<sup>1</sup> Kurt Thomas’s letter to the Dutch Red Cross, 29 July 1946. Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Frenzel, hearing report, Hagen, 10 October 1966, MPLW Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Hubert Gomerski, hearing report, StA.Do-XII 65-758, Hagen, 7 December 1965, NIOD Archives.

<sup>4</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, *Z Hrubieszowa do Sobiboru* [From Hrubieszów to Sobibór] (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-122.

not mean that they wanted to treat their prisoners in a more humane way. The reason for this rule's institution was that, at that time, smaller number of transports came to Sobibór, because most locomotives and cars were then needed for the thousands of German soldiers who had gained Christmas leave. By introducing this regulation, the Germans were able to ensure an appropriate number of labourers in each commando, without having to exchange them for new ones, hence, no retraining was necessary, and the labour routines stayed efficient.

The Commandant of the camp prepared the daily schedule and the range of tasks which the prisoners had to complete. This schedule had to, however, comply with the official directive issued by SS-Obergruppenführer Oswald Pohl, which concerned all the camps: “[...] *The (prisoners’) working time should not be in any way limited; it should depend on the organisational and structural goal of a given camp, as well as the type of labour done [...]*”<sup>5</sup>. The prisoners of the Sobibór camp laboured for a full six days a week and half the Sunday, yet they had to be on stand-by any time day or night. Also, the schedule changed, depending on the season of the year. In general, a typical day of a Sobibór prisoner-labourer was as follows:

*Reveille* – 5 a.m. – Testimony states that for a long time, the prisoner who had to sound the reveille bugle was a barber by profession (he sounded the reveille bugle from the forestry lookout tower located right next to Camp I). He also worked as the Germans’ barber. At that time, the prisoners had to go to wash, and the water taps and washbasins were behind the barracks. The bars of soap which the prisoners were given to wash with came from the sorting barrack, so it was what the camp victims had left behind.

*Breakfast* – coffee (sometimes soup);

*Roll-call* – between the barracks on the square of Camp I. Arranged in rows and watched by their kapos, the prisoners were to wait for the German Duty Officer to come. Most frequently, that person was Karl Frenzel. The kapos, standing to attention three steps away in front of the first row, were to submit, one by one, a report to this man.

*Leaving for work* – at 7.00 a.m. – the prisoners went to their places of labour: the craftsmen went to their workshops in Camp I, the women - to the sorting barracks or to the German and Ukrainian laundries, while the rest went to Camp II. The prisoners had to sing on their way to work. At noon, there was a dinner break. At this time, the kapos counted their prisoners, and, in military quick step, marched them to Camp I to join the queue in front of the camp kitchen. For dinner, each prisoner got half a bowl of groats, and, from time to time, a piece of horse meat. After dinner, at 1 p.m., the prisoners were counted again.

*Return from labour* – at 5 p.m. – the labour day officially finished at this time. The kapos counted their prisoners once more, after which the prisoners returned to Camp I, where they could have their supper consisting of 200 grams of bread and barley coffee. At 5.15 p.m., preparations started for the last roll-call. The kapos arranged their prisoners in columns and counted them yet again. At 6 p.m., the

<sup>5</sup> Leon Cymiel’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 6397, Warszawa, 20 June 1963.

German duty officer came to the roll-call. That was the time when punishment was publicly inflicted on miscreant prisoners.

The prisoners who were selected for labour from their transports were placed into several larger groups meant to perform particular jobs, and were to ensure the efficient and unproblematic functioning of the camp. However, no prisoner was irreplaceable. The Jewish specialists of all sorts were only allowed to labour and live as long as they managed to preserve their physical fitness and work efficiency. According to the former prisoners' accounts, the Germans formed 5 or 6 commandos (working units). There was also a separate group of craftsmen who worked in the workshops situated in Camps I and II (tailors, shoemakers, goldsmiths, washerwomen, cooks, apothecaries, orderlies, stokers who burnt things left behind by the camp victims, gardeners, and labourers for the stable, pigsty and chicken coop).

Leon Cymiel mentions the following labour units - commandos that worked in the camp:

1. *Bahnhofkommando* – the prisoners were dressed in German working overalls with labelled military shoulder straps and forage caps. The group consisted of 15-20 men, who had to 'receive' Jewish transports and to handle all the jobs necessary on the railway ramp.
2. *Pakietenkommando* – these prisoners prepared the already sorted items of property left behind by the camp victims so as for these to be loaded onto the trains for shipment elsewhere.
3. *Sortierkommando* – this was the largest group of prisoner-labourers, and was divided into several subgroups. They examined, repaired and sorted the left-behind items of clothing (above all, they ripped off the 'Star of David' mandatory on each piece of clothing), as well as other items of property after the camp's victims had perished.
4. *Friseurkommando* – the prisoners from this commando had to shear the hair of the women who were on their way to the gas chamber.
5. *Waldkommando* – a group consisting of several dozen prisoners formed to cut down trees for the wood to be used as timber, or to heat the buildings or to feed the cook-fires inside the camp. When the Germans began to burn the victims' bodies, the number of prisoners from this commando was increased because the wood was also used to feed the pyres.
6. *Baumkommando* – bricklayers, carpenters, decorators, mechanics – around 20 men.
7. 'Pucrzy' – 'cleaners' – they cleaned the quarters of the Germans and Ukrainians, as well as the other rooms which the camp personnel used.
8. Craftsmen from the workshops.

Sometimes, some of the prisoners had to work in the camp offices. For example, witnesses state that a Dutch Jewish woman named Ketti worked in the office as a typist, as she knew German very well. Each commando was headed by a Kapo (a Jewish prisoner overseer), and each commando was made up of several sub-

commandos (formed on the basis of what their labourers specialised in), in charge of which was the Unterkapo. The commander of all the Kapos was the Oberkapo<sup>6</sup>.

One of the greatest problems the Sobibór camp prisoners were haunted by, was a lack of food. As a result, the minimal food rations and the backbreaking work damaged the health of all prisoners, even the strongest and toughest ones. The influence of constant hunger had an enormous impact on the prisoners' psyche, but also on the relationships between prisoners. Yet, everybody tried to cope somehow. The prisoners who managed to successfully steal what was left behind after the new transports had arrived and had been 'processed', traded these items with the Ukrainian guards, or had secret dealings with the kapos or cooks. Generally, the prisoners were ready to do anything just to get some food, because the extreme and never-ending hunger changed their personalities. Those most advantaged were the prisoners from the *Bahnhofkommando*. Being the first to get access to the luggage of the new arrivals, they set their minds on nothing but the food they could find. There were even cases when the prisoners from the other commandos returning from work to their barracks saw the Jews from the railway commando eating 'gourmet' food. The surviving accounts note that the *Bahnhofkommando* were happy to have their stomachs full. Indeed, their pockets were always crammed with biscuits or salami. Sometimes they even drank whisky. All these 'goodies' they had received from the Jews they had unloaded before. Therefore, it was excellent food, unusual and completely different to what they were accustomed to, because the food came from the Jews from Western Europe. Also, it was usually fresh or in very good condition. The *Bahnhofkommando* could only get such 'spoils' from 'Western' transports. The Jews from Poland were much poorer.

In Camp I, there were two men's barracks, which were separated from the women's barrack only by the kitchen building, so men could easily approach the other barrack unseen. The Germans avoided being in Camp I, and they only entered it to check the list of the prisoners, to conduct investigations or to take away one of the prisoners. Testimony suggests that quite often, men would sneak into the women's barrack to ask for some food. Moreover, some of the women took pity of them and gave them either a teaspoonful of jam or a slice of bread.

In the camp, the women prisoner-labourers worked in the laundry, the sorting barrack or in the kitchen. Some of them also attempted to postpone the hour of their death by trying to ingratiate themselves with the Germans, the Ukrainians or the kapos, so they put on the elegant clothes which they had got from the sorting barrack, and they also put up make-up. Accessories necessary for such make-up were found among the things left behind the new transports of Jews. Testimony states that some of the women were very beautiful, and some became the kapos' lovers, and they, in return, brought them different delicacies. Thus, a lot of them looked quite well. Moreover, some of them, wanting to look healthy, and to please 'their' kapos, changed their clothes three or four times a day. In Sobibór, clothing was in abundance because it all came from the newly-arrived transports. Furthermore, several of the kapos often held 'parties' in the women's barrack.

<sup>6</sup> Leon Cymiel's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 6397, Warszawa, 20 June 1963.

In general, the majority of the women avoided this type of contact with the kapos, and suffered the consequences. They were hungry and sick, but they could not count on any help. Nonetheless, as Leon Feldhendler commented on the Sobibór prisoners, “The Jews only had one goal: *carpe diem*, and in this they simply went wild”<sup>7</sup>.

Life in the camp was completely isolated from the outside world, not only in a physical sense, but also emotional. For the prisoners, according to the survivors, their past seemed so distant now that they had an impression that it simply had never existed. They were exhausted physically and mentally, and thus lived on instinctively. They knew they could die at any moment, and they even hoped that this would be so. At the end of each day, the prisoners were amazed to realise that they were still alive. Their health kept on deteriorating, they were beaten every single day. Nonetheless, they somehow knew how to cope. For example, while labouring, survivors’ statements say, they kept a watchful eye on the German who happened to be supervising them on that particular day. Any time the German turned his back, they stopped doing anything, but when he looked back at them, they started working fast and energetically. In this way, they avoided a flogging.

Most of the prisoners suffered also because they felt alone and lonely. However, even in such tragic circumstances, people managed to make friends, later betrayed them, fell in love with somebody and then walked out on them, like in real life. Post-war accounts speak of a famous case of a Jewish prisoner, a barber, whom the Germans tolerated due to his exceptional professional skills and abilities. The Jew fell in love with a girl, and asked the Germans for permission to marry her. To everyone’s utter amazement, the Germans did give their permission for this marriage. What is more, sometimes, the SS men organised dancing ‘parties’ for the prisoners – they forced them to dance in order to have a good laugh by watching them. The irony is that this is the way in which two prisoners: Selma and Chaim Engel got to know each other. Due to one of such parties, they fell in love with each other, got married and spent the rest of their lives together. Another couple, Eda and Ichhak Lichtman, also made friends while in the camp. After the revolt, they both served in Satanowski’s partisan unit. They too got married, had a daughter, and they lived to see their grandchildren grow up.

In Sobibór, post-war accounts note that in their free time after work or on Sunday, the prisoner-labourers tried to find something to do in order to keep themselves occupied. They chatted with others, painted or read the books found in the sorting barrack. Jakub Biskupicz recounted how each man in the camp had tried to find himself a girlfriend. In this way, the prisoners paired off<sup>8</sup>. As a rule, the men and

<sup>7</sup> Leon Feldhendler’s account (in:) *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce*. [Documents and Materials on the Time of the German Occupation of Poland., Łódź 1946, ed. by N. Blumental, Part I, Camps, Chapter V Sobibór, Łódź, 1946, pp. 202-207; Leon Cymiel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD’s 1-3, USC Shoah Foundation Institute For Visual History and Education Archives, file ref. No. 29630, 26 March 1997; Szlomo Alster, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD 1, Hagen/Tricht, 1983. Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>8</sup> Stanisław Szmajzner, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-156.

women could spend the time together as long as it was permissible to move about the camp, i.e. till 9 or 10 p.m. Aleksander Peczerski, in his post-war diary, wrote about his camp relationship with a girl called “Luka”, with whom he used to spend time in the women’s barrack after a whole day’s work. These meetings also served as a cover for his meetings with Leon Feldhendler and all the others involved in the planning and the preparation of the prisoners’ revolt. After the war, the surviving prisoners remembered her as a girl who had come from Holland. In fact, she was German, and her real name was Gertrude Poppert-Schonborn. She was born on 29 June 1914, in Dortmund. When Peczerski met Luka in Sobibór, she was 28 years old. Before the war, in the 1930’s, together with her husband, she escaped to the Netherlands and settled in Amsterdam. On 28 November 1942, she ended up in the Westerbork transit camp, whence she and her husband were deported to Sobibór on 18 May 1943<sup>9</sup>.

The prisoners’ sense of community and their contacts with other people gave them a lot of strength. The closest relationships were amongst family members. Also, the fact that some prisoners came from the same place or country was of great importance to them in starting new relationships, as this strengthened their feeling of community and united them somehow. Survivors state that the people of the Sobibór camp rarely cried. It was their strong egos that enabled them to survive. Small groups of prisoners stuck together. However, it was not that everyone trusted each other and that it was a solid camp community. Quite the contrary, the people did not know each other very well and they did not trust each other. There were just a few small groups of people closely attached to each other, but the whole that they formed was completely inaccessible to anybody from outside their circle. A great barrier between the prisoners was language. And thus, the Poles stuck together and they did not come into contact with Jews from other countries<sup>10</sup>.

Stanisław Szmajzner recalled in his post-war accounts that Sobibór did not only mean working and killing. It was also a place of outright deceit. The masters of those ‘odious dealings’ were the Ukrainians. They always found a pretext to draw the prisoners away from their duties. They would offer them vodka, roast chicken or salami in return for gold. The prisoners were in need of vodka especially in winter time. The winter of 1942/1943 was particularly harsh, so everybody was interested in obtaining stronger spirits and good food. They bought all that from the Ukrainian watchmen, paying them with the gold they had stolen from the sorting barrack. Many prisoners, especially those who worked in Camp II on sorting the things left behind by those who were ‘processed’, had access to precious items, and they frequently stole them.

According to survivors’ accounts, everybody in the camp knew that if anyone was caught red-handed while having illegal dealings, they would be sent to Camp III immediately. Nonetheless, illegal trading thrived. Nobody thought about the death

---

<sup>9</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 181-189; Aleksander Peczerski, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Mordechaj Goldfarb’s testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 02/2212, Haifa, 29 January 1962.

penalty because death had become something obvious and natural in Sobibór, so it was something everybody expected to happen sooner or later. On the other hand, the Germans turned a blind eye to their German personnel stealing jewellery. Yet, this rule did not apply to the Ukrainians. The Ukrainians, survivors state, were obsessed with gold and they were all for it in their trading with prisoners. One of the most common excuses the Ukrainians used to visit the prisoners' workshops, like the one in which Stanisław Szmajzner worked, was to report the alleged blockage of a breech or any other fictional technical problem with their rifles. Next, while the prisoners were pretending to repair the flawed part, the two sides would strike a bargain. On other occasions, the Ukrainians stealthily came to the prisoners' barracks to make deals during the time when the prisoners had a little bit more freedom to move about Camp I after work<sup>11</sup>.

There was a special Jewish commando which worked in Camp III within Sobibór. The prisoners who were selected to work in that part of the camp had to live there as well, and they were completely isolated from the remaining sections of Sobibór<sup>12</sup>. Since the members of this commando were direct witnesses to the crimes committed in the camp, from time to time, the whole commando was killed off to be replaced by a new one. The major task of these prisoners was to remove the corpses from the gas chambers, to bury them, and, in the later phase when the camp was fully operational, to burn the bodies. The work was extremely exhausting, both physically and psychologically. The bodies in the gas chamber were intertwined with each so much so that it was hard to separate them in order to take them out of the chamber. At one go, the prisoners took out a particular number of corpses so that the so-called 'dentists' could get access to them.

This group of prisoners was obliged to pull out, from the corpses, any dental crowns made of gold, platinum or silver, and to remove false teeth. The 'dentists' also had to carefully examine the bodies of the previously gassed people in search of valuables. When the gas chamber was empty, another group of labourers had to quickly scrub the blood and excrement off the floors and the walls. This was because, within

---

<sup>11</sup> Z. Krawczak's account, Switzerland, 1943, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 033/425; Philip Bialowitz, Joseph Bialowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-174 and pp. 175-197; Symcha Białowicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-4 USHMM Archives/ RG – 50.120 0027, 13 May 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Jakub Biskupicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Eda Lichtman's account, Yad Vashem Archives, Holon/Israel, 29 December 1960, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57; Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/2352, excerpts from an interview with Eda Lichtman, Icchak Lichtman, Dov Freiberg, Abraham Margulies, Symcha Białowicz and Jakub Biskupicz, which took place in Dr Olga Barniczowa's presence in Tel-Aviv in September 1963; Stanisław Szmajzner, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-134; Franz Hodl, hearing report, file ref. No. 47/316, Linz, 18 April 1963, NIOD Archives; Alfred Ittner, hearing report, RLKW/NW (15 December), Kolumba, 17 July 1962, NIOD Archives.

the extermination process, the appearance of the 'bath-house' could by no means raise any suspicions or concerns among the next successive groups that were being taken there. At first, the commando from Camp III was a small group, but when an open-air crematorium was built, the number of Jews condemned to it rose up to 150 men.

The prisoner-labourers from Camp III were the most oppressed group of people in all of Sobibór. Isolated from the rest of the camp, they were under constant close surveillance. Consequently, few people knew anything about them. Hersz Cukierman and his son were selected, on arrival, to work in the camp kitchen, and in fulfilling his duties, Cukierman cooked for the prisoners from Camps I, II and III. At the beginning, the kitchen was located in the same barrack where some of the Ukrainian watchmen lived, so he could also easily trade with them. During the first few weeks of his stay in the camp, Cukierman kept wondering what was happening to such a great number of Jews that were being brought to the camp. What was happening to them? Why did no-one ever see them? Since he had dealings with the Ukrainians he realized that, through a bottle of vodka, he would be able to get some information out of them. However, the Ukrainians tried to make him believe that there were other camps around Sobibór, and that Sobibór was just a transit camp. They told him that right after the new-arrivals came, they went to the bath-house, where they received new underwear and had a bath, after which they were sent away to Ukraine to work in the country. Cukierman kept asking them whether the newly-arrived Jews went there on foot or whether they were taken there by train. They said that there was an underground railway line where trains were parked, ready to go to Ukraine at any moment. Camp III was camouflaged, and the people who worked there (according to Cukierman – there were about 300 of them) were separated from the rest of the camp so perfectly that the prisoners believed such stories.

Yet, some of the prisoners sensed that something wrong was happening in Sobibór. All of them were misled by the fact that with the arrival of any transport, the sick and the weak were selected from the rest of the new-arrivals, and were taken, as the prisoners thought, to the camp's hospital. With time, Cukierman learnt that the healthy were taken to the gas chamber, and that the sick and the weak were taken to the previously-dug pits to be shot. He finally began to recognise these realities six weeks after he had arrived at the camp. The Ukrainians' stories were not convincing to him, and he kept wondering what to do to find out the truth. As he worked as a cook together with, at first, his own son and seven other people (although, after some time, the group was increased by four other women and two men), Cukierman assumed, on the basis of the quantities they prepared, that around 300 people worked in Camp III. It should be noted that his cook-house provided meals for all the prisoners from Camps I, II and III.

At any rate, it was Cukierman that came up with an idea of how to come into contact with the Jews from Camp III. Every day, he sent them from 20 to 25 buckets full of food. He decided to take advantage of this, especially because the Germans were never interested in what he cooked. Therefore, one day, he cooked dumplings so big that he managed to insert into one of them a piece of paper with a note saying,

*“our fellow prisoners, write us what is happening out there in your camp and what your life is like there.* Normally, 10 Jews carried the buckets of watery soup and placed them next to the gate of Camp III. They left them there, and took the empty buckets back to Camp I. They did this twice a day, with some guards keeping an eye on them, of course. Carrying food for the *Sonderkommando* was always a risky business for them.

There were times when prisoners of these two camps: Camp I and III, happened to meet. Any time a thing like this happened, the consequences for the Camp I prisoners were always tragic. They were immediately taken to the gas chambers. When Cukierman got the empty buckets back to his kitchen, he found a scrap of paper attached to the bottom of a bucket, which read, *“Here, it’s just constant suffering. Here, it’s the last step that a man makes, nobody comes back from our place. Here, the people finally turn stiff”*. That same evening, Cukierman told his fellow prisoners everything. Now, they knew that the only way out for them would be to rebel<sup>13</sup>.

The fence of Camp III was interwoven with pine tree branches, so that no one from outside could see what was happening there. SS-Oberscharführer Kurt Bolender, Hubert Gomerski and Erich Bauer were in charge of this camp. In order to have more comfortable working conditions in Camp III, Kurt Bolender had ‘a wooden hut built on the edge of the crematorium pit’. As Bauer testified after the war, *“[...] From there, he could watch the cremations, and have a good time, by, for example, roasting potatoes over the flames coming out of the pit. We lived quite a nice life there [...]*”<sup>14</sup>.

The wooden hut Bauer talked about in his testimony might have been a small barrack, a guardroom for the Germans keeping guard in Camp III. After the war, one of the Ukrainian watchmen marked on the plan of the Sobibór camp he sketched, this building in close proximity to, and north of the gas chamber. He called it the ‘tearoom-restaurant’<sup>15</sup>. Gomerski never hid the fact that when he had served in Camp III, he drank heavily. He even admitted to having drunk a litre of vodka a day, and plenty of beer

---

<sup>13</sup> Herszel Cukierman, hearing report, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1187, Łódź, 8 December 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, ZStL-251/59-8-1590, Berlin, 20 November 1962, MPLW Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Zachar Filipowicz Popławski’s memo to the Plenipotentiary from the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brest Oblast, 7 October 1943 (copy in Marek Bem’s private collection): *“[...] they take the stripped corpses to the pyre, throw them onto the ground and quickly place them on the rail tracks (about 1000-1500 people at a time). Then they light a small fire and the bodies start burning. Only one ‘Mr.’ German is sitting in the restaurant over a glass of rum, giving out orders, “That one is working badly, shoot him. Look at that one! He’s not laughing, drown him in a barrel of water. Oh, yet another! He is too weak – hang him.” What remains after the bodies of those people, who an hour or so ago were still alive, was white burnt-out bones, which are now turning into ashes and will be thrown into the pits. This process is going on night and day. People die and the Germans take all their belongings, making themselves richer and richer [...]*”.

too<sup>16</sup>. Bauer had problems with alcohol as well. He drank so much that Commandant Reichleitner threatened to send him away, as he did with Grömer<sup>17</sup>.

Camp III was intentionally completely isolated from the remaining parts of the Sobibór camp, and anything that happened there was shrouded in complete mystery. Therefore, those who happened to catch a glimpse, even for a short while, of what was going on inside, were killed instantly. Yet, there were some rumours circulating among the prisoner-labourers that there had been attempts made by the Camp III prisoners to escape from the camp. In April 1943, the Germans discovered an almost completed tunnel which started under the Jews' barrack and led towards the external fence. In consequence, all the prisoners of Camp III were shot. During the execution, the prisoners waiting for their turn to die were made to sing "Góralu, czy ci nie żal?" ["Oh, highlander, do you not grieve over leaving your homeland?"]. At that time, this used to be a very popular Polish song sung during social meetings, such as family gatherings<sup>18</sup>. That same evening, the Jews from Camp I gathered in one of the barracks in order to say a Kaddish. After the war, while giving testimony in the Hagen court, Hersz Cukierman said that he clearly remembered that particular event. He recalled how the sounds of the prisoners singing, and how the sound of rifle shots came from Camp III. He also recalled that half an hour after the execution, a guard by the name of Koszewadzki came into Cukierman's kitchen. His boots were splashed with blood. He told Cukierman what had happened in Camp III – 150 Jews had been shot<sup>19</sup>.

Tomasz Blatt, in his work, provides an account which states that on 28 September 1943, a large group of Ukrainian guards turned up for the afternoon roll-call in Camp I. The prisoners were told not to leave for their working places, and to stay in the square. They soon heard the sound of gun shots coming from Camp III. At the time, he states, everybody suspected that the news about the Camp III prisoners having built the tunnel had been made up by the Germans. What is more, it was believed that this merely served as a pretext to execute the already redundant labourers from Camp III, because there was less and less work to be done there<sup>20</sup>.

Not a single prisoner from Camp III survived World War II. Therefore, we can only try to imagine and speculate upon what conditions they must have worked in. After the war, the members of the German staff who were being tried at court, refused to reveal any information about that part of the Sobibór camp. The only direct information comes from the surviving former prisoners who managed to come into contact with the 'labourers' from the gas chamber zone.

Camp III was isolated, on each side, from the remaining sectors of the extermination centre. It was surrounded by a pine coppice and a fence, because no one was to find out

<sup>16</sup> Hubert Gomerski, hearing report, Frankfurt am Main, 28 November 1973, MPŁW Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, file ref. No. StA.Do-XI'65-557, Hagen, 15 November 1965, MPŁW Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Frenzel, hearing report, file ref. No. Abs. 2 St. PO, MPŁW Archives.

<sup>19</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

what was happening inside. The prisoners who worked in the other parts of the camp could only see the roof of the ‘bath-house’ protruding above the line of trees. Some of them also recall seeing Oberscharführer Bauer on the roof of that building. In post-war testimony, it was made clear that he went up there to look inside the death chambers through a small roof window, and that Bauer did so to control the amount of poison flowing through the gas pipes disguised as ordinary shower pipes. Hence, he was the one that saw those victims suffocating to death – and it was he who gave the orders to increase the flow of gas or to stop it. So, Bauer was the sole witness to the Sobibór victims’ last struggles and to their deaths.

Although it was strictly forbidden, some of the prisoner-labourers succeeded in coming into contact with the Jews from Camp III. Sometimes, they found scraps of paper with a note attached to the bottom of the empty buckets which were taken from under the gate of Camp III. In these, the men who worked on burning the bodies described what was happening in their camp. One of such notes talked about a blood-stain which no-one could scrub off the floor of the gas chamber. The note stated that the German guards had come to the conclusion that the blood had soaked into the floor boards after a group of pregnant women had been gassed, and during the gassing, one of them had given birth to a child. The poisonous gas had, therefore, mixed with the pregnant woman’s blood, forming an indelible stain. Another note said that, one day, the Camp III labourers were told to remove a few floor boards after pieces of ears, cheeks and palms had got ‘stuck’ in the floor. In the same way, the news was spread that the Jews who worked in the ‘crematorium’ tried to put up resistance a few times, and even made desperate escape attempts. However, they were never successful, and all of the suspects were immediately killed<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> <sup>21</sup>Moshe Bahir’s account (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-163; Chajim Bergdorf’s testimony, The Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 034145, Tel Aviv, March 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Symcha Białowicz, transcript of DVD recording DVD/DVD’s 1-4 USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0027, 13 May 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Jakub Biskupicz, transcript of DVD recording DVD/DVD’s 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Hersz Cukierman’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944; Hersz Cukierman’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1187, Łódź, 8 December 1945; Tomasz Blatt’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948; Abraham Margulies’s account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/7019, (the date and the place where the account was given remains unknown); Samuel Lerer’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/104, 1945; Dov Freiberg, *To survive Sobibor, Jerusalem*, 2007, pp. 201-203; Eda Lichtman’s testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959; Mordechaj Goldfarb’s testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 02/2212, Haifa, 29 January 1962; Kurt Ticho, *op.cit.*, p.79; Josef Frajtag’s testimony, ŻIH Archives, Włodawa, October 1945; Siemion Rozenfeld’s account transcript, DVD recordings/DVD 1, Marek Bem’s private collection, November 2007, translated from Russian by Wiesława Leśniewska; Kurt Bolender, hearing report, Hagen, 18 December 1963, NIOD Archives.

## 2. Punishment, sadism, torture and executions

During one of the court hearings, Karl Frenzel admitted, when asked to comment on the documented proofs that the Jewish prisoner-labourers of the Sobibór camp had been flogged, beaten, hanged, shot or killed in any other way, to once having punished a Jewish labourer by having him whipped 25 times. Most frequently, though, he stated, he would order 10 blows.

He did not deny that the German personnel had punished, of their own free will, Jews for so-called 'camp crimes', and that he himself had given one order like this. Frenzel also testified that the Jews who had been unable to work were first flogged and then shot. However, he was quite positive about the fact that none of the Jews he had ordered to be whipped were later killed. He only assumed that, after a given prisoner had received this type of punishment, they were no longer able to work, so they were either shot or sent away to the gas chamber. Generally, right after a prisoner was punished, they were allowed to have a few-hour's rest, after which they had to immediately go back to work. However, if, in consequence of the punishment by flogging, a given Jew lost their consciousness or became disabled, the German personnel who had ordered the punishment, had to, by order, report to the Camp's Commandant. Most often, the Commandant then gave his permission to send the 'good-for-nothing' prisoner away to Camp III.

In his post-war testimony, Karl Frenzel admitted that he, certainly, could always withdraw from meting out this type of punishment, and that he would not have had to bear any consequences for doing so. He recollected that the only thing he was afraid of was that, if he did so, he would 'lose face' amongst the other German personnel, whose comment on such cases was that it was improper to be 'humane' towards the Jews. In Frenzel's view, the most frequently punished 'camp crimes' committed by the prisoners were the stealing of food, being caught bartering or having caused damage to the camp property. Depending on how serious a given crime was, the punishment ranged from 10 to 20 blows with a whip. Asked if he had had any pang of sympathy when he was administering such a painful type of punishment, he said that it would have been much worse if he had had to have those people shot. All the time, he insisted that he had treated the Sobibór prisoners well.

According to Bauer, the administering of punishment only took place when a Jewish prisoner-labourer had been found guilty of violating the camp rules. Moreover, he stated that the miscreant was normally punished by way of 20 to 30 blows with a whip. One of the German staff would give the order to whip the 'culprit', which the Jewish prisoners themselves had to execute. All the SS men, except for Johann Klier<sup>22</sup>, as well as all the Ukrainians had to carry whips. These they used to beat prisoners with. The whips had been made by Sobibór prisoner-leatherworkers who worked in the shoemakers' workshops. They usually fabricated them from the leather coming from suit-cases previously confiscated from the newly-arrived

---

<sup>22</sup> Johan Klier, hearing report, Frankfurt, 21 August 1950, file ref. No. 49/105, NIOD Archives.

transports. Whips were made from four or five leather strips sewn together, eighty centimetres long<sup>23</sup>.

Another fearsome punishment in the Sobibór camp, albeit temporarily enforced, was the sentencing of prisoners to join the *Strafkommando* (penal commando). Men were put to that group for minor offences (being late for roll-call, or for being thought to be working too slowly). As punishment, for three days, they had to carry on their shoulders a piece of red material which singled them out. Once marked, when they did any work, they had to do it running, they had no breaks and they had to work beyond their physical capacity. What is more, they only could eat while working. The penal commando ceased to exist almost as quickly as it had been formed. However, by that time, around 50 prisoners had undergone a terrible period of bullying and torture, which went on until those labourers had become so exhausted that they could no longer do any work. Therefore, they were systematically shot in the ‘lazaret’. The Germans who most often supervised this commando were Wagner, Frenzel and Wolf.

Tomasz Blatt claims that the penal commando was formed in the second half of 1943, but it was liquidated before October that same year. However, Estera Raab states that the penal commando existed from May to July 1943. None of the Sobibór survivors remembers a single case in which a prisoner who had ended up in the *Strafkommando* survived it. Tomasz Blatt recalls that its members were allowed to sleep only four hours a day.

Another way of terrorising the prisoners, apart from the bullying and beating, were the SS men’s dogs. Bauer claimed that there had been three dogs in the camp: Barry (a Saint Bernard dog), Zeppel (an Alsatian) and a black sheep dog which did not respond to the Germans’ commands. Barry was the one that was thought particularly dangerous and aggressive. Those who survived Sobibór state that Barry was as huge as a ‘calf’, and if he charged at a man, he could easily knock him down. Once, he even charged at Bauer<sup>24</sup>. He frequently accompanied Bolender, who had taken Barry over from the commander of the Ukrainian watchmen who left the camp. The Ukrainian who looked after Barry, and whose surname Bolender could not remember, was sent away from Sobibór as punishment because Barry had bitten another Ukrainian guard. Generally, Barry would rush towards anything or anybody that would make the slightest move. After the war, Bolender testified that during his service in Sobibór, Barry had never bitten anyone. But in fact he had. Once, he bit the Jew that looked after him, on another occasion he also bit a Jew that was rushing off to somewhere. Fortunately, in both of these cases, the incident did not bring any serious consequences. The Jew responsible for looking after Barry kept on cleaning and brushing him. Bolender also insisted that nobody had ever set the dog on the Jews, and that Barry had always followed him anywhere he went. During the day, Barry roamed about the camp. Later, Barry was transferred to Treblinka, where Kurt

<sup>23</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, StA.Do-Gom-PB-III-1136, Berlin, 8 October 1974, NIOD Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, StA.Do-WZ-III-1146, Berlin, 9 October 1974, MPLW Archives.

Franz became his new master, and he even took a few pictures of him. One of such pictures shows the dog in front of the entrance to a barrack<sup>25</sup>.

### 3. Kapos

Those that survived Sobibór, indeed, those that survived any labour or death camp in the Third Reich system state that the SS men were not the only ones who tormented their prisoners. The kapos could also be violent towards the other prisoners, whom they kept an eye on. They differed from the rest of the prisoners in that they wore a special arm band and a cap. Their main duty was to make sure that the prisoners from their own commandos worked at an appropriate pace. For this purpose, the Germans gave them whips. These some kapos used with great zeal to beat their fellow prisoners with any time they saw a German or a Ukrainian approaching. Very often, in order to suck up to the Germans even more and to preserve their privileged position, such people shouted and swore profusely while beating the prisoners under their charge. Indeed, there were cases when the Germans used the kapos to beat miscreants for them, when they themselves did not feel like doing so.

The kapos' privileged position also lay in the fact that they slept separately from the remaining prisoners, in slightly better conditions. Moses Sturm, who was appointed the first *Oberkapo* [Chief Kapo] by the Camp Commandant, as well as his first two assistants, Benjamin Katz and Herbert Siegel, came to Sobibór in June 1942. His function was to form the first working units meant to do particular types of work. In this way, the prisoner-labourer commandos were initiated. Such commandos were hierarchical in character: the Germans appointed the kapos, who were then 'first' in hierarchy in each commando. However, they were also held personally responsible to the German personnel for the efficiency of their task-force.

Each kapo frequently had several assistants assigned to him, the so-called 'Foremen'. Among others, post-war testimony mentions Menche Chaskiel (Kapo of the Hatters), Walter Poppert (Kapo of the *Waldkommando*), Stanisław Szmajzner (Kapo of the Maintenance Commando), Josef Podchlebnik (yet one more Kapo of the *Waldkommando*), and Josef Duniec (Kapo of the Sorting Labourers). The prisoner-labourers were appointed to particular commandos on the basis of their professions, the type of work they would have to perform, as well as on the number of labourers needed in that commando. The person who was on top of all the kapos and foremen was the Chief Kapo (the so-called *Gouverneur*)<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Barry, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>26</sup> Tomasz Blatt's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948; Aron Licht's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2761, (the date and the place where the account was given remains unknown), translated from Yiddish by Adam Bielecki; Leon Cymiel, interview, DVD recording/DVD's 1-3, USC Shoah Foundation Institute For Visual History and Education Archives, file ref. No. 29630, 26 March 1997; Mordechaj Goldfarb's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 02/2212, Haifa, 29 January 1962; Aleksander Peczerski, hearing report, IPN Archives, Lublin, Kijów, KGB the

The prisoners whom the Germans appointed as kapos did not volunteer, but were forced to perform this function. The range of their duties was quite broad, and so they had to supervise the other prisoners in their work, control the quality of the work done, check the cleanliness in the barracks, govern the prisoners during roll-calls and meals, check the prisoners' state of health, and mete out, on the Germans' orders, punishment for different acts of misdemeanour. Some of the kapos tried to treat their fellow prisoners in as much a humane way as possible. Others, on the other hand, who were the Germans' favourites, carried out all the orders with great zeal. That is why they were so much hated in the camp. By being so faithful to the Germans, they did not differ much from the brutal SS guards. Sometimes, the meting out of punishment, like beatings, was taken over by the SS men themselves, who considered that the punishment inflicted by the kapos had not been severe enough. In such situations, they thought that the kapos did not want to punish their fellow prisoners too excessively or to injure them. In such cases, the kapos themselves got beaten as well.

At least three or four of the German staff always accompanied the kapos during roll-calls, and they oversaw the counting of the prisoners. On such occasions, the SS men brutally showed the prisoners who held the real power in the camp. If any prisoner was out of line, when drawn up in parade formation, or if they moved too slowly when an order was barked out, their kapo was obliged to hit them hard. Sometimes, one or more of the SS men took over the kapo's task by whipping the prisoner even longer. Nonetheless, the kapos, just like the German overseers, held mastery over the prisoners' life and death. At the same time, they were fed better and lived in better conditions than the remaining prisoners. They were usually dressed in breeches, high well-polished boots and special caps. Moreover, they had the right to make free use of their whips.

The person who held the position of *Oberkapo* throughout much of the camp's existence, was Moses Sturm, whom the prisoners nick-named *Moisze Gouverneur* ['Moisze the Governor']. Frenzel ordered the tailors to sew for him a special outfit. It consisted of trousers with red stripes on the sides, a jacket with shiny buttons and three stars on the breast, red braces and a round hat with a red stripe around the crown. 'Moisze Gouverneur' held enormous power. The Germans supported him and ordered all the prisoners to doff their caps before him and to address him as 'Herr General-Governor'. Whoever failed to follow the instructions could expect twenty-five strokes with a whip. Post-war testimony reveals that some of the prisoners called him 'Mad Moisze', as no-one ever knew what he would do next, since his mood would change unexpectedly. At times he was cruel and would beat people for no apparent reason, yet, afterwards, he would come back to beg for forgiveness, crying

---

Special Investigations Department, 11 August 1961, translated from Russian by Wiesława Leśniewska; Kalmen Wewryk, *To Sobibor and back. An eyewitness account*, Włodawa 2008, translated from English by Marek Bem, p. 42; Michaił Affanasewicz Razgonajew, hearing report, Interrogation Department at the USSR Ministry of State Security of the Dniepropietrowsk Oblast, Dniepropietrowsk, 20 September 1948., cf. - Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

like a small boy. Sometimes he cursed God, while on other occasions, he stood and prayed. Dov Freiberg once heard a conversation when one of the prisoners asked Mojsze why he was so ruthless, especially because he knew very well that, like all the other Jews, he would finally end up in the gas chamber. Mojsze answered that he knew that perfectly well, but that beating and bullying anyone he could gave him satisfaction, and that he wanted to be the last to enter the gas chamber. Although he was completely unpredictable and frequently tyrannised his fellow prisoners, he persistently tried to convince them to escape from the camp. In the evenings, he often talked to others about escape. However, sometimes during such conversations, he would get into a fit of rage. He would then beat everyone around with anything he laid his hands on, and would yell, “[...] *You bastards, you can already see what is going on, and you’re just sitting like that. For fuck’s sake, I will show you how to do it [...]*”.

His first assistants were Benjamin Katz (‘Bunye’, ‘Bunio’) and Herbert Siegel (called ‘*Rajwitzer*’ - his pseudonym coming from the name of his birth place, i.e. the town of Rejowiec). Both Mojsze and Bunio came from Hrubieszów. In the summer of 1943, all three of them were killed by the Germans in connection with suspicions that they were preparing to escape from the camp. In fact, they did plan to do so, indeed, they even tried to strike a deal with a few Ukrainian guards.

The three of them were betrayed by Herbert Naftaniel, a German Jew from Berlin, who had revealed their plan of escape to the Germans. He was then promoted to take Moses Sturm’s place. In consequence, this event made many prisoners realise that they had to be extremely cautious all the time. They now knew that quite a few of them were always ready, in order to extend their own time on this Earth, to rat on their fellow prisoners and to collaborate with the Germans.

Those who survived Sobibór state that, during the first few days of his service, Herbert Naftaniel, called ‘Berliner’, behaved quite well towards the other prisoners. However, with time, he got worse and worse - to the point when people started saying that Berliner was strange and not completely sane. Berliner kept saying that, although he was born a Jew, in fact he was a German, and, therefore, he did not feel a member of the ‘Chosen People’. He also said that he was sure to return to Berlin and to regain his honour. The Germans had a special outfit and a cap made for him.

Berliner was loyal and fawning towards the Germans, but towards the Jews he remained ruthless. Whenever he saw a group of people sitting together, even in their barrack in the evening, he would approach them and demand to know what they were talking about. At night, he would also walk between the rows of plank beds to check if everyone was asleep.

Berliner was, thus, the Germans’ faithful dog. He always demanded that all the prisoners worked beyond their physical capacity. He freely administered punishment by whipping whenever he wanted to. He yelled at and cursed out the other prisoners, all the time puffing himself up, and indulging in his feeling of self-importance. Obviously, it gave him great pleasure to show his fellow prisoners that he had power over them. He had an overwhelming feeling that he was someone of great importance and better than the rest of the camp Jews.

Berliner became so confident about the power he had that he ignored Frenzel's publicly expressed order to increase the food ration for the Jews from the *Bahnhofkommando*. Berliner felt that they did not deserve such a reward, and told the cook not to prepare for them that extra portion. The *Bahnhofkommando* labourers complained about this to Frenzel, who got so furious that he gave them a free hand in dealing with Berliner. That was the moment, survivors relate, when the prisoners decided to get rid of him - they sentenced him to death.

At that time (the end of September and the beginning of October 1943), a group of conspirators was preparing the mass-revolt that ended the camp's existence. They all agreed that one of the prerequisites to implementing their plan, if they wanted to succeed, was to do away with Berliner. Thus, the carefully-prepared plan, the decisive and effective action, as a result of which the conspirators managed to 'liquidate' Berliner, boosted the prisoners' morale and strengthened their belief that the planned revolt and escape stood a chance of being successful<sup>27</sup>.

Berliner was later replaced by a Jew by the name of Schmith. Sobibór's survivors mention the following people who held the positions of Kapo: Benjamin Katz, Herbert Siegel, Szymon Pożycki, Hersz Pożycki, Abram Fibs ('Shpitz'), Walter Poppert ('Walter'), Zygmunt Tuchman, and 'Franz' (surname unknown).

#### 4. Music and singing in the camp

Post-war testimony states that Sobibór's SS men and Sobibór's Ukrainian guards frequently forced their prisoners to sing or play music. Indeed, from time to time, the German personnel created an orchestra out of Jewish musicians picked out from the transports. Music was also played through loudspeakers. In general, if prisoner-labourers were ordered to sing, they had to do so whether they liked it or not. However, there were times when they sang secretly, in quite a different way, and as either a discrete or overt act of defiance. Moreover, they sang spontaneously, just to themselves, for their own pleasure, doing so in their 'free' time after work<sup>28</sup>. Most often, though, the prisoners had to sing or perform music at somebody's command, for instance, when they were given the order to start singing by their kapo or by a member of the SS personnel.

The German personnel treated their prisoners' obligatory singing as a sort of military drill aimed at disciplining them, and those who did not sing loudly enough, or did so out of tune, or were not prompt enough to start, gave their overseers a pretext to bully them even more. Obligatory singing was part of the camp routine<sup>29</sup>. During the

<sup>27</sup> Stanisław Szmajzner, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-257.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Zielinski, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-96; Jakub Biskupicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959.

<sup>29</sup> Guido Fackler, *Muzyka w obozach koncentracyjnych 1933-1945* [Music in Concentration

daily roll-call, the Germans used the prisoners' singing as a macabre musical-setting for the infliction of punishment. The prisoners were also forced to sing on their way to and from work, or during special parties organised for the Sobibór personnel for their entertainment. Worse still, they had to sing when compelled to do enforced penal exercises, during roll-calls or even during executions<sup>30</sup>. On such occasions, the camp's guards did not tell the singing prisoners to sing any particular songs. As the survivors of Sobibór relate, the prisoners themselves chose songs which, they hoped, would put the Germans and Ukrainians in a better mood. Therefore, they most often chose German folk songs, often maudlin in nature. Yet, some overseers deliberately used the prisoners' singing as a way of humiliating them. For this purpose, they taught the prisoners specially prepared lyrics, whose obscene, bawdy and grotesque character was meant to insult the most important symbols of their prisoners' religion, and their ancestry<sup>31</sup>.

Additionally, music from the radio or gramophone was continuously played through the loudspeakers installed throughout in the camp, and the sounds of calm classical music or that of well-known music hits 'welcomed' the newly-arrived transports. Here, music served as part of the camp's camouflage. Throughout executions, various melodies were played as well, in order to confuse and calm down the future victims of Sobibór genocide, and to drown out the crying and shouting of those who were being murdered. After such a murderous 'action' had been completed, music was played again, this time to the perpetrators (who were usually being served alcohol) to minimize their inhibitions and to dispel their scruples and doubts which might have arisen as a result of their criminal actions.

As touched upon earlier, in the Sobibór camp, live orchestras were created, composed of both amateur and professional prisoner-musicians. One of the major tasks these orchestras had, was to give, in the roll-call yard, performances for their fellow prisoners, and for the SS personnel and the guards. Apparently, these concerts were meant to entertain the camp's prisoners. In reality, however, the true purpose hidden behind the creation of such orchestras was to turn the prisoners' attention away

---

Camps 1933-1945], „Muzykalia” VI, Judaica1, p. 2; Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 4; Samuel Lerer's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/104, 1945; Leon Feldhendler's account (in:) *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce* [Documents and Materials on the Time of the German Occupation of Poland. Camps], Łódź 1946, (ed.): by N. Blumental, Part I, Camps, Chapter V Sobibór, pp. 202-207; Selma Engel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0067, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem; Chaskiel Menche, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD 1, Tricht, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska, copy in Marek Bem's private collection; Mordechaj Goldfarb's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 02/2212, Haifa, 29 January 1962; Philip Bialowitz, Joseph Bialowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-174 and 175-197.

<sup>30</sup> Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file No. 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959; Hersz Cukierman, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944.

<sup>31</sup> Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

from what was happening in the camp, and to leave them as little ‘uncontrollable’ leisure time as possible<sup>32</sup>.

The composition of the orchestras and their repertoire depended on the newly-selected prisoners and the skills and abilities they possessed. The musicians had, in their repertoire, marches, dance music, popular songs and classical music. Anything the orchestra musicians needed to give their concerts came from newly-arrived transports. Yet, although it might be thought that the musicians were privileged within Sobibór, the reality was different. Quite the contrary, they stood no chance of survival. Like all the other prisoners, they were compelled to do labour, and their ‘musical career’ frequently ended after only one performance, after which they were deliberately force-marched to the gas chambers of Camp III.

From time to time, the Sobibór camp’s orchestra played music during the unloading of the newly-arrived transports and the selections which took place on the ramp afterwards. Massive executions were also accompanied by the music played by the camp’s orchestra. It can be said that these talented and highly-educated musicians and singers became ‘music slaves’ who had to be on stand-by non-stop. Naturally, they were closely connected with the SS men and the prisoner functionaries, yet this, paradoxically, put them in a very hazardous position. Any refusal to satisfy their superiors’ desire to listen to some music brought a tragic end to them.

Yet the special position held by these tragic individuals within the camp, guaranteed them minimum protection from the casual acts of violence on the part of the SS or Ukrainian personnel. It also prolonged their lives, albeit temporarily<sup>33</sup>. Because they lived for music, the moments when they could sing of their own accord or initiative was extremely vital to them, and their spontaneous and secret music was a source of some relaxation and inspiration to those who heard it. This offered them some consolation and faith, put them in a good mood by reminding them of their pre-Sobibór life. It helped them, at least for a short while, to forget about their utter loneliness and terrible fear. Singing boosted their courage and so became a form of their private resistance and rebellion. If they sang patriotic military and partisans’ songs, the lyrics brought an air of freedom. Their songs somehow served as a protection shield against the constant camp’s terror and oppression. It must be stressed, however, that the fact the Sobibór camp’s prisoners played music or sang in any way implies that their life there was bearable or livable. Music or singing did not change the bare facts that the life of every single prisoner was, sooner or later, meant to end inside the gas chamber<sup>34</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> Guido Fackler, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-11; Andrew Zielinski, *op.cit.*, pp.47-96; Dov Freiberg, *op.cit.*, p.53.

<sup>33</sup> Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, p. 74; Eda Lichtman’s testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959; Tomasz Blatt, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD 1, Marek Bem’s private collection, Włodawa, April 2008; Aleksander Peczerski, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Guido Fackler, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-20.



## CHAPTER VI

### EXTERMINATION

#### 1. On the railway ramp

The timetables for the trains coming to Sobibór did not follow any fixed rule or regular pattern. While a great number of transports arrived at the camp during the day, there were some, however, which came late at night. Thus, whenever the camp's prisoner-labourers heard the Commandant blowing his whistle, they knew a new transport was coming, and then the Jews from the *Bahnhofkommando* had to get ready for the unloading. At this point, the routine procedure of murdering an enormous number of people commenced. The Germans took the 'strategic' positions on the new arrivals' way to death, beginning from the ramp, through Camp II and the 'Road to Death', up to the gas chamber. Everything had to happen fast and under full control. German staff personnel were always present on the railway ramp while the Jews were being unloaded. There were no exceptions – no SS man was ever exempt from this duty. Each of them had to, sooner or later, supervise the extermination process at any one moment and on each single step of the way to the very end.

After the arrival of a new transport, the whole procedure usually ran smoothly, and each SS man had to be in the right place and at the right time. Everything was supervised by the camp's commandant. At that moment, all the work which was being performed in the camp had to be halted, only to be resumed after all the Jews from this particular train had been completely 'processed'<sup>1</sup>.

None of the new-arrivals knew what was going to happen when they found themselves at Sobibór. Some, though, while back in their ghettos, had heard whispers that Sobibór was a death camp. Still, although they suspected that it was not an ordinary labour camp, they could not believe, till the very last moment, what its real purpose was. Indeed, the very idea was so deranged. Therefore, there were times when the rising feeling of uncertainty, suspicion and fear among the newcomers caused utter confusion on the ramp. In such cases, the Germans immediately stepped into action, frequently making use of their whips and pistols, in order to prevent the Jews from making any attempts to put up resistance or opposition.

Some of the new-arrivals also looked for possibilities to save themselves at the last possible moment. They would offer the Germans money in the hope that they would be allowed to go away. Others, on the other hand, tried to hide themselves somewhere on the premises of the camp. From time to time, it turned out that some of the train wagons were damaged because their 'passengers' had managed to gouge holes in them in an attempt to jump out of the train on their way to the camp.

---

<sup>1</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, Dortmund, 5 January 1961, MPLW Archives.

Whenever the Germans received information, from the transport's escort, that there had been escapes during the journey, they were on stand-by and ready to act, with their machine guns loaded, when the first wagons were being rolled onto the ramp. In this way, any attempt to put up resistance was immediately nipped in the bud. However, the Germans tried to limit the use of their weapons as much as possible to avoid causing panic among the new-arrivals.

During the first two months in which Sobibór functioned, horse-drawn carts were the main means of internal transport – from the ramp to the lazaret, as well as from the ramp to the places where the luggage and other items were stored. Most probably, as early as in May 1942, the construction of a narrow-gauge railway line, connecting the ramp with Camp III, was commenced. The tracks were adapted so that small wagons could run along them. These wagons had a chassis normally used for mine carts, and their bodies were made in the form of a platform deck or a small wagon.

The Germans had to be informed beforehand that a given transport was coming to Sobibór. Before the train reached the Sobibór station, the German and Ukrainian guards were already waiting on the railway platform. The trains themselves were guarded by soldiers sitting on the roofs of the wagons or in the brakeman's observation points, which came out above some of the wagons. The railway-men from the Sobibór station had to set all the points so that the train could roll onto an appropriate track, from which the locomotive pulled a few wagons at a time to the siding located inside the camp<sup>2</sup>.

If a given transport consisted of a small number of wagons, the whole train ran straight onto the camp's ramp. At one go, eleven wagons could enter the camp. As soon as the main gate was opened, the first wagons were rolled towards the buffer stop. When the wagons stopped, the armed Ukrainians formed a cordon to make it impossible for the new-arrivals to escape. Additionally, the locomotive was unfastened so that it could drive out of the camp. The Germans made sure that it left the camp's premises as quickly as possible to speed up the whole procedure, but also to limit the possibility that the engine-driver would notice what was happening inside. After the engine had left, the gate was closed. At that time, some of the prisoner-labourers from the camp sometimes tried to grab at the chance, while the train was standing on the ramp, of staging an escape<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Piwoński's account, ZStL-643/71-443, Lublin, 29 April 1975, MPŁW Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Moshe Bahir's testimony, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 03/2353-1733/159, Tel Aviv, 12 August 1960, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Dariusz Dołubizna, *Maszynista* [The Engine Driver], Suwałki 1997; Dariusz Dołubizno, a retired railwayman, describes an interesting story in his memoirs, "[...] *I kept thinking about the people with whom I used to work. I recalled those who were still alive and those who had passed away. What I could say (about many of them) was that "he was a great friend, a good work mate". It would be hard to enumerate all of them here...Gawlik, once, when he came to visit me in my house, threw some light on a certain mystery from the time of the Nazi occupation. As a small boy, he had worked as an assistant to an engine-driver in the engine*

Unlike the Polish or Soviet Jews, the Jews from Western Europe were treated in a different way when they arrived at Sobibór. First, in the Westerbork transit camp, each transport was carefully prepared to provide appropriate travelling conditions. Second, on board of each train there were doctors and nurses to take care of the sick, and guardians who looked after the children and the disabled. Third, there was plenty of food and medicine on the train. Therefore, sometimes, the first thing which the Jews from France, Holland or Germany did after disembarking their train in Sobibór was to ask the *Bahnhofkommando* prisoner-labourers what time the next train, on which they were to continue their journey, was due to leave<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, there were cases when the new-arrivals were ‘welcomed’ with music played through the loudspeakers or played by the prisoners’ band.

At first, when the Sobibór camp was in operation, it was the SS men and the Ukrainians that opened the doors of the trains’ wagons, where they found completely dazed and disoriented Jews. Later, the camp’s commandants established a principle which proved more effective and whose originator and ardent supporter was Christian Wirth. The Germans began to engage Jews themselves in the extermination process. They selected, from the people gathered on the ramp, ‘labourers’ appointed to carry out particular duties connected with killing those who arrived at the camp. The newly-selected prisoners were divided into commandos, which were present at each successive phase of the extermination process. So, on disembarking, those who were being ‘processed’ could see that, nearby, there was a group of 25 Jews – prisoners from the ‘railway unit’ dressed in blue overalls and caps (with a *BK* emblem, which stood for *Bahnhofkommando*, embroidered on their caps). The caps looked like the ones the German soldiers from the mountain divisions wore. Therefore, if these prisoners had not been speaking Yiddish, they might easily have been taken for Germans<sup>5</sup>.

---

*house in Skarżysko Kamienna. He managed to drive an engine uneventfully throughout the time of the occupation, but certain events had sunk deep in his psyche. Many times he drove transports of Jews to the concentration camp in Sobibór, in Lubelszczyzna [the Lublin region]. On such occasions, when he was parking his engine before the transport was due to leave, those who were soon to find themselves inside the wagons would come up to the engine. They offered him and his colleagues gold in different forms and other valuables in return for any information about the destination place of their transport. The SS man who was standing nearby, however, listened to the conversation very carefully because the disclosure of this type of information was threatened with execution by shooting on the spot. Yet, the engine crew performed heroic deeds, especially on their way back from Sobibór. They often hid people in the water vat of the tender. It never occurred to the supervising Nazis to check that part of the engine. As a result, the constant fear of being caught red-handed, together with other stresses, led to Marian [Gawlik] developing a speech disorder [...]*”.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Margulies’s account, Yad Vashem Archives, case file 03/7019, (the date and the place where the testimony was made remains unknown), translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Aurelia Jaworska, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 302/119.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Cymiel, interview, DVD recording/DVD’s 1-3, USC Shoah Foundation Institute

The *Bahnhofkommado* was the first to spring into action. On the Germans' order, they opened the wagons' doors and told the people inside to get out, helping them to alight from the train and to carry their heavy luggage. Initially, the 'passengers' had to jump off the wagons straight onto the ground. In the summer of 1942, in order to make the unloading process more effective, the Germans had the area stretching along the camp's siding covered with earth to form a sort of ramp. The remains of this ramp survived till the 1960's<sup>6</sup>. The sick, the disabled, the old, the children who had got lost, as well as all those unable to move around on their own, were told to stand aside and wait.

The first thing all new-comers saw upon disembarking were pretty and neat homes and buildings surrounded by colourful gardens, and with well-maintained entrance-ways. Everything that then followed happened at a rapid pace. This created general chaos, and, as a consequence, gave the newly-arrived prisoners no time to think. All that time, the Germans kept swearing and yelling and shouting out their orders, as well as making free use of their whips, batons or rifle butts. With the unloading process complete, the men and the women who could move about on their own were told to form two separate groups. Children under six years old stayed with their mothers. If a lonely child happened to have found itself among this crowd of complete strangers, it was immediately pushed towards one of the women.

After the newly-arrived prisoners alighted from the train, they were led towards Camp II. Meanwhile, the railway commando prisoner-labourers had to transport a selected group of people to the lazaret, remove from the wagons the corpses of those who had died on the way to Sobibór and throw them onto the narrow-gauge wagons, which were in turn taken to Camp III. They also had to collect the luggage scattered around in the wagons and on the ramp.

It was the exception rather than the rule that the Jews who were brought to Sobibór were selected for work. It was even more seldom that they were selected for labour in other camps. Most probably, this happened only when the Sobibór camp's commandant received a request which was more like an order, in fact<sup>7</sup>. It seems

---

Archives For Visual History and Education, file ref. No. 29630, 26 March 1997; Moshe Bahir's testimony, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 03/2353 - 1733/159, Tel Aviv, 12 August 1960, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Jakub Biskupicz, transcript of DVD recording/DVD's 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG - 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Aron Licht's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2761, (the date and the place where the testimony was given - none), translated from Yiddish by Adam Bielecki; Salomon Podchlebnik, 's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/10, 15 September 1944; Philip Bialowitz, Joseph Bialowitz, *Bunt w Sobiborze* [Revolt at Sobibór], Warszawa 2008, pp. 175-197.

<sup>6</sup> On the basis of the photo of the ramp of the Sobibór railway station (the 1960's). Thomas Blatt's private collection.

<sup>7</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 8. During the first three years of the German occupation, as many as 17 labour camps were in operation in the Chełm District alone. Most of the camps were medium-sized, while 5 of them were large camps. These were the camps

quite likely that the ‘Operation Reinhardt’ camps regularly received ‘contracts’ for a certain batch of labourers from the labour camps of the General Government. Therefore, any time the number of deportees decreased (on account of breaks in transports, for example), the SS might have felt some pressure, on the part of the commandants of the local labour camps, to hand-over some prisoner-labourers. It cannot be precluded, then, that it was those ‘permanent labourers’ from Sobibór that were sent to the local labour camps, and not those freshly selected ones from new transports<sup>8</sup>.

---

in Krychów (approx. 1,500 people), Siedliszcze (1000 people), Staw (800), Sajczyce (600) and Włodawa (500). The smallest camp, situated in Kamień, had 150 Jews. In total, they all could accommodate more than 8,000 people at a time. Altogether, these camps imprisoned around 15,000 people, Jews in particular. With time, the commandants of the camps in Krychów, Luta, Osowa and Ujazdów sent, in agreement with the SS, their emaciated prisoners who were no longer able to do any physical labour, to the gas chambers in Sobibór. The biggest labour camp of this type in the Lublin region was the peat mine in Dorohuczka.

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Novitch, *op.cit.*, p. 149. ‘Wagner’s list’ which some of the survivors mention was perhaps a listing for such a group of prisoners, which, for some unknown reason, was cancelled. Moshe Bahir describes Gustav Wagner’s position in Sobibór in the following way: “[...] in Sobibór, he was responsible for counting the Jews who were arriving in new transports, selecting those who were suitable to do labour, as well as collecting the valuables which belonged to the newcomers. He was also responsible for all the camp’s administrative work, but especially for sending thousands of people to the gas chambers [...]”. **Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-224:** “[...] one Sunday afternoon, Wagner came into our barrack. He was in a good mood. He started, patiently and with a lot of zeal, to note down the personal data of all the people there, like surname, age, place of birth, all the time joking, “When were you born? Where were you born? Why were you born?” When I told him that my name was Berale, he did not want to accept this and tried to make up a new name for me. Finally, he said, “I’ll put down ‘Borys’, do you agree?”. Of course, I agreed.. After Wagner left, we gathered together, wondering why he had come and put down the details of our personal data [...]”. **The witnesses who survived the selection on the Sobibór ramp and who, due to this, got out of the camp, are:** Joseph Schnitzer, Interview, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 11 April 1995, translated from English by Marek Bem. (Prague, early March 1942, the first transports (of women); 3-4 weeks later – men’s transports to Majdanek; 2-3 weeks later – transport of married men (including Schnitzer) to the transit camp in Żylin; 2-3 days of stay in Żylin; 22 May - transport to Rejowiec via Preszów; 24 or 25 May – arrival in Rejowiec; 22 July, 9.00 a.m. - gathering on the square before being deported to Sobibór; Lucie Pollak-Langford, Interview, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 11 April 1995, translated from English by Marek Bem (she was deported in April 1942, spent 2-3 weeks in Theresienstadt; 2-3 days’ journey to Lublin, from where she was taken to Sobibór); Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, pp. 72-73, (an excerpt of Mirjam Penha-Blits’s memoirs written for Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie in 1947), translated from English by Marek Bem; Penha-Blits Mirjam arrived at Sobibór in the transport from Holland on 13 March 1943. According to her later explanation, this transport was most probably due to go to Auschwitz. After two days’ journey, the train, which was made up of passenger wagons, arrived there. However,

When the first batch of wagons was completely empty, the Bahnhofskommando's task now was to clean them out. They had to scrub the floors and walls, and to empty the buckets full of body waste. The wagons were to be used again, so they could not bear any traces of what had been happening inside them and what purpose they had really served. The things left behind by the newly-arrived prisoners on the ramp also had to be cleared away. Finally, the Germans checked whether all the wagons were empty. The engine-driver, who, all that time, was waiting on the siding outside the camp, drove back into the camp, took the wagons away, and, after a while, rolled inside the camp another batch of wagons full of Jews. The whole unloading procedure was started anew.

The last thing which had to be done in order to remove any trace of there having been any Jews in the German extermination centre in Sobibór, was to clear the nearby railway tracks along which the Jewish transports ran. It so happened that a number of Polish families had been resettled from the Żywiec district to the village of Stulno, situated not far from Sobibór. The locals, who at first treated the newcomers with considerable distance, later accommodated them in their own homes. The new settlers earned a living by working for the local peasants. Their children had a possibility to go to school, but only the younger ones did. Older children had to help their parents in their work.

In 1942, the Germans formed, out of these resettled children, a group which, once a week, had to clear a two-kilometre section of the nearby railway tracks. The children were to gather everything the Jews had thrown out of the train, usually in the neighbourhood of the Sobibór camp. Most often, these were postcards, letters, documents and photographs<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. From the railway ramp to the gas chamber

Exhausted by an extremely long journey by train, all the newly-arrived Jews greeted with relief the end of their journey, the possibility of getting out of the train

---

for some unknown reason, it stood there for some time only, with nothing happening. No one was allowed to leave the train. After a few hours, the train departed, and after two more days it arrived at Sobibór; Sofia Hoisman-Engelsman, Interview, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, 7 February, 1996, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Nina Czapnik's testimony, 147 Js 43/69, Hamburg, 28 March 1966; Rachela Milecznoj's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, transcript of the recording/tape No. 0276, translated from Russian by Wiesława Leśniewska; Rachela Milecznoj's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, transcript of the recording/tape No. 0276, translated from Russian by Wiesława Leśniewska; Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p.73 (testimony given by Isaac Cohen before Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 20 October 1947). The third consecutive transport from Holland left for Sobibór on 17 March 1943 (964 people). Isaac Cohen was the only deportee from that transport who survived World War II.

<sup>9</sup> The court's decision to discontinue the criminal proceedings, 31 March 2005, IPN Archives, Regional Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Katowice, file ref. No. S 5/00/Zn, p. 15.

onto the platform and a breath of fresh air. Those who had alighted from the train were offered some water to drink and were promised some tea or coffee which, as they were told, would be distributed soon after they had taken a bath and had undergone disinfection. These well thought-out announcements were one of the methods the Germans used to make sure that the Jews would march, quickly and calmly, to the gas chambers. The procedure of the unloading of those being 'processed', arranging them on the ramp, followed by their marching towards the other parts of the camp, was always the same.

More or less in the place where the siding ended, west of the ramp and perpendicularly to the railway tracks and to the main camp road, the newly-arrived prisoners entered a road lined with a high fence. This road led them to a large barrack, where they were told to leave their luggage. This storage barrack, as well as two smaller barracks, which perpendicularly adjoined the large barrack from the north, had been built in June 1942. In this storage barrack, used for the prisoners' luggage (most probably, this was once a huge military stable-block, but without the gable walls; perhaps it was one of the dismantled stable-blocks originally built in the pre-war military barracks area of Włodawa), the Jews left their suitcases, rucksacks and travel bundles. The two smaller barracks were the places where the luggage was unpacked, the contents taken out to be sorted. Thus, instead of leaving all their property on the ramp, the newcomers could carry it to this special storehouse and leave it for the Jewish labourers to take care of. Due to this, the Germans could economise on time and give their victims the false hope that, by leaving their property with the Jewish labourers, they could be sure to get it back afterwards.

Some of the Jews refused to do so. They had doubts whether they could or should part with what was important and valuable to them, like documents, money, jewellery or medicine. In such cases, at first, the Germans tried to convince them to change their minds through gentle persuasion, telling the prisoners that they would get their property back later. The camp's personnel had mastered the art of deceiving the new-arrivals to perfection. However, whenever these tricks failed, the Germans resorted to the most brutal methods of pacifying the crowds at their slightest attempt to put up any resistance. They used violence, yet, at the same time gave those people some hope. In this way, the brutality of the supervisors taking their victims for 'disinfection' could easily be explained through the fact that they were in a hurry and that they had to 'serve' a huge group of people waiting for their turn in the 'bath house'.

When the prisoners had left the 'luggage barrack', now with no luggage in their hands, they entered Camp II, where they were placed within two groups – a group of men and a group of women with their children. More or less at that time, the Germans took the soldiers who had been escorting the newcomers and a group of Jews specially selected from the newly-arrived transport, to Camp I or to the square between Camps I and II. There were some tables laid out for the soldiers, with sweet coffee, bread and jam. While the soldiers were eating the food, they would beckon Jewish prisoners over, one by one, and would ask them questions like: have you been working here long? Is the food good here? Are you satisfied with the working

conditions here? Do you want to go back home? Certainly, the answers were such as to please the Germans, who struck up polite conversations with the future victims, frequently took children up to their arms and gave them sweets. Next, the new-arrivals were given postcards and were told to write a message to their family and friends. The content always had to be the same – we've arrived at a labour camp, we've been given good food, we're going to get a job suitable for us. The escorting officers observed all this, took pictures and made notes. Later, they said goodbye to the camp's officers and left, reassured that the people they had escorted to the camp would stay there to live and to work<sup>10</sup>.

At this moment, one of the SS men always gave a short speech to all the newcomers present on the square of Camp II. Most often, this man was Oberscharführer Hermann Michel. The prisoner-labourers called him 'the doctor' because he wore a white overall whenever he gave such speeches. Sometimes, they also called him 'the preacher' because his 'welcoming' speeches were so carefully and skilfully prepared. He spoke in German, but he did not care whether his listeners could understand anything or not. Those who did not know German watched the reactions of those who did. He spoke in a most convincing way, telling the people gathered that, in light of the present military situation, they would be sent to settle in the uninhabited lands which had been occupied by the German army. He also assured the prisoners that each of them would get a job there. But first, he said, for sanitary reasons, they would have to take a shower and undergo disinfection. He greatly encouraged them to write postcards to their relatives to inform them that they were in good health and that they were being resettled within a decent place.

Some of those Jews always asked him questions, like: what will happen to our wives? What will they be doing in those new places? He would reply that the women would find themselves enough work to do in their new households. But if a woman, he said, insists on going to work, who will stop her? Sometimes, he described the prospect of this camp as just a transit camp, from which, in a matter of days, they would leave for Ukraine. He also said that, perhaps, they would be granted autonomy there. On other occasions, he told them that they would be deported to Riga. There were times when his eloquent and witty replies were greeted with applause. And so, when the German saw that he had managed to convince everyone to his point of view, and that the Jews gathered on the square believed his tales, which put them in a good mood, he would start giving out orders. All of them had to undress, put all their items of clothing in one place, neatly arrange all their bundles in perfect order, count their money and the amount of jewellery which they were to hand over to deposit, mark their clothes to avoid situations in which someone else would take them by mistake, and, finally, go to the 'bath-house' to have a shower.

The prisoners were obliged to deposit all their valuable hand-carried possessions. On the square of Camp II, there was a small barrack with the sign 'Cash Desk' on

---

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Margulies's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file 03/7019, (the date and the place where the account was given is unknown), translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Stanisław Szmajzner, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-241.

its door. The German sitting inside received from the Jews all their valuables. He reminded them to remember the number he was giving them so that, later, they could collect their things without any problem. He warned them that if any guard caught them having any valuables with them after the shower, they would be punished. He also said that they did not have to take any towels or soap with them because all this would be distributed among the prisoners in the bath house<sup>11</sup>.

Contrary to the camp's law, many of the newcomers tried to discretely bury their money or gold in the ground, in the hope that they could dig them up later. Next, Michel ordered the prisoners to undress. They had to do so in the open air even when the temperature was below zero, as only part of this square was shielded from the wind and rain. Most probably, this part was covered by a wooden canopy adjacent to the fence. There were pegs hammered in the planks there so that the prisoners could hang their clothes to protect them from being soaked or getting dirty. For most men, it was the first time they had had to undress in the presence of the remaining members of their families, not to mention all the strangers standing around. The women undressed under the other canopy. Any time they were too embarrassed or simply refused to do this, the German guards started to scream at them<sup>12</sup>.

Soon afterwards, the prisoners were ordered to enter the 'Heavenly Avenue' (*Himmelfahrtstrasse*). This was a few-metre wide road which ran between two rows of barbed-wire fence interwoven with green pine tree branches. The road, in fact, led to the gas chamber. It was 250 metres long. To enter the road, the prisoners started from the square in Camp II and went through a gate. But first, they had to pass by the afore-mentioned 'Cash Desk', where an SS man was sitting. Initially, this individual was Alfred Ittner; several weeks later he was replaced by Herbert Floss. The next 'cashier' was Hans-Heinz Schutt. Here, as mentioned previously, the Jews had to deposit their money, jewellery and all the other valuable things. In doing so, they never received any receipt. Indeed, no list of the newcomers to the camp was ever made, either. The 'cashier' only told each of them an appropriate number which they were supposed to remember.

After the last victim had gone through the gate leading onto the 'Road to Heaven', Anton Novak and the Wolf brothers, accompanied by their Jewish working commandos, entered the place where, only a minute before, the newly-arrived transport had been undressing. They then quickly cleared the area of the clothes, and took them through a special entrance, to the nearby barracks for sorting (these were situated in Camp II, behind its northern fence). Johann Klier's commando took the discarded shoes away to another barrack, where they were sorted according to their size and quality<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Dov Freiberg, transcript of his account, DVD recordings, Marek Bem's private collection, DVD's 1-2, Ramla/Israel, 21 October 1995, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

<sup>12</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, StA.Do-WZ-II-80, Hagen, 30 November 1965, MPLW Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Klier, hearing report, Frankfurt, 21 August 1950, case file 49/105, NIOD Archives.

As soon as these commandos had done their job, Beckmann and Groth came to Camp II with another commando, whose task was to collect all those things which had been left there. Particularly close attention was paid to documents, photographs and letters. All these things were taken to the camp's incinerator to be burnt. Next, the whole area was raked over and levelled off in order to obliterate any trace of what had been happening before. Everything had to be ready for the next 'batch' of prisoners<sup>14</sup>.

At the end of the '*Himmelfahrtstrasse*' and in front of the fence of Camp III, there was, on the left-hand side, a fork of this road, which led to three barracks adjoined to each other by means of gable walls. In various testimonies and accounts, the barracks were frequently referred to as those where the women, right before they entered the gas chamber, had had their hair sheared. The barracks were built in 1942, most probably at the time when the gas chamber was being rebuilt. The women's hair was sheared by a dozen or so young Jewish men (who were selected for this work occasionally, as there was no permanent commando for this type of labour). In the camp's jargon, the men were nicknamed 'friseurs'.

Some of the Sobibór camp's survivors described the whole procedure of shearing women's hair in their post-war accounts. According to them, the hairdressers' commando was taken to the third part of the barrack, where the women were already sitting on benches, completely naked, waiting to have their hair sheared. The young men – the 'friseurs' - were absolutely forbidden to say a single word to the women behind whom they were standing and whose hair they were about to cut. First, the 'hairdressers' had to remove all the hair accessories, like hair pins, combs or hair clips before they could get down to their task. When all the women had had their hair cut, they were led out of the barrack, whose exit door led directly to the gate of Camp III. There, it either met the end of the '*Himmelfahrtstrasse*', or the exit and the '*Himmelfahrtstrasse*' met back in front of the gate of Camp III. When the women had left the barrack, the 'hairdressers' had to gather all the hair and clean up the barrack. The hair was formed into bales, which, after some time, were sent to Lublin. From there, the *SS-Standortverwaltung* (the General Property Management) forwarded the bales to the 'Reimann' company near Wrocław, where the hair was processed. The company paid half a Reichmark for a kilo of hair<sup>15</sup>.

However, most of the accounts or witness's testimonies (of both the former Sobibór prisoners and German, as well as the Ukrainian personnel) do not unambiguously imply that this building complex was used solely for this particular purpose<sup>16</sup>. It can only be presumed that the three barracks adjoining each other, one of which served as the 'hairdresser's', were the places where women and children were kept and forced to undress.

<sup>14</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, ZStL-251/59-8-1594 and 1671, Berlin, November/December 1962, MPEW Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Józef Marszałek, *Majdanek, Geschichte und Wirklichkeit lines Vernichtungslagers*, Reinbek/ Rowohlt, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 92.

When these barracks were completed, the Germans changed established routine and drove the women and their children inside them right after the ‘speeches’ were made on the square of Camp II. Due to this, women no longer had to undress in the presence of men. In my opinion, it is this particular aspect that was decisive in the Germans’ creation of such a communication between Camp II and the gas chamber. In this way, they eliminated any situations that would be hazardous to the rate, control and efficiency of the extermination process. For a Jewish woman, who was completely unaware that her life was in danger, there was nothing more drastic than having her children taken away from her or being forced to undress publicly, especially with male strangers around. Thus, we can imagine how, during the first months of the functioning of Sobibór, the fact that the newly-arrived women had to undress in the presence of men on the same square must have been problematic for both the German and Ukrainian guards. Obviously, these circumstances prolonged the process of forming groups of Jews in Camp II, and made it difficult for them to secure discipline among the newcomers<sup>17</sup>.

Some of the survivors’ accounts clearly point to the fact that at one moment the men stayed in Camp II, while the women disappeared, through a certain gate, somewhere into the unknown. The separation of the men from the women and their children enabled the Germans to more efficiently perform their duties. Each group was force-marched towards the ‘bath-house’ by the Germans and the Ukrainian watchmen alike. The Germans were equipped with whips and the Ukrainians with bats which they used to beat their victims at the smallest attempt of resistance or when they were reluctant to enter the gas chambers. At the same time, a group of armed watchmen stood on the outer sides of the “*Himmelfahrtstrasse*”, where they constantly watched what was going on inside the passage. As a rule, right before entering the gas chambers, sensing something was wrong, the Jews tried to put up resistance by refusing to go inside, but the watchmen and the Germans forced them to do so.

### 3. The gas chamber

The victims were shoved into the gas chamber naked and with their hands raised so that the maximum possible number of people was ‘packed’ inside<sup>18</sup>. The resulting crush in each of the rooms of the gas chamber limited the amount of air to the minimum, which enabled the killing fumes to work faster and more effectively (the most effective gas chambers were those with low walls, i.e. no more than two metres high, and compact). In order to preclude the possibility of the outbreak of panic among the people who were being so processed, the interior of each chamber had been furnished to look like a typical bath house. Thus, they were equipped with dummy hydraulic installations and showers<sup>19</sup>. Sometimes, for more camouflage, the victims, before entering the gas chamber, were given a piece of soap.

<sup>17</sup> Estera Raab, DVD interview/DVD 1 November 2007. Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>18</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, Hagen, 6 October and 15 November 1965, MPLW .

<sup>19</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, StA.Do-X’65-177, Hagen, 16 October 1965, MPLW Archives.

The people herded in the gas chamber were killed by means of carbon monoxide produced by an internal combustion engine which was placed in the extension added to the rear part of the gas chamber. The engine's exhaust system was attached to the chamber by means of special plumbing which led the exhaust fumes into each room. The process of gassing a 500-person group of Jews lasted about half an hour. After that, the engine stopped and a group of Jewish prisoner-labourers opened the door in the side wall of the gas chamber building. A German guard then ordered the prisoners to separate the bodies and take them out of the rooms. First, the *Sonderkommando* had to air all the rooms out.

The Jewish labourers, members of the so-called *Sonderkommando* [special commando] had the task of emptying and cleaning up the gas chamber. Each room of the gas chamber had its external door in the side wall. The floor sloped down towards that door in order to facilitate the process of removing the corpses and cleaning up the room. The bodies falling out of the rooms were entangled with each other. In the upright position, they looked as if they had been frozen while making some convulsive movements. Some of the corpses lay one on top of another, some of them remained on their knees. The bodies were covered in excrement, urine and saliva. On the whole, they looked 'normal', though the tips of the noses and the lips of some of them were bluish. In some of the corpses the eyes were shut, others had their eyes opened and turned upwards. The bodies were still warm. Sometimes, some of the Jews survived their gassing. In such cases, a German guard finished them off with his gun. The *Sonderkommando* prisoners had to arrange the bodies in the yard in front of the gas chamber<sup>20</sup>.

The next group of Jewish labourers opened, by means of iron hooks, the corpses' jaws, and used small hammers to knock out gold teeth, dental bridges and crowns. Another group examined the body holes in search of money, diamonds and gold. Yet another group had to throw the already 'cleared' corpses into the narrow-gauge wagons. The narrow-gauge railway line started right next to the gas chamber and ran parallel to the chamber's wall where there were the external doors of each particular room of the gas chamber. At present, it is hard to state whether the gas chamber rooms were situated on both sides of the corridor running through the building, or whether they formed only one row. Obviously, the location of these rooms must have affected the arrangement of the narrow-gauge tracks situated next to the gas chamber. In the post-war period, some of the guards who had served in Sobibór at the time when the camp was still under construction testified that the narrow-gauge railway had been next to the gas chamber from the very first moment the camp became operational. According to them, at the time when the gas chamber was undergoing a trial period, the bodies of the first gassed Jews were carted away to the burial pits by means of narrow-gauge wagons. Prisoner-labourers had to pull the wagons full of corpses towards the burial pits or, in the second stage of the functioning of the camp, towards the crematorium.

---

<sup>20</sup> Mieczysław Sękiewicz's testimony, Instytut Zachodni [the Western Institute] in Poznań. Document III – 42, Konin, report, pp. 90-91.

The corpses were thrown into the burial pits right from the wagons which the prisoner-labourers tilted. Since the pits were deep, the prisoners used special chutes made from boards, which they placed on the side wall of the pits. In this way, each pit was prevented from collapsing inwards, and the whole process of throwing the corpses into them was made more effective. Next, the corpses were arranged within the pits. They were put one next to another, with their heads facing, alternately, one or the other side. It cannot be precluded, like it was in the Chelmno camp, that the prisoners were told to cut off certain parts of the bodies to make as much room for the next corpses as possible. Each layer of bodies was covered with lime, or chloride and sand.

In order to establish the approximate number of victims buried in one grave (which was of a specific size), it is possible to make an attempt to estimate how much space one body took up. Since, among the murdered were both men and women, children and adults, I have limited this analysis to the 'overvalued average', which means the body of an adult man. If we use this ratio in calculating the number of bodies buried by the Germans in the burial pits, this, still, has to be a very careful calculation on account of the fact that small women and even smaller children will be omitted. Also, it is not possible to measure the empty space between the bodies, but if we consider the average height of a man to be 173 cm, we might accept, then, that the space taken up by the human body is 0,093 m<sup>3</sup>.

The Germans aimed at the most effective utilisation of the burial pits; it seems plausible, therefore, that they must have made sure that the burial commando arranged the corpses as carefully and effectively as possible. If we assume the average volume of a human body to be 0,093m<sup>3</sup>, any calculations of the size of a typical burial pit will be a realistic estimate. Normally, burial pits are described as cubic in shape. In Sobibór, however, the huge graves must have been the shape of an isosceles upside-down trapezium, with the shorter base at the bottom of these graves. The deeper a given pit was, the more sloping it had to be, in order to prevent its sides from sliding inwards.

The soil in the area of former camp III is sandy, which, on the one hand, made it easier to dig burial pits, but, on the other, made the graves less stable. Following these lines, we may accept the notion that the edges of all the pits were cut at an angle. However, the precise angle of inclination of the sides of the pits remains unknown, and it obviously depends on the size of each particular pit. In my calculations of the volume of the graves uncovered in the area of the former camp, I put forward that the slope indicator had to be about 60 degrees. As the total volume of the four pits uncovered so far (these were the pits made in the first phase when Sobibór was in operation, i.e. the corpses were buried there) amounts to 15,000m<sup>3</sup>, it can be assumed that if filled up to the full, they could have accommodated more than 120,000 human corpses.

#### 4. The disposal of the bodies of murdered Jews

In the summer of 1942, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler came to *KL Auschwitz* to watch the whole extermination process, from the unloading of the newly-arrived Jews, up to the moment when their bodies were buried in the burial pits. During that period, the corpses were not yet burnt, but were thrown into the pits. During that visit, Himmler did not raise any objections; neither did he make any comments on what he had been a witness to. His visit was soon followed by that of Standartenführer Blobel, an official in Eichmann's office, from where he brought the order to remove the bodies from the mass graves and burn them. Also, the ashes were to be removed so that, in the future, it would not be possible to count the number of the incinerated corpses. Prior to his visit to *Auschwitz*, Blobel had carried out experiments with various ways of burning dead bodies in Chełmno-on-Ner.

Eichmann had told Blobel to show the Commandant of *Auschwitz* these different ways of incinerating corpses, as well as the necessary equipment. For this purpose, Rudolf Höss and a specialist in burning corpses from his camp, Franz Hossler, went to Chełmno-on-Ner. On 15 September 1942, the Main SS Administration-Economy Office gave *KL Auschwitz* official permission to send a car to Łódź [Lodz] to inspect a station which conducted, within 'Operation Reinhardt', research into open-air furnaces. The official reason for this expedition was to explore the possibility of burning corpses in pyres, and doing so economically and efficiently. At that time, SS-Standartenführer Paul Blobel was staying in the Chełmno camp. The fact that Rudolf Höss paid a visit to Chełmno-on-Ner was confirmed by the British intelligence office, as they had managed to capture the radio message from September 15 1942 which contained information about it<sup>21</sup>.

During his visit to Chełmno, Rudolf Höss had a possibility to acquaint himself with Blobel's experiments with the technology of the disposal of dead bodies. Blobel had had various makeshift furnaces built, in which corpses were incinerated by means of wood and petrol. He also made attempts to destroy bodies with explosives, but this did not bring any desirable effects. The ashes, which were first ground in special stationary mills, were scattered in the nearby forest<sup>22</sup>. In Chełmno, Rudolf

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Tyas, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> Lucja Pawlicka-Nowak, *Badania archeologiczne na terenie byłego ośrodka zagłady w Chełmnie nad Nerem* [Archaeological Research in the Grounds of the Chełmno-on-Ner Extermination Centre] (in:) *Mówią świadkowie Chełmna* [Chełmno Witnesses Speak], Konin-Łódź 2004, pp. 147-160: **Heinrich May, with reference to the extermination camp in Chełmno-on-Ner:** „[...] when I was, again, working with Bothmann in summer 1942, and while I was putting up a wooden pole fence, I could see the graves, and an unbearable sweetish stench was floating all around the place. I had to cover my nose and I left the place as soon as possible. Bothmann showed me large round bulges which were forming on those long graves, out of which light vapours were floating into the air, visible in the sun. Bothmann told me that 250,000 bodies lay buried there, but that at least 100,000 more were planned to be buried. One day, Bothmann came to the forestry office and said that his superiors had ordered him to burn all the corpses. Therefore, he had already had the graves opened, after which he tried to burn the corpses by means of

Höss was also shown the vans especially adapted for killing people through carbon monoxide fumes. However, the Commandant of the Chelmno camp claimed that they had proved defective.

Standartenführer Blobel got the order to find and destroy all the mass graves in the Eastern territories. His unit which was made responsible for carrying out this task, was code-named 'Aktion 1005'. The plan of the implementation of the action was ready in early 1942.

In *Auschwitz*, still in the summer of 1942, corpses were buried in mass graves. It was only at the end of the summer that different methods of burning bodies were introduced. At first, bodies were incinerated within wooden pyres, which could accommodate up to 2,000 corpses. Later, the pyres were replaced by burial pits, where the bodies were incinerated. This came about in the earlier phase of the camp's operations. Initially, the corpses were poured over with the residues of petroleum, later – with methanol. These corpses were burnt in the pits non-stop, day and night. In late November 1942, all the mass graves in *KL Auschwitz* were emptied.

---

*thermite bombs. He said he wanted to try to deal with the matter by means of fuelwood and, therefore, demanded a large supply of it. It turned out that the thermite bombs had caused a fire which destroyed a part of the forest surrounding the graves. The burnt remains of the trees could not be removed, however, because this would uncover the sight of the graves from the side of the road. With regard to releasing the ordered fuelwood, I turned to the State Forestry Office (Ladesforstamt), where I was clearly instructed to release the wood. After many different attempts, the corpses were begun to be burnt in a stone-laid pit. This had a diameter of about 4 metres, and was 3 metres deep. Inside, a huge fire was lit and the corpses were thrown into it. The unburnt bones were later taken out and ground in a motor crusher installed in a wooden barrack. I do not know what this bone meal was later used for. There must have been an enormous amount of it. When I was at that grave field for the last time, while juniper seeds were being planted, Bothmann showed me the bone crusher. In the barrack, there was also a certain number of sacks filled up with something. Suddenly, Bothmann said to one of the manacled labourers: "bring me a handful of flour from one sack." The elderly man went up to one of the sacks and brought two handfuls of pure white finely ground bone meal. Bothmann said to him "Do you know what this is?". The man stood quiet, and Bothmann went on, "This is your fellow race". To this the man replied calmly and patiently: "And what can be done about this?". By his accent I knew that he was German [...]*

**Rozalia Peham, with reference to the extermination camp in Chelmno-on-Ner:** „[...] in early spring, there came the order from Berlin to destroy the corpses and to obliterate all traces of the camp. The order also required that bodies be burnt in crematory furnaces in the future. Therefore, the graves had to be dug up and the removed corpses had to be incinerated either in specially constructed crematory furnaces or in huge fires lit in the forest. Then, a special commission came from Berlin to inspect the work in progress. The stench was terrible. My husband joked that "die Harren aus Berlin" couldn't bear being close to the dug-up graves more than five minutes, after which they fainted. Two crematory furnaces were built. How they were equipped, I have no idea because, of course, I had never been to the site where they were installed. I only know that the furnaces had tall chimneys and that the draught inside was very strong. The corpses were arranged in the furnaces in layers. Each layer of corpses was interleaved with a layer of dried cut wood. If bodies were burnt in open fires, the pyre of bodies and the wood were first poured over with petrol. One of the Jews had to mount the pyre and set fire to it. The fire often broke out so intensely that the Jew had no opportunity to get out of the crematory pyre, and was burnt alive [...]"

At the same time, in September 1942, SS-Untersturmfürer Johann Opperman from the SSPF administration in Lublin went to Holland, apparently on business. Globocnik had ordered him to turn to the *Augus Haras* company in Hamburg to buy two excavators. It cannot be precluded that these were later used in Sobibór to exhume the burial pits filled with dead bodies in order to dig them up and burn them.

In the summer of 1942, the situation in Sobibór was getting more and more dramatic. The discharge from the decomposing bodies buried in the burial pits percolated through the soil into the groundwater, polluting the drinking water in the camp's wells. Every day, a dozen or so prisoner-labourers had to carry buckets filled with water from the well situated right next to the railway station, to the camp<sup>23</sup>. Thus, there was an urgent need to destroy the decomposing bodies in order to prevent the real danger of the outbreak of cholera. Certainly, this decision must have been taken in accordance with the directives from the 'Aktion 1005' headquarters.

As early as in June 1942, the first burial pit, having been filled to its maximum capacity, was sealed with a layer of sand. Soon afterwards, another pit was dug by the *Sonderkommando* prisoners from Camp III. However, while the new pit was being prepared, it was necessary to add new bodies to the first pit. In the scorching sun, the corpses kept on decomposing at such a fast pace that the blood and other body fluids began to drip down into the yet-unfinished new pit. Therefore, Bolender gave the order to form something like a high embankment around the edge of the pit. In the meantime, the layer of sand covering the first pit cracked and rose to such a level that some of the swollen bodies were pushed up to the surface and rolled down over the edges of the pit. In their post-war testimonies, Ittner and Bolender said that the sight had been simply unbearable, just as was the overpowering stench which floated around the whole area<sup>24</sup>.

Soon afterwards, it was decided that the dead bodies should be burnt, hence, the Nazis brought to Sobibór, an excavator with the aim of digging up those more than 120,000 corpses in order to burn them<sup>25</sup>. Thus, in autumn 1942, in the middle of the night, the heavy equipment arrived at the camp. The camp's prisoner-labourers thought that a new transport of Jews had come, but, to their astonishment, the *Bahnhofkommando* was not called out to get down to their usual task of unloading the train. Soon, at a distance they managed to see the SS men and Ukrainian guards unloading a huge excavator, which they took to Camp III. After a few days, the excavator began to do its job<sup>26</sup>.

It was first used to dig a pit that was smaller and more shallow than the ones which already contained the victims' bodies since this pit was meant to be a pyre.

<sup>23</sup> Czesław Sójka, witness hearing report, Provincial Police Headquarters of the Polish People's Republic in Lublin, 22 January 1968, MPLW Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Kurt Bolender, hearing report, Hagen, 18 December 1963, MPLW Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Kurt Bolender, hearing report, Bavaria, Bavarian State Criminal Police Office, Munich, 5 June 1962, MPLW Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, witness hearing report, the file has no number, Hagen, 9 November 1965, NIOD Archives.

Most probably, it was built from railway rails and bricks into a structure which resembled a fire grate. The excavator's bucket took the decomposing bodies and moved them to the new pit. Next, the corpses were arranged in piles and set on fire. Most probably, a great amount of petrol or petroleum was used to incinerate the bodies as the Germans wanted the whole cremation process to go as fast as possible.

This way of the incineration of corpses differed considerably from the cremation of the bodies directly removed from the gas chamber. When the Germans started to utilise the crematory pits, all the bodies of the gassed victims were taken there right from the gas chambers for immediate incineration. So far, the archaeologists doing their research into the area of the Sobibór camp have managed to pinpoint 14 pits, which, without doubt, were used for 'burying' corpses as well as the ashes coming from burnt bodies. One of the 'renowned experts' in the cremation of the victims' bodies in the 'Operation Reinhardt' camps was Herbert Floss.

Most probably, Floss came to Sobibór from the extermination camp in Bełżec in late April 1942. He replaced Hans Schutt, who had left Sobibór on 15 August 1942. It is not clear, however, whether he took over Schutt's position while already having been established in Sobibór for some time, or whether he had first come to Sobibór to occupy a newly created position. Perhaps, in the meantime, he went back to Bełżec. Anyway, following Schutt's departure, Floss dealt with the organisational matters<sup>27</sup>.

In all likelihood, Herbert Floss supervised the preparation of the crematory pits in Sobibór. This is implied by the way his professional career continued afterwards. After the corpses had been taken out of the burial pits and the crematory pits had been dug, i.e. at the end of 1942, Floss went back to the Bełżec camp, where he was made responsible for the cremation of the dug-up corpses as well. Soon, he earned the label of being an 'expert' in cremating the 'Operation Reinhardt' victims.

In Bełżec, large-scale cremations were commenced only in early winter 1943, following SS-Reichsführer Himmler's inspection of the camp. The operation was supervised by SS-Unterscharführer Fritz Tauscher. As in Sobibór, here, an excavator was also used to remove the human remains from the burial pits. Similarly, Herbert Floss applied the same method of incinerating the bodies as he had done in Sobibór. At first, the victims' bodies were burnt on pyres, which were arranged alternately, a layer of corpses and a layer of wood. The pile was poured over with an inflammable substance and set on fire. In the Germans' view, however, this method was not efficient enough because it required too much fuel and was too much time-consuming. Therefore, Herbert Floss was appointed to change all this, so he built fire grates similar to those that were already utilised in Sobibór<sup>28</sup>.

In the Treblinka extermination camp, the cremation of the victims' corpses began as late as in February 1943, and, as in Bełżec and Sobibór, it started after Himmler's inspection of the camp. As a result of this inspection, Himmler ordered Franz Stangl

<sup>27</sup> Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Tregenza, *Christian Wirth, Inspekteur Der SS-Sonderkommandos Aktion Reinhard*, „Zeszyty Majdanka“ [Majdanek Notebooks] 1993, vol. 15, p. 48.

[the Camp Commandant] to burn all the corpses, both the 'old' ones buried in the pits and those of the new arrivals. Stangl was terrified because he had no idea how to do it. To his relief, Christian Wirth and Herbert Floss came to his rescue. Wirth assured Stangl that Floss would cope with the problem perfectly well by burning the corpses on fire grates, and that he firmly believed the method to be effective. At first, Floss utilised narrow-gauge light rails to make the fire grates. It turned out, however, that they were too fragile and bent in the fire. Therefore, he replaced them with standard railway rails<sup>29</sup>.

When Herbert Floss had completed his task in Treblinka, he went back to the extermination centre in Sobibór. The camp's survivors remember him from the day of the prisoners' revolt. Later, he took part in the liquidation of the camp. On 22 October 1943, during the escort of 30 Ukrainian guards from Sobibór to the camp in Trawniki, SS-Oberscharführer Herbert Floss was shot by a Ukrainian watchman called Wasyl Hetmaniec.

In April 2001, an archaeological expedition from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń began to conduct, at the request of the Polish Board for the Protection of Monuments of Combat and Martyrdom, and under the management of Professor Andrzej Kola, trial excavations in the area of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór. The research aimed at gaining some preliminary knowledge about the present-day surface structures in the area of former Camp III, and to tentatively identify the camp borders and the location of particular spatial elements, including the pits used, in time of war, to bury the victims' corpses, as well as to bury their ashes.

During Professor Kola's expedition, the archaeologists managed to pinpoint seven pits, which the Professor called 'graves' and numbered from 1 to 7 in his report. Grave No. 1 was identified west of the Memorial Mound of Ashes, which is now part of the Sobibór Site of Remembrance. In the horizontal projection, it is 20 metres wide, 20 metres long and 4,30 metres deep. It exhibits the characteristics of a cremation grave.

Grave No. 2, also crematory in character, was pinpointed south of the Mound of Ashes. Its surface is irregular in the horizontal projection, and it is 20 by 25 metres, with its depth reaching up to about 4 metres. Grave No. 3 is also irregular in the horizontal projection, with its size being approximately 20 by 12 metres. The longer edge spreads along the north-south axis. Most of the grave is located beneath the north-western part of the present-day mound. Its depth reaches up to 5,8 metres. In its lower part, it is skeletal, with human remains showing evidence of adipocere formation. In its upper part, it exhibits the characteristics of a cremation grave, with inter-beddings of lime, sand and charcoal.

Grave No. 4 is the largest of all the graves identified so far, as, in the horizontal projection and along the north-south axis, it reaches the size of 20 by 70 metres, with its depth amounting to 5 metres. In its lower parts, the researchers found human remains showing evidence of adipocere formation. In its upper parts, the grave

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

exhibits the characteristics of a cremation grave, as it has inter-beddings of lime, sand and charcoal. Grave No. 5, which is at least 10 metres wide, 12 metres long and has the depth reaching up to 4,90 metres, is also skeletal in character. In its lower parts, there were human remains showing evidence of adipocere formation. The upper parts bear the traces of cremation.

Grave No. 6 is located south of grave No. 5. Its shape is irregular in character, with its size being at least 15 by 25 metres, and its depth amounting to 3,05 metres. The lower parts of the grave exhibited human remains that show evidence of adipocere formation. The upper parts reveal traces of cremation<sup>30</sup>.

The character of these graves implies that in four of them corpses were buried. Obviously, these were the pits out of which the bodies were, after some time following their burial, taken out and incinerated. The archaeological analysis of the other two graves suggests that, most probably, they were used to store the victims' bodies, and that they were utilised at the time when bodies were regularly burnt, and not buried. The sample material taken for analysis exhibited the presence of human ashes, as well as the ash of burnt wood mixed with sand. Four of the pits contained, at their bottom, human remains showing evidence of adipocere formation. Above them were found human ashes and the remains of charcoal.

Assumedly, these were the pits where the bodies were first buried, then taken out (the adipocere formation implies that this was not done carefully enough) burnt and the ashes re-buried. The remaining two pits might have been solely used to bury human ashes, yet I do not preclude the possibility that one of them is the remains of a crematorium pit which differed from the one utilised to burn the decomposing bodies taken out of the burial pits. It is possible that the crematorium pit in Sobibór was similar to the one in the extermination camp in Chełmno-on-Ner.

In their research, the archaeological team identified topsoil disturbances which reached up to two metres. It can be assumed that these disturbances are connected with the reconstruction of the alleged crematorium, as well as the intensive activity resulting from the shifting of people's corpses or the removal of ashes. The pit, which Professor Kola refers to as 'Grave No. 7', differs considerably from the other six. It is 10 by 3 metres, and it is one metre deep. In this case, it is only the topsoil layers which suggest that the pit was a grave.

In the lower parts of this object, there were found traces of an oily dark-brown layer (which smelt like lubricating oil), brick particles, decayed wood and large pieces of charcoal. In his post-research report, Professor Kola points out that this particular structure was qualified as a grave only on account that it bears traces of cremation.

In 2013, approximately 7 metres north of this site, the archaeologists found a similar place, which was probably built in the later phase of the camp's operation. This structure is very similar in character, and it is even located parallel to grave No.

---

<sup>30</sup> Andrzej Kola, *Badania archeologiczne terenu byłego obozu zagłady Żydów w Sobiborze* [Archaeological Research into the Former Extermination Camp of Jews in Sobibór], „Biuletyn Rady Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa” [Bulletin of the Polish Board for the Protection of Monuments of Combat and Martyrdom], 2001, No. 4 (21).

7. The researchers uncovered there pieces of iron narrow-gauge railway sleepers. It is likely that this place and Grave No. 7 are the remains of the crematoria meant for the cremation of the corpses removed from pits marked as graves Nos. 3, 4, 5 and 6.

The samples of the contents of these graves clearly exhibit a mixture of sandy soil and ashes. At present, however, it is impossible to define the proportion of this mixture. Interestingly, the mixture contains sand and ashes only, with other elements practically nonexistent, although normally they are expected to be found in an open-air crematory pit as natural residues of the incineration of bodies (in the form of the remains of human bones, teeth, hair and charcoal). The pure form of the ashes mixed with the sand implies that all that remained after cremation was (as in other extermination and concentration camps and in places of mass executions) later crushed into powder in special crushing machines. For this purpose, two types of crushing machines were used: stationary and 'motor' crushers.

Presumably, the difficulty in accessing electricity in the area of Camp III in the Sobibór camp forced the camp's authorities to make use of a crushing machine which was installed on a vehicle. This model of crusher was a well-known type in the surrounding area, and it was also utilised, in 1943, by *Sonderkommando 1005* in Chełm Lubelski to obliterate all trace of the murders committed by the Germans in a place called 'Borek'<sup>31</sup>.

The total volume of the six pits identified in the area of former Camp III is approximately 19,000 m<sup>3</sup>. The character of the mixing of the ashes with sand implies their wide dispersal and the lack of homogenous compact concentrations. The volume of the pits uncovered by the *Sonderkommando* in order to remove the corpses substantially exceeded the capacity necessary to accommodate human ashes even if they were considerably mixed with charcoal. Nevertheless, it is impossible to define precisely the amount of wood used in the cremation process. Generally, the cremation of a human body produces about 3,5 litres of ashes. If we apply this 'model' calculation to the extermination centre in Sobibór, the 300,000 bodies incinerated there should have produced about 1500 m<sup>3</sup> of human ashes.

The resulting volume is over ten times smaller than the capacity of the pits identified in former Camp III in Sobibór. It has to be borne in mind, however, that the above calculation is far-reaching, though, on the other hand, it allows us to create a certain image of the cremation process which took place in the camp. The carelessness in which cremations were carried out in the crematory pits, as well as the huge amount of wood used, in comparison with the ashes produced as a result of these cremations, were later compensated by the employment of the bone-crushing machine. However, even if we increase this volume by several times in comparison with what the above model calculation implies, we might assume that, perhaps, the Germans managed to effectively hide the ashes by mixing them with a disproportionately larger amount of sand.

<sup>31</sup> Andrzej Rybak, *Sonderkommando 1005 w Borku [Sonderkommando 1005 in Borek]* (in:) *Chełm nieznan. Ludzie, miejsca, wydarzenia [Chełm Unknown. People, Places, Events]*, (ed.): Małgorzata Karwatowska, Chełm 2009, pp. 251-252.

Most probably, graves Nos. 1 and 2 functioned as open-air crematory furnaces. The walls of each pit got narrower towards the bottom, making the pits look like inverted truncated cones. In each of them, approximately 1 - 1,5 metres above the bottom, and on a fireproof brick foundation, there was installed a fire grate made from railway rails. The space between the fire grate and the bottom served as an ash-pan. The ash dropped through the fire grate and was drawn from the ash-pan by an air shaft, which ran aslant towards the upper part and outside, providing sufficient ventilation in this way. The air shaft was so large that a man, if bent forward, could use it to go down to the grate.

The furnace was kindled with wood. The corpses were put on the grates so that they did not touch each other. The layers of corpses were interleaved with dried cut wood, due to which the furnace could accommodate a few hundred bodies. If we compare the size of pit No. 2 from Sobibór, with the much smaller hearth utilised in Chełmno-on-Ner, it should be assumed that it was possible, without any difficulty, to shape them into a size which would make it possible to install fire grates capable of burning 500 bodies at a time. Obviously, it cannot be precluded that the hearth in Sobibór was larger, and that a lot more corpses could be burnt there at one go.

Another archaeological team, which conducted research into pit No. 1 in Sobibór until the end of 2013, and under the management of Wojciech Mazurek, formulated three different hypotheses as to the purpose the pit served. One of these states that this object might have been used as yet another mass grave which, with the completion of 'Operation Reinhardt', was filled only partly with human remains, and which, after the successful prisoners' revolt on 14 October 1943, was filled in. Another assumption is that this huge pit was a crematorium similar to those utilised in Chełmno-on-Ner. The third hypothesis, very difficult to prove at the moment, puts forward that pit No. 1 was, completely or to a great extent, filled with burnt human remains, but that later it was emptied as per the directives of 'Sonderaktion 1005', and the removed remains were carted away to an unknown direction or scattered all around the area of the camp or in the near environs.

The archaeological research carried out between 2004 and 2013 into the area of the former Sobibór camp, pinpointed other places which exhibit the characteristics of crematory and skeletal graves. These, following Professor Andrzej Kola pioneering work, they numbered from eight up to eighteen. Out of all these pits, those identified in 2013 seem exceptionally difficult to interpret. During the research completed in the spring of 2013, the archaeologists found two skeletal graves, i.e. Grave No. 12, where six bodies were buried, and Grave No. 13 - containing one corpse only. Another, single grave, No. 14, was found east of the crematory graves numbered 7 and 8/15. Further research, conducted in the autumn of 2013, did not uncover any new skeletal graves east of graves Nos. 12 and 13.

It can be assumed that both graves, situated so close to each other, bear the traces of the single execution of 6 people who were brutally shot in the back of their heads or in their temples, and were then thrown into one pit (Grave No. 12). Most probably, the last of those victims had to bury the others, after which the perpetrators shot and buried him in another shallow grave (No. 14).

In November 2013, about 15 metres north of skeletal grave No. 14, almost in a straight line, the researchers found the roof of another skeletal grave (No. 16). This grave contained the bodies of two people – one in an upright position and the other in a squatting position, with their heads facing the east. The bodies were buried with their personal items (a jack-knife, the remains of fabric and an unidentified iron object).

The cremation of corpses was an ongoing process, and, therefore, we might assume that each new batch of bodies was removed from the gas chamber, taken to the crematorium by narrow-gauge railway, and thrown next to the edge of the pit. The Jews servicing the hearth systematically added more and more corpses, which burnt, making room for new bodies and wood. Corpses burnt very quickly – after, more or less several dozen minutes, they were gone. Each time the whole process was complete and the furnace had cooled down, the prisoners removed the ashes from the ash-pan by means of a specially-made poker (in the Chełmno-on-Ner death camp, these were iron poles with 40-centimetre-long wooden boards covered with steel sheet, attached perpendicularly to their ends), and left close to the pit to cool down. Next, they were taken to the bone-crushing machine to be crushed into a powder which was either buried in the neighbouring pits, or packed into sacks or barrels and taken to the other parts of the camp. The ashes were scattered over it or were carted away to somewhere else<sup>32</sup>.

Unfortunately, no documents, accounts or testimonies concerning the cremation operations in Sobibór have survived. Therefore, the archaeological work systematically conducted in the part of the camp where extermination took place, raises some hope that we will learn more about the process of cremation itself. Similarly, accounts of former prisoners of *Auschwitz* who serviced its open-air crematoria, might help us to get an idea what this type of cremation procedure was really like. This might prove particularly helpful if we assume that the same type was utilised in Sobibór:

**Henryk Maldenbaum:** “[...] *the cremation of bodies on pyres was different to that in the furnaces. Firstly, piles of corpses were placed in pits. The burning process ran in a different way, it was slower. Layers of bodies were interleaved with layers of wooden slates. Additionally, we placed conifer branches brought in from Kobiór. All this was poured over with petrol or burnt oil. Sometimes, the flame was four, five metres high. The smoke was yellowish-gray. The flame was all right until the wood had burnt. Heads, legs, hands burnt fast, but trunks and thighs took longer to burn. It's like with wood – branches burn first, trunks smoulder slowly. The human fat never managed to burn, so it ran down into holes. We had to take this fat out with pots; we poured it over the pile so, in the pits, the dead bodies fried rather than burnt. Appropriate temperature was needed for the intestines, livers and hearts to catch fire. Inside the pit, the corpses sizzled like crackling. They also cracked like*

<sup>32</sup> Lucja Pawlicka-Nowak, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-127: on the basis of the testimonies of: Szymon Srebrnik, case file No. S. 13/45 vol. II I. 163-166, Mordka Żurawski from 1945, case file III S. 13/45, and Walter Piller, *Własnoręcznie spisane zeznanie jeńca wojennego Waltera Pillera* [The Testimony Written Down by a Prisoner-of-War, Walter Piller Himself], 19 May 1945.

*chestnuts crack if thrown into the fire. Therefore, when we were emptying the pits with hooks, we had to throw the thighs and entrails into the other pit. Cremation in the pits was not a good idea, the work was massive, and yet, a dead body did not burn as it should have (...). 'Pits' is not a good word. They were more like ditches, one metre, or perhaps one and a half metres, deep. I can't say precisely, because we never removed the ashes down to the very bottom. But I don't think that they were deeper. If so, what for? The bigger the pit, the worse the burning. This [open-air cremation] was absolutely primitive in comparison with the crematorium ovens [...]"<sup>33</sup>.*

**Shlomo Venezia:** *"[...] the Germans ordered us to go behind the house, where the pits were. They told us to take the corpses from the gas chamber and place them next to the pits. I didn't enter the gas chamber, I only kept moving from the bunker to the pits and back. Other men from the Sonderkommando, more experienced than we were, got the task to arrange the bodies in such a way that the fire didn't go out. The bodies couldn't be cramped together because there would be too little air, and the flames would be extinguished or would be dying out. This would infuriate both the Kapo and the Germans who guarded us. The bottom of each pit was sloping so that the human fat coming from the bodies could run down to one of the corners where something like a vat had been dug into the ground. When the fire was beginning to grow weaker, we had to draw some fat from the vat and pout it over the flames to stoke the fire. I only had seen this happen in the pits next to the bunker (...) one person to deal with one corpse. Even if two of us carried one body in this muddy area, where our legs sank, we found it hard to do so. And what if I had to do it myself? I have no idea how I managed, but I remember that I was at the end of my tether. We had to do what we were told to do, thoughtlessly, like machines. Yet, when I looked at those burning bodies, I thought to myself that, perhaps, those dead people had been more lucky than us, the living, because they no longer had to bear this Hell on Earth or look at all this cruelty done by man. So we worked on till the morning, almost twenty-four hours a day, non-stop. Only then did they allow us to go back to our barracks. We also had to get rid of the ashes so that no traces were left, especially because certain bones, for example, pelvic bones, burnt poorly, both in the furnaces and in the pits. Therefore, we had to take out the thickest bones and crush them before we could mix them with the ashes. We did this on the crematorium courtyard behind the building. The crushed ashes were taken away in a small cart. From time to time, they were carted off by truck and thrown into the river. A few times, I managed to swap over with the man responsible for crushing the bones. Due to this, I was able to spend some time in the open air and to get away from the depressing atmosphere of the crematorium and from this stench [...]"<sup>34</sup>.*

<sup>33</sup> Igor Bartosik, Adam Wilma, *Ja z krematorium Auschwitz. Rozmowa z Henrykiem Mandelbaumem byłym więźniem, członkiem Sonderkommando w KL Auschwitz* [I Was at the Auschwitz Crematorium. A Conversation with Henryk Mandelbaum, Former Prisoner and Member of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz], 2009, pp. 42-43.

<sup>34</sup> Shlomo Venezia, *Sonderkommando. W piekle komór gazowych* [Sonderkommando. Inside the Gas Chambers], Warszawa, 2009, pp. 75-7 and 89-90.

One of the situational plans, or rather a sketch of the topography of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór (made at the request of the court in Hagen for Karl Frenzel's appeal) shows, in the part where Camp III and its crematory pit are marked, a caption which says: *The site where the pieces of foundations were unearthed, as well as truck parts with burnt human bones inside.* It is highly unlikely that this note referred to the chassis of the truck on which there was installed the bone-crushing machine, though such a possibility cannot be completely excluded. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the parts of the truck holding the burnt human bones were the remains of truck chassis frames which might have been used within the crematory pits as gratings.

When, in autumn 1942, Sobibór's camp's authorities made the decision to start cremating bodies, they fully realised that this would require the use of much wood. Therefore, the Germans formed a special group of prisoners whose task was to get hold of this. The group was called the *Waldkommando*, and, at the beginning, was made up of 20 – 30 men. However, since the work the *Waldkommando* labourers had to do was extremely exhausting, the composition of this work unit was changed every day. Members of the *Waldkommando* laboured outside the camp's area, in the neighbouring forests. Most of the wood the commando obtained was later used in the crematorium, however, some of the wood was used to heat the camp's buildings, to do the cooking or to serve as building material. At first, only young and strong men were selected for this commando. With time, women began to be selected as well, and their task was to gather tree branches which were used to cover the internal and external fences in the camp<sup>35</sup>.

## 5. The Lazaret – the camp's 'field hospital'

The prisoners from the *Bahnhofkommando* were forced to be as brutal as possible towards the sick and the disabled they were unloading from the incoming trains. When all the train wagons had been emptied, the newcomers who were able to walk by themselves were taken straight from the railway ramp to Camp II. After all of them found themselves in Camp II, the people who had been left on the ramp - the disabled and those selected for work in other places, mostly labour camps (these selections were made on special 'orders' placed by some external authorities) remained thoroughly confused about what was happening around. Those selected for outside work were then marched away, all the others waiting on the ramp: the sick, the disabled or those still in shock and half-conscious (i.e. all those unable to move

---

<sup>35</sup> Symcha Białowicz's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/2352, excerpts from a conversation with Eda Lichtman, Icchak Lichtman, Dov Freiberg, Abraham Margulies, Symcha Białowicz and Jakub Biskupicz held in the presence of Olga Barniczowa, PhD, in Tel-Aviv in September 1963; Jakub Biskupicz's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/2352, excerpts of a conversation with Eda Lichtman, Icchak Lichtman, Dov Freiberg, Abraham Margulies, Symcha Białowicz and Jakub Biskupicz held in the presence of Olga Barniczowa, PhD, in Tel-Aviv in September 1963.

about by themselves) were told by the Germans that they would be taken to the camp lazaret. This calmed the people's fears a little. In this way, the Germans managed to begin carrying-out, undisturbed, their well-planned and sly 'natural' process of separating the able-bodied from the disabled.

Once Sobibór became fully operational, a new procedure was introduced. In this, the newcomers unable to move about by themselves were taken, by means of carts pulled by the *Bahnhofkommando* prisoners, to a nearby abandoned small chapel. On the way to their destination, once moved away from the ramp, these helpless individuals were treated in such a brutal way that many of them went insane, lost their consciousness or simply died. At the site located next to a pit surrounded by bushes, they were dumped out of their carts and 'welcomed' by a few Germans or Ukrainian guards, who, in cold blood, shot them down.

All the former prisoners of Sobibór with whom I have talked about the camp, stressed, whenever the question of the lazaret was raised, that the name of the place had only been an empty word, a euphemism which, in actual fact, referred to the place where prisoners were executed by shooting. These conversations, as well as most of the survivors' accounts and memoirs, describe the lazaret as the place of execution of those who, for different reasons, could not be killed in the gas chamber.

The most common way of execution was by shooting. Generally, the following prisoners were sentenced to be shot:

- those who were unable, after disembarkation, to move about by themselves, as this made it impossible for them to undergo the routine extermination process in the gas chamber;
- those who were first selected for work in the camp, but then were sentenced to death, most frequently for having violated the camp's rules or because they were sick or exhausted through hard labour and torture;
- those who were brought to Sobibór by truck, horse-drawn carts or those who arrived at the camp on foot in small groups of a few dozen people. These groups were simply too small for the gas chambers to be activated especially for them since, in the Germans' view, this would not be economical<sup>36</sup>.

With new transports arriving at Sobibór more regularly and more frequently, the Germans were forced to plan and organise a fast and efficient way of eliminating the 'detritus' who, not being strong enough to move about, were left on the railway ramp while the rest of the newcomers were being taken to the gas chamber. Presumably, as early as in June 1942, the Germans had a narrow-gauge railway line built in the camp in order to transport the sick and the disabled from the ramp to Camp III to be shot dead. They were killed near the same pits in which the corpses of those murdered in the gas chambers were placed.

It would be completely unjustified, it seems, to assume that the lazaret, at the time when the narrow-gauge railway line became operational, was a specially

---

<sup>36</sup> Kurt Ticho's account (written for the Sobibór court trial in Hagen), Columbus, 4 July 1966, translated from English by Marek Bem. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection; Interview with Kurt Ticho, DVD recording/DVD 1, November 2007, the original in Marek Bem's private collection.

appointed place for people of this sort. The information that was spread on the ramp was merely that the sick and the weak were to be sent to the lazaret in order to be 'medically treated'. In reality, though, this was a premeditated and crafty trick which the Germans used to maintain order. This, obviously, guaranteed the Nazis' effective control over this large group of people.

It can be assumed, however, that during the first months when Sobibór was operational, and when there were no cremations being done, the camp's authorities had no reason to separate the prisoners meant to be shot in any way different to the routine way of extermination. As with the corpses of those murdered in the gas chambers, these too could be easily buried in the same pits. Hence, the camp's prisoners, as well as some of the personnel, interpreted the place called the 'lazaret' in the earlier operations of the camp, differently.

The newcomers who were handicapped, too young, too aged or otherwise nearly or completely immobile, were selected on the ramp and either taken on foot, supported by the *Bahnhofkommando* prisoner-labourers (perhaps by the Ukrainian guards as well) or in carts pulled by the railway commando, towards a little chapel with a cross on the roof. Presumably, the lazaret was located not far from the chapel, which, in turn, was situated approximately 100 metres from the ending of the ramp in a straight line running along the railway tracks in the northerly direction. Right in front of it, there was a path going to the left to the forest. Most probably, it was there that the prisoners were taken for execution.

None of the post-war accounts directly implies whether the lazaret was in the form of a pit that was located there, over the edge of which the old, the sick and pregnant women were killed, and inside of which their bodies were buried, and was not situated within the fenced-off Camp III. After the war, Erich Bauer alone recollected the pit behind the fence of the eastern part of Camp III which bordered with the chapel. However, he claimed he did not recall having seen any corpses inside that pit, and that he had only seen inside it, the walking sticks which must have belonged to the victims murdered in the camp.

It cannot be precluded that the road behind the chapel led to Camp III, and it is here, over the camp's common burial pits that these people were murdered. The pit mentioned by Bauer might have been the one located right next to the entrance to Camp III. Yet, most probably, this is where the personal belongings of no value, of those processed, were thrown. Yet, perhaps this was the place where the Jews undressed, were then led behind the fence of Camp III and subsequently shot dead.<sup>37</sup>

It is also possible that the main road which ran across the camp along the south-north axis and along the railway tracks of the camp's ramp, from the main entrance gate, to the camp up to the northern part of its external fence, near the chapel, branched off into a side road which led to the gate in the eastern part of the camp's fence. The traces of this road have survived in the form of a forest path. Stanisław Szmajzner marked, in his plan of the camp, that this was one of the ways in which

---

<sup>37</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, LK NW (15 December), Berlin, 25 September 1962, MPŁW Archives.

the selected newcomers got to Camp III. According to several other plans, one of the watchtowers was located in this part of the camp, and this implies that the place must have been under close surveillance.

This way of internal communication between Camp III and the other parts of the camp might have played an important role for another reason. Namely, it guaranteed the Germans the efficient and effective transporting to Camp III, of building materials, lime, the great amount of wood utilised in the crematoria, petrol, petroleum, railway rails or the excavators by means of which the corpses were removed from the pits. Perhaps, along the same road as well, huge amounts of human ashes were carted out of the camp<sup>38</sup>.

Without doubt, when the construction of Camp IV began, this internal road was used on a regular basis. This is implied by its prominence in most of the plans and sketches of the camp's topography made by former prisoners and members of the camp's personnel. The fact that the testimonies or accounts of former prisoner-labourers, Ukrainian or German staff, do not mention (nor do surviving plans reveal) any separate road or any other connection between the camp's main road and Camp I and II, with Camp III, suggests that the above-mentioned internal road was also the one along which, on foot or in narrow-gauge wagons, certain prisoners selected on the ramp were taken for their execution alongside the pits located there.

We cannot preclude the possibility, however, that the place called the 'lazaret' was located 'behind the chapel' and beyond the fence of Camp III. Perhaps this was meant to be a temporary place at first. Raznogajew testified that the number of Jews from one transport who could not move about by themselves after having been unloaded from the train, and who, therefore, had to be separated out and shot one by one, numbered not more than 50 people. The distance between the ramp and the chapel was only 120 metres. If looked at from the point of view of the camp's topographical plan, this area gives an impression of having been the only 'secluded' place that was located near the 'ramp' and was hidden within the forest – a place practically within the camp, but not visible from the camp area.

This 'secluded' place was located in close proximity to the unloading area and next to the ramp. This fact, as well as the fact that it was connected to the ramp by means of a road, and that it was planned to only be temporary in character on account of the intentions to build a narrow-gauge railway line, suggest that the small pit located 'behind the chapel' and beyond the borders of Camp III, was, for a short while (from April to July 1942), the place of execution of both Jews taken there directly from the ramp and of those who were regular prisoner-labourers, but who were sentenced to death for having committed a 'crime'. In general, for the prisoner-labourers, 'the place behind the chapel' remained something mysterious, unknown and terrifying. It was situated 'outside' the camp, whose infrastructure they usually knew and understood very well. They also remembered the place to have been exceptional in that there was a chapel with a cross there.

In his post-war court testimony, Samuel Lerer noted that during the first weeks of his stay in the camp, he had seen the sick and the disabled being shot not far

<sup>38</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, p. 31.

from the railway line, in a place where the forest began. According to him, it was only later that these executions were carried out in Camp III. At that time, if any prisoner-labourer got sick, he recalled, they were sent to Camp III to the place called 'lazaret'. During each roll-call at the camp, he testified, the German overseers asked the prisoners whether any of them were sick or tired or simply did not want to work anymore and wanted to 'have some sleep'. In such cases, if there were no 'volunteers', one of the Germans would select out a group of people who looked overtired or feeble. They would then march off – never to be seen again. All the prisoners knew perfectly well that the place mentioned was not a 'lazaret', therefore, as the Germans wanted them to believe, but Camp III<sup>39</sup>.

At first, these individuals were taken to an area that incorporated no more than two burial pits. The Germans made sure that the Camp III of that time seemed to be an ordinary peaceful work-place. For this reason, the corpses of those previously killed in the gas chamber had been covered with sand, as it was absolutely necessary for the perpetrators that the victims would not guess what fate was awaiting them. There is a possibility, however, that as of late-autumn 1942, when the cremations began, there was a change in the way those not selected for the gas chambers were killed. This was the time when the extension and reconstruction work in the Sobibór camp had been completed. As a result, the whole camp looked and operated in a different way than it had a few months before. Thus, prisoner-labourers sentenced to death by shooting, or newcomers carted away from the ramp by means of the narrow-gauge wagons, as well as small groups of deportees who had just arrived at the camp (for whom it was not 'payable' to activate the gas chambers) were culled in a different place than the pits into which the previous freshly-shot victims had been thrown before.

The character of Camp III changed dramatically after these improvements were made, and, as a result, there was less and less free space. The organisation of the work of the gas chamber and the crematoria, the storing of wood and fuel, the digging-up and the crushing of the ashes, as well as the operation of the bone-crusher – all this

---

<sup>39</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, file ref. No. StA.Do-X'66-185, Hagen, 6 October 1965, NIOD Archives; Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 31-32; Erich Bauer, hearing report, Berlin, 10 January 1962, NIOD Archives; Kurt Bolender, hearing report, LKA/NW (15 December), Dusseldorf, 22 August 1962, NIOD Archives; Alfred Ittner, hearing report, RLKW/NW (15 December), Kolumbach, 17 July 1962, NIOD Archives; Nikolaï Antoniewicz Pawli, defendant's hearing report, Interrogations Department at the Ministry of Defence in the Stalino Oblast, Archives of the Attorney General of the USSR, No. 56434 (vol. 2, pp. 118-121), Stalino, 17 November 1949, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources; Prokofij Businnij, witness's hearing report, Kiev, 8 August 1975, (with reference to the criminal case against Hubert Gomerski), file ref. No. 4/73 Ks. 3/50), NIOD Archives; Emmanuel Henrykowicz, hearing report, KGB Investigations Department at MS USRR, Vinnica, 27 April 1961, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0050; Emmanuel Henrykowicz Szulc, hearing report, KGB Investigations Department at MS USRR, Kiev, 6 September 1961, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0060; Emmanuel Henrykowicz Szulc, hearing report, KGB Investigations Department at MS USRR, Kiev, 7 September 1961, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0063.

might have contributed to the fact that Camp III had to become an absolutely closed enclave. Therefore, the victims meant to be shot were no longer led or carted there. The Germans must have come to realise that taking prisoners-to-be-shot into this sort of place posed a risk to maintaining the 'peace and quiet' among the prisoner-labourers, and amongst those who were to be processed. There was a real danger that they might get into panic, stage a revolt or exhibit any other hard-to-control behaviours.

The activation of the crematoria radically changed the appearance and the everyday character of Camp III. Therefore, it seems plausible that the camp's authorities decided to prepare a new site, in close proximity to Camp III, where executions by shooting were carried out, and from where the corpses of those shot were easily carted off to the crematorium zone by the Camp III prisoner-labourers. It was only from that moment onwards that these corpses, together with the corpses of those processed in the gas chamber, underwent the further procedures meant to cover up all trace of those crimes.

Perhaps this place was the one marked in various schematic camp plans (made both by former prisoners and members of the camp's personnel) as the 'fenced working yard'. Regrettably, except for this laconic note, I have not managed to find any other information about this place. The place itself has been marked on various maps and sketches and is remembered, but nobody knew exactly why it had been fenced off. I cannot exclude the possibility that it played the role of the aforementioned 'lazaret'.

During the archaeological excavations conducted on that site, in 2001 (about 50 metres west of the possible location of the gas chamber, and 80 metres south-west from the place between the ash pits), the archaeologists came across the remnants of 'some' structure. However, the archaeological work in 2001 was merely preliminary in character; and only in 2011 was it resumed. Therefore, now it is difficult to unambiguously determine what kind of structure it used to be. Perhaps the object is the relic of an extended wooden barrack that was about 60 metres long and 6 metres wide. It could also have been a yard surrounded by a high fence.

The longer axis of the structure is situated north-south. At its northern end, the object was bordered by another adjoining 'building', 14 metres by 4 metres in size. Both possible structures had been built of wood. In a few places, especially in the middle part of the bigger structure, traces of vertical wood foundation blocks were found. It can be assumed then, that if it really was a barrack, the wooden floor of it was built upon some wood footings, and was raised up from the ground (about 60-70 cm). On the site of the smaller structure, two large wooden beams, 210 cm long, were discovered. In the upper part of these beams, a row of holes, 5-6 cm in diameter had been drilled, and in a few of these, some wooden pegs were still stuck.

The beams, coming from the construction of the barrack, most probably found themselves in situ secondarily, perhaps as a result of the demolition of those buildings. In the neighbourhood of the beams, the archaeologists also discovered two vertical wooden bearing posts. In the 'cultural layers' of that structure, many

things were found which had undoubtedly belonged to the victims or the personnel of Camp III. These include hair pins and combs, underwear and clothes buttons, spectacle frames and cases, spoons, forks and table knives, scissors, belt buckles and pendants, clasps, lighters, metal boxes, parts of shavers and razors, watch cases, watch mechanisms, cuff links, empty little medicine bottles and packages, mirror fragments, pocket knives, etc.

It is worth noting down that in the central part of the smaller barrack, within only a dozen or so square metres, a lot of *Mauser* and *Mosin* rifle bullets were found (about 1830 rounds) that had been shot into the ground, and, therefore, were deformed. Mauser cartridge cases (9), Mosin cartridge cases (3) and one other round, were also found.

In light of the above-mentioned findings, it is natural to ask what function such a huge barrack served. Undoubtedly, in its northern annex (the smaller barrack), victims were shot, and the accumulation of so many bullets in a small area implies that the victims were forced to lie-down at the time of their shooting. Had they been standing, the bullets (being fired horizontally) would have become scattered after passing through their bodies. The distance from that barrack to the nearest mass grave is only 60 metres, and it is about 100 metres to the centre of the grave area<sup>40</sup>.

The air photos taken in 1940 and 1944 of the camp, show clear signs of a road leading from the area of Camp II, towards the place where those structures were found. Hence, it can be assumed that from the autumn of 1942 to October 1943, the same procedure was followed in transporting the victims by narrow-gauge railway from the ramp to Camp III. This was that they were taken in narrow-gauge railway wagons to the area of the crematorium pits, here they were shot and then their bodies trundled away to be burnt together with the other corpses brought from the gas chamber. We could assume, then, that the promises the Germans made to all those present on the ramp that they would be taken to the 'lazaret', were intended to effectively calm them down. However, from the moment the two wagons at a time left the loading platform filled with the sick, the infirm and the disabled, as well as children and pregnant women, there was no longer the need to apply any special procedure to camouflage what was really going to happen. Those dozen or so people were taken near to the crematory pit, were forced to undress, were shot dead, carted off and thrown onto the crematory pyres<sup>41</sup>.

The act of rolling only two narrow-gauge wagons at a time, filled with just a dozen or so victims to the place of their death, was the only means possible to guarantee an element of surprise, keep full control over the victims and maintain the

---

<sup>40</sup> Andrzej Kola, *Badania archeologiczne terenu byłego obozu zagłady Żydów w Sobiborze* [Archaeological Research into the Former Extermination Camp of Jews in Sobibór], „Biuletyn Rady Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa” [Bulletin of the Polish Board for the Protection of Monuments of Combat and Martyrdom], 2001, No. 4 (21).

<sup>41</sup> *Sobibór*, (eds.): S. Wileński, B. Gorbowicki, A. Tieruszkin, Moscow 2008, translated from Russian by Wiesława Leśniewska, p. 79.

speed of execution<sup>42</sup>. The object discovered by the archaeologists in 2001, indicated in different descriptions by means of the letter 'E' (located 50 metres away from the gas chambers), and presented in the former prisoner-labourers' accounts in the form of a fenced yard, could have played the role of being the 'long-awaited lazaret'. This, then, was also the place where people sentenced to death by shooting were taken. It is even possible that this was the final destination of groups arriving in the so-called 'small transports', i.e. transports of several dozen Jews, brought in on foot, by truck, or in horse-drawn carts. In accordance with the procedures imposed by the camp's management, it did not pay to activate the gas chamber for such small numbers of people, so they were shot. These groups of Jews, just like all the others, were led through the transit barrack to Camp II, where they left their luggage, partially undressed and were led towards the barrack which might have been called the 'lazaret'.

Accessibility to the lazaret must have been an important element in deciding upon its location. On most of the plans sketched by former prisoners, as well as by camp personnel, it is quite evident that the alleged barrack which could have functioned as a lazaret (and which was in fact a 'waiting room' before the execution), was easily accessible from Camp I, Camp II and the yard between both camps. The route to this barrack started at the western fence of Camp II and ran along the 'Road to Heaven'. In the air photos from the first half of 1944, the path is clearly visible. However, this access path appears (it seems so at least) somewhere in the middle of the 'Road to Heaven' as if it were coming out of it, as if it were a 'branch' road.

It cannot be excluded that it was actually connected to it, and from that point onwards, it was not an ordinary path, but, similarly to the 'Road to Heaven', a passageway between two walls of a high fence. Most probably, smaller transports of prisoners were not taken to the gas chamber. Rather, they were force-marched, after all the routine reception procedures, from Camp II, along the initial parts of the 'Road to Heaven', and directed left towards a double-fenced path running towards the lazaret or 'the waiting room'. This path led the prisoners into a barrack or a fenced yard.

In the same place in which the road ran out of the '*Himmelfatstrasse*', the path could have been entered from a clearing which was easily accessible from Camp I, Camp II and the yard between the camps. Yet, it cannot be excluded that the access road to the waiting room barrack was not connected with the 'Road to Heaven'. This place might have been reached from Camp II through a separate exit, but not the one directly connected with the 'Road to Heaven'.

Such a transport layout inside the camp must have allowed the guards to easily lead to the lazaret the people brought in through smaller transports and who had finished being processed in Camp II, as well as the Jews working in the camp who were to be killed because of poor health or because they had run afoul of some camp rule. Closed in the big barrack or inside the fenced yard, they were under full control.

---

<sup>42</sup> Erich Lachman, hearing report, LKA NW (15 December), Wegscheid, 6 November 1962, MPLW Archives.

Before the promised ‘disinfection’, they undressed and were taken a few at a time to a place in front of the northern wall of the barrack and then met their end. To this structure, as preliminary research has shown, another ‘structure’ was adjoined.

Perhaps this was either a fenced-in area or a shelter, approximately 14 by 4 metres in size. It is in that place that the prisoners were actually shot, as the archaeologists found 1830 rifle bullets penetrating the soil here. First, the condemned were forced to lie down on the ground, then they were executed. Next, the Jews working in Camp III took the corpses to the crematoria, while the victims’ clothes and other belongings were sent to the sorting barrack. Individual prisoners were killed in the same place and in the same way.

Verification excavations of the anomalies in the boreholes and in the geophysical research conducted to the south of object ‘E’ in the spring of 2011, confirmed its continuation to be about 75 metres long in total. Its width is always 6 metres, the side walls are sloping, with visible signs of wood boarding. Further research on object E/2001 carried out in the autumn of 2001 uncovered another 25 metres in its length, which amounts to 100 metres in total. The object is exactly 6 metres wide along its entire length. The walls are sloping, at times boarded with nowadays-decayed wood. At its southern end, object ‘E’ was 8 metres in width in 4 metres of its length. In its south-western part, on the other hand, the archaeologists found something which was most probably the remains of wooden stairs. In its eastern part, numerous empty rifle cartridge cases were found, while in the western part, the excavators found mostly machine gun cartridge cases. At the 50th metre and the 25th metre of object ‘E’, the remains of sand embankments, 2 metres wide, were uncovered. Because of the nature of the excavation and features, archaeologists have tentatively identified this as a shooting range.

To the north of object ‘E’, during the same archaeological excavations, a south-eastern quoin of an object similar to object ‘E’ was found. On the basis of the boreholes, its length in the western direction can be estimated at 15-20 metres, and its width, at about 5–6 metres. In the fill of this object, a few small iron items and pieces of broken vodka bottles were found. Perhaps that was the place where the SS men on duty in Camp III had their barrack – the one called the ‘Tea Room’. Roughly in its 50th metre of length, on the eastern side of object ‘E’, a concentration of broken vodka bottles and Dutch rum bottles were excavated.

At present, it is hard to say with certainty whether this was a sort of rubbish tip or another object somehow connected with the barrack (guardroom) for the SS men supervising Camp III. The barbed wire fence of Camp III was systematically interwoven with branches of coniferous trees because this ensured that nobody could see from the outside, what was happening inside. SS-Oberscharführer Kurt Bolender, Hubert Gomerski and Erich Bauer were in charge of Camp III. Bolender, wanting to have a little bit more comfortable working conditions in Camp III, had a wooden hut built at the edge of the crematory pit. Bauer reports in his testimony that, “from there, he could watch the cremations, enjoying himself at the same time by, e.g. roasting potatoes over the flames arising from the pit”. The hut that Bauer

mentions was probably a small barrack, a guardroom for the Germans who were on duty in Camp III. After the war, one of the Ukrainian guards sketched a plan of the camp and marked the building as the one located at a small distance to the north of the gas chamber.

He called it the ‘Tea Room’: “[...] *they take the stripped corpses to the pyre, throw them onto the ground and quickly place them on the rail tracks (about 1000-1500 people at a time). Then they light a small fire underneath, and the bodies are in flames, they are burning. Only one ‘Mr.’ German is sitting in the restaurant over a glass of rum, giving out orders, “That one is working badly, shoot him. Look at that one! He’s not laughing, drown him in a barrel of water. Oh, yet another! He is too weak – hang him.” What remains after the bodies of those people, who an hour or so ago were (still alive?), was white burnt-out bones, which are now turning into ashes and will be thrown into the pits. This process is going on night and day. People keep dying and the Germans take all their belongings, making themselves richer and richer [...]*”.

In Camp III, alcohol freely poured into the staff personnel. Gomerski made no secret of the fact that he and his compatriots drank a lot. He even admitted that he himself would drink a litre of vodka and lots of beer each day. Bauer drank so heavily that Commandant Reichleitner threatened to send him away from the camp, which was exactly what had earlier happened to Grömer. Camp III was perfectly isolated from the rest of the camp and anything that concerned it was kept absolutely hushed-up.

The archaeologists’ hypothesis, which, as stated before, tentatively assumes that the whole of the uncovered object ‘E’ is the remains of a former shooting range, raises some doubts. It is possible, though, that object ‘E’ was not a coherent whole, but rather consisted of two independent and different parts, each serving a completely dissimilar function. The natural sand embankment revealed in its half length, might have been the borderline between those parts. There is also a possibility that a barbed wire fence ran there on both sides of a 2-metre-wide path, which was the inner fence isolating Camp III from the remaining parts of this extermination centre. The vast majority of the accounts given and plans drawn by some witnesses (former prisoners, camp staff members and Ukrainian guards), indeed, mark this place as the fence surrounding Camp III.

Due to such a division of object ‘E’, it is possible to make a distinction between the two parts: northern and southern. In all probability, the excavation of Professor Andrzej Kola in the 2001 field season ascertained almost the whole of the northern part, while the one carried out in 2011, brought to the fore, the information found within the southern part of object ‘E’. The reports on the two expeditions imply that the remains of construction elements and the artefacts found in those two parts differ from each other. The existence of such a division can also be implied by the road (independent of the ‘*Himmelfahrtstrasse*’), clearly visible in the air photos of the camp, which connected Camp II with the southern end of the northern part of object ‘E’. At the crossroads of the ‘*Himmelfahrtstrasse*’ and the presently-existing road

(the so-called Remembrance Alley), the archaeologists found, in the autumn of 2011 (located on the western side of the ‘*Himmelfahrtstrasse*’), the remains of a dirt road which, running from the south, turns at that point towards object ‘E’. Conceivably, this is the road which linked Camp II with the alleged lazaret - the northern part of object ‘E’.

Some of the camp’s survivors marked on their own sketches an object which, without specifying its function, they called the ‘fenced working yard’ or ‘barrack’. Each of them located this behind the fence, within Camp III. Assuming that it is actually two independent camp objects, it is possible to hypothesize that the northern one was the alleged ‘lazaret’ (the site where shootings took place), while the southern might have been connected with so-called Camp V (the Ukrainian guards’ barracks, the reserve camp of the camp guards). It cannot be precluded that it could have been, according to the archaeologists, a training shooting range for the soldiers living in Camp V. At present, information on this particular subject is very scarce. Camp V functioned for no longer than two or three months. It was a separate part of Sobibór and was not structurally connected with the extermination centre as such. The soldiers stationed in that sector might, however, have been assigned the task of providing the external protection of Camp IV, which, while still under construction, was just becoming operational.

When I last talked to Kurt Ticho, and asked him about his opinion of the lazaret in the Sobibór camp, he replied: “*The name was just a euphemism for the non-existent hospital, one of the many lies meant to calm the people down on their way to the gas chambers.... meant to create some illusions.... a word that signified a death sentence... ‘Lazaret’... there were a few places like that in the camp*”.

## CHAPTER VII

# PREPARATIONS FOR THE UPRISING. THE REVOLT AND THE PRISONER ESCAPE

### 1. Escapes and spontaneous forms of prisoner resistance

In their everyday struggle for survival, the prisoner-labourers of Sobibór constantly focused their minds on how to get away from this place of death and suffering. Their living in constant danger, all the experiences each new working day brought, and the overwhelming feeling of helplessness united most prisoner-labourers and fostered a sense of solidarity among them. For these people, mutual understanding and help were the first signs of their growing resistance against the tyranny of their perpetrators. In building upon this, those who had stayed longer in the camp acquainted the newcomers with all the different habits and preferences each SS man and Ukrainian guard had. Moreover, the prisoner-labourers working in the sorting barracks and warehouses stole food any time it was possible. Even teenage ‘cleaning boys’ ‘liberated’ food and cigarettes from their superiors’ houses. Furthermore, the camp’s paramedics and pharmacists secretly helped those in need<sup>1</sup>. At night, the stolen food was used to make additional meals which were shared among the weaker and the sick, while the stolen cigarettes were bartered for other items.

Healthier and fitter prisoners often protected and helped the sick or the exhausted by doing their work for them, by giving them extra food, or by simply trying to lift their spirits. However, any chances of preparing organised resistance in the Sobibór camp were minimal. Language barriers, as well as mutual distrust among the prisoners ensured that attempts to put up resistance were only made by small groups of prisoners who knew and trusted each other. Unfortunately, many acts of resistance, would-be revolts or potential escape attempts were thwarted by informers. One of such plans, the so-called ‘Dutch plan’, supported by a few guards, ended in the ‘liquidation’ of more than seventy prisoners. Therefore, prisoners realised that planning to destroy the camp or to break out from the camp was simply unrealistic. Equally unrealistic proved to be a plan to liberate the camp by a group of Polish partisans, who, after making a reconnaissance of the camp, gave up the idea. The camp’s perimeter defences, the

<sup>1</sup> Philip Bialowitz, Joseph Bialowitz, *Bunt w Sobiborze* [Revolt at Sobibór], Warszawa 2008, pp. 133-174 and 175-197; Jakub Biskupicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD’s 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Kalmen Wewryk, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-24; Selma Engel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD’s 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0067, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem; Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 76-77; Hella Fellenbaum-Weiss, *From Lublin to Sobibor. Testimony of Hella Fellenbaum-Weiss* (in: Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-51.

guards' superior firepower, and the range of armaments inside the camp made such an undertaking highly risky<sup>2</sup>.

In 1943, Jews from the General Government territories already knew well what was happening in the places they were being taken to. Even outside the ghettos, news about the extermination of Jews was spread from place to place, mostly by Polish railway workers. Hence, with time, it became impossible to hide the truth. While being shipped in for processing, many Jews, therefore, tried to escape. They forced windows open or made holes in the floors and jumped out. In most cases, those who did so died on the spot; only a minority succeeded in escaping in this way. Yet, while many of the escapees got shot by the soldiers escorting their transport, in other cases, all trace was lost of those who had jumped out and nobody knows what happened to them and where they ended up<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, sometimes, some of the deportees refused to get out when their transport arrived at the destination place. These people were dealt with swiftly and violently. Any time this happened in Sobibór, the Germans and Ukrainians reacted instantly. On the way from the railway ramp to the gas chamber, they beat and harassed all the Jews, keeping them all confused and bewildered. They even shot those more recalcitrant<sup>4</sup>.

With new transports arriving constantly, some of the *Bahnhofkommando* prisoners saw an opportunity to escape by trying to stir up a revolt among those who were jumping off the trains onto the ramp. They believed that if such a crowd of people rushed at the Germans, they could easily cause utter confusion in the whole camp. This, in turn, would push the remaining prisoner-labourers into taking up the challenge, which, in turn, would offer everybody a chance to escape. Once, therefore, Icchak Lichtman and several other *Bahnhofkommando* prisoners wrote a dozen or so notes on scraps of paper in which they warned the newcomers that Sobibór was a death camp. They began to distribute the notes among the German or Austrian Jews who were just disembarking the train, and wanted to persuade them to undertake joint action. Yet, the reaction they met with was completely unpredictable. Some of the new-arrivals read the notes and hid the scraps of paper in their pockets, others

---

<sup>2</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, interview transcript, DVD recording /DVD's 1-8, USHMM Archives/ RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Philip Bialowitz, Joseph Bialowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-197; Leon Cymiel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-3, USC Shoah Foundation Institute For Visual History and Education Archives, file ref. No. 29630, March 1997; Aron Licht's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2761, (the date and the place where the account was given - missing), translated from Yiddish by Adam Bielecki.

<sup>3</sup> Szlomo Alster's account, Yad Vashem archives, case file 03/4442, 1977, translated from Yiddish by Anna Szyba.

<sup>4</sup> Chajim Bergdorf's testimony, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, case file 034145, Tel Aviv, March 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Aleksander Peczerski, *Powstanie w Sobiborze* [Sobibór Revolt], „Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” [Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute] 1952, No. 1/2 (electronic version of the transcript, pp. 7-15).

rumped them up and tossed them away, while an elderly Jew began to scream that somebody was trying to lie to him that it was a place where people were killed<sup>5</sup>.

At the end of 1942, there came a transport with a great number of women on board. Soon, they were standing, completely naked, in Camp II. Many of them were holding their children in their arms. All of a sudden, they all rushed at the German and Ukrainian guards standing nearby, and used their nails to scratch the guards' faces. The attacked men got furious and started shooting at the women. As a result, most of the women were killed before they even entered the 'Road to Death'<sup>6</sup>.

Once, an old Polish Jew came in one of the transports. He struggled hard against being forced out of the train, so the Ukrainian guards pushed the old man back into the wagon. It so happened that the whole incident was witnessed by Franz Reichleitner, the camp's commandant. The Jew told him that he did not believe in any of those lies about 'the hospital, light work and good living conditions' which the newcomers were being told about. Having said that, he got out of the wagon on his own, stooped down and took, with his trembling hands, two handfuls of sand, turned around to look at Karl Frenzel and said, "[...] *Can you see how I'm scattering this sand, slowly, grain after grain, and how the wind is blowing these grains? And this is awaiting all of you. All your great Reich will disappear, like this dust floating around or like smoke turning to nothingness up in the air! [...]*"<sup>7</sup>.

The old man then shuffled away and joined up with his compatriots, reciting 'Hear, O Israel'. After the words 'The Lord, our God, the Lord is One', he turned around to Frenzel again and smashed him in the face with all his might. The German was just about to deal with him, when Reichleitner, who was standing nearby, and amused by this whole incident, said that he himself would get even with the man. So, the camp's commandant pulled the old man aside and killed him in front of his family and all the people from his transport, who were gathered there<sup>8</sup>.

Estera Raab remembers a Polish Jewish woman who came to Sobibór with her husband, and was a tailor by profession. As an excellent seamstress, she was selected for work in the camp. The Germans brought her parachute silk, and she used the material to make underwear for them. Some time later, she gave birth to a child. All the other women prisoners tried to help her. They were successful for only two weeks. One day, Wagner came to the barrack unexpectedly and heard the baby crying. He offered the woman a chance to save her life by making a choice – her or her child – because he needed her as a labourer. So, he told the woman to give him the child if she wanted to save her life. To this, she spat him in the face. Both the mother and the child were swiftly shot dead. The murderer was so vile that he shot the baby first to make the mother die in greater pain<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Icchak Lichtman's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, case file 032309, October 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Bahir's account (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-163.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Estera Raab, interview transcript, DVD recording, Wentworth Films Inc, Holocaust, Esther Raab, USHMM Archives, 12 February 1992, translated from English by Marek Bem.

Another Sobibór survivor, Chaskiel Menche recalled a transport from the Netherlands. On the way to Sobibór, the train stopped at a railway station to replenish the water supplies. At the station, a group of Polish people was standing. They started to shout to the Dutch that they were going to Sobibór to be killed. They gesticulated too, knowing that these foreigners might not understand them. In one of the wagons was a Dutch woman of Polish origin. Looking out, she understood the Polish people's warnings and repeated them to the people from her wagon. None of them wanted to believe her. They laughed and said that she should not be spreading such gloomy propaganda. However, when they drove onto the Sobibór camp's ramp, they realised how right she had been. When the woman got out of the train, she took a bottle out of her suitcase, came up to one of the SS men and pointed to the bottle, making signs that she wanted some water. After this, she struck him in the head with the bottle, turned about and walked away. She was swiftly killed. Even a long time after this incident, the prisoners kept talking about this Dutch woman, insisting that she was truly the embodiment of heroism<sup>10</sup>.

The first successful escape from the German extermination centre in Sobibór took place as early as in April 1942. In the early spring of 1942, the Włodawa *Judenrat* was ordered to deliver 150 Jews to do building work at the railway station in Sobibór. The work lasted about two months. No one knew at the time what the real purpose of the building work was or the actual purpose of the camp. The first news of what was truly going on reached Włodawa only when two prisoner-labourers from this group managed to escape. These were Abraham Szmais and Fajwel Cukierman's son-in-law. The moment they had realised what the 'bath-house' really was, and that they would, sooner or later, end up there, they had taken advantage of a moment of great confusion at the camp, and ran for it. Afterwards, they kept wandering about the forests until they had got back to Włodawa. When they reached the ghetto, they immediately told everyone about the so-called 'bath-house', which, in reality, was a gas chamber. It turned out later that all the other labourers who could not get away, were amongst the first to be gassed. Szmais and Cukierman, hence, avoided the fate of their fellow labourers.

Still, at first, no-one believed them. Soon afterwards, however, more news about the bath house/gas chamber reached Tzaddik Szlomo Szmuel Lajner from Radzyń, who, since 1939, had been staying in Włodawa. The rabbi was one of the few Hasidic leaders who were perfectly aware that the Nazis' ultimate goal was to kill off all the Jews. Therefore, when he was in the company of his trusted followers, he confirmed the news and he urged them to stand up to the murderers. Indeed, even as early as in 1941, he had been preparing for groups of young Jews ways to escape to the forests so that they could put up a fight against the enemy<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Chaskiel Menche, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD 1, Tricht, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection; Thomas Blatt's account, ŻIH Archives-4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948.

<sup>11</sup> Ephraim Tilip, *op. cit.*; Matel Rabinowicz's account, ŻIH Archives, case file 49E/2202, (the place and the date when the account was given - unknown).

Once, while a group of prisoner-labourers was loading items which had previously been prepared for dispatch in the camp's sorting barracks (most probably this was from the transport which carried the Jews from Biała Podlaska in mid-June 1942), they managed to hide one of the prisoners among the piles of clothes. He was a young man, about 25 or 26 years old, whose name nobody remembered. Former Sobibór prisoners claimed that he had survived World War II and that he was the first Jew who had succeeded in running away from the camp. While still in the camp, they learnt that when the train had reached Lublin, the man had managed to get out. He later kept telling people about Sobibór and what was happening there, but no one wanted to believe him<sup>12</sup>.

At one point, there arose a plan to poison all the Germans and Ukrainians in the camp. Symcha Białowicz told Leon Feldhendler that he would be able to get hold of a sufficient amount of morphine to poison all the members of Sobibór's personnel, the Germans and Ukrainians alike. Białowicz worked in the camp's pharmacy which stored medicines left by the newly-arrived Jews. His job was to sort these and prepare them for dispatch. He took advantage of this situation, and began to collect this morphine on a regular basis, by using a syringe to withdraw small amounts out of each seized ampoule. This lasted for almost a month. In this way, he prepared two vials, 250 g each. Białowicz knew the cooks who worked in the SS men's canteen and the female cook who prepared meals for the Ukrainians. He managed to convince the cooks to join in the plot. Białowicz and Feldhendler gave the cooks one vial to each kitchen.

Unfortunately, the woman from the Ukrainian canteen revealed this secret to one of the watchmen and warned him not to eat lunch. The guard immediately reported this to his German superiors, the vials were seized, and Wagner came to the pharmacy, dragging with him the cook and a young boy. He immediately started to beat and question Białowicz. Białowicz, however, was lucky. Symcha managed to explain to Wagner that each item in the pharmacy was carefully labelled, so it was absolutely impossible that the vials came from his medicine stock. Perhaps, he continued, someone had found the vials among the luggage and took the labels off. Therefore, now it was impossible to state what it was, but it might as well be poison. At that very moment, the German who supervised the pharmacy came in. He confirmed that there was absolutely no possibility of there having been any unlabelled containers there. Wagner left, taking with him the female cook and the boy whom Symcha had given, as a member of the plot, one of the vials with morphine. They were both shot<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> Moshe Bahir's account (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-163; Mordechaj Goldfarb's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, case file 02/2212, Haifa, 29 January 1962; Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, case file 301/14, 17 September 1944; Abraham Margulies's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file No. 03/7019, (the date and place where the account was given is unknown).

<sup>13</sup> Symcha Białowicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-4 USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0027, 13 May 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Lea

There was also a plan for the ‘cleaning boys’ to kill all the camp’s SS staff while they were enjoying themselves in the bowling alley, and then to grab their weapons. The plotters assumed that if they were successful, the Ukrainian staff would go over to the insurgents. They knew that, almost every night, the Germans went to the bowling alley to indulge in their favourite pastime. Dov Freiberg was one of the prisoners sent each evening to work in the bowling alley. Other young men also worked there. With time, they realised that if most of the relatively scarce personnel gathered in one place at the same time, this could create a window of opportunity to kill them all and make an escape. Therefore, they began to watch closely what exactly happened inside the bowling alley, how many Germans came, where they left their weapons, and how they behaved. In those circumstances, it seemed an easy task to attack the Germans. A group of SS men was always busy playing the game. Moreover, some of them were drunk and did not have their guns with them, as they had put them aside. Therefore, a sudden assault on the bowling alley would enable the plotters to kill the Germans before they would even have the time to get hold of their weapons.

Apparently, the Germans must have thought about this before as well, because they had appointed a Ukrainian watchman to stand guard at the entrance door to the bowling alley. The plotters knew then that if they wanted to force their way inside, they would first have to quietly get rid of the Ukrainian. However, there was one more obstacle to overcome. It was Wagner. While the other Germans were having a good time drinking and playing bowls, Wagner would steal away from the bowling alley to walk among the barracks and to keep a close watch on everything that was happening in the camp. Out of all the Germans in the camp, he was the one who had this extraordinary ability to sense and predict things. All things considered, Dov Freiberg was perfectly aware that the plotters’ plan to take control over the bowling alley, to force their way inside and to escape afterwards required a man who would be able to lead an appropriate group of people and impose strict discipline on them. There was no one suitable for this task. And thus the plan failed<sup>14</sup>. Another version of this plan was to throw a few hand grenades inside the officer’s mess while they were having lunch. The explosion would then cause the deaths of all the German staff, which, in turn, would give the prisoners opportunity to take control of the whole camp. However, the plot got disclosed, and the Germans beat to death three prisoners suspected of having been involved in it<sup>15</sup>.

An equally daring and spectacular plan was to kill Himmler during his visit to Sobibór. At that time, Menche Chaskiel worked in the tailor’s shop where clothes were made and mended for the Ukrainian guards. The Germans had a separate tailor’s

---

Białowicz (née Reisner), interview, DVD recording/DVD 1, Tel Aviv, November 2007. The original is in Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>14</sup> Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Moszek Merensztein’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1292, report No. 1292, typescript, Lublin, 17 January 1945, Hersz Cukierman’s account, ŻIH archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944.

shop, where specially selected prisoners worked for them. One day, a watchman brought to Chaskiel a bundle of clothes for mending. In the conversation that followed the Ukrainian revealed to Chaskiel the secret that a very important SS man was coming. The Ukrainian offered to sell Chaskiel a few grenades, which, he said, Menche could use to kill ‘those fat German fish’. It turned out later that this important SS man was Heinrich Himmler himself. That night, Chaskiel Menche met with Leon Feldhendler and ‘Szlojme the cook’, and told them about the Ukrainian’s idea. They discussed the question of whether to grab a chance like this. However, they could not be sure if this was not actually a provocation on the part of the camp’s authorities. Menche and Feldhendler both agreed that if they managed to carry out their plan, this would do the whole world a great favour. Of course, arranging for the money for the Ukrainian watchman did not pose any problem. At first, they decided to carry on with their plan, but, with time and after some more discussion, they gave up on the whole idea<sup>16</sup>.

After the war, Symcha Białowicz kept repeating that each prisoner of Sobibór had constantly looked for a way to break out from the camp. He remembered two Jews working in the sorting barracks who decided to set those barracks on fire. They were ready to sacrifice their lives for the others so, one day, they prepared two bottles of petrol and stayed in the barracks for the night. The two men hoped the fire would spread so much that it would encompass the area of the whole camp, creating panic and disorder so as to enable other prisoners to escape. Unfortunately, they failed to realize that their absence during the evening roll-call would raise suspicions among the Germans, and that their fellow prisoners would rat on them. And so this happened. At the roll-call, the kapos reported to the German in charge that two prisoners were missing. Other prisoners, terrified and worried about the possible consequences of this confusion, said that the two prisoners had fallen asleep of exhaustion in the sorting barracks and so were still there. The kapos brought the men back. After the roll-call, they were taken to Camp III and killed<sup>17</sup>.

Dov Freiberg remembers this event in a different way. He does, however, agree that two young Jews volunteered to set two sorting barracks on fire, and that they were aware they could die in the flames. Still, one day, they did prepare two cans of petrol. They knew that Camp II was not under close surveillance, so they planned to stay in the sorting barracks for the night and set them on fire. The resulting fire would, they hoped, cause much confusion because the Germans would be engaged in extinguishing the fire. The remaining prisoners could then take advantage of this chaos, break through the main gate and the fences, and escape. Those privy to the plan were full of doubt, however. They could not be sure how the Germans and the

---

<sup>16</sup> Chaskiel Menche, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD 1, Tricht, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska. Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection; Meier Ziss, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD 1, Hagen, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska. Copy in Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>17</sup> Symcha Białowicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD’s 1-4 USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0027, 13 May 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

watchmen would really act during the fire. They knew that only those more lucky prisoners would manage to escape while the rest would have to die. All the same, the plotters decided to take the risk. The attitude of these two young men, who wanted to sacrifice their own lives, for they stood very little chance of survival, gave everyone a ray of hope. The story, though, changes from here onwards. On the appointed day, however, no sooner were the boys ready to sneak out of their barrack and go to Camp II than two other prisoners rushed into the barrack the boys were in, and threatened to reveal everything to the Germans if they did not cancel their plan. All those present tried to convince the protesting men that all the prisoners were already practically dead and there was no hope for them to survive, but they both remained adamant that the plan was a crazy idea. All the attempts to make them change their minds were in vain. Thus, the whole operation had to be cancelled<sup>18</sup>.

Dov Freiberg wondered, for a long time, how to escape from the camp on his own. With time, he came to the conclusion that a getaway on an individual basis was pointless because he realised that even if he managed to run away from the camp, he would not last long. He neither knew the area around nor the people out there. Besides, he was a Jew and looked like a Jew. Therefore, Freiberg concluded that, in planning his escape, he would have to find himself a companion, preferably one who knew the neighbouring area well. And so he talked the matter over with his friend Abraham, who, however, withdrew from taking part in such an undertaking. Yet, Freiberg did not give up. He collected a large number of gold coins, put them in bags and buried in different places of the camp so that he could dig at least one of them up in case the time to escape should come. Apart from this, he memorised the order in which the Ukrainian guards went on their duty. He noticed that before each watchman began his shift, Graetschus and Roktsuk gave him his ammunition. Whenever the watchmen went off duty, they returned the ammunition to the stores.

Dov Freiberg also watched and memorised what happened at the camp's main gate and the yard in front of it. He noticed that the fields lying next to the Ukrainians' quarters and spreading along the railway tracks had not been mined because he saw people walk along the fence there. Dov also watched the Ukrainians load and unload their guns, and saw that they left them unattended in their rooms. Many times, when he was on his own in their barrack, he felt an overwhelming desire to take one of these. One day, he tried. At first, he just touched the cold barrel. Then, with his heart in his mouth, he picked the gun up and tried to unlock it in the same way as the Ukrainians did. He freed the safety catch but immediately returned it to 'safe' and put the rifle away. For the Ukrainians, a rifle did not pose any problem, for Freiberg it was extremely heavy. Even so, he felt glad and even pictured himself having just learnt everything there is to know about rifles.

---

<sup>18</sup> Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, p. 39; Aron Licht's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2761, (the dates and the place where the account was given - missing), translated from Yiddish by Adam Bielecki; Moshe Hochman, *From Zolkiewka to Sobibor. Testimony of Moshe Hochman* (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-124.

Once, Dov Freiberg hit on an idea in which prisoners would stage an uprising in Sobibór. This was to begin on a Sunday afternoon when everyone was having a rest in the camp. At the planned time, most of the Germans would be asleep, while the majority of the Ukrainians, together with some Germans, would be on a day's leave far away from Sobibór. Each Sunday afternoon, Dov lit a fire under the cauldrons under the boiler used to heat water. A kapo would send him two young prisoners who then returned to the camp, each with two pails full of hot water. Whenever they came back, the kapo sent two other prisoners to help out. According to Freiberg's plan, when the two boys came, Dov would dress them in black Ukrainian uniforms, and give them guns and as much ammunition as they could carry. On the way back to the camp, in being dressed so, they would not raise anybody's suspicions. This, Dov believed, would create an opportunity for them to quietly dispatch the Ukrainians stationed at the main gate. After this, the two next prisoners who would come to take the water would, too, put on such uniforms and take guns with them; then they would go up to the guardhouse, take the guard by surprise and kill him. In this way, not only would they be able to get more weapons, but they would also control the armoury located nearby. If the insurgents were accompanied by these 'false' Ukrainians, and if they could control the road, they could rush towards the gate and the SS quarters. The main idea lying behind this plan was to take the Germans by surprise. In the total chaos resulting from this situation, the 'real' Ukrainians would not be shooting at the false ones, who, in turn, would have a great opportunity to kill a few Germans.

Freiberg was sure that his plan was good, yet he was afraid to tell anyone about it for fear that someone might turn him in. One day, however, he came up to Leon Feldhendler and shared his plan with him. Feldhendler was truly astonished by Freiberg's resourcefulness. He agreed that the plan was good but said that he doubted that any-one was ready for such a challenge. What is more, he added, there was not a person who would assume leadership in this case. Hence, it came to nought.

One of the ways in which the prisoners of Sobibór morally resisted the Germans, and fought against their own fatigue<sup>19</sup>, was to maintain their Jewish identity by praying for the dead and by celebrating traditional Jewish festivities, although this was extremely risky.

Yet, for some of the prisoners, the only form of protest was manifested by their suicide. The Germans considered themselves masters of life and of death for their prisoners, and, therefore, they jealously held onto their self-given right to appoint the exact time and place at which 'their' Jews left this Earth. Any suicide attempt on the part of prisoners deprived the Germans of this ultimate form of control; thus, this was considered an act of rebellion and defiance. Therefore, those prisoners who were caught doing so were publicly humiliated, beaten and executed at the nearest roll-call. Frenzel was of the opinion that this was a good warning for those prisoners who dared to decide themselves on the date of their death.

---

<sup>19</sup> Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Izrael, May 1959; Mordechaj Goldfarb's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 02/2212, Haifa, 9 January 1962.

During the court trial held in Hagen, Karl Frenzel was charged (Indictment No. 22) with having issued, on a morning between May 1942 and October 1943, an order to take one of the dying prisoners, who had slashed his wrists at night, from his barrack to the courtyard where the daily roll-calls were held. Next, Frenzel rebuked the dying man sharply, lashed him with his whip and shot him in the presence of all the gathered Jews. Drunk with his glorious feeling of absolute power, he shouted out to them that no Jew had the right to take his or her own life – true Aryans alone had that power.

Among the prisoner-labourers of the Sobibór camp, there was one forty-year-old Jew from Hrubieszów who was a very good bricklayer. It was he and his assistant that had built, to Wagner's great satisfaction, the camp's canteen and the SS quarters. One October night in 1942, under the cover of pitch darkness and the falling rain, the two men crawled towards the barbed-wire fence, climbed over it and ran away into the nearby forest. After the war, Moshe Bahir claimed that the Ukrainian watchmen had told him the men had been captured a few days later and killed. Jakub Biskupicz said that he had been working together with these two Jews the day before their escape, and therefore he knew what had really occurred, and what happened afterwards.

This happened in 1943, several months prior to the outbreak of the October prisoners' revolt. According to Jakub Biskupicz, the two prisoners came from Włodawa. That day, the two prisoner-labourers from the construction commando were building a gate between Camp I and II. This gate was meant to lead to the new barracks which were being built on the western part of the camp's fence for an additional Ukrainian unit. At night, it began to rain. The two men, whose names Biskupicz could not remember, though he believed they were his age, asked him whether they could move from their uppermost bunk to his, and lie down next to him. Each bed had three bunks and, since it was raining heavily that night, the uppermost bunk was soaking wet, with water dripping through the ceiling.

Biskupicz woke up before dawn, at around 5 in the morning, to go to the toilet. He noticed that the two fellow prisoners were missing, so he rushed out of the barrack to look for them, but could not find them anywhere, so he went to look for a kapo. He came across kapo Bunio (Biskupicz and Bunio had arrived at the camp on the same transport) and told him what had happened. The two men began to walk around the camp, searching for the missing men, but in vain. During the morning roll-call, Bunio informed Frenzel that the two prisoners had vanished. Having heard this, Frenzel and Wagner, together with some Ukrainians, started to lash out at the prisoners standing on the roll-call yard. They kept shrieking with fury.

After the war, Biskupicz testified that it was during this roll-call that Frenzel had first come up with the idea of collective punishment in retribution for any escape attempt. Frenzel gave the order to count off every tenth person from this commando, and each "chosen" one had to make a step forward. All these selected prisoners were then immediately marched away and shot. Thomas Blatt remembered that Frenzel himself had patted his victims on the shoulder, saying "go" to them. Among those "chosen ones" was the father of Blatt's friend, whose name was Itne Mojsze.

Tomasz Blatt claimed that the two escapees had managed to survive World War II. He said that they were bricklayers who came from Chełm, and that he had met them in Germany after the war. Anyway, the two men's escape cost the lives of 20 persons. Kurt Ticho testified that just before the convicts were to have been taken away to their place of execution, suddenly Untersturmführer Niemann came to the roll-call yard to have a word with Frenzel. When they finished, Frenzel cut down the number of convicts by half.

Nobody knew why Niemann had done this, especially because his intervention had saved, at least for some time, the lives of ten innocent people. After the war, during his trial, Frenzel denied, at first, having even heard about this incident. However, the witnesses' testimonies given during the following trial with respect to the goings-on in Sobibór forced him to change his mind and to admit that he had resorted to decimation as a way of retaliation. He even admitted to having selected the ten prisoners during one of the roll-calls and to having them killed. He claimed, however, that he himself had not personally taken part in this execution<sup>20</sup>.

Another successful and bold escape was effected in June 1943 by two people: Josele Pelc, a carpenter from Tyszowice, and an unknown bricklayer from Chełm. This time, the two men made a hole in the fence, got out through the hole and escaped to the forest. This incident has been mentioned in the memoirs by Leon Cymiel, Moshe Bahir and Tomasz Blatt<sup>21</sup>.

A further escape attempt was made by a prisoner of unknown identity. Hubert Gomerski recalled this incident during his post-war trial. He testified that, once, a Jewish prisoner had tried to run away from the camp, so a Ukrainian watchman gave chase on his horse, caught up with the man and shot him<sup>22</sup>. The same incident is described in Hersz Cukierman's account<sup>23</sup>.

Yet another Sobibór prisoner, Simon Honigman, made an escape attempt which proved successful. Later, he claimed that he had managed to escape twice, the first escape having taken place in November 1942, only two days after his arrival at the camp. At this time, he managed to crawl under the fence of Camp II, despite the nearby presence of the guards. He then returned to the Izbica ghetto, where he stayed

---

<sup>20</sup> Author's conversation with Kurt Ticho in November 2007; Aron Licht's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2761, (the date and the place where the account was given - unknown), translated from Yiddish by Adam Bielecki; Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959.

<sup>21</sup> Leon Cymiel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-3, USC Shoah Foundation Institute For Visual History and Education Archives, file ref. No. 29630, 26 March 1997; Moshe Bahir's testimony, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 03/2353, Tel Aviv, 3 March 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>22</sup> Hubert Gomerski, hearing report, file ref. No. StA.Do-XII'65-754. Hagen, 9 December 1965, MPLW Archives.

<sup>23</sup> Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944.

until April 1943. Recaptured, he found himself back in the Sobibór camp. On 27 July 1943, Honigman subsequently ran away with four other prisoners working in the forest outside the camp<sup>24</sup>.

On 26 June 1943, a transport of Jews arrived which was escorted by Paul Groth. This was the last group of prisoners from the extermination camp in Bełżec. The prisoners had been promised that they would be transferred to a labour camp, but they sensed that this was merely a trick played on them by the SS men. Therefore, when their train stopped at the railway ramp of Sobibór, they realised what was awaiting them, and so they rose up against the German and Ukrainian guards. However, the result of this revolt was easy to predict: all of them were killed<sup>25</sup>.

Prisoner-labourers who survived the Sobibór camp and World War II made mention, in their post-war accounts, of the so-called “transport from Bełżec”. However, these accounts differ in their presentation of this particular transport. They vary in terms of the date of its arrival, the number of new-arrivals, and the circumstances in which they were killed. What all of the survivors did remember, though, was that the day and the events that followed had been highly unusual. When the transport came, the prisoner-labourers were locked in their barracks for as long as it took the SS men and the Ukrainians to “process” the newcomers. Though locked inside, the prisoners could feel the great tension, alertness and anxiety exhibited by the camp’s staff. After some time, they could also hear the sound of shooting; they were also made to follow a completely different camp routine that day<sup>26</sup>.

Prisoners from Camp III also made attempts to escape from the Sobibór camp. In early April 1943, the Germans uncovered an almost finished tunnel dug in Camp III. This ran from the prisoners’ barrack, up to the camp’s fence. Naturally, the “plotters” were executed. Chaim Powroźnik claimed that it was the prisoners from the February 1943 transport from Chełm that began to dig this tunnel. They had already managed to make a 30-metre passage when the Camp III kapo, a young boy, turned them in. Powroźnik remembered this kapo very well because they had both come to Sobibór on the same transport, moreover, several days after their arrival at the camp, the young man was appointed a functionary kapo in Camp I. One day, Powroźnik and a few other prisoners were ordered to deliver, under the supervision of this kapo, some lime to Camp III, by means of the narrow-gauge railway wagons. They kept pushing the wagons, but failed to notice that they had shoved them beyond

---

<sup>24</sup> Simon Honigman, hearing report, Hagen, 13 December 1965, NIOD Archives.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Hersz Cukierman’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944; Philip Bialowitz, Joseph Bialowitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-197; Chaim Engel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD’s 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0066, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem; Tomasz Blatt’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948; Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, p. 73; Eda Lichtman’s testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959; Abraham Margulies’s account, Yad Vashem Archives, file 03/7019, (the date and the place where the account was given - unknown), translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

the gate of Camp III. Powroźnik managed to withdraw and escape, but the others did not, and, as a result, they were detained in Camp III. The kapo, who also found himself behind the gate of Camp III, was allowed to keep his rank. In this way, he became Camp III's kapo. It was him that reported to the Germans on the prisoners' plan to escape through the tunnel which, at that time, was almost ready. As a result of this man's betrayal, the Germans shot about 80 of the prisoner-labourers of Camp III<sup>27</sup>.

On 28 September 1943, during the afternoon roll-call, Camp I was surrounded by an extremely large group of Ukrainian guards, and the prisoner-labourers gathered in the roll-call yard were made to stay there without a word of explanation as to why. They only guessed that another mass-execution would be taking place. As it was usually the case, in such extraordinary circumstances, the Germans always wanted to keep everyone under control. Soon, gun-shots rang out somewhere in Camp III. A minute later, the guards began to disperse, and everything went back to 'normal'. That evening, a rumour was spread that the shot prisoners had tried to dig an underground tunnel. On the next day, 30 Jews were transferred from Camp I to Camp III<sup>28</sup>.

The archaeological excavations carried out in 2013, in the area of the alleged location of Camp III, unearthed traces of a barrack, which, most probably, held the *Sonderkommando* prisoner-labourers. What was discovered were rows of small post-holes which had probably supported the prisoners' bunk beds. Around the area, traces of three rows of barbed wire entanglements were also evident. The research that followed indicated that the attempt made by prisoners of Camp III, of an escape through an underground tunnel, was genuine. Right next to the southern wall of this barrack, the archaeological work showed a backfilled trench which ran from, more or less, the half-length of the southern wall, towards the east. At the beginning, the trench was around 60-70 cm wide and about 60-70 cm deep. Further on, however, right before the first entanglements, its depth suddenly increased up to even 1,60 m, reaching the present ground water level.

Surviving prisoners of Sobibór speak of another event. Stanisław Szmajzner devised a plan to get rid of the infamous kapo, Berliner, whom all the prisoners hated deeply. He put a few thousand Reichmarks into a pair of socks. Next, when he was speaking with Frenzel, he started complaining about Berliner, and he gave Frenzel the socks as evidence of Berliner's deceit. During the evening roll-call,

<sup>27</sup> Chaim Powroźnik's account, Chełm, 10 August 1944. Copy of the materials in possession of the Archives of the Regional Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Lublin, and compiled from either documents from the Central Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland or from the Majdanek State Museum, IPN Archives, Lublin.

<sup>28</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, p. 93; Jakub Biskupicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Blatt Tomasz's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948; Freiberg Dov, *op. cit.*, p. 68; Andrew Zielinski, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-96; Salomea Hanel, *Sobibór. Gazowanie. Bunt* [Sobibór. Gassings. Revolt] (in:) *Dokumenty zbrodni i męczeństwa* [Documents of Crimes and Martyrdom], (ed.): M. Borowicz, N. Rost, J. Wolf, Kraków 1945, pp. 63-66.

Frenzel summoned Berliner, accused him of theft and ordered the administering of a punishment of 75 lashes. This was to be meted out by prisoners, who got down to the task immediately afterwards, making use of Frenzel's heavy whip. Fired up with a long held burning desire for vengeance, they beat Berliner mercilessly and violently. Afterwards, Berliner barely made it back to his bunk bed. He was dead in the morning. Berliner's body was taken to Camp II, thrown onto a truck and driven away to Camp III. Anyone who saw the truck driving by, spat at his corpse. The fact that they had finally got rid of this traitor brought all the prisoners great relief. The next day, Frenzel asked Kurt Ticho about the cause of Berliner's death. Ticho said that the death was the result of some 'internal injuries'. Frenzel subsequently appointed another Chief Kapo, this time a kindly and good-natured man from Vienna by the name of Spitz. Several days later, Frenzel ordered Szlomo to bring him another pair of socks<sup>29</sup>.

Hersz Cukierman and his son were brought to Sobibór in mid-May 1942. During the selection on the ramp, he found himself among those lucky ones who had been chosen for forced labour. He volunteered as a cook, and was appointed the 'chef' of the camp's kitchen. Here, he had seven assistants, including his son. Later, the Germans sent more staff to the kitchen, i.e. four women and two men. With time, Cukierman was made the chief cook of the entire camp, and thus became responsible for preparing meals for Camps I, II and III. When, several weeks after his arrival, he learnt the whole truth about the camp, the first thoughts of escaping from Sobibór crossed his mind. His kitchen was frequented by a Ukrainian called Kaszewacki, who came from Kiev. Cukierman decided to become closer with him and he bribed him with 'soft' and 'hard' cash. Money was not a problem for him since, every day, he got some from other prisoners who worked in the sorting barracks.

Cukierman and Kaszewacki talked a lot with each other. Hersz wanted to find out whether the Ukrainian was honest or whether he was only in it for the money. Cukierman frequently asked him to explain to him what happened to the newly arrived transports. He also hinted that he wanted to buy a gun. Any time this happened, however, Kaszewacki answered evasively, and, usually half-way through their conversation, he would leave the kitchen without a word. Yet, one day he came to Cukierman and said that he had a request to him on account of the fact that he wanted very much to leave the camp to meet with his fiancée in Chełm. She was Jewish. Of course, Kaszewacki was forbidden to leave the camp like this. Luckily for him, however, he was the supervisor of the kitchen at that time, so his presence in the camp was not highly conspicuous. Also, he did not have to attend roll-calls. What is more, the Ukrainians and Germans from the kitchen never paid any special attention to him. He knew that a one-day or a several-day absence would pass unnoticed. Therefore, he asked Cukierman to cover for him if necessary, and to say, in case any German came to ask for him, that he had just been in the kitchen, but had gone out somewhere. Step by step, Cukierman finally came to trust this Ukrainian, especially when he

---

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Kurt Ticho in November 2007; Tomasz Blatt's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948.

was told by his fellow-prisoners that Kaszewacki had some contacts with a nearby partisan group. Allegedly, Kaszewacki had even assured some of the prisoners that there would come a day when he would help them to escape from the camp.

Despite all this, Cukierman could not be certain whether Kaszewacki said all these things because they were true, or because it got him gold. Eventually, Cukierman came to the conclusion that the Ukrainian was a trustworthy person. Kaszewacki told him that, from time to time, he sneaked out of the camp to meet with a partisan group. Therefore, he said, he wanted Cukierman to arrange to hand-over enough money to buy some weapons. Thus, Cukierman, as much as he could, took measures to help Kaszewacki in so doing. Only one person from the camp knew about Cukierman and Kaszewacki's cooperation, i.e. a man originally from Warsaw, Szlojme Goldsztajn, who worked in the food storage barrack. However, in the meantime, there happened something which confirmed Cukierman's conviction that one could never fully trust the Ukrainian watchmen, and so caution could not be thrown into the wind.

At that time, a young boy from Warsaw had made his decision to escape. To accomplish this, he gave one of the Ukrainian guards a lot of gold in the hope that the man would help him get out of the camp while on duty. While he took the gold, the Ukrainian immediately handed it back to the Germans. The boy was then hauled away and shot.

During one of his conversations with Kaszewacki, Cukierman learnt that the nearby partisan group had given up their idea of liberating the camp. The reason was that this action would certainly be too risky, as, according to the partisans, the camp was under too close surveillance. Also, they realised that, if their plan failed, the Germans would, in retaliation, immediately murder most of the camp's prisoner-labourers.

All the same, after one of such visits to the partisans, Kaszewacki told Cukierman that he was expected to prepare a plan to poison all the Germans and Ukrainians. Cukierman's task was to find out if it were possible to form an appropriate group of prisoners that could be trusted. If so, the group were to fix a date when they would add the poison to the meals prepared for the camp's personnel. The poison (morphine) would probably take effect after about six hours, and with the guards and staff incapacitated, the partisans would be able to break into the camp and free all the prisoners. Cukierman was acquainted with Symcha Białowicz, who worked in the pharmacy, and so he asked him to prepare 600 grams of morphine in three bottles. Białowicz agreed, and began to regularly take, with a syringe, small amounts of morphine from many different vials so that nobody noticed. This took a long time, but, finally, the three small bottles of morphine were delivered to the camp's kitchen. Unfortunately, circumstances surrounding Himmler's visitation to Sobibór in July 1942, put an end to this plan.

After Himmler's visit to the camp, the Germans changed the way the camp's kitchens operated. The one in which meals for the Germans and Ukrainians were prepared could no longer employ Jews, who, in turn, were transferred to the kitchen responsible for the preparation of food for the prisoners only. From then onwards,

there were three kitchens in the camp: one for the Germans, one for the Ukrainians and one for the Jewish prisoners. Some of the Sobibór survivors link this removal of the Jews from the kitchen for the camp's staff with an escape effected by a young woman employed in the kitchen for the guards, as well as with Wagner's discovery of one of the bottles containing morphine. It so happened that one day he turned up in the medicine storage barrack. He brought there Cukierman and five other prisoners, including one girl, and wanted to find out how the vial full of morphine had come into her possession. Fortunately, Białowicz managed to come up with some rational explanation, and Wagner dropped the matter, but a boy, and the woman were shot<sup>30</sup>.

Cukierman got involved in other schemes as well. He was accompanied in one of these by: Szlojme Goldsztajn, from Warsaw; Jasza Pelc, a carpenter from Tyszowce; Lejb Pelc, a merchant from Żółkiewka; and Szymon "The Warehouseman", from Warsaw. All this happened in the early part of the summer of 1943, and the intermediary in this transaction was a tailor who worked for the Ukrainian watchmen. In this one, the conspirators made a deal with some Ukrainians that, one night, when they were on duty, they would provide a few trucks which would be parked not far from the camp. Cukierman recounted later that the number of vehicles was to be such as to make the entire evacuation of the camp's prisoners possible. The deal was that the Jews were to be driven in these to the other side of the Bug River, where they would form a partisan group. Of course, the conspirators offered the watchmen a huge amount of money for this undertaking.

Some of the conspirators, however, were in doubt whether they could really trust the Ukrainians. Therefore, they decided to pay half before the escape, and half afterwards. The deposit was 700 dollars. As the deadline approached, one of the Ukrainians asked Cukierman's group to meet with him in the bakery. In this meeting, he informed the conspirators that he would be able to help maximum fifteen people to get away from the camp. Cukierman told him that the deal was off. He had realised that the Ukrainians were going to cheat them by, most probably, driving them away from the camp, robbing them, then killing them.

On the next day, however, several Jews changed their minds and agreed to the Ukrainians' plan. That night, they were driven away hidden inside an out-going truck, and were taken to the far side of the Bug river. Here, the truck stopped within the forest, near the railway station, and the driver told the people to get out. They then unloaded some parcels and loaded the truck with some others. Next, he told the Jews to get back into the truck, and he drove them ... back to the camp. Soon, the Ukrainians who were seemingly in league with Cukierman, disappeared. It was discovered later that some 40 parcels were missing from the camp stores. As a result, the 12 Ukrainians were accused of having stolen the parcels. At that moment,

---

<sup>30</sup> Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1187, Łódź, 8 December 1945; Symcha Białowicz, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/2352, excerpts with a conversation between Eda Lichtman, Icchak Lichtman, Dov Freiberg, Abraham Margulies, Symcha Białowicz and Jakub Biskupicz held in the presence of Olga Barniczowa, PhD, in Tel-Aviv, September 1963.

Cukierman guessed that the watchmen had had their own plan, and the Jews were only to have been used and robbed of their money.

The Jewish cooks soon resumed their talks with Kaszewacki, who kept promising to help him to work out an escape plan. It seemed, however, that bad luck haunted the prisoners. By coincidence, at the same time, it was decided that 30 Ukrainian watchmen would be withdrawn from the camp, and Kaszewacki was one of them. Before he left, he told Cukierman a secret. He said that he would soon do what he had not managed to do so far. He also warned Cukierman to be very careful, and not to come into contact with any other Ukrainians. On the day when this Ukrainian platoon of guards was to leave Sobibór, Kaszewacki and eleven other armed watchmen (including the one who used to stand guard by the gas chamber) escaped from Sobibór.

Thus, Kaszewacki succeeded in deserting his duty post at the Sobibór camp. This fact was later confirmed by Irena Sujko in her testimony which she gave in 1968. From 1934 to late December 1943, she had lived, without a break, next to the railway station in Sobibór. All that time she leased the station's eatery, where she sold snacks and alcohol to travellers and local inhabitants. There, the Ukrainian guards from the Sobibór camp frequently came to buy things. From the conversations that she had with them, she learnt many details about the camp. With time, she developed a closer relationship with Kaszewacki and another Ukrainian called 'Podessa'. One might say that Sujko and Kaszewacki remained on friendly terms with each other.

Sujko described Kaszewacki as a middle-aged man, between 45 and 46 years of age, of middle height and sturdy build, always dressed in a khaki uniform. She did not remember any other features of his physical appearance. He told her that he was in fact Russian, not Ukrainian, and that he had held the rank of Major in the Red Army. Moreover, he volunteered to serve in the SS army to escape certain death in the POW's camp he had found himself in. Indeed, Sujko also knew that he had run away from the Sobibór camp - because she had helped him in his escape. She kept his civilian clothes, as well as the money he had prepared before his departure, hidden in her place.

The memoirs of another Polish woman, Maria Pazyna, who lived in the village of Osowa near Sobibór during the German occupation, show that the prisoners of the Sobibór extermination camp, were always looking, with the help of some of the Ukrainian guards, for the possibilities of escaping from the camp, or of coming into contact with the local partisans. Pazyna provided the local Soviet partisans with food on a regular basis. During one of such transactions (when Sobibór was still in operation), she met Anatol Panko, who told her that, not so long before, he had served as a guard in the camp. Fortunately, he had managed to run away and join a Soviet partisan group. Right after the liberation, Pankow visited Maria Pazyna several times, doing so while wearing his Red Army uniform.

In her memoirs, Maria Pazyna mentioned another Soviet partisan, a Władek Mróz, whom she had also met in this way. She did not remember when exactly this had happened, but she recalled that he had come to buy some food. He told her that, on that day or the next day, the Sobibór prisoners would make an attempt to escape

from the camp, with the partisans' support. On the next day, Pazyna did hear sounds of 'explosions' coming from the Sobibór camp. However, a few days later, when Anatol Pankow came to buy some more food, she learnt that the revolt attempt had failed. Panko also told her that the Germans had captured Władysław Mróz, had taken him away to the German camp in Trawniki near Lublin, and had murdered him there<sup>31</sup>.

Perhaps, this happened in July 1943, and, in fact, was the escape that was tried by the Dutch prisoners of that time. The originator and organiser of this plan was a captain of either the Dutch navy or merchant marine. Indeed, some of the prisoners claimed that he had also been a captain with the International Brigades which had fought for the freedom of Spain in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's. He came from Amsterdam, where he had also found work as a journalist. The escape plan was also supported by a group of Jews from Poland, including Leon Feldhendler, Josef Feld, the Kon Brothers, Icchak Lichtman, Hersz Cukierman and Szlomo Goldsztajn. The captain, whose name remains unknown, and Josef Feld, came into contact with some of the Ukrainian guards, who, after lengthy negotiations, promised to help out. All the further contacts with them were maintained via the Polish prisoners working in the kitchen.

The plan of this revolt assumed that a large group of Ukrainian watchmen would escape as well. The uprising was to begin during lunch time. The prisoners were to break into the armoury, and kill only those guards who would try to resist. Next, the prisoners, together with the watchmen acting in collusion with the rebels, would break down the main gate and escape to the forest. However, the plot was uncovered. It was Wagner that conducted the investigation. Despite brutal torture at the hands of his interrogators, the Dutch captain did not betray anyone. In retaliation, the Germans shot him and 71 other Dutch prisoners of the camp. After the war, Sobibór's survivors left accounts which describe this event. However, the descriptions differ with respect to the 'scenario' of the so-called 'Dutchmen's revolt', as well as the circumstances and the people who contributed to the disclosure of this plot.

<sup>31</sup> In the first half of 1943, the local partisan groups from the Włodawa district, as well as the Soviet partisan groups operating on the other side of the Bug River, were in possession of detailed information about the German extermination centre in Sobibór. In his memo from 7 October 1943, Zachar Filipowicz Popławski (*copy in Marek Bem's private collection*) informed the plenipotentiary of the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brest Oblast that, as a soldier in the Woroszyłow and Żukow army units, he had learnt of other crimes committed by the Germans. The political officer of the Woroszyłow Soviet partisan unit also received reports from several of his partisans: a man called Eiberg (the political officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> company of Woroszyłow's unit), Captain Abdułalijew and a partisan called M. Żukowski (or Bukowski). In their reports, they informed him about the death camp located near Sobibór, on the Brest – Chełm railway line. In the summer of 1943, Popławski also gained information about the camp and its gas chambers from partisans who had come from the other side of the Bug River to join the Żukow army unit. The information was confirmed by the inhabitants of the village of Tomaszówka. Abdułalijew also informed Popławski that a partisan from their unit had been an eyewitness to the goings-on in the Sobibór camp, having served there as a guard. This man had escaped in summer 1943 and joined a Soviet partisan group. In his report for his superiors, he presented very detailed information about the camp in Sobibór.

According to Kalmen Wewryk, a group of Dutch prisoners had prepared a plan to poison all the Germans in the camp, as this would open up an opportunity for all the other prisoners to escape. The Dutch Jews had their people who worked in the kitchen for the SS men and had those who worked in the pharmacy, where medicaments brought by the newly-arrived Jews were sorted and stored. The Dutchmen systematically put aside portions of poison, due to which they managed to obtain a large supply of it. The conspirators decided that, if they succeeded in poisoning the Germans and the Ukrainians, they would seize their weapons, equip themselves with the ammunition and weapons from the armoury, and with enough food, escape to the forest. Unfortunately, someone turned in the conspirators at the very last moment. Five minutes before the prisoners were to line up to get some food, a kapo burst into the kitchen and shouted to the prisoners responsible for distributing the food not to give it out. Immediately, the prisoner-labourers were assembled in the roll-call yard. Everybody gathered looked at each other with worry and fear written all over their faces, expecting the worst to happen. Wagner, however, ordered only the Dutch prisoners to take one step forward. He formed them into a column and force-marched them to Camp III. The Polish Jews were lucky in this case. Most probably, they thought, the informer must have told the Germans that this had been solely the Dutchmen's idea<sup>32</sup>.

Selma Engel was of the opinion that the Dutch prisoners had been betrayed by a German Jew, whose name she could not remember. Eda Lichtman and Hersz Cukierman claimed, on the other hand, that the traitor had been a Polish Jew called 'Josef Kohn'. I think, however, that Kalmen Wewryk's recollection joins together two different escape attempts, i.e. the Dutchmen's plan to start a revolt, as well as the escape attempt put together by a group of Polish Jews who wanted to also poison the German and the Ukrainian guards<sup>33</sup>.

When World War II was over, Maria Pazyna met with Pankow once again. He told her that, about four months following this failed Dutch revolt, a transport of Soviet POW's had arrived at the camp. They too organised an uprising, but this time successfully, due to which all the prisoners managed to escape. Soon afterwards, he said, the camp ceased to exist. Pankow stressed the fact that these POW's had been in constant contact with the partisans.

Many Ukrainian watchmen refused to accept what was happening in the camp. They exhibited as little brutality and violence as possible, and helped the prisoner-

<sup>32</sup> Kalmen Wewryk, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-24.

<sup>33</sup> Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944; Selma Engel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0067, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem; Aron Licht's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2761, (the date and the place where the account was given - missing), translated from Yiddish by Adam Bielecki; Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69; Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959; Mordechaj Goldfarb's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 02/2212, Haifa, 29 January 1962; Kalmen Wewryk, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

labourers to obtain or pass on information outside the camp. They also frequently cheated the Germans, and would negotiate illegal, internal and external trade with the prisoner-labourers. Moreover, some Ukrainians helped the prisoner-labourers to prepare escape plans, and to escape, or escaped themselves and even planned to escape together with the prisoners. Most of such attempts, whether successful or unsuccessful, were made in 1943, in connection with the general situation in the military front, including the Stalingrad defeat, as well as with the increased activity of partisan groups operating on the other side of the Bug River. With time, Sobibór's prisoner-labourers, with the aid of some Ukrainian watchmen, also managed to come into contact with these partisan groups.

The SS personnel of Sobibór always kept their distance from the Ukrainians, and they remained very demanding towards their Ukrainian 'colleagues'. Hence, the Ukrainian watchmen frequently found themselves transferred elsewhere for various acts of misdemeanour. This was done so as to prevent them from settling into a routine, developing certain habitual behaviours, establishing 'dangerous' contacts or acquainting themselves too much with the local area. Furthermore, the SS personnel's distrust towards them led to acts of inflicted brutality. Therefore, through such measures, desertions on the part of the Ukrainians were quite rare, as their fear of the brutal consequences of doing so, was stronger than the desire to run away. However, there were at least two known cases of escape attempts made by mixed groups of Ukrainian guards and prisoners which proved successful. One of these is mentioned by Z. Krawczak in his account from 1943<sup>34</sup>. The other escape attempt was made on the night of 25/26 December 1942, when five prisoners (including two women) ran away with two Ukrainian guards. The escapees took with them two rifles and a lot of ammunition. However, somebody informed on them. As a consequence, Wiktor Kisiljew and Wasyl Zischer (Ukrainian watchmen), as well as Pesia Lieberman (prisoner) were found in a nearby village, where, during an exchange of fire with the police, all of them were killed. In retaliation, the SS men then had many prisoners of the Sobibór camp executed<sup>35</sup>. Hersz Cukierman was the only Sobibór survivor who recalled this incident after the war<sup>36</sup>.

One of the practices that sustained the prisoner-labourers in their hellish camp life was the comforting moments when they received scraps of information about what was happening in the outside world. Rumour had it, for instance, that the German offensive had been halted at the gates of Moscow and Stalingrad, that the Germans suffered great losses, and that trains filled with wounded German soldiers kept running from the East to the West, away to Germany. It was also said that, on the Western Front, in Africa, General Rommel had been defeated by the English army and that the Germans had been halted at the Channel Tunnel so that they could not cross it. The prisoner-labourers also learnt that the Allies were bombing German

---

<sup>34</sup> Z. Krawczak's account, Switzerland, 1943, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 033/425.

<sup>35</sup> Report from the military police station in Chełm from 7 January 1943, to the commander of the military police in Lublin, file ref. No. 804/23, NIOD Archives.

<sup>36</sup> Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944.

towns and cities day and night, and much of Germany was reduced to heaps of rubble. In connection with this, there circulated another rumour that one of the SS men left the camp for Germany when he learnt that all his family had been killed in one of the bombing raids. This man was Johann Klier. When he came back, he told the Jews his story. Indeed, he sat down together with his commando, offered his prisoner-labourers cigarettes and told them about his family tragedy, crying like a small child. After his visit to Germany, Klier changed completely.

The prisoner-labourers were told by the Ukrainians about the partisans who made the forests a no-go area for the Germans, and blew up German trains and shot at German vehicles. They also saw that any vehicle leaving the camp for provisions and other supplies was escorted by soldiers armed with machine guns. Once, too, two Ukrainians went on leave and never came back. Some said that they had joined a group of partisans, others thought that partisans had captured them. Either way, this incident left a profound impression on the so-far self-confident Germans and Ukrainians alike. In the meantime, more and more often, the Germans had to leave the camp to take part in manhunts or to penetrate the local forests in search of partisan groups.

Eda Lichtman, who worked in the camp's laundry, recalled that the Germans came back from these actions extremely dirty, black from smoke and covered in blood. After one such action, all those involved brought their uniforms in to be washed. Gomerski personally threw his uniform and underwear into the tub where the washed clothes were normally rinsed out, and tried to wash them himself. While he was doing this, all the women prisoner-labourers present there had to stand to attention, and were forbidden to even look in his direction. When he left, they took his clothes out of the tub. They saw that Gomerski's clothes were covered not only in blood, but also in faeces. Eda Lichtman, who witnessed the whole incident, described it in her memoirs in the following way, "[...] *Apparently, Gomerski shit a brick out of fear. The Germans were terribly afraid of partisans [...]*"<sup>37</sup>.

One night, a group of partisans approached the camp area. Most probably, this was not part of any action aimed at liberating Sobibór. This was the only time, however, when the Germans raised the alarm because they suspected that some partisans were nearing the camp. The commandant had the alarm sounded twice. As a result, all the prisoners were driven out of their barracks to the roll-call yard to be counted. They also had to stand there under the very close surveillance of their guards, who were ready to shoot at any moment. This lasted for about three hours. All the guards were then given a lot more ammunition than what passed as routine in earlier times<sup>38</sup>.

---

<sup>37</sup> Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959.

<sup>38</sup> Leon Cymiel's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 6397, Warszawa, 20 June 1963; Estera Raab, interview transcript, video recording, Wentworth Films Inc, Holocaust, USHMM Archives, 12 February 1992, translated from English by Marek Bem; Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959; Kalmen Wewryk, *op. cit.*,

It is very likely that this event was connected with an operation carried out on the order of the AK [Home Army] Commander of the Włodawa district, Romuald Kompf (nicknamed 'Rokicz'). The report on this, made by Stanisław Pasikowski, says that, on a night of August 1943, the Home Army 'Nadbużanka' Flying Group (the soldiers nicknamed 'Łoś', 'Ryś', 'Delfin' and 'Żółw') broke into the office of the company which had built the death camp in Sobibór. The soldiers tore into pieces important documents and documentation, and set fire to the building. Apparently, this action delayed the planned extension of the camp. According to the report, the office was located not far from the camp, about 200 m from its fence. In his memoirs, Romuald Kompf recalls that his unit was then making preparations to launch an attack and liquidate the Sobibór camp. However, the military training which the soldiers had been undergoing since early 1943, was halted due to the October prisoners' uprising and the following liquidation of the camp<sup>39</sup>.

In his report, Stanisław Pasikowski describes an attack launched by a few Home Army soldiers on the office of the company which had built the death camp in Sobibór. However, this information is inaccurate. As a matter of fact, the soldiers had no idea what kind of building they got into during this action. It did take place, yet the building itself had nothing to do with the German extermination centre in Sobibór. Most probably, it housed a private German building company which, at that time, was constructing the Sobibór – Wytyczno section of the narrow-gauge railway line. The proof of this is that, approximately 700 m southwards in a straight line from the main entrance gate to the death camp, along the railway tracks, there was a small fenced-off yard where the company's offices and warehouses stood. The narrow-gauge railway line was meant to connect the main railway line with the planned potato processing plant in Wytyczno.

On 15 January 2011, I had an opportunity to talk with Henryk Shoen, who had been the master architect of this construction, and who supervised the charting of the route of the narrow-gauge railway line. For this purpose, he would come to Sobibór from Cracow, between June 1942 and June 1944, fortnightly. Once, the company employees (there were 10 of them, including several Germans) informed Shoen that there had been an attack on their main office, as a result of which most of the documents had been destroyed, and a few things taken away. Henryk Shoen could not remember any other details<sup>40</sup>. The existence of this company has been confirmed

---

p. 21; Icchak Lichtman's testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 032309, October 1963; Zelda Metz's account (in:) *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce* [The Documents and Materials on the Time of the German Occupation in Poland], Łódź 1946, ed. N. Blumental, Part I, Camps, Chapter V Sobibór, pp. 207-214; Filip Białowicz, Joseph Białowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 100; Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Stanisław Pasikowski, *Lotny Oddział AK „Nadbużanka”* [The Home Army "Nadbużanka" Flying Group], Łódź 2003, pp. 70-71.

<sup>40</sup> Author's interview with Henryk Shoen, Kraków, 15 January 2011. Original in the author's private collection. Author's interview with Jan Doliński, the Zbereże village, the Włodawski District, 30 April 2011. Original in the author's private collection; Stanisław

in the accounts of two Poles: Jan Doliński and Stanisław Borysiuk, who used to work there. Some traces of the company's buildings have survived to this day.

In the first half of 1943, the local partisan groups from the Włodawa District, as well as the Soviet partisans penetrating the area on the other side of the Bug River, were in possession of detailed information about the German extermination centre in Sobibór. Romuald Kompf, nicknamed 'Rokicz', and the Commander of the 3rd Battalion of the Home Army 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, describes in his memoirs that it was extremely difficult to carry out any systematic observation of the Sobibór camp. Sometimes, however, the partisans managed to obtain some valuable information from drunk German or Ukrainian guards. Also, the ZWZ (Union for Armed Struggle) intelligence collected many letters and postcards thrown by deported Jews from their deportation trains over the area between the railway station in Chełm and the Sobibór camp, as well as along the route where the Jews were force-marched from the Włodawa ghetto to the railway station in Orchówek. Since these messages were written by Jews, they contained a lot of valuable information about the camp itself and about all the ways in which the Jews were persecuted and murdered. The Home Army intelligence immediately sent this information by special couriers to specific points of contact. From there, it would be passed on to the Headquarters of the Union for Armed Struggle of the 'Warna' District, or the Chief of the diversionary-sabotage groups in Włodawa, which encrypted or edited it in an appropriate way and sent it onto the Inspectorate of Lublin-East or directly to the Command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> District in Lublin. Finally, the information would reach the Union for Armed Struggle Command in Warsaw, and then was sent abroad<sup>41</sup>.

Zachar Filipowicz Popławski wrote, in his memo to the plenipotentiary of the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brest Oblast, that when he had been a soldier with the Woroszyłow and Żukow partisans, he learnt about more crimes committed by the Germans. Acting as the political officer of the Woroszyłow Soviet Partisan Unit, he received reports from several of his partisans: a man called Eiberg (Political Officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> company of Woroszyłow's unit), Captain Abdulałijew, and a partisan called M. Żukowski (or Bukowski). In their reports, they informed him about the death camp located near Sobibór, on the Brest – Chełm railway line.

In these, they made a mention of a 'furnace' – a 'bath house' with eight chambers, 'which could accommodate 500 persons each'. In the summer of 1943, the information given to Popławski was reinforced by that of other partisans who had come from the far side of the Bug River in order to join the Żukow army unit. All this information was also confirmed by the inhabitants of the Tomaszówka village, who said that the

---

Borysiuk, witness hearing report, the District Commission of the Investigation of German Crimes in Lublin, file ref. No. OKL/Ds./1/67, Lublin, 3 November 1978. Original in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>41</sup> Author's interview with Jan Doliński, the village of Zbereże, Włodawa Region, 30 April 2011, original in the author's private collection; Stanisław Borysiuk, witness hearing report, The Regional Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, file ref. No. OKL/Ds./1/67, Lublin, 3 November 1978, copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

Germans brought to Sobibór many Jews from the East. They complained that sometimes they could not even leave their houses because of the terrible stench of burning bodies floating all over the area. Captain Abdulałijew told Popławski that one of the soldiers from their unit had been an eyewitness to what was happening in the Sobibór camp, having served there as a guard. He escaped from the camp in the summer of 1943, joined a group of Soviet partisans, and presented, in his report for the new authorities, a very detailed report on the Sobibór camp<sup>42</sup>.

Jules Schelvis speaks of another escape, as well as its aftermath. Members of the *Waldkommando* [the 'Forest Commando'] worked in a place situated approximately between two and three kilometres from the camp. The prisoners were supervised, alternately, by two or four SS men and a few Ukrainians. In July 1943, the *Waldkommando* was made up of about forty Polish and Dutch Jews. On 27 July 1943, the commando was headed by SS-Oberscharführer Werner Dubois, who had arrived at Sobibór around 15 June, after the liquidation of the Bełżec camp. There were three SS men guarding the labourers: Muller, Wendland and Wolf. It was so hot during that summer that the guards allowed two prisoners to bring, twice a day, water from the nearby village of Żłobek. On that day, Dubois ordered Schlomo Podchlebnik and Josef Kopp to bring two buckets of water from the village. They were escorted by one of the Ukrainian guards<sup>43</sup>.

The remaining 40 or so *Waldkommando* prisoners, half of whom were Dutch, impatiently waited for the two men to come back. Because of the delay, they began to suspect that the men had grasped the chance and escaped. The two prisoners' disappearance also raised suspicions among the guards, including Dubois. Therefore, they sent another Ukrainian watchman to Żłobek to find out what had happened, and ordered the prisoners to line up. The Ukrainian soon returned and reported that he had found the watchman's dead body. Obviously, the man had been killed. Dubois then ordered the guards to keep a close watch over the remaining prisoners, and sent one of the Ukrainians back to the camp to inform Commandant Reichleitner about what had happened. Reichleitner, in turn, told Bauer to drive his truck to Żłobek and bring back the body of the killed watchman. In the meantime, several Polish Jews from that commando escaped, taking advantage of the general confusion caused by the whole incident<sup>44</sup>. The Dutch Jews, however, knew perfectly well that, not knowing

<sup>42</sup> Romuald Kompf, *Nadbużański zryw. Wspomnienia z lat okupacji hitlerowskiej majora Romualda Kompfa PS. „Rokicz”, byłego Dowódcy III Batalionu 7 pp. AK* [The Uprising in the Bug River Region. The Memoirs of Major Romuald Kompf, Nicknamed 'Rokicz', Former Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, from the Times of the German Occupation of Poland], „Zeszyty Muzealne Muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego” [Notebooks of the Museum of the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District] 2008, vol. 15, pp. 27-54.

<sup>43</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p.193; Salomon Podchlebnik's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/10, 15 September 1944; Abraham Wang's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/4139, Tel Aviv/Israel, March 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Josef Frajtag's testimony, ŻIH Archives, Włodawa, October 1945.

<sup>44</sup> Franz Wolf, hearing report, file ref. No. ZStL-251/59-8-1632, Heidelberg, 14 November 1962, MPEW Archives.

the Polish language, they did not stand any chance of making a successful escape. The lucky escapees, who survived World War II, were Simon Honigman, Abraham Wang<sup>45</sup>, Schlomo Podchlebnik, Josef Kopf and Josef Frajtag. Soon, Commandant Reichleitner arrived in person to check what had happened.

All in all, it turned out that 14 *Waldkommando* prisoners made a successful escape on that day, albeit, most had only a temporary taste of freedom. The Germans and Ukrainians managed to recapture some of them, while others were shot during the chase. Bauer brought back their bodies in his truck. Back at the camp, the Germans and Ukrainians tormented, in an exceptionally brutal way, the captured Polish Jews. The Dutch prisoners were made to run, while the Polish ones had to crawl throughout the camp. After this, in front of all the prisoner-labourers assembled in the yard between Camps II and III, the captured Polish escapees were then shot<sup>46</sup>. On the same day, Commandant Reichleitner told the rest of the Germans during their dinner that, to warn the prisoners against even thinking about escape, a dozen or so Jews would additionally be killed. And this happened. On a special execution yard located between Camp II and Camp III, a group of selected prisoners were shot dead by a special squad made up of about 15 watchmen. Reichleitner himself gave them the order to shoot<sup>47</sup>.

In early 1943, Leib Feldhendler, the son of the rabbi from the village of Żółkiewka, arrived at the camp in a transport of Jews from Izbica. When Leib realised what was happening in the camp, he set out to devise a plan of organised uprising. In so doing, he convinced the Sobibór prisoner-labourers that their fate should be to die in battle, during an open revolt, and not in the gas chambers. The prologue to the uprising of the Sobibór prisoner-labourers which broke out on 14 October 1943, was the arrival of a group of Jewish POW's from the ghetto in Minsk. One of them was Aleksander Peczerski. He immediately began to prepare plans of the uprising and the collective escape of the camp's prisoners<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> Chaim Korenfeld stayed in the camp from 28 April to October 1943. It has been repeated many times that, in July 1943, it was Korenfeld who succeeded in escaping from the *Waldkommando* working in the forest outside the camp. This assumption is wrong, however. It is true that he was a member of this *Waldkommando*, but on that day, his cousin Abraham Wang had been selected to go instead of him. Chaim Korenfeld claims that, from that day onwards, he used the name Wang as his own. Also, he saw how the *Waldkommando* prisoners who had not managed to escape were brought to the camp and shot. His cousin survived the war.

<sup>46</sup> Kalmen Wewryk, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Franz Wolf's, hearing report, file ref. No. ZStL-251/59-8-1634, Heidelberg, 14 November 1962, MPLW Archives.

<sup>48</sup> Moshe Bahir's account (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-163; Estera Raab, interview transcript, video recording, Wentworth Films Inc, Holocaust, USHMM Archives, 12 February 1992, translated from English by Marek Bem; Chaskiel Menche, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD1, Tricht, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska; Samuel Leder's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/4140, 1964, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

Aleksander Peczerski came to Sobibór on 23 September. As early as on 7 October, his first escape plan was readied. From the very beginning, Peczerski assumed that only a collective escape of all the prisoners made sense, as this would guarantee that the plan would be truly effective. Peczerski's original plan was to dig an underground tunnel. This was considered too risky, however, and it had too many drawbacks. On the day when Peczerski presented this escape plan to his colleagues, he told them that he would prepare another version, more likely to prove effective.

Peczerski's first plan was as follows. The carpenter's workshop was situated 5 metres away from the barbed-wire fence and was 7 metres in width; the three rows of barbed wire making up the fence occupied a width of 4 metres; the mine field beyond it was 15 metres in width and the strip of land beyond the mine field to the forest was about 4 metres wide. This gave a distance of 35 metres in total. The plan was to dig a tunnel next to the furnace in the workshop. To do this, it was necessary to dig down about 80 centimetres into the ground. This was so because the mines in the mine field had been planted 30 centimetres below the ground surface, while, a metre or so below that was the water table. The tunnel was supposed to be 75 by 75 centimetres in width and height. This meant about 20 m<sup>3</sup> of earth which would have to be dug out.

The plan was to throw the dug-out earth underneath the barrack. The conspirators were to dig at night. They predicted that the digging out of 20 m<sup>3</sup> of earth should last 15-20 days. So, what were those drawbacks of this plan then? The conspirators were afraid that the 600 or so people would not manage to walk in single file or to crawl on all fours the necessary 35 metres in such a short time, i.e. from 11 p.m. to daybreak. They also had to take into consideration the fact that the prisoners would not only have to cover that tunnelled distance, but also to escape as far away from the camp as possible during that time. The plotters were also afraid that during such a long waiting time, quarrelling might break out among the escaping prisoners<sup>49</sup>. And thus the plan was not proceeded with.

Arkadij Weisspapier, who was deported to Sobibór on the same transport as Peczerski, prepared his own escape plan soon after he had arrived at the camp. He noticed that the camp's latrines were located not far from the fence. Therefore, together with Szubajew, Fimka, Mazurkiewicz and two other prisoners whose names he did not remember, Weisspapier decided to hide in the latrines and, at night, to get out of the camp over the fence. The area surrounding the latrines was poorly lit, which would make it easier for the escaping men to get over the fence. However, when Peczerski learnt about this plan, he asked the men not to go ahead with it because there was ready another plan for a mass escape. Weisspapier knew that escapes like the one he was planning had been made before. He also knew that, after each such escape, the Germans killed several dozen prisoners in retaliation. Having taken all these facts into consideration, Weisspapier did not proceed with his escape<sup>50</sup>.

---

<sup>49</sup> Aleksander Peczerski, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Arkadii Weisspapier, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-2, USC Shoah

Peczerski also had to talk to a man named Grisza, who was another member of this group. The conversation which they had was extremely heated. In defence of his plan for all the camp's prisoners to escape, Peczerski forbade Grisza and his fellows to get out of the camp on their own. He even went as far as to threaten to kill anyone who would make any unauthorised attempt.

## 2. The revolt and the prisoner escape

Sobibór's prisoner-labourers, who, on arrival, were selected to work in the camp, escaping, albeit temporarily, in this way certain death in the gas chambers, were treated by their German and Ukrainian overseers with utmost contempt. They were forced to do many different jobs, from sorting the personal belongings of those who were gassed in the gas chambers, to doing building work, felling trees, washing clothes, cleaning, and undertaking specialist artisan work. No matter what the task, however, the vast majority of these prisoner-labourers were killed after some time. Hence, when necessary, the camp's authorities supplemented the number of prisoners with those arriving in new transports. Thus, the permanent labour force in Sobibór was more or less maintained at 600-650 Jews.

At the end of June 1943, another transport of Jews meant to be sent to be gassed arrived at Sobibór's ramp. Right before the deportees were to be unloaded, however, the usual routine was changed. The camp's guards ordered all the prisoner-labourers to stay in their barracks. For the 'regulars', this was an unusual event. They guessed that this must have been a special transport. Historically, most probably, this was the transport of 26 June 1943, supervised by the SS man, Paul Groth, of the last 300 prisoner-labourers from the extermination camp in Bełżec. With the sound of shooting, and the subsequent retrieval and processing of the bodies, Sobibór's prisoner-labourers finally woke up to the fact that were they to stay passive, the only way to leave the camp was as smoke.

Hence, by mid 1943, Sobibór's prisoner-labourers began to truly sense that the camp might undergo some radical changes. They did not preclude the possibility that the Germans were thinking of liquidating the camp, or that they were going to fundamentally change the way it functioned and operated. If so, the prisoner-labourers knew perfectly well that this meant death for them. Therefore, all the prisoners began to think about escape. Although the general discussion on the possible liquidation of the camp was still ensuing, it was only in early summer that an organised revolt and a mass escape began to take shape. A group of Jews centred around Leon Feldhendler, the former leader of the Judenrat in the Żółkiewka ghetto, came up with a plan that could succeed. By then, any resistance on their part seemed unrealistic, but still this no longer mattered. The dice was cast and the feeling was that it was better to die in dignity, in battle, than to die in the gas chamber. The prisoners' perception of the camp as a place which posed a deadly threat to their lives

is an essential element of many accounts, memoirs and testimonies which describe the resistance movement in Sobibór. All of these stress the fact that, in the prisoners' view, insurrection, whether armed or bare-handed, was felt to be the only chance for survival<sup>51</sup>.

They were right. In late December 1942, the Germans made plans to liquidate the Bełżec camp. They then ordered Bełżec's surviving prisoner-labourers to dig pits and burn there the thousands of exhumed bodies. This was to obliterate any trace of mass murders they had committed. They made them believe that, when the task was completed, they would be transferred to another camp. When the cremation task was accomplished, the last commandant of the Bełżec camp, Gottlieb Hering, left Bełżec. Then, Christian Wirth, the Inspector of all the 'Operation Reinhardt' extermination camps, set SS-Unterscharführer Fritz Tauscher the task of liquidating the camp, levelling the whole area, and planting bushes all over the place, thus making it as if it had never existed. Tauscher completed his task at the end of March or at the beginning of April 1943.

During the liquidation of the Bełżec camp, Tauscher had under his command several German personnel, including Dubois and Jurs, as well as a contingent of Ukrainian watchmen. Moreover, he had at his disposal, 300-350 Jewish prisoner-labourers. Before leaving the camp, Gottlieb Hering had assured these prisoner-labourers that, after the liquidation, they would be moved to a different camp - either to Lublin, Trawniki or Budzyń - whichever one they would choose. However, more or less two weeks before the liquidation, Christian Wirth came to the camp with no prior notice. At the same time, a train made up of eight or nine wagons pulled into the camp. Wirth announced to the assembled Jews that they would be transferred to the camp he had chosen, and then ordered them to get onto the wagons<sup>52</sup>.

These were the prisoners taken to Sobibór. When the train stopped at the station, the deportees guessed at once why they had been brought there, as back at Bełżec, they had heard stories about the Sobibór camp. Thus, no sooner had they been made to jump out of their wagons onto the ramp than the SS men shot them.

Afterwards, the 'railway' commando prisoners took their bodies in the narrow-gauge wagons to Camp III for cremation. Next, the victims' clothes were sent to a special pit between Camps II and III, where there were burnt, but first, they still had to be processed. To the surprise of the prisoners who were searching through these particular items of clothing, they came across scraps of paper upon which the

<sup>51</sup> Moshe Bahir, hearing report, Beit Lohamei Hagetoat Archives, file ref. No. 4695, Ramat Gan/ Israel, 28 January 1985, NIOD Archives.

<sup>52</sup> Fritz Tauscher, hearing report, file ref. No. ZStL252/59-1838/39, Stadelhelm, 18 December 1963, NIOD Archives; Chaim Engel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0066, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem; Tomasz Blatt's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948; Dov Freiberg, *To Survive Sobibor*, Jerusalem, 2007, translation of Chapter IV by Marek Bem, p. 73; Eda Lichtman's testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

Bełżec prisoners described the situation they had found themselves in<sup>53</sup>. The news was quickly passed around.

The messages alarmed the prisoners of Sobibór. The feeling was intensified by the rumours that the Sobibór camp would also be liquidated<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, someone recounted hearing Johann Klier, one of the few more 'humane' SS men, say that the camp was meant to be closed down. In his conversations with the prisoners, he tried to convince them that it was high time they started thinking of escaping from Sobibór. Even before that, Klier had shown prisoners that he was on their side and that he was against the things he was forced to do there. It has to be mentioned that Klier's information of the possible closure was not unjustified. The prisoners, of course, were unaware of the fact that Himmler had issued a directive which was sent to Sobibór on 5 July 1943.

Its first version was for the Sobibór extermination camp to be made into a concentration camp. Finally, however, upon further reflection, Himmler decided not to change the camp's function but, instead, to extend its infrastructure and to create a special sector for gathering and processing ammunition captured in the East Front. The resulting extension work of the camp relieved the mounting tension among the prisoners, at least for a short while. The construction work on the necessary workshops, bunkers and barracks was launched in the northern part of the Sobibór camp, which increased the whole area by several hectares. This new part of the camp, enclosed by barbed wire, came to be called *Nordlager* [the 'Northern camp'] or Camp IV.

Still, Sobibór's prisoner-labourers did not know whether they would be employed in Camp IV, and they were afraid that the Germans would bring in specialist-labourers from outside the camp. If this occurred, they knew they would be redundant, and hence, killed. However, even before the construction of the new buildings in Camp IV was complete, the first batch of ammunition arrived at the camp. The SS men quickly formed a new commando out of the prisoner-labourers in the camp. This consisted of 50 women and 60 men, who were then assigned the task of sorting ammunition.

In general, therefore, at the time this occurred, all this changed very little the way the camp functioned. Yet without doubt, the intended reorganisation of the character of the Sobibór camp would, however, mean a reduction of the number of prisoners needed to maintain the operation of the camp. Thus, no doubt, the prison workforce was to be downsized. This meant some would die, but would all be killed?

In April, the prisoners received information about the outbreak of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. Although they were shut off from the outside world, the prisoners somehow managed to obtain scraps of information about what was happening

---

<sup>53</sup> Leon Feldhendler's account (in:) *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce* [The Documents and Materials on the Time of the German Occupation in Poland], Łódź, 1946; ed.: N. Blumental, Part I, Camps, Chapter V Sobibór, pp. 202-207.

<sup>54</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór. Zapomniane Powstanie* [Sobibor: The Forgotten Revolt], Włodawa, 2003, p. 78.

outside. This was possible thanks to newcomers who kept arriving at the camp. Also, prisoners tried to eavesdrop on the Germans' conversations, to come into contact with Ukrainian watchmen, and to secretly listen to the radio<sup>55</sup>. It seemed things were not going well for the Reich. Within the camp, this caused happiness, as well as consternation.

In September 1943, the prisoners were becoming more and more worried by the decreasing number of new transports. They were aware of the fact that the Germans kept them alive only because they were needed in the unloading and processing of new transports. Therefore, the most important question remained how long the camp was meant to exist, especially because the Germans started to enigmatically hint at the creation of a 'Jewish Kingdom' somewhere in the forest<sup>56</sup>. All things considered, it appeared that the liquidation of the camp was soon to come. Now, the fate of the prisoners depended on whether the SS men would need any more Jews to work with the ammunition in Camp IV. Thus, feeling that the upcoming liquidation of the camp was close at hand, the prisoners seriously began discussing various plans of escape.

Despite the many failed and the few successful individual escapes from the camp, as well as the subsequent retaliatory actions (which had seriously undermined the prisoners' confidence that they could succeed in running away from the camp), Feldhendler's conspiratorial group kept on looking for new possibilities and circumstances which would help them in succeeding in their planned revolt and mass escape. They were also in need of someone who could assume leadership. However, although they were already conspirators, the connections were quite loose. Moreover, neither Feldhendler nor any other member of his conspiratorial group had the necessary strategic leadership abilities. What is more, they had no idea how to put a theoretical escape plan into action. Thus, it seemed that the problems the conspirators were faced with were insurmountable. Worse still, they could not find a suitable person experienced in organising the crucial networks of collaborators, and this prevented them from developing a concrete action plan.

The prisoner-labourers of the Sobibór camp were a random combination of various types of people, some of whom simply could not be trusted. The SS men selected new prisoner-labourers either because of their specific skills and abilities, or because of their general health and fitness, and certainly not because of their leadership skills. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that all the prisoner-labourers had suddenly found themselves in a place where moral values were not respected. Indeed, the Polish Jews that arrived at Sobibór felt that they had been

---

<sup>55</sup> Symcha Białowicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-4 USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0027, 13 May 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1187, Łódź, 8 December 1945; Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, p. 65; Stanisław Szmajzner, *Hell in Sobibor. The tragedy of a teenager Jew*, Brazil 1979, translated from English by Marek Bem, p. 234; Kurt Ticho, *My Legacy. Holocaust, History and the unfinished task of Pope John Paul II*, Włodawa, 2008, translated from English by Albert Lewczuk vel Leoniuk, p. 115.

<sup>56</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 201.

cheated; they had already suffered three years of imprisonment in the ghettos, which had naturally lowered their morale. They were weak, hungry, sick and depressed. They had been separated from their family members, and they knew these were most probably dead – furthermore, they had seen them being marched off to die. Moreover, the circumstances in which Sobibór’s prisoner-labourers had found themselves in, forced them to continually struggle to survive, even if this involved resorting to any means necessary. Hence, all of the death camp’s prisoner-labourers were guided by one prevailing thought: how to survive one more day, even if this meant gaining this at the expense of others.

Therefore, it was exception rather than the rule that fellow prisoners confided in each other. In most cases, the only connection they had was that they were Jews. Of course, this was too little to form a coherent and tightly-knit group that would face up to the challenge of drawing up a successful escape attempt. That is why Feldhendler had to be extremely cautious in initiating other prisoners into the conspiracy, and so he involved in his escape plan only a selected group of people. But on 23 September 1943, a transport of prisoners from the Minsk ghetto came to Sobibór. Many of the newcomers were Russian POW’s. All of them were Jews, and they were disciplined, fighting soldiers.

One of the newcomers was **Aleksander ‘Sasza’ Peczerski**. His appearance singled him out from the crowd – he looked well-built, healthy, brave and decisive. Feldhendler immediately marked him out, and asked one of the Russians, called **Leitman**, to help him make contact. The first planned meeting (in the women’s barrack) did not take place because one of the kapos was hanging about nearby, and Feldhendler did not want the kapo to see him talking to **Peczerski**. The two men managed to meet only on 29 September. Feldhendler told Peczerski about the previously discussed ideas about how to escape from the camp, and asked him to help him organise such an escape and to take leadership. He also pointed out the possible catastrophic consequences of an escape if it did not include all the prisoners<sup>57</sup>.

During the initial stage of their planning, the conspirators had to convince, sometimes even to intimidate, those prisoners who wanted to escape in the near future, not to do so. This was because, irrespective of whether their escape would prove a success or failure, the Germans would inflict collective punishment on those who remained. Also, the moment Feldhendler and **Peczerski** reached an agreement on the way the revolt and the mass escape would be carried out, it was obvious that any escape attempts made by smaller groups of prisoners could ruin their plans. The only way, they felt, to have a successful escape, was for this to be done en-masse. Feldhendler and **Peczerski** maintained their contacts via **Leitman**.

With mutual trust developing among the conspirators, when more prisoners were informed about the preparations for the revolt, they created a special organisational unit – an escape committee. Most probably, the ‘headquarters’ of this consisted of 10 members, while 15 other members were assigned special tasks. In total, only about 30, out of Sobibór’s 600 prisoner-labourers knew about the escape plan. This time,

<sup>57</sup> Szlomo Alster’s account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 03/4442, 1977, translated from Yiddish by Anna Szyba.

bearing in mind all the former cases in which Ukrainians had betrayed those planning to escape, the plotters gave up the idea of acquainting them with their plan, and they reduced to the minimum the number of prisoners who would know about it. All the same, the remaining prisoners sensed that something was ‘going on’. However, those who, during the final stage of the preparations for the revolt, were informed about the plan and had been assigned appropriate tasks, were forbidden to tell anyone about it, even their siblings, spouses or friends.

When it comes to the women of Sobibór, only a few of them were initiated into this escape plan, and only because their involvement in its preparations was indispensable. Generally, the members of the resistance movement did not trust women. The only women who were acquainted with the plan worked, among other places, in the not-yet-finished Camp IV, where weapons and ammunition were sorted and cleaned. Moreover, they were only informed about the uprising at the very last moment, when they were assigned the task to ‘smuggle’ into Camp I, hand grenades and other weapons. At first, they agreed to this, but, at the last moment, they withdrew. They were afraid that the guards would search them and find the weapons on their way back to Camp I<sup>58</sup>.

The first meeting of the resistance organisation took place on 12 October, in the carpenter’s workshop. In this meeting, only a dozen or so prisoners were present, including **Peczerski**, **Leitman**, Feldhendler, the kapos of the commandos of tailors and shoemakers, as well as a few carpenters and other artisans. In the meantime, several trusted prisoners were assigned to keep guard next to the entrance gate to Camp I, ready to raise an alarm in case of any trouble. While discussing the details of the planned revolt, the group members analysed all the information they had gathered about the camp. They also knew that there was less and less time left to implement the escape plan. The beginning of October meant that the winter was soon to come, bringing low temperatures and snow falls. If the uprising started too late, low temperatures would make it a lot more difficult for the escapees to survive, and the Nazis could easily find them by following their footsteps left in the snow. Also, there were more and more indications that the time of the Sobibór camp was drawing to a close. The number of new transports had dropped dramatically, and the Germans had set out to dismantle parts of Camp III.

One of the Ukrainian guards, whom Peczerski had met while in the Red Army, told him that there had been an unsuccessful revolt in the Treblinka camp, and, therefore, the liquidation of Sobibór was simply inevitable. At that time, there was less work for the prisoners to do, so the guards allowed the prisoners to meet with each other more often. The resistance group decided to use this time to exchange vital information and to commence the planning of the uprising. More or less at that time, kapos Pożycki and Cepik wanted to come into contact with them. The two kapos implied that they knew about the group’s secret activity, and that they wanted to participate in the preparations for the revolt. At first, the conspirators did

---

<sup>58</sup> Eda Lichtman, *From Mielec to Sobibor. Testimony of Eda Lichtman*, (in:) Miriam Novitch, *Sobibor. Martyrdom and revolt*, New York 1980, pp. 52-61; Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 212.

not trust Pozycki. The main reason was that it was of crucial importance that as few of the 'outsiders' should know about their organisation as possible, otherwise there was more chance that someone would report on them to the Germans. Finally, however, the kapos managed to persuade the conspirators that other prisoners did know something about their secret activity anyway. After more discussion and consultation, it was finally decided to involve them in the plan because they already knew 'something' about the group, and because, above all, the rank that they held in the camp enabled them to move around the place more freely, talk to anyone and anywhere they wanted, without raising any suspicions. Their admittance greatly aided the success of the enterprise.

Originally, the uprising was planned for 13 October 1943, around 4.00 p.m. The organisers had learnt that, on that day, quite a few of the Germans would not be in the camp. Indeed, the most dangerous of all, Gustaw Wagner, and Commandant Reichleitner would be on leave, just as Huber Gomerski, Bolender and Klier already were. For the conspirators, Wagner's absence during the outbreak of the prisoners' revolt was extremely important. They were sure that if he was present in the camp on the day of the planned uprising, he would immediately sense that something was going on. They knew that Wagner was the only Nazi who would surely notice, despite all the precautionary measures the plotters had taken, that there was a strange and difficult-to-describe atmosphere in the camp. They also remembered that, when **Peczerski's** transport had arrived at Sobibór, Wagner had advised Frenzel to kill all of the deportees, but Frenzel refused, saying that he needed them in Camp IV. Therefore, Wagner's absence considerably increased the chances that the conspirators' plan would succeed. Since Wagner had planned to come back on 15 October, the plotters made the decision that the uprising would begin either on the 13 or 14 October, at the latest.

**Peczerski** and **Leitman** debated the various options for a successful mass escape until they had come into agreement on a daring and complicated plan. First of all, **Peczerski** wanted to take advantage of the Germans' rapacity, vanity and punctuality. Their greed was manifested by the fact that they always chose for themselves the best clothes and shoes left behind by the camp's victims. In addition, they often ordered prisoners to remake items of clothes for them. Moreover, whenever any Germans went on leave, they took with them suitcases full of valuables brought from the sorting barracks. Thus, the conspirators' plan was to entice the majority, or all of the SS-men, one by one, into the different barracks and workshops, or to catch them alone in their own offices, and to kill them instantly and 'quietly' with a knife or an axe. They assumed that they would have no more than one hour for the completion of this task, as this would boost the chance that no one would notice the gradual disappearance of the camp's SS men. The action was also to be carried out in absolute secrecy, not only from the SS men and Ukrainians, but, in addition, from the other prisoners, as they might guess that something was afoot and cause panic in the camp. The plan assumed that the conspirators would kill as many Germans as possible, and seize their spare uniforms from the storeroom located next to the laundry.

Next, the Russians would put on those uniforms so that the Ukrainians on guard duty would not notice that something unusual was happening in the camp. Dressed in the German uniforms, the Russians would easily be able to lead the rest of the prisoners out of the camp, through the main gate, following the usual camp procedure. It was hard to predict, however, whose side the Ukrainian watchmen would take. Indeed, the Germans themselves were always in doubt as to their loyalty. Therefore, they gave them only a limited amount of rifle ammunition, and only when they went on duty. The conspirators, however, assumed that they would meet with resistance on the part of the Ukrainians. Another serious problem they were faced with was Camp III and its prisoners. Any attempt to free those Jews was too risky, especially because Camp III was completely isolated from the rest of the camp. For this reason, it was decided that the escape plan would not include that part of the camp.

The plan was prepared in great detail. The conspirators even stole watches from the camp's storage barracks so that they could control the time and be synchronised during the revolt. They divided their plan for this mass escape into three stages. Of importance was that the German and Ukrainian guards would be unaware of the outbreak of the prisoners' uprising till the very last moment. But to achieve success, weapons must be gathered and distributed, and the right people must be in the right places. Therefore, during the first stage, the conspirators were to equip particular conspirators with knives, axes, and, if possible, with weapons stolen from the camp's personnel. What is more, they were to assign these people, and certain others, to appropriate places. Several young prisoners were to then function as links between those groups. As for the necessary 'weapons', the camp was full of things such as hatchets, hammers and other carpentry tools because the prisoners needed these in their work, so these would be easy to get. Moreover, the prisoners were to gradually collect knives in the sorting barracks. Another, very important, goal to achieve was to get hold of rifles, pistols, hand grenades, even machine guns if possible. **Peczerski's** plan assumed that the Soviet prisoners would take the weapons from the SS men they killed, and he knew that, as soldiers, they would not have any problems in using these. However, if possible, the prisoners were to seize the camp armoury situated in the Fore-camp, in the neighbourhood of the commandant's house.

The next stage of the revolt was to 'quietly eliminate' members of the camp's personnel by enticing them into the appointed places and killing them there. **Szubajew**, Lerner and **Weisspapier** were allocated the task of killing two SS-men and one Ukrainian in the tailor's workshop in Camp I. First, they were to eliminate the deputy commandant, Johann Niemann, next – Siegfried Graetschus (the head of the guards), and finally – Klatt – their commander. In the meantime, **Rozenfeld** was to entice Frenzel away to the carpenter's workshop and kill him there. **Cybulski** and Kapo **Grisza** were, in turn, to kill Josef Vallaster, Fritz Konrad and Josef Wolf in the shoe storage barrack, while Rudolf Beckmann and Thomas Steffl were to be liquidated in the administration building by Chaim Engel and kapo Pożycki's brother.

The third phase of the uprising assumed the mobilisation of all the prisoners so as to put up open resistance and to escape. The last stage was meant to commence

only after all the prisoners had gathered on the roll-call yard. In the meantime, it was of vital importance that the camp should look as it usually did, and that everything should proceed according to the ordinary routine. Moreover, the kapos who were privy to the escape plan were told to behave as usual. Leon even ordered them to use their whips as they normally did, until all the prisoners had at 5.00 p.m., assembled for roll-call.

A minute or so before 5.00 p.m., the camp's electrician (Walter Schwarz - a German Jew), was to damage the camp's electric power generator. If, by that time, everything went smoothly, Pożycki was to blow his whistle for the roll-call a little bit earlier. The gathered Jews would subsequently form themselves into columns, but instead of waiting for the Germans to come, they would begin the uprising. The organisers planned that the prisoners would walk calmly, as if nothing had happened, towards the main gate. It was assumed that the Ukrainian guards would interpret this as something normal, just a large group of prisoners going out to work. Next, the prisoners were to break into a run, charge towards the main gate and overpower the guards (it was agreed that, during the revolt, the insurgents would shout to the Ukrainians that they should not shoot, but, instead, escape together with them). In order to avoid entering the mine-field right behind the camp's fence that existed there, it was decided that the main escape route would actually be the break in the fence near the German quarters, as, presumably, this area had not been mined. Moreover, some prisoners were tasked with throwing stones and boards out onto the mine-field so as to possibly detonate the mines. Furthermore, in the carpenter's workshop, ladders were made available so that the escaping prisoners could get over the fence. During the revolt, **Sasza Peczerski** also planned for a selected group of prisoners to leave the main column and attack the armoury.

Throughout the preparations for the uprising, **Sasza Peczerski** kept warning all the conspirators to keep in the deepest secrecy everything that was going to happen. He decided that, in case anybody tried to hinder the uprising, they would be eliminated.

14 October 1943 was the day that Sobibór's resistance group sprang into action. From early in the morning, onwards, **Sasza Peczerski** made himself appear to be working in the carpenter's workshop, while, in actuality, he was observing all through the window which overlooked the entirety of Camp I. According to the plan, one of the already armed conspirators was standing at the workshop's door. His task was to let in or let out only those who knew the password. This man was **Siemion Rozenfeld**, who had also been set the task of liquidating Frenzel. In the workshop, apart from **Sasza**, seven other prisoners worked and they were not privy to what was to come.

Right after **Peczerski** began his work in the morning, he summoned **Siemion Rozenfeld** to tell him that Frenzel would come in to the workshop after lunch. He also acquainted him with the details about the revolt and asked **Rozenfeld** whether he would agree to liquidate the SS man. **Rozenfeld** knew that he had never been, as he wrote in his post-war memoirs, a great hero, and that he was just a twenty-year-old boy who had never killed anyone. Despite all these doubts, he accepted **Peczerski's** proposal. He knew how to do it. Therefore, **Sasza** first told **Siemion** to

choose an axe and sharpen it well. Frenzel was planning to come to the carpenter's workshop at 4.00 p.m. to have a look at the wardrobe the carpenters were making for him. In one of the corners of the barrack, **Siemion Rozenfeld** then ripped up a few floorboards so as to have a place to hide Frenzel's corpse.

**Leitman** worked in another barrack, together with other 20 prisoners, including **Aleksij Wajcen, Jefim Litwinowski, Naum Plotnicki, Borys Taboryński, Arkady Weisspapier, Borys Cybulski, Aleksander Szubajew, Mazurkiewicz** and some others, whose task was to kill the remaining Germans, and then to assume leadership of particular groups of prisoners. From the very beginning, **Peczerski** had assigned certain prisoner-conspirators to fulfil particular concrete tasks. In this way, six groups were formed, each of which was to attack a different target. **Siemion Rozenfeld** was to command one of these groups. This included **Sasza Kupczyn** and three other prisoners, whose names **Rozenfeld** could not later remember. The group was to attack the armoury, seize the weapons and hand them out to prisoners.

At 10 a.m., **Rozenfeld** was summoned to the barrack where **Leitman** and some other conspirators were working. He was told that everything had been going along smoothly so far, and that Johann Niemann had been 'invited' to come, at 4 p.m., to the tailor's workshop to try on an item of clothing which was being made for him. At the same time, SS-Oberscharführer Siegfried Graetschus was planning to come there, followed, fifteen minutes later, by a watchman called Klatt. Moreover, at around 4 p.m., to the barrack where **Rozenfeld** was pretending to work, Frenzel had confirmed that he was coming to have a look at the wardrobe.

At 3 p.m., **Szubajew** was to go to the tailor's workshop. **Peczerski** reminded him to prepare an appropriate chisel and an axe, and appointed **Mazurkiewicz** to be his assistant. To **Peczerski's** barrack came **Szubajew**, followed by **Cybulski**. **Peczerski** told **Cybulski** that he was to go to Camp II with two other prisoners whom **Leitman** was to introduce to him, but that, first, he had to get hold of some axes. He was to be taken to Camp II by Kapo Pożycki. It was **Cybulski** that was to launch the action of liquidating the Germans.

**Peczerski** had another conversation with **Weisspapier**, who, together with Yehuda Lerner, was to go, having prepared some axes, to the shoemaker's workshop and be ready to kill three other German personnel. **Naum Plotnicki** and **Aleksij Wajcen** were ordered to then lead the column of prisoners gathered for the roll-call, and to assume command of the group appointed to seize the armoury. At the main gate, they were to attack the camp's guards, to first enable those completely unprepared and defenceless prisoners to escape to the forest, and then to be the last to escape themselves. Meanwhile, **Jefim Litwinowski** and **Borys Taboryński** were ordered to form and command a group of prisoners armed with wire-cutters, who would cut open the barbed wire fence behind the commandant's house. The resulting hole in the fence was to serve as an additional way out of the camp, but, above all, the escaping prisoners were to use this hole as the main way out in case the action at the main gate failed.

Suddenly, at 2 p.m., SS-Scharführer Arthur Walther came to Camp I. He was armed with an automatic machine gun. He took with him kapo Pożycki and three other prisoners, and went with them in an unknown direction. At that moment, all

those who were privy to the escape plan, got scared, thinking that they had been betrayed. The situation was unusual because never before had any SS officer come to this part of the camp armed in this manner. However, at 3 p.m. **Peczerski** learnt that Pożycki had been selected to stack up some wood in the northern camp. Since Walther was escorting Pożycki and the other men unaccompanied by any Ukrainian watchmen, he took his automatic machine gun with him. Having learnt this, **Peczerski** immediately ordered kapo Czepik to take three people from **Leitman**'s group, and, together with **Cybulski**, to escort them to Camp II in order to do what Pożycki was to have done according to the original plan.

Hauptsturmführer Johann Niemann, at that time acting as the commander of the whole camp, came to the tailor's workshop twenty minutes before the agreed time. In her post-war memoirs, Eda Lichtman writes about the role which one of the prisoners, a **Lejbl Dreszer**, played during this stage of the uprising. According to her, **Dreszer** was ordered by **Peczerski** to go to the SS officers and suggest the times when they would come to try on the clothes and shoes they had ordered. First, he went to Niemann to remind him that the tailors were waiting for him. Niemann almost immediately saddled his white horse and came to the workshop. **Lejbl** followed him. Niemann dismounted the horse and fastened the reins by the barrack's door. **Lejbl** then unfastened the reins and took the horse back to the stables. This was necessary because he knew the other Germans were going to come later. If the horse stood by the workshop and its owner was not inside, this might raise some suspicions.

In the workshop, apart from the tailors (including four brothers from Warsaw, Misza Rachman and Awrełm Pelc - a hatter from Turobin), were **Szubajew** and **Sienia Mazurkiewicz**. On the floor, next to the door, an axe was left lying - covered over with a vest. On entering, Niemann took off his uniform jacket, and placed his belt with a gun in its holster, on the table. A tailor, by the name of Józef (Jules Schelvis claimed it was Mosze Hochman), came up to him with a suit in his hands, pretending that he was going to do the fitting. In the meantime, **Sienia** quietly moved towards to the table to restrain Niemann in case he went for his gun. **Szubajew**, who was the same height as Niemann, was tasked with killing the German with the axe. At this moment, Niemann was standing face-to-face with **Szubajew**. Suddenly, Józef suggested that the German turned towards the door, under the pretext that in this way it would be more convenient to do the fitting, and then, **Szubajew** grabbed hold of the axe and struck Niemann in his head. It was not a killing blow, the German shrieked and staggered about<sup>59</sup>.

**Szubajew**'s second blow was fatal. The conspirators then hid his body under the bed, covered it with a pile of clothes, and scattered some sand over the patches of blood on the floor. They expected the next German to come in fifteen minutes. **Szubajew** took Niemann's pistol and went out to give it to **Peczerski**. At 4.10 p.m., Siegfried Graetschus entered the tailor's workshop. This one was killed by **Lerner**. And thus, the revolt had just started. It did not last long, and the events that followed happened in a flash.

<sup>59</sup> Moshe Hochman, *From Zolkiewka to Sobibor. Testimony of Moshe Hochman*, (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-124.

It is understandable, that, many years after the Sobibór uprising, those who survived remembered certain details differently. For example, **Peczerski's**, **Weisspapier's** and **Lerner's** post-war accounts differ from each other with respect to the course of events that happened on 14 October 1943. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that, between 3.30 and 4.30 p.m., in the shoemaker's and in the tailor's workshops, two SS men were killed: Niemann and Graetschus, and, most probably, one guard called Klatt. At 4.20 p.m., **Cybulski** contacted **Peczerski** to report to him that: four Germans had already been killed, two guns had been seized, the telephone cables had been cut, and a group of specially appointed prisoners was making sure that nobody left their barracks.

Following the plan, Kapo **Czepik** escorted **Cybulski's** group to Camp II. There, Leon took them to the sorting barrack from whence they collected a new leather jacket which the prisoners working there had prepared. Next, Leon went to Josef Wolf to tell him that he had found a nice leather jacket that was just the right size for him. None of the SS personnel knew about it yet, he said, so, if he went to the sorting barrack, he could take it for himself. And so he did, and was killed when he was trying the jacket on. **Cybulski's** group managed to kill two other Germans in the same way. They hid the corpses among the piles of clothes in the sorting barrack<sup>60</sup>.

When the uprising started, Klatt, another German from Camp II who was on the list of those meant to be killed, was in the secure room in the camp's administration building. In this room, there was a fireproof safe filled with gold taken from the Jews upon their arrival at Sobibór. **Leon**, **Borys Cybulski** and two other prisoners took out a handful of gold coins from one of the boxes that stood on the tables in the sorting barrack. **Cybulski**, subsequently brought these coins to the administration building, and to Sturmführer Klatt. He pretended to be acting according to routine when he handed the German the daily 'trophy' found among the clothes and luggage of those who had been killed in the camp. The German was being suspiciously cautious, so **Cybulski** leapt upon him and strangled him to death. This is **Peczerski's** version, and perhaps it contains a factual mistake. Most probably, Klatt was killed in Camp I, and **Cybulski** strangled someone else.

In his post-war account, Stanisław Szmajzner provides the following names of the Germans killed in Camp II: Vallaster, Novak and Beckmann<sup>61</sup>. Chaim Powroźnik confirms in his testimony that Wolf was killed in Camp II<sup>62</sup>. When **Cybulski** returned to Camp I to inform **Peczerski** about what had happened, unexpectedly, Unterscharführer Gaulstich entered the yard in Camp I. Hence, **Leitman** came up to him and asked him for help, saying that the carpenters had some problems with the bunk beds they were just making. Gaulstich walked towards the barrack, followed by kapo Schmidt. Kapo **Pożycki** then stopped Schmidt and said that he must

<sup>60</sup> Moshe Hochman, *From Zolkiewka to Sobibor. Testimony of Moshe Hochman* (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-124.

<sup>61</sup> Moszek Merensztein's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2785, CŻKH Department, Szczecin, 22 September 1947.

<sup>62</sup> Stanisław Szmajzner, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

withdraw at once if he wanted to stay alive. He warned him not to disturb him and his colleagues in what they were going to do. Schmidt looked at him terrified. While **Pożycki** took him aside to explain the matter further, **Leitman** killed Gaulstich. In **Peczerski**'s memoirs, however, **Leitman** killed Unterscharführer Walter, and not Gaulstich. Also, according to **Peczerski**, yet another SS man called Ryba was killed in the garage<sup>63</sup>. In the meantime, **Chaim Engel**, who was working in the garage, killed Unterscharführer Beckmann and took his rifle<sup>64</sup>.

**Siemion Rozenfeld** had all this time been fully prepared and waiting for Frenzel. He had already raised a few floor-boards to hide Frenzel's body, but the German still was not coming. There were only ten minutes left before Pożycki was going to sound a signal to start the roll-call of all the prisoners. By that time, 10 Germans had been killed. Therefore, any further waiting for Frenzel was becoming more and more dangerous. Also, the prisoners were beginning to be afraid of the reaction of the Ukrainian guards.

Finally, Pożycki blew the roll-call whistle, and all the prisoners rushed out of their barracks. They were in a desperate hurry, and tension was mounting. The prisoners coming back from Camp II immediately joined those gathered on the roll-call yard. Once, everyone was gathered, Peczerski shouted: 'Comrades! Towards the gate!', and, to this, **Borys Szubajew** cried 'Hurray!'. Only then did most of the prisoners begin to realise what was really going on. The prisoners rushed about in different directions. The largest group of people ran towards the main gate, some of them rushed towards the armoury.

Suddenly, Frenzel appeared as if from nowhere. He knew it was necessary to defend the armoury, so he started to shoot in bursts from his machine gun at the escaping prisoners. Despite this, a small group of insurgents managed to get into the armoury, whose entrance was not being protected too well. They seriously wounded SS man Dubois and captured some weapons<sup>65</sup>. However, the Ukrainians on duty in their watchtowers soon began to shoot at the escapees - as did the guards who were on patrol between the barbed-wire fence. **Aleksij Wajcen** said later that, prior to the outbreak of the revolt, the conspirators had appointed several snipers to shoot at the

---

<sup>63</sup> Aleksander Peczerski, *The revolt at Sobibor. Testimony of Aleksander Pechersky* (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-99.

<sup>64</sup> Chaim Engel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0066, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem; Selma Engel, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-2, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.030 0067, 16 July 1990, translated from English by Marek Bem..

<sup>65</sup> Moshe Bahir's testimony, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, the Testimonies Department, file ref. No. 03/2353-1733/159, Tel Aviv, 12 August 1960, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection; Hersz Cukierman's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/14, 17 September 1944; Moshe Bahir's account (in:) Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-163; Dov Freiberg's letter to Goldman, Yad Vashem Archives, 1961 (the precise date when the letter was written is unknown), translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska. Copy in the author's private collection; Samuel Lerer's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/104, 1945.

guards stationed in the camp's watchtowers. The watchmen were completely taken by surprise, and, utterly confused, had no idea what it was all about. Perhaps they thought it was a partisan attack.

A large crowd of people managed to reach the main gate. The SS men whom the conspirators had not killed tried to block the prisoners' escape by shooting at them from their rifles, but they failed to cause general panic. Another group of escapees then began to cut through the barbed wire entanglements. Meanwhile, yet one more group of escapees ran in a different direction, and began to chop down the barbed wire entanglements using spades. The escape plan also included the throwing of stones and wooden boards out onto the minefield to detonate the mines, however, this did not come about, and many of the escapees died right outside the camp, with their dead bodies paving the way to freedom for their fellow prisoners. It remains unknown, however, how the few dozen or so prisoner-labourers of Camp III reacted when the revolt broke out, and what they did afterwards.

And thus, the Jews from the Sobibór extermination camp succeeded in devising and implementing a revolt and escape. For this purpose, a group of conspirators had been formed. They aimed at helping, not only its own members, but also all the other prisoners to, at worse, die with dignity, at best, live to see a free world again. Living under the constant threat to their lives, on the one hand, combined with a series of self-made favourable circumstances on the other, as well as through the conspirators' absolute determination, their firm belief in success, their effective organisation of the revolt and of the general situation in the camp, brought this about.

In his memoirs, Tomasz Blatt states that the Sobibór survivors never expected, in their wildest dreams, that they would become free again. Their only hope was to destroy the camp and die in battle rather than in the gas chambers. Yet, against all odds, they managed to break free.

There were several factors that contributed to making this revolt a success. First of all, the members of the camp's resistance movement did 'good' jobs or held 'good' positions in the camp, working as carpenters, sorting labourers, kapos or cooks. Due to this, they could focus more attention on its planning. Also, the Germans' use of collective responsibility reduced the number of individual escape attempts to the minimum. Indeed, many prisoners even claimed to have prevented other prisoners from escaping from the camp during the time period leading up to the revolt. Paradoxically, then, perhaps the principle of collective responsibility worked to the benefit of the resistance group. The camp's guards, certain that this principle was effective enough, paid less attention to the prisoners, because they assumed that the prisoners themselves would keep an eye on each other in this respect.

Another key factor which boosted the conspirators' belief in the potential success of their uprising, was the presence of a strong leader - one who knew how to make good use of the prisoners' energy and zeal. Feldhendler and **Peczerski** were the two leaders who managed to develop and maintain the camp's underground resistance movement perfectly well, in a perfectly organised extermination centre. Additionally, the conspirators knew that the Germans were planning to liquidate the

camp. They realised that they had to act fast, and that they had nothing to lose. The constant feeling of danger served too as another contributory factor, as this mobilised the conspirators to go ahead with their plan. Of supreme importance was ‘the desire to die an honourable death’.

### 3. The consequences of the revolt and the prisoner escape

At first, the Germans, taken by surprise, panicked and lost control of their camp. Yet, after a dozen or so minutes, suddenly everything went quiet in Sobibór. The whole uprising had lasted for that interval alone. Now, the surviving Germans and Ukrainian watchmen, under the command of Karl Frenzel, immediately began to thoroughly search the camp area, to assess the general situation in the camp, and, above all, to set out to restrain all the prisoners who had not escaped.

Knowing the original number of Sobibór’s prisoner-labourers from the morning roll-call report, the number of prisoners the Germans had detained after the revolt, as well as the number of those killed during the uprising, Frenzel was able to tentatively calculate the total number of escapees. Of course, at that point, it was impossible to unambiguously determine the number of those who had been shot down by the camp’s staff, or those killed in the mine-fields between the barbed-wire fence and the nearest forest. He knew, however, that the vast majority of Sobibór prisoners had succeeded in escaping. In the meantime, by searching the camp area, the Germans managed to identify the bodies of the camp’s personnel killed as a result of the prisoners’ revolt.

It took Frenzel some time before he managed to find out how many Germans had been killed. Before turning to his superiors and appropriate services for help, he first wanted to get a full view of the situation in the camp, and to regain full control over the whole area. The preliminary assessment showed that twelve members of the German personnel had been killed, i.e.: Beckmann, Bree, Graetschus, Gaulstich, Konrad, Niemann, Nowak, Ryba, Steffl, Stengelin, Vallaster and Josef Wolf, as were two Ukrainians: Klatt and another one (most probably, a guard called Schroeiber)<sup>66</sup>. Frenzel also found out that another SS-Oberscharführer, Werner Dubois, was seriously wounded. The last to be identified was Josef Wolf, whom, at first, Frenzel had thought to be missing. His body was later found in Camp II, hidden under a pile of clothes in one of the storage barracks<sup>67</sup>.

However, Frenzel could not be fully certain if the escapees would return to free the other prisoner-labourers. Nor could he preclude the possibility that the uprising had been organised with the help of the partisans. If so, he could expect another attack. Therefore, later that same evening, most probably at around 8.00 p.m., he used the telephone and the telegraph at the Sobibór railway station to ask for help and for support troops. In doing so, he set out to mobilise the local SS Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*), the SS Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*), the SS Security

<sup>66</sup> Eda Lichtman’s testimony, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg Archives, case file 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959.

<sup>67</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, StA.Do-WZ-II-75, Hagen, 30 November 1965, MPLW Archives.

Service (*SD*), the *Wehrmacht*, the cross border services, the military police in Chełm, and, of course, to notify his superiors in the SS and Police Headquarters in Lublin. These phone calls were later confirmed by one of the witnesses (a railway worker) who claimed that he had overheard someone mentioning on the phone the names of the Germans who had been killed, and that five or six Germans were still alive<sup>68</sup>.

After Frenzel contacted the SS authorities in Lublin, he was given the order to send a report on the revolt to the army unit stationed in Chełm, including the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron of the Mounted Police (*SS-Polizei-Reiterabteilung III*). This squadron, under Erich Wullbrandt's command, had gained considerable experience in carrying out all sorts of pacification actions, in executing hostages, and in enacting the mass liquidations of ghettos and POW camps. Frenzel also contacted Hans Wagner, the commander of the Security Police Battalion in Chełm (*Sicherheitsbataillon 689*), as well as the local Cross-Border Police detachment, who were also stationed in Chełm. Later that night, as he was in the area, SS-Hauptsturmführer Gottlieb Hering, the commandant of the labour camp in Poniatowa, arrived at the Sobibór camp. Not so long before, he had been the commandant of the Bełżec camp and Christian Wirth's deputy (Christian Wirth was the Inspector of the 'Operation Reinhardt' extermination camps). During the uprising, Hering was on his way back from Bełżec, where he had been inspecting the site<sup>69</sup>. Frenzel, however, failing to contact, via the telephone, all those he wanted to ask for help, ordered Bauer to go in person to Chełm to seek help there. After the war, Bauer testified that at first he had refused to go because he was too much afraid for his life<sup>70</sup>.

On the evening of 14 October 1943, Captain Erich Wullbrandt, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron of the Mounted Police in Chełm, was given the order to go to Sobibór. He learnt that the Jewish prisoners of the Sobibór camp had staged a revolt, and that, most probably, the insurgents had managed to seize a certain number of weapons. He was also told that the escapees might launch an attack on the Sobibór camp in order to rescue the prisoners who had not escaped, and that the camp's personnel whom the insurgents had not killed in the revolt were in danger of being overrun. Such was the importance of this deployment that his senior, Major Eggert (the Chief of the Mounted Police in Chełm), made a prompt decision to go to Sobibór in order to carry out a military intervention if necessary. Squadron I was to be under Captain Wullbrandt's command, while Squadron II was commanded by Major Eggert, with Eggert retaining over all command.

---

<sup>68</sup> Franciszek Parkoła, witness hearing report, (file ref. No. missing), Lublin, 5 May 1967, MPLW Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Jules Schelvis (with reference to Frenzel's and Bauer's testimonies) writes in his "Vernichtungslager Sobibór" that Gottlieb Hering came to Sobibór, together with Christian Wirth. This seems unlikely, on account of the fact that Wirth had left for Trieste after the Treblinka camp revolt (2 August 1943), with Globocnik, Stangl and other senior 'Operation Reinhardt' personnel.

<sup>70</sup> Erich Bauer, hearing report, StA.Do-Gom-PB-III-1141, Berlin, 8 October 1974, NIOD Archives.

Still on the same day, i.e. 14 October, the two squadrons went to Sobibór by train, arriving before midnight. At the Sobibór station, right next to the camp's entrance, they were met by two soldiers from the *Waffen-SS*, who told them everything about the events of that day. None of them was an officer. The two soldiers claimed that they had not been present in the camp when the uprising broke out. At that time, they were driving in their truck back to the camp, and they came across a group of armed Jewish prisoners, so they turned back their vehicle and drove away. According to them, in the afternoon, the Jewish prisoners had enticed members of the German personnel to various camp's workshops and killed them there by means of sharp tools. At the same time, they said, a large group of prisoners had broken into the armoury, taken the weapons and had run away from the camp. The revolt gave the impression of having been very well prepared.

In his post-war testimony, Wullbrandt said that, upon his arrival at the camp, he was shown the bodies of the members of the camp's personnel that had been slain during the revolt. The corpses were kept in one of the office rooms. He stated that he was not completely sure but that there might have been about 13 corpses lying there. He said that they were terribly butchered. Some of them had their skulls cleft, others bore traces of deep wounds in the facial parts of the skulls or in other parts of the bodies. He also testified that he did not know precisely how many prisoners had escaped, but later he recalled that, according to the preliminary reconnaissance, it was half of them. However, he could not remember how many prisoners had stayed in the camp. When he got to Sobibór, he recollected, some of them were in their barracks. Moreover, he soon realised that practically there was nothing to be done there, as the camp's guards themselves had quickly managed to restore order in the camp. On the basis of the above, it can be assumed that several hours after the outbreak of the prisoners' revolt, the Sobibór camp's personnel had restored full control over the camp.

As soon as they arrived, the two squadrons were accommodated in the Fore-camp barracks normally lived in by the Ukrainian watchmen. Earlier that day, i.e. 14 October, Wullbrandt's soldiers had taken part in a battle against partisans in the vicinity of Chełm. Now, they were exhausted, so they were sent to the barracks to have some rest, and only a few of the soldiers were ordered to stand-to in the camp.

Wullbrandt and the camp's authorities soon came to the conclusion that there was no need to reinforce the camp's perimeter defences. What is more, inside the camp, the remaining prisoner-labourers were confined to their barracks, and all was under control. According to Wullbrandt, that night, or even earlier, to his astonishment, several Jews who had escaped, voluntarily returned to the camp. Indeed, he saw for himself, four or five prisoners doing so. They reported to the Ukrainian guards who were keeping watch over the camp's entrance. The Ukrainians then let them in and took them to the barrack where the other prisoners were secured.

After the war, Wullbrandt claimed that he did not know what later happened to those prisoners. He could not say for sure whether they had been shot or not. The next morning, Wullbrandt's and Eggert's squadrons set out to comb the nearby forest

for the escaped prisoners, but, as Wullbrandt said, this was just a formality on their part because they failed to find any prisoners there. On the same day, in the morning, he saw several Ukrainian watchmen carrying into the camp the dead bodies of about 50 Jews who had been shot during the uprising. He then observed the Ukrainians lay them on the tracks of the camp's narrow-gauge railway, most probably with a view to transporting them to Camp III for cremation<sup>71</sup>.

In all probability, the first to come to Sobibór after Frenzel's request for help, were soldiers from the *Einsatzkommandos*<sup>72</sup>. They were posted there from the police station of the Cross-Border Police in Chełm. According to the report drawn up by the *Einsatzkommandos*'s commander, SS-Untersturmführer Adalbert Benda, his unit, on the night of 14/15 October 1943, carried out a thorough search of the internal part of the camp<sup>73</sup>. Throughout the time of this action, the report states, members of his unit were purportedly under the fire from the prisoners. Therefore, the soldiers were compelled to use force because the prisoners refused to surrender. As a result, a large number of prisoners, i.e. 159, were shot.

Upon the arrival of Benda's unit at Sobibór, it was decided that "[...] *Taking into consideration the nature of this Sonderlager and its prisoners, the Wehrmacht will be responsible for launching an immediate sweep for the escapees, while the Schulpolizei will provide the protection of the camp area from outside [...]*"<sup>74</sup>. SS-Untersturmführer Adalbert Benda recounted the events that happened during his stay in Sobibór in the form of a report which he wrote five months later. In fact, the report is actually Benda's request for his *Einsatzkommando* SS soldiers to be recognized for their 'meritorious' service after the uprising. That is why, most probably, Benda's description of the events following the prisoners' revolt in Sobibór is very general in character, and also highlights his command's service.

However, the reliability of Benda's report has frequently been questioned. For example, Benda dates the Sobibór uprising at 15 October, while, in reality, it took place the day before. Also, the report says that his unit carried out their action on the night of the revolt and the morning hours of the next day, i.e. 15/16 October, and not 14/15 October. Another problem is that Benda refers, twice, to the Sobibór camp as 'Sonderlager Sobibór', although, at that time, the camp existed under the names *Lager Sobibor*, *Durchgangslager Sobibor* or *Sonderkommando Sobibor*. Despite all these, it can be assumed that, like the two squadrons of the Mounted Police from Chełm, Benda's *Einsatzkommandos* came to Sobibór when control of the situation had already been regained.

In the few hours subsequent to the prisoner-labourers' revolt, all the Jews who had stayed in the camp, i.e. both those who could not escape and those who simply did not want to, were detained in their barracks. Perhaps, Benda's *Einsatzkommandos*,

<sup>71</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 233 (Erich Wullbrandt' testimony given in Brunschweig on 26 March 1961).

<sup>72</sup> A special military unit formed to carry out interim actions.

<sup>73</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*.

together with the Ukrainian watchmen and the remaining German personnel, searched the entire camp at this time and captured or killed any prisoners not already confined. It is also likely that some of the prisoners involved in the uprising were still hiding in the camp, and whenever the searching party discovered them, they put up resistance.

Regarding Camps III and IV, probably, when the uprising commenced, there were a few dozen or so prisoner-labourers inside the enclosed area of Camp III. These were either confined or killed. As Karl Frenzel testified after the war, the Jews from the commando working in Camp IV were also immediately detained. Soon, all were shot by a party headed by Bauer, Wendland, Muller and Rewald. Some of the armed prisoners did not manage to get out of the camp, while others got lost in the area as a result of the revolt and came back to the camp<sup>75</sup>.

In recounting the events following the uprising and escape, before the SS Order Police, SS Security Police and *Wehrmacht* units arrived in Sobibór, the camp's authorities had managed to suppress the uprising. Most of the prisoners who had gone into hiding, as well as those who had not wanted to or had not been able to escape, were also detained and watched over in their barracks. However, the camp's authorities had to take into account the fact that there might still be some armed prisoners hiding somewhere within the area of the camp. Most probably, Benda's soldiers were tasked with searching that area on the night of 14/15 October. Benda's after-action report mentions that 159 prisoners were shot. Most probably, this refers to the mass execution of all the detained prisoners, which took place on 15 October.

Once the situation in the camp was under control, Frenzel realised that the matter of the greatest importance was to take protective measures in case the partisans, taking advantage of the situation, overran the camp. Therefore, in the evening of that same day, he informed Hans Wagner, Chief of the SS Security Police in Chełm, about the uprising. Frenzel also contacted a few times Wagner's aide-de-camp, Wiertz, and asked him to send armed soldiers to Sobibór. He then informed Wiertz that the Jewish prisoners had managed to take over the armoury. He also reported that, when the uprising broke out, 12 (out of the 29) German SS officers and soldiers were on leave in the Reich, and that 12 (out of 17) members of the camp's personnel who were on duty in the camp were killed by the Jews. In the report, he explained that the Jews had enticed the officers, one by one, to different workshops under the pretext that they would try on various items of clothing, and then they killed them there. He added that, one of the Germans who was to be killed in this way, managed to escape, and, although seriously wounded, raised the alarm.

Frenzel also informed Wiertz that some of the Ukrainian guards were in collusion with the insurgents, but that most of the Ukrainians, under the command of the surviving German officers, fought fiercely against the insurgents. Moreover, he stated that the vast majority of the prisoners managed to escape to the forest. Therefore, he went on, he first telephoned the police station in Chełm, but was told that the policemen were already engaged in battle with a group of partisans.

---

<sup>75</sup> Jakub Biskupicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/DVD's 1-8, USHMM Archives/RG – 50.120 0016, 20 March 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska.

For this reason, he had to turn to the *Wehrmacht* for help. Having heard this, Hans Wagner immediately sought confirmation that, on the night of 14 October, all the police units from Chełm were involved in a ‘large-scale’ action against the partisans approximately 40-50 km south-west of Chełm.

After this telephone call, Hans Wagner then summoned his aide-de-camp and ordered him to inform Frenzel that they would not send any military aid to Sobibór. Wagner by no means wanted to engage his battalion in any actions inside the camp. Hence, he called for an orders-group that was to be attended by all the battalion’s officers. He then presented his views on this matter, providing them with the reasons for his refusal by saying that his whole battalion, i.e. every single soldier, was already engaged in military or policing operations, and that he could not afford to withdraw any of them from action. Apart from this, he was of the opinion that the best types of forces to help the personnel of the Sobibór camp would be the police and the SS<sup>76</sup>.

Hans Wagner immediately informed his superior, General Hilmar Moser, about his decision. Moser agreed with Wagner’s opinion that a military intervention in the Sobibór camp was not the *Wehrmacht*’s business. Moser, however, also telephoned General Haenicke, Commander of the *Wehrmacht* in the General Government, for consultation. Haenicke replied that there had been an order issued by SS generals for the *Wehrmacht*, the police, and the *Waffen-SS* to help each other in an emergency, and that in such cases as this one, the chief of the local *Wehrmacht* was obliged to proffer assistance. When the conversation was over, Moser ordered Wagner to send one of his companies to Sobibór<sup>77</sup>. Wagner, in turn, passed this down to Hauptmann Wolf, and he sent 80 soldiers from the 4<sup>th</sup> company to Sobibór. He, however, forbade them to enter the camp’s area.

Wolf’s contingent reached Sobibór only early in the morning on 15 October, probably because the partisans had damaged a section of the railway tracks along the Chełm-Sobibór route<sup>78</sup>. When Wagner himself arrived at Sobibór, he learnt that the camp’s authorities had managed to suppress the prisoners’ revolt with the help of their own personnel (the Ukrainian guards). He was also made aware that most of the Jewish prisoner-labourers had escaped, and the rest of them, a few hundred people, had surrendered. In accordance with the order, Wolf’s unit did not enter the camp’s area, but kept guard at the main entrance, approximately a few hundred metres away from the camp, and on both sides of the main gate.

Also, Wolf’s soldiers did not participate in the round-up of escapees hiding in the forests. Thus, without even firing a single shot, they returned to Chełm on the next day before noon<sup>79</sup>. On 15 October, however, other SS-men arrived at the

<sup>76</sup> Hans Wagner, hearing report, ZStL251/59-4-562 and 574, Munich, 21 October 1960, NIOD Archives.

<sup>77</sup> Hilmar Moser, hearing report, ZStL-251/59-8-1621, Degerndorf, 9 November 1962, NIOD Archives.

<sup>78</sup> Hans Wagner, hearing report, ZStL-251/59-3-564, Munich, 21 October 1960, NIOD Archives.

<sup>79</sup> Feliks Górny, hearing report, LKA/NW (15 December), Dortmund, 6 September 1962, NIOD Archives.

Sobibór camp, including, according to Schelvis<sup>80</sup>, Jakob Sporrenberg (Higher SS and Police Leader in Lublin), Hermann Höfle, Georg Michalsen<sup>81</sup> and Dietrich Alletts. All of them were involved in ‘Operation Reinhardt’.

As soon as Sporrenberg arrived at Sobibór, and had appraised the general situation, he immediately gave the order to execute all the Jews staying in the camp. Karl Frenzel promptly requested Obergruppenführer Sporrenberg to change this order, since he felt that all these individuals were needed to do labour in the camp. The SS and Police Leader in Lublin, however, refused Frenzel’s request, and ordered one of his Untersturmführers to perform this task. He, in turn, passed this on to the Ukrainian guards, who carried out the execution. It cannot be excluded, however, that it was SS-Untersturmführer Adalbert Benda’s *Einsatzkommando* that prepared, supervised or even carried out the execution of 159 Jews<sup>82</sup>. The prisoners were shot in Camp III.

On the basis of the report made in Sobibór, the Chief of the Order Police in the Lublin district sent, on 15 October, a summary of the events to the Chief of the Order Police in Cracow, which runs as follows: “[...]14 October 1943, 5 p.m., the Jewish uprising in SS-Lager Sobibór; 40 km north of Chelm. The prisoners overpowered the camp’s guards, took the weapons from the armoury and, after an exchange of fire with the remaining members of the personnel, ran away in an unknown direction. They killed 9 SS officers, 1 officer went missing; 2 fremdvolkische guards killed. 300 Jews escaped, those that stayed were killed, or are still staying in the camp. The Truppenpolizei and the Wehrmacht were immediately notified about the event. At 1.00 they took over the protection of the camp. The area east and west-east of Sobibór is now being carefully combed by the police and the Wehrmacht [...]”<sup>83</sup>.

This summary was the first official message which mentioned the approximate number of prisoners who had managed to escape from the Sobibór camp. In all probability, on 15 October 1943, Karl Frenzel, Obergruppenführer Sporrenberg and all the SS leaders involved in the securing of the camp and in the round-up of the escapees, were almost fully aware of the number of Jews who had run away, the number of those killed during the uprising, as well as the number of those who had been recaptured and detained in the camp’s barracks. Indeed, on the basis of the morning roll-call report from 14 October, or the reports from the previous days, Frenzel must have known the exact number of the prisoners of the Sobibór camp on the day the revolt broke out. It can also be assumed that most of the bodies of the prisoners killed in the course of the uprising were soon found. However, the camp’s authorities might have had some doubts (still on 15 October) about the number of prisoners detained in the camp after the revolt. They perhaps thought that at this time they had not yet managed to find all the Jews hiding within the camp’s infrastructures.

<sup>80</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 231.

<sup>81</sup> It is highly unlikely, however, that Georg Michalsen was with them, since he had supposedly been seconded to Trieste since about late-August.

<sup>82</sup> Karl Frenzel, hearing report, ZStL-251/59-6-1113, Gottingen, 22 March 1962, MPLW Archives.

<sup>83</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, p. 126.

On 15 October, the search for the escaped prisoners was continued. On the next day, the Chief of the Order Police in the Lublin district sent to Cracow an amended version of his report of the day before. This new report stated that 200, out of 500, escapees had been killed so far, and that 25 had been detained. Furthermore, the SS man thought to have gone missing, had returned. The report confirmed that the several of the guards killed in the uprising were Volksdeutsche<sup>84</sup>.

This report is the last document of this type, on the basis of which it is possible to make an analysis of the number of prisoner escapees, the number of those who had been killed, as well as the number of those whom the Germans had detained but had not yet killed. All this data, together with the information about the execution on 15 October, makes it possible to determine the total number of prisoner-labourers within the Sobibór camp to have been about 500 on the day the uprising commenced, and that 200 were killed. This latter figure might be a combination of the number of Jews killed during the revolt (41 persons either shot by the camp's personnel or killed in mine explosions outside the camp), and the number of the remaining Jewish prisoners (159 persons) who were detained in the camp and shot on 15 October. The figure includes the prisoners working in Camp IV, the *Sonderkommando* from Camp III, the sick and those who had refused to escape.

On 15 October, the major task of the German administrative, police and military authorities from the Lublin district was to continue the chase after the escaped Sobibór prisoners. Captain Wullbrandt was tasked with assuming command over the combined forces of several hundred soldiers from the *Wehrmacht*, the Mounted Police squadron, the *Truppenpolizei*, the military police, and the border guard. Wullbrandt supervised the security system in the camp and the chase after the escapees. Additionally, a 20-person Security Police unit came from Lublin with specially trained dogs. Moreover, two or three spotter planes were involved in the search for the escaped Jews.

In his next report, dated 20 October, the Chief of the Order Police in the Lublin district wrote: “[...] *On 18 October, in Włodawa, 26 km north of Chełm, two airplanes from the airbase in Dęblin were forced to make an emergency landing due to the lack of fuel. One of the airplanes was completely damaged; the other suffered only minor damage. One of the pilots was seriously injured [...]*”<sup>85</sup>.

The round-up was mapped out and divided into several sectors. The action was mainly to take place within the Bug River Region, east of the Sobibór camp. As a result, the area surrounding the camp, as well as between Włodawa and Chełm was thoroughly combed. As the Germans expected that the escaped Jews would try to cross the Bug River in order to join the Soviet partisans, they paid much less attention to the area spreading towards Lublin or Parczew.

On 15 October, Jacob Sporrenberg, Chief of the SS and Police in Lublin, sent to SS Brigadeführer Wilhelm Guntheow, Higher Commander of the SS and Police in Łuck, a radio message saying that about 700 Jews had escaped from the Sobibór camp, and were heading in the direction of where he was stationed, and, therefore,

<sup>84</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 235.

<sup>85</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, p. 131.

he should take all appropriate measures. This message was sent at 11.15 a.m.<sup>86</sup>. In all probability, Sporrenberg was already in Sobibór at that time. Most puzzling is why Sporrenberg stated in this message that 700 Jews had escaped. Having already spent some time in the camp, he must have known that only about 300 prisoners had escaped. This, he confirmed in his next message sent onto Cracow on the same day.

Perhaps, this message might have mistakenly included the prisoners held within a labour camp which was situated in the village of Sobibór, 5 km away from the Sobibór station, next to which the Sobibór extermination camp was located. However, no information can be found of this camp, either in the literary or the historical resources about labour camps in World War II. Yet, in 1971, in the course of an interview conducted in the Dusseldorf prison by Gitta Syreny with Franzl Stangl, the former commandant of the extermination camp in Sobibór (who was serving his life sentence there), Stangl made mention of it. So far, this has been one of the very few accounts made of this place<sup>87</sup>.

Tadeusz Borowski is a witness to the events which took place on 14 October 1943, in this labour camp in the village of Sobibór. At that time, he and his parents had been confined in it for one month. In September 1943, as a result of reprisals from the Ukrainians, the Borowski family had to leave their home village of Maciejów, near Łuków. Hence, they attempted to travel to Chełm Lubelski. At the railway station, they were apprehended and sent to this camp. On 14 October 1943, thirteen-year-old Tadeusz Borowski was working in the vicinity of the death camp, and witnessed the prisoners' uprising and escape. He immediately returned to his parents in the labour camp and informed them of what happened. Within a few hours that same night, together with about 300 other people who were confined in the camp, they too ran away, travelling towards the village of Wola Uhruska<sup>88</sup>.

After the war, Sabina Gaj, Zofia Karowiec, Wiktoria Kołazyk and Janina Zader applied for war reparations. On this occasion, they mentioned both the labour camp in the Sobibór village and the events from 14 October 1943<sup>89</sup>. On the basis of the above, it cannot be excluded that on 14<sup>th</sup> October and the days that followed, it was not only the prisoners of the Sobibór death camp that ran away, but also the 300 prisoners held in the labour camp in the village of Sobibór. Since, most of the prisoners who escaped from this labour camp came from the Łuck area, it is highly likely that when Sporrenberg sent the information about the 700 escaped prisoners to

<sup>86</sup> Sobibor camp history, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>87</sup> Gitta Sereny, *W stronę ciemności. Rozmowy z komendantem Treblinki* [Into That Darkness. Conversations with the Commandant of Treblinka Death Camp], Warszawa 2002, pp. 91-92.

<sup>88</sup> Author's conversation with Tadeusz Borowski held in April 2008. Copy in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>89</sup> Sabina Gaj, *Moja relacja z przeżytej represji* [My Account of the Reprisal I Suffered], the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation Archives; Zofia Karowiec and Wiktoria Kołazyk, witness hearing report, District Court in Chełm, file ref. No. I Co 258/00, 17 April 2000; Janina Zader, testimony given for the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation, the State Archives of Gdańsk, Tczew, 3 May 2002.

the Chief of the SS and Police in Łuck, this number included the escapees from both the labour and the death camps. As a consequence, in that the escapees from both camps might have found themselves in the same place at the same time, it is difficult to precisely calculate (barring the prisoners recaptured or killed, and those turned in or murdered by the 'non-Germans') how many prisoners of the death camp actually survived the revolt and lived to see the end of the war. Therefore, the German reports on the manhunt for those from the extermination camp, might as well have, to some extent, referred to the prisoners who had escaped from the labour camp in the village of Sobibór.

The Germans sent, to Cracow, regular situation reports on their post-escape activities<sup>90</sup>. These mention that 127 escaped prisoners were detained or killed. The

---

<sup>90</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, pp. 236 - 239: "Even eight months after the uprising, there were cases when the Germans found Jews suspected of having escaped from the Sobibór camp. One of the reports prepared by Kommandeur Reiterabteilung III contains information that, as a result of the manhunt launched on 17 June 1944 within the area of Wola Wereszczyńska (30 km away from the Sobibór camp), the Germans tracked down some Jews among the 'bandits'. According to the report, the majority of these Jews were escapees from 'Sonderlager Sobibor'; Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 130-131: "On 21 October, 5 escapees from Sobibór were killed in Adampol. On 21/23 October, 15 km north of Chełm, at the Wehrmacht posts in Sawin, six Jews from Sobibór were arrested. One of the Jews was fatally wounded in an escape attempt"; "Out of 300 Jews that escaped from Sobibór, we killed, with the support from the Wehrmacht and the Border Guard units, about 100 Jews"; "Between 14 and 18 October 1943, the squadron took part in the Judeneinsatz of the SS-Sonderkommando in Sobibór (40 km north of Chełm). Out of 300 Jews who escaped, about 100 might have been killed as a result of our cooperation with the Wehrmacht and the border patrols. On 21 October, together with the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS, we searched the woods thoroughly (4 km in the northerly direction from Chełm). The operation did not bring the expected results"; "28 October 1943. In the neighbourhood of Sawin, soldiers from the 27<sup>th</sup> Wehrmacht Post shot a Jew from Sobibór during an escape attempt"; "29 October 1943, in the neighbourhood of Wyrki, the military police arrested two escapees from Sobibór. The two men were executed"; Adam Panasiuk, in his „Śladami zapomnianej historii...Wereszczyn” [Discovering the Traces of the Forgotten Past...Wereszczyn] (cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources) gives the following information: "On 26 and 28 October 1943, some German police officers murdered five Jews within the area of Wereszczyn. Most probably, these Jews had escaped from Sobibór, where, on 14 October, the prisoners had staged an uprising against their guards. In total, 320 prisoners had escaped. A few hundred soldiers took part in the manhunt that followed, supported by policemen from the local police stations, and by local inhabitants, most of whom were forced to do this. There were cases, however, when some of the local inhabitants carried out this task with great zeal by capturing the hiding Jews and turning them in to the Germans"; In October 1945, Tadeusz Jurewicz gave, at the police station in Włodawa, testimony about the Sobibór camp (witness hearing report, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 5390), in which he provided more information about the Sobibór prisoners' escape: "In October 1943, I was staying in a small house by Lake Brudzieniec, 400 metres away from the Sobibór death camp. At about 4.00 – 5.00 p.m., I heard sounds of a fierce gunfight and of single explosions coming from the side of the garden. On the

Germans spared no effort to track down as many escapees as possible for fear that in the future they might bear witness to what kind of place the Sobibór extermination centre really was. Major Eggert, recognizing the inefficient, uncoordinated nature of the mass search operation, concluded that a different strategy be employed. He decided that, at that stage, it was necessary to limit the operations carried out by the combined forces. Hence, in his report from 22 October, he suggested that the *Wehrmacht*, the police and the SS units be sent away, leaving only the Mounted Police squadron to continue the manhunt. The rest of the units were, hence, released as early as in the evening of 22 October. It can be assumed, therefore, that the search for the escaped prisoners was, more or less, given up for good by 21 October.

The termination of the manhunt was followed by issuance of an order to liquidate the Sobibór camp and to dismantle the camp's infrastructure. In doing so, the camp's authorities began posting the Ukrainian watchmen back to the camp in Trawniki. Thus, SS-Oberscharführer Floss was tasked to escort the Ukrainians on their way to Trawniki. During one of these re-postings, Floss was shot by a Ukrainian guard<sup>91</sup>.

Between 16 and 20 October 1943, when the situation in the camp was under control, the camp's authorities, to put in order and to secure all that had remained of the camp, decided to do the following: to have the infrastructure and equipment rebuilt or renewed, to inventory all the losses, to re-organise the basic administrative functions in the camp, and to get rid of, i.e. to cremate, all the prisoners killed during the revolt. It should be noted that the camp itself had not suffered any serious damage as a result of the uprising. Franz Suchomel stated, in his post-war testimony, that when he had returned to Sobibór (in late October), he did not notice any traces of the uprising. The only thing he did notice was some damage near the camp's fence, right next to the railway tracks<sup>92</sup>.

---

*next day, I found out that the gunfire had had something to do with the Sobibór prisoners' revolt and escape. Being afraid of staying alone in the house, I moved to the nearby forester's lodge. And then, three Jews came to the lodge, hungry and exhausted, unarmed, and who said that there had been about 800 of them back in the camp. They said that now their group consisted of about 20 people. I remember them saying "we could stand anything except for being thrown alive into the fire, like it happened in the camp". The Jews asked me the way to Chelm, and after they ate some food I found in the lodge, they went away. On 1 November 1943, at around 8.30 a.m., some Gestapo officers came to the lodge, accompanied by four guards and a dog. They asked about the Jews, and the forester, who, having been warned beforehand, went into hiding somewhere. Some time later, the forester died. In the afternoon, a gunfight started in the vicinity of the forester's lodge, as a result of which, one Jew was killed, one wounded and four Jews were captured and taken away immediately";* Jan Doliński, an inhabitant of the Zbereże village (10 km away from the Sobibór camp) said, in an interview I held with him on 30 April 2011, that he had been a witness to the execution of 6 Sobibór escapees. The execution was carried out on 16 October 1943, in Zbereże, by some German soldiers from the border guard. Jan Doliński claimed that he remembered the site where the corpses had been buried.

<sup>91</sup> Tomasz Blat, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>92</sup> Franz Suchomel, hearing report, LKA/NW, Dez 15, Alt-Otting, 7 November 1962, NIOD Archives.

By 16 October, the Sobibór camp's personnel was made up, most probably, of six Germans, and, at most, several dozen Ukrainian guards. The German personnel who had all the time been staying in the camp were: Frenzel, Bauer, Wendland, Muller and Rewald. These were joined by the SS men who returned from their holidays, i.e. Gomerski, Bolender, Hodl, Klier, Lambert, Unverhau, Reichleitner and Wagner. At the end of October and the beginning of November, several members of the personnel from the Treblinka camp (Suchomel, Potzinger, Kurt Franz, Munzberger, Sydow, Matthes, Adolf Gentz) were posted into Sobibór to supplement the camp's personnel contingent and rebuild it to the pre-revolt levels, as well as to help in organising the subsequent liquidation of the camp. The Treblinka personnel were transferred in three separate groups. Additionally, Schluch, Zierke and Juhrs came to Sobibór from the labour camp in Dorohuczka. In the meantime, the authorities decided to keep about 25 Jewish prisoners alive. Probably, these were the Jews whom the Chief of the Order Police in the Lublin district described as 'detainees' in his report from 16 October. Now, the camp's authorities awaited the orders from their superiors, with respect to the camp's fate.

On 19 October 1943, in Cracow, Hans Frank had chaired a meeting attended by, among others, the Chief of the *Sipo* and the *SD* in Cracow - Walter Bierkamp, Chief of the Order Police in Cracow - Hans-Dietrich Grunwald, and the Chief Armaments Superintendent - Maximilian Schindler. The intent of the meeting was to discuss the state of security in the General Government territories. The Sobibór prisoner-labourers' revolt only confirmed the participants' belief that there were real dangers to the General Government's security. They all agreed that the presence of Jews in all the possible types of camp posed a serious threat. Therefore, they decided that the most urgent task was to strengthen the Security Police forces, and to arrive at the final decision as to how many Jews to 'remove' from the General Government, and how many of them to consider 'indispensable' for the Third Reich and to subsequently keep alive. When the meeting in Cracow was over, Hans Frank notified Heinrich Himmler about the conclusions reached.

The unprecedented uprising and mass escape in Sobibór was used by Himmler as a pretext to commence the final stage of the 'Final Solution' within the General Government area. Despite the ensuing debate over whether to use the Jews as free labour force or not, Himmler sealed the fate of the Jewish camps only a few days after the Cracow meeting. His instructions were quickly forwarded to Cracow, to the Secretary of State for Security Affairs in the General Government, Friedrich Kruger. In it, Himmler ordered that the Sobibór camp should cease to exist, and that the so-called 'Operation Harvest Festival' should conclude 'Operation Reinhardt'<sup>93</sup>.

In the history of mankind, 'Operation Harvest Festival' has been one of the largest mass murders targeted against representatives of one ethnic group. Moreover, it was carried out within a record short time: it lasted only two days, between 3 and 4

---

<sup>93</sup> 3-4 listopada 1943. *Erntefest, zapomniany epizod Zagłady* [Enterfest 3-4 November - a Forgotten Episode of the Holocaust], ed.: Wojciech Lenarczyk, Dariusz Libionka, Lublin, 2009, pp. 9-10.

November 1943. On the first day, the Germans killed all the Jews staying in Lublin, in the Majdanek concentration camp and in the Trawniki labour camp. On the next day, all the Jews from the labour camp in Poniatowa were liquidated. In total, the death toll of this ‘operation’ was more than 42,000 people. The ‘operation’ was planned to be the final stage of the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ project, which the Third Reich carried out within ‘Operation Reinhardt’.

Following its conclusion, SS-Obergruppenführer Odilo Globocnik (former SS and Police Leader in the Lublin district of the General Government and the Chief of Staff of ‘Operation Reinhardt’, appointed the Higher SS and Police Leader of the Operation Zone of the Adriatic Littoral and transferred to Trieste in Italy on 17 September 1943) sent his final report on ‘Operation Reinhardt’ to Himmler on 4 November 1943<sup>94</sup>. Globocnik did so because he was directly responsible to Himmler for the development of ‘Operation Reinhardt’. His report from 4 November 1943 officially ended ‘Operation Reinhardt’.

The bitter irony is that Christian Wirth succeeded in fulfilling his obsession. Being in charge of the ‘Operation Reinhardt’ extermination camps, he used to say that he always tried to engage Jews themselves in the process of murdering other Jews. In accordance with this approach, then, a group of Jews was appointed the task of obliterating all trace of the existence of the Sobibór extermination centre. The Jews selected especially for this task were brought to Sobibór from the camp in Treblinka. On 20 October, five freight cars set off from Treblinka and headed via Siedlce, Łuków, Dęblin and Lublin, to Sobibór, carrying 200 Jews. During the liquidation of the camp, duty assignments of particular staff members were similar to those from before the revolt. Apart from that, the personal belongings of the Germans killed by the prisoners during the revolt were sorted, secured and made ready to be sent to those Germans’ families<sup>95</sup>.

Each member of the camp’s personnel had a few Jewish prisoner-labourers at their disposal, and they were employed in the camp’s routine tasks in places like the camp’s kitchen, laundry, stable, barn, workshops and the allocated camp sectors. However, this work constituted only a temporary logistic supplement to the most important task, i.e. the evacuation and liquidation of the camp.

Little is known about the first transport of the Treblinka camp Jews who were to work on liquidating the Sobibór camp. The Germans who came to Sobibór at the end of October and the beginning of November never mentioned this group of prisoners in their testimonies during the post-war court trials against them. However, it is implied in their testimonies referring to the second half of October that the liquidation work in the camp area had progressed substantially.

When speaking of that period of time, they only mentioned a small group of about 30 Jewish labourers and another group of Treblinka prisoners who had arrived at Sobibór on 4 November. The first, two-hundred-person group of prisoners from

<sup>94</sup> *Sobibor. Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der „Aktion Reinhard, Institute of Documentation in Israel. For Investigation Nazi War Crimes*, Haifa, 1998, pp. 107-109

<sup>95</sup> Franz Suchomel, hearing report, ZStL-251/59-6-1129f.;-8-1613f, Altotting, 24 January 1962, NIOD Archives.

Treblinka was, hence, used for the hardest initial evacuation and demolition work in the camp. The most important tasks included: preparing and loading, into the freight cars, the victims' possessions that had so far filled the sorting barracks; evacuating the ammunition kept in the storage depots of Camp IV; dismantling the equipment and furnishings of the workshops; demolishing the gas chamber; dismantling the engine used for gassing the victims; tearing down and demolishing the camp barracks, storage barracks and fences; as well as obliterating all the traces, in Camp III, of the places where the victims' ashes had been buried.

The scope of this work was very broad, and its ultimate goal was the complete liquidation of the camp's infrastructure (covering more than 30 hectares), as well as the very careful obliteration of any traces of this extermination centre's existence. As part of this work, a group of *Wehrmacht* sappers disarmed the mines buried in the area surrounding the camp.

In their pursuit of covering up all trace of the camp and camouflaging all that had been happening there, the Germans went so far as to renovate the buildings of the Forest District of Sobibór and the forester's lodge which they had previously taken over and adapted to the camp infrastructure during its construction. Before leaving the camp, the Germans intended (according to Juhrs's testimony) to bequeath the buildings to some 'Polish forestry commission'.

Supposedly, from the very beginning of the camp's shut-down, the camp's authorities planned the maximally quick exploitation of the prisoners, by using them to do as many jobs as possible in the shortest possible time, and, finally, to liquidate the whole group. The Jews, therefore, became a heavy burden to the liquidated camp (even if taking into account the problem of their sustenance and security). The Germans also presumed the necessity of using, for the last time, the crematorium in Camp III, to burn a large number of dead bodies because they wanted, in exactly the same place as before, to hide the ashes of the killed and burnt prisoners. The next group of prisoners from Treblinka then very carefully obliterated the traces in this part of the camp, which meant filling in the ash pits, levelling the ground and planting trees for camouflage.

On 4 November, probably 75 Jews were brought to Sobibór by transport number 6711940. They arrived early in the morning and lined up on the roll-call yard of the former Camp I. Kapo Karl Blau was in charge. He reported to Gustav Wagner, giving him the exact number of the newly arrived prisoners, and declared their readiness to work. The prisoners, on Wagner's or Frenzel's order, were put into groups and assigned particular tasks. The other staff members then took charge of them<sup>96</sup>. Franz Suchomel took charge of the tailors and shoemakers. Most probably, this group was assigned the task of putting in order the remaining items from the sorting barracks, and preparing these for dispatch to the Third Reich. However, the vast majority of the prisoners were engaged in the demolition work and obliteration of any traces of the camp's existence, especially Camp III. This demolition progressed at a very fast pace. The Jews had to work really hard, yet they received very modest portions of

---

<sup>96</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 240.

food. At the beginning of November, there was little left of the camp. Robert Juhrs's account implies (Juhrs arrived at Sobibór together with Zierke, on 5 November, from the labour camp in Dorohuczka) that, at that time, it was possible to move about the camp without encountering any obstacles. Camps III and IV, thus, were completely demolished. Everything was razed to the ground. Moreover, all the internal fences and the 'Heavenly Way' were dismantled. What is more, most of the buildings had already been torn down<sup>97</sup>.

After the war, Robert Juhrs testified that the last prisoners participating in the liquidation of the camp were shot sometime at the beginning of December 1943. The murder took place in the area of former Camp III, or somewhere near the wooded area of the camp. Wagner and Frenzel supervised the execution. Juhrs claimed that the Ukrainian watchmen had carried out the shooting, the most active being Aleks Kaiset. Bauer, Podessa and Hodl, Klier, Lambert and Unverhau also took part. In addition, the rest of the camp staff were present. Some of them cordoned off the place of execution. The Jews were killed by a shot in the back of their heads. He stated that there were no incidents during the execution; the Jews were obedient and did not put up any resistance. A few days after this execution, the liquidation of the last camp barracks still continued<sup>98</sup>.

In mid-December 1943, all the work connected with the liquidation of the German extermination centre in Sobibór was completed. What was left untouched was the renovated former forest district's building used in the camp as the commandant's office, as well as a few barracks in the Fore-camp area, where the Ukrainian watchmen lived. Local residents, who had previously witnessed the construction of the camp and its functioning, now had a possibility to watch the liquidation and evacuation of the SS-Sonderkommando centre in Sobibór<sup>99</sup>.

The fact that, during the camp liquidation, some of its buildings remained untouched and that the Germans carried on with guarding the post-camp area, implies that even then, during the liquidation process, the camp management knew what purpose the place was meant to serve later. Already, as of January 1944, the Construction Service (*Baudienst*) from Chełm took control over the place. This so-called 'Construction Service' was formed under the directive issued on 1 December, 1941, by General Governor Hans Frank. *Baudienst* labourers were the men between 18-60 years of age recruited from the area of the General Government, especially those who were unemployed or had no permanent job, as well as those who had

<sup>97</sup> Franz Suchomel, hearing report, LKA/NW (Dez 15), ZStL-251/59-6-1129f, 8-1613f, Altotting, 24 January 1962, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources; Arthur Matthes's hearing report, Cologne, 4 July 1962, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Juhrs, hearing report, LKA/NW, Dez 15, Frankfurt, 23 May 1962, NIOD Archives.

<sup>99</sup> Jan Krzowski, witness hearing report, case file DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 15 January 1968, MPŁW Archives; Franciszek Parkoła, witness hearing report, (case file missing), Lublin, 5 May 1967, MPŁW Archives; Irena Sujko, witness hearing report, (case file missing), Lublin, 1 February 1968, MPŁW Archives; Czesław Sójka, witness hearing report, case file Ko.Kpp 91/67, Biała Podlaska, 8 July 1967, MPŁW Archives; Jan Piwoński, hearing report, ZStL-643/71-4-445/446, Lublin, 29 April 1975, MPŁW Archives.

volunteered through the job centre. With time, the SS authorities started to group the labourers in special camps. This was induced by the fact that most young people who were supposed to be enlisted into the *Badienst*, massively evaded this poorly paid and physically exhausting work. Therefore, putting *Badienst* labourers in guarded camps became common practice in the years 1942-43. The Jews, since they fell under the category of forced labourers, were not recruited.

Antoni Raczyński, in his letter from 3 December 1966, to the Regional Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Lublin, describes what happened in the area of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór, a dozen or so days following its complete liquidation. Between January and April 1944, Raczyński had to do forced labour for the 'Construction Service' which was organised and supervised by the Construction Service Office in Chełm. One day, a group of forced 'Baundist' labourers (the so-called "swashbucklers") was moved to Sobibór from the main *Baudienst* camp in Chełm Lubelski. They were accommodated inside the area of the former German extermination centre. Every day, escorted by the German and Ukrainian guards, they were made to leave the camp in order to dig various defensive embankments by the Bug River.

The labourers were accommodated in the four barracks, which, a few months before, had been occupied by the Ukrainian watchmen. Raczyński remembered that, apart from those barracks, there was also a large barn-storage hut, which they had no access to, and the commandant's house. The *Baudienst* labourers were forbidden to move freely about the area of the camp. The whole area had been levelled and planted with coniferous tree saplings. When the snow began to thaw, one of the 'swashbucklers' came across a gold coin near their barracks.

After that, they always tried to escape from their work in order to dig, within the area where they were living, over those parts of the camp where easy-to-identify and well-preserved parts of the camp's infrastructure had been found. Many labourers managed to dig out very precious things in this way, like gold watches, gold and silver coins, roubles, dollars, Austrian schillings, Polish, Czech, Austrian, Hungarian, German and French coins, many wedding rings, earrings and rings. They also found remains of some camp's 'rubbish tips', where things such as clothes, suitcases, children's clothes, toys and tableware, were burnt. In late March, the labourers were caught, and forbidden to carry on with their diggings, and the *Baudienst* commandant authorised the Ukrainian guards to shoot at anyone who would try to go beyond their accommodation area. However, the diggings over the post-camp area continued, with the only difference being that the whole 'business' was taken over by the watchmen<sup>100</sup>.

By July 1944, the area, which had formerly been an extermination centre, was now in the hands of the Red Army and the Polish People's Army. During this time, the new Polish authorities used the barracks left by the Germans, and the railway ramp, as a way station for gathering in one place the Ukrainians meant for relocation.

<sup>100</sup> Antoni Raczyński, letter to the Regional Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Lublin, Trawniki, 3 December 1966, MPEW Archives.

In 1945-1947, the Ukrainians from the eastern part of the Lublin District were either relocated to Ukraine or to the western parts of Poland. The Ukrainians who were waiting for their trains (sometimes even for more than a week) needed some wood to light fires. And thus, they dismantled the remaining camp barracks, contributing in this way to the task of obliterating the last traces of the German extermination centre in Sobibór<sup>101</sup>.

Most probably, local residents finally completed the task of destroying all that remained of the camp, including the digging up of the ground to find the expected 'valuable things the Jews left'.

*[...] after the war the news spread.... they're digging up gold in Sobibór: I was fifteen and there are three of us who set off there. There was so much talk that they were digging for gold there. So we get there and we find out that in the place where this office is, the ground was dug the most. South of this building and in the direction of the road, the ground was torn up. We went there a hundred times, maybe. There were about a hundred people there. They had sieves this big (gesticulating, Doliński shows the size of those sieves - about 1,5 by 1,5 metres), supported the way it is done on building sites. They throw earth on these sieves. The sand went through and any gold things remained on the sieve. Not far from where the museum building now is, a little to the north, there was a hole as big as this garden house we are sitting in; it was two metres deep. In the hole, a guy is sitting. He was sitting on a sort of pail. He's got a shovel, a spoon and a sack. He's using the spoon to scrub the walls, the earth falls to the bottom, and he can see what is there. He's scrubbing and scrubbing with this spoon. I saw a coin fall down, but it wasn't gold. He dug through to a pot. He took the pot, knocked on its bottom. It was a copper pot. He knew how much it was worth and put it into his sack. Now he's scrubbing again. Whenever he scrubbed off quite a big heap, he threw the earth up to the top with his shovel. He found parts of children's prams, sometimes thermos flasks. Next to this hole was a similar pit, full of small scissors, knives, but 'diggers' were only looking for gold. My colleagues soon started to dig and dug out a Bible - a sort of Jewish prayer book. It was a thick book, but its pages were rotten. He started to open it, I mean this colleague of mine, and a signet ring fell out of it. It was made of gold and it was shaped like a canoe. They brought it to Zbereż and showed it to our neighbour. He looked at it carefully and said that he would sell us a litre of moonshine in return. We gave it to that neighbour. Everything on that yard was dug up - everything, be it a stone, a branch or a stump. Perhaps this was to find out if something was hidden there. Everything was grubbed up. All this was happening soon after the liberation. Later, the forest guard kept watch of the place. I remember a military man from Włodawa who went there at night with his metal detector. But some time later, a Gierung from this forest guard lay in wait for him. He caught this military man, who, probably, got a year and a half for that [...]'<sup>102</sup>.*

<sup>101</sup> Sobibór, ed.: Ewa Hołodkowa, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources.

<sup>102</sup> Author's interview with Jan Doliński (born on 8 February 1929 in Zbereż, not far from Sobibór) in Zbereż, 30 April 2011.

Even as late as 2010, by sheer coincidence, some remains of, most probably, the last barracks occupied by the camp guards (?), were found. One of the Sobibór railway workers had used these boards to clad his house in the village of Żłobek. The heirs to the house noticed during its extensive renovation, some 'strange' elements within its boarding. Knowing the connections of the former house owner with the post-war history of the camp area (most probably, this person 'looked after' this part of the forest and provided visitors with information - during the camp's existence, the man had worked in the Sobibór railway station), they decided to notify employees of the museum about their find. In this way, pieces of the cladding of the camp barracks were found.

After the revolt in the Sobibór extermination centre, those who had managed to successfully escape, now had to face the difficult reality of having suddenly become free people. They realised that the Germans had certainly launched a manhunt after them, and this put them in a highly dangerous situation. To many of them, the illusion of freedom turned out to be a constant and tragic and often too temporary struggle for survival. For a few hours after the escape, the forest seemed to be a place of safety. The mere thought that they could hide there, under the cover of the night, was very comforting at first, yet the forest was no haven.

Some of the escapees were armed, many of them had managed to take money, gold, diamonds or expensive jewellery with them. Moreover, they were properly clothed and equipped. These were the ones, who, back in the camp, had known about the uprising.

Unfortunately, for most of the escapees, the revolt was a complete shock. Therefore, when they found themselves somewhere in the woods, they had nothing that could help them to survive. Some of the Jews banded together, others were left all alone in the difficult circumstances. Now, each of them had to quickly plan where to go and how to get there.

A large number of the escapees came from places situated in the Lublin region, and so, knowing the neighbouring area quite well, they tried to get back to their towns or villages. Others aimed at joining any partisan group, and, through fighting, at taking revenge for all the persecution they had suffered at the hands of the Germans.

For the foreign Jews and the Polish Jews who came from distant parts of Poland, the only chance for survival was to find a house, a village or town where they would meet kind and friendly people to provide them with shelter so that they could live to see the liberation.

Thus, some of the escapees wandered around the woods for months before they came across someone who was not afraid to help them and would take them under their roof. Others, however, met people who agreed to help them, and who, having deprived them of all their possessions, threw them out of the places they had allowed them to hide in. On the other hand, there were Jews who were very lucky because they quickly came across people who took good care of them and allowed them to stay in their hiding places for months, until the liberation.

In general, the escapees from the Sobibór extermination centre came across both good and bad people on their way towards survival. Most frequently, however, those whom they met were indifferent or scared, the ones that wanted to have nothing to do with these Jews at all.

Some of the escapees were able to return to their home-towns or villages, and were lucky to find neighbours, former friends or acquaintances who would do and did anything they could to help them. Other, less lucky, escapees had to pay for every single day they spent in hiding, with the money, gold or diamonds they had. There were also those, on the other hand, who, though strangers, and bereft of anything that could be exchanged, knocked on the first door they found and met with real ‘angels’, as they called them later, the sort of people who were selfless and ready to do anything possible to help anyone in need.

All the time, the escaped prisoners lived in hope (in fact it was their only hope) that the situation in the front line was changing so much that the Germans were beginning to slowly retreat from the Eastern Occupied Territories. What kept them alive and gave them will to survive was the thought that the Red Army and the Polish People’s Army would finally come and liberate them.

At the end of 1943, for the escaped Jews, there was no place to go back to. Polish towns and villages, once teeming with Jewish life, were now empty and quiet. Moreover, if a person or family were caught hiding a Jew, they were killed immediately. Hence, sometimes, even those Jews who found shelter with Polish people were trapped in mortal danger after but a few peaceful days. The surroundings of the place they had found themselves in were far from safe. What is more, the countryside was being roamed about by various pseudo-partisan groups which robbed local inhabitants of different things. Also, members of the political underground, Polish anti-communists, communists, Ukrainian nationalists, as well as Polish and Soviet partisans very often had an aggressively hostile attitude towards Jews<sup>103</sup>. Against all odds, however, some Sobibór’s escapees survived, and began, even before the war ended, to live relatively normal lives.

In discussing the events of 14 October 1943, when the prisoners’ revolt broke out in Sobibór, I believe that there were approximately 500 prisoners in the camp<sup>104</sup>.

---

<sup>103</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, p. 223. In the footnote to this passage, Tomasz Blatt writes: „[...] In one case, one unit in the leftist partisan group of the People’s Army, treacherously killed all its Jewish members. Colonel Grzegorz Korczyński was the commander of this unit. (Jerzy Ross, *Żydzi a walka zbrojna z okupantem hitlerowskim na ziemiach polskich 1939-45* [The Jews and the Armed Struggle against the Nazi Occupants in the Polish Territories], Tel-Aviv). When, in 1944, I was hiding in the forest, I heard about this massacre from one of its survivors [...]”.

<sup>104</sup> **Alster Schlomo**: “... it is hard to provide the precise number, but according to my estimates, there were 450 men and 150 women. Whether all of them managed to escape is difficult to say. The dead bodies of many of the escaping prisoners hung on the electric barbed wire fence. There were 500-600 of us, very few survived. I don’t know, perhaps 100, 150 or 200 people. There were about six hundred prisoners in the camp at that time”; **Moshe Bahir**: “... despite all these obstacles, about 400 people managed to escape from the camp. About 150 got killed, fifty sick and weak prisoners did not want to escape. At the beginning, there were 300, 400, 500 prisoners. When I’m giving you this number, I want to say that one day there might have been 500 in the morning and 500 in the afternoon. For example, what I mean is that, out of those 50 selected for work, and I was one of them, already on the next day 13 people from this transport were killed. Six months after I had arrived at

I am also of the opinion that the corrected version of the report (from 16 October 1943) made by the Chief of the Order Police in the Lublin district (which said that 500 prisoners had escaped from the camp) is a sort of ‘concluding report’, which summarised all that had happened in the camp between 14 and 15 October. Yet, it is possible that the information it provides that, out of the 500 escaping prisoners, 200 were killed and 25 detained, might truly contain the genuine number of the victims killed from the moment the uprising unfolded.

It can be said, then, that the numbers found within this summary, include the prisoners killed during the revolt by the camp’s personnel, those who got killed on the minefield, as well as those shot on 15 October (these were the Jews who did not

---

*the Sobibór camp, there were approximately 600 prisoner-labourers. [...] 450 men and 150 women. We lived together in the same camp”*; **Chaim Bergdorf**: “... the number kept changing... out of all of the prisoners, some were killed or joined to a new transport which had just arrived. I was in Sobibór till the end, i.e. till the revolt broke out, and there were, I think, about 600 people there at that time””; **Filip Bialowicz**: “... almost 600 prisoners took part in this escape. Many of them were shot by the Ukrainian guards, or got killed while attempting to break down the fence or on the mine field. 200 Jews escaped, and only 47 of them lived to see the liberation””; **Jakub Biskupiczs**: “... there were 600 people until the revolt broke out. Perhaps 20%, no, 10% of them were artisans, the rest were children at the age of 14, 15, 16””; **Tomasz Blatt**: “... there were 550 prisoners on the day of the revolt””; **Moshe Borstein**: “... among the Jewish labourers, were 425 men and 175 women from different countries””; **Hersz Cukierman**: “... after a short and fierce gunfight, during which 180 people were killed, the rest of the fighting prisoners were free. 50 sick prisoners stayed in the camp, and about 400 escaped. There were 600 of us, including 125 women from Holland, France, Germany and Poland””; **Selma Engel**: “... out of the 600 prisoners of the camp, hundreds were killed on the mine field surrounding the camp, and didn’t get to the woods””; **Srul Fajgenbaum**: “... in total, about 500 of us managed to get out, but not everyone escaped. Some were killed in mine explosions because the camp was surrounded by a minefield, others were captured and certainly killed””; **Hella Fellenbaum-Weiss**: “... there were 580 of us in the camp””; **Samuel Larer**: “... almost 60 people got killed in mine explosions, about 300 Jews escaped””; **Mordechaj Goldfarb**: “... in the camp, there were always 601 working Jews, there always had to be exactly this number of them, such was the Germans’ caprice. If one was killed or died, the number was supplemented with Jews from new transports so that the number was always 601. Perhaps it was just more convenient to count and remember the same number of Jews””; **Salomea Hanel**: “... from 17 January to 17 October 1943, 600 people worked in the camp, including 120 women””; **Szmul Leder** : “... there were 600 of us in the Sobibór camp, including 350 men and 250 women, all of them young””; **Abraham Margulies**: “... we immediately heard people shouting “Hurray!”. Everyone in the camp shouted “Hurray!”, i.e. about 600 people or more””; **Moszek Merenstein**: “... together with the women, there were about 600 of us. Out of these, 200-300 people were killed at the main gate, in mine explosions, or shot because, soon, the Ukrainians and the SS men who hadn’t been killed, opened heavy fire at us””; **Kalmen Wewryk**: “... Sobibór prisoners told me that 400 Jewish men and 200 Jewish women had been kept there to do labour””; **Aleksander Peczerski**: “On 29 September, at 6.00 a.m., the Nazis formed all the 600 men and women, all of us, into columns, and took us to the railway siding, which was located inside the camp””; **Regina Zielinska**: “... there were about 500 labourers, though the number kept fluctuating””.

attempt to escape, and, hence, surrendered; those who escaped, but soon returned to the camp by themselves; and those who were captured and detained, as a result of the manhunt lasting between 14 and 16 October that was carried out by the German and Ukrainian guards, both within the camp area and the area surrounding the camp). Thus, these figures include the 159 prisoners who were executed on 15 October, and the 25 Jews who were kept alive. It has to be assumed, then, that 41 prisoner-labourers were killed during the escape attempt, while 275 managed to escape into the forest.

The reports made by those involved in the manhunt (lasting till 22 October) reinforce this notion, as these tentatively calculated the number of prisoners who were captured and killed to be 107. If we add to this number the data coming from other sources (such as the information provided by Adam Panasiuk, Tadeusz Jurewicz and Jan Doliński), we get a total number of 127 for those who managed to break out of Sobibór, yet who were unfortunate to be detained and executed as a result of the manhunt. However, the exact number of escapees killed ‘at other than German hands’ remains a mystery. Neither is it known precisely how many escaped prisoners died of disease or of exhaustion while hiding in the forest, in farmland or in other places. Yet, it can be stated that at least 61 escapees from the German extermination camp in Sobibór survived World War II.

The different post-war accounts, testimonies and memoirs (including my analysis built on the basis of the work of, or through interviews with 30 former Sobibór prisoners) mention the fact that these survivors state that they had witnessed the deaths of 56 Sobibór escapees. These people were killed either by Poles, Ukrainians, ‘bandits’, soldiers of the Home Army, ‘nationalists’, or Polish and Soviet partisans. They were killed when they were in hiding, or when they thought they were safe while living a relatively ‘normal life in freedom’, yet still as the war continued. These accounts also make reference to statements made by the other escapees with whom they ran into, or chatted with during the uprising itself or when they were in hiding. At one point, however, these people, roughly 30 in number, went their separate ways in various circumstances, and their fate remains unknown.

Today, ten survivors of the German extermination camp in Sobibór are still alive, including eight escapees and two former prisoners who only spent a few hours on the Sobibór camp’s ramp, where, by sheer luck, they were selected to work in other concentration camps, then managed to survive and live to see the end of the war. All of the above discussion can be summarised as follows:

The number of Sobibór’s prisoner-labourers, who:

1. were in the Sobibór camp on 14 October 1943 – 500;
2. could not or did not escape, or did not manage to escape and were detained in the camp – 184;
3. were killed during the escape – 41;
4. managed to escape during the prisoners’ revolt – 275;
5. were detained or killed during the manhunt (or later) – 130;
6. are known to have been killed at ‘other than German hands’ – 56;
7. survived the prisoners’ escape from the camp and went into hiding, but whose fate remains unknown – 32;

8. are known to have survived World War II – **61** (57 participants of the prisoners' revolt on 14 October 1943, and 4 escapees from July 1943).

In my search for any information regarding the history of the German extermination centre in Sobibór, I have managed to gather several hundred descriptions, accounts, testimonies and memoirs. These, I feel, can be treated as being an authentic record of the Jews who survived World War II and who can confirm the fact that they had been some of Sobibór's prisoners<sup>105</sup>.

Among these documents are those which I believe to be valuable resources that confirm many important facts from the testimonies provided by Sobibór's survivors, and which were written by those who were not Sobibór's prisoners, but who were somehow 'connected' with the camp and who also lived to see the end of the war. These resources have been evaluated differently by various researchers.

On the basis of the information coming from the above-mentioned resources, several lists have been made of those who survived World War II, and who were regarded, after the assessment of the credibility of their testimonies, as former prisoners held within this man-made Hell.

However, each of these lists is different. Among the resources I have had access to, I managed to find the names of **93** persons who survived World War II and who were prisoners of the Sobibór camp, those who can be regarded as former prisoners or those who claimed to have been former Sobibór prisoners<sup>106</sup>.

---

<sup>105</sup> This information also refers to 23 accounts of World War II survivors who were deported to Sobibór, and were sent, on the same day, to other camps.

<sup>106</sup> Alster, Shlomo; Avon, Moshe; Bahir, Moshe (Szklares); Bardach, Antonius; Begleiter, David; Bergdorf, Chaim; Białowicz, Lea; Bialowitz, Philip/Fizel; Bialowitz, Symcha; Biały, Leon; Biskupicz, Jakub/Jacob; Blatt, Tomasz (Toivi); Borenstein, Moshe; Chomontowski, Józef; Duniec/Dunietz, Josef/Joseph; Engel, Chaim; Engel, Selma (Wijnberg); Fajgenbaum, Jakob; Feldman, Regina/Rywka; Fellenbaum-Weiss, Hella; Field, Charles; Frajtag, Josef; Frei, Sara; Freiberg, Dov/Berl/Berek; Goldfarb, Mordechai/Moshe; Grünbaum, Sofia; Grzesiak, Krzysztof; Halberstadt, Leon; Hanas, Stanisław; Hannel, Salomea; Herszman, Josef; Hochman, Moshe; Honigman, Simon; Huberman, Jecheskiel; Jankew, (Jankow) Leib; Karger, Motel; Kohn, Abraham; Kornfeld, Chaim; Königsberg, Shaja; Kupczyn, Sasza; Leder, Szmuel; Lejst, Chaim; Lerner, Yechuda; Lichtman, Eda (Fischer Eda); Lichtman, Yitzak/Itzhak; Litmanowski/Litwinowski, Yefim; Lumerman, Sofija; Margulies, Abraham; Menche, Yechaskel; Merensztajn, Moshe; Metz, Zeld; Michel, Franciszek; Michel, Janina; Michel, Maria; Michel, Stanisław; Oltuski, Dora; Oltuski, Jacek Orbuch; Owczarek, Franciszek; the Pachter couple; Peczerski, Aleksander; Platnicki, Nachum (Niam); Plotnikow, Chaim; Podchlebnik, Szlomo; Powroźnik, Chaim; Pozner, Herman (Gerstenberg); Pożycki, Yankel; Przedworska, Zofia; Raab, Esther (Terner); Rozenfeld, Siemion; Rotenberg/Rottenberg, Aizyk; Rotter (Friedman), Pearl; Safran, Ilana (Ursula Stern); Sobelman, Cvi; Speisman, Malka; Speisman, Josef; Szmajzner, Stanisław (Shlomo); Szymiel, Leon (Cymel); Szwiec, Fajwel; Taborinskij, Boris; Thomas, Kurt; Treger, Chaim; Wajcen/Vaitsen, Alexy/Alexi; Waks, Berl; Wang, Abraham; Weiss, Adam; Weisspapier, Arkadij; Wewryk, Kalmen; Ziss, Meir, Zukerman, Hershel; Zukerman, Joseph.

Among these persons are seventy-six who have been confirmed, in person (in the form of accounts, testimonies, statements or interviews) to have been imprisoned inside the Sobibór extermination centre. This also includes seventeen who were described as being former prisoners of Sobibór by reliable witnesses, such as former Sobibór prisoners, reputable private persons, as well as by persons and institutions that have conducted research into the history of the Sobibór camp.

With regard to the above-mentioned seventy-six autobiographical written resources, these include the accounts, testimonies and memoirs of fourteen persons<sup>107</sup> whose credibility, however, is difficult to confirm. The documents that are of interest are very laconic, short and imprecise. Moreover, the majority are the testimonies of witnesses who were screened so as to take part in the court trials against Sobibór camp's governing personnel (these individuals were called in as witnesses only because they had previously applied for war reparations on account of their stated imprisonment in the Sobibór camp). The courts did not, however, treat as bona fide evidence material, either the statements and explanations included in the reparations application forms or that found within the witnesses' pre-screening testimonies. In addition, the court treated the materials obtained from such individuals as being irrelevant with respect to the history of the Sobibór camp<sup>108</sup>. Therefore, these

---

<sup>107</sup> Avon, Moshe; Biały, Leszek; Grünbaum, Sofia; Karger, Motel; Königsberg, Shaja; Lumerman, Sofija; Małżeństwo, Pachter; Oltuski, Dora; Oltuski, Jacek Orbuch; Weiss, Adam; Speisman, Malka; Speisman, Josef.

<sup>108</sup> Selected excerpts from case files of the trials which took place in Hagen between 1965-1966 and 1982-1985:

**Shaja Königsberg**, heard at the court in Tel Aviv, testified that she had been deported to Sobibór by horse-drawn cart. She claimed it had been in September 1942, and that she had spent about two years in the camp. She worked the longest time in the camp's laundry. However, she could not provide any more details which could contribute to the clarification of her case. Her answers to most of the questions and admonitions were very general. Particularly unclear were her explanations concerning her husband and daughters. At first, she said she had two children who had been killed in Sobibór, together with her husband, and at the same time. Earlier, however, when she testified in front of a reparations institution, she claimed that her elder daughter had survived, and they had both escaped from the Sobibór camp during the prisoners' revolt. What is more, she could not remember any details from 14 October 1943. On the basis of her testimony, the court decided that it was not able to establish any bona fide evidence in this case.

**Sofia Grünbaum**, heard at the District Court in Tel Aviv, testified that she had arrived at the Sobibór camp by train in April or May 1943. Up till then, she had had no idea that something like Sobibór existed. In her testimony, she was not able to provide any detailed description of a single day she had allegedly spent in Sobibór. Moreover, she could not describe any particular events from her Sobibór days. Therefore, according to the court, she proved to be 'very unreliable', especially in confrontation with the information she had provided in her case for war reparations.

**Leon Biały** did not provide, in his testimony, any details concerning the camp, how it operated or its personnel, which would, at least on a general basis, have corresponded with all the other information resulting from the evidentiary hearing. The court stated that his testimony was useless and that did not, in any way, refer to the extermination camp in Sobibór.

**Herman Posner**, in his pledge (instead of an oath), gave the false information that, after

people were not listed as those officially considered as former Sobibór prisoners by researchers studying the history of Sobibór<sup>109</sup>.

Here, the main difficulty that comes up in either including or excluding such individuals is the so-called 'assurances' which former Sobibór prisoners gave instead of swearing an oath to the court. The people of concern provided these 'assurances' at trials undertaken to establish the reparations which they had applied for, both when they testified in their own cases, as well as when they wanted to help their fellow purported prisoners. The problem is that they could not present efficient evidence in front of the reparations institutions. It must be mentioned that a group of Jews did apply for reparations, claiming that they had been prisoners of the Sobibór camp. However, while these individuals gave statements, which, in fact, were very general in character, only few of them provided information which coincided with either commonly-known, or less commonly known but genuine facts about Sobibór.

Moreover, these people frequently gave contradictory or objectively false information. The court, however, showed some consideration for them in view of the fact that, forced to prove how much they had suffered in the camp but having

---

the Sobibór camp, he had been transferred to the Majdanek concentration camp in Lublin. He also could not explain the given false data about his alleged stay in, for example, the concentration camp in Buchenwald. Furthermore, he did not remember on what grounds he had helped some people living in the USA to confirm that they had been prisoners of Sobibór. However, he kept insisting on the fact that Leon Biały had been a Sobibór survivor. He showed the same attitude in relation to some other persons, among them, Malka Speisman, Josef Speisman, Dora Oltuski, Motel Karger and Orbuch. The court came to the conclusion that it was impossible to unanimously state whether these persons had really been Sobibór prisoners.

**Abraham Margulies** admitted to having made a false pledge (instead of an oath) in favour of Moshe Awnon with regard to his stay in the Sobibór camp. Margulies testified that, later, he had tried to explain his mistake at the police station in Israel.

**Meier Ziss** testified many times, as a witness, during various reparations trials, in favour of those who declared that they were former Sobibór prisoners. He made pledges (instead of oaths) and signed all the necessary statements 'in blanco', without checking carefully what he was signing. However, he never admitted to having purposefully submitted false testimony to the court.

**Mordechai Goldfarb** admitted to having provided, during his reparations trial, false information that, after Sobibór, he had been sent to the concentration camps in Majdanek and Mauthausen, and that, in order to prove that he was a Sobibór prisoner, he had been using 'false' witnesses who had never been in Sobibór.

**Jakub Biskupicz** admitted that, in relation to different statements he had made in his reparations trial, he had taken part in several frauds. This applied, for example, to the case of the Patchers couple. Biskupicz signed statements which were not filled in, but which were later filled in with false information. According to these, he had stayed with them in the Hrubieszów ghetto from September 1941 to November 1943. He also did not know how to explain his statements that, after Sobibór, he had allegedly stayed in Auschwitz. He claimed that, when he was giving this testimony, he was misunderstood.

<sup>109</sup> Grzesiak, Krzysztof; Owczarek, Franciszek; Michel, Maria, Stanisław, Michel; Franciszek, Michel; Janina, Michel; Hanas, Stanisław.

no evidence to do so, they did not tell the truth. The court also showed some consideration for the people who acted as witnesses to such individuals, in view of the fact, that, in certain cases, due to their difficulty in communication or their false understanding of the concept ‘duty to help others’, they gave statements for which they could be held criminally liable. All this raised doubts as to whether the individuals self-named, or put forward by these witnesses were credible enough.

The number seventy-six also includes 7 submitted reparation requests connected with, among other places, the German extermination camp in Sobibór. These were submitted to Polish and international reparations institutions in the 1970’s, 1980’s, 1990’s and the years following 2000. The requests of these people, who did legally certify and confirm their stay in Sobibór, were never formally accepted. However, the refusal to accept these requests was not based on any arbitrary decision undermining their credibility. They were rejected more because of the lack of sufficient evidence to confirm that the applicants had actually been prisoners of the Sobibór camp, which was indispensable in this type of application.

Moreover, the aforementioned resources include the accounts of four persons<sup>110</sup> who, in no other way, but through their own accounts ‘made public’ the fact that they had been prisoners of the Sobibór camp. These people never took part in any post-war court trials; they never came into contact with other Sobibór witnesses, they never wrote any memoirs. In the literature discussing the issue of the Sobibór camp, I have never come across any mention or comment with respect to these accounts.

In addition, among these seventy-six resources, are the accounts of four persons<sup>111</sup>, who purportedly got out of the camp during the prisoners’ mass escape (July 1943), and who had worked outside the camp in the forest commando (*Waldkommando*).

Out of the names of the seventeen persons whose stay in the camp was confirmed by several witnesses or researchers, yet whose names I have not found to be verified by any other resource, three can be found on Dr Olga Braniczowa’s list (‘Przedworska’, ‘Begleiter’, ‘Jankow’), four on Tomasz Blatt’s list (‘Sobelman’, ‘Pożycki’, ‘Waks’, ‘Plotnikow’), one in Lea Białowicz’s testimony (‘Sara Frei’), while five names, i.e. ‘Szwiec’, ‘Litwinowski’, ‘Bardach’, ‘Kupczyn’ and ‘Borenstein’, have been mentioned by several witnesses and researchers into the Sobibór camp. The remaining four are mentioned in accounts and testimonies, which are very laconic and difficult to verify at present:

*“[...] At that time, I was living where Wasylukowa lives now. It was in 1945. One day, my husband went to the barn to fetch some hay. And then, a man comes to my mother-in-law and says: “Good morning. Where’s Mietek?” and my mother-in-law replies “What is it that you want?”. So the man says that he wants to talk to him. “And who are you?”. My husband worked in his father’s slaughterhouse because his father had a butcher’s shop and a slaughterhouse. So, when this Jew came, the two met and began to greet each other as if they were the closest family members. Only then did he start to say that he’d been in Sobibór. He was making a fence there, and escaped. He ran off to*

<sup>110</sup> Bergdorf, Chaim; Leder, Szmuel; Rotter, Pearl; Huberman, Jecheskiel.

<sup>111</sup> Honigman, Simon; Frajrag, Josef; Podchlebnik, Szlomo; Wang, Abraham.

Russia, and later moved somewhere else. And he was abroad and has now come back. I don't remember his name. They got along with each other very well [...]"<sup>112</sup>.

"[...] On 14 October, a prisoners' revolt broke out in Sobibór, and about 300 people escaped. Among these 300 escapees was an inhabitant of the Jewish Religious Community in Rejowiec. He survived the German occupation, and emigrated to the USA. He settled down in New York City, where he lived under the assumed name of Charles Field [...]"<sup>113</sup>.

"[...] Leon Halberstadt, who gave me the anaesthetic, came from Krasnystaw. After the war, I learnt that he had survived the uprising and lived in Poland incognito. Richard Rashke, who wrote a book about the revolt, allegedly did an interview with him. Dear Leon, if you are still alive and if you're reading this book, please, contact me. It would be a great pleasure to see you again, to talk about this and that, and to help you [...]"<sup>114</sup>.

"[...] Following my telephone conversation with Comrade Florczak, I would like to inform you that Citizen Józef Chomontowski, the son of Tomasz and Barbara, born on 29 March 1903, in Zabrodzie, a former prisoner of the Sobibór extermination camp, now lives in the village of Sobibór, Włodawa district. However, the person whose name is Terenkiewicz does not live within this area. It has been established that he has never registered at the GRN [Commune National Council] in Włodawa [...]"<sup>115</sup>.

---

<sup>112</sup> Stefania Bajuk's account (in:) *Żydzi włodawscy w latach 1944-45. Trudne powroty do domu* [Jews from Włodawa in the Years 1944-45. Difficult Comebacks Home], Publiczne Gimnazjum Nr 2 we Włodawie [Public Middle School No. 2 in Włodawa], Włodawa, 2005.

<sup>113</sup> Zdzisław Kalinowski, *Pamięć o ofiarach Zagłady* [Remembering the Victims of the Holocaust], Rejowiec, 2009.

<sup>114</sup> Kurt Ticho, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>115</sup> Letter E - 074/68 from 3 February 1968, of the Deputy Chief of the District Police, Security Department in Włodawa, Captain Stanisław Kędzióra, to the Chief Constable of the Investigations Department of KWMO [Provincial Police Office] in Lublin, IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/5/0178.

## CHAPTER VIII

### REACTIONS AND PUNISHMENT

#### 1. Trials of war criminals from Sobibór

##### *Trials of former members of the German personnel*

Over 120 Germans and Austrians served in the extermination camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka. Most of the perpetrators of ‘Operation Reinhardt’ were found in 1945. Many of them were acquitted and given a chance to begin a new life. Others managed to escape from their internment camps and remained in hiding for a long time. Of the over 120 perpetrators known by name, 46 died or were considered to be dead.

The first detailed pieces of information about the death camps and gas chambers transpired during the Nuremberg trial on 7 and 8 August 1946 in the testimony by SS-Sturmbannführer Georg Konrad Morgen, a former SS judge. Even though the judging panel were not yet familiar with such names as Bełżec, Treblinka or Sobibór, Morgen’s testimony threw a new light upon the death factories because it revealed the fact that ordinances concerning the extermination of people came directly from the Reich Chancellery.

At the Nuremberg trials, knowledge about the death camps of ‘Operation Reinhardt’ was very limited. The prosecutor accused the mass murderers mostly on the basis of atrocities committed in *KL Auschwitz* and other well-known Nazi camps, where evidence and witnesses were easily found. The testimonies given at the Nuremberg trials by Konrad Morgen and Rudolf Höss<sup>1</sup>, the analysis of Odilo Globocnik’s reports<sup>2</sup> as well as Smirnow’s statements passed unnoticed. Smirnow, a representative of the Soviet Union at the trials, turned the Tribunal’s attention to a part of the Polish official report prepared for the trial. He read out information that the camp in Sobibór was created during the first and second phases of the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. However, extermination on a mass scale began at that camp in 1943<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> During an investigation, before the trial in Nuremberg, Höss was asked if he knew the locations of the extermination camps and their names. He answered that there were three more of them: the first – Treblinka, the second – Bełżec near to Lvov, and the third – 40 kilometres away from Chelm, that Chelm in the east.

<sup>2</sup> Prosecutor Elwyn Jones submitted Globocnik’s reports to the International War Tribunal on 5 August 1946, cf. Stanisław Piotrowski, *Misja Odyla Globocnika. Sprawozdania o wynikach Finansowych Zagłady Żydów w Polsce* [Odilo Globocnik’s Mission. The Reports on the Financial Effects of the Extermination of the Jews in Poland], Warszawa, 1949, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> „The Polish Republic in the case against: 1. German war criminals. Their corporations and organisations indicated under indictment No. 1 before the International Military Court”, p. 42. This is the official report of the Polish government for the Nuremberg tribunal,

The world public had again disregarded the nearly 300, 000 murders committed by the Germans in the extermination centre in Sobibór. And again, due to the indifference and 'ineffective' actions of the world public, a former prisoner of the camp in Sobibór prepared a document by means of which he wished to continue the fight for justice at the Nuremberg trial.

On 7 March 1946, Kurt Ticho, a Czech Jew who was a former prisoner of the death camp in Sobibór, and participant in the camp uprising, wrote a letter to General Bogumił Ecer (Etcher), a representative of the former Czech Republic at the Nuremberg trials, who worked in the Ministry of Justice of Czechoslovakia. In his letter, he described the hell of Sobibór, where he was imprisoned from 6 November 1942 until the armed revolt of the prisoners on 14 October 1943. It was only after a few decades that Kurt Ticho discovered what had really happened to his letter. He had never received a reply to it. Moreover, the letter had never been read out during the Nuremberg trials. After many years, he found out that the letter had been deposited at the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Prague. He received the 'official' copy of his document on 4 April 2005. There was a handwritten clause 'Urgent' on it. The letters D, H or Dr H may be the initials of the person who received it. Also, there are official handwritten orders in Czech: *Dat preložit do anglickiny* and *predat, zalobcum*, which meant an instruction to translate the letter into English and submit it to the prosecutors. The underlined handwritten word 'Norimb' next to Kurt Ticho's return address is short for "Norimberk", which means Nuremberg in Czech. Until the very end of his days, Kurt Ticho could not understand why nobody had ever followed the instructions written down by General Ecer<sup>4</sup>.

Even prior to January 1950, investigations were launched against members of 'Operation Reinhardt'. Conducted by various prosecutor's offices, those investigations lasted well into the 1980s. However, a breakthrough happened in the 1960s. The still lingering suggestions about the necessity to improve the procedure of bringing war criminals to justice gained ground at that time. Accidentally, those suggestions received a lot of support in 1958. In that year, a trial was going on in Ulm against 10 war criminals from the so-called *Einsatzgruppe A*. The crimes which had been brought to light during the trial were widely publicised in the West German press. Consequently, they shocked the then very apathetic German public. Following a wave of severe press criticism that ensued in 1958 after the crimes at the Ulm trial had been revealed, the federal government of Germany resolved to take genuine action in order to facilitate the procedure of prosecuting Nazi war crimes.

In that situation, caused by the public, a meeting occurred in the autumn of 1958 in Bad Harzburg. Ministers of justice, senators of all German Lands as well as representatives of West Berlin participated in it. The outcome of that conference was the signing of an agreement on 3 October 1958 which legalised the creation of *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer*

---

document URSS-93, the transcript (fragments) courtesy of Tomasz Blatt, Copy from Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>4</sup> Kurt Ticho, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-222.

*Verbrechen* on 6 November 1958. The central office had a very important task to perform: gathering and systematising all available information and evidence relative to Nazi crimes. The central office was empowered to conduct investigation proceedings and limited investigations<sup>5</sup>.

Another event that significantly influenced the efficiency of prosecuting Nazi war crimes in the German Federal Republic at the beginning of the 1960s was the court trial of SS-Sturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. One of the consequences of that trial was starting, by the Ludwigsburg Central Office, a series of investigations into extermination camps. In the first half of the 1960s, more precisely until 1965, there occurred in the Federal Republic of Germany 103 trials of Nazi war criminals, including those against members of the extermination camps in Bełżec, Treblinka, Sobibór, Sachsenhausen, Matthausen-Gusen, Gross-Rosen, Stutthof, *KL Auschwitz* and Chelmno-on-Ner as well as those against the accused of participation in the so-called 'Action T-4'. The investigation into 'Operation Reinhardt' comprised practically all members of the headquarters of the action, including SS-Gruppenführer O. Globocnik - Head of the action, Ch. Wirth - Inspector of the action, SS-Sturmbannführer H. Höfle, SS-Sturmbannführer E. Lerch, SS-Hauptsturmführer O. Hantke, SS-Hauptsturmführer E. Michelsen, SS-Obersturmführer F. Stangl and others. Only a few of those criminals were actually brought to trial. Globocnik committed suicide on 31 May 1945. His close assistant - Wirth was killed by Yugoslavian partisans on 26 April 1944. Hermann Julius Höfle hanged himself in gaol during an investigation on 21 August 1962 in Vienna. Both Michelsen and Hantke were sentenced by a West German court in Hamburg; Michelsen to 12 years' imprisonment, and Hantke to life imprisonment. Since the end of the war, there had been judiciary and pre-trial proceedings in progress against a great number of members of 'Action T-4' and 'Operation Reinhardt'. Later in those trials, there also participated the defendants from Hagen or other members of the camp personnel in Sobibór<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Henryk Solga, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–121.

<sup>6</sup> 1. In the first Hadamar proceedings, the defendants were the doctors, nurses and office employees of the Hadamar (Lahn) euthanasia centre. Among them was Hubert Gomerski, interrogated as a witness in Hagen, judged in a trial in 1950 in connection with his service in Sobibór, and acquitted. Other people connected with the extermination centre in Sobibór: Jührs, Zierke, Schütt, Hering remained wanted by a warrant. No charges were brought against Klier.

2. In the Kalmenhof proceedings and in the first proceedings of the Eichberg case, the defendants from the Hagen trial or other members of the camp in Sobibór did not participate.

3. In the 4 Ks 1/47 = 4 KLs 25/47 StA Frankfurt-am-Main proceedings, a number of proceedings were brought together: the Hadamar II proceedings against Kneissler and others, the Hadamar III proceedings against Gumbmann and Jührs, the Eichberg II proceedings against Geiger and others. The accusation against Jührs was withdrawn on 4 June 1947. Zierke was legally acquitted on 28 January 1948. Both of them were remanded in custody.

The first post-war criminal proceedings against members of the Sobibór personnel concerned four people who were brought to justice during three trials. The culprits were located by chance. Former Sobibór prisoners: Estera Raab and Samuel Lerer came across Erich Bauer while he was taking a walk in Berlin in 1949. The first inquisitorial proceedings against Josef Hirtreiter in connection with the extermination camps (Treblinka, Belżec) were opened on the basis of a few pieces of information which he himself had described as digressions during interrogations concerning his

4. In the Grafeneck proceedings, also Schütt and Unverhau were remanded in custody in connection with the same case. After the completion of the pre-trial judicial inquiry, the further investigation of the Schütt case was discontinued. Unverhau was legally acquitted on 5 July 1949.
5. In the proceedings signed PKs 3/50 StA (Berlin-Moabit), Erich Bauer was sentenced to death by the Berlin-Moabit jury on 8 May 1950 because of his activity in the extermination camp in Sobibór. After the constitution had taken effect, his death sentence was changed to life imprisonment. Bauer was serving time in Berlin-Tegel. In the afore-mentioned proceedings, separate pre-trial inquiries were started against Bredow, Wagner, Gomerski and Frenzel, former members of the Sobibór camp. However, at that time, none of them, except Gomerski, had been located yet.
6. In the 52 Ks 3/50 Sta Frankfurt-am-Main proceedings, two ex-guards from the extermination centre in Sobibór were charged with their activity in the camp in Sobibór – Hubert Gomerski and Johann Klier. Klier was acquitted by a jury court in Frankfurt-am-Main on 25 August 1950. Gomerski was sentenced for life. Within the proceedings, 27 inquiries were conducted against another 27 former members of the camp personnel in Sobibór. However, the proceedings were dismissed because some of those people died, and the remaining ones could not be located to be summoned before the court.
7. Additionally, a separate pre-trial inquiry was in progress against Frenzel and Wirth because of their participation in the euthanasia action in Hadamar (4 a Js 27/46 StA Frankfurt am Main). However, Frenzl and Wirth could not be located to appear before the court.
8. Owing to the killings committed in the camp in Treblinka, a jury court in Frankfurt-am-Main sentenced Josef Hirtreiter to life imprisonment in 1950.
9. Against another six former members of the camp personnel in Belżec, including (also members of the Sobibór personnel) Dubois, Jührs, Unverhau, Zierke and Fuchs, an accusation was brought on 9 August 1963 (to the First Munich District Court). They were charged with the crime of complicity in mass murder – the mass killing of Jews in the camp in Belżec in 1942. The court refused to open main proceedings, and discontinued investigating the cases of the defendants because their explanation that they had been acting under duress was assessed as difficult to refute. The appeal of the prosecutor's office against that ruling was rejected by the penal senate of the Federal Court in Munich. The extensive accusation of mass murder in the Belżec camp resulted in a jury court in Munich taking main proceedings (only one such case occurred), in which Josef Oberhauser (a witness at the trial in Hagen) was sentenced to four years and six months in prison.
10. A great number of members of the camp personnel in Treblinka stood trial in a jury court in Düsseldorf (from 1964 to 1965), including Erwin Lambert (also accused at the trial in Hagen). He was sentenced there, on 3 September 1965, to 4 years' imprisonment for complicity in the mass killing of at least 300, 000 people.

own participation in the euthanasia action<sup>7</sup>. On 2 July 1946, Josef Hirtreiter, a 35-year old metalworker, was arrested in Frankfurt-am-Main and detained for explaining the circumstances of the patients' death at the lunatic asylum in Hadamar, near Limburg on the Lahn River. The investigators planned to accuse Hirtreiter in the opening proceedings against the main doctor (Adolf Wahlmann) and other employees of the asylum in Hadamar. The charges concerned the killing of 15, 000 patients during the war<sup>8</sup>. A few days later, while he was testifying not only about the murders committed in Hadamar (he participated in the cremation of victims' corpses there), but he also confirmed that after the completion of that action, he was transferred by officials from the Führer's Chancellery to the camp in Małkinia, near to Warsaw. Also, he gave a couple of names of his companions from Hadamar. During those inquisitorial proceedings, the prosecutor's office came upon two living members of the Sobibór personnel in Frankfurt: Johann Klier and Hubert Gomerski. Like Hirtreiter, they were connected to the Hadamar centre<sup>9</sup>. Most of the perpetrators who testified in the proceedings about the euthanasia action did not reveal their later involvement in the extermination camps.

Erich Bauer, who was responsible for the gassing process in Camp III, was sentenced to death in 1950 in Berlin. The death penalty was later changed to life imprisonment.

SS-Scharführer Josef Hirtreiter, a murderer from Treblinka and Sobibór, received a life sentence; he died in prison in Frankfurt in 1978. Hubert Gomerski was also sentenced for life. At a later trial, that sentence was changed to 15 years' imprisonment, but it did not take effect because of the defendant's failing health. As a result, Johann Klier was acquitted.

The most significant and spectacular trial against members of the Sobibór extermination centre began in September 1962 in Hagen<sup>10</sup>. Even though the main trial was initially scheduled for four months, it was extended to 16 months on account of a great number of witnesses. The court verdicts, which had been based upon extensive court files of over 400 pages, were announced by the District Court in Hagen on 20 December 1966<sup>11</sup>. One of the defendants was sentenced to life imprisonment, and five of them to 3 – 8 years in prison. Another five defendants were acquitted<sup>12</sup>. Kurt

<sup>7</sup> Henryk Sołga, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> In October 1945, an American military tribunal sentenced seven employees of Hadamar, among others, Wahlmann, for violating the international law – causing the killing of 476 Soviet and Polish forced labourers in that place. Since officials of the Frankfurt prosecutor's office focused on jurisdiction matters, they did not pay particular attention to Hirtreiter's admission to performing actions in Poland. They did not prove his direct participation in the Hadamar killings, and, consequently, had him dispatched back to the Americans.

<sup>9</sup> Henryk Sołga, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Adalbert Ruckerl, *NS-Vernichtungslager im Spiegel Deutscher Strafprozesse*, Munchen, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Adalbert Ruckerl, *op. cit.*, pp. 84–85.

<sup>12</sup> W. De Mildt, and C. Ruter, eds, *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, Amsterdam, 2009.

Bolender, who was responsible for the functioning of Camp III, committed suicide.  
*Karl August Wilhelm Frenzel* – life imprisonment in a top security gaol; the verdict was confirmed at another trial.

*Franz Wolf* – 8 years' imprisonment in a top security gaol.

*Fritz Erich Fuchs* – 4 years' imprisonment in a top security gaol.

*Jakob Alfred Ittner* - 4 years' imprisonment in a top security gaol.

*Karl Werner Dubois* – 3 years' imprisonment in a top security gaol.

*Erwin Hermann Lambert* - 3 years' imprisonment in a top security gaol.

*Robert Emil Franz Juhrs* – acquitted

*Erich Gustav Willi Lachmann* – acquitted

*Hans-Heinz Friedrich Schutt* – acquitted

*Heinrich Unverhau* – acquitted

*Ernst Zierke* – acquitted

*Kurt Bolender* – committed suicide during the main trial.

Appeal trials of the Germans from the Sobibór personnel occurred in the 1970s and 1980s after Gomerski and Frenzel had filed a motion to reopen the proceedings. At the main trial, Gomerski had his sentence reduced from life imprisonment to 15 years' imprisonment. After making an appeal by the prosecutor's office, the proceedings were opened again in October 1981, but discontinued on account of the defendant's inability to take part in the trial<sup>13</sup>. Between 5 November 1982 and 4 October 1985, a reopened trial was in progress against Karl Frenzel in the District Court in Hagen. The court confirmed the sentence of imprisonment. Frenzel was released after 16 years spent in gaol.

The German judiciary considered Nazi crimes as ordinary crimes. In order to receive a guilty verdict, it was necessary to prove a given murder in great detail; to specify where, when and at what time it happened, which turned out to be extremely difficult because of the lack of witnesses. Secondly, identifying the perpetrators also proved to be very difficult because there were no camp lists of prisoners or files available. Only a tiny number of Sobibór prisoners survived the war; they were scattered in Israel, Canada, the USSR, Australia, Venezuela, Brazil, Sweden, France, Germany, Hungary and the USA. The prosecutors managed, though, to locate 41 of them during the 'Sobibór' trial. For their part, the perpetrators took advantage of loopholes in criminal law to pass themselves off as minor functionaries who received orders and did not act according to their own will<sup>14</sup>. They described themselves as "*little wheels in a machine, the working of which was in some inexplicable way*

---

vol. 25, pp. 52–252.

<sup>13</sup> Hubert Gomerski's testimony, the main trial, 12 November 1973, the District Court in Berlin B Rep. 058, No. 1577., NIOD Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Heinrich Unverhau, interrogation record, file ref. No. 33033/4, the prosecutor's office in Munich, 21 July 1960, NIOD Archives.

*unstoppable*”<sup>15</sup>, and saw their guilt solely in their inability to defy orders or to escape from the camps. They used the division of labour at the camps as a possibility to avoid taking responsibility. Erich Lachmann, who was responsible for the guards in Trawniki stressed: “[...] *I don't feel guilty of the death of the Jews in Sobibór because I didn't gas them myself*[...]”<sup>16</sup>.

The Hagen proceedings were very significant for the process of building up historical knowledge about the German extermination camp in Sobibór. In his analysis commissioned by the court, Historian Wolfgang Scheffler brought up the question of the number of victims killed in Sobibór. The first one hundred pages of the verdict justification constitute solely a historical presentation of events at the camp. It was the first German detailed description of the history of Sobibór.

However, it seems that the Hagen trial did not take full advantage of the opportunity to describe the truth about the extermination of the Jews in Sobibór. The most obvious justification for that was, apparently, the procedures the court had to follow closely. During the trial, the court disregarded the many different perceptions of the history of the camp and its tragedies from the point of view of the victims. Indeed, the victims were viewed anonymously as an abstract mass of numbers. The witnesses were not asked about their biographies or events they had seen, apart from the event they were supposed to testify about. They appeared in court only as witnesses for the prosecution.

Therefore, even though the uprising of the prisoners in October 1943 was mentioned during the court proceedings, the audience may have got the impression that that unprecedented revolt of the prisoners had allowed them only to survive. Its historical perspective was, however, completely disregarded during the trial. The main culprits were viewed as ‘strange’ impersonal demons rather than real people with different personalities. In consequence, the public reaction was that of unquestioningly distancing themselves from those war criminals.

During the Hagen trial, there was much more talk in Germany about the expiry of the statute of limitations period for prosecuting German war criminals than about the subject matter of the trial. Depending on influences of particular social groups on the media, the question that would hit the headlines was “*following orders under coercion*”, thereby justifying the killers. The individual capabilities of the crime perpetrators for action were either denied or not considered at all. The media presented ‘those from the camps’ as people who had no possibility to act freely. The Sobibór crimes were termed as disgusting or common. It was explained that the perpetrators of those crimes had had to commit them because they had had to obey orders. Journalists who wrote reports about the Sobibór trial in Hagen in 1965 worked in a society that refused to acknowledge the truth about the victims or killers.

In 1964, 70% of the population of the Federal Republic of Germany refused the idea of punishing Nazi crimes. Journalists wrote articles about those crimes even

---

<sup>15</sup> Karl Frenzel, interrogation record, the District Court in Dusseldorf, March 1963, MPLW Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Erich Lachmann, interrogation record, LKA NW (15 December), Wegscheid, 6 November 1962, MPLW Archives.

though the public was not interested in that area of knowledge whatsoever. Contrary to expectations, none of the judicial proceedings against members of the German extermination centre in Sobibór turned out to be crucial in revealing crimes against mankind and finding the killers guilty.

After the war, the former camp commandant in Sobibór - Franz Stangl, and Gustaw Wagner were detained in Glasenbach in Austria, but managed to escape. They made their way to Bishop Hudal in Rome, who helped them to leave for Brazil via Beirut and Damascus. They found themselves in Damascus six weeks after their escape. Once there, Stangl made attempts at bringing his family over there. To get to Damascus, his wife took a route via Switzerland. In Bern, she got a Syrian visa. In 1951, Stangl and his family went to Brazil, where he lived under his own name, undisturbed by anyone. It was only in 1961 that the Austrian authorities took more effective action to bring him to justice. His surname figured on the official Austrian list of wanted war criminals (dispatched to all embassies and consulates abroad) under '34/34 Mord Tatbestand Treblinka'.

In 1964, Stangl's surname often appeared in Brazilian and foreign press reports from a trial of the Treblinka personnel. It seems very strange that during the six years that passed between the first appearance of his surname on the Austrian list of wanted war criminals and his actual arrest, the information about Stangl's legal stay in Brazil was never revealed. For six years, an extensive search was under way for that criminal, under the direction of Szymon Wiesenthal<sup>17</sup>. Israel and Poland (the countries in which Stangl could expect a death sentence), and also Austria lodged extradition orders for Stangl. Finally, the Brazilian authorities extradited him to the Federal Republic of Germany for formal reasons.

The trial in Dusseldorf began on 13 May 1970. Stangl was accused of having 900, 000 people killed in the camps in Treblinka and Sobibór. During the trial, he first claimed that he had had no knowledge of the fact that Jews had been gassed in Treblinka. Later, he tried to justify himself by claiming that he had been forced to obey orders. He stated that he had a clear conscience because he had only performed his duties. On 22 July 1970, the court sentenced Stangl to life imprisonment. The criminal actually died in prison in 1971.

His activities in Sobibór were not part of the prosecutor's proceedings for formal reasons. The jury in Dusseldorf determined that Stangl had the position of the commandant, who was responsible for the whole camp. During that investigation and at a later trial, Stangl claimed that he had been responsible solely for the extension of the camp, its administration and paying a flat rate for food provisions. In his testimonies, he gave facts which were against his line of defence. He maintained that while transports with Jews were being unloaded, he stood by the ramp and observed all the goings-on as a 'curious onlooker'.

During the main trial, he explained that in his capacity as the highest ranking member of the camp personnel, he accepted the arrival of a transport and received

<sup>17</sup> Szymon Wiesenthal, *Prawo, nie zemsta. Wspomnienia* [Justice, Not Vengeance. Memories], Kraków, 2010, pp. 122-130; Gitta Sereny, *op. cit.*, pp. 305-309.

*Wagenzettel* (a confirmation that a carriage is in good technical condition). Stangl himself thought it possible that he had received reports every day at assemblies of the German and Ukrainian guards, and during assemblies of Jewish labourers. Also, he added that he had organised transport for a crew of guards from the training centre in Trawniki to Sobibór, even though it was not, according to him, part of his duties in Sobibór. He went on to testify that, apart from monthly flat rate food payments, he supervised and signed documents which detailed all valuables taken away from the killed.

What is more, he claimed that registering valuables had not been his job, but the job of the administration heads. However, he did not rule out the possibility that, upon his command, Jews from Sobibór were transported to the nearby labour camps (he had the authority to do that). Stangl admitted that he had been the highest-ranking officer in the camp. Therefore, he did not protest about being called ‘commandant’ (he did not, however, wish to be called ‘camp commander’ for fear that the whole responsibility would be dumped on him).

According to witnesses, (e.g., Schutt – the camp administration head), Stangl was the superior of the German personnel, who had to report to him on leaving the camp. Former Jewish prisoners of the Sobibór camp: Lerer, Cukiermann and Szmajzner considered Stangl (under oath) to have been the camp commandant. Lerer testified that Stangl ‘had the greatest power’. As transports arrived, he would give orders at the ramp, and he was also present in the place where Jews were undressing. He would also take a stroll along the road leading to the gas chamber. Cukiermann testified that the whole camp had been under Stangl’s command.

According to Szmajzner, who arrived in Sobibór in a transport from Opole on 12 May 1942, Stangl was wearing a white uniform and supervising the unloading of wagons at the ramp. Alois Rzepa, the treasurer in the local SS administration in Lublin, also identified Stangl as the commandant of the Sobibór camp.

Stangl himself admitted to having delivered valuables from Sobibór to the local SS administration in Lublin, which he had consulted with Rzepa. During the main trial, there was read a report of the 152 police station in Vienna, dated 20 June 1942, that a transport of Jews from Vienna was received in Sobibór on 17 June 1942. Stangl explained he could not remember that transport. The abovementioned report undoubtedly proves the fact that, to his superiors, Stangl was the camp commandant. The jury court was certain that that was really the case.

In the indictment, Stangl was accused of having had a prisoner hanged as a punishment and revenge – a certain Jew’s brother who had tried to break free from the camp. (He had got through the fence but a guard had spotted him and shot him). One execution was not enough for Stangl; he had the remaining eight labourers killed, all those who worked with the escapee. The SS-man strongly denied that accusation, and protested that such an event had never happened. The only evidence that the jury court had at its disposal on that matter was a statement by a former camp guard – Bolender, who committed suicide on 3 December 1963 after pre-trial proceedings had been started against him by the District Court in Hagen.

To this, Stangl said that Bolender had been biased against him because, as his superior, he had often admonished Bolender for treating Jews sadistically. Stangl explained that he had testified against Bolender before the SS and the Police Court in Cracow, where he had been tried for perjury. Those explanations did not seem very convincing to the jury because defendant Bolender could not have known at the time of his interrogation that Stangl would be brought to justice (the court in Dusseldorf did not consider Bolender to be a reliable witness).

On the basis of witness Ittner's account, Stangl was also charged with the death of a woman. When he was the commandant of the extermination camp in Sobibór, a Jewish woman arrived there to visit her husband, thinking that he was working in the camp. Stangl commanded Ittner to escort her to Camp III, where her husband was apparently working. Behind her back, he gave him signs to shoot her. Ittner did escort her to Camp III, where he handed her over to a guard who killed her. When Ittner returned, Stangl asked him whether he had killed the woman. His answer was that she had been shot by one of the guards. On hearing this, Stangl said: "*You coward*". Stangl denied it and went on to explain that Ittner must have been driven by revenge because some time before Ittner had been dismissed from the post of the administration head, and transferred to service in Camp III. Ittner must have been convinced that he lost his position upon Stangl's command because he thought that Stangl was biased against him. In fact, Ittner's transfer to another part of the camp was caused by Wirth's decision.

The result of the analysis of that piece of evidence was not sufficient enough to prove Stangl's guilt. During the main trial, Ittner used his right to refuse to give testimony. On the basis of the still not legally binding verdict of the Jury Court in Hagen from 20 December 1966 against the German personnel of the Sobibór camp, it was established that defendant Ittner repeatedly changed his testimonies and, finally, he called them all off. Therefore, there were doubts as to Ittner's reliability and truthfulness. Consequently, the court in Dusseldorf did not consider his testimonies as evidence which could incriminate Stangl<sup>18</sup>.

On 12 April 1950, Gustaw Wagner received residence in Brazil. He peacefully lived in Sao Paulo. In the 1970s, Wiesenthal, who continuously chased Wagner, supposed that he might have been staying in Brazil. He was sure that Wagner was

<sup>18</sup> Compiled on the basis of Franz Stangl, the indictment, the verdict, the verdict justification (in:) Verfahren Lfd. No.746, Tatkomplex: Massenvernichtungsverbrechen in Lagern Angeklagte: Franz Stangl vor Rechtskraft verstorben Gerichtsentscheidungen: LG Düsseldorf 701222, Tatland: Polen, Tatort: HS KL Treblinka, HS KL Sobibor, Tatzeit: 4204-4308, Opfer: Juden, Zigeuner Nationalität: Bulgarische, Griechische, Jugoslawische, Niederländische, Oesterreichische, Polnische, unbekannt Dienststelle: Haftstättenpersonal KL Treblinka, Haftstättenpersonal KL Sobibor Verfahrensgegenstand: Leitung - als Lagerkommandant von Treblinka - der Massentötung von mindestens 400.000 Juden und Zigeunern. Erschiessung und Erhängung von Juden sowie Leitung der Selektion an der Rampe in Sobibor, Veröffentlicht in Justiz und NS-Verbrechen Band XXXIV (in): . W. De Mildt and C. Ruter, eds, *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Straffurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, Amsterdam, 2009.

meeting with other Nazis and that, without doubt, he must take part in annual celebrations of the next anniversary of Hitler's birthday. Such meetings were organised in a hotel called 'Tyli' in Sao Paulo.

During his next visit to Israel, Wiesenthal met a Brazilian journalist – Mario Chimanovich from 'Jornal do Brasil', who showed him photos from a meeting of Germans in the hotel. All the guests present were easily recognisable in the snapshots. Even though Wiesenthal was not quite sure, he resolved to purposefully act on the verge of lying, and achieve success through provocation. Not wishing to inconvenience the journalist, he did not tell him that the information was false.

Of the whole group of people shown in the picture, he chose one man who attracted his attention because of his protruding ears. He claimed he was sure it was Gustaw Wagner. On the first page of 'Jornal do Brasil', the journalist posted a message that in the picture showing celebrations of Hitler's birthday in 'Tyli', there was recognised the deputy commandant of the Sobibór camp. After a few days, Gustaw Wagner reported at a police station himself. Nevertheless, he told lies until the very end, and tried to rescue himself. While he did not deny having done service in Sobibór, he, however, announced that he had dealt only with preparing the barracks for use, and that not a single Jew had been killed in Sobibór.

At the time, in the little town of Goiana, lived Stanisław Szmajzner – an ex-prisoner of the Sobibór camp. A confrontation of Szmajzner and Wagner was quickly organised. The German was shocked, but he did recognise Szmajzner. He said he remembered selecting him from the transport, thus saving his life. At that state of affairs, it was decided that Wagner's expulsion from Brazil should be taken into consideration. As a result, a legal war broke out about his extradition.

Austria's demand was rejected because Wagner had given up Austrian Citizenship, and the crimes he was accused of had not taken place on Austrian territory. The Polish motion was also dismissed because Brazil did not recognise the Polish judiciary at that time. Israeli demands were unacceptable because the state of Israel had not yet been created when Wagner did service and committed the most serious crimes in Sobibór. According to the Brazilian law, only the motion for extradition from the Federal Republic of Germany was legally binding. Still, the Supreme Court of Brazil rejected it because of a typescript error in the translation of German documents into Portuguese. Because of that mistake, the documents said that Wagner had been on the German list of wanted war criminals since 1974, instead of since 1947. At the same time, Brazilian regulations about the statute of limitations ruled that an accusation could be brought no later than 20 years after committing a crime.

Still, it was not clear which country Wagner would be extradited to. In Austria, he had participated in a euthanasia programme; in Poland, he had committed most of his crimes wearing a German uniform, and his victims were mostly Jews. Even though Austria issued two serious arrest warrants for Wagner in connection with his activity in Hartheim and Sobibór, it never bothered to submit a motion for his extradition. Poland did that, but chances for Wagner to be extradited to Poland

were, however, very low because he would be sentenced to death there, which was a more severe punishment than the Brazilian law allowed (in such cases, motions for extradition were usually dismissed).

After the error in the documents had been found, the German ambassador to Brazil immediately turned to the Supreme Court of Brazil to correct it, but he was made to wait for a written justification of the court ruling. Consequently, the whole procedure lasted for many months. Finally, when the German embassy submitted a motion in the appeal, Wagner had already been gone. All in all, Brazil resolved to close his case.

Gustaw Wagner died in his house on 3 October 1980. The official Brazilian papers said that the cause of his death was suicide. The only available picture shows a dead Wagner lying in a pool of blood on the floor of his bathroom with visible puncture wounds all over his body. It is not a photo of a suicide; it looks more like a photo of a person who has been killed. Most probably, it was neither suicide nor homicide, but an act of administering justice<sup>19</sup>.

### *Trials of former Ukrainian guards*

By the autumn of 1942, a small number of locals had been recruited for service in Trawniki<sup>20</sup>. From November 1942 till January 1943, a small group of Poles from the Lublin District and the District of Galicia found themselves there as well<sup>21</sup>. In January 1965, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the People's Polish Republic informed the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin about the fact that the National Security Committee at the Council of Ministers of the USSR had delegated to the Bureau of Investigation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs two of its representatives to collect evidence concerning Nazi German crimes committed on the territory of the Polish People's Republic.

Apparently, they were interested, among other things, in the extermination camps in Bełżec and Sobibór, and the SS training centre in Trawniki<sup>22</sup>. As the investigation was under way, attention was paid, among other things, to Polish citizens whose connections with the training centre in Trawniki were to be closely checked. The Bureau of Investigation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was informed by the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin that, in accordance with the prepared plan of running the investigation, there was a need to establish the place of living of an ex-employee of the Province National Security Office in Lublin – Władysław Śliwiński, who had been sentenced by the District Martial Court in Lublin for his membership in the SS in Trawniki during the German occupation. It was also necessary to establish the whereabouts of Stanisław Michalak, a member

<sup>19</sup> Szymon Wiesenthal, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-130.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Black, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> Colonel Bryniarski's official letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Deputy Province Security Commandant of Citizens' Militia in Lublin, 21 January 1965 (confidential, copy No. 1, No. J-084 T 65), Lublin IPN Archives.

of the camp security in Trawniki, who had been tried by the Court of the Polish People's Republic<sup>23</sup>.

In January 1965, the Investigation Department completed and reported its legal actions to the security authorities of the Soviet Union in connection with crimes committed by Soviet nationals in the extermination camps in Sobibór, Trawniki and Belżec during the German occupation. All materials in the form of original interrogations of witnesses, site inspections and photo albums were handed over to the representatives of the Soviet Union. The remaining materials in the form of copies of interrogation records, lists of war criminals and additional correspondence were deposited in the archives of Department 'C' of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin<sup>24</sup>.

The National Security Committee of the Council of Ministers of the USSR requested Polish judiciary institutions to pay particular attention during the investigation to the following people's activities in the extermination camps and the camp in Trawniki: Wiktor Worobiew, Iwan Ciliurika, Semen Sajenko, Nikolaĵ Sewieryn, Henryk Biencela (Piencela), Aleksander Bylena, Andriej Dejnko, Aleksander Frołow, Andriej Kirilow, Władimir Pawłuczinko, Anton Reheda, Dimitr Staroszczenko, Andriej Timakow, Siergiej Winachodow, Siemion Dowgaluk, Aleksy Rozenko, Wiktor Enoch, Porfiry Szpak, Timofiej Gora and Kierezor Jakow. By way of international legal assistance, the Bureau of Investigation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted an investigation, which had been commissioned by the Prosecutor's Office.

As a result, dozens of witnesses were heard, scientific material was collected, preliminary archives research was carried out, cooperation was established with all institutions which could assist in the collection of all evidence materials<sup>25</sup>. Most probably, the proceedings were ended in the autumn of 1968, the compiled materials were handed over to the Russians, and their copies were deposited in the archives of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin<sup>26</sup>.

While conducting that investigation, the 'Polish side' initiated a secret inquiry about Polish citizens who had been trained in the Trawniki camp, and then sent

<sup>23</sup> Official letter from the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 21 January 1965 ( l.dz. J-084/T/65), Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>24</sup> An official letter from the Director of the Investigation Department of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin to the Head of the Investigation Department of National Security at the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin concerning the deposition in Archives 'C' of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin of materials about German occupation crimes in the extermination camps in Sobibór, Trawniki, Poniatowa and Belżec, Lublin, 10 March 1965, Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>25</sup> An official letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Deputy Province Commandant of Citizens' Militia in Lublin, 8 August 1966 (No. J-74/5/66) and 22 December 1966 (No. J-1410/1240/T/67), Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>26</sup> An official letter from the Lublin District Citizens' Militia Headquarters in Lublin to the Head of Department 'C' of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, 8 August 1968 (G-287/68), Lublin IPN Archives.

away to serve in labour camps, concentration camps and extermination camps, like all qualified guards. The secret inquiry on that matter was given a cryptonym – ‘Raki’ [Crawfish]<sup>27</sup>. The detailed analysis of materials of the investigation conducted upon a Soviet request demonstrated that the surname lists of SS-men who had been transferred from the Trawniki camp to other places also included Polish surnames. In Department ‘C’ of the Citizens’ Militia Headquarters in Lublin, all operational, investigative, object and evidential files were checked for Polish names.

The first Polish names connected with the Trawniki centre turned up in the files of the camp commandant in Trawniki. These were: Jan Pawluczuk, Lucjan Flisiński, Bronisław Zajac and Jan Szpringer. Also, there was located Dymitr Bartnik from Okuninka in the Włodawa district, who had been trained in Trawniki. In the correspondence between the Citizens’ Militia District Headquarters in Włodawa and the Citizens’ Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, the name of a party activist nicknamed ‘Jasiński’ was mentioned (his real surname was not provided, he was termed as ‘our comrade’). He had been trained in Trawniki as well<sup>28</sup>.

The Investigation Department of the Citizens’ Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin continued their proceedings in the Włodawa district. The resulting audit activities concerned the following people: Dymitr Hołub (born in 1921 in Korolówka), Jan Pawluczuk (born in 1925 in Korolówka), Jan Martyniuk (born in 1921 in Korolówka), Bazyli Dudziak (born in 1922), Dymitr Bartnik (resident in Korolówka) and Aleksander Nawoźnik. According to information provided by the Citizens’ Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin to the Citizens’ Militia District Headquarters in Włodawa, all the abovementioned men were members of SS guard units trained in the Trawniki camp<sup>29</sup>.

The investigation was also conducted in the Chełm district. In effect, after talks with inhabitants of the village of Okopy in the Dorohusk commune, information was collected about Ignacy Gardziński – suspected of service in the SS guard units in Trawniki. Until 1939, he had lived in the former Dorohusk commune in the Chełm district, where he helped his parents with farming. In 1943, Polish youngsters were obligatorily recruited by German authorities into a paramilitary youth organisation called ‘Junaki’ [Swashbucklers]. Like some of his other colleagues, Gardziński was not recruited into that service because he voluntarily joined the SS units in Trawniki. After training, he was transferred for service to the extermination camp in Treblinka. When he was still being trained in Trawniki, he went back home to Okopy on leave a few times, wearing an SS uniform.

<sup>27</sup> The Citizens’ Militia Province Headquarters, an internal confidential message, 23 September 1966, Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>28</sup> An official letter from the Citizens’ Militia District Headquarters in Włodawa to the Head of the Investigation Department of the Citizens’ Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, 5 October 1966 (confidential, l. dz. R-0740/66), Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>29</sup> An official letter of the Citizens’ Militia Commandant of the Lublin Province to the Deputy District Security Commandant of Citizens’ Militia in Włodawa, 23 September 1966 (l. dz. G-1139/66), Lublin IPN Archives.

Władysław Lichotop, who lived in Wólka Okopska, an employee of the Chełm Cement Plant knew Gardziński personally. They had both attended primary school in Okopy. Lichotop also confirmed the fact that he had served in the SS together with Czesław Krzykocki, who came from Dobryłów in the Chełm district. After liberation, Krzykocki was arrested by a militiaman from the Citizens' Militia Railway Police Station in Chełm. The arrest was made by Tadeusz Wasiuk - a functionary of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin. Later, Krzykocki was tried and sentenced for his service in the SS. After he had left prison, he settled in the west of Poland.

As far as Ignacy Gardziński is concerned, he avoided getting arrested because he escaped west together with the retreating German army. After liberation, he visited his family in Okopy a few times. The investigators also established that also Franciszek Hajczuk from Okopy (born in 1923) had served in the SS together with Gardziński. Using passes during the course of his training, Hajczuk often went from Trawniki to his family in Okopy. Kazimierz Kołtuniuk, resident in Okopy, testified that he knew Hajczuk very well. He and Hajczuk had gone to the same primary school together. As a guard in the extermination camp in Treblinka, he sent a letter to Kołtuniuk. In that letter, he wrote that he was doing well, that he had a lot of money and 'young girls'. After liberation, Hajczuk fled to the Regained Territories in the west of Poland, and probably settled somewhere in the Szczecin province.

In the course of the investigation, it was also established that Włodzimierz Zinkiewicz from Beredryszcze in the Dorohusk commune had served in the SS guard units in Trawniki. Soon after liberation, he was arrested and sentenced for his collaboration with the SS. After he had served his sentence, he returned to Beredryszcze<sup>30</sup>.

Additionally, the prosecutor examined the files of another man, Eugeniusz Maytchenko, who was put in prison in Poland in 1952 because he was one of the guards trained in Trawniki. Before the war, Maytchenko lived in Chełm Lubelski. At the beginning of the occupation, his mother and two sisters received Ukrainian citizenship. His mother was the owner of a bar which belonged to the 'only for Germans' category. During Maytchenko's trial in 1952, witnesses from Chełm claimed that the whole family had collaborated with the Germans, and had been strongly biased against Poles except his father, who had felt Polish and refused to accept a Ukrainian identification.

Maytchenko testified that he had never been or felt Ukrainian<sup>31</sup>. Most probably, however, he began to declare being Polish only after the war. During the occupation, he wanted to be treated as a Ukrainian. During his trial in 1952, he tried to take a line of defence by maintaining that he had found himself in Trawniki because he had cooperated with the Home Army, which had given him such a command. Supposedly, his job was to gather information about the centre in Trawniki. Maytchenko claimed

<sup>30</sup> The Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, confidential, a memo, 18 October 1966. IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu 0/8/298/5/0088.

<sup>31</sup> Eugeniusz Maytchenko's case, cf. Sources and Literature/Internet resources

that, apart from collecting information, he would also buy weapons for the Polish underground. According to his testimonies, he did that during his visits to his family in Chełm, where he contacted Hungarian soldiers stationed there.

Obviously, all he said was untrue. During the trial, another ex-guard who served together with Maytchenko insisted that his colleague had helped the Germans. One day, he denounced another colleague who had deserted from Trawniki. Maytchenko met him in Chełm and, on the very same day, he denounced him to the German military police. The penalty for desertion from an SS training camp was usually equal to death. The same witness testified that Maytchenko had often been visited in Trawniki by his mother and sisters, who would return to Chełm carrying suitcases full of valuables. During his service in Trawniki, Maytchenko was a guard in the Jewish labour camp. That is why, he was in touch with Jewish prisoners.

The witness who mentioned visits of Maytchenko's family in Trawniki also insisted that Maytchenko and other recruits from Chełm “*wanted to profit by being guards of Jews*”. For his part, Maytchenko claimed that he had not had much contact with the Jewish prisoners. Later, he mentioned his escape from Trawniki in July 1944, and his joining the Home Army. A few months later, after the liberation of Lublin, he was arrested by communist authorities.

When Maytchenko was in custody, he provided a detailed description of what he had done during the war. After a couple of weeks, he was released and drafted into the Polish army, where he began making a military career. First, as a private and then, as a sergeant, he fought on the front line where he was even honoured with a medal for bravery. After the war, he was a militia officer. He got arrested in 1947 for the first time, and sentenced to 11 months in prison. For the second time, he got arrested in 1952. During his trial, he did want to prove that he had had contacts with the Polish underground, and that after the war he had been a good communist. He presented the judge his front medal for bravery and 5 letters of praise from comrade Stalin to prove his point. Eventually, he was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment<sup>32</sup>.

After the war, former guards from Sobibór tried to avoid due punishment. Only a few of them were located and brought to justice. Some of them went to the USA or to other countries in the west of Europe, where they passed themselves off as anti-communists or expatriates in order to be naturalised. They were also hiding in the USSR in various ways. In the 1960s in the USSR, there took place a number of court trials of located and exposed former guards from Sobibór. In the years 1962-1963 in Kiev, there was a trial of 11 ex-guards from Sobibór. Aleksander Peczerski participated in that trial as a main witness for the prosecution. In April 1963, the court sentenced 10 defendants to death, and the eleventh one, Iwan Tieriechow, to 15 years in prison. In June 1965, the court in Kiev sentenced another three ex-guards from Bełżec and Sobibór<sup>33</sup>. In 1965, in Krasnodar, another trial of former camp guards opened<sup>34</sup>. One of the witnesses at the trial was a participant in the Sobibór revolt –

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> S. Wileński, B. Gorbowicki and A. Tieruszkin, A., eds, *Sobibór*; Moscow, 2008, p. 191.

<sup>34</sup> Stanisława Gogołowska, ‘Ludobójcy z Bełżca i Sobiboru. Proces w Krasnodarze’ [The

Aleksy Wajcen, who recognised guard Zajcew. One of the six defendants was a man who went by the name of Podienok. He had managed to avoid justice just after the war; until 1965, he had been working as a teacher all that time<sup>35</sup>.

Until the present moment, so-called ‘Trawniki men’ have still been wanted and tried. In most cases, those trials are opening in the USA and Canada by the Office of Special Investigations of the Department of Justice, and by the General Prosecutor’s Office of the United States of America. Because of a shortage of evidence which could prove crimes committed by former guards of labour camps, concentration camps and extermination centres, cases in which emigrants who wanted to live in the USA lied about their real activity during World War II became a basis for opening such proceedings.

Before emigrating to the USA, applicants are obliged to fill in a form admitting whether or not they were Nazis or took part in crimes against civilians. According to estimates presented by the Office of Special Investigations of the Department of Justice of the United States of America (OSI), at least 10, 000 people of all those who emigrated from Europe to America after the war failed to provide this kind of information.

Since 1979, the OSI has won 79 cases and blocked the emigration procedures of 170 people. In 2002 alone, the OSI lodged cases against eight people accused of having been camp guards in Trawniki. Another six trials concerned Ukrainians and Poles who served as guards in the camps of ‘Operation Reinhardt’.

Andrew Kuras, a Ukrainian from Galicia, served as a guard in the labour camp in Trawniki, in Poniatowa and in the SS labour camp in Dorohuczka. He emigrated to the USA in 1951, and received American citizenship in 1962. However, he was deprived of it in 2004.

Iwan Mandycz was born in Ukraine in 1920. In April 1943, he was trained in Trawniki, and then served as a guard in the labour camp in Poniatowa until November 1943. Later, he became a guard in *KL Sachsenhausen*. Mandycz emigrated to the USA in 1949, where he received American citizenship in 1955. However, he lost it in 2005.

Mykoła Wasylyk served as a guard in the camps in Trawniki and Budzyń from April to November 1943. In 2004, he was deported from the United States. Vladas Zajanckauskas served as an SS guard from the middle of 1942 until March 1945. He participated in the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. After emigrating to the

---

Mass Murderers of Bełżec and Sobibór. The Trial in Krasnodar], *Sztandar Ludu* [The People’s Standard], 1965, No. 146; Stanisława Gogołowska, ‘Po procesie w Krasnodarze. Korespondencja z ZSRR’ [After the Trial in Krasnodar. A Letter from the USSR], *Kamena*, 1965, No. 13 (12).

<sup>35</sup> Stanisława Gogołowska, ‘Ludobójcy z Bełżca i Sobiboru. Proces w Krasnodarze’ [The Mass Murderers of Beżec and Sobibór. The Trial in Krasnodar], *Sztandar Ludu* [The People’s Standard], 1965, No. 146; Stanisława Gogołowska, ‘Po procesie w Krasnodarze. Korespondencja z ZSRR’ [After the Trial in Krasnodar. A Letter from the USSR], *Kamena*, 1965, No. 13 (12).

United States in 1950, he received American citizenship in 1956, but lost it in 2005. Zajanckauskas told immigration officers that he had not mentioned his service in Trawniki because he knew that na if he had, he would have had trouble entering the United States.

Jarosław Bilaniuk, a Ukrainian, was trained in the camp in Trawniki, and then served in the labour camp there. After emigrating to the United States in 1949, he received American citizenship in 1957. Bronisław Hajda was trained in Trawniki in January 1943. He served in the labour camp in Trawniki, and then from March 1943, in the camp in Treblinka I (where he took part in the massacre of Jews in July 1944). Next, he served in the SS Streibel battalion, recruiting and guarding Polish forced labourers who were putting up fortifications. He emigrated to the USA in 1950, and his American citizenship was nullified in 1998<sup>36</sup>.

Like the United States, Canada also takes advantage of its immigration law to pursue war criminals. As a result, it has conducted a number of successful trials. One of them was a trial of a Ukrainian - Josef Furman, which opened in 2004. Furman was trained in Trawniki and later took part in the liquidation of ghettos, including the Warsaw ghetto. He finished his service as a guard in *KZ Flossenbürg*. Furman arrived in Canada in 1949, and received Canadian citizenship in 1957<sup>37</sup>.

On 30 November 2009, in Munich, a trial started against John Demianiuk, a 91-year old Ukrainian. He was accused of complicity in the killing of nearly 28, 000 Jews in Sobibór in 1943. According to the court, Demianiuk was a guard in the Sobibór camp from April to September 1943, and, as Judge Ralph Alt pointed out: “*The defendant keenly participated in the mass killing of Jews*”.

Charges of complicity in the extermination of Jews against Demianiuk appeared in the second half of the 1970s. He was supposed to have been ‘Ivan the Terrible’, who operated the gas chambers in Treblinka. In 1981, he was deprived of American citizenship, and, in 1986, he was handed over to Israel, where he got sentenced to death two years later. However, the Supreme Court of Israel invalidated that verdict because there was no solid evidence proving that Demianiuk really was ‘Ivan the Terrible’. After seven years in Israeli gaol, he returned to the USA. He lost American citizenship again in 2002, after an American court had acknowledged evidence that he had been a guard in Nazi German extermination camps.

Demianiuk’s counsels for the defence strived not to open a trial at all because of Demianiuk’s failing health. His lawyer – Ulrich Busch maintained at the trial that there was no evidence whatsoever that Demianiuk had ever been a guard in Sobibór. He claimed that Demianiuk’s identification card No. 1393, which was a significant proof for the prosecution, had in fact been forged by the KGB. In his final speech, which took him five days to deliver, he accused the Germans of striving to render the blame for the Holocaust relative. He pictured Demianiuk as an innocent victim of German violence.

---

<sup>36</sup> The final trials concerning the Trawniki camp, cf. – Sources and Literature/Internet resources

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

The prosecution, on the other hand, demanded a sentence of six years' imprisonment. Demianiuk's counsels for the defence demanded that he should be acquitted of all charges. Finally, on 12 May 2011, the court in Munich sentenced John 'Ivan' Demianiuk to five years in prison. At the same time, it ruled that the convict should be released from custody. It was really hard to provide any solid evidence proving that he was guilty of specific crimes. However, the court acknowledged the arguments of the counsels for the prosecution whereby the German extermination centre in Sobibór contributed to the crime of genocide, and so did all people who performed guard service in it.

During the trial and upon hearing the verdict, Demianiuk did not look nervous. He also renounced his right to make a final speech. Because of Demianiuk's advanced age and the fact that the verdict was not yet legally binding, the judge ruled that the defendant should be released from custody immediately. In the court's opinion, after two years on remand, any longer time spent there would be a 'particular inconvenience' to the old man<sup>38</sup>.

The Spanish Supreme Court announced that after the verdict was delivered, it would request to have John Demianiuk extradited to Spain. The reason was that the Spanish court charged Demianiuk with killing Spaniards in the concentration camp in Flossenbürg, where Nazi German authorities jailed 150 Spaniards. They were mostly Republicans who had fled Spain after General Francisco Franco's victory.

John Demianiuk died on 17 March 2012 in an old people's home in the south of Germany, where he had been staying since the end of the trial.

## **2. The public understanding of knowledge about the German extermination centre in Sobibór**

The activity of the extermination centre was first considered by the German authorities as strictly confidential. However, the fact that thousands of people were getting killed was difficult to hide. The occupants spread information that the camp in Sobibór was a temporary camp or a labour camp, which raised doubts with the locals. At first, the people did not realise the truth about the camp, so they did not pay much attention to it, but in the summer of 1942, they knew exactly what that place was. Understandably, they were afraid to even look in the direction of the camp.

When groups of Jews were marched through their villages, the local people went into hiding in their own homesteads. They were even afraid to peep through windows and doors. Fear for their own lives and the lives of their family members was stronger than mere curiosity. Poles and Jews may have known about the Sobibór camp, but that knowledge was based on fear; nobody wanted to report about its existence because of serious consequences that might have followed. Fear continuously compounded by news of more transports and more victims became a normal phenomenon.

---

<sup>38</sup> On the basis of the author, who participated in a few cases of that trial.

The main source of information was Ukrainian Sobibór camp guards. They would bother local peasants about alcohol. They paid for it with stolen Jewish money and gold. News about the activity of the camp was also passed by the few who managed to escape from it. However, local people's speculation, together with observations of railwaymen and foresters, made it possible for the information about the camp to spread.

Regrettably, individual pieces of camp news never contributed to the creation of institutions that could promptly react to horrible events going on at the camp. Such pieces of information remained a piece of gossip, a tale, a kind of warning passed on from one person to another in secrecy; they did not become common knowledge. In a number of places located near to Sobibór, i.e.: in Chełm, Włodawa, Biała Podlaska, Krasnystaw or Rejowiec, there were people who knew something vague about Sobibór, but there were also those who had never heard of it when they got there in 1943<sup>39</sup>.

At that time, very few people were ready to believe and understand what the Germans were doing to Jewish people in the death camps. Politicians, religious leaders, journalists, the broadly-understood public, or other people far away from places of extermination, just could not understand such notions as: the extermination camp in Sobibór, the extermination centre in Sobibór or *SS-Sonderkommado Sobibor*. High-ranking officials in governments of neutral countries, and of the Allies, in the Vatican or in the International Red Cross strongly resisted the need to understand and to learn the truth. They were not even giving themselves chances for that because they simply tended to disregard the most intriguing information.

Leaders of many countries would give expression to their outrage and condemn the Nazis for it, but they did not do anything to stop the extermination of Jews in Sobibór. The Allies' decision to struggle until the unconditional surrender of Germany highly influenced all possibilities of preventing 'the Final Solution to the Jewish Question' from happening. There were to be no negotiations. Germany, and its allies were to be completely crushed. That meant that, among other things, the extermination of the Jews could and was to be stopped only after defeating the Third Reich. The information and intelligence services of the Union of Armed Struggle and the Home Army regularly imparted to the authorities of the Polish Underground State materials and information about the German plans of the total annihilation of Polish Jews, and about the stages of that annihilation, which was already under way<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Szlomo Alster, interview transcript, DVD recording/Disc 1, Hagen/Tricht, 1983, copy from the author's collection; Białowicz, Philip, Białowicz, Joseph, *Bunt w Sobiborze* [The Revolt in Sobibór], Warszawa, 2008, pp. 175-197, Tomasz Blatt's account, ŻIH Archives – 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948; Leon Feldhendler's account, ŻIH Archives, 1945; Hella Fellenbaum-Weiss, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-51; Symcha Białowicz, interview transcript, DVD recording/Disc 1-4, USHMM Archives / RG – 50.120 0027, 13 May 1992, translated from Hebrew by Małgorzata Lipska; Moszek Merenzstein's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1292, Lublin, 17 January 1945.

<sup>40</sup> Romuald Kompf, 'Nadbużański zryw. Wspomnienia z lat okupacji hitlerowskiej majora Romualda Kompfa PS. „Rokicz”', byłego Dowódcy III Batalionu 7 pp. AK' [The Breakout

The Polish leaders in London and in the USA regularly informed governments of the Allied Forces about the extermination of European Jews. The Poles demanded that the West took suitable action in order to save the Jews from total destruction. Residents of American and British intelligence were perfectly aware of the German plans of the total extermination of Polish and European Jews. Notwithstanding their routine activities, they would gather and send to London and the USA information about the total extermination of the Jews.

The governments of Great Britain and the USA had a full or nearly full awareness and a precise knowledge about what was happening on the German-occupied territories of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Roumania and Czechoslovakia. President Roosevelt, the American government and the Congressmen knew that Polish Jews were being murdered. Documents describing Nazi genocide also reached the Vatican. They were not as precise as documents about murders committed by the Nazis on Polish Catholics, but the former greatly outnumbered the latter.

It cannot be precisely estimated how much the Soviet government knew about the mass killing of Jews. Reports from the German-occupied territories (those that reached Moscow) have not been made available to researchers to this day. The Soviet Union, the world's second military, political and economic superpower at the time, remained idle in the face of the extermination of European Jews. Stalin was an ardent anti-Semite; he did not tolerate the Jews. Indeed, he was the perpetrator of the extermination of many of the finest figures of the Jewish nation in the Soviet Union.

There is no doubt that in 1943 Soviet partisans who penetrated the Włodawa and Sobibór area on the other side of the Bug River were in possession of detailed information about the activity of the German extermination centre in Sobibór. News

---

on the Bug River. Memories from the Nazi Occupation by Major Romuald Kompf 'Rokicz', the Former Home Army Commander of Battalion III, Infantry Regiment 7], (in): *The Museum Notebooks of the Łęczna-Włodawa Lake District*, 2008, vol. 15, p. 54; Romuald Kompf: "[...] *at first, very little was known about Sobibór and German-directed works which were going on at the camp. Some news transpired to the local people and Jewish artisans mostly from a cab driver [text illegible] Stula from Włodawa, who, for some time, drove military policemen to Sobibór in his cab. Soon, however, that channel of information came to a stop when the artisans from the Włodawa ghetto, after they had done their jobs in Sobibór, never came back home. The reason was that they were either burnt in the stoves, or gassed with exhaust fumes from car engines. The extermination camp for Jews in Sobibór was heavily guarded by SS-men and Ukrainian guards (Kalmyks). There were very few chances of getting an insight into the camp, but still, we managed to get news from the camp from drunken Germans and Kalmyks who often boasted about their actions in the camp. During the so-called resettlement action of Jews from the whole of Europe and different cities in Poland, Union of Armed Struggle intelligence picked up a lot of letters and notes thrown out of train trucks or carriages along the railway line from Chelm to Sobibór, and along the road that Jews marched from the Włodawa ghetto to the railway station in Orchówek and next, to the camp in Sobibór. To alarm the world about the mass killing of Jews by the Germans, Union of Armed Struggle intelligence kept sending immediate reports to District II of the Union of Armed Struggle in Lublin, from which they were dispatched to the Headquarters of the Union of Armed Struggle in Warsaw, and then abroad [...]*".

of the death camp reached Warsaw as early as in May or June 1942 through Jewish contacts, also from the *Oneg Szabat* group<sup>41</sup>, who visited provincial ghettos in the Lublin Region. The news reached Ringelblum's archivists, too.

At the beginning of June 1942, two contacts of the underground *Dror*<sup>42</sup> – 'Frumka' Płotnicka and 'Chawka' Dolman were staying in the Lublin Region, specifically in Werbkowice near to Hrubieszów, where *Dror*'s kibbutz was functioning. They visited Rejowiec, from which the Jews had just been relocated. Later, in Hrubieszów, they came upon a 'relocation' action on 7 June. Then they first heard that transports were going 'into the unknown', but on the following day, at the railway station in Miączyn, they heard the name 'Sobibór', for which transports from the Chełm and Hrubieszów districts were apparently heading. "[...] *From morning till dawn, horse carts full of people and their belongings kept coming in. At dusk, the Jews were squeezed into special trucks. They were not allowed to take their luggage with them. The train started off to an unknown destination. People say the Germans have built a death camp, just like the one in Bełżec [...]*". It was in Miączyn that the women found out about a new German death camp in Sobibór<sup>43</sup> due to the fact that, at that time, transports to Sobibór would pass through Miączyn<sup>44</sup>. The women dispatched that information to the Warsaw ghetto. Next, the information reached Ringelblum's Archives. 'Chawka' Dolman confirmed that piece of news in her account in Israel after the war<sup>45</sup>.

In June 1942, through their own channels, the Jewish community found out that extermination was well under way<sup>46</sup>. One of the ways of imparting the content

<sup>41</sup> *Oneg Szabat*, cf. – Sources and literature/Internet resources: translated from Hebrew: The Joy of Sabbath, in Yiddish: *Ojneg Szabbos* – the cryptonym of an underground Jewish organisation founded by historian Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto for the purpose of documenting ghetto life, and also the fate of Jews all over Poland during the Holocaust. The organisation was founded in mid-1940 and functioned until the beginning of 1943. From the spring of 1942, there were also prepared bulletins and reports as a source of information about the liquidation of the ghettos.

<sup>42</sup> Alina Cała, Hanna Węgrzynek and Gabriela Zalewska, *Historia i kultura Żydów polskich. Słownik*. [The History and Culture of Polish Jews. A Dictionary.], Warszawa, 2000. *Dror* (in Hebrew: freedom) – a Jewish youth organisation which functioned in Poland in the years 1922-1950. *Dror* was a Zionist organisation which prepared Jewish young people for living in Palestine; it organised training for future settlers, and formed scout groups. During the Second World War, *Dror* activists adhered to the idea of armed struggle. In July 1942, together with other Jewish organisations: *Haszomer Hacair*, *Bund*, *Cukunft*, the Anti-Fascist Block and *Akiba* groups, they created the Jewish Fighting Organisation. In 1943, combat units of *Dror* took part in the uprising in the Warsaw and Białystok ghettos. After the defeat of the uprisings, the remaining units joined partisans, and fought in the Warsaw Uprising.

<sup>43</sup> *Oneg Szabat*, Yad Vashem Archives, Mio/261, AR I 261, OM 3489/14.

<sup>44</sup> *Oneg Szabat*, Yad Vashem Archives, Mio/261, AR I 261, OM 3489/14.

<sup>45</sup> Ruta Sakowska, *Die zweite Etapie ist der Tod. Ns-Ausrottungspolitik Genge die polnische Junden, gesehen mit den Augen der Opfer. Ein historischer Essay und ausgewählte Dokumente aus dem Ringelblum-Archiv 1941-1943*, Berlin, 1993, pp. 40-41.

<sup>46</sup> Sara Amolinski-Lustigman, 'Nieznana historia getta' [The Unknown Story of The Ghetto],

of that message was by means of letters which were sent from places undergoing 'relocations'. One of the first messages about the construction of an extermination centre for Jews near Warsaw is included in a letter dispatched from Włodawa on 1 June 1942 by an unknown sender, probably to one of Emanuel Ringelblum's closest collaborators. Only one letter has been preserved: that from 1 June 1942, but, supposedly, there were a few of them.

Notably, the earlier correspondence includes a note from 29 May 1942, written by Elijah Gutowski, one of Ringelblum's collaborators. The note contains information about the annihilation of the Włodawa Jews, and about the fate of a tzaddik from Radzyń, who was staying in Włodawa at the time. The letter, dated 1 June 1942, dispatched from Włodawa, informs the addressee about the Germans building a camp near Warsaw, much similar to the one in Sobibór. In all probability, that message concerns the Treblinka extermination camp, the construction of which the Germans were just beginning.

The sender of this letter from Włodawa used a very complicated way of encoding the letter content in order to dispatch it to the Warsaw ghetto and warn the Jews of the imminent mortal danger. *Uncle* (the German authorities) *is going to expel Adam* (the author refers to Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise. Adam equals a man). *We know for sure that uncle has got his lodgings close to yours almost ready* (the construction of the camp in Treblinka), *and he has already prepared new lodgings for all of you, just like the ones he had close to us* (Sobibór near Włodawa).

Quite justifiably, some historians may have doubts about whether or not the author or authors of the letter already knew something about the building of the extermination camp in Treblinka. On 1 June 1942, the construction of the Treblinka centre was only at its beginning stage. However, it is possible that the 'Włodawa letter' (because of the fact that it provides information rather than personal feelings, and because of the way the content was encoded) was written by one of the Jewish archivists (Emanuel Ringelblum's contacts travelling to provincial towns) who could have heard news about the beginning of the construction of the camp in Treblinka<sup>47</sup>. In the collection of documents gathered by the conspiracy research centre in the Warsaw ghetto, there can be found over a dozen documents directly or indirectly relating to the German extermination centre in Sobibór<sup>48</sup>.

---

(in): Sz. Kanc, ed., *Życie i upadek Włodawy. Księga Pamięci Włodawy* [The Life and Fall of Włodawa. The Włodawa Remembrance Book], Tel Aviv, 1974, translated from English by Albert Lewczuk aka Leoniuk; Abraham Cytryn's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/4384, (the date and place of the account – unknown); Maria Kulczycka, witness interrogation record, file ref. No. II kps 7/46, Warszawa, 15 June 1945, MPLW Archives, Gitla Libhaber's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 2192, Lublin, 15 December 1946.

<sup>47</sup> The Ringelblum Archives, *Listy o Zagładzie* [Letters about Extermination], Warszawa 1997, pp. 153-155.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 87-170; 10 April 1942, the Chełm getto. An anonymous author to a friend in the Warsaw ghetto; 23 May 1942, Dubienka, Luba Rozenberg's letter to Frania Zalcman; 1 June 1942, Chełm, Luba Rozenberg's letter to Frania Zalcman; 4 June 1942, the Dubienka ghetto, Luba Rozenberg's letter to Frania Zalcman; Brocha, 1 June 1942, Hrubieszów. Unidentified

In the early spring of 1942, the Włodawa *Judenrat* was commanded to provide 150 Jews who would have to do building works in Sobibór. Motel Rabinowicz from Włodawa learnt from his German superior, Falkenberg, that in Sobibór they were building “*something that will be famous in the whole world*”. He would not say any more for fear of the Gestapo. Nobody exactly knew what kind of works they would be. The inhabitants of Włodawa already knew that that part of the forest area around Sobibór had been fenced, but nobody had looked inside it.

After two months’ labour, two Jews escaped from it: Abraham Szmajs and Fajwel Cukierman’s son-in-law<sup>49</sup>. They talked about a newly-built ‘bath house’ in Sobibór, which in fact turned out to be a gas chamber, where all the employed workers had been sent after the completion of building works. Half-naked, in the dead of night, the two men stole away to the town, where Szaja called on a famous rabbi from Radzyń, who was staying in Włodawa at the time. Szaja told the rabbi all about Sobibór, and about what had been built there. The rabbi ordained a three-day fast and asked God to have mercy on the defenceless Jews<sup>50</sup>. After hearing the news, Rabbi Lajner gathered together a group of his hassids, and ordered them to rescue themselves by running for their lives from the ghetto to the forest<sup>51</sup>.

As early as in May 1942, the name Sobibór as the destination of ‘evacuation’ transports was known to the headquarters of the Jewish Social Self-Help in Cracow, but it was not yet associated with the extermination of Jews. The history of the case of the Szolson family from Krasnystaw, deported to the death camp in Sobibór, proves that point.

The Szolsons lived in Lublin before the war. Michael Szolson was the eldest son of Szulim Ber, who had three other sons besides him: Mordka, Lejb, Hersz and a daughter – Brandle. Most probably, in 1939, sensing the incoming war, the Szolsons moved to Krasnystaw. They took up their residence in 14 Kilińskiego Street, and, in 1941, they were transferred to a newly-created ghetto in Na Grobli Street. At that time, Michael Szolson was appointed President of the Jewish Social Self-Help. Thanks to Michael’s high social standing, they were a bit better off than other Jewish families.

Unfortunately, Michael came into conflict with the President of the *Judenrat* – Lipe Bloch. The outcome of that conflict was that he and his wife were deported

---

Brocha to the leaders of *Hechaluc-Dror* in the Warsaw ghetto about the liquidation of the Hrubieszów ghetto, and plans to liquidate the kibbutz in Werbkowice; F. Fryd, *Szczebrzeszyn* to M. Wulf, Warsaw, 14 April 1942; S. Wulf, *Szczebrzeszyn* to Moszek Wulf, Warsaw, 16 April 1942; F. Fryd, *Szczebrzeszyn* to Moszek Wulf, Warsaw, 18 April 1942; Icchak from the kibbutz in Werbkowice to Hensch Gutman and the leaders of *Hechaluc-Dror* in the Warsaw ghetto about the relocation from Werbkowice and the liquidation action in the Hrubieszów district, Grabowiec 5 June 1942; Dychterman’s account, Hrubieszów-Warsaw, June 1942; An anonymous account of a Jewish woman passing for a Polish woman, Hrubieszów-Werbkowice, June 1942.

<sup>49</sup> Tilip, Ephraim, *op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> Motel Rabinowicz’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/2202, (the date and place of the account unknown), p.8.

<sup>51</sup> Abraham Engler’s account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4007; Ephraim Tilip, *op. cit.*

to Sobibór during a mass deportation which took place on 12-14 May 1942. On those days, about 6, 000 Jews from Krasnystaw, Żółkiewka, Turobin and Gorzków were deported from Krasnystaw to Sobibór. Michael Szolson and his wife were killed there<sup>52</sup>. On 31 May 1942, a few days after the Szolsons had been deported to Sobibór, the District Jewish Social Self-Help Committee sent a wire to the Presidium of Jewish Social Self-Help in Cracow, requesting that he should intervene and assist in releasing the Szolsons from Sobibór, from which: “*we still have not heard from Mr Szolson or His wife, who was relocated together with him*”<sup>53</sup>.

A lot of information related to the reconnaissance of the German extermination centre in Sobibór can be found in the documentation of central institutions of the Main Headquarters of the Home Army and the Government Delegation for Poland. Gathering information about the camps and the years 1942-1945 was dealt with by the ‘Prison Unit’, which was part of Counterintelligence and Security of Department II of the Main Headquarters of the Home Army. Information received from similar units was used by the Information Department of the Information and Propaganda Bureau.

On the basis of that information, the bi-monthly *Informacja Bieżąca* [Information Up-to-Date] was published in the form of a typescript. It was a periodical for internal use by head sections of the Home Army and the Government Delegation for Poland. A similar role was played by *Aneksy* [Annexes], which was edited by the Occupation Chronicle Department of the Historical Office of the Main Headquarters of the Home Army. In *Aneksy*, some intelligence information was published. In the form of bi-monthly typescripts, it was dispatched to the Commander-in-Chief in London, and also to the Government Delegation.

A similar ‘Prison Unit’ was created in 1942 by the Internal Affairs Department of the Government Delegation for Poland, with Witold Bieńkowski and Władysław Bartoszewski as its heads. The functions of that periodical included collecting and compiling information from prisons and camps, gathering documents concerning Nazi German crimes in Poland to be used by the Polish government still before the war was over, and for the investigation of those crimes after the war.

Apart from the ‘Prison Unit’, information about the camps was being collected by the Press and Information Department as well as the Polish Council to Aid Jews, created towards the end of 1942. The Press and Information Department took advantage of those materials because it printed situational reports in the form of typescripts, and sent over to the Polish government in London. They were the monthlies: *Pro memoria o sytuacji w kraju* [Pro Memoria about the Situation in Poland] and *Przegląd najważniejszych wydarzeń w kraju* [The Important News Review in Poland]. They contained dispatches (mostly weekly ones) which were part of the ‘Post’ for the government in London.

The state of preservation of similar materials relating to the extermination centre in Sobibór, which come from other civilian or military conspiracy authorities is very poor.

<sup>52</sup> The Szolson family, cf. Sources and literature/Internet resources.

<sup>53</sup> The District Jewish Social Self-Help Committee in Krasnystaw, a wire to the Presidium of Jewish Social Self-Help in Cracow from 31 May 1942, p. 4, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 607.

The same was true of the political parties. Society in occupied Poland did not at first exactly realise what intentions the occupants had in relation to the Jews, even though, since 1940, word had been spread of a danger of their biological annihilation<sup>54</sup>. More complete assessments were made in the conspiracy press as late as in 1942, when analyses of Nazi German policies towards Jewish people were published.

During ‘Operation Reinhardt’, conspiracy centres protested against crimes committed against the Jews. Unfortunately, information about the extermination centre in Sobibór appeared incidentally and very seldom. Learning something about the camp proved to be the most difficult job. Dispatches about it from 1942 are very poor in terms of content. They communicate only the fact that the camp exists, and, as far as details are concerned, they mention the fact that it is being extended. They do not highlight any specific transports of Jews deported to Sobibór from the Lublin Region in 1942.

In the majority of the cases, information about the death camp in Sobibór, which spread among the broadly-understood public, was only supposed to expose the issue of the mass killing of the Jews (which was done in an exceptionally imprecise manner). It was agreed that the breach of silence about crimes against the Jews could bring results and could, therefore, force the Germans to stop those practices. Unfortunately, that method did not work in any way.

Most notes and dispatches that informed about the mass killing of Jews were totally thoughtless. The reason was that, in terms of facts, they lacked details. Also, they did not contain any suggestions for any suitable actions or requests for tips or assistance. They were ambivalent, but, at the same time, stressed the fact that “*the horrible planned carnage of the Jews*” was going on “*alongside the tragedy that Polish society was going through.*” Those words seem to prove that the fate of Polish Jews was treated as a separate issue.

For Europe and the world during the Second World War, Polish Jews were not the most important cause for concern. Their fate was considered as a marginal matter. The most important issue was winning the war against Hitler. Interest in Sobibór was more widely aroused only in 1943, because of transports of Jews from abroad, especially from the Netherlands and France.

In occupied Holland, the name ‘Sobibór’ was for the first time mentioned on 26 March 1943 at a meeting of the Central Jewish Committee Council: “[...] *The latest news from Germany isn't so bad. Some transports have been sent not to Auschwitz, but to Sobibór. Besides, as Mr Aus den Funten said, old Dutch people are being dispatched to Theresienstadt. However, as far as employment is concerned, this is still an unclear matter [...]*”<sup>55</sup>.

People in Germany or Holland who got postcards from deported Dutch or German Jews would never have thought that they were sent from Sobibór, because they arrived with stamps of the post office in Włodawa on them<sup>56</sup>. It was not only the Central Jewish

<sup>54</sup> WRN, 15-22 August 1940.

<sup>55</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, p. 18.

Committee Council, but also the Dutch emigration government that were in possession of information about what was happening with the Jews dispatched from Westerbork to Sobibór. Jules Schelvis gives the following explanation to prove that point.

After witnessing events in 1942 in Sobibór, Kurt Gerstein got in touch with J. Ubbink from Doesburg, who was a good acquaintance of his<sup>57</sup>. Twenty years later, Ubbink said that what Gerstein had told him had been so incredible and terrifying that he had not been able to talk to other people about it. Ubbink, who was hiding a few Jews himself, cooperated with a national Dutch organisation that offered assistance to Jews. He knew Cornelius van der Hooft, who was engaged in the printing of an illegal newspaper – *Trouw*. Ubbink retold him Gerstein's story, but he got the impression that he was not able to convince Cornelius van der Hooft.

Still, on 28 March 1943, van der Hooft made a three page long report entitled 'The Death Centres In Poland' with a view to publishing it in *Trouw*. The article gave a report of Gerstein's story, which Van der Hooft was still very doubtful about. That is why, after consulting the matter with representatives of the Dutch underground, he took a decision to stop the report. Approximately, it was at that time that the Jewish Council in Amsterdam wrote down in a protocol that "*several of the latest transports have most probably been sent not to Auschwitz, but to Sobibór*". It might have been just a coincidence, but, curiously enough, Hooft's report was publicised after all.

Van Lidth de Jeude, the Dutch war minister in the emigration government in Great Britain, knew about it as early as at the beginning of May 1943, and took advantage of it. He quotes some of its fragments in his memoirs under the date of 8 May 1943. Clearly, the Dutch government must have known what was happening to Jews at that time. However, the Dutch emigration government did not share the information from the report with Dutch people<sup>58</sup>.

Information about the situation of the Jews in German-occupied Poland was reaching London and Washington from Italian, Hungarian, Roumanian, Swiss, Swedish or Finnish sources. However, Office of Strategic Services (OSS) took very little interest in the extermination of the Jews in Poland. It was more inclined towards indifference on the matter of the Holocaust. Even though the Secretary of State - Cordell Hull made a statement in which he publically condemned the German genocide of the Jews, at the same time, he showed very little interest in the question of the extermination, dismissing it as a less important issue.

On 10 April 1944, OSS prepared a substantial report on the subject of the mass killing of the Jews, Gypsies, Poles and Czechs in the Auschwitz concentration camp. That material was received by the London branch of OSS from a Polish informer "*who wished the matter to be publicised*". Simultaneously, OSS warned that "*there is no proof as to whether the source of the memo is reliable or not*". A month earlier, on 9 March 1944, the OSS London branch informed Washington in a two-page report that "[...] *The Polish underground managed to prove the existence of over a hundred concentration camps [...]*". The report mentions the camps in Bełżec, Sobibór and

<sup>57</sup> Kurt Gerstein's report, cf. Sources and literature/Internet resources.

<sup>58</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, pp. 139-140.

Treblinka II, to which “[...] *Jews from Polish ghettos are being brought, as well as Jews from other European countries. Once there, they stay alive for a very short time [...]*”. It is unknown what happened to this report, or whether or not OSS ever took any advantage of it<sup>59</sup>.

The British network of agents was much better organised in Poland than its American counterpart. Those services operated in occupied Poland on their own, without cooperation with the intelligence of the Union of Armed Struggle – the Home Army<sup>60</sup>. Even before 1 July 1942, a report entitled ‘*Destrukcja ludności żydowskiej*’ [The Destruction of Jewish People] arrived in London.

Adam Puławski, a researcher into the attitudes of the Polish Government-in-Exile, the Government Delegation for Poland and the Union of Armed Struggle – the Home Army towards the deportation of Jews to extermination camps, admits that to this day it has been impossible to find any information about the content of this report<sup>61</sup>. Journalists of the news magazine *Polish Fortnightly Review*, probably in connection with that report in the issue dated 1 July 1942, wrote that the majority of Jews from Lublin were all transported to Sobibór near to Włodawa, and then killed by means of gas, machine guns and even bayonets. The executions were performed by Lithuanian *Szaulis* (Shooters) units which had been brought over to Poland.

The journalists mention the odour of decomposing bodies in Sobibór, and also a Polish labourer who wrote down his request to be transferred to work somewhere else because he complained he could not stand working in such conditions any longer. The stench was so unbearable that even cattle avoided that place. It goes without saying that that kind of information was to shock the reader<sup>62</sup>. Even though the account was not completely true, it must have impressed the reader very much.

Another report mentioning Sobibór was prepared by the Americans in Lisbon. The information included in it came from a British prisoner, a fugitive from occupied Poland<sup>63</sup>. As early as in December 1943, Z. Krawczak, a fugitive from a labour camp in Krychów near Sobibór, imparted (positively to an institution linked with the

<sup>59</sup> Jacek Wilczur, ‘Nie wszystko dotąd powiedziano o nieludzkiej bierności wobec zagłady’ [Not All Has Yet Been Said about the Inhuman Passivity towards the Holocaust], *Oblicza Historii* [Faces of History], 2004, No. 02; Louis Gerson, ‘Reakcja Polskiego Rządu Emigracyjnego oraz rządów sprzymierzonych na informacje o „Endlösung”’ [The Reaction of the Polish Government-in-Exile and the Governments of Allied Countries to ‘Endlösung’], *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Zbrodni Przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* [The Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation of the Institute of National Remembrance], 1993, vol. 35, p. 75.

<sup>60</sup> Jacek Wilczur, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> Adam Puławski, *W obliczu zagłady. Rząd RP na Uchodźstwie, Delegatura Rządu RP na Kraj, ZWZ – AK wobec deportacji Żydów do obozów zagłady 1941-1942* [In the Face of Extermination. The Polish Government-in-Exile, the Government Delegation for Poland, the Union of Armed Struggle – the Home Army in the Face of Deportations of Jews to Extermination Camps], Lublin, 2009, p. 495.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 508.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 509.

World Jewish Congress) his account about his fate during the Second World War. He devoted a substantial part of his story to what he had learnt and heard (April 1942-September 1943) on the subject of the extermination centre in Sobibór<sup>64</sup>.

Another very important stage for checking the reaction of the world public to the crimes committed in the German extermination centre in Sobibór was the time from the end of the war till the Nuremberg trials. It was very likely that evidence which was not used in the years 1942-1943 would be used later, when the guilty were tried and punished, and also, to honourably commemorate and compensate for all the harm done to all the victims of Sobibór.

With reference to Sobibór prisoners, only about 60 of them survived the war (only in the years 1944-1946, before the end of the Nuremberg trial, written and oral accounts, and testimonies were given by: Hersz Cukierman, Chaim Engel, Selma Engel, Srul Fajgenbaum, Leon Feldhendler, Josef Frajtag, Dov Freiberg, Salomea Hanel, Huberman Yecheskiel, Chaim Korenfeld, Kurt Ticho, Samuel Lerer, Aron Licht, Menche Chaskiel, Moszek Merenstein, Zelda Metz, Salomon Podchlebnik, Chaim Powroźnik, Ursula Stern and Aleksander Peczerski). Several dozen other witnesses remembered Sobibór very well (over a dozen of them in the years 1944-1946 also gave written accounts because they had spent terrifying hours at the ramp before being dispatched to other camps after a selection).

Additionally, several dozen railwaymen and local inhabitants from the Sobibór area knew about the camp. Even before the beginning of the Nuremberg trial and during the course of it, the first publications about the German extermination centre in Sobibór appeared in print. Investigative research on the camp and the crimes committed there was launched by the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland.

On 28 September 1945, the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland sent a request to the Prosecutor of the District Court in Lublin to conduct a suitable inquiry, and to prepare an ordinance relating to the preservation of traces of the committed crimes. It was also suggested that, at the same time, there should be performed other judicial acts which might turn out to be necessary during the course of the investigation. The Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland informed the prosecutor that it knew the names of four witnesses, former camp prisoners (Zelda Metz, Podchlebnik Salomon, Hanel Salomea and Cukierman Hersz). The Commission also knew where those people were living<sup>65</sup>.

From the very beginning, the case was dealt with by the Prosecutor of the District Court in Lublin – Kazimierz Schnierstein and the District Investigating Justice – Sergiusz Urban<sup>66</sup>. One of the first actions of the District Commission for

<sup>64</sup> Z. Krawczak's account, Switzerland, 1943, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 033/425.

<sup>65</sup> A letter from the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland to the Prosecutor of the District Court in Lublin, 28 September, Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>66</sup> A letter from the District Judge of Region III in Lublin to the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, to Judge Józef Skorzyński, Lublin 21 October

the Investigation of German Crimes in Chełm secured in photo labs in Chełm and Rejowiec over 700 German photographs (films and copies), including six photos of members of the Sobibór personnel<sup>67</sup>. The witnesses that were heard afterwards, i.e. several members of the Jewish Committee, recognised seven crime perpetrators in the photos<sup>68</sup>. Those materials were handed over to the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes at the Province Governor's Office in Lublin in 1945<sup>69</sup>.

Already at the end of 1945, a press conference was planned in the Ministry of Justice on the subject of the investigation results in the cases of 'annihilation camps' created by the Germans on the territory of Poland. The Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland sent a request to the District Prosecutor in Lublin to dispatch a report from the investigation materials connected with the Sobibór camp by no later than 26 October 1945. The report was to include important data from on-site visits to the scene of the crimes, material evidence and testimonies by those witnesses who reproduced: the structure of the camp, the surnames of the imprisoned, their nationalities and countries of origin, their way of life, the way they were treated, the ways of murdering prisoners, the approximate number of murdered prisoners, the attempts by the Germans to cover up traces of the crimes committed by them, and the time length of the existence of the camp<sup>70</sup>.

An official investigation in the case of Sobibór began on 4 October 1945, and was conducted as judicial acts by a delegated District Investigating Justice – Sergiusz Urban. After he had left for the scene of the crimes, on 11-12 October 1945, the whole area of the camp was examined (ex-prisoner – Eda Lichtman participated in it: "[...] *When I came to the camp with a government commission on an on-site visit, it turned out that 16 Germans and Ukrainians had been killed, and their corpses had been transported to a cemetery in Chełm [...]*"). Also, a site plan and on-the-spot photographic documentation were prepared.

Additionally, there were interviews with locals from Włodawa, who might have provided explanations and observations concerning the arrangement of the camp, the surnames of the German killers who were 'in office' there, the number of transports and people arriving at the camp, the ways of annihilating prisoners, and the Germans covering up traces of their crimes.

On 13-18 October, 9 witnesses, including two ex-prisoners, were questioned. They were residents in Włodawa, Sobibór and its environs. The surnames of eight

1945, Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Alina Gałan, 'Powiatowa Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Chełmie (1945)' [The District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Chełm], *Rocznik Chełmski*, 2010 [the Chełm Annual], vol.14, 20, pp. 252-257.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, (IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu 1/15/2, k.13).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, (IPN Archives, file ref. No. Lu 1/15/2, p.40).

<sup>70</sup> A letter from the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland to the Prosecutor of the District Court in Lublin – Kazimierz Schnierstein, Kraków 19 November 1945, Lublin IPN Archives.

SS-men who 'held office' in the camp were established. From 29 October until 7 November, a further investigation was conducted in Chełm. Witnesses were questioned, including one former camp prisoner, and a sample was taken of ashes and bones from the camp area to establish if, on examination, they were human remains. In the course of the investigation, it turned out that a great number of witnesses (whose testimonies would have been very crucial to the case) had already left the places of their residence, and it was impossible to locate them.

On 23 November 1945, Prosecutor A. Schnierstein wrote a report on the results of the investigation concerning the death camp in Sobibór. Unfortunately, it is too imprecise and general, and, furthermore, it makes the impression of a hastily written summary. The inquiry which was a basis for the report failed to take full advantage of investigative and scientific possibilities in relation to the state of preservation of the former camp area. In October 1946, the investigation about the former death camp in Sobibór was definitively closed.

The first Soviet information about the death camp in Sobibór appeared as early as in the summer of 1944. After his escape from the camp, Aleksander Peczerski found himself in one of the Soviet partisan units. When that group joined the Red Army in April 1944, Peczerski was arrested and directed to a penal battalion. That was the penalty for the fact that he had been taken captive by the Germans as a Red Army officer. As he served in that battalion from June to August 1944, a very important meeting occurred between the battalion commander - Andrejew and Aleksander Peczerski.

Andrejew had previously noticed Peczerski, who was standing out from the other soldiers in terms of his appearance and behaviour. They talked face to face. After Andrejew had heard Peczerski's story, he gave him permission to set off for Moscow, and explained to him how to find the way to the State Special Commission for the Investigation and Prosecution of Nazi Crimes. Also, he advised Peczerski to get in touch with Aleksy Tołstoj, who was a permanent member of that Commission. Peczerski did not succeed in meeting with Tołstoj (which was apparently lucky for him), but he did meet with two other members of the Commission – writers Wieniamin Kawierin and Paweł Antokolski, who were also members of the editorial board of *The Black Book* – a collection of documents concerning the extermination of the Jews on the German-occupied territory of the Soviet Union. They also cooperated with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. After taking down Peczerski's account, it came to be known as so-called *Peczerski's Notes*, which was the beginning of his 'written' recollections.

In July 1944, soon after the Red Army had crossed the former Polish border, press war correspondents of *Komsomolskaja Prawda* [The Komsomol Truth] – Major A. Rutman and Guards Senior Lieutenant S. Krasilszczyk, in Chełm Lubelski, came upon a few fugitives from Sobibór (Selma Engel, Chaim Powroźnik and Dov Freiberg), and wrote down their accounts. Later, they got these accounts published in *Komsomolskaja Prawda* on 2 September 1944 in the form of an article entitled

‘Fabryka śmierci w Sobiborze’ [The Death Factory in Sobibór]<sup>71</sup>. It was the first published and detailed description of the death camp in Sobibór. Thanks to this newspaper, especially its high circulation and importance in the USSR, the whole world could learn about the Sobibór extermination camp and the revolt of its prisoners. However, it should be borne in mind that the information about the successful uprising of the prisoners was first published by the Polish underground press<sup>72</sup>.

On 6 September 1944 in the USSR, the newspaper *Czerwona Gwiazda* [The Red Star] printed an account by Wasilij Grossman ‘W miastach i wsiach Polski’ [In the Cities and Villages of Poland] in which there was a mention of Sobibór. At the same time, Grossman took part in the compilation of *Czarna księga* [The Black Book] together with Ilja Erenburg. They were both the editors-in-chief of the editorial board of that publication to be soon printed. It is nobody else but they who are considered to be the authors of *Czarna księga*.

Works of the State Special Commission for the Investigation and Prosecution of Nazi Crimes (which had already possessed Peczerski’s reminiscences in its archives) focused almost entirely on the preparation of evidence material for the Nuremberg trial. Gathered by the Commission, the archival collection of evidence of German crimes was taken advantage of to a minimum extent because it was inadequately compiled and, additionally, censored. As early as in 1945, the Commission gave up compiling those materials.

Evidently, Erenburg was in possession of Peczerski’s account, written down by Kawierin and Antokolski. He also obtained testimonies by former prisoners of the Sobibór camp (published by Rutman and Krasilszczyk), which he decided to include into *Czarna Księga*. Rutman and Krasilszczyk’s task was to compile those testimonies. Thanks to this, even before the end of the war, Peczerski’s reminiscences got printed for the first time in Rostov-on-Don, his home city. These were published in the form of a book entitled *Powstanie w sobiborskim obozie* [The Uprising in the Sobibór Camp] (unfortunately, it had a low circulation).

In that same year – 1945, a Soviet periodical entitled *Sztandar* [The Standard], No. 4, published Kawierin and Antokolski’s article ‘Powstanie w Sobiborze’ [The

<sup>71</sup> A letter from the District Court Prosecutor in Lublin, 23 November 1945 (No. I Dz. 1438/45) to the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, Kraków, 41 Straszewskiego Street for Citizen Józef Skórzyński, the District Investigating Justice in Radom, 63 Żeromskiego Street, Flat 11, Lublin IPN Archives; the District Court Prosecutor in Lublin, 19 December 1945 (No. I Dz. 1438/45) to Citizen Józef Skórzyński, the District Investigating Justice in Radom, 63 Żeromskiego Street, Flat 1; A letter from the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (No. 41/46) to the District Court Prosecutor in Lublin, Warszawa, 23 January 1946, Lublin IPN Archives.

<sup>72</sup> *Informacja Bieżąca* [Information Up-to-Date], 24 October 1943; A dispatch about fighting in the Białystok ghetto, Treblinka and Sobibór in August and October 1943, Dispatch No. 109, Warszawa, 25 October 1943 (copy from Marek Bem’s private collection), *Informacja Bieżąca*, No. 44, 10 November 1943, *Głos Warszawy* [The Voice of Warsaw], No. 73/82, 16 November 1943; *Aneks* [The Annexe], No. 61, 30 November 1943; ‘Przez walkę do zwycięstwa’ [Through Struggle to Victory], No. 27, 20 December 1943.

Uprising in Sobibór]<sup>73</sup>, which was later included in the world-known *Czarna księga*. Their article was wholly based on Peczerski's reminiscences.

Memories by Chaim Powroźnik, a former prisoner of the Sobibór camp, quoted in Rutman and Krasilszczyk's article entitled 'Fabryka śmierci w Sobiborze' [The Death Factory in Sobibór] are finished with the question: "*Where is Saszko now, and is he still alive? – I don't know*". Aleksander Peczerski replied to the article in a letter published in the same newspaper on 31 January 1945. In the letter, he presented a detailed story of the uprising (he had written it in a hospital near Moscow, where he had been in the cure after the war).

At the end of 1946, activists from the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the editorial staff of *Czarna księga* had Peczerski's book printed in a Yiddish translation, and also began re-editing the manuscript with his memories. Eventually, they prepared a second impression of Peczerski's war reminiscences to get into print. This time, it was a Russian, more extended second version, which was adjusted in accordance with current political directives of the USSR.

Therefore, certain fragments were removed from the original, selected threads were extended, and the whole story was dramatised. At that time, the activity of the editorial board of *Czarna księga*, as well as that of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee came under heavy attack from the so-called decision-making apparatus. The main charge was distorting the genuine picture of German fascism. It was thought that the books issued by those organisations provided the point of view that Germany fought the war against the Soviet Union solely for the purpose of exterminating the Jews, with a suggestion that other nations of the USSR were given a less cruel treatment by the Germans.

As a result, Soviet propaganda organs prohibited the publication of materials about the extermination of the Jews. It was only allowed to write generally about the extermination of 'Soviet people'. Already in 1946, Andriej Żdanow (who collaborated with Aleksiej Tołstoj in works of the State Special Commission for the Investigation and Prosecution of Nazi Crimes) – Head of the Cultural and Ideological Department at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union launched a campaign against all manifestations in art and literature that, in his view, was in disagreement with the political tendencies of the Soviet Union at that time.

Like Aleksander Peczerski, Jules Schelvis, a former prisoner of the camp in Sobibór, tried very hard to impart information about the camp to the Dutch authorities. On 30 June in Amsterdam, he went to local authorities with his notes, and wanted to register as a returned expatriate. However, none of the officials was in the least interested in his return or his accounts. Schelvis is of the opinion that, at that time, people had more serious problems to deal with than Jews coming back home<sup>74</sup>.

On 6 December 1944, the Jewish Agency Aid Committee got a letter from Rabbi Chaim Yechuda Leib Auerbach. The sender was one of the major rabbis of Jerusalem, the chief of *Shaar Hashamayim Yeshiva* and a very famous *Dayan* (his son – Rabbi

<sup>73</sup> В. Каверин and П. Антокольский, 'Восстание в Собиборе', *Знамя*, 1945, No. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor...*, pp. 18-19.

Shlomo Zalman Auerbach was one of the most famous representatives of halachic authorities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). In his letter, he asks: “[...] *Do you happen to have any knowledge of a place in the General Government called Sobibór? A certain woman, a war survivor, requested permission from a rabbinical court to re-marry because witnesses told her that her husband had been taken to Sobibór. Rabbi Auerbach would like to find out more about that matter. Is that place known to be functioning as a concentration camp, or as one of the places of the extermination of our brothers? ... That problem is very important for agunahs. A suitable reply may be decisive in this case [...]*”<sup>75</sup>.

The problem very much intrigued the rabbi of Jerusalem, who attached special significance to the Jewish law, especially to the halachic law. Therefore, that was the reason why he was so much concerned about learning facts connected with the Jewish extermination, especially in Sobibór. Rabbi Auerbach was not the only person who was interested in that issue.

All the rabbis who, after the Holocaust, received inquiries concerning *the Agunah* had to learn the facts first. That kind of historical information was urgently needed as a basis for determining whether or not a given woman could be allowed permission to marry again. When the problem was settled, Rabbi Auerbach wrote an explanation that was published in the periodical *Ha-Posek*. He explained that if Sobibór was an extermination camp, then every person taken there was considered as someone who had been thrown into a pit full of scorpions, snakes and the like; for that reason, it could be supposed that they were all dead<sup>76</sup>.

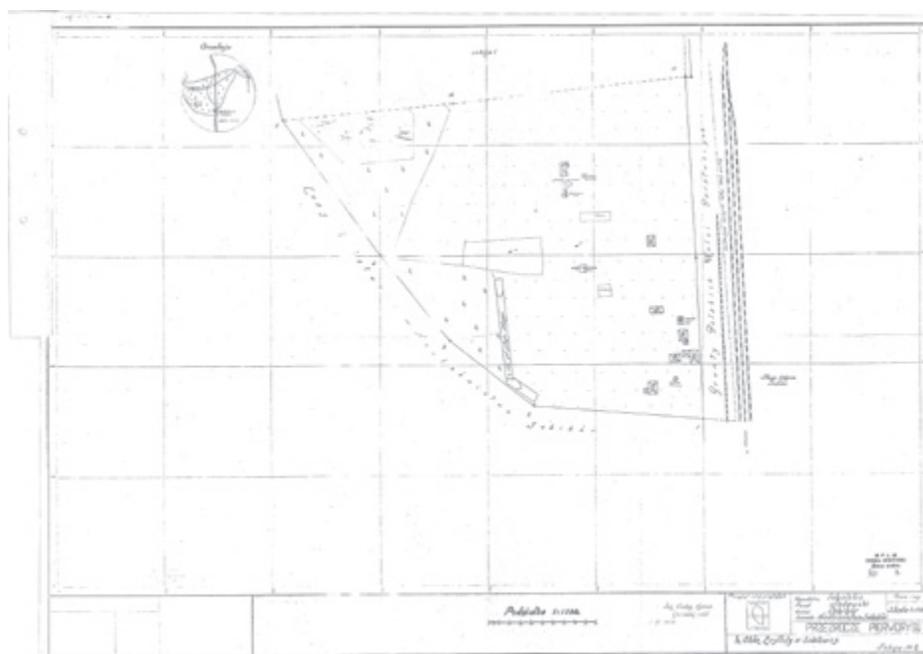
---

<sup>75</sup> An agunah, cf. Sources and literature/Internet resources – (from Hebrew – a woman bound with chains). In Judaism, a woman whose husband has gone missing or has left her and refused to grant her an official divorce. An agunah cannot re-marry. A rabbinical court (bei din) determines the status of such a woman. In the case of a missing husband, the court usually grants permission to the agunah to marry again.

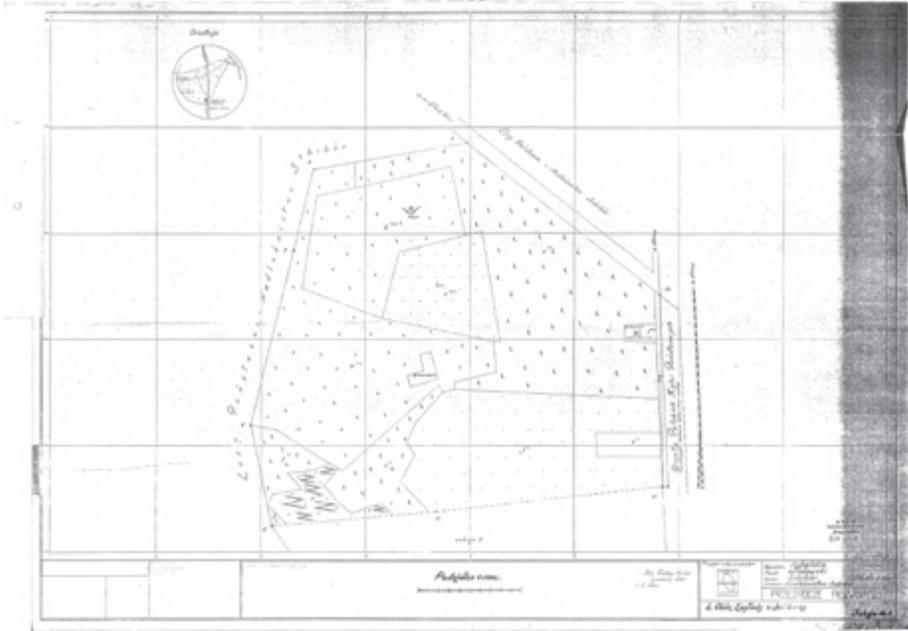
<sup>76</sup> *Rabbi Auerbach to the Rescue Committee of the Jewish Agency*, Dec 6, 1944, Central Zionist Archives, 5613851/12. Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust*, Jerusalem, 2007, pp. 365-366.

## CONCLUSION

Until 1993 (on 14 October 1993, on the territory of the former camp, there was organised the Museum of the Former Nazi German Extermination Camp in Sobibór), information included in the documents from the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland was the only information that provided an analysis of the state of preservation of the former camp area. In 1951, Eng. Marian Cudny made a geodetic map (Scale 1: 1,000) which marked the location of several elements of the camp infrastructure identified by the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland: the gas chamber, the well, the toilet ditch, the barrack for an electricity generator, the bakery, the armoury, a few lodging barracks, the stable, had been the only map of that sort until 2001. The next map, made in 2001, provided geodetic and topographical references to the next series of archaeological research, and on-site visits (55 years after the previous research) that began in 2000 in the area of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór.



*Photo 32. A geodetic map – part I (Scale 1:1000) with the placement of elements of the camp infrastructure located and identified by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland during an investigation and an inspection visit in the years 1945-1946; edited by Eng. Marian Cudny in June 1951. A copy in Marek Bem's private collection.*



*Photo 33. A geodetic map – part II (Scale 1:1,000) with the placement of elements of the camp infrastructure located and identified by the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland during an investigation and an inspection visit in the years 1945-1946; edited by Eng. Marian Cudny in June 1951. A copy of the map in Marek Bem's private collection.*



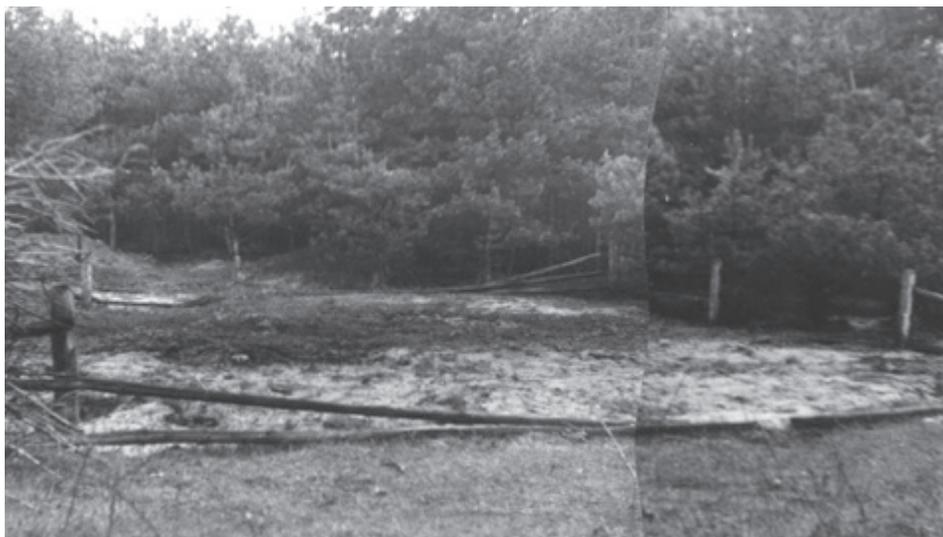
*Photo 34. Remains of camp objects (Camp II). The year in which the photo was taken – unknown. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's collection.*



*Photo 35. The house where the Sobibór camp commandants were lodged (the Fore-camp). One of the oldest photos of that object, taken soon after the end of the Second World War. The exact time when the photo was taken – unknown. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 36. The territory of the former extermination camp in Sobibór. An enclosed place where human ashes were found. The year in which the photo was taken – unknown. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 37. The territory of the former extermination camp in Sobibór. An enclosed place where human ashes were found. The year in which the photo was taken – unknown. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*

A long time after the end of the Second World War, the area of the former extermination camp in Sobibór was a deserted and practically unknown place. No actions were undertaken to popularise the history of that place, or to commemorate it in any way.

Mordechaj Zanin, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Die letzte Neies* visited 100 destroyed Jewish communes after the war. He even got to Sobibór, and the author himself writes about it in the following way:

*“I passed myself off as a British journalist. In the realities of post-war Poland, where the communist government and the people were full of hatred towards the Jews, and seized Jewish property, opened their hearts for me, hearts of all social layers: farmers, city dwellers, intellectuals, and artists, who wished to cleanse their conscience of sin. I perceived the Jewish tragedy from the point of view of their conscience.”* Zanin described all he saw, heard and experienced. His description, which was published in the New York newspaper *Forward*, surely moved the American Jewish community very deeply. ‘There is nothing left in Sobibór’ is a chapter from his book entitled *Uber Stein und Stock*, which appeared in 1952. The book gave a description of the destruction of the Jewish community of Włodawa:

*“[...] About 10 kilometres from Włodawa along the rails leading to Chełm, there is a railway station – Sobibór. It was in the Sobibór forest that Jews from the Lublin area experienced the worst possible catastrophe. Now, it is silent at the little station, the wind is blowing in the forest. Over the forest flows the Bug River. This is the place where the Polish-Soviet border is. Still, you needn't worry that you are staying in a border zone. A few farmers disappear in the thickness of the forest. They go back to their peaceful lives. I approach a farmer and ask him to take me to the former extermination camp. The farmer eyes me without understanding my*

intentions. I tell him: “Not for free. I’ll pay you well!”. The farmer is living a very poor life. We could communicate with each other. However, he doesn’t understand why I want to pay him if nothing can be seen there. There is really nothing there. “I want to see the place where Jews used to be killed” – I say. “Ah ... Jews. Deep in the forest, they burnt a lot of Jews for two years. But there is nothing left there”. We agreed that I would pay him for showing me the place where there was nothing left. We cross the rails and a field track, and go deep into the forest. The farmer tells me that the Germans cut through the forest, and that transports with Jews were directed straight to the gas chambers. Traces of that suffering could still be found there. After a twenty minute walk, we reach a bare forest patch. At first, it looks as if there was a village there once, but it burnt and the people escaped. On the ground, among a few weeds, lie broken pieces of brick and reddish black earth. The ground under the weeds is dug, and it forms narrow and deep pits. All that forgotten territory seems to be smaller than the camp in Treblinka. On that ground stood five barracks for the SS murderers and Ukrainians. Two barracks for the Jews who were selected for labour from transports (one for women and one for men), a crematorium and a gas chamber that could hold 500 Jews at a time, four barracks where victims would take off their clothes, a carpenter’s workshop and a tailor’s workshop – a modern inferno based on scientific foundations: all the camp buildings, houses and the crematorium were built of stone which came from the dismantled Jewish houses in Włodawa. Here, Jews were murdered from Samosz, Rębiszów, Chełm, Włodawa, Lublin, Izbica, Chrasnopol and Lubartów – dozens of communities. Also here, war prisoners were brought from the Polish army and the Soviet army, Jews from France, Czechoslovakia and from almost every European country. People vanished with the smoke coming out of the stoves. Just like in the other death camps, a wild wave of gold fever went through Sobibór. Every patch of ground in this area, starting from the railway station, was dug by the local people. The farmer tells me straight about it. He still believes that if this place were to be dug through carefully, it would be possible to come upon treasures. All his thoughts are centred around those treasures. It is clear from the question he asks. For an instant, I think to myself that he suspects that I’m here to conduct excavation works, and find those ‘treasures’. “Did any commissions come here to examine this area?” I asked. “Not that I know of” - he replied warily – “Except the folks, nobody came to look for the treasures”. The sight of Sobibór is the most horrible of all the cemeteries destroyed in Poland. The ground was dug up for exhumations, and whatever was found was taken away. The waters of the river washed away the ashes of 800, 000 Jews. Some of the ashes were used as a fertiliser in the forest for trees to grow greener, and for shrubs to grow softer. To this day, nobody has thought about erecting a tombstone to commemorate the murdered. Nobody remembers that this is Sobibór, a place where Jews were being murdered ... a mere 800, 000 of them [...]<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mordechai Zanin, ‘W Sobiborze nic nie zostało’ [There Is Nothing Left in Sobibór] (in): Kanc, Sz., ed., *Sefer zikaron Włodawa wehasawiwa Sobibor. Yizkor Book In Memory of Włodawa and Region Sobibor*, Tel Aviv, 1974.

It was only in the mid-1960s that there came up an idea to commemorate the victims killed in the German death camp. In 1965, the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites decided to build a wall with a commemorative plaque on it at the entrance to the former camp. The carved inscription adequately met the requirements of the Polish government towards history at that time:

***“In this place, from March 1942 until October 1943, there functioned a Nazi German extermination camp. In this camp, 250, 000 Soviet Prisoners Of War, Jews, Poles and Gypsies were murdered. On 14 October 1943, an armed revolt of prisoners broke out here. As a result, they escaped after a struggle with the Nazi guards.”***

The prepared concept of the redevelopment of the area of the former camp can be interpreted as a sort of reflection of the quality of knowledge about the camp at that time, the decisions about the ways in which to 'interfere' in this kind of places, as well as the socio-political intentions to commemorate and educate.

In the forest, in the place where, supposedly, the gas chamber was, a sculpture by Mieczysław Welter was raised. It shows a dying mother, holding her child in her arms (with the following inscription on the monument base: 'In Memory of Those Who Were Killed By The Nazis In The Years 1942-1943'). Also, a memorial obelisk symbolising a gas chamber was put up there. Nearby, a mound was also built – a mausoleum by Romuald Dylewski, who was the author of the whole redeveloped area of the former camp as a Site of Remembrance. The documentary background of his concept was a comprehensive historical study written in 1962 by Józef Marszałek entitled *Obóz zagłady Sobibór – 1942-1943* [The Extermination Camp in Sobibór 1942-1943]. In the topographical part of his study, with very important comparisons and references, Józef Marszałek takes advantage of a report from the research and investigation of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland:

*“[...] irrespective of that operation, which was the manifestation of the Nazis' fury about the armed revolt of the prisoners of the extermination camp in Sobibór, the camp commandant was given a special order to liquidate it. Almost immediately after the revolt, the barracks were dismantled and transported out of the camp. Some of them were burnt on the spot. The gas chambers were blown up. In the place where they used to be, a judiciary examination in 1945 revealed only remains of rubble, which made it impossible to establish their exact size or capacity. The ashes and remains of bones were first scattered in long ditches, next covered with sand, and, finally, in those places, a pine forest was planted. Only the foundations of the living quarters of the camp personnel have remained. The very buildings of the living quarters were dismantled after the war by the local people [...]”<sup>2</sup>.*

The geodetic basis for Romuald Dylewski's study were maps with a new land survey made mostly for the purpose of a monument design in 1951, commissioned by the State District National Council in Włodawa (PPRN). The designers also had access to two sketches of the former camp drawn during the research of the Main

<sup>2</sup> Józef Marszałek, *Obóz zagłady Sobibór 1942-1943* [The Extermination Camp in Sobibór], typescript, Lublin 1962, copy from Marek Bem's private collection.

Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (1945- 1946: a sketch attached to *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce* [The Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland], vol. 3, 1947), as well as a sketch published by Żydowski Instytut Historyczny [the Jewish Historical Institute] in Warsaw in 1946. Romuald Dylewski prepared his design on the basis of approximate ideas provided by the Cultural Department of the State Province National Council in Lublin (WK PWRN). At its blueprint stage, the design was approved of by the State District National Council in Włodawa (PPRN) and the State Province National Council in Lublin (WK PWRN). After that, the Fine Arts Studio in Lublin was chosen as the monument design maker, which was promptly accepted by the Artistic Commission of the Fine Arts Studio.

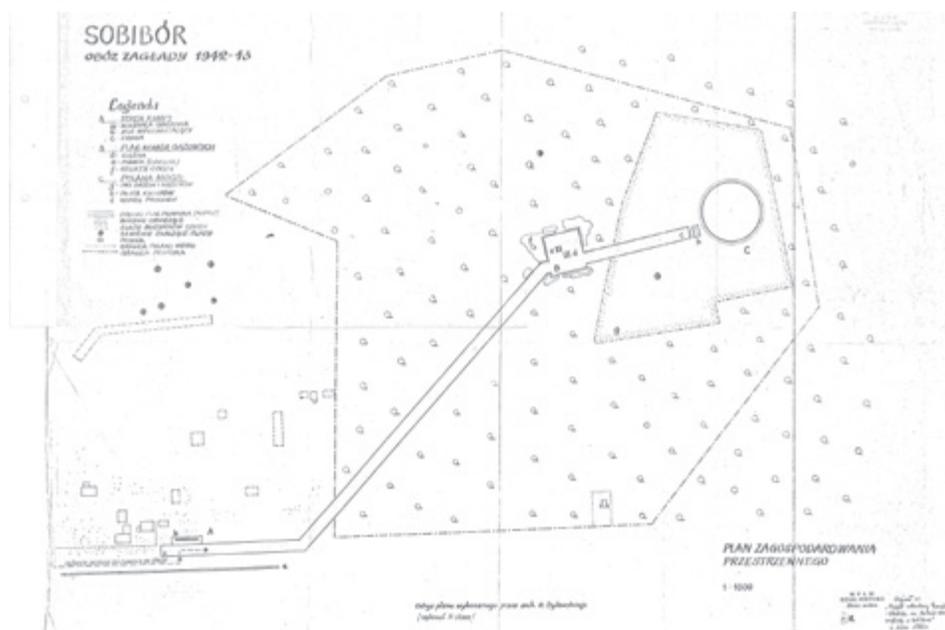


Photo 38. A map of the Sobibór Site of Remembrance (an area redevelopment plan) *Sobibór obóz zagłady 1942-1943* [Sobibór – The Extermination Camp 1942-1943], a copy of the map drawn by architect R. Dylewski, edited by Kazimierz Stasz, 1986. A copy of the map from Marek Bem's private collection.

The extermination camp – Sobibór, the concept of the monument's design.  
 Technical specifications:

“ [...] **A present description of the former camp area.**

*Judging by testimonies and research, the camp covered an area of 60 hectares, surrounded by three rows of barbed wire and mine fields. Inside, the camp was divided into five isolated parts /areas/ for different functions, including Area III with the gas chambers, the burning pits and the living barracks for prisoners working there. To the camp led only one gateway, through which ran the ramp from the Sobibór railway station. Transports with people for exterminations were rolled into that siding. In November 1943, the camp in Sobibór was liquidated, according*

to Himmler's directions. The barracks were dismantled and driven away, the gas chambers were blown up, the grave area was afforested. At present, the area of the former extermination camp in Sobibór is covered with a forest; traces are scarce; it is difficult to exactly reconstruct the plan of the camp. Even so, there is a fair number of proofs to locate basic elements. The ground surface excavations mark the area with the ashes /burnt corpses/ of the victims. The traces of documents and the blown-up walls show the location of the gas chambers /the so-called 'bath house'/. There is a siding into which transports with victims arrived. Also, there are a lot of minor traces like barbed wire on trees, remains of barracks, and a lot of objects scattered all over the forest: plates, bowls, pots, spoons, rims of glasses, parts of prams, etc. Part of the camp forest – an area of 14 hectares with the biggest number of the most important preserved traces /the tombs and the gas chambers/ - was allocated for the construction of the monument. Its purpose is to pay tribute to the victims, and, generally, to commemorate that site.

It is assumed that the monument will be visited by groups and individuals in large numbers.

#### ***The land redevelopment concept.***

The concept of the monument was based on some of the still-existing elements which are the essence of the actions committed here, without considering all other traces which are not certain or less important. These elements are: the existing entrance ramp, the traces of the gas chambers, the grave area and the ashes. The above-mentioned three elements were the quintessence of the camp, and they delineated the road for the extermination victims to follow. Therefore, that road determines the shape of the monument. The suggestion is to build a road (about 10 metres wide and 550 metres long) that connects the above-mentioned elements in straight stretches. It will be an asphalt surface road only for pedestrians /with sharp bends/. At the same time, it will connect the outside territory with the inside of the wooded area allocated for the monument. That area should be visually separated from the rest of the forest by means of cutting down trees there over a land strip of 6 and 10 metres wide, and, subsequently, replacing the trees by shrubs over a strip of 4 and 8 metres wide. The difference in width is used to accentuate the actual boundaries of the former camp. While cutting trees down, caution must be taken to preserve the ones which bear traces of barbed wire. Such trees should possibly form the limits of the allocated area. The kind and colour of shrubs planted there should highlight the different character of that territory /visual hedges/. If possible, the outside boundaries of the camp could be delineated with stone poles. Also, such poles should be set into the ground by all the known and identified camp elements all over the site. Those stones should be clearly marked and described in a future guidebook to the former camp.

#### ***The ramp area.***

The elements of that part of the monument are: the ramp within the camp, the beginning part of the road, the information boards, the flagpole mast stands and the forest. The ramp will be unchanged. However, it is recommended that it should

not be used for business in any way. The beginning part of the asphalt road (about 120 metres long) will, at the same time, be an entrance yard to the monument site. Visitors will arrive at the railway station of Sobibór by train, or by car at a car park / it is necessary to design a car park and a road connecting Włodawa with Sobibór/ situated by the railway station, from which they will walk to the monument road. Four slabs carved in stone walls of 2 by 5 metres each, placed on a concrete base, will give visitors information about the camp in four languages, e.g., in Polish, German, French, Russian, or, possibly, Hebrew. The slabs will also give directions for visitors to find their way round the monument site. The flagpole mast stands situated by the boards will ensure that the site will be honoured on ceremonial days. This will be the only cluster of flags on the monument site. It is advisable to plant trees and shrubs in the area of the ramp, especially from the side of the existing buildings which should be separated from the ramp with a fence. In the ramp area, about 50 metres away from the boards, a public toilet should be put up in the shrubbery.

### ***The gas chamber yard.***

*The gas chambers constituted the quintessence of genocide and, simultaneously, they were the place of the final martyrdom of the victims. Therefore, that place is particularly worth being commemorated in a special way. The design involves covering the remains of the gas chamber foundations /strictly according to an outline made on a base-map/ with an asphalt yard, where the monument and a commemorative torch will be situated. The asphalt yard in that place will be a sort of 30 by 30 metre widening of the road. Such a black, sharply outlined rectangular will be surrounded by freely-shaped concrete surfaces into which all various objects – victims' belongings found in the forest - will be set for preservation. They are: bowls, spoons, prams and other items like coils of barbed wire, etc. In the centre of the rectangular yard, there will be fixed a stone slab of about 6 by 6 metres and 30 centimetres in height, with a big metal commemorative torch. The design involves erecting next to the slab a stone obelisk of 4 by 4 metres, and 8 metres in height which, in terms of space, would be the culminating point of the monument. Into that obelisk made with half-worked stones, there will be set fragments /made of reinforced concrete or other materials/ of the blown-up gas chambers. Additionally, it is proposed that four stone slabs with a suitable text on them in the aforementioned languages should be set into the obelisk walls. From the side of the road, on the front wall of the obelisk, a sizeable ferroconcrete figural sculpture is scheduled to be fixed on metal bolts.*

### ***The grave clearing.***

*The forest growing over the graves should be cut down, possibly leaving a narrow, 6 metre wide strip of a young tree stand, just for the record, and also to create the spatial limits of the clearing. Those limits could be even more highlighted by planting shrubs /possibly other kinds of them than outside the camp/. To protect the site of the dead, it would be possible to surround the clearing by a fence hidden in the shrubbery. The only entrance into the clearing will be along the monument road. The road in that stretch /90 metres long from the gas chambers/ will be finished with*

*a stone slab of 5 by 10 metres, and a height of 40 centimetres. Also, conditions for growing some flowers will be created, possibly roses /the only kind of flowers grown on the site of the monument/. The slab, which visually ends the road, will give visitors an opportunity to lay flowers. The centrepiece of the clearing will be the mound of ashes. The limits of the mound will be a stone wall in the shape of a circle of about 50 metres in diameter, surrounded by paving /possibly loose flagstones/ of 1, 5 – 2 metres in width. The ashes of the murdered should be placed within those limits, above all, the victims' ashes lying on the ground at present. The ashes, covered with earth, will form the cone of the mound. The mound earth should be sown with grass all over it – by contrast to the undergrowth of the clearing. Around the entrance to the clearing /no less than 50 metres from the side of the road/, outside of it, a public toilet should be built in a fairly wooded spot. It is advisable to put a few benches there /possibly in the shape of tree trunks or the like/”<sup>3</sup>.*

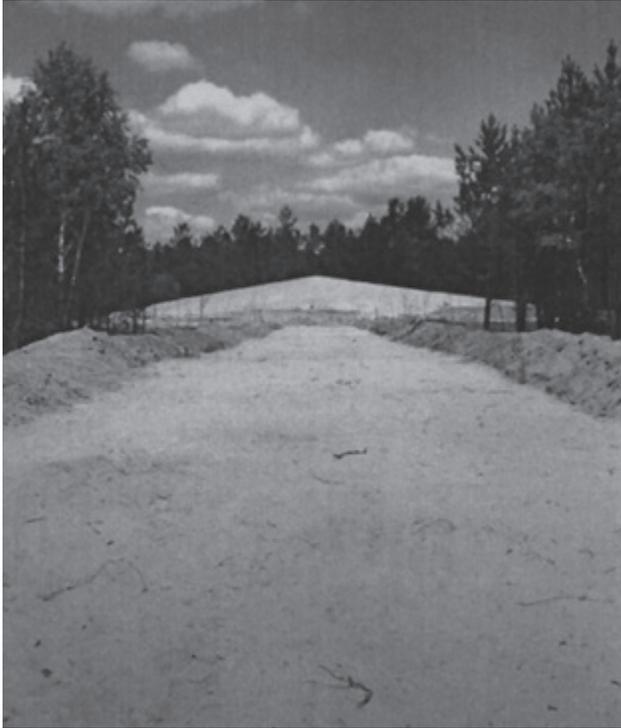
The original design by Dylewski was altered. The version of the monument design that was finally realised (the ceremonious opening of the Sobibór Site of Remembrance took place on 27 June 1965) can be seen to this day, and it remained unchanged from 1965 until 2000<sup>4</sup>.



*Fot. 39. The erection place of the monuments in the area of the former extermination camp in Sobibór. This is the place where the gas chamber was located. A copy from Marek Bem's private collection.*

<sup>3</sup> Romuald Dylewski, (an architect), *Obóz zagłady Sobibór 1942/43, koncepcja projektu pomnika. Opis techniczny* [The Sobibór Extermination Camp 1942/43, the Concept of a Project of the Monument, Lublin, October 1962, copy of the original in Marek Bem's private collection.

<sup>4</sup> The Commission protocol on the construction of the monument in the area of the former camp in Sobibór. 27 May 1965, copy of the original from Marek Bem's collection.



*Photo 40. The area of the former Camp III. The photo was probably taken in 1965. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 41. The area of the former camp III. The place where the Germans buried corpses and ashes of the camp victims in deep pits. The photo taken in the 1960s. The photo shows the construction of the mound of ashes meant to commemorate the victims killed at the camp. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 42. The Memory Mound in commemoration of the victims of the German extermination camp in Sobibór (the former area of Camp III). The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 43. The area of the former camp ramp. A post-war view. The year in which the photo was taken – unknown. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 44. The area of the former camp ramp. The present-day view (after the redevelopment of the area). The photo by Isaac Gilead, 2007.*



*Photo 45. A post-war view of the former road linking the camp ramp with Camp II. The year in which the photo was taken – unknown. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 46. The former road linking the camp ramp with Camp III. The present-day view (after the redevelopment of the area). The photo from Marek Bem's private collection.*



*Photo 47. The chapel which was located within the boundaries of the former extermination camp in Sobibór. The year in which the photo was taken – unknown. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 48. In the place of the pre-war chapel, which was located within the boundaries of the former extermination camp in Sobibór, a new 'outpost' chapel of the parish of St John the Merciful (the Capuchin Fathers) was erected in the 1980s in Włodawa-Orchówek. The photo by Isaac Gilead, 2007.*



*Photo 49. The kindergarten playground - Sobibór Railway Station. The kindergarten was built (it functioned in the 1970s) on the territory of the former extermination camp in Sobibór (Camp II). The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 50. The building of the former kindergarten – Sobibór Railway Station (the area of the former extermination camp – Camp II). In 1993, the building was taken over by Muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego (the MPLW) [The Museum of The Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District] in Włodawa with a view to converting it to the seat of the Museum of the Former Sobibór Nazi Death Camp. The photo from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.*



*Photo 51. Part of the area of the former extermination camp (the Fore-camp) has been sold to private owners. The photo by Isaac Gilead, 2007.*

However, the late 1960s revealed the gradual decrease in the Polish historians' interest in any research into the German extermination centre in Sobibór. The anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, the enforced emigration of many Jewish historians, and the generally unfavourable atmosphere around 'Jewish topics' brought research on the Holocaust to a standstill. The historical consciousness of the Poles about the history of the German death camp in Sobibór almost completely disappeared. A lot more attention to that issue was given in the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, by historians from Israel, Germany, the USA and the Netherlands. Among other issues, they were doing research on the approximate number of victims of the Sobibór camp. A precious experience from that period of research was to take advantage of sources which came into being as a consequence of trials and investigations against members of the German personnel of the Sobibór camp. An important effect of the research which was being carried out at that time was the conclusions reached on the basis of the analyses of the number of Jews killed in Sobibór. The authors of these were Yitzhak Arad, Peter Witte, Jules Schelvis and Tomasz Blatt.

It was only in 1993 that local authorities gave charge of the enclosed (9,82 hectares) area of the former German extermination centre in Sobibór to the Museum of the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District (MPLW) in Włodawa, which opened its local branch over there: the Museum of the Former Nazi German Extermination Camp in Sobibór. In 2012, this institution was transformed to a local branch of the State Museum at Majdanek. Since 2008, in the area of the former German extermination camp in Sobibór, there was launched a project for the creation of the Museum – the Site of Remembrance. It is an international initiative taken up by Poland, the Netherlands, Israel and Slovakia. In February 2011, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage authorised the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation to become the project's operator, which has also been the coordinator of the undertaking since then.

Before the coming 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the armed revolt of the prisoners of the extermination camp in Sobibór, the President of Russia, Władimir Putin, ordained that the Ministry of Defence should prepare a project to commemorate the event. Also, the Human Rights Council, a consultative body by the Russian President, called for bestowing posthumously on Aleksander Peczerski the state highest honorary title – the Hero of the Russian Federation.



the same modern society, whose more popular face we tend to admire so much. The German extermination centre in Sobibór did not come into being out of nowhere. In the intellectual and moral atmosphere of 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, alongside anti-Semitism, there was also a deeply-rooted consent for taking advantage of drastic methods in order to ‘solve’ problems. If we tend to forget about this, and fail to counteract contemporary signs of aggression, we are most likely to face a ‘repetition of history’.

The remembrance of the Holocaust as well as the constant repetition of the ‘never again’ slogan is a maximum effort programme. I am certain that remembrance serves the purpose of diminishing the risk of another genocide happening. It is difficult to understand how it came to happen that 300, 000 people were murdered in one place. It is horrifying just to think of the routine regularly followed by the Germans. As Jews were being killed in the Sobibór camp only for the fact of being Jewish, a few metres away from the camp fence – at the Sobibór railway station, a passenger train stopped every day. People returned home, went to work, or visited their friends. A few hundred metres further away, a civil building company was extending the railway. The Forestry Division in Sobibór worked as usual, according to its normal routine, and, close to the camp, kids were grazing cows on meadows by the rails. The older kids were teaching the younger ones how to count, and the ability test was to count more and more trucks and carriages rolling towards the camp.

During the Holocaust times, quite a number of people knew what Sobibór was. Different pieces of information about the German extermination centre in Sobibór circulated around the neighbouring area, practically the moment it began functioning. The information available at that time or later was never reliable or precise, but it was true at one point: countless crimes and unimaginable cruelties for completely unknown reasons were taking place in the camp. That is why, the public could not believe all that. Curiously enough, the Germans themselves had predicted that common disbelief displayed by the outside world. Szymon Wiesenthal wrote about SS soldiers who, just for sport, mockingly, warned a group of Jews: “[...] *No matter who wins or loses the war, we have won our war against you anyway. None of you will survive, and even if somebody survives to talk about it, nobody is going to believe it. There will be suspicions, discussions, historians will start research, but they will not be absolutely sure because we are going to destroy not only you, but also all possible evidence. And should any evidence survive, people will think that things you will be talking about are too monstrous to believe to be true. They will say that it is the aggressive propaganda of the Allies again, and they will believe us, that is, all our denials. The world will hear the history of the camps from nobody else but us [...]*”<sup>7</sup>.

It is hard not to reflect upon Wiesenthal’s words. Maybe, the truth about Sobibór lies hidden somewhere in them? There really were cases of Sobibór survivors and war survivors whose stories were disbelieved. In Sobibór, all material evidence of the mass killing was destroyed. The camp archives were burnt. To this day, it has been difficult to establish how many prisoners were killed. Before the Nazis built

<sup>7</sup> Levi Primo, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni* [The Drowned and the Saved], Kraków, 2007, pp. 7-8.

the crematoriums, tens of thousands of corpses were thrown into deep pits. Later, it was decided that even those traces should be erased. Prisoners had to dig up the pits, and burn the human remains on piles in the open air. The ashes that were left after burning people were carefully concealed. There were no preserved accounts or testimonies by prisoners from Camp III, where the gas chambers and the mass graves were located. The way the Germans killed their victims was kept secret, which is why, other prisoners were not aware of it.

All descriptions of the actual process of extermination in Sobibór come exclusively from the SS-men. During trials, striving to avoid punishment, members of the Sobibór camp personnel tried to diminish their responsibility and role in the extermination of Jews. They sat there unemotional, providing only dry facts; they pretended that they could not remember anything, and considered themselves to be innocent. They claimed that they had been forced to follow commands. Previously, of course, they had done their best to make sure that not a single witness stayed alive.

Paradoxically, not only Jews were intended for liquidation. After the camp had been gone, members of the camp personnel were sent away to the front line, especially to places “*where partisans took no prisoners*”. Sadly, the truth was that not a single piece of information that slipped through to the outside world, and to the Polish or European public had an effect on the German plans and actions in Sobibór.

Therefore, completely undisturbed, the Germans built a camp in which they murdered about 300, 000 Jews. They did the killing for over eighteen months. I do not know of anybody’s attempts or efforts from outside to stop the Germans doing it. The Germans had enough time to modernise the camp so as to increase its ‘potential’. Some transports, full of people doomed to annihilation, covered distances of nearly 1, 500 kilometres to finally arrive at the Sobibór station. At present, therefore, there remains a question of why these transports from the west of Europe (in the spring and summer 1943) went to Sobibór rather than to Auschwitz Birkenau, where the distance was shorter.

At that time, Birkenau had the conditions to ‘accommodate’ those transports. Maybe the answer to that question can be found in a book by Josef Wulf in the chapter devoted to Globocnik. In the summer of 1943, he happened to be on a visit to KL Auschwitz. As he sat by a fireplace with the camp commandant – Hoess, they exchanged various reflections with each other. During the conversation, Globocnik confessed that he was very much interested in the crematoriums of KL Auschwitz, and went on to say that not enough transports were arriving at his camps. It was Globocnik’s personal ambition to be proud of ‘his places of extermination’ because, as he put it, “*Everything was going on much more quickly here*”<sup>8</sup>.

When it was decided to liquidate the camp, the Sobobór personnel did it slowly and deliberately. Most of the buildings were dismantled, the rest of the infrastructure was burnt or blown up. The whole area of the camp was harrowed, and over the ashes, there was planted a forest which still grows there at present. The soldiers from

---

<sup>8</sup> Josef Wulf, *Das Dritte Reich Und Seine Vollstrecker. Die Liquidation von 500,000 Juden im Ghetto Warschau*, Frankfurt am Main, 1984, p. 270.

the Sobibór personnel were transferred to other regions of Europe, where they kept murdering Jews, and robbing their belongings.

After the war, many of those soldiers went into hiding for a long time. All of them went victorious through denazification trials. The first trial of a member of the Sobibór personnel took place (completely by chance) only in 1950. On 25 August 1950, Hubert Gomerski was sentenced for life in a top security gaol. As a result of an appeal trial in 1972, that sentence was changed to 15 years' imprisonment. Gomerski received compensation and, because of his failing health, he got released from gaol. Even though the doctors diagnosed his disease as fatal, he died only in 1999 at the age of 88, having enjoyed complete freedom all those years after his release.

In 1965, a second 'Sobibór' trial took place. After the trial, SS-Oberscharführer Karl Frenzel heard the verdict – life imprisonment. However, he was released from prison only after 16 years there. Other members of the Sobibór camp personnel, such as Franz Wolf, Erich Fuchs, Alfred Ittner, Erwin Lambert, Werner and Dubois were then found guilty of complicity in committing murders. Two of them were sentenced to three years, another two to four years, and one to eight years in prison. All of them left gaol much earlier. As many as five of the defendants were found not guilty by the court in Hagen in 1965, in spite of the testimonies by eyewitnesses, and other evidence of their guilt. The court ruled that there was not sufficient evidence to find them guilty. They were the following SS members: Erich Lachmann, Hans-Heinz Schutt, Heinrich Unverhau, Robert Juhrs and Ernst Zierke.

After the end of the Second World War, hardly anybody remembered about the area of the former camp. In 1965, a commemorative plaque appeared there with information that Soviet Prisoners Of War were being killed in Sobibór. It was only in 2001 that it was possible to locate the places where the Germans buried the ashes of the remaining 250, 000 victims. In June 2011, another archaeological expedition stumbled upon another pit with ashes of murdered Jews. Iwan Demianiuk was sentenced to five years in prison as late as in 2011 on a charge of serving as a guard who had supervised murders committed in the Sobibór camp for nearly half a year. He was allowed to be under house arrest, though.

Because of financial problems, the Museum of the Former Nazi German Extermination Camp in Sobibór remained closed (for a month) to visitors. The process of revealing the truth about Sobibór had to go a long way with many stumbling blocks, especially because, with all their might, the Germans attempted to conceal the truth about Sobibór. The world was aware of what was going on there, but it did nothing to stop the extermination of the Jews. But one thing happened that the Germans did not predict. Nor did it result from any action, reaction or assistance from the outside world. Namely, the Sobibór prisoners collected the power to put up armed resistance against their oppressors. They organised an armed uprising, killed some of the camp personnel, and escaped from the camp on 14 October 1943. A few days after the revolt, the Germans decided to liquidate the camp.

At the beginning of 1944, all those who had luckily managed to escape started to spread the truth about Sobibór all over the world. And they have been doing it until

the present moment. Ten of them are still alive, and they are still taking the effort to tell people histories of their camp lives in Sobibór. To this day, Germany has not expressed apology in the area where the camp used to be, and now the Sobibór Site of Remembrance is. In a picturesque mountain town in Austria, there is a church near which, even a few years ago, stood a plaque in memory of Second World War victims. Paradoxically, one of the names inscribed there was Josef Vallaster - one of the murderers from Sobibór. It was he who would start the engine in order to gas people with exhaust fumes.

The history of Sobibór still offers a lot of mysteries to be solved. Further research postulates can be and should be put forward continuously. Determined by the passage of time, the top priorities are: continuing preliminary archival research in Polish and European archives, describing materials that have been collected so far, keeping in touch with the living ex-prisoners of the camp, establishing contacts with families of the murdered, and families of the survivors.

An exceptional opportunity in an effort to learn the truth about the German extermination centre in Sobibór is the continuation of archaeological research into the former camp territory. Indeed, research that started in 2000 has been continuing on and off until the present time. As far as the areas of the former extermination camps are concerned, we still have possibilities, like at no other time in history, of exploring the whole of their territory.

Archaeologists who specialise in research on the former camps are aware of their unique and exceptional responsibility. Undoubtedly, confronting the site of remembrance, coping with memories of living eyewitnesses, living up to expectations of thousands of people for whom the former camp means the cemetery of their family members, and, finally, showing respect for the Jewish religious law constitute a great challenge for that branch of archaeology.

On the other hand, a great number of manifold factors contributed to the deformation and devaluation of traces, preserved and hidden in the ground, which could have survived since October 1943 until today. Those factors were: the precision with which the Germans tried to erase all traces of the real function of the camp, the post-war devastation of the remains of the camp, the long-lasting exploration of the area by the forestry management, construction works, easy access to the former camp territory, the passage of time, selling some of the former camp area to various buyers, and the continual use of the ramp. The results of the archaeological research under way make us realise a great degree of historical ignorance that has been widespread for years.

The decisions to continue the scientific research into Sobibór have made us realise there still remain a lot of doubts to be resolved and questions to be answered. The main problem that lies ahead is that of estimating the quality of knowledge of the history of the death camp in Sobibór. The questions that need to be answered are the following: How much does the quality of our knowledge fulfil our duty to commemorate the camp victims? To what degree can our knowledge be considered reliable and complete from the historiographical point of view? How should the

historical truth be reflected in various forms of commemoration? Where are the real boundaries between rewarding symbolism and solid historical knowledge? How is it possible at present to compromise in the form of commemoration of so many various, often conflicting, results of historical research into the number of people killed in Sobibór? The most crucial question is, therefore, very simple – Is our historical knowledge of Sobibór sufficient enough to revitalise and redevelop the Sobibór Site of Remembrance in the future? Maybe it would be advisable to refrain from such projects for a few years, and, instead, continue broadly-understood interdisciplinary scientific research in order to deepen our knowledge, and exhaust the actual research potential of a number of scientific disciplines in that field.

There has been much discussion recently about whether the symbolic mound with the ashes of the victims (built in 1965) should still be there in its present form, or whether it should, like all the other commemorative elements there, be removed and replaced by new forms of commemoration. Those new forms would be possibly more adequate to the nearly full knowledge of the ‘place’ where the mound and the monuments are standing.

The mound, which was erected with a genuine and honourable sense of commemoration, still remains a ‘symbol’ of Sobibór. However, from the present perspective, it was a reflection of the quality of the historical knowledge from nearly fifty years ago. Nowadays, we know much more about that mound of ashes. Fifty years ago, it was supposed to symbolise an indefinite space with a graveyard.

Recently, the archaeological excavations into this place have revealed that the mound ‘covers’ a few of the unearthed mass graves. Similarly, there are indications that both the obelisk symbolising the gas chamber and the monument of a woman prisoner holding a baby in her arms stand in the place where the gas chamber used to be (both monuments were built exactly at the same time as the mound). And so were the intentions of the planners and authors of these monuments, who decided to commemorate the victims of the gas chamber in exactly the same place in which it had operated during the war. Indeed, many new historical analyses indicate that this really might have been the place where the gas chamber used to work.

Therefore, there arises a key question in the matter of commemorating the former extermination camp: should things like this happen, i.e. should the Site of Remembrance be rebuilt before any archaeological research is continued? Perhaps, the answer to this question lies in the fact that it is only archaeological excavations that could finally confirm whether the gas chamber had really stood in that particular place or not.

It is worth mentioning that each archaeological expedition (in the years: 2000, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011-2015) discovered new surprising facts that led to asking new questions. At the same time, step by step, each expedition accurately reproduced the topography of the camp, and confirmed our knowledge about it from other historical sources. Accounts, testimonies, memories and memoirs provided by former camp members, members of the German personnel, Ukrainian guards and outside witnesses verified and determined plans of archaeological

research. What would be the unearthed road between the museum building and the monuments but for accounts given by former camp prisoners who remembered it? Thanks to them, we know that it was the *Himmelfahrtstrasse* (the road to heaven).

Most of the area of the former camp is not under the control of the Sobibór museum because the so-called protection zone regulations apply to them. However, this formal arrangement does not change the present state of affairs whatsoever. Lumber is still being loaded on trucks at the former camp ramp, some of the area of former Camp I, while the Fore-camp is private land, and the remaining dozen or so hectares are under the management of the forestry administration.

Thus, the dilemma that we face today is where the boundaries should lie between the honourable and responsible commemoration on the one hand, and the needs and possibilities of today's times on the other. Hundreds of artefacts which have been found by the archaeologists so far tell the story of the camp. They tell a story that makes us reflect upon it. There still exists a unique opportunity for archaeology to fulfil that, probably, final hope that the mysteries of Sobibór will eventually be revealed. Only the effects of archaeological research can assure us that whatever happens in Sobibór in the future will not completely affect the sanctity of the places where there could still lie remains of the people who were killed in the camp. Any excavated objects will, even though to a lesser extent, contribute to erasing the odium of human anonymity hanging over that site. Admittedly, archaeology is for Sobibór one of the last opportunities for disclosing a great number of mysteries surrounding the camp.

## APPENDICES

1. A register of deportations from the General Government to the German extermination centre in Sobibór in the years 1942-1943.
2. A register of deportations to the German extermination centre in Sobibór – the author’s research proposal.
3. A register of deportations from the District of Galicia and from outside of the General Government to the German extermination centre in Sobibór.
4. Selected biographical notes of members of the German personnel from the Sobibór extermination camp: SS-Oberscharführer Karl Frenzel, SS-Oberscharführer Kurt Bolender, SS-Unterscharführer Erich Fuchs, SS-Oberscharführer Werner Dubois, SS-Oberscharführer Hubert Gomerski, SS-Unterscharführer Johann (Josef) Klier, SS-Scharführer Erich Lachman, SS-Unterscharführer Erwin Lambert, SS-Scharführer Heinz-Hans Schutt, SS-Oberscharführer Heinrich Unverhau, SS-Unterscharführer Franz Wolf, SS-Unterscharführer Ernst Zierke, SS-Unterscharführer Robert Juhrs.

### Appendix No. 1.

Table No. 1. A register of deportations from the General Government to the German extermination centre in Sobibór in the years 1942-1943.

No.	Date of deportation	Deported from	Number of deportees	Author of statistics			List revised on the basis of Arad’s and Scheffler’s data <sup>1</sup>	Author of statistics		Total number of deportees
				Tomasz Blatt <sup>2</sup>	Yitzhak Arad <sup>3</sup>	Wolfgang Scheffler <sup>4</sup>		Martin Gilbert <sup>5</sup>	Józef Marszałek <sup>6</sup>	
<b>1942</b>										
1	2 April	Rejowiec	2,400			2,400	2,400			2,400
2	2 April	Zamość	200			200	200			2,600
3	mid-April	Krychów (labour camp)	200	200						3,000

<sup>1</sup> A copy of the list from the author’s collection.

<sup>2</sup> Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór...*, pp. 49-53.

<sup>3</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *op. cit.*, pp 390-391.

<sup>4</sup> *Sobibor. Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der „Aktion Reinhard, Institute of Documentation in Israel. For Investigation of Nazi War Crimes*, Haifa, 1998, pp. 54-60.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Holocaust*, London, 2002, Map 121, a copy from Marek Bem’s private collection.

<sup>6</sup> Józef Marszałek, *Obóz zagłady Sobibór 1942 – 1943*, a typescript, Lublin, 1962, a copy from Marek Bem’s private collection.

4	1 May	Włodawa	200				200			2, 800
5	3 May	Komarów	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000			5, 000
6	5 May	Opole Lubelskie	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	3, 000 <sup>7</sup>		7, 000
7	6 May	Dęblin-Irena	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500	9, 500
8	7 May	Ryki	2, 500	2, 500	3, 000	3, 000	???	2, 500	2, 000	12, 000
9	7 May	Józefów	1, 270	1, 270	1, 270	???	???	1, 000	1, 000	13, 270
10	8 May	Baranów	1, 500	1, 500	1, 500	1, 500	1, 500	1, 500	1, 500	14, 770
11	8 May	Końskowola	1, 580	1, 580	1, 580	???	???	3, 500	1, 000	16, 350
12	9 May	Markuszów	1, 500	1, 500	1, 500	???	???	1, 580	1, 500	17, 850
13	9 May	Łęczna	200	200						18, 050
14	9 May	Lubartów	800					800		18, 850
15	10 May	Michów	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500	???	2, 500	2, 500	21, 350
16	12 May	Opole	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000		3, 500 <sup>8</sup>	23, 350
17	12 May	Turobin	2, 750	2, 000	2, 750	2, 750	2, 000	2, 750	2, 750	26, 100
18	May	Puławy	2, 500	2, 500	2, 500			3, 500		28, 600
19	12-15 May	Żółkiewka	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000	2, 000	29, 600
20	13-14 May	Gorzków	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000		1, 200	1, 200	31, 600
21	14-15 May	Krasnystaw	3, 400	3, 400	3, 400	4, 000	4, 000			35, 000
22	15 May	Izbica	400	400	400?	5, 000	5, 000			35, 400
23	15-16 May	Zamość	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000			40, 400
24	18 May	Siedliszcze	630	630	630	630	600	1, 000		41, 030
25	21-23 May	Chelm	4, 300	2, 300	4, 300	2, 300	4, 300	4, 300	4, 300	45, 330
26	23 May	Włodawa <sup>9</sup>	1, 200	1, 200	1, 200	1, 200	1, 200	2, 000		46, 530
27	25-31 May	Chelm	1, 500	1, 500		2, 500 (31 May)	2, 500			48, 030
28	May	Łysobyki	500	500	500		500	500	400	48, 530
29	25 May	Wąwolnica	500	500				500	500	49, 030

<sup>7</sup> That number could be the total sum of two deportations from Opole Lubelskie to Sobibór (5 and 12 May 1942).

<sup>8</sup> That number could be the total sum of two deportations from Opole Lubelskie to Sobibór (5 and 12 May 1942).

<sup>9</sup> Probably, it was a transport of 2, 000 people. Detailed explanations about it are provided by K. Skwirowski in his book entitled: *Żydzi włodawscy 1918-1939 i ich zagłada podczas II wojny światowej* [The Jews of Włodawa 1918-1939 and Their Destruction during the Second World War], Lublin, 2009.

30	25 May	Międzyrzec Podlaski <sup>10</sup>	800							49, 830
31	May	Kraśniczyn	???	???						
32	May	Rudnik <sup>11</sup>	???	???						
33	May	Wysokie	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000		1, 000	700	50, 830
34	May	Cyców <sup>12</sup>	???	???						
35	May	Krasnystaw	???	???		???	???			
36	1 June	Cyców	450						450	51, 280
37	1-2 June	Hrubieszów	3, 049	3, 049	3, 049	3, 049	3, 000		3, 049	54, 329
38	2 June	Belz <sup>13</sup>	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000	1, 000		100	55, 329
39	2 June	Dubienka	2, 670	2, 670	2, 670	2, 670	2, 700		2, 670	57, 999
40	6 June	Kraśniczyn	800	800	800	800	800		1, 000	58, 799
41	7-9 June	Hrubieszów	500	500	500	500	500		5, 500	59, 299

<sup>10</sup> Tatiana Berenstein: ‘Martyrologia, opór i zagłada ludności żydowskiej w dystrykcie lubelskim’ [The Martyrdom, Resistance and Extermination of Jewish People in the Lublin District], *Biuletyn ŻIH* [The Jewish Historical Institute Bulletin], 1957, No. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Rudnik – according to Tatiana Berenstein, the Jewish population of Rudnik was 248 inhabitants in 1942. In June 1942, they were ‘evacuated’; T. Berenstein does not specify the place of deportation of those Jews.

<sup>12</sup> According to Tatiana Berenstein, the Jewish population of Cyców was 538 inhabitants in April 1942. They were deported to Sobibór in June 1942; T. Berenstein does not specify the number of deportees. Most probably, it is this transport that Józef Marszałek has written down in his statistics under the date of 1 June (450 deportees).

<sup>13</sup> Tatiana Berenstein writes that on 22 May 1942 the Jewish population of Belz was 1, 540, and on 1 August, there were only 27 people left. In March 1942, 500 Jews from Cracow were deported to Belz. According to Berenstein, there were two relocations from Belz: the first one, which involved 100 people, took place on 2 June 1942 through Hrubieszów to Sobibór, and the other one in September. As far as the other deportation is concerned, Berenstein does not specify the exact number of deportees or the place of deportation. Blatt, Scheffler and Arad have assumed that 1, 000 Jews were transported to Sobibór on 2 June. Józef Marszałek and Tatiana Berenstein have reduced that number to 100 people, who reached Sobibór via Hrubieszów. According to Marszałek, the number of deported Jews in September was 1, 100. Blatt, Scheffler and Arad do not include in their statistics the September relocation from Belz to Sobibór. A somewhat different interpretation of the resettlements from the town of Belz is presented on [www.szetl.org.pl/en/article/belz/](http://www.szetl.org.pl/en/article/belz/) “[...] Soon after the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, the town was captured by the Soviet army. After a treaty between the USSR and Germany was signed in October 1939, Soviet troops left Belz. And so did almost the whole Jewish population of the town. Belz began being occupied by German troops. German occupation authorities marched to Belz the whole Jewish population from its environs. Also, a labour camp for Jews was created there. In July 1942, about 1, 000 Jews were deported from Belz to Sobibór, and about 500 in September. All were murdered. In 1945, 220 Jews returned to Belz. Nearly all of them emigrated to Israel or to other countries towards the end of the 1990s [...]”.

42	8 June	Grabowiec	1, 200	1, 200	1, 200	1, 200	1, 200		1, 200	60, 499
43	10 June	Uchanie	1, 650	1, 650	1, 650	1, 650	1, 700		1, 650	62, 149
44	10-13 June	Biała Podlaska	3, 000	3, 000	3, 000	6, 000	3, 000		3, 000 (10 May)	65, 149
45	June	Sławatycze <sup>14</sup>	1, 000	1, 000						
46	10-13 June	Dubeczno	600	???	???		???		600	65, 749
47	June	Olchowiec	200	???					200	65, 949
48	June	Pawłów	200	???					200	66, 149
49	June	Sawin	900	???					900	67, 049
50	June	Krzywówierzba	300	???					300	67, 349
51	June	Kraśniczyn	???	???						
52	24 July	Włodawa <sup>15</sup>	7 August 1, 500	100s		100 (31 July)	100			68, 849
53	31 July	Chelm	300	300	300 (06)	300	300			69, 149
54	10 August	Rejowiec	2, 000 <sup>16</sup>	2, 000						71, 149
55	10 August	Żółkiewka	1, 000	1, 000	1000	1000		1, 000	?????	72, 149
56	6 September	Ustrzyki	???	???						
57	8 September	Ryczywół	60	60						72, 209
58	September	Bełz	500						1, 100 <sup>17</sup>	
59	September	Grabowiec	2, 000						2, 000	74, 209
60	1-5 October	Puchaczów	150	150		150	150			74, 359
61	8 October	Izbica <sup>18</sup>	2, 500	1, 500		????	2, 500			76, 859

<sup>14</sup> It is very probable that in this case Tomasz Blatt has noted down a transport of 1,000 Jews who on 13 June 1942 were transported to Łomazy, where they were shot together with Jews from Rossosz and Łomazy on 19 August 1942.

<sup>15</sup> That transport took place on 7 August. In total, about 1, 500 Jews were deported from Włodawa during that ‘action’. Detailed information about it is provided by K. Skwirowski in his book entitled *Żydzi włodawscy 1918-1939 i ich zagłada podczas II wojny światowej* [The Jews of Włodawa 1918-1939 and Their Destruction during the Second World War], Lublin, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Information about that transport can also be found in - Zdzisław Kalinowski, *Pamięć o ofiarach zagłady* [In Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust] (Rejowiec, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> That number refers to the transport from 2 June (see Entry 38 in the table).

<sup>18</sup> Tatiana Berenstein writes that between 8 and 19 October 1942, Jews from Izbica (she does not specify the number of them) were resettled for extermination to Bełżec and Sobibór. Robert Kuwałek dates that transport back to 19 October: “[...] 19 October – after a few days’ long action at the ramp in Izbica, the Germans brought together about 5, 000 Jews, including a substantial number of those who had been marched there from Zamość and other towns in the Krasnystaw province. The transport was divided into two groups – about 2, 500 people were deported to the camp in Bełżec, whereas the other group was directed to the extermination camp in Sobibór. About 700 of them were shot by the ramp in Izbica [...]”. It is probably the same transport.

62	10 October	Rejowiec	2, 400	2, 400	2, 400			2, 400		79, 259
63	11 October	Lubartów	3, 000	3, 000	3, 000		3, 000			82, 259
64	October	Wojślawice	1, 200	1, 200	1, 200		1, 200		1, 000	83, 459
65	22 October	Siedliszcze	500	500	500	500	500		2, 000	83, 959
66	22-30 October	Piaski and Izbica <sup>19</sup>	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000	2, 500			88, 959
67	23 October	Łęczna	3, 000	3, 000	3, 000		3, 000			91, 959
68	24 October	Włodawa	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000	5, 000		8, 000	96, 959
69	27-28 October	Chelm	3, 000	3, 000	3, 300	3, 000	3, 000		12, 000	99, 959
70	28 October	Hrubieszów	2, 000	2, 000	2, 000		2, 000		200	101, 959
71	30 October	Włodawa	500	500	500	500	500			102, 459
72	30 October	Bełżyce and Bychawa	7, 230 <sup>20</sup>	7, 000						109, 689

<sup>19</sup> As far as Kurt Ticho's account is concerned, he was deported to Sobibór on 5/6 November 1942. However, it is very probable that the transport written down under the date 22-30 October is really the one in which Kurt Ticho arrived: [...] *On 5 November 1942, at six in the morning, after waiting nearly for five hours, shocked and full of anxiety, we heard SS-men screaming outside: "Piaski wird judenrein, alle aus den Verstecken" (Piaski will be cleansed of the Jews, get out of your hideout). We sat as quite as mice. However, about half an hour later, we heard the alarming sound of an axe chopping at the box masking the entrance to our hideout. Someone lifted the box and shouted out loud to us in Polish to get out. It was a local policeman who had helped the Germans during this air raid. One by one, we crawled back to the cellar. We were told to go back to the exit. Then, we were forced to lie down, after which, we got repeatedly hit on the buttocks. The women were not maltreated. Next, we were pushed out onto a yard where there already was a group of about 1,500 -2,000 people gathered together. Continuously hit and intimidated by Ukrainian traitors, we walked for the last time through the ghetto gateway in the direction of Trawniki. Led by an SS-man, we arrived at the railway stadion in Trawniki at about noon. A train was already waiting for us. It was half filled with Jews from Izbica, a town where there was also a ghetto. The train set off late in the afternoon. We did not know the destination of our journey. The conditions in the freight trucks were horrible. The odour of excrement permeated the musty air. We were all dreaming of getting out, ignorant of our death sentences. In the following morning, on 6 November, at dawn, the train came to a halt [...]*. (Ticho, Kurt, *My Legacy. Holocaust, History and Unfinished Task of Pope John Paul II*, Włodawa, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Adam Kopciowski, 'Społeczność żydowska Bełżyc na przestrzeni wieków' [The Jewish Community of Bełżyce throughout the Ages] (in): *Studia z dziejów Bełżyc* [Studies of the History of Bełżyce], Bełżyce, 2006, "[...] *In October 1942, another transport of Jews from Bełżyce set off for the extermination camp in Sobibór, where it was immediately directed to the gas chamber. It was a transport of 7, 230 Jews who had been concentrated in Bełżyce from seven nearby communes of the Lublin district, among other places, from Bychawa, Jastków or Wojciechów. The remaining inhabitants of the ghetto had been accommodated in a dozen or so houses around the ruined synagogue, thus forming a labour camp within the synagogue walls, separated from the rest of the town by barbed wire [...]*".

73	October/ November	<b>Cyców, Krzywierzba, Olchowiec, Pawłów, Sawin, Świerże, Uhrusk</b>	<b>3,000- 4,000</b>		3,000- 4,000				Krzywo- wierzba (300), Olcho- wicz(200), Pawłów (200), Sa- win (900), Swierże (450), Uhrusk (300)	<b>112, 689</b>
74	2 November	<b>Izbica</b>	<b>1, 750</b>	1, 750	1, 750	1, 750	2, 000		2, 300	<b>114, 439</b>
75	6 November	<b>Chelm</b>	<b>6,000- 10,000</b>	10,000	????	????	??????			<b>120, 439</b>
76	22 November	<b>Staw</b>	<b>800</b>	800		800	800			<b>121, 239</b>
77	December	<b>Dubeczno</b>	<b>650</b>	650	650	???				<b>121, 889</b>
<b>1943</b>										
78	January	<b>Izbica</b>	<b>750</b>	750	750	750	800			<b>750</b>
79	January	<b>Chelm<sup>21</sup></b>	<b>???</b>	???		???	???			
80	February	<b>Chelm</b>	<b>300</b>	300		300	300			<b>1, 050</b>
81	28 April	<b>Izbica</b>	<b>200</b>	200	200	200				<b>1, 250</b>
82	29 April	<b>Łęczna</b>	<b>200</b>	200	200	200			200	<b>1, 450</b>
83	30 April	<b>Włodawa</b>	<b>2,000</b>	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000			<b>3, 450</b>
84	1-7 May	<b>Włodawa</b>	<b>150</b>	150		150				<b>3, 600</b>
85	26 June	<b>Bełżec (*) (liquidation of camp)</b>	<b>306</b>	306						<b>3, 906</b>
86	June	<b>Majdanek</b>	<b>5,000</b>	5,000	5,000		5,000			<b>8, 906</b>
87	8 August	<b>Dębica</b>	<b>2,000</b>	2,000						<b>10, 906</b>
88	10 September	<b>Dorohucza</b>	<b>???</b>	???						
89	20 October/ 4 November	<b>Treblinka</b>	<b>275</b>	100						<b>11, 181</b>
Total sum (the total number of deported people in the years 1942 and 1943)										<b>133, 070</b>

<sup>21</sup> In her book, Tatiana Berenstein writes that the deportation of Jews from Chelm to Sobibór took place in January. However, she does not specify the exact date or the number of deportees.

## Appendix No. 2.

Table No. 2. A register of deportations to the German extermination centre in Sobibór 1942-1943 – Marek Bem’s research proposal. .

No.	Date of deportation	Deported from	Number of deportees	Total
1	31 March 1942	Kazimierz <sup>22</sup>	1, 400	1, 400
2	April 1942	Sosnowica <sup>23</sup>	250	1, 650
3	April 1942	Chełm <sup>24</sup>	120	1, 770
4	April 1942	Włodawa <sup>25</sup>	500	2, 270

<sup>22</sup> Robert Kuwałek, *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu* [The Extermination Camp in Belżec], Lublin, 2010, pp. 99-100.

<sup>23</sup> Stanisław Jadczyk, *Gmina Sosnowica. Monografia* [The Sosnowica Commune. A Monograph], Lublin-Sosnowica, 2003: “*In January 1941, the Nazis created a ghetto in Sosnowica. The area of the ghetto was limited by the land from the school building northwards as far as the road to Sosnowica Lasek. Jews from the settlement and nearby villages were gathered there. Soon, the Nazis accommodated in the ghetto a transport of 40 Jews from Mława, and in March 1942 – a transport of 200 Jews from Kielce. The small area of the ghetto was overcrowded - in November 1942, about 580 men, women and children stayed there. Earlier, in April 1942, the Germans made a selection in the ghetto. As a result, a transport of Jewish children was dispatched straight to an extermination camp. The small area of the ghetto was not fenced, only German warning and prohibition signs ‘guarded’ it. In 1942, the Germans created a labour camp in Sosnowica, with about 300 Jews (men) as slave labour force. They were forced to slave away from dawn till dusk, without adequate food or medical care. The Jews would toil away in mud and water at irrigating marshes and swampy meadows in Sosnowica and Pieszowola. It is no wonder then that diseases decimated the Jews who were assembled in the camp. In November 1942, the ghetto in Sosnowica was liquidated, but in a different way than, for example, in towns or cities: The Nazis simply ordered the Jews to report in the Włodawa ghetto. Terrorised and resigned, they just followed the command. Whole families left for Włodawa in horse-drawn carts... Once they arrived, the Nazis rounded them up and dispatched to the extermination camp in nearby Sobibór. There, the Jewish community of Włodawa perished in the gas chambers”.*

<sup>24</sup> Z. Krawczak, a witness account, Switzerland, 1943, the Yad Vashem archives, file ref. No. 033/425; Jan Piwoński, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 16 January 1968, the MPEW archives.

<sup>25</sup> Zygmunt Białucha, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 17 January 1968, MPEW Archives; Józef Cholewa, witness interrogation record, (the number of the case file - missing), Lublin, 18 May 1967, MPEW Archives; Jan Krzowski, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD – 058/67, Włodawa, 15 January 1968, MPEW Archives; Jan Krzowski, witness interrogation record, Case file ref. No. OKL/DS./1/67, Lublin, 30 November 1967, MPEW Archives; Franciszek Parkoła, witness interrogation record, (the signature of the case file - missing), Lublin, 5 May 1967, MPEW Archives;

5	10-15 May 1942	Tarnopol <sup>26</sup>	2, 500	4, 770
6	25 May 1942	Tyszowce <sup>27</sup>	580 - 800	5, 350
7	27 May 1942	Łaszczów <sup>28</sup>	350	5, 700
8	June 1942	Krychów <sup>29</sup>	200	5, 900
9	24 October 1942	Opole Lubelskie <sup>30</sup>	9, 000	14, 900
10	November 1942	Uchanie <sup>31</sup>	350	15, 250
11	13 November 1942	Kurów <sup>32</sup>	2, 000	17, 250
12	6 November 1942	Włodawa	500????	17, 750
13	December 1942	Krychów <sup>33</sup>	800	18, 550
14	15 December 1942	Dębica <sup>34</sup>	6, 000 (60 cattle trucks)	24, 550

Jan Piwoński, a transcript of an interview conducted by Cloude Lanzmann, a DVD recording, USHMM Archives, file ref. No. 60. 5031, translated from English by Marek Bem; Czesław Sójka, witness interrogation record, Case No. DSD 058/67, Włodawa, 22 January 1968, MPLW Archives; Irena Sujko, witness interrogation record, Case File No. Ko.Kpp. 91/67, Biała Podlaska, 8 July 1967, MPLW Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Aleksij Wajcen, interview transcript, DVD recording/Discs 1-2, The archives of USC Shoah Foundation Institute. For Visual History and Education, Sign. 4412, 14 September 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Kuwałek, *op. cit.*, p.238; Oneg Szabat, Yad Vashem Archives, Mio/261, AR I 261, OM 3489/14.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Kuwałek, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Z. Krawczak, a witness account, Switzerland, 1943, the Yad Vashem archives, Sign. 033/425.

<sup>30</sup> Opole Lubelskie, cf. – Sources and literature/Internet resources; Ryszard Gicewicz, ‘Obóz pracy w Poniatowej (1941-1943)’ [The Labour Camp in Poniatowa] (in): Wojciech Lenarczyk, Dariusz Libionka, eds, *3-4 listopada 1943. Erntefest. Zapomniany epizod zagłady* [3-4 November 1943. Erntefest. A Forgotten Episode of Extermination], the State Museum at Majdanek, Lublin, 2009, pp. 215-217.

<sup>31</sup> Uchanie, cf. – Sources and literature/Internet resources.

<sup>32</sup> Kurów, cf. - Sources and literature/Internet resources.

<sup>33</sup> Z. Krawczak, a witness account, Switzerland, 1943, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 033/425.

<sup>34</sup> On the basis of: Bronia Oling-Burg, ‘Wyskoczyłam z pociągu do Bełżca’ [I Jumped Off the Train to Bełżec] (in): Daniel Leibel, ed., *Sefer Dembitz*, Tel Awiw, 1964, translated from Hebrew by Jerrold Landau, translated from English by Ireneusz Socha, pp. 170-172 and ‘The Murder of the Jews of Dembitz’ (in): Leibel Daniel, ed., *Sefer Dembitz*, Tel Awiw, 1964, pp.141-147. Transports from Rawa Ruska directed to Bełżec on 7 - 11 December 1942 were the last to reach the camp. It is probable that the transport in question could have been scheduled to reach Bełżec, but because the camp in Bełżec had already been liquidated, the transport was directed to Sobibór.

15	8 January 1943	Lubaczów <sup>35</sup>	4, 000	28, 550
16	13 January 1943	Zasławie <sup>36</sup>	1, 300	29, 850
17	17 January 1943	Zasławie <sup>37</sup>	2, 800	32, 650
18	February 1943	Trawniki <sup>38</sup>	500	33, 150
19	March 1943	Osowa	400	33, 550
20	May 1943	Końskowola	900	34, 450
21	July 1943	Włodawa <sup>39</sup>	150	34, 600
22	September 1943	Dębica <sup>40</sup>	2, 000 – 4, 000	<b>36, 600</b>

### Appendix No. 3.

Table No. 3. A register of deportations from the District of Galicia and from outside of the General Government to the German extermination centre in Sobibór 1942-1943

No.	Date of deportation	Deported from	Number of deportees	Total
1	1942-1943	the USSR(Lida, Minsk, Vilnius)	13, 700	13, 700
2	1942-1943	the Netherlands	34, 000	47, 700

<sup>35</sup> Eugeniusz Szajowski, 'Tylko ziemia została ta sama. Lubaczów 1942-1943' [Only the Land Is the Same As Before]. Lubaczów 1942-1943], *Rocznik Lubaczowski* [The Lubaczów Annual], vol. 9-10, 2000, pp. 176-290; Feiga Kamer's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1174, Kraków, (the date of the account - missing).

<sup>36</sup> Yacov Gurfein's account, Israel, 23 June 1960, see – Sources and literature Internet resources.

<sup>37</sup> Hanel Salomea's account (no date provided), ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. M 49/186.

<sup>38</sup> Mosche Bahir's account (in): Miriam Novitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-163; Tomasz Blatt's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 4082, Łódź, 13 June 1948; Samuel Lerer's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/104, 1945.; Dov Freiberg, *op. cit.*, p. 65; Eda Lichtmans testimony, the archives of Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg, Case File 45 Js 27/61, file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959.

<sup>39</sup> Nauman Płotnicki's account, Yad Vashem Archives, file ref. No. 033C/340, Israel, 11 March 1980, translated from Russian by Wiesława Leśniewska.

<sup>40</sup> That transport has been considered in reference to Tomasz Blatt's list (see: Table no. 1., Entry 87), on the basis of: Eda Lichtman's account, the Archives of ZentraleStelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg, Case File 45 Js 27/61, na file ref. No. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Holon/Israel, May 1959; Moszek Merenstein's account, ŻIH Archives, file ref. No. 301/1292, Lublin, 17 January 1945; Mordechai Zanin, 'W Sobiborze nic nie zostało' [There Is Nothing Left in Sobibór] (in): Sz. Kanc, ed., *Życie i upadek Włodawy. Księga Pamięci Włodawy* [The Life and Fall of Włodawa, the Włodawa Remembrance Book], Tel Aviv, 1974, translated from English by Albert Lewczuk vel Leoniuk.

3	1942-1943	France	3, 500	51, 200
4	1942-1943	Germany and Austria	23, 500	74, 700
5	1942-1943	Slovakia	26, 000	100,, 700
6	1942-1943	the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia <sup>41</sup>	10, 000	110, 700
7	1942-1943	the District of Galicia <sup>42</sup>	25, 000	<b>135, 700</b>

#### Appendix No. 4.

#### *SS-Oberscharführer Karl Frenzel*



**Karl Frenzel**<sup>43</sup> was born on 20 August 1911 in Zehdenick/Havel. He was the son of Otto Frenzel (a state railways employee) and Minna Frenzel née Bernau. Frenzel spent his childhood in Grüneberg. He had three siblings. Between 1918 and 1926, he went to primary school in Oranienburg. When he was in the 8<sup>th</sup> form, his parents took him away from school. Between 1926 and 1930, he trained as a carpenter in Zehdenick. He finished his training after passing the journeyman exam in July 1930. At first, Frenzel could not find a job due to a serious economic crisis. He earned a living doing some odd farm jobs. Later, up till 1933, he worked as a supervisor in a meat processing plant in Oranienburg. In the summer of 1933, due to the support from the SA, Frenzel was employed as a military police assistant in Grüneberg. In the autumn of 1933, he left the military police and worked, until 1935, in an ammunition factory in Grüneberg. From 1 September 1935 to August 1939, Frenzel was employed as an administrator in Löwenberg castle. He got this job thanks to the support of influential acquaintances.

In October 1934, Frenzel married Sofie née Aumann. They had five children. His wife died on 5 November 1945, in Löwenberg. Frenzel did not leave the church, and had his children baptised. On 27 August 1939, Frenzel was conscripted into 211 (or 204) construction battalion, an institution which worked for the state and which was subordinate to the Wehrmacht. At the end of 1939, as the only breadwinner of a large family, Frenzel was exempt from the army. However, he immediately went to

<sup>41</sup> Nos 1-6 - Jules Schelvis, *Vernichtungslager...*, p. 272.

<sup>42</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *op. cit.*, p. 391.

<sup>43</sup> This biographical note has been written on the basis of: *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, (ed.): W. De Mildt, C. Ruter, Amsterdam 2009, Lfd. No. 642, LG Hagen 661220, BGH 710325, Lfd. No.897, LG Hagen 851004.

the local military station in order to volunteer to the army. When his application was rejected, he turned to his SA regiment, asking them to ‘pull strings’ and assign him to some unit. As a result, he was told to report to the *Columbushaus* in Berlin.

The leaders of ‘Action T-4’ looked for absolutely devoted members of the Nazi party to carry out strictly confidential duties. Frenzel went there on his own as told. At the beginning of January 1940, together with other 15 persons, he was instructed by Blakenburg or Brack (or both of them) about the type of work they were going to do, and were next sworn to secrecy. Blakenburg and Brack made it clear that the sole duty of the medical personnel of ‘Action T-4’ was to kill. Afterwards, Frenzel was appointed to the euthanasia centres in Grafeneck, Bernburg and Hadamar, and then, back in Bernburg, to work as a craftsman, and then as a stoker or a person responsible for disinfection. Frenzel did not take part in the winter operation of ‘Action T-4’.

In mid April 1942, Frenzel was sent back to Berlin, where he met his colleagues from the euthanasia centres. He took 2 or 3 days of holiday, which he spent at his home with Bolender and Gomerski. Next, he was given the order to go to Lublin. There, he was appointed to do service in the Sobibór camp, where he served until its liquidation in November 1943. From Sobibór, like other ‘Operation Reinhardt’ members, Frenzel was sent to Upper Italy. There, he served in the ‘R’ unit under Globocnik’s command. Before the war ended, he had also worked as a policeman at the main police station in Trieste and Fiume. In the spring of 1944, Frenzel had a motorcycle accident and, as a result, spent a lot of time in different field hospitals. Captured during the offensive of American troops, he was taken to the internment camp in Munich. He was released from the camp in the second week of May 1945 to work for the Americans as a cook. He worked as a cook until August. Frenzel came back home to Loewenberg on the day when his wife died. He needed a job, and he found one with a film producing company as a Deputy Stage Master Carpenter in Goettingen. In 1946, he came across Elfryda Gruber, and soon they lived together.

In 1966, during the Hagen trial, Frenzel made a statement that after he had thought everything over once again, he felt guilty. He realised that the Nazis had done irreparable harm to other people, and that all the anti-Jewish campaign had been a crime. He claimed that he regretted having been personally involved in it. His lawyer described him as a “*man who was not blessed with an outstanding mind*”. The psychiatrist who examined him at the court’s request asked him about his attitude towards Hitler. His answer was: “*I still support his policy, with the exception of all the anti-Jewish actions which took place. This issue should have been sorted out in a different way*”. Karl August Wilhelm Frenzel received a life sentence to be served in a maximum security prison. However, by the time he applied for a review of judgement (5 November 1982), he had been released from prison. Consequently, he was allowed to attend all the subsequent court sessions without police supervision. The court announced its verdict on 4 November 1985. Frenzel was sentenced, once more, to life imprisonment, this time for complicity in murder. This verdict created a precedence in the history of the German judicial system. The verdict from the first trial against Frenzel (1966) for murdering a twelve-year-old boy, was upheld.

Karl Frenzel arrived at Sobibór on 28 April 1942, together with a new commandant, Franz Stangl. He served in the Sobibór extermination centre until its ultimate liquidation, i.e. until the beginning of November 1943. In the meantime, he went a few times on holiday to the Reich. During the period of his service in the camp, about 300,000 Jews were murdered. However, despite all the knowledge and the expertise the Hagen court had at its disposal, he was charged with complicity in the murder of 150,000 people (the number was treated as the lowest possible number and the number in accordance with the court's opinion).

In the Sobibór camp, Karl Frenzel wore a uniform of an SS sergeant with two stars and without the SS rune collar tabs. At first, as a qualified carpenter, he was engaged in the construction of the camp, supervising the putting up of the fence and the barracks for the Jewish prisoner-labourers, the watchmen and the German personnel. Later, at the end of 1942 and in 1943, although he had other responsibilities in the camp, he sometimes supervised the building work in the camp. From the moment the extermination of the Jews began in the camp, Frenzel was being more and more engaged in it. As of the summer of 1942, Frenzel replaced Weiss in the position of the commandant of camp I. He was responsible for the accommodation and the workshops in that part of the camp. There, he organised regular roll-calls of all the prisoners.

Frenzel divided the prisoner-labourers into permanent commandos and commandos which were formed occasionally, as required. During the day, he supervised the commandos in different parts of the camp (except for Camp III), even when another German guard had been appointed to do the task. Whenever new transports came, Frenzel took command over the railway station commando. Despite the fact that he was directly subordinate to Michel (later replaced by Wagner) and the camp's commandants (Stangl, followed by Reichleitner), as well as SS-Second Lieutenant Niemann (deputy commandant), Frenzel held enormous power in the camp.

His limitless power inspired terror in all the prisoners of the camp. He shouted out orders in a loud piercing voice, swearing at the Jews viciously, all the time lashing out at them with his leather whip. Whenever new transports came, as the commander of the 'railway' commando, he was always present on the ramp, accompanied by Wagner and other German and Ukrainian guards. Very frequently, he himself escorted newcomers to the gas chambers. If they tried to stop or if they walked too slowly, he would scream at them and hustle them with his whip. Obviously, he did his best to prevent the victims from even thinking of putting up any resistance. Also, he selected, of his own free will, labourers from the group of newly-arrived Jews. Sometimes, he even kept watch over the women who were undressing, and the 'hairdressers', when they were shearing the women's hair.

Frenzel declared himself 'the camp's judicial authority'. Accordingly, it was him that gave the orders to administer 25 or 50 whip strikes in case a prisoner was found guilty of a 'crime'. In some cases, he meted out punishment himself, on other occasions he made the Jewish kapos beat their fellow prisoners. The 'convicts' had to stoop down or lie down on a table or a bench. The poor prisoner was beaten on his naked buttocks, which frequently brought him to such a terrible state that he only qualified to go to the 'lazaret', which meant death in camp III. Like Wagner, Frenzel selected prisoners for the so-called 'penal commando' created in 1943.

Frenzel took advantage of his privileged position in Camp I and often appropriated valuables coming from the Jewish transports. He often told Stanisław Szmajzner, a goldsmith who arrived at Sobibór on 12 May 1942, to remake different valuable things for him so that he could send them home. He was also very active in camouflaging the real purpose the Sobibór camp served. Therefore, he often induced newcomers, especially Dutch Jews, to write letters to their relatives and friends, and to provide the false address from which they were sending them, i.e. ‘labour camp in Włodawa’. In this way, he aroused their hopes, just a few minutes before they were to enter the gas chambers.

As a member of the camp’s personnel, Frenzel was very ambitious and always showed great zeal in performing all his duties. Therefore, he always made sure that he knew perfectly well what was happening in the camp. He wanted to be the best, and often went beyond his regular chores.

Apart from Wagner, Frenzel was the most fearsome figure in the Sobibór camp. As Sobibór survivors described him in their post-war testimonies, everybody, out of terrible fear, ‘avoided him as much as possible’. The court in Hagen issued the following description of Frenzel’s personality: “[...] *The fact that the defendant had a very strong position and power over other people’s life and death changed him into a man who revelled in his absolute power, and the one who considered Jews to be a worthless race. He used the German policy of terror to personally persecute, oppress, beat, torture and kill Jews or give orders to kill them. The Jews were afraid of him, which gave him satisfaction. He supported the German plans to exterminate Jews by carrying out his superiors’ orders, and he treated his service in the camp as his personal mission [...]*”

### **SS –Oberscharführer Kurt Bolender**



**Kurt Bolender**<sup>44</sup> was born on 21 May 1912 in Duisburg as the second child of Emil and Sofia Bolenders (both of them were artisans). His parents had four children. Kurt’s eldest brother had died before he was born, his other brother was killed in France, while his sister, Ilse Frange, settled in Holldorf (Nienburg). In 1918, he went to primary school in Duisburg-Beck. In 1928, he did his A levels and found a job with the *August-Thyssen* steelworks in Duisburg (Hamborn), where he continued his education at the workplace school. After five years of his apprenticeship, he obtained the position of a railway controller in the steelworks. He worked there until 6 November 1939, when he was conscripted into the *Waffen-SS*.

<sup>44</sup> This biographical note has been written on the basis of Kurt Bolender’s testimony which he gave during his court trial in Hagen (NIOD Archives, MPLW Archives): 5 June 1961, 21 December 1961, 22 August 1962, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1961, 25 October 1962, 18 December 1963, 7 June 1962, 30 January 1964.

In December 1933, Bolender married Margaret Lachman (the wedding took place at the registry office in Wallsum). He had two sons with Margaret: Heinz Kurt (born on 15 July 1934) and Gunter (born on 30 January 1936).

On 6 November 1939, Kurt Bolender was sent on a three-month military training. In January 1940, he was posted, together with 10 other soldiers, to Brandenburg to report to Christian Wirth. At that time, he did not know why he had been sent there. After three days, he was sent to the *Columbushaus* in Berlin. There, he was ordered to wait to swear a special oath.

In spring 1940, Bolender was sent to Grafeneck, where he stayed one day only. There, he had a serious argument with a policeman by the name of Hauptman. On the next day, he left Berlin, under escort, and headed towards the 'Action T-4' headquarters. He was put under house arrest. He was even threatened with the punishment of being sent to a concentration camp. However, he was exempt from such a harsh punishment due to his friends' intercession. Instead, Bolender was given the order to immediately go to the Hartheim euthanasia centre near Linz.

In the meantime, when Wirth arrived at Hartheim, the centre was under construction. Thus, when Bolender came, he had to help in the construction work. When the centre was ready, he served as a 'Desinfektor' there. Several months later, Wirth left Hartheim, and was replaced by Reichleitner. After one of the 'mates' parties', at which Bolender got drunk, he quarrelled with Reichleitner fiercely. As a punishment, he was sent away to the Sonnenstein euthanasia centre, where he worked as a 'Desinfektor' for two months. When he came back, Hartheim was being renovated. After the renovation work was finished, Bolender went, within 'Action T-4', to the East Front, where he 'dealt with' wounded soldiers for three months. Next, right from the front, he was moved to the Sonnenstein centre. Two months later, Bolender was summoned to the 'T-4' headquarters in Berlin. There, he was given the order to go to Lublin. He left Berlin with a group of 10-15 men.

Kurt Bolender arrived at the Sobibór extermination centre in the spring of 1942 with the first group of SS men. He served there until July 1942. He came back to Sobibór in October 1943, after the prisoners' revolt, to participate in the liquidation of the camp and obliteration of all the traces of the German crimes committed there. During his service in Sobibór, Bolender was in charge of the commando from Camp III, whose task was to remove corpses of gassed people from the gas chambers and bury them. After the war, Erich Fuchs testified that Bolender and him used to switch on the engine whose fumes were pumped inside the gas chambers. When the war ended, Bolender, in fear of being unmasked, was hiding under the name Brenner. However, in May 1961, he was recognised and arrested. In the court trial (Hagen, the years 1965/66) against members of the Sobibór camp's personnel, he was charged with having personally killed approximately 360 Jews, and for the 'complicity in the murder' of about 86,000 Jews. Bolender hanged himself in his prison cell on the night of 9/10 October 1966, before the court announced its verdict.

During his court trial in Hagen, Bolender testified about his stay in Grafeneck. His testimony included the names of his co-workers: "[...] *Wirth was the chief supervisor;*

*Reichleitner replaced Wirth. Stangl represented Reichleitner and was a member of the office personnel. Gomerski, Groot, Grömer and Vallaster were 'Desinfektors'; Hödl, Gertzinger and Lothar were car drivers and guards stationed at the main gate. Stoibl worked as the chief custodian, Giertzog worked in the canteen, Barbel worked in the administration, Dr Lohnauer was the chief doctor.*

According to Bolender's testimony, he worked in the Sonnensteins' centre with the following members of personnel: "doctor Schuhmann - the managing director of the centre, doctor Ullrich - his deputy, Schemel - practically, the head of the centre, Tauscher - Colonel, Schemel's deputy, Rost - the head of the transport department, in charge of all the car drivers, Börner - the head of the economic department, Fischer - Börner's deputy, Gley - the chief orderly, Böhm Karl and Kamm Rudi were 'Desinfektors', Franz Kurt and Zänker Hans - chefs or cooks, Schiffner - craftsman, Schmidt - the first orderly, he was later a lorry car driver. I know that he came from Saxony and he lived in proximity to the Sonnenstein centre. [...]"<sup>45</sup>.

When Kurt Bolender came to the Sobibór camp, the extermination centre was still under construction. Only part of Camp I was ready, the one with artisans' workshops, where Jewish specialists selected on the ramp were meant to work. Upon arrival, Bolender was ordered to supervise the work of a group of prisoner-labourers who were felling trees in the neighbouring woods. The wood was to be used as building material, especially for the construction of the camp's fence.

Bolender was also responsible for the installation of barbed wire along the camp's fence. When the fence was ready, it was interwoven with pine tree branches to prevent any observation of the camp from outside. He supervised the work of about 50 - 60 labourers - he was responsible for the organisation of work, and for giving appropriate orders. The labourers' work was directly supervised by a group of Ukrainian watchmen whom Bolender had at his disposal.

At the same time, he was the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon of the Ukrainian watchmen. He had to supervise their training, muster them, make sure that they submitted to strict discipline and observed all the rules and principles, and to supervise military posts situated around the camp. When the first transports of Jews were about to come to the Sobibór camp, the construction of the fence had not been completed yet. Therefore, his commando (supplemented with a dozen or so prisoner-labourers) was ordered to dig, in Camp III, huge pits where the bodies of the first victims were to be buried. The first pit was ready when the first Jewish transports arrived. The next pit was not ready yet. Most probably, Bolender fell ill when it was still being dug.

When asked, during his trial in Hagen, to describe other members of the Sobibór personnel, Bolender mentioned the following: "[...] *Franz Stangl was the camp's commandant, Reichleitner was his successor. Michel had the same position when Stangl was commandant as Oberhauser had when Wirth was commandant. Stoibl worked in camp I. I don't know what he did there; to my mind, he took care of the*

<sup>45</sup> Kurt Bolender, hearing report, the National Court of the Criminal Police, Munich, 5 June 1962, NIOD Archives.

money and jewellery. Schütte was the head of the administration, Gomerski worked in Camp III, Paul Groth was probably stationed in Camp I. What his responsibilities were, I don't know. Frenzel worked in Camp I, and I can't say anything more about him. Jonny Niemann was in Camp III; he lost his life in the prisoners' revolt. Vallastar worked in Camp I and was also killed in the uprising. Richter was a cook, Gretzschus (perhaps his name is spelt differently) was in charge of the guards; he lost his life in the revolt. The man who was nicknamed 'Bulgy Head', and whose real name is unknown to me, shot himself. He got his nickname after he had left the mechanised corps with his head clean-shaven. Dubois was wounded during the revolt. Afterwards, he went to Italy. Erns Bauch was in Camp I; he drowned somewhere when he was on holiday leave in Berlin. Bauer worked, together with above-mentioned 'Emil,' in Camp III. The two of them operated the engine of the gas chamber. The Wolf brothers – I never met them in person. One of them was killed in the uprising.

*When I first arrived at Sobibór, I found out that there was a policeman, whose name I don't remember, and who was in charge of all the crews of guards. He had a dog, a St Bernard, who was very dangerous. The dog reacted to the name Barry. As far as I remember, the policeman was transferred somewhere else because Barry had bitten one of the Ukrainians. When the man was leaving, he gave me the dog. The dog tried to take care of me. He was trained in such a way that he could run at anything that was moving, very fast. During my stay in Sobibór, the dog never bit or killed anyone. Once, he bit a Jew who was looking after him. Nothing terrible happened to the Jew, so he went on combing and cleaning Barry as usual. There was another case when he rushed at a running Jew, but with no serious consequences. Neither me nor anyone else ever set the dog on Jews. In fact, Barry kept following me anywhere I went. During the day, he would roam about the camp [...]*"

During his court trial, Bolender kept repeating that he had worked within 'Action T-4' and 'Operation Reinhardt', but not of his own accord. He was posted to work in the places strictly connected with these two structures and obliged to keep strict professional secrecy although he did not even know the range of his future responsibilities. There was no chance for him of withdrawing from all that. Anyone who tried to do this, was threatened with the punishment of being sent to a concentration camp, which, sooner or later, meant death. He claimed that he had only performed his duties and that he had never killed anyone in person or had incited anyone to kill. During his court trial, he expressed his contrition and admitted that killing Jews had caused great harm and injustice. A week or two after the prisoner's revolt in Sobibór, Bolender returned, on Hering's order, to the Sobibór camp, which was under liquidation. He remembered that when he came back, most of the camp had already been dismantled, the pits with ashes had been put in order and young trees had been planted there. From Sobibór, Kurt Bolender went to Italy.

### *SS-Unterscharführer Erich Fuchs*



**Erich Fuchs**<sup>46</sup> was born on 9 April 1902 in Berlin. Between 1908 – 1916, he attended primary school. After graduation, he trained to be a car locksmith, and obtained his journeyman's licence in 1919. In 1928, he got a lorry driving license. On 1 May 1933, Fuchs joined the NSDAP (his membership No. - 2022204) and the SA. He did this because he wanted to earn his own living after he had lost his job with the *Ulstein-Haus*. He expected that his joining the Nazi party would help him in his professional career. Until 1939, he worked in different companies, mostly as a locksmith or car driver.

In 1940, Erich Fuchs was conscripted to 'Action T-4' and sent to the sanatorium and mental hospital in Bernburg (changed into a euthanasia centre) to work as doctor Eberl's driver (Eberl performed euthanasia in the centre). Additionally, Fuchs worked as a purchasing officer in Bernburg. In February 1942, Wirth moved Fuchs from Bernburg to the Belżec extermination camp, which had just become operational. Fuchs stayed there for six weeks. In April that same year, he was transferred to the Sobibór camp, which was under construction. After a month, he was posted to the extermination camp in Treblinka. It turned out that Treblinka's commandant was his former boss, doctor Eberl. At the end of 1942, he went back to the Bernburg euthanasia centre where, again, he met doctor Eberl. From Bernburg, Fuchs was moved, for the period of time between December 1942 and February 1943, to the euthanasia centre in Wiesloch. Later, due to the intercession of one of his friends, he managed to leave both 'Action T-4' and 'Operation Reinhardt'. As of March 1943, Fuchs worked as a driver with the *Olgessellschaft* in Riga.

In September 1944, Erich Fuchs moved to Potsdam, where he took the position of the driver of an anti-tank company unit. He was wounded in a bombing raid in Hameln. At the end of the war, he stayed in the field hospital in Burg near Magdeburg, where the Russians imprisoned him for four weeks. Next, he went to the British occupation zone, where he was taken into captivity by the English, who took him to Bremen. As a POW, Fuchs worked in an American depository until 1946.

After Fuchs was released from captivity, he lived, for some time, in Luneburger Heide, Bergen-Belsen and Rehna near Koblenz. From 1954 to 1961, Fuchs worked as a driver. Later, he sold cars. He was married five times. First, between 1921 to 1923, he was married to Elisabeth, but their married ended in divorce. The court pronounced that it was his wife's fault. On 9 August 1930, Fuchs married Irma. This marriage ended in divorce on 21 December 1943 at the court in Berlin. The fault was on both of them. Next, between 24 March 1944 and 15 December 1944, Fuchs

<sup>46</sup> This biographical note has been written on the basis of : *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Straffurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, eds.: W. De Mildt, C. Ruter, Amsterdam 2009, Lfd. No. 641, LG Hagen 661220.

was married to Anna. They divorced, and it was Fuchs's fault. On 26 May 1945, he married his fourth wife, Wilma, in Burg near Magdeburg. She was Latvian, and she came from Riga. They divorced on 26 May 1955 at the District Court in Koblenz. This time, it was also Fuchs's fault. Irena was his next wife, with whom he was married from 24 September 1955 to 25 August 1962. During his court trial in Hagen, Fuchs had a relationship with Anna, whom he planned to marry.

Erich Fuchs was arrested on 8 April 1963 in Koblenz, and remained in custody until 9 December 1963. On 15 January 1965, his arrest warrant was cancelled. However, when the trial against him commenced on 5 April 1965, another arrest warrant was issued on account of the fact that he had made an attempt to suborn the witnesses. He was kept in custody until 1966.

In April 1942 (the precise date is unknown), Wirth transferred Erich Fuchs to Bełżec in Poland. While in Bełżec, he was given the order to transport an engine from Lvov to Sobibór, and to install the engine in such a way that it could pump exhaust fumes into the chamber built to gas Jews. He operated the engine in the trial gassings. Fuchs had to take care of the engine, repair it, and to train a few Sobibór guards how to operate it.

In Hagen, Erich Fuchs denied ever being an anti-Semite. He explained that he had always had social-democratic views and that he belonged to the National Socialist People's Welfare (NSV). Even when he worked for 'Action T-4' and was aware of the criminal activity of this programme, he made a few attempts to be transferred to a different type of military service. Before leaving for Poland, he also requested Wirth to change his decision. However, the 'Action T-4' headquarters informed Fuchs that he had to go to Poland because, if not, he would end up in the concentration camp in Oranienburg. Soon after he came back from Bełżec, he wrote to Berlin another petition to be transferred to a different type of military service.

He did so as soon as Wirth informed him what real purpose the Bełżec camp was meant to serve. Fuchs came into personal conflict with Wirth when he refused to carry out the order to install dummy shower nozzles in the gas chambers. Wirth immediately ordered some German guards to take Fuchs to a secluded place and to shoot him. The guards took him away but did not shoot him. They managed to persuade Wirth to withdraw his order. Afterwards, Fuchs wrote to Berlin, asking his superiors to transfer him to a different place, and they granted his request. He was moved to Treblinka, whose commandant was Dr Eberl. Eberl assured Fuchs that he would not be involved in the extermination. From Treblinka, Fuchs went to another euthanasia centre. Only in spring 1943, after he went to Riga, did he manage to withdraw from 'Action T-4' and 'Operation Reinhardt'.

During the Hagen trial, Ann Fuchs, Erich's former wife, described him in the following way: "[...] *Fuchs was a faithful supporter of Führer. Führer was his ideal of a man, was his god. Fuchs was fascinated with everything Hitler did. He was sure that Führer knew everything best and did everything in a proper way. I was not only an opponent but even an enemy of the Nazi regime, and Fuchs knew about it well. Generally, his attitude was: "Führer gave the order, and we carry out his order!"*

*In the camps, he wasn't as bestial as those he told me about. He worked there because his authorities had ordered him to, so he considered it the right thing to do. He believed that Führer knew best what was right for Germany. He wasn't a fanatic but rather a man possessed by nationalistic ideas. I can't say anything about his anti-Semitism. The turning point in Fuchs's way of thinking took place in February 1943. To a great extent, this came as a result of my efforts to influence him. I don't think that he changed his attitude out of opportunism or because he was afraid of the adverse end of the war. As late as in 1944, he still strongly believed in the Third Reich's victory, and therefore wanted me to take the furniture and move to Riga". Anna Fuchs was of the opinion that her husband 'had taken part in all that only because it was Führer's order. Yet, he wasn't as devilish as others [...]'.*

Below is the picture Fuchs painted of himself (his self-critical statements made on 8 and 9 April 1963): “[...] today, I would like to say that I tried to leave those places earlier. Today, my conscience tells me that I could have done certain things in a different way. But back then, I had no idea how to do this. At that time, I had to do what I was told to. With time, I became numb to all those things, and I didn't feel anything. It was in Berlin that I plucked up the courage I had lacked before. All that was our worst cultural disgrace. They were criminals. They could have thought of other ways how to get rid of Jews. I can't sleep at night. I keep having all those scenes before my eyes: naked people, naked corpses. They were people who hadn't committed any crime. It was one great cunning murder on our part. Sometimes, I considered reporting to Ludwigsburg but I lacked the courage [...]”.

Erich Fuchs was arrested on 8 April 1963 in Koblenz, on the basis of the warrant issued on 2 April 1963 by the Regional Court in Düsseldorf. He was charged with murder. On 20 December 1966, the grand jury at the District Court in Hagen sentenced Erich Fuchs, on the basis of the main court trial on 6 September 1966, to four years of prison for the complicity in a mass murder of at least 79,000 people. The time he had spent under arrest was added to the sentence. He was also deprived of his honourable civil rights for the period of four years. Fuchs had to cover the trial expenses. It has to be mentioned that, at first, the court held common proceedings against 11 defendants (including Fuchs) but soon the court ordered a separate case against Fuchs. First, he faced allegations of having participated, in the Sobibór extermination camp, in the murdering of 30 Jewish women and at least 3,600 Jewish men between April and May 1942. The court also pronounced him guilty (on the basis of his criminal activity between April and May 1942) of the complicity in the murder of at least 79,000 Jews. The court based its verdict on evidence that Erich Fuchs had attached the first gassing engine to the gas chamber, which operated incessantly until the restructuring of the gas chamber in 1942.

*SS-Oberscharführer Werner Dubois*

**Werner Dubois**<sup>47</sup> was born on 26 February 1913 in Wuppertal-Langerfeld. From 1919 to 1927, he attended primary school. After graduation, Dubois did not continue his education but, instead, found himself a job in Schreinerei. Later, he began a training course of painting but failed his journeyman's exam. As an unemployed person he completed an agricultural course in Kunersdorf near Frankfurt-am-Oder. Until 1933, Dubois worked on a farm in Frankfurt. From 1933 to 1934, he worked as a volunteer in the *Arbeitsdienst* and, for six or seven months, in the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*. Later, he worked for two years on a farm in Neudörfel bei Schwiebus. At the

same time, he tried to obtain a driving instructor's licence.

In the summer of 1936, Dubois joined the National Socialistic Drivers Corps (*NSKK*) in a Motor Sport School in Ostmark, Frankfurt-am-Oder. He finished school, having obtained a position of an assistant driving instructor. He tried, with no luck, to get the job as a driver with the 1<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division '*Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*'. Finally, he was employed as a driver by the *SS-Totenkopfstandarte* in Brandenburg. Dubois was assigned to the *SS-Totenkopfstandarte* (concentration camps), and was sent to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen, where he worked as a lorry driver.

He worked there until 1939. Just before the outbreak of World War II, Dubois and his friend Hackenholt reported to the Führer's Chancellery, and was assigned to work in the 'Action T-4' programme. He was made a driver of buses which drove patients to the euthanasia centres in Grafeneck, Brandenburg, Hadamar and Bernburg. He was also responsible for transporting corpses. Sometimes, he was made to assist in the cremation, in the crematory furnaces, of the corpses of murdered patients. From January 1942, Dubois took part in the winter 'Action T-4' programme, within which he transported German soldiers wounded in the East Front. After the operation was completed (at the end of March 1942), Dubois was employed as a 'T-4' driver in Berlin. Later, he was given the order to go to Lublin, where he was posted to the extermination camp in Belżec.

When the Belżec camp was liquidated (June 1943), Dubois went to the extermination centre in Sobibór. He was seriously wounded during the prisoners' revolt – received two blows on the head with an axe, had his lungs shot through and got wounded in the hand. As a result, he was hospitalised for a month in the Chełm's field hospital. Afterwards, he went home on a two-month leave, where he spent his Christmas and New Year's Eve. At the end of January or at the beginning of

<sup>47</sup> This biographical note has been written on the basis of: *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, eds.: W. De Mildt, C. Ruter, Amsterdam 2009, Lfd.No.642, LG Hagen 661220, BGH 710325.

February 1944, Dubois joined Wirth's unit in Italy, where he stayed until the end of the war. He took part in actions against partisans near Trieste. At the end of the war in Carinthia, Dubois was captured and disarmed by the English, and taken captive by the Americans. He was found to be a member of the SS.

When he was a POW, Dubois worked as a driver until the beginning of 1947. In 1947, he went to Dachau, from where he was posted, before the Christmases of 1947, to Schwelm. First, he worked in the *Bundesbahn*, then he trained to be a locksmith. Next, he worked as a locksmith in the *Rafflenbeul* company in Schwelm. On account of the wounds he received during the prisoners' revolt in Sobibór and other injuries incurred in Italy, Dubois was declared a war invalid (80% loss of health). He was not given an invalid pension because he had provided false information about the Sobibór events which brought about his injuries.

Dubois was married three times. He had two children with his second wife, whom he married in April 1941. The marriage ended in divorce in 1952. Werner Dubois joined the SA on 1 July 1933. He was also a member of the NSDAP (membership number - 5229440) and the SS. Dubois was active in 'Action T-4' and 'Operation Reinhardt' programmes as a member of the SS. During his service in the *Totenkopfverband*, he held the rank of Scharführer. At the end of the war, Dubois was promoted to Oberscharführer.

Werner Dubois was involved in 'Operation Reinhardt' as Stabsscharführer. After the Belżec camp was liquidated, he went by lorry to Lublin. Since he was unemployed, he asked Wirth for a new assignment. Consequently, he was given the order to report to Reichleitner, the Sobibór camp's commandant. Dubois came to Sobibór in early June (on 15 June at the latest) 1943. The remaining members of Belżec personnel were sent to other camps: Jühns, Zierke, Schwarz and Tauscher went to Dorohucza, Gley went to Poniatowa.

At the beginning of his service in Sobibór, Dubois was in charge of the *Waldkommando* (forest commando) that cut down trees and grubbed up tree stumps. The other members of Sobibór personnel who were in charge of this commando were: Franz, Wolf, Müller and Grömer. Dubois was perfectly aware of the fact that the wood was used for cremating corpses in the crematoria situated in camp III. Also, he frequently drove his lorry to Lublin and other cities to make supplies of the necessary provisions, building materials and fuel. A few times, Dubois, together with Niemann, were both sent to Belżec to check whether the area of the former camp had been camouflaged well enough, and whether the local inhabitants did not dig up the area in search of valuables. Also, Dubois knew perfectly well that the fuel which he brought to the camp was used in the engine utilised in the gassing of Jews.

For several weeks of the summer of 1943, Dubois was in charge of a working unit which consisted of Jews and Ukrainian watchmen who were demolishing the ghetto in Włodawa. The car with the Jews inside was transported to Włodawa in the morning, and drove back to Sobibór in the evening. He was also responsible for keeping a register of the camp's facilities and equipment, and was responsible for the transport matters. When Gomerski was away, Dubois was in charge of the armoury.

Sometimes, he was sent on actions against partisans to, among other places, the Bilgoraj area. During his stay in Sobibór, he took part, at least once, in the reception of a new transport to the camp and the escorting of newcomers to Camp II.

The transport arrived early in the morning, even before Dubois and his *Waldkommando* set off to go to work in the forest. Wagner posted him to the *Bahnhofkommando*. Most probably, it was a transport from a Western country, which is implied by the fact that the newly-arrived Jews had bedding and household equipment with them. Dubois watched the newcomers disembarking the train under the supervision of the Ukrainian watchmen who were keeping guard of the ramp. He also guarded groups of Jews, who were being taken, one by one, to Camp II in order to hand over their luggage and clothes. He left each group with the German guards in Camp II, and went back to the ramp to collect another group of Jews, and to take them to Camp II. It is hard to establish whether Dubois supervised the newcomers' handing over their luggage, their undressing or the cutting of women's hair.

It is equally difficult to state whether Dubois participated in the 'marching of transports' to Camp III. As *Unterführer*, he sometimes inspected the watchmen keeping guard around Camp III. Both in Sobibór and Belżec, Dubois carried a gun and a whip with him. During his stay in the camp as a member of the German personnel, i.e. from 15 June to 14 October 1943, 15,000 people were killed by gassing or by shooting. Generally, he obeyed the orders which he was given. He executed them because, as he claimed, 'an order equalled a law'. He was always ready to carry out any duty he was assigned to perform. Dubois supported the euthanasia programme, but he opposed the extermination of Jews. He had many doubts in this respect, and wondered whether he really had to take part in it. All the same, he dutifully carried out orders, because, as he said: "[...] *I was a soldier and so I had to obey even this type of order [...]*".

Certainly, Dubois was aware of the fact that these orders were meant to achieve criminal purposes and that, as a soldier, he did not have to carry them out so dutifully. He believed, however, that he had to execute all of them because, originally, they had been given by Führer. During the Hagen trial, Dubois testified that he had made attempts to withdraw from 'Action T-4'. For this purpose, he turned to SS-Obersturmbannführer Hillebrand (his former superior in the *SS-Totenkopfstandarte*) for help. None of his requests was granted, however. On the other hand, he never tried to give up 'Operation Reinhardt' because he considered it pointless, taking into consideration his poor relationship with Wirth. Once, Wirth, who always suspected anyone of sabotage, threatened him with his gun because the car Dubois was driving broke down. Dubois, who knew that Wirth could be very hot-tempered, took out his gun and aimed it at his superior. Wirth got scared, turned away and never mentioned the incident afterwards.

The information which the court in Hagen gathered about Dubois and the role he had played in the extermination centre in Sobibór was based on the testimony of Dubois himself, of Heinrich Unverhau (co-defendant), and some Jewish witnesses. Most of the Jewish witnesses did not recognise him as a person

in any way connected with the Sobibór camp. Estera Raab and Regina Zielinski recognised him but could not say anything more about him. Margulies and Goldfarb only said that his face seemed familiar to them. It was only Josef Herszman, a former Sobibór prisoner, who testified (incriminating him seriously) that Dubois had been present during the execution of the prisoners from the forest commando, which was carried out in retaliation for the escape of several Jews from this commando. It was Dubois, Herszman testified, that gave the order to shoot. Dubois denied this. During many different hearings, he changed his version of events and the place where he was staying at the time of the execution. Therefore, on the basis of his testimony, the court was unable to unambiguously state whether he had participated in that execution.

The other Jewish witnesses who had been present at the execution testified that Dubois had not taken part in it. Josef Herszman insisted, during his hearing on 20 January 1966, that Dubois had participated in the execution alongside a group of Ukrainian watchmen who carried out the shooting. Herszman remembered that Dubois had been dressed in a black uniform. In the next hearing, Herszman repeated the same information but added that Dubois had been among the group of executioners. The Ukrainians were dressed in grey-green uniforms, Dubois's uniform was black. Herszman could not unambiguously state whether Dubois was shooting as well.

Most probably, Reichleitner commanded that Dubois gave the Ukrainians the order to carry out the execution. Dubois was their direct commander. The court considered Josef Herszman to be a calm and self-possessed man, and was of the opinion that he presented the facts in the way he had really remembered them. However, the possibility that he was mistaken could not be precluded. Herszman might have remembered the right person but did not remember the uniform, or he might have remembered the uniform well but was mistaken as to the person. None of these possibilities could be precluded. Other Jewish witnesses who saw the event said that the order to shoot had been given by a German commander of the execution. However, they were not sure whether it was Reichleitner, Niemann, Wagner, or perhaps Frenzel. One thing was certain: one of these Germans ordered the Ukrainians to shoot.

That Herszman was indeed mistaken is implied by the fact that he described this event only during his main trial. Therefore, his testimony lacked a certain continuity, which might have been interpreted as a factor detrimental to his testimony. Obviously, the court's doubts worked to the benefit of Werner Dubois. Consequently, for the complicity in the murder of an unidentified number of people, at least 15,000, he was sentenced to three years of hard prison. The time he had spent under arrest was added to the sentence. He was also deprived of his honourable civil rights for the period of three years.

*SS-Oberscharführer Hubert Gomerski*

**Hubert Gomerski**<sup>48</sup> was born in 1911 in Schweinheim, Germany. After graduating from his primary school, he trained as a turner. Gomerski finished his education in 1927. From 1927 to 1939, he worked for various companies. Gomerski was married and had two children. In 1931, he joined the NSDAP, he also became a member of the SS. In November 1939, Gomerski was conscripted to the *Wehrmacht*. After undergoing an appropriate training at the *SS-Totenkopfstandarte*, he was delegated, in January 1940, to work at a police station in Berlin. Someone recommended him to the headquarters of 'Action T-4'. As a result, he was sworn into secrecy, under the threat of bearing severe consequences if he refused to do so. Afterwards, he was sent to the euthanasia centre in Hartheim near Linz, where he was employed to do clerical work. From time to time, he was also made to cremate the corpses of the murdered patients. Soon, he was sent back to Berlin on account of his poor health.

In Berlin, he was suspected of simulating illness and of having refused to carry out his orders, and threatened with being sent to a concentration camp. This time, he was sent to the euthanasia centre in Hadamar, where he worked as a locksmith and where he was, a few times, engaged in cremating the patients' corpses. In August 1941, Gomerski went back to Berlin, where he was ordered to go to Lublin in Poland. When he reported to the Higher SS and Police Leader, he was given the order to go to the Sobibór extermination camp.

Gomerski arrived at Sobibór in April 1942, when the camp was still under construction. During the Christmas of 1942, he was promoted to the rank of Unterscharführer. He stayed in Sobibór until its liquidation between November and December 1943. Still in 1943, Gomerski was sent, with a large group of former 'Operation Reinhardt' soldiers, to Trieste in Italy to serve in a special unit created to persecute the Jewish populace, confiscate their property, and to fight against partisans. When the war ended, he was interned for a short while in Northern Italy. After the liberation, he went back to Germany.

In Germany, Gomerski was arrested in relation to the court trial against the personnel of the euthanasia centre in Hadamar. He was not proven guilty, and so was released from arrest. He found himself a job as a driver. In July 1946, in Frankfurt-am-Main, Josef Hirtreiter was arrested for having been involved in 'Action T-4'. During the court proceedings, it turned out that he had also served in extermination camps. He was the first criminal from Treblinka to have been brought to court for his crimes. The court in Frankfurt-am-Main in West Germany sentenced the man,

<sup>48</sup> This biographical note has been written on the basis of: *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, ed.: W. De Mildt, C. Ruter, Amsterdam 2009, Lfd.No.233, LG Frankfurt/M. 500825, LG Frankfurt/M. 831010, LG Frankfurt/M. 770708, BGH 800118, OLG Frankfurt/M. 840509.

on 3 March 1951, to life in prison. In 1977, Hirtreiter was released on account of his poor health condition. He spent the last 6 months of his life in a nursing home in Frankfurt-am-Main.

During Hirtreiter's hearings, by coincidence, the question of the extermination camp in Sobibór was raised. While testifying about his service in the Hadamar euthanasia centre, the defendant mentioned a camp – a place of the extermination of Jews - situated near the village of Trawniki. This was Sobibór. The man also mentioned names of other Germans who had gone with him from Hadamar to Sobibór. On the basis of this, Hubert Gomerski was arrested in Frankfurt-am-Main on 23 August 1949, and was charged with both the participation and the complicity in the mass murders of prisoners of the German extermination centre in Sobibór. He was also charged with causing serious bodily injuries to some of the prisoners.

During the main trial which took place on 21, 23 and 25 August 1950, the grand jury in Frankfurt-am-Main found Hubert Gomerski guilty of the charges against him and sentenced him to life imprisonment. On the basis of the witnesses' testimonies, the court found that Hubert Gomerski had often supervised the unloading of transports bringing Jews to the Sobibór camp. Most frequently, however, he made sure that the sick and the disabled from the new transports were taken by narrow-gauge railway to Camp III to be executed. The witnesses did not preclude the possibility that he could have been personally involved in the gassing of Jews, as they had often seen him (almost every day) heading towards Camp III. However, they could not state for certain whether he actually entered that part of the camp or not.

One of the witnesses, Estera Raab, remembered Gomerski from the time when she had worked in camp IV in one of the newly-built armouries. She had to clean and sort bullets. She testified that Gomerski once came to her armoury and took a gun and some bullets. When he was leaving, he said: "today, there'll only be 40 people". After a short while, she heard the sound of gunshots. Another witness, Kurt Ticho, confirmed that Gomerski, somewhere near Camp III, had shot more than 100 persons. Perhaps his description referred to the same circumstances as those presented by Estera Raab. Samuel Lerer also saw how Gomerski and Bredow were shooting a group of sick prisoners in the forest near Camp III.

Estera Raab and Samuel Lerer also testified that Gomerski and Frenzel had shot a prisoner by the name of Stark. During their inspection of the camp's pigsty in Camp II, the two SS men noticed a dead pig. They decided that it was Stark's guilt because he looked after the pigs. The accused man got so terrified that he started to run towards the main gate, and the Germans chased after him, shooting in his direction. Seriously wounded (so much so that his intestines were sticking out from the wound), the prisoner fell over right next to the gate. The Germans took him to the roll-call yard and showed him to the remaining Jews, whom they had summoned before. Afterwards, they shot Stark dead.

Estera Raab and Samuel Lerer described another incident – the execution of two kapos from the camp. Suspected of having planned an escape, they were shot by Gomerski and Rost. Raab remembered that Gomerski called out the names of the two

kapos, and then she heard the sound of two gunshots. Lerer testified that after this execution, Gomerski, completely drunk, came up to him to ask about the names of other prisoners who might have been involved in this escape plan. He promised Lerer to keep him alive and to improve his living conditions if he gave him the names.

Chaim Engel spoke of a roll-call during which Gomerski selected 40, 50 sick prisoners, unable to do any work in the camp, and took them to Camp III. Soon, gunshots were heard. Several witnesses remembered him harassing a group of women prisoners brought to Sobibór especially to demonstrate to Himmler, who was visiting the camp, how gassings were performed there. Samuel Lerer, Josef and Hersz Cukierman testified that, once, Gomerski had used a watering can to beat some Jews who had just come in a transport from Majdanek, and then shot them with his gun. The reason he provided was that they had asked for some food.

Defendant Gomerski denied all that the witnesses had testified against him. All the time, he insisted that his only duty in the Sobibór camp had been to supervise and to command the Ukrainian watchmen. On 25 August 1950, Hubert Gomerski was sentenced to life imprisonment in a high-security prison. In 1972, the Court of Appeals shortened his sentence to 15 years of imprisonment.

### ***SS-Unterscharführer Johann (Josef) Klier***



**Johann Klier**<sup>49</sup> was born on 15 July 1901 in Stadtsteinach. After graduation from primary school, he trained to be a baker. In 1931, he obtained a master's licence in baking. He found himself a job, but soon lost it. Only three years later did he find a job with a copper production plant in Heddernheimer, where he worked until October 1940. In 1933, he became a member of the NSDAP and the SS. The party gave him the order to go, in 1940, to the headquarters of 'Action T-4', where he was ordered to take a job with the Hadamar euthanasia centre. He worked there as an assistant builder. He was also responsible for heating up the centre. He never took active part in the extermination of mentally sick patients. When Hadamar ceased to be a euthanasia centre, it was turned into a military hospital. Klier stayed there until June 1942. Next, he was posted to the extermination centre in Sobibór.

Before leaving for Sobibór, still in Berlin, Klier was informed about the type of service he would have to do, and was made to sign an appropriate obligation. He arrived at Sobibór in August 1942. Upon arrival, he received a grey uniform of an SS-Unterscharführer. At the beginning, he ran the camp's bakery, but was later

<sup>49</sup> This biographical note has been written on the basis of: *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, eds.: W. De Mildt, C. Ruter, Amsterdam 2009, Lfd.No.233, LG Frankfurt/M. 500825.

transferred to the commando responsible for the gathering of victims' shoes, sorting them and preparing them for dispatch. Klier stayed in Sobibór until its liquidation. Afterwards, like most of the former members of 'Operation Reinhardt', he was sent to Italy, where he stayed until the end of the war. From 5 May to 15 June 1945, Klier was held captive by the English, and between December 1945 and February 1949 he stayed in an internment camp. After being released from the camp, Klier found a job with the *Jöst* company.

During the Hagen trial, Johann Klier testified that he had never been involved in any form of supervising the newcomers who were on their way to the gas chambers. He worked, with his commando of prisoner-labourers, in a place where the Jews had to undress. When all the Jews had undressed, the task of his commando was to collect, and then to store, sort and pack the shoes the Jews had left, in a barrack situated between Camps I and II. The witnesses who testified in his case confirmed this. The court accepted the testimonies as credible enough. Klier admitted to a few cases of beating his prisoners but he was sure that he had never caused any bodily injuries to them. He only exerted punishment when his prisoners grossly neglected their duties. Klier claimed that, sometimes, he had to beat his prisoners to avoid running afoul of his superiors who might otherwise have thought him too lenient with the Jews.

None of the witnesses who took part in the trial against Johann Klier described him as a brutal man, murderer or sadist. Far from it. They characterised him as a German who was completely different from the other personnel members. To describe him, they used terms like 'decent' (Estera Raab), 'good man' (Lerer), or 'not evil' (Josef Cukierman and Engel). They had never seen him harass any prisoner or even heard of such situations. All of them agreed that he had beaten prisoners but only in exceptional cases. They pointed out, however, that even if he beat prisoners, their injuries were not serious (Lerer stressed this a few times).

In the court's opinion, it was obvious that any actions undertaken by the Sobibór camp's personnel were aimed at murdering Jews. Anything that happened in the camp was meant, on a larger or smaller scale, directly or indirectly, to exterminate the Jewish population. Therefore, Johann Klier's work in the camp's bakery as well as in the 'shoe' commando, contributed to the death of the Jews brought to Sobibór. The moment Klier started his service he knew what the real purpose of the camp was. Ultimately, the court came to the conclusion, however, that Klier had not been directly involved in the murders.

Klier claimed that he had never identified with the NSDAP or the SA even though he joined these two institutions in 1933, like millions of other Germans. However, he played only a minor role in both of these organisations. During his stay in the Sobibór camp, Klier never adopted an anti-Semitic attitude. On the contrary, as testified by most of the witnesses, he tried to help Jews in the camp. Chaim Engel claimed that whenever a prisoner had needed something to eat, they always turned to Klier for help. According to Estera Raab and Josef Cukierman, he never punished the prisoners he caught smoking cigarettes at work. Moreover, Lerer testified, Klier

never hustled his prisoner-labourers when they were working. Estera Raab testified that he even comforted his prisoners and encouraged them not to give up.

All of the above imply that Klier did not treat the Jews as he should have, according to the camp's rules and regulations. Klier worked in the camp but did not want to be part of the extermination system. He only did what he had to, without displaying too much commitment or officiousness. He was aware of the fact that if he ever refused to perform his duties, he would be threatened with severe punishment, including death penalty. When Klier was employed in the Hadamar euthanasia centre, he testified, he was sworn to secrecy and was informed that any refusal to follow the rules meant death. Similarly, before leaving for Sobibór, Klier was again made to swear to obey certain commitments resulting from the type of service he was meant to perform. Klier claimed that, still in Lublin, Wirth had threatened to shoot him if he ever refused to carry out any duties.

According to Klier, during his visitation of the Sobibór camp, Himmler said that the SS men who had got softer should bear the consequences. Klier also heard a story about a guard from another camp who was shot only because he had refused to cooperate any longer. The court could not prove whether Johann Klier had been guilty of the severe beating of prisoners, and believed the defendant's assurances that the few cases in which he had beaten prisoners were meant at showing the other Germans that he "was not the Jews' friend". He had to somehow adapt to the situation in the camp. Klier also testified that, once, a member of the personnel reported on him to the commandant, saying that he was 'too lenient' with his commando. His superior summoned Klier, scolded him and threatened to send him to a concentration camp. All in all, having analysed all the testimonies and evidence, the court in Hagen found Johann Klier innocent of all alleged crimes.

### *SS-Scharführer Erich Lachman*



**Erich Lachman**<sup>50</sup> was born on 6 November 1909 in Legnica, as the youngest child of Paul (a blue-collar worker) and Ida Lichtman. His mother died in 1950, and his father – in 1954. He went to primary school in Legnica, where, on one occasion, he was not promoted to the next form. After graduation, Lachman trained to be a bricklayer, and in October 1927, he obtained a journeyman's licence. In spring 1933, Lachman was admitted to the *Stahlhelm*, and to the SA soon afterwards. He did not hold any special position in the SA, he was not a member of the NSDAP, either. Lachman worked, until 1939, as a bricklayer in various companies in Legnica.

<sup>50</sup> This biographical note has been written on the basis of: *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, eds.: W. De Mildt, C. Ruter, Amsterdam 2009, Lfd.No.642, LG Hagen 661220, BGH 710325.

In September 1939, Lachman was conscripted to the auxiliary police. At first, he served in a police battalion in Legnica, then in Czarnów and Oberschlesien. He failed his Unterführer exam (during a course in Katowice), and yet he was promoted to police Oberwachtmeister. After the completion of his course and his promotion, Lachman returned to Orlau. In mid-1941, he served for three months in the municipal police in Legnica; afterwards, he served in Bolesławiec for a few weeks.

In September 1941, Lachman went to Lublin, whence he was posted to the SS unit in the training camp in Trawniki. He served there, until the summer of 1942, as a courier and as the instructor of the Ukrainian watchmen. Afterwards, he was delegated to the extermination camp in Sobibór. When Reichleitner was appointed the camp's commandant, he sent Lachman back to Trawniki on account of the fact that he was not suitable for the service.

In 1943 (the precise date remains unknown), Lachman escaped from Trawniki. He escaped with his Polish female friend whom he had met there, and who visited him in Sobibór several times. They were in hiding in Warsaw for 6 months. However, Lachman got captured by the SS and, consequently, sentenced by the German court in Lublin to 6 years of hard prison. He stayed in many penal camps. At the beginning of 1945, he found himself in the concentration camp in Dachau. From there, as a prisoner of the penal company, Lachman was sent to do labour in Brandenburg/Hawela, where the Soviets took him captive in May 1945. He was next taken to the USSR, and sentenced for espionage and sabotage to 25 years of forced labour. In 1950, Lachman was pardoned and, on 5 May 1950, released from prison. From then onwards, he lived with his family in Untergriesbach (Niederbayern) and worked as a bricklayer. Lachman had got married on 24 February 1940.

In relation to his trial in Hagen in which he was charged with the complicity in the murder, between August 1942 and July 1943, of at least 150,000 Jews in the Sobibór extermination camp, Lachman stayed under arrest from 22 June 1961 to 28 August 1961, and again – from 10 September 1964 to 15 January 1965. The court gathered the details of Lachman's life and professional career on the basis of his testimony from the main trial. Lachman did not remember when exactly he had served in the Sobibór camp – he did not know whether he had gone there in 1942 or in 1943. However, on the basis of the testimonies provided by the co-defendants and several Jewish witnesses, the court decided that Lachman had begun his service in the Sobibór extermination camp as early as in summer 1942.

When it comes to the prison sentences he received from the SS police court in Lublin as well as the court in the USSR, the court in Hagen had not been presented with any documents by either of these institutions. The moment his first hearings began, Lachman's testimonies always gave an impression of being very monotonous and imprecise. Lachman was unable to provide the exact reason why the court in the Soviet Union had sentenced him to hard labour. Perhaps this had something to do with his serving in the Trawniki camp and training the Ukrainian watchmen there.

In early June 1942 at the latest, Lachman was made the commander of a newly-trained group of Ukrainian watchmen, and sent to Sobibór. During his stay in

Trawniki, he had already learnt that the Belzec and the Sobibór camps had been built to kill Jews. Additionally, transports heading towards Sobibór and back frequently stopped at the station in Trawniki. Those coming back transported the items of Jewish property, like clothes or luggage, neatly sorted in the Sobibór camp.

One of the first commanders of the Ukrainian unit in Sobibór, even before Lachman arrived, was Polizeioberwachtmeister Schäfer from Legnica. Due to illness, he had to go back to Trawniki. It was him that told Lachman the details of the Sobibór camp, like the unbearable stench of decomposing bodies floating in the air.

When Lachman's superior, Polizeimeister Drechsel informed him that he would go to Sobibór to replace Schäfer, Lachman asked for permission to stay in Trawniki. Drechsel did not change his mind, even though Lachman tried to convince him that he would be unable to bear the terrible stench of decomposing corpses. His superior's order was upheld, however. Lachman was perfectly aware of the fact that any further attempts to avoid going to Sobibór could result in his being sent to a concentration camp or penal company. And so he went.

In Sobibór, Lachman found out that there were three Ukrainian platoons stationed in the camp, which the camp's prisoners called the 'Ukrainian SS'. Each platoon was, alternately, assigned the task to keep guard, to undergo training or to serve as special reserve. This system of the watchmen's service had been introduced when the camp became operational, and remained this way until its liquidation. Lachman was in charge of the Ukrainian watchmen. He was not too officious in the way he commanded his unit. He only carried out his superiors' orders.

Each time a new transport came, the reserve platoon was posted to the camp's ramp. Their task was to secure the ramp area against escape attempts or the disorganisation of the unloading procedure, to keep order and to escort the people meant for extermination to Camp II. The court in Hagen failed to unambiguously establish how often Lachman had been present on the railway ramp in Sobibór.

Very often, Lachman's watchmen were in charge of various prisoners' commandos that were responsible for particular types of tasks, like the felling of trees (to obtain wood for the crematoria), or dismantling post-Jewish houses in the neighbouring towns and villages in order to use the building material to construct barracks or workshops in the camp. While supervising their prisoner-labourers, the Ukrainians often bullied the prisoners. The court was unable to state whether Lachman himself had behaved in the same way or whether he had only limited himself to giving his Ukrainian subordinates orders.

During his trial in Hagen, some of the witnesses described a situation in which Lachman had smashed a Jewish boy in the face because the boy had tried to steal some cigarettes he had found in the German canteen. They stressed, however, that Lachman had not reported this theft to his superiors. If he had, the boy would certainly have been sent to the gas chamber. During his stay in Sobibór, Lachman was, together with his Ukrainian watchmen, involved in illegal trading with the camp's prisoners. They gave him valuables, like jewellery, money or clothes which they had stolen in the sorting barrack. In return, Lachman gave them food and alcohol which he had

received from local inhabitants. Lachman wore a ring on his small finger. He had had one of his Ukrainian subordinates 'organise' the ring for him in the camp's jeweller's workshop where the Jewish goldsmiths worked.

While still in Trawniki, Lachman met a Polish woman with whom he developed a close relationship. She went with him to the village of Sobibór, and stayed on a farm near the Sobibór camp. Most probably, she was also involved in Lachman's illegal trade between the camp and the local inhabitants. Like many other German personnel members, Lachman drank excessively. He often got drunk in the company of Bauer. Schäfer, whom Lachman had replaced as the commander of the Ukrainian unit, gave him a St Bernard dog called Barry. Whenever Lachman went on duty, he frequently took Barry with him. The court in Hagen could not prove that Lachman had ever set his dog on the camp's prisoners. The prisoners also saw Bauer and Groth walking with the dog.

In late September 1942 at the latest, the new commandant of the Sobibór camp, Reichleitner, dismissed Lachman from his post and sent him back to Trawniki. Lachman was replaced by Graetschus, who had come from the Treblinka camp. Overall, during Lachman's service in Sobibór, at least 12,000 Jews were murdered in the camp. The court in Hagen could not state whether Lachman had shown an anti-Semitic attitude while in the camp. The court stated, however, that the defendant had been aware that his service in the camp contributed to the extermination of the Jews. On the other hand, when his superiors delegated him from Trawniki to the camp in Treblinka, he turned to Drechsel asking him not to send him there. Drechsel did not want to make the decision himself, so he told Lachman to turn to Globocnik in Lublin. Therefore, he reported to Höfle, who told him that the decision of posting him to Treblinka had been upheld and that his refusal to carry out this order would be interpreted as an act of cowardice. Lachman knew perfectly well what this meant and what kind of punishment he was threatened with. All the same, he decided to desert.

During the Hagen court, some of the former prisoners of the Sobibór camp recognised Lachman. Most of them, however, did not remember him at all. These were: Samuel Lerer, Selma Engel, Filip Białowicz, Symcha Białowicz, Safran, Paul, Freiberg, Thomas, Kellberman. Eстера Raab recognised Lachman at first, but then she realised that she had mistaken him for a Ukrainian guard by the name of Klatt. Obviously, she could not have met Lachman in Sobibór because when she arrived at the camp, Lachman had already been sent away. Two other witnesses, Meier Ziss and Chaim Engel recognised Lachman but were unable to recall any incidents connected with him. Biskupicz, on the other hand, mistook Lachman for Muller or Wolf.

Abraham Margulies recognised Lachman and remembered his name. However, the court could not preclude the possibility that Margulies mistook him for someone else. This was because Margulies described Lachman as a soldier, commander of a platoon, who wore a dark Ukrainian uniform, and who spoke in Russian, Ukrainian or Polish. In fact, Lachman wore a light green police uniform. Therefore, most probably Margulies's testimony was not based on the real facts. Lachman testified that he could not speak Polish, Ukrainian or Russian, and that he communicated with

his Polish friend in German. Consequently, the court in Hagen interpreted all of the above-mentioned testimonies to Lachman's benefit.

Mordechaj Goldfarb claimed that he recognised Lachman. He described him as the Ukrainian platoon commander who wore a uniform shirt and green trousers, and a black forage cap. According to him, Lachman spoke Ukrainian and German and had thin hair (certainly not ginger). Goldfarb must have been mistaken as well. During his stay in Sobibór, Lachman had ginger hair and wore a green uniform and a police peaked cap. Besides, Goldfarb was transported to Sobibór at the end of October 1942, when Lachman had already left the camp. The court questioned Goldfarb further but failed to establish who he had mistaken Lachman for.

Another witness, Tomasz Blatt, mistook Lachman for Wolf during an identification (Blatt was transported to Sobibór in April 1943). Witness Posner remembered the name Lachman and said that the man "had been together with the Ukrainians". However, during an identification he mistook Lachman for Unverhau. Posner claimed that Lachman had stayed in the Sobibór camp all the time until its liquidation. In this case, Posner must have been wrong because he had arrived at the camp as late as in mid February 1943, so he could not have met defendant Lachman. Another witness, Honigman, correctly identified Lachman but did not remember any details about the man, Bachir knew the name Lachman but failed to identify the defendant. During his hearing, he mistook Lachman for Müller and Beckmann. Herszman identified Erich Lachman by his physical appearance but did not know his name. He described Lachman as a Ukrainian who had worn a black uniform and a black forage cap. It was possible that he had made a mistake because Lachman had had a different uniform in Sobibór. Stanisław Szmajzner identified the defendant but could not recall any details about him.

Hersz Cukierman was a witness who described Lachman the most precisely. Cukierman stayed in the camp from May 1942 until the prisoners' revolt. Most of that time, he worked as a cook. In his testimony, Cukierman correctly described Lachman's stay in the camp, his military rank and the function he had in the camp. He also confirmed having heard that Lachman had sent one of 'his' Ukrainians to shoot some Jews in Camp III. The court, however, did not treat this testimony as the basis for charging Lachman with committing murder himself because (as it turned out in the later part of Cukierman's testimony) he did not give the order to shoot but sent the Ukrainians to Camp III under Bolender's order. Cukierman could not state whether Lachman knew why the Ukrainians had been sent to Camp III.

Eda Lichtman testified, during a receivership hearing in Israel, that one night a new transport of Jews was coming to the camp and she heard some screaming in her room. She tried to open the door but Lachman, who was holding it from the other side, said: "[...] *Open the door once again, and I'll command my dog to bite your arse [...]*", and beat her hard with his whip. This was confirmed by witness Icchak Lichtman (Eda Lichtman's husband), who had heard about this incident from other prisoners.

The fact that there were so many mistakes in the identification of Lachman, combined with the witnesses' poor knowledge of his activity in the camp resulted,

without doubt, from the fact that he had served in Sobibór for a short period of time. The court was aware of the many inaccuracies, imprecise information and contradictions in the testimonies of Lachman himself. The court treated Lachman as a man who was dumb, old-fashioned and the one who was unable to sensibly and rationally formulate his thoughts. Everything implied to the fact that he did not want to go into service in the Sobibór camp. It is possible, however, that he wanted to stay in Trawniki only because he was involved, together with his Polish friend, in illegal trade. This does not change the fact that he had adapted to the new circumstances in the camp and continued his illegal dealings there.

The court in Hagen failed to prove the fact that Lachman's service in the camp in any way had helped him to enrich himself. It was equally impossible to unambiguously state that he had harassed or raped Jewish girls in the Sobibór camp (as was implied by Eda Lichtman in her testimony). Also, knowing the specificity of the camp, the court decided that the incident in which Lachman had beaten a Jewish boy for stealing some cigarettes did not in any way incriminate Lachman. Lachman's boorish behaviour and excessive drinking were attributed to the fact that the camp filled him with utter disgust, and therefore he sought forgetfulness in alcohol. Another interpretation was that, by drinking too much alcohol, he wanted to become unable to perform his service. This interpretation might have been confirmed by Bauer's testimony, according to which Lachman had frequently "guzzled" alcohol and was "drunk into a stupor". Also, the fact that Erich Lachman deserted in order to avoid his service in the Treblinka extermination camp worked to the benefit of the defendant Lachman.

In bill of indictment put forward following the decision made by the III Criminal Chamber of the District Court in Hagen on 2 April 1965, Lachman was charged with having contributed, between August 1942 and July 1943, to the murder of at least 150,000 people in the Sobibór extermination camp. Ultimately, the court in Hagen found Erich Lachman innocent of all alleged crimes.

### ***SS-Unterscharführer Erwin Lambert***



**Erwin Lambert**<sup>51</sup> was born on 7 December 1909 in Schildow near Berlin, as the son of Hermann and Minna Lambert. His father was killed in World War I in 1915, and his mother remarried in 1921. Lambert had two sisters, one of whom died in 1920. From 1915 to 1924, he went to primary school in Schildow, at the same time training to be a bricklayer. After he finished his school, he obtained, in 1928, a journeyman's licence, and began to work in his stepfather's company. Next, for three semesters, he attended building school in Berlin.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem.*

On 1 March 1933, Lambert joined the NSDAP (membership number – 1491565). In 1935, he obtained a master's licence in bricklaying. Next, he worked as a second master in the *Vollmann & Schmidt* building company in Berlin. In November or December 1939, Lambert was asked to report to the *Columbushaus* in Berlin, and was admitted to work there. He was promoted to the rank of construction manager. Nobody informed him, however, what kind of job he would do or where. He only knew that it was to be somewhere near Berlin. He could not accept this offer because he had to take care of his sick mother in Berlin.

At the beginning of January 1940, Lambert was conscripted to 'Action T-4'. He was notified about the obligation to maintain secrecy and about the consequences if he failed to do so. At that time, he did not know the details of his future service there. The first task he was to do was to rebuild and renovate the building at Tiergartenstrasse 4 in Berlin. Next, he was told to rebuild the welfare institute for the insane in Hartheim near Linz (later turned into a euthanasia centre), Sonnenstein near Pirna, Bernburg on the Saale river, and Hadamar. He was to rebuild some of the rooms so that they could be used for gassing psychiatrically sick patients. Erwin Lambert did not take part in the winter 'Action T-4' in Russia.

In the spring of 1942, Lambert (together with another 'T-4' member by the name of Hengst) went to Lublin. There, he was promoted to SS-Unterscharführer (without the SS rune collar tabs), and was made to rebuild the gas chambers in the Treblinka extermination camp. Next, he was posted to rebuild the gas chamber in the extermination camp in Sobibór. During his stay in Poland, he also did reconstruction and building work in the labour camps in Dorohucz, Poniatowa and Lublin. In the meantime, he worked in Berlin and Hartheim, and in Attersee in Austria.

In January 1944, Lambert went, with the remaining members of 'Action T-4', to Italy, where he took part in military actions against partisans in Trieste. In summer 1944, he was summoned to Berlin. In January 1945, he went back to Trieste, where he took part in the construction of the crematorium in the *San Saba* concentration camp. At the end of the war, Lambert stayed in Carinthia. He escaped from his own unit (together with other soldiers: Sporrleder, Baer, Riedel and Fettke), and was taken into the English captivity. The English transferred him to the American troops which interned him in a POW's camp near Aalen. Lambert was released in mid-June 1945, and right afterwards he began to work as a second master in a construction company in Stuttgart. In July 1944, he married Maria, with whom he had two daughters.

On 3 September 1965, the grand jury in Dusseldorf sentenced Erwin Lambert, for his participation in the mass murder of about 300,000 people in the Treblinka camp, to four years of hard prison plus six years loss of civil rights.

At the end of May or at the beginning of June 1942, Erwin Lambert was given the order to go to the camp in Treblinka which was still under construction. He took part in the construction of the fence and the barracks. As soon as doctor Eberl, who had carried out euthanasia in Bernburg, became Treblinka's commandant, Lambert fell ill and returned home in Schildow, where he lay sick for several weeks. Upon his recovery, he first went to Hartheim, and then to Attersee (where there was the holiday

home of the 'Action T-4' members) to do some building work there. In August 1942, Lambert was sent back to Treblinka to finish the construction of the gas chamber.

At the end of September and at the beginning of October, Lambert was sent for three weeks to Sobibór to rebuild and extend the gas chamber. He went there, on Wirth's order, together with Hackenholt who was responsible for supplying the 'Operation Reinhardt' camps with building material. They both reported to Reichleitner, the camp's commandant. Afterwards, Lambert, several Ukrainian watchmen and Jewish prisoners rebuilt the gas chamber.

Most probably, they built more rooms in which the future victims were to be gassed by means of car exhaust fumes coming from the motor installed next to the gas chamber building. Before, there had probably been three or four rooms. Now, Lambert strengthened the whole building and increased the number of rooms to six. He also extended the installation which fed car fumes into the gas chamber. It is hard to state, however, whether those six rooms were located on one side of the main corridor or on both of its sides.

Additionally, the main door, as well as the doors of each room of the gas chamber, were changed to make the removal of corpses easier and more efficient. It can be assumed that each room was about 16 m<sup>2</sup> in size, with plastered walls and cement floors. It is not known whether the walls were tiled or not. The pipes feeding the fumes into the rooms were installed after Lambert had left the camp. Lambert did all the rebuilding work as a master bricklayer, and as such he was provided with a group of professionals to help him. Hackenholt organised building material, and Wirth gave appropriate orders in connection with the necessary work. Lambert knew that he was working on the gas chamber to make it more effective and efficient in the extermination process. All the rebuilding work was supervised by Reichleitner and Wirth, who came to Sobibór for inspection.

All of a sudden, Wirth sent Lambert and 'his' Ukrainians to the '*Flughplatz*' in Lublin. The reason why he had to go there was that the sorting barracks filled to the full with personal items of the murdered Jews were in terrible condition, and therefore needed renovating. The walls, made from corrugated sheet began to contort, and there was a danger that they could collapse at any moment. In 1943, Lambert built new barracks in the Dorohucza and Poniatowa forced labour camps. In spring 1943, he returned to Treblinka for a short while. From there, he went to Attersee and Hartheim to continue the building work there. Also, Lambert was engaged in the evacuation of the 'T-4' office from Berlin to Neumark.

Right after he found himself in the Treblinka extermination camp, Lambert wanted to give up his service for both 'Action T-4' and 'Operation Reinhardt'. During his trial in Hagen, Lambert always stressed the fact that anything he did within these two actions came as a result of the orders he had been given. He was also ordered to maintain secrecy. Therefore, he said, he felt obliged to carry out all the orders even though he realised that by building gas chambers he contributed to the unjust murdering of mentally and psychiatrically sick patients. After the euthanasia programme was suspended, he tried, with the rest of the 'T-4' personnel, to join the

winter military action in the East. His request was rejected, however. He was also aware that, by working within ‘Operation Reinhardt’, he contributed, to a far greater extent than in ‘Action T-4’, to the extermination of Jews. Most of the orders he received came from Wirth, who often reminded Lambert that he would bear severe consequences if he refused to carry them out.

During his trial, Lambert testified that after his failed attempts to change the character of his service and to be transferred to the East Front, he had no longer seen any chance of withdrawing from ‘Operation Reinhardt’. He knew that any further attempts to be exempt from this service or to be transferred to a different type of work might have been interpreted as an act of sabotage, for which he was threatened with death penalty. Despite all this argumentation which Lambert gave during his hearings, the court in Hagen was of the opinion that he had not been forced to perform his tasks. According to the court, Lambert treated the orders he received as obligatory and binding. He carried them out extremely conscientiously, and nothing implied that he had ever tried to withdraw from ‘Action T-4’ or ‘Operation Reinhardt’. What is more, the fact that he had acquaintances (which he sustained after the war) among the ‘Action T-4’ higher officers, as well as the fact that he frequented its headquarters but never took advantage of this fact in order to be transferred, e.g. to the *Wehrmacht*, was interpreted to the detriment of defendant Lambert.

All in all, the court in Hagen found Erwin Lambert guilty of the complicity in the mass murder of an unidentified number of people, at least 57,000, and sentenced to three years of hard prison. The time he had spent under arrest was added to the sentence. He was also deprived of his honourable civil rights for the period of three years.

### ***SS-Scharführer Heinz-Hans Schutt***



**Hans Schutt**<sup>52</sup> was born on 6 April 1908 in Dummersdorf (Lübeck District). Hans’s father, Paul Schutt, was killed in World War I, and his mother died in 1944. He had a brother and a stepbrother (born during his mother’s second marriage). Between 1914 and 1917, Schutt attended primary school in Dummersdorf, and, in 1923, *Johanneum* middle school in Lübeck. However, his mother received very small widow’s pension and he received very small orphan’s pension. As a result, Schutt had to leave school. In 1923, he started his education in trading in the *Luders & Hintz* building materials company in Lübeck, which he completed three years later. Next, he worked for many companies as a trade clerk in Lübeck.

In 1931 or 1932, Schutt became a member of the German National Retail Clerks Association (DHV) in Lübeck. Due to this, he began to work as the secretary of the head of this organisation in Gau Nordmark. In around 1934, Schutt got a job as a clerk in the

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*. In 1935, he was transferred to Königsberg, where he was made responsible for providing financial resources for the Gau Nordmark office for vocational training. On 8 November 1935, he married Gertruda. They had three children. In 1936, Schutt became a civil servant in Higher Technical School in Berlin. From 1938 to 1940, he obtained full employment as Sturmbannführer SS- Sturmbann II/6 w Berlin. On the day he finished his work there, he had the rank of Verwaltungsführer, SS-Sturmbanns. Next, he was moved to the *Columbushaus* in Berlin, where, in November or December 1939, he was ordered to serve for ‘Action T-4’.

Schutt was posted to Grafeneck, where he was received by a euthanasia specialist, doctor Schumann. Instructed as to the type of service he was supposed to do there, Schutt committed himself to maintaining secrecy. As the deputy of the Verwaltungsführer of this euthanasia centre, his task was to provide the personnel, i.e. about 60 persons, with accommodation, food and pay. Schutt, whom doctor Schumann acquainted with the euthanasia programme, accepted and fully supported the whole idea. His attitude can be seen in one of his letters (dated 4 March 1940) which he sent to his stepbrother, Jurgen Burmeister, on the occasion of his confirmation:

*“[...] Dear Jurgen, thank you very much for your letter. I was glad to receive the invitation to your confirmation. I have travelled a lot around Southern Germany of late. Therefore, I want to write this letter about your confirmation which will take place this month, and to share with you my thoughts about the Christian way of life. You are lucky, dear Jurgen, to be growing up at the time no German has ever experienced before. You must grow into a man, not in battle but at work. You must grow up. Now, Germany must take out its sword to defend its existence. The number of the victims of this war may reach thousands of people. There is only one winner and it is him that will shape Europe the way it should be. This winner is Adolf Hitler!*

*Perhaps you will ask why I’m writing all this. I’m sure you have talked about this at school many times. I’m doing this to ask you to think about it now, the moment you are bending your knees in front of a wooden altar, and when God’s deputy is giving you his blessing. Believe me, there are many bad things happening in all those Christian actions. I had those views for a long time before I gave up church for good. Bear in mind that our Leader is teaching us how to perceive the world the way God created it, not the way we are told by priests! That our outlook on life is proper is proved by the fact that God gives his blessing and bases his actions on all the actions of our leader. We are forming a great new Germany, blessed by God, and without the accompaniment of the praying sky pilot. A new house cannot be built through praying but through courage and, if necessary, by means of a sword.*

*Now, I myself am in a Sonderkommando which only about 100 people in the whole of Germany might know about. You may think that I’m happy and proud because I have been given the opportunity to join the front, to work in this Sonderkommando. One day, I will tell all of you about it. First, you must understand things I’ve told you about. Always remember that your generation must take responsibility for maintaining what the best of the German men are sacrificing their lives for! This is what, my dear Jurgen, I wanted to tell you now. You must start thinking about all these things. Best wishes to you, mother and the Captain. Yours, Hans – Heinz [...]”.*

The moment Hans Schutt began to work in the Grafeneck centre, he believed that *Führer* was right about the euthanasia programme. At first, his trust in doctor Schuman and his assurances that the selection of psychiatrically sick patients meant for extermination was carried out after a careful examination performed by a five-person council, convinced him that his job was the right thing to do. With time he noticed, however, that all this looked completely different in practice. In September 1940, there came a transport of children who were so-called difficult to bring up, but not psychiatrically sick, and they were meant for extermination. On Schutt's order, the transport was sent back to its original place. With time, he stopped being an ardent supporter of euthanasia, and tried to quit 'Action T-4', with no luck, however. He went on working in the Grafeneck centre until its liquidation in the spring of 1941.

Next, Schutt was transferred to Hadamar, where he was made the deputy auditor and was also made responsible for the provisions supply. He stayed there until late summer 1941, i.e. until the euthanasia programme had been closed down. He was sent back for a short while to the 'T-4' headquarters in the office at *Tiergartenstrasse 4a*. In April 1942, Schutt was delegated to the Sobibór extermination camp, whose commandant at that time was Stangl. He stayed in the camp until mid-August 1942. After his holiday leave, on 1 October 1942, Schutt was transferred to the *Waffen-SS* infantry. He served in Warsaw and East Prussia, France, Italy, Corsica, again in Italy and in Hungary. Most frequently, he served as a lorry driver or a writer stationed in the headquarters of each subsequent unit.

At the end of the war, Schutt was taken into the American captivity, but was released a month later. From June 1945 to 23 December 1947, he was interned for having been a member of the *Waffen-SS*, in an English internment camp in Sandbostel, and, as a result, sentenced to three months of prison by the court in Stade. Afterwards, he worked on a farm near Bremervörde until 16 March 1948, when he was, on the basis of the arrest warrant issued on 22 1947, arrested in Grafeneck. During his hearing, Schutt concealed the fact that he had served in the Sobibór camp. In Grafeneck, a preliminary investigation was initiated against him, but already on 13 July 1948, the arrest warrant was dropped and, in consequence, Schutt was released on 15 July 1948. No charges were brought against him, and the investigation was discontinued. Nowadays, however, it is impossible to state on what grounds the investigation was discontinued because the case file has never been found. Schutt never claimed any damages for having been arrested innocently. Until the trial in Hagen began, no other investigation or criminal proceedings had been launched.

Released to freedom, Schutt went back to live with his family in Schwalingen, where he stayed until 1954. Later, he moved to Soltau. He worked there on a farm. Between 1949-1960, Schutt was employed as a driver by the British armed forces. After quitting the job, he worked for a building company for some time. In 1953, Schutt was elected to the commune council in Schwalingen, and in 1956, he became a deputy of the county council and a town councillor in Soltau. He was also the deputy of the president of the county displaced persons association, the Soltau sports

association, the president of the county shooting association and the president of the German charitable organisation in Soltau. He resigned from most of these positions only after the criminal proceedings had been launched against him in Hagen.

On 28 April 1942, Hans Schutt arrived, together with a dozen or so soldiers, to the Sobibór camp, whose newly appointed commandant was Franz Stangl. Before or even during his journey to Sobibór, nobody told him about the type of tasks he would have to perform in the camp. Right before his departure, Schutt was informed that he would be the administration manager in the resettlement camp for Jews situated somewhere in Poland. He did not even know that the word 'resettlement' was a camouflaged term for extermination. He only learnt about it on the first evening in Sobibór, when Stangl informed all the camp's personnel about the real purpose of the camp.

Upon his arrival at the Sobibór camp, on Stangl's order, Schutt found accommodation in the forester's house and in the building which used to be a post office. The two buildings had been incorporated into the camp area. During his first four weeks in the camp, he frequently left Sobibór to go on business, especially to Chełm. His main task was to supply the camp with the necessary provisions. All the costs were covered by the 'T-4' office in Berlin. At the end of May or at the beginning of June 1942, Schutt replaced Ittner, dismissed by Stangl, as the administration manager of the whole camp. His task now was to appropriate the personal belongings of the camp's victims, especially money and jewellery. It was in the administration manager's office that the victims, right before entering the road to death in the gas chamber, had to deposit all their precious things, like money, jewellery or watches. The location of his office building allowed Schutt to observe all that was happening in the camp.

During the investigation brought against him or during his trial in Hagen, no evidence was found that Schutt had ever tormented prisoners or, as had been testified, sexually abused women prisoners. On 15 August 1942, he went on a 24-day holiday. He never came back to the camp, however. During the trial, he claimed that from the very beginning of his service in Sobibór he had made attempts to be exempt from the service in the camp because he did not accept what was happening there. He did not believe that Stangl, Wirth or Globocnik would agree to his request. Therefore, he tried to contact the 'Action T-4' headquarters. He used his holiday time to contact Schmidel in Berlin about the possibility of his being exempt from the service in the Sobibór camp and being transferred to a military unit in the front. However, he was not granted permission. He tried to turn to his former superior, SS-Oberführer Siebert for help. He told Siebert about the Sobibór camp, in this way violating the obligation to maintain secrecy, and asked him to be dismissed from his position. Siebert knew nothing about the reality of the extermination camps in Poland. He promised Schutt to help him to be exempt from his duties in Sobibór.

When his holiday was over, Schutt had to go back to Lublin to report to Wirth, who had been informed beforehand that Schutt had been exempt from his service in Sobibór. Wirth was furious, berated him and accused him of defiling his own race. Afterwards, Schutt was sent away to Berlin, whence, after completing a military

training, he was sent to the front. The court in Hagen interpreted the fact that Schutt had not tried to ask his direct superiors to exempt him from his service in two ways. On the one hand, this implied that Schutt had wanted to stay in the camp of his own free will, but, on the other hand, perhaps he had been afraid of his superiors' radical reactions, like inflicting punishment on him.

During his trial in Hagen, most of the Jewish witnesses, former Sobibór prisoners, recognised Schutt. Most of them remembered his name and the function he had had in the camp (trader). Some of them were unable to provide any details about him, which implies that they must have been staying in the camp when Schutt had already left Sobibór. Witness Lerer remembered him to have been the camp's supplier but could not provide any facts either to the benefit or to the detriment of Schutt. Meier Ziss remembered that there had been a German by the name of Schutt in the Sobibór camp. Icchak Lichtman only recalled his name. Eda Lichtman, on the other hand, remembered Schutt very well, and during her hearing, she said:

*"[...] I met Schutt on the first day of my stay in Sobibór. When my luggage was taken away from me, I was sent to the warehouse to collect some bedding. Schutt worked there. The defendant was not a bad man. He didn't beat people. At the beginning, a few young girls were selected from their transport and taken to the administration building. No orgies were held in the place where Schutt lived. However, these girls were kept in the camp to entertain the German personnel. Later, they were killed. Taking into account the fact that he lived there, I assume that he also took part in those parties. Schutt did not stay till the end of the camp. He was replaced by Floss. Schutt treated us well. I can confirm this even today [...]"*

Eda Lichtman's testimony did not incriminate the defendant. At the same time, however, it referred to certain incidents in which members of the German staff were involved. It has to be stressed that Eda Lichtman managed to differentiate between her objective perception of Schutt's conduct in the camp and her own experiences or her opinions and conclusions. The fact that the defendant lived in the administration building at the time the above-mentioned girls were kept there, was later confirmed by Bauer and some other defendants. In general, Eda Lichtman's testimony can be treated as her assurance that Schutt behaved properly towards the prisoners.

The most precise information about defendant Schutt comes from witness Cukierman who, as the camp's cook, not only recognised him but also gave concrete details about his conduct in the camp. Cukierman remembered Schutt, knew where he had lived in the camp and what his job had been. His task was to supply the camp with the provisions which Cukierman used to prepare meals for the prisoners. Cukierman remembered Schutt complimenting him on his cooking abilities ("*you cook great*"). He claimed that he had never seen or heard other prisoners see Schutt beat anybody. He also described one event from the camp. Once, a new transport of emaciated 1,600 Jews came and the train stood overnight under the open sky. Cukierman claimed that, in the evening, Schutt had ordered him to cook some soup for those people. And Cukierman made them something to eat. According to Cukierman, the defendant took care of all this although he knew that the transport

was meant for extermination. On another occasion, Cukierman saw Schutt standing on the ramp when a new transport arrived. He was just standing there, talking to the commandant, and was not 'dealing with' the newcomers.

As can be seen from the above information, neither the witnesses' nor his co-defendants' testimonies in any way implied that Schutt had played a vital role in the extermination process in the Sobibór camp or that he had ever treated the prisoners in a brutal way. The court decided that he had only performed his duties assigned by his superiors, and therefore, it was not possible to prove that he had ever gone beyond his duties to undertake drastic actions on his own initiative. Also, the court believed that Schutt had made attempts to quit his service in the camp. On the other hand, the aforementioned letter which Schutt had sent to his stepbrother in March 1940 raised some suspicion that his political views were in accordance with the policy of the Third Reich.

When it comes to Schutt's service in the Sobibór extermination camp, however, these suspicions were not proved to be correct. The letter, which clearly incriminated him at first, had been written two years before 'Operation Reinhardt' commenced, and it only related to euthanasia, not to the extermination of Jews. According to the court, Schutt's approval of 'Action T-4' concerned psychiatrically sick patients, and not necessarily the Jews who were healthy and fit for work. Thus, in the court's view, the letter was not sufficient proof that he had been involved in the extermination of Jews because of his own political views. Also, Schutt claimed that he had condemned euthanasia and, as of 1940, tried many times, albeit in vain, to be exempt from his service. The witnesses' testimonies also worked to the benefit of the defendant as they implied that, unlike many other German guards, Schutt refrained from aggression towards Jews and that, on the contrary, he tried, whenever possible, to ease their fate.

On the other hand, the fact that Schutt, on Stangl's order, replaced Ittner as the Sobibór camp's administration manager, might have put him in a bad light. Here, the problem is that from the very beginning Ittner, the administration manager and the chief accountant, had strongly opposed Stangl's suggestions or orders to use the money taken from the victims for current expenses. Therefore, in accordance with the regulations and directives, Ittner spent only the money sent to the camp from the headquarters in Berlin. These differences of opinion between him and Stangl made the commandant dismiss him from the post and replace him with Hans Schutt. In the court, Ittner testified that Schutt had spent the money taken from the camp's victims for extra shopping. During the main trial, he said that he presumed something like that might have taken place. In consequence, the court stated that the suspicions against Schutt were well-grounded in this case, though insufficient to prove him guilty of the offense.

Also, the court in Hagen carefully examined the allegations that he had sexually abused women prisoners who worked in the camp. According to the court, if these allegations were proved, the previous interpretation of his conduct in which he had acted under constant threat and extortion on the part of his superiors, would be undermined. The court failed to prove the fact that he had killed a Jewish woman in order to hide his sexual relationship with her. During the preliminary proceedings,

the court did not preclude such a possibility because Schutt might have tried, at all costs, to hide from his superiors and the other personnel members this act of ‘defiling his race’.

Schutt testified that, indeed, in the building where he had had his office (former forester’s house) two women prisoners lived, and their job was to clean the rooms and take care of the maintenance of the whole building. First, there were two women from Poland and Ukraine, the next two were from Austria (they shared a room) and one half-Jewish woman (who lived in a separate room) who took care of the personnel’s bedding. Schutt did not deny that intimate encounters had taken place in the room occupied by the Austrian Jewish women. He denied, however, that there had been any orgies held there. He said that when he was there, nothing of this sort had ever happened. He treated the girls in a friendly way, and frequently talked to them. Perhaps, he said, someone had seen one of the girls when he was still in his bed. This might have happened after he had come back late from some journey and, as a result, slept or lay longer in his bed, and one of the girls was cleaning his room. Schutt denied ever having had a sexual intercourse with a Jewish girl. Also, he had never given the order to shoot any of the camp’s girls. What is more, he testified that it was due to his intercession that Stangl decided to transfer the two Austrian girls from Sobibór to a labour camp.

When it comes to the murder of the half-Jewish girl, Schutt explained it in the following way. When he came back from his business journey, Bauer took him to Camp III, showed him the dead body of that Jewish girl and told him to look once more at “the Jewish girl’s nice bottom”. Schutt immediately reported this to Stangl, trying to convince him that he had never had any sexual relationship with that Jewish woman. In his view, members of the camp’s personnel did not accept his decision to quit his job at the camp, and therefore spread such defamatory and denunciatory rumours that he wanted to escape from the camp because he had committed “an act which defiled his own race”.

All in all, Hans Schutt was charged with his contributing, together with Bolender, Frenzel, Ittner, Lachman and other Sobibór personnel members, to the murder of about 86,000 Jews. The court in Hagen, however, found him innocent of all alleged crimes.

### *SS-Oberscharführer Heinrich Unverhau*



**Heinrich Unverhau**<sup>53</sup> was born on 26 November 1911 in Vienenburg, Goslar district. Between 1918-1925, he attended primary school in Frellstedt near Helmstedt. On 1 April 1925, he began his education in tinsmithing. In 1925, he had an accident, in which a piece of steel sheet injured him in the eye. He gave up his education and decided to take up music instead. Therefore, until 1929, Unverhau attended music school in Königslutter, where he learnt to play the violin, the saxophone and the French horn. Until 1932, he was a member of the Königslutter municipal band, *Kurkapeli* Fürstenberg band and the Zehdenick municipal band. Thanks to the

intercession of the manager of the band of the healthcare centre in Neuruppin, on 1 March 1934, he got the job as a nurse in the Teupitz healthcare centre. After doing his exam to become a professional nurse, he stayed in Teupitz until October 1938. Afterwards, Unverhau was transferred back to Neuruppin.

In mid-January 1940, Unverhau was employed in the Grafeneck euthanasia centre. When it was closed down, he moved to Hadamar. Next, from January to March 1942, he took part in 'Action T-4' in the East Front. He went back to Hadamar for a short while, and, in June 1942, he went to Berlin, where was given the order to go first to Lublin and then to the Bełżec extermination camp. In October or November 1942, he fell seriously ill with typhoid fever, and was taken to hospital in Tomaszów. He was guarded there so that no one uninitiated would learn about 'Action T-4'. He was frequently delirious because of high fever, and talked about things he used to do. As a result of this illness, he became blind in his right eye, but this was cured through an operation which took place in December 1942. From January to March 1943, he convalesced in Berlin. Next, he took a leave in May, and in early June 1943, he was transferred to the extermination camp in Sobibór, where he stayed until its liquidation, i.e. November or the beginning of December 1943. In the meantime, he returned to Bełżec to help in the liquidation of the camp and the development of the area of the former camp.

From 14 October 1943, Unverhau was ill for a long time. After a holiday leave and before the Christmas of 1943, together with other 'Action T-4' personnel, he went to Italy to continue his service near Trieste. In March 1944, he returned to Berlin, where he was conscripted to a sappers unit and, right before the end of the war, to a health unit. In April 1945, he was taken into the American captivity, and released in September 1945. Afterwards, he went to live with his parents. Unable to find a job as a nurse, he worked as a musician. On 24 October 1947, a criminal investigation was launched in connection with the Grafeneck euthanasia centre, and Unverhau was arrested. He was the only defendant, a former member of 'Action

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem.*

T-4' and 'Operation Reinhardt', who testified, during his hearing on 20 May 1948, what his service in Poland had been like, without even being asked to. This is how he described that period of time:

*"[...] In Lublin, we found ourselves under the command of the then crime commissioner, Wirth from Stuttgart, and we were sent to so-called Jewish resettlement camps. Upon our arrival, we found out that the place operated in the same way as the one in Hadamar. I arrived at the Belżec camp. I had nothing to do with gassing people there. I was assigned the task of supervising the commando responsible for sorting clothes of the gassed Jews. After I came into conflict with Wirth, he gave me the worst possible tasks to do. I had to, for example, be present at the exhumation of corpses, etc. Sometime later, in June 1942 (in fact it was 1943!), I came to the Sobibór camp. I also had to deal with matters connected with the sorting of clothes [...]"*

In his testimony, Unverhau described the prisoners' revolt and the liquidation of the camp. The court did not question him about his service in other extermination centres. When it comes to the criminal investigation into the Grafeneck euthanasia centre, Unverhau was released from arrest on 5 July 1949. He was not granted any damages for having been arrested innocently for almost 16 months. Until 1952, he worked as a musician, and from October 1952, he worked as a nurse in a municipal hospital in Königslutter in Lower Saxony. The moment the criminal proceedings in connection with the Sobibór extermination camp were initiated, Unverhau was suspended and received only 60% of his salary. Since 1938, he had been married to Elfriede, with whom he had two sons. In 1958, he built his own house in Königslutter. When the trial in Hagen commenced, he had remained in custody since 12 March 1964.

Unverhau was a member of the Sobibór camp's personnel from late May or early June 1943 until the camp's liquidation in November/December 1943. He wore an SS-Unterscharführer uniform without the SS rune collar tabs. Upon his arrival, commandant Reichleitner assigned him the task of supervising the commando working in the sorting barracks. He shared this task with a few guards: Bree, Konrad and Beckmann. From the very beginning, he knew that Jews were murdered in the camp. Unverhau was not the head of Camp II, but a guard, like Bree, Beckmann, Konrad and Józef Wolf. He served, for a long time, in the barrack where luggage was sorted. Whenever a new transport arrived, the women prisoners from the sorting barracks had to stay in their quarters in Camp I. Unverhau had to make sure that the sorting commando cleared, after each new group of newcomers had gone through Camp II, the area from the luggage and clothes left behind, and to take them to the sorting barracks. The assumption was that no new group of newcomers was to have even the slightest suspicion about what had been happening there before.

During the breaks between transports, Unverhau supervised the work of the commando of Jewish men and women who sorted the items of clothing coming from the 'liquidated' transport. The prisoners removed the Stars of David, and unstitched the parts of clothing where money, jewellery and documents were hidden. Checked and searched, the items were sorted according to the type and the quality, prepared for loading onto the train, and dispatched. On the commandant's order, sometimes

Unverhau had to supervise the work of other commandos, like the *Bahnhofkommando*, *Waldkommando* or the group building Camp IV.

The court in Hagen stated that Unverhau had not tormented, beaten or humiliated Jews during his service in the Sobibór extermination camp. On the contrary, he enjoyed a good reputation among the Jewish prisoner-labourers, who considered him as the one who treated his prisoners in a 'humane' way. He had never been too officious in carrying out his duties.

From mid-July to early August 1943, Unverhau went on a three-week holiday. When he came back to Sobibór, he was sent for three weeks to the area where the Bełżec camp used to be. There, he built a farm for a Ukrainian who wanted to settle there, fenced it in and planted pine trees. Since a rumour was spread that in the area of the former camp there was hidden a lot of treasure, the local inhabitants began to dig up the area in search of valuables. Unverhau got the task to secure the post-camp area and to preserve order there. On the day the Sobibór prisoners' revolt broke out, i.e. 14 October 1943, Unverhau was staying in Bełżec. He returned to Sobibór only at the beginning of November 1943. The Hagen court came to the conclusion that Unverhau had not taken part in the shooting of the group of Jews employed to liquidate the Sobibór camp. The reason was that he had spent that time in hospital.

Already when he began his work with the Grafeneck centre, Unverhau made attempts to be transferred to a different place because, as a nurse, he did not approve of euthanasia. His superior, doctor Baumhardt warned him, referring to the orders issued by Führer himself together with the obligation to maintain secrecy, that any refusal to cooperate in the euthanasia programme would be punished by sending him to a concentration camp. Unverhau tried to talk about this with SS-Oberführer Viktor Brack, who visited the centre, trying to convince him that he would prefer to do his service in the front. Brack explained to him that there was no possibility of withdrawing from 'Action T-4' unless it was a concentration camp. When Unverhau went on his first leave from Grafeneck, he even talked to the parish priest in Neuruppin, who, however, could not advise him or help him in any way. Next, he talked to professor Heyde, who was visiting the centre. Heyde was of the opinion that if Führer appointed him to this post, there was no way back. In the end, the only thing Unverhau managed to do was to avoid being directly involved in the euthanasia process. He was only responsible for the warehouses with things left behind by the murdered patients.

He was told to do similar work in the Hadamar centre but he did not give up the idea of being transferred to the front. He wanted to take advantage of the fact that there were some irregularities (it was not his fault) in the financial settlements of the items stored in the warehouses in Hadamar. He tried to use this as a pretext to quit his job and to apply for his transfer to the front. His requests were rejected, however.

As far as 'Operation Reinhardt' is concerned, Unverhau found out the real purpose of this operation only when he found himself in the Bełżec camp. Before, he was sure that the 'Operation Reinhardt' camps were indeed resettlement camps. Upon his arrival, commandant Wirth assigned him the task of supervising the sorting commando.

Several days later, Unverhau asked Wirth to transfer him to the front. He motivated his request by saying that his work in Belżec was too great a psychological burden for him to bear. On hearing this, Wirth berated him, calling him ‘scoundrel’, ‘coward’ and ‘loafer’. He threatened to punish him and ordered him to keep on doing what he was told to. Hering, who replaced Wirth in the position of the Belżec camp’s commandant, remembered Unverhau from the time they had worked in Hadamar. Back in Hadamar, they had been in conflict over the irregularities in the financial settlements of the clothes stored in the warehouses. From the very beginning, when Hering became the Belżec camp’s commandant, he treated Unverhau as a very incompetent worker. Once, when he found a few Stars of David left on the items of clothing that had already been sorted, he accused Unverhau of sabotage. Soon, however, Unverhau fell ill with typhoid fever and, as a result of medical complications, lost sight in his right eye, which had already been injured before.

When Unverhau went to Berlin to undergo medical treatment, he left, with the ‘Action T-4’ headquarters, an application to be transferred to a different place, like the psychiatric clinic Kaufbeuren. It turned out that there was a possibility for him to be employed there. When he found out, however, that psychiatrically sick patients were also killed there, he withdrew from the idea because he did not want to have anything to do with it. He was told that, in such a case, he would have to go back to Belżec. When he did, commandant Hering was far from being favourably disposed to him. Several days later, Wirth came to the camp and found out that Unverhau was still trying to withdraw from ‘Operation Reinhardt’. Again, he berated him terribly in front of all the other staff. Unverhau felt so humiliated that he took out his gun, pointed at Wirth and said that if he ‘did not shut his gob’, he would ‘do away with’ him. As punishment, Unverhau (this type of punishment was called ‘toughening up’) was posted to Camp III in Belżec (Camp III in Belżec served the same function as the one in Sobibór), where he had to take part in the exhumation and cremation of corpses. In consequence, he fell into depression and even considered committing suicide. When he was moved to the Sobibór camp, Unverhau did not give up his attempts to be allowed to go to the front. Although he succeeded in partly persuading Reichleitner to his point of view, his request was rejected. Therefore, he considered escaping from the camp. It was only at the end of April 1944 that he was conscripted to the Wehrmacht.

The court’s opinion about Unverhau was based on his own testimony as well as on the testimonies provided by both his co-defendants and the former Jewish prisoners of the Sobibór extermination centre. None of those incriminated him. On the contrary, they served to his benefit. Witnesses Lerer, Biskupicz, Białowicz and Ziss had some problems with recognising Unverhau. Estera Raab only remembered that there had been a German by the name of Unverhau who served in the camp. The vast majority of the several dozen witnesses neither remembered his name nor recognised him. Witness Tomasz Blatt mistook Unverhau for Bolender. What is more, Blatt might have mistaken Bolender for Fuchs. He described Unverhau as a tall strong man in glasses, and who took Jews to the place of their execution.

The court was not certain whether the height and the glasses implied that Blatt described Unverhau or someone else. Another witness, Posner, mistook Unverhau for Lachman, and he could not provide any details about him.

Eda Lichtman, heard in Israel, remembered Unverhau well. Her testimony did not raise any doubts because, without doubt, she talked about Unverhau, not another person. According to her, Unverhau was present on the ramp several times when new transports arrived. She also saw him among the penal commando of prisoner-labourers who were building Camp IV. She remembered that he had stayed in Sobibór for a short time only, and that he had never beaten or tormented prisoners. The way she described Heinrich Unverhau corresponded with what the other witnesses had testified before. Also, Heinrich Unverhau was the only member of ‘Action T-4’ and ‘Operation Reinhardt’ who openly, of his own accord, and profoundly described his service in the extermination camp in Sobibór. He limited his actions to carrying out orders, he never went beyond his duties, and he never acted on his own initiative. The court treated his testimonies in which he claimed that he had made attempts to be exempt from both ‘Action T-4’ and ‘Operation Reinhardt’ as credible enough.

Initially, Heinrich Unverhau was charged with contributing, together with Dubois, Frenzel, Wolf and Lachman as well as with other members of the Sobibór camp personnel, to the mass murder of about 72,000 Jews. He was also charged with the participation in the unloading of Jewish transports meant for extermination. Later, on 20 December 1966, the State Court in Hagen found Unvehau innocent of all alleged crimes.

### *SS-Unterscharführer Franz Wolf*



**Franz Wolf**<sup>54</sup> was born on 9 April 1907 in Krummau as the son of Josef (photographer by profession) and Maria Magdalena Wolf. His parents died in 1938. One of his brothers, Josef, was killed during the prisoner’s revolt in the Sobibór extermination camp; his elder brother died in 1946. He spent his childhood in Krummau, where he went to primary school for five years, and to high school for three years. Next, he did his apprenticeship in a forester’s office for one year and a half, and attended forestry school in Eger. Since he had problems with finding a job as a forester, he decided to change his profession. From 1 January 1926 to 1 June 1929, he trained to be a photographer and, until 1939, he worked in his father’s photographer’s shop. Between 1 October 1929 and 31 March 1931, he served in the Czechoslovak army. In 1933, Wolf married Maria. They had four children.

In 1936, Wolf joined the Sudeten German Party for, as he explained later, practical and social reasons. He did not join the NSDAP; he did not have a membership

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*.

card of this party. He did not wear any badge of any other party: “[...] *before I was conscripted to the Sudetenlandes, I was a member of the German Sudeten Party. At that time, almost all of the Germans belonged to that party. When the German troops entered Sudetenland, the members of the German Sudeten Party changed the party into the NSDAP. I did not become a member of the NSDAP and I never applied for it. On 28 August 1938, I was conscripted to the Wehrmacht. I never knew that I had ever been automatically admitted to the NSDAP [...]*”. On 27 or 28 August 1939, he was conscripted to the Wehrmacht (130<sup>th</sup> regiment).

As of January 1941, within ‘Action T-4’, Wolf worked as a photographer in the Hadamar euthanasia centre. He had been offered the job by a photographer by the name of Franz Wagner from Krammau, who used to serve his apprenticeship in Wolf’s father’s shop. In Hadamar (later in Heidelberg), Wolf took photographs, for scientific purposes, of the patients selected for euthanasia. From autumn 1941, he worked in one of the photographic laboratories in Berlin. From February or March 1943, Wolf was responsible for the documentation in the psychiatric-neurological clinic in Heidelberg. In early March 1943, together with his brother Josef and two other members of ‘Action T-4’ (Wendland and Konrad) he arrived at the Sobibór camp. He stayed there until October 1943; during the prisoners’ revolt he was staying in the camp. Afterwards, he went on a holiday leave and then returned to Sobibór. After a short stay in the camp, which was under liquidation, he was posted to Italy. He served in Trieste and Fiume. When the war ended, he was taken, in Austria, to the American captivity and taken to Bad Aibling and Weide. Wolf was released to freedom in August 1945. Until 1946, he worked as a photographer for the occupational troops. In 1946, he found his family in Tittmoning, and they settled down in Oberbayern. After some time, they moved to Eppelheim near Heidelberg. Before his arrest, Wolf worked as a storage entrepreneur, and earned 50 Deutsche marks nett.

In Sobibór, Wolf wore a uniform without the symbol of a skull and without the SS rune collar tabs. Franz Wolf came to the Sobibór extermination centre in early March 1943. He arrived there with his brother, Josef, and two other German guards, Wendland and Konrad. In the camp, there were also two other Nazis who came from the same city as Wolf: Franz Suchomel and Thomas Steffl. Franz Wolf served in Sobibór until its liquidation, i.e. until November/December 1943. According to the court in Hagen, during Wolf’s stay in Sobibór, at least 39,000 Jews were murdered. On the first day, commandant Reichleitner explained to Wolf what type of service he would do in the camp. As he testified later, Wolf had all the time been certain that he would be a photographer in the camp. He was obliged to maintain secrecy and received his uniform. He was also given a gun and a whip. The commandant appointed him guard. Josef Kondrat was posted to Camp III as a guard. Josef Wolf and Willi Wendland served as guards in the sorting barrack, and Franz Wolf – in the sorting barrack where luggage was sorted.

Each new transport of Jews was made to march from the ramp, through a loose cordon formed by Ukrainian watchmen, to the transit barrack. There, they left their luggage (in the case of Dutch transports these were suitcases, bundles, sometimes

with bedding inside; in the case of Polish transports these were sacks mainly). The new-arrivals were then taken to a place where they had to undress. Afterwards, they were marched through the so-called *Schlauch* to the gas chamber. After the newcomers had left the transit barrack, Jewish prisoner-labourers carried all the luggage left behind to two separate barracks. If there was too little room for more luggage, it was taken to the so-called storage barracks. Between two transports, part of the luggage was opened and the contents were sorted.

For this purpose, about 10 or 12 tables were prepared in the sorting barracks. Five women prisoners worked at each table. In total, approximately 60 Jewish women worked there, under Franz Wolf's supervision. When a new transport was being 'received', nobody was allowed to stay in the sorting barracks. The women from the sorting commando were locked in the barracks of Camp I. The men were made to remove the luggage from the train wagons and the ramp. Mostly, it was Wolf that supervised the sorting of luggage. Sometimes, he was replaced by Steffl. Occasionally, the head of the camp, Gustav Wagner, replaced him.

Several times, Reichleitner assigned Wolf the task of receiving new transports on the railway ramp. Franz Wolf was also made responsible for taking the newly-arrived Jews from Camp III to the gas chamber. Sometimes, he had to supervise the so-called 'friseurs', who cut women's hair in a special barrack situated near the gate leading to Camp III, which could be approached by a side fork of 'the road to heaven'. The exit of this barrack connected with the *Schlauch* or led directly to the main gate of Camp III. Most probably, this barrack was built soon after Himmler's visitation of Sobibór, during the extension of the camp which lasted from July to September 1942. Most often, Rehwald Nowak supervised this barrack. On Wagner's order, Wolf sometimes took over the task. He only did this when he had finished his work in the sorting barrack and was free. In the spring and summer of 1943, Wolf many times supervised the Waldkommando that worked outside the camp. The prisoners from this commando cut down trees in the neighbouring forests to obtain building material to be used in the camp or as the kindling in the crematoria where corpses of the Jews killed in the gas chamber were cremated. During his trial in Hagen, the court found Wolf guilty of tormenting Jews from this commando by ordering some of them to climb trees which were later cut down together with those prisoners.

When Wolf arrived at the Sobibór camp, he did not know that it served to exterminate the Jewish population. He only learnt about it after he had undergone training carried out by commandant Reichleitner. In his testimony, Wolf claimed that for him the extermination of Jews was great injustice and described his service as 'very unpleasant'. However, he commenced his service, amenable and obedient to his superiors. The prisoners regarded him as an informer who reported to Frenzel on anything he had heard from any prisoners. The prisoners also remembered him as a person who had frequently taken home things stolen from the sorting barracks. He never did anything to avoid performing his duties in the camp.

One summer day in 1943, Franz Wolf was supervising a commando doing some clean-up work between Camps II and III. Suddenly, the kapo of that commando came

up to the fence surrounding Camp III and started to peek through a hole in the fence to see what was happening in that part of the camp. This was strictly forbidden, so when Wolf saw this, he summoned the kapo and reprimanded him. Two hours later, a Ukrainian watchman from Camp III reported to Wolf that he had seen the same kapo looking inside Camp III again. Wolf ordered the watchman (most probably, his name was Dahlke) to take the kapo to Camp III. It is not known what happened later, but the witnesses who described this event testified that they had never seen the man again. Wolf denied having killed the kapo or having ordered the Ukrainian from Camp III to shoot him. He claimed that, two weeks later, a watchman from Camp III, Josef Konrad, had told him about this kapo, praising him as a very good labourer. Estera Raab, a witness in Wolf's trial described the event as follows:

“[...] a young kapo, at the age of about 20, pushed, in Wolf's presence, a narrow-gauge wagon towards Camp III. The kapo passed the site where he was supposed to stop (or the prisoners of Camp III to take over the wagon), and approached Camp III. I heard the sound of a gunshot and saw the wagon coming back empty. I don't know where Wolf was at the time when the shot was fired. Later, rumour was spread that Wolf had shot that kapo [...]”.

During his hearing, Wolf confirmed that the Jewish labourers from Camps I or II who pushed narrow-gauge wagons, were allowed to approach Camp III at a distance of 20 metres. Next, the wagons were taken over by the Jews from Camp III, and then pushed back to the same place. The court had doubts whether Estera Raab described the same event which Wolf talked about. According to Raab, the kapo approached, with his wagon, Camp III, while Wolf claimed that he had been peeking through a hole in the fence. Estera Raab heard a gunshot, while Wolf testified that the kapo had stayed alive. The court came to the conclusion that both Raab and Wolf referred to the same event. For the court, the vital information was that Estera Raab had mentioned the fact that Wolf had had his bandaged arm in a sling. It was an important clue because Wolf testified that he had had such a dressing in the camp. Estera Raab's sorting barrack, where she was working at that time, was situated no more than 100 metres from the scene of this event. There was a high probability, then, that she had seen this event and heard the gunshot, which, in fact, might not have been fired by Wolf (although such a possibility could not be precluded). The court had to decide whether to interpret this event, obviously incriminating Wolf, in the context of his having had to act in accordance with the camp's law or simply as murder.

One of the camp's rules stipulated that none of the Jewish prisoners was allowed to approach Camp III. As a rule, any violation of this regulation equalled death penalty. Additionally, no prisoner was allowed to come into any contact with the Jews working in Camp III. Therefore, if Wolf drew far-reaching consequences by sending the kapo to Camp III, because the prisoner had violated the rule, it means that he acted in accordance with the camp's law. The truth is, however, that he need not have done it and he would not have been held liable for this. This is implied by the fact that two of the camp's guards, Frenzel and Beckman, reproached him for this decision because, in this way, he had broken a promise he had made. He had promised them that the kapo would stay alive. When he failed to do so, the

two guards demanded explanation from him because, as they said, he had ‘acted foolishly’. By giving his order for the kapo to be taken to Camp III he went back on his promise. This implies that Wolf might have imposed a more lenient punishment. Therefore, the court’s conclusion was that Wolf wrongly assessed the situation and, to avoid possible consequences, abused his authority.

Another complicated matter raised during Wolf’s trial concerned the execution of the prisoners from the *Waldkommando* who had escaped from the camp. Wolf took the women prisoners he was supervising on that day from the sorting barracks to the place of execution (the area between Camps II and III). He told them to line up and watch the execution. Wolf was standing next to the other German guards. After the execution, he took the women back to their workplaces. The court established the role which Wolf had played in the execution on the basis of his own testimony and the testimony provided by a witness to that event, Estera Raab, who was among the group of women Wolf had taken to the place of execution. Wolf denied having shot at the victims. Raab testified, however, that Wolf, Reichleitner and Freznel had carried out the execution.

Generally, the testimonies provided by the witnesses, i.e. former Sobibór prisoners and some personnel, differed from each other to a great extent. They varied in details such as who took part in the execution, how many victims were shot, where exactly the execution took place, who was standing and where, who gave a speech to the gathered prisoners, who shot and who gave the order to shoot. Only Estera Raab and Filip Białowicz agreed that Wolf had also been involved in the execution. Most of the witnesses, however, testified that the execution had been carried out by some Ukrainian watchmen. The Germans were standing aside. One of them gave a speech and then gave the order to shoot. None of the Jewish prisoners pointed at Wolf as the German who had given the speech or ordered the firing squad to shoot. Selma Engel, Ilana Safran and Kurt Ticho were not sure whether Wolf had been present at the execution at all. During the trial, the court took into account the possibility that some of the witnesses might have mistaken Franz Wolf for his brother Josef. Both of them came to the camp at the same time and stayed there until the outbreak of the prisoners’ revolt in October 1943. The testimonies of the former prisoners showed, however, that they did not have any problems with the distinguishing between the two brothers. Also, the court precluded the possibility that the witnesses had mistaken Wolf for ‘*Welfel*’ (this is how the prisoners called Wagner) on account of the fact that the two names phonetically sounded very similar.

During the trial against him, Wolf testified that he had never been an anti-Semite. He claimed that he had been conscripted to ‘Action T-4’ against his will, not knowing what kind of institution it was and that, as a soldier, he had been bound to maintain absolute secrecy. The moment he found himself in the Sobibór camp, he told Reichleitner that he did not want to take part in all of this. Reichleitner replied: “*What do you want? You’ve got children, haven’t you?*” Wolf treated this as a stern warning, and he never opposed his commandant afterwards. He did not approve of things which happened in the camp. He talked to his brother, to Steffl, Novak and other guards about this. However, he did not have enough courage to act against

orders. He was sure that if he did, he would immediately be sent to a concentration camp. After the prisoners' uprising (in which his brother was killed), he asked Hering, the then commandant, to exempt him from his service. The request was rejected, however. Hering only agreed to give Wolf a few days free. Also, Wolf testified that he had always given the prisoners he supervised a lot of freedom at work. He turned a blind eye to their smoking cigarettes or eating the food smuggled from the sorting barracks. He remembered that he had only once hit a prisoner with his whip. Most frequently, he only pretended to be whipping prisoners, in fact he struck the whip against his boot. He claimed that he had treated his prisoners in a friendly way:

*"[...] there was strict discipline in the camp. Each SS man had as much freedom of action as the camp's law allowed him to have. One of the rules stated that Jews were forbidden to smoke cigarettes but I allowed my Jews to smoke. Frenzel and Wagner administered punishment for misdemeanours. These two represented justice in the camp. At their discretion, they punished the wrongdoers by whipping them, depriving them of food, transferring them to a very strict Arbeitskommando [working unit] or death penalty. Frenzel or Wagner reported these misdemeanours to the camp's commandant. These two always made sure that the wrongdoers were punished properly. I never reported to Frenzel or Wagner on any Jew. I was never present when punishment was being meted out [...]"*

What Wolf testified was contradicted by the witnesses' testimonies. Selma Engel and Ilana Safran claimed that it was quite the opposite. Wolf forbade prisoners to smoke or to take food from the sorting barracks, and he severely punished those who had done any of these. He often beat the women working in the sorting barracks without any reason. The women prisoners also remembered how he said his favourite sneering statement: *"dalli, dalli, my dear ladies, work makes life sweet"*. The court stated that this type of behaviour was typical of Wolf. On the basis of the careful observation made of his behaviour during his hearings, the court presumed that, indeed, he might have behaved in the way Ilana Safran had described. Moreover, Wolf himself revealed his cynical attitude towards Jews when he recounted one of the events

One day when, on Wagner's order, he was supervising the hairdressers cutting the hair of the newly-arrived women, he caught sight of a Jewish woman and her daughter who came from Vienna. He started to talk with the two women about Vienna as if nothing had happened. He kept talking to them even when they were, completely unaware, entering the gas chamber. The court was of the opinion that Wolf was terrified at what he saw in the camp the moment he arrived there. However, he soon adapted to the new surroundings and behaved in the same way as most of the German guards did. It is true that he was not as brutal as Wagner, Frenzel or Gomerski, as he was not this type of man in general, but still he did torment Jews by beating, harassing or behaving in a cynical way towards them. Witness Margulies, on the other hand, testified that Wolf was one of those guards who were 'harmless'. What he meant was that he did not beat Jews too brutally.

The court decided, however, that such a view presented by one of the witnesses could not radically change the interpretation of Wolf's conduct in the Sobibór camp. For the court, Wolf obediently carried out his superiors' orders because he believed

in the necessity to execute orders diligently. In the court's view, Wolf did this not only, as was implied by his conversation with Reichleitner, because he was afraid of being sent to a concentration camp or sentenced to death, but also of his own free will. This was confirmed by Josef Herszman's testimony in which he described the following event. In 1943, Herszman worked for two weeks under Wolf's supervision in the northern part of the camp, where he was cutting down trees. One day, Gustav Wagner came, and started to shout and beat the prisoners because, he said, they were not working well enough. Wagner came up to Herszman and said: "*Józef, come here, I will show you how to work!*". Wagner began to cut down trees together with Herszman. When Herszman and Wagner were felling a tree, Herszman heard Wolf screaming at one of the Dutch prisoners: "you lazybones!", and saw him hit the prisoner with a branch, take out his gun and shoot the man. At that moment, Wagner stopped cutting down the tree, straightened up to look what was going on. After the gunshot was fired, which killed the man, Wagner said: "keep on working!". Sometime after this incident, Wolf came up to Herszman, who was working in one of the sorting barracks, and asked him what he would do if they met after the war. Herszman did not know what to say because he was afraid to say a thing, and therefore he kept quiet.

According to the court, this story perfectly matched Wolf's psychological profile. During his service in the camp, he very much wanted the camp's management (Wagner was one of them) not to regard him as a poor soldier. When it comes to the afore-mentioned incident, the court presumed that, in Wagner's presence, Wolf had wanted to adapt to the generally accepted treatment of prisoners and to present himself in a positive light to his superior. The only doubt the court expressed was that Herszman had described this event only during the main trial, and not during the criminal proceedings during which he had been asked about Wolf and shown his photograph.

Ultimately, Franz Wolf was sentenced to 8 years of high-security prison.

### ***SS-Unterscharführer Robert Juhrs***



**Robert Juhrs**<sup>55</sup> was born on 17 October 1911 in Frankfurt, as the son of Willi (interior designer) and Marie. His father died in 1915 as a patient of mental hospital, and his mother died in 1948. Juhrs was brought up by his mother and his relatives in southern Germany. As of 1923, only his mother looked after him. He had a brother who was three years younger. He attended primary school in Frankfurt for eight years. Then he continued his education in a vocational school. In May 1929, he obtained a journeyman's licence.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem.*

In 1929, Juhrs joined the SA, and on 1 April 1930 – the NSDAP. During his service within ‘Operation Reinhardt’, he held the rank of SS-Unterscharführer without the SS rune collar tabs. Until 1934, he worked as a *Weissbinder*. He had an accident at work (some lime got into his eyes), as a result of which he lost sight in one eye and developed dizziness. In consequence, Juhrs had to quit his work and was forced to do odd jobs. Between 1935-1936, he worked as an usher and caretaker in the Frankfurt opera. Later, for six months, he worked as a caretaker in one of the estates. After World War I, Juhrs was a postman. Afterwards, for a short time, he worked in the office of the land forces’ garrison in Frankfurt.

In 1940, Juhrs worked as an office assistant in the state work office in Hessian, whence (within ‘Operation Reinhardt’) he was posted to the Hadamar euthanasia centre. In the summer (June/July) of 1942, he was delegated to work in the Belżec extermination camp. From March 1943, he worked in the Dorohucza labour camp as a watchman supervising a commando of Jewish prisoners mining peat. In early November, Juhrs received the order to go to Sobibór. At the end of November or at the beginning of December, he had to go to Berlin where, most probably, he took part in the liquidation of the ‘Action T-4’ headquarters (Tiergartenstrasse 4). At the beginning of 1944, Juhrs went to Italy to join the remaining ‘Operation Reinhardt’ members who, in the vicinity of Trieste, were engaged in actions against partisans.

At the end of the war, he was taken into the American captivity in Kufstein. After four weeks, Juhrs was transferred to the vicinity of Munich to work on a farm. From June to 4 August 1945, he stayed in a POW’s camp. Sometime later, he was released from jail. Three days after he came back home, Juhrs was arrested once more as an identified *Gestapo* and *SS* member. In November 1946, he was released and came back to Frankfurt. On 29 January, Juhrs was arrested once again, this time in connection with ‘Action T-4’. He was not proved guilty of any crime and, on 2 April 1947, was released from jail. Juhrs did not receive any damages for having been arrested innocently. He went to live in Würzburg, where he worked as a scrap metal trader. During the next few years, he often changed his places of stay and workplaces. Juhrs was married twice. His first marriage with Lora lasted from 2 September 1941 to January 1958. They had two children but their marriage ended in divorce. In June 1958, he married Gisela. After World War II, Juhrs was punished many times for violating the obligation of registration and for neglecting the maintenance obligation. When it comes to Juhrs’s stay in the Sobibór extermination camp, charges against him were brought to court on 18 August 1963. During the criminal proceedings, Juhrs was not put under arrest. On 20 December 1966, the State Court in Hagen found Robert Juhrs innocent of all alleged crimes.

*SS-Unterscharführer Ernst Zierke*

**Ernst Theodor Franz Zierke**<sup>56</sup> was born on 6 May in Krampe, Kröslin district, as the son of Paul (railwayman) and Berty Zierke. He was brought up in Krampe, where he attended, for eight years (beginning from 1911) primary school. He was exempt from school when he was in his last form. Zierke was not a particularly good pupil, but he distinguished himself as disciplined and systematic at studying. His father died in 1917, and his mother in 1962.

When he was exempt from school, Zierke worked, for two or three years, for his uncle in the forest in Krampe. Next, he trained as a blacksmith in Köslin.

In 1924, he obtained a journeyman's licence and went to work in different places in Berlin: first in Düppel in Berlin/ Zehlendorf, then in the *Presto* meat processing plant in Berlin, in the Hubertushof estate near Reppen, and finally in the Haidehof estate. From 1930, he was jobless, and tried to find employment as a nurse in the healthcare clinic in Reppen. As a result, Zierke was employed for a trial period in a hospital in Neuruppin. There, he trained to be a professional nurse and, after his diploma exam, he started to work in the hospital full time. On 1 August 1930, Zierke joined the NSDAP (membership No. 272096) and the SA. During his service within 'Action Reinhardt', he held the rank of SS-Unterscharführera without the SS rune collar tabs. Ernst Zierke married Lisbeth in 1934. They had two daughters, but got divorced after the war.

At the end of 1939, Zierke was summoned (together with his colleagues from Neuruppin: Heinrich Unverhau, a male nurse by the name Ahrend and a female nurse by the name Edith Richter) to the headquarters of 'Action T-4' in Berlin. They were sworn in, informed about the tasks they would have to perform within the euthanasia programme, and posted to the Grafeneck euthanasia centre. There, Zierke worked as a nurse who escorted transports of sick patients from different hospitals to Grafeneck, as well as an assistant of the photographer (who took pictures of psychiatrically sick patients). In spring 1941, Zierke and some other staff from Grafeneck went to Hadamar, where he performed the same duties as he had in Grafeneck. In late 1941, Zierke was moved to the Eichberg/ Taunus centre. From early January to mid-March 1942, like most of the 'Action T-4' nurses and drivers, he took part in the winter evacuation of wounded and 'frozen' German soldiers. He was next transferred to the Eichberg/Taunus and Hadamar centres.

In June or July 1942, Zierke was transferred to the extermination camp in Belżec, where he served until March 1943. Then he went to work in the Dorohucz

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem.*

labour camp, and next was posted to the Sobibór extermination camp. At the end of 1943, he went with Robert Juhrs to Berlin to do some clean-up work and to assist in the liquidation of the 'Action T-4' headquarters. Afterwards, he went on a short holiday leave. After the Christmas of 1943, Zierke was given the order to join the remaining 'Action T-4' members in Trieste, Italy. At the end of the war, i.e. On 12 May 1945, he was taken into the American captivity in Carinthia, where he stayed until mid-July 1945. From the end of July until Whitsun 1946, Zierke was interned as an identified SS member. He completed his denazification process successfully and was released from internment. However, on 24 January 1947, on account of his service in Hadamar, Zierke was put to jail, where he stayed until 28 January 1948. He was released from jail on the basis of the verdict of the grand jury in Frankfurt-am-Main issued on 28 January 1948, in which he had not been found guilty of the direct complicity in mass murder. Zierke moved in to his mother's house, who lived in Rateburg. After she died in 1962, Zierke moved to Süd-Winsen/Aller to live with his sister. There, he found employment in the local sawmill.

Robert Juhrs and Ernst Zierke worked in the Bełżec camp until March 1943. Next, with the other former 'Action T-4' members and watchmen from Bełżec, they went to the labour camp in Dorochuczka commanded by SS-Untersturmführer Schwarz, followed by SS-Untersturmführer Tauscher. On 3 or 4 November 1943, most probably within so-called 'Operation Harvest Festival' [*Erntefest*], the SS-Enheit police took the Jewish prisoners from the camp to Trawniki and killed them. It is hard to establish at present (the court in Hagen failed to do so, either) whether Juhrs and Zierke took part in this action. They denied this. When the Dorochuczka labour camp was liquidated, Juhrs and Zierke were posted to the Sobibór camp.

Now, it is impossible to establish who gave that order and who handed it to them. Neither is it possible to state what kind of duties they assumed at the camp. Juhrs and Zierke arrived at the Sobibór camp soon after 5 November 1943. There was only a small group of prisoners in Sobibór. They were kept alive, assisted by some prisoners brought from Treblinka, in order to liquidate the camp. During their trial, both of the defendants testified that there had been about 30 prisoner-labourers in Sobibór at that time. They were evacuating the camp, doing the clean-up work and preparing, for dispatch, the ammunition from Camp IV. Juhrs and Zierke, like all the other guards, were given the order to supervise the prisoners. At lunchtime or in late afternoon, the Jews, completely exhausted, were taken to the nearby forest (within the area of former Camp III or Camp IV). To prevent any escape attempts, both the Ukrainian and German guards formed a cordon, around 10 metres long, to mark off the place of execution. The last Sobibór prisoners (approximately 30 persons) were told to lie down on the grates made from railway tracks. They were shot in the back of their heads. Juhrs and Zierke testified that a Ukrainian by the name of Bodessa and a German, Gustav Wagner, had distinguished themselves in the execution. The court failed to establish whether Karl Frenzel had also taken part. Most probably, Juhrs and Zierke were among the guards who were cordoning off the place of execution. The court in Hagen could not state whether the two defendants had actually carried out the execution.

During their hearings, both Juhrs and Zierke claimed that they had not acted of their own free will and that they had not taken direct part in the execution of those Jews. They only obeyed the orders. They did it because they could not see any other possibility. They only did what they were ordered to do, and there were no political, religious or ideological reasons lying behind their actions. All the same, they said, they realised that their service in the camp had been connected with the extermination of the Jewish population. The findings of the court in Hagen were based on Juhrs's and Zierke's testimonies, which were very difficult to undermine. During their first hearing at the police station, Juhrs talked about the execution of the last group of Jews in Sobibór but denied having been involved in it. During his next hearing, he added that, together with Zierke, they had been among the group cordoning off the place of execution. He even provided the details of the execution. According to him, the Jews had to lie down on a special construction made from railway tracks, and were shot in the back of their heads. He claimed that about 30 prisoners had been killed in this way. He did not preclude the possibility, however, that there might have been more of them, even more than a hundred. He pointed to a very important fact, i.e. that the execution had lasted almost an hour.

The court in Hagen charged Juhrs and Zierke with the participation in the murder of 30 prisoners. The court based its indictment on the number of 30 prisoners as a certain number from the evidentiary point of view. During their trial, the court was unable to establish how the remaining prisoners (from Treblinka), who took part in the liquidation of the camp, were killed. Obviously, when Juhrs and Zierke served in Sobibór, the prisoners brought from Treblinka must have been executed as well. It cannot be excluded that the first group from Treblinka, approximately 200 persons, had been murdered before Juhrs and Zierke came to Sobibór. However, the liquidation of the second group of Treblinka prisoners (about 75 Jews brought to Sobibór on 4 November) must have taken place when Juhrs and Zierke stayed in the camp. It cannot be precluded, however, that they were killed earlier and in different circumstances than the last execution of 30 prisoners which Juhrs and Zierke described, and in which they were among those cordoning off the place of execution. Juhrs's doubts about it and the fact that he changed his testimony implies the possibility that, during that last execution, approximately 100 prisoners were killed, among whom were the prisoners from Treblinka.

Ernst Zierke's testimony concerning the execution of the last prisoners of the Sobibór camp differed from that provided by Juhrs. Zierke claimed that 20 or 25 persons had been killed. According to his testimony, on the day of their execution, the Jews were not working (however, in his testimony from 19 November 1963 the Jews were still working right before their execution). He also said that he had not participated in the execution, and that he was standing at a distance of about 50 metres from the place of execution, so he could not see who was shooting. He also testified that he did not know whether the Jews were lying on grates or perhaps they were standing next to pits. In one of his first testimonies he claimed that, at the time of the execution, he was staying in a different part of the camp, busy dismantling

some of the camp's barracks. He only heard, he said, some gunshots; perhaps the sounds of the gunshots came from an execution which was being carried out in the area of former Camp III or Camp IV. The court did not believe all this and interpreted this testimony as the defendant's typical line of defence meant to justify his actions. Ultimately, however, during the court session on 20 December 1966, the grand jury in the District Court in Hagen stated, on the basis of the main trial held between 6 September 1965 and 20 December 1966, that Robert Juhrs and Ernst Zierke were innocent.

## SOURCES AND LITERATURE

### I. Archive sources

#### 1. The Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Lublin

##### The Sobibór archives records – the extermination camp Lu 1/9.

###### Documents:

a letter from the Prosecutor of the District Court in Lublin to the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, 4 February 1946, file ref. No. Lu/1/9/46/0029

- an official letter from the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 21 January 1965, file ref. No. Lu/08/298/5/0007
- an official letter from the Director of the Investigation Department of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin to the Head of the Investigation Department of National Security at the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, 10 March 1965, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/5/0019
- an official letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Deputy Province Commandant of Citizens' Militia in Lublin, 8 August 1966, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/5/0020
- an official letter from the Citizens' Militia Commandant of the Lublin Province to the Deputy District Security Commandant of Citizens' Militia in Włodawa, 23 September 1966, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/5/0050
- an official letter from the Citizens' Militia District Headquarters in Włodawa to the Head of the Investigation Department of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, 5 October 1966, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/5/0069
- the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters, a confidential note, 18 October 1966, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/5/0088
- an official letter from the Deputy District Security Commandant of Citizens' Militia in Włodawa – Captain Stanisław Kędziora to the Head of the Investigation Department of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, 3 February 1968, Lu/0/8/298/5/0178
- an official letter from the Citizens' Militia Headquarters of the Lublin Province to the Head of Department 'C' of the Citizens' Militia Province Headquarters in Lublin, 23 February 1968, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/5/0183
- a message from the Jewish Historical Institute (303/60/S.G.) for the Deputy Province Prosecutor in Lublin – T. Kamiński, Warszawa, 18 March 1960, Sign. Lu/0/8/298/4/031
- a report from M. Rozegnal, a delegated correspondent for the Investigation of

- German Crimes (Wola Uhruska) to the District Committee for the Investigation of German Crimes in Włodawa, 22 September 1945, file ref. No. Lu/0/8/298/4/031
- a report from the District Court Prosecutor – K. Schnierstein to the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, 23 November 1945, Lu/1/9/46/0017
  - a letter from the District Judge of Region III to the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland to Judge Józef Skórzyński, Lublin, 21 October 1945, a photocopy (no signature)
  - Colonel Bryniarski's official letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Deputy Province Security Commandant of Citizens' Militia in Lublin, 21 January 1965, a photocopy (no signature)
  - an official letter from the District Court Prosecutor in Lublin to Citizen Józef Skórzyński, the District Investigating Justice, 19 December 1945, a photocopy (no signature)
  - a letter from the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland to the District Court Prosecutor in Lublin, 23 January 1946, a photocopy (no signature)
  - a letter from the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland to the District Court Prosecutor in Lublin, 28 September 1945, a photocopy (no signature)

**Accounts and testimonies:**

**Peczerski Aleksander** - Lu/1/9/46/0050; Lu/1/9/46/0076, **Szulc Emmanuel** - Lu/1/9/46/0050; Lu/1/9/46/0060; Lu/1/9/46/0063.

**2. The Archives of the Dutch Institute of War Documentation in Amsterdam (NIOD - Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie)**

**Archive records – the extermination camp in Sobibór (804)**

**Section 3 – witness accounts**

**Group 3.1 - prisoners (according to signatures):**

Alster Szlomo - 804/26, Bahir Moshe - 13/36, Biskubicz Jakub - 13/123; 13/112; 13/97, Cukierman Herschel - 14/30; 14/50, Cukierman Josef - 14/40; 14/26, Engel Chaim - 14/173; 14/183, Engel Selma - 12/85; 14/124, Fellenbaum-Weiss Hella - 804/36, Goldfarb Mordechaj - 15/130, Honigman Zyndel - 15/171, Kohn Abraham - 16/90; 16/102; 16/107, Korenfeld Chaim - 16/155, Lerer Samuel - 17/56; 17/40; 17/47, Lichtman Eda - 17/89, Menche Chaskiel - 804/29, Metz Zelda - 16/62, Raab Ester - 18/126; 18/127; 804/31, Szmajzner Stanisław - 18/250; 18/208; 804/33, Taborinski Borys - 20/4, Zielinski Regina - 20/292; 804/37, Ziss Meier - 804/38; 20/346.

**Group 3.2 - witnesses – Ukrainians, Germans, Poles (according to signatures):**

Businnij Prokofij - Sign.21/8, Engelhardt Jakob - 21/57, Górny Feliks - 804/23, Moser Hilmar - 804/24, Pfannesteil Wilhel - 50/2, Sobotka Franz - 22/125, Tauschner Fritz

- 49/313, Wagner Hans - 804/24, Wullbrandt Erich - 804/24, Borysiuk Stanisław - 21/2, Grodzicka Katarzyna - 21/86, Herszman Josef - 15/155, Maliński Józef - 22/12; 22/17, Parkoła Franciszek - 22/29, Piwoński Jan - 22/65, Sitarski Franciszek - 22/119, Skulski Jan - 05.

### **Group 3.3 - the SS personnel (according to signatures):**

Bauer Erich - 6/25; 6/33; 6/40; 6/42; 6/48; 6/52; 6/82; 46/94; 46/108; 46/120; 46/177, Bolender Kurt - 46/186; 46/203; 46/205; 46/208; 46/212; 46/213; 47/136, Bolender Margarete - 46/220, Dubois Karl - 47/3; 47/19; 47/26; 47/33; 47/36; 47/51, Frenzel Karl - 50/67; 47/100; 47/117; 47/119; 47/124; 47/127; 47/132, Fusch Erich - 47/228, Gomerski Hubert - 804/48, Hodl Franz - 47/315; 47/320, Ittner Alfred - 49/3; 49/22, Juhrs Robert - 49/56; 49/66; 49/98, Klier Johan - 49/105, Lachmann Gustaw - 49/117; 49/121; 49/135, Lambert Erwin - 49/143, Matthes Arthur - 49/160, Schutt Hans - 49/208; 49/216, Stangl Franz - 49/263, Suchomel Franz - 49/268; 49/279, Wolf Franz - 49/323; 49/332; 49/346.

### **Section 8 - supplements:**

- a letter from the guards post in Chełm, 7 January 1943, to the Guards Commandant in Lublin, file ref. No. 804/23  
 - Hilberg, Raul, *The Fate of Jews in the Cities*, a typescript, file ref. No. 804 5029  
 - Der Inspektor für Statistik beim Reichsführer SS, *Die Endlösung Der Europäischen Judenfrage*, Korherr Bericht, a typescript, file ref. No. 804 50/121  
 - a letter from Der Inspektor für Statistik Pg Korherr to SS Obersturmbannführer Dr R. Brandt, Berlin, 23 March 1943, a typescript, file ref. No. 804 50/160  
 - a letter from SS Obersturmbannführer Dr R. Brandt to Der Inspektor für Statistik Pg Korherr, 10 April 1943, a typescript, file ref. No. 804 50/162  
 - a letter from Der Inspektor für Statistik Pg Korherr to SS Obersturmbannführer Dr R. Brandt, Berlin 19 April 1943, a typescript, file ref. No. 804 50/184  
 - SS Reichsführer to SS und Poliseiführer in der Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland, SS Gruppenführer Globocnik, 30 November 1943, a typescript, file ref. No. 804 51/98

## **3. The Archives of the Łęczna – Włodawa Lake District in Włodawa (MPLW)**

### **Archive records – the Museum of the Former Nazi German Extermination Camp in Sobibór**

#### **File 1 - documents:**

- a commitment contract for a person empowered to be in charge of the resettlement of Jews during 'Operation Reinhardt' by the SS and Police Commander in the Lublin District (a copy), (no signature)  
 - a letter from the Chełm Judenrat, 30 April 1942, about individual Jews dispatched to work in the Sobibór camp (a copy), (no signature)  
 - a Sobobór – Lublin rail transport document, 16 April 1943 (a copy), (no signature)  
 - a rail transport document concerning the transportation of prisoners from Treblinka to Sobibór, 20 October 1943 (a copy), (no signature)

- Mazurek, Wojciech, *Wyniki badań archeologicznych na terenie byłego hitlerowskiego obozu zagłady w Sobiborze koło Włodawy, woj. Lubelskie, lata 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011.*

[The Results of Archaeological Research in the Area of the Former German Extermination Camp in Sobibór near Włodawa, the Lublin Province, in the years 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011].

**File 2 – testimonies by former prisoners of the German extermination camp in Sobibór (in alphabetical order):**

Engel Chaim, Engel (Wijnberg) Selma, Fajgenbaum Srul, Goldfarb Mordechaj, Lichtman Eda, Lichtman Icchak, Merensztejn Moszek, Podchlebnik Salomon, Powroźnik Chaim, Stern Ursula, Ticho Kurt.

**File 3 – records of interrogations of members of the German personnel of the extermination camp in Sobibór (in alphabetical and date order):**

Bauer Erich - 30 October 1961; 20 November 1962; 10 December 1962; 11 December 1962; 13 December 1962, Bolender Kurt - 7 June 1962, Frenzel Karl - 6 March 1962; 9 July 1962; 29 November 1962, Gomerski Hubert - 6 May 1961; 22 May 1961, Hodl Franz – no date, Lambert Erwin - 20 December 1962; 12 February 1963; 15 September 1965; Stangl Franz - 19 January 1961; 27 October 1961; 24 June 1967; 26 June 1967; 27 June 1967; 17 July 1967; 26 June 1968; 29 August 1968; 16 September 1968, Wolf Franz - 24 November 1965

**File 4 – accounts by outside witnesses (in alphabetical order):**

Bajuk Mieczysław, Białucha Zygmunt, Bondarczuk Franciszek, Byczek Włodzimierz, Cholewa Józef, Chorąży Leokadia, Chorąży Leokadia, Klauda Józef, Kowalewski Stanisław, Krzowski Jan, Kulczycka Maria, Parkoła Franciszek, Pazyna Maria, Piwoński Jan, Piwoński Kazimierz, Prokopiuk Janina, Raczyński Antoni, Rusiński Stanisław, Ruźkowski Kazimierz, Sójka Czesław, Sujko Irena, Wasilewski Czesław.

**4. The Archives of the Foundation for Polish German Reconciliation in Warsaw**

**Archive records –applications for compensation:**

- a survey concerning the course of war activities and the German occupation, The Commune Office in Wola Uhruska, Sobibór, the Włodawa district, 1946.
- Gaj, Sabina, *Moja relacja z przeżytej represji* [My Memories of the Repressions], an application for war compensation
- Hanas, Stanisław, an account, 4 April 1989, an application for war compensation
- Karowiec, Zofia and Kołaczyk, Wiktoria - a record of interrogations of witnesses, 17 April 2000, an application for war compensation
- Zander, Janina, a testimony, Tczew, 3 May 2002, an application for war compensation

## **5. The Archives of the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority**

### **Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.**

#### **Archive sources No. M10 AR2:**

- Oneg Szabat, file ref. No. M 10/261

#### **Archive sources No. 03 - accounts (according to signatures):**

Alster Szlomo - 03/4442, Bahir Moshe - 03/2353/17, 03/2353, Bergdorf Chaim - 03/4145, Freiberg Dov – no signature, Leder Samuel - 03/4140, Lichtman Eda - 03/314, Lichtman Eda - 29 December 1960 – no signature, Lichtman Icchak - 03/2309, Knopfmacher Michał - 03/2211, Krawczak Z. - 033/425, Margulies Abraham -03/7019, Milecznoj Rachela - 03/4186, Płotnicki Nauman - 033C/340, Rottenberg Aysik - 03414, Rozenfeld Siemion - 03/5440, a conversation of Edy Lichtman, Icchaka Lichtmana, Dov Freiberg, Abraham Margulies, Symcha Białowicz and Jakub Biskupicz, in the presence of Dr Olga Barniczowa - 03/2352, Safran Ilana - 03/1000, Trager Israel - 08044183, Wang Abraham - 03/4139.

## **6. The Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (ŻIH).**

### **Archive sources No. 301 – a collection of accounts by Jews – Holocaust Survivors – 301 (according to signatures)**

Blatt Tomasz - 4082; 17 October 1951 - an application for war compensation – no signature, Cukierman Hersz - 301/14; 301/1187, Cymiel Leon - 6397, Cytryn Abraham - 301/4384, Duniec Józef - 301/4, Engler Abraham - 4007, Feldhendler Leon - 1945 – no signature, Frajtag Josef - October 1945, no signature, Hanel Salomea - M 49/186, Hirszman Pola - 301/1476, Huberman Yecheskiel - 301/277, Jaworska Aurelia - 302/119, Jurewicz Tadeusz - 5390, Kamer Feiga - 301/1174, Kauffman Motek - 301/2182, Lerer Samuel - 301/104, Libhaber Gitla - 2192, Licht Aron - 301/2761, Lichtman Icek – no signature, Maliński Józef - 301/5372, Merensztein Moszek - 301/1292; 301/2785, Petlak Franciszek - 301/5374, Podchlebnik Salomon - 301/10, Rabinowicz Motel - 301/2202.

## **7. The Archives of USC Shoah Foundation Institute. For Visual History and Education in Los Angeles**

### **Archive sources - Jews who survived the Holocaust**

#### **Group - Sobibór recordings**

Białowicz Filip - 32788, Cymiel Leon - 29630, Hoisman-Engelsman Sofia - 11233, Pollak-Langford Lucie - 1964, Schnitzer Joseph - 2019, Sessler Debora -25384, Singer Tsiporah - 28429, Wajcen Aleksij - 4412, Weisspapier Arkadii - 3877.

## 8. The Archives of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (USHMM)

### Archive sources - Sobibór (Concentration camp)

#### Group - oral history (according to signatures)

Białowicz Symcha - RG - 50.120 0027, Biskupicz Jakub - RG - 0.120 0016, Engel Chaim - RG - 50.030 0066, Engel Selma - RG - 50.030 0067, Lichtman Eda - RG - 60.5023; RG - 50.120 0091, Piwoński Jan - RG - 50.030 0184.

## II. Printed sources

*Dziennik Ustaw* [The Law Gazette] 2007, No. 134, Entry 944 – the Directive of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, 10 July 2007, about delineating limits for the Extermination Monument, which is the area of the Museum of the Former Extermination Camp in Sobibór as well as about the area and limits of its protection zone.

De Mildt, W. and Ruter, C., (eds), *Justiz Und NS-Verbrechen Sammlung Deutscher Strafurteile Nationalsozialistischer Totungsverbrechen 1945-1966*, (Amsterdam, 2009. the Archives of the Foundation of Scientific Research into Nazi Crimes) (*Stichting voor wetenschappelijk onderzoek van national-socialistische misdrijven*, Amsterdam) on the basis of the archives of the Centre of the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes (*Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwisburg* – archive sources Lfd. No. 212, 233, 641, 642, 746. *NS-Vernichtungslager im Spiegel Deutscher Strafprocesse*, Munchen 1977).

Friedman, Tuwiah, ed., *Sobibor. Ein NS-Vernichtungslager im Rahmen der „Aktion Reinhard“* (Haifa, 1998).

## III. Accounts, testimonies, recollections, printed memoirs

The Ringelblum Archives, *Listy o Zagładzie* [Letters about the Holocaust], vol. 1 (Warszawa, 1997).

.Bartosik, I. and Wilma, A., *Ja z krematorium Auschwitz. Rozmowa z Henrykiem Mandelbaumem byłym więźniem, członkiem Sonderkommando w KL Auschwitz* [I was at the Auschwitz Crematorium. A Conversation with Henryk Mandelbaum, a Former Member of Sonderkommando in KL Auschwitz] (2009).

Białowicz, P. and Białowicz, J., *Bunt w Sobiborze* [A Promise in Sobibór] (Warszawa, 2008).

Blatt, T., *Z popiołów Sobiboru* [From the Ashes of Sobibór] (Włodawa, 2003).

Blatt, T., *Sobibór. Zapomniane powstanie* [Sobibór – The Forgotten Revolt] (Włodawa, 2003).

Blatt, T., *Ucieczka z Sobiboru* [Escape from Sobibór] (Warszawa, 2010).

Dołubizna, D., *Maszynista* [The Train Driver] (Suwałki, 1997).

Freiberg, D., *To Survive Sobibor* (Jerusalem, 2007).

‘Nadbużański zryw. Wspomnienia z lat okupacji hitlerowskiej majora Romualda Kompfa PS. „Rokicz”, byłego Dowódcy III Batalionu 7 pp. AK’ [The Breakout on the Bug River. Memories from the German Occupation by Major Romuald Kompf ‘Rokicz’, the Former Home Army Commander of Battalion III, Infantry Regiment 7], (in): *Zeszyty Muzealne Muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego* [The Museum Notebooks of the Łęczna-Włodawa Lake District], 2008, vol.15.

Novitch, M., *Sobibor: Martyrdom and Revolt* (New York, 1980).

Pasikowski, S., *Lotny Oddział AK „Nadbużanka”* [The Home Army Flying Unit *Nadbużanka*] (Łódź, 2003).

Peczerski, A., ‘Powstanie w Sobiborze’ [The Revolt in Sobibór] *Biuletyn ZIH* [The Jewish Historical Institute Bulletin], 1952, No. 1/2.

Perechodnik, C., *Spowiedź. Dzieje rodziny żydowskiej podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce* [Confession. A History of a Jewish Family during the German Occupation in Poland] (Warszawa, 2004).

Kanc, Sz., (ed.), *Sefer zikaron Włodawa wehasawiwa Sobibor. Yizkor Book In Memory of Włodawa and Region Sobibor* (Tel Aviv, 1974).

Leibel, D., (ed.), *Sefer Dembic* (Tel Aviv, 1964).

Manor, A, Ganusovitch, I and Lando, A., (eds), *Sefer Lida (The Lida Book)* (Tel Aviv, 1970).

Sereny, G., *W stronę ciemności. Rozmowy z komendantem Trebłinki* [Into That Darkness. Gitta Sereny’s Conversations with the Commandant of Treblinka – Franz Stangl] (Warszawa, 2002).

Bem, M., (ed.), *Sobibór* (Warszawa, 2010).

Szmajzner, S., *Hell in Sobibor. The Tragedy of a Teenager Jew* (Brazylia, 1979).

Szpilman, W., *Pianista. Warszawskie wspomnienia 1939 – 1945* [The Pianist. Warsaw Memories 1939-1945] (Kraków, 2001).

Ticho, K., *My Legacy. Holocaust, History and Unfinished Task of Pope John Paul II* (Włodawa, 2008).

Venezia, S., *Sonderkommando. W piekle komór gazowych* [Sonderkommando. Inside the Gas Chambers] (Warszawa, 2009).

Wewryk, K., *To Sobibor and back. An eyewitness account* (Włodawa, 2008).

Wiesenthal, Sz., *Prawo, nie zemsta. Wspomnienia* [Justice, Not Vengeance. Memories] (Kraków, 2010).

Zielinski, A., *Conversations with Regina* (Włodawa, 2003).

## IV. The Press

- Aneks* [The Annexe]  
 - No. 61, 30 November 1943  
 - *Biuletyn Informacyjny* [The Information Bulletin]  
 - No. 30, 29 July 1942  
 - No. 11, 18 March 1943  
 - No. 24, 18 July 1942  
 - *Die Zeit*  
 - No., 1 December 1966  
 - *Głos Demokracji* [The Voice of Democracy]  
 - No. 36, 4 September 1943  
 - *Głos Warszawy* [The Voice of Warsaw]  
 - No. 73/82, 16 November 1943  
 - *Gwardzista* [The Guardsman]  
 - No. 24, 10 August 1943  
 - No. 8, 25 September 1942  
 - *Informacja bieżąca* [Information Up-to-Date]  
 - No. 22, 16 June 1942  
 - No. 38, 16 October 1942  
 - 24 October 1943  
 - 1 April 1943  
 - No. 22, 9 June 1943  
 - 23 February 1943  
 - No. 27, 27 July 1942  
 - No. 44, 10 November 1943  
 - *Informacja Narodowa* [National Information]  
 - No. 3, 30 September 1943  
 - 30 September 1943  
 - No. 1, 3 September 1943  
 - *Kamena*  
 - No. 13 (12), 1965  
 - *Materiały dla BCC* [Materials for the BCC]  
 - 13 August 1942  
 - *Niezależny Przegląd Wojskowy* [The Independent Military Review]  
 - No. 20 (478), 16-22 June 2006  
 - *Pro memoria o sytuacji w kraju* [Pro Memoria about the Situation in Poland]  
 - 16 July – 25 August 1942  
 - 20 December 1942  
 - 22 May – 19 June 1943  
 - 11 October – 15 November 1942  
 - 22 May – 19 June 1943  
 - *Przez Walkę* [Through Struggle]

- 20 December 1943
- **Robotnik** [The Worker]
- 16 January 1943
- **Rzeczpospolita Polska** [The Republic of Poland]
- No. 37, 17 September 1942
- No. 19, 1942
- **Sueddeutsche Zeitung**
- 13 May 2011
- **Sztandar Ludu** [The People's Standard]
- No. 146, 1965
- **Trybuna Wolności** [The Tribune of Freedom]
- No. 13, 17 September 1942
- **Walka Ludu** [The People's Struggle]
- No. 17, 15 October 1942
- **Walka i Wolność** [Struggle and Freedom]
- No. 61, 18 October 1942
- **WRN**
- No. 1, 17 June 1942
- No. 16, 31 August 1942
- No. 8, 16 April 1943
- No. 15-22 August 1940
- V. Books and articles

Altman, I., *Ofiary nienawiści* [The Victims of Hatred] (Moskwa, 2002).

Arad, Y., *Bełżec, Sobibor, Treblinka: the Operation Reinhardt Death Camps* (Indianapolis, 1987).

Arendt, H., *Korzenie totalitaryzmu* [The Origins of Totalitarianism] (Warszawa, 2008).

Bakunowicz, Cz., 'Wykorzystanie kolei w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie do deportacji Żydów' [Taking Advantage of the Railways for Deportations of Jews], *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* [The Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation, the Institute of National Remembrance], 1993, vol. 35.

Bauman, Z., *Nowoczesność i Zagłada* [Modernity and Genocide] (Kraków, 2009).

Berenstein, T., 'Martyrologia, opór i zagłada ludności żydowskiej w dystrykcie lubelskim' [The Martyrdom, Resistance and Extermination of Jewish People in the Lublin District], *Biuletyn ŻIH* [The Jewish Historical Institute Bulletin], 1957, No. 21.

Berenstein, T., Eisenbach, A. and Rutkowski, A., (eds), *Eksterminacja Żydów na ziemiach polskich w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej. Zbiór dokumentów* [Extermination of Jews in the Polish Territories during the Period of the Nazi Occupation. A Collection of Documents] (Warszawa, 1957)..

Berkhoff, K., *Harvest of the Despair: Life and Death in the Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge / London, 2004).

Blumental, N., (ed.), *Dokumenty i materiały z czasów okupacji niemieckiej w Polsce, vol. I* [Documents and Materials from the Times of the German Occupation] (Łódź, 1946).

Borowicz, M., Rost, N. and Wolf, J., (eds), *Dokumenty zbrodni i męczeństwa* [Documents of Crime and Martyrdom] {Kraków, 1945}.

Browning, Ch., *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Bataillon 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London, 2001).

Browning, Ch., *The Origins of the Final Solution, The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Yad Vashem, 2004).

Browning, Ch., *Fateful Months. Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York, 1992).

Burleigh, M., *Trzecia Rzesza. Nowa Historia* [The Third Reich. A New History] (Kraków, 2010).

Chmielowski, P., 'W sprawie genezy i organizacji Einsatzgruppen działających na terenach ZSRR okupowanych przez Niemców' [The Origin and Structure of Einsatzgruppen on the German-Occupied Territories of the USSR], *Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny* [The Military Historical Review], 1971, No. 2.

Czarnomska, A., (ed.), *Gmina Sosnowica, Monografia* [The Sosnowica Commune. A Monograph] (Lublin – Sosnowica, 2003).

Datner, Sz., Gumkowski J. and Leszczyński K., 'Einsatzgruppen (wyrok i uzasadnienie)' [Einsatzgruppen (The Court Verdict and the Justification)] *Biuletyn GKBZHwP* [The Bulletin of the Central Commission for the Investigation of Nazi German Crimes in Poland], 1963, No. 14.

Datner, Sz., *Zbrodnie Wehrmachtu na jeńcach wojennych w II wojnie światowej* [Crimes against POWs: Responsibility of the Wehrmacht] (Warszawa, 1961).

Davies, N., *Europa* [Europe] (Kraków, 1998).

Doris, L. and Bergen, D., *Wojna i ludobójstwo* [War and Genocide] (Poznań, 2011).

Dujardin J., *Rozważania o Holokauście* [Reflection on the Holocaust], *Znak* [The Sign], 1990, No. 419-420).

Ehrenburg, I. and Grossman, V., *The Black Book* (New York, 1981).

Eisenbach, A., *Hitlerowska polityka zagłady Żydów* [Hitler's Policies of Extermination of the Jews] (Warszawa, 1961).

Engelking, B., Leociak, J. and Libionka, D., (eds), *Prowincja noc. Życie*

*i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim* [The Provinces. Night. The Life and Extermination of the Jews in the Warsaw District (Warszawa, 2007).

Fackler G., 'Muzyka w obozach koncentracyjnych 1933-1945' [Music in the Concentration Camps 1933-1945], *Muzykalia* VI, Judaica1.

Ficowski J., *Cyganie w Polsce. Dzieje i obyczaje* [The Gypsies in Poland. Their History and Customs] (Warszawa, 1989).

Friedlander, S., *The Years of Extermination. Nazi Germans and the Jews, 1939-1945* (Harper Collins Publisher, 2008).

Friedman, F., 'Zagłada Żydów lwowskich' [The Extermination of the Jews of Lvov], *Wydawnictwa Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej przy Centralnym Komitecie Żydów Polskich* [The Publishing House of the Central Jewish Historical Commission at the Central Committee of Polish Jews], 1945, No. 4.

Fritzsche, P., *Życie i śmierć w Trzeciej Rzeszy* [Life and Death in the Third Reich] (Kraków, 2010).

Gałań, A., *Powiatowa Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Chełmie (1945)* [The District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Chełm (1945)], *Rocznik Chełmski* [The Chełm Annual], 2010, vol.14.

Gerson, L., *Reakcja Polskiego Rządu Emigracyjnego oraz rządów sprzymierzonych na informacje o „Endlösung”* [The Reaction of the Polish Government-in-Exile and the Governments of Allied countries to 'Endlösung'], *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Zbrodni Przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* [The Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation ], 1993, vol. 35.

Gotz, A., *Final Solution. Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews* (London, 1999).

Grobman, A., Landes, D. and Milton, S., (eds), *Genocide. Critical Issues of the Holocaust* (Los Angeles, 1983).

Haenel, Y., *Jan Karski* (Warszawa, 2010).

Hilberg, R., *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago, 1961).

Hilberg, R., *Sonderzüge nach Auschwitz* (Mainz, 1981).

Hilberg, R., *Sprawcy, ofiary, świadkowie. Zagłada Żydów 1933–1945* [Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders. The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945] (Warszawa, 2007).

Himmler, K., *Himmler i jego bracia. Historia niemieckiej rodziny* [The Himmler Brothers. A German Family History] (Warszawa, 2006).

Jakimczuk, E., 'Obóz zagłady w Sobiborze' [The Extermination Camp in Sobibór], *Rocznik Białskopodlaski* [The Biała Podlaska Annual], 1998, vol.6.

Kalinowski, Z., *Pamięć o ofiarach Zagłady* [In Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust] (Rejowiec, 2009).

Karwatowska, M., (ed.), *Chełm nieznany. Ludzie, miejsca, wydarzenia* [Chełm Unknown. People, Places, Events] (Chełm, 2009).

Kershaw, I., *Mit Hitlera* [The Hitler Myth] (Zakrzewo, 2009).

Klarsfeld, S., *Vichy-Auschwitz* (Paris, 1983).

Klee, E., „*Euthanasie*“ im NS-Staat: Die „*Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*“ (Frankfurt a. M., 1983).

Klee E., *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich* (S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2003).

Kola, A., „Badania archeologiczne terenu byłego obozu zagłady Żydów w Sobiborze“ [Archaeological Research in the Area of the Former Extermination Camp of the Jews in Sobibór], *Biuletyn Rady Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa* [The Bulletin of the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites], 2001, No. 4 (21).

Kowalow, B., *Okupacja nazistowska i kolaboracjonizm w Rosji 1941 – 1944* [The Nazi German Occupation and Collaborationism in Russia 1941- 1944] (Moskwa, 2004).

Krausnick, H., *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen. Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges 1938-1942*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1989).

Kuwałek, R., *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu* [The Extermination Camp in Bełżec] (Lublin, 2010).

Lenarczyk, W. and Libionka, D., (eds), *3-4 listopada 1943. Erntefest. Zapomniany epizod zagłady* [3-4 November 1943. Erntefest. A Forgotten Episode of Extermination] (Lublin, 2009).

Libionka, D., (ed.), *Akcja Reinhardt, Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* [Operation Reinhardt. The Extermination of the Jews in the General Government] (Warszawa, 2004).

Lubetkin, C., *Zagłada i powstanie* [In the Days of Destruction and Revolt] (Warszawa, 1999).

Łukaszewicz, Z., ‘Obóz zagłady w Sobiborze’ [The Extermination Camp in Sobibór], *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce* [The Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland], 1947, vol. 3.

Mańkowski, Z., ‘Hitlerowska koncepcja “rozwiązania” kwestii żydowskiej: problem decyzji i mechanizm zagłady’ [The Nazi German Concept of ‘Solving’ the Jewish Question: the Problem of Making the Decision and the Mechanism of Extermination], *Kwartalnik Radomski* [The Radom Quarterly], 1998, Notebook.1.

Mańkowski, Z., 'Strategiczne znaczenie Lubelszczyzny i polityka represyjna okupanta' [The Strategic Significance of the Lublin Region and the Occupant's Policy of Repression], *Zeszyty Majdanka* [The Majdanek Notebooks], 1969, vol.4.

Marszałek, J., 'Centralny Zarząd Budowlany SS i Policji w Lublinie' [The Central SS and Police Management in Lublin], *Zeszyty Majdanka* [The Majdanek Notebooks], 1972, vol. 6.

Marszałek, J., *System obozów śmierci w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie i jego funkcje (1942–1943)* [The System of Death Camps in the General Government and Its Functions], *Zeszyty Majdanka* [The Majdanek Notebooks], 1996, vol. 17.

Marszałek, J., *Majdanek, Geschichte und Wirklichkeit eines Vernichtungslagers*, (Reinbek/Rowohlt, 1982).

Marszałek, J., *Obóz zagłady Sobibór 1942 – 1943* [The Extermination Camp in Sobibór], a typescript, (Lublin, 1962).

Marszałek, J., 'Stan badań nad stratami osobowymi ludności żydowskiej Polski oraz nad liczbą ofiar obozów zagłady w okupowanej Polsce' [The Present Study of Personal Losses in the Number of Jewish People in Poland and of the Number of Victims of the Extermination Camps in German-Occupied Poland], *Dzieje Najnowsze* [The Modern Times], 1994, Annual 26, No. 2.

Musiał, B., 'The Origins of 'Operation Reinhard', The Decision-Making Process for the Mass Murder of the Jews in Generalgouvernement', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 2000, vol. 28.

Musiał, St., 'Wojna o definicję człowieka' [The Battle for the Definition of the Human Being], *Apokryf – Tygodnik Powszechny* [Apocrypha - The Common Weekly], 15 September 1999.

Niedźwiedz, J., *Leksykon historyczny miejscowości dawnego województwa zamojskiego* [The Historical Lexicon of Places of the Former Zamość Province] (Zamość, 2003).

Pawlicka-Nowak, Ł., (ed.), *Mówią świadkowie Chełmna* [Chełmno Witnesses Speak] (Konin-Lódź, 2004).

Piotrowski, S, *Misja Odyla Globocnika. Sprawozdanie o wynikach finansowych zagłady Żydów w Polsce* [Odilo Globocnik's Mission. The Reports on the Financial Effects of the Extermination of the Jews in Poland] (Warszawa, 1949).

Primo, L., *Pogrążeni i ocaleni* [The Drowned and the Saved] (Kraków, 2007).

Prożogo, K., *Słownik geograficzno-historyczny miejscowości i obiektów fizjograficznych gminy Dubienka* [A Historical and Geographical Dictionary of Places and Physiographical Objects in the Dubienka Commune], a typescript, (Chełm, 1988).

Puławski, A., *W obliczu zagłady. Rząd RP na Uchodźstwie, Delegatura Rządu RP na Kraj, ZWZ – AK wobec deportacji Żydów do obozów zagłady 1941-1942*

[In the Face of Extermination. The Polish Government-in-Exile, the Government Delegation for Poland, the Union of Armed Struggle – the Home Army in the Face of Deportations of Jews to Extermination Camps 1941-1942] (Lublin, 2009).

Rees, L., *Auschwitz, Naziści i „ostateczne rozwiązanie”* [Auschwitz, the Nazis and the ‘Final Solution’] (Warszawa, 2005).

Rhodes, R., *Mistrzowie śmierci. Einsatzgruppen* [Masters of Death. Einsatzgruppen] (Warszawa, 2007).

Rieger, B., *Odilo Globocnik. Twórca nazistowskich obozów śmierci* [Creator of Nazi Death Camps. The Life of Odilo Globocnik] (Wydawnictwo Replika, 2009).

Rieger, B., *Zawidowca śmierci* [The Manager of Death] (Zakrzewo, 2009).

Roth, J., (ed.), *Remembering the Future. The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide* (Elisabeth Maxwell, London/New York, 2001).

Rubenstein, R., *The Cunning of History* (New York, 1978).

Rutkowski, A., ‘Hitlerowski obóz masowej zagłady w Sobiborze’ [The Nazi German Camp of Mass Extermination in Sobibór], *Ziemia* [The Earth], 1965, vol.1.

Rutkowski, A., ‘Ruch oporu w hitlerowskim obozie straceń Sobibór’ [The Resistance Movement in the German Death Camp in Sobibór], *Biuletyn ŻIH* [The Jewish Historical Institute Bulletin], 1968, No. 65-66.

Sakowska, R., *Die zweite Etapie ist der Tod. Ns-Ausrottungspolitik Genge die polnische Juden, gesehen mit den Augen der Opfer. Ein historischer Essay und ausgewählte Dokumente aus dem Ringelblum-Archiv 1941-1943* (Berlin, 1993).

Schelvis, J., *Vernichtungslager Sobibor* (Amsterdam, 1993).

Schelvis, J., *Sobibor. A History of a Nazi Death Camp* (Washington, 2007).

Sielski, R. and Sroka, J., *Zbrodnie hitlerowskie w regionie bialskopodlaskim 1939-1944* [The Nazi German Crimes in the Biała Podlaska Region 1939-1944] (Lublin, 1977).

Wileński, S., Gorbowicki, B. and Tieruszkin, A., (eds). *Sobibór* (Moskwa, 2008).

Sołga, H., *Niemcy o Niemcach. Bilans ścigania zbrodniarzy hitlerowskich w Republice Federalnej Niemiec* [The Germans about the Germans. An Appraisal of the Prosecution of Nazi War Criminals in the Federal Republic of Germany] (Warszawa, 1988).

*Strategia Rozwoju Gminy Siedliszcze* [The Development Strategy for the Siedliszcze Commune] (UG Siedliszcze [The Siedliszcze Commune Office], 2008).

Suhl, Y., *Ed essi si ribellarono. Storia della resistenza ebraica contro il nazisto* (Milano, 1969).

Szajowski, E., 'Tylko ziemia została ta sama. Lubaczów 1942-1943' [Only the Land Is the Same As Before. Lubaczów 1942-1943], *Rocznik Lubaczowski* [The Lubaczów Annual], 2000, vol. 9-10.

Szarota, T., *U progu Zagłady. Zajścia antyżydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie: Warszawa, Paryż, Amsterdam, Antwerpia, Kowno* [On the Eve of the Holocaust. Anti-Jewish Incidents and Pogroms in Occupied Europe: Warsaw, Paris, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Kaunas] (Warszawa, 2000).

Tregenza, M., 'Christian Wirth a pierwsza faza realizacji „Akcji Reinhard”' [Christian Wirth and the First Stage of 'Operation Reinhard'], *Zeszyty Majdanek* [The Majdanek Chronicles], 1992, vol. 14.

Tregenza, M., 'Christian Wirth, Inspektor Der SS-Sonderkommandos „Aktion Reinhard”', *Zeszyty Majdanek* [The Majdanek Notebooks], 1993, vol. 15.

Tych, F., *Długi cień Zagłady* [The Long Shadow of the Holocaust] (Warszawa, 1999).

Wawryniuk, A., *Powiat Włodawski, historia, geografia, gospodarka, polityka. Monografia miejscowości* [The Włodawa Province. Its History, Geography, Economy and Policy. A Monograph on the Province Places] (Włodawa, 2010).

Welzer, H., *Sprawcy. Dlaczego zwykli ludzie dokonują masowych mordów* [Perpetrators. How Do Ordinary People Become Mass Murderers ?] (Warszawa, 2010).

Wilczur, J., 'Nie wszystko dotąd powiedziano o nieludzkiej bierności wobec zagłady' [Not All Has Yet Been Said about the Inhuman Passivity towards the Holocaust], *Oblicza Historii* [Faces of History], 2004, No. 02.

Witte, P. and Tyas, S., 'A New Document on the Deportation and Murder of Jews during "Einsatz Reinhardt" 1942', *HolocaustAnd Genocide Studies*, 2001, vol.15.

Witte, P., *Zu Geschichte der Theresienstadter Transporte in den District Lublin*, a manuscript.

Wulf, J., *Das Dritte Reich Und Seine Vollstrecker. Die Liquidation von 500,000 Juden im Ghetto Warschau* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984).

Żbikowski, A., *U genezy Jedwabnego. Żydzi na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej, wrzesień 1939 - lipiec 1941* [The Genesis of Jedwabne. Jews in the North Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic, September 1939 – July 1944] (Warszawa, 2006).

## VI. Internet resources

**Aktion Reinhard Economics** [accessed: 16 October 2011], <http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/areconomics.html>

**The Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance**, A ruling about the dismissal of an investigation, 31 March 2005, Oddziałowa Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu w Katowicach [The Branch of the Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Katowice], File Sign. S 5/00/Zn, p. 15 [accessed: 21 October 2011], [http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/pl/831/14478/Sledztwa\\_zakonczone\\_wydaniem\\_postanowienia\\_o\\_umorzeniu.html](http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/pl/831/14478/Sledztwa_zakonczone_wydaniem_postanowienia_o_umorzeniu.html)

**Barry** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ar/treblinka/treblinkagallery/Barry%20the%20%20dog%20in%20Treblinka%20.html>

**The Case Eugenius Maytchenko** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/maytchenko.html>

**Dorohusk** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://dwory.cal.pl/podstrony/dorohusk.php>

**Einsatz Reinhardt**, [accessed: 15 October 2011], [www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/reinhardintro\\_pl.html](http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/reinhardintro_pl.html)

**Gas Chambers** [accessed: 21 October 2011], [http://www.deathcamps.org/gas\\_chambers/gaschambersoverview.html](http://www.deathcamps.org/gas_chambers/gaschambersoverview.html).

**Gerstein Kurt** [accessed: 21 October 2011], [www.deathcamps.info/testimonies/Gerstein](http://www.deathcamps.info/testimonies/Gerstein).

**Gurfein Yacov**, relacja [an account] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/sobijumper>

**Höss Rudolf**, autobiografia [an autobiography] [accessed: 16 October 2011], <http://zrodla.historyczne.prv.pl/>

**Jendroszczyk, P. and Zychowicz, P., Hitler's Valuable Transports** [accessed: 21 October 2011], [http://www.rp.pl/artykul/395085\\_Zyskowe\\_transporty\\_Hitlera\\_.html](http://www.rp.pl/artykul/395085_Zyskowe_transporty_Hitlera_.html)

**Końskowola** [access: 21 October 2011], <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/pl/city/konskowola/>

**Krüger Friedrich Wilhelm**, [accessed: 15 October 2011], [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org)

**The Korherr Report** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/korherr.html>

**Kuriański Jerzy, Wspomienia z Jazłowca** [Recollections of Jazłowiec] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://brozbar.cieplowizja.pl/jazlowiec/index.html>.

**Kurt Daluege** [accessed: 5 December 2011], <http://dev.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>

**Kurów** [accessed: 21 October 2011], [http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kur%C3%B3w\\_%28powiat\\_pu%C5%82awski%29](http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kur%C3%B3w_%28powiat_pu%C5%82awski%29)

**Late Trawniki Trials** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.deathcamps.org/occupation/trawnikitrials.html>

**Likwidacja getta w Dębicy, Drohobyczy...** [The Liquidation of the Ghettos in Dębica, Drohobycza ...] [accessed: 21 October 2011], [http://www.izrael.badacz.org/historia/szoa\\_getto](http://www.izrael.badacz.org/historia/szoa_getto)

**Morgen Konrad**, przesłuchanie [an interrogation] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/konradmorgen.html>

**Obozy pracy** na terenie Gminy Hańsk [Labour Camps in the Hańsk Commune] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.hansk.info/index.php?id=114&id2=102>

**Oneg Szabat** [accessed 15 October 2011], [http://www.archiwa.gov.pl/memory/sub\\_ringelblum/index](http://www.archiwa.gov.pl/memory/sub_ringelblum/index)

**Opole Lubelskie** [accessed: 1 July 2012], [http://www.sztetl.org.pl/pl/article/opole-lubelskie/13\\_miejsca-martyrologii/21360,getto-w-opolu-lubelskim](http://www.sztetl.org.pl/pl/article/opole-lubelskie/13_miejsca-martyrologii/21360,getto-w-opolu-lubelskim)

**Panasiuk Adam**, Śladami zapomnianej historii ... Wereszczyn [Back to the Forgotten History of ... Wereszczyny] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.historia.urszulina.net>

**The Polish Republic in the case against:** This is the official report of the Polish government for the Nuremberg tribunal, document URSS-93 [accessed: 3 October 2011], <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/imt/tgmwc/tgmwc-07/tgmwc-07-68-06.shtml>

**Razgonajew, M., Pankow, W., Danilczenko, I., Pawli, N.**, protokoły przesłuchań [records of interrogations] [accessed: 15 October 2011], <http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/camps/aktion.reinhard>

**Sieciechowicz Jadwiga**, Wspomnienia z Sawina [Memories of Sawin] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.cyfrowa.chbp.chelm.pl>

**Siedliszcze** [accessed: 21 October 2011], [www.sztetl.org/Siedliszcze](http://www.sztetl.org/Siedliszcze)

**Sobibór** [accessed: 16 October 2011], <http://www.deathcamps.org/sobibor/sobibor.html>

**Sobibór**, obóz zagłady [an extermination camp] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.it.com.ua/krakowianka/003-NASHA-DEYATELNOST/50/obozy-zaglady-sobibor>

**Sobibór** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005192>

**Szolson** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://studniapamieci.blox.pl/2009/08/Rodzina-Szolsonow.html>

**Tyszowce** – history [history] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/pl/article/tyszowce/5,historia/?action=view&page=3>

**Uchanie** [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/m/pl/object/11692/>.

**Zagłada Żydów na Podlasiu**, Holocaust [The Destruction of the Jews in the Podlasie Region, the Holocaust] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.holocaust.myoptimus.com/zaglada-zydow-na-podlasiu-holocaust.html>

**Zapala Mieczysław**, *Hitlerowskie obozy i getta na Ziemi Hrubieszowskiej w okresie okupacji w latach 1939-1944* [The Nazi German Camps and Ghettos in the Hrubieszów Region during the German Occupation 1939-1944] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.hrubieszow.info/wiara/zydzi/zydzi.htm#3>

**Złoto SS - Akcja Reinhard** [The Gold of the SS – Operation Reinhard] [accessed: 21 October 2011], [www.eksplorator.com/11rein.htm](http://www.eksplorator.com/11rein.htm)

**Zygelbojm Szmul**, list [a letter] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.historycy.org/index.php?showtopic=12344>

**Zyskowe transporty Hitlera** [Hitler's Valuable Transports] [accessed: 2 December 2011], [www.rp.pl](http://www.rp.pl).

**130 lat kolei na Ziemi Chełmskiej** [The 130th Anniversary of Railways in the Chełm Region] [accessed: 21 October 2011], <http://www.wyjdzpociagu.most.org.pl>

## VII. The author's private collection

Aerial views of the territory of the Sobibór extermination camp, and of the former camp area

28 March 1944, 28 and 30 May 1944. (GX – 168 – SK – 98-124, GX – 5081 – 8-9, GX – 8102 – SK – 187, GX – 19265/713,714, 719)

An act of transfer of guards from Trawniki to Sobibór, *SSPF Lublin/Trawniki Training Camp to SS-Special Detachment. Sobibor, Act of Transfer*, 26 March 1943.

An act of transfer of guards from Trawniki to Sobibór, *SSPF Lublin/Trawniki Training Camp to SS-Special Detachment, Sobibor, Act of Transfer*, 11 April 1943.

An act of transfer of guards from Trawniki to Sobibór, *Lublin/Trawniki Training Camp to SS-Special Detachment. Sobibor, Act of Transfer*, 2 August 1943.

An act of transfer of guards from Trawniki to Sobibór, *Trawniki Training Camp/ Detachment Lublin to SS Labour Camp Sobibor, Act of Transfer*, 16 September 1943, vol. 411.

Alster, Szlomo, a transcript of an interview, a DVD recording/Disc 1, Hagen/Tricht, 1983..

A despatch (Warsaw, 25 October 1943 about fighting in the Białystok ghetto, Treblinka and Sobibór in August and October 1943 (a copy from Michał Lew's collection).

A list of transports bound for Sobibór, compiled by Y. Arad and W. Scheffler (a copy from Kurt Ticho's private collection).

A map 'The Death Factory in Sobibór'.

A map of the camp „*Lagerplan des Vernichtungslagers Sobibor*".

A map of the camp in Sobibór according to a report of the Office for Concentration Camps, The Hague, 1946.

A map of the Sobibór camp drawn by Tomasz Blatt.

A map of the tree stand of the State Sobibór Forestry Division, Sobibór, 1930.

A photo of the ramp at the Sobibór railway station, the 1960s, a copy from Tomasz Blatt's private collection.

A report by the Polish War Crimes Office, Dr. J. Litawski, Officer in charge, on the German crimes in Poland, 1945. AGK, MSW London [In the original, the name 'London' is in Polish].

A survey concerning the course of war activities and the German occupation – the Commune Office in Wola Uhruska, Sobibór, the Włodawa district, 1945.

Białowicz, Lea, an interview, November 2007.

Blatt, Tomasz, an interview, November 2007.

Blatt, Tomasz, an interview, April 2008.

Borowski, Tadeusz, an interview, April 2008.

Menche, Chaskiel, a transcript of an interview, a DVD recording/Disc 1, Tricht, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska.

Cohen, Elias Isak, a copy of an account for Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 1947.

Demianiuk, John, the indictment in the case against Demianiuk John. A copy from the prosecutor's office, Munich I. Register number 115 Js 12496/08/District Court, Munich, 13 July 2009.

Doliński, Jan, an interview, 30 April 2011.

Eberl, Irmfried, a copy of a letter from Sobibór, 26 April 1942 (a copy from the archivess of the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom in Treblinka).

Engel, Chaim, a transcript of an interview and of a film, Wentworth Films Inc, the Holocaust, the USHMM (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum) archives, 12 February 1992, translated from English by Marek Bem.

Engel, Selma, a diary, a transcript of the original from 1944.

Engel, Selma, a transcript of an interview given to Linda Kuzmack on 16 July 1990, the whole original interview is in the archives of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Fisette, Paul (Director Building Materials and Wood Technology, 126 Holdsworth Natural Resources Center University of Massachusetts), *Grade Beam System of construction of the New Gas Chamber*, Amherst, 1998.

Fellenbaum-Weiss, Hella, a transcript of an interview, a DVD recording/Disc 1, Tricht, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska.

Freiberg, Dov, a transcript of an account, a DVD recording Disc 1-2, Ramla/Israel, 21 October 1995.

Freiberg, Dov, an interview, 21 October 1995.

Gilbert, Martin, a map of deportations to Sobibór, May 1942.

Herszman, Josef, a record of an interrogation, Tel Aviv, 14 June 1962.

Lanzmann, Claude, *Sobibor, 14 octobre 1943, 16 heures (film)*, 2001.

Lerner, Yechuda, a transcript of an interview conducted by Cloude Lanzmann, a DVD recording, Israel, 1985.

Popławski, Zachar Filipowicz, a memo to a representative of the Communist Party of Belarus in the Brześć oblast - Iwan Michajłowicz Karakaszk about the death camp in Sobibór, 7 October 1943.

Raab, Estera, an interview, November 2007.

Rozenfeld, Siemion, a transcript of an interview from a DVD recording, November 2007.

Rozenfeld, Siemion, a letter do W.R. Tomin and A.G. Sinielnikow. No date provided (a copy from Michał Lew's collection).

Scheffler, Wolfgang, a report, Berlin, 20 September 1966, 11Ks 1/64, StA Hagen.

Shoen, Henryk, an interview, 15 January 2011.

Skulski, Jan (the Sobibór commune head) – a record of an interrogation (a questionnaire about the camps) written down by the petty offence court (sąd grodzki) in Włodawa, 20 November 1945.

Stern, Ursula, a copy of an account for Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 1947.

Szmajzner, Stanisław, a DVD recording, a confrontation with Wagner in a TV interview on the subject of extermination in the Sobibór camp (BBC), 18 June 1979.

Szmajzner, Stanisław, an interview, a DVD recording/Disc 1, Hagen, 1983.

Ticho, Kurt, an account (a Sobibór trial, Hagen), Columbus, 4 July 1966.

Ticho, Kurt, a letter to the Dutch Red Cross, 29 July 1946.

Ticho, Kurt, a letter to Jules Schelvis, 9 December 1985.

Ticho, Kurt, an interview, November 2007.

Weisspapier, Arkadii, an interview, 4 March 2008.

Zielinski, Regina, a transcript of an interview, a DVD recording/Disc 1, Tricht, 1983.

Ziss, Meier, a transcript of an interview, a DVD recording/Disc 1, Hagen, 1983, translated from English by Małgorzata Lipska.

