

**SPACES OF THE  
HOLOCAUST –  
MAJDANEK,  
BEŁŻEC,  
SOBIBÓR**

**DIDACTIC  
MATERIALS  
FOR TEACHERS**





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**Edited by  
Paulina Pętał**

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English translation:

LINGWAY s.c.

Factual consultation:

Wojciech Lenarczyk, Dariusz Libionka, Wiesław Wysok

Editor's revision, proofreading:

Aleksandra Surdacka, Karolina Wasiluk

Graphic design:

Ewelina Kruszewska

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PMM – State Museum at Majdanek

USHMM – United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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State Museum at Majdanek  
ul. Droga Męczenników Majdanka 67  
20-325 Lublin  
[www.majdanek.eu](http://www.majdanek.eu)  
[ksiegarnia.majdanek.eu](http://ksiegarnia.majdanek.eu)

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## Paulina Pełal

# INTRODUCTION

The State Museum at Majdanek (PMM) in Lublin with its branches being the Museum and Memorial in Bełżec (MMPB) and the Museum and Memorial in Sobibór (MMPS) offer various educational projects addressed to the young people and adults. Through participatory workshops, classes, seminars and study visits, the employees of these institutions pass on the stories of victims to their participants, using the authentic and at the same time symbolic tissue of the post-camp space of the Holocaust. In this way, they propagate cultivating the memory about the tragic past.

This publication is the result of cooperation of the educators from PMM, MMPB and MMPS. It has been created as a support and factual tool for Polish and foreign educators who want to gain basic knowledge about the history of the operation of the concentration camp in Lublin, the extermination camps in Bełżec and Sobibór, and then pass it on to their students in an interesting and accessible way. The publication can also be used to prepare young people for a visit to a memorial site.

It opens with an essay by Wiesław Wysocki, *Pedagogy of remembrance*, where the author discusses the main assumptions of the didactic concept used in the State Museum at Majdanek and its branches. The further structure of the book offers three major layers: factual, corresponding to the historical overviews of the aforementioned former camps; practical, consisting of seven ready-made workshop scenarios with worksheets for participants; and supplementary, containing additional information referred to as the "Teacher's sheet" and iconographic materials. The last of the mentioned parts is to make it easier for teachers to prepare and conduct classes independently.

The proposed participatory workshop entitled "*We are at the camp in Lublin*" – concentration camp at Majdanek in Jadwiga Ankwicz's "Diary" encourages students to learn about the experiences of a teenage girl from Warsaw who secretly kept a journal about her everyday camp life. The next scenario, *Living conditions in KL Lublin*, presents various aspects related to the realities of the fate of former prisoners. The next study "*I cast my mind back to that tragic day*". 3 November 1943 in witnesses' accounts, presents the information about operation "Erntefest" [Harvest Festival] – the largest mass execution in the history of concentration camps, when approximately 42,000 Jews lost their lives.

Simultaneously with the scenarios devoted to selected aspects of the history of the concentration camp at Majdanek, proposals for classes based on the history of the extermination camps in Bełżec and Sobibór were being developed. The workshop *Traces of the past. Contemporary forms of commemorating the victims of the extermination camp in Bełżec* encourages joint reflections on the symbolism of the monument complex located at the premises of the MMPB and the need to nurture the memory of the Holocaust. The outline entitled "*We were dying a little every day...*" – the extermination camp in Bełżec in the accounts of two survivors: Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman is a tragic

record of the camp experiences of its direct witnesses. The next study, *The youngest victims of the extermination camp in Sobibór*, presents the situation of Jewish children during World War II. The last scenario in the collection is a class proposal entitled *The image of the SS-men from the extermination camp in Sobibór – the perspective of the perpetrators and victims*, which, as an element of negative identification, extremely important in historical education, should encourage reflection on the behaviour and motivation of the perpetrators of mass murders. Due to the issues raised and high emotional involvement, each scenario includes suggestions concerning the age of class participants.

Most of the worksheets that co-create lesson plans use the memoirs of former prisoners in text form, enriching them with authentic historical photos and photos of camp artefacts. It was an intentional move, serving not only to teach the ability to work with various sources. It is also a symbolic way of giving the floor to the history witnesses and their silent, visual representations.

By arousing interest in the history of Konzentrationslager Lublin (KL Lublin), SS-Sonderkommando Belzec and SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor, we would like to encourage teachers and educators to treat this publication as an impulse for further, universal considerations of axiological nature. Although the presented subject matter concerns the situation of World War II and the Holocaust, in its broader context it also refers to disturbing social behaviours still present in the contemporary world. Therefore, sensitising young people to manifestations of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, exclusion, stigmatisation and discrimination can be an effective measure in the process of developing democratic attitudes.

The authors of the book hope that the didactic tips and scenarios of educational classes provided there, enriched with factual information and iconographic materials, will be a useful tool for teachers who want to pass on the memory of the victims of concentration and extermination camps.

## Wiesław Wysocki PEDAGOGY OF REMEMBRANCE\*

Under the supervision of the State Museum at Majdanek, there are sites and material remnants of three German crime scenes – the former concentration camp in Lublin and the extermination camps in Bełżec and Sobibór. They form a unique triad of Holocaust landscapes and monuments on a European scale. The mission of the Museum and its branches is to commemorate the victims of the Nazi genocide by shaping the social space with a historical message about these tragic events of World War II. The institution's educational activities constitute one of the most important tools within this endeavour.

The education implemented at the State Museum at Majdanek is based on the assumptions of the didactic concept developed by the Museum under the name of the pedagogy of remembrance. At the general level, it refers to the principles of museum education as a separate form of museum influence. It is assumed that modern museum education combines education with action and is not limited to traditional visits to exhibitions, popularisation, and presentation of museum exhibits. Its main idea is to actively explore, experience, and interpret museum spaces and collections. In this approach, museums are places for encountering objects and landscapes, reading their contents, senses, and current meanings.

Pedagogy of remembrance uses the special meaning of the Holocaust memorials in educational processes. In doing so, it takes into account in particular the impact of the aura of the preserved historical substance on visitors, the presence of ashes and remains of the murdered, and the monuments constructed. The special atmosphere of the memorial site can make a visit more personal and moving. It can also influence the way the visitors interpret and understand the content presented there. Pedagogy of remembrance recognises that a visit to the authentic post-camp spaces marked by crimes and trauma evokes certain emotions, impressions, and images. In addition, it creates a sense of closeness and confirms the verity of the past events anchored in a given historical place. It can give impetus to one's own thoughts and stimulate the visitors' interests. The educational impact in the spirit of the pedagogy of remembrance furthermore concerns the reflection on memory, which is not only an element of the ritualisation of the past, but which engages in a dialogue with the present and strengthens the individual and collective identities. In particular, it is about understanding the meaning and purpose of commemoration and incorporating this aspect into practical activities.

This out-of-school form of education emphasises experiencing historical places. The preserved areas, physical traces, archival materials, and accounts given by the Holocaust survivors are intended to internalise historical events. In addition, exhibition narratives and other representations of the past are helpful in this field. Rather than a passive method of teaching and reproducing specific content, pedagogy of remembrance proposes an

active and creative method of learning. For this reason, its primary aim is to motivate and encourage participants of educational projects to obtain information in an independent and critical manner. The aim of education through discovery is not the transmission of some ready-made knowledge, but a didactic process based on reflection that enables interaction with the past and drawing one's own conclusions. The acquisition of new knowledge occurs as a result of combining cognitive activity and experiences. Therefore, it is crucial to engage both the minds and emotions of the learners.

In learning about the past, based on sound factual knowledge, it is of great importance to move away from the memory-based assimilation of information, and to develop reflective historical awareness. Historical education in memorial museums is also an attempt to form social attitudes, referring to the sense of empathy and responsibility. It is intended to raise awareness of the dangers of social indifference, and to lead towards the rejection of all forms of xenophobia, fanaticism, and anti-semitism. The pedagogy of remembrance starts from the premise that learning history in the post-camp memorials stimulates the development of historical thinking. We are talking about making an effort to acquire the skills to understand and interpret the past. In practice, this means recognising the causes of the past events from the perspective of the times and situations of that time and making references to oneself and one's own perception of history.

The pedagogy of remembrance focuses on the victims, but also advocates that the perpetrators' biographies should be the subject of educational activities. Dealing with this issue significantly broadens the historical and pedagogical perspective, and in particular the cognitive perspective. Learning about this subject matter can help clarify the motives that drove the perpetrators to participate in the persecution and answer the question of what makes ordinary people fanatics, opportunists, and ultimately, obedient executors of criminal orders. One can also consider and trace how racist and exclusionary slogans and antisemitic propaganda spread in Nazi Germany and paved the way for the persecution and stigmatisation of Jews and, consequently, for organised genocide.

Intercultural education also constitutes a part of the pedagogy of remembrance. It promotes interest in other cultures of remembrance. Its main goal is to overcome prejudices and negative stereotypes in relation to other nationalities, which are often based on historical experiences and stories. In addition, it aims to help people develop intercultural skills such as communication, empathy and tolerance, and teach them how to deal with cultural differences. It is an opportunity to learn about different ways of remembering and interpreting history, and helps the learners discover that there exist some narratives about the past that are opposite to their own.

The pedagogy of remembrance at the State Museum at Majdanek is a pedagogy of dialogue and participation that combines historical education with reflective education. It focuses on imparting historical knowledge in an empathetic and engaging way, allowing for a better understanding of the victims and perpetrators of historical events. It is distinguished by its openness to vari-

\* The text is a reprint from the magazine „Varia” 2023, no. 2 (12): *The Holocaust in the education of the State Museum at Majdanek*, pp. 4–11.

ous cognitive perspectives and visions of history, as well as a critical approach to existing ideas about the past and memory. This is accompanied by a reflexive attitude, encouraging reflection – in historical and current contexts – on the motives behind the moral and ethical choices of individuals and societies and their consequences. This creates the conditions for historical and humanistic learning in relation to other people's experiences and poses questions about the importance of these experiences for contemporary societies.

The educational undertakings implemented at the post-camp memorial sites at Majdanek, Bełżec and Sobibór are characterised by a variety of activities and a multitude of organisational forms and working methods. A common feature is the development of independent thinking, historical imagination, and empathy. It is noteworthy that the conceptualisation of the pedagogical work, based on own scholarly reflection, allowed the creation of a well-considered didactic environment with high educational potential and cognitive value. It includes diverse educational means, including factual programmes, active working methods, permanent and open-air exhibitions, authentic artefacts, original archival sources, diaries and written memoirs of the former prisoners, accounts of witnesses and survivors in the form of sound and film recordings.

The State Museum at Majdanek and its branches, where the historical reality of the Nazi crimes can be seen and felt, offer educational programmes that also take into account the specificity of the grounds' topography, didactic resources, and memorial assumptions. Indeed, in the context of buildings and historical and cultural landscapes, these are differently shaped spaces of memory. Majdanek's perception is conditioned mainly by the preserved building remains original artefacts, and documents as well as other archival testimonies. Confrontation with history in Bełżec – due to the lack of building relics – takes place largely through the symbolism of the architectural and memorial complex. The perception of Sobibór, on the other hand, is linked to the traces of the extermination camp infrastructure uncovered during the archaeological works, and the victims' personal belongings excavated from the ground.

An educational visit to the authentic historical sites can be used to gain new cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic experiences. It also fosters the preservation of memory of those who were murdered and died during the German occupation and the building of a proactive attitude towards phenomena that threaten the world today. This constitutes the essence of the educational activities held within the framework of pedagogy of remembrance. This didactic conception, although constantly evoking the past, turns, in fact, towards the present and the future. Its popularisers, aware of the many constraints and difficulties, but also of the opportunities, take up the daunting educational challenges, trying to implement the moral message of the victims affected by the Nazi terror and genocide, so that their fate becomes a warning to the future generations.

## **Jolanta Laskowska**

# **BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE HISTORY OF THE GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMP AT MAJDANEK**

The German concentration camp, commonly known as Majdanek, was located in the south-eastern part of Lublin. It was established following the decision of the head of the German police and SS, Heinrich Himmler, during his visit in Lublin in July 1941, and its organisation was entrusted to Odilo Globocnik, the SS and police commander in the Lublin district.

The commandant, a senior SS officer, had the highest authority at the camp. In Konzentrationslager Lublin (KL Lublin), this function was held by: Karl Otto Koch, Max Koegel, Hermann Florstedt, Martin Weiß and Arthur Liebhenschel. The camp crew consisted of: the commandant's staff, the guard unit and – in the women's field – female supervisors. The construction plans were changed many times. Eventually, on the area of approximately 270 hectares, sectors were located: prisoner sector for about 25,000 people, one for the SS garrison, and the economic sector, as well as administrative and economic facilities, workshops, gas chambers, crematoria and guardhouses. The rectangle-shaped prisoner camp consisted of 5 parts called fields, which were surrounded by double barbed wire, high-voltage wires and watchtowers. Each of them had 2 rows of wooden barracks, with a roll call square in the middle.

Majdanek existed from October 1941 to July 1944. During that time, it served various functions: it was a concentration and forced labour camp for political prisoners, a place of mass extermination for Polish and European Jews brought here as part of the genocidal operation codenamed "Action Reinhardt", a penal camp for residents of villages from the Lublin region, and a transit camp for Polish families from displaced and pacified villages from the Zamość region and Belarus. The largest group of prisoners were Jews from Poland and abroad (mainly from Slovakia), followed by Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Germans and Russians. There were (relatively) few prisoners from Western and Southern Europe. In the first year of its operation, only men were deported here, and in October 1942 a women's camp was established. Children were also imprisoned at Majdanek.

The admission of prisoners to the concentration camp looked similar in all places of this type. In the case of deported Jews, this procedure was usually preceded by selection. Germans separated young and strong people from those deemed unfit for work: the elderly, weak, disabled, visibly pregnant women and children under 14. They were murdered immediately in gas chambers. The rest, women and men separately, were driven to the baths where, in addition to a superficial bath and a haircut, were also disinfected. Finally, the newcomers received camp clothing: striped drill uniforms or old civilian clothes marked with oil paint, shoes with wooden soles or entirely made of wood. After entering personal data in the records, prisoners were given numbers, which from then on replaced their names and surnames. At Maj-

danek, numbering was performed separately for women and men and did not exceed 20,000. After reaching this number, the newly admitted prisoners in men's fields were given the numbers of deceased prisoners or those who had been sent to other camps, released or escaped. Children under 14 were not kept in records. The reason for imprisonment was indicated by a triangle (the so-called "winkiel") in an appropriate colour sewn on the clothing: a red triangle identified a political prisoner, a green one a criminal, a black one a so-called asocial prisoner, a purple one a Jehovah's Witness (a Bible student), a pink one a homosexual. Jews were given two triangles: red and yellow, superimposed on each other to form the shape of the Star of David, while hostages were given red rectangles. The letter indicating their nationality was written on the triangle, and the number on a piece of cloth, which then had to be sewn onto their clothing. In addition, prisoners were given numbers embossed on plates which they had to wear around their necks or wrists. Sometimes, newcomers were subjected to the so-called quarantine lasting about three weeks. During this time, they did not work, but spent whole days learning camp drill: standing for roll call, taking off and putting on hats simultaneously, and marching in working columns. This was accompanied by harassment and beating.

The prisoners lived in primitive barracks. In winter, they were extremely cold, while in summer unbearably stuffy. Intended for about 200 people, they often housed 500 to 800 people. Often, due to lack of space on the bunk beds, prisoners had to sleep on the floor. Prisoners had limited access to water, could not quench their thirst or take care of hygiene. They were taken to the camp baths once every few weeks. Consequently, infectious diseases appeared, spreading amongst the already weak and starving people.

The daily food ration did not meet the needs of the prisoners doing hard physical labour. Work lasting from early morning to evening led to body exhaustion and was one of the main causes of death. The worst conditions were experienced at construction work, especially earthwork, which was performed regardless of the season and weather. The prisoners of special commandos assigned to cover up the traces of the crimes, i.e. operating the gas chambers as well as burying and burning the bodies, were in a tragic situation. As direct witnesses, they were systematically murdered, and new people were assigned to replace them. On the other hand, prisoners sought to be assigned to groups employed in gardening, sorting clothes or any work performed indoors. They gave some hope for survival.

The prisoners lived with a sense of constant threat. The smallest offences were punishable. The most common used method was whipping, which was performed publicly by the SS-men or functional prisoners.

Despite the omnipresent terror, the prisoners had the courage to take risk and made attempts to escape. The largest escape (86 Soviet prisoners) took place on 14 July 1942. The most common escapees were Poles. In total, almost 500 people regained their freedom in this way.

Prisoners were dying of hunger, primitive living and sanitary conditions, omnipresent violence, terror, diseases

and epidemics, they died in executions and in gas chambers, murdered with Cyclone B and carbon monoxide.

On 3 November 1943 the largest massacre in the history of concentration camps took place. The Germans codenamed this operation as "Erntefest" (Harvest Festival), and approximately 18,000 Jewish women, men and children were murdered at Majdanek. This was the last stage of the extermination of Jews in the Lublin district.

The victims of many executions were also Poles transported here from the German prison in the Lublin Castle. The last execution of this group was carried out the day before the Red Army soldiers entered the camp. Around 700 women and men died at that time.

It is estimated that around 130,000 people were detained at the Majdanek concentration camp in Lublin, and nearly 80,000 lost their lives there. Amongst the victims there were around 60,000 Jews, around 10,000 Poles and around 10,000 citizens of other European countries.

The Germans began camp evacuation in early spring 1944, and the last prisoners were taken from Majdanek to KL Auschwitz on 22 July. In the days to follow, the premises were taken over by Soviet troops, and on field III in August 1944 NKWD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, whose task was, amongst others, to track down any deviations from the communist doctrine), organised a camp for soldiers of the Home Army (it was an armed organisation subordinate to the Polish Government in London, which was not recognised by Stalin). After a few weeks, they were deported deep into the Soviet Union.

In November 1944, the world's first martyrdom museum was launched at the premises of the former concentration camp – the State Museum at Majdanek. In 1947, soil with the ashes of the murdered was brought near the crematorium and a mound was built, which became a mass grave of the Majdanek victims.

In 1969, an impressive monument complex by Wiktor Tołkin was unveiled. The Gate-Monument situated on a hill opens the Road of Homage and Remembrance, a wide avenue that runs along the prisoner fields and watch-towers. It leads to the Mausoleum built on the site of the mound, a bowl with ashes covered with a dome supported with four pillars. On the frieze of the dome the creator engraved the message: "Let our fate be a warning to you" a passage from Franciszek Fenikowski's poem *Requiem*.



Aerial view photo showing the area of KL Lublin, taken after the liquidation of the camp, 1944, PMM.

# MAJDANEK – CLASS SCENARIOS





# “WE ARE AT THE CAMP IN LUBLIN”\* – CONCENTRATION CAMP AT MAJDANEK IN JADWIGA ANKIEWICZ’S *DIARY*

<b>TARGET GROUP</b>	students from the age of 15
<b>WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– trigger interest in the history of KL Lublin,</li><li>– arouse empathy towards prisoners of concentration and extermination camps,</li><li>– improve various skills (social, interpersonal, cultural, linguistic, teamwork, etc.),</li><li>– sensitise to worse treatment of other people and groups of people.</li></ul>
<b>TEACHING AIDS</b>	fragments of the <i>Diary</i> , biography of Jadwiga Ankiewicz, family photos
<b>WORK METHODS</b>	working with the source text, group work
<b>COURSE OF THE CLASS</b>	<p>The teacher introduces students to the topic of the class, and then to selected aspects of the operation of the Majdanek camp, using a historical outline (women’s field, situation of the Jewish population, work at the camp). Then the teacher briefly presents Jadwiga Ankiewicz and the circumstances in which her <i>Diary</i> was written. Then the teacher divides the class into 6 groups; each group receives a selected fragment of the text along with a topic for independent analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I – deportation to the camp,</li><li>II – forced labour,</li><li>III – ways of coping with the depressing reality,</li><li>IV – extermination of Jews,</li><li>V – living conditions,</li><li>VI – SS-men and female overseers.</li></ul> <p>The students’ task is to note down as much information as possible. At the end, the group representatives selected by the group present the results of their work and in this way co-create the story of the Majdanek concentration camp.</p>

## TEACHER’S SHEET

The following texts are based on: J. Laskowska, *Jadwiga Ankiewicz and her “Diary” kept at Majdanek*, [in:] J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek. January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, p. 8 et seq.

## About Jadwiga Ankiewicz

Jadwiga Ankiewicz was born on 11 September 1926 in Warsaw as the child of Barbara and Stefan Ankiewicz. Her father was a Varsovian, and her mother, née Lisiecka, came from Kumanowo near Kamieniec Podolski. They got married in 1924. Her one-year-older sister Maria Halina was called at home by her middle name.

In the years 1933–1940, Jadwiga attended Marshal Józef Piłsudski Public Elementary School No. 105 at Czerniakowska Street 128. She was fond of the humanities, especially the Polish language. She was fascinated by Africa and claimed that geography lessons let her explore the world. She also had an artistic talent. She organ-

ised and directed performances for family celebrations, for which she designed and made costumes. She was remembered as a very caring, thoughtful, sensitive and brave person. Jadwiga and Maria Halina were raised in the spirit of love for the homeland, and Stefan Ankiewicz’s patriotic attitude served as a model for his daughters.

When World War II broke out, Jadwiga was 13. Her father was mobilised in the first days of September 1939. He was taken prisoner on 20 September and interned as a prisoner of war. He was then sent to forced labour in Schramberg in the Black Forest, from where he escaped, returned to Warsaw and joined the Home Army – the armed forces of the Polish Underground State.

\* J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, edited by J. Laskowska, translated by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, p. 46.

Jadwiga was captured on 15 January 1943 during one of the street round-ups in Warsaw. The random people captured in this way were usually sent to prisons, concentration camps or to forced labour in the Third Reich. Jadwiga was transported from the Gestapo prison in Pawiak. After two days, together with others, she was deported to the concentration camp at Majdanek in Lublin, where she arrived on 18 January. For a long time, the family made efforts to establish her whereabouts.

For the first weeks at Majdanek, the prisoners from this transport were not formally accepted or dressed in striped uniforms. In her journal, under the date of 15 February 1943 the author noted that after the morning roll call, some of the prisoners from Pawiak went to work, while others returned to the barracks without any assigned duties. Like other inmates, Jadwiga occasionally performed various cleaning tasks in her barrack and its surroundings: cleaning and washing the floors, removing faeces frozen to the ground outside the building, carrying the pot with food. The group of female prisoners from the round-up, with Ankiewicz as one of them, was entered in the records on 24 February. After a bath, they were given camp clothing. It is also then, when Jadwiga was given the number 5322. Starting from 1 March, together with other prisoners, she was sent to install and dismantle bunk beds and dig sewer ditches as a full-time job. Jadwiga became friends with four young girls: Krystyna Gontarska, Maria Turkowska, Janina Nowacka and Mieczysława Strawińska. They were jokingly called the "Majdanek quintuplets".

On 8 March, Jadwiga and her friends volunteered to work in the camp laundry, which was located in the so-called middle-field I, a space fenced with barbed wire between prisoner fields I and II. The laundry was adjacent to the so-called old crematorium, as well as to the building where the bodies of the gassed prisoners were stored. This made it a special observation point. At that time, the Germans were exterminating the Jews from the Warsaw ghetto. The bodies of the victims were also stored near the laundry; Jadwiga saw the effects of the mass murders committed on the inhabitants of her hometown. She did not remain indifferent to this.

Jadwiga worked in the laundry until her release on 17 May 1943. Only Polish prisoners from round-ups, hostages, and some peasant families displaced from the Zamość region could count on leaving the camp in this way. Together with others who had regained their freedom on that day, she went to the headquarters of the Polish Red Cross in Lublin. There, she received money for a ticket and food for the trip. She returned to Warsaw by morning train. She managed to safely smuggle a notebook with her secret notes out in the lining of her jacket.

After returning to Warsaw, Jadwiga started to work as a waitress. Together with her father, who was hiding, she started her underground activity in the Grey Ranks as a liaison. On 30 January 1944, in unknown circumstances, she was shot dead by the Germans on a street. She was just over 17 years old. The funeral was held on 31 January 1944 at the Bródnowski Cemetery. Despite the risk of exposure, her father attended his daughter's funeral. The entire family, plunged in despair, was saying goodbye to Jadwiga.

## About the *Diary*

During her imprisonment at the Majdanek concentration camp, Jadwiga noted down her observations, comments and feelings that accompanied her and other women on an ongoing basis, almost day after day. She was using a Polish language notebook, in a single line, writing with a pencil. Most probably, she had these items – along with the briefcase in which she kept them – since the round-up. Both, the possession of pen or pencil and paper and writing itself were strictly forbidden behind the wired fence. Jadwiga did this secretly, and she also had to demonstrate determination and ingenuity so that her notebook would not be found during a search in the barracks. Also, none of the prisoners revealed to the female supervisors that the girl kept a diary.

Jadwiga's handwriting was small, letters slightly rounded and inclining to the right. It is worth noting that the handwriting did not change over time, and there are no visible signs of haste or tension despite the writer's dramatic situation.

The language used by the author is very sparing, sometimes even raw. We will not find here any phrases or expressions indicating exaltation or excessive emotionality. The linguistic means, probably unintentionally, bring the text of the *Diary* closer to a reportage rather than to diaries or journals kept by teenagers. Jadwiga missed her home and family, but she did not write about these feelings too often or effusively, and she did not complain. For example, she only reported that she had received a card from her family.

What is interesting, in the descriptions she does not omit situations that, despite the depressing reality, were humorous in a certain specific way. When during a round-up women rushed by German policemen had to quickly climb onto a truck, most of them took seats closest to the entrance. Jadwiga quotes the comment of one of the detainees: "Will you please move already, ladies? All of us want a ride!" (15 January 1943).

Jadwiga distanced herself from the reality surrounding her. She was able to factually relate life in prison and behind the wired fence of the concentration camp. The image of the camp that emerges from her journal is certainly less threatening than that presented by the authors who wrote their after-war memoirs. Perhaps it was because of her young age and innate optimism. The last entry from her stay at Majdanek is an account of her release up to her return trip to Warsaw. Bearing the date of 17 May 1943, it was written or completed after she returned home.

We do not know why Jadwiga decided to write a journal. She herself does not mention the reason. Perhaps she had done this earlier when she was free or, using the items she had, such as a notebook and a pencil, she began to write in order to cope with the nightmare of the camp life. She rather did not expect that her *Diary* would be read by anyone other than herself. First and foremost, the prisoners were trying to survive. To keep their spirits up, in their free time after the evening roll call, they secret-

ly recited poems, prose, and sang songs. They re-played scenes from theatre performances and even created their own texts.

After Jadwiga Ankiewicz's death, the notebook with notes from KL Lublin was kept by her mother and then by her sister Maria Halina. When she married Leonard Suchan, the *Diary* came under their custody. The Suchans contacted PMM at the beginning of August 1998, informing about the document in their possession and providing basic biographical data of its author. It was then decided to donate the typescript of the *Diary* to the archive resources. Jadwiga's sister initially wanted to keep the original text as a family keepsake, but after some time she changed her mind and donated the manuscript to the Museum. At the same time, she expressed her will for the material to be published in print.

## Jadwiga Ankiewicz and her family – photographs



Photo 1. Jadwiga Ankiewicz, 1942.



Photo 2. Left: Teresa, Maria Halina, Stefania, Jadwiga (behind the lounge) Ankiewicz in front of the house of uncle and aunt Tadeusz and Zofia Ankiewicz at 90 Czerniakowska Street in Warsaw, 1940s.



Photo 3. Left: Maria Halina Ankiewicz, Janina Dąbrowska (stepsister of Stefan and Tadeusz), holding Teresa Ankiewicz in their arms, Stefania and Jadwiga Ankiewicz under a mulberry tree in the garden at 90 Czerniakowska Street in Warsaw, 1940s.



Photo 1.-4. In the possession of Krzysztof Suchan and Teresa Tobera.

Photo 4. Left: Jadwiga and Maria Halina Ankiewicz holding their beloved cats: Żaba and Ruduś, in front of the house of Tadeusz and Zofia Ankiewicz at 90 Czerniakowska street in Warsaw, 1940s.

**„17 I 43 Sunday**

We are at the camp in Lublin. I don't think I'll be able to describe the terrible ordeal of our journey. 24 hours in a cattle car (normally it takes only 5 to get to Lublin). We spent the night crouched down on the wet floor, dreaming of even a handful of straw to plug up the wide gaps between the floorboards. The wind that rushed in through those gaps was so cold that every couple of minutes we had to get up and march around to warm ourselves up. When doing that, it was important to have your arms stretched out in front to make sure you didn't bump into someone. (It was completely dark). Besides that, the train kept being diverted onto some spur or other, only to stand there for even two hours. This only added to our desperation, making us anxiously wonder if we would ever reach our unknown destination – or whether we were doomed to meet our end in the confines of that car. By morning we were all so horribly exhausted that we could barely stand on our frozen feet. However, the light of day seeping in through those horrid gaps did lift our spirits a bit. Maybe? Just maybe. Just finally let us out of here, doesn't matter where. Let them do what they want with us, just get us out of this terrifying, cold, and dark grave of a car. As if things weren't bad enough, then came another terrible trial. We suddenly, all of us, become desperately thirsty – and there was no water to be had. We had already licked all the gaps clean of the snow blown in by the wind (turned out they were good for something after all). But that snow quenched our thirst for but a few minutes, then it hit twice as hard. Water! Water! Even just a few drops. It's odd that even shivering with cold though as I was, I felt so thirsty, almost as if I were in the sun-scorched Sahara, not a damp railway car. As we passed by some small station, one of us spotted a sign and stated with all certainty that we were only two stops away from Lublin. Could it be true? After so much time travelling we had reached only Lublin? It's already 2 p.m. It feels colder than the day before. But I can no longer walk. I'm too exhausted from marching around, my head is spinning. Come what may, I just have to lie down. I curl up like a cat in a corner of the car, but the wind blowing in through the gaps is just too terribly cold. And the colder I get, the more thirsty I feel. I'm now little more than a block of ice with a tiny flame flickering inside. The only difference was that a flame would melt the ice, while my inner flame does nothing to warm me up. Oh, how gladly I would die right here, just to finally end this ordeal. I wonder what they're doing back home. Has mom already found out? And what of it! We've stopped again and this time it's not like before, as we hear voices and clanking outside. I jump up from my corner and start listening. Footsteps are clearly approaching our car. Yes, the doors are finally being opened. In that first instance, when the doors had opened just a crack, my eyes – kept in the dark for 24 hours – could not bear to look at the blindingly white snow. We're not at a station, but some side-spur. So we have to make quite a leap down to the ground. As soon as I landed in the snowbank, I started eating handfuls of snow. It helped a bit. As far as the eye could see, was a row of Germans and Ukrainians. They ordered

us to line up in fives. Once we had, they gave the sign and we started marching. Frozen to the marrow, we moved like a bunch of mannequins. How terribly long that march was. We walked and we walked, and it seemed to me the march would be long as the train trip. My hat kept sliding down, but my hands were too wooden to push it back up. We went past some wooden barracks but they kept telling us: 'these are not for you, nor are these for you.' A grey dusk had descended and a bright moon appeared in the sky when we finally reached a group of heavily barbed-wired barracks with flickering camp lights. We came to a stop, though for a moment we could still hearing the snow crunching under the feet of those in the rear. Then all went quiet. We were searched. It was done by a group of hooded, vigorous, healthy-looking German women. What the hell were they looking for on people freshly from the Pawiak prison? Over at last, they led us to the barracks. It seemed relatively nice and cozy, but I was so tired that all I could think of was one thing – to lie down, even on the bare floor if must be. However, they ordered us to go to another barracks and collect straw and one blanket each. I trudged along for that miserable straw, grabbed an armful, dropped it by the wall and collapsed fully clothed on top of this pile with my friend (the one I had met back at Pawiak). I woke up several times during the night feeling thirsty, but since there was no water anyway and I had no desire for any more snow, I didn't even bother getting up."

J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, pp. 46–48.

**„31 I 43 Sunday**

For some time now, each barracks has had shifts for respective work groups. There are 13 such groups in our barracks and today happens to be my group's shift. I almost freeze while cleaning behind the barracks (that is, breaking off the frozen poo left by our fellow inmates who were too afraid at night to walk out all the way to the toilet). Then at breakfast, dinner, and supper we had to carry heavy cauldrons with soup and coffee. Nonetheless, our group 'sticks at it' and we end up being praised by the commandant. Better yet, we receive second helpings of soup as a reward."

**„1 III 43 Monday**

We wrote postcards home in the morning and passed them to a workman. It was really easy this time, as there was only one Lithuanian on guard. After breakfast, they sent us to work digging a sewage ditch in the barrack intended to serve as a shower room. From now on, we'll be working all day, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (with one hour's break for dinner). The work is not as hard as we thought it would be. And there's a little diversity because we work with Polish workers. Some of them are from Lublin, some from Warsaw. We'd imagined that after those massive round-ups, everything in Warsaw was turned upside down. Before the workers arrived, we'd been hearing rumors of terrible hunger, shops locked up, cinemas closed, streets practically deserted. In fact, it turns out not much has changed. Just like after any other normal round-up."

**„8 III 43 Monday**

Klejnotowa came a moment ago and asked for volunteers to work at the laundry. The five of us agreed to sign up. After all, at the laundry we'd likely be able to wash ourselves and clean our clothes. Some older women tried to talk us out of it, saying it was no fun, but really hard work, and that we were too young for it. But we signed up nonetheless. Come what may!"

**„11 III 43 Thursday**

Our third night at the laundry. In fact the work is not particularly hard, as no-one's rushing us. But the endless standing and fending off sleep are horrible. Were we able to get our sleep during the day, things would be easier. During the night, we always promise ourselves to go straight to bed as soon as we step back in the barracks. But once we go outside, the cold air refreshes us a little – and then at the barracks there is always something to do: mend this, clean that, visit our old barracks or the Pawiak women. Usually it goes on like that until dinner. Then we get maybe 4 hours of sleep before the commandant's voice wakes us: 'Get up, ladies, time to go.' We sometimes manage to loll about for another 5 to 10 minutes, but then we have to get dressed double-time, make our beds (always with perfect crease), and leave."

J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, pp. 55, 71, 73, 76.

**„28 I 43 Thursday**

Some hope at last. After dinner, they announced a lot of women were to be released. Before leaving, the officer who'd read out the list said: 'I'll come back tomorrow to let more of you go.' This completely changed the atmosphere in the barracks, where it's now quite merry. Some women huddled in the corner and decided to prepare a concert for the evening. The concert was a success. First, there was some wild dancing and singing, but after that it got better. A woman from our group recited Wierzyński's *Młodości*, which encouraged others to give it a go. There were a few other poems, but the one otherwise inconspicuous-looking girl from group 13 astounded everyone by reciting the entire *Ojciec zadżumionych* by heart. Then there was some more singing. And it all ended with an original song and poem entitled *Na wolność, na wolność, na wolność już czas*. We all felt a little lighter for it. For the first time in so many days we went to bed with some hope in our hearts. We fell asleep thinking about the next day's releases."

**„1 IV 43 April Friday [Thursday]**

It's April already. We all tried to honor tradition and play jokes on everyone around. It was actually quite fun at the laundry. 'Pearl' naturally failed to notice us taking a break an hour early. We, the quintuplets, sat ourselves down on some sacks in the last cubicle and reminisced about the best April Fools' tricks from the past. We went back to our barracks in a quite cheerful mood. But as soon as we got back to our field, some girl from our old barracks came up to us and said the 'Rooster' had just killed the woman selling cigarettes, whom we all knew. At first we wanted to berate the girl for making such a horrible April Fools' joke, but as several other people repeated the news, we had to believe it. It was not a joke after all."

**„21 IV 43 Wednesday**

Only three days left until Easter. Only one thing at Majdanek signals the holidays are approaching: the Easter letters and packages. Some of us have already received several this week while we quintuplets seem cursed with bad luck. So we all sit down on Marysia's bed and talk, as usual, about 'how beautiful it was and how beautiful it will soon be again.' The ladies Wisia and Pola offer some treats from their own packages, but we feel awkward accepting them, as we know they don't have much themselves. Oh, how I wish to return the favour soon. Work at the laundry has one benefit, in that we can bathe in the cauldrons where underwear is boiled and change our underwear as often as we want. Now before Easter, especially during the breaks when we are working the night shift, the cauldrons are all full. They are built-in in the high, round kitchens. There are six cauldrons per kitchen and when we take our baths, all that sticks out are our heads."

**„25 IV 43 Sunday | Easter**

It's 7 a.m., and we've just made it back from the laundry. We go through two roll-calls, one at 8 and another at 11, and finally we have some time for ourselves. To mark the holiday, they did not even bring us breakfast. So we all simply exchanged Easter wishes. Then Schmit recited the holy mass and started singing the hymn: *The Joyous Day is Upon Us*, and we all joined in. I could no longer contain myself and started bawl. How is everyone doing at home? Is everyone all together at this very moment? Where is Mama? Are you all mentioning me, do you even know where I am? Why, since you know my address, haven't you sent me so much as a postcard for Easter? I climb up on my bed and bury my head under a blanket. But then someone lifts it and says: 'Come now, little quintuplet, there's no need to cry. Everything will be alright. Come down and join us on our bed.' It's again that kind and caring voice of Mrs. Wisia. She pulls the blanket back and wipes my tearful face with her handkerchief. I go with her to her bed and see all the quintuplets already sitting there. Pieces of eggs, bread, and cake are laid out on a white napkin. Mrs. Pola, Mrs. Wisia's sister, picks up the eggs and shares pieces of them with us. We wish each other all the best and the stupid, unwanted tears start flowing again. Mrs. Wisia pours coffee into our bowls and invites us to help ourselves to the food. Afternoon. As every Sunday, we get a bowl of groats for dinner. We gather this time on my bunk and start reminiscing about the good old days. So it passes until 5. We've had sour mint tea, potatoes, and a piece of sausage for supper. Now we are getting ready for the concert in the Pawiak barracks. As we make our way to the concert, we cannot have anticipated how it would end. Everything starts with some beautiful Easter songs performed by Mrs. Malina (she used to be a professional singer before the camp). Then we hear a nice Easter tale and some choir songs, followed by two nice poems. The first part of the concert concludes with a performance of the song: *When you're out. When you're out. [...]*

As soon as the second part of the concert starts, we spot a green cap moving among the crowd and soon hear the voice of our good doctor: 'Listen up, there's a man here who wants to enjoy our songs.' The program is changed immediately. The choir starts singing *A wagon is heading for Kraków*. The green man stays for a few minutes and leaves. Once he is gone, it is announced that the 'Majdanek radio' broadcast has been disrupted due to weather conditions. But as everything is back to normal now, the show can resume. First, our lovely Tońko and Szczepko (two women from the Lvov prison) receive well deserved applause. Their piece was excellent. Then a simply fabulous poem for tomorrow entitled *Easter Monday at Majdanek*. The choir starts another song but never finishes."

J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, pp. 53–54, 81, 88, 90–92.

**„16 III 43 Wednesday [Tuesday]**

The Pawiak women once told us some terrible things, claiming the Germans kill people in some gas chamber here. At first we couldn't believe it, but now that we've seen it with our own eyes we no longer have doubts. We don't know if they are killing people the way the Pawiak women told us, but it's a fact that they are carrying out mass-murder. After dinner we saw an enormous truck with a trailer pull up to the crematorium window. A few Germans got out and went inside the building. A moment later the window was opened and they started throwing out naked bodies. Two men (Soviet POWs) would grab the corpses by the arms and legs and toss them onto the truck. Up on the truck, another two stacked the bodies. There were frightfully many. They started at 1 o'clock and did not finish until 4. We always get our bread at 4. Today, I went as well. We passed right by that truck, and so we got a good look at the bodies. They were terribly emaciated, some badly bruised as if beaten, others covered in blood. There was so much blood in fact that it was dripping from gaps in the truck's cargo section and forming pools underneath the vehicle. The stench was so overwhelming we had to hold our breaths. What particularly etched itself into my memory was the face of a Jewish man whose mouth was wide open as if in his last moments he had been gasping for breath (maybe they really are gassing them). I felt nothing while waiting in line to get the bread, nor during the walk back. But as soon as we stepped back into the laundry, I went to the drying room and sat down, as I felt dizzy and nauseous. I thought I would vomit but I couldn't, so I burst into tears, no longer caring if anyone would see me or not. Kryisia wanted to comfort me, but Mrs. Wisia said: 'Let her cry, she'll feel better.' So they all left the cubicle, only Mrs. Wisia remained with me. She sat down beside me but said nothing. Once I had cried my eyes out, I actually did feel better. This was when Mrs. Wisia said: 'And now, little quintuplet, chin up!' I really loved Mrs. Wisia after that. I could not sleep all night. I kept seeing the face of that murdered Jewish man. It was not until morning that sleep finally came. But, to my horror, that chilling face haunted me even in my dreams."

**„19 III 43 Saturday [Friday]**

New transports of Jews are arriving all the time. That horrid event with the bodies is now being repeated on a regular basis. When a transport arrives, the crematorium is working day and night. They hooked up a trailer to the large truck... Whenever we head toward the crematorium, we have to cover our noses from very far away."

**„20 III 43 Sunday [Saturday]**

They murdered so terribly many people tonight that they were unable to haul them all away. In the morning as we were walking to work, all the bodies were still there: the full truck, full trailer, full shed, and even a few bodies still lying in the open, covered with paper."

**„28 IV 43 Wednesday**

A massive transport of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto arrived today. The men were put in the male field, women and children in ours. All women with small children were placed in a separate, fenced barracks. We found out from them a little about the situation in Warsaw. After our round-up, there was another equally bad one, after which the round-ups died down. But terrible things started happening in the ghetto, apparently a full-scale battle erupted and half of the quarter was now a smoldering ruin, buildings burning, basically a hell on Earth. The Jewish women we talked to had terribly swollen and reddened faces. They said it was because they had spent three weeks hiding underground, and when they were suddenly driven out into direct sunlight, they all went blind initially and this was what made them swell up so badly. The crematorium was again working at full capacity all night. They must have already pulled out new victims from among the newly arrived Jews."

**„30 IV 43 [Friday]**

New transports with Jews are now coming in all the time. Our field has been converted into a miniature ghetto. But even that terrible ordeal has not managed to quieten the newcomers, there's a terrible raucous everywhere. The barracks where they put women with small children is particularly overcrowded. As the transports keep coming, the work at the crematorium is picking up the pace."

**„4 V 43 Tuesday**

We are working day shifts again. Today we saw a group of Jews led into the crematorium. They were mostly small children, elderly, and the sick. No! One can truly go mad looking at those ghastly cadaver-pale faces frozen in desperate fear. Could it be more ghastly? They take a tiny, innocent child with their dark eyes and curly hair, just a child who understands nothing of what is going on, and a few hours later toss their cold, lifeless corpse out the window. And what are they punished for so cruelly? What is their crime besides simply being born a Jew? I passed on a letter through one of the women field workers today. Dear God! I hope it reaches home. I don't even dare to hope for Freedom anymore, but maybe a letter, at least a letter."

**„7 V 43 Friday**

Another transport of Jews. The crematorium trucks are now shuttling back and forth non stop. The clothes we wash now are terribly bloodied and dirty. In the afternoon, they painted over the windows so that we cannot see the terrible things they are doing at the crematorium."

J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, pp. 77–79, 94–96.

**„18 I 43 Monday**

Reveille at 6. I get up, wipe my face clean with snow, and try to gather up my straw as best I can. They do roll-call outside. Our German woman is rather short but quite shapely for a German. She has nice blue eyes, a healthy complexion, and is unusually energetic. She counts us and it turns out there are 401 women in our barracks. Next, the interpreter explains that we will be receiving our mattresses today and we'll have to stuff them with straw. As she is leaving, she also mentions that if we clean things up properly and behave (I wonder what passes for good behavior in her opinion), things will settle down by tomorrow. They serve us some passable soup for dinner as well as some long awaited tea – mint, to be precise. For the second night we were able to prepare ourselves much better. We each received another blanket and we made a bed for three as we were joined by a Ukrainian by the name of Nadzieja. We have high hopes about our new Ukrainian friend Hope, as she might soon be released on account of her nationality – if so, she'll be able to take our postcards and send them to our families."

**„19 I 43 Tuesday**

In the evening, they issued each of us a bowl, a spoon, and a towel. We had some watery barley for supper. Overall, the food is not so bad. The worst is the lack of water. Snow leaves a nasty aftertaste and it's not possible to quench your thirst with it. We go to bed very early because our barracks does not have a light."

**„20 I 43 Wednesday**

The freeze has let up. It's a relief not to be frozen stiff during roll-call. Finally a sign of life from the outside world. The German woman came with two men and they read out some names of women to be released. So there's a way out of here after all. How happy they must be! They were ordered to get dressed and collect all their things. They're already leaving now, smiling somewhat sheepishly, as if unable to believe their luck. We get rutabaga for dinner. It is not as bad as at Pawiak, thicker and with a slight hint of meat. Beggars can't be choosers."

**„21 I 43 Thursday**

This morning it's very cold. We got up at 6, as usual. Life is generally starting to fall into rhythm. Wake up at 6. Oh, it's so hard to climb out from the warm blankets. We cover our heads for five more minutes until we hear the voice of our neighbour, Mrs. Zdunek: 'Get out of bed, girls, or you won't have time to get dressed.' What can you do. C'mon, Marysia! One, two three, let's see who gets dressed faster. We jump up at the same time. We have straw all over our skirts (we take off only our coats and sweaters for bed) and in our hair. Time to wash up. Dear God, to think we call this washing. We still have some mint tea in our bowls from yesterday, so we dip our noses in and that's it. Dark stains appear on our towels. 7 o'clock. Roll-call. We put our coats on already at the door. The air is crispy today. It's quite pleasant to be out, but not for too long. While we are standing for roll-call, the cleaning crew is

busy in our barracks. When we come back, it's fresh. Soon, we hear the rumbling of cauldrons on a wagon. They are bringing breakfast. Doesn't matter what it is, as long as it's hot. Warmed up by some whole meal porridge, we sit on our mattresses and do whatever we like. We talk, write, play cards (made from a notebook cover), etc. Dinner. Then nothing to do but be bored until supper. As we have no light, we go to bed early again. What exactly do they intend to do with us? It's unlikely they'll keep us here like this, feeding us without putting us to work. After supper, we each got a bit of melted butter and a spoonful of marmalade. In the evening, one of the women who'd been to Germany told us about what she'd experienced there."

**„22 I 43 Friday**

It's been a week since they caught me. Today is not much different from yesterday, so there's nothing in fact to write about."

**„6 II 43 Saturday**

Well, we've now got what we've most been fearing: lice. I found a giant white one today crawling down my skirt. It's hardly a surprise as we've been sleeping on the floor without undressing for three weeks now, without changing our underwear once in that time. The daydreams of home now have one more focus: a bath and clean underclothes."

*J. Ankiewicz, Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, pp. 48–51, 57–58.*

**„27 I 43 Wednesday**

Our German hasn't appeared for a few days now. Another one replaced her, a woman so nasty it's almost unbearable. During the morning roll-call, she burst into the barracks and started yelling that we had too many sick women and that it was not a place to be loafing about (admittedly, there are a lot of malingerers). She chased most of them outside and then ordered us to stand there for another hour as punishment. Our feet got terribly cold and we had to start stomping them. Mind you, when 385 pairs of feet start stomping, it can be heard. The German burst out her barracks and started yelling: 'if you don't stop making all that noise, you'll stay there even longer.' But as she was going back she must have had a change of heart, because she told the commandant that we could go back inside in 10 minutes. Apparently, even a she-devil like her still has some semblance of humanity."

**"14 II 43 Sunday**

Already my fifth Sunday at Majdanek. After breakfast, the nice dark-haired German came again. She sat down with us, the young ones, next to the stove, asked if before our capture we'd gone to school or worked. Then she told us not to worry and to be patient, we would no doubt be home soon. She also missed home and hoped all of this would end soon. Somewhat hesitantly, she pulled out of her wallet a photograph of a darling little boy. Her head drooped and she whispered: 'mein Sohn', furtively wiping a tear away. With that, she got up, said her goodbyes, and left. I wonder how she ended up here, though having such a small child."

**"15 II 43 Monday**

Today after roll-call the German commandant came and made a commotion like we hadn't seen for a long time. She burst into the barracks and chased all of us outside with her whip. She ordered the floor, still wet after Saturday's washing, to be washed again – then the doors, tables, stools, etc. We envied group 4, even though they had to do all the cleaning. At least they were indoors and not out in the biting cold like us. We gathered around the window, stomping our feet and peering in, flattening our noses against the glass. They were working fast but for us, freezing outside, it seemed like they were taking their time and so we kept rapping at the pane. At last they finish. We rush back in like a band of savages. I toss aside my frozen shoes and wrap my blanket around my feet. In the evening we were visited by former Pawiak prisoners. Their behaviour elicits our admiration. Even though they must work hard and do not expect to see their homes before the end of the war, they know how to be patient and smile. Their lives have fallen into a rhythm. They have bathed and are in their striped uniforms. Every day they get up at 6 just as we do, and stand for roll call with us at 7. Whereas we then go back to our barracks, they are lined up in fives and escorted out for work. Some do sewing, some laundry, some also stay in our area; these wear green armbands and, under Monika's leadership, assist the Germans."

**„21 II 43 Sunday**

My sixth Sunday at the camp. The day is sunny and biting cold. At the morning roll-call was the German woman-guard the Pawiak prisoners call 'Sunshine'. Hers was the only appearance indicating it was Sunday. Crisply pressed uniform, snow-white shirt, hair done in neat waves. She smiled and told us to go back in, saying we must be cold. Although she was very nice to us, I felt a wave of inexplicable anger. I was most envious of that white shirt of hers. If I ever return home and maybe, after the war, make some decent money, I will always buy for myself only white shirts. I was woken by gunfire during the night. Several shots, one after another, as if from a machine gun, then a few single ones. The shots came from the direction of the male field (we women are at the very end of the camp). The women who know someone on the male side can communicate with them through the Pawiak prisoners, as they're sent there to get coal. They pass notes, sometimes even exchange a few words, but they have to be very careful. Should the wrong person notice, the consequences would be dire."

**„[9 III 43] [Tuesday]**

It's 4 a.m. The commandant wakes everyone up. We, of course, haven't slept a wink. Heads start appearing all around that gaze at us with interest, surprised at how young and nice we look. One lady says: 'so young and pretty, just like tchem Canadian quintuplets', to which another quips: 'not Canadian but Majdanian.' We go out and line up in fives in front of the barracks to wait for the German guard. Another surprise: the guard turns out to be that nice, petite German – 'Pearl!'"

**„13 IV 43 Tuesday**

Today, we learnt the truth of the adage 'the devil's not so black as he is painted.' Our new German is not at all as bad as she looked. Her name is Anni and when in a good mood, she'll play tag with us in the field and tell funny jokes. Today she caught us making pancakes from rotten potatoes behind the last stove. We expected her to upbraid us for not being at the tables, but instead she just told us to carry on as she wanted to see how it was done (I thought to myself: 'fair enough, you too may have to eat rotten potatoes one day'). [...]

Anni watched the entire process while seated on a bag of coal, tapping some rhythm with her foot and watching us work. When we'd finished, we offered one of the cakes to her, curious if she would eat it. She nibbled on its edges a little, then put it on a stick and, when she thought nobody was looking, tossed it behind the bag of coal."

J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, pp. 53, 60–62, 65, 74, 85.

## **“I CAST MY MIND BACK TO THAT TRAGIC DAY”\***

### **3 NOVEMBER OF 1943 IN WITNESSES’ ACCOUNT**

**TARGET GROUP** students from the age of 17

**WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES**

- trigger interest in the history of the former concentration camp at Majdanek,
- trigger interest in the fate of the Jewish population during World War II,
- trigger interest in the fate of Jewish prisoners of KL Lublin, with particular emphasis on the events of 3 November 1943,
- arouse empathy towards the victims of the Holocaust,
- improve the ability to work with the source text and independently form own conclusions,
- develop group work skills,
- sensitise to the problem of anti-Semitism, xenophobia and discrimination in the contemporary world.

**TEACHING AIDS** fragments of source texts and memoirs of former prisoners of KL Lublin, worksheets

**WORK METHODS** work with the source text, group work, discussion

**COURSE OF THE CLASS**

The teacher introduces students to the topic of the class, presenting a brief outline of the history of the concentration camp at Majdanek (with particular emphasis on: the time of operation of KL Lublin, various prisoner groups, fate of the Jewish population behind the wired fence of the camp and the number of victims). Then, the teacher divides the class into 4 smaller groups:

- I – the situation of the Jewish population at Majdanek before 3 November 1943,
- II – preparations for the massacre,
- III – 3 November 1943,
- IV – the situation at the camp after the mass execution.

Each group is given source texts and worksheets. The students’ task is to familiarise themselves with the received material, complete the worksheets and present the results to the rest of the class. During the summary of the classes, the teacher asks the participants how they would commemorate the victims of operation “Erntefest.”

\* K. Niesiobędzki, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 51.

## TEACHER'S SHEET

## Additional information regarding operation "Erntefest":

On 3 November 1943, the largest mass execution in the history of concentration camps was carried out in KL Lublin, the victims of which were Jewish prisoners. During the operation codenamed "Erntefest" (Harvest Festival), the Germans shot dead around over 18,000 people.

The execution sites were the areas behind prisoner field V, near the newly built crematorium. The Jews were first led to one of the barracks in field V, where they were forced to strip naked and give away all their valuables. Then, driven through a hole cut in the fence, they were directed to 3 previously dug execution ditches. This genocidal operation lasted from dawn till dusk. The SS-men captured and murdered the remaining Jews hiding on the Majdanek premises on a later date.

To cover the sounds of gunfire, two police cars were used playing marching and dance music. The remaining prisoners were not allowed to leave the barracks on that day, and consequently only a few were direct witnesses to the massacre.

The victims of "Erntefest" at Majdanek were not only the Jewish prisoners of that camp. All the Jews from the two other labour camps in Lublin: at Lipowa Street and at the premises of the pre-war airport of the E. Plage and T. Laśkiewicz company, called Flugplatz (the German word for airport) by the occupiers, were also shot.

A group of 600 people were selected from amongst 18,000 victims – 300 women and 300 men, who were then used to sort the clothes of the murdered and cover up the traces of the crime. Afterwards, these prisoners were being gradually murdered. Most of the rescued women were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they died in gas chambers. Only a few of them managed to survive by escaping from the transport. From the group of men who were engaged in burning the dead bodies, few who escaped from the Borek forest near Chetm survived.

Majdanek was not the only camp in the Lublin region where mass murders took place. On 3 and 4 November 1943, Jewish prisoners from the labour camps in Trawniki and Poniatowa were murdered. A total of about 42,000 Jews were shot in two days. Operation "Erntefest" was therefore the last stage of the extermination of Jews in the Lublin district.

Witnesses of the massacre that took place on 3 November 1943 called this day "Bloody Wednesday."

Read a fragment of a historical study and the memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners, and then answer the following questions:

1. What can you say about the treatment of Jewish prisoners at the Majdanek concentration camp?

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2. What specific factors could have directly contributed to the deterioration of the living conditions of Jewish prisoners at the camp?

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3. What can we conclude from the cited memoirs about the relations of Jewish prisoners with other prisoner groups at the camp? Justify your answer.

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4. What emotions do the cited historical information and memoirs of former camp prisoners evoke in you? Justify your answer.

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**Fragment of a historical study:**

"Terror against Jews was a common phenomenon in German concentration camps, but its scale and cruelty were exceptional at Majdanek. Even prisoners who spent only a few weeks here and were held in other camps for many months often remembered Majdanek as the hardest place in their ordeal. [...] The worst conditions were in the Jewish barracks. In one block intended for 250 prisoners, up to a thousand people were often crammed together, who terribly crowded were not only unable to lie down, but even to sit comfortably."

T. Kranz, *Konzentrationslager Lublin. Powstanie, organizacja, działalność*, [in:] *Więźniowie KL Lublin 1941–1944*, eds. T. Kranz, W. Lenarczyk, Lublin 2022, p. 86.

**Memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners:**

1) "In the middle of May, a transport of Jews from Warsaw arrived. Several thousand people came, men, women, and even nursing infants. The SS-men turn their attention away from us on the field; everyone is busy with the Jews. They arrived at night and were put in the so-called *Rosengarten*\* – a very romantic-sounding name – but there is neither a garden there nor roses. It's simply next to the bathhouse building and the gas chamber, a square maybe an acre in size surrounded by barbed wire. The people are kept there in the open air until morning, and then the processing of the transport begins. First of all, the men are separated from the women and children. Suitcases are taken away before they enter the bathhouse, where they are ordered to undress and their hair is cut. Next, the Jews stand before a commission where they have to open their mouths and raise their arms to check whether they are trying to smuggle in any jewelry. The commission sorts the young and healthy to one bathhouse and the older, sick, and adolescents (if they are not with their mothers) to the other bathhouse".

J. Kwiatkowski, *485 Days at Majdanek*, introd. by N.M. Naimark, transl. by N. Siekierski, W. Wojtaszko, Stanford, California 2020, p. 154.

2) "Slovak Jews stood around us, very neglected. They had shaved heads, dirty prison clothes and clogs on their feet or were barefoot. Most had swollen legs. They asked us to give them something from our provisions. We gave them what we could."

W. Rosenberg (R. Vrba), *Żydzi słowaccy*, [in:] *Majdanek. Obóz koncentracyjny w relacjach więźniów i świadków*, selection and elaboration by M. Grudzińska, Lublin 2011, p. 27.

3) "New transports with Jews are now coming in all the time. Our field has been converted into a miniature ghetto. But even that terrible ordeal has not managed to quieten the newcomers, there's a terrible raucous everywhere. The barracks where they put women with small children is particularly overcrowded. As the transports keep coming, the work at the crematorium is picking up the pace."

J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, p. 95.

4) "They sent me to work in the basket workshop, which was located in field IV, I can't remember which block it was. On the other side of our field. This is where we repaired damaged missile boxes, which came from the front. The daily norm was 8 pieces. Those who did less were beaten. There were a lot of Gypsies and Jews there. Mostly Jews got such beating. They worked very slowly, besides, they were people, specialists in other fields and they were usually beaten for any offence, even a trivial one. Whether they did something wrong or finished it... It was the same with the Gypsies. They treated them worse than us. I must admit that I was never beaten when I was there."

H. Nieścior, video memoirs, APMM, XXII-39.

\* Rosengarten – Rose garden.

Read a fragment of a historical study and the memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners, and then answer the following questions:

1. What were the official explanations for digging the trenches, and what was their real purpose? Why do you think the SS-men did not reveal their real plan?

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2. How did the prisoners interpret the situation? How did they react to it?

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3. What do you think the prisoners of the camp might have felt when they saw the digging of the trenches and heard various rumours?

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4. What emotions do the cited historical information and memoirs of former camp prisoners evoke in you? Justify your answer.

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**Fragment of a historical study:**

„To perform this horrific task, huge forces were mobilised, with around 2,000 Security Police and Waffen SS officers, who were rushed to Lublin, as well as some even from outside the General Government. The 1st Battalion of the 22nd SS Police Regiment, the 25th SS Police Regiment, the 1st Motorised Gendarmerie Battalion, and the 3rd Mounted SS Police detachment took part in the operation. There were also several SS-men from the Auschwitz camp crew.

[...] Large trenches had been dug beforehand. This work did not raise any suspicions, as it was announced that they were to be an air defence measure. Until the last moment, even the commandant of KL Lublin was unaware of what was going on (at that time the camp commandant was replaced).“

D. Libionka, *The Holocaust in the General Government of Nazi-Occupied Poland*, transl. by J. Giebułtowski, Lublin 2024, pp. 247–248.

**Memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners:**

1) “We were told that behind field VI near the crematorium some Jewish commandos were digging deep ditches. Nobody knew their purpose, even the friendly SS-men shrugged their shoulders when we asked them. After lunch, however, a detachment of SS-men marched towards the crematorium singing and with shovels on their shoulders, as it turned out also to dig trenches in field VI. This made us think that they were apparently making some fortifications and anti-tank trenches, perhaps expecting an attack by some landing force or partisan raid from [the direction of] the village of Dziesiąta.

On 2 November, before noon, heavy machine guns were placed on crow’s nests\* with foreign crews of SS-men with the faces of typical thugs and murderers [...].

It seemed that life went on as always. Work in the potato storehouse and kitchen continued uninterrupted. After dinner, in the fenced part of the barracks where the cooks slept, you could hear the characteristic wailing of Jews praying in Hebrew. Apparently, they already had some information about the vile fate awaiting us.”

B. Jasieńczyk-Burski, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, pp. 41–42.

2) “Majdanek prisoners were given new important work. A rumour was spread that the Soviet front had moved into the Polish territory, that fighting was taking place in the former Volhynian voivodeship and that therefore the Germans were expecting air raids. According to the circulating information, a network of anti-aircraft artillery positions were to be built to repulse them. The first such position was started to be built on the newly created field VI. Earthwork for this position was carried out at a record pace, day and night. Huge spotlights were installed to illuminate the construction site at night. An

interesting detail was that only Jews were engaged to do this work.”

M. Pych, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 63.

3) “In the last days of October 1943, about 50 meters behind the crematorium, opposite barrack 22 in field V, a large commando made up entirely of Jews was digging trenches. We were surprised by the fact that electric lights had been installed on high poles placed around the area. This work group was called the Luftschutz-kommando. They were digging in great haste. The trenches were dug in two shifts, day and night, each shift working twelve hours. Around 150 Jews worked during one shift. At that time I worked in block 21 of field V right next to the crematorium. Through the window in the toilet/washroom I watched the Luftschutzkommando at work. They were digging zigzag trenches, each about 100 meters long, 3 meters deep and 3 meters wide. After three days and three nights of work, the trenches were ready. The comments as to the purpose of the trenches were different, but all optimistic. Some believed that the camp crew feared an attack by partisans, while others claimed that the Germans expected air raids and bombing. However, no one predicted what their actual purpose was to be.”

Z. Pawlak, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 87.

4) “The early, frosty morning did not herald any revelations or surprises. We were woken up with the usual shouting and beating before five in the morning, the block elders threw the sleepy prisoners out of the blocks, in front of the blocks they began to hand out a quarter of a litre of a slightly warm liquid called tea and three unpeeled potatoes. In front of the barracks the block elders prepared the prisoners, living and dead, in neat rows of fives for roll calls, they reported to the SS-man who counted us – fortunately the numbers matched up.”

K. Niesiołędzki, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 51.

\* Crow’s nests – watchtowers.

Read a fragment of a historical study and the memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners, and then answer the following questions:

1. What happened at the Majdanek concentration camp on 3 November 1943?

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2. Who were the victims of the execution and what codename was given to this operation?

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3. What does the word harvest festival bring to your mind? How did the executioners change the meaning of this word in the context of the crime committed on 3 November 1943?

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4. What role was the music played from the loudspeakers supposed to play?

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5. What emotions do the cited historical information and memoirs of former camp prisoners evoke in you? Justify your answer.

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**Fragment of a historical study:**

"In the morning on 3 November 1943, German police units tightly surrounded the camp and began the execution. The Majdanek crew separated the Jewish prisoners and gathered them in individual fields, from where they were gradually led to field V, which had been converted into a gathering point and was located directly next to the execution ditches. Almost at the same time, Jewish women and men from other camps (Lipowa, Flugplatz, external commandos) began to be brought to the camp. Those who attempted to escape were caught and shot on the spot, and their bodies were loaded onto carts. In field V, in one of the barracks, the victims had to give away their valuables and strip naked. From there, they were herded to the dug ditches through the cut fence wire and a line of armed policemen."

T. Kranz, *Konzentrationslager Lublin. Powstanie, organizacja, działalność*, [in:] *Więźniowie KL Lublin 1941–1944*, eds. T. Kranz, W. Lenarczyk, Lublin 2022, p. 106.

**Memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners:**

1) "In the morning the cooks went to work as usual. We were waiting impatiently for the gong. As soon as we heard it, we rushed out onto the square. We noticed with horror that the posts on the towers were doubled and the heavy machine guns were fully staffed. Patrols were cruising behind the wires. Columns of prisoners were moving quickly along the road towards field V, densely lined with posts. From the direction of field VI, lively melodies of music could be heard from megaphones, mixed with, somehow dull probably only by distance, bursts of machine guns and chaotic shooting. We all stood there speechless, not knowing what to do. Columns of women, men and children were constantly moving, or rather running, along the road.

And so an act of unheard-of crime had begun [...].

In the typhus blocks, the SS-men are pulling out naked prisoners, falling over from exhaustion. They are dragging the half-dead by their legs and throwing them onto the platforms like sacks. The music and gunfire in field VI do not stop even for a moment. [...] The SS-men were returning with their stock down the deserted road, searching the roadsides and picking up various trinkets abandoned by prisoners led to the execution site, mainly money, often torn banknotes."

B. Jasieńczyk-Burski, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, pp. 43–45.

2) "A few moments passed, no commands were given, but instead of the shouts of the block elders and kapos, strange things began to happen around the camp. Numerous groups of SS-men, heavily armed with machine guns, with dogs on leashes, began to set up dense posts in front of the wires in all five fields. We also noticed doubled posts with heavy machine guns on the guard towers. We recognised armoured combat vehicles in front of the barracks of the entrance fields.

It was an instantly blood-chilling sight. Various, most terrible thoughts were running through our heads; what could we do – we stood in our places and waited with fear

for what would happen next. [...] After a while, we saw that the Germans were separating a certain group of prisoners from the service of the field III office and directing them to the exit gate. Then, they moved to the rows of prisoners in each block and also separated large groups of people – in some blocks they took about 60–70% of the block prisoners. Then we realised that the so-called selection of Jews was being done, but we still did not know who and for what purpose they were selecting, what awaited whom. [...]

It was clear now. Here are the Jews going – as we used to say – to slaughter. In field V there was violence, screaming and indescribable wailing. The music was to drown out the gunfires and the screaming of people being shot, who were guilty of being born under the sign of the 'Star of Zion'. The Jews were driven to the so-called L-barrack, where they stripped naked and then came out on the other side towards the crematorium. The SS-men were lined along the dug ditches, one next to the other, and there, on that road, they were driving the Jews with whips. At the edge of the ditches, they were mowing down dozens and dozens of them with shots in the back of the head.

On that day, by 6 p.m., the SS 'supermen' murdered 18,600 human beings. The Nazis codenamed this operation *Erntefest* – 'Harvest Festival'. So malicious! It lasted about 10 hours, so every 2 seconds one human life ceased to exist.

That tragic day of 3 November 1943 was irrevocably over. And it will never happen again in the history of humanity."

K. Niesiołędzki, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, pp. 52–54.

3) "At noon, the SS-men rushed in and together with the female supervisors and the commandant, they called out all the Jewish women and ordered them to line up in fives. The supervisors checked the numbers and names against the lists from the office. The SS-men were raging in the barracks, dragging out those who had not managed to leave or were trying to hide. Accompanied by wild screams and insults, the terrified women were led out of our women's field. Finally, they ordered to load the sick ones onto trucks. They were only in their underwear, so we covered them with hospital blankets. Ehrich, who personally supervised this loading, passionately tore the blankets off them and whipped me on the back, cursing that I dared to waste hospital property. It was then, at that moment, that I understood that they were being taken to death."

S. Perzanowska, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 129.

Read a fragment of a historical study and the memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners, and then answer the following questions:

1. What action was taken to conceal the traces of the genocidal crime?

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2. What happened to the survivors of the execution?

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3. Based on the memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners, what can you say about the situation in the camp after 3 November 1943? Which behaviours of former prisoners particularly caught your attention and why?

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4. What emotions do the cited historical information and memoirs of former camp prisoners evoke in you? Justify your answer.

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**Fragment of a historical study:**

"On 'Bloody Wednesday' 3 November 1943, the Germans shot almost all the Jews from Majdanek and its sub-camps. They spared only 600 women and men. [...] After the massacre was over, a small group of Jewish prisoners hid in Majdanek, but the SS quickly caught and murdered them. A so-called Filzkommando was formed from the spared Jewish women from Flugplatz. Its task was to search through and sort the clothes of the murdered. Since valuables were found sewn into the clothes of the victims, the women were placed in a strictly guarded barrack. In April 1944, they were taken to KL Auschwitz. During transport, a dozen or so of them jumped off the train and escaped. A few women survived until the end of the war. The rest were gassed at their destination. On the other hand, the men – Polish Army soldiers taken prisoner from the camp at Lipowa Street – were assigned to burn the bodies of victims of operation 'Erntefest'. This lasted for over two months. They were also used to remove traces of crimes in other camps. They dug up mass graves there and burned the bodies of victims of mass shootings. The members of the commando that handled this (Sonderkommando 1005) were regularly murdered, which is why only a few managed to survive in the end."

T. Kranz, *Konzentrationslager Lublin. Powstanie, organizacja, działalność*, [in:] *Więźniowie KL Lublin 1941–1944*, eds. T. Kranz, W. Lenarczyk, Lublin 2022, pp. 107–108.

**Memoirs of former Majdanek prisoners:**

1) "Already on 5 November, the crematorium commandant Muhsfeldt began burning piles of corpses lying in the ditches. The crematorium furnaces could not keep up with the burning of the huge numbers of corpses: and yet, in addition to the people shot in the ditches, they also had to burn the bodies of those who were dying every day."

Z. Pawlak, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 100.

2) "311 young Jewish women survived this horrible massacre. The following evening they were brought to our field, placed in one of the empty Jewish barracks and not allowed to have any contact with anyone. They were spared to sort the clothes of their murdered inmates. They were half-conscious and were moving as if they were drunk. Every day they went to sort and then put away these clothes in the warehouses, constantly thinking when they would share the fate of those murdered on 3 November. And nobody knows why they were spared for another half a year. After some time they dared to move around the camp, they came to the medical barrack for advice, still full of fear, but already more conscious. When on 13 April 1944 we were leaving with the entire women's hospital from Majdanek to Auschwitz, the Jewish women

were loaded into one of the cattle cars carrying us. Five of them jumped out through a tiny window of the carriage while the train was running."

S. Perzanowska, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 131.

3) "On 13 April [1944] they took us as well. They took away our tin numbers and gave us yellow Zion stars. They loaded us into wagons, 60 girls in each. An SS-man was sitting inside. The supervisor told us we were going to Auschwitz. I decided to escape. A few girls tried to talk me out of it, but I was determined to jump out of the train. When the train was approaching Nałęczów, I saw that some guards were busy with the girls and others were sleeping. I called out to them to turn off the light because I couldn't sleep. When it got dark, I sat on the window and jumped out in one jump. I broke my right leg below the ankle. It had to be partially amputated later."

I. Mazower, [in:] *Krwawa środa. 3 listopada 1943 w pamięci świadków*, memoirs selected and compiled by K. Czuryżkiewicz, B. Siwek-Ciupak, Lublin 2023, p. 175.

4) "Małgosia Stecka and Hala Madurowicz, working in the office, hide the files of those suspected of Semitic origin from the records, but the SS-men from the Politische Abteilung, with the help of Monika and *lagerkapo* Gaby, are still sniffing around, searching, and picking out female prisoners who look Jewish."

D. Brzosko-Mędryk, *Niebo bez ptaków*, Warszawa 2022, p. 429.

# LIVING CONDITIONS IN KL LUBLIN

**TARGET GROUP** students from the age of 15

**WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES**

- familiarise with the basic aspects of the history of KL Lublin and the realities of the camp,
- arouse interest in deepening knowledge about the history of KL Lublin and other camps,
- improve interpersonal and group work skills,
- sensitise to the manifestations of stigmatisation, exclusion and discrimination in the contemporary world,
- sensitise to the worse living conditions of others.

**TEACHING AIDS** photographs of artefacts, fragments of accounts by former prisoners

**WORK METHODS** group work, work with an object, work with the source text

**COURSE OF THE CLASS** The teacher introduces students to the topic of the lesson, providing them with basic information about the history of KL Lublin. Then, he divide the class into 5 groups, according to the topics:

- I – clothes and marking,
- II – food,
- III – barracks,
- IV – oppression and punishment objects,
- V – personal items of prisoners and victims.

Each group is to analyse the materials received and answer the questions posed in the worksheet. After that, they present their conclusions on the forum. Students can write down information in the form of keywords on the board or flipchart. At the end, there is a discussion about the students' thoughts on the topic. The teacher moderates the discussion using the "Teacher's sheet".

# TEACHER'S SHEET

## Camp numbers

After the prisoners were given numbers, the SS crew no longer used their first and last names. The numbering at the Majdanek camp was separate for women and men, both lists were limited to 20,000 and rotated. This meant that new prisoners received numbers of prisoners who were already dead, had escaped, or had been moved to another camp. Prisoner numbers were not tattooed on prisoners in KL Lublin.

## Punishments and persecution

Beating was a very common form of punishment at the concentration camp. The SS-men were allowed to carry weapons and to use them. Functionary prisoners did not have such a right, however they were allowed to use any other objects, such as e.g. specially designed whips or bats and random objects, such as boards or tools.

Lashing, on a special table, was often performed publicly during roll-calls, as a caution for other prisoners.

Apart from delivering tangible benefits, work in a concentration camp was a way for the camp administration to maintain discipline. Its organisation and the conditions in which it was performed were based on the physical

elimination of the weakest prisoners. Sending prisoners to specific work could also be a form of punishment.

## Prisoners' documents and personal items

The J-Ausweis was a document issued by the occupation authorities to Jews. It authorised them to stay in the ghetto and temporarily saved the holder's life by protecting them from deportation.

From the point of view of current knowledge about concentration and extermination camps and the fate of Jews sent to them, it may seem useless to have taken personal belongings with them, which they had to give away immediately upon arrival. However, the German authorities deceived them and claimed that they were being sent "to work in the east", where they could start a new life. The deportees packed their basic supplies, work tools, valuables and documents.

## Guiding questions for the summary discussion:

1. What can you say about the living conditions in KL Lublin? What terms can you use?
2. What can you say about the prisoners and victims of KL Lublin based on the gained knowledge? What kind of people do you think they were? Look at their personal belongings and the ways they spent their free time – do you see any similarities between them and yourselves?
3. In today's world, do we appreciate what we have (food, home, personal belongings)? How would you describe the attitude of contemporary people towards material items?
4. Are you aware of any cases where someone was treated worse because of their appearance or possessions? Describe this situation and its consequences.

Look at the photographs, their descriptions, and the source texts, and then answer the questions:

1. What was the condition of the striped uniforms and civilian clothes given to prisoners? Why do you think they looked like that? What effect did it have on the situation of prisoners at the camp?

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2. Why were prisoners numbered and what effect did it have on their psyche?

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3. Why do you think concentration camp prisoners were divided into categories? What was the purpose of this?

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4. Do you see any signs of categorising or marking certain people or social groups nowadays? If so, what do you think is the reason for this behaviour?

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### Source texts – fragments of accounts by former Majdanek prisoners:

1) "They line us up in a single file and we approach one by one, first to collect striped uniforms – prison clothes, a dress, then individual pieces of underwear, garter belts, finally stockings and headgear. All of this is terribly dirty, apart from the new striped uniforms, usually too big or inappropriate for a given figure. I get very dirty underwear and a huge, very dirty garter belt. I only had luck with the headgear: the issuing person chose a new, beautiful, woollen, red Krakow scarf with a floral pattern".

I. Marszałek, *Pierwsza kąpiel*, [in:] *Majdanek. Obóz koncentracyjny w relacjach więźniów i świadków*, selection and elaboration by M. Grudzińska, Lublin 2011, pp. 69–70.

2) "Then we are issued clothing. From one pile they dispense shirts, long underwear from a second, then socks, pants, jackets, wooden-soled clogs, and hats. But, dear Lord – how does it look – where did they get the hundreds and thousands of such raggedy clothes? [...] The shirts are mostly child-sized, too narrow around the neck, all are buttonless; many of us receive women's leotards or swim trunks instead of long underwear. You have to take the clothing you get, without trying it on. The clogs are mis-matched and often too small to wear. I get such big clogs that they fall off my feet. [...] I have no way to button up the shirt on my chest but at least the jacket I get is fairly new; unfortunately it's a summer style with a silk lining and a single button. The hat will not fit on my head so I have to simply perch it on top."

J. Kwiatkowski, *485 Days at Majdanek*, introd. by N.M. Naimark, transl. by N. Siekierski, W. Wojtaszko, Stanford, California 2021, pp. 37–38.

3) "It was the most horrifying thing that had happened to us so far. At that moment we were deprived of our surnames and names, we became just numbers – a humanoid shred without any rights, a toy in the hands of savage superhumans. The numbers were made from small pieces of tin from canned food and the digits were die-cut\*. The plates were hung around our necks like dog collars. Decorated like that – I automatically stopped to be a human being for my oppressors – I became number '1324'."

C. Skoraczyński, *Żywe numery*, Kraków 1984, p. 22.

4) "The prisoners are divided into different groups and categories. [...] They [political prisoners] wear red *Winkel* with the top pointing down. [...] The letters printed on the triangles denote nationality, [...] the Germans have no letter on their triangles. [...] [P]rofessional criminals, referred to in the camps as '*Befauer*,' wear green, upside-down triangles. Having served their sentences in prison, the criminals are sent to concentration camps. [...] The *Asoziale*, abbreviated '*Aso*,' asocials, arrested for avoiding work, violating wartime economic regulations, slaughtering cat-

tle in secret, etc. Black, upside-down triangle. [...] Bible students, arrested for not recognising secular authority and refusal to serve in the army. Violet, upside-down triangle. Homosexuals, abbreviated 'Homo' or '§175,' pink, upside-down triangle. *Juden*, Jews, [...] red, upside-down triangle over a yellow triangle, forming a six-pointed star with three yellow corners showing from below the red. Abbreviated as 'J.' [...] The categories are strictly applied only to German prisoners. [...] It really doesn't matter what triangle you are wearing, since everyone gets fed the same and has to do the same kinds of work. Although as far as influence is concerned, green triangles have the most sway, because kapos\*\* are primarily recruited from their ranks."

J. Kwiatkowski, *485 Days at Majdanek*, introd. by N.M. Naimark, transl. by N. Siekierski, W. Wojtaszko, Stanford, California 2021, pp. 137–139.

\* Die cut – mint.

\*\* Kapos – singular kapo, a prisoner functionary in a camp that oversaw a prisoner group's labour.

Look at the photographs, their descriptions, and the source texts, and then answer the questions:

1. What did the prisoners get to eat at Majdanek? How did it affect the prisoners?

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2. What happened to the food rations intended for the prisoners? What would you call it?

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3. Why do you think the prisoners received such food rations?

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4. Are there people in today's world who suffer from hunger? What do you think is the cause of that?

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Photo 3. Soup kettle from the camp kitchen.



Photo 4. Utensils and cutlery used by the Majdanek prisoners.



**Source texts – fragments of accounts by former Majdanek prisoners:**

1) "Hunger was stronger than pain. You would constantly think about what you could eat. [...] The food we received consisted of 1 litre of coffee without sugar and bread in the morning, for lunch we were given about a litre of turnip soup, sometimes there were potatoes in it, which we considered a great delicacy. Soup was often made of rotten turnip with such an unpleasant smell and taste that even prisoners could not eat it. For dinner they brought coffee, bread and a few potatoes. A loaf of bread was given for eight people. In any case, it was very little. There is no point in writing about the quality of this food, because everyone can guess that it had no value. Sawdust or something like that was added to the bread, because it crumbled a lot. Despite that, when it came to dividing it, there were often misunderstandings. Every little bit was picked up from the ground. People didn't know what to do with this bread: eat it right away or leave it for breakfast. Most often, we ate it a little at a time, thinking we would leave a piece for later, but after a few bites there was nothing left."

Z. Badio, *Jesień 1942 roku*, [in:] *Majdanek. Obóz koncentracyjny w relacjach więźniów i świadków*, selection and elaboration by M. Grudzińska, Lublin 2011, pp. 39, 41.

2) "Amongst the meals I received in Majdanek, I liked soup the least, as it was impossible to eat it without spitting, which is why we called it 'spit soup'. It was a muddy and bland mixture of liquid with sharp, probably oats, chaff. The second type of soup was a dark brown, thin liquid with some bitter-tasting suspension. However, this soup had the advantage that you weren't spitting while eating it, so there was always something left in your stomach."

J. Jeleń, APMM, VII/M-594, c. 50.

3) "Food – it was another nightmare that made being in the camp unbearable. Coffee in the morning – like dishwater with a piece of bread made out of sawdust and peels. Sometimes we received a little margarine, beetroot marmalade or a slice of horsemeat sausage. Lunch usually consisted of rotten turnip and frozen potatoes. The real plague was the 'spit soup' made of oats chaff, which was supposed to imitate porridge. The worst, however, was kale – kale roots poorly rinsed and only soaked in hot water – leftovers sent from the SS kitchen. For the supper we had again the 'spit soup' tasting like dishwater. With such nutrition, bloody dysentery\* spread, the body would swell from hunger and become covered with ulcers. We were losing strength. The mortality rate was rising. There were rumours that food rations were officially provided in larger caloric portions, but the warehouseman and the SS chef kept it strictly confidential in order to feed their own families in the German Reich at the prisoners' expense."

A. Imach, *Pole kobiet*, [in:] *Majdanek. Obóz koncentracyjny w relacjach więźniów i świadków*, selection and elaboration by M. Grudzińska, Lublin 2011, p. 73.

\* Dysentery – an acute infectious disease of the intestines, the main symptom of which is diarrhoea.

Look at the photographs, their descriptions, and the source texts, and then answer the questions:

1. What did the barracks look like and what was their quality? What were they equipped with? What items did the prisoners have at their disposal?

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2. What were the conditions in the barracks? What can you say about the space available to the prisoners, the possibility of intimacy, rest and hygiene?

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3. How did these conditions affect the prisoners?

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4. Do you think that in today's world all people are provided with sufficient conditions for living, learning and development? Justify your answer.

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Photo 5. Barrack interior with bunk beds.



Photo 6. A stove from a camp barrack.

**Source texts – fragments of accounts by former Majdanek prisoners:**

1) "The average daily number of prisoners in the field was about 10,000. We were crammed in barracks with 800 or more women on bunk beds, arranged in three storeys. Two women lay on each bunk bed on a rotten mattress, under blankets infested with lice, without water, warmer clothing, unbearably cold and extremely hungry. In these conditions, in addition to dysentery\*, epidemics of typhus\*\* and other diseases would spread, killing the prisoners."

A. Imach, *Pole kobiet*, [in:] *Majdanek. Obóz koncentracyjny w relacjach więźniów i świadków*, selection and elaboration by M. Grudzińska, Lublin 2011, p. 73.

2) "And what kind of sleeping was that anyway? You literally lay on a board, packed like herrings. You had to be careful that those in the upper bunks didn't get on your head. Mud was constantly falling off their shoes. At first there were no bedbugs, but later they multiplied so much that they were countless, more every day. One of the most malicious ways of tormenting a person is to deprive them of sleep. [...] In the morning we were like shadows and besides, you couldn't wash yourself unless you wanted to sacrifice your breakfast for that."

N.N., *Żydzi słowaccy*, [in:] *Przeżyli Majdanek. Wspomnienia byłych więźniów obozu koncentracyjnego na Majdanku*, introd., selection and ed. by C. Rajca, A. Wiśniewska, Lublin 1980, p. 71.

3) "And the barracks themselves, put together carelessly from dirty grey boards, also look repulsive. Inside each of them, in front, to the left of the entrance, there is a table and a couple of stools. The rest of the room is occupied by three, four or five rows of three-storey wooden bunk beds. In some barracks, due to the lack of beds, the prisoners slept on the floor on straw mattresses. There were many broken panes in the small windows, and since the only heating was a small iron stove, the barracks were usually underheated. On average, it could accommodate three to five hundred people, but sometimes even more. The cold women could not warm up by sleeping on a narrow straw mattress stuffed with chipwood and covering themselves with a blanket sticky with dirt, usually infested with lice."

S. Perzanowska, *Gdy myśli do Majdanka wracają*, Warszawa 2022, p. 29.

\* Dysentery – an acute infectious disease of the intestines, the main symptom of which is diarrhoea

\*\* Typhus – an infectious disease of the digestive system.

Look at the photographs, their descriptions, and the source texts, and then answer the questions:

1. For what offences could a Majdanek prisoner be punished?

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2. Why do you think beating was so common in the camp and what was the purpose of that?

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3. Why do you think a shovel, which is usually associated with labour, was included in the group of objects used for punishment and beating?

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4. Why do you think people still show aggression towards each other? What can this indicate and what can it lead to?

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Photo 1. Tools used to punish camp prisoners.



Photo 3. Shovel.

Photo 2. Table used for lashing.

### Source texts – fragments of accounts by former Majdanek prisoners:

1) "The Jewish functional kapos' beat the Jews with clubs so as to kill them."

Z. Działyński, *APMM*, VII/M-586, c. 2.

2) "The SS-men accompanying our group notice the prisoners eating the beets; they stop them, order them to bend over and press their arms against their knees, and whip their behinds with all their might. Inhuman screams of pain cry out from the mouths of the beaten."

J. Kwiatkowski, *485 Days at Majdanek*, introd. by N.M. Naimark, transl. by N. Siekierski, W. Wojtaszko, Stanford, California 2021, p. 43.

3) "In reality, a prisoner gets his first whipping as soon as the kapo nabs him; then, after he is taken to the SS officer, he gets more lashes and kicks; the *Feldführer*\*\* whips him while the report is being written; and Hessel doesn't want to be left out either. Once he receives the report, Thumann calls him in for interrogation and uses his heavy whip to give him fifty to seventy lashes, so altogether the prisoner will collect up to 120 extra lashes and then, once everything is healed and forgotten – after the 'doctor's examination' – he'll get whipped twenty-five times and sometimes only ten or fifteen. The doctor's exam consists of him observing the whipping."

J. Kwiatkowski, *485 Days at Majdanek*, introd. by N.M. Naimark, transl. by N. Siekierski, W. Wojtaszko, Stanford, California 2021, p. 346.

4) "It's practicing to strike a man down with a single blow. He seeks out his victim – any pretext is easy to find – pulls him out of line, positions him diagonally in front of himself, moves toward the prisoner, feels where the liver is, steps back, practices a semicircular swing of his arm to check if his distance is right, spreads his legs in a boxer's stance, and then with one swift blow punches the chosen spot."

J. Kwiatkowski, *485 Days at Majdanek*, introd. by N.M. Naimark, transl. by N. Siekierski, W. Wojtaszko, Stanford, California 2021, p. 59.

5) "– It's more educational – he used to say when he was in a good mood, smiling jovially. – I beat one and everyone is afraid."

C. Gawet, *Kapo Lukesz*, [in:] *Jesteśmy świadkami. Wspomnienia byłych więźniów Majdanka*, selection and introd. by C. Rajca, E. Rosiak, A. Wiśniewska, Lublin 1969, p. 189.

6) "SS-men and kapos line up along the path tread by the columns of prisoners going one way and another, cracking their whips and shouting, constantly driving everyone to speed up."

J. Kwiatkowski, *485 Days at Majdanek*, introd. by N.M. Naimark, transl. by N. Siekierski, W. Wojtaszko, Stanford, California 2021, p. 69.

7) "Before putting it [the scarf] on, you still have to comb your hair and hide it under the scarf so that no strands stick out, because for that an SS-woman might whip you on the head."

S. Perzanowska, *Gdy myśli do Majdanka wracają*, Warszawa 2022, p. 36.

8) "Unfortunately, many showed all their meanness and smallness of character in this hell, where people exposed their entire souls. I would not believe in such cowardice and egoism of many of us. The image they presented here was extremely sad. [...] What do such people deserve? Such Jews should be shot like mad dogs without any sentiment. When people were beating us – enemies, even the most brutal ones, no consideration was expected from them, but your own blood, fellow sufferers?! You would actually think you were in a madhouse and I'm surprised I didn't go mad."

L. Dionyz, *APMM*, VII/M-515, c. 25, 36.

9) "The prisoners of the third group worked on laying the road surface. Some of them approached the pile of broken stone with reinforcements, put the material on them and carried it to the marked road. Others placed the stone on previously spread sand, fitting one to the other closely. The stone placed in this way was covered with fine grit. And in this group, it was only possible to work on your knees or 'in a squatting position'. After laying a certain section of the road, the surface had to be compacted with a very heavy stone roller. Of course, the pulling force of this stone monster were prisoners from the same work group. This group, the most visible one, was looked after by our patron – an SS-man who demonstrated extraordinary sadism. Rolling was exhausting labour".

C. Skoraczyński, *Żywe numery*, Kraków 1984, p. 59.

10) "It [labour] is often senseless, mind-numbing, like digging and filling trenches, carrying stones from one pile to another, carrying snow or soil."

S. Perzanowska, *Gdy myśli do Majdanka wracają*, Warszawa 2022, p. 37.

\* Kapo – a functionary prisoner at the camp supervising the work of a working group of prisoners.

\*\* Feldführer – leader of a field, an SS-man that oversaw prisoners on a given field.

Look at the photographs, their descriptions, and the source texts, and then answer the questions:

1. What do you think is the significance of personal items in our lives?

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2. Why do you think personal items were taken to the concentration camp? What happened to them when their owners crossed the camp gate?

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3. Do you think prisoners could use them while in the camp? Why?

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4. Can you name the items in the photographs? Do you recognise any that you or your loved ones/friends still use (even if in a modified form)? What does it prove?

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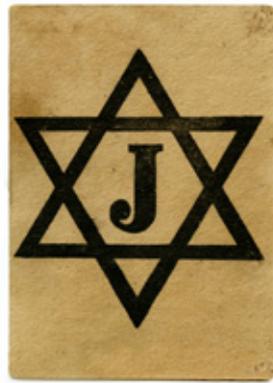


Photo 1-4. Document, money and personal items brought to the camp.

**Source texts – fragments of accounts by former Majdanek prisoners:**

1) "Their [Jews'] civilian belongings were not packed into separate bags at all, [...] but were immediately included in the general stock of camp belongings, of course after a thorough search and removal of dollars, pounds and jewellery often sewn into them by the SS-men and the vilest *Häftlings*\* who shared with them their loot."

K.M. Radziwiłł, *Pamiętniki*, Warsaw 2000, p. 239.

2) "There they ordered us to undress and deposit our valuables and money. Each of us received a paper bag where we put our belongings. Along the left side of the barracks there were high shelves reaching the roof. This is where functionary prisoners would stack individual bags with clothes, labelled with our individual numbers."

J. Szczygieł, *Byłem jednym z transportu lwowskiego*, [in:] *Jesteśmy świadkami. Wspomnienia byłych więźniów Majdanka*, selection and introd. by C. Rajca, E. Rosiak, A. Wiśniewska, Lublin 1969, p. 129.

3) "The camp authorities were instructed by Berlin to send gold, currencies and jewellery of the murdered Jews to Reich banks."

S. Perzanowska, *Gdy myśli do Majdanka wracają*, Warszawa 2022, p. 99

4) "We enter the *Bekleidung*\*\*". The women say their names and are handed their bags of clothing. This are the same bags we put our clothes in four months ago."

J. Ankiewicz, *Majdanek January 15 – May 17, 1943. Diary*, ed. and introduced by J. Laskowska, transl. by W. Wojtaszko, Lublin 2021, p. 100.

5) "There were also large chests there and the SS-man ordered to throw all valuables into these chests, separately watches, rings and other valuables, e.g. dollars, etc."

R. Pinczewski, *Selekcje*, [in:] *Majdanek. Obóz koncentracyjny w relacjach więźniów i świadków*, selection and elaboration by M. Grudzińska, Lublin 2011, p. 95.

\* *Häftling* (German) – a prisoner of a concentration camp

\*\* Actually *Bekleidungskammer* (Ger.) – the clothing warehouse.

## **Tomasz Hanejko**

# **BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE HISTORY OF THE GERMAN EXTERMINATION CAMP IN BEŁŻEC**

In the autumn of 1941, the Germans started to build the first extermination camp in the General Government. It was situated on a hill near the railway station in Bełżec, connected by railway line to Lublin, Lviv and Kraków. They used it as a model when building death camps in Sobibór and Treblinka.

The camp covered a relatively small area of about 7 hectares. It included a railway ramp and infrastructure for receiving transports. Within a short distance, a wooden gas chamber with 3 rooms was built, where mass murders were executed.

The commandant was the head of the crew, responsible for the overall operation of the camp; in Bełżec this function was held successively by Christian Wirth and Gottlieb Hering. The most important tasks were supervised by a group of about 20 SS-men and about 100 former prisoners of war from the Red Army were also included in the crew. They had been previously recruited in POW camps, and following appropriate training, they were sent to serve as guards.

Between 17 March and December 1942 the Germans exterminated nearly 435,000 Jews. The victims were mainly from ghettos located in the Lublin, Kraków and Galicia districts. About 20% of all the murdered in the camp were Jews brought from the Third Reich, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and Slovakia. In the summer of 1942, the camp was rebuilt, eliminating the wooden chamber and dividing it into two parts. The lower camp consisted of a railway ramp with an undressing room and workshop barracks, while the upper camp included a concrete gas chamber with 6 rooms and pits where victims were buried.

Bełżec was the first place where exhaust gases were used in stationary chambers for mass murders. Jews were transported to the camp in overcrowded and sealed freight wagons. After arriving at the railway station in Bełżec, the train was stopped on a side track. The ramp leading to the camp could accommodate up to 20 wagons, which is why the train was usually divided into two or more parts.

From amongst the deportees the Germans selected a group of 500 prisoners. They were forced to sort the belongings taken from the victims, pull the bodies out of the chambers and bury them. Those who could not cope with the harsh living conditions were killed, and others were chosen to replace them.

All the rest were sent to undressing rooms, where they had to give away their belongings, money, valuables and documents, and then strip naked. Then, they were driven through an exposed corridor, called "die Schleuse" (the lock), to the gas chamber building. To speed up the passage and fit as many people into the chambers as possible, the guards and SS-men used clubs and whips. Males were murdered first. At the same time, a special hairdressing unit cut women and girls' hair, which was collected in bags to be used in industry. When all the internal rooms of the chambers were completely full, the combustion engine was started. After about 20 minutes, everyone was dead as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning. Then, the prisoners from the death unit proceeded to remove the crammed bodies of the victims. In the first phase of the extermination operation, narrow-gauge railway wagons were used to transport the corpses. After rebuilding the camp, the bodies were pulled by hand using leather belts.

The victims' clothes and personal belongings were loaded onto wagons standing on the ramp, and then transported to the engine depot located several hundred meters from the main gate. There, the confiscated property was sorted and disinfected before being sent to Lublin, and then to the Third Reich.

In mid-December 1942, the extermination in gas chambers was stopped and the camp was liquidated. From late autumn 1942 to spring 1943, prisoners burned corpses on crematory stakes. The ash generated in this process was sifted in search of previously undiscovered valuables. When the traces of the crime had been concealed, all buildings and equipment used for extermination were dismantled. The camp was finally liquidated at the end of June 1943. The area was levelled and pine trees were planted. In order to prevent the local population from digging up the area of the former camp in search of gold, the Germans built a farm, where one of the former guards was settled as a caretaker.

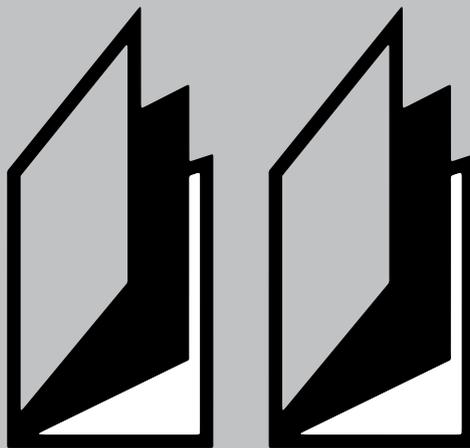
Two people managed to survive the death camp. One of them was Rudolf Reder, who was brought to Bełżec from Lviv in August 1942. During several months of his stay at the camp, he performed various jobs, including digging mass graves, and he was also responsible for renovations and repairs. During a trip to Lviv to collect building materials in November 1942, he escaped the guards. The

second survivor was Chaim Hirszman, deported from Janów in the Lublin district on 2 November 1942. He survived in the death camp until the end of its operation, and was a member of the work group liquidating the camp. After completing this task, he was sent to Sobibór with other prisoners. He escaped from the transport, and his inmates were murdered after reaching the destination.

The first unsuccessful attempts to commemorate the victims were made several years after the end of the war, in the meantime the area of the former camp was desecrated by treasure seekers. The first monument was

unveiled in 1963. The opening ceremony for the second monument concept took place in 2004. The architectural and sculptural concept comprises the entire area of the former extermination camp. The hill was covered with slag of varying gradation and darker colour in places where mass graves were located. The Cemetery-Grave is cut through by a narrow road called *Crevasse* leading to Ohel Niche. All of it is surrounded by a pavement with the names of the towns from which transports were sent to Bełżec. The shape of the museum building alludes to the shape of a train.

# BEŁŻEC – CLASS SCENARIOS





# TRACES OF THE PAST. CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF COMMEMORATING THE VICTIMS OF THE BEŁŻEC EXTERMINATION CAMP

<b>TARGET GROUP</b>	students from the age of 15
<b>WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– trigger interest in the history of the extermination camp in Bełżec,</li><li>– develop the ability to analyse texts and photographic materials,</li><li>– develop group work skills,</li><li>– cultivate the ability to formulate independent conclusions,</li><li>– develop critical thinking,</li><li>– encourage reflection on the need to cultivate the memory of the Holocaust victims.</li></ul>
<b>TEACHING AIDS</b>	photographs of fragments of the monument complex at the Museum and Memorial in Bełżec, a poem by Jerzy Ficowski
<b>WORK METHODS</b>	group work, work with photos and text, discussion
<b>COURSE OF THE CLASS</b>	The teacher introduces the students to the topic of the lesson, presenting a brief outline of the history of the Bełżec extermination camp, with particular emphasis on: the period of its operation, the fate and number of victims, and concealing the traces of crimes by the Germans. Then the teacher writes the word “commemoration” on the board and asks to provide associations related to it. After creating a mind map together, the lesson participants are divided into 4 groups. Each group receives photographs of selected parts of the monument complex located at the Museum and Memorial in Bełżec, and worksheets. The students’ task is to analyse the received materials and try to read the symbolism of the monument’s elements. After answering the questions, representatives of individual groups present the results of their work. The teacher may complement the students’ statements with additional information on the significance of the architecture in Bełżec. As an element of evaluation, the teacher may read the poem by Jerzy Ficowski entitled <i>The Seven Words</i> and hold a discussion around the proposed question: how else can we nurture the memory of the Holocaust victims?

## TEACHER’S SHEET

### Information about the monument complex at the Museum and Memorial in Bełżec:

“When entering the premises of the monument complex, what you see first is a large, rectangular hill covered with blocks of slag of various sizes and shades. Beneath its surface, there are 33 mass graves with the remains of victims. They have been covered with darker slag, which symbolises death. This cemetery is cut through in the middle by a road called the *Crevasse*. It resembles a crack or a wound that even time is not able to heal. For the interpretation of its symbolism it is important to note that its form resembles the last path of the victims, who were driven to the gas chamber through a corridor masked with wire and tree branches. The *Crevasse* leads deep into the hill. Its heavy, concrete walls rise higher and higher, giving

the visitor the impression of walking along the bottom of a ravine. This evokes a feeling of danger, anxiety and fear. At the end of the *Crevasse* there is Ohel Niche, where two stone slabs are installed with hundreds of engraved names of victims. There is also a *Stone Wall* made of white granite, which closes the passage through the *Crevasse*. From this part of the monument, visitors can go to the surface using side stairs, and they can see the Cemetery-Grave again. Returning along the concrete band, they come across the names of several hundred towns from which Jewish residents were deported to be murdered. A symbolic railway ramp is integrated with the entrance to the monument premises. An artistic installation has

been built on it, being a pile of railway sleepers and slag. On the opposite side there is the museum building with the shape referring to the shape of a train".

E. Szumilak, *Kompleks pomnikowy w Beżcu jako przestrzeń edukacji i refleksji*, „Varia” 2023, no 2 (12): *Holokaust w edukacji Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku*, pp. 61–62.

## Description of photos

### Photo 1

The stone wall is the culmination of the monumental concept. A quote from the Book of Job is engraved on its surface – “O Earth, do not cover my blood, and let my cry have no resting place” – as an appeal for the need to continue remembrance of hundreds of thousands of innocently murdered people. The visible fissures in the lower part symbolise wounds, tears and pain.

### Photo 2

View of the Cemetery-Grave, where 33 mass graves were found during the archaeological excavations. It has been covered with metallurgical slag, which brings to mind a burnt-out area and refers to the process of burning corpses in the camp.

### Photo 3

The name of one of the towns from which the Jewish population was deported to Beżec. Izbica was the largest transit ghetto in the Lublin district in the General Government. During the occupation, several thousand Jews from abroad were resettled to this town. The inscriptions on the edge of the Cemetery-Grave are in Polish and Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jews. This emphasises the fact that the victims came from this cultural circle.

### Photo 4

Although people were dying in the death camp anonymously, their identity has been symbolically recalled. The most popular male and female names from the documents from the towns from which Jews were deported to Beżec and from transport lists from Western Europe are engraved on two walls of the Ohel Niche.

### Photo 5

A sculpture made of original railway sleepers used during World War II, stones and concrete. It has dimensions similar to a railway car. It symbolises the siding where trains stopped, as well as the pile of rails on which human corpses were burned.

## Poem by Jerzy Ficowski

Jerzy Ficowski (1924–2006) was a Polish poet, prose writer, essayist, and researcher of Bruno Schulz’s work, Jewish and Roma culture.

### The Seven Words

“Mummy!  
But I’ve been good! It’s dark!”

(words of a child being shut  
in a gas chamber at Belzec  
in 1942, according to the statement  
of the only surviving prisoner)  
quoted in Rudolf Reder, *Belzec*, 1946.

Everything was utilised  
everyone perished but nothing was lost  
a mound of hair fallen from heads  
for a hamburg mattress factory  
gold teeth pulled out  
under the anaesthetic of death

Everything was utilised  
a use was found even for that voice  
smuggled this far in the bottom of another’s  
memory  
like lime unslaked with tears

and belzec opens sometimes right to the bone  
and everlasting darkness bursts from it  
how to contain it

and the complaint of a child who was who was  
though memory pales  
not from horror  
this is how it has paled for thirty years

And silences by the million are silent  
transformed into a seven-figure sign  
And one vacant place is calling calling

Who are not afraid of me  
for I am small and not here at all  
do not deny me  
give me back the memory of me  
these post-judaic words  
these post-human words  
just these seven words

Translated by K. Wandycz and K. Bosley.



Photo 1. Fragment of the monument complex at MMPB.

1. Look at the above photograph of a fragment of the monument at the Museum and Memorial in Betžec. What do you think it shows? What could it symbolise?

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2. How do you think the presented architectural element could refer to the history of the camp?

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Photo 2. Fragment of the monument complex at MMPB.

1. Look at the above photograph of a fragment of the monument at the Museum and Memorial in Betžec. What do you think it shows? What could it symbolise?

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2. How do you think the presented architectural element could refer to the history of the camp?

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Photo 3, 4. Fragment of the monument complex at MMPB.

1. Look at the photographs of fragments of the monument at the Museum and Memorial in Bełżec. What do you think they show? What could they symbolise?

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2. How do you think the presented architectural element could refer to the history of the camp?

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Photo 4. Fragment of the monument complex at MMPB.

1. Look at the above photograph of a fragment of the monument at the Museum and Memorial in Betžec. What do you think it shows? What could it symbolise?

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2. How do you think the presented architectural element could refer to the history of the camp?

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# “WE WERE DYING A LITTLE EVERY DAY...”\* – THE EXTERMINATION CAMP IN BEŁŻEC IN THE ACCOUNTS OF TWO SURVIVORS, RUDOLF REDER AND CHAIM HIRSZMAN

<b>TARGET GROUP</b>	students from the age of 17
<b>WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– trigger interest in the history of the extermination camp in Bełżec,</li><li>– develop empathy towards the victims of the camp,</li><li>– develop the skills of critical thinking and analysis of historical sources,</li><li>– develop group work skills,</li><li>– improve competences (social, linguistic, cultural).</li></ul>
<b>TEACHING AIDS</b>	cards with fragments of accounts and photographs.
<b>WORK METHODS</b>	work with the source text, group work, brain storming, discussion
<b>COURSE OF THE CLASS</b>	<p>The teacher introduces students to the topic of the class, presenting a brief outline of the history of the Bełżec extermination camp (period of operation, number of victims, survivors) and familiarises them with the life of Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman (life before the war, circumstances of deportation to the extermination camp and regaining freedom). They also emphasise the importance of the testimonies of direct witnesses as a historical source. The students are then divided into 5 groups. Each group receives fragments of survivors' memoirs and photographs and analyses them in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>I – transport to the camp,</li><li>II – situation in the camp,</li><li>III – death,</li><li>IV – escape of two survivors,</li><li>V – liquidation of the camp.</li></ul> <p>After reading and completing the worksheets, the groups present their conclusions, at the same time showing the received photos. During the summary discussion, the teacher can raise topics related to the importance of survivors' memoirs and accounts in understanding history and preserving the memory of extermination camps. Together with students, they can also reflect on the contemporary meaning of the slogan “no more wars”.</p>

## TEACHER'S SHEET

## Biographical information

### Rudolf Reder

The text below was prepared based on a more extensive biography: R. Kuwatek, *Relacje i zeznania Rudolfa Redera*, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 19 et seq.

Rudolf Reder was born on 4 April 1881 in Dębica, as the son of Herman and Fryderyka née Jortner. He had a secondary education, completed 7 years of lower secondary school, was a chemist by profession, owner of a soap factory in Lviv. He married Fajga (Fanny) née Felsenfeld, with whom he had three children: son Bronisław and two daughters Zofia and Maria. Zofia is the only family member who, according to him, survived the German occupation. After the war, she lived near London and used the surname Reder-Smith. Bronisław was supposedly deported to

Bełżec a week before his father's deportation. The fate of the others is unknown. In one of his statements given in Kraków, Reder said that: “The family was deported to Russia, currently in Tehran”. However, on another occasion he claimed that everyone except Zofia died during the German occupation, murdered “for racial reasons”.

Under the Soviet occupation of Lviv in 1940-1941, he was in charge of a nationalised chemical factory. After the Germans entered the city, he hid in various places. On 17 August 1942, he was deported to Bełżec. During the

\* Accounts and testimonies of Rudolf Reder, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 60.

selection in the camp, he volunteered for work as a driver-assembler. He was in the death unit, digging graves and burying the murdered. He expanded the camp kitchen and repaired the stoves there. At the end of November, he was sent under escort to Lviv to buy sheet metal and other necessary materials, when he managed to escape. He received help from his pre-war servant Anastazja Hawrylak and Joanna Borkowska.

After the borders of Poland changed in 1945, Rudolf Reder moved to Kraków. In the second half of the 1940s, in connection with the liquidation of private enterprises by the communist authorities in Poland, he was arrested. He then decided to change his name and emigrate. As Roman

Robak, with Borkowska married earlier, he left for Israel in 1951, and from there to Canada in 1952. In 1960, Reder and Robak went to Munich, where as the only survivor of the Bełżec extermination camp he gave testimony in the trial of Josef Oberhauser and other SS-men from the camp crew. During the trial he did not recognise the key defendant, because he had never met him in the camp. Oberhauser was transferred from Bełżec on 1 August 1942, while Reder was deported to the camp 17 days later. These circumstances certainly influenced the sentence, which was 4.5 years of imprisonment for Oberhauser.

Rudolf Reder died at the age of 96 in October 1977 in Toronto, Canada.

## Chaim Hirszman

**The text below was prepared based on a more extensive biography: D. Libionka, *Relacje Chaima Hirszmana i Poli Hirszman, [in:] Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 159 et seq.**

Chaim Hirszman was born on 24 October 1912 in Janów Lubelski, as the son of Jankiel Lejba and Chaja née Hochman. He spent his early years in his hometown, where he completed six years of primary school, and then three years of a vocational course at a supplementary training school. In 1928 he joined the Bund youth organisation, and in 1932 the Communist Union of Polish Youth, where he was responsible for the educational and political unit.

In 1936–1937 he did his compulsory military service in the 8th Legions Infantry Regiment in Lublin. He graduated from a non-commissioned officers' training school with the rank of corporal. He worked as secretary of the City Committee of the International Organisation for Aid to Revolutionaries.

In August 1939, Hirszman was drafted into the army and took part in the defensive war with the Germans. His unit was defeated, and he himself managed to return to Janów Lubelski. He married Sara Morel, with whom he had a son Sewek. In 1941, the family was forced to leave Janów and move to Zaklików, where a concentration site for the Jewish population was established.

On 2 November 1942, Chaim Hirszman and his family were deported to the Bełżec extermination camp. During the selection he was classified as fit for work. He did not die in the gas chamber, like his family. He spent 7 months in the camp, until its liquidation in the summer of 1943. The last group of prisoners were then transported to SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor. They were murdered on the railway ramp while trying to resist. Hirszman, anticipating the danger, jumped off the train to Sobibór. He managed to find shelter with a Polish friend. He was a member of guerilla forces in the Lipsko forests.

In March 1944, Hirszman joined the 1st Brigade of Władysław Grzybowski People's Army and was assigned to the 2nd Company. After the Red Army entered the Lublin region, he became a member of the Citizens' Militia. In June 1945, he took up work as a clerk in the Department of Combating Banditry. Due to health problems and family circumstances, he applied for release from service three times, which finally took place in March 1946.

On 19 March 1946, Hirszman began to testify about the death camp before the Provincial Jewish Historical Commission in Lublin. He described the first 24 hours in Bełżec with the intention to continue on the next day. In the evening, he was fatally shot in his flat. He died in hospital on 20 March 1946, leaving behind his second wife Pola and a newborn son. The perpetrators, young members of the conspiratorial Secret Military Organisation, intended to obtain weapons that Hirszman was allegedly hiding. One of them, Jerzy Fryze, was sentenced to life imprisonment, which was later replaced with 15 years' imprisonment, and following the amnesty he left prison in 1956. The other attackers managed to escape prosecution.

Pola Hirszman was able to partially complete her husband's unfinished testimony based on what he had told her about his experiences. She later emigrated from Poland.

## PHOTOGRAPHS OF RUDOLF REDER AND CHAIM AND POLA HIRSZMAN



Photo 1. Rudolf Reder,  
1945, ŽIH.



Photo 2. Pola and Chaim  
Hirszman, MMPB.

### Source texts – fragments of the accounts of Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman:

1) "At six in the morning they ordered us to get up off the damp grass and form up in fours, and the long rows of the doomed marched to the Kleparów station. Gestapo and Ukrainians surrounded us in tight ranks. Not a single person could escape. They herded us onto the ramp at the station. A long freight train was already waiting just past the ramp. There were fifty cars. They began loading us. The doors of the freight cars had been slid open and Gestapo stood on both sides, two on each side with whips in their hands, beating everyone on the face and head on the way in. All the Gestapo were beating people. We all got welts on our faces and bumps on our heads. The women were sobbing and the children were crying, hugging to their mothers. There were women with babies unweaned amongst us. Driven by the Gestapo who kept beating people ruthlessly, we stumbled over each other. The entrance was high, people had to climb up, pushing each other aside – we were in a hurry ourselves, we wanted to get it over with. A Gestapo-man with a machine gun sat on the roof of each wagon. The Gestapo were beating people and counting off a hundred into each wagon. It all happened so fast that it took no longer than an hour to load several thousand people. [...] They finally sealed the cars. Packed into a crowd of trembling people, we stood tight, practically one on top of another. It was stuffy and hot and we were close to madness. Not a drop of water, not a crumb of bread. The train moved at eight in the morning. [...] We rode on. No one said a word. We were aware that we were headed for death, that nothing could save us; apathetic, not a single moan. We were all thinking one thing: how to escape. But there was no way. The freight car we were riding in was brand new, the window so narrow that I couldn't have squeezed through it. It must have been possible to pry the doors of other cars open, because we heard shots fired at escapees every few minutes. No one said anything to anybody, no one comforted the women lamenting, no one stopped the children from sobbing. We all knew: we were on our way to a certain and horrible death. We wished it was already over."

R. Reder, *Betżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, pp. 117–118.

2) "Then all Jews were ordered to leave Janów. They were allowed to go to Kraśnik or Zaklików; I went to Zaklików with my family. Segregation was made in Zaklików. Men fit for work were placed separately from women, children, the elderly and those considered unfit for work. I was put on the side of selected for work, but since my wife and a six-month-old son were put on the opposite side, I volunteered and was allowed to stay with them. We were loaded onto the train and taken to Betżec. The train entered the forest. The entire train crew was then changed. The railway workers were replaced by SS-men

from the death camp. We did not realise it at the time. The train reached the camp".

Ch. Hirszman, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Betżcu w relacjach ocalonych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 94.

3) "About noon the train reached the Betżec station. It was a small station. Little houses stood around it. The Gestapo lived in these little houses. Betżec was on the Lublin–Tomaszów line, fifteen kilometers from Rawa Ruska. At the Betżec station the train reversed from the main line onto a spur that ran another kilometer, straight through the gate of the death camp. Ukrainian railroad workers also lived near the Betżec station, and there was a small post office. An old German with a thick black mustache got into the locomotive at Betżec – I do not know his name but I would recognise him in an instant; he looked like a hangman. He took command of the train and drove it right to the camp. It took two minutes to get to the camp. [...] The whole terrain between Betżec and the camp had been taken over by the SS. No one was allowed to show himself there. Civilians who wandered in by mistake were shot".

R. Reder, *Betżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, p. 119.



Photo 3. Railway station in Betzec, MRTL.

**Read the source texts and look at the photograph, and then answer the following questions:**

1. What did the transport to the extermination camps look like?

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2. What were the feelings, thoughts and reactions of the prisoners?

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### Source texts – fragments of the accounts of Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman:

1) "You drove into that yard through a wide, wooden gate topped with barbed wire. Next to the gate stood a hut where a sentry sat with a telephone. In front of the hut stood several SS-men with dogs. [...] That was when the 'taking delivery of the train' took place. Several dozen SS-men opened the cars, screaming 'los!' They drove people out of the cars with whips and rifle butts. The cars had doors a meter above the ground, and all those being herded out, young and old, had to jump. They broke arms and legs during this, having to jump to the ground. Children hurt themselves, everyone fell, dirty, exhausted and terrified. The sick, the old and the small children, all the ones who could not walk on their own, were placed on stretchers and set down at the edge of enormous dug graves. Gestapo-man Irrman shot them there, and then pushed them into the grave with the rifle butts. [...] As soon as the victims were unloaded, they were assembled in the yard, surrounded by armed askars, and here Irrman gave a speech. There was a deathly silence. He stood close to the crowd. Everyone wanted to hear; hope dawned suddenly in us – 'If they are speaking to us, perhaps we're going to live, perhaps there will be some sort of work, perhaps after all...' Irrman spoke very loudly and distinctly. 'Ihr gehts jetzt baden, nachher werdet ihr zur Arbeit geschickt' (Now you are going for a bath, and afterwards you will be sent to work). That was all. Everybody cheered up and was happy that they were going to work after all. They applauded. [...] It was a moment of hope and delusion. For an instant, the people breathed easy. There was total calm".

R. Reder, *Betżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, pp. 119–120.

2) "They took us to the barracks all together, women, men and children. We were told that we would go to the baths and told us to undress. I understood immediately what that meant. After undressing, we were ordered to line up, men separately and women with children separately. An SS officer was standing there with a whip which he used to show either the direction to the right or to the left to the men, which meant either death or work. He chose me for the side of death, but I did not know that yet at the time. Besides, I thought that both sides meant the same, that is death. However, when I jumped in the indicated direction, the SS officer called me and said: 'Du bist ein Militärmensch, dich können wir brauchen'. [You are a military man, we can use you]. Those selected for work were ordered to put their clothes back on."

Ch. Hirszman, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Betżcu w relacjach ocalonych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 94.

3) "I belonged to the permanent death crew. There were five hundred of us all together. Only 250 were 'skilled workers', but of these, 200 worked at jobs for which they didn't have to be specialists: digging graves and dragging corpses. We dug the pits, the enormous mass graves, and dragged the bodies.[...] We were watched all the time we worked by a thug named Schmidt, who beat and kicked. If someone was not – in his opinion – working quick enough [...] Also, thirty to forty workers were shot each day. [...] They were led out to a grave at dinnertime and shot. The roster was also replenished each day, with the same number of people being picked out from the several daily transports."

R. Reder, *Betżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, pp. 130–131.

4) "It was still dark when they woke us up in the morning; no lights were allowed. [...] When we woke up we were as miserable and exhausted as when we lay down to sleep. We each got one thin blanket and could either cover ourselves with it or lay it on the bunk. They gave us old, worn-out rags from the warehouse – and if someone so much as sighed when he got his, he was struck in the face. In the evening, the lights burned for half an hour. Then they were turned off. The Oberzugsführer prowled around the barracks with a whip and didn't allow people to talk. We spoke very quietly with our neighbors. The crew was mostly made up of people whose wives, children and parents had been gassed. [...] and when the barracks was locked for the night, in the bunks we heard the murmur of the Kaddish prayer. We were saying prayers for the dead. Then it was quiet. We did not complain; we were totally resigned."

R. Reder, *Betżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, p. 132.

5) "At twelve noon we received a meal. We filed past two small windows. At the first one we got mugs, and at the second a half a liter of barley soup, in other words water, sometimes with a potato. Before dinner we had to sing songs; we also had to sing before the evening coffee. At the same time the wails of the people being suffocated in the chambers were audible, the orchestra was playing, across from the kitchen the high gallows was standing...".

R. Reder, *Betżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, p. 133.



Photo 4. A board containing information about the need to undress and go for a bath, found at the premises of the former camp, MRTL.

6) "They woke us at 4 a.m. and the prisoners stood for a roll-call. The Germans would inspect them, and those they didn't like or those who were sick were selected for the Himmelkommando. At the same time, the Jews had to sing every day: 'Góralu, czy ci nie żal...' [Highlander do you have no regrets...], and then everyone went to their work. [...] The prisoners were beaten and there was not a day that several prisoners from the permanent staff were not killed. Typhus was spreading, but you couldn't admit to being sick. The sick were killed immediately. Medical treatment or staying in bed were unattainable. Suffering from typhus and a 40-degree fever, my husband worked and somehow managed to hide his condition from the Germans. He was one of the oldest prisoners. No one lasted there as long as he did. Later, there was not even such hunger. There was a Ukrainian who bought them food for valuables, and everyone in the camp had enough opportunities to get something valuable."

For her murdered husband Chaim Hirszman – Pola Hirszman, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocamlonych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, pp. 96–97.

7) "I don't know how to describe the mood in which we lived, we doomed prisoners, or what we felt hearing those horrible pleas of the people being suffocated each day, and the cries of the children. Three times a day we saw thousands of people on the verge of losing their minds. And we were close to insanity. We moved from one day to the next, not knowing how. We had not a moment of illusion. Each day we died a little along with the whole transports of people who for a short moment still experienced the torment of illusion. Apathetic and resigned, we didn't even feel the hunger or cold. Each waited his turn, knew that he too must die and must suffer inhumanly. Only, when I heard how the children cried out – 'Mommy! But I've been good! It's dark! It's dark!' – our hearts were torn to shreds. And then we went back to not feeling anything."

R. Reder, *Bełżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebicka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, p. 141.

Read the source texts and look at the photograph, and then answer the following questions:

1. Describe the situation of the victims after being transported to the camp.

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2. What emotions accompanied the people who found themselves in the yard?

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3. What emotions accompanied the people selected for forced labour?

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### Source texts – fragments of the accounts of Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman:

1) "The building containing the chambers was low, long and wide, gray concrete, with a flat roof covered in tarpaper, and above that another roof of netting covered with foliage. [...] The doors, made of wood, a meter wide, were slid open with wooden handles. The chambers were completely dark, with no windows, and completely empty. A round opening the size of an electrical socket could be seen in each chamber. The walls and floor of the chambers were concrete. The corridor and chambers were lower than a normal room, not more than two meters high. On the far wall of each chamber there were also sliding doors, two meters wide. After asphyxiation the corpses of the people were thrown out through them. Outside the building was a small shed, perhaps two meters square, where the 'machine' was, a gasoline-driven motor."

R. Reder, *Bełżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, pp. 122–124.

2) "We dragged the bodies of people who had still been living not long ago; we used leather straps to drag them to the huge, waiting mass graves, and the orchestra played during this. It played from morning to evening... [...] I could tell precisely at which moment everyone understood what was awaiting them, and the terror, despair, cries and horrible moans mingled with the notes of the orchestra. The men were driven in first with bayonets, stabbed as they ran to the gas chambers. The askars counted 750 into each chamber. By the time they filled all six chambers, the people in the first chamber had been suffering two hours already. Only when all six chambers were so tightly packed with people that it was difficult to close the doors, was the motor started. [...] The machine ran for twenty minutes by the clock. They shut it down after twenty minutes. Right away the doors of the chambers leading to the ramp were opened from the outside and the corpses were thrown on the ground, making a huge mound of corpses several meters high. [...] The calling for help, the screams, the desperate wailing of the people locked in and being smothered in the chambers lasted ten to fifteen minutes,

horribly loud, later the groans got quieter and at the end everything quieted. I heard the desperate screams and cries in different languages, because there were not only Polish Jews, there were also transports of foreign Jews. [...] When the askars opened the sealed doors after twenty minutes of suffocation, the corpses were in a standing position, the faces as if asleep, not changed. [...] it was the task of the death crew to pull the corpses out of the chambers, throw them into a high pile, and then drag them all the way to the graves. The ground was sandy. It took two workers to drag one corpse away".

R. Reder, *Bełżec*, ed. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, pp. 122, 125–127, 131.

3) "I was assigned to women. At the entrance to the gas chamber stood a Volksdeutsche, a Ukrainian Schmid, and he hit every entering woman with a whip. Before the door closed, he fired a revolver few times, then the door closed automatically, and after 40 minutes we went in and took the corpses to a special [illegible word – D.L.] and shaved the hair off the corpses, which were then packed into bags, and the Germans took them away. Children were thrown into the chamber, simply on the women's heads. In one of the 'transports' from the gas chamber there was my wife's body, I was supposed to shave her hair. The corpses were not buried immediately, they waited until there were more of them."

Ch. Hirszman, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, pp. 94–95.



Photo 5. Model of the gas chamber, MMPB.

Read the source texts and look at the photograph, and then answer the following questions:

1. How did the mechanism of extermination created by the German Nazis function?

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2. What emotions and reflections do the descriptions of the functioning of the gas chambers and the role of prisoners forced to work in removing the corpses evoke in you?

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### Source texts – fragments of the accounts of Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman:

1) "I went there [Lwów], loaded into a truck with four Gestapo-men and a sentry. In Lwów, after a whole day loading sheet metal, I was left alone in the truck with one hoodlum guarding me. The rest went off to have a little fun. I sat there for a few hours without thinking or moving. Then I chanced to notice that my guard had dozed off and was snoring. By reflex, without a moment's thought, I slipped out of the truck; the thug was still asleep. I stood on the sidewalk, for a while longer I pretended to be fussing with something near the sheet metal, and then I moved slowly away. Legionów Street was very busy. I pulled my cap down. The street was dark, and no one saw me. I remembered where my landlady lived, a Polish woman, and made my way there. She hid me. I spent twenty months recovering from the wounds all over my body. Not only the wounds. Images of the horror I had lived through haunted me. Awake and asleep I heard the wailing of tormented victims. And the cries of the children. And the roar of the motor. I could not tear from my memory the criminal faces of every Gestapo-man. I endured until the moment of liberation. When the Red Army drove the German thugs out of Lwów and I could emerge into God's world, look around without fear, breathe the fresh air, and think and feel something for the first time since the moment of German captivity."

R. Reder, *Betżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, pp. 141–142.

2) "In the last few weeks, the transports stopped completely. The crew and prisoners left the camp by train for the camp in Sobibór. The Germans told them that they were going to work. However, the prisoners, seeing that they were going to Chełm, realised where they were being taken. My husband decided to escape. He also convinced two other inmates who were in the same wagon. They took out a board in the wagon floor and then pulled knots to see who would escape first. It was my husband. He slipped out through the opening. First he put his legs out, and then he slid down himself. He had to lie down until the train passed, and then he couldn't get up again for a while, because there were Germans with automatic weapons on the roofs of the wagons. The other two were supposed to escape right after my husband. They had arranged to meet at some place. My husband waited, but they didn't come, so they must have failed to escape. My husband was always certain that no one else had survived. During his stay in Betżec, according to his and his fellow prisoners' calculations, 800,000 Jews died, that is they were gassed there. After my husband escaped, he went to the railway station. There he asked a railwayman for directions to Hrubieszów. After walking a bit, he realised that someone was following him. He realised that the man had denounced him. A real manhunt was organ-

ised to catch him. Ukrainians on bicycles were chasing him. He managed to hide in the rye field. From his hiding place, he watched as the 'blacks' (Ukrainians in black uniforms) searched the roadside bushes; they illuminated them with searchlights and shot with machine guns. Somehow, despite everything, he managed to survive. He then made his way to Janów Lubelski, and from there to the forest, to the People's Army guerilla forces AL District 23, to the Władysław Grzybowski brigade, where he stayed from March 1944 until the Red Army entered."

For her murdered husband Chaim Hirszman – Pola Hirszman, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Betżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 98.

\* Note added by the author of the workshop.

Read the source texts, and then answer the questions below.

1. What emotions and thoughts accompanied the survivors during their escape?

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2. How do you think the war experiences could have influenced the survivors' further lives?

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3. What long-term psychological and emotional effects do you think the survivors could have experienced?

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**Source texts – fragments of the accounts of Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman and the inhabitants of Bełżec: Ludwik Ż. and Tadeusz Misiewicz:**

1) "After nine months of his stay in Bełżec, the Germans were liquidating the camp. They took away the prisoners who worked there, and before that, they had liquidated all the workshops and the office. In the last few weeks, the transports stopped completely. The crew and prisoners left the camp by train for the camp in Sobibór."

For her murdered husband Chaim Hirszman – Pola Hirszman, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 98.

2) "Soon I went there [Bełżec\*], I spoke with the people living in the area. They told me that in 1943 there had been fewer and fewer transports and that the center for exterminating Jews had shifted to the Auschwitz gas chambers. [...] Thick dark smoke had drifted tens of kilometers around the enormous bonfires. The wind spread the choking stench over far distances for a long time. For long days and nights, for long weeks. And later, the local residents told me, the bones were ground up and the wind had scattered the dust over the fields and forests. A prisoner named Spilke, brought for the purpose from the Janowska Camp to Bełżec, set up a machine for grinding human bones. He told me that he had found only piles of bones there and that all the buildings had disappeared. Later he managed to escape and save himself. Now he is in Hungary. He gave me his account of this right after the liberation of Lwów by the Red Army. When the production of 'synthetic fertiliser' from millions of human bones was finished, the torn-up graves were filled in and the surface of the blood-soaked ground was properly and painstakingly levelled. The criminal German monster spread lush

vegetation over the Jewish grave of a million at Bełżec. I exchanged goodbyes with my informants and went along the familiar path of the 'rail spur'. It was no longer there. The field led me to a living, fragrant pine forest. Now it was very quiet there. In the middle of the forest there was a huge bright meadow."

R. Reder, *Bełżec*, eds. F. Peiper, J.S. Russek, T. Świebocka, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Kraków 1999, pp. 142–143.

3) "I saw how excavators operated by Jews were used to extract decomposing bodies and throw them onto piles, which were later set on fire. A huge stench and smell spread because of this, which was unbearable. It also depended on the strength and direction of the wind."

Ludwik Ż., account 28, MMPB.

4) "At that time, all the buildings located on the camp grounds and the fence were demolished, the area was levelled and young pine trees were planted. I cannot describe the interior of the camp, because I had no opportunity to see it. Travelling by train, you could see the barracks on the camp grounds, as well as the paths that crossed the grounds of the camp. In order to camouflage the camp, it was surrounded by an artificial fence made of pines and spruces."

T. Misiewicz, [in:] *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu w relacjach ocalałych i zeznaniach polskich świadków*, ed. D. Libionka, Lublin 2013, p. 160.

\* Note added by the author of the workshop.

Photo 6. Levelled post-camp area, 1945, MRTL.



Read the source texts and look at the photograph, and then answer the following question:

1. Why do you think the German camp authorities wanted to remove all traces of the genocidal crime they had committed?

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## **Tomasz Oleksy-Zborowski**

### **BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE HISTORY OF THE GERMAN EXTERMINATION CAMP IN SOBIBÓR**

The German extermination camp SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor was established at the turn of April and May 1942 as the second, after Bełżec, centre for the extermination of Jews as part of the genocidal operation codenamed "Aktion Reinhardt". It was built near a small railway station Sobibór, located along the railway line connecting Lublin, Chełm and Włodawa.

Initially, it covered the area of 25 hectares. It was divided into 4 parts: the foreground with an unloading ramp and quarters for crew members, camp I with workshops and residential barracks for prisoners, camp II with a yard for receiving transports and warehouses intended for property taken from the newcomers. In camp III, completely separated from the rest of the complex, gas chambers were built, there were also pits where the bodies of victims were buried. All of it was managed by the commandant (first Franz Stangl, then Franz Reichleitner), who was in charge of a crew of 20–30 SS officers, mainly Austrians and Germans, and a guard company with 120 guards, former Soviet prisoners of war, mostly of Ukrainian origin.

In May 1942, the systematic extermination process began in Sobibór. At that time, Jews from the Lublin region were brought to the camp. At the same time, transports of Jews from Austria, Germany, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and Slovakia began to be sent here. First gas chambers were built following the model of those operating in Bełżec. Between June and September 1942, additional rooms were added to the existing building. In this way, 8 gas chambers connected with a corridor were established.

Men, women and children were forced off the trains, separated and led to camp II, where a German informed them that they would be sent to work from the transit camp, they only had to undergo disinfection. After leaving their luggage and undressing, they were led to the chambers. The extermination process lasted about 20 minutes. Carbon monoxide produced by an internal combustion engine was used to kill the victims. The women and girls had their hair cut before execution in a special barrack located at the road leading towards the chambers. The hair was sent to warehouses and processed.

Jewish prisoners selected from the transports (600–700 men and women) worked in the camp. Some of them

buried the bodies of the murdered, others sorted the property brought by the victims, and yet another group served the SS and guard crews. Selections were conducted regularly amongst the prisoners of the work units, and the murdered were replaced by the newcomers.

Due to the renovation work carried out on the Lublin–Chełm railway line in the summer of 1942, only a few transports arrived at the camp. Many people were brought in horse-drawn carriages, others on foot from nearby towns. From September, the railway was used again. At that time, these were mostly deportations from part of the Lublin district. Together with Polish Jews, Austrian, Czech, German and Slovak Jews were also displaced, who had previously been placed in transit ghettos in the Lublin region. From the beginning of 1943, transports from the Galicia district were sent to Sobibór. At that time, the last Jews were also sent there from certain towns in the Lublin district. Between March and the end of July, 19 transports from Holland arrived at the camp, bringing over 34,000 Jews. In March, 4 transports from France were sent to Sobibór. In early autumn 1943, the last trains with deportees from Vilnius, as well as Lida and Minsk in Belarus arrived at the camp.

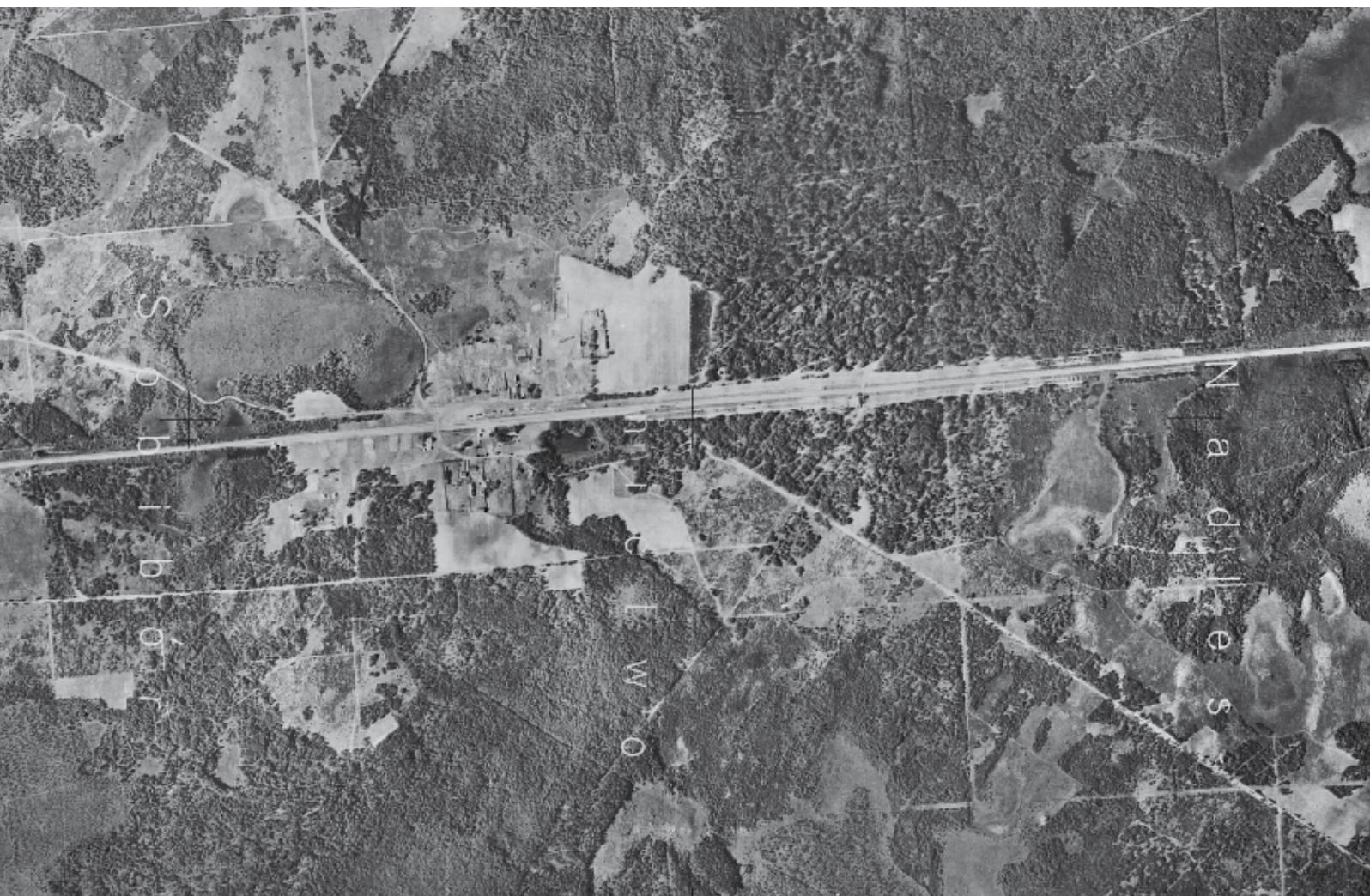
Initially, the bodies of the murdered were placed in mass graves on the grounds of camp III. In late autumn 1942, the process of burning the corpses began and lasted until the end of the camp's operation. The bodies were cremated on grates made of railway tracks.

Around 180,000 Jews were murdered in the Sobibór death camp. Over half of the victims were Polish Jews. The remaining were citizens of various European countries occupied by the Third Reich. An unspecified number of Roma people also died there.

In the summer of 1943, a conspiratorial group was formed amongst the prisoners, whose goal was to organise a mass escape. Preparations for the revolt sped up when the Germans selected a group of Jewish Soviet prisoners of war from one of the transports from Minsk. Their military experience gave a chance for a successful armed uprising. The resistance movement had two leaders, Leon Felhendler and Aleksander Peczerski. On 14 October 1943, an uprising broke out in the camp. After killing several members of the SS garrison and guards, a group of about 300 people managed to escape. Less than 60 escapees survived until the end of the war. After the uprising, the Germans liquidated the camp, murdering all the prisoners remaining there. Later, they blew up the building with the gas chambers, dismantled most of the prisoner barracks, and then, to remove the traces of the crime, planted a forest on the grounds of camp III.

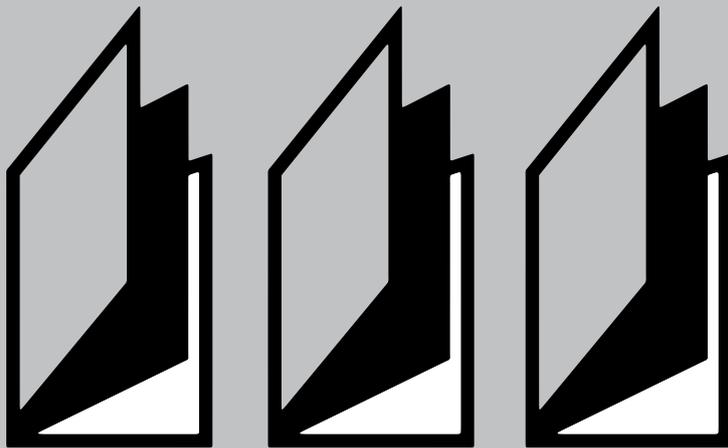
The first initiative to commemorate the Sobibór execution site was undertaken only in the first half of the 1960s. In 2023, an international project to build a new museum and monument was completed. The permanent exhibition incorporates 700 artefacts excavated from the ground during archaeological research, mainly personal items belonging to the victims. The architectural and

spatial concept of the complex displays: fragments of the ruins of the gas chamber building, the outline of the hairdressing room, the residential barracks of prisoners from camp III and the yard where the uprising broke out. The Wall of Remembrance, marking the way that led to the gas chambers, leads to the Glade with Mass Graves, covered with white marble aggregate.



**Aerial Luftwaffe photo from September 1941 showing the Sobibór settlement a few months before the death camp was established, PMM.**

# **SOBIBÓR – CLASS SCENARIOS**



# THE YOUNGEST VICTIMS OF THE EXTERMINATION CAMP IN SOBIBÓR

**TARGET GROUP** students from the age of 15

**WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES**

- trigger interest in the history of the former extermination camp in Sobibór,
- trigger interest in the fate of children deported to the former death camp in Sobibór,
- arouse empathy for the fate of the victims,
- improve group work skills,
- develop linguistic competences,
- develop the skills to draw and formulate own conclusions,
- sensitise to violating children's rights in the contemporary world.

**TEACHING AIDS** historical photographs, photographs of museum exhibits

**WORK METHODS** group work using photographs, source text, brainstorming, discussion

**COURSE OF THE CLASS** The teacher introduces students to the topic of the class, presenting a brief outline of the history of the Sobibór extermination camp with particular emphasis on: the character of the camp, the number of victims and the fate of deported children. They speak about the issue of violating children's rights during World War II. Then they divide the youth into 3 groups and give each of them photos and worksheets (photographs of: I – identification badges belonging to children, II – personal items belonging to children; III – source texts describing the fate of deported children). The students' task is to familiarise themselves with the received material and answer the questions included in the worksheet. The students discuss within each group, then selected representatives present the results of their work in front of the class. As an element of the summary, a discussion is proposed on the topic: how are children treated today? Are their rights respected?

## TEACHER'S SHEET

**Additional information regarding the fate of Jewish children during World War II together with explanations of the photographs from the worksheets:**

"World War II was the first war in history consciously directed against children, and especially Jewish children, who according to Hitler's plans were to be completely annihilated. In a speech by Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer SS, to the Gauleiters on 6 October 1943, the following words were said: 'I believe that it would make no sense to exterminate adult Jews, men and women... and leave their children alive to take revenge on our sons and grandchildren. A decision must be made to eliminate every Jewish

child so that this nation completely disappears from the face of the earth. That is what we are doing now.' Jewish children, as a carrier of national identity and at the same time a potentially dangerous element in the future, were sentenced to death for at least these two reasons."

A. Witkowska-Krych, *Dziecko wobec Zagłady: instytucjonalna opieka nad sierotami w getcie warszawskim*, Warszawa 2022, p. 25.

## GROUP I

The badges with the names of children deported to the camp, probably made at the request of their parents or guardians, were intended to facilitate the identification of the child and their place of residence in the event of separation from their parents during forced relocation.

Photo 1. Lea Judith de la Penha and her identification badge. Aluminium, H. 3.6 cm, W. 4.4 cm. Found at the premises of the former camp II.

**Lea Judith de la Penha** – born on 11 May 1937. She came from Amsterdam. As a result of a street round-up, she and her parents, Judith and David, ended up in a transit camp in Westerbork. From there, the family was transported to Sobibór. At the time of deportation, Lea was 6 years old, her mother – 39, and her father – 33. They died in a gas chamber on 9 July 1943.

Photo 2. Daddie Zak and his identification badge. Brass, H. 2.3 cm, W. 3.5 cm. Found at the premises of the former camp III.

**David (Daddie) Jacob Zak** – born 23 February 1935, lived in Amsterdam at Uiterwaardenstraat 71. He was deported to Sobibór with his mother Judith and father Simon. He was 8 years old, his mother – 37, father – 35. The Zak family was gassed on 11 June 1943.

Photo 3. Identification badge of Annie Kapper. Aluminium, H. 3.1 cm, W. 4.1 cm. Found at the premises of the former camp III.

**Anna (Annie) Kapper** – she lived in Amsterdam at O. Yselstraat 44. At the time of deportation she was 12, her brother Gerard was 6, parents, Elisabeth and Meijer both 35. The Kapper family died in a gas chamber on 2 April 1943.

## GROUP II

Photo 1. Mickey Mouse brooch. Mickey Mouse, a popular cartoon character by Walt Disney, was a common motif in children's decorations. Such pins were produced in the 1930s.

Photo 2. Fragment of a doll's leg. Objects connected with children constitute a small part of the collection of Sobibór relics. The ceramic doll's leg is the only fragment of a toy found.

Photo 3. A pendant belonging to Karoline Cohn. Above the girl's date of birth there is the Hebrew phrase "mazzal tov" – a wish of happiness. Silver, H. 2.9 cm, W. 2.4 cm. Found at the premises of the former camp II.

**Karoline Cohn** – born 3 July 1929 in Frankfurt am Main, in November 1941 she was deported with her parents Elsa and Richard and sister Gitta to the ghetto in Minsk (in present-day Belarus). She was probably brought to Sobibór during the liquidation of the ghetto in September 1943.



Photo 1-3.

**Look at the photographs,  
and then answer the questions:**

1. What information can we learn from the badges?

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2. What is the condition of these badges? Why do you think that is?

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3. Who did they belong to?

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4. For what purpose do you think they were made?

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Photo 1-3.

**Look at the photographs,  
and then answer the questions:**

1. What is in the photographs?

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2. Who might have owned these items?

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3. What story do you think is behind these items?

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4. Do you have an item that has a special meaning for you? Justify your answer.

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### Source texts – fragments of accounts by former Sobibór prisoners:

1) "When the camp first became operational, the SS and Ukrainians opened the wagons themselves, finding the tightly packed and bewildered victims inside. Hurling abuse and barking their commands at them, they would use whips, clubs and the butt end of their rifles to drive them out of the wagons. Once this had been accomplished, while inflicting the requisite pain and discomfort on the victims, the Jews were finally able to stretch their legs and get a little fresh air after a journey which had often lasted for days, and the men and women who could still walk were forced to form separate groups. Children under six had to stay with their mothers; any lone children looking around helplessly would be pushed towards another woman. The SS leadership then applied a formula that had already proved effective on previous occasions: they engaged the Jews in their own demise. From the hundreds of people gathered on the platform, around fifty predominantly younger men would be selected to take care of the work still to be done. Their first task was to help unload the elderly, handicapped, lone children and all the remaining luggage from the wagons."

J. Schelvis, *Sobibor. A History of a Nazi Death Camp*, transl. by K. Dixon, Oxford–New York 2007, p. 63.

2) "When all the Jews had left or had been dragged out of the wagons, Wagner started to bark methodical orders, shouting all the while. He shouted: 'Men separate, women separate, children separate!' Many mother didn't want to leave their children, so Wagner gave an order to SS-men and Ukrainians standing near him. They ran over and started to rip the children out of the mothers' hands. The children were crying; some of them felt what was in store for them, and others were simply terrified of the monstrous murderers. Some children remained silent – they knew everything and had resigned themselves. Many mothers fought valiantly to keep their children – they resisted and clutched the children to their chests. But it was all futile. First Wagner shouted: 'Kinder links!' (Children left!) 'Frauen links!' (Women left!). That meant that they were destined straight for the death camp and its gas chambers."

K. Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back. An Eyewitness Account*, ed. and transl. by H. Roiter, Włodawa 2008, p. 61.

3) "'Halt! Men, right! Women, children, left!' the SS-man shouted. A few boys my age remained with their mothers. My ten-year-old brother left my father and went to my mother whose hand I still held. Did I have a chance? I had to decided... I reached over and hastily kissed my

mother's cheek. I wanted to say something, aware we were parting forever."

T.T. Blatt, *From the Ashes of Sobibor. A Story of Survival*, foreword by Ch. Browning, ed. M. Bem, Włodawa 2008, p. 30.

4) "There were too many Jewish children to be 'processed' rapidly so they were in a long, steadily shrinking circular line from morning to night. Such beautiful children, gorgeous little blonde girls with pigtails, decently dressed. These poor unfortunates were well-fed, with pretty, round little faces. Their parents must have loved them so, must have lavished such care on them, and now... Many of the carried small suitcases or bags. It was pitiful, so sad! The SS-men were watching over them. We weren't supposed to even glance at those Berelach and Yosselech and Esterlech; saying one word to them was out of the question. Some of the kids were crying; they probably understood. The soil was sandy, so some children made circles in the sand and they played with pebbles and branches. After all, they were only children."

K. Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back. An Eyewitness Account*, ed. and transl. by H. Roiter, Włodawa 2008, p. 63.

5) "Once, on a frosty morning, when a thick layer of snow covered the ground, a transport of people arrived. About two thousand people were forced out of the wagons and quickly rushed along the path next to our window. We noticed a whole group of young women with children in their arms. Others were leading their children by the hand. Suddenly we heard the cry of a boy, maybe a two-year-old. The little boy was left alone, the mother, clearly driven to move forward, left the child alone. His shorts were unbuttoned and fell down his legs, the child was tangled in the shorts and could not move, his naked body was turning red from the frost. Suddenly a dog came running, sniffed the child, licked him and ran away. It returned with a watchman, who carried the child along the same path to reunite him with the convicts."

E. Lichtman, account, 1959, ref. no. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg, p. 242.

Read the source texts, and then answer the following question:

1. What was the fate of the Jewish population immediately after arriving at the German extermination camp in Sobibór?

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2. Describe the situation and behaviour of Jewish children deported to the German extermination camp in Sobibór.

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3. Why do you think adults told about the fate of children deported to Sobibór?

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# THE IMAGE OF THE SS-MEN FROM THE SOBIBÓR EXTERMINATION CAMP – THE PERSPECTIVE OF PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS

**TARGET GROUP** students from the age of 16

**WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES**

- trigger interest in the history of the former extermination camp in Sobibór,
- develop the skills to use source materials,
- develop group work skills,
- develop linguistic competences,
- improve the ability to formulate conclusions,
- critical reflection on own behaviours and attitudes towards others.

**TEACHING AIDS** historical photographs, fragments of memoirs of former prisoners of the Sobibór extermination camp

**WORK METHODS** work with photos, source text, brainstorming, discussion

**COURSE OF THE CLASS**

Due to the specific nature of this workshop, the teacher does not begin the lesson by introducing the students to the subject of the meeting, nor do they present a brief outline of the history of the former Sobibór extermination camp. Students are divided into 4 groups, each receives several photographs from the so-called Niemann collection and worksheets with questions. They think independently about what the photos show, who the people presented are, when and where the photos could have been taken. After noting down the answers, representatives of individual groups present results of their work. The teacher gradually introduces the students to the topic of the lesson, additionally giving them fragments of the memoirs of former prisoners of Sobibór and providing basic information about the SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor (topography, structure, description of the crew). As an element of evaluation, they can initiate a discussion by asking the class questions such as: what image of the perpetrators emerges from fragments of the memoirs of former prisoners and from the photos? What emotions do you feel after analysing the photographs and accounts? How many perpetrators do you think were held responsible for the acts committed in the Sobibór extermination camp? What could have been the motivations of the SS-men? In your opinion, do the decisions we make in our everyday lives have or not have an impact on other people?

## TEACHER'S SHEET

Additional information regarding the photos from Niemann's Collection and other perpetrators from the Sobibór extermination camp.

### Niemann Collection

The photos used in educational activities come from the so-called Niemann Collection. Their author, Johann Niemann, was an SS officer in the rank of SS-Unterscharführer, then SS-Oberscharführer. Before the war, he worked as a house painter and art teacher. In 1934 he joined the SS. In Sobibór, he was deputy commandant for Franz Reichleitner.

The collection consists of 361 black-and-white photographs (of which nearly 60 concern the SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor). It was found in 2015. Until then, almost no photos from this extermination camp had been known. The collection belonged to Lothar Kudlasik from Völen, Niemann's grandson. He donated the entire collection to the Bildungswerk Stanislaw-Hantz association in Kassel, and in 2020 it was acquired by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In 2020, a German-language album presenting these photos was published (*Fotos aus Sobibor*).

*Die Niemann-Sammlung zu Holocaust und Nationalsozialismus*, ed. M. Cüppers et al., Berlin 2020), in 2022 English version (*From "Euthanasia" to Sobibor. An SS Officer's Photo Collection*, ed. by M. Cüppers et al., Indiana 2022).

Starting from July 1942, the SS officers involved in Aktion "Reinhardt" obliged in writing not to pass on any information regarding the course of the operation and their work to the outside world. A strict ban on photographing was introduced in extermination camps.

The photographs in the camp were taken from autumn 1942 to summer 1943. Niemann was in Sobibór from September 1942 to 14 October 1943 (he was killed by prisoners during the uprising). The photographs show the space inside and around the camp, they depict SS-men spending their free time during social gatherings and feasting together in a casual atmosphere.

## Descriptions of photos from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum\*

### GROUP I

Photo 1. Johann Niemann (left), Rudolf Beckmann and an unknown SS officer holding piglets in front of a pigsty on the grounds of camp II, spring 1943.

Photo 2. Rudolf Kamm with a German Shepherd dog on the grounds of the camp, summer 1943.

Photo 3. Niemann and an unknown SS officer with German Shepherds, foreground, summer 1943.

Photo 4. Willi Wendland (left) and Rudolf Kamm on the grounds of camp II, summer 1943.

### GROUP II

Photo 1. Franz Reichleitner (left), Erich Bauer (centre), Erich Schulze and Niemann with a female kitchen worker.

Photo 2. Arthur Dachsel, Reichleitner, Niemann, Schulze and Bauer spending time in the company of two female kitchen workers, drinking alcohol from crystal glasses, most likely from stolen items belonging to people deported to Sobibór.

Photo 3. SS crew (left Niemann, Reichleitner) looking through photo prints, female kitchen workers in the background.

## Selected trials of perpetrators

Only a dozen or so people from the camp crew were brought to trial. The first commandant, Franz Stangl, received a life sentence. The second, Franz Reichleitner, was killed in January 1944 by Yugoslav partisans.

During the trial of the camp crew in Hagen in 1965, out of 12 defendants from Sobibór only Karl Frenzel received a life sentence, the rest were sentenced to several years in prison (from 3 to 8 years) or were acquitted. Kurt Bolender committed suicide before the verdict was announced. The defendants' defence during the trials was that they were following orders, which could have been punished by imprisonment or death if disobeyed. 9 crew members were killed during the prisoner uprising on 14 October 1943.

### GROUP III

Photo 1. Heinrich Unverhau, Rudolf Kamm, probably Fritz Konrad, and Willi Wendland and Johann Klier (from left to right) on the terrace of the new casino, early summer 1943

Photo 2. Left Rudolf Kamm, Willi Wendland, Heinrich Unverhau, Fritz Konrad, Johann Klier in front of the new casino building, summer 1943.

Photo 3. Fritz Konrad, early summer 1943.

Photo 4. Wendland (left) and Franz Wolf playing chess in front of the new casino, summer 1943.

### GROUP IV

Photo 1. Niemann (centre) with other SS-men in the old casino, spring 1943.

Photo 2. Niemann in civilian clothes on a horse-drawn cart in the camp foreground surrounded by other SS members, summer 1943.

Photo 3. Niemann in the centre, on the grounds of the old casino, spring 1943.

Photo 4. Niemann on horseback (left) in front of the new casino, winter 1942/1943.

\* Photo captions taken from: *Fotos aus Sobibor. Die Niemann-Sammlung zu Holocaust und Nationalsozialismus*, ed. M. Cüppers et al., Berlin 2020.

Photo 1.



Photo 2.



Photo 4.



Photo 3.



Photo 1.



Photo 2.



Photo 3.

Photo 1.



Photo 2.



Photo 3.

Photo 4.



Photo 1-4. USHMM.



Photo 1.



Photo 2.



Photo 3.



Photo 4.

### Fragments of accounts by former prisoners of Sobibór extermination camp for each group:

1) „Pain, or the threat of pain, was used to motivate people to do what the Nazis wanted. A slight infraction of the rules would result in the minimum punishment: twenty-five lashes on the naked buttocks. The victim would be made to count the lashes aloud, and no mistake in the count was permitted. Loss of consciousness meant death, or a beating that brought the prisoner close to death.”

T.T. Blatt, *Sobibor. The Forgotten Revolt. A Survivor's Report*, Issaquah 1998, p. 49.

2) „Another of the cruelest German officers is SS Oberscharführer Hubert Gomerski. He derives great satisfaction from using his whip every day. I learn about his sadism first from Symcha, who tells me one evening at roll-call that Gomerski had entered the medical warehouse earlier in the day and asked Symcha for some kind of opiate. Symcha had told Gomerski that there was not currently any of this drug in the warehouse, and to please check again tomorrow. Gomerski had responded by giving Symcha twenty-five lashes.”

P. Bialowitz, J. Bialowitz, *A Promise at Sobibór. A Jewish Boy's Story of Revolt and Survival in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, Madison, Wisconsin 2010, p. 85.

3) “The Jews who worked in the stable and with other household animals were held responsible with their lives for the health of the animals. Max, a stablemaster, was severely beaten and sent to Lager III where he was executed for lightly hitting a horse. Shaul Stark, in charge of the geese, was killed when one goose died.”

T.T. Blatt, *Sobibor. The Forgotten Revolt. A Survivor's Report*, Issaquah 1998, p. 51.

4) “Whoever had displeased an SS-man, for one reason or another, or no reason at all, was taken out. The SS-men would shout, ‘Let your pants down!’ The other SS would join ‘the party’, and they would beat the prisoner mercilessly. The blood would flow, and we were strictly ordered to look at the scene attentively and laugh. If a German saw that a Jew was not looking, the Jew would get beaten too. The beaten Jews were thrown into the barracks after the beatings. However, the next day they couldn't go to work – they were in such bad shape. They were then taken straight to the gas chamber.”

K. Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back. An Eyewitness Account*, ed. and transl. by H. Roiter, Włodawa 2008, p. 84.

5) “Each Nazi had his own particular style of administering pain. Survivors agree that the worst of them was Gustav Wagner, called ‘The Angel of Death’. His cruelty had no bounds; he killed at the slightest pretext. [...] Wagner would shoot at women and children on their way to the gas chambers. [...] Wagner was both cruel and very intelligent. Always on the go, he would suddenly show up in the last expected place. Always suspicious, he was difficult to fool. Besides, his colossal frame and strength would be very difficult to overcome silently with primitive weapons.”

T.T. Blatt, *Sobibor. The Forgotten Revolt. A Survivor's Report*, Issaquah 1998, pp. 51, 71.

6) “Also at the same time, Frenzel caught a thirteen-year-old boy who took a box of sardines during sorting. What a scandal, shouted Frenzel, ‘such impudence!’ Jews want to eat sardines in the camp. He called all the workers in the sorting room, lined them up in a circle and shot the boy. He announced that if anyone dared to touch the canned food, they would end in the same way”.

E. Lichtman, account, 1959, ref. no. 208 AR-Z 251/59, Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsbürg, p. 239.

7) “And as I watched I saw they're unloading the whole train. And the mother, I don't know for what reason, she left the baby in the box car. And Frenzel – who was in charge most of the time of the Bahnhaukommanden [NB: the Bahnhofkommando], of the trains – he grabbed that little baby by the little feet and smashed his skull against the box car and... and just threw it in like a dead rat.”

E. Raab, spoken account, 1994, USC Shoah Foundation, Los Angeles.

Look at the photographs,  
and then answer the questions:

1. When, where, and in what circumstances do you think these photos were taken?

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2. What do these photos show?

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3. Did anything in these photos particularly catch your attention? If so, describe it.

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4. Who do you think could have taken these photos?

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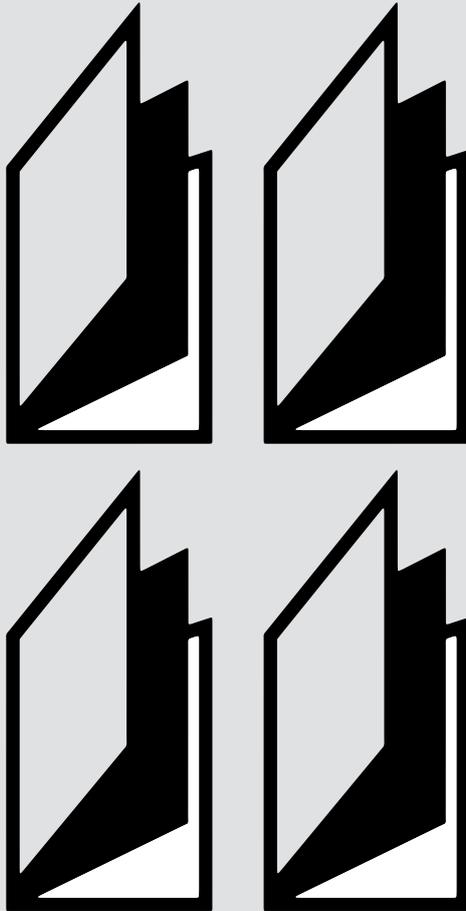
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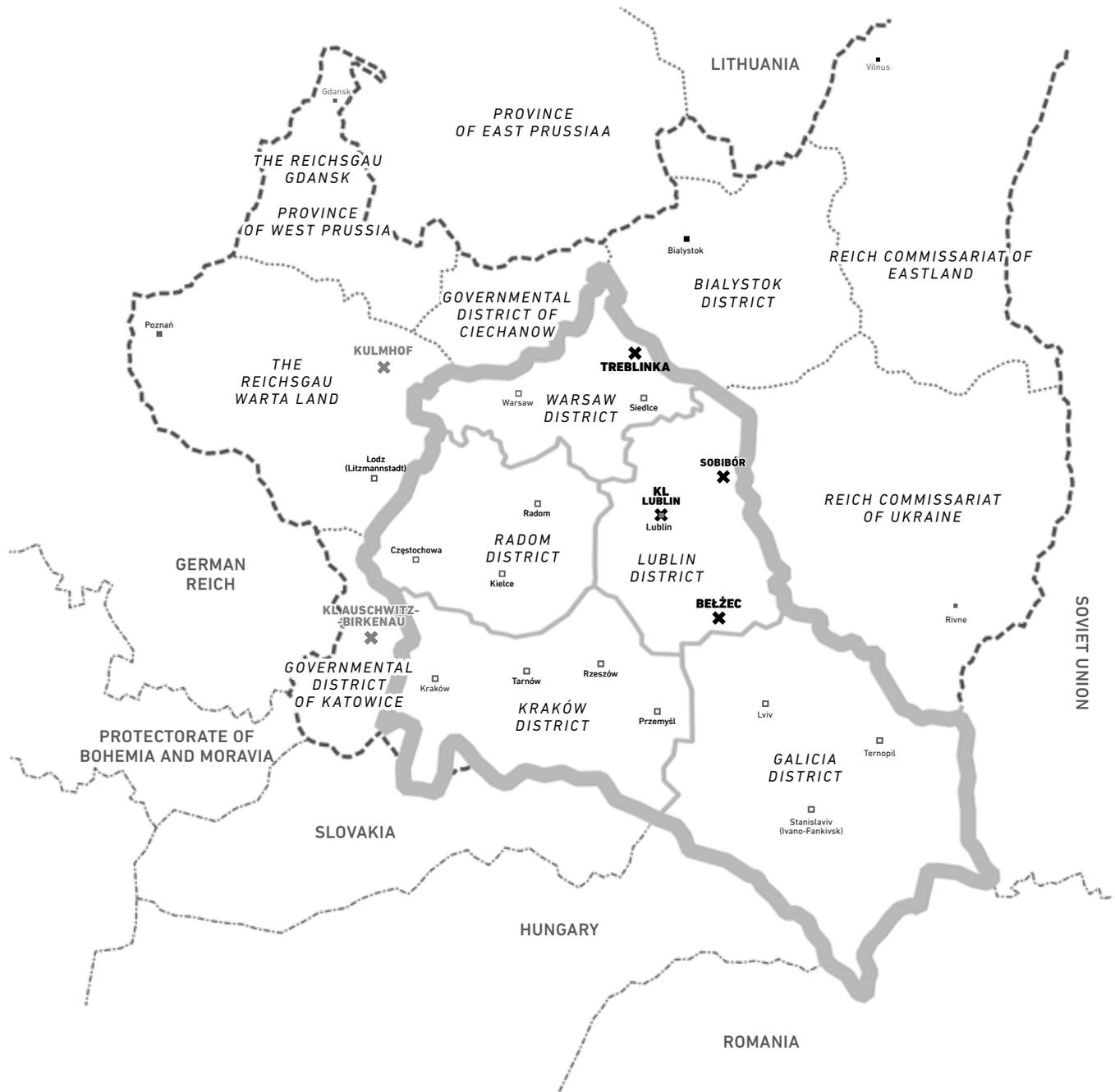
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# ICONOGRAPHIC MATERIALS



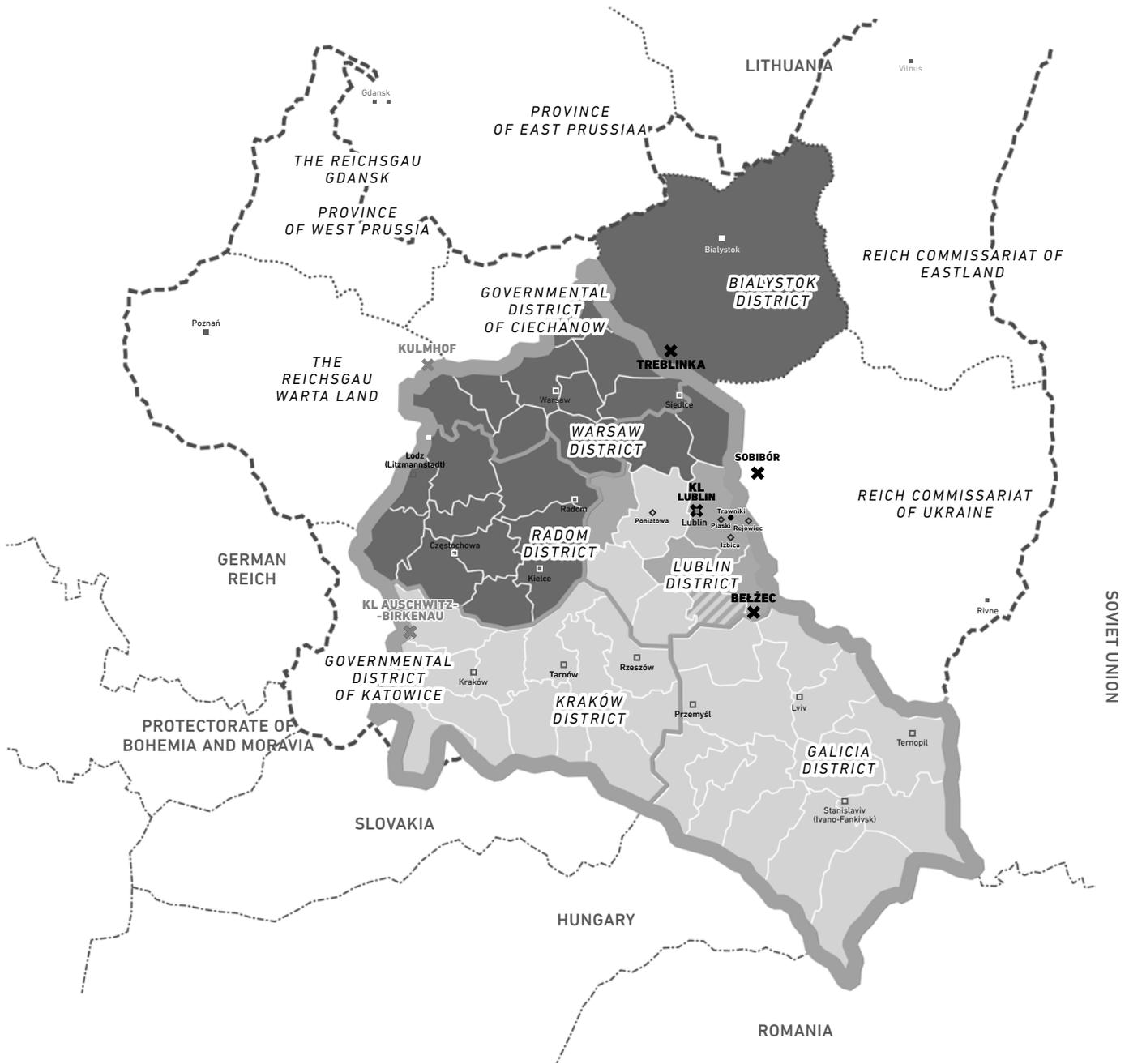
**A map showing the territories of occupied Poland during World War II**



**Legend:**

-  borders of the General Government
-  borders of the Second Polish Republic, 1939
-  borders of the General Government districts
-  borders of the German administrative units
-  operation "Reinhardt" extermination camps
-  death camps in the territories incorporated into the Third Reich
-  largest ghettos

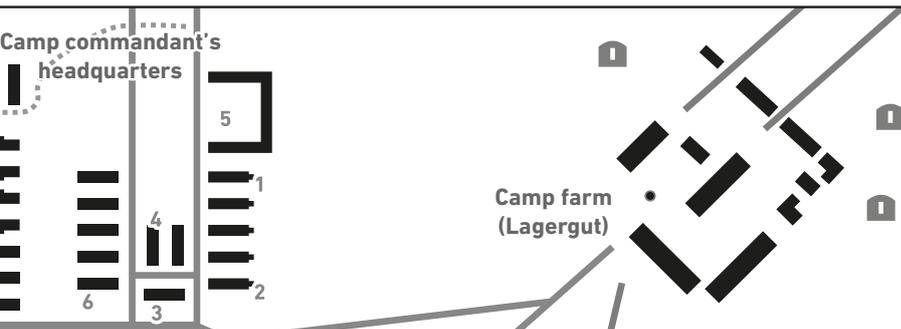
# Deportations within the framework of operation "Reinhardt"



**Legend:**

- Areas of deportation to the German death camp in Belzec
  - Areas of deportation to the German death camp in Sobibor
  - Areas of deportation to the German death camp in Treblinka
  - borders of the General Government
- borders of the Second Polish Republic, 1938
  - borders of the General Government districts
  - borders of the German administrative units
  - ✕ operation "Reinhardt" extermination camps
  - ✕ death camps in the territories incorporated into the Third Reich
- largest ghettos
  - Transit ghettos
  - SS training camp





- 23. Cobblers' workshop
- 24. Tailors' workshop
- 25. Garages
- 26. SS canteen
- 27. Warehouses for prisoners' belongings (no. 43 and 44)
- 28. Stables
- 29. Food warehouses (no. 46 and 47)
- 30. Clothing warehouses
- 31. Carpentry and timber storage
- 32. Smithy and locksmith's workshop
- 33. Electrical workshop
- 34. Clothing warehouses (no. 56–61)
- 35. Doghouse
- 36. Old crematorium, then disinfection building
- 37. Corpses storage (since 1943 clothing warehouse)
- 38. Camp laundry
- 39. Drying building, burnt in a fire on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1944
- 40. Castle built in summer of 1943
- 41. Kitchen of field III, burnt partially in a fire on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1944
- 42. Kommando of car mechanics (Fahrbereitschaft)
- 43. Column of Three Eagles
- 44. „Sonderkommando's" barrack
- 45. Barrack no. 10 on field V, burnt in a fire on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1944
- 46. Medical barrack on field V
- 47. New crematorium
- 48. Mass execution ditches

-  Bunkers
-  Guardhouse
-  Guard towers

## Situation plan of the German death camp in Sobibór

Buildings the location of which is documented by archival photographs and/or archaeological research results are marked in black. The location and purpose of the remaining zones and buildings were determined on the basis of post-war sketches, primarily the plans drawn up by former prisoners: Estera Raab (née Ternner) and Tomasz (Toivi) Blatt.

Legend:

### Foreground

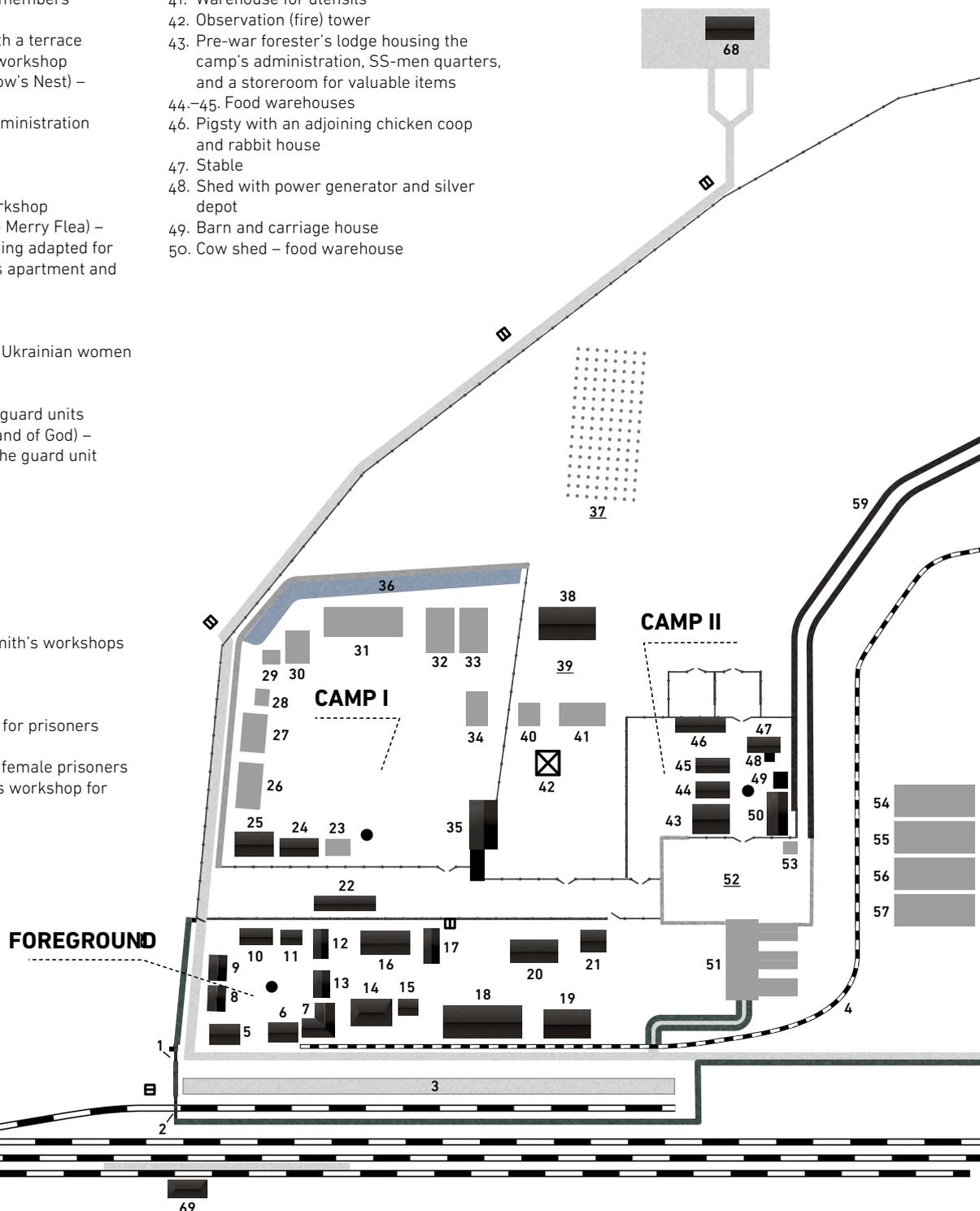
1. Main gate
2. Spur gate
3. Unloading ramp
4. Narrow-gauge train line
5. Guardhouse
6. Dental office of the camp SS staff / detention quarters for members of the guard crew
7. SS kitchen and mess with a terrace
8. Warehouse and ironing workshop
9. "Schwalbennest" (Swallow's Nest) – quarters of the SS-men
10. "Old" mess and camp administration quarters
11. Laundry workshop
12. Bathhouse
13. Garage and barber's workshop
14. "Zum lustigen Floh" (The Merry Flea) – pre-war post office building adapted for the camp commandant's apartment and quarters of the SS-men
15. Ammunition depot
16. Guard unit quarters
17. Residential barracks for Ukrainian women serving the camp staff
- 18–19. Guard unit quarters
20. Kitchen and canteen for guard units
21. "Gottes Heimat" (Homeland of God) – quarters of the head of the guard unit
22. Bowling alley

### Camp I

23. Dispensary
24. Tailor's workshop
25. Shoemaker's workshop
26. Locksmith's and blacksmith's workshops
27. Carpenter's workshop
28. Latrine
29. Painter's workshop
- 30–31. Residential barracks for prisoners
32. Kitchen
33. Residential barracks for female prisoners
34. Shoemaker's and tailor's workshop for the guard crew
35. Baker's
36. Ditch with water

### Camp II

37. Vegetable garden
38. Sorting workshop and warehouse for footwear plundered from the victims
39. Square in front of the footwear sorting workshop
40. Laundry and ironing workshop
41. Warehouse for utensils
42. Observation (fire) tower
43. Pre-war forester's lodge housing the camp's administration, SS-men quarters, and a storeroom for valuable items
- 44–45. Food warehouses
46. Pigsty with an adjoining chicken coop and rabbit house
47. Stable
48. Shed with power generator and silver depot
49. Barn and carriage house
50. Cow shed – food warehouse



**Camp II  
cont.**

- 51. Transitional barracks – it contained the luggage of the arriving prisoners, next to it were the sorting facilities of the victims' plundered property
- 52. Square where deportees were forced to strip naked
- 53. So-called cash desk, where victims going to their deaths were forced to surrender all their jewellery and money
- 54.–57. Sorting barracks and clothing warehouses
- 58. Shed with furnace for burning photographs, books, and personal documents of the murdered

- 59. "Schlauch" (the tube) – a path marked out with barbed wire fences, along which the victims were driven to the gas chambers
- 60. Barracks where women had their hair cut before being gassed

**Camp III**

- 61. Building of the gas chambers and an outbuilding for internal combustion engine
- 62. Pits where until the autumn of 1942, the bodies, and later the ashes of the murdered were being buried
- 63. Field crematorium built of fire grates used for burning corpses of the gassed on pyres
- 64. Guard tower equipped with a machine gun and a searchlight
- 65.–66. Residential barracks and kitchen for prisoners working in camp III

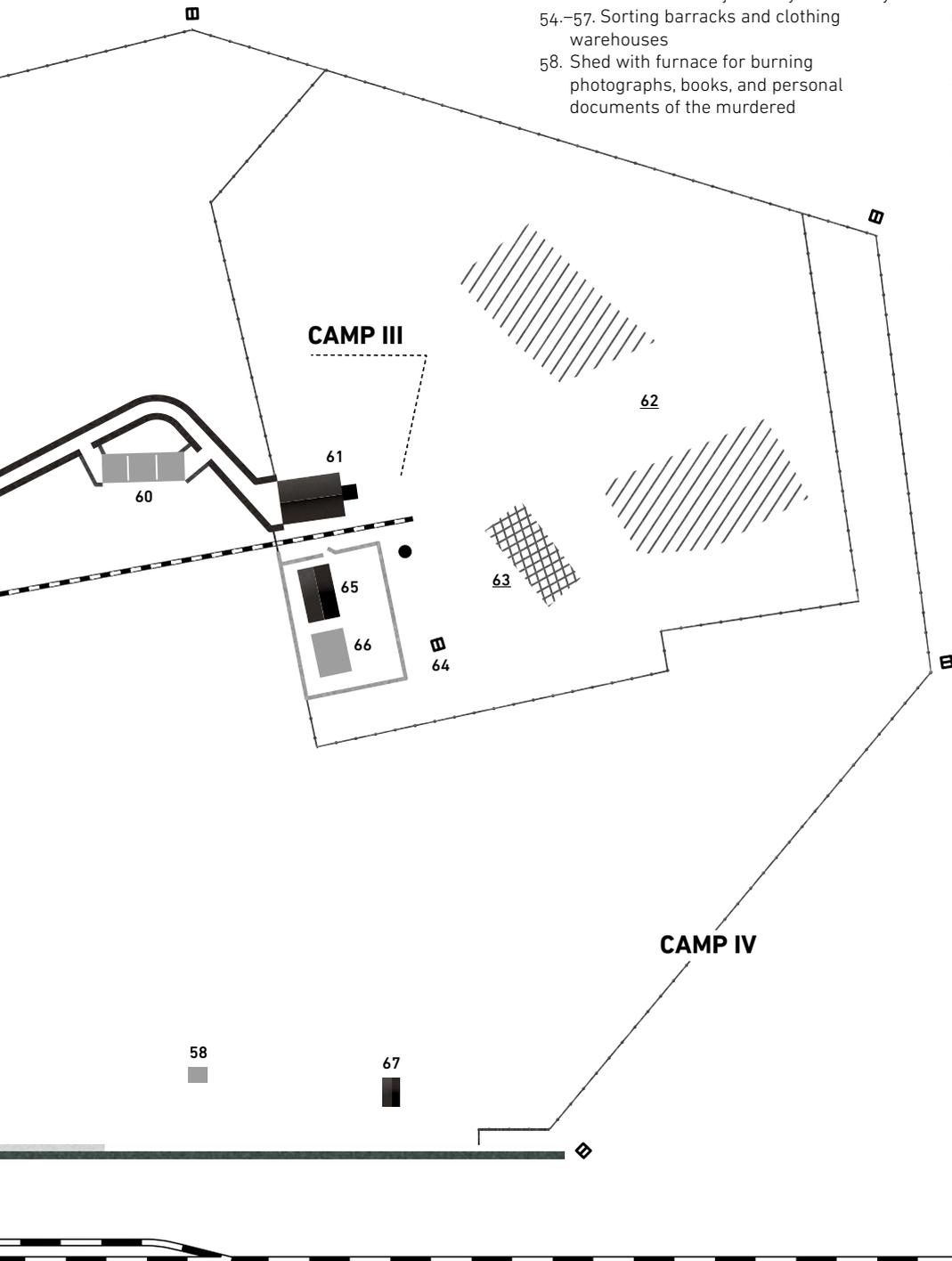
**Camp IV**

A designed, only partially built sector, also called the northern camp, intended for warehouses and workshops for processing captured ammunition

**Other facilities**

- 67. Pre-war chapel
- 68. External kommando – reserve camp of the Ukrainian guard
- 69. Sobibór train station building

- Camp fence
- ▣ Guard towers
- Wells





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