

The history of the former Gestapo concentration camp "Oderblick" in Schwetig/Swiecko

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On February 19 a conference on the history of the former concentration camp "Oderblick" took place in the Polish town of Slubice, which lies on the border with Germany. The conference was organised by the Project for German-Polish History of the Polonicum College, a joint institution of the universities of Slubice and the neighbouring German town of Frankfurt/Oder.

The project's goal is to focus public attention on the former concentration camp in Schwetig, situated only a few kilometres from Frankfurt/Oder and Slubice. The group has demonstrated considerable commitment to pressuring the authorities to expand the existing (very small) memorial, have the site published in town maps and guidebooks, and eventually organise sign-posts.

A highlight of the conference was the participation of 76-year-old Nicholas Livkovsky, a survivor of the "labour education camp", who visited the scene of his suffering for the first time since his imprisonment and spoke of his experiences (see accompanying article).

Horst Joachim, a retired history teacher and author of a number of works about the crimes of the Nazis and the experiences of Jews in Frankfurt/Oder, reported the results of his years of painstaking research.

During the 40 months that camp "Oderblick" functioned, i.e., from October 1940 to January 1945, documented evidence reveals that at least 4,000 inmates met their death through forced labour, hunger, beatings and executions.

The camp had a capacity of 400 prisoners, but was generally packed with around 800 inmates. On January 30, 1945 the camp held 1,600 prisoners, who were sent on a death march after the Gestapo evacuated the facility. Only the weakest, about 70 who were unable to walk, remained in the barracks. They were burnt to

death, as the Nazis set fire to all the camps in advance of the entry of the Red Army.

In the years following the war neither the East German nor the Polish governments paid much heed to these terrible events. In 1963 Horst Joachim obtained permission to visit the former camp at Schwetig. Inside the burnt-out walls he observed that there still remained a 15 to 20 centimetre thick layer of ash, bits of timber, broken plates and cups along with the bleached thigh bone of a burnt corpse. He reported that he had been unable to erase this picture from his mind. When his official escorts noticed his horror, they quickly shoved the human remains under the ashes. Since then, Joachim has worked to uncover the Nazi crimes in his district.

In Germany under Hitler's fascist regime there were 25 work camps in the Frankfurt/Oder district. The Gestapo camp in Schwetig, however, had a particular function.

In September 1940 the fascist heads of state decided to construct "labour education camps", calculating, 10 months before the German army invaded the Soviet Union, on a massive influx of foreign "workers". The labour education installations were to operate as forced labour "re-education" camps. In six weeks, later eight weeks, the workers were to become either pliant, or die. Camps of this type were exclusively under the control of the Gestapo, which had free rein in their running, unrestricted by any legislation.

The buildings in the Schwetig facility, which had served since 1938 as accommodation for workers building the autobahns, were reorganised in October 1940 as a labour education camp. The Gestapo command decided who should be sent to such camps.

Grumbling on the part of a forced labourer in the Oder region about his miserable working and living conditions was sufficient for him to be sent to one of the “re-education” camps. Awaiting him were hunger, hard labour and perpetual torment.

Every month 70 Schwetig prisoners were incinerated in Frankfurt's crematorium, others were hastily buried in a wood near the camp. Jews were invariably buried.

This was established by Joachim in the course of his 30 years of research, during which he fought to gain access to the records of the crematorium located in the public prosecutor's office. The book recording incinerations cited over 2,500 dead from the Gestapo camp.

The ashes of the dead were sent in cardboard cartons to the then-mayor of Schwetig, who saw to it that they were tossed onto the rubbish heap of the community cemetery. One attempt by Joachim to talk with the former mayor was blocked by the Frankfurt/Oder public prosecutor.

The camp inmates came from 14 different countries, mostly Poles, Russians, White Russians and Ukrainians, but also Yugoslavs, Czechs, French and Moldavians, and Jews of every nationality. Germans were also incarcerated from 1942 onwards.

A mass execution of prisoners from the Soviet Union took place in the camp in the autumn of 1944. Because the camp had only two gallows, the men were hanged one after another, followed by all the women. Among these was a married couple accused of planning an escape, because they possessed a small reserve of dry bread.

The camp was disbanded in mid-January 1945, shortly before the arrival of the Red Army. The inmates were to disappear, and so 1,600 ambulant prisoners were sent on their death march. The remainder were burnt along with the camp buildings.

The death march went westwards toward Berlin, and took seven weeks. The prisoners had to walk around Berlin to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and on the next day to a labour depot at the Potsdam airport. Another 29 prisoners arrived at Buchenwald concentration camp on March 16, 1945, the march continuing the next day. One prisoner hid himself there and was the only survivor.

The fate of the concentration camp commandants and the prison guards has never been made public. It is not

known what became of them after the war.

As late as 1977 a memorial was set up on the site of the former Schwetig camp. An enclosed path leads to a small tower and a wall with broken bars in a window opening—a symbol of liberation from the outside. There is also a notice board.

The attempt by the Project for German-Polish History to erect an additional notice board in two languages has met with considerable official obstruction. In the meantime, a Swiss organisation aiding refugees has agreed to finance such a sign.



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