Excavation of gas chamber at Nazi Sobibor concentration camp completed

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With the assistance of supporters, archaeologists Yoram Haimi from Israel and Wojciech Mazurek from Poland have excavated the remains of the gas chamber at the Nazi Sobibor concentration camp near Lublin, near the eastern Polish border, as *Spiegel Online* reported on September 23.

In a clearing near the old Sobibor train station, one can see the newly discovered finds and remains of the walls. It includes the remains of an estimated four gas chambers, each 5 by 7 metres, which served as death chambers for between 70 and 100 people. Haimi and Mazurek hope that their findings will make the Nazi crimes at Sobibor more comprehensible. The Nazis destroyed the concentration camp 71 years ago, after SS officers and their allies had murdered between 170,000 and 250,000 people, mostly defenceless Jews and Roma.

The Sobibor, Belzec and Treblinca concentration camps were designed to carry out the systematic extermination of Jews and Roma living in the "General Government," which was composed of those parts of Ukraine and Poland occupied by the Wehrmacht. Jews from the Netherlands, Germany and other states were also murdered there.

From the outset, the concentration camps were purely extermination camps. Only a small number of the people sent there were employed in forced labour. Most were driven directly from the goods wagons to the gas chambers.

In the three camps, between July 1942 and October 1943, at least 1.7 million Jews and 50,000 Roma were killed, more than in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which became the synonym for industrial mass murder. The implementation of the mass murder, code-named "Operation Rheinhardt," was tasked to the SS and the police chief in Lublin, Odilo Globocnik, by SS leader Heinrich Himmler.

According to *Spiegel Online*, the Nazis ensured that no trace was left of Operation Rheinhardt. In the midst of the war, the war criminals, following the extermination of the Jews, sought to methodically eliminate all remaining traces of them. Between November 1942 and December 1943 they exhumed bodies, killed almost all remaining residents of the three concentration camps in eastern Poland, and burnt all of the remains of bodies.

Plans and documents referring to the camps were also destroyed, as well as the buildings. The grounds were flattened, forests planted and farms established. As few traces as possible of the monstrous crimes planned and carried out within the framework of Operation Rheinhardt were to be left.

Only very few people survived the three concentration camps. On October 14, 1943, 50 prisoners launched an uprising and broke out from Sobibor and survived the remainder of the ongoing war. In Treblinka, where 800,000 people were murdered, only around 60 survived. In Belzec, more than 430,000 were killed and only eight survived.

The excavations were initiated by the Israeli archaeologist Yoram Haimi, who came as a visitor to Sobibor in April 2007 to pay tribute to his two uncles who died there. "At that time the museum was closed," he said. "There were monuments to see, but nothing that showed where and how the murders were carried out."

He decided he would look for the remains of Sobibor himself and in the Polish archaeologist Wojciech Mazurek he founded an equally engaged partner for the project. Together they fought to obtain the necessary financing and authorisations from the authorities.

Already in 2010, next to the square with the monument, the archaeologists discovered remains of security barriers. One year later, they discovered the so-called "route to heaven," along which the new arrivals were driven to the gas chambers. "It was quite clear to us that the gas chambers would be at the end," Haimi told *Spiegel*

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Online.

But at first they could go no further. The memorial faced closure. Due to a lack of money, the visitors' centres had to be temporarily closed. Then the foundation for Polish-German reconciliation and the Majdanik State Museum took over responsibility for the grounds.

Haimi and Mazurek continued their excavation and found remains from barriers, barracks, crematoriums, as well as skeletons. The Rabbi of Warsaw gave them authorisation to remove the tarmac from the suspected site of the mass grave.

On September 8 this year, the archaeologists discovered remains of walls of red brick. Everything pointed to the conclusion that they were standing on the remains of the gas chamber. The area was between the "route to heaven," the crematorium and the remains of a barracks of the "special commando unit," as well as a water hole. Experts from Auschwitz confirmed the find.

The discovery was of "the greatest importance for Holocaust research," said David Silberklang, historian at the Yad Washem memorial in Jerusalem. He expected that it would become possible to provide a more accurate estimate of the victims, and know more precisely about how the murders had taken place.

Traces of Jewish life were also found during the excavations at Sobibor, such as an earring with the engraving, "see, you are dear to me," and a metal plaque with the date of the birth of the then six-year-old Lea Judith de la Penha from Amsterdam. As a result of this find, a television crew from the Netherlands are to film a documentary about the story of the child and her family. At least some of the victims of Sobibor will thereby be recognised.

Eighty-four-year-old Philip Bialowitz, one of the few living survivors from Sobibor, responded with satisfaction to the excavation finds. As a youth, he had belonged to the group of conspirators who planned the Sobibor uprising of October 14, 1943.

He was able to escape and was taken in and concealed along with his brother by a Polish farmer until the Red Army arrived. He had spent his life travelling the world, "because I swore that I would tell my story to young people as long as I am able. What happened back then should never be forgotten."

Another survivor of the Sobibor camp, and participant in the 1943 uprising, was Thomas Blatt. He turned his recollections of the period into a book titled, "Sobibor, the forgotten uprising."

Both Philip Bialowitz and Thomas Blatt appeared as witnesses and joint plaintiffs in January 2010 during the trial of SS helper John Demjanjuk in Munich. They described the terrible experiences they had as forced labourers in Sobibor.

The historian of Munich's Institute of Contemporary History, Dieter Pohl, presented a report to the court. He described the establishment of the National Socialists' system for exterminating Jews in the areas of Eastern Europe occupied by the Nazis, and the emergence of the extermination camps, including Sobibor. Since May 1942, Jews from throughout Europe had been systematically murdered in this camp in Poland, Pohl told the court. "The sole aim was murder." The leadership of the camp was composed of 25 to 30 SS soldiers, while the dirty work was carried out by 100-120 so-called Trawnicki guards, Demjanjuk among them.

Although the trial of Demjanjuk shed light on the crimes of National Socialism, it left many decisive questions unanswered. Demjanjuk died shortly after his conviction in May 2011, before the sentence of five years imprisonment for assisting in the murder of 28,000 Jews in Sobibor went into force.

A major problem in the trial of Demjanjuk was that most of those chiefly responsible for the Nazi crimes and those who assisted them were never brought before the courts in post-war Germany. Many of those responsible in the judiciary, intelligence services and police continued to be active in the federal republic without interruption, and without being held to account for their actions.

In the 1960s and 1970s, only half of the SS men prosecuted in the Sobibor trials were convicted. The camp's chief at the time received a life-long custodial sentence, and the others imprisonment of between three and eight years.

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