

EXCAVATING
SOBIBOR



**Holocaust Archaeology
between Heritage, History and Memory**

Martijn Eickhoff, Erik Somers, Jelke Take (eds.)



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S O B | B O R

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 **BOOKS**

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**Plan of the German death camp in Sobibór (2020)
Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku (PMM)**

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 Terner) and Tomasz (Toivi) Blatt.

VORLAGER

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

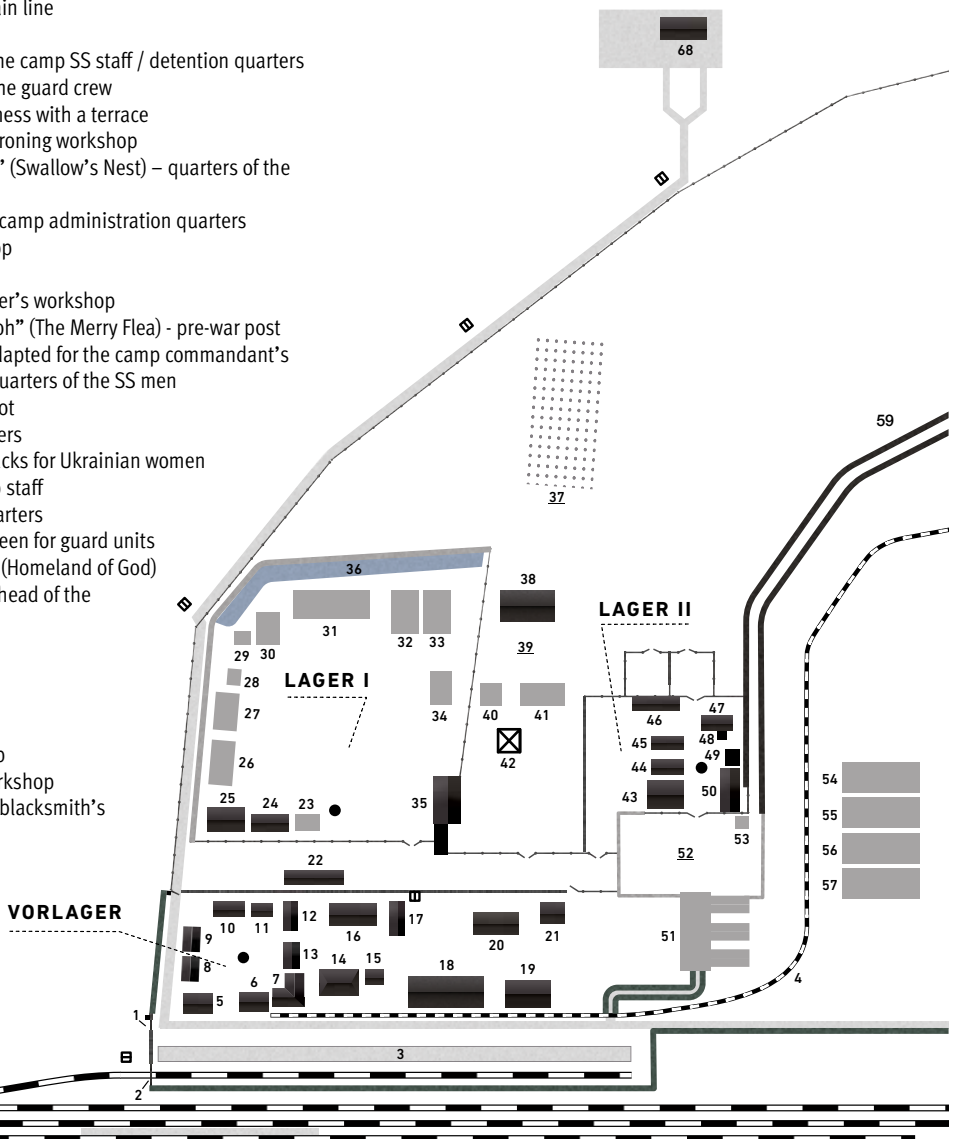
LAGER I

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

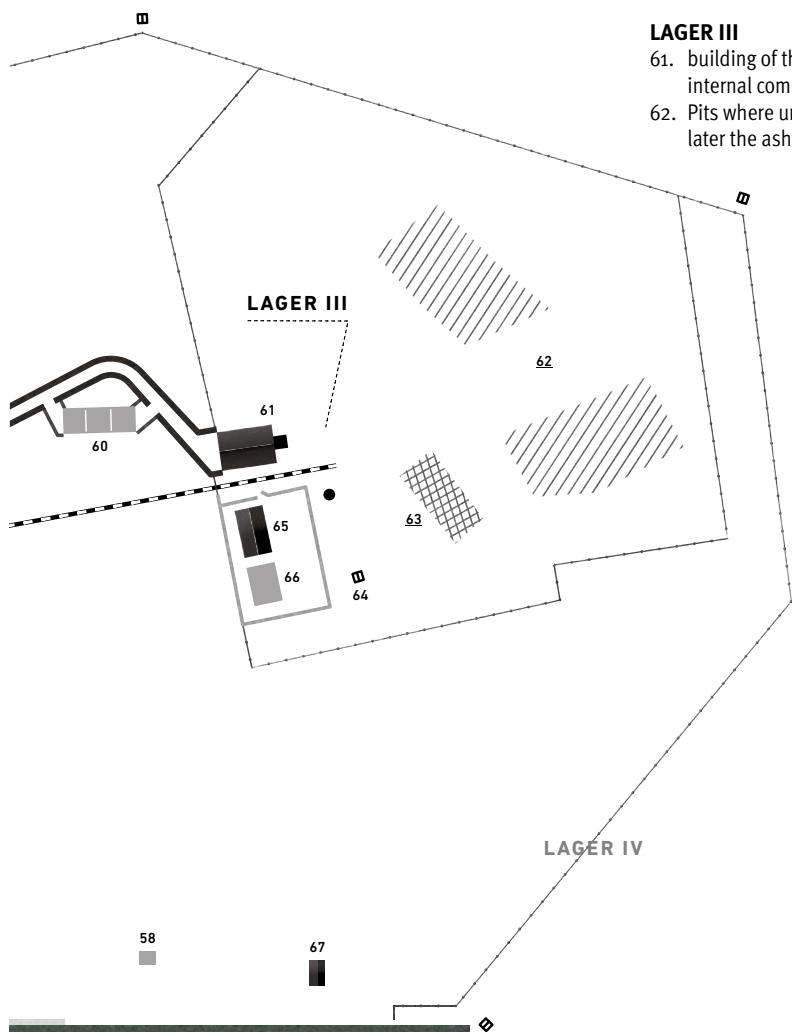
LAGER II

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

- 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



LAGER 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 camp III

LAGER 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

credit: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2020

PREFACE

It was not intended that the former Sobibor extermination camp would ever be found again.¹ When the Nazis dismantled the camp after the prisoners' uprising in 1943, the walls of the gas chambers were razed to the ground and trees were planted on the ashes of the deceased.

Through the testimonies of the few survivors of the camp, exploratory judicial and legislative investigations, and details that came to light during the trials of the perpetrators, a historical picture of the mass destruction that took place there was formed after the war. However, the actual traces of these crimes remained hidden in the soil, waiting to be revealed one day.

Decades after the end of this terror, archaeologists set to work. The archaeological research at Sobibor, which began in 2000 and continued until 2020, occasionally until 2023, entailed the most extensive archaeological excavations to have been held at a Holocaust site. In 2000 and 2001, an extensive survey of the site was conducted through archaeological coring. In 2004, the survey data was supplemented with 'non-invasive' geophysical prospection. The main purpose of the excavation was initially to trace the exact locations of the victims' ashes. From 2007, the archaeological research continued in the form of an archaeological excavation. 'Non-invasive' geophysical methods were used a second time to further map the site in 2008. The results of the research were used when realising plans for the redesign of the memorial site. From 2012 onwards, the archaeological research took a more structured approach and the excavations became larger in extent.

Large areas were then revealed, including the so-called '*Schlauch*', the route victims were forced to walk to their deaths. In the area of Camp III, the gas chambers, an escape tunnel and a large pit were excavated. Important excavations also took place in the *Vorlager* and Camp II, as well as in the area around the train station and unloading platform.

Not only were the exact locations where historical events had taken place traced, but the excavations also unearthed tens of thousands of artefacts. These finds, comprising the personal belongings the deportees had brought along with them, unaware of the true purpose of their journey, attracted press attention and helped to promote the memorial site and its history.

¹ The term 'Sobibor', written in German and without a Polish diacritical mark, is used in the text only when referring exclusively to the official German name of the camp (*SS-Sonderkommando Sobibor*) and the camp as such. The Polish spelling of the settlement's proper name is used in all other contexts, such as the name of the village and the memorial erected on the historical site of the former Nazi camp. Every effort has been made to use these spellings as consistently as possible.

The excavation results deepened our understanding of what took place in Sobibor, especially the fate of the victims. They added a new dimension to the imagination of the past. The results of the archaeological research also contributed to a transition in the process of commemorating and musealising the past. In the museum's permanent exhibition, which opened on the memorial site in 2020, a curated selection of excavated artefacts has been prominently displayed. These objects, unearthed after decades, not only serve as tangible evidence of the Holocaust, but also function as material and symbolic carriers of the memory of the Jewish men, women and children murdered in Sobibor in 1942 and 1943.

The background, course and results of the Sobibór archaeological research have raised many questions. This extensive but also complicated archaeological project involved many stakeholders, including representatives of both national and local governments, archaeologists, experts in Holocaust Studies, memorial culture, heritage and museology, architects, religious leaders, paid local workers and volunteers, local residents and, last but not least, the victims' relatives. All exerted influence on the objectives of the archaeological research. The interaction between the stakeholders, and the tensions that sometimes arose from this, highlighted how charged the impact of archaeological research at a location such as the Sobibor memorial site could be.

For these reasons, NIOD – invited to do so and made possible by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) – brought together an international group of archaeologists, historians and heritage and museum specialists, who shed light on the archaeological research and its impact based on their own expertise. The outcome is this scholarly volume: *Excavating Sobibor. Holocaust Archaeology between Heritage, History and Memory*. An interdisciplinary approach was explicitly adopted, whereby the authors focus on various aspects associated with archaeological research from different perspectives. They trace commonalities, intersections and differences, and identify relevant academic approaches. As a result, this edited volume has a strong interdisciplinary outlook. A critical examination of archaeological research methods is employed to investigate contemporary socio-cultural phenomena. After all, a discipline that evolved to explore a distant past is now also used to derive meaning from uncovered traces of a relatively recent past that still strongly influences the present. In addition, attention is devoted to the practical execution of the research. As a result, the choices made in relation to the inevitable moral implications of the archaeological work done in Sobibór form an integral part of this edited volume.

The contributions in *Excavating Sobibor* encompass diverse themes and address questions arising from the archaeological project. While preparing the publication, the editors created and consolidated an inventory of the numerous questions. These questions were then grouped into four points of focus that served as a guideline for this volume:

1. The history of Sobibor as an extermination camp and its transformation into a memorial site.
2. The factual findings of the archaeological excavations, viewed from both the perspective of the archaeologists and that of the commissioner.
3. A broader perspective on Sobibór in the context of archaeological research on sites of terror, considering its connection to interdisciplinary scientific research.

4. The implications of the archaeological research results in Sobibór for stakeholders, museum representation, historical heritage, memory culture, and their influence on historiography.

Within this framework, the authors were asked to define their topic and formulate their questions. The result is this diverse collection. Opening the volume is the chapter by Stephan Lehnstaedt, a professor of Holocaust Studies. In his chapter, he contextualises the historical background of our understanding of the Sobibor camp within the context of the *Aktion Reinhard* system.² He then discusses how the excavation results can contribute to enhancing our knowledge of the camp. These varied historical traces uncovered serve as new testimonies that complement the history of the camp.

In her chapter, historian Anne-Lise Bobeldijk connects the excavations with how, after World War II, Sobibor was slowly transformed from a landscape of terror into a landscape of memory; a development that unfolded within the context of perspectives on memorialisation and monumentalisation.

Using an interview format, Jelke Take interviewed archaeologists Wojciech (Wojtek) Mazurek, Yoram Haimi and Ivar Schute to analyse their findings of years of archaeological research in this 'guilty' landscape. What were their expectations, how did they approach their assignment, how did they handle the constant confrontations with an emotional past, which research methods were chosen, and how did they make choices? In their subsequent chapter, the three archaeologists then describe the most evocative and poignant research result: the reconstruction of the extermination process that began with the arrival of the deported Jews on the camp's platform, and then their progression to Camp II, where their luggage was confiscated, and they had to undress. They were then forced to follow the '*Schlauch*', the path to the gas chambers. The foundations of the gas chambers were uncovered in 2014, an event that received extensive coverage in the international press.

Claudia Theune, a professor of Historical Archaeology, focuses on the broader context of the significance of found personal objects. Considering finds from other Nazi concentration camps in her research, she emphasises the expressiveness – the non-verbal communication – of artefacts. She advocates taking much more account of specific contextualising factors when evaluating finds, as well as the particular characteristics of the terror site in question and knowledge of its history. 'Only by means of such an approach can a nuanced understanding be developed, one that does justice to all the victims involved.'

Heritage historian Hannah Wilson herself spent some time conducting archaeological research in Sobibór. In her chapter, she discusses personal artefacts and deals with the specific and sensitive aspect of 'forensic restitution'. Objects that have been linked with known victims hold significant emotional value for descendants; they serve as a tangible link to their loved ones. The issue reflects a broader concern: 'objects are a crucial part of identity formation, particularly where death and destruction are concerned'.

A collaborative team of archaeologists and cultural historians consisting of Katarzyna Grzybowska, Caroline Sturdy Colls, Roma Sendyka and Kevin Colls made an intensive effort to understand the complexity of the archaeological research at Sobibór. Based on a series of interviews with various actors involved in this complicated process, the authors evaluate the ways in which the research affected

² There are different spellings for *Aktion Reinhard*. This is due to variations in transcription and translation from German into other languages. In this volume, we use the German spelling *Aktion Reinhard* or Operation Reinhard. 'Reinhard' is a reference to German Nazi-leader, SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, who played a central role in establishing the death camps Belzec, Treblinka and Sobibor.

different stakeholders over time, and how these stakeholders in turn influenced the archaeological research. More generally, they reflect on the role that stakeholder relations can play in the implementation of archaeological research at atrocity sites.

The extent to which the archaeological findings guided the redesign of the Sobibór memorial site is illustrated in the contribution by cultural historian Erik Somers. He describes how, first and foremost, the site had to be a place of tranquillity and respect for the victims, and that this – not the archaeological findings – was the *a priori* principle guiding the design. The photographs by Krzysztof Stanek provide a visual reflection of what the memorial site looks like today. In the museum that opened at the Sobibór memorial site in 2020, the excavated artefacts in the permanent exhibition serve as the guiding principle. Historian Zofia Wóycicka analyses how archaeological finds have been transformed into museum objects and how they are incorporated into the historical narrative of the exhibition.

Cultural historian Zuzanna Dziuban focuses on an entirely different aspect linked to archaeological research, by addressing the complex and charged politics pertaining to the human remains of Holocaust victims at the former extermination camp at Sobibór. Her contribution extends beyond this practice at Sobibór, responding to the broader, longstanding perception that the dead of the Holocaust are ‘invisible’, and describes the political, cultural, religious and material processes involved in the ‘politics of dead bodies’.

Finally, Anna Izabella Zalewska, an archaeologist and historian, discusses how to manage the material heritage found at the Sobibór site. She discusses how archaeological research in Sobibór connects to current Polish and European frameworks of archaeological heritage management, whether archaeological research at sites such as Sobibór should be included in national heritage management structures, and what the history of archaeological research at Sobibór can contribute to heritage management practices in Poland and beyond.

The Epilogue draws together the authors’ findings, and concludes with a warning that today’s Sobibór, as a commemorative museum and heritage site, may ‘freeze’ the past if viewed as a final, neutral translation of archaeological data. The authors of this volume urge against this, and encourage diverse forms of appropriation. We emphasise transparency in the archaeological narrative of the 21st century, allowing people to incorporate newly acquired traces into their narratives.

The compilation of this volume was a careful process with a shared starting point. From 24 to 26 October 2022, the group of authors, the project team and key collaborators (nineteen individuals) attended an Expert Meeting in Poland. In addition to the discussions there, they visited the memorial site in Sobibór and the museum. The discussions continued in Majdanek, and a visit was made there to the depots where the archaeological finds from the excavations at Sobibór are stored. The insightful discussions that took place significantly enhanced the understanding of the topics covered in this volume and provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of scientific research. However, they also re-emphasised the complex nature and sensitivity of the subject. The expert meeting was used to align the chapters as far as possible.

During the editing process, we shortened some parts of the contributions, with the consistency of the volume as a whole in mind. Afterwards, all of the chapters underwent a meticulous and independent

peer-review process. We express our sincere gratitude to the exceptionally skilled scholars who shouldered this responsibility, providing insightful and constructive feedback.

In the realisation of this volume, NIOD could rely on an independent scientific committee that was willing to assist the project team in word and deed. This committee consisted of: Prof. Nanci Adler (NIOD and University of Amsterdam), Paulina Florjanowicz MA (director of the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections), Dr Barbara Hausmair (University Innsbruck), Dr David Silberklang, (Yad Vashem) and Em. Prof. James E. Young (University of Massachusetts). We are very grateful to these highly respected scholars for their dedication and commitment to this project.

This volume, *Excavating Sobibor: Holocaust Archaeology between Heritage, History and Memory*, is part of a larger project which, as mentioned above, was initiated and made possible by the Dutch Ministry of VWS, and implemented by NIOD. Simultaneously with this volume, a book for the general public, *Traces of Sobibor: Archaeology of an Extermination Camp*, is being published by historian and publicist Erik Schumacher. In addition to his independent research and exclusive interviews, the author has incorporated the findings from this scholarly volume into his publication. Erik Schumacher's book, *Traces of Sobibor*, is available in four language editions (Polish, English, German and Dutch).

Martijn Eickhoff, Erik Somers and Jelke Take
February 2024

The Sobibor death camp

The Sobibor death camp was built in a remote location in eastern Poland, some eight kilometres south of the village of Włodawa. This location was chosen for several reasons: first, the site was located near the railway line that connected Chełm with Brześć nad Bugiem, making it easy to transport large numbers of Jews to the camp. Second, the area was relatively isolated, making it easier to conceal the atrocities committed there.

The construction of the Sobibor death camp began in March 1942. The camp was designed by SS officer Richard Thomalla, who had previously been involved in the construction of the Belzec death camp. The actual building process was carried out by a combination of SS officers, civilian workers and Trawniki men.⁷

The latter, officially called *Wachmannschaften des ss- und Polizeiführers Lublin*, were recruited by Globocnik from among captured Red Army soldiers in the late summer of 1941 and trained in the Trawniki camp. Most were Ukrainians and Russians of German origin, because the SS thought they would potentially have less affinity with the Soviet regime. By the end of the war, nearly 5,000 men had been recruited in this way. Their 'voluntary enlistment' was often only a matter of survival, given the disastrous conditions in the POW camps; over 3.3 million Red Army men died in German custody.



Overview photo of Sobibor Camp I taken from a watchtower in early summer 1943, with the Vorlager in the background. Two Jewish forced labourers can be seen next to the barrack on the left of the photo and in the foreground among the piles of firewood. On the right, a Trawniki patrols the corridor between the camp fencing.

Collection Johan Niemann, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), gift of Bildungswerk Stanislaw-Hantz

Globocnik used them for all kinds of tasks throughout the Generalgouvernement: they protected property, helped with the harvest and worked in construction.⁸ Above all, however, they provided forces for the deportation of Jews to the extermination camps and worked there as guards. For every fifteen to twenty Germans, there were 100 to 120 Trawniki men.

John (Iwan) Demjanjuk is the best known of these Trawniki men,⁹ of whom in most cases no names have survived. (See photo on page 62.) The German personnel, however, have been carefully researched and the perpetrators identified, thanks in particular to a study by Sara Berger.¹⁰ The members of this small conspiratorial circle usually isolated themselves from the *Fremdvölkischen* and staged a petty-bourgeois everyday German life; a pretence of normality beyond the mass murder and a relatively comfortable existence, thanks to the exploitation of Jewish victims.

Even with these staff in place, however, the genocide could not yet be carried out. The German perpetrators therefore not only included men from the 'euthanasia' programme, but also more than 300 subordinates of Hermann Höfle. His department in Lublin, which was the coordination centre for the mass murder in the Generalgouvernement, can be compared to Adolf Eichmann's department IV b 4 in the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin, which directed the deportations of European Jews mainly to Auschwitz. Indeed, there was more than one exchange of experiences between the two SS officers.

Höfle's people requested trains from the *Reichsbahn*, assigned Trawniki men to the respective ghettos, and coordinated with local German forces to operate on the ground. At the same time, they supervised and oversaw the loading of the Jews and arranged for the immediate shooting of those who could no longer fit onto the trains or were unfit for transport. This highly efficient killing machinery always operated in direct coordination with Odilo Globocnik, not least because the latter's office manager Ernst Lerch (b. 1914) worked closely with Höfle and also ensured the coordination of *Aktion Reinhard* with the Reich Security Main Office.¹¹

The Sobibor camp was laid out in a similar fashion to Belzec, with a railway platform, barracks, gas chambers and burial pits. A barbed-wire fence and guard towers surrounded the camp. It was divided into two sections: the living quarters for SS officers and Trawniki men and the section where the prisoners were held. The living quarters were at the front of the camp, while the prisoner section was at the back.

The prisoner section was further divided into three zones: the reception area, the living quarters and the killing area. The victims were brought to the reception area when they arrived at the camp. The enormous number of victims meant that there were comparably large quantities of leftover possessions, and a lot of money was generated through robbery. Even though the Jews were often only allowed to take one suitcase or even no luggage at all, many had kept a very last nest egg, which they took with them on

7 Józef Marszałek, 'Zentralbauleitung Der Waffen-SS Und Polizei W Lublinie', in: *Zeszyty Majdanka* 4 (1977) pp. 5-45.

8 Peter Black, 'Foot Soldiers of the Final Solution: The Trawniki Training Camp and Operation Reinhard', in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25 (2011); Angelika Benz, *Handlanger der SS: Die Rolle der Trawniki-Männer im Holocaust* (Berlin: Metropol, 2015).

9 Lawrence Douglas, *Späte Korrektur: Die Prozesse gegen John Demjanjuk* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020).

10 Sara Berger, *Experten der Vernichtung: Das T4-Reinhardt-Netzwerk in den Lagern Belzec, Sobibor und Treblinka* (Hamburg: Hamburger Ed, 2014).

11 Bertrand Perz, 'The Austrian Connection: SS and Police Leader Odilo Globocnik and His Staff in the Lublin District', in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29 (2015) pp. 400-430.

to a halt because the story is brought back to a level we can relate to, that of a single person, with a name and a face, an identity. One time, I was driving home through the Polish countryside and got a call from a journalist asking about Sobibor, and I suddenly broke down, unexpectedly, leaning against my car.

‘Another such thing is this one object that has come back to me over the years: a small ceramic fragment with an equally small drawing on it. In a woven nest lie six eggs, two white, two brown, and two green. On the edge of the nest, two birds embrace each other with their wings. Love. Hope. Future. The place where victims had to surrender their belongings, including once a cup from which this shard broke off, before walking naked to their death. No hope, no love, no future. That shard, that image, wanders through my thoughts and surfaces at times when I don’t want it to. But it just happens, and over the years, it has happened more often.’

Haimi: ‘These days, I’m no longer excavating. It has been enough for me. However, if asked to excavate a Holocaust site, I would do it. But I can no longer excavate a regular site like a Roman site or an early Bronze Age site. I feel that as an archaeologist, I am full. No more flint, pottery, glass, churches, or mosque walls like I once excavated, for me. Sobibór did something to my heart; it changed me. Now I am dealing with all the archaeological material we have excavated in Sobibór. I feel that we, the excavators, are responsible for all these objects placed in depots. So, I am focused on the museum and exhibitions but no longer on excavation. Something happened in my heart that makes me excavate only Holocaust sites. And I think this says something.’

Mazurek: ‘It has always been a matter of discussion because when we uncover something, one item, it marks the beginning of a historical narrative. For instance, the name tag of Lea Judith de la Penha, the first one, was found very close to the ramp. It was a shock for everybody, you know, that we have the name of this young girl and having the list of victims from Holland, noting when she arrived and when she was killed.

‘You know, for a few days after finds like these, we discussed this, recognising it as such conclusive evidence of what transpired there. It’s always a profoundly emotional experience because, as archaeologists, we are expected to maintain objectivity and be very meticulous for documentation purposes – detailing where an item is found and so forth. However, the emotional impact resonates similarly among the workers, everyone involved, as human beings.

‘The sentiment is universal. It’s challenging, of course, in this moment of discovery, to remain detached. It was an atmosphere, a discussion – some people were crying, but there was this profound sense that we were connecting with something intimately tied to real people, real lives.

‘I believe that archaeology offers a new perspective and can change how people view history. It’s not just about countering deniers; it’s crucial for everyone to understand the true events of Sobibor. Involving young people from various countries such as Poland, Germany, and Russia in discussions and even excavation work can be more impactful than traditional lessons. Our goal is to remember and ensure that such atrocities are not repeated.

4

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON THE GAS CHAMBERS IN SOBIBÓR

Yoram Haimi, Wojciech Mazurek
and Ivar Schute

Abstract

The archaeological research in the Sobibor camp presented in this chapter is interdisciplinary, combining sources traditionally used in both archaeological and historical fields. The historical findings, which include documents, testimonies and visual documentation, are integrated with the physical finds (buildings and artefacts) revealed in the archaeological excavations; the two sets of findings are mutually complementary. The purpose of the present research is to reconstruct the physical structure of the Sobibor camp in the light of the historical findings, analyse the results of the archaeological excavations, and examine the material finds. An analysis of the archaeological excavations that took place between 2007 and 2017 reveals the patterns of life in the camp, the extermination procedures and the camp's history during and after the war, while addressing both the operations and the victims' fate. This chapter describes the extermination process that began when the Jews arrived at the camp's train platform and continued to Camp II, where they were sorted and stripped, and onwards to the 'Schlauch' ('Himmelfahrtstrasse' or 'Road to Heaven') and the entrance to the gas chambers in Camp III, culminating with the last station, the crematoria and the mass graves.

Introduction

Sobibor was the second of the three 'Operation Reinhard' extermination camps, alongside Belzec and Treblinka. These camps were established to implement Nazi Germany's Final Solution: the extermination of European Jewry. Sobibor was in operation for eighteen months, from April 1942 to 14 October 1943. In its early stages, the camp comprised three areas. The administrative area was located in Camp I, which was itself sub-divided into two parts. In the south-eastern part of the camp were the *Vorlager*, where the commander's house and the living quarters of the SS and Ukrainian personnel were located, and the entrance to the camp and the railway platform. The south-western part of Camp I was the area where Jewish labourers were housed. Camp II held the sorting and receiving facilities for Jews arriving there, and warehouses to store belongings. Camp III contained the extermination zone, which included the gas chambers, the prisoners' barracks, open crematoria and mass graves. In July 1943, Camp IV was built to prepare the camp to receive and store ammunition.

sunglasses, hairpins, finger rings, wedding rings, brooches, earrings, clothing accessories such as cufflinks, numerous buttons and zippers, as well as coins from Poland, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria (pre-1938), Slovakia, France, the USSR, Sweden, Belgium and other countries. Watches, fountain pens and other writing implements, smoking accessories such as cigarette-holders or pipes, playing cards, dice, a travel chess set and other game pieces, as well as religious symbols like Star of David badges or crosses, and keys; small ones, possibly belonging to suitcases, and larger ones from their former homes or doors, and mailbox nameplates with their names. Particularly poignant are finds that attest to the murder of children, such as a fragment of a doll, pins with child-related symbols, or cups with children's motifs. All these items were deliberately selected by the deportees.

Hence, various categories emerged: items that were listed on the packing lists, such as dishes and cutlery, pocket knives, torches, lighters, thermos flasks, and so forth; necessary objects important for a journey, such as clothing and toiletries; items that held personal significance for individuals, such as glasses and various forms of jewellery; and items for entertainment, such as smoking paraphernalia, playing cards and other games.



- a. Pair of cufflinks with partially preserved enamel coating, excavated in Camp II.
- b. Fountain pen made of Ebonite steel. The marking on the nib reads: Warranted / Pointe / Iridum. Excavated in Camp II.
- c. Brass and nickel lipstick case manufactured by the J. Szach company, Warsaw. Excavated in Camp II.
- d. Hair iron made of metal rods resembling scissors, excavated in Camp III. PMM / Krzysztof Stanek

These finds reveal the personal, active choices made regarding possessions and personal availability, as well as the selection of items individuals brought on this journey. Although the instructions provided should be allowed for, individual possibilities for action become visible.

In some cases, the origin of the items can also be identified: beer bottles originating from Hengelo, Leiden and Groningen, or mineral water from Bad Cannstatt. Deportees may have packed beer from breweries in their hometowns.

Religious symbols are significant. Overall, few such religious symbols were found. In addition to symbols associated with Judaism, there are some Christian crosses, indicating that Christians as well as people of the Jewish faith were murdered in Sobibor. The classification by the National Socialists, determining who belonged to the 'Jewish race' and who did not, was based on the racial laws of 1935, regardless of whether these individuals were religious, attended synagogue regularly, attended less frequently, or were baptised.

What is also remarkable is what was *not* found in Sobibor or other extermination centres: suitcases, remains of blankets, warm coats, scarves, gloves, earflaps, boots, socks and warm underwear. These items are made of organic materials and deteriorate easily in the ground. However, some remains would have survived if these items had been in the ground. The most likely possibility is that these items were located at the ramp or in Camp II, but such a hypothesis would need to be tested during new excavations and by revisiting existing excavation data. Thus, how should these absences be interpreted?



e. Excavated mailbox nameplates with family names, as shown in the Sobibór Museum. Krzysztof Stanek

f. Keys of different sizes – small ones, possibly from suitcases, and larger ones from house or cupboard doors – excavated from different places on the site, as shown in the Sobibór Museum. The caption in the display case reads: 'The Germans obscured the truth about death camp deportations by using various euphemisms such as "evacuation", "relocation", "removal", "expulsion from the country", etc. For this reason, some of the deportees carried the keys to their houses and apartments with them, hoping to return home one day.' PMM/Krzysztof Stanek



This house in the *Vorlager* of Sobibor was the residence of the camp commander of Sobibor death camp, Franz Stangl (April 1942 – September 1942). The house, which has survived to this day, is now privately owned. Krzysztof Stanek



The museum, which opened in 2020, is situated within the perimeters of the former camp. The building houses the permanent exhibition as well as a multi-purpose room intended for educational classes, lectures and seminars. The building also houses a visitor service centre and offices for employees. *Krzysztof Stanek*

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Slovakian metal badge of the Star of David unearthed from excavations of the 'Schlauch' ('Himmelfahrtstrasse') during the 2011 Sobibór excavations. Photo from filmmaker Gary Hochman's documentary, *Deadly Deception at Sobibor*. Gary Hochman

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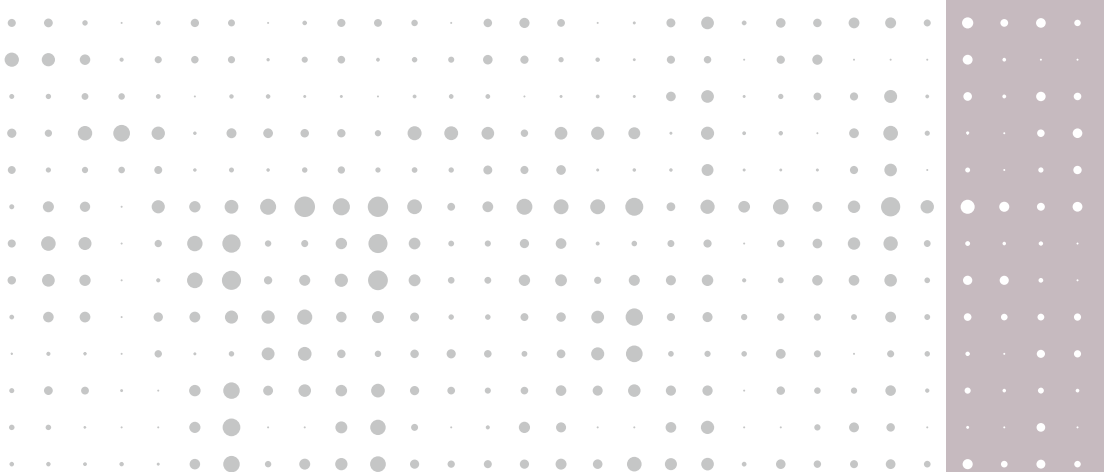
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From 2000 to 2020, archaeologists conducted extensive research at the site of the former Nazi death camp Sobibor, marking the most comprehensive excavations at a Holocaust site to date. They traced the exact locations where historical events had taken place and unearthed tens of thousands of artifacts.

The research generated an 'archaeological momentum,' bringing a challenging past directly into the present and triggering a multitude of social, political, memory, and heritage processes. In this edited volume, an interdisciplinary group of archaeologists, historians, museologists, and heritage researchers critically examine these developments.

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