

We Remember: KL Warschau (19 July 1943 – 1 August 1944)

19 July 1943 Germans established the KL Warshau concentration camp on the ruins of the former Warsaw Ghetto. About 20 thousand people – Poles and Jews – are estimated to have died in the camp over the course of its operation.

“We set a house after a house afire. There was nothing left but stone and brick debris,” Jürgen Stroop noted consciously, post-factum, in his conversation with Kazimierz Moczarski. [11] The past – homes and lives of the Jewish people – was reduced to rubble. It was replaced by the present with an undercurrent of temporality. The future was to fall within this new, very different space. The route to it led through KL Warschau. The words spoken by the “Executioner of the Warsaw Ghetto” could be treated as an epitaph for the part of Warsaw which until then had been known as the “Jewish quarter”, if it were not for the German pragmatism underpinned by the desire to profit from the plundering of the remnants of Jewish property. However, there were also other reasons. Officially, Stroop planned to “extract, collect and reuse millions of bricks, scrap iron and other materials.” [10; 821] He acted together with Franz Konrad, who earned the nickname of the “King of the Warsaw Ghetto.” The latter claimed that the primary goal was to raze to the ground everything that was left of the “closed quarter.” “The Ghetto was to be obliterated, and replaced with a park and a green square. The rubble from the burnt city was to be used to fill the cellars and level the height differences.” [4; 72-73] There was, however, another motivation behind the actions of the Germans: as the perpetrators, they were fully aware of what they were doing, and thus intended to leave no trace of their deeds. It was nothing new to them. After all, they were doing the same thing at the time in Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibór death camps. Apart from these very “practical” goals, the Germans – perhaps driven by their greed for profit – believed that the legendary Jewish wealth was the most valuable “product” which could be recovered from the ruins of the Ghetto. They believed that they would find money, gold, and diamonds.

The German occupants intended to pursue their plans following the completion of the so-called

Grossaktion [22 July 1942 – 21 September 1942]. In the autumn of 1942, Heinrich Himmler ordered that “plants producing military supplies and all the Jews working there” be grouped together in the concentration camps in Warsaw and Lublin. In the winter of 1943, he dictated that “all private undertakings in the Ghetto be incorporated into the concentration camp.” [10; 821] Such decisions served to create “undertakings” that would be directly under the command of the SS and profit from the prisoners’ labour. It is considered that KL Warschau was established on 19 July 1943, i.e. on the day when a transport of about 300 German prisoners arrived in the former Ghetto. “Almost all wore green triangle badges, which indicated that they were ‘career criminals’ brought from KL Buchenwald to supervise the slave labour of Jewish prisoners.” [1; 7] Almost four thousand Jewish prisoners were brought from KL Auschwitz in the subsequent months of that year. They came from a number of European countries, including Austria, the Netherlands, Greece, France and Germany. And, of course, there were also Polish Jews. The last transport – of Hungarian Jews – reached KL Warschau in the spring of 1944. It is estimated that almost eight thousand Jews were sent to KL Warschau. How many of them died, it is still unknown... KL Warschau operated from 19 July 1943 until 1 August 1944. On the day that the Warsaw Uprising broke out, there were about 350 Jewish prisoners at KL Warschau. The others were forced to march to concentration camps to the west of Warsaw. [2; 3 and 3; 8 and 7; 5. Also: 8; 53]

The everyday life at KL Warschau was in no way unique. What was left of it? Symbols embedded in the memory of those who survived despite hostile conditions. Fragmented memories of their suffering at the hands of Germans...

“The camp consisted of rows of wooden barracks painted green,” said Tadeusz Zuchowicz, codename “Marek,” who served in the “Zośka” Battalion of the Home Army. “It was surrounded by a high, concrete wall with watchtowers equipped with machine guns. The heavy iron gate was the only entrance to the camp.” [6; 2] The wall separated the camp from the “dead zone” of the former Ghetto. The deadly silence was interrupted by the sounds of executions carried out in Zamenhofa, Nowolipka and Dzielna Streets: victims of KL Warschau, Pawiak Prison, Gestapo or Warsaw residents detained during round-ups. Those who were found hiding in cellars or bunkers under rubble of the former Ghetto were also murdered. [8; 227-228. Also: 9; 363 – 364]

„The whole neighbourhood – noted Dawid Icchak Mehl – reeked of burnt flesh and bones of the victims.” Those were the corpses of people who were shot, died at “work” or from exhaustion. The so-called “death brigade” transported the corpses to 45 Gęsia Street. “There the bodies were piled up: they were placed on a pile of wood which was later set on fire.” [2; 7 – 8] It was not uncommon for the members of the brigade to end up on that pile. “During the burning of piles of corpses, I once saw the SS men from KL Warschau shoot the Jewish prisoners when they finished their job.” [8; 60 – 62] It was nothing unusual -according to the directives of the “King of the Warsaw Ghetto” – to order death of the “redundant” people in the “gas chamber in KL Auschwitz”: “I could not continue working with these Jews because the work was too hard for them due to their physical structure.” [4; 74]

KL Warschau was riddled with corruption from beginning to end. That is why in May of 1944 it became a sub-camp of KL Majdanek. The supervisory authorities of the camp were also replaced. It did not change much. Both the Germans and ethnic groups subordinate to them continued to prey on human tragedy until the very end, while the prisoners tried with all their might to survive. They made the attempts to exchange the “treasures” found in the ruins for food which was illegal. They often paid the highest price for such actions: “The SS men shot two prisoners because one of them found and hid a piece of soap in his uniform, and the other one tried to do the same with some other object “. [8; 228]

“An SS doctor would look each of us in the mouth to see how many golden teeth each of us had,” one of the prisoners recalled that it was one of the first things to which the Jews transported in November 1943 from KL Auschwitz were subjected. He would soon realise that such practices were the norm in his new destination. Perhaps the Germans were measuring the “value” of their prisoners? By the end of 1943, he recalled, those who did not manage to survive were treated as objects: “After writing down the number of the dead and checking their mouths, [their] golden and platinum teeth were taken out.” [2; 7 – 8] Since the beginning of 1944, this has been “corrected”. A Polish physician and Pawiak prisoner working several hours a day in KL Warschau in a “mockery of an infirmary”, Felicjan Loth, talked about the rumors circulating in the camp at the time: “The commandant of the camp and two policemen searched for prisoners with a large number of gold dental crowns and bridges and killed [them] under the pretext of an attempted

escape, and then knock out their golden teeth with hammers.” Those who managed to get in touch with Loth confirmed it: “This practice was getting worse by the day.” [8; 226] Therefore, they asked to have him deprive them of the things the possession of which could cost them their life.

Camp life was dominated by hunger, infectious diseases, slave labour and merciless treatment of prisoners. It started and ended with roll calls: early in the morning and late in the afternoon. They lasted up to two hours. There were, however, instances where the camp authorities prevented the prisoners from retiring to their barracks after the so-called “work.” It happened in January 1944: “Two people were missing during the evening roll call. We stood “at ease” for exactly 6 hours – said Oskar Paserman – 18 people died of cold. It turned out that two missing persons died in the camp hospital, but somebody forgot to report their death.” [1; 11]

The sanitary conditions were terrible: “We had millions, no, billions of lice. Everything we ate was full of them, our blankets were moving by themselves. Our stomachs were badly bitten. We had no place to wash ourselves.” There were consequences, of course – in the winter, typhus was running rampant in the camp, and scabies soon followed. At that time, the isolated prisoners stayed in closed barracks: “They died by dozens every day.” [1; 10. Also: 2; 7] It was only when the SS men were also infected that the camp authorities took preventive measures. They were ineffective, anyway. In the spring of 1944, there were more Polish and German civilians working in the camp than Jewish prisoners.

While the manufacturing plants previously located in the Ghetto were relocated to KL Majdanek, the prisoners of KL Warschau were mostly exploited to “clean the Ghetto”: “We used dynamite to blow up the walls of houses that were not quite destroyed yet, or we had to climb high and use tools to demolish the walls.” [2; 8-9] Death was ever-present: “The smell of dead bodies that were still lying in bunkers and ruins was in the air,” recalled Paserman. “I saw the bodies of women, men and children who died of starvation.” [1; 7]

“Here come the SS men– echoed the last words of a young woman written down in the first days of May 1943 – it is the end”. In the following months, the journal was lying on the floor of a

bunker, where the nameless author lived out the rest of her days. In the autumn, it was recovered by members of the "Search Brigade." One of its members was Alois Eisenhendler: "It was all written in pencil, but the last sentence – I remember it very well – was written in blood." For the "finders", it was proof of what had happened in the Ghetto a few months earlier: "We considered it a relic and hid it from the unwanted eye." [5; 4] Perhaps it was this very document that came into the hands of Esther Oryt, who, using a fake ID and posing as a Polish woman, Czesława Glaser, worked in a laundry near KL Warschau? "One time, the "seekers" brought me a diary they found in a bunker on Miła Street, she said years later. "It was written by a young girl during the uprising." [2; 8]

"On Pawia Street, of a four-storey house," said Paserman, who was conscripted into the "Search Brigade", "only a small room remained, like a small remnant of its former life." On the order of the SS men who supervised their work, the prisoners put a ladder to this ruin of a house and then checked the room. The Germans were disappointed because they only found bodies of two young people: a woman and a man. The Robinsons. She was unconscious, and he was already dead: "The girl was shot." [1; 8] The bodies were taken away by the "Death Brigade."

"Anyone who finds valuables," said the Gestapo officer, "will be granted freedom". This took place at the intersection of Dzielna and Karmelicka Streets. Maybe the victim, who has just been tortured at Szucha Avenue, believed it? Soon the Gestapo arrived. They brought thirty prisoners from KL Warschau. For the Germans, a game has just began – a game with people's lives. For the Jews, it was also a game – for life or death. The risk was great. But hope was stronger than fear. Probably because the prisoners were aware that every day could be their last... The Gestapo man flipped a coin. The one who grabbed it soon set off to look for hidden treasures. The staircase was destroyed. With the use of ropes, fellow prisoners pulled him up to the top floor of what was left of the house. In one of the few surviving rooms, he found a casket with valuables. When he came down, he handed it over to the Gestapo man. He checked it and gave the order: "Come, you will get your freedom." When the prisoner stood before him, without further ado: "He took out his gun and shot him on the spot." [8; 228 – 229] A Polish woman who witnessed it saw the ruthlessness in the eyes of that German as he fulfilled his "promise."

There would be as many such stories as people sentenced to death camps, slave labour, and often death. If they were alive. Their stories died with them. A few have survived. KL Warschau existed just over twelve months. It is estimated that the total number of Polish and Jewish people who perished there amounts to approximately 20 thousand. For the Germans, they were just numbers. But in their records, they were happy to report the measurable benefits: "More than 30 million bricks were recovered, as well as 6,000. tons of scrap iron, including more than 800 tons of non-ferrous metals." [10; 824] There was no room for information about the looting. Nor about the victims.

After the war, the thought of KL Warschau was pushed out of the collective consciousness. In part, probably, because the former residents of this part of Warsaw, the Warsaw Jews, were gone. We should remember about it, even though the buildings in which the Jews used to live no longer exist. And yet, the new houses, squares and streets, together with the people living there, are located on a land soaked with Jewish and Polish blood...

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Photo: Barracks and guard towers of KL Warschau. A photograph taken after the capture of the camp by soldiers from the "Zośka" Battalion (public domain)

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