

## II. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SHOAH IN ART

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### **Art in Places of Death: Polish Signs of Memory in the Nazi Death Camps**

#### I

In four Nazi death camps built on Polish soil by the Germans, aiming at the extermination of the European Jews, nearly two million human beings were annihilated between December 1941 and the end of 1944. How important are the numbers? Is the place of a brutal murder committed on one innocent person less important than a place where a million perished? Yes, it is, because in our perception of the Holocaust two things are most important - the magnitude of the crime and the way in which it was enacted.

Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek, arguably the best known extermination sites in Poland, will not be discussed here, as they constituted parts of large concentration camp complexes, which functioned until the liberation, and where the remnants of the camps' life and death - barracks, ruins of crematoria, some of the victims' personal belongings - survived until the liberation. Things were different in the case of Chełmno upon Ner, Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, where the Germans built the death factories for hundreds of thousands of people, and, with their aims achieved, did everything possible to destroy all evidence of the crimes committed. They were successful to the extent that for people coming here after the war no traces remained in which memory and imagination could be anchored. In those emptied spaces the artists were entrusted with the task of creating symbolic signs, which would guard the identity of the place, suggesting ways in which it could be experienced. The artists were, of course, neither the only acting agents, nor were they

working independently; their ideas, planning and execution of the works were influenced by the historical knowledge of the day; by the ideological and political orientation of patrons and sponsors; by the expectations of different social and national groups. Of importance were also dominant artistic trends and styles - in Poland the latter were heavily dependent on the political set-up.

## II

With the passage of time at least five different ideas emerged as to how best to safeguard and commemorate places of the Shoah.

**The first one** concerns efforts to make "real", in the imagination and emotions of visitors, what had happened: to recall the sequence of events, as if from the perspective of the victim, starting with the initial experience of helplessness and disorientation, and ending with the horror of dying. This is attempted by taking the visitor, symbolically, through the topography of the place, from arrival and unloading through the barracks for undressing to the so-called "baths" - in reality the place of death, which was most commonly a gas chamber - to the final destruction of the body, on a grate, in a crematorium, thrown into a burial pit. Finally, visitors are led to the place of homage and prayer, conceived not in terms of rituals of any given religion, but as a form of mournful meditation on the fate of murdered people. Here, the central monument is often located.

**The second** idea is a vision of land bearing the mark of Cain - violated, wasted, destroyed forever. It has to be sealed off, covered with gravel or sand, or flooded with concrete, so that nothing can grow here again. The ashes should be left in peace, and the land empty, with the stigma of genocide never to be erased.

**The third** conception is the land returned to nature, a landscape of trees, alleyways and lawns, a terrain of mourning, but also a reminder to visitors that nature is more lasting than human madness.

According to **the fourth** idea, it is the educational process which is of utmost importance - giving people the fullest possible information about the history of the site, providing detailed, documented knowledge about its past existence, and placing this in the broader context of the war and of Nazi ideology, thus turning the "voided" place of murder into a museum, documenting the circumstances, "planting" historical memory.

In the last few decades a **fifth** idea has come to the fore: the "opening up" of the land of death into the present time, inviting new signs of mem-

ory from the families, communities, national groups or political organisations; at the same time, seemingly paradoxically, calling upon the more remote past by bringing here objects - symbols from the times before the Shoah.

Strands of the above can be brought together, in different ways and to different degrees, sometimes as a result of deliberate actions, sometimes without deliberation, or even accidentally. Today, more than ever before, we are aware of the fact that the former death camps are visited by people with different degrees of historical knowledge, varied sensitivities and limits of emotional endurance, and from different spheres of memory. Among them are survivors with a factual memory of this or of a similar land; their children with a memory "planted" through family narratives; there are also the perpetrators or their children, and the last living witnesses of wartime events. Still, the majority are people - and soon it will be only they - with no authentic memory, but with a "second-degree" memory, or a memory which is wholly derivative, filled with images and concepts induced by and taken from textbooks, historical works, documentaries and fiction films, internet websites, literary and visual works of art. And it is to them, primarily, that the commemorative signs and public works of art should appeal.

Memory, clearly, is not a static phenomenon, but a process which realises itself through the history of individuals, groups, nations, and even the history of the whole human species. There is a tendency among scholars to "universalise" the phenomena and the memory of Shoah, while one of the tasks of this paper is to anchor Polish public art which commemorates the Holocaust in the historical time of its making, to ask questions about its entrapment in specific ideological and artistic processes: **how** it looks, but also **why** it looks as it does. The paper also constitutes a reflection on the present shape and functioning of the former death camp grounds, considered primarily in terms of the artistic intervention which took place here, its possible influence on the visitors' experience of the place, and how it can support the human duty of remembrance.

Let us add that out of the five mentioned concepts regarding the preservation of places of the Shoah, two have been realised in distinct form in Poland: the first in Treblinka, and the fifth in Chełmno upon Ner. The artists' idea which shaped the Treblinka memorial emerged in an early phase of the commemorative project and has survived to this day in almost unchanged form, while Chełmno acquired its present shape at a much later time, in the early 1990s.

### III

Before presenting the camps' history and their commemorative art, a few words of warning are needed. In spite of a long lasting interest and extensive research, there are still no fully reliable data concerning some of the important matters: firstly, the numbers of people murdered - the differences here might reach hundreds of thousands; the wartime limits of the camps have not been precisely traced and secured; some elements of the camp topography have not been fully identified. This has consequences for the commemorative signs: untrue or contradictory data can appear on monuments, site plans and on information boards. This can adversely affect the reception of commemorative works. Secondly, commemorative signs may not appear in appropriate places; it might happen that sites important in the history of the camp remain unacknowledged, outside the present borders. It also happens that commemorative works appear in the wrong place, e.g. commemorating an execution site or crematorium, which *de facto* existed in a different area of the camp.

Bearing in mind the above, a brief history of the four camps, and of their public art and commemorative signs, will now be presented, in chronological order, using a simple, descriptive model. Chełmno camp, named Kulmhof by the Germans, was the first to be established, and it started functioning on the outskirts of the small Polish town of Chełmno, on 8 December 1941, with the arrival of a transport of Jews from the nearby ghetto in Koło. It was different from other camps in three respects: the extermination process was carried out on two different sites; it was administered in mobile gas chambers; it had two, separate phases of activity, with the second ending finally in January 1945.<sup>1</sup> During the first phase of its existence it centred around a one-storey Chełmno palace, where people were stripped of their clothes and belongings, gassed by exhaust fumes in a van converted for this purpose, and driven to the Rzuchowski Forest, some four kilometres away. The so-called Forest Commando dealt with the arrivals: Jewish prisoners had to drag out the bodies and clean the cars before their return for the next group of victims. Polish prisoners or Ukrainians removed wedding rings, gold

<sup>1</sup> Two recently published books in Polish provide a substantial amount of information about the history and functioning of Sobibór and other extermination camps. These are: S. Sterkowicz, *"Jeśli echo ich głosów umilknie..."*, Włocławek 2002 and M. Maranda, *Nazistowskie obozy Zagłady. Opis i próba analizy zjawiska*, Warszawa 2002.

teeth and hidden valuables from the corpses, which were then placed hurriedly in burial pits, 250 metres long, 10 metres wide, and about 5-6 metres in depth. About a thousand people would perish in a day. From 1942 the exhumed bodies and those of new victims were burnt in huge fires and in field crematoria.<sup>2</sup>

In the early spring of 1943 the decision was taken to destroy the camp and to obliterate all traces of its existence. The palace was blown up and the forest crematoria destroyed on 7 April 1943, but one year later the Germans decided to re-establish an extermination camp here.<sup>3</sup> This time it was a forest camp. In the Rzuchowski Forest two barracks were erected, and people were murdered in mobile gas chambers. The vans were driven across forest clearings, between the barracks and crematoria. The victims were first brought to Chełmno and after a night spent in the local church transported to the forest. Jewish prisoners serving the death machine were kept in a former palace granary.

On the night of 17 January 1945, SS Sonderkommando Kulmhof, the German team which ran Chełmno, decided to leave the area, after liquidating the last 47 Jewish prisoners. The men were led out of the granary building in groups of five and killed with a shot to the back of the head. Two prisoners attacked the SS-men and after a brief struggle the Germans set the granary on fire; the people in it were burnt alive and those trying to escape were gunned down. This final incident ended the operations of the Kulmhof death camp. Two sites in need of commemoration remained - the palace grounds and the area in the Rzuchowski Forest, each with its own history.

After the war everyday life took over the palace grounds, giving them an air of "normality". Warehouses were erected where the palace had once stood, the burnt granary was rebuilt, and the whole site became property of the local rural cooperative.<sup>4</sup> The only sign of memory from the early

<sup>2</sup> The decision to exhume and burn the corpses was taken in the summer of 1942, as the fermentation of bodies caused an unbearable stench, and a growing threat of infectious diseases. The number of Chełmno victims is difficult to establish - the lowest number given is 150,000, the highest 350,000. The figures given on the Chełmno monuments and information boards differ substantially.

<sup>3</sup> The main purpose was to exterminate the remaining inhabitants of the Lodz ghetto. During the two phases of the Chełmno camp's existence about 70,000 Jews were murdered here; 7,000 of them in the second phase.

<sup>4</sup> It was only in the late 1980s, when the Museum of the Former Death Camp in Chełmno upon Ner was established, that works aiming at commemorating the Holocaust commenced in the palace grounds. They are still in progress; archaeological digs have been going on since 1997, resulting in the uncovering of the palace foundations. The palace granary will be renovated, possibly in 2004.



post-war years was a large funerary slab with a concrete tablet on it bearing an inscription in Polish and Yiddish: "This place has been made holy with the blood of thousands of victims of the Nazi murderers. Let their memory be honoured".<sup>5</sup> Here, in all probability, the remains of the prisoners burnt in the granary were buried.

In the Rzuchowski Forest people were trying, since the early 1950s, to tidy up the burial grounds; then, at the beginning of the 1960s, a commemorative programme for the whole terrain was prepared. Its central monument was designed by the architect Jerzy Buszkiewicz and the artist Józef Stasiński, whose project was selected from 38 works submitted for a competition organised in 1961 by a branch of the Polish Association of Visual Artists in Poznań.<sup>6</sup>

The early 1960s were a singular period for Polish art commemorating Holocaust victims. The main patron for the monuments was the government acting through The Council for the Protection of Memorials of Combat and Martyrdom. In 1960, fifteen years after the end of the war, one of the West German courts in a local trial of war criminals pronounced their crime void due to the length of time elapsed. Poland and the Soviet Union, together with the entire "Socialist Camp", ran a campaign against West Germany, aiming, among other things, at persuading the world that the statute of limitations should not be applied to crimes of genocide.<sup>7</sup> A year later, on 10 April 1961, the trial of Adolf Eichmann

<sup>5</sup> Two commemorative stones were placed in this area much later, in 1995, one in the palace grounds, the other by the local church. They were both funded by Germans from the German-Jewish Friendship Society of Hamburg; they carry inscriptions in German and in Polish, the first one stating: "From December 1941 to September 1942, by the order of the German authorities, 150,000 Jews were murdered and buried here. In June and July 1944, at the command of the Nazi authorities, over 7,000 Jews were gassed here. Among the murdered were also Jews from Central Europe deported by the Germans to the Łódź Ghetto in 1941". The second inscription reads: "In 1942 the clothes and luggage of many thousands of Jews were kept in this church. In June and July more than 7,000 Jews spent their last night here before being murdered in the forest camp".

<sup>6</sup> It was a competition held in 1961 and open to all members of ZPAP (Association of Polish Artists) in the Poznań area, to which 38 projects were sent. The verdict of the jury was announced in March of 1962.

<sup>7</sup> The aim of this campaign was to establish that all Nazi crimes should be treated as genocide, and without the statute of limitations. This was indeed agreed upon at the United Nations forum, with strong support coming from world combatant associations, Holocaust victims' associations, and also from some states of Black Africa, hoping for an extension of the notion of genocide to include the crimes of apartheid.

commenced in Jerusalem. It aroused tremendous interest across the world, and among its various consequences there was support for and the erection of numerous commemorative monuments, reminding the world of the guilt and crimes of Nazi Germany. Appropriate titles and inscriptions, which pointed unequivocally to the fact that German fascism was the culprit and that martyrdom was the fate of the entire Polish nation and not one, chosen minority group, were of great importance to the communist rulers. The idea of brotherly solidarity with all the murdered people, and protection of the memory of human suffering, suited well the socialist ethos, both internationally and nationally. The choice of artistic means of expression was not rigorously imposed. This was the decade in which Polish monumental sculpture, after a short reign of social realism, developed in a dynamic and varied way, characterised by "a great diversity of monumental forms from traditional, most commonly expressionistic sculptures, through works half-sculptural and half-architectural, to architectural and spatial forms close to abstraction, or even fully abstract".<sup>8</sup> In the case of commemorative works placed in the grounds of former death camps, they were mostly the outcome of collaboration between architects and sculptors, and the very terrain with its vast, empty spaces and hidden history asked for solutions which were both temporal and spatial.

Between intensified government activity involving prosecuting German war criminals and commemorating their victims on the one hand, and artistic development in Polish creative circles on the other, many unusual projects were born, although most remained unrealised. But there were also numerous proposals which, once executed, shaped for many decades Polish landscapes of memory. Commemorative monuments placed on sites of genocide were designed, in most cases, in the studios of architects and artists of the young generation, then in their thirties. They had all been affected by the war, some were former prisoners of concentration camps or forced labourers of the Third Reich, many of them lost members of their families; they were aware of the fate of Polish Jews, as the Germans had murdered their school friends, neighbours, acquaintances. There was a genuine wish to commemorate the wartime disasters and events, but there was also a need to work, to win competitions, to carry out commissions.

<sup>8</sup> I. Grzesiuk-Olszewska, *Polska rzeźba pomnikowa w latach 1945-1995*, Warszawa 1995, p. 18.

The designers of the Chełmno project wanted to create a commemorative work which would be "different and unusual (...), to throw into the air a huge, colossal funerary slab".<sup>9</sup> Buszkiewicz, who was fascinated by Jewish culture, considered deconstructing the Star of David in such a way that it would delineate the shape of a building, serving both as a monument and as a museum. The latter was to document and to illuminate the history of the place. This innovative idea of a monument-museum, which would form a dramatic entrance to the vast terrain of Kulmhof, preceded by many decades the celebrated Jewish Museum building designed by David Libeskind for the city of Berlin.

The completed work - unveiled officially on 27 October 1964 - is a monumental architectural structure made of concrete (the main slab is 36 metres long, 35 meters wide and 6.7 metres high), resting on five massive supports in the shape of truncated cones, variously described as pylons, pyramids or plinths. According to some writers, it symbolizes a huge sarcophagus or a gas chamber. Inside, the planned exhibition rooms were not constructed for financial and technical reasons. The commemoration of the victims of Chełmno is carried out primarily through a multifigure low relief, 24 meters long and 4.2 meters high. Placed high up on the front of the monument, it acts as a frieze, depicting generations of Jews marching to their death. A deeply cut slit separates the frieze from an empty rectangular surface, carrying at the bottom one word only: PAMIĘTAMY /we remember/. An object reminiscent of a van-gas chamber, placed in the centre of the relief, swallows up the victims. In his search for a more tangible expression of unimaginable events, Stasiński wanted to include the authentic, preserved chassis of such a vehicle, but the authorities did not consent. The sculptor, who is also an excellent medal-engraver, has been praised for creating ethereal and flickering forms, and half-materialised structures from which "fragments emerge precisely defined, polished, distinct in their otherness, in their strongly defined existence".<sup>10</sup> In the Chełmno relief the outlines of bodies, garments, objects, sometimes indivisible, contain details which are precisely sculpted, imbuing the whole with the distinctiveness of a nightmare - utterly improbable and yet real. High above the visitors' heads, in the changing light of day which casts the figures in half-darkness or leads

<sup>9</sup> Józef Stasiński, in an interview with H. Taborska and M. Turski, in Poznań in May 2003.

<sup>10</sup> M. Hniedziewicz, in a catalogue *Józef Stasiński. Medals*, Poznań 1977.



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Chełmno death camp memorial

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Chełmno death camp memorial

them into the light, flows the procession of victims, summoned from non-existence.

On the other side of the monument, facing the camp, a huge inscription carries a dramatic letter-appeal, written by a Chełmno prisoner, describing the agony of the Jewish nation, begging to be remembered and calling for revenge. It starts with the words: "They have taken us all - from an old man to a baby".<sup>11</sup> The final sentences of the letter: "This was written by the last Jews. We lived until 24 December 1944", have been omitted, and the word "Jews" does not appear on the monument. It is difficult now to establish who was responsible for this omission; in the late 1990s the management of the Museum and the Council for the Protection of Memory of Combat and Martyrdom decided to place, in the vicinity of the memorial, a stone monument carrying the full text of the letter. This is to be done in 2004.

Stasiński's and Buszkiewicz's work was dedicated "To the Victims of Fascism". The official ideology and ruling rhetoric of the time lauded the heroic struggle with fascism and warned of the threat of West German revisionism. It was the fight with an ideological enemy and not the martyrdom of the Jews which was of the utmost importance to the authorities.

The main monument of Chełmno was restored in the late 1990s under the supervision of Benedykt Kasznia, who at the time of its construction had assisted Stasiński, working on the low relief. The sculpted figures and the letters were cleaned, and the whole surface evenly coloured. At the beginning of the decade, a new work, artistically less ambitious, was erected upon the initiative of the Museum's management. It was called "The Memory Wall for the Jews murdered in Chełmno in the years 1941-1945". Unveiled in June 1990, it consists of a simple, concrete wall, 37.5 meters long and over two meters high, with a symbolic gate cut in it and an inscription in Hebrew: "This is the Gate to God, the righteous shall enter through it". It stands near the spot where once the biggest crematorium was located and it provides a supporting "background" for plaques commemorating individuals, families and communities.

Nearby some more elaborate signs of remembrance, such as obelisks or carved stones, have an allocated site, along the road leading from the Wall towards the mass graves. These are the Jewish signs of memory, executed mostly by Polish artists and craftsmen.

<sup>11</sup> The letter has been reproduced in a few books, among them in J. Gulczyński, *Obóz śmierci w Chełmnie nad Nerem*, Konin 1991, Annex, p. 14.

There are also other works, scattered across the terrain, devoted to people who perished on this soil, such as a cross and a mass grave for the Polish hostages shot here in the autumn of 1939, an obelisk devoted to Stanisław Kaszyński, a local official who was killed by the Germans for trying to inform the world about the murders committed on the Jews, and also a number of boards naming places of execution and ghettos in the Konin region.

Of particular interest is a collection of gravestones, once removed from a Jewish cemetery in Turek. It forms a somewhat unexpected, beautiful funerary accent in the vast, wooded landscape of Chełmno, forming "a symbolic link between the history of the Polish Jews and the tragedy of the Holocaust".<sup>12</sup> All of these elements, brought together, provide a remarkable example of the fifth type of commemorative projects mentioned above, as the whole terrain opens up both to the present and to earlier times, before the Holocaust.

#### IV

The camp at Chełmno was the only death camp in the Wartheland established as the result of a "local" Nazi initiative; three other camps, which were started in 1942, were part of a larger scheme, intended to facilitate the "Final Solution" by destroying the Jewish communities from the General Government, and were part of "Operation Reinhard".<sup>13</sup> The construction of the first one, described in German documents as the SS-Sonderkommando Bełżec (Belsec), commenced on 1 November 1941 and was completed by the end of February 1942. The killing process itself, carried out in three gas chambers, started with the arrival of the first transport of victims, on 17 March 1942, and ended in mid-December of that year. The activities were halted for one month, from mid-June to mid-July, when a new concrete building was constructed, with six gas chambers, three on each side of a centrally positioned corridor. Two thousand people could be murdered here simultaneously.

<sup>12</sup> Ł. Pawlicka-Nowak, "Dzieje upamiętniania byłego obozu zagłady w Chełmnie nad Nerem", in: *Mówią świadkowie Chełmna*, eds. S. Krakowski and Ł. Pawlicka-Nowak, Konin-Łódź 1996, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> For a more thorough discussion of "Operation Reinhard", see: I. Arad, *Bełżec, Sobibor, Treblinka. The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1987.

Exhaust fumes, most probably generated by the engine from a Russian tank, were used, and the killing time lasted approximately 20 minutes.<sup>14</sup>

In the nine months of Bełżec's existence, nearly 600,000 people perished there; the victims came from the regions of south-east Poland,<sup>15</sup> but also from other European countries, among them Austria, Germany, Hungary and Romania. Poles were killed here, too, most of them for trying to help Jews, and the Roma people, whose numbers some sources give as hundreds, while others talk about thousands.

The victims were brought to Bełżec in freight trains; unloading at the



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#### Bełżec camp memorial

<sup>14</sup> M. Maranda describes in some detail the structure and functioning of these gas chambers in his book *Nazistowskie obozy Zagłady*, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Mainly from the districts of Tarnopol, Lwów, Krakow and Lublin.

camp's ramp lasted only a few minutes; the road to death ran through the undressing barracks, along the corridor, which was about ten meters long and two meters high, to the alleged "baths", in reality the gas chambers. The final stage of the extermination process was similar to that in Chełmno: golden teeth and wedding rings were removed, bodies were "searched" for hidden valuables, then thrown into mass graves, and from November 1942 burnt. The final liquidation of the camp started in December 1942. The exhumed bodies burned, day and night, on pyres, and later on grates made of rail tracks, until April 1943. In the spring of 1943 the gas chambers and barracks were demolished, traces of the pits obliterated, the ground ploughed and planted over.

The camp had at the time of its functioning a surface of over 6 hectares; the fenced terrain, which is now a memorial place, has about 4 hectares. After the early cleaning activities and commemorative actions of the 1950s, a project for the whole terrain, which included proper fencing and a number of new commemorative projects was instigated in the sixties, under the supervision of The Council for the Protection of Memorials of Combat and Martyrdom. Urns, made of concrete and covered with metal lids, which could act as flame holders, were installed in a long row where some of the mass graves were once located. On the northern side of the compound four concrete structures were erected, referred to in the literature as pylons or sarcophagi, to commemorate the places where the bodies had been burnt. A simple cubic block covered with panels of artificial stone was erected on the axis leading from the entrance gate to the camp's interior. It served as a kind of mausoleum or crypt, in which some human remains and objects, once belonging to the prisoners, were gathered. An inscription made of iron letters attached to the wall stated: "To the memory of the victims of Nazi terror murdered in the years 1942-1943". Nothing was said about the victims being Jewish, in accordance with the state's ideology and policy at the time. The numbers of victims were not stated either. Inside the crypt, accessible through a small metal door, visitors could place burning candles.<sup>16</sup> A concrete podium, attached to the crypt, carried a two-figure sculpture by Stanisław

<sup>16</sup> The burnt-out candles added to the feeling of neglect, which characterised the mausoleum in recent years. The sarcophagi were also in a state of disrepair, and lacking information about their commemorative function. They were removed, together with the urns, to make place for the new project. The Strzyżyński sculpture was put in storage.



Strzyżyński (executed in association with Jarosław Olejnicki), representing the totally wasted, skeletal figure of a prisoner, supporting the falling body of his dying companion. It was described as a monument "terrifying through the "unreality" of the human figures in this shocking, phantom-like place of extermination; a tragic Pieta of our times".<sup>17</sup> According to the artist himself, he was trying to create "an image often evoked by Nazi terror" by "juxtaposing a huge block, constructed from cubes of stone, and the swooning figure of a mortified human wreck positioned against it".<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to establish now at what point of the creative process a second figure appeared, though its presence is of great significance for the whole piece and its ideological message. It gives a new meaning to this representation of martyrdom, as the relation between the two figures suggests human solidarity, present even in the most extreme and inhuman circumstances.<sup>19</sup> Let us add that the images of the victims of Bełżec were made in a decade when the artist, in search of intensified artistic expression, was introducing deformations of human forms combined with the "ravaging" of their surfaces. The figural works which emerged out of this process were, according to a critic, "emphatically and exaggeratingly expressive. (...) Strzyżyński rips apart plaster figures, deforms them, elongates them to excess, brutalises their surfaces with dozens of tiny strokes".<sup>20</sup> However, the prisoners of Bełżec represented here a truly tragic case, as the reality of the wasted body was far more horrible than even the most extreme artistic deformation.

The material state of the commemorative works at Bełżec deteriorated considerably over the years and the decision was taken to remove them.<sup>21</sup> A new monument, work on which began in the spring of 2003, treats the whole terrain as "a symbolic mass grave containing authentic

<sup>17</sup> K. Parfianowicz, in a catalogue *Stanisław Strzyżyński*, Bełchatów 2000, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Stanisław Strzyżyński interviewed by K. Kasprzak, "Pasjonują mnie ludzkie losy. *Sztandar Ludu*, 17 December 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Human solidarity is, according to the artist, the main message of this monument. He expressed this view in an interview given to H. Taborska and M. Turski, in June 2001.

<sup>20</sup> UK, "Wspominając kamienne głowy", *Kamena*, 7, April 1974.

<sup>21</sup> The decision to remove the existing works came when a new commemorative program for the Bełżec site was made in 1997, following a national competition. The winners of the competition were three Polish sculptors: Andrzej Sołyga, Zdzisław Pidek and Marcin Roszczyk.

mass gravesites within its borders".<sup>22</sup> The intention is to honour the memory of the Jews murdered here in accordance with their own culture and religion, so the monument at Bełżec belongs to a new political era, and a different ideological and artistic narrative than the works which had stood here until recently.

One should add that the work on the new project was preceded by archaeological research carried out by the team of professor Andrzej Kola in the years 1997-1999.<sup>23</sup> They confirmed the existence on the examined land of at least 33 death pits, of different dimensions. Many hundreds of artifacts related to the functioning of the camp were also found, and about 800 of them were selected for conservation.

## V

In March of 1942, when extermination was already being carried out at Bełżec, the construction of Sobibór (Sibibor) started; this was the third death camp built on Polish soil, close to a small railway station of the same name, placed on the Chełm - Włodawa railway line. The grounds were vast - about 60 hectares, surrounded by triple fencing, with six watch towers; there were four main areas, separated from each other by barbed wire. The first one, known as the Vorlager, contained an unloading ramp and living quarters for the crew; the three others were known as Lager 1 (where the Jewish prisoner-workers lived), Lager 2 (where the undressing barracks and the storage barracks for the victims' belongings were located) and Lager 3 - the killing area.<sup>24</sup> From Lager 2 to Lager 3 ran the death road - straight to the gas chambers and the mass graves; it was called "der Schlauch". Three metres wide and about 150 meters long, it was bordered on each side by barbed wire with twigs woven into it. Pieces of this wire can be found in the undergrowth to this day.

The camp at Sobibór functioned for 18 months, until October 1943. Mass murder by carbon monoxide was carried out in two stages: the first

<sup>22</sup> *Bełżec hitlerowski oboz zagłady/Nazi death camp 1942*, Warszawa 2003. This booklet contains a presentation of the "Project of the Cemetery Memorial to the Jewish Victims of the Nazi Death Camp in Bełżec", developed under the aegis of The Council for the Protection of Memory of Combat and Martyrdom and The American Jewish Committee.

<sup>23</sup> See A. Kola, *Hitlerowski obóz zagłady Żydów w Bełżcu w świetle źródeł archeologicznych: badania 1997-1999*, Warszawa-Washington 2000.

<sup>24</sup> For the description of the three Lagers, see: Maranda, op. cit.

one between May and July 1942, in three gas chambers, and then, between October 1942 and June 1943, in six gas chambers. First the bodies were buried, but after the heatwave of the summer of 1942, when the stench from rotting corpses and swarming vermin threatened the functioning of the camp, they were removed from the pits and burnt in field crematoria. In the second phase of the camp's activity the bodies of the victims were burnt immediately after their removal from the gas chambers.

On completion of its extermination tasks, the Sobibór camp, unlike the others, was not to be destroyed, but, following Himmler's decision of 24 July 1943, some of it was to be adapted for storing munitions. It was at that stage in the camp's existence that the prisoners' rebellion broke out, led by a Russian officer, Aleksander Peczorski and the former head of the Judenrat in Żółkwia, Leon Feldhendler. Eleven SS-men and many Ukrainian guards were killed. Of the 300 prisoners who attempted to escape, many died on the minefields surrounding the camp, others were shot. About fifty of those who escaped survived the war.

The commemorative work in the area of the former camp was formally completed in the mid-1960s. Some of the ashes and bones were gathered in a huge mound, encircled by a low wall, designed by the architect Romuald Dylewski. The mound's surface was covered with gravel and grass, and a small rectangular window was placed in the wall, so as to make people aware of the presence of human remains underneath the surface.<sup>25</sup>

The central monument, standing by the road leading from the camp's entrance to the mound, was unveiled on 28 June 1965. It was initially described as "a figure of a woman with a child against a wall symbolising a gas chamber".<sup>26</sup> Its maker, Mieczysław Welter, first designed it as a metal sculpture, attached to a wall of a simple, quadrilateral structure made of stone, but the latter appeared too weak to support a work of art weighing more than four tonnes.<sup>27</sup> After some deliberation a freestanding monument representing a woman with a child was placed on a low plinth-like wall, meeting the four-cornered "tower" at a right angle. This "tower", sometimes referred to as an "obelisk", came to symbolise the gas chambers of Sobibór.

This was not a satisfactory solution for the artist, who attached great importance to a proper linking of his sculptural work, which carried

<sup>25</sup> This "window" was walled up by decision of the museum director.

<sup>26</sup> Grzesiuk-Olszewska, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

<sup>27</sup> Mieczysław Welter, in a conversation with the author, May 2003.

a clear message, to the accompanying architectural structure, and wished for a very careful positioning of both in their environmental context. Towards the end of the 1970s the sculpture was finally divorced from the quadrilateral "tower". Executed anew, this time in red sandstone, it was placed on a low, rectangular plinth, bearing the inscription: "In honour of those murdered by the Nazis in the years 1942-1943". The gas chambers had stood within a hundred metres of this spot. In Sobibór women with children were gassed first. Welter's towering figure of the mother cannot protect her small girl, though their two bodies, hewn from one block of stone, are joined inseparably. Soft, undulating contours and the porous, uneven surface of the trunk contrast strongly with the sharply defined, realistic features of the woman's face. Welter attached great importance to scrupulous observation of nature as a basis for his more universalised artistic representations; his studies of human models were long lasting and detailed. For the Sobibór woman he studied a death mask taken from the face of a woman-prisoner, killed in the Majdanek concentration camp.<sup>28</sup> This expression of ultimate human torment in the peaceful woodland of Sobibór is today the only truly moving Polish sign of memory in this place.

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<sup>28</sup> This piece of information provided by the artist, cf. ibidem.

At the entrance to the camp stands a wall made of stones, dating back to the 1960s, inscribed "SOBIBÓR", with five plaques informing briefly about the history of the camp. In accordance with the ruling ideology of the time and "the needs of the day", the original text reads as follows: "In this place from May 1942 until October 1943 there existed a Nazi extermination camp. In this camp 250,000 Soviet prisoners of war, Jews, Poles, Gypsies were murdered. On 14 October 1943 there began in the camp an armed rebellion of a few hundred prisoners, who escaped after fighting the Nazi guards".

In the early nineties the decision was taken to change this text to the following: "At this site, between the years 1942 and 1943, there existed a Nazi death camp where 250,000 Jews and approximately 1,000 Poles were murdered. On 14 October 1943 during the armed revolt by Jewish prisoners the Nazis were overpowered and several hundred prisoners escaped to freedom. Following this revolt the death camp ceased to function. 'Earth, conceal not my blood' (Job)". The text has five language versions: Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish, English and Dutch.<sup>29</sup> It was unveiled on 19 October 1993 by Thomas Blatt, who was one of those who escaped from Sobibór and survived the war.<sup>30</sup>

In October 2000, Professor Kola and his team carried out archaeological research aimed at defining with greater precision the topography of the camp. Most importantly, they were to establish the exact locations of burial pits and to help in recreating the "death road". The team succeeded in identifying the exact position of seven burial pits, and this will play an important part in the realisation of the new commemorative work for Sobibór.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The new inscription does not mention the Gypsies or the Soviet prisoners of war. The reasons given are that there is no proof of Gypsies being murdered at Sobibór, while the Russian prisoners were brought there solely on account of their Jewish origin. This is a debatable issue.

<sup>30</sup> T. Blatt is the author of *Sobibor: the Forgotten Revolt. A Survivor's Report*, Washington 1996, and *From the Ashes of Sobibor-a Story of Survival*, Evanston 1997.

<sup>31</sup> The new project for Sobibor has been prepared by Marek Bem, Director of the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Pojezierze Museum, with which the Museum of the Former Nazi Death Camp at Sobibór is affiliated. It aims, first of all, to secure and clearly mark seven common graves and to design an Avenue of Remembrance which will be a symbolic reconstruction of the "Death Road" as well as an educational path, which will act as an external exhibition and include four billboards and information boards presenting the history of the camp and the prisoners' escape from Sobibór. At a later stage, a new museum called "The Remembrance Centre" will be established.



## VI

Treblinka 2 was to be the best organised and most efficient of all Nazi death camps, profiting from the organisational experiences and "improved" methods of extermination developed at Bełżec and Sobibór. Its construction began in late May 1942, finished on 11 July of that year and already on 23 July the gas chambers of Treblinka received their first consignment of victims from the Warsaw Ghetto. Standing in woodland four kilometres from the Treblinka railway station and two kilometers from a penal labour camp known as Treblinka 1, which functioned here since the autumn of 1941, the camp was well situated to facilitate the process of liquidation of the largest concentration of Polish Jews shut up in the Warsaw Ghetto. Designed primarily for the extermination of Polish Jews from the General Government districts,<sup>32</sup> it also received transports from distant countries, such as Bulgaria and Greece. This death factory was active for 13 months, and the exact numbers of its victims are still debated - the *Holocaust Encyclopaedia* puts the figure at 870,000.

The first commandant of Treblinka, Dr. Imfrid Eberl, dreamt of surpassing all other camps in terms of the numbers of victims, and he was willing to accept any number of train transports. However, the three gas chambers of Treblinka were not sufficient for the task, and this, combined with the breakdowns of the engine producing poisonous carbon monoxide and delays in clearing dead bodies arriving on trains, led within one month of the activation of the camp to one of the most macabre incidents in the history of the Holocaust. The organisational chaos and the fermentation of masses of corpses thrown into burial pits, which caused a dreadful stench drifting across the surrounding countryside, enforced a brief suspension of the camp's activities. The transports were temporarily halted (from 28 August to 4 September) and the decision to construct six new gas chambers was taken, while the terrain was cleaned up. After a visitation from the bosses of "Operation Reinhard", at the end of September 1942, a new commandant, Franz Stangl, was appointed, and from February 1943, after a visitation by Himmler, the practice of burning bodies immediately after gassing became obligatory. Also, the corpses were dug out from the earlier graves and burnt on grates con-

<sup>32</sup> Mainly from the districts of Radom, Warsaw and Białystok; some also came from the Lublin area.

structed from rail tracks. Charred bones were pulverised and the ashes mixed with layers of sand placed in the emptied pits, then lupine was planted over them.

The layout of the camp remained basically unchanged throughout its existence. In the area known as the Lower Camp there were the commandant's quarters, the barracks of the German and Ukrainian crews, and, separated by barbed wire, the barracks and workshops of the Jewish prisoners. The reception area was also here, with an "unloading" ramp, two squares, called transportation and sorting squares, two barracks for undressing, one for men and the other for women and children. To the Upper Camp, the Death Camp, led, like at Bełżec and Sobibór, a "corridor", 150 metres long, five metres wide, and made of barbed wire, two metres high, with twigs woven into it. Called by the Germans "The Road to Heaven", it ran straight to the gas chambers. Nearby some light railway tracks were installed to facilitate the transportation of corpses to the pits. The pits were dug by the Jewish prisoners, sometimes with the aid of the excavator from the gravel pit of Treblinka 1.

On 2 August 1943, a rebellion of Jewish prisoners at Treblinka broke out. A dozen members of the Ukrainian crew were killed, as were over 500 prisoners, while some 200 escaped to the surrounding woods. The authorities took the decision to liquidate the camp. The final obliteration of all traces of its existence was carried out in November. On the seventeenth the SS-Sonderkommando left the grounds of Treblinka 2.

In the mid-1950s, two young Poles came to this area. One was the sculptor Franciszek Duszeńko, a former inmate of the Gross-Rosen and Sachsenhausen concentration camps, and the other was the architect Adam Haupt. They were to design a commemorative monument for the site where the gas chambers had once stood. Years later, while recalling their first impressions, they talked about "an unreal space... the sadness of a place deserted by God and people"<sup>33</sup> and "the earth raked up here and there, bones lying on the surface, which had first to be secured, so they would not be desecrated, as these were holy graves..",<sup>34</sup> This place, in the artists' view, demanded something more than a single monument. The vast area covered by mass graves, human remains scattered on the ground, an awareness of the apocalyptic chain of events enacted here

<sup>33</sup> Franciszek Duszeńko, in an interview given to H. Taborska and M. Turski, June 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Haupt, in an interview given to H. Taborska and M. Turski, in June 2001.

- from the moment of the victims' arrival at the faked railway station, to the final destruction of the bodies, and all that happening in the course of hours - demanded that the whole area be protected and honoured. Help was also needed for the living, wishing to walk the path of the victims from the beginning to the end.

After years of planning, of artistic searching and the intense physical labour needed to construct a monument of such dimensions and complexity, on 10 May 1964, one of the world's most magnificent - and undoubtedly Poland's greatest - Holocaust monuments was unveiled. The work of two young men and of many anonymous labourers, it had artistic guidance from Franciszek Strynkiewicz, a professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

Old camp borders are now invisible among the trees, but their outlines are marked by granite stones, roughly hewed and irregularly spaced. A few blocks of stone and concrete, suggesting entrance to the grounds, carry brief information, and two of them commemorate the old entrance gate. Here begins the last stage of the journey to death. Heavy, concrete sleepers, symbolising railway tracks, run rhythmically towards the empty ramp. They are accompanied by shards of irregular, broken shape, and by a parallel path of cobblestones about which Adam Haupt said: "Cobblestones like in the small towns which I remember so well from before the war...".<sup>35</sup> Ten more boulders carry the names of the countries from which the victims came: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Yugoslavia, Germany, Poland, USSR.

The concrete ramp terminates suddenly. This is the end of the line. From here there is only one road, to the gas chambers. It is a path made of cobblestones, like those once found in Jewish-Polish towns big and small; on each side of this path stones mark the location of the undressing barracks.

The central monument rises, as it was planned from the very beginning, in the place of the gas chambers, where in the darkness whole families and generations of the Jews of Europe were murdered, from five to ten thousand people in a day. Made of grey granite blocks, with a dark, vertical slit running through the middle, this is a distant echo of the Jerusalem Wall, and also a reference to the Jewish funerary iconography of broken trees, shattered objects, smashed jars. A relief, which crowns

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

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the monument, depicts on three of its sides a dense mass of human bodies, torn and broken. On the fourth, eastern side, an outline of the seven-branched menorah evokes the tradition of a thousand years, and the light of faith which cannot be extinguished. On a chipped off block of stone placed near the monument two words delivered in six languages reassure the visitor: "NEVER AGAIN" - an expression of protest and of promise, which history hardly ever fulfils.<sup>36</sup>

A short distance away, behind the central monument, there are "traces" of the grate on which the bodies were burnt. This takes the form of a black concrete strip, fifteen meters long and five meters wide, with "human remains" sunk into it. Adam Haupt pondered for a long time over possible ways of symbolic commemoration for this place, searching for a material which would be resistant to climatic changes, would have the glow of freshly set lava and carry within itself "the memory of hell". He was fascinated by basalt, which melts in very high temperatures, forming black icicles, with opalescence of very dark blue and deep red. To counteract the brittleness of this material the artist ordered a special cooling treatment at the Starachowice Factory. He brought to Treblinka seven freight cars of the material and selected, on the site, suitable fragments, sinking them into a concrete base placed in a hollow in the ground. They looked "like burnt pieces of wood, others like bones, some like Greek robes, like some geysers, and no inscription of any kind near them, nothing".<sup>37</sup> Disturbing and not fully defined, they have become a sensory stimulus, capable of activating complex processes of awareness and memory, indispensable to the act of remembrance. Decades have passed and they still evoke the picture of charred human bodies, smashed bones, torn ligaments - horrible remnants of genocide.

Still, it is not the main monument and the symbolic traces of the grate which secure the greatness and memory of Treblinka. The imagination and emotions of those who come here are activated and drawn towards a huge necropolis of 17,000 irregular stones, grouped in three vast fields. Of different size and shape, seemingly common, like grey fieldstones, they have in them the dignity of broken tombstones. They are anonymous apart from those, 216 in number, which carry the names of Polish towns from which the victims were taken. There is only one stone which

<sup>36</sup> The author's description of the Treblinka monument was first published in the weekly *Polityka*, 30 (2360), 27 July 2002, pp. 66-67.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with A. Haupt, cf. note 34 above.



invokes a particular person, with the inscription "Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) and children". All stones were formed on the grounds of Treblinka, from thousands of tons of Silesian granite, brought here from the quarries. The artists, who supervised the process, said that they "were shooting the stone. After the gunpowder was applied the stone would burst and splinter. The stay in this place, the daily contact with it, and with the material, created a particular kind of tension".<sup>38</sup> In this dramatic interaction between an artistic idea, the selected material and the land of death, thousands of shattered stones were transformed into the greatest necropolis of the Holocaust.

## VII

Polish works commemorating the Holocaust have sometimes appeared in places mistakenly identified as the sites of infirmaries, executions or crematoria, carrying incorrect information or politically motivated inscriptions. Their character may have been influenced by ideological and political circumstances, and also by their moment of "entry" onto the scene of contemporary art. Artistic projects of the 1960s often combined in them totalitarian monumentality with representational expressionism, which gained a new lease on life in art after the Second World War. This is well illustrated by the Chełmno monument, where the huge architectural structure is adorned by an expressionistic low relief of the extermination march. In Bełżec the flame holders have acquired monumental form, while a very strong expressionist accent has been provided by Strzyżyński's sculpture, which depicts the total emaciation of the victims of war. Expressionism in the land of extermination is, of course, not that historically shaped expressionism of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which was born out of the need for artistic expression, personal and violent, restless and unnerving, with all the ramifications of the artistic style which imposed the anxiety of soul and mind through exaggeration and deformation on idyllic scenes of nature, the beauty of the female body or the tumult of a city. The expressionism of the post-Holocaust world was charged with the need to commemorate events so terrifying that they numbed the imagination, and this might be the reason why in the public spaces so few artists went beyond using obvious stylistic devices of the movement.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with F. Duszeńko, cf. note 33 above.

Despite their historically motivated shortcomings, Polish signs commemorating the extermination sites were necessary and important gestures, coming from the authorities and from different sectors of society. Whether they had the markings of great art and its cathartic power, this is another question. One indisputable example of the latter, was - and is to this day - Treblinka.

## VIII

The Holocaust is currently a very popular topic. In twenty years this will probably no longer be the case. The genocide of the European Jews is still the greatest warning for mankind against its own madness and cruelty. In twenty years this might be a crater, left after a city of millions destroyed by a nuclear attack. It should not, however, diminish our need and our duty to secure and commemorate places of the Shoah. Now, even more than before, powerful artistic projects and durable materials are needed, ones that will not be removed from the Polish landscape and which will serve the memory of victims of the Shoah and the collective memory of mankind.