

Management Changes and Challenges to Preserve Holocaust Extermination Site

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"For these I weep." (Lamentations 1:16)

Abstract

The Holocaust is named for the systematic, bureaucratic, well-organized murder and genocide of over 6,000,000 European Jews implemented by the Nazis and their collaborators. From 1933 to 1945, Jews were humiliated, tortured, starved, incarcerated, systematically executed, shot into mass graves, and gassed for the purpose of total annihilation—all performed under an official capacity.

The most characteristic feature of the Jewish genocide is the bureaucratic organization and management of the feat, whereby besides the SS, state institutions and members of various groups were to varying degrees accomplices on account of their knowledge and responsibility—the doctors who performed medical experiments; the engineers who constructed the gas chambers and crematoriums; those who participated at the highest levels of government. Hitler could not have completed his accomplishment without the help of collaborators such as Hungarians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Romanians. In addition, with countries remaining silent with screaming indifference, even turning refugees away, the Nazi machine was given an additional gateway to implement the task at hand.

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JEL classification: M10.

Introduction

Auschwitz-Birkenau has become the symbol of the Holocaust. But nowhere is the totality and finality illustrated more than at the extermination sites which emerged from the Final Solution, "Die Endlösung." The obsession of the Nazis to find a solution to the problem of the Jews in Europe culminated with the Wannsee Conference. That is not to say that other death factories were not performing (Luxenberg Eisenberg, 2012).² The management of the conference was carried out akin to an urgent business meeting. The beautiful villa, located in the suburb of Wannsee, would later symbolize the epitome of the evil side of management. The beautiful and serene location by Lake Grosser Wannsee set the stage for the discussion and coordination of the execution of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question in all its managerial and official capacity. Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Security Main Office of the SS and the initiator of the

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² Chelmo mobile gas vans were already used in 1941. The extermination site became the prototype for gas chambers used in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the sites of mass extermination. In addition, the killing fields operated.

conference, summoned representatives of a variety of branches of the Nazi regime. This meeting, convening half a year after the systematic murder of the Jews on the Eastern front had begun, was called to coordinate the expansion of the mass murder to include all European Jewry. The purpose of the meeting was to coordinate the Reich offices and authorities to include the annihilation of 11,000,000 Jews in Europe.

Country	Number
Frankreich / Substatus Gebiet	900.000
Polen	3.000.000
Ungarn	1.000.000
Belgien	1.000.000
Frankreich	40.000
Bulgarien	350.000
Polen	2.000
Finnland	4.000
Irland	40.000
Italien, einschl. Sardinien	200
Albanien	40.000
Kroatien	5.000
Portugal	542.000
Russien einschl. Bessarabien	8.000
Schweden	18.000
Schweden	10.000
Serbien	88.000
Slowakei	8.000
Spanien	59.000
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine	2.994.684
Weißrußland un- schl. Bialystok	446.484
Zusammen: über	11.000.000

Figure 1. Original document taken on location at House of the Wannsee Conference and Education Center showing the notorious 11,000,000 Jews in Europe, divided by country, as part of the Final Solution

The code name "Operation Reinhard" was eventually given to this plan, named after Reinhard Heydrich who was assassinated by Czech partisans in May 1942. As part of this operation, the Nazi leaders established three killing centers in Poland with the sole purpose of total destruction of the Jew. It became a question of intent. Other sites followed suit using gas chambers, for example, Auschwitz in the spring of 1942 and Majdanek outside Lublin from autumn 1942 until September 1943. But the Reinhard sites of Belzec (March, 1942), Sobibor (May, 1942), and Treblinka (July, 1942), resulted in the murder of over 2,000,000 Jewish men, women, and children.

They became mass killing centers and death came swiftly in their gas chambers, immediately upon arrival. Although Chelmno is not included in the Reinhard Site category, it should be included as an extermination site for the Final Solution, as it was still in operation during that period and until 1943. It entered its second phase of operation with the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto Jews in 1944. The "Final Solution" called for the murder of all European Jewry by gassing, shooting, and other means.

Table 1. Number of perished who were murdered in the Rein hard Sites of mass extermination.

Reinhard Site	Estimated perished
Chelmno	350,000
Belzec	550,000
Sobibor	280,000
Treblinka	850,000
TOTAL	Over 2,000,000

The Reinhard Sites for total extermination were established one following the other. The estimated figure of over 6,000,000 Jews murdered during the Holocaust resulted in the obliteration of two-thirds of the Jews living in Europe before World War II.³ Despite the swiftness of death, these factories of annihilation are underrepresented today. With the demise of survivors, the urgency to preserve memorial sites on authentic grounds where the atrocities occurred is becoming stronger and humanity has reached the edge, looking into the abyss. There is a rush to gather testimonies but when survivors are gone within the next decade or two, it will be the memorial sites on location which move to the forefront as the authentic evidence of the crimes against humanity just behind these eyewitnesses to the actual events.

Despite all this, the sites of mass extermination are underrepresented and often put on the wayside. Even at Holocaust lectures, including the Yad Vashem⁴ 70th anniversary Symposium on the Final Solution, the Reinhard Sites were hardly mentioned by name. In Poland, Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Stutthof are under the government's Cultural Ministry. It is only in 2006 that Belzec became a branch of Majdanek and a decent memorial established to remember the perished. Treblinka is still not under the Ministry of Culture and relies on the region of Siedlce to allocate funding. Chelmno is not funded by the government and for decades has been maintained by one woman and the Konin Museum in the town of Konin. Recently it shifted to be managed by the city of Poznan. The SS attempted to destroy all evidence of their crimes so what the staff manages is empty ground with ash and bones save for the odd monument here and there. Yet, due to archaeological excavations, remnants of the atrocities are being discovered. The mass extermination site is silent accompanied by an ominous nakedness, an eerie silence on places with no life. What is on its surface however, is not necessarily what is under its ground. The ground surface is a combination of ash, bone, and earth. Bodies were burnt in ovens but there were no urns to place the ashes. The latter was strewn around the area and used as fertilizer. The thought is so grotesque, that one prefers to forget about it when journeying through these places of atrocities.

Thoughts of what lies under the surface is what intrigues anthropologists and archaeologists to embark on projects of discovery. They try to find remnants or artifacts and attempt to identify areas of former barracks, gas chambers, and crematoriums. As a result, on Treblinka for example, the boundaries of the site have changed due to its recent discoveries of more mass graves and remnants of gas chambers. According to forensic archaeologist Dr. Caroline Sturdy-Colls who recently discovered more mass graves on Treblinka, "Nothing can ever be completely destroyed. There is always something left" (C. Sturdy Colls, personal communication, May 6, 2012). Discoveries on Sobibor of personal artifacts and

³It must be mentioned that gas chambers operated in other parts of Europe as well. Many sites to this day still remain undiscovered and therefore the figure of 6,000,000 is under-estimated. Gas chambers also operated in camps across Germany including Buchenwald, Ravensbruck (1945), Sachsenhausen, and Dachau.

⁴Yad Vashem is the national Holocaust museum in Israel and visited by dignitaries worldwide.

even teeth, as well as remains of the gas chamber and identification of mass graves, have also impacted the boundaries of the site. The "Himmelfahrstrasse" or Road to Heaven where the Jews took their last walk on the path to the Sobibor gas chambers is now exposed. All this has impacted the Holocaust denial world, which tries to minimize or outright deny the atrocities placed at these locations. Playing on the fact that on the surface, nothing can be seen unlike Auschwitz for example (although even there, twisted attempts have been made to deny the deaths of 3,000,000 people); they create their own movement and drum up dangerous and twisted fallacies.

The museum heads of these sites have an arduous task. Their compelling need to watch over the site; to create projects with local schools; to have more contact with Israel; to try and promote awareness - all the while knowing that their position is met with limited means and is precarious. Similarly they are all in desperate need of funding. Each one has its most urgent need to be fulfilled but their feelings of isolation are nonetheless in an ensemble. All of them were happy to speak to a willing listener. The museum heads on these grounds of grief want to have a voice and need to be heard. It is perhaps this that is touching to the human spirit most of all. For some of them it was the first time anybody outside took an interest to hear about their work. These sites should be addressed separately from all the others as they are in a separate category. They are not like Majdanek or Auschwitz which are graphic and have many artifacts left. They provide a turning point not only for the final termination of the Jew but a turning point for today's world. If not for the amazing work and dedication by the caretakers of the sites, they would stand a good chance of being forgotten altogether, disappearing into the annals of history.

Their preservation lies at the very heart of humanity's morality and the ultimate in the Holocaust genocide story. Their needs are different; their cries of urgency are loud; and their vulnerability is visible. Just as it began with political prisoners, handicapped, Jehovah Witnesses, Poles, homosexuals, Catholic priests and many others, it culminated with the Jewish genocide. But the story in its entirety can be forgotten if the sites of mass extermination, the ultimate cruelty and barbarism are permitted to fade away. Through on location interviews and meetings, the author was able to piece together the management problems that daily engulf the preservation of the sites. The sites of mass extermination experience the greatest difficulties and at the bottom of the hierarchy, is Chelmno.

Because the Jew was eliminated on arrival there remained few survivors from these sites of instant death. None are left from Belzec and there was only one; one survivor is still alive who survived the revolt in Treblinka; none are left from Chelmno from only three; only two remain who survived the Sobibor revolt from a total of approximately fifty. As a result, there is nobody left to speak for the preservation of the sites. They have very little representation. The process of having these sites under the jurisdiction of the Polish government has taken many decades and still, Treblinka and Chelmno are left basically to fend for themselves. Although Holocaust museums are springing up worldwide, the sites of mass extermination which resulted in the death of over 2,000,000 human beings in a

250-day period are not given their due. The sites of mass extermination are at the bottom of the hierarchical funding ladder in Poland. School groups from Israel do not visit these sites very often, save for Treblinka which is on the itinerary. Due to all the factors mentioned, the position of these sites in terms of their survival is precarious.



**Figure 2. Treblinka site of mass extermination. On location with author.
Monument in background**



**Figure 3. The manor grounds of Chelmno site of mass extermination.
There is no protection and it is exposed**

Majdanek is a Holocaust site that is different. Not included on the list of the Reinhard Sites, there are researchers who do. Its gas chambers were built for the purpose of mass extermination of the Jews from the spring of 1942. Unlike the others, it is very physically graphic, is funded by Poland's Ministry of Culture like Auschwitz, and its urgent needs are less vocal. Nevertheless, unlike Auschwitz, it does not have an endowment plan for the future which leaves Majdanek as well in a precarious position.

Due to the many artifacts--barracks, gas chambers, crematoriums, mausoleum of ashes, exhibitions of shoes, and maintenance of the grounds, its funding needs for preservation are great. Majdanek plays a pivotal role in the management of the mass extermination sites. Through a decision taken by the Federal government of Poland, it manages the extermination sites of Belzec since 2004 and more recently, has added the site of Sobibor as an additional branch. The task of Majdanek is cumbersome. The staff oversees not only their own huge task at Majdanek but administrate Belzec and Sobibor as well. There is no question and it is only logical, that monetarily and in terms of the duties of the staff, it takes its toll.



**Figure 4. Taken by author. Large gas chamber at Majdanek.
Remnants in blue are from Zyklon B**

For a long time after the war, the area of the Belzec extermination site was abandoned and devastated. The first monument commemorating the victims was erected in December 1963. In its present form, the commemoration simultaneously consists of the cemetery of the victims and the museum with an exhibition, depicting the history of the death camp. The Memorial Site in Belzec is unique and symbolizes its sorrow. It shifted from being an area left on the wayside, dilapidated and forgotten, to one of commemoration for remembering the dead. The old

memorial was dismantled. Belzec has been a branch of Majdanek since 2004. This means that it is also funded albeit indirectly from the government because Majdanek allocates the monies to it. It also makes administrative decisions at Belzec. But the site has its own staff of three people, completely dedicated, busy and effortlessly promoting awareness and remembrance of this sacred ground. And this they do under limited conditions, lack of documentation, and no survivors to tell their story. With the newfound management under Majdanek, along with the amazing memorial and museum in Belzec, a gateway opened for an increase in visitors, seminars, education projects, its own website, publications, and most importantly, an increase in its security on the Polish camps' hierarchy. It was no longer just an empty and naked wasteland, but became a memorial that properly commemorates the estimated 550,000 perished. It documents the lives of the murdered, popularizes knowledge about the Holocaust, and prioritizes on developing historical education. The museum uses the theory of pedagogy of remembrance and educational practice of the State Museum at Majdanek. Using this framework of reflection, visitors learn about the past and contemporary issues connected with tolerance and racial or cultural hatred.



Figure 5. Old Belzec memorial, what was. Dilapidated and abandoned.
 Courtesy of Belzec memorial site



Figure 6. Belzec memorial site today. What is. Taken on location with author

Nowhere is the effect of changes felt and witnessed more than in Sobibor. It is undergoing a commemoration transformation since it became a branch of Majdanek on May 2, 2012. It is an undertaking that took 70 years in the making. Prior to 2012, the extermination site which resulted in an estimated 300,000 murdered Jews from all over Europe, received its funding from the small town of Wlodowa. Along with the preserved Synagogue, Sobibor was managed by the same staff. Management of the site passed two distinct phases: Up until 2012, the struggle to preserve Sobibor was ongoing. It was at the beginning of June 2011 (prior to the author's research trip to Sobibor) that the tiny red-roofed museum came under the threat of closure.

Due to the outcry of Holocaust survivors, the Polish government decided to keep the museum opened, knowing that something had to be done. Although plans were made along with former museum head Marek Bem, involving four countries to build a decent memorial site on Sobibor, it did not come into fruition. Sobibor remained in a vulnerable, precarious position. In Sobibor, there is a monument which pays homage to the hundreds of thousands whose ashes are spread around the sad grounds. Like Treblinka, the trees don't move, birds don't fly, there are no signs of life, and the monument does not do justice for the crimes committed on such a grandiose scale. A mound of ashes occupies the rear of the site but unlike Majdanek which is funded by the government; it is not protected and is exposed to the elements of nature. According to Marek Bem, the exposed mausoleum of ashes "sits on top of three mass graves and there are still different plans about what to do with it. Should it be removed altogether, repositioned? Protected with an exterior roof?" (M. Bem, personal communication, October 20, 2011). Surrounding the mound of ashes are other mass graves discovered by Marek Bem and his team. "We found two wedding rings in the ground at the former area of the gas chamber. Prior to their extermination, a husband and wife decided to bury their wedding rings. This is the story of Sobibor. This is the cemetery of Europe. Where is Europe?"

Since May 2, 2012 activity has been ongoing. A competition under the management of Majdanek for a proper commemoration of the site includes 150 participants. Sobibor has its own website which is properly done and there is an increase in visitors. An additional temporary caravan is attached to the small museum to make more space, and exhibitions are seen on the ground. There is an exhibition being planned for October 2013 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Sobibor revolt.



Figure 7. Monument at the Sobibor site of mass extermination. Taken by author



Figure 8. Illustrates activity going on around the mausoleum of ashes. Right photo shows what was. Courtesy of Tomasz Pudelko, historian in Sobibor, 2012. Below: Exhibition on the grounds and archaeological research. Most recent photo taken in the winter, sent to author, April 2013. The temporary caravan added to the small museum can be seen in the background

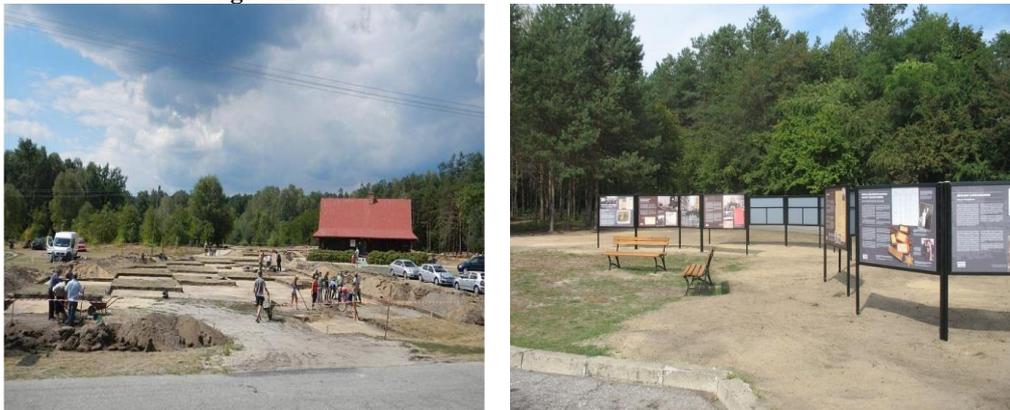




Table 2. Process in the transfer of management and administration at Sobibor site of mass extermination.

2008-2010	Preliminary preparation for the project of commemoration coordinated by the Secretary of the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom in cooperation with Israel, the Netherlands, and the Republic of Poland to agree to a joint project.
November 17, 2010	Meeting in Amsterdam to develop a set of recommendations.
December 7, 2010	Steering Committee meeting which included the appointment of the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation as a provider of foreign funds.
December 2010	Negotiations with the Ministry's district office of the District Włodawskie (Włodowa) whose department from 1993 to 2012 included the museum in Sobibor.
February 28, 2011	Second meeting of Steering Committee. Preliminary agreement on the scope of the first stage of archaeological research as a basis for implementation of the investment project.
April 2011	The beginning of the first stage of archaeological research in the former camp which included archaeologist-anthropologist Marek Bem.
June 29 2011	Third meeting of steering committee. The Minister shall decide on the establishment of Sobibor in 2012 as a branch of the State Museum at Majdanek, subordinate to the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.
Summer 2011	Agreement on the scope of the second phase of archaeological research in Sobibor.
December 2011	Conclusion of negotiations between the Ministry of Culture and the district office of Włodowa for the conditions of the transfer of the former Nazi extermination site in Sobibor, to be transferred to the State Museum at Majdanek.

January 17, 2012	Letter signed by Minister of Culture and Heritage and Wlodowa District on the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage department of Majdanek and the former extermination site in Sobibor.
March 27 2012	Agreed on the deletion of Wlodowa
April 2, 2012	Ordinance of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage in the creation of a branch of the State Museum at Majdanek called the Museum of the former death camp in Sobibor.
May 2, 2012	State Museum at Majdanek employs personnel necessary for the operation of the facility at Sobibor and assumes responsibility for the care of the area and public service.
May 24, 2012	Preliminary agreement by steering committee on the scope of the competition for the development of a memorial.
June 5, 2012	The State Museum at Majdanek becomes a full owner of the land in Sobibor.
June-August 2012	Rules of competition to create a new concept of architectural and artistic memorial at the former Nazi German death camp in Sobibor.
October 11, 2012	Fifth meeting of Steering Committee in Amsterdam devoted to reaching a final acceptance of contest rules for the new concept.
December 2012	Agreement on the proposed draft rules of the contest, the completion of the proposed composition of the judges.

Source: Memorial and Museum at Sobibor at www.sobibor.info.pl

In 2011 and 2012 there were archaeological discoveries of the former camp infrastructures and many artifacts belonging to the victims of Sobibor. They will be on permanent exhibition in the new museum at Sobibor. In order to establish a proper memorial, the areas of mass graves must be identified and marked according to Jewish law. As a result, the Chief Rabbi of Poland is directly involved in the establishment of the memorial as he was with the establishment of the Memorial Site in the former extermination camp of Belzec. The positive results of government intervention and international cooperation on the preservation of the sites are visible on both extermination sites. Sobibor remains opened all year.

Prior to the transfer of hands, it was closed due to the harsh winter and lack of funding from October to March. Both Belzec and Sobibor are living proof on the ground that proper management and support as well as government intervention is crucial for work to be achieved. Preservation of the extermination sites is crucial to the protection of truth and the perpetuation of memory. They are the authentic evidence of the atrocities which took place. With survivors disappearing, the actual locations move to the forefront of Holocaust remembrance. They are reminders when humanity stepped out of its naivete and faced its evil side. They are reminders of the consequences of racism, hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and the persecution of those who are different. Management which we generally associate with the good, revealed its evil side.



**Figure 9. Recent name tag of a 7 year old girl found in the ground at Sobibor.
Courtesy of Tomasz Pudelko**



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