
Reviewed by
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In 1995, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland published a five-volume work of nearly 1,600 pages in Polish under the title Auschwitz 1940-1945. Węzłowe zagadnienia z dziejów obozu. Ten authors, mostly staff of the museum’s Historical Research Department, collaborated under the supervision of Dr. Franciszek Piper, head of the department, who edited the main results of their decade-long research efforts.

As ideological restrictions on historical research in Poland had been toppled together with the collapse of communism some years ago, the new, five-volume work rendered most of the previous Polish literature on Auschwitz outdated. A one-volume predecessor of this work was published by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in 1993: Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka, eds., Auschwitz - Nazistowski obóz śmierci. It was successively translated into French (1994), English (1996), German (1997), and Italian (1997), and it is still a good starting point for anyone who is just beginning to study the history of Auschwitz.¹

A partially revised, updated, and - especially in vols. I and IV - enlarged German translation of Auschwitz 1940-1945 was published in 1999.² The manuscript (in Polish) of this enlarged edition was itself the basis for the English translation, which was published at the end of the year 2000. Some editorial changes, however, especially in the introductory chapters and in

¹ Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka, eds., Auschwitz - Nazistowski obóz śmierci (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1993).
Volume III, were intended to make things clearer for non-Polish, non-German readers. Both translations - the German by Jochen August and the English by William Brand - meet high historical and linguistic standards, indicating that the translators are well acquainted with the subject. As the English translation was the latest publication of Auschwitz 1940-1945, the following book review will relate mainly to this version.

Volume I begins with a survey by Piper of the state of the research on KL Auschwitz roughly until 1995, concentrating primarily on Polish authors and literature published in Poland. Many of the East European pre-1990 publications do not meet scholarly standards, as Piper frankly admits. In addition, most of the older literature in general suffers from a one-sided view due to the fact that different images of Auschwitz originated on either side of the Iron Curtain. The main reason for this surely lies in the political restrictions, which, until 1989, had barred the flow of information and an exchange of ideas among scholars from East and West. In addition, historians, as human beings, share the values, attitudes, and “collective memory” of their social group, which - in general, unconsciously - influence their scholarly work and give rise to different “inventions of tradition” in different societies.

Thus, Western literature and Jewish memoirs have put particular emphasis on Auschwitz as the site of extermination of the Jews, with Birkenau at the focus of attention, whereas in Poland, due to tradition and oral as well as written memoirs, Auschwitz - with the main camp in the focus of attention - was primarily viewed as a place of Polish suffering. (Note that Polish society traditionally differentiates sharply between “Jews” and “Poles”: polskość excludes Jewishness.) While other groups of victims have been considered in Hermann Langbein’s classic monograph Menschen in Auschwitz, they have attracted little attention until recently. Nevertheless, a consensus seems to have emerged among historians all over the world with regard to the

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4 As coined by Eric Hobsbawm in Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980)
5 Hermann Langbein, Menschen in Auschwitz (Wien: Europa Verlag, 1972); reprinted several times, most recently (Munich: Europa Verlag, 1999).
perception of Auschwitz. One example is the broadly structured anthology *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, edited by Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, to which historians from seven countries contributed, among them several authors of *Auschwitz 1940-1945*.

In the following, Piper, Piotr Setkiewicz, and Irena Strzelecka outline the origins of the camp and its construction, its expansion and the history of its development. The main camp and Birkenau - which, rightly, is considered as a separate entity - are treated in some detail, based primarily on sources from the archives of the State Museum. Among them are documents from the Bauleitung (construction department), which were captured by the Soviets at the time of the liberation of the camp and, until recently, were not accessible to historical research. The authors conclude that the main camp was planned as a permanent institution, as a center of terror, repression, and exploitation of the prisoners' labor even after the end of the war. Birkenau, they note, apart from the facilities for mass murder, was intended to be only a temporary establishment, a gigantic turntable for the masses of deportees to be selected for work in the Reich or to be sent to the gas chamber. The sub-camps of Auschwitz, including Monowitz, the big camp at the site of the Buna works, are dealt with only summarily. The reader is referred to articles or monographs in German or Polish, some of which are still unpublished (probably dissertations by students of Katowice or Cracow universities) but are accessible at the museum's archives.

Deeper insight into the development of Birkenau, Monowitz, and the main camp, with special reference to their interrelations with the policy on development and "re-Germanization" practiced by the civil authorities in annexed Upper Silesia, can be found in the books of Robert-Jan van Pelt and Deborah Dwork, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present* (not mentioned in *Auschwitz 1940-1945*), Sybille Steinbacher, "Musterstadt“ Auschwitz. Germanisierungspolitik und Judenmord in Oberschlesien, and Bernd C.

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More than half of volume I is devoted to the organizational structure of KL Auschwitz and to a sociological analysis of its SS garrison (Aleksander Lasik). The two subjects logically overlap, because they deal with the same group of people. They are also an indispensable “who’s who in Auschwitz,” as many names can be found later on in the upper echelons of other camps. This fact indicates that, more and more, Auschwitz had taken over the part of Dachau and Sachsenhausen as the central place for the training of concentration-camp staff.

Based primarily on SS personnel files as well as on records of postwar criminal proceedings, investigations, and testimonies, both of SS people and former prisoner functionaries, the author describes in a precise manner how the camp was organized and how the organization changed as the tasks were altered. Unlike other concentration camps, Abteilung IIIa - Arbeitseinsatz (Department IIIa - Labor) was an autonomous part of the camp administration from April 1942. Its leader (Arbeitseinsatzführer) reported directly to the camp commandant. This underlines the paramount importance for which Auschwitz was destined in the exploitation of its prisoner workforce for the benefit of the Nazi war economy.

As Omer Bartov recently pointed out, we will neither be able fully to understand the Holocaust nor to draw consequences for our own lives from it if we a priori exclude the perpetrators from humanity. Along these lines, Lasik’s materially rich sociological analysis of the Auschwitz SS garrison - apparently a novelty in Holocaust research - according to criteria such as gender, age, education, religious affiliation, or pre-war nationality may give new concrete meaning to Hannah Arendt’s somewhat abstract “banality of evil.”

Volume II centers around the prisoner himself: on his committal and his first weeks in the camp, housing, clothing, food, work, punishment and torture, contacts with the outside world, and (a rare event) release from the camp.

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(Tadeusz Iwaszko, Irena Strzelecka). Separate chapters deal with the camp hospital service. This, too, was rather a killing organization of its own with a large forgers’ workshop added, than a medical institution. It was also a place where SS doctors carried out their pseudo-medical experiments. Other chapters deal with women, children, and adolescents in the camp (Strzelecka, Helena Kubica), with the plundering of the victims’ property and the utilization of their corpses (Andrzej Strzelecki), and with the exploitation of the prisoners’ labor (Piper). The authors’ deep empathy with the victims, evident between the lines in spite of all efforts to take a detached view, supports Wolfgang Sofsky’s comment that no “third position” between perpetrators and victims is possible in Holocaust historiography.

In the last chapters mentioned above, the authors also make an attempt to estimate the profit to the German Reich from the prisoners’ workforce (60 million marks; Piper) and from the victims’ property (several hundred million marks; Strzelecki). These figures seem reasonable, at least in their order of magnitude, although the calculations are based on limited and not always reliable data. As this issue is important, for instance, with regard to negotiations about restitution and compensation, further research into this topic - optimally on an interdisciplinary scale - is highly desirable. More detailed information about the exploitation of the prisoner workforce in general can be found in Piper’s monograph Der Arbeitseinsatz der Häftlinge aus dem KL Auschwitz. Special reference to the main “employer,” IG Farben, can be found in Bernd C. Wagner’s previously cited study and in Piotr Setkiewicz’s Ph.D. dissertation.

Volume III (Piper) deals with extermination: the role that KL Auschwitz played in the National-Socialist policy of repression and genocide and the methods of mass murder carried out there. The author stresses that Auschwitz was initially devised as a detention camp for Poles in an occupation system, which had as its long-term goal the liquidation of the Polish nation

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12 Franciszek Piper, Der Arbeitseinsatz der Häftlinge aus dem KL Auschwitz (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1995).
and that “Jews constituted a small fraction of the prisoners ... until the commencement of mass annihilation, that is, until 1942” (p. 12). His conclusion from the fact that the food rations for the prisoners were deliberately planned by the SS to be far below the biological minimum is evidence that Auschwitz from the very beginning was to be a place of extermination is hardly refutable. The food argument, by the way, also qualifies the concept of Vernichtung durch Arbeit (“extermination by labor”), at least for KL Auschwitz, where having the prisoners work would only accelerate their planned extermination.

A special chapter is devoted to executions. The author demonstrates, based mostly on sources from eyewitnesses (prisoners and SS staff), the high degree to which Auschwitz served as a site of single and mass executions. At the “Death Wall” alone, more than 20,000 people were shot, among them several thousand Polish civilians. Many of them were summarily sentenced by the German Police Summary Court of Katowice, which held its sessions in the Todesblock, Block 11.

The integration of KL Auschwitz into the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” from January 1942, and into the genocide of the Gypsies from February 1943, including the selections and the gassings, is generally known and is widely described in the literature. Piper summarizes these topics again and, in addition, sketches their inner and outer correlations.

Statements about the gas chambers and the crematoria are verified by various documents, such as blueprints from the SS construction offices and wartime photographs (annotated by the author), which, for the most part, were not accessible until the Soviet archives opened their files. They are further illustrated by survivor reports, which, to a great extent, are still unknown outside Poland.

Important corroboration of the facts on mass murder by gassing can be found in reports of the Sonderkommando members, which the author quotes in great detail. In the appendix to vol. IV, one of these reports, deposed by Henryk Tauber before a Polish investigation commission on May 24, 1945, is reprinted in full in the English translation.
In a separate chapter, which was completely rewritten for the English version, the number of victims at Auschwitz is investigated. Based on his earlier monograph,\textsuperscript{14} Piper corrects the widely exaggerated figures that were published just after the end of the war and that can still be found today in school textbooks (not only in Poland) and even in scholarly literature. Nevertheless, with a statistically safe minimum of 1.1 million dead - among them 960,000 Jews and more than 70,000 (non-Jewish) Poles - Auschwitz still remains the greatest cemetery in the history of mankind.

Volume IV deals with resistance in KL Auschwitz, which the author, Henryk Świebocki, understands in a broad sense as a triple struggle: for biological survival, for the preservation of human dignity, and as actions directly targeted against the occupier. Compared to the Polish edition, the German and English versions show the greatest changes. They contain a completely rewritten introductory section and, in addition, chapters dealing with the resistance organizations in the vicinity of the camp, with escapes from the camp, and with mutinies within the camp.

Besides acts of spontaneous resistance, mutual aid and solidarity among the prisoners, the author describes in detail the origin and work of the various clandestine movements within the main camp and its major sub-camps. There is particular emphasis on the international underground and its Jewish branch, based, among others, on documentary and biographical material not utilized before. Świebocki portrays the cooperation among those groups and with the various resistance movements outside the camp - some of which, as is well known, bitterly fought one another - in a rather favorable light. From other concentration camps, however, we have learned that relations among the resistance groups within the camp were not always good. Perhaps Auschwitz was exceptional also in this respect.

Widely unknown until today, even in Poland, is the considerable support that prisoners were given by individual Poles and Polish resistance groups outside the camp. Świebocki documents this with an immense quantity of hitherto untapped archival and biographical sources from those who extended aid as well as from Jewish and gentile survivors. It should be noted, however,

\textsuperscript{14} Franciszek Piper, \textit{Die Zahl der Opfer von Auschwitz} (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1993).
that no help from the outside was possible for the vast majority of Jews who were selected for gassing right from the railroad ramp upon their arrival. The chance for an inmate to receive aid from the outside depended to a high degree on the work detail he was assigned to and on his position in the informal prisoners' hierarchy: the lower his status, the lower also the probability of his benefiting from aid. Those Jews with no knowledge of German or Polish were in the worst position, and it is no wonder that the majority of the Jewish survivors did not even hear about this outside help.

Support from the outside came in three main forms: material aid, help in maintaining secret contacts with family and friends, and aid in escapes. Świebocki documents many cases where prisoners from work details on duty outside the camp received food from the population and where civilian workers at the coal mines often shared their rations with the - mostly Jewish - prisoners. On a far greater scale, Polish legal, semi-legal, and illegal organizations gathered food in the neighboring villages and supplied it clandestinely to the prisoners. This was an important contribution to their survival, especially during the first two years of the camp’s existence. (Later on, non-Jews were allowed to receive parcels officially, and prisoners also benefited from the foodstuffs in the luggage of the Jews from the RSHA transports.) Large quantities of medicine, especially typhus vaccine, were also supplied to the prisoners from outside sources. This organized material aid was apparently meant first and foremost for the fellow countrymen. It seems, however, that other prisoners also benefited from it - although who and to which degree remains an open question.

Support of the local population was indispensable for a successful escape by a prisoner. Świebocki cites a number of 802 escapees (not taking into account those who escaped during mutinies and those who were – allegedly or actually – “shot while attempting escape”). At least 144 succeeded in getting away from the camp; most of them survived the war. Without knowledge of the locals' language, however, it was practically impossible to get support from them. Therefore, it is no wonder that Poles made up one half of the escapees as well as the major part of those who were successful. Nevertheless, aid to Jewish escapees is also documented in this volume,
such as the case of the two Slovakian Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, who escaped on April 7, 1944, and succeeded in reaching Slovakia, receiving help along the way from Polish civilians. Their testimony was published in the summer of 1944, as one of the first widely published documents about the crimes perpetrated at Auschwitz.

Świebocki also gives reasons for the fact that a general uprising did not take place. The possibility was often discussed among the various resistance groups within the main camp, Birkenau, and in Monowitz, yet it did not materialize. From documents of the resistance groups Świebocki shows that the leadership, estimating realistically the relative strengths of the prisoner forces and those of the Germans, thought it wiser not to take the tremendous risk involved in a general uprising unless the SS would be seen to making preparations for the liquidation of all the prisoners. The evacuation of the camp in mid-January 1945, rendered all those plans irrelevant.

While a general armed uprising never occurred in Auschwitz, there were several armed mutinies by some groups of deportees who found themselves in imminent danger. Świebocki chose three illustrative examples, all from Birkenau: the rebellion of fifty Polish prisoners from the penal company on June 10, 1942; the mutiny of several dozen Soviet POWs on November 6 in the same year; and the famous revolt of the Jewish members of the Sonderkommando on October 7, 1944. The last stands out insofar as it was the only uprising that was “planned meticulously and at length” (p. 245). Although each time the SS quickly got the better of the rebels and retaliated with brutal collective punishment, those mutinies showed that the prisoners “retained the will to fight and to maintain their human dignity” (p. 252).

Another important act of resistance within and outside the camp, which the author cites in great detail, was the gathering and dissemination of evidence of the crimes committed in the camp. Some documents were buried within the camp and saved after its liberation, such as the record book of the Gypsy “family camp” and the manuscripts of the Sonderkommando members. Others were smuggled out and conveyed to the Free World by Polish resistance groups. They all are an indispensable source for the research on
extermination and its implementation, and each is a powerful refutation of Holocaust denial...

Volume V deals with the end of KL Auschwitz and some events that took place in the aftermath. It begins with an outline of the liquidation process of KL Auschwitz by Andrzej Strzelecki, an abridged version of the author’s book *Endphase des KL Auschwitz. Evakuierung, Liquidierung und Befreiung des Lagers*.\(^\text{15}\) It follows a brief description of the first measures taken by Soviet and Polish authorities to document the crimes (Strzelecki) and to arrest and punish as many perpetrators as possible (Lasik). Somewhat isolated is a short article about the “KZ Syndrome,” the medical after-effects of imprisonment (Stanisław Kłodziński). One-third of the volume is taken up with an excerpt from Danuta Czech’s *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945*.\(^\text{16}\) A select bibliography, an index of names and locations (which can also be found in every volume), a glossary, and a list of abbreviations conclude the book.

The editors and contributing authors of *Auschwitz 1940-1945* doubtlessly are aware that they neither covered all aspects of the history of KL Auschwitz nor solved all the problems related to it. Some issues have already been mentioned above. In addition, the clandestine cultural and religious life in the camp, as well as the fate of the minor groups of victims are only marginally touched. Topics such as the horizontal and vertical stratification of the prisoner population and the relations among the various groups of prisoners, the organizational and national structure of the Häftlingsselbstverwaltung (prisoner “self government”) and its relation to the prisoner masses and the SS staff remain highly controversial in the survivors’ memoirs and have not yet been properly researched. The various organizational, economical, and personal interrelations between Auschwitz and the concentration camps in the Reich’s interior and the roles that Albert Speer, minister of Armament, and Hans Kammler, the “technocrat of destruction,”\(^\text{17}\) played in connection with Auschwitz also await comprehensive research. And what did the “ordinary Germans” know about Auschwitz before 1945, and how did they react to this

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\(^\text{17}\) Title of his biography by Rainer Fröbe, in Ronald Smelser and Enrico Syring, eds., *Die SS Elite unter dem Totenkopf* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2000).
knowledge? As Wagner reminds us, KL Auschwitz was not “far away somewhere in the east” but lay within the borders of the Greater Reich.\(^{18}\) Lastly, how can our usual classification of inmates (and staff) by “nationality” and/or “citizenship” be matched with that of the Nazis, who saw the cleavages along the lines of “race” and \(Volk\)?

Most of the results presented in this impressive five-volume work were previously published elsewhere, scattered in monographs or journals not easily accessible to the English-speaking reader. It is thanks to the editors that they were collected, rearranged, updated, and presented to a broader public. The result is far more than the sum of its parts: an academically solid compendium of the history of KL Auschwitz. In spite of some shortcomings, it will remain, together with Danuta Czech’s *Auschwitz Chronicle*, an important reference work for years to come.
