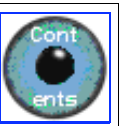
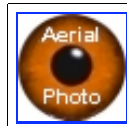


Sobibor Camp History

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The Sobibor extermination camp was located near Sobibor village, in the eastern part of the **Lublin** district of Poland, close to the **Chelm - Wlodawa railway line**. The Bug River (5 km away) today forms the border with the Ukraine. In **1942** it was the border between the *Generalgouvernement* and the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*. The area was swampy and is today as densely wooded as it was then.

The camp was the second death camp to be constructed as part of the Aktion Reinhard programme, and was built on similar lines to **Belzec** (the first *Aktion Reinhard* camp), following the lessons learned there.

Several days after a visit by a small aircraft that circled over the village, a train arrived at Sobibor. Two SS officers disembarked, construction engineers from the *SS-Zentralbauleitung* in **Zamosc**. They were **Thomalla**, the construction expert for *Aktion Reinhard*, and construction supervisor **Moser**. They walked around the station, took measurements and finally made their way into the forest opposite the station.

In **March 1942** a new spur was built, which ended at a concrete ramp (still visible in 2004). The ramp is opposite the station building. The camp fence (with interwoven branches) was built in a manner which ensured that the special spur and the ramp were located inside the camp, thus preventing passengers at the station from seeing what happened behind the fence. The deportation trains entered the ramp through a gate and disappeared behind the "green wall".

In the station area three larger buildings existed - the station, the forester's house, and a two-storey post office.

As construction work progressed (by 80 Jews from nearby ghettos), the site was inspected by a commission led by *SS-Hauptsturmführer* **Naumann**, head of the Central Construction Office of the *Waffen-SS* and Police in **Lublin**. Once the Jews had completed the initial construction phase, they were shot.

In **April 1942** *SS-Obersturmführer* **Franz Stangl** was appointed commander of Sobibor. His first task was the speeding up of the construction works. **Stangl** visited **Wirth**, the commander of **Belzec**, to obtain guidance and experience. After his return the building of the camp was accelerated. In **Mid April 1942** the camp was ready to receive the first transports.

The camp was in the form of a 400 x 600 m rectangle, surrounded by a 3 m high double barbed wire fence, partially intertwined with pine branches to prevent observation from the outside (e.g. at the station area). Along the fence and in the corners of the camp were wooden watchtowers.

Each of the four camp areas was individually fenced in: The SS administration area (*Vorlager*), housing and workshops of the Jewish command (Camp I), the "reception" area (Camp II) and the real extermination site (Camp III).

The *Vorlager* included the ramp, with space for 20 railway cars, as well as the living quarters for the SS staff, both German and Ukrainian (Trawniki men / "Trawnikis"). The *Vorlager* also included the main gate. On top of the main gate was a wooden sign about 0.60 x 2.40 m, with the words *SS-Sonderkommando*, painted in Gothic letters. Unlike **Belzec** the SS men lived inside the camp.

The Jews from the incoming transports were brought to the "Reception" Area (Camp II). Here they had to go through various procedures prior to their death in the gas chambers: division according to sex, the surrender of their suitcases, removal of clothing, cutting of women's hair and the confiscation of possessions and valuables. On their way to the gas chambers the naked victims passed various buildings; some warehouse barracks, a second former forester's house separated by a high wooden fence (used as the camp offices and living quarters for some of the SS men), a small agricultural area with stables for horses, cattle, swine and

geese, and about 450 m south of the gas chambers, a small wooden Catholic chapel in the shadow of tall pine trees. A high observation tower overlooked the entire area.

The most isolated extermination area (Camp III) was located in the northwestern part of the camp. It contained the gas chambers, burial trenches and housing for the Jewish prisoners employed there. A path, 3 - 4 m wide and 150 m long (the "Tube"), led from the reception area to the extermination area. On either side the path was fenced in with barbed wire, intertwined with pine branches. Through it, the naked victims were herded towards the gas chambers. The barber's shop, a barrack where the hair of the Jewish women was cut for further use in Germany, was halfway through the Tube.

The three **gas chambers** were inside a brick building. Individual chambers were square shaped (4 x 4 m) and had a capacity of 160 - 180 persons. Each gas chamber was entered through a small door, leading from a veranda which ran along the length of the building. After gassing the bodies were removed through a 2 x 2 m folding door, opposite to the entrance, and placed on a second veranda. Outside the building was an annex in which a motor produced the deadly carbon monoxide gas. Water pipes conducted the gas to the gas chambers.

The burial pits were 50 - 60 m long, 10 - 15 m wide, and 5 - 7 m deep. The sandy walls were constructed obliquely in order to facilitate the burying of the corpses. A narrow gauge railway with tippers led from the station to the burial pits, bypassing the gas chambers.

While the basic installations were being made ready to exterminate the Jews, the organisation of the SS and Ukrainians was also taking shape. **Stangl**, an Austrian with experience in the euthanasia program, had as his deputy another SS man with euthanasia experience: **Hermann Michel**, who was replaced a few months later by *SS-Oberscharführer* **Gustav Wagner**. Camp I, where the Jewish prisoners worked, and Camp III had their own commanders, subordinated to **Stangl**.

The commander of Camp I was *SS-Oberscharführer* **Weiss**, who was replaced by *SS-Oberscharführer* **Karl Frenzel**. He had previously supervised the Jewish prisoners in Camp II. *SS-Oberscharführer* **Kurt Bolender** served as commander of Camp III from **April 1942 until Autumn 1942**. He was later replaced by *SS-Oberscharführer* **Erich Bauer**. **Alfred Ittner** was in charge of the camp administration, later transferred to Camp III.

The Ukrainian guards at Sobibor came from the SS training camp in **Trawniki** where they were trained by *SS-Scharführer* **Erich Lachmann**. He had been in charge of these "Trawnikis" since **August 1942**. In **autumn 1942** he was replaced by **Bolender**. The Trawnikis were organized in three platoons, led by Ukrainians who had already served in the German police and held appropriate ranks.

In **mid-April 1942** when the camp was nearly completed, experimental gassings took place. About 250 Jews from **Krychow forced labour camp** were brought there for this purpose. **Wirth**, the commander of **Belzec**, arrived in Sobibor to witness these gassings, accompanied by the chemist Dr **Karl Blaurock**.

After the experimental killings had been carried out, the mass exterminations began in the first days of **May 1942**.

The **deportation trains**, consisting of up to 60 wagons, stopped at Sobibor station. Then a locomotive pushed 18 - 20 freight cars through the gate into the camp. When these had been unloaded, the next part of the train was picked up and pushed into the camp. The escort and railway workers had to stay outside the fencing. Only a specialised team of trusted *Reichsbahn* employees was allowed to enter the camp. Once inside, the train stopped alongside the ramp and the cars were opened by the Ukrainian guards. Those who were still alive were ordered to disembark from the dark, malodorous wagons. SS men drove them to the "Reception Area" in Camp II. A **camp orchestra** played during this procedure.

SS-Oberscharführer **Kurt Bolender** testified how the extermination process operated: "Before the Jews undressed, *Oberscharführer* **Hermann Michel** made a speech to them. On these occasions, he used to wear a white coat to give the impression he was a physician. **Michel** announced to the Jews that they would be sent to work. But before this they would have to take baths and undergo disinfection, so as to prevent the spread of diseases. After undressing, the Jews were taken through the "Tube", by an SS man leading the way, with five or six Ukrainians at the back hastening the Jews along. After the Jews entered the gas chambers, the Ukrainians closed the doors. The **motor** was switched on by the Ukrainian **Emil Kostenko** and by the German driver **Erich Bauer** from **Berlin**. After the gassing, the doors were opened and the corpses were removed by a group of Jewish workers."

Elderly people, the sick and invalids were told they would receive medical treatment. They were put in carts (later the railway tippers were used) which were pushed by men or pulled by a horse directly to the pits in Camp III, where those who had been so transported were shot. Some survivors have suggested that a flock of geese was kept in Camp III specifically for the purpose of drowning out the screams of the victims with their honking. Whilst it is known that geese were kept at Sobibor (and at **Belzec** and **Treblinka** too), there is no definitive evidence that the birds were used for this purpose. Witnesses may have assumed that the honking of the geese, frightened by the screaming guards and terrified victims, formed part of the plan to mask the activities of the gas chambers. It seems more probable that the geese were kept as a source of food for the Germans, and any noise made by them during the extermination process was simply coincidental. However, it is understandable that inmates may have thought that this was part of an intentional attempt at concealment.

After the first few weeks of undressing in the open air square of Camp II, an undressing barrack was erected. Inside this barrack were signs indicating directions "To the Cashier" and "To the Baths". The Jews handed over their money and valuables through the window of the cashier's room. The cashier was *SS-Oberscharführer* **Alfred Ittner**, who was the camp accountant. Later he was replaced by *SS-Scharführer* **Herbert Floss**.

A limited number of skilled workers were selected from the transports, among them carpenters, tailors, shoemakers and a few dozen strong young men and women. It was their duty to carry out the physical labour. [See the edited extracts from the memoirs of Stanislaw \("Schlomo"\) Szmajzner!](#)

Every day some of them were shot or sent to the gas chambers. Their ranks were filled by arrivals from new transports. Some deportees were taken to Camp III, where they had to remove the gassed bodies and bury them. Others were engaged in collecting and sorting out the victim's property [which was sent to Germany](#).

The 200 - 300 Jewish prisoners who were kept in Camp III had no contact with those in the other parts of the camp. Their food was cooked in Camp I and taken by Jewish prisoners to the gate of Camp III.

During the first phase of killing operations in Sobibor, from **5 May** (a transport from **Opole**) until the **end of July 1942**, at least 90,000 - 100,000 Jews perished in Sobibor. The transports mainly came from ghettos or transit camps in the **Lublin** district (at least 57,000), the Czech Republic and Slovakia (6,000) as well as Germany and Austria (10,000).

At the end of **July 1942** the deportations to Sobibor ceased, because of reconstruction works on the **Lublin - Chelm railway line**. During the next two months only a few smaller transports from some nearby ghettos arrived.

Because the killing capacity (600 people per gassing) could not cope with the increasing number of transports, during this phase the old gas chambers were replaced by a larger building. The construction works were supervised by *SS Unterscharführer* **Erwin Lambert** and *SS-Scharführer* **Lorenz Hackenholt**. They were the principals involved in the building of all of the gas chambers of *Aktion Reinhard* and of the Nazi euthanasia programme (*Aktion T4*).

The new building had six gas chambers, three on each side of a corridor that ran through the centre of the structure. Now 1,300 people could be gassed at the same time.

After the construction works at the **Lublin - Chelm railway line** were completed, transports from the *Generalgouvernement* (145,000 - 155,000) and Slovakia (25,000) arrived between **October 1942 and June 1943**.

In early **February 1943** *Reichsführer-SS* **Heinrich Himmler** visited the camp. It was cleaned and looked virtually idle. It is therefore probable that **Himmler** gave the order that henceforth, transports from the Netherlands should go to Sobibor, as well as to other death camps. **Himmler** also watched a special demonstration of gassing in which several hundred Jewish girls from a nearby work camp lost their lives.

In **March 1943** four **transports from France** brought 4,000 people. All of them were killed. **19 transports** arrived **from the Netherlands** between **March and July 1943**, carrying 34,313 Jews in passenger trains (the exact numbers may never be confirmed, but most sources state that there were 19 transports, 34,313 Jews deported and less than 20 survivors). They were greeted by the SS with a polite welcome, in order to allay any concerns on the deportees' behalf. Of course the Dutch Jews also finally met their end in the gas chambers. If these people had not been convinced that they were being transported to work camps somewhere in the East, it is conceivable that they would have tried to escape from the trains whilst in transit.

On 5 July 1943 **Himmler** ordered the addition of a munitions supply area (Camp IV). Bunkers were built and mines were laid around the camp.

The last transports came from the **Vilna, Minsk and Lida ghettos**: 14,000 Jews arrived in the second half of **September 1943**.

Resistance and escape attempts occurred throughout the camp's existence. On 20 July 1943, the "Forest Command" (*Waldkommando* / cutting trees, making firewood and branches for camouflage of the fences) revolted. Eight prisoners managed to escape, all others were shot.

In July / August 1943 an underground group was formed amongst the Jewish prisoners, under the leadership of **Leon Feldhendler**, who had been the chairman of the *Judenrat* in the **Zolkiew ghetto**.

In one of the last transports from **Minsk**, Jewish members of the Red Army were brought to the camp. One of these was Lt. **Aleksander (Sascha) Pechersky**. He became the camp underground's commander, with **Feldhendler** as his deputy.

The revolt was planned to occur on 13 October 1943, but the unexpected arrival of an SS troop from the labour camp at **Ossowa**, caused a delay of 24 hours.

On 14 October 1943 **Reichleitner, Wagner and Gomerski** were on leave. The absence of **Wagner** and **Gomerski**, two of the cruellest SS men in Sobibor, seriously weakened the guard garrison.

At about 4 p.m. deputy commander **Johann Niemann** visited the tailor's shop to try on a new uniform. There he was killed by **Yehuda Lerner** with a blow from an axe. The revolt had begun - there was no turning back.

Ten Germans, two *Volksdeutsche* and eight Ukrainian guards were killed, *SS-Oberscharführer* **Werner Dubois** was seriously injured.

On 15 October 1943, the *SSPF Lublin* advised his neighbouring *SSPF* in **Luzk**, *SS Brigadeführer* **Wilhelm Günther** in a **radio message**, that some 700 Jews had broken out of the Sobibor camp and would be escaping in **Günther's** direction. Counter-measures should be undertaken. In fact at this time Sobibor held 700 Jews but not all of them fled (source: S. Tyas), so that a smaller number (approximately 300) of escapees must be estimated. Most of these lost their lives in the **hunt** that followed, organized by the SS and police units.

Following the revolt in **Treblinka** in **August 1943**, and the dismantling of its facilities, the last prisoners and SS men were directed from there to Sobibor on **20 October 1943**.

On 23 November 1943 **Wagner** announced the execution of the last remaining thirty Jews. The SS men **Jührs, Sporleder and Zierke**, assisted by Trawniki (among them **Bodessa and Kaiser**), made these Jews work at the double, at meaningless heavy labour. The Jews were then executed in batches of five by a bullet in the neck.

In the wake of the uprising the Germans decided to liquidate Sobibor. Camp III, the extermination area, was immediately destroyed. The other facilities, especially those close to the ramp, were used until July 1944 as a camp for the German *Baudienst* (Construction Service). According to a witness in **Wlodawa**, who worked there as member of the *Baudienst*, the gas chambers were not destroyed in course of Camp III's dismantling but at a later date.

In the **summer of 1944**, the Sobibor area was liberated by the Red Army and Polish forces. At the end of the war, about fifty Jewish former inmates of the camp were still alive. Many had been in hiding or had joined the partisans.

Because Sobibor was no longer used as extermination camp, most of the barracks were not destroyed by the SS, but rather in the post-war era. The ramp was used until 1947 for gathering Ukrainian transports; **Between 1945 and 1947** the Ukrainian population from the eastern part of the **Lublin** district was resettled to the Ukraine or to the western part of Poland. While these Ukrainians waited for their trains (sometimes for up to one week), since they needed the wood for fuel or for campfires, they demolished the rest of the barracks.

The large watchtower was not destroyed because it was required by the forester to observe the forest (fire prevention). The commandant's house ("Swallow's Nest") was also not razed since it originally belonged to the forester's administration and the Nazis simply returned it. In addition, the building was not strictly connected with the killing process, so that the Germans reasoned that it was not necessary to demolish it.

The ramp was used until **1960**. The railway traffic ceased in **1999**. Sobibor station was in normal use until this time.

Between 150,000 and 250,000 Jews lost their lives in Sobibor.

In post-war trials, *Gasmeister* **Erich Bauer** was sentenced to death, but had his sentence commuted to life imprisonment. **Hubert Gomerski** also received a sentence of life imprisonment. The main Sobibor trial was held in **Hagen** in **1965/66**. The principal defendants were **Karl Frenzel** (life imprisonment), **Kurt Bolender**, **Werner Dubois** (3 years), **Erich Fuchs** (4 years) and **Franz Wolf** (8 years).

Bolender committed suicide in his detention cell.

Gustav Wagner escaped to Brazil and committed suicide in **1980**.

In **1961** a first memorial was built. Today an impressive memorial and a well-managed museum are located at the camp site.

Sobibor Finds

Map "Deportation Trains": Sir Martin Gilbert

Sources:

Encyclopaedia of The Holocaust

Arad. **Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka**

Stanislaw Smajzner. **Hell in Sobibor**

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