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FOREIGN DESK

Auschwitz Revisited: the Fullest Picture Yet

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL (NYT) 1278 words

Prodded by Holocaust survivors and scholars, Auschwitz has been giving up more of its last infernal secrets.

Drawing on captured German documents newly available from Russian archives and more than a half-century of Auschwitz studies, researchers in Poland have compiled what experts call the most complete and authoritative history of the vast killing center for the Nazi extermination of the Jews.

Called simply "Auschwitz 1940-1945" and just issued in English, it is a five-volume work of more than half a million words that has been under preparation by Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum since 1979. Replete with names of killers and victims, it fills 1,799 pages, including construction plans for the gas chambers and crematories, prisoner lists, first-hand accounts, rare photographs, an almost day-by-day calendar and a 49-page bibliography.

By the time Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz and its subcamps 56 years ago yesterday, an estimated 1.3 million people had been shipped there and at least 1.1 million, including 960,000 Jews, had died there, the history establishes. Because fleeing guards burned millions of documents -- while leaving behind others from the so-called Hygiene Institute and infirmary as exculpatory ploys -- the exact toll will never be known.

"It is by far the most comprehensive in its detail and level of source material," said Rabbi Irving Greenberg, chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which will be selling the work.

Using lists of victims and other camp documentation recently retrieved from Russia, the Auschwitz history offers new computations of the death toll, including the fate of 232,000 deportees under 18. It profiles many of the nearly 8,000 SS men and women who ran the camp and who, the book says, largely escaped justice after World War II. It tallies property plundered from the prisoners: gold teeth and hair by the trainload and convoys of empty baby carriages that, one former prisoner recalled, "were pushed in rows of five, and the procession took more than an hour to pass."

But the study also devotes nearly 400 pages alone to the often-overlooked camp resistance movement: the operations of Polish underground cells; an ill-fated mutiny on Oct. 7, 1944, in which 451 prisoners died; and 802 escapes that helped smuggle out news of the killings to an often uninterested world.

The history includes accounts secretly recorded by anonymous doomed prisoners assigned to execution details who buried their testaments like time capsules around the Auschwitz grounds. It also cross-references Nazi memoirs and testimony from a welter of war crimes proceedings, including the trial of the camp's commandant, Rudolf Höss, who was hanged in 1947.

For many years after the war, said Teresa Swiebocka, a curator at the museum, the Polish Communist

authorities played down the singular victimization of the Jews. Since the fall of Communism, scholars say, the distortions have been redressed, as the book reflects.

Eli Rosenbaum, director of the Justice Department's Nazi-hunting Office of Special Investigations, called the history "clearly a landmark work and a major contribution to scholarship." He said his office has consulted it on people suspected of being Nazi guards who might have taken refuge in the United States and who could be stripped of their American citizenship and deported.

After the history appeared in Polish in 1995 and in German in 1999, an expanded version was translated into English by an American educator and filmmaker, William Brand, and paid for by Warren L. Miller, a former federal prosecutor and trial lawyer in Washington. Mr. Miller has served since 1992 on the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, which helps maintain European sites of historic and cultural interest to Americans. The history costs \$60 at the Auschwitz -Birkenau museum.

Compiling the history was an arduous job, said Ms. Swiebocka, who helped prepare the English version. Researchers drew on museum archives going back to 1947, a grim trove that now includes more than 70,000 death certificates, punishment annals, résumés of more than 500 SS members, 6,000 drawings by prisoners and 40,000 photographs of mostly non-Jewish prisoners taken by the Germans before they abandoned the practice.

Yet despite all the new research, Ms. Swiebocka said, some critical questions remain unanswered: particularly the number of victims.

The history traces Auschwitz from its designation on Jan. 25, 1940, at the site of a Polish artillery barracks in the Katowice district at Oswiecim (pronounced ohsh-VYEN-cheem), a remote location at the fork of the Sola and Vistula rivers served by good rail connections. On June 14, the first transport, from Tarnow, brought 728 Polish prisoners, mostly high school and university students and soldiers.

On July 6, a Polish prisoner became the first escapee. When his absence was discovered, all prisoners were forced to stand at roll call for 20 hours. Many were beaten and flogged and one, Dawid Wongczewski, a Jew, became the first to die at Auschwitz, according to the history.

The first prisoners were put to work expanding the camp and building the first crematory. The coke-fired ovens, with an initial capacity of at least 100 bodies a day, were supplied by J. A. Topf & Söhne of Erfurt, Germany, and the burning of corpses began on Aug. 15, 1940. Heinrich Himmler, commander of Hitler's SS, visited the camp on March 1, 1941, and decreed a vast expansion that would clear the surrounding countryside for a second large camp called Birkenau, subcamps and factories of I. G. Farben, Bayer and other industrial giants, to be staffed by forced labor.

Shortly afterward, Höss later recalled, Himmler told him, "the Führer has ordered the final solution of the Jewish question."

Until 1942, Poles made up the largest group of prisoners, the history recounts. An estimated 150,000 were deported there throughout the war and about 75,000 died. Starting in 1941, Soviet prisoners of war were sent to Auschwitz, where at least 15,000 of them died, many in the first trials of the gas chamber using pellets of Zyklon B.

The first transport of Jews arrived from Bytom, Poland, on Feb. 15, 1942. By the end of 1942, there were more Jews than Poles in Auschwitz, and thereafter the camp became primarily an extermination center for Jews, although most of the estimated 23,000 Gypsies and perhaps 15,000 other prisoners deported there also were killed.

Although calculations after liberation suggested that four million people may have died at Auschwitz, based in part on the capacity of the crematories, most scholars have since settled on a toll of 1 million to 1.5 million.

From personnel records of 6,335 of the men and women who served at Auschwitz, the study also analyzes the varied makeup of the SS garrison, putting the average age at 36.1 years and the educational level as relatively low, with about 70 percent not having gone beyond grade school. In the whole history of Auschwitz, it said, there were few instances of SS members refusing to carry out orders and no documented instance of any guard being punished for refusing to carry out mass murder.

Justice was substantially cheated, a chapter by a Polish sociologist, Aleksander Lasik, concludes. No more than 789 members of the staff were ever tried and, he wrote, "a smaller percentage were convicted and a still smaller percentage served their sentences in full."

Correction: January 30, 2001, Tuesday An article on Sunday about a new English translation of a five-volume history of Auschwitz misstated the source of financing for the project. It was raised from donors by Warren L. Miller as a member of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. He did not pay for it himself.