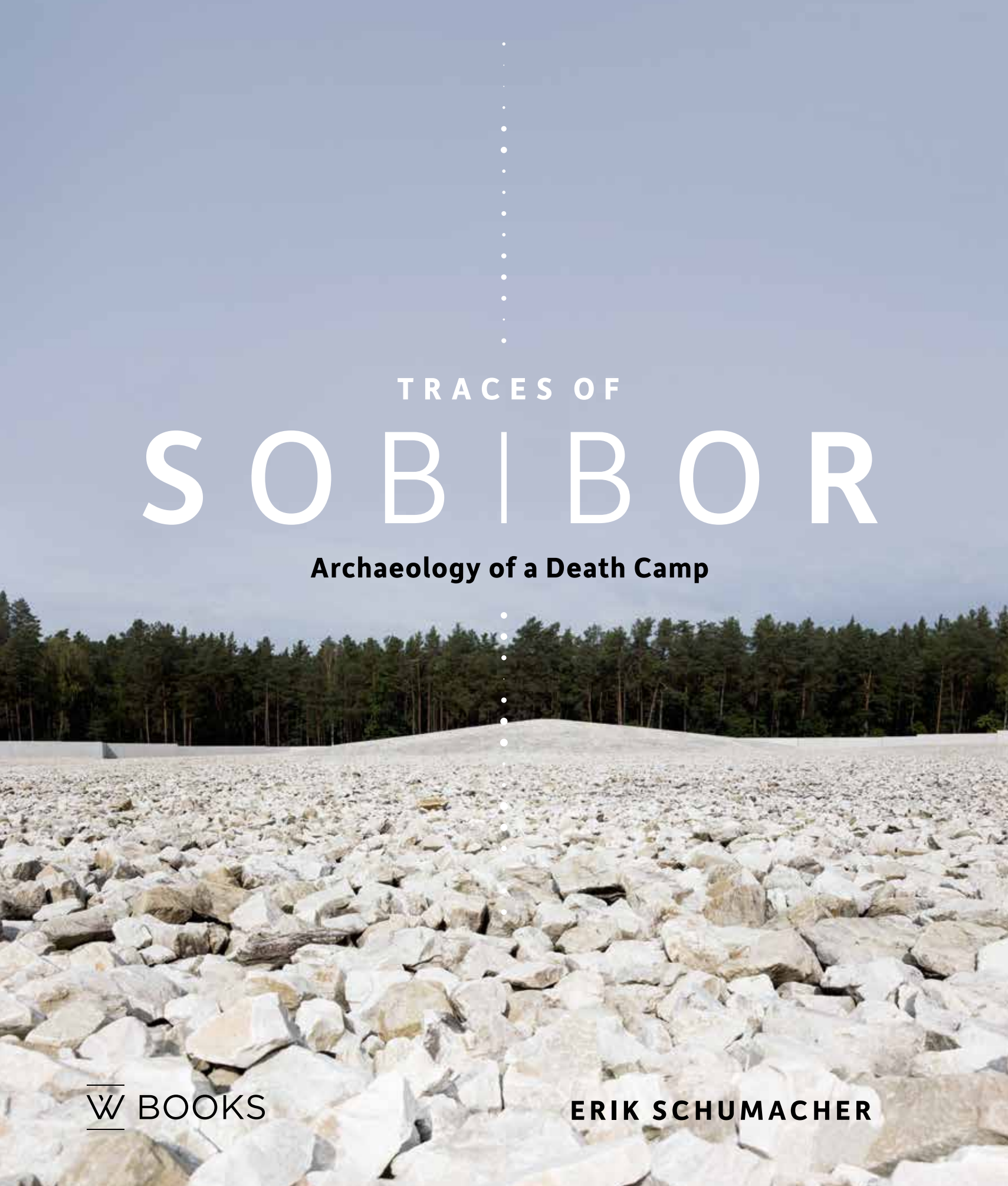

# TRACES OF SOBIBOR

## Archaeology of a Death Camp

W BOOKS

ERIK SCHUMACHER

# CONTENTS





*Previous page* **Aerial photo from 1944. Above the railway – the long horizontal line – there is a clearing in the forest where Sobibor death camp used to be. Only a few of the camp buildings were left standing.**

# 1.
# ARRIVAL

Everyone on the bus is silent. A steady drizzle ticks against the windows. Outside, an endless blur of trees, punctuated by an occasional cabin. The road snakes through the Bug River valley on the eastern Polish frontier, a few kilometres from where Belarus, Ukraine and Poland meet. The only sound is the GPS, whose tinny female voice patiently guides the driver to the remote location where long ago, during the German occupation, Sobibor death camp stood.

The passengers are a group of about thirty people, most of them Dutch and a few English. They signed up for the commemorative trip that Stichting Sobibor, a Dutch foundation, organizes every spring for surviving relatives and others. Eighty years have passed since the camp closed, but to the visitors it doesn't feel like very long ago. Many participants have brought along lists of names, the names of relatives they never met or only saw when they were infants. For many in the group, it took years to prepare for the trip. They had to pluck up their courage, bit by bit, until they were ready to come.

The group is following a carefully planned itinerary. They landed in Warsaw yesterday, and the first day was reserved for them to acclimatize. On the bus from the airport, the English members of the group looked up in surprise when the Dutch passengers burst into song. Tour guide Petra van den Boomgaard hastened to explain it was someone's birthday. The passengers were chatting away, exploring whether they have mutual acquaintances: 'Remember such and such? They used to have a store there…'. At some point, however, the conversation turns to why they are on the trip. Each of them takes a deep breath and softly starts telling the story that never gets any easier.

Today, the group is going to Sobibor. On the way they visit the former synagogue in the nearby town of Włodawa. 'It's a stressful day', Van den Boomgaard says, addressing the passengers through a microphone from the front of the bus. Everyone has their own way of dealing with the tension. One woman shows her neighbour photos of her grandchildren on her phone. Another man, not used to wearing a yarmulke, is fumbling with a hairpin. Further towards the back of the bus, the conversation turns to football. A few seats away, a passenger succumbs to tears. Her sister calls out jokingly, 'We need some vodka!'

After Włodawa, it's a 15-minute ride to Sobibor. Maarten Eddes, who organized the trip with Van den Boomgaard, requests silence so that everyone can prepare themselves. An elderly participant stares silently at the faces in the black and white photos he has brought with him.

The bus pulls into the car park. With a startled motion, one of the participants clutches the headrest in front of her with both hands. She presses her face against the back of the seat and cries into the upholstery.

The car park is in the same spot where the trains used to arrive. The first thing the deportees would have caught sight of were the camp guards' colourful homes. The buildings had names like 'Gottes Heimat' and 'Fröhliche Herberge'. They had neatly landscaped

**Upon arrival at the former camp terrain, one of the visitors on the trip organized by Stichting Sobibor walks to the railway tracks. May 2023.**

**The *Vorlager*, seen from behind, in a rare photo taken when the camp was in operation.**
© Johann Niemann Collection, USHMM, gift of Bildungswerk Stanislaw-Hantz



gardens with flowerbeds and gravel paths. From the outside, Sobibor looked like a Tyrolean village.[1] The camp had been purposefully designed this way to keep the victims calm. They were meant to believe until the very last moment that they had gone there to work. They were not supposed to know that, upon arrival, they were going directly to the gas chambers.

The camp was a speck in a vast forest. It stood next to Sobibór train station, a few kilometres from the village of the same name, which was primarily used to transport timber. Since the bridge over the Bug River had been destroyed in the fighting between the Red Army and the Germans, the station was the next-to-last stop on the railway line. The only people who disembarked there were the few who had reason to be in Sobibor – and the many brought there against their will.

The planners had deliberately chosen a remote location. The mass murder of Jews was shrouded in secrecy. The forests of Eastern Europe provided the Nazis with space to conceal their crimes. It all began on the east side of the Bug River, with bullets. Where German forces had conquered territory from the Soviet Union since the summer of 1941, special units hunted down Jews. They rounded them up and usually executed them in remote areas just outside their hometowns. The scale of the operation is hard to fathom; by the end of the year, a million Jews had already been murdered that way.[2] They disappeared in anonymous mass graves among the trees. On the west side of the Bug River, a more efficient method of killing was developed. German occupiers had controlled the area since late 1939 and confined the Jews to ghettos. Starting in the spring of 1942, most of the Jews were transported to the three forest-enclosed extermination camps that were part of 'Operation Reinhard': Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibor.

In the memorialization of World War II, Auschwitz has become the symbol of the Holocaust. Far lesser known are the three camps of Operation Reinhard controlled by the Nazis from Lublin, where the industrialization of murder in gas chambers was perfected before it was implemented in Auschwitz. Between 1.5 and 2 million people were killed in the

**Two SS officers pose with their dog in front of the geese that were kept at the camp.**
© Johann Niemann Collection, USHMM, gift of Bildungswerk Stanislaw-Hantz



Operation Reinhard camps combined – more than in Auschwitz.[3] The killing was done in sparsely populated areas, amid a silence that still prevails. To this day, the names of the three camps remain unfamiliar to many.

While the number of victims is staggering, Sobibor's dimensions were remarkably small. Initially, it was the size of seventeen football fields, but was eventually expanded to over eighty. It was a world in itself, surrounded by barbed wire and minefields, and it was largely self-sustaining. In the camp, crops were grown, and cows, chickens, pigs and rabbits were raised.[4] An almost bucolic scene – but for the fact that the geese were regularly startled so their honking would drown out the screams from the gas chambers.[5]

Management was kept small. About twenty SS officers ran the camp. For daily tasks, the Nazis pitted different groups of prisoners against each other. At other camps, they forcibly recruited guards from among the Soviet POWs who were starving under the scorching sun. They came to be known as 'Trawniki men', after the camp where the Germans trained them. Typically around 120 of them were deployed at Sobibor at any given time.[6] A step lower in the hierarchy were the hundreds of Jewish prisoners who worked as forced labourers in the *Sonderkommando*. They had been pulled out of the line upon arriving in Sobibor. In exchange for their labour, they were allowed to stay alive a little longer. But eventually, they too were killed.

> 'My heart was bleeding, because I knew that in a half hour the human being standing in front of me was going to become nothing but ashes.'

Philip Bialowitz, from the Polish town of Izbica, is one of the few who survived to tell the world about the Sobibor nightmare. He was seventeen when he

# 2.
# THE CONCEALED CAMP

The camera zooms out to capture thirty-foot-tall pine trees against a blue sky. The three people walking through a clearing seem small by comparison. Interviewer Claude Lanzmann has his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. To his left is Barbara Janicka, a Polish-French interpreter, and to his right is the eyewitness Jan Piwonski who worked as an assistant switchman at the Sobibór railway station during the war. The treetops gently sway in the wind. 'This silence, this beauty – it's the charm of our forest', says Piwonski. 'But it wasn't always this quiet here.' Lanzmann points to a row of trees. Is that where the mass graves are?

This scene is from *Shoah*, Lanzmann's monumental nine-hour documentary released in 1985. The French director chose to not use any archival footage to tell the story of the extermination camps, but personally sought out the places where it had happened. He was the first to show a mass audience what the sites looked like forty years later. He referred to them as *non-lieux de mémoire*: 'non-sites of memory'. 'There was nothing at all', he said in an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 'sheer nothingness, and I had to make a film on the basis of this nothingness.'[19]

The suffering had been supplanted by trees. Piwonski told Lanzmann that in the 1960s, he had given a tour of the former camp site to a German judge involved in a trial of Sobibor guards. The man had remarked that it was so idyllic, so romantic, that even though he knew the facts, he simply couldn't imagine what had happened there.[20]

Other visitors to Sobibor might recognize that sensation. The forest is so beautiful that the past threatens to slip away. Sobibor – 'Owl Forest' in Polish – is located in Polesia, a marshy plain that stretches from Poland to Russia and is promoted in travel guides as the 'Amazon of Europe'. Because of its abundant biodiversity, it has become a paradise for birdwatchers and rare plant enthusiasts. The cover of the book that Sobibor survivor Jules Schelvis wrote about the camp features a photo of the forest printed in negative, with a black sky above a horrific landscape of white branches. We want places of horror to appear sinister and tragic: the weather should be nasty and we invent stories that no birds sang there.[21] Natural beauty is not welcome because it dares to provide false testimony, even before a judge.

Around the time Lanzmann was working on *Shoah*, Armando, a Dutch painter, sculptor and writer, created a series of paintings and lithographs titled *Guilty Landscape*. They are grim images of forest scenes that appear to have been pressed onto the canvas with angry strokes. Armando grew up near Kamp Amersfoort, a penal and transit camp in the Netherlands. He was eleven years old when the German occupiers began operating the camp. He never forgave the tall trees surrounding the camp for 'ridiculing' the scene in the background, as he later wrote. After the camp was closed, the trees remained silent about what had happened, even overgrowing the crime scene. 'This landscape has done / evil', Armando wrote. 'Time is guilty, everything grows / again, but thinking becomes / forgetting. Betrayal!'[22]

Around the same time, Halina Birenbaum, a Polish poet and camp survivor, expressed a similar sentiment. Birenbaum had struggled with the natural beauty that surrounded her when she was imprisoned in Auschwitz, she wrote. She would gaze longingly at the trees, which she saw as a symbol of life. She wanted to climb into their branches and


**Still from *Shoah* (1985) at the old Sobibór railway station. From left to right: interpreter Barbara Janicka, interviewee Jan Piwonski and director Claude Lanzmann.**

fly away. She loved the trees but was, like Armando, angry at them too, for stubbornly remaining silent, for seeming indifferent to human suffering, sometimes even mocking the victims. She implored the trees to keep the memory alive but knew it was in vain.

'Many like me confessed to the trees / begged for remembrance', she wrote. 'The trees saw and heard all these / but in their habit / kept growing and getting green / and they kept silence.'[23]

That indifference was maddening. For the victims, it was an unbearable thought that behind the camp fences, they would truly vanish into obscurity, that no one would recount who they were and what had happened to them.

In the face of impending doom, they sought ways to resist oblivion, often choosing the ground as their ally. In the Warsaw Ghetto, Jewish resistance fighters led by historian Emanuel Ringelblum compiled thousands of documents about life under German persecution, which they buried in jugs and cans. In the extermination camps, Jewish prisoners left notes in bottles among the corpses. Papers from Zalman Gradowski found in Auschwitz read, 'Dear finder, search everywhere, in every inch of soil. Tens of documents are buried under it, mine and those of other persons, which will throw light on everything that was happening here.'[24] It was a message in a bottle to an unknown future, a manifestation of hope that humanity would be less indifferent than the trees, that it would care enough to be enraged by what had been done to the prisoners.

On the day of the Sobibor uprising, the prisoners knew that many of them would probably not make it to the forest. But there was something the fortunate could do for the unfortunate. In Bialowitz's recollection, Felhendler and Pechersky, the leaders of the uprising, gave all those who were to survive a mission: they had to tell the world what had transpired there. Bialowitz himself spent a lifetime fulfilling that mission.[25]

But who would believe them? SS officers often

# 3.
# THE FIRST CAMPAIGNS

On Wednesday 11 October 2000, a group of archaeologists walked onto the site of the former Sobibor camp. They were looking for unusual vegetation that might indicate that something had happened to the soil in a particular spot. At ten different locations, they inserted a thin hand auger into the ground to extract a soil sample. Three of the boreholes produced normal results: a layer of humus, then a layer of reddish sand, and beneath that, light yellow sand. The other seven boreholes yielded a 'positive result', wrote archaeologist Mieczysław Góra in the diary he kept during the week-long reconnaissance. 'In these samples, a layer of sandy brown soil with concentrations of charcoal and burnt human bones was found', he noted.[58]

That was the first time an archaeological investigation in Sobibor was documented. It was preliminary research, led by archaeologist Andrzej Kola from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. It would be several years before other archaeologists would carry out the main excavations in Sobibor. Two longer field campaigns in the spring and fall of 2001 followed the first reconnaissance work. Kola's primary goal was to map the human remains, but he also hoped to locate the gas chambers. His team discovered seven burial pits. He determined that the monumental ash mound, contrary to popular belief, was not composed of ashes at all. To the south of the burial pits, he examined five underground structures and labelled them A through E. Object E especially piqued Kola's interest. There, the foundations of an elongated building measuring 6 by 60 metres were located.

Could they be the gas chambers?

A long search began.

The video connection with Włodawa is unstable. Marek Bem is visible, but there's no sound. Bem was the one who initiated the archaeological research. As the director of the museum in Włodawa's former synagogue, he had been in charge of the Sobibor memorial site until 2011, when it ceased to be the museum's responsibility. He had worked hard on plans to transform the neglected site into a dignified place of remembrance. In today's interview with him, it quickly becomes clear that he is still proud of his efforts. Once he manages to get the microphone on his computer working, he is all but unstoppable. He needs only half a question to launch into a passionate story that is only interrupted when the interpreter raises her hand to indicate that she can't keep up with his words.

Bem ended up in Sobibor by chance but the place immediately got under his skin. He had met his wife at university, where he studied anthropology. After graduating, they wanted to settle in her native region. He searched for job opportunities there and landed the job in the museum in Włodawa in 1987. Once there, he noticed that more and more visitors were showing an interest in Sobibor, the camp that everyone had seemingly forgotten about.

It was a turbulent time in Polish history. In 1988, a wave of mass strikes and demonstrations pushed for the legalization of Solidarity, the broad opposition movement that had been banned nine years earlier. The protests eventually brought the communist regime to its knees and Poland set out on a path towards democracy. The future belonged to a counter movement that had spread its own perspective on history from the beginning. The idea was to do

**Archaeologists taking core samples from the soil at the site of the former camp, 2001.**
© Private collection of Marek Bem

away with the communist distortions: it was time to rewrite history. Activists organized commemorations for aspects of Polish history that had been taboo under the communist regime, and in the process rediscovered Polish Jewry. Within the democratic movement, a curious fascination with Jewish history and culture emerged. Fans, especially young people, saw the vanished community as a symbol of communist censorship and the lost Poland that had disappeared. They cooked Jewish dishes, listened to Jewish music and drank kosher vodka. And they learned about the Holocaust.[59] Bem saw it in Sobibor: more people started visiting the camp.

In April 1993, the new Polish democracy presented itself to the world as a country that would no longer ignore the Holocaust. In the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and US Vice President Al Gore, the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was commemorated in grand fashion.

That same year marked the 50th anniversary of the Sobibor uprising, and that too was commemorated on a larger scale than ever before. Thomas Blatt's relentless lobbying had finally convinced the Polish government to declare part of the former camp a historical heritage site. The day care centre had been evacuated and the playground dismantled. The wooden building housed a small museum. A significant correction was made at the entrance to the site: the sign that had previously listed Soviet POWs as the primary victims now explicitly stated that the overwhelming majority of the victims had been Jewish.

Still, Bem felt that the importance of the place had not been done justice. 'The museum was just a modest little building', he says. Certainly, it marked progress. There was finally a place where visitors could find some information. But in Bem's view, the exhibition was incomplete.[60]

That was partly because there wasn't much information available. Bem quickly ran up against the limits of what was known about the camp. Even in the West, comprehensive studies of Sobibor were just getting started. For instance, Schelvis's ground-breaking monograph, which was published in Dutch in 1993, would not be translated into German until 1998. So Bem conducted his own research, searching for archives and survivors to gather more

# 7.
# THE IMPACT OF A NAME

'You have no idea how long I stared at these letters …' Schute chuckles. On his computer screen, he points out a close-up of a stained plaster with brown lines that could be letters and numbers. Schute had not been in Sobibor for long when Mazurek called him over to show him a white, enamelled dinner plate. A museum employee had found it under a tree, amid pine cones, in the spring of 2013. It might have been dug up at some point by a looter and cast aside as a worthless find, or perhaps it came to the surface through forestry work. There was no telling how long it had been there. But the plate was in remarkably good condition, aside from some rust on the edges. The most extraordinary thing about it was that this plaster taped to it seventy years earlier was still stuck to it. The owner had written his or her name on it. But what did it say?

'Bakker', thought Mazurek. Indeed, a common Dutch name. Schute peered, took a picture, zoomed in, mulled over the letters and numbers and compared them to the Dutch transport lists. He searched until he was finally sure what it said. 'S. Mock-Hakker', and underneath that, 'Den Haag, Holland, 18-9-1883.'

With the name in hand, Schute could look for the story behind the plate. Sara Hakker was married to Amsterdam diamond worker Maurits Mock, he discovered. He found a photograph too. Now Schute was no longer staring at letters, but at the face of an upper-class lady. She was 59 when she and her husband were herded into the gas chamber on 5 March 1943.[143] Three days earlier, she had left Westerbork for Sobibor, assuming that when she got there she would be able to eat from her own plate. Now, her long-forgotten name was spoken aloud once again, thanks to a single object among thousands.

In the archaeology of the Holocaust, it is extremely rare to be able to trace an object back to its original owner. Twenty thousand objects were found under Schute's leadership at the excavations in Westerbork, and not one of them could be linked to a name.[144] In the excavations in Sobibor, fourteen items were traced back to a person. A plate, two military ID tags, a pendant, six nameplates that had once been fixed to a doorjamb and four children's name tags. Most of these items came from the Netherlands. 'Finds like these always caused a shock', Schute wrote in his memoir. 'The monotone sounds of the shovels fell silent as these objects were passed around.'[145] The archaeologists out in the field immediately checked on their phones for whatever information could be found online. Suddenly they could connect an object to a real person, a real life. The crew were in close contact with staff at the memorial centre at Westerbork, who were sometimes able to immediately send photos of the victims whose possession had been found. Within minutes, the archaeologists would be holding their telephone with a photo of a smiling child in one hand and the name tag the child had worn until the last moment of their life in the other. Times like these shattered the team's daily routine. Haimi says these were the hardest moments he experienced in Sobibor.[146]

**Sara Mock-Hakker's plate, with the plaster bearing her name inside the bottom rim.**

FIND **Pin**

CAMP II

**'Even in Sobibor, Mickey Mouse was present', says Yael Atzmony. She still finds it alienating.**

**She first saw the pin when she was visiting the excavations. In her hotel room, she photographed the boxes full of finds Wojciech Mazurek had brought to her. She worked all day long, until evening set in. Surely she couldn't sleep with those boxes next to her bed!**

**Atzmony called Mazurek and asked him, 'Can't you come pick up the boxes?' The archaeologist, who had been dealing with those objects every day, had grown more accustomed to having them around. 'Can't you put them in the bathroom?' he replied.**

**The Mickey Mouse pin, presumably worn by a child, was one of the objects that Atzmony spent that strange night with. The idea of a cartoon character in a death camp stuck in her mind.**

**She made a porcelain replica of the pin. And then another, and yet another. 'When I lined them up in the kiln to fire them, I saw the power of the replication', she says. That is how the work came about – rows of Mickeys side by side.**

**It was darkly appropriate. The mass-produced mouse was eerily reminiscent of a camp where throngs of prisoners had been transported to their deaths and 'processed' – as if on a conveyor belt.**

**To Atzmony, the Mickeys symbolize the children in the camp. Her father entered the camp as a child, having just turned fifteen. While boys that age who happened not to be Jewish were dreamily reading comic strips, he was cutting off women's hair before they entered the gas chambers. He was also gathering ammunition for the uprising.**

**That loss of carefreeness is baked into the porcelain. Atzmony called the work *Bolero*. The way she sees it, the Mickeys dance.[222]**

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**Project: Archaeology of Destruction**

From 2000 to 2017, archaeologists carried out a series of excavation campaigns in Sobibor. The main reason to dig at the site of the former death camp was the planned construction of a new museum and transformation of the area's memorial site. The excavations were the first to uncover a large part of a death camp's layout using modern archaeological techniques, revealing details such as the gas chambers and the path leading to them. In the process, tens of thousands of objects were brought to the surface.

At the request of the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), NIOD brought together an interdisciplinary group of researchers to contribute to a collection of scholarly articles and a popular scientific book highlighting the archaeological excavations from various perspectives. *Traces of Sobibor: Archaeology of a Death Camp* is the popular edition.

The scholarly volume, titled *Excavating Sobibor: Holocaust Archaeology between Heritage, History and Memory*, edited by Martijn Eickhoff, Erik Somers and Jelke Take was published by WBooks in 2024: ISBN 978 94 625 8619 5

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**No one was supposed to find Sobibor ever again. In 1943, when the Nazis shut down the death camp, they destroyed the gas chambers. To cover up the pits where they had buried their victims' ashes, they planted trees.**

But they did not manage to totally erase the camp. The marshy ground in an Eastern Polish river valley still held the victims' last possessions, rusty and buried beneath the soil. From the year 2000 on, archaeologists dug up tens of thousands of objects on the former camp terrain. Traces in the ground showed the path to the gas chambers the prisoners had been forced to walk. In deep pits, the archaeologists discovered the ashes of the dead.

For decades on end, the ground in this wide forest had concealed the traces of mass murder. Sobibor was one of the Holocaust's forgotten places, a ghost image that existed only in the nightmares of eyewitnesses and their descendants. But as a new memorial site was developed, the camp's remnants were laid bare.

The excavations took place at a time when Holocaust tourism in Poland rapidly grew and a long-ignored past became a wedge dividing Polish society. The question of what should be done with the traces of Sobibor led to harsh confrontations. In the meantime, the archaeologists kept digging. Day by day, shovel by shovel, they uncovered an unspeakable history.

**ERIK SCHUMACHER** is a Dutch author and historian who has published works on various aspects of World War II. He was commissioned to write *Traces of Sobibor* by NIOD, the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam.

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