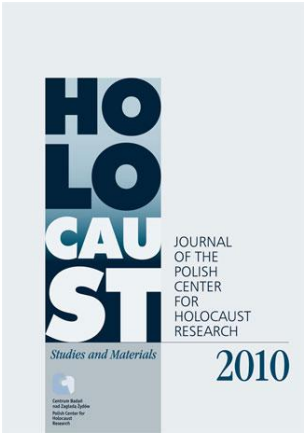


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"And the Earth Was Still Moving..." The Massacre of Jews in Szczeglacin in Eyewitness' Testimonies

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"And the earth was still moving…" Massacre of Jews in Szczeglacin as Presented in Witnesses' Testimonies

Introduction

In the valley of the middle stretch of the Bug, in the Korczew commune one might still hear extremely moving stories about people and events from the past. Stories in which the Jews and Romanies play an important role, stories from the multicultural and multireligious Podlasie area, which, unfortunately, are sinking into oblivion together with the people who remember the former way of life and the events that took place many dozen years ago.

One of the important topics repeatedly appearing in conversations with the locals is the issue of the massacre of a few hundred Jews in the labor camp set up by the Germans in Szczeglacin, near Korczew. It is practically the last moment to talk with the witnesses of those cruel events. Today where the Nazis murdered the Jews there is a heap of "count's" straw – the "Jews' place" (*Żydowizna*), as the place was dubbed after the war, is nowadays owned by the Korczew counts' heirs. Nobody erected a sign to commemorate the massacre and the younger inhabitants are usually unaware that they walk every day on the site of a horrible massacre.

The Camp

In Szczeglacin there was a forced labor camp for Jews. According to Marta Janczewska's definition, it was an "isolated place to which workers were brought for a period necessary for the performance of certain tasks after whose completion they were either released or murdered (depending on the phase of the Holocaust)."[1]

The Jewish workers of the Szczeglacin camp were murdered together with their families, and the manner in which they were killed could be described as a unique combination of the purest Nazi calculation and primordial, primitive bestiality. And

[1] M. Janczewska, "Obozy pracy przymusowej dla Żydów na terenie dystryktu warszawskiego," in *Prowincja noc. Życie i zagłada Żydów w dystrykcie warszawskim 1939–1945*, ed. B. Engelking, J. Leociak, D. Libionka (Warsaw, 2007).

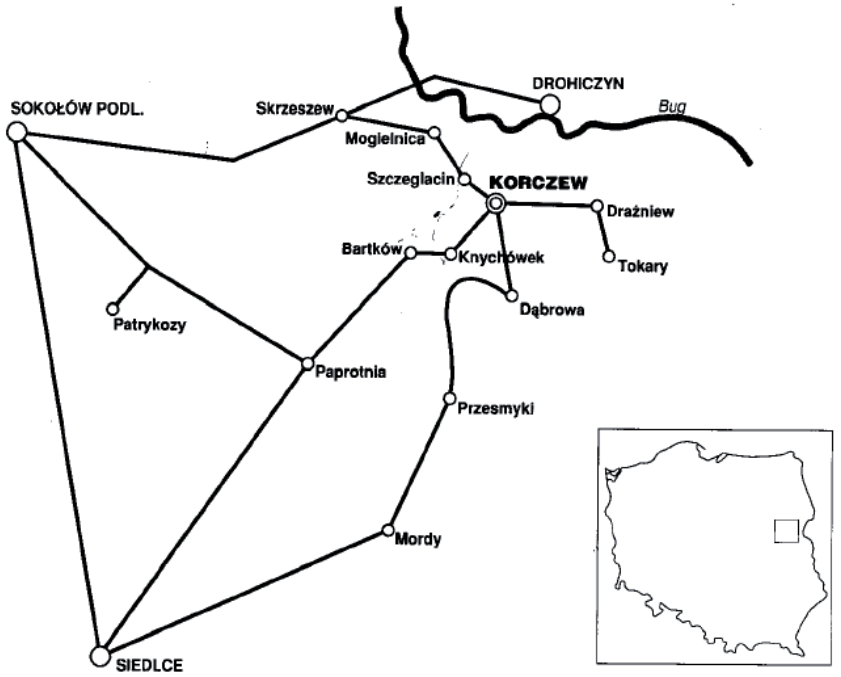


Fig. 1 The location of Korczew
(in Adam Buszko, *Ziemia korczewska* [Korczew 1997]).

so the Germans' perfidy consisted in such organization of the murder that it was practically the Jews themselves who performed almost all the activities involved in it, except for the act of killing itself. According to some testimonies, the Jews dug their own graves trusting that they were pits for storing potatoes over the winter. Moreover, it was the Jewish workers who buried their own wives and children, only to be buried in the pits of death by the Jewish policemen a moment later.

The Nazis' perfidy also consisted in the whole action being conducted very swiftly and "secretly," probably in the morning of 22 October 1942. The Germans arrived by cars at the camp, conducted its liquidation, they fired rounds from the machine guns at the pits full to the brim with the Jews' bodies, they sprinkled lime over the pits, covered them with soil and immediately set off in the direction of Drohiczyn. According to the witnesses, "when spring came," probably of 1944, the Germans returned to the spot to conduct an exhumation of the remains in order to ultimately cover the traces.

In the context of the murderers' cynical calculation, the primitiveness of the murder tool – a wooden club – is surprising. For the Germans usually did not kill with club blows; they usually shot people dead (or e.g. burned them alive in barns). Thus, perhaps the most probable version of the events is the one according to which

the Jews were clubbed by Ukrainian SS-men in German caps. Allegedly, some of the Jews jumped into the pits earlier in order to avoid the blows, for the Nazis standing on both sides "were by turns threshing"[2] the approaching persons.

The Jews who died in that camp performed work connected with water management which consisted in draining the farmland and engineering the Kołodziejka River. They worked in extremely difficult conditions, often standing in the river water for days on end, which caused, among other things, edema of the legs. Constant malnutrition as well as spreading diseases resulted in fatal exhaustion of many of them.

At the beginning the camp was located in Cerkwisko near Bartków Nowy, and it was transferred to Szczeglacin due to the works' advancement along the river.

The Jews held in Szczeglacin came from various places. In September 1941 there were 150 workers, including 85 from the ghetto in Sokołów. The *Arbeitsamts* – the German employment offices – ordered the Judenrats to select a certain number of men for the camp. It was common for the better-off Jews to buy themselves out in the Judenrat from being directed to the camp. The situation was reversed during the period of the ghetto liquidations when the labor camps could seem to give a chance for survival. After the liquidation of the Sokołów ghetto on 22 September 1942, a few hundred Jews continued to work in Szczeglacin (according to various accounts there were from 400 to 800 Jews).

A Mosaic of Accounts
"When I came running to the spot, the earth was still moving"[3]

My grandfather Ludwik Woźniak lives in the village of Bartków Stary located in the Korczew commune. His account of the murder in Szczeglacin is of great significance – as a 12-year-old he was an eyewitness of those events. So far he had told me various stories, including the one about the Szczeglacin Jews, with great ease. But when I took out the dictaphone in order to record the story and to subsequently present it in writing, the grandfather grew silent for a moment. I guess that he was thinking about how to put his experiences into words, for he felt that his story was very important and unique. That he was one of the few who saw it and who know how it was. He was aware of the uniqueness of his status, of his being a witness of a unique crime conducted against people who were also simultaneously the Others.

Ludwik Woźniak's story:

How should I, gosh… I had a sister or I was at my sister's… I'm beginning already! I was at my sister Irena's in Szczeglacin and suddenly I heard an uproar, that the Germans have arrived and that they are beating the Jews. That they are

[2] The term taken from the testimony of witness L. Woźniak, Bartków Stary, Korczew commune, born in 1930, conversation of 4 August 2009.

[3] Ludwik Woźniak, Bartków Stary, Korczew commune, born in 1930, conversation of 4 August 2009.

murdering, killing the Jews. And so panic spread in the village, cos it was so, banditry, that they are beating the Jews. And out of curiosity I went to the place where they are beating the Jews, but since nobody could enter the square where they were murdering, there was Stanisław Kosmala's barn, right by the creek, and I went into that barn. In that barn there was somebody else sitting with me, I suppose so. And because the planks were nailed sparsely, I could see everything through the holes, and the distance was about 50 meters.

There were the barracks, probably two barracks and about 30 meters from the barracks there were two round, deep pits dug. And the Jews walked in a single file, one after another, about 1 meter from the pits, out of the barracks. And by the pit there was a German with such a club, and another one on the other side. They had such clubs in their hands, thinner on one end, thicker on the other. When the Jew approached him, then bang! he clubbed him on the head and he fell into the pit. When he was raising the club then during that time the other one – bang! And they were threshing by turns. Bang! bang! and into the pit, and into the pit.

It even happened that some of them jumped into the pit alive. So as not to get hit, he jumped into the pit because he knew that he would get clubbed on the head. And they even jumped alive. When they finished all of them off, the first, the other pit, then they sprinkled them with something white; I saw the cloud of dust rising, up into the air. I don't know if it was chlorine or if it was lime. Oh, sorry, at first he shot at the pits with a machine gun and sprinkled that white thing and they covered it with soil. They did it very quickly and into the cars, and they set off in the direction of Drohiczyn. And I ran out of that barn and I ran to the place, that maybe I would find something after those Jews. Thinking as a child, I'll see if I can hear something there, if they are alive…

When I came running to the spot, the earth was still moving. And there were various post-Jewish stinking rags, there was a cap, then there was a tipped over part of a stool… And some money, those papers, but they were torn, tattered, thrown aside.

And they got into the cars and set off, and that's how it ended.

And my friend Ciura from Szczeglacin told me, the one who got married in our village and came to our village to pay a visit to his fiancée, that he and a couple of other people were sitting at home and in the evening two Jews came from those pits. The bullet missed them. And since they jumped alive, they could not have been hit, and the earth was moving… They could not die later… My friend told me that two came out of the pits and came in the evening. The light was on and they came, stayed a bit, but everybody was afraid and at night they went in an unknown direction. That's all I know.

Among the murdered there were men, women and children, there were whole families, not only those able to work. I remember well.

Here, by this river, even if I lived five hundred years I would still know! I remember all of it, I know how it was. And who heard about it, he heard about it in the villages…

I asked if that experience from over 60 years ago was so deeply engraved into his memory because it was so horrible.

No, I... about the experience... there was nothing that moved me, damn, I don't know... It was just like a great spectacle, as if it had been on television. But a shiver, or horror or compassion, no, nothing like that. It was like: oh! he's clubbing the Jews! – an extraordinary event. For a kid should have been all the more scared, but I wasn't. For I ran there immediately, so I was not scared.

I was also curious if the Jews walking one after another toward the pit and knowing what was going to happen tried to escape or resist in some way. "The victims humbly walked toward the pits, they didn't try to escape. Just like you drive the geese in." The witness is surprised with that. "No way, you Kraut, that I would be digging the grave and you would [kill me afterwards?]!..."

From Within Hell

There is also another eyewitness account of that massacre. This time it is a description of the cruel events as seen, until a certain moment, somehow from within. Piotr Szczepaniak – at that time a 31-year-old Szczeglacin inhabitant – found himself on that day inside the "ghetto" – as he and my other interlocutors call the local labor camp. Unfortunately, the witness is dead, thus, in this case I must make do with his testimony written down 15 years ago by Zbigniew Chybowski – a local historian and retired Korczew school history teacher.

Piotr Szczepaniak's account:

On the eve of the liquidation of the ghetto in Szczeglacin a Jewish policeman came to me and hired me with my wagon. The next day, very early in the morning I was to take a Jewish family (about five people) near Sokołów. I was to present myself in the ghetto at dusk. Very early in the morning I drove my wagon into the ghetto. The Jewish family which I was to transport slowly started getting ready, the children in particular were delaying the departure. During that short commotion the ghetto was surrounded. The Germans ordered the men to dig the pits. Since I was in the ghetto, they caught me as well. I tried to explain that I was a Pole, but nobody understood me. At that time Dropia, a Szczeglacin inhabitant, appeared and he began explaining in German to the Germans that I was a Pole, that I only drove into the ghetto to bring the tools the Jews needed for engineering the Kołodziejka River. It took a lot of effort to convince the German that I was really a Pole, and thanks to it they let me go.

Then I ran to watch what was happening in the ghetto. Mieczysław Solich's house was the closest to the ghetto. I saw everything from his house. At first the men were digging the pits, then the Germans brought the women and children to the pits and ordered them to jump in and since they did not want to jump they were hitting them with long clubs. Some of them, wanting to avoid the blows, jumped into the pit "voluntarily." When the pit was full, one of the Germans approached it with a machine gun and shot a round. Immediately the pit grew silent. Then the men were covering up their wives and children.

Right after that they had to dig the pits for themselves and one small additional one. When the pits were ready, the men were ordered to approach them and everything proceeded exactly as before. Actually there was a difference because that time the Jewish policemen were the gravediggers. When the pits were covered up, the policemen's turn came. They were ordered to approach the pits and the situation repeated! The Ukrainians serving in the German army covered up the policemen. Soon afterwards the German detachments drove away because it was over. All the ghetto buildings remained. Some people, including me, went to look for gold.

I remember that one day, well, actually at night, we went to the ghetto. Searching in the dark, I came across a flap. When I opened it, it turned out that there was a hiding place. I went in there and I kept feeling the ground and… I came across… a purse with jewelry. That was my whole loot! Soon after that the ghetto burned down. The whole ghetto was surrounded with barbed wire, which was about 2.5–3 m high. There were about five buildings. One building was outside the wires and it was the building where the Jewish policemen lived. The other buildings were within the wires (I guess four). I do not recall if there was a kitchen, it seems to me that the Jews cooked food on various tripods and in pots, on the square.

In Szczeglacin alone before the war there lived three Jewish families.[4]

Kosmala's Account

Ludwik Woźniak hid in the fall of 1942 in Tomasz Kosmala's father's barn in order to watch the Jews' massacre. As I remarked in the introduction, in the place where the labor camp used to be today there is no trace of those events. The sheaves of straw cover, like a veil of oblivion, the bloody fragment of that place's history.

Tomasz Kosmala talks among other things about the massacre survivors whom he saw or whom he heard about:[5]

There were two little Jewesses, scared, I saw, they hid somewhere, and one small kike stayed and walked about the village. Mrs. Bolek Kiryluczka [unfortunately, she is dead] gave them food, but only for a couple of days, because of the fear [she'd get] a bullet in her head right away. Two boys went out somewhere, they were not in the ghetto at that time, they survived. One was the son of a doctor and the other one, a handsome, young boy. When there was the draft later, he was dressed in an army uniform. He stood by me and talked. "What's up, Tomek?" he asked. "I've made it," he said.

There were three sisters, Estera, the youngest, came to us, she was crying: "Ay vay, Mrs. Kosmala!" My mother gave her something to eat, she stayed a bit and went

[4] Piotr Szczepaniak, Szczeglacin, Korczew commune, born in 1911, his account was written down by Z. Chybowski on 3 July 1994.

[5] Tomasz Kosmala, Szczeglacin, Korczew commune, born in 1924, conversation of 4 August 2009.

somewhere. That's how it was, if she had stayed then they would've finished off our whole family. And where did she go then? Maybe to Sokołów? To Treblinka? A bullet in the head for hiding, fear that the neighbor would denounce… Nobody knows what happened with them later, for when they saw the massacre they ran away as far as they could.

He also added new information to the already emerging image of the events:

A Pole, D., was watching them, those Jews in the ghetto, he had yellow boots. And later, when the capitulation came, he escaped to the West, because he was a German lackey and perhaps they would have killed him.

In the camp the Germans killed perhaps about 500 people. When they ordered them to dig the pits, they said that they were for the potatoes for them, before the winter, and the Jews thought that [they were] for the potatoes. They thought that they would spend the winter. And it was for them.

And later, in spring, the Germans came to take out the bones, they dug the pits up, they loaded a whole car, the arms were sticking out – there was no flesh, just the red bone. [It was] when they were still fighting with Russia. They were removing the traces. Maybe [they took the remains] to Treblinka, to burn them…

When "Good Old Hitler Came"

Why did the Germans decide to engineer the winding Kołodziejka River, or rather a creek, which flows into the Bug River just a few kilometers further? Why, it was the reason why they set up the labor camp for the Jews. One of the oldest inhabitants of Bartków Nowy, Mieczysław Wasiluk, spoke in that context about the vision of the manor, which with time was to become a German officer's property. The engineering and soil improving works which the Jews had to perform were aimed among other things at draining the riverside terrain intended for the future (and would-be) owner. Wasiluk's account tells us a bit more about the work performed by the Jews on the engineering of the river:

At first the ghetto was near Cerkwisko.

There was a certain story – Leosin [pre-war, small grange on the Korczew property, located right by the river] was assigned to a German officer. During the Germans' war with the Soviets in 1941 the Germans were already preparing the manor here. They were engineering the river, they started in Bartków from the count's bridge. When the war ended, he was supposed to come and live here, he was to settle in Leosin. They made the barracks for the Jews and they engineered everything for him here. The Jews went to dig barefoot, in fours, sometimes the representative led them and… the singing:

Marshal Rydz Śmigły hadn't taught us how to work,

And then came good old Hitler, he taught us how to work…

They had their trousers rolled up to their knees and they dug the rivers barefoot. And when they had dug as far as the Bartków border of Leosin, then they had to walk a long distance, because they were engineering as far as the Bug River, and

they moved the barracks beyond Szczeglacin. They worked there until they finished the work. And they conducted a massacre on them, they shot them. They ordered them to dig the ditches and then to stand at the ditches and with a machine gun…

Oh, no, it wasn't like that! They made the squad leaders stand there and gave them clubs, and a blow on the head, and they fell into the ditches. The selected squad leaders murdered their own folk. Who did not want to get clubbed jumped into the ditch of their free will, and another [jumped] on him. And in the end they shot those who were clubbing and threw them in.

And then they called the people of Szczeglacin to cover it up, and those people say that the earth was moving. And many persons from Szczeglacin saw it from the windows, so they tell about it, there are still those who tell about it…

It is a totally different image of the Szczeglacin massacre to the one presented by its two witnesses: Woźniak and Szczepaniak. Most likely the information about the massacre, spreading over the villages, became distorted during all those years separating us from the time of the crime. Wasiluk, as a resident of Bartków, knows a lot more (and probably he is closer to the historical truth there) about the place where the Jews were stationed earlier, that is about the labor camp in Cerkwisko, and also about the works they performed there. He only heard about the liquidation of the labor camp in Szczeglacin. The myth of the Szczeglacin massacre which he presented involves the meanings attributed to it by the inhabitants. Why would the Jewish squad leaders murder the others? Why would the Germans give the murder tool into the hands of the Jews?

The accounts of the witnesses, such as Woźniak or Szczepaniak, who firmly state that SS-men in German caps, probably Ukrainians, were in charge of the clubbing, rather dispel the factual doubts.

Moreover, according to their accounts, the Germans wanted to do the whole thing quickly and "secretly" – immediately after they had conducted the massacre, they set off in "taxis" (this term was widely used then to denote motor cars). And so it is improbable that they "called for the Szczeglacin people to cover up" the pits with the massacre's victims (by the way, what is important and what many witnesses stress, many victims survived the execution, to which the moving earth was to testify).

Wasiluk knows more about the events in Cerkwisko:

In Cerkwisko from among the Jews there were only men. 7 Jews died here. And in the meantime they brought one hundred Russkies here, because they went to work every day to the pasture. Two Germans made them pick beets, dig up potatoes. On the return each of them carried a beet under the arm and later in the square one could see something like that: they had a bonfire and baked and ate. Their mortality rate was horrible, the dysentery struck, they buried 90 there, and only 7 Jews died during the works. The ditch was being dug further and further and it was shifted further and further. Well, they conducted the exhumation later, but they only made a hole. There where the Woźniaks' meadow is, there is only a small hole. There was a plaque with the names written, it disappeared after the war. Oh, I should have taken it and stored it, then there would be a token of it…

Wasiluk is certain that after the war there was a plaque with the deceased persons' names in the meadow by the forest, and he regrets that he did not store it, that it disappeared. It is interesting who ordered such a plaque to be placed there and how it disappeared…

According to Wasiluk, the engineering of the Kołodziejka River was as follows:

They erected pales and fences, they covered the sides with fascines and sod. For the Germans are enterprising. They were preparing [the land] *for the new owner. For it was a winding river, Kołodziejka, it flooded. But the name probably comes from some cartwright. They engineered* [the stretch] *from the bridge in Bartków to the Bug. We were young boys, so sometimes somebody ran to the river to catch some fish with a basket, and we saw them engineering.*

In Cerkwisko, about 200 meters from the Kołodziejka, there were two or three barracks, there was a ditch and barbed wire 2 meters high on both sides. And there was a gate, barracks with servants, and guards. And when they took the Jews from Szczeglacin, they pulled everything down, leveled it, so that you would not tell.

I asked Wasiluk if among the local people there were people who tried to provide help to the Jews, for example to give them something to eat. Wasiluk firmly stated that it was impossible.

The barracks were fenced, and they went to work escorted by the Germans. One time, when they were driving the Russkies to work, and I was transporting turnips and was passing them by, they stretched their hands and I threw them some turnips. A German came running, he hit me so hard with the butt that I lost my balance, and he whipped the horse!

Wasiluk does not know how many Jews there were, but he remembers that "they were not from here, they were brought from somewhere, maybe from Siedlce…" And then he sums up, unfortunately in accordance with the truth, "Now the people don't even know where they were buried. And I know. There is no trace now, they left an empty square."[6]

"Fair Game" – Josek Kopyto

In the Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (*ŻIH*) there is one testimony which mentions Szczeglacin. It is Josek Kopyto's testimony written down in 1947. It also concerns other villages and towns in that region, particularly Sokołów Podlaski, in which Kopyto lived, also during the occupation. In his detailed testimony Josek Kopyto, born in 1897, describes the occupation years spent in the Sokołów ghetto and in other local villages and towns. He tries to point out helpful people not only among the Poles and Jews, but even the "good Germans," who helped him survive the Holocaust, as well as numerous shady characters.

[6] Mieczysław Wasiluk, Bartków Nowy, Korczew commune, born in 1928, conversation of 3 August 2009.

Kopyto's testimony reads:

In 1941 the camp was set up in Szczeglacin, 20 km from Sokołów Podlaski. There were a few hundred people in the camp. In Sokołów it was decided who was to go to work. The rich did not go, they bought themselves off in the Judenrat. The Judenrat decided how much one had to give monthly in order not to go to that work. The German supplies administration designated bread for the workers in that camp. The workers drained the mud on the farm. The portion the Germans granted comprised 1.5 kg of bread. Rubin Rozenberg and Dawid Liberman were the commandants of the camp, ordinary people before the war. The Judenrat took monthly 35 quintals of flour, but even that was not enough. In the beginning the Judenrat gave 1 kg of bread to each worker by charging bigger sums to those who did not go to work. But it was like that only at first. Later the workers did not get even 20 dag of bread, the Judenrat took the rest for itself. The Judenrat received sugar, fat and marmalade for the workers. They did pretty good business on the Jewish miseries.[7]

My ex-partner Rubin Rozenberg [from the testimony one can infer that before the war Kopyto was a wealthy merchant with extensive contacts among the Jews and Poles – M.W.] was in the work camp in Szczeglacin. There were 800 other Jews there. They continued working after the liquidation of Sokołów [he refers to the liquidation of the Sokołów ghetto conducted on 22 September 1942, during which the Jews were either killed or deported to Treblinka – M.W.]. Perhaps they were under the illusion that they would survive. My partner Rubin Rozenberg lost his only brother and that brother's son during the liquidation of Sokołów. Thinking that he could rescue me, Rubin Rozenberg sent me a letter by the agency of a certain Pole named Władysław, in which he proposed to me to move to the labor camp in Szczeglacin. That letter went as follows: "Dearest brother, I have lost my brother, I accept you in his place as a loving brother. Do not cry after reading this letter so that the enemies would not find out. I secured a place for you in the camp. Tell me when I should call for you, and I will." I read the letter to my wife. We both cried but my wife said that we would not go to the camp. I wrote him: "Live on hope, brother. Our wrong shall not be forgotten, our blood is not gushing for nothing, do not cry." After having sent that letter by the agency of the same Pole, I received a sign from Rubin that he had received my letter.[8]

My friend Pinches Jankiew Lewin did not know what to do. He asked me: what is going to happen? I said: save yourself while you still can. Lewin went to the labor camp in Szczeglacin, where his son was. Soon after that the camp in Szczeglacin was liquidated and all the Jews who were there died.[9]

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[7] Josek Kopyto, Przeżycia w Sokołowie Podlaskim i okolicach, testimony no. 4085 of 24 March 1947, recorder: K. Mirska (Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [Archive of Jewish Historical Institute]), pp. 13, 14.

[8] Ibidem, p. 33.

[9] Ibidem, p. 34.

Around 22 October 1942 I received a letter from Rubin Rozenberg from the camp in Szczeglacin, in which he asked me what my plans were. I answered him in the form of a letter that if I managed to hide somewhere I would send for him. I sent the letter by the agency of the acquainted Pole, Władek, a citizen's son. I also gave him 300 zlotys for Rubin and I asked him to bring me the reply. After half an hour a woman, who had returned from a store near the commune council, approached me and said: "Mr. Kopyto, many taxis, many taxis with the Germans drove in the direction of Szczeglacin." I felt that something would happen. After some time Władek, whom I gave the letter to Rubin Rozenberg, came back. He told me that no sooner did he manage to… the letter at the camp's gate, the Germans arrived in the taxis and attacked the Jews in Szczeglacin. Hearing the moans and shots, Władek hid under a wide pine in the grove and observed everything. It was about 9–9.30 a.m. He saw them hitting the Jews with rods and ordering them to dig the pits. Then he saw the Germans leaving. He wanted to know what happened. He cycled to the side of the pit. He saw the earth moving but he did not see the Jews any more. It happened around 22 October 1942. I learned from the other Poles that Szczeglacin had been liquidated. There were about 800 Jews, mostly from Sokołów. Having learnt about it, I became totally frantic.[10]

The Jews Who Lived Among the Peasants

According to both the witnesses and Kopyto, on-local Jews were placed in the camp in Szczeglacin. Hence, a question arises as to what happened with the local Jews, whose number, according to the 1921 Korczew commune census, was 191, while the number of members of Judaism was 213. According to the inhabitants' testimonies, the local Jews, if they did not escape beyond the Bug to the Soviets or hide in the forests or sometimes at the homes of Poles, were mostly killed on the spot. The testimony of Mieczysław Łoniewski from Korczew might serve as an example here:

I was still a child… I only saw them driving the Jews in Korczew. The Germans killed four on the hill. In Korczew there were four Jews in the farm laborers' quarters. They hid in bread stoves, and somebody accused them, denounced them and the Germans drove them through the forest. And W.L., Lucio's brother, ran after the Jews to boast to the Germans that he was capturing Jews, and they shot him, he is lucky that they didn't kill him. Here, after they beat [them] *up on the hill, J.M., who was a kind of ragman, knocked their gold teeth out, he didn't manage to take off the boots, the jackboots, so he cut the legs off with an ax.*

And before the war quite a lot of Jews lived [here]. *They were, well you know, tailors, cobblers, petty merchants.*[11]

For years Florian Roszuk, a peasant from Bartków Nowy, wrote diaries or rather wrote down the local history. The chronicler, who died in the 1980s, mentioned the

[10] Ibidem, p. 39–40.

[11] Mieczysław Łoniewski, Korczew, born in 1936, conversation of 2 August 2009.

local Jews in his writings which are kept by his family. These mentions throw some light on their relations with the Polish peasants and counts from Korczew.

Considering the topic of this work, Florian Roszuk's last mention of the Jews is interesting: "Then they drove the Jews to the ghetto, each Jude had an armband on the sleeve with the Star of David. They transported them and drove them on foot to Treblinka, there was the end of all business."[12]

The opinion element in that mention sounds very bad and it is puzzling or even shocking that that scrupulous local chronicler mentions neither the engineering of the Kołodziejka River, which flows near his house, carried out by the Jewish workers, nor the Szczeglacin massacre. He stereotypically and quite enigmatically "informs" only about Treblinka, as the place where "all business" came to an end.

Mentions in Regional Publications

Ziema korczewska written by Adam Buszko in cooperation with, among others, Zbigniew Chybowski only briefly discusses the labor camp in Szczeglacin:

In 1942 between Szczeglacin and Mogielnica there was a labor camp for 800 Jews from the nearby villages and towns. Some of them died during the hard engineering works. The Germans murdered the remaining 400 in the fall of 1942. The victims' bodies were taken away in an unknown direction. Some witnesses claimed that the murderers threw people who were probably still alive into the pits dug in Cerkwisko.[13]

The description lacks basic information concerning the crime, but still the most striking thing is the factual mistake. For the massacre took place in Szczeglacin and not in Cerkwisko, where the former camp was located. The pits into which the "people who were probably still alive" were thrown were dug in Szczeglacin, not in Cerkwisko.

The book *Nadbużańskim szlakiem. Od Korczewa do Treblinki* only mentions that at the turn of 1940 and 1941 the residence and movement restrictions were introduced for the population of that area, and then the ghettos in Sokołów, Kosów Lacki and Sterdynia and a transient camp in Szczeglacin near Korczew were created. The Germans conducted the first liquidation of those ghettos on 30 September 1942 and the second one in spring 1943.[14]

A very concise, but not particularly informative, mention.

More information on the local Jews, including the information on their engineering the Kołodziejka, can be found in Zbigniew Florysiak's book *Korczew lat okupacji niemieckiej Okruchy wspomnień*. Florysiak writes that the engineering of the river started as early as 1940, and "a special bureau established in Sokołów invited ten-

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[12] Florian Roszuk, memoir (manuscript), Bartków Stary, 1978.

[13] A. Buszko, *Ziemia korczewska* (Korczew, 1997), 37.

[14] *Nadbużańskim szlakiem. Od Korczewa do Treblinki*, ed. W. Piecyk, W. Wierzchowska (Sokołów Podlaski, 1999), 42.

ders and the bid was won by engineer Jerzy Marynowski's Engineering Works Enterprise (*Przedsiębiorstwo Robót Inżynieryjnych*) from Warsaw." The village council chairs were obliged to provide daily a certain number of workers, but because it was very badly paid (59 groszy for working from dawn until night) the locals did everything to avoid it. The German district governor Grass threatened punishments and, according to Florysiak, thought Korczew "the most defiant village." "Later the Jews were brought from the ghettos in nearby towns to perform the engineering works and they were quartered in the barracks in Cerkwisko and Szczeglacin."[15]

In turn Zbigniew Chybowski published an article about the camp in Szczeglacin in *Tygodnik Siedlecki*. It was inspired by an event which was a reinterpretation of the thread of the local massacre. And so in 1993 a student of a Korczew elementary school brought to his lesson an army mess kit with the Star of David inscribed on it. Chybkowski wrote then that "it was found in the Szczeglacin 'ghetto' and now it is one of a few pieces of evidence for the German genocide conducted on at least a few hundred Polish citizens of Jewish origin who were murdered in the fall of 1942."[16] After some time it transpired that the girl, having heard about the Szczeglacin labor camp, inscribed the symbol on the mess kit herself. But since every cloud has a silver lining, the historian took interest in that topic and it resulted, among other things, in his conversation with Szczepaniak.

Epilogue

The sources presented here are heterogeneous – beginning with the oral history accounts I gathered in 2009 in Szczeglacin and nearby villages, through the writings made in 1947 (Kopyto) and 1994 (Szczepaniak), to the manuscript of Roszuk's memoir and regional publications.

These sources provide a still not entirely clear image of the Szczeglacin events. The task of finding as much information as possible, of establishing the facts and putting them in a coherent sequence, turned out to be difficult, for not all Korczew inhabitants know what happened there to the Jews and the witnesses of those events, which happened 68 years ago, obviously do not remember everything in detail. Human memory is subject to mechanisms which make the threads mix and blend, and the image of an event changes in time together with the person who is its narrator. The words of the witnesses recalling an episode from the Holocaust today often provide not so much an image of a traumatic event as its rationalization.

Each of the stories I was told is different – subjective, dependent on the circumstances of the account's creation, often differing from the others in merit. In the accounts interesting for me were both the historical facts which my interlocutors talked about, and the meaning and sense they attributed to them. "The main aim of oral history is not to uncover unknown facts. For memory is not a depositary of

[15] Z. Florysiak, *Korczew lat okupacji niemieckiej. Okruchy wspomnień* (Siedlce, 2009), 41.
[16] Z. Chybowski, "Menażka z gwiazdą Dawida," *Tygodnik Siedlecki* 24 (1994): 7.

facts but an active process of attributing meanings."[17] The value and significance of such relations is connected with the subjectivity of account and interpretation, spontaneity and multivoicedness. Oral history's polyphony does not, however, exclude a possibility of the main melodic line's emergence, when the common part of the story begins to clarify.

The witnesses of the events are passing away. There is no commemoration – no effort was made either in Cerkwisko or in Szczeglacin to erect any sign commemorating the massacre which took place there.

The Kołodziejka River, if it were still engineered almost to a straight line, could be the sign of the Jews' forced labor and massacre, but even the river itself has changed its image over almost 70 years. Nowadays, other engineers – beavers – change its course. Life goes on, the water flows, as always in the direction of the Bug.

And only the old willow trees and the oldest inhabitants *know how it was*.

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska* and *Jerzy Giebułtowski*

[17] P. Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna* (Warsaw, 2005), 5.