

The sobibor extermination camp history essay



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When we think of the Holocaust what comes to mind? The first thing that comes to mind is Auschwitz, or about the killings of millions of Jews, but not Sobibor. What is Sobibor you might ask? Well, allow me to explain the significance of Sobibor in the Holocaust. Sobibor was one of the few true extermination camps. Sobibor was opened in May of 1942 and closed in October 1943. In that 18 month period, Sobibor killed 260, 000 Jews. Why isn't Sobibor widely known? What did Sobibor contain? How did each part in the camp contribute to the overall process? How were so many Jews killed in an 18 month period? How did they leave no trace of the bodies? Why was the camp only opened for an 18 month period?

Sobibor was actually a small village in the woods along the Wlodawa railway 8km south of the town of Wlodawa. The border between the general government and the Reichskommissariat of Ukraine was only 5km east of Sobibor which was the Bug River. The general area of where the camp was supposed to be was swampy, wooded, and thinly populated. The exact location of the camp would be decided by the SS Central Building Committee. In the end, the camp was built along the Wlodawa railway west of the Sobibor Station. The whole camp was surrounded by a sparse pine forest. Close to the station was a building and platform that they used for disembarking the train cars passengers. In the preexisting area of the camp were two large wooden buildings, one was a former forester's house. The other was a large two store post office.

Construction of Sobibor started in March 1942. During the construction process, they relied on experience from the building of Belzec. At this time, extermination actions were beginning in Belzec. So Richard Thomalla from

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the SS Central Building Administration in Lublin, Poland was appointed as commander of the camp. Richard Thomalla then hired surrounding villagers, town's people, 80 Jews, and 10 Ukrainians from Traniki. When construction fell behind in April of 1942, Franz Stangl was appointed new commander of Sobibor. When construction was still behind Franz visited Belzec for inspiration for Sobibor and he tells of his experience.

I went there by car. As one arrived, one first reached Belzec Railway station... Oh God, the smell! It was everywhere. Wirth wasn't in his office. I remember they took me to him... he was standing on a hill next to the pits... the pits...full... they were full. I cannot tell you; not hundred, thousands, thousands of corpses... that's where Wirth told-he said that was what Sobibor was for. (Arad 31).

After his visit the camp's construction caught back up to schedule. With construction back on schedule, the camp opened in mid-April 1942 after running experiments in the gas chambers.

The camp was employed by not only German but Ukrainians and Jews. There were not many Germans that staffed the camp. Their main job in the camp was to fill most of the administrative and command jobs. The Ukrainians however filled more jobs than the Germans, their purpose in the camp were unit guards. The Jews were the most employed in the camp, their jobs were all physical jobs, example: cleaning the trains, cleaning the gas chambers, and carrying the gassed bodies to the burial trenches.

The camp staff included 20 to 30 German SS men, most of whom had previously taken part in the Euthanasia Program,...In addition, 90 to 120
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Ukrainians served in the camp. Most were Soviet prisoners of war who had been trained for the job at Trawniki;... The German staff filled most of the command and administrative positions, while the Ukrainian unit acted as guards and security personnel... Jewish prisoners were employed as well, on various physical tasks. (Sobibor Encyclopedia 1).

The camp in was about 5 football fields by 6 football fields. The camp contained 3 sub camps. Sub camp 1 contained administration offices and shops. Sub camp 2 contained the loading docks where the trains came and unloaded the Jews. Sub camp 3 was the gas chambers and the burial trenches. The whole camp was enclosed by a barbed wire fence that had tree branches intertwined in it to help hide the camp with its forest surroundings. " The camp formed a rectangle 1, 312 feet by 1, 969 feet in the area. It was surrounded by a barbed wire fence 9. 8 feet high, with tree branches intertwined in it to conceal the camp" (Sobibor Learning about the Holocaust 1).

Sub camp 1 was broken down into 2 sections the, forward and the Vorlager. The forward, also known as the admiration area, was located in the southwest corner of the camp. The forward included the entrance gate, the railway platform, and the living quarters for the SS men and the Ukrainians. The Vorlager was set up different from every other camp. The Vorlager contained the Jewish workers who were housed in the same camp section as the SS Men, but in a different barracks. The Vorlager also contained the workshops for the SS Men where the Jews worked.

The Vorlager was also known as the Administration area. Along with the train station that could hold up to 20 cattle cars were the workshops which are as follows the tailor, black smith, shoemaker, and the barber shop. As stated before Camp 1 also contained the Jewish prisoner's barracks which were 70 feet long by 40 feet wide. They were built all out of wood with 1 fire place to heat the barracks. " The Barracks was seventy feet long and forty feet wide, with beams running along the ceiling like the ribs of a wooden whale." (Rashke 10).

Sub Camp 2 was located directly behind Sub Camp 1 separated by a barbed wire fence. It contained the undressing barracks where the prisoners would prepare for their showers. It also contained the barber shop where the girl's hair was shaved and sent back to Germany. Also in this area was where they would remove all personal belongings from the Jews. They would also clean and sterilize the trains before they went out and picked up another group. Nobody would know if they looked in cars what they were being used for. " Its job was to remove from the cars those who were incapable of getting off on their own; to remove the bodies of those who had died en route; to clean out of the cars the dirt that had accumulated and the articles left behind.... Purpose to ensure it would contain no trace of human cargo it had transported." (Sobibor 2).

Sub Camp 3 was located in the Northwestern part of the camp. Sub Camp 3 housed the gas chambers, the burial trenches, and the barracks for the Jews who were employed there. The chambers were located in brick buildings down stairs. They could hold anywhere from 100-200+ Jews at one time. The burial trenches were down the road from the gas chambers. Here they would

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dispose of the bodies by burning them so there would be no trace of the Jews they had gassed. " The gas chambers were inside a brick building... Each Chamber measured 172 square feet, and had a capacity of 160 to 180 persons... The burial trenches were nearby, each 164 to 197 feet long, 33 to 49 feet wide, and 16.4 to 23 feet deep." (Sobibor 1).

The gassing process took about 15-20 minutes. Before the Jews were gassed, they would strip of all clothes. Then they were told that they must take showers before they could go to work to ensure that they were clean and sterilized before they began work. They were taken into the brick buildings which were designed as showers. Once the door was closed one of the Ukrainians went to a nearby shed and turned on a 200-horsepower engine. They took the exhaust fumes and pumped them into the gas chambers and waited until they were all dead. Once they were all dead Jewish workers took the bodies to the burial trenches. With this process, an estimated 260,000 Jews were killed in almost the year and half Sobibor was open.

On October 14, 1943 the camp residences rebelled against the Nazis and planned an escape route. The group was led by Leon Feldhendler and Lt. Aleksandr Pechersky. The plan they came up with was 2 stages. The 1st stage was a quiet killing of the SS Men in sub camp 1. The 2nd stage was the escape from the actual camp. When the revolt took place there was one flaw Sub Camp 1 and Sub Camp 2 were involved in the plan but not Sub Camp 3. When the revolt took place they killed the 11 SS Men that were on site and seized their guns and fled the camp.

Almost all the men that were involved in the revolt escaped successfully; except for the 200+ men in Sub Camp 3 that did not know about the actual revolt. The men left behind were killed on site due to the escaped prisoners' actions. After all the men had been killed or escaped, the Germans decided to destroy the camp and cover it with a farm and farm house in hopes of covering their tracks.

As we have seen the Sobibor Extermination camp was just that. All men that were not of staff were killed within 30 minutes of their arrival. Sobibor was not a widely known camp because they tried to hide the mass killing camp. An estimated 260,000 Jews were killed in the 18 months it was open. The camp was only open 18 months because the prisoners escaped. The Germans were afraid the camp would be made out; they believed the camp served its purpose. There was no trace of the bodies or the camp because they destroyed the camp and burned their bodies to hide their tracks.