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AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30-18:00

Krakow-Plaszow Camp Remembered

by
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Layout, Events and Life in the Plaszow Camp

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The Plaszow Camp: Maps, Photos, and Sources:

The map of Plaszów, assembled from various sources is based on Joseph Bau’s map and other sources. The camp was built on two cemeteries divided by Jerozolimska (Jerusalem) Street—the Old Cemetery (*Podgorzny Cmentarz*, approximately two hectares in area), entered from 25 Jerozolimska Street, and the New Cemetery (*Krakowski Cmentarz*, about eight hectares in area, with a two-hectare reserve), entered from 3 Abrahama (Abraham) Street.

The camp was commanded by the Nazi murderer Amon Goeth—along with a band of bloodthirsty accomplices—from February 1943 until September 1944, when the SS tribunal arrested him for corruption and embezzlement. Until February 1943, he had attended the SS “school” at the Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka extermination camps, working in jobs that had euphemistic names such as “Administration,” “Supervision,” and *Geheimebaumassnahmen des Reiches*” but actually involved extermination activity . His actions in transforming the Plaszów camp into a death factory in the “kingdom of Goeth” included having a railroad spur extended to the camp and designing a crematorium . Thus he planned himself a career as a mass murderer in the Thousand-Year Reich!

A brief list of sources follows:

1. *Proces Ludobojcy Amona Leopolda Goetha przed Najwyzszym Trybuwalem Narodnowym*, Warszawa-Lodz-Kraków, 1947—Proceedings of the Trial of Amon Goeth in the Polish High Court, published in Polish by the Historical Center of the Jewish Committee in Poland. During the two-week trial, approximately seventy witnesses revealed Goeth’s

sadistic, murderous nature and the brutal abuses and deceptive measures that he took as commander of the Plaszów camp. Goeth, tricky and clever to the end, attempted to deny his actions, but the detailed testimony of his former personal secretary, Mieczesław Pemper, a twenty-six-year-old Jew, frustrated his intentions (*ibid.*, pp. 58-95).

2. Before the war, Jakub Stendig was an engineer with the Kraków *kehilla* (Jewish community administration). In the Plaszów camp, he worked for the Building Department and was given the task of supervising the construction of the barracks after the engineer Diana Reiter was murdered. Stendig survived the inferno and produced an accurate and stunning picture of the Plaszów camp in his book, *Plaszów, the Last Stop for the Jews of Kraków* (Tel Aviv: 1970, Menorah).

3. Joseph Bau was a draftsman in the camp who miraculously managed to keep the original map of Plaszów in his possession. This amazing story, among other things, is retold in his fascinating book, *Years of Murder* (fourth edition, Tel Aviv: 1995).

4. Joseph Bosak is the author of *And the Ram was Not Caught in the Thicket—A Biography of Abraham, 1939-1944* (Moreshet and Sifriyat Poalim, 1986), written in memory of his uncle, Abraham Bosak. Amazingly, Abraham Bosak kept a diary on scraps of paper in the Plaszów camp making it possible to construct the chronological framework that is so lacking in survivors' testimonies. Surviving members of the family visited Plaszów after the war and found the diary in the foundations of the barracks, in a bottle sealed with lacquer.

5. Photographs Division of the Yad Vashem Archives.

The testimonies—in the Polish court, in the publications listed above, and in additional copious sources—elicit a reliable and vivid account of the Plaszów camp and what happened there. Those who wish to blur or ignore the evidence cannot dull this picture; neither can the ravages of time. Below we present some very short excerpts of this material that deserve more intensive study. They may substantiate the events in Plaszów, and one can also use the map to track the events and their locations. The substantiation can be completed with the help of the attached photographs from the Yad Vashem Archives.

Bau's report of the Murder of Thousands in March 1943:

It was a quarantine camp composed of two barracks and a latrine surrounded by barbed wire. This is where the Jews of Kraków were buried. After the last brutal Aktion in which the ghetto was liquidated, the Germans rounded up all persons found hiding in the houses and who had not reported to the transport and brought them to this location. A deep pit had been dug there, and more than 2,000 people were killed. They had a latrine built atop the mass grave. Next to the quarantine camp, in an area that had been leveled and dug into the hillside, stood the bathhouse, the clothing warehouse, and the delousing facility (The funeral home of the Old Cemetery was situated at the right-hand corner of the roll-call yard). To prepare the area for construction, a tractor worked there. It pushed all the soil from the hill down a steep slope on the other side of the lot. The tractor removed the soil of the cemetery, along with decomposed bodies wrapped in rotting prayer shawls.

We called the tractor driver "the dentist" because he used a hammer to remove gold teeth from every skull that fell out as the soil slid down. My father, of blessed memory, also died there; he was killed by an SS man named Gruen. Because of this, a very meaningful

expression was created: “He went under the tractor.” They said that about any Jew whom the Germans killed, even if [it happened] elsewhere” (Bau, *ibid*, p. 118-119).

Murder of “The Lazy Jew”:

Joseph Bosak presents a close eyewitness account of the murder by Goeth, known as “the sniper,” of a prisoner in the midst of labor: *I was working in a company that pushed wheelbarrows of sand that would be used to make concrete for the foundations of the barracks. A long line of wheelbarrows was being pushed along a path of boards between small hills—some in front of me, some behind. Just then, a little old man pushed his wheelbarrow of sand next to me. Huffing and puffing, he shoved it along and every moment he bumped into some obstacle. Then, all at once, he fell. With all his strength he wanted to work as quickly as the others. Suddenly I heard him cry out. He fell to one side of the board and the wheelbarrow overturned on the other side. The Germans and Ukrainians raced over to him. He lay there motionless, blood pouring from his head. Zdrojewski turned the corpse over with his foot; then he looked in the direction of the Germans’ villas on the hill nearby. There stood Goeth, clutching his handgun. The commander approached the corpse and said loudly, so all the workers would hear, “Here lies the Jewish laggard”* (Bosak pp. 50-53)

Goeth used these kinds of killings and the services of his obedient gang of murderers to create a reign of terror. According to his previous “schooling” in the death factories, human beings were utterly worthless. Hardly had he reached the camp when he hanged two young girls on March 5, 1943: Rega Teichmann-Salz and Erica Weitz. The depraved commander sought in this manner to instill discipline and raise labor output to insane levels, in order to show “excellence.” For this accomplishment, he was given a two-grade promotion to *Obersturmfuehrer*, on 1st August, 1943. (*ibid*, p.95)

Stendig Describes the “Women’s Train”:

The *Mannschaftszug*—wheeled carts to which people were hitched—was an “invention” of Amon Goeth. The *Mannschaftszug* were used day and night to haul building materials from the quarry for construction of buildings, streets and roads. In his moving account, Jakub Stendig provides the following details: ... *It seems to me that only the quarry at the Plaszków camp could pride itself in the Mannschaftszug, that is, a train with human locomotives. Before they built barracks in the workshop area, they built roads. Whenever it rained, one could not reach the workshops of D.A.W., Madritsch, and others the next day without losing one’s shoes or soles in the sticky, deep mud. This made it a matter of urgency to build the “industry street”* The *Mannschaftszug*, made of three carts, was towed by seventy women in two columns, thirty-five on each side. The rope, about 100 meters long, was attached to their arms in such a way that as they walked, they pressed it to their arms with both hands so they could pull the load with their entire bodies. The pen is incapable of reconstructing this picture. (Stendig, P. 103-106).

Federber-Zalz describes how the “Kindergarten” Trap was Set:

The following account makes it clear that Goeth deviously planned the May 14, 1944, transport in minute detail and set the “kindergarten” trap . He persuaded parents to remove their children to a “kindergarten” by offering improved conditions, thereby separating them from their parents totally. As the parents were immobilized by a roll call, the children were loaded aboard trucks and sent away for extermination. This occurred two months (!) after the “kindergarten” was established: *One day we were informed that they were building a special children’s home for the camp children. In their deceitful way, the murderers announced that they wanted to make things easier for the parents, who were away at work, and to create more comfortable conditions for the miserable, unattended children while their parents were working. An order was given to transfer the children to a special clubhouse that had been built for them. It was a new block, thoroughly cleaned, airy and well-lit. In front of the block, they even set up a playground with lawns and rows of flowers. It was the first time that some of the children had ever seen the shape of a flower. Special people were posted to the club to look after the children. . This happened in the spring of 1944.*

*At daybreak on May 13 [It actually occurred on May 14, 1944]—we stood there as usual at the morning roll call. Along the death trails, the paths leading to the rear gate of the camp, through which they would take out those doomed to extinction, trucks were standing, ready to go. The loudspeakers played children’s songs. We saw how they led the children from the clubhouse toward the trucks. A silence of the bereaved settled over the camp. We escorted our dear ones with a last parting gaze. We were not even allowed to approach them. (Berta Federber-Zalz, *And the Sun Appeared*, Tel Aviv: 1968, pp. 90-91).*

Goeth found an opportunity to murder the “old-timers” of Kraków, who had witnessed his murders and corruption. He planned the May 14 transport in detail and devised an explicit schedule leading to it: massing of the children in the “kindergarten” on March 11, 1944; a “health roll call” on May 7; bringing in massive armed forces and departure of the transport to Auschwitz on May 14. That day, he cabled Auschwitz and demanded *Sonderbehandlung* (“special treatment”) for this transport, with no “*Selektion*” allowed. This meant death. He also demanded that the deceased persons’ clothing be returned—a sure sign that he meant all to be killed, lest there remain a witness to his regime of murder and corruption. See below, Pemper’s testimony at Goeth’s trial.

Goeth’s trial: The May 14, 1944, Transport Initiative:

When the concentration camp administration in Berlin (*Amtsgruppe D*) asked Goeth provisionally to accommodate 10,000 Jewish prisoners from Hungary in Plaszów for lack of room in Auschwitz, he agreed but with “strings attached.” Here Goeth found a way to rid himself of a large proportion of the veteran Jews of Kraków—living witnesses to his murders and acts of corruption—and to reduce the others to a state of psychological collapse. He agreed to admit the prisoners from Hungary only if allowed to perform a “*Selektion*” in the camp in order to remove, i.e., to kill, non-productive elements. He was given the go-ahead. In March 1944, Goeth took the initiative to establish a “kindergarten.” Finding it impossible to concentrate the children easily in any conventional way, he created a bait in the form of a “kindergarten,” lavishly equipped in terms of the location, appropriately maintained and well tended. On May 7, Goeth staged a “health roll call” where, among other things, he spoke

about arranging a supplement of “vitamins” for prisoners who had become weak and introducing a regime of “work according to ability.” No one believed a word of it. However, they had no choice but to go along, since all these “promises” were given them under the threat of the whip and the machine gun.

Goeth’s trial began on Tuesday, August 27, 1946, in the Polish High Court, and lasted for two weeks. Seventy-one witnesses appeared. The court allowed Goeth to ask the main witness, Mieczysław Pemper (who had been his personal secretary), approximately seventy questions. Below is an abridged excerpt of the court deliberations concerning the transport to Auschwitz on May 14, 1944. Goeth (now a defendant) “interrogated” the witness, Pemper, who had been his personal secretary:

Defendant: The witness was a clerk in the camp for a year and a half and also conducted secret correspondence?

Witness: Yes, in part.

Defendant: Whence does the witness know that those sent to Auschwitz reached [Auschwitz] and were exterminated there?

Presiding judge (to the interpreter): Please call it to the defendant’s attention that in respect to the questions he has asked the witness, the defendant, who has been interrogated by the Court, has stated that the Auschwitz camp was an extermination camp. Everyone in the SS knew this.

Defendant: Only part of it was that kind of camp.

Chairman: Please tell the defendant that his deposition says: “I knew, and it was known among us, that in 1940-1943 the Auschwitz camp was an extermination camp.”

The presiding judge allowed Goeth to proceed with his examination:

Defendant: Does the witnesses state that the transport of May 14 [1944] left for Auschwitz and was exterminated there?

Witness: That is correct.

Defendant: if so, how can be that the cook, a prisoner named Meier, received a letter from his wife and children several weeks later?

Witness: It is difficult to explain cases like those, which are self-explanatory. Maybe it was done especially to make the cook happy, maybe because he behaved well.

Defendant: The fact is, he received the letter and ran all over the camp with it.

Witness: I can say nothing in this matter; I only know [that] no one survived (Proces, ibid., p. 90).

Goeth attempted to present the court with “facts”: if the letter was received, then everyone must have remained alive and no extermination took place at all. By 1946, however, the German ruse having Jews in arriving transports write letters before their extermination and posting them after their extermination, was known.

Thus, the transport and the deception surrounding it were an initiative of Goeth’s. The purpose was to murder the camp’s veteran prisoners, the last minuscule remnant of the Jews of Kraków, who had witnessed his crimes in the Kraków ghetto on March 13 and March 14 and knew about his corruption there. It was definitely known on the day of the transport: an engineer named Popper, a foreman at the electric plant (a “productive” person by all accounts but one who knew too much about Goeth and the development of the war, since his plant had

radios, and workers there listened to the BBC), when assigned to the transport, asked Goeth to spare his life. Goeth replied, “*Du hast schon genug gelebt*—you have already lived long enough”

Goeth Attempts to Diddle the Court:

As the trial continued, Goeth asked how Pemper knew that the May 14, 1944, transport had been exterminated in Auschwitz. In response, Pemper showed—citing his access to secret letters and cables—that Goeth had specifically demanded the extermination of the Jews in this transport. Here the presiding judge intervened, asking Goeth to explain the purpose of these questions to Pemper. The judge calls Goeth’s attention to his [Goeth’s] deposition, in which he described Auschwitz as an “extermination camp.” In response, Goeth claimed that only “part” of Auschwitz had been an extermination camp and noted that, according to the quotation from his remarks, he had stated explicitly that Auschwitz was an extermination camp only “in 1940-1943.” Thus, Goeth tried to fabricate a scenario: the transport sent to Auschwitz from Plaszów in May 1944 had not been dispatched to an extermination camp, since, after all, Auschwitz was not an extermination camp after 1943! From the court’s standpoint, however, Auschwitz was an extermination camp that operated until the end of the war; the court had no use for the distinction between Auschwitz I (an extermination camp until July 1943) and Birkenau.

Goeth was “unaware” of the existence of Birkenau and the mass annihilations. However, Pemper, who had access to Goeth’s personal file (!), reported that Goeth had worked at three concentration camps—Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka—until February 1943. Goeth attempted to diddle the court into believing that he knew nothing about Birkenau!

The Amon Goeth that Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* does not Portray:

From what we have seen, Spielberg seems to have “planted” an Amon Goeth that we never knew into his film, *Schindler’s List*! Spielberg’s Goeth comes across as a disturbed child of sorts, beset with psychological problems and driven by irrational urges. He murders people for no reason and purpose. In fact, Goeth’s “arbitrary and irrational” murders were calculated; they were meant to increase output at the camp to inhuman levels. On August 13, 1944, Goeth murdered Chelowicz, his trustee and the chief of police at the Plaszów camp, in order to eliminate a witness to his corruption. The SS tribunal took Goeth into custody (on suspicion of corruption) on September 13, 1944, and the transport meant to be sent to Schindler in Brinnlitz (Sudetenland) left Plaszów on October 15, 1944. (The women were removed separately, via Auschwitz.) Thus, Goeth had absolutely no influence in Plaszów at the time the transport set out. Even before this he had no influence to wield, because the decision belonged solely to the concentration camp administration (*Amtsgruppe D*) in Berlin. The account of negotiations between Goeth and Schindler and the tendering of the “bribe” creates a link between this murderer and assistance in saving the people on “Schindler’s List.” Thus, not for the first time, a murderer of the SS school of death factories is “prettified” by being shown as having a humane streak. Schindler himself was a unique phenomenon and an incredible miracle. The act of keeping more than 1,000 Jews alive for six months in a fictitious (!) armaments factory in Germany, under the very nose of the SS, defies the capacity

of the imagination. There was nobody like Schindler in this regard, and the man had no accomplices!

The film also fails to explain that this “kindergarten” was established—as a trap—only from March 11, 1944. Thus, Spielberg refrains from portraying Goeth as a systematic murderer in the SS mold. We should not “buy” the prettified version of Goeth, the one that portrays him not as a systematic murderer but as a problematic human being. The film is seriously flawed in this respect. In view of the impact films can have, their creators ought to be more careful.

Daily life in the Plaszów Camp:

Even though the site of the camp is a “vacant” area that may seem as desolate as if never touched by human feet, the camp is an astonishing place to visit. There were some 200 barracks and other buildings here; the camp had a prisoner population of 10,000–25,000 at any given time and at least 50,000 people passed through. Some 5,000 people were murdered here—of whom 4,500 were Jews—and many thousands were sent from here to other camps for extermination and labor. It is hard to believe that a bustling camp once existed here—a place where buildings were erected for housing, workshops, and storage of property looted from the Jews of Kraków. Roads and paths were pushed through; water, electricity, and sewage systems were installed; a bakery, latrines, and buildings for policemen, German officers and their families were built here. The camp had a police force, barbed-wire fences, and watchtowers. There were two Jewish cemeteries and a funeral house there, which were demolished so thoroughly as to have been wiped off the face of the earth. The camp was equipped with pits where thousands of Jews remaining in the Kraków ghetto were murdered. Hundreds of men and women—Poles who fought against the Nazis, people who acted against the regime—Germans, aliens, Jews found in hideouts or caught with forged papers ... and Jewish collaborators with their families—were executed. The commander of the camp and his gang of homicidal underlings murdered dozens of people as they worked, after they were caught possessing a smuggled slice of bread, or as a punishment for the escape of other prisoners. The goal was to instill discipline and achieve maniacal levels of labor output

Germans who circulated in the area beat prisoners indiscriminately and for no reason. They also sent soldiers in the SS to this camp after they had suffered war injuries. One soldier in charge of labor wandered around and said he had been wounded in the Warsaw ghetto during the uprising. “Those guys, the fighters in the Warsaw ghetto,” he stated, “are serious Jews. They’re fighters. You guys are dogs, you are nothing.” He always showed his back, where one could see a large hole. He was also missing an eye, which he replaced with a glass one. Having left the Warsaw ghetto maimed, he informed the Jews in Plaszów that he would make them pay for his injuries in full. His beatings were exceptionally brutal.

The Germans had a nasty rule in Plaszów—a mocking, sarcastic, Satanic version of the Scouts’ well-known adage, “One for all and all for one”: if one prisoner escapes, ten are executed.

Soup was usually doled out from a barrel. Prisoners stepped up to the barrel with a pot in hand and were given soup. If you held your pot one moment too long, the dispenser would hit

you on the head with the ladle! Once you received the soup, you were to walk away at once. Some prisoners held on for a moment, hoping to let a little more soup drip into their pots from the ladle or imagining that they might receive an extra drop. Since the dispenser sometimes gave a bit more to a friend, the man behind him thought he might get a little extra, too.

How did people live in Plaszów? In dread of death every second. They were in such deep despair that only macabre humor, moderated with sadness and a bit of a provocative smile—a contemptuous spit in the face of death—provided momentary relief. Everything, it seemed, revolved around matters that concern “free” people: sports, food, and sex. “Sports” meant keeping up on the scores: 3:0, 6:0, 20:0—the number of people who were murdered that day. Murder at the pits in the Old Cemetery, where a tractor worked around the clock, was called “going under the tractor.” When someone turned toward the sun to warm up in the cold winter, the Nazi degenerate would say, “The sun’s not for you.” SS officers stared at a group of people and said, “You look too good for the food you’re getting here; you should have died long ago. You’re smugglers and thieves!”

Today, as one circulates in the open, one “sees” barracks packed with gray, stooped people; a queue for soup; people being made to run with whips; the sounds of gunfire as people are being murdered. People pass in front of you. In the eyes of some, you can detect a glint of hope. Other’s eyes are lifeless. Children hide in a corner of the barracks, “seasoned” from their experiences and agile as demons, trusting no one and moving on to their next hideout.