



The Rzuchów Forest

In the Rzuchów Forest, there was the so-called forest camp. During the initial period of the death camp's operation, this was the place where bodies of the victims were buried in mass graves, and from the summer of 1942, burnt in two cremation furnaces. Today, one can see the remains of the foundations of one of the furnaces.

The Rzuchów Forest was also the site of death of 56 Polish hostages executed by firing squad in November 1939 during the Intelligentsia Operation (*Intelligenzaktion*), which was connected with the so-called political clearing of the grounds.

Out of the many forms of commemoration present in the Place of Remembrance in the forest, it is particularly worth noting the delineation of mass graves, the dimensions of which were determined by archaeological research. Also the locations of the burn pits, crematoria and the bone grinder are marked.

A unique structure is the Wall of Remembrance erected in 1990 and devoted to the Jews murdered in Kulmhof. The plaques on the Wall commemorate whole communities, families, and individuals.

Kamil Janicki



MUZEUM BYŁEGO NIEMIECKIEGO
OBOZU ZAGŁADY KULMHOF

W CHEŁMNIE NAD NEREM

ODDZIAŁ MUZEUM
MARTYROLOGICZNEGO
W ŻABIKOWIE



Museum

The Museum of the Former German Kulmhof Death Camp in Chełmno-on-Ner is a Place of Remembrance of the first centre of mass extermination of Jews established by Germans in the occupied territory of Poland during the Second World War. The mission of the Museum is to commemorate the victims of the first Nazi death camp, at the same time preserving the local historical and cultural heritage through the Museum's research, educational and exhibition activity.

History of the Camp

The German Kulmhof Death Camp in Chełmno-on-Ner, located in the so-called Wartheland (*Warthegau*), which was a *Reichsgau* formed from the Polish territories incorporated into Germany, started its operation even before the Wannsee Conference (January 20, 1942), during which the details of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' were discussed. It was the only camp where victims were murdered in gas vans, and the only one liquidated and then reactivated. Kulmhof was the place where many Nazi officers gained the experience they later used in their criminal activity in other death and concentration camps established in the territory of occupied Poland.

The first period of the camp's operation started in November 1941, with the arrival of a German special commando – *Sonderkommando Kulmhof* – headed by SS-Hauptsturmführer Herbert Lange in the village of Chełmno (Kulmhof). On the edge of the village, there was a former estate with a mansion in the centre, which the Sonderkommando officers adapted as a 'death factory'. In the Rzuchów Forest located about 4 kilometres from the village, the so-called forest camp was created.

The extermination of the Jewish population started on December 8, 1941. The first to be murdered were Jews from ghettos near Chełmno (from Koło, Dąbie, Izbica Kujawska, Kłodawa etc.). Over the following months, the Jewish population from the Wartheland ghettos was liquidated. Starting in January 1942, Roma from the so-called Gypsy camp established in the autumn of 1941 in Łódź were brought to the camp. Then, using the railway line that connected Łódź with Koło, Jews from the Łódź ghetto were transported (including Jews from Germany, Bohemia, Austria and Luxembourg deported to *Litzmannstadt Ghetto* in the autumn of

1941). The victims were murdered in gas vans parked at the mansion with exhaust fumes from the engine. Their bodies were transported to the Rzuchów Forest, where they were buried in graves prepared earlier. In the summer of 1942, due to the decomposition of the bodies and the epidemiological risk this entailed, the transports were halted. Field crematoria were built in the Rzuchów Forest, in which the bodies excavated from the mass graves were burnt. After the operation of burning the bodies had been completed, transports resumed.

The decision to liquidate the camp was made in March 1943. In order to cover up traces of the crime, Germans destroyed the crematoria, and on April 7, they blew up the mansion. On April 11, SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof left the camp and were assigned to new tasks in the Balkans.

The military situation changing to the disadvantage of the Third Reich made the occupation authorities revise their policy towards the ghetto in Łódź, which was a labour camp at the time. Arthur Greiser, Reich Governor of the Wartheland, decided to gradually liquidate it. SS-Sonderkommando Kulmhof under the command of SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans Bothmann, which came to Kulmhof in March 1944, was appointed to perform the extermination.

As the mansion had been blown up in April 1943, the victims were murdered in the forest camp. Between June 23 and July 14, 1944, ten transports of Jews from the Łódź ghetto were sent to Chełmno, after which the extermination was halted. The remaining prisoners from the Litzmannstadt ghetto were deported to KL Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The German staff, however, stayed in the village until January 1945, cleaning up the area and guarding a group of Jewish prisoners kept in the granary. The final liquidation of the camp took place on the night of January 17, 1943, when the staff started evacuation and liquidation of the last prisoners, who – realising that their death was near – mutinied and killed two staff members. In response to this, Germans, by order of the camp commandant Hans Bothmann, set the granary on fire with the victims inside. The only survivors were two men who managed to escape: Szymon Srebrnik and Mieczysław Żurawski.

Approximately 200,000 people were murdered in the death camp during both periods of its operation. Most of them were Jews from Poland. Apart from them, about 4,300 Roma and Sinti, more than 10,000 Jews from Western Europe, a group of Czech children from the villages of Lidice and Ležáky, and an unspecified number of Poles and Soviet prisoners of war were also murdered in Chełmno.



Mansion Ruins

During archaeological work performed between 1997 and 2005, remains of the former mansion were uncovered, and the arrangement of basement rooms was identified. The exhibition of the mansion ruins shows the original floor of the basement and the arrangement of rooms. Above the remains, there is a footbridge that offers visitors a better view. It is a symbolic structure as its longer section runs along the corridor of death that the victims went down to gas vans.



Permanent Exhibition

The permanent exhibition in the Museum/Place of Remembrance illustrates in a monographic and multi-faceted way the history of the crimes committed by Germans in the Kulmhof camp. It is also a form of commemorating the victims. It shows the camp's history from the perspective of eyewitnesses, allowing the victims to tell their stories and thus reviving the memory of them. The events are presented against a broad historical background, with emphasis on the unique nature of the Kulmhof death camp compared with other extermination sites. The exhibition also has an educational value and prepares visitors to the Place of Remembrance to a meeting with its authentic space.



Granary building

The exhibition "The Granary – The Place of the Tragedy" uses objects/artefacts to tell the story of the last Jewish workers imprisoned in the camp until its liquidation. It displays belongings of the victims excavated in the Rzuchów Forest and Chełmno. The artefacts exhibited include everyday items, religious objects as well as shoemaking and tailoring tools. The austere design of the exhibition is to reflect the harsh conditions the prisoners had to suffer. The granary also presents the accounts of Szymon Srebrnik and Mieczysław Żurawski, two of the last prisoners of the camp, which are the most important sources of information about the second period of the camp's operation.