

POLES

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM



VICTIMS OF THE NAZI
1933-19

*Cover: In an area of
Poland annexed to
Germany, Polish women
are guarded by German
soldiers prior to their
deportation to the
General Government,
1940. Bundesarchiv
Koblenz, Germany.*

During World War II Poland suffered greatly under five years of German occupation. Nazi ideology viewed “Poles”—the predominantly Roman Catholic ethnic majority — as “subhumans” occupying lands vital to Germany. As part of the policy to destroy the Polish resistance, the Germans killed many of the nation’s political, religious, and intellectual leaders. They also kidnapped children judged racially suitable for adoption by Germans and confined Poles in dozens of prisons and concentration and forced labor camps, where many perished.



State Museum Auschwitz, Oswiecim, Poland

POLES: VICTIMS OF THE NAZI ERA

Auschwitz mug shot of Czesława Kwaka, who was born August 15, 1928. She arrived at Auschwitz on December 13, 1942, and died there March 12, 1943.

Mug shot of Jan Oglodek, an architect, who arrived at Auschwitz on April 5, 1941. He was one of 151 inmates shot in the first mass execution at Block 11, on the Polish national holiday, November 11, 1941.

Mug shot of Eugenia Smolenka, who was born October 2, 1886. She entered Auschwitz on November 27, 1942, and died there March 8, 1943.

THE INVASION AND OCCUPATION OF POLAND

German forces invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Polish troops fought valiantly in the face of vastly better equipped forces, with fierce engagements around Warsaw. Exhausted of food and water, the besieged capital surrendered on September 27, and fighting by regular Polish army units ended in early October.

Hitler's pretext for military expansion eastward was the "need" for more *Lebensraum*, "living space," for the German nation. On the eve of the invasion he reportedly stated in a meeting of high officials:

I have issued the command—and I'll have

anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by firing squad—that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formations in readiness—for the present only in the East—with orders to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space that we need.

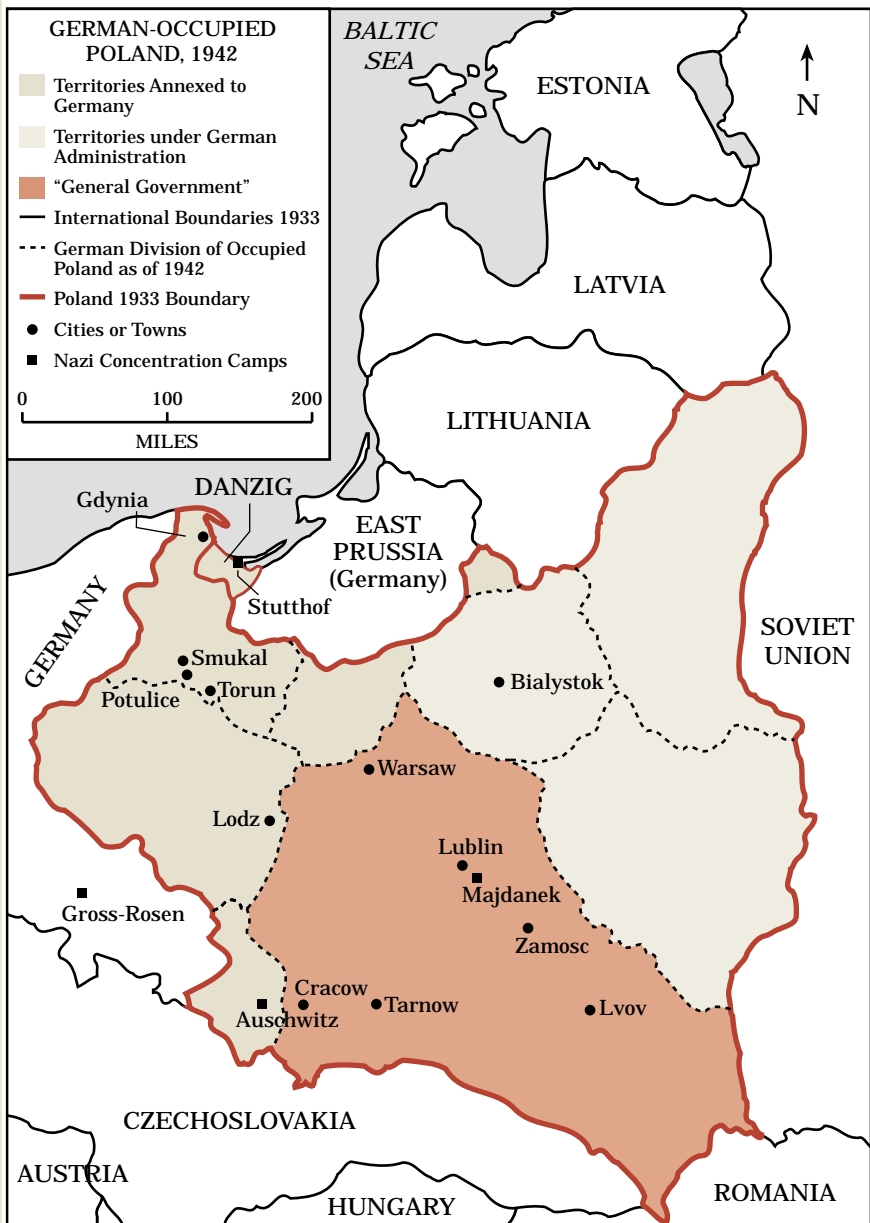
In 1939 Germany directly annexed bordering western and northern Poland, disputed lands where many ethnic Germans

(*Volksdeutsche*) resided. In contrast, the more extensive central and southern areas were formed into a separate “General Government,” which was ruled by German civil administrator Hans Frank. Cracow became the capital of the General Government, as the Germans planned to turn the Polish capital of Warsaw into a backwater town. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Germany also seized eastern Poland. (This territory had been invaded and occupied by the Soviets in September 1939, in accordance with the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939 that divided Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union.)

One aspect of German policy in conquered


Poland aimed to prevent its ethnically diverse population from uniting against Germany. “We need to divide [Poland’s many different ethnic groups] up into as many parts and splinter groups as possible,” wrote Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, in a top-secret memorandum, “The Treatment of Racial Aliens in the East,” dated May 25, 1940. According to the 1931 census by language, 69% of the population totalling 35 million inhabitants spoke Polish as their mother tongue. (Most of them were Roman Catholics.) Fifteen percent were Ukrainians, 8.5% Jews, 4.7% Belorussians, and 2.2% Germans. Nearly three-fourths of the population were peasants or agricultural laborers, and another fifth, industrial

On German maps “Poland” disappeared as a geo-political entity. Annexed territories (shaded dark gray): Danzig and northwestern lands were incorporated into the German provinces of Danzig, West Prussia, and East Prussia, and southwestern lands, including Auschwitz, into Upper Silesia. Western Poland, including Lodz, became a new German province, the “Wartheland.” The Bialystok district (shaded light grey) became a quasi-incorporated area. The rest of eastern Poland under German administration (shaded light grey) was merged with the German-occupied Baltic states and Soviet Union into a “Reichskommissariat Ostland” (in the north) and a “Reichskommissariat Ukraine” (in the south).



“Poles may have only one master—a German. Two masters cannot exist side by side, and this is why all members of the Polish intelligentsia must be killed.”—Adolf Hitler (1940)





(left) A Polish priest, Father Piotr Sosnowski, before his execution by German Security Police, near the city of Gdynia, late 1939. (below) Polish women being led to a German execution site in the Palmiry forest, near Warsaw, June 18, 1941.

workers. Poland had a small middle and upper class of well-educated professionals, entrepreneurs, and landowners.

In contrast to Nazi genocidal policy that targeted all of Poland's 3.3 million Jewish men, women, and children for destruction, Nazi plans for the Polish Catholic majority focused on the murder or suppression of political, religious, and intellectual leaders. This policy had two aims: first, to prevent Polish elites from organizing resistance or from ever regrouping into a governing class; second, to exploit Poland's leaderless, less educated majority of peasants and workers as unskilled laborers in agriculture and industry.

TERROR AGAINST THE INTELLIGENTSIA AND CLERGY

During the 1939 German invasion of Poland, special action squads of SS and police (the *Einsatzgruppen*) were deployed in the rear, arresting or killing those civilians caught resisting the Germans or considered capable of doing so as determined by their position and social status. Tens of thousands of wealthy landowners, clergymen, and members of the intelligentsia—government officials, teachers, doctors, dentists, officers, journalists, and others (both Poles and Jews)—were either murdered in mass executions or sent to prisons and concentration camps. German army units and “self-defense” forces composed of

Volksdeutsche also participated in executions of civilians. In many instances, these executions were reprisal actions that held entire communities collectively responsible for the killing of Germans.

During the summer of 1940, the SS rounded up members of the intelligentsia in the General Government. In this so-called *A-B Aktion* (Extraordinary Pacification Operation), several thousand university professors, teachers, priests, and others were shot. The mass murders occurred outside Warsaw, in the Kampinos forest near Palmiry, and inside the city at the Pawiak prison.

As part of wider efforts to destroy Polish culture, the Germans closed or destroyed uni-

versities, schools, museums, libraries, and scientific laboratories.

They demolished hundreds of monuments to national heroes. To prevent the birth of a new generation of educated Poles, German officials decreed that Polish children's schooling end after a few years of elementary education. "The sole goal of this schooling is to teach them simple arithmetic, nothing above the number 500; writing one's name; and the doctrine that it is divine law to obey the Germans. . . . I do not think that reading is desirable," Himmler wrote in his May 1940 memorandum.

In the annexed lands, the Nazis' goal was complete "Germanization" to assimilate the territories politically, culturally, socially, and economically

into the German Reich. They applied this policy most rigorously in western incorporated territories—the so-called *Wartheland*. There, the Germans closed even elementary schools where Polish was the language of instruction. They renamed streets and cities so that Lodz became Litzmannstadt, for example. They also seized tens of thousands of Polish enterprises, from large industrial firms to small shops, without payment to the owners. Signs posted in public places warned: “Entrance is forbidden to Poles, Jews, and dogs.”

The Roman Catholic Church was suppressed throughout Poland because historically it had led Polish nationalist forces fighting for

Poland’s independence from outside domination. The Germans treated the Church most harshly in the annexed regions, as they systematically closed churches there; most priests were either killed, imprisoned, or deported to the General Government. The Germans also closed seminaries and convents, persecuting monks and nuns. Between 1939 and 1945 an estimated 3,000 members of the Polish clergy were killed; of these, 1,992 died in concentration camps, 787 of them at Dachau.

EXPULSIONS AND THE KIDNAPPING OF CHILDREN

The Germanization of the annexed lands also included an ambitious program to resettle Germans from the Baltic

and other regions on farms and other homes formerly occupied by Poles and Jews. Beginning in October 1939, the SS began to expel Poles and Jews from the *Wartheland* and the Danzig corridor and transport them to the General Government. By the end of 1940, the SS had expelled 325,000 people without warning and plundered their property and belongings. Many elderly people and children died en route or in makeshift transit camps such as those in the towns of Potulice, Smukal, and Torun. In 1941, the Germans expelled 45,000 more people, but they scaled back the program after the invasion of the Soviet Union in late June 1941. Trains used for resettlement were more urgently needed to transport sol-

diers and supplies to the front.

In late 1942 and in 1943, the SS also carried out massive expulsions in the General Government, uprooting 110,000 Poles from 300 villages in the Zamosc-Lublin region. Families were torn apart as able-bodied teens and adults were taken for forced labor and elderly, young, and disabled persons were moved to other localities. Tens of thousands were also imprisoned in Auschwitz or Majdanek concentration camps.

During the Zamosc expulsions the Germans seized many children from their parents to be racially screened for possible adoption by German parents in the SS *Lebensborn* (“Fount of Life”) program. As many as 4,454 children

At a December 14, 1942, meeting with Nazi Party leaders in the General Government, Governor General Hans Frank bluntly presented “extermination” of the Poles as a policy option in conflict with the growing demand for Polish labor.

GERMAN OCCUPATION POLICY IN POLAND

You know that within the Party the line which is generally adopted is that our Polish policy consists of the deportation of the Poles, their destruction, or their treatment as a mere source of labor. You are also aware that the policy has been largely put into practice. Now, however, things are becoming tremendously complicated in this sphere. The problem arises above all from the fact that the Reich is being forced to transfer large sections of industry from the areas threatened by air attack to the General Government. On the other hand, there is a necessity to ensure the supply of local labor for the plants which are already in the General Government at all costs, to maintain the transport system and the whole administrative apparatus, and to ensure the harvest etc. . . .

It would be desirable if the Reich ministries, the Party agencies, and the territorial authorities could finally decide on a course of action. It simply will not do for some people to say all Poles of whatever sort will be exterminated, and for others to say all Poles of whatever kind, if they are fit for work, must be put to work. There is a complete contradiction here....

Should we exterminate or build things up, should the work be created here or in the Reich, should we give up workers or keep them here, should we let the Poles starve or should we feed them?

From J. Noakes and G. Pridham, Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945 (New York, 1988), Vol. 2, pp. 967-968. Translated from W. Prag and W. Jacobmeyer, eds., Das Diensttagebuch des deutschen Generalgouverneurs in Polen 1939-1945 (Stuttgart, 1975), pp. 590-91.

A POLISH DEPORTEE RECALLS HER ORDEAL

Account by a Mrs. J.K. of her expulsion to the General Government from the port city of Gdynia, part of the Polish lands annexed directly to Germany in 1939. This deposition appeared in the Black Book of Poland, a publication that chronicled Polish suffering under German occupation.

On 17 October 1939, at 8 A.M. I heard someone knocking at the door of my flat. As my maid was afraid to open it, I went to the door myself. I found there two German gendarmes, who roughly told me that in a few hours I had to be ready to travel with my children and everybody in the house. When I said that I had small children, that my husband was a prisoner of war, and that I could not get ready to travel in so short a time, the gendarmes answered that not only must I be ready, but that the flat must be swept, the plates and dishes washed and the keys left in the cupboards, so that the Germans who were to live in my house should have no trouble. In so many words, they further declared that I was entitled to take with me only one suitcase of not more than fifty kilograms in weight and a small hand-bag with food for a few days.

At 12 noon they came again and ordered us to go out in front of the house. Similar groups of people were standing in front of all the houses. After some hours' waiting, military lorries drove up and they packed us in one after the other, shouting at us rudely and also striking us. Then they took us to the railway station, but only in the evening did they pack us into filthy goods trucks, the doors of which were then bolted and sealed. In these trucks, most of which were packed with forty people, we spent three days, without any possibility of getting out. I hereby affirm that in my truck there were






six children of under ten years of age and two old men, and that we were not given any straw, or any drinking utensils, that we had to satisfy our natural needs in the tightly packed truck, and that if there were no deaths in our transport it was only because it was still comparatively warm and we spent only three days on the journey. We were unloaded, half dead at Czestochowa, where the local population gave us immediate help, but the German soldiers who opened the truck exclaimed 'What! Are these Polish swine still alive?'

From Polish Ministry of Information, The Black Book of Poland (New York, 1942), p. 184.

Expulsion of Poles from their villiage in territory annexed by Germany.



Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi War Crimes, Warsaw, Poland



(left) One eyewitness of the kidnapping of children at Zamosc later recalled: "I saw children being taken from their mothers; some were even torn from the breast. It was a terrible sight: the agony of the mothers and fathers, the beating by the Germans, and the crying of the children." (below) Some children ultimately rejected for Germanization were interned in the Dzierzazn children's camp, where the mortality rate was very high.

chosen for Germanization were given German names, forbidden to speak Polish, and re-educated in SS or other Nazi institutions, where many died of hunger or disease. Few ever saw their parents again. Many more children were rejected as unsuitable for Germanization after failing to measure up to racial scientists' criteria for establishing "Aryan" ancestry; they were sent to children's homes or killed, some of them at Auschwitz of phenol injections. An estimated total of 50,000 children were kidnapped in Poland, the majority taken from orphanages and foster homes in the annexed lands. Infants born to Polish women deported to Germany as farm and factory laborers were also usually taken from

the mothers and subjected to Germanization. (If an examination of the father and mother suggested that a "racially valuable" child might not result from the union, abortion was compulsory.)

The Zamosc expulsions spurred intense resistance as the Poles began to fear they were to suffer the same fate as the Jews—systematic deportation to extermination camps. Attacks on ethnic German settlers by members of the Polish resistance, whose ranks were filled with terrorized peasants, in turn provoked mass executions or other forms of German terror.

Throughout the occupation, the Germans applied a ruthless retaliation policy in an attempt to destroy resistance. As the Polish

resistance grew bolder in 1943 after the German defeat at Stalingrad, German reprisal efforts escalated. The Germans destroyed dozens of villages, killing men, women, and children. Public executions by hanging or shooting in Warsaw and other cities occurred daily. During the war the Germans destroyed at least 300 villages in Poland.

FORCED LABOR AND TERROR OF THE CAMPS

Between 1939 and 1945 at least 1.5 million Polish citizens were transported to the Reich for labor, most of them against their will. Many were teenaged boys and girls. Although Germany also used forced laborers from western Europe, Poles, along with other

eastern Europeans viewed as inferior, were subject to especially harsh discriminatory measures. They were forced to wear identifying purple P's sewn to their clothing, subjected to a curfew, and banned from public transportation. While the actual treatment accorded factory workers or farm hands often varied depending on the individual employer, Polish laborers as a rule were compelled to work longer hours for lower wages than western Europeans, and in many cities they lived in segregated barracks behind barbed wire. Social relations with Germans outside work were forbidden, and sexual relations with them were considered "racial defilement" punishable by death. During the war

hundreds of Polish men were executed for their relations with German women.

Poles were prisoners in nearly every camp in the extensive camp system in German-occupied Poland and the Reich. A major camp complex at Stutthof, east of Danzig, existed from September 2, 1939, to war's end, and an estimated 20,000 Poles died there as a result of executions, hard labor, and harsh conditions. Auschwitz (Oswiecim) became the main concentration camp for Poles after the arrival there on June 14, 1940, of 728 men transported from an overcrowded prison at Tarnow. By March 1941, 10,900 prisoners were registered at the camp, most of them Poles. In September 1941, 200 ill prisoners, most of them

Poles, along with 650 Soviet prisoners of war, were killed in the first gassing experiments at Auschwitz. Beginning in 1942, Auschwitz's prisoner population became much more diverse, as Jews and other "enemies of the state" from all over German-occupied Europe were deported to the camp.

The Polish scholar Franciszek Piper, the chief historian of Auschwitz, estimates that 140,000 to 150,000 Poles were brought to that camp between 1940 and 1945, and that 70,000 to 75,000 died there as victims of executions, of cruel medical experiments, and of starvation and disease. Some 100,000 Poles were deported to Majdanek, and tens of thousands of them died there. An estimated


20,000 Poles died at Sachsenhausen, 20,000 at Gross-Rosen, 30,000 at Mauthausen, 17,000 at Neuengamme, 10,000 at Dachau, and 17,000 at Ravensbrueck. In addition, victims in the tens of thousands were executed or died in the thousands of other camps—including special children’s camps such as Lodz and its subcamp, Dzierzazn—and in prisons and other places of detention within and outside Poland.

POLISH RESISTANCE

In response to the German occupation, Poles organized one of the largest underground movements in Europe with more than 300 widely supported political and military groups and subgroups. Despite military defeat, the Polish government itself

never surrendered. In 1940 a Polish government-in-exile became based in London. Resistance groups inside Poland set up underground courts for trying collaborators and others and clandestine schools in response to the Germans’ closing of many educational institutions. The universities of Warsaw, Cracow, and Lvov all operated clandestinely. Officers of the regular Polish army headed an underground armed force, the “Home Army” (*Armia Krajowa*—AK). After preliminary organizational activities, including the training of fighters and hoarding of weapons, the AK activated partisan units in many parts of Poland in 1943. A Communist underground, the “People’s Guard” (*Gwardia Ludowa*), also

(continued on page 23)



A young Polish Catholic who emigrated to the United States after the war, Wallace Witkowski, describes the harsh conditions in wartime Poland. He served as a courier for the Polish resistance. Museum visitors can access his video testimony in the Wexner Learning Center.

DAILY LIFE FOR POLES UNDER GERMAN OCCUPATION

We were...survivors of a period in which every able-bodied person aged 14 and up had to work ten hours a day, six days a week. Otherwise, we would be shipped to Germany, to forced labor camps, or to work in factories of the German war machine. We were given rations of food so most of us went—often—hungry. We were decimated by disease—typhus and typhoid fever were prevalent. . . .We were terrorized by continuous dragnets—*lapanka* we called it in Polish. You walk on a street from your house to your aunt's house and suddenly the street is closed by the gendarmes on both sides and all the people are surrounded and asked to show their papers. 'Are you working somewhere? Who are you? What's your occupation? What are you doing now?' Whoever appeared not employed in a meaningful way that involved supporting the German war effort was being singled out, put on a truck, and shipped to the railroad station and put on a train and shipped to Germany. There were hardly any families that did not feel the tragedy of war.



PIESN OBOZOWA (CAMP SONG)

Lyricist: Zbigniew Koczanowicz

Composer: Ludwik Zuk-Skarszewski

Translated from the Polish

The music and text were written in April 1945 at Falkensee, a subcamp of Sachsenhausen. The piece was associated with a clandestine "camp patrol" that prisoners, including Koczanowicz and Zuk-Skarszewski, formed in 1945. As their liberation neared, the patrol stole arms from a camp arsenal to defend themselves against camp guards.

Separated from the world by barbed wire,
We're rounded up from everywhere,
The longing woven into our hearts,
Throbs like a ringing bell.

You with the striped rag on your back,
Could you forget who you are—and where?
They stitched a number to your breast,
A red triangle and the letter "P."

And your shaved head reminds you,
Of your burden of sins unknown,
And you yearn for the day
When your will and your purpose return.

Neither stars nor sun bring you happiness,
Neither day nor night yields joy.
You stand and wait, dressed in stripes and shaved bare,
With thousands of others like you.

The words of this song are stained with our blood,
Within them are sorrow and grief,
Yet your camp song will carry beyond these barbed wires
To a distant place unknown to you.

Yet your camp song will carry beyond these barbed wires
To a distant place unknown to you.

formed in 1942, but its military strength and influence were comparatively weak.

With the approach of the Soviet army imminent, the AK launched an uprising in Warsaw against the German army on August 1, 1944. After 63 days of bitter fighting, the Germans quashed the insurrection. The Soviet army provided little assistance to the Poles. Nearly 250,000 Poles, most of them civilians, lost their lives. The Germans deported hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to concentration camps. Many others were transported to the Reich for forced labor. Acting on Hitler's orders, German forces reduced the city to rubble, greatly extending the destruction begun

during their suppression of the earlier armed uprising by Jewish fighters resisting deportation from the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943.

CONCLUSION

The Nazi terror was, in scholar Norman Davies's words, "much fiercer and more protracted in Poland than anywhere in Europe." Reliable statistics for the total number of Poles who died as a result of Nazi German policies do not exist. Many others were victims of the 1939–1941 Soviet occupation of eastern Poland and of deportations to Central Asia and Siberia. Records are incomplete, and the Soviet control of Poland for 50 years after the war impeded independent scholarship.

Visitors to the Wexner Learning Center can hear a performance in the original Polish of this piece, and many others from the Museum's Aleksander Kulisiewicz Collection. A Polish poet and musician, Kulisiewicz himself wrote many songs during his imprisonment in Sachsenhausen from 1939 to 1945.

The changing borders and ethnic composition of Poland as well as vast population movements during and after the war also complicated the task of calculating losses.

In the past, many estimates of losses were based on a Polish report of 1947 requesting reparations from the Germans; this often cited document tallied population losses of 6 million for all Polish “nationals” (Poles, Jews, and other minorities). Subtracting 3 million Polish Jewish victims, the report claimed 3 million non-Jewish victims of the Nazi terror, including civilian and military casualties of war.

Documentation

remains fragmentary, but today scholars of independent Poland believe that 1.8 to 1.9 million Polish civilians (non-Jews) were victims of German occupation policies and the war.

This approximate total includes Poles killed in executions or who died in prisons, forced labor, and concentration camps. It also includes an estimated 225,000 civilian victims of the 1944 Warsaw uprising, more than 50,000 civilians who died during the 1939 invasion and siege of Warsaw, and a relatively small but unknown number of civilians killed during the Allies’ military campaign of 1944–45 to liberate Poland.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

VISIT THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION

Violated Border (4th floor): An enamel shield bearing the Polish national insignia that at one time may have been affixed to a customs house along the Polish border.

The War Begins (4th floor): Film footage of the German invasion of Poland.

Terror in Poland (4th floor): Photos and a tree stump that marked a mass grave near the village of Palmiry, Poland.

Prisoners of the Camps (3rd floor): Includes mug shots of many Polish victims.

Slave Labor (3rd floor): A purple “P” on a yellow patch indicating that the wearer was a Polish forced laborer.

Resistance (2nd floor): Poster announcing the execution of Poles for anti-German activities.

The Courage to Rescue (2nd floor): Segment on Zegota, including narrative and photographs of leadership; poster warning Poles against aiding Jews; wall including Polish rescuers recognized as “Righteous Among Nations” by Yad Vashem.

VISIT THE WEXNER LEARNING CENTER (2nd floor)

From the MENU choose TOPIC LIST. From the alphabetical list of topics choose “THE FATE OF THE POLES: Repression and Murder in Occupied Poland.”

From the MENU choose ID CARD. Type in the following numbers to read about the experience of Polish people who were persecuted during the Holocaust: 6233; 4274; 2361; 6793; 4554; 5974; 4902; 2514; 6255; 6241; 1741; 4464; 6864; 6852; 6826; 6814; 2004; 5986; 1106.

MUSEUM HOLDINGS

LIBRARY

Numerous scholarly works and memoirs in English and Polish pertaining to the persecution of Poles during World War II and to the Polish resistance.

COLLECTIONS

Documents relating to occupied Poland, Polish victims, and the resistance, including material from the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, the Polish State Archives, and concentration camp memorials.

Videotaped interviews of a number of Polish victims.

Extensive collection of photos of German “actions” against the Polish population, of the 1944 Warsaw uprising, of the Lodz children’s camp, and mug shots.

Watercolor illustrations of Auschwitz by Jan Kowski, a Polish artist who was imprisoned in the camp.

Letters written by Kazimierz Smolen, a political prisoner at Auschwitz who later became Director of the Auschwitz State Memorial Museum.

Two series of anti-Nazi satirical prints, “Hitleriada Macabra” and “Hitleriada Furiosa” made in a concentration camp by Stanislaw Toegel, a Polish lawyer and amateur artist.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Ascherson, Neil. *The Struggles for Poland* (New York, 1987).
- Davies, Norman. *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. 2* (New York, 1982).
- Gross, Jan Tomasz. *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944* (Princeton, NJ, 1979).
- Hrabar, Roman et al. *The Fate of Polish Children during the Last War* (Warsaw, 1981).
- Kielar, Wieslaw. *Anus Mundi: 1,500 Days in Auschwitz-Birkenau*, trans. from German by Susanne Flatauer. (New York, 1980).
- Klukowski, Zygmunt, *Diary from the Years of Occupation 1939–44*, trans. from Polish by George Klukowski (Urbana, IL, 1993).
- Lukacs, Richard C. *Out of the Inferno: Poles Remember the Holocaust*. (Lexington, KY, 1989).

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