

Preliminary Report of Archaeological Excavations in the Sobibór Extermination Center, 2015

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The excavation season commenced in November 2015 and continued through December 2015. In wake of the decision of the Steering Committee concerning the construction of the a new visitors center in Sobibór, archaeological excavations were deemed necessary in order to reconstruct the map of the camp and also to integrate finds discovered in excavations into displays that will be part of the new center.

The excavation was initiated by the Polish-German Foundation with the goal of examining a number of areas where the new visitor's center may be built. The excavation was directed by Wojciech Mazurek on behalf of the Sub Terra company and Yoram Haimi on behalf of Yad Vashem and Tel Aviv University and Dr. Ivar Schute, the Dutch representative.

The excavation was carried out in two separate areas in Camps II and III. Prior to the excavation, the Gepro company from Włodawa surveyed the site and produced an excavation grid. The Zakład Usług Lesnych from Stulno cut down trees in the areas to be excavated.

The Area of Camp II

The area selected for investigation is located near the Himmelfahrtstrasse and the goal of the excavation was to verify the existence of an entrance gate to this road. The excavation area covered ca. 7 dunams in which 126 new objects (loci) were revealed (Fig. 1). During the course of the excavation a poorly preserved structure (Object 5827) (Fig 2) was uncovered. In spite of its poor condition it was possible to identify remains of the east and west walls (marked in green on Fig. 1). A number of artifacts including jewelry was recovered between the two walls. Among the artifacts were 47 pearls of a necklace (Fig. 3). A plastered reservoir (Object 5176) was revealed north of the structure, measuring 1 x 1 m. in size and 1 m. deep (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 1 – Plan of the Excavated Area in Camp II
(Rafal Ratajczak and Wojciech Mazurek)**



Fig. 2 – Object 5827 – a possible registry building (Wojciech Mazurek)



Fig. 3 – The pearls found in Building 5827 (Yoram Haimi)



Fig. 4 – The reservoir, Object 5176 (Yoram Haimi)

There are a number of proposals concerning the function of this building: the first is that it functioned as a registry that the Jewish victims passed through before reaching the Himmelfahrtstrasse, a possibility that negates our previous suggestion in 2011 that Object 1124 served as a registry building. This kind of structure could have served as an entrance gate because no remains were found elsewhere of an entrance gate. A second possibility is that the structure may have been used as a barracks where women

victims undressed. At present, we are unable to explain the presence of the plastered reservoir.

Two large channels were revealed south and parallel to the 'Road to Heaven'. The northern channel is Object 5106 and the southern channel, Object 5883 (marked light blue on Fig. 1). The channels had different depths and Object 5883 contained personal items of the victims. A number of round objects (loci) were uncovered at a distance of 3.5 to 4.5 m. from one another north of this channel. They contained organic material. This area also contained the remains of roots of bushes that damaged the excavated layers when we attempted to remove them using a tractor (Fig. 5) such that it was decided to leave them in place.

The function of the channels is as yet unclear. However, enlarging the excavation in this area may provide answers.



Fig. 5 – Removal of the tree roots in Object 5883 (Yoram Haimi)

The Area of Camp III – The Southeast Corner of the Mass Graves

This area is slated for the construction of an enclosure wall around the graves. Due to the sensitive nature of the building the wall so close to the graves it was decided that an

excavation area of at least two dunams was necessary (Fig. 6). During the 2011, a large pit (Object 568) (Fig. 7) was revealed here that contained many objects mixed with a large number of splinters of bones, such that it was decided to include this as part of Grave No. 18.

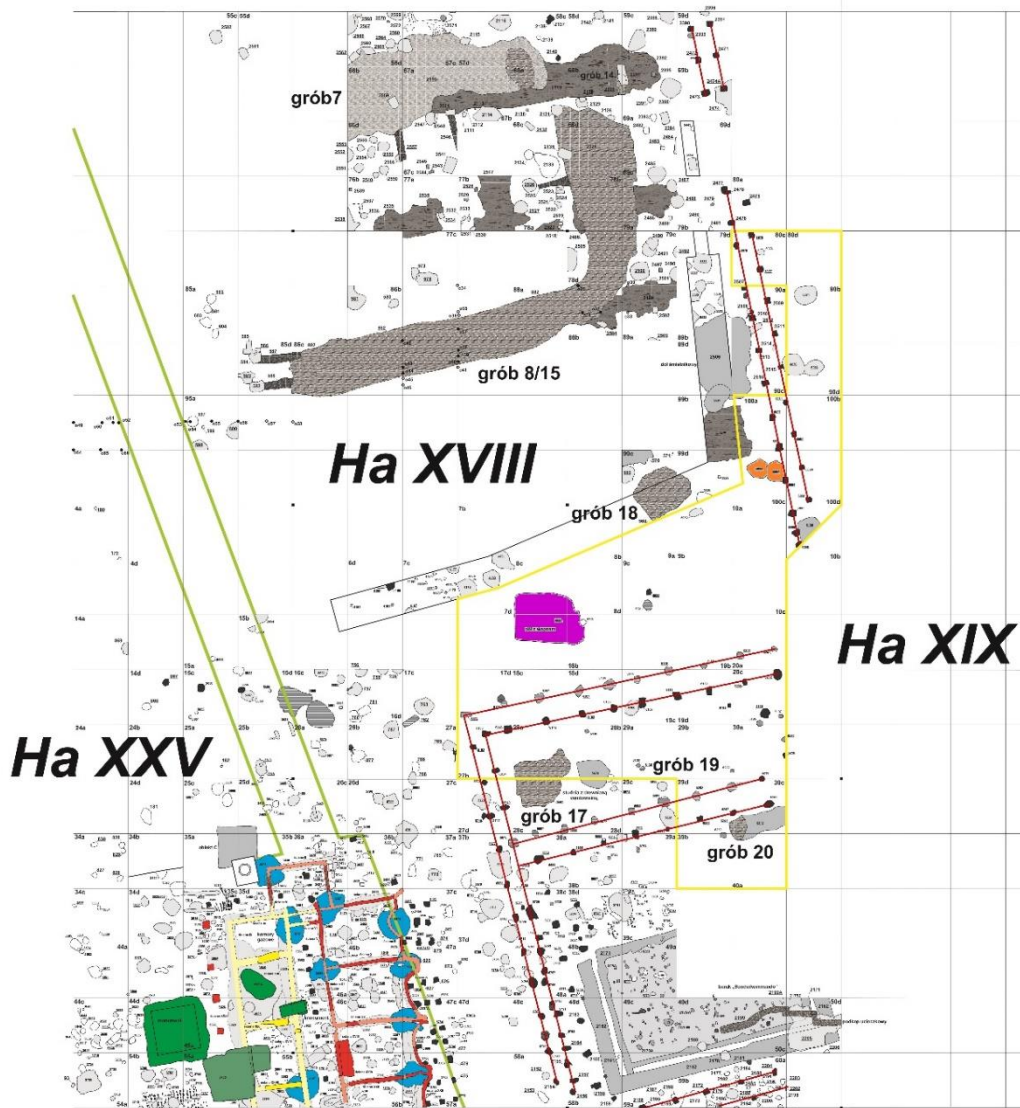


Fig. 6 – Plan of the Excavation Area in Camp III

(Rafał Ratajczak and Wojciech Mazurek)

East of this grave two objects (loci) were revealed, Objects 6094-6095, that contained human bones immediately next to the double fence of Camp III (marked in orange on Fig. 6). During the 2014 excavation season a well was later used as a grave (Grave No. 17). The well appears to have been fenced similar to the structure housing the Jewish victims, possibly because the Germans found it important to control the water sources

around the camp. The fence around the well was a double fence (marked in red on Fig. 6). An important detail provided by Leon Feldhendler is the description of poor quality of water with a terrible taste in the camp.¹



Fig. 7 – Object 568/ Grave No. 18 (Yoram Haimi)

The ground water in the camp was quite high and probably contaminated by the mass graves and this was the drinking water that the Jewish captives were forced to drink. East of this grave two additional graves were uncovered, Grave No. 19 (Object 6135), which measured 25 cm. in diameter and contained human bones. Southeast of Grave No. 19 was located Grave No. 20 (Object 6242), sunk to a depth of ca. 1 meter. Here, whitened human bones that had undergone burning were discovered mixed with gray soil (Fig. 8)

¹ מרים נוביץ, סוביבור מחנה האבדון והמרד, בית לוחמי הגטאות והוצאת הקיבוץ המאוחד, תל אביב 1979, עמ' 24



Fig. 8 – Section of Grave No. 20 (Wojciech Mazurek)

A channel was found east of Grave No. 20 that may have served as a latrine for the prisoners. A pit (Object 6043) was revealed between Graves No. 17-18 measuring 4 x 6 m. (marked in purple in Fig. 6). The northwest part of the channel contained the remains of lime and southeast part contained many pieces of barbed wire (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 – The plaster pit (Object 6043) and the barbed wire (Wojciech Mazurek)

During the excavation, a number of artifacts were recovered, some of which are presented here in Fig. 10.

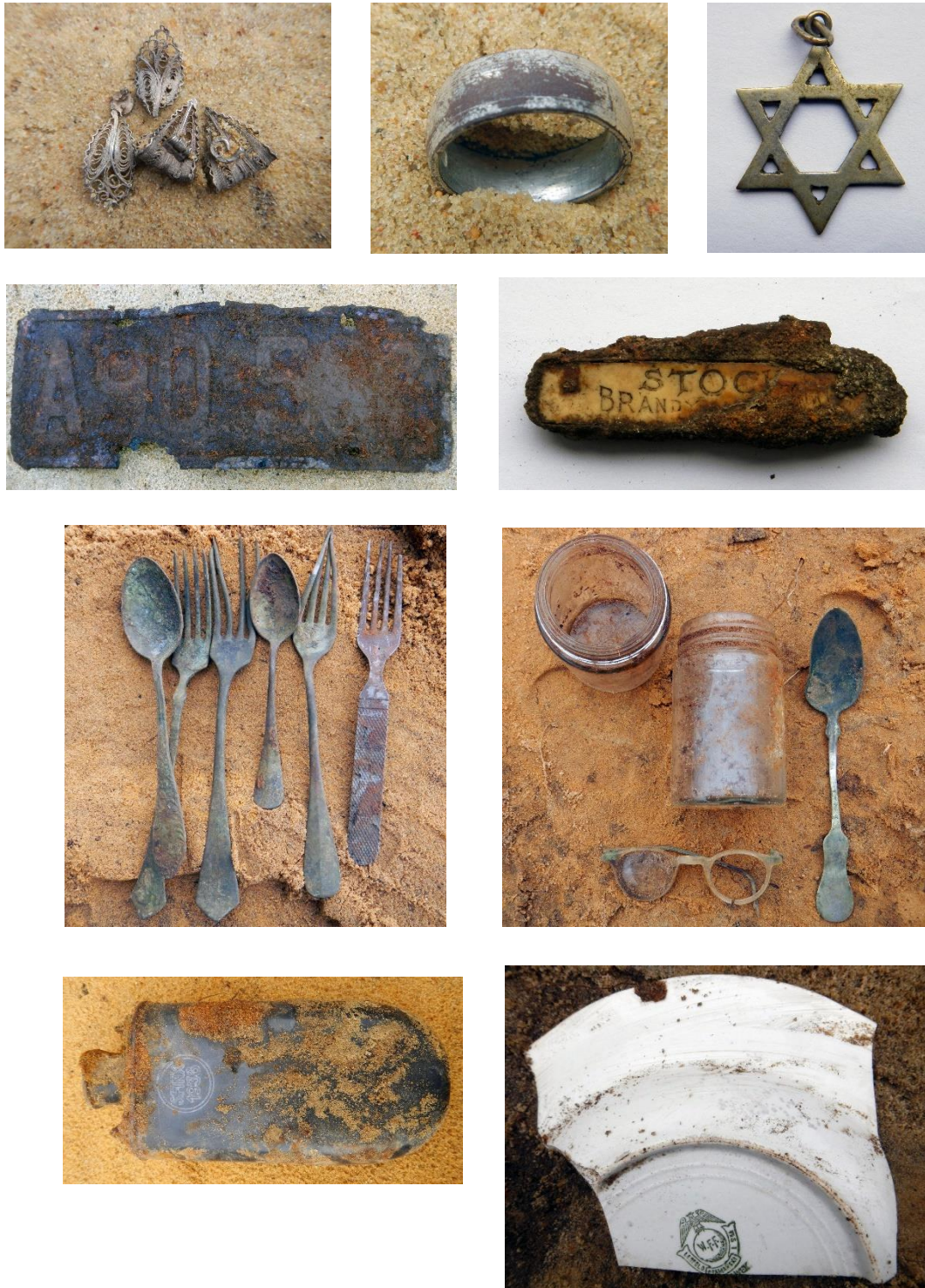


Fig. 10 – Artifacts recovered in the 2015 excavation (Yoram Haimi)

The Conservation of the Gas Chambers

Extensive conservation work on the gas chambers in the camp are a welcome development. However, I wish to point out this kind of work requires the archaeological supervision of the excavators of the site. The conservation project was accompanied by an archaeologist from Lublin who is far less familiar with the site than our team. Although we were not allowed to enter the work area around the gas chambers, it appears that conservators dug trenches around the walls and we have not been able to obtain information concerning what was found there (Fig. 11). I hope that in the future we will be allowed to supervise the work of the conservation team.



Fig. 11 – the conservation work around the gas chambers (Yoram Haimi)

Summary

The data that was collected in the 2015 excavation season resolves a number of questions but also raises new ones. These include the structure (Object 5827) that appears to belong the entrance to the 'Road to Heaven'. The function of the small reservoir next to the northern exterior of the building is unclear and the question arises as to why such a water reservoir was necessary in this part of the camp. The two parallel

channels run westward and future excavations may provide answers concerning their use.

The area in Camp III is extremely sensitive due to the presence of the graves and human remains in that area such that development in this area should be carefully weighed. Continued investigation of the 'escape tunnel' is advised in order to determine if Jewish prisoners were able to cross the double fence of Camp III.

Additional testimony of an unnamed girl from Holland who was incarcerated in Sobibór reinforces the hypothesis of the existence of an escape channel in Camp III. At age seventeen this young woman worked with a group of women prisoners knitting clothing and she described the discovery of an escape tunnel by the Nazis prior to its completion. In wake of the discovery of the tunnel, all the prisoners of Camp III were summarily executed.² We hope that the Steering Committee will allow us the opportunity to complete our investigations in Sobibor.

We wish to thank the Steering Committee, especially and in particular Mr. Dariusz Pawłoś and Mr Mariusz Kacperkiewicz from the Polish-German Foundation for their support of the on-going archaeological researches in Sobibór. We would also like to thank the Majdanek Muzeum. We appreciate the work of our surveyors, Rafal Ratajczak and all the team from the local residents.

² Archive Ghetto Fighters, 14944.