
Transforming remembrance in the former death camp Belzec – a short history

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Which history stands behind the name Belzec? In most cases an average citizen in Germany or in any other European country could not answer this question. In Poland some people would know, that a small village with this name exists in South East Poland close to the Ukrainian border, which is somehow connected with the Holocaust. Belzec is indeed one of the least known former death camps. Like most extermination centres of the 1940s it has only a small place in the public memory of the Holocaust. The Holocaust is symbolically strongly connected with the name of Auschwitz that became the universal catch-word, the main symbol of the extermination of the Jewish population in Europe. But only specialists on the subject could tell you more about thousands of other places associated with the Holocaust like Belzec, Panierai near Vilnius in Lithuania or Piaski in the outskirts of Lvov in Ukraine. The few known facts we know about these places mostly come from few survivors and eyewitnesses of the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe. This testimony has guaranteed in the past 70 years, that memorials have been built, extermination sites commemorated and historical education developed. Nevertheless, the situation has always been difficult for sites for which no witness could be found. In Eastern Europe, a second problem has been the official politics of the Soviet-Union and other socialist states towards the Holocaust, which for more than 40 years did not support any active commemoration of Jewish suffering during the Nazi occupation. The focus of remembrance culture laid on the suffering of the nation in general. Consequently, the Jews as a victim group were not explicitly mentioned or, even worse, extermination sites were neither recognized nor commemorated. In the case of the former death camp in Belzec both aspects were important which had consequences not only for the first period after world war two, but also for the changes of the memorial in the last twenty years: In addition to that, there has been no survivor who was present to fight for an adequate commemoration, and also from the Polish official side no effort was made in this direction for a long time.

THE FORGOTTEN CAMP

Belzec is in a rather unique situation. On the one hand it is obvious that the former death camp Belzec is one of most important locations of the Holocaust, where except for the death centres of Auschwitz and Treblinka, most Jews were killed during the Nazi-occupation of Europe. On the other hand, behind the iron curtain, Belzec has been about 50 years nearly forgotten since neither Polish officials nor the nearby inhabitants showed any interest in the place. The first monument, which was opened in the 1960s did not change this general lack of initiative. It was only in the 1990s that negotiations started for the construction of a new memorial, which was finally opened in 2008. In this respect, the process leading to the opening of the Belzec museum and memorial was exceptional for the remembrance culture in Poland. But an important question is, whether the construction of a new memorial can be associated with changes in how the local population as well as visitors perceive the site.

Recent research shows that from March 17th 1942 to the end of June 1943, 450 000-500 000 people were killed in the death camp Belzec¹. As in the other two extermination camps of the *Aktion Reinhardt*, Treblinka and Sobibór, the site was built solely to exterminate Jews from Eastern Poland. In the case of Belzec, the Jewish population from Galicia, which lies between the cities Lvov, Krakau and Lublin, was the main target. Apart from this, Jews from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, were also exterminated in Belzec after first being deported to different villages in occupied Poland. After a more or less short stay they were deported together with the local Jewish population to one of the three death camps of the *Aktion Reinhardt* where they were murdered using exhaust gasses produced by the motor of a Soviet tank.

Belzec was the first of the three death-camps of the *Aktion Reinhardt* and there the German Nazis installed the first gas-chambers, solely built for the extermination of Jews. The death camp was located 400 meters from the Belzec village on a railway siding only 50 meters east of the main Lublin – Lvov railway line. 1941 specialists of the Third Reich euthanasia-program travelled to the *Generalgouvernement*, to examine the locality's potential for the construction of an extermination camp. The decision to build the first camp in Belzec probably relates to the good infrastructure, which allowed a higher number of people to be transported to the camp more efficiently.

It is in Belzec that the logistics of the destitution and extermination of Jews was conceived, structured and experimented with. To this end, the killing methods used within the Third Reich euthanasia programme were developed into an extermination model to be later used in the two other death-camps of the *Aktion Reinhardt*, Treblinka und Sobibór. This model involved deportation, systematic robbing and the killing process itself. These tasks as any other work in the camp were carried out by Jewish prisoners.

[1] Robert Kuwałek, *Obóz Zagłady w Belczcu*, Lublin, Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2010, p. 165-172.

The final so called “resettlement transports” to Belzec arrived on December 11th 1942 and this led to the accelerated burning of corpses, which had begun in November 1942. The decommissioning of Belzec started in spring 1943. On May 8th 1943 the last member of the SS left the village after the traces of the mass-murdering had been erased – no evidence was to remain to indicate what had occurred in the death camp. The buildings were demolished, the soil ploughed, trees were planted and a farm was set up. The entire area was then landscaped with firs and wild lupines. The last remaining 300 Jewish workers of the *Sonderkommando* were deported to Sobibór. As they arrived in Sobibór they realised that they were to be killed and started an uprising, but were murdered on the spot.

Only two neighbouring SS buildings next to the Belzec camp – the Commandant house of the camp and the administration, which had been the property of the Polish Railway before the war – were not demolished. Their ruins still exist. Together with an old train shed, which during the lifetime of the camp was used as a warehouse for the belongings of the murdered Jews, these are the last remaining original buildings. In the summer of 1944 the Belzec region was occupied by the Red Army and shortly after the liberation, local villagers demolished the farm that the German Nazis had built on the former death camp.

THE VILLAGE OF BELŻEC

One characteristic of the death-camp in Belzec was its close proximity to the village, after which the camp is named. Probably no other Nazi extermination field in Eastern Europe was located so close to a settlement. During the operative life of the camp, workers and villagers were confronted daily with the extermination of people. People saw the deportation trains in the public train station; they saw the deported who sometimes waited inside the wagons for hours. The villagers were forced to build the camp's first barracks and gas-chambers. Later they took on renovation-jobs inside. Some of the SS men and the so called Trawniki-men (Ukrainian guards) lived in the village, did their shopping, drank their evening beer and had relationships with local women.

In the first years after the war the Polish and international interest in Belzec was very small. The site was not even marked by a commemoration or information plate. As a result of German efforts to erase evidence of the camp's existence just before the war's end, almost all traces of the camp had disappeared. Despite or perhaps precisely because of the involvement of the villagers with the daily life of the camp, there was no particular will to commemorate the murdered Jews. The mass graves, however, remained, and in the post-war period, local inhabitants ransacked them in search of valuables buried with the victims². Different reasons may explain the villagers near

[2] See the testimony of Mieczysław Nieduzak, the deputy major of the militia-post in Belzec after 1945: „After disbanding the camp the local inhabitants started to dig over the camp-area to find gold or valuables, the Jews

absence of mourning at the disappearance of a large part of the pre-war population³. The close contact between villagers and the camp and the guards may be part of the explanation, but cannot explain alone the lack of interest in the site of the former camp. The German ghettoization had isolated the Jews and deepened the division between Poles and Jews. Furthermore, some Poles had to a limited extent profited from, and even exploited, the destitution and extermination of the Jews to obtain their houses and buy their belongings at low prices. Some played an active role in the murder policy. Moreover, remembrance for the murdered Jews was not possible in postwar Poland when both groups were recognized as separate subjects of enquiry. During the war, the Polish society was already divided. Some supported the German extermination policy, others tried to help the suppressed, while most were more or less indifferent to the persecution. The fate of the Jews had been omitted from the history of Poland and they were not treated as distinct group of victims. The anti-Semitic attitude of a large part of Polish society could not be questioned in a situation, were the Jewish communities in the official socialist historiography did not exist. After the war, this difficult subject was left untouched for decades, which was a relief for many people. The ethnic cleansing was widely accepted and not seen as a problem. Everyone who lived close to the former death camp Belzec after the war knew exactly what had happened on the site, though there was no effort, no initiative to address this part of the Belzec history. On the contrary the remains of the Jewish settlements were erased, cemeteries were destroyed and buildings were re-occupied and used for other purposes. In this context, the main task of the education work is to contribute to unearthing the subject and bringing it closer to people.

BELZEC DURING THE POST-WAR PERIOD

One reason why Belzec became nearly forgotten in post-war time is that nearly nobody survived the camp. Only a handful of Jews succeeded in escaping Belzec. Among them, only three of them survived the war and were able to provide eyewitness testimonies about the camp. Only one survivor – Rudolf Reder – wrote a longer report, which was published shortly after the war⁴. This is in contrast to Treblinka and Sobibór, where in the summer and autumn of 1943 during an armed uprising of Jewish prisoners, some managed to run away and survive the war. After the war they not only recounted what had happened in the camps, but also stood up against the

left behind. At that time single corpses were dug up and sometimes also mass-graves from several persons got opened. The corpses were in a state of total decomposition. The people were looking in the mouths for golden teeth. This explains, why the territory of the camp was extreme ploughed up and in consequence dirty.” Archive of the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej Lublin, Lu 1/15/105, investigation file in the case of the crimes, which had been committed in the death camp Belzec, 1945-1949.

[3] The Jewish population reached in various villages and cities in Eastern Poland up to 70-90 % of the total population.

[4] Rudolf Reder, *Belzec*, Kraków 1946.

on-going misinformation about the former camps⁵. For a long time the testimony of Rudolf Reder was the only available document about Belzec⁶. The case of Reder also provides invaluable information on how Holocaust survivors were treated in Polish post-war society. Reder was deported to the death camp in Belzec from Lvov in 1942. After three months he succeeded in running away and was hidden in Lvov by a Polish woman, who later became his wife. After the war he tried to return to his pre-war profession as a soap factory owner, for which the socialist Polish state accused him of being a capitalist and condemned him to short imprisonment. Coming out of jail he changed his name, emigrated with his wife to Canada and never set foot in Poland again.

The paucity of Belzec survivors substantially hindered the prosecution of the camps' perpetrators. In 1963 the only trial concerning the death camp Belzec took place in Munich. In the case of 7 of the 8 accused former SS-men the court in 1964 threw out the case, on the grounds that the guards had obeyed (superior) orders. Only in the case of one, Josef Oberhauser – the adjutant of the camp's commander, a trial was opened. Rudolf Reder was invited to testify during the trial, but was already blind and could not recognise Oberhauser. His testimony was therefore not acknowledged. Consequently Oberhauser was sentenced to 4 years and 6 months imprisonment for 300, 000 murders after a four day trial.

OFFICIAL POLITICS TOWARDS THE COMMEMORATION OF MASS-MURDER CENTRES IN POLAND

The former death-camps of the *Aktion Reinhardt* were not acknowledged as mass-murder sites in Polish post-war remembrance culture, for which official politics at the time bear a significant responsibility. Between 1949 and *circa* 1980 predominant official remembrance policy was defined by the Socialist state. It increasingly drew on traditional canons of national history. Although official ideology promoted internationalism and friendship among the people, the communists nationalism in Eastern Europe, which was designed to stabilise the state's hold on power, was, by contrast, highly traditional and xenophobic. Reflection on Polish history, opened public debates on self-perception, Polishness, patriotism, and the nation, as well as discussions about the Holocaust or the minorities living in Poland were thus not possible or not accepted. There was no discussion on the collaboration of parts of the Polish society in the Holocaust. It seemed that the memory of the suffering of the Polish population did not fit with the memory of Nazi extermination politics against the Jewish population. Effectively, these topics tended to be discussed in private, such

(5) At the entrance of the former death-camp Sobibor a memorial stone was erected in the year 1965 on which was erroneously stated that soviet prisoners of war, Jews, Poles and Gypsies had been killed in the camp. This misinformation – only Jews were murdered in Sobibor – was only corrected in 1993 at the initiative of a survivor – Tomasz Blatt, a former Jewish prisoner, who took part in the uprising, who constantly protested against the inscription. Tomasz Blatt, *Sobibór – zapomniane powstanie*, Włodawa 2003, p. 130.

(6) Only in 2010 the first monography about Belzec was published: See footnote 1.

as among families, whether a counter-memory existed (is this one of the topics? If so it needs to go after topics). It would be wrong to assume that the Polish official culture of remembrance was monolithic. The Jews were very much present in the memory of private individuals. In public, however, they were not mentioned. Furthermore, the case of camps built for the purpose of exploiting and exterminating the Jewish population was particularly complex. The state tried to hide what kind of people had been murdered on these sites and denied and hid the unique nature of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. This is precisely the case of the former death camp Belzec. Although official discourse did not mention, that the site had been built exclusively to exterminate Jews, every inhabitant knew this was the case. A symptomatic example for official approach to the different Polish and Jewish memories from the 1960s is the entry *concentration camp* in the Polish Great Encyclopaedia. Originally a distinction was made between concentration and extermination camps, such as Belzec where the Jews were especially named as a victim group. This was met with protests by the nationalist-oriented faction within the Polish United Working Party, who claimed that all concentration camps had been extermination camps and did not support the specific distinction of the Jews. In their opinion all Poles had been threatened by extermination. According to this logic, the history of the Polish Jews should not be granted a unique status⁷.

THE 'OLD' MEMORIAL IN BELZEC

Memorials in the three death camps of the *Aktion Reinhardt* were first erected in the 1960s. The definition of the "victims" was in line with the official interpretation from the Polish authorities. For example, it was not mentioned that Jews from Western and South Europe were also killed in the camps. Only in the case of Treblinka it was explicitly stated that the victim group was mainly the Jewish population of the region⁸. These memorials were built at the time of the prosecution of Nazi perpetrators in Israel and Germany. In the aftermath of these trials the Holocaust became an important subject in the international media and community, which devoted more attention to the death camps in Eastern Europe. In reaction to this increasing attention, the area of the former camps was fenced off, and memorials were erected. In Sobibór and Belzec the fenced area did not correspond to the actual camps' area, and commercial development took place on areas formerly belonging to it.

[7] Karol Sauerland, „Literarische und mediale Erinnerungskultur[en] in Polen“, in Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, Jürgen Zinnecker, *Zwischen Zwangsarbeit (dir.), Holocaust und Vertreibung. Polnische, jüdische und deutsche Kindheiten im besetzten Polen*, Weinheim und Munich, 2007, p. 19-41, p. 22.

Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*, Warszawa, 2001, p. 330-331.

[8] The memorial in Treblinka was erected in the year 1965 and till the erection of the new memorial in Belzec in the year 2004 the only one in a former concentration – or death-camp in Poland, where in the composition of the memorial were symbolically included Jewish elements, like an inscription in Yiddish and a monument in a shape of a Jewish tombstone.



The badly preserved first memorial in Belzec in the late 1990s. © Archive of Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz.

The construction of the memorial in Belzec was completed and officially opened in the year 1963. The memorial showed two emaciated figures, and a number of concrete plinths that marked the supposed mass graves. There was also a row of monumental concrete urns, symbolising ever-burning fires. As mentioned previously no explicit mention of the actual victims of the death centre Belzec was made whether in the sculptural representation or in the opening discourse⁹. The inauguration of the memorial on December 1st 1963 did not feature significantly in the media, not even in the regional press of Lublin. Short press-notes reported succinctly about the official delegations present at the celebration. It is only through the mention of the attendance of the representative of the Jewish Committee, Maurycy Wiener¹⁰, that the former camp was somehow connected to the Holocaust. Similarly, if the notes mentioned that at this site thousands of people had been murdered, no further information was provided on the history of the camp. Two survivors “of the camps in Belzec” were reported to have taken part in the celebration. Their Polish names did not allow them to be identified as Jewish. Also it was not mentioned that they had been imprisoned not in the death camp but in the work camp which existed in Belzec before, in the year 1941¹¹. Further blatantly erroneous information was published for example in a

[9] The description of the inauguration of the first memorial in Belzec used in this text is to find in: Robert Kuwatek, „Obozy koncentracyjne i ośrodki zagłady jako miejsca pamięci” p. 493-525, in *Nastęztwa zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944-2010*. Red. Feliks Tych, Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin, 2011, p. 512-513.

[10] Maurycy Wiener: 1909-1990, attorney, president of the Krakau TSKZ in [Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów w Polsce - *Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland*.]

[11] Zygmunt Lewandowski and Adam DREWNIĄK were the two Jewish prisoners, who survived the ghetto of Lublin. In the year 1940 they were brought for some months to the work-camp Belzec. After the war they lived both in the city of Lublin and changed their Jewish names in Polish ones. « Pomnik – mauzoleum ku czci pomordowanych odstonieto w Betczu », *Sztandar Ludu*, 19th year, n° 284, 02.12.1963.

Lublin newspaper “600 000 Poles” were said to have died in Belzec¹². Whether this erroneous information is the result of deliberate misinformation or ignorance on the part of the journalist is difficult to say. Moreover, the inscription and depiction on the memorial did not make it clear, who the victims in Belzec were and whether they had died in a death camp. The inscription is indeed very vague: ‘For the remembrance of the victims of the Nazi-terror in the years 1941-1943’¹³.

This difficult context as well as the isolated location of the former camp on Poland’s current eastern border explains the very small number of visitors during the first forty decades after the war. The site was largely forgotten and poorly maintained. Over the years of neglect, the memorial and surrounding wall and fence fell into disrepair and became ruins, human remains became occasionally exposed; it was a shameful site for the hundreds of thousands of Jews who were murdered there.

THE ‘NEW’ MEMORIAL

“The pedagogical moment lies not in the direct education against cruelty and violence, instead to communicate clearly to the world the event you want to immortalize as well as the loss it is associated with¹⁴.”

Only in the aftermath of the collapse of communism in 1989, the situation in Belzec began to change. As the number of visitors to Poland interested in Holocaust sites increased, so also did the number of visitors to this remote part of eastern Poland. What they saw was a devastated terrain. No information indicated where the mass graves had been. Bone remains from the victims were spread all over the ground. The memorial from the 1960s still existed but had largely deteriorated. Previously most visitors had been local inhabitants, who sometimes came looking for a lonely place and were rather indifferent to the degrading state of the grounds. Without the engagement of Miles Lerman, who was born in Tomaszów Lubelski, lost his whole family in Belzec, became one of the founders of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in

[12] „Yesterday a monument was unveiled in Belzec – a mausoleum at the place of the execution of 600 000 Poles.” Title of the article in the *Kurier Lubelski*, 7th year, n° 282, 03.12.1963.

[13] [Pamięci ofiar terroru hitlerowskiego pomordowanym w latach 1941-1943]. Only later, at the beginning of the 1980s another sign was placed, which informed visitors, that in the camp „600 000 Jews died as wells as ca. 1 500 Poles for helping Jews” [600 000 Żydów i około 1 500 Polaków za pomoc udzielana Żydom]. Still there is however no evidence, that Poles were murdered in Belzec. (In the Polish discourse the distinction between Poles and Jews are made. Generally the term of Jewish Poles is not used.) A statue from Stanisław Strzyżynski was further added to the memorial, which showed a group of prisoners holding each other. This element did not represent what really happened in Belzec. It’s aim was to express the solidarity between prisoners: an important element in the presentation of the history of concentration-camps, not death-camps. More about the figure of Strzyżynski: H. Taborska, “Art. in Places of Death: Polish Signs of Memory In the Nazi Death Camps.” *Kultura Współczesna*, n° 4 (38), 2003, p. 50-51.

[14] Sapper, Manfred, Weichsel, Volker (red.), *Osteuropa*, 6/2008, Berlin, Leonid Levin in a talk „Die Landschaft ist Co-Autor meiner Gedenkstätten...” p. 247-252, p. 250. „Das pädagogische Moment liegt nicht in der direkten Erziehung gegen die Grausamkeit oder die Gewalt, sondern darin, dass du der Welt das Ereignis, das du verewigst, sowie den damit verbundenen Verlust deutlich machst.” Translation S. Hänchen.

Washington, the fight for the remembrance and fundraising for the current memorial project would not have been initiated.

It is through Miles Lerman that at the end of the 1980s negotiations between the Polish state and American-Jewish organizations were initiated towards the conservation of the former death camp Belzec terrain. It is however only in the aftermath of the fall of the socialist state in Poland that positive results were achieved: in 1993 an agreement from the American Jewish Committee with the Polish Government was signed. The Council for the Preservation of Monuments to Resistance and Martyrdom, acting on behalf of the Polish government, and initially in conjunction with the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, later together with the American Jewish Committee, smoothed the way for a new conception of remembrance on the site of the former camp. The decision was made to carry out (for the first time) archeological research on the site of the former camp and on their completion to build a new memorial. In the new memorial concept, a key consideration is to acknowledge that the site is effectively an enormous Jewish cemetery. It was therefore seen as necessary to locate the mass graves and to insure that these would be in the future treated in an adequate way. Polish artists Andrzej Solyga, Zdzislaw Pidek and Marcin Roszczyk won the competition for the design of the new area of remembrance and their project was unveiled in 2004¹⁵.

The memorial complex in Belzec consists of a memorial to the camps' victims coupled with a museum, a branch of the state museum in Majdanek. The architectural and sculptural memorial concept encompasses the whole area of the memorial. This combination is unique and the first new museum/memorial in Poland after more than 40 years.

The new Belzec memorial was officially inaugurated on June 3rd 2004 by Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the President of Poland, accompanied by representatives from the Polish and foreign governments, the American Jewish Committee, the United States Holocaust Museum, other Jewish organisations and many guests from all over the world.

The centre of the new memorial was covered with slag stones which evokes the image of a mass grave. A paved path leads through the mass-graves inside the hill to a place of remembrance which resembles a crack in the ground. "Earth do not cover my blood; Let there be no resting place for my outcry." (Job 16, 18) is written here in Polish, English and Hebrew on a big granite wall. On the opposite side, the

(15) The Polish sculptors Andrzej Solyga, Zdzislaw Pidek and Marcin Roszczyk, who designed the new area of remembrance, commented their project 1994 as follows: "Our main task was to find the form of the Cemetery for this place that would appropriately honour and venerate the Jews murdered here according to tradition, culture and religion in which they and their ancestors lived. Our architectural – sculptural concept covers the entire area of the former death camp. The most important element of the composition is the space of the symbolic mass grave containing authentic mass gravesites within its borders."

first names of the murdered victims are carved in stone. The whole area of the mass graves is framed with cast-iron names of the towns, where the death camp victims were driven together and then deported. The part in front of the mass graves on the side of the gateway consists of two parts: a ramp, which symbolises the deportations and the building of the Museum. In the museum building, which is shaped like a freight wagon, the permanent exhibition focuses on the history of the former death camp. One of the main responsibilities of the museum is the documentation and commemoration of the victims of the Nazi German death camp.

PERSPECTIVES

For more than 8 years the museum and memorial in Belzec have been active parts of the remembrance culture in Poland. Every year several ceremonies related to specific days and events in the history of the *Aktion Reinhardt* are organized. This has consisted of a major change: with this museum/memorial visitors have the opportunity to come to Belzec and to commemorate in an appropriate manner the fate of the Jews who were exterminated on the site¹⁶. Belzec is no longer the forgotten place it was during the first 40 years after the war. However, without the active personal engagement of one individual, a foreigner, whose history is intricately entwined with Belzec the whole development would not have been possible.

As a branch of the museum in Majdanek, Belzec fosters historical education in the region of eastern Poland. The pedagogical activities are mainly directed at junior high school pupils over 14, university students, teachers who are interested in the historical education at memorial site and the employees of social institutions but also to anyone interested in extending their knowledge on the Holocaust¹⁷. This task of the museum is not easy to achieve since the local population still only partly acknowledges Jewish history as a part of its own history and for whom Jewish culture or the extermination of the Jews are alien in their daily lives. Today the existence (and remembrance) of the Jewish population may not seem as threatening or associated with greed as during the Nazi occupation; nevertheless Jews remain exotic and strange and are not considered to belong to local remembrance culture. At the same time some sign of change can be noticed, as for example the popular “festivals of three cultures” (catholic, Jewish and orthodox) in the region.

Nevertheless, the Eastern Poland region remains traumatized by the events during the Nazi-occupation. The wounds have not healed and people still remember well what happened in these times. Society’s opinion of the fate of the Jewish population

[16] To give an example: on March 17th, 2011 the 69th anniversary of the day, when the first deportations during the so-called “Operation Reinhardt” to Belzec began, a ceremony commemorating the victims was held in the memorial of Belzec, with the attendance of representatives of the Polish and Israel states, different memorials in Poland, officials from the Lublin region and many other guests.

[17] See the museum internet site: <http://www.belzec.eu/articles.php?acid=81&mref=39&lng=1>.

remains divided. Despite the disappearance of the Jewish population in the region, anti-semitic prejudices remain rife. Whether this is related to feelings of culpability associated with the intense collaboration with Nazi politics and their exploitation of events is difficult to say. In any case this status quo makes it difficult to commemorate the Jewish population beyond the walls of the Belzec memorial. One example is the incident related to current plans to erect a monument for the remembrance of the Jewish population in Lubicza Królewska, a small village around 10 kilometers away from the former death camp Belzec. Before the war Lubicza K. was a typical Jewish Shtetl. About 90 % of the population was Jewish; nowadays not a single Jew is left and like in most of the villages in the region no sign or plate bears witness of this dramatic fact¹⁸. But this was to be changed: In the year 2012 a local initiative started to negotiate with the village government to acknowledge the long history of this Jewish settlement through the erection of a memorial stone which was not only to commemorate the existence of the former Jewish inhabitants but also the moment, (delete comma) when this history came to an end: In an act of revenge the SS-men who worked in the death camp of Belzec killed 16 Poles and 32 Ukrainians on 4th of October 1942. Most of the Jewish inhabitants were gassed on that same day in the death-camp Belzec¹⁹. Today in Lubicza Królewska there is a memorial stone for the Ukrainians and one for the Poles, who were shot – but none for the Jews. Initially the local administration supported the plan, though after long-winded public discussions, in which many anti-Semitic stereotypes came up, it was abandoned²⁰. The election in the community council, which was held after a public discussion, indicated that the opinions of the inhabitants are divided in half, which has so far prevented the construction of a monument to the former Jewish population in Lubicza Królewska²¹.

In this context the task of explaining the significance of the suffering of the Jewish population and the Shoah is daunting, especially in view of the limited resources of the museum in Belzec, which only has (except for the guards) a staff of three employees and a chronic lack of funding. A long way remains ahead to transform the subject of the memory of Galician Jewish population into a useful tool for studying and understanding the evolution of European remembering and understanding the consequences of racist-anti-Semitic attitude of non-tolerance. Thanks to its original

[18] In the year 1921, 649 Jews, 55 Poles, 4 Ukrainians and 2 persons from another nationality lived in Lubicza Królewska. Mariusz Koper, *Gmina Lubicza Królewska. Pogranicze geograficzno-kulturowe*, Urząd Gminy w Lubyczy Królewskiej, Białostockie Zakłady Graficzne SA, Lubicza Królewska-Jakubów 2010, p. 32.

[19] The planned inscription for the memorial stone was: „Remembering the Jews of Lubicza, who were murdered in the extermination camp in Belzec in the year 1942” [Pamięci Żydów lubyczkich zamordowanych w Obozie Zagłady w Belczu w 1942 roku].

[20] One village councillor said during the discussion: „For sure they will begin to come. First they will pray, express their tribute. Then they will live here and start to act. Better we don't wake up, what already fell asleep” in: „Stara Lubicza mocno spi” *Gazeta Wyborcza, Duży Format*, 07.08.2012. See also: “Nie chcą Żydów”, *Kronika Tygodnia* <http://www.kronikatygodnia.pl/tekst.php?abcd=38008&dz=1> [access: 6.09.2012].

[21] The village councillors voted 6 to 6 for and against the erection of a memorial stone commemorating the Jewish history of the village.

architectural concept the new memorial has rapidly become an interesting place to visit for the local population. Although visitor numbers have declined a bit in the last years, they still reach around 30, 000 people a year, most of whom come from Poland²². This is far less than, for example, in Auschwitz, but still much more than in the whole time up until 2004.

Since the new memorial has been primarily constructed to preserve the mass graves as a cemetery, the transformation of the former camp into an educational place of significance is only a secondary goal. As a huge cemetery, the archeological and historical aspects of the former death centre take a second place to the preservation and the guarantee of rest for the victims. This decision was not only the wish of family members of the murdered victims, but also a direct consequence of the lack of a living remembrance culture in relation to the Holocaust in the region. Insufficient financial support may have resulted in the two original buildings (house of the commander and train shed) not having been integrated in the concept of the new memorial. Furthermore, there is also neither a library to archive historical documents nor a conference or workshop rooms. Only a small underground room next to the hall of the permanent historical exhibition is suitable for meetings, workshops



The first prize of the school competition *Remembering Betzec*, painter Karolina Szajewska, Betzec 2012.
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[22] Visitors in the year 2008 in total: 32 377, from Poland: 26 301; visitors in the year 2010 in total: 30 571, from this 24 808 from Poland. The numbers of visitors from 2004-2008 is 164 486. Statistics from the Betzec museum, September 2012.

and small temporary exhibitions. Documents and testimonies about Belzec are very rare; nevertheless the museum staff have started in the last years to collect historical documents about the Nazi policy in the region and the Holocaust.

Local school classes regularly visit the memorial and educational workshops and participate in drawing competitions for pupils of the eastern part of Poland. In 2012 pupils of the Belzec public school drew paintings and designed installations to express their impressions of the death camp²³. Moreover, the museum published in the last years a few publications concerning Belzec, which is another sign that the interest in Belzec in the last years has increased.

As a result of genocides, the affected societies are deeply divided. We know from places like Rwanda and other parts of the world that a reconciliation of the victims, perpetrators and by-standers is an important part of the process for the future of these regions. Only through this process can the traumatized people learn to live peacefully again side by side. In the eastern part of Poland this reconciliation process after the Second World War started slowly and late. In the first post-war years the country was isolated and the representatives of the Jewish victims were excluded. Only in the aftermath of the political changes in the beginning of the 1990s did this begin to change. Nowadays we can see that at least an exchange between the experiences of the different actors is going on. But still the problem remains that the Jewish victims are no longer present in the region their representatives are often recognized as outsiders. Besides this, the different actors in the Holocaust are still busy reviewing their own role. For Polish society this means that in the center of the debate in the last years stands their own responsibility for the Holocaust. This step may open also a window on the suffering of the Jewish population, which would be a condition for common commemoration and learning about history. The memorial in Belzec plays an important role in the reconciliation process in East Poland, although the museum as a small institution has only limited possibilities. Still, Belzec belongs to the forgotten death centers of the Holocaust and talking about transforming remembrance in this case means mainly to confront the people with the fact that this camp existed.

(23) The competition was organized in the year 2012 from the museum – memorial Belzec and the German foundation "Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz" together with the grammar school of Belzec under the title: „Pamięć o Betzcu” [Remembrance of Belzec].