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## Labour Camp for Political Criminals and Suspects at Krzesimów, 1944–1945. Certain Aspects of Its Operation

*If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out*

Luke 19:40

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł wznawia refleksję historyczną nad pierwszymi miesiącami istnienia tzw. Polski lubelskiej, koncentrując się nad problematyką instytucji represji specyficznego typu, jakimi były obozy pracy prowadzone przez Resort Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego. Obóz w Krzesimowie jest najsłabiej poznany, zwłaszcza okres funkcjonowania przed formalnym utworzeniem. Artykuł koncentruje się na represyjnych aktach prawa, próbuje dać odpowiedź na pytania dotyczące stanów liczebnych obozu, liczby zmarłych, form terroru stosowanych wobec zatrzymanych, z których znaczną część stanowiły osoby podejrzewane o współpracę z okupantem niemieckim.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunistyczny aparat represji, Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego, Lublin, Więzienie na Zamku, Obóz pracy, Krzesimów, Resort Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego, okupacja niemiecka ziem polskich, rozliczenia powojenne.

**Abstract:** The paper revives historical reflection on the first months of the so-called 'Lublin Poland', focusing on the specific type of repressive institutions, i.e. labour camps run by the Department of Public Security. The camp at Krzesimów is the least known of these facilities, especially in the period of operation before its formal establishment. The article focuses on



repressive legislation, and attempts to provide answers to questions about the camp's headcount, the number of deceased, and the forms of terror used against detainees, a significant number of whom were suspected of collabourating with the German occupier.

**Keywords:** communist apparatus of repressions, Polish Committee for National Liberation, Lublin, Castle Prison, labour camp, Krzesimów, Department of Public Security, German occupation of Poland, postwar reckoning.

In the fall of 1944, presumably in October, fencing off a section of an estate at Krzesimów near Lublin began. The new authorities began their rule by setting up camps. A fence of thickly beaten boards was erected around the five brick livestock buildings, with barbed wire running along the top. The clearances were so small that only a thin slice of bread could sometimes be squeezed through. The camp's crew was made up of Security Service (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, UB) officers, the outer cover was provided by soldiers of the Internal Security Corps (Korpus Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, KBW). The camp was closed down after a year, the documents were taken away, the fence and some of the buildings dismantled, the number plates removed from the graves, the graves levelled and backfilled.

The District Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation learned of the camp's existence in March 1990. An investigation was launched, as Commission staff searched for documents and witnesses. The investigation proceeded at a leisurely pace until 1996. One summer day, a bucket of an excavator working on the construction site of the road linking Melgiew and Łączna retrieved human bones from a pit. Some local children found the skull, placed it on a sand hill, carefully decorated it with field flowers, and lit a candle. It was only then, after more than 50 years, that the forgotten communist labour camp at Krzesimów, shrouded in secrecy and silence, was truly discovered.

## Sources

In April 1990, the District Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Lublin (Okręgowa Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu [OKŚZpNP], in 2000 incorporated into the structure of the Institute of National Remembrance [Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN]) launched an investigation into the operation of the Krzesimów camp. This started when penitentiary boards began handing over documents from the years 1944–56 to the Commission, as per the ordinance of Aleksander Bentkowski, Minister of Justice in Tadeusz Mazowiecki's cabinet. Thus, in 1989 the Penitentiary Institution in Zamość handed over the 'Index of the Deceased. Labour Camp at Krzesimów' to the Regional Commission for the Investigation

of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Lublin. The 300-page brochure was originally intended to be an 'Index of Additional Deposits'. However, since the camp's prisoners were much more likely to die than to deposit anything, 'additional deposits' were carefully crossed out by a functionary and replaced by the word 'deceased'. We will return to this source, which brought to light the completely forgotten existence of the Krzesimów camp.

Witnesses began to come forward as a result of advertisements in the local press (the first was placed in February 1990 in *Dziennik Lubelski*). That is how the 45-year-long silence about one of the earliest and most brutal communist operations to terrorize residents of conquered Poland finally came to an end.

A year later, on 29 June 1991, the OKŚZpNP prosecutor decided to launch an investigation into '1) the shooting of over 20 prisoners in May 1945 at Krzesimów, Lublin Province, by security officials employed at the local labour camp; 2) causing the death of approximately 424 prisoners, including an undetermined number of prisoners of Polish nationality, at the labour camp at Krzesimów, Lublin Province, between 1944 and 1946 as a result of inadequate nutrition, unsanitary living conditions and arduous labour'.<sup>1</sup> The investigation was suspended between 29 January 1999 and 9 November 2000 (due to the establishment of the Institute of National Remembrance and the liquidation of the Chief Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation) and was officially discontinued on 15 February 2008, in view of the failure to identify perpetrators.

The investigation records, collected in 11 volumes, constitute the main body of source material about the camp. There are no official camp records, except for the aforementioned 'Index of the Deceased'. As for documentary sources, information about the people taken to the Krzesimów camp is provided by the ledgers of the prison located in the Lublin Castle: 'The General Ledger of Prisoners in Custody', and 'The General Ledger of Criminal Inmates'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The investigation was conducted regarding the crime specified in Article 148, section 1 of the Criminal Code ('Whoever kills a human being is punishable by imprisonment for not less than 10 years or life imprisonment') in conjunction with Article 2b of the Act of April 6 1984 on the Chief Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation – the Institute of National Remembrance. Article 2b, item 1, states that there is no statute of limitations for war crimes or crimes against humanity, while item 2 clarifies that it refers to crimes of genocide 'as well as other forms of grave persecution based on the persecuted persons' national, political, social, racial or religious affiliation, if said persecution is committed, inspired or tolerated by state authorities', Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Główna Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu Oddział Lublin, Akta Główne Prokuratora sprawie pozbawienia życia ok. 400 więźniów w obozie pracy w Krzesimowie w latach 1944–1946 przez funkcjonariuszy b. WUBP, vols 1–11, ref. no. S10/00/Zk (hereinafter: AGP with volume number).

<sup>2</sup> *Księgi więzienia na Zamku w Lublinie 1944–1954*, eds A.T. Filippek and M. Krzysztofik, vols 1–3 (Lublin, 2009–12).

For nearly 20 years of investigation, prosecutors have been conducting searches at state institutions that might hold documents on the operation of the camp. Numerous and increasingly precise inquiries in selected locations began to yield results. By the end of 2006, IPN GKSZpNP obtained over a thousand pages of documents relating to the camp from the State Archive in Lublin, included in the 'Central Prison in Lublin 1944–1956' collection. Much of the information in these files is of secondary or tertiary importance, but there were also crucially significant death certificates of prisoners.<sup>3</sup> In March 2001, it turned out that in the autumn of 1945 the corpses of those who had perished at Krzesimów were delivered to the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, which had been established less than a year earlier with the words 'science in the service of the people' as its motto. The records of the place of origin of the corpses were no secret to the staff of the Department of Human Corporal Anatomy of the Faculty of Medicine, as evidenced by the 'delivered from' column of the 'Cadaver Register' kept by the Department, where the phrase 'labour camp – Krzesimów' was clearly entered.<sup>4</sup>

The Chief Commission's repeated appeals to the press, calling for witnesses to come forward, have yielded some very interesting accounts from former prisoners. The testimonies, which make up the bulk of the material collected during the investigation, constitute the most extensive collection of sources, although in many cases their reliability is poor or questionable. For purely biological reasons, the value of the testimonies given by witnesses decreases over time, so the most valuable are those given in the 1990s, included in the initial volumes of the investigation files.

We owe a considerable portion of the information about the workings of the Krzesimów camp to press publications. When the Branch Commission undertook its investigation, it sent out appeals to national and local papers asking witnesses who remembered the camp, its prisoners and guards, to come forward. The response was substantial, and many journalists took up the subject by publishing their own texts: in the 1990s there was a perceptible tension between the expectations of a society demanding the truth about the People's Poland period, and the reluctance of those in power, many of whom had come from post-communist circles, to reveal the actual extent of the crimes and repressions of the 1944–89 regime.

Therefore, in addition to texts whose authors tried to faithfully convey the accounts of witnesses (the credibility of the latter remains a separate issue), there were also cathartic pieces of journalism responsive to public sentiment. This is understandable, as journalism has every right to appeal to intense feelings, and to respond to the readers' needs. This legitimate journalistic approach, however, creates distrust of press materials among those historians

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<sup>3</sup> AGP, vol. 5, fols 838–1000.

<sup>4</sup> AGP, vol. 3, fols 411–22.

who are still committed to the positivist demands of hyper-objectivism and often deny the value and importance of non-archival sources.

The sparse database of documents on Krzesimów and the difficulty of accessing other types of sources meant that historians have written rarely and little about the camp. A monographic article by Anna Wilk, based on an extensive source query, is the most comprehensive work on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Krzesimów is mentioned relatively often by Tadeusz Wolsza in his synthesis *Więzienia stalinowskie w Polsce*.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Wolsza is one of the few historians to recognize the value of press longform journalism, especially in terms of eliciting accounts.<sup>7</sup> Bogusław Kopka also devoted considerable attention to Krzesimów.<sup>8</sup> Symptomatically, almost nothing was written about the camp by the authors of the most recent publication dealing with camps of the Stalinist period.<sup>9</sup>

## Origin Myths and Hypotheses

Since prehistoric times, every human community has yearned to learn about its origins and the meaning of existence. This is how genetic myths emerged, as they provided roughly rational answers to questions about the causes, meaning and purpose of existence by means of thinking about the world. Myths, in anthropological terms, enable us to reconstruct the state of knowledge and views about the world and man held by their creators. Origin myths seek to provide answers to important questions posed by communities. The camp at Krzesimów also has its myths.

The last owner of the Krzesimów manor, Kazimierz Drecki set out in 1939 to defend his homeland. Taken into Soviet captivity, he was buried with a bullet in his occiput alongside other 4,404 Polish officers in the mass graves of Katyń.<sup>10</sup> It is unlikely Drecki knew that his family home had been

<sup>5</sup> A. Wilk, 'Funkcjonowanie Centralnego Obozu Pracy w Krzesimowie w latach 1944–1945', *Aparat Represji w Polsce Ludowej 1944–1989*, no. 1 (12) (2014), pp. 41–57.

<sup>6</sup> T. Wolsza, *Więzienia stalinowskie w Polsce. System, codzienność, represje* (Warszawa, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> When writing about the Krzesimów camp, T. Wolsza refers to the most valuable journalistic source, a longform radio piece by Czesława Borowik, a reporter for Radio Lublin, entitled 'Where the Silence Lasts'. We should clarify that the article published on 13 May 1998 in *Gazeta Wyborcza* was a press edit (done by Monika Panfil) of the original radio piece. Czesława Borowik introduced into academic circulation the account of Rozalia Taraszkiewicz, a former prisoner of the camp; to this day, her memoir remains one of the most important and reliable sources on life in the Krzesimów camp.

<sup>8</sup> B. Kopka, *GUŁag nad Wisłą. Komunistyczne obozy pracy w Polsce 1944–1956* (Kraków, 2019). A large portion of the chapter on the Krzesimów camp is based on the article by A. Wilk.

<sup>9</sup> *Obozy i więzienia sowieckie na ziemiach polskich (1944–1945). Leksykon*, ed. D. Iwaneczko (Rzeszów–Warszawa, 2022), pp. 13, 26, 220.

<sup>10</sup> Second Lieutenant Kazimierz Drecki fought in the Polish-Bolshevik War in the 1st Krechowicki Cavalry Regiment named after Colonel Bolesław Mościcki. Over the

looted by Red Army soldiers in September of that year. Four years later, in the summer of 1944, NKVD soldiers, executioners of the last heir, again set up camp in the palace. It is not known how long the Soviet functionaries stayed at Krzesimów, or whether they participated in the establishment and management of the camp. Some prisoner accounts include mentions of ‘Russians’ or ‘Soviets’. This is how the officers on duty in the camp were described in mid-May 1945 by two soldiers who claimed to have defected from the Krzesimów garrison and spoke about the camp with Mieczysław Szczerbatko, who at the time commanded a post-AK partisan unit operating in the Trawniki and Łęczna area.<sup>11</sup> The perception that the camp was run by NKVD officers may have been caused by the accent of soldiers from the camp’s security detail: a number of them were from the eastern parts of Poland.<sup>12</sup> The original occupation of the palace by the NKVD – according to some accounts it had been used as a hospital<sup>13</sup> – combined with the eastern accent of the soldiers resulted in the myth of the camp’s NKVD origins.<sup>14</sup>

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following years he kept close and constant contact with the Regiment. He was awarded the Independence Medal for his wartime merits. In September 1939, as a reserve officer, he left home to report to the Regiment. The Reserve Cavalry Center, which included the Krechowiecki Regiment, was located in Volkovysk; starting on 14 September, the Reserve Cavalry Brigade (RBK) under the command of Gen. W. Przeździecki was being organized. The RBK left Volkovysk on the night of 17/18 September, moving toward Vilna and then Grodno. It is possible that Kazimierz Drecki was captured by the Soviet invaders in the vicinity of Volkovysk. Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe (Central Military Archives), ref. no. I.481.D.4842; 23.01.1933, MN; <https://katyn.ipn.gov.pl/kat/form/r17312125591562,Drecki-Kazimierz.html> (accessed: 22 July 2024).

<sup>11</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 47. Cited accounts, unless noted otherwise, are from these files. A. Wilk, working on her article in the early 2000s, anonymized the identities of the authors of the accounts in order to protect their personal information. Journalists C. Borowik and M. Panfil followed suit, albeit for different reasons: in numerous conversations with residents of Krzesimów and neighboring villages, their interviewees mentioned they were afraid of men affiliated both with the camp and the communist repression apparatus who lived nearby, having married local women. The story about elderly men searching for those who violated the conspiracy of silence by talking to the reporters is also mentioned by M. Wyrwich, *Obozy pogardy. Komunistyczne obozy represji we Polsce 1944–1956* (Warszawa, 2015), p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Wójtowicz’s testimony, AGP, vol. 1, fol. 19: ‘In the month of October 1944, soldiers of the People’s Polish Army arrived in the estate, dressed in uniforms, with the Polish eagle on their field caps or fusillades, nicknamed ‘hen’ by the local population. The unit was about 200 soldiers strong. I sometimes talked to the soldiers, they spoke Polish and told me that they came from the Vilnius area’.

<sup>13</sup> S. Jadczyk, ‘Krzesimów – stacja męki polskiej (2)’, *Dziennik Lubelski*, no. 59 (18 April 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Wyrwich, *Obozy pogardy*, p. 60, mentions that ‘the camp was run by the Russians between July 1944 and March 1945’. The hypothesis of Soviet origins is also accepted by the authors of *Obozy i więzienia sowieckie*, who wrote: ‘We should also mention the camps that were used for several years after the end of the war by the Polish communist authorities as labor camps, and were initially, sometimes only for a few weeks, operated by the NKVD. These include the sites in Jaworzno, Krzesimów near Lublin and Potulice near Bydgoszcz’. The fact that the camps in Jaworzno and Potulice were managed by the NKVD is confirmed

The hypothesis-myth that the Krzesimów camp remained under the management, however temporary, of the NKVD would also neatly explain the absence of the camp's records, and substantiate the suspicion that the files were taken to the USSR by the warden's office.<sup>15</sup> But in this case, too, we must accept the responsibility of the communist authorities of People's Poland: the Branch Commission's prosecutors managed to ascertain that 'in 1956–57, the documentation of camps and prisons from the Lublin Province was transferred to the Ministry of Justice'. A question posed in March 1993 by the Branch Commission prosecutor was answered just three weeks later by the Central Board of Prisons, which informed that 'it does not hold any materials concerning the labour camp at Krzesimów in its archive'.<sup>16</sup> The logical conclusion would be that after the so-called October Thaw, the camp's documentation was transferred to the Ministry of Justice, where the officials realized the scope and severity of the illegal acts that had taken place at Krzesimów – even taking into account the repressive legislation of the usurping Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN); thus, they erased all evidence by redacting the documents. Only the documentary sources that, for various reasons, did not end up in the Ministry of Justice were preserved.

## Lawful and Unlawful Acts

The unlawful foundation of the camp at Krzesimów is evident almost immediately. All we need to do is confront two documents with each other. The first is Circular Number 42 of 6 April 1945, issued by the Department of Prisons and Camps of the Ministry of Public Security. It establishes Central Labour Camps in Warsaw, in Poniatowa (Puławy powiat), Krzesimów (Lublin powiat), Potulice (Pomorskie voivodeship), and in Jaworzno (Krakow voivodeship).<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the earliest date of deportation to the 'Krzesimów camp'

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by sources. Krzesimów has only an origin myth. This is understandable: it is difficult for both prisoners and witnesses of their ordeal to accept the notion that it was Poles who mistreated Poles so cruelly. It's easier to come to terms with the idea that foreigners were murdering us. This psychologically plausible mechanism of denying blame of 'our own' and shifting it to 'strangers' was recognized by Lothar Herbst, as evidenced by one of his best poems about the Martial Law in Poland: '... some think that the ones that arrest us | and shoot at us | Aren't our brothers | Unfortunately, that's not true'.

<sup>15</sup> I also succumbed to this tempting claim, putting it forward an article from 2020, 'Sowiecki obóz śmierci w Krzesimowie', <https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/teksty/65079,Sowiecki-oboz-smierci-w-Krzesimowie.html> (accessed: 22 July 2024).

<sup>16</sup> AGP, vol. 2, fols 112, 128.

<sup>17</sup> The literature most often cites Circular No. 42(5) of April 25, 1945, item III, which regulates the matter of 'segregation of *Volksdeutsche* and those accused of collaboration with the Germans, in Labor Camps'. This was followed by a recounting of the four camps, with item 2 listing the camp at Krzesimów, Lublin powiat. However, the original circular bore

recorded in the aforementioned Lublin Castle prison ledgers is 12 November. Based on the records in the books of the Castle prison, we can identify seven large transports and nine smaller ‘additional transports’ of a handful of people each. The first transport of 59 people left for Krzesimów from the Castle on 12 November 1944, another group of 39 people was brought on 20 November, and 238 people arrived in three separate December batches: 103 on 10 December, 132 on the 23rd, and three on the 28th. A month and a half later, 67 unfortunate detainees arrived on 10 February (a handful of people were also brought on 13 and 20 February); in March, further 24 people were brought in by two separate transports. Only then was the camp officially established. After that date, only small transports were coming in: groups of several prisoners arrived on 20 April and 18–19 July.<sup>18</sup> A total of 484 people were transferred from the Castle to Krzesimów.

At this point, we can put forward a hypothesis which redirects our reflection towards Soviet responsibility. Since 26 July 1944, the legal relations in the Polish lands occupied by the Red Army were regulated by two agreements between the PKWN, a *de facto* group of private individuals usurping power in Poland at that time, and Joseph Stalin. On 26 July, the PKWN concluded the ‘Agreement on Relations between the Soviet Commander-in-Chief and the Polish Administration after the Soviet Army entered Polish territory’. The PKWN placed ‘supreme authority and responsibility’ in the ‘zone of direct warfare’ (Article 1) in Stalin’s hands, with the PKWN members leaving the definition of the zone to Stalin’s discretion. The Polish civilian population was also subject to ‘the jurisdiction of the Soviet Commander-in-Chief’ (Article 7). Only ‘the moment that any part of the liberated Polish territory ceases to be a zone of direct warfare operations will the Polish Committee for National Liberation assume full command over all matters of civil administration’ (Article 6).<sup>19</sup> The two acts – importantly, neither had been published – were examined in 1996 by the Polish Constitutional Tribunal (TK), chaired by Judge Andrzej Zoll. Regarding the 26 July Agreement, the TK found that ‘the practice of applying Article 7 of the 26 July 1944 Agreement as an exceptional provision, allowing the exercise of jurisdiction over the civilian population

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the date of 6 April, which should be taken as the date of the official establishment of the labor camp. On the original name of the camp, see below.

<sup>18</sup> Wilk, ‘Funkcjonowanie Centralnego Obozu Pracy w Krzesimowie’, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> The Soviet side eventually established the boundaries of the ‘zone’ – announced in February 1945 – only in May 1945, i.e., after the Wehrmacht’s surrender and actual end of hostilities. The agreement reached the following day was an act of even more far-reaching usurpation: the Communists forming the PKWN were ceding half the territory of the Polish Republic to the Soviet Union. In doing so, they repeated the agreement between the USSR and the Third Reich of 23 August 1939, except that Ribbentrop was replaced by Osóbka-Morawski, and Stalin graciously agreed to return Białystok to Poland. Only then, on the afternoon of 27 July, did PKWN members depart for Chełm aboard two Soviet military planes.

carried out by Soviet organs, could be shaped arbitrarily and allowed interference by these organs in the matters of the Polish State. The Polish side's attempt to take 'control' of the sentencing of Polish citizens by the 'Red Army Tribunals' by transferring the files of individuals tried in criminal cases to the Polish Supreme Military Court was rejected by the USSR government's representative to the PKWN (letter from the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army of 23 November 1944; a written refusal of 10 December 1944). Reports from the Front commands and the chairman of the war tribunal pointed out that it was necessary to bring cases under the jurisdiction of the Red Army's war tribunals, since 'the Polish courts do not handle these cases properly' (memo from the chairman of the war tribunal of the 1st Byelorussian Front to the Front Council on 8 October 1944 [...]).<sup>20</sup> Thus, the question is whether the decision to establish the camp at Krzesimów, made in September–October 1944 by an unidentified official, as in the case of the camp in Błudek-Nowiny, was not in fact made by the NKVD which exercised 'supreme authority and responsibility' on behalf of Stalin on the territory of 'Lublin' Poland?<sup>21</sup>

The actual operation of the Krzesimów camp – the long-term detention of people against their will, under guard, in a secluded location – was regulated by PKWN's decrees. The first of these was the famous 'August Act', i.e., the decree of the Polish Committee for National Liberation of 31 August 1944, on the punishment of Fascist-Hitlerite criminals guilty of killing and persecuting civilians and prisoners of war, as well as of traitors to the Polish Nation (Journal of Laws No. 4, item 16); and the Decree of the PKWN of 12 September 1944 on Special Criminal Courts for the Cases of Fascist-Hitlerite Criminals, found in the same issue of the Journal of Laws (item 21). Significantly, repressive organs set up by the communist authorities used the 'August Act' to prosecute individuals for crimes committed (or, as we shall see, only alleged) after 31 August 1939. 'Resisters argued that this was a violation of a basic principle of criminal law: *Nullum crimen sine lege*

<sup>20</sup> Dz. U. 1996, no. 63, poz. 304. Meanwhile, according to the Constitutional Tribunal, the 27 July agreement 'was an act lacking a normative element, as it did not abrogate the provisions of the Riga Treaty; it could not abrogate them due to the lack of competence on the part of the PKWN, which was not a governmental body'. Please note the following two facts: the cited correspondence between the commander of the Polish Army and General Bulganin bears dates that almost completely coincide with the dates on which prisoners were sent from the Castle to the camp at Krzesimów. And secondly, one must admit the Polish communists to the very end were persistently opposed the idea of an independent and sovereign Poland. The dissenting opinion to the Constitutional Tribunal resolution was submitted by Judge Zdzisław Czeszejko-Sochacki, a former member of the PZPR and PRON, delegated to the CT by the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD).

<sup>21</sup> K. Tochman, 'Komunistyczny obóz pracy Nowiny-Błudek na Zamojszczyźnie (1944–1945)', *Aparat Represji w Polsce Ludowej 1944–1989*, no. 1 (11) (2013), pp. 91–105; *Obozy i więzienia sowieckie*, pp. 218–21.

*poenali anteriori* (no one can be punished for an act not banned by the law before it was implemented). Today [1964] these doubts seem ridiculous, but at the time, probably not without the influence of various “lawyers” eager to justify Nazi crimes, it was not so simple. One had to explain...’, recalled Leon Chajn, then deputy head of the PKWN Justice Ministry.<sup>22</sup>

Certain provisions of the decree on special criminal courts were even more significant for the existence and operation of the Krzesimów camp. The authors of the act referred to the provisions of the 1932 Criminal Code, specifically to its Article 100: ‘Whoever, in time of war, acts to aid the enemy or harm the Polish or allied armed forces shall be punished by imprisonment for a term of not less than 10 years to life’, but at the same time implemented the procedural pragmatics typical of communist repressive authorities. That is, there was no presumption of innocence, replaced by unrestrained voluntarism on the part of officers: the ‘security’ organs would simultaneously notify the court ‘of any act bearing the characteristics of a crime’ and ‘immediately’ detain the suspect (Article 7). The prosecutor’s office was relieved of its investigative duties, and was instead equipped with the right to confiscate all property of the suspect, their spouse and children, while the investigation was still in progress (Article 8). The indictment did not require justification (Article 12), while objections to it were ‘inadmissible’ (Article 14). Last but not least: the sentences of the special criminal court were ‘final and conclusive’ (Article 18).

The last of legal acts used to repress Polish citizens who declared German nationality or descent during the German occupation and enjoyed privileges on these grounds, was the PKWN Decree of 4 November 1944 on Protective Measures Against Traitors to the Nation (Journal of Laws 1944, No. 11, item 54). Article 1 of the decree stipulated that any Polish citizen found on the *Volksliste* (regardless of the actual circumstances of entry and the list category) ‘shall be subject, regardless of criminal responsibility, to arrest, indefinite detention in a place of confinement (camp) and forced labour’. Decisions to send a person to a camp were made by the prosecutor’s office of the special criminal court, and implemented by the public security organs. Termination of parental and guardianship rights was an additional punishment for ‘traitors to the Nation’. And then there is the particularly ominous Article 7, which basically repeats verbatim the German occupation police orders on penalties for giving aid to Jews: ‘Whoever: [...] provides assistance to a person falling under the provision of Article 1 of this decree, in particular by sheltering, feeding or supplying them with personal or other goods shall be punished with life imprisonment or the death penalty’. After reading this article, we can easily imagine the kind of welcome a camp escapee with letters ‘VD’ painted on their back, jacket or dress, could expect among Polish villagers.

<sup>22</sup> Cited after: D. Baliszewski, A.K. Kunert, *Ilustrowany przewodnik po Polsce stalinowskiej 1944–1956*, vol. 1 (Warszawa, 1999), p. 65.

Each person sent to the Lublin Castle prison was meticulously labeled.<sup>23</sup> A note about transfer to the Krzesimów camp was entered in the ‘remarks’ column. In total, 484 people were transferred from the Castle to Krzesimów. Given the legal framework presented above, and using the entries about these 484 individuals, let’s try to determine who and for what reason decided to arrest people who were then relocated to the camp. There are seven institutions indicated in the ‘organ issuing the arrest warrant’ column: The Department of Public Security (RBP) (on 1 January 1945 renamed the Ministry of Public Security, MBP), Provincial Public Security Offices (WUBP), Poviats Public Security Offices (PUBP), Municipal Public Security Offices (MUBP), Civil Militia units, Special Criminal Courts, and their prosecutors. The largest number of detentions was carried out by ‘public security’ institutions: RBP/MBP – 184 people, WUBP – 155 people, PUBP – 13 and MUBP – 10. A total of 362 people, or almost 75 per cent of the entire figure. The Criminal Courts prosecutors, who ordered the arrest of 47 people, contributed most to the remaining quarter of detainees, followed by the Special Courts – 39 detainees, and finally the Civil Militia – 14 individuals. The largest number, i.e. 156, were taken to Krzesimów on the charge of being a *Volksdeutsche(r)*. This category also includes a woman arrested as a *Reichdeutsche*, and four people whose German nationality was listed as their charge. On two occasions, this was the reason given by the MUBP, and twice by the Courts prosecutor. The next two categories of charges: 62 people were detained as collaborating with the German occupiers, and 41 under Article 100 of the Criminal Code. The RBP has introduced the ‘S’ charge, the abbreviation for the ‘August Act’, into its pragmatics. It was used against 23 individuals detained by the RBP, and further nine arrested by prosecutors. The charge was applied twice by the Courts and the WUBP. No other organ than the RBP filed charges under ‘Article 9 of the PKWN Decree’. That was an unclear legal basis, presumably on purpose. After all, the only Article 9 from the above-cited list of legal acts that loosely fits the procedure for detention on charges of collaboration with the German occupiers, is Article 9 of the November Decree on Protective Measures against Traitors to the Nation. It states that ‘the execution of this decree is entrusted to the Heads of the Ministries of: Justice, Public Security, and Finance and the National Economy’. In other words, the Ministry’s officials detained people because they could. This conclusion is supported by the fact that in the case of 92 individuals, the ‘accused under the article’ box was left blank. Courts did not indicate the basis for arrest twice, prosecutors four times, militiamen left the box blank in five cases: a total of 11 cases.

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<sup>23</sup> Sections: surname and first name; parents’ names; date of birth; place of birth; place of residence; occupation; nationality; religion; accused under article; organ issuing arrest warrant; at the behest of; date of arrival; date and reason for leaving prison; authority issuing release warrant; notes.

The remaining 81 people were arrested, detained in Castle Prison and sent to a labour camp by Ministry officials: 10 by the RBP, 58 by WUBP, 8 by PUBP and 2 by MUBP. In three cases, both the name of the detaining institution and the reason for the detention are missing. However, it can be presumed that such disregard for regulations and a sense of impunity could only be characterized by officers of the increasingly omnipotent Ministry. In relatively few cases, RBP officers, precisely out of the sense of impunity, cited affiliation with pro-independence underground organizations as the charge: three people were taken to Krzesimów on charges of 'AK' and another three were 'accused' of 'WN' – an abbreviation of the name *Wolność i Niezawisłość* (Freedom and Independence).

Nevertheless, it is evident that the majority of individuals transferred to Krzesimów were accused of signing the *Volksliste* and cooperating with the occupier. The key word is 'accused'. Less than 10 per cent of Krzesimów prisoners were placed in the camp after a court ruling. When an officer of the terror apparatus decided to arrest an individual and send them to a camp, the only basis might have been, and very often was, a German-sounding name, Protestant confession, place of birth. Or simply a denunciation by a person who, for example, liked their neighbour's apartment – and the neighbour happened to work on the railroad during the occupation.

The name of the camp originally used by the RBP Prison Department was identified only three years into the investigation. In 1993, one of Lublin's military prosecutors came across a document in the Special Criminal Court's files on Franciszek Dąbrowski regarding the transfer of the prisoner from the camp to the Castle. The heading of the document read: 'Labour camp for political criminals and suspects at Krzesimów'.<sup>24</sup>

## Inhumane Figures

Minkowice railroad station. Russians built many such stations and small depots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were constructed with care and attention to detail, even the remote ones like those in Minkowice, Nałęczów and Gołab; highly weather-resistant Siberian wood was imported, the facade was decorated with carved cornices. However, were any of the prisoners of the Castle and other communist prisons of 'Lublin' Poland, chased out of a train carriage on a November or December evening, able to appreciate the charming little station? The prisoners were still facing the march. Seven kilometres in the rain and mud up to their ankles: an eternity for people who were emaciated, malnourished, and had often suffered beatings at the hands of the NKVD and UB investigators. In the camp, there were

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<sup>24</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 108.

pigsties and barns with broken windows, with bundles of straw posing as bedding scattered on concrete floors, with cesspool ditches dug in the courtyard and a single water pump. How many people slept on dust-like remains of the straw, starved on meagre rations, and worked beyond their strength?

Attempts to take a statistical snapshot of the camp's operation create further uncertainties. The number of prisoners in the Krzesimów camp is unknown. Two thousand, maybe three, perhaps more... According to conservative estimates up to 4,000 people may have passed through Krzesimów and Poniatowa, the two camps affiliated with the Castle prison; most of them died.<sup>25</sup> However, 'due to the scant sources, determining the number of transports is very difficult'.<sup>26</sup>

We assume that at least 2,042 prisoners went through the Krzesimów camp. This is the highest registration number assigned to a person who perished at Krzesimów and was recorded in the 'Index'. The number was worn by Adolf Klingbeil, buried in grave No. 389.<sup>27</sup> The group brought in from the Castle, a bit under 500 people, represents less than 25 per cent of the camp's prisoners. And the Castle being the largest prison in 'Lublin Poland', the next question is: Where did the remaining 1,600 Krzesimów prisoners come from? The clue to the question can be found in testimonies of former prisoners before the prosecutors of the Chief Commission. Kazimierz Rusinek (b. 1914) recounted that he was arrested on 4 November 1944 in Brody Duże near Szczepieszyn. UB officers from Zamość detained about 30 men along with him. After six weeks, 'I was taken to the Labour Camp at Krzesimów near Lublin, with a group of other men, by train. It's hard for me to say how many of us there were, but there were several train cars'.<sup>28</sup> Zbigniew Frey, along with his parents and a few dozen others, was brought from Krasnystaw,<sup>29</sup> Mieczysław Szczerbatko spoke about a car transport from Chełm,<sup>30</sup> and in late February 1945, prisoners from Rembertów were brought to the camp.<sup>31</sup> In the death notice of prisoner Walter Essers (dated 12 January 1945), in the column 'preventive measure, date and name of the authority ordering the arrest', camp head Aleksander Trzcianka entered: 'detained by partisans near Biała Podlaska in July'.<sup>32</sup> The authority that decided to make

<sup>25</sup> Wolsza, *Więzienia stalinowskie*, p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> *Księgi więzienia na Zamku w Lublinie*, vol. 1, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Although the 'Index' records the registration number 5571 next to the deceased Karolina Nieć, this high figure is more likely the result of a clerical error.

<sup>28</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 62.

<sup>29</sup> AGP, vol. 3, fols 406–09.

<sup>30</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fols 74, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Paulina Krol-Rinat died on this transport and was buried in the camp cemetery, as reported to the Prison Department of the MBP by Commander Trzcinka, AGP, vol. 5, fol. 941. In the 'Index' her death was reported without a registration number.

<sup>32</sup> AGP, vol. 5, fol. 863.

the arrest which led to the death of the 42-year-old carpenter, an evangelical born near Hamburg, was thus a People's Army detachment. Large and small groups of people who were deemed unworthy to live in the new Poland by the new authorities, poured into the camp in cattle cars, on military 'Studebakers', on horse-drawn wagons and on foot. Krzesimów became a grave for at least 425 of them. And for around a dozen of the deceased, the last journey continued even after their death. Their dissected skeletons and macerated tissues served as teaching aids for students of the Medical Faculty of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University.<sup>33</sup>

I have cited the number 425, although the IPN investigation documents consistently mention 424 deceased. However, the 'General Ledger of Prisoners in Custody' records at least one more person whose death should be linked to Krzesimów. All the stories of Krzesimów prisoners are heart-wrenching, but this one is particularly grim. Helena Comandeur, a schoolgirl, was detained by the prosecutor of the Special Criminal Court on 10 March 1945. The charge he brought against the girl was: 'a German'. She was to turn 18 in less than three months. Helena was taken to Krzesimów on the last day of March. Instead of a birthday party there was a funeral: Comandeur died on 7 August.<sup>34</sup> By that time, the camp no longer officially existed; it was liquidated on 12 June with Circular No. 57, which stated in item I that 'The labour camp at Krzesimów mentioned in item III of Circular No. 4 all German2(5) is dismantled as of today'. In mid-1945, the camp was converted into an agricultural colony. Another hypothesis: the official liquidation of the camp should have resulted in the closure of documentation related to its operation, including the 'Index of the Deceased'. That is why Helena Comandeur's name is nowhere to be found in the book.

## Auschwitz Was a Child's Play

Rotmistrz (cavalry captain) Witold Pilecki volunteered to the German concentration camp in Auschwitz in September 1940, and escaped it after almost three years. He fell into the hands of UB functionaries in May 1947. He uttered the words about Auschwitz being a child's play during the last visit by his wife, after a year of interrogations at the Investigation Detention Centre Number 1 of the Ministry of Public Security at 37 Rakowiecka Street in Warsaw.

The German concentration camp at Majdanek, Lublin, had the highest percentage mortality rate of all German concentration camps. It also had

<sup>33</sup> AGP, vol. 3, fols 411–21.

<sup>34</sup> *Księgi więzienia na Zamku w Lublinie*, vol. 3, p. 34, item 765. Helena was the daughter of Paul and Ela. She may have come from Alsace or Lorraine, as her surname is French rather than German. 'Luisen Tall' was entered as her place of birth.

a hospital ward with 10 barracks that could accommodate up to 1,500 patients. Although SS doctors carried out selection for gassing rather than treatment, actual care for prisoners was provided by at least a dozen inmate doctors with a well-stocked camp pharmacy and contraband typhoid vaccines in sufficient numbers to inoculate all arriving prisoners. The meals in the German concentration camps were lousy, but over time the Germans allowed the Polish Red Cross to feed the prisoners and granted deliveries of food parcels to the camps (that did not apply to Jews). In the Krzesimów camp, established by the Polish Committee for National Liberation in the ‘liberated’ Polish territories, there was no medical care. The only doctor on site was Władysław Sokołowski, sent to the camp for collabourating with the Home Army. He did the best he could, which was hardly much due to the absence of medical infrastructure and drugs. He paid for his devotion to the Hippocratic oath with illness and death in a Lublin hospital in September 1945.<sup>35</sup> At one point, Dr. Sokołowski was assisted by two female prisoners: Anastazja Jackowska, a feldsher, and Juliana Komorska, a Red Cross nurse.<sup>36</sup> There was also a prisoner-priest Walerian Markl, referred to as Walenty in the camp documents.<sup>37</sup> Unable to help the living, the chaplain gave last service to the dead. Here is an account by Zygmunt Wójtowicz: ‘In December 1944. [...] I saw a group of prisoners carrying corpses on stretchers, escorted by soldiers and accompanied by a priest with a prayer book; one of the prisoners carried a cross’.<sup>38</sup> Zbigniew Frey, whose father passed away in late autumn 1944, also spoke of funerals with the participation of a prisoner-priest. ‘He died at night and I know this from the priest who slept on the bunk next to my father. I obtained permission for the priest to participate in the burial of my father. I remember exactly that the burial site had a plaque with the number 231’.<sup>39</sup>

While ‘only’ 5 people died at Krzesimów in the last two months of 1944, there were 14 deaths in January, 21 in February, 85 in March and 112 in April. These are official figures, certainly not reflecting the actual mortality rate.

<sup>35</sup> Death certificate issued by the pastor of St Nicholas parish in Lublin, AGP, vol. 3, fol. 436.

<sup>36</sup> AGP, vol. 5, fol. 841.

<sup>37</sup> Father Markl is yet another proof of the persisting secrecy which shrouded the Krzesimów camp. Father Markl’s biography was compiled by Fr. Jerzy Myszor and sister Agata Mirek in ‘Suplement do Leksykonu Duchowieństwa Polskiego represjonowanego w PRL’, *Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne*, vol. 41 (2008), p. 159. We learn from the book that Father Walerian Markl was a parish priest in Serniki (Lubartów powiat) before his arrest, that he was sentenced to death in 1945 ‘for collaboration with the Nazi occupiers’ (Articles 1 and 2 of the ‘August Act’), that the sentence was commuted to 15 years, and that he began serving it on 4 June 1945 in Koronowo. Furthermore, Fr. Markel is named as a witness of the death of Michał Bender and is listed on his death certificate, dated 22 December 1944 (the first document of this type issued in Krzesimów), as well as dozens of subsequent certificates.

<sup>38</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 20. Wójtowicz also mentioned ‘men dressed in cassocks, indicating that they were priests – and prisoners’.

<sup>39</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 74. According to the ‘Index’, Leon Frey was buried in grave number 230.

The first to die, on 21 December 1944, was Michał Bender, a farmer from Rogóžno, detained under Article 100 of the 1932 Penal Code. The death certificate listed ‘purulent tuberculosis’ as the cause of death. When camp warden Aleksander Trzcianka sent a report to the MBP two weeks later, he seemed to have forgotten the contents of the death certificate and stated that he had passed away from old age – at the time of his death, prisoner Bender was 57 years old.<sup>40</sup> The following night, Stanisław Pastwa, a stove-pipe maker, passed away. Cause of death: tuberculosis. Trzcianka entered the causes of death randomly: sometimes it was stomach cancer, sometimes a heart stroke (attack) or senility, nephritis or meningitis, most often pulmonary tuberculosis (accompanied by adjectives: open, purulent). Some of the detainees were trying to escape: on 26 January 1945, Trzcianka reported to the director of the MBP’s Prisons and Camps Department that the previous day ‘while working, detainee Tezlaw Helmut, born 6.5.1917, was shot during an escape attempt’.<sup>41</sup> On 5 March, Friske Benjamin, a 60-year-old German resettler from Romania, and a 32-year-old janitor of Monopol Tytoniowy from Lublin tried to flee the camp. Both were shot and killed.<sup>42</sup>

Dreadful living conditions, absence of rudimentary sanitary facilities, the arduous, exhausting labour – logging, stone quarrying and field work (digging up beets) forced upon everyone, including women and children – made Krzesimów a house of the dying, just as the ‘people’s’ government intended. A place of planned elimination of ‘foreign class elements’ by the new authorities. As prosecutor Sawicki told Jadwiga Bogusz during an interrogation in the Krzesimów palace: ‘We’re not like Germans, we won’t hit you, you’ll die off on your own, and we’ll manure the soil with you’.<sup>43</sup>

Publications about Krzesimów paint the picture of the living conditions in the camp, based on testimonies given by former prisoners to the Chief Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation – Institute of National Remembrance (Główna Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, GKBZpNP) prosecutors. Jadwiga Bogusz, Józef Nowakowski, Bronisław Banat and others have very similar recollections of starvation rations of sub-standard quality. The nutrition of people subjected to forced hard labour was deliberately grossly inadequate. Exactly as prosecutor Sawicki said, the idea was to make the prisoners ‘die off’ on their own. Former prisoners agree that it was the terrible famine that caused the unusually high mortality rate in the camp, exceeding 20 per cent. In Jadwiga Bogusz’s recollection: ‘Prisoners died *en masse* in this camp, which

<sup>40</sup> AGP, vol. 5, fol. 872; *Księgi więzienia na Zamku w Lublinie*, vol. 3, p. 183, item 2408.

<sup>41</sup> AGP, vol. 5, fol. 889.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, fols 964–70. Józef Olejarz’s wife obtained permission to claim her husband’s remains: the exhumation took place on 14 March.

<sup>43</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 37.

I witnessed. In my opinion, the reasons they died were typhoid epidemic, exhaustion from hunger and labour. I don't know how many prisoners died in the camp. However, I saw piles of corpses – basically human skeletons, their remains had been gnawed by rats'. Józef Nowakowski testified: 'I was hungry, and so were the other prisoners. People searched for thrown-away peelings and other vegetables. They ate this and then got dysentery, scurvy; I was terribly exhausted from the lack of food and working in the quarry'.<sup>44</sup>

Dysentery is mentioned as the cause of death for the first time in a note about Adam Dziubinski (b. 1890), a clerk from Lublin, who perished on 8 January 1945.<sup>45</sup> Typhoid (called typhoid fever back then) is not listed at all. Witnesses who lived at Krzesimów at the time told reporters: 'They ate "osypka", that is: ground grain with some chaff, with water poured over it. It could've worked if the water had been boiled. But they contaminated themselves'; 'They had diarrhoea. They washed themselves under the well. One person held them by the legs, another by the arms, the third worked the pump and washed them with water'.<sup>46</sup>

One of the crucial witnesses to the methods that were used to implement 'social justice' and 'consolidation of people's power' at Krzesimów was Rozalia Taraszkiewicz, the 10-year-old younger sister of Leon 'Jastrząb' and Edward 'Żelazny', two WiN soldiers hated and relentlessly hunted by the communists. She survived an epidemic of bloody diarrhoea in the camp thanks to 'medicines' prepared by her mother, imprisoned along with her: bits of bread toasted over coals and an infusion of raspberry leaves and twigs.

Every morning started with my mother nudging me, and me nudging her. I checked to make sure she was alive. And she checked to make sure I was alive [...]. – It was a mass dying. Corpses were being stacked like matchsticks, one next to the other. They were strewn with quicklime and covered with soil. Then another layer, and another. The ditch was as long as the barn they were housed in. And in March, when it got warmer, the stench became terrible, unbearable. That's when the corpses were lifted with hooks from the ditch and taken somewhere to the forest...

At this point we should note the fact, reported by many prisoners, that the corpses were piled into heaps, and only after some time were they dragged away to be buried. This casts some doubt on the credibility of assigning grave numbers to specific people in the 'Index'.

The camp warden consistently covered up the ongoing epidemic: until the end of February 1945, official death certificates of prisoners mainly list pulmonary tuberculosis as the cause of death. Measles fever is mentioned

<sup>44</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fols 46; 35.

<sup>45</sup> AGP, vol. 5, fol. 853.

<sup>46</sup> Borowik, 'Tam, gdzie cisza trwa'.

only a few times. It is not until 23 February that the ‘medical’ opinion on Ignacy Burghardt’s death includes ‘heart stroke and exhaustion’.<sup>47</sup> From that point on, that diagnosis figured in the overwhelming number of certificates and reports. This is probably related to the personnel change: in March, Aleksander Trzcianka was replaced by Tadeusz Krawczyk as the camp warden.<sup>48</sup>

## An Entire Hell Below

The medical commission that arrived on 18 April, twelve days after the camp had been ‘established’, was horrified: its report spoke of rotting straw on the concrete floor, tuberculosis, bowel infections, fleas, lice, scabies, malnutrition, pervasive filth, and the total absence of medical care. And worst of all: among the most seriously ill, dying of dysentery, were twenty-three heavily pregnant women.<sup>49</sup> Rozalia Taraszkiewicz recalls:

[...] a young married woman gave birth to a child. A baby boy. It died three days later. The baby was miserable, tiny. And she kissed the baby, wrapped it in her petticoat, and said: ‘Come, Lola, see if the sentry is out’. She dug a little hole behind the barn door, placed that baby of hers, kissed the corpse, covered it with dirt and arranged a few pebbles for disguise. And she said: ‘I’ll come back for you, my son, and I’ll bury you, if I manage to survive’.

The number of children born in the camp is unknown. Even if exhumations are carried out on the camp grounds, in the ‘sandbox’ (the sand mine where the bodies were buried) or in ‘Pruszków’ (another cemetery, a site of a cleared forest), the corpses of the babies will certainly not be found: they had no teeth, and their tiny bones by this time turned into ‘sticky bits of dirt’. But a meticulous reading of camp documents may prove helpful here. And help us find those wholly innocent and identify those guilty to the highest degree. Witold Pilecki, looking for adequate words to convey the truth of the Auschwitz camp, wrote: ‘I was going to say – men like beasts... But no! We are worse than animals, an entire hell below!’<sup>50</sup> The Krzesimów functionaries, the men from ‘an entire hell below’, wrote that Eugenia Styrlé, born in 1911 at Justynów near Pionki, a Protestant housewife, died on 10 March. The cause of death was ‘exhaustion, the effects of pregnancy and past childbirth, and a heart stroke’. Kazimierz Styrlé, born at Krzesimów on 5 March, died on the same day as his mother, 10 March. The cause of death was ‘lack of

<sup>47</sup> AGP, vol. 5, fol. 922.

<sup>48</sup> Wyrwich, *Obozy pogardy*, p. 63.

<sup>49</sup> Wilk, ‘Funkcjonowanie Centralnego Obozu Pracy w Krzesimowie’, pp. 52ff.

<sup>50</sup> W. Pilecki, *Raporty z Auschwitz. Raport, Raport W, Raport Teren S* (Kraków, 2016), p. 62.

vital forces'. The most horrifying fact: the camp administration pulled the baby into the records of prisoners, assigning him the number 1740.<sup>51</sup>

The commission forced the camp authorities to improve living conditions. The mortality rate slowly declined: 54 people died in May, 43 in June, 32 in July, and 29 in August. People at Krzesimów kept on dying, even though the camp actually ceased to exist. Many clues suggest that it continued to operate until 1946.

## Secrets upon Secrets

Canon Karol Serkis, the parson of the Młgiew parish which includes Krzesimów, could not understand why no one had ever told him anything about the camp, despite him serving several years in the parish, despite thousands of confessions he had heard. In 1996, the priest led the effort to have the Krzesimów pit elevated to the status of a cemetery, and dedicated a plaque in honour of the prisoners murdered by the NKVD and the UB. In his sermon he said: 'I have been a pastor in this parish for as many years as our countryman John Paul II has been Pope in Rome. I'm ashamed that for so long I have not prayed for these people, who are my parishioners as well'. The camp at Krzesimów was shrouded in a conspiracy of silence. Those who chose to speak up years later claim the reason had been fear. Some of the guards, and perhaps MBP officers, who had been employed at the camp remained in the area after its liquidation, found wives, joined the ORMO. And were armed.

In recent years, scholarly and popular publications shed some light on the great dark secret of the camp. But there are still several incidents that remain mysteries, yet to be explained.

The first incident: the breakup of the camp by the anti-communist underground forces. Reportedly, in late 1944/early 1945, the Krzesimów camp was captured by a Polish armed detachment; the guards were chased away, the warden was shot, and almost all the prisoners were liberated. The incident was reported by the head of the Prisons and Camps Department of the Public Security Ministry himself, Captain Teodor Duda.<sup>52</sup> This is the only account of the alleged capture of the camp, unverifiable using other sources. Unless the basis for Duda's story was an incident recounted to the Chief Commission prosecutor by Jadwiga Bogusz:

<sup>51</sup> AGP, vol. 6, fols 1010–15. In the 'confession' column, the infant was registered as 'Roman Catholic'. Credit Father Markl, who, having witnessed the unfolding tragedy, saw to it that the child was baptized.

<sup>52</sup> Wolsza, *Więzienia stalinowskie*, pp. 173, 204. Teodor Duda spun the tale about of capture of the Krzesimów camp in a nostalgia-filled veteran interview: 'Takie były początki. Z mgr. Teodorem Dudą, pierwszym dyrektorem więziennictwa w Polsce Ludowej rozmawia Henryk Michalski', *Gazeta Penitencjarna*, no. 4 (1984), p. 2.

I don't remember the exact day, but I think there was a shooting around the camp in February 1945. It happened at night, the guards ordered us to lie down on the ground. It turned out that the partisans wanted to liberate the prisoners. In the morning I told the female prisoners that the partisans came that close to freeing us. Someone reported this to the camp authorities. I was summoned to Commander Trzciński, who said to me: You want partisans, you fascist bitch? Six days of strict confinement. Undress. I was led to a punishment cell in the palace. I stayed there for six days.<sup>53</sup>

For some reason, Teodor Duda turned the shooting which resulted only in a solitary confinement for Jadwiga Bogusz, into the story of a camp capture, embellished by details such as dispersing of the crew and the death of the warden.

The second mystery: the execution of 20 men, carried out by the Internal Security Corps or the UB in the pit of the sand mine. The executed were allegedly members of the armed underground or prisoners. On 29 June 1991, the prosecutor of the Regional Commission in Lublin opened an investigation into 'the shooting in May 1945 at Krzesimów, Lublin Province, of more than 20 prisoners by officers of the Security Office employed in the local labour camp'.<sup>54</sup> This lead in the investigation was based on the aforementioned testimony of Mieczysław Szczerbatko who cited the accounts of two KBW soldiers, deserters from the camp's crew:

A 'Studebaker' truck covered with a tarpaulin arrived at the gate. The convoy commander entered the guardhouse. 'Zima' and his colleague were on duty outside, in front of the guardhouse, and they heard the people asking the guards who were escorting them: 'Where have you brought us, what do you want to do with us?' The guards replied 'no talking' and managed to calm them down verbally. The sentries then approached the car from behind and saw escorting guards dressed in Polish uniforms and armed with submachine guns. The prisoners were sitting on the floor of the car with hands tied behind their backs, dressed in military denim pants and white shirts. The aforementioned conversation was conducted in Polish. After some time, the commander of the convoy returned from the camp grounds. The car then drove towards the 'sandbox'. At this time, about 10 security officers with guns left the camp area and walked towards the 'sandbox'. [...] 'Zima' and his fellow escapee told me that a short while later, they heard gunshots from the 'sandbox' area. After some time, the UB men returned to the camp, and the car stopped in front of the gate; after a short stopover, it drove away. The aforementioned servicemen were not in the car, indicating that they had been shot. From the accounts of 'Zima' and the other man, it followed that at that time '20 plus Polish military men' were brought in by the car.<sup>55</sup>

Some of the testimonies of witnesses point to Chełm as the alleged place from where the 20 servicemen were brought. Chełm was the site of the Officer Tank School that had been in operation since October 1944. The Security

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<sup>53</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 37.

<sup>54</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 78.

<sup>55</sup> AGP, vol. 1, fol. 48.

Ministry and the Chief Information Board of the Polish Army kept a close eye on the cadets, as evidenced by the fate of Rudolf Pieczka (later Pietzek), a cadet arrested for signing the *Volksliste*.<sup>56</sup> The case of the execution has not been explained to this day. Five years ago, a student from the Krzesimów school, during a visit to the Valley of the Crosses, i.e., the former ‘sandbox’, plucked a rifle bullet from a nearby brick wall.

I don't remember the exact date, but I think it was late autumn 1945. The camp was dissolved, the fence and lighting were taken down, and the soldiers left the Krzesimów estate. I don't know what became of the living prisoners, and people didn't say what happened either.<sup>57</sup>

*Translated by Krzysztof Heymer*

## Summary

In October 1944, the Labour Camp for Political Criminals and Suspects at Krzesimów was one of the first camps established on the Polish territories west of the Curzon Line after the incursion of the Red Army. For nearly six months, it operated as an ‘unauthorized facility’, i.e. established without legal basis. Individuals suspected of collaborating with the German occupier, those on the *Volksliste*, but also people who were inconvenient to the new authorities for various reasons, were sent there. The documentation of the camp office was destroyed after 1956 at the Ministry of Justice. Therefore, we still do not know the number of detainees in the camp or the number of its victims. The mortality rate was about 20 per cent, almost double that of the *Konzentrationslager* Lublin at Majdanek. During the single year of the camp's operation, at least 425 people died and were shot in the camp. Attempts to reconstruct the history of the Krzesimów camp are based on remnants of files and accounts of camp inmates collected by prosecutors of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation. The sources comprise 11 volumes of files from the investigation conducted from 1991 to 2008.

## Obóz Pracy dla Przystępców Politycznych i Podejrzanych w Krzesimowie, 1944–1945. Niektóre aspekty funkcjonowania

Obóz Pracy Przystępców Politycznych i Podejrzanych utworzony w Krzesimowie w październiku 1944 r. był jednym z pierwszych obozów tworzonych na ziemiach polskich na zachód od linii Curzona po wkroczeniu na nie Armii Czerwonej. Przez blisko pół roku obóz działał jako „dziki”, czyli bez podstaw prawnych. Kierowano do niego osoby podejrzane o współpracę z okupantem niemieckim, osoby z *volkslisty*, ale także ludzi z rozmaitych względów dla nowej władzy niewygodnych. Dokumentacja kancelarii obozowej została zniszczona po 1956 r. w Ministerstwie Sprawiedliwości. Dlatego do dziś nie znamy liczby zatrzymanych w obozie ani liczby jego ofiar. Śmiertelność wynosiła ok. 20%, czyli była prawie dwukrotnie wyższa niż w *Konzentrationslager* Lublin na Majdanku. W ciągu roku funkcjonowania obozu zmarło w nim

<sup>56</sup> Extensive correspondence, accompanied by numerous documents on the intriguing story of Rudolf Pieczka, a prisoner of Krzesimów, can be found in AGP, vol. 2, fols 253–85.

<sup>57</sup> Zygmunt Wójtowicz's testimony, AGP, vol. 1, fol. 21.

i zostało zastrzelonych co najmniej 425 osób. Próby odtworzenia historii obozu w Krzesimowie opierają się na szczątkowych aktach oraz zebranych przez prokuratorów Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu relacjach więźniów obozu. Składają się one na 11 tomów akt śledztwa prowadzonego od 1991 do 2008 r.

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