

Witness reports are invaluable, but there was no getting around a professional on-the-spot investigation in Auschwitz. Sehn and his colleagues from the legal subcommission want to see the former camp grounds just as soon as possible. Though it may now seem scarcely plausible, it takes them ages to arrange a car. The trips can only be arranged in May.

The blurry photographs from the period show the members of the subcommission on their way. A roofless truck has been equipped with benches to seat Sehn, Pęczalski, Jarosiński and three record-takers: Krystyna Szymańska, who ‘had a fluent command of German and somewhat “mangled” the Polish language,’ Stefania Setmajer and Jadwiga Wojciechowska. ‘[W]e made occasional use of the truck – a banger provided by the administrative authorities,’ Jarosiński recalled years later. ‘Later we reached an understanding with a private car owner who, in exchange for being able to use the vehicle, agreed to let the commission use it half the time, while he got it for the other half.’ ‘We generally left Krakow on Monday, returned home on Saturday, and the Monday after that we headed back again to the former camp,’ Szymańska recalls. [...]

Despite the adverse conditions, the Krakow commission ultimately manages to get a great deal done. The lawyers have a look at the objects from the camp, they try to safeguard the documents the Germans left behind. As Szymańska states, they searched for them: ‘in all corners of the former camp. They lay there scattered on the ground, on the floors of various rooms, in especially large quantities in the camp administration offices. Judge Sehn said that any pieces of paper with writing had to be gathered up, and only later would we decide if they were of interest. That’s what we did. We even dug camp files out of the garbage cans and latrines. We stuffed them into big paper bags. Then from time to time our truck shipped them off to Krakow’. There, in the Court Evaluation Institute, they are scrubbed free of dirt and excrement and then read under infrared light.

In this way they manage to tease out lists, correspondence and commands by the German camp commanders. In the attic of Block Eleven, known as the Execution or Death Block, Sehn and Pęczalski find a prisoners’ card catalogue. ‘The search led me to the demolished barracks, to the waterlogged basement, where the papers, which had been literally kicked around, had to be gathered up,’ Sehn tells Marschak. ‘In the charred remains of one barrack, for example,

I found questionnaires from prisoner interrogations, elsewhere I stumbled across a camp map. The documents had to be carefully segregated, any one of them could have documented a crime.’

Yet the commission was short on workers and means of transport. The truck that the Krakow voivode had rummaged up was not making its daily rounds. Sehn and Pęczalski warned that ‘the bags full of documents waiting to be packed into the vehicle were, in two cases, snatched by Soviet soldiers.’ The investigative judge orders an intervention, but the materials cannot be retrieved. All they tell the Krakow team is: ‘No! That’s our loot and we’re not giving it back.’

Excerpt translated by Soren Gauger



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FILIP
GAŃCZAK

Born 1981

Jan Sehn. Tropiciel nazistów [Jan Sehn. The Nazi Tracker]

Publisher: Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2020

ISBN: 978-83-8049-978-2; 264 pages

Translation rights: Andrew Nurnberg Associates

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Books published

Polski nie oddamy. Władze NRD wobec wydarzeń w PRL 1980-1981, 2017

Filmowcy w matni bezpieki, 2011

Erika Steinbach. Piękna czy bestia?, 2008

Selected awards

Kazimierz Moczarski History Prize (2017) – nomination

History Book of the Year Award (2011) – nomination