

Belzec Camp History

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The Belzec death camp was located in the southeastern part of the Lublin District, near Belzec, a small village on the Lublin - Lviv railway line. In early 1940 the Germans set up a number of labour camps in the Belzec district, housing workers building the "Otto-Line", a series of fortifications on the border with the Soviet Union. These Jewish labour camps were disbanded in October 1940. The death camp was not part of, or converted from any other recognised camp facility. It was built in connection with *Aktion Reinhard*, specifically for the murder of Jews.



Belzec Painting #1

The site chosen was on a railway siding, at a distance of about 400 m from the Belzec railway station, and only 50 m east of the main Lublin - Lviv railway line. **Richard Thomalla** of the *SS-Zentralbauleitung Zamosc* supervised the construction works. The on-site supervisor was an unidentified red haired SS officer, known as "the Master" (*der Meister*). Skilled manual Polish workers from Belzec and the surrounding area built the gas chambers and barracks. They were later replaced by Jews from the nearby villages of **Lubycza Krolewska** and **Mosty Maly**. Following the clearing of trees from the northern half of a hill, construction began on 1 November 1941 and was completed by the end of February 1942.

The entire camp occupied a relatively small, almost square area. Three sides measured 275 m, the fourth, south side measured 265 m. An adjoining timber yard was incorporated into the camp, which was itself surrounded by a double fence of chicken wire and barbed wire. The outer fence was camouflaged with tree branches. During the later reorganisation of the camp, the space between the two fences was filled with rolls of barbed wire. On the east side, another barrier was erected on a steep slope by the fixing of tree trunks to wooden planks. During the second phase of the camp's existence, a wooden fence was built along the side of the road at the foot of the steep eastern slope. A line of trees was planted between the western outer fence and the Lublin - Lviv railway line. Four watchtowers were constructed: on the northeast and northwest sides, at the southwest corner and at the most westerly point of the camp. The northeastern tower was constructed on top of a concrete bunker at the highest point of the Belzec terrain, providing an excellent vantage point over the entire camp. A fifth tower in the centre of the camp overlooked the entire length of "the Sluice" (also known as "the Tube"), the camouflaged barbed wire pathway to the gas chambers. The corner watchtowers were manned by *Trawnikiänner* (Ukrainian *Volksdeutsche* from the *Trawniki* Labour Camp), armed with rifles. The central tower was equipped with a heavy machine gun and searchlight. In the camp's second phase, further watchtowers were erected, including one positioned at the far end of the ramp. The guardhouse, permanently manned by SS men and Ukrainians, was located close to the entrance gate on the west side of the camp. There was a separate compound for the *Trawnikiänner* to the east of the main gate. The Ukrainian area included three barracks, comprising two large huts and one smaller structure. The first large hut was used as housing for the *Trawnikiänner*. The second large hut housed the sickbay, a dentist and a barber. The third and smallest of the structures was used as the kitchen and canteen (mess hall).

Belzec was divided into two sections:

Camp I, in the northern and western section, was the reception area and included the railway ramp, which could initially accommodate 10-15 wagons. A disused siding was subsequently added to provide a second ramp for the later phase of exterminations. Together, the two ramps provided unloading facilities for 40 wagons. A 200 m long railway spur led through the gate on the northwest side of the camp. A secondary inner gate was constructed at the point where the two sidings inside the camp diverged, close to the beginning of the second ramp. A "holding pen" (an enclosed yard) at the far end of the second ramp was used for the "overflow" from the huge later transports. In the second killing phase there were two undressing barracks, one for women and children, the other for men.

Camp II, the extermination area, included the gas chambers and large rectangular burial pits. The pits had an average size of 20 m x 30 m x 6 m deep. These mass graves were located at the northeast, east and southerly sections of the camp. Later, two barracks, consisting of living quarters and a kitchen, were erected in Camp II for the Jewish prisoners who worked there (the *Sonderkommando*).

Camps I and II were separated by a camouflaged fence with two gates, one east of the SS garage, and the other close to the far end of the ramp. From this point a path led up a hill and through the forest to an execution pit. A narrow passageway called "*die Schleuse*", ("the Sluice"), was constructed, 2 m wide and a 100 m long, enclosed on both sides by camouflaged barbed wire fences. This passageway connected the undressing barracks in Camp I to the gas chambers in Camp II. A camouflage net was stretched over the roof of the building housing the gas chambers in order to prevent aerial observation. **Stanislaw Kozak**, a Pole who participated in the building of the first gassing shed in Belzec, described its construction, as well as that of two other barracks:

"We built barracks close to the side-track of the railway. One barrack, which was close to the railway, was 50 m long and 12.5 m wide. The second barrack, 25 m long and 12.5 m wide, was for the Jews destined for "the baths". Not far from this barrack we built a third barrack, 12 m long and 8 m wide. This barrack was divided into three chambers by a wooden wall, so that each chamber was 4 m wide and 8 m long. It was 2 m high. The inside walls of **this barrack** were of double boards with a vacant space between them filled with sand. The walls were covered with pasteboard. In addition, the floor and walls (to a height of 1.10 m) were covered with sheets of zinc. From the second to the third barrack led a closed passageway, 2 m wide, 2 m high, and 10 m long. This passageway led to a corridor in the third barrack where the doors to the three chambers were located. Each chamber of this barrack had on its northern side a double door 1.80 m high and 1.10 m wide. These doors, like those in the corridor, were sealed with rubber gaskets round the edges. All the doors in this barrack could only be opened from the outside. These doors were built with strong planks 7.5 centimetres thick, and were secured from the outside with a wooden locking bar held by two iron hooks on either side. In each of the three chambers of this barrack a water pipe was installed 0.10 m above the floor. In addition, in the corner of the western wall of each chamber, was a water pipe 1 m above the ground with an open joint, turned toward the centre of the room. These pipes with the joint were connected through the wall to a pipe that ran under the floor. In each of the three chambers of this barrack a stove weighing 250 kg was installed. It was expected that the pipe joint would later be connected to the stove. The stove was 1.10 m high, 0.55 m wide and 0.55 m long."

The stoves described were used to heat the shed's rooms, thus allowing the bottled gas and *Zyklon B* used in the early stage of the camp's killing activities to work more efficiently in cold weather. It was in this manner that the camp operated in the early weeks, but not without some "difficulties". The gas chambers were in fact, nothing more than a wooden barrack adapted and constructed to give the impression of a bathing facility. To enhance this deception, the false showerheads that an SS man involved in the camp's construction, **Erich Fuchs**, had been unable to fit earlier, were now installed and signs indicating a bathroom displayed. Despite all of their efforts, the construction team were unable to make the building airtight. According to **Werner Dubois**, at each gassing operation in the wooden barrack, sand had to be piled against the outer door to rectify this problem. After the gassing, the sand had to be removed to allow access to the corpses. It became apparent that major alterations were necessary, particularly since the gas chambers were proving inadequate in size.



Belzec Painting #2

Christian Wirth, commander of the camp and its most dominant figure, ruled Belzec by fear and terror. He was known by his fellow SS members as "Savage Christian". The Ukrainians nicknamed him "*Stuka*". **Gottfried Schwarz** acted as deputy commander, with **Johann Niemann** in charge of Camp II. **Niemann** was soon transferred to **Sobibor**, where he was killed during the uprising there. **Josef Oberhauser**, **Wirth's** right hand man, deputised in **Wirth's** absence. Together, they selected *Trawnikiänner* for service in Belzec.

Lorenz Hackenholt was in charge of the gassing engines, with two Ukrainians subordinated to him. **Schwarz** and **Niemann** supervised the gas chambers during the first phase, and **Dubois** or **Karl Schluch** in the second phase. **Heinrich Unverhau** oversaw the sorting depot in the old locomotive building from July 1942. In phase I, the same role had been performed by **Rudolf Kamm**. Possessions were sorted and sent onward to **Odilo Globocnik's** warehouses in **Lublin**. The sorting depot was located outside the camp in the locomotive area, close to the Belzec station.

Shortly before Christmas 1941, **Wirth**, an *SS-Obersturmführer* of the *Stuttgarter Kriminalpolizei*, arrived in Belzec along with a number of SS men. On arrival they were met by **Oberhauser** and **Schwarz**, who had been involved in the construction of the camp from an early period. Throughout the latter part of February and early March 1942, **Wirth** and Dr **Helmut Kallmayer**, a chemist who worked for the euthanasia programme T4 in Berlin, carried out several tests on the toxicity of the exhaust gas produced by a Russian tank engine. In addition, during this period another series of experiments were carried out in Belzec, supervised by **Wirth** and **Hackenholt**, assisted by **Siegfried Graetschus**. They jointly converted a Post Office delivery van into a mobile gas chamber.

Franz Suchomel, who served in **Treblinka**, described Belzec as a laboratory, and that would appear to have been the case. It was here that the system of mass murder was conceived and refined. **Wirth** carried out experiments to determine the most efficient method of handling the transports of Jews, from the time of their arrival until the time of their murder and burial. He developed basic concepts for the process of extermination and for the camp structure. The aim was to give the victims the impression that they had arrived at a transit camp from where they would be sent onward to a labour camp. The deportees were to believe this until they were enclosed within the gas chambers. In addition, everything was to be carried out with the utmost speed. The victims had to run, having no time to look around, to reflect on or to comprehend what was happening to them.

According to **Wirth's** annihilation scheme, the Jews themselves would carry out all physical work involved in the liquidation of each transport. In the first phase the Jewish work brigade consisted of 100-150 men.

In the second phase, a total of 500 prisoners in Camps I and II were utilised. It was the task of these work brigades to remove the corpses from the gas chambers and bury them. They also collected and sorted clothing, suitcases and other goods left behind by the victims. During the first phase, Jewish workers were executed after a few days, although after July 1942, **Wirth** organised permanent work brigades in which each member knew his function. This was initiated in order to ensure that the entire process could function without disruption.

The SS garrison was located in two stone houses across from Belzec station, on **Tomaszowska Street**. In the house nearest the camp, **Wirth** had his living quarters, and the Commandant's office, the *Kommandantur*. The second house was used solely as housing for the SS, with a small 10-12 x 6 m stable at the rear. The complex was surrounded by a wooden fence and barbed wire, with the exception of the roadside area, which was manned around the clock by sentries. Adjacent to **Wirth's** quarters there was a one-storey wooden cottage named "The Pavilion", used for the camp's general administration. It also served as accommodation for **Gottlieb Hering** and **Erwin Fichtner**.

A barrack was constructed to the left of the *Kommandantur* and at right angles to the main road to accommodate the additional T4 personnel who arrived in July 1942. All of the SS men were given

assignments in the camp administration and were in charge of specific activities, some having several duties. From time to time there were changes in these assignments. Close to the expected time of arrival of a transport, the SS men were allocated their respective duties in the handling of the liquidation of the deportees, from disembarkation to extermination. These duties included the shooting of those unable to be taken to the gas chambers.

The *Trawniki* men were under the overall command of **Schwarz** for their orders and for disciplinary purposes. In the initial phase there were about 60-70 of these auxiliaries. This number was later increased to 120 men in two companies organised into four platoons, three on duty and one off duty (standby). The training instructors for these men were **Kurt Franz**, **Dubois**, **Reinhold Feix** and **Fritz Jirmann**. The platoon and squad commanders were mainly Ukrainian *Volksdeutsche* and, like the other members of this unit, had formerly been soldiers in the Soviet army. They had the titles *Hauptzugwachmann* (Senior Platoon Leader) and *Zugwachmann* (Platoon Member).

The Ukrainians manned the guard positions in the camp: at the entrance, in the watchtowers, and on certain patrols. Some of them assisted in operating the gas chambers. Before the arrival of a transport, the Ukrainians took up guard positions around the railway ramp, the undressing barracks and along the "Tube". During the experimental killings and the initial transports, they were also given the task of removing the bodies from the gassing shed and burying them.

Towards the middle of March 1942, Belzec death camp was ready to receive the first transports (Phase I). On the evening of 16 March 1942, mass round-ups of Jews in the Lublin Ghetto commenced. The commanding officer for the first resettlement transport to Belzec was **Hermann Worthoff**.

SS and *Trawniki* men seized 1,400 Jews from the ghetto. They were kept overnight in one of the large synagogues therein. The following morning they were marched to the Lublin slaughter yard, near to the railway station on the outskirts of the city, and about 3 km from the ghetto, where they were loaded onto 19 wagons. On the morning of the 17 March 1942, the transport left for Belzec. There were no survivors. By the end of March 1942, over 20,000 Jews from the Lublin Ghetto had been interred in the pits at Belzec. A further 10,000 Jews from Lublin were transported to the death camp in April 1942.

Transports to Belzec arrived in two directions: from the Lublin District and from eastern Galicia, with deportations from the Lviv Ghetto in the period March to August 1942. The first transport of Jews from Zolkiew (Lviv district), a town 50 km southeast of Belzec, arrived on 25 or 26 March 1942. Within a period of three weeks after the arrival of this transport, almost 30,000 Jews had been deported to Belzec from Galicia. Among them were 15,000 Jews from the city of Lviv, deported during the so-called "March Action", 5,000 from Stanislawow, 5,000 from the Kolomyja Ghetto, and others from Drogobych and Rawa Ruska.



Belzec Painting #3

Transports arriving at Belzec station marshalling yard were held on spur lines in strict order of entry. In rotation, the wagons were uncoupled in blocks of 20 and shunted into the camp. Deportations arriving late in the evening were held overnight.

The driver of the train shunting wagons into the camp was **Rudolf Göckel** (the German stationmaster of Belzec), who was described by Polish Railway workers as being both cruel and sadistic.

The first contact the deported Jews had with the SS occurred after they were offloaded at the reception yard. Bemused and frightened, anyone showing anguish or defiance was removed by the guards to the execution pit in Camp II, where the Jews were shot in the back of the neck with a small calibre pistol. The SS attempted to lull the deportees with calming words, **Wirth** or **Jirmann** welcomed incoming transports through a loud-speaker, saying, "This is Belzec. Your stay is temporary - you will move onto work camps where your skills are needed. There is work for everyone. Even you housewives are needed to feed your families and to keep the houses clean. First I must have your co-operation so that we can get you on your way quickly". There was often a ripple of applause and shouts of "Thank you Mr. Commander". Then **Wirth** mentioned the crucial part of the deception. "We must have order and cleanliness. Before we feed you, you must all have a bath and have your clothes disinfected. It is necessary for women to have their hair cut". **Wirth** then passed on the gassing process to the duty NCO's.

Men were requested to remove their shoes and tie them together with pieces of string handed out by Jewish workers. The men, now separated, were marched off towards the "Sluice" in blocks of 750, five abreast. Supervised by the SS, at various points they handed over clothing, personal property and money, until they stood completely naked at the entrance to the "Tube". In a well-rehearsed operation, the Ukrainians, armed with whips and bayonets, prodded and forced the men into the chambers and closed the doors. With a signal from the escorting *Scharführer* the gassing engine was started. After approximately 20 minutes, inspection through the peephole in the chamber door confirmed that the engine could be turned off. The SS had completed their part of the operation. Now the Jewish *Sonderkommando*, led by *Zugführer* **Momiek**, took over and removed the bodies at the rear of the gas chambers. The doors were opened and the corpses were thrown out. Straps were fastened to the bodies in order to drag them to the trolleys in which they were to be ferried to the mass graves. Each corpse was searched for valuables and any gold teeth removed before the bodies were lowered into the pits. Another commando cleaned the gas chambers, whilst still others raked the sandy pathways to the building.

The women, having had their hair cut, together with the children, all awaiting their "bath", feared the worst. By now in they were in the "Sluice" and their fate was sealed. If weeping and cursing took place, the Ukrainians stepped in to brutally chase the victims into the gas chambers. Once the Jews had been off-loaded from the wagons and were on their way to Camp II, those found dead on arrival at the camp from incoming transports were piled to one side. Sick, elderly, infirm or "troublesome" Jews were taken to the execution pit in Camp II and shot. All of these ghastly scenes were accompanied by the camp orchestra. Favourite songs of the SS were *Drei Lilien*, and a song to the melody of "Highlander Do You Have No regrets".

Chaim Hirszman remembered:

"A transport of children up to three years of age arrived. The workers were told to dig a big hole into which the children were thrown and buried alive. I cannot forget how the earth rose, until the children suffocated."

In April 1942 **Franz Stangl** visited Belzec for a briefing by **Wirth** concerning **Stangl's** duties as commandant at the soon to be opened **Sobibor** death camp. **Wirth** was not in his quarters, but at the mass graves. **Stangl** was horrified by the sight of the enormous pits, filled with thousands of bodies, recalling:

I can't describe to you what it was like. I went there by car. As one arrived, one first reached Belzec railway station, on the left side of the road. The camp was on the same side, but up a hill. The *Kommandatur* was 200 metres away, on the other side of the road. It was a one-storey building. The smell... oh God, the smell. It was everywhere. **Wirth** wasn't in his office. I remember they took me to him... He was standing on a hill, next to the pits... the pits... full... they were full. I can't tell you, not hundreds, thousands, thousands of corpses... oh God. That's where **Wirth** told me - he said that was what **Sobibor** was for. And that he was putting me officially in charge... **Wirth** wasn't in his office; they said he was up in the camp. I asked whether I should go up there and they said, 'I wouldn't if I were you - he's mad with fury. It isn't healthy to go near him.' I asked what was the matter. The man I was talking to said that one of the pits had overflowed. They had put too many corpses in it and putrefaction has progressed too fast, so that the liquid underneath had pushed the bodies on top up and over and the corpses had rolled down the hill. I saw some of them - oh God, it was awful. A bit later **Wirth** came down. And that's when he told me..."

(Source: **Sereny, Gitta. Into That Darkness - From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder**, Pimlico, London, 1995.)

In about mid-April 1942, **Wirth** temporarily closed the camp and left for **Berlin**, taking with him his deputy **Schwarz**, and his gassing expert **Hackenholt**. Before leaving Belzec, the entire Jewish workforce was shot. **Wirth** visited **Berlin** in order to receive orders for the expansion of the camp and for the construction of larger gas chambers for intended future transports. When he returned to Belzec the reconstruction of the death camp took on a new sense of urgency. Phase II began to take shape.

In the last week of May 1942 three small transports arrived at Belzec; on 22 May 1,000 Jews from **Tysowce**, on 23 May 1,000 Jews from **Komarow** and on 27 May 500 Jews from **Laszczow**. In June 1942 new transports from the **Krakow District** arrived at the camp. Three trains with 5,000 Jews from the **Krakow Ghetto** arrived between 3 and 6 June. From 11 to 19 June 1942 an additional 1,600 Jews were transported from the **Krakow District**.

Because of the increasing number of transports, the three existing wooden gas chambers were totally inadequate to deal with the number of potential victims. New chambers with larger capacities were necessary. The old wooden gassing hut was dismantled, and in a central location a larger, more solid structure was erected. The second gas chambers were located behind a copse of trees. Due to Belzec's high elevation, this copse shielded the gas chamber building from observers outside the camp area. The "Sluice" ran through this copse. A 2 m wide open air corridor enclosed within 3 m high camouflaged fences, it led from the undressing barracks to the door of the second gassing building. The new building was 24 m long and 10 m wide. It had six gas chambers, each of them 4 x 8 m (although some sources state 4 x 5 m). Toward the middle of July 1942 the new chambers were operational. According to **Rudolf Reder**, one of the few Jewish inmates to survive the camp, the new building was low, long and wide. It was constructed from grey concrete, and had a flat roof covered with pap (tar-paper). A net, covered with green branches, was strung above it. Three steps 1 m wide and without railings led into the building. In front of the building was a large flowerpot filled with colourful flowers (geraniums). There was also a clearly written sign reading: *Bade- und Inhalationsräume* (Bath and Inhalation Rooms), as well as a sign that read "Stiftung *Hackenholt*" ("Hackenholt Foundation") named after the SS-NCO who designed the gas chamber. The steps led to a dark, long and empty corridor, 1.5 m wide. On the right and left of the corridor were the 1 m wide wooden doors to the gas chambers. The corridor and the chambers were lower than ordinary rooms, no higher than 2 m. The wall opposite to the entry door of each chamber included another 2 m wide removable door, through which the gassed bodies were removed. The chambers were 1.5 m above ground level, with false showerheads in the ceiling. A metal "Magin David" (Star of David) was placed over the entrance door. Outside the building was a shed measuring 2 x 2 m, where the gassing engine was installed. During the second phase, the chambers were so full that it was found necessary to throw water over the bodies to facilitate their disentanglement.

Wirth was appointed inspector of the *Aktion Reinhard* death camps at the end of August 1942. He was replaced as camp commander of Belzec by **Hering**, who was an old acquaintance of **Wirth**, and had served with him in the **Stuttgart** Criminal Police. **Hering** was thought by the Jews to be more "humane" than **Wirth**.



Belzec Painting #4

The peak period of "resettlement" was from July-October 1942. Three to four transports per day arrived at Belzec, where conditions were gruesome. Piles of flea-bitten, evil smelling, putrefying bodies were simply dumped on the ramps, awaiting removal by the Jewish work brigade. The next batch of deportees, which inevitably contained some who were dead on arrival merely added to the mass of corpses on the ramps. **Robert Jührs** was ordered by **Hering** to take those too sick or too weak to be gassed to Camp II "for a pill" (a euphemism for a shot to the back of the neck).

Despite the German attempt to maintain secrecy, two reports from the Polish underground organization concerning Belzec indicate that a good deal was known about the nature of the camp's activities. One report describes an act of resistance in the camp, when members of the *Sonderkommando* attacked the Ukrainian guards in June 1942. One other incident worthy of note took place in March 1943.

Heinrich Gley killed a fellow SS man. At a bunker in a copse near the barracks, two Ukrainians had been imprisoned for stealing valuables. In the darkness and confusion **Gley** had shot **Jirmann**, mistaking him for one of the Ukrainians. **Wirth**, **Hering** and **Oberhauser** conducted a thorough investigation. **Jirmann** was buried in the German Military cemetery at **Tomaszow Lubelski**.

According to **Reder**, **Heinrich Himmler** visited Belzec in October 1942, accompanied by **Fritz Katzmann**, the *HSSPF* of **Galicia**.

It was during the time of the **Kolomyja** transport that **Kurt Gerstein** and **Wilhelm Pfannenstiel** arrived in Belzec. Both from the SS Technical Disinfecting Services, they were ordered to test the efficacy of *Zyklon B* for the delousing of lice infected clothing. Possible improvements in the efficiency of the gas chambers were also under consideration.

Gerstein committed suicide in a French prison, but provided a very detailed description of what he witnessed on his visit to Belzec:

"The Death Brigade's main task was digging graves, working in shifts to open the ground. So organised was the brigade that they always worked with one grave in hand - just for emergencies. The Death Brigade of some 500 Jews worked non-stop to clear the corpses. When an exceptionally large transport of 51 wagons arrived from **Kolomyja** in **September 1942**, 2,000 bodies were found dead on arrival. 100 additional naked Jews were taken off the next incoming transport to assist. Once this work was completed and the emergency over, the *Volksdeutsche* **Heinz Schmidt** marched the 100 Jews to an open grave and shot them. When he ran out of ammunition, he killed the remainder with a pickaxe handle. **Schmidt** was one of the most sadistic of the camp's guards, as the above demonstrates."

The Germans realised that they were losing the war, and **Himmler** ordered that all traces of mass killings must be obliterated throughout the occupied areas. He directed **Paul Blobel** to form a special command for this, named "**Sonderkommando 1005**".

The final resettlement transports to Belzec arrived on **11 December 1942**. This triggered the acceleration of corpse burning, which was carried out by the Jewish workers and staff rather than by *Sonderkommando 1005*, who were denied access to the *Aktion Reinhard* camps.

Hering delegated **Gley** and **Friedrich Tauscher** to begin this work, assisted by **Hackenholt**, who had at his disposal a mechanical digging machine for excavating the corpses. Jewish workers of the "Death Brigade" assembled pyres, burned the bodies and re-buried the remains in the pits. The grates (pyres) were built by arranging standard gauge railway line sections on top of large concrete plinths. Narrow gauge line sections were then placed crossways on top of the structure to form a close meshed solid grate. Three to four pyres (Belzec villagers state there were 5) were constructed from **early November 1942** onwards and were in continual use until **March 1943**. The corpses were loaded onto the grates and soaked in heavy oil, then set alight.

Between 434,000 and 500,000 corpses were cremated in this fashion at Belzec. For months the whole area lay under a heavy pall of black oily smoke. The local inhabitants scraped human fat from their windows. Attempts to destroy all evidence were assisted by the use of a bone-crushing machine (from the **Janowska Labour Camp**), operated by a certain "**Szpilke**".

The decommissioning of Belzec commenced in **Spring 1943**. The elaborate system of fences and barriers, the barracks and gas chambers were all dismantled and items of use were taken to the **KZ Majdanek**. The entire area was then landscaped with firs and wild lupines. **Wirth's** house and the neighbouring SS building, which had been the property of the Polish Railway before the war, were not demolished.

The camp leadership decided to transport the remaining 300 *Sonderkommando* Jews to **Sobibor**. **Hering** told the Jewish Kapos, that they were being taken to **Lublin**. Dining tables and bread for three days, together with canned food and vodka were placed in the wagons. **Leon Feldhendler**, a Jewish prisoner at **Sobibor**, recorded:

"On **30 June 1943** a transport of the last Jews from Belzec arrived under the supervision of *SS-Unterscharführer* **Paul Groth**, to be liquidated. Whilst being unloaded, the Jewish prisoners began to run in all directions. They were shot at random throughout the camp."

With the exhumations and burning activities nearly completed, **Hering** left the camp, placing **Tauscher** in charge of the final liquidation. When that was completed, the Belzec SS garrison was dispersed to other camps. The local population descended on the camp, looking for gold and other valuables. Whilst doing this they unearthed parts of decomposed bodies.

The scavenging of the death camp site was discovered by **Dubois**, who had been sent back from **Sobibor** by **Wirth** a few days after the SS had left. **Dubois** reported his findings to **Wirth**, who discussed the matter with **Globocnik**. They decided to plant trees and construct a farm for a permanent occupation by a Ukrainian family in order to guard the area from scavengers.

In **summer 1943**, two small commands of SS men and Ukrainians arrived to implement this work. One command came from **Treblinka**, the other from **Sobibor**. The **Treblinka** group was led by **Karl Schiffner**, the **Sobibor** contingent by **Unverhau**. A large Jewish house from the other end of **Belzec village** was demolished and then reconstructed as a farm for the Ukrainian custodian to inhabit.

In summer 1944 the **Belzec region** was occupied by the Red Army. After the liberation, local villagers demolished the farm.

About 50 Jews escaped from **Belzec**. Of those who did escape, 7 remained alive at the war's end. An unknown number of deportees were also able to **escape from the death trains** by jumping out of cattle wagons. Only **Rudolf Reder**, who escaped from **Belzec** in **November 1942**, was able to provide eyewitness testimony concerning the camp's activities. The most recent research indicates a total of 434,508 victims for Belzec, although it is unclear whether this figure includes those killed during round-ups and in transit. Earlier estimates had placed the number of victims at a minimum of between 500-600,000. As with other extermination camps, it is unlikely that a precise figure for the number of victims will ever be known.

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