

## The People of Oświęcim During the War

**You are a historian, you work in the Museum, but you also have an interest in the city of Oświęcim. Where does that interest come from?**

I deal with the history of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, but also with the IG Farbenindustrie chemical plant, which was built near the camp and the city of Oświęcim. But researching the history of the factory wouldn't make sense without researching the history of the city during the war and the fate of its inhabitants. These elements have to be combined into a single whole.

**What was the local community in Oświęcim like before the war? What groups was it made up of, how many people lived there, and what did they do?**

Oświęcim was a small city with a slight Jewish majority. Over 7,000 of the residents were Jews, out of about 13,000, with the rest being Poles. It was a small center of light industry and commerce. The roots of the city reach back to the early medieval period, but it somehow never managed to get back on its feet after being completely destroyed during the Swedish wars in the 17th century. Only with the development of the railroads did the population start to rise at the beginning of the 20th century.

**And what were relations between the Polish and Jewish groups like? From what I've heard, they weren't bad.**

There was no anti-Semitism in Oświęcim, and no acts of violence ever occurred. The fact that the Jewish and Polish populations were numerically almost equal might have been significant. You can find references to the harmonious coexistence of the two communities in the city council minutes. Some researchers go as far as to point out Oświęcim as a model of the avoidance of conflict, even though such conflicts were allegedly inevitable in small Polish cities between the wars.

**There must have been Jews enjoying full rights on the city council. Were there also Jewish mayors?**

Yes, Jews filled a significant number of seats on the city council. There was an accepted principle of parity, so that if a Pole occupied a given post, then a Jew held a comparable one. There is no trace of conflicts or disputes between the two communities in the minutes of city council or the local press.

**What changed once the war broke out? What plans did the Germans have for Oświęcim?**

At first, after Oświęcim was occupied and annexed to the Third Reich (it became part of the German Reich, which limited the rights of the Polish population), the Germans didn't know what the future of the city was supposed to be. There were lots of plans. In the shorter or longer term, they intended to remove the Polish inhabitants and replace them with German settlers, from either the Tyrol or Soviet territory. The most significant thing in the history of Oświęcim, however, was the founding of the concentration camp. Himmler's decision in the spring of 1940 about founding Auschwitz Concentration Camp went hand in hand with the decision by the board of IG Farben, then the largest company in Europe, to build a synthetic

rubber and fuel plant near the city. The distance from the camp to the factory was about 4 km., and the old city of Oświęcim stood in between.

**And the prisoners, in part, were simultaneously employees of the firm.**

We must suppose that the most important factor in the location of the factory here was precisely the existence of the concentration camp, which was treated as a source of cheap labor. In Silesia, where they originally intended to build the factory, there was already a lack of workers who could be employed on such a large construction project. In Oświęcim, on the other hand, because of the existence of the concentration camp, they had access to a far greater number of construction workers.

**But weren't workers also brought to the factory from other countries?**

Of course, it turned out that the concentration camp was not able to supply as many laborers as the IG Farben officials wanted. On the other hand, it turned out that prisoners could perform the simpler sorts of labor, such as digging drainage ditches, for example, or building roads. The other work, which required some sort of higher qualifications, such as bricklaying, could not be done by the prisoners. It was therefore necessary to employ "free" workers, and it was decided to build a complex of a dozen or more barracks camps around the factory, to house these workers temporarily. Furthermore, the Germans arrived at the conclusion that it would be good to ensure themselves access to rationed building material by connecting the construction of the plant with some support of an ideological kind for German settlement in the east, for creating a German enclave in the middle of Polish territory that would influence the surrounding area by promoting German culture. Oświęcim was supposed to be the beginning of the Germanization of the region, which would lead to the removal, above all, of the Jews, but also of the Poles, thus making the land of Oświęcim into an integral part of the German state.

**The Oświęcim Jews went to the camps and the great majority of them perished, but what was the situation of the Polish part of the population? What happened to them?**

The Jews were not sent directly to the camps, Auschwitz and other camps. They were first resettled in Sosnowiec (in an understanding between the company and the SS) so that their dwellings could be taken over by skilled workers transferred to Oświęcim from the western part of Germany. Thanks to this, the IG Farben company was spared the expense of building new houses as quarters for its workers. There were also plans to completely remove the Poles from Oświęcim but, since they were seen as potential construction workers, it was decided that they could stay in Oświęcim until the construction was finished-but only those who could be considered as industrial workers. The remaining Poles, that is, the older people and children, were to be removed in 1941. This never occurred, because the factory's need for laborers was so great that not only did all the Poles living in Oświęcim and the vicinity find jobs at the building site, but Poles also began to be brought to Oświęcim from other parts of Silesia and the General Government. They were followed by workers from almost every corner of Europe. The IG Farben records mention Frenchmen, Belgians, Dutchmen, Czechs, and even Spaniards and Portuguese staying in Oświęcim. Among them were also 40 Arabs from North Africa. In addition to the several thousand Poles left from before the war, there were workers here from almost every country in Europe-a total of about 20 thousand-when construction of the plant ended in 1944, not to mention 10 thousand Auschwitz Concentration Camp prisoners housed in a separate camp near the factory. They also worked for IG Farben.

And so the Germans created a one-of-a-kind, special environment here, where there were Germans, German workers and people from countries regarded as related to the Germans, such as Flemish and Scandinavians, but also workers from the Mediterranean countries (France and Italy), then Slavs (Poles, Czechs, and Russians), and finally Jews, who made up the majority of the concentration camp prisoners. The interesting thing is that the Germans tried to organize the lives of these communities in the city in a way that conformed to the ideological principles of Nazism. Therefore the best quarters and the best food went to the German workers, while those from The Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway were just slightly less well off. Lower in the hierarchy came the French and Belgian workers, then the Poles, and below them the Russians and the Ukrainians-and, at the very bottom, obviously, the concentration camp prisoners. That gives us something of an insight into what Europe would have looked like if the Nazis had won the war.

**To what degree did they manage to carry out the Germanization plans? Where did they fail, and why?**

There were three causal agents, each with its own conception of the development or transformation of Oświęcim. The first was the concentration camp. Here, of course, it was a matter of expanding the camp-increasing the number of barracks and the capacity of the camp, and also building a tract of small single-family houses for the SS men and their families. All of this was supposed to stand on the left bank of the Soła. On the right bank, on the other hand, existed the city, with its own German mayor and with a German architect, Hans Stosberg, who had his own vision of how Oświęcim should develop. It was generally held that Oświęcim should become a German city not only in name-Auschwitz-but also in spirit. It was agreed that all traces of the Polish spirit and the Jewish spirit-in architecture, for instance-should be changed, should be adapted to the needs of the city's German population. In this connection, it was felt that the castle, built by the first Piast princes, was part of the German cultural heritage. The Piasts were regarded as a German dynasty. On the other hand, it was decided to tear down those buildings in Oświęcim that were regarded for any reason as Polish or Jewish. The church, for instance, because it was felt that there was no need for a church in Oświęcim. Beyond the old town, there were plans to build new districts exclusively for Germans, with broad streets, squares featuring playgrounds for children, and parks. The apartments would be spacious, well equipped, with about 90 sq. m. of floor space, so that Germans could live well in Oświęcim.

All these plans remained largely unrealized. It might have seemed that the Germans had a sufficient number of laborers available in the area for this sort of large construction project. But it turned out in practice that it was impossible, during wartime, to obtain the needed quantities of building materials, which were strictly rationed: construction steel, bricks, cement, and so on. It was decided in connection with this to erect only the barracks settlements that ended up housing IG Farben workers-Poles and others, and also Germans. The barracks for the Germans were better equipped and less densely inhabited. Aside from this, the Germans embarked upon the construction of a new residential district, not particularly large, but they erected only a few dozen buildings and managed to complete only some of them, with the remainder still unfinished in 1945. Several roads were built. But if we compare this with the ambitious plans for the total rebuilding of Oświęcim, we see that the plans were completed to only a very small degree. In the meantime, however, they did manage to demolish many homes occupied by Poles and Jews, which they regarded as ugly and un-German. This means that the overall balance was unfavorable.

**We therefore had what could be thought of as three population groups in Oświęcim during the war: prisoners, foreign workers, and Poles. What were the relations between these three groups like, and what opportunities were there for aiding prisoners?**

In general, the relations between the different groups of workers were correct. There were no major conflicts. It is said that the Poles looked askance on the French, who had failed to come to the aid of Poland when it was attacked. But people from the countries under German occupation maintained some kind of solidarity. Not that this had any great impact on their everyday lives. These people lived together in the same barracks, walked together to work, and tried not to come into any particular contact with Poles—the language barrier surely played some role here. On the other hand, all these people would surely have known what was going on in the concentration camp, because they lived in barracks, walked around town, and went to the cinema or stopped at a tavern for a beer. They had opportunities for some sorts of contacts, they could sometimes see prisoners, and they also saw, from no great distance, the crematorium chimneys. They worked together with prisoners on the construction site and there were chances for brief conversations. All these people—20 thousand conscript laborers—certainly knew what was happening in Auschwitz Concentration Camp. On the other hand, plainly, there were never any mutinies, and no powerful resistance organization ever arose, for a simple reason: these people were, in the end, isolated here, and furthermore there were many German guards, SS men, and people from the industrial police on the factory grounds—and informers, too. A resistance movement did indeed exist in the sense that, from time to time, a worker would see a prisoner too weak to stand up and would give him some of his lunch, or might offer him a cigarette if the SS man was not watching. It was help on that scale. There was never any organized resistance movement of any significance among these foreign workers. A more widespread resistance movement existed, but among the Poles who lived in Oświęcim, who had some kind of family connection with a baker thanks to which they could acquire a little flour that they later used to bake bread that they supplied to the prisoners working outside the perimeter fence or at the factory. If we are to speak of a resistance movement, it was rather a matter of people from Oświęcim or the surrounding area.

**And these residents of Oświęcim and the surrounding area were discriminated against in a variety of ways, through eviction, for instance. What did such expulsion look like in practice? How widespread was it, and was it limited as a result of the labor shortage?**

There can be no doubt that the German plans envisioned the resettlement of almost the entire Polish population of the region. Very few Poles or Silesians signed the *Volkliste*, and so almost all the Poles would be slated for expulsion from Oświęcim. This intention was never carried out fully, but nevertheless the residents were expelled from all the villages lying within the camp interest zone, encompassing almost 40 sq. km. around Auschwitz. The peasants inhabiting these villages were resettled for the most part from Oświęcim to the region of Jasło and Krosno, and their homes demolished. The SS patrolled this zone, which Poles could not enter without special passes signed by the commandant. There were no Poles in the immediate vicinity of the camp, but there were certain groups of Polish slave laborers working near the camp.

**What sort of losses were borne by these Oświęcim residents? There weren't many of them, but they mounted an impressive effort to aid the prisoners.**

An indication of the scale of losses suffered by the residents of these villages is the fact that, on the basis of data derived from members of 1,425 families expelled at the time (numbering

a total of 4,802 people), it can be established that 821 of the houses belonging to them were demolished, along with 514 barns and other agricultural outbuildings. One can assume, however, that the scale of destruction was greater, since not all the victims submitted accounts after the war, and the number of people expelled probably runs to somewhere between seven and eight thousand. It can be estimated on the basis of findings by my colleague Dr. Henryk Świebocki that at least 177 people from Oświęcim were arrested for aiding prisoners, and that 62 of them perished in Auschwitz or other concentration camps. It is therefore all the more fitting to appreciate the courage of the residents of the city. They were fully conscious of the risk they ran by standing up against the occupation regime's regulations.

**Stefan Wilkanowicz**