THE CENTER FOR
HOLOCAUST
STUDIES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

Volume I, Number 2 SPRING 1997

THE STATE MUSEUM AT AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU, 1947-1997

by Jonathan Huener
Department of History, The University of Vermont

Nearly fifty years ago, on 14 June 1947, some 50,000 visitors from Poland and abroad gathered in Oswiecim, a sleepy town of 10,000 residents on the southeastern border of Upper Silesia. It was a public event, a ceremony, a spectacle of sorts, and the occasion was the seventh anniversary of the day in 1940 when 728 Polish prisoners were brought to newly-remodeled military barracks in Oswiecim—barracks which would serve as a concentration camp for the next five years. But the concentration camp in Oswiecim—"Auschwitz," as the Germans called it—would become much more than a prison for the internment of Polish conspirators. The entire Auschwitz complex, with its branch camps Birkenau and Monowitz, its numerous auxiliary camps in the region, its inmates from countries throughout Europe, its massive storehouses, its "Block of Death," starvation cells, gallows, and with its gas chambers and crematoria—Auschwitz would become the largest death factory in all of Europe, the site where more than a million perished at the hands of the German occupiers. And so on this June day thousands gathered to remember the dead of Auschwitz, to commemorate their legacy, and to participate in the dedication of the grounds and structures of the "State Museum at Oswiecim-Brzezinka."

The grounds of the former camp were intended to serve as both a historical artifact and an admonition to future generations. As the Polish Prime Minister Jozef Cyrankiewicz stated in his dedicatory speech: "The Museum will be not only an eternal warning and document of unbound German bestiality, but also at the same time proof of the truth about man and his fight for freedom—a document arousing intensified vigilance so that the genocidal powers which bring destruction to the nations will never rise again." And as a charge to former prisoners attending the event, Cyrankiewicz called on the survivors of Auschwitz to be at the forefront of a struggle for a new beginning—the "beginning of a new world in which there would be no place for the smoking chimneys of crematoria." At the conclusion of his speech the prime minister declared the museum officially open and the crowd joined in the singing of *Rota* or "Pledge," a patriotic Polish anthem from the time of the eighteenth-century partitions.

The crowd then walked the three kilometers from Auschwitz I, the base camp, to Birkenau, the spacious moor which had served as the massive extermination center of the Auschwitz complex. Wreaths were laid in memory of the victims, a cross was erected atop the ruins of one of the crematoria, and the day's ceremonies were concluded with the singing, once again, of *Rota* :

> We will not abandon the soil from which our ancestry comes;
> We will not allow our native tongue to be buried;
> We are the Polish nation, the Polish people;
> We are the royal tribe of the Piast.
> —So help us God
>
> To the last drop of blood we will defend the Spirit.
> Until into ashes and dust
> The Teutonic storm does fall,
> For every doorstep is for us a fortress.
> —So help us God
>
> No more will the German spit in our face
> Nor germanize our children.
> Our legion will arise, and the Spirit will lead us;
> We will go when the Golden Horn sounds
> —So help us God

A call for a new world order based on international solidarity, a museum documenting Nazi atrocities in Poland, a vengeful, anti-German patriotic anthem, and a

continued on page 2

A Visit to a Shtetl in Poland

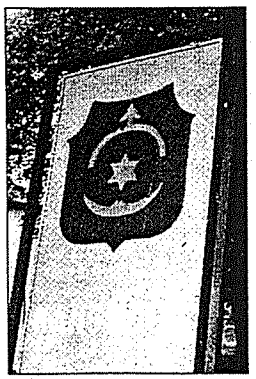
ı the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains of
in southeastern Poland lies the small town of
Most travel guides neglect to mention this com-
ıeir regional descriptions, and it rarely appears
s. Yet, its place in the history of the Holocaust
ection to a past I never knew created a large and
erence point for me during a recent visit to

to accompany a former colleague, Sam Intrator,
ther, Mike, on a research trip to chronicle and
rent forms of remembrance of the Nazi Holo-
and last September, I welcomed the opportu-
Kanczuga, the hometown of my great-grandfa-
am A. Brill, for the first time. For a week, the
raversed the topography of Nazi terror. Begin-
treets that once outlined the Warsaw ghetto, we
me confronting the ugly reminders of a horrid
es like Chelmno, Treblinka, and the small town
a community 60 miles west of the capital that
Sam and Mike's family had called home for
turies before 1941. Cracow and Auschwitz-
lowed before we headed east toward Kanczuga,
Majdanek.
ry juncture, we wrestled with the "rules" and
remembrance. Here we were, three Americans
t Jewish heritages linked to rural Polish villages
expensive rented automobile to death camps,
tes, and long neglected cemeteries in a nation
o overcome decades of communist economic
environmental and cultural neglect. What did
find at these places of murder anyway? Should
ith scorn and judgment, painting Poland and
the broadstokes of self-righteous indignation
for politicizing the Holocaust as a violation of
not Jewish lives? Should we be more aware of
s of rich, Polish culture and history rather than
ı almost 6 years of German occupation that
oland a nation virtually free of Jews? Would we
p in the wave of "new" Jewish tourism begin-
ourish in the wake of Steven Spielberg's
s List" where visitors flock to sites from the film,
ı restaurants and shops to spend lavishly on
ouvenirs of a world expunged?
ers to these and other inquiries did not come
oughout the week, we met with dignitaries,
ıd deputy directors of historical societies and
arch institutes to discuss our findings and nag-
ons. We also spoke with artists, religious leaders,
ommitted to recalling a vibrant Jewish commu-
by the Holocaust. These individuals encouraged
:d us to pursue our journey with vigor and an
nderstanding and openness.
ver, by the time we reached Kanczuga, cynicism
g our sympathy, and our patience, having been
a lack of sleep, several ugly encounters with
, and an overwhelming sense that the heinous

crimes committed by the Nazis lay buried beneath the surface of virtually every city and town we passed through, was ebbing quickly. According to the Central Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Warsaw, during the six years of German occupation, over 5,700 camps and ghettos were established by the Nazis in Poland. Systematic executions occurred in these camps and ghettos as well as in hundreds of cemeteries, synagogues, forests, fields, barns, and village and city centers across the nation. How many sites of murder and terror had we passed and not even noticed? If these traces of the Holocaust are erased and covered up with time, development, or neglect, how could we begin to imagine what this lost world of Jewish communities once looked like? Is memory the only monument left to those who perished?

We needed to look no farther than Kanczuga. Situated south of the old Cracow-Lemberg (L'vov) Road, we drove into a farming town that appeared to have changed little since the war. An imposing Catholic Church and cemetery dominated the approach to the center of town from the main road. Rays of the noonday sun were slowly choked off by the dark, windswept clouds of an onrushing summer rain shower, and the few people that were outside hustled to find shelter. In the main square, a monument depicting a mountain with an eagle perched atop the summit detailed the nations and regimes that had control over the town throughout its history.

Like much of Poland, Kanczuga experienced periods of revolving national affiliation, and it was under the flag of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that my great-grandfather was born near the end of the last century. As a teen, he emigrated from Kanczuga to the United States where he put himself through school and became a psychoanalyst and colleague of Sigmund Freud. In this capacity, he was the first to translate Freud's works into English, as well as the first to use the word "Holocaust" in reference to the actions of the Nazis when writing the introduction to *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, a collection he had just translated and edited in 1938. Yet, in spite of his academic and professional success, his connections to his hometown did not grow more distant with time. I came to see if any of these connections were still visible, and to learn the fate of the relatives he left behind.



Kanczuga town seal

We parked in front of the sign of the town seal. How odd to have a seal with a prominent yellow star of David emblazoned in the center of a blue shield. I walked toward a building identified as the library while Sam and Mike took photographs of the square.

Inside the well-lit one-room library sat a man of about 50 hunched over a reference book. A young boy read a picture book on a corner stool. In my best attempt at Polish, I asked where the Jewish cemetery was located. The man responded that the town of Kanczuga had no Jewish cemetery. I produced a map of former Jewish communities I obtained from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw to show that there was both a cemetery and at least one synagogue in this community. Shocked, he picked up the phone and called someone. He understood neither English nor German and when he replaced the receiver, he tried to explain something to me. By this time, Sam and Mike had returned. Within minutes of their arrival, a woman near the age of the librarian entered and asked to see the map. She too appeared shocked and beckoned us to follow her. Her language skills in German were somewhat better and she told us we would meet a man who could answer our questions.

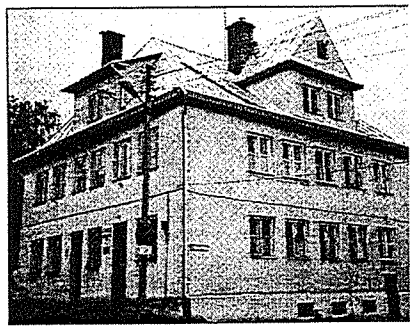
Passing through the small tree-lined square with a fresh carpet of lawn that would make many suburban Americans jealous, we entered an old two-story building across from the library, and climbed over boards in a dark passageway that opened into a small courtyard. Opening a door before us was a tiny elderly woman with a face like an apple doll. Her apron tied tightly around her waist, she exuded warmth and confidence. Behind her stood another woman around the same age, her gray hair tightly wound in a bun and wearing a similar apron, and a man over 70 who had just changed out of his work clothes and into a neatly pressed pair of slacks. Several young children poked their heads from behind the curtains of this comfortable apartment as we made our first formal introductions in German to the Knuprinski family and their friends.

I asked about the cemetery, synagogue and knowledge of the Brill family. At the mention of Sara Malka Brill, my great-grandfather's sister, the three older people in the room became quite animated. Polish sentences flew from one to another while we sat dumbfounded. They all knew this woman, her husband, a klezmer musician, and their family. They had lived just down the street. Only they were murdered by the Nazis. Mieczyslaw Knuprinski had been there. Silence. Did we hear that correctly? What did he say?

While we struggled to press him for the details, one of his granddaughters arrived. A 10th grader home from school for lunch, Magda had taught herself English by watching American films, and studying from a book she bought through the mail. She wants to be a teacher or translator of English someday, in contrast to many of her friends who aspire to be models and actresses.

Following an exchange of small gifts and details about our lives in the United States and our journey through Poland, we pressed Mr. Knuprinski on this astonishing information about the murder of Jews in Kanczuga. Against the mild protests of his wife and her friend that it was too wet, Mr. Knuprinski told us through Magda that he would show us the cemetery and the sites of the murders. As we left the apartment, Magda told us she had never even known there were Jews in her home town. Yes, she had learned about the Holocaust in school, but never in reference to the very community in which she was growing up.

We asked Mr. Knuprinski about the star of David in the



Building that once served as the 'new' synagogue

town seal as we squeezed into the sedan. Magda saic
even a Jewish symbol, but Mr. Knuprinski calmly t
prior to the German invasion, 80% of the town was J
that it had been a lively *Shtetl* (small Jewish town)
ries. If that was the case, why didn't Magda even kn
happened to these people and their belongings?
there no markers or memorials remembering the liv
annihilated in 1942?

We pulled out onto the main road and Mr. K
discussed the events that shaped his life before an
Nazis came. In a slightly self-depreciating manne
with conviction and resolve, waving his weathere
front of his face. These stories gave life to the w
youth and the horrific events that destroyed his
innocence. We sat enthralled.

Mr. Knuprinski related that the two buildi
each other had been the old and new synagogu
the rabbis lived in the house that now served
grocery store. One block from the synago
Knuprinski noted that the house on the left hac
home of Sara Malka Brill Reizfeld. At a place in fi
house, over 100 Jews had been shot. Across the s
1000 Jews, including the elderly, women, and
were gathered where a Ferris wheel now stood, an
to the top of a nearby hill to be executed. Mr. K
asked us to pull off the road and begin the ascent
along a muddy track that wove through a corn

Within moments, we arrived on the cres
overlooking a rolling patchwork of fields below
but dense, stand of trees and shrubbery crowne
Dozens of broken tombstones stuck out of the ea
these trees like rows of abscessed teeth. Under
grass and nettles, many gravestones lay toppled an
Moss, lichen, and fissures in the stones made a
them difficult to read. There was a dread suffocatio
and we proceeded to investigate the site in silence,
tive thoughts punctuated only by an occasional
Amid the peaceful rustling of trees, the depth of the
difficult to fathom.

After saying kaddish, the prayers for the deac
asked Mr. Knuprinski what he meant when he said
these murders. In a melancholy voice, he related that
in the hay loft of a barn across from the Brill-Reizfe

contin

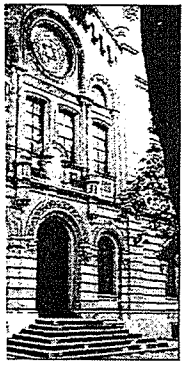
Warsaw Holocaust Memorials

ents in Warsaw commemorating the events of
›locaust are, for the most part in the area of the
hed ghetto. In roughly 735 acres some 500,000
npounded in late 1940, 370,000 city residents
deportees.
pulation diminished with killings, starvation,
ortation to concentration and death camps,
scapees to about 60,000 in Sept. 1942. By May
ere no survivors in the ghetto. Not all memo-
rly identified as in remembrance of Jewish
ially recognizing that there were many non-
ı and other victims as well.

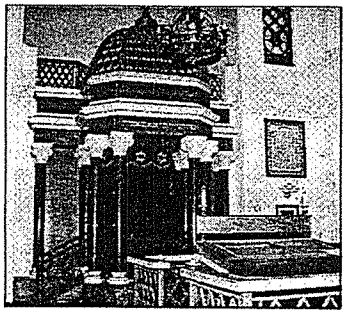
Prior to World War II there were three major synagogues in Warsaw. Nazi forces blew up the Great Synagogue on Tlomackie St.(1887) in May 1943 in retribution for the ghetto uprising. The badly damaged Prague District synagogue was demolished after the war. Only the Nozyk(1902) survived, as a Nazi stable, now restored by the Polish government and others. The Jewish Historical Institute including a Holocaust museum, adjoins the site of the former Great Synagogue.

Memorials we show are an effort, in a limited, concise way, to keep alive the memory of people and events from those torturous times.

Joseph Bornstein, Photographer and Narrator.



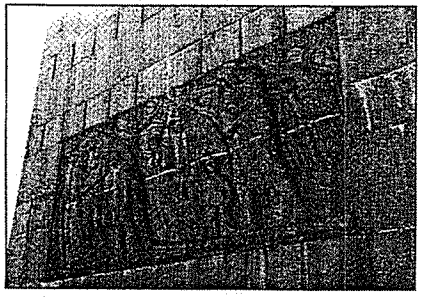
›r of the restored
›gue.

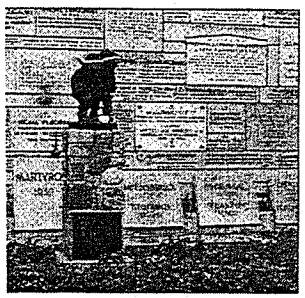


Above: Interior, Ark and bimah.

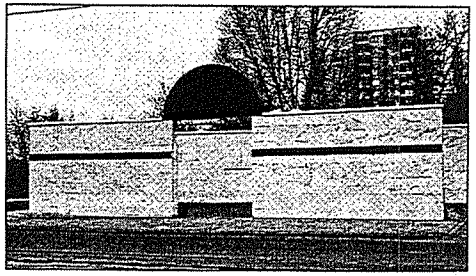
Top Right: Heroes of Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, Sculpted by Natan Rappaport, of labradorite stone imported from Sweden by Hitler for a proposed victory statue, front view;

Right: Rear view showing death march frieze.

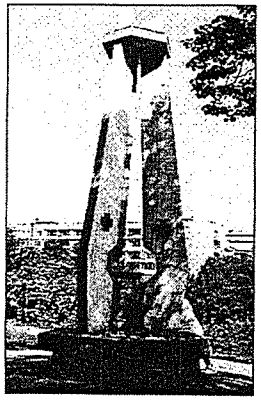




of small children who served as
d smugglers through the sewers to
etto, and wall plaques naming
nd death camps, at St. Stanislaus
located outside the ghetto area.



Above: Umschlagplatz (collecting point) memorial at site of former railroad siding where ghetto inmates were loaded on freight cars for deportation to Treblinka and other camps.

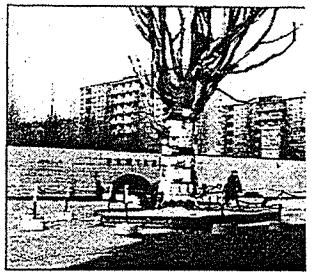


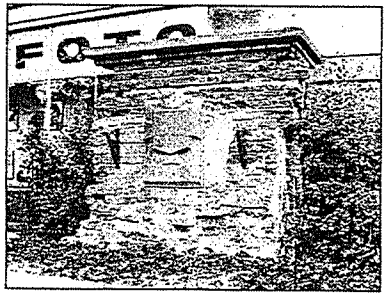
Left: Sculpture over sewer access.

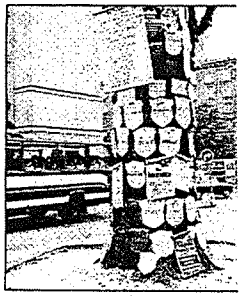
Right: Pawiak prison – a dungeon with cells for severe treatment of those incarcerated.

Below: Remnant of ghetto wall with plaque memorializing "Polish blood" spilled in the cause of freedom.

Below Right: Witness tree at Pawiak with memorial shields listing individuals and groups murdered by the Nazis.







Poetry:

Joseph Hahn

Joseph Hahn was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Bohemia. He escaped to England in 1939 and to the United States in 1945. Both parents perished in the Holocaust. Joseph Hahn is an accomplished poet and artist, whose work in both mediums will be published in Germany in 1997. He lives in Middlebury, VT.

1
O moon, you frozen eye,
cross-eyed knife-thrower.

Whoosh, hair flew into the sky,
And the mouth with the shaft of light,
there was whistling across the glacial brain:

Heeled over, keeled over, bowled over,
slapped back, snapped back, smoke.

Kyrie, where are you?
Here, at the skull-rock,
a threesome with hammer tongue
and the blistering shriek.

Slam the windows shut,
Draw the curtain over time!

Moon, your cross-eyed stare,
frozen eye.

2
When, in the night, you
gallop off with your brain whinnying
to the moon,
over the conspiring heath
to horizons writhing black with
teeming ovens, to all of this,
to the last
lightning infused spark of
the seven-armed candle holder —
back into disinheritance.

Deeper and deeper you hollow out
into the serpent-knotted smile of Eden,
angel-less you were banished,
and Bathsheba did not come to dip
into the glaring scrawl of the water,
your lute, also, stole away, your
shrill fluting throat flutters
as a banner on the barbed wire —
thus you plunge down.

Plunged to oblivion
before the malicious gallows tree
and the blood-black core of death —
Where, where will you whinny to next?
here you are in the deepest depths:
burned down,
transfixed with the space of light years,
a brain-heavy lump,
an atom of soul.

3
The moaning horn called l
two violins:

Remember the crushed bu
infant's fists,
remember the hangman's l
toying
with the kaleidoscope of d

None of the bells revolted,
none pealed black,
pity, where were you?

The ash came in drifts thro
door,
the flames came down the
of the soul,
the smoke clouded up lifel
still with life.

Lord, where did you hide,
and where did you hide in
In a flash our life second b

Where were you, pity?
Shekinah, shekinah!

Poems translated by David Sc

Summer Seminar Preview

The fourth annual Summer Seminar for Educators on the Holocaust and Holocaust Education will be offerred 23-27 June 1997 at the University of Vermont. As in previous years, the seminar is open to teachers as well as undergraduate and graduate students for three credits through the office of Continuing Education.

The seminar provides teachers and students with a solid historical foundation and a general introduction to the study of the Nazi Holocaust. The education staff at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates that at least 95% of American educators have not had a college-level course on the history or literature of the Nazi Holocaust. While teachers engaged in seminars and lectures on the American Civil War or the plays of Shakespeare while in undergraduate or graduate school, few had the opportunity to examine the Holocaust in a formal academic setting.

As a result, the seminar offers educators and students numerous points of entry into the study of the Nazi Holocaust. In addition to historical overviews, the subjects of literature, art, music, drama, and philosophy will be explored. Holocaust survivors and rescuers from across the state and the Montreal metro area will share their experiences. Those taking the course will also receive a complementary copy of *The Holocaust - Introductory Essays*, a collection of writings by many of the seminar instructors.

Throughout the week, the Center for Hol
ies will also sponsor a Summer Holocaust Le
Beginning at 8:00 PM in Rowell 103, these lect
and open to the public. On Monday 22 Jur
Dwork will present a lecture. The Rose Profes
caust History at Clark University and author of
a Star, Dwork's latest book is *Auschwitz - 1270 t*
which she co-wrote with Robert Jan van Pelt.

CVU Studies
continued from page 10

representatives from the Kraft family, who o
England Patriots and the New England Revol
intensive trip amplified the student experienc

Each student's presentation was unique, r
insightful. As a parent of one of the students
proud and impressed with the students' abili
late the lessons learned. It was also clear that e
seriously undertaken the endeavor of questioni
issues around the Holocaust.

During that Sunday evening, the audienc
listening to the outcome of this course. Each stude
semester a different person - with a better unde
the community of family, society, government,
and the world. Robert Bernheim and Robert Ku
applauded by students, parents, and the CVU co
their orchestration of this incredible course.

Sarah W. Sprayregen

Center for Holocaust Studies
The University of Vermont
Dept. of German & Russian
415 Waterman Bldg.
Burlington, VT 05405

Non-
U.S
P
Perm
Burli