Archaeological Research in the Sobibór Camp
A Preliminary Report of the 2012 Excavation Season
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In wake of the decision of the Steering Committee regarding the construction of a new visitors' center in Sobibór, the chairman of the Polish-German Foundation, Mr. Dariusz Pawłoś, requested that we conduct a salvage excavation in the camp in order to locate an area on which the center can be built. For this purpose we have prepared a plan for archaeological excavations covering an area of ca. half hectare (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – 2012 excavation plan marked in yellow
(Wojciec Mazurek – Sub Terra Badania Archeologiczne – Chełm, Poland)
Prior to the 2012 excavation, we were able to obtain a copy of a plan of the Sobibór camp prepared by the Polish government in 1951. An analysis of the plan showed the existence of the eastern fence of the camp that stood between the internal rail platform and the main Chełm-Włodawa railroad line outside the camp (Fig. 2). In addition, a number of structures appear in the southern area of the camp (the Vorlager), which were detected in the 2012 excavation. We are continuing our archival search for the report that accompanied the 1951 plan, which lacks a key describing its features. Hopefully, the missing report will contain vital information concerning the structures uncovered in the excavation.

Fig 2 - Sobibór camp prepared by the Polish government in 1951
A second plan, drawn by Jacob Biskowitz during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, displays a structure in the Vorlager that he describes as the kitchen used by the Ukrainian guards (Fig. 3). This structure was subsequently excavated during the current season (Object 1548). North of the structure, Biskowitz depicts an empty lot that may have been used for separating the women and children from the men before entering Camp II. Thereafter, the victims were undressed in structures inside Camp II.

Fig 3 - Plan Drawn by Jacob Biskowitz during the Eichmann trail 1961
Israel State Archives "Eichmann on Trial, Jerusalem, 1961" (File 1292)
When the plan of the 2012 excavation was layered over the 1944 aerial photo, it became apparent that the excavation took place directly outside of the area where the victims were undressed (Photo 1).

The excavations began in mid-July and continued until the end of August 2012. Two sections of Camp II were excavated as well as the northern quadrant of the World War II German administration headquarters. The excavation areas can be divided into two parts: the first area is located west and north of the Sobibór Museum over Camp II and the second area is located east and southeast of the museum over the German administration quarters (Photo 2).
Photo 1 - 2012 excavation squares on an aerial photo, circa 1944
(Wojciec Mazurek – Sub Terra Badania Archeologiczne – Chełm, Poland)
In the first area (Camp II), a number of refuse pits were discovered containing a rich variety of small artifacts of the World War II period (Fig. 4). Some of the artifacts, mainly of glass and metal, were produced and brought to the camp from Holland, Germany (photo3) and Czechoslovakia. Together with the artifacts from the period of the war, a relative amount of modern artifacts were uncovered that were deposited when a kindergarten operated in the 1970s, before it was converted into the Sobibór Museum in the 1990s.
South of this area were uncovered a sewage pipe and cesspools (Object 1430 A and B) covering an area of 10×24 m. (fig 4, photo 4) belonging to the kindergarten. These modern installations damaged the remains of the wartime camp. To the northeast, a number of post-holes were revealed running north to south that may have belonged to a second, internal fence.
In the second area (the Vorlager), a number of squares were excavated south and east of the museum, revealing structures that belonged to the German administration quarter that appear in the 1961 plan described above.

In summary, in the 2012 excavation we discovered a number of structures and features, the nature and function of which have yet to be determined (fig 4).

A large number of artifacts were discovered next to the main road used today. The most important of these was an aluminum identification tag belonging to a six-year old girl, Lea Judith De La Penha of Amsterdam (Photo 5), who arrived from the Westerbork Camp in Holland together with her parents, on a transport that left on July 6, 1943 and arrived to Sobibor on
July 9, 1943. The child's mother was Judith de Abraham Rodrigues Parreira, b. 1903 and her father was David de Hartog Juda De La Penha, b. 1909.

The De La Penha family belonged to a community of 'Portuguese Jews' who arrived from Spain and Portugal to Holland approximately one hundred years after the Spanish Inquisition in 1492. Portuguese Jewry made an important contribution to the cultural and economic development of modern Holland. Following the German invasion, the situation for Dutch Jews became critical and in July 1942, the first transports of Jews to Poland began. Many members of the De La Penha family were sent to their death in extermination camps in Poland.
Conclusions

We would to thank the Steering Committee and the German-Polish Foundation for their support of the 2012 excavations and we wish to offer the following suggestions:

The Sobibór extermination camp is unique in that it includes the best-preserved and authentic remains of the camps constructed in wake of the Reinhart Operation. With regard to the presentation of the site to visitors it is important to determine which features should be highlighted and emphasized.

The plan to construct a new visitors center southwest of the museum in the area disturbed by sewage works is problematic due to the necessity of additional infrastructure, e.g. water, telephone, electricity and sewage lines. The construction of part of the visitors center underground is not feasible due to the presence of high ground water at a depth of only two meters. Thus, it appears that at least 800 square meters would be required for the construction of the center in this sensitive area. Moreover, there is presently a serious problem with providing adequate parking for visitors to the site.

We believe that it is imperative to maintain the integrity of the site and to refrain from constructing new buildings inside its remains. It is obvious that in other sites, such Majdanek, the construction of new buildings next to the barracks would be considered unacceptable and this kind of consideration is required in planning the visitors center at Sobibór as well.

In view of the problems described here above, we propose an alternative place for the construction of the center and parking space south of the camp in order to preserve the integrity of site. We would be willing to discuss the exact area that we propose and offer suggestions concerning the presentation of the site to visitors at whatever time you choose.
We have not yet completed the goals of the 2012 excavation and it is necessary to continue the excavation of Camp III. With regard to the intention of the Steering Committee to mark the mass graves in the site, the situation of the mass graves, Graves 1 and 2, remains unclear. At present it appears that these graves are located outside the perimeters of the double fence surrounding the camp uncovered in the 2011 excavations. We wish to carry out an investigation in this area in order to determine whether or not they are indeed mass graves. In order to investigate this area, we have obtained the permission of the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, who has agreed to provide inspection and guidance in this sensitive part of the site.