

THE LAST STAGE OF THE FUNCTIONING OF THE ZIGEUNERLAGER IN THE BIRKENAU CAMP

(MAY - AUGUST 1944)

Here, we publish a fragment of new research by historians of the Auschwitz Museum dedicated to the history of the *Zigeunerlager* at the Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp. The entire article will be published in the next edition of *Auschwitz Studies*.

Was there a Roma uprising in Birkenau?

A fragment of the account of Polish political prisoner Tadeusz Joachimowski, report writer of section BIIe of Birkenau, served as a basis for the hypothesis on the Roma insurrection in May 1944:

"On May 15, 1944, Bonigut [SS-Unterscharführer Georg Bonigut worked as Rapportführer in the Roma camp] came to me and told me that the situation with the Gypsy camp was bad. It was decided that the Gypsy camp be liquidated. He got the order from the Political Department, transmitted to him by Dr. Mengele, on the liquidation of the Gypsy camp by killing with gas all those Gypsies who were still alive. At the time, there were about 6,500 Gypsies in the camp. Bonigut told me to inform those Gypsies in whom I had complete trust about it. He asked to prevent them "not to let themselves be slaughtered like sheep". He also said that "Lagersperre" will be the signal to begin the action and that the Gypsies should not leave their barracks. Bonigut assisted some Gypsies himself. I also performed the task entrusted to me in secret.

On the next day, [i.e. May 16] at about 7 p.m., I heard the sound of a gong announcing "Lagersperre". Cars arrived in front of the Gypsy camp and an escort of about 50-60 SS men armed with machine guns left them. The SS men surrounded the barracks inhabited by the Gypsies. Some SS men entered the habitable

barrack shouting "Los, los!" Complete silence fell over the barracks. The Gypsies gathered there - armed with knives, shovels, iron, crowbars and stones - were waiting for the further course of events. They did not leave the barracks. After a short consultation, they went to the "Blockführerstube", the commandant of the action. After some time I heard a whistle. The SS men surrounding the barracks left their posts, got in the car and drove away. "Lagersperre" was called off.

The next day (May 17, 1944), Lagerführer Bonigut came to me and said to me that, "For now, the Gypsies are saved."

The importance attributed to this account probably resulted from the fact that Tadeusz Joachimowski, who made numerous exhaustive statements and gave evidence after the war, would turn out to be a mostly reliable witness and, due to the function that he served in the camp, he used to be rather well-informed. As at that time, other equally exhaustive accounts of former Roma prisoners were missing, some researchers would tend to treat it as substantially sufficient and, to some extent, incontestable.

It should be mentioned, however, that among quite an important number of accounts included in the Museum archive until the 1970s, such an uprising is never mentioned, nor the attempts of armed resistance of the Roma towards the SS' intention to liquidate the *Zigeunerlager*.



Similarly, the prisoners of the neighboring men's camp BIIId did not mention the Roma uprising in their statements and evidence given after the war, and even those who were incarcerated there for many months and knew a lot of Roma.

Statements and periodical reports which reached the Home Army Headquarters in Warsaw in the following weeks do not include any mention of the attempts to liquidate the Roma camp in May 1944 either. They are also absent in the reports sent from KL Auschwitz by the camp resistance movement, preserved for the period May – August 1944 in a quite significant quantity.

It was possible to collect some accounts by Roma witnesses concerning these events as late as the turn of the 20th and 21st century. However, they are usually quite laconic, which should not surprise anybody as their authors were very young during their incarceration in Birkenau and were making these statements over half a century after these events. Sometimes, however, they contain a lot of surprisingly detailed information, for example the exact date of the uprising (May 16, 1944) as well as the data concerning the number of the Roma leaving Auschwitz in transports, almost exactly matching the findings by Danuta Czech. Nevertheless, this does not seem particular in any way; very often, witnesses making their statements after such a long time wish, following their best intentions,

to support their memory by referring to historical literature, for fear of making a mistake.

Referring to essential elements of description included in the accounts above, it is necessary to emphasize that the Roma incarcerated in Birkenau were probably aware of the growing danger of total or partial liquidation of the camp for more than a year. It thus cannot be excluded that at least some of them did begin to collect and hide primitive weapons which they could use in that definitive moment in order, as Joachimowski wrote it, to at least try to give the end of their lives some value.

However, it is doubtful that the SS men, having received the order to liquidate the camp and drive the Roma who remained there to the gas chambers, would not perform the action for fear of potential confrontation with prisoners. After all, they had a huge advantage in weapons: one or two SS platoons, equipped with rifles and machine guns, would have been able to simply shoot all prisoners trying to resist them.

What is more, the SS men standing perhaps helplessly in front of the closed barracks would have had to become suspicious after a short time and thus, the Roma would have lost the only advantage they had – the surprise factor.

Auschwitz II-Birkenau; the Roma family camp visible in the background.



Finally, the most important aspect: such an event would have been remembered by practically all the Roma in the camp, who, shut in the barracks, would certainly have been aware of the danger. Survivors' accounts, as have been presented above, include very few (and/or late) mentions of the sense of danger on that critical day or of the intention to begin the fight with the SS.

If the SS men really had retreated, for fear of confrontation with the Roma, from performing the order assigned to them, the news would have spread among other Birkenau prisoners. From that moment, the prisoners would have known that, in case of selection and transport to the gas chambers, they would be equally determined to save their lives. For this reason, the SS men, if they had really been confronted with the Roma refusing to perform the order, could have not showed any weakness or retreat.

The story includes a few more enigmatic threads. For example, it is not clear when this supposed attempt to liquidate the camp could have taken place. Bonigut very generally mentioned only "May or June". Joachimowski, in turn, in his subsequent copies of the account, was later including important modifications, changing May 15 (when he was supposed to learn about the SS intentions) into April 15, 1944. Finally, in his next account he stated that the first attempt to liquidate the Roma camp took place "in early April 1944".

Trying to find the most probable explanation of the events which took place in the Roma camp in the spring of 1944 among the pieces of very divergent information from former prisoners, as well as referring to preserved documents from the SS office, the authors of the present study have concluded that:

- In early April 1944 (before the deportation of Jews from Hungary), in the face of the growing deficit of workforce in concentration camps, the SS men decided to assign a bigger group of Roma to work in the industry, mainly young and strong men.

- This happened a month after partial liquidation of the BIIb camp in Birkenau was announced, where six months before, the Jews from the ghetto in Theresienstadt had been placed. It is necessary here to refer to the circumstances in which this crime was committed: on March 7, 1944, the SS men led the Jews, who arrived in September 1943 in

the first transports from Theresienstadt to separated barracks in the BIIa quarantine camp. The reason was supposed to be to 'travel to work in Heydebreck' (Kędzierzyn-Koźle). At that time, the relocation of prisoners for such reasons was quite common in Auschwitz; therefore, it did not result in any major anxiety among those selected. The next evening, the SS men led these Jews to lorries which transported them directly to death in the gas chambers. The information on these events soon reached the Roma incarcerated in the BIIe camp; some of them had probably even witnessed this crime themselves, as their barracks were located at a distance of only 100 – 200 meters from the crematoria.

- When in early April 1944 the news about the planned big transport of Roma to work in a different concentration camp spread, some of them treated it as an SS plan to liquidate the next "family" camp in Birkenau – this time BIIe. Maybe the information was indeed transmitted to his Roma friends by report writer Tadeusz Joachimowski.

- Finally, when soon after the SS men appeared in the Roma camp and ordered young Roma men to leave for work in Germany, to their surprise they came up against passive resistance and the refusal to perform the order. Maybe only then they realized (or some prisoners explained to them) what the reasons of such behavior of the Roma were. The SS men, without the intention to provoke riots and wanting only to calm the mood in the camp, told Joachimowski to prepare the list of Roma able to work, which was supposed to ease these concerns. It all seems to show that the plan brought the result desired by the SS as nothing is known about the expressions of rebellion or resistance when the lists were being prepared or later, directly when the transport was formed and when it left.

It is also necessary to emphasize that no sources, including the account by Tadeusz Joachimowski, mention the confrontations which were supposed to occur between the Roma defending themselves and the SS. In such context, referring to an 'uprising', or a 'revolt', seems to constitute a semantic misuse.

So, if one wanted to search for fighting in the history of the *Zigeunerlager*, or for the Roma actively resisting the SS men, the events which took place in Birkenau on August 2 1944 match such descriptions much more accurately. This is how former prisoner Alfred Fiderkiewicz described them:

"...uniforms began to swarm in the Gypsy camp. A few hundreds of them must have come. A line of lorries is coming. We hear the scream: "Raus! Raus!" The Gypsy barrack in front of our block is closed. The SS men are trying to open it, but the door must be locked from the inside. They are beating rotten boards with crowbars. They are coming inside as one body. We hear screams, shots, but nobody is leaving. One more group of the SS men is intruding the barrack. After a while we see them drag out two young Gypsy girls screaming piercingly. Others are attacking the torturers, scratching their faces. They are defending themselves with gunstocks. The SS men are dragging kids' legs and an elderly man is trying to defend them but one kick is enough to disable him and take him to the lorry. No one leaves the barrack without resistance. Everyone is fighting. We hear the SS men screaming and the Gypsies shouting. Women are the fiercest in their fight – they are younger and stronger – protecting their children. The fight lasted until dusk and it seems that everyone dragged to the lorries expressed some resistance. This is how the remaining Gypsies were murdered, in a number from three to four thousand. On that same night, our camp was covered with smoke, as dark as tar."

Liquidation of the Roma camp in Birkenau on August 2, 1944

The accounts of both Roma as well as Polish witnesses reveal – albeit, unfortunately very incomplete and differing in their details – the following image of the events preceding the liquidation of the Roma camp.

According to Tadeusz Joachimowski, in the second half of May 1944, he prepared a list of 3,200 Roma who were supposed to be relocated from Auschwitz; he also added that on the eve of liquidation of the BIIe camp, there were 3,300 Roma incarcerated there. It could thus be concluded that in late spring 1944, c. 6,500 Roma were supposed to remain in this camp. However, Joachimowski

mentioned that 3,229 prisoners were supposed to take part in the last roll call, including 1,575 women.

In another version of his account, revised and presented some time later, Joachimowski stated that in early June 1944 not 3,200, but 2,300 Roma were deported from Birkenau, the number which matches the reality much better, and that in the final period of the existence of the *Ziegeunerlager* there were about 3,500 prisoners incarcerated there.

Dr. Rudolf Weisskopf-Vitek, a doctor in the Roma camp, estimated that in the summer of 1944, 3,000 Roma were sent to other concentration camps, while 3,800 persons were later murdered in the gas chambers in Birkenau.

Tadeusz Śnieszko stated that on August 1, 1944, there were 5,000 people in the Roma camp.

Hermann Diamanski, the last *Lagerälteste* in the Roma camp, said that he took part in the selection of two to three thousand young Roma able to work, who were transferred from Birkenau to the mother camp. Soon after, the remaining Roma (two-thirds of their initial number) were murdered in the gas chambers. In his testimony before the tribunal in Frankfurt, he gave a more precise number of 2,000 people.

Felix Amann remembered that, right before the liquidation, there were 4,200 people in the Roma camp.

Marian Perski quoted the biggest number – about 7,000 – but it must have referred to the number of prisoners in the Roma camp before its partial evacuation in spring 1944.

Elisabeth Guttenberger stated that during the last stage of the existence of the Roma camp, there were 4,500 Roma incarcerated there, who were all murdered.

Prisoner Michalý Keéri-Szántó, a doctor who remained in the neighboring BIle section of the camp on August 2, 1944 (where the Jews from Hungary had already been placed) said that on that day, there were 3,540 Roma incarcerated there, all of whom were later transported to the gas chambers.

29. JUN. 1944 8.7

Hyg.-bakt. Unters.-Stelle
der Waffen-SS, Südost

Auschwitz OS., am 29. Juni 1944.

Anliegend wird übersandt: **46574/VIII/150**
(12-jähriges Kind)

Material: **Kopf einer Leiche** entnommen am
zu untersuchen auf **Histologische Schnitte**

Name, Vorname: _____

Dienstgrad, Einheit: **siehe Anlage**

Klinische Diagnose: _____

Anschrift der einsendenden Dienststelle: **H.-Krankenbau
Zigeunerlager Auschwitz II, B II e**

Bemerkungen: _____

Der 1. Lagerarzt
K.L. Auschwitz II
Josef Mengele
SS-Hauptsturmführer.
(Stempel, Unterschrift)

69/41

A request for histopathologic examination of the head of a 12-year old Roma boy signed by Dr. Josef Mengele

Miklós Nyiszli, the author of famous memoirs and a pathologist working in the nearby crematorium wrote that, on the day of liquidation of the Roma camp, there were 4,500 prisoners remaining there.

Rudolf Höss, commandant of KL Auschwitz, testified before Polish court that 4,000 Roma were murdered at that time.

It can thus be noticed that the number of Roma murdered in early August 1944 differ significantly between witnesses, but in general they are closer to over four thousand than to three thousand.

The study which has been most often referred to by researchers and journalists is *Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz* (*Calendar of Events in KL Auschwitz*) by Danuta Czech, published successively in subsequent editions of "Zeszyty oświęcimskie" (*Auschwitz Studies*) in the early 1960s, as well as being published separately in various languages thirty years later.

According to the author, what should be considered as the beginning of the *Zigeunerlager* liquidation action is the transfer from the BIIe section in Birkenau of over 1,500

Roma to blocks 10 and 11 on May 23, 1944.

They were supposed to be waiting there for transfer to other camps in the Reich.

Under the date of July 29, 1944, the *Calendar* presents the number of men in the BIIe camp as 1,495 persons. According to Czech, the number of women incarcerated there at that time 'remains unknown'.

Nevertheless, three days later (August 1), according to the Employment Department's data the number of prisoners increased unexpectedly to 2,815 prisoners. According to Danuta Czech, this resulted from additions made by the person preparing the list (an SS man or a prisoner-schreiber) to the number of men and women incarcerated in the Roma camp.

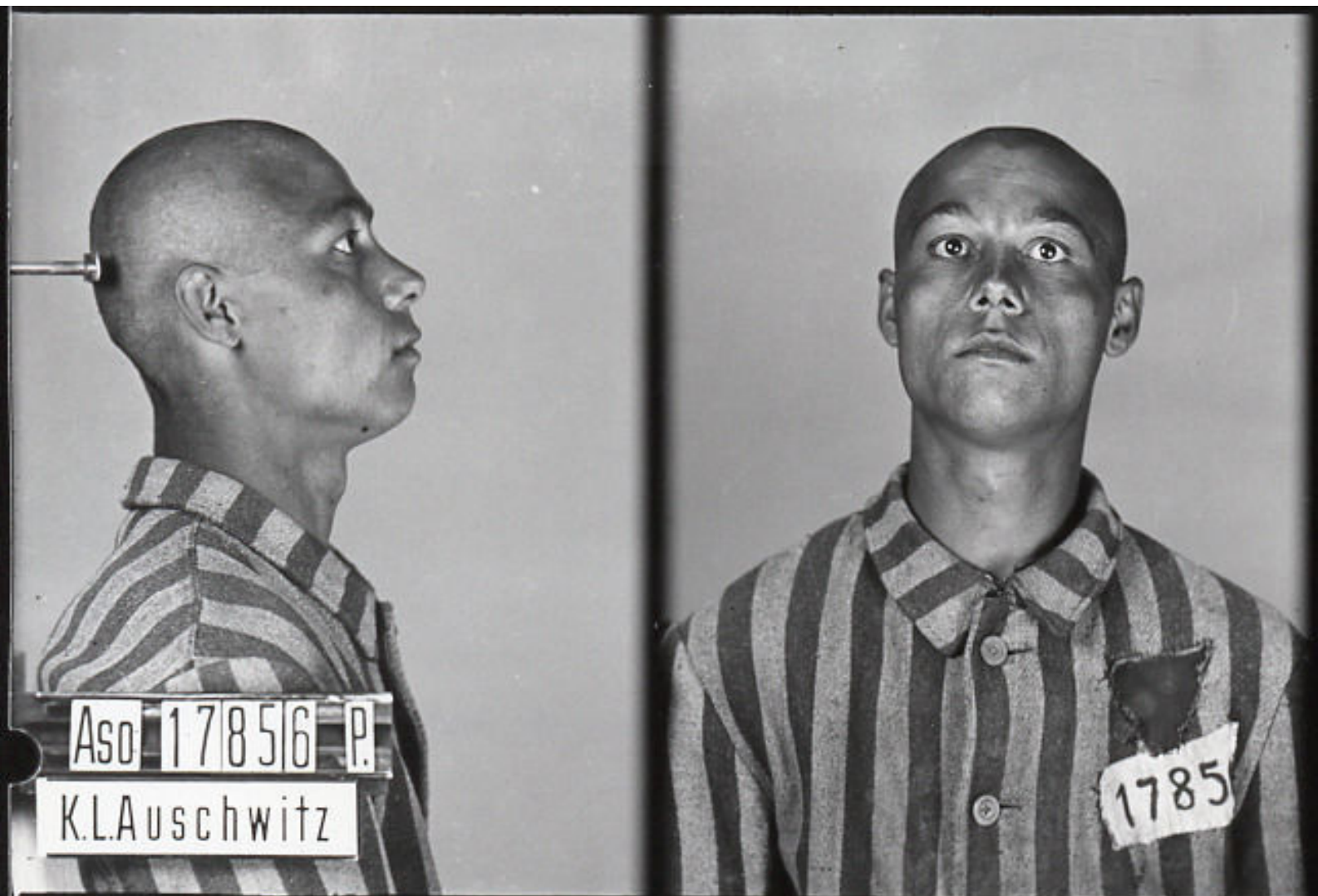
On the day that followed, the decisive liquidation phase began: 1,408 men and women were led from the mother camp (supposedly Blocks 10 and 11) to the rail ramp in Birkenau and then transported to KL Buchenwald. 2,897 Roma still remaining in Birkenau were then killed by the SS in the gas chambers of crematorium V.

The reconstruction of events by Danuta Czech presented above was later generally approved and often used by the authors of various commemorative texts as well as quoted while honoring subsequent anniversaries of the liquidation of the Roma camp.

Today, it is difficult to state why no one has so far paid attention to a number of inconsistencies in the argumentation by Czech as well as to visible discrepancies in the accounts by witnesses as well as in other sources to which she referred. According to the numbers presented by Czech in the *Calendar*, in the month of May there were about 6,500 Roma in the Blle camp; more than two months later, at the turn of July and August 1944, only 4,303 remained alive (both in the Auschwitz main camp and Birkenau). It should be assumed that at that time, over two thousand Roma disappeared from the SS registers in an inexplicable way. Such an important decrease in the number of prisoners of the Roma camp at that time is not confirmed by any preserved sources.

For reasons which are difficult to guess, Danuta Czech did not use the collection of daily reports on the number of female prisoners in the Roma camp, preserved for the period from July 17 to 31 1944, in her study. They show that at that time, this number was subject to minor changes and was much higher, oscillating around c. 3,400.

These documents are essential as the data which they include challenge practically the entire argumentation of the author of *Calendar*.





Postwar photograph of SS-Unterscharführer Fritz Buntrock who supervised the liquidation of the Roma camp

It results from analysis of the preserved sources that, most probably, on July 18, nearly 2,000 Roma were taken from Birkenau: 535 women and about 1,400 men. They were placed in Auschwitz I, in Blocks 9 and 10 (women on the first floor of Block 10), separated from the remaining part of the camp with barbed wire fence. In this way, about 2,900 women and 1,500 men (in total 4,400 people) remained in section BIIe in Birkenau.



The last group of Roma was relocated from Birkenau to Auschwitz on August 1. They spent only one night there and then, together with other prisoners brought there nearly two weeks earlier, were led to the ramp in Birkenau. This is where the dramatic scenes of them saying farewell to the members of their families remaining in BIIe camp took place, as so often described by eyewitnesses. Next, these Roma were led to railway wagons and transported to KL Buchenwald and KL Ravensbrück.

On the afternoon of August 2nd, about 4,200 – 4,300 Roma were incarcerated in Birkenau: men, women and children. They were all subsequently led out from the barracks and, in spite of their desperate resistance, loaded onto lorries and transported to the gas chambers next to crematoria II and V.

Camp registration photo of Rudolf Richter who was deported to Auschwitz on July 9, 1941 and perished in the camp on June 24, 1942