

Chris Webb & Artur Hojan

The Chelmno Death Camp

History, Biographies, Remembrance

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**Dedicated to Artur Hojan and all of the victims of the
Chełmno Death Camp**

For Zuzia, Freya and Lilli

“He who comes here, does not walk away alive.”

Inscription on the basement wall, in the Mansion at Chełmno

In addition *Hauptsturmführer* Lange said to us that the orders to exterminate the Jews had been issued by Hitler and Himmler.

Kurt Möbius – SS *Sonderkommando* Kulmhof

The gassed people were thrown out of the vehicle and piled like rubbish. They were grabbed either by their legs or hair. Above the grave, there were two men throwing the bodies into it. Inside the hole there were another two men putting the corpses in layers, faces down, in a way that one person's legs met another person's head.

Szlamek Bajler

Szlamek escaped from Chełmno on January 19, 1942. He wrote a report on Chełmno. He perished in the Bełżec death camp after being deported from Zamość in April 1942.

Foreword

Chełmno is still relatively unknown, even amongst esteemed historians of the Holocaust. The importance of Chełmno in the development of the Holocaust is also not well understood and is certainly under researched.

Chełmno was the first death camp on *Reich* territory, and played a hugely important role in the plans of *Gauleiter* Arthur Greiser to develop the *Warthegau* into the model district (*Gau*), cleansed of Jews and other “undesirables.” Greiser’s relationship with Himmler, the *Reichsführer-SS*, allowed him to take a much more pivotal role in the development and organization of the Holocaust in the *Warthegau*, including the death camp Chełmno, than any other Nazi District leader. Greiser was a frequent visitor to Chełmno and it was Greiser’s civil administration that organized the delivery of Jews to Chełmno.

Jewish Ghettoization began first in the *Warthegau* in 1940, and Łódź was the first large scale Jewish ghetto in Nazi occupied Europe. It was Greiser who sought approval from Adolf Hitler to kill the first 100,000 Jews of the *Warthegau* in 1941. There are direct links between the killing of mental patients between 1939 and 1941 in the *Warthegau* by Herbert Lange, and the development of Chełmno the death camp, with Lange as its first Commandant. It was Lange who devised the methodology and the organization of the camp and it was he who recruited the personnel. Chełmno was an integral part of the development of the racial policies that Greiser adopted for the *Warthegau* region.

Chełmno was the first Nazi death camp when it began operations in early December 1941. In Chełmno the gas vans were the first mass use of poison gas to kill Jews. Chełmno was the only death camp to use gas vans as its primary method of killing. Because of its proximity to Berlin, Chełmno became a testing ground for techniques for disposing the bodies of the dead victims. It was Colonel Paul Blobel under the auspices of *Sonderkommando 1005*, who developed the techniques in Chełmno, later used in the Aktion Reinhardt camps of

Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and all over occupied Eastern Europe, to dig up and burn the bodies of untold numbers of victims of the Nazi regime.

These firsts and interconnections make Chełmno and the killing of the Jews in the *Warthegau* almost unique in the annals of the Holocaust, but are also insightful in how the Holocaust itself developed. The number of histories published about the Chełmno death camp number less than ten. Chris's book is therefore timely. As always Chris brings his own style to the difficulty of how to write about the Nazi death camps, while respecting the memory of the victims. His book covers the development of the camp and racial program, its operations, the key events, the accounts of the brave Jews who escaped from this hell, the detailed Roll of Remembrance, the perpetrators and the post-War trials, right up to the modern-day.

This book is also important for me, as Chris has graciously co-authored with my late colleague Artur Hojan. I worked with Artur for eight years in researching Nazi War Crimes in the *Warthegau* and beyond. Artur's knowledge, especially of the killing of mental patients in Nazi occupied Western Poland was exceptional. This led to Artur and I setting up the *Tiergartenstrasse 4* Association in 2005 to research Nazi War Crimes. The Association is now established in Berlin, as *Tiergarten4 Association e.v* with a library and research center. Chris has quite rightly dedicated the book to our friend and colleague Artur and his memory.

I wish Chris the best of luck with this book on Chełmno that is a worthy successor to his books on the *Aktion Reinhardt* camps and Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Cameron Munro

Tiergarten4 Association e.V.

A crucial extension to our body of knowledge on the Holocaust, *The Chełmno Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* is an authoritative and well-researched account of the construction, historical context and liquidation of Hitler's first death camp.

Drawing on detailed accounts from Jewish prisoners, perpetrator biographies and war crimes trials, Chris Webb and the late Artur Hojan paint a characteristically rich picture of the atrocities that happened at Chełmno, as well as providing an impactful list of remembrance.

Going forward, this book is a great resource for modern historians and students of the Holocaust who wish to understand more about how Chełmno sparked wider developments in the systematic murder of over six million Jews from 1941 to 1945.

Lest we forget!

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