

Chris Webb & Michal Chocholatý

The Treblinka Death Camp

History, Biographies, Remembrance

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For Artur Hojan and Robert Kuwalek

Dedicated to the memory of
Richard Glazar, Shmuel Goldberg,
Eliahu Rosenberg,
Kalman Teigman, Samuel Willenberg and all
the victims of Treblinka

And to a special arrivals

Genevieve-Arden and Amelia Rae

Foreword

The Holocaust was a set of events that engulfed an entire continent. The Nazi occupation of Europe pursued Jews from Greece to the Soviet Union. The survivors have been scattered around the globe. In recent years the memory of these events has become a global discourse—there is a UN mandated Remembrance Day and the Holocaust has become a kind of moral touchstone which is held up as the central event of the twentieth century. As a consequence, whenever one thinks of the Holocaust, one inevitably thinks in terms of scale—of six million dead, of journeys of thousands of miles. The rhetoric of Holocaust studies—as attempts to understand the Holocaust have become defined—also emphasize the enormity of the events with which we are grappling. We are constantly reminded of the idea that the Holocaust is both unrepresentable and unimaginable. Part of this rhetoric is the idea that the Final Solution operated on an industrial scale, and that the concentration camps need to be understood as factories of death. Within this epic memory it is the camp at Auschwitz that provides much of the iconography both through contemporary images (the unmistakable tower at the entrance of Auschwitz-Birkenau for example) and the images bequeathed by the memorial museum, the apparently endless stacks of human hair, or the piles of shoes and suitcases.

Reading Chris Webb and Michal Chocholatý's book on Treblinka one is somewhat paradoxically struck by the essential truth of that epic memory, but at the same time of some of its inherent distortions—by the degree to which Treblinka in some ways conforms and in some ways denies this epic memory. In Treblinka a meticulously constructed factory of death did emerge, where killing ultimately was the only function of the facility. This factory consumed, according to the numbers collected here, some 885 thousand lives. Such an observation is scarcely credible and one is tempted to simply throw up one's arms in despair and declare such events unimaginable.

Yet the detail brought together here, some of it for the first time in the English language, also provides a timely warning about surrendering to such rhetoric. This is not an unrepresentable or more precisely unimaginable horror. As Alan Confino argues in his recent *Foundational Pasts*, the Final Solution was and is imaginable—precisely because it was imagined by its perpetrators. Chris Webb's reconstruction of Treblinka reminds us of this over and over again. This was a camp in which the technology of death was continuously refined and made more efficient. While the end result might have been a cleaner process, it was not one in which the perpetrators were distanced from their crimes because the means of carrying out those crimes had been considered, reconsidered; imagined and re-imagined, over and over again.

One is also reminded in Webb and Chocholatý's book of another, at times neglected reality of the Holocaust. Despite the implications of the epic memory I described, the Final Solution did not take place on another planet. Despite the desires of the perpetrators to keep their crimes secret—the building of an imaginary train station at Treblinka being the most obvious indicator of that—they were not. Although the reality of what was occurring in the death camps might have been obscured, these places were public spaces with which local populations engaged in a variety of ways—some of which are testified to here.

And despite the scale of the death toll, one is also reminded by Webb's book just how small places like Treblinka were and as such that the seismic events of the Holocaust were in many ways rather intimate too. Covering just a few hundred square meters, and with a largely identifiable staff, Treblinka was a place in which victims and perpetrators confronted one another repeatedly. This intimacy is reconstructed here and as such Treblinka emerges as very much representable. These are epic events, but they took place in spaces that are only too conceivable in the human imagination.

And it was of course because Treblinka was constructed on a small scale that in the aftermath of *Aktion Reinhardt* the camp could be dismantled and disguised. One of the consequences of this is that to visit Treblinka today is to visit a space in which there are no visible remains from the camp itself. Treblinka therefore stands,

perhaps more than any other place, as representative of the void which the Final Solution represents.

Yet it is thanks to works like Webb's and the scholarship that he and his co-author represent here that we can know something of what happened there. We can hear the voices of surviving victims, and of course of the perpetrators themselves. We can in that sense win a small victory over the Nazis' efforts to destroy and to expunge Jews and Judaism from this world, and of course to expunge the memory of their own destructiveness. We can, thanks to collections of material like this, continue to proclaim that, in the words of Primo Levi, it has been. We can, however imperfectly, see into the void.

Professor Tom Lawson
Northumbria University