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Children of Various Nationalities in the German Concentration Camp at Majdanek

Dzieci różnych nacji w niemieckim obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku

Abstract: The article focuses on children of three nationalities: Polish, Jewish and Belarusian, who constituted the largest groups in the German concentration camp at Majdanek. The ordeal and extermination of children at Majdanek are among the most tragic issues in the history of this camp. It is impossible to say exactly how many children stayed in this camp and how many of them died there because the Germans deliberately destroyed the documents and did not even record all data about the children to conceal the actual state of affairs. Hence, we will never know the true data about German crimes against children during World War II.

Keywords: Majdanek, concentration camp, Polish children, Jewish children, Belarusian children, children of the Zamość region.

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German crimes against children and young people during World War II were extremely tragic. As the ideology of racism was the basic reason for committing them, whether a child would live or die was most often determined by their origin. The mass executions and gas chamber deaths of thousands of children in many German concentration camps scattered throughout occupied Europe were a catastrophic phenomenon. German crimes against children consisted of not only taking their lives but also a mass action of selecting and Germanizing those whose appearance and racial conditions gave hope for erasing the traces of their origins over time. Forcing children to live under inhumane conditions in the concentration and labour camps established particularly for children and young people, for example, in Łódź, Dzierżążnia, Gorzyczki and Gliwice, was also a crime. It was the Germans who decided which of the children deserved to live and which did not.

Many decades have passed since the end of World War II, yet the issue of German crimes is still alive in the consciousness and memory of not only the victims and their families but also entire nations. Although the last witnesses are passing away, subsequent generations are guarding the memory of these traumatic events. The issue of the fate of children during the German occupation is also the subject of new scientific publications. In 2020, Janina Kostkiewicz published a collection of articles on the extermination of Polish children during World War II.¹ In 2023, the Academy of Zamość published a collective work about the fate of the children of the Zamość region.²

This article examines the issue of the presence of children of different nationalities in the German concentration camp at Majdanek (Konzentrationslager Lublin) from 1941 to 1944. It focuses on the fate of children of three nationalities: Polish, Belarusian and Jewish, who, according to documents, constituted the largest groups in the Majdanek camp. The ordeal and extermination of children at Majdanek are among the most tragic issues in the his-

- 1 *Crime without Punishment... The Extermination and Suffering of Polish Children during the German Occupation 1939–1945*, ed. J. Kostkiewicz, Kraków 2020; Polish version: *Zbrodnia bez kary... Eksterminacja i cierpienie polskich dzieci pod okupacją niemiecką (1939–1945)*, ed. J. Kostkiewicz, Kraków 2020.
- 2 *Aktion Zamość 1941–1943*, eds. B. Kopka, R. Skrzyński, I. Hajscewicz-Zimek, Zamość 2023.

tory of this concentration camp. So far, this topic has been described by Zofia Murawska,³ Beata Siwek-Ciupak,⁴ Marta Grudzińska,⁵ Magdalena Gajderowicz and Ryszard Skrzyniarz.⁶

The preserved documents do not make it possible to calculate exactly how many children arrived at Majdanek. There are estimated data only for prisoners of Polish nationality, but when determining them, only files relating to children from the Zamość region were taken into account, so the percentage of children was calculated relative to the total population of the Zamość region. In this case, the rate of children is high: 2.4% were children up to 1 year of age; 3.2% – children aged 2–4; 5% – from 5 to 9 years; while those aged 10 to 14 constituted 2.7% of children. To sum up, in the Majdanek camp, 13.3% of children were under the age of 14.⁷ It is difficult to say whether this applies to all three nationalities.

- 3 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, „Zeszyty Majdanka”, 5 (1971) pp. 140–157.
- 4 B. Siwek-Ciupak, *Więźniowie białoruscy w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, „Zeszyty Majdanka”, 22 (2003) pp. 197–226.
- 5 M. Grudzińska, *Los dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, in: *Zdeptytane dzieciństwo. II wojna światowa i jej wpływ na sytuację dzieci*, eds. A. Bartuś, P. Trojański, Oświęcim 2017, pp. 115–137; eadem, *The Fate of Children at the Majdanek Concentration Camp*, in: *The Young Victims of the Nazi Regime: Migration, the Holocaust and Postwar Displacement*, eds S. Gigliotti, M. Tempian, London 2016, pp. 171–187.
- 6 M. Gajderowicz, R. Skrzyniarz, *Children of the Zamość Region in the Majdanek Camp (in Selected Archive Files and Personal Accounts)*, in: *Crime without Punishment...*, pp. 115–130. The following works were created under my supervision: M. Winiarczyk, *Obraz matki w twórczości i wspomnieniach więźniów obozu koncentracyjnego na Majdanku*, Lublin 2012 (KUL); eadem, *Rodzina w świetle zapisków archiwalnych więźniów obozu koncentracyjnego na Majdanku*, Lublin 2019 (KUL); M. Skrzyńska, *Postawy kobiet i mężczyzn w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, Lublin 2012 (KUL); M. Miller, *Działalność pomocowa na rzecz więźniów obozu koncentracyjnego na Majdanku w latach 1941–1944*, Lublin 2012 (KUL); M. Krzywicka, *Sytuacja dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku w latach 1941–1944*, Lublin 2013 (KUL).
- 7 Z. Murawska-Gryń, *Dzieci w hitlerowskich*, p. 8; M. Gajderowicz, R. Skrzyniarz, *Dzieci Zamojszczyzny w obozie na Majdanku (w wybranych aktach archiwalnych i relacjach)*, in: *Zbrodnia bez kary*, pp. 136–137.

Polish children

Of the 1,800,000 murdered Polish children, only a small number died as a result of direct military action. The vast majority died due to the planned extermination of Poles. Children died during pacification, from executions and of starvation and cold during transports. From 22 October 1939 to the end of October 1944, over 600,000 Poles, including 250,000–300,000 children, were displaced.⁸ About 200,000 Polish children were deported to the Reich for Germanization.⁹ Children died during transports, freezing in the wagons during great frosts and dying of thirst and starvation. Others ended their lives in displacement and concentration camps.¹⁰

The largest and most famous group of Polish children and young people staying in the Majdanek camp were children from the Zamość region.

As part of the development of the German bastion in the east, approximately 110,000 inhabitants from 294 villages were displaced, including approximately 30,000 children. ...These children were forcibly separated from their parents and sent to transit camps in Zamość and Zwierzyniec, where they died *en masse* as a result of inadequate sanitary conditions, starvation and diseases. Most of the people who died were those who were sent to concentration camps in Auschwitz and Majdanek.¹¹

A total of 1,409 children aged up to 14 years old were sent to the Majdanek camp. The largest group (133) were children born in 1938, the smallest group (27) were born in 1929.¹²

From 30 June to 1 August 1943, as part of the Wehrwolf displacement action from the Zamość, Biłgoraj, Tomaszów and Hrubieszów districts, huge transports of entire families from those areas began. These were the inhabit-

8 Z. Murawska-Gryń, *Dzieci w hitlerowskich*, p. 7.

9 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, „Zeszyty Majdanka”, 5 (1971) p. 140.

10 Z. Murawska-Gryń, *Dzieci w hitlerowskich*, p. 7.

11 Ibidem.

12 M. Gajderowicz, R. Skrzyniarz, *Dzieci Zamojszczyzny w obozie na Majdanku (w wybranych aktach archiwalnych i relacjach)*, p. 137.

ants of pacified villages (approximately 16,000), who were brutally displaced from their homes. On the way to Majdanek, they spent many days in transit camps in Zamość and Zwierzyniec.¹³ In Zamość, the displaced families were divided into four groups: groups I and II were families of German origin or those suitable for Germanization, group III was people aged 14–60 qualified as able to work, and group IV included children under 14 years of age and people over 60 years of age. The last group was treated as unable to work. After the preliminary activities, examinations and registration, the children were separated from their mothers. These children and seniors were sent to the so-called horse barracks, where they had to lie directly on the muddy ground.¹⁴ Conditions in the resettlement camps were tragic – no one cared about providing the prisoners with food, the use of wells was forbidden and, as a result, it was impossible to bathe children and wash nappies. German doctors not only did not take care of the ill but even made it difficult for any Polish staff to do so.¹⁵

In Zwierzyniec, conditions were even worse. Many children died of starvation and many murders were committed.¹⁶ After the camps in Zamość and Zwierzyniec became overcrowded, the people were sent to other transit camps in Lublin (at Krochmalna Street), Budzyń – primarily men, and Majdanek – women and children.¹⁷

There were many children in the transports from the Zamość region, including three infants born during the journey. During this period, many people were imprisoned at Majdanek, which led to the deterioration of camp conditions and organization. People from some Zamość transports underwent selections, during which men and boys over 12 were separated from women, girls

13 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, pp. 146–147; J. Kiełboń, *Wysiedleni z Zamojszczyzny w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku 1943*, Lublin 2006; B. Kozaczyńska, *Gdy zabrakło łez... Tragizm losu polskich dzieci wysiedlonych z Zamojszczyzny (1942–1943)*, in: *Zbrodnia bez kary...*, pp. 116–131.

14 J. Wnuk, *Dzieci Zamojszczyzny*, in: *Zbrodnie hitlerowskie na dzieciach i młodzieży polskiej 1939–1945*, Warszawa 1969, p. 55.

15 J. Wnuk, *Dzieci polskie*, p. 117.

16 Ibidem, p. 175.

17 J. Wnuk, *Dzieci Zamojszczyzny*, p. 61; idem, *Tragedia dzieci polskich na Zamojszczyźnie*, „Zeszyty Majdanka”, 1969, No. 3, p. 212.

and small children. As Field V¹⁸ (women's field) could not accommodate such a large number of women and children, some of them were left with men and placed in Field III.¹⁹

From October 1943, further transports of children arrived at Majdanek. These groups were sent from other camps.

At the end of October 1943, about 70 children arrived from the children's camp in Potulice. These were mainly ill and weak children. In the third decade of February 1944, several dozen women with children, arrested in the village of Huszlew, Łosice district, were brought there. In the summer of 1944, shortly before the liberation of Lublin, people from the Zamość region were again brought to Majdanek. Starting from 27 June, transports from the camp in Zwierzyniec arrived almost every day and on 15 July, wagons of peasants from the camp in Biłgoraj arrived.²⁰

In the transports from the Zamość region, particularly in late July and early August 1943, when most of them arrived, there were many children of various ages, even infants several days old. It is estimated that the number of all minors was approximately 5,000.²¹ Children from the last Zamość transports were not taken from Majdanek during the evacuation of the camp. Those who managed to survive were liberated at Majdanek.²²

Children who came to the camp were not given a separate file; they were assigned their mothers' numbers.

They were also included in the lists of items brought to the camp by individual prisoners (the so-called *Effektenverzeichnis*), next to suitcases, trunks and various pieces of clothing, and very often the names and ages of the children were not taken into account and only their numbers were recorded.²³

18 The concentration camp at Majdanek was laid out in six compounds, called fields, each surrounded by a barbed wire fence, to separate the different categories of inmates [translator's note].

19 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 147.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 150.

21 *Ibidem*.

22 *Ibidem*.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 151.

Consequently, children were assessed through the prism of objects belonging to particular prisoners. It can be assumed that this was one of the ways of camouflaging the actual number of prisoners.

It is also worth paying attention to the selection of children by age. According to the SS men, only those who were under 13 had the right to childhood. Young people above this age were treated in the concentration camp as adults and thus forced to perform hard daily work and submitted to the camp regime.²⁴

The living conditions of children at Majdanek, similarly to other camps, did not meet the basic standards of existence. Due to overcrowded barracks, they often slept with adults on bunks or, due to the lack of places, on the floor, covered with dirty, lice-infested blankets, under which other prisoners had previously slept, got sick and died.²⁵ The lack of access to water made bathing children and washing nappies much more difficult. The concentration camp did not have clothes for children, so upon arrival, the younger children remained in their own clothes and the older ones were given adult clothes after bathing. Toys, dummies and spare clothes were taken away from people immediately after arriving at the camp.²⁶

The food was the same for both adults and children. They received black cereal coffee without sugar for breakfast and soup made of kale and grass or fodder turnip for lunch (in winter). Dinner was a piece of bread and cereal coffee. Twice a week, prisoners received additional items such as beetroot marmalade, margarine or a piece of horse sausage. No milk was provided even to the youngest children.²⁷ With this type of food, starvation was the greatest threat to children in the camp. Those who were taken to the camp with their entire families had no one to send them food parcels. Due to the lack of milk, if mothers were not able to produce breast milk, newborns were doomed to death. Some women were so determined that they gave their little ones whatever food they could get. One mother gave her infant wheat. Unfortunately, this accelerated

24 *Ibidem*, p. 152.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 40.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 150.

27 *Ibidem*, p. 40.

his death. Camp food was also largely harmful to older children. Kale or turnip soup often caused abdominal pain and bloody diarrhoea. Older children often tried to provide themselves with additional food by searching rubbish bins for vegetable leftovers or potato peelings. Sometimes, they even dug in the sand, looking for crumbs of groats or a piece of cabbage leaf.²⁸

Children staying at Majdanek did not work like adults. However, there were cases where they were hired for certain jobs. A group of boys and girls from the Zamość region, aged 10–12, dug sewage ditches and helped build barracks. Girls also worked in the garden.²⁹

In the autumn of 1943, several dozen children worked in the brush factory of the German branch of the 'Osti' company, and in the summer of 1944, children from the Zamość region carried ash from the crematorium to the camp gardens (Gärtnerrei) and spread it on the vegetable beds.³⁰

Jewish children

As is known, the Jewish population was treated by the Germans as an inferior race that needed to be eliminated. Children, like adults, had no right to live. To kill all Jews, all people of this origin were gathered in the so-called ghettos. Children in particular, as innocent beings, could feel that the aggression directed against them was only because of their origin. The worse treatment of Jews by the Germans was noticeable even before the ghettos were established. Jews were attacked, their homes were broken into and food and goods stolen. Food was distributed to the detriment of the Jewish population. Every person staying in the ghetto was obliged to wear an armband with a Star of David.³¹

The first transports of children to the Majdanek camp were sent in April 1942. According to the testimony of one of the Judenrat officials,³² approx-

28 Ibidem, p. 151.

29 Z. Murawska-Gryń, *Dzieci w hitlerowskich*, p. 15.

30 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 151.

31 *Dziecko polskie*, p. 8.

32 Judenrat (Jewish Council) – Jewish leaders in the service of the Germans who exercised power over the Jewish population in the ghettos.

imately 8,000 people of Jewish origin were transported to the concentration camp from the Majdan Tatarski Ghetto. These were people with low qualifications or the unemployed – primarily women and children.³³ The first transport sent from this ghetto on 20 April 1942 included 1,000–1,500 people. The number of children in this group is unknown. However, it is known what happened to them next: the SS men forcibly took the infants and youngest children from their mothers and threw them into a square, where they died of hunger and cold within a few days. Older children and adults who did not qualify for work were taken to the Krępiecki forest and shot there. A similar fate befell children from the Lublin Ghetto on the transport that arrived at the camp on 2 September 1942 – approximately 500 women and children died.³⁴

In April and May 1943, transports from the Warsaw Ghetto were recorded almost every day. The selection was made in the square in front of the baths – older people, the sick and those unable to work, as well as most children, were sent to the gas chambers. Those women who did not want to give up their children also went to the gas chambers. Those who managed to successfully pass the selection along with their children were placed in Field V in barracks intended for 250 people, which in reality exceeded this number several times.³⁵

In the spring of 1943, the people in five transports from the Drancy camp were also murdered.³⁶ Among them were men, women and children who had no idea what fate awaited them until the last moment. The image of nicely dressed children, playing with toys in the square in front of the gas chambers was particularly tragic.³⁷

In August 1943, following the suppression of the uprising that took place in the Białystok Ghetto, approximately 2,500 Jews were deported and brought to Majdanek. A significant number were children who, after the initial selection, were sent to the gas chambers.³⁸

33 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 142.

34 *Ibidem*, p. 143.

35 *Ibidem*.

36 The Drancy camp was intended for Jews from France and Western European countries waiting to be transported to concentration camps outside France.

37 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 144.

38 *Ibidem*, p. 144.

In Auschwitz, the death of a child was synonymous with the death of their mother. At Majdanek, it was slightly different – the supervisors decided whether a child was left with their mother or taken away (because mothers were treated there as persons still useful for work). The situations in which such separation occurred were very dramatic. Children were taken away by force, kicked and hit when their parents resisted. Sometimes children came only with their fathers and in this case the situation was similar.³⁹

As a result of many transports from the Warsaw Ghetto, such a large number of Jews were brought to the camp that the Germans could not kill all those who did not qualify for work due to the 'limited capacity' of the gas chambers. Therefore, at the beginning of May 1943, some of the children were sent to a special barrack (some sources say there were two barracks) in the women's field intended exclusively for them. Most of the mothers also stayed there. It is estimated that in May and August, there were probably several hundred mothers and children there.⁴⁰ Preserved documents indicate that a group of approximately 3,000 Jewish women with children up to four years old or those expecting a child, brought from the Warsaw Ghetto, were imprisoned there.⁴¹ People who knew about the situation of these children and their mothers report that the conditions were catastrophic.

The sanitary conditions were the worst. There was no water or toilets inside the blocks or within the fence. Several children slept on one bunk. No one changed the mattresses and underwear of those who got wet. They were not washed or bathed and their clothes were not changed. The floors of the barracks were covered with several centimetres of faeces.⁴²

Moreover, the untreated wounds on the prisoners' bodies became inflamed due to the lack of dressing materials, which resulted in swarms of flies in the barracks.⁴³ Under such conditions, a few children were born in dirty and

39 B. Schwindt, *Dzieci żydowskie w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku w 1943 r.*, „Zeszyty Majdanka”, 22 (2003) p. 62.

40 Ibidem, p. 65.

41 Z. Murawska, *Warunki egzystencji więźniów na Majdanku*, p. 38.

42 Z. Murawska-Gryń, *Dzieci w hitlerowskich*, p. 9.

43 B. Schwindt, *Dzieci żydowskie*, p. 65.

stuffy barracks. Immediately after being born, the SS men took them from their mothers and murdered them, most often by hitting their heads against the wall. These barracks housed very young children, separated from their mothers, often unable to even eat on their own, which is why they were sometimes omitted when sharing meals. After three weeks of such torture, all the women and children were taken to a gas chamber.⁴⁴

Generally, Jewish children under 15 had little chance of surviving the camp. Due to their age, during the selection process, they were not treated as useful for work. For this reason, they were most often murdered in the gas chambers together with the ill and older people. By Himmler's order, young people from the age of 16 were forced to work, yet 12–15-year-old children who were physically in good condition and could work had a chance of survival.⁴⁵ This is confirmed by the story of Halina Birenbaum, a 13-year-old Jewish girl who was sent to Majdanek. When she was brought there, she was quite a stout and physically healthy girl and perhaps this was the only reason why she successfully passed the selection process, despite her young age.⁴⁶ Appearance, properly styled hair and high-heeled shoes 'helped' convince the SS men that children would be useful as the labour force.⁴⁷ Those who qualified for work were placed in barracks with adults and treated as such.

On 28 May 1943, an operation was organized at Majdanek to transport all children to a gas chamber. Wiesława Grzegorzewska-Nowosławska describes what happened on the hospital premises in the women's field:

In the morning, Oberaufseherin⁴⁸ Ehrich came to the hospital with several SS men. She called the block supervisor and asked how many Jewish children we had. Hania Fularska, our block leader at that time, was sick with a high fever and gave a number in a semiconscious manner. Oberaufseherin wrote it down, told us to take them out and left with her entourage. ...

44 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 144.

45 B. Schwindt, *Dzieci żydowskie*, pp. 58–59.

46 H. Birenbaum, *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia*, Warszawa 1988, p. 98.

47 B. Schwindt, *Dzieci żydowskie*, p. 63.

48 The senior overseer of the women's camp, an SS woman [translator's note].

We were feverishly debating which ones would be easiest to hide and how to arrange it. I do not wish anyone to ever face such a dilemma.⁴⁹

According to the German overseers, infants born to Jewish women in the camp had no right to life. There is a known case of two children born in the camp hospital, who, immediately after being born, were transported in a briefcase to the crematorium by medical orderly Günter Konietzke.⁵⁰ Jadwiga Lipska-Węgrzecka describes a situation when Konietzke personally brought one of the women in labour to the hospital and comforted her throughout the labour. When the baby was born, he showed it to the woman, saying: 'Look what a beautiful baby you gave birth to' and even gave it to her for a moment at her request, but then brutally took it away, put it in a wheelbarrow and took it to the crematorium.⁵¹

On Christmas Eve 1943, another Jewish baby was born in Block IV. The baby was delivered by Doctor Stefania Perzanowska. The mother of the newborn was one of the few Jewish women left alive after the 3 November massacre.⁵² Fearing for the child's life, the mother placed him in the attic and the women took turns taking care of him, feeding him with herbs or milk provided by the Central Welfare Council. During the transport to Auschwitz, the Germans were very surprised there was a four-month-old baby. The boy and his mother died in the Auschwitz camp.⁵³

49 W. Grzegorzewska-Nowoślawska, *Poczucie wspólnoty*, in: *My z Majdanka*, ed. K. Tarasiewicz, Lublin 1988, pp. 83–84.

50 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 144.

51 J. Lipska-Węgrzecka, *Byłam szrajberką rewiru*, in: *My z Majdanka*, red. K. Tarasiewicz, Lublin 1988, p. 118.

52 The massacre of 3 November 1943, also known as Bloody Wednesday, that took place in the Majdanek camp was the largest execution of prisoners in the history of German concentration camps. It was part of the mass shootings carried out under the code name *Erntefest* (Harvest Festival), the last stage of the extermination of Jews in the Lublin district. As a result, 18,400 people of Jewish nationality died. On that day, similar actions were carried out in Trawniki, Poniatowa and several smaller camps in the Lublin district. In total, 42,000 people died.

53 K. Tarasiewicz, *Z wyrokiem śmierci – Wanda Ossowska*, in: *My z Majdanka*, pp. 99–100.

Beating and killing Jewish prisoners, including children, was common among the Germans. The reason could be trivial, for example, breaking one of the rules in the camp. This is how a six-year-old boy died. He was in a group of people from the new transport waiting for 'clearance'. He walked away from the place where he was supposed to be to find some water. The child was shot.⁵⁴ Another time, one of the guards hit a young child arriving in another Jewish transport with his rifle so hard that he fell. The mother, defending the boy, shouted to the SS man that a child should not be treated so meanly by a representative of the German nation. Both she and the child paid for this with their lives.⁵⁵

Throughout the entire period of the camp's operation, Jewish children were treated much worse than Polish children, as an enemy, an inferior race and, according to some sources, even as non-humans. Jewish origin determined the children's fate. Harassment and killing of Jewish children occurred almost every day in the camp.

Belarusian children

At the beginning, it is worth noting that the history of Belarusian children is related to the fact that the camp at Majdanek was established for children from the western areas of the Soviet Union. The idea arose in connection with pacification actions and fights against the local guerrillas.

If this fight against the gangs in both the East and the Balkans is not carried out by the most brutal means, then soon the forces at our disposal will not be able to control this plague. Therefore, troops have the right and obligation to use all means without restrictions, including against women and children, in this fight if it is to lead to success.⁵⁶

At the same time, burning villages and murdering people wherever there was a suspicion of partisan activity led to the orphaning of children and young people.⁵⁷

54 B. Schwindt, *Dzieci żydowskie*, p. 61.

55 *Ibidem*, p. 61.

56 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 141.

57 *Ibidem*, p. 141.

'Racially valuable' children, as was the case with Polish children, were intended for Germanization in the Reich. To make it easier for them to forget their origins, they were placed in special centres where speaking their native language was forbidden, Germanic culture was taught and all children's personal data were changed.⁵⁸

On 6 January 1943, at the request of the army, Himmler issued an order to transport all 'racially worthless' children to economic enterprises in concentration camps. There they were to receive appropriate training and upbringing. The order reads as follows:

Their upbringing is to teach obedience, diligence, unconditional submission and honesty towards German masters. They must learn to count to 100, recognize road signs and prepare for their professions as agricultural workers, locksmiths, stonemasons, carpenters, and so on. Girls should be trained as agricultural workers, weavers, spinners, knitters and for other similar jobs.⁵⁹

The head of the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office, Oswald Pohl, was responsible for organizing the children's camp for minors from the USSR, on Himmler's orders. For economic reasons, he ordered the creation of the children's camp on the site of the newly established concentration camp at Majdanek, specifically in Field v.⁶⁰ This field was to be prepared in such a way that the rest of the prisoner fields were not visible. The buildings were to be transformed for school purposes or new ones built for this purpose. However, on 27 March 1943, a letter was received in which official group D of the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office explained that 'nothing can be done at the moment to organize a camp for children due to the need to carry out construction works in the concentration camp in Lublin'.⁶¹ At the same time, the army asked for abandoned children and orphans to be removed from the operational areas of the former Russian territory: children up to 2 years

58 Ibidem.

59 J. Wnuk, *Dzieci polskie*, p. 23.

60 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 141.

61 J. Wnuk, *Dzieci polskie*, p. 25.

old – 108 boys and 158 girls; from 2 to 5 years old – 457 boys and 549 girls; and aged 6–12 years – 1,253 boys and 1,210 girls.⁶² The problem of 4,000 children (nearly one-third were under 6 years of age) remained open.⁶³ In the second half of March 1943, transports of Belarusian women and girls also arrived and since there were no children under 13 among them, they were treated as adults and given separate numbers.⁶⁴ In mid-May 1943, Einsatzgruppe B requested that children should not be separated from their mothers for practical reasons as no woman would decide to escape and leave her child in the camp.⁶⁵ This ensured the obedience of women who, having their children with them, had to take care of them first.

In the summer of 1943, transports of women and children from Vitebsk and Borisov began, arrested in retaliation for partisan activities there. The first group of Belarusian children arrived at the camp on 13 June and the next transport took place on 9 October. There were 61 women and children there. On 31 October, approximately 200 children aged 2 to 10 were brought there.⁶⁶ At the end of the winter of 1943, transports of families from the vicinity of Smolensk and Vitebsk arrived at the camp. Shortly after their arrival, women and children, separated from the men, were brought to Field v. After bathing, it was the children who were in the worst situation. Their mothers were unable to provide them with adequate clothing and food as only Polish women received parcels. Although Polish women organized help for these children using these parcels, it was definitely insufficient.⁶⁷

On 3 January and 4 February 1944, 2,500 women and children from Zhytomyr, Smolensk, Minsk and Borisov were also recorded in transports. The children were exhausted, dirty and lice-infested. Due to their young age, they received their mothers' numbers.⁶⁸

62 Ibidem, p. 26.

63 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 142.

64 Eadem, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym w Majdanku*, p. 39.

65 Ibidem, p. 40.

66 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 145.

67 W. Ślusarczyk-Burakiewicz, *Ludzie ludziom*, in: *My z Majdanka*, p. 176.

68 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym w Majdanku*, p. 40.

In the period from March 1943 to January 1944, at least 16 transports arrived from various areas of Belarus. Preserved documents from another eight transports provide the basis for an estimated number of people brought in these 16 transports. The probable number of prisoners from all transports was 8,863, including 3,900 men, 3,988 women and 975 children.⁶⁹

The people were transported in very poor conditions. After travelling for several days in cold wagons, prisoners arrived at the camp in a state of severe weakness. Several people died each day of long-term starvation. Many had symptoms of infectious diseases.⁷⁰ 'The children who arrived alive were a picture of the most extreme poverty. Diseases such as diarrhoea, colitis and scurvy were rampant among them. The typhus epidemic was getting stronger day by day. Many children died immediately after arrival.'⁷¹ After all the preliminary formalities, registration and selection took place. Men were separated from women and children. After bathing, children were given adult clothes due to the lack of children's clothing.⁷² Mothers with children were sent to the women's field. Sometimes, however, children were placed in special barracks without their mothers. Their mothers could only visit them for one hour on Sundays. Those who were left with their children did not work like other prisoners and also took care of other children whose mothers did go to work.⁷³

Belarusian children did not stay long in the Majdanek camp. From time to time, transports from Majdanek were sent to other camps. At the end of November 1943, 250 children under ten years of age were taken from their mothers under the pretext of being given warmer clothes and taken to Field v, where they stayed all night. The next day, all of them, dressed identically and neatly, were transported in three trucks to the camp in Konstancinów near Łódź.⁷⁴ Those who arrived a little later left for Ravensbrück, among other camps (11 March 1944), then another group was sent to Łódź and on 16 April,

69 B. Siwek-Ciupak, *Więźniowie białoruscy w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, „Zeszyty Majdanka”, 22 (2003) p. 207.

70 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 145.

71 B. Siwek-Ciupak, *Więźniowie białoruscy*, p. 208.

72 Ibidem.

73 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 145.

74 B. Siwek-Ciupak, *Więźniowie białoruscy*, p. 216.

children with their mothers were taken to Auschwitz.⁷⁵ After another transport went to Łódź, the remaining 38 young prisoners were sent together with their mothers to Auschwitz in April.⁷⁶

Preserved documents show that:

372 Belarusian children were deported from Majdanek to the camps in Konstantynów and Auschwitz. It is not known what happened to the children placed in Field IV in October 1943. One night they simply disappeared. Perhaps they were taken to one of the children's camps. The fate of 304, or 41% of the children, is also unknown. It can be assumed that they died in the camp.⁷⁷

As a result of the German occupier's actions in Belarus, from March 1943 to January 1944, approximately 8,000–9,000 of the local population ended up at Majdanek, of which as many as 56% were women and children. Experiences related to pacification, transports and staying in the camp resulted in a mortality rate of 50% in this group. Belarusian prisoners who survived Majdanek were gradually transported to other camps.⁷⁸

It can be said that Belarusian children were treated similarly to Polish children. Due to their origin, they were not at risk of a quick death, like Jewish children, but often age alone determined survival. These children had to count on the help of other prisoners because they were brought to Majdanek with their entire families and so did not receive parcels, like Polish prisoners. Thanks to the kindness and help of other prisoners, some of them survived the camp, as evidenced by later letters of thanks.

Conclusions

Children from the Polish territories occupied by the Germans were deported alone or with their families to Majdanek, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Gross-Rosen,

75 J. Wnuk, *Dzieci polskie*, p. 116.

76 Z. Murawska, *Dzieci w obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku*, p. 146.

77 B. Siwek-Ciupa, *Więźniowie białoruscy*, p. 219.

78 *Ibidem*, p. 220.

Stutthof, Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibór.⁷⁹ It is estimated that approximately 200,000 Polish children were deported to the Third Reich to be Germanized, of whom only 15% to 20% were recovered after the war.⁸⁰ Selection was made in resettlement camps, such as in Zwierzyniec, Zamość, Potulice, Smukale and Łódź.⁸¹ Children selected for Germanization were sent to special facilities in Kalisz, Bruczkowo, Polczyn Zdrój, Puszczykowo near Poznań and at a later stage, deeper into the Reich.⁸²

Transported to concentration camps, they had to endure hunger, dreadful sanitary conditions and terror just like adults. Children deported to the extermination camps in Chełmno, Treblinka, Sobibór and Belzec were going to certain death. Others were sent to children's labour camps in Łódź, Dzierżążnia, Gorzyczki and Gliwice, where they had to work hard.⁸³ It was also common for children to die in mass executions. It is estimated that of the 2,332 executions carried out, 242 were of children under 14 years of age.⁸⁴

The consequences of German military operations from 1939 to 1945 were the deaths of approximately 1,800,000 Polish and Jewish children under 15 years of age and approximately 225,000 young people aged 16–18, as well as

- 79 *Dziecko polskie*, p. 5; B. Gola, D. Pauluk, *Cierpienie dzieci w Auschwitz – wyniszczenie biologiczne i psychiczne*, in: *Zbrodnia bez kary...*, pp. 93–115; A. Kołakowski, *Zbrodnia bez kary: eksterminacja dzieci polskich w okresie okupacji niemieckiej w latach 1939–1945*, in: *Zbrodnia bez kary...*, p. 66–80.
- 80 *Dziecko polskie*, p. 4; M. Rembierz, *Nazistowska zbrodnia totalna – o antropologiczno-pedagogicznych aspektach eksterminacji, rabunku, zawłaszczania i zniemczania polskich dzieci. (W przedpolu badań biograficznych)*, „Biografistyka Pedagogiczna”, 5 (2020) No. 1, pp. 13–49, DOI: 10.36578/BP.2020.05.01.
- 81 A. Molesztak, *Doświadczenia obozowe dzieci w niemieckim obozie przesiedleńczym i pracy w Potulicach i Smukale – wspomnienia więźniarek*, in: *Zbrodnia bez kary...*, pp. 191–208.
- 82 *Dziecko polskie*, p. 10; J. Kostkiewicz, *Polskie dzieci pod okupacją niemiecką (konteksty polityczne, bytowe, wychowawcze) – wprowadzenie w problematykę badawczą*, w: *Zbrodnia bez kary...*, pp. 7–15; J. Kostkiewicz, *Niemiecka polityka eksterminacji i germanizacji polskich dzieci w czasie II wojny światowej*, w: *Zbrodnia bez kary...*, pp. 51–65.
- 83 Z. Murawska-Gryń, *Dzieci w hitlerowskich obozach koncentracyjnych*, „Zeszyty Majdanka”, 10 (1980) p. 5.
- 84 *Dziecko polskie*, p. 7.

the deportation of 200,000 children destined for Germanization. This constitutes almost 35% of the total losses of the Polish population.⁸⁵ Although these numbers are huge, it should be remembered that not all documents have been preserved – for Majdanek and other camps. Many were deliberately destroyed or all the data not even recorded to conceal the actual state of affairs. Hence, we will never know the true data about German crimes against children during World War II.

Streszczenie: W artykule skupiono się na dzieciach trzech narodowości, które stanowiły największe grupy w niemieckim obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku: polskiej, żydowskiej i białoruskiej. Gehenna i eksterminacja dzieci na Majdanku jest jednym z najtragiczniejszych zagadnień w dziejach tego obozu zagłady. Nie można podać dokładnej liczby dzieci przebywających w niemieckim obozie koncentracyjnym na Majdanku, ani ile z nich w nim zginęło, ponieważ Niemcy celowo zniszczyli lub wręcz nie odnotowywali wszystkich danych o dzieciach, aby zataić faktyczny stan rzeczy. Stąd nigdy nie poznamy prawdziwych danych o zbrodniach niemieckich na dzieciach w czasie drugiej wojny światowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Majdanek, niemiecki obóz koncentracyjny, dzieci polskie, dzieci żydowskie, dzieci białoruskie, Dzieci Zamojszczyzny.

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85 Ibidem, p. 11.

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