The Warschau concentration camp, known in Poland as Gęsiówka because it stood at 45 Ulica Gęśia, was established in the summer of 1943 on the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto. After the deportation of the last of Warsaw’s Jews, the Jewish quarter was to be razed and rendered uninhabitable, but not before all usable building materials from the ghetto had been recovered. But the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April and May 1943 stymied German plans. The Germans’ scorched-earth tactics under Jürgen Stroop to quell the Jewish resistance reduced the area of the ghetto to rubble. After the defeat of the Jewish resistance fighters, the Germans could now proceed to salvage significant quantities of construction materials, especially bricks and scrap metal, from the debris to be used in support of the German war effort. For this task, Stroop suggested the deployment of Jewish prisoners who would be incarcerated in a concentration camp converted from the former ghetto prison. The Germans also expected to uncover large caches of secreted valuables hidden by the deported Jews. Furthermore, clearance of the rubble would facilitate the effort of German forces to uncover the hiding places of Jewish fugitives from the German assault on the ghetto in cellars, bunkers, and dugouts. Finally, it was in the Germans’ interest to erase all evidentiary traces of their annihilation of Warsaw’s 400,000 Jews.

In an apparent endorsement of Stroop’s proposal, in June 1943, Heinrich Himmler ordered Oswald Pohl’s SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA) and the Security Police (Sipo and SD) in the General Government to erect a concentration camp on the site of the destroyed ghetto. It was Himmler’s wish not only to salvage bricks, scrap metal, and other building materials from the rubble of the former ghetto but also to seal all underground hideouts, flatten it to the ground, and plant a park in its place. Responsibility for the implementation of this plan was delegated to Hans Kammler, chief of the WVHA’s Office Group C.

The Warschau concentration camp was officially established on July 19, 1943, with 300 prisoners, German inmates from Buchenwald, both political opponents of the regime and common criminals, who would soon become the camp’s de facto administrators. In April 1944, the camp was annexed to the Majdanek concentration camp in Lublin and assumed the new name of Lublin concentration camp–Warsaw labor camp (Konzentrationslager Lublin–Arbeitslager Warschau). The camp’s first commandant was SS-Obersturmbahnführer Wilhelm Göcke, who was transferred in September 1943 to establish a concentration camp in Kauren (Kovno or Kaunas); after his departure the camp was headed first by SS-Hauptsturmführer Nikolaus Herbet and then by SS-Oberstürmführer Friedrich Wilhelm Ruppert, the commandant of the camp when it was evacuated in July 1944. Four German construction firms—Merkle (Ostrów Wielkopolski), Ostdeutscher Tiefbau (Naumburg), Berlinisches Baugeschäft (Berlin), and Willy Keymer (Warsaw)—were contracted to execute Himmler’s order with the assistance of the German Eastern Railway (Ostbahn).

Jewish male inmates from Auschwitz constituted the prisoner labor force for the execution of this project. Two series of transports of Jewish prisoners arrived in Warsaw. Four transports with 3,683 Jews arrived in Warsaw from Auschwitz in August, October, and November 1943. After mid-May 1944, transports of an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 Hungarian Jews replenished the inmate population, which was considerably depleted by then. To the Germans, the key criteria in the selection of these prisoners were their relatively decent physical condition, since the work would be heavy and arduous, and their non-Polish origins, because they did not want Jewish prisoners to fraternize with Polish civilians employed in the same work area. Moreover, command of Polish would be an invaluable asset in the event of escape. Thus the Germans deliberately selected Jews from Western and Central Europe and Greece for prisoner labor in Warsaw. In spite of German intentions, several Jewish prisoners in the Warschau concentration camp had migrated westward from Poland before the war and therefore spoke Polish. In the November 1944 transport, moreover, the Germans were forced to include 50 Polish Jews because there were not enough non-Polish prisoners available to fill the quota of 1,000 men. A couple of thousand paid Polish civilian workers and dozens of salaried German technicians augmented the camp’s Jewish labor force.

The bulk of the Jewish prisoners were assigned to the demolition of the ghetto. It entailed several steps: gathering
bricks from the ruins of the ghetto—that is to say, not only recovering bricks already lying on the ground but also demolishing the unstable walls of dilapidated buildings for their bricks; cleaning the bricks by scraping the mortar from them; and stacking them in piles for conveyance by trucks (driven by Poles) to trains. The prisoners were forced to perform this task mostly with the use of their bare hands and occasionally primitive tools like picks and shovels. In the spring of 1944, the use of dynamite, often planted by the prisoners, was introduced to raze remaining buildings. This was backbreaking, exhausting, and dangerous work, and many prisoners were killed and injured. The bricks were heavy, especially for men suffering from fatigue, malnutrition, and disease. Prisoners frequently fell from the heights of ramshackle buildings earmarked for demolition. The tempo was brisk, and German overseers disciplined prisoners who were unable to maintain the pace or abandoned their labor for a brief respite. In his account of the ghetto's demolition, one surviving prisoner writes, "Human life played no role whatsoever." The stupefying lengths to which these prisoners were driven are attested to by the results of their forced labor. By June 1944, they had demolished an area of approximately 10 million square meters (nearly 12 million square yards) and collected 34 million bricks, 6,000 tons of scrap metal, 1,300 tons of iron ore, and 805 tons of nonferrous metals! Of the SS unit assigned to the Warschau concentration camp, which amounted to a company, were transferred from various other camps, including the Sachsenhausen and the Lublin subcamp Trawniki. After the annexation of the camp to Majdanek in April 1944, SS personnel from Lublin replaced the original SS unit. The primary function of the SS in Warschau was to guard the periphery of the camp. In spite of this minimal task, the camp's Jewish prisoners bore the brunt of oppressive SS tactics, as the SS unit attached to the camp never recoiled from acts of violence. The SS unit assigned to the Warschau camp appears to have exhibited an unreflective “healthy, common sense” or “everyday understanding” that Jewish concentration camp inmates were enemies of the state, enemies whose execution—largely through work at this late stage in the war—was totally appropriate. In the Warschau camp, SS violence was prompted further by prospects of personal enrichment. SS men were enticed not merely by the plunder of valuables discovered by prisoners in the debris of the ghetto but also by the hope of lining their own pockets with the gold teeth of the camp's dead—and occasionally barely living—prisoners. The ferocity of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in which Jewish insurgents had managed to kill and wound several SS men, apparently served to intensify the loathing of Jews among the SS men in this unit into a violent animosity.

SS brutality aside, the German prisoner-functionaries, who essentially ran the camp, dispensed most of the daily humiliation and degradation that the prisoners suffered. Prisoner-functionaries took pains to intimidate the Jewish prisoners under their control with forcible measures and even wanton cruelty. This was especially true of the criminal elements among the Kapos, whose feral instincts were directly opposed to the prisoners’ welfare. But because of their own inmate status, most of the German prisoner-functionaries were probably most concerned with their own survival, to which aim the Jewish prisoners were expendable.

Hundreds of Jewish prisoners died from sheer exhaustion, mistreatment, and execution; in addition, a typhus epidemic in the winter of 1944 devastated the inmate population. Starvation rations and primitive sanitation, even by the low standards of the concentration camp system, helped create conditions conducive to disease. Lice spread quickly through the camp in the winter of 1943–1944, and typhus then struck the camp with a vengeance in January and February 1944. Afflicted prisoners were placed in an isolation barrack, where they just lay on soiled pallets, receiving no supplemental rations or antibiotics until they either recovered or died. The epidemic created a legion of walking skeletons—"Muslims" (Muselmänner) in the universal argot of camp life—who, enervated by camp conditions, gave up on themselves and apathetically awaited death. By March 1944, approximately 75 percent of the camp’s Jewish prisoners had died, with approximately 1,000 men still alive. Since the ghetto's demolition was not completed, German authorities decided to replenish the camp's depleted Jewish workforce with additional Jewish prisoners from Hungary in June 1944.

Jewish prisoners employed various stratagems to survive their plight. Successful escape from the camp was rare, since fleeing prisoners had to overcome two sets of guarded walls—the wall surrounding the camp proper and the ghetto wall. Apprehended escapees were hanged in the presence of the entire inmate population, in an effort to deter others from contemplating flight. Since escape was impractical, survival demanded the capacity to endure the deplorable conditions of camp life by navigating breaches in the camp's brutal regime. Physical self-preservation necessitated what was called, in the universal vernacular of the concentration camp system, “organizing.” In the Warschau concentration camp this activity essentially entailed scavenging through the rubble of the ghetto for abandoned objects of value and then either selling them for cash to buy food or bartering them directly for food in the flourishing underground economy established between Jewish prisoners and Polish civilian workers. When it later became more difficult to locate items of value in the rubble, many prisoners had their gold teeth extracted by fellow prisoners and then sold them to Poles for either bread or cash to buy bread.

There was modest cultural activity among the Jewish prisoners. A few prisoners would meet in the barracks for prayer. Jewish classics found in the rubble were smuggled into the camp and either passed from person to person or read aloud in the barracks. A few fortunate prisoners were able to draw from a stable reservoir of emotional sustenance from friends or relatives. Jewish prisoners from Greece found fellowship among themselves not only because they felt different from their fellow Jews who hailed from the continent but also because they shared a distinct cultural and communal tradition.
Although the Germans planned to complete demolition of the ghetto by August 1, 1944, the Soviet advance to the east bank of the Vistula forced the camp's closure in July 1944. The Germans decided to evacuate the prisoners westward in the first of the large wave of death marches undertaken in the terminal phase of the war. Before evacuation, the Germans killed a couple hundred of the most debilitated prisoners; approximately 300 prisoners decided to take their chances and volunteered upon request of the camp’s authorities to remain after evacuation to complete the dismantlement of the camp. On July 28, the Germans evacuated approximately 4,500 of the remaining 5,000 prisoners under heavy SS guard in the direction of Kutno, located 120 kilometers (about 75 miles) west of Warsaw. The Germans shot any prisoner breaking ranks or falling behind. Marching in scorching summer heat, the prisoners were wracked by thirst.

The death march to Kutno lasted three days. On August 2, the surviving prisoners were loaded into boxcars on a train to Dachau for a journey of almost 750 kilometers (466 miles). Conditions in the cars were abysmal. Approximately 100 men were crammed into each boxcar without any rations. Scores of prisoners died en route from suffocation and heat prostration, while several became mentally unhinged during this agonizing journey. This death train reached Dachau on August 6. Of the prisoners who were evacuated from Warsaw, not quite 4,000 survived the death march and death train to Dachau.5

In Warsaw itself, the Warsaw Uprising erupted on August 1, and on August 5, the “Zoska” battalion of the Polish underground Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK) liberated the Warschau concentration camp. In a fierce skirmish on the first day of the uprising, Polish fighters had already freed a group of 50 Jewish prisoners toiling outside the perimeter of the camp. Of the roughly 350 Jewish prisoners freed in the camp by the AK, dozens, including 24 women, had been transferred on July 31, from Pawiak. (Pawiak was the notorious prison for Poles suspected of underground activities; its inmate population included Jews discovered in hiding on the “Aryan” side or temporarily spared from destruction because of their indispensable manual skills.) The vast majority of liberated prisoners volunteered to fight in the uprising and served the revolt in various capacities. A special Jewish fighting platoon and a Jewish brigade to construct barricades were formed from liberated prisoners. These units sustained heavy losses. The morale of the former prisoners was corroded, however, when antisemitism reared its ugly head in the fighting units; antisemitic Poles even killed several liberated prisoners who volunteered for combat units. With the defeat of the Warsaw Uprising by superior German forces on October 2, the surviving Jewish prisoners were compelled either to flee or go into hiding in bunkers. Life in the bunkers was a grueling ordeal. When the Red Army finally entered Warsaw on January 17, 1945, only 200 Jews, among them former prisoners from the Warschau concentration camp, reemerged from their bunkers still alive.

The existence of the Warschau concentration camp is hardly mentioned in standard accounts of the Holocaust. It was doubtless a minor camp in the large scheme of things, but it dispensed more than its fair share of suffering. Thousands of Jews fell victim there to the Nazi annihilationist labor policies. Of the 8,000 to 9,000 inmates who were impressed into the prisoner labor battalion of this camp between the summers of 1943 and 1944, 4,000 to 5,000 of them perished in the course of the camp’s existence, during the camp’s evacuation, and in battle or in hiding after liberation.

There have been several postwar trials of camp personnel. In the late 1940s, eight SS men were executed for the murder of camp prisoners—five in German courts and three by the Polish regional court in Lublin. In addition, Walter Wawryniak, the camp’s initial orderly, was convicted in an East German criminal court in Leipzig in 1950 of the murder and mistreatment of camp prisoners. On appeal, his death sentence was reduced to life imprisonment.6 In July 2000, the U.S. District Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania vacated the citizenship of Theodor Szehinskyj because of his service in the ranks of the Waffen-SS in various concentration camps, including the Warschau concentration camp. He should have been ineligible for a visa to enter the United States after the war.7 Substantial evidence from the camp was introduced during the trial in Poland of Jürgen Stroop, who was executed in 1951 for his role in the persecution of Jews and Poles in Warsaw. Both Germany’s Central Office of State Justice Administrations (ZdL) in Ludwigsburg in the 1970s and the Polish Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation—Institute of National Memory from 1974 to 1996 conducted extensive investigations of camp personnel. In both 1974 and 1980, German state prosecutors in Munich terminated the proceedings, and in 1996 the Investigative Department of the Provincial Prosecutor in Warsaw followed suit for similar reasons: the death of many suspected culprits, the failure to discover the whereabouts of others, and the difficulty of identifying the perpetrators of numerous individual killings.
SOURCES


Source material for the Warschau concentration camp is scattered in various archival record groups. The most interesting Nuremberg Trial documents pertaining to the camp are Stroop’s final report of May 16, 1943, on the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, which contains his recommendation to establish a concentration camp for Jewish prisoners on the ruins of the ghetto (PS-1061); Himmler’s order of June 11, 1943, to establish a concentration camp in the former ghetto (NO-2496); Pohl’s announcement of July 23, 1943, of the establishment of the camp (NO-2516); and four reports by Kammler from October 1943 through June 1944 on the progress of the demolition of the former ghetto by the camp’s prisoners (NO-2503, NO-2517, NO-2504, NO-2505). Files from Stroop’s trial in Warsaw in 1946, located in IPN and available on microfilm in USHMMA, 1998.A.0255, 3 reels, contain several relevant documents. In the course of its investigation, the ZdL amassed several witness statements from SS men and German prisoners assigned to the camp (available at BA-L). The evidentiary record of the Szehinskyj trial includes two transfer reports and a troop muster roll, all of which were discovered in Russian archives, showing the transfer of SS units to and from the Warschau camp. The AZIH, RG No. 301, and YVA, Record Group No. 03, possess the most extensive collection of Jewish survivor accounts of life in the camp. On transports from Auschwitz to Warschau, see Danuta Czech, Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939–1945 (New York: Henry Holt [Owl Books], 1997), pp. 475, 501, 502, 535. Alois Eisenhändler, “Bericht über das Konzentrationslager Warschau” (unpub. memoir, December 1967), AZIH, 301/6401, p. 3.

NOTES


5. The file number of the unpublished verdict in the trial of V. Szehinskyj is LG Leipzig Gr. Strfk. (201) 3/50, April 28, 1950. His death sentence was reduced by the appellate court to a life term because of the failings of capitalist society to reform him during his recidivist youth before consigning him to the concentration camp system! The file number of the unpublished decision of the Erste Grosse Strafkammer des Landgerichts Leipzig is Gr. Strfk. [Grosse Strafkammer] (201) 3/55—19 St. Ks 4/50.
