

Polish Law Discovers a Nazi Camp: The Investigation and Trials of the Death Camp in Chełmno

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In the conditions of the postwar chaos and the growing Soviet influence, the Polish state was able to achieve significant legal punishment of Nazi crimes. Parallel to the International Military Tribunal, Polish Supreme National Tribunal (NTN) and multiple cases heard in regular courts based on the August 1944 Decree allowed political and moral dealing with the trauma equally important to Poles and Jews, individuals and politicians.

This paper tells the story of discovery and investigation of the former Nazi death camp in Polish village Chełmno in 1945-1946 by Polish judge Władysław Bednarz and the following trials of Nazi perpetrators. It seeks to demonstrate how justice was organized in Poland, how it treated Nazi crimes against the Jews, and what was the role of Jewish survivors as witnesses. I analyze how Polish investigators worked in Chełmno, what were their methods, and what obstacles they encountered. To this end, it is crucial to include positions of the Polish government, court clerks, clergy, militia, local population, Jewish survivors, and the international community. I demonstrate what social, political, and economic circumstances impacted the treatment of war crimes in one particular death camp, and will attempt to answer why Chełmno was forgotten for many years after. I highlight the special role of Jewish witnesses and historians collecting the evidence and assisting justice.

The outcome of the Bednarz's investigation published as a brochure was for many years the only source of information about Chełmno, and therefore determined how the camp is remembered. With this paper, I will contribute to the genesis of this source and the understanding of the creation of the Holocaust-related knowledge intertwined with the legal and mnemonic actions in post-war Poland.