ESCAPE TUNNEL FOUND AT NAZI DEATH CAMP

Germany occupied Poland during World War II. In 1942, the Nazis located one of many Nazi death camps at Sobibor, Poland. Unlike concentration camps where prisoners were housed, a death camp was solely a facility to kill those who had been rounded up by the German SS, or Nazi police forces. The majority of the people targeted by the Nazis were Jewish, although others were also sent to such camps because of their ethnicities or political views.

Sobibor had a relatively small staff of German SS officers. The center was divided into three main areas. The administrative section housed the offices and barracks for the guards. The reception area included railway siding, barracks for the victims, and warehouses. Finally, the extermination area included gas chambers and mass graves. Also at the extermination area were barracks for the prisoners who avoided the gas chambers because they were forced to work instead. They were used to dispose of bodies into the mass graves and to clean railway cars before they were used to bring more prisoners. On occasions, the SS would kill these workers and replace them with new laborers.

The victims were from ghettos located in the area. Trains brought them to the Sobibor train station nearby. The trains could be as long as 60 freight cars, each loaded to capacity. Groups of 20 freight cars at a time were moved to the rail siding that led to the camp's reception area. The prisoners from these cars were unloaded at the barracks where they were required to give up their valuables and remove all of their clothing. The valuables were stored in the warehouses before being sorted and shipped back to Germany. The prisoners were then forced to walk through a tube from the barracks that led directly to the gas chambers. Once inside, the doors were sealed. Guards in the adjacent engine room pumped carbon monoxide into the chamber, killing everyone. This process would repeat with another group of 20 freight cars. In its 17 months of operation as a death camp, Sobibor claimed the lives of an estimated 167,000 to 250,000 people.

Compared to other death camps, less is known of Sobibor since there were so few survivors. Historians do know, however, that the prisoners organized a resistance group at the camp in the spring of 1943. Some of the newly arrived prisoners had military training and shared their skills with their fellow inmates. Meanwhile, several German camp officials had been removed, leaving the camp less guarded. Sobibor had approximately 600 prisoners who remained at the camp. On October 14, 1943, the resistance group led an uprising. They were able to kill dozens of German personnel, and about 300 prisoners broke out of the camp. While many escapees were captured and killed, the uprising prompted the Nazis to close the camp. The entire facility was razed and trees were planted to cover up any trace of the former death camp.

Amazingly, in June of this year, archaeologists at the site of Sobibor found an escape tunnel. The tunnel was located at the laborers’ barracks and stretched 32 feet (9.8 m) from there to under the barbed wire fence that surrounded the camp. The tunnel was 5 feet (1.5 m) below the surface and only wide enough to allow one person to pass at a time. A tunnel this deep and long would be difficult to build and keep hidden. Experts doubt the tunnel was successfully used. They suspect it was likely discovered and the people who constructed it executed. However, it is the first discovery of an escape tunnel from a Nazi camp. Historians can now say that the imprisoned laborers of Sobibor not only led a resistance movement that ended up closing the camp, used or not—they also managed to build an escape tunnel.

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QUESTIONS

1. After reading the article, research to learn more about German concentration camps during World War II. Then, create a Venn diagram to compare concentration camps with what you have learned in the article about death camps. How were these [two] camps used similarly and how were they different?

2. Were you surprised to learn about the events at Sobibor? Write a paragraph describing what you did not know before reading this article. Include whether this new information changed your point of view about the Holocaust and if so, in what ways?

3. Look at the map of the Sobibor death camp. Locate the extermination area and the nearby barracks for the laborers. Note where the perimeter fences were located in relation to these barracks. Then, think about the obstacles the prisoners would have had in building this tunnel, such as the distance from the barracks to the perimeter and where to put the dug out earth. What other obstacles would have made digging the tunnel very difficult? Record your answers to help you think about and imagine what you have read.

4. Because the tunnel was newly discovered, historians do not have much information about it. However, more is known about the uprising that took place at Sobibor. Do these two events appear to be related and if so, in what way? Infer what connection, if any, the uprising has with an escape tunnel that was probably unused.

COMMON CORE STRANDS:

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.5 Compare and contrast the overall structure (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in two or more texts. [Question 1]

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. [Question 4]

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.1 Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information. [Questions 2 and 3]

• CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate. [Question 1]

http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy