

Wojciech Korcuć  
*The First  
Transport*

**U–jazdowski**

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exhibition

# Wojciech Korcuć

## *The First Transport*

Honorary curator

Barbara Wojnarowska-Gautier

Exhibition design

Wojciech Korcuć

Curator

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Consultant

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Text  
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*The First Transport*, an installation by Wojciech Korcuć presented at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, is a continuation of an artistic project that began in 2020 following a conversation with Barbara Wojnarowska-Gautier, former prisoner of the Auschwitz concentration camp, victim of Josef Mengele's experiments, and now the honorary curator of this endeavour. In response to Mrs. Gautier's request, Korcuć decided to work towards restoring the memory of the first transport of Poles to the largest death factory in the history of the world.

On 14 June 1940, the Nazis deported a group of 728 Poles to the recently established Auschwitz concentration camp. The transported group consisted mainly of young people: scouts, students, and members of underground independence organizations. Among them were also soldiers who fought in the September campaign and were trying to reach Hungary to join the Polish Army that was forming there. They were transported by trains from the prison in Tarnów, unaware of the purpose of the journey. At the railway station in Kraków, they heard joyful announcements about the German occupation of Paris (met with no resistance from the French). In subsequent years, thousands of similar transports took place, but this very first one is the subject of Korcuć's artistic vision. He is one of the few Polish artists who speak up for historical truth.

In memory of that first transport, in June 2020 and 2021, Korcuć carried out a public space project entitled 728. In Nowogrodzka Street in Warsaw, he in-

stalled an exhibition presenting all the names and photographs of the first Polish prisoners of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Posters honouring the memory of this event were also displayed throughout Warsaw.

In *The First Transport*, the artist goes a step further. He tries to focus on the individual, youngest victims and attempts to shorten the distance between them and contemporary Poles by employing an array of present-day visual techniques.

This year's project is also accompanied by a wide-ranging media campaign to remind the public of the anniversary of the first transport of Poles to Auschwitz, so that the forgotten memory of the Polish prisoners of this concentration camp is reinstated. We owe it to them.

Text  
Marcin  
Kaczorowski<sup>[1]</sup>

# Auschwitz Concentration Camp – The First Transport

## Invasion, Occupation, and Propaganda

The 14 June 2022 saw the 82<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the First Transport of prisoners to KL Auschwitz and 1 September 2022 – the 83<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the beginning of World War II. The start of WWII and the establishment of the largest German concentration and extermination camp are just months apart, but the first concentration camps were established in occupied Poland immediately after the Third Reich's invasion. The 1 September 1939 saw not only the attack of German military power on Poland, but also an outburst of hatred, driven in advance by national socialists. Shortly before the outbreak of the war, Goebbels' propaganda reported crimes allegedly committed against Germans, providing fictional pretexts for "retaliation" against the Poles. These fabrications fell on fertile ground. Plenty of hostile ideas – such as for example by Bismarck's theories that were extremely aggressive to the Poles – were already forged decades earlier. The previous decades also saw the victory of Polish uprisings in Silesia and Wielkopolska.<sup>[2]</sup> The very resurrection and independence of the Polish state was a huge frustration for many

<sup>[1]</sup> Author is the President of Association for Preserving the Memory of the Home Army

<sup>[2]</sup> "Hit the Poles so hard that they despair of their life; I have full sympathy with their condition, but if we want to survive, we can only exterminate them; the wolf, too, cannot help having been created by God as he is, but people shoot him for it if they can." Letter to his sister Malwine (26/14 March 1861) published in *Bismarck-Briefe* (Second edition Göttingen 1955), edited by Hans Rothfels, p. 276

in Germany. In 1922, General Hans von Seeckt of the Reichswehr wrote:

Poland's existence is intolerable and incompatible with the essential conditions of Germany's life. Poland must go and will go – as a result of her internal weakness and of action by Russia – with our aid... The obliteration of Poland must be one of the fundamental drives of German policy and is attainable by means of, and with the help of, Russia. [3]

For Poland, the coming war would be a total war – from the first day when the Luftwaffe bombs fell on the hospital in Wieluń and the sleeping civilians – in line with the following:

I have issued the command [...] to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only this shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need. [...] Poland will be depopulated and settled with Germans. [4].

## The Intelligenzaktion

During the first phase of the occupation, the largest mass executions took place in Pomerania and Wielkopolska. The forests in Piaśnica Wielka (also known as the “second” or “Pomeranian” Katyń), Valley of Death in Fordon, Bydgoszcz, Fort VII in Poznań, KL Stutthof, and Palmiry near Warsaw are just a few of the many sites of Nazi extermination of the Polish elites. In a planned operation, the invaders murdered tens of thousands of Poles, and transported tens of thousands to concentration camps, where most prisoners would die.

[3] Jochen Boehler, *Najazd 1939*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2011, p. 26

[4] Adolf Hitler, *The Obersalzberg Speech*, August 22, 1939: [http://www.europarl.tv.europa.eu/publications/index\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.tv.europa.eu/publications/index_en.htm)

## Why them, why here?

As soon as the Nazi army arrived in Oświęcim, several special SS commissions inspected the area. Their task was to investigate the possibility of establishing a concentration camp in Zasole – one of the suburbs of Oświęcim. The idea was born in the Office of the Senior Commander of the SS and the Police in Wrocław. This office was headed by SS-Gruppenfuehrer Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, to whom inspector Gestapo SS-Oberfuehrer Arpad Wigand was subject. Wigand motivated his request with the need to carry out a wave of mass arrests among the Polish population of Silesia and the General Government (...). The order to establish a concentration camp in Oświęcim was issued in April 1940; Rudolf Hoess was appointed commander of the camp. [5]

## The first mass transport to Auschwitz concentration camp arrived on 14 June 1940.

On 14 June 1940, the Nazis deported a group of 728 Poles to the recently established Auschwitz concentration camp. The transported group consisted mainly of young people: scouts, students, and members of underground independence organizations. Among them were also soldiers who fought in the September campaign and were trying to reach Hungary to join the Polish Army that was forming there. (...) [6]

Escorted by German guards, the men were transported by trains from the prison in Tarnów, unaware of the purpose of the journey. At the railway station in Kraków, they heard joyful announcements about the German occupation of Paris (met with no resistance from the French). When the train reached its destination:

Suddenly, the doors of our carriage are flung open. Someone on the platform shouts at the top of his voice 'Everybody out! Get a move on, you shit.' Our escorts assist us to climb out of the train in their

[5] Kazimierz Smoleń, *Oświęcim 1940–1945, Przewodnik po Muzeum*, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Katowice 1978

[6] <http://www.chsro.pl/pierwszy-transport/lista.html>

own way. They bring the butts of their carbines down on our backs with resounding blows. We all dash like mad towards the one and only exit. One by one we jump down from the high carriage and land directly at the feet of scores of SS men; they are lined up in rows leading towards a high fence which encircles a large building. Beaten, pushed and terrified by the SS men yelling at us, we rush like a flock of panicking sheep through the open gate... [7]

**Transported to Auschwitz three months later, this is how Witold Pilecki recalls first entering the gate with an inscription reading: *Arbeit Macht Frei*.**

The first thing was a question thrown out in German by a striped man with a club: “*Was bist du von zivil?*” [Hey you, what’s your civilian job?]” Replying priest, judge, lawyer, at that time meant being beaten to death. When asked, the fellow standing in the row in front of me replied in German “*Richter* [a judge],” as his clothes were grasped under his throat. It was a disastrous mistake. Within moments he was on the ground being beaten and kicked. So, they were going out of their way to kill the professional classes. [8]

## The First Prisoners of Auschwitz

**Let us recall one of the figures that very well reflects the profile of the first prisoners of Auschwitz Concentration Camp.**

Mieczysław Ciepły was born on 26 July 1920. He was a first-year student at a Construction School in 1939/40, a member of the Tadeusz Kościuszko 5th Scout Team in Jarosław. He was arrested on 6 May 1940 during class. After a brutal interrogation, he was detained and deported to Tarnów, and from there – on 14 June 1940 – the first mass transport took him to Auschwitz, where he received one of the lowest camp numbers – 35. In the camp, he was forced to hard labour, he stayed in block 8, and later in the camp hospital. Mieczysław Ciepły’s sister, Henryka, recalled: “About three weeks

[7] Wiesław Kielar, *Anus mundi*, p. 9

[8] Witold Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, trans. Jarek Garliński, Los Angeles: Aquila Polonica, 2012, p. 17

before his death, we received a note from him – he was healthy. When Kozakiewicz returned from Auschwitz, he told our father that his [Mieczysław’s] arms and legs were frostbitten. My brother died in the camp on 6 June 1942. We were notified by telegram, citing the heart as the cause of death. I don’t know any details about my brother’s death. We don’t have any keepsakes. We were taking packages with food and underwear for our brother to Tarnów. The prison office returned my brother’s dirty underwear, and there was a bloody shirt between them. [9]

**What crime did he commit? The occupiers knew that following the fiasco of their defence, the Poles would organize a resistance movement. This movement was meant to be wiped out, entirely annihilated. Four days before Germany’s assault on Poland, an Intelligence Officer from the 208. Wehrmacht Infantry Division wrote:**

Poles – as is their treacherous Slavic nature – will attempt to cause damage to the enemy through (...) acts of sabotage. The insurgent war will, in many (cases), be led by clergy, who are known for their fanatical hatred of the Germans. (...) Rebellious activity should also be expected in the wider population who should be treated harshly (...), and if necessary, with brutality. [10]

**We can see that the two key groups that posed a threat to the Germans were the underground fighters and the clergy. The third group condemned to extermination was indicated by the leader of the Third Reich himself. As noted by Martin Bormann following a meeting with Hitler on 2 October 1940:**

Once more, the Führer must point out that the Poles can only have one master, and that is the German; two masters cannot and must not exist side by side; therefore, all representatives of the Polish

[9] <https://rzeszow.ipn.gov.pl/pl8/aktualnosci/100602.81-rocznica-wywiezienia-mieszkancow-Jaroslawia-w-pierwszym-transporcie-do-Auschw.html>

[10] Jochen Boehler, op. cit., p. 173

intelligentsia should be eliminated [*umbringen*]. This sounds harsh, but such are the laws of life.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Conditions in the Camp

Known for his swagger and irony, Wiesław Kielar, a prisoner from the first transport, recalls the first days in Auschwitz Concentration Camp:

Our daily program was thoroughly varied. Our Kapos and the SS men saw to that. They outdid each other in inventing ever-new tortures. For days on end, we engaged in what was known as “sport”: hopping, rolling, dancing, knee-bending. Hopping involved a distance of dozens of yards across the square and back. Rolling, on the other hand, took place only where there was a lot of dust. Dancing was for relaxation, to cheer things up a bit, while knee-bending was carried out to the command of: “One, two, three,” to a standing position and don again to knees bent. A shorn head, swollen from the sun, and heavy as lead. Thirst burning the entrails. Did someone faint? They took him to the building; there the Kapo managed to bring him round. Cold water, a well-applied kick, off you go, back into your line.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Survival

Once the prisoners were unloaded, brutal selection began – for slave labour and abrupt death at the hands of German criminal prisoners with numbers from 1 to 30, SS men, and trained guard dogs. Thousands of Poles would die from hunger, cold, and attending roll calls for hours on end, in all weather conditions. They would die of exhaustion, be shot in the back during escape attempts and executed during camp roll-calls and in the

<sup>[11]</sup> Linda Jacobs Altman, *Adolf Hitler: Evil Mastermind of the Holocaust*, Enslow Publishers, 2005, p. 111

<sup>[12]</sup> <https://archive.org/details/anusmundi1500day00kiel/page/8/mode/2up>, p. 9

so-called penal companies; killed with shovels, knives and clubs.

And if one dies like that, let us say if only ninety times, then, no way for it, one becomes someone else. But thousands of us were dying there... tens of thousands... later, hundreds of thousands. So, the outside world and the people in it seemed to us comical, busy with what in our eyes were irrelevant matters.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Children in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Many children died from hunger and various diseases. Every day I saw little corpses lying among the piles of the dead by the blocks. Often, as I approached the dead, I'd see mischiefs of rats devouring the bodies.<sup>[14]</sup>

Young children were also subjected to cruel, inhumane practices. They were told to stand for six hours at roll-calls in freezing weather. SS men committed inhumane crimes, burning whole groups of small children (and not only children) alive, if a transport arrived too late to activate the large gas chambers... Such testimony was given by the witness, Eugeniusz Motz.<sup>[15]</sup>

One of the child prisoners of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp was a young Barbara Gautier (Basia), the child of well-known Warsaw artists who were active in the Polish underground, performed in the best European theatres before the war, including in Paris. She was one of 13,000 Warsaw citizens from the so-called uprising transports – the first of which arrived on 12 August 1944. Her parents participated in helping Jews in the ghetto, and were friendly with, among others, the famous Vera Gran. Thanks to their German informants, they received reports from Berlin which they passed

<sup>[13]</sup> Witold Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, op.cit., p. 50

<sup>[14]</sup> Antonina Piątkowska, *Wspomnienia oświęcimskie*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1977, p.107

<sup>[15]</sup> *Testament Więźniów KL Auschwitz* [Testament of Auschwitz Concentration Camp Prisoners], part V

on to the Home Army. The reason for their arrest is not quite known, but it was most likely an anonymous denunciation. At the age of three and a half, Barbara was separated from her parents – also deported to Auschwitz. Her further fate would be determined on the so-called child block, in the midst of a brutal struggle for food and the ruthlessness of other children, struggling to survive, often at any cost.

One day, Mengele passed the hungry Basia an apple, observing the blond-haired and blue-eyed child of “subhumans” – *Untermenschen*. Basia was not afraid of him; this must have made quite an impression on the inquisitive sadist. Basia – a little blonde girl with the number 83638 – instead of eating the apple and thanking the man, threw it at the head of the “scientific” psychopath, the master of life and death in KL Auschwitz-Birkenau. Even so (or maybe because of that?) she would survive the camp and cruel experiments, and after the war she would travel around the world as a UN employee, helping people of all denominations and nationalities for several decades. Eventually, however, after many years of living abroad, she would return to Poland to fulfil the wish of Kazimierz Albin, the prisoner of the First Transport, to preserve the memory of Polish prisoners of Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Perhaps this is the essence of the Polish experience of Auschwitz, and maybe even part of the Polish experience

of the war: resistance. Resistance and struggle against all odds, from the start of the war and to its very end, and often in the name of helping others and in order to remain human.

This is how the friend of little Basia’s mother – her “Guardian Angel”, as Barbara Gautier called her years later – Antonina Piątkowska, prisoner number 6805, remembered the horrors of Auschwitz:

“On that day (...) (SS-Scharführer) Stiwitz appeared in the block. He was accompanied by SS-Aufseherin Kitzmann, known in the camp for cruelty. Stiwitz summoned Lidia Magerowa, who, as she spoke German, was to be the interpreter. She translated Stiwitz’s question to me about why I gave the potatoes to the Jews. I replied that I would not ask a hungry prisoner about their nationality. I lost my husband and my 17-year-old son here in the camp, and I know hunger. When Magerowa translated my answer, Stiwitz demanded that I swear I would do no such thing in the future. I listened to his translated demand and stayed silent for a while. I knew very well that disagreeing would mean death (...). – Lydia, please tell SS-Scharführer that I cannot make that promise. I am a faithful Catholic and such a promise would go against my beliefs. Whenever I meet a hungry man, and I have something to eat – I will share it with him, regardless of whether it is a Pole, a German, a Russian or a Jew.” [16].

Mrs Piątkowska’s extraordinary courage is also evidenced by the following passage in Pilecki’s report:

“On the 16th of March (of ’42), 120 Polish women were brought in. They smiled at the inmates who were entering the camp in columns. After interrogations and maybe some special torturing, which no one could confirm, that same evening wagons took to the crema-

[16] Antonina Piątkowska, op. cit., p. 63

[17] Witold Pilecki, *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, op. cit., p.173

torium a number of bloody corpses in pieces, with severed heads, hands, breasts.” [17]

## Memory, Identity, and Trauma

To this day, the psychological scars of the older generation and the trauma of war and occupation are passed on to the younger generations, who have never experienced war, but absorb the syndrome of post-traumatic stress disorder and have the experience of rape, terror, fear and hunger, somehow inscribed in their DNA. [18] “The Polish society bears the permanent mark of war and concentration camps. They live with it like a bleeding, but honourable scar. If they are trying to expunge it, it’s because it hurts. It constitutes Polish history and heritage, but also the present and the future. [19] The wounds and scars of previous generations are a part of us and our consciousness (and the subconscious). This fragment of *Testament Więźniów KL Auschwitz* [Testament of Auschwitz Concentration Camp Prisoners] serves as advice and a warning:

“Today, Poles are frequently accused of being complicit in committing crimes alongside the Germans. What is more, “Polish concentration camps” are often mentioned in the West and the victims of these camps are accused in various ways. This is a grave injustice. There were no Polish camps, there were only German concentration camps. Accusing the victims of these camps of crimes when they can no longer defend themselves, is the greatest crime against man, humanity, and peace.”

According to historians, about 325 people survived the First Transport.

[18] Paweł Nowak, Izabela Łucka, *Młody Polak po doświadczeniach wojennych. Siła transgeneracyjnej transmisji traumy*, June 2014, “Psychiatria i Psychologia Kliniczna” 14(2): p. 84

[19] Ryn Z.J., *Long-term psychological morbidity of incarceration in Auschwitz. Echoes of Holocaust 2000*; Issue No. 6



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A passerby in front of Wojciech Korkeu's installation in Warsaw presented as part of 728 project in 2021.