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Museum of the Second World War, Poland

CRIMES AGAINST PRISONERS OF WAR IN THE MAIN EXHIBITION OF THE MUSEUM OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN GDANSK

The Museum of the Second World War is currently being developed in Gdansk, Poland as a unique site presenting the narration about the largest most destructive conflict in the history of mankind. The exhibition would cover nearly 7,000 square meters and would be composed of around 1600 unique exhibits. It's only natural that the Museum would narrate the complex history of Poland during the war in its ups and downs, but this would be depicted on the canvas of broader history of the conflict, which –we believe –would help the foreign visitors to understand it better. The story does not end with the history of Poland, but will also tackle the more general questions and issues. One of these, treated separately within the narrative of the main exhibit, would be the barbaric nature of the Second World War.

Wartime atrocities committed on single or small groups prisoners of war happened across the fronts and continents and perhaps are inseparable from the brutality of armed struggle itself. However, in some places during the war atrocities committed on PoWs claimed dozens, hundreds or hundreds of thousands of victims. Moreover, some of the victims were not killed as a result of brutalization of the captors through involvement in actual combat, but due to a cool, ideologically motivated decision made in safe environments of political cabinets. These atrocities would be firmly included in the overall narrative of the war.

The first issue of large-scale murder of the PoWs would be raised in the part of the main exhibition telling the story of the Polish Campaign of 1939. The German invasion of Poland was conducted in a ruthless and brutal manner, and many of the phenomena usually connected to later stages of the conflict – like aerial attacks on civilians, disregard for property and hostage-taking – were discernible already in 1939. The issue of crimes committed on PoWs also appeared; it is estimated that the German Army is responsible for

murder of at least 2500 Polish PoWs, the largest massacre occurring on September 9th, 1939 at Ciepielów in central Poland, where German Colonel Walter Wessel of 29th Motorized Infantry Division ordered to shoot about 300 Polish soldiers recently taken prisoner by his unit, claiming that the Poles were guerrillas fighting without uniforms. This story, alongside other instances of violation of the laws of war by the Germans in 1939, would serve to illustrate that in the East the war itself was a ruthless war of annihilation from the very beginning. The story would be told using traditional methods, with printed photographs and texts.

The second place where the issue of PoW treatment would be mentioned is the section devoted to the Japanese occupation of lands in Asia. There, apart from the well-known stories of mistreatment of white PoWs in the camps, the issue of massacres of PoWs and usage of them as dummies for bayonet practice would be mentioned and illustrated by photographs, including some that to our best knowledge have never been published.

One of the sections of the main exhibition of the Museum would be devoted to the criminal methods of conducting the war. There, three main issues would be stressed – (1) the aerial bombardment of cities conducted first by Nazi Germany and, in limited manner, by Japan and the Soviet Union in its war against Finland in 1939-1940, later brought back to Germany and Japan by Allied armadas of strategic bombers; (2) the blockade of Leningrad as a unique example of an attempt to starve out one of the metropoleis of Soviet Union; and, finally, the genocide of Soviet PoWs by the Germans, which claimed around three million victims – about a million of which were starved to death in camps by the end of 1941. The fate of the victims would be told via a short audiovisual presentation combining comment with footage and photographs of the victims of inhuman treatment by the Germans, stressing the suffering of common Red Army soldiers who, perhaps not always willing to fight for the Communist totalitarian regime ruling their own country, were to learn that the enemy was not all that much different. The presentation would be accompanied by items excavated on the sites of some of the PoW camps located within the current border of Poland. It is worth to remember, that the mass killing of Soviet PoWs was one of the greatest single acts of genocide apart from the Shoah.

The final place where the crimes committed on PoW would be told is the section devoted to the terror of the German and Soviet occupation regimes in Europe. There, in a section showing how the Nazis and the Soviets targeted members of Polish military and social

elites, the so-called Katyn Massacre would have its place. This crime and the subsequent attempt to cover the identity of the perpetrators are stressed within the exhibition due to its significance for the war and post-war history of Poland. Again, a special multimedia presentation has been prepared to illustrate the fact. The presentation itself would be concentrated on the suffering of the victims' families, who for decades were lied to about the fate of their loved ones and often harboured desperate hope that they would come back. The presentation would be shown in a specially arranged room, where the scenography would imitate the woods which were planted over the graves of the Polish officers. Numerous items dug out of the graves or preserved by families would be shown there. Actually selecting the proper method of displaying the Katyn Massacre was one of the biggest challenges our team faced in preparation of the main exhibition, since – as opposed to all the other instances of crimes committed on prisoners of war – the issue of subsequent cover-up had to be tackled. We do believe that with cooperation with the graphic designers of the exhibition (Belgian company Tempora) and the multimedia artists (Cracow-based Polish company NoLabel) we managed to reach a satisfactory solution. We heartily invite you all to come to our Museum in late 2016 to judge for yourself.

Note for the interpreters: for more information on the Museum and the exhibition please refer to our website:

Polish version:

www.muzeum1939.pl

English version:

<http://www.muzeum1939.pl/en/home-page>