

Rūta Trimonienė

Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, Lithuania

ŠILUTĖS MACIKAI PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS AND IMMORTALISATION OF THE SITE OF THE SOVIET LABOUR CAMP

After the restoration of Lithuania's independence, information about former prisoner of war (POW) camps in the village of Macikai near the town of Šilutė, later a Gulag division, began to emerge. The area was first shown on the Lithuanian TV programme *Veidrodis* (Mirror), where the River Šyša overflowed its banks in Macikai, and part of the bank was washed away revealing the remains of prisoners of war buried there. One of the human skeletons was intertwined in a metal chain with the dog tag of a Belgian pilot hanging around his neck.

In 1999, following the research of documents in the Lithuanian Central State Archives, archives of Lithuanian public organisations, Lithuanian Special Archives, and the Russian Federation State Archives, various sources of information, publications, and memories of witnesses, historian Rimgaudas Maslauskas prepared a 'Review of the Comprehensive Search for Macikai Camp and Cemetery'. The chronological range of the operation of the POW camps and the Gulag division was also established.

In **1941–1944**, there was a POW camp on the site for prisoners from anti-Hitler coalition countries: Americans, Belgians, Brits, French, Poles and Soviet citizens. The imprisonment conditions differed and depended on the nationality of prisoners. None of the provisions of the Geneva Convention were applied to citizens of the Soviet Union. According to a local resident from Armalėnai Village, Dovydas Stučka, many prisoners of war perished, particularly in 1942–1943 (as many as up to 40 per day), usually from exhaustion and disease. Fugitives or other prisoners who violated the rules were shot or gassed. At first, the deceased prisoners were buried about 500 meters away from the camp. Stučka said that dead naked prisoners were taken on sledges and buried 20–25 people per grave. There could have been around 60 such mass graves in Macikai, another 200–300 individual graves were located outside the camp in front of watchtower No. 3. Later, in 1943–1944, when there was no more space to bury prisoners by the River Šyša, the dead prisoners were transported further away to the fields of farmer Koblencas in Armalėnai Village. According to the testimony of Hilda Petraitytė, only Soviet prisoners of war who died of typhus epidemic were buried there. Dead naked bodies of the deceased were covered with overcoats and brought for burial by

prisoners of war in oblong pits (trenches) 2–3 meters wide in two rows in what today is Žalioji Street. Groups of 20 bodies were buried in pits: two levels of 10 bodies in each sprinkled with bleach.

With the second Soviet occupation of Lithuania, one POW camp was replaced by another POW camp that functioned between **1945** and **1948**. Imprisonment conditions were harsh. In three months of 1945, 18 POWs perished. The main cause of death was dystrophy, but the inhumane working conditions also played a part. Starting from 1946, this was the camp for completely exhausted POWs, those not capable of working, and condemned to death. Prisoners who passed away from disease and hunger were buried in an area near the camp by the River Šyša specially allocated for the cemetery, 250 meters from the boundary of the camp zone on the northwestern side. In 1946, the cemetery was fenced with barbed wire and divided into 3 quarters of 25 graves. Each grave was marked with a post with the registration number of the prisoner and the number of the quarter of the cemetery in black paint.

At the same time, a Gulag division functioned on this site between **1945** and **1955**. Lithuanian citizens who were not ‘in favour’ with the occupational authorities were held in the Gulag. The rather small site had all the Soviet attributes: barracks, a punishment cell, a sanitation section, etc. In 1948, when the POW camp was disbanded, the area of the Gulag division expanded at the expense of the former POW camp. This was the largest Gulag division in Lithuania. It held between 2,000 and 3,000 inmates, some of whom were political prisoners and were accommodated in separate sections. A significant number of the inmates were sick and disabled. The prison also had a Mother and Child Home for women prisoners with children up to 2 years of age. Hard forced labour, unsanitary living conditions and hunger were the causes of death of prisoners. Research of the surviving registration records of prisoners shows that between 1948 and 1955, 372 prisoners and 72 children passed away in the camp. All the deceased were buried in the cemetery located next to the camp. One of the Gulag burial instructions was to place a post by the grave with the number of the quarter of the cemetery. In 1955, after the Gulag division was closed, attempts were made to annihilate the cemetery under the guise of a ‘land reclamation’ project. Edmundas Stankevičius, who at the time worked as a draftsman at Šilutė Institute of Engineering Design, was tasked with the preparation of the plan. As a former political prisoner, Stankevičius understood the reasons for the task (at that time very few people knew about the former Soviet camp there) and tried to drag the work out for as long as possible. As a result, the work continued up until the time of the Reform Movement in Lithuania in 1990. The reclamation project was never realised, although some residential buildings were built on part of the cemetery.

In 1998 the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (hereinafter – Centre) discovered that the location was of great historical and social value, not only in Lithuania, but also internationally. Staff members of the Centre visited Šilutė in 1998 and met with municipal and museum employees. They inspected the remaining cemetery, and the buildings of the bathhouse and the punishment room. Municipal and museum employees, members of the Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees in Šilutė expressed concern about the preservation of the site. They recounted how in 1995, on the initiative of the chairman of the Union – the above mentioned Stankevičius – and Šilutė Museum, an exhibition was held in the former punishment room introducing periods of history of the POW camp and the Gulag division, which was regularly supplemented with exhibits from former inmates or their relatives. According to the photograph taken by the Germans and obtained from the US and also based on the existing foundations of the former buildings, a site plan of the former POW camp that functioned during the Nazi occupation was re-created. The collections of the museum include photographs of the cemetery of Macikai camp with still existing posts and numbers of the graves on them and the material on Lithuanian citizens who were imprisoned in the camp (their photographs, biographies, letters from the camp, copies of various documents from the Lithuanian Special Archives).

The remainder of the cemetery was fenced. On 14 June 1996, a monument to commemorate those who perished here was unveiled. Other monuments were also erected on the site: a granite slab to commemorate Americans who perished, a tall wooden cross – to commemorate Belgian and French soldiers who perished, and various tombstones for people tortured here by the Soviets.

After studying all the material brought from Šilutė about Macikai and the people of different nationalities imprisoned in Macikai, and implementing ‘The 1996–2000 state programme for the creation of memorial signs, symbols and monuments to the victims of genocide and people repressed for their resistance against occupation regimes’ approved by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania in 1995, some of the aims of which are to take stock of memorial sites and structures on the sites, to prepare lists of such sites, and to ensure their preservation, employees of the Centre:

- Contacted the then vice-minister of Culture regarding a joint group of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania and the Centre that would resolve the issues of the preservation and maintenance of the area (no reply was received).
- Contacted the ambassadors of Belgium, Germany, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States regarding joint immortalisation of the memory of inmates of POW camps and the Gulag division in Macikai. The letter to the German Embassy contained a request as to whether it was possible to get information from German archives about German prisoners of

war who perished in Macikai and also information about the POWs of the Kingdom of Belgium, Republic of France, United Kingdom, United States, and the former USSR prisoners of war who died in these camps. A reply was only received from the Embassy of the United Kingdom, which specified the addresses of two organisations in the United Kingdom. Both organisations were contacted, but only one of them responsible for British soldiers who died during WWI replied.

- Started preparing lists of Lithuanian citizens imprisoned in the Gulag division in 1948–1955.
- Prepared historical-archival data in order that the site with the remaining original buildings of the punishment room and the bathhouse, and also the area of the cemetery be enlisted in the Register of Immovable Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Lithuania and a protection zone for it determined.
- Ensured that a memorial plaque with an information note be installed on the remaining authentic building of the punishment room (it was installed on 6 June 2002).

In spring 2003, the Centre wrote to the Ministry of Culture suggesting the re-establishment of a joint working group of the representatives of the Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Defence, the Department of Cultural Heritage, embassies of concerned countries, the Centre, and the Agency for Care of Cultural Heritage with the aim of establishing specific obligations for each of these organisations in immortalising the site. The Ministry of Culture gladly accepted this proposal, but indicated that Šilutė Municipality, as the manager of this cultural heritage, should be doing it.

Between 2003 and 2011, the Monument Management Department of Šilutė District prepared a scheme for maintenance of the cemetery and the National Union for Care of German Soldiers' Graves and the Polish Embassy as well as various social organisations built monuments in memory of their citizens. Relatives of political prisoners also took care of immortalising the memory of their family members. The author of this presentation prepared a 'Project for maintaining the site of Macikai POW and a Gulag division in Šilutė District and immortalisation of the people who perished there', which reviewed the work already done and stated that, despite all this work the remaining original buildings of the punishment room and the bathhouse and also the cemetery did not give the impression of a single object, monuments were erected in no particular order, the cemetery was difficult to find from the museum without a guide, there were no signs or access paths. In order to resolve these problems, it was proposed to publish a brochure about the object not only in the Lithuanian language, but also in English, French, Polish and Russian with a historical overview and photographs reflecting the various historical periods of the site; to discuss with tourist

companies in Lithuania the inclusion of the site into their tourist routes and the placing of information about it on their websites; it was also proposed to place a notice at the museum in Macikai about allocating 2% of personal income tax to the proposed project for the maintenance of the site. The project also included guidelines for long-term maintenance of the site. A copy of the project was handed over to the museum in Šilutė District.

In 2009, Šilutė District Municipality presented a project selected by way of tender for maintenance of the site of former POW camps and a Gulag division in Macikai to foreign embassies. Unfortunately, this was a very expensive project and due to the lack of funds it was suspended.

On 11 November 2011, in Žalioji Street on the western edge of Armalėnai Village, which I mentioned as the site of a mass grave of prisoners describing the 1941–1944 period, an excavator was digging a trench for water pipes by a newly constructed house, when at a depth of approximately 1.2 meters human remains were discovered. The number of skulls indicated that there were remains of 10 bodies. In 2012, a research group under the leadership of archaeologist Egidijus Abromavičius conducted an archaeological survey of the site. It was identified that there could have been a total of 7 mass graves, each 1.6 m × 20 meters in size. In 2013 the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania commissioned two archaeological surveys on the sites on Žalioji Street of Armalėnai Village of Šilutė District and the old cemetery and the former prisoner of war complex in Macikai Village of Šilutė District. The archaeological survey was conducted by a group of archaeologists led by Abromavičius.

In 2012, Šilutė Museum obtained funding under the project ‘Development of creative industries through upgrading and promoting museum exhibits’ to purchase and use audio guides in several foreign languages. This was very useful for the museum in conducting tours both for foreign tourists and individual visitors.

Thus, over a period of 20 years there has been steady work towards immortalising and granting heritage status to one of the most unique historical objects in Eastern Europe. An object which testifies to the crimes of the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes. And it is not yet over. I am convinced that with the help of all interested state and public organisations and availability of funds from a variety of international agencies this object will be further maintained and protected in order to retain its international historical commemorative value and social significance.