

THE IMAGE OF TREBLINKA IN THE EYES OF SAMUEL WILLENBERG



'The Image of Treblinka in the Eyes of Samuel Willenberg' educational project

In January 2020, the Institute of National Remembrance initiated an exhibition and educational project on the basis of sculptures by Samuel Willenberg, depicting people and situations he remembered particularly vividly during his imprisonment at Treblinka extermination camp. These unique sculptures, constituting the world heritage of the Holocaust, were brought by the IPN from Israel for the purposes of the project. The endeavour was possible thanks to the kindness and trust bestowed upon the Institute by the widow of the sculptor, Ada Krystyna Willenberg. The exhibition received the National Patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda to mark the Centenary of Regaining Independence.

The exhibition is accompanied by the screening of "Treblinka's Last Witness", a documentary film produced by and screened courtesy of WLRN Public Television for South Florida, as well as educational workshops.

The aim of the project is not only to educate about the tragedy of the Holocaust, but also to familiarize the younger generation with the author of the sculptures, a Jew from Częstochowa, a soldier of the September campaign, a prisoner of Treblinka, a participant in the camp rebellion, a Warsaw insurgent, and an advocate of reconciliation between Polish and Jewish nations. He was among 200 inmates who on 2 August 1943 succeeded in escaping from Treblinka. At the moment of his death in 2016, he remained the last survivor of the revolt. Samuel Willenberg was known for speaking equally openly about both the tragic and beautiful pages of history.

In spite of the perpetrators' efforts to destroy all traces, the sculptures provide direct evidence of their deeds.

The head of the artist Samuel Willenberg
Bronze, 2002



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SAMUEL WILLENBERG

The photo of Samuel Willenberg eight days after he ran away during the revolt in Treblinka, taken for the purpose of preparing false documents (courtesy of the Treblinka Museum).



Samuel Willenberg was among 200 inmates who on 2 August 1943 succeeded in escaping from the Treblinka German extermination camp. At the moment of his death in 2016 he remained the last survivor of the rebellion in Treblinka.

Samuel Willenberg was born in 1923 in Częstochowa, Poland, the son of Maniefa, née Popov, and Perec Willenberg; he had two sisters, his elder Itta and younger Tamara. In October 1942 he arrived at the Treblinka camp in a transport of 6,000 Jews deported from the Opatów ghetto. Most perished immediately; he was the only one who remained alive. On his first night in the camp, Willenberg heard "a familiar voice, as if from a great distance"; it was Professor Merring, his elementary school history teacher. That night Merring urged him, "You've got to escape from here and tell the world what you've seen. That will be your duty."

Willenberg was in Treblinka until the outbreak of the rebellion on 2 August 1943. He saw with his own eyes the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Jews and thousands of Roma and witnessed them being sent to death in the gas chambers; his own sisters Itta and Tamara were killed there. Willenberg himself suffered humiliation, violence, cruelty and extreme viciousness at the hands of the German SS staff and the Ukrainian SS-Wachmänner guards. Inmates in the

camp organized the rebellion with the objective of avenging the murdered and destroying the extermination facilities. Willenberg took part in the uprising and was shot in the leg. Wounded and under gunfire, he managed to escape and reached Warsaw. Under the assumed name of Ignacy Popov ("Igo"), he took part in the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944, first within the ranks of the Home Army (AK) and then the Polish People's Army (PAL). After the war he remained in Poland. In 1950, following his father's death, he emigrated to Israel with his mother and his wife, Ada. Professor Merring was killed in Treblinka and Samuel Willenberg carried out his teacher's behest until his death. Willenberg wrote his memoir of the camp and uprising and commemorated them in his book *Surviving Treblinka* (1984). He made pencil drawings and cast bronze sculptures based on his memories of the murder site. He and his wife accompanied youth delegations and tours to Poland, to give testimony about what he had experienced in Treblinka.

For his activities during and after the World War II Samuel Willenberg received the highest national honours of the Republic of Poland, including the *Virtuti Militari*, the Cross of Merit with Swords, the Cross of Valour, the Warsaw Uprising Cross, the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, the Order of Polonia Restituta, and the Polish Army Medal.



ADA KRYSTYNA WILLENBERG



Krystyna (Ada) Willenberg, née Lubelczyk, was born in 1929 in Warsaw. During the war she found herself in the Warsaw Ghetto, from which she escaped to the Aryan side thanks to the help of her family in 1943. Under a false name, she found shelter in the home of Helena and Edmund Majewski. She met her husband, Samuel Willenberg, in Łódź after the war. They got married in 1948 and emigrated to Israel two years later. Krystyna Willenberg is the author of the book *Skok do życia* [Leap to Life], in which she describes her wartime experiences.

Ada Krystyna Willenberg was devoted to accompanying her husband in his educational activities, and is now continuing this work. She is a well-known figure in Polish social and political life, and is a great advocate and supporter of the construction of an educational pavilion on the grounds of the Treblinka Museum, where, according

to Samuel Willenberg's last will, his sculptures are to stand. The IPN is immensely grateful for her involvement in the project and the fact that she agreed to lend her husband's sculptures free of charge, and to appear at the exhibition's opening ceremony as a guest of honor. Ada Willenberg gave the guests a tour of the exhibition, and personally carried out the first educational workshops. She also took an active part in subsequent installments of the project in various locations across Poland, including the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the revolt at the Treblinka extermination camp, where the IPN exhibition was presented in an outdoor version.

Ada Willenberg remains a respected authority for many circles in Poland and Israel, her presence and extraordinary charisma allowing her to build bridges of understanding across nations.

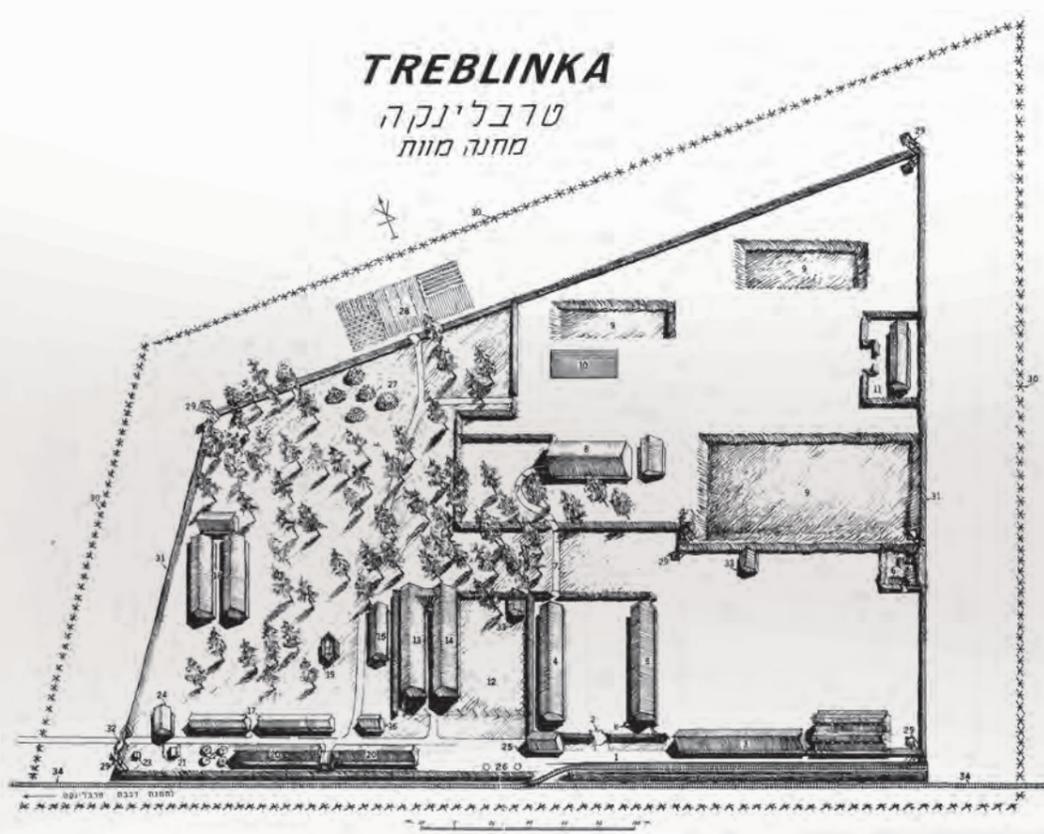


TREBLINKA II EXTERMINATION CAMP

(JULY 1942 - NOVEMBER 1943)



View of the western part of the camp
courtesy of the Treblinka Museum



Plan of the death camp Treblinka II, drawn by Samuel Willenberg

1. Railway ramp
3. Storehouse of the victims' sorted belongings (disguised as a railway station)
4. Undressing hut for women and children
6. 'Lazarett'
7. 'Death Road'
8. Gas chambers
9. Burial pits for victims' bodies and ashes
10. Grills for burning the victims' bodies
11. Prisoners' hut
33. Latrine

courtesy of the Treblinka Museum

The attack of Germany and the Soviet Union on the Polish State in September 1939 started World War II and gave way to the possibility of the Holocaust. Treblinka was one of the main German death camps established as part of the so-called Operation Reinhardt (Aktion Reinhardt), in which Jews from Central Poland, called the General Government, were murdered. Treblinka was located in the Warsaw District (Distrikt Warschau), Sokołów County (Kreishauptmannschaft Sokolow).

More Polish Jews died in Treblinka than in Chełmno nad Nerem, Bełżec, Sobibór, Majdanek or Auschwitz. This is the largest Polish cemetery in history. The use of specialized methods meant that it took just over 12 months, 20 hectares of camouflaged and isolated area, a dozen or so barracks, several gas chambers, several dozen Germans, a hundred trained Soviet prisoners of war, about a thousand terrorized inmates who were forced to work, and the helplessness of the local Polish community, as well as the silence of the world in the face of the murder of nearly a million people. The gassing and burning of 6 thousand people took 2 to 3 hours and was sometimes performed as often as three times a day. Most of the victims were defenceless due to physical exhaustion, terror, worry for their loved ones and the system of mystification of the alleged labour camp.

Despite this fact, a conspiracy was set up among the Jewish work commandos, led by Julian Chorążycki, a physician from Warsaw. On 2 August 1943, following the example of the Warsaw Ghetto insurgents, the inmates mounted armed resistance. Nearly half the Jewish workers managed to escape. About two hundred of them survived. Among them was Samuel Willenberg from Częstochowa (1923–2016). At the end of 1942, the Polish underground already knew what was taking place in the camp. The underground press, including Biuletyn Informacyjny (Information Bulletin), wrote about it. The Home Army intelligence were considering an attack on the camp, through, among others, a railwayman, Franciszek Ząbecki (who wrote a memoir after the war). The reports that were sent to the Polish Government in London and the information given to the world about the extermination of Jews did not result in any reaction on the part of the Allies. The perpetrators were effective in removing the traces of their crime. The victims' personal effects were stolen and transferred to the Treasury of the Third Reich. The infrastructure was destroyed in 1943, after the corpses had been exhumed and burned. What remains of the German camp in Treblinka is the memory of its victims, rich cultural treasures created by the people murdered there, as well as a warning for the world and hope that similar crimes of genocide will not be committed ever again. The sculptures presented at the exhibition are a part of this message.

Prepared by Dr Marcin Urynowicz,
Historical Research Office of the Institute of National
Remembrance



'Lazarett'
courtesy of the Treblinka Museum



DESCENDING FROM THE BOXCAR

BRONZE, 2000

One sun-drenched morning [...] That day, as every day, the shouts of the foremen were reverberating across the yard as they spurred us on to work. [...] From the railway platform we heard the clatter of flanged wheels inching toward the camp. The first morning transport had arrived, loaded with the condemned, who as yet had no idea of what awaited them here.



THE 'BLUES'

BRONZE, 2001

[...] this detail usually consisted of Hasidic Jews [...] One could see by their demeanor that most of them had been Yeshiva students and had dressed until very recently in traditional attire. [...] This modest group, with the broom as its emblem, was in charge of cleaning the freight cars and scattering disinfectant.

It was they who removed the bodies of the people who died in the freight cars during the transport, and hauled them to the 'Lazarett' to be incinerated.



ORDERED TO REMOVE THEIR SHOES

BRONZE, 2002

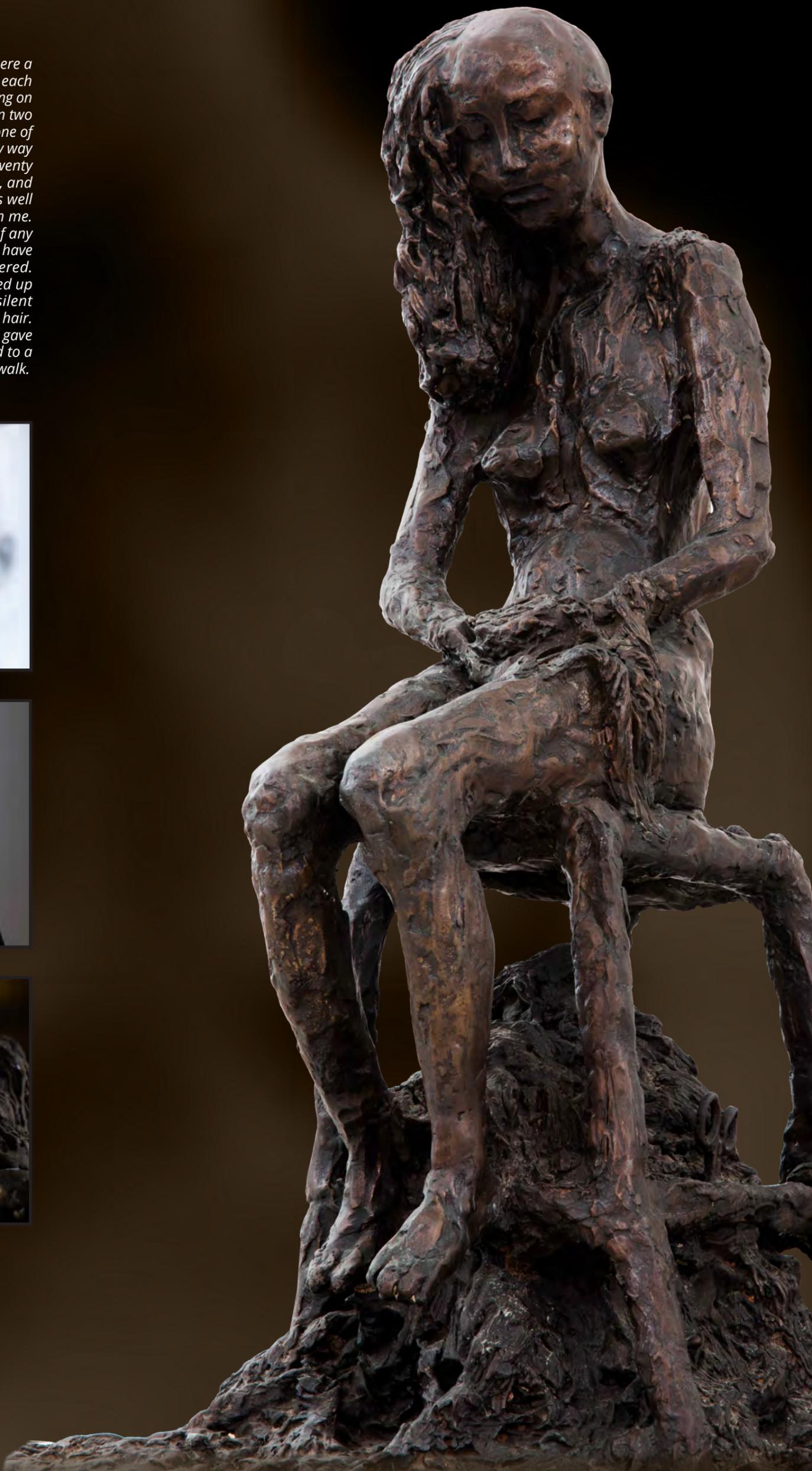
Again the train stopped. Now it lurched backward. The cars rocked violently. Through the grating I saw that most of the train had been left behind at the station. Our wagon and a few others were being pushed slowly onto a siding. [...] Then some huts burst into view, beside the track in the forest. Immediately behind them stood a huge pile of shoes; people milled about, this way and that, in the pile and around it. [...] I found myself in a yard about 30 meters wide, with huts on either side. [...] I took [a] position within a herd of men alongside the hut. A group of some fifteen Jews, all with red armbands, ordered us to sit on the ground, take off our shoes and tie them together by the laces.



HOMAGE TO RUTH DORFMANN

BRONZE, 2002

We entered the hut and proceeded to a little hut where a row of prisoners in white hairdressers' smocks stood, each beside a small stool. I donned a smock which was hanging on the wall, pulled a pair of scissors from a crack between two boards, and stood like the other 'hairdressers', beside one of the available stools [...]. Hundreds of women passes my way that day. Among them was a very lovely one about twenty years old [...] Her name was Ruth Dorfmann, she said, and she has already graduated from high school. She was well aware of what awaited her, and kept it no secret from me. Her beautiful eyes displayed neither fear nor agony of any kind, only pain and boundless sadness. 'How long will I have to suffer?' she asked. 'Only a few moments,' I answered. A heavy stone seemed to roll off her heart; tears welled up in our eyes, Suchomil of the SS passed by. We fell silent until he was gone; I continued cutting her long, silken hair. When I had finished, Ruth stood up from the stool and gave me one long, last look, as if saying goodbye to me and to a cruel, merciless world, and set out slowly in her final walk.

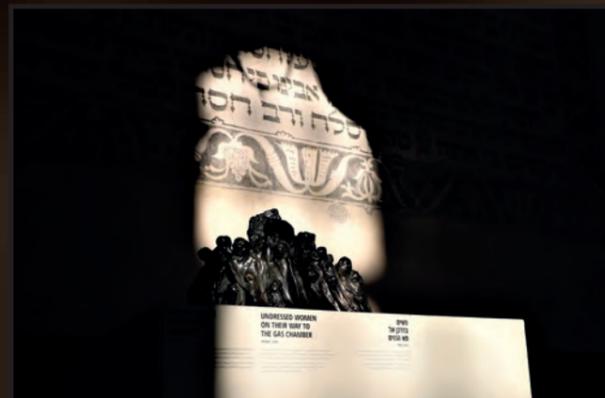


UNDRESSED WOMEN ON THEIR WAY TO THE GAS CHAMBER

BRONZE, 2000

People were ushered from the platform towards the wide open gate that led to the transport yard. After crossing it, the SS ordered the men to undress, while the women were directed to the hut.

[...] Naked women with children were rushed to the row of hairdressers, and then they were led further - to the path of death, to the gas chambers.



A CRIPPLED JEW AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE 'LAZARETT'

BRONZE, 2002

Huge piles of clothing were ranged parallel to the hut. At the edge of the yard, 150 metres away, stood the fence with its intertwined pine branches. An opening in this fence was marked by a Red Cross flag. [...] I reached a little room camouflaged at every angle. [...] with benches along the walls. [...] Elderly and crippled men sat on the benches, and a Kapo wearing a white apron and a Red Cross armband stood in the middle of the room. He turned to the older people, and with a great deference, asked them to undress for a medical examination. [...] they sat down, withered and shivering with cold. Noticing my presence, the orderly ordered me to leave at once through a door to the right. As I obeyed, however, I found a wall of shrubbery in my way; to circumvent it, I turned left and climbed to the top of a raised bank of sand. Ahead of me, a bored Ukrainian sentry sat on a little chair, clutching a rifle. Before him, down below, was a deep pit. At its bottom were heaps of corpses which had not yet been consumed by a fire burning under them.



AN INMATE COLLECTING BOTTLES

BRONZE, 2000

The prams were used for collecting bottles, thermos flasks, jars and aluminium containers. The prisoners who handled these items had the right to cross the transport yard to a storeroom reserved for them. It was situated behind the hut where the women undressed; there, behind the hut, bottles of all shapes and sizes were piled. The prisoners in charge of bottles were nicknamed the Flaschensortierungskommando – the Bottle-sorting Detail. [...]

The new detail was ordered to collect all bottles, including broken and small ones, which had once held medicines. [...] They were being collected not for any value they might possess, but as part of the cover-up of what was happening in Treblinka. When [...] the war was over – by which time we would no longer be here – the presence of so many medicine bottles in this little area could only be incriminating. This was the only reason to gather them up and ship them in a direction unknown to us...



A GIRL FROM WARSAW

BRONZE, 2002

One little girl was left alone on the platform. Her age was difficult to ascertain. The torn rags which covered her delicate, slender body had apparently been a dress at one time. On her head was a colorful kerchief; she gnawed at its fringes with her white teeth. Her large, doe-like black eyes flashed about in fright. Her skinny legs were red from the frost, and her feet were sheathed in gleaming shoes with very high heels, in stark contrast with the rest of her miserable attire. [...] She was clutching a partly eaten loaf of bread to her chest, as if afraid that someone might steal it from her. [...]

Like an apparition from another world, she approached the sorters one after another, glancing at the contents of the suitcases as if she were browsing around a market [...] [the SS man Miete] approached her and pushed her toward the opening in the green fence with its flapping Red Cross flag. No one said a word. [...] Everyone watched the little girl from Warsaw being pushed toward the 'Lazarett' [German: military hospital; in the camp it was a killing pit, disguised as an infirmary, where the sick and disabled were executed]. She vanished behind the fence. A few minutes later we heard a shot. Silence, utter silence everywhere.



A CONCERT

BRONZE, 2002

...Among the [50] new men was the famous Warsaw musician Artur Gold. [...] He and the other two prisoners added up to a violin trio [...] The trio of musicians began to play popular pre-war tunes which, reminding of years gone by, left us depressed and sore of heart. The Germans were pleased with themselves: they had succeeded in organizing an orchestra in the death camp. [...]

After one of these concerts the Germans reached a conclusion: the maestros did not look good. [...] They ordered our tailors to sew jackets of shiny, loud blue cloth, and to attach giant bow-ties to the collars. Dressed as clowns, they entertained us after roll call day in, day out. However spent we might be after a twelve-hour working day, we had to stand in rank and take in a concert.



AN INMATE IN CANTOR'S GARB

BRONZE, 1999–2000

When the Germans noticed that the prisoners were going to the latrine too often and spending too much time there, the SS man Lalka [Yiddish: doll; the camp's deputy commandant, Kurt Franz] ordered the foremen to go to the storeroom and procure two rabbinical black suits and a couple of black hats with pompons on them. Two prisoners were equipped with whips. It was their job to make sure no more than five prisoners entered the outhouse at any one time, and that they spent no more than one minute inside. Alarm clocks dangled from their necks on strings. They were called the Scheisskommando. As for their job, they took a contrary attitude to it; thanks to them, the latrines became points of rendezvous between ourselves and prisoners from different groups. Here we exchanged news and information, with the Scheisskommando hovering protectively outside. Whenever a real guard approached, the Scheisskommando began to make a racket which indicated that it was time to hurry out.

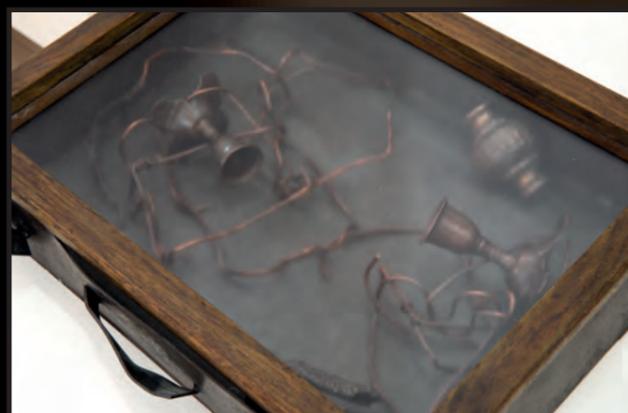


AN INMATE SORTING BELONGINGS

BRONZE, 2001–2002

We marched to a large yard behind our hut which was cluttered from one end to the other with mountains of shoes and scattered heaps of clothing and luggage. These rows to a height of some 10 meters around them were thousands of open suitcases, their locks broken, and their owners' names smeared on them in oil paint.

Prisoners would take up positions amid the open suitcases beside the hut and sort all the belongings of the Jews who had been transported from all over occupied Europe to this dead earth. The suitcases were filled with spoons, knives, eyeglasses, pocket knives, shaving brushes, fountain pens – all the little items packed by the people who had been brought here.



AN ARTIST – PAINTER INMATE PREPARING MISLEADING SIGNS

BRONZE, 2001

Another prisoner approached us, a professional painter from Warsaw, a man of medium height with a hawk's nose and a very black moustache on his fair-skinned face. He was wearing a wide-brimmed black hat, and a narrow black-bow tie around his neck. [...] He often talked to me at great length about his work: 'I do paintings, portraits, for the Germans. They bring me photos of their relatives, wives, mothers and children. [...] The SS describe their families to me with emotion and love – the color of their eyes, their hair. I produce family portraits from amateurish, blurred black-and-white photos' [...]

The artist was especially distraught on this occasion. He has been ordered to paint [...] an array of little white signs; 'First Class', 'Second Class', 'Third Class', 'Waiting Room', 'Cashier'... and a model of a large, round wall clock. [...] Several days later, the Germans ordered us to hang [...] the clock on the wall of the hut alongside the platform. Now the platform looked like an ordinary railway station.



2 AUGUST 1943 – THE INSURRECTION

BRONZE, 2002–2003

The date chosen was 2 August 1943, a day I shall never forget. [...] As that long-anticipated day dawned, our hearts pounded with the hope that now, maybe, our dream would at last come true. We had little thought for ourselves and our lives. Our overwhelming desire was to obliterate the death factory which had been our home. [...]

Utter silence reigned in the camp. The familiar sentries were positioned on the watchtowers as usual, fixing languid eyes on us. SS men hurried about the area just as they did every day. Nothing at all hinted at what was about to unfold here.

The silence was meant to fool our enemy. [...] the Germans, ordinarily so suspicious, were off their guard. They did not imagine that a prisoners' insurrection was about to break out that day.

The rebellion was timed to start at 4:30 p.m. [...] Shortly before 4 and not as planned we heard an explosion from the direction of the Germans' huts. The Ukrainian at the gate to the vegetable patch let loose a burst of gunfire. One of our men returned fire; the Ukrainian fell lifeless at the fence. I seized the rifle and ran to the Germans' compound. I could see rifles protruding from the windows of the Ukrainians' huts, firing into the forest. [...] As the hail of gunfire intensified, other prisoners followed us toward the gate.

We heard thunderous explosions from the garage; flames soared over the trees. A pillar of fire burst from the garage; the Germans' huts burned [...] The dry pine branches we had woven into the fence burned as well [...] Treblinka had become one massive blaze.



2 AUGUST 1943 – ESCAPE DURING THE INSURRECTION

BRONZE, 2002

I ran with the others toward the vegetable garden. Reaching the fence, I was greeted by a horrifying sight: masses of human corpses strewn between the tank obstacles. Dead prisoners stood erect like tombstones; dozens of human bodies leaned against the obstacles and the barbed-wire fences.

Machine-gun fire continued to rain down relentlessly from the watchtowers. As I skipped across the bodies of my dead

comrades, I felt a sudden pain in my leg and a sharp blow. My shoe filled with blood. I had been hit in the leg. Limping, I reached the railway track. [...]

I was alone, desperately thirsty, and dressed only in a shirt and trousers. One of my shoes was filled with blood; my leg throbbed horribly. I removed the cap from my shaven head. [...] I had no clear plan of action; I depended only on my instincts.



'Treblinka in the Eyes of Samuel Willenberg' educational project

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Documentary: *Treblinka's Last Witness* directed by Alan Tomlinson courtesy of WLRN, Public Television for South Florida

Sources of quotations in the descriptions of the sculptures:

Samuel Willenberg, *Bunt w Treblince*, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma, Warsaw 2016

Samuel Willenberg, *Surviving Treblinka*, Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford 1989

Samuel Willenberg, *Mered be-Treblinka*, Ministry of Defence of Israel, Tel Aviv 1986

