

# Institute of National Remembrance

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## Samuel Willenberg's legacy in Poland

Today marks the anniversary of the death of Samuel Willenberg, the last survivor of the rebellion against the Germans in Treblinka death camp. His unique sculptures can now be viewed in Opatów, from which, in October 1942, he and 6,000 other people were sent to Treblinka.





Samuel Willenberg was born in 1923 in Częstochowa, Poland, the son of Maniefa, nee 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 Jews deported from the Opatów ghetto. Most perished immediately; he was the only one who remained alive. 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 also perished there. Willenberg himself

suffered humiliation, violence, cruelty and extreme viciousness at the hands of the German SS staff and the Ukrainian "SS-Wachmänner" guards. Samuel Willenberg was among 200 inmates who on 2 August 1943 succeeded in escaping from the German extermination camp in Treblinka. At the moment of his death in 2016, he remained the last survivor of the rebellion in Treblinka. Samuel Willenberg became the spokesman for good Polish-Jewish relations, speaking openly about both the tragic and beautiful events, linking these two groups of Polish citizens during the criminal German occupation. For his activities during and after the Second World War Samuel Willenberg received the highest national honors 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.

In January 2020, the Institute brought 14 sculptures, made by Willenberg as a result of his painful memories from the camp, from Israel. "The Image of Treblinka in the Eyes of Samuel Willenberg" exhibition, created on their basis and accompanied by an educational project, toured a number of Polish cities and was enormously popular despite the pandemic. For those who could not see it in person, the Institute of National Remembrance prepared a virtual tour of the exhibition in Polish and English. It is available here:

<https://lastwitness.eu/> The efforts of the Institute of National Remembrance made it possible for the sculptures to remain in Poland for one more year. The sculptures portraying the author's personal

experiences as both a prisoner and a participant of the revolt in the Treblinka German death camp is accompanied by the screening of "Treblinka's Last Witness", a documentary film produced and screened courtesy of WLRN Public Television for South Florida, which is a first-hand account of Samuel Willenberg's life as a Jewish prisoner of the death camp.

In early 2021, the exhibition of the Institute of National Remembrance appeared in the Cultural Center in Opatów, which, after Częstochowa and Treblinka, remains the most significant place in the artist's life. It was here that before the war, his father Perec Willenberg created paintings on the synagogue walls. It also housed the ghetto established by the Germans during the war, from which, in October 1942, young Samuel was sent to the Treblinka extermination camp.

In the spring (April), the exhibits will arrive at the "Świętokrzyski Shtetl" Educational and Museum Center in Chmielnik, located in the former synagogue. The reconstructed and restored building reflects several hundred years of Jewish history in Chmielnik, as well as life typical for a pre-war shtetl. The exhibition will be on display until the end of April.

In addition, the IPN is in the advanced stage of negotiations with the

Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which is planning to exhibit the sculptures in its subordinate institutions.

The Institute's intention has been to take care and popularize Willenberg's legacy until the completion of the construction work at the Treblinka Museum, where it should be exhibited permanently according to the Artist's last will. Willenberg's sculptures and the accompanying educational project e.g. workshops for young people, are the best form of teaching about the tragedy of the Holocaust. Moreover, they constitute a stern warning for future generations against any form of totalitarianism. Willenberg himself - a long-time educator of young people from both Poland and Israel was also a strong believer in this approach. Currently, his work is being continued by his wife Ada Krystyna Willenberg.

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