

Involvement of partner city Wrocław/Oleśnica World War II

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Poland, the liberated state as created in 1918 after the end of the WWI, was dreamed of for many years. When it appeared, the happiness didn't last for a long time. Poland was in that time deeply into inside conflicts and when building the governing system it was romantic to think that in an environment of growing powers, like the Third Reich or Soviet Russia, the country would be left untouched. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl would say that Poland was deep in the Lifeworld (Lebenswelt) -sometimes defined as a bubble- that it is hard to put on an equal rule with the others. In his '*Crisis of the European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*' (published in 1936) he wrote: "In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as a universal horizon, as a coherent universe of existing objects, we -each "I-the-man" and all of us together- belong to the world as though living with one another in the world; and the world is the world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this 'living together'"¹.

World War II started on the 1st of September, 1939 with an attack on the Polish harbour in Gdańsk in the west and with the bombing of the city of Wieluń in central Poland. The country was invaded by Nazi Germany from the West and on the 17th of September from the East by Soviet Russia. The second date, after The War ended, would be forbidden to mention due to Soviet propaganda. For those who were fighting in a Home or Partisan Army during WWII, the Soviet Government would organise fake trials where a lot of them would be sentenced to jail and others just killed as they were wishing for liberation and not for domination, this time by Soviet Russia. So there were two wars. One from above, in which Polish troops worked together with the Soviet Army to defeat Nazi Germany, and one from below, to kill any resistance against the arriving communism. The year 1945 is the backdrop of a very important

¹ Husserl, Edmund, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, 1970, pp. 108-109.

event: the Yalta conference. And thus, the great resettlement in Europe began.

Wrocław (former Breslau) and Oleśnica (former Oels) were German cities till 1945. In Oleśnica was located an Airport of Luftwaffe Fliegerhorst Kommandantur (Air Force Headquarters). On September 1st, 1939 two squadrons of the 4th Aircraft Regiment Bombers Kampfgeschwader 4, "General Wever" (stationed in Oleśnica from 25.08.1939 to 22.09.1939), were bombing Poland. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Erdmann groups of Heinkel He 111 airplanes, after a flight of around 500 km, were bombing the airport in Lviv dropping 22 tons of bombs. Afterwards, these planes were bombing Dęblin, Kraków, Lublin, Radom and other cities. In Oleśnica and its surroundings (Community of Oleśnica, Dobroszyce commune) were located numerous POW camps and the former horticulture station was home to about 500 Poles and 300 Russian civilians. In addition to the barracks was a small camp (one barrack) and there lived about 100 Poles generally employed in the barracks (as horse hospital services) and military magazines in front of the former dogcatcher's magazines.

At the edge of the airport near the railway track to Kępno was a camp inhabited only by Poles employed in various establishments and in commercial and construction companies in Oleśnica. The camp also housed Italian prisoners in the barracks between warehouses and the former railway roundhouse. There were about 800 people.

The largest camp for foreigners was located at the current plant of railway repair warehouses (ZNTK). In total there lived around 7-8 thousand people. In this camp there were two separate and closely guarded satellite camps for about 250 French slaves and 500 Russian ones. In addition, the population numbered around 800 Poles, 2,500 Russian civilians, 300 French civilians, 200 Spaniards, 200 Lithuanians, 500 Czechs, 200 Romanians and 400 Silesians. About 80 people were Polish Volksdeutsche (German minority), mostly from Kępno and the surrounding area. The Silesians, Czechs, Romanians, Lithuanians and Volksdeutsche lived separately and were treated like Germans.

In Dobroszyce - there was a sub-POW camp 'VIII C' existing during the period of 20th of May, 1940 and July, 1941. In the camp were imprisoned approximately 650 Belgian and 70 Dutch people. After deciding to leave Hitler's coalition, there started to be in the POW Camps Bulgarians, Czechs and Slovaks as well and in 1944 a large group of Italians was placed there. They occupied all available places; the barracks at the Spacerowa street, the barracks at the airport and the railway station.

During The War a glider landing airport was created in Sokołowice, Community of Oleśnica (the gliding school was in the barracks at the fork of the road to Boguszyce). In addition to the existing real airport on the fields between Dąbrowa and Smardzów, there was a decoy airport on which planes made of plywood were located and were relocated from one place to another by the prisoners.

"In Oleśnica, during World War II, there were no concentration camps (the Lower Silesia branch camps had only KL Gross-Rosen). There was though a large camp for forced labourers." Alfred Konieczny, in the article Fri. *'The size of employment of foreign forced laborers and prisoners of war in the economy of Lower Silesia during the Second World War'* (in "Studia Slaskie, T.13, Opole in 1968, p.285) reported that "Reichsbahnausbesserungswerk-Lager Oels was composed of 17 barracks, where there were about 2,000 people. They were workers, Polish, French, Serbian, Slovak, Soviet and Italian. The camp operated from July, 1943 until mid-January, 1945. Workers from the camp were employed in the railway workshops"².

The Berthold Line (defence line) had an antitank ditch with a width of approximately 4m and a depth of approximately 3m and trenches for infantry positions, for machine guns, for barbed wire and for minefields which started being built, amongst others, by German children from Hitler's Youth aged 14-16 years as part of their holidays in 1944. In autumn and winter the building was done by prisoners and forced labourers. At the same time, Germans held managerial positions and/or had the leisure of carriages and horse waggons.

The construction of the fortifications lasted until the 15th of January, 1945. Till the day the Soviet troops attacked Lower Silesia. Traces of antitank trenches can be found in the forest near Sokołowice (community of Oleśnica). Traces of trenches and artillery positions are still visible at the entrance to other community of the Oleśnica villages. Wherever the road enters the forest and the foreground is clean for at least 500m there are traces of antitank artillery positions. Operation Vistula-Oder started on the 12th of January, 1945 (Soviet Army invasion). The increased number of prisoners from Oleśnica goes to Wrocław for the construction of fortifications.

Oleśnica was the last big town on the route to Wrocław. Winning this point of resistance would allow the development of a direct assault on Fortress Breslau, which had not yet completed its defensive preparations.

2 Source <http://olesnica.nienaltowski.net/WalkiwOlesnicy.htm> (non-official translation by Piotr Michałowski)

Oleśnica, together with other cities was an important defensive belt around Wrocław. However, the information appearing in Wrocław's (Breslau's) newspapers as "Fortress Oels" - was greatly exaggerated.

And nowadays in 2016, after 26 years since the transition we can speak loudly about the history and we do it so. We are organising many projects that are related to the memories of eye witnesses of The War, of the transformation and of the communist period. Of those who survived the Death and Concentration Camps. Of those who came to the 'new lands', nowadays western Poland, from many different places, regions, and countries. And at present, within the Bridging Generations project, we have had the chance to speak also with the people who had to leave, meaning the thousands of Germans that were expelled from their houses and lands just as the Poles that had to come were. Thus, those who had to leave could meet those who had to come.

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Resources:

<http://olesnica.nienaltowski.net/WalkiwOlesnicy.htm>

<http://oels-nest.prv.pl/index.php?strona=plan>

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BRIDGING GENERATIONS

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