

Guidebook

Piaśnica
A scene of German crimes
in Pomerania in 1939

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Introduction

Massacre in Piaśnica

During the first months of World War II, around 10 km from the town of Wejherowo, in the forest area of approximately 250 km², the Germans committed a crime which is considered to be the biggest one in Pomerania, and supposedly one of the first massacres on such a large scale in Europe. Already in the second half of September 1939 they selected a spot to be used for organizing executions. The guidelines prepared by the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin indicated that the area should be located far away from human settlements, but at the same not too far from main roads and local prisons and arrests.

Piaśnica became a peculiar experimental site because it was a place where the Germans, for the first time in Poland, performed planned mass executions of civilians. This crime was also directly related to political objectives of the Third Reich which consisted in conquering new living space (*Lebensraum*) and eliminating Polish elites to such an extent that would make it impossible for the Polish State to recover from suffered losses. First people were arrested on 1 September 1939 in the Free City of Danzig during the *Operation Tannenberg*. The Germans arrested about 1.500 persons registered on proscription lists. The second operation on a large scale in Pomerania called *Säuberungsaktion* was carried out between 14 and 30 September 1939. Approximately 20,000 men aged from 14 to 70 were detained and about 2.500 of them got arrested. They were held mostly in temporary makeshift arrests in Gdynia, that is: in churches, cinemas, factories, old barracks of anti-aircraft artillery, and also in police and court prisons.

Another operation took place at the end of October 1939 and it was called *Intelligenzaktion*. As a result, many priests, teachers, merchants and people who carried out political, social and educational activities got imprisoned.

They were transported to the prison on Schiesstange Street in Gdańsk, and later, on 10 November 1939, to a prison in Wejherowo. On 11 November 1939 when Poles celebrate the Independence Day a group of 314 prisoners were executed in the Piaśnica Forest¹.

The executions in the Piaśnica Forest started in late October or early November 1939 and lasted until the first months of 1940. In November and December 1939 the Germans murdered about 2,000 Poles and Jews from Gdynia, Wejherowo, Puck, Kartuzy District and Gdańsk. They were people arrested during the *Operation Tannenberg* and the “operation against the intelligentsia”. The massacres in Piaśnica became a model for further executions that aimed at a mass elimination of Polish people. The Germans were bringing their victims to Piaśnica from prisons and arrests in Gdańsk, Gdynia, Sopot, Tczew, Puck, Kartuzy and from a railway ramp in Wejherowo. People transported by train from the Reich also were dying in Piaśnica. Amongst them were mentally ill patients, opponents to the Nazi ideology and Poles who had lived in Germany before the war.

The Germans carried out an extermination of mentally ill people in Piaśnica within the framework of the operation called “T4”. In 1939 in Western Pomerania and Mecklenburg, there were five big psychiatric hospitals located in the towns of Lębork, Ückermünde, Treptow, Stralsund and Obrzyce. The analysis of transport lists of patients treated in those psychiatric hospitals indicates that their destination was a “Medical Institution in West Prussia”. However, such an institution never existed. One could have assumed

¹ Polish Red Cross Archives, (hereinafter PRCA), ref. Lista strat PCK 18044 Lista rozstrzelanych w dniu 11 XI 1939 r. w Piaśnicy [List of Losses of Polish Red Cross 18044 List of Victims Executed on 11 November 1939 in Piaśnica], *passim*; National Archives of Poznań, ref. 587 Polski Związek Zachodni 1945–1949 [587 Polish Western Association 1945–1949], p. 323–324; Z. Milczewski, *Wejherowo i powiat morski wrzesień 1939 – maj 1945 [Wejherowo and the Maritime District September 1939 – May 1945]*, Rumia 1996, p. 9–21; *Historia Wejherowa [The History of Wejherowo]*, edit. J. Borzyszkowski, Wejherowo 1998, p. 371–376; H. Krausnick, *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges 1938–1942*, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 26–34.

that those people were brought to the District Medical and Custodial Institution in Kocborowo (*Conradstein*) near Starogard Gdański. Then again it didn't happen because patients of that institution were successively murdered in the Szpęgawski Forest between 1939 and 1945, and the hospital itself could accommodate only 2000-2100 inmates². Patients' transportation cards allow to specify a number of people taken out of the hospitals in which they were undergoing a psychiatric treatment: 103 people left the institution of Ückermünde between 23 and 30 November 1939; 719 people left the hospital of Stralsund between 17 November and 11 December 1939; 283 people were taken out of the institution in Treptow between 22 and 28 November 1939; and 179 people left the hospital in Lębork (*Lauenburg*) between 14 and 28 November 1939. The total number of displaced people was 1214. We shouldn't uncritically assume that all those people were murdered in the Piaśnica Forest. This is due to the fact that notes made on some of those lists indicated dates of arrival to specific medical institutions at the beginning of 1940, and the last transports occurred when the mass executions in Piaśnica no longer were taking place³.

Originally firing squads consisted of SS troopers from Gdańsk detached to Wejherowo, but when they refused to participate in further executions due to the fact that they were burdened significantly with other tasks, a special troop called *Wachsturmbann SS* was formed from the soldiers of 36th SS

² D. Steyer, *Eksterminacja ludności polskiej na Pomorzu Gdańskim w latach 1939-1945* [*The Extermination of Polish people in Gdańsk Pomerania 1939-1945*], Gdynia 1967, p. 24-25; *Szpęgawsk. Z martyrologii mieszkańców Kociewia* [*Szpęgawsk. The Martyrdom of Kociewo residents*], Gdynia 1959, p. 36; Regional Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against the Polish Nation in Gdańsk (hereinafter RC of Gd.), ref. Ko 187/73, śledztwo w sprawie funkcjonowania Zakładu w Kocborowie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej [investigation into the functioning of the Institution of Kocborowo during the German occupation], vol. I, Writing from the Civil Registry Office in Chełm Lubelski of 3 October 1974, without pagination.

³ RC Gd., ref. S 56.2011.Zn śledztwo w sprawie masowych zbrodni dokonanych na obywatelach polskich w Lasach Piaśnickich koło Wejherowa dokonanych jesienią 1939 r. [investigation into mass crimes committed against Polish citizens in the Piaśnica Forest near Wejherowo in autumn 1939], vol. XXXIV.

Regiment. Initially it was commanded by *SS Sturmführers* Hans Söhn and Leopold Neis and later Kurt Eimann. In order to secure the place of executions, the Germany were using troops of the local gendarmerie from Wejherowo subordinated to the command of *Polizeihauptmann* Carl Lassen. After every operation, the gendarmerie commander submitted to Heinz Lorenz, the district governor of Wejherowo, a report on the actions carried out by his troops. The execution operations in the Piaśnica Forest were managed also by Friedrich Class, the commander of the Gestapo of Gdynia and by Christoph Diehm, the Police Chief of Gdynia. SS officers of *Wachsturmbann Eimann* under the supervision of the Police of Gdynia and the Gestapo were escorting the victims to the place of execution and shooting them. Kurt Eimann personally took care of the selection of members of execution platoon which each time consisted of 40-60 people. They always went by lorries to pick up mentally ill people, who had been transported by train to Wejherowo, in order to bring them to the place of execution. The victims of Piaśnica were executed from a distance of circa half a meter with a shot to the back of the head, in a kneeling or standing position, in front of dug graves, in groups of 5 or 6 people. The platoon commander would use his own pistol to administer coup de grace to those who were merely wounded. At the same time, other victims were waiting at a distance of approximately 200 meters from the place of execution clearly hearing gunshots and cries of the dying people. Until now the investigators have estimated the number of victims between 12 and 14 thousand. The investigation conducted by the Regional Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Polish Nation in Gdańsk will verify this data. To the present day, it was possible specify approximately 800 names of the killed Poles and about 1200 mentally ill people transported from Germany⁴.

The corpses of the murdered people were buried in 35 mass graves. In the spring of 1940 the area used for executions

⁴ Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, ref. N Prozess, B 132/Fall 11; Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Bundesarchiv Aussenstelle Ludwigsburg, ref. 203 AR-Z 73/59.

was camouflaged by planting flowers and trees, and the police took special effort to control the crime scene. At the end of August 1944 the Germans started to remove traces of the executions conducted in Pomerania. In Piaśnica, 36 prisoners of the Stutthof concentration camp (the so-called “commando to heaven”) were carrying out works related to the excavation and burning of the bodies. They were accommodated in a forest pit and when their work was done, they were all murdered. The Germans took care also of destroying documentation files of that crime.

In 1946, at the initiative of the members of the Polish Western Association in Wejherowo and the Regional Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, a special exhumation commission was appointed in order to specify the number of the victims murdered in Piaśnica and to identify the bodies which hadn't been burnt during the “cover up” operation. The exhumation works, managed by the judge of the District Court in Gdańsk, Antoni Zacharasiewicz, took place from 7 to 22 October 1946. The investigators found 26 places of original graves and two graves which contained unburned bodies of 305 people. Based on the identification of the bodies, carried out with the help of the victims' families, it was possible to determinate identities of only 55 people⁵. 30 bodies of Gdynia residents were buried on 26 October 1946 in the Military Cemetery in Gdynia-Redłowo and the rest of the victims were entombed in the mass graves number 1 and 2 in Piaśnica upon request of their families.

When World War II ended one of the objectives of the countries that belonged to the anti-Nazi coalition consisted in ensuring mutual assistance for the purpose of persecuting and penalising war criminals who were guilty of murders and mistreatments of people from the occupied

⁵ PRCA, ref. Lista strat PCK 11901 Protokoły z ekshumacji osób, które zginęły w egzekucjach w latach 1939 -1945 i zostały pochowane w Lesie w Piaśnicy [List of Losses of Polish Red Cross 11901 Reports on exhumations of people who died in the executions in 1939-1945 and were buried in the Piaśnica Forest], 1946, *passim*.

countries. Poland also got involved in those works. On 2 April 1967 Marian Multan, the deputy prosecutor from the Provincial Prosecutor's Office in Gdańsk, issued an order to start an investigation under the proceedings number Ds. 1/67 concerning the murders of circa 12,000 Polish people in the Piaśnica Forest in the district of Wejherowo during the period from September to December 1939. The investigation was suspended on 20 September 1975 because it was impossible to interrogate the witnesses and suspects who lived behind the "Iron Curtain". In 2011 the prosecutor Maciej Schulz, the Chief of Regional Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Polish Nation in Gdańsk, reopened the investigation that has been pending to date⁶.

After the war there were several penal trials in which "executioners of Piaśnica" were accused. The former *Gauleiter* of Gdańsk Albert Forster was declared guilty for the massacres in Piaśnica. In 1948 the Supreme National Tribunal sentenced him to death. The execution probably took place on 28 February 1952 in the prison of Warszawa-Mokotów. *SS Gruppenführer* Richard Hildebrandt, who served as the Superior Commander of SS and Police in the Reich District of Gdańsk and West Prussia in 1939-1943 appeared before the U.S. Nuremberg Military Tribunal in a trial called "Fall VIII". He was accused primarily of the contribution to the executions of 1.400 mentally ill people in the Piaśnica Forest, the killing about which he himself wrote in the report on his operations dated 8 January 1940 that was sent to the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin. The American tribunal didn't carry out any assessment of the evidence gathered in relation to that case and Hildebrandt was found innocent. However, the Polish court in Bydgoszcz sentenced him to death and he was executed on 10 March 1951. On 16 May 1950 Friedrich Freimann, the mayor of the occupied town of Puck, was sentenced *in absentia* to death, confiscation of all his assets and derivation of honorary civic rights in perpetuity by the District Court in Gdynia. He was never found neither did he serve

⁶ RK. Gd. ref. S 56.2011.Zn, vol. I –LII.

the sentence⁷. *SS Untersturmführer* Herbert Teuffel, an SS trooper from Gdańsk, who had participated in brutal questionings and had conducted “selections” in the autumn of 1939 in the prison of Wejherowo, was sentenced to death by the District Court in Gdynia. His execution took place in 1948⁸. A sentence in a trial with a reference number 2 Ks 2/67 against Kurt Eimann was pronounced by the Jury of the National Court in Hannover on 20 December 1968. The defendant was sentenced for participation in the extermination of mentally handicapped people during the operation “T4”, mass murder of 1,200 people and other individual crimes committed on 10 people, to four years of imprisonment and three years of deprivation of honorary civic right.

Nevertheless, the fact is that many of the direct perpetrators of that crime have never been found and punished.

Currently, the place of martyrdom in Piaśnica, also called “Calvary of Kashubia”, is the Sanctuary of the Blessed Martyr Alicja Kotowska and Companions. The Sanctuary was established on the initiative of the “Piaśnica Family” Association at the Parish of Christ the King in Wejherowo. A chapel built of the trunks of the trees from the Piaśnica Forest is a destination of pilgrimages of Pomeranian residents. The Piaśnica Museum was created in December 2015 to conduct various scientific and investigation works which aim at revealing all the aspects of the crime.

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⁷ Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk (hereinafter A INR Gd.), ref. 516 SO Gdynia, Sentence of the District Court in Gdynia, ref. K. 284/47 of 16 May 1950, p. 24-28.

⁸ A INR Gd, ref. 607/184, Case in the District Court in Gdynia against Herbert Teuffel, 1947, p. 21-191.

Piaśnica

A scene of German crimes in Pomerania in 1939

Piaśnica is a small Pomeranian village situated in Darżłubska Wilderness, around 9 km north of Wejherowo. The surrounding forests became a symbol of cruelty and crimes committed by German executioners.

This is the place where in the first months of World War II German special troops murdered thousands of people. Some publications say that there might have been at least 12 thousand victims. Since 2011, the investigation department of the branch office of the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk has been conducting an inquiry which may bring forth a new perspective concerning the number of the victims.

The massacres in the Piaśnica Forest were one of the first previously planned experiments aimed at finding the best method of extermination of large groups of people who deserved to be killed according to the Germans. After the termination of the warfare, on the grounds of earlier prepared proscription lists, during the operation called *Intelligenzaktion* and the Operation *Tannenberg*, mass arrests of the members of Polish leadership class took place. The Germans were putting in front of firing squads the Pomeranian Poles, sometimes whole families with children, and also Polish, German and probably Czech citizens transported from the Third Reich territory. Besides, many patients of psychiatric hospitals and Jewish people were also killed during those executions.

The tragedy was announced at the begging of the German occupation of Poland, in September 1939, by Albert Forster, the future governor of the Reich District of Gdańsk and West Prussia. He yelled from the town hall of Wejherowo decorated with Nazi symbols:

– We need to exterminate those lousy Polacks starting with those who are still in their cradles. You can do anything you want with them.

A gathered crowd shouted:

– Let the Polish dogs die! Death to all the Poles!

When the western front was approaching the borders of the Third Reich, the Germans started to cover up traces of the committed crimes. They had been planting trees in Piaśnica since 1940 anyway. It can be assumed that it was a way of covering up the traces of the crimes which they had committed.

Today the Piaśnica Forest is a memorial place of inhuman massacres committed by the Germans against innocent civilians which remains also as a warning for us and future generations.

Main Memorial

Near the roadway which leads from Wejherowo toward Puck and the Hel Peninsula, there is a memorial dedicated to the victims of the massacres in Piaśnica. Former members of the Polish Western Association and veterans from Wejherowo took the initiative to build the memorial, which was one of the ways of remembering the tragedy that had took place in Piaśnica. Thanks to their idea, and the special contribution of Leon Prusiński, a former prisoner of the Stutthof concentration camp and well-known citizen of Wejherowo, in September 1955 the memorial designed by engineer Aleksander Wiecki was unveiled. There are three caskets built in the niche of the monument which contain soil taken from the former Stutthof concentration camp, Westerplatte and one of the fireplaces in Piaśnica where human corpses were burned.

Numerous celebrations commemorating the people murdered in the Piaśnica Forest take place near the memorial. Next to it, there are several plaques that inform about the massacres in Piaśnica and present a map that points the location of graves and memorial places.





Crossroads – “Pensive Christ”

One of the victims of the mass executions in the Piaśnica Forest was Władysław Kiedrowski, a judge of the District Court in Gdynia. The Gestapo detained him in September 1939 and imprisoned in a provisional camp in Gdynia. On 11 November 1939 when Poles celebrate the Independence Day, the Germans murdered the judge. During post-war exhumation works his body was never found.

Władysław Kiedrowski was born on 24 October 1900. In 1924, he graduated in Law from the Poznań University. He worked as a chairman of the Commercial Department in the District Court in Gdynia. He also gave lectures at the Maritime School. He was passionate about Pomeranian and Kashubian tradition and he was one of the founders of the *Stanica* Kashubia Lovers Society.

Władysław Kiedrowski's daughter and son, Maria and Wojciech, commemorated their father's death in the Piaśnica Forest. By the road leading to the graves they placed a sculpture of the Pensive Christ, a work of artist Andrzej Arendt.

Grave No. 4

A forest area chosen by the Germans to be a place of executions in Piaśnica covers approximately 250 hectares. The area located in Darżlubska Wilderness was selected in accordance to guidelines of the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin. It was supposed to be a place located far away from human settlements but at the same time near to main prisons and arrests.

The graves, which today we can visit in the Piaśnica Forest, are gathered in three big groups but there are as well individual graves such as the grave number 4. The exhumation commission who had investigated the area of executions after the war in 1946 said that the grave was 5.4 meters long, 4 meters wide and 2.6 meters deep. The Germans emptied it out during the operation of covering up the traces. After the war only some parts of skulls and several finger bones of a human hand were found there.





Grave No. 1

Only two of the Piaśnica tombs (grave number 1 and 2) contained human relics. During the 1946 exhumation, 305 bodies covered with whitewash were found. There were 191 bodies in the first mound and 114 in the other one. For unknown reasons, those bodies weren't burnt during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. The families of the victims, which had participated in the disinterment works, recognised bodies of at least 55 people.

One of them was Teofil Naczek's body recognised by his relatives. He worked in the Junior High School in Wejherowo. His son Bornisław Naczek in the following way related the exhumation in which the closest members of the victims' families had taken part:

– My mother Aniela and my oldest sister Maria came to the Piaśnica Forest to participate in the exhumations. They identified our father by his teeth, underwear and socks with monograms. Other important evidence consisted of the fact that my father couldn't move the middle finger of his right hand. The finger was stiff; the forensic commission confirmed that. My father's body was identified on 18 October 1946. After a few days, his funeral took place in the old cemetery on 3 Maja Street in Wejherowo.

Other well-known person among those identified was Hipolit Roszczynialski, the mayor of Rumia. His brother Wiktor, his sister Maria Helena and his wife Władysława were present at the recognition. Roszczynialski's head was smashed with a rifle butt. The family buried his body in the cemetery of Rumia.

Grave No. 2

The grave number 2 is one of two graves in which victims' bodies were found during the exhumation works in 1946. One of them was a body of an educator for the deaf known in Wejherowo, Jan Maciejewski, a teacher working in the school for deaf children in Wejherowo, a member of the Polish Western Association and the Polish Teacher's Union. His brother, Alfons Maciejewski, a physician from Poznań, said that there was a noticeable indentation on Jan's face, near his nose and lips. Probably, someone hit him with a rifle butt. Now Jan Maciejewski's body rests in the cemetery of Wejherowo-Śmiechowo.

The bodies found in graves number 1 and 2 were precisely examined. As a result, it was possible to specify the causes of death. Here is a section of the exhumation report:



The death was caused by a bullet from a firearm of some unknown calibre shot in the skull either from behind, near the occipital bone, or from the front side, from a very close distance, and two others near the chest and the abdomen. In many cases, the cause of death was produced by cracking the skull with a hard object, probably a rifle butt. In both cases, death occurred rapidly due to complete cracking of the skull, fracturing the bone of the skull base or taking a shot in the heart. Shots at abdomen or chest produced temporary disruption of these centres and bleeding from internal organs which caused a short mental breakdown. It is also possible that some deaths occurred slowly due to suffocation in the grave in the case of covering wounded people with dead bodies and soil.

Monument to Leon Najman – Mirza Kryczyński

Among the victims of the massacres in Piaśnica was a lawyer and historian Leon Najman – Mirza Kryczyński. Well-known Polish Tatar was born 1887 in Vilnius. He studied in Saint Petersburg. He fought for the liberation of Crimean Tatars and between 1918 and 1920 he was a member of government of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1934 he



travelled to Morocco where he was received by the Sultan. He describes his travel in his book “Pod słońcem Maroko” [“Under the Sun of Morocco”]. In 1935 he became vice-president of the District Court in Gdynia. His symbolic grave is located in the cemetery in Gdynia-Redłowo. In 2005 a plaque was unveiled on that graveyard and in 2016 a statute that commemorates this extraordinary person stood in the necropolis of Piaśnica. The monument was erected on the initiative of the Association of Tartar Nobility of the Former Duchy of Lithuania.



Memorial to the Murdered Kashubian Foresters

In the eighties a memorial of an extraordinary artistic form dedicated to Kashubian foresters murdered by the Germans was erected in the Piaśnica Forest. The monument consists of a combination of a contorted trunk form, a cross and a plaque with inscriptions engraved in the wood. Many people related to the forest management at that time contributed to erect this memorial.

The tree trunk degenerated by cancer was found and cut out by Jerzy Błaszczak, a forester from the contemporary forestry department of Rekowo. The unusual form sculptured by the nature captured the attention of Forest Manager of the Forest District of Wejherowo Marian Zieliński and of the Director of the District Management of State Forests in Gdańsk Tadeusz Chodnik. They came up with an idea of using the finding as a monument in the Piaśnica Forest. The trunk was debarked by forester Błaszczyk's sons, Krzysztof and Karol Błaszczyk. The final form was given by Kazimierz Rohda, a forester of the Plant Nursery in Domatowo who engraved the inscriptions and combined all the elements into one monument.

The memorial to the murdered foresters in Piaśnica constitutes an extraordinarily original form which commemorates this professional group. The Germans considered many of them to be dangerous for the Third Reich, therefore they were killed during the occupation of Pomerania.

Forest Manager Roman Kuniewski's Grave

The Forest Manager Roman Kuniewski, a known councillor of Wejherowo and a member of the Polish Western Association was a district chief of the Polish Riflemen's



Association and vice-president of the District Council of the Non-Party Bloc for Cooperation with the Government. In 1939 he started to cooperate with the Command of the Land Coastal Defence and he instructed to cut out trees to make fortifications. He also organised workforce and transport for the 1st Naval Sniper Regiment which was stationed in Wejherowo. Besides, he decided where to locate heaps of cut trees on forest roads and fire paths which slowed down the march of German troops. At that time, Wejherowo was a frontier town. The German-Polish border was near, for example in the village of Zamostne.

Before the German occupation of Wejherowo, engineer Roman Kuniewski came to Gdynia. The Germans arrested him there. He was held with a group of the so-called "Gdynia hostages" in Fangrata Café near the Kościuszko Square and later he was detained in the prison of Gdynia. On 11 November 1939 the Germans executed him in the Piaśnica Forest. His grave is the only one individual grave in this unusual Pomeranian necropolis.

Grave No. 3 – A symbolic grave of priests

The grave number 3 is a symbolic grave of priests murdered in the Piaśnica Forest.

In October 1939 almost every priest of the Diocese of Chełmno was arrested. Almost half of them were killed. It has been determined that more than 50 priests were executed in Piaśnica. Among them there were:

Rev. Ludwik Gasiński, the parson of the Virgin Mary Parish in Grudziądz;

Rev. Juliusz Heinig, a vicar from Wejherowo;

Rev. Anastazy Kręcki, the parson of the Parish of Strzelno near Puck;

Rev. Franciszek Przybysz, a vicar from Wejherowo;

Rev. Teodor Turzyński, a dean from Gdynia, the parson of the Virgin Mary Parish;



Rev. Bolesław Witkowski, the parson of the Parish of Mechowo, an MP and a political and social activist.

Elżbieta Ellwart, a witness to a massacre in Piaśnica, found herself at a place of the execution of rev. Bolesław Witkowski when she was passing through the forest. That's how she related that incident:

I looked around and I saw a dead body of rev. Bolesław Witkowski, the parson of Mechowo Parish hanging from the tree in close proximity to the place where I stood. Priest Witkowski was hanged by his arms tied up above his head to a big tree. He was wearing a long church robe. I had already heard that at the time of his arrest the Germans had told him to get dressed up like he had been going to say a holy mass.

The priests constitute one of the most numerous group murdered in the Piaśnica Forest. The Germans considered them to be their main enemy because already since the period of partitions of Poland, the Catholic Church was an apostle of Polishness in Pomerania.

Grave No. 5

A group of graves marked with numbers from 5 to 9 can be found in one of the three places with the most numerous concentration of tumuli. The exhumation commission

measured in 1946 that the grave number 5 was 9.5 meters long, 3.8 meters wide and 3.8 meters deep. The mass grave was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. Only some rifle shells, a pair of scissors and a snuffbox were found in the mound.

Usually the prison of Wejherowo was the last stage for prisoners from Gdańsk Pomerania and Kashubia before their execution in Piaśnica. They were transported there from local jailhouses and camps and later held briefly before the execution. Probably sometimes the prisoners were brought to the place of massacre directly from the prison in Puck or prisons and camps for the internees in Gdynia and Gdańsk, and as well from other localities. Transports from the Third Reich were arriving to Wejherowo by railroad. Usually the Germans were using the Lębork-Gdańsk train for this purpose. They were attaching to it some so-called “special wagons” full of men, women and children to be executed in Piaśnica. These wagons were detached on Wejherowo railway station and then they were shunted to the siding, called cargo ramp, located next to the level crossing of the Wejherowo-Krokowo roadway. The Germans were loading the victims to lorries carrying out selections in order to separate families and take children away from their mothers.



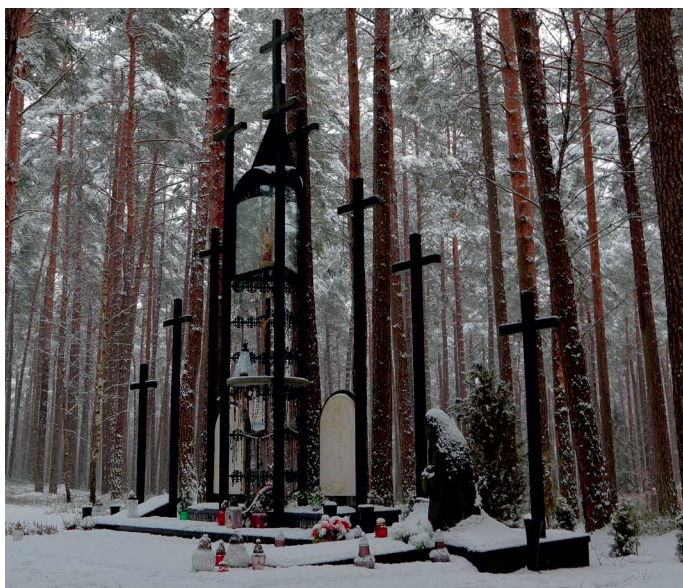
The prisoners were brought to the forest with covered trucks accompanied by motorcycles and cars which transporting the escort and the members of firing squads. Teofil Mudlaff, a lineman on the Wejherowo-Krokowo roadway, said that in autumn 1939 everyday he had observed convoys of up to 12 vehicles entering into the forest.

Grave No. 6

The mass burial pit marked with number 6 was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. The tomb was 8.5 meters long, 3.8 meters wide and 3.8 meters deep. During the exhumation conducted in 1946 some human bones and a military spoon were found inside.

The mass graves were excavated in the forest already before the execution. Initially, German farmers from close villages were doing these works. The Germans were using also prisoners from the Stutthof concentration camp to dig the burial pits.





Grave No. 7 – A symbolic grave of the blessed Sister Alicja Kotowska

The grave number 7 was 8.5 meters long, 5.8 meters wide and 3.2 meters deep. The corpses of the victims were removed from it during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. In 1946 the exhumation commission found in the pit some human bones and hair, a pack of “Mewa” cigarettes, a shoehorn, some broken bottles and a rosary. Because of the rosary found in the grave number 7, it has been considered to be a symbolic final resting place of the blessed Sister Alicja Kotowska murdered in Piaśnica.

Sister Alicja Kotowska was born in 1899 in Warsaw. In 1919 she started to study Medicine at the University of Warsaw. In 1920 she worked as a military nurse during the Polish-Soviet War. In 1934 she became a headmistress of the Private Common School and the Female Junior High School of General Education in Wejherowo. She was working on that position until 1939. At that time she gained the trust and



affection of children and their parents alike. In appreciation of her service for Polish education, the Polish Western Association awarded her a diploma of a Honorary Member.

Sister Alice Kotowska was arrested and imprisoned in Węjerowo on 24 October 1939. She was executed on 11 November 1939. In 1999, during an annual commemoration ceremony in Piaśnica, a memorial erected near the grave number 7 was blessed. The monument presents a figure of a kneeling nun with a slightly bowed head. The inscription on the plaque reminds about the Alicja Kotowska's martyr death and her beatification by the Pope John Paul II on 13 June 1999 in Warsaw. The statue is a sculpture of artist Andrzej Arendt.

In 2013 the composition and layout of the grave was changed. Now a row of crosses stands there along with a figure of the Holy Mary of Swarzewo and a relief of Archangels Gabriel and Michael. There is a plaque attached to the statue of the kneeling nun with a quote from Sister Alicja Kotowska: *Does it really matter where the body will rest? I'd prefer if nobody knew where my grave is. The most important thing is to be united with God and this is possible everywhere and under all circumstances. To live in Him, to be drowned deep in Him like a drop of water within the vast ocean of His mercy – this is my great desire.*

Grave No. 8

The mass burial pit marked with number 8 was 8.5 meters long, 5 meters wide and 2.9 meters deep. The exhumation commission confirmed in 1946 that it hadn't contained human bodies. Probably it was backfilled shortly after it had been dug up. The commission drew the same conclusion in case of the neighbouring grave number 9.

The victims executed in Piaśnica may be divided in three main groups. The first group consists of the people



murdered during the operation *Intelligenzaktion* which aimed at exterminating Polish social leaders of Pomerania that could be dangerous for the rule of the Third Reich in that area according to the Germans. Those people were arrested when the *Wehrmacht* marched into Poland and later assassinated. The second group comprises of people and families transported from the inland territories of the Third Reich. The researches carried out to date indicate that they were Polish, German, Czech and also Jewish. Although they constitute the most numerous group of victims, we know least about the mechanism of organising their extermination. The third group consisted of the patients of psychiatric hospitals murdered during the German program of physical elimination of people suffering from mental disorders.

Grave No. 9

The grave no. 9 is one of the two graves in the Piaśnica Forest in which the exhumation commission didn't find any human remains nor other objects. The grave was probably prepared for burial but the executors didn't use it and backfilled the pit. The grave was 7.5 meters long, 4 meters wide and 2.9 meters deep.

The results of the investigations do not allow to determine precisely the number of people from Pomerania region who were executed in Piaśnica. This task turned even



more difficult because of the German operations of concealing the traces of the crime and statements of witnesses which varied significantly. In January 1940 Heinz Lorenz, the district governor of the occupied Wejherowo informed *Gauleiter* Albert Forster that “634 people have been eliminated from the district”. However, that number includes only people who lived in the territories of the current districts of Puck and Wejherowo.

Until the present day it was only possible to make a list which contains circa 1100 names of the victims of the massacres in Piaśnica.

The murdered residents of Pomerania were representatives of every class of Polish society involved in political, social, educational, cultural, religious and sports activities before World War II. There were also cases of murdering Polish war prisoners and the Germans opposed to the Nazi ideology.

Memorial to the Murdered Children

The German assassins also murdered children in the Piaśnica Forest. They did it with an unbelievable cruelty. Elżbieta Ellwart, the only eyewitness of the mass executions in Piaśnica who accidentally landed at a place of massacre later related what she had seen:



I saw also that under a different tree there were two men wearing white shirts, black trousers, half-length boots and black forage caps on their heads. They were both heavily blood-stained and one of them were holding a two years

old baby by its legs. The man was tearing it apart, and then he hit the baby's head against a tree several times.



In 1993 on the initiative of the Social Committee for the Care of the Piaśnica Graves headed by Prelate rev. Bogusław Żurawski, a memorial dedicated to the memory of the murdered children was unveiled. One of the elements of the Memorial to the Children, a huge rock dug out in the forest, was donated by the Forest District of Wejherowo. The Żarnowiec Power Plant (under construction) helped to transport the rock offering their specialised personnel and heavy duty equipment. The founder of the memorial plaque was the Factory of Ship Equipment in Rumia.

At the memorial place of murdered children in Piaśnica, there are also sculptures of an angel and an empty cradle created by Tomasz Sobisz, a sculptor.

Grave No. 10

The mass grave number 10 was 8.5 meters long, 3.5 meters wide and 3.2 meter deep. During the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime, all the bodies were disinterred from the grave. The exhumation commission confirmed that fact in 1946.

On the Polish Independence Day, 11 November 1939, the Germans murdered more than 300 people in the Piaśnica Forest. Among them there were inhabitants of Gdynia and Wejherowo, including the blessed Sister Alicja Kotowska,

school teachers Kazimiera and Stanisława Panek, judge Władysław Kiedrowski, forest manager Roman Kuniewski, and composer and lawyer Stefan Bereza.

Barabara Bojarska mentioned in her book titled “Piaśnica” that SS *Untersturmführer* Herber Teuffell *was personally calling the prisoners out of their cells and sending them to the lorries parked in the yard.*

The fact that the Germans murdered a larger than usual number of prisoners on the Polish Independence Day supposed to convey a message to all Poles that their home country no longer existed and would never exist again.



Grave No. 11

The grave number 11 was 7.2 meters long, 4.2 meter wide and 3.2 meters deep. The mass burial pit was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. In 1946 the exhumation commission confirmed that it had contained human bodies.

Stanisław Bereza, a composer, pianist and lawyer from Siedlce was also murdered in the Piaśnica Forest. After graduating from the secondary school in Siedlce, he went to Moscow to study Law. He completed his law studies



there and also graduated from the music conservatory in the piano class. When he came back to Poland he worked in Warsaw as a public officer and later he practiced law. During the Polish-Soviet War he joined voluntarily the army and took part in the warfare. In 1936 he worked in Gdynia as a notary public. He was an active member of the local Music Society. The opera “Grażyna” which he wrote was awarded a medal in Moscow. He also composed some études for a piano, mazurkas, ballads and other musical pieces.

Stefan Bereza was murdered on 11 November 1939 in Piaśnica. A composer’s symbolic grave is located in the Evangelical-Augsburg Cemetery in Warsaw.

Grave No. 12

The mass grave marked with number 12 was 7.9 meters long, 3.8 meter wide and 2.9 meters deep. Although the exhumation commission didn’t find any bodies of the victims there, it confirmed that it had contained human corpses which had been removed during the German operation of covering up the traces.

The Germans used the spot in the Piaśnica Forest also to kill patients of psychiatric hospitals. The mentally ill people were exterminated within the framework of the German programme which consisted in the physical elimination of people who suffered from mental disorders. The Germans considered them to be an unwanted weight for the Third Reich's economy. They also had to be annihilated in order to maintain the so-called racial purity. The operation was called "T4". During that operation the Germans were murdering patients of the medical institutions in Łęborg, Stralsund, Trepow and Ückerunde. The patients were transported from a railway ramp at Wejherowo Station to the place of execution. They were accompanied by a medical personnel who was giving them sedatives to make the whole operation smoother. The statements of the executioners and people responsible for the organisation of the executions mentioned the number of 1,200 shot to death. Some publications which describe the massacres in Piaśnica indicate that the actual number may be much higher.



Grave No. 13

The grave number 13 was 9.2 meters long, 4.0 meter wide and 3.2 meters deep. The mass burial pit was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. In 1946 the exhumation commission confirmed that it had contained human bodies. Two crosses with plaques dedicated to Jan Koszałka, the headmaster of the school in Pierwoszyno and to Leon Miotke, a forester from Gołębiewo, were placed on this grave. In 2016 the councillors of the Kosakowo Commune adopted a resolution in which they named one of the streets after Jan Koszałka in order to commemorate him.

On the initiative of the Polish Western Association between 7 and 22 October of 1946 some surveys were conducted under the supervision of the exhumation commission chaired by judge Antoni Zachariasiewicz. As a result, traces of 30 collective graves scattered over a forested area of circa 250 hectares were found. 26 of them were examined. The commission didn't manage to examine the last four graves because it was summoned to start an exhumation in Rudzki Most near Tuchola.





Grave No. 14

The mass grave marked with number 14 was 9.0 meters long, 3.9 meters wide and 2.9 meters deep. The corpses of the victims were removed from the grave during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.

Only in two graves situated in the area of the Piaśnica Forest the corpses of the victims were discovered, and meticulously inspected afterwards. In other graves, the investigators found only some remains of bones and clothes and several small objects of everyday use. In the exhumation report of 1946 it was written that *those graves definitely had contained human bodies which had been removed after an extended period of time. The above was proved by the fact that the soil from the graves was permeated by the decayed human body tissue. The soil from those graves has rather preservative properties, therefore, the corpses were decomposing slowly.*

Grave No. 15

The mass grave number 15 was 10.2 meters long, 3.5 meters wide and 3.0 meters deep. In 1946 the exhumation commission confirmed that it had contained human bodies. The grave was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.

As a consequence of the exhumation works it was possible to find various personal belongings of the victims in the graves located in the Piaśnica Forest, for example cross necklaces, blessed medals, wedding rings, prayer books, etc. A rich photographic documentation was also prepared. It presents the commission's work as well as the bodies and objects found during the exhumation. Unfortunately, objects and photos shown on exhibitions, which supposed to enable the identification of the dead bodies were lost after 1948 under unexplained circumstances.





Grave No. 16

The grave marked with number 16 was 10.5 meters long, 2.5 meters wide and 3.4 meters deep. In 1946 the exhumation commission confirmed that the burial pit had contained human bodies but they had been removed during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.

The Germans murdered also Major Edward Łakomy in Piaśnica. According to a report of a prison guard named Herbert Schramm, when Łakomy saw that the Germans were murdering some children in Piaśnica just one moment before his own execution, he attacked Hans Söhn, one of the executioners, and broke his arm. He was immediately shot after that incident.

Edward Łakomy originated from Greater Poland. He got expelled from a junior high school because he backed the anti-Prussian students' strike in Września. During the First World War he was fighting as a volunteer in Polish Legions. Later he participated in the Polish-Soviet War. He was awarded the medal "Defender of Poland" in appreciation of his service. When he retired, he moved with his family to Wejherowo. In 1935, he became a governor of the District of Wejherowo Wieś. Just before the Germans marched into Wejherowo, he came to Gdynia to file his professional documents in the Government Headquarters.

He was arrested and imprisoned first in the prison of Gdańsk, and later in the prison of Wejherowo. Then he was executed in the Piaśnica Forest.

In 1946 during the exhumation works the remains of Major Edward Łakomy were found in the grave number 1. His family moved his body to the cemetery on 3 Maja Street in Wejherowo.

The first spot used to burn the bodies

The German operation of covering up the traces of the crime had been given a code name “1005”. It had the highest secrecy clause and it was managed by Paul Blobel who, along with his collaborators, organised all the actions, including a terrifying practice of burning the bodies of the murdered. Blobel and his deputies carried out inspections of the places where the works were taking place. They reported the number of excavated and destroyed bodies hiding this information under the code name of a “weather report” which was supposed to determine the height of the cloud ceiling. The operation of covering up the traces of the mass executions caused that today it is very hard to see a full picture of German crimes committed in Pomerania, including the number of victims murdered in the Piaśnica Forest.





Grave No. 17

The grave number 17 called the “grave of bones” was 10 meter long, 3.8 meters wide and 2.9 meters deep. The exhumation commission confirmed in 1946 that it had contained corpses of the victims but they had been excavated and burnt during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. Upon the grave there is a sculpture (pietà) created by artist Tomasz Sobisz.

The executions in Piaśnica were carried out within the framework of the German operation under a code name *Intelligenzaktion*. The purpose of the operation was to eliminate the Polish leadership class. The Germans included in this class priests, superior officials, teachers, doctors, merchants, businessmen, landowners, and people with higher and secondary education. Members of political parties and associations promoting Polishness were also considered to



be representatives of this class. Among those organisations there were for example the Polish Western Association, the Association of Former Insurgents and Soldiers, the Falcon Gymnastic Society and the Marksmen Fraternity.

The Germans exterminated Polish community leaders in order to avoid any possible threats to their plan of permanent Germanization of the territories incorporated to the Reich, and prevent potential attempts at organized resistance. The operation was carried out in many regions of Poland but in Pomerania it was especially vicious. According to various resources, at least 30 thousand Poles were executed as a result of the operation.

The Germans had prepared to the extermination of Polish elites before the invasion of Poland in September 1939. They created special lists which contained names of people which, after the German aggression, supposed to be detained and held in prisons and provisional arrests and later brought to the place of execution and murdered.

Grave No. 18

The mass grave marked with number 19 was 8.8 meters long, 3.2 meters wide and 3.2 meters deep. In 1946 the exhumation commission confirmed that it had contained corpses of the victims. The grave was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.

The executions in the Piaśnica Forest were carried out by members of *SS Wachsturmbann Eimann* of Gdańsk, the *Einsatzkommando 16*, gendarmerie officers and members of the *Selbstschutz*, that is German self-defence troops.



The operation was managed by Dr Rudolf Tröger, the Chief of the Gestapo in Gdynia and the *Einsatzkommando* 16, and Friedrich Class, the Criminal Department Director of the Gestapo in Gdynia.

Usually the prisoners were forced to undress to their underwear at the place of execution. Then five or six people formed up in front of a firing squad in a kneeling or standing position over the dug graves. Other victims were waiting at a distance of 200 meters from the place of execution. Some of the wounded ones were killed afterwards with rifle butts. This can be proved by shattered skulls found inside the graves. When the exhumation commission examined the bodies, it confirmed that some people could have been buried alive.

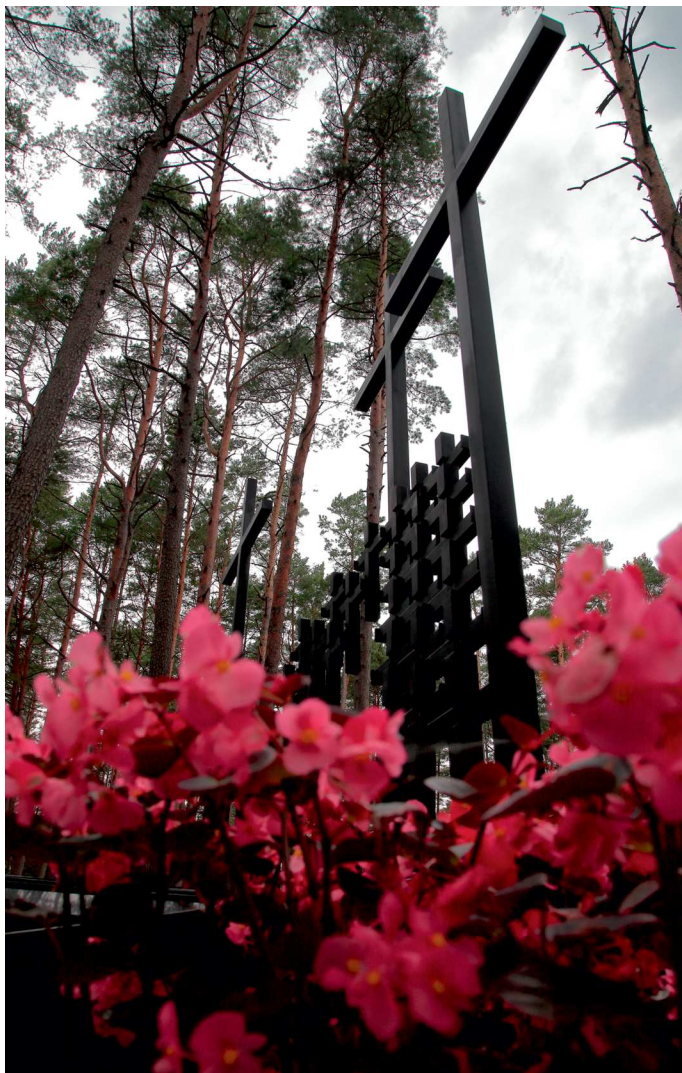
Grave No. 19

The grave number 19 was 8.6 meters long, 4.5 meters wide and 3.5 meters deep. The mass burial pit was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. In 1946 the exhumation commission confirmed that it had contained human bodies.

One of the paramilitary formations responsible for the executions in Piaśnica was *Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz*. Members of this organization were representatives of German minority who lived in the territories of the Second Polish Republic. The formation's main objective was to protect German people and their property. But in reality the troops of *Selbstschutz* were used in operations of extermination of the Poles who were considered to be dangerous for the Third Reich and lived in the territories incorporated into the German state. The formation proved to be very useful for this purpose because its members knew well the area and the people who lived there.

The executions, in which the *Selbstschutz* participated, were carried out in cooperation with the SS troops and the

Einsatzgruppen, that is, operational groups of the Nazi Security Police and the Security Service. It occurred many times that a member of the *Selbstschutz* killed his neighbour who had been indicated by him to the authorities as the so-called “anti-German element”. The procedure permitted the Germans to get revenge on their Polish neighbours with whom they had been in conflict and seize their property.



Grave No. 20

The mass grave number 20 was 9.6 meters long, 4.2 meters wide and 3.2 meters deep. During the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime, the corpses of the victims were excavated from the grave and burnt.

Wachsturmbann Eimann was a formation which participated in conducting the executions in the Piaśnica Forest. The unit was formed in June 1939 and it was commanded by Kurt Eimann, the commander of the 36th SS Regiment, on the basis of which the formation was created. The name of the unit derived from its commander's surname. During the September Campaign in 1939 the troop took part in taking control over the Polish resistance points in Gdańsk. Later it was responsible for arresting Poles in the territory of that town. One of the crimes committed by SS men of the *Wachsturmbann Eimann* was killing defenders of the Polish Post in Gdańsk. The unit was also used in operations of extermination of the Polish leadership class as well as the patients of psychiatric hospitals. During his trial, Kurt Eimann confessed to murdering 1,200 mentally ill people in Piaśnica. He was sentenced to four years of prison but served only two years.





Grave No. 21

The collective tomb marked with number 21 was 9.8 meters long, 4.0 meters wide and 3.9 meters deep. The bodies were excavated from the grave and burnt during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.

Einsatzkommando 16 was another formation responsible for the massacres committed in the Piaśnica Forest. *Einsatzgruppen* were operational groups of the German Security Police and the Security Service. Their tasks included murdering specific persons and population groups, which could have posed a threat for the implementation of the Third Reich's ideology on the home front of the German army engaged in warfare. The *Einsatzgruppen* played a key role in the extermination of Jews.

The *Einsatzkommando* 16 operated in the region of Pomerania. After the creation of the unit in Gdańsk, its troops were also formed in Gdynia, Bydgoszcz and Toruń. A special role in the organisation of the executions in Piaśnica was played by SS *Hauptsturmführer* Friedrich Class, the commander of the Gdynia unit. When he put *CL+* next to a name on the lists of wanted persons, it meant a death sentence.

The Supreme Commander of the *Einsatzkommando* 16 was SS *Sturmbannführer* Dr Rudolf Tröger, one of the most important personages who were responsible for the execution of the operation *Intelligenzaktion* in the Reich District of Gdańsk and West Prussia. In 1940, Tröger joined the Wehrmacht. In the same year he fought in combat in France.

Grave No. 22

The collective grave marked with number 22 was 12.8 meters long, 3.6 meters wide and 3.5 meters deep. The exhumation commission confirmed in 1946 that it had contained human bodies. The grave was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.

After the war, most of the executioners responsible for the massacres in Piaśnica lived in north Germany. Several criminal trials of the perpetrators took place and there some death sentences were pronounced. SS *Untersturmführer* Herbert Teuffel, SS *Gruppenführer* Richard Hildebrandt, NSDAP *Gauleiter* Albert Forster and Friedrich Freimann were sentenced to capital penalty. Karl Eimann, the Commander of the SS *Wachsturmbann Eimann* was



sentenced to four years in prison but he served only two years. SS *Oberführer* Georg Ebrecht didn't serve three years in prison because his internment from 1945 was included in the penalty.

Hans Söhn, the head of the execution commando in Wejherowo and SS *Obersturmbahnnführer* Paul Köpke were never sentenced although some proceedings against them were conducted by German prosecutors. The Prosecutor's Offices in Munich, Dortmund and Mannheim focused on Hans Söhn. Also, the Prosecutor's Office in Dortmund questioned Paul Köpke. After the war, the mayor of Wejherowo under occupation, Gustaw Bamberger, became deputy mayor of Hannover.

Grave No. 23

The mass grave marked with number 23 was 11.6 meters long, 3.8 meters wide and 3.5 meters deep. The exhumation commission confirmed in 1946 that it had contained human corpses but they had been excavated and burnt during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.



One of the principal persons responsible for the massacres in Piaśnica and also other crimes committed in Pomerania was Albert Forster. In autumn 1939 he became governor of the Reich District of Gdańsk and West Prussia. He started to carry out his tasks of exterminating Polish people in the occupied territories with a great sense of commitment. Pomerania was one of the territories of the Republic of Poland incorporated to the Third Reich in which the Germans murdered the largest number of Poles during their extermination operations called *Intelligenzaktion* and *Tannenberg*. Forster was also one of the initiators of establishing the Stutthof concentration camp. In 1945 he managed to run away to Germany but soon he was captured and handed over to Polish authorities because his name was included on the list of war criminals. After the trial held in Gdańsk, the Supreme National Tribunal sentenced him to death. The execution took place on 28 February 1952.

Grave No. 24

The grave number 24 was 11.6 meters long, 4.2 meters wide and 3.2 meters deep. After the excavation and examination of the mound in 1946, the exhumation commission confirmed that it had contained bodies of the victims. The grave was emptied during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime.

In the territory of the former Reich District of Gdańsk and West Prussia, apart from the Piaśnica Forest, there are many other scenes of crimes committed by the German occupant during the operation *Intelligenzaktion*. For example, the Germans murdered about 7,000 people in the Szpęgawski Forest situated about seven kilometres north-east of Starogard Gdański. They executed also 10,000 people in the old gravel mine in Mniszek near Świecie. As a consequence of the extermination operation called “bloody autumn of Pelplin”, almost every member of the chapter of the Diocese of Chełmno and several professors



of the Higher Theological Seminary lost their lives. The “Death Valley” in Fordon is the final resting place for teachers, priests, doctors, lawyers and Jewish people from Bydgoszcz. Other places of mass executions include Tuchola, Księżę Góry, Grupa, Kocborowo, the Barbarka Forest near Toruń and many other locations.

Grave No. 25

The mass grave marked with number 25 was 11.6 meters long, 3.2 meters wide and 3.2 meters deep. It was emptied of the corpses of the buried victims during the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime. The exhumation commission confirmed in 1946 that it definitely had contained human bodies during a certain period of time.

The crime committed in Piaśnica is often considered to be a forgotten crime and facts related to it rather remain unknown in Poland. This is due to the fact that the authorities of the Polish People’s Republic intentionally failed to disseminate information about the mass executions in the Pomeranian woods. The Polish victims of massacres in Piaśnica belonged mainly to the intelligentsia of the Second Republic of Poland and not to the working and peasant



classes which were privileged by the governments of that time. Preserving remembrance of the murdered people and caring for their graves became responsibility of different local community organisations operating in various periods, such as the Polish Western Association, the Municipal and Communal Civic Committee for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites in Wejherowo, the Social Committee for Care of the Piaśnica Graves in Wejherowo, the Piaśnica Family Association and the Committee of Piaśnica. Today several institutions, organisations and companies take care of particular graves and memorial places. Piaśnica is located in the administrative area of the District of Wejherowo and the administrator of this site is the Forest District of Wejherowo.

Grave No. 26

The mass grave number 26 was 8.2 meters long, 4.0 meters wide and 3.0 meters deep. During the German operation of covering up the traces of the crime, the corpses of the victims were removed from the grave.

A pre-war mansion of Dr Franciszek Panek, a physician and a respected social activist from Wejherowo, situated

on 6 Ofiar Piaśnicy Street in Wejherowo, is especially related to the crime of Piaśnica. Its architecture refers to Józef Piłsudski's mansion "Milusin" in Sulejówek. Before the war the villa hosted a cultural salon of the town.

In 1939 the Germans seized the building and transformed it into the local Gestapo quarters. The Germans coordinated the operation of exterminating the victims of Piaśnica at this place. They were storing up clothes and other objects robbed from the victims in the basement and garden of this villa.

Among the victims of the crime in Piaśnica there were people who had lived in the mansion before the war, Dr Panek's daughters, Kazimiera and Stanisława, school teachers who were socially active and involved in the life of the pre-war Wejherowo.





The Piaśnica Museum established on 16 December 2015 will have its seat in the aforementioned historical mansion, today called “Villa Musica”. After the general overhaul of the building and its adjustment to the functions of a museum it will host the main exhibition presenting the history and the mechanism of the crimes committed by the German executioners in the Piaśnica Forest. The exhibition will also show profiles, accomplishments and pre-war estate of the victims.

The second spot used to burn the bodies

The Germans were afraid that their extermination operations would be discovered by the approaching Red Army, therefore already in 1943, after the Stalingrad defeat, in accordance with the resolution of *Reichsführer* SS Heinrich Himmler, the German started to covering up the traces of the committed crimes. Works conducted in the Piaśnica Forest consisted in excavating bodies from the mass graves and burning them on specially prepared stacks (fireplaces). In order to carry out this task, the Germans were using prisoners of the Stutthof concentration camp.



Smoke and smell of burning corpses reached surrounding villages such as Piaśnica Wielka, Domatówko, Warsz-kowo, Leśniewo and others.

The fireplaces were concealed with sheets hanged on the trees. The purpose was to limit fire and smoke impact. Until now, on the trees growing around the fireplaces we can see parts without bark that was burnt as a consequence of high temperature of the flames.



Lair of the prisoners of the Stutthof concentration camp

The Germans were using prisoners of the Stutthof concentration camp to excavate and burn the corpses of the victims in order to cover up the traces of their crime. At the begging, the prisoners were held in the village of Tyłowo, confined in basements by the Germans. Later they were moved to the Piaśnica Forrest. The Germans were afraid that they would run away so they chained their legs. During the works, which lasted about seven weeks, they were sleeping on the ground covered with a thin layer of straw and eating meals prepared on fire. They were forced to excavate the bodies and move them into the fireplace. They also had to cut down trees and carry trunks. When the work was done, they were murdered and their bodies were burnt.





Chapel

In 2010 in the place of the old chapel, on the initiative of the Piaśnica Family Association and Rev. Prelate Daniel Nowak, a new chapel was built which also fulfil the function of a memorial. The memorial place was designed by the architect Andrzej Sotkowski. The shape of the chapel is supposed to resemble a sacrificial stack similar to those on which the Germans executioners burned the excavated bodies of the victims. Besides, the murdered people's names were engraved on the back of the monument, on posts similar to stacked trunks. It also contains six brazen plaques, each one with an engraved fragment from the



book written by Barbara Bojarska, dedicated to the crime of Piaśnica. Inside of the stack there are 12 sculptures of various figures created by artist Tomasz Sobisz, PhD. They symbolise victims executed in Piaśnica.

A figure of the Christ Crucified which towers above the altar was sculptured by Marcin Plichta. It's a symbol of the martyrdom of Jesus and of the murdered people. The mausoleum chapel was unveiled ceremonially on 3 October 2010.

Currently, Piaśnica remains a place of patriotic celebrations as well as the Sanctuary of the Blessed Martyr Alicja Kotowska and Companions. The Parish of Christ the King and the Blessed Sister Alicja Kotowska takes care of the sanctuary. In the church, located on 2 Narutowicza Street in Wejherowo, there is a chapel dedicated to the martyrs of Piaśnica.

Biographical notes of selected victims

Rev. Bolesław Witkowski (1873-1939)

He was a parson of the St. James and St. Nicholas Parish in Mechowo involved in the community service. He was a respected herbalist and member of many social and cultural organisations associated with the National Party and the National Popular Union. He was an active participant of the Polish electoral movement during the partitions of Poland. In 1912 he was a deputy to the German parliament and the Prussian Estates. In 1923 he was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta. In the same year he was appointed the dean of Puck Deanery and a synodic judge. When he got arrested on 11 September 1939 the Germans interrogated him brutally and later murdered him in Piaśnica with particular cruelty.

Rev. Anastazy Kręcki (1888-1939)

He was an active social and national activist. Member of the Association for the Defence of Western Polish Borderlands and initiator of various cultural and social events. For example, he contributed to the establishment of a four-voice men's choir, a mixed choir, a dairy co-operative in Łebcz and various agricultural and gardening clubs. In 1931-1934 he built the Catholic Parochial House in Strzelno which became the heart of social and cultural life of this that municipality. He contributed to the formation of a volunteer fire department in Strzelno in 1933 of which he was an active fireman. On 11 September 1939 the Germans arrested and imprisoned him in Wejherowo. After a week he was freed and he could continue his priestly service. Despite the ban, he said masses in Polish language. He was arrested again on 24 October 1939. The Germans transported him towards Puck and he was executed in Piaśnica.

Rev. Edmund Roszczynialski (1888-1939)

Roman Catholic priest and Kashubian social and cultural activist. Since 1915 he was a member of the Scientific Society in Toruń. In 1917 he was drafted to serve in the German army and sent to the western front in Belarus. During the Polish-Soviet war in 1920 he was a prefect of the Teacher's Seminar for Women in Wejherowo. In 1922 he became a stockholder and soon afterwards a member and chairman of supervisory board of the Polish publishing company and printing house whose press title was "Gazeta Kaszubska" ("Kashubian Journal"). When he was a parson of the Holy Trinity Parish in Wejherowo he established many Catholic fraternities, secular associations and societies becoming their director or pastor. He also chaired the Committee for Assistance to the Unemployed and was the president of the management board of the People's Reading Society in Wejherowo (1934-1939) and a vice-president of the local department of the Polish Red Cross. In 1926 he became a dean of the Wejherowo Deanery. Since 1924 he was a leading activist in the Association for Defence of Western Polish Borderlands (since 1935: the Polish Western Association). He bestowed upon the title of prelate (papal chamberlain) and obtained the papal cross "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice". He was also awarded the Gold Cross of Merit and the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta. During the German occupation he started the secret organization "Aid for Poles". He was also a representative of the Educational Office of Western Borderlands in the coastal region which was part of the secret organisation "Homeland" in Greater Poland. He was arrested in late October or early November 1939 and later murdered in the framework of the program that consisted in elimination of the Polish leadership class. The Germans executed him in the village of Cewice near Łębork.

Bolewsław Kralewski (1872-1939)

He was a member of the Polish Western Association. In the 1920s he was a deputy governor of Wejherowo-Zamek. He

ran an inn and a restaurant on the ground floor of his own house on 10 Sienkiewicz Street in Wejherowo in which rehearsals of Polish choirs and meetings of patriotic organisations took place (including the Polish Western Association). When the Germans marched into Wejherowo in autumn 1939 he refused to display a flag with a swastika and take down the Polish flag from the front of his house. For that attitude and for hiding Polish soldiers in the basement of his house he was executed on 27 November 1939 in the Piaśnica Forest. His wife Klara and four daughters Elżbieta, Helena, Magdalena and Maria spent five years in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. In 1943 Helena and Magdalena were moved to a subsidiary camp, that is, to the ammunition factory in Hallendorf near Braunschweig. In March 1945 Klara and her daughter Elżbieta participated in the death march from Ravensbrück to Flossenbürg.

Teodor Bolduan (1902-1939)

Since 1933 he was the Mayor of Wejherowo. He made that town an attractive residential town, touristic centre and health resort. He put the administration to order, fixed the budget, reduced the unemployment rate and built a modern bathing pool and tennis courts. On his initiative, the Hieronim Derdowski Kashubian Theatre was created. He was member of many organisations, including the Association for the Repair of the Polish Republic, the Riflemen's Association, the Polish Western Association, the Non-Party Bloc for Cooperation with the Government created by the sanation government and the Camp of National Unity. He was also member of the Chief Council of the Association of Polish Cities (since 1935), secretary of the Board of Pomeranian Cities and sat on the Supervisory Board of the National Development Bank in Poznań. In Wejherowo, he was member of the District Council and the Regional Board of Polish Western Association. He was also chairman of the Chief Council of Kashubian Printing House, president of the Volunteer Fire Department and the Polish Red Cross, and member of the Markmen Fraternity as well as

the Falcon Gymnastic Society. On 15 October 1939 he was murdered as a result of the program aimed at the elimination of the Polish intelligentsia. He was executed under the Castle Mountain (Zamkowa Góra) near Wejherowo.

Roman Kuniewski (1888-1939)

Before the war he was the forester manager, town councillor and social activist in Wejherowo. Besides, he was the president of the district branch of the Polish Riflemen's Association and vice-president of the District Council of Non-Party Bloc for Cooperation with the Government. He was also an active member of the Polish Western Association. In 1939 he started to cooperate with the Command of the Land Coastal Defence and he instructed to cut out trees to make fortifications. On 11 November 1939 he was murdered by the Germans in the Piaśnica Forest.

Jesuit Józef Konewecki SJ (1893-1939)

After he took holy orders, he worked as a history teacher and tutor of boy scouts in the San Casimiro Junior High School in Vilnius and later he became rector and first director of the private Jesuit Junior High School in Gdynia in 1937-1939. After the September Campaign he was arrested on 24 October 1939 by the Germans. He was imprisoned in Gdańsk and later in the Stutthof concentration camp. Finally, the Germans executed him in Piaśnica. Some monastic sources indicate 10 November 1939 as the date of his death.

Kazimierz Bieliński (1897-1939)

Electrical engineer, social activist and director of the Municipal Electrical Plant in Gdynia. During the First World War he fought in the German army on the western front. In 1929 he moved to Gdynia where he organised the Municipal Electrical Plant. He introduced, for the first time in Poland, block fees. He was the first president of the Polish Electrician's Association. He was awarded the Silver and Gold Cross of Merit by the president of the Republic of

Poland, and also a diploma of the Committee of the Maritime League of Aerial and Gas Protection for his service in favour of the defence of Polishness. The Germans murdered him in November 1939 in the Piaśnica Forest.

Stanisław Walenty Łęgowski (1887-1939)

Shipbuilding engineer, director of the Maritime Authority in Gdynia and manager of the Port of Gdynia. He was also member of the town council and the management board of the Sea Fisheries Institute. He was considered to be a leading expert in maritime affairs. He supervised the construction of the ports of Gdynia, Wejherowo, Jastarnia and Hel. He also reconstructed the Port of Puck and provided protection for the coastline from Krawieńskie Błota to Hel. For his work and social activity he was awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta and the French Legion of Honour. During the September Campaign in 1939 he cooperated with the Command of the Land Coastal Defence. When the Germans marched into Poland he was arrested and later executed in Piaśnica.

Władysław Kiedrowski (1900-1939)

He was judge of the District Court in Gdynia and professor of Law in the State Maritime School. He was passionate about Pomeranian and Kashubian traditions and was one of the founders of the *Stanica* Kashubia Lovers Society. He was a member of the Kashubian Committee for Construction of Barracks in Gdynia. Well known Kashubian activists (such as Aleksander Majkowski o Wiktor Roszczynialski) used to have their meetings in his villa on 33 Tatrzańska Street. In September 1939 the Germans arrested him and held for a while in the provisional camp on Śląska Street in Gdynia. He was murdered on 11 November 1939 in Piaśnica. Władysław Kiedrowski's daughter and son, Maria and Wojciech, commemorated their father's death in the Piaśnica Forest. Near the road leading to graves, they placed a sculpture of the Pensive Christ, a work of artist Andrzej Arendt.

The newly created Piaśnica Museum is looking for mementoes

The Piaśnica Museum appeals for assistance with finding any mementoes related to the crime committed in the forests near Piaśnica Wielka (Pomeranian Voivodeship) in 1939. The crime claimed thousands of victims who were executed near Piaśnica Wielka and buried in mass graves. It was one of the first massacres of civilians committed on such a huge scale during World War II.

The Piaśnica Museum in Wejherowo was established on 16 December 2015. After the building is refurbished and suitably adapted, the Museum will function in the historic Villa Musica in Wejherowo (former headquarters of a local unit of Gestapo). The obtained mementoes will be used for preparing a permanent exhibition at the museum. They will also broaden the knowledge of the tragedy in Piaśnica, which has not been thoroughly examined so far, and majority of its victims remain unknown.

As a result of a disinterment carried out in 1946, some personal belongings of the victims, such as, amongst others, crosses, medallions, wedding rings, prayer books and other items were taken out of mass graves in the forests near Piaśnica Wielka. Abundant photographic documentation of the disinterment was prepared. It showed the works of the commission, as well as the discovered bodies and objects. Unfortunately, the objects and pictures presented subsequently at exhibitions with the aim to facilitate identification of the bodies were lost after 1948 in circumstances that remain unexplained. Any information on what happened to exhibits of value for the Piaśnica Museum can help us in finding them.

Should you have any mementoes or information, please contact us:

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The Piaśnica Museum in Wejherowo (in organisation)

The Piaśnica Museum is being established in the Villa Musica building in Wejherowo, at 6 Ofiar Piaśnicy Street. The building is being prepared for complete refurbishment, which will enable the museum to carry out its activities in it. Inside the building there will be a permanent exhibition with modern installations presenting the history of the crime perpetrated in Piaśnica. The exhibition will present also profiles, achievements and pre-war legacy of the victims. During the twenty years between the two wars, many of them were activists in multiple areas of social, political, business and cultural life, and rendered great service to our country.

A temporary seat of the Piaśnica Museum is currently situated at 11/2 Św. Jacka St. in Wejherowo.

