
Poland. 17.5 tonnes of human ashes unearthed in forest

The recent unearthing of 17.5 tonnes of human remains in a forest in central Poland, against the background of news from war-ravaged Ukraine, has not caused much of a stir. Yet, among the ashes of more than 8,000 bodies killed and turned into ashes by the Nazis in 1944 to cover up the horrors of the KL Soldau concentration camp, buried up to 3 metres beneath the ground in two mass graves respectively 28 and 12 metres long, could be those of Blessed Antoni Julian Nowowiejski (1858-1941) titular Archbishop of Silio, Bishop of Płock, beatified by John Paul II in 1999, his auxiliary Msgr. Leon Wetmański, as well as several dozen other priests, religious men and women, including Blessed s. Mieczysława Kowalska Poor Clare from the Przasnysz convent. Commenting on the unearthing of the mass graves in the Biały forest near Działowo, situated halfway between Warsaw and Gdańsk, Karol Nawrocki, President of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej - IPN), said that the massacre “was perpetrated so that no one could be held accountable for the crimes of the German Nazis”, announcing that there would be further excavations in at least six different locations, which have already been identified and may possibly reveal more human remains. Nawrocki also assured that “IPN is firmly committed to continuing the search for the heroic victims of the Second World War, and so that not one of them will be forgotten.”

– I was four years old when, together with my parents and four siblings, I suffered horrific violence, starvation, and a paralysing fear of beatings as well as summary executions of prisoners, hounded by dogs, tortured and brutalised in this Nazi camp. I also witnessed the brutal beating of one of the prisoners, Bishop Antoni Julian Nowowiejski, whom my mother described at the time as "a saint on earth", remembers 85-year-old Teresa Krowicka from Płock, a former KL Soldau prisoner, recently awarded the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Cross by Pope Francis. On September 1, 1939, Third Reich troops invaded the Polish territory, thereby igniting the Second World War, which ended in 1945. The conflict, sadly evoked by many images reaching us over the past few months from Russia-invaded Ukraine, resulted in the death of more than 60 million people, including at least 6 million of Jewish origin, 3% of all humanity at the time. Just a fortnight after the Nazi invasion from the west, on September 17, Poland was attacked from the east by the Soviet Union, allied with Hitler. The German-Soviet Pact was signed in August 1939 by the foreign ministers of the two powers, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov. After the German invasion, the KL Soldau concentration camp (now known as Działowo) was among the first detention and forced labour camps set up on Polish territory by the invader. The infamous concentration and extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Kulmhof, Treblinka, Sobibór, Stutthof, Bełżec, Majdanek, Warschau and Gross-Rosen were erected only later. An estimated tens of thousands of prisoners were detained in the barracks of the KL Soldau camp, at least 30,000 of whom perished. The hovels where the prisoners were detained, men and women separated from each other, were built by the same prisoners. They lacked cots or any other furnishings, and the prisoners were forced to sleep on the ground with just a few shrubs as their beds. The KL Soldau prisoners, mostly Poles, members of the clergy and social elites as well as members of the National Army (AK - Armia Krajowa, the largest Polish resistance movement comprising approximately 400,000 members during the Second World War), were subjected to torture and humiliation, and were forced to work days on end exceeding their human limits. Those who were not killed in summary executions would die of starvation or from diseases that were easily spread in that environment with no hygienic conditions. After the German invasion, the KL Soldau concentration camp (present-day Działowo) was among the first detention and forced labour camps set up on Polish territory by the invader. The infamous concentration and extermination camps known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Kulmhof, Treblinka, Sobibór, Stutthof, Bełżec, Majdanek, Warschau and Gross-Rosen were erected only later. An estimated tens of thousands of prisoners were detained in the barracks of the KL Soldau camp, at least 30,000 of whom perished. The hovels where the prisoners were detained, men and women separate from each other, were built by the same prisoners. They lacked cots and any other piece of furniture, and the prisoners were forced to

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