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**From Ground to Display: Findings & Challenges of the Archeological Unearthing**

**Sobibor Death Camp**

I first arrived at the site of the former Nazi death camp Sobibór in Eastern Poland in 2014, to join the archaeological excavations taking place that summer. Guided by the archaeologists, I stepped off the “public path” into the surrounding woodland and was disturbed to find gnarled, rusting barbed wire crudely wrapped around thick tree trunks. Back by the circular memorial mound, I kneeled closer to the sandy grass only to discover fragments of ash and cremated bone. The following day, I joined the team to dig and sift the earth in the area by the remains of the gas chambers. There, on the makeshift metal sieve, gleamed a pearl and silver earring, standing out against the rock and debris. And some seventy years later, on that day, I held in my hand tangible evidence of a murdered being: a sign of personal expression, identity, and womanhood. The owner of these beautiful earrings had chosen to wear this pair, perhaps her favourite, on the day she would be killed at Sobibór.

In his article *Bones Never Lie? Unearthing Europe's Age of Terror in the Age of Memory*, Rob van der Laarse emphasised: “While personal memories might travel, the sites themselves are mostly fixed within local and national canons of memory. Many material remnants and findings of conflicts are trapped in such a state of in-between”. The former site of Sobibór death camp is one such place: remote, quiet, and enclosed by nature. Yet, the deceptive beauty of its surrounding woodland and few neighbouring residents, however, cannot conceal the terrible and violent history of this site. Sobibór is a space that has witnessed extreme

violence, politicization, de-politicization, and even re-politicization as a result of the more recent archaeological, material, and museological developments. Through various stages of preservation and commemoration, the site has been transformed from a space of non memory—or “terrorscape” — into a place of remembrance and mourning. Yet, only recently has the narrative of Sobibór death camp started to integrate the narrative of Holocaust memory as we now know it, with a stronger focus on perpetration, memorialization, touristification, and excavation. For years, it has remained on the periphery. Yet, it is precisely this absence of memory and materiality that stimulated the forensic and material turn at the site in the early 2000s. This has been embodied by a ten-year period of forensic archaeological excavations, as well as the decision of the Polish state in 2011 to build a new museum and memorial in coordination with an international steering committee.

Following the years of neglect and contested memorialization, archaeologists also began to shed new light on public memory and the collective consciousness of Sobibór. Not only has this form of research revealed further physical evidence of topographical camp structures, but it has also helped to restore the memory of those victims who did not survive to tell their experiences through objects and fragmented material traces. While there is evidence of archaeological work taking place on the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau as early as 1962, excavations at Holocaust sites have evolved into their own forensic discipline from the 1980s onward. By utilizing traditional methods of historical and combat archaeology, the field of Holocaust archaeology approaches the memory, material culture and preservation of sites of this specific conflict. Much like the revision and shift of commemorative narratives at former camp sites in Poland, forensic work can also be understood within the broader context of ‘changing transnational perspectives on Holocaust heritage’. Concerning the Reinhard camps

specifically, excavations began at Chelmno in 1987, while British archaeologist Caroline Sturdy Colls has performed multiple excavations at the site of Treblinka. While Belżec was also investigated for a short period of time, the vast memorial that was built there has prevented any further excavation being done on site. At Sobibór, the first excavations were led in 2000–2001 by Andrzej Kola of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, who used a particularly invasive and contested method of drilling. As Isaac Gilead notes: *“That Kola was allowed to drill mass graves is considered by Orthodox Jews as a monumental failure”*. Through this method, his team found mass graves and the remains of five structures, as well as approximately 873 artifacts which were transferred for conservation to the Majdanek State Museum- though not much of his work was published. Richard Freund also conducted some small excavations at the site with a team from the University of Hartford in the United States and using only geophysics. In this study, however, I focus on excavations that I have been involved with personally, the role of the archaeologist at Sobibór, and of the material culture unearthed there. Indeed, the widescale excavations at Sobibór have been the largest of any other former death camp, and most importantly, have created a substantial archive of objects from below-ground. In 2007, on behalf of Ben Gurion University, Yad Vashem, and the Włodawa Museum, Polish archaeologist Wojciech Mazurek and Israeli archaeologist Yoram Haimi, began working together to try to uncover as much physical information regarding the site as possible. Mazurek, of Sub Terra Archaeological Research in Chelm, had already completed some non-invasive geophysics at Sobibór in 2004. Haimi, of the Israel Antiquities Authority, had personally lost family members there, including two cousins from his mother’s side who had been born in Morocco; this was the main motivation for his involvement. Archaeological research at the site of the Sobibór extermination camp allows us to physically touch the Holocaust beyond the limited evidence provided by historical

documents. The excavations enable us to reconstruct the camp accurately, and uncovering the artifacts allows us to discover more of its victims' story." Alongside a team of skilled local workers- including Mazurek's sons- the archaeologists referred to a wider variety historical sources such as maps, sketches, drawings, and aerial photographs, as well as the accounts of Sobibór witnesses as a basis for their research. Haimi was able to consult personally with Yehuda Lerner and Simcha Bialowitz, who were living in Israel at the time, while Simcha's brother Philip Bialowitz was even able to see the excavations himself. Though many visitors came to the site during the excavations, including relatives of Sobibór victims, myself and American filmmaker Gary Hochman were permitted as 'unofficial' members of the excavation team. As the project unfolded, a strong working relationship formed between Haimi and Mazurek, who were able to bring different historical backgrounds and investigative methods to the excavations. From my perspective, this has also contributed to the strength of their investigation, alongside the hard work of their team members. The high level of trust and support between the international actors involved – both Jewish and non Jewish- allowed for deeper communication and understanding of what was being unearthed, what their findings might represent for the memory of the site, and ways to disseminate this knowledge to the wider public.

Initially, Haimi and Mazurek's goal had been to reconstruct the 'original plan' of the camp site, the former details of which had been 'insufficient and inaccurate', despite previous investigations and scientific research. The team have since excavated a huge amount of terrain at the site, and the excavations have successfully uncovered the remains and former location of several important camp features, including the correct location of the 'Himmelfahrstrasse' ("Road to Heaven") in 2011, the female hair cutting barracks, the

original railway ramp constructed within the camp, the 'Sonderkommando' barracks, the number of previously undetermined graves, and even the traces of a failed escape tunnel. Excavations in Camp I and II revealed buildings and refuse pits full of wartime artifacts used by the Trawniki guards, and the undressing area of the new arrivals. Further investigations of Camp III and mass grave area uncovered newer pits of bone and ash fragments, possibly from the cremation of camp inmates who did not escape during the uprising. An area in which approximately 1830 bullet casings were found also revealed a shooting range, possibly for the prisoners who were unable to make it to the gas chambers.

Indeed, the methodical digging in excavation squares conducted by Mazurek and Haimi's team, provided the new forensic framework of research at the site and provided hope for future discoveries. Though comparatively, this process is time consuming and requires extensive physical labour, it has also allowed for more intricate findings to be made, and to better trace soil inconsistencies below ground. The archaeologists at Sobibór have faced the challenge of the natural landscape; time is spent cutting down trees, removing roots and burning foliage.

They have also contented with manmade changes to the site, such as the impact of post-war looting, and the establishment of the large-scale memorials which directly impacted the terrain. More 'primitive' tools such as shovels and sieves are used, which require modification and repair (paid for by the archaeologists), to catch the smallest fragments of human remains and precious materials. The use of the sieve also requires direct tangibility and a process of selection, reflective of the epistemological process involved in forensic research. Thus, the methods of excavation in the case of Sobibór has directly expanded the legacy and material memory of the camp, leading to new historical research and investigation

beyond the limits of traditional research. At the same time, these tools also reflect the smaller amount of funding dedicated to excavations in Poland, unless money is brought in internationally.

Since beginning, the archaeologists also unearthed approximately 11,000 personal belongings. As Sturdy Colls suggests, sites that are devoid of physical evidence and remote in location, like Sobibór, must find alternate ways in which to engage with the public. One such alternative way is through the mediation of artifacts. Those uncovered throughout the excavations in Sobibór, including eyeglasses, alcohol bottles, ladies' hairpins, wooden chess pieces, bottles, toiletries, tools, gold teeth, and wedding bands, as well as perpetrator items such as bullet casings, have had a substantial impact on public memory. The items with an obvious link to Judaism or which bear a prominent Jewish symbol are not as common but have been categorized by the archaeologists as "special findings". Through these, the memory of Sobibór and its Jewish victims can begin to be restored, as was diminished throughout the years of neglect and misplaced commemoration efforts. Most significant are the small number of identified artifacts- 14 in total- some of which have enabled us to reconstruct victims' biographies, and even track down living family members.

This is the case of a name tag belonging to a six-year-old Dutch girl named Lea Judith de la Penha who was deported from Westerbork and a pendant belonging to Karoline Cohn who had been deported from Frankfurt to Minsk, before arriving at Sobibór. As Anne Frank was thought to have owned a similar pendant, its discovery gained coverage around the world. The uncovering of traces of Karoline Cohn's fate resulted in a *Stolperstein* being placed in her name in Frankfurt. The case of personalized items being discovered at the site of Sobibór

(this is not the case at Treblinka, for instance) has, of course, resulted in greater public awareness and interest in the camp's history. As with the excavations themselves, there are underlying ethical and anthropological debates surrounding the discovery of these objects. As the state museum at Majdanek retains every object unearthed during the excavation period, they include items for which we have been able to track down living relatives due to their biographical identifications. However, the families are not permitted to take these items, since they are expected to remain in Poland as part of the new museum's exhibition. Much to the upset of the descendants, I have spoken with, they are not even granted the privilege to touch them without wearing special gloves, whereas even I have done so during the excavations. The most evocative instance of this tension is illustrated by the finding of a name tag, uncovered during the archaeological phase of the area Camp III.

The tag, engraved with a name and address, belonged to David "Deddie" Zak—a young Dutch Jewish boy—who was born in Amsterdam on February 23, 1935, and murdered in Sobibór on June 11, 1943, at the age of eight. Following further research, archaeologists were able to reconstruct the fate of members of his family, most of whom, including David's parents, were also murdered in Sobibór. But his cousin, Lies Caransa, survived the war in hiding and still lives in Amsterdam today. Informed about the discovery, Caransa was invited to a memorial service held for David by the Majdanek State Museum at the site of Sobibór later that year. Accompanied by her son, she traveled to Poland for the memorial, fully expecting to return to the Netherlands with David's name tag in her possession. At the ceremony, however, Lies Caransa was presented with a framed replica of the tag. Only after Caransa returned to Amsterdam did she realize how upset she felt. In an interview, she told me: "I am angry about their refusing [to give me back the original], I am legally the owner of

the name tag. It makes me angry because I cannot bear that something of my cousin stays in that terrible place where my family is murdered. Only because of rules”.

By 2012, the archaeological team had already produced a ‘new layout’ for Sobibór death camp, suggesting that previous excavations had proved unreliable in detecting mass graves and building fragments. Following the absorption of Sobibór into the branch of the State Museum at Majdanek, however, the new museum and memorial planning also began to affect where the team should and could research, ahead of building plans and potential disruption of remains. From this period onward, all material findings would be presented to Majdanek for further preservation, limiting the opportunity of archaeologists to study them. At the same time, the discovery of numerous objects originating from the Netherlands led to the participation of a Dutch archaeologist on site, Ivar Schute, who joined the project in 2013 on behalf of the Ministry of Welfare in Holland (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid). Schute had previously worked on other former camp sites such as Amersfoort, Vught, Westerbork, Bergen-Belsen, and Treblinka. As a result, further investigations were permitted and carried out in the years that followed, and cooperation with Schute also ignited greater international interest, particularly from the Netherlands. In summer of 2014, when I first joined the excavations under the tutelage of these three archaeologists, the exact location and physical remnants of the gas chambers were uncovered: a fundamental aim of their project. This discovery made headlines and was covered by German, Dutch, Israeli, British, and Polish media outlets and widely commended by international Holocaust scholars, showcasing the impact of archaeological excavations at killing sites like Sobibór. Similarly, the objects found during this specific excavation were remarkable. Unlike other areas of the camp, this area revealed material culture pertaining to the body, rather than household items. We found, for



example, gold fillings, dentures, pendants, earrings, and rings. What is most noticeable here, is that these were all items that naked victims who had turned over their belongings before being marched to the gas chambers, would have had on them, and thus proof that the bodies of the victims were indeed searched after they were murdered. This particular phase of the excavations, however, also led to a debate about the “invasiveness” of the large-scale archaeological digs in Sobibór, performed in coordination with the Polish Rabbinical authorities in Warsaw. Although the archaeologists have encountered clandestine graves previously undocumented in maps and research, mass graves were avoided at all times. When human remains are discovered, they are treated and reburied according to Jewish burial protocols. In response to the question of why this area needed to be excavated (since, after all, the post-war testimonies and maps had already revealed where the gas chambers had been located), this relates back to both the need for and the power of tangible proof, as well as the importance of a response to the planning of a new museum and memorial—something that Sturdy Colls refers to as “reactive responses.” This calls into question the ethical responsibility of Holocaust archaeology more generally and our relationship to material culture in the context of genocide. As might be expected, the extensive period of excavation at Sobibór has not been without its conflicts and issues over the years. In 2011, before the former campsite became property of Majdanek, the State Forestry Administration attempted to have the archaeologists arrested for cutting down trees to complete their excavation that year. Their investigations have also inadvertently attracted the attention of Holocaust deniers, who in response have also launched personal attacks on the archaeological team; Sturdy Colls also experienced this during throughout her research at Treblinka. The former Reinhard camps, with less tangible evidence and official documentation than other sites, have always been the subject of revisionists such as David Irving. Irving, who offers paid guided tours to

the Reinhard camps, visited Sobibór during the excavations in 2014 the day before I first arrived. It seems, however, that the biggest conflicts the archaeologists have faced, concerning the outreach and protection of their work, is with the State Museum at Majdanek. Once the museum began to determine the goals of the excavations in response to their architectural planning, more issues began to arise, particularly in response to the uncovering of the gas chambers.

Following a visit to the site by Piotr Cywiński, director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, who insisted that these be preserved immediately, a decision was made to apply two layers of insulation to the inside of the fragments, with a layer of agrotexile and thick construction film outside. This responsibility fell to Majdanek, who were advised by the archaeologists to cover them with sand until the former procedure could take place. A year later, the foundations were still exposed and due to the harsh Polish winter that year, the remains were damaged further. In 2015 they were finally treated with a chemical substance, preserving most of them, with the intention of making them visible to visitors through plexiglass. Ultimately, the advice and forensic research conducted by the archaeologists has often been neglected in favour of the memorial museum planning, even though their findings have formed the basis of their new exhibition. Claudia Theune has referred to this as a kind of 'political education', whereby the archaeologist is indebted to the goals and vision of a memorial centre. Rarely were decisions made in coordination, and the 'exhaustive' nature of the excavations of Sobibór were reflective of this; more intensive excavations needed to be done to ensure the safety of the material remains. At the same time, incredibly important objects continued to be unearthed at every stage of these excavations, adding to their concern. Despite these debates, the unearthing of the gas chambers did eventually impact the memorial

design in the former area of Camp III. The director of Majdanek, Tomasz Kranz, stated: “We are aware of the fact that the architectural project of the museum in Sobibór, especially the commemoration of the road leading to the gas chambers, does not appeal to everyone.” Moreover, around 700 objects from the excavations are now on display in the new museum exhibition, which opened in October 2020.

Thus, not only has the archaeological research helped to determine the topographical and material memory of the camp, restoring a sense of Jewish victimhood, but they have also directly impacted the site’s new, cultural memorialisation process. In short, this form of forensic research has shaped public awareness and understanding of the camp in ways we never thought possible. Yet, how these findings are integrated into public memory remains the responsibility of the State Museum and Majdanek and the archaeologists respectively as tensions remain, and future collaboration becomes less likely.