

„THE DEAD SLEEP HERE” – THE HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHOJNICE’S DEATH VALLEY

„TUTAJ ZMARLI ŚPIĄ” – HISTORIA, ARCHEOLOGIA I ETNOGRAFIA CHOJNICKIEJ DOLINY ŚMIERCI

Dawid Kobialka

Institut Archeologii, Uniwersytet Łódzki
ul. Pr. Gabriela Narutowicza 65, 90-131 Łódź
dawid.kobialka@filhist.uni.lodz.pl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3806-4408>

ABSTRACT: Death Valley in Chojnice, Poland, is a mass murder site from World War II where Germans and various officials of the Third Reich organised and carried out mass executions of Poles. The site and the events that took place there have been the subject of scholarly research and war crimes prosecutions since 2020. This paper intends to outline three aspects of them: 1) how playing in Death Valley as a child determined the later scholarly interest in the site, 2) how reading of a book *Chojnice 1939–1945*, about World War II and the crimes committed in the region, drew attention to undiscovered aspects of the site, 3) the last parts present the course and preliminary results of three seasons of scientific research and prosecution of war crimes committed on the northern outskirts of the town.

KEY WORDS: archaeology, history, World War II, war crimes, mass graves, Death Valley, Chojnice

INTRODUCTION – THE *CHILDREN’S* EXPERIENCE OF DEATH VALLEY¹

Death Valley is a well-known place for the inhabitants of Chojnice (and the surrounding area). For many years, on 1st September, a solemn holy mass has been held

¹ This introduction is a fragment of another popular-scientific article (see more in Kobialka, 2022a). It has a personal, reminiscent character, and for this reason it is written in the first person singular which is important because the childhood games in Death Valley marked the beginning of my interest in the place and its “aura” (Buchholz, 1947).

there in the memory of the victims of World War II from the town and the region. It also marked the official beginning of the school year for the Chojnice students.

The present landscape of Death Valley is a meadow with an altar, a cross and a memorial plaque describing the events that took place here during World War II. The meadow is surrounded by thickets, bushes, deciduous trees and wetlands. At first glance, nothing indicates that this is a place of mass murder – as if the local landscape was empty, devoid of material traces of a tragic and painful past. Today, Death Valley is a charming corner close to the town centre – an ideal place for a walk, a dog walk, a running track, etc. In other words, it is a landscape that seems to have been robbed of its dark history – or at least that is how it was in May 2020, when the multidisciplinary scientific research of this place has started.

The above comments are personal. I come from Chojnice. I was born in there, spent my childhood and only after graduating from a high school, I left the town permanently. I used to live there with my parents and brothers at Rzepakowa street – located only about 400–500 metres from Death Valley. I remember it like it was yesterday — for years, when I had breakfast in the kitchen of our flat on the second floor of the block, I looked at the fields surrounding the estate – Death Valley was always in the background.

Like other children, when I was already in elementary school, I regularly participated in the 1st September celebrations organised in the northern outskirts of the town. Like my peers, we did not know what was being commemorated. Surprisingly, we regularly walked along the road where Poles were led and transported to be shot, both in the autumn of 1939 and at the end of January 1945. Death Valley was indeed a mysterious place for us, and therefore a place of interest shrouded by a mysterious “aura”. Its natural shape was probably one of the reasons why the Germans chose it for mass executions. The hilly terrain, on the other hand, was an ideal area for winter fun for us as children. We used to go sledging in winter from the dirt road that departs from Igielska street to the monument in Death Valley. As it turned out, almost three decades later, on 13 June 2020, we stopped almost literally at three burial pits (“death pits”), where, according to the current state of research, several hundred people were murdered and their bodies burnt in order to cover up the traces of the crime.

This childhood interest in the aura of the execution site near Chojnice later turned into a search for information on the history of the crimes committed by the German-Nazis and the Third Reich officials during World War II on the northern outskirts of the town – previously known as Pola Igielskie. The basic book for the research was *Chojnice 1939–1945*. It is the most important study of the period of occupation in the town and region. In the end, these childhood and youth fascinations with Death Valley turned into a scientific interest with the subject of the material legacy of the World War II crimes that remained to the present day. The facts from the book have been confirmed by regular scientific research (and a public prosecutor’s investigation) that have been conducted there since 2020.

In the following, I present the course of the research process related to the works in Death Valley – its history, archaeology and ethnography. Therefore, the next part of

the article is a discussion and summary of the critical analysis of *Chojnice 1939–1945*, which was one of the main factors in favour of starting the search for material traces of the World War II crimes near Chojnice. The following chapters describe the subsequent seasons of scientific research and investigative activities which began in 2020, continued in 2021, and from 2022 will be carried out as part of a multidisciplinary and international scientific project entitled *An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939*.

READING *CHOJNICE 1939–1945*

One of the main reasons for doing scientific research in Chojnice's Death Valley in 2020 was a reading of the book *Chojnice 1939–1945*. It was published in 1947, just two years after the end of World War II. Despite the passage of time, it is still the most important publication that describes the times of the German terror in the town and district. The authors of each chapter (the introduction was written by Marian Grochowski, the main chapter was prepared by Wojciech Buchholc, and the crimes in Czersk and the surrounding area were presented by Józef Ostrowski) based on material collected primarily by members of the District Committee for Commemorating the Victims of Nazi Crimes in Chojnice. The book also contains many findings about the mass extermination of Polish citizens that took place on the northern outskirts of Chojnice between 1939 and 1945. It is for this reason that, as early as the autumn of 1939, the local community called the surrounding fields, meadows and agricultural wasteland Death Valley – a place of mass extermination.

For the purposes of this article, a number of important conclusions drawn from the reading of the aforementioned book should be highlighted. In the autumn of 1945, exhumations were carried out at various execution sites in the Chojnice district, with the aim of finding individual, collective and mass graves of people murdered by the Germans during the occupation. In Pola Igieskie, a part of which was then referred to as Death Valley, the remains of a total of 107 victims were found between 21 November and 1 December 1945. Families or friends of the victims were able to identify 53 bodies (fig. 1).

Exhumations were also carried out in the vicinity of the pre-war National Social Welfare Institutions in Chojnice (the so-called Witki). A fragment of a Polish military trench prepared in the summer of 1939 for the expected conflict with the Third Reich was found – as it was the case with Death Valley. A few months later, the trenches were used by the Germans as convenient places for mass graves. In Witki, almost all residents (mainly mentally ill people) of the Chojnice National Social Welfare Institutions lost their lives. The exact number of people murdered at the turn of October and November 1939 still vary. It is generally estimated that there were at least 218 mentally ill people.

According to the protocol prepared by the forensic and medical commission, the exhumation work in Witki lasted from 1 to 2 December 1945. The commission was able to locate a trench in which the decomposing bodies of mentally ill people from



Fig. 1. Józef Kościelny – one of the victims murdered in the autumn of 1939 in Death Valley (Radosław Kerszk's private archive)

the nearby National Social Welfare Institutions had been dumped. Most importantly, the exhumation recovered the skulls of only 61 murdered people – the rest of their bodies, as well as the remaining bodies of over 150 people, were not recovered for unexplained reasons. Only a small mound was built on the site of the mass grave and there is no trace of it in the local landscape today.

At the turn of October and November 1939, Germans murdered the local intelligentsia near Chojnice (including priests, teachers, state officials, representatives of the Polish Western League, landowners, merchants), farmers, workers, the mentally ill people, Poles with whom the local Germans had had various problems before the outbreak of the war, as well as the representatives of the local Jewish community. The book also mentions that the area now known as Death Valley (in the inter-war period it was a place called Ostrówek, or less often Ostrówko) was the scene of another mass crime.

According to various post-war witnesses, a group of several hundred Poles was taken to Chojnice at the end of January 1945. Then, according to Jan Grunt, quoted by Wojciech Buchholc, for three days and three nights a glow of light and the characteristic smell of burning flesh rose from Ostrówek, and the entire area was to be tightly secured by the German police and auxiliary units. Therefore some of the witnesses

were telling that hundreds of people were murdered in Ostrówek and their bodies were burnt on the pyre in order to cover up the traces of the crime. The introduction by Marian Grochowski and archival material found, among others, in the collection of the Historical and Ethnographic Museum of Julian Rydzkowski in Chojnice, suggests that members of the Committee found (uncovered) the place where the bodies of the victims were burnt at the end of January 1945. For reasons that remain unclear, the burnt remains of the victims were not exhumed. Only one document mentions that the site was – as it was enigmatically stated – secured.

It should also be emphasised that the exhumations in the Chojnice district were not carried out with the participation of the military, surveyors, cartographers or archaeologists (fig. 2). The chairman of the forensic and medical commission and the Committee itself was a medical doctor Jan Łukowicz. In result of lack of the elementary means and tools (e.g. part of the documentation of the Committee’s work was done on German papers from the occupation period), no detailed photographic and drawing documentation of all exhumed sites and graves was made. Little attention was paid to the preservation of material evidence (e.g. shell casings, bullets). From today’s perspective, it must be said that the reports from the site visits and the exhumations themselves are very general and imprecise. It only took a few decades for the knowledge of the exact sites in Death Valley to be erased and forgotten. One could say that, in a sense, history has become archaeology.

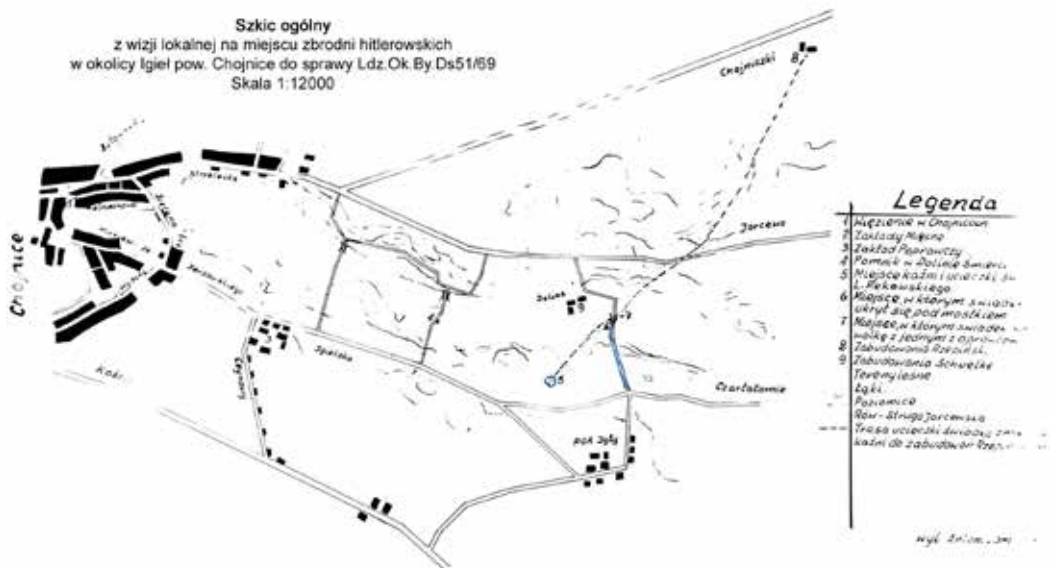


Fig. 2. Sketch with the location of the most important places related to arrests and executions in the autumn of 1939 in Chojnice and its outskirts. The document was created only in 1970 on the basis of the testimony by Leon Styp-Rekowski – one of the Poles who survived executions in Death Valley (source: Institute of National Remembrance)

Indeed, the book contains certain limitations and inaccuracies – they reflect the aura of the years of occupation and the post-war period. There was a general tendency to overestimate the scale of the crimes. For example, Donald Steyer (1967) assessed that at least 50,000 people were murdered in the autumn of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania. Barbara Bojarska (1972), another distinguished researcher of the extermination of the Pomeranian population in the early stages of World War II, wrote about 40,000 Polish citizens who were exterminated in 1939 (Ceran, Mazanowska, Tomkiewicz, 2018). Therefore, some imprecise and exaggerated estimates are also found in the book *Chojnice 1939–1945*.

Firstly, it seems that at the end of October 1939, Germans exterminated 218 people from the Chojnice's National Social Welfare Institutions – not 249 as stated in the book. The publication mentions the murder from 10 February 1945, when functionaries of the Third Reich on the outskirts of Leśno murdered a group of 200 Jewish women from the sub-camp in Dziemiany (in German Sophienwalde), that was a part of the Stutthof concentration camp. In 1970, their remains were exhumed, as a result of which the bones of about 60 women were found (Tomkiewicz, 2014). Also, the number of Poles who were murdered at the end of January 1945 in Death Valley (in the publication this area is often referred to as “Ostrówek”) seems to be overestimated. An error also appeared in Józef Ostrowski's chapter on Nazi crimes in Czernik. During the exhumation of the remains of the victims murdered on 4 November 1939, in the forest near Łukowo, 28 people were shot but not – as the author most likely mistakenly stated – 78. This was confirmed by the post-war exhumation works.

The reading and analysis of *Chojnice 1939–1945* clearly suggested that there may still be remains of victims murdered by Germans during World War II on the northern outskirts of Chojnice, as well as various types of the evidence of crimes in the form of cartridge cases, bullets, personal belongings of the victims or abandoned (lost) items by the perpetrators. The main research thesis of the scientific work started in 2020 in Death Valley as part of the project entitled *An Archaeology of Death Valley*, was the statement that using the methods and tools of archaeological research and their integration with historical and ethnographic sources, it is possible to find material traces of the crimes that took place near Chojnice between 1939 and 1945.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN DEATH VALLEY IN 2020

The methodology of research in *An Archaeology of Death Valley* was in fact based on three scientific disciplines and their methods and sources. They were tentatively referred to as: the history of Death Valley, ethnography of Death Valley and archaeology of Death Valley (Kobińska, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022b; Kobińska et al., 2020, 2021). The research conducted in 2020 was co-financed by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage from the Culture Promotion Fund. The works were also financially supported by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the local authorities of Chojnice.

It was the history of Death Valley that was the pillar of later activities (fig. 3). As part of it, archival research was carried out in various Polish institutions in order to collect and later critically analyse documents related to the mass murders that took place on the outskirts of Chojnice during World War II. The result was a collection of copies of over 1,000 historical sources. These included, e.g. testimonies of witnesses to the German arrests of the inhabitants of Chojnice and the region from September to the end of November 1939, protocols of interrogations of those who escaped from the shootings, exhumation reports, copies of death certificates and the daily correspondence of the members of the Committee, to name but a few.

From all the sources, it can be concluded that the articles by Marian Grochowski, Wojciech Buchholc and Józef Ostrowski were reliably and meticulously prepared in accordance with the collected evidence and current state of knowledge. At the same time, after archival research, it was certain that the mass graves of the inhabitants of the town and region murdered as part of Intelligenzaktion (Wardzyńska, 2009) and T-4 (Evans, 2004) must still be located at unknown sites on the outskirts of Chojnice. The same is true for the remains of people who were cremated in the second half of January 1945 in Death Valley. However, the analysis of historical sources alone did not provide reliable reasons for selecting locations for detailed archaeological investigation.

The second pillar of the work carried out in 2020 focused on the ethnography of Death Valley, e.g. conducting interviews with people who lost their family members on the outskirts of Chojnice in the autumn of 1939. In fact, ethnographic research was a very important social and cultural component of the work. On the one hand,



Fig. 3. During the archival query of the collections of the Historical and Ethnographic Museum of Julian Rydzkowski in Chojnice (photo by Daniel Frymark)

it was possible to reach and talk to the descendants of the murdered. These included daughters as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those murdered in Pola Igielskie in autumn 1939 (fig. 4).

Many previously unknown photographs of the victims and various types of documentation from private collections were recorded for the purposes of scientific research. Most of these materials have never been made available to the scientific community. On the other hand, during the ethnographic research, members of the research team contacted people with knowledge of the location of mass graves on the outskirts of Chojnice. One of the interviewees claimed that as a 13-year-old boy, he and his colleagues, in the late autumn of 1945, had observed the exhumation works carried out in Death Valley from a distance. During one of such a visit, he came across burnt bones and charred wood lying on the surface of the ground. Even then, the witness assumed that these could be cremated human remains. Other informants also mentioned Pola Igielskie as the place where local residents and farmers had allegedly found human bones in recent decades. It can be assumed that some of these were the remains of victims murdered near Chojnice in autumn 1939.

Archival queries and ethnographic interviews helped to locate sites and areas for archaeological research as precisely as possible (see also Sturdy Colls, 2015). They consisted of two stages. The first one was completely non-invasive. These were anal-



Fig. 4. During an ethnographic interview with Urszula Steinke, whose father Alojzy Słomiński was murdered on November 19th, 1939 in Death Valley (photo by Daniel Frymark)

yses of derived products of aerial laser scanning, historical and contemporary aerial photographs and satellite imagery. Thanks to adopted research procedure, it was possible to register fragments of the Polish trenches from 1939, whose selected sections a few months later became mass graves for the inhabitants of Chojnice and region. Then, geophysical prospection was carried out in various parts of Pola Igielskie, using ground penetrating radar as well as magnetic and electro-resistance methods. Difficult field conditions meant that these methods which normally yield positive results were less effective in this case.

The invasive research, in turn, consisted of metal detector surveys, which were carried out systematically from 9 May to 4 September 2020. The culmination of the planned work were eight test trenches in different parts of the Pola Igielskie. Their relatively small area was undoubtedly one of the obstacles that made it difficult to find the mass graves of 1939 or the traces of the exhumations carried out in autumn of 1945.

The breakthrough in the research was undoubtedly 13 June 2020, when the next metal detector survey was carried out in Death Valley. During it, Daniel Nita and Karol Woliński, two volunteers participating in the field research, found – as later analyses confirmed – burnt human remains lying several centimetres below the ground surface (fig. 5). The site was immediately secured, and the found bones were sent for anthropological analysis, which confirmed that these were cremated



Fig. 5. June 13th, 2020 – the very moment of discovery of burnt human remains in Death Valley (from the left: Karol Woliński, Filip Waldoch and Dawid Kobiałka) (photo by Daniel Frymark)

human remains (Banaszak, 2020). Among the bones, were also found personal belongings of the victims (including a gold wedding ring, civilian buttons), traces directly related to the mass murder (bullets), as well as charcoal being relics of the cremation pyre. Subsequently, the Institute of National Remembrance was informed about the situation, which later initiated an official investigation into the mass murder that took place at the end of January 1945 in Death Valley by the prosecutor Tomasz Jankowski from the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk.

The archival documents indicated that the execution site located in Death Valley could be a place where the remains of hundreds of people were buried. Therefore, it was decided to secure it and excavate in 2021.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND PROSECUTOR'S INVESTIGATION OF DEATH VALLEY IN 2021

The exhumation works and scientific research in 2021 in Death Valley were a complex of official investigation conducted by prosecutor Tomasz Jankowski and a new scientific project on mass crimes on the northern outskirts of Chojnice entitled *The Terrible Smell of Burning – Archaeological Research of the Place of Execution in the Death Valley in Chojnice*. It was an example of a scientific research project that was part of an official investigation conducted by the prosecutor's office of the Institute of National Remembrance. The main purpose of the fieldwork was to exhume the burnt remains of the victims murdered at the end of January 1945 on the northern outskirts of the town and to secure various types of evidence of the crime. The research in 2021 was co-financed by the Polish Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport from the Culture Promotion Fund. The work was also financially supported by the local authorities of Chojnice.

As a result of an in-depth archival query, a list of over 120 people who were most likely murdered in Death Valley in the second half of January 1945 has been compiled. Two wedding rings with the initials of the spouses and the dates of the marriage made it possible to identify the first victims. They were: Irena Szydłowska, a Home Army courier from Grudziądz (fig. 6) and Anna Stołowska, also from Grudziądz, who was arrested by the local Gestapo with her husband and three children on the night of 16/17 January 1945 (Jankowski, Kobiąka, 2021a, 2021b). Elżbieta Łęgowska from Chojnice and her fiancé Edward Makowski were also seen in the group of people led by Chojnice. Wojciech Buchholz mentions this fact in his text.

Archaeological research, consisting of the scientific recovery of the burnt remains of the victims, was the main objective of the works carried out from 31 May to 21 July 2021. The excavation area covered less than 1.5 ares. Planigraphy allowed for precise location of the research area. All the soil removed from the excavation was floated (washed under running water) on sieves specially constructed for this purpose



Fig. 6. A – Irena Szydłowska, a courier of the Home Army from Grudziądz – one of the victims murdered at the end of January 1945 in Death Valley, B – a copy of an abbreviated marriage certificate, which confirms the husband’s initials and the date of marriage. Thanks to the data, it was possible to connect one of the found wedding rings with its owner Irena Szydłowska (Mariola Nawrocka’s private collection)

(fig. 7). Thanks to the adoption of such research methodology, the field team was able to secure even small fragments of human remains.

The entire research area was covered with a grid of 10 by 10 meters. Each area was in turn divided into 100 smaller documentation units of one square metre each (fig. 8). The evidence from different levels of excavation depth was inventoried separately. The precise location of discovered artefacts, the diagnostic elements of the human bones as well as the place where the samples were taken were documented using a total station. The form of documentation of the excavation and places of concentration of burnt human remains were aerial photos taken with an unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) and photogrammetry, which allowed the preparation of 3D models of the recorded relics.

As a result of the research work, almost a ton of burnt human remains was discovered. Only in a few dozen cases individual bones show no visible signs of high temperature. Three concentration points of human remains were discovered. Between and among them were the remains of cremation pyre (charcoal, wood with traces of



Fig. 7. During floatation of excavated soil with human bones found in 2021 in Death Valley (photo by Daniel Frymark, source: Institute of National Remembrance)



Fig. 8. Aerial photo showing the excavation grid, which was the basic method of inventorying discovered human bones, artefacts, wood and charcoal during fieldwork in 2021 in Death Valley (photo by Daniel Frymark, source: Institute of National Remembrance)

high temperature). In 2021, 4,275 inventory items were documented. In most cases, these are things that the victims had at time of death. The objects were located in different parts of the excavation, but most of them were found among the human remains, providing that the bodies of the murdered were burned together with their clothes. The quantity and variety of valuable everyday objects also supports the theory that the crime was committed in a hurry. Gold wedding rings, signets, rings, silver pocket watches and different types of wristwatches confirm this. There are also medallions with the image of the Virgin Mary, rosary beads, and even bobbins of preserved thread, a thimble, elements of fountain pens and safety pins. Despite the efforts made to cover up the traces of the crime, fragments of leather from shoes or fabrics from the clothes of the murdered people have also been preserved. What is more, the haste with which the murder was organized and its traces covered up is also evidenced by the fact that many of the victims' gold tooth crowns were not removed after they were killed (fig. 9).

According to the testimonies, the victims were taken from the buildings of the National Social Welfare Institutions to Death Valley. In total, two seasons of field research have uncovered a large collection of cartridge cases and most likely from Walther PPK and P08 Parabellum pistols – ballistic analysis is in progress at the time of writing (fig. 10).



Fig. 9. A field photo of a tooth with a gold crown found during field research in 2021 in Death Valley. The white structures in the background of the photo are burnt human remains (photo by Daniel Frymark, source: Institute of National Remembrance)



Fig. 10. Pistol shell – one of the artefacts found among the burnt remains of the victims murdered at the end of January 1945 in Death Valley (photo by Daniel Frymark, source: Institute of National Remembrance)

Part of the archaeological work consisted of collecting materials for specialist analysis. During the excavation, samples of wood and charcoal were taken, the analysis of which may shed light on the construction of the pyre itself and the fuel used to burn the victims' bodies. The soil in and around the cremated human remains was the subject of geomorphological and palynological research in order to reconstruct the local environment before, during and after the murder. In turn, geochemical analyses will be used to resolve the fundamental question: are the discovered pits containing human remains the place of burning the victims' bodies or just the place of its deposition?

Similarly, the expertise of the forensic scientist and the analysis of the recovered artefacts will shed new light on the execution that took place in Death Valley at the end of January 1945 and on the ways in which the evidence of the extermination carried out by the officials of the Third Reich was covered up. These analyses will be carried out by a specially appointed team of experts in the coming months. The results of the investigation will be published once the investigation is completed.

In autumn 2021, the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk has continued the search for the 1939 crime scenes in Death Valley. The work of Wojciech Buchholz revealed that not all the victims had been found during the exhumations. As a result, more rifle shells were secured – traces of executions that took place near Chojnice. Other interesting finds included Mauser cartridge clips and metal parts from shoes. Nevertheless, the most important result of the field research in October 2021 was the excavation of one of the mass graves associated with the murders near Chojnice. As a result, it was confirmed that a part of grave had been exhumed in autumn 1945. No human remains were found inside. However, at the bottom of the grave were single shells from a Mauser system rifle and – interestingly – a practice ammunition and fragments of barbed wire.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND PROCESUTOR’S INVESTIGATION IN DEATH VALLEY IN 2022 AND THE NEAREST FUTURE

The archival materials, the book *Chojnice 1939–1945* and the fieldwork carried out in 2020–2021 clearly show that material traces of the crimes in the Pola Igielskie and the social memory of them among the inhabitants of Chojnice and the district have survived to the present day (Kulesza, 1986; Lorbiecki, 2017). The research methodology combining sources, methods and perspectives characteristic for history, ethnography and archaeology proved to be the effective ways of searching for the diverse heritage of mass crimes, even several decades after they were committed. This is, moreover, an approach that is often used in the case of other initiatives in the field of broadly understood so-called modern conflict archaeology (e.g. Saunders, 2007; Sturdy Coll, 2015; Zalewska 2016; 2021; Kostyrko, Kobiąłka, 2020).

In his text, Wojciech Buchholz emphasised the specificity of Chojnice at several points in relation to the crimes and terror of World War II. Another regionalist, Klemens Szczepański (1986), aptly described it by claiming that the German occupation of the town and region was the time when Poles lived “in the darkness of the night”. The events that took place on the outskirts of Chojnice were not an isolated act of – as it has sometimes been called – “cleansing the area” (Evans, 2004; Wardzyńska, 2009).

During the first months of World War II, thousands of Poles were murdered in mass executions in the Pomeranian Voivodeship, including priests, teachers, politicians, members of the Polish Western League, merchants, state officials (e.g. postmen, policemen, border guards), to name but a few (Steyer, 1967; Bojarski, 1972; Jastrzębski, Szilling, 1979). The bodies of the victims were usually buried in mass graves in order to cover up the traces of the crime. In the bloody autumn of 1939, the lives of the mentally ill people and representatives of the local Jewish community were taken – in this sense, Death Valley is a “classic” example of the events that took place in Gdańsk Pomerania during the first months of World War II. Currently, it is estimated that between September and December 1939, approximately 20–30 thousand Polish citizens of the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship were murdered (Ceran, Mazanowska, Tomkiewicz, 2018). This number was twice as high as the total number of victims from other pre-war Polish territories. For this reason, some Polish historians have recently postulated that all Nazi-German crimes in Gdańsk Pomerania in the early months of the war should be summarized under one term – the “Pomeranian Crime of 1939”. It was a prelude to later mass exterminations during World War II: “the term Pomeranian Crime of 1939 includes acts of direct extermination carried out against the Polish population from September to December 1939 (in some places until the beginning of 1940) by Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz units, with the active support of the Wehrmacht and the SS” (Ceran, Mazanowska, Tomkiewicz, 2021; my translation).

In fact, Germans murdered Polish citizens in about 400 places in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship (Bojarska, 2009; Mazanowska, 2017; Kubicki, 2019). Death Valley in Chojnice is just one of them, as it is clear from reading *Chojnice 1939–1945*. Despite the passage of several decades since the described events, for the purpose of the next project entitled *An Archaeology of Pomeranian Crime of 1939*, it was hypothesised

that a diverse heritage related to mass crimes that took place in Gdańsk Pomerania during the first months of World War II has survived to the present day. This is true not only to Death Valley but also to other places in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. The first field activities carried out in 2022 confirmed the validity of the above assumption.

Despite the intensive historical, ethnographic and archaeological work carried out in 2020–2021, further unknown materials were found in 2022. These include various types of documents related to the victims who gave their lives for their homeland near the town in autumn 1939, as well as testimonies from people who escaped from Death Valley. Subsequent metal detector surveys made it possible to find further evidence of the crime – cartridge cases and rifle bullets that can be linked to the mass executions at Pola Igielskie. Also, the first metal detector surveys at the execution site in Szpęgawsk Forest, where several thousand people were murdered, confirmed the fact that various material traces of committed crimes have survived in the local landscape to the present day (see also Kubicki, 2019). From the first weeks of the implementation of *An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939* new ethnographic interviews were conducted with the families of the victims, whose memories, although fragmentary and in many places not corresponding to historical reality, constitute valuable research material related to the heritage of the crimes from Pola Igielskie.

Undoubtedly, a valuable supplement to the publication *Chojnice 1939–1945* is the account by Władysław Kulesza (1986) of Józef Zblewski who was one of the few people who escaped with his life from Death Valley. It turns out that he managed to escape from the execution in Pola Igielskie and told his story to his later comrades-in-arms – partisans belonging to the secret military organization “Pomeranian Griffin” (Kobiałka et al., 2022). As part of the historical and ethnographic activities, I contacted Józef’s son, who was interviewed about his father and his memories of the escape itself. A valuable source of information enriching the history of Death Valley is a collection of photographs of Józef Zblewski (fig. 11).

The inhabitants of Chojnice and the region have unpublished collections that are of great cognitive and commemorative value. This was the case, for example, with the descendants of Alojzy Stoltmann – a retired teacher from Swornegacie, according to his family records he was killed in Death Valley. Other notable results include photographs of him from different periods of life, documents related to his professional work, to a handwritten note by the victim’s wife from 1968 and ethnographic interviews with descendants. The adopted methodology allows for the collection of potentially diverse sources and data. Archaeological artefacts, historical documents and the living memory of the inhabitants of the region offer a more complex picture of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 and its role and significance to present. This was indeed one of the main aims of the authors of *Chojnice 1939–1945* – to preserve the traces and memory of the crimes committed and their victims (fig. 12–13).

Mass execution sites are crime scenes. From this point of view, every piece of material culture is the evidence. From an archaeological perspective, these places can be studied as a specific category of archaeological site. In this approach, every bullet and every shell is an archaeological source. Bullets, cartridge cases, personal belongings of victims,



Fig. 11. Józef Zblewski (first from the left) – photo taken before the outbreak of World War II (Józef Zblewski's private archive)



Fig. 12. Commemorative photo of graduates of the State Teachers' Seminar in Kościerzyna from 1924 – Alojzy Stoltmann standing in the upper row, fifth on the left (Krystyna Roszkowska's private archive)

human remains, dimensions of mass graves and exhumation pits can be seen as important sources of knowledge about the past. Through these small, rusty, damaged objects, some of the key aspects of the German crimes of 1939 and their legacy in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship can be reconstructed. Here, archaeology becomes a way of collecting the evidence of crimes – forensic archaeology (Sturdy Colls, 2015) (fig. 14–15). *An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939* is another example of this approach.



Fig. 14. Rifle cartridges of the Mauser system found in Death Valley (photo by Daniel Nita, source: Institute of National Remembrance)



Fig. 15. An eagle from a railway cap, dating from the Second Polish Republic period, found in Death Valley. Railway workers were also among the victims murdered in the autumn of 1939 near Chojnice (photo by Daniel Nita, source: Institute of National Remembrance)

CONCLUSION

The research thesis put forward in 2020 for the purposes of the project activities was confirmed. Preliminary results and findings of the work carried out in 2020 and 2021 have already been published in Poland (e.g. Kobiałka, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, Kobiałka et al., 2020) as well as in international scientific journals (Kobiałka, 2022b; Kobiałka et al., 2021). In fact, thanks to the use of archaeological research methods and tools, in-depth archival queries, obtaining valuable memories and relations of the local community (ethnographic research) and the cooperation of scientists with the prosecutor Tomasz Jankowski, the remains of several hundred victims murdered by Germans at the end of January 1945 in Death Valley were found and exhumed. It can even be said that the intuition of the local community regarding the lingering of the remains of the victims in Death Valley were also true. As one of the interviewees recalled her childhood days: teachers warned children passing through Death Valley to behave with dignity, because “the dead sleep here” (A. Werochowska, oral information, 15 March 2022).

The research teams involved in the three projects described in this article consisted of many specialists. Among them there were e.g. archaeologists, scientists involved in macroscopic analysis of plant remains, geomorphologists, palynologists, historians, physical anthropologists, forensic physicians, geneticists, ethnographers, ballistics specialists, specialists in material culture. Only through such extensive multidisciplinary cooperation it will be possible to reconstruct the course of the crimes and the ways in which they were covered up. Ultimately, the multifaceted scientific research and the prosecutor’s investigation should answer the most important questions: who were the victims murdered on the outskirts of Chojnice at the end of the war, where

did they come from and why did they have to die in the region a few weeks before the end of the war. To date, there have been many, even mutually exclusive, versions of events (e.g. Jastrzębski, 1974; Lorbiecki, 2017). The conducted research also enriches the knowledge about the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 itself and its multidimensional heritage and memory.

Analysis of the recovered bones, artefacts, wood and charcoal from the cremation pyre, soil samples and artefacts in general will continue over the coming months. It is only a matter of time before the next victims are identified. Investigations of this kind, such as those in Death Valley in Chojnice, show that even several decades after the murder and despite strenuous attempts to cover up the traces of the crime, there is still a chance of finding the remains of murdered people who were supposed to remain nameless forever, buried in the ground forever (fig. 16). *Chojnice 1939–1945* is also an important and mostly up-to-date description of the German terror during World War II in Chojnice and the region.



Fig. 16. August 1st, 2021 – official laying of flowers at the site of the mass murder from the end of January 1945, which was discovered in 2020 in Death Valley, and exhumed a year later (photo by Daniel Frymark)

Several hundred victims whose remains weighing less than a ton were discovered in 2020 and 2021 in Death Valley, were someone’s fathers, mothers, sons or daughters. Thanks to the combined efforts of the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk and scientific research, a part of history of German murders described in the publication *Chojnice 1939–1945* will be clarified and closed.

Finally, the gained experience provides a solid basis for even more thorough, more complex and long-term research into the material heritage related to the mass

murders of Polish citizens that took place during the first months of World War II in Gdańsk Pomerania. The issues of social commemorative practices related to these events have also not been extensively analysed. These are just some of the goals that have been set to be implemented as part of the multidisciplinary and international scientific project entitled *An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939*. One of the main inspirations for its preparation was the re-reading of *Chojnice 1939–1945*. This publication is still a valuable basis for revealing further unknown, hidden or forgotten aspects of these difficult and painful events, which were the mass murders of Polish citizens in the autumn of 1939 as part of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939, as well as those committed at the end of January 1945 on the outskirts of the town.

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„TUTAJ ZMARLI ŚPIĄ” – HISTORIA, ARCHEOLOGIA I ETNOGRAFIA CHOJNICKIEJ DOLINY ŚMIERCI

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy chojnickiej Doliny Śmierci – miejsca kaźni z czasów II wojny światowej. Z materiałów archiwalnych wynikało, że jesienią 1939 roku Niemcy na okolicznych polach zamordowali kilkuset obywateli Polski. Wśród ofiar byli przedstawiciele szeroko rozumianej inteligencji (m.in. duchowni, urzędnicy państwowi, działacze społeczni, ziemianie), pensjonariusze miejscowych Krajowych Zakładów Opieki Społecznej oraz członkowie chojnickiej społeczności żydowskiej. Mordy nie były spontanicznymi wydarzeniami, ale dobrze przemyślanymi oraz przeprowadzonymi akcjami eksterminacyjnymi, którym jeszcze przed wojną nadano kryptonimy *Intelligenzaktion* oraz *T-4*. Współcześnie coraz liczniejsze grono badaczy postuluje za pojęciem *Zbrodni pomorskiej 1939*, które miałyby ogół tych zbrodni definiować.

Co więcej, chojnicka Dolina Śmierci jako miejsce kaźni z jesieni 1939 roku należy do nelicznych lokalizacji, które w kolejnych latach wojny zostało ponownie użyte przez Niemców jako punkt eksterminacji narodu polskiego. Według niektórych osób zeznających po wojnie, w drugiej połowie stycznia 1945 roku Niemcy doprowadzili do miasta kolumnę (lub też kolumny) więźniów. Nikt z tych osób wojny nie przeżył, a znad Doliny Śmierci przez trzy dni i trzy noce unosiła się łuna światła, słychać było wystrzały z broni palnej oraz śwąd palonego mięsa.

Niniejszy tekst składa się z trzech zasadniczych części. Wstęp to krótka osobista refleksja, w której autor artykułu wspomina czasy dzieciństwa, kiedy to wraz z kolegami bawił się czasem w Dolinie Śmierci. Już wtedy miejsce zdawało się być tajemnicze i owiane grozą.

Rozdział drugi to krytyczna analiza książki *Chojnice 1939–1945*. Jest to najważniejsze i nadal w wielu fragmentach aktualne opracowanie czasu niemieckiego terroru w latach 1939–1945 na terenie miasta i powiatu. Praca zawiera także wiele cennych wspomnień i ustaleń na okoliczność zbiorowych i masowych zbrodni dokonywanych przez Niemców – najważniejszym z nich były Pola Igielskie (Dolina Śmierci). Lektura książki stanowiła kolejny punkt zainteresowania historią chojnickiego miejsca kaźni.

Kolejna część w istocie to opis trzech kolejnych sezonów badań archeologicznych oraz czynności śledczych prowadzonych w Dolinie Śmierci na okoliczność masowych zbrodni dokonanych przez Niemców pod miastem w czasie trwania II wojny światowej.

Badania rozpoczęły się w 2020 roku. Pozwoliły one na odnalezienie pierwszych materialnych śladów zbrodni – zarówno z 1939 roku, jak i ze stycznia 1945 roku. Najważniejszym z nich było zlokalizowanie miejsca zalegania spalonych szczątków ludzkich.

W 2021 roku przeprowadzono prace terenowe w ramach oficjalnego śledztwa kierowanego przez Tomasza Jankowskiego, naczelnika Pionu Śledczego Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Gdańsku. W wyniku zrealizowanych czynności zabezpieczono prawie tonę spalonych szczątków ludzkich oraz ponad cztery tysiące materialnych dowodów zbrodni.

Zebrane informacje i doświadczenia w trakcie prac z lat 2020–2021 stanowiły podstawę do realizacji projektu *Archeologia Zbrodni pomorskiej 1939*. To multidyscyplinarne i międzynarodowe przedsięwzięcie ma na celu badania kolejnych miejsc kaźni z 1939 roku na Pomorzu Gdańskim oraz analizę ich współczesnej roli i znaczenia. Ważnymi elementami działań są dalsze studia historyczne. Należy także podkreślić fakt, że czynności stanowią składową oficjalnych śledztw prowadzonych przez Pion Śledczy IPN w Gdańsku na okoliczność masowych zbrodni dokonanych w czasie trwania II wojny światowej. W zamierzeniu cztery miejsca kaźni mają być studiami przypadków. Jednym z nich jest chojnicka Dolina Śmierci. Stąd też ostatni rozdział pracy przedstawiał działania zrealizowane na jej terenie w drugiej połowie 2022 roku.

