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□ “We Found People...” – The Discovery, Research, Experiences and Artistic Documentation of Mass Graves from 1945 in Death Valley in Chojnice, Poland

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Abstract

Death Valley in Chojnice, Poland, is the site of mass crimes committed by officers of the Third Reich against citizens of the Second Polish Republic during World War II. This photo essay describes the circumstances of the discovery of mass graves dating from late January 1945, when several hundred Poles were taken to the outskirts of the town, murdered, and their bodies burned to cover up the traces of the crime. The text advocates the presentation of human remains as irrefutable material evidence of the crime and of the cover-up attempt. The reason it is presented as a photo essay is because the visual arts, in the context of documenting mass graves, are able to capture aspects of the site – the materiality of the crimes committed and the aura of the exhumation itself – that are not usually taken into account in archaeological field research. Such elements, however, are inherent to any field research that involves the exhumation of innocent victims.

Keywords: art, crime scene, mass grave, materiality, World War II

This photo essay shows human remains. Viewer discretion is advised.

Introduction

Since May 2020, multidisciplinary scientific research and war crimes investigations by a state prosecutor have been taking place on the outskirts of Chojnice, Poland, at a site of mass killings from World War II known as "Death Valley". According to an earlier investigation conducted just after the war, the perpetrators were mainly members of the local pre-war German community, who were organized within the infamous parapolice *Selbstschutz Westpreussen* (Buchholz 1947) and who operated under the supervision of SS members who were also stationed in Chojnice. Numerous artefacts were found during the first day of the field research confirming that mass executions had taken place here, but the key moment came on 13th June, 2020, when metal objects including bullets and pistol casings, coins, buttons and a gold tooth crown were found with burnt bones. After carrying out the necessary anthropological analysis, it was confirmed that the bone remains were human (Kobiałka 2022).

In accordance with Polish law, the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) was informed of the discovery. As a result, prosecutor Tomasz Jankowski, head of the Investigation Division of the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk, opened an *ex officio* investigation into the war crime. It was then decided to secure the site, to raise the necessary financial resources and to appoint a research team. A year later, as a result of further archaeological research, it was possible to exhume almost a ton of burnt human remains – literally tens of millions of bone fragments burnt by the Germans in order to completely cover up the traces of the crime. The data obtained are now the subject of research as part of a multidisciplinary and international scientific project entitled "An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939". The purpose of this photo essay is to provide an insight into the history of the place, the discoveries made and their range as well as to develop artistic documentation, which was a very important element of the research strategy adopted (see also Kobiałka *et al.* 2021; Kobiałka 2022; Kobiałka *et al.* 2022; Smykowski and Kobiałka 2023). Until now, these materials have been kept confidential by the investigation. All photographs were taken by Daniel Frymark and they are stored in the collection of the IPN.

Death Valley in Chojnice – Historical Context

The name "Death Valley" was coined by the local community of Chojnice and the surrounding area in the autumn of 1939, after ethnic Germans carried out mass shootings of the local community on the northern outskirts of the town. Among the victims were teachers, priests, social activists and state officials. The executions followed a pre-planned action commonly known as the *Intelligenzaktion*. Mentally disabled people from National Social Welfare Institutions in Chojnice were also murdered in the same death pits, and archival documents also mention that some members of the local Jewish community were killed here as well. Currently, it is estimated that several hundred Poles were murdered between the second half of October and the end of November 1939. However, after the war, the remains of only 168 people were found, 53 of whom were identified by family and friends (Buchholz 1947; Kobiałka *et al.* 2022).

The mass crimes near Chojnice were not an isolated, spontaneous act of aggression. Death Valley is just one of nearly 400 known sites in Gdańsk Pomerania alone, where the Germans organised mass executions in the first months of the war. According to current estimates, between 20,000 and 35,000 human beings were murdered in Gdańsk Pomerania during this period (Ceran *et al.* 2018), a rate that was twice as high as elsewhere in Poland at the time. This is one reason why some Polish historians have coined a new term, “Pomeranian Crime of 1939”, to define all German crimes from the period in Gdańsk Pomerania (Ceran *et al.* 2018).

Additionally, the archival material examined for the purposes of the project includes some scarce information about several hundred Poles who were executed by the Germans on the northern outskirts of the town at the end of January 1945 and their corpses burnt. Wojciech Buchholc, in his study of German crimes during World War II in Chojnice and the county published two years after the war, quoted the testimony of a witness, Jan Grunt, dated 14th June, 1945:

In mid-January of 1945 (around 6 p.m.), a transport of political prisoners, probably 800 people, arrived in Chojnice. Some of them were kept in the National Social Welfare Institution, and some were taken directly to the Igielskie Fields [Death Valley – author], about 500 meters from the Institution. The rest of the prisoners were taken out in groups at night, also to the same place. The sound of revolver shots could be heard from there almost all night [...]. The bodies of those who had been shot were probably doused with petrol and burnt. This is evidenced by three petrol barrels that are still there today. There are also shovels and hoes scattered about. A fire burnt in this area for three days and three nights. Especially at night, a great glow could be clearly seen and a terrible odor of burning could be smelt.

(Buchholc 1947, 70, my translation)

Reports from inspections carried out by the Country Committee for Commemorating the Victims of Nazi Crimes in Chojnice in June, 1945 show that its members managed to find, among other things, a location with traces of burning in Death Valley (Kobiałka *et al.* 2022). However, this area was not among those where exhumations had previously been carried out, in late autumn 1945. Knowledge of this particular site and even of the 1945 events themselves was obliterated over the decades and became finally a form of “war myth” – it has even been questioned whether it ever happened.

However, similar mass crimes are known to have occurred in the region during the same period. When there was no time to dig mass graves in January–March 1945, burning bodies was a quick and effective way to cover up the traces of crimes. This was the case, for example, with Jewish women from a branch of the KL Stutthof camp in Sophienwalde (Dziemiany), who were taken to a barn near Leszno, where they were murdered and the building then set on fire (Buchholc 1947). In the case of the Pogdaje massacre in late January–early February 1945, members of the 15th Waffen SS Grenadier Division of the SS (1st Latvian) murdered 32 Polish soldiers, whose bodies were also burnt in a barn (Wróblewski 2020).

The grave of mentally disabled people executed in 1939 in Death Valley was only partially exhumed in 1945 too. Only 61 skulls were excavated from the trench, which hid the bodies of at least 218 victims, the rest being left in place. Therefore, the research thesis that more material traces of German crimes from World War II were still to be found on the northern outskirts of Chojnice seemed very likely.

"We Found People..." – 13th June, 2020 in Death Valley and its Repercussions

The 13th June, 2020 marked the second round of our metal-detector survey in Death Valley. Adhering to our established research methodology, each artefact was geolocated using an RTK GPS device. My focus was on one part of Death Valley, but around noon, an urgent call beckoned me to a different and marshy area, where two volunteers had made a startling discovery.

What I encountered was transformative. Volunteer Karol Woliński presented his glove, stained with ash, which I immediately recognized as the remains of victims from executions in late January 1945. The evidence indicated an execution site and the mass graves of several hundred Poles murdered in the region as the war drew to a close. Recounting his experience, Woliński expressed the intense emotions of that moment:

There was nothing on the west side. In the ditch, wading knee-deep in mud, I came across a lot of rubbish and a shovel. There was hope of getting closer to the victims, although from 1945 [rather than 1939]. It was not known where their bonfire had been. The reports of three days of execution and burning were overwhelming: shooting and burning of the murdered. German crime on the eve of the end of the fighting in this area. After leaving the eastern side of the draining ditch, I resumed my search. At that time, about 20 meters further on, casings from handguns and matching bullets began coming out. Everything pointed to a possible execution site. It was all recorded by Daniel Frymark. Another [detector] signal, another one that breaks, uncertain, strange. A photographer comes over and starts recording. I tell him that I have a strange signal, and there are shells coming out, that he will definitely find material worth recording. He took my advice. I dug a hole and turned on the pinpoint. I comb through a lump of dark water-wet earth and its light fractions... Wait a second! [...] I look and see a spongy structure... bone... I already know that I have bone on my gloves. 20 m from the place where the shells are.

(K. Woliński, pers. comm., 11th January, 2022, translated)

As the volunteer further recalled:

We found people in Death Valley, I said, pointing to a lump of earth with more and more bone shards. In the hole already filled with water under my fingers, I felt a lot of hard structures in the soft, swampy soil. We were filled with reverie, glad to have found the missing victims, but no one was laughing. We secured all the excavated soil and it was sent for anthropological analysis. It turned out that there were over 200 bone fragments in the nugget, and

the source of the strange signal for this hole was a woman's wedding ring. Something very personal to this woman, to this victim of crime. I was incredibly happy when Dawid Kobińska said that they would try to find out who it belonged to. And even more so when it happened. Her name was Irena, and, after her husband, Szydłowska. A Home Army courier from Grudziądz, arrested on 17th January, 1945, held in the Gestapo prison in Bydgoszcz. Just like the relatives on my father's side.

(K. Woliński, pers. comm., 11th January, 2022, translated)

The site was not explored further in 2020. We returned to it a year later. As a result of fieldwork in 2021, almost a ton of burnt human remains were discovered, and only in a few dozen cases did individual bones show no visible signs of high temperature. Three death pits were discovered, in which burnt human remains were mixed with the remains of wood and charcoal from the cremation bonfire. More than 4000 artefacts, most of which belonged to the murdered, were also excavated and secured from the death pits and their vicinity. These were objects and their elements that the victims had with them at the time of death. In most cases, the items were found among the burnt human bone, which proves that the bodies of the murdered were burnt together with their clothes.

The large number and variety of valuable everyday objects also supports the theory that the crime was committed in a hurry. Gold wedding rings, signets, other rings, silver pocket watches, various types of wristwatches and gold and silver coins confirm this. There are also medallions with the image of the Virgin Mary, rosary beads and even spools 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 clothing fabrics have also been preserved. Numerous examples of gold teeth and gold tooth crowns have also been found. The executioners clearly did not have time to rob the victims thoroughly before their deaths, nor did they have time to loot their corpses after the executions.

Discovering the Materiality of the Crime

Those who were murdered by the Nazis, whose bodies were burnt and whose remains were deposited in a boggy area of Death Valley, were meant to be erased permanently from memory, history and existence. Archaeologists and the IPN investigators, however, refused to allow such an abomination to occur. Tens of millions of fragments of burnt human remains of several hundred Poles were exhumed, and the first observations were made about the crime, its organization and the methods used to cover up the evidence, including the identities of the victims.

The research that took place in Death Valley in 2021 was one of the most comprehensive and significant archaeological undertakings in Poland in recent decades. Although there were Poles who had testified to the crime after the war, as noted above the massacre had come to be treated as a kind of “war myth” – something anchored between historical reality and fiction. The personalia of the victims, the scale and scope of the crime, its organization and location had all been unknown to the scientific community, to families of the victims and to Polish society as a whole until the research began in 2020. The families of those killed on the northern outskirts of Chojnice in the second half of January 1945 did not know what had really happened to their mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers.

The topic of mass graves and their exhumation is an extremely complex and ambivalent one. It involves ethical, moral and religious concerns, as well as the wishes of family members and the decisions of the state. In many cases, it is not possible to have a definitive view of the perspectives and expectations of all stakeholders. Some descendants of victims want remains to be exhumed, while others refuse permission. Policies and laws in this area may vary from country to country – the differences between Germany, Spain and Poland are examples of this. The literature is very rich and shows how many factors influence the archaeological research of mass graves from World War II (e.g. Fforde *et al.* 2004; Hansen 2010; Dreyfus and Anstett 2016; Dziuban 2017; Pollock 2020). Importantly, in the case of Poland, crimes from World War II are not subject to a statute of limitations. As such, research carried out in Death Valley as well as the most recent activities within a framework of "An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939" are carried out as part of the official investigations conducted by the IPN prosecutor's office in Gdańsk. However, taking into account the social aspect of the conducted research, an open information policy regarding the planned work and its progress was adopted. I have never met a single person who has said that the projects are unnecessary – sometimes people even had tears in their eyes, grateful that someone, after eight decades, was looking for those people who were murdered and then burnt at the end of January 1945 on the outskirts of Chojnice.

The earlier German crimes in the autumn of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania also targeted representatives of the Jewish community, and it is estimated that approximately 600 victims were Jews. However, so far only the remains of approximately 300 Jews have been identified as result of exhumations at various execution sites (Ceran *et al.* 2018). There were also 15 Jews from Chojnice who were murdered in the surrounding fields, although their bodies were found in the autumn of 1945 (see also Study Colls 2015; Schute 2018). The victims from 1945 whose burnt remains were found and finally exhumed in 2021 were Poles arrested at the end of the war in Bydgoszcz, Toruń, Grudziądz and the surrounding area – among them members of Polish underground organizations, which was also confirmed by the research.

It must always be remembered that the main goal of the perpetrators was to hide all evidence of the crime, so that the massacre and the victims would simply vanish. Therefore, I consider it imperative and our ethical duty, respecting various religious beliefs at the same time, to do our very best to uncover the sites of massacres such as those that occurred in Death Valley. It is our honour and privilege to find and reclaim evidence of the crime, to exhume the remains, to record and process the associated scientific research data and finally to give the victims the proper, dignified burial they deserve.

The artefacts intermingled with the human remains effectively embodied the emotionally charged research process. No longer silenced, thanks to the collaborative excavation efforts of the research team, the uncovered remains of those who perished and the discovered artefacts themselves now speak volumes and reveal the truth about the 1945 massacre in Death Valley. The reaction of the families alone shows the value of such research. Although the information brings back pain and sorrow, discovering the remains of loved ones after eight decades also brings relief and closure. Their commitment to the projects and to the investigation should also be acknowledged – they shared private photographs and

documents relating to their parents and grandparents with the team, and were eager to testify in front of the prosecutor as well as to provide samples for DNA research.

As part of the investigation, it was possible to reach the families of two victims whose wedding rings were identified based on their initials, the date of their marriage and the correlation of these data with archival materials. The search for the families of the remaining victims is ongoing and is being conducted by the IPN prosecutor's office in Gdańsk. At the current stage of the investigation and research, it can be stated that a list of approximately 120 Poles – women and men – who most likely ended up in Death Valley has been compiled. Among them are the owners of the two wedding rings that have already been identified. The conservation of the artefacts and their scientific analyses are underway, with the aim of further confirming the identity of those who lost their lives near Chojnice at the end of January 1945.

More than Just Documenting the Evidence of Crimes

Archaeological work in Death Valley and other places investigated as a part of the “Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939” project involves the creation of typical archaeological documentation in the form of inventories of artefacts, photographs and samples etc. However, such an approach has its limitations, due to the need to maintain objectivity. Daniel Frymark's artistic photography in Death Valley, in contrast, was not intended to be a “mirror of nature” – an objective reflection of the reality being studied – but, rather, a subjective response.

Every archaeologist knows the importance of image and photography in their work. It is a cliché to say that a picture is worth a thousand words, but this was the premise of our scientific and artistic collaboration with Daniel Frymark. Mass graves are such a complex and multi-faceted topic that artistic activity can be a part of understanding them. The photographs presented in this photo essay are meant to convey what words cannot, that which escapes language as such.

The crimes committed in Death Valley cannot be conveyed through the written word alone. It is only by kneeling in the death pit and using a trowel to explore a burial pit filled with nothing but burnt human remains, charcoal and artefacts that one can comprehend and embrace the magnitude of the crime. Art photography is also intended to give an insight into this unique experience. In my opinion, typical archaeological photography usually lacks this power. Artistic sensitivity, however, is able to capture this – let's call it – “metaphysics of the mass grave”. In the case of Chojnice, it was a crime scene: approximately 400–500 people murdered in one night, and for three consecutive days the traces of the crime were covered up.

Art photography also has an ethical and political aspect. The victims were murdered, their bodies burnt and their remains thrown into the swamp for a very specific reason. It was about the liquidation of a specific category of Poles, their physical elimination and, as mentioned above, their erasure from reality, history and ultimately memory. To show what was never meant to see the daylight again is a deeply ethical act. It defies the logic of the oppressors. What they wanted to hide and erase, archaeology and artistic photography can reveal – showing the truth about the crime that was committed. The heritage that we have unearthed and that Daniel Frymark photographed is therefore also a political activity.

War crimes from so long ago are beyond time and space. The victims are dead, and the perpetrators are probably dead too. But that is no excuse for an archaeologist and a photographer. The photo essay as a collage of words and images is an expression of our ethical and political commitment – to stand up for the victims and to speak about them, because they will never be able to speak for themselves again. For these reasons, artistic photography is a key component of the project. The truth must be revealed and shown in its rawness and materiality. That is why this photo essay presents human remains. The photos of mass graves tell, show and materialise the stories of mass killing. In my opinion, it should also be part of similar projects being carried out in various places around the world. It is also another chapter in a long and rich dialogue between archaeology and art as such.

Conclusion

The research at Death Valley has a special value to me – I was born in Chojnice, spent my childhood in the town, and I even played with my peers as a child almost literally on mass graves. Thirty years later, as a doctor of archaeology, I was able to find these graves with my research teams.

The experience and materials collected in Death Valley form the basis for the implementation of "An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939". This is the first archaeological project of this kind in Poland dedicated to German war crimes from the autumn of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania. Although more than eight decades have passed since the crimes were committed, it is archaeology, with its research methodology and attention to the materiality of the crimes that have been committed, that can shed new light on their organization and course. The collaboration with Daniel Frymark is also a part of the adopted methodology of work. The artistic documentation of mass graves and places of execution has scientific as well as a social and cultural value.

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