

TREBLINKA

Introduction:

Treblinka Death Camp is eerily quiet: *"It is in the middle of summer but not a bird can be heard nearby."* (Witold Chrostowski, p.24) In the "Road to Treblinka" episode of Laurence Rees's BBC TV series **The Nazis: a Warning from History**, a similar suggestion is made. It is certainly true that Treblinka possesses an atmosphere. Gilbert describes it as "oppressive" ([Holocaust Journey](#) p.339). Either way, birdsong can occasionally be heard and so it is recommended that teachers do not try to enhance the myth of the place. It will speak for itself.

Treblinka was the third *Aktion Reinhardt* camp to be opened in the summer of 1942 and it became by far and away the most efficient. It is estimated that over 800,000 victims were sent to their deaths here.

The 13 hectare site was chosen because of its proximity to an existing slave labour camp which would facilitate its construction. More importantly, it is where the railway lines from Warsaw, Siedlce, Lomza and Bialystock intersect one another. It is 2.5 miles from the nearest village, Treblinka, and 5 miles from the nearest main town and station at Malkinia. The site is surrounded by dense forest and is sandy underfoot. Above all, it is remote.



Visiting today:



Today, visitors will find little there by way of a museum or information facilities. Along with Chelmno and Sobibor, it is the least developed of the Death Centre sites. The latter two have museums of sorts. At Treblinka there is only really the memorial site. There is a little hut in the car park from which a leaflet can be purchased with a map of the site and some basic information. There are small toilets as well. There is rumoured to be a plan due to create a new information centre and proper museum facility but this has yet to be confirmed. Entry to the camp is free and it is open from 9am until dusk. It is about 1.5-2 hours' journey time from Warsaw depending upon the means of transport used.

Some teachers may judge from what's just been said that there is little point in visiting the site. On the contrary, the power of place can be strongly felt here particularly if one is well prepared with appropriate readings and, if possible, some relevant film footage that students can watch either in the hotel before embarking or on the coach (see references below for a couple of suggestions). As the biggest killing centre after Auschwitz, Treblinka's importance and power should not be underestimated. Moreover, as the scene of a successful revolt and other incidents of note, it is a valuable site with which to discuss issues surrounding resistance in the extermination camps. Plan to spend at least an hour here even though, on the face of it, there's little to see. Time for students' reflection will make this stop all the more worthwhile.

Treblinka I Labour Camp is about half an hour's walk further down the path past the main monument. Individual visitors may be interested to see the gravel pits, and the small markers and monuments that exist there but it is not really necessary to take a school party that distance. This would probably add an extra 45 minutes to an hour to the time spent here.

As with other sites, it is well worth having blown-up and laminated drawings or maps of Treblinka to aid understanding about what exactly was where. There are useful ones to be found in the Gilbert, Willenberg, Chrostowski or Deborah Dwork & Jan van Pelt books that could serve as a basis for this kind of approach. There are also photographs of Treblinka that can be found on the internet that can be used to prove the existence of such things as the zoo. None of the sites referred to below exist any longer. One should be able to use photos and maps to locate most of them.

Plans of the camp can be found at www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/maps.html



As you walk around the site, the things that might be worth emphasizing include:

- The Mock Station complete with signs, a clock, waiting rooms, etc. Today concrete sleepers are symbolic of the railway siding and ramp that led into the camp. M. Gilbert, *Holocaust Journey* pp. 326-7 has a short passage describing the station and German deception. The boundary of the camp is also marked by occasional obelisks.



- The sorting area. Today, this is where the larger stone markers that denote the countries of victims' origin are to be found just up from the ramp.



Source: Yad Vashem #4069 – a Treblinka Selection

- The Lazaret/Infirmary where two SS men dressed in white coats with Red Cross armbands would shoot those too sick or infirm to make it to the gas chamber in the back of the head. This would have been located in what are now woods over to the right of the sorting area.
- The “Tube” or “Pipe” or “*Himmelstrasse*” (Path to Heaven) i.e. the path that ran from the undressing area to the gas chambers. Approximately, it runs around to the left and then up to the main monument which commemorates the site of the gas chambers today. On the monument in Yiddish, German, Polish, French and English is the inscription “Never Again”.



- The ‘living’ half of the camp from where it was easier to perpetuate the lie that Treblinka II was nothing more than another labour camp. Standing looking up at the monument with one’s back to the ramp, this would have been on the left hand side.
- The approximate locations of workshops and barracks. Reference could be made to the barracks named after Max Bielas, an SS man who was knifed to death by prisoner Meir Berliner on September 11th 1942.
- The small zoo built by prisoners in the spring of 1943.
- The headstone of Janusz Korczak, the only individual headstone marker in the Camp. See <http://korczak.com/Biography/kap-0.htm> - a website of Janusz Korczak’s life story. The stone is to the left of the main monument amongst others and is dedicated to Korczak *and the children*.



- The pits where victims' ashes were strewn are demarked by small boulders, each supposedly commemorating a community destroyed at Treblinka. On each town's stone is engraved the number of people in that community who were killed.



- To the rear of the main monument is a commemorative grate to illustrate the burning of bodies.



The Camp's establishment:

SS-Sonderkommando Treblinka II, to give it its full title, was virtually at the half-way point between the two major ghettos at Warsaw and Bialystock. Treblinka I was the name given to the labour camp that existed to work the nearby gravel pit between June 1941 and July 23rd 1944. Its commandant, Theodor van Euppen, kept a stable and pack of hunting hounds. It is alleged that one of his favourite activities was trampling prisoners to death as they lay on the ground under his horses' hooves. A Polish railway worker, Franciszek Zabecki testified that he *"was a sadist who ill-treated Poles and Jews working there, particularly the Jews, taking shots at them like they were partridges"* (cited in M.Gilbert, *Holocaust Journey* p.329).

400 Jewish and Polish workers began construction on the new camp in April 1942. The branch line from Malkinia was completed on June 15th 1942 and the camp's concrete ramp had the capacity for 20 carriages or wagons at a time. The loading and unloading of transports could be carried out in as little as an hour and a half. Not a single Jew survived Treblinka II's construction.

The actual death camp (*"Totenlager"*) only occupied one-sixth of the total area. In fact, there were two camps within Treblinka II. The extermination area was located inside Camp No.2. The camp was designed by Christian Wirth and the contractors that oversaw its construction were the Schoenbronn Company of Leipzig alongside the Warsaw branch of Schmidt und Muenstermann. Such details, whilst being of little import to the average student, serve to illustrate not only the mundane but also the extent to which ordinary German firms must have been aware of what was happening in the East.



Source: Treblinka "station" www.deathcamps.org

Camp Commandants:

There were four commandants at Treblinka in all. The first, Thomalla, supervised the camp's initial construction between April and July 1942. From July-August 1942, Dr. SS-Unterscharfuhrer Irmfried Eberl, an Austrian from Bregenz, was placed in charge. He'd begun his career working on the T-4 Euthanasia programme at both Bernburg and Brandenburg before a brief stint at Chelmno. He lacked the organisational skills to maintain an efficient operation at "TII" (as it was referred to in reports e.g. the infamous Stroop Report) and was quickly sacked by Wirth and Globocnik after a visit in August. This incident is recounted in episode 3 of the BBC *Auschwitz: the Nazis and the Final Solution* series. Eberl would hold no higher rank for the rest of the war and eventually committed suicide in 1948.

"... all over the place there were hundreds of human bodies. Piles of packages, clothes, suitcases, everything in a mess. German and Ukrainian SS men stood at the corners of the barracks and were shooting blindly into the crowd..."

Oskar Berger, Jewish eyewitness, August 1942, cited in Chrostowski, p.37

Treblinka's third commandant would become its most notorious. Franz Paul Stangl was an Austrian (born March 26th 1908) from Altmuenster. An ex-policeman like Wirth, he'd joined the NSDAP in 1936. He participated in the T-4 programme at Hartheim. In 1942, he was appointed commandant of Sobibor before being transferred to Treblinka to sort out Eberl's mess. He had a reputation as a highly competent administrator and people manager with an excellent grasp of detail. Around the camp he wore a white uniform and carried a whip. Inmates nicknamed him "the White Death".

Treblinka's last commandant was SS-Untersturmfuhrer Kurt Hubert Franz, born in Dusseldorf in 1914. He joined the Nazi Party in 1932 and enlisted in the army in 1936. By 1938 he'd joined the SS-*Totenkopfverbände* ("Death's Head Division") and was stationed at Buchenwald. In 1939 he was drafted into the T-4 programme and served at Hartheim, Grafeneck and Sonnenstein until 1942. After a short spell at Belzec, he was appointed deputy commandant at Treblinka. It was his job to supervise the unloading of transports, work commandos and the transfer of Jews from the undressing rooms to the gas chambers.

"Undoubtedly, [Franz] was the most terrifying of all the German personnel in the camp... witnesses agree that not a single day passed when he did not kill someone..."

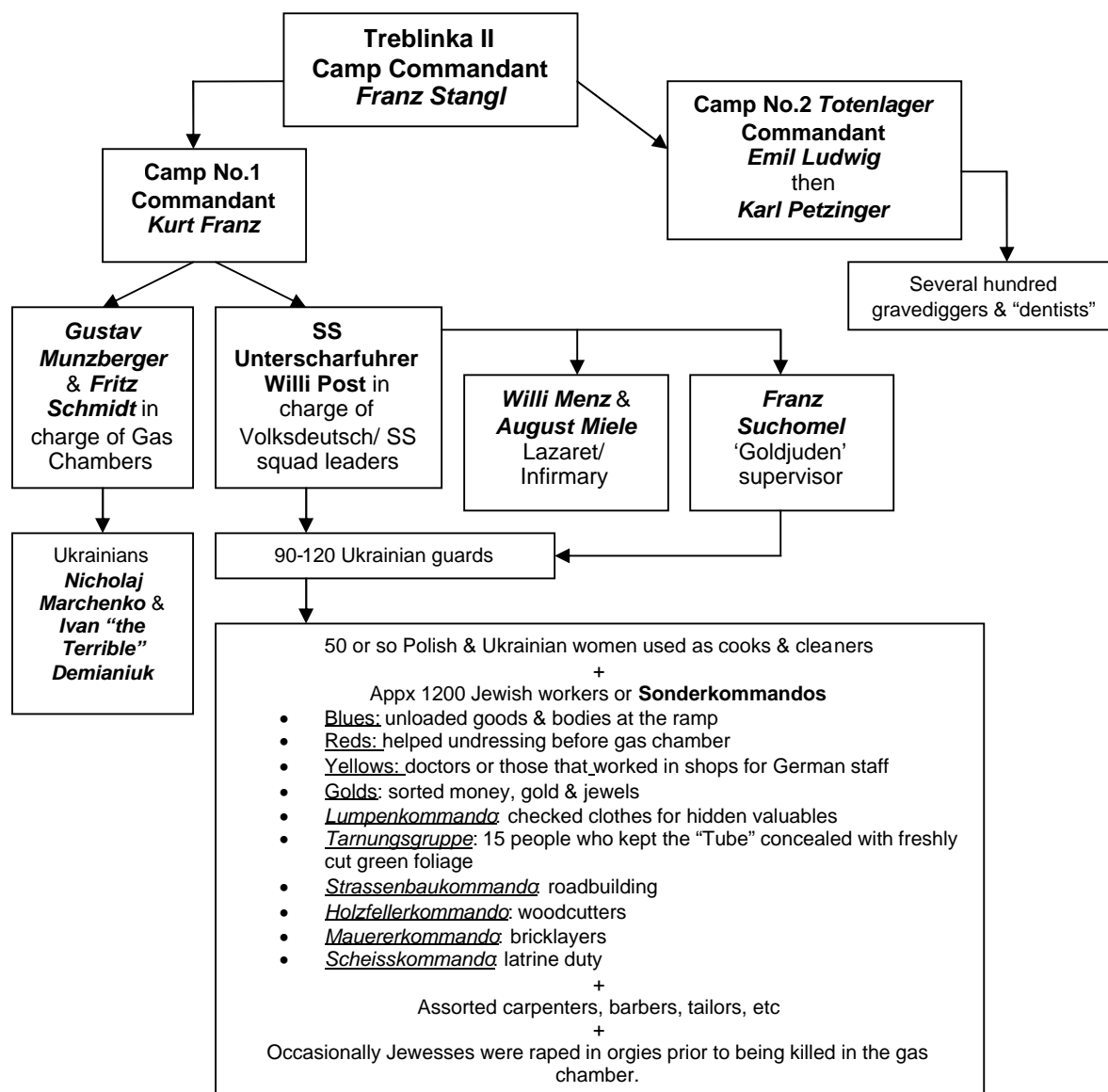
W. Chrostowski, p.39

Franz was given a nickname by camp inmates; "The Doll" was handsome and very fond of a St. Bernard dog called Bari. The dog *"used to bite at buttocks and genitals. It tore bits of flesh from human bodies..."* (**Samuel Willenberg, cited Chrostowski, p.39**). In his memoirs, Willenberg comments that this experience was all the more horrific because of the reputation that particular breed of dog has as a rescuer of men.



Source: Stangl talking to Franz www.deathcamps.org

Treblinka II's Organisation:



All fourteen Germans who worked at Treblinka were veterans of the T-4 Programme. Generally, they were men of between 26 and 30 years of age. They were paid 58 marks per day plus an extra 18 marks for each day spent inside the Death Camp. They were entitled to three weeks of leave every three months. All were brutal to the extreme, possibly to conceal the fact that they were few in number compared with the trainloads of 2,500 plus victims that were deposited there. The Ukrainian camp guards – or *Hiwis* as they were also known – were trained at Trawniki, south of Lublin. They too were also brutal with some believing that they were on some special mission that justified extreme sadism. Ivan Demianiuk earned himself the nickname “Ivan the Terrible”.

“Ivan hacked those who were hesitant to enter the gas chamber with his long cavalry sabre. He cut off their hands, he chopped at their naked bodies. He tore small children from the arms of their mothers and ripped them in half...”

W. Chrostowski, p.43

An abbreviated history of Treblinka:



The first transport to arrive did so on July 23rd 1942 at 9.30 am. M. Gilbert, Holocaust Journey pp.329-331 contains four graphic descriptions by Polish train worker Zabecki of the first transports to arrive and are worth reading. Over the next 400 days – except for the brief interlude when Stangl took command – 2-4 trains of between 39 and 60 wagons each would arrive from abroad and elsewhere in Poland every day. Local Jews and Gypsies would also be delivered in lorries or carts. Treblinka's peak period of operations was between September and December 1942. So appalling were the scenes there that ordinary passenger trains were forbidden to stop at Treblinka after September 1st. From this date the Jews from Warsaw began arriving. This was also when the construction of ten new gas chambers was begun under the experienced and careful supervision of Erwin Lambert and Laurenz Hackenholt. . By October 1942, these 10 gas chambers were operational and capable of processing 12,000 to 15,000 victims every day. For instance, the 2500 Jews of Bransk, as documented in Eva Hoffman's Shtetl, went to their deaths here on November 8th 1942.

The old gas chamber had measured 48 square metres in size. The new gassing rooms were located in a brick building of 320 square metres in area complete with columns, flower-filled vases, a Star of David and the following inscription in Hebrew above the door: *"Through this gate only the righteous pass."*

"Each chamber was seven metres by seven in size and 2.3 metres high. The floor was covered in tiles; walls were painted to make them easier to clean. Each chamber had two doors. The entrance door was made of steel with rubber around the edges, and closed hermetically. The other door was situated in the back wall. It looked like a huge rectangular steel window located just above the floor. Through this door the bodies of victims were removed. The floor of this chamber sloped towards this door, to make it easier to remove the bodies."

W. Chrostowski, p.70

Like other camps, the camp had, especially after Stangl's appointment, its routines. Roll call was always at 5 am and 7pm. For new arrivals, an SS officer would make a welcome speech announcing that they'd arrived at a transit camp. Men were separated from women and children. Those too sick to walk were led to the Infirmary where they were despatched with a single shot to the head. All victims had their heads shaved and many were ordered to write postcards of reassurance that could be sent to relatives.

A camp orchestra was formed, giving its first concert of Ukrainian dances and Jewish music on August 31st 1942. It faded as the killings went on but was resurrected in the spring of 1943 when famous Warsaw musician Arthur Gold was ordered to reform it. (See Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapter 22.)

August 1942 was a fateful month for Treblinka and the Holocaust. An SS man by the name of Kurt Gerstein was despatched to instruct personnel there on the effectiveness of Zyklon B as a gas over carbon monoxide. So appalled was he by what he saw there that he resolved to do something. His resolve may also have been hardened by the fact that he had discovered that his sister-in-law, a Bertha Ebling, had been murdered in an asylum. He claimed that the batch of Zyklon B he had with him was faulty and ordered its destruction pending arrival of some more. Furthermore, he would later encounter Baron Goran von Otter, First Secretary

to the Swedish Embassy in Berlin and reveal to him what he'd witnessed at Treblinka and at Belzec which he'd visited with Globocnik and Wirth. He would later commit suicide.

The winter of 1942-43 was extremely harsh. Transports dwindled in number and there was even a period of near famine for inmates. Willenberg describes how those kommandos working on sorting the booty were able to negotiate food and vodka from the Ukrainian guards or local Poles in exchange for jewels and trinkets. Typhus was a recurrent and major problem. (See Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapters 17, 18 and 30, for example.)

In February 1943, new excavators were brought in to dig up and burn the bodies of those already murdered. Grates were created using five or six rails laid on top of concrete. Stacks of up to 3,000 bodies were then burnt. Jewish "diggers" were then supposed to sweep away the ashes into the earth and grind down any tell-tale signs of bone, teeth, etc. Some deliberately failed to do this in order to leave some evidence behind. Worldwide reaction to the discovery of the massacre at Katyn in the Spring of 1940 had left the Nazis in no doubt what might happen if evidence of the Final Solution were ever uncovered. Ironically, the crime committed at Katyn had been perpetrated by the Soviet Red Army intent on ridding Poland of its potential ruling elite.

In mid-March, Himmler and Eichmann paid the camp a visit following which the camp was renamed "Obermajdan Treblinka". They were ensuring that preparations for the final liquidation of the Warsaw and of Jews from Bulgaria and Greece were complete. (See Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapter 19 for an interesting prisoner's eye view of such a visit and chapter 21 about the Greeks.)

Treblinka also suffered its share of odd incidents that demonstrate the bizarreness of human behaviour:

- In April 1943 a zoo was created for two peacocks, young roe deer and local foxes. There are photos of these available on the Internet at both [Forgotten Camps](http://ForgottenCamps.com) and Deathcamps.org. (See also Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapter 26.)



Source: Treblinka "Zoo" www.deathcamps.org

- No honour amongst thieves... In mid-October 1942, at Siedlce, a transport for Treblinka was ransacked by local SS who'd discovered the destination of the train! The Camp SS were appalled that fellow SS-men had intercepted their loot and complained most vociferously about how this had affected the Camp's "takings". Of course, the camp inmates were just expected to part with even more. (See Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapter 8.)

Resistance:

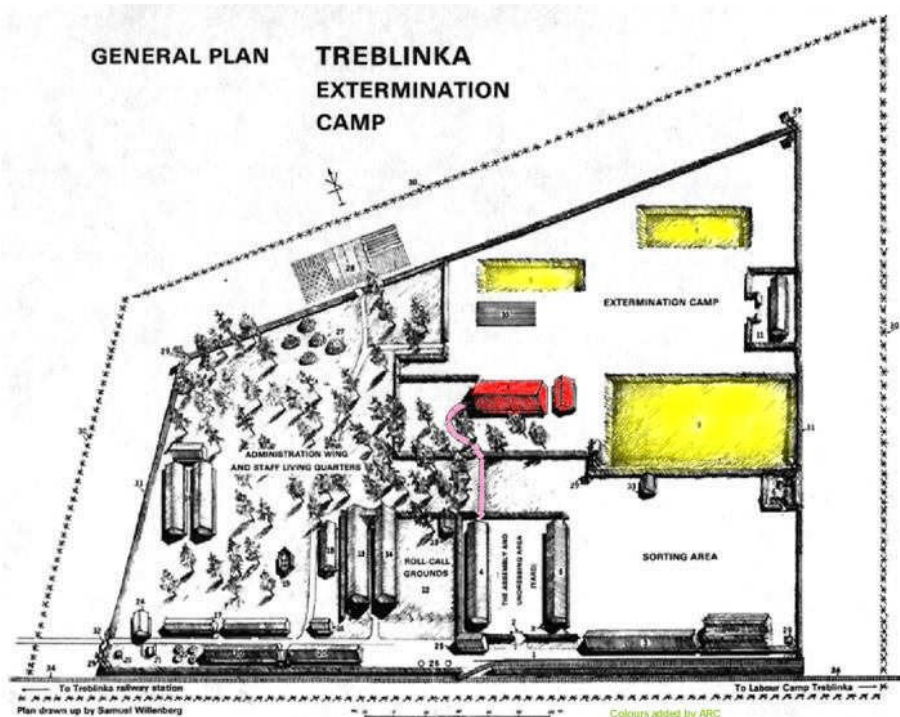
Treblinka was plagued by instances of resistance culminating in a full-blown revolt. For this reason, resistance is a theme well worth exploring here.

1. On September 11th 1942, SS man Max Bielas was murdered by a prisoner, Meir Berliner:

"The SS men looked petrified... Berliner did not even try to escape. He stood quite composed, with a strange, mild smile on his face... a few minutes later he was lying on the ground with his face smashed... Two other Jews were killed with spades. The Ukrainians started beating people around frantically... The commandant ordered [Franz] to shoot ten Jews..."

Eyewitness cited in W. Chrostowski, p.71

2. In November 1942, a train from Grodno with 2000 on board rose up against the accompanying guards. All were killed and three SS men ended up being hospitalised because of their injuries. (See Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapter 6.)
3. Dr. Julian Chorozycki was one of three, alongside Rudolf Masarek and Engineer Galewski, to start up a conspiracy that would plan the subsequent revolt. This was in part a response to the decision to start eliminating traces of the camp in the summer of 1943. The Doctor's part in the plot was uncovered and, after a violent fist-fight with Franz, Chorozycki swallowed poison to avoid further questioning. There are a couple of interesting accounts in Willenberg's book about the dealings he had with the Doctor. There is also a vivid description of what happened when Franz confronted the Doctor about his conspiracy. Willenberg addresses the difficult question about the role played by Jewish doctors in the camps. He also analyses in a basic way the way in which taking poison was seen by inmates; it could preserve one's dignity in that one chose to die rather than be murdered but it takes a courageous man to do this nonetheless. (See Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapter 31.)



Source: Willenberg Map www.deathcamps.org

The Revolt Itself: Monday August 2nd 1943

An organisation committee for the Revolt of twelve was formed. It co-ordinated companies of twelve persons each to enable the gradual theft of weapons like guns and grenades from the camp arsenal as its locks were changed or repaired by Jewish locksmiths. Only one member of each company knew one member of the organising committee in an attempt to preserve security in the event of capture. The weapon-smugglers were usually boys aged 13-15 who would arouse less suspicion amongst guards as they lugged their potato sacks about the camp. The conspirators used a password - "death" - to which the response was "life".

The plan involved exploiting a period when several Germans were on leave and a number of the Ukrainian guards would be swimming in the local river. The camp's patrol strength was thus weaker than normal and this was compounded by the increasing rate of desertions by the *Hiwis* as news of Germany's declining fortunes on the Eastern Front filtered through. The boys would distribute weapons and begin the revolt by throwing grenades at the SS buildings. Returning workers at 5pm would seize an armoured car to ram the gate whilst others cut the camp phone lines and killed the guards. Then as many as possible would flee to the forests.

Things did not go quite according to plan. SS-man Franz, a few other SS and 16 Ukrainians duly went for their swim because of the hot, August weather. However, the boys had only managed to scrape together 37 weapons and 80 fuseless grenades. Although a few fuses were later obtained, much of what the rebels had was useless. Furthermore, when camp guard "Kiewe" began beating a son in front of his father who knew the plan, the decision to start the revolt an hour before the workers returned was taken for fear that he would give the game away. Kiewe was shot dead and shots were fired at Franz Suchomel. Flammable liquid was poured around the barracks by prisoner Bendin and set alight. The phone lines were successfully cut. The gas chambers were also burnt and grenades thrown at the SS buildings. Prisoner Zelo Bloch seized an armoured car and rammed the gates. 200 or so inmates then fled with a few managing to cross the River Bug near the village of Glina with the assistance of Stanislaw Siwek's Polish partisans.

The Germans mobilised all available personnel and dogs in the hunt for escapees. Guards from Treblinka I, local SiPo units, Polish police and even Malkinia station's firemen were drafted in. Those escapees that were captured were usually murdered on the spot. A few were hidden by Poles. Some were hidden by Poles who then betrayed them to the Germans. A few gave themselves up after several days of wandering aimlessly unsure of the territory and unable to survive. No one is absolutely certain of how many escaped successfully. Lower estimates put the figure at 50 whilst a figure of 87 is also used. One German was wounded and there were six other guard casualties. Prisoners from Treblinka I were deployed to extinguish fires and clean up. (See Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka chapters 32-33.)



Source: Armoury after the Revolt www.deathcamps.org

The Closure of the Camp:

The camp was not completely destroyed and, a week later, new transports arrived so the gassings continued. The last transports were processed on August 19th 1943. After this, trains were rerouted to Sobibor and Majdanek. Trains were now used to transport all the machinery and booty amassed at Treblinka back to the Reich. Globocnik, Wirth and Stangl were reassigned to Northern Italy in September 1943 and Franz was left to oversee the dismantling of the camp between September and November. On November 17th 1943, Franz had the last remaining 25 or so Jews shot before he and the Ukrainians transferred to new duties at Sobibor. The site of the camp was turned into a farm and it was offered to a Ukrainian to be run as such.

The work camp in the gravel pit would remain open after the closure of the death camp. The last 500 Jews left at Treblinka I were shot on August 23rd 1944 as Soviet troops approached.



Further reading and resources

Witold Chrostowski, Extermination Camp Treblinka (London, Vallentine Mitchell 2004) ISBN 0-85303-456-7.
Samuel Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka (Warsaw, Jewish Historical Institute 1992) ISBN 83-85888-62-4
Gitta Sereny, Into That Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder (London, Pimlico 1995) ISBN 0-7126-7447-0
Martin Gilbert, Holocaust Journey: Travelling in Search of the Past (London, Phoenix 1998) ISBN 0-75380-477-8 specifically Chapter 12 pp.328-339.
Deborah Dwork & Jan van Pelt, Holocaust: a History (John Murray, 2003) ISBN 0-7195-5486-1
Eva Hoffman, Shtetl: The history of a Small Town and an Enlightened World (Secker & Warburg, 1998) ISBN 0-436-20482-7 plus see the PBS linked website <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shtetl/> .

<http://www.deathcamps.org/>

<http://www.scrapbookpages.com/sitemap03.html>

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/index.html>

<http://www.jewishgen.org/ForgottenCamps/Camps/TreblinkaEng.html>

The “*Road to Treblinka*” episode of Laurence Rees’s BBC TV series **The Nazis: a Warning from History** and episode 3 of **Auschwitz: the Nazis and the Final Solution** series called “*Factories of Death*” are also useful here. Excerpts from Claude Lanzmann’s landmark film **Shoah** could also be used as he interviews train drivers as well as inmates who were barbers, for instance.