



“You are no longer a person”

Photographer
KEVIN CASHA
speaks of his
experience after
visiting the
Stutthof
Concentration
Camp in Poland

Although a bitterly cold day, the clear, cloudless sky was of an incredible blue hue, in deep contrast with my reserved and sombre mood as I arrived at the infamous Stutthof Concentration camp, passing through the entrance of the notorious “Death Gate”.

Being in Poland for the first time, it was my strange wish to visit one of the Nazi concentration camps which are usually more aptly referred to as “extermination camps”.

Why I would want to experience such bleak and hideous places is difficult to explain. Is it my inquisitive nature or journalistic thirst for truth? Is it because I wanted to feel the horror first hand or perhaps needed to condition myself so that if there is ever, God forbid, the slightest chance of this occurring again, I would have the resolve to fight it with all my heart. Perhaps even the dark, worse than animal depths that

mankind can at times lower himself in, needs to be understood more deeply in order to safeguard us all from falling ever again into such horrors as were incredibly perpetrated in these camps.

Yes, unfortunately, but hopefully to a much lesser degree, torture, unjust imprisonment, freedom of speech, killings and maiming are still an everyday occurrence in some parts of the world. It is amazing how man has been so successful and brilliant in many spheres, but has still not been able to control such basic instincts like hate, rage, envy, lust, etc.

Still, I think few times in the history of man have there been such atrocities perpetrated to so many human beings in such a short time. In recent history, Hitler’s “Final Solution” simply and undeniably must take first place.

My choice of visiting Stutthof was only dictated by location, as it was quite near to Elblag and the northern Polish lake areas where I was staying and visiting. It was a strange feeling realizing that, nature wise, the site is so beautifully blessed with fir and pine forests decorated with silver-birch and oak. Coupled with extensive plains, this gives the impression of a land of tranquillity and beauty. The surrounding ground around the camp is quite wet and mainly consists of a thin layer of sand with underlying marshes and peat-bogs.

The camp’s secluded surroundings, even to this day, still invoke the conflicting feeling of being



close to nature’s beauty and yet one is standing in the same spot where so many unspeakable horrors took place. While in the place, the eerie silence, conspicuous by the absence of birdsong, was only broken by the rustling of the wind through the many trees. No wonder that, particularly as dusk crept in, I felt like walking side by side with the ghosts of so many inmates who had met their untimely and inhuman death on this same, now sacred ground, urging me in silence to feel the ugliness of what had befallen them.

I could not actually utter a word while in the camp, only see, listen and struggle to understand. It is a sobering reminder of what we are at times capable of.

Stutthof (or Sztutowo), in Poland, was the first concentration camp constructed by the Nazi regime outside of Germany. Sztutowo was a fisherman’s village, located 34 kilometres northeast of Gdansk (Danzig) and three kilometres from the Baltic coast. With the German invasion of Poland, the name became Stutthof and unfortunately entered history as the wartime site of one of the most infamous concentration camps.

Completed on September 1939, during World War II, Stutthof was the last camp liberated by the Allies, on 9 May 1945. More than 85,000 victims are estimated to have perished in the camp from about 110,000 hapless people forcibly deported there.

Stutthof began its dark existence



as an internment camp under Danzig police, then, in 1941, it was changed to a “labour education” camp under German security police, before finally becoming an all out concentration camp in 1942.

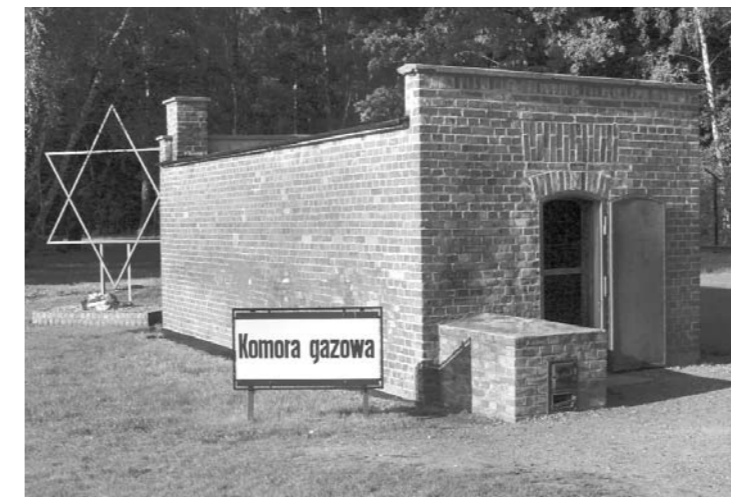
It is documented that Nazi authorities were compiling data and information on Jews as well as Polish Intelligensia, as early as 1936.

The first inmates at Stutthof were around 150 Polish citizens, imprisoned in 1939 after being classified by the Nazis as “undesirable Polish element” and arrested on the streets of Danzig right after the outbreak of the war. The inmate population then rose dramatically to 6,000 in the following two weeks. These were mostly socially and politically active Poles.

The original camp was composed of eight barracks for the prisoners and a huge building (the *kommandantur*) for the SS personnel. It was called “the old camp”. In 1942, the SS began to build a “new” camp and 30 barracks were added. In 1943, the crematory and gas chamber, holding a maximum capacity of 150 inmates at one go came into existence. When this eventually became not enough to “cater” for the vast amounts of people that were being murdered, the SS also used mobile wagons as gas chambers. The lowest estimation of the number of victims at Stutthof is 85,000. The actual amount is certainly much higher as it is believed that inmates who were selected for immediate execution directly on their arrival were not registered.

In fact some prisoners did not even enter the camp proper as they arrived with a death sentence for “offences” against the Nazis. Those thus condemned would be taken towards the crematorium where they were either shot in the back of the head or summarily hanged. In retrospect, taking into account conditions in Stutthof, one can consider these victims “lucky!”

The commander of the camp was SS officer Max Pauli. After the war, Pauli was tried by an Allied court and sentenced to death. The security officer of the camp was SS captain Werner Hoppe. Despite evidence of his participation in the murders, the court sentenced Hoppe to only nine years imprisonment. Still further proof, if it was needed, of the atrocious way the camp was run were the substantial number of other camp personnel who were eventually tried and convicted for their respective war crimes.



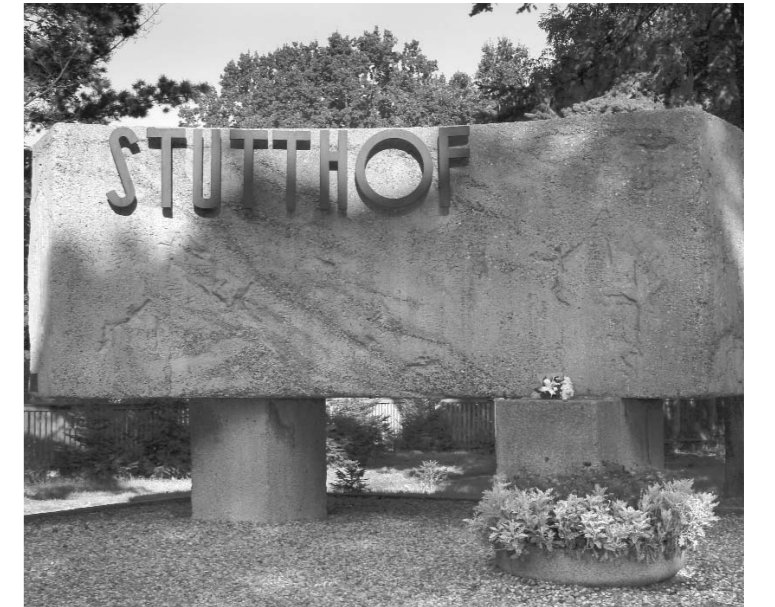
Suffice to say, that it was the grisly and inhuman custom that when each group of new arrivals entered the camp through the main gate the first brutal greeting they received was that of an SS officer saying: “You are no longer a person, just a number. All your rights have been left outside this gate. You are left with only one right which you are free to do, and that is to leave through that (gas chamber) chimney!”

Newly arrived prisoners were grouped in the “Old Camp” square. Here they sometimes waited a whole day or even longer, irrespective of the weather condi-



Prisoners were beaten before they were entered on the camp register. They were forced to strip on the camp square, as well as to hand over all personal possessions to the camp stores.

This was followed by the shaving of both men and women, then the body search for hidden valuables and finally a bath. The prisoners were then issued with camp clothing and a number while their personal details were recorded. A prisoner’s comments, who witnessed the arrival of one such prisoner “consignment” sums up the full horror: “They arrived in a horrifying physical state, usually



from other camps, mainly Auschwitz, to die here. They plodded on and on fatigued, with black faces, hair growing from their skin in bristle. Staring with their huge black eyes with what seemed to be an inhuman expression. They wore only torn summer dresses, through which their grey bodies could be seen. They were without vests, gaunt with their pointed shoulders, sunken chests – they were more like some weird ugly birds.

In their hands they gripped pieces of bread, but were unable to eat. Were they aware where they were once more being taken?”

Living conditions in the camp were brutal. Many prisoners died during typhus epidemics that swept the camp in 1942 as well as in 1944. Overcrowding was rampant, with the barracks often housing three to four times more inmates than these barracks had been originally planned to hold.

During detention, those who fell sick did not die just from illness. Those judged to be incurable were murdered by means of injections of phenol or even drowning in the bath, at night. Few were spared. Those prisoners who managed to endure the starvation, excessive forced labour, beatings and disease were many times still killed either by a shot in the back of the head or by lethal gas. Gassing was executed with the deadly Zyklon B. (*Zyklon B* was the trade name of a cyanide-based pesticide infamous for its use by the Nazis in the extermination camps during the Holocaust.)

I passed reverently and in complete silence through each section of the camp. Viewing in horror the small wooden bunks where inmates were packed four to each bunk, the photographs of prisoners in their daily struggles, the piles of prison clothes and shoes, the inhuman washroom “facilities”, the Nazi camp registers, the personal files of the inmates, the medical rooms, the wagons and gas chambers were the “final solution” was implemented. The gaunt drawings by inmates of their own friends inside the camp are particularly haunting.

With the course of war taking a bad turn against the Nazi regime, evacuation of prisoners from the Stutthof camp began in January 1945. When the final evacuation began, there were still around 50,000 prisoners, the overwhelming majority of them Jews. About 5,000 prisoners from Stutthof sub camps were marched to the Baltic Sea coast, forced into the water, and barbarically machine gunned. The rest of the prisoners were marched in the direction of eastern Germany. Here their progress was cut off by advancing Soviet forces with the Nazis having to force the surviving prisoners back

to Stutthof. Thousands perished during these brutal marches.

In late April 1945, the remaining prisoners were removed from Stutthof by sea, since it was now completely encircled by Soviet forces. The evacuation, which commenced at six in the morning, was under the command of SS Teodor Meyer. The march was expected to last seven days.

One of the few surviving prisoners described it as follows: “How many of them fell down on the road, they were marching so long, until their legs could be pulled forward. When they fell down, a blow with the rifle butt tried to lift them up. They were too weak to continue the march; some of these falls were their last falls. An SS-man’s kick removed the body to the side of the road. Sometimes one kick was enough or one knock with a rifle butt in the face, to finish life.”

Again, hundreds of prisoners were forced into the sea and shot. Over 4,000 were sent by small boat to German concentration camps near Hamburg or to camps along the Baltic coast. Many drowned along the way. It has been estimated that over 25,000 prisoners died during the evacuation from Stutthof and its sub camps.

The march actually lasted 10 days, with the Germans only issuing some form of rations for two days; the sounds of artillery fire from the Red Army’s guns could be heard from the east and south. The columns marched on through snow drifts with the SS guards murdering anyone who fell behind.

Soviet forces eventually liberated Stutthof and this martyred piece of land on 9 May 1945. Alas they released just around 100 prisoners. These survivors had managed to hide during the final evacuation of the camp.

One just cannot be indifferent to places like Stutthof. I think they are not only a monument to the courage and suffering of the people who experienced them, but should be forever kept open to act as a constant reminder of mankind’s ferocity and evil against fellow human beings.

It is sickening that after so much proof and facts on this dark episode of history have emerged, we still have persons, as well as the odd leader of countries, denying that this ever happened!

No wonder we need to be jolted back into our senses from time to time.

I left Stutthof wearily, as the sun slowly disappeared, filled with shock, horror and anger.

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