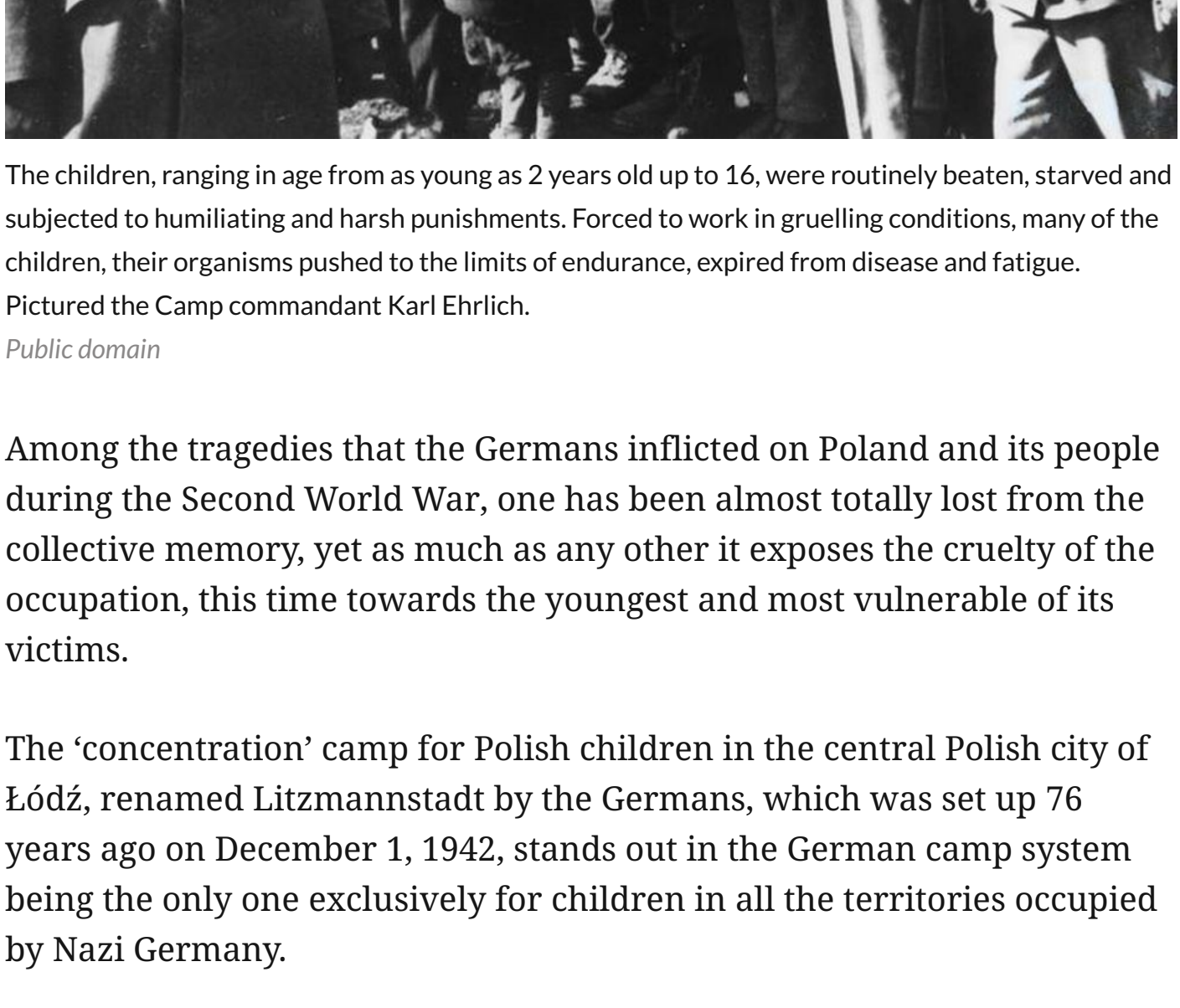




# Beaten, starved and tortured: The horrifying story of Hitler's concentration camp for children

HISTORY

STUART DOWELL DECEMBER 04, 2018



The children, ranging in age from as young as 2 years old up to 16, were routinely beaten, starved and subjected to humiliating and harsh punishments. Forced to work in gruelling conditions, many of the children, their organisms pushed to the limits of endurance, expired from disease and fatigue.

Pictured the Camp commandant Karl Ehrlich.

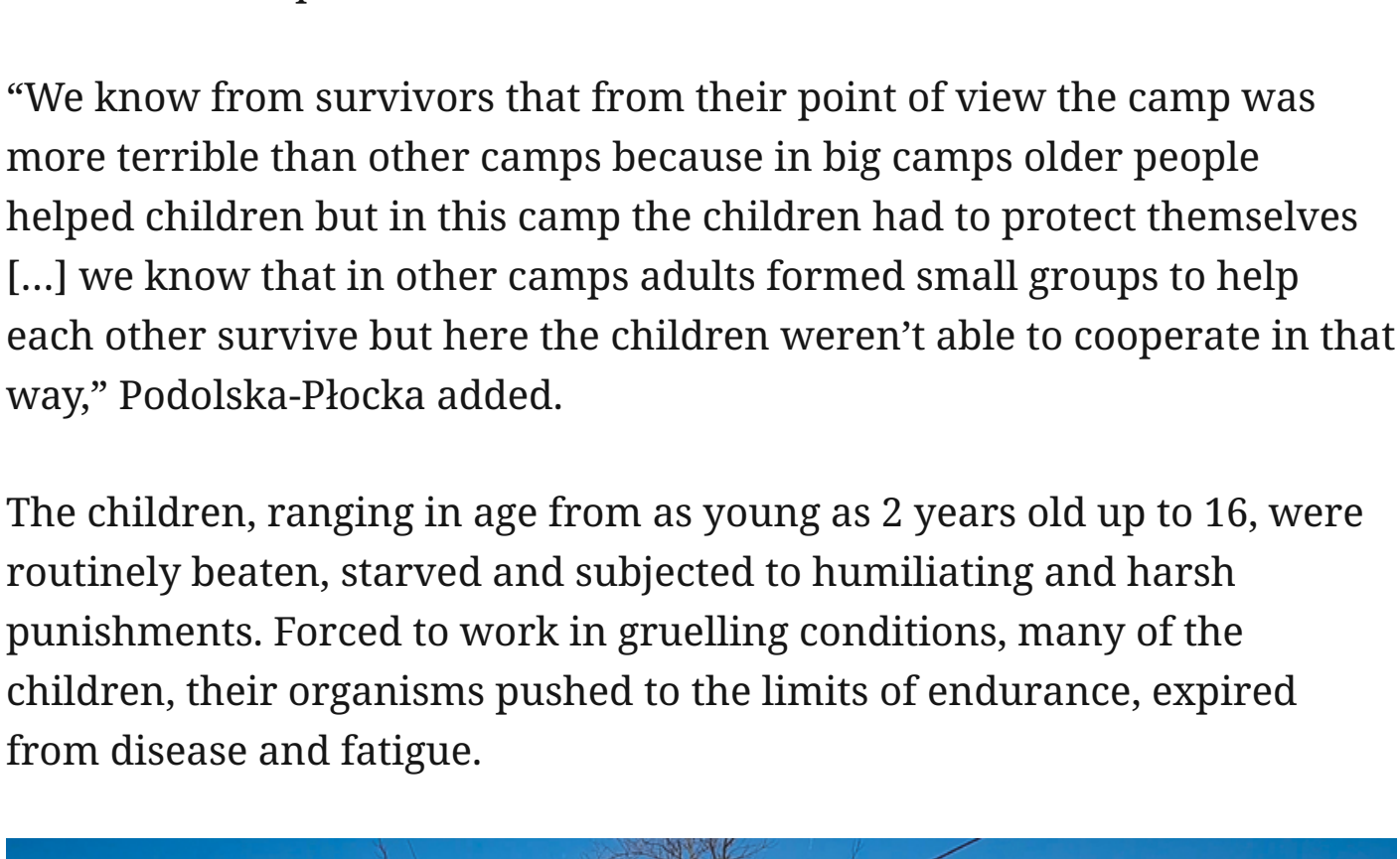
Public domain

Among the tragedies that the Germans inflicted on Poland and its people during the Second World War, one has been almost totally lost from the collective memory, yet as much as any other it exposes the cruelty of the occupation, this time towards the youngest and most vulnerable of its victims.

The 'concentration' camp for Polish children in the central Polish city of Łódź, renamed Litzmannstadt by the Germans, which was set up 76 years ago on December 1, 1942, stands out in the German camp system being the only one exclusively for children in all the territories occupied by Nazi Germany.

Although many children were imprisoned in other German camps during the war, in the Łódź camp Polish children had to face the cruelty of German discipline and the bestiality of sadistic SS guards completely alone without any protection or support from adult prisoners. Their delicate bodies were fully exposed to a brutal camp system that was designed to punish, exploit and dehumanise.

Joanna Podolska-Płocka, the director of the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center in Łódź, which aims to preserve the multicultural history of Łódź, explained in an interview with TFN: "In the middle of Łódź, the Germans decided to create a ghetto in the ghetto – a camp for Polish kids inside the Łódź ghetto".



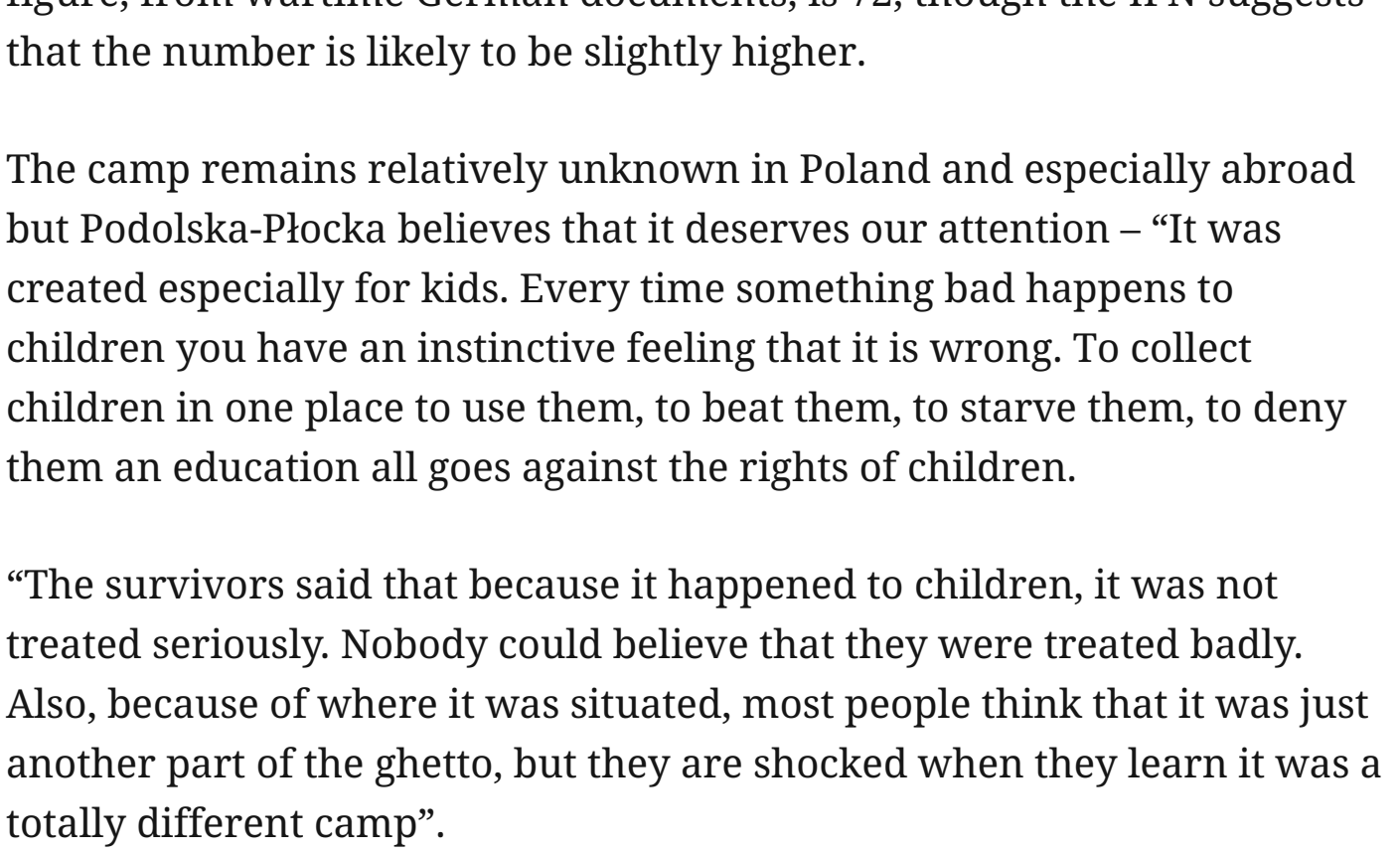
Although many children were imprisoned in other German camps during the war, in the Łódź camp Polish children had to face the cruelty of German discipline and the bestiality of sadistic SS guards completely alone without any protection or support from adult prisoners. Their delicate bodies were fully exposed to a brutal camp system that was designed to punish, exploit and dehumanise.

Kalbar/TFN

Though not strictly part of the vast concentration camp system, it was operated by the SS and survivors say that in some respects it was worse than other camps.

"We know from survivors that from their point of view the camp was more terrible than other camps because in big camps older people helped children but in this camp the children had to protect themselves [...] we know that in other camps adults formed small groups to help each other survive but here the children weren't able to cooperate in that way," Podolska-Płocka added.

The children, ranging in age from as young as 2 years old up to 16, were routinely beaten, starved and subjected to humiliating and harsh punishments. Forced to work in gruelling conditions, many of the children, their organisms pushed to the limits of endurance, expired from disease and fatigue.



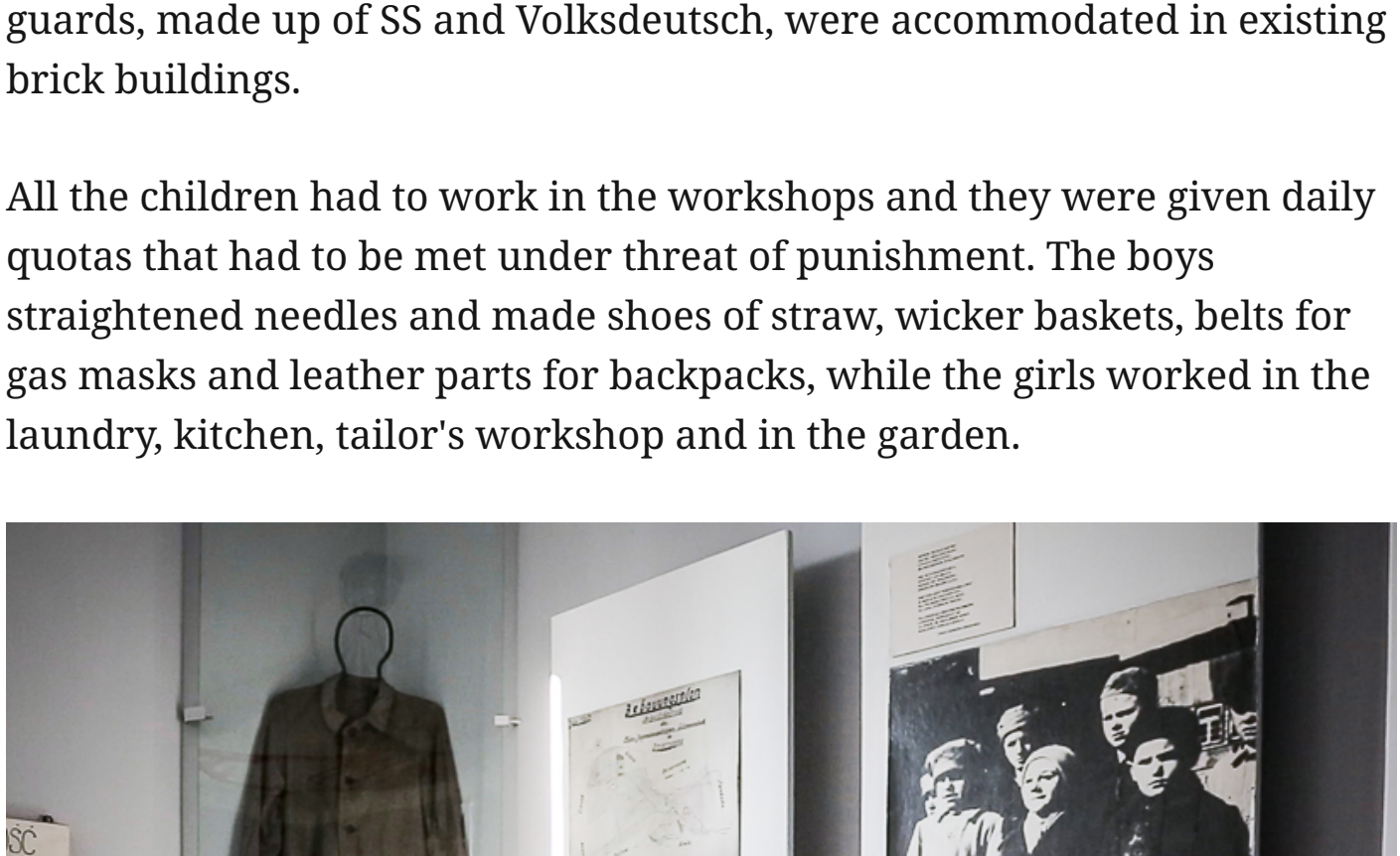
Today a quiet residential street, during the war Przemysłowa street is where the entrance to the camp and the role-call square were located. The building on the left is where the camp commandant SS-Sturmbannführer Karl Ehrlich lived.

Kalbar/TFN

The number of children who were imprisoned at the camp is unknown and Poland's Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) is working on establishing the figure. However, over the years since the camp was closed when the Red Army arrived in Łódź on January 19, 1945, estimates have ranged from the low thousands up to an improbable 13,000. The same is true regarding the number of deaths. The lowest figure, from wartime German documents, is 72, though the IPN suggests that the number is likely to be slightly higher.

The camp remains relatively unknown in Poland and especially abroad but Podolska-Płocka believes that it deserves our attention – "It was created especially for kids. Every time something bad happens to children you have an instinctive feeling that it is wrong. To collect children in one place to use them, to beat them, to starve them, to deny them an education all goes against the rights of children.

"The survivors said that because it happened to children, it was not treated seriously. Nobody could believe that they were treated badly. Also, because of where it was situated, most people think that it was just another part of the ghetto, but they are shocked when they learn it was a totally different camp".



The camp area was separated from the ghetto with a high wooden fence made by Jewish work units. Wooden barracks for inmates were built that offered little protection from the cold during winter, while the German guards, made up of SS and Volksdeutsch, were accommodated in existing brick buildings.

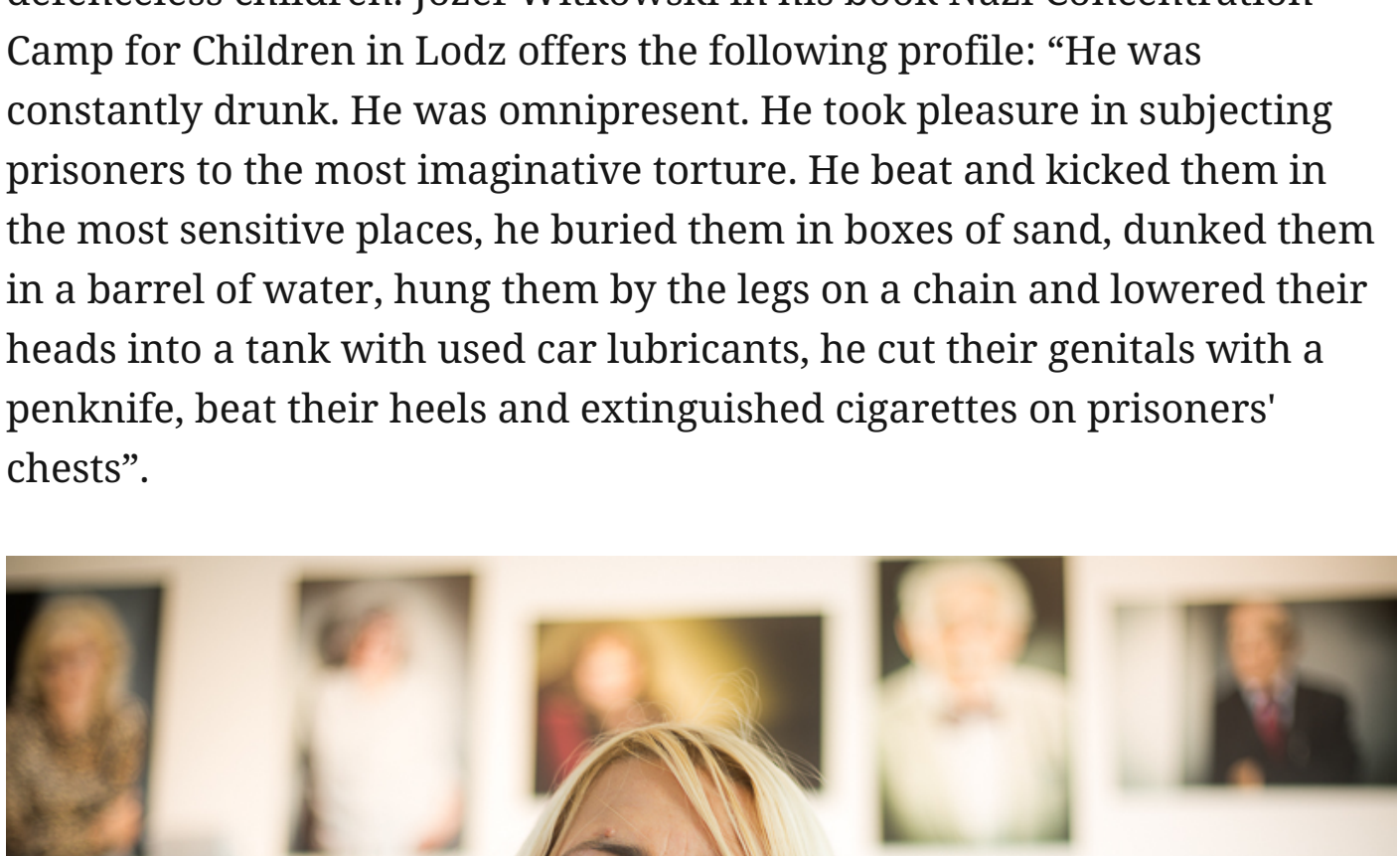
Public domain

The camp was set up because the Germans had a problem about what to do with Polish children arrested for petty theft, smuggling and street trading, as well as children whose parents had been killed or arrested.

Eventually, it was decided to isolate an area in the Łódź ghetto around Przemysłowa Street as the land was easy to obtain and it could be scaled up if needed.

The camp area was separated from the ghetto with a high wooden fence made by Jewish work units. Wooden barracks for inmates were built that offered little protection from the cold during winter, while the German guards, made up of SS and Volksdeutsch, were accommodated in existing brick buildings.

All the children had to work in the workshops and they were given daily quotas that had to be met under threat of punishment. The boys straightened needles and made shoes of straw, wicker baskets, belts for gas masks and leather parts for backpacks, while the girls worked in the laundry, kitchen, tailor's workshop and in the garden.



Chamber of Remembrance in Łódź just outside of what was the camp's boundary.

Kalbar/TFN

Testimonies from prisoners after the war tell of constant, unrelenting hunger. For breakfast, the children would receive a slice of camp bread and half a litre of black coffee, sometimes sweetened with saccharine. Dinner was a litre of rutabaga or potato soup with beet leaves or cabbage. Sometimes they were given a spoonful of marmalade. A typical punishment was to be denied food. As a result, the children in the camp suffered from chronic hunger. They became experts at hunting birds and rodents and they would sprinkle dead flies and insects into their watery soup.

Washing took place outside under a pump or in a basin, regardless of the weather. Both washing with soap, which could only be obtained in parcels from home, and changing underwear were rare. Until the spring of 1944, there was no permanently active bath or room for steaming clothes. Regardless of this, having lice or being dirty were punished by flogging or being denied meals.

Some of the guards were particularly brutal towards their young charges. Edward August, an SS guard from a German family in Łódź was notorious as a sadist who committed many crimes against the defenceless children. Józef Witkowski in his book Nazi Concentration Camp for Children in Lodz offers the following profile: "He was constantly drunk. He was omnipresent. He took pleasure in subjecting prisoners to the most imaginative torture. He beat and kicked them in the most sensitive places, he buried them in boxes of sand, dunked them in a barrel of water, hung them by the legs on a chain and lowered their heads into a tank with used car lubricants, he cut their genitals with a penknife, beat their heels and extinguished cigarettes on prisoners' chests".



Joanna Podolska-Płocka, the director of the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center in Łódź, told TFN: "We know from survivors that from their point of view the camp was more terrible than other camps because in big camps older people helped children but in this camp the children had to protect themselves [...] we know that in other camps adults formed small groups to help each other survive but here the children weren't able to cooperate in that way."

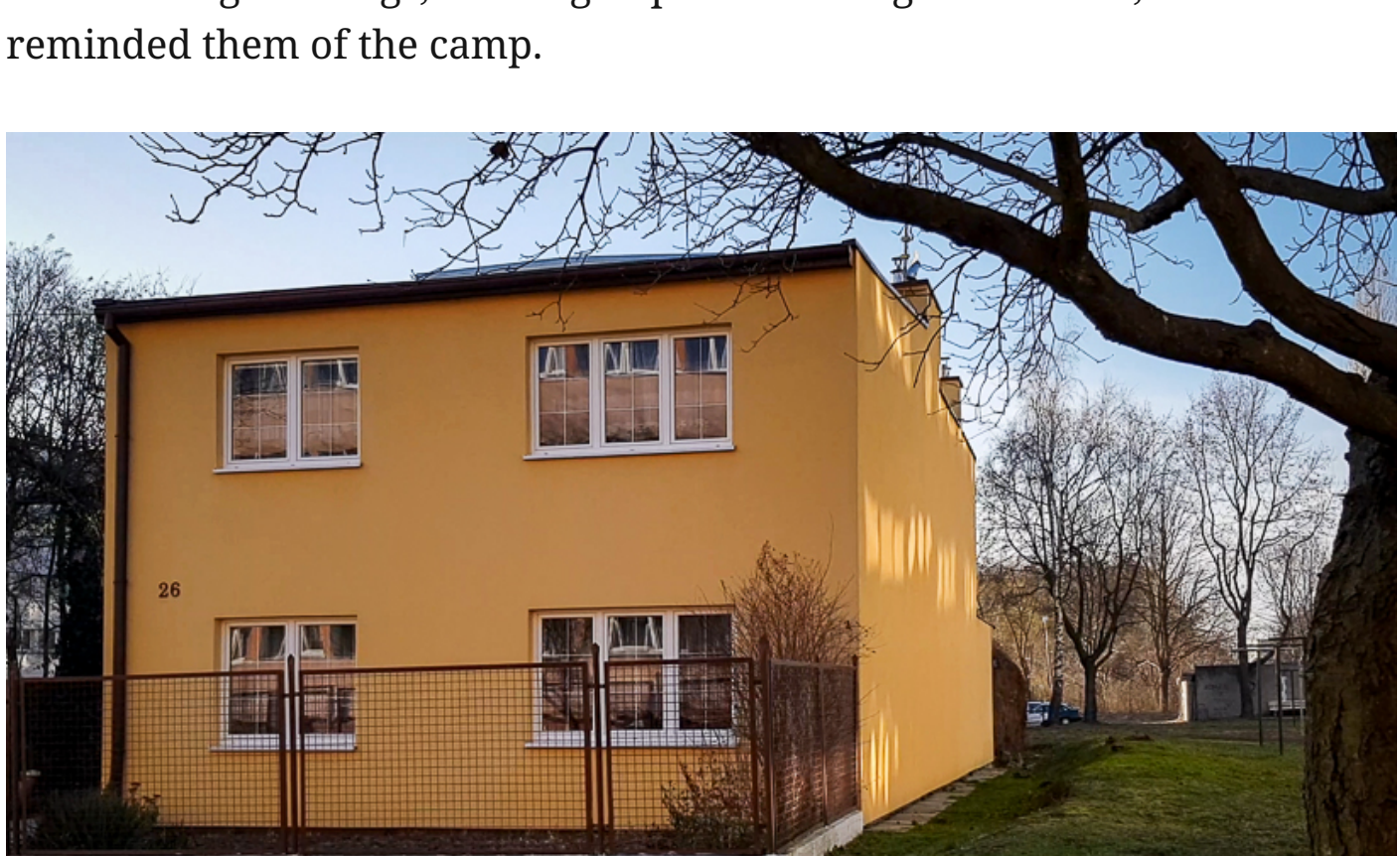
Kalbar/TFN

This level of cruelty even shocked his SS colleagues, who sometimes tried to stop him from abusing the children. Ultimately, August's aggressive behaviour led to his removal from his post and he was sentenced by a German court not for his crimes against prisoners but for insubordination.

The female guard with the worst reputation was Sydomia Bayer, also from Łódź, known as Frau Doktor as she ran the camp clinic. She enjoyed dragging sick children out into the snow and pouring cold water over them, and she would flog, beat and kick them and deprive them of meals.

While most of the camp's guards avoided justice, Sydomia Bayer and Edward August were arrested in Łódź after the war sentenced to death for crimes committed against Polish children at the camp.

The worst conditions prevailed in block 8, where children who wet their bed were placed. Initially, these children had their straw bedding taken away and were woken up every two hours. However, when this did not help, the camp authorities considered bed wetting an act of disobedience and punished.



The camp was set up because the Germans had a problem about what to do with Polish children arrested for petty theft, smuggling and street trading, as well as children whose parents had been killed or arrested.

Kalbar/TFN

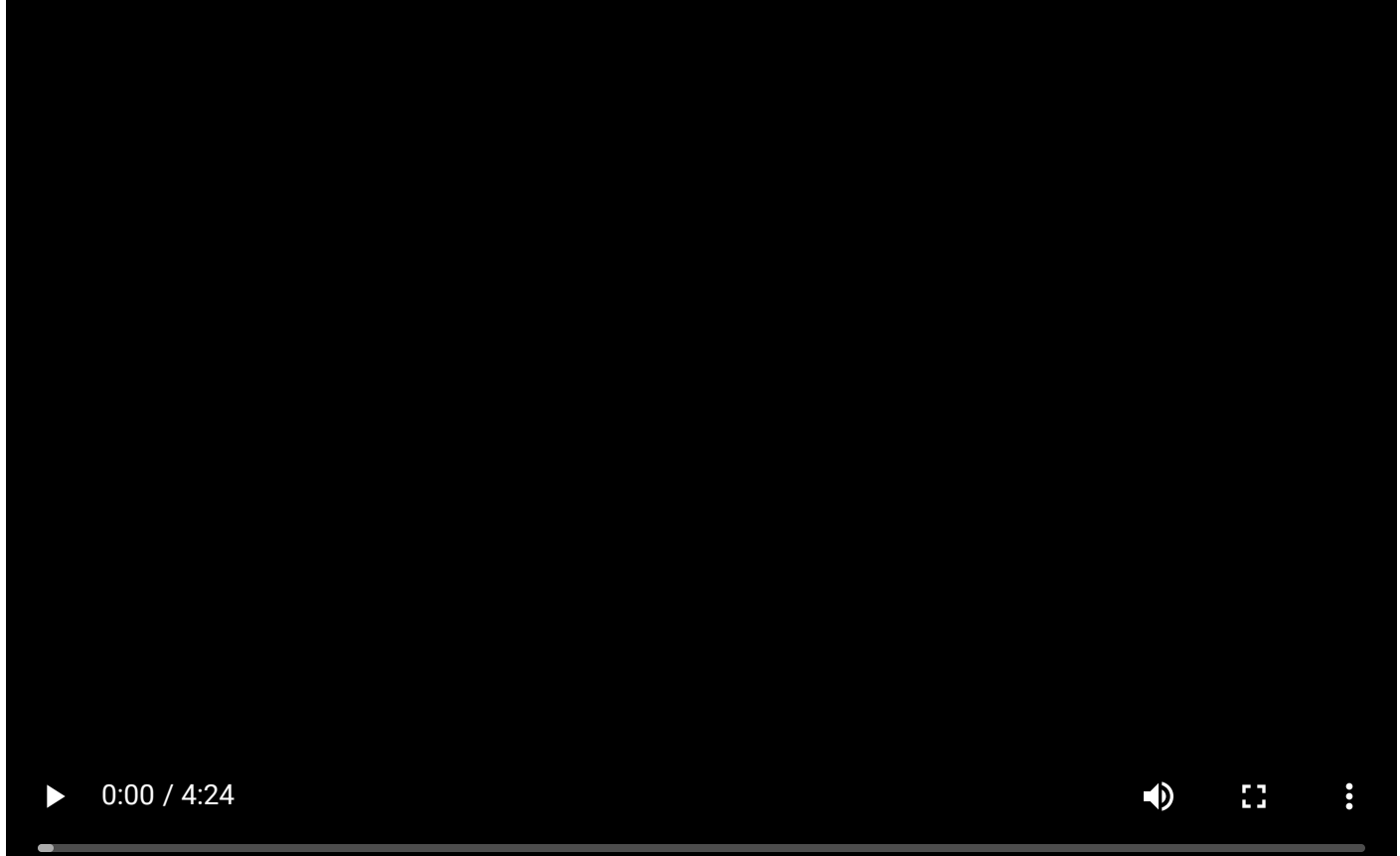
They were forced to sleep on bare planks, which soon rotted and never dried out. The children had to sleep in their camp uniforms and underwear and as a result they were permanently wet. Because of their unpleasant smell, these children had to work outside all year round.

They got swelling to such an extent that they did not fit into their clothes, and yet they were never sent to the clinic. For this reason, mortality in block 8 was the highest.

The most common ailments suffered by the children were pneumonia, meningitis, tuberculosis, skin, mouth and throat ulcers, scurvy, bloody diarrhoea and even paralysis. The camp clinic lacked basic materials such as cotton wool, bandages and iodine. After reporting and registering in the book, patients would often be whipped for simulating an illness.

The camp functioned until the end of the German occupation in Łódź on 19 January 1945. When the gates opened there around 800 underage prisoners in the camp. Many tried to make their way home, or were taken away by their parents. Others, who left the camp on their own, but unable to cope with life outside, mainly due to lack of food, returned to the camp.

According to those who looked after them at that time, they were different to other children. At the beginning, they were similar to animals. They threw themselves at their Polish caregivers, treating them as though they were German guards. Few of the staff could last more than a week. As time went by, there was a slow improvement. The children enjoyed wearing warm clothes, but they couldn't endure communal gatherings, walking in pairs or being whistled at, which reminded them of the camp.



The children's accommodation block for around 100 children is now private accommodation.

Kalbar/TFN

Podolska-Płocka pointed out that the difficulties for the prisoners did not end with liberation. "What is very sad is that these children were not treated as victims. They were told they had not been in a concentration camp so it was nothing. They had to fight for many years to be treated as victims.

"Many of them were too young to know their own identities and some never managed to find out who they were," she added.

Nowadays, the area of the camp has been rebuilt with blocks of flats. Some original buildings still exist, such as the commandant's building and some workshop buildings, although they have been adapted for accommodation.

In 1971, a moving monument to the victims was unveiled, which shows a malnourished child burying his head into his mother's broken heart. Each year on June 1, a commemoration takes place at the monument to coincide with International Children's Day.

Meanwhile, just beyond the camp boundary, the local primary school hosts a Remembrance Chamber that displays many photos and documents relating to the camp as well as a scale model and an original camp uniform.

Despite all of this, awareness of the camps existence remains relatively unknown, even in Łódź, edged out perhaps by more dramatic events. The inscription at the Broken Heart monument, which reads "Your lives were taken from you; today we offer you only memory", for most people remains an unfulfilled promise.



Hitler's concentration camp for children

Kalbar/TFN

TAGS: WWII, ŁÓDŹ, NAZI GERMAN, SS, CONCENTRATION CAMP, MAREK EDELMAN

Share:



HISTORY | LIFE

## 'Priceless' Stradivarius violin looted from Poland during WWII found in Paris

Handmade in 1719 by Antonio Stradivari, the instrument is one of only 650 Stradivarius violins that have survived to this day.

