Panel 3: Scopes of Action: Reactions of the Persecuted

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Polish political organisations in Buchenwald Concentration Camp – between rivalry and cooperation

Living conditions of prisoners in concentration camps were not helpful in canvassing. The mere existence of every single prisoner depended not only on the type of performed work or cruelty of SS men but on non-favourable circumstances as well. A resistance movement as organized form of fight against the Nazis was in a few camps and unfortunately in limited extent.

Buchenwald Concentration Camp was the exemplary exception from the rule in this respect. There was illegal communist organisation, which at first was mainly German but with time almost all nations in the Camp joined and belonged to it.

The aim of this article is to illustrate the specific character and the place of Polish people in the social structure of Buchenwald's hierarchy, their activity in the resistance movement and their role in the process of self-release of the camp. The author of this work will also attempt to present the periodization of the Poles’ history in the Buchenwald Camp in a way to precisely depict changing forms of self-organization. The attention mainly is going to be focused on the elements of cooperation between Polish people and rivalry between particular political groups arranging the Poles (Oświęcim – Majdan Group, Palczewski Group, PPR Group etc.)

History of the Poles in Buchenwald begins on October 5th 1939 when the first part of 189 Polish prisoners had arrived. On October 15th and 16th the next part of 2098 prisoners was brought into the camp. Among them were Polish communists who quickly started their cooperation with German ones. Stefan Misiaszek and Leon Stasiak were so-called informal leaders of Polish group. Gradually, from 1940 the Poles had gained more important functions in the hierarchy of the camp. The cooperation between Polish and German communists was tightened, which in turn resulted in conveying many spectacular actions. One of such sort was the salvage of about 200 Polish children in the age from 8
to 16 who were brought to Buchenwald in 1940. From that year the main role performed by the Poles in the resistance movement was to monitor the radio and counterespionage inside the camp.

At the beginning of 1940 the crisis among Polish communists occurred, that was the effect of the exportation of Misiaszek and Stasiak to different camps. At the time the overall situation of Polish prisoners was worsened as the result of disagreements among communists inside Polish group. In this way Palczewki Group and Królik Group were formed and Wolff's case occurred. The agreement between all of the groups took place in 1943. The next subject matter of the analysis in this article will be the circumstances of agreement and the way in which model of leadership of Polish Group was changing. It is impossible to understand the specificity of Polish communists without the reflection upon the matter. In order to achieve the organization level which reduced the risk of exposure was the fact that varied rules of mutual cooperation were applied. Those particular regulations will also be one of the subject matter of this article. The rules mentioned above were established during secret meetings of vying political groups. Among the factors that led to compromise between those groups were more frequent and numerous transports of prisoners from Poland, as well as the leaders' persuasion that unity and cooperation may be the only single way to success in the fight against Nazis.

The subject matter of this article has not been comprehensively undertaken hence that is the reason to do so.