

SOBIBOR PERPETRATOR COLLECTION, circa 1870-1970

2020.8.1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW
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Descriptive summary

Title: Sobibor perpetrator collection

Dates: circa 1870-1970

Accession number: 2020.8.1

Creator: Niemann, Johann, 1913-1943

Extent: 1.5 linear foot (1 box, 2 oversize boxes, 3 oversize folders)

Repository: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW, Washington, DC 20024-2126

Abstract: The Sobibor perpetrator collection consists of over 360 black and white photographs, some in two albums and some loose, as well as dozens of paper documents that chronicle Johann Niemann's social background, his family, and his SS career, culminating in his role as deputy commander of the Sobibor death camp. Niemann was killed by prisoners during the October 1943 Sobibor uprising. The photographs and documents trace Niemann's advancement through the concentration camp system (Esterwegen and Sachsenhausen) and the T4 "euthanasia" program (Grafeneck, Brandenburg, and Bernburg) to the Operation Reinhard death camps (Belzec and Sobibor). The collection includes the first photographs to come to light showing SS leaders and their auxiliaries at the Sobibor killing center.

Languages: German

Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open for use.

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Preferred citation: (Identification of item), Sobibor perpetrator collection (2020.8.1), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC

Acquisition information: Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz donated the Sobibor perpetrator collection to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2020.

Custodial history: Following Johann Niemann's funeral, his belongings, including the two photograph albums, were sent to his widow, Henriette Niemann. The photographs came to light through a German historian, Hermann Adams, who was researching Niemann's role in the Holocaust and reached out to Niemann's descendants. In 2015, Niemann's grandson donated the photographs and documents to the Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz, which specializes in the history of Operation Reinhard. With the grandson's help, historians from the Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz and their partners at the Forschungsstelle Ludwigsburg of Stuttgart University were able to locate even more material in the summer of 2019.

Related material: *Fotos aus Sobibor: Die Niemann-Sammlung zu Holocaust und Nationalsozialismus*, herausgegeben vom Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz e. V. und von der Forschungsstelle Ludwigsburg der Universität Stuttgart, Metropol Verlag, January 2020. ISBN: 978-3-86331-506-1 ISBN: 978-3-86331-956-4 (E-Book)

Accruals: Accruals may have been received since this collection was first processed, see archives catalog at collections.ushmm.org for further information.

Processing history: Julie Schweitzer, February 2020

Biographical note

Johann Niemann (1913-1943) was born August 4, 1913 in Völlen, Germany to farmer and milkman Klaas Johann Niemann (b. 1882) and farmer and housewife Bilda Johanna Niemann (b. 1879). He was the middle of nine siblings. He attended elementary school for eight years, studied with a local master painter, and passed his journeyman's examination.

Niemann joined the Nazi Party in 1931 as member number 753,836 and the SS in 1934 as member number 270,600. He first served as SA-guard at the Esterwegen concentration camp before he joined the SS and became a guard at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In 1939 Niemann's son August was born, Niemann started working for the T4 "euthanasia" project, and he married longtime girlfriend Henriette Frey (1921-1980) in December. Henriette's parents August and Janna Frey also lived in Völlen. Niemann was assigned to the Grafeneck, Brandenburg, and Bernburg facilities, where his duties included moving the murdered victims from the gas chambers to the crematoria. He was promoted to SS-Oberscharführer in August 1941. Niemann next helped establish the Belzec killing center, where he essentially commanded Camp II, the extermination side of the camp. He then helped establish the Sobibor killing center in spring 1942, was ordered there as deputy commander in the summer, and was promoted to SS-Hauptscharführer. His daughter Johanne was born the same month that gassing operations began at Sobibor, and Niemann was promoted to SS-Untersturmführer in June 1943.

At least 167,000 Jews were killed in Sobibor's gas chambers during the time it operated as a killing center from April 1942 to November 1943. Most newly arrived prisoners were immediately sent to the gas chambers, and only a few were spared immediate death in order to serve as slave laborers assisting with the operation of the camp. Sobibor and Belzec were both part of Operation Reinhard, the SS plan to annihilate the Jews of occupied Poland, during which more than 1.7 million Jews were murdered between 1942 and 1943.

Niemann was killed during the October 14, 1943 Sobibor prisoner uprising when an underground committee formed from the approximately 600 remaining prisoners killed eleven members of the SS and several auxiliaries. As the highest-ranking SS officer on duty that day, Niemann was the first to be targeted. Survivor witnesses report that he was lured to the tailors' barracks by Moshe Hochman with the promise of a leather jacket, and that Alexander Shubayev, a Jewish Red Army soldier imprisoned at Sobibor, killed him with an axe to the head. Although the uprising did not go as planned, approximately 300 prisoners managed to escape and about 50 or 60 survived through the end of the war. Those who were unable to escape or whom were recaptured were all killed.

Following the uprising, the SS and Trawniki-trained guards shot the remaining prisoners, razed the extermination side of the camp, buried all evidence, and planted trees to disguise the area. A funeral was held for Niemann and the other officers killed, and his widow was sent his belongings including two photograph albums he had compiled containing images of his Holocaust-era service.

Scope and content of collection

The Sobibor perpetrator collection consists of over 360 black and white photographs, some in two albums and some loose, as well as dozens of paper documents that chronicle Johann Niemann's social background, his family, and his SS career, culminating in his role as deputy commander of the Sobibor death camp. Niemann was killed by prisoners during the October 1943 Sobibor uprising. The photographs and documents trace Niemann's advancement through the concentration camp system (Esterwegen and Sachsenhausen) and the T4 "euthanasia" program (Grafeneck, Brandenburg, and Bernburg) to the Operation Reinhard death camps (Belzec and Sobibor). The collection includes the first photographs to come to light showing SS leaders and their auxiliaries at the Sobibor killing center.

The first album includes 116 photographs and is titled "2. SS-T.V. [Totenkopfverband] Brandenburg." Photographs depict Niemann's early SA and SS career in the Esterwegen and Sachsenhausen concentration camps, the daily activities in the NS-Ordensburg Vogelsang, several family photos, and his activities in the T4 "euthanasia" facilities of Grafeneck, Brandenburg, and Bernburg. The collection also includes loose photographs from Sachsenhausen (1), Grafeneck, Brandenburg, and Bernburg (9), and a vacation home for T4-staff at Attersee (6) that supplement the images in this album as well as fifty-five loose family photographs.

The second album includes 80 photographs depicting an official trip to Berlin and Potsdam as a reward for SS officers from Sobibor (including Niemann and his wife) and a group of twenty-two Trawniki auxiliary guards. The group snapped photos on breaks by the side of the road, in beer gardens and at historical monuments. They are also pictured with high-ranking members of Hitler's Chancellery (Kanzlei des Führers). The album is housed in its current state in Box 2, and the loose photographs removed by someone at an earlier date are housed separately in folder 14. A digital display shows how the album pages would have looked with those loose photographs in their original order. The collection includes additional loose photographs that duplicate or supplement the images in this album.

Sixty-two loose photographs from Sobibor from autumn 1942 to summer 1943 depict scenes in and around the camp, Johann Niemann, Commandant Franz Reichleitner, Erich Bauer (in charge of the operation of the gas chambers), Arthur Dachsel (in charge of Camp IV), Karl Frenzel, Rudolf Kamm (in charge of the sorting barracks), Erich Schulze (in charge of the forest and penal commandos), Gustav Wagner (the "Lagerspiess" in charge of the daily running of the camp), and nearly two dozen additional perpetrators. The photographs also depict several unidentified camp prisoners, local civilian female servants, German official guests, and Trawniki guards. Only a small number of German officers staffed the death camps, relying on Trawniki-trained auxiliaries to guard prisoners and operate the gas chambers. The Sobibor photographs also document the topography of the camp; the interactions among the camp's SS staff, and between the SS and local civilians and the Trawniki guards; the involvement of leading T4 and Führer Chancellery officials in the Operation Reinhard; and the interaction and complicity of the wives of the perpetrators. Fourteen photographs depict the funeral held in the nearby city of Chełm for the eleven SS men killed during the Sobibor prisoner uprising in October 1943. Photographs also include four images from the Belzec killing center from late 1941 to early 1942.

Identifications of individuals and locations in the photographs are drawn from photograph or album notations or are based on research by the Bildungswerk Stanisław Hantz and the Forschungsstelle Ludwigsburg der Universität Stuttgart. Research into further identifications continues.

Documents include Johann Niemann's Wehrpass and other official records from the Nazi period documenting his posts at the Esterwegen and Sachsenhausen concentration camps, a marriage loan, and promotions, honors, and medals he was awarded; his Kleiderkasse-SS membership card; a letter he wrote from Sobibór to his wife just a few months before he was killed; and documents announcing his death. Three bank account books for Henriette and August Niemann and August Frey might contain entries for deposits of money robbed from Belzec and Sobibor victims.

Documents dated after Johann Niemann's death include letters from the Gemeinnützige Stiftung für Anstaltspflege, which was a camouflaged public name used by the T4 "euthanasia" program; a letter from the Lebensborn Hauptabteilung SS-Kriegerwaisen inquiring about the care of Henriette's children; and correspondence about pensions and insurance payments Henriette received as a war widow. They also include official copies of birth, marriage, and death certificates related to the Niemann family and cards documenting Henriette's membership in a singing club and in the Reichsbund der Kriegs- und Zivilbeschädigten, Sozialrentner und Hinterbliebenen.

This series includes two notebooks. The brown notebook marked "1934 Nordwesthandel Oldenburg" is a re-purposed 1934 day planner that was primarily used between 1948 and 1955. The notebook includes accounting information and related names, a poem, notes, tax information, a copy of a letter, calculations of cultivated acres of land, and a narrative about the activities and elections of a singing club. The entries seem to be made in the handwriting of multiple people, and the names Hanne Niemann, Aunt Didi, Uncle Theo, Henny, and August Frey are present. A loose document about milk suppliers was found between the pages corresponding to the week of September 16-22. A loose bill for August Frey dated October 1953 about leased land was found between the pages about traffic signals near the back of the notebook. A loose tag was found in the back cover. The blue notebook marked "Henriette" contains lyrics to Christmas carols including "O Freude über Freud," "Süßer die Glocken nie klingen," "O du fröhliche," "Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe," and "Fröhliche Weihnacht überall."

The correspondence folder primarily relates to the Frey family and includes genealogical research conducted before Henriette's marriage to Johann and a 1940 letter from a German soldier serving in Poland who was formerly billeted with the Frey family. A World War I era postcard, estate records, and a death announcement also relate to August and Janna Frey. An employment certificate and copy of a court decision document a 1970 legal finding that laborer Jon Hayo Klimp probably did not contract Bang's disease while working on Henriette Niemann's farm or in the neighborhood.

Printed materials include two issues of *Parole-Buch* from 1934 and 1935 and a newsletter about Reichskriegertag in Kassel in 1936.

System of arrangement

The Sobibor perpetrator collection is arranged as two series:

Series 1: Photographs, circa 1870-1944 (bulk 1934-1944)

Series 2: Documents, 1918, 1930-1970

Indexing terms

Person:

Niemann, Johann, 1913-1943.

Bauer, Erich, 1900-1980.

Dachsel, Arthur, 1890-1958.

Frenzel, Karl, 1911-1996.

Kamm, Rudolf, 1905-?

Reichleitner, Franz Karl, 1906-1944

Schulze, Erich, 1902-?

Wagner, Gustav, 1911-1980.

Corporate:

Bełżec (Concentration camp)

Esterwegen (Concentration camp)

Gemeinnützige Stiftung für Anstaltspflege (Germany)

Kanzlei des Führers der NSDAP

Kyffhäuserbund

Landes-Pflegeanstalt Grafeneck/Württbg.

Landes-Pflegeanstalt Brandenburg a.H.

Landes-Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Bernburg

Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei.--Sturmabteilung

Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei.--Schutzstaffel

Reichsbund der Kriegs- und Zivilbeschädigten, Sozialrentner und Hinterbliebenen

Sachsenhausen (Concentration camp)

Sobibór (Concentration camp)

Topical Subject:

Aktion T4 (Germany)

Euthanasia--Germany.

Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)
Operation Reinhard, Poland, 1942-1943.
Concentration camps--Officials and employees.

Geography:

Attersee (Austria : Lake)
Bełżec (Poland)
Berlin (Germany)
Bernburg (Germany)
Brandenburg (Brandenburg, Germany)
Chełm (Lublin, Poland)
Esterwegen (Germany)
Potsdam (Germany)
Sachsenhausen (Brandenburg, Germany)
Sobibór (Poland)
Völlen (Germany)

Genre/Form:

Correspondence.
Bankbooks.
Notebooks.
Photographs.
Photograph albums.

CONTAINER LIST

Series 1. Photographic materials, circa 1870-1944 (bulk 1934-1944)

Box/Folder	Title
1.1	Attersee (6 photos), 1941
1.2	Belzec (4 photos), circa 1941-1942
1.3	Berlin/Potsdam trip (9 photos), additional photographs, 1943
1.4	Berlin/Potsdam trip, duplicates from album (9 photos), 1943
1.5-1.6	Family photographs (55 photos), circa 1870-1944 (2 folders)
1.7	Funeral and gravesite in Chełm (14 photos), 1943-1944
1.8	Grafeneck, Brandenburg, Bernburg (9 photos), circa 1940-1941
1.9	Sachsenhausen (1 photo), circa 1938-1939
1.10-1.11	Sobibor (62 photos), 1942-1943 (2 folders)
1.12	Postcards, circa 1940-1943
1.13	Photo envelopes (empty), circa 1930s-1940s
Box 2	Album 1, "2. SS-T.V. [Totenkopfverband] Brandenburg," [as is], circa 1934-1941
1.14	Album 1, "2. SS-T.V. [Totenkopfverband] Brandenburg," loose photographs, circa 1934-1941
Digital only	Album 1, "2. SS-T.V. [Totenkopfverband] Brandenburg," [original order], circa 1934-1941
Box 3	Album 2, Sobibor personnel official trip to Berlin and Potsdam, 1943

Series 2. Documents, 1918, 1930-1970

Box/Folder	Title
1.15	August Frey, World War I postcard, 1918
1.16	August Frey, bank book, 1930-1952
OS 1	<i>Parole-Buch</i> , Deutscher Reichskriegerbund "Kyffhäuser," Nr. 51, December 17, 1933
OS 2	<i>Parole-Buch</i> , Deutscher Reichskriegerbund "Kyffhäuser," Nr. 14, April 8, 1934
1.17	Johann Niemann, Wehrpass, 1934-1943
1.18	Johann Niemann, official documents, 1935-1943
1.19	<i>Reichskriegertag Kassel 1936</i> , July 1936
1.20	Correspondence, circa 1939-1944
1.21	Henriette Niemann, bank book 1942-1958
1.22	Johann Niemann, letter from Sobibor to Henriette, 1943
1.23	Letter announcing the death of Johann Niemann, 1943
1.24	Johann Niemann, published death announcement, 1943
1.25	Johann Niemann, estate, 1943
1.26	Gemeinnützige Stiftung für Anstaltspflege letters, 1943-1944
1.27	Birth, marriage, and death certificates, 1944-1945, 1951
1.28	August Niemann, bank book 1944-1964
1.29	Lebensborn, Hauptabteilung SS-Kriegerwaisen letter, 1944
1.30, OS 3	Insurance and pensions, 1944-1946
1.31	Notebook "1934 Nordwesthandel Oldenburg," circa 1948-1955
1.32	Notebook "1934 Nordwesthandel Oldenburg," loose items, circa 1952-1953
1.33	August and Janna Frey, estate, 1950-1961
1.34	Henriette Niemann, Gesangverein "Concordia" membership card, 1952
1.35	Janna Frey, published death announcement, 1954
1.36	Jon Hayo Klimp, employment and lawsuit, 1955, 1970
1.37	Henriette Niemann, Reichsbund der Kriegs- und Zivilbeschädigten, Sozialrentner und Hinterbliebenen E.V. membership book, 1959-1968
1.38	Notebook "Henriette," containing lyrics to Christmas carols, undated