

### The Museum at Auschwitz, 1941-45

By Sybil Milton

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In October 1941 Rudolf Höss, the camp commandant at Auschwitz allowed a museum to open in barrack 6 at Auschwitz I. It moved to barrack 24 in March 1942, where it occupied two rooms until Auschwitz was liberated in late January 1945. "The goal of the museum was to collect, in small quantities, various rarities, art works, valuable objects, coin and stamp collections as well other rare objects located in the prisoners' personal possessions (such as documents, awards, banners, liturgical clothing, etc.). About six prisoners were assigned to the museum. Two of them were assigned to translate the Talmud into German, one repaired watches for the SS, the remaining prisoners were mostly artists, graphic artists, or fine arts, and created works of art that were considered the property of the camp and were used as presents to visiting dignitaries from the Reich."<sup>i</sup>

The initiative to open this museum had come from the Polish prisoner Franciszek Targosz, who had been deported to Auschwitz in December 1940, and assigned prisoner number 7626. In early 1941, Höss discovered Targosz sketching horses. Targosz knew that art not specifically ordered by the camp administration was a punishable offense. To save himself, he suggested that Höss establish a museum in one of the camp barracks. The museum, Targosz argued, would provide a place of culture for Nazi officers stationed at Auschwitz. Such a museum would exhibit examples of Nazi-approved art, including handicrafts and folk objects "collected" from the prisoners. Höss saw the propaganda potential of such a museum, since Nazi dignitaries visiting Auschwitz would be impressed by his cultural achievement and he would also have a vehicle to show the supremacy of the Aryan race. He consented to the plan and ordered Targosz early in 1941 to organize the museum. Thus, Targosz managed both to save his own life and to have some of his drawings exhibited. The museum at Auschwitz remained open in several locations until the camp was

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liberated in 1945. Its exhibits included ceramics, glass, and metalwork crafted by prisoners, as well as coins and antiques confiscated from the deportees. It also displayed Nazi military regalia and documents, as well as Jewish prayer books, shawls, and phylacteries. The other art shown there included landscapes, portraits of Nazi officials, and illustrations of German legends.

Although the museum was not an official labor kommando for prisoners at Auschwitz I, it became a place where Polish artists incarcerated at Auschwitz could go after completing their official assignments. There they produced what was ordered, as well as their own works in their few free late evening hours and on Sundays.

The museum provided a temporary sanctuary for these artists (including Mieczysław Kościelniak, Jan Baraś-Komski, Włodzimierz Siwierski, Waldemar Nowakowski, Bronisław Czech, and many others). The museum had materials available for officially commissioned works and thus also provided supplies for secret sketches, portraits, and caricatures, that they created for themselves. Thus, the Krakow sculptor Xawery Dunikowski, prisoner number 774, was assigned to make a model of the camp. The materials available to him officially were, in part, filched for a series of clandestine portraits of sleeping fellow inmates. Similarly, the graphic artist Mieczysław Kościelniak, prisoner 15261, produced officially requested art showing the orchestra and hospital at Auschwitz, and used materials pilfered from this assignment for clandestine sketches of sickness, suffering, and despair. Initially Kościelniak had been assigned to heavy demolition labor in kommando number 2. There, he spontaneously risked talking to an SS guard and offered to draw his portrait in five minutes. Impressed by a portrait completed in such a short interval of time, the guard arranged for Kościelniak to be reassigned to work at the SS Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke, an armaments factory adjacent to Auschwitz I.<sup>ii</sup> Kościelniak drew as a duty to the resistance movement, attempting to smuggle more than 300 works outside the camp, although only a relatively small number of these works are known to have survived.

It is clear that portraits were commissioned by the Germans as gifts to superiors or to their own families, and also for documentation of medical experiments. Thus, Josef Mengele commissioned a Czech Jewish artist, Dinah Gottliebowa, to do portraits of Roma (Gypsy) prisoners as illustrations for a book he hoped to publish about his medical experiments in Auschwitz. Other prisoner artists, like Leo Haas, Halina Olomucki, and Arnold Daghani also reported receiving orders to do portraits of Nazi officers, often from photographs of relatives missing in action. If the resulting work was acceptable, it often helped secure more lenient work assignments or better rations. Obviously compulsory work produced by inmate artists was meticulously executed and technically excellent, since the interned artist's fate depended on compliance with SS orders

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and whims. Moreover, paper, ink, and watercolor available through official work could—with luck—be used as materials for clandestine art.

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<sup>i</sup> Franciszek Piper, *Arbeitseinsatz der Häftlinge aus dem KL Auschwitz* (Oświęcim, 1995), 173; and Janina Jaworska, *Nie wszystek umrę* (Warsaw, 1975, 77-80).

<sup>ii</sup> Jaworska, 81.