

The Secrets of Sobibor: An Oral History

After a revolt at a death camp deep in the Polish forest, the Nazis burned, blew up, and buried the site. But survivors, witnesses, and now a group of scientists are uncovering the grim truth of Sobibor.

From [Reader's Digest](#)



The Survivor

Selma Wijnberg Engel, 88;
retired
jeweler; Branford,
Connecticut



The Villager

Jan Manaj, 83;
farmer; Luta, Poland



The Searcher

Yoram Haimi, 49;
expedition leader and
archaeologist, Yad Vashem
International Institute for
Holocaust Research and
Ben-Gurion University of
the Negev, Israel



The Archaeologist

Richard Freund, 55;
director, Maurice
Greenberg Center
for Judaic Studies,
University of Hartford

The Historian

Avinoam "Avi" Patt, 34;
assistant professor of
history, Maurice Greenberg
Center



for Judaic Studies,
University of Hartford



The Geophysicist

Paul Bauman, 51;
chief geophysicist,
WorleyParsons, a global
energy, mining, and
engineering firm in
Calgary, Canada

Plus: [Read excerpts from Selma Engel's diary](#) and [watch video of her recounting the escape from Sobibor](#).

How does history uncover an atrocity? How does science make sense of evil? The team that examined Sobibor in 2008 includes experts of all types. Yoram Haimi, an Israeli archaeologist and nephew of two Sobibor victims, has led three expeditions to the death camp since 2007. Avi Patt, a Holocaust historian from Connecticut (and himself the great-grandson of victims), interprets the past for the team, while Richard Freund, a Judaica scholar, has helped raise money and spread awareness of the work to be done. Revealing what lies beneath the soil while respecting the dead, the team depends on the instruments of Canadian geophysicist Paul Bauman. And of course, to help the world remember what it must never forget, history relies on eyewitnesses like Jan Manaj and survivors like Selma Engel, who has the first word.

"I grew up in Zwolle, Holland. My parents owned a kosher hotel. My father died in 1941, before the Germans started rounding up the Jews. After my mother and my three brothers were sent away to Poland by the Germans, I didn't want to live in the apartment anymore. A Catholic priest found a place for me to stay. One night, the gestapo broke into the home. I didn't have enough time to escape. I was 20. [After jail in Amsterdam and a concentration camp in the Netherlands], they sent me to Sobibor in a freight train."

—Selma Engel, the survivor

"Many camps at the end of World War II were destroyed, dismantled, or burned out of fear of being discovered by Allied forces. The open question was, What happened to Sobibor? ... This is exactly the kind of project we can do. Instead of spending years digging with no direction, we can map the subsurface to determine where to dig. From an archaeologist's viewpoint, Sobibor is virgin territory. It has never been systematically excavated since it was cleared by the Nazis, who planted forests there to hide what they did. [This team] will be the first to document, in a dignified and scientifically accurate way, the entire sinister process without having to disturb human remains."

—Richard Freund, the archaeologist

"At least 167,000 people were on the transport list. They got off, and a couple of hours later, they were ash. When we arrived to map the site, I felt a little choked up. It's very stark, that area. It's all weeds and somewhat derelict. You realize how insane the whole

thing was, how hopeless for the people getting off the trains. They had no idea what was in store for them."

—Paul Bauman, the geophysicist

"Before the war, Luta was predominantly a Ukrainian village, with Poles and Jews. I had Jewish friends in school—Hanshe, Moishe, Yankel. Hanshe was very pretty. And the Germans came and took these Jewish families to the forest and shot them. In Luta, everyone knew the Germans were building a death camp nearby, but no one said anything. Everyone was looking out for himself. On one occasion, all the men were taken by Germans to be shot in retaliation for the partisan attacks on the German soldiers. They were almost executed, but the women of Luta bought them back. They paid the Germans with a huge supply of fresh eggs."

—Jan Manaj, the villager

"Passengers [disembarking] at the station had to go through various procedures: division according to sex, the surrender of their suitcases, removal of clothing, cutting of women's hair, and the confiscation of possessions and valuables. On their way to the gas chambers, the naked victims passed various buildings: warehouse barracks; a former forester's house (used as the camp offices and living quarters for some of the SS men); a small agricultural area with stables for horses, cattle, swine, chickens, and geese; and a small wooden Catholic chapel. A high observation tower overlooked the entire area. The exterminations were carried out in the northwestern part of the camp, the most isolated area. It contained the gas chambers, burial trenches, and housing for the Jewish prisoners employed there. A path, three to five feet wide and 492 feet long, led from the reception area to the extermination area. The path was fenced in on either side with barbed wire, intertwined with pine branches. Through it, the naked victims were herded toward the gas chambers."

—Richard Freund

"We were hit with whips. There was one woman. Her baby fell, and she said, 'Can I take my baby?' A German hit her in the face. She was bleeding. He told her, 'We'll take care of your baby.' And they threw them in the fire. From there, we passed a whole bunch of Germans, and they picked me out [along with] a group of Dutch girls that I'd met in the Amsterdam jail. Somehow we stayed together—that was our luck. And the Germans say to us, 'Go on the side.' We had no idea what would happen to us."

—Selma Engel

"Most of my Jewish friends and their families never made it to Sobibor. They were taken into the forest and shot, then buried alongside the road. When I was about 16, I was forced one cold December day in 1942 to take the family's horse and wooden cart, the one we used to carry hay or produce, to transport Jews to Sobibor. I wasn't the only one. Every peasant had to provide a cart. My father was supposed to transport the Jews, but he was so scared, he hid, and I had to do it."

—Jan Manaj

"Sobibor was the second killing center constructed as part of Operation Reinhard. It was built along the Chelm-Wlodawa railway line, in a wooded, swampy, thinly populated region. The camp covered a rectangular area of 1,312 by 1,969 feet and was surrounded by a minefield 50 feet wide. This was the site, in fact, where my great-grandparents on my mother's side had been deported from Vienna in the spring of 1942 to meet their deaths."

—Avi Patt, the historian

"We used GPR—ground penetrating radar. Think of it as an MRI of the ground. We were hoping to see construction material, concrete, wood, materials that wouldn't be detected by other instruments. We used a high-resolution metal detector, the kind used to search for

unexploded bombs and shrapnel. We wanted to find rail ties and spikes, barbed wire, spades, shovels, eating utensils. We had another detector, an EM 38. It is sensitive to subtle changes in conductivity. It can differentiate between compacted soil in a trench versus undisturbed soil. We could use it to uncover mass burial plots if the ashes gave off salt, as ashes often will. Our magnetometer measured, in incredibly high resolution, the earth's magnetic field. Two things will change the magnetic field: buried iron or steel and burned material."

—Paul Bauman

"I grew up hearing about how my two uncles—Maurice and Yahia Ben Zaquen—moved from their native Morocco to Paris in the 1930s to open a photography studio. They sent money and notes home to the family. The notes always ended, 'Take care of our little sister,' who was my mother. The notes stopped suddenly in 1941, after the Germans occupied Paris. Four years ago, I woke up suddenly needing to know what happened to them. I went to Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial and the world authority on documenting and archiving that history."

—Yoram Haimi, the searcher

"The Germans shot and killed over a million Jews in their communities, but it was too hard, too labor-intensive, and a waste of ammunition. Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, said, 'We need an easier way.' So they took the euthanasia staff, which had already secretly gassed people in Germany, to Sobibor. Franz Stangl [the commandant at Sobibor] was one of them. Psychologically, it made it much easier on the Germans because they didn't have to kill one to one."

—Avi Patt

"We were sent to a small barracks. In the afternoon, we had to start working. We had to sort the contents of the backpacks. We saw packages of food and very nice clothes, everything you could have wanted. Sometimes we find a child in the luggage. Then I see all the women without hair. They go into the barracks with the showers, except no water comes out."

—Selma Engel, diary, April 9, 1943

"When I arrived [at the site], my heart started to pound. I feel electricity in my fingers."

—Yoram Haimi

"Haimi has attempted one of the most daunting tasks that an excavator undertakes, excavating a place where you have a personal connection: an extermination camp."

—Richard Freund

"Every day the Germans made us do something else. One day we had to walk for hours and sing songs. Some Jewish people had an instrument, and we had to dance. Chaim Engel asked me to dance. First time I met him, he fell instantly in love with me. That's the way I met Chaim, my husband. First day. He was from Poland. I did not know what was happening at Sobibor until two prisoners told me that all the people that came the same time I did were sent to the gas chambers and burned."

—Selma Engel

"When the gas chambers were filled with victims, the gas that was vented into the rooms asphyxiated the victims in about 20 to 30 minutes. Before being [burned] and buried, the bodies were searched for valuables, and gold teeth were removed."

—"Excavating Nazi Extermination Centres," by Isaac Gilead, Yoram Haimi, and Wojciech

Mazurek, 2009

"We stole from the backpacks. There was food there. I was very good at that. I put it in my bra, my underpants. That's the reason we stayed alive. I never believed that I would get out. I had typhus, and one day all the people who were sick were shot to death. I was just lucky."

—Selma Engel

"Yoram noticed a number of post holes, and he used those to target his excavations for the possible site of the gas chambers. After the Germans blew up the gas chambers, they pulled the concrete pillars out of the ground, and pieces of metal fell into the holes. Those pieces of metal became readily identified as magnetic anomalies."

—Paul Bauman

"The rebellion at Sobibor took place because of the Jewish Soviet army officers who were rounded up in 1943 as the Nazi army juggernaut pushed farther into the Soviet Union. These trained, fit officers formed the core of the rebellious crew at places like Sobibor."

—Richard Freund

"They devised a daring plan. SS officers would be lured into storehouses on the pretext that they were to be given new coats and boots. Once inside, they would be attacked by the prisoners and killed with axes and knives. Nazi weapons were to be seized, and at roll call, the camp would be set ablaze. All prisoners would have a chance to bolt for freedom. Once outside Sobibor's gates, they would all be on their own."

—Avi Patt

"It seems they planned the escape for about a week. We knew something had to happen. There was no work, no transports. Chaim said to me, 'Selma, put a lot of clothes on and be ready at four o'clock tomorrow.' So I did, and he was standing there waiting with a young man, who was involved in the uprising. The young man was supposed to kill a German with somebody else, but he was afraid to go. Chaim said, 'You have to go. Ten SS men are dead, the electricity is out, and the telephone is cut off. They know. Now we are dead anyway.' Chaim had a bread knife. We walk out on roll call, and I was alone. And the door opens, and out comes Chaim. That's a miracle. How would I have gone alone? I put a handkerchief around his arm, and he took my hand and says, 'Come,' and we start running. Everyone starts running toward the entrance. We were running, running, running."

—Selma Engel

"By dusk, more than half the prisoners—about 300 people—had escaped. Most were killed by their Nazi pursuers or died crossing the minefields. After the revolt, some joined partisan units; others found shelter among sympathetic Poles. It is estimated that just 50 of the escapees survived the war."

—Avi Patt

"I was trying to imagine myself in [the escapees'] shoes: Where do you go? What direction do you run in?"

—Paul Bauman

"This is the only revolt that succeeds in all of World War II. I have a dream in the beginning that I will come here. Maybe I will find the identity cards of my uncles."

—Yoram Haimi

"News of the escape, which reached German headquarters after some delay because of the cut telephone lines, caused a good deal of panic. The search for escapees began only at

dawn. Surveillance planes were employed to follow them in the fields and forests. The escapees split into smaller groups to avoid detection. In the week following the escape, 100 of the 300 escapees were captured or shot to death. The vast majority did not live to witness the day of liberation."

—"The Nizkor Project," by Yitzhak Arad, Yad Vashem Studies

"Chaim was the only man who took his girlfriend. We were in the woods, and a bunch of people from Sobibor wanted to shoot Chaim because they didn't want me to come along. [They feared Selma, who didn't look or speak Polish, would give them away.] So Chaim and I went by ourselves. I was at Sobibor for six months. Chaim was there for a year."

—Selma Engel

"The camp was liquidated immediately and covered over with dirt and trees, giving the impression that there was never one there. Nazi officials feared other camps would rebel and chaos would break out. Ironically, in their attempt to cover up what happened, the Nazis provided archaeologists with the single best evidence of this unspeakable crime—an untouched site."

—Richard Freund

"We filled a weather balloon with helium, attached a digital camera, tethered the balloon to a line of string, and let it float 1,000 feet above the site. The camera shot hundreds of photographs, which we compared with a 1944 aerial photo shot by the German Luftwaffe six months after the camp was dismantled. We immediately saw different shades of green in the grassy field ... The dark green areas would be associated with mass burials because ash is a great fertilizer. When you think about the fact that by now each victim's ashes comprise the volume of a teacup, you realize you're looking at a mass grave of tens of thousands of people."

—Paul Bauman

"My whole family got killed. I have nobody left in Holland. They all walked to the gas chamber. Healthy people with children. Twelve, 13, 14 years old. It is something that nobody can understand. And that is something I suffer now very much. I cannot sleep at night."

—Selma Engel

"When I tell my family or friends the story of what happened, they don't believe it. They tell me I'm telling fairy tales."

—Jan Manaj

"There are 20 different maps of Sobibor, [drawn up from the memories of survivors and the Germans and Ukrainians who worked there]. We want to try to map Sobibor like it should be, like it was. I feel that after the Germans exploded the important buildings in the camp, they buried everything in a pit in the woods. For an archaeologist, this is the best place to excavate. And we're still looking for the gas chambers. There is also a plan to build a new museum once we finish our excavations. Four countries are working on this—Poland, Israel, Holland, and Slovakia. But we need funding to do all of this. I don't take money, and I don't want money. Just enough to pay the workers and to finish the job. This work is a document for the next generation about what happened at Sobibor and about the Nazis' attempt to erase history."

—Yoram Haimi

"My grandfather spent the rest of his life mourning the loss of his parents—they died at Sobibor—and wishing he had died with them. I've tried to tell him and my paternal great-grandparents, 'Look, this family has continued. People lived.'"

—Avi Patt

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