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## Michniów and Polish countryside during WWII



Michniów is a village founded in the 16th century, located in Suchedniów the Commune, Świętokrzyskie Province. Michniów (Michnów) was the property of the bishops of Kraków, part of a larger estate whose management was located in the town of Bodzentyn. The village was inhabited by woodcutters, forest rangers and charcoal burners. The development of the industry in Suchedniów and its surroundings enabled the village to develop as well. The settlement's

large kilns, foundries and sheet-metal shops required an increasing supply of both coal and manpower. The small settlement soon grew to become a village. In 1855, the village numbered 24 houses, three official houses (for the deputy forester, firewood cutter and rifleman) and three communal premises: a school, smithy and tavern. It is unknown how involved the residents of Michniów were in the uprisings and independence movements of the 19th century, but according to a local legend, the village's inhabitants supplied food to a freedom fighter unit led by General Marian Langiewicz stationed nearby.

Poland regaining her independence in 1918 spurred the cultural and economic development of the village. During the interwar period, the following associations operated in Michniów: The "Strzelec" Rifleman Association, the Youth Catholic Action of the Wzdół Parish, the Farmer's Wives Association, the Volunteer Fire Department, as well as the Female Samaritan-Firefighting Team. A school was also established, originally in a private house belonging to Walenty Dulęba, before being moved to a newly-erected fire station. The village had many shops and packing plants, and beekeeping was also developing well. However, the small size of the plots with sandy and rocky terrain resulted in low crop yield and low profits. This is why the local people usually had additional jobs. They worked as woodcutters, carpenters, woodworkers, sawmill workers, railway workers, as well as employees of factories located in Suchedniów, e.g. of the earthenware container factory of Antoni Wędrychowski, the Ludwików Steel Mill of the Tański family, and the National Ammunition Factory in Skarżysko.

In the summer of 1939, some members of the local population were drafted to defend their homeland. The German invasion of 1 September 1939 fed the atmosphere of terror and anxiety. Military operations quickly reached the village. On 3 September, Polish units began erecting fortifications near the local forester's lodge, extending them in the direction of the railroad connecting Kraków and Warsaw. Polish soldiers ultimately left Michniów on the night of 6 September. The 2nd Light Division of the Wehrmacht was advancing from Kielce towards Skarżysko. The Germans arrived in the village on the morning of 8 September. The school's interior was vandalised and taken over. This was the sign of things to come – the occupier's plan to ruin and terrorise the locals.

After the German victory, the establishment of the General Government with its capital in Kraków was proclaimed on 26 October 1939. The GG was divided into four districts: Kraków, Lublin, Radom and Warsaw. Michniów was located in the Radom district and was part of Kielce County's Ostoja Commune (later Suchedniów).

Approximately 600 people lived in Michniów in 1939. In late 1939 and early 1940, several families deported from the territories incorporated into the Third Reich arrived in the village, including the Fagasiński (also known as Daniłowski) family from Greater Poland Province, Hieronim Błaszowski (also known as Franciszek Kaczmarek) and the sisters Irena Kampf and Julianna Milde. Władysław and Feliks Fagasiński had both been teachers in the town of Kleczew. Together with Julian Materek, a Michniów-born teacher from Złotkowo (Kleczew Commune),

they moved to Kielce County and settled in Materek's home village. During their stay in Michniów, the Fagasiński family used the surname Daniłowski, and that is the surname under which they were arrested on 12 July 1943, as well as the surname which can be found on their death certificates issued in Auschwitz. Hieronim Błaszowski was a local official – he was the secretary at the communal office in Kleczew and a very prominent social worker. When the war broke out, he destroyed some of the official documents which could have been of interest to the Germans. Together with his wife Czesława and son Jerzy, he fled his home town. Pursued by the Germans, he contacted Fagasiński and Julian Materek, who had been hiding in Michniów, and the three went to Kielce County together. He stayed in Kielce, Suchedniów and Michniów, and worked at the Suchedniów Commune Office. Hieronim also served in the Union of Armed Struggle and the Home Army after being sworn in. He took a false name and surname: Franciszek Kaczmarek. He died on 12 July 1943 during the pacification of Michniów. In October 1939, the Franke family from Skarżysko moved into the house of Jan Obara.

Michniów, similar to the rest of the Polish territories incorporated into the General Government, was subjected to a ruthless policy of economic and human exploitation. From 1940, peasants living on the territory of the GG were forced to contribute a share of their crops to the authorities. The amount required would increase every year, and its collection was always brutal and ruthless. From 1942, by order of Hans Frank, everyone who attempted to evade the duty to contribute could be sentenced to death. In addition, the occupiers imposed

various kinds of new taxes and labour requirements on every farm. The latter included transporting timber and removing trees and weeds growing along railroads. Some inhabitants of Michniów worked at the ammunition factories located in Skarżysko, which were operated by a German company called "Hasag".

By July 1943, residents who were sent to work in the Reich in various circumstances included: Stanisława Mikulska, Eugenia Dupak, and Marian Dzierżyło. In 1942, Marian Józef Rynkowski, an inhabitant of Michniów, was arrested for unknown reasons. He died in KL Auschwitz on 26 February 1943. In the summer of 1942, Mieczysław Banaczkowski was arrested as a result of a denunciation by a German informer. However, he was able to escape while being transported to a forced labour camp in the Third Reich. After returning to his home village, he refused to spend nights at his family house. In 1942, near Kamień Michniowski, a German gendarmerie executed two brothers bearing the surname Cygler, probably as a result of a denunciation by the same informer. The two were the sons of a Polish officer and lived in Wzdół with the family of Wincenty Sowa. In May 1943, Antoni Franke, who had been living with the Obara family, was arrested and sent to KL Auschwitz. His wife and daughter continued to live in Michniów until the pacification of the village, after which they lived in the villages of Krzyżka and Jędrów near Suchedniów.

After the defeat Poland suffered in September, Michniów helped the last Polish soldiers and the first guerrilla fighters of Major Henryk Dobrzański (aka Hubal). The cavalymen stayed there to rest on their

way to Końskie Forests. In late 1939, a resistance network began to emerge in the village. One of its originators was an officer of the Legion 4th Infantry Regiment, Hipolit Krogulec. A cell of Service to Poland's Victory – Union of Armed Struggle began operating in Michniów. The first resistance fighters were sworn in by Hipolit "Albiński" Krogulec. A group belonging to the Union of Retaliation was also established. By the time the Union of Armed Struggle was transformed into the Home Army, the Michniów unit numbered close to 40 soldiers and bore the codename Kuźnia (Forge). Władysław Krogulec became the commander of the regiment, with Franciszek Berezyński as his deputy. Lieutenant Jan Piwnik (aka Ponury or Donat) was another Silent Unseen after Eugeniusz "Nurt" Kaczyński and Waldemar "Robot" Szwiec to arrive in Kielce Province. His task was to establish a larger unit of the Home Army. It was June 1943.

Residents of Michniów who worked at "Hasag" also participated in the resistance and sabotage operations, intentionally damaging factory equipment and manufacturing faulty ammunition. Members of the Michniów unit of the Home Army employed at the Tański factory were involved in secretly manufacturing pistol parts. In 1940, Reserve Cavalry Officer Stanisław Tański and his wife were executed by the Germans, and his factory was taken over by Kazimierz Czerniewski, an engineer, in 1943. He was the person who, by order of Major Jan "Ponury" Piwnik designed the assembly line for a machine pistol similar to the British Sten.

With the arrival of Ponury in Siekierno Forests and the now-legendary

Wykus Thicket, guerrilla activity around Michniów greatly increased in scope. On the night of 2 July 1943, guerilla fighters from Wykus assaulted a German train stopping at a station in Łączna. An Oberfeldkommandantur 603 Kielce daily report claims that eight people died as a result of two passenger trains coming under fire, including four soldiers: one from the Wehrmacht, three from the Ostlegion. 30-40 people were wounded, including 11 soldiers. According to Polish sources, approx. 170 Germans were killed, a number which seems to be greatly inflated. On 8 July 1943, German authorities convened in Radom to discuss the details of how to conduct the pacification operation of Michniów. On 11 July 1943, on a Sunday afternoon, a group of German police officers arrived by car and closely examined the village.

On 12 July, between 3 and 4 AM, a pincer of double encirclement tightened around Michniów. Internal watch posts were set up around buildings, and external posts were also ordered to watch the hills and forest. Heavily-armed checkpoints were set up near the roads leading out of the village between Suchedniów and Bodzentyn. They would not allow anyone to enter or leave the village. Part of the German police force entered the village and commenced with arresting the local population. Those arrested were treated with particular brutality. During the operation, the villagers' belongings were taken away. Nine people were brought to Kielce for further interrogation. SS-Sturmscharführer Herman Weinub, who was in charge of the operation, applied for eight of those arrested to be sent to Auschwitz. Karl Essig, chief of the Kielce Gestapo, approved the decision. Several days after

the pacification, Wiktor Wikło, a man from Michniów, was arrested in Skarżysko and sent to KL Auschwitz after a short investigation. On 12 July 1943, 18 women were taken away and sent to perform forced labour. They worked on farms near Hannover and at a porcelain factory in Königszelt.

On 12 July 1943, the Germans murdered 102 people in Michniów, including 95 men aged 16 to 63, five children aged 5 to 15 and two women (44 and 48 years old). The women and children were either shot or stabbed with bayonets. 23 men were shot, the rest was locked in barns and burnt alive. The pacification operation lasted approx. 11-12 hours. The operation was a result of denunciations by German informers regarding the villagers' ties to guerrilla fighters.

News of the German operation in Michniów arrived in Wykus before noon on 12 July. After discussing their course of action, a group of guerrillas set out towards the village. After a two-hour march, they arrived in the village. The Germans had already gone – they had left the place around 3 PM. On the night of 12 July, the Home Army conducted a retaliatory operation – an attack on a German train approx. a kilometre away from Michniów. A military train was stopped and came under fire. In cars designated as “nur für Deutsche” (only for Germans), all passengers were shot, and a message was left behind which said “REVENGE FOR MICHNIÓW”. The retreating fighters, led by Lieutenant Jan “Ponury” Piwnik, passed through the village and headed towards Wykus. Some of the village's residents had left their homes upon hearing gunfire. Between 10 and 11 AM on 13 July, the Germans



once again entered Michniów. This time, they murdered everyone they came across, regardless of their age or sex. Very few people managed to survive. The Germans' youngest victim was Stefan Dąbrowa, a nine-day-old baby burnt alive with his entire family.

The following units participated in the Michniów operation: sub-units of the 3rd Battalion of the 17th SS Police Regiment (II/17 SS Pol. Rgt.), 22nd SS Police Regiment (22 SS Pol. Rgt.), gendarmerie units from Częstochowa, Skarżysko, Starachowice, Ostrowiec and the nearby posts, as well as the Kielce Gestapo.

In total, 211 people were killed during or as a result of the pacification. On 27 May 2010, the Branch Commission for Prosecuting Crimes against the Polish Nation in Kraków, after examining the files from investigation S 9/09/Zn concerning Nazi crimes committed during the pacification of the village of Michniów, decided to discontinue the investigation and concluded that the number of people who lost their lives as a result of the pacification operation of 12 and 13 July 1943 was 204 (102 men, 54 women, 48 children aged 9 days to 15). The remaining seven people were arrested and lost their lives in concentration camps. 22 people temporarily lost their freedom. Latest research indicates that the number of victims may have been greater, considering that we know nothing of the fate of those who had lived in the village temporarily.

Several days after the pacification, the Grey Ranks set up signboards along the Suchedniów railroad, one of which read, "*Waffen SS haben hier im Dorf Michniów 200 Männer, Frauen und Kinder ermordet und*

*dieses Dorf verbrannt*" (In the village of Michniów, the SS have murdered 200 men, women and children, and set fire to the village). Another signboard read "*Deutsche Katyń*" (German Katyń). The signboards were made by the scouts themselves. Their authors were pursued by the German authorities because the execution of Polish officers by the Soviets which took place in Katyń had been propagandised by the Germans and was synonymous with cruelty, barbarism and violating all rules of warfare. Comparing Michniów to Katyń quite unambiguously emphasised the lawlessness and cruelty with which the Germans treated the Polish population. Several days after the pacification, Jolanta Franke, who was a nine year old child at the time, saw the following while passing through the village on her way from Wzdół to her family in Skarżysko: "... someone painted the word 'Katyń' on the welcome sign, at that time, I did not even know what that meant".

On 13 July 1943, Michniów ceased to exist. All houses and utility buildings were burnt down. The village's surviving inhabitants found shelter in the surrounding villages. On 15 July 1943, approval was issued to bury the dead. Most of the bodies were laid in a shared grave located on the school plot. Some families were buried close to their homes, and it was not until 1945 that they were moved to the shared grave.

Despite the tragic outcome and strict prohibition on returning, some of the village's residents chose to disregard German orders and came back to what was left of the village the day after the massacre. On 17

July 1943, Ignacy Wikło, a local man, encountered a gendarmerie patrol near the village of Krzyżka, which had been scouring the territory after an attack on a German train. When he saw the Germans, he began to run, but died from machine gun fire. On 16 August 1943, Stefania Materek was shot on the territory of Michniów. After the pacification, Jan Kowalik and Czesław Ciszek were sent to the camps. The two were put on a transport to Auschwitz on 2 October 1943, and were moved to Buchenwald three days later. Hipolit Krogulec was arrested in Warsaw on 5 July 1944. He was held in the Custody Suite on Kościuszki Street in Radom, from which he was sent to Auschwitz on 28 July 1944.

In August 1943, Franciszek Banaczkowski was captured in the fields surrounding Michniów after he had escaped off a transport headed to a forced labour camp. In September 1943, Kazimierz Żołądek and Zygmunt Wikło were arrested on the premises of the village. They were held in the Kielce prison, from which they were sent to Częstochowa after two days. Żołądek was able to escape off the transport. Until the end of the war, Zygmunt Wikło stayed in Berlin's Tempelhof camp. Several other inhabitants of the village were also captured around that time: Józef Karyś, Jan Materek, Ignacy Materek, Maksymilian Gruba, Bogusław Banaczkowski – they were all sent to perform compulsory labour. They were able to return to their home village after the war. In September 1944, the Germans organised roundups in the neighbouring villages. They also reached Michniów, and were extremely surprised to find people working there. The women and children were let off. However, Bolesław Biela, Karol

Sobocho and Kazimierz Żołądek were arrested (Żołądek for the second time). The latter, when saying goodbye to his wife, said: "Don't cry, Hanka, I'll be back soon". He kept his word, and escaped from the convoy in Suchedniów on the very same day. The other men returned from forced labour in the Reich in the autumn of 1945.

In the spring of 1944, some of the village's inhabitants began to work their fields. However, it was not until after the war that people really began to come back and rebuild. Approximately 140 people returned. Initially, they settled in dugouts and makeshift shacks. Kazimierz Żołądek, known for his inventiveness, claimed an abandoned gypsy cart as a temporary house for his family.

The new political regime in the People's Republic of Poland was not conducive to Michniów's quick rebuilding and development. The authorities would make no concessions for the devastated village. Those returning to Michniów were offered a different solution to rebuilding the ruins. The area of the village was planned to be forested, with only a monument to the fallen to remind us of the tragic fate of the village and its inhabitants. Those who survived could move near Jedlnia-Letnisko, to other abandoned villages or to the Recovered Territories in the west. The inhabitants of Michniów did not accept the offer. Against all adversity, they rebuilt their homes.

In 1949, SS-Brigadeführer Herbert Boetcher, commander of the SS and the police of Radom District and the person responsible for the entirety of the crimes committed in that area, was put on trial before the District Court in Radom. Witnesses to the pacification of Michniów also

testified in the trial. After listening to their testimonies, Judge Józef Nawachowicz asked H. Boetcher if, in his opinion, such actions could be called a military operation or combating guerrilla combatants. The response of the accused was short, "I would call it a crime". This declaration was neither an admission of guilt nor taking responsibility for the pacification of Michniów. The accused claimed that the first time he had heard of the massacre was in the courtroom in Radom.

According to an unequivocal penal law assessment, the actions of the German officials from 12 and 13 July 1943 were fully in violation of the law of war and the international legal regulations concerning the treatment of civilians during wartime and occupation. The entire pacification operation was targeted at the civilians living in the area and constituted unjustified repression. The ruthless killing of people, including women and children, as well as the burning of an entire village, unambiguously indicated the intention to eradicate the entire community for their nationality. Such actions meet the statutory definition of crime found in Article 123 Section 1 Point 4 of the Polish Penal Code and constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity as specified in Article 3 of the Act of 18.12.1998 on the Institute of National Remembrance - Commission for Prosecuting Crimes against the Polish Nation. There is no statute of limitations on such crimes, which is why prosecuting them is still possible and legally justified.

The tragedy of the pacification and the subsequent operations resulted in this very village becoming the symbol of the martyrdom of the Polish peasantry during World War II.

Ewa Kołomańska

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