

Institute of National Remembrance

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The investigation of the IPN's Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, Cracow Branch into the killings of Polish citizens on the Czechoslovak-Austrian and Czechoslovak-German border

The Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, Cracow Branch is conducting an investigation into the killings of Polish citizens who in the years 1949–1989, during their planned escape from Poland to Western Europe, attempted to cross the Czechoslovak-Austrian and Czechoslovak-German border.



STATEMENT

The graphic features the word "STATEMENT" in large, bold, black capital letters centered on a light gray background. Behind the text is a faint, large-scale watermark of the Polish coat of arms, which includes a crowned eagle with wings spread, holding a sword and a cross. The watermark also contains some partially visible letters like "POLSKA" and "NARODOWA" around the eagle.

The fugitives from Poland chose the route through the Czechoslovak-Austrian and Czechoslovak-German border, seeing it as an easier way to reach Western Europe in comparison with the closely guarded border between East and West Germany. This was, however, a misconception.

In the course of the investigation it was established that along this border the Czechoslovak Border Guard built three parallel rows of barbed wire stretched on wooden poles, the middle pole being connected to an electric voltage of 4,000 to 5,000 volts. There were no warning signs on the fence informing about the risk of being electrocuted in the event of touching the wires. The fact that the electric current flowed through the middle fence constituted a death trap. A person who easily crossed the first dam confirmed the belief that overcoming the next obstacle would not be a problem. Other security measures, such as a ploughed strip of land, on which footprints would be visible, minefields, and the presence of specially trained dogs and armed officers, were also taken.

The investigation revealed the shocking circumstances of the death of people attempting to cross this border, including the cases the Czechoslovak Border Guards finishing off through electric shock those fugitives who survived yet remained unconscious and hung on the barbed wire fence.

One of the aims of the investigation was to establish a full list of Polish citizens who were deprived of their lives while attempting to escape to Western Europe. This is a difficult task, because in the documents

drafted by the Czechoslovak Security Service, the names of Polish victims were often spelled incorrectly. In addition, the bodies of the refugees were cremated and buried in nameless graves. It should also be noted that the victims were mostly young people who did not start their families yet, whose relatives have in most cases already died, which further hindered establishing facts. Despite this, the Commission managed to determine personal data of 31 Poles who lost their lives while trying to escape to their dreamed better life in the West. The places where their ashes were buried at the cemeteries in Brno, České Budějovice and Bratislava were also determined.

At the current stage of the proceedings, complete evidence has been collected, and the investigation has entered the phase of examining the possibility of prosecuting those who are liable for the death of Polish citizens.

Wojciech Pardyak

Prosecutor

Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation,
Cracow Branch

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