

# FREED PRISONERS RETURN HOME

As has already been mentioned, some survivors who were in relatively good physical condition left the camp on their own immediately after liberation. They headed east, most frequently to Cracow, in small groups. Citizens of the Soviet Union, both men and women, were sent to a Red Army collection-transit point there from which some of them, after being examined and found fit for military service, were assigned to reserve regiments. The others went through interrogation at NKVD interrogation points and then were incrementally transported to the Soviet Union. Citizens of other countries only had to pass through the NKVD filtration points and obtain a certificate

that they had been in the camp, which enabled them to travel onwards. At this period, certificates confirming the fact of having been incarcerated in the camp were also issued by Polish administrative units in Cracow and Oświęcim, local *milicja* (police) posts, and the Polish Workers' Party committee in Oświęcim. Survivors who for one reason or another stayed on at the former camp or who were convalescing received certificates issued by the PCK and field hospitals at the site.

Former prisoners who found themselves in Cracow in the first weeks after liberation received aid from the Polish administration and charitable institu-

Photo 1

Cover of a souvenir book, bound in the cloth from a striped camp uniform, kept by Leokadia Szymańska. In KL Auschwitz under the name Ewa Sowińska, she was deported from Pawiak prison in Warsaw on May 13, 1943. Registered as number 44783. She lived to see liberation in Auschwitz. Shortly before liberation and for some time afterward, her fellow prisoners wrote souvenir entries in her book.



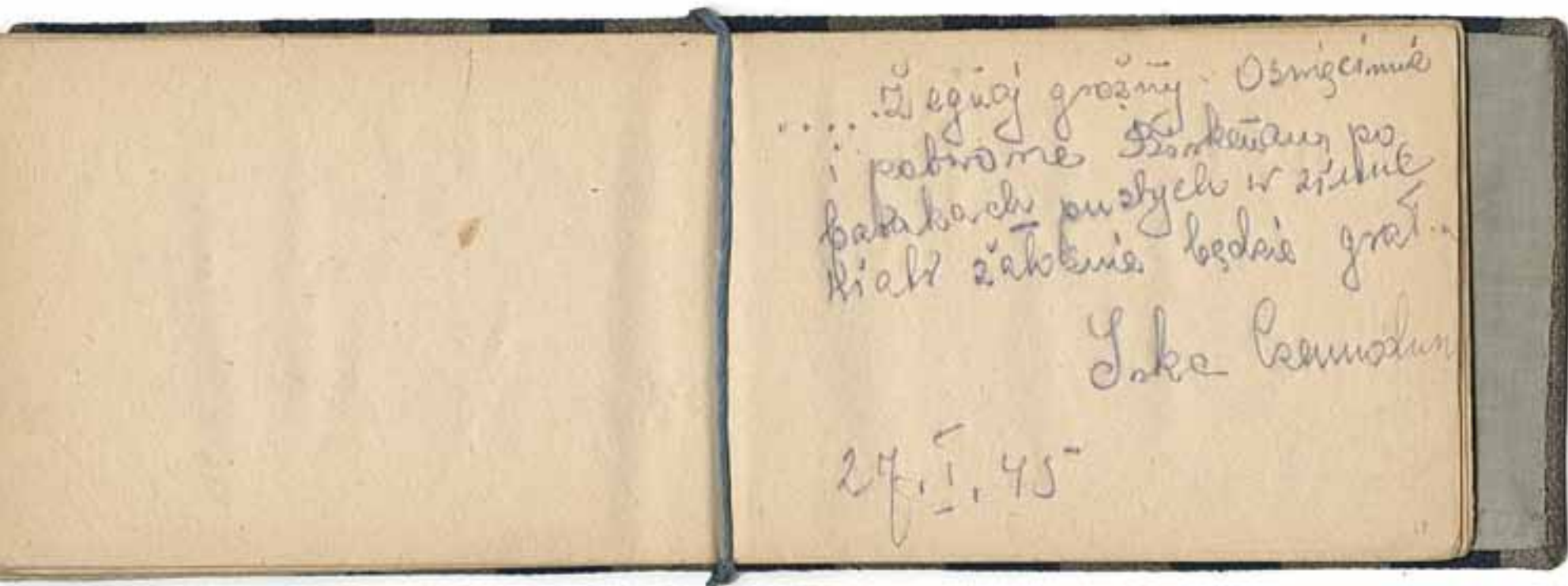
Photo 2

A page from Leokadia Szymańska's souvenir album with an entry made by her fellow prisoner Irka (surname illegible) on the day of liberation. It is a passage from a camp verse reading "Farewell terrible Auschwitz and monstrous Birkenau, the melancholy winter wind will whistle through your empty barracks . . ."

tions. They ran and financed field kitchens, medical posts, and lodging houses. The Soviet military command also organized aid. Some survivors who came from parts of Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary where hostilities had ended attempted to return home on their own as soon as they could. On the other hand, those who had been deported from western and southern Europe, because of the fighting still going on in central parts of

the continent, could not return to their own countries. They were sent to transit camps set up by the Soviet authorities in Katowice-Bogucice.

Over time, the majority of the survivors left the former Auschwitz camp in transports conducted by Soviet troops. Before departing, they usually received clothing, shoes, and linen, as well as several day's worth of dry provisions and



a small sum of money. Dozens of these transports took place from February to July. The destinations were various cities in Poland, as well as the camps in Katowice-Bogucice. In the spring, a group of former prisoners traveled by train from Katowice to Odessa, and from there, by sea, to Marseilles. In the summer and autumn more survivors were transported first to transit camps in Ukraine and Belarus, and then onward

to western Europe by way of Romania, Hungary, and Austria. Missions from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Romania, and Hungary also came to Oświęcim and took citizens of those countries home.

As previously noted, children left in the camp with no parents or relatives were taken to various care facilities in Cracow, Harbutowice near Cracow, Katowice, Rabka, Okęcie near Warsaw,

and elsewhere. Some of these children were later found by their families or taken in by Polish families and adopted; others remained in care homes until they came of age. There were also a dozen or more children taken home by residents of Oświęcim and nearby localities just before liberation or shortly afterward. Some later rejoined their relatives and others remained with their foster parents.

Photo 3

A group of women prisoners leaving the former Birkenau camp. The main gate is visible in the background.





Photo 4

Souvenir photo of former prisoners, taken shortly after liberation.