

- Shimon Rosenberg



It was the size of roughly two football fields and had 20 to 30 SS soldiers and around 80 Ukrainian guards; it was in existence for only 14 months, and the Nazis tried to destroy any trace of its existence. Yet Treblinka was the place where some 875,000 Jews were systematically murdered during the Holocaust. Only a handful succeeded in escaping, and Reb Yudel "Eddie" Weinstein was one of them. *Zman* was fortunate to have the privilege of interviewing Weinstein, the last US survivor of Treblinka, weeks before his passing at the age of 85. This is his story of miraculous survival, escape, and his life's mission to testify about the atrocities of Treblinka to the world.

Exclusive Zman Interview

# Treblinka: The Last Witness



**T**reblinka. The name alone sends chills down the spine, even 70 years later.

Nearly one million Jews arrived at this death camp in Poland, most with no knowledge of what awaited them. Treblinka was said to be a transit camp where Jews were temporarily held until they could be sent to a destination elsewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Today, we know that Treblinka was itself the final destination. The camp existed for the sole purpose of exterminating Jews. There were no barracks, because they did not remain there overnight. There was no slave labor; no dying from the combination of disease, heavy work and slow starvation, as in labor camps. The inmates in Treblinka lasted only about as long as it took to climb down from the train and walk the short distance to the gas chambers.

Treblinka stands second only to the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau complex in terms of the number of deaths that took place there. Sadly, the Nazis succeeded in Treblinka where they failed at Auschwitz: they were able to destroy virtually all traces of the extermination camp. As a result, they nearly succeeded in hiding forever the very existence of this camp representing evil incarnate.

Fortunately, *hashgachah* saw to it that a few witnesses survived. One of them was a teenage boy, Yehuda Yaakov (“Yudel”) Weinstein.

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For three days, 17-year-old Yudel plodded along non-stop on the march. The guards beat and kicked their victims without any provocation throughout the exhausting journey. Every few minutes another person fell to the ground, unable to continue under such terrible hunger, thirst pain and exhaustion. Every few minutes a scream pierced the air as another Jew was shot or beaten death.

The survivors of the harrowing march finally boarded the train that was to

take them on the rest of their trip to their unknown destination. However, the end of the march brought no relief. The teenager spent four hours crammed into a cattle car, and still not a drop of water to relieve his parched lips.

At last, the clatter of the train over the tracks was stilled. They were here at last... at Treblinka.

The few who survived the unabated travails of their impossible journey now faced the final stage of the hell the Nazis had prepared for them: death by gassing.

Weinstein dragged himself out of the cattle car and inhaled the fresh air. What a luxury! And then he saw that they were doling out... water! With his last ounce of strength he joined the line of exhausted Jews waiting for their tiny ration.

The Nazi who supervised the rationing looked over the line of Jews, more dead than alive. As his glance fell on the teenage boy an idea came into his sadistic mind. He pulled out his pistol and began firing wildly, all the while laughing uproariously. The Jews on the line scattered in all directions to escape the hail of bullets.

Unfortunately, not everyone succeeded. One of the bullets pierced Weinstein’s chest. The boy fell to the ground in a pool of blood. The pain was so excruciating that he completely forgot his terrible hunger and thirst.

“Please G-d,” he prayed, “help me!”

## Treblinka

Today, we know that Treblinka was one of three extermination camps – along with Belżec and Sobibór—built as part of Operation Reinhard, whose express purpose was to kill Jews. Although more Jews were murdered at Auschwitz, Treblinka even surpasses it in a way because it was a place dedicated exclusively to murder. In Auschwitz, a percentage of the inmates – about 80,000 at any given time—were kept alive for slave labor or slow death by disease, beating, work and starvation. In Treblinka, only a very small group of inmates were



Zman interviews Reb Yudel Weinstein, one of the last survivors of Treblinka.

kept alive. Their purpose was clearing out the train cars, sorting the clothing of the murdered and finally dragging the corpses from the gas chambers to the mass graves for disposal.

Treblinka remained in operation more than a year, from July 23, 1942 until October 19, 1943. It took its name from a nearby hamlet, 52 miles northeast of Warsaw. The site was chosen by the Nazis because it was strategically located near the large train station at the town of Malkinia Gorna. This central station had direct lines to Warsaw, Bialystok and Lublin, all of them major cities with large Jewish populations. This made the logistics of transporting hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews to their deaths significantly easier.

The Nazis employed their evil genius to camouflage the true nature of the camp. Not only did the world at large fail to guess what went on there, but most of the arrivals themselves had no inkling of the fate awaiting them. A train station was erected outside the camp, including regular railroad signs, to create the impression that this was

just another stop. On the buildings – inside of which the clothes and belongings of the victims were stored for transport back to Germany—the Nazis hung signs such as “ticket office,” “restaurant,” “telegraph” etc. They even hung a train schedule posting the arrival and departure times of supposed lines to Grodno, Suwalki, Vienna and Berlin! The deception was complete.

## The Last Survivor

Yehuda Yaakov Weinstein passed away in the summer of 2010 at the age of 85. Just weeks before his passing, he granted *Zman* an interview in which he shared with us his astonishing story and the miracles that allowed him to escape death.

When we arrived at the Queens address, we were welcomed in by a refined elderly gentleman. We opened the interview by commenting that we were honored to personally speak with a hero, the last living witness to one of the greatest crimes in history. Weinstein played down his role, saying, “I am not a hero. I am a regular Jew.”



Train station constructed by the Nazis to give Treblinka the appearance of a transit camp.



Sign at the Treblinka station.