

= Sajmište concentration camp =

The Sajmište concentration camp (pronounced [sâjmišt?]) was a Nazi concentration and extermination camp during World War II . It was located at the former Belgrade fairground site near the town of Zemun , in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) . The camp was organized and operated by SS Einsatzgruppen units stationed in occupied Serbia . It became operational in September 1941 and was officially opened on 28 October of that year . The Germans dubbed it the Jewish camp in Zemun (German : Judenlager Semlin) . At the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942 , thousands of Jewish women , children and old men were brought to the camp , along with 500 Jewish men and 292 Romani women and children , most of whom were from the Serbian towns of Niš , Smederevo and Šabac . Women and children were placed in makeshift barracks and suffered during numerous influenza epidemics . Kept in squalid conditions , they were provided with inadequate amounts of food and many froze to death during the winter of 1941 - 42 . Between March and May 1942 , the Germans used a gas van sent from Berlin to kill thousands of Jewish inmates .

With the gassings complete , it was renamed Zemun concentration camp (German : Anhaltelager Semlin) and served to hold one last group of Jews who were arrested upon the surrender of Italy in September 1943 . During this time it also held captured Yugoslav Partisans , Chetniks , sympathizers of the Greek and Albanian resistance movements , and Serb peasants from villages in other parts of the NDH . An estimated 32 @, @ 000 prisoners (mostly Serbs) passed through the camp during this period , 10 @, @ 600 of whom were killed or died due to hunger and disease . Conditions in Sajmište were so poor that some began comparing it to Jasenovac and other large concentration camps throughout Europe . In 1943 and 1944 , evidence of atrocities committed in the camp was destroyed by the units of SS @-@ Standartenführer Paul Blobel , and thousands of corpses were exhumed from mass graves and incinerated . In May 1944 , the Germans transferred control of the camp over to the NDH , and it was closed that July . Estimates of the number of deaths at Sajmište range from 20 @, @ 000 to 23 @, @ 000 , with the number of Jewish deaths estimated at 7 @, @ 000 to 10 @, @ 000 . It is thought that half of all Serbian Jews perished at the camp .

Most of the Germans responsible for the operation of the camp were captured and brought to trial . Several were extradited to Yugoslavia and executed . Camp commander Herbert Andorfer and his deputy Edgar Enge were arrested in the 1960s after many years of hiding . Both were given short prison sentences in West Germany and Austria , respectively , though Enge never served any time given his old age and poor health .

= = Background = =

The site that became the Sajmište concentration camp during World War II had originally been an exhibition centre built by the Belgrade municipality in 1937 in an attempt to attract international commerce to the city . The centre 's modernist pavilions featured elaborate displays of industrial progress and design from European countries , including Germany . Its architectural centerpiece was a large tower which was used by Philips to transmit the earliest television broadcasts in Europe . Much of the centre stood empty and unused until the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941 . The country was dismembered following the invasion , with Serbia being reduced to its pre @-@ 1912 borders and placed under a government of German military occupation . Milan Nedić , a pre @-@ war politician who was known to have pro @-@ Axis leanings , was then selected by the Germans to lead the collaborationist Government of National Salvation in the Territory of the Military Commander in Serbia . The civilian administration in the country was headed by SS @-@ Gruppenführer Harald Turner , who commanded the Einsatzgruppen Serbien . Originally led by SS @-@ Standartenführer Wilhelm Fuchs , and later by SS @-@ Gruppenführer August Meyszner with SS @-@ Standartenführer Emanuel Schäfer as his deputy , the group was responsible for ensuring internal security , fighting opponents of the occupation , and dealing with Jews .

Meanwhile , the extreme Croat nationalist and fascist Ante Pavelić , who had been in exile in Benito

Mussolini 's Italy , was appointed Poglavnik (" leader ") of an Ustaše led Croatian state ? the Independent State of Croatia (often called the NDH , from the Croatian : Nezavisna Država Hrvatska) . The NDH combined almost all of modern day Croatia , all of modern day Bosnia and Herzegovina and parts of modern day Serbia into an " Italian German quasi protectorate . " NDH authorities , led by the Ustaše militia , subsequently implemented genocidal policies against the Serb , Jewish and Romani populations living within the borders of the new state . The territory of the former Belgrade municipality was divided between occupied Serbia and the NDH . Zemun , the area where the Sajmište fairgrounds were located , came under Croatian control . The occupation of Zemun would last until late 1944 , and saw the Ustaše relentlessly persecute the district 's non Croat population , especially Serbs , Jews and Romanis . By the end of the war , more than one quarter of the municipality 's pre war population of 65 ,000 had perished .

A large scale uprising erupted in Serbia following the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 . Although they took no part in the rebellion , Jews were targeted for retaliatory execution by the Germans . The Germans soon implemented a number of anti Jewish laws , and by the end of August 1941 , all Serbian Jewish males were interned in concentration camps , primarily at Topovske šupe in Belgrade .

= = History = =

= = = Establishment = = =

In the fall of 1941 , Turner ordered that all Jewish women and children in Serbia be concentrated in a camp . At first the Germans considered creating a ghetto for the Jews in the Gypsy quarter of Belgrade , but this idea was quickly dismissed due to the area being considered " too filthy and unhygienic . " When several other plans to intern the Jewish and Romani populations of Belgrade failed , a concentration camp was established on a peninsula surrounded on three sides by the Sava river , and located in full view of Belgrade 's central Terazije Square . The camp was positioned in a manner which made escape almost impossible . It was located near administrative and police centres , as well as the Belgrade central railway station , which allowed for the efficient transport of Jews to the camp from the many towns in the region . Its purpose was to detain Jewish women and children that the Germans claimed " endangered " public safety and the Wehrmacht .

The Germans dubbed Sajmište the " Jewish camp in Zemun " (German : Judenlager Semlin) . The camp was intended to hold as many as 500 ,000 people captured from rebels areas across occupied Yugoslavia . The name " Semlin " was derived from the German word for the former Austro Hungarian frontier town of Zemun , where the camp was located . Despite being located on the territory of the NDH , it was controlled by the German military police apparatus in occupied Serbia . NDH authorities did not object to its establishment and told the Germans that it could be located on NDH territory as long as its guards were German rather than Serb . Soon after the camp was established , SS Scharführer Edgar Enge of the Belgrade Gestapo became its commander . Initially , the campgrounds held about 500 male Jewish inmates who were given the task of running the camp 's so called " self administration " and were made responsible for distributing food , dividing up labour , and organizing a Jewish guard force which patrolled along the camp . The exterior of the camp , however , was guarded on a rotation basis by twenty five members of Reserve Police Battalion 64 . By October , all male Jewish inmates and most male Romani inmates were killed . Most were executed in four major waves , with frequent killings occurring in mid September and between 9 and 11 October . On each occasion , inmates were told that they were being transported to a camp in Austria with better labour conditions but were instead taken to Jabuka in the Banat or to a firing range on the outskirts of Belgrade , where they were killed . Sajmište officially opened on a wider scale on 28 October 1941 . The last of the initial male Jewish inmates were killed on 11 November .

= = = Judenlager Semlin = = =

At the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942 , approximately 7 @, @ 000 Jewish women , children and old men were brought to the camp , along with a further 500 Jewish men and 292 Romani women and children . Most of these people were from the outlying Serbian towns , primarily Ni? , Smederevo and ?abac . Women and children were placed in makeshift barracks that were barely heated , and whose windows were shattered due to German bombing raids carried out during the invasion of Yugoslavia . Originally constructed as fair pavilions , the largest of these barracks held up to 5 @, @ 000 prisoners . Inmates suffered during numerous influenza epidemics , slept on wet straw or bare floorboards , and were provided with inadequate amounts of food . Starvation was widespread , and Jewish inmates appealed unsuccessfully to Serbian authorities for more food to be provided to the camp . Consequently , a high number of detainees , especially children , died in late 1941 and early 1942 , with many inmates freezing to death in one of the coldest winters on record . The Romani inmates were kept in far more miserable conditions than their Jewish counterparts . They also slept on straw in an unheated hall , but were kept separate from non @-@ Romani prisoners . The majority of Romani inmates were released after six weeks of detention . Most Jewish inmates remained detained , with the exception of ten Jewish women who were married to Christian men .

In January 1942 , SS @-@ Untersturmführer Herbert Andorfer was appointed to replace the inexperienced Enge as commander of the camp . Enge was subsequently made Andorfer 's deputy . That month , German military authorities demanded the camp be cleared of Jews in order to accommodate the growing number of captives taken in battles with the Partisans . By February the camp held about 6 @, @ 500 inmates , ten percent of whom were Romani . In early March , Andorfer was informed that a gas van had been sent to the camp from Berlin . The Sauer van had been delivered upon the request of the German military administration chief in Serbia , Harald Turner . Stricken with guilt over having to play a central role in the murder of the Jewish inmates , some of whom he had developed good relations with , Andorfer requested a transfer ; this was denied . In order to ensure the quickness and efficiency of the gassings , he made announcements intended to convince the prisoners that they were going to be transferred to another , better @-@ equipped camp . He went so far as to post fictitious camp regulations , and announced that prisoners would be allowed to take their bags with them . Many detainees registered for the supposed transfer , hoping to escape the camp 's terrible living conditions . Inmates who had volunteered to leave the previous evening climbed into the van the next day in groups of between 50 and 80 . The drivers of the van , SS @-@ Scharführers Meier and Götz , distributed candy to children in order to win their affection . Afterwards , the doors of the van were sealed shut . The van then followed a small car driven by Andorfer and Enge , before crossing the border into German @-@ occupied Serbia . It was here that one of the drivers exited the van and crawled underneath it , diverting its exhaust into the interior of the vehicle and killing the inmates with carbon monoxide gas . The van was then taken to the Avala firing range , where corpses were dumped into mass graves freshly dug by Serbian and Romani prisoners . Such gassings became routine , and the gas van arrived every day except Sunday . Rumours quickly circulated about the gassings , with news reaching German troops stationed in Belgrade and even some Serbians . Consequently , the gas van was nicknamed the " soul killer " (Serbian : du?egupka) by the Serb population exposed to these rumours . It is thought that the gassings took the lives of as many as 8 @, @ 000 inmates , mostly women and children . The seven Serbian prisoners that had participated in unloading the murdered inmates from the van were shot after the gassings stopped , but the gravedigger , a Serb named Vladimir Milutinovi? , survived . " Eighty @-@ one or eighty @-@ two trenches were prepared and I helped dig all of them , " he recalled . " At least 100 people [fit] into each trench [...] These ones were only for those suffocated in the truck . We dug a different set for those who were shot . "

Few inmates remained in the camp after the gassings stopped , mostly non @-@ Jewish women who had been married to Jews . They were released several days later , after being sworn to secrecy . Apart from Sajmi?te inmates , the 500 patients and staff of the Belgrade Jewish Hospital ,

as well as Jewish prisoners from the nearby Banjica concentration camp , were also killed in the gas van . The last Jewish prisoner in Sajmište was killed on 8 May 1942 , and the gas van used at the camp was returned to Berlin on 9 June 1942 . It received a technical upgrade there , and was then transferred to Belarus where it was used to gas Jews in Minsk . Shortly after leading the extermination of the Jewish inmates in Sajmište , Andorfer and Enge were assigned different Security Police roles . Andorfer later received an Iron Cross 2nd Class for running the camp , and won a promotion .

= = = Anhaltelager Semlin = = =

With the extermination of the original Jewish inmates completed , the camp was renamed Zemun concentration camp (German : Anhaltelager Semlin) and served to hold one last group of Jews who were arrested upon the surrender of Italy in September 1943 . It also held captured Yugoslav Partisans , Chetniks , sympathizers of the Greek and Albanian resistance movements , and Serb peasants from villages in the Croatian Ustaše controlled regions of Srem and Kozara , where they had been detained in the Jasenovac concentration camp . During this period , Montenegrin separatist leader Sekula Drljević became the camp 's administrator . Conditions deteriorated to such an extent that some began comparing it to Jasenovac and other large concentration camps throughout Europe . The camp became the main transit point for Yugoslav prisoners and detainees on their way to labour locations and concentration camps in Germany . An estimated 32 ,000 mostly Serb prisoners passed through Sajmište during this period , 10 ,000 of whom were killed or died due to hunger and disease .

Alarmed by the fact that the campgrounds could easily be seen from across the Sava , in late 1943 , the new German ambassador to Serbia proposed that the camp be moved deeper into NDH territory , because its " [continuing existence] before the eyes of the people of Belgrade was politically intolerable for reasons of public feeling . " His requests were ignored by German authorities . By the end of 1943 , the Germans made an effort to erase all traces of the atrocities committed in the camp by burning records , incinerating corpses , and destroying other pieces of evidence . This task was undertaken by SS Standartenführer Paul Blobel , who arrived in Belgrade in November 1943 . Upon arrival , he ordered the head of the local Gestapo , SS Sturmbannführer Bruno Sattler , to form a special detachment that was to be responsible for the exhumation and burning of bodies . The detachment was led by Lieutenant Erich Grunwald , and composed of ten security policemen and 48 military policemen . The digging battalions were composed of 100 Serbian and Jewish prisoners . Exhumations occurred from December 1943 to April 1944 , and thousands of bodies were burned . All of the prisoners who were present during the exhumations were shot , except for three Serbs who managed to escape . Allied aircraft bombed Sajmište in April 1944 , killing many inmates and inflicting heavy damage on the camp itself . On 17 May 1944 , the Germans transferred control of the camp over to the NDH . The camp was closed that July .

= = Aftermath and legacy = =

After the war , Yugoslavia 's new communist government announced that Sajmište had held a total of 100 ,000 prisoners during the war , half of whom were killed . The Yugoslav State War Crimes Commission later estimated that as many as 40 ,000 may have been killed in the camp , including 7 ,000 Jews . According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia , the overall death toll was greatly exaggerated by the communists for political purposes , and the real number of inmates was about 50 ,000 , with 20 ,000 killed . It is estimated that half of all Serbian Jews were killed at Sajmište . The Staro Sajmište memorial estimates that 23 ,000 people perished in the camp , of whom 10 ,000 were Jews .

Most of the Germans who were responsible for the operation of the camp were captured and brought to trial . Many of those who had been prominent German officials during the occupation of Serbia , including Turner , Fuchs and Meyszner , were extradited to Yugoslavia by the Allies after

the war , where they were executed . Camp commander Andorfer managed to escape with the assistance of the Roman Catholic Church , which helped him flee to South America . He returned to Austria from Venezuela in the 1960s , and was subsequently apprehended and tried on the minor charge of being an accessory to murder ? for which he was sentenced to two @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half years imprisonment . Andorfer 's deputy , Enge , was apprehended in the 1960s , and sentenced to one @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half years imprisonment . His sentence was never carried out due to his old age and poor health . German guards suspected of executing Serbian prisoners were never tried , although they served as witnesses in several trials in West Germany .

Belgrade Jews murdered during the Holocaust , including those at Sajmi?te , were not commemorated by Yugoslavia 's post @-@ war Communist government until thirty years after the events . Croatian author Anto Kne?evi? caused considerable controversy in May 1993 when he suggested that Serbs , not Germans , had been responsible for running the camp . This claim was vehemently denied by Jewish historians and Belgrade 's Jewish community . At present , the old Sajmi?te fairgrounds are marked by small plaques and a monument to commemorate those detained or killed in the camp . The plaques were dedicated in 1974 and 1984 , respectively . In 1987 , the Sajmi?te fairgrounds were granted cultural landmark status by the government of Yugoslavia . A monument , 10 m (33 ft) high and created by the artist Miodrag Popovi? , was erected on the banks of the Sava in 1995 . No memorial centres or museums have ever been built on the former campgrounds . Today , the area where the camp was located is used as a state @-@ run facility housing low @-@ income residents of Belgrade . As of February 2013 , an estimated 2 @, @ 500 people live on the grounds of the former camp .