

# **The Role of the Jewish Women in the 1944 Sonderkommando Uprising in Birkenau**

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## **Abstract**

On January 5th 1945, four Jewish women prisoners were executed by hanging in Auschwitz. They were charged with stealing gunpowder from the 'Union' munitions factory, where they were force-labored, and smuggling it to the prisoners of the Sonderkommando at the nearby camp of Birkenau, who mutinied three months earlier, on October 7th 1944, in an attempt to escape from the camp.

The uprising of the Sonderkommando may be likened to the tip of an iceberg, where much is obscured under water. This research attempts to delve into the details below the surface, both during the period preceding the uprising and the period following it: On the one hand it traces the preceding events: the establishment and execution of the gunpowder smuggling activity and reevaluates them, and on the other hand it delineates the German investigation that followed the uprising, which led to the imprisonment of the four Jewish women and to their execution - all while evaluating multiple testimonies and documents, some of which have not yet been subjected to research.

This research yields several main results. First, contrary to common knowledge, according to which, the four women who alone were involved in the smuggling were apprehended and executed, it turns out that no less than thirty Jewish women prisoners participated in the gunpowder smuggling, which was an extensive operation, carried out in secrecy during a period of about seven months.

Regarding the uprising itself, this research refutes the common knowledge that the smuggled gunpowder was used to blow up one of the four crematoria. Rather, it turns out that the crematorium was indeed set on fire and burnt down, however, the hand-grenades that were made out of the smuggled gunpowder were never used, and therefore their potential did not materialize. Thus, the great effort, risk and courage associated with the smuggling - were all in vein.

Regarding the investigation that followed the uprising, this research reexamines two distinct narratives concerning the circumstances that led to the arrest of the four women. It determines that both are valid, do not contradict each other, rather, they complement one another: the betrayal of one of the smugglers by a Jewish prisoner attempting to avoid punishment, prompted the activation of a secret agent against this smuggler, thereby leading to her incrimination.

Perhaps the most important finding is the uncovering of the reason for which the four women were accused of smuggling gunpowder and the determination of the goal behind their execution by hanging in publicly held ceremonies. Contrary to common wisdom, this was not due to the fact that a crematorium was blown up – allegedly with gunpowder that

was smuggled by these women. It turns out that camp authorities chose to regard the proven smuggling from the factory as an act of sabotage that damaged the production process. These women therefore paid with their lives for the widespread acts of sabotage that were commonplace at the 'Union' factory, and which had a detrimental effect on both the rate of production and its quality - acts of sabotage that camp authorities have failed to uncover and prevent. Therefore, the four women were hanged in order to terrorize the laborers at the 'Union', so as to prevent any further acts of sabotage in the factory, and at the same time to demonstrate to the higher echelons of the SS and the army that they are determined to put an end to sabotage once and for all.