

Burials from Boreczno – an episode of the January Offensive in the past East Prussia

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Abstract: *During the excavations on the post-mediaeval manor house on a mound in Boreczno (Zalewo community, Warmian-Mazurian voivodeship) two burial pits were found with burials dated back to the 2nd World War. In one of them an older man was buried, in the other – two women and a younger man. All of them were killed during the January offensive, probably on the 22nd of January 1945 or a bit later. The older man was killed by shrapnel, the rest of them were shot by the Red Army soldiers.*

The flash January offensive enabled many inhabitants of East Prussia to evacuate to the Reich. First-line troops quickly reached Elbląg and Tolkmicko, often bypassing longer defending points of resistance, and second-line units seized them, often carrying out several murders on civilians. The evacuation of parts of the German and indigenous populations and the subsequent resettlements have left the fate of many missing civilians in the last months of the Second World War unknown and the found graves of the civilian population are impersonal.

Keywords: Archaeology – January offensive – East Prussia – the Red Army – civilian population

From many years archaeology of battlefields becomes more popular. Battlefields from the past periods were investigated as well as these of the 19th – 20th-century conflicts. Some years ago archaeologists began to excavate mass graves and death camps and archeology of martyrology became a fact. In these cases a subject of interests is a fate of civilians, like in the case of searching for the victims of the Wołyń massacre graves as well as investigation of the Nazi's death camps in Bełżec and Sobibór. Civilians which have been involved in a war but not tied up with a precise battlefield.

Researches on civilians' fate during military conflicts are rather difficult for archaeologists. Often there is a lack of written sources that are useful in courses of battles and soldiers' fate reconstruction (tactical plans, orders, dispatches and reports). Human memory is unreliable and witnesses relations often are not coherent as well as impossible to verify. Most often civilian graves are found accidentally, by the way of earthworks or other archaeological excavations.

During the excavation of the post-mediaeval manor house at Boreczno (Schnellwalde), community Zalewo, Warmian – Mazurian Voivodship, the burials of four persons were uncovered¹. The manor house was built on the top of the low hill and it was probably damaged during the January Offensive fights in January 1945 and finally it was collapsed in 1947. Relics of the manor house as well as outbuildings north of it were dismantled. Now the area serves as a pasture (Fig. 1).

On 10th of August 2012, during the explorations of the F trench in the western slope of the hill, more or less halfway down, to a depth of ca. 30 cm a human skeleton was uncovered (burial S.1, Fig. 2). Local police decided not to carry the investigation and referred the skeleton to archeologists. The skeleton

¹ Excavations in Boreczno, see: Żurek 2013: 385–411; also Żurek 2021: 23–88. About the burials accidentally found during the excavations and Polish legal procedures, see: Żurek 2018.



Fig. 1. Boreczno, the hill with the manor ruins. View from the west. Photo M. Żurek



Fig. 2. Boreczno, the skeleton of the old man. Photo K. Zdeb

Fig. 3 Boreczno, the skeleton of the old man with shrapnels. Photo K. Zdeb



was swept, documented and explored. Deceased lay on the left flank. A button was found with him. The condition of the bones (connated alveoli, cranial seams, and vertebrae) indicates that it was a male of more than 60 years old, stoop-shouldered. Within vertebrae and ribs as well as close to the humerus and the tibia shrapnels were found. It indicates that deceased man was one of the II World War victims.

A few days later, 13th of August 2012, when we were scraping of the pit of the grave, another burial pit was uncovered, with three skeletons in it (S.2–S.4, Fig. 3). This mass grave was situated west a bit from the above-mentioned single burial. The skeletons were swept, documented and explored too. In the grave pit were placed:

- The skeleton S.2, of a rather young woman, gracile, laid on the abdomen, on the left arm of the S.3 skeleton, face pointing to the left, right leg straight, left-angled, left arm along the body, inserted under the flank, the right one on the chest of the S.4. Close to the pelvis a fragment of a bullet was found. Lack of traces of clothes.
- The skeleton S.3, of a rather young woman, on the abdomen, right hand on the S.4 pelvis, left hand away from the body, legs slightly bent in the knees. In the vertebrae, under the right scapula a fragment of a bullet was found. The deceased woman was dressed in a woolen dark two-button blouse or dress (traces of buttons are preserved as well as dark traces around the wrists and the chest), a bra (a peg was found) and short wellington boots with button at the side, size 7 ½, made in Hamburg.
- The skeleton S.4, of a rather young man, laid on the back, lies on the back, the hands are loosely laid along the body, the legs are straight. Close to the legs a machine gun shell casing (of Mossin?) and two shrapnels were found. The deceased man was dressed in a jacket with a strap with a metal buckle (a buckle and two buttons on the post found at the breastbone and the pelvis). Lack of shoes.

The condition of teeth, cranial seams and bones indicate that the skeletons S.2–S.4 were of the age of 25–40 years, without visible degenerative lesions.

Deceased persons were buried in two shallow pits – the old man in one of them, two woman and a younger man in the other. The burials were unoriented, without the features of a funeral rite. It seems to the author that victims, although they were buried close to each other, they have not died at the same time. The single burial might be organized a bit later, when it was clear that the late manor house had been abandoned.

Excavations and documentation was rather difficult, because for the sake of interests of village inhabitants and the lack of possibility of the site protection, a triple burial should be documented and explored within one day. The work was completed after dusk.

The layout of the skeletons allowed us to understand the burials succession:

- S.4 – the man was dropped first, he fell on his back, with his arms loosely laid along the body, and legs straight;
- S.3 – the woman was dropped as the second, she fell down, with her right arm on the S.4 pelvis, left arm away from the body, legs slightly bent in the knees;
- S.2 – the woman standing for the cut felt on the abdomen, on the left arm of the S.3 skeleton, face pointing to the left, right leg straight, left bend, left arm along the body, inserted under the flank, the right arm on the chest of the S.4 skeleton.

Deceased people were buried in two shallow, irregular pits without a funeral rite. Objects found in pits as well as shrapnels and bullets identified them as civil victims of the Red Army January Offensive, died 22nd of January 1945 or a bit later. A fact that three of them were buried in one pit in front of the manor house may indicate that they were came from this farmhouse, murdered by the Soviet soldiers. The older man died accidentally at the same time. It is difficult to say why all these victims were not buried in the local cemetery around the church, 200 meters south of the manor house. The graves had all the qualities of hasty burials – shallow pits are dug at the place of execution, or just a short distance from the place of death, without the features of a funeral. Burial environment – clay gathered in prism during the manor house construction – has caused the bones to be in good condition, even though they have not been in depth.

The skeletons were crated in carton boxes and handed over to the municipality of Zalewo office. They were buried at 20th of August 2012 at the cemetery of Zalewo with all their belongings.

In 1807–1945, the old manor house, in front of which an execution was carried, became a farm manager house. Probably he lived here, perhaps with his family. There is no information about forced laborers in the manor of Boreczno (pass Schnellwalde). As they dwelt in other farms in the vicinity, probably forced workers were at Boreczno manor too. Deceased persons were probably the farm manager family or forced laborers.

Rather precise setting a date for execution is possible thanks to historians' findings regarding the course of the offensive on the 2nd Belorussian Front and its share, the so-called Mława/Elbląg-based operation². The operation lasted from 14th to 26th of January 1945 (Fig. 4). It was initiated by the attack of Soviet troops from the river mouth of Narew to Wisła toward the north. Its aim was an accessing to the Gdańsk Bay as quickly as possible to cut German army in Bydgoszcz vicinity off the supply which it could obtain might by provided by sea or from the German forces cut off in the Kurland region. The group of rapid-attack troops consisted of the 5th Guard's Armored Army as well as the 2nd Army and the 48th Army following it. Although tanks operated in the field with a large number of lakes, mud, and peatlands, the extremely cold winter allowed them to move smoothly in difficult terrain. More than 400 km, of which 300 km during combat operations, were spent in 12 days. The defense positions in the direction from Nidzica (Neidenburg) and Działdowo (Soldau) to Elbląg (Elbing) were prepared in three lines, the last one running from Pisz (Johannisburg), through Olsztyn (Allenstein), Ostróda (Osterode), Miłomłyn (Liebemühl) to Malbork (Marienburg). German forces has secured approaches to cities that were road hubs and rail networks with anti-tank chicanes and trenches and constructed caltrops on roads and passes between lakes. Some of the houses were also adapted to defend themselves with designated shooting ranges. The Russians recognized the towns: Przasnysz, Ciechanów, Grudusk, Napierki, Nidzica, Działdowo, Dąbrówno (Gilgenburg), Lubawa (Löbau), Ostróda, Iława (Deutsch Eylau), Stębark (Tannenberg), Miłomłyn, Zalewo (Saalfeld), Morąg (Mohrungen), Pasłęk (Preussisch Holland), Młynary (Mühlhausen), Tolkemicko (Tolkemit) and Elbląg as important points of resistance, although not all of them had the status of cities and not in all of them were located German garnizons. Some of them had only a communication role, such as Grudusk, or propaganda, such as Stębark, close to the battlefields of Grunwald in 1410 and Tannenberg in 1914, which was won with the assistance of military correspondents.

² Relation of Mława-Elbląg-based operation, see: Gliniecki 2019: 543–557.



Fig. 4 Boreczno, the skeletons of two women and the man. Photo M. Žurek

The offensive progressed in a flash. On the morning, 22nd of January, the order was issued that the 5th Guard's Armored Army, after the capture of Ostróda and Iława regions, went north, seized the border Morąg – Zalewo (ca. 40 km) in one day and till the morning, 24th of January Soviet forces should capture the border Elbląg – Pasłęk – Młynary (ca. 50 km). The listed military units were to take the indicated towns. The order of the Zalewo capture was given to the 29th Armored Company, which besieged Iława at that time. At 1.30 p.m., 22th of January 1945, the 31th Armored Brigade, a part of it, started to the north. By the way it smashed a ca. 50 German cars troop going for help for Iława and by Majdan Wielki (Gross Altenhagen) a defense line fixed with a scanty Volkssturm troop was passed. At 7.00 p.m., the 31th Armored Brigade entered to Zalewo from the Małdyty (Maldeuten) and Półwieś (Ebenau) directions. The same day, after Iława capturing, the 25th Armored Brigade, the 32nd Armored Brigade, 53rd Motorized Riflemen Brigade and 47th Mechanized Brigade started to Zalewo. The 47th Brigade captured Miłomłyn after the short fights, left one battalion here and moved toward Małdyty. 24th of January Soviet forces reached Elbląg but the city was defended longer. At that time another troops seized Morąg and Młynary and reached Tolkmicko.

The approaching Eastern Front to East Prussia has resulted in some of the inhabitants being sent back members of their families, mainly children, to families living in West Pomerania or behind Odra river³. However, this was the only signal that the civilian population was trying to protect themselves against the Soviet attack. From witnesses' reports it is known that, just a few days before the Red Army takes up the city, inhabitants of Zalewo town (Saalfeld) were not prepared for evacuation. Although small groups of refugees passed through the town – Zalewo was located on the Ostróda railway route, located before of the railway hub in Myślice (Miswalde) and on the road from Ostróda to Pasłęk and Elbląg, as well as to Dzierżoń (Christburg), Malbork and Tczew (Dirschau) – there were lessons at school in 19.01.1945 and shops were open day later. In the town small groups of German soldiers appeared, most of all transports of injured and schoolboys from the Zalewo middle school – local Volkssturm – after lessons, they had dug anti-tank trenches on the outskirts of Miłomłyn and Ostróda, as well as hacked ice off on the Ewingi lake and fixed stakes to prevent them from landing with transport aircraft⁴. In manors in the vicinity of Zalewo many forced laborers from different countries dwelt at that time⁵. Only 21st of January 1945 the evacuation order was issued about 6.00 p.m. The train with the evacuees started at 10.00 22.01.1945 and was able to cross the Vistula river. Those who tried to get out of the town on the roads were slow because of the crowd.

Nine tanks from the 32nd Armored Brigade, under the command of Captain Giennadij Diaczenko, reached Zalewo from Boreczno at 4.00 p.m., skirted around the town, and went to Elbląg (Skrodzki – Cydzik – Sokołowski 2005, 253). Zalewo was seized at the evening, 22nd of January. The next day, second-line military troops arrived, the killed persons in the anti-aircraft trenches were buried and the systematic burning of homes began. Within a few days a booming, densely built town (5 industrial factories, port, railway station) has ceased to exist. Only 65 houses survived (approximately 25% of the pre-war state, Fig. 5), most of all situated in the outskirts. Victims' account: 50 people died when the Russians entered the city, 55 were missing, 73 died from the injuries during the flight, 10 committed suicide, 24 were murdered (Skrodzki – Cydzik – Sokołowski 2005, 261–162).

The tactics applied by the Red Army in the Mława-Elbląg operation were that the first-line troops, mainly armored units, could reach as far as possible without losing time to stifle resistance more effectively in defending towns. Second-line troops were under the fast-moving first-line units, designed to eliminate the points of resistance that were around and it was these who were responsible for the sackage, rape, and murder of the civilian population.

³ It concerned e.g. daughters of von Finckenstein family from Gubławki (Gublauken), see: Skrodzki 2018: 18) as well as Boetticher family from Duba (Leissnersberg), see: Król 2016: 17.

⁴ Relation of witness Karl-Heinz Schlamelcher, Schlamelcher, Kacprzak 41, 2018: 24–26.

⁵ In Kupin the parents of A. Borysiuk wored at that time, in Zalewo there was a sewing room evacuated from Białystok city together with Polish workers, see: Skrodzki 2016: 28, 30.

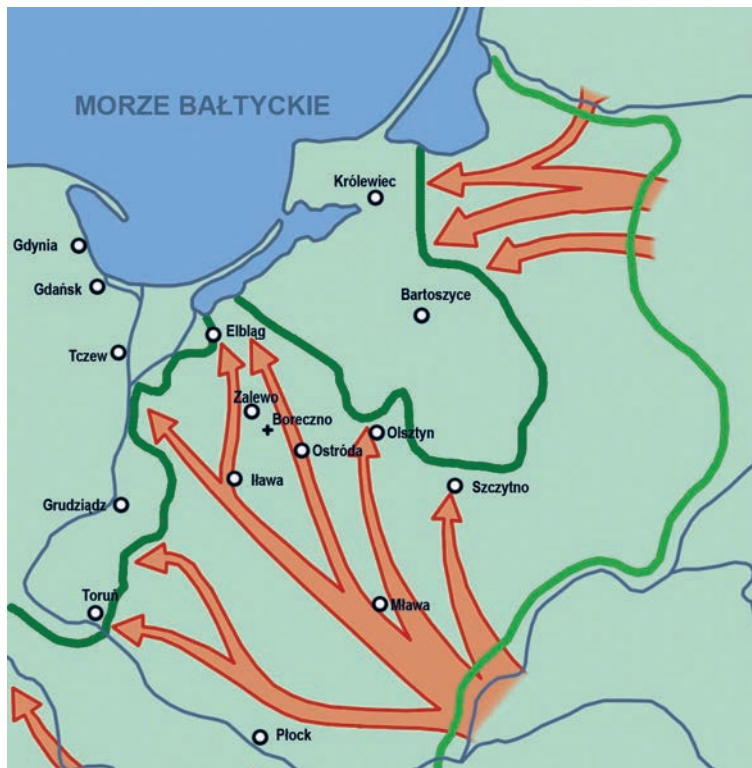


Fig. 5 Plan of the Mława/Elbląg-based operation. Drawn by R. Rybarczyk

The reports of the few witnesses, which have been gathered over the last few years, show the threat that happened on the last days of January 1945 around the Jeziorak Lake⁶. In the manor house at Kamień Mały, Soviet soldiers killed an old German woman who couldn't evacuate, villagers buried her in the orchard⁷. In Duba, 23rd of January 1945, the farmer Johann Boettcher was shot in front of the house in front of his wife⁸. In the same day in Jerzwałd (Gerswalde) 22 persons were murdered and their houses have been set on fire, in few days time over 40 persons were murdered (Skrodzki – Cydzik – Sokołowski 2005, 256). According to Taube's relation, who was a senior secretary of the municipal office in Zalewo, 24 persons were murdered (account of killed in the town capture and dead of injuries he reported separately), and 55 persons were missing⁹. At that time probably the people buried on the Boreczno hill's slope were killed. In Gubławki just after the front, some civilian men were shot (Skrodzki 2018, 15).

The Red Army murders of civilian people happened not only in the Iława Lakeside. Similar situations took place also in other regions of Warmia and Mazuria. The victims of such a massacre, commemorated years later, were also the inhabitants of Małszewo (Malshöfen), who were shot in the forest during their evacuation. At that time 12 persons were killed, including 7 children (Fig. 6). This episode and the victims' identity is known thanks one of them, who was 9 years old at that time and survived the execution although injured (Wiśniewska 2019, 82–83). Patients and medical staff of the psychiatric hospital in Kortowo (Kortau) were also murdered and the wounded and refugees there. In June 1955 their mass grave was found with bones of 277 men, women and children inside. This is the biggest mass grave of the victims of the Red Army ever uncovered in Warmia and Mazuria.

The Red Army murders of civilian people in East Prussia population was no longer a secret at the end of 1944. Information about the earliest of them, this one of Mayakowskoye (Nemmensdorf) disclosed German propaganda. The village, captured 21st of October 1944 by troops of the 11th Guard's Army taking part of the 3rd Belarussian Front, was taken back by Germans in two days' time. At that time

⁶ Pieces of information about the Red Army offensive we can find in relations of pass habitants of Zalewo and its vicinity, published in "Zapiski Zalewskie", some of them in: Skrodzki, Cydzik, Sokołowski 2005: 255–262.

⁷ Relation of A. Borysiuk, see: Skrodzki 2016: 29.

⁸ Relation of R. Boettcher, Król 2016: 17.

⁹ Taube's relations, see: Skrodzki, Cydzik, Sokołowski 2005: 262.



Fig. 6 An exhumation of civilians killed by Red Army soldiers at Nemmersdorf. (Bundesarchiv_Bild_101I-464-0383I-26, _Nemmersdorf_(Ostpreußen),_ermordete_Deutsche.jpg)



Fig. 7 Zalewo before the January 1945, Langgasse, the street east of the church. (https://polska-org.pl/foto/7708/ul_Zeromskiego_Stefana_Zalewo_7708604.jpg)



Fig. 8 Zalewo after the January 1945, the place where the old city existed till 1945 Zalewo_zlotuptaka .jpg – Szukaj w Google

graves of probably 24–26 inhabitants were found and exhumed. German propaganda has used this fact, giving twice the number of victims and stressing that they were tortured and raped. Exhumation photos and the film chronicle spread the knowledge of the incident throughout the Reich, and were intended to make the German army more resistant (Fig. 7).

Not all executions can be justified by the ongoing war. Civilians were arrested and hijacked also when the front passed. 3rd of March 1945, NKVD from Zalewo abducted count Hans Joachim von Finckenstein from Gubławki and two other men (Skrodzki 2018, 11–13)¹⁰. A head of the Land Office in Olsztyn in his report written 19th of March 1945 to the National Council asks for an improvement of the Polish and indigenous people situation, mentioning violence against them (robberies, seizures). In November 1945, a district head from Susz (Rosenberg) described the situation at the railway station in Iława, through which the Red Army returned to the USSR. It happened that groups of Soviet soldiers idled about streets and seizing Iława's inhabitants in their houses, plundering and raping. Since the October 1945, rapes and murders on the railway station area were nearly daily occurrence (Kraft 1999, 537).

It should also be noted that for the average Soviet soldier, every civilian in East Prussia was a German. We know from the witnesses relations that even a knowledge of Russian language did not guarantee security as Soviet soldiers believed that German spies remained in Eastern Prussia¹¹. They were not able to read the documents used by forced workers. Indigenous people as well as forced workers from Poland were also exposed to the loss of life.

While the armed robberies and aggression of Soviet soldiers against civilians were also recorded in Małopolska, the region of Łódź and Kutno, Wielkopolska and Silesia, in addition to Warmia, Mazuria, and Powiśle, the situation was extremely dramatic. The intemperate cruelty of the Red Army soldiers was probably the result of the fact that East Prussia was the first German territory to enter. In the face of the weak resistance of the German troops, Soviet soldiers were mainly used to baste on the civilian population. In addition, the propaganda campaign before the offensive encouraged to kill and humiliate the Germans (Kraft 1999, 536).

Another problem is the state of knowledge about civilians killed in recent months of the war in the former East Prussia. It is also an unusual region because it is difficult to find potential witnesses of these incidents – people who could survive attacks or bury victims. Within Mazuria and Warmia area after the second war, an exchange of the populations occurred. As early as the end of October 1944 the evacuation of civilians from the eastern part of East Prussia has begun, which included about 600000 persons. A beginning of the January offensive in 1945 cut East Prussia off from the Reich, moreover, most witnesses' reports show that evacuation of the surrounding Zalewo areas was not ordered and that the institutions were normally still in operation on Friday and Saturday, 19th–20th of January 1945. The town inhabitants were started to evacuate 22nd of January 1945 (Schlamecher 2018, 24–25). Probably only about 250000 inhabitants of western part of East Prussia managed to escape to the West by a land road before the Red Army moved in¹². About 450000 people went through the frozen Vistula Lagoon to Gdansk, nearly 200000 passed through the Vistula Sandbar from the Piława (Pillau, now Baltijsk) and Królewiec (Königsberg, now Kaliningrad) vicinity. These were attempted to evacuate further by sea.

It is difficult to assess the loss of the evacuated civilian population. It is estimated that at the end of 1944 2 322 000 people lived in East Prussia (Germans, Poles and indigenes). In the last months of the war 299000 people got killed. In the East Prussia, West Prussia and Gdansk region less than 30% of the population

¹⁰ The family von Finckenstein from Gubławki was able to survive January 1945 thanks to the fact that they welcomed the Russian soldiers and received written confirmation of this from the major in charge of them.

¹¹ Relation of Jadwiga Sławińska, see: Skrodzki 2016: 30–31.

¹² Data concerning the evacuation, see: Eberhardt 2000: 47–48.

has remained in their current residence. Others reached the Reich or died during the evacuation (Eberhardt 2000, 47–48).

Although since 23rd of May 1945 formally the Mazurian District civil administration was in Polish hands but Soviet military commandants still existed as they should guarantee safety and supplies of front-end troops. They were ordered to intern all Germans (i.e. both German, Warmian, and Mazurian populations capable of working. Interned people went from transitional camps to USSR. Because in former East Prussia a labor force was also needed, some of the interned people were employed in the large-scale manors acquired by military commandants (Kraft 1999, 535, 537).

Already in April 1945, the registration of indigenous peoples began. Registered persons received a temporary certificate of Polish origin. The award of Polish national membership was made after the application was submitted and the proof of Polish origin was furnished to the specifically appointed verification committee (Kraft 1999, 546). This verification has been overrun because there have been cases of renunciation of Polish national membership, mostly due to the treatment of indigenous people by the formation of administration and incoming Polish settlers.

In February 1946, the German population was displaced from Warmia and Mazuria. It was quite slow, because the German population (first of all intelligence) was to be displaced only after verification of indigenous people. It is estimated that around 42 500 people were displaced in 1947. According to official statistics from 1.01.1948, there were 8469 Germans in the territory of the Olsztyn Voivodeship (Kraft 1999, 544).

Above-mentioned state administration actions have left few people in the area of Zalewo, the town closest to Boreczno, who remember 1945. No one remains from the pre-war inhabitants of Jarnołtowo in the village until today, one of the last ones left with his family to Germany in May 1958. Similar situation is in Przezmark and Stary Folwark. The settlers from Central Poland and the displaced people from the Bieszczady area ("Wisła" action) took their places as well as also migrated indigenous people from other areas of Warmia and Mazuria.

The slow outflow of the Germans first and foremost in 1946 caused new Polish settlers to feel uncertain about the continued presence of former landowners for a long time. This condition was one of the reasons for a sense of transience among the new inhabitants of East Prussia, and perhaps also their migration.

In the vicinity of Boreczno we can observe the ethnic composition and migration dynamics on the basis of the village school's teachers' memories, that was attended by children from the three closest settlements. In the school year 1952/53 for the total number of 120 pupils, 10 were indigenes, 38 were displaced as a result of the action "Wisła", and the rest were the children of parents coming from central Poland. A year later only 5 children were of "local origin", and 5 children departed to the Federal Republic of Germany or the German Democratic Republic. When the described burials were found, there were no one in the village, who could survive the January offensive 1945 in Boreczno or know it from the family stories. The oldest inhabitant of Boreczno who lived in the village at the time of excavation, arrived as a child with his parents in 1947.

Above-mentioned demographic situation led to the fact that, after the war, mass graves were often not exhumed, because the memory of them was lost. In Zalewo single graves were found few years after the war during the town arrangement on past lots, in gardens as well as surrounding meadows. Till 2000 three mass graves were uncovered, the fourth in 2002 during a construction work. There is no such an information from the surrounding villages.

Due to the post-war exchange of people in Boreczno, no-one in the countryside was aware that people were buried on a slope of the hill, from which in winter all children in the village were sledging. No one can say who they were: whether they were the family of the manor manager, the farm workers, or even what nationality they were. There is certainly a lot of such burial in Warmia and Mazuria.

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