



AUSCHWITZ & THE HOLOCAUST

THE SHOCKING STORIES OF COMMANDANT &
LEADERS OF THE HOLOCAUST & AUSCHWITZ



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the Holocaust & Auschwitz

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Introduction

Thank you for downloading this book, “Auschwitz and the Holocaust: The Shocking Stories of Commandant & Leaders of the Holocaust & Auschwitz”.

“Germany will pay a heavy penance for this mass murder of the Jews.” These were the last words of a Jewish victim in Auschwitz, said to the face of the commandant of the camp, Rudolf Höss.



The pictures above show Berlin and the eastern German city of Dresden. These are just two of the larger cities of the nation that were absolutely flattened during the war. Every major city went up in flames. Most secondary cities were as well. To a degree, the Germans paid a price for starting the war and for the brutal murder of millions during the Holocaust and its occupation of Europe. In terms of just of raw numbers, however, German losses were far below those inflicted upon those whom the Germans occupied and captured.

Comparing suffering is a dangerous historical game. After the war, many Germans, brainwashed by twelve years of constant propaganda were not fully aware of the suffering of those conquered by the Nazis. They believed they were suffering unduly at the hands of the Allies. After the occupation forces moved in, the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials began. The Allies press reported on the damage inflicted by German forces and in the camps. It was then that many in Germany began to see the war in a different light.

The bombing of German cities and the occupation of the country were the logical outcomes of Germany’s war of aggression and war crimes. In the years since the end of the war, many historians, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, have felt that the Allies could have done more to save the Jews of Europe from the fate that awaited them in Auschwitz and the other death camps. To a degree this is true.

However, it is the belief of Jenkins that the bombing of railroads, perhaps even the camp itself would not have stopped the killing and it may only have slowed it down temporarily. Though the Nazis built the extermination camps as a way to avoid the psychological toll of close up mass killing by bullets. The *Einsatzgruppen* (“Special Action Squads”) had killed roughly 1.5 million people in Poland, the Baltic countries, and the Soviet Union by pulling triggers; they would have simply have done it again.

Advocates of the high altitude bombing of the camps also forget the incredible inaccuracy of WWII bombing. The effectiveness of the bombing of German cities came because it entailed the indiscriminate bombing of large geographical areas. Despite everything else the Allies could have done; the most effective way to end the Holocaust was to defeat Germany.

This short volume is an introduction to the lives and mindset of some of the most evil and unfeeling people history has ever seen. Chapters, paragraphs, and sentences used to describe the mindset, outlook, and rationale of the Holocaust perpetrators within this book is not in any way to illustrate a sympathetic understanding of the personalities involved. It is an illustration of how an individual finds or intentionally enrolls himself in a system whose sole purpose is the mass murder of other human beings.

The author and the publisher of this book assumes that the reader will have a basic understanding of the history of the rise of the Nazi Party, the role of anti-Semitism in the Nazi Party and in German history, especially in the post-WWI years. There is also an assumption on the part of the author that the progression of anti-Semitic behavior and legislation in pre-WWII Germany is familiar to the reader and that the reader has a basic understanding of the events and milestones that led to the determination and execution of the Nazis' "Final Solution of the Jewish "Problem" in Europe". For those readers who wish to either refresh their memory, or to learn about these events for the first time, we would like to recommend the volumes in this series that relate to the Holocaust. These can be found with a simple search on Amazon for the obvious keywords.

This volume will concentrate on the lives, actions, thoughts, and memories of those men who were near the top of the Nazi hierarchy or key figures within the Holocaust machinery. A basic knowledge of the Holocaust and the events surrounding it is assumed.

Lastly, as with the other volumes in this series that deal with the Final Solution in Europe, the author wishes to convey that neither the information and/or description of events, whether in narrative form or from the direct quotation of a war criminals' testimony, is meant in any way as an excuse, endorsement, or justification of some of the most tragic events in recorded history. It cannot be excused, never endorsed, and never justified, except by those with the same soul-sickness which enveloped too many of those in Germany and Europe in the years 1933-45.

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Chapter 1: Höss

At the war crimes trials and in prison after World War II, former Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss testified and wrote about his role in the establishment of the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau and his role in the machinery of death there.

“I was ordered to establish extermination facilities at Auschwitz in 6/1941...I visited Treblinka to find out how they carried out their exterminations. The camp commandant at Treblinka told me that he had liquidated 80,000 in the course of one-half year. He was principally concerned with liquidating all the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. He used monoxide gas, and I did not think that his methods were very efficient. So when I set up the extermination building at Auschwitz, I used Zyklon B, which was a crystallized prussic acid which we dropped into the death chamber from a small opening. It took from 3-15 minutes to kill the people in the death chamber, depending upon climatic conditions. We knew when the people were dead because their screaming stopped. We usually waited about one-half hour before we opened the doors and removed the bodies. After the bodies were removed our special Kommandos took off the rings and extracted the gold from the teeth of the corpses... *Another improvement* (author's italics) we made over Treblinka was that we built our gas chamber to accommodate 2000 people at one time whereas at Treblinka their 10 gas chambers only accommodated 200 people each.”

This quote is an example of the bureaucratic detachment that took place among many of those involved in the Holocaust – especially those at middle, higher, or clerical level. We also gain insight to the qualities that made the Holocaust unique in human history.

Genocide is defined by Webster's Dictionary as “the deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group.” The Nazi Holocaust of WWII was not the first example of genocide in history, nor sadly has it been the last. In the 20th century alone, two notable genocidal campaigns took place before Hitler. These were the mass deaths of the Congolese by the Belgians in the late 1800's to early 1900's and the Armenian genocide of 1915 committed by Ottoman forces during World War One. Some argue that the man-made famine in Ukraine initiated by Stalin in the 1930's was genocide.

While Stalin certainly wanted to eliminate Ukrainian nationalism and nationalists. Another region of the nation been the primary agricultural center of the country. The Soviet dictator would not have hesitated to initiate a famine there in a similar effort to feed the cities at the expense of the rural population and collectivize the farms. Stalin did not hate Ukrainians and he did not view them as biologically inferior or even racially distinct. He simply saw them as an obstacle to his power and goals.

After WWII, despite all of the talk of never again, we have seen genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Sudan, and the former Yugoslavia. The Mongols and the Romans both conducted genocidal campaigns. Genocide is not something new, and is likely to be with the human race for the foreseeable future.

What makes the Holocaust different than these other examples is that it was the first case of modern industrial techniques, under the auspices of a modern industrial nation,

applied to the killing of those deemed “inferior”. In this case mainly the Jews of Europe, but certainly others as well. White Russia, or “Byelorussia”, suffered huge losses as a result of the Nazi world view that deemed Slavs, as well as Jews, sub-human.

Entire government bureaus, military and economic resources, and private business were involved in the killing and made a profit from the killing. The victims of the Nazis and their collaborators not only had their lives and dignity taken, but also their wealth. The “by-products” of the killing included the hair of the victims which was used for insulation of various kinds; as well as glasses, shoes, prostheses, clothing, and much more was shipped to Germany or to the front. Winter clothing to an example of an item shipped to the front as it was a valuable commodity.

To carry out the functions of a bureaucracy, bureaucrats are needed. Obviously, someone to do the dirty work was needed too, and Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höss was both a ruler and a executioner.

Hitler, Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich (the SS Security Service Chief delegated by Himmler to both initiate and coordinate the “Final Solution”) all grew up in strict households with at least one religious parent. Although other aspects of their backgrounds differed, such as economic class; the similarity in all their households were a stern father and a relatively doting mother present. The same holds true for the childhood of Josef Stalin. His father, while strict, was a drunkard who faded into the background as Stalin grew into adolescence. The same holds true for Rudolf Höss.

Höss was born in the ancient spa city of Baden-Baden in southwest Germany in 1900. His father was Franz Xaver Höss and his mother, Lina Speck. Despite having a brother and sister, Höss was both a loner and lonely. The Germany of 1900 was influenced strongly by the military. Military ideals such as loyalty, duty, obedience, and sacrifice were stressed as the greatest virtues a man could have. Coupled with the strict religious atmosphere of both the time and especially of his family, Rudolf Höss came to value unquestioningly obedience and loyalty as two of his most developed characteristics.

Höss’s father, who had served in the Kaiser’s army in some of its brutal East African colonial campaigns, was determined that his son Rudolf would become a priest. In early 20th century Germany, a father’s rule was law – it was rare for a son and even rarer for daughters to disobey a fathers commands, even after death. Höss’s father passed in 1908, but the boy was enrolled in the seminary in his early teens. By the time he was fourteen, however, Höss had become rebellious and disenchanted with the church. A number of incidents, including the earlier breaking of the sacrament of the confessional by a priest who had informed Höss’s father of his son’s admitted sin, led Höss to look for another way to fulfill his role as a loyal and obedient German youth.

The opportunity for Rudolf to leave the seminary behind came with the outbreak of World War I. He first volunteered as a medical orderly at a military hospital, but was soon admitted to his father’s old regiment at the age of fifteen. This was not at all unusual at the time. In the military, Höss was able to lead a life of duty and obedience while also satisfying a young man’s desire for adventure.

In 1915, the 21st Dragoons were sent to Turkey to help and advise the army of the Ottoman Empire, defeat the British, and help put down various Arab uprisings in Iraq and Palestine. By 17 he was the youngest non-commissioned officer in the German Army. By war's end, he had been wounded three times, and awarded numerous times for bravery by both Germany and the Ottoman Turks.

Rudolf Höss had found his calling. Military life was the calling of many young men in pre-WWI Germany, but when the war ended in German defeat, millions of these men had their dreams denied. Among the many restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles which formally ended the war was a limitation on the size of the German Army. Instead of millions, it was to be limited to a one hundred thousand man defensive force. That is a little more than a paramilitary auxiliary police force for keeping internal order.

Before 1871, Germany did not exist. It was a conglomeration of independent or semi-independent German speaking monarchies. When the war ended, Germany was in political, economic, and cultural chaos. A relatively new nation which had been ruled by the Hohenzollern family since its inception. Germany found itself leaderless, its Kaiser forced to abdicate the throne and a new republican government with weak support in its place.

In the vacuum of power left by the abdication of the Kaiser, extremist parties of the Left and the Right vied for power throughout the nation. Though radical socialists and communists had great support in some cities, most Germans in the countryside and the middle class supported a stronger republican government with a right wing conservative agenda and executive. A significant portion supported extreme rightist views, which at the time were most based on general anti-communist and anti-Semitic ideas rather than specific parties or platforms. Both the parties of the Left and the Right included armed paramilitaries which fought street battles against each other in cities all over the country. In addition, many of the right-wing paramilitaries fought against incursions from a newly independent and militarily stronger Poland and uprisings against ethnic Poles in eastern Germany. Rudolf Höss was one of these men.

The paramilitaries were filled with men who had served in the army or at the front, who had grown to feel separate and alienated from civilian life by the horrors of WWI. On the other hand, there were a number of younger men in the paramilitaries who had been too young to serve in the war, and whose chance for "glory" was limited by both Germany's condition internationally and militarily.

Many of the older and/or experienced men like Höss, had become inured to the horrors and atrocities of war and viewed communism as a threat to German culture and Germany's economy. Many of the younger men among them wanted to both eliminate the threat to German culture and to prove themselves to their older and more experienced comrades. Many of these units called themselves "Freikorps" (Free Corps), under a trusted leader, but other rightist paramilitaries existed as well.

Much of this held true for the men in the paramilitaries of the Left as well, though they carried a different ideology with them. Many in the ranks of the leftist paramilitaries were combat veterans also, but they returned from the front feeling as if the Germany they had

grown up in was a sham and that they had fought, suffered, and died for the men and interests of the royal aristocracy and the rich capitalists.

The immediate post-war landscape of Germany was brutal in many ways. In Munich, communists seized the reins of city government and of much of Bavaria. But after only a short time in power; the army, accompanied by thousands of armed right-wing paramilitaries, took the city back. Hundreds of rightist were killed, but over a thousand communists were also, and the Leftists were driven from power. After the uprising in Munich and the surrounding area, right-wingers rounded up hundreds of communist men and women, either real or suspected, and executed them without trial. These actions were condoned by the government. In other German cities, atrocities by both sides took place on a regular basis into the 1920's.

In the east of the country there were different problems. These concerned national boundaries and ethnic conflict. In 1919 a series of three clashes between Polish nationals, Germans of Polish descent, and the forces of the Reichswehr (the post-WWI German Army)/Freikorps began which started and stopped three times throughout 1922. As part of the Freikorps, Höss took part in the conflict, which was fought over the borders of the two nations. There was the desire of German Poles to be included within Poland, and the German desire from losing more territory to Poland, and the formation of the Polish Corridor, which cut off East Prussia from the rest of Germany.

The conflict was marked by atrocity on both sides and thousands died. Among the guilty parties was the Freikorps. Even if Höss did not take part in the killing, he certainly was aware of it. In the end, neither party was satisfied. German Poles either emigrated or remained in Germany and the new nation of Poland retained the Polish Corridor, which resulted in East Prussia becoming an island separated from Germany and surrounded by Poland and Lithuania. Neither side was pleased with the outcome. That in a way, foreshadowed the future conflict and boundary shifting.

After the conflict, Höss found himself in the Bavarian capital of Munich, the center of Freikorps and right-wing activity in Germany. It was there in 1922 that he met Adolf Hitler. Already a right-wing extremist with a extreme expectation for obedience and duty, Hitler's personality and rhetoric convinced Höss that the Nazi movement was the wave of the future.

In May 1923, Höss committed his first crime for the Nazis. Along with another Freikorps man named Martin Bormann, Höss kidnapped and murdered Bormann's former school teacher; whom was also a Freikorps man. They accused him of treachery and collaboration with the French occupation forces in Rhineland, which was occupied by the French in 1919. This was because the French had determined that Germany would not be able to meet its post-WWI financial obligations. Rudolf Höss was sentenced to ten years in prison which was commuted after serving five while Bormann was only sentenced to a year. This act cemented both Bormann and Höss as trusted members of the early Nazi movement. Bormann later on became the powerful head of Hitler's Reich Chancellery and at the end of the war, became a rival for power with Heinrich Himmler.

Prison time had only increased Höss' ability to separate himself mentally from suffering

and brutality. Upon his release, he joined the right-wing “Artaman League”. Within the German extreme right, there was a movement born out of twisting the Romantic Era ideals which called for a return to the land and a Germany populated solely by Germans. These beliefs coalesced into what historians call the “völkisch” movement. Much of Nazi ideology was based on völkisch beliefs. While a member of the Artaman League, Höss met two people who would influence the course of his life – one perhaps for good, the other evil.

The first was his wife to be, Hedwig Hensel (d. 1989) who bore him five children. The second was a man named Heinrich Himmler.

Himmler had been a Nazi Party member since 1923, and was deeply influenced by the ideas of the völkisch movement. This is what he elaborated upon in later years. Himmler had joined the SS in 1925, when it was a small unit within the much larger SA. Himmler had risen through the ranks – an extraordinarily able organizer and a loner without personal friends who was able to devote his entire life and energy to the Party. By 1927, he was the Deputy Leader of the SS, and in January 1929, its leader or “Reichsführer”.

Höss remained a member of the Nazi Party during its journey to power. In 1934 he joined the SS. He was fanatically loyal to Heinrich Himmler, whose völkisch ideas aligned with those of Höss and were more ingrained than those of Hitler himself. Hitler, while appreciating the abilities and ruthlessness of Himmler, never included the Reichsführer in his true inner circle and considered Himmler’s extreme völkisch ideas as “quatsch” (nonsense). He did not stop Himmler as he found the ideals useful for propaganda purposes. Höss was fanatically loyal to Himmler until his dying day.

Höss’s path to Auschwitz began at the first Nazi concentration camp, Dachau. Located in the Munich suburbs of the same name, the camp became notorious for its brutality and was the training center for many of the future concentration camp commandants and SS personnel. The first commandant of Dachau and the man largely responsible for the regime of horror which spread to all of the Nazi camps was SS Oberführer Theodor Eicke (1892-1943).

Theodor Eicke was a violent and psychopathic sadist that adhered to right-wing extremist principles. After seeing a lot of combat in WWI, he became a policeman. However, his vocal and violent outbursts against the post-war Weimar Republic eventually costed him his job. These included not only speeches, but activity in violent anti-government marches. After his dismissal, he worked for IG Farben one of the largest German industrial companies. Later both Eicke and IG Farben were very valued assets in the construction of many concentration camps such as Auschwitz.

In 1928, he joined the SA, but enrolled in the SS six months later. Eicke brought in many SS recruits and helped to organize the SS in northern Bavaria. Within three years, he had risen to the rank of Standartenführer (Colonel). All the while, Eicke maintained his job at IG Farben, but his visible radical right activities caused him to be let go from his position in 1932. That same year he was sentenced by a Bavarian court to a two year prison stint for preparing to carry out terrorist attacks against political enemies. However, by 1932, the Nazis in Bavaria were already a force to be reckoned with. With friends in

high places, Eicke managed to be “allowed” to escape to Italy.

Less than a year later, the Nazis had taken power and in March 1933 Eicke was back in Germany. He soon landed in hot water again, this time it was for threatening a powerful Nazi politician with death. The politician turned out to be the Nazi Party leader of the Saar-Palatinate region. He had Eicke confined to a mental institution for months before he was released after Himmler placated and pressured the official in question. With Eicke’s release, Himmler appointed him commandant of Dachau concentration camp.

Built in March, Dachau was almost overflowing with real and imagined political enemies of the Nazis within three months. While there were Jewish prisoners at Dachau in 1933, it was more likely they were there because of their political views or vocal opposition to the Nazis rather than their ethnicity.

The first six months of the Nazi regime was the period of “Gleichschaltung”, or “coordination” - a bureaucratic and innocent sounding term for the forcible takeover of all aspects of the German nation. Labor unions, entertainment and culture, newspapers, education, the courts, youth, and sports organizations, were all brought under Nazi control. The Nazis applied force or the threat of force to achieve what they wanted. Enemies from before the party came to power were not spared either. They were eliminated or imprisoned. Those that may oppose them were also threatened or imprisoned as a warning. During the time of operation, Rudolf Höss eventually became Eicke’s deputy commander at Dachau.



*Höss at SS hospital
dedication near
Auschwitz, 1940's*

Eicke’s regime at Dachau set the tone for all future Nazi camps. Eicke’s “Lagerordnung” (the “Disciplinary and Penal Code”) became the standard

set of regulations for the camps. Punishment began with three days of “hard time”. This included small isolation cells, one ration of bread, and water, and like almost all daily life in the camps - the risk of beating by guards. The code then progressed to “hard time” accompanied by punitive labor for weeks. This was usually breaking rocks or moving heavy objects back and forth, sometimes for twelve or more hours at a time. This then escalated to a week, then two, of hard time and being flogged twenty-five times with a long pole. The times of punishment confinement increased to weeks depending on infraction. In camp life, punches to the face, gut, and kidneys were a fact of life.

The ultimate punishment was a bullet in the back of the neck, or shot while approaching forbidden areas near the wire, gates, or other parts of the camp. SS guards who did not shoot to kill when a prisoner approached or entered a forbidden area were subject to punishment themselves. This was the regime that Höss, as Eicke’s deputy, enforced.

Eicke became the chief inspector of all Nazi camps in the spring of 1934. In June of that year he took part in the Hitler’s purge of the SA, personally shooting SA Chief Ernst Röhm on Hitler’s orders. Höss remained at Dachau for over three years and before being sent to another camp as deputy commandant there.

Eight months after the German invasion and conquest of Poland, Rudolf Höss was given command of a new German prison camp. It was on the grounds of an old Polish army barracks in the southern central town of Oświęcim known to history by its German name: Auschwitz.

Though Höss was determined to bring a greater sense of order to his camp than what existed at Dachau and Sachsenhausen, it did not mean he was going to give up any aspects of their harsh regimes. Both of these camps, and others in Germany seemed to Höss as overly chaotic and involved the SS guards too frequently in the “dirty” work of the camp. The SS at Auschwitz could be brutal, and in 1940 there was only one camp at the site. However, Höss planned that with SS oversight, much of the day to day punishment could be taken on by prisoners themselves.

For this, Höss relied on hardened and violent German, and later Polish criminals. The initial convicts were sent from camps and prisons in Germany. It was also where their ranks were replenished when necessary. These men, were anywhere from murderers to enforcers of organized crime and everything in between. They were given privileges within the camp if they kept the other inmates in line and if labor tasks assigned to them were finished on time and to the satisfaction of Höss and the SS.

Long before Auschwitz II became synonymous with the murder of millions, Auschwitz I became synonymous with brutality. In the second chapter of my e-book “Auschwitz & The Holocaust: Eyewitness Accounts from Auschwitz Prisoners & Survivors” (available at http://www.amazon.com/Auschwitz-The-Holocaust-Eyewitness-Concentration-ebook/dp/B00MSW2BTG/ref=pd_sim_351_1?ie=UTF8&refRID=0HHHRPMZKQ22VQT4QJR2), I mention the story of Witold Pilecki, the Polish cavalry captain who volunteered to be interned at Auschwitz I to report on conditions there for the Polish underground and government in exile. After two and half years at Auschwitz I, Pilecki escaped to write a report on what he had experienced and

seen at the camp.

When he first arrived, Pilecki had teeth knocked out for holding a registration card in his mouth instead of his full hands. He describes “Bloody Alois”, the first German convict at the site whom is also an overseer and known as a “capos”. He was thrilled to work prisoners to death by making them do “gymnastics” for hours at a time in all weather. Another capos killed a number of inmates daily by forcing them to lie on their backs and placing a bar or board across their throats. They would then step on both ends of the bar/board and rocking back and forth until the inmate was dead. This behavior was not only accepted by the SS – it was encouraged.

One of the most dreaded punishments at Auschwitz I was imprisonment in the “bunkers”. These punishments, if not begun by Höss, were approved by him and were used daily. Witold Pilecki described them in his report:

“A simple bunker - it was a set of cells in the basement of block 13 (old numbering), where capos and SS-men were mainly kept until their interrogation, at the disposal of the political department, or serving their punishment. The simple bunker cells included 3 parts of the basement of block 13, in the remaining 4 part there was a cell similar to those ones, but deprived of any light - called a “dark” one. In one end of the block, the basement corridor turned right at a square and ended immediately. In this branch of the corridor, there were small bunkers of quite different kind. There were three so-called “standing cells ” (Stehbunker). Behind a rectangular opening in the wall, through which only a bowed man could go, there was a quasi-cupboard of 80 x 80 centimetres, 2 meters high, so that you could stand freely. But to such a “cupboard”, four prisoners were pushed in with the help of a stick, and, the door locked with bars, they remained there until morning (from 7:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m.). It may seem impossible, there are witnesses alive until now, who served a “Stehbunker” punishment in the company of their colleagues, pushed into such “cupboard” in the number of eight men! In the evening they were released and taken to work, but for the night they were again pushed in, like sardines, and locked with the use of iron bars till morning. The measure of punishment reached usually up to 5 nights, but sometimes it could be much higher. Whoever had no connections with the authority in his work place, he usually ended his life at his work, due to lack of strength, after one or several such nights. Who was able to rest in his commando in the daytime, he could happily survive that punishment...”

Höss had grown up in a harsh disciplinary childhood, then moved on to army life and life at the front. Combined with his time in the Freikorps and absorbing and becoming a true believer in Hitler’s beliefs, he served under Eicke, and helped implement the most notorious “disciplinary” practices in the Nazi Empire. Long before its establishment as the premier extermination camp, Auschwitz was a name whispered in fear in Poland and Eastern Europe.

The majority of those held initially at the camp were Poles. Most of these men were believed to be members, or potential members, of the resistance. These included military officers, teachers/professors, writers and other intellectuals that valued freedom and others. Many of these men, except some of those from the military, had never been

exposed to manual labor in their lives. They dropped like flies. Eventually exhaustion, malnutrition, sickness, infection, beatings, and bullets, took their toll.

As the Germans established their rule in Poland more firmly, they began to send others to the camp. Soon, German intellectuals who refused to bend to the Nazi will were being sent. Homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Czechoslovakians, Austrian, and political prisoners all started to arrive.

In the first period of the camps' existence, some inmates could expect to be released. Auschwitz I was not an extermination facility and Auschwitz II Birkenau was just being planned. Those who were released, were usually Poles and Germans who had been brought in for petty crimes. They and all others who survived a German concentration camp in the first years of the Nazi regime were expected not to speak of the camp or their experiences there with a threat of death – perhaps to their family as well. Most did not, but some did.

One of the most famous prisoners was a Catholic priest of Polish/German descent. Father Maximilian Kolbe is known today as the “Saint of Auschwitz”. Born in 1894 in Russian controlled central Poland, Kolbe became dedicated to the Catholic Church at an early age when he believed he had received a vision of the Virgin Mary. By age thirteen, both Kolbe and his brother were enrolled in the seminary.

Over the course of his life, Father Kolbe traveled the world and began his own order, the “Militia Immaculata”, or “Army of the Immaculate One”. Its primary purpose was the conversion of those deemed sinners and enemies of the Catholic Church. He worked in China, Japan, and India attempting to spread the Gospel.

In 1936 he returned to Poland and established a Catholic radio program two years later. Broadcasting was done from his home monastery at Niepokalanow. When the Germans invaded, Kolbe and a few others remained at the monastery treating wounded Polish soldiers and civilians. When the Germans first marched in, they arrested many of the Catholic priests and novitiates. This was done mostly as a warning for the populace of Poland that no one would be safe if they worked against the Germans. Kolbe and the others were released after a few of months of imprisonment.

Kolbe angered the Germans when he refused their offer to sign a document which would have given him protection due to the German heritage of his father's family. To the Germans, he was refusing a great gift and was now on their radar. Despite this, Father Kolbe was allowed by the Germans and the Catholic Church to operate his radio station. He used his radio station to criticize the German occupation. He also issued critical pamphlets. His monastery also sheltered and passed on some two thousand Jews, allowing them a better chance to survive the war. Eventually the Germans decided Father Kolbe must be stopped. He was arrested on February 1941 and his monastery shut down. Two and a half months later, he arrived at Auschwitz.

Commandant Höss had a childhood that included a strict Catholic education, so he had a particular hatred for the members of the Catholic Church that came within his jurisdiction. Many of the SS had a similar childhood and at this point regarded the

Catholic Church as a rival power to Germany within Europe. They also believed that Catholics stemmed from a Jewish origin.

Father Kolbe was placed into a camp populated mostly by Polish Catholic inmates. He continued to act as a priest within the camp, which earned him the wrath of the SS. He was beaten many times and whipped so severely that only the intervention of the underground group could save him. They managed to smuggle him into the camp hospital to prevent him from dying.

In July 1941, three brave Poles managed to escape from Auschwitz I, dressing and arming themselves as SS men. They stole a car and escaped through the front gate. As retribution and as a lesson to those within the camp planning the same thing, Höss ordered his deputy commander SS Hauptsturmführer Karl Fritsch, to pick ten men at random to be starved to death in the punishment cells. These were not the standing cells, but a cell set aside for the isolation and death of those within. One of the men selected plead loudly for his life, saying that his wife and children needed him. Father Kolbe volunteered to take his place.

In the cell, a starvation diet and very little water was given to the men. This was not to keep them alive, but to make them suffer longer. Every time a guard checked on the prisoners, Father Kolbe was ministering to them or leading them in prayer. At the end of the two week period, only the priest was alive. The Germans were tired of this man and needed the cell for other prisoners. Finally, they walked in with a syringe full of carbolic acid and administered a relatively quick but painful death. By the accounts of those Germans and capos who survived the war; Father Kolbe raised his hand to the Germans, offering himself as a martyr. This was life at Auschwitz but things were soon to get worse.

After the war, Höss was asked about the evolution of the camp from a concentration camp to the inclusion of an extermination facility:

“... In the summer of 1941 I was summoned to Berlin to Reichsführer SS Himmler to receive personal orders. He told me something to the effect—I do not remember the exact words—that the Führer had given the order for a final solution of the Jewish question. We, the SS, must carry out that order. If it is not carried out now then the Jews will later on destroy the German people. He had chosen Auschwitz on account of its easy access by rail and also because the extensive site offered space for measures ensuring isolation.”

The work on Auschwitz-Birkenau began shortly after. Most of the labor was done by Russian POW's that recently arrived and Poles from Auschwitz I. The most sinister aspects of the camp were the gas chambers and the crematoria, which were already planned from the beginning.

Auschwitz consisted of three main camps. Auschwitz III was called Buna, after the name for the synthetic rubber that was supposedly made there. There were also many satellite camps which supplied both labor and victims to the main camp. Plaszow, the camp made famous in the film Schindler's List, was one of these satellite camps.

Perhaps no company is more infamous for its participation in and knowledge of the true nature of Birkenau than Topf and the firm known as Sons. They were the makers of the

crematoria for getting rid of bodies. This firm was an established company in Germany before the war. They were used for the purpose of disposing of the deceased. They bid on and won the contract for building crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Construction began in October 1941. Höss toured the extermination facilities already in operation while the rest was under construction. After the viewing, Höss revealed he was unimpressed by the process done at the camps such as Treblinka, and he also determined that the extermination process was too slow.

It was deputy Karl Fritzsche, who suggested the use of prussic acid in the extermination of human beings. The first victims of the gas chambers at Auschwitz were Russian POW's and a number of sick inmates. They were gassed in the newly erected chamber at Auschwitz I. It was through trial and error that prussic acid in the form of a commercial vermin killing product known as "Zyklon-B" was found to kill much more quickly than the carbon monoxide poisoning taking place at Treblinka and Sobibor.



Zyklon-B consisted of prussic acid, which is the common name for hydrogen cyanide in the form of pellets. They atomize in the air and form a poisonous cloud of gas, which causes asphyxiation on a cellular level. Presently, a number of companies used the chemical licensed from Degesch Company located in Germany for different reasons; One of the more known companies in America being American Cyanamid. One of the inventors of the formula is Bruno Tesch. Eventually he created his own company, Tesch and Stabenow which became the main supplier of Zyklon-B to Auschwitz. After the war, there was evidence that Tesch knew how his invention was being used and was executed in 1946.

In his memoir written after the war, Höss relayed the experience of the first gassing and how he rationalized the action for himself and those under his command:

The killing of these Russian prisoners-of-war did not cause me much concern at the time. The order had been given, and I had to carry it out. I must even admit that this gassing set my mind at rest, for the mass extermination of the Jews was to start soon and at that time neither Eichmann nor I was certain how these mass killings were to be carried out. It would be by gas, but we did not know which gas or how it was to be used. Now we had the gas, and we had established the procedure. I always shuddered at the thought of carrying out exterminations by shooting, when I thought of the vast numbers concerned, and of the women and children. The shooting of hostages, and the group executions ordered by the Reichsführer SS or by the Reich Security Head Office had been enough for

me. I was therefore relieved to think that we were to be spared all these blood-baths, and that the victims too would be spared suffering until their last moment came. It was precisely this which had caused me the greatest concern when I had heard Eichmann's description of Jews being mowed down by the Special Squads [Einsatzkommandos] armed with machine-guns and machine-pistols. Many gruesome scenes are said to have taken place, people running away after being shot, the finishing off of the wounded and particularly of the women and children. Many members of the Einsatzkommandos, unable to endure wading through blood any longer, had committed suicide. Some had even gone mad. Most of the members of these Kommandos had to rely on alcohol when carrying out their horrible work...."

While construction continued, Auschwitz II began operations in the spring of 1942. The first two operational gas chambers were small buildings on the outer periphery of the camp. These were known as the Little Red House because of its brick construction, and the Little White House for its whitewash. Höss was present for the first gassing of Jews at Auschwitz II, which took place at the Little Red House in March:

They were taken from the detraining platform to the 'Cottage' — to Bunker I — across the meadows where later Building Site II was located. The transport was conducted by Aumeier and Palitzsch and some of the block leaders. They talked with the Jews about general topics, inquiring about their qualifications and trades, with a view to misleading them. On arrival at the 'Cottage', they were told to undress. At first they went calmly into the rooms where they were supposed to be disinfected. But some of them showed signs of alarm, and spoke of death by suffocation and annihilation. A sort of panic set in at once. Immediately all the Jews still outside were pushed into the chambers, and the doors were screwed shut. With subsequent transports the difficult individuals were picked out early on and most carefully supervised. At the first signs of unrest, those responsible were unobtrusively led behind the building and killed with a small-calibre gun, that was inaudible to the others...."

Those familiar with the Holocaust will recognize the pattern. It was the process used at the other extermination camps, but was perfected at Auschwitz. When the tired and frightened victims arrived at the camp, they were told that they will be given work at the camp, or temporarily housed until they were sent further east to work. They were then told that they needed to be de-loused and re-housed according to sex, age, and fitness for work.

As the operation at Auschwitz accelerated, the process became second nature for the SS guards and officers of the unloading team. The victims were paraded in front of an SS officer that is sometimes a doctor. They proceed to selected younger children and their mothers, the elderly and the sick to go to the left. In about ninety minutes, these people would have been led to the gas chambers and crematoria. They would be told to strip for de-lousing. They were then told to enter the gas chamber which was disguised as a mass shower. The doors were then shut and SS personnel poured the crystals of Zyklon B into the chamber via chutes. The actual duration varied based on humidity, but it was only a matter of minutes before the people suffocated to death. The room was then fumigated and the men of the "Sonderkommando" (special squad) went in and began the process of

removing the bodies and sending them to the crematoria to be burned.

The other passengers on the train were led into Auschwitz II where they were expected to work until they died or were selected for gassing. These men, women, and teens may have been less fortunate in comparison to those gassed on arrival. Some children managed to avoid selection by lie, oversight, or Nazi design. There were various children that were used as subjects of medical experiments that took place at Auschwitz. Most of those taken to the gas chambers on arrival did not know what their fate was to be. Those who passed the initial selection were soon informed of the whereabouts of their families by other inmates. Further selections in the camp were made regularly as a result of overcrowding, sickness, or the need to eliminate more Jews and others not of the superior race. Unfortunately, these victims were fully aware of their fate.

Höss went on to describe a few of the thousand of selections and gassings which took place at Birkenau:

A further calming effect was obtained by members of the Special Detachment accompanying them into the rooms and remaining with them until the last moment, while an SS man also stood in the doorway until the end.

It was most important that the whole business of arriving and undressing should take place in an atmosphere of the greatest possible calm. People reluctant to take off their clothes had to be helped by those of their companions who had already undressed, or by men of the Special Detachment.

The refractory ones were calmed down and encouraged to undress. The prisoners of the Special Detachment also saw to it that the process of undressing was carried out quickly, so that the victims would have little time to wonder what was happening.

The eager help given by the Special Detachment in encouraging them to undress and in conducting them into the gas chambers was most remarkable. I have never known, nor heard, of any of its members giving these people who were about to be gassed the slightest hint of what lay ahead of them. On the contrary, they did everything in their power to deceive them and particularly to pacify the suspicious ones. Though they might refuse to believe the SS men, they had complete faith in these members of their own race, and to reassure them and keep them calm the Special Detachments therefore always consisted of Jews who themselves came from the same districts as did the people on whom a particular action was to be carried out.

They would talk about life in the camp, and most of them asked for news of friends or relations who had arrived in earlier transports. It was interesting to hear the lies that the Special Detachment told them with such conviction, and to see the emphatic gestures with which they underlined them.

Many of the women hid their babies among the piles of clothing. The men of the Special Detachment were particularly on the lookout for this, and would speak words of encouragement to the woman until they had persuaded her to take the child with her. The women believed that the disinfectant might be bad for their smaller children, hence their efforts to conceal them.

The smaller children usually cried because of the strangeness of being undressed in this fashion, but when their mothers or members of the Special Detachment comforted them, they became calm and entered the gas chambers, playing or joking with one another and carrying their toys.

I noticed that women who either guessed or knew what awaited them nevertheless found the courage to joke with the children to encourage them, despite the mortal terror visible in their own eyes.

One woman approached me as she walked past and, pointing to her four children who were manfully helping the smallest ones over the rough ground, whispered:

“How can you bring yourself to kill such beautiful, darling children? Have you no heart at all?”

One old man, as he passed by me, hissed:

“Germany will pay a heavy penance for this mass murder of the Jews.”

His eyes glowed with hatred as he said this. Nevertheless he walked calmly into the gas chamber, without worrying about the others.

One young woman caught my attention particularly as she ran busily hither and thither, helping the smallest children and the old women to undress. During the selection she had had two small children with her, and her agitated behavior and appearance had brought her to my notice at once. She did not look in the least like a Jewess. Now her children were no longer with her. She waited until the end, helping the women who were not undressed and who had several children with them, encouraging them and calming the children. She went with the very last ones into the gas chamber. Standing in the doorway, she said: “I knew all the time that we were being brought to Auschwitz to be gassed. When the selection took place I avoided being put with the able-bodied ones, as I wished to look after the children. I wanted to go through it all, fully conscious of what was happening. I hope that it will be quick. Goodbye!”

From time to time women would suddenly give the most terrible shrieks while undressing, or tear their hair, or scream like maniacs. These were immediately led away behind the building and shot in the back of the neck with a small-caliber weapon.

It sometimes happened that, as the men of the Special Detachment left the gas chamber, the women would suddenly realize what was happening, and would call down every imaginable curse upon our heads.

I remember, too, a woman who tried to throw her children out of the gas chamber, just as the door was closing. Weeping, she called out:

“At least let my precious children live.”

There were many such shattering scenes, which affected all who witnessed them.

During the spring of 1942 hundreds of vigorous men and women walked all unsuspecting to their death in the gas chambers, under the blossom-laden fruit trees of the “cottage” orchard. This picture of death in the midst of life remains with me to this day.

The process of selection, which took place on the unloading platforms, was in itself rich in incident.(authors' italics)

The breaking up of families, and the separation of the men from the women and children, caused much agitation and spread anxiety throughout the whole transport. This was increased by the further separation from the others of those capable of work. Families wished at all costs to remain together. Those who had been selected ran back to rejoin their relations. Mothers with children tried to join their husbands, or old people attempted to find those of their children who had been selected for work, and who had been led away.

Often the confusion was so great that the selections had to be begun all over again. The limited area of standing room did not permit better sorting arrangements. All attempts to pacify these agitated mobs were useless. It was often necessary to use force to restore order..."

One of the most note-worthy and disturbing things about the testimony and memoirs of Richard Höss is his lack of remorse, his matter of fact manner relating the death of more than a million people, and his notion that his audience would be interested in hearing what he had to say – not necessarily because of the importance of his testimony, but because, like any story-teller, detail makes it more interesting. For these reasons, Höss's testimony/memoirs are some of the most horrific reading in history.

Let us see how Auschwitz survivors viewed these scenes, which were (in Höss' words) "so rich in incident." The first account is from Dr. Andre' Lettich, who was one of about one hundred of the Sonderkommandos to survive the war.

Until the end of January 1943 there were no crematoria in Birkenau. In the middle of a small birch forest, about two kilometers from the camp, was a peaceful looking house... this cottage had been equipped as a gas chamber for a long time.

More than five hundred meters further (there were) two barracks, the men stood on one side the women on the other. They were addressed in a very polite and friendly way: " You have been on a journey, you are dirty. You will take a bath. Get undressed quickly."

Towels and soap were handed out, and then suddenly the brutes woke up and showed their true faces: this horde of people, these men and women were driven outside both summer and winter to go the few hundred yards to the 'Shower Room.' Above the entry door was the word "Shower". One could even see shower heads on the ceiling which were cemented-in but never had water flowing through them. These poor innocents were crammed together, pressed against each other. Then panic broke out, for at last they realised the fate in store for them. But blows with rifle butts and revolver shots soon restored order and finally they all entered the death chamber. The doors were shut and, ten minutes later, the temperature was high enough to facilitate the condensation of hydrogen cyanide, for the condemned were to be gassed with hydrogen cyanide. This was the so-called Zyklon B gravel pellets saturated with twenty per cent of hydrogen cyanide which was used by the German barbarians. Then the SS Unterscharführer Moll threw the gas in

through a little vent. One could hear fearful screams, but a few moments later there was complete silence. Twenty to twenty five minutes later, the doors and windows were opened to ventilate the rooms and the corpses were thrown at once onto pits to be burnt. But, beforehand the “dentists” has searched every mouth to pull out the gold teeth. The women were also searched to see if they had not hidden jewelry in the intimate parts of their bodies, and their hair was cut off and methodically placed in sacks for industrial purposes.”

Another French Jewish doctor, Sigismund Bendel, related the process that occurred after selection. The incident described took place after May 1944 when Birkenau had been improved by the addition of larger gas chambers and crematoria.

“One day, in June 1944 at six o’clock in the morning, I join the day shift (150 men) of crematorium IV... At eleven o’clock, a member of the political section appears on a motor cycle and reports that a transport is on its way. It is mid-day, when a long line of women, children, and old people enter the yard of the crematorium, people from the Lodz ghetto. One can see that they are exhausted and anxious. The senior official in charge of the crematorium, Herr Hauptscharführer Moll (by this time, Otto Moll had received a promotion to master sergeant) climbs on a bench to tell them that they are going to have a bath and that afterwards they will get a drink of hot coffee. There is applause... they all undress in the yard. The doors of the crematorium open and they enter the large room which in winter serves as an undressing room. Pressed together like sardines, they realise they have fallen into a trap out of which there is no longer any escape. Nevertheless, they continue to hope since a normal brain is incapable of grasping the terrible death which awaits them. Finally, everything is ready. The doors are opened and an indescribable jostling begins. The first people to enter the gas chamber begin to draw back. They sense the death which awaits them. The SS men put an end to this pushing and shoving with blows from their rifle butts, beating the heads of the horrified women who are desperately hugging their children. The massive oak double doors are shut. For two endless minutes one can hear banging on the walls and screams which are no longer human. And then, not a sound... five minutes later the doors are opened. The corpses, squashed together and distorted, fall out like a waterfall... The bodies, which are still warm, pass through the hands of the hairdresser who cuts their hair and the dentist who pulls out their gold teeth... One more transport has just been processed through No. IV crematorium.”

While all this was happening, Höss raised a family at his spacious house on the grounds of Auschwitz I.



Höss' house today

He had married in 1929. By the time he was commandant of Auschwitz, he had five children; two sons and three daughters. His wife was not the true purpose of Auschwitz until 1942 when she confronted her husband with the rumors she had been hearing. The children did not know until after the war.



While his family lived a privileged life, with servants, a chauffeur, and the privileges of Höss' rank and status within the camp, the killing went on. At its height, the killing system at Auschwitz-Birkenau was able to eliminate anywhere between nine and twelve thousand people a day. According to Höss the total could have been higher, but the crematoria often broke down due to twenty-four hour use. In the spring/summer of 1944 when the hundreds of thousands of Jew from Hungary arrived, open-air pits were used to burn the bodies. This was standard practice prior to the installation of the crematoria. The picture below was taken by a member of the Sonderkommando with a pinhole camera. This is the Kanada warehouse where the victim's goods were housed and smuggled out to the underground. Bodies are thrown

into one of the large open air pits at the edge of the camp.



In November 1943, Höss was given command of Department D1 in the SS Economic Office. His responsibility was to overseeing prisoner affairs, which he oversaw department that made economic use of the prisoners and their goods. He also became deputy inspector of all German concentration camps. He held this position for six months while Obersturmbannführer Artur Liebenhenschel took command of Auschwitz. However, Höss returned to assume command of the camp six months later when the large influx of Hungarian Jews began to arrive in the spring of 1944. The effort to kill the Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz was given the code-name “*Aktion Höss*” in honor of the commandant.

Höss was commander of the camp when men of the Sonderkommando in Crematoria IV rose in revolt. The revolt had been planned for some time, but different opinions within the Sonderkommando of various crematoria delayed the revolt. They could not agree on whether the uprising should lead to an escape or be more of a revolt with the destruction of the crematoria and the deaths of as many Germans as possible. In the end, it was decided that the revolt would destroy as much of the machinery as possible and if escape presented itself, so be it. Most if not all of those involved in the planning and carrying out of the uprising understood and accepted the plan was suicidal.

The plan had been in the works for months. It was carried out when word was received within the Sonderkommando that the Germans were preparing to kill them. This was a common occurrence as teams of Sonderkommando would work for a period of time, then be eliminated. It was speculated that this was due to them being eyewitnesses to mass murder.

There were many parts to the uprising but the most important one was obtaining gunpowder. To get the gunpowder, some heroic women prisoners risked their lives. For months women prison laborers who worked in the Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke smuggled small amounts of gunpowder out of the plant area. The company was tasked to make shells for the German Army and was one of many companies that took advantage of the

slave labor provided by the concentration camp system. The plant was located just outside Auschwitz I, and almost every day a few women smuggled gunpowder on or in their persons so the uprising could begin. The gunpowder was then smuggled to other women in the resistance who had occasional contact with men from the labor battalions of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The gunpowder was then given to the men of the Sonderkommando who stored it secretly.

There were many times in which they could be detected, however this was the only choice they had. Everyone that did this risked being killed either from being caught or accused of being part of the uprising. A man or a woman driven to near insanity by hunger would have turned the conspirators in at any time. Collaboration within the camp happened more frequently than people would expect. People were willing to kill each other for food when starving. It would also not come as a surprise that people would be willing to go to the authorities with information about a revolt for extra rations.

On October 7 1944, the men of the Sonderkommando in Crematoria IV learned that the SS had plans to eliminate them. With the gunpowder smuggled into the camps made into grenades and larger explosive charges, they started the uprising. Armed with homemade axes, knives, and a few weapons smuggled in with the help of the resistance outside the camp; the prisoners of the 12th Sonderkommando of Crematoria IV rose up. One of the SS guards was grabbed and thrown into the burning oven alive.

A gunfight then ensued but it was a losing proposition from the start. The men of the Sonderkommando knew this from the beginning. Their main goal was to hold off the SS long enough for the explosive charges to be set off in the crematoria. Dozens of the Sonderkommando men gave up their own lives and locked themselves into the ovens to blow up as many ovens in Crematoria IV as they could.

Soon the SS broke into the buildings, killing or wounding many left inside. Some inmates used the confusion to get through gated gaps in the fence while chaos ensued. They are quickly found and shot. The remaining Sonderkommando, some were wounded, others were in barracks, and many were dazed were rounded up, forced to lie on the ground, and shot in the back of the neck. The next class of Sonderkommando, the 13th in the history of the camp, were assigned to burn their bodies.

Some of the men are spared, and tortured for information. During the interrogations which involved beating, electric shocks to the genitals, pulling of nails, some of the men give up the names they know among the women gunpowder smugglers.

On October 9, four women were seized by the SS. They were tortured, raped, and beaten on a regular basis for two months. None of them gave up the names of any men that were still alive and in the Jewish underground within the camp. These four women were Rosa Robota, Estusia Wajcblum, Regina Safirsztain, and Alina Gartner. Under torment impossible to imagine, they only gave up the name of those men in the Sonderkommando who had already died. Roza Robota knew many others in the underground of the camp, yet said nothing.

On January 5th 1945, just twenty two days before the liberation of the camp by the Red

Army, the women were hung. Two in front of the day shift of the factory where they worked and two in front of the night shift. Roza Robota yelled “Be strong and be brave!” before the noose tightened around her neck.

All of this was done on the orders of Rudolf Höss.

The camp was liberated on January 27th 1945. In the days before the Red Army arrived, Rudolf Höss and the staff at the camp planned their getaway. Höss escaped in the guise of a Kriegsmarine (naval) officer. When the war ended, Höss was on the run for nearly a year. His wife had been found and repeatedly asserted that her husband was dead. The British in whose German territory which Frau Höss was found strongly suspected she was lying. When the British threatened to send her eldest son to the Russians as a POW, she caved and gave them the location of her husband which she had known since the end of the war.

Rudolf Höss was disguised as a gardener named Franz Lang in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein on the Danish border. When he was captured by the British on March 11th 1946, he denied being the Auschwitz commandant. But a photo held up to his face showed otherwise. British troops realizing that they had a mass murderer in their custody, beat Höss badly, but not enough so that he couldn’t stand afterward.

Many Holocaust deniers cite the fact that Höss was beaten upon capture and evidence that his testimony was forced. Höss not only gave his testimony in court, when asked if he would write his memoirs while in his cell, he did. He felt that his thoughts on the war, and his role in it were important to the future generations of people.



A more robust and well-fed Höss on trial in Poland



Höss on the day of his capture. Without the uniform, just a small

On April 2nd 1947, Rudolf Höss was hung at Auschwitz I for crimes against humanity. He was hung at the same spot where prisoners had been beaten and hanged during his tenure.

Originally both Höss and the initial investigation into the crimes of Auschwitz claimed that three million people perished at Auschwitz, historians now estimate this total to be closer to 1.1 million.

Accused at his trial of murdering three and a half million people, Höss replied, “No. Only two and one half million—the rest died from disease and starvation.”

One of the survivors of Auschwitz, also survived the medical experiments conducted there. Eva Mozes Kor is still alive (2015) and lives in Indiana. She has become famous for her forgiveness of those who took part in the Holocaust, which has drawn the ire from both survivors and others, but at the same time the respect of others. She has an adopted son named Rainer Höss, the grandson of Rudolf; who has made it his life work to repudiate the deeds of his grandfather and to educate everyone about the Holocaust.

Chapter 2: A Chapter For the Short Life of Erich Mühsfeldt



One of the men responsible for keeping order in Crematoria IV was a little man named Erich Mühsfeldt, sometimes written Mussfeld or Mußfeld (1913-1948). His work was mostly done at the crematoria and gas chamber.



In the words of the artist David Olere, who survived the work of the Sonderkommando, “We learned from Soviet prisoners who knew him well, this man with the meek and harmless appearance, friendly face, was actually a merciless brute”. Indeed he was.

Before he came to Auschwitz, Erich Mühsfeldt had been stationed at the Majdanek camp which was a combination work/extermination camp. This camp was located in central Poland, southeast of the capital Warsaw. There he took part in crimes against humanity as cruel as any that took place at Auschwitz. Majdanek today is the best preserved of all of the Nazi camps because it was liberated by the Red Army before the SS could destroy it. Unlike most Nazi camps, Majdanek was named after the small suburb of Majdan outside the city of Lublin. It was no mystery to anyone what was there and what happened there. People went in and they did not come out.

The construction of the camp foretold its brutal existence. Over three quarters of the two thousand Soviet POW’s that built the camp died before the camp was complete. After

completion, all of the original slave laborers were dead. Those that had survived working and living out in the open, died from a typhus epidemic.

Majdanek was originally set up as a holding pen and storage to sort through the belongings of victims from Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibor extermination camps. These camps, were solely extermination facilities with very little housing for prisoners and Sonderkommando. However, as these three camps ramped up their activity and the SS rounded more Jews for death, the three extermination camps quickly exceeded capacity. This was why Majdanek was converted into a killing center as well as a holding pen and labor center. This was also part of the reason for the construction of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Erich Mühsfeldt was assigned to the Majdanek camp in November 1941. Mühsfeldt was a sergeant and was known for committing a heinous crime. He holds the record for largest single mass shooting at a camp during the entire Holocaust.

In the fall of 1943, the Germans began what they called “Operation Harvest Festival”, or in German, “Erntefest”. This was the operation to kill or send all Jews in the Lublin area of Poland to extermination camps, which included the Majdanek camp.

There were many mass shootings in the Lublin area during the “operation”, but none as deadly as that at Majdanek. In the course of one day, Mühsfeldt and the men under his direct command killed over 18,000 people, shooting them by machine gun, pistol, and rifle fire. As soon as victims lined the edge of large pits and shot, another group was led forward.

This was the man who was given the responsibility for the oversight of operations at the crematoria in Auschwitz, and whom artist David Olere saw on a regular basis. Olere’s depiction of Mühsfeldt shows a severe man in SS uniform; one of many that Olere learned to fear and avoid if possible. The post-war picture of Mühsfeldt as a prisoner himself paints a different picture, despite the vacant stare.



Shortly before the prisoner revolt that destroyed Crematoria IV, an incident occurred in Crematoria I. It was recorded by the Hungarian Jewish doctor Miklos Nyiszli, who worked in the camp laboratory and hospital. He was forced to work as an assistant to the infamous Dr. Mengele and attempted to aid his fellow prisoners with medicine and medical care.

A teenage girl was found to have survived the gas chamber, but she was deathly ill. Nyiszli did his best to revive her. He attempted to convince Mühsfeldt that she would be valuable as slave labor, perhaps giving her a chance to survive. Mühsfeldt had her shot in the back of the neck.

When the revolt in Crematoria IV took place, Mühsfeldt was one of the men responsible for the killing which took place afterward.

At war's end, Mühsfeldt was identified and held by the Western Allies, but went on trial in Poland. He was sentenced to death by hanging. He was killed on January 28th 1948, three years after the liberation of Auschwitz.

Chapter 3: Amon Goeth

To many people since the release of the movie “Schindler’s List” in 1993, the face of evil that is the Holocaust is that of Hauptsturmführer Amon Goeth. He was the principal commander of the Plaszow camp, which was part of the Auschwitz chain of camps and lay to the southeast of the extermination camp.

The famous list of Oskar Schindler included one thousand two hundred Jews from the Plaszow camp and the Krakow ghetto. While Schindler’s deed was certainly heroic and should be remembered; most of the people that arrived at Plaszow died either in the camp or at Auschwitz. An estimated ten thousand people died at Plaszow, many of them by shooting. Many thousands of others were eventually killed at other camps.

The character of Amon Goeth was played by Ralph Fiennes, a classically handsome actor. The real Amon Goeth was a nondescript, pale, and overweight man with no remarkable physical features. The only thing not average about Amon Goeth was his sadism and his desire and fondness for killing.

Goeth was Austrian, born in 1908 in Vienna. In the late 1920’s there was a nascent Nazi Party in Austria and Goeth was attracted by its anti-Semitism. Which was especially strong in during that era in Austria. In 1930, he joined the Austrian SS. In 1933, after the Nazi assumed power in Germany, Goeth and others worked to overthrow the Austrian government and replace it with a National Socialist one. For this, he was made a wanted man and carried out subversive activities on behalf of the Nazis. He was jailed in 1934 but escaped and went into exile in Germany. He was stationed at the SS training facility next to the Dachau concentration camp. Three years later, he left the Nazi Party and the SS to help his parents in Munich and got married. He divorced quickly but not before having three children.

When Austria joined Germany in 1938, Goeth returned to his homeland and rejoined the SS as a sergeant. His fanatical anti-Semitism and his organizational abilities brought him to the attention of senior management and was soon promoted to lieutenant. He was assigned to the office responsible for relocating the Jews of Europe, which involved isolating them and seizing their assets.

In the summer of 1942, he was assigned to the staff of SS General Odilo Globocnik, one of the lesser known of the commanding figures of the Holocaust. Globocnik was responsible for the organization of the entire Holocaust movement in southern Poland. He was also responsible for the oversight of Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek, and Belzec. Under Globocnik’s command, Goeth was shown to have organized many of the local deportations and killings.

In February 1943, Goeth was given command of the camp construction effort at Plaszow and was named the camp’s commander. One month later, the Krakow ghetto was cleared out. Those who were not fit for slave labor were sent to Auschwitz where they were killed by the thousands. Many hundreds more were killed during the ghetto clearing operation.

Those who were deemed fit to work were sent to Plaszow. Goeth also had another part in another ghetto clearing operation which took place six months later in Tarnow, Poland. In the process of clearing out the ghetto, most of the population was shot. The eight thousand or so who survived, were sent to Auschwitz. Half perished on the short train trip there while others were gassed immediately. Witnesses later testified that Goeth personally shot dozens of people during the operation, including women and small children.

Goeth was also the officer in command of another clearing effort. This time of the smaller Szebie camp. Under Goeth's orders, one thousand of the nearly six thousand prisoners were shot. The rest were sent to Auschwitz. Few survived.

While twelve hundred people had been able get on Oskar Schindler's famous list and were spared, an estimated one hundred and fifty thousand people passed through the camps gates. The people on the list were less than one percent of all the people that arrived at Auschwitz and perished.

Goeth owned two Great Danes during the war and they were trained to maul prisoners. These dogs were a common theme in the camps at Poland. "Barry" the Saint Bernard mix was a terrorizing feature at Sobibor.

He beat and shot prisoners for small things such as moving too slow or for serving soup too hot. Sometimes he just leaned out the window of his office and shot people. Like many people in command in the camps, Goeth held the inmates to a policy of collective responsibility. In Schindler's List, Goeth is shown killing people for the escape attempt of others and stealing. These were just two episodes of many.

Surprisingly, even the SS had standards. Goeth had been under suspicion since his promotion as camp commander. In addition to the money he received from Schindler for the lives and labor of prisoners, Goeth was suspected of seizing much of the looted Jewish property himself. The SS do not like being stolen from. Goeth was also accused of mistreating prisoners and was punished for his open and public killings. He was also in trouble for allowing prisoners and non-essential personnel to go through and maintain camp records. However, by the time his trial was to begin within the SS army, Germany was on the edge of defeat and Goeth was sent to the SS hospital in Bavaria.

Goeth was there when the Americans conquered southwest Germany in 1945. Like Höss and Mühsfeldt, he was deported to Poland to stand trial. He was eventually convicted for war crimes and also for homicide on a mass scale. He was hung in September 1946.

Goeth had a daughter out of wedlock with his wartime mistress named Monika Hertwig. She met with some of the Schindler's survivors and worked together to help each other to move on from the past.

Monika Hertwig also had secret. In 1970, she had a daughter by a boarder at her house whom was a Nigerian immigrant. The girl was put in foster care at age three and was adopted at age seven. She had kept in touch with her birth mother throughout. She lost touch with her mother in later years and had not been told about her family background. In 2008, she came across her mother's book "I Have to Love my Father, Don't I?" while

searching in the library. Recognizing the name, she took the book from the shelf and read it. The young woman's name is Jennifer Teege, and she is forty-five years old today. She is the grand-daughter of Amon Goeth. In 2013, she published a book titled "*My Grandfather Would Have Shot Me: A Black Woman Discovers Her Family's Nazi Past.*"



Bundesarchiv, B 162 Bild-00113
Foto: v.Reg. | 1938/1940 ca.

Courtesy Warsaw Ghetto Fighters' Museum

Chapter Four:

Justice Delayed

In the previous photo, we see some of the SS staff at Sobibor extermination camp on their off hours. Without the uniforms you might think this is a candid shot of a wild frat house party. In a way, it was; the business that tied these men together was murder and their fraternity was the SS.

The man second from right is Kurt Bolender, an especially sadistic guard whose smile disguises his cruelty. After the war was over, Bolender went into hiding. Unlike the many SS criminals who survived and escaped, Bolender remained in Germany, living under an assumed name. His family thought he was dead and he remained undetected, until 1961. Someone recognized him working as a bouncer in a nightclub in the busy port city of Bremen in West Germany. His alias was Heinz Brenner. Brenner is a traditional German family name that loosely translated means “one who burns things”. That is exactly what Kurt Bolender did in the mid-1940s.

Bolender had been assigned to the Sobibor extermination camp by its commandant, Franz Stangl. They had met when they worked together in the T-4 program in Germany. This program, was responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of mentally and physically disabled people in Germany before and during the war.

Bolender had been involved with Stangl and SS Major Christian Wirth in the gassing of victims and the disposal of their bodies.

Bolender was only a staff sergeant, but he was known to have a close relationship with Stangl. Eventually, he was placed in direct charge of the extermination facilities in the spring of 1942. Bolender was one of the people were responsible for turning on the motors that pumped carbon monoxide gas into the chambers where hundreds of victims awaited

their death.

Bolender was also the overseer for the SS guards and Ukrainians that drove the victims up an enclosed and camouflaged wire area (known as “The Tube”, or “The Way to Heaven”) that led to the gas chambers. In these two hundred or so meters, Jewish victims were driven like cattle to slaughter. Bolender along with the others, used his whip to move them along.

This whip was used at other times too. Bolender was in charge of the Sonderkommando at Sobibor as well. At this camp, bodies were cleared from the gas chambers and thrown into open burning pits.

Many of the Sonderkommando at Sobibor fell victim to Bolender’s dog “Barry”, a Saint Bernard mix who was trained to maul victims on command. If Bolender took a dislike to a prisoner, for any reason as simple as their appearance, he would often set Barry on them. The dog was trained to go for the buttocks and private parts. Those who were not killed by Barry died soon after with a shot to the head or in the gas chamber. Sometimes they were thrown directly into the burning pits alive.

In testimony during his trial and in the subsequent trial and interviews of Commandant Franz Stangl. It became clear that the widely held notion that SS men would not touch Jewish women was incorrect. There was a brothel at Sobibor where pretty Jewish girls were kept alive, given food and clothes, and raped repeatedly in orgies that took place on a regular basis. These girls were all eventually killed. Bolender was a regular participant in both the sexual assault and the murder of these young women.

In the fall of 1942, Bolender was put in charge of the Ukrainian guards at Sobibor. These men had an even worse reputation than many of the SS. A survivor of the camp later testified about Bolender’s activities at this time:

“It is hard to forget Oberscharführer Kurt Bolender, with his athletic body and long hair, who used to go walking half naked, clad only in training breeches, carrying a long whip with which he brutally lashed the camp prisoners whom he came upon on his way. On his way to lunch he was in the habit of passing the main gate and swinging a whip with all his strength upon the heads of the Jews who went through. Once, when I was still working in the platform commando, the group was accused of carelessness when we had left a window open on one of the train cars. Each one of us was punished with 100 lashes. Bolender was very active in this task. More than once I saw him throwing babies, children, and the sick straight from the freight cars into the trolley with the load that went to the Lazarett [execution pits disguised as a field hospital]. He was the one who chose the ten men to deliver the food to the workers in Camp III. When he had a yen to accompany the group, not one of them would return to us when the task was done.”

In October 1943 there was a mass uprising and escape at the Sobibor camp. Though most of the prisoners involved were killed during or immediately after the uprising, more than a few survived the war and were able to testify against Bolender and others at their later trials.

In 1961 after his arrest, a search of his apartment revealed a whip with the initials

K.B. on it. This was made by a prisoner who made jewelry and embossed knives and whips for the SS. He was still alive in 1961 to testify about the whip and Bolender.

In 1965, after much pre-trial red tape and legal motions, the trial of Bolender and other Sobibor guards took place in West Germany. Bolender denied being even at the camp until faced with irrefutable evidence at which he broke down and confessed. Throughout the trial, he maintained his innocence and that he was just a minor functionary.



Bolender (far right foreground, dark framed glasses) with other SS defendants, 1965

sheet in his cell before the trial was over.

He hung himself by a

Conclusion

The publisher and author of this e-book hopes that you found it both educational and rewarding. The history of the Holocaust demands great caution in its writing and we hope that we have been both sensitive and thorough in its telling.

Survivors are few in number in 2015, but many of them are eager to relate their experiences to a younger audience in the hope that what they experienced will be remembered. We urge you to look up organizations and schools in your area who can put you in touch with these men and women before they too are gone.

Finally, we would like to ask you to give a short, honest, and unbiased review of this book. You can easily access the review page through our Author Page:

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