

Main entrance to Auschwitz I with the inscription "Work Makes Free".

The Death Factory

DOCUMENT ON AUSCHWITZ

by
OTA KRAUS
and
ERICH KULKA

Translated from the Czech
by
STEPHEN JOLLY

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I

Introduction

WE, the joint authors of this book, were political prisoners at Auschwitz: No. 73,046, Ota Kraus, of Prague, arrested April 2nd, 1940, imprisoned in Prague and at Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Neuengamme, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald concentration camps; No. 73,043, Erich Kulka, of Vsetín, arrested June 23rd, 1939, imprisoned at Špilberk Castle and Kaunitz College in Brno, and at Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Neuengamme and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps. We were arrested on account of our active resistance to the Nazi occupants.

We have endured Gestapo interrogations, maltreatment in prison, the horrors of transportation, and the soul-searing experience of belonging to the penal company at Dachau, Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme. But these things were only so many stages on the road through purgatory that led to hell. When we reached that hell at Birkenau, our earlier existence in concentration camps seemed comforting in retrospect.

We were together at Dachau, Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme for two years. On the very first day we were set working with spades, and subsequently we worked as locksmiths.

We took leave of our comrades at Neuengamme early in November, 1942. On the eve of our departure they strove to encourage us to face the future, being convinced that we would survive.

We arrived at Auschwitz on November 4th. Two days later we were moved to Birkenau. Here a Pole named Matlak helped us through our initial difficulties, and it was thanks to him that we were again taken on as locksmiths.

Our experience of other concentration camps had taught us the vital need to live collectively. Political consciousness and contact with others in the struggle against Nazism were necessary conditions of success; it was this that gave people a sense of purpose in life behind barbed wire and enabled them to hold out. Those who had the good fortune to be

able to work at their trade were the best placed to develop common activity with like-minded prisoners of other nationalities. It would be true to say that we owed our lives to our employment at Birkenau as locksmiths.

Above all, our work kept us in good health, since we enjoyed better conditions than the other prisoners. We had access to more and better food, and were able to keep ourselves clean; we had sufficient clothing and footwear. In due course we were able to assist other prisoners.

We locksmiths had special passes, known as *Passierscheinen*, from the camp authorities. With these we were able to go outside the camp and also to visit the other camps at Birkenau, including the women's camps, the disinfection block and the crematoria. Even in the areas where prisoners were kept under strict surveillance in work squads, which they were not allowed to leave, we were able to move about entirely unsupervised.

Often enough we merely pretended to work. Many were the good door handles and locks that we unscrewed and screwed up again at the approach of an SS man. If we were to work effectively as contacts between the various resistance groups it was essential that we should be able to hang about in this way, especially when we needed information from other camps or when something unusual was going on. For instance, it was from new arrivals that we learnt about the journey to Birkenau and what was happening in the outside world.

The work of construction never stopped at the camp. Besides the prisoners employed as cheap labour on building jobs, there were many civilian experts from private firms in Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland. The latter, known as "fully incorporated workers", directed the work from the technical angle. They were not allowed, however, to have any contact with the prisoners and hence were always accompanied by SS men. Before coming to work at the camp they were obliged to take a solemn oath not to tell anyone, even their families, about what they saw. Failure in this respect meant imprisonment in the camp, which actually happened in several instances. They were allowed to visit their families once in three months. Once back in the camp they had to give a detailed report on everybody they had met, and renew their oath.

We got to know various Czech civilians working in the camp on this basis. They kept us in touch with our homeland and passed on information to us regarding the destruction of human life in the camp.

We started work in 1942, with empty hands. We had no official

permission, no tools and no workshop. Within a year, by dint of skilful "organizing", we had a workshop which under camp conditions could be considered magnificently equipped.

There was a great deal of essential work to be done by locksmiths in all the camps at Birkenau. This work we did "black" and at greater speed than if it had had to be duly authorized through the complicated official channels. Our services were required not only by those prisoners who had been given various duties by the camp authorities, but also by the SS who relied upon us to "organize" for them.

We provided them with locks and kitchen equipment, including complete stoves, we mended their bicycles and domestic utensils. We repaired the boilers in the camp kitchens and were given food in return. We received clothing for the work we did at the disinfection block. We helped the camp hospital to obtain sanitary equipment.

We had friends in all the work squads, particularly in the "Canada" Disposal Squad which became our main source of supply.

After we had been in the camp some time, our workshop became our living quarters and we had a much quieter life than the people in the blocks. We even cooked our food on the field smithy, though this meant keeping a sharp look-out for SS men since prisoners were not allowed to cook.

Our workshop was at the southern end of the men's camp BIIId (*Stammlager*) near the wood store (*Holzbof*). Here prisoners would find their way to us of an evening, and we kept a record of the reports they gave us. In this way we were able to get an overall picture of what was happening in the camp and help to co-ordinate the political work. Newspapers were secretly sold to us by the civilians employed by private firms. Our workshop also served as a secret post office.

The various reports, documents and plans were hidden in the double walls of the hut, under the anvil and among the tools. We had cameras and even a radio set. The SS frequently searched the place from top to bottom but only once did they discover anything—a pair of radio headphones.

Although we were at all times so preoccupied with such matters that we even became oblivious of the horrors of death around us, we did not believe it possible that we should actually survive the camp. Our one hope was that we might be able to make a successful escape, and by March, 1944, this had become our main concern. At the same time we were determined that the evidence we had collected in the form of reports, plans and documents should be preserved. We were

able to send a number of these to Ota Kraus's wife at Libčice and Vltavou by the hands of Tomáš Mařák, Josef Moravec and Fabián Sukup. In June, 1944, Fabián Sukup brought Mrs. Kraus a letter from her husband telling her of his intention to escape and asking her to make such preparations as she could.

Ota Kraus left Birkenau on October 26th, 1944, having smuggled himself aboard a train destined for Ohrdruf camp near Buchenwald. Erich Kulka remained at Birkenau with his son until the camp was evacuated in January, 1945; he was put on a train to Mauthausen but succeeded in making good his escape at Ostrava.

The drawings in this book were made by Dina Gottliebová, prisoner No. 61,000, who spent 15 months at Birkenau.

The map of Auschwitz district is from the Military Geographical Institute in Prague.

The various plans, except for that of Birkenau camp itself, are the work of Věra Foltýnová, prisoner No. 42,808, and Jiří Kolín.

The photographs have been supplied by the Extraordinary State Commission, the Auschwitz Museum, the State Jewish Museum in Prague and the authors.

THE NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Immediately after his seizure of power, Hitler issued his Protective Custody (*Schutzhaft*) Decree of February 28th, 1933, the aim of which was to undermine any active resistance to the regime. By 1939 the Nazis had established six concentration camps with a population of some 20,000. These were in the hands of the SS whose ranks were continually being increased.

The most notorious camps were at Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, Neuengamme, Flossenburg, Belsen and Auschwitz. Each camp had its foreordained task. Unlike the other camps, Auschwitz was designed first and foremost as an extermination concern.

The post-war trials of war criminals have provided irrefutable proof that the horrors that took place at Auschwitz were only a beginning, a testing period. Still more intense biological destruction, starting with the Slav nations, was to be initiated after victory had been achieved in the war.

Auschwitz was the scene of the greatest crime in the history of mankind.

BIRKENAU CAMP

The prisoners' compound was a rectangle about 2 km long by 1 km broad, divided by east-west roads into three sectors: BI, BII and BIII.

To the west of this rectangle were Camp BIIg, the disinfection block, Crematoria I, II, III and IV, and the filter plant.

To the east of this rectangle were the SS buildings (Command H.Q., the barracks for 3000 SS men, the SS hospital and the water-tower).

The three sectors (BI, BII and BIII), Camp BIIg, the disinfection block, the crematoria and the filter plant were surrounded by high tension barbed wire and the inner cordon of guard-posts. SS guards manned the wooden sentry towers which were placed at intervals of about 50 yds.

The main entrance to the camp was on the eastern side, between Sectors BI and BII. Between the sectors was the station ramp. It was constructed in 1944 and had three lines. Trains leaving the ramp went east, to Auschwitz.

Sector BI

Built in 1941, this was the oldest of the sectors. It contained two camps, BIa and BIb, the majority of the blocks being built of brick.

After the summer of 1942 Camp BIa was occupied by women and nearly half of it was used as a women's hospital.

Block 25 served as a collecting point for women due to be sent to the gas chamber. The block marked A contained a surgery; that marked R was the experimental X-ray centre. It was in the latter, in December, 1942, that Professor Clauberg started sterilization experiments on women by injection while Professor Schumann experimented on men to the same end with X-rays (see pp. 97 *et seq.*).

Camp BIb, which was originally a men's camp, became a women's camp in 1943 to receive the overflow from Camp BIa.

When Camp BIb was a men's camp, Block 1 was a penal block. Block 3 contained a Stehbunker—a cell where prisoners were kept standing. Block 7 was a hospital which was later extended to include Block 12 and then Block 8. Blocks 8 and 12 were surgeries, the former containing a small room where lethal injections were administered. Block 15 was a collecting point for persons due to be sterilized; for some time it also served as a children's collecting point. Block 20 was

received special official rations from the SS kitchen. These were far more substantial than the rations which were occasionally given to the prisoners engaged on the heaviest work.

The first floor of Block 24 was specially adapted and its forty rooms were luxuriously appointed. Each prostitute had her own little room and had to receive six visits three times a week; the time allotted for each visit was twenty minutes. A bell rung by the "Puffmutter", which sounded in all the rooms, announced the beginning and end of each visit.

The Auschwitz brothel was not in any way unique, being typical of those in all the larger camps. At the same time prostitution was carried on in a more covered form. SS men would come to the women's camps, accompanied by the senior wardress, to select young prisoners for service. They would normally come when disinfection was in progress and the women were in a state of undress. They would point to a young girl and, if they found her pleasing, would take her away as a personal servant. The girl would then receive instructions from the senior wardress that she must do everything that was required of her.

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*The Machinery of Death***DEATH AS A PROGRAMME**

THE mass destruction of millions of people of different nationalities in the Nazi concentration camps, and particularly at Birkenau, was not the result of any passing murder-psychosis induced by success or failure on the battlefields, but of deliberate, premeditated, cold-blooded planning.

The legions of Nazi youth, organized in the *Hitlerjugend* ("Hitler Youth"), were expertly trained for this work of destruction. When they grew to manhood, they became SS men who, working alongside their underlings, the German "green" prisoner-criminals and the German "black" prisoner-prostitutes, perfected their machinery of death.

On their caps and the lapels of their uniforms all the SS wore the symbol of their mission: the skull and cross-bones on a black field. This symbol expressed their programme which reached its culmination at Birkenau.

This entire sadistic system of destroying human lives was the product of the degenerate minds of Nazi politicians, scientists and doctors. Even those trained to Nazi ways were dumbfounded at the thoroughness and brutality with which Nazi policy was carried out. Some of the SS who came to Birkenau from other parts were aghast at the bestialities committed in the camp, but being Nazis and SS men, they became accustomed to such scenes in a few days and were soon able to commit murders themselves as easily as their fellows.

The following table, compiled from documents submitted at the Nuremberg trial and evidence given by witnesses at the trial, testifies eloquently to the highly efficient technique of destruction. It shows that with their five crematoria (including the first, in Auschwitz I)

the Nazis had the necessary equipment to wipe out entire nations. The figures appear in the Nuremberg Trial records.

Crematorium	Number of months in use	Monthly capacity for burning corpses	Number of corpses destroyed throughout working period
I	24	9,000	215,000
II	19	90,000	1,710,000
III	18	90,000	1,620,000
IV	17	45,000	765,000
V	18	42,000	810,000
	TOTAL	276,000	5,120,000

THE FIRST EXPERIMENTS AT GASSING

In Auschwitz I

The first mass destruction by gas in Auschwitz took place in the spring of 1942, at the only crematorium then in existence—in Auschwitz I. Before this, gassing had been carried out on some small groups of emaciated prisoners, notably Russian prisoners of war.

The Auschwitz crematorium was small. It had one gas chamber for 600–800 people, and six furnaces.

One of the first experiments in mass execution by gas took place when 700 Slovak Jews arrived from Žilina in May, 1942. The technique used on this occasion was considerably inferior to that used a few days later after Himmler had visited the camp.

Once the first success had been achieved, work was started at Birkenau on the construction of four large crematoria complete with gas chambers.

In June, 1943, the Auschwitz crematorium was closed down and used as a store for some thousands of urns containing the ashes of its victims. The ash was not separated in any way, so that those to whom urns were sent did not receive the ashes of their dear ones. The gas chambers of the crematorium were converted into a store-room for the SS dispensary, and the corpses from Auschwitz I were burnt at Birkenau.

In the “confession” which he wrote in Cracow prison in 1947, Rudolf Hoess, former Commandant of Auschwitz, described the first experiments at Auschwitz as follows:

“One day in 1941, when I was on duty, my deputy, Fritsch, carried out a test execution by gas on some prisoners. For this he used hydrocyanic cyclon B which up to then had been used for destroying insects in the camp. The gassing took place in the cells of Block 11. I subsequently went to inspect the results wearing a gas mask. The prisoners, packed tight in the cells, had died immediately the crystals of cyclon gas were thrown in. A few stifled cries—and all was over.

“This first attempt at exterminating people with gas did not weigh at all heavily on my conscience—perhaps because I was considerably excited by the efficiency of the experiment. I have a more vivid memory of the gassing of 900 Soviet prisoners of war. This took place shortly afterwards in the old crematorium, since the use of Block 11 would have caused considerable inconvenience and made it necessary to take elaborate security measures.

“As the Russians were getting out of the train, several holes were drilled in the roof of the mortuary at the crematorium. The Russians undressed in the entrance hall and then filed quietly into the mortuary, having been told that they were to be deloused. Once they were inside the room, which they filled completely, the doors were bolted behind them and the gas was turned on through the holes in the roof. I do not know how long they took dying but they made quite a din for some time. As the gas was fed in, some of the prisoners shouted ‘gas’, which was followed by prolonged shouting and a furious battering on the door. But the door held. After some hours the mortuary was opened up and aired.

“This was the first time I had seen so large a pile of gassed bodies. I had expected death by gas to be bad enough, but this made me feel ill. I was overcome by a feeling of horror . . . All the same I have to state quite frankly that I was quite satisfied with the gassing of this convoy because we had soon to begin with the mass extermination of the Jews, and up to that day neither Eichmann nor I had had any clear idea how to set about the task of mass executions. We knew that some kind of gas had to be used, but we were not sure which gas or how to use it. Thanks to this experiment we had found both the gas and the method of use. . . .”

At Birkenau

The Auschwitz camp authorities started mass executions at Birkenau even before the construction of the crematoria was completed.

For this purpose two thatched cottages were adapted and fitted up as primitive gas chambers. These buildings were about 0.5 km to the west of the disinfection block and had previously been farm buildings before the district was evacuated. They measured 20 ft × 40 ft and were divided into four rooms with heavy doors; there were also heavy doors in the back wall. There was a small barred window high up on the side wall.

In front of the cottages was a huge notice with the inscription:

DISINFECTION

On the front door of one of the rooms was a notice stating:

THIS WAY FOR DISINFECTION

On the back door another notice:

THIS WAY TO THE BATHROOM

Inside the rooms there were notices in a number of languages:

NO NOISE!

WARNING — DANGER!

KEEP THIS PLACE CLEAN AND TIDY!

Behind the cottages was a stout fence, covered with thick material to prevent anybody peeping through it. Near by were two large, windowless buildings, 30 ft × 130 ft, used for undressing.

It was to these buildings that the people were brought in lorries. As they were unloaded they found themselves surrounded by a close cordon of SS guards, armed with automatic rifles, hand grenades and machine guns. The guards also had trained dogs.

The victims were ordered to enter the undressing-rooms in groups, women and children in one, men in the other. They were told that they were in a work camp and must have a bath and be disinfected as a precaution against infection.

Next they were ordered to undress to the skin and to arrange their clothes and other belongings tidily. They had to hand in their valuables but were promised that they would get them back. After this the SS drove them into the gas chambers. If any of them saw through the trick and offered resistance, the SS beat them with sticks, whips and rifle-butts.

As soon as a gas chamber was full—up to 150 people were crammed into a space of 21 square yards—the SS banged the doors to, screwed up the bars, and fed in the poison through the window in the wall.

The window was then hermetically sealed, and for some minutes shouting and groaning could be heard.

After about half an hour the SS opened the rear doors. It was a ghastly sight. Naked women and children were convulsed into the most horrible attitudes, their skin lacerated, their fists clenched and their limbs bleeding from biting each other in their pain. The victims died standing up, for they were so wedged together that they could not fall.

The *Sonderkommando* (special work squad) then set to work throwing the corpses into deep pits prepared in the vicinity. The rooms were quickly cleaned out, whitewashed and sprayed with eau de Cologne (brought in ample quantities by the victims themselves, especially the women). The next convoy must know nothing of the terrible tragedy which had been enacted there but a moment before and now awaited them.

The process of gassing, clearing away the corpses and cleaning the rooms lasted about an hour; a convoy of from two to three thousand people was thus destroyed and cleared away within a few hours.

After a few months, although the corpses were covered with chlorine, lime and earth, an intolerable stench began to hang around the entire neighbourhood. Deadly bacteria were found in springs and wells, and there was a severe danger of epidemics.

To meet this problem, the *Sonderkommando* was increased in size. Day and night, working in two shifts, the prisoners in the squad dug up decaying corpses, took them away on narrow-gauge trucks and burnt them in heaps in the immediate vicinity. The work of exhuming and burning 50,000 corpses lasted almost till December, 1942. After this experience the Nazis stopped burying their victims and cremated them instead.

Such were the emergency methods used for destroying people at Birkenau in the early days. They continued in use until February, 1943, when the crematoria were completed and brought into use—first Crematorium I, and then the others.

GASSING BROUGHT TO PERFECTION

Crematoria with Gas Chambers

The new crematoria with their gas chambers—corpse-processing factories—were no longer old converted cottages but modern buildings, carefully devised, planned and constructed by SS officers.

The construction was started in the autumn of 1942. They were built by thousands of prisoners organized in building parties bearing the official titles: *Arbeitskommando Krematorium I, II, III, IV*. SS officers gave the Kapos directions in accordance with the plans drawn up at the enormous building office in Auschwitz I. The technical drawings for the furnaces were marked "Topf & Sons, Erfurt"; they were dated 1937, which makes it clear that the Nazis were preparing and planning this crime, down to the last detail, long before they unleashed the Second World War. The erection of the four Birkenau crematoria thus constitutes a culminating point in the Nazis' organized attempt to break all resistance by freedom-loving mankind.

Crematoria I and II were large and were equipped with underground gas chambers; Crematoria III and IV were smaller, not so well appointed, and the gas chambers were above ground. Crematoria I and II each had a single squat chimney, while Crematoria III and IV each had two chimneys.

The plans for these crematoria, reproduced in this book, come from the building office (*Bauleitung*) at Birkenau Camp whence they were removed by Vera Foltýnová, an architect who worked there. We sent these plans to Czechoslovakia in August, 1944, by Fabián Sukup because at that time we assumed that both the crematoria and we ourselves would be liquidated as witnesses to German crimes. The removal of inconvenient witnesses was a normal occurrence throughout the Third Reich, especially in the concentration camps.

At first sight the crematoria—one-storey buildings in German style, with steep roofs, barred windows and dormer windows—presented the appearance of large bakeries. The space around them was enclosed by high tension barbed wire and was always well kept. The roads were sprayed with sand, and well-tended flowers bloomed in the beds on the lawn. The underground gas chambers, projecting some 20 in. above ground level, formed a grassy terrace. A person coming to the crematoria for the first time could have no idea what these industrial-looking buildings were actually for.

Crematoria I and II were close to the camp itself and were visible from all sides. Crematoria III and IV, on the other hand, were hidden in a little wood; tall pine trees and birches concealed the tragedies that befell millions. This place was called Brzezinka, from which the name Birkenau is derived. Around the crematoria were long, high piles of wood which was used for burning corpses, mainly in the pits.

At Crematoria I and II there were two underground rooms. The

larger of these was an undressing-room and was occasionally used as a mortuary; the other was a gas chamber. The whitewashed undressing-room had square concrete pillars, about 12 ft apart, down the middle. Along the walls and round the pillars there were benches, with coat-hooks surmounted by numbers. A pipe with a number of water taps ran the entire length of one of the walls. There were the usual notices in several languages: NO NOISE!, KEEP THIS PLACE CLEAN AND TIDY!, and arrows pointing to the doors bearing the words: DISINFECTION, BATHROOM. The gas chamber was somewhat shorter than the undressing-room and looked like a communal bathroom. The showers in the roof, of course, were not used for water. Water taps were placed along the walls. Between the concrete pillars were two iron pillars, 1 ft × 1 ft, covered in thickly plaited wire. These pillars passed through the concrete ceiling to the grassy terrace mentioned above; here they terminated in airtight trap-doors into which the SS men fed the cyclon gas. The purpose of the plaited wire was to prevent any interference with the cyclon crystals. These pillars were a later addition to the gas chambers and hence do not appear in the plan.

Each of the gas chambers at Crematoria I and II was capable of accommodating up to 2000 people at a time.

At the entrance to the gas chamber was a lift, behind double doors, for transporting the corpses to the furnace-rooms on the ground-floor, with their 15 three-stage furnaces. At the bottom stage air was driven in by electric fans, at the middle the fuel was burnt, and at the top the corpses were placed, two or three at a time, on the stout fire-clay grate. The furnaces had cast-iron doors which were opened by means of a pulley.

There was also a dissecting-room on the ground-floor where the prisoner-doctors in the Sonderkommando carried out various experiments and post mortems under the supervision of SS doctors.

Next to the dissecting-room was the execution room whose smooth concrete floor sloped gently towards a runnel in the centre to drain away the blood of those executed. The back wall of the execution room was black. An extra door, not visible at first glance, led to the lift by which the bodies were taken to the furnaces.

There were various other rooms and equipment, such as the engine-room, electric motors, ventilators, an incinerator for burning rubbish and rags, washrooms, rooms for the use of the SS, a room for melting down gold taken from dead people's teeth, and lavatories.

Entrance to the basement from the yard was by steps. But a built-in

concrete chute made it possible to deposit the bodies of the old and the sick, the half-dead and the dead, immediately in front of the gas chamber.

Crematoria III and IV, though smaller, worked faster than Crematoria I and II. Each had three gas chambers above ground, accommodating more than 2000 people at once, and eight furnaces.

The four crematoria together had eight gas chambers with a capacity of 8000 people; there were forty-six furnaces all told, each capable of burning at least three bodies in 20 minutes.

The fire was so intense that flames would shoot upwards several feet above the chimneys. The latter often cracked with the heat and had to be strengthened with iron hoops.

When the furnaces were unable to cope with the number of bodies—a frequent occurrence—the corpses were burnt by the thousand on great heaps. The gassed bodies would be flung into the yard, the gas chambers cleaned out, and gassing would then continue while the corpses were being taken away to be burnt on the heaps.

Direct from Train to Gas Chamber

Often enough, when a convoy for extermination was due to arrive at Birkenau, a rumour would spread through the camp, some days before its arrival, that victims were on their way from France, Holland, Czechoslovakia or elsewhere, and it was usually not long before this proved to be true.

Orders for extermination were issued by the Supreme Reich Security Office in Berlin (R.S.H.A.), which was directly controlled by Himmler, its leading lights being Kaltenbrunner, Pohl and Eichmann. Before its arrival, each convoy was reported to the officer commanding the Sonderkommando who issued orders for the stoking of the furnaces and other necessary preparations.

Until June, 1944, trains to Auschwitz stopped for "classification" at a special ramp, invisible both from the camp itself and the immediate vicinity. A train would consist of from fifty to eighty cattle trucks. As soon as it arrived at the ramp, it was surrounded by a close cordon of SS guards with their dogs. Personnel from the "Canada" Disposal Squad opened up the trucks, and with much yelling and shouting the people were driven out of them in a state of utter confusion.

The first duty of the "Canada" Squad at the station was to unload the newcomers' luggage as quickly as possible and take everything

away from them except their handbags. The people were told that their baggage would be returned to them in the camp. If any person tried to object, his luggage was taken off him by force.

The "Canada" Squad were forbidden, under pain of death by shooting, to speak to the new arrivals, and the SS guards watched to see that this order was obeyed.

It frequently happened that members of the "Canada" Squad recognized relatives among the new arrivals; thus a son might suddenly catch sight of his mother and be powerless to do anything but help prepare her funeral while she was still alive. Many newcomers, especially among the Poles, knew what was ahead of them and kept on asking: "Are we going to the furnaces? Are we going to be burnt?"

As the men got out of the trucks, they were separated from the women and children. Then an SS doctor and SS officer, after a superficial examination of each man, would show by a jerk of the thumb whether they were to go to the right or left—life or death.

Children were assigned to death, and women who did not want to be separated from their children went with them. Of the remaining women only those from sixteen to thirty who were young and healthy were selected for the camp; the rest were sent to the gas chambers. Of the men some 15 to 20% were classified as fit for work.

People destined for the gas chambers were loaded on to waiting lorries. Those classified as fit for work had to walk to the camps on foot, but before they left they were given the option of going on the lorries, if they thought they could not walk—which meant death in the gas chambers.

We shall never forget the sight of those long convoys of fast-moving lorries, packed full of people. We were unable to give them the least word or sign to show them where they were heading—but they were really better off if they did not know.

One of the most cynical touches in the whole affair was the use of an ambulance, marked with the Red Cross. The vehicle waited at the ramp, to give the impression that it was performing the normal function of an ambulance, and then moved off at the tail of the convoy. But instead of medicines and patients it carried tins of the deadly cyclon B crystals for the gas chambers.

Many were the terrible sights we ourselves witnessed.

Once, for instance, an old starving prisoner hailed a lorry carrying

new arrivals: "Throw us a piece of bread, you're going to your death anyhow!"

An SS man standing nearby noted down his number, and later on the Camp Commandant punished both the man himself and his entire work squad—all were sent to the gas chamber.

On another occasion a lad of about fifteen jumped off a lorry as it was moving off. The SS quickly recaptured him, beat him up and took him straight to the crematorium.

In August, 1943, they grabbed hold of a thirteen-year-old boy, pushed him onto a lorry and drove off with him to the crematorium. The lad jumped off several times, shouting that he wanted to work and was perfectly fit. Afraid that the other prisoners might become suspicious, the SS put him in the vehicle with the Red Cross. But the boy broke one of the windows and kept shrieking at Schwarzhuber, the Camp Commandant, until the latter finally allowed him back into the camp where he acted as a messenger-boy to the guard-room until the evacuation. He was a Pole named Karol.

In June, 1944, work was completed on the construction of a branch line from Auschwitz Station to Birkenau. The line passed through the main entrance to the camp, continued between Sectors BI and BII as far as Crematoria I and II, and ended at a ramp with three platforms. The work had gone on day and night. Even at Birkenau we had never seen such a feverish tempo. Hundreds of prisoners collapsed under the strain and finished up in the gas chambers.

This was a time when Birkenau was busier than ever, with the arrival of the convoys from Hungary. The trains stretched from the crematoria at Birkenau all the way to Auschwitz. Several trains were unloaded simultaneously, and the process of "classifying" was carried on in full view of the women's and men's camps. In 24 hours, 20,000 people would be unloaded, classified and gassed—fourteen convoys in all.

People died of thirst in the fearful heat. They had been packed eighty to a truck and travelled at least four days without any food or water; many became insane.

All along the roads where the people walked to the disinfection block and the crematoria could be seen plenty of evidence that many of them were well aware that this was their last journey. Articles of clothing, small hand luggage, valuables and torn bank-notes were strewn over the ground. We even found artificial limbs thrown away.

Even the SS officers and doctors found their task too much for them. Although hardened to such labours, they needed the solace of drink to deaden their senses, and they would swap over their duties several times a day. The commandants of all the Auschwitz camps also worked shifts.

Such horrors became our daily fare. We often saw elegantly dressed women straight from Paris or Budapest; in a few hours time we saw those same women emerging from the disinfection block, transformed into slaves of the Nazi regime, with shaven heads, dressed in the shabbiest of rags and wearing wooden slippers instead of shoes. At night we heard trains arriving, cars driving off, shouting and groaning. Newcomers walking round the camps tried to question the older prisoners: "Where are we?". Some, on hearing "Auschwitz", already knew the fate that awaited them.

On arrival at the crematoria, whether by lorry or on foot, the women and children were separated from the men. Women and children were then sent to one crematorium and the men to another.

At the crematoria the victims were first taken to the "changing-room for death" where they were ordered to undress, put their clothes away tidily and take careful note of their coat-hook numbers so that they would have no difficulty in finding their things after the bath and disinfection.

Next they were told to go into the "bathroom", in other words the gas chamber. Then, the doors having been tightly closed, the SS inserted the cyclon crystals into the iron pillars from outside.

The number of people in the gas chamber and the amount of gas used determined the length of time the prisoners would take to die—normally from 20 to 30 minutes. Sometimes, however, insufficient gas was put in and the wretched victims were alive for several hours. The SS men in charge of the crematoria, who received a liberal ration of alcohol to bolster their morale, watched the people dying through little windows.

Sometimes the people became aware that a terrible fate was being prepared for them, for the mask of decency and courtesy, which the SS assumed at the outset, quickly dropped when the people were undressing and being driven into the gas chamber. Once their victims were naked and helpless, the SS would show themselves in all their bestiality, beating, abusing, humiliating. They were especially brutal with the last small groups of people who found difficulty in squeezing

their way into the packed gas chamber. Moll, the officer in charge of the crematoria, did not hesitate to drive people in with pistol shots.

When the SS at the windows saw that the prisoners were dead, they switched on the air suction pipes which cleared the poisoned air from the gas chambers. As they opened the doors, the sight that met their eyes was unspeakably horrible. Dead bodies projected from the crushed mass in grotesque attitudes, with bluish marks on their chests, lacerated and bleeding.

Dr. Nicholas Nyizsli, a Hungarian doctor who lived for half a year at one of the crematoria, gives the following description of what happened many times over in the four gas chambers of Birkenau crematoria over a period of eighteen months:

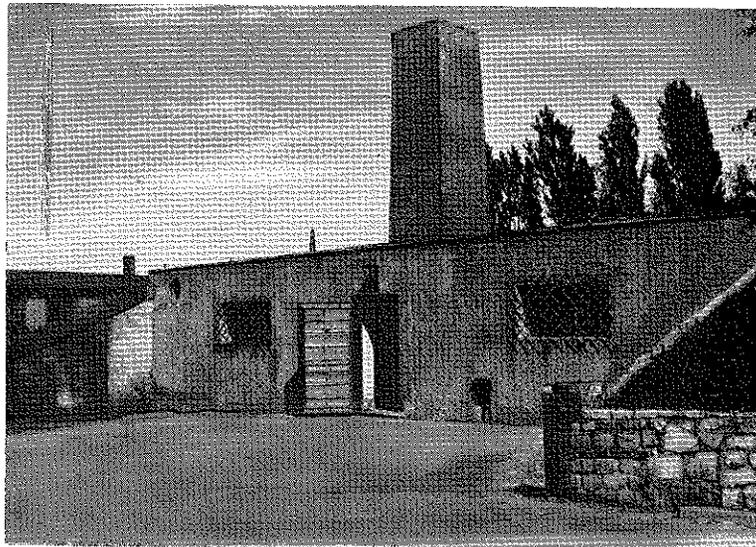


FIG. 37. Crematorium I, Auschwitz main camp.

“From the station ramp comes the sound of a locomotive’s siren. It is early morning. I can see the ramp from my window. A long train has just pulled in, and a few minutes later the truck doors are opened and the people pile out. It takes less than half an hour to line them up and ‘classify’ them. Those assigned to the left start walking slowly forward.

“Raucous commands and the noise of hurrying steps reach my room. These sounds come from the boiler-room of the crematorium where preparations are in progress to receive the convoy. I hear the roar of

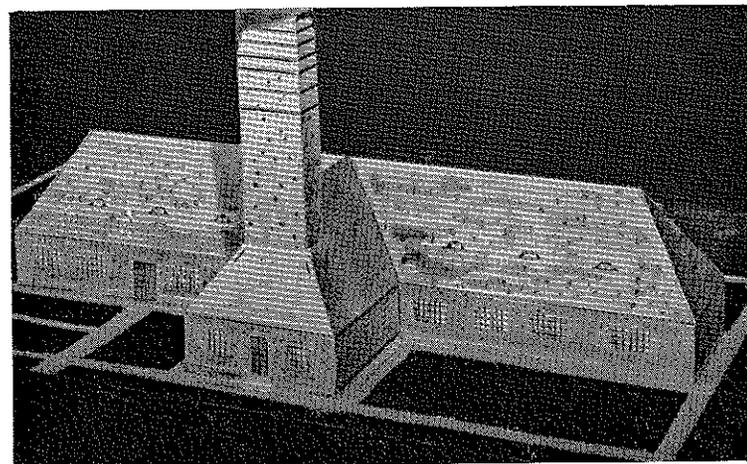


FIG. 38. Model of Crematorium II, Birkenau.

the electric motors starting up the enormous ventilators which fan the fires to the required heat. There are fifteen ventilators in all, one to each furnace. The furnace-room is 30 yds long, and along it the enormous cast-iron doors of the furnaces in their framework of red brickwork form a long black line.

“The procession—in the usual formation of a column of fives—comes up to the gate and goes through the double doors to the crematorium yard. No one knows the subsequent fate of these people, for no one who has once passed along these 300 yds from the ramp has ever returned to tell the tale. This is the end of the road for those sent to the left at the ‘classification’—a crematorium, and not, as the Nazi deceivers endeavoured to explain to the anxious people assigned to the right, a camp for the old and sick, where the children would be looked after by persons unfit for work.

“They go forward with slow, weary steps, the little children sleepily clutching the women’s clothes. Babies are carried in their mothers’ arms, or pushed in prams. The SS guards accompanying the column

stop at the gate—as the notice states, there is no admittance for unauthorized persons, not excluding members of the SS.

“In the yard the wretched people immediately catch sight of the hydrants serving the hose-pipes for watering the lawn. All sorts of utensils are pulled out, and the people break their ranks, elbowing each other in their efforts to get to the water. No wonder they are so impatient! For five days the little water they have managed to find has been brackish and failed to quench their thirst.

“The SS men who have taken over the column are used to this sight. They wait patiently while each person quenches his thirst and refills his utensil. It would be quite impossible to get them back into their ranks until they have drunk their fill. Gradually the people form up again. About 100 yds further on along the clinker-sprinkled route between the lawns they come to an iron railing painted grey. Here

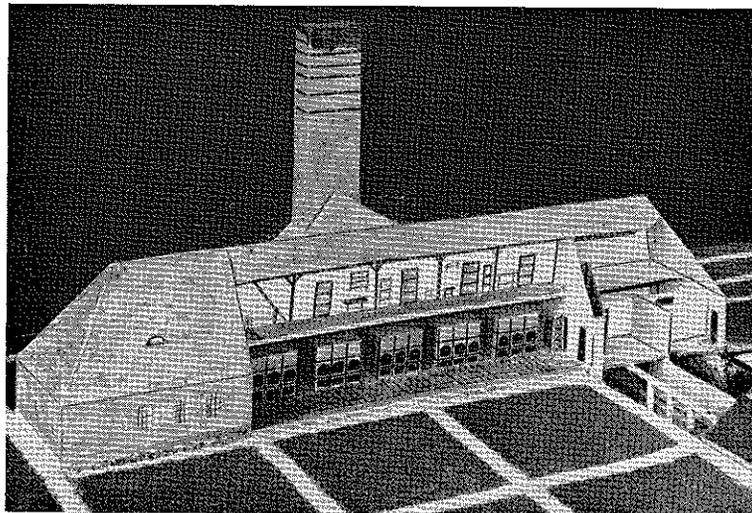


FIG. 39. Cross-section model of Crematorium II, Birkenau.

some ten or twelve concrete steps lead below ground to an enormous room; a huge notice in German, French, Greek and Hungarian informs them that this place is the ‘Bath and Disinfection Room’, which helps to dispel their forebodings of evil. The victims are almost gay as they go down the steps.

“The room is about 200 yds long, whitewashed and well-lit, with pillars down the middle. Round the pillars and along the walls are benches and long rows of numbered coat-hooks. Countless notices in all the required languages tell the people that their clothing and footwear are to be put together and hung on the hooks. They are also

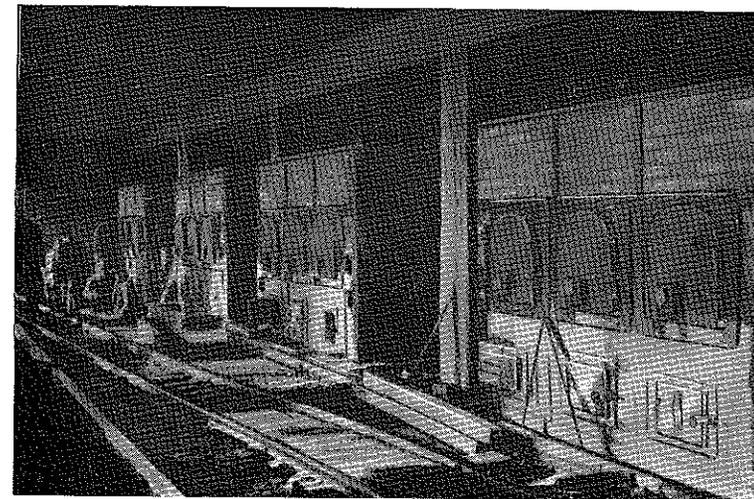


FIG. 40. Crematorium furnace-room.

to take good note of the numbers of their coat-hooks so as to avoid any muddle when they come out of the bathroom. True German love of order, the people comment. Rightly so, this is indeed in the interest of order—to ensure that thousands of pairs of excellent boots, required in the Third Reich, do not get mixed up. The same goes for the clothes which must be kept conveniently together for the German victims of the bombing raids.

“There are almost 2000 people in the room—men, women and children. SS men enter and give the order: Every person is to undress completely! Time allowed—ten minutes! There is consternation among the mixed throng. Overcome with shame, the women look helplessly around them. Grandads, grannies, husbands, children—all are thoroughly upset. Have they perhaps misheard the German command? But the command is repeated. The voice is impatient, almost threatening.

"In the end, in spite of their forebodings as to what is in store for them, they remember their total helplessness and slowly begin to undress. Old people and crippled and mentally deficient persons are assisted by members of the Sonderkommando specially assigned for this purpose. In ten minutes all are naked, the clothes are hanging on the hooks, and the boots are duly tied together. The coat-hook numbers are firmly committed to memory. . . .

"Next, SS men force their way through the crowd to open the oak doors at the end of the room. The people pour into the adjacent room which is also well lit, the same size as the undressing-room but without benches or coat-hooks. Down the centre of the room, at distances of about 30 yds, are pillars reaching from the concrete floor to the ceiling—not, however, supporting pillars but square metal pipes, drilled with innumerable holes, which gives them the appearance of wire lattice-work.



FIG. 41. The ultimate destination.

"Now everybody is in the room. There is a loud word of command: SS and Sonderkommando, leave the room! The order is obeyed, and a check is made at the door to make sure they have all left. Then the doors are closed and the lights are switched off from outside . . .

"At this moment the 'Red Cross' vehicle drives up, and an SS

officer and an N.C.O. of the Sanitary Service get out. Carrying four green tins, the two men step up to the raised piece of lawn at the side of the building with low projecting concrete chimneys. They put on gas masks and raise the concrete flaps of the chimneys, pouring in the violet cyclon capsules, about the size of beans, which form a deadly

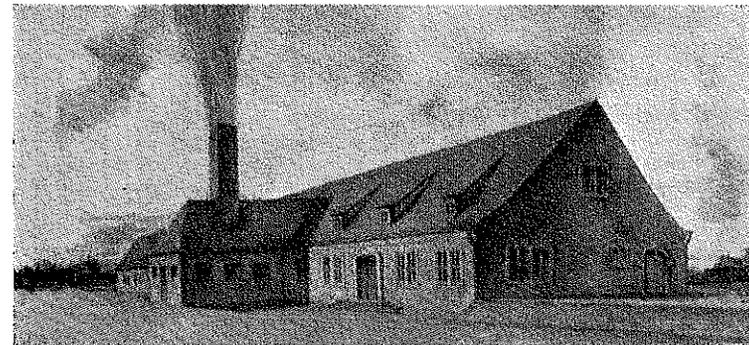


FIG. 42. One of the four Birkenau crematoria.

gas as soon as they are exposed to the air. As the capsules fall down the metal pipes into the gas chamber, the gas immediately escapes through the perforations and fills the packed room in a few seconds. In five minutes all is over . . .

"Twenty minutes later the electric ventilators are switched on to suck out the gas. The doors of the undressing-room are opened, lorries drive up, and a detachment of the Sonderkommando loads on to them the clothes and footwear which are taken away for disinfection—this time to a real fumigator. The booty is then dispatched to warehouses all over Germany.

"It does not take long for modern ventilators to clear the gas from the gas chamber. But a small quantity lingers on among the corpses, lurking in chinks and crevices. If breathed into the lungs, it causes a choking cough which lasts for hours. Members of the Sonderkommando have therefore to wear gas masks when they go in with their hose-pipes.

"The lights are switched on again, and a fearful sight meets the eye. The corpses are not spread over the whole area of the room but are piled up on top of one another, in an enormous heap. This is because

the lower part of the room is the first to be saturated by the gas. The gas level climbs gradually to the ceiling, forcing the victims to claw and trample on one another in their struggle to reach upwards. Those on top are the last to succumb. There is a ghastly life-and-death battle for an extra minute or two of life. Every movement is merely a reflex of the instinct of self-preservation. At the bottom of the pile are babies and children, women and old people. The corpses are fantastically entangled, bleeding from blows received during the mortal struggle. Blood flows from noses and mouths, and heads are blue and so disfigured as to be unrecognizable."

The following is but one of the horrifying experiences Dr. Nyizli had to go through at the crematorium:

"Some two thousand corpses were lying in a heap in the gas chamber. Members of the Sonderkommando were busy separating the entangled bodies. The banging of the lifts penetrated to my room. The work was in full swing; the gas chamber had to be cleared for the next convoy.

"Suddenly the leader of the Sonderkommando detachment burst excitedly into my room. They had found a woman still alive, he told me, at the bottom of the pile of corpses. I grabbed my doctor's bag and rushed to the gas chamber. Next to the wall near the entrance, half covered by corpses, was the writhing body of a young woman; from her throat issued the death rattle.

"We removed the corpses, and I carried the light girlish frame to a room nearby which was used as a changing-room by the Sonderkommando. I placed the child on a bench—she was about 15 years old—and administered three injections, one after the other, into her heaving body. She was ice-cold, and we covered her with a heavy coat.

"One of the men ran to the kitchen for hot tea or soup; each man tried to help as though it were his own child. The child was seized by a fit of coughing which brought up a mass of secretions from her lungs. She opened her eyes and stared stonily at the ceiling. Anxiously I watched the signs of returning life. Her breathing became more regular; her gas-ravaged lungs hungrily gulped in air; her temperature rose rapidly under the stimulus of the injections. I waited impatiently. The injections had still not had their full effect, and in a few minutes the girl ought to recover consciousness. Yes, indeed. Colour was returning to her delicate cheeks as her blood circulation quickened,

and some expression came back into her eyes. She looked around her in amazement, then closed her eyes. She was evidently still unable to grasp what was going on around her.

"Her movements followed each other in ever more rapid succession. She raised her head, put out her hands, looked around; her face gave convulsive jerks. She made great efforts to sit up. Then came an attack of nerves, after which she gradually became calm and lay back, utterly exhausted. Tears glistened in her eyes, but she did not weep.

"I got the answer to my first question. She was 16 years old, and she and her parents had come from Sedmihradsko.

"Our brains were feverishly active. What was to be done with the child? She could not stay at the crematorium for any length of time. I knew too much to imagine that that was possible. Nobody had got out alive, whether he had come with a convoy or was a member of the Sonderkommando.

"We had little time for thinking. Oberscharführer Mussfeldt was already doing his round, and he saw our group as soon as he entered the room. I motioned to the others to withdraw, as I intended to attempt the impossible alone. Three months under a common roof had established a certain relationship between us. Mussfeldt used sometimes to come to the dissecting-room for a chat with me. Clearly he saw his work as a contribution to Nazi science and the gassing of hundreds of thousands as his own particular patriotic task.

"I told him of the child's ghastly experience in the gas chamber. In the mass struggle for life she had evidently been pressed to the ground where the moisture had prevented the gas from filling her lungs completely; cyclon gas is ineffective in a damp atmosphere. I begged him to let the child live.

"He listened gravely and asked me what I could suggest. I told him I thought the only solution was to take the child to the gate where a large group of women was always at work making the road; there she could join in and return with the women to the camp in the evening. I pointed out that very few of the thousands of women working there knew each other, so the child could well pass unnoticed. Mussfeldt objected that a naive sixteen-year-old girl would be sure to tell the first women she met where she had been and all she had experienced and seen. The report would spread and bring about the destruction of all three of us. Nothing could be done about it, he said, the child could not possibly be saved.

"A quarter of an hour later the girl was led away, or rather carried

away, to the entrance to the boiler-room where she was shot in the back of the neck. Mussfeldt sent a deputy to perform the deed on his behalf."

On another occasion a dead mother was found in the gas chamber with her child so firmly pressed against her breast that it was still alive. They shot it forthwith and threw it among the other corpses.

If a convoy had less than 100 people—which meant that gassing would be uneconomic—the victims were sent stripped into the execution-room where they were shot in groups. Moll, the virtuoso marksman, would try his skill at shooting five people in a row with one bullet, "to save ammunition".

When there were no convoys, the Sonderkommando were set to work repairing and cleaning out the furnaces, tidying up the area round the crematoria, and removing ash. The remains of burnt human bones were crushed to pulp, and the pits around the crematoria were levelled off with human ash. Subsequently the ash was deposited in the River Vistula.

THE "CANADA" DISPOSAL SQUAD

The "Canada" Disposal Squad consisted exclusively of Jews, both men and women, though its leaders, also prisoners, were German men and women from the Reich.

When it was started in the summer of 1942 at Auschwitz I, it had 100 prisoners on the day shift and 50 on the night shift. In addition to this, 200 women travelled to Auschwitz from Birkenau, 100 for the day shift and 100 for the night shift.

In January, 1943, the men in the squad were transferred to Block 16 in Camp BIIb at Birkenau, and the squad was increased in size because more and more convoys were arriving. The day shift consisted of 400 men and 200 women, the night shift of 150 men and 200 women, all of whom went to work in Auschwitz I.

In the summer of 1944, the store for personal belongings (*Effektenlager*) and the entire "Canada" squad were transferred to Camp BIIg at Birkenau. The store had previously been in Auschwitz I where the squad had worked in a small camp, surrounded by barbed wire, with one brick block, five wooden blocks and a disinfection block.

Although physical violence and a variety of punishments were used

to force the members of the "Canada" squad to carry out their tasks, the latter sabotaged their work wherever possible. The parcels and suitcases brought by the new arrivals were thrown into their blocks in fantastic disarray, and once the blocks were full up the goods were deposited outside. Often the various classified items, such as blankets, underwear, feather-beds, footwear, medicines and other goods, lay about in the rain for weeks on end until they were soaked through and utterly useless. The place was like a huge open-air jumble sale with silk underwear, eau de Cologne, expensive soap, furs, shoes, cigarette lighters, knives, ladies' handbags.

A special detachment from the squad ripped up clothes, tore shoes apart, and searched the various ointments, toothpastes and face-creams for any precious items that might be hidden there, such as gold, diamonds or foreign currency. Some members of the squad deliberately destroyed everything they could lay their hands on, tearing up dollar bills and other bank-notes, breaking watches, and so on.

The work of the squad was supervised by the SS who would often get drunk on the liquor acquired from the convoys. SS men were frequently punished by the Camp Gestapo and posted elsewhere, on account of stolen valuables in their kit.

When they finished work, the "Canadians" were closely searched and often had to strip naked. They were again checked at the entrance to the camp. Nevertheless they still found ways and means of smuggling things into the camp.

"Canada" played an extremely important role in the camp. It was the source from which the prisoners obtained the wherewithal to make their life to some degree bearable. When an escape was being planned, "Canada" supplied money, clothing, compasses, field-glasses, wigs and identity cards. Cameras were also obtained in this way, and some members of a secret organization actually succeeded in taking photos of people being "selected" for the gas chamber. These photos were among the documentary material which we subsequently sent out from the camp through the partisans in the neighbourhood.

On the other hand, many prisoners met their death as a result of their contact with "Canada", for all persons caught carrying forbidden goods, especially valuables, were viciously punished.

Many of the "Canadians" were very tough with the other prisoners and thought only of themselves. Their one aim was gold and wealth, even in the shadow of death. No doubt they were goaded on by the thought that it might ultimately buy them their freedom and life.