"Testimony of Gas-Van Driver Walter Burmeister"

By: Willi Dressen and Volker Reiss

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About the Author: Volker Reiss is a German historian, whose area of particular interest is the Holocaust. Willi Dressen is an attorney, a deputy director of the Central Bureau for the Judicial Authorities of the German Lander for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes; Ernst Klee is a journalist, a teacher, award-winning filmmaker, and author of numerous books on the Holocaust.

INTRODUCTION

In their book, The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders, Germans Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Reiss have taken the position that many of the perpetrators in the mass exterminations of Jewish citizens and others deemed undesirable were far from reluctant victims who were forced, coerced and terrorized into carrying out orders against their will or better judgment. In this book, Klee, Dressen, and Riess have included photographs, photo albums,
personal diaries, official reports, and letters that attest to the willingness of some Germans to actively participate in the "Final Solution."

Holocaust deniers and Holocaust historical revisionists have suggested that either the extermination of Jews by the Nazi regime was grossly exaggerated or was carried out by individuals who were forced to do so. In this book, Klee and his co-authors provide original evidence that not only did the mass extermination of Jews and other marginalized groups occur, it was perpetrated, at least some of the time, by individuals who were willing and eager participants. "Of the annihilation of thousands of Jews in White Russia, one Nazi commander says, 'The action rid me of unnecessary mouths to feed.'"

Chelmno, also called Kulmhof, a small town not far from the city of Lodz (site of a large Jewish ghetto), was the location of the first mass extermination camp in Poland. The extermination camps were unique in that the people brought there were sent specifically to be killed; there were no work projects or experiments conducted at the camp. William Burmeister, a gas-van driver whose testimony is quoted below, was stationed at Chelmno. He was also responsible for oversight of the gold that had been removed from either the personal possessions or dental work of those killed. Chelmno was established in December of 1941, under the command of Herbert Lange. The first phase of operations took place between December 1942 and March 1943. After a brief hiatus, operations resumed in late June of 1944 and finally shut down on January 17, 1945. The cited death tolls for Chelmno have ranged from 150,000 to more than 350,000 individuals, the majority of whom were Jewish. The mass killings were carried out by means of gas-vans; groups of prisoners were taken into the castle at Chelmno, told to undress and hand over all valuables, and told that they were to be transferred to a work camp after showering and disinfection. They were then loaded into disguised freight vans. When the van was fully loaded, it was sealed and the exhaust pipe was connected to an opening in the freight area. The van's engine was started and the freight compartment's inhabitants were asphyxiated. After all prisoners were dead, the van was driven to another area, where the corpses were unloaded into mass graves. Eventually, cremation pyres replaced the mass graves.

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SIGNIFICANCE

In 1939, the Nazi government ordered several SS (Schutzstaffel, or specialized military) units to act as mobile killing squads. These killing squads, or Einsatzgruppen, were highly efficient. Their mission was to murder the Jewish population of towns in Poland and Russia as the German army advanced eastward. The Einsatzgruppen killed an estimated one million people during the Holocaust. Einsatzgruppen men were rewarded with extra rations, pay, and other incentives to continue their work. Concerned about the psychological toll direct executions could have on perpetrators, the Nazi government sought an alternative method of killing that would limit direct contact between perpetrators and victims. This led to the creation of the death camps. Chelmno was reported to be the first operational extermination camp with the sole purpose of systematic killing of all individuals brought there.

Chelmno was used expressly for exterminating large numbers of Jewish citizens who inhabited the western areas of Poland, particularly those who lived in Lodz (which was, at the time, the second largest city in Poland). In 1939, the Jewish population of Lodz was estimated at 202,000. Initially, the killings were carried out via the use of gas-vans equipped with special hoses carrying exhaust fumes from the idling van engines into the sealed freight areas.

The precursor to the gas vans was an experiment in Mogilev, in which a number of the inhabitants of a psychiatric facility were systematically killed through the use of automobile exhaust. Between twenty and thirty patients were brought into a room containing two pipes in one wall. The room was locked and sealed. The exhaust pipe of a car parked outside the facility had been connected to the pipe, and the room was filled with carbon monoxide. The experiment was initially unsuccessful, as all inhabitants were still alive after nearly ten minutes. An additional car's exhaust was connected to the second pipe, and both vehicles were operated simultaneously. Moments later, all in the room were dead, and the experiment was considered a success. This led to the development of a vehicle designed to be a portable execution chamber.

Extermination camps were considered a highly efficient means of eliminating Jewish citizens, as they were cost effective and required little feeding, housing, and supervision of prisoners. They were relatively secret and few prisoners escaped when arrivals were promptly killed. Efficiency dictated a streamlined process of arrival, removing of valuables, extermination, and burial.

The extermination camps were referred to by Hitler as the "Final Solution," and he was the high commander in direct charge of their operation, although Himmler was credited with the design of the extermination camps themselves.

Chelmno was the precursor to Operation Reinhard, which was a mass extermination effort located at Sobibor, Belzak, and Treblinka. The staff sent to operate the sites were not told the nature of their jobs in advance; instead, they were trained to consider their work as euthanasia. They were required to sign oaths of secrecy. Operation Reinhard took the technology developed at Chelmno and advanced it through the use of vast stationary gas chambers and massive crematoria. The killing centers were designed to be operational for brief periods of time, then completely destroyed in order to prevent identification of their intended, and successfully accomplished, missions.

FURTHER RESOURCES
Books


Web sites


*Jewish Gombin (Gabin, Poland, Jewish Genealogy) Chelm05*. "Deposition of Theodor Malzmueller." <http://dss.ucsd.edu/~lzamosc/chelm05.htm> (accessed July 18, 2005).


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