

From Notes Made by Kurt Gerstein, An Engineer Working for the SS, on the Extermination Camp at Belzec*

...In Lublin, SS *Gruppenfuehrer* Globocnik was waiting for us. He said: This is one of the most highly secret matters there are, perhaps the most secret. Anybody who speaks about it is shot dead immediately. Two talkative people died yesterday. Then he explained to us that, at the present moment - August 17, 1942 - there were the following installations:

1. Belzec, on the Lublin-Lvov road, in the sector of the Soviet Demarcation Line. Maximum per day: 15,000 persons (I saw it!).
2. Sobibor, I am not familiar with the exact situation, I did not visit it. 20,000 persons per day.
3. Treblinka, 120 km. NNE of Warsaw, 25,000 per day, saw it!
4. Majdanek, near Lublin, which I saw when it was being built.

Globocnik said: You will have very large quantities of clothes to disinfect, 10 or 20 times as much as the "Textiles Collection," which is only being carried out in order to camouflage the origin of the Jewish, Polish, Czech and other items of clothing. Your second job is to convert the gas-chambers, which have up to now been operated with exhaust gases from an old Diesel engine, to a more poisonous and quicker means, cyanide. But the Fuehrer and Himmler, who were here on August 15, the day before yesterday, that is, gave orders that I am myself to accompany all persons who visit the installations. Professor Pfannenstiel replied, "But what does the Fuehrer say?" Then Globocnik, who is now Higher SS and Police Leader in Trieste on the Adriatic Coast, said: "The whole *Aktion* must be carried out much faster." Ministerial Director Dr. Herbert Lindner [Linden] of the Ministry of the Interior suggested, "Would it not be better to incinerate the bodies instead of burying them? Another generation might perhaps think differently about this?" Then Globocnik, "But, Gentlemen, if we should ever be succeeded by so cowardly and weak a generation that it does not understand our work, which is so good and so necessary, then, Gentlemen, the whole of National Socialism will have been in vain. On the contrary, one should bury bronze plaques [with the

bodies], on which is inscribed that it was we, we who had the courage to complete this gigantic task." Hitler said to this, "Well, my good Globocnik, you have said it, and that is my opinion, too."

The next day we moved on to Belzec. There is a separate little station with two platforms, at the foot of the hill of yellow sandstone, due north of the Lublin-Lvov road and rail line. To the south of the station, near the main road, there are several office buildings with the inscription "Belzec Office of the *Waffen-SS*" [Military Unit of the SS]. Globocnik introduced me to SS *Hauptsturmfuehrer* Obermeyer from Pirmasens, who showed me the installations very much against his will. There were no dead to be seen that day, but the stench in the whole area, even on the main road, was pestilent. Next to the small station there was a large barrack labeled "Dressing Room," with a window that said "Valuables," and also a hall with 100 "Barber's Chairs." Then there was a passage 150 m. long, in the open, enclosed with barbed wire on either side, and signs inscribed "To the Baths and Inhalation Installations." In front of us there was a house, the bathhouse, and to the right and left large concrete flower pots with geraniums or other flowers. After climbing a few steps there were three rooms each, on the right and on the left. They looked like garages, 4 by 5 m. and 1.90 m. high. At the back, out of sight, there were doors of wood. On the roof there was a Star of David made of copper. The front of the building bore a notice "Heckenholt Institution." That is all I saw that afternoon.

Next morning, a few minutes before 7 o'clock, I was told that the first train would arrive in 10 minutes. And in fact the first train from Lvov arrived a few minutes later. There were 45 carriages with 6,700 persons, of whom 1,450 were already dead on arrival. Through small openings closed with barbed wire one could see yellow, frightened children, men, and women. The train stopped, and 200 Ukrainians, who were forced to perform this service, tore open the doors and chased the people from the carriages with whips. Then instructions were given through a large loudspeaker: The people are to take off all their clothes out of doors and a few of them in the barracks - including artificial limbs and glasses. Shoes must be tied in pairs with a little piece of string handed out by a small four-year-old Jewish boy. All valuables and

money are to be handed in at the window marked "Valuables," without any document or receipt being given. The women and girls must then go to the barber, who cuts off their hair with one or two snips. The hair disappears into large potato sacks, "to make something special for the submarines, to seal them and so on," the duty SS *Unterscharfuhrer* explained to me.

Then the march starts: Barbed wire to the right and left and two dozen Ukrainians with rifles at the rear. They came on, led by an exceptionally pretty girl. I myself was standing with Police Captain Wirth in front of the death chambers. Men, women, children, infants, people with amputated legs, all naked, completely naked, moved past us. In one corner there is a whimsical SS man who tells these poor people in an unctuous voice, "Nothing at all will happen to you. You must just breathe deeply, that strengthens the lungs; this inhalation is necessary because of the infectious diseases, it is good disinfection!" When somebody asks what their fate will be, he explains that the men will of course have to work, building streets and houses. But the women will not have to work. If they want to, they can help in the house or the kitchen. A little glimmer of hope flickers once more in some of these poor people, enough to make them march unresisting into the death chambers. But most of them understand what is happening; the smell reveals their fate! Then they climb up a little staircase and see the truth. Nursing mothers with an infant at the breast, naked; many children of all ages, naked. They hesitate, but they enter the death chambers, most of them silent, forced on by those behind them, who are driven by the whip lashes of the SS men. A Jewish woman of about 40, with flaming eyes, calls down [revenge] for the blood of her children on the head of the murderers. Police Captain Wirth in person strikes her in the face 5 times with his whip, and she disappears into the gas chamber....

* Gerstein wrote down his evidence on May 26, 1945.

Source: *Documents on the Holocaust, Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland and the Soviet Union*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1981, Document no.163. pp.347-350