

SS Captain Kurt Gerstein Sees a Gassing

SS Captain Kurt Gerstein's sister-in-law was a victim of the euthanasia program. Perhaps because he was so shocked by her death, he joined the concentration camp service where he provided the death gas. He compiled a report of what he saw and first took it to the Papal Nuncio in Berlin who refused to see him. Later he approached a Swedish diplomat who took it to Stockholm. When the war ended the existence of this report was confirmed. It was also revealed that its contents had been forwarded to the authorities in London in August 1945 after the war. Did Sweden keep it secret because it wanted to maintain neutrality? What would the Allies have done had they learned of Hitler's Final Solution of the Jewish Question?

Gerstein gave himself up to the Allied troops at the end of the war and while in prison committed suicide. Was he a saint? A coward? The controversy about him is still unsettled.

Following is his eyewitness report of what he saw at Belzec . . .

"Then the march began. To the right and left, barbed wire; behind, two dozen Ukrainians with guns. Led by a young girl of striking beauty, they approached. With Police Captain Wirth, I stood right in front of the death chambers. Completely naked, they march by, men, women, girls, children, babies, even a one-legged person, all of them naked. In one corner, a strong S.S. man told the poor devils in a strong voice: 'Nothing whatever will happen to you. All you have to do is to breathe deeply; it strengthens the lungs. This inhalation is a necessary measure against contagious disease; it is a very good disinfectant.'

"Asked what was to become of them, he answered: 'Well, of course, the men will have to work, building streets and houses. But the women do not have to. If they wish, they can help in the house or the kitchen.'

"Once more, a little bit of hope for some of these poor people, enough to make them march on without resistance to the death chambers. Most of them, though, knew everything, the smell had given them a clear indication of their fate. And then they walked up the little staircase—and beheld the picture:

"Mothers with babies at their breasts, naked; lots of children of all

from Harvest of Hate by Leon Poliakov

ages, naked, too; they hesitate, but they enter the gas chambers, most of them without a word, pushed by the others behind them, chased by the whips of the S.S. men.

"A Jewess of about forty years of age, with eyes like torches, calls down the blood of her children on the heads of their murderers. Five lashes in her face, dealt by the whip of Police Captain Wirth himself, drive her into the gas chamber. Many of them said their prayers; others ask: 'Who will give us water before our death?'

"Within the chambers, the S.S. press the people closely together: Captain Wirth has ordered: 'Fill them up full.' Naked men stand on the feet of the others. Seven hundred to eight hundred crushed together on twenty-five square metres, in forty-five cubic metres! The doors are closed!

Meanwhile the rest of the transport, all naked, waited. Somebody said to me: 'Naked in winter! Enough to kill them!' The answer was: 'Well, that's just what they are here for!' And at that moment I understood why it was called the Heckenholt Foundation. Heckenholt was the man in charge of the diesel engine, the exhaust gases of which were to kill these poor devils.

S.S. Unterscharführer Heckenholt tried to set the diesel engine going, but it would not start. Captain Wirth came along. It was obvious that he was afraid because I was a witness of this breakdown. Yes, indeed, I saw everything and waited. Everything was registered by my stop watch. Fifty minutes . . . seventy minutes . . . the diesel engine did not start!

"The people waited in their gas chambers—in vain. One could hear them cry. 'Just as in a synagogue,' says S.S. Sturmbannführer Professor Doctor Pfannenstiel, Professor for Public Health at the University of Marburg/Lahn, holding his ear close to the wooden door.

"Captain Wirth, furious, dealt the Ukrainian who was helping Heckenholt eleven or twelve lashes in the face with his whip. After two hours and forty-nine minutes—as registered by my stop watch—the diesel engine started. Up to that moment, the people in the four chambers already filled were still alive—four times seven hundred and fifty persons in four times forty-five cubic metres! Another twenty-five minutes went by. Many of the people, it is true, were dead by that time. One could see that through the little window as the electric lamp revealed for a moment the inside of the chamber. After twenty-eight minutes only a few were alive. After thirty-two minutes, all were dead.

"From the other side, Jewish workers opened the wooden doors. In return for their terrible job, they had been promised their freedom and a small percentage of the valuables and the money found. The dead were still standing like stone statues, there having been no room for them to fall or bend over. Though dead, the families could still be recognized, their hands still clasped.

It was difficult to separate them in order to clear the chamber for the next load. The bodies were thrown out blue, wet with sweat and urine, the legs covered with excrement and menstrual blood. Everywhere among the others were the bodies of babies and children.

"But there is no time!—two dozen workers were busy checking the mouths, opening them with iron hooks—'Gold on the left, no gold on the right!' Others checked anus and genitals to look for money, diamonds, gold, etc. Dentists with chisels tore out gold teeth, bridges, or caps. In the centre of everything was Captain Wirth. He was on familiar ground here. He handed me a large tin full of teeth and said: 'Estimate for yourself the weight of gold! This is only from yesterday and the day before! And you would not believe what we find here every day! Dollars, diamonds, gold! But look for yourself!'

"Then he led me to a jeweller who was in charge of all these valuables. After that they took me to one of the managers of the big stores, Kaufhaus des Westens, in Berlin, and to a little man whom they made play the violin. Both were chiefs of the Jewish worker units. 'He is a captain of the Royal and Imperial Austrian Army, and has the German Iron Cross, First Class,' I was told by Hauptsturmbannführer Obermeyer.

"The bodies were then thrown into large ditches about one hundred by twenty by twelve metres located near the gas chambers. After a few days the bodies would swell up and the whole contents of the ditch would rise two to three metres high because of the gases which developed inside the bodies. After a few more days the swelling would stop and the bodies would collapse. The next day the ditches were filled again, and covered with ten centimetres of sand. A little later, I heard, they constructed grills out of rails and burned the bodies on them with diesel oil and gasoline in order to make them disappear.

"At Belzec and Treblinka nobody bothered to take anything approaching an exact count of the persons killed. Actually, not only Jews, but many Poles and Czechs, who, in the opinion of the Nazis, were of bad stock, were killed. Most of them died anonymously. Commissions of so-called doctors, who were actually nothing but young S.S. men in white coats, rode in limousines through the towns and villages of Poland and Czechoslovakia to select the old, tubercular, and sick people and have them done away with shortly afterwards in the gas chambers. They were the Poles and Czechs of category No. III, who did not deserve to live because they were unable to work."