

Excerpted from Gutman, Yisrael and Michael Berenbaum. "Hungarian Jews" in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*. Chapter 20 "Hungarian Jews" by Randolph L. Braham. Pages 462-463.

PREPARATORY WORK IN AUSCHWITZ

In anticipation of the daily arrivals of 12,000 to 14,000 Jews from Hungary, the SS administration of Auschwitz revamped and expanded the extermination machinery of the camp. By the time the first transports arrived on May 16, the machinery of destruction was ready to ensure a regular, effective, and continuous assembly-line operation at a scale and speed never before employed.

The SS staff was reinforced, and additional "experts" were assigned to the camp. Among them was SS-*Obersturmführer* Karl Höcker, who was transferred from Majdanek early in May 1944 to serve as adjutant to Richard Bär, the camp commander. Höcker was reportedly the SS plenipotentiary for the resettling of the Jews from Hungary (*Bevollmächtigter der SS für die Umsiedlung der Juden aus Ungarn*). In that capacity, he "set the extermination machinery in motion during the time of the Hungarian transports."¹ About the same time, *Hauptscharführer* Otto Moll, a murderously cruel officer, was transferred from the Gleiwitz auxiliary camp to serve as "manager" in Auschwitz. His primary task was to plan and supervise the efficient extermination of the masses of Hungarian Jews. The former Auschwitz commandant, Rudolf Höss, arrived back in Auschwitz temporarily to supervise the whole action.

With the Soviet forces fast approaching Romania, time was of the essence. A large number of prisoners were employed to bring the destruction machinery up to date. Under Moll's direction, the crematoria were renovated: the furnaces were relined, the chimneys were strengthened with iron bands, the loading and unloading ramps were completed with a three-track railway system that provided a direct link to the death factories, and large pits were dug in the immediate vicinity of the gas chambers for the burning of the large number of corpses that the crematoria could not handle. Each pit was 40 to 50 meters long, 8 m wide, and 2 m deep. At the bottom of each pit, a channel was dug in the center to make possible the "harvesting" of the fat, exuding from the burning corpses for reuse as fuel in the cremation process. At the height of the deportations from Hungary nine such pits were in operation, in addition to the crematoria. The strength of the two Jewish *Sonderkommando* units serving the gas chambers was increased from 224 to 860, and the "Canada" commando, in charge of sorting the loot, was increased to more than 2,000.

¹ Bernd Naumann, *Auschwitz: A Report on the Proceedings against Robert Karl Ludwig Mulka and Others before the Court at Frankfurt* (New York, 1966).