Belżec

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TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

In 1946 a slim volume entitled Belżec came out in Kraków. It was published by the Jewish Regional Historical Commission, which collected the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The booklet included an introduction by Nella Rost, who was on the committee’s editorial board, and Rudolf Reder, a former soap manufacturer from Lemberg who managed to escape from the camp and lived long enough to tell his story. He was one of only two known survivors of Belżec death camp. The other, Chaim Hirszman, was murdered in Lublin in 1946 by two youth members of a Polish underground organization. The day he began to testify about the camp to the Lublin branch of the Jewish Historical Commission, thus, Reder’s booklet remains to this day the only document written by a victim concerning this most obscure murder camp.¹

Belżec murder camp was the first camp set up by Aktoń Reinhard, an operation whose purpose was to dispose, in the least obtrusive manner, of the Jewish population of the General Government and adjacent countries under Nazi rule. The other two camps were Treblinka and Sobibór. The building of Belżec started towards the end of November 1941, and at the beginning of March 1942 the camp was ready. On 17 March the first transport arrived; about 10 December that year saw the last. Between those two dates, with a break for ‘modernization’ which lasted six weeks, Belżec murder camp claimed between 500,000 and 650,000 victims, of whom over three-quarters came from the provinces of Kraków and Lublin, and the Distrikt Galizien.² The remaining 150,000 or so consisted of Jews expelled from those parts of pre-war Poland which had been incorporated into the Third Reich, Austria, and Czechoslovakia.

Like the other two camps of Aktoń Reinhard, Belżec had no attached labour camp and no ordinary prisoners. It consisted of rudimentary murder facilities: undressing barracks for men, another for women to have their hair cut, and yet another with the gas chambers.

¹ There are two other documents written by eyewitnesses. Both were SS visitors to the camp. The first was Kurt Gerstein, a disinfection expert. Deeply shaken by what he saw, he tried unsuccessfully to pass his knowledge on to the neutral parties, the Swedish and Vatican legations in Berlin. In French custody after the war he wrote a harrowing account of his visit, which included a ‘show gassing’. The other was Wilhelm Pfannenstiel, a professor of hygiene. He went to Belżec with Gerstein and also accompanied Himmler on a visit in Nov. 1942. He did not come forward voluntarily to testify about Belżec, but was interrogated about it after the war, first by the Allies and then twice by German legal authorities.

² The name Distrikt Galizien refers to a fifth province of the General Government created by the Nazis in July 1941 with Lemberg (Lwów/L’viv) as its provincial capital. It consisted of three pre-war voivodeships situated in south-eastern Poland: Lemberg, Tarnopol, and Stanisławów.
In August 1942 there still wasn't a walled ghetto in Lemberg. Instead there were several streets where we were forced to live; nowhere else. These together became known as the Jewish quarter. It consisted of the following streets: Panińska, Wąska, Ogrodniczka, Stónecka, and a few others, which had once been a part of the third quarter of Lemberg. There we lived in constant anxiety and torment.

Nearly two weeks before deportation everyone was talking about it as an imminent disaster. We were in despair, since we all already knew what the word Ausiedlung [Jewish resettlement] meant. We were being told the story of a worker who once belonged to a death commando in Belzec, but then eventually managed to escape. While still there he was employed in building chambers disguised as baths which in fact were intended for gassing people. He forecast that none of those who had gone there would ever return. We had also heard the story of a Ukrainian guard employed there in murdering Jews recounting his experiences to his Polish girlfriend. The woman was so terrified by what she had heard that she decided to pass the news around in order to forewarn prospective victims. That is how we got to know about Belzec.

Belzec's legend thus became a reality, which we all knew and dreaded. That is why, for several days before 10 August, the streets of the Jewish quarter were filled with frightened and helpless people repeatedly asking each other the same question: what should they do and where should they go? Early in the morning of 10 August all exits leading out of the Jewish quarter were sealed by German patrols. The Gestapo, SS, and Sonderaktion in groups of five or six patrolled the streets a few paces apart. They were enthusiastically assisted by the Ukrainian police.

Two weeks earlier Generalmajor Katzman, the chief butcher of Lemberg and eastern Galicia, had distributed permits among some of the ghetto workshops. Other workshops got theirs from a police station at Smolka Square. The lucky ones were not very numerous. The vast majority of Jews, overcome by mortal fear, tried all sorts of rescues or escapes, but no one really knew what to do or how to save himself.

Meanwhile, for a few consecutive days, German patrols combed one house after another, looking into every nook and cranny. Some of those caught by the Gestapo had their permits honoured, others did not. All those without permits, or whose permits the Germans did not honour, were driven out of their houses without food or clothing. Next the Germans herded people into large groups. Those who resisted were shot on the spot. I myself was in my workshop working. I did not have a permit. I locked the front door and did not open it, even though I heard them banging outside. Eventually the Gestapo forced their way in. They found me hiding in a corner, beat me on the head with a stick, and took me away. They squeezed us like sardines into trams and transported us to the Janowska camp. We could neither move nor breathe.

Night was already falling. All 6,000 of us were squeezed into a meadow. We were ordered to sit down, and forbidden to move, raise an arm, stretch a leg, or get up. A watchtower directed its blinding light at us. It became as light as if it were day. We sat there, packed tightly together, young and old, women and children alike. A few well-aimed shots were fired in our direction. Someone got up and was shot on the spot. Perhaps he wished to die a quick death.

And so we passed the night. The crowd was deathly silent. Not even women or children dared to cry. At six o'clock in the morning we were told to get up off the wet grass, on which we had been sitting all night, and to arrange ourselves in a column, four in a row. The long line of condemned was then made to march in the direction of Kleparowski railway station. Our column was guarded on both sides by the Gestapo and Ukrainian police. There was not the slightest chance of escape. Our column was driven to the railway station and onto a ramp, where a long train of cattle-trucks was waiting. The Germans began to load the train. They opened the doors to each truck. On both sides of the doors stood the Gestapo men, two on each side, whips in hand, slapping each of us on our faces and heads. All the Gestapo men were alike. They all beat us so badly that each of us had marks on our faces or bumps on our heads. Women sobbed, children in arms cried. Thus driven along and beaten mercilessly, we climbed on top of one another. The doors to the trucks were high above the ground. In the general scramble we trampled those who were below. We were all in a hurry, wanting to have all this behind us. On the roof of each truck sat a Gestapo man with a machine-gun. Others beat us while counting 100 people to each car. It all went so fast that loading a few thousand people took no more than an hour. Our transport contained many men, including some who had the so-called 'secure' work permits, young girls, and women. Finally they scaled all the trucks. Squeezed into one trembling mass we stood so close to each other that we were almost on top of one another. Stifling heat was driving us mad. We had not a drop of water or a crumb of bread. The train started to move at eight o'clock. I knew that the train-driver and fire-stoker were Germans. The train went fast, although it seemed to us that it moved at a snail's pace. It stopped three times, at Kulikowo, Żółkiew, and Rawa Ruska. I suppose it was giving way to other railway traffic. During those stops Gestapo thugs got down from the roofs in order to stop anyone coming near the trucks. They were there to prevent anyone from the outside from showing us a little mercy and giving...
water through the small window secured by barbed wire to those who were dying of thirst inside.

We went on and nobody spoke—completely apathetic and silent. We knew that we were being taken to our deaths and that we couldn't do anything about it. Although all our thoughts were occupied with escape, we saw no possibility of success. Our truck was a new one; its windows were so narrow that I would not have been able to squeeze through. In other trucks it was possible to smash doors. Every few minutes we heard shots being fired after breakaways. No one said a word to anyone else; no one tried to console lamenting women or to calm crying children. We all knew one thing: that we were going towards a certain and terrible death. What we all wished for was that it would be quick. Perhaps somebody managed to escape, but I do not know... Escape was possible only from the train.

About midday the train pulled into Bełżec. It was a small station surrounded by little houses occupied by the Gestapo. Next to the station stood a post office and the lodgings of the Ukrainian railwaymen. Bełżec is on the line between Lublin and Tomaszów, 15 kilometres from Rawa Ruska. At Bełżec our train left the main line and moved onto sidings about a kilometre long, which led directly into the camp. At the main station in Bełżec an old German with a thick moustache mounted the engine. I do not know his name, but I would recognize him at a glance. He looked like a butcher. He took charge of the train, bringing it into the camp. The journey lasted no more than two minutes. During my four months in Bełżec I saw no one but this thug doing the job.

The sidings led through empty fields; not one habitable building in sight. The German who brought the train climbed down from the engine in order to 'help'.

With shouts and kicks he drove people out of the trucks. Then he went to inspect each truck personally, in case someone was trying to hide. He took care of everything. When the whole train was empty and checked, he signalled with a flag and moved the train away from the camp.

The camp was under the total control of the SS. No one was allowed to come near. Those who found themselves in the area by mistake were shot at. The train would come into a courtyard 1 square kilometre in size enclosed on all sides by barbed wire and wire netting 2 metres high. This fencing was not electrified. The entrance to the courtyard was through a large wooden gate covered with barbed wire. Beside this gate was a guardhouse with a telephone. By the guardhouse stood a few SS men with dogs. When the train had been brought into the courtyard, one of the men would come out of the guardhouse, shut the gate, and then go back in. At this moment the reception of the transport began. Several dozen SS men yelling 'Los' opened the trucks, chasing people out with whips and rifle-butts. The doors were about a metre from the ground, and the people, young and old alike, had to jump down, often breaking arms or legs. Children were injured and all tumbled down exhausted, terrified, and filthy. The SS men were assisted by the so-called Zugsführer, who supervised the Jewish death commando. They were dressed in everyday clothing without any distinctive marking. The sick, the old, and small children—in other words, all those who could not walk on their own—were thrown onto stretchers and taken to pits. There they were made to sit on the edge, while Irmann—one of the Gestapo—shot them and pushed their bodies into the pit with a rifle-butt.

This Irmann, who specialized in murdering old men and small children, was a tall, dark, handsome man—quite normal-looking. Like the others, he lived in a small house next to the railway station in Bełżec. Alone like the rest, without women or family. He used to turn up at the camp early in the morning and stay the whole day receiving death transports. As soon as the train was empty, all the victims were assembled in the courtyard and surrounded by the askers. It was then that Irmann would give a speech. There was deathly silence. Irmann stood close to the crowd. Everybody wanted to hear him. We all suddenly hoped that, if we were spoken to, then perhaps it meant that there would be work to do, that we would live after all... Irmann spoke loudly and clearly: 'Ihr geht jetzt bader, nachher werden Ihr zur Arbeit geschickt.' That was all.

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In normal circumstances Zugsführer meant 'train master'. In the camp's usage the term referred to fifteen or so Jews selected from the death brigade, led by an Oberzugsführer, with the task of being present at the ramp to meet each transport as it arrived.

SS Hauptscharführer Fritz Irmann (11 Oct. 1941 – 14 Apr. 1942) was in charge of a platoon of Ukrainian guards. He was accidentally shot dead in Bełżec some time in the autumn of 1942 by his colleague Heinrich Gey in a scuffle during an escape attempt by two Ukrainian guards. (See Dr. Janusz Peter Kornien, 'Bełżec: jedne z Obiegu', Dzieje, no. 2, 1977, p. 31.)

You are going to take a bath now. Afterwards you will be sent to work. The text of the speech varied, according to different testimonies. But it contained two basic elements: an instruction to undress in order to take a bath, and a vague promise of work. It was not always delivered by Irmann, but by any member of the SS garrison who was at the ramp on duty.
The crowd rejoiced; the people were relieved that they would be going to work. They applauded. I remember his words, repeated day after day—three times a day on average, during the time I was there. It was a moment of hope, of illusion. The crowd was peaceful. And in silence they all went forward: men straight across the courtyard to a building bearing the inscription 'Bade und Inhalationsräume' in large letters, the women, some 20 metres further on to a large barracks, 15 by 30 metres. They were led there not knowing why. For a few minutes more there was peace and quiet. I saw that when they were handed wooden stools and ordered first to stand in a line and then to sit down, and when eight Jewish barbers, silent as death, came in to shave their hair to the bare skin, it was at this moment that they were struck by the terrible truth. It was then that neither the women nor the men—already on their way to the gas—could have had any illusions about their fate.

With the exception of a few men chosen for their trade, which could be handy in the camp, all the rest—young and old, women and children—went to certain death. Little girls with long hair had it shaved; others with short hair went to the gas chambers directly, together with the men. And all of a sudden, without any transition from hope, they were overcome by despair. There were cries and shrieking. Some women went mad. Others, however, went to their death calmly, young girls in particular. Our transport consisted largely of the intelligentsia. There were also many young men, but, as in every other transport I saw, women were in the majority.

I stood to one side with others left to dig pits, watching my brothers, sisters, friends, and acquaintances being driven to their deaths. While the women, naked and shaved, were rounded up with whips like cattle to the slaughter, without even being counted—'Faster, faster'—the men were already dying. Shaving the women took approximately two hours. Two hours was the time it took to prepare for murder and for the murder itself.

A dozen or so SS men drove the women along with whips and fixed bayonets all the way to the building and from there, up three steps to a hall. There the asbers counted 750 people for each gas chamber.9 Those women who tried to resist were bayoneted until the blood was running. Eventually all the women were forced into the chambers. I heard the doors being shut; I heard shrieks and cries; I heard desperate calls for help in Polish and in Yiddish. I heard the blood-curdling wails of women and the squeals of children, which after a short time became one long, horrifying scream... This went on for fifteen minutes. The engine worked for twenty minutes. Afterwards there was total silence. Then the asbers pushed open the doors that led outside. It was then that those of us who had been selected from different transports, in unmarked clothing and without tattoos, began our work.

We pulled out the corpses of the people so recently alive. We dragged them to pits with the help of leather straps while an orchestra played... from morning until night.

After a while I came to know the whole area well. The camp was surrounded by dense forest of young pine. Although the forestation was thick, extra branches were cut and interwoven with the existing ones over the gas chambers to allow a minimum of light to penetrate. Behind the gas chambers was a sandly lane along which we dragged the corpses. Overhead the Germans had put wire netting interwoven with more branches. This part of the camp was covered by a sort of roof of greenery and was darker than elsewhere. I suppose the Germans wanted to conceal the area from aerial observation. The main gate led to a sizeable courtyard. There was a substantial shed where the women had their hair shaved. Next to the shed was another small courtyard, surrounded on all sides by a fence 3 metres high. It was made of close-fitting wooden boards, greyish in colour. The courtyard led directly to the gas chambers. Thus no one on the outside would have been able to see what was happening within. The building containing the gas chambers was not high, but long and wide. It was made of grey cement blocks, and was covered by a flat roof made of asbestos sheets. Immediately above it stretched wire netting covered with branches. The door to the building was approached by three steps a metre wide and without railings. In front stood a large flower-pot filled with plants. There was an inscription in large letters on the front: 'Bade und Inhalationsräume'. The steps led to a completely empty and unlit corridor: just four cement walls. It was very long, though only about a metre and a half wide. On both sides of it were doors to the gas chambers. These were sliding doors made of wood, with wooden handles. The gas chambers had no windows. They were dark and empty. In each gas chamber there was a round hole the size of an electric socket.10 All the walls and floors were made of cement. Both the corridor and the gas chambers were no more than 2 metres high. On a wall opposite the entrance to each gas chamber were more sliding doors 2 metres wide. Through these the corpses of the gassed were thrown outside. On one side of the building was an adjoining shed no bigger than 2 metres square. This housed the engine, which was petrol-driven. The gas chambers were about a metre and a half above ground level. The doors leading to the ramp, onto which the bodies of the victims were thrown, were on a level with the gas chambers.11

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9 The building with the gas chambers had six cubicles, each about 25 sq. m. It is almost impossible to squeeze such a large crowd into such a small space. The figure of 750 people was provided by Christian Wirth, the camp's first commandant, to a company of high-ranking SS officers who visited the camp in the middle of Aug. 1942. Wirth's purpose was to impress them with the efficiency of his methods of murder, which they had come to improve. The figure must then have become official, although highly unrealistic, and the source of the wild overestimate made by Reder after the war of 2.5 million victims. See n. 32.

10 This was the outlet of a gas pipe.

11 The first building housing the gas chambers, which was constructed some time towards the end of 1944, was made of double wooden planks with the spaces in between filled with sand. It was only half the size of the second gassing installation, described by Reder, and had only three gas chambers. This building was taken down some time in June or July 1944, during the camp's extensive modernization.
There were also barracks for the camp’s death commando. The first served the
workers doing miscellaneous jobs; the other was for the so-called ‘professionals’.
They were identical. Each had space for 250 people. There were bunks on two
levels, consisting of bare wooden boards with one small angled board as a headrest.
Not far from the barracks was a kitchen, the camp’s store, an office, a laundry, a
tailor’s shop, and, finally, comfortable barracks for the askers.

There were mass graves on both sides of the building housing gas chambers.
Some were already full; others were still empty. I saw many graves filled to capac-
ity and covered high with sand. It took quite a while for them to level down. There
always had to be one empty pit, just in case...

III

I stayed in Bełżec death camp from August until the end of November. This was a
period which saw the gassing of Jews on a massive scale. I was told by some of the
inmates who had managed to survive from earlier transports that the vast majority
of the death convoys came during this precise period.\(^13\) They were coming each
and every day without respite. Usually they arrived three times a day. Each convoy
was composed of fifty cattle-trucks, each truck containing 100 people. If a transport
happened to come during the night, the victims were kept in locked cars until
six in the morning. The average death toll was 10,000 people a day. Some days the
transports were not only larger, but even more frequent. Jews were brought in
from everywhere: no one else, only Jews. I never saw anybody else. Bełżec served
no other purpose but that of murdering Jews. All the transports were unloaded by
the Gestapo, askers, and Zugführer. Further on, in the courtyard where the people
undressed, there were also Jewish workers. We would ask in a whisper, ‘Where are
you from?’ In a whisper they would answer, ‘From Lemberg’, ‘From Kraków’,
‘From Zamość’, ‘Wieliczka’, ‘Jasło’, ‘Tarnów’, and so on. I witnessed this once,
twice, even three times every day.

Each transport received the same treatment. People were ordered to undress
and to leave their belongings in the courtyard. Each time there was the same
debilitating speech. And each time people rejoiced. I saw the spark of hope in their
eyes—hope that they may be going to work. But a minute later, and with extreme
brutality, babies were torn from their mothers, old and sick were thrown on
stretchers, while men and little girls were driven with rifle-buttts further on to a
fenced path leading directly to the gas chambers. At the same time, and with the
same brutality, the already naked women were ordered to the barracks, where they
had their hair shaved. I knew exactly the moment when they all suddenly realized
what was in store. Cries of fear and anguish, terrible moans, mingled with the

\(^13\) The engine, said to have come from a captured Russian tank, was installed and supervised by SS
Scharführer Lorenz Hackenholt (b. 25 June 1914), a mechanic responsible for the gassing installations
constructed first in Belzec and then in Sobibór and Treblinka. Apart from the two askers, the engine
was switched on and off by a Jew called Monick, a taxi-driver from Kraków. This incriminating infor-
mation comes from Reder’s interrogation by Jan Sohn. The interrogation took place in Kraków on
29 Dec. 1945 (Collection of Testimonies of Jewish Survivors, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warsaw,
file no. 10040). The information was omitted from the printed edition of Reder’s booklet.

\(^14\) Reder is wrong. No French Jews were deported to Bełżec. Some Dutch Jews were deported to
Sobibór. Some Greek Jews were taken to Treblinka. But there were German Jews in Bełżec; most
came from different ghettos in Lublin district, where they had been taken after deportation from
Germany some time in the early months of 1941.
future. They were sure that they were being brought to Belzec to work: they were well dressed and carefully prepared for the journey. Once there, they were treated by the German thugs in the same way as the Jews from other transports. And they were murdered by the same method, perishing in an equally horrible manner. About 100,000 foreign Jews might have been brought to the camp while I was there. They were all gassed.

When, after twenty minutes of gassing, the askers pushed open the tightly shut doors, the dead were in an upright position. Their faces were not blue. They looked almost unchanged, as if asleep. There was a bit of blood here and there from bayonet wounds. Their mouths were slightly open, hands rigid, often pressed against their chests. Those who were nearest to the now wide-open doors fell out by themselves. Like marionettes.

IV

Before they were murdered, all the women were shaved. While the first group was rushed to the barracks, others waited their turn, naked and barefoot even in winter and snow. Lamenting and nearly mad mothers pressed their children close. Each time I watched them with a breaking heart. I could not really stand the sight of them. A group of women already shaved was hustled along, while those who followed waded through the hair of many shades which covered the entire floor of the barracks like some soft and silky carpet. When all the women had been shaved, four workers using brooms made from the branches of lime trees swept the floor and collected the hair into a large pile the size of nearly half a room. Then with bare hands they put this multicoloured pile into jute sacks, which they carried to a store.

The store where the hair, undergarments, and outer clothing of the victims were collected was in a small barracks not larger than 7 by 8 metres. Hair and personal possessions were kept there for ten days. After this time the hair in sacks was put on one side and personal possessions on the other, both ready to be loaded onto a goods train, which came to take away the spoils. Those who worked in the camp’s offices told us that the hair went to Budapest. One Jew in particular told us all he knew. His name was Schreiber, a lawyer from the Sudetenland. Schreiber was an honest man. Irmann had promised to take him on holiday. One day Irmann took a short break. I heard Schreiber asking, ‘Nehmen Sie mich mit?’ [‘Are you going to take me with you?’] Irmann answered, ‘Noch nicht’ [‘Not yet’]. And so he kept Schreiber hoping. But I am sure that he perished, just like all others. It was he who told me that every few days a railway truck full of hair went to Budapest.

Apart from hair, the Germans also sent away baskets filled with gold teeth. In those few hundred metres separating the gas chambers from the pits stood some dentists with pliers. They stopped everyone as they dragged the corpses away.

They opened the mouths of the dead and yanked out the gold teeth, which they then threw into baskets ready for the purpose. There were eight dentists, usually young men specially selected to do the work.15 I knew one of them well. He was called Zucker and came from Rzeszów. The dentists occupied a small separate barracks, which they shared with a doctor and a chemist. At dusk they went back to the barracks with baskets full of teeth, gold crowns, and bridges. There they separated the gold, which they melted into ingots. They were supervised by a Gestapo man called Schmidt, who beat them when they thought they were not working fast enough.16 The gold was turned into ingots 1 centimetre thick, 50 millimetres wide, and 20 centimetres long.

Every day the SS men collected jewellery, money, and dollars from the store. They loaded them into suitcases, which a Jewish worker carried to the camp’s main office in Belzec. A Gestapo man went ahead, while the suitcases were carried by Jewish workers. The main office was a short distance away, no more than twenty minutes on foot. Belzec murder camp was run from this office. Jews who worked in the administration told us that a whole transport of gold and precious objects was dispatched to the headquarters in Lublin, of which the camp in Belzec was a branch.17

Clothing torn from the Jewish victims was carried by workers to the store, where another ten workers took each garment apart in search of gold and money. These workers were supervised by SS men, who beat them frequently. The SS men divided the money found in clothing between themselves. These SS supervisors were specially chosen for the job; they never changed. The Jews who worked there never took anything for themselves. Nor did they want to. For what could we do with money or jewellery? We could not buy anything. We had no

15 A Jew named Santo Perter employed in one of the SS workshops in Lemberg testified after the war that “Towards the end of December 1942 there came to our workshop once a young dentist whose name I do not recall. . . . He told us that he escaped from Belzec . . . This dentist was in Belzec for three months. Because of his profession he was detailed to a dentist’s brigade, which numbered, if I remember correctly, fifteen men. Their job was to pull out gold teeth and bridges from corpses yanked out from the gas chambers.” What happened to this dentist afterwards is not known. (See Collection of Testimonies of Jewish Survivors, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warsaw, file no. 4772.)

16 See n. 28.

17 Lublin was the headquarters of Aktion Reinhard, the operation consisting of the organized murder and plunder of the Jews in the specially designated murder camps of Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. In charge of Aktion Reinhard was Brigadeführer Odilo Globocnik, SS- and Polizeiführer for Lublin district. From 1 Aug. 1942 the responsibility for economic plunder was entrusted to the most capable hands of Christian Wirth (24 Nov. 1885–26 May 1944), Kriminalrat from the criminal police in Stuttgart, who became an inspector of SS garrisons in all three camps of Aktion Reinhard after relinquishing the post of first commandant of Belzec. Part of his new job consisted in preparing for further use the mountains of clothing and personal items belonging to victims murdered in the Aktion Reinhard camps. The spoils were collected in hangars at a disused airport in Lublin, where 500 Jewish workers did the job of sorting, checking, and preparing items for dispatch. Money and precious metals were sent to Hitler’s chancellery via Globocnik’s headquarters. A final report of the financial gains of Aktion Reinhard was submitted to Himmler by Globocnik in 1944 for approval. It was approved.
hope of staying alive. No one believed in miracles. But although each worker was searched very thoroughly, it often happened that we trod on dollar bills which nobody had noticed. But we did not even try to pick them up. They served no useful purpose. One day a shoemaker took a five-dollar note. He did it deliberately and openly. He was shot together with his son. He went to his death quite obviously glad of the fact that soon he would leave all this behind him. Death was a certainty, anywhere. There was no reason to prolong this agony... In Belzec dollars helped us to die an easier death...

V

I was a member of the permanent death commando. We were 500 men all told. The 'professionals' accounted for half of the total, but even they were employed where no special skills were required, like digging pits and dragging corpses. We dug pits, enormous mass graves, and pulled bodies along. After they had done their own work, all the professionals had to take part in this job. We dug with spades, but there was also a machine which loaded sand, brought it to the surface, and emptied it beside the pits. There was a mountain of sand which we used to cover the pits when we were filled to overflowing. On average 450 people worked round the pits on a daily basis. What I found most horrible was that we were ordered to pile bodies to a height of about a metre above ground-level, and only then to cover them with sand. Thick, black blood ran from the mounds and covered the whole area like a sea. In order to get to the next empty grave we had to cross from one side of an already full pit to another. Ankle deep we waded through the blood of our brothers. We walked over mounds of bodies. And this was most dreadful, most horrible...

We were supervised on this job by Schmidt, a complete thug, who punched and kicked. If somebody was not working fast enough in his opinion, he ordered the man to lie on the ground to receive twenty-five lashes with a riding-crop. The poor fellow had to count the lashes. If he made a mistake, he was given fifty. The mangled victim had no chance of survival. He was hardly able to crawl back to the barracks, where he was usually found dead the next morning. The same thing went on several times a day.

No fewer than thirty or forty workers were shot each day. Usually it was a camp doctor who prepared a list of those too weak to work, but sometimes it was a kapos with the function of Oberzugsführer who submitted names of so-called criminals. At least thirty to forty men from the death commando were shot daily. They were

18 Heni, or Christian, Schmidt was a Volksdeutsch from Latvia with the rank of Zugführermann. He was one of the former Soviet prisoners of war trained in the camp at Trzebnica for service in the murder camps of Aktion Reinhard. These people were known to the Poles who lived in the vicinity of the camp as Ukrainian guards (prisoners of war of Ukrainian origin were in the majority), or askers. In German they were called either Trzebnitz Männer or Hilftwillige, Himis for short.

19 Reder is wrong. Bills of lading were delivered to the German station-master. They contained not personal names, but average numbers and the names of the localities where the Judenabwagen (Jewish deportation trains) originated. Belzec railway station was set on fire by a bomb dropped from a Soviet plane in 1944, and the documents did not survive. Documents from the other murder camps of Aktion Reinhard were destroyed on Himmler's specific orders after the termination of the murder operations, to obliterate all traces—written and material—of the massacre.

20 Reder contradicts here his earlier and later testimonies. During an interrogation by Jan Sosn (sec. n. 13) he gave a list of four names of askers (Schmidt, Schneuer, Kunz, and Trumwitz) and only three names of the members of the SS garrison (Irmann, Schwarcz, and Felix), which suggests that members of the Jewish death brigade had at least some contact with the Ukrainian guards and very limited contact with the Germans. This is confirmed by the fact that, during an interrogation in the office of a public prosecutor in Munich in Aug. 1960, Reder stated that he had never heard the names of Obecznica, Fichter, Fless, Herigl, Schwarcz, Dubois, Girzig, Deichsel, Barbel, Groh (Groth), Kamn, Schlich, Zierz (Zierko), and Gley, although most of them had been members of the SS garrison in Belzec murder camp. (The name of Schwarcz crops up in Reder's booklet on numerous occasions.)
down in our shoes, since we rarely had enough time in the morning to put them on. It was still dark when we were woken up. Schmidt would run through the barracks like a madman, slashing his riding-crop left and right. We got up as exhausted and desperate as we had been the night before. We were given one thin blanket, either to lie down on or to use as a cover. They always chose for us old and worn rags to dress in. If anyone so much as sighed, he was hit about the face. We were allowed a light on for half an hour in the evening; then it was switched off. An Oberaufsichtsführer went round the barracks, whip in hand. He did not allow us to talk. We communicated in whispers with our neighbours.

The death commando consisted mostly of men who had seen their wives, children, and parents gassed. Many of us managed to smuggle a tallit and tefillin from the store. After our barracks had been secured for the night, a murmur of kaddish could be heard from the bunk. We prayed for our dead. Later there was silence. We were so benumbed that we never complained. Perhaps those fifteen Aufsichtsführers still cherished some hope. We didn’t.

We moved around like people without a will of their own: like one body. I remember some names, but not too many. It was of no importance in the camp who was who before, or what name he bore. I recall that one camp medic was a young doctor called Jakubowicz. He came from the vicinity of Rzeszów. I also knew a merchant and his son, both from Kraków. Their name was Schübel. Also a Czech Jew called Ebhogen. He said he had once owned a bicycle shop. There was also a Goldschmidt, once a well-known cook from the Brüder Hanicka restaurant in Carlsbad. No one was really interested in anyone else. We were just carrying on this dreadful existence mechanically.

We got our lunch at midday. At the first window we got a bowl, at the other a pint of watery soup with a potato thrown in if we were lucky. Before lunch and also before the evening meal we were forced to sing songs. At the same time we heard the moans of those who were being gassed, an orchestra played, and opposite the kitchen stood the gallows.

VI

The SS men lived without women both in Belzec and in the camp. Even their drinking parties took place in male company only. All the work in the camp was done by men alone. But this changed in October. In that month a transport came from Zamość carrying Jewish women from Czechoslovakia. Among them were several dozen women whose husbands worked in the death commando. We decided to save some. Forty were assigned jobs in the kitchen, laundry, and tailor’s shop. They were forbidden to communicate with their husbands. In the kitchen they peeled potatoes, washed up pots and pans, and carried water from a well. I do not know what happened to them. Presumably they went the same way as the others. These were educated women, belonging to the intelligentsia. They brought their personal possessions to Belzec. Some even carried butter. They gave us all they had. They also helped those who worked either in the kitchen itself or in the vicinity. They lived in a small separate barracks supervised by a female Aufsichtsführer. I often saw them talking (my job of stove-repairer gave me an opportunity to move around freely). They did not seem to have been as maltreated as we were. They finished their work at dusk and stood in pairs waiting for their portion of soup and coffee. Like us, they had kept their original clothing: no striped uniforms in Belzec. I suppose it did not pay the Germans to introduce uniforms for a crew which was to stay alive for a very short period.

Straight from a transport, dressed in their own clothes and with their hair intact, these women were sent to workshops and the kitchen. Through the windows of their workplaces they could see the death convoys arriving daily.

VII

The camp heaved with mass murder. The days were full of mortal fear and death. But there were also cases of individual butchery. I saw some of those. There was no roll-call in Belzec. Nor was it needed. Spectacles of horror were played out to a gallery without any special announcement. I must tell you about a transport from Zamość. It arrived some time about 15 November. It was already cold. Snow and mud covered the ground. The transport from Zamość came in a snowstorm. It was one of many. It carried the entire Judenrat. When, in accordance with the usual procedure, the victims were all naked, the men driven to the gas chambers and the women into the barracks to have their hair shaved, the president of the Judenrat was ordered to stay back in the courtyard. Then, while they were driving everybody to their deaths, the SS men paraded round the man. No, I do not know his name. I saw a middle-aged man, deathly white and very still. The SS men ordered an orchestra to come to the courtyard and await further orders. The orchestra, composed of six musicians, was in its usual place on the path between the gas chambers and the pits. The musicians played on instruments which had belonged to the victims. I was working in the vicinity, doing some brickwork, and so I saw it all. The SS men ordered the orchestra to play ‘Es geht alles vorüber, es geht alles vorbei’ and ‘Drei Lilien, kommt ein Reiter, gefahren, bringt die Lilien’ [‘Everything passes, everything goes by’ and ‘Three lilies, comes a rider bringing lilies’]. And the orchestra played those tunes on violins, flutes, and an accordion. This went on for quite a while. Afterwards they ordered the man to stand against a wall and lashed him about the head and face with riding-crops tipped with lead.

21 Between 16 and 19 Oct. three transports came to Belzec from Zamość via the transit camp in Izbica carrying between 12,000 and 15,000 victims, the majority of whom were foreign Jews.

22 The transport, which went via the transit camp in Izbica, carried 4,000 victims, among whom were the last Jews of Zamość.
until the blood ran. Irmann participated in this savagery, and also that fat pig Schwarz, and Schmidt and some askers. While he was being beaten, the victim was ordered to dance and jump to the rhythm of the music. After a few hours he was given a chunk of bread and beaten again in order to force him to eat it. Covered in blood he stood there, indifferent and solemn, without so much as a moan. For seven hours he was tortured. The SS men stood there laughing. ‘Das ist eine höhere Person, Präsident des Judenrates’ ['What a distinguished person, the president of the Judenrat'] they called in harsh voices. It was not until six o’clock in the evening that Schmidt drove the man to a pit, shot him in the head, and kicked the body onto a pile of other corpses.

There were other singular events. Soon after my arrival at Belzec the Germans picked out from a transport (we did not always know the name of the locality a transport came from) several young men, including a young boy. He was the picture of youth, health, and strength. He also amazed us by his good humour. He looked round and asked almost playfully, ‘Did anyone ever sneek out of here?’

And that was that. He was overheard by some Germans. As a result this young boy, practically a child, was tortured to death. They stripped him naked and hung him upside-down on the gallows. He was there for three hours—and he was still alive. So they took him down, threw him onto the ground, and pushed sand down his throat with sticks. He died.

From time to time a transport larger than usual arrived. Instead of fifty cattle-trucks, there could be sixty or more. Not long before my escape, such a transport arrived. The Germans calculated that they had to keep aside 100 men—already naked—to help with burying the murdered, who were too numerous for the death commando to manage in one day. They chose young boys only. Whipped and bludgeoned, the boys dragged corpses to the pits, naked in the snow and cold, without even a drop of water. In the evening Schmidt took them to the pits and shot them one by one with a pistol. He ran short of bullets for the last few, so he killed them with the handle of a pickaxe. I did not hear them moaning, but I saw them trying desperately to jump the death queue, tragic and helpless relics of youth and life.

VIII

The camp was under the constant surveillance of armed askers and several dozen SS men, but only a few were particularly active. Some of them stood out for their cruelty. They were real animals. Few murdered in cold blood. Others happily enjoyed it. I saw their happy and contented faces at the sight of naked and wounded people driven to the gas chambers at bayonet point. They took evident

pleasure in the sight of the resignation and despair of the young people, who were shadows of their former selves.

We knew that the nicest house next to the railway station in Belzec was occupied by the commandant of the camp. He held the rank of Obersturmführer. No matter how hard I try, I cannot remember his name. It was short. He did not come often to the camp, except on special occasions. He was tall and thick-set, over 40 years old, and with a boorish air—a real bully and a complete pig. One day the death-machine went out of order. When he was informed, he came on horseback and ordered an immediate repair. He did not allow the gas chambers to be opened to let the people out; let them asphyxiate slowly and die in agony for a few hours longer. He crouched beside the engine, yelling and shaking with fury. Although he seldom came to the camp, for the other SS men he was a terror. He lived alone, attended by an asker who did all sorts of work and brought daily records from the camp.

Neither the commandant nor the other Gestapo had personal daily contact with the camp. They had their own canteen and a cook from Germany, who prepared meals for all the Germans. No family ever came on a visit. None of them lived with a woman. They kept large flocks of ducks and geese. People said that early in the summer they received whole baskets of cherries. Delivery of wine and other alcohol arrived daily. I repaired an oven there once and saw two young Jewish women plucking geese. They threw me an onion and some beetroot. I also saw a village girl working there. There was no one else there, except ordeliers. Every Sunday they took an orchestra from the camp and had a drinking orgy. The Gestapo drank and stuffed themselves like pigs. No one else was there. They threw scraps of food to the musicians. When the commandant visited the camp, I saw the Gestapo and askers shake with fear and apprehension.

Besides them, the Belzec slaughterhouse was run and controlled by four other thugs. It is difficult to imagine anyone more depraved than those four criminals. The first was Franz Irmann. About 30 years old, with the rank of Stabscharführer, he was responsible for the camp’s supplies. His little sideline was shooting old people and small children. He performed his murderous tasks coolly. Not talkative, he liked to give the impression of inscrutability. Every day he reassured people

28 SS Oberscharführer Gottfried Schwarz (3 May 1913 – 19 June 1944) held the post of deputy commandant of Belzec from the end of 1942 until May 1943, when the camp was dismantled under his supervision. In 1943 he was promoted by Himmler to the rank of SS Untersturmführer.

29 As is known from other sources, the gassing machine broke down on numerous occasions. One breakdown occurred in the middle of Aug. 1942 during the ‘show’ gassing witnessed by Kurt Gerstein and Wilhelm Pfannenstiel, two SS experts on disinfection (see n. 1). The breakdown, timed by Gerstein, lasted for over two hours, with the victims locked inside.

30 Not SS Stabscharführer but SS Hauptsturmführer; see n. 5.
about to be murdered that they were going to work, having bathed first. A conscientious murderer.

An altogether different sort of murderer was Oberscharführer Reinhold Feix.²⁷ It was said that he came from Gablonz, on the Niisa, and was married and the father of two children. He spoke like an educated man, but fast. If someone failed to get his meaning first time, he punched and yelled like mad. One day he ordered the repainting of a kitchen. The person doing the job was a Jew with a degree in chemistry. He was high up a ladder when Feix came in. Every few minutes he ordered him to come down and beat him about the face with a riding-crop until the man was covered with blood and swollen all over. This is how Reinhold did his work. He gave the impression of being abnormal. Feix played the violin and ordered the orchestra to play endlessly the tune ‘Góralu czy ci nie żal?’ (‘Mountaineer, do you not feel sad? [that you have to leave your own land]’), forcing people to dance and sing while he laughed and beat them. A mad dog.

I do not know which of them was more diabolical and cruel: Feix or the fat, squat, dark-haired Schwarz.²⁸ He came from somewhere deep in Germany. He took care that the askers did not show us any sympathy. He also supervised us when we were digging pits. Whipping and yelling he drove us to the gas chambers, where piles of bodies awaited their final journey to the mass graves. Once he had driven us to the gas chambers, he ran back to the pits again. There, staring blankly into the depths, with a lunatic gaze in their eyes, stood old people, children and the sick, all waiting to be shot. They had been given plenty of time to see the corpses, to breathe the smell of blood and putrefaction, before they were shot by Irmann Schwarz beat everyone constantly. He did not allow anyone to protect his face against the blows. ‘Hände ab!’ [‘Take your hands away!’], he yelled. Tormenting was his pleasure and joy.

Even more beastly was a young Volksdeutsch called Heni Schmidt.²⁹ Probably a Latvian, Schmidt spoke German with a strange accent. He pronounced ‘s’ as ‘t’ (not ‘was’ but ‘wat’). With askers he spoke Russian. He was in the camp every day. Agile, thin, and quick—looking like a real cut-throat and constantly drunk—Schmidt rushed around the camp from four o’clock in the morning until night. He beat whomever he could find with evident pleasure. ‘This one is the worst,’ we whispered among ourselves, adding immediately: ‘They are all equally beastly.’ Schmidt always turned up where harassment was at its worst. He never missed an opportunity to see victims being driven to the gas chambers. He stood there listening to the terrible screaming of women being gassed. He was the real soul of the camp, bloodthirsty, monstrous, and degenerate. It gave him real pleasure to observe the expressionless features of the death commando returning exhausted to the barracks at night. On the way back each one of us received a blow on the head from his riding-crop. If anyone tried to evade it Schmidt would run after him.

There were also others—perhaps less memorable, but they were all inhuman monsters. Not for a moment did any of them show any human feelings. They tormented and tortured thousands of people from morning until night. At dusk they went back to their little houses by the railway station in Bětice. During the night the camp was guarded by the askers, who manned the machine-guns. During the day it was the Gestapo who ‘welcomed’ the death transports.

The biggest event for those thugs was Himmler’s visit. It took place some time towards the middle of October.³⁰ That day we knew that something unusual was afoot. There was an air of secrecy all around. Everything was done with great speed. Even the process of murder took a much shorter time that day. Irmann announced that because ‘Es kommt eine höhere Person, Ordnung muss sein’ [‘A distinguished guest is coming; everything must be in order’]. He did not elaborate, but we all knew from the whispered exchanges of the askers.

About three o’clock in the afternoon Himmler arrived, escorted by Generalmajor Katzman (the butcher of Lemberg and eastern Galicia), an aide-de-camp, and ten Gestapo. Irmann and others conducted him to the gas chambers just in time for him to see corpses falling out. A terrible pile of bodies of very young people, small children, and babies. The Jewish death commando dragged the corpses along while Himmler stood there watching. He stayed and watched for half an hour and then left the camp. I saw how pleased and uplifted the Gestapo felt. I saw their joy and I heard them laughing. I also heard them talking of promotions.

IX

Words are inadequate to describe our state of mind and what we felt when we heard the terrible moans of those people and the cries of the children being murdered. Three times a day we saw people going nearly mad. Nor were we far from madness either. How we survived from one day to the next I cannot say, for we had no illusions. Little by little we were dying, together with those thousands of people who, for a short while, went through an agony of hope. Apathetic and resigned to our fate, we felt neither hunger nor cold. We all waited our turn to die an inhuman death. Only when we heard the heart-rending cries of small children—‘Mummy, mummy, but I have been a good boy’ and ‘Dark, dark’—did we feel something. And then nothing again.

²⁷ SS Scharführer (not Oberscharführer) Reinhold Feix (3 July 1909 – 30 May 1945) was a supervisor of the Jewish death brigade (those who emptied gas chambers, dragged bodies, and dug pits). Reder spells his name wrongly as ‘Feix’.

²⁸ See n. 23.

²⁹ According to Yitzhak Arad (Bětice, Sobibór, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), 165–9). Himmler never went to Bětice but visited Sobibór and Treblinka in 1943. However, according to the post-war testimonies of Polish inhabitants of Bětice and Turnowsk Lubelski, Himmler visited Bětice twice; once in Aug. then in Oct. or Nov. 1942.
I had been in this nightmare for nearly four months when, towards the end of November, Irmmann told me that the camp would need metal sheets, and a lot of them. I was swollen and blue all over. Pus ran from open wounds. Schmidt bludgeoned me about the face with a truncheon. With an ironic smile Irmmann told me that I would go to Lemberg under escort to fetch the sheets, adding ‘Sollst nicht durchgehen’ [‘Don’t try to escape’]. Off I went in a lorry with one guard and four Gestapo. After loading the whole day, I stayed in the lorry guarded by one of the thugs, while the others went away looking for fun. I sat there for a few hours without moving or thinking. Then, quite by chance, I noticed that my guard was asleep and snoring. Instinctively and without a thought, I slipped down from the lorry and stood on the pavement pretending to adjust the load. Then I slowly backed away. Legionowa Street was full of people. There was a blackout. I pushed my cap down lower and no one noticed me. I remembered the address of my Polish housekeeper and went straight to her flat. She hid me. It took twenty months for the physical injuries to heal. But what of the mental wounds? I was haunted by images of past horror, hearing the moans of the murdered and the children crying, and the throb of a running engine. Nor could I wipe from my memory the faces of those German thugs. And in such a state of continuous nightmare I survived until the liberation.

When the Red Army expelled the Germans from Lemberg and I was finally able to come out of hiding without fear, to breathe fresh air and to begin to feel and think again, I was seized by a desire to go back to this place where two and a half million of our people met their terrible death. I went there soon and spoke at length with the locals. They told me that in 1943 a much smaller number of transports came to the camp. The murder centre for the Jews moved further west, to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. In 1944 the Germans opened up the pits and burned the bodies with petrol. Dark, heavy smoke rising from the enormous open-air pyres hung over an area of several dozen square miles. The wind carried the stench still further, for many long days, nights, and weeks.

And later, the locals told me, the Germans pounded the remaining bones to powder, which the wind blew away over the fields and forests. The machine for pounding the bones had been put together by someone named Spilke, a prisoner from Janowska camp brought to Bėżec for the purpose. He told me that he found nothing in the camp except mounds of bones. All the buildings had already gone. (Spilke managed to escape, and survived the war. He now lives in Hungary. He told me all this in Lemberg, where we met after the liberation.) When the production of ‘artificial fertilizer’ from human bones came to an halt, the open pits were filled with soil and the blood-soaked earth scrupulously levelled. The German murderers covered this graveyard for millions of murdered Jews with fresh greenery.

I said goodbye to my informants and went along the familiar siding. The railway line was gone. Through a field I reached a young and sweet-smelling pine forest. It was very still. In the middle of it was a large, sunny clearing . . .