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ל ק ט – האיגוד העולמי למדעי היהדות

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Article:

Arad, Yitzhak, "Operation Reinhard"; Extermination Camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka"

Published in:

Yad Vashem Studies 16 (1984) 205-240

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“Operation Reinhard”: Extermination Camps of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka

Yitzhak Arad

SOON AFTER THE task forces had began their campaign of extermination in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union, the deputy of the Governor General Hans Frank, Secretary of State Dr. Bühler, remarked at the Wannsee Conference

... that the General Government would welcome it if a start were to be made on the final solution of this question in the General Government, because here transportation does not pose a real problem nor would the deployment of a labor force interfere with the process of this operation. Jews should be removed from the area of the General Government as quickly as possible, because it is here that the Jew represents a serious danger as a carrier of epidemics, and in addition his incessant black marketeering constantly upsets the country's economic structure. Of the approximately 2.5 million Jews in question, the majority are anyway unfit for work.

Secretary of State Dr. Bühler furthermore stated that the solution of the Jewish question in the General Government is under the control of the Chief of the Security Police and the SD and that his activities are supported by the authorities in the General Government. He [Bühler] has only one request: that the Jewish question in this region be solved as quickly as possible.¹

¹ The so-called “Wannsee Protokoll,” original in the Archives of the Foreign Office, Bonn.

Dr. Bühler's request was given a positive response. The General Government consisted of the districts of Warsaw, Cracow, Lublin, Radom, and Lvov. According to the estimate of the German authorities, they were inhabited by approximately 2,284,000 Jews. A special organization was set up in Lublin to prepare for their extermination. The actual killing was to be carried out in three death camps — Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka, at the eastern border of the General Government.

The geographical location of the extermination sites also served as a pretext for the claim that the Jews were to be deported to ghettos in the East. Their disappearance could thus be explained in terms of their transportation to labor camps in the huge areas then occupied by the German armed forces in the Soviet Union.

SS-Brigadeführer Otto Globocnik was entrusted with conducting Operation Reinhard — named after Reinhard Heydrich who had been assassinated on May 2, 1942. In this office he was Himmler's immediate subordinate; as the commandant of SS and Police in the Lublin district he was subordinate to the Supreme SS- and *Polizeiführer* of the General Government, *Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Krüger.

The principal tasks of Globocnik and his staff in Operation Reinhard were: the overall planning of the deportations and of the extermination operations; the construction of extermination camps; to coordinate the deportation of Jews from the different administrative districts to the extermination camps; the killing of the Jews in the camps; to secure their belongings and valuables and transfer them to the appropriate German authority.

Headquarters of Operation Reinhard was responsible for coordinating the timing of the transports with the absorption capacity of the camps.

The organization and supervision of the respective transports from the entire area of the General Government and later on also from other European countries was the task of the RSHA and its departments as well as of the supreme commandant of the SS and Police and his subordinate departments.

To date no written orders by Himmler to Globocnik concerning Operation Reinhard have been discovered. A reason for this may be that either Himmler issued no written statement on this subject, or that any orders and directives were destroyed.²

The Personnel of Operation Reinhard

Preparations for Operation Reinhard were initiated more than six months before Himmler's order to commence the *Aktion* and at the latest two months prior to the Wannsee Conference. The first tasks were to organize the labor force and to construct the extermination centers. Upon completion of his task, Globocnik, in a letter dated October 27, 1943 to the Personnel Headquarters in Berlin, provided a detailed report, which sets out the total number of personnel involved in this operation — 434 men.³

In the construction and handling of the gassing installations, experienced former workers from the "Euthanasia" programs occupied leading positions in the planning, building, and administration of the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka extermination camps.

In the late autumn of 1941 the Belzec and later the Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps were set up, as was a training camp for "foreign" personnel — Ukrainian volunteers — in Trawniki, as well as the camp in the "old airport" of Lublin where the clothes and movable belongings of the victims were stored.

As head of the main department on Globocnik's staff, SS-*Sturmbannführer* Höfle was responsible for organizing and deploying the work force. He also coordinated the timing of the arrival of the extermination transports at the different camps. During the first months of Operation Reinhard, all extermination camps

² Nuremberg Document 4024-PS (covering letter by Globocnik to the report to Himmler of January 5, 1944, concerning the conclusion of "Operation Reinhard").

³ Original in the US Documentation Center, Berlin.

were under Globocnik's direct control; at the beginning of August 1942 Christian Wirth was appointed Inspector of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka.⁴

About twenty to thirty SS-men served in each camp. Most of them had formerly been engaged in the "Euthanasia" Operation. The camp commandants held the rank of SS-Ober- or *Hauptsturmführer*. The others also held noncommissioned officer ranks. No rank-and-file SS-men were employed in any of the camps.

Units composed of Ukrainians with some *volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) were assigned to assist the German camp personnel. The formation and training of such units took place in the "Trawniki SS-Training-Camp" which had been set up in the autumn of 1941. Afterwards, they were distributed among the camps in groups of 60 to 120 men with their own leaders, usually ethnic Germans. Some of the units assembled in Trawniki were also brought into action in the ghettos during the deportation of Jews, for example, at the time of the transportation of the Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp.⁵

The first Jews brought to the camps were those from the vicinity. They were used for construction work and also performed various services for the German camp personnel. They were generally skilled workers or craftsmen such as carpenters, blacksmiths, tailors, and shoemakers. As soon as the construction phase was completed, most of them were killed in trial gassings.

When the organized mass gassings began, the camp administration needed more and more workers from amongst the death transports. A few, especially skilled workers, were employed in the extermination camps according to the specific directives of

⁴ The documents do not specify that Wirth's area of command extended also to Kulmhof.

⁵ StA Wiesbaden AZ: 8 Js 1145-60 with plentiful evidence (see indictment, p. 329); verdict in the criminal proceedings StA Hamburg AZ: 147 Ks 2/75 of 17.5.1976 (ZSL Misc. vol. 519).

the German and Ukrainian camp leaders. Others had to work in the gas chambers, removing and incinerating the corpses, and also sorting the clothes and baggage of the victims. In the initial period, in particular, they were kept alive for only a few days or weeks before being killed and replaced by Jews from newly arrived transports. In each of the camps the Jewish labor force consisted of 600 to 1,000 prisoners. At a later stage Jewish prisoners became part of the permanent staff of the camp. While members of the German or Ukrainian camp personnel were occasionally transferred to other camps, once Jewish prisoners had entered a camp they never left it again.

The Construction of the Belzec Extermination Camp

Belzec, a small town in the southeast of the district of Lublin, close to the border of the district of Lvov and on the Lublin–Zamość–Rawa Ruska–Lvov railroad line, was selected as the locality for the first extermination camp. The area specified for the camp was a railroad siding half a kilometer from the Belzec railroad station.

The Pole Stanislaw Kozak described the beginning of its construction:

In October of the year 1941 three SS-men came to Belzec and demanded 20 men for the work from the municipal administration. The local council chose 20 workers from among the inhabitants of Belzec, and I was one of them. The Germans selected the terrain to the southeast of the railroad station, which adjoined a siding. The railway line to Lvov runs along this sidetrack. We began to work on November 1, 1941, with the construction of huts on the plot adjoining the siding. One of the huts which stood right next to the siding was 50 m. long and 12.5 m. wide. The second hut, which was 25 m. long and 12.5 m. wide, was intended for the Jews who went to the baths. Next to this hut we built a third hut, which was 12 m. long and 8 m. wide. This hut was divided into three sections by wooden walls, so that each section was 4 m. wide and 8 m. long. These sections were 2 m. high. The interior walls of these huts were built such

that we nailed the boards to them, filling in the empty space with sand. Inside the hut the walls were covered with cardboard; in addition the floors and the walls, to a height of 1.10 m. [were covered] with sheet-zinc. A 3 m. broad avenue, fenced in with barbed wire, which was also 3 m. high, led from the first to the second of the above-mentioned huts. A part of this fence, facing the siding and beyond it, was covered with pines and firs which had been specially felled, in order to conceal the siding. From the second hut a covered passage, ca. 2m. wide, 2 m. high, and ca. 10 m. long, led to the third hut. By way of this passage one reached the passage of the third hut, from which three doors led to its three sections. Each section of this hut had a door on its northern side, approximately 1.80 m. high and 1.10 m. wide. These doors, like the doors to the passage, were closely fitted with rubber. All the doors in this hut opened toward the outside. The doors were very strongly built of three-inch-thick planks and were secured against pressure from inside by a wooden bolt that was pushed inside two iron hooks specially fitted for this purpose. In each of the three sections of this hut water pipes were fixed at a height of 10 cm. from the floor. In addition, on the western wall of each section of this hut water pipes branched off at an angle to a height of 1 m. from the floor, ending in an opening directed toward the middle of the hut. The elbow-pipes were connected to pipes which ran along the walls and under the floor... The trench has been dug by 70 "blacks," that is to say, by former Soviet soldiers who worked with the Germans. It was 6 m. deep, 20 m. wide, and 50 m. long. This was the first ditch in which the Jews, killed in the extermination camp, were buried. The "blacks" dug this ditch in six weeks, at the time when we built the huts. This ditch was later continued as far as the middle of the northern border. That was already at a time when we no longer worked on building the huts. The first hut which I mentioned was at a distance of approximately 20 m. from the siding and 100 m. from the southern border. At that time when we Poles were building the huts, the "blacks" put up the fence around the extermination camp; it consisted of posts with closely spaced barbed wire. After we had built the three huts described above, the Germans dismissed us Poles from work on December 22, 1941.⁶

In the second half of December, Christian Wirth was appointed Camp Commandant of Belzec, with Josef Oberhauser as his adjutant. *SS-Scharführer* Erich Fuchs reported on Wirth's arrival in Belzec:

⁶ StA Munich I, AZ: 22 Js 64-83-61 (AZ. ZSL AR-Z 252/59, vol. VI, p. 1179).

One day in the winter of 1941, Wirth put together a transport to Poland. I was selected along with ca. eight to ten others and transferred to Belzec in three motorcars... Upon our arrival in Belzec we met Friedel Schwarz and two other SS-men whose names I do not remember. They served as guards during the building of a hut which we were to fit out as a gas chamber.

Wirth told us that in Belzec "all Jews were to be bumped off." For this purpose the huts were fitted out as gas chambers. I installed shower nozzles in the gas chambers. The nozzles were not connected to a water pipe because they were only meant to serve as camouflage for the gas chambers. The Jews who were to be gassed were untruthfully informed that they were to be bathed and disinfected.⁷

Wirth developed his own ideas on the basis of the experience he had gained in the "Euthanasia" program. Thus, in Belzec he decided to supply the fixed gas chamber with gas produced by the internal-combustion engine of a motorcar. Wirth rejected Cyanide B which was later used at Auschwitz. This gas was produced by private firms and its extensive use in Belzec might have aroused suspicion and led to problems of supply. He therefore preferred a system of extermination based on ordinary, universally available gasoline and diesel fuel.

At the end of February 1942 the installations for mass extermination were completed. The first two or three transports, each consisting of four to six freight cars fully loaded with a hundred or more Jews, were used for trial killings in order to test the capacity and efficiency of the gas chambers and the technique of the extermination process. The tests lasted several days. The last group to be killed consisted of the Jewish prisoners who had taken part in building the camp.⁸

Bottled carbon monoxide was used for these experiments. However, a short while later the gassings were carried out with carbon monoxide from the exhaust fumes of a motorcar engine.

⁷ StA Dortmund AZ: 45 Js 27-61 (AZ. ZSL: 208 AR-Z 251/59, vol. 9, pp. 1782 f.).

⁸ See note 6 (vol. IX, pp. 1681 ff.).

The engine from an armored vehicle ("250 h.p.") was installed in a shed outside the gas chamber, whence the gas was piped into the gas chamber. Wirth continued to experiment in his search for the most effective method of handling the transports of Jews, from their arrival at the camp to their extermination and the subsequent removal of the corpses. Everything was arranged in such a way that the victims should remain unaware of their impending doom. The intention was to convey to them the impression that they had arrived at a work or transit camp from which they would be sent on to another camp.

In addition, everything was to proceed at top speed so that the victims would have no chance to grasp what was going on. Their reactions were to be paralyzed to prevent escape attempts or acts of resistance.

The speedy process was to increase the camp's extermination capacity. In this way, several transports could be received and liquidated on one and the same day.

The entire camp covered a relatively small, flat, rectangular area. Its southern side measured 265 m., the other sides ca. 275 m. It was surrounded by a high wire fence, with barbed wire attached at the top and camouflaged with branches. Young trees were planted along the fence so that no one would be able to look into the camp from the outside. There were three watchtowers in the corners, two of them on the eastern perimeter and the third on the southwestern one. There was an additional watchtower in the center of the camp, near the gas chambers. A railroad track some 500 m. in length led from the Belzec railroad station into the camp through the gate on its northern side. The southern and eastern boundaries were lined with conifers.

Belzec was divided into two areas. Camp I, in the northwest, was the reception and administrative sector; Camp II, in the eastern section, was the extermination sector.

The reception sector comprised the railroad ramp, which had room for twenty freight cars, and two huts for the arrivals — one for undressing and the other for storing clothes and baggage.

Camp II, the extermination sector, comprised the gas chambers and the mass graves which were located in the eastern and northeastern part. The gas chambers were surrounded by trees and a camouflage net was spread over their roof to prevent observation from the air. There were also two huts in this sector for the Jewish prisoners working here: one served as their living quarters, the other as the kitchen. Camp II was completely separated from the other sector by a strictly guarded gate.

A low path, 2 m. wide and 50–70m. long, known as the “tube,” fenced in on both sides with barbed wire and partly partitioned off by a wooden fence, connected the hut in Camp I where the arrivals undressed with the gas chambers in Camp II.

The living quarters of the SS-men were at a distance of ca. 500 m. from the camp, near the Belzec railroad station. All the SS-men were employed in the camp administration. Each SS-man had his specific job and some of them were assigned more than one task. From time to time there was an exchange in the spheres of responsibility.⁹

SS-Oberscharführer Gottfried Schwarz was the Deputy Camp Commandant, *SS-Oberscharführer* Niemann was in charge of the extermination sector of Camp II, and *SS-Oberscharführer* Josef Oberhauser, Wirth’s adjutant, held responsibility for the construction of the camp. *SS-Oberscharführer* Lorenz Hackenholt, together with two Ukrainians working under him, was responsible for the operation of the gas chambers.

The Ukrainian unit numbered 60–80 men, divided into two groups. The Ukrainians served as security guards inside the camp, at the entrance gate, and on the four watchtowers; they also carried out several patrols. Some of them assisted in operating the gas chambers. Before the arrival of a transport, the Ukrainians were deployed as guards around the ramp, at the hut for undressing and along the “tube,” as far as the gas chambers.

⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. VII, pp. 1288, 1384; vol. VIII, p. 1465.

During the experimental killings they had to remove the corpses from the gas chambers and bury them. Later on, Jewish prisoners were forced to do this work.

The Construction of the Sobibor Extermination Camp

Sobibor, a village in a thinly populated region on the Chelm–Włodawa railroad line, was chosen by the Central Building Administration (*SS-Zentralbauverwaltung*) in Lublin as a suitable locality for an additional extermination camp.¹⁰

The camp extended westward from the Sobibor railroad station, along the railroad track, and was surrounded by a thin coniferous wood. Near the railroad station buildings a siding led into the camp where the deportation trains were unloaded.

Originally there were two wooden houses in this locality, a former forester's house and a two-storey post office. The total area of the camp measured 12 hectares, forming a 600 × 400 m. rectangle. Later on the area was enlarged.

Construction of the camp began in March 1942 after the extermination operations in Belzec had already started. *SS-Obersturmführer* Richard Thomalla, head of the Central Building Administration in Lublin, was in charge of its construction. The workers employed for this purpose were local people from the neighborhood.

At the beginning of April 1942 the building operations slowed down. In order to speed up the work, Globocnik appointed *SS-Obersturmführer* Franz Stangl as camp commandant. However, he first sent him to Belzec to gain experience in operating a camp.¹¹

¹⁰ Verdict of LG Hagen AZ: 11 Ks 1/64, p. 64 (AZ. ZSL: 208 AR–Z 251/59, vol. 14, p. 2835).

¹¹ Gitta Sereny, *Into the Darkness*, London, 1974 (hereafter—Sereny), pp. 109 f. The British writer and journalist, Gitta Sereny, had the opportunity to talk to Franz Stangl, the former commandant of the Treblinka extermination camp, while he was in custody.

After Stangl assumed his post, the construction of the camp was accelerated. A group of Jews from the ghetto of the Lublin *Bezirk* was brought in for construction work.

The first gas chambers in Sobibor were housed in a strong brick building with concrete foundations, in the northeastern part of the camp. Inside were three gas chambers; each measured 4 × 4 m. and could hold 150–200 people at a time. Each chamber had a separate entrance door leading off from a platform on the long side of the terrain. Opposite the entrance was another door through which the corpses were removed. As in Belzec, the exhaust fumes were conducted through pipes from a nearby shed into the gas chambers.

Upon completion of the construction work, extermination tests were conducted in mid-April 1942. Wirth came to Sobibor in order to follow the experiments. He was accompanied by a chemist whose pseudonym was Dr. Blaurock (or Blaubacke). *SS-Unterscharführer* Erich Fuchs, who served in Belzec, described the preparations for the first gassing trials:

On Wirth's instructions I travelled by truck to Lvov and collected a gassing engine there, which I transported to Sobibor.

In Sobibor... [we] unloaded the engine. It was a heavy Russian gasoline engine [probably a tank or train engine] with at least 200 h.p. [V-engine, 8 cylinders, water cooled]. We stood the engine on a concrete base and connected the exhaust to the pipe conduit. Then I tried out the engine. To begin with, it did not function. I managed to repair the ignition and the ventils so that the motor finally started. The chemist, whom I already knew from Belzec, entered the gas chamber with a measuring instrument in order to test the gas concentration. Next, an experimental gassing was carried out. I seem to recall that 30–40 women were gassed in one chamber. The Jewesses had to undress on a covered piece of wooded ground near the gas chamber and were driven into the gas chamber by... members of the SS as well as by Ukrainian volunteers. When the women were locked into the gas chamber, I, together with Bauer, operated the engine. Initially the engine idled. We both stood next to the engine and switched from free-exhaust so that the gases were conducted into the chamber. At the suggestion of the chemist, I adjusted the engine to a certain number of revs per minute so that no more gas had to be supplied. After approximately 10 minutes all the women were dead. The chemist

and the *SS-Führer* gave the signal to switch off the motor. I packed up my tools and saw how the corpses were removed. Transport was by means of a rail-trolley which ran from the gas chamber to a distant area.¹²

After this experiment, which confirmed the smooth functioning of the gas chambers, and the completion of some other construction work, the Sobibor extermination camp was ready to operate. It was an improved version of Belzec.

The camp was divided into three parts: an administration sector, a reception sector, and an extermination sector. The administration and reception sectors were near the railroad station, while the extermination sector was in a distant part of the camp, even more isolated than in Belzec.

The administration area in the southeastern part was subdivided into two camps: the "Pre-Camp" (*Vorlager*) and Camp I. The Pre-Camp consisted of the entrance gate, the railroad ramp, and the living quarters of the SS-men, the Ukrainians, and their servants — in contrast to Belzec, here all the SS-men lived inside the camp. Camp I was the area set aside for the Jewish prisoners who worked in Sobibor. This is where their living quarters and workshops were located and where a few of them worked as shoemakers, tailors, blacksmiths, etc.

The reception sector was called Camp II. After being unloaded, the new arrivals were chased into this area where the huts for undressing and the storage sheds for their valuables were situated. The former forester's house, which was also in this area, served as camp offices and apartments for some of the SS-men. A high wooden fence separated the forester's house from the reception sector.

The "tube," which connected Camp II with the extermination sector, began at the northernmost corner of this fence: it was a narrow path, ca. 3–4 m. wide and 150 m. long, fenced in on both sides with barbed wire intertwined with branches. Along

¹² StA Dortmund AZ: 45 Js 27–61 (AZ. ZSL: 208 AR–Z 251/59, vol. 9, pp. 1784 f.).

this path the victims were chased into the gas chambers which were located at the other end of the "tube."

Near the entrance to the "tube" were a cowshed, a pigsty, and a chicken pen. Halfway along the "tube" stood a hut known as the "hairdresser's," where the Jewish women had their hair cropped before entering the gas chambers.

The extermination sector, designated as Camp III, was in the northwestern part. It comprised the gas chambers, the mass graves, and separate barracks for the Jewish prisoners working there and for the guards. The mass graves were 50–60 m. long, 10–15 m. wide, and 5–7 m. deep. The sidewalls of the ditches sloped in order to facilitate the unloading of the corpses. A narrow track for a trolley ran from the railroad station, past the gas chambers, to the ditches. People who had died in the trains or were too weak to walk from the ramp to the gas chamber were driven in this trolley.

The extermination sector was surrounded on all sides by barbed wire with intertwined camouflage material. Watchtowers were located along the fence and in the corners of the camp.

The staffing of the camp was settled simultaneously with the completion of its basic installations. Stangl's deputy was *SS-Oberscharführer* Herrmann Michel, replaced a few months later by *SS-Oberscharführer* Gustav Wagner.

The Ukrainian company of guards in Sobibor was made up of three platoons. Erich Lachmann, a former police official who had trained the Ukrainians in Trawniki, was placed in charge of this unit. Being an outsider among the "Euthanasia" group, he was replaced by Kurt Bolender in the autumn of 1942. In Sobibor, as in Belzec, each member of the German personnel had a specific function. Upon the arrival of a transport most of the SS-men were given additional, specific tasks connected with the extermination procedure. *SS-Oberscharführer* Erich Bauer later testified at his trial:

Normally, every member of the permanent staff had a specific function within the camp (commandant of the Ukrainian volunteers, head of a

work commando, responsibility for digging ditches, responsibility for laying barbed wire and the like). However, the arrival of a transport of Jews meant so much "work" that the usual occupations were stopped and every member of the permanent staff had to take some part in the routine extermination procedure. Above all, every member of the permanent staff was at some time brought into action in unloading the transports.¹³

At the end of April 1942 the Sobibor extermination camp was operational.

The Construction of the Treblinka Extermination Camp

Construction of Treblinka began after Belzec and Sobibor were in operation. The experience gained from the installation and the extermination procedures in those two camps was taken into consideration in the planning and building of Treblinka. Thus, it became the most "perfect" extermination camp of Operation Reinhard.

The camp was situated in the northeastern part of the General Government, not far from Malkinia, a town with a railroad station on the main Warsaw-Bialystok line and close to the Malkinia-Siedlce line.

The camp was erected in a sparsely populated region, 4 km. from the village of Treblinka and the railroad station. The site chosen for the camp was wooded and thus naturally concealed. Since the spring of 1941 a punishment camp had been located a few kilometers away, where Polish and Jewish prisoners were made to process raw material from a gravel pit for frontier fortifications.

At the end of April or the beginning of May 1942, an SS-unit decided on the location. The size and master plan of Treblinka were identical to those of Sobibor. The construction of the extermination camp began at the end of May or beginning of

¹³ StA Dortmund AZ: 45 Js 27-61 (AZ. ZSL: 208 AR-Z 251/59, vol. 5, p. 988).

June 1942. Richard Thomalla was in charge; he had completed his construction job in Sobibor and had been relieved by Stangl in April 1942. In building the gas chambers he was assisted by SS-Unterscharführer Erwin Lambert, a chief-of-construction for technical matters from the "Euthanasia" program. The extermination sector was located in the southwest, in an area measuring 200 × 250 m., totally separated from the rest of the camp by barbed wire. As on the outside, branches were intertwined with the barbed wire to hide it from view. For the same reason, the entrances were placed behind a special partition. The gas chambers were housed in a massive brick building in the center. The access paths, including the "tube," in Treblinka named "Street to Heaven" by the SS-men, were modelled on those in Belzec and Sobibor; the same applied to the "reception camp" and "accommodation camp."

During the first stage, three gas chambers were in operation, each of them, much like those in Sobibor, 4 × 4 m. in size and 2.6 m. high. A diesel engine producing poisonous carbon monoxide, as well as a generator which supplied the whole camp with electricity, were housed in a built-on room.

The entrance doors of the gas chambers opened into a passage in front of the building; each door was 1.8 m. high and 90 cm. wide. They could be hermetically closed and bolted from the outside. Inside each gas chamber, opposite the entrance door, was a thick door made of wooden beams, 2.5 m. high and 1.8 m. wide, which could also be hermetically closed. The walls in the gas chambers were covered with white tiles up to a certain height, shower heads had been installed, and water pipes ran along the ceiling — all this so as to maintain the "showers" fiction. In reality the pipes conducted the poisonous gas into the chambers. When the doors were shut, it was completely dark inside.

To the east of the gas chambers were huge ditches into which the corpses were thrown. They had been dug with an excavator from the gravel pit in Treblinka. Prisoners had to participate in

this work. The ditches were 50 m. long, 25 m. wide, and 10 m. deep. A narrow-gauge track had been laid from the gas chambers to transport the corpses to the ditches. Prisoners had to push the trolleys.

The main extermination installations were completed by mid-June 1942. The murder operations began on July 23, 1942, while the construction work continued for another few months.

Belzec — from March 17 till June 1942

Organized mass extermination began with the deportation of the Jews of Lublin on March 17, 1942. This date marks the actual onset of Operation Reinhard.

When the train entered Belzec station, its 40–60 freight cars were rearranged into several separate transports because the reception capacity inside the camp was 20 cars at the most. Only after a set of cars had been unloaded and sent back empty was another section of the transport driven into the camp. The accompanying security guards as well as the German and Polish railroad personnel were forbidden to enter the camp.¹⁴

The train was brought into the camp by a specially selected and reliable team of railroad workers. According to the concept of the extermination process, the procedure was as follows:

The camp looked “peaceful.” The victims were unable to discern either graves, ditches or gas chambers. They were led to believe that they had arrived at a transit camp. An SS-man strengthened this belief by announcing that they were to undress and go to the baths in order to wash and be disinfected. They were also told that afterwards they would receive clean clothes and be sent on to a work camp.

Separation of the sexes, undressing, and even the cropping of the women’s hair could not but reinforce the impression that

¹⁴ See note 6 (vol. VII, pp. 1360 ff.).

they were on their way to the baths. First the men were led into the gas chambers, before they were able to guess what was going on; then it was the turn of the women and children.¹⁵

The gas chambers resembled baths. A group of young and strong Jews, a few dozen, occasionally even a hundred, was usually selected during the unloading of a transport. Most of them were taken to Camp II. They were forced to drag the corpses from the gas chambers and to carry them to the open ditches. Several prisoners were employed in collecting the victims' clothes and belongings and carrying them to the sorting point. Others had to remove from the train those who had died during the transport and to take those unable to walk to the ditches in Camp II. These Jews were organized into work teams with their own *Capos*. They did this work for a few days or weeks. Each day some of them were killed and replaced by new arrivals.

SS-man Karl Alfred Schluch, a former "Euthanasia" worker, who spent ca. sixteen months in Belzec from the very beginning, described what else happened to the transports inside the camp:

The unloading of the freight cars was carried out by a Jewish work commando, headed by a *Capo*. Two to three members of the German camp personnel supervised it. It was one of my duties to supervise here. After the unloading, those Jews able to walk had to make their way to the assembly site. During the unloading the Jews were told that they had come for resettlement but that first they had to be bathed and disinfected. The address was given by Wirth, and also by his interpreter, a Jewish *Capo*. Immediately after this, the Jews were led to the undressing huts. In one hut the men had to undress and in the other the women and children. After they had stripped, the Jews, the men having been separated from the women and children, were led through the tube. I cannot recall with certainty who supervised the undressing huts... Since I was never on duty there I am unable to provide precise details about the stripping process. I just seem to remember that in the undressing hut some articles of clothing had to be left in one place, others in a different one, and in a third place valuables had to be handed over...

¹⁵ StA Munich I, AZ. 22 Js 68/61, pp. 2625 f.

My location in the tube was in the immediate vicinity of the undressing hut. Wirth had stationed me there because he thought me capable of having a calming effect on the Jews. After the Jews left the undressing hut I had to direct them to the gas chamber. I believe that I eased the way there for the Jews because they must have been convinced by my words or gestures that they really were going to be bathed. After the Jews had entered the gas chambers the doors were securely locked by Hackenholt himself or by the Ukrainians assigned to him. Thereupon Hackenholt started the engine with which the gassing was carried out. After 5–7 minutes — and I merely estimate this interval of time — someone looked through a peephole into the gas chamber to ascertain whether death had overtaken them all. Only then were the outside gates opened and the gas chambers aired. Who did the checking, that is to say, who looked through the peephole? I can no longer say with any certainty... In my view, probably everyone had occasion to look through the peephole.

After the gas chambers had been aired, a Jewish work commando, headed by a *Capo*, arrived and removed the corpses. Occasionally, I also had to supervise in this place. I can therefore give an exact description of what happened, because I myself witnessed and experienced it all. The Jews had been very tightly squeezed into the gas chambers. For this reason the corpses did not lie on the floor but were caught this way and that, one bent forward, another one backward, one lay on his side, another kneeled, all depending on the space. At least some of the corpses were soiled with feces and urine, others partly with saliva. I could see that the lips and tips of the noses of some of the corpses had taken on a bluish tint. Some had their eyes closed, with others the eyes were turned up. The corpses were pulled out of the chambers and immediately examined by a dentist. The dentist removed rings and extracted gold teeth when there were any. He threw the objects of value obtained in this manner into a cardboard box which stood there. After this procedure the corpses were thrown into the large graves there.¹⁶

It is difficult to establish exactly how many of the gas chambers were in operation during the first three months of the mass extermination in Belzec. At times not all three gas chambers functioned because of technical problems or actual defects.

¹⁶ See note 6 (vol. VIII, p. 1511).

Problems also arose with the burial of the victims. When a ditch was filled with corpses, it was covered with a thin layer of soil. As a result of the heat, the decomposition process, and sometimes also because water seeped into the ditches, the bodies swelled up and the thin layer of soil burst open.

Those no longer able to walk were led directly to the ditch where they were shot. Robert Jührs, an SS-man who started his service in Belzec in the summer of 1942, described how such shootings were conducted:

At the beginning of the autumn of 1942, upon the arrival of a largish transport, I was assigned to the unloading site.

On this transport the freight cars had been seriously overcrowded, and many Jews were unable to walk. It is possible that in the confusion a number of Jews had been pushed onto the floor and trampled on. In any case, there were Jews who could not possibly have walked via the undressing huts. As usual, Hering also turned up here for the unloading. He ordered me to shoot these Jews...

The Jews in question were taken to the gate by the Jewish work commando and from there conveyed to the ditch by other working Jews. As I recall, there were seven Jews, both men and women, who were laid inside the ditch.

At this point I should like to stress that the victims concerned were those persons who had suffered most severely from the transport. I would say that they were more dead than alive. It is hard to describe the condition of these people after the long journey in the indescribably overcrowded freight cars. I looked upon killing these people in that manner as a kindness and a release.¹⁷

The first large Jewish community taken to Belzec for extermination came from Lublin. Within four weeks, from March 17 to April 14, close to 30,000 of the 37,000 inhabitants of the ghetto were deported to Belzec. Within the same period of time an additional 18,000–20,000 Jews from the Lublin *Bezirk* were sent to Belzec.

¹⁷ See note 6 (vol. VIII, pp. 1483 f.).

The first Jewish transport from the Lvov *Bezirk* came from Zólkiew, a town 50 km. southwest of Belzec. This transport consisted of approximately 700 Jews and reached Belzec on March 25 or 26, 1942. Subsequently, within the two weeks up to April 6, 1942, some 30,000 other Jews from the Lvov *Bezirk* arrived in Belzec.

After 80,000 Jews had been murdered in a major operation, which lasted about four weeks, the transports were discontinued. Toward the end of April or the beginning of May 1942, Wirth and his SS-men left the camp.

At the beginning of May 1942 SS-*Oberführer* Brack from Berlin visited Globocnik in Lublin. Globocnik requested the return of Wirth and his staff, and also asked for additional personnel from the "Euthanasia" program.

In mid-May 1942 Wirth returned to Belzec. Until the end of June more transports arrived from the Lublin and Krakow districts with about 22,000 Jews.

With the onset of the deportations from the *Bezirks* of Cracow, Lvov, and Lublin, Wirth realized that the wooden gas chambers could not cope with the arrival of the increasing number of victims. Deportations to Belzec therefore ceased in mid-June 1942, while new gas chambers were being built there. This concluded the first period of the operation in Belzec.

Sobibor — from May to July 1942

The extermination installations in Sobibor had been tested in April 1942, and mass exterminations began during the first days of May. Commandant Stangl introduced into his camp the extermination techniques employed in Belzec. He received additional advice and guidance when Wirth visited Sobibor.¹⁸

¹⁸ Sereny, pp. 110, 113.

Ada Lichtmann, a survivor from Sobibor, reported how the arrivals were “greeted”:

We heard word for word how *SS-Oberscharführer* Michel, standing on a small table, convincingly calmed the people; he promised them that after the bath they would get back all their possessions, and said that the time had come for Jews to become productive members of society. They would presently all be sent to the Ukraine where they would be able to live and work. The speech inspired confidence and enthusiasm among the people. They applauded spontaneously and occasionally they even danced and sang.¹⁹

Older people, the sick and invalids, and those unable to walk were told that they would enter an infirmary for medical treatment. In reality, they were taken on carts, pulled by men or horses, into Camp II, straight to the open ditches where they were shot.²⁰

During the first weeks the arrivals had to undress in the open square in Camp II. Later, a hut was erected for this purpose.²¹ There were signs pointing toward the “Cash Office” and the “Baths.” At the “Cash Office” the Jews had to deposit their money and valuables. It was located in the former forester’s house, on the route along which the naked people had to walk on their way to the “tube” and the gas chambers. The victims handed over their money and valuables through the window of this room. They had been warned that those trying to hide something would be shot. When time permitted, the Jews were given numbers as receipts for the items handed over, so as to lull them into a sense of security that afterwards everything would be returned to them.²²

¹⁹ Yad Vashem Archives 0-3/1291, p. 18.

²⁰ StA Dortmund AZ: 45 Js 27/61 (AZ. ZSL: 208 AR-Z 251/59, vol. 7, pp. 1282, 1308, 1433).

²¹ See plan of Sobibor in the appendix.

²² Verdict of LG Hagen AZ: 11 Ks 1/64, p. 243 (ZSL: misc. file 209).

Transports which arrived in the evening or at night were unloaded and kept under guard in Camp II until the morning, when the people were taken to the undressing huts and then led into the gas chambers.²³ Extermination operations did not normally take place at night.

Frequently, the entire procedure, from the unloading to entry into the gas chambers, was accompanied by beatings and other acts of cruelty on the part of the Germans and the Ukrainians. There was a dog called Barry whom the SS-men had trained to bite Jews upon being called to do so, especially when they were naked. The beatings, Barry's bites, and the shouting and screaming by the guards made the Jews run through the "tube" and of their own accord push on into the "baths" — in the hope of escaping from the hell around them.

Occasionally, a restricted number of skilled workers were selected from some transports. These included carpenters, tailors, and shoemakers, as well as a few dozen strong young men and women. They had to do all the physical work.

For months on end, the extermination machinery in Sobibor operated smoothly and uninterruptedly. It should be recalled that fewer transports came to Sobibor than to Belzec, and generally with fewer deportees per train. Usually only one deportation train arrived each day; there were also days without a transport. The size of a transport rarely exceeded 20 freight cars, conveying 2,000–2,500 persons.

Stangl, the leading figure, supervised operations. His personality and experience of many years as a police officer in the "Euthanasia" program made him a very suitable camp commandant.

The first phase of operations in Sobibor lasted from May until the end of July 1942. During this period the Jews from the ghettos of Lublin district were taken there. Among these were also Czech and Austrian Jews who had first been deported to these Polish ghettos. Altogether, 61,330 Jews from *Bezirk*

²³ Yad Vashem Archives M-2/236, p. 2.

Lublin were taken to Sobibor. Simultaneously, transports arrived with 10,000 Jews from Austria, 6,000 from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and part of the 24,378 Slovak Jews who were murdered in this camp by the end of 1942. The first wave of extermination in Sobibor lasted three months, claiming at least 77,000 Jewish victims, excluding those deported from Slovakia.

At the end of July 1942 the large deportations to Sobibor were halted due to repair work on the railway line between Lublin and Chelm. At the beginning of August several transports reached the camp from the ghettos in the neighborhood; they travelled along the eastern sector of the line which was again open to traffic.

Treblinka — from July 23 until August 28, 1942

The procedure adopted upon the arrival of the trains was the same as that in Sobibor: two German railroad workers, classified as being reliable, took over the transport from the Treblinka station to the extermination camp, a distance of 4 km.

The Pole Franciszek Zabecki described the arrival of the deportation train from the Warsaw ghetto:

A small locomotive stood ready in the railroad station to transport the first section of freight cars into the camp. Everything had been planned and prepared in advance. The train consisted of 60 closed freight cars, fully loaded with people: young ones, old ones, men and women, children and babies. The car doors were locked from the outside and the air holes covered with barbed wire. On the running boards on both sides and on the roof about a dozen SS-soldiers stood or lay with machine guns at the ready. It was hot and most of the people in the freight cars were deadly exhausted... As the train came nearer it seemed as if an evil spirit had taken hold of the waiting SS-men. They drew their pistols, returned them to their holsters, pulled them out again, as if they wanted to shoot and kill. They approached the freight cars and tried to reduce the noise and the weeping; but then they screamed at the Jews and cursed them, all

the while urging the railroad workers to hurry: "Quick, faster!" After that they returned to the camp in order to receive the deportees.²⁴

As the train approached the extermination camp, the engine blew a prolonged whistle which was the signal for the Ukrainians to man their position in the reception sector and on the roofs of the buildings. One group of SS-men and Ukrainians took up positions on the station platform. As soon as the train was moving along the tracks inside the camp, the gates behind it were closed. The deportees were taken out of the freight cars and conducted through a gate to a fenced-in square inside the camp. At the gate they were separated: men to the right, women and children to the left. A large placard announced in Polish and German:

Attention Warsaw Jews!

You are in a transit camp from which the transport will continue to labor camps.

To prevent epidemics, clothing as well as pieces of baggage are to be handed over for disinfection.

Gold, money, foreign currency, and jewellery are to be deposited at the "Cash Office" against a receipt. They will be returned later on presentation of the receipt.

For physical cleanliness, all arrivals must have a bath before travelling on.²⁵

The undressing procedure and the manner in which the victims were led to the gas chambers were almost identical to those described for the Sobibor camp.

During this first phase, from the beginning to the middle of August, 5,000–7,000 Jews arrived every day in Treblinka. Then the pace of the transports increased; there were days on which 10,000–12,000 deportees reached the camp, together with thou-

²⁴ Franciszek Zabecki, *Wspomnienia dawne i nowe*, Warsaw, 1977, pp. 39 f.

²⁵ Verdict of LG Düsseldorf AZ 8 I Ks 2/64, p. 81.

sands who were already dead and others who were utterly exhausted.

Abraham Goldfarb, who arrived there on August 25, described the scene:

When we arrived in Treblinka and the Germans opened the freight cars we beheld a horrible sight. The car was full of corpses. The bodies were partly decomposed by chlorine. The stench in the cars made those still alive choke. The Germans ordered everyone to get out; those still able to do so were half dead. Waiting SS and Ukrainians beat us and shot at us...

On the way to the gas chambers Germans with dogs stood along the fence on both sides. The dogs had been trained to attack people; they bit the men's genitals and the women's breasts, ripping off pieces of flesh. The Germans hit the people with whips and iron bars to spur them on so that they pressed forward into the "showers" as quickly as possible. The screams of the women could be heard far away, even in the other parts of the camp. The Germans drove the running victims on with shouts of: "Faster, faster, the water will get cold, others still have to go under the showers!" To escape from the blows, the victims ran to the gas chambers as quickly as they could, the stronger ones pushing the weaker aside. At the entrance to the gas chambers stood the two Ukrainians, Ivan Demaniuk and Nikolai, one of them armed with an iron bar, the other with a sword. They drove the people inside with blows... As soon as the gas chambers were full, the Ukrainians closed the doors and started the engine. Some 20-25 minutes later an SS-man or a Ukrainian looked through a window in the door. When they had ascertained that everyone had been asphyxiated, the Jewish prisoners had to open the doors and remove the corpses. Since the chambers were overcrowded and the victims held on to one another, they all stood upright and were like one single block of flesh.²⁶

Breakdowns and interruptions occurred in the operation of the gas chambers. During the initial phase the personnel did not know how long it would take to asphyxiate the victims. On occasion the doors were opened too early and the victims were still alive, so that the doors had to be closed again. The engines

²⁶ Yad Vashem Archives 0-3/2140.

which produced the gas occasionally failed. If such mishaps occurred when the victims were already inside the gas chambers, they were left standing there until the engines had been repaired.

Some 268,000 Jews met their deaths in the first extermination wave in Treblinka, which lasted five weeks — from July 23 to August 28.

The gas chambers with their technical breakdowns were unable to cope with such enormous numbers. Those who could not be pressed inside were shot in the reception camp. Many prisoners and additional ditches were needed in order to bury all those who had been shot, in addition to the thousands who had died during the transports. An excavator from the gravel pit in the nearby Treblinka punishment camp was used for digging additional mass graves.

But this did not solve the problem and at the end of August chaos still reigned in Treblinka. Reports of what went on in the camp reached headquarters. Globocnik and Wirth arrived, assessed the situation, and dismissed Eberl, the camp commandant. Stangl, from Sobibor, who was without work because of repairs on the tracks, was appointed commandant of Treblinka.

The Construction of Larger Gas Chambers

The first period of operation in Belzec and Sobibor lasted about three months, in Treblinka five weeks. After this initial phase, those holding key positions in Operation Reinhard decided to introduce “improvements” into the camps so as to increase their extermination capacity. This decision was brought on by Himmler’s order of July 19, 1942 that all the Jews in the General Government, with a few exceptions, were to be eradicated by the end of that year.

The main problem was finding a way to speed up the extermination procedure, i.e., increasing the absorption capacity of the gas chambers.

Belzec was the first camp in which large gas chambers were built. The old wooden structure containing the three gas chambers was demolished, and on the same spot a larger, strong building was erected, which was 24 m. long and 10 m. wide. It contained six gas chambers. Statements differ as to their size; they fluctuate between 4 × 4 m. and 4 × 8 m. The new gas chambers were completed in mid-July.²⁷

Rudolf Reder was the only one to have survived the Belzec extermination camp. He described the new gas chambers:

The building was low, long, and broad. It was built of grey concrete and had a flat roof made of roofing felt, with a net over it which was covered with branches. Three steps without banisters led into the building. They were ca. 1 m. wide. In front of the building stood a large flowerpot with colorful flowers and a clearly written placard: "Bath- and Inhalation Rooms." The steps led into a dark, empty corridor which was very long, but only 1.5 m. wide. To the left and right of it were the doors to the gas chambers. They were wooden doors, 1 m. wide... The corridor and the chambers were lower than normal rooms, no higher than 2 m. In the opposite wall of every chamber was a removable door through which the bodies of the gassed were thrown out. Outside the building was a 2 × 2 m. shed which housed the gas machine. The chambers were 1.5 m. above the ground...²⁸

These new gas chambers were able to take in 1,500 persons at one and the same time, i.e., a transport of about 15 freight cars.²⁹ After he had completed the rebuilding of the Belzec gas chambers, Christian Wirth was appointed inspector of all three extermination camps. He was replaced in Belzec by SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Gottlieb Hering. Wirth's new headquarters was now in Lublin.

The most urgent need for an increase in the absorption capacity was felt in Treblinka already in the first months of operation,

²⁷ StA Munich I, AZ: 22 Js 68/61, pp. 2602, 2613.

²⁸ Rudolf Reder, *Belzec*, Cracow, 1946, pp. 42 ff.

²⁹ Verdict of LG Munich I, AZ: 110 Ks 3/64, p. 10.

because the small gas chambers there constantly led to chaos in the extermination process. Newly appointed Commandant Stangl therefore ordered the construction of a new building next to the old one. At the same time, the old gas chambers continued to function. Within the framework of this reorganization, he also put an end to the chaotic conditions that had prevailed when the deportees arrived, and he introduced soothing means of deception.

Wirth, in his role as Inspector of the Extermination Camps, sent *SS-Unterscharführer* Erwin Lambert and *Scharführer* Lorenz Hackenholt, who was responsible for the gas chambers in Belzec, to Treblinka to assist in the construction of the new gas chambers.

The new building comprised 10 gas chambers. In place of the three old ones which together measured 48 sq.m., the area now covered was 320 sq.m. The new rooms were 2 m. high, i.e., ca. 60 cm. lower than the old ones. A low ceiling reduced the volume of the room and hence also the amount of gas needed for killing the victims. In addition, it shortened the asphyxiation time.

The new building was rectangular. A dark curtain from a synagogue hung at the entrance to the passage. It had written on it in Hebrew: "This is the gate, through which the righteous may enter."

The pediment above the entrance door bore a Shield of David. Five steps led up to it, both sides of which were decorated with pot plants. The new building, with its idyllic flight of stairs, plants and curtain, stood at the end of the "tube." The victims who had been chased through the "tube," ran up the stairs to the entrance and into the passage. The engine producing the gas was located at the end of the building, near the old gas chambers.

In order to speed up the construction, a group of Jewish masons was brought from Warsaw. They had been selected from a transport intended for the beginning of September 1942. A total of 40 Jewish prisoners worked on the gas chambers. Jankiel Wiernik described their feelings:

The construction of the new building took five weeks. To us it seemed like eternity. The work continued from sunrise to sunset, accompanied by lashes from whips and blows from rifle butts. Woronikow, one of the guards, beat and ill-treated us mercilessly. Every day several workers were murdered. The extent of our physical fatigue was beyond human imagination, but our mental agony was still greater. New transports arrived daily; the deportees were ordered to undress, then they were taken to the three old gas chambers. They were led past the building site. Several of us recognized our children, wives or relatives among the victims. If, in his agony, someone ran to his family, he was shot on the spot. Thus we built the death chambers for ourselves and for our brothers!³⁰

The new gas chambers were able to accommodate 4,000 persons at a time, the old ones only 600.

Sobibor was the last camp to be provided with larger gas chambers. This construction program was carried out in September 1942 under the supervision of SS-Unterscharführer Erwin Lambert, who had erected the new gas chambers in Treblinka, and SS-Scharführer Lorenz Hackenholt, who was in charge of the gas chambers in Belzec. They had both been posted to Sobibor by Christian Wirth.

The new building had six gas chambers, three rooms on each side. Its layout was similar to that in Belzec and Treblinka, where the entrances to the gas chambers branched off from a central passage. The new rooms here were not larger than the old ones, i.e., 4 × 4 m., but the extermination capacity was increased to 1,200–1,300 persons.

Another important technical change in Sobibor was a narrow-gauge mine-track which ran from the railroad platform to the mass graves in Camp III. It was to replace the trolleys pulled by prisoners or horses, which had transported the dead, the sick, and the invalids from the train to the ditches. According to Oberscharführer Hubert Gomerski, who was responsible for

³⁰ Jankiel Wiernik, *Rok w Treblince*, Warsaw, 1944.

Camp III, the narrow-gauge track was about 300–400 m. long. It had 5 or 6 wagons and a small diesel locomotive.³¹

The Attempt to Remove Traces

Hundreds of thousands of corpses of people murdered in the death camps during the spring and summer of 1942 lay in huge mass graves. In the autumn of 1942 the camp commandants of Sobibor and Belzec decided to incinerate the corpses; in Treblinka, a start on this was made only in 1943. However, the idea to remove all signs of the crimes was not new. In the spring of 1942 Himmler had decided that in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, the corpses of the murdered Jews and Russian prisoners of war were to be exhumed from the graves and incinerated without leaving any traces. The same was to be done with the past and future victims of the extermination camps.

In June 1942 *SS-Gruppenführer* Müller, Chief of the Gestapo, charged *SS-Standartenführer* Blobel with removing all traces of the mass executions in the East carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen*. This order was a “State Secret” and Blobel was instructed to refrain from any written correspondence on the subject. The operation was given the code name “*Sonderaktion 1005*.”

Upon his appointment, Blobel, together with a small staff of three or four men, initiated experiments involving the incineration of corpses. The place chosen for them was Kulmhof. For this purpose the ditches were opened and the corpses burnt by means of incendiary bombs, but this led to big fires in the surrounding forests. Subsequently an attempt was made to burn the corpses together with wood on open fires. This method came to be adopted in all the camps of Operation Reinhard. The corpses were carried to the open fires straight from the gas chambers. At the same time, the existing mass graves were opened and those

³¹ StA Dortmund AZ: 45 Js 27/61 (AZ. ZSL: 208 AR–Z 251/59, vol. 7, p. 1308).

buried there were also incinerated. This cover-up operation was initially introduced in Sobibor.

In Belzec, the incineration of corpses began in November 1942, toward the end of the mass murder. *SS-Scharführer* Heinrich Gley testified:

Then began the general exhumation and burning of corpses; it may have taken from November 1942 to March 1943. The incinerations went on day and night, without interruption, initially at one, then at two sites. At one of the sites it was possible to incinerate about 2,000 corpses within 24 hours. Approximately four weeks after the start of the incineration operation, the second site was set up. Thus, on an average, a total of 300,000 corpses were burnt at one site within about five months, and 240,000 at the second one during ca. 4 months. These are obviously estimates of averages. It would probably be correct to put the sum total at 500,000 corpses...

This incineration of disinterred corpses was such a horrific procedure from the human, aesthetic, and olefactory aspects that it is impossible for people who are now used to living like ordinary citizens to be able to imagine this horror.³²

In Treblinka a start was made in the spring of 1943, on Himmler's personal command after he had visited the camp.

The vacated ditch area was levelled and sown with lupins! *SS-Oberscharführer* Heinrich Matthes, who was responsible for the extermination sector in Treblinka, testifies:

An *SS-Oberscharführer* or *Hauptscharführer* Floss arrived at this time, who, so I presume, must previously have been in another camp. He then had the installation built for burning the corpses. The incineration was carried out by placing railroad rails on blocks of concrete. The corpses were then piled up on these rails. Brushwood was placed under the rails. The wood was drenched with gasoline. Not only the newly obtained corpses were burnt in this way, but also those exhumed from the ditches.³³

³² See note 6 (vol. IX, p. 1697).

³³ StA Düsseldorf, AZ: 8 Js 10904/59 (AZ. ZSL: 208 AR-Z 230/59, vol. 10, pp. 2056R, 2057).

The burning of corpses proceeded day and night. When the fire had died down, whole skeletons or single bones remained behind on the grating. Mounds of ash had accumulated underneath it. A different prisoner commando, the "Ashes Gang," had to sweep up the ashes, place the remaining bones on thin metal sheets, pound them with round wooden dowels, and then shake them through a narrow-mesh metal sieve; whatever remained in the sieve was crushed once more. Bones not burnt and which could not easily be split were again thrown into the fire.

The camp leadership was faced with the problem of how to get rid of the huge heaps of ash and bone fragments. Experiments at mixing the ashes with dust and sand, in an effort to conceal them, proved unsuccessful. Finally it was decided to pour the ash and bone fragments back into the empty ditches and to cover them with a thick layer of sand and garbage. Alternate layers of ash and sand were poured into the ditches. The top layer consisted of 2 m. of earth.

The Liquidation of the Camps

Himmler's order of July 19, 1942, stipulated that the deportations from the General Government were to be concluded by December 31, 1942. A limited number of Jews were to be kept back for work in the assembly camps (*Sammellager*). On November 10, 1942, Krüger, the Supreme SS- and Police Chief of the General Government, decreed the places where the employed Jews and their families were to remain in the ghettos and camps. By the end of 1942, the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population in the General Government had been annihilated. The continued operation of the three special extermination camps was therefore no longer required. At the time Auschwitz-Birkenau increased its extermination capacity, taking in Jewish transports from the various countries of occupied Europe.

Belzec was the first camp where the exterminations were stopped — at the beginning of December 1942. The camp continued to operate till March 1943, and in this final phase the mass graves were opened and the corpses incinerated. During this period the gas chambers and other buildings were destroyed. The Jewish prisoners were taken from Belzec to Sobibor where they were killed.

The dismantlement of Treblinka began after Himmler's visit to the headquarters of Operation Reinhard and to the death camps at the end of February — beginning of March 1943. Prior to that 800,000 victims still had to be exhumed and incinerated and also other work still needed to be done in order to obliterate all traces. In March and April 1943 several transports continued to arrive from the destroyed Warsaw ghetto, from Yugoslavia and from Greece, but this hardly delayed the razing of the camp.

The revolt of the Jewish prisoners in Treblinka on August 2, 1943, occurred in the final phase of the camp's existence and speeded up its liquidation. On August 18 and 19 the last two transports from the ghetto of Bialystok, with 8,000 victims, arrived in Treblinka.

On July 5, 1943, shortly before the dispatch of the last transports of Dutch Jews, Himmler decreed that the Sobibor extermination camp was to be converted into a concentration camp where captured arms were to be stored and processed. While the exterminations continued there on a smaller scale, and in September 1943 transports still arrived from the East, a start was made on the construction of munitions' camps. However, even before the conversion from extermination to concentration camp was completed, the revolt of the Jewish prisoners on October 14, 1943, put an end to the Sobibor camp.

At the end of August 1943, Globocnik was appointed Supreme SS- and Police Chief of Istria, in the region of Trieste. Wirth, Stangl, and the majority of the German personnel from the extermination camps were transferred there together with him.

With Globocnik's departure, Operation Reinhard came to an end, as he confirmed in a letter to Himmler from Trieste dated November 4, 1943:

On October 10, 1943, I concluded Operation Reinhard which I had conducted in the General Government and have liquidated all camps.³⁴

A few SS-men and Ukrainians remained in the extermination camps. In Treblinka even a group of Jewish prisoners was left behind in order to dismantle the huts, fences, and other camp installations. After completion of this work, on November 17, 1943, the last group of Jewish prisoners was shot in Treblinka.

The terrain of the former extermination camps was ploughed up, trees were planted, and peaceful-looking farmsteads constructed. A number of Ukrainians from the camp commandos settled there. No traces whatsoever were to remain which might bear witness to the atrocities committed in Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, and to which, according to a conservative estimate, ca. 1,700,000 human beings had fallen victim. Written records had been extensively destroyed as early as the end of 1943.³⁵ Nevertheless, in the postwar interrogations initiated by the German Federal Republic in order to investigate and criminally prosecute former members of the German personnel of these extermination camps, all the people questioned in these proceedings, without exception, irrespective of whether they had at the time spent a prolonged or only a short period in or near one of the camps, testified to the existence and the operation of the gas chambers installed there for the purpose of killing people. In isolated cases, those accused of direct involvement in the mass murders denied their participation in especially extreme acts. However, they did not deny the extermination of Jews and Gypsies in the gas chambers. Moreover, quite independently of

³⁴ Nuremberg Document 4042-PS.

³⁵ See note 3.

one another, they invariably gave detailed descriptions of the purpose of the camps and of the murderous procedures which had been practiced there.

According to Polish official publications based on the data of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland and the trials of Nazi war criminals, the total number of victims killed in Treblinka was 850,000,³⁶ in Belzec — 600,000 and in Sobibor — 250,000.³⁷

³⁶ Yitzhak Arad, *Treblinka, Hell and Revolt* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1983, pp. 261–265.

³⁷ Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce, *Obozy hitlerowskie na ziemiach polskich 1939–1945*, Warszawa, 1979, p. 94 (Belzec), p. 462 (Sobibor).

