

## Auschwitz: Myths and Facts

By Mark Weber

Auschwitz is regarded as the most notorious Nazi extermination center. During World War II, we are told, hundreds of thousands of prisoners — most of them Jewish — were systematically killed there, especially in gas chambers.

Auschwitz was unquestionably a place of horror, where many perished under terrible circumstances. And yet, much of what has been said about the camp is exaggerated or untrue. A closer look at the facts calls into question at least some aspects of its reputation as a center of systematic mass extermination.

### A Large Camp Complex

The Auschwitz camp complex was set up in 1940 in what is now south-central Poland. Large numbers of Jews were deported there between 1942 and mid-1944. The main camp was known as Auschwitz I, Birkenau, or Auschwitz II, was supposedly the main extermination center, while Monowitz, or Auschwitz III, was a large industrial site where gasoline was produced from coal. In addition there were dozens of smaller satellite camps devoted to the war economy.

### Four Million Victims?

At the postwar Nuremberg Tribunal, the Allies charged that the Germans exterminated four million people at Auschwitz. This figure, which was invented by the Soviets, was uncritically accepted for many years, and often appeared in major American newspapers and magazines. [1] Today no reputable historian accepts it.

Israeli Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer said in 1989 that it is finally time to acknowledge that the familiar four million figure is a deliberate myth. In July 1990 the Auschwitz State Museum in Poland, along with Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Center, announced that altogether perhaps one million people (both Jews and non-Jews) died there. Neither institution would say how many of these people were killed, and no estimates were given for the numbers of those supposedly gassed. [2]

One prominent Holocaust historian, Gerald Reitlinger, estimated that perhaps 700,000 Jews perished at Auschwitz. [3] French Holocaust historian Jean-Claude Pressac estimated in 1993 that the number of those who perished there was about 800,000 - of whom 630,000 were Jewish. [4]

Fritjof Meyer, a respected foreign policy analyst, author of several books, and managing editor of Germany's foremost weekly news magazine, presented a still lower figure in 2002. Writing in the scholarly German journal *Osteuropa*, he estimated that altogether 500,000 or 510,000 persons — Jews and non-Jews — perished in Auschwitz. [5]

While all such figures are conjectural, they show how the Auschwitz story has changed drastically over the years.

### Fake 'Gas Chamber'

Each year for decades, tens of thousands of visitors to Auschwitz have been shown an execution "gas chamber" in the main camp, supposedly in its "original state." In January 1995 the prestigious French weekly magazine *L'Express* acknowledged that "everything" about this "gas chamber" is "false," and that it is in fact a deceitful postwar reconstruction. [6]

### Bizarre Tales

At one time it was seriously claimed that at Auschwitz Jews were systematically killed with electricity. American newspapers in February 1945, citing a Soviet eyewitness report from the recently-liberated camp, told readers that the methodical Germans had killed Jews there using an "electric conveyor belt on which hundreds of persons could be electrocuted simultaneously [and] then moved on into furnaces. They were burned almost instantly, producing fertilizer for nearby cabbage fields." [7]

At the Nuremberg Tribunal, chief US prosecutor Robert Jackson charged that the Germans had used a "newly invented" device to instantaneously "vaporize" 20,000 Jews near Auschwitz "in such a way that there was no trace left of them." [8] No reputable historian now accepts either of these fanciful tales.

### The Höss 'Confession'

A key piece of Holocaust evidence is the "confession" of former Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss. In a

sworn statement, and in testimony before the Nuremberg Tribunal on April 15, 1946, he declared that between May 1940 and December 1943, while he was commandant of the camp complex, "at least two and a half million victims were executed and exterminated there by gassing and burning," and that "at least another half million succumbed to starvation and disease, making a total dead of about three million" during that period alone. [9]

Although it is still widely cited as solid historical evidence, this "confession" is actually a false statement obtained by torture. Some years after the war, British military intelligence sergeant Bernard Clarke described how he and five other British soldiers tortured the former commandant to obtain his "confession." Höss himself privately explained his ordeal in these words: "Certainly, I signed a statement that I killed two and half million Jews. I could just as well have said that it was five million Jews. There are certain methods by which any confession can be obtained, whether it is true or not." [10]

Even historians who generally accept the Holocaust extermination story now acknowledge that many of the specific statements made in the Höss "confession" are simply not true. For one thing, no serious scholar now claims that anything like two and a half or three million people perished in Auschwitz.

The Höss "confession" further alleges that Jews were already being exterminated by gas in the summer of 1941 at three other camps: Belzec, Treblinka and Wolzek. The "Wolzek" camp mentioned by Höss is a total invention. No such camp existed, and the name is no longer mentioned in Holocaust literature. Moreover, those who accept the Holocaust story currently claim that gassings of Jews did not begin at Auschwitz, Treblinka, or Belzec until sometime in 1942.

### **Many Jewish Inmates Unable to Work**

Many thousands of secret German wartime documents dealing with Auschwitz were confiscated after the war by the Allies. But not a single one refers to a policy or program of extermination. In fact, the familiar Auschwitz extermination story cannot be reconciled with the documentary evidence.

It is often claimed that all Jews at Auschwitz who were unable to work were immediately killed. Jews who were too old, young, sick, or weak were supposedly gassed on arrival, and only those who could be worked to death were temporarily kept alive.

But the evidence shows otherwise. In fact, a very high percentage of the Jewish inmates were not able to work, and were nevertheless not killed. For example, an internal German telex message dated Sept. 4, 1943, from the chief of the Labor Allocation department of the SS Economic and Administrative Main Office (WVHA), reported that of 25,000 Jews held in Auschwitz, only 3,581 were able to work, and that all of the remaining Jewish inmates — some 21,500, or about 86 percent — were unable to work. [11]

This is also confirmed in a secret report dated April 5, 1944, on "security measures in Auschwitz" by Oswald Pohl, head of the SS concentration camp system, to SS chief Heinrich Himmler. Pohl reported that there was a total of 67,000 inmates in the entire Auschwitz camp complex, of whom 18,000 were hospitalized or disabled. In the Auschwitz II camp (Birkenau), supposedly the main extermination center, there were 36,000 inmates, mostly female, of whom "approximately 15,000 are unable to work." [12]

The evidence shows that Auschwitz-Birkenau was established primarily as a camp for Jews who were not able to work, including the sick and elderly, as well as for those who were temporarily awaiting assignment to other camps. That is the considered view of Dr. Arthur Butz of Northwestern University, who also says that this was an important reason for the unusually high death rate there. [13]

Jewish scholar Arno Mayer, a professor of history at Princeton University, acknowledges in his 1988 book about the "final solution" that more Jews perished at Auschwitz as a result of typhus and other "natural" causes than were executed. [14]

### **Anne Frank**

Perhaps the best known Auschwitz inmate was Anne Frank, who is remembered for her famous diary. But few people are aware that thousands of Jews, including Anne and her father, Otto Frank, "survived" Auschwitz.

The 15-year-old girl and her father were deported from the Netherlands to Auschwitz in September 1944. Several weeks later, in the face of the advancing Soviet army, Anne was evacuated from Auschwitz along with many other Jews to the Bergen-Belsen camp in western Germany, where she died of typhus in March 1945. While at Auschwitz, Otto Frank came down with typhus, and was sent to the camp hospital to recover. He was one of thousands of sick and feeble Jews who were left behind when the Germans abandoned the camp in January 1945, shortly before it was overrun by the Soviets. He died in Switzerland in 1980.

If the German policy had been to kill Anne Frank and her father, they would not have survived Auschwitz. Their fate, tragic though it was, cannot be reconciled with the familiar extermination story.

### **Allied Propaganda**

The Auschwitz gassing story is based in large part on the hearsay statements of former Jewish inmates who did not personally see any actual signs of extermination. Their beliefs are understandable, because rumors

about gassings at Auschwitz were widespread. Allied planes dropped large numbers of leaflets, written in Polish and German, on Auschwitz and the surrounding areas which claimed that people were being gassed in the camp. The Auschwitz gassing story, which was an important part of the Allied wartime propaganda effort, was also broadcast to Europe by Allied radio stations. [15]

### **Survivor Testimony**

Former inmates have confirmed that they saw no evidence of extermination at Auschwitz.

An Austrian woman, Maria Vanherwaarden, testified about her camp experiences in a Toronto District Court in March 1988. [16] She was interned in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942 for having sexual relations with a Polish forced laborer. On the train journey to the camp, a Gypsy woman told her and the others that they would all be gassed at Auschwitz. Upon arrival, Maria and the other women were ordered to undress and go into a large concrete room without windows to take a shower. The terrified women were sure that they were about to die. But then, instead of gas, water came out of the shower heads.

Auschwitz was no vacation resort, Maria confirmed. She witnessed the deaths of many fellow inmates by disease, particularly typhus. She saw some take their own lives. But she saw no evidence at all of mass killings, gassings, or of any extermination program.

A Jewish woman named Marika Frank arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau from Hungary in July 1944, when 25,000 Jews were supposedly gassed and cremated daily. She likewise testified after the war that she heard and saw nothing of gas chambers during the time she was interned there. She heard the gassing stories only later. [17]

### **Inmates Released**

More than 200,000 prisoners were transferred from Auschwitz to other camps, and about 8,000 were in the camp when it was liberated by Soviet forces. In addition, about 1,500 prisoners who had served their sentences were released, and returned to their home countries. [18] If Auschwitz had actually been a top secret extermination center, it is difficult to believe that the German authorities would have released inmates who "knew" what was happening there.

### **Telltale Aerial Photos**

Detailed Allied aerial reconnaissance photographs taken of Auschwitz-Birkenau on several random days in 1944 — during the height of the alleged extermination period there — were made public by the CIA in 1979. These photos show no trace of piles of corpses, smoking crematory chimneys or masses of Jews awaiting death, things that have been repeatedly alleged, and all of which would have been visible if Auschwitz had been the extermination center it is said to have been. [19]

### **Absurd Cremation Claims**

Cremation specialists have confirmed that thousands of corpses could not possibly have been cremated every day throughout the spring and summer of 1944 at Auschwitz, as has often been alleged. Ivan Lagacé, manager of a large crematory in Canada, testified in court in April 1988 that the Auschwitz cremation story is technically impossible. The allegation that 10,000 or even 20,000 corpses were burned every day at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944 in crematories and open pits is simply "preposterous" and "beyond the realm of reality," he declared under oath. [20]

### **Gassing Expert Refutes Extermination Story**

A leading American gas chamber expert, Fred A. Leuchter, carefully examined the supposed "gas chambers" in Poland and concluded that the Auschwitz gassing story is absurd and technically impossible. At the time he conducted his examination, Leuchter was acknowledged as the foremost specialist on the design and installation of gas chambers used in the United States to execute convicted criminals. For example, he designed a gas chamber facility for the Missouri state penitentiary.

In February 1988 he carried out a detailed onsite examination of the "gas chambers" at Auschwitz, Birkenau and Majdanek in Poland, which are either still standing or only partially in ruins. In sworn testimony to a Toronto court and in a technical report, Leuchter described every aspect of his investigation. He concluded that the alleged gassing facilities could not possibly have been used to kill people. Among other things, he pointed out that the so-called "gas chambers" were not properly sealed or vented to kill human beings without also killing German camp personnel. [21]

Dr. William B. Lindsey, a research chemist employed for 33 years by the Dupont Corporation, likewise testified in a 1985 court case that the Auschwitz gassing story is technically impossible. Based on a careful on-site examination of the "gas chambers" at Auschwitz, Birkenau and Majdanek, and on his years of experience, he declared: "I have come to the conclusion that no one was willfully or purposefully killed with Zyklon B [hydrocyanic acid gas] in this manner. I consider it absolutely impossible." [22]

In March 1992, a prominent Austrian engineer made headlines when a report he had written about alleged German wartime gas chambers was made public. Walter Lüftl, a court-recognized expert engineer who headed a large engineering firm in Vienna, concluded that the familiar stories of mass extermination of Jews in

gas chambers at the wartime camps of Auschwitz and Mauthausen are impossible for technical reasons. Lüftl also specifically affirmed Leuchter's findings about Auschwitz. [23]

### Himmler Orders Death Rate Reduced

In response to the deaths of many inmates from disease, especially typhus, the German authorities responsible for the camps ordered firm counter-measures. The head of the SS camp administration office sent a directive dated Dec. 28, 1942, to Auschwitz and the other concentration camps. It sharply criticized the high death rate of inmates due to disease, and ordered that "camp physicians must use all means at their disposal to significantly reduce the death rate in the various camps." Furthermore, it ordered: "The camp doctors must supervise more often than in the past the nutrition of the prisoners and, in cooperation with the administration, submit improvement recommendations to the camp commandants ... The camp doctors are to see to it that the working conditions at the various labor places are improved as much as possible."

Finally, the directive stressed that "the Reichsführer SS [Heinrich Himmler] has ordered that the death rate absolutely must be reduced." [24]

### Combating Disease

As ordered, German physicians in Auschwitz carried out wide-ranging and intensive measures to reduce the prisoners' death rate. For example, in a letter of Feb. 25, 1943, camp physician Dr. Wirths informed the central WVHA office, which was responsible for the SS concentration camp system:

"As already reported, after the typhus epidemic in the Auschwitz camp had practically been suppressed in November and December, there followed a new rise in typhus cases among the Auschwitz inmates as well as among troops, brought by the newly arriving transports from the East. In spite of the counter-measures that were immediately taken, a complete suppression of typhus cases has still not been achieved." [25]

None of this can be reconciled with the currently official Auschwitz extermination story.

### Summary

Maintaining the hatreds and passions of the past prevents genuine reconciliation and lasting peace. The Auschwitz extermination story originated as World War II propaganda. And all wartime propaganda, unless hatred and passion are to have the final word, must be viewed critically. It is high time to take a more objective look at this highly polemicized chapter of history.

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Mark Weber studied history at the University of Illinois (Chicago), the University of Munich, Portland State University and Indiana University (M.A., 1977). For five days in March 1988 he testified in a Toronto District Court case as a recognized expert on the "Final Solution" and the Holocaust issue.

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