

THE CHELMNO DEATH CAMP

History, Biographies, Remembrance

Chris Webb & Artur Hojan

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**Dedicated to Artur Hojan and all of the victims of the
Chelmno Death Camp**

For Zuzia, Freya and Lilli

“He who comes here, does not walk away alive.”

Inscription on the basement wall, in the Mansion at Chełmno

In addition *Hauptsturmführer* Lange said to us that the orders to exterminate the Jews had been issued by Hitler and Himmler.

Kurt Möbius – SS *Sonderkommando* Kulmhof

The gassed people were thrown out of the vehicle and piled like rubbish. They were grabbed either by their legs or hair. Above the grave, there were two men throwing the bodies into it. Inside the hole there were another two men putting the corpses in layers, faces down, in a way that one person's legs met another person's head.

Szlamek Bajler

Szlamek escaped from Chełmno on January 19, 1942. He wrote a report on Chełmno. He perished in the Bełżec death camp after being deported from Zamość in April 1942.

Foreword

Chełmno is still relatively unknown, even amongst esteemed historians of the Holocaust. The importance of Chełmno in the development of the Holocaust is also not well understood and is certainly under researched.

Chełmno was the first death camp on *Reich* territory, and played a hugely important role in the plans of *Gauleiter* Arthur Greiser to develop the *Warthegau* into the model district (*Gau*), cleansed of Jews and other “undesirables.” Greiser’s relationship with Himmler, the *Reichsführer-SS*, allowed him to take a much more pivotal role in the development and organization of the Holocaust in the *Warthegau*, including the death camp Chełmno, than any other Nazi District leader. Greiser was a frequent visitor to Chełmno and it was Greiser’s civil administration that organized the delivery of Jews to Chełmno.

Jewish Ghettoization began first in the *Warthegau* in 1940, and Łódź was the first large scale Jewish ghetto in Nazi occupied Europe. It was Greiser who sought approval from Adolf Hitler to kill the first 100,000 Jews of the *Warthegau* in 1941. There are direct links between the killing of mental patients between 1939 and 1941 in the *Warthegau* by Herbert Lange, and the development of Chełmno the death camp, with Lange as its first Commandant. It was Lange who devised the methodology and the organization of the camp and it was he who recruited the personnel. Chełmno was an integral part of the development of the racial policies that Greiser adopted for the *Warthegau* region.

Chełmno was the first Nazi death camp when it began operations in early December 1941. In Chełmno the gas vans were the first mass use of poison gas to kill Jews. Chełmno was the only death camp to use gas vans as its primary method of killing. Because of its proximity to Berlin, Chełmno became a testing ground for techniques for disposing the bodies of the dead victims. It was Colonel Paul Blobel under the auspices of *Sonderkommando 1005*, who developed the techniques in Chełmno, later used in the Aktion Reinhardt camps of

Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and all over occupied Eastern Europe, to dig up and burn the bodies of untold numbers of victims of the Nazi regime.

These firsts and interconnections make Chełmno and the killing of the Jews in the *Warthegau* almost unique in the annals of the Holocaust, but are also insightful in how the Holocaust itself developed. The number of histories published about the Chełmno death camp number less than ten. Chris's book is therefore timely. As always Chris brings his own style to the difficulty of how to write about the Nazi death camps, while respecting the memory of the victims. His book covers the development of the camp and racial program, its operations, the key events, the accounts of the brave Jews who escaped from this hell, the detailed Roll of Remembrance, the perpetrators and the post-War trials, right up to the modern-day.

This book is also important for me, as Chris has graciously co-authored with my late colleague Artur Hojan. I worked with Artur for eight years in researching Nazi War Crimes in the *Warthegau* and beyond. Artur's knowledge, especially of the killing of mental patients in Nazi occupied Western Poland was exceptional. This led to Artur and I setting up the *Tiergartenstrasse 4* Association in 2005 to research Nazi War Crimes. The Association is now established in Berlin, as *Tiergarten4 Association e.v* with a library and research center. Chris has quite rightly dedicated the book to our friend and colleague Artur and his memory.

I wish Chris the best of luck with this book on Chełmno that is a worthy successor to his books on the *Aktion Reinhardt* camps and Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Cameron Munro

Tiergarten4 Association e.V.

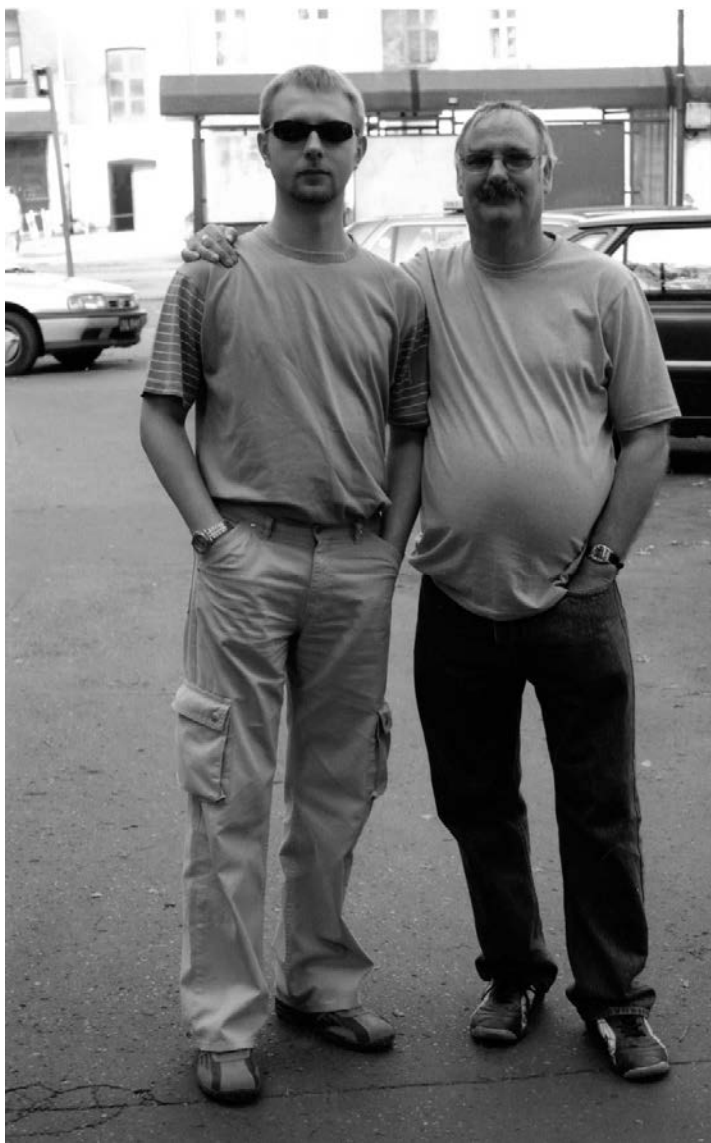
A crucial extension to our body of knowledge on the Holocaust, *The Chełmno Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* is an authoritative and well-researched account of the construction, historical context and liquidation of Hitler's first death camp.

Drawing on detailed accounts from Jewish prisoners, perpetrator biographies and war crimes trials, Chris Webb and the late Artur Hojan paint a characteristically rich picture of the atrocities that happened at Chełmno, as well as providing an impactful list of remembrance.

Going forward, this book is a great resource for modern historians and students of the Holocaust who wish to understand more about how Chełmno sparked wider developments in the systematic murder of over six million Jews from 1941 to 1945.
Lest we forget!

Dr. William Allchorn is Associate Director of the Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Leeds.

Author's Introduction



Artur and Chris – Łódź 2005

This book chronologically tells the story of the Chełmno death camp that the Nazis created in late 1941, in central Poland. Chełmno was the first death camp to murder the Jews using gas, though not in static gas chambers, but using gas-vans. I am deeply indebted to the work of Kryzysztof Gorczyca and Zdzisław Lorek, whose unpublished *Chełmno Day By Day* account has been invaluable. Also Patrick Montague's book *Chełmno and the Holocaust* published in 2012, has also been heavily quoted. There is simply too little published work and research in respect of the Chełmno death camp and this book hopes to cover previously uncharted territory, with new accounts and new information. Also an invaluable source has been the book *Chełmno Witnesses Speak* published by the District Museum in Konin, Poland.

In September 2005, Artur Hojan planned and guided Cameron Munro and myself on a visit to the former death camp in Chełmno, and numerous places connected with the T4 Euthanasia "*Aktions*," in what was called the *Warthegau*, during the War. We also visited major cities like Poznań and Łódź and smaller places like Dąbie, Grabow and Koło, all closely bound up with the history of the Chełmno death camp. During this trip I had the good fortune to meet Zdzisław Lorek in person, a real expert on Chełmno.

Four years later another research trip to Chełmno was undertaken: Artur again produced the trip schedule. Our group of intrepid Holocaust researchers consisted of Arthur Hojan, Cameron Munro, Professor Matthew Feldman, Chris Webb and our Polish driver Krystof.

We were based in Kutno, and toured a number of places near Chełmno, such as Krośniewice, Sompolno, not previously visited, plus Dąbie, Zawadka, Łódź and Warsaw. I have included in this book some of the photographs taken on these two trips to provide the reader with a better understanding of how these places look now, and the horrors that once took place in this region of Poland.

Chełmno death camp has been generally neglected compared to other camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka, but that should not be so, and this work demonstrates the vital role it played, and the

need to be fully documented in this terrible tragedy that was the Holocaust.

This account begins with the establishment of the camp, and the commencement of mass murder by the use of gas vans in December 1941. It contains the detailed accounts of escapees Szlamek Bajler, who survived Chełmno only to lose his life in another of Hitler's slaughterhouses Bełżec in April 1942, and Michał Podchlebnik, who survived the hell that was Chełmno, and lived to see the Nazis defeated.

All sides in this modern tragedy are represented, the other Jewish survivors, such as Shimon Srebnik and M. Zurawski and Jewish victims, the German police and SS, the Polish workers who assisted the Nazis, the Polish and German residents of Chełmno and other places in the *Warthegau*.

A Roll of Remembrance of the Jews deported from Germany to Chełmno, has been created using the Bundesarchiv online resource the *Gedenkbuch* as well as names gleaned from the few survivors' accounts. The power of this website cannot be underestimated, 520 pages with over 5,000 names. To reproduce this would swamp the book, and a compromise has had to be found. Instead every surname has been included, which in no way diminishes those who have not been included, but does provide the reader nevertheless with a sense of the scale of the destruction.

The members of the *Sonderkommando Kulmhof* have been meticulously researched by the late Artur Hojan and by Cameron Munro, from *Tiergartenstrasse 4 Association* in Berlin. It is thanks to Artur in particular that so many biographies have been compiled, of the men responsible for these ghastly crimes against humanity. Their initial findings have been updated and improved, with additional information and more biographies included.

The events of the post-war are captured, including testimonies and trials as well as personal accounts of our trips to Chełmno, and the surrounding villages all connected with the death camp's history, including some modern-day photographs, along with some rare documents to embellish the account.

With Grateful Thanks

This book owes everything to my late friend Artur Hojan. I first met Artur in Kraków in the summer of 2004, when the ARC Website group undertook their second field trip to Poland, visiting a host of sites connected with the Holocaust. Artur was from Kościan, in Poland and at that time he was learning English. During the trip he acted as one of our guides, and we became firm friends.

The following year in September 2005, I visited Chełmno for the first time, with Cameron Munro and Artur, who had established their own Holocaust research site. During that trip we met Zdzisław Lorek, who provided me with maps, documentation and research material about Chełmno some of which has been used in this book.

Artur sadly lost his life in December 2013, in the midst of writing a book on Chełmno, some of which he shared with me, and this has been incorporated in this work. Thus it is only fair that he has been given a co-writing credit. For Artur's family this is an important legacy, in recognition of his many years of dedicated research, and something tangible for generations to come. I am grateful to his wife Ada, for allowing me to include some of the work he started, but sadly did not finish.

Firstly I must thank Tom Nixon for his cover design and support, which is much appreciated. I am also grateful for the proof reading and copy-editing work of Tania Mühlberger, who really brings so much to the table. I must in this respect thank Professor Matthew Feldman, for introducing Tania to me, and his support for this book. Professor Feldman visited Chełmno with me in 2009, and has supported this work in so many ways. I cannot thank him enough.

I also want to thank the late Sir Martin Gilbert, who kindly gave me copies of his maps and drawings to use in my ventures. He was always a great inspiration to me, and always kind and generous with his knowledge and support. I have again used his fine maps to enrich my work.

I must place on record my thanks to Cameron Munro, Robert Parzer and Reinald Purmann from the *Tiergartenstrasse*4

Association in Berlin. As always, they have provided material, support, advice and expertise, which was invaluable. Cameron in particular is an expert in his own right on Euthanasia in the *Warthegau* and Chełmno in particular. This work owes a great deal to him, and I am proud to call him my friend. He kindly wrote the foreword to this book, and he is an inspiration in the field of Holocaust research. I first met Cameron in 2004, on the Second Field Trip to Poland undertaken by the ARC Group that I co-founded in 2001. This group initially focused on the *Aktion Reinhardt* mass murder program, but subsequently covered other aspects of the Holocaust. The photograph of Artur and me in Łódź was taken by Cameron, during our 2005 trip, and this particular trip was one of the most memorable I have taken part in.

In terms of institutions I am grateful for the assistance given by the staff of the Wiener Library, including its former head of photo archives Marek Jaros, who kindly gave me a number of photographs of Chełmno from their archives, which appear in this book. I must thank Elise Bath who has taken over from Marek for her kind permission to use the photographs.

The Wiener Library also provided a number of documents, and records from the International Military Tribunal held after the end of the Second World War, and I am very grateful for the help and guidance of Howard Falkensohn, who specializes in this particular field. The Wiener Library also provided other material that has been much appreciated, and they deserve much credit and support. They truly are a national treasure.

I am also grateful to Alla Kucherenko from Yad Vashem who has helped me to locate a number of rare and important documents regarding Chełmno and these have been reproduced in this book and it is much improved by their inclusion.

The Bundesarchiv in Berlin has also helped me with my research and I must thank Lutz Moeser for his patience and efforts in looking through numerous files of personnel who served at Chełmno, as well as their support with photographs and documents.

Abbreviations

AK	Armia Krajowa – Polish Home Army
ARC	Aktion Reinhard Camps website
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
GFH	Ghetto Fighters House, Israel
H.E.A.R.T.	Holocaust Education and Archive Research Team
HHS	Holocaust Historical Society, UK
KL	Konzentrationslager (Concentration Camp)
NA	National Archives, Kew, London
NSKK	National Sozialistische Kraftfahr Korps (National Socialist Motor Corps)
POW	Prisoner of War
PPS	Polish Socialist Party
RSHA	Reich Security Main Office
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service)
SIPO	Sicherheitspolizei (Security Police)
SS	Schutzstaffel (Protection Squad)
TAP	Secret Polish Army
TOW	Military Organization Union (Polish)
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
WL	Wiener Library, London
WVHA	Administration and Economic Main Office of the SS
YVA	Yad Vashem Archives

Part I

The Hell Called Chełmno

Chapter I

November 1941

Chelmno Death Camp Established

Chelmno, or as it was known during the Nazi occupation, *Kulmhof*, is located 50 kilometers north of Łódź, and 13 kilometers from Koło, otherwise known as *Warthbrücken* during this period. This area of Poland was recognized at that time as the *Warthegau*. The *Warthegau* was incorporated into the *Reich*, this included Wielkopolska (Greater Poland Voivodeship: with its Capital Poznań), Kujawy (Opole Voivodeship) and the Łódź region.

Arthur Greiser, the *Gauleiter* of *Reichsgau Wartheland* (*Warthegau*) and Wilhelm Koppe, the Higher SS and Police Leader, whose headquarters were based in *Posen*, today Poznań, sought solutions to overcome the overcrowding of ghettos within their sphere of influence. They called upon the services of *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Herbert Lange, who had been in command of a special unit (*Sonderkommando*) charged with murdering the disabled and mentally-ill in Soldau, in East Prussia and other locations within the *Warthegau*, such as Kościan and Osieczna. These executions were undertaken by shooting and by the use of gas vans (*Sonderwagen*), and were carried out under the auspices of the euthanasia program in the *Reich* that was known as the *T4*, program. *T4* was the abbreviation derived from the address of its headquarters in Berlin, *Tiergarten 4*, which was run by *SS-Oberführer* Viktor Brack, Chief of the Head Office II of Adolf Hitler's private Chancellery.

Herbert Lange was born in Menzlin, Pomerania on September 29, 1909. He studied law, but failed to obtain a degree and became a police officer. After serving in *Einsatzgruppe VI* under Erich Naumann, prior to the invasion of Poland in September 1939, Lange went to *Posen*, where he became Commandant of Fort VII for a brief

period, between October 10–16, 1939. Here he selected the staff he required and admitted the first prisoners.¹

Herbert Lange was then appointed head of the *Sonderkommando* Lange, and this *Kommando* conducted a series of gassing *Aktionen* asylums at Owińska, Dziekanka, Gniezno, Gostynin, Kochanowska near Łódź, Kościan, Warta and other places, from October 1939 to mid-1940. It is estimated that during these *Aktionen* and gassings at the stationary gas chamber at Fort VII, in *Posen*, that at least 10,000 patients were murdered by these means.²

One of the witnesses to these gassings at Fort VII in *Posen* was Henryk Maliczak, who was arrested in November 1939 and incarcerated in a *Gestapo* prison in Kościan. He was later transferred to Fort VII, where he was imprisoned in the cell designated *SK* (*Sonderkommando*). He recalled the gassing of patients from the hospital in Owińska:

We were initially employed in transporting and burying the corpses of the mentally ill. The first victims came from the psychiatric hospital in Owińska. They were transported by truck to Fort VII and gassed in a bunker, the door and window had been hermetically sealed. I saw how members of the camp staff and others, dressed in SS uniforms, observed the gassing through a window in the door of the bunker. A special group of approximately ten SS men, not Fort VII personnel, transported the mentally ill from the hospital in Owińska and gassed them. This group was commanded by an SS man named Lange.

The gassing occurred in this way two or three times over a period of several days.... The victims were calm; I suppose they had been tranquillized with injections. Our role in this activity consisted of carrying the corpses of the victims to trucks that transported them to forests near the town of Oborniki Śląskie. Here we threw the corpses into previously dug pits. We learned from members of Lange's *Kommando*, that the victims came from Owińska and were mentally ill. They tried to put us at ease, saying that such people had to be eliminated.³

Returning to the use of mobile gas-vans, they were constructed with a hermetically closed cargo hold, where the victims were incarcerated, and

¹ Artur Hojan – *Chełmno SS Personnel* unpublished paper.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, p. 20.

from the outside they looked like refrigerator vans. To camouflage their true purpose there was a sign that read, *Kaiser's Kaffee-Geschäft* and a cup of steaming coffee was also depicted. The gas—carbon monoxide (CO) was pumped into the interior from steel bottles installed in the driver's cabin.⁴

A detailed description of the *Kaiser's Kaffee-Geschäft* gas-vans was provided by Wacław Berłowski who was employed at the Kochanowska hospital in Łódź from 1933 to 1941 as a metalworker / locksmith and who repaired the *Sonderwagen*:

They were regular trucks with canvas coverings. Only one of them was a completely closed, metal vehicle, the interior of which was hermetically panelled with wood. This van had no windows. I repaired the van together with Antoni Bula.

The inscription "Café Kaiser"⁵ was written on the side of the van. During the repair work we noticed that the pipe led out from the motor. This pipe was flexible; it led out from the middle of the motor, from underneath and was connected to the body of the rear compartment. We also noticed that there was a grated opening in the floor of the vehicle. The pipe running from the motor led to this opening. This pipe was attached to an adaptor.

Antoni Bula can provide additional details as he is a professional driver. When we saw this pipe, Bula said that it was for gassing people. This vehicle was never washed by personnel from the hospital, but occasionally Jews were brought from the city to do it. The vehicle was gone from the hospital for three to four hours at a time after transporting a group of patients.⁶

After the Euthanasia *T4-Aktionen* in the *Warthegau*, Lange's *Kommando* was sent to Soldau in East Prussia, and to the Konin region. This was at the request of Wilhelm Rediess, the Higher SS and Police Leader for East Prussia. He wanted Lange and his *Sonderkommando* to liquidate asylum inmates in the Zichenau region under his jurisdiction. According to the agreement reached with the *RSHA*, between May 21 and June 8, 1940, *Sonderkommando* Lange "evacuated"

⁴ Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, pp. 8–9.

⁵ Should read "Kaiser's Kaffee Geschäft".

⁶ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, p. 26.

1,558 “burdensome persons” brought to the so-called *Durchgangslager Soldau*. These people were killed in the camp by shooting and the use of *Kaiser’s Kaffee Geschäft* gas-vans using gas cylinders. After these arduous *Aktionen* in Soldau, the members of *Sonderkommando* Lange involved in these murderous activities were granted a holiday in the Netherlands, which cost more than RM. 3,000. Lange was then transferred to the post of head of the Economics Crimes Department of the Criminal Police in *Posen*.⁷

Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, some two months later on August 16, 1941, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, Higher SS and Police Leader *Mitte* requested that *Sonderkommando* Lange come to his headquarters in Baranowicze, to give a demonstration of his killing process. This information was contained in a captured German Police decode intercepted by the British Intelligence Service at Bletchley Park. This was followed by another decoded message, by von dem Bach on August 18, 1941.⁸

Another decoded message intercepted by the British Intelligence Service on October 3, 1941, stated that a Senior Physician Freyberg, of the Army High Command requested that *Sonderkommando* Lange should be sent to Novgorod in Russia, to clear out three asylums, so they could be used by the *Wehrmacht*. A Junkers JU52 aircraft was to be provided for Lange and his assistants, as well as their equipment. Heinrich Himmler agreed the request. Whilst very little is known, it is unlikely that Himmler’s orders were ignored. The Junkers JU52 most probably carried carbon monoxide bottles and piping, in order to convert the rooms in the asylums into provisional gas chambers.⁹

According to the testimony of Herbert Lange’s driver and adjutant Walter Burmeister, the search for a suitable site to carry out the extermination of the Jews in the *Warthegau* commenced in the autumn of 1941. Lange and Dr. Walther Becht, the *Landrat* and

⁷ Artur Hojan – *Chełmno SS Personnel* unpublished paper, p. 2.

⁸ National Archives Kew HW16/32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, HW16/32.

Kreisleiter of the Nazi Party in *Warthbrücken*, visited Chełmno and decided that Chełmno was the ideal location for a death camp.

A few days later Herbert Lange and Walter Burmeister returned to Chełmno and local schoolteacher Erhard Michelsohn, one of the Germans who had been resettled into the village of Chełmno recalled:

One day in the winter of 1941/42 several cars drove to the town hall opposite the school and several men in field-grey uniforms got out. I could observe this from the school. They went into the town hall and conferred there with *Amtskommissar* Schulz. Afterwards Schulz told me that a *Sonderkommando* would establish a Transit-Camp in Chełmno. The SS men told him that Jews would pass through here on their way to Russia.¹⁰

Herbert Lange told his driver Walter Burmeister:

To make it plain from the start, absolute secrecy is crucial. I have orders to form a special commando in Chełmno. Other staff from *Posen* and from the State Police in *Litzmannstadt*,¹¹ are going to join us. We have a tough but important job to do.¹²

Chełmno was chosen because of its central location within the *Warthegau*, and its important transport links with *Warthbrücken* (Koło), a key station on the *Posen–Warschau* railroad line. There was a narrow gauge railway line from *Warthbrücken* (Koło), to Dąbie, that passed through Chełmno, but in the first phase of the death camp's activity, the bridge over the Rigilowka stream was destroyed in the 1939 invasion. Thus the Jewish deportees were transported on the narrow gauge track to Powiercie and from there the journey to Chełmno was completed by trucks. After the bridge was repaired in the autumn of 1942, the transports went directly to Chełmno.

The Jews were also deported from the Łódź ghetto and from locations in the vicinity of Chełmno by road. From Łódź they travelled in trucks from via Łęczyca–Grabow–Koło or a shorter route Łódź–

¹⁰ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, p.51.

¹¹ Litzmannstadt was the German name for Łódź.

¹² L. Rees, *Auschwitz. The Nazis and the Final Solution*, BBC Books, London 2005, p. 86.

Poddębice–Uniejów–Dąbie–Koło, which was a journey of approximately 70 kilometers.

The final destination was the 19th Century Manor House of Baron von Bistram, which was transformed into a place of extermination by the Nazis during November 1941. It was partly destroyed during the First World War and was under State supervision from 1918. It was located at the edge of the village, about 150 meters from the road, on the high bank of the valley of the River Ner, which is a tributary of the River Warta. The Manor House was also known as the Mansion, the Palace, the *Schloss* (Castle), or simply the *Haus* (House).

The Manor House area of almost 3 hectares, together with farm buildings, the park and the garden was separated from the village with a high fence some two and a half-three meters high made of boards. From the side by the river there was a fence made of netting, which had been put up before the Second World War. There were two entrance gates: the first one was located near the church, and it was constructed as a sluice: when guards opened one gate, the second gate was closed. The so-called Manor House was a substantial building, three storeys high. At the front façade there were two symmetrically placed entrances leading to, through wide galleries with stairs, the high ground floor. The garden façade had one entrance leading to a large patio. On the north-north western gable wall there was an entrance to the cellars from the inside of the building led by narrow stairs located near the southern entrance. Also there was a building in the grounds that was the Granary.

Approximately 150 meters south-east of the Manor House there was a neo-Gothic church separated from the estate by a road. During the first phase of the camp's activities the church was used as a garage for vans, according to the villagers who lived in Chełmno and then as a transit and a sorting place of the possessions taken from the victims.¹³

Chełmno was unlike the other death camps established in Poland, such as Bełżec, Lublin, Sobibór and Treblinka, in the first phase

¹³ Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, p. 23.

of its existence. After the people had been gassed in the gas-vans, the victims were driven in the gas-vans to the so-called *Waldlager* in the Rzuchów forest. In the forest the mass graves were located within the camp's area, where the victims were buried. In the other extermination camps the mass graves were located near the stationary gas chamber facilities.

Mass graves and later furnaces were located in two forest clearings, of approximately 5 hectares. The clearings were some 5 kilometers north-west of the Manor House, on the road to *Warthbrücken* (Koło), the forest belonged to the Ladorudz forest administration region, walk 77, under the supervision of the Forest Administration in Koło.¹⁴

The method of mass extermination at Chelmno was the use of gas-vans, which were used by Lange in Chelmno, a new more humane method of killing, was suggested. In November 1941, a new type of gas-van was introduced. As before, these were hermetically closed vans, but this time those inside the rear of the vehicle were killed by means of exhaust fumes, which were introduced from the exhaust pipe to the compartment containing the victims, using a flexible metal-strengthened spiral pipe connected to it. This outlet was additionally secured by a perforated sheet.

The *RSHA*—*Reich* Security Main Office II D 3a was responsible for the construction of the gas-vans, also known in German as *Sonderwagen*, recruitment of drivers and the provision of spare parts for the *Sonderwagen*. Two types of vehicles were used, a smaller version with a 3.5 tonnes payload which accommodated 50 persons, these were Diamond, Opel Blitz and Renault vehicles and a larger version with a payload of 70–80 persons, Sauer and Magirus vehicles with petrol engines. These gas vans had an air tight car-body and looked like furniture vans. Exhaust fumes were fed into the car-body by means of a removable tube. A barred lamp illuminated the interior.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵ www.deathcamps.org/gasvans. ARC - online resource.

The *RSHA* ordered both series from the plant *Gaubschat Fahrzeugwerke GmbH* in Berlin– Neukölln on the pretext of meeting the requirements of secure transportation of bodies of those who died due to typhoid epidemic. They were made of precisely pressed boards upholstered with sheet from inside and were equipped with hermetical doors. On the floor there was a wooden grille, as in bath, preventing the blockade of the exhaust fumes from the inside. In the driver's cabin there was a window, through which it was checked whether the exhaust fumes were working. The whole thing was painted dark grey.¹⁶

Having covered the camp and the chosen method of extermination, it is the turn of the perpetrators and their helpers, who commenced Phase One of the camps murderous activities. We have already mentioned the Commandant Herbert Lange and his deputy Herbert Otto, who both arrived in Chełmno on November 15, 1941. Immediately they were joined by between 10–15 SS-Officers. They were further strengthened by a unit of policemen (*Schutzpolizei*) and military policemen, who were accommodated in several buildings in Chełmno village.

The military policemen and *Schutzpolizei* were deployed from *Litzmannstadt* (Łódź) mainly from the 1st and 2nd companies of the 2st Station Battalion of Police Reserves. They were deployed by the Chief of the Police in Łódź, *SS-Brigadeführer* Karl-Wilhelm Albert. Another group came from *Posen* whilst others came directly from an *Aktion* in Konin. One of those who came from *Posen* was *Hauptscharführer* Karl Heintz and he gave the following account:

I was to report to *Polizeimeister* Lenz at the *Posen Gestapo* (*Stapo*) office, in order to be incorporated into a guard squad together with other police officials. *Revierleutnant* Graf personally passed this order on to me. I do not know who from the *Kommando* of the *Schutzpolizei* passed on this order. I was not told either, for what purpose or in what place this *Kommando* was to be employed.

As ordered I went to the *Gestapo* office in *Posen* on the following day. The aforementioned *Polizeimeister* Lenz, whom I did not know, met me

¹⁶ Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, p. 23.

at the entrance. Altogether, five or six police officials met there, who like Lenz came from the police districts in *Posen*. As far as I remember there were:

Polizei-Oberwachtmeister Hannes Runge

Polizei-Wachtmeister Max Sommer

Polizei-Hauptwachtmeister Simon Haider

Polizei-Oberwachtmeister Erich Kretschmer

I cannot now recall the other persons. We asked Lenz for what purpose we were being employed, but he told us he did not know. He told us to go to the canteen and wait for him. Then he went to the *Stapo* office. In the afternoon, at about three o'clock, Lenz appeared and ordered us to depart. In front of the *Stapo* office we got into a truck, which was driven by a member of the *Stapo*, *Oberscharführer* Erwin Bürstinger. He drove us via Koło to the village of Chełmno. After we arrived there, Lenz assigned us quarters in a house in the village, where we spent the night in a big room.¹⁷

The SS men were originally housed in the building of the local volunteer fire department, the so-called *Deutsches Haus*, but later when the police detachment was quartered in the *Deutsches Haus*, they moved into private homes in Chełmno village. Barracks to house the additional policemen drafted in, were erected next to the *Deutsches Haus*.

Lange and his driver Burmeister stayed in the local *gmia* (community) building. *Sonderkommando* Lange also requisitioned houses to serve as a kitchen and canteen. They also took over the presbytery, which stood opposite the church. The local Priest, Father Karol Morozewicz was arrested by the Germans and he later perished in the Dachau Concentration Camp on May 3, 1942.

The guard deployment at Chełmno was divided into three sub-units and these were known as detachments.

These were:

Transportkommando – Transportation Detachment

Hauskommando – Manor House Detachment

Waldkommando – Forest Detachment

¹⁷ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, pp. 51–52.

The first of the detachments was mainly responsible for the escort of the deported during the transportation to the death camp. To transport the victims and prisoner-workers they used a truck covered with tarpaulin and a bus. Later there were three trucks. The commanding officer had a car.

The Manor House detachment kept guard duty around the buildings in the village, guarded and hurried the victims who were already on the Manor House grounds, and supervised the group of prisoners-workers.

The forest detachment guarded parts of the camp located in the Rzuchowski forest, and performed other functions as well in relation to the supervision of burying and burning the bodies and covering up the traces of their crimes.

The *SS-Sonderkommando* members who were part of the original death camp personnel were as follows:

Hauptsturmführer – Herbert Lange
Obersturmführer – Herbert Otto
Rottenführer – Walter Burmeister
Hauptscharführer – Friedrich Neumann
Hauptscharführer – Erwin Bürstinger
Hauptscharführer – Alfred Behm
Hauptscharführer – Johannes Runge
Hauptscharführer – Karl Heint¹⁸
Unterscharführer – Erich Kretschmer
Polizeimeister – Wilhelm Lenz
Polizeiwachtmeister – Max Sommer
Polizei-Hauptwachtmeister – Simon Haider¹⁹

The German camp personnel were assisted by a group of Polish prisoners, who became co-workers in this place of horror. There were eight men who had previously been incarcerated in Fort VII in *Posen*, and some of these men had been involved in the *T4 Aktionen* and

¹⁸ Some reports claim that Karl Heint arrived in Chelmno at the end of January 1942, but the above report would seem to place him there at the start of operations.

¹⁹ P. Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust*, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, p. 53.

the extermination of Jews in the Konin district. These men arrived at Chełmno on November 15, 1941 and were:

Lech Jaskolski
Marian Libelt
Henryk Maliczak
Henryk Mania
Franciszek Piekarski
Stanisław Polubinski
Kajetan Skrzypczyński
Stanisław Szymanski²⁰

With the personnel in place, the first tasks were to make the Manor House secure and move out the residents who were living there. *Amtskommissar* Schulz acted as the liaison man between the local population and the *Sonderkommando*. The Manor House residents were made to clean it thoroughly under the supervision of the village administrator Jakob Semmler, and then evacuated their homes.

Members of the *Sonderkommando* carried out minor repairs, basement windows were boarded over and later bricked in, and a local carpenter was ordered to make a number of benches and to modify the existing ones in the church for use in the Manor House.

The grounds of the Manor House were made secure and a wooden fence approximately three meters high was constructed on three sides. A large gate was built on the front side where the driveway met the main road. The rear of the Manor House, facing the River Ner, was sectioned off with a wire fence. A second wooden fence was built in front of the Manor House enclosing the courtyard. This fence had two gates located in the northwest and southeast sides.

Inside the Manor House, near the main entrance on the left side of the building, was a door that led downstairs to the basement and a small landing. A long corridor just over one meter wide and illuminated with gas lamps, led to the right. On the left hand side of the corridor were as many as seven rooms. On the right side were four rooms, about the same size as those on the other side of the corridor,

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 227–229.

as well as one other much smaller room. The corridor ended at a door that led outside on the right side of the building. A wooden ramp enclosed on two sides was built there.²¹

At the end of November 1941, a number of policemen were added to the *Sonderkommando Kulmhof*. On November 24, 1941, *Oberleutnant* Harold Lang arrived to take up duty in Chełmno, although his stay was brief. The following day on November 25, 1941, *Oberwachtmeister* Franz Schalling arrived from Łódź, with another group of policemen. Two days later Theodor Malzmüller also arrived at the camp, with a group of policemen from Police Battalion XXI, also previously based in Łódź.²²

Franz Schalling described in an interview with Claude Lanzmann for the film “Shoah” his arrival at Chełmno:

We were on permanent guard duty, protecting military objectives: mills, the roads, when Hitler went to East Prussia. It was dreary, and we were told, “We need men who want to break out from this routine.” So we volunteered: we were issued winter uniforms, overcoats, fur hats, fur-lined boots, and two or three days later we were told, “We’re off!” We were put aboard two or three trucks... I don’t know... they had benches, and we rode and rode. Finally we arrived; the place was crawling with SS men and Police. Our first question was, “What goes on here?” They said, “You’ll find out!”

We were told to report to the *Deutsches Haus*, German Headquarters, the only stone building in the village. We were taken into it. An SS man immediately told us, “This is a top secret mission!”

“A top secret mission: Sign this.” We each had to sign. There was a form ready for each of us, a pledge of secrecy. We never even got to read it through. No, just sign, promising to shut up about whatever we’d see. Not say a word. After we’d signed we were told: “Final Solution of the Jewish question.” We didn’t understand what that meant. It all looked normal.²³

²¹ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, pp. 54–55.

²² Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, p. 52.

²³ C. Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1985, pp. 73–74.

Chapter II

December 1941

Mass Murder Begins

On December 1, 1941, members of the *Sonderkommando Lange* carried out the final liquidation of the Kalisz ghetto and the remaining 100 inhabitants were murdered by gassing in the gas-vans in the Jedlenki forest near Głuchów.²⁴

The Polish *Arbeitskommando* dug the first mass graves in the Rzuchowski forest on December 4, 1941, and the following day members of the *Sonderkommando Lange* went to the Koło ghetto in a car and truck. They selected 30 Jewish workers who were forced into the truck. This was the first Jewish work-commando in the history of Chełmno, but their survival was short-lived.

December 8, 1941 marked the start of the mass murder of Jews in the Chełmno death camp, indeed in Poland itself, with the first transport of Jews from nearby *Warthbrücken* (Koło).

Franz Schalling recalled the arrival of transports:

In the winter of 1941/42, then we were assigned to our stations. Our guard post was at the side of the road, a sentry box in front of the castle. We could see. We were at the gatehouse. When the Jews arrived, the way they looked—half-frozen, starved, dirty, and already half-dead: Old people, children. Think of it! The long trip here, standing in a truck, packed in. Who knows if they knew what was in store. They didn't trust anyone, that's for sure. After months in the ghetto, you can imagine!

I heard an SS man shout at them: "You're going to be deloused and have a bath. You're going to work here." The Jews consented. They said, "Yes, that's what we want to do. They were hustled into two or three big rooms on the first floor. They had to undress, give up everything, rings, gold, everything.....

Then stark naked they had to run down more steps to an underground corridor that led back up to the ramp, where the gas-van awaited them..... they were beaten. Blows fell everywhere, and the Jews

²⁴ Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, p. 26.

understood. They screamed; it was frightful! Frightful! I know because we went down to the cellar when they were all in the van. We opened the cells of the work detail, the Jewish workers who collected stuff thrown into the yard out of a first floor window.

Franz Schalling was asked to describe the gas vans and the method of mass murder:

Just big trucks, like moving vans, with two rear doors; It went like this a Pole yelled "Gas," then the driver got under the van to hook up the pipe that fed the gas into the van, from the motor.²⁵

One of those who witnessed the deportations of the Jews from this town was Michał Podchlebnik. He and his wife had been resettled to the nearby village of Bugaj, but he worked for a German in Koło, under a work permit and he recalled:

At three o'clock, everyone was entered on an A or B list – those able or unable to work. Then they were taken and locked in the synagogue and the Jewish school. The next day they were taken by transport to Chełmno. Everyone was told where they were going. It was said that Chełmno is an assembly point for further transports to the east. Sick people and pregnant women were treated with excessive politeness; they were taken during the last day of the ghetto's liquidation.

The drivers were given special instructions, so that all could hear, to drive cautiously because they would be carrying sick people. Those leaving were ordered to take indispensable items and clothing. The trucks were loaded with between 40 and 60 people. During this time the names of the people leaving were read out loud and they were marked off from the registration list with red ink.

I personally helped with the loading of the trucks. When the last transport was loaded, I asked if I could go to Chełmno to visit my family. They told me I couldn't, because it was impossible to return from there.²⁶

On December 7, 1941, approximately 700 people arrived at the Manor House, where they were incarcerated for the night. The following day they were loaded into the *Kaiser's Kaffee Sonderwagen*,

²⁵ C. Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1985, pp. 75–76.

²⁶ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, p. 64.

taken to the Rzuchowski forest, gassed and buried. This process for the Jews of Koło was repeated until December 11, 1941.²⁷

Three days later on December 14, 1941, approximately 500 Jews from the nearby village of Czachulec, were murdered in Chełmno and on the same day 975 Jews from the nearby village of Dąbie, six kilometers south of Chełmno, were locked in the Catholic Church before being taken to Chełmno to share the same fate.

On December 15/16, 1941, two groups of gypsies from the *Litzmannstadt* ghetto numbering approximately 8,300 were transported in trucks from gypsy camps direct to Chełmno, where they were murdered.²⁸

SS-Unterscharführer Kurt Möbius arrived from Łódź on December 19, 1941, and was put in charge of organizational work in the Manor House. The day after his arrival he was taken to the Forest Camp and he gave an account of what he saw, after the war:

There was a large clearing in the forest surrounded by one or two cordons of guard posts. There was a large grave in the clearing that had been dug by four or five Polish workers. The grave had the following dimensions; five to six meters deep, eight meters wide and twenty meters long. About one-eighth of it was filled with bodies.²⁹

Rottwachtmeister Jakob Wildermuth, a policeman who worked in the *Waldlager*, also recalled the mass graves:

In the first clearing, there were two mass graves about 30 meters long, ten meters wide and three meters deep. In the second clearing, there was a mass grave about 30 meters long, ten meters wide and three meters deep. In the third clearing, there was a mass grave about 12 meters long, ten meters wide, and three meters deep. When I started my duty in Chełmno, the mass grave in the third clearing had already been filled with corpses. The mass grave in the second clearing was half-filled with

²⁷ Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, p. 54.

²⁸ Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, p. 55.

²⁹ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, pp. 91–92.

corpses. The other mass graves had only been prepared and were filled with corpses later.³⁰

Sometime, just prior to the deportation of the Jews from Koło to Chełmno in December 1941, Heinrich May the local Forester recalled an event in the forest near Chełmno:

A few weeks later my youngest son returned home from school for vacation. I took him around through Koło and Chełmno. Near the district 77—the road ran through the northern strip of the district—there was a large, closed van stuck in a ditch. It was attached to another vehicle trying to get it out of the ditch back on to the road, which also became blocked.

My son got out of the car and went up to the men in police uniforms near the van. I heard them address my son harshly, so I also got out and walked in their direction. The vehicle in the ditch was about four meters long and two meters high and the rear end was closed with an iron bar and padlocked. A peculiar, unpleasant smell was coming from the van and the men. When I asked if the road would be passable soon, they answered rudely that they would move out of the way a bit. Then they told me to leave quickly. A few days later my son was in Koło. After he returned home, he told me that Jews from Koło had been herded together by gendarmes and driven away in trucks.³¹

Transports of gypsies from the *Litzmannstadt* ghetto resumed on December 29, 1941, for two days, with approximately 4,000 deported in trucks to Chełmno where they were murdered.³²

³⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

³¹ *Chełmno Witnesses Speak*, Konin – Łódź 2004, pp. 154–155.

³² Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, pp. 56–57.

Chapter III

January 1942

The Slaughter Intensifies—Eichmann's Visit—Prisoner Escapes

With the start of the new year of 1942, a number of important changes of personnel took place at Chełmno. Fritz Ismer who was appointed to look after the valuables came from Łódź. His assistant Karl Göde also arrived in early January. Two gas van drivers *Oberscharführer* Basler and Franz Walter also arrived in either late December 1941, or early January 1942.

Stanisław Polubinski, one of the Polish *Arbeitskommando* in Chełmno was taken to the hospital in *Warthbrücken* (Koło), showing symptoms of typhus. He recovered from this, but was murdered by the Germans in Fort VII, in *Posen*, during 1943.

On January 2, 1942, 30 gravediggers from the Kłodawa ghetto were sent to Chełmno, and two days later another 16 gravediggers went to Chełmno from the Kłodawa ghetto.³³

Between January 5, 1942 and January 12, 1942, approximately 5,000 Gypsies were transported directly from *Litzmannstadt* to Chełmno in trucks. They belonged to the Lalleri tribe and came from Burgenland, Austria, on November 5, 1941. They were incarcerated in a "Gypsy Camp," which had been established on the border of the ghetto at Brzezinska Street. They arrived at the Radogoszcz railway station and were escorted to the camp by SS guards. Among the deportees were a Jewish doctor, Dr. Fickelburg and an unknown Jewish nurse.³⁴ The Gypsy Camp was guarded by gendarmes from the 132nd

³³ Krystof Gorczyca, Zdzisław Lorek, *Day After Day in the extermination camp Kulmhof am Ner* – unpublished draft, p. 57.

³⁴ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust – The Jewish Tragedy*, William Collins, London 1987, p. 251.

Schutzpolizei battalion under the command of Eugen Jansen, who contracted typhus and died on December 23, 1941.³⁵

Hauptscharführer Fritz Ismer on his arrival at Chełmno, with two other policemen, recalled the liquidation of the Gypsies in Chełmno:

When we reported to Lange, he instructed us to go with him by car to the forest, which was about five kilometres away, in order to witness the commando in action. Lange had told us before that everything that happened there was top secret and that we had to keep absolutely silent about everything.

When we arrived at the forest, one of the policemen who guarded it reported to us. The Forest Camp was a short distance off the country road and a dirt road led to it. Lange told us to come closer. We could see a clearing in the forest and a grey van that was parked there with the rear doors open. The van was full of bodies, which were taken out by a Jewish labour squad and thrown into a mass grave. The dead people looked like Gypsies. There were men, women and children there. The bodies were clothed.

When I saw this I began to feel sick and had to vomit. When I rallied a little, Lange told me, "You'll get used to it." We stayed there for only about ten minutes. I think two more vans came during this time. They were also full of Gypsies. When we came back Lange told us that he wanted to show us the mansion. In the area of the mansion we saw people go directly from the trucks into the gas vans. Those people were Gypsies too.³⁶

On January 5, 1942,³⁷ Szlamek Bajler who lived in the town of Izbica Kujawska was ordered to assemble for work, and the following day on Tuesday January 13, he reported to the police station. He managed to escape from Chełmno on Monday January 19, 1942. He made his way to the Warsaw ghetto, where he made contact with Emanuel Ringelblum and wrote an account of his experiences at Chełmno for Ringelblum's *Oneg Shabbat* group. These experiences included witnessing the mass murder of Gypsies from Łódź, and Jews deported to Chełmno from the local area, including his own home-town.

³⁵ L. Dobroszycki, *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto 1941–1944*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1984, p. 82 and 101.

³⁶ P. Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, London 2012, p. 66.

³⁷ Incorrectly stated as January 12, 1942 in Szlamek's testimony.

Szlamek Bajler was also known by the names Wiener and Grojnowski, possibly false names, for self-preservation.

Szlamek Bajler survived Chełmno, but he was deported from Zamosć, in south-eastern Poland, with other members of his family on April 11, 1942, to the nearby Bełżec death camp, where he perished.³⁸ His detailed and very moving account of life and death in Chełmno covered thirteen days and certain entries have been extracted to provide the reader with the main points he experienced:

Tuesday, January 6, 1942

We arrived at 12:30 noon. At both doors stood *Gestapo* men and gendarmes doing guard duty. When we came in the second courtyard we were pushed out of the lorry. From here onwards we were in the hands of black uniformed SS men, all of them high ranking *Reich* Germans.

We were ordered to hand over all our money and valuables. After this fifteen men were selected. I among them and taken down to the cellar rooms of the *Schloss*. We fifteen were confined in one room, the remaining fourteen in another. It was still bright daylight outside, but down in the cellar it was pitch dark.

Some Ethnic German on the domestic staff provided us with straw. Later a lantern was also brought. At around eight in the evening we received unsweetened black coffee and nothing else. We were all in a depressed mood. One could only think of the worst, some were close to tears. We kissed each other and took leave. It was unimaginably cold and we lay down close together. In this manner we spent the whole night without shutting our eyes. We only talked about the deportation of Jews, particularly from Kolo and Dabie. The way it looked, we had no prospect of ever getting out again.³⁹

³⁸ C. Webb, *The Bełżec Death Camp, History, Biographies, Remembrance*, ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart, 2016, pp. 114–115.

³⁹ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust – The Jewish Tragedy*, William Collins, London 1987, pp. 252–253.

Wednesday, January 7, 1942

At seven in the morning, the gendarme on duty knocked and ordered us to get up. We hadn't slept anyway, because of the cold. It took half an hour till they brought us black coffee and bread from our provisions. We drew some meagre consolation from this and told each other there was a God in heaven; we would after all be going to work.

At about 8:30 in the morning, we were led into the courtyard. Six of us had to go into the second cellar room to bring out two corpses. The dead were from Klodawa, and had hanged themselves. They were conscript grave-diggers. Their corpses were thrown on a lorry. We met the other fourteen enforced grave-diggers from Izbica. As soon as we came out of the cellar, we were surrounded by twelve gendarmes and *Gestapo* men with machine guns.

We got on the lorry together with the twenty-nine enforced grave-diggers and the two corpses: our escort were six gendarmes with machine guns. Behind us came another vehicle with ten gendarmes and two civilians. We drove in the direction of Kolo for about seven kilometers till turning left into the forest: after half a kilometer we halted at a clear path. We were ordered to get down and line up in double file.

An SS man ordered us to fall in with our shovels, dressed despite the frost, only in shoes, underwear, trousers, and shirts. Our coats, hats, gloves, had to remain in a pile on the ground. The two civilians took all the shovels and pick-axes down from the lorry. Eight of us who weren't handed any tools had to take down the two corpses.

Already on our way to the forest we saw about fourteen men, enforced grave-diggers from Klodawa, who had arrived before us and were at work in their shirtsleeves. The picture was as follows: twenty-one men in two's, behind them eight men with two corpses, ringed by armed Germans. The people from Klodawa were also guarded by twelve gendarmes. All in all we were guarded by thirty gendarmes.

As we approached the ditches the men from Klodawa asked us in whispers, 'Where are you from?' We answered, 'From Izbica.' They

asked us how many of us there were and we replied, 'Twenty-nine.' This exchange took place while we worked.

The eight men without tools carried the two corpses to the ditch and threw them in. We didn't have to wait long before the next lorry arrived with fresh victims. It was specially constructed. It looked like a normal large lorry, in grey paint with two hermetically closed rear doors. The inner walls were of steel metal. There weren't any seats. The floor was covered by a wooden grating, as in public baths, with straw mats on top. Between the driver's cab and the rear part were two peepholes. With a torch one could observe through these peepholes if the victims were already dead.

Under the wooden grating were two tubes about fifteen centimeters thick which came out of the cab. The tubes had small openings from which gas poured out. The gas generator was in the cab, where the same driver sat all the time. He wore a uniform of the SS death's head units and was about forty years old. There were two such vans.

When the lorries approached, we had to stand at a distance of five meters from the ditch. The leader of the guard detail was a high-ranking SS man, an absolute sadist and murderer. He ordered that eight men were to open the doors of the lorry. The smell of gas that met us was overpowering. The victims were gypsies from Łódź. Strewn about the van were all their belongings: accordions, violins, bedding, watches, and other valuables.

After the doors had been open for five minutes, orders were screamed at us, 'Here! You Jews! Get in there and turn everything out!' The Jews scurried into the van and dragged the corpses away. The work didn't progress quickly enough. The SS leader fetched his whip and screamed, 'The devil. I'll give you a hand straight away!' He hit out in all directions on people's heads, ears and so on, till they collapsed. Three of the eight who couldn't get up again were shot on the spot.

When the others saw this they clambered back on their feet and continued the work with their last reserves of energy. The corpses were thrown one on top of another, like rubbish on a heap. We got hold of them by the feet and the hair. At the edge of the ditch stood

two men who threw in the bodies. In the ditch stood an additional two men, who packed them in head to feet, facing downwards.

The orders were issued by an SS man who must have occupied a special rank. If any space was left, a child was pushed in. Everything was done very brutally. From up above the SS man indicated to us with a pine twig how to stack the bodies. He ordered where the head and feet, where the children and the belongings were to be placed. All this was accompanied by malicious screams, blows and curses. Every batch comprised 180–200 corpses. For every three vanloads twenty men were used to cover up the corpses. At first this had to be done twice, later up to three times, because nine vans arrived—that is nine times sixty corpses.

At exactly twelve o'clock the SS leader with the whip ordered, 'Put your shovels down!' We had to line up in double file to be counted again. Then we had to climb out of the ditch. We were surrounded by guards all the time. We even had to excrete on the spot. We went to the spot where our belongings were. We had to sit on them close together. The guards continued to surround us. We were given cold bitter coffee and a frozen piece of bread. That was our lunch. That's how we sat for half an hour. Afterwards we had to line up, were counted and led back to work.

What did the dead look like? They weren't burnt or black: their faces were unchanged. Nearly all the dead were soiled with excrement. At about five o'clock we stopped work. The eight men who had worked with the corpses had to lie on top of them face downwards. An SS man with a machine gun shot at their heads. The man with the whip screamed, 'The devil, get dressed quickly!' We dressed quickly and took the shovels with us. We were counted and escorted to the lorry by gendarmes and SS men. We had to put the shovels away. Then we were counted again and pushed into the lorry.

The journey to the *Schloss* took about fifteen minutes. We travelled together with the men from Klodawa and talked very quietly together. I said to my colleagues, 'My mother wanted to lead me to a white wedding canopy, she won't even have the experience of leading me to a black one.' We cried softly and spoke in whispers, so the gendarmes sitting at the back shouldn't hear us.

On the first day, the following happened: it was ten in the morning. A certain Giter from Bydgoszcz, a fat individual, resident in Izbica during the war, belonged to the group of 'eight' and was unable to keep up with the speed of the work. The SS man with the whip ordered him to undress. He flogged him and others till they lost consciousness. His body looked black as spleen. He had to lie down alone in the ditch, where he was shot.

It turned out there were many more rooms in the *Schloss*. We numbered twenty in our room, with fifteen more in the adjacent one. There weren't any other enforced grave-diggers. As soon as we came into the cold dark cellar, we threw ourselves down on the straw and cried about everything that had befallen us. The fathers wept from pain at never seeing their little ones again. A fifteen-year-old boy by the name of Moniek Halter embraced and kissed me. Weeping, he said to me, 'Ah Schlomo, even if I die a victim, my mother and sister should at least stay alive.' Meir Pitrowski, forty-years-old from Izbica, my neighbor on the straw, kissed me and said, 'Who knows if I will ever see them again, and what is going to happen to them?'

Gershon Prashker, a fifty-five-year-old from Izbica, said, 'We have a great God up in heaven and must pray to him. He wont desert us—that's why we must all now together say the 'prayer of confession and penitence before death.' Amid great pain and tears we recited the prayer. It was a very depressing sight. The sergeant-major knocked at the door, shouting, 'Quiet, you Jews, or I shoot.' We continued the prayer softly with choking voices.

At 7:30 in the evening they brought us a pot of thin kohlrabi soup. We couldn't swallow anything for crying and pain. It was very cold and we had no covers at all. One of us exclaimed, 'Who knows who among us will be missing tomorrow.' We pressed close together and lapsed into exhausted fitful sleep haunted by terrible dreams. We slept for about four hours. Then we ran about the room freezing cold and debated the fate that was in store for us.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 253–258.

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At 5 a.m. six people got up and recited Psalms amid crying and wailing. Some of the others made fun of us because of our piety. They said there was no God. This consolation struck them as youthful foolishness. We replied that our life was in the hands of God. If all this was his will then we accepted it with love, all the more so as the days of the Messiah were approaching. After the morning prayer and Kaddish, in which even Eisenstab took part, we recited the prayer of penitence.

At 7 a.m. they brought us coffee and bread. Some of the men from Izbica drank up all the coffee. The others got very annoyed and said we were already facing death and had to behave with dignity. It was decided to share out a little coffee to everyone in future. At 8:30 we were already at work. At 9:30 the first gas van appeared.

Among the 'eight' were Aharon Rosenthal, Schlomo Babiacki, and Schmuël Bibedgal, all of them aged between fifty and sixty. On this day we were absolutely slave-driven. They wouldn't even wait till the gas smell had evaporated. You can imagine the screams of the tortured people. Immediately after the first van, the second one arrived. By twelve o'clock noon, the third had already come.

When we went to lunch the 'eight' remained behind to dispatch the last transport. Meanwhile a black limousine arrived and four officers got out. They heard a report from 'Big Whip' after which they shook his hand most appreciatively. 'Big Whip' then once again beat the 'eight' violently to his joy and satisfaction. When the SS men left, the 'eight' received their meagre lunch. That afternoon the work lasted till six. Nine transports, each of sixty Jews from Klodawa, were buried: fivehundred people from Klodawa in all.

My friend Getzel Chrzastowski screamed terribly for a moment when he recognized his fourteen-year-old son, who had just been thrown into the ditch. We had to stop him, too, from begging the German to shoot him. We argued it was necessary to survive this suffering, so we might revenge ourselves later and pay the Germans back. After work the five oldest men in the detail that handled the