

## **An Addendum to the The Real Oskar Schindler Story**

### ***Vernichtungslager 'Bełżec'***

#### **Rudolf Reder's 'Bełżec'**



**Fig.** Rudolf Reder

This photograph was published in a Canadian newspaper 'The *Leader Post*' at the time when legal proceedings against eight members of the SS staff in Bełżec were commenced

Rudolf Reder was born in Dębica on 4 April, 1881. The most time of his life he spent in Lwow, where, until 1910, he ran his own soap factory. He was deported to the death camp in Bełżec during the 'August Operation' that took place in Lwow in 1942.

In November 1942, he succeeded in escaping. It happened when five members of German staff took him to Lwow to buy sheet metal. After his escape, a Ukrainian woman, his former employee, helped him. During the Holocaust, Reder lost his first wife, a daughter and a son. His oldest daughter survived the war and settled in Great Britain. In 1949, Rudolf Reder changed his name to Roman Robak and in 1950, along with his Polish wife, left Poland. At first they were living in Israel and after several months they moved to Canada, where Reder died early 1970.

Reder died in Toronto in 1968. His account of the Bełżec camp imprisonment was published for the first time in his 1946 book '*Bełżec*'.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

This research relating to *Bełżec* has been undertaken on a number of different, related fronts. It includes critically important data derived from an archaeological survey of the mass graves at Bełżec by forensic archaeologists from Toruń, Poland. The author, who was a volunteer participant in this investigation, introduces detailed mapping of the camp in the first and second phases of operational activity. These findings provide indisputable evidence of mass murder committed there,

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrzej Kola. *Hitlerowski Obóz Zagłady Żydów W Bełżcu W Świetle Źródeł Archeologicznych*, Badania 1997 – 1999. Warsaw 2000.

independent of eyewitness testimony and a rebuttal to revisionist deniers of the Holocaust.

The location and number of graves found corroborate both the testimonies and plans made by Rudolf Reder in 1945, Chaim Hirszman in 1946, and the Report of the Polish War Crimes Investigation Commission of 1945-46. Now we have the Kola report *Obóz Zagłady Żydów W Bełżcu W Świetle Źródeł Archeologicznych*.

In addition, in 1987, the author interviewed a survivor from the Plaszów KZ, Joseph Bau. Bau related how he had met Rudolf Reder in Kraków in 1945, and, with the information given by Reder, drafted plans of Bełżec camp showing the location of mass graves, gas chambers and other buildings. Bau produced for the author the original sketches of these plans.

## Modus Operandi of Destruction:



**Fig. :** Kriminalkommissar Christian Wirth Commandant of Belzec extermination camp December 1941 — August 1942.<sup>2</sup>

The technology of the euthanasia programme, which necessitated techniques of killing significant numbers of people efficiently, quickly and with maximum secrecy, became, through trial and error, the blueprint for the destruction of European Jewry.

The principle of police leadership, in the personas of the Stuttgart Police Superintendent Christian Wirth and the newly elevated to Higher SS-Police Leader, Odilo Globocnik, was unprecedented. The combination of police and civilians appears to have been a direct policy of the Nazi state. The majority of *Reinhardt* personnel operating in these camps were a maverick unit and given the spurious cover of SS insignia to facilitate their objective.

These men, operating under a *Geheime Reichssache* (Secret Reich Affair) became 'untouchable'. All outside influences concerning rank, status and human dignity meant absolutely nothing to this group.

Within the *Reinhardt* establishment, there was a complete negation of any recognised principles of law and order, discipline or basic humanitarian considerations.

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<sup>2</sup> **Christian Wirth** (24 November 1885 — 26 May 1944) was a Detective Chief Inspector from Stuttgart and SS officer, who was one of the leading architects of the program to exterminate the Jewish people of Poland, known as Aktion Reinhardt. Wirth worked at scaling up the Action T4 program, in which disabled people were murdered by gassing or lethal injection, and then at scaling up Reinhardt, by developing extermination camps for the purpose of mass murder. Wirth served as Inspector of all Operation Reinhardt camps. He was the first Commandant of Belzec extermination camp. He was later killed by Yugoslav partisans in Hrpelje-Kozina near Trieste.



**Fig. : T4/SS personnel at Bełżec 1942**

The men engaged in *Reinhardt* had practiced institutional murder by euthanasia since 1940, and were psychologically conditioned to continue similar duties when they were transferred *en-Bloch* to direct killing operations in the newly established camp of Bełżec. After all, if they could engage in the murder of their 'own' by euthanasia, they could hardly be expected to have any inner moral conflict over murdering Jews elsewhere.

Even so, in practice, clinical institutionalised murder was a far cry from what these men were later faced with in Bełżec, which called for an extra dimension of personal commitment. Among the *Reinhardt* personnel, the motivation for carrying out the base murder of men, women and children varied according to the individual. Fear among the lower echelons of the leadership predominated, but others were attracted by generous pay and conditions of service with extra leave, allowances and opportunities for further advancement. Others were motivated by the spoils of war: corruption, greed, and, in some cases, by crude prejudices and sadistic self-gratification. Exemption from frontline duty was an added inducement. In due course, all these men, even those who self-righteously proclaimed abhorrence of Bełżec's purpose, became corrupted when given the power of life and death over people whom they were encouraged to treat as sub-human.

The basic idea of the Final Solution was to be accomplished by bringing the victims to the killing centres, as opposed to the messy business of the SS Murder Squads going to the victims. The modus operandi of how to kill large numbers of people was planned, tested and approved firstly within the euthanasia programme and then transferred to the experimental and prototype camp at Bełżec. Both Treblinka and Sobibor were based on what had been learned at Bełżec. Yet Bełżec is the least known of the *Aktion Reinhardt* death camps. This is largely due to (a) the absence of survivors, and (b) that only one of the camp personnel was ever indicted for the Bełżec crimes.

Construction of the death camp in Bełżec commenced on 1 November 1941, directly after the decision was taken by the Nazi authorities to implement *Aktion 'Reinhardt'*. This was the operation which main goal was the annihilation of the Jews living in the region known as the 'General Government' and the

appropriation of their property. Bełżec was the first death camp in which the Nazis used stationary gas chambers for killing people.

The annihilation of the Jews in Bełżec lasted, with some intervals, from March until December 1942. In Bełżec, during this period of approximately nine months, the Germans killed about 500,000 of Polish and foreign Jews and small groups of non-Jewish Poles and Gypsies (Sinti and Roma). Corpses were buried in mass graves. No significant physical evidence of the victims is now to be found within the camp area. Neither do the transport lists any longer exist. The people perished here in an anonymous mass. Officially, there were only two survivors of the camp, who provided post-war testimonies about Bełżec.

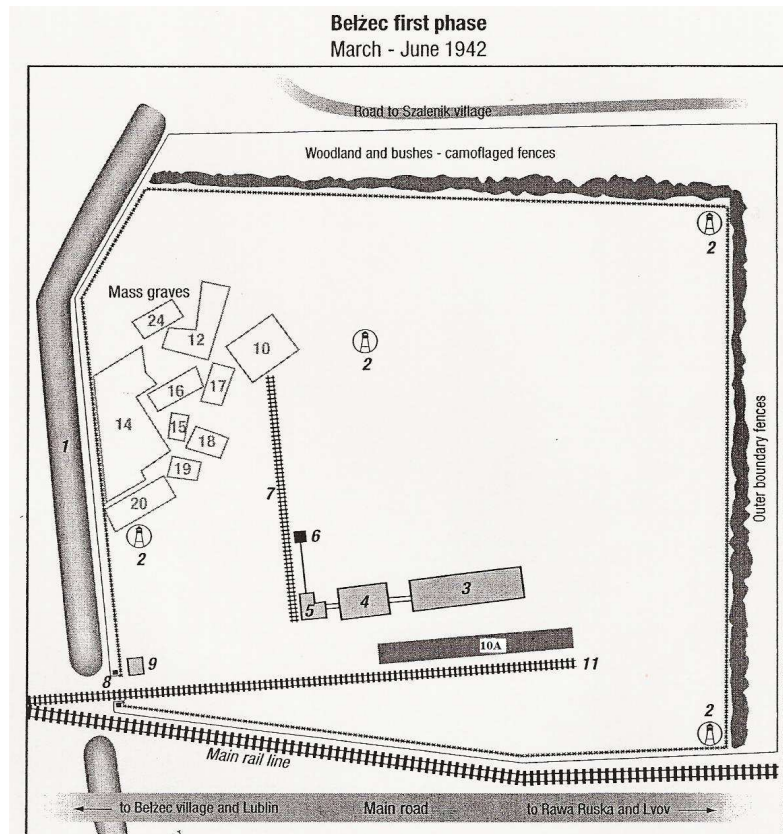
Between December 1942 and April 1943, transports no longer arrived at the camp. During this period, Jewish prisoners had to open the mass graves and burn the bodies of the gassed victims.

In June 1943, the camp was totally liquidated and all buildings were destroyed. The last prisoners were deported to the Sobibor death camp and murdered there.

### **March - May 1942 (first phase)**

In the first operational period of the Nazi death camp in Bełżec, about 75.000 people were murdered. The first transport arrived on 17 March 1942 in the morning from Lublin. In the afternoon from Lwow.

At that time. Primitive wooden gas chambers existed in which it was possible to kill between 700-1400 people in one operation. 2-3 transports arrived daily at the camp containing differing numbers of victims. After gassing, the bodies were transported by a narrow gauge railway to the mass graves located in the north-western part of the camp. In the first month, between 17 March and April 1942, transports arrived mainly from the ghettos in the Lublin district (Lublin, Piaski, Izbica, Zamosc and surroundings) and from the Galicia district (Lwow, Drohobycz, Rawa Ruska, Stanislawow and Kolomyja). After a short pause in April 1942, the camp recommenced operations in the middle of May. At that time, mainly Jews from **Zamosc** County (Komarow, Laszczow, Tyszowce, and Szczekheszyn) were deported.



**Fig. :**

November 1941-February 1942

As suggested by the author:

**Key:** Numbered shapes are mass graves as located. **1.** Anti-tank ditch. **2.** Watchtowers. **3.** Undressing barrack. **4.** Hairdressing barrack. **5.** Gassing barrack. **6.** Gassing engine. **7.** Single gauge-rail link to mass grave area. **8.** Main gate. **9.** Gate house. **10A.** Ramp. **11.** Rail siding.

### **June - December 1942 (second phase).**

At the end of May 1942, the death camp in Belzec was temporarily closed. With the help of guardsmen from the training camp in Trawniki and together with Jewish prisoners from the Sonderkommando, the SS-staff virtually rebuilt the entire camp increasing the capacity from three to six gas chambers.

With effect from the conclusion of this rebuilding programme, the camp was able to receive a greater number of transports. The new, concrete gas chambers that had been erected could kill more than 3.500 people at one time. The camp ramp, at which the transports arrived, was also reconstructed as part of this programme.

In the middle of June 1942, the next big wave of transports of Jewish victims arrived at the camp. Most of the Jews who were deported at that time to Belzec and were killed there were from the Krakow district (Krakow, Tarnow, Przemysl, Rzeszow, Nowy Sacz, Nowy Targ, Jaslo, Krosno, Sanok, Jaroslaw). From the Galicia district (Lwow, Tarnopol, Stanislawow, Kolomyja, Stryj, Drohobycz, Czortkow, Brzetany, Zloczow, Kamionka Strumilowa and Rawa Ruska).

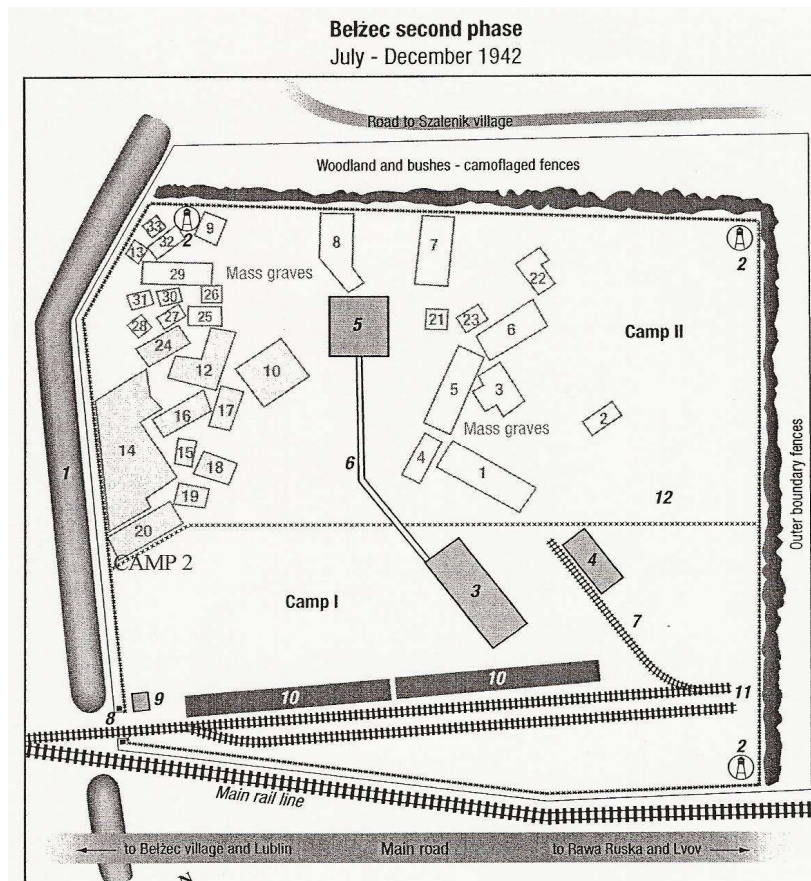
In the second half of 1942, the Jews from the southern part of the Lublin district were deported to Bełżec (Janow Lubelski, Krasnik, Bilgoraj, Szczebrzeszyn, and Tarnograd).

The last transport to Bełżec arrived in the middle of December 1942.

The author refers to notes taken during the archaeological investigation at the site of the former Bełżec death camp.

### Second phase at the time Reder had entered the camp.

Drawing by the author showing location of the 33 mass graves discovered during the archaeological search 1998 – 2000, where he was an observer.<sup>3</sup>



**Fig. : Bełżec camp - Second Phase**

Author's simplified reconstruction

**Key:** Numbered irregular shapes 1-33 are located mass graves. 1. Anti-tank ditch fortification 1940. 2. Watchtower. 3. Undressing and haircutting

<sup>3</sup> See *Bełżec: Stepping Stone to Genocide*, 2008, based on the author's PhD thesis and donated to JewishGen, Inc.



barracks. 4. Warehouse. 5. Gas Chamber. 6. The Tube. 7. Rail link. 8 Main gate. 9. Gate house. 10. Ramp. 11. Rail siding.

**Belzec: Mass graves Numbered 1-33 in order of discovery 1998 - 2000**

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

Rudolf Reder 1947

- Grave pit No. 1:** Located in north-western part of the camp. Dimensions of the grave were determined as 40 m x 12 m and over 4.80 m deep, filled with bodies in wax-fat transformation, and a mixture of burnt human bones and charcoal. Beneath this deep strata lay a several-centimetres-thick layer of foul-smelling water beneath which were found unburnt corpses compressed by the weight of soil to a layer 20 cm thick. The drill core brought to the surface putrid pieces of human remains, including pieces of skull with skin and tufts of hair attached, and unidentifiable lumps of greyish, fatty, human tissue. The bottom of the grave was lined with a layer of evil smelling black (burnt) human fat, resembling black soap. As no evidence of fabric was brought to the surface, it may be assumed that the corpses are naked. The conclusion was that the preservation of the corpses was due to the fact they lay virtually hermetically sealed between a layer of water above and a layer of solidified fat below, underneath which the natural, dry and compressed sand where no air could penetrate, resulted in their partial mummification.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 2:** Located in north-eastern part of the camp. Dimensions of the grave were determined as 14 m x 6 m x 2 m deep, containing a layer of unburnt corpses and a mixture of cremated substances.
  - ❖ **Grave pit No. 3:** Located in southern part of the camp. This was the first mass grave, the location of which was positively identified from a Luftwaffe aerial photograph taken in 1944. It appears as a T-shaped white patch and has the appearance of being the biggest grave in the camp. Dimensions of the grave were determined as 16 m x 15 m x 5 m deep. Contained a mixture of carbonised wood, fragments of burnt human bones, pieces of skulls with skin and tufts of hair still attached, lumps of greyish human fat, and fragments of unburned human bones. The bottom layer consisted of putrid, waxy human fat.
  - ❖ **Grave pit No. 4:** Located immediately to the south of the camp. Dimensions of the grave determined as 16 m x 6 m. At a depth of 2.30 m drilling was suspended due to contact with bodies in wax-fat transformation. Contained cremated remains. From below the water layer, the drill core brought to the surface pieces of unburned human bones, including pieces of skulls with skin and hair still adhering and lumps of foul smelling greasy fat, indicating the presence of unburned corpses.
  - ❖ **Grave pit No. 5:** Located in the south-western part of the camp and formed from the left-hand bar of the T-shaped arrangement of graves **3**, **5** and **6**. Dimensions of the grave determined as 32 m x 10 m x 4.50 m deep. Contained pieces of burnt human bones so densely packed together that the drill could not penetrate further.
  - ❖ **Grave pit No. 6:** Located in south-central part of the camp. Dimensions determined as 30 m x 10 m x 4 m deep. Containing carbonised wood and fragments of burnt human bones. At the east end of the grave, the ground is covered with grey sand containing a mixture of crushed pieces of burnt and unburned pieces of human bones.
  - ❖ **Grave pit No. 7:** initially located in October 1997 is located in the vicinity of symbolic tomb No. **4** at the eastern-central part of the camp. Dimension of the grave (in a shape closely resembling a trapezoid) was determined as 13 m x 14 m., at a depth of 4.50 m.



The symbolic tomb lay just to the right (south) of the grave. It contained carbonised pieces of wood and fragments of burnt human bones mixed with dark grey ash.

- ❖ **Grave pit No. 8:** located at the south-western part of the camp. Dimensions were determined as 28 m x 10 m x 4 m. and contained burnt pieces of human bones and fragments of carbonised wood.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 9:** located immediately behind symbolic tomb No. **1**, next to the north-east fence. Dimensions determined as 10 m x 8 m x 3.80 m. and contained burnt human remains and pieces of carbonised wood mixed with grey sand.

(Surface soil/sand in the vicinity of graves **7**, **8** and **9** was grey in colour suggesting large quantities of crushed pieces of human bone).

- ❖ **Grave pit No. 10:** one of the biggest graves; located in the northern-central part of the camp. Dimension determined as 24 m x 18 m x 5 m, contained a thick layer of human fat, unburned human remains and pieces of large unburned human bones. The drill core brought to the surface several lumps of foul smelling fatty tissue still in a state of decomposition, mixed with greasy lime.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 11:** located at north-eastern corner of the camp. Dimension determined as 9 m x 5 m x 1.90 m. and contained a few fragments of burnt human bones mixed with innumerable small pieces of carbonised wood.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 12:** located immediately to the north of grave No. **10**. A 'L-shaped' grave with the foot measuring 20 m, lying to the west. The stem was 28 m in length, pointing north. A small number of pieces of unburned human bones were found at a depth of 3 m, mixed with grey sand and innumerable small fragments of carbonised wood. This layer extended to a depth of 4.40 m.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 13:** located next to the western fence. Dimensions of the grave (trapezoid in shape), was determined as 12.50 m x 11.00 m x 4.80 m. deep, contained a mixture of burnt human remains and pieces of carbonised wood mixed with grey sand.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 14:** the largest grave basin in the camp that extended beyond the north fence into the area of the adjacent timber yard. The section within the fence is an irregular zigzag on the south side, measuring 37 m x 10 m at its widest point east to west, and 8 m at its narrowest, and 5 m deep. It contained burnt pieces of human bones and fragments of carbonised wood mixed with grey, sandy soil to a depth of 5 m. originally; grave No. **14** could have measured about 70 m. x 30 m.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 15:** another small grave measuring 13.50 m x 6.50 m, with a depth of 4.50 m, was situated adjacent to the south side of grave No. **14**, and containing a mixture of pieces of burnt human bones fragments of carbonised wood and grey sand.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 16:** located adjacent to grave No. **14** and immediately east of grave No. **15**. Measuring 18.50 m x 9.50 m, it contained a mixture of burnt fragments of human bones and carbonised wood to a depth of 4.00 m.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 17:** situated next to and south of graves **12** and **16**, measures 17 m x 7 m contained a mixture of pieces of burnt human bones, carbonised wood and grey sand.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 18:** situated next to the southern edge of grave No. **15** and measuring 16 m x 9 m x 4 m, contained the same mixture of burnt pieces of human bones, carbonised wood and grey sand.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 19:** located within the area formed by graves **14**, **15**, **18** and **20**, and close to the south-western corner of grave **14**, measuring 12 m x 12 m and containing a mixture of grey sand, burnt pieces of human bones and carbonised wood to a depth of 4 m.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 20:** in the form of a long trench at the western end of grave No. **14**, and is the last one at the northern end of the group of 18 graves along the north fence. In the same manner as its neighbour, grave No. **14**, it also extends beyond the north

fence into the area of the adjacent timber yard. The section within the fence measures 26 m. x 11 m x 5 m. At a depth of 4 m. a dental bridge with four false teeth was found.

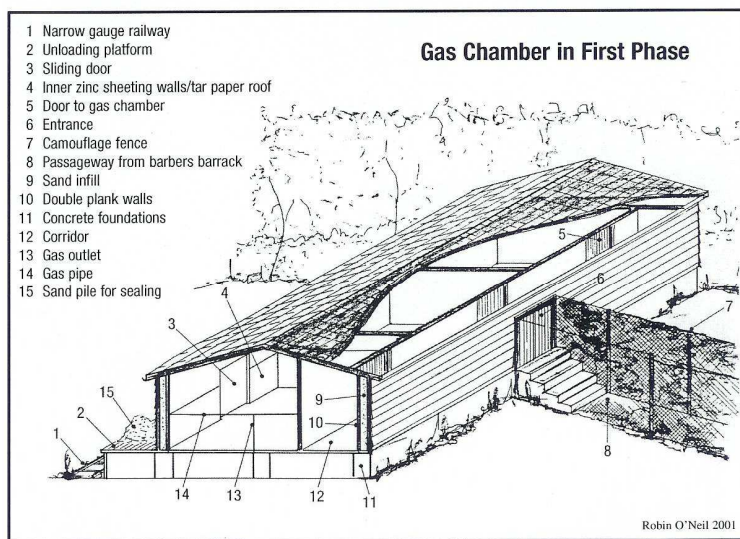
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 21:** located centrally. Dimensions determined as 5 m<sup>2</sup> and situated in the forested southern part of the memorial area, midway between graves **5** and **7**. It is also unexpectedly shallow, being only 1.70 m deep and containing pieces of burnt human bones and fragments of carbonised wood mixed with grey sand.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 22:** located in the eastern part of the camp in the shape of an inverted 'L', close to grave No. **6**. Measuring 27 m on the long (east) side and 10 m on the south side, containing pieces of burnt human bones and fragments of carbonised wood mixed with grey sand to a depth of 3.50 m.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 23:** one of the smaller graves, measuring 16 m x 8.50 m x 4.20 m and located between graves **6** and **21**, contained burnt human remains.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 24:** a narrow trench measuring 20 m x 5.50 m x 5 m., located at the north fence and next to the eastern corner of grave No. **14**, contained burnt human remains.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 25:** located immediately to the east of graves **12** and **14**. Dimension determined as 12 m x 5 m. Contained a mixture of burnt human remains, including corpses and skeletons, to a depth of 4 m. Below this level, there was a 1 m deep layer of waxy fat and greasy lime. A foul odour was released when the drill penetrated the layer of corpses and the drill core withdrew lumps of decaying fatty tissue and large pieces of bone.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 26:** another small grave, measuring 13 m x 7 m x 4.20 m; located next to the eastern edge of grave No. **25**, contained a mixture of burnt human remains.  

(Note: The soil above and around graves **25** and **26** has a layer of innumerable small fragments of burnt human bones and small pieces of carbonised wood)
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 27:** measuring 18.50 m x 6 m x 6 m, and situated close to the north end of grave No. **25**. Contained burnt and unburned human remains: the top layer consists of burnt human bones and carbonised wood beneath which there is a layer of grey, waxy lime. The bottom of the grave contains completely decomposed human remains mixed with putrid smelling greasy human fat.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 28:** one of the smallest graves measuring 6 m x 6 m x 5 m, located between grave **27** and the north fence. Containing burnt human remains beneath which there is a layer of grey greasy lime. The bottom of the grave is lined with putrid smelling, greasy human fat.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 29:** measuring 25 m x 9 m x 4.50 in the form of a long trench and located just to the north- east of grave **26**; its eastern corner is immediately in front of symbolic tomb No. **1**. Contained pieces of burnt human bones mixed with fragments of carbonised wood and grey sand.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 30:** located in the north angle between graves **26** and **29** and measured 5 m x 6 m. Contained pieces of burnt human bones and fragments of carbonised wood mixed with grey sand to a depth of 2 70 m.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 31:** similar in size to grave No. **30**, measuring 9 m x 4 m x 2.60 m. Situated next to the north fence between graves **28** and **29**, this grave also contained a mixture of burnt pieces of human bones, fragments of carbonised wood and grey sand.
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 32:** situated close to the north corner of the memorial site between graves **9** and **13**, and measures 15 m x 5 m. Contained a mixture of burnt human bones and carbonised wood mixed with grey sand, beneath which there is a layer of grey, greasy lime and a foul smelling layer of human fat containing decomposing human remains. The drill core brought to the surface pieces of skull with skin and tufts of hair still attached. At the bottom of the grave, at a depth of 4.10 m. lay a large number of unburned human bones. The path to the small gate near the north corner of the memorial area passes over the southern end of the grave.

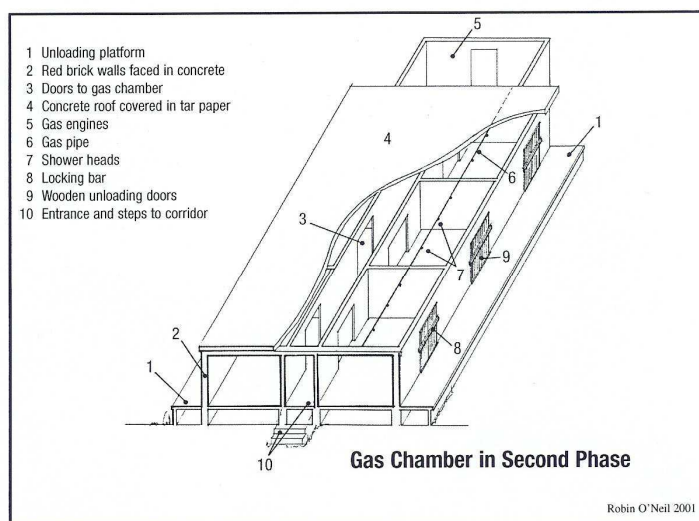
- ❖ **Grave pit No. 33:** a small, shallow grave measuring only 9 m x 5 m x 3 m, located in the extreme north-eastern corner of the memorial site. Contained tiny fragments of burnt human bones mixed with small pieces of carbonised wood and grey sand.

The total surface of the mass graves is estimated at 21,000 cubic metres. At least a dozen graves still today contain unburnt, partially mummified or decomposing corpses. Exactly why the SS did not empty all the graves and destroy their contents is not known; they were in no hurry to leave the area as the entire SS-garrison was redistributed to other camps in the Lublin District for at least five months after the liquidation of Bełżec.

**The first and second phase gas chambers drawn by the author based on Reder's account.**



**Fig. : March 1942: Gas Chambers - First Phase**



**Fig. : August 1942: Gas Chambers Second Phase**

**Eye Witness Rudold Reader: BELŻEC:<sup>4</sup>**

**i.** In August 1942 there still wasn't a walled ghetto in Lwow. Instead there were several streets where we were forced to live: nowhere else. These together became known as the Jewish quarter. It consisted of the following streets: Panienska,

<sup>4</sup> This new and up-dated addition was possible with thanks to the Littman Library for permission to include Rudolf's Reder 1947 publication: *Bełżec*. Reder's *Bełżec* was originally published in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, Volume 13: The Holocaust and its Aftermath*, edited by Antony Polonsky.

Waska, Ogrodnicka, Sloneczna, and a few others, which had once been a part of the third quarter of Lwow. There we lived in constant anxiety and torment.

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

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

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

Meanwhile, for a few consecutive days, German patrols combed one house after another, looking into every nook and cranny. Some of those caught by the Gestapo had their permits honoured, others did not. All those without permits, or whose permits the Germans did not honour, were driven out of their houses without food or clothing. Next the Germans herded people into large groups. Those who resisted were shot on the spot. I myself was in my workshop working. I did not have a permit. I locked the front door and did not open up, even though I heard them banging outside. Eventually the Gestapo forced their way in. They found me hiding in a corner, beat me on the head with a stick, and took me away.<sup>3</sup> They squeezed us like sardines into trams and transported us to the Janowska camp. We could neither move nor breathe.

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

And so we passed the night. The crowd was deathly silent. Not even women or children dared to cry. At six o'clock in the morning we were told to get up off the wet grass, on which we had been sitting all night, and to arrange ourselves in a column, four in a row. The long line of condemned was then made to march in the direction of Kleparowski railway station. Our column was guarded on both sides by

the Gestapo and Ukrainian police. There was not the slightest chance of escape. Our column was driven to the railway station and onto a ramp, where a long train of cattle-trucks was waiting. The Germans began to load the train. They opened the doors to each truck. On both sides of the doors stood the Gestapo men, two on each side, whips in hand, slashing each of us on our faces and heads. All the Gestapo men were alike. They all beat us so badly that each of us had marks on our faces or bumps on our heads. Women sobbed; children in arms cried. Thus driven along and beaten mercilessly, we climbed on top of one another. The doors to the trucks were high above the ground. In the general scramble we trampled those who were below. We were all in a hurry, wanting to have all this behind us. On the roof of each truck sat a Gestapo man with a machine-gun.

Others beat us while counting 100 people to each car. It all went so fast that loading a few thousand people took no more than an hour. Our transport contained many men, including some who had the so-called 'secure' work permits, young girls, and women. Finally they sealed all the trucks. Squeezed into one trembling mass we stood so close to each other that we were almost on top of one another. Stifling heat was driving us mad. We had not a drop of water or a crumb of bread. The train started to move at eight o'clock. I knew that the train-driver and fire-stoker were Germans. The train went fast, although it seemed to us that it moved at a snail's pace. It stopped three times, at Kulikowo, Zolkiew, and Rawa Ruska. I suppose it was giving way to other railway traffic. During those stops Gestapo thugs got down from the roofs in order to stop anyone coming near the trucks. They were there to prevent anyone from the outside from showing us a little mercy and giving water through the small window secured by barbed wire to those who were dying of thirst inside.

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

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

The sidings led through empty fields: not one habitable building in sight. The German who brought the train climbed down from the engine in order to 'help'. With shouts and kicks he drove people out of the trucks. Then he went to inspect each truck personally, in case someone was trying to hide. He took care of

everything. When the whole train was empty and checked, he signalled with a flag and moved the train away from the camp.

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

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

The crowd rejoiced; the people were relieved that they would be going to work. They applauded. I remember his words, repeated day after day—three times a day on average, during the time I was there. It was a moment of hope, of illusion. The crowd was peaceful. And in silence they all went forward: men straight across the courtyard to a building bearing the inscription 'Bade und Inhalationsräume' in large letters, the women, some 20 metres further on to a large barracks, 15 by 30 metres. They were led there not knowing why. For a few minutes more there was peace and quiet. I saw that when they were handed wooden stools and ordered first to stand in a line and then to sit down, and when eight Jewish barbers, silent as death, came in to shave their hair to the bare skin, it was at this moment that they were struck by the terrible truth. It was then that neither the women nor the men—already on their way to the gas—could have had any illusions about their fate. With the exception of a few men chosen for their trade, which could be handy in the camp, all the rest—young and old, women and children—went to certain death. Little girls with long hair had it shaved; others with short hair went to the gas chambers directly, together with the men. And all of a sudden, without any transition from hope, they were overcome by despair. There were cries and shrieking. Some women went mad. Others, however, went to their death calmly, young girls in particular. Our transport consisted largely of the intelligentsia. There



were also many young men, but, as in every other transport I saw, women were in the majority.

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

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

## **ii**

After a while I came to know the whole area well. The camp was surrounded by dense forest of young pine. Although the forestation was thick, extra branches were cut and interwoven with the existing ones over the gas chambers to allow a minimum of light to penetrate. Behind the gas chambers was a sandy lane along which we dragged the corpses. Overhead the Germans had put wire netting interwoven with more branches. This part of the camp was covered by a sort of roof of greenery and was darker than elsewhere. I suppose the Germans wanted to conceal the area from aerial observation. The main gate led to a sizeable courtyard. There was a substantial shed where the women had their hair shaved. Next to the shed was another small courtyard, surrounded on all sides by a fence 3 metres high. It was made of close-fitting wooden boards, greyish in colour.

The courtyard led directly to the gas chambers. Thus no one on the outside would have been able to see what was happening within. The building containing the gas chambers was not high, but long and wide. It was made of grey cement blocks, and was covered by a flat roof made of asbestos sheets. Immediately above it stretched wire netting covered with branches. The door to the building was approached by three steps a metre wide and without railings. In front stood a large flower-pot filled with plants. There was an inscription in large letters on the front: 'Bade und Inhalationsräume'. The steps led to a completely empty and unlit corridor: just four cement walls. It was very long, though only about a metre and a half wide. On both sides of it were doors to the gas chambers. These were sliding doors made of wood, with wooden handles. The gas chambers had no windows. They were dark and empty. In each gas chamber there was a round hole the size of an electric socket. All the walls and floors were made of cement. Both the corridor and the gas chambers were no more than 2 metres high. On a wall opposite the entrance to each gas chamber were more sliding doors 2 metres wide. Through these the corpses of the gassed were thrown outside. On one side of the building was an adjoining shed no bigger than 2 metres square. This housed the engine, which was

petrol-driven. The gas chambers were about a metre and a half above ground level. The doors leading to the ramp, onto which the bodies of the victims were thrown, were on a level with the gas chambers.

There were also barracks for the camp's death commando. The first served the workers doing miscellaneous jobs; the other was for the so-called 'professionals'. They were identical. Each had space for 250 people. There were bunks on two levels, consisting of bare wooden boards with one small angled board as a headrest. Not far from the barracks was a kitchen, the camp's store, an office, a laundry, a tailor's shop, and, finally, comfortable barracks for the askers.

### **iii**

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

Each transport received the same treatment. People were ordered to undress and to leave their belongings in the courtyard. Each time there was the same deceptive speech. And each time people rejoiced. I saw the spark of hope in their eyes—hope that they may be going to work. But a minute later, and with extreme brutality, babies were torn from their mothers, old and sick were thrown on stretchers, while men and little girls were driven with rifle-butts further on to a fenced path leading directly to the gas chambers. At the same time, and with the same brutality, the already naked women were ordered to the barracks, where they had their hair shaved. I knew exactly the moment when they all suddenly realized what was in store. Cries of fear and anguish, terrible moans, mingled with the music played by the orchestra. Hustled along and wounded by bayonets, first the men were made to run to the gas chambers. The askers counted 750 people to each chamber. Before all six chambers were filled to capacity, those in the first had already been suffering for nearly two hours. It was only when all six chambers were packed with people, when the doors were locked into position, that the engine was set in motion.

The engine was large, about a metre by a metre and a half. It consisted of a motor and wheels. The engine whirred at intervals and worked so fast that one could not see the spokes turning. It worked for twenty minutes. Afterwards it was turned off. The doors leading from the gas chambers onto the ramp were then opened. Bodies were thrown out onto the ground in one enormous pile a few metres high. The askers who opened the doors took no precautionary measures. We did not smell any particular odour; I saw no balloons filled with gas, or any powder thrown in. What I saw were petrol canisters. The machine was manned by two askers. But once, when the engine went wrong, I was called in to put it right. In the camp they

called me an Ofenkünstler (stove-setter). That's why they selected me. I looked it over and saw glass tubes connected to metal pipes, which led to each gas chamber. We thought that the engine worked either by producing high pressure, or by sucking air away, or that the petrol produced exhaust fumes, which suffocated the people. The calls for help, shrieks, and terrible moans of people locked in and slowly asphyxiated lasted between ten and fifteen minutes. Horribly loud at first, they grew weaker and weaker, until there was complete silence. I heard desperate cries in many different languages. Apart from Polish Jews there were also transports of Jews from other countries. The majority of foreign transports came from France. There were also Jews from Holland, Greece, and even Norway. I do not recall seeing German Jews. On the other hand, I do remember Jews from Czechoslovakia. They were brought in cattle-trucks like the Polish Jews, although they were permitted to take their personal luggage and food. Transports from Poland were full of women and children. In contrast, transports from abroad consisted mostly of men. Children were few. Evidently their parents were able to leave them in the care of goyim in their respective countries, so they were able to save them from a terrible fate. The foreign Jews had no idea of their future. They were sure that they were being brought to Belzec to work: they were well dressed and carefully prepared for the journey. Once there, they were treated by the German thugs in the same way as the Jews from other transports. And they were murdered by the same method, perishing in an equally horrible manner. About 100,000 foreign Jews might have been brought to the camp while I was there. They were all gassed.

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

#### **iv**

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

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

Schreiber hoping. But I am sure that he perished, just like all others. It was he who told me that every few days a railway truck full of hair went to Budapest.

Apart from hair, the Germans also sent away baskets filled with gold teeth. In those few hundred metres separating the gas chambers from the pits stood some dentists with pliers. They stopped everyone as they dragged the corpses away. They opened the mouths of the dead and yanked out the gold teeth, which they then threw into baskets ready for the purpose. There were eight dentists, usually young men specially selected to do the work.<sup>15</sup> I knew one of them well. He was called Zucker and came from Rzeszow. The dentists occupied a small separate barracks, which they shared with a doctor and a chemist. At dusk they went back to the barracks with baskets full of teeth, gold crowns, and bridges. There they separated the gold, which they melted into ingots. They were supervised by a Gestapo man called Schmidt, who beat them when he thought they were not working fast enough. The gold was turned into ingots 1 centimetre thick, 50 millimetres wide and 20 centimetres long.

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

Clothing torn from the Jewish victims was carried by workers to the store, where another ten workers took each garment apart in search of gold and money. These workers were supervised by SS men, who beat them frequently. The SS men divided the money found in clothing between themselves. These SS supervisors were specially chosen for the job; they never changed. The Jews who worked there never took anything for themselves. Nor did they want to. For what could we do with money or jewellery? We could not buy anything. We had no hope of staying alive. No one believed in miracles. But although each worker was searched very thoroughly, it often happened that we trod on dollar bills which nobody had noticed. But we did not even try to pick them up. They served no useful purpose. One day a shoemaker took a five-dollar note. He did it deliberately and openly. He was shot together with his son. He went to his death quite obviously glad of the fact that soon he would leave all this behind him. Death was a certainty, anyway. There was no reason to prolong this agony. In Bełżec dollars helped us to die an easier death . . .

▼

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

area like a sea. In order to get to the next empty grave we had to cross from one side of an already full pit to another. Ankle deep we waded through the blood of our brothers. We walked over mounds of bodies. And this was most dreadful, most horrible.

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

No fewer than thirty or forty workers were shot each day. Usually it was a camp doctor who prepared a list of those too weak to work, but sometimes it was a kapo with the function of Oberzugsführer who submitted names of so-called criminals. At least thirty to forty men from the death commando were shot daily. They were taken to the pits during the lunch break and shot. The death commando was supplemented daily by other men from the incoming transports. One of the jobs of the camp's administration was to keep records of all the workers of the death commando, both past and present, in order to make sure that the figure of 500 was always kept up. But there were no records concerning the number of transports or victims. We knew, for example, that Jews built this camp and set the death machine in motion. Not one of those who worked on the original installations survived until my arrival there. It was a miracle if anyone survived for longer than five or six months at the most.

The gassing machine was serviced by two askers—always the same two murderers. When I came to Bełżec they were on the job, and they were still at it when I left. The Jewish workers had no contact with either of those two or with any other askers for that matter. When the people in the transports begged for a drop of water, the askers shot those Jewish workers who tried to bring some.

Besides digging graves the commando was also employed in emptying the gas chambers, piling the bodies on a ramp, and dragging them all the way to the pits. The ground was sandy. Two workers dragged one body. We had leather straps with metal braces, which we put round the hands of a corpse. Then we pulled, while the head of the dead man often dug deep into the sand . . . As regards small children, we were ordered to carry them in pairs on our backs. If we dragged the dead, we did not dig graves. When we dug graves we knew that thousands of our brothers were being murdered at the same time. And on those jobs we spent our days, from morning until night. Dusk signalled the end of a day. This 'work' was done only in full daylight.

At half past three in the morning an asker-posten (guard on duty) who kept watch of our barracks during the night would bang at the door shouting 'Auf! Heraus!' ('Up! Out!'). We were barely up when this thug Schmidt would burst in, chasing us outside with his riding-crop. We would run out, often barefoot, holding our shoes in our hands. We seldom undressed for the night. Often we also lay down in our shoes, since we rarely had enough time in the morning to put them on. It was still dark when we were woken up. Schmidt would run through the barracks like a madman, slashing his riding-crop left and right. We got up as exhausted and desperate as we had been the night before. We were given one thin blanket, either to lie down on or to use as a cover. They always chose for us old and worn rags to

dress in. If anyone so much as sighed, he was hit about the face. We were allowed a light on for half an hour in the evening; then it was switched off. An Oberzugsführer went round the barracks, whip in hand. He did not allow us to talk. We communicated in whispers with our neighbours.

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

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

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

## **vi**

The SS men lived without women both in Belzec and in the camp. Even their drinking parties took place in male company only. All the work in the camp was done by men alone. But this changed in 21 October. In that month a transport came from Zamosc carrying Jewish women from Czechoslovakia. Among them were several dozen women whose husbands worked in the death commando. We decided to save some. Forty were assigned jobs in the kitchen, laundry, and tailor's shop. They were forbidden to communicate with their husbands. In the kitchen they peeled potatoes, washed up pots and pans, and carried water from a well. I do not know what happened to them. Presumably they went the same way as the others. These were educated women, belonging to the intelligentsia. They brought their personal possessions to Belzec. Some even carried butter. They gave us all they had. They also helped those who worked either in the kitchen itself or in the vicinity. They lived in a small separate barracks supervised by a female Zugsführer. I often saw them talking (my job of stove-repairer gave me an opportunity to move around freely). They did not seem to have been as maltreated as we were. They finished their work at dusk and stood in pairs waiting for their portion of soup and coffee. Like us, they had kept their original clothing: no striped uniforms in Belz.ec. I suppose it did not pay the Germans to introduce uniforms for a crew which was to stay alive for a very short period.

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

## **vii**

The camp heaved with mass murder. The days were full of mortal fear and death. But there were also cases of individual butchery. I saw some of those. There was no roll-call in Bełżec. Nor was it needed. Spectacles of horror were played out to a gallery without any special announcement. I must tell you about a transport from Zamosc. It arrived some time about 22 November. It was already cold. Snow and mud covered the ground. The transport from Zamosc came in a snowstorm. It was one of many. It carried the entire Judenrat. When, in accordance with the usual procedure, the victims were all naked, the men driven to the gas chambers and the women into the barracks to have their hair shaved, the president of the Judenrat was ordered to stay back in the courtyard. Then, while they were driving everybody to their deaths, the SS men paraded round the man. No, I do not know his name. I saw a middle-aged man, deathly white and very still. The SS men ordered an orchestra to come to the courtyard and await further orders. The orchestra, composed of six musicians, was in its usual place on the path between the gas chambers and the pits. The musicians played on instruments which had belonged to the victims. I was working in the vicinity, doing some brickwork, and so I saw it all. The SS men ordered the orchestra to play 'Es geht alles vorüber, es geht alles vorbei' and 'Drei Lilien, kommt ein Reiter, gefahren, bringt die Lilien' ('Everything passes, everything goes by' and 'Three lilies, comes a rider bringing lilies'). And the orchestra played those tunes on violins, flutes, and an accordion. This went on for quite a while. Afterwards they ordered the man to stand against a wall and lashed him about the head and face with riding-crops tipped with lead until the blood ran. Irrmann participated in this savagery, and also that fat pig Schwarz, and Schmidt and some askers. While he was being beaten, the victim was ordered to dance and jump to the rhythm of the music. After a few hours he was given a chunk of bread and beaten again in order to force him to eat it. Covered in blood he stood there, indifferent and solemn, without as much as a moan. For seven hours he was tortured. The SS men stood there laughing. 'Das ist eine höhere Person, Präsident des Judenrates' ('What a distinguished person, the president of the Judenrat'), they called in harsh voices. It was not until six o'clock in the evening that Schmidt drove the man to a pit, shot him in the head, and kicked the body onto a pile of other corpses.

There were other singular events. Soon after my arrival at Bełżec the Germans picked out from a transport (we did not always know the name of the locality a transport came from) several young men, including a young boy. He was the picture of youth, health, and strength. He also amazed us by his good humour. He looked round and asked almost playfully, 'Did anyone ever sneak out of here?' And that was that. He was overheard by some Germans. As a result this young boy, practically a child, was tortured to death. They stripped him naked and hung him upside-down on the gallows. He was there for three hours—and he was still alive. So they took him down, threw him onto the ground, and pushed sand down his throat with sticks. He died.

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



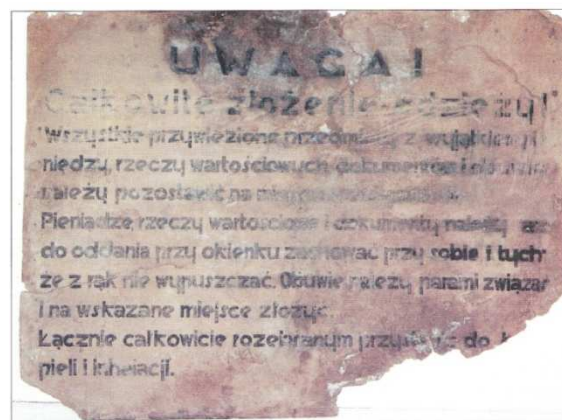
them trying desperately to jump the death queue, tragic and helpless relics of youth and life.

### viii

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

We knew that the nicest house next to the railway station in Bełżec was occupied by the Commandant of the camp. He held the rank of Obersturmführer.<sup>24</sup> No matter how hard I try, I cannot remember his name. It was short. He did not come often to the camp, except on special occasions. He was tall and thick-set, over 40 years old, and with a boorish air—a real bully and a complete pig. One day the death-machine went out of order. When he was informed, he came on horseback and ordered an immediate repair. He did not allow the gas chambers to be opened to let the people out: let them asphyxiate slowly and die in agony for a few hours longer. He crouched beside the engine, yelling and shaking with fury. Although he seldom came to the camp, for the other SS men he was a terror. He lived alone, attended by an asker who did all sorts of work and brought daily records from the camp.

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



**Fig. : Original Information Board from Bełżec  
'Attention!'**

Complete removal of clothing!

All personal belongings, except money, jewellery, documents and certificates must be left on the ground. Money, jewellery and documents must be kept until being deposited at the window. Shoes must be collected and tied in pairs and put in the place indicated...<sup>5</sup>

Besides them, the Bełżec slaughterhouse was run and controlled by four other thugs. It is difficult to imagine anyone more depraved than those four criminals. The first was Franz Irrmann. About 30 years old, with the rank of Stabscharführer, he was responsible for the camp's supplies.<sup>26</sup> His little sideline was shooting old people and small children. He performed his murderous tasks coolly. Not talkative, he liked to give the impression of inscrutability. Every day he reassured people about to be murdered that they were going to work, having bathed first. A conscientious murderer.

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

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

Even more beastly was a young officer called Heni Schmidt. Probably a Latvian, Schmidt spoke German with a strange accent. He pronounced 's' as 't' (not 'was' but 'wat'). With he spoke Russian. He was in the camp every day. Agile, thin, and quick—looking like a real cut-throat and constantly drunk—Schmidt rushed around the camp from four o'clock in the morning until night. He beat whomever he could find with evident pleasure. 'This one is the worst,' we whispered among ourselves, adding immediately: 'They are all equally bestial.' Schmidt always turned up where harassment was at its worst. He never missed an opportunity to see victims being driven to the gas chambers. He stood there listening to the terrible piercing cries of women being gassed. He was the real soul of the camp,

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<sup>5</sup> Can be seen at the Tomaszow-Lubelski Regional Museum.

bloodthirsty, monstrous, and degenerate. It gave him real pleasure to observe the expressionless features of the death commando returning exhausted to the barracks at night. On the way back each one of us received a blow on the head from his riding-crop. If anyone tried to evade it Schmidt would run after him.

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

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

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

ix

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

I had been in this nightmare for nearly four months<sup>31</sup> when, towards the end of November, Irrmann told me that the camp would need metal sheets, and a lot of them. I was swollen and blue all over. Pus ran from open wounds. Schmidt bludgeoned me about the face with a truncheon. With an ironic smile Irrmann told me that I would go to Lwow under escort to fetch the sheets, adding ‘Sollst nicht durchgehen’ (‘Don’t try to escape’). Off I went in a lorry with one guard and four Gestapo. After loading the whole day, I stayed in the lorry guarded by one of the thugs, while the others went away looking for fun. I sat there for a few hours without moving or thinking. Then, quite by chance, I noticed that my guard was asleep and snoring. Instinctively and without a thought, I slipped down from the lorry and stood on the pavement pretending to adjust the load. Then I slowly backed away. Legionowa Street was full of people. There was a blackout. I pushed my cap down lower and no one noticed me. I remembered the address of my Polish housekeeper and went straight to her flat. She hid me. It took twenty months for

the physical injuries to heal. But what of the mental wounds? I was haunted by images of past horror, hearing the moans of the murdered and the children crying, and the throb of a running engine. Nor could I wipe from my memory the faces of those German thugs. And in such a state of continuous nightmare I survived until the liberation.

When the Red Army expelled the Germans from Lwow and I was finally able to come out of hiding without fear, to breathe fresh air and to begin to feel and think again, I was seized by a desire to go back to this place where two and a half million of our people met their terrible death.<sup>32</sup> I went there soon and spoke at length with the locals. They told me that in 1943 a much smaller number of transports came to the camp. The murder centre for the Jews moved further west, to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. In 1944 the Germans opened up the pits and burned the bodies with petrol.<sup>34</sup> Dark, heavy smoke rising from the enormous open-air pyres hung over an area of several dozen square miles. The wind carried the stench still further, for many long days, nights, and weeks.

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

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

**Appendix 3:** Every Jew carried one... just in case: 'It was a passport to life'.



**Fig :** 500 Zloty and 50 Reichsmark

The 500 Zloty currency note dated 1940 (to-days value £100) came into the author's possession as a gift in 1990. Given to the author by a former Polish police officer who had served in Krakow and Rabka, June 1942. Wishing to remain anonymous, the former officer stated that he had taken the money as a bribe to release a Jewish male in his custody on Zaryte Street, Rabka during the deportation round-up for the Bełżec death camp.

The author has donated the currency notes as a gift to Pastor Werner Oder (the son of former SS Scharführer Wilhelm Oder) and to his church: the **Tuckton Christian Centre**.

