

BELZEC

Testimony of Rudolf Reder

Sole survivor of BELZEC extermination camp, WW2

Translator's Notes

The original documents were published in Polish. I translated it to Hebrew. George Salingar translated it from Hebrew to English.

*'The Central Committee responsible for historical records of Jewish people in the Cracow area of Poland' published this document in 1946. They published Reder's testimony (which had originally been given to Red Army investigators a month after liberation in August 1944). **In addition** they published testimonies given by Polish men and women who lived near the extermination camp. Members of the 'Central Committee': Michal M. Borwitz, Nella Rost and Jozef Wulf.*

*The Red Army liberated Belzec and the nearby extermination camp in July 1944. The camp was built by the Germans for the murder of thousands upon thousands of Jewish men, women and children. The translation is a **verbatim** report of testimony given to the Red Army investigators.*

Reder was the only man who survived - it must be stressed - the sole survivor among the countless thousands who were murdered.

Reder lived through the horrors of Belzec for three months. The testimony is his account of the murder of thousands upon thousands of Jewish people.

I know that there are vast numbers of books and articles written about the holocaust, but I felt that Reder's testimony is unique and must also be translated into English.

Dawid Glück

Kiryat Tivon, Israel, 2014

BELZEC

VERBATIM TESTIMONY of RUDOLF REDER

August 1944

In September 1942 the boundaries of the ghetto in German occupied Lvov had not yet been demarcated. However, the following streets in the city were occupied by Jewish families: Voska St., Panienska St., Ogrodicka St., Sloeneczna St. and others. Here we lived under constant fear and stress. Rumours spread of imminent catastrophe a fortnight before the 'expulsion'.

One of the prisoners building the **Belzec** extermination camp had managed to escape. He was employed in the construction of the specially designed chambers in which the victims were gassed to death. The cruelly deceptive name given to these chambers was 'shower rooms'. This man reported that every person 'expelled' to Belzec will be murdered there. He also reported that one of the Ukrainian guards had told a woman about the gas chambers. This woman decided that it was her duty to inform Jewish people about the murderous Belzec camp. It was from these people that we first heard about Belzec. We soon learned that the horrifying reports were true. All of us lived in fear. For many days before September 10th our people constantly asked each other 'what can we do?', 'what can we do?'

At dawn on September 10th 1942 all exits from the Lvov ghetto were closed. Several groups of SS and Ukrainian police with five or six men in each group patrolled the area.

Two weeks before September 10th, General Katzman (German governor of the Lvov district) had arranged to have work permits issued to a few skilled Jewish workers employed in essential trades. Everyone, except for those few, sought a way to escape or to hide. No way was found.

The SS and Ukrainian police patrols went from house to house, searched each room thoroughly then evicted the people into the street. They were not allowed to take anything with them, no clothes, no food, nothing. Some men who had an official work permit were also evicted from their home. All were then forcibly assembled into one huge group. Anyone who tried to resist was shot in the head.

I was in my workshop, I did not have a work permit. I locked the door, the police came and knocked, I did not answer. They battered down my door, then punched and kicked me on all parts of my body. They dragged me onto a crowded tram. I could not move and could hardly breathe. They pulled me off the tram at Janovska police station, where all our people had been assembled.

We were a group of about 6,000 people and in the evening we were forced to sit in a huge circle on the wet grass in a meadow. It was forbidden to stand up or to move our arms and legs. A powerful projector, mounted on a watch-tower, lit up the whole area. We were surrounded by soldiers armed with automatic weapons. We sat jammed together - men, women and children, old people and babies. Sometimes there were rifle shots, a man or woman who could suffer no more stood up and was then shot immediately. We sat all night in complete silence.

At six o'clock we were ordered to stand up and form four rows. Surrounded by SS and Ukrainian police, we were forced to walk to the Kalparov railway station. At the station, beside the passenger platform, stood 50 freight wagons. The wagon doors were opened. At both sides of each wagon door stood a Gestapo guard with a whip. Everyone was whipped on the head and face. We were forced to climb from the platform into the wagons. We all cried from the stinging pain but the Gestapo got what they wanted - everyone got into the wagon as fast as possible to escape the whip. A hundred people were crammed into each wagon. On the roof of each wagon stood an armed SS guard. The whole terrible procedure went very fast. Within one hour all 50 wagons were loaded with our people. All the doors were shut from the outside.

In our wagon were adult men, children, young women and some older women. We stood crammed together in the hot and badly ventilated wagon. All of us were exhausted, some fainted. We were given neither water nor food. At 8 o'clock the train began moving. The train travelled fast, though to us it seemed slow.

The train stopped three times at Kolikov, Zolochiv and Rava Ruska. It must have been to make way for other trains. At each halt there were some people who tried to bring us water, but the SS did not allow any merciful person to approach the wagons. Our train continued its journey. In our wagon nobody spoke. We knew we were going to be killed. We were exhausted and in deep despair.

Our wagon was new, there was one vent, it was impossible to escape. We learned that in some other wagons it was possible to force the door open from the inside and jump from the moving train. We heard that most of those who jumped were seen by the roof guards and were killed. In our wagon nobody spoke, many wept, we knew it was the end and could only hope that it should come quickly.

At midday the train arrived at the Belzec station. It was a small station. Nearby were buildings where the Gestapo lived. Belzec is situated on the Tomaszow- Lublin railway line, 15 km from Rava Ruska. The train crossed onto a track through the Belzec camp outer gates. After our train had entered the camp, an SS officer took over command and gave orders to the guards and the train driver. This officer was not a young man, he had a cruel face, the face of a

vicious sadistic murderer. Within two or three minutes the train was in the inner camp, the Belzec extermination camp. For months, day after day and sometimes three times a day, I saw this ruthless monster direct the mass murder of our people. The officer gave the order for two guards to stand beside each wagon door. Each guard held a snarling dog on a leash. He gave the order for the doors to be opened and with extreme brutality the victims were forced to jump down from the wagons. After it was thought that all the victims had been evicted from the wagons, this officer would go from wagon to wagon to make sure that they were empty. Then he would order the train driver to drive out of the camp.

This 'final station' was encircled by barbed wire and covered by a double layer of steel net. The train entered the area through a specially designed gate. The guards and their hateful commanding officer forced our people to jump down quickly from the wagons. The threatening dogs and rifle butts and whips ensured that the people moved as fast as they possibly could. Some people, especially old people, fell and broke a leg.

Beside the SS stood Jewish prisoners with stretchers. Their job was to carry their Jewish brethren who were unable to walk. They were carried to the very edge of a specially prepared wide and deep pit. Another Gestapo officer named Irman would then shoot each of the victims and then with his foot, push the body into the pit.

This Irman, tall handsome and insane, lived alone near the Belzec station. Every day, two or even three times a day he awaited the arrival of helpless victims who he could murder and kick into the pit. He had an additional duty which he performed to perfection as often as needed. The Jewish victims had been evicted from the wagons and had been massed together, surrounded by guards and dogs. Handsome Irman would then stand before them and deliver a speech, each time the identical speech. He spoke loud and clear - his message which awakened a tiny spark of hope - "You are now going to the shower rooms. After you have washed, you will be sent to work". I cannot forget this speech, heard every day, sometimes three times a day.

This was a brief moment of relief when people dared to hope. All the men, some of the women and all the children were hurried on until they reached a very large concrete building. In front of the building was a notice board with the words 'Shower Rooms' printed on it. Women and girls with long hair were separated from the group and sent to another building and ordered to sit on wooden benches. Here, eight Jewish barbers, prisoners in Belzec, sheared off every woman's hair. They worked at great speed in absolute silence, under threat of immediate death if they said a word.

Everyone was forced to enter the 'Shower rooms', apart from the women who had been sent to have their hair cut off, and a group of men, myself included. We were set aside to dig burial pits and terrible tasks that I shall describe later.

Immediately our people realized that the moment of hope had been a horrible deception. They knew they would be killed in this place. Some people shouted, some wept, and some women became hysterical. People went mad from fear and helpless rage. Not all, many young girls remained calm and silent before their certain death.

NOTE: 'Transport' was the innocent sounding name given to the thousands upon thousands of Jewish people sent to their death in each and every batch of railway freight wagons hauled to Belzec and other death camps.

In our 'transport' were thousands of young students and, as in other 'transports', the majority of victims were women. As I worked with the group of men digging burial pits, I saw the arrival of a new 'transport'. I saw my brother, my sisters and dear friends and knew they would be killed.

While the women's hair was sheared off, a procedure that took about two hours, all the rest of our 'transport' had been murdered in the gas chambers and their bodies thrown out of the gas chambers and dragged to the freshly dug burial pits.

Working groups, regularly replaced and killed, had several terrible tasks, both before and after a new 'transport' arrived. First, they had to dig the deep, large burial pits, then haul the dead bodies to the wide sliding door in the chamber and throw them out of the chamber (the chamber floors were one and a half meters above the surrounding grounds). Then drag or carry the bodies to the burial pits and place or throw them one on top of the other in the pit, leaving some space at the top for later coverage. We were forced to work fast, with whips and blows, so that the chambers would be empty and ready for the next victims. On this, the first day of our awful heart breaking tasks the 'next victims' were the women of our transport who had been sent to have their hair shorn off.

As soon as the gas chambers were empty, SS men armed with bayonets and whips, forced the women along the narrow corridor leading to the gas chambers. Women who tried to resist were whipped, in extreme cases they were bayoneted, the floor of the corridor was covered in blood. I heard anguished cries in Polish and Yiddish. The doors to the chambers were shut.

The engine that emitted the lethal gases was started and after twenty minutes all our dear women had been killed. We began again to perform the terrible tasks. We dragged these women who had been alive twenty minutes before, dragged them to the burial pits.

I had forgotten to relate that there was a camp orchestra that was forced to play every day from morning to night, throughout all the murder and horror.

*Now Reder describes the gas chambers and surrounding area in greater detail. On this page there is some repetition but Reder gives more information and of great importance. **These are his words.***

After a while I got to know all the Balzac camp area. It was situated within a small densely wooded forest. The trees hid the gas chambers and burial pits. More trees had been brought in and attached to the existing trees to make the cover-up even more effective. In addition, the Germans had spread wire netting above the large buildings and placed leafy branches and plants on the netting to prevent the camp being seen from aircraft. Also, beneath this canopy was the building where the woman's hair was shorn before they were killed. A narrow passage connected this building to the gas chambers.

The gas chambers were inside a large concrete building with a flat roof. Steps led up to the building. Beside the entrance was placed a huge flower pot filled with flowers and a notice board with the words 'SHOWER ROOMS' painted on it. Inside the building was a long, narrow, dimly lit corridor. There were three doors on each side of the corridor, each door led into one of the six gas chambers.

The gas chambers were in absolute darkness. The walls and floors were made of concrete, the floors were 1.5 meters above the outside ground level. A sliding door, more than two meters wide, was fitted into the outside wall of each gas chamber. These doors were designed so that the dead bodies could be thrown out quickly from the gas chambers.

Near the main building was the engine room. The lethal exhaust gases from this engine were piped to the gas chambers. There was a large hut for the prisoners who were kept alive to perform the terrible tasks that I have described previously. There was a second identical hut for the prisoners with special skills, cooks, barbers, plumbers, mechanics, musicians and so on. In each hut were 125 two-storey bunks, just wooden strips, enough for 250 prisoners in each hut.

Next to these huts were the kitchens, various store rooms, a laundry, a clothing store with clothing repair room and offices. In the same vicinity were comfortable quarters for the SS, Gestapo and Ukrainian guards.

Outside the gas chambers, in clearings in the forest, were the rows of burial pits filled with the bodies of the murdered victims. The pits that were full of bodies were covered by a layer of sand. Every day, pits were dug in preparation for the next victims.

At this stage in his testimony Reder gives more details about himself. He states that he was a prisoner in Belzec from early September 1942 until the end of November 1942 when he miraculously managed to escape. Reder gives details, later in the testimony, of how he escaped. He survived for so long because he had a special skill. He repaired boilers and furnaces. The fact that he also worked with 'working groups' would have kept him alive a few days. As said before, the groups were themselves murdered after a few days and were replaced by new victims.

Continuation of Reder's testimony:

This was a long period of intensified murder of Jewish people. I was told by prisoners who came to Belzec many months before I did (and survived due to their special skills) that the number of 'transports' sent to Belzec during September, October and November 1942 was much greater than the 'transports' sent previously. During these three months the greatest number of Jewish people were murdered. I cannot testify on the period following November 1942.

During those three months I saw every day a 'transport' of 50 wagons with 100 prisoners in each wagon, that is 5,000 victims sent to Belzec. A second identical 'transport' arrived every evening. These prisoners were held in the suffocating wagons without food or water until 6 o'clock the following morning. A minimum of 10,000 victims were murdered every 24 hours. There were days that three 'transports' arrived. There were days that more than 50 wagons were hauled in each 'transport'. The 'transports' came seven days a week. All the victims were Jewish.

SS men, Gestapo and volunteer Ukrainian guards murdered our people. There were Jewish prisoners working in the area where the victims were forced to undress after being dragged from the wagons. They managed in a whisper to ask the new victims from which place they came. The answer was from Lvov, from Cracow, from Tranov, from Zanosc, from Jaslo and other Polish towns.

Every day, at least twice a day, the same awful procedures, the same questions, the same sadistic Gestapo officer, Irman, made the same speech with the same sickening lies. For a moment there was hope, they were not going to be killed, they were going to work. A moment later babies were snatched from their mother's arms, all those unable to walk were thrown on stretchers and taken to the burial pit where the same Irman shot them in the head and pushed them into the pit. All the rest, apart from the women with long hair, were brutally herded to the gas chambers. The women had their hair shorn off before they too were murdered.

I saw again and again how people reacted to their fate. All the time the prisoner's orchestra played loudly to drown out the desperate cries.

The first prisoners to be crammed into the gas chambers were those who had been wounded by bayonets or whips. 750 prisoners were crammed into each of the six gas chambers. The agonizing process of forcing almost 5,000 people into the gas chambers took about two hours. All six gas chambers were packed to maximum capacity, all victims standing jammed together and all doors were locked. Then the engine was started and the lethal exhaust gases were piped into the chambers. The murder process took 20 minutes. Twenty minutes each time to murder almost 5,000 Jewish people. Again and again I heard awful cries of anguish, I shall never forget. Most times in Polish and Yiddish, sometimes in Czech, Greek or French. After 20 minutes the engine was shut down. The outer doors of all the gas chambers were opened, the dead victims were all standing, their faces expressionless, mouths slightly open, their arms clasped about their chests. Those that stood nearest the opened doors dropped out of the opening like felled trees.

'Transports' from Czechoslovakia came in the Polish railway freight wagons, but the Czech prisoners had water and food. The 'transports' from Poland were men, women and children. 'Transports' from other countries were men, women and few children. It seemed that these 'transports' came from countries where Christian families were ready to hide and take care of Jewish children. The victims in these 'transports' were told that Belzec was a work camp. Their fate was exactly the same as the fate of the Polish Jews, they were all murdered. I think that during the months that I was in Belzec about 100,000 prisoners from other countries were murdered, a small number compared to the countless thousands of Polish Jews.

I must testify in more detail about the awful suffering endured by most of the women before they were killed. Women with long hair were sent to have their hair shorn off, a procedure that took about two hours. Eight barbers worked in a hut at their terrible task. All the women, hundreds of women, were forced to stand outside the hut until their turn came to be shorn. They were naked, barefoot, often in severe wintery weather. Their suffering and despair was indescribable. I saw this tragic sight when I had to work in the vicinity of the barber's hut. These unbearable images will never leave me. When all the woman had been shorn they were brutally herded to the gas chambers.

After each group of women had had their hair shorn, the floor of the hut was covered in a carpet of hair. A group of four prisoners came, swept up all the hair and packed it in jute sacks. The sacks were carried to one of the camp stores where murdered prisoner's clothes were also packed in sacks. It was rumoured that shipments of hair and clothing were regularly sent by rail to Budapest.

A lawyer named Schreiber, a prisoner from Czechoslovakia, told us about the hair and clothing. Schreiber worked in the camp office and had access to information on all the Belzec activities. Apparently, the Gestapo monster Irman valued the Jewish lawyer's work, and according to Schreiber's account, promised to take him on a short holiday outside the camp. Nothing ever came of it and Schreiber was murdered like all the rest.

It was Schreiber who told us about the regular shipments of gold from Belzec. It was true because during my work I witnessed part of the procedure.

There was a group of eight 'specialists' standing along the route between the gas chambers and the burial pits. Their job was to halt each prisoner who was dragging or carrying a corpse to the burial pit. The 'specialists' would then force open the corpse's mouth, extract false teeth with a special tool and remove dentures. The corpses were then taken to the burial pits.

These same 'specialists', at the end of the day, under Gestapo supervision, brought the teeth to a store. This store contained all the necessary equipment. The eight men removed the human teeth from the gold crowns, cleaned the gold crowns and a similar procedure with the dentures. They then melted the cleaned gold and poured it into molds. The gold ingot produced in each mold was half a centimeter wide by one centimeter thick and twenty centimeters long.

All clothes, cast off by the victims before they were herded into the gas chambers, were collected every day and brought by the work groups to one of the stores. In the store, 10 prisoners were forced to cut open the seams of every garment and search for hidden money and valuables. This procedure was under Gestapo supervision. The Gestapo divided a large part of the money among themselves. Every day the ingots, money and valuables were sent by railway, under Gestapo guard, to headquarters in Lublin.

As far as I know, no prisoner ever tried to take gold or money or valuables. Every man knew that shortly he would be killed. There was the case of a prisoner who dropped money on the floor and openly picked it up. He was shot immediately. This man certainly wanted to die.

A detail that I forgot to explain about the burial pits. It took 40 men a week of constant labour to dig one pit. We worked with simple shovels, though there was a machine that gathered the sand that we threw out of the pit and formed a high pile beside the pit (the whole Belzec area was sandy ground).

Our overseer was SS man - Schmidt. If he was dissatisfied with a prisoner's pace of work, he beat and kicked without mercy. If Schmidt thought a prisoner was shirking he forced him to lie down and gave him 25 lashes of the whip. The prisoner had to count aloud each stroke, and if he counted incorrectly he got another 25 lashes.

A man, after such terrible punishment, could only crawl back to the hut and in many cases, just die. Every day, regularly, 30 or 40 men from the work groups were set aside and shot. These were men who could not work fast enough. They were immediately replaced by men from the latest 'transport'.

The Ukrainian guards and the Gestapo were the ones who decided which workers should be shot. There always had to be 500 men in the groups, 250 unskilled workers and 250 men with various skills (like myself) who also had to perform all the work, digging burial pits and dragging the dead to the pits.

We knew that Jewish prisoners had built the gas chambers and all the other buildings in the Belzec extermination camp. After the construction of the camp all of these hundreds of men were shot. Only one man managed to escape. I related previously that this was the man who told us in Lvov that Belzec was a death camp, everybody brought there would be killed.

Every morning the working groups were brutally woken at 3:30. The Ukrainian guard at each hut would bang hard on the door and order us to get outside. SS man Schmidt was always there, whip in hand. The guards and Schmidt evicted us so fast that many men did not manage to put on their shoes and went out barefoot, shoes in hand. Our time of rest was so short and comfortless. We were given one thin blanket. Some men covered themselves with it and some used it as an almost useless mattress.

Our clothes were terrible rags. Any good clothes cast off by the victims were shipped to Germany. If we complained about our clothes we were beaten.

At night we were ordered into our hut and allowed one half hour of light. The light was switched off by the Ukrainian guard, it was then forbidden to speak. The guard constantly patrolled the hut with whip in hand. Nevertheless, we did manage to whisper a little. In our working group were many men whose wives, children or parents had been murdered in Belzec. They managed to salvage prayer shawls from one of the huts and in complete darkness, men whispered Kaddish - the memorial prayer for the dead.

We were a group of men, each needing all his strength and will power to just survive. No close friendships could be made, but I managed to learn a little about my fellow prisoners. I knew that a young doctor named Yakobovitch came from a small Polish town. I knew a man named Shissel from Cracow, and a prisoner named Elbogen from Czechoslovakia, he had a shop selling bicycles. There was a chef who worked in a famous restaurant in Karlsbad, his name was Goldschmidt. Nobody spoke about the past.

At 12 o'clock midday we assembled for our 'meal'. We lined up; at the first window we were given a tin mug, at the next window we were given soup made of coarse grains, water and sometimes a small potato. Before our midday 'meal' and before our coffee in the evening, we were forced to listen to the orchestra

and to sing. This was in order to drown out the cries of anguish from the gas chambers. Opposite our kitchen stood a high gallows.

The SS and Gestapo lived in Belzec without women, all the work was done by men. In October 1942 a 'transport' came from Zamosc. On this 'transport' came a group of educated Czech women. The SS decided that some of these women should work in the kitchen, laundry and other tasks. They were allowed to keep their own clothes, their hair was not shorn and they were not maltreated by the SS and the Gestapo. The women were friendly and helpful to those of us who worked near them.

Though these women were treated much better than all the rest of us, they knew very well that Belzec was a death camp. They saw the 'transports' arriving day after day. I do not know what happened to them, they were probably murdered.

Belzec was a mass murder camp, but I saw individual victims being horribly tortured by the Gestapo and SS. The act of torturing their helpless victims gave these insane sadists great pleasure. On November 15th 1942 a new 'transport' from Zamosc arrived. In this group were members of the Zamosc Judenrat (The Judenrat were the Jewish leadership committees in the Polish towns). After the prisoners had cast off their clothes, the Ukrainian guards herded all the men and children to the gas chambers and the women to have their hair shorn. They set aside one man whom they knew to be the chairman of the Zamosc Judenrat. SS men surrounded him, this middle aged man pale as death, stood calmly before his tormentors. The SS gave commands to bring the orchestra. The musicians came, three violinists, a flautist and an accordionist. I had seen them so often standing between the gas chambers and the burial pits, these men must have died a thousand times as they played. This was a different place where we were repairing a building. The SS gave the order to the orchestra to play the melody of the well-known German song 'All things come to an end'. The orchestra played. They pushed their victim against a wall and whipped him all over his body, especially his head and face. The victim was covered in blood. Irman, Schwartz and Schmidt took part in this awful ritual. They ordered him to jump as they whipped him and stuffed bread in his mouth. The man stood silent throughout his terrible ordeal. This went on for hours, the SS laughed and mocked him 'behold this is an important man, a prince among the Jews'. In the evening they forced him to run to a burial pit where they shot him in the head.

There were other incidents of insane sadism. A few days after I came to Belzec a young boy arrived with one of the 'transports'. An SS man heard him asking one of our working group "is something bad happening here?" They tore his clothes off and hung him for three hours, head downwards from the gallows.

They took him down still alive then pushed his face into the sand. He suffocated and died.

In October 1942 the 'transports' brought even more victims. Instead of 50 wagons there were 60 wagons or more. The SS realised that there would not be enough burial pits. Immediately they set aside 100 men from each new transport and formed them into extra work groups to dig the pits and drag the corpses to the burial pits. These men, though they had just been dragged from the wagons, were given neither water nor food before they were forced to work.

The camp was well guarded. Ukrainian guards on each watch tower, tens of SS men and tens of Gestapo. Most, but not all, of these men had specific tasks. Those men who were in reserve, tried all the time to prove they could be just as cruel, just as merciless and sadistic as their senior colleagues. They longed to play a more active role in the mass murder. The unbelievable bestiality of these men must be recorded. They were happy when they saw naked, wounded people thrust into the chamber. They were indifferent to the anguished cries of children.

We knew that the camp commander lived in a pleasant house near the Belzec railway station. The Commander came very rarely to the extermination camp. He looked like a murderer. A middle-aged man with a coarse vicious face, tall and broad shouldered. Only once did I see him in the camp. There were problems with the engine that pumped its lethal exhaust gases into the gas chambers. The chambers were crammed with victims. The commander was told that the engine repair may take several hours, should the victims be temporarily released? In a terrible rage the commander shouted "let those Jews choke, let them suffer for hours, and repair that engine fast or you will all regret it". You could see that the SS men and Gestapo were in great fear of this commander and what he was capable of doing to them.

The Commander lived with one bodyguard who also acted as his personal servant and brought a daily report on all camp matters, prepared by the SS. The Commander and several high ranking officers did not come to the camp regularly. These men lived a life of luxury, they had a restaurant and professional chef to prepare their meals. I was told that they were brought boxes of cherries and other fruits and received daily deliveries of wines and vodka. I was repairing a stove in their kitchen and saw Jewish women helping the chef prepare poultry and other meat for their table. These women secretly gave me some onions and turnips.

In the vicinity were another group of bodyguards. I was told that every Sunday these men had a drinking orgy. There were three Gestapo officers who worked daily in the extermination camp and organized the mass murder. These three men were in daily contact with the Commander.

A few words about these three men. First, Irman, an insane monster who I have spoken about before. Then Felix Reinold, an educated man, well spoken, a violinist and yet insane, vicious and sadistic. Another man, Hans Schmidt, was a Latvian. He spoke German badly but he spoke Russian and could communicate with the numerous Ukrainian guards. This man derived great satisfaction from murdering innocent people. We all asked ourselves the same question “which of these despicable monsters is the worst?” And we all answered ourselves “they are all insane sadists beyond belief.”

A most important event for all the SS men and Gestapo was the visit in October 1942 of Heinrich Himmler (the Commander in Chief of the SS and Gestapo). On that particular day we saw that the SS and Gestapo performed their murderous tasks, even faster than usual. Our working groups were beaten and forced to dig the pits faster, and drag the corpses to the burial pits faster. Irman let it be known that an important visitor was coming, he did not say who it was. At 3 pm Himmler arrived with General Katzman and other high ranking Gestapo officers. Irman accompanied Himmler’s group to the gas chambers to watch the corpses being dragged to the burial pits. Himmler watched for half an hour then left with his company of officers. I saw that the murderers were in high spirits. I overheard their talk, Himmler had been well satisfied and the SS and Gestapo men could all hope for and expect promotion.

I do not have the words, I cannot describe how we in the work groups felt, how we carried on living as we witnessed our fellow Jews being murdered, as we heard the cries of anguish. Day after day the same horrors and despair.

I speak for myself, though I am sure almost all in the work groups felt the same. We were not dead but we were not alive, each suffered for our fellow Jews and knew that he too would soon be killed.

Near the end of November 1942, Gestapo officer Irman told me that there was a shortage of iron building materials in the camp. He knew that I worked with these materials and would know where to find them, so I would be sent by truck with guards to Lvov to get the materials. I was ill, very weak and my face and body was covered in suppurating sores. Yet, for no reason Gestapo man Schmidt beat my face with his stick.

We found the materials in Lvov. Four guards left the truck to go for drinks and left me and one guard in the truck. I noticed that the guard had fallen asleep. Without hesitation I got out of the truck and pretended to examine the iron materials. I saw the guard still slept, and I began to walk slowly towards Legyonov Street. Many people were in the area but fortunately it was evening and misty. I pulled my cap well down over my face. My Polish landlady lived in the area. I came to her and begged her to give me shelter. This dear lady took a terrible risk

and hid me and fed me for 20 months, until the Red Army liberated this part of Poland in July 1944. It took more than a year for my sores to heal.

In my dreams and in my waking hours I see the ghastly scenes in Belzec and hear the anguished cries. Only after the liberation could I go out into the fresh air, see the sky and trees and begin to try and live again.

I went to look again at the Belzec extermination camp. It was just a very large clearing in the forest, nothing was there. The local people in the Belzec town told me that in 1943 the Germans sent less 'transports' to the camp. I learned that more 'transports' were then sent to Auschwitz.

In 1944 they began to dismantle all the buildings and cover up all traces of the death camp. I was told by the locals that the Germans uncovered the burial pits, poured fuel over the decomposing bodies and burned the bodies. Thick acrid smoke spread over a huge area and a terrible stench remained for weeks.

I was told that a prisoner named Spilkie was transferred from a different concentration camp to the Belzec camp. Spilkie was a very talented mechanic and was commanded to design a machine to grind up human bones. I met Spilkie after the liberation. He told me that when he came to the Belzec camp area, nothing remained, just massive piles of human bones. He designed and built the machine. Strong winds did the rest of the work, they blew the dust that remained of my dear people and spread it over a vast area. Spilkie also told me that he too had been called to testify before Red Army investigators about his enforced work in Belzec.

That forested corner of Poland (now Ukraine) is the grave of countless thousands of Jewish men, women, and children.