RUDOLF HOESS

During trial, 1946

Rudolf Hoess, the director of the most infamous extermination camp, was, by his own admission, history's greatest mass murderer, personally supervising the extermination of approximately 1.1 million people in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In 1947, Hoess was hanged for his role in the murder of the victims of Auschwitz.[1]

EXCERPT FROM RUDOLF HOESS'S TESTIMONY AT THE NUREMBERG TRIALS

The President: Stand up. Will you state your name?
Witness: Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Hoess.

Q) During an interrogation I had with you the other day you told me that about sixty men were designated to receive these transports, and that these sixty persons too had been bound to the same secrecy described before. Do you still maintain that today?

A) Yes, these sixty men were always on hand to take the detainees not capable of work to these provisional and, later on, to the other installations. This group, consisting of about ten leaders and sub-leaders, as well as doctors and medical personnel, had repeatedly been told both in writing and verbally that they were bound to strictest secrecy as to all that went on in the camps.

Q) And after the arrival of the transports did the victims have to dispose of everything they had? Did they have to undress completely; did they have to surrender their valuables? Is that true?

A) Yes.

Q) And then they immediately went to their death?

A) Yes.

Q: I ask you, according to your knowledge, did these people know what was in store for them?

A) The majority of them did not, for steps were taken to keep them in doubt about it so that the suspicion would not arise that they were to go to their death. For instance, all doors and all walls bore inscriptions to the effect that they were going to undergo a delousing operation or take a shower. This was proclaimed in several languages to the detainees by other detainees who had come in with earlier transports and who were being used as auxiliary crews during the whole action.

Q) And then, you told me the other day, that death from gassing occurred within a period of three to fifteen minutes. Is that correct?

A) Yes.

Q) Did you yourself ever sympathize with the victims, thinking of your own family and children?

A) Yes.

Q) How was it possible then for you to carry out these actions?

A) In spite of all the doubts which I had, the only one and decisive argument was the strict order and the reason given for it by the *Reichsfuehrer* Himmler.

Q) To what do you attribute the particularly bad and shameful conditions which were found on invasion by Allied troops, and which to an extent were photographed and filmed?

A) The catastrophic situation at the end of the war was due to the fact that, as a result of the destruction of railways and of the continuous bombing of the industrial works, for example, Auschwitz with its 140,000 detainees... The number of sick became immense. There were next to no medical supplies; plagues raged everywhere. Detainees who were capable of work were used continuously. By order of the *Reichsfuehrer*, even half-sick people had to be used wherever possible in industry. As a result every bit of space in the concentration camps which could possibly be used for lodging was filled with sick and dying detainees.

Q) Did you learn that towards the end of the war concentration camps were evacuated, and, if so, who gave the orders?

A) Let me explain. Originally there was an order from the *Reichsfuehrer*, according to which camps, in the event of an approaching enemy or in the event of air attacks, were to be surrendered to the enemy. Later on, with respect to the case of Buchenwald, which had been reported to the Fuehrer, there was... no, at the beginning of 1945, when various camps came within operational sphere of the enemy, this order was withdrawn. The *Reichsfuehrer* ordered the Higher SS and Police Leaders, who in an emergency case were responsible for the security and safety of the camps, to decide themselves whether an evacuation or a surrender was appropriate.

Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen were evacuated. Buchenwald was also to be evacuated, but then the order from the *Reichsfuehrer* came through to the effect that no more camps were to be evacuated. After Buchenwald had been occupied, it was reported to the Fuehrer that internees had armed themselves and were carrying out plunderings in the town of Weimar. This caused the Fuehrer to give the strictest order to Himmler to the effect that in the future no more camps were to fall into the hands of the enemy, and that no internees capable of marching were to be left behind in any camp.

EXCERPT FROM RUDOLF HOESS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"...What are my opinions today concerning the Third Reich?... I remain, as I have always been, a convinced National-Socialist in my attitude to life... The concentration camps before the war had to be depositories in which to segregate opponents of the state... similarly, they were necessary for the preventive war on crime... I also see now that the extermination of the Jews was fundamentally wrong. Precisely because of this mass extermination, Germany has drawn upon herself the hatred of the entire world. It in no way served the cause of antisemitism, but on the contrary brought the Jews far closer to their ultimate objective... I have sufficiently explained how the horrors of the concentration camps could come about. I for my part never sanctioned them. I myself never maltreated a prisoner, far less killed one. Nor have I ever tolerated maltreatment by my subordinates... I knew very well that prisoners in Auschwitz were ill-treated by the SS, by their civilian employers, and not least of all by their fellow-prisoners. I used every means at my disposal to stop this. But I could not."

— *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Hoess* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959), 176

1 Hoess was the commandant of Auschwitz from May 4, 1940 to November 1943, and again from May 8, 1944 to January 18, 1945.