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Rudolph Höss: The Man Behind Auschwitz

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in History.

By:
Summer Fields

Under the mentorship of Brian K. Feltman

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on Rudolph Höss, who was the commandant of Auschwitz from May 1940 to November 1943. The introduction begins by presenting a historiography of Auschwitz and the following chapters focus on Rudolph Höss, the victims and an analysis on the motives for holocaust perpetrators. A developed body of research exists on perpetrators of the Holocaust and this thesis seeks to contribute to this body of scholarship by examining Höss' diaries, and trial transcripts, as well as Holocaust survivor memoirs, to determine whether Höss may be appropriately labeled a "desk killer."

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Introduction



Entrance to Auschwitz Extermination Camp. Wikimedia Commons

“This world is not our world.” An Israeli dentist spoke these words after his release from the Nazi death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹ He believed he had witnessed the worst of human behavior and wanted no part of a world that allowed the extermination of millions of innocent people. Auschwitz-Birkenau was responsible for the deaths of nearly 1.1 million people during the time of its operation from May 1940 to May 1943. Scholars’ have calculated that nearly 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz leaving only two hundred thousand survivors. Among the murdered were: 1.1 million Jews, 75,000 Poles, more than 20,000 Gypsies, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and 10,000 victims of other nationalities.² The statistical enormity of the crimes committed at Auschwitz begs the question: who were the monsters behind the murders of

¹Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 1.

²Walter Laqueur, *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 44.

over a million people in a single location? Were the men and women behind Auschwitz monsters, or were they merely ordinary people who were simply following orders?

This thesis addresses this question while focusing on the career of Rudolph Höss, the notorious commandant of Auschwitz from May 1940 to November 1943 and again from May to July 1944. Society often depicts the perpetrators of the Holocaust as evil sadists. However, scholarly research suggests that ordinary people can commit heinous crimes if put in the right situation. A developed body of research exists on perpetrators of the Holocaust and this thesis seeks to contribute to this body of scholarship by examining Höss' diaries, and trial transcripts, as well as Holocaust survivor memoirs, to determine whether Höss may be appropriately labeled a “desk killer.”³

Höss was not physically involved in the mass murders at Auschwitz, but he orchestrated the deaths from his office and treated the prisoners as numbers on a page. Sadism and evil alone could not account for the mass genocide of the Holocaust. Therefore, we must turn our attention to the bureaucracy of killing. German scholar Max Weber referred to bureaucratic killers as “detached, faceless...”⁴ Although Weber died before the onset of the Holocaust, his depiction matches the actions of Rudolph Höss during the Holocaust. Most of the victims never came into contact with Höss and he rarely appears in their memoirs. However, he was the man orchestrating the deaths from his office on camp grounds. He was detached from the victims because he did not interact with the prisoners at the camp, making it easier to view them as numbers on a page.

³ Adolf Eichmann is the primary example of a “desk killer.” Refer to Hannah Ardent, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Group, 1963) to further investigate the idea of a “desk killer.”

⁴ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 15.

While researching Höss's claims of his time as commandant at Auschwitz, this thesis will also cover several victims' recollections of what happened through an examination of several victims' memoirs and interviews after their time at Auschwitz. Throughout Höss's memoir, written as he was awaited his execution for crimes committed as the commandant of Auschwitz, he proclaimed he never was involved in any of the killings personally. Although one must view Höss's memoir with a degree of suspicion, in order to provide an unbiased thesis I will present Rudolph Höss's and his victims' portrayals of what happened at Auschwitz from 1940-1944.

Before beginning an analysis of Höss and other Nazi perpetrators it is important to establish background information on Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Auschwitz camp was established in April 1940 in southwestern Nazi occupied Poland. The camp was located 60 km west of the city of Kraków in the smaller town of Oświęcim.⁵ The first purpose of the camp was to serve as a transit center for hostile Poles that were to be sent to Germany as forced laborers.⁶ The original site of the camp was not large enough to hold ample amounts of prisoners. Therefore, the Nazi officials decided to add onto the existing buildings and also created new buildings. The buildings would become known as blocks and each was given a number.⁷

In summer 1941 the camp's Construction Chief, Hans Kammler, ordered for expansion due to increased numbers of inmates. The increase in prisoners resulted from the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, which left millions of Red Army prisoners of war in Nazi occupied areas. The expansion led to

⁵ "KL Auschwitz-Birkenau." Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, accessed March 30, 2014. <http://en.auschwitz.org/h/index.php>.

⁶ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 32.

⁷ Laqueur, *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, 33.

the creation of the *Schutzstaffel*⁸ (SS) prisoner-of-war camp Birkenau. Birkenau was three kilometers to the west of Auschwitz I. In 1941 the camp underwent heavy construction and its prisoners performed the manual labor of expansion.

Soviet prisoners began to arrive in late 1941. Three thousand of the men were immediately executed, and 12,000 were destined to perform hard manual labor. By the beginning of 1942, fewer than one thousand of the men were still alive. The high death rate was a foreshadowing for the years to come. In 1941 Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, informed Rudolph Höss that Adolf Hitler had decided to annihilate the European Jews. He was told that SS Officer Adolf Eichmann, head of Jewish Affairs, would share with him the details on the annihilation of the Jews. Höss was commandant at Auschwitz when the order was given, and it was therefore, his responsibility to carry out the order. This would become Höss's defense before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945. He claimed that he oversaw the murders at Auschwitz solely because he was following orders from superior officers. Himmler told him that due to Auschwitz's location and railway communication that the camp would be a primary destination of genocide.⁹ It was at this point that the camp turned from a concentration camp to an extermination camp.

In 1941 shooting was still the primary method of execution at the camp. However, due to the mental strain it put on the SS officers, Höss created a new killing method. He introduced the use of Zyklon B gas to commit mass murder. The introduction of the gas

⁸ The SS became under the control of Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler in 1925 and transformed from their previous role as security guards to mass killing machines. From 1925-1945 they wreaked terror across Nazi occupied areas, and were responsible for majority of the roundups at Ghettos and killings. The SS was banned after the end of World War II.

"SS." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified June 10, 2013, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007400>.

⁹ Rudolph Höss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 27.

made the killing process more efficient and the camps staff was able to kill larger quantities of prisoners simultaneously. The SS men told the prisoners that they were going to shower before being assigned work within the camp. The prisoners then walked with shaved heads into the chambers already undressed. The gas chambers at Auschwitz could kill a mass amount of people at once, “The highest capacity of its gas-chambers amounted to killing of 60,000 people per 24 hours and that of the crematoria to burning of 24,000 bodies per 24 hours.”¹⁰ Therefore, approximately one million victims died at Auschwitz from the gas chambers alone. The trickery employed by the Germans to coerce victims into the “showers” worked very well for years.

The issue of pollution arose after time passed and more corpses began to fill the pits dug for the disposal of dead bodies. Nazi engineers began to innovate a more efficient way to rid the pollution from the camp, and crematoriums were created throughout the camp as a result. In 1942 the crematoria were increased to a total of five furnaces each with drainage and ventilation systems, and victims stepped down into the chamber attached to the morgue replacing the chute that was used previously.¹¹ Total crematoria on the camp site equaled four. The daily capacity for the crematoria was 4,756. By the end of 1942 Auschwitz-Birkenau had been transformed and prepared for the mass killings of prisoners of the following year.

In 1943 *Obersturmbannführer* Arthur Liebehenschel replaced Höss after his transfer to the Economic and Administrative Main Office. Höss returned to Auschwitz in 1944. In a little more than six months after Höss’s return, 600,000 people, about ninety-five percent of them Jews were brought to the camp. The numbers increased when a flood

¹⁰ United Nations War Crimes Commission, *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals*, Vol. VII (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1948), 12.

¹¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 232.

of Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz after the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944.

On January 17, 1945 SS Officers held the final roll call as the Red Army advanced to liberate the camp.¹² At Auschwitz there were still 67,000 prisoners and orders were given to march them out in preparation for the Red Army's arrival. Approximately 1,000 corpses and more than 8,000 prisoners who were either ill or hiding remained in the camp when Soviet troops captured Auschwitz on January 27, 1945. The total number of people deported to Auschwitz was 1.3 million and the total number killed was 1.1 million. The two-hundred thousand survivors never returned to the life they had prior to the Holocaust because their world had been changed forever.

¹² Ibid., 44.

The Perpetrator



SS-Obersturmbannführer Rudolph Höss. Wikimedia Commons

Rudolph Höss was born on November 25, 1900 to parents Lina née Speck and Franz Xaver Höss.¹³ He was raised in a house outside of Baden-Baden, Germany, and his family was an average German family. His father was a strict Catholic. Höss stated in his autobiography, "...my father had made a vow that I would lead a religious life and become a priest."¹⁴ Höss was raised in a very strict military fashion because of his father's strong ties to Catholicism. His father did not have strong political views that he passed onto his son, but he did proclaim that one is to obey whoever is in charge of the government without question. Later in life, Höss would use the excuse of following the orders of his superiors as the justification for his crimes against humanity. Scholars have

¹³ Leon Goldensohn, *The Nuremberg Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 296.

¹⁴ Höss, *Death Dealer*, 49.

identified this form of defense as the *Führerprinzip*, which states “absolute authority downward and responsibility upward.”¹⁵ The *Führerprinzip* validates Höss’s defense that he was following orders and had no other choice than to do what he was ordered to do.

Höss never had the desire to become a priest like his Father wished, especially after Höss discovered that his priest regularly revealed his confessions to his parents. Shortly after his father died, Höss made his way into the military during World War I at the age of sixteen. He became the youngest non-commissioned officer in the German forces, in addition to receiving the Iron Cross First and Second Class for bravery.¹⁶

Höss came home after the war and had a hard time adjusting to civilian life. Like many other struggling veterans he served in the Free Corps (*Freikorps*) from 1918-1921.¹⁷ The Free Corps consisted of men who could not let go of their lives as soldiers after World War I.¹⁸ They were men who were looking for their next mission. Men of The Free Corps often opposed the Weimar Republic, the democratic government established in Germany in 1919 that lasted until Hitler’s accession in 1933, and often were supporters of the Nazi party. In 1922 Höss left the Catholic Church and soon after joined the Nazi Party, making him one of the earliest members of the party. A year later Höss and fellow members of the Free Corps were involved in the murder of a man who betrayed his friend to the French. The victim was twenty-five year old Walter Kadow, whom Höss and three other men clubbed to death. Kadow reportedly turned in Höss’s friend Leo Schlageter, who was one of the leaders of active resistance against the French

¹⁵ Gerhard Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27.

¹⁶ “Rudolph Höss” Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team, accessed April 23, 2013, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/hoess.html>.

¹⁷ Goldensohn, *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 296.

¹⁸ Robert Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism* (New York, The Norton Library, 1952), 8.

occupation of the Rhineland in 1923.¹⁹ Höss was convicted as the ring leader in the murder and was sentenced to ten years in prison. During his time in prison at Brandenburg he was the ideal prisoner. Höss stated, “From childhood I was taught to be absolutely obedient to the point of the most painstaking neatness and cleanliness, so it was not hard to fit into the hard life of prison.”²⁰ His whole life had been focused on order and obedience. His childhood trained him to be loyal, dedicated and efficient. All qualities that made him an ideal prisoner and would help him excel in the Nazi Party.

Höss was released from prison in 1928, and shortly following his release he joined the Artamans, which was a nationalist group focused on “clean living.” Since childhood, Höss had loved the outdoors and farming. While with the Artamans he met his wife, Hedwig Hensel. Höss remained with the group until June 1934 when Heinrich Himmler asked him to join the SS. It is not clear whether Höss had any involvement in the Night of Long Knives from June 30 –July 2, 1934, when the Nazi Regime and the SS led a purge against several opponents of Nazism and the leadership of the Nazi paramilitary branch, the SA. During his time awaiting the Nuremberg Trial, Höss stated that he regretted leaving his original life plan as a farmer and that he would have loved to have had that time with his family back. It’s easy for a man awaiting his death for the atrocious crimes he committed to say that he wished he had made different choices in life. However, Höss could not escape or take back the decisions he made for his family when he decided to join the SS and begin his journey to becoming the commandant of Auschwitz. When he decided to join the SS, Höss changed his life course. Here began his transformation into the efficient mass murderer the world saw at the Nuremberg Trials in

¹⁹ Goldensohn, *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 297.

²⁰ Höss, *Death Dealer*, 70.

1946. The time he spent in the SS pushed him farther away from having a sense of humanity and sympathy for all people of so-called “inferior races”; instead, he viewed them as numbers.

In 1934 Höss began his time in the SS as a drill instructor at the Dachau concentration camp. Dachau was the first concentration camp, and here he witnessed flogging and harsh punishments towards prisoners of the camp that he would later use at Auschwitz. He stated that he learned from his superiors that “any compassion towards the enemies of the state would be unworthy of an SS soldier.”²¹ Later camp leaders made him a block leader, a position he claimed he did not want, but his superiors proclaimed no one else was a better fit for the job than Höss. Höss’s superiors perception of his suitability was based on his time as a soldier in World War I and his experience with prisoners while incarcerated at Brandenburg. Höss followed out his orders as block leader because he was a soldier and a soldier obeyed orders. After Dachau, Höss moved to Sachsenhausen where he learned how to operate and control a concentration camp.

On May 1, 1940 Heinrich Himmler appointed Höss as commandant of Auschwitz. Within the first year of the camps opening prisoners began arriving from the General Government and other Polish territory.²² In his memoir Höss proclaimed that he wanted to create better housing for the prisoners and to treat them with kindness. This way they would be willing to help with construction of the camp. He passed blame for the harsh treatment we now know the prisoners endured onto his subordinates. Höss believed that since he was not able to rely on his staff it caused him to become a different person. He claimed that he started to not see the good in people anymore and was very suspicious of

²¹ Höss, *Death Dealer*, 83.

²² Goldensohn, *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 299.

others. He handled the atrocities that took place at his camp by drinking alcohol—a common coping mechanism.²³ He never allowed himself to become a drunkard because that was not the example he wanted to set for his men. However, he did take the edge off of his day with alcohol. It was the only way he could cope the atrocities he was surrounded by every day. In 1941 Himmler visited Höss at Auschwitz and told him, “The Führer has ordered the final solution to the Jewish problem. Those of us in the SS must execute these plans. This is a hard job, but if the act is not carried out at once, instead of us exterminating the Jews, the Jews will exterminate the Germans at a later date.”²⁴ Until 1942 the majority of the prisoners in Auschwitz were Poles but as the war progressed the number of Jews increased. Höss believed that National Socialism would win over all countries through its intellectual appeal and not by force. He thought that the best way to defeat the Jews was to overcome them intellectually because that is where Jewish people supposedly flourished. Höss proclaimed that anti-Semitism was not a new concept created by the Nazis. Instead he said that the increase in anti-Semitism lay with the Jews. Höss said “it made its strongest appearance when the Jews had pushed themselves into positions of power and when their evil actions became known to the general public.” Höss was like every other Nazi in the sense that he blamed the Jews for Germany’s loss in World War I, the Versailles Treaty, and the economic turmoil the country suffered after the war.

The “Final Solution” of the Jewish question was ordered following the Wannsee Conference of January 1942. SS officials and other representatives of the state gathered at a villa outside Berlin to decide upon the implementation of the Final Solution. The Final

²³ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

²⁴ Goldensohn, *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 300.

Solution was “the code name for the systematic, deliberate, physical annihilation of the European Jews.”²⁵ Following the Wannsee Conference, Höss wanted to create a new way to exterminate the Jews that would not affect the executors’ mental state in the manner that the direct killings had previously. Most of the soldiers could not mentally deal with direct executions by shooting the prisoners in the head. Höss introduced the gas Zyklon B, a prussic acid, to his superiors, and he was able to kill thousands of prisoners in the gas chambers as a result. He bragged about the number of prisoners he could kill in a day in his gas chambers compared to the other camps. Höss wrote in his memoir that he was “at ease” with the killings now because he and his men were saved from the blood baths.²⁶ He never considered the effect this would have on the Jewish prisoners of the *Sonderkommando* who had to transport the dead bodies from the gas chambers to the grave pit.

Perhaps this was because he knew that it did not matter if the prisoners were traumatized, because they would not live long enough for it to matter. Höss was commandant at Auschwitz until late 1943 and, he estimated that 2.5 million victims were “executed or eliminated there by gassing and burning.”²⁷ Half a million died of hunger and illness, which makes a total of three million. The numbers described by Höss represent seventy or eighty percent of all people who were sent to Auschwitz. However, the number of deaths Höss testified to was exaggerated. In reality, “at least 960,000 Jews were killed in Auschwitz. Other victims included approximately 74,000 Poles, 21,000

²⁵ “Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified June 10, 2013, accessed March 6, 2014
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005477>.

²⁶ Höss, *Death Dealer*, 157.

²⁷ Ernst Klee, “*The Good Old Days:*” *The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1988), 254.

Roma (Gypsies), and 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war; and 10,000-15,000 members of other nationalities (Soviet civilians, Czechs, Yugoslavs, French, Germans, and Austrians),” totaling 1.1 million.²⁸

In November 1943 Höss moved on from commandant of Auschwitz to an inspector of all concentration camps. While in this position he began to notice that Himmler was the man behind the killings in the camps. He observed that not a single action happened without the orders of Himmler. In April 1945 while traveling, Höss learned of the death of Adolf Hitler and he knew the life he had was over. Höss went into hiding in Flensburg (located on the German-Danish border) and called himself Franz Lang.²⁹ He was later discovered and arrested on March 11, 1946 by the British Army. Two days before he was captured, the vial of poison he carried broke. He was forced to give his victims the justice they deserved by going to trial for the crimes he committed throughout the Nazi reign over Europe. After his arrest, he was taken to Nuremberg; however, since his crimes were committed in Poland he was eventually taken to a prison in Warsaw.³⁰ During his three week trial he answered questions about his time as commandant concisely and without emotions. Höss stated, “I take full responsibility as camp commandant for everything that had happened in Auschwitz,” and he claimed that unlike his SS-subordinates, “he had never stolen prisoners ‘valuables. He had never personally abused or killed any prisoners. He had acted always under orders.”³¹ Höss

²⁸ “Auschwitz,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified June 10, 2013, accessed March 6, 2014, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=1000518>.

²⁹ John Jay Hughes, “A Mass Murderer Repents,” last modified March 25, 1998, accessed April 23, 2013, <http://www.shu.edu/academics/theology/upload/mass-murderer-repents.pdf>.

³⁰ Hughes, “Mass Murderer,” 4.

³¹ Ibid, 4.

was found guilty of crimes against humanity and was executed on April 16, 1947 on the grounds of Auschwitz in front of one of the gas chambers.

The Victims



Auschwitz Crematorium. Wikimedia Commons

It appears that Rudolph Höss never physically killed any death camp inmates, yet like many other perpetrators, he may be defined as some variety of a desk killer. Höss was more involved than a typical desk killer in the fact that he lived on the camp grounds and had direct visuals of the gas chambers and crematoria. The concept of viewing Höss as a desk killer does not imply that millions did not die at the hands of Höss; rather that it is impossible to prove he personally killed a prisoner. Although the issue of whether Höss physically murdered prisoners at Auschwitz is largely irrelevant, while researching I never found a victim specifically say they saw or suffered themselves violence at the hands of Rudolph Höss. Höss like other perpetrators was what one would define as a “desk killer.” He did not personally murder prisoners, but he did orchestrate the killings from the safety of a desk. Höss was following orders from above and therefore his subordinates were required to carry out his commands. Höss’s postwar trial by the Supreme National Tribunal of Poland in March 1947 charged him with being responsible

for everything the prisoners underwent while at Auschwitz and his prosecutors asserted that Höss was responsible because he was commandant. The Tribunal found Höss guilty of the murders, ill treatment, living condition and medical experiments that the prisoners endured at the camp. To give justice to the victims that died at Auschwitz and those that survived, it is important to analyze what they went through at the camp while Höss sat comfortably at his desk.

Lucille Eichengreen, a Jewish teenager, survived Auschwitz in 1944. A Polish Jew, she was transferred from the Lodz Ghetto where she had resided for three years to the death camp. Her memoirs recall her experiences on arrival to Auschwitz. Lucille and thousands of other Jews arrived to the camp after four long days in cattle car train at 4:00am. She remembers the train abruptly stopping and Nazis screaming orders at them to hurry and get onto the platform. She recalls children being terrified and parents trying to comfort their children with words, even though no one knew what was coming. She proclaimed that the SS officers used their rifle butts to herd the prisoners together and into a line, shouting “men to the right, women to the left!”³² The SS began separating out the prisoners again by sending some to the left and some to the right. Lucille stated it was easy to catch on that the older women and children were being separated from the younger, stronger prisoners. She remembered this moment and stated, “I looked at my watch: 4:10. Only minutes had passed since we’d left the trains. Life and death decided within seconds-at the whim of the German SS!”³³ The sorting process continued and prisoners were ordered to drop their bags that they would be returned to them later, which we now know would never happen.

³² Lucille Eichengreen, *From Ashes to Life* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), 90.

³³ *Ibid*, 91.

Lucille remembered being herded into huge, low barracks and then ordered to undress. The camp's new inmates were ordered to, "Fold your clothing neatly. Remove all jewelry...Remember I said all jewelry!"³⁴ She then entered into the barracks and realized her surroundings, a windowless, lightly painted room that reflected the shadows of the clustered humans. The next step in the process was to have their heads shaved. Lucille recalled SS women with the clippers laughing as they took away her pride and dignity. Afterwards, the women were guided into a large shower room and luckily for them they actually received a shower that day. Many other prisoners were convinced that they were headed into the showers, and actually were herded into the gas chambers created by Rudolph Höss. Lucille recalled the SS guard yelling, "What an ugly bunch! Too bad the gas chambers are overworked today. But we'll get them another day. There's plenty of time- if they're still around!"³⁵

The women were led to the barracks and received rags for clothing that were not sufficient to protect them from the harsh cold weather of Poland. On the way to the barracks Lucille heard music being played, possibly Beethoven. When she looked up she realized it was prisoners playing the music and being conducted by a German SS officer. She witnessed smoke barreling out the chimneys of the crematorium and the smell of burning bodies that carried on for miles. In the barracks, five women occupied each cubicle, and there was barely enough room for the women to sit much less lay down. The bathrooms and washrooms subpar, to say the least. The toilet was a simple hole in the ground that reeked, and the washroom was a large metal trough with spigots that leaked small drips of brown water. A favorite past time of the Kapo, a supervising prisoner

³⁴ Ibid, 91.

³⁵ Ibid, 91.

appointed by the SS, was to stop prisoners right before they reached the latrine and force them to stand at attention and answer questions until they could no longer take it and relieve themselves.³⁶ The Kapo would then beat the prisoners and then allow them to drag themselves to the latrine covered in their own feces.³⁷ For food they were given soup but no bowls, they had to salvage what soup they could and eat with their palms. The women were then instructed that every morning they would line up for roll call in rows of five, in alphabetical order.

Lucille stood in roll call for almost five hours with minimal clothing and malnourished every day. In her memoir, she spoke of prisoners who could not withstand the rigor of roll call were carried away and never seen again. As a result of this routine and the work that followed, some prisoners ran to the electrified barbed wire fence and held on until they were dead from the shock.³⁸ Lucille recalled when she had to run naked past the camp doctor, Dr. Mengele, who is now infamous for the harsh medical trials he conducted on the prisoners. Prisoners were required to run by Dr. Mengele to prove if they were healthy enough to continue working. Once again the Nazis' determined in a matter of seconds life or death for the prisoners. One morning Lucille and some other prisoners attended roll call and then were herded back onto trains to be transported to the work camp Dessauer Ufar in Hamburg, Germany.

Lucille was lucky in the sense that she survived the horrendous acts against humanity during the Holocaust. However, millions were not as fortunate. Even though Lucille was happy to be alive, the amount of trauma she witnessed changed her life

³⁶ The Kapo were prisoners that were assigned by the SS to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative task within the camp.

³⁷ Terrence Des Press, "The Will To Survive" in Donald L. Niewyk, ed., *The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 60.

³⁸ Eichengreen, *From Ashes to Life*, 99.

forever. She, like many other survivors, was physically liberated by the Allied Powers in 1945, but never emotionally. She was not and would never be again the naïve, happy young girl she was prior to the Holocaust.

Lucille did not spend a tremendous amount of time at Auschwitz, but her memoir grants us insight into the running of the camp. Her experience was not the standard for all. She was lucky enough to leave and not have to withstand the harsh treatment of Auschwitz for long, but other prisoners were not so lucky. For example, the *Sonderkommando*, or Special Squad, was a group of prisoners selected by the SS to assist in the running of the crematorium. It was their task to maintain order among the new arrivals headed to the gas chambers, to extract corpses from the chambers, to pull gold teeth from the victims, to cut women's hair, to sort and classify clothes, shoes, and luggage and to transport the bodies to the crematoria and extract and eliminate the ashes.³⁹ Even though this demonstrates collaboration from the prisoners with Nazis, in October 1944 a *Sonderkommando* rebelled and blew up one of the crematoriums to show the prisoners were not compliant.

Primo Levi was an Italian Jew that was sent to Auschwitz in February 1944. Levi was arrested for being an anti-Fascist, and was deported by the Italians to Poland. He, unlike Lucille, had to endure severe labor while at the camp. He and other prisoners were forced to move large objects around the camp, while dealing with the harsh conditions of everyday life. They were given minimal food and clothing and what they were given was not efficient. Levi details that he was forced to work in the snow with large wooden shoes that were difficult to maneuver in. He remembered that when he reached the work site he was required to “unload an enormous, cast-iron cylinder from the wagon: I think it was a

³⁹ Omer Bartov, *The Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 2000), 261.

synthesis tube and weighed several tons.”⁴⁰ The prisoners that were considered healthy were required to participate in grueling labor everyday that would wear them down, and often result in death. Levi explained that he was worried about taking his focus off of his job even for a minute, because the weight of the cylinder could easily crush any prisoner.

Numerous prisoners were exposed to the indignities described by Levi and Eichengreen, and after the camp was liberated by the Red Army, Höss would eventually be called upon to answer for his role. Rudolph Höss was put on trial in March 1947 by the Supreme National Tribunal of Poland, for his war crimes during the Holocaust. One of his charges was being the commandant of Auschwitz and thereby being responsible for the murders and treatment of prisoners. In his indictment it stated that Höss was charged with the following crimes:

“Deprived of life: (a) about 300,000 camp registered inmates, (b) about 4,000,000 people mainly Jews brought to the camp from different European countries to be killed upon their arrival, and therefore not included in die register of the camp inmates, (c) about 12,000 Soviet prisoners of war confined in the camp in violation of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of Prisoners of War; all this by asphyxiation in gas-chambers, shooting, hanging, lethal injections of phenol or by medical experiments causing death, systematic starvation, by creating special conditions in the camp which were causing a high rate of mortality, by excessive work of the inmates, and by other methods...”⁴¹

The prosecution declared that Höss was responsible for the ill treatment the prisoners suffered at Auschwitz, because he was commandant of the camp for majority of the killings. Also, he was charged with allowing camp officials to steal prisoner’s valuables.

Höss’ defense did not deny any of the charges, but his defenders simply claimed that the four million estimated murders were higher than what he believed to be the

⁴⁰ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958), 66.

⁴¹ United Nations War Crimes Commission, *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals*, Vol. VII (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1948), 11.

number. Höss believe the actual number was approximately 2,500,000 million. Also, Höss used the defense that he was following orders given to him by Heinrich Himmler in 1941 that called for the extermination of camp prisoners.

Throughout the trial witnesses came forward to testify to observing the crematoria, impossible living conditions and ill treatment of the prisoners of the camp. However, no one pin pointed Höss in directly murdering any prisoners. Instead, it was claimed that Höss was a desk killer that never directly murdered any of the prisoners, but orchestrated their deaths from a distance. Most survivors' testimonies do not mention any Germans directly in their ill treatment, because they mostly dealt with "brutal thugs" dealing out orders from German employers.⁴² Interactions between Jewish prisoners and the German authorities were often "conducted through the intermediaries, the local representatives of the Jewish Councils of Elders."⁴³ Therefore, throughout my research I did not discover any direct mention by survivors of ill treatment or brutality suffered at the hands of Höss.

Even though the victims' stories never detailed any direct contact with Rudolph Höss, his presence can be felt in all of their stories. The orchestration and organization of the camp all comes back to him. Höss was the leader that taught the camp guards how to do their jobs; therefore, even though he did not personally murder any prisoners he gave the ammunition to the SS. The Nazis were organized mass murders and is proven in the victim's memoirs and interviews. Höss was the shadow killer that never made his presence known to the prisoners, as far as scholars' can prove. It is not a defeat that a smoking gun cannot be found to link him to the murders, because through Höss' own

⁴² Mary Fulbrook, *A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 152.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 152.

memoir we know that he admitted to creating the gas chambers and the construction of the camp. Without Höss there would not have been the Auschwitz we know today, he created the camp and transformed it into the mass death camp it is infamous for today. All of the victims' stories are important in detailing the turmoil and pain he instilled in the prisoners lives forever.

Motivations for the Perpetrators of the Holocaust



Höss After His Capture by the Allies. Wikimedia Commons

Rudolph Höss, like many of the other perpetrators of the Holocaust, was an ordinary man that committed horrendous acts against humanity. Höss was not born or raised by his parents to be a mass murderer. Through his training in the German military, the Free Corps, the Nazi Party, and the SS, he changed from an ordinary man to man that could commit genocide. Scholars have researched the mindset of Nazis for decades to better understand why they made the decision to exterminate millions. Höss is a tragic example of how obedience and loyalty to the wrong people can change your life course. Höss enjoyed life outdoors, which was seen during his time in the Artaman group, and he would have been happy to continue in that lifestyle if Heinrich Himmler did not convince him to join the SS. However, Höss may not have been the man that ordered the Final Solution, but he did create the use of the gas chambers and that took time and thought. Höss thought on his own to innovate a new killing method, but he never would have if he

had not been recruited by the SS and Himmler. Höss and other perpetrators like him are examples of how certain decisions can change your entire life course for the worst.

Höss was a sane man. If he was insane it might be easier to understand how he was able to commit genocide. Ultimately he had profound respect for law, order and bureaucracy. He served the Nazi Party very well, because he enjoyed the extreme organization of the party. Overtime, he began to view the prisoners as numbers instead of people. He was obsessed with killing more and more prisoners within the gas chambers. He took great pride in being able to efficiently meet the quotas set by his superiors. Within the Nazi Regime there was a sense of competition between leaders to be the most efficient in their job of eliminating “enemies of the state.” Höss was rational, organized and determined, traits that enabled him to orchestrate efficiently the death millions of Jews. But how could someone “sane” not see that what he was doing was evil?

The first factor that contributed to his acts against humanity was his inability or unwillingness to think for himself. Höss blindly followed orders and did not take time to think if his actions were right. However, this does not mean that Höss did not know what he was doing was wrong. He knew what he was doing was cruel, but within the Nazi party and Germany there was propaganda that instilled in Germans that Jews were less than human. Scholar Hannah Ardent did significant research on Adolf Eichmann, prominent SS and Nazi party member in charge of organizing the transportation of Jews from the ghettos to concentration camps. Ardent claimed that perpetrators were not able to be critical of positive law, that is, their failure to take distance from the requirements that law and policy imposed on them.⁴⁴ Höss is guilty of not thinking for himself. His

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, "Hannah Ardent's Death Sentences," *Comparative Literature Studies* (November 2011), 280.

father taught him at a young age to be obedient to whomever was in charge of the government, and that is exactly what Höss did. This defense refers back to the *Führerprinzip* and that subordinates were following the orders of their superiors when they killed the prisoners.

It cannot be said that Rudolph Höss is free of guilt because he was an obedient, loyal and efficient Nazi. He had a mind of his own he just never utilized it or it was easier to go along with the ideals of Nazism because the party gained popularity throughout the 1930s. The decisions he made in his life could have been avoided if he had more of a capacity to think for himself. Höss's role in genocide could have been stopped in this case if he would have thought ethically.⁴⁵ There are four kinds of evil in man and each can hinder a person to commit acts of "evil". The four types of evil are indifference, selfishness, heartlessness and malevolence. Höss was heartless; he caused sufferings of others to advance his own interests. Examples of other individuals that are suitable for the heartless group of evil are terrorists.⁴⁶ They murder a group of people to achieve their personal goals. Höss is responsible for the death of nearly a million victims to obtain his goal of eliminating a perceived enemy (Jews) of Germany.

Christopher Browning wrote his book *Ordinary Men* to analyze the mindset of the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101 who murdered civilians while stationed in Poland during the Second World War. Browning presents four reasons for how ordinary men were capable of committing genocide. First, is the idea of brutalization and dehumanizing of the Jewish people to where Nazis saw them as less than human.⁴⁷ Nazis were educated when joining the party on Hitler's prophecy of a "Europe free of Jews". The education

⁴⁵Peter Schotten, "Hannah Ardent's Eichmann Reconsidered." *Modern Age* (Spring 2007), 142.

⁴⁶Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitler's Bureaucrats* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 277.

⁴⁷ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 160.

about Jews that Nazis learned depicted Jews as less than human and an enemy of the state. Second, scholars have produced the idea of a “sleeper” that all human beings have the ability to become brutally violent under certain circumstances. Third, the idea of careerism is presented. This philosophy hits on both ends of the spectrum. Some men did not partake in the murders because they did not have any desire to move up in rank. Yet, some men wanted to become more respected and “tough” in order to move up rank so they volunteered to murder Jews. Finally, the most common reason is the authority of the Nazi leaders and that the men were simply following orders.⁴⁸ The men were to be excused of all blame for the mere fact that they were doing what was ordered of them and they could not disobey. Rudolph Höss is a mixture of the third and fourth reasons for how ordinary men can commit mass murders. Höss had a desire to please his superiors, such as Himmler, so he could move up in rank and obtain their approval. That is how he was promoted from a block leader at Dachau, to the commandant of Auschwitz and finally an inspector of all Nazi concentration camps. Also, Höss fits the mold of men who commit violent acts because they were simply following orders. That was his defense throughout his entire trial and what he wrote about in his memoir explaining his actions.

The only thinking Rudolph Höss did on his own was creating ideas to exterminate more Jews efficiently, which he was excellent at because he never questioned the orders set by his superiors. When they wanted sum amount of Jews exterminated at Auschwitz, Höss achieved that number. He perhaps did not possess a willful desire to murder, but the thoughtless, almost passive desire to please his superiors, to perform well on the job, is

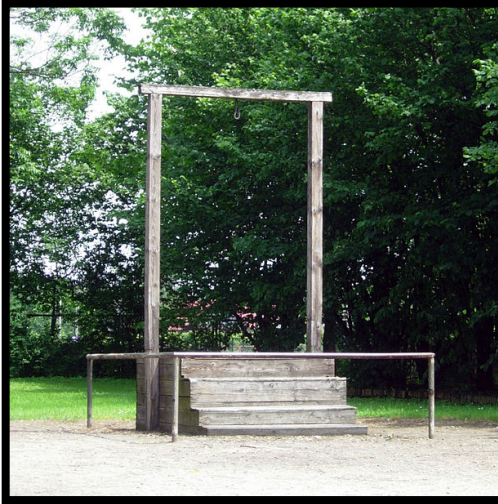
⁴⁸ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 170.

what accounted for the destruction of innocent life.⁴⁹ This prompted Höss to create methods to complete the elimination of Jews and other prisoners from Europe.

Overall, scholars have spent decades trying to understand the mindset of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. It is unimaginable for people to understand how ordinary men can commit genocide. Usually literature on the Holocaust depicts the perpetrators as evil and secluded to only Nazis. However, that is untrue because scholars, such as Christopher Browning, proved that the men of Police Battalion 101 were ordinary men that were put in the right situation at the right time, and therefore were capable of participating in extreme violence. Rudolph Höss was a normal German boy that transformed into an efficient “desk killer” once he joined the SS and was trained to dehumanize his prisoners.

⁴⁹Jennifer Ring, *The Political Consequences of Thinking* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997) 22.

Conclusion



Gallows at Auschwitz Where Höss was Executed. Wikimedia Commons

Rudolph Franz Ferdinand Höss was a typical German boy who was transformed into a relentless effective SS functionary who is responsible for the death of nearly one million victims by his development of the gas chambers during the Holocaust. Höss was an obedient, loyal and efficient Nazi who was eager to please his superiors. Throughout researching Höss' memoir, his trial transcripts, interviews and victim memoirs it is clear that Höss was in fact a "desk killer." However, he was not the typical desk killer, because he had more personal encounters with his victims since he lived on the grounds of Auschwitz. Another perpetrator, Adolf Eichmann, was in charge of transporting prisoners from the ghettos to camps. In his trial for his acts against humanity during the Holocaust he was defined as a desk killer also. Eichmann rarely saw his victims he sat in an office and planned out transporting schedules and numbers; Höss saw his victims day-in and day-out because while he was commandant he lived on the grounds of Auschwitz, and if he did not see the killings he certainly could smell the burning of corpses from the crematoria.

Rudolph Höss' defense of that he was following orders when he carried out the murder of millions was a popular defense of Nazi perpetrators. His defense is true in the fact that if he had not joined the Nazi party in the 1920s or the SS in 1934 he could have lived an ordinary life. The propaganda and his training in the SS made him begin to dehumanize Jews, Gypsies and others that were seen as enemies of Germany. Throughout the years of the Holocaust he lost his sympathy and compassion for his victims. Höss did not have a passion for killing, but he did enjoy pleasing his superiors and being obedient at the task they requested. When Henrich Himmler called for the elimination of Jews in 1941, Höss exceeded expectations by implementing the use of the gas chamber to kill hundreds of prisoners at once. Höss impressed Himmler to the point that he was promoted to being in charge of inspecting all concentration camps under German territory in 1943.

Research has proven Höss' defense that "he had never stolen prisoners 'valuables. He had never personally abused or killed any prisoners. He had acted always under orders."⁵⁰ Through research of his memoir, trial documents and victim memoirs it was never discovered of any direct killing of a prisoner at the hands of Höss. This does not mean that it never, happened but that it was never documented. The fact that there is no proof of him directly killing anyone does not mean he is innocent. Höss still created the use of gas chambers and the Zyklon B gas to kill millions during the Holocaust, because Auschwitz was not the only camp to use gas chambers after Höss implemented them. Gas chambers were used in majority of the extermination camps, because it was the quickest way to kill mass amounts of prisoners.

⁵⁰ Hughes, *Mass Murderer Repents*, 4.

Looking at the victims' memoirs it is easy to see the harsh environment they suffered through at Auschwitz. They had subpar food, clothing and shelter while at the camp. The Nazis were worried about their own party members and their well-being above the prisoners, which led to the creation of the gas chambers because it was less traumatizing to the Nazi killers. The prisoners of Auschwitz rarely left once they entered the camp and were welcome by the haunting sign, "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" (Work Makes You Free). The Nazis kept the prisoners working by making them believe there was still hope in their release. The same concepts of trickery were used to coerce them into the "showers", which actually was the gas chamber. Rudolph Höss was at Auschwitz at the beginning in 1940 and was part of the building and transformation of the camp, if anyone is responsible for the conditions and harsh treatment the prisoners endured, it is Höss.

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