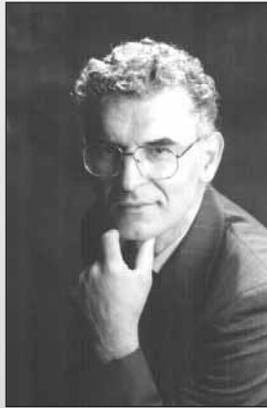


In spring and summer of 1944, 400,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz and allegedly murdered there in gas chambers. The Auschwitz crematoria are said to have been unable to cope with so many corpses. Therefore, every single day thousands of corpses are claimed to have been incinerated on huge pyres lit in deep trenches. The sky over Auschwitz was covered in thick smoke. This is what some witnesses want us to believe.



This study investigates all available documentary, physical, and anecdotal evidence. Carlo Mattogno shows that the witness statements contradict each other in every regard. They also contradict what would have been physically possible. The fact that there is no documentary or forensic evidence supporting the claims is finally explained by air photos taken by German and Allied air planes in 1944. They prove that the witnesses were wrong: No traces of huge pyres or massive smoke covering the camp can be seen.

Although based on a kernel of truth, Mattogno concludes, the witness statements are vastly exaggerated, and their homicidal claims are untrue.

CARLO MATTOGNO • AUSCHWITZ: OPEN AIR INCINERATIONS



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AUSCHWITZ: OPEN AIR INCINERATIONS

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Carlo Mattogno



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Introduction

In 1979, two CIA agents, Dino A. Brugioni and Robert G. Poirier, published for the first time a selection of air photos of Auschwitz-Birkenau taken by the U.S. Air Force in 1944. They argued that these photographs demonstrated the reality of the mass extermination of Jews perpetrated at Birkenau, but because of their incompetence both in the field of air photogrammetry and in history¹ the result was a superficial and fanciful interpretation.

From that moment on the air photos of Birkenau became part of the argumentative tools of holocaust historiography. On the one hand, these photos led to a heated internal debate about the reason why the Allies did not bomb Auschwitz and thus destroy the “factory of death.”² On the other hand, the thesis of the alleged proof of a mass extermination was moved into the background in favor of the proof of the presence of alleged introduction holes for Zyklon B on the underground morgues of crematoria II and III in some of these photographs. Already in 1989 Danuta Czech had used the photograph of August 15, 1944, for that purpose.³ The most important of these photographs were published and discussed in 1992 by revisionist scholar John C. Ball.⁴

The thesis of the “proof” of the Zyklon B apertures was further developed until it reached its climax with Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman⁵ as well as with Robert Jan van Pelt.⁶ This thesis has, however, no foundation and has been radically refuted by revisionist scholars.⁷ Perhaps for that very reason John C. Zimmerman wanted to redirect the attention on the thesis, according to which these air photos constitute the “proof” of the alleged mass extermination. The nucleus of this “proof” is said to be the “cremation trenches,” and Zimmerman has devoted many pages to this topic in a book he published in

¹ The authors based their “historical” analysis on two strongly propagandistic works: Jan Sehn’s article “Concentration and extermination camp at Oświęcim (Auschwitz-Birkenau),” in: Central Commission for Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, *German Crimes in Poland*, Warsaw 1946, vol. I, pp. 25-92, and the book by Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, *The Death Factory*. Pergamon Press, Oxford-New York 1966.

² One of the first books of this trend was *Warum Auschwitz nicht bombardiert wurde* by Heiner Lichtenstein (Bund-Verlag, Köln 1980), which contains the reproductions of six air photos.

³ D. Czech, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau 1939-1945*. Rowohlt Verlag, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1989, p. 862.

⁴ J.C. Ball, *Air Photo Evidence. Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, Sobibor, Bergen Belsen, Belzec, Babi Yar, Katyn Forest*. Ball Resource Services Limited, Delta, B.C. Canada, 1992.

⁵ M. Shermer, A. Grobman, *Denying History. Who says the Holocaust never happened and why do they say it?* University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2000 (First paperback printing 2002, p. 145).

⁶ R.J. van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz. Evidence from the Irving Trial*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2002, pp. 174f.

⁷ Cf. My articles “C. Mattogno, “‘No Holes, No Gas Chamber(s),’” *The Revisionist* 2(4) (2004), pp. 387-410; C. Mattogno, “Denying Evidence,” *The Revisionist*, 3(1&2), (2005), in preparation. All reprinted in a slightly revised version in Germar Rudolf, Carlo Mattogno, *Auschwitz-Lies*, Theses & Dissertations Press, Chicago 2005.

2000.⁸ Even though he did turn to two “experts” on air photogrammetry, Mark van Alstine and Carroll Lucas, his conclusions are even farther off the mark than those of Brugioni and Poirier.

In this matter, the most surprising aspect is that in spite of the enormous demonstrational value, which official historiography attributes to the air photos of Birkenau, these people have never produced a general study of such documents. Zimmerman’s own work is intentionally truncated: while he does in fact present an (imaginative) analysis of the photographs, he does so without confronting them with the corresponding testimonies. As the reality of the alleged event (the mass extermination of Jews) is based solely on self-styled eyewitnesses, a proper historiographic method would require a comparison of the statements by these witnesses with what can actually be seen in the air photos, and only if the photographs fully confirm the testimonies can they be taken to prove the reality of the extermination.

And if they do not? In that case they constitute the proof of the fact that the testimonies are false. It is clear that Zimmerman did not want to run that risk. But from the point of view of method and science, the problem must be viewed precisely along those lines. The first part of this study is dedicated to this approach.

Besides the air photos, the holocaustic historiography makes use also of documentary “proof” of the extermination of the Jews in 1944: the increase in the workforce of the Birkenau crematoria in line with the arrival of the Hungarian Jews at Birkenau is claimed to demonstrate that these Jews were for the most part gassed and then cremated. In the second part of this study, I will therefore discuss the available documentation (much more abundant than the holocaust historians might think) in an effort to decide on whether this interpretation is, in fact, inevitable or whether there are not other and quite innocuous explanations in this respect.

⁸ *Holocaust Denial. Demographics, Testimonies and Ideologies*, University Press of America. Lanham, New York, Oxford 2000, pp. 208-253 and 275-301.

Part One:

Open Air Corpse Cremation at Birkenau in 1944

1. Official Theses

In the official history of Auschwitz, spring and summer of 1944 represent the crucial phase of the alleged extermination of the Jews. During that time, it is claimed, such an enormous number of Jews arrived at the camp that the Birkenau cremation ovens were no longer able to incinerate the masses of gassed people, and the SS was forced to resort to open-air incinerations. In spite of the fact that, most of all for this period, the alleged mass cremation⁹ trenches played an essential part, holocaust historiography is extremely vague in this respect.

Franciszek Piper, the director of historical research at the Auschwitz Museum, who is considered to be one of the foremost specialists of the alleged exterminations at Auschwitz, has this to say:¹⁰

“Furnace overload caused frequent breakdowns. For example, in the initial stages of the extermination of Hungarian Jews, crematorium V had to be shut down due to a breakdown of the chimneys. As a result, some bodies were incinerated in crematorium IV. The remainder were burned at the rate of about 5,000 corpses in 24 hours in the incineration pits near the crematoria. The same number were incinerated in the pits of bunker 2, which was reactivated in the spring of 1944.

Thus in the summer of 1944, the combined capacity of all the incineration installations reached the staggering number of 20,000 victims.”

Official historiography is not in a position to say anything specific about the dimensions, the location, or the number of these alleged mass cremation trenches, which means for all practical purposes that it is not able to say anything whatsoever in this respect, and the assertions of individual historians like Jean-Claude Pressac¹¹ represent nothing but their own personal conjectures. This is due to the fact that the story of mass cremation trenches is based exclusively on testimonies and that these testimonies, as we shall see in chap-

⁹ I use the term “cremation” in a wide sense because, strictly speaking, a cremation can only be realized in a crematorium furnace.

¹⁰ F. Piper, “Gas Chambers and Crematoria,” in: Israel Gutman, Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington / Indianapolis 1994, pp. 173f.. The figure of a daily cremation of 20,000 bodies is the result of a generous rounding, because F. Piper held that the Birkenau crematoria had a total capacity of 8,000 bodies per day.

¹¹ Cf. Below, chapter 5.

ter IV, are contradictory in every regard so that it is impossible to draw from them any data of historical value.

2. The Genesis of the Story of Mass Cremations: The Reports from the Auschwitz Resistance Movement

The initial reports concerning cremation trenches at Birkenau in 1944 came from the secret resistance movement at Auschwitz. The “Periodic report for May 5 through 25, 1944” contains a section entitled “The death factory” which asserts the following:¹²

“The 4 crematoria in operation have ‘handled’ up to 5000 [persons] per day. The Auschwitz ovens have ‘handled’ 1,500,000 Jews, plus 100,000 Poles, Russians and others.”

The “Special annex to the periodic report for May 5 though 25, 1944” was devoted to “Auschwitz Action Heess [Aktion Höss].” We read i.a.:¹³

“Starting in mid-May, intensification of transports of Hungarian Jews. 8 trains arrive each night, 5 during the day. The trains have 48-50 cars with 100 persons in each one.”

Hence, within one day we would have a total of 13 trains with 62,400 to 65,000 deportees! The detainees located at Auschwitz furthermore assert that at Birkenau there are two gas chambers altogether:¹⁴

“Both gas chambers run all the time, but they are insufficient.”

With respect to the cremation of corpses, the report says:¹⁵

“The 4 crematoria operate continuously – [there is] a furnace,^[16] and pyres^[17] are burning in the open. From afar, one can see a dense black smoke. Still, it is not possible to cope with the cremation. One crematorium is now out of commission and being repaired in feverish haste, because the grids and parts of the oven burned out on account of the uninterrupted operation.”

On May 27, 1944, the Jewish detainees Czesław Mordowicz and Arnost Rosin escaped from Birkenau. In June they drew up a report on the camp, in which we can read:¹⁸

“On May 15 [1944], transports from Hungary began to arrive at Birkenau in great numbers. Every day some 14,000 to 15,000 Jews would arrive. [...] Only 10% of them were accepted in the camp, the others were

¹² Sprawozdanie okresowe od 5 V 1944 – 25 V 1944. APMO, D-RO/91, vol. VII, p. 437.

¹³ Dodatek nadzwyczajny do okresowego sprawozdania za czas od 5 – 25 V 1944. APMO, D-RO/91, vol. VII, p. 440.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 441.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 442.

¹⁶ “jedna cegielnia”

¹⁷ “stosy”

¹⁸ Henryk Świeboccki (ed.), *London wurde informiert... Berichte von Auschwitz-Flüchtlingen*, Staatliches Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 1997, pp. 302f.

immediately gassed and burned. [...] As the capacity of the crematoria was insufficient, trenches some 30 m long and 15 m wide were again (as before the time of the crematoria) dug in the little birch wood where corpses were burned day and night. In this way, the 'possibilities of extermination' were almost unlimited."

In her *Kalendarium* under the date of August 30, 1944, Danuta Czech reports a secret message from the detainee S. Kłodzinski who speaks of the filling in of "trenches, in which the corpses of the gassed had been burned."¹⁹

3. Cremation Trenches in the Soviet and Polish Investigations

Between February 14 and March 8, 1945, a commission of experts composed of the Polish engineers Jarosław Doliński and Roman Dawidowski and of the Soviet engineers V.F. Lavrushin and J.I. Shuer drew up a report on the alleged extermination installations at Birkenau. On the subject of open-air cremations, they stated the following:²⁰

"b/ Gas chamber No. 2^[21] with the pyres

[...] The activity of the second gas chamber and the pyres nearby was interrupted in April of 1943, then resumed in May of 1944 and continued until October 1944. Therefore, this gas chamber and the pyres near it operated for a total of one year and ten months.

c/ Pyres near crematorium No. 5

Between May and October of 1944, the ovens of crematorium 5 were stopped and the corpses of the persons poisoned were burnt on 3 pyres located in the area of the crematorium."

In its reports, the Soviet commission of investigation speaks always of "pyres," never of "cremation trenches."

In his technical report on the alleged extermination installations at Auschwitz, dated September 26, 1946, and prepared for Judge Jan Sehn as part of the preparation of the Höss trial, the engineer Roman Dawidowski wrote:²²

"In May of 1944 large transports of people began to arrive – (mainly Hungarian Jews) that were sent directly from the ramp to the gas chambers – so large, in fact, that the four crematoria did not succeed in cremating the bodies of the gassed. On account of this, 6 enormous trenches were dug next to crematorium V and the gas chambers of Bunker 2 were reactivated, as were the trenches next to this gassing installation. A cremation in all crematoria and in the two groups of trenches, one day in June of 1944,

¹⁹ D. Czech, op. cit. (note 3), p. 866. Cf. below, chapter 10.3.

²⁰ Protocol, February 14 – March 8, 1945, City of Oświęcim. GARF, 7021-108, pp.7-9.

²¹ Designates the so-called "Bunker 2," a term unknown to the Soviet commission of investigation, as were the designations "little red house" and "little white house."

²² AGK, NTN, 93 (Höss trial, vol. 11), p. 41.

allowed a total of 24,000 gassed bodies to be reached; for that reason, the detainees assigned to work in the crematoria were rewarded with [a ration of] vodka.”

In 1946, Jan Sehn published the results of his findings on Auschwitz in the form of an article, which later became the basis of the indictment against Rudolf Höss. On the subject of the extermination of the Hungarian Jews Sehn affirmed:²³

“Between May and August of 1944, when there were mass transports of Hungarian Jews and French insurgents, in the rush caused by the developments on the war fronts, Hungarians and Frenchmen were gassed in such numbers that the crematoria were not in a position to cremate all the bodies. Therefore, six enormous trenches^[24] were dug next to crematorium V and the old trenches near the gas chamber in the wood [Bunker 2] were reopened and the bodies were cremated continuously. When all installations ran at full throttle, in August of 1944^[25], a figure of 24,000 cremated bodies per day was reached!”

The verdict of the Höss trial (April 2, 1947) asserts in this respect:²⁶

“In the four crematoria of the Birkenau camp there were thus 46 mufles with a total capacity of 10,000 bodies per day.^[27] The gassing of the detainees in the Birkenau camp area took place in the gas chambers. Those gas chambers, 2 of them, were in the basements of crematoria II and III. Furthermore, crematoria IV and V had 4 gas chambers on the ground floor. The total capacity of all gas chambers was 60,000 [persons per day...].

Because the capacity of the gas chambers in the crematoria was considerably greater than that of the crematoria ovens, the bodies of the gassed persons were also burnt in a series of enormous trenches next to the crematoria.^[28] In these trenches the bodies of the people were cremated on piles of burning wood.”

And in the indictment for the trial against the camp garrison one can read:²⁹

“At certain times the crematoria were unable to cope with the workload, therefore 6 enormous trenches were dug near crematorium V and a supplementary incineration of corpses was undertaken there. The capacity of the Auschwitz gas chambers was 60,000 gassed per day, but that of the ovens was much lower. It was only after the trenches had been dug that it was possible to reach an average of 18,000 cremated corpses per day. On the basis of the average capacity of the crematoria and the supplementary installations, the People’s Supreme Tribunal, in the verdict of the Höss

²³ J. Sehn, “Obóz koncentracyjny i zagłady Oświęcim,” in: *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce* Poznań 1946, vol. I, p. 126.

²⁴ “sześć olbrzymich dolów”

²⁵ Roman Dawidowski speaks instead of June 1944.

²⁶ AGK, NTN, 146z, p. 32.

²⁷ The theoretical maximum daily cremation capacity of the Birkenau crematoria was 1,104 corpses.

²⁸ “obok krematoriów”

²⁹ GARF, 7021-108-39, p. 38.

trial, has set the total number of persons cremated in the Auschwitz extermination installations at no less than 3 million.”

4. Testimonies Concerning the Cremation Trenches

Many former detainees of Auschwitz have spoken of the alleged cremation trenches, but the most important ones are obviously those of the so-called “*Sonderkommando*” of the Birkenau crematoria. In this chapter, we will list their assertions in chronological order.

4.1. Henryk Tauber

Henryk Tauber was deported to Auschwitz from the Krakow ghetto on January 19, 1943, and was given the ID number 90124. In February of 1943 he claims to have been incorporated into the so-called “*Sonderkommando*.” On February 27, 1945, Henryk Tauber was questioned by the Soviet military prosecutor, major Pakhomov. As to the topic of this study, he declared:³⁰

“Huge numbers of people were exterminated in the summer of 1944; 4 crematoria and 4 large pyres were in use for the extermination, French insurgents and Hungarians were exterminated. The whole time I worked in the Sonderkommando and came to work in all crematoria and on the pyres, so I know everything in detail.”

According to the witness, 400 corpses were placed into one trench and burned within 48 hours.³¹ When questioned by Judge Jan Sehn on May 24, 1945, he asserted:³²

“In May of 1944, the SS ordered us to dig, in the yard of crematorium V, in the area between the drainage ditch and the crematorium building, five trenches in which the bodies of the gassed persons from the Hungarian transports were then burned. Actually, rails for little carts were laid between those trenches [but because] the SS considered them impractical the detainees of the Sonderkommando dragged the corpses from the gas chambers directly into the trenches. At that time, the old Bunker 2 and its trenches for burning the corpses were put back into operation.”

In this way, the four “pyres” for the whole camp in the first declaration became, in the second statement, five trenches located only in the yard of crematorium V!

³⁰ Minutes of the interrogation of Henryk Tauber on February 27-28, 1945, GARF, 7021-108-8, p. 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³² Minutes of the interrogation of Henryk Tauber on May 24, 1945. Höss trial, vol. 11, p. 149.

4.2. Henryk Mandelbaum

Henryk Mandelbaum was deported to Auschwitz on April 23, 1944, and was registered as detainee No. 181970; six weeks later, according to what he says, he was assigned to the so-called “*Sonderkommando*.” On February 27, 1945, he was questioned by the Soviet military prosecutor Major Kotikov. Mandelbaum stated that he had been sent to crematorium V where the bodies of the gassed were burned on pyres. Asked by the Soviet prosecutor about the number of persons gassed and cremated daily in the crematorium in which he had worked, Mandelbaum replied:³³

“Each shift worked for 12 hours and cremated 6000-7000 corpses.”

Hence, in crematorium V alone, 12,000-14,000 corpses were burnt each day! When asked about the make-up of the pyres, the witness replied:³⁴

“We laid down one layer of wood and one of corpses, for ten layers altogether. In total, we put about 150-180 corpses on one pyre. We lit the pyre with pinewood soaked with gasoline. For that purpose we used also the bark stripped off the trees because it contained a lot of resin. We did that when we burned people from the camp, because they were very lean and burned poorly.”

Henryk Mandelbaum appeared as a witness in the fifth session of the Höss trial, at which he declared:³⁵

“At the time, burning was not done in the ovens but on pyres, because there were mass transports that arrived, Hungarian transports during that period. We had to work two shifts of 12 hours, a day shift and a night shift and this changed every week; those who worked the night shift would work the day shift the week after, and vice versa. There was a narrow-gauge track, because the ground was clayey, that made it difficult to carry the dead.”

Later, Mandelbaum also participated in the trial of the camp garrison. At the eighth session of that trial he made the following declaration:³⁶

“The cremation, when I worked there, was done in trenches and on pyres. The pyres were made up in the following way: they were 30-35 meters long and some 15 meters wide. The preparations for the cremation of the gassed went like this: with the carts came large amounts of wood in small chunks which were laid out in the trenches, then from the forest were brought fir branches and on such a layer the bodies of the gassed were dumped. From the gas chamber to the trenches a narrow-gauge track was laid, by which the corpses were transported on flat cars to the trenches into which they were then thrown. When a certain number of corpses had been thrown in, they were doused with gasoline, and the pyre was lit at its four corners, and then, as the corpses burned, another layer of corpses and

³³ Minutes of the interrogation of Henryk Mandelbaum on February 27, 1945. GARF, 7021-108-13, p. 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁵ AKG, NTN,108, p. 839.

³⁶ AGK, NTN,162, pp. 163-164.

wood was added, so that the trenches burned continuously for 24-48 hours. After the cremation, the ashes were removed from the trenches and taken to the place where the crematorium was.”

According to the witness, into one cremation trench ten layers of 150-180 corpses alternating with a layer of wood were placed.³⁷ However, if we assume an average thickness of one meter for a layer of wood plus a layer of corpses, this would have yielded a pyre ten meters high!

4.3. Stanisław Jankowski (alias Alter Feinsilber” alias Fajnzylberg)

Stanisław Jankowski was deported to Auschwitz from the camp at Compiègne (France) on March 30, 1942, and was registered with the ID number 27675. According to his account, he was assigned to the so-called “*Sonderkommando*” in November 1942. In the interrogation by Jan Sehn on April 13, 1945, Stanisław Jankowski declared:³⁸

“Some time in July of 1944 the first transport from Hungary arrived. [...] At that time, an average of 18,000 Hungarians were murdered in Birkenau every day. From the transports that arrived for days on end, one after another, some 30% were picked out and housed in the camp. They were registered as series A and B. The remainder were gassed and burned in the ovens of the crematoria. In cases where the required number had not been reached, they were shot and burned in trenches. The rule was that the gas chambers should be used only for groups of 200 or more, because it was not worthwhile to operate them for smaller groups of people”

In an account secured by Franciszek Piper on August 28, 1985, Alter Fajnzylberg asserted:³⁹

“The cremation trenches which had an enormous capacity were located west of the gas chambers of crematorium V at a distance of some tens of meters. There were two trenches, and each one could accommodate some 2000 corpses. The corpses were placed on a layer of wood, a layer of men and a layer of women at a time, because they burned better that way. The corpses of children were also burned there. The cremation trenches worked in parallel with the ovens. Next to the trenches, run-off channels for the human fat had been dug, but I never saw that any fat flowed there – the corpses burned completely.”

³⁷ The expression used by the witness “on one pyre we placed 150-180 corpses altogether” can only mean that each layer of the pyre was made up of 150-180 corpses, because ten layers of 15-18 corpses each would have required a pit of hardly 14 sqm, whereas the witness goes on to speak of pits measuring 450-525 sqm, and because the cremation of 150-180 corpses in 24-48 hours would have been absolutely irrelevant in the face of the alleged cremation of 12,000-14,000 corpses per day at crematorium V alone.

³⁸ Minutes of the interrogation of Stanisław Jankowski, in: Jadwiga Bezwińska, Danuta Czech (eds.), *Inmitten des grauenvollen Verbrechens. Handschriften von Mitgliedern des Sonderkommandos*, Verlag des Staatlichen Auschwitz-Birkenau Museums, 1996, pp. 48f.

³⁹ APMO, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 113, p. 9.

The witness attached a drawing⁴⁰ to his account showing the position and the dimensions of the trenches – both were 20 meters long, 2 meters wide, and 2 meters deep. Jankowski's statement will be addressed in more detail in chapter 7.3. below.

4.4. Szlama Dragon

Szlama Dragon was deported to Auschwitz from the Mława ghetto on December 6, 1942, and was registered with the ID number 80359. He is said to have become part of the so-called “*Sonderkommando*” the day of his arrival. Questioned by Jan Sehn on May 10 and 11, 1945, he declared:⁴¹

“In early May of 1944, the transports of Hungarian Jews began to be gassed and burned in crematorium V. The corpses of the gassed of some of the early transports were burned in the ovens of crematorium IV, because at the time the chimneys of crematorium V were damaged. Finally, the corpses of the Hungarian Jews were cremated in trenches dug for this purpose next to the building of crematorium V. There were 5 trenches excavated there, 25 meters long, 6 wide, and 3 deep. In the trenches, 5000 corpses were burned daily. But as there were more and more transports with Hungarian Jews that arrived, Bunker 2 was reactivated, and those people were gassed and burned there as well. I don't know how many persons were burned each day at that Bunker because at that time, when they burned the Hungarian Jews, I was no longer working at Bunker 2 [...]. On the basis of my observations, I would guess that during those two months some 300,000 Hungarian Jews were cremated in crematorium V.”

Both Dragon and Mandelbaum claim to have worked on the cremation trenches at the same place and at the same time, but whereas for the former there were five trenches measuring 25 by 6 meters, for the latter there were only two and they were some 30-35 by 15 meters in size! Moreover, Dragon's trenches, while having a total area of 750 square meters, had a capacity of 5000 corpses per day, considerably more than Mandelbaum's trenches with their 3000-3600 corpses in 24-48 hours and their minimum size of 900 square meters!

4.5. Sigismund Bendel

Sigismund Bendel was deported to Auschwitz from the camp at Drancy (France) on December 10, 1943, and received the ID number 167460. He claims that he became part of the “*Sonderkommando*” in June of 1944 and stayed there until January 18, 1945.

⁴⁰ Cf. Document 1.

⁴¹ Minutes of the interrogation of Szlama Dragon on May 10 and 11, 1945. Höss trial, vol. 11. p. 110.

In a report published in 1946, he described the alleged cremation trenches near crematorium V in the following way:⁴²

“When I entered the Sonder,^[43] the capacity of the ovens was regarded as being insufficient, and they were replaced by three trenches, each one 12 meters long, 6 meters wide, and 1.5 meters deep. The output of those trenches was tremendous: one thousand persons per hour.”

We have here another testimony on the alleged trenches of crematorium V which is at variance both with Mandelbaum’s and with Dragon’s statements

The following year, Bendel asserted that the record of the cremations – 26,000 (and not 24,000 as maintained by Jan Sehn) – was reached on June 25, 1944,⁴⁴ a day on which there could not have been any Hungarian Jews to be burnt, because no transports left Hungary between June 21 and 24⁴⁵ and the transports that left on June 25 took three days to arrive at Birkenau. The story of the 24,000 people gassed and burnt in a single day, with all its variants, was part and parcel of the propaganda baggage of the former Auschwitz detainees and each one gave it a different date. The anonymous author of the “Report on the Auschwitz Camp,” for example, placed it on June 9, 1944.⁴⁶ The story had very arbitrary contours. For Jaacov Gabai, the self-styled member of the “Sonderkommando,” the figure of 24,000 gassed persons was a daily average.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the detainee Kurt Marcus declared:⁴⁸

“When the transports from Hungary began to arrive on May 16, 1944, the crematoria were insufficient, because up to 30,000 corpses had to be burnt in the first few days.”

4.6. Miklos Nyiszli

Miklos Nyiszli arrived at Auschwitz on May 29, 1944, with a transport of Hungarian Jews and was registered as number A-8450. If we follow his declarations, he was selected in early June by Dr. Mengele as physician for the so-called “*Sonderkommando*,” with which he stayed until January of 1945. In 1946, his memoirs were published as a book with the title “I was an anatomist for Dr. Mengele at the crematorium of Auschwitz.”⁴⁹ It was later translated into many languages.

Even though he claimed to have spent eight months with the so-called “*Sonderkommando*,” being completely free to move around among all the

⁴² S. Bendel, “Les Crématoires. ‘Le Sonderkommando,’” in: Jean Cassou (ed.), *Témoignages sur Auschwitz*, Edition de l’Amicale des déportées d’Auschwitz, 1946, p. 161.

⁴³ Meaning *Sonderkommando*.

⁴⁴ Ministère de l’Intérieur. Direction Générale de la Sureté Nationale. Minutes of the interrogation of Sigismund Bendel on October 7, 1947. AGK, 153, p. 210a.

⁴⁵ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary*, Columbia University Press, New York 1981, vol. 2, p. 607.

⁴⁶ NO-1960, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Cf. below, testimony No.12.

⁴⁸ AGK, NTN, 135, p.153

⁴⁹ Miklos Nyiszli, *Dr. Mengele boncolóorvosa voltam az auschwitz-i krematóriumban*, Oradea, Nagyvárad, 1946.

crematoria, Nyiszli knows nothing of any cremation trenches in the yard of crematorium V; besides, according to his testimony, the so-called “Bunker 2” was not a gas chamber but merely an undressing room for the victims who were subsequently shot in the back of the neck by means of a small-caliber weapon. In this respect, he writes the following:⁵⁰

“The pyre was located about five or six hundred yards from number four [= number V] crematorium, directly behind the little birch forest of Birkenau, in a clearing surrounded by pines. [...] We set off in the direction of the thick twisting spiral of smoke. All those unfortunate enough to be brought here saw this column of smoke, which was visible from any point in the KZ, from the moment they first descended from the box cars and lined up for selection. It was visible at every hour of the day and night. By day it covered the sky above Birkenau with a thick cloud; by night it lighted the area with hellish glow. [...] Passing through the gate, we reached an open place which resembled a courtyard, in the middle of which stood a thatched-roof house whose plaster was peeling off. [...] In any case, it was now used as an undressing room for those on their way to the pyre. It was here that they deposited their shabby clothes, their glasses, and their shoes. It was here that the ‘surplus’ from the ‘Jewish ramp’ was sent, that is, those for whom there was no room in the four crematoriums. The worst kind of death awaited them. Here there were no faucets to slake the thirst of several days’ voyage, no fallacious signs to allay their misgivings, no gas chamber which they could pretend was a disinfection room.”

Some 150 meters away from this house, according to Nyiszli, there were two cremation trenches which he describes like this:

“The pyre was a ditch 50 yards long, six yards wide and three yards deep, a welter of burning bodies. [...] Fifty yards farther on a scene similar in all respects was being enacted. [⁵¹...] When the two pyres were operating simultaneously, the output varied from five to six thousand dead a day. Slightly better than the crematoriums, but here death was a thousand times more terrible, for here one died twice, first by a bullet in the back of the neck, then by fire.^[52]”

4.7. Dov Paisikovic

Dov Paisikovic was deported to Auschwitz from the ghetto of Munkacs (Hungary) in May of 1944 and was assigned the ID number A-3076 on May 21, 1944.⁵³ After three days in the camp, he claims to have been incorporated

⁵⁰ M. Nyiszli, *Auschwitz. A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, Fawcett Crest, New York 1961, p. 68-71.

⁵¹ A very free translation. The literal wording would be: “Some 50 meters from this ditch there is in operation another ditch just like it.” M. Nyiszli, op. cit. (note 49), p. 61.

⁵² According to M. Nyiszli, the capacity of each crematorium was 5000 corpses per day, or a total of 20,000 corpses per day! Ibid., p. 39.

⁵³ However, according to Danuta Czech's *Kalendarium*, the numbers A-2846/A-3095 were assigned to 250 Dutch Jews coming from the Westerbork camp; op. cit. (note 3), p. 779.

into the so-called “*Sonderkommando*,” in which he stayed until January 18, 1945, the day the camp was evacuated. In a declaration made in 1963 on the subject of the so-called “Bunker 2” (which he called “Bunker V), the witness declared:⁵⁴

“There was a pile of naked corpses; the corpses were bloated, and we were ordered to carry the corpses to a trench, some 6 meters wide and 30 meters long, in which corpses were already burning.”

On August 10, 1964, Dov Paisikovic drew up a long account, which was entrusted to Tadeusz Szymański, custodian of the Auschwitz Museum. The witness stated i.a.:⁵⁵

“As we approached the trench that had been dug and which was some 30 meters long and 10 meters wide, we saw at the bottom of this trench chunks of wood. Near the trench I saw a new hole, recently dug, which was already aflame and into which we carried the corpses.”

Paisikovic continued at this job for two weeks, doing day shifts and night shifts.⁵⁶ The witness attached four drawings of the alleged “Bunker 5” [= Bunker 2] to his account, one of which shows the position of the two “cremation trenches.”⁵⁷ With respect to the northern yard of crematorium V, Paisikovic relates a variant of the story of the cremation trenches:⁵⁸

“There was a time when corpses were buried in a trench near crematorium IV [= V], but after the end of the work in Bunker V [= Bunker 2] these corpses were unearthed from the trench near crematorium IV [= V] and were cremated in the crematorium ovens.”

Another variant of the story appears in the report by a “French student” – who had reached London by way of Auschwitz on April 17, 1945 – dated May 31, 1945. Under items 41 and 42 we read the following:⁵⁹

“In addition, large transports of Hungarian Jews arrived for extermination and these did not pass through the camp but were sent direct to the gas chambers. During July 44 they were being liquidated at the rate of 12,000 Hungarians daily (!) and as the crematories could not deal with such numbers, many bodies were thrown into large pits and covered with quicklime.”

4.8. Joshua Rosenblum

Joshua Rosenblum was deported to Auschwitz in March of 1944. After eight weeks in quarantine, he was assigned to the so-called “*Sonderkommando*.” In a declaration of 1970 he wrote:⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Declaration by Dov Paisikovic dated “Wien, den 17. Oktober 1963.” ROD, c[21]96, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Account by Dov Paisikovic of August 10, 1964. APMO, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 44, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

⁵⁷ Cf. document 2.

⁵⁸ Account by Dov Paisikovic of August 10, 1964. APMO, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 44, p. 101.

⁵⁹ L-161.

“I started working there on May 15, 1944, on ovens No. 3 and 4 to be exact. Up until that time – so I was told – the Polish Jews had been burned. Then it was the turn for transports from all over Europe.

Each oven could absorb 800 corpses in 24 hours. But that was not enough. More mass graves were dug, each one 2 meters deep, 10 meters long and 5 meters wide, to burn people. [...]

But when the large transports from Hungary and the Lodz ghetto began arriving from May and there were 10,000 people for each crematorium, they would be gassed and were then thrown into the graves in which 2000 people were burned within 2-3 hours.”

4.9. Filip Müller

Filip Müller was deported to Auschwitz from Slovakia on April 13, 1942, and registered under ID number 29236. According to his account, he was initially assigned to the so-called “*Sonderkommando*” of crematorium I at Auschwitz, from where he was moved to the Birkenau crematorium when it went into operation. In his well-known book that appeared in 1979, the witness describes the alleged cremation trenches. With respect to the trenches in the yard of crematorium V, he has this to say:⁶¹

“The two pits that had been dug had a length of 40 to 50 meters, were some 8 meters wide and 2 meters deep. [...] In the rear yard of crematorium V, Moll had another three cremation trenches dug so that now he had five available there.”

In addition to that a concrete platform measuring 60 by 15 meters was arranged in the yard of crematorium V:⁶²

“In order to quickly and inconspicuously remove the ashes from crematoria and the trenches, Moll had an area of some 60 m in length and 15 m wide next to the trenches close to the crematorium covered with concrete. Later on, the ashes from the trenches were pulverized on it by means of massive pounders.”

And this is how he describes the trenches in the area of “Bunker 2”:⁶³

“Furthermore, the farmhouse to the west of crematoria IV and V, which had been used as a place for annihilations in 1942, was put back into service under the designation of Bunker V. Next to the four rooms of the house, which served as gas chambers, four cremation trenches had been dug as well.”

⁶⁰ “Zeugenaussage (Betrifft das Sonderkommando in Birkenau)” (witness statement (concerns the Sonderkommando at Birkenau)) by J. Rosenblum dated Haifa, November 23, 1970. AF, collection “Wo ist Mengele?”, Haifa, p. 2.

⁶¹ F. Müller, *Drei Jahre in den Krematorien und Gaskammern von Auschwitz*. Verlag Steinhausen, Munich 1979, p. 207, 211.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 211f.

According to this witness, 1200 corpses were placed into the trenches in three layers of 400 corpses each:⁶⁴

“Once these ‘work phases’ were repeated one more time, 1200 bodies were lying on top of one another in three layers.”

On the question of the duration of the cremation, the witness asserts:⁶⁵

“The cremation of the corpses had taken five to six hours.”

4.10. Josef Sackar

Josef Sackar arrived at Auschwitz on April 11, 1944, with a transport of Jews from Greece and was registered with the ID number 182739. He was interviewed by Gideon Greif in 1985 and related the following:⁶⁶

“I remember the first day very well. We were in camp D, and one night they took us behind the last crematorium building where I saw the most horrible thing in my life. A small transport had arrived that evening. We did not have to work; they had taken us there just to get us used to the sight. There were excavated trenches called ‘Bunkers’ to burn the corpses. From the gas chambers they brought the corpses to these ‘Bunkers’, dumped them and burned them in the fire. [...] The ‘Bunkers’ were being used again when I was there and the Hungarian Jews arrived; at that time there was no more room in the ovens of the crematoria and the ‘Bunkers’ were activated once more. [...] Yes, it was a large trench where the corpses were taken and dumped. The trenches were deep and there was wood placed on the bottom. They brought the corpses here from the gas chambers and dumped them into the trenches. These trenches were all outside, in the open air. There were several trenches in which they burned the corpses.”

4.11. Saul Chasan

Saul Chasan came to Auschwitz with the Jewish transport from Greece on April 11, 1944, and was registered with the ID number 182527. In an interview given to Gideon Greif in May of 1987, he asserted the following on the subject of the so-called “Bunker 2”:⁶⁷

“We had to bring out the corpses. There was this basin, a deep pit, called ‘Bunker.’ We had to arrange the corpses there, one next to the other, like sardines. Other workers chopped wood, and we loaded everything – wood, corpses, corpses, corpses until the whole pit had been filled. [...] The pit was very deep, about four meters, I think.”

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 219.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 221.

⁶⁶ G. Greif, *Wir weinten tränenlos... Augenzeugenberichte der jüdischen “Sonderkommandos” in Auschwitz*, Böhlau, Köln 1995, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 228f.

4.12. Jaacov Gabai

This detainee, too, came to Auschwitz with the transport from Greece on April 11, 1944. He received the ID number 182569. When interviewed by Gideon Greif, he stated:⁶⁸

“24,000 Hungarian Jews had to be burned each day. [...]

From the end of April onwards and throughout the month of May several transports of Hungarian Jews came to Birkenau. There were so many people in these transports that the capacity of the crematoria could not absorb them. So they arranged pits and were thus able to burn thousands more each day. My group of the Sonderkommando was working next to the ‘sauna building’ in the woods, opposite crematorium III-IV. Pits were dug there to burn the corpses that the crematorium itself could not handle. These pits were called ‘Bunkers.’ I worked there for three days. From the gas chamber the corpses were taken to the Bunker and burned. The ‘Bunker’ was in the middle, among the trees, so one could not see what was going on there.”

4.13. Shlomo Venezia

Shlomo Venezia, another self-styled member of the “Sonderkommando” and latter-day witness, also came to Auschwitz with the Jewish transport from Greece on April 11, 1944, and was registered as detainee number 182727. According to him, he was assigned to the “Sonderkommando” in May. One day, he was sent to work in the “little farmhouse” (“Bunker 2”) where he witnessed a homicidal gassing. He related:⁶⁹

“Ten minutes later, the door opposite the entrance was opened. The capo called us to take out the bodies. We had to push them into the fire in a kind of swimming pool some 15 meters away. I saw the flames and said to myself: look, that is hell.”

4.14. Summary

What kind of historical knowledge can we gather from these testimonies? Let us see:

Area of crematorium V:

Depending on the witness, the cremation trenches numbered either 2, 3, 4, or 5; they were either 40-50, 30-35, 25, 20, or 12 meters long, 15, 8, 6, or 2 meters wide, and 1.5, 2, or 3 meters deep. Their capacity was either 150-180 corpses per trench in 24-48 hours, 400 corpses per trench in 48 hours, 1,000

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

⁶⁹ Interview by Stefano Lorenzetto of Shlomo Venezia, published under the title “Io, l’ultimo dei Sonderkommando addetti ai crematori di Auschwitz” in the Italian daily paper *Il Giornale* of January 13, 2002, p. 16.

corpses per hour (in one or three trenches), 1,000 corpses per trench in 24 hours, or 1,200 corpses per trench in 5-6 hours.

Area of the so-called "Bunker 2":

There were either 1, 2, or 4 trenches, 50 or 30 meters long, 10 or 6 meters wide, and 3 or 4 meters deep. According to M. Nyiszli, there were no cremation trenches near crematorium V at all, and the so-called "Bunker 2" was not a gas chamber but an undressing room for victims who were then shot. Moreover, for S. Chasan, J. Sackar, and J. Gabai the "Bunker" was not the little house with the gas chambers, but a cremation trench. I have summarized the essential statements concerning the cremation trenches resulting from the testimonies in the table below.

AREA OF CREMATORIUM V					
Witness	Trenches	Length	Width	Depth	Capacity
Tauber/1	4 pyres	-	-	-	400 per pyre in 2 days
Tauber/2	5	-	-	-	-
Mandelbaum	-	30-35 m	15 m	-	1,500-1,800 per trench in 1-2 days
Jankowski	2	20 m	2 m	2 m	2,000 per trench per ?
Dragon	5	25 m	6 m	3 m	5,000 in 5 trenches per day
Bendel	3	12 m	6 m	1,5 m	1,000 in 3 trenches per hour
Müller	5	40-50 m	8 m	2 m	1,200 per trench in 5-6 hrs

AREA OF "BUNKER 2"					
Witness	Trenches	Length	Width	Depth	Capacity
Nyiszli	2	50 m	6 m	3 m	5,000 in 2 trenches per day
Paisikovic/1	2	30 m	6 m	-	-
Paisikovic/2	2	30 m	10 m	-	-
Müller	4	-	-	-	-
Chasan	1	-	-	4 m	-
Venezia	1	-	-	-	-

AREA NOT INDICATED					
Witness	Trenches	Length	Width	Depth	Capacity
Mordowicz-Rosin	-	30 m	15 m	-	-
Rosenblum	-	10 m	5 m	2 m	2,000 in 2-3 hrs

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