

Belzec

Propaganda,
Testimonies,
Archeological Research
and History

Carlo Mattogno



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Belzec: Propaganda, Testimonies, Archeological Research and History

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Table of Contents

Page

Introduction	7
Chapter I: Literary Origins and Development of the Alleged Methods of Murder	9
1. Birth of an ‘Extermination Camp’	9
2. Extermination by Electricity	11
3. From Electrocution to the “ <i>Trains of Death</i> ”	22
4. The “ <i>Soap Factory Using Human Fat</i> ” at Bełżec	33
Chapter II: Origins and Development of the Official Historical Version	35
1. The Struggle between Electric Current and Exhaust Gas	35
2. Revisions and Contradictions by Michael Tregenza	41
3. Execution Chambers of the First Extermination Building: Narrative Origins and Recent Developments	44
4. The Number of Victims of the Alleged Gassings.....	47
Chapter III: Witnesses and Defendants	51
1. The Witnesses Kurt Gerstein and Rudolf Reder	51
2. The Witness Wilhelm Pfannenstiel	52
3. The Bełżec Trial	62
Chapter IV: Bełżec in Polish Archeological Research (1997 to 1999).....	71
1. The Mass Graves	71
2. Comparison of Research Results with Testimonies and Judicial Findings	74
2.1. Testimonies	74
2.2. First Judicial Findings	74
2.3. The Location of the Mass Graves.....	75
3. Uncovering the Corpses	76
3.1. The Findings and Claims of Andrzej Kola.....	76
3.2. The Polish Findings of 1945.....	79
3.3. Significance of Corpses Present	81
4. Compatibility of Archeological Research Results with the ‘Extermination Camp’ Thesis.....	82
4.1. Cremation of the Corpses	82
4.2. Capacity of the Graves	85
4.3. Wood Requirements	85
4.4. Duration of the Cremations	86
4.5. The Ash	86
4.6. The Soil Removed from the Graves	87
4.7. Actual Surface Area of the Graves.....	88

4.8. Density of Corpses in the Graves	90
4.9. Reasons for Cremation	91
5. The Buildings	92
5.1. The Actual Purpose of the Excavations.....	92
5.2. The Alleged Gas Chambers of the Second Phase of the Camp	93
5.3. The Alleged Gas Chambers of the First Phase of the Camp	94
Chapter V: Documented History of the Belzec Camp.....	97
1. Origins and Function of the Belzec Camp	97
2. The Belzec Camp in Documents	99
3. Belzec As Part of the German Policy of Deporting Jews to the East...	103
Conclusion	109
Appendix	111
Abbreviations	111
Tables	112
Documents.....	115
Bibliography.....	129
Index of Names.....	133

Introduction

For official historiography it is now indisputable dogma that, from March 1942 onwards, three extermination camps were set up on Polish soil – at Bełżec, at Treblinka, and at Sobibór – where mass murder of Jews deported there took place in homicidal gas chambers using the exhaust gases from diesel engines. However, this is neither the first nor the only version that circulated during the Second World War; it was the eventual result of a slow narrative evolution, the main phases of which can be followed in the propaganda, in the original historical version, and in the judicial proceedings of that time. Until 1946, there circulated several totally different versions of the extermination methods allegedly used in those camps, which nonetheless received the blessings of the Polish authorities. With respect to the number of victims in these camps, various absolutely ludicrous figures were reported: 3 million for Treblinka,¹ now reduced to 870,000; some 2 million for Sobibór,² now standing at 250,000; and 3 million for Bełżec,³ against 600,000 at present.

How and why did the present ‘authorized’ version of official historiography come about? And what is its historical value? In the book *Treblinka: Extermination Camp or Transit Camp?*⁴ Jürgen Graf and I have exhaustively answered those questions for the alleged extermination camp at Treblinka. The present study undertakes the same task with respect to the alleged extermination camp at Bełżec. In the discussion which follows, I shall obviously make use of the results arrived at in my Treblinka book, without repeating the corresponding evidence each time, although some quotations become necessary.

I did not, on the other hand, think it necessary to reiterate the technical objections valid with respect to the use of diesel exhaust gases for homicidal gassings; they apply for the Treblinka camp just as much as for Bełżec.⁵ Aside from this, I have been able to make use of a precious tool – archeological research at the ‘scene of the crime’ – which unfortunately was not available at Treblinka and which, as we shall see, will furnish us with conclusive criteria for testing the official theses.

Carlo Mattogno

¹ Report of the Soviet commission of inquiry, Aug. 24, 1944. GARF, 7021-115-9, pp. 103-110.

² Testimony of Zelda Metz, in N. Blumental (ed.), *Dokumenty i materiały*, vol. I, Łódź 1946, p. 210.

³ According to witness R. Reder. Cf. below, Chapter II.4.

⁴ Theses & Dissertations Press, Chicago 2004.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 111-137.

Chapter I: Literary Origins and Development of the Alleged Methods of Murder

1. Birth of an ‘Extermination Camp’

Bełżec originated in the summer of 1940 as a work camp,⁶ but from November 1941 on – according to the official historiography – it took on a new function as a camp for total extermination, in line with the camps at Sobibór and Treblinka created later. This means that the Jews deported there were totally exterminated on arrival, except for an insignificant handful of people who were allowed to live a little while longer in order to carry out labor tasks. The alleged extermination activity at Bełżec began on March 17, 1942, and ended in November or December of that year. The camp was allegedly equipped, successively, with two extermination installations. The first, made of wood, was allegedly built some time in November and December 1941; it measured 12 by 8 meters and housed three gas chambers 4 by 8 meters each. The second structure was claimed to have been set up in June of 1942 after the first had been torn down. It was a brick structure that contained six gas chambers arranged on either side of a central corridor, each measuring 4 by 5 meters.⁷

For Bełżec, and the other two camps as well, the study of the origins and development of the sources of information during the war and in the postwar period is of vital importance for an understanding of how the currently dominant historical version of Bełżec came about and what level of credibility can be ascribed to it.

In the book *Treblinka*⁴ I have described the origins and the development of these sources of information about the Treblinka camp: from the effect of the mysterious “*toxic fluids*” to the “*mobile gas chambers*,” to the delayed-action gas, to the railroad cars sprinkled with quicklime, to the famous “*steam chambers*,” to the vacuum death chambers, to the poisoning by means of “*chlorine gas and cyclon gas*.”⁸

⁶ Cf. Chapter V.1.

⁷ For a summary of the official version see Israel Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 4 vols., Macmillan, New York 1990, here vol. 1, pp. 174-179.

⁸ C. Mattogno, J. Graf, *Treblinka, op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 47-76.

In 1946, witnesses imputed even more fanciful methods of murder to the Sobibór extermination facilities; Alexander Pechersky depicts them as follows:⁹

“At first sight, one has the impression of entering a bath-house like any other: faucets for hot and cold water, wash basins. [...] As soon as all have entered, the doors are closed with a heavy thump. A heavy black substance comes down in swirls from openings in the ceiling. One hears frantic screams, but not for very long because they change to gasping suffocating breaths and to convulsions. Mothers are said to have been covering their children with their bodies.

The ‘bath’ keeper observes the whole procedure through a window in the ceiling. Within a quarter of an hour everything is over. The floor opens and the corpses fall into carts waiting below, in the basement of the ‘bath-house’. As soon as they are full, they move away quickly. It is all done according to the latest German technology. Outside, the corpses are discharged in a certain order and doused with gasoline which is then lit. Right there, they burn.”

Another witness, Leon Feldhendler, declared:¹⁰

“The bath was equipped in a way as if it were really meant to be used for washing (faucets for the shower, a pleasant environment). The baths were places for gasification.^[11] Five hundred persons were gassed at a time. Sometimes they released streams of chlorine [sic¹²], they always tried out other gases.”

The themes of chlorine and a sliding floor were subsequently merged into a new version by the witness Zelda Metz, who asserted:¹³

“[The victims] went naked to the cashiers. They deposited there any money, jewels, and other valuables. The Germans gave them a brass token or simply a number, orally, so that later they would be able to withdraw the money and their belongings. They then entered the wooden building where the women’s hair was cut, and then to the ‘Bath’, i.e., the gas chamber. They were asphyxiated with chlorine.^[14] After 15 minutes, they had all suffocated. Through a window it was checked whether they were all dead. Then the floor opened automatically. The corpses fell into the cars of a train passing through the gas chamber and taking the corpses to the oven. Before being burnt, their gold teeth were extracted. The oven was an enormous open-air furnace with a grid.”

⁹ A. Pechersky, *The Sobibór Revolt*, State Edition Der Emes, Moscow 1946, in Yuri Suhl, *Ed essi si ribellarono. Storia della resistenza ebraica contro il nazismo*, Milan, 1969, p. 31.

¹⁰ N. Blumental (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 204.

¹¹ “gazowniami”

¹² “czasem puszczano prąd chlorku”

¹³ N. Blumental (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 211.

¹⁴ “dusili chlorem”

The version of murder by means of exhaust gas from an undefined “engine” was only made official from 1947 on.¹⁵

Propaganda stories that are no less fantastic were told of Bełżec as well; we shall examine them in the following paragraphs.

2. Extermination by Electricity

In the stream of information on the Bełżec camp which emerged during the Second World War, the alleged system of murder later to be embraced by the official historians – gas chambers using the exhaust gas from a diesel engine – does not appear at all. Instead, we find all manner of methods, not only diverse in nature, but in part quite fantastic.

The first reports of Bełżec appeared on April 8, 1942, a few weeks after the opening of the camp.¹⁶

“Among the Jews terrible desperation. We now know that every day there is a train arriving at Bełżec from Lublin and one from Lvov, each with twenty cars. The Jews must get off, are taken behind a barbed-wire fence and murdered by an electric current^[17] or poisoned with gas^[18] and then the corpses are burnt^[19].”

The electrocution tale appears also in the Auschwitz chronicles, by an unknown author, said to have been unearthed in that camp in 1953.²⁰

“Sadism in the years 1940–1941

At Bełżec, near the Soviet border, there was a camp which surpassed even Auschwitz in terms of sadism. For example, Jews were arrested every day, forced to dig a deep and narrow ditch and were then thrown into it one at a time. Then each prisoner was forced to go to the toilet on the head of the victim. Anyone refusing received 25 lashes. In this way, they went to the toilet all day long until the victim finally suffocated in the feces.

The Soviet border guards, on the other side, asked the Jews to try to escape to the Russian zone if at all possible. Anyone able to make use of a moment of inattention by the SS would succeed, because the SS, when they noticed this, could no longer shoot – the bullets would have hit the other side of the borderline. Then the SS took up a position next to the fence, shooting at the hands or feet still sticking out on their side, and when the

¹⁵ Z. Łukaszewicz, “Obóz zagłady w Sobiborze,” in *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce*, Poznań 1947, p. 52

¹⁶ Z. Klukowski, *Dziennik z lat okupacji*, Lublin 1959, p. 254.

¹⁷ “prądem elektrycznym”

¹⁸ “gazami”

¹⁹ “zwłoki palą”

²⁰ “Kronika oświęcimska nieznanego autora,” in *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, Warsaw, no. 54, January-June 1954, p. 307.

Soviet border guards protested, the SS shouted, 'The hand or the leg is still on our side!'

At that time, the work to be done was to dig a long and deep trench along the borderline. Later, when the Germans had penetrated deep into the USSR, 8 large barracks were built in the forest, equipped with tables and benches. The Jews from Lublin and Lvov were pushed into them and electrocuted."²¹

On July 10, 1942, the Polish government in exile in London received the following report:²²

"According to information from a German who is employed there, the place of execution is at Belżec, near the station, and is surrounded by barbed wire. Inside as well as around the fence, Ukrainians are on guard duty. The execution is done in the following way: A train full of Jews, after arriving at Belżec station, moves on a siding toward the fence which surrounds the place of execution. There is a change of crew. Beyond the fence, the train is handled by German personnel up to the point of unloading where the rails end. Once discharged, the men go into a barrack on the right, the women into one on the left, to undress, supposedly for taking a bath. Then the groups go together into a third barrack with an electric plate^[23] where the execution occurs. The bodies are then taken by means of a railway to a pit, about 30 meters deep, situated outside the fence. The pit was dug by Jews who have all been killed. The Ukrainian guards who are assigned to the camp are to be murdered once the action is over. The Ukrainians on guard duty have lots of stolen money and jewelry: They pay 400 zloty for a liter of vodka, or 2,000 to have sex with a woman, and give her jewels."

On November 15, 1942, Dr. Ignacy Schwarzbart, a member of the Polish National Council, made a declaration, in which he paraphrased the above report:²⁴

"The methods applied in this mass extermination are, apart from executions, firing squads, electrocution and lethal gas-chambers. An electrocution station is installed at Belzec camp. Transports of settlers arrive at a siding, on the spot where the execution is to take place. The camp is policed by Ukrainians. The victims are ordered to strip naked ostensibly to have a bath and are then led to a barracks with a metal plate for floor. The

²¹ "elektryzowano"

²² *Meldunek nadzwyczajny z miejsca tracenia w Belżcu z 10.VII.42r*, SPP, Jcha 15, poz. 81. The report was later included as "Annex 3" in the long account (Sprawozdanie No. 6/42) drawn up in London on December 23, 1942, by the Interior Minister, St. Mikołajczyk, of the Polish government in exile. HILA, Stanford University, Box 3, pp. 63f.

²³ "z płytą elektryczną"

²⁴ Jacob Apenszlak (ed.), *The Black Book of Polish Jewry*, American Federation for Polish Jews, New York 1943, p. 131.

door is then locked, electric current passes through the victims and their death is instantaneous. The bodies are loaded on the wagons and taken to a mass grave some distance from the camp."

The report dated July 10, 1942, reappears on December 1 in an English-language Polish review:²⁵

"Extraordinary Report from the Jew-extermination Camp at Belzec.

July 10th, 1942.

According to information from a German employed at the extermination camp, it is situated in Belzec, by the station, and is barred off by barriers of barbed wire. Inside the wire, and all round the outside, Ukrainians are on guard. The executions are carried out in the following fashion: When a trainload of Jews arrives at the station in Belzec, it is shunted by a side track up to the wire surrounding the place of execution, at which point there is a change in the engine crew and train guards. From the wire onward the train is serviced by German drivers who take it to the unloading point, where the track ends. After unloading, the men go to a barracks on the right, the women to a barracks situated on the left, where they strip, ostensibly in readiness for a bath. After they have undressed both groups go to a third barracks where there is an electrified plate, where the executions are carried out. Then the bodies are taken by train to a trench situated outside the wire, and some thirty metres deep. This trench was dug by Jews, who were all executed afterwards. The Ukrainians on guard are also to be executed when the job is finished. The Ukrainians acting as guards are loaded with money and stolen valuables; they pay 400 zlotys for a litre of vodka, 2,000 zlotys and jewellery for relations with a woman."

The declaration made by Dr. Schwarzbart was recapitulated ten days later by the bulletin of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in an article entitled "250,000 Warsaw Jews Led to Mass Execution: Electrocuting Introduced As New Method of Mass Killing of Jews."²⁶ On December 20, 1942, the *New York Times* ran an article on the alleged extermination of Jews in Poland by the Germans which said, among other things:²⁷

"Actual data concerning the fate of the deportees is not at hand, but the news is available – irrefutable news – that places of execution have been organized at Chelm and Belzec where those who survive shootings are murdered en masse by means of electrocution and lethal gas."

In 1944, the story of the electrocution installation at Belzec was embellished with new and fantastic details. On February 12, the *New York Times* revisited the camp, publishing a more detailed report headlined "Nazi Execution

²⁵ *Polish Fortnightly Review*, December 1, 1942, p. 4.

²⁶ "250,000 Warsaw Jews Led to Mass Execution: Electrocuting Introduced As New Method of Mass Killing of Jews," *Daily News Bulletin*, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, vol. XXIII, no. 273, November 25, 1942, p. 2.

²⁷ "Allies describe outrages on Jews," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1942, p. 23.

Mill Reported in Poland: Fugitive Tells of Mass Killings in Electrically Charged Vats".²⁸

"Stockholm, Sweden. Feb. 11 (AP). A young Polish Jew who escaped from a mass execution in Poland with the aid of false identification papers repeated today a story that the Germans operated an 'execution factory' in old Russian fortifications in eastern Poland.

The Jews were forced naked onto a metal platform operated as a hydraulic elevator which lowered them into a huge vat filled with water up the victims' necks, he said. They were electrocuted by current through the water. The elevator then lifted the bodies to a crematorium above, the youth said.

The youth said he personally had seen trainloads of Jews leave Rawna Luska [Rawa Ruska] in eastern Poland in the morning for the crematorium at near-by Beljec [Belżec] and return empty in the evening. He was told the rest of the story, he said, by individuals who escaped after actually being taken inside the factory. The fortifications, he added, were built by the Russians after they had occupied eastern Poland."

In 1944, Dr. Abraham Silberschein, a member of the Polish parliament and delegate of the World Jewish Congress, published, in Geneva, a series of mimeographed brochures entitled *Die Judenausrottung in Polen* (The extermination of Jews in Poland), in which he included even more horrifying propaganda stories. From these, I shall present two reports on the Belżec camp in their entirety. The first one has the title "*Die Hölle von Belzec*" (The Belżec Hell).²⁹

"Jews deported to Belzec were ordered to undress, as if they were going to take a bath. They were, indeed, taken to a bathing establishment able to contain several hundreds of people. However, they were executed en masse by means of an electric current. A boy who managed to escape from such an establishment told me what happened after the electrocution: The fat from the corpses was drained in order to – make soap from it. The remnants of the corpses were then thrown into anti-tank ditches which had been laid out along the Russian border by the arch-henchman Major Dollf. Burial of the slaughtered had to be done by the strongest of the Jews, selected among the doomed. It often happened that these people had to bury their own relatives. Not much later, these Jews, too, who had been assigned the task of burying their dead brethren – a task which they did against their will and by being forced – were killed in the same way. The

²⁸ "Nazi Execution Mill Reported in Poland: Fugitive Tells of Mass Killings in Electrically Charged Vats," *The New York Times*, February 12, 1944, p. 6.

²⁹ A. Silberschein, "*Die Hölle von Belzec*," in *Die Judenausrottung in Polen*, vol. V, Geneva 1944, pp. 21f.

Jews buried at Belzec came mainly from Lublin, Lemberg [Lvov], and other towns in Eastern Galicia. Some 300,000 Jews were interred there.

Far too many corpses having been thrown into these mass graves, it was impossible to cover them with a sufficiently thick layer of earth. This caused a stench of rotting flesh to spread over the whole area. This smell is still perceptible (i.e. in April, at the time of writing of this eyewitness report). Travelers on the railway line Zawada-Rawa Ruska close the windows, for this awful stench penetrates into the compartments and causes the people to vomit. I myself had to travel along this line on several occasions and have thus been able to convince myself of this state of affairs. As late as April 10, 1943, I passed through there one last time. The Christian population of Belzec has left this place for the only reason of this stench.

The men of the Gestapo and the Ukrainians who commit these murders have magnificently enriched themselves by taking the gold and the jewelry which some Jews had sewn into their clothes. Those butchers had so much money that they were able to pay 20 gold dollars to the farmers for a bottle of vodka.”

The second report published by A. Silberschein was called “*Hinrichtungs- und Vernichtungslager Belzec*” (Execution and Extermination Camp Belzec) and spoke of an undefined “*electric oven*” as the means of assassination:³⁰

“The Victims.”

Starting in 1942, so-called actions took place in all Polish cities and towns. Based on a well-defined plan, they were repeated at almost regular intervals and became the horror of the Jewish population. In general, such actions consisted of a number of local Jews being rounded up and deported. The number was often specified in advance, and the local Jewish council was demanded to provide this number. Special commando units were organized for this purpose. They traveled from one town to the next to carry out their hounding of the Jews. The Jews caught in this way were normally taken to the Belzec extermination camp. Without exception, this was the fate of all Jews caught in Eastern Galicia.

Belzec is a little town, formerly a border crossing between Galicia and Poland, situated on the railway line from Lemberg [Lvov] to Lublin. The camp that existed here was a most extraordinary one. While all other camps were officially designated as prison camps, concentration camps, or work camps, this camp was a pure extermination camp. Jews were sent there for this purpose only. It would not be wrong to say that all Jews from Galicia, certainly all who came from Eastern Galicia, died there with the exception of the few who were able to save themselves. However, not only were transports of Polish Jews from Galicia taken there, Belzec was also

³⁰ A. Silberschein, “*Hinrichtungs- und Vernichtungslager Belzec*,” in *Die Judenauströpfung in Polen*, Geneva 1944, vol. III, pp. 41f.

the destination for many convoys of foreign Jews, in particular Jews from Holland and from Germany.

Installations.

Belzec and its surroundings have become a fortress of the Inquisition as never before seen in the history of mankind.

Special buildings for gassing experiments were built here, special factories for the production of soap and shoe polish from Jewish fat, hospitals were built for the purpose of a prior withdrawing of blood transfusions of Jewish children [sic]. Special types of equipment for hanging were devised. Even soldiers of the Wehrmacht would not believe it, but still, those installations were observed by reliable eyewitnesses.

Murder Procedure.

Not a single one of all the hundreds of thousands brought to Belzec ever managed to escape. We are, therefore, unable to know the details of what was going on inside the camp.

According to a German employed there, the camp is protected by a barbed-wire fence and is situated in the immediate vicinity of the station. Within the barbed-wire, Ukrainians are on guard duty.

The executions take place as follows: On arrival, the train with the Jews is taken to a siding right next to the wire fence. Then the crew is changed. After unloading, the men are directed to the right, the women into the barrack on the left. They were ordered to undress and to prepare for an end. They then must enter a third barrack, which contains an electric oven. The executions take place in this barrack. After that, the corpses are taken by train to a ditch beyond the barbed-wire fence. The ditch has a depth of some 30 meters. It was dug by Jews.

Travelers and tourists who have passed through Belzec have confirmed that the fields all around have become mass graves. At every step one notices traces of lime and gore. The fields are strewn with skeletons in various stages of decomposition. The air reeks with a pestilential stench. Therefore, the farmers in the area have fled from their villages. The town itself is deserted and ghost-like. There is only the occasional SS policeman loitering about, yawning.

On the basis of the number of Jews caught during the actions, who were all taken – as previously mentioned – to Belzec, it can be assumed that no fewer than six hundred thousand Jews from Galicia died as martyrs there. Adding the other transports, one can safely say that the number is much higher still, perhaps twice as high.”

The paragraph relating the method of execution appears nearly word for word, in another book, also published in 1944; here, however, instead of the

term “oven” we have “hearth”: “Then they move on into a third barrack with an electric hearth where the execution takes place.”³¹

In a book published in Stockholm in 1944 and translated into English and German a year later, Stefan Szende gives the following account of Belzec camp.³²

“Belzec was a little place to the north of Rawa-Ruska, just on the 1939 Russo-German frontier. Immediately this frontier line had been agreed on, the Russians had begun to erect fortifications on a big scale. When the German troops crossed the frontier in June, 1941, the fortifications were still incomplete.

It was from these half-finished Russian fortifications that the Nazis made their slaughter-house in which millions of Jews were exterminated.

To exterminate 5 million people is an enormous task, and even in our age of technical perfection it needs a lot of preparing and organizing, and there are many problems to be faced by those planning to carry it out. Tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of Jews had been taken to ‘Pjaski.’ Further tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands had died as a result of ill-treatment, starvation and disease. But there were still millions left and they all had to be killed in accordance with the orders of the Fuehrer.

Even the effective killing of bed-bugs or lice on a large scale demands a certain technique. However, no one can doubt that the Germans are a highly talented people in all technical matters. Amongst them there were highly efficient engineers of death. These men were given their instructions by the Gestapo, and they set to work to solve the technical problems to which the mass slaughter of millions of defenseless men, women and children gives rise. They solved the problem. They solved it brilliantly. Their Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, and Himmler, the head of the Gestapo, must be well satisfied with them and their work.

Months of planning and building operations were necessary, but the Germans are a patient people and the objective was worth the time spent on achieving it. The extermination of millions of Jews with the very latest modern technical means -what an enticing aim! Hundreds of thousands of labor hours were expended. Tens of thousands of tons of valuable materials were used in the process. But at last, in the spring of 1942, the scientific slaughter-house at Belzec was ready.

The mass-killing installation at Belzec occupies an area almost five miles across. This area is surrounded by barbed wire and every other

³¹ *Soll ich meines Bruders Hüter sein? Weitere Dokumente zur Juden- und Flüchtlingsnot unserer Tage*, Evangelischer Verlag A.G. Zollikon, Zürich 1944, p. 56.

³² Stefan Szende, *Der letzte Jude aus Poland*, Europa Verlag, Zürich 1945, pp. 290-292; Engl. Stefan Szende, Adolf Folkmann, *The Promise Hitler Kept*, V. Gollancz, London 1945/Roy, New York 1945, pp. 159-161.

modern device for keeping prisoners in and others out. No one is permitted to come near the place except properly authorized persons or those who will never leave the place alive. But despite all these precautions there were one or two people who saw the inside of Belzec and nevertheless succeeded in escaping. Despair and desperation makes a man ingenious.

Specially chosen S.S. men guard the Belzec killing plant. They are men without nerves. There is much to do in a slaughterhouse and it gives sadists great pleasure to compel their victims , to do as much of it as possible. For instance, the clothes and the belongings of the millions of victims had to be collected and sorted out. For this purpose the S.S. chose certain Jews out of each transport that arrived. These Jews were not spared, of course. It was merely that their execution was postponed. Two such Jews actually succeeded in making their escape. They escaped into the Ghetto which still existed in Rawa-Ruska at the time. In Rawa-Ruska they reported the details of the technically perfected slaughter going on in Belzec.

As far as I know, no Jew ever succeeded in escaping from Belzec and reaching neutral or Allied territory. The two Jews who made their escape from Belzec to Rawa-Ruska in the summer of 1942 were probably killed subsequently when the Ghetto there was liquidated, but a number of people who heard the evidence of these two fugitives from Belzec did escape. The following description of the Belzec slaughterhouse comes from them.

The trains coming into Belzec loaded with Jews were driven into a tunnel in the underground premises of the execution building. There the Jews were unloaded and ordered to divest themselves of all their things. In 1942 Jews arriving at Belzec came dressed and carrying all sorts of belongings with them. Fully loaded trains from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Holland, France and the Balkan States arrived in Belzec, and they were all treated in the same way. These Jews were told to take all their things with them, as they were going to be 'settled' in the East. Thus tens of thousands of Jews arrived, bringing all sorts of property with them, typewriters, sewing machines, crockery, silver and so on.

Everything was taken away from them. The goods seized in this way were carefully sorted out, listed and ticketed and subsequently used for the benefit of the master race. It was to spare the staff at Belzec this tremendous task, which, of course, hindered them in their real job, that later on all Jews were sent to Belzec naked.

When trainloads of naked Jews arrived they were herded into a great hall capable of holding several thousand people. This hall had no windows and its flooring was of metal. Once the Jews were all inside, the floor of this hall sank like a lift into a great tank of water which lay below it until the Jews were up to their waists in water. Then a powerful electric current was sent into the metal flooring and within a few seconds all the Jews, thousands at a time, were dead.

The metal flooring then rose again and the water drained away. The corpses of the slaughtered Jews were now heaped all over the floor. A different current was then switched on and the metal flooring rapidly became red hot, so that the corpses were incinerated as in a crematorium and only ash was left.

The floor was then tipped up and the ashes slid out into prepared receptacles. The smoke of the process was carried away by great factory chimneys.

That was the whole procedure. As soon as it was completed, it could start up again. New batches of Jews were constantly being driven into the tunnels. The individual trains brought between 3,000 and 5,000 Jews at a time, and there were days on which the Belzec line saw between twenty and thirty such trains arrive.

Modern industrial and engineering technique in Nazi hands triumphed over all difficulties. The problem of how to slaughter millions of people rapidly and effectively was solved.

The underground slaughter-house spread a terrible stench around the neighborhood, and sometimes whole districts were covered with the foul-smelling smoke from the burning human bodies.”

A variant of the underground extermination was published in the infamous *Black Book* of the well-known Soviet propaganda writers I. Ehrenburg and V. Grossman, compiled in 1945 and 1946. A certain corporal (*Obergefreiter*) Erik Heubaum, a German prisoner of war, is said to have declared in a statement, about which no particulars are given, not even a date:³³

“I have even seen how peaceful citizens were exterminated by means of gas. I drove some communications people to a minor station some 12 kilometers from Rawa Ruskaya. Near that station, in the middle of a forest, an underground encampment had been set up. One day, when I was there, a convoy of Jews was brought in. From closed cars, people were stretching their arms out the windows begging for water, but nobody was allowed near them. In the evening, these people were led into the forest. Anyone not involved was moved to the station building. The forest was surrounded by SD units. Then all of these people, without any distinction of age or of sex, had their clothes taken from them and were pushed into the underground encampment. Three quarters of an hour later, men from a different section were sent in to take out the corpses before another group was brought in. In this way, each night, up to three hundred people were killed.

*I observed that scene over a period of eight days. An SS man from Saxony, Karl Horst, told me that those people were being asphyxiated by means of gas. He took part in this. The executions were directed by *Sturmbannführer* [major] Herbst, who came from Breslau.”*

³³ I. Ehrenburg, V. Grossman, *Le livre noir*, Actes Sud, 1995, pp. 1058f.

But even the story of the descending or collapsible floor took on further variations. The files of the Soviet commission of inquiry for the Sokal territory, dated October 7, 1944, contain is the statement of a certain Rozalja Schelewna Schier:³⁴

“My husband, who was working at the Belżec station at the time, told me the following:

At Belżec station two transports consisting of fifty to sixty cars arrive every day. Each car holds 100-120 persons. The train is taken to a siding in the forest, about one kilometer away. There a movable shed has been placed on the rails. It is marked ‘Baths for Jews.’ The people who have arrived are ordered to undress and enter the baths; they are promised work afterwards. When the bath house is completely full with 100-120 people, gas and high-voltage electric current are fed into it. Within 5 minutes, all the people in the bath house were dead. Inside the shed, the floor folds automatically, and the corpses fall into a previously dug trench where the victims are doused with a flammable liquid and burnt.”

A year later, the extraordinary collapsible floor at Belżec has changed again. On October 16, 1945, the witness Jan G. declared to the investigative judge of Zamość:³⁵

“By what means the Jews in the gas chamber were killed is difficult to say. At the time the Jews were driven into the gas chamber, a strong engine (250 HP) was running within the camp. It is said that the Jews were killed by means of the exhaust gas. It is untrue that the Jews were killed by means of an electric current; the voltage was much too low for masses of people to be killed that way. While the extermination camp was in operation, the ‘blacks’^[36] in my railroad workshop fashioned 48 pairs of special hinges, and a large number of narrow-gauge rails were shaped by bending. From this I conclude that the hinges were used for the floor of the gas chamber, which opened up after the Jews had been killed, thereby letting the corpses drop into carts, which took them to a common grave.”

In 1945, Dr. Guérin reported on an encounter he had had three years before with a soldier of the Security Police during a round-up of Jews in the ghetto of Rawa Ruska:³⁷

“He then pulled out a map and pointed to the name of a village: Belsetz [sic]. The means of extermination: electrocution. Women, old people, and children were taken on foot, naked, into a hall with metal plates in the floor. When a certain number of people had been assembled, a high-voltage current passed through the plates. The name of Belsetz was con-

³⁴ GARF, 7021-67-82, p. 3.

³⁵ ZStL, 252/59, vol. I, p. 1157 (translation from the Polish).

³⁶ Soviet prisoners of war.

³⁷ Armand Guérin, *Rawa Ruska*, Editions Oris, Paris 1945, p. 148.

firmed on two occasions by other Germans but none of those we approached was able to confirm that he had personally witnessed such executions. Others held that the executions took place in gas chambers, but here, too, the exact place could not be ascertained.”

In 1945, Stefan Tadeusz Norwind wrote:³⁸

“Major corpse factories existed at Belzec, at Sobibor, at Majdanek, and also, it is said, at Palmyry in the region of Warsaw.[...] The factories had two types of installations. Some of them were electrical, i.e. naked people were pushed onto a steel plate and then killed by a high-voltage current (this took place e.g. at Belzec). Others consisted of hermetically sealed gas chambers where, again, naked people were killed by means of steam or gas (this took place at Tremblinka [sic]).”

The story of extermination by means of electricity also appears, with other fanciful details, in the above-mentioned *Black Book*.³⁹

“Belzec is a terrifying place where the Jews were exterminated. And this place is surrounded by the utmost secrecy on the German side. But the railway men who operate the convoys of the condemned tell their family and friends the truth about the extermination of the Jews at Belzec.

The Jews were made to go into a gigantic hall, which could take in up to a thousand people. Along the walls, the Germans had strung uninsulated electric wires. The same wires were in the floor. When the hall was full of naked people, the Germans switched on the current. It was a gigantic electric chair, which we never thought could have been invented even by the most warped mind.”

In 1946, Simon Wiesenthal wrote an article with the title “*Seifenfabrik Belsetz*” (soap factory Belżec), his second of two dedicated to this fanciful topic.⁴⁰ In this article he outlined out an imaginary history of the Belżec camp, crammed with historical falsifications. In January 1942, Wiesenthal says, the Belżec area was inspected by a commission of top SS officials, among them Adolf Eichmann, whom Wiesenthal promotes to the rank of “*SS General*” for the occasion! The commission decides to make “*the available installations the starting point for the erection of a place of extermination.*” For this purpose, “*a site of 3 square kilometers*” (300 hectares, or about 750 acres) was fenced in. The area of the camp proper came to about 6 hectares, or about 15 acres. Then comes his description of the alleged extermination procedure.⁴¹

“The people, squeezed together by the SS, hounded by the Latvians and Ukrainians, ran into the ‘bath’ through the open gate. It could hold 500 persons at a time. The floor of the ‘bathhouse’ was made of metal, and

³⁸ S. T. Norwind, *Martyrium eines Volkes*, 1945, pp. 102f.

³⁹ I. Ehrenburg, V. Grossman, *op. cit.* (note 33), pp. 213f.

⁴⁰ Cf. below, section 4.

⁴¹ S. Wiesenthal, “*Seifenfabrik Belsetz*,” *Der neue Weg*, No. 19/20, Vienna 1946, p. 14.

showers hung down from the ceiling. When the space was full the SS delivered a 5,000-volt current to the metal plate. At the same time, the showers spewed out water. A brief scream and the execution was over. An SS surgeon-major by the name of Dr. Schmidt ascertained the death of the victims by looking through a peephole, the second door was opened, the 'corpse commando' arrived and quickly removed the dead. – There was now room for the next load of five hundred."

3. From Electrocution to the “*Trains of Death*”

Another story about Belżec, widely circulated during the Second World War, concerned the “*trains of death*.” It was invented by Jan Karski (his real name was Koziński), a courier with the Polish government in exile in London, who affirmed that he had visited the Belżec camp in October 1942, disguised as an Estonian guard, together with a real Estonian guard who had been bribed. Walter Laqueur writes:⁴²

“Karski lived underground in Warsaw in 1941-2, engaged in ‘black propaganda’ among German soldiers, printing and distributing leaflets in German.”

In fact the story told by Karski is a simple kind of “*black propaganda*.” It was the final product of a well-defined literary development which can easily be traced in the surviving documents. The first version of this story, dating back to November 1942, did mention trains of death, but only as an instrument of torture, taking the Jews from the Warsaw ghetto “*to special camps at Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor*,” where they would be killed. With respect to the camp at Belżec, Karski not only did not yet pretend to have visited it but ascribed to it the method of extermination in vogue at the time – electrocution. However, by December 1942, Karski had invented the story of his phantom visit – disguised as a Polish policeman – to a “*marshalling camp*” fifty kilometers from Belżec, rehashing ‘the trains of death’ motif, the trains having now become a means of extermination in themselves, although he was still assigning to Belżec the methods of murder by poison gas and electric current. In the final elaboration of his story, Karski transformed the “*marshalling camp*” into the camp at Belżec, which he now pretended to have visited disguised as an Estonian guard!

On November 25, 1942, Karski arrived in London and handed the Polish government in exile a report.⁴³ It was transcribed under the title “*News Is*

⁴² W. Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: An Investigation into the Suppression of Information about Hitler's “Final Solution”*, H. Holt, New York 1998, p. 230.

⁴³ Cf. M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, Henry Holt, New York 1981, p. 93-95.

Reaching the Polish Government in London about the Liquidation of the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw,” and the complete text of it is as follows:⁴⁴

“The persecution of the Jews in Poland, which has been in progress from the very first day of the German occupation, has taken on extremely acute forms since March 1942, when Himmler ordered the extermination of 50% of the Jewish population in the Government General, to be carried out by end of 1942.

Though the German assassins had started this work with extraordinary gusto, the results apparently did not satisfy Himmler for during his visit to the General Gouvernement in July 1942 he ordered new decrees personally, aiming at the total destruction of Polish Jewry.

The persecution in Warsaw started on 21st July 1942, when German police cars suddenly drove into the ghettos. The soldiers immediately started rushing into houses, shooting the inhabitants at sight, without any explanation. The first victims belonged mostly to the educated classes. On that day almost all the members of the Jewish Municipal Council were arrested and held as hostages.

On 22nd July 1942 the Jewish Council was ordered to proclaim the decree of the German authorities dealing with the re-settlement of all the Warsaw Jews, regardless of sex or age, in the eastern part of Poland, with the sole exception of persons working in German factories or members of the Jewish militia. The daily quota of people to be re-settled was fixed at 6,000 and members of the Jewish Municipal Council were ordered to carry out the order under pain of death.

By the next day, however, on 23rd July, the German police again appeared in the Jewish Municipal Council and demanded to see the chairman, Mr. Czerniakow. After the police had left, Czerniakow committed suicide. From a note left for his wife, it became clear that he had received orders to deliver 10,000 people the next day and 7,000 daily on the following days, in spite of the fact that the quota had been fixed originally at 6,000. The victims to be delivered to the Germans are either dragged out of their homes or seized in the streets. As the zeal of the Jewish police to perform these duties against their own people was slight and did not give a guarantee of efficiency, the Germans have mobilised temporary security battalions for the man-hunts, consisting of Ukrainians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. These battalions, under the command of SS men, are characterised by their utter ruthlessness, cruelty and inhumanity.

The Jews, when caught, are driven to a square. Old people and cripples are then singled out, taken to the cemetery and there shot. The remaining people are loaded into goods trucks, at the rate of 150 people to a truck with space for 40. The floor of the truck is covered with a thick layer of

⁴⁴ Foreign Office papers, 371/30923, xp 009642, pp. 78f., and 371/30917, xp 5365, pp. 78f.

lime and chlorine sprinkled with water. The doors of the trucks are locked. Sometimes the train starts immediately on being loaded, sometimes it remains on a siding for a day, two days or even longer. The people are packed so tightly that those who die of suffocation remain in the crowd side by side with the still living and with those slowly dying from the fumes of lime and chlorine, from lack of air, water and food. Wherever the trains arrive half the people are dead. Those surviving are sent to special camps at Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor. Once there, the so-called 'settlers' are mass murdered.

Only young and relatively strong people are left alive, for they are valuable slave labour for the Germans. However, the percentage of these is extremely small, for out of a total of about 250,000 're-settled' only 4,000 have been sent to auxiliary work on the battlefronts.

Neither children nor babies are spared. The orphans from asylums and day-nurseries are evacuated as well. The director of the biggest Jewish orphanage in Warsaw and well known writer Janusz Korczak, whom the Germans had given permission to remain in the ghetto, preferred to follow his charges to death.

Thus under the guise of re-settlement in the east, a mass murder of the Jewish population is taking place. Started on 22nd July 1942, it has been progress ever since. By the end of September 1942 250,000 Jews had been eliminated. The extent of this action is best characterised by a few figures: In the Warsaw ghetto there lived, according the official German statistics of March 1942, about 433,000 people. In spite of the extremely high mortality caused by bad hygienic conditions, epidemics, starvation, executions etc., the number of Jews in the ghetto remained more or less stable, for to replace the dead, Jews from other parts of Europe, Germany, Austria, Holland, were sent to Warsaw. According to information leaking from the Arbeitsamt [Labor Office], only 40,000 people are to remain in the Warsaw ghetto, only highly skilled workers, to be employed in German war industry. The most convincing proof of the dwindling numbers in the ghetto lies in the fact that for September 1942 120,000 ration cards were printed. For October the number issued was only 40,000.

Simultaneously with the extermination of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, ghettos in the provinces, at Falenica, Rembertow, Nowy Dwor, Kaluszyn and Minsk Mazowiecki are being liquidated. In the district of Wilno only one Jewish community has remained, in the city itself, numbering only 12,000 people. According to news which reached London some time ago the Germans have murdered 60,000 Jews in Wilno, 14,000 in Kowno and 50% of the Jewish population of Lwow; similar news reaches us from cities in S. Eastern Poland, such as Stanislawo, Tarnopol, Stryj.

The methods applied in this mass extermination are, apart from executions by firing squads, electrocution and lethal gas-chambers.

An electrocution station is installed at Belzec camp. Transports of 'settlers' arrive at a siding, on the spot where the execution is to take place. The camp is policed by Ukrainians. The victims are ordered to strip naked, – to have a bath, ostensibly – and are then led to a barrack with a metal plate for floor. The door is then locked, electric current passes through the victims and their death is almost instantaneous. The bodies are loaded on the waggons and taken to a mass grave some distance from the camp.

A large digging machine has been installed recently at Treblinka. It works ceaselessly digging ditches – mass graves for Jews who are to meet their death there. The Ukrainian guards, witnesses of the mass murders, are allowed to keep the money and jewellery robbed from the victims. These bestial murders sometimes take place in the presence of the local non-Jewish population, who are helpless and overcome with horror at the sight of such inhuman violence. What the Poles' reactions to these unspeakable crimes are, is best proved by a pamphlet by the 'Front for the Liberation of Poland', containing a strongly worded protest against the terrible extermination of the Jews. According to the pamphlet, the total number of Jews murdered in Poland since September 1939 exceeds one million."

The text of the report on Belzec is identical to the one by Ignacy Schwarzbart mentioned above, which, however, dates from November 15, 1942, and therefore precedes it by ten days. On November 26, 1942, Richard Law, British Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, wrote in a note that "*this morning*" two English Jews, Mr. Silverman and Mr. Easterman, had requested an audience to talk "*about the extermination of Jews in Europe,*" and that the latter had presented him with a document, "*which was handed to him last night by a member of the Polish Government.*"⁴⁵ But I. Schwarzbart, who was indeed a member of the Polish National Council, was in possession of a portion of the document as early as November 15.

Another portion, the section dealing with the transports of the Jews, appeared with some modifications and with the inevitable reference to the electrocutions in the report of the Polish government in exile at London of December 10, 1942:⁴⁶

"The floor [sic] of the trucks were covered with quicklime and chlorine. As far as is known, the trains were dispatched to three localities, Tremblinka [sic], Belzec and Sobibor, to what the reports describe as 'extermination camps'. The very method of transport was deliberately calculated to cause the largest possible number of casualties among the condemned

⁴⁵ Foreign Office papers, 371/30923, xp 009642, p. 73.

⁴⁶ Foreign Office papers, 371/30924, xp 5365, pp. 121-124. Jacob Apenszlak (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 24), p. 122.

Jews. It is reported that on arrival in camp the survivors were stripped naked and killed by various means, including poison gas and electrocution.”

This shows that the ‘mission’ of Jan Karski was, in fact, a “*black propaganda*” operation carried out in style. Sure enough, the story of the trains of death, attributed to a “*courier who reached London in December 1942,*” surfaced in London that December.⁴⁷

This precedes Jan Karski’s version of 1944, which we will examine below, but with one decisive difference. He did not yet pretend to have smuggled himself into the Belzec camp, even though he did visit a marshalling camp situated “*about fifty kilometers from the city of Belzec.*”

In March of 1943, the newspaper *Voice of the Unconquered* published the report in question under the title “*Eye-Witness Report of a Secret Courier Fresh from Poland.*” It also referred to a courier who “*reached London at the beginning of December, 1942.*”⁴⁸

This courier, just like the other one, had brought back “*a personal eye-witness account,*”⁴⁸ which was published in the newspaper. The part on Belzec is set forth below, with subtitles added by the editors of the paper.⁴⁹

“Roads Paved With Dead

I want to return to the question of ‘deportations’: I saw in Warsaw the first part of this act and later on the outskirts of Belzec the second and last part. From Warsaw the Jews are driven to the tracks on the outskirts of the city where a long train of cattle cars is already waiting for them. Before they reach the tracks, however, many are shot for one reason or another. Particularly those who lag behind. The whole route is literally strewn with corpses. When they finally reach their destination they are robbed of all their possessions (officially the deportees are urged to take along their most valuable possessions). Then they are loaded in cars, a hundred people in a car, and the first lap of the journey which lasts from two to eight days begin. Not once during the journey are the doors of the cars opened with the result that many die before they reach the ‘sorting point’ (Obóz Rozdzielczy) which is located about fifty kilometers from the city of Belzec. Nevertheless the first stage of this journey is mild, almost human, in comparison with what awaits them at the second stage.

Belzec the Slaughter House

In the uniform of a Polish policeman I visited the sorting point near Belzec. It is a huge barrack only about half of which is covered with a roof. When I was there about 5,000 men and women were in the camp. However,

⁴⁷ Jacob Apenszlak (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 24), pp. 135-138.

⁴⁸ “*Eye-Witness Report of a Secret Courier Fresh from Poland,*” *Voice of the Unconquered*, March 1943, p. 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

every few hours new transports of Jews, men and women, young and old, would arrive for the last journey towards death.

It is humanly impossible to convey the impression that these 5,000 people made upon me: they are no longer in the image of men. Skeletons with eyes dead with resignation. Naked, frightened, they are in constant motion with convulsive, nervous movements. A child is lying with his face towards the roof. It is in the last agony of death. But no one pays any attention to it. I spot amidst this indistinguishable mass an old man completely nude. He was probably stripped of his rags. No one looks at him. He makes no impression upon the people that surround him. The guards keep on shooting at the throng. Corpses are scattered everywhere. Men, in their convulsive moving about, step over them. They hardly notice the dead. Every few minutes the guards pick a number of men to clear the dead which are piled up alongside the fence. This, too, is done without any emotion, without a single expression, in their faces as though they are completely oblivious of what they are doing. These are no longer normal beings but one large convulsive mass breathing its last.

The people are kept in this camp for several days. By the time they start on the last leg of their death-journey most of them have had nothing to eat for days since they are not given any food and have to subsist on whatever they manage to bring along with them.

The second and the most gruesome stage of their journey commences. Accompanied by the lashing of whips and the shooting of guns the 'deportees' are suddenly, without any warning, beginning to be driven to the railroad tracks which are several dozen meters from the camp. A wild stampede of human beings begins. In the meantime, the Germans have made all the preparations to intensify their torture.

The route from the camp to the tracks is a specially constructed narrow passage lined by a weak fence of boards. On both sides of the fence are stationed armed guards. From behind the people are driven by guards who lash out mercilessly with their whips. Everything is designed to create a panic and stampede. But at the same time 'order' is demanded and no one dare touch the fence. Anyone who as much as touches the fence is shot by the guards who are lined alongside of it. The shooting, the blood and the groans and shrieks of those who have been hit only increases the stampede and this gives the guards additional reason for shooting. In this manner, hundreds are killed on a stretch of several meters. But these are the lucky ones. An even more horrible death awaits the survivors.

The narrow passage leads to an open door of a cattle car. These are the famous cars designed for '40 people or 8 horses.' We have measured these cars and found that if human beings were to be loaded there tightly pressed together and completely nude they could hold only 90. Yet 140 people are loaded in these cars. On both sides of the entrance are stationed special

S.S. men with guns and whips. It is their job to force the people into the cars.

In Area of 50 Kilometers Corpses of Jews Are Being Burned Day and Night

In panic and fear the emaciated skeletons perform acrobatic feats. A moment comes when the last inch of a car is loaded to capacity. But human beings are still being driven into it: einsteigen, einsteigen!^[50] People begin to climb over the heads of their neighbors holding on by the hands, feet or hair of those who are already inside. Thus fifty more manage to get into the car which is then locked. Soon another takes its place...

A long train thus packed with several thousand men, women, and children is switched to a side line where it remains from two to eight days. The doors are never opened. Those inside suffer inhuman agony. They have to perform natural functions over the heads of the others. Many cars are painted with lime which begins to burn from the dampness of the urine and increases the tortures of the barefooted and nude.

Because there are not enough cars to kill the Jews in this relatively inexpensive manner many of them are taken to nearby Belzec where they are murdered by poison gases or by the application of electric currents. The corpses are burned near Belzec. Thus within an area of fifty kilometers huge stakes are burning Jewish corpses day and night."

In 1944, Karski published a book of memoirs entitled *Story of a Secret State*. He relates that in early October of 1942 he slipped into the ghetto of Warsaw and established contact with the local Bund, the union of socialist Jews. The head of this organization informed him about the deportation of "over three hundred thousand" Jews into "execution camps."

The story goes as follows:⁵¹

"A few days after my second visit to the Warsaw ghetto, the Bund leader was to arrange an opportunity for me to see the Jewish death camp. The camp was located near the town of Belzec about one hundred miles east of Warsaw and was well-known all over Poland from the tales of horror that were circulated about it. The common report was that every Jew who reached it, without exception, was doomed to death. The Bund leader had never been in it but had the most detailed information on its operations. I was to go on a day when executions were scheduled. The information was easy to obtain because many of the Estonian, Latvian, and Ukrainian attendants who worked there under Gestapo supervision were in service of Jewish organisations. Not from any humane or political consideration, but for money. I was to wear the uniform of one of the Estonians who would stay home while I went in with his papers. [...] Early in the

⁵⁰ In German in the text.

⁵¹ Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1944, pp. 339-351.

morning of the day we had selected, I left Warsaw in the company of a Jew who worked outside the ghetto in the Jewish underground movement. We arrived in Belzec shortly after midday and went directly to the place where the Estonian was supposed to be waiting to give me his uniform."

Karski's story is quite verbose, so I will only quote the essential points. Accompanied by an Estonian guard, he approaches the camp:

"As we approached to within a few hundred yards of the camp, the shouts, cries, and shots cut off further conversation. [...] We passed through a small grove of decrepit-looking trees and emerged directly in front of the loud, sobbing, reeking camp of death. It was on a large, flat plain and occupied about a square mile. It was surrounded on all sides by a formidable barbed-wire fence, nearly two yards in height and in good repair. Inside the fence, at intervals of about fifteen yards, guards were standing, holding rifles with fixed bayonets ready for use. Around the outside of the fence militia men circulated on constant patrol. The camp itself contained a few small sheds or barracks. The rest of the area was completely covered by a dense, pulsating, throbbing, noisy human mass."

Karski then dwells on the description of the crowd, repeating and enlarging on themes already dealt with in his paper of December 1942, but with an important addition: *"They were all former inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto."* As in the preceding report about the "marshalling camp" located at 50 km from Belzec, Karski mentions the trains of death and the narrow passages the Germans had set up to funnel the crowd into the cars, and then continues:

"And now came the most horrible episode of them all. The Bund leader had warned me that if I lived to be a hundred I would never forget some of the things I saw. He did not exaggerate. The military rules stipulate that a freight car may carry eight horses or forty soldiers. Without any baggage at all, a maximum of a hundred passengers standing close together and pressing against each other could be crowded into a car. The Germans had simply issued orders to the effect that 120 to 130 Jews had to enter each car."

After another digression describing the loading of the victims into the cars, Karski writes emphatically:

"I know that many people will not believe me, will not be able to believe me, will think I exaggerate or invent. But I saw it and it is not exaggerated or invented. I have no other proofs, no photographs. All I can say is that I saw it and that it is the truth. The floor of the car had been covered with a thick, white powder. It was quicklime. Quicklime is simply unslaked lime or calcium oxide that has been dehydrated. Anyone who has seen cement being mixed knows what occurs when water is poured on lime. The mixture bubbles and steams as the powder combines with the water, generating a large amount of heat. Here the lime served a double purpose in the Nazi economy of brutality. The moist flesh coming in contact with the

lime is rapidly dehydrated and burned. The occupants of the cars would be literally burned to death before long, the flesh eaten from their bones. Thus, the Jews would 'die in agony', fulfilling the promise Himmler had issued 'in accord with the will of the Fuehrer', in Warsaw, in 1942.^[52] Secondly, the lime would prevent decomposing bodies from spreading disease. It was efficient and inexpensive – a perfectly chosen agent for their purposes."

After three hours, the forty cars of the train filled with Jews started to move. Karski continues:

"My informants had minutely described the entire journey. The train would travel about eighty miles and finally come to a halt in an empty, barren field. Then nothing at all would happen. The train would stand stock-still, patiently waiting while death penetrated into every corner of its interior. This would take from two to four days. When quicklime, asphyxiation, and injuries had silenced every outcry, a group of men would appear. They would be young, strong Jews, assigned to the task of cleaning out these cars until their own turn to be in them should arrive. Under a strong guard they would unseal the cars and expel the heaps of decomposing bodies. The mounds of flesh that they piled up would then be burned and the remnants buried in a single huge hole. The cleaning, burning and burial would consume one or two full days. The entire process of disposal would take, then, from three to six days. During this period the camp would have recruited new victims. The train would return and the whole cycle would be repeated from the beginning."

Even if Karski's account, in its various literary layers, is a simple fabrication, someone tried to improve on it, arguing that Karski had simply been wrong, that instead of visiting Belżec he had gone to Izbica, a place some sixty kilometers farther north.⁵³ That could be true with respect to the "marshalling camp" of December 1942, but in 1944, as we have seen, Karski spoke specifically of the Belżec camp:

"A few days after my second visit to the Warsaw ghetto, the Bund leader was to arrange an opportunity for me to see the Jewish death camp. The camp was located near the town of Belżec about one hundred miles east of Warsaw and was well-known all over Poland from the tales of horror that were circulated about it."

⁵² This promise was another infantile invention of Jan Karski.

⁵³ E. Th. Wood, S. M. Jankowski, *Karski. How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York 1994, pp. 128f.

This is so clear that the book was published in the US with a leaflet by William Sharp containing four drawings which summarized its contents, the fourth one containing the following explanation:⁵⁴

“He visited notorious Jewish death camp, disguised as Estonian guard.”

In 1987, in an interview given to Maciej Kozłowski, a journalist with *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Karski stated firmly that he had actually entered the Bełżec camp.⁵⁵

“We went together [with a guide] to Lublin, then changed trains and finally came to Bełżec. It was in mid-October [1942].”

At this time, Karski added a further lie to his original fabrication:

“I thought, then, that Bełżec was a transit camp. It was only after the war that I convinced myself that Bełżec was the final point of extermination.”

In his description of 1944 he unavoidably made serious errors, because, in fact, he had never seen the Bełżec camp. For example, that camp is not “on a large, flat plain,” but on the side of a hill, and Estonian guards were never on duty there. Furthermore, the very basis of the story – that the camp guards could be bribed – is in flagrant contradiction to their being described, in the report of July 10, 1942, and others, as having “lots of stolen money and jewelry” and being able to pay 20 gold dollars for a bottle of vodka.

That the whole account has been completely invented is evident, by the way, from its basic premises. In October 1942, in order to investigate how the deportees from the Warsaw ghetto were allegedly exterminated, Karski allegedly went – on the specific instructions of the head of the Bund – not to Treblinka but to Bełżec! And at a point in time at which the first wave of deportations has been over for a month, he ‘sees’ there crowds of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto! Thus, if Karski’s fable were to be convincing, it would be necessary for the Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to have been deported to Bełżec via Izbica! With total disregard for the intelligence of the victims of his fabrications, Karski did not even go to the trouble to check the location of Bełżec. He places it at a distance some 160 km east of Warsaw, whereas in reality it is nearly 300 km to the south-east of the Polish capital.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Reproduced in E.Th. Wood, S.M. Jankowski, *Karski. Opowieść o emisariuszu*, Wydawnictwo Baran i Suszczyński, Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, Kraków/Oświęcim 1996, documentary annex outside the text.

⁵⁵ “Niespełona misja. Z profesorem Jenem Karskim kurierem polskiego podziemia w latach II wojny światowej rozmawia Maciej Kozłowski,” in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, No. 11, 1987. (No page number shown in the photocopy in my possession).

⁵⁶ This information is also in error for Treblinka, which is situated some 80 km northeast of Warsaw (by rail).

The whole story invented by Jan Karski has fallen into disrepute among official historians (despite isolated paroxysms),⁵⁷ but not the man himself, who enjoyed high regard among the official historians until his death in July 2000.⁵⁸ As Theodore O’Keefe has correctly said:⁵⁹

“few alleged eyewitnesses to the Nazi ‘extermination’ camps have been as influential, and as honored, as Jan Karski.”

Thus the *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust* has an entry on Karski which, however, puts in doubt the acceptability of his testimony:⁶⁰

“It is not quite clear whether Karski, disguised as a guard, actually did view the mass murder in the Belżec extermination camp, as he later wrote.”

In Western countries, on the other hand, he was always careful, enjoying the mendacious fame of being an ‘eye-witness’ of the ‘extermination camp’ at Belżec, to give support to the official story by his presence or his signature, without, however, detailing his ‘testimony.’ With the complicity of the official historians, he became the guarantor of the alleged exterminations in the gas chambers of Belżec, for which the exhaust gas from a diesel engine was allegedly used. In this role he appeared, for example, in an Italian broadcast⁶¹ and in Claude Lanzmann’s famous film *Shoah*. In these Karski tells about his various ‘missions’ during the war, but without ever mentioning the Belżec camp.⁶²

Here is another striking example. In 1997 J. Karski wrote the foreword to the new edition of a translation of Rudolf Reder’s book about Belżec, which

⁵⁷ E.g., on Oct. 7, 2003, p. L37, Germany’s highly renowned newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote: “[Historian Raul] Hilberg’s last book to date [...] ‘Sources of Holocaust Research,’ has silently abandoned some of the most famous, but obviously also least reliable witnesses like Kurt Gerstein and Jan Karski. Thus, the denier and the propagandist are complementary figures of our times.”

⁵⁸ “On September 10th, 2002, Polish Foreign Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz unveiled a monument to Dr. Jan Karski on the campus of Georgetown University. The monument is crafted as a park bench with Karski sitting on it.” http://polish-jewish-heritage.org/Eng/monument_karski.htm. In 1999, the book by Karski was published in Polish under the title *Tajne państwo: opowieść o polskim podziemiu*, Twój Styl, Warsaw 1999.

⁵⁹ T.J. O’Keefe, “A Fake Eyewitness to Mass Murder at Belżec,” in *The Revisionist*, No. 1, November 1999, p. 1.

⁶⁰ E. Jäckel, P. Longerich, J. Schoeps (eds.), *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust*, Argon Verlag, Berlin 1993, vol. II, p. 741; the earlier English edition of this encyclopedia does not mention Belżec in its entry on Karski at all: Israel Gutman (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 7), vol II, p. 787.

⁶¹ The “*Speciale-Mixer*” of Giovanni Minoli, broadcast for the first time by RAI 2 on June 21, 1989, at 8:30 PM. Cf. in this respect my comments in *La soluzione finale: Problemi e polemiche*, Edizioni di Ar, Padua 1991, pp. 208-219.

⁶² C. Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Fayard, Paris 1985, pp. 183-196.

had first appeared in 1946,⁶³ needless to say without giving the slightest hint of his alleged visit to that camp.⁶⁴ Fraud in league with buffoonery!

4. The “*Soap Factory Using Human Fat*” at Bełżec

Even before the Second World War had ended, the legend of a factory established at Bełżec for the manufacture of soap from the corpses of the allegedly exterminated Jews was being circulated.

A report sent on August 30, 1942, by the Geneva Office of the Jewish Agency for Palestine to the US government and forwarded by the latter to the Holy See on September 26, 1942, contains the first germs of this legend.⁶⁵

“Liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto is taking place. Without any distinction all Jews, irrespective of age or sex, are being removed from the Ghetto in groups and shot. Their corpses are utilized for making fats and their bones for the manufacture of fertilizer. Corpses are even being exhumed for these purposes.

These mass executions take place, not in Warsaw, but in especially prepared camps for the purpose, one of which is stated to be in Belzec [sic⁶⁶].”

As we saw in section 1, by 1944 the legend of a factory for human soap at Bełżec had already started to take shape, and was disseminated in its initial form by A. Silberschein. In fact, the reports on Bełżec mentioned above state that in this camp “*the fat from the corpses was drained in order to – make soap from it*” and that the Germans had set up “*special factories for the production of soap and shoe polish from Jewish fat.*”

This juicy story then appeared in the *Black Book* in the following form:⁶⁷

“In another place, still in the Belzec camp, there was a soap factory. The Germans selected the fattest people and killed them to make their soap. Arthur [Israelevitch] Rosenstrauch, a bank clerk from Lvov to whom we owe this report, even held a bar of this ‘Jewish soap’ in his hands. The Gestapo bandits did not deny the existence of such a ‘factory’. When they wanted to scare a Jew, they said to him ‘we will make soap from you.’”

⁶³ Cf. below, Chapter II.1.

⁶⁴ R. Reder, *Bełżec*, Fundacja Judaica, Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, Krakow 1999. Polish text and English translation with foreword by Jan Karski dated Washington, July 4, 1997, pp. 5 and 77.

⁶⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1942, vol. III, p. 775.

⁶⁶ The text received by the Vatican has the spelling “*Belick.*” *Actes et documents du Saint Siègre relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale. Le Saint Siègre et les victimes de la guerre, janvier-1941-décembre 1942*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, vol. 8, 1974, p. 52. This is the only mention of the Bełżec camp in the whole book; clearly it has been confused here with the Treblinka camp.

⁶⁷ I. Ehrenburg, V. Grossman, *op. cit.* (note 33), p. 214.

However, the most enthusiastic storyteller and spreader of this legend of human was none other than Simon Wiesenthal. In 1946, he wrote an article entitled “RIF,” which opened with these words:⁶⁸

“In the last week of March, the Rumanian press published a unique piece of news: In the little Rumanian town of Folteceeni, twenty boxes of soap were laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery with all the traditional pomp and circumstance of a funeral. The soap had recently been found in a former German army depot. The boxes were clearly labeled ‘RIF – Rein jüdisches Fett’ [RIF – pure Jewish fat]. The boxes were destined for the Waffen-SS, and on the wrappers it said with full and cynical objectivity that the soap had been made from Jewish bodies.”

In reality, the acronym RIF stands for “Reichsstelle für industrielle Fettversorgung” (National office for industrial fat supply) and has nothing to do with human fat, much less Jewish fat, as was also admitted by the Jewish historian Yehuda Bauer in a letter dated January 9, 1991.⁶⁹

Still, Simon Wiesenthal recounts profusely the fantastic story of the alleged manufacture of human fat:

“Toward the end of 1942, the terrible words ‘transport for soap’ were uttered for the first time! It was in the Government General, and the factory was in Galicia, at Belsetz[sic]. In this plant, between April of 1942 and May of 1943, 900,000 Jews had been used as raw material [...]; certain solids [of the corpses] were separated and sent to northern Germany, and there, a special oil for U-boat engines was produced. The human bones went into the Lemberg bone mill, and there they were turned into fertilizer. [...] What was left, the residual fat, was needed for soap production. In parallel with the human transports, other substances such as soda, kolophonium, and sand were transported as secondary raw materials. The Belsetz plant had a daughter company at Danzig; a portion of the intermediates were sent there. Belsetz was a model plant. Therefore, transports to this location had priority with the Ostbahn [Eastern Railroad]. The plant needed raw materials ... and wheels turned for victory!”

We see that before he embarked on his lucrative career as a ‘Nazi hunter,’ Simon Wiesenthal pursued the slightly less noble activity of a catcher of lies!

⁶⁸ S. Wiesenthal, “RIF,” in *Der neue Weg*, No. 17/18, Vienna 1945.

⁶⁹ <http://www.nizkor.org/features/techniques-of-denial/appendix-7-02.html>; cf. also Reuter press release of April 24, 1990, as published in, e.g., *The Daily Telegraph*, April 25, 1990, “Jewish Soap Tale was ‘Nazi Lie’”; cf. Mark Weber, “Jewish soap,” *Journal of Historical Review*, 11(2) (1991), pp. 217-227.