

“Grasping the Spokes of the Wheel of History”

Gerstein, Eichmann and the Genocide of the Jews

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Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the access to new archives previously kept secret by the Soviet Union, historians of Nazism have had a growing tendency to believe that the historical narrative should be based exclusively on archives and refrain from using eyewitness testimonies, which are such fragile sources. This article argues, on the basis of the case of Adolf Eichmann’s involvement in Zyklon B deliveries to the extermination camps, that such an approach is unsatisfactory. Without eyewitness testimonies, neither Eichmann’s implication in this activity (which he of course always denied) nor the role played by Kurt Gerstein could be narrated. Taking into account only what is documented in archives would, therefore, mean relinquishing the aim of creating as complete a picture of the past as possible. In the case discussed in the article, this would mean forfeiting information that can alter the usual perception of Eichmann, Gerstein, or the workings of the RSHA.

Addressing “the much debated question of whether Eichmann, of the R.S.H.A. [Head Office for Reich Security], was involved in *Gasgeschichten*,” a very famous observer of the Jerusalem trial decided simply to give her opinion: “It is unlikely that he was, though one of his men, Rolf Günther, might have become interested of his own accord.” The observer was Hannah Arendt, and this somewhat casual remark was made in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which appeared in 1963.¹ Subject to further research, it may be said to coincide with a point when a dramatic change was taking place in some fundamental aspects of the historiography of the

genocide, a change in which it itself took part. I shall, however, start by explaining this enigmatic and allusive statement.

In June 1942, SS-Sturmbannführer Rolf Günther, Adolf Eichmann’s deputy, contacted the man in charge of the toxic gas service at the Waffen-SS Hygiene Institute, SS-Untersturmführer Kurt Gerstein, and ordered him to deliver Zyklon B to the Generalgouvernement, the parts of occupied Poland not annexed to the Reich. The intention was to change the modus operandi of the gas chambers at the Operation Reinhardt camps, replacing the exhaust gas used until then by this highly toxic gas. This mission, which took place in Belzec at the end of August, was, depending on one’s point of view, either a fiasco or an extraordinary example of successful disobedience. Gerstein, a determined opponent of the increasingly criminal Nazi regime, actually arranged for the Zyklon B to be destroyed. In the spring of 1943, Günther ordered a large quantity of Zyklon B, to be stored at the Oranienburg and Auschwitz camps, for use in slaughtering an undefined group of opponents. Gerstein stated on a number of occasions, both during and after the war, that he had destroyed this reserve of gas also, thereby making it unavailable for extermination purposes. In April–May 1945 he drafted a report, of which a number of German and French versions have survived, in which he related these episodes and his successful efforts to warn certain German religious elites, the Allies and a number of neutral countries about the genocide being perpetrated.² This report, together with the original documents that went with it, was included in the documentation of the Nuremberg Tribunals, and copies were to be found at all the major documentation centers. Gerstein’s account was thus readily available despite its author’s premature death in July 1945.

This archival collection, compiled in a legal context, constituted the main source of the earliest period of the historiography of the Jewish genocide. Due to the destruction of archives, whether accidental or deliberate, it was very incomplete. For example, Eichmann systematically destroyed the archives of his own service, Section IVB4 of the RSHA, which under Heydrich was responsible for designing and implementing the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question.”³ However, eventually a number of important documents were discovered, such as the minutes of the Wannsee Conference, a single copy of which (out of the thirty produced) was tracked down in the archives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Generally speaking, however, entire aspects of the history of the Third

Reich were not really documented. Hence it comes as no surprise that in the overall studies by Léon Poliakov (1951), Gerald Reitlinger (1953) or Raul Hilberg (1961), the episode outlined above occupies a significant place,⁴ coming as it does at the crossroads of two narratives: one about the technical history of the gassings, about which there is a major dearth of archival material, and the other about the activities of Eichmann and his services.⁵ The announcement of Eichmann's kidnapping in Argentina triggered a number of publications. They all drew on the same archival corpus and made the ordering of Zyklon B through Günther an obligatory stage in any account of Eichmann's activities.⁶

Forty years on, however, this episode appears to have been forgotten. In the most recent overall studies on the genocide, it is either completely omitted (as for example in Peter Longerich's work) or briefly referred to by Saul Friedländer in order to justify Gerstein's presence in Belzec: he is referred to here as a witness, as one of the rare examples of a "messenger" to use Hilberg's expression. There is no longer any reference to his mission, nor to Eichmann's indirect involvement, via his subordinate.⁷ In parallel, in the many studies published in recent years about Eichmann and his men, the episode is completely ignored, as if it had not taken place or did not concern Eichmann:⁸ as if, at most, Günther (in Arendt's words) was "interested of his own accord" in Zyklon B, behind his boss's back.⁹

On the other hand, although his place in the general history of the genocide gradually shrank to practically nothing, Gerstein experienced an extraordinary posthumous destiny, albeit somewhat late in the day. From the early 1960s onward, he became an independent subject, on his own merits, a "historical character" in his own right, so much so that a number of biographies were written about him. In 1963, a young German playwright, Rolf Hochhuth, published *The Deputy*, a damning indictment of the Catholic Church in which Gerstein, with the support of a fictional partner, a Jesuit called Ricardo, slammed Pope Pius XII's refusal to protest against the extermination of the Jews. Throughout the whole of Europe, the play triggered an extraordinarily passionate debate, together with an outpouring of writings: about the role of the Church, as in Friedländer's 1964 *Pius XII and the Third Reich*, but also about Gerstein, with the first and undoubtedly the most successful biography about him, by the same author, coming out in 1967. Two years later, journalist Pierre Joffroy, who saw Gerstein as a "spy of God" and his destiny as a "passion," published

a hagiography. Lastly, in 1999, a new biographer, Jürgen Schäfer, was more cautious in his description of this “life between biblical circles and the SS,” emphasizing the “witness to the Holocaust.”¹⁰

In 2001, Constantin Costa-Gavras adapted Hochhuth’s play for the screen, under the title *Amen*, while in *The Specialist* (1999) Rony Brauman and Eyal Sivan produced a documentary about Eichmann for the general public, which drew its inspiration directly from Hannah Arendt’s arguments. In terms of what they set out to do as well as in terms of quality, the two films were not comparable. But they were both indicative of the intellectual torpor which, at the turn of the century, could overwhelm those who wanted to make people think about the genocide of the Jews: the analytical frameworks hammered out in the 1960s appeared to them to be set in stone, and they had nothing to add to them.

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A number of explanations can be advanced for the disappearance of Kurt Gerstein’s mission from general accounts about the genocide or from biographies of Eichmann. They should be viewed as complementing each other rather than as alternative explanations. For the Jerusalem trial, as in Nuremberg, a new set of documentation was collected: in terms of scope, it was less wide-ranging, since it centered on the activities of the accused, but at the same time it was more in-depth. This considerably enriched the inventory of facts regarding Eichmann’s criminal activities. Although the episode of the Zyklon B deliveries became consequently less important (relatively speaking at least), it is nonetheless very curious that it entirely disappeared from the historical narrative. New documentary contributions, the sometimes spectacular discovery of previously unsuspected archival holdings, such as the Nazi archives confiscated by the Soviets and only made public after the fall of the Berlin Wall, had a profound influence on the very way of writing history. Over half a century of historiography, and especially in the last twenty years, the use of testimony provided by the perpetrators has progressively shrunk: sometimes one even has the impression that some historians today share the utopia of a history, a “grand récit,” devoid of eyewitnesses and based solely on archives. Here, on the contrary, I will try to show through examples that even the establishment of the *grand récit* is dependent on eyewitness accounts and, if these are disregarded, this inevitably means missing decisive elements which help

to provide a better understanding of the development and pace of the “Final Solution” or the type of involvement of secondary perpetrators who became major historical figures. There are also eyewitness accounts which make it possible to provide a far more sophisticated description of the behavior of the various actors than is possible on the basis of archives alone, and to weigh up what over time has become one of the key aspects of historiography: their motivation.¹¹

Gerstein’s tale was undoubtedly the victim of this heuristic change of framework. For this was a tale which, basically, was documented solely by a few Zyklon B invoices, and its main players were dead: the witness; the man who gave the orders, Günther; Christian Wirth, the man in charge of the Operation Reinhardt camps; and SS-Gruppenführer Odilo Globocnik, his superior, who had supervised with unprecedented zeal the murder of Europe’s largest Jewish community, that of the Generalgouvernement on former Polish territory. True, the secondary players had been able to confirm specific aspects of the mission, such as SS-Obersturmbannführer Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Pfannenstiel who had accompanied Gerstein to Lublin, Belzec and Treblinka, or Dr. Gerhard Peters, managing director of the firm which produced Zyklon B.¹² But none of these witnesses was able to go beyond what Gerstein, at the time, had told them. What remained unconfirmed by outside sources was the RSHA’s involvement in these orders, and the reasons why it had approached Gerstein.

They were all dead—apart from Eichmann. His trial was the opportunity to thrash out these facts, or in other words to test these charges. The defense advanced by Eichmann, who wanted to make absolutely sure of avoiding any implication in these “gas stories,” had begun several months before he appeared in court. During a very lengthy interrogation conducted in prison by Captain Avner Less of the Israeli police, Eichmann himself brought up the role that Günther had played in the Zyklon B orders. He implied that one day his subordinate had spoken to him about this matter, and he had given him a severe dressing-down because this had nothing to do with the remit of the service.¹³ This version—which Eichmann would try to palm off, as it were, on the trial court, this time by imagining that Günther might have been acting on the orders of Müller, the Gestapo chief, or at the request of Globocnik, and in any case without he himself being informed of this¹⁴—was actually a line of defense that had been around for several years. For Eichmann had been confronted by the

Gerstein report when he was still in Argentina, during the long series of interviews that he gave to a former Nazi called Wilhelm Sassen.¹⁵ These interviews were like a rehearsal, in a friendly setting, of the subsequent trial, apart from the fact that although Eichmann was confronted by a large number of documents incriminating him, including the Gerstein report, the person talking to him was neither a prosecutor nor a judge. Henceforth he denied that he had been directly involved. When he himself raised the episode a few years later with Avner Less, Eichmann was hoping to prove his sincerity and to disarm in advance a charge that would undoubtedly be leveled at him. One of the issues before the court was indeed whether Less had read the Gerstein report to the accused before raising the subject.¹⁶ However, when questioned a little later, Eichmann forgot that the naivety of his account was a vital element in his credibility, and indicated that he had been familiar with the report when still in Buenos Aires.¹⁷ This did not escape the attention of the court which, quite rightly, thought that any personal initiative by Günther would have been completely out of the question. Eichmann was thus held to be guilty of involvement in the Zyklon B deliveries, and this guilt was confirmed on appeal.¹⁸ For her part, Hannah Arendt had accepted the accused's version, but with a note of caution:¹⁹ it was “unlikely” that Eichmann had been involved in these “gas stories.”

Perhaps the philosopher-journalist had merely skimmed through the proceedings, or perhaps, since she had followed them from some distance, she had based herself solely on a transcript of the Sassen interviews. It may, however, be assumed that Arendt considered that the proof had not been properly adduced and deemed, on the whole, the accused's version more “likely” than the one accepted by the court (it is also true that Eichmann's direct involvement in the gassings, by reducing the distance between the desk-criminal and the bloodshed, did not entirely fit in with her theory of the “banality of evil”).²⁰ And this reversal of judgment was undoubtedly based on a more or less clearly formulated impression which, I believe, is fairly widespread and explains the disappearance of the Gerstein-mission tale from the general history of the genocide: this whole affair failed to “fit in” with the normal functioning of the RSHA as reflected in the surviving archives and Eichmann's plea in self-defense. In Arendt's opinion, it was precisely because Eichmann was an RSHA man that involvement by him in the gas deliveries was “unlikely.”²¹

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And yet the idea of the RSHA operating in a non-standard, not to say deviant, fashion is far from absurd. The “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” in its ultimate version, from the spring of 1942 onwards, involved two separate phases: the arrest and deportation of the Jews, and their extermination or forced labor at the camps. The RSHA, via Eichmann, was basically in charge of the former for most of the territories under German domination, while the latter was assigned to the WVHA, the Economic-Administration Main Office, for the Auschwitz and Majdanek camps, and to the Generalgouvernement’s security services for Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. This division, which for Eichmann was so important, was—and remains—blurred by just two elements that it seemed impossible to relate to each other: Kurt Gerstein’s testimony and that of Rudolf Höss.

Captured in February 1946, the Auschwitz commandant had, in his statements, associated Eichmann with the choice of the lethal gas used in Auschwitz. According to him, they had spoken about this at their first meeting: after describing the different methods used elsewhere—shootings, gas trucks or chambers using carbon monoxide—Eichmann had indicated that he would enquire about a gas “which would be easy to find and not require any special installation”; the final choice, according to Höss, was made following a meeting in Berlin attended by Eichmann’s representatives in various countries and Höss himself.²² His account could be seen as a straightforward denial of guilt, since it made Eichmann share the responsibility for the choice of the gas, and especially since the charge against Eichmann was made by Höss after a considerable delay, to put it mildly.²³ It also had its chronological weaknesses. Höss claimed that this episode occurred immediately after the conversation during which the Reichsführer, at the beginning of the summer of 1941, had ordered him to turn the Auschwitz concentration and prisoner-of-war camp into an extermination camp, which would mean that Eichmann had come to Auschwitz during the summer of 1941, and Höss thought he remembered the Berlin meeting taking place a few months later, in the autumn. The chronological framework advanced by Höss was initially adopted by historiography, which did not drop it until the early 1980s. On the basis of various arguments, which need not be outlined here, historians came to agree on an ever-later decision relating to total extermination:

today, there is broad consensus as to the end of 1941.²⁴ This later dating correspondingly shifted the plan recounted by Höss and, at the same time, moved Eichmann’s first visit to Auschwitz to some time in 1942. It would even appear to totally undermine its coherence, since the first criminal gassing with Zyklon B, whose victims were Soviet prisoners of war and sick prisoners, took place in Auschwitz three months earlier, in September 1941: and hence how could it be argued that Eichmann had been associated with the choice of the gas used?

Once it is held that, whatever the actual facts, Höss’s argument does not take account of the first gassing operation in September 1941 (whereby it can be shown that this did not fall under the heading of the “Final Solution”),²⁵ two options may be considered: either to completely drop Höss’s account or to make limited use of it by stripping it of its substance, or to consider that, irrespective of the chronology, it retains a strong internal logic, a substantial informative quality, and can still be used as the groundwork for a methodically grounded historical narrative, and that it would even be harmful to do without it. In brief, Höss provides a satisfactorily accurate description—albeit dating it explicitly to the summer and autumn of 1941—of a context which is undoubtedly that of the spring and summer of 1942: we can assume that he simply got the date wrong, as he did quite often, and, in order to confirm this, we can try to move the plan accordingly.²⁶ Thus the only RSHA meeting in which Höss participated took place, not in November 1941, but at the end of August 1942, as confirmed by various documents.²⁷

Spring–summer 1942: at the same period, an expert in toxic gases had been commissioned to undertake similar reflections about the choice of gas. The expert was Gerstein and the person who did the immediate commissioning, Günther, was Eichmann’s deputy. In this instance also, even though the specific method of extermination—gas chambers using exhaust gases—had long since been worked out, the matter was subject to consideration. The method itself had even been used routinely since March 1942, and several hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews had already been exterminated in Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka when Gerstein carried out his mission in mid-August. In Berlin, nevertheless, this method had appeared inappropriate because of the decision to speed up the massacre of the Jews. The two events—Eichmann’s investigation, according to Höss, into the most suitable gas for extermination operations at Auschwitz, and

Gerstein's mission (at Eichmann's instigation) to Belzec—help shed light on each other. At the end of spring 1942, it was considered necessary to reexamine from every angle the different gassing methods that had been developed on the local level, without intervention from the central authorities, and whose use had been considerably extended. According to one of his employees, Bruno Tesch, the head of Testa (the company which, through Degesch, delivered Zyklon B to Auschwitz), had stated in a report that he had been invited—in the early summer of 1942, it can be assumed—to a meeting which discussed the use of Zyklon B for the mass extermination of the Jews.²⁸

Only fragmentary evidence is available to us for this attempt at rationalization, which could also involve checking out hands-on experience: Höss went to Treblinka and Globocnik to Auschwitz in order to study the methods used elsewhere.²⁹ It did not in any case lead to much. At Auschwitz, Zyklon B continued to be used, whereas at the Operation Reinhardt camps, the project to change the gas chambers was a failure. Gerstein, as has been seen, was absolutely determined to sabotage the mission. He found an unexpected ally in the shape of the man he came to talk to, Christian Wirth, who was in charge of the three Generalgouvernement camps, as Gerstein would recount in his report: “Wirth is asking me not to suggest to Berlin any modifications in the killing methods in the gas chambers because they have proven themselves (sic). What is curious is that nobody asked me anything in Berlin. I had the prussic acid which I brought with me buried.”³⁰

Clearly, the fate of the mission had in part been determined on site, as a result of the unexpected combination of two instances of reluctance, with contrasting motivations but an identical result: Gerstein did not wish to be involved in a crime which Wirth thought was so perfectly perpetrated that nothing had to be changed.

However, this heterogenesis of ends certainly does not entirely explain what happened, as intimated in Gerstein's allusion to the “curious” absence of any report concerning his mission. What is most likely is that this mission was simply one element among others in a wider and in part superfluous rationalization plan. In the Nazi administration, as doubtless in any administration, not infrequently parallel, not to say conflicting evaluations on the same subject would be sought. The subjects could be extremely varied: long-term development plans involving—at a

minimum—the forced movement of millions of people and the exploitation, through forced labor, of hundreds of thousands of others, such as the *Generalplan Ost*³¹ or the choice of an appropriate gas for killing the mentally ill.³² In the present instance, there is no link of any kind, for example, between the meeting referred to by Bruno Tesch and Günther’s contacts with Gerstein. Above all, Rainer Fröbe recently revealed that the complex of extermination camps, in both Upper Silesia and the Generalgouvernement, was inspected in July–August 1942 by somebody whom Himmler trusted, the man in charge of WVHA Amtsgruppe C (construction), SS-Brigadeführer Hans Kammler.³³ So in order to have an overall view of things, Himmler had dispatched on mission two subordinates belonging to two different branches of the administration: the WVHA and the RSHA with Eichmann, who linked the inspections of one extermination site with the other. On August 11, 1942, the Reichsführer received the two men in turn at his Vinnitsa headquarters near Minsk.³⁴ During the coming days, orders would follow each other at a rapid pace: an enormous industrial extermination site would be constructed at Auschwitz, comprising no fewer than four combined gas and cremation installations; the camp’s capacities would be further increased, taking it up to 250,000 prisoners; Eichmann would send out invitations for a meeting of his deputies, to which he would also invite Höss.³⁵ Gerstein’s mission to Belzec had taken place on August 16, and he had returned to Berlin two days later: if he was not asked for any reports, it is most likely that this was because the decision about gassing methods had already been taken, on August 11. To the extent that everything, basically, was working satisfactorily, the best thing was to leave things unchanged and simply increase extermination capacities.³⁶

Lastly, it should be noted that the date when Gerstein was given his mission by Günther, June 8, 1942, fell into a very narrow time slot during which, according to a number of authors, a new order by Hitler provided the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” with its ultimate form—indiscriminate short-term murder.³⁷ In order to attain this goal, which involved an unprecedented speeding up of the pace of extermination, new means, in terms of transport, for example, or personnel were granted. The RSHA opted (for a short time, it is true) to dispense with the administration’s normal operating methods, not hesitating, in some countries, to act in the stead of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order

to negotiate with these allies the implementation of the program on their territory.³⁸ To use Himmler's expression of the period, the intention was to achieve "tabula rasa"—to wipe the slate clean.

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It is my understanding that this "gas story" really did take place, and it undoubtedly reflects Eichmann's involvement during the summer of 1942 in the very heart of the genocidal machinery: rather than merely organizing the transports, he had also intervened in perfecting the techniques of murder. However, while it is possible, albeit not with absolute certainty, to reconstruct the variables of Gerstein's mission, from its instigation to its failure, one area is particularly difficult to fathom: the motivations of its protagonist, and the connections between the goals pursued and the means used by him. The fact is that one episode is missing in the account I have just given of his mission to Belzec and Treblinka: that of the preparations, between the order and its implementation, about which we have very few sources. In his postwar interrogations, Gerstein indicated that he had accepted the mission without any qualms, being sure that his acknowledged technical competence would enable him to destroy the gas by declaring that it had decomposed. But other elements indicate that, during a certain period, he was far from certain of any latitude on his part in terms of his actions. Two witnesses described after the war the trials and tribulations to which he was subject: by carrying out this order, *ipso facto* he himself became a murderer, he confided to one of them, Pastor Herbert Mochalski, who added: "He intended to commit suicide. It was impossible for him to carry out this mission."³⁹ But a technical aspect shed an even more disturbing light on the situation. The lethal gas that was transported to Belzec and buried by Gerstein was not the standard industrial product marketed under the name of Zyklon B, but its main component, prussic acid, in liquid form rather than adsorbed by porous granules. Furthermore, it was most likely irritant-free.⁴⁰

This was not the result of any chance happening but of a deliberate choice which must be attributed to Gerstein. For after accepting the mission, he had hoped to relieve the victims' suffering by eliminating the irritant, which caused uncontrollable and agonizing coughing in those who inhaled the gas. He opened his heart to his traveling companion, Professor Pfannenstiel, throughout the trip to Lublin, and then the follow-

ing year to Peters, the managing director of the company that produced Zyklon B. In the series of reports that he wrote at the very end of the war, Gerstein condemned the inhumanity of these killings, which, according to his argument, resulted not so much from the “sadism” of the torturers, as from a “total indifference” and “laziness in dealing with things.” The options confronting Gerstein when proceeding in this way were the following: to obey, knowing that this would make him into a murderer; to disobey, knowing that this would prevent any relief of the victims’ suffering in their last moments; or to commit suicide.

Suicide was a recurring thought for Gerstein. In 1935 and 1938, he was arrested several times by the Gestapo, because of his opposition to the Nazi government’s religious policy, and he even spent six weeks at the Welzheim concentration camp. In a letter, he wrote an account of this ordeal to his uncle:

I cannot describe the humiliations, the ill-treatment, the hunger, and the way I was forced to live crowded together with pimps and criminals.... Lice, bugs, and other vermin, hunger, forced labor, and treatment that was beyond description!... Several times I came within an ace of hanging myself or putting an end to my life in some other way because I hadn’t the faintest idea if, or when, I should ever be released from that concentration camp.⁴¹

Following Gerstein’s account of his mission to Belzec, he again had thoughts of suicide when he was in the corridor that ran alongside the gas chambers, while the victims were dying:

Many were praying. I could not yet give them any assistance. I prayed with them, I pressed myself into a corner and in a loud voice cried out to their God and to mine. I could let myself do this, there was enough noise around me. How gladly I should have gone into the gas chamber with them, how gladly I would have died the same death as theirs. If they had found an SS officer in uniform in the gas chamber, the murderers would have never believed that this could be a protest by me. They would have considered it an accident, and my epitaph would have been: “Died for his beloved Führer, while discharging important duties for the Führer.”

But ultimately, the path of suicide was barred to him. So Gerstein carried on:

No, that won't do. I do not yet have the right to give into the temptation to die with these people. I know enough about it... I am one of the [only] five men who have seen all these installations. There is certainly not one, other than me, who sees this as an adversary, as an enemy of this bunch of murderers, hence, I must continue to live and to shout out what I have seen here. In truth, this must be far more difficult, I must live and [expose this].

This need to testify was in fact given as one of the two real reasons for accepting his mission. In the same report, giving an account of the meeting with Günther, he wrote the following:

Today it still seems to me that a chance which bears a strange resemblance to destiny has placed me in a position where I can look precisely where I wanted to have a clear view with every fiber of my being. Among the thousands of possible jobs, I had been given, among the hundreds of others, precisely that job which brought me closest to this sort of thing and which required me, me among so many others, to work on it. When I think about it, this seems incredible to me.

Hence there was just one alternative left to him: to obey or not.

And yet, it would appear that he had been offered another path, one to which he never referred: to refuse outright to obey orders or, by providing a bland excuse, to make it impossible to fulfill his orders. His ingenuity, his strength of character could just as well have been used in order to shirk this duty. And it would not appear that he would have risked his life by doing so: if, as Christopher Browning has shown, where the massacres were actually committed, on the brink of the mass graves, the executioners had the possibility of not taking part in the shooting, how can we assume that such a way out would have been unavailable to those further from the crime scene?⁴² Gerstein's very tone, in recounting his meeting with Günther, shows clearly that he had *chosen* to obey: because he saw in this order a unique opportunity to become the "agent" which

he prided himself on being, as we have seen, but also because he thought that he was the only person who could undermine the order:

I have no qualms whatsoever about accepting this mission, because anyone else would have carried it out as the SD wished, while I was capable of making the entire consignment disappear on the grounds that the material was spoiled or decomposed. This is the only way of preventing the use of prussic acid for executing human beings.

Thus when, during his conversation with Mochalski, Gerstein referred to the possibility of suicide, he was referring to a near future, when, during the deed itself, he might be forced to acknowledge that he could not disobey.

Since everything played out at the last minute, the outcome of the mission could not be foreseen. During the journey, Gerstein tried to convince Pfannenstiel of the moral justice of his aim—to relieve the suffering of the victims. Ultimately there would appear to be little doubt that by doing so he was trying to convince himself that, by taking part in this murder, he would at least have had the satisfaction of making its perpetration somewhat less horrible, as the result of a carefully designed technical device. At the same time, he had also prepared for the mission’s failure. According to his account, Gerstein had hinted to the workers of the Kolin factory in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia that the prussic acid was to be used for criminal purposes. According to the postwar account of one of his friends, he had hoped that they would have the idea of providing inferior packaging for the goods in order to make it easier to divert them. Subsequently, during the trip between Kolin and Lublin, Gerstein claimed that one of the bottles of gas was leaking and buried it with his own hands, as attested by Pfannenstiel, by Gerstein himself in an interrogation, and also by his widow, on the basis of Gerstein’s clearly partial account.⁴³

The alternative was resolved in the heat of things, at the very last moment, and for reasons quite different from all the issues that Gerstein had tried to anticipate. Wirth, as we have shown, was satisfied with the procedure used at the Operation Reinhardt camps and was not willing to run the risk of using this new, highly toxic gas, which was complicated to use in the liquid form supplied by Gerstein. The prussic acid which

Gerstein said had decomposed was buried. Everything had gone off well, due to pure luck: Gerstein, who had managed to witness the extermination of the Jews, had nonetheless not been involved in murder. And because decisions concerning the killing methods had been taken without involving him, he did not even have to report on his mission's failure. At Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka, therefore, the Jews continued to die in the same way, as if Gerstein's considerations about the inhumanity of using exhaust gas and his efforts to minimize the pain associated with the prussic acid had simply never existed. Moreover, in his report, he would make only a passing comment on the cruelty of the killing methods, without indicating that he himself had found a "humane" method, which had perhaps come very close to being implemented.

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In the Belzec episode, Gerstein appeared to have finally rejected the possibility of suicide, arguing that the most important thing was to be a witness, so that he could denounce the terrible crime being committed. During the years to come, he would indeed be one of the most extraordinary "messengers" about the genocide. On his return, in the train from Warsaw to Berlin, he met a Swedish embassy attaché, Göran von Otter, to whom he described the gassing operations he had just witnessed in Belzec and Treblinka. He warned another diplomat, this time a Swiss one, in 1944. He contacted a number of Protestant and Catholic leaders and informed his close friends on whom he could rely. Through one of them, the Dutch engineer J. H. Ubbink, he managed in the spring of 1943 to get a fairly detailed report passed on to London.⁴⁴ But none of his reports would appear to have had any impact whatsoever on the reaction of the Churches, the neutral countries or the Allies. In certain cases, quite simply, no credence was given to his testimony: "Ask the people in your part of the world if now, at least, they believe what happened in Belzec," he wrote to Ubbink in the spring of 1945. In other cases, it must be assumed that this testimony simply confirmed aspects which were already known: the silence of the Churches, the low-key stance of the neutral countries, the Allies' precautions—all these must be interpreted in a more general framework. In all these instances, his "appeal," to use Friedländer's expression, remained "without echo."⁴⁵

To put himself in a position that would enable him to know, in order to then be able to testify: this was the goal that Gerstein said he had set for himself, the profound logic of a destiny which in many respects was disconcerting. In April 1945 he left Berlin in order to rejoin his family in Tübingen, but his flight came to an end at Rottweil, where the Allied troops were advancing. He voluntarily handed himself over to the French forces and was left under “day parole” at a hotel in the town. This was the point at which he drew up several versions, in German and French, of this famous report which, more than anything else, became the basis for his position in history. He handed this text, plus various archival materials, over to two British intelligence agents, since the French forces seemed to be totally indifferent to his potential as the major witness he thought he was. He presented himself to the British agents as a “secret agent” working for a famous figure in the German Protestant world, Pastor Niemöller. In a letter to his wife, who had until then been kept out of his activities, he revealed, at the same time, the secret role of an “emissary of the Confessing Church” that he had played within the Waffen-SS over recent years.⁴⁶ However, it is obviously in the different versions of the report that we find the most detailed presentation of this figure of an infiltrated “agent.” On May 8, 1945, he wrote:

When I heard about the massacres of the feeble-minded and the mentally deranged at Grafeneck, Hadamar, etc., shocked and hurt to my very core, since there was such a case in my own family, I had but one desire: to see, to see clearly into this entire mechanism and then cry it aloud to the whole nation! Even if my life would be threatened, I had no qualms. I myself had twice been fooled by agents of the Security Service who had infiltrated the innermost circles of the Protestant Church and prayed at my side. I thought to myself: “What you have been able to do, I will do better than you” and I volunteered for the SS. In doing so, I was spurred on by the fact that my own sister-in-law, Bertha Ebeling, had been murdered at Hadamar.

In Paris, a few weeks later, when he was charged with murder and being an accessory to murder, Gerstein followed the same line during his inter-

rogation, stating that he had joined the SS for this purpose on December 10, 1940.⁴⁷

This was not a last-minute invention, designed to justify his membership of a criminal body, but a recurring presentation of his credo, which was borne out afterwards by a number of people who had been in contact with him in various contexts, and also by a variety of documents.⁴⁸ One of the most detailed accounts is that of his brother Karl:

On February 20, 1941, the internment of the urn containing the ashes of my sister-in-law took place at Saarbrücken. My brother Kurt also took part in the ceremony. The circumstances of this sudden death had been strange.... Dumbfounded though we were, we suspected nothing. It was my brother Kurt who, on the way home from the funeral, enlightened my unsuspecting wife and me. Our utter consternation was only heightened when Kurt then further revealed to us that he wanted to join the Waffen-SS.... In this way, he said, he would be able to get to the bottom of these various rumors and find out what was really going on in the SS. I must confess that we didn't take Kurt seriously.⁴⁹

What was true in these rumors was that, on a written order from Hitler and on Reich Chancellery instructions, at the beginning of the war a program to exterminate the insane had been initiated, under the code name of T4, the acronym of the address of the service in charge, Tiergartenstraße 4. Seventy thousand mentally ill people were murdered in the gas chambers of various centers established for this purpose, at Hadamar or Grafeneck. Bertha Ebeling was one of them. This figure applies only to the period up to the summer of 1941, when, under pressure brought about by the public positions adopted by various members of the Churches, especially the Bishop of Münster, Bernhard von Galen, Hitler "officially" ordered the end of the program which nevertheless continued both in the Reich and in some of the occupied or annexed territories.⁵⁰

However straightforward Gerstein's version of his joining the SS may appear, it does not stand up to serious historical scrutiny. As early as 1967, Saul Friedländer determined that his application to join the Waffen-SS was made in the summer of 1940, reversing the chronology which in Gerstein's account had been based on causality: he had in reality volunteered *before*,

not *after*, his sister-in-law’s murder. What basically came about in the wake of her murder was the justification that Gerstein could provide for joining the Waffen-SS (which only became effective in March 1941, when he was admitted to its ranks): none of the available testimony actually refers to the period prior to Bertha Ebeling’s death.⁵¹ Another fact was revealed by Jürgen Schäfer in a recent biography: in the few weeks that preceded Gerstein’s application to the Waffen-SS, he had already tried to change his position twice. At the end of July, he had resubmitted his application to volunteer for the Wehrmacht, which he had originally made a few weeks after the beginning of the war, in October 1939, and which had not been followed up. Then on August 15 he had applied for a teaching position at a technical school. However, on the same day, he was still hoping to be enrolled in the Wehrmacht in October.⁵² Eventually, on the 17th, he finally put his name down for the Waffen-SS.⁵³

In order to analyze this brief sequence of events, with its multiple contradictions, it is necessary to look at a longer period. Following his arrest, Gerstein had been expelled from the Nazi Party in 1936: the immediate consequence was his dismissal from the Saarland Mines Administration. Enjoying powerful support from his family, he tried to soften the blow, since this meant not being able to continue in his professional field. To do so, he contacted various state services, providing evidence for the Gestapo, in both private correspondence, which he was sure would be intercepted by the censor, and other correspondence with the Party Court (where he did not hesitate to adopt outspokenly anti-Semitic stances, a bitter irony even if such positions were apparently the result of family pressure).⁵⁴ In the summer of 1939 these tactics led to his sentence being amended: instead of being expelled from the Nazi Party, he was simply dismissed. Within a few weeks, he found a job at a private company, but he still continued to wage his campaign to have his sentence overturned and be allowed to rejoin the Party. His unflinching efforts in this direction can be seen as reflecting a desire to return to a normal social position, under the sway of a profoundly conservative father, as well as the desire not to be rejected by a community of which he still felt himself a member, as attested by his volunteering to serve in the Wehrmacht a few weeks after the outbreak of the war—a war of aggression.⁵⁵ Moreover, Gerstein was having more clashes with his employer, and he very clearly wanted to change jobs as quickly as possible. Hence his enrolling in the Waffen-SS might have been

both a sign of this desire for change, like his two other moves toward the Wehrmacht and teaching, and also a tactical maneuver in his long-term rehabilitation campaign.

If Gerstein was ultimately a heroic individual, this was the result of a throw of the dice. He could just as well have gone into the Wehrmacht or spent the war teaching, as he had said he wanted to. What is clear is that he had to find a justification for joining the Waffen-SS with regard to his fellow Confessing Church members with whom he shared prayer and struggle, in order to avoid being expelled once again, this time in an even more painful fashion than when he was expelled from the Party. According to Pastor Kurt Rehling, Gerstein gave him the following explanation:

If you hear strange things about me, do not believe that I have changed.... I have joined the S.S. and now, at times, I talk their language. I do this for two reasons: the collapse is coming. That is absolutely certain.... When that moment comes, these ruthless desperados will do all they can to get rid of anyone left whom they regard as their enemy. At that point, help from outside will be useless. Help then can only possibly come from a person who can suppress orders or deliver them in garbled form. That is where I come in. The second reason is that I am on the trail of so many crimes! My aunt [sic] was killed at Hadamar. I want to know where and by whom the orders for these murders are given!⁵⁶

To come up with a justification: clearly, the word has two meanings. In one, justification is a word devoid of content, intended solely to save face. In the other, the effort is made to subvert, to correct the reprehensible action by giving it a different meaning. This is clearly what Gerstein did, even if it is not possible to know when, in the multiple-choice situation he had brought about, his decision to join the Waffen-SS had been eroded from within by his plan to conduct himself in its ranks as an “agent” (even if nothing substantiates Gerstein’s statement that he acted in complete agreement with Niemöller, who from 1937 was interned in a concentration camp). After all, one could equally suppose that this two-stage plan of action had already been conceived as such in the summer of 1940, at the very moment that he took this step. Public denunciation of the murders of the insane had begun several weeks earlier, even if Gerstein’s

sister-in-law had not yet been a victim of this policy. If the Waffen-SS had nothing to do with the T4 project run by the Reich Chancellery, this was not a bad choice of target insofar as the Totenkopf division controlled the concentration camps, which a year later would become the location for large-scale murders. Apparently Gerstein volunteered for the Totenkopf on August 17, 1940.⁵⁷ Instead, he was assigned to the Waffen-SS, to the Hygiene Institute.

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In the spring of 1943, Eichmann's deputy, Günther, called Gerstein in again and instructed him to order large quantities of Zyklon B. According to his account, Gerstein managed to modify this order in a number of ways: by changing what was supposed to be a large-scale order into small, regular quantities; and by ensuring that the Zyklon B would not be stored in Berlin, as Günther wished, but in Oranienburg and Auschwitz. Be that as it may, the criminal purpose of this order was not in doubt:

These were very large quantities, several freight cars altogether, which were to be gradually accumulated and kept available for him. This poison was enough to kill several million human beings, who would thus have vanished without much ado. Günther told me that he did not yet know where, when, how, for what purpose, for what circles this poison was to be used. In any case, it was to be continuously available. I deduced from several technical questions asked by Günther that part, at least, of this poison was to be used in order to do away with a large quantity of men in some clubs and reading rooms. According to the scanty information, I assumed that these were officers or clerics, in any case cultivated people, and the poison was to be used in Berlin itself.

This criminal purpose was in fact confirmed by the Degesch managing director, Dr. Peters, with whom Gerstein had negotiated the deliveries directly.⁵⁸ In many respects, this is a mysterious order, insofar as it is difficult to identify the program of which it was to be part. It may be assumed that the Nazi regime, caught up in a criminal spiral as the perspective of defeat loomed ever larger following the fall of Stalingrad, had come up with a plan to liquidate the regime's opponents when the situation became

crucial. Thus on a number of occasions Hitler had referred to the order given by Himmler to liquidate, when the time came, all concentration camp inmates in order to prevent their liberation and subsequent ability to foment an uprising which would weaken the home front. All of Hitler's political thinking—and even more so, all his political praxis—was the upshot of the traumatic events of 1918. This project never became more specific, and it was obviously never implemented.⁵⁹

The issue of who the victims were to be is less relevant to our investigation. What is most interesting here is the striking similarity between the mission to Belzec in 1942 and the series of orders initiated in the spring of 1943 which, spread out over a year, involved four tons of Zyklon B: an enormous quantity if it is borne in mind that in 1942, at the time of the first extermination “peak” at the Auschwitz camp, slightly over seven tons had been received, only part of which was used for criminal gassing operations. Once again, Gerstein indicated in his report that he had accepted the order because he thought that he could ensure that the product would not be used for criminal purposes:

With great difficulty, I managed to arrange for this poison to be stored at Oranienburg and Auschwitz, at the concentration camps. I then managed to get the poison spirited away when it arrived, claiming it was for disinfection purposes. The invoices of the supplying firm [Degesch] were drawn up, at my request, in my name, on the grounds that this would keep things more secret; in point of fact, it was in order to get the poison out of the way more readily. For this reason I avoided presenting for payment the various current invoices in order to avoid constantly reminding the SD and the RSHA of the large quantities of poison which were supposed to be available. I made the company wait and left the invoices unpaid.

Once again, only part of this information can be checked out: the rest is based solely on Gerstein's testimony. Gerstein gave the American agents a number of original invoices for Zyklon B, which were indeed made out to him: they remained unpaid up to the end of the war.⁶⁰ In contrast, the question of the destruction of this Zyklon B is extremely problematic. In the absence of any corroborating documentation or testimony, the Frankfurt court that tried Peters was unable to determine with certainty

what had happened to it.⁶¹ In the last months of the war, Gerstein strove constantly to convince his friends that he had not dirtied his hands. In a very moving letter to his father, from the autumn of 1944, he developed the same idea. After referring to Schiller’s *Legislation of Lycurgus and Solon* (which discusses the Spartans’ massacre of the helots)⁶²—an indirect but clear allusion to the genocide of the Jews—he wrote:

I have never lent my hand to any of these things. Whenever I have received orders of such a nature, I have either never carried them out or I have used a diversion to prevent them from being executed. So far as I am concerned, I have come out of this affair with my hands clean and my conscience completely at peace. This has had an enormously calming effect on me, and there is no question in it of any opportunism. If the worst came to the worst, what would death amount to? What matters are principles and one’s personal bearing.... It is the fate of all those with a spark of daring in them to risk all that they possess, even their substance, for the sake of an uncertain gain....⁶³

Since we have no cast-iron evidence, we cannot draw any conclusions as to whether or not this Zyklon B was to be used for gassing—Jews specifically. While Günther’s order in the spring of 1943 was not given as part of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” it is highly likely in one case, and definite in another, as we shall see, that Gerstein was approached several times in the framework of the extermination of the Jews. In any case, it also turns out that even though Gerstein may have destroyed the store of gas that he had ordered, he did not do so in accordance with the method described in his report: gradually, as the deliveries arrived. For on May 24, 1944, approximately one year after the beginning of the orders, Gerstein wrote to Peters, the Degesch managing director:

... I should be grateful if you could let me know how long you consider the special deliveries for Oranienburg and Auschwitz will remain stable. In the event of any doubts on your part concerning the length of the storage period, we should be obliged to use up the supplies in the first shipments for disinfection purposes and, for the time being, keep only fresh deliveries in stock. Up to now, no part of

these quantities has been used. As against this, considerable amounts, perhaps even the entire stock, might in certain circumstances be required at short notice. But safety and/or stability is naturally the first consideration.⁶⁴

Through this letter, Gerstein was actually replaying his visit to the Kolin factory during the summer of 1942: he was implying in the same fashion that the Zyklon B was being used for criminal ends—for why would he suggest destroying the older supplies “for disinfection purposes” (normally the only use to which the product would be put), without saying for what (i.e. exceptionally) the rest was to be used? Furthermore, he was providing his correspondent with a plausible technical excuse for declaring the stock of gas to have passed its use-by date. Peters did not grasp the lifeline that Gerstein was offering him, and as a managing director proud of his product’s reliability, he provided a one-year guarantee, stating that the product could doubtless be kept for longer.⁶⁵

By May 24, 1944, when Gerstein was writing to Peters, 138,870 Hungarian Jews had been deported to Auschwitz.⁶⁶ The operation had been initiated at the end of April. The vast majority of those deported had been gassed immediately. At the same time, the Zyklon B supplies had been jeopardized by the bombing of the main production plant, in Dessau. On April 5, two weeks after the occupation of Hungary, when Eichmann was already preparing the massive deportation of Hungarian Jewry, a colleague of Gerstein at the Hygiene Institute asked Degesch to immediately supply five tons of Zyklon B, since the Waffen-SS needed it urgently. A week later, the order was made official by the armed forces’ hygiene service which, in order to rationalize the use of resources, centralized orders: it involved a smaller amount—2.8 tons—and it was to go to Auschwitz.⁶⁷ The reasons for this reduced amount are not known, but it may be noted that the difference between the letter of intention and the order corresponded to the Zyklon B stock that Gerstein had had delivered to Auschwitz, and which he said a month later was still untouched.

There is another, even more disturbing element. This order differed from all those placed by the Auschwitz camp to date, via the armed forces’ hygiene service, insofar as the ordering party at the Waffen-SS Hygiene Institute had specifically asked for the Zyklon B to be supplied in an irritant-free version. The request was so strange that it triggered reservations

at Degesch: if they authorized the supply of such a product, was there no risk to the company’s monopoly over this proprietary product?⁶⁸ For the patent clearly did not apply to the prussic acid itself, but to Zyklon B, an industrial product whose composition included, in addition to the prussic acid, a preservative and an irritant.

These concerns were particularly surprising given the fact that, as we know, this had already happened previously. But the order in question, apart from being spread over an extended period at a monthly delivery rate of 400 kilos, had been placed outside the normal channels, in direct negotiations between Gerstein and Peters. On the invoices that Gerstein later gave the American agents, there was a specification that the product was irritant-free. When questioned after the war, Peters sought to make mileage out of this “humanizing” aspect:

[Gerstein] told me: we have to eliminate a group of lower-caliber people, idiots, the sick. This will be done using prussic acid. It is torture. He wanted to cut this torture short. He said: I wanted above all to eliminate this torture produced by the irritant.... It is terrible, he said. We must eliminate this torture. Help me to develop a procedure which will work more immediately and faster. I was not able to give him any advice other than to use prussic acid without the irritant, and that was all. I never saw him again after that.⁶⁹

But Peters’ version was intended solely to defend himself. What had happened was different: Gerstein had simply asked Peters to provide him with Zyklon B without any irritant—without in fact being sure that the Degesch managing director would agree, as he eventually did. Gerstein did not need his advice insofar as, as we have seen, already in the summer of 1942, when he went to Belzec, the SS officer had made a point of taking liquid prussic acid, i.e. an irritant-free form. And the speech that he had given Pfannenstiel, during the trip was more or less the same as that reported postwar by Peters.

To sum up: in anticipation of the arrival of the Hungarian Jews, a large quantity of Zyklon B, albeit far smaller than the amount originally hoped for, had been delivered to Auschwitz. A large-scale store of Zyklon B, some two tons ordered by Gerstein, was available at the same camp. More than 400,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported to Auschwitz,

most of them being gassed immediately on their arrival, by July 1944, at which point the Hungarian government reversed its policy and refused to continue the deportations. Gerstein had claimed that he had clean hands and had destroyed the Zyklon B which he had ordered in his own name. It is difficult to determine whether this removal of material, if it did take place, might have led to a more or less serious shortage of Zyklon B. New orders were placed by the head of the SS Disinfection Bureau and the Auschwitz police at the beginning of August 1944. Hilberg claims that the supplies continued to arrive: "The SS did not run out of gas."⁷⁰ Other accounts, however, hint at the possibility of a very different state of affairs: Hermann Langbein, for example, stated that on orders from Höss, young children had been thrown alive into the furnaces where the corpses were cremated in order to save Zyklon B, which was beginning to run short.⁷¹ Whatever the truth, Gerstein's purported destruction of his stock of Zyklon B did not prevent the Jews from dying in their hundreds of thousands.

But these Jews were probably killed with irritant-free Zyklon B, subsequent to a *modus operandi* which Gerstein thought of as early as the summer of 1942 and whose implementation he had given up. We do not know why his colleague at the Waffen-SS Hygiene Institute—the person who ordered five tons of Zyklon B for Auschwitz—finally adopted this "humanized" procedure.⁷²

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A little while later, Günther called me back to the RSHA and asked me how it might be possible to poison the Jews interned in ... Theresienstadt by throwing prussic acid from the top of the fortifications. In order to prevent the implementation of this plan, I stated that it could not be done. I later learned that he had got hold of prussic acid in some other way and that he had executed the Jews nevertheless.

A few short weeks before the end of the war, this was the final episode during which Gerstein would find himself confronted by criminal use of Zyklon B. The situation had completely changed. In order to facilitate contacts with the Allies with an eye to the postwar period, at the end of the autumn of 1944 Himmler had suspended the extermination of the Jews, even if this "suspension" would not prevent the Jews from dying

in their thousands during “death marches” or occasional massacres.⁷³ Eichmann was extremely displeased by this policy reversal, as he stated to a highly placed Nazi figure at the beginning of April 1945, during a conversation of which, exceptionally, we have a record: “As regards the overall problem of the Jews Eichmann maintained that Himmler was in favour of humane methods. He himself was not completely in agreement with these methods, but as a good soldier he of course followed the commands of the Reichsführer with total obedience.”⁷⁴

For a number of weeks, he had been making frequent visits to the Theresienstadt “model ghetto.” It was there that in January he had his service’s most compromising archives transferred, doubtless totaling several hundred thousand documents, which would be systematically burnt a few weeks later. He made another visit there during the same month, together with Günther, and interrogated a recently transferred female Ravensbrück inmate in order to try to find out the extent to which knowledge of the extermination of the Jews had spread throughout the concentration camp system. Several more visits were made in February and March.⁷⁵ It was in February that construction began on two installations which were soon rumored to be intended for exterminating the Jews of the ghetto and the prisoners of the Small Fortress. It is highly likely that these installations were intended for criminal purposes, for it would be somewhat surprising, to put it mildly, to build a fortified storage facility for vegetables of all things, particular one with a special ventilation system and a leak-proof door. And one may well ask what was the need to construct, at this point in the war, a duck farm attached to the fortifications and surrounded by high walls. It was big enough to contain a good proportion of the population of the “ghetto,” who could have been exterminated in it, whether by shooting or a flamethrower, according to the testimony of the Small Fortress commander, Heinrich Jöckel. There had also even been some idea of throwing canisters of Zyklon B down from the walls, insofar as the layout would appear to correspond to Günther’s incongruous idea as outlined to Gerstein. However, those in charge on site had ruled out the idea, insofar as such a method would not eliminate the issue of the epidemics which would result from such a heaping up of bodies—precisely the reason for considering the flamethrower. Be that as it may, Zyklon B is known to have been stored at Theresienstadt at this time. Although it could certainly have been used for disinfecting the buildings, why was

Karl Rahm, the ghetto's commander, the only person to have the key to this storeroom? In addition to Jöckel's statement, we also have an indirect report about the RSHA's wish to exterminate the Jews of Theresienstadt. On February 24, Dieter Wisliceny, one of Eichmann's deputies, explained to a Jewish leader, Rudolf Kastner, that he had convinced Eichmann not to give the order to exterminate these Jews if the Soviet forces launched an offensive, using as his argument the issue of the corpses: how could all traces of such an enormous crime be concealed?⁷⁶ At the very least, it can thus be said that Eichmann was consistent in terms of his beliefs, and also showed foresight: he had to some extent anticipated the possibility that Himmler's "humane" orders might be reversed, with the Reichsführer ultimately ordering the final massacre. But Himmler did not waver,⁷⁷ the work was interrupted, and no criminal gassing operations are documented for Theresienstadt.

It should by now be amply clear that there is no need to elaborate further. At a number of crucial moments—summer 1942, spring 1943, spring 1944 and early 1945—Eichmann had become involved, via the intervention of his deputy, Rolf Günther, in the sphere of gassing. After the war he tried desperately to claim he had had nothing whatsoever to do with this sphere, asserting that his role had involved nothing more than the technical supervision of the deportations. This may be compared with his denial concerning his implication in the removal of all traces of the genocide, through Kommando 1005.⁷⁸ While this involvement may not tally with the standard way of depicting Eichmann, it comes as no surprise. Eichmann never had any problem with the surrounding levels of violence. When it came to physical violence in Vienna in 1938, by his own admission he slapped a Jewish leader.⁷⁹ In September 1941, when massacres by firearms were being perpetrated on an ever-larger scale in the conquered Soviet territories, he suggested, on his own authority, that Serbian Jews whose deportation was not possible due to lack of transport should be shot.⁸⁰ His approach was free of all doubts and misgivings, and so it was only logical that from the summer of 1942, when the "Final Solution" took the form of indiscriminate, short-term murder, Eichmann should become involved in criminal gassing techniques, in the context of a program that he was proud to implement and whose ideological bedrock he endorsed. And it will be remembered that what drew attention to him, when he was hiding in Argentina under a false identity, and finally led

him to the gallows in Israel, was the sentence that his son repeated to his fiancée, unaware of her German Jewish roots: “It would have been better if the Germans had finished their job of extermination.”⁸¹

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The case of Gerstein is of course of an entirely different nature. When Hannah Arendt was hammering out the concept of the “banality of evil,” Saul Friedländer was describing Gerstein’s special path in terms of “the ambiguity of good.” At the beginning of the 1960s, Arendt and Friedländer, each in their own way, had helped to inject complexity into a history in which people preferred to think that the executioners were entirely diabolical and the resisters always above reproach. Perhaps a different complexity—that of ethics—makes it possible to query the Gerstein case, as Carlo Ginzburg has suggested.⁸² One question raised by Max Weber in his “Politics as a Vocation,” is “what kind of human being one must be to have the right to grasp the spokes of the wheel of history.” One of the main qualities he gives is the “sense of responsibility,” which develops later in the text into an “ethics of responsibility,” as opposed to a *Gesinnungsethik*—an ethics of conviction or an absolute ethics. Each of these two ethics has its own qualities: “ultimately there are only two kinds of mortal sin in the field of politics: the lack of commitment to a cause and the lack of a sense of responsibility.” Neither is pure, since the ethics of conviction is not “identical with irresponsibility,” and vice versa. Finally, neither is, in principle, preferable to the other.⁸³

Weber distinguished between these two diametrically opposite poles on the basis of certain well-known, explicit criteria—the absolute nature of the commitment; a sense of responsibility. But, underlying this, there might perhaps be another issue: the question of the “foreseeable” nature of the events (the adjective recurs several times in the text). If the advocate of the ethics of conviction is surprised to discover that he has contributed to a situation diametrically opposed to the one he had hoped for, the reason is because he had not been able to anticipate the distorted effects of his behavior.⁸⁴ By the same token, the concept of foreseeability introduces that of duration, for, as time passes, the foreseeability of the world is increased: Weber is doubtless more prepared to make allowances for the error than for persevering in an error.

It is at first difficult to place Gerstein within the framework of Weber's contrasts. Clearly, conviction, in both the positive and the negative sense, was one of his character traits. He was, however, consumed by the question of his responsibility: "The time will come," he wrote to his father in March 1944, "when you, along with others, will have to stand up and be called to account for the age in which you live and for what is happening in it. [Let me] ask you not to underestimate this responsibility, this obligation on your part to answer for yourself. The call may come sooner than we think. I am aware of this obligation and, admittedly, it is devouring me (*consumor in ea*)."⁸⁵ He had proclaimed to all his friends, in his letters, in his reports, to the French military, as well as before the examining magistrate who had charged him with murder, that his hands had remained clean. And ultimately it is not relevant that he had been unable to provide explanations about the background to his actions, since he did not appear at the examination during which, facing a skeptical judge, he would have had to say when and how he had had the two tons of Zyklon B which had been delivered to Auschwitz destroyed: physically and morally exhausted, on the eve of this examination, he hanged himself in his cell at the Cherche-Midi prison.

Ultimately it is irrelevant, because the question arising from the forms of his involvement is valid in both cases, irrespective of whether or not he destroyed the stocks, removing them from the genocidal machinery. To recap: what we have done in Gerstein's case is to slow down the historical narration. After all, it may be considered that disobedience—and even more so resistance, which is disobedience over a period of time—is only rarely the upshot of an impulse to which the player has yielded in a moment, unreflectingly. On the contrary, it presupposes an intense examination, however brief, during which the pros and cons are weighed up. In the three episodes that we have explored—the application to the Waffen-SS in 1940, the mission to Belzec in 1942 and the Zyklon B deliveries to Auschwitz over the next two years—the final form of Gerstein's actions was the result of a number of opportunities: accepting an order or a voluntary act; dealing with the situation which came about, through specific devices, sometimes offsetting possible negative effects; and implementing the action itself, where this tension was released, through an inextricable blend of chance and skill that chance might have chosen to thwart. In all three cases, each time Gerstein had acted in the same way: he had accepted

that chance was involved and eventually could thwart his plans. In none of these cases was he able to be sure that he was entirely in control of his actions. And the devices that he had chosen to instigate, without being sure at the outset that he would succeed, reflected his awareness of this possibility of failure. Each time, he had injected a lesser evil into the evil, should it nevertheless come about: a spy in the service of good if he joined the Waffen-SS; more humane killings if these resulted from the Zyklon B transported by him. But this desire to master fate had its reverse side: for who would be the “spy of God” if not himself? And the Jewish victims, one after the other, would continue to suffer unspeakable pain when they died in the gas chambers unless the irritant-free Zyklon B which he had ordered specially to avoid this were used.

In many respects, this lesser evil could be referred to as an attempt by Gerstein to reconcile the two ethics defined by Weber, or more precisely to say that it is the means he chose in order to deal, to some extent, with his “ethics of conviction,” by making the possible harmful consequences less unbearable. But by doing so, he had placed himself in a dilemma from which he could never, come what may, emerge in a completely satisfactory fashion: it was a trap, which had just one victim, himself, and which he had set for himself as a result of the path he had pursued. In doing this, he had failed to recognize the underlying issue in the Weberian intuition: that ethical choices must be made on the basis of a foreseeable future, and not according to the infinity of possibilities. In Gerstein’s case, it was possible that he might nevertheless manage to thwart Nazi criminal designs, but it was foreseeable that he might well fail to do so. And, we must repeat, this is the very reason why he invented the intermediate category of the lesser evil.

Neither of the two ethics is pure; neither, in principle, is preferable to the other. Yet, according to Weber, an “ethics of conviction” and an “ethics of responsibility” are simultaneously irreconcilable (since only one of these two principles can guide action) and complementary: “In this sense an ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who is capable of having ‘a vocation for politics.’” The only valid question therefore concerns “when we should choose one rather than the other.” In order to illustrate his arguments, Weber had given two examples: that of a man

who espouses the ethics of conviction and who will not allow himself to be diverted from his path by anything or anyone—nor by time, which, however, makes the future more and more foreseeable. When it comes to the second example, the tone of the speaker—who has previously not flinched from delivering trenchant views on various burning topical issues—suddenly becomes far more personal: “I find it immeasurably moving when a *mature* human being—whether young or old in actual years is immaterial—who feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethics of responsibility reaches the point where he says, ‘Here I stand, I can do no other.’”⁸⁶ For it is not always possible, within the bounds of the foreseeable, to save everything—both one’s soul and the world. The lesser evil is not a Weberian category. At a particular moment, it becomes necessary to choose.

*

Although the two intertwined cases discussed above involve very different issues, they both raise the question of testimony, to which I would like to return by way of conclusion. What Eichmann and Gerstein had in common, at the very least, was that they were survivors, witnesses—indeed, loquacious witnesses, even if one stopped speaking far sooner than the other. One may of course wonder what would have happened if they had both disappeared without testifying: this is not a question of replaying history, but simply of showing, through a counterfactual device, the fragile nature of our knowledge, of what we could just as easily not have known. We would know practically nothing of Gerstein’s history: we would simply have a letter from the diplomat, von Otter, confirming their meeting in August 1942 three years later;⁸⁷ some fifty years after the war, the report that had reached London may have been rediscovered and a connection may have been made between the two documents;⁸⁸ no legal proceedings would have been undertaken against Dr. Peters, the Degesch managing director, who would of course have denied everything; it would not have been known that at the beginning of the summer of 1942, an attempt was made to rationalize the operations of the Operation Reinhardt camps in order to increase their output and cope with the extraordinary increased pace of the massacres of which, together with other elements, it provides exemplary testimony; nor would it have been known that this attempt to

make technical improvements to the gassing operations had been ordered and supervised by Eichmann, and it would have been far more difficult to show that the RSHA had, at certain points, been able to go beyond its standard scope of action and deal not only with directives and transports but also with gassing operations. This would have been shown by Höss's testimony: if Eichmann had not made such a forceful effort to contradict the witness on this subject, it is undoubtedly he himself who would have appeared, in the historical accounts, as the person who, together with the Auschwitz commandant, had chosen the location of the “bunkers” and decided on the gas to be used, irrespective of any chronological errors made by Höss. Eichmann being dead, the historical account would have lacked a few details: it would not have been known that he himself drafted the letter in which in July 1941 Göring charged Heydrich with preparing the “Final Solution”; nobody would have imagined that at Wannsee, the most highly placed individuals in the Reich's administration had spoken about gas chambers and toxic gases (according to the imaginative tale fabricated by Eichmann in order to specifically divest himself of all responsibility for criminal gassing operations); it would not have been known that he had made official visits to the main killing centers, and also that in the spring of 1942 he had transmitted to Globocnik authorizations for the murder of specific quotas of Generalgouvernement Jews, showing that at this specific period the scope of the murders was gradually increasing. To sum up: there would have been no knowledge of a certain number of true facts, many of which are of secondary importance, but nor would it have been necessary to pursue the false scents that he had deliberately laid down for some other statements. In both cases, the *grand récit* would have changed on the fringes only, but there would have been no “ambiguity of good” and no “banality of evil.”

But these accounts do exist, and they must be made part of the historical narration of the event. How is this to be done? This is a problem that has existed since the end of the war, but has become increasingly acute: the “age of suspicion” identified by Nathalie Sarraute could not limit this to the literary field only,⁸⁹ as attested in its own fashion by the *linguistic turn*. On reading the various efforts that have been made to reconcile Eichmann's testimony, for example, with the account of the decision-making process of the “Final Solution,”⁹⁰ it becomes quite clear that one of the difficulties for historians lies in the hierarchy of their own

interests and, one might also say, in the resulting hierarchy they institute in their sources. For while testimony is fallible, it nevertheless constitutes a linguistic product governed by a very powerful internal logic, which one can sometimes—but not always—manage to reconstitute: it *means* something which its reader is not necessarily prepared to hear. By reversing this implicit hierarchy, it may be possible to get beyond or round the problem of integrating testimony in the historical account. Specifically, this means not relating to the testimony as a subsidiary element or, even worse, a simple illustration of a preconceived description of the event, but rather as a point of departure for an investigation which, at one point or another, will find itself intersecting the major issues of the *grand récit*. For example, perhaps more could be learned about the workings of the RSHA or the activities of its emblematic member, Eichmann, by shaking off a classical descriptive history, based primarily on archives, and instead taking as the point of departure the testimonies of Höss, Wisliceny, Gerstein or Eichmann himself, which provide access to realities not documented by the archives.

By proceeding in this fashion, it becomes necessary to use these fragile sources more carefully, to consider such testimony as one element in a series which contains far more, where the same fact might have been recounted several times, with or without significant differences, and where a clearer idea can be obtained as to which other fact this fact is associated with, and what logic links them. It may even be possible to do without the true or false alternative, which although fundamental is sometimes simply one way of dressing up another alternative: between what seems to be relevant in the composition of the historical narrative based on other sources and what seems to be irrelevant. This is a gamble, and it is a complicated one. In other areas, the fertile nature of such an approach has become clear.⁹¹ For the history of Nazism, this undertaking is no less—or even more—perilous, because the sources of all kinds are both superabundant and seriously lacking. Testimonies are often, so to speak, a recalcitrant source. Nonetheless, even though their examination may lead to nothing or take one less far than one would have wished, it will undoubtedly have the merit of raising unexpected, and crucial, questions.

Translated from French by Ruth Morris

NOTES

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1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 95. See also p. 64 for an even less explicit reference to the Zyklon B question.

2. On this well-known episode, see Saul Friedländer’s biography, *Counterfeit Nazi: The Ambiguity of Good*, trans. Charles Fullman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).

3. David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (London: Vintage, 2005), 196.

4. Léon Poliakov, *Bréviaire de la haine: Le III^e Reich et les juifs* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1951), 220–24; Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution: The Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe, 1939–1945* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co, 1953), 152–55; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 892.

5. A third, no less important one can be added. Kurt Gerstein’s account of the gassings at Belzec was used by Poliakov and Hilberg, as well as other historians after them, as a paradigmatic description of the gassing procedures. They clearly considered this to be the best available description of these killings. See Florent Brayard, “Comment écrire l’histoire sans archives: Un regard sur l’historiographie du camp de Belzec,” in idem, ed., *Le génocide des juifs entre procès et histoire, 1943–2000* (Brussels: Complexe, 2000). It is precisely because the Gerstein report was credited by historians as having an exemplary nature that it was violently and repeatedly excoriated by the revisionist movement. See Florent Brayard, *Comment l’idée vint à M. Rassinier: Naissance du révisionnisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 329–68; and Pierre Bridonneau, *Où il faut parler des négationnistes* (Paris: Cerf, 1997).

6. See, for example, Joseph Billig, ed., *Le dossier Eichmann et “la solution finale de la question juive”* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1960), 48; Robert M. W. Kempner, *Eichmann und Komplizen* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1961), 201; Robert Pendorf, *Mörder und Ermordete Eichmann und die Judenpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (Hamburg: Rütten & Loening, 1961), 100.

7. Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung: Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung* (Munich: Piper, 1998); Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCol-

lins Publishers, 2007), 458; Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

8. Hans Safrian, *Eichmann und seine Gehilfen* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1995); Irmtrud Wojak, *Eichmanns Memoiren: Ein kritischer Essay* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2001); Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitler's Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2002); Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 270.

9. It is important to note, however, that Gerstein's account remains ever present in the historiography of the Belzec camp. See in particular Adalbert Rückerl, ed., *NS-Vernichtungslager im Spiegel deutscher Strafprozesse: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977); Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein and Adalbert Rückerl, eds., *Nazi Mass Murder: A Documentary History of the Use of Poison Gas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhardt Death Camps* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

10. Rolf Hochhuth, *The Deputy* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); Saul Friedländer, *Pius XII and the Third Reich* (New York: Knopf, 1966), and *Counterfeit Nazi*; Pierre Joffroy, *A Spy for God: The Ordeal of Kurt Gerstein* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970) (expanded edition, Paris: Seghers, 1992); Jürgen Schäfer, *Kurt Gerstein—Zeuge des Holocaust: Ein Leben zwischen Bibelkreisen und SS* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1999). The first work on Gerstein was written by his friend Helmut Franz, *Kurt Gerstein: Aussenseiter des Widerstandes der Kirche gegen Hitler* (Baden, EVZ-Verlage, 1964).

11. See in particular the extended controversy about Police Battalion 101, studied by Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996). On this debate, see also Dany Trom, *La promesse et l'obstacle: La gauche radicale et le problème juif* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2007), 93–149.

12. Most of the records of Pfannenstiel's interrogation can be found at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich. Peters was questioned a number of times during the series of legal proceedings against him, the judgments from which were published by Irene Sagel-Grande, H. H. Fuchs and C. F. Rüter, *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen*, vol. 13 (Amsterdam: University Press Amsterdam, 1975), Lfd 415.

13. Examination of June 6, 1960, tape 9, in *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann* (Jerusalem: State of Israel, Ministry of Justice, 1995), 7:387; examination of June 5, 1960, tape 19, *ibid.*, 7:933–934; examination of Sept. 4, 1960, tape 46, *ibid.*, 8:2256 ff.; examination of Sept. 8, 1960, tape 48, 1960, *ibid.*, 8:2340.

14. *Ibid.*, 5:2177.

15. See transcript of tape 50, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, All. Proz. 6/105 fol.1.

16. *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, 3:1224.

17. *Ibid.*, 4:1653.

18. *Ibid.*, 5:2176 ff.

19. In this passage at least, because a little earlier, when examining Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höss’s testimony, Arendt noted: “And with the use of gas Eichmann had nothing whatever to do” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 81).

20. Arendt thus notes that Eichmann “did not see much” of the extermination of the Jews: he was never present at any of the massacres carried out by shooting (whereas Eichmann stated that he had witnessed the end of one such massacre, at Minsk), and that out of friendship Höss avoided showing him the more sordid aspects of the camp, the selections or gassings (*ibid.*, 84). However, as it emerged in the proceedings, Höss asserted on the contrary that Eichmann had been present at the entire process, and even classified him as one of the “toughest” ones, on whom the sight of the killings had little impact (Martin Broszat, *Kommandant in Auschwitz: Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen des Rudolf Höss* [Munich: DTV, 1998], 199). Once again, Arendt had adopted Eichmann’s version, ignoring testimony to the contrary.

21. Arendt had developed this approach 15 pages earlier in respect of Höss’s testimony, to which we shall return (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 81).

22. Broszat, *Kommandant in Auschwitz*, 239.

23. In his various interrogations in Germany, between March and May 1945, Höss presented the choice of Zyklon B as obvious. Only in his statements made in Poland, from the autumn of 1946 onward, is there a reference to Eichmann’s involvement in the choice of gas.

24. Ian Kershaw provides a very illuminating overview of this development in “Hitler’s Role in the ‘Final Solution,’” *Yad Vashem Studies* 34 (2006): 7–43.

25. See in particular Karin Orth, *Das System der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Eine politische Organisationsgeschichte* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 113–41; and Florent Brayard, *La “solution finale de la question juive”: La technique, le temps et les catégories de la décision* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), chap. 6.

26. Philippe Burrin was the first person to advance the hypothesis that Höss had simply got the date wrong by one year, *Hitler et les Juifs: Genèse d’un génocide* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 193 n. 15. See subsequently Jean-Claude Pressac, *Les crématoires d’Auschwitz: La machinerie du meurtre de masse* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1993), 103; and Dieter Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien, 1941–1944: Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens* (Munich: Olenburg, 1997), 205. See also Karin Orth, “Rudolf Höss und die ‘Endlösung der Judenfrage’: Drei Argumente gegen deren Datierung an den Sommer 1941,” *Werkstattgeschichte*, no. 18 (1997): 45–57.

27. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive"*, 520–21, n. 221.

28. Report by Emil Sehm dated June 25, 1945, Public Record Office, London, WO 309/1602. This account contains various doubtful points, while others entirely tally with what we know from elsewhere. One such reference is to the need to henceforth cremate the corpses, stated at the beginning of the summer of 1942, which enables me to propose an approximate date for the meeting. See also the accounts along similar lines, albeit in less detail, by two secretaries, Erna Biagini and Anna Unzelmann, depositions made on Aug. 17, 1948 and Oct. 23, 1945 respectively, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden, 461/36342-8, and Public Record Office, London, WO 309/1602.

29. Respectively Broszat, *Kommandant in Auschwitz*, 256; and Steven Paskuly, ed., *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992), 256.

30. This and all following quotations from the Gerstein report are taken from the French version dated May 6, 1945, held in the Archives de la Justice militaire au Blanc. The "sic" is by Gerstein himself.

31. Karl Heinz Roth, "'Generalplan Ost'—'Gesamtplan Ost': Forschungsstand, Quellenprobleme, neue Ergebnisse," in Mechtild Rössler and Sabine Schleiermacher, eds., *Der "Generalplan Ost": Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs- und Vernichtungspolitik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993).

32. See Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive"*, 245–46.

33. Rainer Fröbe, "'Bauen und Vernichten': Die Zentralbauleitung Auschwitz und die 'Endlösung'," in *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus* 16 (2000), "Durchschnittstäter": *Handeln und Motivation*, 155–209.

34. Peter Witte et al., *Der Dienstkalender Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42* (Hamburg: Christians, 1999), 513.

35. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive"*, chap. 3.

36. One of the reasons why Zyklon was not used at the Operation Reinhardt camps may be because its highly toxic nature would have endangered the German personnel handling it. Hence at Auschwitz, every gassing operation had to be performed in the presence of a doctor. In order to make such arrangements at Belzec or Treblinka, it would have been necessary to post physicians to these camps which, unlike Auschwitz, which was both an extermination and a concentration camp, did not have a health or sanitary service.

37. Brayard, *La "solution finale de la question juive"*; Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*.

38. This was true in particular for Romania, and doubtless for Croatia. It should further be noted that RSHA Section IVB4 was not the only body that at that time operated in complete breach of the administrative operating rules: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when it came to the "Final Solution," also operated

in an abnormal fashion during the summer of 1942. See Brayard, *La “solution finale de la question juive”*, 80–84.

39. Testimony by Pastor Herbert Mochalski, cited in Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 171.

40. See Florent Brayard, “Humanitarian Concern Versus Zyklon B,” in John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, eds., *Remembering for the Future 2000: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocides* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 2:54–65. Subsequent information for which no specific reference is given is taken from this publication.

41. Letter from Kurt Gerstein to his uncle, Robert Pommer, Nov. 1938, in Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 61.

42. See Browning’s classic study, *Ordinary Men*.

43. Brayard, “Humanitarian Concern Versus Zyklon B,” 59.

44. See Florent Brayard, “Un rapport précoce de Kurt Gerstein,” *Bulletin du Centre de Recherche Français de Jérusalem*, no. 6 (spring 2000): 69–88.

45. Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 122.

46. *Ibid.*, 215, 217.

47. Interrogation of Kurt Gerstein, June 26, 1945, reproduced in Georges Wellers, “Encore sur le ‘témoignage Gerstein’,” *Le Monde juif*, Jan.–March 1980, 23–35.

48. Some witnesses had more or less deliberately engaged in apologetics, particularly since, in light of Gerstein’s death, the only thing that could still be saved was his honor, in other words through the denazification procedure so as to ensure that his wife would be entitled to a pension and his family would thus avoid penury. On these procedures, see Valérie Herbert, “Disguised Resistance? The Story of Kurt Gerstein,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 1 (spring 2006): 1–33. However, the 1943 report already contains the following clarification: “Having then received the notification of the sudden death of my mentally ill sister-in-law, I decided that I would not have any peace of mind before finding out what was true in the reports about the atrocities and the killings of the mentally ill.” Cited in Brayard, “Un rapport précoce de Kurt Gerstein,” 86.

49. Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 79.

50. On the T4 operation, see in particular Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

51. Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 73ff.

52. Herbert, “Disguised Resistance?” 24.

53. Schäfer, *Kurt Gerstein*, 144.

54. See letter to the Party Court, Nov. 28, 1936, where Gerstein highlights his struggle “against the Judeo-Bolshevik attacks threatening the German popular

force” and castigating “the scandalous Judeo-Galician undertakings Fromms Act and Prim Eros” for corrupting youth (Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 47).

55. Schäfer, *Kurt Gerstein*, 144.

56. Cited in Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 80–81.

57. Schäfer, *Kurt Gerstein*, 146.

58. Brayard, “Humanitarian Concern Versus Zyklon B,” 58.

59. See the conclusion of my book *La “solution finale de la question juive”*, especially 474–76.

60. Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 185–88.

61. *Ibid.*, 200.

62. Friedrich von Schiller, “The Legislation of Lycurgus and Solon,” in *idem, Poet of Freedom* (Washington: Schiller Institute, 1988), 2:273 ff. On the massacre of the Spartan helots, see the outstanding analysis by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Assassins of Memory,” in his *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

63. Letter by Gerstein to his father, autumn 1944, in Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 208.

64. Letter by Gerstein to Peters, May 24, 1944, in *ibid.*, 185–86.

65. Letter from technical director of Degesch to Gerstein, June 7, 1944, in *ibid.*, 186–87.

66. Franciszek Piper, *Die Zahl der Opfer von Auschwitz: Aufgrund der Quellen und der Erträge der Forschung 1945 bis 1990* (Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu: Oświęcim, 1993), 182.

67. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 891.

68. *Ibid.*; Jürgen Kalthoff and Martin Werner, *Die Händler des Zyklon B. Tesch und Stabenow: Eine Firmengeschichte zwischen Hamburg und Auschwitz* (Hamburg: VSV, 1998), 180.

69. Brayard, “Humanitarian Concern Versus Zyklon B,” 58.

70. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 892.

71. Testimony by Hermann Langbein during the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, reproduced in the volume edited by him, *Der Auschwitz-Prozess: Eine Dokumentation*, 2 vols. (1965; Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1995), 88. Similar testimony was provided by Marie-Claire Vaillant-Couturier twenty years earlier at the Nuremberg Tribunals, Jan. 28, 1946. Lastly, a former member of the Birkenau *Sonderkommando*, Shlomo Dragon, related that the SS head of this commando, Otto Moll, threw alive into the furnaces the old and sick who had not been assigned to work duties at the camp during the selection. See Gideon Greif, “Wir weinten tränenlos...”: *Augenzeugenberichte des jüdischen “Sonderkommandos” in Auschwitz* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1999), 161.

72. It should be noted here that the difference between Zyklon with or without irritant cannot have been so great since, because of supply difficulties caused by the war, Degesch regularly reduced the proportion of irritant in the Zyklon B (Brayard, “Humanitarian Concern Versus Zyklon B,” 61).

73. On this episode, see Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi–Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945*, new ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). On the last months of the persecution of the Jews, see also Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 644 ff.

74. Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 197.

75. *Ibid.*, 196.

76. On this episode, see the following books and articles: H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt, 1941–1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft. Geschichte, Soziologie, Psychologie* (Tübingen: J.B.C. Mohr, 1955), 197 ff; Carlo Schmid, *Der Kastner Bericht* (Munich: Kindler Verlag, 1961), 294–95; Frantisek Fuchs, “Building Gas Chambers in Terezin,” and Arnost Weiss, “The Duck Pond,” in *Terezin* (Prague: The Council of Jewish Communities, 1965), 300–303 and 304–5; Gabriele Anderl, “Die Lagerkommandanten des jüdischen Ghettos Theresienstadt,” in Miroslav Karny, Vojtech Blodig and Margita Kana, eds., *Theresienstadt in der “Endlösung der Judenfrage”* (Prague, Verlag Panorama, 1992), 221; Vojtech Blodig, “Die letzte Phase der Entwicklung des Ghettos Theresienstadt,” in *ibid.*, 272; Miroslav Karny, “Die Theresienstädter Herbsttransporte 1944,” in *idem*, Raimund Kemper and Margita Karna, eds., *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* (Prague: Institut Terezinské iniciativy, 1995).

77. Schmid, *Der Kastner Bericht*, 327.

78. Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitlers Bürokraten*, 174.

79. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 42.

80. Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 108.

81. *Ibid.*, 221.

82. Email to the author, Jan. 1, 2000. I am very grateful to Carlo Ginzburg for sharing this idea.

83. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *idem*, *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 76–77, 83.

84. *Ibid.*, 83–84.

85. Letter to his father, March 5, 1944, in Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 204–5.

86. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 91–92

87. Friedländer, *Counterfeit Nazi*, 125–26.

88. Brayard, “Un rapport précoce de Kurt Gerstein.”

89. Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel* (New York: Braziller, 1963).

90. Especially striking is the series of articles by Christopher Browning: "The Decision Concerning the Final Solution," in idem, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985); "Nazi Policy: Decisions for the Final Solution," in idem, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) (where the author, for the sake of his argument, does not flinch from turning the double Minsk-Bialystok battle, explicitly and very often referred to by Eichmann, into a double Vyazma-Bryansk battle because the date at which the latter occurred fitted better with his time-frame than the former; 43); and "Perpetrator Testimony: Another Look at Adolf Eichmann", in idem, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimonies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003). See also Irmtrud Wojak, *Eichmanns Memoiren: Ein kritischer Essay* (Frankfurt, Campus, 2001).

91. See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).