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Article

New Perspectives on the Murder of Unfit Prisoners in Nazi Forced Labour Camps for Jews (Schmelt Camps) and Their Connection to Auschwitz

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Abstract

Selections for sick and unfit prisoners and their murder through lethal injections or in gas chambers were characteristic of Nazi camps like Auschwitz. This article investigates the start of these murders through the lens of a system of forced labour camps for Eastern Upper Silesian Jews, so-called Schmelt camps, that did not form part of the usual concentration camp system. Their independent status gave Schmelt camps more leeway for experimenting with killing methods and they implemented respective policies to liquidate unfit prisoners several months before the concentration camps. However, they were also supervised by SS physicians from Auschwitz and began to send unfit prisoners to the camp's gas chambers from early 1942. In parallel, they developed despicable killing methods, primarily water-induced murders. These events are contextualized within Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'homo sacer.' The paper demonstrates that Fritz Todt, whose Reich Motorway Company utilized Jewish labour for construction work in Silesia, was a driving force behind Himmler's decision to eliminate 'unproductive' prisoners. It shows how civilian camp leaders collaborated in these crimes. Finally, it delineates the transformation of convalescent camps in Schmelt's system from places of recovery for lightly ill prisoners to killing centres and collection points for Auschwitz transports.

Keywords: Auschwitz; Schmelt camps; Holocaust; 'Aktion 14f13'

1. Introduction

The article addresses for the first time the introduction of systematic murders of sick and unfit prisoners in a camp system set up in Silesia and parts of Sudeten in October 1940 by Himmler's Special Commissioner SS-Brigadeführer Albrecht Schmelt. The so-called Schmelt camps served to intern young, able-bodied Jewish women and men from Eastern Upper Silesia, a formerly Polish territory annexed to the German Reich in October 1939, where 120,000 Jews lived. In autumn 1942, Schmelt augmented their ranks by extracting Jewish men from deportation convoys from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The prisoners had to do war work for the Germans and were required to construct segments of a fast-track route to the Ukraine, the thoroughfare IV, in preparation of the premeditated attack on the Soviet Union. The Reich Motorway Company (Reichsautobahn-Gesellschaft), first under Fritz Todt and then Albert Speer, thus was Schmelt's most influential client.

The conditions in Schmelt camps swiftly rendered prisoners sick or unfit. Interestingly, it was the Motorway Company that first demanded to dispose of such 'unproductive' inmates to save money. The murderous practices that followed will be contextualized within Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, of groups of the population stripped of their right to exist. As Schmelt camps operated outside the concentration camp system, they had leeway for experimenting with killing methods several months ahead of the respective directives to murder unfit prisoners in concentration camps. Schmelt's staff thus already announced that sick prisoners would be killed in December 1940, whereas Himmler only enacted a similar decree targeting the inmates of concentration camps, known

as 'Aktion 14f13,' in April 1941. Moreover, Schmelt camps utilized perpetrator groups, like policemen and civilians, that would have been unacceptable in concentration camps. In-camp killings through water-induced methods started to play a crucial role in eliminating prisoners unfit for work. At the same time, Schmelt camps were under the supervision of SS physicians from Auschwitz and, from early 1942, also began to send unfit prisoners to the gas chambers there. Investigating the developments in Schmelt camps thus sheds light on a hidden side of Auschwitz, especially during the initial stage of its transformation into a death camp. The case of the Schmelt camps exemplifies Fritz Todt's spearheading role in the subsequent implementation of decrees to liquidate unfit prisoners by Himmler, and it shows the many facets of killing methods that remain understudied or ignored by Holocaust scholarship, as well as the intense collaboration of 'ordinary' civilians in these crimes.

The paper opens a new perspective on the motives and initiators behind Himmler's 'Aktion 14f13' decree to murder unfit prisoners in Nazi camps by moving beyond the existing research that is restricted to concentration camps [i]. By addressing for the first time the role played by in-camp killings of the sick and unfit, it adds crucial knowledge on the Schmelt camps' function in the Holocaust of the Eastern Upper Silesian Jews to scholarship in the field [ii]. Its focus on the crimes of civilians equally carves out a new research field. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the similarities and discrepancies between policies towards sick prisoners in the concentration camp system and Schmelt camps. This enhances our understanding of phenomena such as camps for the sick and convalescent and reactions to infectious disease epidemics.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Materials

The experiences of survivors are the most important sources this article draws on. Written testimonies collected by the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH) in Warsaw, the Netherlands' Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies (NIOD), the Polish Research Institute at Lund (PIŻ), Yad Vashem (YVA), and the International Tracing Service (ITS) are combined with judicial statements from trials against Schmelt's staff and other perpetrators [iii]. Digital oral history archives add extra nuances of what Lawrence Langer called "deep memory," i.e. memory affected by trauma [iv]. Testimony and life writing by Jewish medical personnel are especially crucial to reconstruct the harsh realities of treating sick and unfit prisoners in Schmelt's system [v]. Moreover, interrogation protocols and judicial files by perpetrators are utilized [vi]. Schmelt's policies towards the sick can also be gleaned from company files [vii]

2.2. Methods

The murder of sick Schmelt prisoners will be contextualized within Agamben's theory of *homo sacer*, the reduction of human beings to 'bare life,' who could be killed without punishment after the state had stripped them of their civil rights. Agamben saw the Nazi regime as the first 'biopolitical' state, in which the ancient Roman principle of *homo sacer* was used to marginalize and finally destine certain groups, like the Jews, for death. The introduction of selections, first in German healthcare facilities to 'euthanize' the disabled and mentally ill, and later in Nazi camps to eradicate prisoners unfit to work, indicate the state's transgression beyond the threshold of political life. The Nazi regime joined forces with doctors and scientists and delegated its sovereign power to decide which life may be killed to other actors. The practice of authorizing civilians to take lives in Schmelt camps represents one of the most radical forms of this delegation. [viii]

3. Results

3.1. The Perpetrators

3.1.1. The German Order Police

The order police were created in 1936 and, from their inception, served as an instrument to implement Nazi ideology. Under the command of Kurt Daluge, the police began to be merged with the SS. Thus, by 1941, half of the police officers had become members of the Nazi party, and one third

had joined the SS. They actively collaborated in the Holocaust and other atrocities from the start of the war [ix]. In the annexed Silesian territories, the order police guarded ghettos and Schmelt camps. In 1942, 233 policemen and 169 police veterans were deployed in Schmelt camps under the command of Schmelt representative SS Obersturmführer Heinrich Lindner and the Higher SS and Police Leader of Silesia Heinrich Schmauser [x]. The policemen had received ideological indoctrination from the start of their careers [xi]. In Schmelt camps they were specifically trained in an SD (SS secret service) school in Blechhammer to carry out water-induced murders and selections. The school was established in late 1942. Heinrich Lindner and another member of the Schmelt Office named Knoll were the main instructors [xii]. Like in concentration camps, police presence was required in Schmelt camps, as they had the monopoly on all Jewish affairs [xiii]. Walter Rettinghaus, an unidentified policeman and member of the SD, was installed as inspector-general of the Schmelt camp guards in spring 1943. He was infamous for committing water-induced murders in Blechhammer and was cynically nicknamed *Mikvenik*, derived from the Jewish ritual bath *mikvah*, by prisoners. He trained other guards in this cruel killing method [xiv]. Most police guards showed high levels of brutality towards prisoners and lived out their sadism by way of maltreatment, long roll calls and murders. A small fraction was lenient or even supportive.

In some Schmelt camps, where prisoners constructed railways, transport police were deployed. Originally under the command of German Rail, they had been incorporated into the order police in 1936 [xv]. One of these men, who served as guard duty officer in Neukirch (Nowy Kościół), shot prisoners en masse, contributing to the camp's soaring death tolls [xvi].

3.1.2. Auxiliary Policemen

Members of the National Socialist Motor Corps (*Nationalsozialistisches Kraftfahrer-Korps*, NSKK), a suborganization of the Nazi party, joined the order police in the annexed Polish territories as auxiliaries. By 1942, their number reached three thousand [xvii]. Numerous of these men signed up as Schmelt camp guards, as they were promised good wages and food [xviii]. As they wore uniforms similar to those of the SA (stormtroopers), some survivors erroneously testified they had been guarded by real stormtroopers [xix]. They were often excessively violent. In Brande, they maltreated prisoners with bull's whips for not standing straight during extended roll calls [xx]. Brande's NSKK guard duty officer, Raphael Lazotta, was an Upper Silesian blacksmith and veteran of the First World War, who habitually shot prisoners for alleged escape attempts by ordering them to trespass the camp enclosures under some pretext. He took great pride in his past as an army officer and still wore a military-style uniform. His exaggerated antics nevertheless appeared so comical that the prisoners compared him to a circus clown [xxi]. Members of the NSKK committed some of the first murders of unfit prisoners in Gross-Sarne (Sarny Wielkie) in summer 1941. Their commander was a hairdresser from Katowice named Anton Pietrzak infamous for his fervent anti-Semitism [xxii].

In spring 1943, the police guards and their auxiliaries were withdrawn from Schmelt camps to serve in newly formed rapid response units operating within and outside of Silesia. They assisted in ghetto liquidations and deportations. A police guard duty officer nevertheless remained staffed in all camps [xxiii].

3.1.3. Wehrmacht Guards

Following the police guards' withdrawal in spring 1943, Albert Speer persuaded Himmler to deploy Wehrmacht veterans and convalescents in Schmelt camps. This step was regarded as crucial in ensuring the continued exploitation of Jews in the German armaments industry [xxiv]. Ideological indoctrination within the Wehrmacht set in as early as 1934. Despite the soldiers' diverse backgrounds, Nazi ideology thus served as a common ground on which their collaboration in atrocities and mass murder could be based [xxv]. The level of complicity was nevertheless determined by individual soldiers or units, as the Wehrmacht was not formally obligated to carry out tasks related to the Holocaust [xxvi]. In Schmelt camps, soldiers were not actively involved in in-camp killings; however, they could list prisoners for Auschwitz if they did not work fast enough [xxvii]. They generally showed a wide behavioral spectrum. In Reigersfeld (Birawa), soldiers frequently shot

prisoners for being 'slow' at work. Survivors reported that prisoners even committed suicide because of the inhumane conditions created by the soldiers [xxviii].

3.1.4. Civilian Camp Leaders

Male and female civilian camp leaders came from all walks of life and typically belonged to the Polish German mixed population of Upper Silesia. The Nazis played out their diminished status as an allegedly 'untrustworthy' and 'fluid' segment (*schwebendes Volkstum*) [xxix]. Serving as camp leaders, therefore, provided an opportunity for Upper Silesians to demonstrate their allegiance to Germany. They were partnered with police guard duty officers in camps. Both men and women received instructions in making selections and the practice of water-induced killings. However, it was predominantly men who perpetrated murders. Their collaboration in selections and killings was nonetheless voluntary. Some actively committed murders, while others refrained or tried to help prisoners. A common motive for taking up the position of camp leader was personal gain through embezzlement. Nazi ideology was not always a dominant factor. Some camp leaders, like Erich Hoffmann in Blechhammer (Blachownia Śląska), even considered themselves as 'anti-Nazi,' while still becoming collaborators in the Holocaust [xxx].

3.2. *The First Policies to dispose of Unfit Prisoners in 1940-1941*

December 1940 was a watershed regarding the treatment of sick and unfit Jewish prisoners in Schmelts camps. The Motorway Company under Fritz Todt informed the Schmelts Office that they were no longer willing to pay for 'unproductive' workers in camps. The Schmelts Office complied with their influential client's wishes by introducing a two-pronged policy: sick prisoners were either sent home or began to be murdered. The first selections already took place in December 1940 [xxxi].

3.2.1. The Policy of Sending Unfit Prisoners Home

Maria Adlerflügel, a Jewish nurse in camp Auenrode (Osiek), reported that sick prisoners were taken to the Jewish hospital in Sosnowiec and then returned home [xxxii]. The final decision was made by SS doctors from Auschwitz, who checked prisoners' records during their visits to Schmelts camps. Some healthy inmates paid bribes to Jewish medical staff, who often pointed out likely candidates for going home to the SS doctors [xxxiii]. Others deliberately hurt themselves to be sent back by breaking or severing fingers, or by rolling naked in the snow to catch pneumonia. A teenage boy's parents even sent him nicotine to poison himself, hoping that he would come back to them. Tragically, the boy died of the substance [xxxiv].

Returning to the ghettos, however, did not protect the people in question for long. They were usually reallocated to camps once they had recovered or fell victim to the deportations to Auschwitz in 1942 and 1943. This seemingly 'humane' gesture, therefore, did not offer a respite from the Nazis' annihilatory policies in the long term. Sending unfit inmates back to the ghettos, where the already impoverished and overburdened Jewish councils had to provide for them, mainly served the Schmelts Office as a temporary strategy to please the Motorway Company and other contractors, who were intent on saving money on 'unproductive' Jewish workers.

The practice of sending sick prisoners home was terminated at the end of 1941 [xxxv]. When the United States entered the Second World War after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, financial and material aid by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to the Eastern Upper Silesian ghetto population had to be stopped. Apparently, the Germans made the final decision to eliminate sick and unfit Schmelts camp prisoners when this funding ceased, as the Jewish councils no longer had the means to sustain them. Neither the Schmelts Office nor its clients were ready to preserve the lives of young Jewish workers, whose health and fitness had been ruined by the adverse conditions in the camps [xxxvi]. The change of policy was already palpable to prisoners towards the end of 1941. The survivor Abram Rosmarin, who had spent a short time recovering in Sosnowiec before being sent out to a labour camp once more in late 1941, related that a Schmelts representative's remark that the prisoners would soon be grateful to go to work had made him realize the Nazis' plans to murder the sick and unfit [xxxvii].

3.2.2. Early Murders

Schmelt representative Heinrich Lindner inspected camp Annaberg (Góra Świętej Anny) in December 1940 at a time when sick rates peaked due to the wintry conditions. He had all prisoners assemble to announce that, from now on, they were no longer permitted to report ill. To state an example, he picked ten sick men from the infirmary and took them to Auschwitz. Their next of kin were notified of their deaths a few days later. Cynically, they were required to pay a fee for receiving their ashes in an urn [xxxviii]. Moreover, Lindner sent another sixty unfit men from Sakrau (Zakrzów) and Gogolin to Auschwitz to be murdered in December 1940 [xxxix]. It is unclear how the respective prisoners were killed there, as gas chambers did not exist yet.

Lindner's announcement also marked the start of systematic murders of sick and unfit inmates in Schmelt camps. Like in Auschwitz, a phase of experimenting with different killing methods began. Camp Gross-Sarne was chosen as a 'testing lab' for this purpose. It had been set up in 1940 to construct roads and was administered by the Motorway Company. The guards comprised of NSKK men under the command of guard duty officer Anton Pietrzak, a forty-year-old hairdresser from Katowice infamous for his vicious hatred of Jews. In mid-1941, the first group of twenty-five men rated unfit for hard labour was taken to Gross-Sarne from the Sosnowiec ghetto. The close link between the policy of sending unfit inmates back to the ghettos and their subsequent murder is demonstrated here. Pietrzak and his guards shot several of these prisoners, and Heinrich Lindner whipped one of them to death during a visit, as he suffered from lumbago. On another occasion, Pietrzak poisoned a member of this group, who was so weak that he had to be supported by comrades on the way back from work. Pietrzak called him into the infirmary and forced him to drink a glass of water in which he had dissolved pills. The prisoner died fifteen minutes later [xi].

Early murders were simultaneously committed in other camps. In Annaberg, eight sick prisoners were shot in summer 1941, allegedly as a 'warning' to the others. Around the same time, Lindner emptied the infirmary of Grünheide (Sieroniuwice), proclaiming that he would no longer feed any 'useless mouths.' The patients were taken away on trucks to an unclear destination [xii].

Likewise in summer 1941, elderly people from the Chrzanów ghetto began to be arrested under some pretext. Police cars then took them to Auschwitz to be murdered. These incidents happened on a weekly basis [xiii].

Conspicuously, all camps named in connection with early selections and killings were administered by the Motorway Company. Fritz Todt's paramount role in turning Schmelt prisoners into some of the earliest victims of systematic murders of sick and unfit inmates in Nazi camps is underscored here. His influence further manifests itself in the fact that Schmelt camps established their own killing schemes, whereas Auschwitz, at least initially, followed patterns set by doctors involved in the 'Aktion T4 euthanasia' program, the murder of patients in German healthcare facilities. The fact alone that the Schmelt camps operated outside the concentration camp system does not offer a satisfactory explanation for the deviant path they took.

3.3. *The Start of Gassings of Schmelt Prisoners in Auschwitz*

There is controversy among historians as to the exact time when unfit prisoners from Schmelt's system began to be taken to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Wolf Gruner and Sybille Steinbacher posit that, analogous to a sweeping order by Higher SS and Police Leader Fritz Katzmann to kill sick inmates in Eastern Galician labour camps, Schmelt prisoners unable to work had been liquidated from autumn 1941. Evidence in support of this contention was, however, not provided [xiii]. Christopher Browning likewise assumes that Schmelt prisoners were taken to Auschwitz from late 1941 [xiv]. Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss was extremely vague when he purported that Eastern Upper Silesian Jews had been gassed from September 1941, or perhaps from January 1942 [xiv]. The Polish historian Igor Bartosik published a study on the initial phase of mass murder at Auschwitz in which he made out Schmelt prisoners as possible early victims of gassings of small groups of up to three hundred people at the turn of the year 1941-1942. He bases his contention on a report by Pery Broad, a member of the Political Department at Auschwitz [xvi]. Broad delineated the gassing of elderly civilians, who had previously worked in factories, on an unspecified day in 1942. He particularly elaborated on the tactics used by the perpetrating SS men to reassure their victims that

they would be reallocated to work after 'taking a shower.' However, Broad also mentioned that these people had worn yellow Stars of David on their breasts and were of an advanced age [xlvi]. Schmelt camp prisoners generally had white stars sewn to their trouser legs and sleeves and were rarely older than fifty-five years [xlviii]. These facts indicate that Broad described people from a ghetto, not Schmelt camp prisoners.

He could nevertheless have referred to the presumed first group of people deported from Eastern Upper Silesian ghettos to Auschwitz. According to Danuta Czech, inhabitants from the Bytom ghetto were taken to the gassing facilities in the Auschwitz main camp on 15 February 1942 [xlix]. Survivor testimony corroborates that this date also marked the start of gassings of unfit Schmelt prisoners in Auschwitz. Josef Wiener had been interned in camp Birkenhain (Brzeźny Śląskie) near Bytom from January 1942. He related that one hundred out of four hundred camp inmates had become unfit to work due to maltreatment by German overseers. These one hundred men were sent to Auschwitz to be killed in mid-February 1942 [i]. The camp in Birkenhain had been established in spring 1941 and was temporarily closed in December 1941, before its reopening with fresh prisoners in January 1942. Conspicuously, none of the survivors of the first camp phase reported any Auschwitz transports. This hardens the assumption that the second group of Birkenhain prisoners was among the earliest victims of gassings in Schmelt's system beginning in February 1942 [ii]. There was another early transport of two Jewish girls from a spinning mill in Neusalz (Nowa Sól). The camp had only been opened on 30 January 1942, with 158 teenage girls from Sosnowiec to fabricate Wehrmacht uniforms. The two girls were sent to Auschwitz in late February because they had developed mental health problems [iii].

Although Schmelt prisoners were not subjected to experimental gassings in Auschwitz in 1941, they evidently were among the first victims of the gas chambers in the main camp in 1942. These early transports from Schmelt camps and Eastern Upper Silesian ghettos might have served the SS to 'practice' gassing routines with growing numbers of people before the onset of larger deportation waves in summer 1942. As corroborated by Pery Broad's account, faking friendliness and applying perfidious manipulation techniques to lull incoming people into a false sense of security and trick them into entering the gas chambers free willingly, were of central importance.

Moreover, the Schmelt Office had found another way of disposing of sick and unfit prisoners to comply with entrepreneurs' demands. The respective terms of agreement between Schmelt and Auschwitz are unknown and might never have been fixed in written form. However, subcamps were prioritized over Schmelt camps regarding the frequency of Auschwitz transports. On average, one transport per month went off from Schmelt camps, whereas there could be up to three transports from Auschwitz subcamps [iiii]. For this reason, in-camp killings were not just continued but even further intensified between 1942 and 1944.

3.4. *In-Camp Killings, 1942-1944*

3.4.1. Medicalized Murders

Medicalized murders required physicians or at least a physician's advice including the respective medical equipment and substances. A common form of medicalized murder was the oral administration of overdosed medicines. It could be carried out by non-medical personnel, like civilian camp leaders. In a newly founded camp for women in Neusalz, female inmates who were too weak for an Auschwitz transport were killed with medicinal drops from spring 1942. The first victim was an eighteen-year-old girl who had been bedridden for three months [liv].

In summer 1943, the civilian camp leader of Gräditz (Grodzice), Kisky, forced a fifteen-year-old Dutch Jewish prisoner to drink a glass with poison following his unsuccessful attempt to escape from the infirmary. The young prisoner showed extreme courage in the face of death and dared to propose a 'toast' to Kisky proclaiming that the war was lost for Germany before emptying his glass [lv].

Lethal injections were commonly given to unfit prisoners at Auschwitz from summer 1941. In the Schmelt system, they were only introduced in certain camps from 1943 [lvi]. The injections were administered by medical staff using various substances. In some cases, visiting SS doctors from Auschwitz committed these murders; in others, Jewish prisoner physicians were coerced to collaborate. In Landeshut (Kamienna Góra), for instance, SS doctors administered petroleum

injections to sick prisoners, or they infected them with septicemia by injecting them pus from other prisoners with gangrenes [lvii]. A case in Langenbielau (Bielawa) demonstrates that Jewish medical staff still had a certain latitude for action when required to carry out such murders. The Jewish camp physician Dr. Kornreich thus refused to execute orders by a Schmelt representative to kill a seventeen-year-old girl with an injection after she had suffered an accident at work. Thanks to the doctor's courage, the girl was left alive and made a full recovery [lviii]. This notwithstanding, several Jewish doctors were threatened with death or sent to their deaths for not obeying orders to kill their patients. Evidently, the German personnel in individual Schmelt camps played a decisive role in either allowing Jewish doctors to opt out of killings, or in enforcing their collaboration [lix]. These actions, taking place within a spectrum referred to as 'grey zone' by Primo Levi, mostly elude moral judgement [lx].

3.4.2. Water-Induced Murders

In spring 1942, a new killing method was introduced in the Schmelt system by police guard duty officer and member of the SD Walter Rettinghaus in Blechhammer. The camp, having just been set up to construct a giant synthetic fuel plant, was administered by the Motorway Company that had equally taken over the plant's building supervision. Rettinghaus murdered prisoners by pouring cold water on their hearts or by drowning them. He was often assisted by the camp leader Dr. Erich Hoffmann, a lawyer and civilian employee of the Motorway Company. When the police were pulled out of Schmelt camps in January 1943 and Rettinghaus had been relocated after being promoted to inspector-general of the Schmelt camps, Hoffmann fully took over the killings [lxi]. In his new function, Rettinghaus travelled around Schmelt camps to teach water-induced killing techniques to other guards. It seems likely that his promotion was linked to his introduction of this particular method into Schmelt's system. As will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs, water-induced murders emanated from the concentration camp system and also helped other perpetrators to climb up the career ladder.

The practice of water-induced murders originated from Gusen, a Mauthausen subcamp in Austria. From May 1941, unfit prisoners of Gusen had regularly been taken to the 'Aktion T4' gassing facility in Hartheim under the 'Aktion 14f13' scheme. When the killing centre at Hartheim became temporarily unavailable in autumn 1941, Gusen's second-in-command Heinz Jentsch initiated large-scale murders by drowning or inserting a hose in prisoners' mouths to cause organ rupture. Water-induced murders were terminated in Gusen in January 1942, when transports to Hartheim could be resumed [lxii].

The similarities between the killing techniques introduced by Rettinghaus into the Schmelt camp system and the ones in Gusen are too great to be merely coincidental. Moreover, witness testimony corroborates that water-induced murders in Schmelt camps only began in spring 1942, when this practice had already been tried out in Gusen. Evidently, a knowledge transfer occurred between the staff of a Mauthausen subcamp and the Schmelt camps.

A possible exchange could have taken place through a guard, who was transferred to Auschwitz from Gusen in late October 1941. His name was Lorenz Christian Carstensen, born in Flensburg in 1892. Mental health issues forced the police officer to retire from active service in 1940. Carstensen had been a member of the Nazi party since 1937 and also joined the Waffen-SS a short time later. After a tenure as an SS guard in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, he was deployed in Gusen from 23 June 1941. In the end of October 1941, he was sent to the Auschwitz main camp as a platoon leader of the guard battalion. Not even three weeks later, Carstensen was promoted to SS Scharführer and made a career jump by being placed in the camp's notorious Political Office (*Politische Abteilung*) on 19 November 1941. Carstensen's personnel record contained several rejected requests by him to be promoted. Conspicuously, his previous history of mental health problems had posed an unsurmountable obstacle, until he relocated to Auschwitz. An official reason for his sudden promotion was not given; however, it seems possible that it was a reward for suggesting the water-induced murders he had undoubtedly witnessed in Gusen as a method to eliminate unfit Schmelt prisoners. As a former policeman and member of the SS and SD, Carstensen was ideally suited to form a bridge between the concentration camp system and Schmelt camps. Carstensen returned to

Gusen in January 1945 and was captured by Allied troops in May 1945. When interrogated, he kept quiet about his activities in the Political Office and, in 1948, received a comparatively lenient prison sentence of six years by a Polish court. He died in captivity in 1952 [lxiii].

Water-induced murders were committed in several more Schmelt camps next to Blechhammer from late 1942. One of them was Dyhernfurth (Brzeg Dolny), where unfit inmates were killed by water inserted through a hose in their mouths [lxiv]. Similar techniques were applied in Lazy (Łazy). In this camp, emaciated and injured prisoners were also attached to a hook in the washroom barrack, and a jet of cold water was pointed at their heart until it stopped beating [lxv]. Water-induced methods were used for mass killings on at least two occasions in Lazy. In winter 1942-1943, one hundred fifty emaciated prisoners were accused of 'sabotage' as their lack of physical strength slowed down their pace at work. The camp leader hosed them with cold water and left them standing outside until they had died of hypothermia [lxvi]. In February 1943, a transport with exhausted prisoners arrived in the camp. On seeing them, the camp leader drily remarked that shooting was 'too good' for these men and drowned them in the washroom barrack. Their bodies were laid outside as a deterrent to others. Guta Weislitzer, then a teenage girl interned in Lazy, witnessed the scene. In a postwar interview, she related that the shock had rendered her unable to cry for a long time afterwards [lxvii].

In Brande (Prądy), a former motorway construction camp remodeled into a camp for the sick and convalescent in January 1943, water-induced murders were used to systematically eliminate unfit prisoners who did not regain their ability to work within two weeks. The camp's guard duty officer Pompe, who was infamous for his brutality, was a key perpetrator. He murdered up to fourteen prisoners each day by exposure to cold and boiling water. Two sixteen-year-old inmates, Roman Ziegler and Walter Ziffer, were forced to remove the victims' mutilated bodies and bury them. Both were profoundly traumatized by this experience [lxviii].

The Jewish physician Dr. Wollenberg also became a first-hand witness to these killings. In his postwar autobiography he stated that Pompe coerced three Jewish functionary prisoners to collaborate in the murders under threats of being deported to Auschwitz themselves. The three prisoners turned to strangling their victims, as this was a faster and less disturbing method. Moreover, they often asked the Jewish physicians to have the patients sedated beforehand [lxix]. Hoping that the perpetrators would be brought to justice one day, Dr. Wollenberg secretly kept a list with the names of the victims [lxx].

Between February and August 1943, when Brande was disbanded, no more than five hundred prisoners were sent to Auschwitz as opposed to an estimated two thousand prisoners who had been murdered in the camp itself. The relevance of water-induced murders in the Holocaust in Eastern Upper Silesia is underlined here [lxxi]. The spike in these murders in Brande and other Schmelt camps was presumably linked to the overburdening of killing facilities at Auschwitz. In preparation of large deportation waves, Auschwitz enlarged its gas chambers and crematoria in the period of March to June 1943. In the summer, the mass murder of the Jews of Poland reached a climax [lxxii]. Apparently, Schmelt was held to reduce the number of transports to Auschwitz through in-camp killings. Several survivors thus rightly considered Brande a 'death camp' [lxxiii].

In late 1943, Brande's guard duty officer Pompe was relocated to a camp in Schmiedeberg in Sudeten. Blechhammer's former guard duty officer Walter Rettinghaus and acting inspector-general of the Schmelt camps, visited Pompe every fourteen days to further instruct him in in-camp killings. Schmelt representative Heinrich Lindner often accompanied him [lxxiv]. Resulting from this training, Pompe began to drown sick prisoners, who had been in the infirmary for more than two days, in a nearby lake [lxxv].

3.4.3. Other Killing Methods

Unfit Schmelt prisoners were also murdered by other methods. In many camps, weak and emaciated inmates were shot, beaten or trampled to death [lxxvi]. In Trzebinia, the German camp personnel brutally beat to death exhausted prisoners or those having received complaints by companies for working 'slow' in full view of their assembled comrades. A survivor stated that seventy per cent of the inmates perished within the year 1943 due to maltreatment [lxxvii]. During the winter months, prisoners were deliberately exposed to the cold and died of hypothermia or

pneumonia [lxxviii]. In Trzebinia, guards buried a prisoner under a pile of snow during work as a 'punishment' for having injured his foot. He was only dug out when the work details left in the evening. The prisoner died in the same night [lxxix].

At times, it was entrepreneurs who caused the deaths of prisoners. The Fürstengrube (Wesoła) mine belonged to *IG Farben* and supplied their Buna plant in Monowice with coal. Until summer 1943, the mine utilized Schmelz prisoners. The *IG Farben* directors demanded that the Jewish prisoners work without their overcoats in winter, claiming that 'when a Jew is warm, he does not work; therefore, they should not have overcoats, they should generate warmth through motion and through work.' The survivor Jacques Matzner witnessed many of his comrades freeze to death due to this inhumane policy [lxxx].

3.5. Selections for Auschwitz and Transport Modalities

3.5.1. Selections in Infirmaries, 1942-1943

Selections in infirmaries were established as a routine from spring 1942, when it was possible to send unfit Schmelz prisoners to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Transports went off on a monthly basis, comprising between two hundred and four hundred inmates at a time. The selections were made by guard duty officers and civilian camp leaders. Heinrich Lindner of the Schmelz Office also randomly added prisoners to lists for Auschwitz during his camp inspections [lxxxi]. The police officers and camp leaders were trained how to make selections by the SD. From late 1942, the SD school set up in Blechhammer was used for this purpose. However, no SS physicians or other medical personnel were involved in the training. The participants were merely advised to list any prisoner for Auschwitz who appeared weak or who suffered from long-term illness or injury. They were also encouraged to send prisoners to their deaths for transgressing rules. None of the people thus authorized to select inmates for death was qualified to evaluate their medical conditions [lxxxii]. Moreover, camp leaders usually forwarded the number of prisoners to be sent to Auschwitz to the Schmelz Office before even starting their selections in the infirmary. This practice indicates that prisoners were not picked based on their medical records but plainly to use up the permitted monthly contingents. It is not surprising then that camp staff were able to arbitrarily add prisoners to Auschwitz convoys simply because they disliked them. Jewish doctors' efforts to save their patients were, therefore, doomed to fail [lxxxiii].

3.5.2. Selections Among Working Prisoners, 1942-1943

In May 1942, the SS Main Economic Administration Department (WVHA) decreed to regularly scrutinize working concentration camp prisoners for emaciation and injuries [lxxxiv]. In Schmelz camps, similar selections among fit prisoners started around the same time.

In many camps, like in Peiskretscham (Pyskowice), Sunday roll calls were used by camp leaders for selecting prisoners in deteriorate physical condition. The selected were often aware that they would be murdered and some made desperate escape attempts [lxxxv]. In a camp adjacent to the Anhalt (Hołodunów) coal mine, the prisoners were not inspected individually but asked to step forward if they felt incapable of heavy work. None of them believed the camp leader's promises that those stepping forward would simply be assigned to lighter work [lxxxvi].

In Parschnitz (Poříčí), all prisoners had to run fast across a meadow in front of the guard duty officer, who selected those unable to perform the task [lxxxvii].

In a camp for women in Neusalz, the female prisoners had to undergo X-ray screenings for tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases every six months. Hazardous working conditions in a thread factory caused many prisoners to develop lung problems. Those affected by diseases were taken to Auschwitz via the transit camp at Sosnowiec. Most likely, these precautionary measures were taken by the Schmelz Office to protect German workers at the factory from infectious diseases [lxxxviii].

3.5.3. The Intervention of SS Physicians from Auschwitz in Selections in 1943

From spring 1943, SS doctors from Auschwitz began to make selections in Schmelz camps. This development emanated from orders by the SS WVHA to delegate selections in Auschwitz from SS block leaders without medical training to SS physicians. It was assumed that more prisoners would

be made available to the war industry in this way [lxxxix]. Apparently, Himmler also strove to increase the number of working Schmelzt prisoners by sending SS doctors into these camps for selections.

The SS physicians visited Schmelzt camps every three months. Their names were not corroborated by survivors [xc]. They examined working prisoners in all camps, using different methods. In Blechhammer, they made prisoners run past them at a high pace. Those not keeping up were pierced into their legs with pencils to check the circulation [xci]. In Trzebinia, prisoners were asked to voluntarily step forward if they did not feel strong enough to work [xcii].

In several camps, among others in Trzebinia and Markstädt (Laskowice), the SS physicians also took over the selections in the infirmaries [xciii]. In Blechhammer, selections in the infirmary continued to be made by the police guard duty officer and the camp leader; however, the SS doctors encouraged them to participate in their selections among working prisoners, possibly to teach them more refined criteria [xciv].

In Johannsdorf (Jaskowice), Bobrek, Freiwaldau (Gozdica), and Gross-Masselwitz (Maślice Wielkie) German physicians from neighboring towns with no apparent connection to Auschwitz or the SS equally came by for selections. Their identities could not be established [xcv].

3.5.4. The Modalities of Auschwitz Transports

As there were no standardized routines of taking prisoners to Auschwitz, each camp had to make arrangements of its own. In Annaberg, the police guards received extra payments for driving sick prisoners to the gas chambers [xcvi]. The use of the order police in this context was in line with their overall collaboration in deportations and selections. By contrast, Blechhammer hired a commercial driving company called Hancke for this purpose. Issued with a list of the names of the prisoners they were carrying, the drivers were permitted to enter Birkenau. They not only became first-hand witnesses to the industrial mass murder at Auschwitz, but also accessories to murder in their own right. During the winter months, many of the prisoners, who were merely clad in a thin shirt, died of hypothermia while riding forty miles to Auschwitz on open trucks [xcvii]. A camp adjacent to an ammunitions factory in Ludwigsdorf (Ludwikowice Kłodzkie) used passenger trains, apparently together with other camps that were not specified by the source. The conditions on the trains nevertheless became lethal to many due to overcrowding and a lack of drinking water [xcviii].

Several camps seized the opportunity to clandestinely send extra numbers of sick and unfit inmates to Auschwitz during the unauthorized phase of the Cosel stops, ignoring Auschwitz commandant Höss's order to terminate this practice. Between 18 October and 10 December 1942, and again between 24 August and 16 November 1943, sick prisoners were added to Auschwitz-bound deportation convoys stopped in Cosel to obfuscate the fact that Schmelzt's staffers continued to extract able-bodied men from among western deportees [xcix]. In November 1942, Birkenhain thus sent thirty prisoners with edema in their legs to Auschwitz via Cosel [c]. Similar transports were reported from Freiwaldau around this time [ci]. Auschwitz commandant Höss was infuriated when he noticed the continuing prisoner exchange and, on 10 December 1942, instructed the Higher SS and Police Leader of Silesia, Heinrich Schmauser, to stop Schmelzt Office staff from meddling in the deportations in Cosel [cii]. This notwithstanding, Blechhammer secretly added three hundred and fifty typhus patients and several other prisoners to a Westerbork convoy on 1 September 1943 [ciii]. Another contingent of sick prisoners followed on 15 September 1943 [civ].

Prisoners from camps in the vicinity of Auschwitz often had to march to Birkenau. In September 1942, the total prisoner population of a coal mine in Anhalt was exchanged due to physical exhaustion. They were all sent on a foot march of eight miles before being gassed in Birkenau [cv]. Similarly, when Trzebinia and Schoppinietz (Szopiniec) were disbanded on 2 and 3 November 1943, the prisoners had to cover fifteen miles to Birkenau, where another selection took place but over sixty per cent of them were murdered. A pre-selection had indirectly been made by offering prisoners incapable of marching a ride on trucks. Everyone on the trucks was indiscriminately killed in the gas chambers [cvi].

3.6. Dealing with Epidemics

Infectious diseases like typhus and dysentery became rampant in the Schmelt camp system due to malnourishment, overcrowding, and a lack of hygiene. Nazi ideology branded Jews as 'endemic' carriers of contagious diseases, and Jews' alleged 'inferior race' gave the Germans leeway for a radical killing policy during outbreaks [cvii]. By contrast to Auschwitz, where infectious prisoners were isolated and only murdered if they did not make a fast recovery, the Schmelt Office often strove to eliminate entire prisoner populations. Interestingly, SS doctors from Auschwitz intervened in these plans. A drastic example is a dysentery outbreak in Blechhammer in July 1942. When German public health authorities announced that the camp's inhabitants would be quarantined, Heinrich Lindner of the Schmelt Office came by and ordered to have all 1,400 inmates shot, claiming that they posed a health hazard to the German population. The prisoners were already made to dig their own graves, when an SS physician from Auschwitz arrived. He asked the Jewish head surgeon of the Chrzanów ghetto, Dr. Ritter, to medically supervise the Blechhammer inmates. Dr. Ritter eventually managed to convince Lindner that it sufficed to separate the infected prisoners from the healthy ones. In October, most of those still infected with dysentery were added to Auschwitz-bound deportation convoys in Cosel to be murdered [cviii]. A small fraction was taken to the Jewish hospital in Sosnowiec. However, after some time in an isolation ward they, too, were sent to Auschwitz. The only survivor of this group was a young boy, who escaped through a window when Jewish medical staff disclosed what was in store for the patients. He went into hiding near his parents' home in Będzin [cix].

The Schmelt Office once more tried to conceal an infectious outbreak in Blechhammer in May 1943, when two prisoners showed symptoms of typhus. Two Jewish functionaries, one of them a medical orderly, were forced to strangle the patients. The brutal attempt to contain the disease was nonetheless fruitless. Within a short time, a fully-fledged typhus epidemic raged in Blechhammer, and the Schmelt Office was compelled to return to the system of isolating infected inmates practiced in Auschwitz. Hundreds of prisoners with typhus were sent to their deaths via Auschwitz-bound deportation convoys stopped in Cosel in September 1943 [cx].

A case in Gräditz further underscores the brutality employed by the Schmelt Office to cover up outbreaks. In winter 1943-1944, ten typhus-infected prisoners were taken from their camp in Gnadenfrei (Pilawa Górna) to a neighboring camp in Gräditz to be killed there. According to Jewish survivors assigned to a burial detail, the ten men fell victim to water-induced murders carried out in a particularly despicable and lengthy fashion by camp leader Lehmann and his helpers [cxi]. The Jewish physician Dr. Haar had tried in vain to persuade Lehmann to isolate the sick prisoners and give them a chance for recovery [cxii]. Like in Blechhammer, the in-camp killings did not prevent the disease from spreading. By February 1944, the whole camp was in the grip of a typhus epidemic, which even began to affect camp guards and the local population. Half of Gräditz's 1,500 prisoners died of the disease [cxiii]. Moreover, Heinrich Lindner selected three hundred fifty typhus survivors, who had not regained their ability to work, for Auschwitz. They were placed on a train, whose departure was delayed for several days due to technical problems. The Jewish elder of Gräditz seized the opportunity to offer bribes to Lindner, and the train was eventually rerouted to Annaberg, a camp for convalescents [cxiv].

Shortly thereafter, the premature transfer of four hundred fifty seemingly healthy prisoners from Gräditz to Faulbrück (Mosciski) caused another typhus outbreak in that camp because the lice carried by the prisoners were infectious and spread to the inmates of Faulbrück. Many died of the disease. Exacerbating the situation even further, the Schmelt Office sent the infected prisoners back to Gräditz again [cxv].

Measures taken by the Schmelt Office to prevent epidemics often caused more harm than good. In summer 1942, Gross-Masselwitz received prisoners recovering from typhus but no longer contagious. As a precautionary measure, all barracks were sealed and disinfected with poison gas. When the prisoners returned to their barracks at night, gas was still accumulating in the rooms, causing their lungs to start bleeding [cxvi]. Similarly, in Trzebinia in summer 1943, prisoners in the upper tiers of bunk beds asphyxiated in their sleep because of gas remaining in the barracks [cxvii].

3.6. Camps for the Sick and Convalescent

In October 1942, the Schmelt Office prohibited the referral of critically ill prisoners to the Jewish hospital of Sosnowiec. Jewish doctors were informed by Haunschild, a representative of the Motorway Company, that patients requiring long-term treatment or complicated surgeries should simply be sent to Auschwitz henceforth [cxviii]. So-called camps for the sick and convalescent (*Kranken- und Erholungslager*) were to be set up instead. Although not formally subdued to the SS, the Schmelt Office apparently complied with a directive given out by Oswald Pohl of the SS-WVHA to concentration camps to preserve more workers for the war industry by permitting emaciated prisoners to recuperate for a maximum period of six weeks. By contrast, Auschwitz commandant Höss blatantly refused to follow the directive, claiming that he had not received any additional food allocations or medicines for this purpose. Commandants of concentration camps were authorized to ignore or remold superior orders from Berlin [cxix].

In Schmelt's system, only few prisoners benefitted from the SS WVHA's half-hearted measures to maintain higher work productivity. The sick camps can be distinguished into three types. The first type were 'triage camps,' where prisoners were divided into three categories: those able to regain their ability to work after some rest and feeding up, those with minor injuries or sicknesses treatable within a few weeks, and those who were severely ill or injured. The latter group was murdered in Auschwitz, whereas those in the first two groups had a chance of being reallocated to another labor camp. Annaberg, Sakrau and Gogolin, all under administration of the Motorway Company, served as triage camps between fall 1942 and summer 1943 [cxx].

The second camp category, the 'killing facility,' was represented by Brande, which maintained the triage principle to a certain extent but predominantly murdered prisoners in the camp. Brande, a former road construction camp, was fully transformed into a sick camp in January 1943, but remained under the Motorway Company's administration. The civilian camp leader Thien ridiculed efforts to restore weak prisoners' fitness by mimicking the routines of a real sanatorium. He thus made the inmates take 'walks' and force-fed some to death. In spring 1943, the Schmelt Office ordered to subject unfit prisoners in Brande to water-induced murders. About two thousand inmates fell victim to these killings until the camp's closure in August 1943. By contrast, only two transports with five hundred prisoners were sent to Auschwitz during this time [cxxi].

The third category was 'collection camps' that were emblematic of the last phase of the Schmelt camp system, when most of the Eastern Upper Silesian ghettos had been liquidated and their inhabitants had been murdered. The most important and long-standing among these camps was Blechhammer. It operated a sick camp from September 1943 until it was taken over by Auschwitz in April 1944. Unfit prisoners were kept in a former washroom barrack stripped of all sanitary facilities in despicable conditions. After a few days or weeks of almost total neglect, they were taken to Auschwitz [cxxii]. Blechhammer's sick camp was equally used for sending up to two thirds of the fit prisoner populations of disbanded Schmelt camps to Auschwitz, who had simply become 'superfluous.' In winter 1943, a group of unfit female prisoners held in Blechhammer's sick camp was murdered with cold showers because they had realized they would be sent to their deaths and started to panic [cxxiii].

Bunzlau (Bolesławice) also served as a collection point for Auschwitz at the turn of the year 1943-1944. The prisoners only received some thin soup and no medical attention. The camp was disbanded in March 1944 [cxxiv].

Parschnitz, a camp for women, was used as a central prisoner exchange and collection centre throughout 1943 and early 1944. Surrounding Schmelt camps brought in their unfit inmates and picked up new arrivals in their stead. The sick and unfit prisoners were subsequently sent to Auschwitz from Parschnitz [cxxv]. In spring 1944, women from disbanded camps were segregated in Parschnitz into those considered to be fit for work in Gross-Rosen subcamps, and those to be murdered in Auschwitz. A prisoner hospital constructed by several companies exploiting female Jewish inmates in the area was only completed three weeks before Parschnitz was transformed into a Gross-Rosen satellite. A French Jewish doctor, who worked there, had to participate in selections of women from liquidated camps [cxxvi].

In summary, camps for the sick and convalescent offered merely a small chance of survival to a few prisoners able to make a fast recovery. Their introduction already indicated a change in the Nazis'

policies toward sick inmates. Jews were barred from any kind of hospital treatment, resulting in prisoners with more complex medical issues being murdered. In 1943, at the height of the mass killings in Eastern Upper Silesia, Brande developed an independent infrastructure for murdering unfit prisoners to relieve the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The collection camps that followed merely facilitated the transfer of unfit or 'superfluous' prisoners to the death camp. The fact that most camps for the sick and convalescent were under administration of the Motorway Company under Albert Speer points to his involvement in their development. Speer's close ties to concentration camps, and especially to Auschwitz, are well known [cxvii]. His influence on Schmelt camps was even greater. It becomes obvious that neither he nor Oswald Pohl had a genuine interest in preserving the lives of Jewish prisoners; to the contrary, the sick camps increasingly served as entities for carrying out the genocide on a large scale.

4. Discussion

The Schmelt camps with their special status permit unprecedented insights into the genesis and practical implementation of killing policies towards prisoners unable to work that were at the root of high mortality rates in Nazi camps and that formed a cornerstone of the genocidal concept of 'annihilation through labour.' Studying this camp system brings a crucial new actor to the fore, whose role as (co-) initiator of such murderous practices was hitherto unknown to Holocaust scholars. Fritz Todt's announcement of December 1940 that he would not pay for unfit prisoners led to brutal killing experiments by Schmelt Office staff, policemen, and civilian camp leaders. Todt's influence on Himmler's decree to eliminate unfit concentration camp prisoners of April 1941 was palpably real. Schmelt's system apparently served as a forerunner of the concentration camps in this respect. It is nevertheless important to remember that these seemingly utilitarian measures against the sick could only be turned into a horrifying reality because the Jews and other victim groups had been earmarked for genocide by Nazi ideology.

In sharp contrast to concentration camps, Schmelt camps trained civilians in carrying out selections and in-camp killings. Thereby, a broad cross-section of the Upper Silesian population not only learned about the Holocaust but became enablers and perpetrators themselves. Their incrimination indubitably resulted from Nazi 'Germanization' policies and the pressure to prove their 'Germanness.' Schmelt's sinister relationship with Auschwitz can only be reconstructed from events and practices corroborated by survivor testimony. Evidently, Auschwitz's medical staff closely scrutinized the work of Jewish camp physicians, and interfered in certain areas, while ignoring others. Until spring 1943, SS physicians left the process of making selections for the gas chambers entirely to policemen and civilians with no medical background. And later, they mostly restricted their influence to selections among working prisoners, but not the sick. In some cases, SS doctors could avert massacres by Schmelt personnel during epidemics and force them to adapt to the more refined system of separating the sick from the healthy applied in Auschwitz. However, Schmelt's people continued to pursue their radical killing policies whenever possible. Unlike Auschwitz itself, Schmelt camps purported to comply with demands by the SS WVHA to preserve more Jewish workers. This notwithstanding, they swiftly converted the early triage camps into killing facilities and collection points, also for 'superfluous' prisoners of disbanded camps. On the other hand, Schmelt obviously permitted a knowledge transfer on water-induced killing techniques by staff from the Mauthausen satellite Gusen and further brutalized these techniques in the process.

In summary, Schmelt camps took on a leading role in the murder of sick and unfit prisoners. They closely collaborated with Auschwitz but also had leeway in many areas to establish their own practices, which could be even more despicable and detrimental to the inmates than those commonly found in concentration camp settings. This study's findings pinpoint the relevance of in-camp killings, especially through water-induced methods, in the Holocaust of the Eastern Upper Silesian Jews. This is still a new research field, and it is hoped that this important aspect will be investigated further in future scholarly works.

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