

Postwar testimony about the first successful gassing of mentally handicapped on 4 January 1940

. . . At the beginning of the first euthanasia experiment in the Brandenburg asylum near Berlin, I was ordered there by Brack. It was in the first half of January 1940 when I traveled to the asylum. Structures of the asylum were fixed up especially for this purpose. A room, similar to a shower room and covered with tiles, approximately 3 by 5 meters and 3 meters high. There were benches around the room and about 10 cm above the floor, a water pipe about 1" in diameter ran along the wall. There were small holes in this pipe, from which the carbon monoxide gas poured out. The gas cylinders stood outside this room and were already connected to the pipe. The installation of this facility had been carried out by a workman from the SS Main Building Office in Berlin . . . In the entrance door, which was constructed like an air raid shelter door, was a rectangular peephole through which the behavior of the delinquents could be observed. The first gassing was carried out by Dr. Widmann personally. He turned the gas tap and regulated the amount of gas. At the same time, he instructed the asylum doctor, Dr. Eberl, and Dr. Baumhart, who later took over the extermination in Grafeneck and Hadamar. Prominent personalities who were there, as far as I can remember: the doctors already mentioned: Dr. Ebert, Dr. Baumhart, Dr. Widmann . . . Prof. Dr. Brandt, the Führer's personal physician, a Detective Wirth, at that time head of the homicide branch of the Stuttgart police department and later head of the Hardthelm asylum near Linz. For this first gassing about 18 to 20 people were led into this "shower room" by the nursing staff. These men had to undress in an anteroom, so that they were completely naked. The doors were shut behind them. These people went quietly into the room and showed no signs of excitement. Dr. Widmann operated the gas, through the peephole I could see that after about a minute the people collapsed or lay on the benches. There were no scenes or disorder. After a further 5 minutes the room was ventilated. Specially assigned SS people carried the dead on special stretchers out of the room and brought them to the crematorium ovens. When I say special stretchers, I mean stretchers specially constructed for this purpose. They could be placed directly in front of the ovens and the corpses could be conveyed into the oven mechanically by means of a device, without the people carrying them coming into contact with the corpse. These ovens and the stretchers were also constructed in Brack's department. Who was responsible for this, I can't say. The second attempt and the further extermination procedures were then carried out by Dr. Eberl alone and on his own responsibility. Following this successful test, Victor Brack, who naturally was also present and whom I forgot to mention, said a few words. He expressed satisfaction with this test and emphasized once again that this

action should only be carried out by doctors, according to the motto, the syringe belongs in the hand of the doctor. Subsequently, Prof. Dr. Brandt spoke and also stressed that doctors alone should carry out these gassings. With that, the start in Brandenburg was considered a success, and the matter continued further under Dr. Eberl.

Please note the following:

- You will find more information on August Becker in Kalfus, *Primary Source Documents*, p.98f.
- Dr. Albert Widemann was the head of the chemical section of the Criminal Technical Institute in Berlin who experimented with explosions of dynamite, morphine suppositories, and ampoules of hydrocyanic acids as efficient methods of killing.
- Dr. Brandt was Hitler's personal physician.
- Dr. Christian Wirth was to become the commandant of the Belzec extermination camp where prisoners were immediately gassed upon arrival to the camp.
- Once it had been demonstrated that gas was an "ideal" means of extermination, Dr. Becker, within a couple of months transferred canisters of gas from the BASF chemical factories in the city of Ludwigshafen to several euthanasia centers (e.g., in Brandenburg, Grafeneck in Southwest Germany, and Hartheim in Austria)

See also Kalfus, *Primary Source Document...*, p.14.

The role in genocide played by the German industry, such as the chemical industry, is extremely important. IG Farben which ironically stands for "association of common interests," was a very powerful cartel of BASF, Hoechst and other chemical and pharmaceutical German companies. These companies are still in existence today and have controlling interests in a wide range of American companies. During the Holocaust, for example, IG Farben ran a synthetic rubber factory at Buna, part of the Auschwitz complex; the factory was staffed with concentration camp inmates. Please go to the following website for more information:

http://www4.dr-rath-foundation.org/PHARMACEUTICAL_BUSINESS/The_Chemnitz_Programme/chemnitz15.htm

- Many of the innovations cited in the document, such as collective cremation and specially constructed doors with peepholes, would be used after 1941 in the extermination camps.

QUESTIONS TO DOCUMENT

1. What is Dr. Becker most interested in when he looks through the peephole?
2. What is significant about the special construction of the stretchers?
3. Why did the Nazis consider it so important that the doctors alone should carry out the gassings?