

Using specific examples from the following eyewitness account, support the concept that “the final solution” was a carefully planned bureaucratically organized application of a means to an end. Take particular note of the emphasis of efficiency in the process.

Memoir by Irene Schwarz of Gestapo office work at Birkenau

..I worked the night shift in the Revier of the women’s camp in Birkenau, along with twenty other Jewish secretaries. Our chief was Frink, a German communist prisoner, She was a bespectacled woman, a typical clerk. As Blockälteste, or chief of both the hospital and the office, she controlled the entire roll call of the hospital. Her supervisor, the German physician-in-chief, Dr. Vetter, came to the office every day on his motorcycle to sign various documents prepared for him in advance. . .

The night shift started at seven o’clock in the evening and finished at six in the morning, precisely when roll call was held. Every night we had to type death certificates. For each dead prisoner there was a card to be processed according to specific regulations. The hour of death had to be indicated; for the directive permitted only one death every two minutes and the morning and evening roll calls were the points of departure in our time schedule. The notations were as mechanical as those of an army payroll. “After evening roll call at 7:02 p.m. the Dutch Jewish prisoner X died of pneumonia. At 7:04 p.m. the Polish Jewish prisoner Y died of tuberculosis at Lagerstrasse,” etc., etc. The typists could choose any time and any of the thirty-four prescribed diseases for the victim’s death. They usually preferred heart failure, because the short word in German (Herzschwäche) facilitated the fulfillment of quotas. The card had to be filled in accurately although the information was utterly false, since the cause of death was always the gas chamber. These documents were completed with the signature of an SS physician, and then telegrams were sent announcing the demise of the prisoner.

Shortly after I started to work at the Revier, an epidemic of typhus and spotted fever broke out which caused between four and five hundred deaths daily in Birkenau. It had been an extremely hot summer. There was no water. The barracks had been built on swamps under which, according to rumor, the corpses of fourteen thousand Russian prisoners had been buried. It was said that they had constructed the barracks of Birkenau and this was why they were called “Russian barracks”. Conditions there were horrible. There were no facilities whatsoever, and the crumbs of food were vile. When the prisoners returned from hard labor in the Aussenkommandos, they rushed to the rain puddles and fought for every drop of this muddy contaminated water. No wonder there was an epidemic of spotted fever.

“We have about four hundred and fifty reports of death today,” Frinke shouted. “You must finish the records by five o’clock in the morning. Any of you who misspells a name or make a mistake in the numbers may prepare for Block 25.” Each of us knew the meaning. Block 25 faced our office and it contained those destined for the gas chamber. The women in it lay in rags, mud and excrement. Some of them grasped the iron gates of the windows, moaning and yelling. They knew that soon SS men, together with SS Arbeitsführerin Dreschler and three or four of her assistants, would throw them onto a truck headed for the gas chamber and then the crematorium.

Every night I would look out of the office. Punctually at half-past eight, a truck would arrive with the SS guard. Shortly after I would hear the cries of the victims, who, beaten with guns and truncheons, were pulled by their hair and limbs and flung onto the truck. I would also hear the callous laughter of the SS who were usually given a supplementary ration of two or three liters of brandy to carry out this job. Through the square window of the office, one could see the beams of huge searchlights illuminating the entire camp, the electrical wires with their white poles and the guardhouse with the SS-sentinels. Truck after truck would leave with its cargo, until Block 25 was empty. In the morning, immediately after roll call and before the prisoners' details left for work, the block would again be crammed with fuel for the chimneys, which operated day and night. There were five such chimneys in Auschwitz. They consumed their innocent victims, transforming them to ashes, which, in conformity with practical Nazi economy, were utilized as fertilizer.

The look in my eyes and the expression on my face were frozen. I was called a mummy because I rarely spoke and never laughed, although laughter had once been one of my trademarks. I was always exhausted by the constant pressure of work and the eternal threat of Block 25. Mountains of files stared me in the face and had to be in perfect order by morning. Each night I yearned to write the truth just once, to let it be known. Frinke would hand me a card and say, "Make this one 10:56 p.m.. Body found on Kasernenstrasse. Heart failure." Couldn't I just write that this was a lie, an invention of the Devil? That this life was snuffed out deliberately to fill the quota of the chimney? My heart bled for the mothers whose little ones were destroyed before they saw the light of day and who were then themselves assigned to heavy labor so that they would perish quickly. That is how I lost my best friend. She made the mistake of admitting that she was four months pregnant and was systematically added to the transports, depending upon the number of available places in the gas chambers. The chief of this block was an eighteen-year-old girl in high black boots who ran about her living cemetery, laughing every time a truck arrived. What made a young girl so abnormal? I recalled the words which were written above the Holy Ark: "Keep the Lord always before thee!" In Birkenau, I always saw Block 25 before me.

NOTE AND REFLECT ON THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION: There was a fanatical attention to accuracy required by the inmates who had to fill out the cards. No erasures were permitted. While most Jews transported to Auschwitz were immediately sent to the gas chambers, a small percentage selected for slave labor were carefully entered into a card file kept by the so-called Political Section of Auschwitz.