

The gas chamber at Mauthausen

Witness accounts and stories from Italian deportees

By Bruno Maida

A brief history of the camp

Some months after the *Anschluss* (the forced incorporation of Austria into the German Reich carried out in March 1938), 300 prisoners were transferred from Dachau to Mauthausen. It was 8 August, and, accompanied by 80 members of the SS, they were crossing through the pleasant Austrian village laid out on the banks of the Danube, some twenty kilometres from Linz in the direction of Vienna.

Slowly, they climbed the hill amid the timid glances of the local population. The older ones remembered that even during the First World War, a concentration camp had been built on the edge of Mauthausen, to house Italian prisoners-of-war. Now, however, the 300 prisoners were preparing to build a camp that Heydrich would locate on its own in Category III (in a classification of concentration camps prepared in 1941), that is the most brutal camp reserved for political prisoners who could be “re-educated” only with difficulty – in reality, for prisoners who had been selected for death.¹

Mauthausen was not chosen randomly, and certainly not for its natural attractions. From nearby stone quarries, granite could be extracted - in the past, the granite had been used in the construction of roads and palaces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now it would serve the German Reich. The quarries were above all an important economic undertaking for DEST (Deutsche Erd und Steinwerke GmbH), a subsidiary of the SS Main Economic Office, headed by Oswald Pohl. Like other camps, Mauthausen (which means “customs checkpoint” in German) was in a strategically important location, a crossroads for railway and river traffic, easily available for the transport of people and granite.

Construction work on the camp continued late into the summer of 1939, by which time there were some 3,000 prisoners, amongst them political detainees, “anti-social” elements, Gypsies, Jehovah’s witnesses, criminals etc. From the beginning of the war, the camp population began to systematically rise, with the arrival of thousands of prisoners deported from territories occupied by the Nazis. Meanwhile, there were 49 sub-camps in operation across the whole territory of Austria and some of these, like Gusen (the first to become operational, in May 1940) or Ebensee, would ultimately be larger than the central camp at Mauthausen. There, the number of registrations had already passed 20,000 in 1942, but in the same year, 14,000 deaths were noted. In 1943, the inmates at Mauthausen and Gusen reached 26,000, rising to 45,000 in 1945, a year in which the entire network of Mauthausen sub-camps held more than 84,000 prisoners in total (including those in the central camp). According to the best researched figures available, 120,000 people were murdered in Mauthausen, including 38,000 Jews.

The deliberate and systematic extermination programme, be it through starvation, illness or mass executions, was accompanied by the brutal conditions in which the prisoners were forced to work in the Mauthausen quarries. The stone they extracted and cut into squares had to be carried on their shoulders along 186 steep steps to the top, where the SS who were waiting for them, punched, pushed and tortured those prisoners moving with difficulty. They called it the “Staircase of Death”, while the precipice of the quarries was called the “Wall of the Parachutists”, in view of the fact that the Nazi slave drivers would from time to time, by way of entertainment, push the first prisoner in line off, who would then drag down dozens of other prisoners with him as he fell, thus causing continual massacres. But prisoners were also killed on a daily basis by a blow to the back of the head in the bunkers, by being thrown onto electrified fences (at 380 volts), murdered in the gas-vans which constantly shuttled between Mauthausen and Gusen, or in the gas chambers at Hartheim and Mauthausen itself. The crematoria were always in operation.

A circular from Pohl in April 1942 – a response to the German need to increase military production, which would logically conflict with the desire to “exterminate through work” – came into force at Mauthausen and its sub-camps in June 1943. While prisoners excavated the tunnels at Gusen to house production of the A4 rocket (better known as the V2 – Vergeltungswaffe), the majority of the prisoners were set to work not just

¹ For a short but precise reconstruction of events in the camp, see G. J. HORWITZ “All’ombra della morte. La vita quotidiana attorno al campo di Mauthausen”, Marsilio, Venice 1994 and M. DE BOUARD, “Mauthausen”, in “Le système concentrationnaire allemand (1940-1944)”, special edition of “Revue d’histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale”, nn. 15-16, July-September 1954)

with DEST but also in various private-sector factories, like Heinkel-Werke, Messerschmitt and Steyr-Daimler-Puch. The terrible working and living conditions came to a head in the summer of 1943, when Allied aerial bombardment reached Austria.

Although Mauthausen had held prisoners from nearly all German-occupied territory during the course of the war, in its final phase, the situation became even more dramatic. It was to Mauthausen, with the Red Army advancing on the Eastern Front, that the long and lethal evacuation marches from the more distant Polish camps in the winter of 1944 were now directed – from January to May 1945, for instance, roughly 9,000 prisoners (above all, Jewish prisoners) arrived from Auschwitz. Women and children from Ravensbrück, men from Sachsenhausen, and Hungarian Jews arrived, crammed into the Mauthausen camp in which 14 tents were now constructed to hold the prisoners, forced to sleep in the mud, decimated by dysentery and typhus. Many thousands of men, women and children had been murdered during the evacuation marches.

Amongst the most tragic aspects of this final phase in the life of the camp is without doubt the escape of 495 Soviet officers from Block 20 – nicknamed the “Death Block” – at the start of 1945. They constituted most of what remained of a group of 4,700 Soviet prisoners interned in the camp in March 1944. Closed in the only block that was fenced in, the Soviet prisoners were forced into roll-calls for executions, made to sleep on a barracks floor that had been deliberately flooded during the winter, or sealed in without water during the summer. Almost completely deprived of food, dozens died each day. Those who still had some strength to resist left managed to escape during the night of 2 February. The SS were not the only ones who chased them into the nearby country-side, a large portion of the local population joined in with what became known as “the rabbit-hunt”. Within just 24 hours, 300 of the escapees had already been re-captured, of whom only 50 were still alive. By the end, the survivors numbered just a dozen.

At midday on 5 May 1945, American commander Albert J. Koziak approached the camp with two armoured vehicles. The SS had escaped: camp commander Franz Ziereis was hiding in the countryside, where he would be discovered and fatally wounded twenty days later. Most of the camp’s documentation had been burnt. The Allies were met by a delegation from the International Red Cross: the Spanish prisoners first stretched a red banner across the main entrance, and later one of the Spanish Republic.

The gas-vans, Hartheim and Gusen

It has been said that “amongst the camps that functioned in the narrower sense as camps for extermination, Mauthausen is a singular case: more prisoners were murdered there compared to every other concentration camp, whether one considers the main camp itself, the sub-camp at Gusen, or the gas-vans that shuttled back and forwards between Mauthausen and Gusen”.² In fact, Mauthausen employed a wide range of ways to kill prisoners, other than “natural” deaths due to over-work and starvation: a blow to the back of the neck in Barracks 20 (which had been prepared for these executions); “raspberry picking”, when prisoners who been forced by the guards to cross the camp confines to pick raspberries were machine-gunned to death by those same guards for “attempting to escape”; ice-baths, that caused heart-attacks or pneumonia; and torture. The poison gas itself played a fundamental role in the exterminations at Mauthausen, in four different ways: the gas-vans, the gas-chambers at Hartheim Castle, the gassings in the barracks at Gusen, and the gas-chambers at Mauthausen itself.

Between Autumn 1941 until at least summer 1942, between 900 and 2,800 prisoners were murdered in the gas-vans, during the five kilometre drive between Mauthausen and Gusen.³ The van would stop in the main square of the central camp, carrying thirty victims on each journey: massed into its well-sealed rear section, they would be killed via carbon dioxide poisoning. On arrival at Gusen, the bodies would be unloaded for cremation, and the van could continue its journey with another thirty victims who would suffer the same fate, this time on its return to Mauthausen.⁴ The gas-van was probably invented by SS Chemist, Hauptsturmführer Erich Wassitzky:

² E. KOGON, H. LANGBEIN, A. RÜCHERL, “Les chambres à gaz secret d’État”, Seuil, Paris, 1984, p.222. For the numbers exterminated at Mauthausen, see H. MARSALEK “Mauthausen”, La Pietra, Milan, 1977.

³ G. J. HORWITZ, *All’ombra della morte*, cit., p. 32.

⁴ A detailed reconstruction of these events can be found in H. MARSALEK, *Le pratiche delle operazioni effettuate nel campo di concentramento di Mauthausen per asfissiare i prigionieri*, Documentazione, Vienna, 1990

- Do you remember a special vehicle that operated between Mauthausen and Gusen, in which prisoners were gassed during the journey?
- Yes, the commander personally came with this vehicle. Wasicki put the gas in.⁵
- How many people could the van hold?
- Twenty or thirty.
- And this vehicle came from SS-Hauptsturmführer Wasicki?
- It was actually a police vehicle that had been hermetically sealed.
- Did Ziweis drive it?
- Yes, I saw him myself.⁶

The gas (carbon dioxide in cylinders) was also used at Hartheim Castle, one of the six “Euthanasia” centres, by which the Nazis sought to eliminate what they called “lives not worth living”. Commenced in September 1939, the “Euthanasia Action” was suspended in August 1941 after protests and fears were expressed amongst the German people. However, the Austrian castle was ready to continue with its tragic operations. Already in May 1941, the first prisoners had been selected at Gusen; the same operation began at Mauthausen a couple of months later. Victims were directed to gas chambers disguised as showers: “this room measured 6.60 by 4.20m, the floor (which had previously been made of wood) had been concreted over, and then covered with red tiles. There were also tiles on the walls, up to a height of 1.7m. In the centre of the ceiling was the water pipe, with three shower-heads. On the floor, the length of three walls, was a pipe with many holes (around 15mm wide). From this tube, the lethal gas came out from a steel cylinder located in an adjacent room. A doctor supervised this process.”⁷

As testified to by one of the workers in the exterminations at Hartheim, its function “was to gas and kill prisoners who could not be murdered in Mauthausen”.⁸ While the numbers of victims of the “Euthanasia Action” at Hartheim alone reached 18,269, the number of prisoners gassed between 1942 and 1944 at Mauthausen and Gusen were more than 8,000.⁹ According to the calculations of Italo Tibaldi, 303 Italians were murdered at Hartheim.¹⁰ Stefano Barbera – who probably confuses the gas-vans with a blue truck with sealed and darkened windows that went to Hartheim – is however clear in his recollection: “...then we knew what they were doing... they were coming to the Invalid block, and when they reached a certain number of people... they came with one of those delivery vans, they loaded it up and said they were taking them to another camp for medical attention, but instead they went on their way, giving them I don’t know what type of gas it was, killing them and taking them to the other camp, where they burnt them...”¹¹

A third way in which the Nazis utilized poison gas was in barracks 16 and 31 at Gusen. On 2 March 1942, 164 Soviet prisoners, unable to work, were gassed with Zyklon-B inside Barracks 16. It is also likely that another 300 prisoners of various nationalities were given the same treatment that same day. The method was to send the prisoners into the barracks immediately after disinfection by operatives of the firm in charge. When the barracks was filled with Zyklon-B, it were sealed and the prisoners had no chance of survival. A similar method was used in the second documented case of gassing, at Gusen in April 1945. Ordered by the camp commander, SS-Hauptsturmführer Fritz Seidler, the massacre involved between 684 and 892 prisoners (including sick inmates and those unable to work).¹²

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⁵ The spelling of this name would change throughout the interrogation.

⁶ Witness statement at Nuremberg by Albert Tiefenbacher, during the trial of the major war criminals by the International Military Tribunal, 1945-6, vol. XXXIII, document PS-3845, Nuremberg, 1949, pp. 226-227

⁷ H. MARSALEK, *Le pratiche delle operazioni effettuate nel campo di concentramento di Mauthausen*, cit., p. 24

⁸ Deposition by Vincenz Nohel, in V. and L. PAPPALETERA, *La parola agli aguzzini*, Mursia, Milan, 1979, p. 148

⁹ H. MARSALEK, *Le pratiche delle operazioni effettuate nel campo di concentramento di Mauthausen*, cit., p. 26, drawing on data in P. S. CHOUMOFF, *Les exterminations par gas à Hartheim, Mauthausen et Gusen*, Seuil, Paris, 1988

¹⁰ Appendix in H. MARSALEK, *Le pratiche delle operazioni effettuate nel campo di concentramento di Mauthausen*, cit., pp. 35-41

¹¹ ARCHIVIO DELLA DEPORTAZIONE PIEMONTESE (now ADP), witness statement by Stefano Barbera, p. 15. Other witnesses made the same assumption in their recollections. “I saw the gas-trucks, which took them on the famous “walk” as we called it, and where they gassed them... a short journey in the truck” (ADP, statement by Giovanni Aliberti, p. 55). “that famous blue van always came to the central camp... without windows etc” (ADP, witness statement by Antonio Bellina, p. 6). See also E. FERGNANI, *Un uomo e tre numeri*, Speroni editore, Milan, 1945, pp. 128-129)

¹² H. MARSALEK, *Le pratiche delle operazioni effettuate nel campo di concentramento di Mauthausen*, cit., pp. 30-31

Started in the autumn of 1941 and probably complete by March 1942, the Mauthausen gas chamber was located in the cellar of the new hospital, near to the crematorium.¹³ Hans Marsalek describes its function and the extermination process thus: “this room, 3.7m long and 3.5 wide, partially covered with tiles, was disguised as if it was a shower, with 16 shower-heads. Central heating and lights were on a wall, above the tiles; in a corner of the ceiling was an electric ventilator and a glazed pipe about a metre long. In a part of the wall that was not visible, this tube had a large half-centimetre split in it, around 80cm long, and was connected with the gas storage point in the adjacent cell. The switches for the lights, water and the ventilation were all outside the gas chamber. A brick that had already been heated up was placed above a shovel, and carefully laid down at the bottom of the container. An SS man, wearing a gas-mask, placed the Zyklon-B on the brick, and the container would immediately be sealed and hermetically closed via two lateral screws. The warmth given off by the brick caused the rapid release of the gas.”¹⁴ Ziareis later maintained that the gas chamber had been built on the basis of arrangements made by SS-Gruppenführer Richard Glücks and under the command of the camp’s medical officer, SS Hauptsturmführer Eduard Krebsbach, who in turn denied all responsibility:¹⁵ “By order of commander Ziareis, chemist Dr Wasicky designed and installed a gas chamber. It was Wasicky who had charge of the gas that was used, and it was him who carried it to the gas chamber, and carried out the gassings”.¹⁶

The gas chamber could hold between 30 and 80 people,¹⁷ and each gassing lasted about 30 minutes. Overall, the process lasted about two to three hours for each group of victims (from transportation to the gas chamber, through undressing, the “medical examination”, murder in the chamber, and finally delivery of the bodies to the crematorium ovens). It is likely that the first to be murdered were 231 Soviet prisoners-of-war on 9 May 1942. The last group was murdered on 28 April 1945, comprising 33 Austrians, 5 Poles, 5 Croats and 1 Austrian of English nationality. In total, more than 4,000 people were killed.¹⁸ We should also not forget that another effort at massacring Mauthausen prisoners was dreamt up in the autumn of 1944: various parts of the ventilation system from the now-demolished gas chambers at Auschwitz were transported to Altais-Harteil, near Mauthausen, but this plan could not be carried out.

We have now reached the final and most dramatic part of the camp’s life, when the Italian prisoners suddenly came to know of the existence of the gas chamber: Ferruccio Maruffi remembers that “we knew that it existed, because we knew there was a gas chamber, and that there had perhaps been some mass executions, but like this, you know there were people in the camp who said unspeakable things, but that it existed, there were some people who said it did... but certainly it was not used much at Mauthausen... in that time, until the end of April, it definitely operated then, but whether it was used as it has been before, I cannot say”¹⁹ On the other hand, Bruno Simioli remembers: “we already knew it, we already knew. Immediately no, but... afterwards you knew because everyone else had told you.. the older ones, who were there”²⁰ There are even people, like Carlo Podestà, who remember that the gas chamber was used as a direct threat [by the Nazis]: “did we know! We knew! They told us. From time to time, they would say to us “You not working? Off you go to the gas chamber!” We could not but know. We knew”.²¹ The reasons for its existence may be diverse, but in the end, its purpose was clear to everyone. According to Francesco Albertin: “the gas chamber was reserved for those who could not work any more, those who ate but could not produce”.²² Enzo Comazzi recalls that the gas chamber was where “they sent the old, the ill and invalid women”.²³

For Italians, the gas chamber at Mauthausen represents above all the 1,200-1,400 people murdered in April 1945. The climate in the camp in those days is vividly brought to life by witness Piero Caleffi: “of what

¹³ On the Mauthausen crematorium, see J. PRESSAC, *Le macchine dello sterminio. Auschwitz 1941-1945*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1994

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 10

¹⁵ E. KOGON, H. LANGBEIN, A. RÜCHERL, *Les chambres à gaz secret d'État*, cit., p. 223

¹⁶ V. and L. PAPPALETTERA, *La parola agli aguzzini*, cit., p. 101

¹⁷ Although E. LE CHÊNE, *Mauthausen: The History of a Death Camp*, London, 1971, p. 84, suggests the chamber could hold 120 victims, cited in G. J. HORWITZ, *All'ombra della morte*, cit., p. 242

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 229

¹⁹ ADP, p. 41

²⁰ ADP, p. 24

²¹ ADP, p. 13

²² ADP, p. 6. See also Serafino Bianchi: “We knew about the gas chamber. We knew by the fact that... there was a queue for the shower and they went in and came out... of course, they didn't come out... then, there was that smell of, of, of, well we knew what it was” (p. 4).

²³ ADP, p. 45-46

happened, of what Mauthausen was in those dreadful April days, I have only retained memories of visions filled with faces that no longer retained their previous physiognomy, bodies that no longer had any spark of life, and the incredibly slow movements of the dying, events and words frozen in time without leaving me any other reality, before or since... In those days, it was no longer a personal tragedy, it was no longer a case of the death of human beings, because there was no more human life. The tragedy became collective, enormous, the tragedy of 40,000 creatures most of whom were murdered in camp 2, camp 3 and in the “Russian camp”, who clung onto life by a thread and by animal instinct, but who now were to be abandoned, in ever greater numbers, to decay before extinction.²⁴

At the start of the month, Gestapo offices in Graz, Vienna, Iglau, Brünn, St. Pölten and Linz sent some 1,200 prisoners to the central camp, where they would be murdered within the space of 24 hours.²⁵ On 20 April, while Hitler celebrated his birthday for the last time, at Mauthausen SS doctor Waldemar Walter requested the transfer of 3,000 seriously ill prisoners from the hospital block in Camp 3 to create space for other inmates, although in reality they were to be immediately gassed. The order was sabotaged by the clandestine organisation, in which Giuliano Pajetta played a central role:²⁶ “I managed to contact my father, because he had been sent from Gusen to Mauthausen, and he was in the hospital block ... the day that I met him and he was in another block, I was in block 2, and I don’t remember whether he was in block 8 perhaps, and we made an appointment to meet the next day... the following morning, they sent me to the camp to carry stones, deliver them to Camp 3, and place them on an external bed, where they were mending the road... and this was around 20 April, I heard, so I decided to see Pajetta to tell him that my father was there [in the hospital block]... I went to Pajetta and said “can you see if you can do something, my father is there in Camp 3” and we knew that they were waiting to go to the gas chamber.. my father was there, he escaped by pretending to be French... by this time the French had already been liberated and De Gaulle had contacted the International Red Cross in Geneva, he was interested in the French prisoners, and in fact outside the camp, there was the International Red Cross, who could not enter the camp, but were able to help the French prisoners, they gave them new clothes, got them out and then sent them home, they went back to France via Switzerland, and my father was removed from Camp 3 like many other Italians who passed themselves off as French, and they sent him down to the sickbay...”²⁷ Many people were saved by individual acts: in conversation with Bruno Vasari and Ada Buffulini, Giuseppe Calore recalled that “I spoke to you earlier about Carrara and then Tino Ceriana who was very young, less than 20 years old, and I snatched him, I don’t know on what excuse, nearly throwing him amongst the legs of the SS officers who flanked the column, and I pulled him out. Then I tried to convince an old man, an engineer from Breda who had been captured, I tried to convince him not to be persuaded [by the Germans] that this was freedom, (which did not square with anything to me), that he should not go, he should hide himself and not go”.²⁸

Despite all these efforts, and aside from the large number of prisoners who were saved from certain death, all told around 1,500 ill prisoners were transferred, and 650 of these were gassed between 22 and 25 April. On 29 April, the equipment in the gas chamber was dismantled and the area disguised as a bathroom.²⁹ The prisoners forced to “work” in the crematorium and the gas chamber were shot, but a few managed to hide and so save themselves. As Terenzio Magliano remembers: “The gas chamber was a very ordinary room, without windows, with a sealed door. When I saw it, the Germans had taken away equipment and materials, so as not to leave any trace of their criminal behaviour, but you could still see perfectly well where the cylinders had been kept and where the pipe-work came out.”³⁰

There are many witnesses to these final days in the Mauthausen camp and the machinery of death represented by its gas chamber.

²⁴ P. CALEFFI, *Si fa presto a dire fame*, Mondadori, Milan, 1967, p. 207

²⁵ H. MARSALEK, *Gli ultimi giorni del campo di concentramento di Mauthausen-Gusen*, in E. VINCENTI (a cura di), *Gli ultimi giorni dei Lager*, Angeli, Milan, 1992, p. 155

²⁶ See G. PAJETTA, *Mauthausen*, Ed. Orazio Picardi, Milano, 1946, who suggests that nearly 200 Italians were murdered in the camp gas chamber in the last week of April (p. 28), a figure also offered by B. VASARI, *Mauthausen, bivacco della morte*, Giuntina, Florence, 1991, p. 49

²⁷ ADP, witness statement by Afro Zanni, p. 18

²⁸ A. BUFFULINI, B. VASARI, *Il Revier di Mauthausen. Conversazioni con Giuseppe Calore*, Dell’Orso, Alessandria, 1992, p. 37. An exemplary case is that of Nino Bonelli, as recounted by G. VALENZANO, *L’inferno di Mauthausen (come morirono 5000 italiani deportati)*, S.A.N., Torino, 1945, p. 95, and Gaetano De Martino in *ANED-SEZIONE DI MILANO, L’oblio è colpa*, Milan, 1954, pp. 6-7

²⁹ H. MARSALEK, *Gli ultimi giorni del campo di concentramento di Mauthausen-Gusen*, cit., p. 157

³⁰ T. MAGLIANO, *Mauthausen, cimitero senza croci*, Odip, Turin, 1963, p. 79

Serafino Bianchi: “from time to time, they would get a thousand, two thousand men from the barracks at the Russian camp... to take them to the gas chamber in the central camp... from there, I was called to queue up three times... and we were there inside, waiting from them to open the door, and on the other side, there it was, the gas chamber!”³¹

Alberto Todros: “In the final phase, they had nearly lost the war by now, but they were still resisted, the pocket [of Germans] inside Mauthausen resisted until 8 May, until the day of the armistice, no, they resisted... they started to eliminate the ill prisoners, in the sub-camp, the Russian camp, where the hospital block was, and I am one of the witnesses to what they did: they took them in groups of a 100, 150, took them up there, by now they were just shadows, they were no longer men because they had been in the hospital block so by now they are already finished, they took them up, they gassed them and burnt them... we saw them coming, at hourly intervals, prisoners who arrived from the hospital block, they took them inside to the gas chamber, gassed them, and then they burnt the bodies they could burn and took the rest to the mass graves”.³²

Bruno Vasari: “under a dismal spring sky, it was just before Easter in 1945, this miserable column of prisoners (with a blanket for each) came up towards the hill... they were being driven in a group from the main camp, and they stayed there for some days, and every day a group was selected to go to the showers before being transported somewhere else. Furnished with a towel, they went into the gas chamber. Finally, a mission from the French Red Cross arrived to free all the French prisoners and in this block which had been selected for the gas chamber there were French prisoners and they were also freed.”³³

Mino Micheli, whose recollections seem to have inspired Gino Gregori to produce a painting recreating the prisoners’ tragic journey to the gas chamber, remembers: “I ran to Vallardi, who spoke German, to try and get some accurate information. He told me he did not know anything, but he was evasive, and seemed very worried and upset to me. I was still talking to Vallardi, when a Venetian prisoner came running up to us, all excited, and wearing only a blanket to cover his nudity. He spoke very quickly, he was crying, asking for help, he wanted to be saved, he had learnt the truth that he was to be taken to Camp 3, the ante-chamber of death. He begged us to do something to help, he screamed out his right to exist and that of his family. I did not manage to calm him down in time or hide him when he was taken away from us and dragged into the group. Now he was quiet and trembled all over as if an electric current was making him vibrate, and like the others, he was looking at us in absolute terror. Around a hundred prisoners came out of each “block”. It seemed like an exodus from a city of the wretched. They walked with difficulty, trying to keep out the cold as best they could, some had a blanket around their shoulders, the rest naked, or with only a shirt or underpants. They gathered there out in the open. They were in their thousands, they were silent, most seemed stunned rather than numb, others were terribly absorbed and serious. Seeing them like that made me want to scream. But they were silent, because they did not have the words to describe their terror, or define the crime being committed.”³⁴

However, maybe the most poignant account is that of Sergio Coalova: “rebuilding the roadway near to the gas chamber, the gas chamber that Faurisson says never existed... we were watched by two SS guards, and every time a column of prisoners arrived for the gas chamber, the two guards kept their weapons between us and the column to prevent contact of any sort between us, it is a hallucinatory scene... this happened nearly every hour, 100 skeletons went through the entrance escorted by two SS guards, and they directed them towards us who... were busy with our work, they stopped for a moment while the door was opened, and then they were docile, unaware of the corridor that leads to the gas chamber, we on the other hand who knew what was waiting for them remained dismayed and terrified... terrified of the cynical cruelty of a bunch of criminals who did not hesitate to murder people and did it with a casualness that is really madness, now they open the doors, to make these poor individuals in the most sorry state disappear, men and young boys who weigh 30 kilos, skeletons wrapped up in a veil of flaccid skin, stunned faces staring into space, now stripped of all will, without making them even vaguely aware of what is happening, maybe tomorrow it will be our turn, and unlike these ill people, we have had the good luck to endure less cruel hardships and so today we

³¹ ADP, p. 4

³² ADP, pp. 21-22

³³ ADP, p. 1

³⁴ M. MICHELI, *I vivi e i morti*, Mondadori, Milan, 1967, pp. 158-159

get out of bed again because we are still able to work, meanwhile I am intent on sorting through the roadway from the lethal entrance, and while they are preparing another column of prisoners, an imploring voice calls out to me (having seen the symbol “IT” on my triangle) “Italian, Italian, where are they taking us? You know so tell me, I beg you to tell me where they are taking us?”, and I feel my heart sink in a moment of despair, how I could throw in the face of that poor young man who is unaware of the reality, of the tragic reality that awaits him, do I deceive him out of pity a few minutes before he dies, or do I find the courage to make him aware of the tragic reality? Meanwhile, he carries on saying “Italian, Italian, where are they taking us?”, a lump in my throat stops me from talking and a violent cry comes out...”³⁵

Translator’s note: footnotes in the text are the original Italian references by Bruno Maida, and hence refer to books and articles written in Italian, listed below.

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³⁵ ADP, pp. 16-17

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