

The castle at Hartheim

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After decades of use as a care-home (often for sick children), the castle at Hartheim was selected by the Nazis as one of six facilities for the “Euthanasia” murder programme. The nuns from the convent at Alkoven who had run the castle were expelled, and the structure was transformed into a key centre of a killing operation known by the code-name “Aktion-T4”, in which the mentally and physically disabled were murdered. It is known that under the direction of **Christian Wirth** (who later served at Belzec and the Risiera death camp at San Sabba in Trieste), 18,269 disabled people were killed at Hartheim between May 1940 and August 1941.

Alongside Wirth was also Franz Stangl, who would later go on to become commandant of the extermination camps at Sobibor and Treblinka. The patients murdered at Hartheim included people suffering from epilepsy, senile dementia and neurological problems, but also the criminally insane, elderly long-term care patients, war invalids, cripples, beggars, plus blind and deaf/mute people. All were killed, using poison gas or other horrendous methods. This extermination programme had been directly authorised by Hitler in a secret order to Third Reich doctors that would “**allow them... to offer a merciful death to ill people deemed incurable**”, the so-called *Ballast-Existenzen*, lives without value. From 1941 to 1945, an even more indiscriminate form of “euthanasia” was under way, with the elimination of thousands of people deemed incapable of working, killed by injections of luminal or similar, after being completely deprived of food.

Once the extermination of the mentally-ill had been completed, Hartheim became a centre for the annihilation of political prisoners. The staff were changed, but the familiar large buses with their painted-out windows (sourced from the Reich railway network) that transported patients to the sites of their deaths remained, as did the so-called “bone-mill” used to pulverise the ash of the victims’ bodies after incineration. The stocks of poison gas were replenished, contained in steel cannisters that were re-filled at a IG-Farben owned factory at Ludwingshafen. An abundant supply of carbon was also maintained for use in the crematorium, which started operating at Easter 1940. Obviously, the gas chambers remained fully functional.

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Transports to Hartheim

To maintain the secrecy of the programme, the death transports were given a code number: in April 1941, Himmler ordered the use of the code "**14f13**" for transports of the mentally-ill and weak. For the same reason, Hartheim was officially designated as "**a rest camp**", "**a cure camp**", "**the Dachau sanitorium**", along with other similarly innocuous and misleading terms.

The first transport to Hartheim comprised 70 Dutch Jews deported from Mauthausen on 11 August 1941. The following day, another 80 prisoners of various nationalities would follow. On 14 August, 45 prisoners arrived from Gusen. For 1941, it is possible to positively document the murders of 1,168 patients at Hartheim, but we can estimate (given the incomplete documentation remaining from Hartheim) that in fact the total number of deaths was 1,580. 1942 saw "the death trips" transport 3,075 prisoners to the castle's gas chamber, but data for 1943 is entirely missing. In 1944, transfers to Hartheim recommenced, including the last prisoners despatched from Mauthausen, who probably reached Hartheim on 10 February 1944, and were immediately gassed.

Every transport conducted using the large bus mentioned above was escorted by the SS. Once it arrived at the castle, it would park close to a concealed woodshed, located in the western section of the castle. Via a secondary entrance, the victims would then make their way to the "**courtyard of the arches**", and then into the changing rooms. Once undressed, they would enter the "**recovery rooms**" (where there is a commemorative plaque today): here some of the prisoners would have their picture taken (via a photographic apparatus specially set up for the purpose). Any prisoners with gold teeth or fillings would be marked, so that the precious metal could be recovered from their dead bodies later. Finally, the prisoners entered the gas chamber, a room that measured 6.6m by 4.2m.

Initially, its floor was made of wooden beams, but this was later concreted, and finally covered with red brick. The walls were tiled to a height of 1.70m, and a water-pipe with three shower taps came down from the ceiling. Along three walls and on the floor, there was a gas pipe with numerous small holes punched in it (measuring 15mm each): it was from this pipe that the poison gas would escape into the chamber, having been dispersed by a member of the SS from a cannister located in the next room. The bodies were then burnt in the crematorium, and once the resulting ash has been pulverised by the "bone-mill", it was dumped in the nearby rivers Danube and Traun.

Between 60 and 80 people were involved in the murders via gas. Every 10,000th body that was burnt was celebrated with a party, including extra rations of cigarettes and alcohol, and speeches, along with group trips to the **SS-Unterrufer** at Mauthausen, featuring music and food.

The victims

On 4 September 1945 in Linz, Vinzenz Nohel, who had stoked the crematorium at Hartheim, testified that roughly 30,000 people had been murdered there over the course of its operations. He was sentenced to death in 1945, and his execution was carried out at Landsberg.

From information gathered by Pierre Serge Choumoff, we can identify 8,066 Hartheim victims of the "**14f13**" programme, divided thus:

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------|
| transported from Dachau | 3,025 |
| transported from Mauthausen | 3,011 |
| transported from Gusen | 1,830 |

Prisoners from other camps were also transported to Hartheim: two transports of women prisoners were sent from Ravensbruck, according to the statement of witness Pereival Treite taken on 8 April 1947. 1,000 Soviet prisoners-of-war, sent from Buchenwald on 19 May 1942 to Mauthausen, never reached their destination: it is entirely reasonable to assume that they were instead gassed at Hartheim. It is likely that the same happened to 189 women from the Red Army medical corps, who were supposed to reach Auschwitz on 17 October 1943 but never arrived, and for 434 Jews deportees, including many children.

"Medical" control in the castle was under the direction of Linz doctor **Rudolf Lonauer**, a fanatical Nazi and SS member. Later, on 10 September 1943, he was replaced by Nazi doctor **Georg Renno**. All their assistants were dedicated Nazis, who gave their services free. Lonauer probably committed suicide on 5 May 1945, whereas Renno continued to practice medicine in post-war West Germany. When he was brought to justice in 1961, the trial was indefinitely suspended after Renno developed a range of timely illnesses; he retired (drawing a State pension), and lived out his days quietly, peacefully and entirely unrepentant until his death in 1997.

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Dismantling the machinery of death

At the end of November, an order issued in the name of the Fuhrer Chancellery led to the dismantling of the facilities at Hartheim. Between 12 and 19 December 1944, and again between 2 and 15 January 1945, a 20-strong workdetail (builders, carpenters and blacksmiths) was sent from Mauthausen to “cleanse it”: the gas chambers, the crematorium and the “bone-mill” were destroyed, along with anything else that could have revealed the horror of what happened at Hartheim. Spanish inmate Miguel Justo Compagné (Mauthausen prisoner number 3765) made records of his time in this workdetail, and sealed them in a bottle. This text, discovered when construction began after the war on a monument to the victims of Hartheim, indicates that on 18 December 1944, he sealed up the door that had led into the gas chamber.

In January 1945, the Nazis allowed some of the nuns initially expelled from Hartheim to return, entrusting them with the care of some ill children. The castle was returned to its Renaissance splendour, now lacking only a drainpipe that had been removed during the construction of the crematorium.

According to research conducted by Italo Tibaldi, survivor of Ebensee concentration camp and vice-president of the International Committee of Mauthausen Concentration Camp, no less than 303 Italian prisoners officially “died in the sanitorium”, i.e. were gassed and their corpses burnt at Hartheim. Ten of them had been born in Rome.

“Until September 1944, the blue bus was in service: it left the camp twice a week to take the sick and disabled to a “sanitorium”. 70 of them were loaded onto it at a time, but instead of taking them to a “sanitorium”, they took them to a specially-installed crematorium oven built in a castle about ten kilometres from the camp, on the road to Linz” (Giuliano Pajetta – Mauthausen prisoner, registration number 110352).