

Chelmno and the Holocaust

The History of Hitler's First Death Camp

Patrick Montague

I.B. TAURIS

Patrick Montague is an independent scholar. He was educated at Louisiana Tech University and Kansas University, where he specialised in Soviet and East European Studies. His research on the history of the Chełmno death camp was funded by a grant from the Fulbright Program. This book is the result of that and additional research conducted independently while living and working in Warsaw, Poland.

“Chełmno and the Holocaust is very well researched and presents in highly accessible form a significant amount of new material. Patrick Montague gives much attention to the Jewish victims of Chełmno, but also explores in greater depth the background, motives and behaviour of the SS men, their local ethnic German auxiliaries and, in particular, the group of Polish former prisoners who were deployed as helpers and who turned into collaborators. This is an important contribution to the history of the genocide against Europe’s Jews and also sheds important light on the mass murder of the disabled and Gypsies at the hands of the Third Reich. It will become the standard work on the killing site at Chełmno.”

**David Cesarani, Research Professor in History,
Royal Holloway, University of London**

“Through assiduous research into new sources Patrick Montague gives a chilling account of the Chełmno camp, from its unusual topography to its terrible death toll to its overall horror. He further reconstructs Nazi extermination policies in the Warthegau, the German-annexed territory which Chełmno was to serve, while analyzing the camp’s German personnel as well as the Poles and Jews who served in its nightmarish work detachments. In all, *Chełmno and the Holocaust* is an essential addition to Holocaust scholarship.”

**Norman J. W. Goda, Norman and Irma Braman,
Professor of Holocaust Studies, University of Florida**

“Chełmno is a subject that is relatively underrepresented in the growing literature in Holocaust studies in general and histories of the camps in particular. This book provides a very useful addition to the English language historiography and will be a valuable reference work for historians interested in knowing more about the evolution of the Chełmno camp. It is well written and packed with detail.”

**Tim Cole, Senior Lecturer in Social History,
Bristol University**

Chel̨mno
and the
Holocaust

The History of Hitler's
First Death Camp

Patrick Montague

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2012 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Copyright © 2012 Patrick Montague

The right of Patrick Montague to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or any part thereof, may not be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

International Library of Twentieth Century History Vol 39

ISBN: 978 1 84885 722 3

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset in Palatino by MPS Limited, a Macmillan Company
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

*This book is dedicated to all the men, women and children who
labored and who died in the Chelmno death camp;
may they never be forgotten.*

Contents

List of Illustrations	viii
List of Maps	xi
Acknowledgments	xii
Foreword	xiv
Introduction	1
1. Prologue	9
The Euthanasia Program	9
Mobile Killing Operations	14
The Turning Point	32
2. Extermination: The First Period (1941–1943)	49
Establishing the Camp	49
The Transports	62
The Mansion: Arrival, Murder, Plunder	76
The Forest Camp	91
Resumption of Transports	119
Escapes	127
First Liquidation of the Camp	141
3. Extermination: The Second Period (1944–1945)	149
Re-Establishing the Camp	149
A New Killing Procedure	157
Final Liquidation of the Camp	168
4. Epilogue	175
Chełmno: 1945 to the Present	175
The Number of Victims	183
Conclusion and Reflection	188
Appendices	197
Appendix I: The Gas Vans	199
Appendix II: The Kaszyński Affair	213
Appendix III: Fates of Key Figures	219
Notes	231
Bibliography	257
Index	269

List of Illustrations

1. General view of Chełmno from the south. The mansion is visible to the left of the church (pre-1943). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 47407*
2. Chełmno local government. Seated from left: Andrzej Miszczak (2nd), Stanisław Biskupski (3rd - senior official), Stanisław Kaszyński (5th). Standing from left: Czesław Potyrański (3rd), Konrad Schulz (7th), Franciszek Opas (8th), Leopold Chwiałkowski (11th) (Jan 1939). *Zdzisław Lorek*
3. Back of the mansion; Ludwig and Hanna Koziej at top of stairs. The granary building is visible in the background (1939). *Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak*
4. Chełmno church and Ludwicki home; the mansion is located to the left of photo (ca. 1940). *FORUM Polskiej Agencji Fotografów*
5. Local government office. Lange, and later Bothmann, lived in this building (1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 11294*
6. The church rectory was used by the Sonderkommando as its administrative office. Valuables taken from the victims were stored here (1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 11289*
7. Building of the volunteer fire department referred to as the German House during the war. Policemen were quartered in this building (1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 11292*
8. The Banaszewski's house was requisitioned by the Sonderkommando and used as a canteen. The building was located across the street from the German House and the entrance to the mansion grounds (1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 11230*
9. Herbert Lange *Berlin Document Center*
10. Hans Bothmann *Berlin Document Center*
11. Herbert Otto *Bundesarchiv*
12. Albert Plate *Berlin Document Center*
13. Walter Piller *Berlin Document Center*
14. Herbert Hiecke-Richter *Berlin Document Center*
15. Walter Burmeister *Berlin Document Center*
16. Erwin Bürstinger *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 47421*
17. Gustav Laabs *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 47422*
18. Johannes Runge *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 47423*
19. Erich Kretschmer *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej 47424*
20. Wilhelm Görlich *Berlin Document Center*
21. Fritz Ismer *Berlin Document Center*
22. Alois Häfele *Berlin Document Center*

23. Ernst Burmeister *Yad Vashem* 4577_605
24. Arthur Greiser *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 05019
25. Wilhelm Koppe *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 58846
26. Hans Biebow *Yad Vashem* 36EO9
27. Policemen and Polish workers drinking beer in front of the mansion. Seated from left: Henryk Mania (1st), Policeman Friedrich Maderholz (3rd), Sergeant of the Guard Otto Böge (7th) (1942–43). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 50378
28. Poles employed in Chełmno. From left: Henryk Mania, Stanisław Polubiński, Lech Jaskólski, Kajetan Skrzypczyński, Henryk Maliczak (1942–43). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 47430
29. Passenger train from Łódź ghetto arrives at Koło station (1942). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 50377
30. Victims transferring to narrow-gauge train (1942). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 00498
31. Victims loaded and waiting for departure to Powiercie (1942). *Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*
32. Close-up of victims in narrow-gauge freight wagon (1942). *Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*
33. Victims arriving at Powiercie (1942). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 00499
34. Transfer of belongings to trucks for transport from Powiercie to Chełmno (1942). *Zdzisław Lorek*
35. View of the mansion grounds from the Koło-Dąbie highway (Oct 1945). *Yad Vashem* 4063_7
36. The granary building housed the Jewish laborers and craftsmen during the second period of the camp's operation (Feb 1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 50380
37. Interior of the granary building (Feb 1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 50381
38. Remains of the last Jewish workers and two Sonderkommando members killed during the final liquidation of the camp (Feb 1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 50385
39. Remnants of the crematoria (May 1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 50390
40. Rails used in the construction of the crematoria (May 1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 50391
41. Remnants of the main guard house (May 1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 11253
42. Remnants of unidentified structures on the edge of the main clearing (May 1945). *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* 11296
43. Abram Rój (1946). *Sara Roy*
44. Szlama Winer (1942). *Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*
45. Michał Podchlebnik (1945). *Art Gallery of Ontario*

46. Yerachmiel Widawski (1946). *Henech Widawski*
47. Szymon Srebrnik (1961). *Government Press Office D409-018*
48. Mieczysław Żurawski (1961). *Government Press Office*
49. Death camp survivors at the Chełmno trial in Bonn, West Germany. Seated from left: Mieczysław Żurawski, Michał Podchlebnik, Max Podchlebnik (relative from US), Szymon Srebrnik (Jan 1963). *Yad Vashem 7452_12*
50. Monument under construction (Jul 1964). *Zdzisław Lorek*
51. Monument completed: *Pamiętamy - We Remember* (1987). *Patrick Montague*

List of Maps

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. Map 1. Reichsgau Wartheland | xvi |
| 2. Map 2. Chełmno and Environs | xvii |
| 3. Map 3. Chełmno Village and Mansion Grounds | xviii |
| 4. Map 4. Forest Camp | xix |

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of a project that eventually stretched over a 20 year period. So many people intersected with this work over the years that it is truly impossible to name them all. A sincere thank you seems less than adequate. Others who cannot go unnamed and whom I want to acknowledge and thank here are as follows:

The University of Kansas and specifically Professor Anna Cienciala for her professionalism, wisdom and encouragement. The Fulbright Program for acknowledging the importance of pursuing this topic and its generous support. The staffs of all of the institutions and archives cited within the pages of this book. I was always treated professionally and courteously. I am especially grateful to the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Warsaw and Poznań (Agata Gut), the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (Ruta Sakowska, Jan Jagielski), the Central Office of the State Justice Administration for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in Ludwigsburg (Willi Dressen) as well as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (Benton Arnovitz).

Anna Wiszniewska for her generosity in unselfishly devoting her time to the laborious task of assisting in the translation and verification of numerous documents. Przemysław Nowicki for his knowledge of local Polish history and pointing me in directions I wouldn't have gone without his assistance. Łucja Pawlicka-Nowak and Zdzisław Lorek from the Chełmno branch of the District Museum in Konin, Poland, for their professional and personal devotion to the topic of this book and willingness to share their knowledge of the intricacies of the camp. Christopher Browning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for agreeing to read and share his thoughts on the manuscript and for his encouragement to see the project through to its completion. Naphtali Lau-Lavie for sharing his recollections of the war and his personal knowledge and involvement in saving the lives of two men who desperately needed a friend. Szymon and Hava Srebrnik for their gracious hospitality, remarkable patience and fortitude while recounting horrific events. The Widawski family in Belgium and Israel for responding so openly to a stranger with so many personal questions. Sara Roy for sharing so much of her time and family history, for her encouragement and belief in the value of this project and for her efforts in ensuring the results of my endeavor will be available to future generations.

While many individuals contributed in various ways to this book, I bear sole responsibility for any shortcomings and deficiencies that remain within these pages.

Patrick Montague

Foreword

The small Polish village of Chełmno was the site of the first Nazi death camp, which unlike the larger and better known death camps that followed—Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek—used mobile gas vans rather than stationary gas chambers. What has been known about the Chełmno camp until now in mainstream Western and Israeli Holocaust scholarship stems mostly from the investigation and trial of 12 defendants in Bonn in 1962–63. Invaluable as that investigation and trial were as a source of historical knowledge by virtue of the numerous judicial interrogations and interviews that it produced and preserved, its main purpose was to provide evidence and reach judgment concerning the actions of specific defendants, not to write a comprehensive history of the camp. But for historians without knowledge of the Polish language or access to Polish archives at the height of the Cold War, the trial records were the best source with which they had to work. What we now know, thanks to the meticulous and exhaustive research conducted by Patrick Montague, is that great quantities of vital evidence concerning Chełmno were also stored in Polish archives but had never been sufficiently accessed, examined and incorporated into Holocaust scholarship. The full incorporation of this vital evidence from Polish archives into our historical knowledge of the Chełmno death camp is one of the major achievements of Patrick Montague's book.

Equally important, Patrick Montague has written a book that allows the reader to hear the multiple voices of witnesses who experienced the camp in one way or another. In addition to the chilling testimonies of perpetrators taken for postwar trials, the reader encounters the vivid accounts of others: Heinz May, the German forester who supervised the land that became the site of the death camp's mass graves and crematoria; various Polish villagers, as well as Henryk Mania and Henryk Maliczak, Polish prisoners of the Germans who temporarily ascended to a position of privileged collaborators at Chełmno before descending to the position of victim prisoners at Mauthausen; and above all the harrowing accounts of four escapees, Szlama Winer, Mordechai Żurawski, Michał Podchlebnik and Szymon Srebrnik—the latter two now known to those who have seen Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*.

Historical scholarship is a collective endeavor that builds on past achievements and grows as each historian adds his or her own contribution

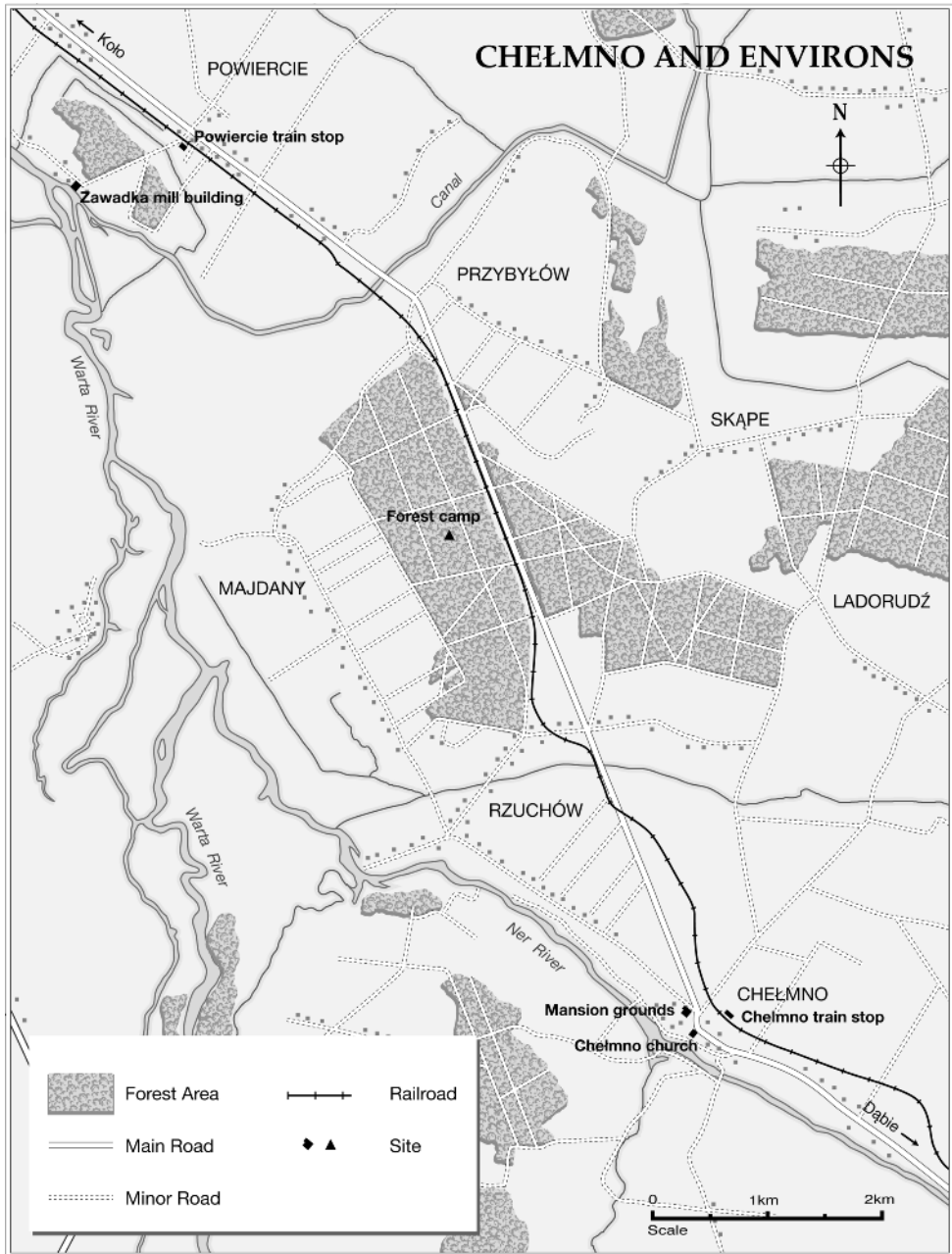
to the pool of knowledge. Thanks to Patrick Montague, what we now know about the Chełmno death camp is significantly greater than before.

Christopher R. Browning

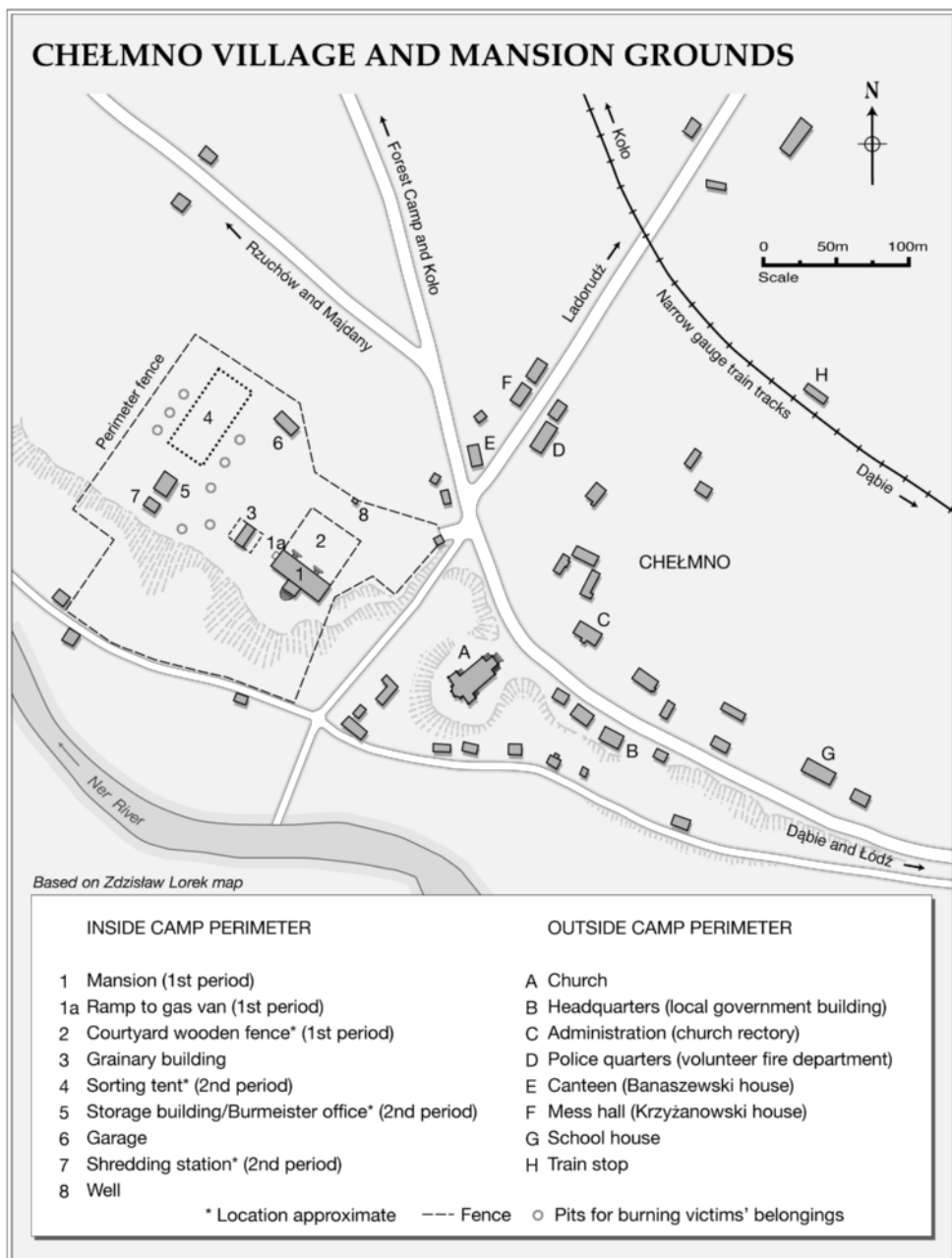
*Frank Porter Graham Professor of History
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*



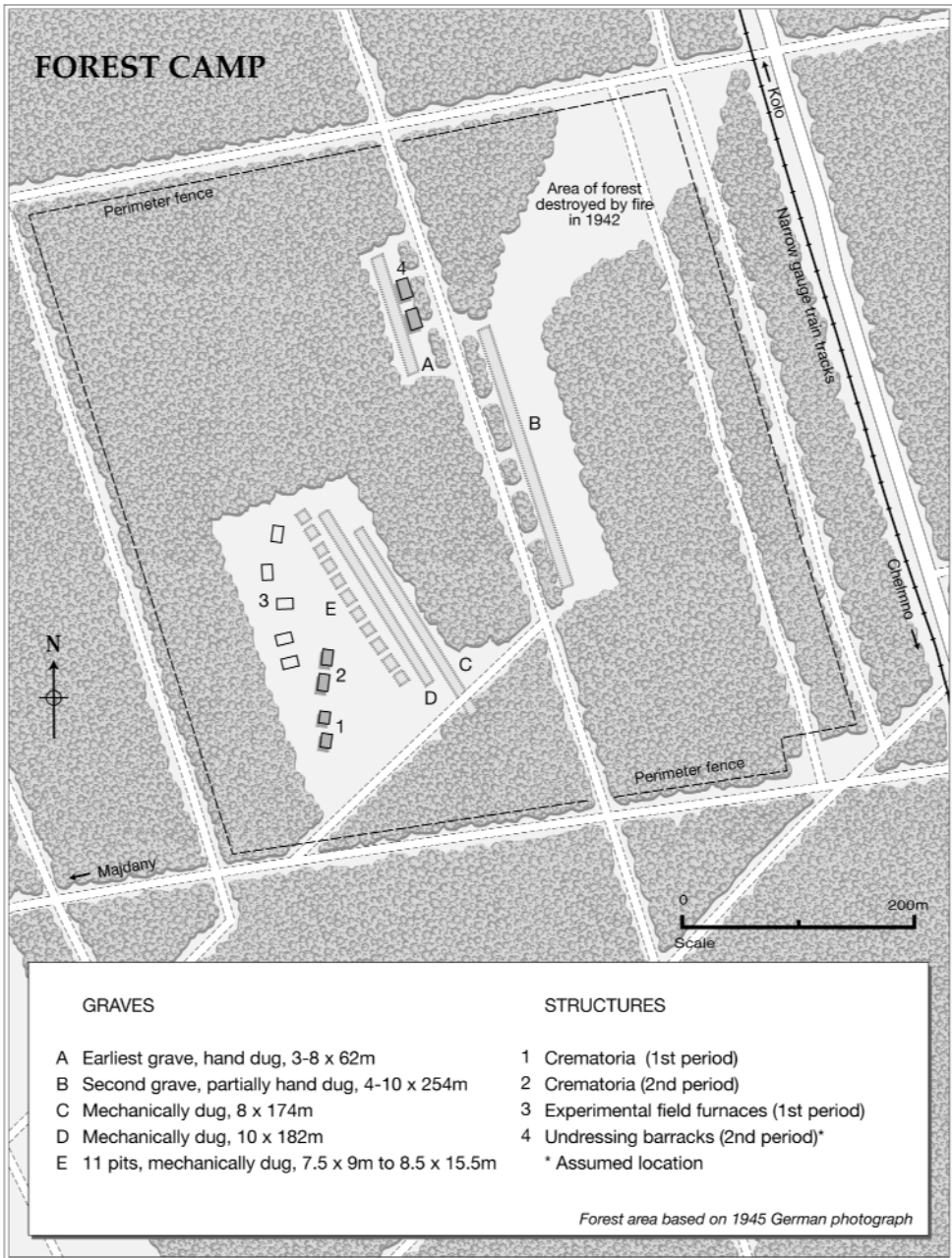
Map 1. Reichsgau Wartheland



Map 2. Chełmno and Environs



Map 3. Chełmno Village and Mansion Grounds



Map 4. Forest Camp

Introduction

The literature on the extermination of the Jews during the Second World War is vast. It is common knowledge that millions of people perished in the Holocaust, yet research concerning the extermination centers, where many of the victims actually died, is limited at best. The purpose of the present work is to fill this major gap in knowledge with respect to one of these camps. While the literature is extensive regarding the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex, it is extremely limited with respect to the four sole-purpose extermination centers of Treblinka, Sobibór, Bełżec and Chełmno.¹ Of these, Chełmno—the first extermination center established by the National Socialist regime—and its unique history, which served as the bureaucratic catalyst and operational prototype for the other camps and what ultimately has become known as the Final Solution, remains a relative enigma. The purpose of this work is to shed light on this little known but crucial chapter of the Holocaust and to clarify lingering misconceptions that surround the history of the camp. Chełmno broke a psychological barrier by actually establishing an extermination camp and provided a structural template on which the other camps could build.

The literature on the Chełmno camp is meager. During the postwar period, the primary sources of information on Chełmno were two books, both published in Polish. The first of these works, *Obóz Straceń w Chełmnie nad Nerem* [The Death Camp in Chełmno-on-Ner] by Judge Władysław Bednarz,² outlined the results of the Polish government's postwar investigation of the camp which was conducted by the author of the work. The second book, *Obóz zagłady w Chełmnie nad Nerem* [The Extermination Camp in Chełmno-on-Ner] by Professor Edward Serwański,³ appeared in the mid-1960s after the trial in Bonn, West Germany, of 12 former members of the camp staff, but offered little new in substantive terms to the subject. Furthermore, a synopsis of the Bednarz investigation, translated into English and published in 1947, was included in the first volume of the *Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland*. While the print run and distribution of this volume were limited, the journal article became a key source for the English-language reader.

It was not until the mid-1980s that the District Museum in Konin, Poland, began conducting archeological work and publishing information devoted to the Chełmno death camp. During the past two decades three additional books were published, one in Polish by Janusz Gulczyński,

*Obóz Śmierci w Chełmnie nad Nerem*⁴ [The Death Camp in Chełmno-on-Ner], and two in German; the first by Manfred Struck, *Chełmno/Kulmhof, Ein Vergessener Ort des Holocaust?*⁵ [Chełmno/Kulmhof, A Forgotten Place of the Holocaust?] and the second by Shmuel Krakowski, *Das Todeslager Chełmno/Kulmhof, Der Beginn der Endlösung*⁶ [The Chełmno/Kulmhof Death Camp, The Beginning of the Final Solution]. However, these three works present merely a broad overview of the subject, far from a comprehensive history of the camp. The main contribution of these books is raising awareness of the camp for readers of the language in which the works were written.

There are several reasons for the dearth of published research on the Chełmno death camp. First, the camp was systematically liquidated over a period of some four months prior to the arrival of the Red Army in January 1945, leaving little physical evidence behind to investigate. Second, of the more than 150,000 people murdered at Chełmno⁷ only six of the camp's prisoners survived the war and, of these six men, only three were located for questioning immediately after the war. Other contributing factors include the absence of the camp's records and other relevant Nazi documents. While postwar trials of individual members of the camp staff (Bruno Israel, Walter Piller, Herman Gielow) were held in Poland soon after the war, the material contained within the court records has been largely ignored by researchers. In addition, although camp personnel took numerous photographs of Chełmno's operations, these photographs tragically remain lost to history and therefore the substantive content (documentation) of the photographs as well as the impact of the visual image are also lost.

Given the scarcity of known resources, the Chełmno camp has consistently presented the researcher with a formidable challenge. The two main types of information needed to assemble a history of the Chełmno death camp are eyewitness testimonies and documents. With respect to eyewitnesses, the Chełmno camp provides three different types, the camp staff, the Jewish prisoners forced to labor in the camp and the residents of the village and surrounding area, referred to respectively as the perpetrators, victims and bystanders. The Germans who served as members of the camp staff, and in the case of Chełmno the Poles who served as laborers, would be an excellent source of information; after all, they were the ones who carried out the extermination. Their testimonies are in fact very useful as they do provide a substantial quantity of information. However, these testimonies are for the most part lacking, as they were given primarily in connection with pre-trial investigations and therefore information is rarely volunteered. Testimonies given in this type of situation tend to be self-incriminating and so responses to questions are bereft of the kind of detail so valuable to the researcher.

The Jewish victims are the second type of eyewitness in Chełmno. Unfortunately, of the thousands of people sent to the camp, only seven men successfully escaped and, of these seven, only six survived the war. Amazingly, these six key witnesses were never properly questioned, particularly just after the war when the events they had experienced were still fresh in their minds. Many questions remain unanswered in spite of the testimony given by three of the Jewish survivors to Polish authorities and their testimony given in connection with the Bonn trial.

As eyewitnesses to the daily events happening around the camp, the local residents are the source of a significant amount of valuable information. However, the scope of this information is limited as they did not have direct access to the camp or the extermination procedure. Nor were they privy to the decision-making process of the camp staff. Most of the local villagers were simple peasant families who tried to go about their lives with as little interaction with the soldiers as possible. Many were generally afraid of these officials, particularly the SS officials. This is understandable. Therefore, the researcher is often left with a single testimony or statement upon which to reconstruct a particular event, or indeed to patch together an entire history.

There are few documents relating directly to Chełmno. The camp's own records, the most important primary source, have not been found and according to at least one account were destroyed at the end of the war. Despite the issues mentioned above, there are three key primary sources for any serious examination of Chełmno. The first is the Polish government's investigation of the Chełmno extermination camp conducted immediately after the war in 1945. Colloquially referred to as the Bednarz investigation, this crucial work is currently housed in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw, Poland. The investigation includes, among other findings, invaluable testimonies by three of the camp's survivors as well as by local villagers who were employed in the camp as cooks and cleaners, and others who witnessed the killing process as it occurred outside their homes. Much of the information contained in these testimonies is published here for the first time. The second key source is the prosecutor's pre-trial inquiry into the activities of the former camp staff conducted in Germany during the late 1950s and early 1960s. These materials, located at the Federal Archives in Ludwigsburg, Germany, include testimonies from individuals who worked in the camp, collected as part of an effort to bring criminal charges against camp officials. The third indispensable source of information is the uniquely detailed testimony of Szlama Winer, the second person to escape from Chełmno. After fleeing the camp in January 1942, Winer made his way to the Warsaw ghetto and filed an extensive report on the time he spent in the camp. Winer died a few months later in the extermination camp at Bełżec, but his testimony

miraculously survived the war and is part of the Ringelblum Archive, currently housed in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland. Winer's testimony stands alone, providing an incredibly in-depth eyewitness account of the camp's operations as seen through the eyes of a Jewish prisoner. Winer's report is reproduced in this volume in its entirety. Collectively, these testimonies by camp staff (perpetrators), local villagers (bystanders) and Jewish prisoners (victims) provide critical insight into the extermination process by some of those who witnessed and participated in it. Without these three sources no meaningful history of the Chełmno death camp can be written.

Three other important sources that provide a fuller understanding of Chełmno are the postwar testimonies of two key figures, Henryk Mania and Henryk Maliczak, prisoners who worked for Hauptsturmführer Herbert Lange's Sonderkommando during both the mobile killing operations conducted as part of the Euthanasia Program and the later stationary extermination program of the Chełmno period. These testimonies have not been previously cited in the literature. The interviews of these men, conducted in the 1960s, provide a greater understanding of the mobile and static operations, critically tie the two periods together and are vital as they offer the only eyewitness testimony to the events leading up to and including the mass murder perpetrated inside the Chełmno camp. Additional facts, also absent from the literature, are contained in the records of the pre-trial investigation of Henryk Mania, who in 2001 was convicted of complicity in genocide for his activities in Chełmno. The third source originates from a chapter of the postwar memoir of Heinz May, the German government official in charge of the forest where the camp's victims—first gassed to death in vans—were initially buried and their bodies later exhumed and burned. This document provides invaluable information concerning the camp's early and later operations from one of a handful of individuals with direct access to those operations.

Secondary sources include both general and specialized works (academic and scholarly studies, research projects, personal memoirs as well as a work of fiction based on a meeting with a survivor of Chełmno) in English, Polish and German on the Second World War in general and the Holocaust in particular. Primary and secondary sources are quoted extensively throughout the text, thereby allowing the participants in these horrible events to speak directly. The importance of the testimonies by the eyewitnesses—victims, perpetrators and bystanders—cannot be overemphasized. Their words form the backbone of the camp's history. They must be allowed to speak for themselves.

Of course a critical eye is required with respect to these firsthand accounts. Is the testimony of a traumatized survivor accurate? Is the testimony authentic? What about the perpetrators and the content of their

testimonies? They certainly have reason to deflect and minimize their own participation, yet they do not deny their employment in the death camp; the camp existed and they witnessed the murders (if not participated in them). Even the bystanders are not necessarily neutral observers. To one degree or another each category of eyewitness is prejudiced. Complete accuracy in these testimonies should not be expected, even discounting intentional distortions particularly originating from perpetrators. While individual "facts" may vary from witness to witness, what emerges from the universe of testimonies cannot be denied: No less than 152,000 people were murdered in Chełmno, despite the efforts of the killers to cover up the crime.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned difficulties, a history of the camp does emerge from the documentary evidence that has survived. The history of the Chełmno death camp is the story of how a portion of the population residing in today's western Poland, and others deported to it, were murdered in a cold-blooded, calculated and deceptive manner as a matter of government policy. Broader issues surrounding Chełmno, such as government policy toward the Jews of occupied Poland in general and the history of the Łódź ghetto in particular, which provided so many of the camp's victims, are well covered in the literature and are therefore kept to a minimum in this work. However, for purposes of context, some attention is focused on the Euthanasia Program and the activities of Sonderkommando Lange, critical events leading to the establishment of the death camp.

The Chełmno death camp was unique in several respects, the first of which is the fact that no death camp by this name ever officially existed. Chełmno is the Polish name of the village where the camp was established. The German civil administration changed the name of this village in 1940 to Kulmhof, prior to the establishment of the camp. The villages of Treblinka, Sobibór and Bełżec were not renamed and therefore no issue exists regarding the names of the death camps established in these villages. Moreover, historical accuracy has been maintained in the case of Auschwitz, the German name of the town of Oświęcim. Poles, if no one else, would certainly be outraged if the Auschwitz camp was referred to as the Oświęcim camp. However, the term "Chełmno death camp" has raised few objections, from either the Polish community or Holocaust scholars. This situation may originate from the aforementioned English-language translation and publication of the first volume of the *Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland* in 1947, in which the name "Chełmno" was used, usually in regard to the location of the extermination camp, but not exclusively. This article was a primary source of information about the camp for the English-speaking reader. Whatever the reason for this inaccuracy in name, the Kulmhof death

camp is generally known and referred to in English as the “Chełmno death camp” and, while not historically accurate, the term is used throughout this work.⁸

The Chełmno camp is also unique in that it was the first camp established by the Nazi regime for the sole purpose of committing mass murder. The camp began operating before the infamous Wannsee Conference during which the organization and implementation of the Final Solution of the Jewish Question was discussed. Chełmno was also the only extermination camp liquidated and later reactivated. Its use of gas vans as opposed to static gas chambers, even after the other extermination camps had proven the efficacy of the chambers, was another unique feature of the camp. The other single purpose killing centers—the Operation Reinhard [Aktion Reinard] camps of Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibór—were located to the east of Chełmno in the General Government [Generalgouvernement] and were administered collectively. Chełmno was located in the newly created Warthegau, a portion of western Poland that was incorporated into the German Reich and fell under an administrative bureaucracy completely separate from the Aktion Reinhard camps.

The use of gas to kill thousands of people in the Wartheland occurred in two stages. The first was within the framework of the so-called Euthanasia Program, which largely involved the gassing of mentally and physically disabled patients in psychiatric hospitals and other facilities. This operation was mobile in nature and did not specifically target Jews; the criterion for selection was a supposed mental or physical deficiency. The second stage, implemented based on the experience gained from the first stage, involved establishing a stationary facility to which the victims were transported for the sole purpose of gassing them. These victims, primarily Jews and to a lesser degree Roma, were selected on the basis of a supposed “racial deficiency.” The static facility, the first of its kind, was the Chełmno extermination center.

Chełmno served as the template for establishing the subsequent killing centers but, in comparison, the prototype was primitive but effective. The camp lacked elements commonly associated with concentration or extermination camps. The characteristic barbed wire fencing, rows of barracks and guard towers were not present in Chełmno. Other than purpose, logistics was the thread common to the later Aktion Reinhard camps. The locations were isolated yet accessible. Due to the large number of targeted victims, rail lines were key. Once at the camps, victims were deceptively put at ease. People in the transports arriving at Treblinka believed they were at a normal train station. Many remained ignorant even during the processing stage, when heads were shaved (a step absent at Chełmno) and clothing removed. By the time victims stood before a gas van or gas chamber, it was too late; their fate was sealed. Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibór

were built on these fundamentals. They were also built, literally, from the ground up (while Chełmno utilized pre-existing structures) and so were specifically constructed to meet the requirements of an extermination center. Rail lines were brought directly into the camps. Workshops for various purposes were constructed, as were storage facilities. (Treblinka even had a small zoo.) Gas chambers were constructed and located a short walk from the reception area and the sector for body disposal placed next to the gassing facilities. At Chełmno, a drive of four kilometers, one way, was required to dispose of the bodies. Chełmno was established on the authority of Arthur Greiser, the Provincial Governor, to solve a "local problem," while the Aktion Reinhard camps were instituted by Adolf Hitler to solve a "European problem." Chełmno, with its limited killing capacity, was adequate to achieve its initial objective of murdering 100,000 people. The Aktion Reinhard camps adopted the model and "improved" on it in order to meet their much more ambitious goal of murdering millions of people.

The road to Chełmno was a long one and part of a complex process that began even before 1925, when Adolf Hitler set his twisted philosophy to paper in his book *Mein Kampf*. Just one year after the First World War, Hitler wrote that the Jews were the cause of "racial tuberculosis among nations" and the "final aim" of this problem must be the "removal of the Jews altogether."⁹ Milestones along this road include Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933, the takeover of government institutions and indoctrination of the German public, the establishment of concentration camps, adoption of the Nuremberg Laws, forced sterilization, "mercy killing," the outbreak of the Second World War, the grisly work of the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union and, of course, the progressively restrictive measures taken against the Jewish population as a whole.

In order to understand how this progression brought a small detachment of SS men to a pastoral village in rural Poland to launch a campaign of mass murder, it is vital to take a step back to before the outbreak of the Second World War. The covertly conducted Euthanasia Program and its expansion into the newly incorporated territory of the Warthegau leads to the very doorstep of Chełmno. By September 1941, all of the elements had come together, making the great leap from concentration camp to extermination camp in fact only a small step.

CHAPTER 1

Prologue

The Euthanasia Program

“Euthanasia” is a word derived from the Greek language meaning “helping to die.” The modern concept of “physician-assisted suicide” has nothing in common with what has become known as the Euthanasia Program conducted by the National Socialist regime. This program was based on racial theory and eugenics. The health of the victim was secondary or played no role at all. Neither the patient nor the family had any say in the process and, in fact, were completely unaware of what was happening.

Euthanasia remains a controversial subject today, as it was when it was debated during the Weimar Republic. This debate, part of psychiatric reform in general, was an element of a much larger discussion of the welfare state and the lack of financial resources to maintain the system during the ongoing economic depression. At the core of this dialogue was the concept of the collective versus the individual. When the National Socialists came to power in Germany in January 1933, the debate was over. The first legal step toward involuntary euthanasia was the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases, signed in July 1933. This law mandated the compulsory sterilization of the disabled. The Marriage Health Law followed the next year, which prohibited a marriage if either of the partners suffered from a disability covered by the sterilization law. More laws followed. As a result of these laws, between 1934 and 1945, some 400,000 people were subjected to the procedures, tubal ligation, and later the use of radium and X rays for females and vasectomy for males.¹ Cases for sterilization were brought before a panel of experts for deliberation, a perfunctory point as the patients were considered defective.

As part of the overall propaganda campaign of indoctrinating the population to the ideals of National Socialism, the German government immediately launched a campaign aimed at convincing the population of the “benefits” of euthanasia. However, Hitler believed it more practical not to implement a euthanasia policy during peacetime, fearing negative public reaction. He also believed that in time of war (which he was planning in the second half of the 1930s) “when the attention of the entire world is turned on military operations and when the value of human life in any

case counts for less, it would be easier to free the people from the burden of the mentally ill."²

In May 1939, Hitler ordered bureaucrats within his Chancellery of the Führer [Kanzlei des Führers, KdF] to establish an organization, the Reich Committee for the Scientific Registering of Severe Hereditary and Congenital Diseases, to oversee a program of providing "mercy deaths" for children. Midwives and physicians were required to register children born with deformities. Candidates for the program were vetted by a panel of experts. These children were sent to so-called special child groups and killed either by administering a lethal injection or by starvation. Dr. Hermann Pfannmüller, the director of one such institution where children were euthanized, preferred the method of slow starvation. One visitor recalled that during a tour of the facility in late 1939, Dr. Pfannmüller picked up one of the children from its bed and

[...] exhibited the child like a dead rabbit, he asserted with a knowing expression and a cynical grin: For this one it will take two to three more days. The picture of this fat grinning man, in his fleshy hands the whimpering skeleton, surrounded by other starving children, is still vivid in my mind. [...] Asked] whether a quicker death with injections, etc., would not at least be more merciful, [the doctor] then praised his methods again as more practical in view of the foreign press. [...] Pfannmüller also did not hide the fact that among the children to be murdered ... were also children who were not mentally ill, namely children of Jewish parents.³

Some 6,000 children perished in the so-called children's euthanasia program, which continued throughout the war despite Hitler issuing a halt order in August 1941.

In the summer of 1939, Hitler ordered Reichleiter Philipp Bouhler of the Führer's Chancellery and Professor Karl Brandt, an inner-circle physician, both of whom were already overseeing the children's Euthanasia Program, to establish the bureaucratic structures necessary to carry out a clandestine adult euthanasia program as hospital beds and medical personnel would soon be required for the war effort. Physicians were selected, meetings were held and plans drawn up. Hitler received periodic briefings and, in October 1939, put his official seal of approval on the program by signing a document, backdated to September 1, 1939 (the outbreak of the war).

Reichleiter Bouhler and the physician Dr. Brandt are charged with the responsibility of extending the authority of certain physicians, to be designated by name. These latter will be able to grant a mercy death to patients considered incurable according to the best of human judgment.

Adolf Hitler⁴

This was not a public document and it was not published while Hitler was in power. Hitler issued the order, or authorization, which was illegal under existing German law, as the head of the Nazi party, on his personal

stationary of the Chancellery of the Führer, and not as the Chancellor of Germany. The purpose of the document was to provide the program with an air of legitimacy in persuading physicians to participate in it. Karl Brandt and Philipp Bouhler assigned Viktor Brack, the head of the Chancellery's Department II, State and Party Affairs, to administer the program, whose staff eventually occupied a building rented by the Führer's Chancellery located in Berlin at 4 Tiergartenstrasse from which the program took its code name, Operation T4 [Aktion T4]. Each person brought into the program was told the nature of the operation, asked if they agreed to participate (no one was forced) and, if so, was subsequently sworn to secrecy. By the outbreak of the war in 1939, Hitler had the bureaucracy in place to begin secretly murdering the mentally ill.⁵

A total of six euthanasia centers were established: Grafeneck in Württemberg, Brandenburg near Berlin, Hartheim near Linz in Austria, Sonnenstein in Pirna, Saxony, Bernburg in Saxony, and Hadamar in Hesse. Each facility was equipped with a gas chamber. In mid-1940, a Stuttgart police official, Christian Wirth, was appointed head of administration at the Hartheim facility. Wirth has been described as a gross, crude and florid individual. In regard to the necessity of conducting the Euthanasia Program, Wirth spoke of "doing away with useless mouths" and said that "sentimental slobber" about such people made him "puke."⁶

Grafeneck Castle, a hospice for invalids, was taken over by T4 personnel in October 1939, and designated Facility A. Operations began the following month. The geographical area of responsibility of this center covered Austria and even south into northern Italy. (Cooperation was established with the Italian government with respect to patients of German origin living in this region of Italy.)

The center in Brandenburg, code named Facility B, was established in an old prison. Its area of responsibility covered patients in Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, Brandenburg, Brunswick, Mecklenburg and Anhalt, as well as the cities of Hamburg and Berlin. This facility was closed in November 1940, and the personnel transferred to the "Facility for Care and Nursing" located in Bernburg, which had better technical capabilities.

Hartheim Castle, located near Linz, Austria, was code named Facility C. The victims sent to this center came from Austria, part of Saxony, southern Germany and even Yugoslavia and Bohemia-Moravia. One of the officials assigned to this institution later described Hartheim as an "undisciplined pigsty."⁷

Facility D was the code name for the Facility for Care and Nursing at Sonnenstein. T4 personnel took up residence here in April 1940. The geographic area of responsibility covered Thuringia, parts of Saxony and Silesia, as well as parts of southern Germany.

The Grafeneck facility ceased operations in December 1940. The personnel were transferred to Facility E, Hadamar, located near Limburg. Patients arriving to Hadamar originated from Rhineland-Palatinate, North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony.

All hospices and asylums in Germany were sent patient registration forms. Patients were to be classified into three groups. Among others, Group One included people with epilepsy and therapy-resistant paralysis, while Group Two included all patients who had been continuously hospitalized for at least five years. It has been stated that most of the patients classified in these groups were not terminally ill. "They were suffering no pain, and the majority of them were not on the point of dying and did not wish to die."⁸ Institutions that were uncooperative in filling out the questionnaires, filled them out incorrectly or incompletely, received visits from a T4 commission. When required, the commission filled out the forms itself, even without examining the patients.

These questionnaires were transferred to the T4 central office where they were reviewed by a panel of three experts. Each case was decided by either a plus sign (extermination), minus sign (postponement) or a question mark (further consideration) inked on the patient's medical record. Lists were then drawn up for individual asylums and nursing homes of those patients designated for euthanasia. The lists were transferred to the relevant euthanasia center for processing. Each facility had buses and drivers at its disposal for picking up and transporting the victims to the centers.

The role played by the SS in the Euthanasia Program in Germany was limited but important. The Chancellery of the Führer required technical experts and materials (drugs and gas) for the T4 killing centers to function and, in regard to maintaining secrecy, the SS was the logical source to provide them. For rendering these technical services, close cooperation was established between Viktor Brack from the Chancellery of the Führer and Reinhard Heydrich's Reich Security Main Office [Reichssicherheitshauptamt-RSHA], and specifically the Section for Chemical Analysis [Referat Chemie] within the Technical Institute for the Detection of Crime [Kriminaltechnisches Institut, KTI]. This section was headed by a chemical engineer and SS officer Albert Widmann.

KTI was tasked with experimenting and determining the best way to terminate the lives of those subject to the program. At a subsequent demonstration conducted at the euthanasia facility in Brandenburg—attended by many high ranking functionaries including Karl Brandt, Philipp Bouhler and Dr. Leonardo Conti (the Reich health leader), as well as by Viktor Brack, Albert Widmann and the notorious Christian Wirth—one group of patients received injections of drugs, while a second group was escorted into a gas chamber to which carbon monoxide gas was introduced. The drugs were deemed to be less effective than the carbon monoxide and those given