

## READING

## Bystanders at Hartheim Castle

While the Nazis loudly proclaimed the campaigns to demonize and isolate Jews and “Gypsies” (the name Germans gave to two ethnic groups known as the Sinti and Roma) in newspapers and magazines, on billboards, and over the radio, they attempted to keep secret the program to murder mentally and physically disabled “Aryans.” And yet by the end of 1940, most Germans were aware of some if not all aspects of the killings.<sup>1</sup> As historian Gordon J. Horwitz investigated the history of Mauthausen, a small Austrian town 90 miles from Vienna, he uncovered evidence of what the residents of a nearby village had known about the “euthanasia,” or medical killing, program taking place there.

Soon after Austria became part of the Third Reich in 1938, the Germans built a labor camp for political prisoners in Mauthausen. As the camp expanded, German officials took over buildings in a number of nearby villages. One of those buildings was Hartheim Castle, which was a home for mentally handicapped children. In researching the history of Hartheim Castle, Horwitz discovered a letter written by a man he identified as “Karl S.” The letter recalls events in 1939.

[The] house of my parents was one of the few houses in Hartheim from which one could observe several occurrences. After Castle Hartheim was cleared of its inhabitants (around 180 to 200 patients) in the year 1939, mysterious renovations began which, to an outsider, however, one could hardly divine, since no [local] labor was used for it, and the approaches to the castle were hermetically sealed. Following completion of the renovation work, we saw the first transports come and we could even recognize some of the earlier residents who showed joy at returning to their former home.

Karl S. watched the buses arrive from a window in his father’s barn. He recalled that groups of two or three buses came as frequently as twice a day. Soon after they arrived, “enormous black clouds of smoke streamed out of a certain chimney and spread a penetrating stench. This stench was so disgusting that sometimes when we returned home from work in the fields we couldn’t hold down a single bite.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Gordon J. Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 59.

A woman called Sister Felicitas, who had formerly worked with children kept in the castle, had similar memories:

My brother Michael, who at the time was at home, came to me very quickly and confidentially informed me that in the castle the former patients were burned. The frightful facts which the people of the vicinity had to experience first hand, and the terrible stench of the burning gases, robbed them of speech. The people suffered dreadfully from the stench. My own father collapsed unconscious several times, since in the night he had forgotten to seal up the windows completely tight.<sup>3</sup>

Horwitz notes, "It was not just the smoke and stench that drew the attention of bystanders. At times human remains littered parts of the vicinity. In the words of Sister Felicitas, 'when there was intense activity, it smoked day and night. Tufts of hair flew through the chimney onto the street. The remains of bones were stored on the east side of the castle and in ton trucks driven first to the Danube [River], later also to the Traun.'"<sup>4</sup>

As evidence of mass murders mounted, Christian Wirth, the director of the operation, met with local residents. He told them that his men were burning shoes and other "belongings." When they asked about the strong smell, he told them it came from a device that turned old oil and oil byproducts into a water-clear, oily fluid that was of "great importance" to German submarines. Wirth ended the meeting by threatening to send anyone who spread "absurd rumors of burning persons" to a concentration camp.<sup>5</sup> The townspeople took him at his word. They did not break their silence.

The castle at Hartheim was one of six facilities, most of which were hospitals, that the Nazis outfitted with gas chambers and ovens in 1940 and 1941 in order to murder physically and mentally disabled people and burn their remains. Between May 1940 and May 1941, 18,269 patients were murdered at Hartheim.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Gordon J. Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 60.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Gordon J. Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 60–61.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Gordon J. Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 61–62.

<sup>6</sup> Robert N. Proctor, "Culling the German Volk," in *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Peter Hayes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 267.

## Connection Questions

1. What did people who lived near Hartheim observe? What did they know about what was happening there? Why did they keep silent about what they knew?
2. Professor Ervin Staub believes that bystanders play a critical role in society:

Bystanders, people who witness but are not directly affected by the actions of perpetrators, help shape society by their reactions. . . . Bystanders can exert powerful influences. They can define the meaning of events and move others toward empathy or indifference. They can promote values and norms of caring, or by their passivity of participation in the system, they can affirm the perpetrators.<sup>7</sup>

According to Staub, what choices do bystanders have? What choices did people who lived near Hartheim Castle make? What were the consequences?

3. Who was part of this town's universe of obligation?

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<sup>7</sup> Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 86–87.