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AN EARLY REPORT BY KURT GERSTEIN¹

Historical knowledge, although it tends to be forgotten, is often times a matter of luck.² The past, in short, is not exactly what was, but rather what we have been able to find out. The history of the report on the extermination of the Jews, published here for the first time in a language other than Dutch, provides a perfect illustration.

It has taken more than a half a century for the true importance of this document to come to light. Unknown, ignored, then underestimated, it proves that the detailed information provided by Kurt Gerstein and concerning the Operation Reinhard extermination camps was indeed transmitted to London by the Dutch resistance in mid 1943.

This article first traces the history of this transmission before making several succinct proposals for analysis of this document.

I. Informations from Kurt Gerstein transmitted to London

The story begins with Kurt Gerstein, in the middle of the summer of 1942. A member of the “Hygiene Institute” of the Waffen SS, Gerstein received an order in June from Rolf Günther, Eichmann's deputy, to go to the Operation Reinhard extermination camps, which had gradually begun functioning the previous spring, to modify the mode of operation of the gas chambers. At that time, the gas chambers of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka used diesel engine exhaust gas, and needed to be adapted to the use of Zyklon B, an extremely toxic disinfecting gas employed since September 1941 to exterminate Soviet prisoners of war, followed by the Jews in Auschwitz, and then in other camps. The visit took place from August 17 to 19 and did not achieve its purpose, because the “modernization” plan for the gas chambers was purely and simply dropped for reasons that we only partially understand. It is clear however that Gerstein's lack of enthusiasm

¹ I would like to thank Henk Biersteker, Pieter Lagrou, Céline Chateau, Robert Kloots and Benoît Majerus for their assistance in the preparation and writing of this article, most of whose source material is in Dutch. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, for its support.

² Jean Stengers develops this idea however in a small book entitled *Vertiges de l'historien. Les histoires au risque du hasard*. Le Plessis Robinson, Institut Synthélabo, 1998.

to take part in this criminal undertaking, and the reticence of Christian Wirth, the head of the three camps to change the *modus operandi* of killing by making it more dangerous to his people by the use of a highly toxic gas, doubtless played a decisive role in the abandonment of the plan.

This visit however had one direct outcome whose repercussions would be felt for many years; namely to turn Kurt Gerstein into an eye witness of genocide by gassing carried out in the camps of Belzec and Treblinka. Deeply shocked by what he had witnessed, Gerstein never ceased in his attempts to warn the world about the on-going genocide. As soon as he left, in the train taking him from Warsaw to Berlin, Gerstein made a detailed description of the exterminations being carried out against the Jews in Belzec to a member of the Swedish delegation in Germany, Baron Göran von Otter. Similar contacts took place until the end of the war, with a Swiss diplomat, Paul Hochstrasser, and a large number of influential members of various Protestant denominations, such as Otto Dibelius. In short, Gerstein contributed greatly to breaching the wall of secrecy with which the Nazis attempted to conceal the extermination of the Jews.

In this capacity, Gerstein should clearly be seen as a great resistant. At the same time however, his activities within the Institute of Hygiene of the Waffen-SS, as much as we know about it, has its dark side. It is likely that he played a major role in the distribution of Zyklon B within the Waffen-SS. It is also likely that Gerstein was involved in a series of regular orders of this same gas for shipment to Auschwitz and Oranienburg, where it is certain that its original destination was criminal, and that it may have been directly connected to the policy of genocide of the Jews. Gerstein claims, although the documentation to date cannot confirm it, that he prevented the gas from being used for other purposes than disinfecting. Thus, Saul Friedländer was right to call Gerstein the incarnation of ambiguity, even if this was the ambiguity of Good he was referring to.³ By specifying the likely category of ambiguity, Friedländer was in a certain way echoing the intense fascination elicited by this historical figure over many years, in particular during the 1960s.⁴

³ Saul Friedländer, *Kurt Gerstein ou l'ambiguïté du bien*, Paris, Casterman, 1967.

⁴ This fascination was originally prompted by a play by Rolf Hochhuth, *Le Vicaire* (Paris, le Seuil, 1963, for the French translation; *the Representative*, also performed as *The Deputy*, 1964 for the English translation). It condemned the silence of the Holy See during the War concerning the fate of the Jews. The plot revolves around the figure of Gerstein. The considerable success of the play, and the polemics it elicited, had numerous repercussions in France, as can be seen by the book by Jacques Nobécourt, *Le Vicaire et l'histoire* (Paris, le Seuil, 1964) as in Germany and elsewhere in Europe (see on the subject of this "Kontroverse", the 17 entries listed by Michael Ruck in his *Bibliographie zum*

This fascination arose from a single source: the series of testimonies in French and German which Kurt Gerstein wrote to Rottweil in April-May 1945, several months before he committed suicide in the Cherche-Midi prison in Paris, where he was facing charges of murder and complicity. It is an understatement to say that this testimony had a major impact on the historiography of genocide. Like the Höss memoirs, the “Gerstein report” contributed decisively to shaping our view even today of the homicidal gassing of Jews in the extermination camps.⁵

The document reproduced at the end of this article is directly related to the efforts to provide information to neutral and allied countries. It is easy to reconstruct the way in which this information passed from Germany to Holland. Gerstein had been the friend of a Dutch industrialist, Ubbink, since the beginning of the thirties. In 1941, while Gerstein, a young volunteer conscript in the Waffen-SS was training at Arnhem, he re-contacted Ubbink, at Doesburg, and the two friends maintained their relationship until almost the end of the war. In February 1943, Ubbink visited Gerstein in Berlin:

“With great indignation he told me how the gassings took place using the exhaust gas from diesel engines. He gave me all the details and told me that at that time there were 9000 deaths per day in the three camps. At the beginning I didn't want to believe him at all, but his show of emotion and state of psychic collapse more than the fact that he swore, gave me the conviction that a secret had been revealed to me that only a very few people knew. [...] He asked me if I could get in touch with people who had radio contact with London. I told him I could. He asked me, no-- more than that, he begged me to transmit this story to England, so it would be known all over the world, and that the German people could be warned.”⁶

National-Sozialismus, Cologne, Bund Verlag, 1995). More specifically on Gerstein himself, aside from the book by Saul Friedländer and a series of articles by Léon Poliakov in *Le Monde Juif*, there was also a biography by Pierre Joffroy (*L'espion de Dieu. La Passion de Kurt Gerstein*, Paris, Grasset, 1969, new edition 1992). The interest in Gerstein has not waned, as is shown by the new biography by Jürgen Schäffer, *Kurt Gerstein- Zeuge des Holocaust. Ein Leben zwischen Bibelkreisen und SS*, Bielefeld, Luther Verlag, 1999).

⁵ On this point, I refer to a paper entitled “Comment écrire l'histoire sans archives. A propos du camp d'extermination de Belzec” to be published by Complex, in Brussels in the year 2000, in a collective work under my editorship, entitled *Le génocide des juifs entre procès et histoire*.

⁶ Letter from J.H. Ubbink to Erika Arajs, Department of Justice in Nuremberg, dated September 14, 1949 (this is a copy, Landeskirchliches Archiv Bielefeld,

Ubbink indeed passed on the information given to him. “I kept my word” wrote Ubbink – who added “but they did not at that time believe such a horrifying story.”⁷ The disbelief he encountered, or felt he had encountered, as we will see later – profoundly affected him. In 1947, he had already revealed his sentiment to the widow of Kurt Gerstein,⁸ and he would not say differently, fifteen years later, to the historian Lou de Jong.⁹

Like Ubbink, obviously, Gerstein remained convinced that he had delivered his testimony without having been believed. In one of the versions of his report, in April 1945, he discusses this reaction of disbelief:

“In the year 1943, the Dutch resistance asked Ubbink to tell me that I was requested not to provide invented atrocities but to be satisfied to report the truth alone.”¹⁰

Several weeks later, writing to Ubbink doubtless from his cell in the Cherche-Midi prison, he exclaims: “Ask your friends if now, at least, they believe what happened in Belzec, etc.”¹¹

Gerstein/Ubbink was the first link in the chain. Both were convinced during the war and doubtless until their deaths¹², that the risks they had taken were in vain, that no one wanted to believe that the extermination was a reality, and that nothing would be done to stop the ongoing massacres.

Bestand Gerstein, n.365). As of 1946, Ubbink confirmed to Gerstein's widow that the information had been passed on through him to the Dutch resistance (letter to Elfriede Gerstein dated August 3, 1946, *ibidem*, n.334).

⁷ *Ibidem, idem.*

⁸ He wrote to her: “The reality of what he told me about the 'concentration camps' was never believed at the time, in 1943 by the Dutch resistance movement.” (Letter from J.H. Ubbink to Elfriede Gerstein dated January 31, 1947, *ibidem*, n.463a).

⁹ Louis de Jong, “The Netherlands and Auschwitz”, *Yad Vashem Studies on the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance*, n.VII, 1968, p.45.

¹⁰ Version of the Gerstein report in French, dated May 6, 1945, deposited in the National Archives in Washington.

¹¹ Letter from Gerstein to J.H. Ubbink. This letter was found in the personal effects of Gerstein after his death and sent to his wife in 1949. After a copy (which I use here) was made, (Landeskirchliches Archiv Bielefeld, Bestand Gerstein, 5.2. Teil `1,5,7, Fase 2) it was then sent to Ubbink who then lost it (letter from Ubbink to Pastor Weiselberg, dated July 22, 1967, *ibidem*, 5,2, Teil 1 N 2 Fasc 1.).

¹² This was true for Gerstein, and doubtless for Ubbink, who emigrated to Canada, where it is possible that he never knew about the report published here.

Let us turn now to the second link in the chain, another loop, namely Ubbink's correspondents in the Dutch resistance. Because of his actions in the rescue of persecuted Jews, Ubbink was in touch with Cornelius Van der Hooft, who in turn was associated with the clandestine Calvinist newspaper *Trouw*. Ubbink sent Van der Hooft Gerstein's testimony in February or March 1943. Van der Hooft manifested extreme caution or disbelief, and Ubbink “had a great deal of difficulty convincing the leader of the resistance of the veracity of [his] report,” as he explained to Joug in 1963.¹³

Nevertheless, as of March 19, the newspaper *Trouw* alluded to the fate in store for the Dutch Jews:

“We must never forget what this usurper [the German occupier] inflicts upon us, how he in his cowardly way assassinates the most noble and pure of the nation, how he makes mass arrests of our best fellow citizens and imprisons them in these evil places where cruelty and sadism reign, how he sacks our country with a brutality never before equaled in all our history, how he robs us of our valiant laborers in order to force them to work like Pharaoh made the Israelites, how coldly and in the most inhumane manner, he strips our Jewish fellow citizens and then assassinates them [...]”¹⁴

As brief as it was, thus buried in the long list of offences and crimes destined to prick peoples' consciences, this mention was nevertheless the first denunciation of the persecution of Jews, published by the underground newspaper *Trouw*. It is likely, or at least possible that this was the first echo of the information Gerstein gave to Ubbink.

Several days later, on March 25, 1943, Van der Hooft met with members of his underground network, Jo Satter and his father, in the outskirts of Doesburg. In their presence, Van der Hooft wrote a four-page long report in Dutch, entitled “Tötunsanstalten in Polen” – the one reproduced here which will be analyzed in part two of this article. The report was hidden in the chicken coop of the Satter farm. A year later, Van der Hooft was arrested¹⁵, as well as Satter and his father.¹⁶ Only Satter would survive. The farm was destroyed but not the chicken coop. Satter recovered the document there after the war, but kept it to himself. Why

¹³ Louis de Joug, “The Netherlands and Auschwitz” op.cit.. De Joug bases himself on a letter from Ubbink in November 1963. In addition the information on Van der Hooft et *Trouw* are mentioned in the same article.

¹⁴ *Trouw*, March 19, 1943. This information was given to me by Henk Biersteker. I use his translation.

¹⁵ Louis de Jong, “The Netherlands and Auschwitz” op.cit..

¹⁶ Letter from Henk Biersteker to the author dated November 4, 1996.

disseminate a document providing information that everyone knew about, at a time when, unfortunately, nothing could be done?

Satter only realized the importance of the document in his possession in 1996 when he was watching a television program presented by Lou de Jong on the occupation¹⁷. He sent a copy to the historian, who the next year revealed it to the public during his inaugural lesson in a Rotterdam college.¹⁸ Jong's retelling of this event left no room for doubt. "Van der Hooft did not send his report to the resistance newspaper *Trouw*, the only copy written in his own handwriting was hidden [...]" His conclusion was no less scathing. "Three Dutchmen, three brave members of the resistance, had the privilege of seeing [this report] and – there is apparently little doubt on this score – all three refused to believe it in full."¹⁹

The footnote proving this assertion makes reference to a sentence written by Gerstein in his last letter to Ubbink, quoted above, but is unlikely that he was also including Ubbink. Thus the information provided by the first link in the chain of transmission – Gerstein/Ubbink – enabled Lou Jong to reconstruct the actions of the second link. The conclusion he arrived at follows directly from the argument which underlies his article. Expressed in a literary form by a maxim of La Rochefoucauld – "neither the sun nor death can be looked at directly" – Jong's feeling was that "The Nazi concentration camps only became a reality for most people – and in fact not completely – after they had ceased to exist, and even because of this."²⁰ Although in general terms this statement contains some truth, euphemistically speaking, it may be offensive to those who took part in these events, and illustrates the discrepancy which at times emerges between a witness' testimony and a historian's analysis.

This is what happened to Jo Satter who always rejected this version of events. No, it was not because of his disbelief that the report was not sent to *Trouw*, but for another reason, difficulty of transmission, need to take precautions²¹...The manuscript was not given by Jo Satter to the renowned Amsterdam Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie directed for many years by

¹⁷ Ben Van Kaam, "De waarheid bleef liggen onder een dakpan", *Trouw*, July 22, 1995.

¹⁸ Lou de Jong. *Een Strefgeval te Auschwitz, publikatie van zijn rede uitgesproken te Rotterdam, op 21 september 1967*. An English version was published by the Yad Vashem journal, "The Netherlands and Auschwitz", *op.cit.*..

¹⁹ Louis de Jong, "The Netherlands and Auschwitz", *op.cit.*..

²⁰ *Ibidem*

²¹ Ben Van Kaam "De waarheid bleef liggen onder een dakpan", *op.cit.*..

Lou de Jong but to a private individual who still maintains it in his possession.²²

Up until 1990, the history of this manuscript can be summarized in the following way. Until 1967, only the first link between Gerstein and Ubbink, was known, frozen in the memories of the disbelief with which it was (or they believed it had been) received. In 1967 the second link between Van der Hooft and Satter and his father was discovered. The interpretation of his role until 1992 depended on the memories of the first link, even though the only survivor of the second link refuted this interpretation. Finally in 1992, a young historian, Jim Van der Hoeven, discovered a third link²³, vastly larger than the previous ones, which made it possible retrospectively to analyze the actions of the two previous links differently than Lou de Jong had done.

On April 24, 1943, one month after the meeting between Van der Hooft and the Satters, another version of the report inspired by Gerstein was written. Typed on paper without an official heading, and with the simplified title of “Tötungsanstalten” this document has the sole reference number “Rappt. Nr. 61”.²⁴ probably an in-house reference number of the Ministry of War of the Dutch government in exile intelligence service.²⁵ The document probably arrived on April 24, 1943 or a few days before in London, perhaps by radio. None of the archives consulted by Van der Hoeven indicate the exact source of this report, but its great similarity to the almost identical report dated March 25, 1943, suggest that Van der Hooft had indeed succeeded in transmitting Ubbink's information to London. The discovery of this document confirmed Satter's recollections concerning the belief by Van der Hooft, himself and his father, in the report transmitted by Ubbink, but this discovery came too late: Satter had died in 1988 and Ubbink two years later.

The circulation of the report inspired by Gerstein within the Dutch government in exile is no less fascinating than its previous peregrinations, because the same figures are found in both, and the same reactions. I base myself on Van der Hoeven's article to reconstruct what happened to the document in London.

²² Information provided by Henk Biersteker

²³ Jim Van der Hoeven, “De Nederlandse regering in ballingschap wist al heel vroeg van de 'Endlösung'” *Vrij Vederland*, May 2, 1992.

²⁴ I am grateful to Henk Biersteker to have sent me a copy of the original upon which this description is based.

²⁵ This same secret service, according to Van der Hoeven, stamped the document.

The Tötungsanstalten report arrived in late April and was quoted and fairly extensively paraphrased on May 8 in the diary of the Minister of War Van Lidth de Jeude. The fact that he quotes the main pieces of information suggests that Van Lidth was persuaded it was true. This passage from the Minister's diary had been made public in 1979 by Lou de Jong ²⁶who drew two conclusions. First of all he deduced that Van Lidth had been fully informed as of that date of the ongoing genocide, and secondly that the minister had done nothing to circulate this information. The latter deduction, based more on reasoning than on real archival work, was contradicted by a letter from Van Haersma, the advisor to the president of the council of ministers and the minister of wartime affairs (AOK), to the minister of Foreign Affairs dated August 16, 1943. In this letter, Van Haersma talked about “a report dated March 24, 1943 [sic]²⁷ from a German SS officer, also dealing with the murder of Jews in Poland which had been transmitted [to him] by the intermediary [of] the War office which classified it as coming from a credible source.”

From the Ministry of War, the Tötungsanstalten report was thus sent to the AOK at an unspecified date, between May and August 1943. The date it was sent is important, because it is indicative, on the one hand, of the rapidity with which the Ministry of War circulated the information and secondly, the duration of Van Haersma's lack of belief in a document containing such atrocious information. In the letter cited above, after having indicated the source of the document, he expressed the feelings it elicited in him. “My original doubts on the truth of the events described in the above mentioned report were substantially diminished by the letter from a Dutch civil servant²⁸ in which he talks about “gassing” Jews in Poland. It seems to me that we should give credence to the horror of the information from the member of the SS.” The mention of a 'letter from a Dutch civil servant' enables us to put an accurate date on Van Haersma's change of opinion concerning the report inspired by Gerstein, since this document was sent to him by his correspondent in fact on July 21. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs thus transmitted to the AOK the documents concerning the extermination of the Jews, and AOK accompanied its response with a copy of the Tötungsanstalten report, asking for it to be circulated.

²⁶ De Jong, L. *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, volume 9, Le Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979, p. 561.

²⁷ It is likely that this is merely a mistake in the date: this letter was the only one that refers to a document dated March 24.

²⁸ This is an undated document written in German indicating that 'most of these Jews [deported from Holland] are systematically assassinated, initially by shooting, but now by gassing in the so-called “disinfecting installations.”

This exchange of information and documentation was not restricted to the above-mentioned ministries since Van Haersma ended his letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the following. “After requesting the advice of the Government service, I decided to contact the Interallied Information Committee to ask the committee to have it published.”

This exchange of letters between Van Haersma and A. Pelt, from the RVD (Royal Intelligence Service) – the government service alluded to in the first part of the sentence – provides a means of tracing the information Van Haersma had available concerning the aftermath of his initiative to contact the Interallied Information Committee (IIC).

On July 30, several days after having received indirect confirmation of the truth of the Tötungsanstalten report, Van Haersma wrote to Pelt to inform him of the contents of the report and to ask his advice. On August 3, Pelt responded and suggested transmitting the report to the IIC. On August 16, Van Haersma replied, sending Pelt a copy of the report and saying that he had followed his advice to transmit the report to the allied organism based in New York for purposes of publication. It is difficult to determine whether Van Haersma had already made contact on his own initiative or whether he was asking Pelt to do so. In any case, Van Haersma was waiting for Pelt to tell him what had been done. He contacted him on September 6, then on September 23, asking him to reply to his letter of August 16. Pelt only replied on September 27 to tell Van Haersma that the IIC was being restructured and that he would wait for this to finish before contacting him again. Our narrative ends here²⁹, in uncertainty as to what happened to the report inspired by Gerstein within the Interallied Information Committee.

Van der Hoeven states that to the best of his knowledge, the document was not published by this institution. The complex history of the circulation of the Gerstein report as well as its gradual rediscovery should prompt us to exercise extreme caution concerning hypotheses as to the fate of this document. Jean Potocki's striking metaphor is worth citing here: “The pilot who is probing at great depths and sees his rope spin out to the last fathom does not conclude that he has reached the bottom, but rather that he should not hope to reach it.”³⁰

²⁹ Nevertheless it should be noted that there was an exchange of letters between Sommer from the war ministry and a certain Drooglever Fortuyn on the subject of this report on August 10 and 16, 1943 which appears to confirm that this minister took other initiatives to disseminate the report.

³⁰ Jean Potocki, *Essai sur l'histoire universelle et recherches sur celle de Sarmatie*, Warsaw, 1789, p.89, quoted in Carlo Ginzburg in *Le Sabbat des sorcières*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, p.387.

For several months - between April and September 1943, during the time we can trace its circulation, the report inspired by Gerstein elicited a series of reactions which adhered to a similar pattern each time.

First of all was a period of disbelief, varying in extent and duration, overcome in different ways as a function of the distance of the recipient of the message from the original informer. Ubbink was persuaded of the truth of Gerstein's testimony when he saw the effect on his friend of what he had seen. Ubbink was able to convey his conviction to Van der Hooft, and then to the Ministry of War of the Dutch government in exile. The document was described as reliable and was quoted by the minister himself. Van Haersma, the next recipient of the document, was able to overcome his initial doubts by recouping with other sources of information and presented the document as reliable, citing these overlapping sources of information.

Once disbelief had been overcome, efforts at the dissemination of the document were made towards individuals or institutions thought to be more capable of making the report public, or doing so more efficiently. These attempts, amazingly, ranged from the Netherlands to England then to the United States, although the different links in the chain were not necessarily informed of the outcome of their actions. Thus some links thought that the next link had prevented dissemination of the information.

This lack of feedback and certain participants' feelings that they had not been understood also influenced the way in which historians saw these events, in particular Lou de Jong. The discovery of new documents, partly through luck and partly as a result of systematic archive work by Van der Hoeven, help rectify overly hasty judgments and do justice to the more or less committed, more or less efficient actions of each of the links in the chain.

The circulation of the report inspired by Gerstein also prompts a number of comments (as highlighted by Walter Laqueur and David S. Wyman³¹) on the crucial issue of the information available to the Allies and the neutral countries as regards the achievement of the Final Solution and reactions to this information in the political arena.

The first comment concerns the fairly narrow margin of maneuver that the various departments of the Dutch government in exile authorized themselves. It is noteworthy that each link in the chain was able to transmit the information to the next link. However, is no less striking that none of these links seemed to have had the idea of bypassing the next in line, and submit this report which so terrified them to the general public.

³¹ Walter Laqueur, *Le terrifiant secret. La 'solution finale' et l'information étouffée*, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, David S. Wyman, *L'abandon des juifs. Les Américains et la solution finale*, Paris, Flammarion, 1987.

This adherence to established (or assumed) bureaucratic regulations leads me to the second comment, concerning the chasm between the recipients and the different actors in the ongoing tragedy. They do not seem to be living on the same planet, or the same time frame. The urgency is not the same. Between the end of April and the end of September 1943, tens and tens of thousands of people were exterminated in Sobibor and Treblinka (Belzec had already been shut down in December 1942)³² and more than a hundred thousands Jews had been deported to Auschwitz.³³

What would have happened if the report had been circulated more quickly, with greater initiative? In many respects this is a question which goes far beyond the scope of this article.

II. “Tötungsanstalten in Polen”

Written by Coor Van der Hooft, this four page handwritten manuscript in Dutch has a German title: “Tötungsanstalten in Polen” – “Killing Institutions in Poland” – and a date: March 25, 1943. It contains a short introduction concerning the author of the report, “a high ranking German officer” who swore that the facts he described were true.

The rest, the report itself, is in the first person. The author presents himself briefly, and indicates the reasons why he was witness to exterminations. This introduction is followed by a description of the two camps visited, Belzec and Treblinka, without explaining the actual reasons for the author's trip to the southern part of the former Poland. Then follows the story of the extermination of a convoy in one of these camps, from the moment the convoy reaches its destination, the killing in the gas chambers, to the burial in mass graves. The author then makes an estimate of the number of victims killed daily in the Operation Reinhard camps, and then a provisional estimate of the number of people already executed. In addition he mentions the total number of victims. Finally the author mentions that there are plans to use cyanide for killing in the gas chambers of Operation Reinhard, presuming however that it had not been used.

Aside from the level of detail, the report as a whole has an emotional tonality that bears the hallmarks of Kurt Gerstein. This tonality is also present in the report which earned him posterity, the one he wrote in several versions, two years later in April-May 1945. I will not make a systematic analysis or commentary on the “Tötungsanstalten in Polen”

³² Arad, Yitzhak, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987.

³³ See the table summarizing the arrival of convoys in the work by Franciszek Piper, *Die Zahl der Opfer von Auschwitz*, Oswiecim, Verlag Staatliches Museum in Oswiecim, 1993, p.144.

report, but will simply make several remarks and suggest avenues for future research, for lack of space.

In many ways, it is difficult to analyze the April 1943 report without referring to the April-May 1945 reports, since each document helps to better grasp the value but also at times the omissions or changes in the others.

It is obvious that for example the 1943 report sheds light on those written in 1945. The structure of the testimony is absolutely identical³⁴ and the introduction where Gerstein paints his self portrait is merely more extensive in the 1945 version than in the 1943 report. The report includes numerous items, which are either part of the prescribed sequence of events (for instance the arrival of the train or the gassing itself) or form striking details, like harmonics to the story (the little boy is pushed into the gas chamber in almost the same way in both narratives). Gerstein tells the same thing, which is natural, but he does it in exactly the same way, which is more interesting.

This great similarity, in both structure and detail, suggests that the 1943 report was a frame for the ones written in 1945, or more probably, that the two reports testify to the existence of a frame that served for both reports at a two year interval. What constituted this frame? One argument is that it was simply Gerstein's recollections, but this type of argument is insufficient. It is more likely that the frame is an organizing principle, and probably the ossification of recollections shaped by Gerstein's frequent repetition of his testimony to numerous interlocutors. The two written reports should thus be seen as two exceptional written versions of even more intense testimony, which in most cases was presented orally.

The reverse approach is also relevant. The 1945 report helps for example better grasp what is only mentioned allusively in the 1943 report. This is true of the allusion to cyanide which can only be fully understood in the context of the 1945 report: Gerstein himself, as the chief of the medical techniques office in the Institute of Hygiene of the Waffen-SS was responsible for this switch.

The 1945 report also enables us to detect the changes in Gerstein's testimony over the course of the various stages of transmission. Neither of the two reports written in 1943 are in Gerstein's hand, whereas he wrote the 1945 report himself. It is clear that although later, it is more reliable.

³⁴ With the exception of an addition in the final version of the 1945 report, of more incidents, destined apparently to give an overview of the persecutions and way in which the participants in this persecution acted or reacted.

This is why it can serve as a reference for the two 1943 versions, in terms of their differences. These documents are clearly not derived from each other. The Dutch document dated March contains autobiographical information about Gerstein which was eliminated doubtless for reasons of security or anonymity, in the English version in April. Thus this latter version cannot be the reference document used to write the March version.³⁵ The reverse is also true. The English April document contains, for example, an additional allusion to Rauschning's book *Hitler told me*³⁶ which helps establish cross validations with attested historical facts of Gerstein's life.³⁷ Since this passage does not appear in the Dutch March report, it is logical to assume that it was not the model for the other. These philological deductions - merely sketched out here, but which could be developed more fully - indicate that none of the documents was produced from another, but that they have a common source, direct or indirect, from which they branched off.

This common source can also be assessed roughly for its degree of reliability to Gerstein's narrative as he must have told it in February 1943 to Ubbink, and that two years later Gerstein wrote down. Take for example the figures indicated in the 1943 reports for the daily 'output' for all the camps, 9000 victims. It is clear that this figure appeared in the written or oral version transmitted by Ubbink, since Ubbink mentions it from memory, as of 1949, in a letter cited above, and this figure appears in the two 1943 versions. However the reports Gerstein himself wrote in 1945 give figures of much higher magnitude (between 15 and 25,000) and, moreover, these figures do not apply to the extermination complex in its totality but to each of the extermination camps separately. It could be argued that the 1945 figures are exaggerations on Gerstein's part; he would have provided increasingly higher figures as he distanced himself from the event. I would like to argue the contrary, without unfortunately having the space to devote to it here - in my opinion it is much more likely that the figure of 9000 victims per day in the 1943 document was an alteration in the figures provided by Gerstein. This is because the figures appearing throughout the 1945 report written by Gerstein form a logical, coherent series even in its excessiveness in comparison to what we know

³⁵ Simply because the March document was written earlier is not enough to eliminate this hypothesis. It is very possible that the date of April was the date it arrived in London, and the document could have been written earlier, in March, and been used as the reference document for the version dated March 25.

³⁶ Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler m'a dit*, Paris, Pluriel, 1995 [1982]

³⁷ See Saul Friedländer, *Kurt Gerstein, op.cit...*, p.87.

about the history of the camps. The figures stated by Gerstein should not be taken as an accurate reflection of reality but as the accurate transcription of figures mentioned by the head of the camp to the witness Gerstein at the time of the events. The exaggeration, by Wirth or Globocnik, of the yield of the installations they were in charge of is demonstrative of the bragging that was characteristic for example of Rudolf Höss³⁸. However, this bragging in itself constitutes a historical fact in itself which sheds an instructive light on the competition³⁹ that took place between the two extermination complexes -- the Operation Reinhard camps on the one hand and Auschwitz and to a lesser extent Maidanek on the other.

This process of alteration of the original narrative, located here at the level of the first transmission link, Ubbink, can also be seen in the two 1943 versions, which as was stated above, were written on the basis of the same document. The Dutch document dated March has a passage that does not appear in the English document dated April.

“After the wagons arrived at the camp, the people were chased out with whips and in the surrounding barracks and locked in. The next day or several days afterwards, depending on arrivals, 700 to 800 people were pushed together into a courtyard.”

This addition radically changes the sequence of the extermination process, which thus would have taken place the day after arrival of the convoy or several days later. In the English version dated April, as in Gerstein's report in 1945, killing took place almost upon arrival, and the various testimonies also indicate that killing took place immediately after the convoy reached its destination. It seems to me that once again, this change can be interpreted as a first sign of the chronic difficulty of Gerstein's interlocutors, and also of certain historians, to believe what this witness said in its entirety.

³⁸ See the instructions by Rudolf Höss on Globocnik in Steven Paskuly (ed) *Death Dealer, the Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, Buffalo, Prometheus Books, 1992. In particular, Höss writes: “According to [Globocnik] his extermination centers operated much faster [than Auschwitz] and he threw out figures concerning his daily results. I remember him saying to me that at Sobibor they handled five convoys per day and that they collected valuables in the millions. His bragging was incredible on all occasions. I always had the impression that he really believed and was firmly convinced of everything he said. Through Eichmann, I learned that for technical reasons, only two trains could reach Sobibor every day.” (p.256).

³⁹ This competition is dealt with briefly by Raul Hilberg in *La destruction des Juifs d'Europe*, Paris, Fayard, 1988, p.773 sq.

To better illustrate this mistrust, it is worth taking a brief historical look at the way the text was received, by taking two examples fairly far apart in time. The first scientific publication of the Gerstein report appeared in Léon Poliakov's *Le Bréviaire de la haine*,⁴⁰ published in 1951. The second example, published thirty years later, is the passage devoted to Belzec in the standard reference work *Les chambres à gaz, secret d'état*⁴¹. Although the different versions of the Gerstein report written in April-May 1945 themselves contain several minor variations which do not affect the coherency of the document as a whole, it is obvious that most of the passages are repeated from one version to another almost identically, in particular the passage below dealing with the gassing itself.

"The [gas] chambers fill up. "Load well" ordered Captain Wirth. [The victims] step on each others' feet. From 700 to 800 human beings in 25 m², in 45 m³."⁴²

In Poliakov's quote of this document, the surface area of the gas chamber is changed from 25 to 93 m², and this change is neither mentioned nor explained. Poliakov's reason, insofar as it can be reconstructed, doubtless involved a process to which the historian often has recourse but tends not to emphasize: common sense. How, indeed could one imagine squeezing such a large number of people into such a small space? It seems impossible, and even the eye witness, Kurt Gerstein says "Wirth was right, with the help of the SS, 750 people can be put into 45 m³, and the SS using their whips cram in as many as is physically possible."⁴³

Poliakov's doubt concerning details on places reported in Gerstein's testimony take a fairly naive form is also found in a more subtle fashion in other historians' writings. Yitzhak Arad, in his chapter on "Operation Reinhard" in *Les Chambres à gaz, secret d'état*,⁴⁴ preferred replacing this passage which he apparently thought lacked credibility, with the narrative of the same scene by another witness, Wilhelm Pfannenstiel. This replacement may have reduced the problematic nature of Gerstein's figures by simple omission, still managed to astonish since it is so obvious from reading Pfannenstiel's series of affidavits,⁴⁵ that the witness had gradually

⁴⁰ Léon Poliakov, *Bréviaire de la haine*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1951.

⁴¹ Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1984.

⁴² See above, note 10. Note that in the most frequently cited version of the Gerstein report, the version in French dated April 26, 1945, which was included in the documentation at the Nuremberg Trial, reference number PS-1553, the surface area indicated by Gerstein is 20 m² (4 x 5 m).

⁴³ *Ibidem*

⁴⁴ Paris, editions de Minuit, 1984.

⁴⁵ Most of these depositions are preserved in the form of copies at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich.

developed a systematic strategy of minimizing the facts and a point-for-point challenge to Gerstein's narrative.

The arbitrary change in the area of the gas chamber, in one case, and the replacement of a problematic story by a more suitable one, are complemented by a third case, from the Dutch report dated March. The change in the extermination sequence probably stems unconsciously from the same presumed lack of logic between a figure of 750 people and the area of the gas chamber. It is symptomatic that the area is not specified in the Dutch report. It is remarkable that although the Gerstein report prompted various yet analogous expressions of doubt from the start, it also motivated people to quote it, disseminate its contents and make efforts for it to be heard.

The historian's task is clearly to attempt to resolve contradictions of this type, by a critical approach to historical sources. There is reason to presume⁴⁶, as I suggested earlier, that the figure repeated by Gerstein was not necessarily faithful to reality, but adhered to the reality described by participants in the event; namely, the criminals at the time of the crime itself.

When possible, the historian's task also consists of pinpointing the various levels of interpretation in recipients to the testimony, to define the layers of added meaning to better identify the original message. Only then do the unadulterated words of the witness come to the fore “with all its atrocity, its incredible brutality and its cruelty” – the words of the one who speaks from experience – and who must be heard.

Corr “Snor”⁴⁷

Killing Installations in Poland
[Tötungsanstalten in Polen⁴⁸]

⁴⁶ Note that this analysis takes into account other documents which space prevents me from presenting here. In particular it is striking that the sole survivor of Belzec, Rudolf Reder, indicated in numerous depositions that in each of the gas chambers, 700 people were exterminated. This figure is thus very close to the one provided by Gerstein. It is unimaginable that one testimony could have contaminated the other, in other words that Reder had read Gerstein's testimony or the reverse.

⁴⁷ In all probability this is a code designating the type of document “correspondence” and the pseudonym of the recipient.

⁴⁸ The German terms found throughout this text have been placed in brackets.

The description below, in all its atrocity, its incredible brutality and cruelty came to us from Poland, accompanied by the fervent prayer to inform humanity of it. A high-ranking German officer guarantees its veracity: he made his statements under affidavit, and asked that the following be published:

Following conversations I had with German officers who served in Poland and Russia, I heard the most fantastic horror stories. Having then received the notice of the sudden death of my institutionalized sister in law, I decided that I would have no respite until I knew what was true in these stories on the atrocities and the killings of institutionalized persons. All my efforts consisted of establishing contacts with high ranking individuals in the SS and to gain their complete trust. After months, I succeeded in visiting two of these so-called killing installations [Tötungsanstalten]. The first that I visited is located in Belsjek [sic] on the Lemberg-Lublin road; the second at Treblinka, about 80km north of Warsaw. There are still two other in Poland but I did not succeed in obtaining access to them.

The above-mentioned two installations [Anstalten] are located in a deserted region of forest and heather. Seen from the outside, they are no different from ordinary concentration camps. A wooden door with some kind of sign, ending by 'heim' gives no hint of the den of assassination.

The trains with the victims arrive from all the occupied territories of Europe. They are made up of cattle wagons whose windows are barred with barbed wire, in each of the wagons there are 120 people. Depending on the weather, about 90% arrive alive, although more than once last summer, 50% were already dead from lack of water. After the wagons arrive at the camp, the people are whipped out and into the surrounding barracks, and locked in. The next day or several days later, depending on arrivals, 700 to 800 people are pushed together in to a courtyard. They are told to undress completely, the clothes must be put carefully in piles and the shoes lined up. Completely naked, men, women, children are pushed along a passage between two dividers of barbed wire. Then Ukrainian criminals begin to cut and shave the women's and men's hair. The hair is collected carefully because it is used to seal the joints [Dichtungen] of the submarines [U-Boot]. For long hours, the poor people must stand in the biting cold or the burning heat. As soon as some fall, worn out by the harsh cold or the burning heat, the henchmen lash the naked bodies of these poor people with the whips. The pain and the suffering that takes place in these corridors defy description. Mothers try to warm their infants against their own naked bodies. There is hardly any talking, only the eyes of the poor people express a nameless suffering and dulled resignation. This corridor leads to an iron door of a stone building. The door is opened and the 700-800 people destined for death are whipped inside until they are squeezed

like herring in a barrel and unable to move. A three year old boy who tries to run away is caught and whipped back inside. Then the doors are hermetically closed. Outside the building, a large tractor is turned on, its exhaust fumes are pumped inside the building by a small window, I could see the effects on the victims inside. Packed in, the poor people were standing and waiting for their last moment, there was no panic, no cries, only a low murmur that could be heard from outside, as though a collective prayer rose towards the sky. One hour later, all were dead. Sliding windows were opened from the outside for the carbon monoxide to be evacuated. A half hour later, some Jews came - they owe their life to this dismal work which follows - to open a door in the back wall and drag out the bodies of the gassed people outside, before carrying them to the pits full of lime prepared for this task. They must remove rings from the fingers and open mouths to pull out gold teeth if there are any. Each installation keeps statistics of the number of killings [Tötungen]. Every day, in other words, every 24 hours, three or four killings[Tötungen] take place. This means that for the four installations [Anstalten], 8000 to 9000 deaths per day. In all, 6 million and a half people have already been killed in this way, including 4 million Jews and 2 and 1/2 "institutionalized individuals" or so-called "Deutschfeindlichen". The program includes 16 million and a half people, in other words, all the Jews in the occupied territories and all the Polish and Czech intellectuals. In high places, there is currently an emphasis on rapidity and it is planned to use a more efficient method of killing. Cyanide gas has been suggested but apparently it has not been used yet, so the killing continues to take place in the cynical manner described above.

March 25, 1943

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