

John M. Steiner collection
Interviews with former members of the SS, other Nazi officials, and witnesses to Nazi Germany
RG-50.593

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Interview with Josef Erber

Tape 4-05-1

In this interview, SS Oberhauptführer Erber talks about his experience working on the ramps in Auschwitz. His duty was to register names and provide lists of people arriving on the transports. He was not involved in the killings and believes it was physically impossible to exterminate millions of people. He believes many died by themselves.

- 01:14 Erber says that it is not true that people did not know about the exterminations. Everybody knew. He discusses one case in which a Jew tried to cross the Swiss border, but was delivered to the Gestapo by the Swiss guards because he did not have money.
- 04:19 Erber tells about a transport that came from Bergen-Belsen to Auschwitz in 1943. He could not unload the people on the ramp because he did not have orders. Later, orders came from Berlin to unload. The orders always came from Berlin, not from the camp. The Jews were sent to the crematorium. Erber heard Jews say, on many occasions, "It is not your fault. Our people did it to us." They meant the Judenrat.
- 08:10 He is eighty years old now and was already a soldier in Austria in 1915. He was arrested in 1962 as a war criminal and released in 1970.
- 10:27 Erber tried not to go to Auschwitz, but was told that Auschwitz was part of military service and to refuse to go meant death.
- 16:38 He describes his work which was to receive transports, count people, and fill out papers. He had nothing to do with the killings, but knew about it. Erber repeats that he kept hearing people say, "Our people did not want us. The Judenrat gave us away."
- 21:13 He talks about feeling upset and stressed because he could not talk about his experiences. No one could trust anybody.

- 22:31 Erber describes people trying to escape and being shot and others throwing messages across the fence. He could not help people. He feels that he got a more severe punishment because he was not an academic.
- 30:25 He says that Himmler and other party officials visited the camp between 1942 and 1943 and of course knew what was going on. To talk about it meant death.
- 33:45 Erber was in jail for eight years, from 1962 to 1970. He asked his lawyer for leave.
- 36:42 When people were sent to the crematorium, he had to check their name and number because of orders from Berlin. He was later accused of sending people to their death.
- 38:01 Erber talks about cases in which people that were not Jewish were sent to the camp by accident, and later released. All of the mail was sent under the address of Neubrunn, not Auschwitz.
- 44:13 He discusses another case of two women who were ultimately released because they were not Jewish.
- 46:30 He talks about Mengele, who did a lot of good by establishing infirmaries and sanitation barracks. In 1944, Erber received from Berlin lists of names of people who were to be gassed. Those who were not gassed were sent to work camps.

Tape 4-05-2

- 00:12 Erber says that all orders came from Berlin and basically all transports were condemned to death.
- 02:10 Doctors contacted Berlin to tell them not to send anymore transports because they could not deal with large numbers of people. The answer from Berlin was to make selections.
- 13:34 Erber's job was to accept transports, make lists of names, and send them to Berlin. Until 1943, Jews from other camps were also sent to Auschwitz. He claims that all these papers and lists exist and were not destroyed.
- 17:50 All those who were still alive after the war were tried.
- 19:38 Erber complains that his lawyer was not much help to him. He was never believed during his trial. He could not have stopped what was happening.
- 29:30 He talks more about his lawyer and his wish to obtain leave. [The interviewer promises to help him.]

1-13

He tells that in 1944 crematorium 1,2,3 were demolished only number 4 remained. Describes the rebellion at the crematorium in Auschwitz in 1944. He had to note the number of people who broke out. All of them were shot. He never killed anybody. You were allowed to shoot people only in cases of escape. People were beaten to death but not shot.

He talks about his disappointment in his lawyers. He was sick in prison. He was also sick as a child, had bone problems.

His thought processes were also affected and he had to drop out of school. He has severe asthma and was hospitalized in prison.

Describes activities in Auschwitz, Mauthausen and Ravensbruck. Talks about Melk (?)

CD 2-5: John Steiner's Interview with Joseph Erber, SS-Oberscharführer (Senior Squad Leader) and member of the Camp Gestapo at Auschwitz
Recorded in July 1977

Short (10 minute) conversation in which Erber states that he doesn't agree with what others have written, including a British historian who claimed that Hitler did not know anything about the death camps. Erber says that anyone who lived in the Third Reich knows that decisions were made at the top and that while people perhaps did not know "officially" what was going on, they talked about it in private. He also says that the residents who lived near Auschwitz could not have been clueless given that the flames in the crematoria chimneys were five to ten meters high and that the smell of burning flesh was perceptible as far away as the train station, four kilometers from the camp. It was all an open secret.