

# *Eyewitness Auschwitz*

## THREE YEARS IN THE GAS CHAMBERS

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*The inferno*

Filip Müller was born in 1922 in Sereď, Czechoslovakia. He was deported to Auschwitz in April 1942 where he was assigned prisoner number 29236. He worked as a prisoner in the *Sonderkommando* until the evacuation of the camp in January 1945 and was liberated in May 1945. Afterwards he was unable to work until 1953 when he became an auditor in Prague. Since 1969 he has lived in Western Europe.

Thus the weeks passed and the sky over Birkenau continued to grow darker. There were daily indications of impending disasters. Although the Red Army was only a few hundred kilometres away from Auschwitz and drawing nearer every day, there was frantic activity in the area around Birkenau. Day and night many hundreds of prisoners were busy laying railway tracks right up to crematoria 2 and 3. On the road between the building sites B1 and B2 the construction of a loading and unloading ramp complete with a three-track railway system was in progress in order to provide a direct link between the death factories, Auschwitz railway station and the outside world. A large number of prisoners were employed on road works. From early morning to late at night there was the incessant din and clatter of trucks, cement-mixers and other building machinery. New prisoners' quarters in camp B2c and also in *Mexico* were nearing completion, while in camp B2g final preparations to ensure efficient handling were made in the barracks housing the personal effects stores. The work-force known as the *Canada team* was gradually built up to a strength of almost 1,000 prisoners. It was their job to load personal belongings, taken from new arrivals on the ramp, on trucks, deliver them to the stores, sort them, search them for

valuables, clean all clothing, and get everything ready for despatch to the Reich. All clothing, underwear, shoes, and any other articles left in the changing rooms were also taken to *Canada*.

In addition to several prisoner teams civilian workers from a factory in Upper Silesia were called in to overhaul the crematoria. Cracks in the brickwork of the ovens were filled with a special fire-clay paste; the cast-iron doors were painted black and the door hinges oiled. New grates were fitted in the generators, while the six chimneys underwent a thorough inspection and repair, as did the electric fans. The walls of the four changing rooms and the eight gas chambers were given a fresh coat of paint.

Quite obviously all these efforts were intended to put the places of extermination into peak condition to guarantee smooth and continuous operation. What mystified us not a little, however, was the beautification of crematorium 5, where everything in sight was whitewashed. What was the point of wasting all this white paint when on the first day after operations had started again the entire room would be enveloped in a veil of black soot. It never occurred to anybody that during the forthcoming mass exterminations this was to be the SS staff headquarters.

There was great activity also in the whitewashed farmhouse, separated from the camp of Birkenau by a wooded area which was now bunker 5. Who would have thought that this peaceful and homely cottage would once again be used to gas thousands upon thousands of people?

Towards the end of April 1944 there were increasing rumours of the imminent extermination of the Jews of Hungary. To us, the prisoners of the *Sonderkommando*, this terrible news came as a devastating blow. Were we once more to stand by and watch while more hundreds upon thousands were done away with? Once again we pressed the camp Resistance to give the signal for an uprising. However, they still refused to run risks. Once more we were fobbed off with the idea that the Red Army's advance would be certain to demoralize and disorganize the SS very soon. Only when the time was ripe, we were informed, would an uprising have any chance of success. When we argued that this attitude meant nothing more or less than that we would yet again be forced to cremate hundreds of thousands of people, we were given to understand that there was no saving these people anyhow.

These stalling tactics on the part of the Resistance leadership led us to have serious doubts as to whether their leaders were

genuinely prepared to fight and make sacrifices not only for their own lives but for the sake of saving umpteen thousands of other human beings. By now we were convinced that, as they watched their own chances of survival increase hourly, they were less and less inclined to jeopardize their own lives in an undertaking fraught with risks. Who could blame them for this attitude when liberation had come within their grasp? Thus we had no choice but to grit our teeth and wait for things to happen. Isolated as we were in the *Sonderkommando*, we did not, perhaps, appreciate that the Resistance felt responsible, first and foremost, for the camp as a whole, and that to its members to sacrifice individual groups seemed unavoidable.

At the beginning of May 1944 camp *Lagerkommandant* Höss arrived, followed a few days later by *Hauptscharführer* Moll. We knew Moll only too well, for it was he who had supervised the burning of the corpses which, in the summer of 1942, had risen to the earth's surface from their mass graves, and who, afterwards, had liquidated to the last man the *Sonderkommando* workers employed there. We were therefore seized by fear and foreboding at the sight of him. It was no doubt because of the vast scale of the forthcoming extermination enterprise that Höss had decided to place the death factories under new management and to entrust *Hauptscharführer* Moll, one of World War 2's worst murderers, with the post of manager.

Moll was rather short and thick-set. His chubby face was, as is often the case with gingery-blond people, covered with freckles. He wore a glass eye. In the *Sonderkommando* we used to call him 'Cyclops'. Moll was cruel, brutal and unscrupulous. For him Jews were sub-human creatures and he treated them accordingly. Anything was permitted when dealing with a *Rassenfeind*, a member of the hated race. He gloated over the suffering to which he submitted his victims and constantly thought up new torments and novel methods of torture. His sadism, his callousness, his bloodthirstiness and his lust to kill knew no bounds. He was an unpredictable monster whose state of mind was wholly unfathomable. Next to his unscrupulousness and fanaticism, he was also a man of indefatigable energy, petty conscientiousness and outstanding organizing ability, qualities which predestined this monstrous extermination maniac like no other to prepare and implement the biggest mass extermination undertaking of all time. In the opinion of the camp authorities *Oberscharführer* Voss

was obviously not competent to cope with this task, and was therefore relieved of his post.

To begin with, Moll made many changes among the SS *Unterscharführers*. *Unterscharführer* Steinberg was temporarily put in charge of crematoria 2 and 3. Very soon, however, he was relieved by *Oberscharführer* Muhsfeld who came from Majdanek. Soviet prisoners of war who had come to know him there told us what a merciless and brutal slave-driver this man with a harmless countenance and almost frail build really was. Under him worked *Rottenführers* Holländer and Eidenmüller. Both were lean and lanky. Bunker 5 was under the management of *Unterscharführer* Eckardt. He was about twenty-eight, tall, slim and blond. Born in Hungary, he spoke Hungarian like his mother tongue. His crony, Kell, who came from Lodz, spoke Polish as well as Yiddish. Both had instructions to listen carefully to what victims said on their last walk to the place of extermination, in particular to watch out for the least signs of insubordination. Reinforcement for crematoria 4 and 5 – up to then mainly under the command of *Unterscharführer* Gorges and *Sturmmann* Kurschuss – came in the persons of *Unterscharführer* Seitz and, a little later, *Scharführer* Busch.

Soon after his arrival Moll ordered the excavation of five pits behind crematorium 5, not far from the three gas chambers. An increasing number of prisoners was also employed on the site near bunker 5 to dig more pits there. Here as well as at the crematorium yards wattle screens had been put up to prevent the curious from looking in at the death factories from the outside. The meadow behind the yard of crematorium 5, where thousands of spring flowers were in bloom, now turned into a strange building site where some 150 prisoners were set to work. Vast supplies of shovels, spades, wheelbarrows, timber, pneumatic drills and other tools, waited ready to be used for excavating cremation pits, once the surveying work was completed. Accompanied by his henchmen, extermination expert Moll paced up and down the large site, giving instructions for the siting of pits, a fuel depot, the spot where the ashes were to be crushed, and all the rest of the devices which he had thought up for the extermination and obliteration of human beings.

We were divided into five work teams. Urged on by constant threats and blows we now began to dig the sticky clay soil. Once again we had to yield to force and participate in the building of places which were to make possible the worst and most cruel mass

murder yet at Auschwitz. No sooner had we begun our excavations than Moll's eagle eyes noticed that somebody had dug his spade into the clay a few centimetres beyond the taut marking string. At once he went berserk and began to shout: 'You bloody lot of idiots, are you blind? One more mistake like that and I'll show you! I demand accuracy and absolute obedience!' Encouraged by this outburst the rest of our persecutors felt it incumbent upon themselves to follow his example. A hail of blows rained down on us, accompanied by shouts of: 'Get on with it, you scum, come on, come on! We'll teach you how to do a day's work!' The *Kapos*, too, began to yell at us, but at least they did not beat anyone.

There seemed to be no end to the rush and hurry of this first day on the building site; the pace of work grew more and more hectic as the day went on. The soil which we had dug out was loaded on to wheelbarrows and, under the watchful eyes of our tormentors, wheeled away at the double. Everything had to be done at the double. As for Moll, he was positively ubiquitous. Anywhere and at any time he was likely to pounce on people. The only thing that pleased him was the sight of us prisoners working ourselves to a frazzle. He was clearly fascinated by the filthy and barbarous business of murder which he had started: to bring it to a successful conclusion had become his life's work. But for us the day was dragging on. As the sun drew near to the horizon we felt our strength flagging. The strains of the camp orchestra greeting the returning work teams had long since faded away. But Moll made us go on working until it was dark. Then at last he blew his whistle, the sign for us to stop work. Spades were cleaned and put away; then we lined up in rows of five to be counted, first by the *Kapos* and then by the SS to make sure no one was missing. And only then were we allowed to march back to camp. We were forcibly struck by the realization that things would be very different now that Moll was here.

As long as Voss was in charge of the crematoria, our living conditions had been relatively tolerable, in marked contrast to the brutal harshness of Moll. Of course, Voss too, was a murderer, but not the worst in Auschwitz by a long chalk. He was in his mid-thirties, of medium height and stocky, with a small, slightly hooked nose. Alcohol played an important part in his life. In the execution of his duties Voss displayed neither the fanaticism nor the zeal of Moll. Of course, he too was perfectly aware of his role as

the man appointed to implement the mass murders. However, more than once during executions I heard him mutter 'Orders are orders': it was as though he wanted to dismiss any last scruples or give himself courage. His training in the SS had turned him into an uncritical and willing tool rather than a fanatically cruel exterminator. Voss had two personalities. He could be high-spirited, laughing and joking and talking about trivial things, even to us prisoners. Towards the SS men under his command he was rather affable and lenient, never standing on his dignity as the superior leader. On the other hand, he never batted an eyelid when it came to shooting men, women and children one after the other, if that was what he had to do. To us he was, in spite of everything, of all the executioners the least inhumane.

In addition to his penchant for alcohol, Voss had another weakness which we readily exploited, namely for gold, diamonds, dollars and other valuables. Since, after each gassing large amounts of these things were invariably picked up by prisoners detailed to search the corpses for hidden valuables, we managed to slip him quite a few of them. For example, shortly before each home-leave, diamonds of more than ordinary brilliance would be discreetly sewn into concealed places of his uniform by one of our tailors, without Voss incurring any risk whatever, needless to say. Any time he hinted more or less casually that he was due for leave soon, he would be told: 'But, *Herr Oberscharführer*, surely you don't intend to go on leave wearing this uniform jacket. Leave it here for the tailor to repair and press.' Of course, this was all put on and well Voss knew it. However, he pretended and so did we. This kind of corruption which we practised also with other members of the SS was a great help to us. As long as it involved no risk for them, many would, on occasion, turn a blind eye: many things went on which they did not, or did not want, to see. It was in this way that we managed to smuggle in the three hand-grenades, and also to make contact with a few of the outside teams, mainly with Russian prisoners of war who, at great risk, supplied us with arms and ammunition. To get them, we too needed gold, dollars and diamonds.

Under Moll our living conditions immediately deteriorated. He ruled us with a rod of iron, with the result that we were all steeped in despair and despondency. We doubted whether we would still be able to keep up our contact with the camp or to continue our plotting. Worse still, it was feasible that, by their brutal and

vicious methods, Moll and his henchmen might succeed in reducing us all to *Mussulmans*, another reason to keep on pressing the Resistance for an early signal to rise up.

We could not understand why the civilized world allowed the death mills of Auschwitz to turn faster and faster without any discernible reaction, while the military overthrow of the Third Reich was agreed to by every right-thinking person. Almost a month had passed since the flight of Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg-Vrba, and there was no sign that they had reached any of their goals. Had the Nazis and their artful Propaganda Minister managed once again to deceive the rest of the world, we wondered. Could it be possible that their accounts were not believed because the crimes they had described were so ghastly as to be unbelievable? The two might even have been declared mentally ill and rushed into a psychiatric hospital, for had they not asserted that hundreds of thousands of human beings had been and were being murdered by means of a chemical compound used for pest control, merely because they were Jews?

Next morning we went to work in the knowledge that a general uprising was planned for a few weeks hence. This was the result of a conference between our own leaders and contacts of the camp Resistance. This news somewhat calmed most of us: we were now determined to avoid any conflict with our tormentors.

Even before work began Moll paced nervously up and down the site. He inspected the area, going from place to place, consulting a large drawing which he had unfolded and comparing it with smaller detailed drawings of the pits as well as of the rest of the extermination installations. Eagerly following in his wake were *Unterführers* Eckhardt, Kell, Steinberg and Gorges, and *Sturmmann* Kurschuss, to all of whom he explained the tasks he expected to be carried out this day, while his Alsatian, on whom he doted, walked to heel.

Meanwhile the *Kapos* stood by their teams waiting for their orders. A whistle and a brisk command made them sprint over to Moll and stand to attention in a row. When our *Kapo* returned he informed us that according to Moll's calculations five pits must be dug in one week. He had even worked out exactly how much earth would require moving each day.

We set to work. It was still cold, for the sun had not yet risen. Nobody had the least notion whether or how Moll's order could be carried out in this short time. To the accompaniment of threats

from the SS and shouts of encouragement from the *Kapos* we went on digging the heavy clay. But the deeper we dug the harder the work became. After a few hours we were all thoroughly exhausted and near the end of our strength. When Moll's minions noticed that the pace of work was slowing down they belaboured us with their sticks yelling: 'Come on, come on, you lazy bastards, get a move on, faster!'

It was a good job Moll was nowhere near. The thought of the fiendish tortures which he knew how to use like no other man kept us in a constant state of fear and terror. When late that afternoon we heard the sound of his motor cycle and saw him roaring up, with his Alsatian sitting in the side-car, we felt distinctly uneasy. However, for once our fears were unfounded. After Moll had thoroughly inspected all the pits he ordered us to return to camp.

After a few days even Moll's henchmen had to admit that work on the pits could not be finished in the time allotted. For in the meantime it had started to rain and we were now standing ankle-deep in sticky, slippery clay. It was decided that we should concentrate all our efforts on two pits only. A few days later we made it: the two pits were 40 to 50 metres long, about 8 metres wide and 2 metres deep. However, this particular place of torment was not yet ready for use by any means. Once the rough work was finished, there followed the realization of the refinements thought up by the arch-extermimator's warped ingenuity.

Together with his assistant, Eckardt, he climbed down into the pit and marked out a 25 centimetres by 30 centimetres wide strip, running lengthways down the middle from end to end. By digging a channel which sloped slightly to either side from the centre point, it would be possible to catch the fat exuding from the corpses as they were burning in the pit, in two collecting pans at either end of the channel.

A group of prisoners had to climb down into the pit. Provided with spades, shovels, hammers, trowels, bricks, cement and spirit levels it was intended that they should make a drain channel for human fat. The whole concept seemed quite inconceivable: a drain channel to catch human fat which in turn was to be used as fuel in order to obliterate as fast as possible all traces of these murderous deeds. Outraged and depressed we saw the tragedy in all its horrendous scale coming ever closer.

There was still no sign from the outside world, while we were

helpless in the face of SS power. Any refusal to work, even the merest hint, would have meant certain death without the slightest effect on the course of events.

Two more Jewish prisoners, Czeslaw Mordowicz and Arnost Rosin, managed to escape towards the end of May. Once again I supplied them with details including those of the extermination of Hungarian Jews which was then in full swing. Perhaps *they* would succeed in rousing world opinion.

When Moll had finished giving precise instructions concerning the digging of the channels he departed. Mercifully this time I did not have to work on 'technical installations', but was ordered to remove earth in wheelbarrows instead. A few hours later Moll returned. He walked straight up to one of the pits, climbed nimbly down and ran purposefully towards the centre. There he stopped, looking expectantly to the right and to the left along the channel. Then he ordered a couple of buckets of water to be brought. Before long they were lowered on ropes and placed in front of Moll. He took hold of the first bucket and poured water down one side of the channel, tensely watching its course. I peered down curiously from the top; from what I saw I knew at once that we were in serious trouble. The water, even before it reached the collecting pan at the front end of the pit, slopped back and slowly came to a halt. All eyes were on Moll; the tension was almost unbearable. When he realized that something was wrong with the fall of the channel he grabbed the empty bucket and brought it down on the heads of any prisoners unfortunate enough to be standing within reach. The *Kommandoführers*, feeling the need to emulate their superior, leapt into the pit and pelted anyone in their way. Moll too flung himself on the wretched prisoners in the pit who were cowering together with fright and kicked them viciously, shouting at the top of his voice: 'You stupid shits, what's the matter with you, can't you even manage a simple job like that?'

Meanwhile evening had come. All the other work teams were back in camp. Only our team was in for a long night. At nightfall floodlights were set up. Moll put on blue overalls and gave a hand himself, along with Eckardt. With a long surveyor's rod, a water-level and other tools he estimated the incline all along the channel and superintended the alterations that were necessary.

When the work was finally finished, Moll again ordered a couple of buckets of water to be brought, seized the first one

impatiently and again flung the water into the drainage channel. Then he stayed motionless for a few seconds, bending forward, and watched intently as it splashed down the channel. The process was repeated a couple of times, until the last bucket of water had been poured in the opposite direction along the channel. Now Moll ran irritably to the collecting pan at the front end of the pit and noted with satisfaction that this time the water had drained away completely and collected in the pan. Then he went calmly to the other collecting pan on the opposite side and there too he convinced himself of the success of his experiment. Now he relaxed. His face showed satisfaction and round his lips hovered something like a fleeting smile. He was obviously relieved, and convinced that he had taken a big step forward on the road towards a solution of his task.

But there was still one last vestige of doubt as to whether this extermination plant of his would really work in the way he had intended. I heard him ask Eckardt: 'What d'you think, will it work the same with hot fat as with water? Fat is viscous, isn't it?'

'I should think it will be all right, *Herr Hauptscharführer*,' replied his *Unterführer*, in an attempt to put his chief's mind at rest, although not altogether succeeding. Moll continued to stand there pondering and staring down into the pit without, however, uttering a word. We stood around, utterly exhausted and waiting. It was past midnight when Moll at last gave orders for us to return to camp.

After only a few hours' sleep a new day began and with it final preparations for the extermination campaign about to begin. The two new pits had considerably increased the capacity of the four crematoria at Birkenau. It was just a matter of adding the finishing touches. There was a constant stream of trucks delivering materials of all kinds, such as old railway sleepers, conifer branches, waste wood, beams, rags, large quantities of wood alcohol, barrels of waste lubricating oil, rammers, coarse- and fine-meshed iron sieves, cement, wooden planks, boards and barrels of chlorinated lime. Wherever the fuel was stacked in the open, it was roofed over.

It was the middle of May 1944 when the first transports of Hungarian Jews arrived in Birkenau. By now the *Sonderkommando* had been increased to 450 men, a number soon to be almost doubled. At the time when the machinery of extermination was running at full speed there were about 450 Hungarian, 200 Polish,

180 Greek, 3 Slovak and 5 German Jews as well as 19 Russian prisoners of war, 5 Polish prisoners in 'preventive custody' and one *Reichsdeutscher Kapo*.

Three more cremation pits were dug in the back yard of crematorium 5, making up the five Moll had ordered. In addition, the farmhouse which had served as a place of extermination in 1942, was put in running order. Its four rooms served as gas chambers while an additional four cremation pits were dug outside. The changing rooms were located in three wooden barracks, and the whole complex was known as bunker 5.

There were now nine of these large pits in addition to the crematorium ovens, making it possible to burn an almost unlimited number of corpses. All these installations originated in the brain of mass murderer Moll who had succeeded in turning a small corner of the earth's surface into something of such unspeakable vileness that it made Dante's *Inferno* appear like a pleasure garden.

From the outset the camp authorities took rigorous care to obliterate all traces of their crimes. For this reason the ashes of the burnt corpses were thrown into fishponds or the river Vistula. In this connection Moll had thought up a new technique to expedite the removal of ashes. He ordered an area next to the pits adjoining crematorium 5 and measuring about 60 metres by 15 metres to be concreted; on this surface the ashes were crushed to a fine powder before their final disposal.