



'This book is filled with evil...it has no literary quality
and reading it is agony', comments Primo Levi in his
introduction. 'The author comes across as what he is: a
coarse, stupid, arrogant, long winded scoundrel'. And yet
'...it is one of the most instructive books ever published'.
Rudolph Hoess was Commandant of Auschwitz during the
war. Taken prisoner by the British he was ordered to write his
autobiography in the weeks between his trial and his
execution. This is it.

An extraordinary and unique document: Hoess was in charge
of the huge extermination camp in Poland where the Nazis
murdered some three million Jews, from the time of its creation
(he was responsible for building it) in 1940 until late in 1943,
by which time the mass exterminations were half completed.
Before this he had worked in other concentration camps, and
afterwards he was at the Inspectorate in Berlin. He thus knew
more, both at first-hand and as an administrator, about Nazi
Germany's greatest crime than almost anyone. Captured by the
British, he was handed over to the Poles, tried, sentenced to
death, and taken back to Auschwitz and there hanged.

*The royalties from this macabre but historically important book
go to the fund set up to help the few survivors from the
Auschwitz camps.*

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Hoess on the first day of his
trial © Hulton Getty

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COMMANDANT
OF AUSCHWITZ



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INTRODUCED BY PRIMO LEVI

COMMANDANT OF AUSCHWITZ

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Royalties from the English translation go to the *Comité International d'Auschwitz*, a charitable organisation set up to help survivors of the Auschwitz camp; they are a pitifully small proportion of those who passed through its gates.



COMMANDANT
OF AUSCHWITZ

The Autobiography of Rudolf Hoess

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Constantine FitzGibbon

Introduced by
Primo Levi

Translated by Joachim Neugroschel



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10

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Contents

Translator's Note	13
List of Illustrations	15
Introduction	17
 AUTOBIOGRAPHY	 27
 <i>Appendices:</i>	
I The final solution of the Jewish question in Auschwitz concentration camp	183
II My meetings with Himmler	201
III SS Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann	213
IV SS Gruppenführer and Lieutenant-General Müller	216
V SS Obergruppenführer Oswald Pohl	220
VI SS Standartenführer Gerhard Maurer	226
VII SS Gruppenführer Globocnik	230
VIII SS Obergruppenführer Theodor Eicke	235
IX SS Gruppenführer Richard Glücks	244
 Index	 249

Introduction

Usually when you agree to write the introduction to a book, you do so because you truly care about the book: it's readable, it's got a high literary quality, so that you like or at least admire the author. This book, however, is the extreme opposite. It's filled with evil, and this evil is narrated with a disturbing bureaucratic obtuseness; it has no literary quality, and reading it is agony. Furthermore, despite his efforts at defending himself, the author comes across as what he is: a coarse, stupid, arrogant, long-winded scoundrel, who sometimes blatantly lies. Yet this autobiography of the Commandant of Auschwitz is one of the most instructive books ever published because it very accurately describes the course of a human life that was exemplary in its way. In a climate different from the one he happened to grow up in, Rudolph Hoess would quite likely have wound up as some sort of drab functionary, committed to discipline and dedicated to order—at most a careerist with modest ambitions. Instead, he evolved, step by step, into one of the greatest criminals in history.

We survivors of the Nazi concentration camps are often asked a symptomatic question, especially by young people: Who were the people 'on the other side' and what were they like? Is it possible that all of them were wicked, that no glint of humanity ever shone in their eyes? This question is thoroughly answered by Hoess's book, which shows how readily evil can replace good, besieging it and finally submerging it—yet allowing it to persist in tiny, grotesque islets: an orderly family life, love of nature, Victorian morality.

Precisely because the author is uneducated, he cannot be suspected of deliberately perpetrating a colossal falsification of history: he would have been incapable of that. His pages teem with mechanical rehashes of Nazi rhetoric, white lies and black lies, attempts at self-justification, at embellishment. Yet these are all so ingenuous and transparent that the most unprepared reader will have no trouble seeing through all these things—they stick out from the texture of the narrative like flies in milk.

On the whole, this book is substantially truthful. It is the autobiography of a man who was not a monster and who never became one even at the height of his career in Auschwitz, when at his orders thousands

of innocent people were murdered daily. What I mean is that we can believe him when he claims that he never enjoyed inflicting pain or killing: he was no sadist, he had nothing of the satanist. By contrast, satanic features can be found in Hoess's portrait of his peer and friend, Adolf Eichmann; however, Eichmann was far more intelligent than Hoess, and we are left with the impression that Hoess took some of Eichmann's bragging at face value, even though it doesn't hold up to a serious analysis.

Rudolph Hoess may have been one of the worst criminals of all time, but his makeup was not dissimilar from that of any citizen of any country. His guilt, which was not inscribed in his genes or in his German birth, lay entirely in the fact that he was unable to resist the pressure exerted on him by a violent environment even before Hitler's takeover.

To be fair, we have to admit that the young boy got off to a bad start. His father, a businessman, was a "fanatical Catholic" (but be careful: for Hoess, as in the overall Nazi vocabulary, the adjective 'fanatical' always has a positive ring). The father wanted his son to be a priest, yet he simultaneously subjected him to a rigid, military-like upbringing, while totally ignoring the boy's inclinations and aptitudes. Understandably the son felt no affection for his parents and became taciturn and introverted. Soon orphaned, he suffered a religious crisis, and when the Great War broke out he did not hesitate. His moral universe was now reduced to a single constellation: Duty, Fatherland, Comradeship, Courage. After enlisting in the army, the seventeen-year-old was shipped to the savage Iraqi front. He killed, was wounded, and felt he had become a man—that is, a soldier: for him the two words were synonymous.

War was the worst school—anywhere, but especially in a defeated and humiliated Germany. Yet Rudolph Hoess did not try to reintegrate himself in normal life. Amid the terrible conditions of post-war Germany, he joined one of the Freikorps, the volunteer corps, with their basically repressive aims. After participating in a political assassination, he was sentenced to ten years in prison. Life behind bars was hard, but it suited him. He was no rebel, he liked discipline and order, he even liked expiating: he was a model prisoner. His heart was in the right place: he had accepted the violence of war because it was ordered by Authority, but he was disgusted at the violence committed by his fellow inmates because their acts were spontaneous. That was to become one of his leitmotifs: order is necessary in everything.

directives have to come from higher up, they are good by definition, and they are carried out conscientiously and without discussion; personal initiative is permissible only if it fosters a more efficient execution of orders. Hoess was suspicious of friendship, love, and sex, he was a loner.

After six years he was amnestied and he then found work in a farming community. He got married, but he admits that he never succeeded in communicating intimately with his wife—either then or later on, when he needed even more to do so. It was at this point that the pitfall opened before him: he was invited to join the SS and he accepted, drawn as he was by the "prospect of a rapid career" and "the concomitant financial advantages." And it is also at this point that he lies to the reader for the first time: "Reading [Heinrich] Himmler's invitation to join the SS service in the concentration camps. I did not think even minimally about the actual reality of those camps. . . . They were an absolutely unknown concept, and I failed to have any idea of them." Come now, Commandant Hoess. Lying requires a lot more mental agility. That was the year 1934. Hitler was already in power and had never pulled any punches. The term 'concentration camp' was already well-known in its new meaning: few people knew what went on in the camps, but everyone knew that these were places of terror and horror—and enough was known about them in the world of the SS. The "concept" was anything but "unknown," it was already being cynically utilised in the regime's propaganda: 'If you don't behave, you'll end up in a concentration camp' had become an almost proverbial turn of phrase.

Rudolph Hoess's career was indeed rapid. His prison experience was not useless: his superiors, who rightfully viewed him as a specialist, turned down his feeble requests to go back to the troops. Both forms of service were equally valid: after all, the enemy was ubiquitous—at the borders and on the inside. Hoess had no reason to feel slighted. He accepted. If it was his duty to be a jailer, then a jailer he would be with all possible diligence. "I must confess that I did my job conscientiously and attentively, I had no regard for the prisoners, I was severe and often harsh." No one doubts that he was harsh, but the statement that his "stone mask" concealed an aching heart is not only an indecent but also a childish lie.

Still, he is not lying when he repeatedly maintains that once he entered the Nazi machine it was difficult to get out. He would certainly not have been risking death, or even a severe punishment, but leaving would indeed have been difficult. Life in the SS involved a skilful and

intense 're-education' that fed the ambitions of the recruits, who, mostly uneducated and frustrated outcasts, felt their self-esteem thus boosted and exalted. The uniform was elegant, the pay was good, the power was virtually unlimited, and impunity was guaranteed. Today they were the masters of Germany and tomorrow—according to one of their anthems—the entire world.

At the outbreak of World War II, Rudolph Hoess was already the *Schutzhaftlagerführer* (leader of the protective-custody camp—at Sachsenhausen, which was no small position. But he deserved a promotion. And when, to his surprise and delight he was named Commandant of a new camp, he accepted. The camp, which was still under construction, was located far from Germany near a small Polish town named Oswiecim or, in German, Auschwitz.

He was truly—as he puts it without irony—an expert. At this juncture, his text becomes agitated: the Hoess who is writing this has already been condemned to death by a Polish tribunal, and since this sentence has been handed down by an authority, he fully accepts it. But this is no reason for him not to describe his finest hour. He pontificates, supplying us with a veritable treatise on city planning, his knowledge must not be lost, nor his patrimony scattered. He teaches us how to plan, build, and run a concentration camp so it will function smoothly, *reibungslos* (without friction), despite the ineptness of subordinates and the blindness and internal conflicts of superiors, who sent him more trainloads than the camp could handle. And what about him, the Commandant? Well, he makes do as best he can. Here, Hoess becomes downright heroic: he asks for the reader's praise, admiration, even commiseration. He was a highly competent and zealous functionary, sacrificing everything to his camp: his days, his nights of rest, his feelings for his family. But the Inspectorate had no understanding for him, they sent him no provisions—so that he, the model bureaucrat, squeezed between the upper and lower jaws of authority, had to "literally go and steal the most urgent minimum of barbed wire. . . . I had to attend to my own concerns!"

He's less convincing when setting himself up as a pundit for the sociology of the *Lager*. With righteous disgust he bemoans the infighting among the prisoners. What riffraff! They know neither honour nor solidarity, the great virtues of the German people. But then several lines later he nevertheless admits that 'those struggles were stirred up and cultivated by the head of the camp'—that is, Rudolph Hoess. With professional bonté he describes the various categories of inmates

mingling his old-fashioned scorn with jarring cries of post-facto hypocritical piety. The political prisoners were better than the common criminals, the Gypsies ("the inmates I cherished most") were better than the homosexuals, the Russian POWs were animals, and he never liked the Jews.

In regard to the Jews his false notes become more strident. He feels no conflict, his Nazi indoctrination never collides with a new and more humane vision of the world. Quite simply, Hoess has understood nothing, he has not transcended his past, he is not cured. When he says (and quite frequently at that), "Now I realize. . . . Now I understand. . . .", he is brazenly lying—as do today's political 'penitents' and all those who express their remorse in words rather than deeds. Why does he lie? Perhaps in order to leave us with a better image of himself, or perhaps only because his judges, who are his new superiors, have told him that the correct opinions are no longer the earlier ones but are now entirely different ones.

The theme of Jews shows us how heavily Goebbels's propaganda weighed on Germany and how hard it is to wipe out the effects it had—even on a pliant individual like Rudolph Hoess. He admits that the Jews were "quite persecuted" in Germany, but then he quickly points out that their mass presence had a pernicious impact on the moral level of the camps: the Jews, as is well-known, are rich, and money can corrupt anybody, even the highly ethical officials of the SS. But the puritan Hoess (who had an affair with an Auschwitz prisoner and extricated himself by sending her to her death) does not agree with the pornographic anti-Semitism of Streicher's *Der Stürmer*: his newspaper "caused a lot of harm; it was totally useless for serious anti-Semitism." But this is not surprising since, as Hoess ad-libs, "the editor was a Jew." It was the Jews who spread (Hoess doesn't dare say, 'invented') the atrocity stories about Germany, and for that reason the Jews deserve to be punished. However, Hoess the Righteous disagrees with his superior Eicke, who wanted to stop the leaking of information by applying the intelligent system of collective punishment. The campaign about atrocities would have continued even if hundreds or thousands of people had been shot to death" (the stress on even a gem of Nazi logic, is mine).

In the summer of 1941, Himmler "personally" notified Rudolph Hoess that Auschwitz would be something different from a place of affliction; it had to be "the largest extermination centre of all time," and Hoess and his colleagues would have to come up with the best technology. Hoess didn't bat an eye, it was an order like any other, and

orders are not to be questioned. Experiments had been conducted in other camps, but mass machine-gunnings and toxic injections were inconvenient; they needed something faster and more reliable. Above all, the Germans had to avoid "bloodbaths," because they had a demoralising effect on the executioners. After the bloodiest actions, several SS-men killed themselves, others got methodically drunk. What they needed was something aseptic, something impersonal, to safeguard the mental health of the soldiers. Collective gassing set off by motors was a step in the right direction, but it had to be perfected. Hoess and his assistant got the brilliant idea of resorting to Cyclon B, a poison used on rats and cockroaches, and it was all for the best. After testing it on nine hundred Russian prisoners, Hoess felt "greatly at ease": the mass killing had gone well both quantitatively and qualitatively - no blood, and no trauma. It's one thing machine-gunning a bunch of naked people on the edge of a pit that they themselves have dug; but inserting a container of poison through an air conduit is fundamentally different. Rudolph Hoess's highest aspiration was reached, his professionalism had been demonstrated and he was the finest technician of mass slaughter. His envious colleagues were clobbered.

The most repugnant pages of this autobiography are those on which Hoess is quick to describe the brutality and indifference of those Jews who were assigned to get rid of the corpses. These passages contain a loathsome charge, an accusation of complicity, as if these unfortunates (weren't they too 'carrying out orders?') could assume the guilt of the people who had created and delegated them. The crux of the book, and its least credible lie, then appears on page 154: in regard to killing children, Hoess says, "I felt such immense pity that I wanted to vanish from the face of the earth, but I wasn't allowed to show the slightest emotion." Who would have prevented him from "vanishing"? Not Himmler, his supreme superior, who, despite Hoess's great esteem, comes across as both a demi-urge and a pedantic, incoherent, and intractable idiot.

In the final section, which takes on the tone of a spiritual testament, Hoess again fails to gauge the horror of what he has done or to find a touch of sincerity. "Today I understand that the extermination of the Jews was a mistake, a colossal mistake" (not a 'crime'). "Anti-Semitism was absolutely useless [for us]; quite the contrary, Judaism took advantage of it in order to get closer to its ultimate objective." A short time later, Hoess says he felt "faint" upon "learning of the horrible tortures

man writing those words is about to be hanged, we are stunned by his obstinacy in lying until his very last breath. There is only one possible explanation: Hoess, like all of his ilk (not only Germans; I'm thinking of the confessions of terrorists who have repented or dissociated themselves), spent all his life assimilating lies from the very air he breathed and therefore lying to himself.

We can wonder—and someone will certainly ask himself or others—if it makes any sense putting this book out again today, forty years after the end of the war and thirty-eight years after the execution of its author. To my mind there are at least two good reasons for doing so. The first reason is a contingent one. Several years ago, an insidious trend was launched when people began affirming that the number of victims of the Nazi era was far less than stated by 'official history,' and that no poison gas was used to kill human beings in the camps. In regard to both these points, Rudolph Hoess's testimony is complete and explicit, nor would he have formulated it in such a precise and articulate manner, and with so many details confirmed by survivors and by material evidence, if he had been acting under coercion, as the 'revisionists' allege. Hoess often lies to justify himself but never about facts; indeed, he seems proud of his organisational work. He and his supposed instigators would have had to be very shrewd to concoct such a coherent and plausible story out of thin air. The confessions extorted by the Inquisition, or by the Moscow Trials of the nineteen-thirties, or by the witch-hunts had an entirely different tone.

The second reason for republishing Hoess's book is an essential one with a permanent validity. At present, when many tears are being shed over the end of the ideologies, it strikes me that this text reveals in an exemplary fashion how far an ideology can go when it is accepted as radically as by Hitler's Germans, indeed by extremists in general. Ideologies can be good or bad, and it is good to know them, confront them, and attempt to evaluate them. But it is always bad to espouse an ideology even if it is cloaked with respectable words such as 'Country' and 'Duty.' The ultimate consequences of blindly accepted Duty—that is, Nazi Germany's *Führerprinzip*, the principle of unquestioning devotion to a Great Leader—are demonstrated by the story of Rudolph Hoess.

Primo Levi
March 1985

Translated from Italian by Joachim Neugroschel

They flinched from nothing, no matter how desperate, in their efforts to make such safe jobs fall vacant and then to acquire them for themselves. Victory usually went to the most unscrupulous man or woman. Time and again I heard of these struggles to oust a rival and win his job.

In the various camps I had become well acquainted with the struggles for supremacy waged between the different categories of prisoners and political groups, and with the intrigues that went on to secure the higher posts. But I found that the Jews in Auschwitz could still teach me a lot. 'Necessity is the mother of invention', and here it was an actual question of sheer survival.

Nevertheless, it frequently happened that persons who had acquired these safe positions would suddenly lose their grip, or would gradually fade away, when they learnt of the death of their closest relations. This would happen without any physical cause such as illness or bad living conditions. The Jews have always had very strong family feelings. The death of a near relative makes them feel that their own lives are no longer worth living, and are therefore not worth fighting for.

I have also seen quite the contrary, during the mass exterminations, but I shall refer to this later.

What I have written above applies particularly to the female inmates of all sorts.

But then everything was much more difficult, harsher and more depressing for the women, since general living conditions in the women's camp were incomparably worse. They were far more tightly packed in, and the sanitary and hygienic conditions were notably inferior. Furthermore the disastrous overcrowding and its consequences, which existed from the very beginning, prevented any proper order being established in the women's camp.¹

The general congestion was far greater than in the men's camp. When the women had reached the bottom, they would let them-

¹ From mid-May 1942 the newly built Women's Camp at Birkenau was designated as the principal detention camp for German and non-German female prisoners. In July 1942 the Reich Security Head Office informed all senior police and security offices that henceforth all arrested females were to be sent to Auschwitz. In September of that year Himmler ordered that all the Jewish women in Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp were to be transferred to Auschwitz, and that Ravensbrück was to be made 'Jew-pure'. A number of non-Jewish inmates from Ravensbrück had already been moved to Auschwitz to act as female Capos in the new Women's Camp there; these were principally criminals and a-socials (see below).



1. Arrival of a transport train. To the left and right can be seen part of the barracks of the Birkenau camp, in the background the chimneys of crematoriums II and III





3. An SS doctor examining the prisoners as to their fitness for work. The white edge to his cap denotes an officer's rank



5. Old men who failed the selection



6. Women and children waiting for further orders, often long delayed



7. Women and children walking along the road after receiving orders to proceed in the direction of the 'Baths'. They sometimes waited in nearby woods till the batch ahead had departed, then had to undress and go to the gas chambers





9. Entrance to the camp. The lettering over the gateway erected by the SS reads: 'Work Brings Freedom'. A guard tower and notice board warning about electric wires can be seen



10. Women prisoners after being undressed, shaved and given prison dress; their prison number was tattooed under their left arm





12. Men prisoners after receiving their prison clothes. Men and women went to different camps



selves go completely. They would then stumble about like ghosts, without any will of their own, and had to be pushed everywhere by the others, until the day came when they quietly passed away. These stumbling corpses were a terrible sight.

The 'green' female prisoners were of a special sort. I believe that Ravensbrück was combed through to find the 'best' for Auschwitz. They far surpassed their male equivalents in toughness, squalor, vindictiveness and depravity. Most were prostitutes with many convictions, and some were truly repulsive creatures. Needless to say, these dreadful women gave full vent to their evil desires on the prisoners under them, which was unavoidable. The Reichsführer SS regarded them as particularly well-suited to act as Capos over the Jewish women, when he visited Auschwitz in 1942. Not many of these women died, except from disease.

They were soulless and had no feelings whatsoever.

The Budy blood-bath is still before my eyes.¹ I find it incredible that human beings could ever turn into such beasts. The way the 'greens' knocked the French Jewesses about, tearing them to pieces, killing them with axes, and throttling them—it was simply gruesome.

Luckily not all the 'greens' and 'blacks' were such utter brutes. There were capable ones among them, who preserved a measure of sympathy for their fellow-prisoners. But such women were of course continually and cruelly persecuted by other members of their colour. Nor could the majority of female supervisors² understand this.

A welcome contrast were the female Jehovah's Witnesses, who were nicknamed 'bible-bees' or 'bible-worms'.

Unfortunately there were too few of them. Despite their more or less fanatical attitude they were much in demand. They were employed as servants in the homes of SS-men with large families, the Waffen SS club-house, and even in the SS officers' mess. But they worked above all on the land.

They worked on the poultry farm at Harmense,³ and on various

¹ Budy was a village some five miles from the Auschwitz base camp, where a punishment company of prisoners was stationed and employed on drainage work connected with the Vistula. This punishment unit was completely cut off from the rest of the camp and the Capos of both sexes, who were recruited from among the criminals, conducted a reign of terror over their prisoners.

² The female equivalent of the SS guards.

³ One of the agricultural undertakings run from Auschwitz. There was also a fish-processing plant at Harmense.

OPINIÓN

27-9-2011



¡QUIA!

ARCADI
ESPADA*Obedientes*

ENTRE LAS rendijas de una información sobre los encuentros entre víctimas y verdugos del terrorismo etarra o, para decirlo en la neolengua de todo proceso de arrepentimiento, entre víctimas y victimarios, se vislumbra una línea de defensa del terrorismo etarra: «Las víctimas se han reunido con reclusos de la banda que han hablado como exmiembros de una organización jerárquica en la que ellos no elegían a sus víctimas: cumplían órdenes.» La nota, de *El País*, coincide con mi lectura de las memorias de Rudolf Höss, el comandante de Auschwitz. Como las de otros jefes nazis, se trata de unas memorias dudosas, en el sentido de que no se sabe bien hasta qué punto las escribió él y en qué condiciones. Pero su apelación a la obediencia debida es un clásico. Höss dice que no era fácil eludir las órdenes sabiendo que a los desobedientes les esperaba un Consejo de Guerra. No le falta razón, desde luego. Una de las características del crimen es lo cómodo que es, y la buena vida que llevan los criminales.

De generalizarse, más allá de este caso concreto, me sorprendería la adhesión de los terroristas a la doctrina de la obediencia debida. Yo esperaba más bien

de algunos de ellos las consabidas alusiones al entorno, que también aparecen en su pliego de descargos, aunque con un rol secundario. Sobre el entorno, por cierto, hay un párrafo

«Una de las características del crimen es lo cómodo que es, y la buena vida que llevan los criminales»

irrevocable en la introducción de Primo Levi a las memorias de Höss: «Se pasó la vida haciendo tuyas las mentiras que impregnaban el aire que respiraba y, por lo tanto, mintiéndose a sí mismo». Es verdad que la doctrina de la obediencia prolonga el simulacro militar que los terroristas de ETA siempre quisieron dar a la naturaleza de su lucha, a su estructura y a sus acciones, y hasta a sus venganzas, entre las que destaca con repulsión imprescriptible el asesinato de su compinche Yoyes. Pero, aparte de exponerse al absurdo del simulacro, la justificación de la obediencia decepciona. Advertir en el terrorista etarra la naturaleza de un reclutado forzoso es demoledor para una mitología radicalmente incompatible con cualquier modalidad mercenaria. Ante la exigencia de la patria todo intercambio, sea el de la vida, la libertad o el dinero, resulta envilecedor. Un terrorista no obedece órdenes: las experimenta.

Por lo demás he de decir que, desde el punto de vista logístico, me parece una vía muerta. A cada puerca obediencia debida le llega su Nuremberg.



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>Vea de martes a sábado el videoblog de Carlos Cuesta **La escopeta nacional**. Sólo en EL MUNDO en Orbyt, hoy: *La paradoja del ladrón*

