A specialist: the daily work of Erich Muhsfeldt, chief of the crematorium at Majdanek concentration and extermination camp, 1942–44¹

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In the context of the invasion of the Soviet Union, due to begin on 22 June 1941, Heinrich Himmler, visiting Lublin on 20 June that year, ordered a camp to be built in this Polish city situated in the south-east of occupied Poland, the so-called Generalgouvernement. Officially run as the ‘Lublin Waffen-SS prisoner of war camp’, the camp – which the prisoners named after the Lublin suburb of Majdan Tatarski – was nevertheless revealed after inspection to be a concentration camp,² although, for as long as it existed, from 1941 to 1944, it fulfilled many different functions. It served as a prisoner of war camp for Soviet soldiers (1941–44), as a labour camp primarily for Jewish, but also for Polish, prisoners (1941–42), as a hostage and internment camp for the Polish and Soviet rural population, and as a concentration camp principally for Polish political prisoners (1942–44). In October 1942 a women’s camp was set up within the men’s camp, for Polish and Jewish women, where Jewish infants were also occasionally held. The Jewish prisoners – women, men, and children – were systematically murdered, since Majdanek was, between June 1942 and November 1943, one of the extermination camps for European Jews from all over Europe.

The history of the camp is directly linked with the National Socialist policy of occupation and extermination in occupied Poland, as well as with the course of the war on the Eastern Front. Majdanek was a place of political and racist persecution and forced labour, and, at the same time, it was a place of systematic

extermination.³ The Polish historian Tomasz Kranz coined the phrase 'multifunctional provisional arrangement'⁴ to describe Majdanek, as its multifunctionality and improvisational character make it difficult to compare with other concentration camps. The nearest parallel is Auschwitz, which was also a concentration camp and extermination camp combined. I follow the French historian and sociologist Jacques Sémelin, and I make use of his social science oriented concept of 'destruction'.⁵ Destruction is a broader and less normative concept than the judicial concepts of 'murder' and 'genocide', and it may be the result of any method of killing, whether it involves fire, water, gas, hunger, or cold, or whether direct and fast or stealthy and slow.⁶ This concept is useful in examining the mass murder that took place at Majdanek concentration and extermination camp since it can be used to analyse the systematic murder of European Jews as well as the mass extermination of prisoners of different nationalities. This makes it possible to see how concentration camp violence went hand in hand with genocidal violence.

The SS killed the prisoners in Majdanek and destroyed their bodies in many different ways. Because of poor material provision and poor maintenance of the camp's infrastructure by the SS, epidemics were rife and killed thousands of prisoners. Instead of resolving the problem and providing better living conditions, the SS killed prisoners who were, or were suspected of being, ill. They were killed, or 'injected' (*abgespritzt*) as it was called in SS language, in the medical section with carbolic acid or petrol injections. Larger groups were shot in a nearby forest area. The systematic murder of Jewish prisoners began in June 1942, and the murdering did not only take place in the gas chambers. Most were killed in mass shootings, the last of these being the massacre of 3 November 1943, the so-called Aktion Erntefest (Operation Harvest Festival), in which 18,000 Jews were murdered.⁷ The genocide of the European Jews was carried out as 'Geheime Reichssache' (secret Reich business). The SS were scrupulous in ensuring that virtually no administrative evidence of it was produced and that even less was left.

According to Thomas Kranz, because of limited source material, the exact number of fatalities at Majdanek can no longer be established. Today the research assumes that between summer 1941 and summer 1944, some 78,000 people lost their lives at Majdanek, of whom 59,000 were of Jewish origin.⁸ The analysis of occupancy at the camp showed that, in comparison with Auschwitz, the SS

committed a relatively high percentage of Jewish prisoners to the camp (i.e. let them live at the selections). According to Kranz, over 60 per cent of those who died did not die in the gas chambers but rather because of extremely poor supplies and living conditions, malnutrition, forced labour, illness, or violent treatment by camp staff.⁹ In this sense, it was not only the camp commanders who bore considerable responsibility for the lethal living conditions: it was also the female supervisors and SS men who, in the way they conducted themselves in their daily duties, controlled and decided the lives and deaths of the prisoners.

It is precisely this daily work, with its protagonists and social dynamics, that deserves our attention in all its complexity and presumed normalcy, for it points us towards the social practices of concentration camp supervisory staff, the ambiguity of their actions, and the production and organization of social norms. For this purpose, an everyday historical approach is useful because it no longer focuses on the elites,¹⁰ but rather on the everyday work of 'normal' perpetrators in terms of a history of experience. In our case this group is the subordinate SS staff¹¹ of the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp. To ask questions about daily realities and daily practices has the 'controversial consequence', to quote Alf Lüdtke, 'that not only the people in "high command" become visible as historical agents'.¹²

Taking a closer look at daily work at the camp reveals how closely work and extermination were bound, for violence on a massive scale does not imply the suspension of the everyday; rather, in the daily practice of violence, and even in exceptional circumstances – at the workplace of the concentration camp – a particular kind of banality emerges, and this should be explored and scrutinized. My thesis is that the enormous scale of violence and extermination at the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp cannot solely be explained by the National Socialist policy of persecution and extermination, or the 'institution' of the concentration camp. The SS men and women's actual modes of behaviour on site, and the emotional background to these, are also determining factors. As we will see, in the context of daily work, material interests, and individual states of mind or needs are interwoven with the National Socialist policy of persecution and extermination.

In this chapter I analyse the working practices at Majdanek, using statements made in court during the Krakow Auschwitz trial (1946–47) by Erich Muhsfeldt (also spelt Mußfeldt), the chief of the crematorium at Majdanek, as well as statements made by his

deputy, Robert Seitz, as part of the investigations for the Düsseldorf Majdanek trial.¹³ Even though the judicial statements of former SS staff are in many respects problematic (the discourse of exculpation, refusing to speak about acts of violence, extenuation, etc.), they are nonetheless very useful for a study focused on everyday history. The depositions that have been recorded enable the historian to semantically analyse the former SS staff members' argumentation and their justification of their actions. If we examine their statements in their cultural, social, and historical context we can reconstruct the SS men's internal logic and value system from statements made during their interrogations. Ultimately, we are also able to analyse the social dimension of their actions. By linking historical setting and ethnological analysis we should gain an insight into the way of life and the practice of violence at Majdanek.

The assignment

Extermination was carried out as a professional work process that entailed many different steps and that actively involved a multitude of agents, male and female. The prisoners had to be selected, some of them bathed and stripped of all their valuables, supervised, and eventually killed. Finally, the corpses were transported off site and – again via several procedures – removed.¹⁴ Whereas the processes of killing and the cremation work at Auschwitz have been thoroughly researched by Robert Jan van Pelt,¹⁵ there has been no such study of Majdanek.

As in Auschwitz, the 'removal' of corpses was an important job within the extermination process at Majdanek. First, it had to be carried out as efficiently as possible, for reasons of hygiene and the threat of epidemics, and, second, this work had political significance, for it was, of course, about removing evidence of mass murder. The job was done by special squads in Majdanek, as in Auschwitz. Jewish and Soviet prisoners worked under the command of prisoners who were 'citizens of the Reich' (*Reichsdeutsche*) and under the strict supervision of SS staff. The two men who led this squad were the chief of the crematorium, Senior Squad Leader Erich Muhsfeldt, and his deputy, Junior Squad Leader Robert Seitz.

Muhsfeldt was born in Brandenburg in 1913, and he was a qualified baker in terms of his civilian profession. He joined the SA in 1933, and in 1939 he became a member of the Nationalist Socialist Party. In 1940 he switched to the SS, where he first completed a

short training course in Sachsenhausen and was then transferred to the main camp at Auschwitz in August of the same year.¹⁶ At first, he led various prisoner work squads there, and soon he became a block commander (*Blockführer*).

According to his own statements, Junior Squad Leader (*Unterscharführer*) Muhsfeldt was moved to Majdanek on 15 November 1941, where he again worked as a commander of a block. He recounts that a few months after his arrival, in the summer of 1942, the then camp commander, Karl-Otto Koch, transferred to him the so-called 'funeral squad'. He stated that he took on this job reluctantly.¹⁷ To provide him with assistance, Muhsfeldt was given Junior Squad Leader Robert Seitz as his deputy. Seitz was born in 1911 in Liedolsheim and transferred to Majdanek in late 1941 or early 1942.

Initiation into extermination 'work' and further professionalization

According to Muhsfeldt's statements, between November 1941 and June 1942 the corpses were hastily buried in mass graves on a plot of land behind the area where Field V was later constructed. Due to the high mortality rates in the camp, the mass graves were constantly expanded.¹⁸ Seitz, too, indicated in his interrogation that the corpses were 'buried'¹⁹ in the beginning. 'For the transport and burial of the corpses there was a special squad consisting of Polish Jewish prisoners of war',²⁰ Muhsfeldt explained at the 1947 Krakow Auschwitz trial. But this method was uneconomical and too time-consuming in the long run, since corpses had to be transported to the graves in trucks.

In June 1942 the first crematorium, made by the Kori company in Berlin, was built between Fields I and II, diagonally opposite the bathing barracks which later became the gas chambers. This crematorium was known in the camp as the 'old crematorium'. The Kori company was a rival of the renowned firm Topf & Söhne, based in Erfurt, which supplied material to Auschwitz and other camps. Both companies specialized in heating systems, delousing equipment, and combustion furnaces for incineration and waste.²¹

Because both furnaces at the Majdanek crematorium came from the Sachsenhausen camp, the camp command sent Muhsfeldt there to be trained in incineration before the Majdanek crematorium was put into operation. He spent a week with the squad leader of

the crematorium there, Chief Squad Leader (*Hauptscharführer*) Klein, learning how to operate the furnaces. According to his own statements, Muhsfeldt performed this duty unwillingly:

But I didn't like the work. This is why, after I returned to Lublin and had to show Kommandant Koch how I operated the furnaces, I started a fire, where the roof of the barrack where the two furnaces were housed burned down.²²

We have no way of knowing today whether he really felt this way. His immediate reluctance, however, was dispelled. Because this crematorium work was of national-political importance, and probably also in order to motivate Muhsfeldt, he was immediately promoted on 1 September 1942 to SS Squad Leader (*Scharführer*).²³

As Seitz explained in his interrogation, at the time of the implementation of the 'funeral squad' it was assigned a new team, which means that the previous prisoner crew had been killed.²⁴ At the Krakow Auschwitz trial Muhsfeldt gave a detailed description of how the crematorium was operated:

It consisted of two iron furnaces which held fire clay bricks inside. Each furnace functioned independently, had its own chimney and was heated with oil.... Each crematorium furnace had only one combustion chamber. 2-5 corpses could fit into a combustion chamber like this. Around 100 corpses could be burned in each furnace every day if they were in constant operation for 24 hours.... The first crematorium was in operation up to the end of October 1942. From June 1942 until October 1942 I always led the work in the crematorium, and so I can say that during this period around 5,000 corpses were burned in the crematorium.²⁵

Any remains of corpses were ground up in the so-called 'bone mills' and scattered in the surrounding woods or used as fertilizer in the nursery at the Fellin storage facility. Magnificent cabbages thrived there, and this remained a vivid memory for all the camp's survivors.²⁶

It must be noted here that the cremation that took place in Majdanek, as in all other concentration and extermination camps, was not 'professional' in terms of civil cremation standards for the time. Unlike in civil cremation, where only one corpse is burned sequentially per oven, so that the ashes can be attributed to this person, the SS burned several corpses at once in one furnace chamber, meaning that the ash could not be attributed unequivocally to any one person. The ash and other remains of the burned corpses were mixed together in metal containers under the

grills. 'If sometimes Germans from the Reich requested the ashes of their dead relatives, they were just given something from the large mound',²⁷ explained the Polish prisoner and former 'Clerk of the Dead' Julian Gregorowicz before the Düsseldorf regional court.

The first crematorium in Majdanek was powered by oil, and because there was soon a shortage of oil the SS stopped operating the combustion furnaces as early as November 1942.²⁸ According to Muhsfeldt's statements, the crematorium team then returned to the old method, of burying the corpses.²⁹ If we believe the chief of the crematorium's estimates, his squad buried around 2,000 corpses in the Krepiecki forest between November 1942 and January 1943. The corpses were taken into the forest by the SS men in trucks. Again, the crematorium replaced its prisoner team: 'I was assigned 20 French and German Jews', Muhsfeldt explained to the Krakow court. 'Apart from these 20 Jews, I also had 3 Russian prisoners of war and a German overseer working in my squad.'³⁰

Yet the mass graves could be only a temporary solution. On 19 February 1943 Muhsfeldt was sent for further training: this time he was to learn how to burn corpses in open pits at Auschwitz, that is, at Birkenau. We will see in the next section how this was a technique he was to develop and perfect.

Muhsfeldt travelled to Auschwitz together with the SS medic and future manager of the Majdanek gas chamber Anton Endreß (also spelt Entress), who was sent to view the delousing institute and to familiarize himself with the killing of people by gas. At Auschwitz Muhsfeldt reported to Camp Commandant Höss, who referred him to the Protective Custody Camp Leader (*Schutzhaftlagerführer*) Hans Aumeier.³¹ 'Aumeier showed me the site plan of a corpse-burning pit, explained the map to me and added that corpses burned excellently in the open pit',³² Muhsfeldt recalled in Krakow. In the end, the Protective Custody Camp Leader sent Endreß and Muhsfeldt to Maximilian Grabner, the chief of the political division. He placed a subordinate SS man, Bogner, at the disposal of the two delegates from Majdanek, who took them to the open pits where the corpses of people who had been gassed were burned.³³

There, the squad leader who was in charge of the work explained to us the process of gassing and the burning of the corpses. The corpses were burned right there in the pit, and the gas chamber was empty. It was a walled building, a farmhouse that had been converted into a gas chamber.³⁴

Auschwitz started operating its first crematorium from the firm Topf & Söhne, with a performance rate of more than 100 corpses

a day, as early as summer 1940, and was well ahead of Majdanek, with many more years of cremation experience.³⁵ As Robert van Pelt has so powerfully portrayed, as the mass killings and mortality rates at Auschwitz increased, the incineration facilities were gradually extended, and already by autumn 1941 they had reached a throughput of up to 1,440 corpses every day. In the course of the mass extermination of the Jews with gas, it was decided as early as February 1942 that a new, large crematorium should be set up at Birkenau. The farmhouse that Muhsfeldt describes in his interrogation was converted according to the most modern standards and was, like all the crematoria in Auschwitz, both gas chamber and incineration facility in one. In the late winter of 1943, when Muhsfeldt came for his training at Auschwitz-Birkenau, it was serving mainly as a crematorium. At this time the killings had reached an average of 800 every day, and the bodies were disposed of in four crematoria altogether. Yet it seems they could barely cope with the corpses, which meant that open incineration pits had to be used concomitantly.

The day after the short, intensive period of training at Auschwitz, Endreß, and Muhsfeldt returned to Lublin and started their work straightaway. Endreß took on the management of the gas chamber, while Muhsfeldt and his team, on the orders of the new commandant, Hermann Florstedt, had to exhume the corpses in the Krepiecki forest, dig up the graves on the edge of Field V, and then burn the remains on funeral pyres.³⁶ This massive exhumation operation, which went under the code name Special Operation 1005, involved the cremation of all the Jews in the General Government for the Occupied Polish Territories and Soviet prisoners of war who were executed and buried during Operation Reinhardt. Special Operation 1005 was carried out in order to remove all traces of this crime. People who had been gassed or who had died in other ways in the concentration camp were also 'disposed of' in this way from thereon. In 1961 Seitz described this cremation work as follows:

I went to the forest about twice with the squad myself. On these occasions 20 Jewish workers were deployed. I estimated that the forest area was about 8 kilometres from Majdanek concentration camp. The cremation site was in the middle of the forest. A grill had been made out of hollowed out railway track. The fuel was the oil already mentioned. At any one time I had four or five members of the SS security force with me to guard the prisoners.³⁷

Over the following months, like his colleagues in Auschwitz, Muhsfeldt and his crew developed a system that optimized the

cremation process: corpses with fatty tissue burned better, so they were put at the bottom on the grill to kindle the fire. Muhsfeldt explained the technique in detail at the Krakow Auschwitz trial:

First, I dug a pit. But because I could not kindle the fire in the pit, I built myself the following construction for cremating the corpses themselves: I mounted old truck undercarriages onto large stones, laid the corpses on top and poured methanol over them. I put layers of wood under the undercarriages and lit them. About 100 corpses were cremated each time in one go. These were corpses from the pits as well as freshly dead bodies from the camp. Once one load had been burned, it was pounded into meal, and then it was poured into the pit where the corpses were stored for cremation. An iron board and an iron pounder were used to pound the bones. This is the operative method I used up to the end of October 1943 to cremate all the corpses buried in the forest and the corpses from the pits behind camp Field V.³⁸

According to Muhsfeldt's statements, he cremated around 6,000 corpses in the forest and around 3,000 behind Field V. As we can see, Muhsfeldt clearly became reconciled to his work over time; in fact, he developed not only expertise but also ambition. His work was esteemed by his superiors, and on 1 June 1943 the departing Commandant Florstedt promoted Muhsfeldt to SS Senior Squad Leader (*Oberscharführer*).³⁹

The specialist

In November 1943 his expertise was needed again, this time with particular urgency. The day after the massacre of 3 November 1943 (in Operation Harvest Festival), on the orders of the departing Commandant Florstedt and his successor, Weiss, Muhsfeldt's squad set about cremating 18,000 corpses behind the crematorium, in the pits. Here, the chief of the crematorium used the cremation technique he had learned in Auschwitz, and which he explained in detail at an interrogation:

On the 4th I collected wood and planks and on 5 November 1943 I began cremating the corpses. Because the part of the ditch where the victims entered did not have corpses in it, I filled it with some soil so that the ditch was a bit flatter and had a better draught. Then I built a kind of grill out of wood on the ground. The prisoners placed the corpses from the ditches in layers on top. Once there was a stack of corpses it was covered in methanol and set alight. The next corpses were then constantly piled up in the ditch in the places where corpses

had been taken away for cremation. Once the ash had cooled after the cremation it was brought to the top by prisoners in my squad, where it was ground with a special petrol-powered mill and turned into bone meal. The bone meal was put into paper sacks and taken by car to SS land near the camp.⁴⁰

It was a matter of removing traces of evidence, and this was of great political importance in the context of the Front moving closer and closer. The fact that – according to Muhsfeldt's descriptions – an official of the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) Lublin was closely supervising the cremation workers indicates the top political priority of this whole operation. The SD officer wanted to make sure that all the corpses were cremated.

Muhsfeldt came up to the expectations of his superiors and had shown, once again, he could work efficiently. In Krakow he explained, not without pride: 'I completed the cremation of 17,000 murdered Jews, which began on 3 November 1943, before Christmas 1943'.⁴¹ After that, the ditches were filled with soil and levelled off.

Former female supervisors vividly remembered the cremation work, which lasted just under two months. 'It went on day and night, and it smelled terrible',⁴² said Anna M. at the Düsseldorf Majdanek trial. In a documentary film, Luzie H. similarly remembered the stench that accompanied these cremations in their daily work:

After the shootings they filled in the ditches, you know, and then they always burned the corpses. That really stank! That really stank! The smoke came over the camp street where we walked to work. Then we walked like this [covers nose and mouth with left hand – EM] with a handkerchief over our faces through the smoke to work.⁴³

Meanwhile, in September 1943 the building of a new crematorium had begun, but it was ready for operation only in January 1944. This new crematorium, which, like the old one, came from the Kori company in Berlin, had five chambers and therefore a larger capacity, was cheaper to heat, as it was fuelled with coke, and was meant to create less of a stench. Coke, the solid carbonic remainder from bituminous coal, is low in ash and sulphur, and burns with an almost invisible blue flame. Ideally, it does not produce any rust or visible smoky gases when it burns. Muhsfeldt set about testing the new material as soon as the crematorium was up and running:

Only one corpse was put into one combustion chamber. The cremation took around 1 hour. I burned one corpse after another in all the furnaces in order to try them out. The corpses burned only very slowly, for the

furnace had a weak chimney draught. Because the one chimney had to serve all combustion points, it had a poor draught and the burning happened very slowly.⁴⁴

Not least, this draught defect once again caused a dreadful smell, which continued to leave its mark on the daily work of all the staff at Majdanek.

However, according to Muhsfeldt's statements, once the evacuation of the camp began in January 1944, 'fewer corpses accrued, so I could no longer keep trying out the daily capacity of this crematorium in my work at Majdanek'.⁴⁵ We might be tempted to think that he was bored in this final phase at Majdanek, before he was transferred to Auschwitz in May 1944.

The end of a (successful) career

Once he arrived at Auschwitz, Muhsfeldt worked under the direction of Otto Moll, leader of the two special squads of crematoria I and II. However, seemingly at Auschwitz as initially at Majdanek, Muhsfeldt did not enjoy the work anymore, as he complained at the Krakow trial that the equipment at Auschwitz had become dilapidated since he had last been there: 'The chimneys in these crematoria at that time were already so burnt-out and worn that you had to be prepared for the operation to stop at any minute'.⁴⁶

Muhsfeldt worked only during the day: 'Then in the mornings I came across corpses in the gas chamber and I started cremating them'.⁴⁷

14 days after beginning my duties there, I started cremating the corpses in crematoria I and II, which were under my control. These were the corpses of Jews who had been gassed in the crematoria. At this time only those Jews who came to the camp at night with the transports were gassed in crematoria I and II with the aid of gas. Prisoners who arrived by day were gassed and cremated in crematoria III and V as well as in the farmhouse behind the new sauna and the pits behind the house.⁴⁸

This shows how Muhsfeldt was significantly involved in the extermination of the Hungarian Jews, a killing operation that was coordinated by the former camp commandant, Rudolf Höss, who was specially delegated from Oranienburg to Auschwitz for this purpose. As squad leader, Muhsfeldt had at his side ten men

who changed guard duty shifts by day and night. Prisoners had to do the main work. We only have to look at the number of workers in the team for the two crematoria to see just how extensive the killings were. According to Muhsfeldt there were 180 in the teams, including twenty Russians from Lublin and some Poles and French Jews, but the majority were Greek Jews.

According to some estimates, Muhsfeldt cremated 10,000–12,000 corpses altogether during his time working in Auschwitz, between the end of May and the beginning of August 1944. Despite his initial lament about the state of the equipment, he acknowledged before the court the relatively high performance of the Auschwitz furnaces:

In these crematoria three adult corpses could be put into each combustion chamber. The corpses of children were classed as extras. It took about half an hour to cremate a load like this. The furnaces in these crematoria were more efficient than those in Majdanek. They were merely heated up and then switched off, so the corpses burned in their own flames which were formed as the corpses burned.⁴⁹

The SS men and the medics on duty who served in the special squads were given vouchers for extra provisions for their hard work: they could get an extra half a litre of schnapps, ten extra cigarettes, and a piece of sausage and bread.⁵⁰

Muhsfeldt had already requested to be transferred to the Front while at Majdanek because he was enjoying his work less and less. By mid-August his request was finally granted, and he was assigned to a combat unit of the Waffen SS in Bohemia and Moravia, where he first fought in Hungary and then finally, up to May 1945, in the Alsace and Lorraine.⁵¹ After being wounded he was again sent into service in a concentration camp – against his will.

On my arrival in Oranienburg I registered in Office Group D. The officer who received me there severely reproached me for registering myself at the Front as a person entrusted with confidential information, telling me that there was no question of me commanding such divisions and that I was to continue to serve in a concentration camp, more specifically at Flossenbürg.⁵²

At this camp in Franconia, for about four weeks, Muhsfeldt undertook his last concentration camp duty, now as roll-call leader. During the evacuation and the death march⁵³ he was to prove his ability and use his expertise in the disposal of corpses one last time in the service of the SS, as the leader of the funeral squad.

Conclusion: a man for all phases

Despite his initial reluctance, Muhsfeldt developed in Majdanek broad-ranging expertise, indeed talent, in everything related to corpse disposal. In the first phase (November 1941 to June 1942) he buried the corpses near the camp. From June to October 1942 he cremated them in the so-called 'old' crematorium. In the third phase (November 1942 to January 1943), because of lack of materials, he went on to bury the corpses in the Krepiecki forest again. The fourth and fifth phases were the greatest challenge to his professional performance and his expertise: between February and the end of October 1943 Muhsfeldt cremated the corpses on funeral pyres, while from 5 November to 24 December 1943 he burned the cadavers in open pits. In the final months (January to May 1944) he operated a crematorium again. In his own estimation, he and his team cremated 33,000 corpses during his two and a half years of employment at Majdanek, that is, between November 1941 and May 1944.⁵⁴ Then there are the 10,000–12,000 corpses he cremated at Auschwitz between May and August 1944. Altogether, in just under three years of his 'undertaker career', Muhsfeldt destroyed at least 43,000 cadavers.

As this example of the chief of the crematorium Erich Muhsfeldt precisely shows, even after initial reluctance – Muhsfeldt let it be known at the Krakow Auschwitz trial that he was at first anything but pleased to be assigned to the Majdanek funeral squad – it was possible to come to enjoy one's work. It was specifically the 'manual skill' and expertise required that motivated a dynamic approach to work and gave the work meaning. His work and career correspond to sociological professionalization criteria. The work of a chief of the crematorium was a monopolized field that was strictly separated from other activities and functions. It required qualifications, training, and constant professional development, but it was also characterized by a certain degree of autonomy in executing the work. Gratifications (promotions) and economic incentives (extra rations) had a motivating effect.⁵⁵

It is clear from the court interrogations that his professional self-image and his professional ambition were based on the importance and value attached to his work. This is because, along with specialist knowledge, Muhsfeldt also developed professional-ethical principles. For Muhsfeldt, the mass murder of Jews was primarily a 'logistical problem', and solving it was a great challenge for him, for of course he had to fulfil the quota and 'master' the constantly

rising number of corpses. As Sémelin details, the extermination of people on a massive scale always requires a certain degree of organization; however, this does not exclude improvisations, accelerations, pauses, or radicalizations by the agents doing the actual work on site. These daily challenges demanded of the camp's SS staff 'professionalism', a 'performance mentality',⁵⁶ and emotional hardness. Ambition (Alf Lüdtke speaks of 'professional appeal' or 'momentum of specialized professionalism') connected killing with a professional understanding of work.⁵⁷ 'Quality work' produced, not least, satisfaction, 'even when the aim or result was destruction, not production'.⁵⁸

The macro perspective does not do justice to the extermination work on the ground. A phenomenological perspective on daily extermination at Majdanek shows, rather, that the 'system' in the General Government did not function almost perfectly – as, for instance, Timothy Snyder claims, or as the metaphor of the 'death factory' suggests.⁵⁹ The gas chambers in Majdanek, but also in other camps, were not able to cope with the number of people who had to be killed, which is why firing squads often had to be brought in again. Even with its numerous crematoria the cremation work could not keep up, and breakdowns delayed the quota, which was difficult to fulfil anyway. In the camps, mountains of corpses were accumulating, adding to the already serious danger of epidemics. SS staff were overworked, and this exacerbated the level of violence.

We should not assume that the everyday just means routine. It actually means the multi-layered reality of life, not just as it is found to be, but also as it is perpetually appropriated, that is, interpreted, confirmed, constructed, and changed by its protagonists. The everyday and everyday behaviours are interesting moments of crystallization, within which we can not only comprehend individuals in their actions but also observe human beings living together, and establish tangibly how historical protagonists relate to one another, how they treat one another, how they live and work together, how they joke and quarrel.

Central to the everyday history, as developed by Lüdtke, is the question of domination (*Herrschaft*) or, rather, domination as a social practice.⁶⁰ Everyday life is not an apolitical vacuum; rather, it is everyday life that is the principal generator of mastery, through the social practice of all those affected, through their perceptions and interpretations, their actions and modes of expression. The institution of the concentration camp created the framework and the National Socialist ideology created the goal for violent action.

However, the male and female protagonists on site appropriated these 'framework conditions' on their own terms (*eigensinnig*; cf. Alf Lüdtke). State interests or the National Socialist ideology did not play the prominent role in violent actions or the 'work' of killing that most research claims. Nobody worked for years in a concentration camp in order to serve an idea. It was precisely in the practice of their daily duties that the protagonists adopted conceptions of the enemy and ideological patterns as their own, and imbued them with meaning. The kaleidoscope of daily work quotas, minor and major breakdowns, 'problem' solving, incentives, and the SS staff's feelings that they were succeeding in something, and indeed creating something, had a motivating and even radicalizing effect. From an everyday historical perspective it is clear that violence and extermination were not only ordered 'from above', but rather – if not primarily – generated by the complex interaction between the agents on the ground.

This is why this study has focused less on the ideological reading of violent practices and more on the chief of the crematorium's work-based actions and forms of appropriation. This does not mean we are fundamentally ruling out the influence of ideology on the actions of the perpetrators as an explanation for these. The materials reviewed here, and the close attention to the micro perspective, have, however, drawn attention to another important aspect: the staff of the concentration camp understood their duty as work they had to carry out 'well', and the SS men and the female supervisors experienced the camp primarily as a workplace. The violent behaviour of the protagonists was a multi-layered process that was in no sense linear but multi-causal. Violence and extermination arose out of complex normative, institutional, social, and situational dynamics. In this respect, the everyday historical approach, in spite of the ideological context, allows us to take into account the individual working experiences and violent practices of the concentration camp staff. At the same time, it becomes apparent that even in an institution like the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp, staff could still choose how to act. Staff rarely refused violence or extermination 'work'; rather, as in Muhsfeldt's case, they went about it energetically, and added their own personal touch.

Notes

- 1 The text of this chapter was translated from the author's German by Cadenza Academic Translations.
- 2 The central administration of the concentration camps was in Oranienburg, and from 1933 to 1942 it was under the control of the central Inspection of Concentration Camps (IKL). From 1942 the IKL was replaced by Department Group D of the Main Economic and Administrative Department (WVHA). See J. Tuchel, *Die Inspektion der Konzentrationslager, 1938–1945: Das System des Terrors. Eine Dokumentation (The Inspection of the Concentration Camps, 1938–1945. The System of Terror. A Documentation)* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 1994); J. E. Schulte, *Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung: das Wirtschaftsimperium der SS: Oswald Pohl und das SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt 1933–1945 (Forced Labour and Extermination: The Economic Empire of the SS: Oswald Pohl and the SS Main Economic and Administrative Department 1933–1945)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001).
- 3 B. Schwindt, *Das Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager Majdanek: Funktionswandel im Kontext der 'Endlösung' (The Majdanek Concentration and Extermination Camp. Functional Change in the Context of the 'Final Solution')* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005); E. Mailänder, *Gewalt im Dienstalltag. Die SS-Aufseherinnen des Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslagers Majdanek (1942–1944) (Violence in Daily Work. The Female Overseers at Majdanek Concentration and Extermination Camp (1942–1944))* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2009).
- 4 T. Kranz, 'Das KL Lublin – zwischen Planung und Realisierung' ('The Lublin concentration camp – between planning and realisation'), in U. Herbert, K. Orth & C. Dieckmann (eds), *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Entwicklung und Struktur (The National Socialist Concentration Camp. Development and Structure)* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1998), pp. 363–7, at p. 369.
- 5 J. Sémelin, 'Du massacre au processus génocidaire', *Revue Internationale des Sciences Sociales*, 147 (2002), 483–92; see also J. Sémelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- 6 Sémelin, 'Du massacre au processus génocidaire', pp. 486–7.
- 7 T. Kranz, 'Das Konzentrationslager Majdanek und die "Aktion Reinhardt"' ('The Majdanek Concentration Camp and "Operation Reinhardt"'), in B. Musial (ed.), *'Aktion Reinhardt': Der Völkermord an den Juden im Generalgouvernement 1941–1944 ('Operation Reinhardt': The Genocide of the Jews in the General Government 1941–1944)* (Osnabrück: Fibre Verlag, 2004), pp. 233–55.
- 8 T. Kranz, 'Ewidencja Zgonow i Smiertelnosc Wiezow KL Lublin' (Records of deaths and mortality at KL Lublin), *Zeszyty Majdanka*, 23 (2005), 7–53.
- 9 Kranz, 'Das KL Lublin', p. 381.

- 10 See A. Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (trans. W. Templer) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 11 In contrast to Karin Orth, who has studied the male functionary elite in the form of the camp commandant, by 'subordinate' I mean the 'common' or subordinate male and female security staff. K. Orth, *Die Konzentrationslager-SS: Sozialstrukturelle Analysen und biographische Studien (The Concentration Camp SS: Socio-structural Analyses and Biographical Studies)* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2000).
- 12 A. Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrung und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus (Self-Will: Daily Factory Work, Workers' Experience and the Politics of the German Empire up until Fascism)* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1993), p. 15; A. Lüdtke, "German work" and "German workers": the impact of symbols on the exclusion of Jews in Nazi-Germany. Reflections on open questions', in D. Bankier (ed.), *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), pp. 296–311; A. Lüdtke, 'People working: everyday life and German Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000), 75–92.
- 13 Muhsfeldt was sentenced to death and hanged in Krakow, while on 11 July 1975 the Cologne Public Prosecutor's Office accused Seitz of premeditated joint murder and murder in several individual cases in Lublin Majdanek concentration camp between December 1941 and early 1944. Seitz was, however, declared unfit to stand trial before the case could begin.
- 14 Andreas Kilian, Eric Friedler, and Barbara Siebert have researched this process of extermination at Auschwitz in detail. To what extent Majdanek differed from this is still in question, for there is as yet no study of the special squads there. It is probable, however, that the division of work between SS and prisoner squads, as well as the allocation of the different procedural steps, was largely similar. E. Friedler, B. Siebert & A. Kilian, *Zeugen aus der Todeszone: Das jüdische Sonderkommando in Auschwitz (Witnesses from the Death Zone: The Jewish Special Squad in Auschwitz)* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005). See also *Die Auschwitz-Hefte. Texte der polnischen Zeitschrift 'Przegląd Lekarski' über historische, psychische und medizinische Aspekte des Lebens und Sterbens in Auschwitz (The Auschwitz Books. Texts from the Polish Magazine 'Przegląd Lekarski' on Historical, Psychiatric and Medical Aspects of Living and Dying in Auschwitz)* (Weinheim: Hamburger Institut für Sozialgeschichte, 1987); R. Glazar, *Die Falle mit dem grünen Zaun: Überleben in Treblinka (The Trap with the Green Fence: Surviving in Treblinka)* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992); G. Greif, 'Wir weinten tränenlos'. *Augenzeugenberichte des jüdischen 'Sonderkommandos' in Auschwitz ('We cried without tears': Witness Reports by the Jewish 'Special Squads' in Auschwitz)* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2001).
- 15 R. J. van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

- 16 See Muhsfeldt, Bundesarchiv-Berlin (Federal Archive), Berlin Document Centre (henceforth BDC), N0008.
- 17 See Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, former Hauptstaatsarchiv (henceforth HStA) Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 96.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Robert Seitz, Interrogation, 17 March 1965, in Liedolsheim, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 266, p. 140.
- 20 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 95.
- 21 See also Advertising and Information Material, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 420, pp. 539–50. There is now detailed research on the firm Topf & Söhne: see E. Schwarzenberger, *Topf & Söhne: Arbeiten an einem Täterort (Topf & Söhne: Working at a Criminal Scene)* (Erfurt: Förderkreis Topf & Söhne, 2001); A. Assmann, F. Hiddemann & E. Schwarzenberger (eds), *Firma Topf & Söhne: Hersteller der Öfen für Auschwitz. Ein Fabrikgelände als Erinnerungsort? (The Firm Topf & Söhne: Manufacturers of Furnaces for Auschwitz. A Factory Site as a Place of Memory?)* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2002); R. J. van Pelt, 'Auschwitz', in G. Morsch & B. Perz (eds), *Neue Studien zu nationalsozialistischen Massentötungen durch Giftgas: Historische Bedeutung, technische Entwicklung, revisionistische Leugnung (New Studies on National Socialist Mass Killings with Poisonous Gas: Historical Meaning, Technical Development, Revisionist Denial)* (Berlin: Metropol, 2011), pp. 196–218.
- 22 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 100.
- 23 Muhsfeldt, Federal Archive, BDC, N0008.
- 24 Robert Seitz, Interrogation, 17 March 1965, in Liedolsheim, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 266, p. 140.
- 25 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, pp. 99–100.
- 26 E. Fechner, *Der Prozess: Eine Darstellung des Majdanek-Verfahrens in Düsseldorf (The Trial: A Portrayal of the Majdanek Proceedings)*, parts 1–3, documentary film, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 1984.
- 27 Statement by Julian Gregorowicz, 19 April 1977, Main hearing, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 283, p. 4.
- 28 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 100. According to Muhsfeldt, the two furnaces were dismantled and transferred to Plaszow at the beginning of 1943.
- 29 The guard Otto Z. also recalled that prisoners dug mass graves because, apparently, the death quota in the camp was so high that the corpses could not all be cremated in the crematorium. See Otto Z., Interrogation, 20 February 1970, LKA-NW, Munich, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 30.
- 30 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 101. According to his statements,

- the German overseer was a 'German Reich' prisoner or later a Jewish prisoner from Vienna. Ibid., p. 125.
- 31 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 102.
 - 32 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 8 September 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 125.
 - 33 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 102.
 - 34 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 8 September 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 126.
 - 35 van Pelt, 'Auschwitz'.
 - 36 See also Adam Czuprin, Interrogation, 9 August 1944, by Russian-German commission, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 274, pp. 114–18; Kazimierz Gagol, Interrogation, 9 August 1944, by Russian-German commission, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 274, pp. 119–20.
 - 37 Robert Seitz, Interrogation, 5 December 1961, in Karlsruhe, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 266, pp. 85–6.
 - 38 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, pp. 101–2. See also Robert Seitz, Interrogation, 17 March 1965, in Liedolsheim, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 266, p. 141.
 - 39 See also Muhsfeldt, Federal Archive, BDC, N0008.
 - 40 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 16 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 108.
 - 41 Ibid., p. 110. In the research it is assumed that there were 18,000 victims of this massacre, rather than the 17,000 Muhsfeldt indicates here.
 - 42 Anna M., Interrogation, 2 August 1961, Zentrale Stelle, Stuttgart, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 234, p. 23f.
 - 43 Luzie H., in Fechner, *Der Prozess*, part 3.
 - 44 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 16 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, pp. 110–11.
 - 45 Ibid.
 - 46 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 19 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 116.
 - 47 Ibid., p. 120.
 - 48 Ibid., pp. 119–20.
 - 49 Ibid., p. 120.
 - 50 Ibid., p. 123.
 - 51 See also Muhsfeldt, Federal Archive, BDC, N0008.
 - 52 Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 19 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, p. 124. Office Group D was the central administration of the concentration camp.
 - 53 See D. Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011).
 - 54 See also Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 16 August 1947, in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 No. 204, pp. 95, 97, 101, 103; Erich Muhsfeldt, Interrogation, 14 August 1947, in Krakow, ibid., pp. 112–13.

- 55 K. H. Jarausch, 'Higher education and social change: some comparative perspectives', in K. H. Jarausch (ed.), *The Transformation of Higher Learning 1860–1930: Expansion, Diversification, Social Opening and Professionalization in England, Germany, Russia and the United States* (Stuttgart: Klett Kotta, 1983), p. 29.
- 56 H. Buchheim, 'Befehl und Gehorsam' ('Command and obedience'), in H. Buchheim, M. Broszat, H.-A. Jacobsen & H. Krausnick (eds), *Anatomie des SS-Staates (Anatomy of the SS State)* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), pp. 215–320, at p. 242.
- 57 A. Lüdtke, "'Die Fiktion der Institution'. Herrschaftspraxis und Vernichtung der europäischen Juden im 20. Jahrhundert' ('The fiction of the institution'. Ruling practice and extermination of European Jews in the 20th century'), in R. Blänkner & B. Jussen (eds), *Institutionen und Ereignis: Über historische Praktiken und Vorstellungen gesellschaftlichen Ordens (Institutions and Event: On Historical Practices and Concepts of Social Ordering)* (VMPG 138) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), pp. 355–79, at p. 369.
- 58 A. Lüdtke, "'Fehlgreifen in der Wahl der Mittel': Optionen im Alltag militärischen Handelns' ('Mistakes in the choice of means': options in everyday military actions'), *Mittelweg*, 36:1 (2003), 61–75, at p. 68.
- 59 T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), pp. 253–76, at p. 260.
- 60 In the last few years there have been some innovative studies in the area of National Socialist research. See, for instance, M. Koch, *Fahnenflucht: Deserteure der Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Lebenswege und Entscheidungen (Desertion: Wehrmacht Deserters in the Second World War. Lives and Decisions)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008); R. Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen: Sexuelle Gewalttaten und intime Beziehungen deutscher Soldaten in der Sowjetunion 1941–1945 (Conquests, Sexual Violence and Intimate Relationships of German Soldiers in the Soviet Union 1941–1945)* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2010); A. Oeser, *Enseigner Hitler: les adolescents allemands face au passé nazi. Appropriations, Interprétations et usages de l'histoire (Teach Hitler: German Teenagers Face the Nazi Past. Appropriations, Interpretations and Uses of History)* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2010); M. Christ, *Die Dynamik des Tötens: Über die Ermordung der Berditschewer Juden. Ukraine 1941–44 (The Dynamics of Killing: On the Murder of the Berditschew Jews. Ukraine 1941–44)* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2011).

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