

GESCHICHTE

The Camp's Endless Expanse

In March 2017, 36 Borussia Dortmund and Evonik employees, including Klaus Engel und Hans-Joachim Watzke, traveled to Oświęcim in Poland to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorials. They were accompanied by the historian and writer Per Leo.

March 22, 2017

The Author
Per Leo, who has a PhD in history, lives and works as a freelance author and journalist in Berlin. In "Flood and Soil," his highly-praised novel, he works with the true story of two brothers – one of them an SS officer, the other a victim of the euthanasia program.

We got lucky with the weather. Normally, that would be self-explanatory. Sunshine on the beach, fresh snow in St. Moritz, a brisk breeze on a sailing trip. But what does that mean for a journey to a place that stands for the crimes of National Socialism like no other? What kind of weather is fitting for a trip to Auschwitz? There's no short answer to that question. The weather in Auschwitz deserved its own story. The journey begins as it would in a Hollywood film. Our plane dips into wisps of dirty white and gray as it descends. Only shortly before we land do the clouds reveal a view of Kraków. The streets glisten darkly. Raindrops patter against the windows, small and fleeting at first, then clinging and watching us with a hundred sad eyes before they plunge into the depths. Auschwitz is in Poland. It might sound like a detail of geography – in fact it is the first step to knowledge. The past, whose boot marks we are following here, is not merely terrible, it is also complicated. At any rate, much more complicated than most of us thought. It not only involves Nazis and Jews, but also the Polish love of liberty and the Red Army. And so much more. Yet as our journey begins, this has yet to dawn on us. At first, as the conversations on the bus indicate, everything is oppressively unambiguous. We get straight to the point. Yes, we all had respect for the trip; yes, we had all already gone in depth on the subject in

school; yes, we were also concerned by the current political climate, there was no denying the echoes from the past. The rain falls harder. It falls on a landscape that capitalism has painted with crude strokes. Hard-faced plastic signs invite people to spend. Imposed on gray facades, they seem like smeared lipstick on a mass of tired faces. Only the signposts inspire confidence. They are made of sturdy steel and

do not lie. If you want to go to the gas chambers, they say, this way please. Oświęcim. Like a noose, the name draws tight around the place we approach with uneasy hearts.

Bruxelles is Brussels, Moskva is Moscow. But Oświęcim is not Auschwitz. Our tour guides, the historian Andreas Kahrs and Borussia Dortmund fan ambassador Daniel Lörcher, both know this. And they also know that you need to spend time in Oświęcim to understand Auschwitz, to the extent understanding it is even possible. Which is

why they did not organize accommodation in picturesque Krakow. Instead, we unpack our bags in the only local hotel where you can put up Champions League winners and representatives of a global business with a clear conscience. Jacques Chirac stayed here once, and the smile on his commemorative photo isn't even tortured. Andreas Kahrs welcomes us, it's the first time we hear the name of our destination out loud: Oshvyentshim.

After lunch – heaps of beetroot and excellent risotto – the agenda allots two hours for "individual free time". But here, new arrivals find their freedom on a chain. The compulsion to connect everything they see to the horror to which the city owes its notoriety is almost impossible to resist. The wall in front of the used car dealer, for example, topped with barbed wire. Supporters have written the name of the local soccer club on the concrete mass in oversized black-and-blue letters: Unia Oświęcim. You wouldn't notice it in any other place on earth. But here your mind makes a drama of it. It transforms "Oświęcim" into "Auschwitz," separates it from "Unia," links the word with the barbed wire, painting a picture of horror, and is certain that the vandals – anti-Semites, of course! – knew exactly what they were doing.

Big rigs roar by. Damn it, you say to yourself, if I get run over now I'll have died in Auschwitz. Even in the hotel you are not safe from macabre thoughts, not even in the men's room. A sign is fixed above the urinal that contains the word "Eliminacja." Of course, you think, what else would you put on a sign above a urinal in Auschwitz? It doesn't dawn on you that it might not mean "extermination" at all, but "elimination",



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and has been put up at the best possible location to remind everyone that a World Cup qualifier will be shown in the hotel bar that evening.

Later, waiting in line at the cash machine, someone tells a pretty good Helmut Kohl joke. No one could help but laugh. Nor could you help thinking – who said it? Granted, it was a representative of the company whose predecessor delivered Zyklon B for the gas chambers. And who was laughing? Well, it was a reporter, the grandson of an SS officer, together with employees of Borussia Dortmund, a club whose fan scene has a problem with neo-Nazis. Are we allowed to joke around in Auschwitz? We, of all people?

Andreas Kahrs knows how compulsively new arrivals in Oświęcim act. And he also knows that it only stops when it's specifically counteracted. His introductory lecture illustrates that what we have in our mind's eye when we think of "Auschwitz" are just words and images. All of them with great symbolic power. Words like "Wannsee Conference," "Final Solution," "ramp," "selection," "gas chambers," "Zyklon B," "crematorium," "gold teeth"; images of train tracks, guard towers, livestock cars, exhausted faces, SS guards with German shepherds, geriatrics carrying luggage, piles of corpses, smokestacks, children in striped uniforms behind barbed wire. None of this is invented. Every image comes from a picture, every word is documented with evidence. But the story that we piece together from these elements is simple. At the same time, it is so unbelievable that nothing of it reminds them of the people that could have been our grandparents. It could be summarized in a single sentence. It goes as follows: In Auschwitz, the SS implemented Hitler's monstrous plan to kill all the Jews.

Yet it wasn't like that. It was much worse.

Kahrs says that "there was no master plan for the murder of the European Jews." There were plans galore, but they mostly referred to the rosy future awaiting Germany after the war. In particular, people liked to picture how Eastern Europe would look like once it had been conquered, pacified, and settled by Germans. Countless experts helped develop these plans, scientists, civil servants, soldiers and entrepreneurs. Many of them didn't even think of themselves as Nazis. It was clear to these completely normal family fathers that the realization of their utopia would cost millions of people's lives, but only in the form of abstract calculations. They knew that there wouldn't be enough food to feed the inhabitants of Eastern Europe during the war; they knew that they would have to dispossess the locals of houses, farms, companies and businesses to make way for Germans; and they knew that this war could only be waged with the help of slave labor.

For their part, the Nazis could only image a Greater German Reich without "racial foreigners," without political opponents, without "Gypsies," without the mentally ill, without the "anti-social," without criminals, and above all, without Jews. All these groups of people were to be incarcerated or "removed" from Germany as well as the areas conquered to the East. But the first victims were always Jews. In Poland, they were robbed of their rights immediately after the end of hostilities, dispossessed, exploited as forced labor, and herded into ghettos with the vague goal of deporting them to a "reservation" in

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the near future. Perhaps in the eastern Polish district of Lublin, some said; but the local civilian population also wanted their domain "Jew free". So it would have to be to Madagascar, others said; but then the British dominance of the seas would have to be broken. Finally, it was to be somewhere out in the Siberian arctic, as soon as Russia was conquered; but even that was nothing more than an ill-disguised murder phantasy. The actual genocide began in the summer of 1941. When the hope of a quick victory over the Red Army faded, the SS death squads began to systematically kill not only the Communist functionaries and partisans behind the front lines, but also the Jewish civilian population. The carnage often lasted days, with cooperation of German soldiers and police. At the same time, within weeks hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers had died from starvation and plagues in the POW camps.

It was in this climate of unbridled violence, once mass murder had become an unremarkable military tactic, that the decision was made to kill the Jews vegetating in the Polish ghettos. We don't know when exactly and by whom, but it would have been inconceivable without Hitler's approval. At any rate, it only needed one small step from here to the decision to kill all Jews in the areas ruled by Germany. It had been taken by January 20, 1942, when the SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich hosted a group of senior civil servants at the Wannsee Conference. That the small town of Oświęcim – which was renamed Auschwitz in 1939, as it had been from 1772 to 1919 when it belonged to Austria – was to play such a critical role had nothing to do with Jews at first. Instead, it was down to the SS, and to the war. It happened that from 1939, Heinrich Himmler unified two key offices in his person. He was no longer merely head of the SS

and paramilitary police, but also responsible for the Germanization of Eastern Europe as the "Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of German Nationhood". The camp he had built in Auschwitz in the summer of 1940, modelled after the first concentration camp, Dachau, was primarily intended for Polish resistance fighters. It was located within the pre-war Polish border on a strip of land that had been annexed by the Reich.

Himmler visited this camp in March 1941, and announced two decisions, the fatal consequences of which no one suspected at the time. First, not far from the main camp, a second camp was to be built in Birkenau for the Soviet POWs who would soon be captured. With the war in mind, Himmler announced that IG Farben would, using slave labor, construct a huge chemical plant in neighboring Monowitz for the production of Buna, a syn-





thetic rubber. Its construction and operation was to require up to 30,000 forced laborers, housed in a third camp. Finally, he declared the city and its surround areas to be a center of Germanization, the “Auschwitz Restricted Area”. Not least due to the decent transport infrastructure and the proximity to the Upper Silesian coal basin, it was here that German colonists, especially SS dependents, were to create a model town with a network of work camps.

So when one asks, why Auschwitz, the terrible answer is: because the infrastructure was suitable. Rail connections from Vienna, Berlin, and Krakow intersected here. The nearby mines were able to provide raw materials for a chemical factory. There were barracks in Birkenau. IG Farben needed masses of slave labor in Monowitz. And hundreds of Soviet POWs had already been murdered with poison gas in the main Auschwitz camp in September 1941. They were prepared for everything that was to come.

By the end of 1941, Jews were being deported to Auschwitz from the entire Reich; most of them died within weeks. Yet the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau only started their monstrous production line of death at the start of 1943, when most of the Jews of Eastern Europe were already dead, killed with rifles,

pistols, bayonets, clubs, and pitchforks in the Soviet Union, and with automobile exhaust in Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Majdanek, the murder stations in Eastern Poland. Only after these places, purely serving the purpose of extermination, had been destroyed, did the deportation trains begin to roll from the rest of Europe towards Auschwitz: from France and the Netherlands, from Greece and Belgium, from Italy and

the Balkans, from Norway and Luxemburg, and finally, more than any other country, Hungary. By the end of 1944, more than a million Jews had been killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. And not just them. At least 70,000 Poles, 20,000 Sinti and Roma, and 15,000 members of the Red Army were among the victims.

That evening the reporter gave a reading from his novel, which revolves around his grandfather Friedrich and uncle Martin, two children from a highly cultivated Hanseatic bourgeois family. One of them made a career with the SS during the Third Reich, the other was forcibly sterilized due to a handicap. Despite the alternative of watching Polish-born Lukas Podolski play in Dortmund in his final soccer match for Germany, the BVB delegation was present in full strength. The subsequent discussion didn't want to end. Still, at heart it all hinged on one simple question. how could anyone behave like that? Using different approaches, the author, his fellow-historian Kahrs, and Daniel Lörcher, who had become a kind of expert through his many excursions to Oświęcim, all tried to give answers.

In the end, the question remains. But perhaps, at least, a couple points have been addressed hinting at the circumstances which make the incomprehensible possible. For example, that genocide is never an end in itself in the consciousness of those who carry it out. They not only have a concept of an enemy in their heads, in this case the Jews, but also an exaggerated ideal of their own group. Friedrich Leo was a specialist for human selection. However, he didn't just choose people who had to work before being murdered, but also those who looked, despite their French, Slovenian, or Polish origins, as if they could be “Germanized”. So he gave more life than he took away. But that was pure chance. Both things belonged together. “Make live and let die” as the historian and philosopher Michel Foucault summarized the two sides of racist demographic policies.



March 23, 2017

Damn smartphones. If we hadn't trusted our weather apps then half of us wouldn't be standing around freezing in jackets. It has stopped raining, but there is no sign of the warm spring weather, nearly in the 60s, that we were supposed to be enjoying. There's a biting wind that makes the prospect of spending the entire day outdoors even colder. Only a couple of us have thought to wear a hat. The men among us are at least wearing a kippah on our heads. First on the agenda for our tour is not the camp, but rather the old Jewish cemetery in Oświęcim. Kahrs remains true to his method of initially disappointing the expectations that a trip to this town inevitably carry with it. He calls the cemetery an "unexpected" place (it is obvious what the "expected" places are). The deceased who lie buried here are differentiated from those who went through the crematory in Birkenau. They are a part of a culture in which commemorating the dead plays a central role. Jews call their graves "houses for eternity", so holy for them that they cannot ever be abandoned. One visits them to converse with one's dead -- friends and relatives -- but also the nearly three thousand years of generations within Judaism. The small stones that are left on the graves are testament to the importance of such visits. There was a Jewish community in Oświęcim then, making up more than the half of the city's population of 14,000. Most of them were killed, like nearly all Polish Jews, in Belzec, Majdanek, and Sobibór in 1942. Only the remnant that was forced into slave labor died in the gas chambers on the outskirts of their home town.

Kahrs tries to help us understand the fact that the Nazis not only killed an inconceivable number of people, but also wanted to erase a culture. In Germany, Jewish life had largely become a part of wider civil society; superficially, most Jews could hardly be differentiated from their Protestant or Catholic fellow citizens; many of them were even christened. But that was precisely what provoked the hatred of many of their contemporaries. According to the logic of anti-Semitic paranoia, if they are so much like us, then that means not the integration of the Jews, but rather the "Jewification" of Germany. But as is so often the case with resentiments and prejudices, they deftly adapted to reality. In Poland, it was the very visible signs of Eastern Judaism, the synagogues and cemeteries,

the caftans, beards, and side-locks, which triggered the spontaneous acts of violence of the German occupiers. Finally, many of them thought, and wrote in their letters home, there were Jews who looked the way they did in the Nazi propaganda newsreels. Ordinary SS men, Wehrmacht soldiers, and civil administrators didn't need to be ordered to drag the Torah through the dirt, destroy grave-stones, cut off beards, herd men, women and children into synagogues, lock the doors, and then set them on fire.

No other country in Europe was as influenced by Jewish life as Poland. More than ten per cent of the roughly 30 million people living in Poland were Jews. Today, the Jewish community in Poland makes up a mere 12,000, most of whom have only resettled in recent years. Coexistence between Catholics and Jews was never entirely peaceful, but the relationship had grown strangely unbalanced since there were hardly any Jews left in Poland. The question is no longer one of coexistence, but rather remembrance. The concentration camp in Auschwitz happens to be a central place of memorial for the Poles as well. It was established to destroy national resistance, and tens of thousands of non-Jewish Poles were murdered here. But in the consciousness of the majority this place is occupied by the Shoah. Over two million people visited the concentration camp memorial in 2016. Most of them came by tourist busses from Krakow to briefly check out the crazy place where Hitler killed six million Jews, except for the couple that Liam Neeson a.k.a. Oskar Schindler bought off Commandant Höss. For a bag of diamonds. In black and white.

This is what you need to know if you're looking for the answer to the question that visitors always ask - how can anyone stand to live here? Well they can because Oświęcim is no longer Auschwitz, but rather a town whose inhabitants need to get on with life the same way you or I do, and that gives them enough to think about. But there is another reason they can live here: Auschwitz is not the same as Auschwitz. For Poles, the place means something different than for the Jews who come here from all over the world. Many Poles are quite proud of the martyrdom their compatriots suffered for their fatherland in this place.

And then there are a few inhabitants of Oświęcim who have consciously shouldered the heavy and ambivalent heritage of the German occupation period. These are impressive people like Leszek Schuster, who we meet at the International Youth Meeting Center. Daniel Lörcher, who had already frequently visited with groups of fans, is welcomed by Schuster like an old friend. Schuster recalls the history of the institute, which he co-founded, in fluent German - and says something remarkable: "The German-Polish relationship includes Auschwitz." Metaphorically speaking, he drew a triangle that connected the descendants of the victims, the perpetrators, and the country in which the crimes occurred. Jews, Poles, and Germans. And not just them. It is this spirit that brings young people from all over the world here in order to discover a new through di-



ologue what “Auschwitz” stands for. After the presentation, the leaders of our delegation want to set an example of friendship. Klaus Engel, the CEO of Evonik, donates three historical reference books that had been commissioned by his company to the institute library. Hans-Joachim Watzke, Borussia Dortmund CEO, presents a black-and-gold football. The confidence with which Schuster, smiling, places his hands on the ball for the photograph is a hint that his father won a couple of caps for the Polish national team – as well as fighting against the Nazis.

Equally impressive is Bożena Kramarczyk, a small woman whose beautiful face is marked by the hard work she puts herself through every single day. She leads German-language groups through the camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau. In keeping with the historical chronology, our first “obvious” tour takes place in the main camp. It lasts almost three hours and feels like a dream, unreal as a whole, grotesquely immediate in detail. We are forty visitors among thousands. Nearly all huddle around a guide who holds up a sign with small red numbers so that no one gets lost in the hustle, which can happen quite quickly because the voices of the guides transmit even at a distance over radio. Strangely, you can usually immediately recognize where the groups are from. The unavoidable Japanese here. The men with wide-brimmed hats, Orthodox Jews there. And then there are the elderly, many with canes or walkers. A clutch of girls is particularly conspicuous, with Israeli flags over their shoulders, as if for protection, but also with unmistakable pride. And us? What did we have in common in their eyes?

Ms. Kramarczyk tells us the famous gate, above which the cynical camp motto is written in black silhouette, is a copy. The original was recently stolen by Swedish Neo-Nazis. Visitors who look back after having walked through the gate are offered an image of comic absurdity. They see an endless river of people with headphones walking in their direction, all holding their phones up



to take a photo of the letters IERF THCAM TIE-BRA. “Please let the other groups past,” the headphones say, “and take a step to the side.” We are standing on the parade ground. The cold we have had to tolerate since this morning has already chilled us to the bone.

Fatigue is visible on many of our faces, on others the continuation of the previous evening’s discussion at the hotel bar. How must the prisoners have felt when they were forced to stand at attention in freezing cold, clothed only in a cotton uniform, exhausted from a day of hard labor, hungry, standing for hours, until it was established that no one was missing, even far longer when someone was missing, or if a prisoner was tortured or hanged in front of everyone? In the middle of the camp, from which the barbed wire fences cannot be seen, it all has the air of a model settlement. Streets at right angles to blocks of red brick buildings. They all look identical, even Block 6, in which the museum is located. Because of the large crowds, we have to wait until we are part of the sluggish mass that is sucked into the house. There are cords separating the groups entering and exiting. The steps sag from the millions of footsteps. The voice of Ms. Kramarczyk says “Please make space for the other groups, please come this way.” She is not visible while she speaks to us. The museum is more like an art exhibition. There are no labels or explanations, just display cases with objects that are supposed to



speak for themselves, while the headphones say something that sounds reasonable but refuses to form a logical attachment to what you are looking at. A form from prisoner administration. Name, age, place of birth, reason for arrest: a brief swipe of the pen. Many rooms are divided by panes of glass, behind which objects are piled high, all of the same kind. Exhibits of genocide. Glasses. Shoes. Suitcases. A gray-brown heap of tangled hair. The spaces behind the glass have differing dimensions, some seeming like huge display windows, others like halls. One looks like a swimming pool. Except instead of water, there is a surging sea of cups, mugs, and bowls. A feast of faded enamel colors. Pairs of cherries are painted on one cup. It is hard to turn one's gaze away. A woman is crying. The headphones admonish: "Please move along, please make room for the next group." There are radiators in every room but they do offer no comfort - the warmth only heightens the fatigue. I want to lie down on the floor and sink into a dreamless slumber. In Block 7 a gallery of prisoner photos fills the entire hallway. Maria Petricka, no. 7637, Czech. Born November 20, 1895; deported June 17, 1942; died September 25, 1942. These were the faces of those who escaped a quick death. Block 11 was the location of punishment. In the cellar are windowless standing cells. Next door, in the prison cells, Zyklon B was experimented with for the first time; it took two days until all of the Red Army soldiers had suffocated. Executions took place in the space between Block 10 and 11. "An eyewitness recalled a girl," the headphones said, "who on the way to the firing squad asked her mother if it would hurt. The SS grabbed the child and flung her so hard against the wall that her skull burst."



The first gas chamber was built in the main camp. After viewing it and returning to the open air, we see that the camp has emptied as if by magic. Aside from us, only the girls with the white-and-blue Israeli flags are still here. They have formed a circle and are singing *Hatikvah*, their national anthem, arm in arm, a sorrowful song that pulls you along in a minor key. "Kol 'od balevav penimah" - "As long as in the heart, within" they sing, "A Jewish soul still yearns, and onward, towards the ends of the east, an eye still gazes toward Zion, our hope is not yet lost, the hope two thousand years old, to be a free nation in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem." They have marked this spot. With their grief, their defiance, their song. With their vitality.

March 24, 2017

We are standing next to the train tracks and freezing, again. And just like yesterday, the girls with the Israeli flags are here, near the cattle car belonging to the Reichsbahn, the German railway, symbolizing the place where trains arrived from Hungary in 1944, day after day. Aside from



that, there is nothing in Auschwitz-Birkenau that reminds one of the main camp. It is early in the morning, the first busses from Krakow are only now on their way. This area of remembrance still belongs to the few groups that are serious about their visit. A mere three kilometers west of the city, between the rivers Vistula and Soła, the expanse of the camp seems endless. It is hard to imagine that there is a world out there still, somewhere beyond the brick tower through which the single railroad track leads to the unloading ramp. In every other direction, one's view is lost in the distance. Barracks and smokestacks as far as the eye can see, the contours of a wood stick out on the horizon, flat and black. The clouds have retreated into the firmament, hanging high, infinitely far from the tips of the poplars that stand isolated on the grounds of the camp. Somewhere in between, cranes fly past, recognizable far before they are overhead.

What is this here? A place? The word doesn't fit. But it also is not a landscape. More of a space. A zone. "Death zone," as Ernst Jünger called the front trenches of the Western Front. Yet for Auschwitz-Birkenau the term is even more appropriate. At any rate, the language of the prisoners expresses an alert consciousness that the extermination camp as a whole can only be comprehended from above. Due to its size, true, but also its purpose. As if even God would need a map to find his way around Auschwitz-Birkenau, places that were less than a mile apart were named after countries. One can look to Mexico from the ramp and Canada lies in the distance, by the little wood.

Language is the only means through which one can reassure oneself of the existence of something



that isn't there. Even something that one has never seen or has lost forever. Beauty and plenty. That is what the names of the two countries stand for. Mexico is colorful, as colorful as the women who had to be accommodated in the barracks of the expanded camp B II for a couple days or weeks because in summer of 1944 crematoria capacity was insufficient to kill all the passengers on the day of their arrival. There were no uniforms for them, so they were dressed in the clothing belonging to women who were already dead. The proximity of death was colorful in Birkenau. Colorful like Mexico. Affluence was far away in Birkenau. Far away like Canada, towards which we can now make our way.

The wind blows even more harshly on the open ground than in the city. The cold is even more oppressive than yesterday because the way is long and we keep on stopping to listen to Ms. Kramarczyk. There are even a couple drops of rain, even if it is a mystery where they come from. They feel like snow. Far and wide, there is no warming shelter to be found. Just a small toilet block on the edge of the wood, several hundred meters behind the remnants of the crematoria. And it's a wonder: it has heating! Even the water is warm. Loud sighs, dumb cracks, relieved laughter. It is one of the most pleasant moments of the entire trip.

The path that we are following now was also taken by the prisoners who were not immediately sent to the gas chambers upon arrival. Their destination was a complex of buildings located at the furthest end of the camp where they left behind their old lives, most of them forever. And with their lives, their possessions.

Here the plunder was sorted and stored, in order to be sent back to the Reich to needy Germans. The storerooms in "Canada" were stuffed with

clothes, fur coats, watches, gold, silver, and money. Visitors follow in the footsteps of the prisoners inside the building too, along the desks in which their details were recorded, the rooms where their hair was shorn and their naked bodies dried without a towel after a shower, the hot air ovens in which their clothes were disinfected, the shelves where they were given their uniforms. The path leads to a large, low-ceilinged room, with a wall of photos at its end. These too were confiscated from the prisoners upon registration. They show people, not one like the other, caught in a moment when they were free to do as they wished. The photos were worthless for the Nazis. Yet whoever examines them will

immediately understand that these were perhaps the most valuable possessions that those doomed people took along on their final journey.

On the way back we pause at the memorial that was erected between the remains of the crematoria. Klaus Engel and BVB CFO Thomas Treß place a wreath with an "Evonik" ribbon and another with "Borussia Dortmund". In lieu of the prepared speech, Engel asks for a moment of silent prayer; Treß has no stomach for speeches either. So Tadeusz Borowski has the last word at Birkenau, a member of the Polish resistance who survived the camp as an orderly. Daniel Lörcher gives voice to his words as he reads aloud from a passage from Borowski's memoirs. Borowski recalls that the infirmary was close to the ramp. No one cared that the prisoners who carried out their privileged slave labor here had created a small garden next to the barracks. Where they even played soccer. One Sunday the first flowers were blooming. Borowski was the keeper. He parried a shot for a corner. As he retrieved the ball, he saw that a train was being emptied onto the ramp behind his goal. Women in colorful summer clothes, men in brilliant white shirts, the sleeves rolled up, several of them sitting on the grass and watched the match. Shortly later there is a similar sequence. Once again, Borowski ran to retrieve the ball. The ramp was empty. "I came back with the ball and rolled it out for the corner. Three thousand people had been gassed behind my back between two corner kicks."

In the end, we return to the reason for our journey. Why Evonik? Why Borussia Dortmund? Markus Langer, Vice President of Corporate Marketing – together with Lörcher, the initiator of this tour – has addressed this several times over the past few days. It comes down to an approach through which a bridge from the past to the future can be built. Evonik wishes not merely to dwell on the processing of the company's past, but also create within its employees a consciousness for values that go beyond immediate company goals. And BVB aims to weaken extreme-right groups within its sphere of influence by promoting the power of tolerance within its ranks, with fans and employees. Klaus Engel and Thomas Treß had reinforced this message the previous



evening, more or less officially. When Treß mentioned extreme-right Borussia fans, one could sense that these groups were more than just an image problem for him. Engel recounted a trip to Israel. There, at Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Center, he saw an object on display that confronted him with nothing new, yet for that shook him all the more. An empty can, the label not only listing the product name – “Zyklon Poison Gas” – but also the supplier: “Degesch” – the German Corporation for Pest Control, which was a subsidiary of Degussa, the German Gold and Silver Refinery, and therefore the company whose legacy Evonik Industries AG has assumed.

Over lunch, Andrea Hohmeyer, director of the Evonik company archives, explains what this legacy entails. It is a historian’s lecture that conveys the facts about a group of businessmen that were part of the company as soberly as how they became complicit to genocide. Hohmeyer reports there were no National Socialist enthusiasts on the board of the company’s precursor. There were even six Jews on Degussa’s board until 1938. Only two board members joined the party after 1933, presumably for strategic reasons. There is no evidence of ideological zealotry or anti-Semitism. Everything the members of the board at Degussa did can be justified by commercial rationale. Like others, what Arianization offered them, they took. Like others, they used slave labor. They refined Jewish “Blood Gold”; to maintain their position in the marketplace. They delivered poison gas to Auschwitz. Because otherwise someone else would have. And thus, became criminals.

After liberation, life went on in all three camp complexes. Or perhaps it would be better to say: it resumed. Many of the survivors remained in the main camp for months. As so-called Displaced Persons, many of them had to wait before they could return to their home countries or emigrate to Israel or America. In Auschwitz they started families, resumed their careers, but most of all, secured the remains of the camp and founded the concentration camp memorial. The Red Army held German prisoners of war in Birkenau. One of them was Reinhart Koselleck, who later became a historian. He reports that conversation had turned to the murder of the Jews while peeling potatoes in the barracks. A fellow soldier had doubted it, upon which the Russian soldier guarding them and clearly understanding German, grabbed a stool and threatened a deadly blow. That’s when I knew, Koselleck writes, that it was true.

However, the strangest thing is the afterlife of Monowitz. As we set off that afternoon to view the third camp complex, it becomes apparent why Kahrs calls it too an “unexpected” place. At first glance nothing here reminds one of the past. As we leave Oświęcim in a bus headed east, we pass by a huge business park containing industrial chemical production facilities. These have been in existence since 1942; the occupiers had to leave them behind, and they were taken over by the locals. Thanklessly. Just like the slave labor camp. In 1945 Poles moved here who came from the regions annexed by the Soviet Union. Over the years, the barracks morphed into buildings where one cannot sense their origin. The only thing identical to the camp is the layout of the streets. Walking down the main street in the

small town, we notice the red bricks that are part of many of the houses, here and there a couple colorful patches on a white wall, here a column supporting a garage roof. They come from buildings in the camp.

A tractor drives past and the driver knows what we’re looking for, and waves to us nicely. After a few hundred yards we reach our destination: a small memorial that the denizens of Monowitz have erected to commemorate the camp. It deviates from the official memorials in a remarkable way. One might consider the large cross, still a symbol of the religion from whose midst anti-Semitism emerged, as unfitting. But that would be unfair. It is not an expression of thoughtlessness, but rather highest esteem. The only symbol that, from a Catholic perspective, makes a place untouchable. There are fresh flowers lying at the base of the memorial. Next to the cross there is a small plastic statue of the Virgin Mary with water from Lourdes. As we make our way back, the sun shines through a small strip between the cloud cover and the horizon. Our journey started with a cliché and ends with kitsch.

March 25, 2017

We are approaching Krakow. The same route, the same countryside. Yet as is typical for a successful trip, nothing is reminiscent of the first leg of the journey. We had already noticed this in the morning, when we travelled one last time to the main camp in order to view the exhibition displaying the prisoners’ works of art. These deserved another, long piece of writing. The art exhibited there had such power that, regardless of its technical quality, one should not shy away from comparisons with the world literature produced by Auschwitz, the works by Primo Levi, Ruth Klüger, or Imre Kertész. Only two pictures will be mentioned here, because they make reference to a neglected chapter of the camp history. Dina Gottlieb, a Czech Jew, was good at drawing. So good that she would later work for the Disney Studios in Hollywood. So good that Josef Mengele forced her to produce detailed portraits of the “Gypsy Camp” prisoners. Today, two of them are hanging in the exhibition. They are like a miracle. Drawn in colored pencil, she renders the faces more precisely than color photography of the time would have managed. So they fulfilled their goal of documenting so-called racial physiognomy. However, Dina Gottlieb simultaneously made use of her freedom, hardly noticeable and yet so overwhelming, by lending those portrayed an expression of dignity.

After viewing the exhibition, we stroll over the camp grounds alone or in small groups. The sun is shining. The reporter, a fan of Werder Bremen, says to the group of BVB fans that “it would be nice if you could play against us at half-strength in the final match of the season; we need the points more than you.” “What would be the point,” Lars Ricken replies, “we’ll beat you even at half-strength.” We’ll see.



The Memorial Tours

Daniel Lörcher, the BVB fan liaison, provided the impulse for the journey with members of Evonik and BVB. Together with the Fan Projekt Dortmund e.V. and the BVB fan and support department, he has been organizing tours of the memorials for several years with the aim of sensitizing BVB fans to the dangers of right-wing extremism.