EYE-WITNESS

of the AUSCHWITZ HORRORS

by Dr. Rudolf Vrba *

THE day that Himmler and Adolf Eichmann visited us in Auschwitz, the camp had almost a festive air. As the cars approached, the prisoners' orchestra was playing a famous aria from the Czech opera, "The Bartered Bride"—Why Should We Not Be Merry, When God Gives Us Health?"

As they passed through the sombre gates, the tune changed to "The Triumph March" from Aida. The heretics drove on to the battlefield where children were being murdered on an industrial scale.

It was August, 1942. We lined up in clean uniforms, the socks and the beaten well in the background. And, as I stood rigid, the orders which had been pounded into us all for three days echoed through my head:

"If they speak to you answer 'yes' or 'no' when possible.
"If they ask about camp life, answer 'I am happy here.'"

The visit made a change. That day there would be no beatings, no shootings.

RELIEF

Himmler, bespectacled and immaculate, looked like a school teacher. Eichmann stood beside him, the perfect avenger. They chatted with Camp Commandant Rudolf Hoess, glanced at us with idle curiosity—and left.

We sighed with relief, but we had yet to learn the reason for their visit. In fact, we were about to enter a new era of fantastic efficiency.

At that time, victims were being gassed in a wooden shed and burned in crude trenches. Now they were planning a massive new building which would be gas chamber, crematorium and dissecting room all in one.

Extermination was to be streamlined.

Five months later it was ready. I was working now as a registrar in the quarantine section, where I met the few survivors from the transports which were bringing in thousands of doomed prisoners.

They were the strong, who could work, and they were able to tell me not only where their transports originated, but how many they carried—vital information which I planned to reveal to the world, if and when I escaped.

DELAY

Himmler and Eichmann returned for the inauguration of the new building—the first of four. The SS guards were determined that everything would proceed with Teutonic efficiency.

But they forgot that their bosses had Teutonic appetites.

The first gassing—a fine bag of 3,000 Poles—was due to begin at 9 o'clock. By 9:04, the victims were packed in the chamber.

An SS man stood on the roof, ready to pour in the cyanide disinfectant powder which would turn to gas when the packed bodies raised the temperature to a certain pitch.

But there was no sign of Himmler or his party. They were still eating. And that meal ran two hours over schedule, while the victims pounded hopelessly on the iron doors.

At last they arrived. Himmler wanted to see everything. When the gassing began, he watched it for several minutes through a thick glass window.

JOKED

Then he had a cigarette, chattered with the officers for a while, cracked a joke or two, promoted the Camp Commandant to colonel, and whisked away.

Auschwitz was ready for extermination on a scale which would make its previous efforts look pedestrian.

When the next transport arrived, the camp officers told them they would have to take a shower for reasons of hygiene.

A Red Cross van guided by reassuringly. But the victims did not know it contained the powder which was to kill them.

Everywhere was heard the sound of water as there was a new air of exaggerated courtesy. They even apologized to the women and children because they had no separate shower rooms for them.

They were issued with soap and splendidly clean towels which they had stripped.

And, as they were escorted slowly into the gas chamber which had dummy showers in the dreamy Strauss waltzes lifted from loudspeakers.

But, when the chamber was almost full, the mood changed.

The soldiers slipped quietly out and fired a few shots through the open doors.

CLUBBED

Those inside cowered back. And more victims were beaten in with clubs until the chamber was a solid, whirling mass of naked flesh.

When there was no more room on the floor, the children were tossed in on the heads of the adults. The doors closed that. The powder was poured in. And, in less than 30 minutes, there was silence.

Powerful hoses, built inside the chamber, dispersed the gas. The doors were opened. The dead were still standing because there was no room for them to fall.

The bodies were cremated mechanically on another path where dentists removed gold teeth and surgeons dissected those suspected of concealing valuables in their bodies.

And soon the assembly hall
moved on into the crematorium, the biggest crematorium in the world.

The whole process was designed to prevent panic. Even a minor outbreak of hysteria could clog the smooth wheels of the murder factory.

And that was the pattern, night after night, sometimes when there was a rush on — day after day.

Indeed I almost grew immune to it — until early in 1944 I learned that the most appalling massacre yet attempted was being planned.

Philip Miller, a Slovak friend who worked in the crematorium, told me that the Nazis would have so many victims on their hands that they would have to resort again to their old idea of throwing Jews—dead and alive——into mass burning graves. The SS spoke of an enormous job which would tax the resources of the four new chambers.

That meant the slaughter of at least 10,000 a day.

GLUT

I wondered where they could find such a glut of victims. It was the guards who gave me a hint.

Usually I knew the type of transport to expect from their gossip. If they spoke of getting choosy, for instance, I guessed Dutch Jews were on their way.

Talk of sivovitsa meant Slovaks and, if they spoke of de-lousing, we got ready for Polish Jews who had been forced by the Nazis to live in filthy ghettos.

Now they were rubbing their hands and saying: "Soon we'll have some real Hungarian salami."

Hungary! Of course! Only in Hungary were there any large numbers of Jews left — about 1 million. And the frantic preparations convinced me that they intended to obliterate every one of them.

GHETTO

I remembered the Warsaw ghettos and knew that I had to escape.

In Warsaw the previous year,

50,000 Jewish men, women and children had kept German tanks and artillery at bay with their bare hands for six weeks when the Nazis were at the height of their power.

Now the Red Army was on the Hungarian borders. The Anglo-Americans forces were biding into Southern Europe. By revolt — even by slight resistance — the Hungarians could not only save themselves, but shorten the war.

They had nothing to lose. I had seen Himmler's factories preparing a trench, half a mile long and 30 yards wide, for them and their children.

Tomorrow: A bowl of soup saves my life. I escape — and am cornered by a German patrol.