



Robert Jan van Pelt

Auschwitz, Holocaust-Denial, and the Irving Trial

Abstract

Seit den 1970er-Jahren richten Holocaust-Leugner ihre Aufmerksamkeit vor allem auf die Frage der Krematorien von Auschwitz: Mit der Infragestellung ihrer Existenz meinen sie, den Holocaust überhaupt leugnen zu können. Im berühmt-berüchtigten Londoner Prozess *David Irving gegen Deborah Lipstadt* im Jahr 2000 erreichten die Attacken der Holocaust-Leugner gegen die Evidenz der Auschwitzer Krematorien einen dramatischen Höhepunkt. Fünf Tage lang verteidigte der vom Gericht bestellte Sachverständige Robert Jan van Pelt seinen 700-seitigen Bericht im Kreuzverhör – mit einem erbärmlichen Ausgang für David Irving.

Der englischsprachige Vortrag des niederländischen Architekturhistorikers fokussierte auf die Hintergründe und Entwicklungen dieses historischen Gerichtsprozesses.

In 1987, I decided to investigate the career and fate of the architects who had designed Auschwitz. That year, I had obtained a teaching position at the School of Architecture of the University of Waterloo in Canada. Considering the question of the ethics of the architectural profession, I became interested in the worst crime committed by architects. As I told my students, 'one can't take a profession seriously that hasn't insisted that the public authorities hang one of that profession's practitioners for serious professional misconduct.' I knew that physicians everywhere had welcomed the prosecution and conviction of the doctors who had done medical experiments in Dachau and other German concentration camps. But what about the architects who had designed the gas chambers of Auschwitz? Had any architectural association ever demanded that they would be prosecuted? Had any professor of architecture ever discussed in class the crimes committed by architects?

I began by making a literature search, but found no reference to any discussion on the criminal culpability of architects in the Holocaust. Then I made a three-week research trip to Jerusalem. In the Yad Vashem archive I found an indictment [*Anklageschrift*] issued by the Vienna State Court for Criminal Cases [*Landesgericht für Strafsachen*] against two Austrian architects: Walter Dejaco from Reutte, and Fritz Ertl from Linz. Both of these men had been identified in the early 1960s by Auschwitz survivor Hermann Langbein as key members of the Auschwitz Central Construction Authority [*Zentralbauleitung*]. But it had taken the Austrian authorities a decade to bring the two men to trial in 1972. The archive also had the final judgment: both men were acquitted.

Intrigued by the trial, I travelled to Vienna to study the trial documents in the State Court. These provided some insight in the scope and nature of the role of professional architects in the Holocaust. My focus began to change: if I had been initially focused on the question of professional culpability, I now became fascinated by the question of architectural practice in extremis and questions pertaining to inter-



play of political, economic, financial, social and criminal forces that had shaped the development of the Auschwitz camps as man-made environments. Would it be possible to write an architectural history of Auschwitz? With the materials discovered in the State Court archive, in the archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, the German Federal Archive in Koblenz, and the Osobyi [Special] Archive in Moscow, which hold a remarkable collection of captured German documents, inclusive many records of the Auschwitz Construction Authority, I wrote, in collaboration with Debórah Dwork, what became an *Ortsgeschichte* of Auschwitz. This history, published as *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (1996), tried to recreate the historical context of the camp that had been of relevance to the men who created it. In 1939, at the end of the Polish Campaign, the Polish town of Oświęcim had been annexed to the German Reich, and a process of ethnic cleansing began in the town and its surrounding countryside that was justified through references to the medieval German *Drang nach Osten*. Also the large-scale and generally benign 'Auschwitz Project', which was to lead to the construction of a large and beautiful model town of some 60,000 inhabitants supported by an immense synthetic rubber plant, was begun with a clear reference to medieval precedents of German settlers founding and building new towns in the Wild East.

The discovery of this 'other' history of Auschwitz – a history that had been only very partly realized to be completely overtaken by the history we know, a history defined by the murder of more than one million human beings, mostly Jews, in architect designed factories of death – was very exciting. When I had begun my work in the archives, the consensus of historians was that Himmler's choice of Auschwitz as a site of mass extermination had been determined on the basis of his assessment that that place wasn't good for anything else.¹ The discovery of ample evidence that the Germans invested in 1941 and early 1942 great resources in trying to transform Auschwitz into a model city for Germans raised, of course, the question why and how that 'Auschwitz Project' had come to a stop, and why and how Auschwitz became a landscape of murder. It was a phenomenon that reminded me sometimes of the Strange Case of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and at other times of *A Tale of Two Cities*. What was the hinge that connected these two characters, these two cities? I shall not give away the key element of the plot. You may read it for yourself in Chapter Nine of the book (which, incidentally, was published in German as *Auschwitz: 1270 bis Heute*).

The publication of the book led to an unexpected twist in my career. I had turned to the topic because I had been interested in the general question of professional culpability of architects. The book had reached beyond that by providing what may be defined as a cultural history of a death camp. But in the wake of its publication, I was called upon to become an agent in the battle against Holocaust Denial. In 1997, I was approached by the filmmaker Errol Morris to help him complete a documentary that focused on the American Holocaust denier Fred Leuchter,² and in 1998, I was asked to join the defence team of Deborah Lipstadt, who had accused the English historian David Irving of being a Holocaust Denier and, as such, a falsifier of history. Both Morris and Lipstadt desired my expertise because in both cases the interpretation of the historical evidence of the role of Auschwitz in the Holocaust was of central importance. Leuchter had written an engineering report in which he had come to the conclu-

1 This theory was first proposed by Jan Sehn, Concentration and Extermination Camp Oświęcim (Auschwitz-Birkenau), in: Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland, *German Crimes in Poland*, 2 vols. Warsaw: Central Commission, 1946-7: 1, 27f.

2 Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter Jr. Motion picture. Directed by Errol Morris. Fourth Flour Pictures, 1999.



sion that the Auschwitz gas chambers and ovens could not have killed the alleged number of victims, while Irving, on the basis of *The Leuchter Report*, had converted to Holocaust denial to become its most famous and perhaps also notorious champion.

Holocaust deniers consider the established historiography of Auschwitz to be the key citadel that they needed to destroy to be successful in convincing the world of the validity of their cause. They realise well its great symbolic value as of 'the capital' of the Holocaust because it is, first of all, the site where the single largest group of Jews were murdered: at least one million. Furthermore Auschwitz is particularly important because it was in its technology and organization thoroughly 'modern'. The crematoria offered in the logical arrangement of undressing rooms, gas chambers, and crematoria ovens carefully thought-out production facilities of death. Furthermore, only in Auschwitz did the whole process of extermination take place inside, making the procedure anonymous – and hence deniable. Most important, however, is the fact that there are many survivors who, and material remnants that, can bear witness to the genocide committed in Auschwitz. Of the 1.1 million Jews who were deported to Auschwitz, some 100,000 Jews left the camp alive. In addition there were 100,000 non-Jewish survivors of Auschwitz. They helped to keep the memory of Auschwitz alive. And then there is the site itself. Of the *Stammlager* [main camp] at Auschwitz and its huge satellite camp Auschwitz-Birkenau enough remains intact to give the visitor a sense of the nature and scale of the operation. And it is for this reason that a Holocaust denier like David Irving often referred to Auschwitz as 'the biggest weapon' in what he described as the Jewish propaganda campaign against the truth. Auschwitz was 'the great battleship', and following Churchill's 1941 instruction to 'Sink the Bismarck', Irving called other deniers to 'Sink the Auschwitz'.³

As I began to study the methods of the Holocaust deniers, I discovered that they were focused on Auschwitz not only because of its symbolic significance, but also because the abundance of material remains of the gas chambers and the crematoria were essential to their forensic games. In order to succeed, they cannot invoke the testimony of eyewitnesses, because it is difficult to use eyewitness evidence to attest to a non-event. In general, Holocaust deniers like to rely on the interpretation of some material piece of evidence by expert witnesses. They discredit and discard all eyewitness testimony as either false (because the eyewitnesses were beneficiaries of indemnification) or unreliable (because the condition in the camps was chaotic), and focus on the interpretation by expert witnesses of material evidence such as blueprints of the crematoria, figures of the fuel supply to these buildings, technical data about the behaviour of cyanide at various temperatures, measurements of cyanide compounds in the walls of the so called gas chambers, and so on. They believe that they can challenge and overturn the historiography of the Holocaust by finding one or more sleuths who share Sherlock Holmes' talent for deduction based on an expert knowledge of the minutiae of arcane subjects. The deniers, who have no hope to advance their argument with the help of eyewitness testimony, relish Holmes' forensic deduction because material clues cannot protest when you misinterpret them. They're always silent, and only acquire a voice through the expert who interprets them.⁴

³ David Irving, *Battleship Auschwitz*, in: *The Journal of Historical Review* 10 (1990): 499.

⁴ A fundamental source for the rest of this lecture is Robert Jan van Pelt, *Expert Opinion* written on instructions of Davenport Lyons and Mishcon de Reya, solicitors for Penguin Books Limited and Deborah E. Lipstadt, for the purposes of assisting the Queen's Bench Division in the High Court in London, Great Britain, in the case between David John Cawdell Irving, plaintiff, and Penguin Books Limited and Deborah E. Lipstadt, defendants, 2000. Available on the web at <http://hdot.org/en/trial/index.html>. Also see Robert Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial*. Bloomington and Indianapolis 2002.



A detective who desires to establish or for that matter overturn the truth by interpreting clues needs material evidence as a point of departure. The problem Holocaust deniers face is that both the gas vans that has operated in Russia and in Chelmno and the *Operation Reinhard* death camps have left few if any clues to provide a basis for Holmes' brand of deduction. But a wealth of clues can be found in Auschwitz: these include documents in the archives and the remains of the gas chambers and incinerators. Using deduction, skilful minds ought be able to provide explanations that suggested a routine, innocent and non-genocidal use for what eyewitnesses had identified as proofs of criminal intent. By focusing on arcane issues that are thrown up by a cunning interpretation of carefully selected pieces of material evidence – be it the lack of soot in the ovens of the crematorium in Auschwitz, or the negligible amount of residual cyanide in the crumbling remains of the gas chambers, or the designation 'morgues' in the blueprints of the crematoria for rooms that eyewitnesses identified as gas chambers, or through specious comparisons between the design and operation of civilian crematoria as they exist in almost every major European and North American city and those in Auschwitz – and by presenting themselves as detectives and experts, deniers believe that they can undermine the established facts by making the evidence on which these facts were based look suspect is not absurd.

Deniers do not believe it is necessary to challenge all evidence. They trust on the 'so-called' butterfly effect. As gambler Jack Weil (Robert Redford) put it in the movie *Havana* (1990), "a butterfly can flutter its wings over a flower in China and cause a hurricane in the Caribbean."⁵ Obviously Weil was raised with the nursery rhyme that linked the loss of a nail to the fall of the kingdom. "For want of a nail the shoe was lost. / For want of a shoe the horse was lost. / For want of a horse the rider was lost. / For want of a rider the battle was lost. / For want of a battle the kingdom was lost. / And all for the want of a horseshoe nail." Deniers are gamblers at heart, and they believe that they may strike lucky if they flatter their tiny wings in the Auschwitz gas chambers. In 1982, the well-known American denier Arthur R. Butz evoked in a conference of deniers the butterfly effect in the context of a rare admission of the deniers' strategy. "The basic tactic of the defenders of the [extermination] legend ... will be to attempt to make claims that cannot be tested." Those who peddled the hoax of the Holocaust pointed to extermination camps like Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka – places of which little remained. When looking at these camps, deniers had few clues to debunk the hoax. But in the case of Auschwitz "the defenders of the [extermination] legend are in an impossible position." Butz noted that "it is very easy to bring down the legend as it applies to Auschwitz and Auschwitz in turn, on account of the nature of the evidence involved, brings down the rest of the legend with it."⁶

The French academic Robert Faurisson had a key role in developing the theory Holocaust Deniers use to assault the established record of Auschwitz, and he also sponsored the forensic investigations done by Leuchter. A teacher of comparative literature, Faurisson had no standing as a historian, and neither had other well-known deniers such as Butz, who was (and still is) an Associate Professor of Electrical Engineering. The inability of Holocaust Deniers to find support amongst historians was, and remains an embarrassment that they can only can try to neutralize through the spurious claim that all historians are either brainwashed to accept a lie as truth, or that

5 Havana. Motion Picture Directed by Sydney Pollack. Universal Pictures, 1990.

6 Arthur R. Butz, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case Against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry*, 2nd edition. Torrance: The Institute for Historical Review, 1992: 363f.



they are part of a great conspiracy to hide the truth from the public at large. Yet it is an obvious source of concern. Hence their enthusiasm when, in 1988, a well-known writer of histories of the Second World War public embraced their cause. To them, David Irving's endorsement of The Leuchter Report marked a watershed.

Born in 1937 in England, Irving showed already at an early age somewhat contrarian tendencies.⁷ When, at grammar school, he was awarded a book as a prize, he asked for Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. After a short stint at the University of London, he left for Germany to work in a Thyssen steel mill. There he rose to the position of Third Smelter and, perfected his German, and for the first time encountered in the stories of his fellow workers a German perspective on the Second World War – one that defined the Germans not as perpetrators, but as victims. One of them came from Dresden, and told Irving about the Allied fire-bombing of that city in February 1945. His story proved a catalyst, and Irving decided to write a history of what he had come to see as a major Allied war crime. Published in 1963, Irving's well-written *The Destruction of Dresden* not only became a best-seller, but its allegation that the bombing of the city was the biggest single massacre in European history⁸ gained him access to Germans who, after 1945, had chosen to remain out of the public eye. When asked, these Germans were happy to share with Irving their memories and some old documents which they had kept under lock and key since 1945. As a result, Irving gained among professional historians the enviable reputation for finding hitherto unavailable historical material. Irving, in turn, developed a profound disdain for the work of other historians, whom he accused of intellectual incest as they copied each other's conclusions without bothering to dig up new evidence. In quick succession Irving published, among other books, the memoirs of Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel (1965), a history of the Nazi atomic research program (1967), a biography of Air Force Field Marshal Erhard Milch (1973), and a biography of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel (1977). Irving's friendship with Hitler's SS adjutant Otto Günsche proved fateful. Günsche introduced him to surviving members of Hitler's personal staff. These people who had lived very close to Hitler trusted Irving as an sympathetic Englishman who had no anti-Nazi axe to grind, and, when asked, entrusted him with their diaries and private papers.

After more than a decade of research, Irving published his massive, more than 900-page *Hitler's War* (1977). Written in a gripping narrative style, *Hitler's War* was very different from the dry studies that preceded it. Showing a keen eye for the texture of life, Irving wrote the book in the style of a historical novel. It read as if he had somehow crawled into the skins of the main protagonists – a quality that does not surprise because Irving had relied heavily on the interviews, diaries and memoirs he had obtained from the members of Hitler's inner circle. The general public loved it. But most historians were deeply troubled by the fact that Irving had uncritically accepted as truth the views of those who had a vested interest in putting Hitler in the best possible light. The result resembled the account of his life during the war that Hitler never came to write.

Irving's sympathy for Hitler had led to what most reviewers considered the offensive core of *Hitler's War*: Irving's theory that the Holocaust had been initiated behind Hitler's back by men like Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, SD Chief Reinhard Heydrich, and Gauleiter Artur Greiser. While Irving had tried to lift the burden of guilt from Hitler's shoulders, misquoting evidence to make his point, he did not deny that the Holocaust had occurred.

⁷ See van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 15ff., 3



If Irving had hoped that Hitler's War would earn him the respect of the historical establishment, he must have been disappointed. Hugh Trevor Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, concluded that Irving's judgement could not be trusted, that his discussion of Hitler's attitude to the Jews was highly implausible, and that he routinely distorted the evidence. Also Martin Broszat, Director of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, and the prominent historian Eberhard Jäckel of the University of Stuttgart published devastating critiques. But *Hitler's War* attracted the sympathetic attention of Holocaust deniers. Until the publication of *Hitler's War*, no historian of reputation had come even close to their views. They recognised in Irving a kindred spirit who could lend their case legitimacy, and they actively began to cultivate him as a fellow traveller. In the early 1980s, he agreed to establish an ongoing commercial relationship with the Institute for Historical Review, which was a centre of Holocaust denial, the right to distribute his books. While projecting towards the outside world an image of success, with a flat in Mayfair and a Rolls-Royce, Irving was having financial difficulties and was in need of help.

In 1983, Irving agreed to attend the annual conference of the Institute for Historical Review. Irving's confidence was buoyed by the reaction to his highly visible role in the debunking of the Hitler Diaries as forgeries.⁸ Endorsed as authentic by amongst others Trevor-Roper and Jäckel, who had so heavily criticised *Hitler's War*, Irving maintained that the diaries were fake. His conviction derived from the fact that he knew the collection from which the diaries had come as one riddled with forgeries. In fact, he was in the possession of copies of many of these fakes. Editors of magazines who had missed the scoop of the Hitler diaries, and who had a vested interest to protect their own circulations by showing that they were not genuine, had courted Irving as never before. It had made him a lot of money. More importantly, in a remarkable *coup de théâtre* during a public presentation of the Hitler Diaries in Hamburg, the affair had allowed him to appear as a prophet of truth. His vindictive and very public triumph over Trevor-Roper and Jäckel reinforced his neurotic sense of pride and his grandiose sense of self-importance, and the conviction that he was the only one who could, when confronted with remnants from the Third Reich, distinguish a fake from the real thing.

He saw another chance when, in 1988, he attended in Toronto the trial of Holocaust denier Ernst Zündel. Irving and Zündel had had a commercial relationship since the mid 1980s. When Zündel found himself in a courtroom indicted for having spread 'false news', Irving volunteered to testify on Zündel's behalf. Faurisson coordinated Zündel's defence, and he had conceived of the idea to employing Fred Leuchter, an American engineer who had serviced the gas chambers of the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, as an expert witness. Leuchter agreed to investigate the ruins of the Auschwitz crematoria. He left for Poland on February 25 and returned on March 3, 1988. His conclusions were to Faurisson's liking: "The author finds no evidence that any of the facilities normally alleged to be execution gas chambers were ever used as such, and finds, further, that because of the design and fabrication of these facilities, they could not have been utilized for execution gas chambers."⁹ The judge was not convinced, but David Irving was. During his testimony Irving publicly embraced Leuchter's conclusions. "I'm very impressed, in fact, by the presentation, by the scientific manner of presentation, by the expertise that's been shown by it and by the very novel conclusion that he's arrived at." Irving admitted that "as a

⁸ See Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler*, New York 1986.

⁹ Fred A. Leuchter, *The Leuchter Report: The End of a Myth*. Decatur, AL: David Clark, nd.: 7



historian I'm rather ashamed it never occurred to me to make this kind of investigation on the particular controversy." In conclusion, he endorsed the report wholeheartedly. „I think it is shattering in the significance of its discovery.”¹⁰

Descending from the witness box, Irving had the choice to pack up, return to London, forget about it, and continue his studies of the Nazi pantheon. Probably his reputation would not have suffered much, and he would still have enjoyed the pleasures of a scholar's life without many controversies and court actions. Yet, he chose a different route: he decided that Leuchter's *Auschwitz* was to be his Rubicon, a hinge in his own career, and a turning point in the history of history. Irving began to aggressively trumpet his own conversion as a world-historical event. His behaviour had little to do with the professional conduct of historians in search for the truth, and much with the narcissism of a man caught in a no-man's land between an inflated sense of his own superiority as a historian and a debilitating sense of inferiority vis-a-vis the historical establishment. In a lecture given in 1988 in Canada Irving admitted that since he had been a small boy he had enjoyed to see important people, or people with reputation and prestige, with 'egg on their face'. With Holocaust denial, he had found a way to act out his boyhood dream: "just imagine the omelette on their faces if we manage to expose that other six million lie [as opposed the six million marks Stern paid for the Hitler diaries]. This is the prospect that is now opening up in front of me." The reference to the Hitler diaries was revealing, because it had been an occasion when he had indeed played a useful public role. Again and again he was to compare his role in the Hitler Diaries Affair with his endorsement of Leuchter's results. Irving predicted that soon he was to bring the whole exterminationist edifice down with a new book on Auschwitz. „This is why I hope that people will recognize that I managed to pull off a coup even more spectacular than exposing the Hitler diaries as a fake. From one six million lie to another. That I will see then that some of the world's most famous historians and politicians have the biggest omelette of all times all over their face.”¹¹

In a hurry to see the omelette on their faces, Irving bought from Zündel the right to publish the British edition of *The Leuchter Report* through his own publishing venture *Focal Point*. To Irving the prospect of a major historiographical revolution appeared bright. Half a year earlier by the respected Princeton historian Arno Mayer had published a controversial book entitled *Why Did The Heavens Not Darken? The Final Solution In History* (1988). Mayer had proposed that the Holocaust was not the result of antisemitism, but of antibolshevism. It did not arise from the National Socialist phantasy concerning the so-called 'Jewish Question', but resulted from German frustration when the Wehrmacht failed to defeat the Soviet Union in the Summer and Fall of 1941. While this thesis could perhaps be accepted for the operations of the *Einsatzgruppen*, Mayer went farther: *Operation Barbarossa* also provided the cause and context for the death camps, including Auschwitz. Mayer's book included a whole chapter on Auschwitz which provided enough clauses, sentences and paragraphs to raise the enthusiasm of Holocaust Deniers everywhere. While Mayer did not deny the presence and importance of the gas chambers, he attached a particular importance to typhus as a cause of death in Birkenau, which he described as the place where the ailing and dying from the other camps in the Auschwitz complex were sent. "From 1942 to 1945, certainly at Auschwitz, but

¹⁰ Irving Testimony, District Court of Ontario: Her Majesty the Queen v. Ernst Zündel '88, transcripts, 9423. See also: van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 45.

¹¹ Lecture given by David Irving in Toronto, August 1988, in: van Pelt, *Expert Opinion*, 588; see also: van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz*, 46.



probably overall, more Jews were killed by so-called 'natural' causes than by 'unnatural' ones.¹² Mayer's thesis that typhus had been one of the main causes of death in Birkenau had brought happiness to Faurisson, who had claimed earlier that all Auschwitz victims had died of disease. With the apparently partial conversion of a prominent member of the historical establishment to a Holocaust Denial position vis-a-vis the Auschwitz gas chambers, Irving believed that the prospects of *The Leuchter Report* to attract establishment support looked good indeed. By 1989 Irving became the public face of Holocaust Denial. In 1990, he addressed a conference of Holocaust deniers organized by the Institute of Historical Review. He introduced his remarks on Auschwitz with, once again, a straight reference to his role in the Hitler diaries.

Just picture me seven years ago, in 1983. I am at the press conference of the West German Magazine *Der Stern*, in Hamburg. I had been smuggled in disguised as a reporter for *Bild-Zeitung*, which is the opposition newspaper group in Germany. I was very familiar with the Hitler case: I had spent twenty years of my life studying the story of Adolf Hitler. I had built up a personal card index of his life – about 30,000 index cards – and when they told me that they were about to publish the Hitler diaries, I knew it was phony! So *Bild-Zeitung* said: "Will you come along disguised as our press correspondence and attend this damned press conference and blow it up for them?" So I went along. I was the first on the microphone, and I was the first one to have a chance to ask the people at *Der Stern* certain questions. I said right out: "The Diaries are fake – the Adolf Hitler diaries are fake!" They had spent nine million Marks on them! And all the German historians had said they were genuine. Eberhard Jäckel had said they were genuine, so they must be genuine – but they were not. Inflation had done its work: if in 1989 he had talked about an expense of six million German marks, the figure had risen to nine million a year later. Irving continued by suggesting that the Holocaust was just another fraud to be exposed.

This is how it was when I was in Toronto a couple of years ago. I was called as an expert witness as a historian to give evidence at the Ernst Zündel case, where Zündel's researchers showed me the *Leuchter Report*, the laboratory tests on the crematoria and the gas chambers. As a person who, at the University of London, studied chemistry and physics and the exact sciences, I knew that this was an exact result. There was no way around it. And suddenly all that I had read in the archives clicked into place. You have to accept that, if there is no evidence anywhere in the archives that there were any gassings going on; that if there is not a single German document that refers to the gassings of human beings – not one wartime German document; and if there is no reference anywhere in the German archives to anybody giving orders for the gassings of people, and if, on the other hand, the forensic tests of the laboratories, of the crematoria, and the gas chambers and Auschwitz and so on, show that there is no trace, no significant residue whatsoever of a cyanide compound, then this can all only mean one thing.

He then referred to the fact that in 1990 the chief historian of Auschwitz had published a study in which he had established on the basis of careful research the total number of victims of that camp as 1.1 million – rejecting the figure of four million established by Soviet investigators in 1945. Having identified Auschwitz as a "battleship" and the main weapon in "the biggest propaganda offensive that the human race has ever known", Irving now claimed that "the Auschwitz has been steering amongst the Icebergs, and finally it has begun to scuttle itself".

12 Arno Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken? The 'Final Solution' in History*. New York 1988, 365.



They have begun to haul down the flag of the battleship Auschwitz. They have taken down the placard, they've taken down the memorial to the four million, and they have replaced it with a rather smaller memorial to one million.

Of course that is not the end of the story. I am convinced that it's just the 'interim memorial'. I think it is on cardboard, if you have a close look, because why waste money on an expensive memorial when you are going only to have to change it again in a few months time! To me, Auschwitz is unimportant – I am happy that the ship is scuttling itself. It is vanishing. It is going to be left like the battleship Arizona at Pearl Harbor – if you ever go to Hawaii and have a look at it – with just its mast sticking out of the water to mark where once a great legend stood. And when people go there a hundred years from now and say: "Down there is the most incredible legend that people believed for fifty years: it's the great battleship Auschwitz, it was scuttled by its crew!"

Why don't we have to believe it? Well, you know about the *Leuchter Report*.¹³ In his speeches to more general audiences, Irving did not mince his words either. "I don't see any reason to be tasteful about Auschwitz. It is baloney. It is a legend," he told an audience in Calgary, Alberta, in 1991. Once we admit the fact that it was a brutal slave labour camp and large numbers of people did die, as large numbers of innocent people died elsewhere in the war, why believe the rest of the baloney? I say quite tastelessly in fact that more people died on the back seat of Edward Kennedy's car in Chappaquiddick than ever died in a gas chamber in Auschwitz. Oh, you think that's tasteless. How about this. There are so many Auschwitz survivors going around, in fact the numbers increases as the years go past which is biologically very odd to say the least, because I am going to form an association of Auschwitz survivors, survivors of the Holocaust and other liars for the A-S-S-H-O-L-E-S, ...¹⁴

Such language attracted the attention of the American scholar Deborah Lipstadt. In 1986, she had published *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933-1945*. This analysed the largely unconscious patterns of denial that had marked contemporary American reporting of the Holocaust. In the late 1980s she had become interested in the highly conscious patterns of Holocaust Denial propagated by Butz, Faurisson, and Irving. In 1993 she published in the United States her *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. In this book she identified Irving as "one of the most dangerous spokesman for Holocaust denial". She charged that, "familiar with historical evidence, he bends it until it conforms with his ideological leanings and political agenda". Writing about Irving's conversion to Holocaust denial, Lipstadt wrote: David Irving, who during the Zündel trial declared himself converted by Leuchter's work to Holocaust denial and to the idea that the gas chambers were a myth, described himself as conducting a 'one-man infitادا' against the official history of the Holocaust.

In his foreword to his publication of the *Leuchter Report*, Irving wrote that there was no doubt as to Leuchter's 'integrity' and 'scrupulous methods'. He made no mention of Leuchter's lack of technical expertise or of the many holes that had been poked in his findings. Most important, Irving wrote, "Nobody likes to be swindled, still less where considerable sums of money are involved". Irving identified Israel as the swindler, claiming that West Germany had given it more than ninety billion deutsche marks in voluntary reparations, "essentially in atonement for the 'gas chambers of Auschwitz'". According to Irving the problem was that the latter was a

¹³ Irving, Battleship Auschwitz, **

¹⁴ Lecture given by David Irving in Milton, Ontario, October 1991, in: Van Pelt, Expert Opinion, 505f.



myth that would 'not die easily'. He subsequently set off to promulgate Holocaust denial notions in various countries.¹⁵

Initially, Irving did not consider suing for libel. And he would have had little chance to win a case in an American court: American libel laws made success very unlikely because the burden of proof be on him and, as a public figure, Irving would have to prove that Lipstadt had made her criticisms of him with knowledge of falsity or with reckless disregard of the truth. The book appeared in Britain in 1994, under the imprint of Viking, a subsidiary of Penguin. British libel law favours the plaintiff and not the defendant. The plaintiff only needs to make the charge that certain remarks are defamatory. Unless the defendant claims that the plaintiff misunderstood the ordinary meaning of the words at issue, or their innuendo, the law requires that the defence justifies the words by proving the alleged libel to be 'substantially' true.

Yet, for two years nothing happened. But in 1996, Lipstadt was instrumental in getting a major American publisher cancel publication of one of Irving's books. Irving was enraged. In September 1996 he issued a writ of summons, and triggered with this an action in which Penguin and Lipstadt, if they chose not to settle, would have to prove in the British High Court that the statements that Irving considered libellous were justified. Lipstadt and Penguin decided not to settle. They assembled a team to prepare a defence, and it included a few historians. I was one of them because Irving had included in his complaint Lipstadt's description of his conversion to Holocaust denial on the basis of Leuchter's conclusions, and his subsequent sponsorship of *The Leuchter Report*. Hence the legal team needed a expert witness who could determine the evidentiary value of Leuchter's forensic research against the background of the totality of evidence about the genocidal character of Auschwitz available to a historian in 1988. In other words, they needed a historian who could answer the question what was known about Auschwitz on the basis of what evidence, and if a responsible historian, who would have acted with due diligence, would have embraced Leuchter's conclusions.

I worked on and off for a year on an expert report that not only brought together the eyewitness and material evidence for our knowledge about Auschwitz as an extermination camp, but also analysed and refuted all the major challenges to that knowledge made by Holocaust deniers like Butz, Faurisson, Leuchter, Irving, and others. Much of this work of was a simple but extremely tedious exercise of comparing their statements about the sources to the sources themselves. For example, Faurisson attempted to show that what Auschwitz Kommandant Rudolf Höss had said in his post-war confessions about the gassings in Birkenau was improbable, if not impossible. In order to make his case, Faurisson juxtaposed two of Höss's statements.

The door was opened a half an hour after the gas was thrown in and the ventilation system was turned on. Work was immediately started to remove the corpses.¹⁶ They dragged the bodies from the gas chambers, removed the gold teeth, cut off the hair, then dragged the bodies to the pits or to the ovens. On top of that, they had to maintain the fires in the pits, pour off the accumulated fat, and poke holes into the burning mountain of bodies, so that more oxygen could enter. All these jobs they performed with an indifferent coolness, just as if this was an everyday affair. While dragging the bodies, they ate or smoked. Even the gruesome job of burning the bod-

¹⁵ Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, New York 1993, 179.

¹⁶ Rudolf Höss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, ed. Steven Paskuly, transl. Andrew Pollinger, Buffalo 1992, 44.



ies dug up after being in mass graves for a long time did not prevent them from eating.¹⁷

Closely reading this first passage, Faurisson had noted the adverb ‘immediately’. In other words, work began immediately when the ventilation began, that means when the room was still highly toxic. This was very dangerous. It was evident, Faurisson had argued, that the *Sonderkommando* only could have entered the space equipped with gas masks. The second statement by Höss seemed, however, to preclude this as it recorded that members of the *Sonderkommando* dragged bodies while eating and smoking. This meant that they could not have been wearing gas masks—probably because of their ‘indifferent coolness’. In short, there was an inexplicable contradiction between the extreme toxicity of the gas chamber and the behaviour of the *Sonderkommandos*. Adding to the collection the official instruction manual of Zyklon B, which stipulated that spaces that had been fumigated with the agent should air out for at least 20 hours, Faurisson came to the conclusion that Höss obviously did not know what he was writing about, and that his testimony was worthless.¹⁸

Yet, on examination, it became clear that Faurisson had quoted out of context. The second quotation taken from Höss occurred in the middle of a paragraph that deals with the ‘strange’ behaviour of the *Sonderkommandos*. It did not discuss the extermination procedure in any logical order. When Höss mentions that the *Sonderkommandos* ate or smoked while dragging bodies, he did not say “while dragging bodies from the gas chambers”. In fact, there was a lot of body-dragging in Auschwitz: in crematoria 2 and 3 bodies were dragged within the incineration halls from the elevator doors to the ovens, in crematoria 4 and 5, bodies were dragged not only from the gas chambers to the morgue, but also from the morgue to the incineration room, and in the case of the open air burning of the buried corpses in the late summer and fall of 1942, bodies were dragged from the opened mass graves to the incineration pits. At no time did the members of the *Sonderkommando* need a gas mask for this awful job. Likewise Faurisson had misrepresented the Zyklon B instruction manual. The rule for spaces to be aired for twenty hours applies to rooms without any special ventilation system. After twenty hours of natural ventilation, and another hour with closed windows and doors, the room should be available for all activities except sleeping; this should wait another day. The situation in the gas chambers was different. Equipped with a powerful ventilation system, the time could be reduced to twenty minutes.

Comparing the evidence adduced by the deniers to the sources was a tedious labour, but it did not pose a particular moral dilemma. After more than fifteen years of marking exams, I had learned how to deal with cheating students. But refuting Faurisson forced me to move beyond identifying the way he misconstrued the historical evidence. I also had to engage his ‘science’. It was a small step from comparing Faurisson’s statement about what the Zyklon B instruction manual said about the need to ventilate rooms fumigated with hydrogen cyanide with the original document to engaging the scientific question how quickly it would take to reduce a lethal concentration of hydrogen cyanide to a harmless concentration in a room of a certain size using a ventilation system of a certain capacity. This step I was forced to make because deniers did not limit themselves to misquoting sources, but also invoked scientific arguments to “prove” that Auschwitz had not been an extermination camp be-

¹⁷ Höss, *Death Dealer*, 160.

¹⁸ Robert Faurisson, *Mémoire en Défense contre ceux qui m'accusent de falsifier l'histoire / La question des chambres à gaz*, preface by Noam Chomsky. Paris: La Veille Taupe, 1980: 161.



cause the gas chambers could not have killed the alleged number of people, or the incinerators could not have incinerated the alleged number of corpses. Leuchter, for example, had calculated that over the history of the five Auschwitz crematoria the total number of people gassed could have been no more than 112,456, and that the maximum number of corpses that could have been theoretically incinerated had been 193,576, while practically the number would have been a little less than half, at 85,092. In other words, the 'alleged' killing of a million people in the Auschwitz gas chambers and the incineration of their bodies in the Auschwitz incinerators had been technologically 'impossible'.¹⁹

In order to refute Leuchter, I had to go over his premises and his calculations, and take out a pocket calculator myself, and engage in what I considered to be the obscene exercise of showing that the killing of a million people in the Auschwitz gas chambers and the incineration of their bodies in the Auschwitz incinerators had been technologically quite 'possible'. And as Holocaust deniers had argued that the Zyklon B deliveries to Auschwitz had not been sufficient to leave enough hydrogen cyanide to kill the alleged number of victims, I had to write what I consider to be the nauseating nadir of my academic career: a thirty-two-page report on Zyklon B use in Auschwitz (mostly for delousing of garments, barracks and train wagons), showing that, for example, in the year 1943 even the most intensive delousing with Zyklon B would have left a surplus of between 1,660 kg and 3,160 kg Zyklon B, available for killing people. This resulted in the following concluding paragraphs: How many people can be killed by such an amount? Let us only consider the lower figure of 1,660 kg Zyklon B. The figure given by the Health Institution of the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia in Prague is that one needs 70 mg of Zyklon-B to kill one person. This means that one gram can kill 14 people, or 1 kg 14,000 people. If all the 1,660 kg Zyklon-B would be used with 100 per cent efficiency, the surplus of 1,660 kg Zyklon B could have killed (1,660 x 14,000 =) 23.2 million people. But, of course, the efficiency was much lower, as first of all people would absorb more than the minimal lethal dose, and because much Zyklon-B would not be absorbed by the victims, but remain in the gas chamber to be pumped out after all had died, and so on. Pery Broad testified that the SS used two 1 kg tins to kill 2,000 people, or 1 kg per 1,000 people – a ratio of 1kg per 1,000 people that was also used by Gerstein when he assumed that 8,500 kg of Zyklon B sufficed to kill eight million people. This implies that the 1,660 kg Zyklon-B could have killed 1.6 million people. Testifying in Hamburg, Dr. Bendel stated that 1 kg tin was good for the murder of 500 people, which would mean that 1,660 kg Zyklon B would have allowed for the murder of 800,000 people.

It is clear that the extra 1,660 kg to 3,160 kg of Zyklon-B available in the camp in 1943 would have more than sufficed to kill the number of 250,000 people murdered in Auschwitz in 1943 with Zyklon B. If we follow Broad's estimate, only 250 kg Zyklon B would have been used for genocidal purposes; if we follow Bendel's estimate, 500 kg would have sufficed.

Using the most conservative estimates possible, Auschwitz had a surplus of Zyklon B of between three to six times necessary to kill the 250,000 people murdered in Auschwitz in 1943.²⁰

As long as I was writing at home, the agony of having to do such obscene calculations was my own. But when I left in January 2000 for England to defend my report

¹⁹ Leuchter, *The Leuchter Report*, Tables V, VI, VIII.

²⁰ Appendix to Robert Jan van Pelt, *Expert Opinion*



under cross-examination, I realized that I faced a difficult situation. I was to testify in public, in the presence of Auschwitz survivors who were to fill the public galleries or follow the trial through the media. On the one hand I felt a great sense of loyalty to those who had been murdered in Auschwitz, or the survivors of that camp. As a scholar on Auschwitz, I owed it to them to show in posture, language and thought a clear rejection to the obscene phantasmagoria of Holocaust denial. On the other hand, I had to be effective as a champion of truth. I knew that Irving would have the initiative, that he would raise the issues he wanted – from how much Zyklon B it takes to kill a person to how much coke to incinerate a corpse, from how long it would take to empty a gas chamber to how long it would take to burn the bodies – and that I had little choice but to accept and engage whatever challenge he threw in my direction. I contemplated the possibility to do both, to honour the victims and defeat Irving, but I did not believe that it would be possible to find a balance.

Having agreed to serve as an expert witness, I would serve the objective demands of historical truth, the memory of the victims, and the dignity of survivors best by making offensive calculations when necessary, drawing distressing diagrams when possible, and taking the court on an abhorrent forensic site-visit to the crematoria within the virtual reality created by today's computer programs.

And this is exactly what I did. It was troublesome, not only to me, but also to those in the court room. Witnessing Irving's challenge that the elevator connecting the gas chamber to the incineration room of crematorium 2 was a 'bottleneck' in the whole operation, journalist James Dalrymple described to the readership of *The Independent* what followed.

Irving knows the value of a strong phrase and the silence in Court 73 seemed to deepen as he said it. We all knew what was coming. Even the judge murmured that he could see where this was leading. How could 500,000 bodies – the number estimated to have died in that one crematorium – be transported up a single lift-shaft, only about 9ft square. Irving demanded that Van Pelt now do the arithmetic of nightmares. How much could the lift carry? 750 kilos, 1,500 kilos, 3,000 kilos? How many bodies would that be at, say sixty kilos a body? Were they in gurneys or were they just squeezed in, like people squashed into a telephone box? How long to take each batch up to the ovens? Ten minutes, or more, each batch? Twenty corpses at a time, or 25?

Dalrymple noted that I entered into the exercise 'reluctantly'. In fact, I was deeply disgusted by Irving's question to make some 'back-on-the-envelope' calculations, and actually did remember Ericson's resolve when I finally answered Irving. My answer was, however, not too clear. Dalrymple, in any case, was not too convinced, and returning that night home in the train he took out his pocket calculator. "Ten minutes for each batch of 25, I tapped in. That makes 150 an hour. Which gives 3,600 for each 24-hour period. Which gives 1,314,000 in a year. So that's fine. It could be done. Thank God, the numbers add up." At that moment, Dalrymple was overcome by the obscenity of his calculations. "When I realised what I was doing, I almost threw the little machine across the compartment in rage." To him, this little episode was a normal event in "the strange and flourishing landscape that has come to be known as historical revisionism."

It is an area of study with only one subject. The Holocaust. And it is a place where tiny flaws can be found – and magnified – in large structures, where great truths can be tainted and wounded by small discrepancies, where millions of dead people can be turned into a chimera. And where doubt can be planted like seed in the wind, to grow and fester as the screams of history grow fainter with the years.



A dark and dangerous place where even reasonable people start to do furtive sums on pocket calculators.²¹ Indeed: engaging Irving's arguments was a messy business, and none of us who stood in the witness box and tried to represent the historical record with honesty, dignity and decency emerged from it with clean hands. Yet, in the end, from the descent into the sewers of Holocaust denial emerged some moment of truth. On April 11, Judge Gray pronounced his judgement. When he came to the matter concerning Auschwitz, he told the packed court that at the beginning of the trial he had supposed that the evidence of mass extermination of Jews in the gas chambers at Auschwitz was compelling, but that he had "set aside this preconception when assessing the evidence adduced by the parties in these proceedings." After going through all the arguments produced by Irving to prove that the 'Factory of Death' could not have worked, and my counterarguments that it had worked sufficiently well to murder all those the Germans intended to kill, Judge Gray stated that, "having considered the various arguments advanced by Irving to assail the effect of the convergent evidence relied on by the Defendants, it is my conclusion that no objective, fair-minded historian would have serious cause to doubt that there were gas chambers at Auschwitz and that they were operated on a substantial scale to kill hundreds of thousands of Jews."²²

The next day many major newspapers from all over the world carried editorials analysing the meaning of the judgement. Many commented on the great civic and moral responsibility of the historian when he or she sets out to reconstruct the past. *The Irish Times* applauded the destruction of Irving's reputation. And it found worth noting that his defeat was not the result of some "argy-bargy on university campuses" or had occurred under a "hail of rotten eggs and the shouting down of his message by strident adolescent voices". The hero, in this case, was "the clinical, forensic examination of his credo, a calculated and methodical destruction of his untruthful version of history."²³ *The Guardian* also reflected on the meaning of the trial for our understanding of the task of the historian. "Truth is no shining city on a hill", *The Guardian* pronounced.

It has to be worked at; the credibility of those who claim to express it is critical. Even a casual reader of the case reports could quickly see how painstaking genuine historical scholarship is; it builds detail upon detail, avoiding casual inference and thin deduction. Eventually, a plausible narrative is pieced together but even then it has to withstand the slings and arrows of competitive scholars. And the Holocaust is now hot history. Due, in part, to the persistence of the deniers, academic effort has been redoubled. Among the many Irving assertions to be comprehensively demolished was the suggestion that thought police prevent open challenge to received historical wisdom. It is precisely because of the historians' efforts from the early 50s on that there is now no room for doubt, despite the false trails and the lacunae left by a Nazi bureaucracy as assiduous about destroying the signs of its crimes as realising the final solution. Other jurisdictions make denying the Holocaust a crime. After this case, we can rely on empiricism and the sheer weight of evidence.²⁴

Reading these editorials as my plane took off from Heathrow to bring me back to Toronto, I realised that my quest in search for an understanding of the professional responsibility of the architect, begun in 1987, had ended thirteen years later with a new insight into the professional responsibility of the historian. As a historian, it appeared to me a worthwhile result.

21 Dalrymple, James, The curse of revisionism, in: *The Independent*, January 29, 2000.

22 Charles Gray, *The Irving Judgement: David Irving v. Penguin Books and Professor Deborah Lipstadt*. Harmondsworth 2000, 323.

23 Holocaust Denial, in: *The Irish Times*, April 12, 2000.

24 Truth's Sheer Weight: Irving Was the Deniers' Best Shot, in: *The Guardian*, April 12, 2000.



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