



'A remarkably powerful collection'

Antony Beevor

LAURENCE REES

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THEIR DARKEST HOUR



PEOPLE TESTED TO THE EXTREME IN WWII

THEIR DARKEST HOUR

For Helena

LAURENCE REES

**THEIR
DARKEST
HOUR**



Ebury Press, an imprint of Ebury Publishing,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Ebury Press is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

Copyright © Laurence Rees 2008

Laurence Rees has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this Work in
accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published in the United Kingdom by Ebury Press in 2008
This reissue edition published in the United Kingdom by Ebury Press in 2022

Plate section picture credits:

p.1 Ishikawa Kiyoko, Petras Zelionka; p.2 Aleksey Bris, Maimichi; p.3 Bildarchiv Preussischer
Kulturbesitz/Pk-Hachle, Masaya Enomoto; p.4 Australian War Memorial, Jewish Museum,
Imperial War Museum; p.5 Museum Panorama; p.6 Zinaida Grigorievna Pytkina, Bildarchiv
Preussischer Kulturbesitz; p.7 Karl Bohm-Tettelbach, Kenichiro Oonuki; p.8 AKG London

www.penguin.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780091917593

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is
made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTIONvii

PART ONE – MASS KILLING

1 Paul Montgomery and Bombing the Japanese
to Destruction.....5
2 Petras Zelionka and the Killing Fields of the Holocaust.....11
3 Oskar Groening and a Double Life in Auschwitz.....17

PART TWO – RESISTANCE

4 Alois Pfaller and the Struggle Against the Nazis29
5 Aleksey Bris and the Shattered Dreams of the Ukrainians35
6 Vladimir Kantovski and Stalin’s Penal Battalions.....41

PART THREE – FIGHTING AND KILLING THE ‘INFERIOR’ AND THE ‘INHUMAN’

7 James Eagleton and Killing the Japanese51
8 Hajime Kondo and the Making of a Devil in the Japanese
Imperial Army59
9 Wolfgang Horn and Shooting Red Army Soldiers67
10 Masayo Enomoto and Rape, Murder and Cannibalism73

PART FOUR – PRISONERS

11 Aleksandr Mikhailovski and the Nazis’ Human Mine
Detectors83
12 Samuel Willenberg and Surviving a Death Camp.....89
13 Peter Lee and the Virtues of an Englishman Imprisoned
by the Japanese95
14 Tatiana Nanieva and the Revenge of Stalin101
15 Estera Frenkiel and Choices in the Ghetto107
16 Maria Platonow and Betrayal by the British113

17	Toivi Blatt and the Philosophy of Sobibor	121
18	Connie Sully and Rape by the Japanese	129
19	Lucille Eichengreen and Abuse in the Ghetto.....	135

PART FIVE – SOLDIERS OF BELIEF

20	Vladimir Ogryzko and the Panic in Moscow	151
21	Suren Mirzoyan and Hand-to-Hand Combat in Stalingrad.....	157
22	Jacques Leroy and the Mentality of a SS Fanatic.....	163
23	Zinaida Pytkina and SMERSH	171
24	Hiroo Onoda and the Refusal to Surrender.....	177

PART SIX – SERVANTS OF THE REGIME

25	Erna Krantz and Living an Ordinary Life under the Nazis	191
26	Mark Lazarevich Gally and the Mind Of Josef Stalin.....	197
28	Manfred Freiherr von Schroeder and Working with Hitler	205
29	Ken Yuasa and Human Experiments in War.....	213
27	Fritz Hippler and ‘The Eternal Jew’	219
30	Nigel Nicolson and Deporting Yugoslavians	225
31	Karl Boehm-Tettelbach and the Charming Nazis.....	231
32	Kristina Söderbaum and Acting for Hitler	239

PART SEVEN – MASS SUICIDE

33	Kenichiro Oonuki and the Logic of the Kamikaze	251
34	Waltraud Reski and Mass Rape in Demmin	259
35	Shigeaki Kinjou and the Death of the Innocent.....	265
	Postscript.....	271
	Timeline	279
	Acknowledgements.....	299
	Index	301

INTRODUCTION

How could Nazi killers shoot Jewish women and children at close range? Why did Japanese soldiers rape and murder on such a horrendous scale? How was it possible to endure the torment of a Nazi death camp? For nearly 20 years I have tried to answer these and many other similar questions by meeting hundreds of people who participated in World War II. I was particularly interested in the motivation of the perpetrators – the people who committed atrocities – though I also met many of their victims and others who faced difficult, sometimes impossible, decisions during the war.

In the course of my work I travelled from Japan to the Baltic States, from Poland to America, from Germany to Borneo and from Italy to China. I encountered rapists, murderers and cannibals. I talked to soldiers who acted heroically; survivors of the worst atrocities imaginable; even a man who shot little children. Each of the hundreds of interviews was filmed, and each encounter lasted several hours. I used some of this interview material in a series of television documentaries I wrote and produced about the war and in the accompanying books, but an enormous amount of historical information remained unpublished. So I decided to study carefully once again the more than 7 million words of interview transcript and write a series of essays about the 35 most extraordinary people I met on my travels. This approach has enabled me to include in the previously published stories information that has not been made public before, and to add several new interviews, which appear here in book form entirely for the first time – notably my encounters with Hiroo Onoda, Nigel Nicolson, Marie Platonow, Fritz Hippler and Kristina

Söderbaum. This fresh format also allowed me to offer an insight into my own personal encounters with all of these interviewees, which the previous narrative form prevented.

Over the years, as I questioned people who had been tested in ways that I had never been, I also felt questions asked of myself. And the one question that I believed I had to address more than any other was simple: what would I have done in similar circumstances? Of course, I could not know for certain. Had I been in those circumstances all those years ago then I would not have been the identical person I am today, since we are all shaped so much by the times in which we live. But in order to read any history we have to imagine what the past was like and create once again the circumstances in which historical characters lived. And by a similar act of imagination we can surely place ourselves in history and ask what kind of person we would have become in that situation, and consequently what choices we might have exercised.

The past is not some alien world. They may have ‘done things differently’ there but that is because the circumstances were different, not because human beings and their fundamental needs and motivations were different. The physiology of the human mind has not changed over the last few thousand years (certainly not since World War II) and so the dilemmas and challenges faced in this book were faced by people essentially like us – indeed, by our parents and grandparents. I believe there is consequently a great deal we can learn about ourselves by asking, ‘What would we have done?’

It was vital, of course, to treat the oral testimony that I and my team were gathering with an element of scepticism – especially when people were talking so long after the event. We researched all the interviewees thoroughly before filming, and checked that the factual details of their story were consistent both internally with their own testimony and externally with documents of the period, like the war

diaries of the various military units concerned. If we had any doubts about the fundamental veracity of a potential contributor's testimony, then we did not film an interview.

Unlike some interviews conducted for oral-history projects, I also focused each filmed interview around a handful of specific themes. There were two reasons for this. First, I found we got the most interesting answers when we concentrated on one area rather than trying to cover an entire biography, and, second, it allowed us to check once again with internal references that the story we were hearing was consistent.

Then there is the question of how much we can expect human beings to recall so long after the events in question. Here I think there is an important distinction to make. If you interview people about what seem to them insignificant details, like the exact names of all their comrades years ago, it is likely that their recollections will be unreliable. But if you focus on key emotional moments, then in my experience many people have very powerful and accurate recall. I think we can recognize this from our own experience. I could not tell you, for example, exactly what I had for lunch four weeks ago. But I could tell you precisely the circumstances and emotions around the sudden illness and death of my mother 30 years ago. One event was not very significant to me; the other was a searing, life-changing moment that I can recall in almost photographic detail.

Historians must ask questions of all source material, and oral testimony is no exception to this rule. But, as I discuss later in this book in the story of Nigel Nicolson and the deportation of thousands of Yugoslav soldiers to their deaths, it is important to remember that documents are capable of lying just as much as people.

As for the format of this book, I have chosen to divide it into seven sections. But I appreciate that many of these interviewees could have fitted into several sections: someone involved in mass

killing was also subsequently a prisoner, for example. So what I have done is to place each person in the category that was historically the most significant for them. This was, I think, the best way to present this material since it allowed comparisons between nationalities to be made which I believe have not been highlighted before; though I am the first to recognize that the chief value of this testimony remains the detail of the individual experience.

However, it is important that the intermingling in some sections of this book, of essays about former Nazis or soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army with essays about veterans from the Allied side, is not taken to imply any moral equivalence between the different political systems involved. No one with my family heritage – a father who fought in the RAF during the war and an uncle killed on the Atlantic convoys – could ever forget that the Western democracies were fundamentally on the side of righteousness during the conflict. Though the testimony in this book does reveal that there are occasionally some surprising similarities of personal experience across national boundaries.

Meeting these people has changed the way I think about the world. Whilst they may have talked about the past, I believe that what they said is of value for the future.

Laurence Rees

London

JULY 2007

PART ONE MASS KILLING

OVER 60 MILLION PEOPLE DIED in World War II – more than in any other conflict in history – and one of the chief reasons this level of carnage was possible was the power of modern methods of killing. Two of the three personal histories in this section illustrate how easy it had become – both technologically and psychologically – to kill people in large numbers by the middle of the twentieth century. Oskar Groening talks of the modern killing techniques of Auschwitz allowing him to ‘separate’ himself from the murders during his time working in the camp. And Paul Montgomery speaks of the ‘distancing’ effect of bombarding civilians from the air.

It is troubling material for many reasons, not least because this testimony forces us to confront an important issue about the human capacity to kill. What if all it took to remove your greatest enemy, your biggest danger, the person who you believed threatened your own life, was merely to press a button in front of you? You simply wouldn’t see them again. No bad memories, no post-traumatic stress. In fact, you wouldn’t really feel you had ‘killed’ anyone. After all, you would only have pressed a button. Paul Montgomery put the issue succinctly during his interview when he revealed that he felt destroying people by dropping bombs on them was like playing ‘a video game’.

And these modern methods of killing didn’t just allow more people to be destroyed than ever before, and with less personal involvement from the killers; they also raise difficult questions of

guilt and innocence. It is easy to see how the third person included in Part One, Petras Zelionka, was guilty of murder: he stood in front of his victims and pulled the trigger. As a result he was sentenced to 20 years in a prison camp after the war. But what about Oskar Groening? He worked in an office sorting money and never directly killed anyone, yet he clearly helped the smooth functioning of the murder factory that was Auschwitz.

Along with thousands of other members of the SS who worked at Auschwitz, Groening was never charged with any offence – 85 per cent of the SS who served there escaped all punishment. This was primarily because the legal authorities in most countries decided that the majority of SS men in Auschwitz had not personally killed anyone – it was chiefly the technology that was guilty. And you can't put gas chambers on trial. All of which begs this question, of course: does that mean that if in the future a state organizes an entirely mechanized system of extermination, no one will be guilty of any crime?

Then there is another question of guilt and innocence that this testimony raises. Both the Nazis at the time, and a number of people since, have argued that there is some kind of equivalence between the extermination of the Jews in the gas chambers and the mass killing of the Japanese and Germans by Allied bombers. Oskar Groening himself implies this comparison (see page 21). It's an extraordinary idea – especially given that American flyers like Paul Montgomery came from a democracy and had been forced into a war to defend themselves against blatant aggression – but it is important to address the question, and I discuss it towards the end of my essay on Groening.

None of these issues is easily resolved. But the questions they raise are fundamental to any judgements we form about the legality and morality of war.

PAUL MONTGOMERY AND BOMBING THE JAPANESE TO DESTRUCTION

I have probably met more people who were responsible for mass killing during World War II – from Japan, Germany, the former Soviet Union and the USA – than any other living person. It is a dubious distinction and was not one of my life ambitions. But it does offer me the opportunity to make some comparative judgements. And one of my most surprising findings was that the vast majority of the people I met who were involved in killing large numbers of men, women and children seemed relatively untroubled by their actions. Take the case of Paul Montgomery for example.

I interviewed him in 1999 at his ranch in the heart of the Mid-West. The setting was idyllic. His house nestled peacefully in green pastures, and was reached down a long country road. He and his wife had been happily married for years, and were at the heart of a large extended family of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. His home was a calm and happy place to be. Paul Montgomery himself had been raised near by as a teetotal, model citizen. So the idea that this man had participated in the killing of thousands of people was almost unimaginable. It was the war, obviously, that allowed him the opportunity to commit these acts. In particular, it was the branch of the armed forces that he chose to join that made it possible, because he was a flyer in the United States Air Force (USAF).

He joined shortly after Pearl Harbor, and the memory of that ‘sneak’ attack conditioned his attitude throughout the war. ‘I began to develop a hatred for the Japanese for what they had done in such an underhand manner,’ he told me. ‘The Japanese had surely

damaged our property ... and I wanted to confront the Japanese much more than I did the Germans. I had lost some friends in Pearl Harbor and so I felt a responsibility to them.’ The bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii before declaring war on the United States was a catastrophic misjudgement by the Japanese. Of course, any country would have reacted to such an attack with outrage and fury, but with the Americans there was an added intensity to the response. It touched something deep in the American psyche – something to do with an almost mythic notion of ‘fair play’ or ‘straight dealing’ that was central to how many Americans saw themselves and their country. It drove Montgomery and millions of his compatriots to sign up for the war effort with vengeance in their hearts. He had always wanted to fly, and his chosen weapon of retribution was the four-engined bomber.

Initially he joined the USAF pilot programme, but after being told there were too many pilots he transferred to train as a radio operator. Eventually he was posted to a base on the small island of Tinian in the Pacific as part of the crew of a Boeing B29 Superfortress, the biggest and heaviest bomber of the war. His job was to help guide the plane over Japan to the general vicinity of the target and assist the bombardier in ensuring that the bombs fell where they should. His first raid was on the refineries at the port of Yokohama: ‘After we rolled off the target we could look back, see the refinery ablaze, and finally I felt some sense of accomplishment.’ A number of industrial targets followed, like the Mitsubishi heavy machinery complex at Osaka, but soon the overwhelming size of the USAF meant that Americans quite simply ran out of factories to bomb.

So now Montgomery and his crew participated in one of the most controversial military operations of the war – the fire-bombing of Japanese cities: ‘It was felt that we had to reduce not only their ability to wage war, but their desire to wage war. And so that brought

about the fire-bombing missions of the major targets. We started with Osaka and Tokyo and Nagoya, and all the major cities, and they were fire-bombed to nothing left except steps and chimneys. Complete one hundred per cent obliteration.’ Within their bomb clusters the Americans dropped special ‘fire-fighting bombs’ that exploded at unspecified intervals to prevent firemen from dealing with the blaze. Not that these bombs were strictly necessary, because the Japanese had virtually no ability, either on the ground or in the air, to deal with these attacks. The American planes, bombing from altitude, were almost impregnable, and Montgomery seldom felt fear during his work. The few who survived these attacks on the ground speak of ‘blizzards of fire’ and of ‘living people burnt alive’. The wooden and paper houses of the Japanese instantly combusted, and fire storms engulfed whole communities. Around 100,000 Japanese died in the fire-bombing of Tokyo during the night of 9–10 March 1945 – more than were initially killed at either Hiroshima or Nagasaki by the first atomic bombs.

‘I didn’t have any regrets, to put it bluntly,’ said Montgomery. ‘I was twenty-one years old that summer of the fire-bombing. And I really was wanting to get the war over and I wanted to go home. And if they told me to go bomb some cities, I went and bombed cities.’ He admitted that below him, suffering in the fire storm, ‘it must have been women and children, yeah,’ but he still felt that ‘it’s just what I was told to do as part of the war effort.’

These words on the page make Paul Montgomery sound like an unthinking man. But he wasn’t. With each of my questions he tried to search his own emotions and respond honestly. In a way, it was still hard for him to realize, emotionally, that he had been a part of a military operation that had brought death to thousands and thousands of women and children. One reason he felt that was because he had been just one of the aircrew in his plane, which

itself was part of a larger unit. So itemizing out the number of people that each individual had personally killed was impossible. But he himself articulated another, more important, reason why he felt so little about the destruction he had helped create: 'It's not like going out and sticking a bayonet in somebody's belly, OK? You kill them from a distance and it doesn't have that demoralizing effect upon you that it did if I went up and stuck a bayonet in somebody's stomach in the course of combat. It's just different. It's kind of like conducting war through a video game.'

This 'distancing' is, I believe, one of the keys to understanding why such a seemingly 'normal' man can participate in the killing of women and children in large numbers. Modern methods of killing have not just allowed more people to be killed than ever before, they have made the task psychologically easier for the killers. It was almost certainly harder for our ancestors to kill one person with a stone axe than it was for Paul Montgomery and his comrades to kill thousands via aerial bombardment from six kilometres up in the sky.

This ease of killing combined powerfully with the immense sense of justification that the US bomber crews felt in pursuing 'vengeance' against the Japanese. The Americans had not started the war, had not coveted anything the Japanese possessed, and felt they had been placed with no option but to fight. At Pearl Harbor the Japanese had sown the wind – now they would reap the whirlwind. In addition, a number of the US servicemen in this war believed they were fighting racially inferior people – American cartoons even portrayed the Japanese as 'monkeys'. But Paul Montgomery denied that racism formed part of his own motivation. 'One of my sons married a Japanese – she's from Hawaii,' he told me, 'and she's the greatest thing that ever happened to him. I have no animosity towards the Japanese people at all. I just, at the time, had an animosity towards the German or the Japanese war effort ... And I was determined, as

we all were, that we were gonna end the war ... And if it took bombing civilian cities, so be it.'

But during one mission – and one mission only – Paul Montgomery felt a connection with the people down below him. It was during a raid on the city of Kure on the southwest coast of the island of Honshu. His plane was one of the last to make its bomb run, and below him the city was ablaze: 'Kure was burning with such intensity, and we were at such low level, we had obnoxious odours from the incineration coming up to the airplane. We could see sheets of metal from out-houses and what have you coming up almost to our altitude ... I was gagging ... that odour struck me as an odour of indescribable stench. It was somewhere between burning urine and human waste ... It was a nauseating experience.'

'What did it make you feel,' I asked, 'when you smelt that?'

'I don't know. I felt everything except mercy for the people, for some reason. I was not obsessed with any feeling of sympathy. I just wasn't. I was young and I was case-hardened.'

Despite his statement that he felt 'no mercy' for the people below him, the smell of human waste coming up from the fire storm did affect Paul Montgomery. As he told the story of the raid on Kure he looked uncomfortable for the first time in the interview. It was as if he were still fighting to eliminate the message his senses had given him: this is the consequence of what you have done, the intense heat, the destruction of metal and wood, and the elimination of human beings so that all that is left is the smell of their excrement. The circumstances of the raid over Kure must surely have created all of these feelings somewhere deep within him – feelings that the 'distancing' of previous raids had prevented.

Clearly his superiors were aware that there was a danger the American bomber crews would suffer psychological problems because as soon as they landed back on their home base of Tinian, and their

debriefing had been completed, a flight sergeant offered each member of the crew a shot of powerful liquor. ‘I said, “I don’t drink.” He said, “Drink it anyway.” And so I drank it. And what I’m saying is it masked or tranquillized me almost to the point I couldn’t get back to my barracks. I went right to sleep. And he [the flight sergeant] said, “This is to prevent you from having any nightmares or failing to go to sleep.” And I went right to sleep. I was knocked out. And that’s the only time I ever drank any alcoholic beverage in my life.’

So concerned were the medical authorities for the psychological welfare of the bomber crews that a ‘medical man’ patrolled the rows of resting airmen to check that everybody was asleep. ‘He explained to us later that it was necessary – vital – that you get to sleep right away. That you not start this traumatic afterthought. And it worked. I didn’t feel any sympathy for the Japanese at any time.’

As I said earlier, these sort of words – ‘I didn’t feel any sympathy for the Japanese at any time’ – appear harsh. But I would defy anyone to meet Paul Montgomery and not like him. It was typical of him that as I left he pressed me to take a jar of home-made preserve back to London for my family. This was an intriguing person to meet. He freely admitted that he had participated in the mass killing of thousands of Japanese civilians – men, women and children. He had managed to do all that and yet he remained an apparently ‘normal’ man, full of kindness and generosity.

PETRAS ZELIONKA

AND THE KILLING FIELDS OF THE HOLOCAUST

In the summer and autumn of 1941, when he was a young man of 24, Petras Zelionka participated in one of the worst crimes in history: the shooting of Jewish men, women and children in the murders that occurred in the wake of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.¹

I filmed an interview with him in the mid-1990s at the site of one of the massacres – the Seventh Fort in Kaunas, Lithuania. He was able to spare us an hour or so of his time, he said, as his wife had gone shopping and he was waiting for her to return before travelling back to their home in the countryside. We were fortunate – and we knew it – that he had been persuaded to be interviewed at all.

What I wanted was to see how far it was possible to understand why he had taken part in the crime. And it was clear that an understanding of the background to the killings was crucial in any attempt to penetrate his mentality.

There was long-standing ‘traditional’ anti-Semitism in Lithuania, based in part on jealousy of the (often imaginary) wealth of the Jewish population, and events in the year before the Nazi invasion had strongly reinforced this prejudice. In 1940 Lithuania, along with the other Baltic states, had been occupied by the Red Army and there was a widespread (though false) belief amongst Lithuanians that many of the worst atrocities subsequently committed by Stalin’s men had been perpetrated by Jews. ‘In general,’ says Zelionka, ‘there was the greatest indignation when the Russians came. Many Lithuanian Jews became the political leaders, joined the police ... and everyone was saying that in the security department people were mostly tortured by the Jews. They used to put the screws on the

head and tighten them, thus torturing the teachers and professors.’

Now, after their invasion of the Baltic States and the rest of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Nazis wanted to murder first the adult male Jews and then, soon afterwards, the women and children as well. The Nazis were driven in their task primarily by ideological fervour – how could the ‘Garden of Eden’ that their Führer, Adolf Hitler, wanted for the Germans in the East be created if any Jews still lived in it?

Jews were driven out of their homes by the Germans and Lithuanian collaborators like Petras Zelionka to the nearby countryside, where large pits had been prepared. Often many curious villagers followed this sad procession. The Jews knew they were going to die so they ripped up the paper money in their pockets and threw it to the ground in order that their killers would not profit. Standing by the pits, the Jews were then ordered to take their clothes off. Just before they were shot, they would sometimes try to throw a treasured coat or jacket to one of the non-Jewish bystanders from the village in a last act of generosity.

Zelionka admitted that he and his comrades took the Jews out from the villages or the city ghettos to the freshly dug pits, stripped them of their clothes and pulled the trigger: ‘Everything short and clear. Without any ceremonies – nothing. We used to give them up for lost and that was it.’ Sometimes, he remembered, just before they were shot, ‘At the edge of the grave, some of them used to say, “Long live Stalin!” Only that kind of “prank” ... Sometimes when I think about the story of my life – you could write such a book. You would read without stopping ... Maybe [people] would understand, but maybe it becomes worse [and they don’t].’

Zelionka also revealed that he and his comrades were often drunk when they shot the Jews – alcohol played a big part in the killing process. ‘After you have a drink,’ he said, ‘everyone is braver then.’

At the end of a day's shooting he and his comrades returned to their Lithuanian army base: 'When you came back to the barracks, no one used to pay any attention. They used to bring us vodka; we could drink as much as we wanted ... If they give me, I drink.' Zelionka drank after the killing partly, he said, to 'throw out' of his head the 'unpleasant' pictures in his mind from the day's events.

But the fact remains that Petras Zelionka chose to take part in the killings – he was a volunteer. And though he was too careful to express virulent anti-Semitism more than 50 years after the murders, he admitted that amongst his fellow killers, 'Some people were saying that they [the Jews] deserved it, that they tortured other people or helped torture them ... there were many men who became indignant with the Jews. We were told what they have done, how they used to kill even the women ... others did it because of their indignation. The Jews are very selfish.'

And even though he tried, I believe, to conceal his own personal hatred towards the Jews during our interview and to distance himself from the views of these 'other' people who took part in the killing, there were moments when what I took to be his genuine emotion came through. He described himself as a 'real Lithuanian' and was quick to point out that he had not shot other Lithuanians, 'only Jews' (even though, of course, the Jews he shot were of Lithuanian nationality). And when asked if he would have been prepared to shoot non-Jewish Lithuanians, he instantly replied, 'I would not shoot.' He also confessed that he was worried that he might have been asked to shoot someone who was 'innocent' (by which he meant non-Jewish; he therefore did not consider Jewish women and children, even Jewish babies, 'innocent').

Fuelled by their 'indignation' against the 'selfish' Jews these killers went about their work, driven on chiefly by their hatred of the Jews. But another motivation was greed: 'They [the Germans] used

to search them [the Jews] and take all golden things from them, watches etc., everything made of gold ... Our former warrant officer also had a suitcase where he used to put those things.' And though Zelionka denied that he personally benefited from this theft, it is clear that the killers had the opportunity to share out some of the belongings of the dead Jews amongst themselves – despite the fact that, according to Heinrich Himmler, commander of the SS, all 'profit' from the killings should have gone to the Nazi state.

As our interview neared its end – and he was worried that he might be keeping his wife waiting on her return from her shopping expedition – Zelionka gave two final clues as to his own motivation for the murders. First, he revealed that he had possessed a kind of 'curiosity' about what he would see after he had pulled the trigger. Curiosity is, at first hearing, perhaps too weak a word to describe a killer's motivation to shoot a child at close range. But curiosity is clearly a powerful force in our lives. It is the basis, surely, of much human development. Children want to crawl because they are curious about what is on the other side of the room, just as Columbus set sail on his voyage of discovery across the Atlantic because he was curious as to what lay on the other side of the ocean. And curiosity can be a very dark force indeed. For thousands of years myths and fairy stories have focused on the power of curiosity to overcome good sense. In Ancient Greek legend, for instance, it was Pandora's desire to see inside a box given her by the gods, which she had been forbidden to open, that brought suffering into the world.

The second additional clue Zelionka gave to his motivation was an almost throwaway remark that 'youth is foolishness' and 'whilst you are young, you do a lot of stupid things'. It was an important reminder that these killings were committed when this grey-haired grandfather was a vigorous young man in his twenties. Indeed, the reality is that the majority of violent crime in most countries is

committed by young men between the ages of 18 and 25 – precisely the age range that Petras Zelionka and many of his fellow killers fell within.

After the interview was over Zelionka was hailed as something of a hero by one of the Lithuanian army officers who had helped us to arrange the filming at the Seventh Fort. ‘You’re a journalist,’ this man in his mid-twenties said to me, ‘and you’re missing the big story. The story isn’t what we did to the Jews. It’s what the Jews did to us.’ Then he looked across at Petras Zelionka, now happily reunited with his wife, and smiled.

1. It is important to remember that the Germans initially invaded the Soviet Union, not Russia, on 22 June 1941. In fact, they didn’t reach Russian territory for some time since they had first to fight across the territory of the Ukraine, Belarus or the Baltic states (all, at the time, part of the Soviet Union) in order to get Russia. In addition, large numbers of Red Army soldiers were not of Russian, but of Soviet origin (i.e. from one of the Soviet republics other than Russia).

OSKAR GROENING AND A DOUBLE LIFE IN AUSCHWITZ

One of the few certain conclusions I have come to as a result of my work is that people rarely conform to your preconceived ideas about them. Take the kind of person who might have worked in Auschwitz, for example. Try to imagine someone who was a committed supporter of the Nazis whilst he was growing up in the 1930s, volunteered for the SS during the war, and then participated in a killing process that made Auschwitz the site of the largest mass murder in the history of the world. Who do you see? Well, whoever it is, I doubt if your creation corresponds to Oskar Groening.

He was one of the calmest people I have ever encountered. He wore spectacles and was rather mild-mannered. After the war he became a personnel manager in a glass works. And he doesn't seem to have lost a moment's sleep as a consequence of his time at Auschwitz. When I met him in Hamburg a couple of years ago I thought he resembled one of my Scottish uncles who had spent his working life in a bank. Like my uncle, Oskar Groening was upright, well turned out and apparently exceedingly respectable. And I soon discovered it wasn't surprising that he reminded me of my relative, as Groening revealed he had also worked in a bank before the war. Groening had never been a man of action – had never wanted anything more for himself than to be considered a useful member of society. But, of course, the society he lived in during his formative years was the one created by the Nazis, and he unquestioningly accepted their values as his own.

When war broke out he was 18 years old and, much influenced by stories of his grandfather who had been a trumpeter in a cavalry

regiment, he craved to be a member of an ‘elite’ unit of the German armed forces. So, despite his poor eyesight, he applied to join the SS. He was successful, and was assigned to administrative duties in southern Germany. Then, in 1942, he received news of a different posting, to a concentration camp in the east called Auschwitz. He had never heard the name before, but he knew, of course, that concentration camps existed in the Nazi state to control and punish the ‘internal enemies of the country’.

When he arrived at Auschwitz main camp by the Sola river in the south of Poland he thought he was entering a ‘normal’ concentration camp. He was assigned to the ‘economic department’ of the camp and started sorting the cash that had been taken from the inmates on arrival and that he thought would be handed back to them on their eventual release. It was only when he was told that the money taken from the large numbers of Jews arriving at the camp ‘was not going back to them’ that he realized that Auschwitz was not an ‘ordinary’ concentration camp at all. It was explained to Groening that Jews who were not capable of work in the camp were ‘being diminished’ and ‘got rid of’. When he asked what being ‘got rid of’ actually meant and was told the truth – extermination – he just ‘couldn’t imagine it’. It was only when he witnessed the arrival of a transport of Jews to the camp and saw first hand the selection process by which some were picked to work and others were chosen to die at once in the gas chambers of Auschwitz/Birkenau that Groening fully grasped what was taking place.

Learning the true function ‘was a shock’, said Groening: ‘But you mustn’t forget that not only from 1933 onwards but before that, in the propaganda I received as a boy in the media, we were aware that Jewishness – especially in Germany – was the cause of the First World War and the “stab in the back” legend [by which German Jews behind the lines were falsely blamed for betraying the

troops at the front]. [The Jews] also ensured that the Communists had a revolution in 1918–19, and it spread. The Jews were actually the cause of Germany’s misery ... and we were convinced by our world view that there was a great conspiracy of Jewishness against us. And that was expressed in Auschwitz in the idea that said, “Here the Jews are being exterminated ... what happened in the First World War – that the Jews put us into misery – must be avoided. The Jews are our enemies.” So we exterminated nothing but enemies.’

But whilst he might have agreed in a theoretical way with the collection of lies that constituted the Nazi propaganda against the Jews, it was quite another thing to be involved in their mass murder. And crucial to the way Groening adjusted to Auschwitz was his immediate decision to separate method from theory. When he saw SS ‘sadists’ brutally clearing the arrival ramp of lost children, the sick and the elderly, he went at once to complain to his superiors and asked for a transfer (which was denied). But he didn’t think of complaining about the fact that mass murder was taking place – instead he complained only about the way it was happening. He said to his boss that ‘if there was a necessity to exterminate the Jews, at least it should be done within a certain framework’.

Groening accepted the decision of the Nazi leadership that the Jews were a threat and had to be ‘diminished’; I suspect he even agreed with the policy. So he concentrated his efforts on ensuring that, on the rare occasions he witnessed it, the process was completed in as ordered a way as possible. And in this respect Auschwitz was the ideal place for him to work.

Only a handful of members of the SS at Auschwitz were directly confronted with the murder of the Jews. Each of the four combination crematoria/gas chambers of Auschwitz/Birkenau, capable of killing 4700 people per day between them, was manned by fewer than half a dozen Germans. The work of cleaning the gas chambers

of bodies and human waste, of burning the corpses and of sorting the belongings of the murdered victims, was all carried out by other prisoners, forced to participate in the killing process or else face immediate death themselves. (These Sonderkommando were, of course, by their actions only postponing the moment of their own murder.) This meant that a member of the Auschwitz economic department, like Oskar Groening, only rarely had to face the reality of the killing. For most of the time he could sit in his office sorting out money, or rest in his barracks drinking liquor stolen from the latest transport of Jews to the camp.

Auschwitz main camp, where Groening worked most of the time, was about 2.5 kilometres from the killing factory of Auschwitz-Birkenau, so he felt removed from the process of murder physically as well as emotionally. As a result he came to feel that the main camp was like ‘a small town. It had its gossip ... There was a cinema and a theatre with regular performances.’ There was even an Auschwitz ‘Sports Club’ of which Groening was a keen member – he revealed during his interview that he ‘specialized in the high jump’. And it was not just the social structures that allowed Groening to form the opinion that, from his perspective, Auschwitz was a ‘wonderful’ environment in which to exist; that view extended to the people who worked alongside him. ‘Apart from the fact that there are pigs who fulfil their personal drives – there were such people – the special situation [at Auschwitz] led to friendships which I’m still saying today I like to think back on with joy.’

It was thus a combination of his own personality and the structure of Auschwitz that allowed Groening to ‘separate’ himself from the reality of the killing. ‘It’s a quality of human beings,’ he said, ‘even a good quality, that they separate pleasant things from unpleasant things in such a way that they don’t begin to suffer in such a situation.’ Groening shifted knowledge of the details of the killing

process into a distant part of his brain and locked the door. But this technique of ‘separation’ only worked so long as he could turn his back on the suffering. Groening felt that if he had witnessed the killing in front of his own eyes on a regular basis then he would probably have gone ‘mad’. And so he came to the conclusion that ‘it is easier to throw a hand grenade behind a wall than to kill a man who is in front of a wall’.

Like many of the people I have filmed over the years – not just former Nazis but veterans from all sides – Groening was a believer in the ‘life is about looking after Number One’ school of philosophy. ‘Everyone puts himself first,’ he said. ‘So many people died in the war – not only Jews. So many things happened. So many were shot. So many were burned. If I thought about that, I wouldn’t be able to live one minute.’

Groening would even like us to believe that there is a legitimate comparison to be made between the Allied bombing campaign during the war and the extermination of the Jews. He put it this way: ‘We saw how bombs were dropped on Germany and women and children died in fire storms. We saw this and said, “This is a war that is being led in this way by both sides.”’ Other Nazis took the same view. Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, directly compared himself with a bomber pilot who was ordered to drop bombs on a town that he knew contained women and children. Just like the SS in Auschwitz, so that argument made by the Nazis and their supporters goes, the bomber crews participated in the mass killing of non-combatants. And it is correct that the Allies deliberately targeted enemy civilians. Towards the end of the war, one criterion used in target selection was the ‘burnability’ of German towns – something that led to the destruction of ancient cities like Würzburg.

But though all that is true, there are important conceptual differences between the mass bombing of German and Japanese cities and