

THE CHELMNO DEATH CAMP

History, Biographies, Remembrance

Chris Webb & Artur Hojan

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**Dedicated to Artur Hojan and all of the victims of the
Chelmno Death Camp**

For Zuzia, Freya and Lilli

“He who comes here, does not walk away alive.”

Inscription on the basement wall, in the Mansion at Chełmno

In addition *Hauptsturmführer* Lange said to us that the orders to exterminate the Jews had been issued by Hitler and Himmler.

Kurt Möbius – SS *Sonderkommando* Kulmhof

The gassed people were thrown out of the vehicle and piled like rubbish. They were grabbed either by their legs or hair. Above the grave, there were two men throwing the bodies into it. Inside the hole there were another two men putting the corpses in layers, faces down, in a way that one person's legs met another person's head.

Szlamek Bajler

Szlamek escaped from Chełmno on January 19, 1942. He wrote a report on Chełmno. He perished in the Bełżec death camp after being deported from Zamość in April 1942.

Foreword

Chełmno is still relatively unknown, even amongst esteemed historians of the Holocaust. The importance of Chełmno in the development of the Holocaust is also not well understood and is certainly under researched.

Chełmno was the first death camp on *Reich* territory, and played a hugely important role in the plans of *Gauleiter* Arthur Greiser to develop the *Warthegau* into the model district (*Gau*), cleansed of Jews and other “undesirables.” Greiser’s relationship with Himmler, the *Reichsführer-SS*, allowed him to take a much more pivotal role in the development and organization of the Holocaust in the *Warthegau*, including the death camp Chełmno, than any other Nazi District leader. Greiser was a frequent visitor to Chełmno and it was Greiser’s civil administration that organized the delivery of Jews to Chełmno.

Jewish Ghettoization began first in the *Warthegau* in 1940, and Łódź was the first large scale Jewish ghetto in Nazi occupied Europe. It was Greiser who sought approval from Adolf Hitler to kill the first 100,000 Jews of the *Warthegau* in 1941. There are direct links between the killing of mental patients between 1939 and 1941 in the *Warthegau* by Herbert Lange, and the development of Chełmno the death camp, with Lange as its first Commandant. It was Lange who devised the methodology and the organization of the camp and it was he who recruited the personnel. Chełmno was an integral part of the development of the racial policies that Greiser adopted for the *Warthegau* region.

Chełmno was the first Nazi death camp when it began operations in early December 1941. In Chełmno the gas vans were the first mass use of poison gas to kill Jews. Chełmno was the only death camp to use gas vans as its primary method of killing. Because of its proximity to Berlin, Chełmno became a testing ground for techniques for disposing the bodies of the dead victims. It was Colonel Paul Blobel under the auspices of *Sonderkommando 1005*, who developed the techniques in Chełmno, later used in the Aktion Reinhardt camps of

Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and all over occupied Eastern Europe, to dig up and burn the bodies of untold numbers of victims of the Nazi regime.

These firsts and interconnections make Chełmno and the killing of the Jews in the *Warthegau* almost unique in the annals of the Holocaust, but are also insightful in how the Holocaust itself developed. The number of histories published about the Chełmno death camp number less than ten. Chris's book is therefore timely. As always Chris brings his own style to the difficulty of how to write about the Nazi death camps, while respecting the memory of the victims. His book covers the development of the camp and racial program, its operations, the key events, the accounts of the brave Jews who escaped from this hell, the detailed Roll of Remembrance, the perpetrators and the post-War trials, right up to the modern-day.

This book is also important for me, as Chris has graciously co-authored with my late colleague Artur Hojan. I worked with Artur for eight years in researching Nazi War Crimes in the *Warthegau* and beyond. Artur's knowledge, especially of the killing of mental patients in Nazi occupied Western Poland was exceptional. This led to Artur and I setting up the *Tiergartenstrasse 4* Association in 2005 to research Nazi War Crimes. The Association is now established in Berlin, as *Tiergarten4 Association e.v* with a library and research center. Chris has quite rightly dedicated the book to our friend and colleague Artur and his memory.

I wish Chris the best of luck with this book on Chełmno that is a worthy successor to his books on the *Aktion Reinhardt* camps and Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Cameron Munro

Tiergarten4 Association e.V.

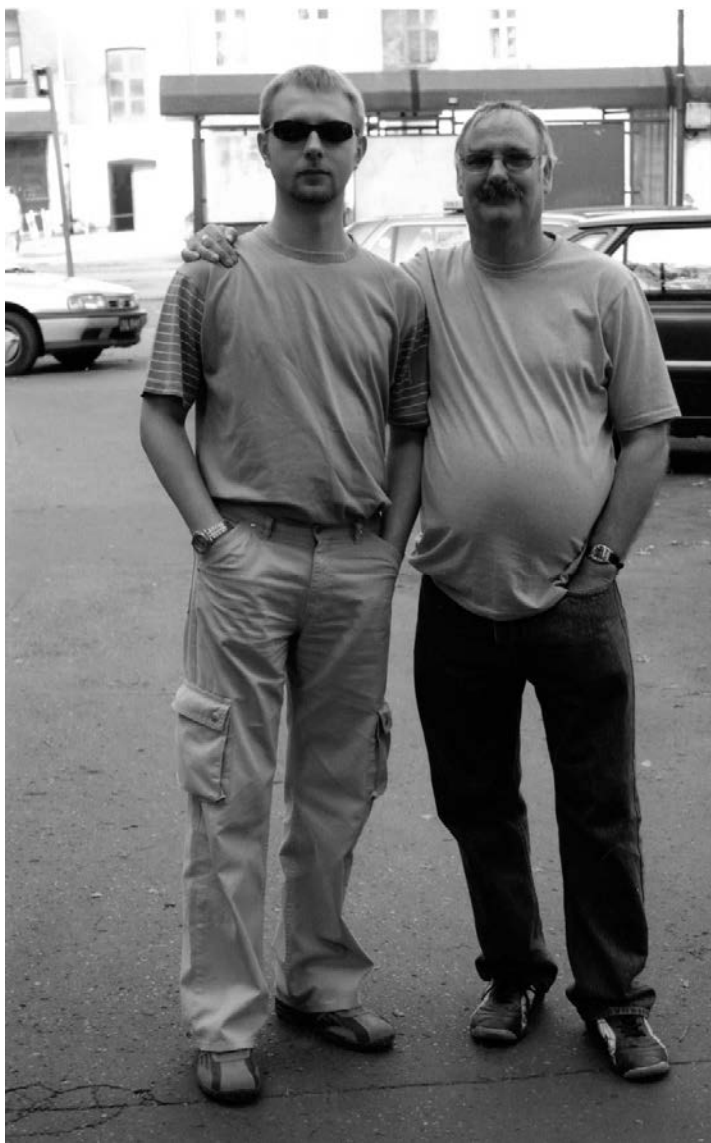
A crucial extension to our body of knowledge on the Holocaust, *The Chełmno Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* is an authoritative and well-researched account of the construction, historical context and liquidation of Hitler's first death camp.

Drawing on detailed accounts from Jewish prisoners, perpetrator biographies and war crimes trials, Chris Webb and the late Artur Hohenjan paint a characteristically rich picture of the atrocities that happened at Chełmno, as well as providing an impactful list of remembrance.

Going forward, this book is a great resource for modern historians and students of the Holocaust who wish to understand more about how Chełmno sparked wider developments in the systematic murder of over six million Jews from 1941 to 1945.
Lest we forget!

Dr. William Allchorn is Associate Director of the Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Leeds.

Author's Introduction



Artur and Chris – Łódź 2005

This book chronologically tells the story of the Chełmno death camp that the Nazis created in late 1941, in central Poland. Chełmno was the first death camp to murder the Jews using gas, though not in static gas chambers, but using gas-vans. I am deeply indebted to the work of Kryzysztof Gorczyca and Zdzisław Lorek, whose unpublished *Chełmno Day By Day* account has been invaluable. Also Patrick Montague's book *Chełmno and the Holocaust* published in 2012, has also been heavily quoted. There is simply too little published work and research in respect of the Chełmno death camp and this book hopes to cover previously uncharted territory, with new accounts and new information. Also an invaluable source has been the book *Chełmno Witnesses Speak* published by the District Museum in Konin, Poland.

In September 2005, Artur Hojan planned and guided Cameron Munro and myself on a visit to the former death camp in Chełmno, and numerous places connected with the T4 Euthanasia "*Aktions*," in what was called the *Warthegau*, during the War. We also visited major cities like Poznań and Łódź and smaller places like Dąbie, Grabow and Koło, all closely bound up with the history of the Chełmno death camp. During this trip I had the good fortune to meet Zdzisław Lorek in person, a real expert on Chełmno.

Four years later another research trip to Chełmno was undertaken: Artur again produced the trip schedule. Our group of intrepid Holocaust researchers consisted of Arthur Hojan, Cameron Munro, Professor Matthew Feldman, Chris Webb and our Polish driver Krystof.

We were based in Kutno, and toured a number of places near Chełmno, such as Krośniewice, Sompolno, not previously visited, plus Dąbie, Zawadka, Łódź and Warsaw. I have included in this book some of the photographs taken on these two trips to provide the reader with a better understanding of how these places look now, and the horrors that once took place in this region of Poland.

Chełmno death camp has been generally neglected compared to other camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka, but that should not be so, and this work demonstrates the vital role it played, and the

need to be fully documented in this terrible tragedy that was the Holocaust.

This account begins with the establishment of the camp, and the commencement of mass murder by the use of gas vans in December 1941. It contains the detailed accounts of escapees Szlamek Bajler, who survived Chełmno only to lose his life in another of Hitler's slaughterhouses Bełżec in April 1942, and Michał Podchlebnik, who survived the hell that was Chełmno, and lived to see the Nazis defeated.

All sides in this modern tragedy are represented, the other Jewish survivors, such as Shimon Srebnik and M. Zurawski and Jewish victims, the German police and SS, the Polish workers who assisted the Nazis, the Polish and German residents of Chełmno and other places in the *Warthegau*.

A Roll of Remembrance of the Jews deported from Germany to Chełmno, has been created using the Bundesarchiv online resource the *Gedenkbuch* as well as names gleaned from the few survivors' accounts. The power of this website cannot be underestimated, 520 pages with over 5,000 names. To reproduce this would swamp the book, and a compromise has had to be found. Instead every surname has been included, which in no way diminishes those who have not been included, but does provide the reader nevertheless with a sense of the scale of the destruction.

The members of the *Sonderkommando Kulmhof* have been meticulously researched by the late Artur Hojan and by Cameron Munro, from *Tiergartenstrasse 4 Association* in Berlin. It is thanks to Artur in particular that so many biographies have been compiled, of the men responsible for these ghastly crimes against humanity. Their initial findings have been updated and improved, with additional information and more biographies included.

The events of the post-war are captured, including testimonies and trials as well as personal accounts of our trips to Chełmno, and the surrounding villages all connected with the death camp's history, including some modern-day photographs, along with some rare documents to embellish the account.

With Grateful Thanks

This book owes everything to my late friend Artur Hojan. I first met Artur in Kraków in the summer of 2004, when the ARC Website group undertook their second field trip to Poland, visiting a host of sites connected with the Holocaust. Artur was from Kościan, in Poland and at that time he was learning English. During the trip he acted as one of our guides, and we became firm friends.

The following year in September 2005, I visited Chełmno for the first time, with Cameron Munro and Artur, who had established their own Holocaust research site. During that trip we met Zdzisław Lorek, who provided me with maps, documentation and research material about Chełmno some of which has been used in this book.

Artur sadly lost his life in December 2013, in the midst of writing a book on Chełmno, some of which he shared with me, and this has been incorporated in this work. Thus it is only fair that he has been given a co-writing credit. For Artur's family this is an important legacy, in recognition of his many years of dedicated research, and something tangible for generations to come. I am grateful to his wife Ada, for allowing me to include some of the work he started, but sadly did not finish.

Firstly I must thank Tom Nixon for his cover design and support, which is much appreciated. I am also grateful for the proof reading and copy-editing work of Tania Mühlberger, who really brings so much to the table. I must in this respect thank Professor Matthew Feldman, for introducing Tania to me, and his support for this book. Professor Feldman visited Chełmno with me in 2009, and has supported this work in so many ways. I cannot thank him enough.

I also want to thank the late Sir Martin Gilbert, who kindly gave me copies of his maps and drawings to use in my ventures. He was always a great inspiration to me, and always kind and generous with his knowledge and support. I have again used his fine maps to enrich my work.

I must place on record my thanks to Cameron Munro, Robert Parzer and Reinald Purmann from the *Tiergartenstrasse*4

Association in Berlin. As always, they have provided material, support, advice and expertise, which was invaluable. Cameron in particular is an expert in his own right on Euthanasia in the *Warthegau* and Chełmno in particular. This work owes a great deal to him, and I am proud to call him my friend. He kindly wrote the foreword to this book, and he is an inspiration in the field of Holocaust research. I first met Cameron in 2004, on the Second Field Trip to Poland undertaken by the ARC Group that I co-founded in 2001. This group initially focused on the *Aktion Reinhardt* mass murder program, but subsequently covered other aspects of the Holocaust. The photograph of Artur and me in Łódź was taken by Cameron, during our 2005 trip, and this particular trip was one of the most memorable I have taken part in.

In terms of institutions I am grateful for the assistance given by the staff of the Wiener Library, including its former head of photo archives Marek Jaros, who kindly gave me a number of photographs of Chełmno from their archives, which appear in this book. I must thank Elise Bath who has taken over from Marek for her kind permission to use the photographs.

The Wiener Library also provided a number of documents, and records from the International Military Tribunal held after the end of the Second World War, and I am very grateful for the help and guidance of Howard Falkensohn, who specializes in this particular field. The Wiener Library also provided other material that has been much appreciated, and they deserve much credit and support. They truly are a national treasure.

I am also grateful to Alla Kucherenko from Yad Vashem who has helped me to locate a number of rare and important documents regarding Chełmno and these have been reproduced in this book and it is much improved by their inclusion.

The Bundesarchiv in Berlin has also helped me with my research and I must thank Lutz Moeser for his patience and efforts in looking through numerous files of personnel who served at Chełmno, as well as their support with photographs and documents.

Abbreviations

AK	Armia Krajowa – Polish Home Army
ARC	Aktion Reinhard Camps website
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
GFH	Ghetto Fighters House, Israel
H.E.A.R.T.	Holocaust Education and Archive Research Team
HHS	Holocaust Historical Society, UK
KL	Konzentrationslager (Concentration Camp)
NA	National Archives, Kew, London
NSKK	National Sozialistische Kraftfahr Korps (National Socialist Motor Corps)
POW	Prisoner of War
PPS	Polish Socialist Party
RSHA	Reich Security Main Office
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service)
SIPO	Sicherheitspolizei (Security Police)
SS	Schutzstaffel (Protection Squad)
TAP	Secret Polish Army
TOW	Military Organization Union (Polish)
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
WL	Wiener Library, London
WVHA	Administration and Economic Main Office of the SS
YVA	Yad Vashem Archives

Part I

The Hell Called Chełmno

Chapter I

November 1941

Chelmno Death Camp Established

Chelmno, or as it was known during the Nazi occupation, *Kulmhof*, is located 50 kilometers north of Łódź, and 13 kilometers from Koło, otherwise known as *Warthbrücken* during this period. This area of Poland was recognized at that time as the *Warthegau*. The *Warthegau* was incorporated into the *Reich*, this included Wielkopolska (Greater Poland Voivodeship: with its Capital Poznań), Kujawy (Opole Voivodeship) and the Łódź region.

Arthur Greiser, the *Gauleiter* of *Reichsgau Wartheland* (*Warthegau*) and Wilhelm Koppe, the Higher SS and Police Leader, whose headquarters were based in *Posen*, today Poznań, sought solutions to overcome the overcrowding of ghettos within their sphere of influence. They called upon the services of *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Herbert Lange, who had been in command of a special unit (*Sonderkommando*) charged with murdering the disabled and mentally-ill in Soldau, in East Prussia and other locations within the *Warthegau*, such as Kościan and Osieczna. These executions were undertaken by shooting and by the use of gas vans (*Sonderwagen*), and were carried out under the auspices of the euthanasia program in the *Reich* that was known as the *T4*, program. *T4* was the abbreviation derived from the address of its headquarters in Berlin, *Tiergarten 4*, which was run by *SS-Oberführer* Viktor Brack, Chief of the Head Office II of Adolf Hitler's private Chancellery.

Herbert Lange was born in Menzlin, Pomerania on September 29, 1909. He studied law, but failed to obtain a degree and became a police officer. After serving in *Einsatzgruppe VI* under Erich Naumann, prior to the invasion of Poland in September 1939, Lange went to *Posen*, where he became Commandant of Fort VII for a brief