

HOW AUSCHWITZ GOT ITS ZYKLON B

By ERNIE MEYER; Jerusalem Post Reporter. **Jerusalem Post** [Jerusalem] 10 Feb 1989: 02.

Abstract

Degesch is the acronym for Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Schaedlingsbekaempfung, a company for the extermination of vermin. It developed the method of using hydrogen cyanide, Zyklon B, as a powerful ingredient in its fumigation gas for buildings and ships. It was also used to disinfect clothing in special gas chambers and to delouse people protected by gas masks, according to Prof. Raul Hilberg in his study of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*.

In March 1944, just as the SS was preparing to murder 750,000 Hungarian Jews at [AUSCHWITZ], the Zyklon plant at Dessau was bombed and heavily damaged. But Degesch managed to keep up the supply, and when the Hungarian Jews started arriving in May, sufficient Zyklon was on hand. "The SS did not run out of gas," says Hilberg.

As an engineer, [Kurt Gerstein] became an expert in the handling of Zyklon B. He was sent to the Treblinka and Belzec extermination camps in order to substitute the more efficient Zyklon B for the gasoline exhaust fumes in use until then. At Belzec he witnessed the killing of several thousand Jews from Lvov.

Full Text

The involvement of the West German firm Degussa in the supply of chemicals to Libya which may be used to manufacture poison gas, has led to inquiries into the giant company's activities during World War II.

The Jerusalem Post reported this week that Degussa (Deutsche Gold Und Silber ScheideAnstalt) had knowingly bought gold and silver confiscated by the Nazis in the Lodz and Pabianice ghettos. Degussa also owned a 42.5 per cent share in the Degesch company, which supplied the Zyklon B gas used in the death camps.

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extermination of vermin. It developed the method of using hydrogen cyanide, Zyklon B, as a powerful ingredient in its fumigation gas for buildings and ships. It was also used to disinfect clothing in special gas chambers and to delouse people protected by gas masks, according to Prof. Raul Hilberg in his study of the Holocaust, *The Destruction of the European Jews*.

Degesch's other owners were the giant I.G. Farben chemical firm, which also held 42.5 per cent of the shares, and the smaller Goldschmidt company (15 per cent). Degesch did very well during the war years, yielding I.G. Farben profits of 100-200 per cent on its investment from 1938 to 1943.

The reasons for this profitability were Degesch's low overheads - it had fewer than 50 employees - the ever-increasing demands of the war economy and, most important, its monopoly on the production of the gas.

Zyklon was produced in factories in Dessau (Germany) and Kolin (Czechoslovakia). The I.G. Farben plant at Uerdingen provided the stabilizer for the gas. Distribution was controlled by Degesch, which in 1929 shared the world market with an American corporation, Cyanamid. The gas was retailed by Tesch & Stabenow (Testa).

Almost all the gas supplied to Auschwitz was used in the killing process. The camp administration itself did not buy the gas. It was purchased by Obersturmfuehrer (First Lieutenant) Kurt Gerstein, the "chief disinfection officer" in the hygiene department of the Waffen SS.

One drawback was that the pellets of Zyklon B deteriorated after three months and thus could not be stockpiled. Auschwitz officials frequently sent trucks to the Dessau factory to pick up materials which, they claimed, were to be used for "the resettlement of Jews."

Deliveries to SS installations for fumigation purposes were made every six months or so, but Auschwitz required supplies every six weeks. To discerning eyes, that frequency had special meaning.

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Gerstein's connection with Zyklon B is fascinating and enigmatic. Born in 1904, he joined the Nazi Party in 1933 but was expelled for his activities on behalf of the dissident Protestant Church. He served terms in a concentration camp in 1936 and 1938. Anxious to know more about the Nazis' activities, he volunteered for the Waffen SS in March 1941 and was assigned to its hygiene service. There are, however, other versions of why he joined the SS.

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On his return to Berlin, Gerstein tried to stop the murders. He told the Swedish and Swiss legations, the Vatican and underground church groups what he had seen, but encountered only disbelief and indifference.

At one stage, Gerstein succeeded in destroying two consignments of gas. When the war ended, he submitted to an Anglo-American intelligence team a detailed report on Nazi atrocities, which was used at the Nuremberg trials. A second report was published in 1953.

Arrested by the French as a suspected war criminal, Gerstein was found hanged in his cell on July 25, 1945. In 1963, the German playwright Rolf Hochhuth cast Gerstein as one of the central figures in his play *The Deputy* which attacked Pope Pius XII for his failure to condemn Hitler's persecution of the Jews.

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Details

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