

Nazi Gas Chambers

From Memory to History

An Art Project by Robert Priseman

With Essays by Professor Rainer Schulze, Professor Peter Vergo
and Robert Priseman

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Contents

The Essays

Painting the Holocaust: Can there be Art after Auschwitz? by Robert Priseman	3
The Nazi Gas Chambers by Professor Rainer Schulze	13
On Robert Priseman and the Possibility of Painting by Professor Peter Vergo	21
The T4 Euthanasia Centre: Drawings	29
The Nazi Gas Chambers: Paintings	43

Afterword

Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History By Robert Priseman	55
The Wannsee Portraits	61
Thanks Due	73

**An Essay by
Robert Priseman**

Painting the Holocaust: Can there be Art after Auschwitz?

Many would argue that any attempt to create art on the subject of the Holocaust by an artist who has not experienced the horrors of a death camp, or been raised by a family that has, would be destined to failure. Without authentic context, how could one possibly understand in any meaningful way the events which took place? Indeed, the only genuine artistic response to the Holocaust would seem to come from those who have experienced it in some way and whose testimony has survived.

I was born in 1965 in the United Kingdom, was raised Christian and became an artist. Between 2008 and 2009, with no personal connection, I set out to create a series of paintings which would in some way explore an aspect of the Holocaust of Nazi Germany.

As an artist I believe in the civilising power of culture and have a deep love and admiration for the heritage of German society. Yet to see that a nation so great had in the past turned its means to an act so dark is a source of profound intellectual and emotional disturbance. How is it that a society as culturally and materially advanced as that of 20th Century Germany, a society that had previously nurtured Beethoven, Goethe and Kant, be capable of instigating a mass killing programme? The idea of creating a set of paintings in response to this question had been gestating within me for around 20 years. In many senses it feels that the greater the trauma, either individual or social, the greater the period needs to be before examining how one feels about it. So it was not until almost seventy years after the Wannsee Conference and the instigation of the Holocaust, that it felt even remotely appropriate for someone like myself to attempt to tackle the theme.

The main source of inspiration for this undertaking did not come from the imagery of starving figures or contorted piles of dead bodies which have become the all too

familiar yet tragic representation of the Holocaust; in fact it emerged from many hours spent visiting the *Seagram Paintings* (1958 - 1959) by Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970) at the Tate, London. As a set, the Seagram Paintings hang like a painted version of Stonehenge, acting as a metaphorical gateway to the eternal void. The German artist Caspar David Friedrich (1774 - 1840), who practiced a century earlier than Rothko, was also famous for producing images around the theme of a universal emptiness experienced within the human psyche, such as his *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), *The Monk by the Sea* (1808 -1810) and *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (1809 - 1810). With these and many other of Friedrich's paintings we are confronted by a lonely figure who stands on the threshold of something much bigger than ourselves, something unknown. In studying Friedrich's work we imagine ourselves to stand in the shoes of the subject. A hundred years later and Rothko removes any proxy figure within the picture plane that we might imagine ourselves to be, and in doing so places us the viewer directly at the metaphorical heart of the painting, making for a more immediate visual experience.

It was this idea of meditating over a void which most intrigued me. Not images of the Holocaust itself, because as horrific as they are, as time passes, the shock of what we are looking at subsides; in fact one thing which puzzles me is just how quickly we become de-sensitized to pictures of brutality, and how over time audiences become hardened by portrayals of atrocity. Instead, what I hoped to achieve with this series is a renewed look at the subject, a reflection which aimed to consider how there may be an underlying darkness residing in us all. More specifically, what intrigued me revolved around how we act within our social setting as individuals. And that this may on occasion, if we don't pay attention to the seemingly insignificant details, pave the way towards our own culture descending into a void of inhumanity. This meditation seeks in some way to explore whether a social evil is the responsibility of only a small handful of people who manage to manipulate and distort a broader culture, or whether a whole society can be held in some way accountable for its actions.

As I began to contemplate this series, I was highly conscious of Theodor W. Adorno's line 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.' (1949)¹ and wondered if, indeed,

there can ever be any art after Auschwitz? After all, historians, survivors and nations are still trying to grasp exactly what happened decades after its occurrence, so how could any artist hope to approach a theme of such magnitude? Is this subject in fact off limits to all artists aside from those who have witnessed it first-hand? If this is the case, then it would seem at first appearance that an art of either reportage or catharsis, an art of account or therapy, rather than of symbolism and interpretation would be the only authentic response.

In order to explore this I first want to ask the question: What actually is art? For me, art is the creation of metaphor, the statement of one thing as being something it clearly is not. By engaging in this way the artist seeks to create a fresh way of looking at a subject, opening our eyes to additional angles and ideas which help bring new perceptions to bear. How then can this be applied to a trauma as great as the Holocaust?

For a person who was there, who recorded and depicted scenes they witnessed first-hand, by camera or with pen and paper, perhaps it is impossible to make metaphor from an event of such magnitude and instead perhaps we should regard the greatest achievement in this context as being to have witnessed and documented in some way, as a testament for others, events so horrific. This, I would argue, is both reportage of the highest order and a statement of the strength of the human spirit to be recognised and heard against extraordinary odds. Works of this nature are documentation brought back from the edge of humanity. It is this material, the written, spoken and recorded matter of survivors and eye witnesses which becomes the substance of authentication. And it is this substance which artists can attempt to use as the source material from which to create metaphor.

Art then appears to enter as a second stage to understanding; it arrives as a reflection of our emotional responses to events, rather than a description of them, enabling us to gain in some small way an alternative angle on our sensitivities to experiences.

In the 1970's the Slovenian born painter Zoran Mušič (1909 - 2005) produced a series

of haunting images in response to the Holocaust titled *We are not the Last* which depict twisted and emaciated human figures, often appearing as a kind of knotted undergrowth. Mušič was recognised during his lifetime as an artist of international importance, with his works hanging in many of the world's most important art museums, and in 1956 his status as a major artist was confirmed when he won the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale. Mušič had moved to Venice in October of 1943, and in the November of the following year he was arrested and deported to Dachau concentration camp by Nazi forces. Whilst at Dachau he produced over one hundred sketches of life in the camp, of which around seventy survive.

Mušič's work offers us an authentic response to the horrors of the Nazi concentration and death camps, perhaps the most genuine of all artistic voices on this subject. Yet we notice that his artistic response to the horrors of Dachau began as a direct recording of the sights he observed, only being synthesised some 25 years later into a more metaphorical format and a form we would view as art rather than record. This holding trauma apart for an extended period permits the emotional response time to breathe, enabling something more considered and meditative to emerge. It brings us to an understanding that great art may not be born of an immediate reaction to trauma, but instead grows slowly as a measured reply to the subject it explores.

In this way we might begin to observe that with Zoran Mušič, first came the recording of suffering, then much later a symbolic reply to it. And I believe what occurs within the individual is mirrored within society, and that what has been recorded in a time of pain, becomes the material with which artists much later build a metaphorical bridge between individual experience and a broader social understanding. This was the foundation of understanding for my own series of paintings *Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History* (2008 - 2009). Having no personal connection to the Holocaust, I felt it was neither appropriate nor possible for me to produce a personal response to the sorrow and death caused by the events in question. Nor did it seem appropriate for someone in my position to undertake the creation of monument to those departed. Instead, what I hoped for was an

alternative meditation on the origins of this tragedy and how it arose.

For the first part of this project I drew six delicately coloured pencil drawings designed to be reminiscent of hand tinted postcards. They represent external views of the hospitals in Germany and Austria where the T4 Euthanasia programme took place between 1939 and 1941, the programme which acted as the first whisper of the death camps which were to follow. I wanted them to have the appearance of holiday photos, the locations do after all look like retreats and hotels, places where state sanctioned murder would appear to be the last thing on the agenda. This somehow innocent and innocuous view is something I hoped might act as a visual stepping stone to the larger more direct paintings which make up the second part of the series.

The second part of the project consists of five large scale black and white oil paintings, each portraying the interior of a gas chamber. Each painting shares the same horizon line so that they work visually as a unit when hung together. Over the course of the five paintings the spaces depicted widen out, from the small and confined adapted shower room presented in Bernberg through to the large purpose built killing room at Auschwitz. As each painting visually expands we gain a sense of each room having the capacity to accommodate more people, and notice a gradual falling away of the pretence of cleansing the newly arrived to the straight forward practicalities of exterminating as many people as possible in the shortest given time.

The rooms themselves are painted devoid of figures, so that we might view them as places which hold no moral position about the events they were used for. They stand silent and empty, unconcerned by what we might think or feel. With this somewhat detached observance it is my aim that we view the Nazi gas chambers not so much as killing centers, which of course they were, but as a perverse cultural expression, constructed by a social group acting together towards a common goal, during a particular time and place. Each brick cemented in to position, every tile carefully laid down and all the pipes meticulously plumbed. In doing this it is my hope that we might begin to consider visually how no one person was individually

responsible for the realization of these rooms or what took place in them. Not the architects who drew up the plans or the suppliers of materials to build them, not the factory workers who made the tins which held the Zyklon B or the truck drivers who delivered it. Instead they are the manifestation of a series of people acting in unconnected and banal roles towards a common goal.

Evil, if that is the term we use within this context, is allowed to occur because it takes root in the mundane. The gas chambers of Auschwitz, Sobibor, Majdanek and the many other locations of Nazi mass killing did not just appear overnight, someone somewhere received an order to tile the gas chamber, someone was contracted to make and fit the pipes, supply the bricks make the metal doors and their hinges. All these people and many more will have received money for their work and not thought of themselves as directly responsible for the atrocity of the Holocaust, because they did not carry out the actual killing or come up with the original policy. They were in fact just getting on with their lives. And perhaps this is where one aspect of denial can take hold, that when no one person can be held wholly accountable, then no one person can be easily held to blame. Denial can of course be used as a coping mechanism. By ignoring or disbelieving powerful events which have the potential to emotionally overwhelm us, we enable our everyday lives to continue, we gain the capacity to 'carry on as normal'.

As an artist coming to the subject of the Holocaust without any special connection and at a considerable time lag behind the events, it would be fair to ask; why should one do this? Personally, my motivations lie in a drive to explore the often difficult subjects that underpin contemporary society and appear as universal human themes. When we look at the history of the twentieth century in particular, we see violence enacted on a grand scale. We witness rampage shootings, total war and genocides which have occurred in places as diverse as Cambodia, Columbine, Armenia, Nanking and Rwanda, acts which have come to define the twentieth century as perhaps the most brutal of all time. In fact it would appear that violence is somehow hard wired into the human psyche. But as we know, it was the industrialisation of the killing process which for many marks out the Holocaust of Nazi Germany as a chapter to be treated separately from all other atrocities.

Now, after seventy years, as the last survivors die out, memory of the Holocaust has the potential to fade, despite written, spoken and visual legacy. Perhaps after seventy years we have a duty not only to archive and shore up the testimony of survivors but to examine our past for lessons as to how we might live more fully in the future, one in which we treat each other with respect and dignity.

So what lessons might we begin to learn by studying the gas chambers of Nazi Germany? For me, it is that social atrocities, when they arrive, come with little warning, yet they are enabled by the commonplace activities of many people who cannot be held individually fully accountable for what occurs. And it is perhaps these small sins of omission which we must all be on our guard for if we are to maintain and build communities of peace and prosperity in the future, societies where each person is valued for their uniqueness within the group regardless of their opinions. By embracing our differences we are able to nurture and develop strong communities, creating civilizations which are enriched and rendered beautiful through diversity.

Robert Priseman, 2013

The series 'Nazi Gas Chambers: From Memory to History' is in the permanent collection of the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria

1. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' [1949], translated into English in *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA (MIT Press) 1983, p. 34.

An Essay by Rainer Schulze

The Nazi Gas Chambers

The common definition of a gas chamber is that of an airtight sealed chamber used for killing or disinfestation by employing a poisonous or asphyxiant gas. Most people will associate death in gas chambers almost immediately with Auschwitz and the Nazi extermination of the Jews. However, gas chambers as a means of execution are not an invention of the Nazis. They were first introduced in the 1920s as a method of capital punishment in the United States. The first US prisoner to die in such a gas chamber was Chinese-born Gee Jon, convicted for the murder of a member of a rival gang and executed in the Nevada State Prison on 8 February 1924; the last, so far, was German citizen Walter LaGrand in the Arizona State Prison on 3 March 1999, who chose death in the gas chamber over lethal injection.

The Office of the Clark County Prosecuting Attorney in the US state of Indiana describes the process on its website:

The execution protocol for most jurisdictions authorizes the use of a steel airtight execution chamber, equipped with a chair and attached restraints. The inmate is restrained at his chest, waist, arms, and ankles, and wears a mask during the execution. The chair is equipped with a metal container beneath the seat. Cyanide pellets are placed in this container. A metal canister is on the floor under the container filled with a sulfuric acid solution. There are three executioners, and each executioner turns one key. When the three keys are turned, an electric switch causes the bottom of the cyanide container to open allowing the cyanide to fall into the sulfuric acid solution, producing a lethal gas. Unconsciousness can occur within a few seconds if the prisoner takes a deep breath. However, if he or she holds their breath death can take much longer, and the prisoner usually goes into wild convulsions. A heart monitor attached to the inmate is read in the control room, and after the warden pronounces the inmate dead, ammonia is pumped into the execution chamber to neutralize the gas. Exhaust fans then remove the inert fumes from the chamber into two scrubbers that contain water and serve as a neutralizing agent. The neutralizing process takes approximately 30 minutes from

the time the offender's death is determined. Death is estimated to usually occur within 6 to 18 minutes of the lethal gas emissions.

(<http://www.clarkprosecutor.org/html/death/methods.htm>)

Proposals to use lethal gas as a means of carrying out the death sentence followed the development and use of poison gas in the First World War. The gas chamber was also regarded as a more humane and a more efficient method of capital punishment than death by hanging, firing squad or the electric chair. Almost 1,000 prisoners were put to death by lethal gas in the United States, among them seven women. The best known gas chamber is no doubt the one at the California State Prison at San Quentin, where 192 men and 4 women were executed between 1938 and 1995. The United States is the only country which introduced death by lethal gas as a means of judicial execution: 11 US states had this method on their statute books. Most of them have now abandoned this practice; only five states (Arizona, California, Maryland, Missouri and Wyoming) continue to allow it as an alternative to lethal injection.

More notorious is the use of gas chambers as a means to kill political opponents and anyone regarded as 'unworthy of life': the physically or mentally disabled, the racially 'unacceptable', or generally social outsiders whose non-standard behaviour is seen as potentially threatening or destabilising the regime in power. There were recently reports that North Korea used gas chambers in at least one of their gulags and executed political prisoners for chemical experiments. However, it is the Nazi régime, their euthanasia programme and, of course, the Holocaust, which have shaped the public perception of the gas chamber.

The Nazi régime began gassing people immediately after the invasion of Poland and the outbreak of the Second World War. In the spring and summer of 1939, a secret programme of killing physically and mentally disabled children, usually by lethal injection or by starvation, had begun. In October 1939, this was extended to adults and became the T-4 programme, which took its name from the address of its main office: Tiergartenstraße 4 (in Berlin). With the large number of people falling under the 'Aktion (Operation) T-4', lethal injections became inefficient and too expensive.

The Nazis, therefore, started experimenting with mobile gassing vans, killing the people in the freight compartment which was fed with the exhausts. This was, however, also a slow process, and other lethal gasses were tested as well.

From January 1940, six euthanasia killing centres were set up in Germany (including Austria) which had gas chambers installed, disguised as shower rooms, for the mass killing of the helpless victims in groups of up to 70 people. Due to increasing protests, especially from the Churches, the T-4 programme was officially shut down by Hitler in August 1941, after more than 70,000 physically and mentally disabled people had been murdered.

However, from December 1941, the gassings at the euthanasia centres resumed. They now mainly involved, under the code name '*Sonderbehandlung (Special Treatment) 14f13*', concentration camp prisoners who were judged to be permanently unable to work, but the criteria were often interpreted liberally to include Jews, political prisoners or 'anti-socials'. Those selected for death were transported from the camps to one of the euthanasia killing centres where they were killed in the gas chambers. The operation '*14f13*' was ended by Himmler in 1943, by which time up to 20,000 people had perished. The collaboration of SS and T-4 staff in this operation underlines the close relationship between the euthanasia programme and the systematic extermination of the Jews in the East. Many of the T-4 staff were transferred to the East to apply their experience to the killing of the Polish Jews in the area of the Generalgouvernement in Poland.

In a written instruction of 31 July 1941, Hermann Göring, Hitler's appointed successor and at that time officially responsible for Jewish policy, had charged Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the SS Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt, RSHA*), 'with making all necessary preparations with regard to organizational, technical and material matters for bringing about a complete solution of the Jewish question within the German sphere of influence in Europe' and to send him 'an overall plan [...] for the accomplishment of the final solution of the Jewish question (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*) which we desire.'

On 20 January 1942, Heydrich convened a meeting of 15 high-ranking civil servants

and SS officials at a villa on the Wannsee in the suburbs of Berlin to ‘achieve clarity in basic questions’ with regard to ‘the final solution of the European Jewish question’. The Wannsee conference focused on the practical organisation and implementation of the killing programme, and even though the minutes were left deliberately vague, they can be seen as confirming what was already in process and systematizing the procedure. Following the Wannsee conference, special extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*) were set up in the East with the sole purpose of implementing the ‘final solution’ and killing large numbers of (mainly) Jews as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Under the code name ‘Aktion Reinhard’, four camps for the extermination of the Jews were established in the Generalgouvernement. They were not part of the regular concentration camp system, of which the inspectorate of concentration camps and SS guard units (*Inspektion der Konzentrationslager und SS-Wachverbände*) was in charge, but were directly under the control of the RSHA.

The first of these camps was Chelmo (Kulmhof) near Łódź, which began operations on 7 December 1941 just before the Wannsee conference as a kind of ‘pilot’ extermination camp. It employed three mobile gas vans which could kill 50 to 70 people each at a time, using carbon monoxide. The three other ‘Aktion Reinhard’ camps began their operations after the Wannsee conference; they had actual gas chambers where the victims were killed by carbon monoxide gas generated by stationary engines: Bełżec (March 1942), Sobibór (April 1942), both in the Lublin district of the Generalgouvernement, and Treblinka II (July 1942), some 100 km northeast of Warsaw. The ‘Aktion Reinhard’ came to an end in November 1943, when more than 1.5m Jews (and an unknown number of Sinti and Roma, Poles, and Soviet prisoners-of-war) had been gassed, and the four camps were dismantled.

Two existing concentration camps also had gas chambers installed for mass extermination: Auschwitz, at Auschwitz II (Birkenau), and Majdanek-Lublin. In these two camps, the gas chambers were disguised as shower facilities, and most prisoners were poisoned by pellets of the insecticide Zyklon B which were poured through the vents (initially, Majdanek used carbon monoxide).

Auschwitz-Birkenau became the centre of the extermination of the European Jews and because of this, later, the symbol of the Holocaust. From early 1942, mass transports of Jews were directed there. Selections were conducted immediately on the railway platform, which became known as 'the ramp', and newly arrived prisoners classified by the SS physicians as unfit for labour were sent directly to the gas chambers. In most cases, these people comprised around 70 to 75 per cent of each transport; they received no serial numbers and were not registered in the camp records. This is why it is not possible to give a precise number of victims. Historians estimate that among the people sent to Auschwitz were at least 1,100,000 Jews from all the countries of occupied Europe, and around 1 million of them died in the gas chambers. A section of Auschwitz-Birkenau was set up as a special 'Gypsy Family Camp' (*Zigeunerfamilienlager*); up to 24,000 Roma and Sinti from all of central Europe were deported there, and more than 20,000 of them perished in the gas chambers.

In the spring and early summer of 1944, Auschwitz-Birkenau was running at its peak as a 'factory' of extermination, with a capacity of killing and cremating up to 5,000 prisoners per day. The two largest gas chambers which were in operation in 1943-44 could hold some 1,500 to 2,000 people each. The SS established that the gas chambers worked most efficiently if crammed with people to capacity, and if there was a room temperature of 27° C.

Maydanek-Lublin was evacuated in late July 1944, when Soviet forces closed in; around 100,000 to 200,000 Jews had been murdered there. The gassings at Auschwitz-Birkenau continued until November 1944, when Himmler ordered the gas chambers to be disabled. The remaining installations were destroyed when Soviet forces approached in January 1945.

Other concentration camps, such as Stutthof and Mauthausen, also had gas chambers installed. Most of them used Zyklon B. They were much smaller than those in the extermination camps, and were mainly employed for killing concentration camp prisoners who were too weak or too ill to work. Sachsenhausen concentration camp (near Berlin) experimented in 1941 with killing Soviet prisoners-

of-war in gassing vans, until it got a gas chamber installed in 1942. In the small gas chambers at Neuengamme concentration camp (near Hamburg) some 450 Soviet prisoners-of-war were killed in September and November 1942. At Ravensbrück concentration camp (some 80 km north of Berlin), a gas chamber was only constructed in late 1944. Around 5,000 and 6,000 prisoners were killed there in the short period from January 1945 until the liberation of the camp in April. Dachau concentration camp (near Munich) had five small gas chambers constructed in 1942-43; they were used for fumigation and disinfestation of clothing, bedding, and blankets.

The Nazi gas chambers imparted to the twentieth century some of its most disturbing and most lingering images. The ramp and the chimneys of Auschwitz-Birkenau have become almost iconic symbols of the abyss of inhumanity that human beings are capable of.

Rainer Schulze, 2010

Further Reading:

Götz Aly. *Final Solution: Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews*. Translated by Belinda Cooper and Allison Brown. London and New York: Arnold, 1999.

Henry Friedlander. *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein and Adalbert Rückerl (eds). *Nazi Mass Murder: A Documentary History of the Use of Poison Gas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

An Essay by Peter Vergo

On Robert Priseman and the Possibility of Painting

'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.'
Theodor W. Adorno (1949)

This famous remark by Adorno has been frequently quoted by other writers on the Holocaust - so frequently that, as Yvonne Kyriakides has pointed out, it has come to resemble a political sound-bite, a maxim endlessly repeated without, in the majority of cases, any serious attempt to explore its implications or situate it within the context of Adorno's thinking more generally. In fact, Adorno's seeming interdiction of 'art after Auschwitz' - that is, the idea that all the arts, not just poetry, can scarcely dare to engage with or appropriate this kind of subject-matter without risking the moral philosopher's stern censure - touches on a much wider range of issues including whether it is possible to memorialize the Holocaust at all and, if so, how one might go about that task.

The advent of peace in Europe in 1945 revealed in all its horror the extent of the human tragedy that had unfolded as a direct consequence of the Nazis' murderous delusions. Yet even concentration camp survivors themselves failed to agree on what should happen to the physical evidence of all this suffering and death, once the period of post-war reconstruction had begun. Some argued passionately that what remained of the camps should be preserved at all cost, lest we forget the enormity of the crimes committed by the Third Reich. Others, equally passionate, insisted that these obscene stains on an innocent landscape should be expunged as quickly as possible. One can see why they disagreed. For many people, the act of preserving something is equated with a kind of dedication in which emotions such as love, admiration and reverence are all mixed up in hard-to-disentangle proportions. When we say that a painting or a historic building has been 'preserved for the nation' or 'preserved for posterity', these kinds of unspoken feelings are often in our minds. We 'lovingly preserve' mementoes handed down to us by our parents and

grand-parents: objects or trinkets whose sentimental value, together with the memories they evoke, far outweighs any considerations to do with monetary worth. It seems almost obscene - or, in Adorno's terms, 'barbaric' - to talk about lovingly preserving the remains of gas chambers, alongside the memories of the appalling suffering inflicted on helpless people in places whose names are synonymous with brutality: Auschwitz, Majdanek, Dachau. And yet, so argued the opponents of such views, might not the destruction or neglect of what remained of the camps play right into the hands of those who would deny the Holocaust (or, at least, its extent and hence, by inference, its significance)? Might not the obliteration of the physical remains of the past hasten the fading or even the obliteration of memory itself, leading ultimately to the awful fulfilment of Santayana's warning that 'those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it'?

Works of art that try to depict or narrate or somehow engage with the subject-matter of the Holocaust confront us with questions that are just as awkward. It is not simply that we tend to regard the making of art - any art - as a special kind of activity, something to be prized and admired. But also, our very notion of art is often bound up with that of 'beauty' and hence with a degree of skill or technical accomplishment. True, some contemporary painters clearly regard a certain crudeness, a lack of skill or refinement as synonymous with a special kind of vitality and directness of expression unfettered by academic conventions, and prize these qualities accordingly. Even so, to say that something is 'beautifully painted' is usually taken as a compliment rather than an insult, at least by the majority of artists. But can one 'beautifully' paint the Holocaust? Indeed, what kind of art, whether painting or music or poetry, could possibly live up to the task of representing the attempted murder of entire peoples, together with all the horror entailed by that evil ambition?

In fact, art's relationship to the subject-matter of the Holocaust in general poses even wider and more troubling questions - almost certainly one of the reasons why Adorno cast doubt on the very possibility of 'art after Auschwitz'. For example, how might the artist, the poet or the musician go about depicting or describing those obvious and fundamental contradictions that lie at the very heart of the Nazis' genocidal mania? The greatest contradiction of all being, of course, encapsulated in

the question: how could it happen that a highly developed and cultured nation should have set about applying all its intelligence, its technical know-how, its ingenuity and formidable logistical skills to the task of inflicting efficient, mechanized death on millions of people whose only crime was that, in the eyes of their tormentors, they were not regarded as 'people' at all?

And there are other contradictions, too, which one might have thought it impossible to paint or explain in words or describe in music or drama. Until I saw Robert Priseman's paintings, I had thought that attempting to depict in any prosaic fashion what remains of the camps and all their paraphernalia of killing would be doomed to failure, if that meant simply creating some kind of visual record of those remains as seen through modern eyes. For the present-day visitor's experience of visiting these places is, in many respects, an equivocal one. Although the phrase 'tourist attraction' sticks in one's throat, in fact nearly all the sites of former concentration camps have become precisely that, in the literal sense that they now attract many hundreds of thousands of tourists (in the case of Auschwitz, over a million) every year. Moreover, some locations - Hartheim Castle in Austria, for example - are extremely picturesque, as Robert's coloured drawings reveal. Mauthausen, one of the most feared of all the camps on account of its singular brutality, is spectacularly located on a steep hill-top with views across undulating countryside to the distant, snow-capped Alps. Visiting such sites on a warm summer's day, surrounded by other well-fed and manifestly healthy visitors clad in brightly coloured holiday attire, can give rise to an almost unbearable feeling of tension between what one is actually seeing and experiencing for oneself and what one knows from witness accounts and from old black and white photographs - visual documents which, for all their inadequacies, seem to equate in far more vivid and convincing ways to the testimony of those dreadful times, compared with the 'reality' of the camps as they exist today.

Only after pondering these dilemmas at some length did it occur to me how important it is to view Robert's 'Gas Chambers' series in its entirety rather than as individual images - not only the paintings but also, of course, the coloured drawings. Only then does one begin to appreciate how skilfully the artist has addressed those same profound contradictions: for example, the tension between beauty of

depiction and the horror that resides in the subject-matter, or the jarring disjunction between knowledge and memory on the one hand and, on the other, our own perceptions of the here-and-now. Not only are the coloured drawings 'beautiful'; they also deliberately recall the kinds of tinted postcards that holiday-makers in the 1930s might well have sent home to family and friends. 'Having a wonderful time ... wish you were here.' On first arriving at Hartheim or Mauthausen, were some of the victims still innocently wondering what was in store for them, in contrast to those who already knew? If so, were they struck, if only for a fleeting moment, by the picturesque quality of the setting, the beauty of the landscape, the fairy-tale quaintness of the architecture? Were they taken in (willingly, perhaps, because the truth was too awful to contemplate) by all the cynical, barely plausible lies about 're-settlement' and 'being allowed to take their possessions with them' - even mention of 'a holiday'? And what of us, people who really are on holiday, when we now visit such places in the guise of tourists?

My family and I visited Auschwitz on a beautiful sunny day in July 2006. The weather was perfect, with a gentle breeze wafting through the trees. The landscape through which we drove was idyllic, almost as far as the very doors of the camp at Birkenau - the 'gateway of death'. 'Had a nice trip to Auschwitz today' Could one possibly, even in an unguarded moment, have written such a thing - in one's diary, perhaps, or on a postcard? Part of the magic spell cast by Robert's postcard-style depictions is that they catch us in just such an unguarded moment - tripping over our own feet, as it were, as we struggle to deal with the welter of contradictory emotions and experiences that form part of the complex amalgam of trying to come to terms with the past.

By contrast, there is nothing beautiful about the oil paintings depicting the gas chambers themselves. Oil is a profoundly intractable medium, even at the best of times. At the worst of times, it can stubbornly confront the painter who would bend it to his will with obstacles no less challenging than the laborious process of carving in wood. The achievement of some of the greatest artists of the part has been to make oil paint appear to be fluid, transparent, flexible, easy to manipulate, which it is not - but that is not Robert's intention. As we struggle to penetrate the

darkness of the canvases depicting Auschwitz and Majdanek (in reality, the pictures are painted on linen), the paint seems to clot before our eyes, its surface bearing the marks of scrapes and scratches that call horrifyingly to mind the last, desperate, scrabbling gestures of those who clawed the air for help as they succumbed to the poison gas. The gestural quality of the paint in these two pictures is in striking contrast to the smoothness and the icy, seemingly dispassionate quality of the handling of paint in *Bernau* and *Mauthausen*. Here, it is as if the artist is seeking both in the medium itself and in the manner of its manipulation a kind of metaphor for the ‘clinical’ nature of the purported experiments with euthanasia that are part of the tragic history of ‘clinics’ such as Sonnenstein, also shown in one of the coloured drawings.

Reflecting further on the things art can do that a simple, artless narrative cannot, one comes to realize that there may, after all, be ways for the poet or painter to confront the challenge of how to ‘represent’ the Holocaust: strategies that even Adorno might have found acceptable. These strategies have little to do with telling a tale (in words or through images) that comes across as somehow more vivid or ‘realistic’ than the stories told by Holocaust survivors. That, one must admit, would be almost impossible. It is more a matter of finding ways of manipulating the very medium, the ‘stuff’ of art itself: melody and harmony, colour and texture, rhyme and metre. Only then can the song, the image or the poem miraculously succeed in slipping past our defences, playing upon our emotions or probing areas of thought and feeling that would be inaccessible by any other means. Yet Adorno, too, himself a talented composer and someone more sensitive to the realities of how art is actually practised than he is often given credit for, was clearly conscious of just such possibilities. In a curious after-word to his original challenge to the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz, he wrote:

I do not want to soften my statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry ... But ... suffering ... also demands a continued existence of the very art it forbids; hardly elsewhere does suffering still find its own voice ... The most significant artists of the period have followed this course.

Peter Vergo, 2010

The T4 Euthanasia Centre Drawings

Hartheim

Hartheim Castle (or Palace) in Alkoven near Linz, Austria, built in the late sixteenth century.

In 1898, the castle was donated to the Provincial Charity Association of Upper Austria, which turned it into a home for physically and mentally severely disabled people, run by the sisters of the Order of St. Vincent of Paul.

After the *Anschluß* of Austria, Hartheim was confiscated 'for the needs of the German *Reich*', and in 1939 it was handed over to the 'Aktion T4', the Nazi euthanasia programme. A gas chamber was installed, disguised as shower room. Between May 1940 and August 1941, more than 18,000 people were killed here. After the end of the 'Aktion T4', the facility was used to kill a further 12,000 concentration camp prisoners from Dachau, Mauthausen, Sachsenhausen, Groß Rosen and Ravensbrück under the code name '*Sonderbehandlung* (Special Treatment) 14f13'. The last killings took place on 11 December 1944. Prisoners from nearby Mauthausen concentration camp then had to dismantle the gassing installations.

After 1945, the castle was used for housing refugees, and it was later turned into flats. Today it is an information and documentation centre and a memorial.



Grafeneck

Grafeneck Castle in Grafeneck near Münsingen south-west of Stuttgart, Germany, built in the sixteenth century as a hunting seat by the Duke of Württemberg on the site of a medieval castle.

In 1929, the castle was acquired by a Protestant charity in Stuttgart and turned into a hospice for physically disabled ('crippled') men.

In October 1939, Grafeneck was confiscated 'for the needs of the German *Reich*' and handed over to the 'Aktion T4', the Nazi euthanasia programme. A gas chamber was installed in an old coach house, disguised as a shower room, which could hold up to 75 people. Between January and December 1940, more than 10,600 people were killed here. The operation was stopped because of the public unrest it had caused in the region.

From 1941 to 1945, Grafeneck was used as a home for children who were evacuated from urban conurbations to escape the Allied bombing raids. After the end of the war, the French occupation authorities used it briefly, before it was returned to the Protestant charity in 1946. It now serves again as a home for disabled men and women.



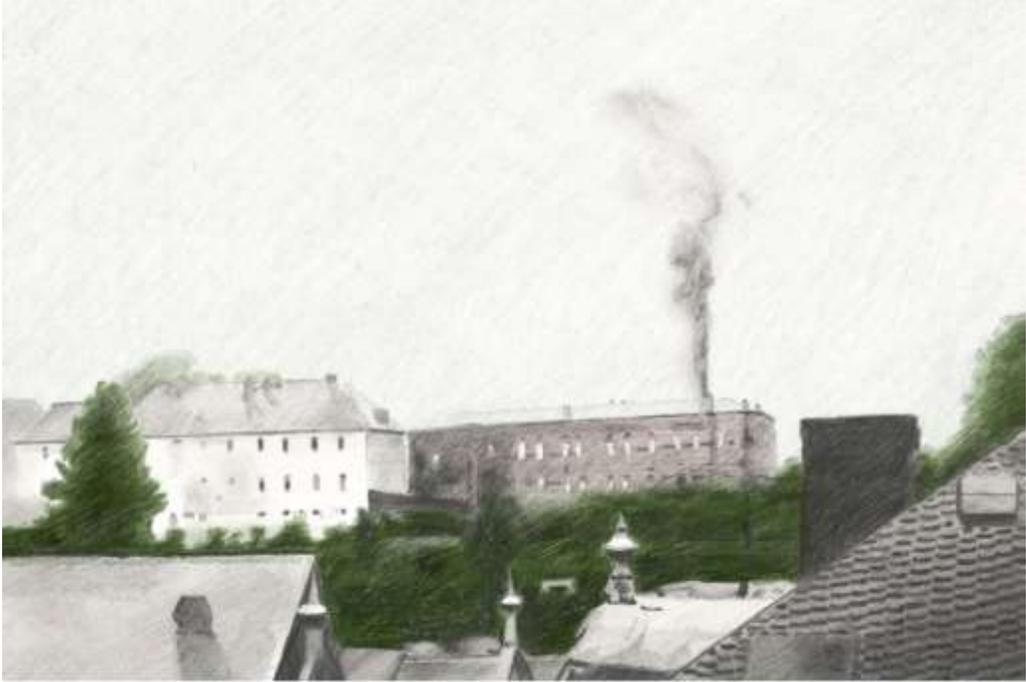
Hadamar

Correctional institution for released Prisoners in Hadamar near Limburg in Hesse, Germany, established in 1883.

In 1906, Hadamar became a mental home, and in August 1939 it was designated as a military hospital. However, in November 1940, following the closure of the Grafeneck euthanasia facility, it was handed over to the 'Aktion T4', the Nazi euthanasia programme. A gas chamber was installed, disguised as a shower room. Between January and August 1941, more than 10,000 people were killed here, roughly 100 people every day.

After the end of the 'Aktion T4', the gas chamber was dismantled, but the killing continued; around 4,500 victims were now killed by overdoses of barbiturates or lethal injections.

After the war, Hadamar became a mental hospital and a psychiatric clinic again.



Brandenburg

Building complex in the town centre of Brandenburg near Berlin, Germany.

Originally set up as a poor-house in 1790, it served as a prison from 1820 to 1932. In 1933-34 it was briefly used as a concentration camp and police barracks.

In 1939 it was handed over to the 'Aktion T4', the Nazi euthanasia programme, and renamed 'Brandenburg State Hospital and Nursing Home'. A gas chamber, disguised as a shower room (initially without showerheads and passed off as an inhalation chamber), was installed in a former brick barn. Between January and October 1940 more than 9,000 people were killed here; the last victims were 28 children from a mental home in Brandenburg-Görden.

From late 1940, the complex served as a prison for slave labourers and police barracks. Part of the complex was destroyed during the war, and new buildings were constructed on the site after the war.



Sonnenstein

Sonnenstein Castle at Pirna near Dresden, Germany, built in the fifteenth century on the site of a medieval castle.

Since 1811, Sonnenstein served as mental home, hailed worldwide as a model and reform-orientated hospital as it was committed to treating (and not just interning) its patients.

In October 1939, the mental home closed. One part of the castle was used first as a military hospital and then as accommodation for ethnic German resettlers from Bessarabia; another part remained a mental hospital (under the name Mariaheim); and one part was handed over to the 'Aktion T4', the Nazi euthanasia programme. Between June 1940 and August 1941, more than 13,500 people were killed in the gas chamber that was installed in the basement of the former men's sanitary building. From mid-1941 until September 1942, the facility was used to kill another 1,500 concentration camp prisoners under the code name '*Sonderbehandlung* (Special Treatment) 14f13'. In the autumn of 1942, all installations for the 'T4' and '14f13' programmes were dismantled, and from October 1942, Sonnenstein served as a military hospital.

After the war, the Sonnenstein complex was initially used by a large business enterprise. In 1970, Sonnenstein became a home for disabled people again.



Bernburg

Mental home in Bernburg near Magdeburg, Germany, established in 1875.

In the summer of 1940, following the closure of the Brandenburg euthanasia facility, one block of the hospital was handed over to the 'Aktion T4', the Nazi euthanasia programme. A gas chamber was installed in the basement, disguised as a shower room, which could hold between 60 and 75 people at a time. Between November 1940 and August 1941, around 9,000 people were killed here. After the end of the 'Aktion T4', the facility was used until April 1943 to kill another 5,000 concentration camp prisoners under the code name '*Sonderbehandlung* (Special Treatment) 14f13', mostly Jews from Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Groß-Rosen, Neuengamme, Ravensbrück and Sachsenhausen.

Throughout this time, the main part of the hospital continued to operate as a regular mental institution.

After the war, Bernburg became again a mental hospital and a psychiatric clinic.



The Nazi Gas Chambers Paintings

Bernburg

Mental home near Magdeburg, Germany, established in 1875.

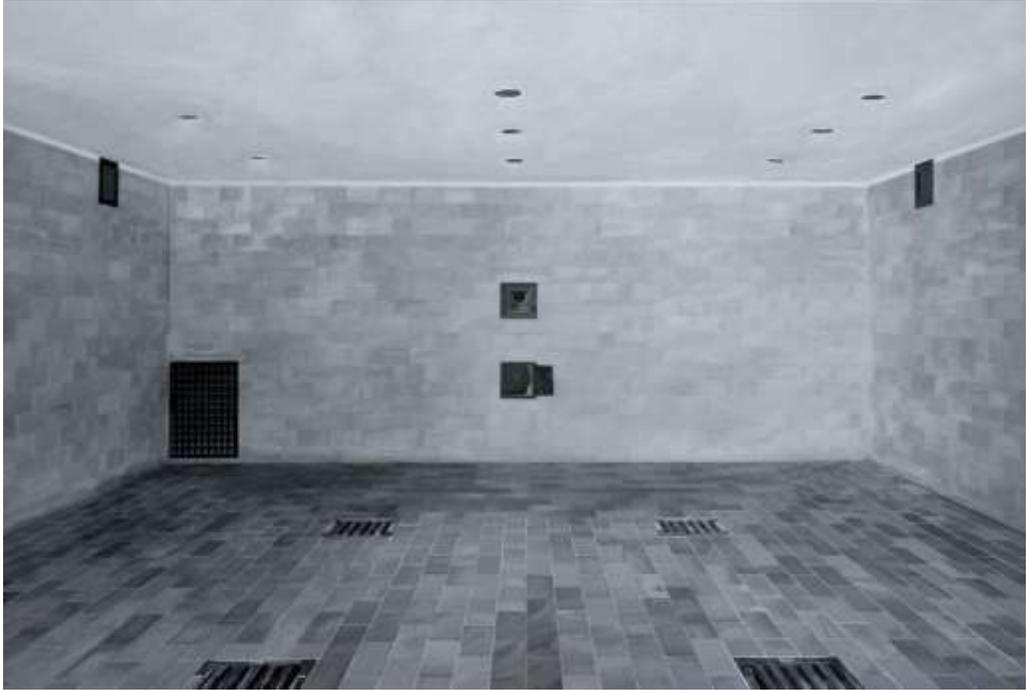
In the summer of 1940, one block of the hospital was handed over to Operation T4, the Nazi euthanasia programme. Between November 1940 and August 1941, around 9,000 mentally and physically disabled people were killed in groups of 60 to 75 at a time in the gas chamber which was disguised as a shower room. After the end of Operation T4, the facility was used to kill another 5,000 concentration camp prisoners under the code name 'Special Treatment 14f13', mostly Jews. Throughout this time, the main part of the hospital continued to operate as a regular mental institution.



Dachau

Concentration camp near Munich, Germany, established in March 1933.

In 1942-43, a new crematorium, which became known as Baracke X, was constructed and incorporated five small gas chambers. They were used for fumigation and disinfection of clothing, bedding, blankets etc. The design of one of these gas chambers was such that it was technically possible to kill people by gassing, but there is no evidence that it was ever used in this way.



Mauthausen

Concentration camp near Linz, Austria, established in 1938.

In the autumn of 1941, a gas chamber was constructed in the basement of the camp prison, partly tiled and disguised as a shower room. From spring 1942 until the liberation of the camp on 5 May 1945, at least 3,500 prisoners were gassed here with Zyklon B.



Majdanek

Concentration camp near Lublin in the Generalgouvernement (Nazi occupied Poland), established in 1941.

Originally set up as a camp for Soviet prisoners-of-war and a (mainly Jewish) forced labour camp, it officially became a concentration camp in 1943. In the winter 1941-42, a provisional gas chamber was installed, and in the autumn of 1942, a bunker originally intended for disinfestation was converted into gas chambers. Until September 1943, an unknown number of prisoners, going into the tens of thousands, mainly Jews, were gassed with carbon monoxide and Zyklon B.



Auschwitz 1

Stammlager, the original camp of the Auschwitz concentration camp complex and its administrative centre in Oświęcim (German: Auschwitz) near Kraków in Nazi annexed Poland, established in 1940.

The first gassings took place on 3 September 1941 when the SS tested the use of Zyklon B, killing some 250 severely sick concentration camp prisoners and 600 Soviet prisoners-of-war in a provisional gas chamber in the basement of 'Block 11', the concentration camps' prison block and place of torture and executions. Following this, a bunker outside the prisoner compound was converted into a permanent gas chamber, which could hold between 700 and 800 people. Until December 1942, it was in regular use, but the exact number of people killed here is unknown: estimates vary from a maximum of 10,000 to several ten thousand people. With the mass gassing operation shifted to Auschwitz II (Birkenau), the gas chamber at Auschwitz I was closed down, and it was used first as an execution chamber and later as an air raid shelter for the SS. After the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops, the gas chamber was partly reconstructed.



Afterword

Nazi Gas Chambers

From Memory to History

On the 5th May, 2011, Claude Stanley Choules, the last known combat veteran of the First World War, died quietly at a nursing home in Perth, Western Australia. He was 110 years old and saw active service in the British Navy. With his passing the First World War moved from an event of living memory to an occurrence which now exists only in history. It can be debated, written about and revised, but it can never again be remembered or spoken of in the first person.

On the 20th January, 2012, seventy years passed since the Wannsee Conference took place in a quite villa located in the suburbs of Berlin. Most of us are of course fully aware of the terrible decision which was made on that day by fifteen men sitting around a table headed up by Reinhard Heydrich - the decision to kill by lethal gas eleven million European Jews.

Seventy years is a significant amount of time because it marks the 'three score years and ten' we anticipate as being the average natural life span, the 'full' life we all hope to live. It makes us aware of those who never had the opportunity to realise the natural extent of their lives as a direct result of Nazi policy. It also makes us aware that there are now only the very old, those who have exceeded their 'three score years and ten' remaining who can actually remember this terrible chapter of our past.

When these last survivors have gone, the Holocaust, like the First World War, will move from the realm of memory to history. At this point it can be debated and its facts questioned; a space for denial has the potential to open up and take root. This makes our challenge to secure the evidence, configure the details and make time for remembrance all the more important. Many debates are already arising: Was the Holocaust unique in human history? Should we remember events like the

transportation of African slaves with equal weight? How much time should be given to teaching the Holocaust in schools?

Unfortunately genocides have occurred around the world many times since the Second World War. We think of Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge killed over a million people between 1975 and 1979, or the 'Disappearances' in Guatemala between 1981 and 1983 which saw some 200,000 people 'vanish', or the loss of 3 million Bangladeshis during secession from Pakistan in 1971. We are also able to call to mind events in Rwanda, Bosnia, Vietnam, Eritrea, Sierra Leone and so many others. The Holocaust is however unique amongst all these mass killings because it is the only time in history where industrial processes have been applied by a culturally advanced people to the taking of human life.

Genocide, it seems, is hard wired into human nature, appearing at times of great stress when one community gains a desire at some deep level to get rid of those they don't like. Projecting out their own feelings of self-loathing onto a targeted group of others who they hope will be destroyed. We don't like to think of ourselves as possessing this capacity and perhaps that is where denial takes its role. Denial can of course be used as a coping mechanism. By ignoring or disbelieving powerful events which have the potential to emotionally overwhelm us, we enable our everyday lives to continue, we gain the capacity to 'carry on as normal'. But after seventy years, memory of the Holocaust has the potential to fade, with the written, spoken and visual legacy likely to cause audience fatigue. Why? Because we quickly become desensitized to pictures of brutality, and as horrific as images of the Holocaust are, with photographs of piles of dead bodies and starving prisoners wearing stripped pyjamas, as time passes the shock of what we are looking at subsides - it shouldn't, but it does.

Perhaps after seventy years we have a duty to examine our past for clues as to how we might live more fully in the future, a life which is better than 'normal'. We all wish to imagine ourselves living forever in a beautiful world, untouched by hardship, bitterness and illness. A paradise of peace which seems always to be somehow just out of reach. At the heart of this vision is freedom of speech. This should be inclusive, where we not only listen to the views of those we agree with, but

occasionally have to hear the opinions of those we disagree with, those who wish to say things we find repulsive or disturbing. Perhaps by engaging in this process we enable all members of our society to feel as though they belong, to feel valued and that all hatred might subside as a result.

So why should we remember the Holocaust? Because if we don't we might forget that evil is allowed to occur because it takes root in the mundane. The gas chambers of Auschwitz, Sobibor, Majdanek and the many other locations of Nazi mass killing did not just appear overnight, someone somewhere received an order to tile the gas chamber, someone was contracted to make and fit the pipes, supply the bricks make the metal doors and their hinges. All these people and many more will have received money for their work and not thought of themselves as directly responsible for the atrocity of the Holocaust, because they did not carry out the actual killing or come up with the original policy. They were in fact just getting on with their lives.

Robert Priseman, January 2012

The Wannsee Portraits



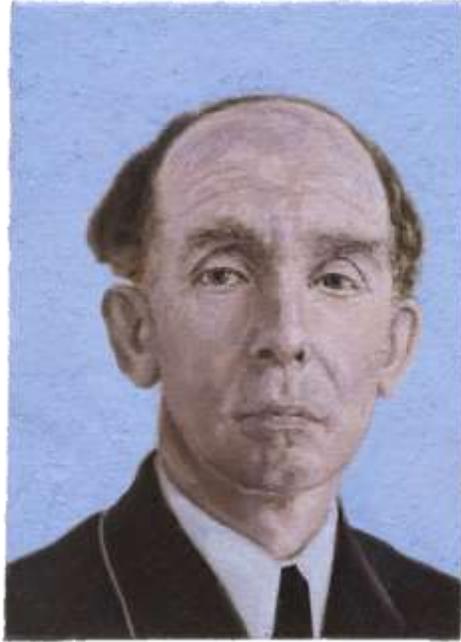
Reinhard Heydrich
Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015



Top: Adolf Eichmann, Bottom: Dr Alfred Meyer
Both: Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015



Top: Dr Eberhard Schöngarth, Bottom: Dr Georg Liebbrandt
Both: Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015



Top: Dr Roland Freisler, Bottom: Dr Gerhard Klopfer
Both: Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015



Top: Dr Rudolf Lange, Bottom: Dr Josef Bühler
Both: Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015



Top: Dr Wilhelm Stuckart, Bottom: Heinrich Müller
Both: Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015



Top: Martin Luther, Bottom: Erich Neumann
Both: Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015



Top: Otto Hofmann, Bottom: Wilhelm Kritzinger
Both: Oil on board, 17.8 x 12.5 cm
2015

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