



PROGRAMME FIVE FRENZIED KILLING

“If you have to save your life you’ll try it in every way, even in a criminal way if it comes to that, but you have to save it. Your life is first. You are nearest to yourself, whatever people try to say.”

Éva Speter, Hungarian-Jewish survivor of the ‘Final Solution’

The most important year in the history of Auschwitz is 1944, the year when more people are killed than ever before. It is also the year in which the Nazis send unlikely messengers to the East to try to sow seeds of confusion amongst the Allies, and when the Western Allies struggle with the dilemma of whether to negotiate with the Nazis about the Jews and whether or not to bomb the camp.

The Hungarians under Admiral Horthy have been unwilling to deport their Jews up to now, but in the wake of the German occupation of March 1944 comes Adolf Eichmann, the man charged with organising the deportation of all the Jews in Hungary.

Eichmann makes a mysterious offer to one of the most politically involved members of the Jewish community, in which he gives him a chance to broker a deal with his contacts abroad – 1 million Jewish lives saved for the provision of certain goods. But at the same time, Eichmann continues to organise the deportations from Hungary to Auschwitz, where Höss is back in charge to oversee the murder of hundreds of thousands of people. He ensures that the ovens in Crematorium V are fully operational and

that five ditches are dug next to this gas chamber complex. Work is speeded up on the railway sidings into the camp.

Within ten weeks of the start of the deportations, 437,000 Hungarian Jews are sent to Auschwitz. About 75% of them are killed on arrival.

Whilst the scale of the killing grows, the Jewish envoy sent by Eichmann, Joel Brand, meets Jewish Agency representatives in Aleppo, Syria. He does not get the help he expects. News of the offer also reaches the Allies, but it is dismissed as blackmail. The Allies, who by now know in detail just what is happening at Auschwitz – even the location of the crematoria and gas chambers – reject requests to bomb the camp.

Until now, Gypsy families have been kept separate from the other inmates at Birkenau in a special family camp. Orders are given to liquidate it. Because they know what fate awaits them, the Gypsies struggle with the SS to avoid being killed, but without success.

The Sonderkommando, who work in the gas chamber complexes, are aware that they will also be killed one day to protect the secret of their grim task – the processing of the bodies of those killed in the gas chambers. In October 1944, in Crematoria II and IV, they revolt but are crushed by the SS guards.

Meanwhile, the Red Army east of Auschwitz is drawing near and Himmler is busy trying to negotiate a deal with the Western Allies. In December 1944 and January 1945, the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau are dismantled to cover the Nazis’ tracks.

Those prisoners who are well enough to walk are forced on a march in sub-zero temperatures back towards Germany, while Nazis like Höss and Mengele prepare to go into hiding. Retribution is close at hand.

Frenzied Killing includes testimony from a witness to the liquidation of the Gypsy family camp, members of the Sonderkommando who worked in the gas chamber complexes and a Hungarian Jew who survived the ‘Final Solution’ by accepting a place on Eichmann’s ‘goodwill gesture’ to the Allies – a train of Jews supposedly bound for neutral Switzerland.

PROGRAMME SIX LIBERATION AND REVENGE

“Question: You were part of the largest killing factory in history; don’t you think you should have stood trial?”

Answer: No. You [are wrong to] assume that just being a member of a large group of people who lived in a garrison where Jews were killed is enough to make them criminals.”

Oskar Gröning, SS garrison, Auschwitz

On 27 January 1945 Red Army soldiers liberate the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. They are not warned about its existence in advance, so when they enter it, they are utterly shocked by the walking skeletons, the remains of the gas chambers and the piles of human hair. But it is not only Auschwitz-Birkenau that horrifies the world. A few months later other concentration camps are liberated – among them Bergen-Belsen, where thousands of unburied bodies are strewn over the ground. The British are horrified and unprepared for how to deal with the situation – 14,000 prisoners die in the first five days following their liberation; another 14,000 succumb in the following weeks.

Tragically, life for many liberated prisoners continues to be appalling. Women are raped by the advancing Soviet soldiers. When Jewish survivors return to their homes in countries such as Slovakia or Poland, they find that their property has been confiscated and they are told by their neighbours to return to where they came from. Some face pogroms in their home cities. Others decide to leave for Palestine, but many are stopped on their way by British patrols and placed in British camps in Cyprus.

Whilst Hitler and Himmler commit suicide, frustratingly large numbers of perpetrators manage to remain hidden.

Ex-Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss is captured by the British but they do not recognise him. He is subsequently freed and finds work on a farm in northern Germany. Adolf Eichmann becomes a lumberjack in the same region, while Josef Mengele works as a farmhand in Bavaria where he writes self-pitying poems about his long and hard-working days.

Groups of avengers are created by Jews who wish to take revenge into their own hands. In the chaos of post-war Europe, they track down Nazis and murder some of them. Höss is hunted down by the British, tried in Poland and eventually hanged at Auschwitz. Eichmann and Mengele escape to Argentina. In May 1960 Eichmann is finally captured by the Israelis, brought to trial and executed a year later. Mengele successfully evades capture and dies of natural causes in 1979.

Overall only a small percentage of the SS men from Auschwitz are ever put on trial. The problem is that they can only be convicted if there is sufficient evidence of personal involvement in the crimes committed in the camp. Many of the perpetrators have never confronted their role in the ‘Final Solution’. In contrast, those they persecuted are unable ever to forget.

Liberation and Revenge hears from a member of the SS garrison at Auschwitz who, towards the end of his life, decides to confront the Holocaust deniers. The programme also follows individual stories of former prisoners who did not find peace after returning home, as well as the story of a Jewish avenger who admits to the murder of several Nazis and gives a first-hand description of Adolf Eichmann’s capture.

