

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SEMINARY

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

A MASS MURDERER REPENTS:

The Case of Rudolf Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz

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The visitor to the Auschwitz concentration camp who follows the prescribed route comes, at the end of the tour, to a square mound marked with a sign identifying it as the place where the camp's builder and Commandant, Rudolf Hoess¹, was hanged on April 16, 1947. Visible from the site is the spacious villa, two hundred yards distant, in which Hoess lived throughout the war with his wife and five children.

Among the many top Nazi war criminals who were executed following Germany's defeat in May 1945 the case of Rudolf Hoess is unique. In testimony before the war crimes tribunal in Nürnberg in April 1946 he surprised the court by giving a full and frank account of his crimes, including a contradiction of Hermann Göring's claim that there was never any order for mass destruction of Jews.

Though his story has been known to Holocaust scholars at least since 1951², it has received little attention. This neglect, and the publication in 1997 of a new book on Hoess by a German scholar, with much new material³, make the case of Rudolf Hoess worth revisiting.

Hoess was born on November 25, 1901 in the German town of Baden-Baden, the eldest of three children and only son of devout Catholic parents. He was baptized on December 11, 1901 with the Christian names Rudolf Franz Ferdinand. His parents, solid middle-class burghers, had a tea and coffee business inherited from Hoess's maternal grandparents. Rudolf's father came from a military family and had been a German army officer himself in East Africa. He left the army because of multiple wounds. In the prison memoirs which Hoess wrote in January-February 1947 he describes the family atmosphere thus:

A warm relationship existed between my parents, full of love ... and yet, I never saw them being affectionate to one another. My two younger sisters ... were around my mother a great deal and loved to cuddle with her, but I refused any open show of affection... A handshake and a few brief words of thanks were the most that one could expect from me. Although both of my parents cared for me very much, I could never find a way to confide in them. ... The only one I confided in was my Hans [his pony].⁴

Prof. Batawia, the Polish psychiatrist who interviewed Hoess in Cracow, wrote that Hoess's childhood was

stamped with principles of military discipline and religious fanaticism, accompanied by constant emphasis of sin and guilt and the need to do penance. Hoess grew up in a family atmosphere in which expressions of love, freedom from worry, spontaneity, and humor were paralyzed; where everything the child did was judged by strict moral standards, where the word "duty" had almost mystical significance and disobedience in trifles was almost a crime. ⁵

During his imprisonment at Nürnberg Hoess told the American psychiatrist Martin Gilbert that his "fanatically Catholic" father punished his son's many youthful transgressions by making him say prayers.⁶

Following the birth of the couple's second daughter Rudolf's father took a vow of celibacy, promising to live with his wife henceforth as brother and sister, and dedicated his son to God as a priest. To cultivate this vocation Hoess senior took his son on pilgrimage to numerous shrines, including that at Lourdes. Priests were frequent visitors in the Hoess family home. Rudolf listened, he wrote, "in radiant rapture" to the tales of bearded missionaries who had known his father during the latter's service in Africa. He "believed deeply", took his religious duties seriously, and "was zealous as an altar boy."⁷

The first break in this atmosphere of hothouse piety came when Rudolf was thirteen. As he hurried downstairs at school with his classmates on a Saturday morning he accidentally pushed another boy, causing him to break his ankle. Rudolf was punished with two hours' detention. Conscientious as always, he mentioned his transgression in his weekly confession the same day. He did not report the incident at home, however, not wishing "to spoil Sunday for my parents", as he wrote, adding: "They would learn about it soon enough during the coming week."

The same evening his confessor, a good friend of his father, visited the family. The following morning Rudolf's father scolded and punished him for not reporting the pushing incident right away. Since the family telephone was out of order, there had been no other visitors, and none of his classmates lived in their neighborhood, Rudolf concluded that the priest must have broken the seal of the confessional. "My faith in the holy profession of priesthood was smashed and doubts began to stir within me," Hoess wrote. "After this incident I could no longer trust any priest."⁸ He changed confessors and soon stopped going to confession altogether.

The death of Rudolf's father the year following, and the outbreak of World War I changed the course of young Rudolf's life. Volunteering in a military hospital, the teenager found himself as fascinated by the soldiers' tales of military life as he had previously been by the talk of African missionaries at home. After repeated unsuccessful attempts to join the army himself, he finally succeeded before his fifteenth birthday in 1916, with the help of an officer in his father's and grandfather's old cavalry regiment. Serving on the Turkish front, he was three times wounded, receiving several decorations and becoming at age seventeen the youngest sergeant in the German army. Following the armistice Hoess, now only eighteen, led his cavalry platoon, all men over thirty, on a marathon trek from Syria to Germany. Seventeen years later Hoess remained proud of this achievement "As far as I know, no complete unit ever returned home from that theater of war."⁹

Hoess's wartime experiences affected him deeply. The commercialism he observed at pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land, where he recuperated from his wounds, further eroded what remained of his youthful piety. Especially significant is the concept of leadership he learned on the battlefield:

It was then I learned that leadership does not depend on rank, but on better knowledge. The ice-cold, unshakeable calm of the leader is decisive in difficult situations. I learned too how hard it is to remain an example to others, and preserve outward calm, when one is filled with fears and doubts within. ¹⁰

That the cause for which he fought was just, was taken for granted. This same combination of unshakeable confidence in the rightness of the cause, and an ice-cold exterior despite inner doubts, would characterize Hoess's later career as concentration camp officer and commandant.

Discharged from the army in 1919, Hoess found himself without a home. His mother had died in 1917, his two sisters were in convent schools. Relatives had divided the family property. When the uncle who was his legal guardian told Rudolf he would pay for seminary studies but none other, the young man declared angrily that he no longer wished to be a priest and formally renounced his inheritance in favor of his sisters. The next day he traveled to East Prussia where he volunteered for service with one of the private militias which flourished in the chaos of post-war Germany. During the next three years Hoess was involved in battles which he described as "more brutal and vicious than anything I had experienced before."¹¹ In 1922 he formally left the church. Shortly thereafter, Hoess joined the Nazi party after hearing a speech by Adolf Hitler in Munich. These years also brought meetings with his future commander and hero Heinrich Himmler, and with Martin Bormann, whom Hoess recruited for the Nazi party.

In 1923 Hoess was involved in the brutal gang murder of a supposed traitor, an act of vigilante justice of the kind still practiced in Northern Ireland today. Hoess was tried and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. In the third year of this term he suffered a severe mental and physical breakdown.

With all my power I tried to pull myself together, but I just couldn't fight it. I wanted to pray, but all I could manage was a sad, fearful mumbling. I had forgotten how to pray; I could no longer find the way to God.... I believed that God didn't want to help me any more because I had left him. My official withdrawal from the church in 1922 tortured me.¹²

Hoess would draw on his experiences of prison life in his later concentration camp work.

Released from prison through a general amnesty in 1928, Hoess joined an organization called the Artaman League.¹³ This was a nationalistic back-to-the-land movement: youthful idealists who wished to escape decadent and corrupting urban life through farming and healthy living. Here he met his wife, whom he married in 1929.

In June 1934 Heinrich Himmler, by now Commander of the elite military SS, invited Hoess to join its ranks. Hoess would come to revere Himmler so much that he considered whatever he said "gospel" and to hang his picture rather than Hitler's in his office.¹⁴ At this early stage, however, Hoess hesitated to abandon farming, his first love, for military service. When he decided to do so, he continued to hope that he could return to farming later.

Hoess's first assignment was to the concentration camp at Dachau, just north of Munich. His mentor there was the camp commander, SS-Colonel Theodor Eicke,

a simpleminded, old-time Nazi from the street-fighting days. ... He considered all prisoners enemies of the state, who must be kept locked up at all times, must be treated harshly, and annihilated if they resist. This is what he lectured about and how he educated his SS officers and soldiers.¹⁵

In his prison memoirs Hoess describes how upset he was when he had to witness the flogging of prisoners in Dachau - a punishment so brutal that prisoners had been known to commit suicide in order to avoid it.¹⁶ "Hot and cold chills ran through me when the [prisoner's] screaming started."¹⁷ When Hoess had to order corporal punishment himself as commandant of Auschwitz, he was seldom present. Hoess's description of his reaction makes it clear, however, that what most distressed him was not the victim's suffering but rather the fear of being viewed by his SS-colleagues as a weakling.¹⁸

In May 1938 Hoess was assigned to the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen, near Berlin, where he came into contact with the inner circle around Hitler. He served at Sachsenhausen until April 1940, when he was made Commandant of the newly established concentration camp at Auschwitz in Poland. To

understand his activity there one must know what motivated him. Despite the unspeakable cruelties for which he was responsible, Hoess was no sadist. He acted on the basis of an ideology in which he believed as fanatically as his father had believed his own twisted version of Catholicism.

In his prison memoirs Hoess wrote that there had been two driving principles in his life: love of country and love of his family.

I believed that the National Socialist ideology [Weltanschauung] was the only one suited to the German people. The farm was supposed to be our [family] homestead. My wife and I saw in the children our purpose in life. It was to be our life's task to enable them to get a good education and create a stable home life for them.¹⁹

Martin Broszat, who edited the German edition of Hoess's memoirs, calls Nazi ideology a "catch-all, a conglomeration, a hodge-podge."²⁰ Its racial component, however, was consistent and (in every sense of the word) simple. This theory was rooted not in revelation, like the Catholicism he learned from his father, but in nature. All of nature - plants, animals, humanity - was engaged in perpetual struggle. Only the strong survived. Humanity's strong races must dominate the weaker ones, therefore, and keep themselves racially pure. Admixture of blood with weaker races was fatal.

Aryans, the creators of culture, were at the top of the Nazi racial pyramid. Beneath them were culture-bearers: Slavs and Asians. Their role was to provide slave labor for the culturally creative Aryans. Beneath both were the destroyers of culture, the Jews: humanity's parasites, who dragged everyone down. History was the record not of class warfare (as in Marxism) but of racial warfare. Germany had lost the first World War because it had allowed Jews to become assimilated, thus committing the cardinal sin of racial bastardization. The renewal of Germany's national life proclaimed by Adolf Hitler could come about only through a return to racial purity. If this meant enslavement of non-Germans and eradication of Jews, so be it. Struggle was the law of life. Only the strong survived. "The SS was, in my opinion, the most energetic defender of this ideology," Hoess wrote in his prison memoirs, "and the only one capable of leading the German people back to a life more in keeping with its character."²¹ He added, however:

I want to emphasize that I personally never hated the Jews. I considered them to be the enemy of our nation. However, that was precisely the reason to treat them the same way as the other prisoners. ... Besides, the feeling of hatred is not in me ...²²

Consistent with this ideology, in which Hoess believed, "as firmly as a Catholic believes the dogmas of the church"²³, was his desire to be notorious for toughness. Any appearance of being soft would call into question his membership in the Aryan master race. To what lengths this desire led is shown by two incidents at Sachsenhausen.

Shortly after the outbreak of war Hoess had to command the firing squad at the execution of a fellow SS-officer. The man had been ordered to arrest a former Communist official. The arresting officer knew the man, whom he had found always honorable. Out of kindness he allowed the prisoner to take leave of his wife at home. While the officer and a guard were talking to the wife in the apartment, her husband escaped through another room. A hastily convened court martial immediately sentenced the SS-officer to death. Hoess tells the story:

Just the day before we had sat in the mess hall and talked about the executions [we had to carry out]. Now the same thing was going to happen to him, and I had to carry out the order. Even my Commandant felt that this was going too far. ... The condemned man was a decent person in his middle thirties, married with three children, who had been conscientious and loyal in his duties prior to this incident. ... To this day I still cannot understand how I could have calmly given the order to fire. ... I was so upset I could barely hold the pistol steady when I had to give him the coup de grace.²⁴

The second incident is described by a former inmate at Sachsenhausen who witnessed it. On January 18, 1940, Hoess ordered more than eight hundred prisoners who were unfit for work to remain standing all day outside in thin prison clothing in a temperature of minus 15 degrees Fahrenheit. When many collapsed Hoess forbade subordinates to take them to the prison hospital. Asked why this was necessary, he replied: "If the others [who had left the camp in work details] must freeze, then these malingerers can spend a day in the cold too." The prisoner who reports the incident, a trusty with supervision over others, says that when he finally told Hoess, "The men can't take any more," he received the curt reply: "They aren't men, they are prisoners." Hoess's action caused the death of one hundred forty-five prisoners during the day and the night following, in addition to those who died of the consequences of their ordeal later.²⁵ The account of this incident is consistent with that of a former prisoner at Auschwitz who testified that "Hoess would watch the beatings and hangings as if he were watching a movie, but with no reaction showing in his face." ²⁶

When Hoess was chosen to develop a concentration camp at Auschwitz in late April 1940, he was ordered "to create a transition camp for ten thousand prisoners from the existing complex of well-preserved buildings." He found them teeming with "lice, fleas, and other bugs" and devoid of sanitary facilities²⁷ - a foretaste of the immense difficulties ahead. At that time, Hoess says, a camp for ten thousand prisoners was considered "tremendously large". By March 1941 Hoess had received orders to increase the camp's capacity tenfold.²⁸ When he complained that this rate of expansion was impossible, given the incompetence of his staff and the denial of his requests for needed building material and supplies, Himmler told him he didn't want to hear about difficulties. For an SS-officer difficulties did not exist. His task was to overcome them by himself. "As to how? That's your headache, not mine!"²⁹

By November 1943, when Hoess was transferred to a staff position at SS-headquarters in Berlin, Auschwitz had become so large that three officers were assigned to replace him. What Hoess himself called "the largest killing center in all of history"³⁰ was the product of his unremitting hard work and constant pressure on subordinates to meet his exacting standards. Hoess went to Auschwitz determined "to do things differently" and develop a camp better than those in which he had served hitherto. His memoirs are full of complaints that his best intentions were frustrated by the shortcomings and stubbornness of the officers and men who were assigned to him.³¹

Repeatedly he says that he learned only after the war about many of the worst abuses in the treatment of prisoners. He was so taken up with administrative duties that he had to leave discipline and punishment to subordinates, who constantly disobeyed his orders.³² The state prosecutor at Hoess's post-war trial in Warsaw stated that, unlike other SS-men, Hoess had never personally abused or struck a prisoner in Auschwitz.³³ Hoess's own claim, however, that he had done everything in his power to prevent abuses, clearly goes too far. This would have required him to close the camp entirely.³⁴

Until the beginning of 1942 most of the prisoners in Auschwitz were Polish. This changed when Himmler put Hoess in charge of the destruction of all European Jews. He was ordered to keep this secret, even from his superiors.³⁵ Hoess admits in his memoirs that he was deeply affected by the horrible scenes he witnessed at the gas chambers. Since everyone was watching him, however, to see his reactions,

I had to appear cold and heartless during these events which tear the heart apart in anyone who had any kind of human feelings. ... Coldly I had to stand and watch as the mothers went into the gas chambers with their laughing or crying children. ... I was never happy at Auschwitz once the mass annihilation began.³⁶

"Did you never have qualms of conscience?" the Polish prosecutor asked Hoess at his trial.

Yes, later [he replied] when the mass transports arrived - especially when we had to exterminate women daily. Everyone involved had the same unspoken question: was this necessary? They came to me a number of times and spoke about this. All I could do was tell them that we had to carry out orders without permitting ourselves any human feelings.³⁷

Hoess says that he had lengthy discussions about the mass extermination of Jews with Adolf Eichmann, though "without ever letting him know what was going on inside me."³⁸ Eichmann discerned Hoess's doubts nonetheless. During his post-war exile in Argentina Eichmann said that Hoess had told him he had received reassurance from Heinrich Himmler. After personally viewing the gassing of "our enemies" at Auschwitz and the burning of their bodies, Himmler had told Hoess and his fellow SS-officers: "These are battles which the generations that come after us won't have to fight."³⁹

"I will never forget the last meeting and farewell from Himmler," Hoess wrote in his memoirs. It was the first week of May 1945. Hitler had committed suicide in Berlin on April 30. When they heard this news, Hoess and his wife wanted to take poison.

Our world had perished with the Führer. Was there any sense for us to continue living? We were going to be pursued and hunted everywhere. ... For our children's sake we did not do it. ... I have since regretted it many times.⁴⁰

Following Hitler's death Heinrich Himmler set up a provisional government in Flensburg, on the German-Danish border. When Hoess reported to him there he was shocked to find the commander he had so revered

beaming and in a great mood; yet the world, our world, had perished. If he had said, "Well gentlemen, now it's over, you know what to do," I would have understood - this would have corresponded with what he had preached year in and year out, "Self-sacrifice for the ideology." But instead, he gave us his last order: "Hide yourself in the army!" That was the goodbye from the man I respected so highly, in whom I had placed such tremendous confidence, whose orders and sayings were gospel to me.⁴¹

Hoess's disillusionment would have important consequences two years later. At the time, however, his only thought was to disappear. Hoess was able to avoid capture for ten months. His luck ran out on March 11, 1946, when British military police arrested him on the farm where he was working near Flensburg. After three weeks he was taken to Nürnberg where his sober and detailed account of Nazi crimes differed dramatically from the evasions and lies of those on trial there. Since Hoess's own crimes had been committed in Poland, he was handed over to the authorities in that country on May 25. Upon arrival in the Warsaw prison where he was kept in solitary confinement for nine weeks, "several prison officials approached me and showed me their Auschwitz tattoo numbers."⁴² At the end of July he was transferred to another prison in Cracow. After initial rough treatment, which Hoess says, "almost had me at the breaking point ... and I can stand quite a bit"⁴³, the Polish prosecutor's office intervened on his behalf. Of his treatment thereafter Hoess wrote: "I have to confess that I never would have expected to be treated so decently and so kindly in a Polish prison."⁴⁴

Hoess's trial began in Warsaw on March 5, 1947. Many Polish lawyers had been killed in Auschwitz, part of the Nazis' campaign to destroy the country's intelligentsia. Despite this, the authorities made every effort to conduct a fair trial. The opening statement of the Polish judge merits citation:

Mindful of our great responsibility towards the dead and the living, we must not lose sight of what was at stake for all those who fought for freedom. Their guiding principle was respect for human dignity. Let us extend this respect to the accused as well, for the man who stands before this court is a human being.⁴⁵

During the three-week trial Hoess answered the questions put to him concisely and without visible emotion. At the trial's conclusion he acknowledged his "full responsibility as camp commandant" for everything that had happened in Auschwitz. Unlike his SS-subordinates, he said, he had never stolen prisoners' valuables. He had never personally abused or killed any prisoners. He had acted always under orders. He concluded: "In making these statements I am not trying in any way, however, to evade my responsibility."⁴⁶

On April 2, 1947, the court issued a 64-page finding of the defendant's guilt and condemned him to death. Still showing no emotion, Hoess thanked the lawyers who had defended him and declined his right to appeal for clemency. Pending execution of the court's sentence Hoess was transferred to the prison

in Wadowice, some 30 kilometers from Auschwitz. In one of history's ironies, the birthplace of Karol Wojtyła, now Pope John Paul II, would become the setting for the brief but dramatic final chapter in the life of the builder and commandant of "the largest killing center in all of history."⁴⁷

In February, in conversation with the Polish prison psychiatrist, Professor Batawia, Hoess confessed to having felt, all during his concentration camp activity that "something was not right". This remained a feeling only. He did not reflect on the matter but simply obeyed, as he had been trained to do.

And even today, when I think so much about everything I have experienced, I cannot say with certainty that the ideology of National Socialism was wrong. I do recognize with certainty, however, that the abandonment of morality was wrong, and also the crimes, the terror, the spreading of hatred. I always felt that. Now it is not just a feeling, I understand where the ideology went wrong.⁴⁸

In his prison memoirs, written the same month, Hoess stays, however:

I am now as I was then, as far as my philosophy of life is concerned ... still a National Socialist. A person who has believed in an ideology, a philosophy, for almost twenty-five years and who was bound up with it body and soul cannot simply throw it away just because ... the National Socialist state and its leaders acted wrongly. In fact, criminally and through their failure our world collapsed and the entire German people have been plunged into unspeakable misery for decades into the future.⁴⁹

Evidence of Hoess's continued attachment to Nazi ideas was his further statement:

Today I realize that the extermination of the Jews was wrong, absolutely wrong. ... The cause of anti-Semitism was not served by this act at all, in fact, just the opposite. The Jews have come much closer to their final goal.⁵⁰

What did Hoess really think? Was the ideology itself wrong, or only the methods used to achieve its goals? The statements just quoted show him still uncertain, even as he moved away from the political faith in which he had believed so fanatically. Hoess's farewell letters to his wife and children, written nine days after being sentenced to death, show a significant further change in his thinking. To his wife Hoess wrote on April 11:

Based on my present knowledge I can see today clearly, severely and bitterly for me, that the entire ideology about the world in which I believed so firmly and unswervingly was based on completely wrong premises and had to absolutely collapse one day. And so my actions in the service of this ideology were completely wrong, even though I faithfully believed the idea was correct. Now it was very logical that strong doubts grew within me, and whether my turning away from my belief in God was based on completely wrong premises. It was a hard struggle. But I have again found my faith in my God.⁵¹

In a letter to his children Hoess told his eldest son:

Keep your good heart. Become a person who lets himself be guided primarily by warmth and humanity. Learn to think and judge for yourself, responsibly. Don't accept everything without criticism and as absolutely true... The biggest mistake of my life was that I believed everything faithfully which came from the top, and I didn't dare to have the least bit of doubt about the truth of that which was presented to me. ... In all your undertakings, don't just let your mind speak, but listen above all to the voice in your heart.⁵²

The SS had trained Hoess to ignore the voice in his heart. In the same letter he reiterated his conviction that this training was radically false when he told his daughters: "retain your soft and feeling hearts."⁵³ Responsible for Hoess's dramatic reversal was something that had happened the day before these letters were written.

On April 4, the day he was transferred to the prison in Wadowice and two days after the sentence of death in Warsaw, Hoess asked to see a priest. When none appeared, he repeated his request in writing. Any suspicion that he might have been trying to curry favor with his jailers is excluded by the fact that Poland was then ruled by atheistic Communists. Moreover, Hoess had accepted his fate by declining to file the appeal for clemency to which he was legally entitled.

It took almost a week to find a priest who understood enough German to minister to Hoess, who spoke no Polish. On April 10 Hoess was visited by the Jesuit Provincial from Cracow, Fr. Władysław Lohn SJ. Fr. Lohn had taught at the Gregorian University in Rome from 1928 until 1934, had served as Provincial of the south Polish province of the Society of Jesus since 1935, and spoke fluent German. During the war twenty-seven of Lohn's Jesuit brethren had been imprisoned in Auschwitz. Twelve of them perished.

Fr. Lohn spent several hours with Hoess on April 10. At the end of this conversation Hoess made a formal profession of Catholic faith, thus returning to the church he had left a quarter-century before, and made his confession. The day following Fr. Lohn returned, with the sacristan of the local parish church and gave Holy Communion to Hoess, who knelt in the middle of his cell, weeping.⁵⁴

Eleven years later, in a sermon at the first Mass of a fellow Jesuit, Lohn would tell the story of his death-cell visit to the murderer of his brethren as an example of how radical the demands of the ministry of reconciliation can be.⁵⁵

On the same day Hoess wrote the farewell letters quoted above. One day later Hoess sent to the state prosecutor a final statement.

My conscience compels me to make the following declaration. In the solitude of my prison cell I have come to the bitter recognition that I have sinned gravely against humanity. As Commandant of Auschwitz I was responsible for carrying out part of the cruel plans of the "Third Reich" for human destruction. In so doing I have inflicted terrible wounds on humanity. I caused unspeakable suffering for the Polish people in particular. I am to pay for this with my life. May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done. I ask the Polish people for forgiveness. In Polish prisons I experienced for the first time what human kindness is. Despite all that has happened I have experienced humane treatment which I could never have expected, and which has deeply shamed me. May the facts which are now coming out about the horrible crimes against humanity make the repetition of such cruel acts impossible for all time.⁵⁶

Four days later, on April 16, 1947, Hoess was hanged in the camp he had built and commanded. The official report states that he remained "completely calm right up to the end, and expressed no final wishes."⁵⁷

Noteworthy in Hoess's final declaration is the absence of any reference to Jews. Repentance, especially for crimes as grave as those of Rudolf Hoess, is a process, seldom a single act. Hoess started on the road of repentance. He did not finish the journey. Those who would withhold recognition because his repentance was incomplete would do well to reflect that few, if any, of Hoess's colleagues expressed any regret for their crimes at all.

What moved Hoess to do so? Joseph Tennenbaum answers this question in the categories of Freudian psychology and denies any real change in Hoess. "His behavior was always peculiarly consistent, not logically but psychologically."⁵⁸ Steven Paskuly and Manfred Deselaers both accept Hoess's change of heart at the end, while recognizing its limitations. They agree also in ascribing it to two factors: the sudden and total collapse of the ideological world in which Hoess had believed so fanatically; and the kindness shown him in Polish prisons.

Professor Batavia, the Polish prison psychiatrist whom we have cited several times already, noted the traumatic effect on Hoess of Germany's collapse and the refusal of all responsibility by the two men most responsible for it, Hitler and Himmler. Both committed suicide.

Profoundly shocked by Germany's military defeat, and deeply disillusioned by its former leaders, [Hoess] was unable to join his fellow Nazis in the tendency to deny what had happened.⁵⁹

Hoess believed that the Nazi leaders had deceived not only the German people but him personally. In his farewell letter to his wife Hoess spoke also of betrayal by his subordinates.

Since I was Commandant of the extermination camp Auschwitz I was totally responsible for everything that happened there, whether I knew about it or not. Most of the terrible and horrible things that took place there I learned only during this investigation and during the trial itself. I cannot describe how I was deceived, how my directives were twisted, and all the things they had carried out supposedly under my orders. I certainly hope that the guilty will not escape justice. It is tragic that, although I was by nature gentle, good-natured, and very helpful, I became the greatest destroyer of human beings who carried out every order to exterminate people no matter what.⁶⁰

The tone of self-pity in this passage shows, once again, the limitations of Hoess's repentance.

The trauma of Germany's defeat and the feeling of betrayal by its leaders destroyed Hoess's fanatical belief in the Nazi ideology. This factor cannot explain, however, his expressions of regret for the crimes that ideology inspired. This was clearly the result of the humane treatment he received in Polish prisons. Hoess himself mentioned this, as we have seen, in his final declaration asking forgiveness of the Polish people. Three days before he had said the same in his farewell letter to his wife.

My misspent life places on you, dearest, the sacred obligation to educate our children so that they have, in their deepest heart, a true humanity. ... Make them sensitive to all human sorrow. What humanity is, I have only come to know since I have been in Polish prisons. Although I have inflicted so much destruction and sorrow upon the Polish people as Commandant of Auschwitz, even though I did not do it personally, or by my own free will, they still showed such human understanding, not only the high officials, but also the common guards, that it often puts me to shame. Many of them were former prisoners in Auschwitz or other camps. Especially now, during my last days, I am experiencing such humane treatment [as] I could never have expected. In spite of everything that happened, they still treat me as a human being.⁶¹

Why? Evidence which might allow us to answer this question is lacking. One would like to think that the Catholicism so deeply entwined with the history and national consciousness of Poland, a country in this respect much like Ireland, was responsible. That remains speculation, however. If indulged in, it could easily lead to an all too familiar kind of Catholic triumphalism. A glance at Hoess's youth forbids such complacency. The Catholicism which he learned from his father was, for all practical purposes, devoid of good news - a religion not of love, but of law.

Living today in a church in which many Catholics seem to regard law as a somewhat quaint relic of the times of ignorance that God winked at, we would do well to recall that within still living memory law was regarded as so important that obedience, and not love, was thought to be the supreme Christian virtue.

If the tragedy of Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Hoess affords Catholics any reason for thanksgiving, therefore, it can only be this: that in the final weeks of what he himself calls his "misspent life", Hoess finally heard the good news - not in words but in the conduct of very ordinary people: his jailers. Could there be a better example of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council about the lay vocation?

The laity are called in a special way to make the church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can she become the salt of the earth. 62

1This is the anglicized version of his German name, "Höß". He must be distinguished from the Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, who flew to Scotland on May 10, 1941, to make peace overtures to the British government. In 1946 the Nürnberg War Crimes Tribunal sentenced Hess sentenced to life imprisonment. He died in Spandau prison, Berlin, in 1987.

2That year saw the first publication (in a Polish translation) of Hoess's memoirs, which he wrote in January/February 1947 during his imprisonment in Cracow: see *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce* (Bulletin of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland) vol. vii (Warsaw 1951).

3Manfred Deselaers, "Und Sie hatten nie Gewissensbisse?" Die Biographie von Rudolf Höß, Kommandant von Auschwitz, und die Frage nach seiner Verantwortung vor Gott und den Menschen (Leipzig: Benno-Verlag, 1997). Cited hereafter as "Deselaers."

4Cited from Steven Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: the Memoirs of the SS Commandant at Auschwitz* (Buffalo/NY: Prometheus, 1992); cited hereafter as "Paskuly." Following his arrest in 1946 Hoess was interviewed at length by psychiatrists, both in Germany and Poland, who found him remarkably candid and truthful. Tom Segev, the author of "The Commanders of Nazi Concentration Camps" calls Hoess's memoirs "probably the most open account ever written by any of the war criminals" (PhD Dissertation, Boston University 1977, p. 295).

5Deselaers, 39

6Martin Gilbert, *The Psychology of Dictatorship* (New York: Ronald Press, 1950), 241.

7Paskuly, 50.

8Paskuly 52f.

9Paskuly, 59.

10My translation of the German original in Deselaers, 45; cf. Paskuly, 58.

11Paskuly, 60.

12Paskuly, 72.

13Cf. Michael H. Kater, "Die Artamanen - Völkische Jugend in der Weimarer Republik", in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 213 (1971), 577-638.

14Deselaers, 70.

15Paskuly, 243.

16Deselaers, 104.

17Paskuly, 82.

18cf. Paskuly, 82f and Deselaers, 103f.

19Paskuly, 185. I translate *Weltanschauung* as "ideology"; Paskuly renders it "world philosophy."

20Cited from D.K.Buse and J.C.Doerr (eds.) *Modern Germany: an Encyclopedia of History, People, and Culture, 1871-1990* (New York & London: Garland, 1998) vol. 2.,686, col. 2.

21Paskuly, 185.

22Paskuly, 142.

23Hoess's statement to Martin Gilbert, the American prison psychiatrist at Nürnberg; cited from Deselaers, 86.

24Paskuly, 100.

25Deselaers, 110ff.

26Paskuly, 100 n.1.

27Paskuly, 118.

28Paskuly, 125.

29Paskuly, 287.

30Paskuly, 153 and 286.

31e.g. Paskuly, 119.

32Asked at his trial in Warsaw about the case of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, who volunteered to replace a prisoner condemned to death as a hostage, Hoess denied that such a thing had ever happened. Given his verifiable truthfulness in other matters, it is entirely credible that Hoess never heard about Kolbe. The Commandant was simply too busy to know about many things that went on in the camp. Cf. Deselaers, 91 n. 322.

33Cf. Deselaers, 153.

34Cf. Deselaers, 155.

35Cf. Deselaers, 172s.

36Paskuly, 162.

37Deselaers, 184; cf. Paskuly, 161.

38Paskuly, 163.

39Cited from Deselaers, 185.

40Paskuly, 176f.

41Paskuly, 178.

42Paskuly, 180.

43Paskuly, 181.

44ibid.

45Deselaers, 218.

46Deselaers, 220.

47Cf. n. 30 above.

48Deselaers, 221f.

49Paskuly, 182.

50Paskuly, 183.

51Paskuly, 192.

52Paskuly, 194.

53ibid.

54This account is based on that in Deselaers, 224ff.

55Cf. Deselaers, 225 including n. 1003.

56Translated from Deselaers, 228f. Another English translation appears in Joseph Tennenbaum, "Auschwitz in Retrospect; the Self-Portrait of Rudolf Hoess", in: Jewish Social Studies 15 (1953) 203-36, at 235.

57Deselaers, 230.

58Article cited in n. 56 above, 231.

59Cited from Deselaers, 208.

60Paskuly, 189.

61Paskuly, 190.

62Lumen gentium, 33; emphasis supplied.

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