

DR. WIRTHS



The most important of the physicians in uniform who reluctantly served in the machinery of destruction was Dr. Eduard Wirths. His reluctance was of the greatest practical importance to the prisoners, for he held the office of ss garrison physician from early September 1942 until the evacuation of Auschwitz—that is, during virtually the entire period in which masses of human beings were murdered—and he accepted the consequences of his attitude as no other physician did.

I already knew him from Dachau. In my *Bericht* I described my first encounter with him in the Inpatient Department of the inmate infirmary where I was serving as a clerk.

A new ward physician has arrived. His name is Dr. Eduard Wirths. Tall, thin, dark hair, very bright eyes, resolute bearing. In the buttonhole of his uniform coat, there is a medal ribbon that I have not seen on anyone else. "That is the EK II [Iron Cross second class]; he must have served at the front," says Valentin, a German nurse. Later I learned that Wirths was rendered unfit for further frontline service during an action of his ss unit in Lapland and that Dachau was the first KZ that he encountered.

On the second day I already notice something else that distinguishes him from the other ss physicians. He is standing in the outpatient section, the veins on his neck are swollen and his voice is menacingly sharp. In front of him stands Heini (the young senior nurse in the inpatient section who has all too often irresponsibly neglected the patients entrusted to his care) with his hands on the seams of his trousers.

"Why didn't you administer the injection yesterday, as I had ordered?"

"Herr Obersturmführer, I didn't get a chance to do it; there was so much work in the ward." Heini wants to talk his head off but Dr. Wirths interrupts him: "Don't you know that this person could have died. Have you no sense of responsibility?"

This is something new. He also makes rounds differently from the other physicians. Every day he walks from bed to bed, sometimes addresses a few friendly words to a patient, and once I even caught him trying to communicate with an old Pole in Polish, something that would never have occurred to any other arrogant SS man.

I accompanied Wirths on these rounds, which were so unusual in our experience, conscientiously wrote down his instructions, and in front of every bed briefly summed up what he had previously ordered. In this way I forced senior nurse Heini, who was as high handed as he was indolent, really to follow the instructions. Wirths could not have known what motivated me, but he learned to appreciate me as a conscientious clerk. He remained on our ward for only a short time. This is what I wrote in my *Bericht*:

Dr. Wirths is taking over another ward. Once I ran into him in the corridor. We are alone, and I stand to attention.

"Well, how are things in the inpatient section, Langbein?"

"Not as good as when you were with us, Herr Doktor." When Wirths has already passed me, I notice that he has blushed. It is quite noticeable on his neck and ears. Does he rejoice when an inmate praises him? Strange. He isn't like the others.

Later Dr. Wirths is transferred—to Neuengamme, according to office gossip.

I had been in Auschwitz for less than three weeks when I learned that a new ss garrison physician had arrived who was looking for German inmates to serve as clerks. Karl Lill, who had been transferred to Auschwitz together with me, and I were the only clerks in the HKB who were listed as Germans; most of the others were young German-speaking Poles. The two of us were ordered to go to the ss infirmary and had to wait in the office where a few ss men were sitting around idly. In my *Bericht* I described what followed:

The door opens. The two ss men jump up and click their heels. A tall man wearing an officer's cap comes in. But that's Dr. Wirths from Dachau! He has already recognized me. Before his orderly, who is accompanying him, has a chance to say anything, Wirths calls out loudly: "Langbein it can't be! I'll be darned! How did you get here?" And then he asks me about the condition of the patient who was laid up with chronic gastritis at the Dachau infirmary and of one who had articular rheumatism, whom he treated. Finally he turns to his top sergeant and says, "Langbein is going to be my clerk." Then he leaves. One of the ss men is offended, sits down, and says: "Since his arrival the ss garrison physician hasn't spoken with me as much as he has with these inmates."

This is how my employment by the ss garrison physician began, and it continued for almost two years until my transfer to Neuengamme on August 25, 1944, with two interruptions caused by typhus and detainment in the bunker.

The following description of Dr. Wirths was produced by Hoess in the Cra-cow prison:

Before the war Wirths had an extensive rural practice as a general practitioner in the Baden hinterland. (His family's address, which I often wrote down, was Merchingen, postal district Osterburken). At the beginning of the war he was conscripted into the Waffen-ss as a physician and served at the front with various units. His indifference to personal risk caused him to develop a serious heart condition in Finland, and he could not be used at the front any more. Thus he served in the office of the inspector of concentration camps and then in the KL Auschwitz.

Wirths was a capable physician with a pronounced sense of duty, extremely conscientious and cautious. He had a comprehensive knowledge in all medical fields and always strove to expand his medical knowledge and ability. Yet he was very gentle and good natured and definitely needed strong support. He carried out all orders that he was given with painstaking care, and in cases of doubt he always made sure that they were correct.

Thus he always had the orders of Grabner's Polit. Dept. relating to camouflaged executions confirmed by me as a matter of principle before carrying them out. Grabner took this very amiss, and it was a permanent source of annoyance for him. Wirths often complained to me that he could not reconcile the killings demanded of him with his conscience as a physician and that this caused him a lot of suffering. He repeatedly requested another medical assignment from Lolling and the Reich physician, but to no avail. I had to keep getting him back on his feet by pointing to the harsh necessity of the orders issued by the RFSS. He also had scruples about the entire extermination of the Jews, and he often revealed these to me in confidence.

Hoess made the following addition to this characterization: "W. was in a running fight with those in charge of construction because he constantly urged the improvement or replacement of the hygienic facilities, and if defects came to his attention, he did not relent until these were eliminated.

The permanent wrangling with the Construction Department was conducted in writing, and I remember it well. I repeatedly informed Wirths of bad conditions in buildings and reminded him of promises not kept by those in charge. Eventually Wirths requested a construction expert for our detail so that smaller jobs in the various inmate infirmaries might be prepared directly by his office. Thus Hanus Majer, a Jewish engineer from Czechoslovakia, joined us. He survived the camp.

To continue with Hoess's characterization of Wirths: "Even Lolling admitted that W. was the best physician in any concentration camp, an admission he

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did not like to make. In my ten years of service in the concentration camp system, I never encountered a better one. In associating with the inmates, he was proper and attempted to do justice to them. In my opinion, he often was too good natured and above all too credulous. Also, his good nature frequently was exploited by the inmates, especially the female ones, to his detriment. He particularly favored the inmate physicians. In fact, I often had the impression that he treated them as colleagues. This caused considerable problems for the camp."

Hoess concludes his description with these words: "W. was very companionable and very popular with his comrades. He helped everyone who came to see him and gave much medical assistance to the families of ss men as well. Everyone trusted him." In his characterizations of other ss leaders in Auschwitz, Hoess used praise quite sparingly. Even Maximilian Grabner, the director of the Political Department, with whom Wirths carried on a permanent feud and who tried to disparage Wirths in another context, had to make this admission in notes he prepared in Polish captivity: "Wirths was regarded as the only physician who got his camp epidemic-free and as the best physician in any of the camps.

There are testimonies by others as well. Thus ss camp leader Franz Hofmann made this statement: "When the physicians made selections in the camp, they had received orders from higher-ups. I have proof of this; I know it from a conversation with ss garrison physician Wirths, my good friend from our days in Dachau. We often had heart-to-heart talks. One day he came to me and said: 'Franz, I had another adventure today. I had to go up and see Hoess, but before that I had a conversation with Aumeier and Grabner.' Wirths opposed the selection of inmates, saying that physicians were not there to make selections but to treat patients. The upshot of the matter was that Wirths told me a few days later: 'An order has come directly from Berlin, and now I have to do it.' "

At the Hoess trial in Warsaw, Maria Stromberger, a nurse who worked in the ss infirmary, testified as a witness that someone reported her in early 1943. Wirths reproached her for treating the inmates too maternally and humanely, saying that he had heard this from several sources. Then he ended his admonishment: "I would not want you to be put behind the wire, and so I am warning you." She responded that she was neither an ss man nor a guard, and if her conduct was cause for criticism, she would ask for a transfer. Thereupon Wirths patted her on the shoulder and said: "Nurse Maria, you stay here, and I will protect you from any further slander."

■ In the two years that we worked together, I got to know Wirths better than any other wearer of an ss uniform. Single-mindedly I worked toward gain-

ing influence over him, and in this I was aided by the situation created by my employment.

If a physician in an ss uniform is not lazy and uninterested, he looks for a secretary who will think along with him; if a clerk wearing an inmate's garb is not egotistical and heartless, he will use the opportunities that this offers. Any intellectually active prisoner is superior to his guard because he constantly concerns himself with the problems that arise from his situation, whereas those who guard him are distracted by other issues. In the long run neither instructions nor warnings could keep a daily contact at work from deepening and becoming a personal relationship if that is what the inmate was aiming for. The relationship between Wirths and me is not an isolated exception. Thus Kogon writes: "Occasionally it was possible to turn higher-ranking ss leaders into tools of the inmates' self-government not only by corruption but also by direct political influence. These cases were extremely rare and involved a great risk. Such attempts were most likely to succeed with a certain kind of ss physician." Kogon was himself the secretary of an ss physician in Buchenwald, and thus he speaks from personal experience. Similar experiences were had by Walter Poller as the clerk of the physicians in Buchenwald and Ernst Martin as the clerk of the ss garrison physician of Mauthausen. However, to my knowledge no other ss physician went as far as Wirths did.

Several factors combined to produce this: Wirths's attitude toward the crimes committed in the concentration camps, which I was able to study in Dachau; his diligence, which made him look for a secretary who could also handle confidential messages and who had neither the dull indifference nor the limited intelligence of ss Sergeant Richter, the official clerk in his office; the attacks of other ss leaders to which he as an intellectual was subject (he once wrote that he often heard statements like this one: "You're one of those international eggheads, too!")—all this combined to further my aim to create a personal relationship between us and then use it for the benefit of the camp. By strictly adhering to two principles, I endeavored to make sure that I remained the active partner. As a matter of principle I never used my chances to secure something for myself; in that way I kept from being corrupted, and this impressed Wirths. I discussed every important step with Ernst Burger and later with the leadership of the resistance movement, and this protected me from becoming a privileged tool in the machinery of extermination. A conversation I had with Wirths in the early weeks bears witness to that. In my *Bericht* I wrote:

Wirths goes up to the desk again and sits down. He gives me a quizzical look: "Langbein, can I rely on you?"

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"Herr Doktor, I shall help you to the best of my ability with anything that is useful for the inmates of this camp. You won't demand anything else of me. I'd like to leave the camp some day, but in such a way that I don't have to lose respect for myself."

We have never talked with each other like this. Wirths dictates a few more trivial things and then he is finished. I have taken a step on a very dangerous path. That evening I tell Ernstl about this conversation.

In another context I have outlined what could be achieved for the infirmaries in this way.

■ In an effort to avoid giving a one-sided picture of the man who probably was the most interesting personality in the ranks of the Auschwitz ss, I shall draw on the descriptions of others who got to know Wirths as inmates.

This is what Wladyslaw Fejkiel wrote about him:

In the inmate infirmary the changes began with the arrival of a new ss garrison physician. This position was taken over by ss Major Dr. E. Wirths, who came from Dachau. A few dozen Austrian and German communists who had worked as nurses in that camp arrived together with him. (Fejkiel made some minor mistakes. It is true that we knew Wirths from Dachau, but we did not come with him; he had served in Neuengamme for some time. There were only seventeen of us, and only the better-known men were communists.) It was a group of inmates who had a lot of experience in conspiracy and camp life and who worked well together. These inmates were favored by the ss garrison physician, who was a Nazi but hated criminals with an elemental passion. The new arrivals quickly familiarized themselves with the Auschwitz atmosphere, established contact with the group of Polish democrats, and with the aid of the ss garrison physician produced a sort of revolt in the infirmaries.

Fejkiel's statement confirms the following passage from the apologia composed by Wirths after the war: "It is all but unimaginable that the innocent political prisoners, irrespective of their persuasion, were supervised in the camp by men who had committed serious crimes. At all times and in all places, I proposed that these felons be replaced with the so-called politicals, innocent men of good character whose ranks included the Jews. The reason this proposal met with opposition was that the leaders viewed this as a strengthening of their political opponents. In the infirmaries I did not tolerate having imprisoned criminals in leading positions.

Fejkiel has provided a description of his first encounter with the ss garrison

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physician shortly after his transfer to Auschwitz; it took place when Wirths was inspecting the inmate infirmary.

He gained an insight into the organization and order, conversed with patients, and asked the physicians about their methods of treatment. The impression he made on me was different from that of the other ss men. After inspecting the infection section, he called me and arranged to have the section receive several hundred cans of meat as a one-time gift, which one would not have expected from an ss man. In the evening we picked up the canned meat, took it to the block, and pondered the significance of this occurrence. After all, the whole thing looked suspicious.

I had never trusted the ss, never believed in its good will and benevolence. After our experiences with phenol and gas, we could hardly believe that the ss garrison physician had sent those cans for the nourishment of the patients. I suspected that this was a new method of getting rid of the sick, and this assumption was reinforced by the fact that Wirths had expressly stated that the canned meat was for the exclusive use of typhus patients and could not be given to other patients or nurses.

Doubts gnawed at me. Together with my friends Stanislaw Glowa, Stanislaw Klodzinski, and Tadeusz Szymanski, I considered what was to be done. Caution prevailed, and we retained the cans with the intention of secretly throwing them away. However, during the night some patients pounced on the cans and ate the meat. In the morning they felt all right. We waited until evening to see whether symptoms of poisoning would show up. Nothing of the kind happened, and so we were finally able to distribute the cans.

Testifying before the Frankfurt judges, Fejkiel characterized Wirths as "an intelligent physician and not a bad person. He brought medicines and knew how to combat typhus." Dr. Kurt Uhlenbrook, Wirths's immediate predecessor as ss garrison physician, had fought typhus by having the lice gassed together with the patients. Fejkiel added that in the fall of 1943 Wirths got him released from the bunker, where he had been detained under suspicion of belonging to an underground organization.

Dr. Alina Brewda reminded me of an action that we took together and that had slipped my mind. She was a physician at the experimental Block 10, where a block elder named Margit was misusing her power and beating patients. After Brewda had called this to my attention, I induced Wirths to send for Brewda and have her describe the situation to him. He relieved the block elder of her duties; but he felt constrained about appointing Dr. Brewda as her successor because Dr. Brewda was a Jew. Thus he ordered, without further ado,

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that the position of block elder remain vacant and that the deputy block elder report to the physician in charge—that is, Dr. Brewda.

I have already reported that Dr. Wirths broke with the taboo and appointed inmate physicians to key positions, including camp elders, in the infirmaries. Teddy Pietrzykowski, a Pole who worked in the ss infirmary, was once whipped by Irma Grese, an ss warden, because he had not taken off his cap to her. Wirths, who observed this, warned the warden in front of the inmate: "Don't beat my people!"

The Pole Irena Idkowiak came to Auschwitz with her parents at the age of nineteen. After the death of her parents, Wirths pulled her out of the camp by requisitioning her as a maid. After the end of the war, she stayed on in the home of the Wirths family for a few months and in the fall of 1945 testified as follows: "I declare herewith (with reference to an oath taken) that Dr. Wirths always stood up for the inmates in a humane fashion and that thanks to his vigorous fight against epidemics and his self-sacrificing care thousands of inmates were kept alive. His care was so great that wives of ss complained that Herr Doktor Wirths preferred the inmates to them. I emphasize again that I heard only good things about Dr. Wirths from my fellow inmates."

When Karl Lill, a communist who had been transferred from Dachau to Auschwitz along with me and replaced me as the ss garrison physician's clerk after my transfer, was asked about Wirths by the presiding judge at the Frankfurt trial, he testified as follows:

Lill: "I knew Dr. Wirths from Dachau. He was a man who treated the patients there like a real physician would, and he endeavored to do good work."

Judge: "Did he effect improvements in Dachau? Did he stop the capricious injections of sick inmates?"

Lill: "There is no doubt that this happened because of him."

Judge: "Was there a conflict between him and Dr. Entress?"

Lill: "Sure. Entress was a medical monster."

Judge: "Some witnesses here have described Dr. Wirths as arrogant. Is it your impression that such an arrogance might perhaps have been just a pose?"

Lill: "Yes, that is how I perceived it."

Despite frequent disappointments Wirths constantly strove to stir up his superiors. From time to time he had to write reports for Berlin, and this is what Hoess, who had to initial these reports, said about them:

In his monthly medical reports to D III and the Reich physician ss, Wirths described in minute detail, in a clear style, and with the most unsparing

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frankness the exact health conditions, the state of all the hygienic and sanitary facilities, and the defects that had developed. In each of these reports Wirths begged for help in eliminating this rough and subsequently horrendous general condition of the camp. Everyone who read these reports could gain a realistic insight into these conditions. In his oral reports to D III and the Reich physician ss, Wirths did not pull his punches and gave unsparing accounts. When Pohl requested, via D III, special reports about epidemics for example, when the high death rate gave him pause—Wirths's presentation was so blunt and, above all, emphasized the causes of all these bad conditions so unambiguously that his reports often seemed too overstated even to me. However, I did not rein Wirths in. These medical reports never produced any perceptible help for Auschwitz, but no responsible higher authority could remain in the dark about the catastrophic conditions in the KL Auschwitz and no leader, not even the RSHA, could ever claim to have heard nothing about them.

Wirths dictated his monthly reports to me and also had me collect the documentation for them. I drew the ss garrison physician's attention to inaccuracies and whitewashings in the reports from the individual camps, and I frequently pointed out problems that he then included in his reports. Our collaboration was so smooth that on one occasion, when the deadline for submitting the monthly report was near and he was busy with other things, he told me to work up a report by myself "as usual" on the basis of documents and present it to him for his signature. He sent this report off unchanged even though it was a bit more pointed than usual.

At a later date Wirths wrote about this collaboration that "from the beginning of my work I dictated to a prisoner whom I knew well all reports with figures in the silent hope that this would make these figures known. Also, in my monthly reports I described conditions in the camp in accordance with the actual situation."

I had to overcome doubts about whether the Central Office should be informed so openly. There might be a negative reaction—for example, something like this: if the overcrowding of the camp produces such atrocious conditions, then we have to step up the gassing of the inmates in order to gain some space. The leadership of our organization discussed this, and we concluded that prettifying reports might have more deleterious consequences than realistic ones. We were under no illusions about the effectiveness of even completely unvarnished reports because I knew the noncommittal responses to Wirths's pleas for help that kept coming from Berlin. Hence I must agree with Hoess when he writes: "He (Dr. Lolling, the ss garrison physician's superior) probably visited Auschwitz most often, but I never saw him take any

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action on the basis of his extensive inspections. Any sanitary or medical improvements made in Auschwitz were the work of the camp physicians themselves. Dr. Wirths often bitterly complained to me that he received absolutely no help and understanding from Lolling.

Nevertheless, these reports probably had a certain effect when the war situation worsened for the Germans, which made them more sensitive to news about the extermination system of Auschwitz that was disseminated by the Allies.

■ The most terrible burden that was imposed on every physician in the extermination camp by the ss leadership was to decide who would be gassed at selections. Several witnesses have testified about Wirths's conduct as the chief of all ss physicians in Auschwitz.

His friend Dr. Horst Fischer told the court that in the spring of 1943 Wirths managed to have the selections of arriving transports made by responsible ss physicians rather than the ss camp leader and his subordinates. According to Fischer, Wirths effected this change because he observed the leaders making selections too rigorously and sending even able-bodied prisoners to the gas. Wirths used the same arguments in explaining his initiative to his brother. In his apologia he wrote: "I had to burden the physicians serving under me with this terrible reality by asking the camp leadership to consult the physicians on decisions about fitness for work.

Wirths did not impose this burden only on his subordinates but insisted that he himself be periodically assigned to ramp duty, just like any other ss physician. If he was ever unable to perform it, he made up for it later.

His attitude toward selections may be gleaned from a letter he addressed to the SDG of the satellite camp Gollerschau on November 16, 1943 Wirths points out that "the inmates who arrived on the latest transport of patients were horrendously uncared for . . . in particular, inmates with injuries wore exceptionally filthy bandages. Their wounds were neglected and soiled. When asked, the inmates stated that some of the bandages had not been changed in ten days." The ss garrison physician concluded his letter with these words: "I hold you fully responsible for these occurrences; and if this happens again, I may mete out the most severe punishments." Both this kind of threat on such an occasion and the reference to statements of prisoners are unusual. This letter proves that Wirths wanted to prevent the killing of the patients who were transferred from satellite camps because otherwise he would not even have been informed about their condition. I remember that Wirths dictated to me similar letters on a number of occasions.

Years later I became acquainted with letters written by Wirths from Auschwitz to his family. Here are some excerpts that shed light on his personality.

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Auschwitz, Sept. 9, 1943—to his wife. Mockel (ss first lieutenant and chief of administration) has returned from Berlin and is very happy to be here again. He says that he does not want to go away again. So such creatures exist, too!

Auschwitz, Nov. 29, 1944—to his wife. You can imagine, my love, how beautiful it is for me that I won't have to do this terrible work again—in fact, that it no longer exists. (At that time the gassings were discontinued.)

Auschwitz, December 13, 1944. Dear Parents, you are wrong if you believe that it was I who produced the present great changes in Auschwitz. No, the order came from the very top. My arm still does not reach that far. The only credit that might be entitled to is perhaps that I started the ball rolling by using every opportunity to pressure all the high-ranking people who were accessible to me, pointing out to them that the whole process is inhumane, impossible, and truly shameful, that I have attempted in every way to paint this terrible burden in the most glaring colors in order to show those persons what they have saddled our whole people with and continue to encumber it with for as long as there is no change, particularly during such a terrible war.

It is a wonderful satisfaction for me that I was able to hear, after my return, this clear, unambiguous decision made in Berlin and to take along the complete rejection and even prohibition of such things. We breathed a sigh of relief that I can't even describe to you. You, dear father, know what my thoughts are. There is no denying the guilt.

This letter bears the notation: "Please don't preserve this letter." Nonetheless, it was preserved twice: by Wirths's father and by the resistance organization in Cracow, for Wirths dictated it to his clerk Karl Lill, who gave a carbon copy to that organization.

■ On other occasions, too, Wirths shouldered the burden of responsibility when he had a chance to take some helpful action. He mentioned such an initiative in his apologia:

The Gestapo frequently staged courts-martial, and after the verdict almost 100 percent of those sentenced were shot. When prisoners drew my attention to those sessions, I requested permission to participate in them as a physician to decide psychiatric cases. These sessions involved exclusively Polish citizens who were accused of sabotage. In many cases my medical judgment prevented a death sentence; I was often able to accomplish this by pointing out that the defendant's physical condition enabled him to work.

In this way the men who had been sentenced were admitted to the camp as prisoners and preserved from death.

One such rescue can be verified. Ian Pilecki, the Polish clerk of Block II, where the prisoners of the Gestapo waited for the court-martial, had observed that in sessions in which Dr. Wirths participated fewer defendants were sentenced to be shot. Since Pilecki had to call the prisoners in, he was able to observe Wirths's favorable influence. One day, when the Gestapo got its hands on Pilecki's fiancée, he asked me to induce Wirths to attend the next session of the tribunal. Wirths did so, and Pilecki instructed his fiancée how to behave; according to his observations, those prisoners had the best chance who looked the ss men in the eye as they answered their questions loudly and in good German. As a matter of fact, the woman was not shot, survived the camp, and married Pilecki after the liberation. Of his own accord Wirths assumed joint responsibility for the courts-martial in order to avert at least some death sentences.

There are some negative judgments on Wirths as well. Most of those that came to my attention are either by prisoners who did not know him personally but were only familiar with his uniform and function or by ss men who as usual attempted to whitewash themselves in a courtroom at the expense of people no longer alive.

■ I have often asked myself how that man had come to wear an ss uniform. On one occasion Wirths told me this: "I am not a Nazi, for I am a physician and as such an individualist." From his personal papers I learned that he was born in Würzburg in 1909 and joined the ss on May 1, 1933. That he was not raised in the spirit of Nazism at home I learned from his private letters. In his apologia Wirths wrote:

In the summer of 1930 I started my medical studies and passed my Physikum in Würzburg in the academic year 1932—33. For further studies a certificate of political reliability was required, and I was described as unreliable because I sympathized with the SPD. In an effort to avoid the threat of expulsion from the university and interruption of my studies, I applied for admission to the SA. I served for only about four weeks in June and July, but I was not admitted. Service in the SA had to be accomplished in my parents' place of residence, Geroldshausen near Würzburg. To enable me to continue my studies, I applied in October 1934 for admission to an ss medical unit in Würzburg. As a candidate for the ss, I served in that unit until January 1935 and then went on leave to prepare for the Staatsexamen and get more professional training. As a consequence I always remained a candidate for the ss.

The dates in this statement are at variance with the ones I remember from Wirths's personal papers, and so this apologia stirred doubts in me. I therefore later asked his brother, and he told me that it was the fine uniform that had prompted Eduard Wirths to join the ss. If a man wanted to study and advance in those days, he had to be a member of an organization of the NSDAP, but the SA was too plebeian and disagreeable.

Wirths owed his appointment as ss garrison physician of Auschwitz to his good reputation as a physician. All the previous ss garrison physicians had failed to combat the typhus epidemic, which gave the physician in charge of all concentration camps headaches because it spread to the ss contingent and the civilian population, or else they had taken sick themselves and dropped out. Wirths wrote that when he was appointed ss garrison physician, Lolling told him that his exclusive task would be the combating of the typhus and typhoid fever epidemic among the ss garrison. Other duties would not be his concern. According to Johann Schindler, who had a good overview of the general picture as the top sergeant of the guard unit, there were about fifty cases of typhoid among the ss.

After the war Wirths asserted that when he was confronted with the system of extermination, he turned to Hoess in despair. The commandant pointed out that Auschwitz was an extermination camp and medical help did not matter. According to Wirths, the numbers of deaths and the chaotic hygienic conditions brought him to the verge of suicide.

When Wirths was confronted with the system of the Nazi concentration camps for the first time in Dachau, he turned to a clergyman of his acquaintance, Father Wolfram Denser of Munich, for counsel. After the War Denser confirmed that he had told Wirths that it was his duty to continue working in the KZ and to do as much good in the medical field as he could. In view of the daily mass murder in Auschwitz, Wirths again sought counsel, this time from his father, and again the response was that he ought to stay and help wherever this was possible. Years later the aged father repeatedly urged me to respond to the tormenting question of whether he had given his son the right advice.

In my *Bericht*, which I wrote when I knew neither Father Denser's testimony nor the answer of Wirths's father, I have described a critical moment. On the basis of my information about the shootings at the Black Wall, Wirths complained to the head of the Political Department. The formal occasion was the fact that in the reports sent to Berlin the murdered inmates were listed as having died of some fictitious illness rather than as having been executed. At that time Wirths strove to reduce the death rate, and in this endeavor he was able to refer to an order from the Central Office. This is what I wrote in my *Bericht*:

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Yesterday Wirths was very nervous and curt. Today he dictates to me a letter to Lolling, his boss, in which he applies for a transfer from Auschwitz. As his reason for doing so, he states that ss Second Lieutenant Grabner, the director of the Political Department, describes his conduct to the commandant as unworthy of an ss leader—surely in connection with the reports of deaths in Block II.

While I am tapping this letter out on my typewriter, I must do some thinking. Did Wirths deliberately dictate this letter to me rather than to ss Sergeant Richter, who always has to write letters dealing with internal matters of the ss? Does Wirths want us inmates to know about this? Does he really still believe in Hitler's victory? Also, his transfer would be a great blow to our organization. Who knows who will succeed him. Surely it won't be someone who can be as effectively influenced as Wirths. By now I know at least two dozen ss physicians from Dachau and Auschwitz; none of them is like Wirths, and I have not been able to achieve as much with any of them.

I wait until he is alone in his room and then take the letter to him. He looks at me quizzically.

"Here is the letter to D III, Herr Doktor." He nods and reads the letter with his fountain pen in his hand. Then he signs it with his big slanted letters. He looks up again and seems surprised that I am still here. "I don't have anything more to write, thank you.

"May I speak quite openly with you, Herr Doktor?" He leans back, and I stand before him. "I wanted to ask you not to send this letter."

"Well, I can't possibly put up with this.

"In making this request I have primarily us inmates in mind.

We look at each other for a long time. I'd like to know whether he desired or expected it, but I can't make it out. "It's all right, Langbein. You can always speak frankly with me; you don't need to ask."

I never found out whether Wirths sent that letter off. In any case, he stayed. He was obviously referring to that letter when he wrote this in his apologia: "On many occasions the inmates of the camp urged me so ardently not to give up my work and leave my post—because otherwise there would be no one to protect their lives—that I could not evade this task of preserving the lives of many tens of thousands of human beings for reasons of egotism and my own health without causing the most serious moral dilemmas."

When I spoke to Wirths in that vein, I was not thinking of burdening him morally but only of us inmates. Wirths received the same advice from all sides. With his willpower and

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intelligence, he would surely have found a way of leaving Auschwitz on one pretext or another, but he stayed and was able to achieve positive things:

The lethal injections in the infirmaries were stopped; the most dangerous murderers in his department, Entress and Klehr, were removed from their key positions in the main camp; epidemics were brought under control; the supervision of nutrition was improved; responsible prisoners were given influential positions in the inmate infirmary, and inmate physicians were entrusted with medical tasks; steps were taken against the mistreatment of inmates if this was discovered at their admission to the infirmary; and, finally, Wirths was able to influence the second commandant, Liebehenschel, whose reforms eliminated or alleviated many bad conditions. All this gave meaning to Wirths's continued presence in the camp.

■ During the entire period, however, the ss garrison physician of Auschwitz performed the tasks assigned to the physicians in the program of destruction. Even he was not able to evade the influence of the murderous atmosphere exuded by Auschwitz. I sensed that he might become disheartened, and in an effort to encourage him I asked Zbyszek at Christmastime 1943 to prepare a card with fancy lettering that said that 93,000 prisoners owed their lives to his activities. There also was a quotation from Grillparzer: "Ein Menschenleben, ach, es ist so wenig, ein Menschenschicksal aber ist so viel !" (One human life, alas, it is so little, but one human fate is so much!). The messenger Emil, who had access to Wirths's apartment, put this card on a table. This was the thinking that led me to the number given above: if the mortality rate in 1943 had remained as high as it was in the summer of 1942, before Wirths came to Auschwitz, it would have been necessary to register 93,000 more deaths. It was a rather theoretical calculation, but it was perceptibly effective. Wirths gave the card to his father, and after the war, when he was waiting in Hamburg to be interrogated by British officers, he wrote his wife on May 24, 1945. "If only my father could help us! I gave him two additional documents. We received a Christmas card in 1943, didn't we?"

I soon took another step. The occasion was the agitation among the ss that was caused by a London broadcast inspired by us. It gave the names and exact personal data of members of the ss who occupied key positions in the machinery of death. They were threatened with the death penalty. As I knew from personal papers, Frau Wirths was celebrating her birthday at that time. This is what I wrote in my *Bericht*:

We obtained flowers from inmates who worked in the Garden Center and had an artist who was laid up in the infirmary paint a picture of her and the children on the basis of a photo (Fejkiel remembers the artist's name:

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Mieczyslaw Koscielnak), and we sent everything to Wirths's home via our Czech runner Emil.

Early the next morning Wirths rings for me. "Please write . . .," and then he dictates the results of his examination of a female warden whom he saw at the clinic. He dictates the last sentences fast, and I am still writing when he has finished. Okay, now I have got it down, and I want to get up, but he bends across the desk. "Tell me, Langbein, do you know about the picture and the flowers?" "Yes." "Why did you do it? This puts me to shame." "The painting has its significance, Herr Doktor."

His face is flushed, and he gives me a quizzical look. "You know, Herr Doktor, that a death sentence has been pronounced on you and your family, too." I pause, and he is silent. I sense that he knows about it, and he does not show any surprise. "The picture is meant to indicate that the death sentence has been revoked." "Yes, but how—I mean, where do you know that from?"

"I have the right to inform you. I am not saying this in my name."

It's quiet. The statistics on the wall show, in red and black zigzag, the number of inmates in the camp and the decline of the death rate. I can hear him breathe.

"That's good. But are my children to blame? And my wife?"

Quiet again. "I have to thank you, Langbein."

"Not me, Herr Doktor."

When I walk out the door, I snap to military attention, as I always do. Now, this is no more than a formality.

This was our plan; Wirths should know that he is dealing with an organization and not just with me. He can take no action against us because he learned about us at the same time as he was informed of the fact that we want to save him and his family. He loves his family and wants them to live. You are our tool now, ss garrison physician!

Wirths does not mention this episode in his apologia; he only writes that he "always cooperated closely with inmates I knew well, particularly Hermann Langbein, who informed me about bad conditions and the undermining of my activities by the leadership of the camp."

It is part of Wirths's personality profile that he and his family lived on his food ration coupons. We learned this from the female Jehovah's Witness who worked in his household. In this he was a lone exception in the jungle of corruption.

■ However, even Wirths could not resist the temptation of misusing for experimental purposes the "human material" of Auschwitz that was destined to

die. He had been ordered to satisfy Professor Clauberg's and Dr. Schumann's needs for guinea pigs. Many women were transferred to Block 10 to be at the disposal of those two as "rabbits." In cooperation with his brother, a gynecologist in Hamburg, Wirths wanted to find a method of diagnosing uterine cancer early. At a later date the brother testified that Eduard Wirths had started colposcopic experiments "on his own initiative": "The specimens—a small number, in my estimation—were sent to the laboratory at our clinic in Altona, where they were examined by Dr. Hanselmann." In a conversation the brother assured me that these experiments were absolutely harmless. Physicians who were not themselves involved in these experiments also stated that taking tissue samples from the uterine orifice was not medically injurious. However, apart from the fact that the procedures were painful, as attested to by the nurses on the block, Wirths must have realized that the very undertaking of an experiment in the KZ constituted an extraordinary emotional burden for any woman. Was there anyone in that place who could believe assurances that these were brief and harmless surgical procedures when those who performed experiments intended to produce permanent sterility also said, if they said anything at all, that everything was completely harmless?

In the experimental block Wirths met Maximilian Samuel, an inmate physician, and involved him in his experiments. When Samuel was killed, Wirths must have known about it. In that block the ss garrison physician also met the French physician Adelaide Hautval, who had refused to participate in human experiments. As I have already mentioned, Wirths used anti-Semitic arguments to convince her that experiments on Jewish women were permissible, but she stood firm and was not punished.

In my view, the darkest chapter in his activity as the ss garrison physician of Auschwitz is an episode in which "only" two human beings had to die (by Auschwitz dimensions, a bagatelle) but that incriminates Wirths more than anything else. After I had assured Wirths by means of the family picture that we were prepared to protect him, this is what happened (as recorded in my *Bericht*):

In the infection block 20, two small rooms on the ground floor are being cleared—"for experiments," says Hans (Sauer), and as the block elder he ought to know. Experiments? Wirths told me nothing about experiments. Every evening I look at the rooms. It is strictly forbidden to enter them. I pass the doorkeeper and the nurse as though it were the most natural thing, and neither man dares to keep the clerk of the ss garrison physician from entering the rooms. On this evening the rooms are occupied. Four Jews, all of them healthy, are lying in them. I go to see the camp elder of the infirmary (Fejkiel).

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"Say, what's happening with the Jews in the two rooms in Block 20? "I mustn't tell you." "It's all right to tell me." "The ss garrison physician expressly ordered me not to discuss it with anyone, including you. So you mustn't report me. Those four Jews are being given typhus artificially. The ss garrison physician wants to try out a new remedy, but we no longer have patients with typhus in the camp. He sent me to Birkenau, but there I didn't find anyone suffering from typhus in the whole infirmary."

"Have they already been infected?" "Yes, they were yesterday. Wirths himself was here."

I am thinking: should I speak with Wirths about it? Yes, I have to talk with him; such a step might be followed by others. I must keep him in check. I wait for a moment when I am alone with him and he has time.

"Herr Doktor, may I say something?" "Yes." A familiar opening, but what follows has never before been discussed by us.

"Yesterday I was in Block 20 in the two rooms that you filled with four Jews." "How come you know about this?" His voice is unpleasantly harsh.

"Herr Doktor, there are few things in the camp that we don't hear about. I emphasize the word "we." "So?" "The four now have typhus, but they were healthy when they came to the infirmary." "I have received a new medicine for typhus, and it is probably very effective. It benefits science and also the inmates when an effective remedy against typhus is available.

"Four human beings are lying in the two rooms. Last night they had a high fever.

Wirths's face is quite red. "Am I the ss garrison physician or are you?" He pounds the table with his fist in a real rage. He has never spoken to me like this.

"You are, Herr Doktor." I ready my shorthand pad and remain silent, waiting for him to dictate.

"I don't need you any more." Have I gone too far? Can he be a danger to me? Can he still be a danger to anyone?

The next day I respond to all his orders with a strictly military "Jawohl." Once, as he dictates, he makes a remark that is supposed to lead to a conversation, but I don't take the bait. Between two letters he pauses for a long time; I have the impression that he wants me to start a conversation, but I bend mutely over my shorthand pad. I mustn't display any weakness on my side. He has to take the initiative. As I leave the room I stand at attention more snappily than usual.

In the afternoon the time has come. "Did you see those four yesterday? How are they doing?" He asks this question suddenly while dictating a letter to the Construction Department concerning the installation of water

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pipes in the new buildings of Birkenau that are to be populated in the near future.

"Jawohl. They are not doing well." "Are they getting enough to eat?" "Typhus patients have no appetite." He avoids eye contact with me. Is he ashamed?

"Herr Doktor, you shouldn't make it so hard for me to help you." "Why? What do you mean?" "I am referring to that picture. I stood up for you."

His fingers play on the glass top of the desk. "This will be the last time, Langbein, that this sort of thing has happened in the camp. Does that suffice for you?"

"Yes." So he can't step out of line anymore. If the Red Army were still lighting in Stalingrad and had not reached the Polish border, this conversation would have ended differently. Two of the four infected Jews have died, and I have informed Wirths of this.

In my view, this experiment, which resulted in two murders, is weightier than all the things he did in the machinery of killing on orders. Every experiment on human beings must be debited to his personal account as guilt. Wirths failed most spectacularly at experiments. It is no accident that most damning judgments have come from female occupants of the experimental block. For example, Jeanne Salomon has described Wirths as "a man of exceptional courtesy but a real sadist of the worst kind." My *Bericht* also includes this account of my last conversation with Wirths: This morning a very excited Emil takes me to the radio in the ss garrison physician's office (where we regularly listened to the BBC from London before the ss reported for duty). The ss is still asleep. The speaker makes this clear and unmistakable statement: "Romania has capitulated and the southern front is open." We stand behind Wirths's desk and look at each other. I have to think of Austria.

The weather is fine. The ss men come along at a leisurely pace. They don't know yet. Wirths rings; he, too, is clueless. How he reacts to this news will enable me to gauge his true political orientation better than before.

"Herr Doktor, have you heard that Romania has declared war on Germany?"

"Yes, it has gone over to the Russian side.

"You don't say! Where did you hear that?"

"We in the camp always know everything a bit sooner."

"That's bad news." "It means that the war is definitely lost now." I almost said "definitely won."

"Do you really mean that?"

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"Of course."

"But we stopped the Russians conclusively at the Vistula.

"How often have you stopped the Russians conclusively in the past two years? With their next offensive they are going to be here in Auschwitz, and that means in Upper Silesia as well. There is no firm front in the East or the West. Herr Doktor, the war is definitely lost."

"But that's terrible."

"It is good, Herr Doktor."

"How can you say such a thing? After all, you are a German, too."

"I am thinking of the drawing you once showed me. The projected expansion of Auschwitz. The enlargement of the camp after the victory. Both of us know Auschwitz. Isn't it good that it can no longer be expanded?"

Wirths once showed me this blueprint, and when I asked him when this expansion of the camp was to be accomplished, he replied: "After the war, when we shall need even bigger camps." Now he doesn't answer for a time, and his head is lowered.

"Then all my work for the military hospital would come to naught."

"Of course." In recent months Wirths has concerned himself particularly with establishing an ss military hospital. It is a source of pride to him and is to be opened in a few weeks; Pohl and Lolling are coming for the festive inauguration, and Wirths is counting on being promoted to the rank of ss major on that day. He stops talking, and his hand lies feebly on the table.

"Only one thing has not come to naught: our work here in the camp and our help for the people here." Wirths does not respond. No, he has not reached the point where I can include him in plans to escape.

On the next morning I was, at the behest of the commandant and to my surprise, assigned to a transport that left the camp. Karl Lill took over my duties as Wirths's clerk.

This, too, is part of Wirths's picture: he feared a defeat of Nazism even though he had become acquainted with its true face more distinctly than anyone else. As I gathered from another conversation, he clung to the very end to the insane notion that the Fuhrer did not know about all the things that were happening in the places of extermination. He probably needed this idea to justify his membership in the Nazi movement to himself.

■ When the Russian front was approaching Auschwitz, the resistance organization learned about a plan to kill the sick inmates and those unable to march at the evacuation. Lill spoke about this with Wirths, who confirmed the existence of such a plan but also said that he had managed to have the inmates

who could not be transported left behind alive. This actually happened. True, after the evacuation there were several instances in which inmates were killed by returning ss units, but most of those who had been left behind in the camp were liberated by Russian troops on January 27, 1945.

In his apologia Wirths wrote: "I succeeded in saving numerous sick prisoners from the intended killing to be done at the eventual clearance of the concentration camp Auschwitz."

Wirths was transferred to other camps and at the end of the war was able to make his way to Hamburg, where his brother lived. From there he wrote to his wife on May 24, 1945: "If due to human inadequacy and a lack of mental clarity I was unable to recognize in time the true face of this period, this may also have been God's will, because later, when I was given superhumanly difficult tasks, I applied my strength to helping and saving whatever I could in order to snatch it from destruction."

In another letter Wirths wrote: "In the meantime we have arranged for me to speak with the English, but I shall have to wait for a decision until Monday. And then there is no telling how everything will develop. Oh, what wouldn't I give if I had one of my familiar prisoners from A. here who could bear witness for me in this terribly difficult undertaking! With the best conscience it is a difficult step because it is hardly possible to foresee to what extent the other side will understand the difficulty of my task, whether it will be able to appreciate how heavily the hard pressure weighed on me, and all the things that caused, and still cause, so many headaches.

Wirths was arrested by the British. Years later Colonel Draper, who interrogated him, described to me what followed. He had Wirths brought before him, extended his hand, and said: "Now I have shaken hands with the person who as the physician in charge at Auschwitz is responsible for the deaths of four million human beings. Tomorrow I shall interrogate you about this. Reflect during the night about your responsibility and look at your hands."

During that night Wirths hanged himself. He was cut down before he was dead and did not die until a few days later, on September 20, 1945.

When I told Colonel Draper almost twenty years later what role Wirths had played in Auschwitz, he asked me whether he had acted incorrectly then. I said that he had not. Draper was familiar with Auschwitz and Wirths's function there, but did not know any details. Around the same time I spoke with Wirths's widow, and she said that it was probably best for her husband that he had ended his life. I agreed.