

Cross examination of the SS-doctor Herta Oberheuser

Question: “[...] You indicated, Miss Oberheuser, that the operations were carried out by Dr Fritz Fischer, and you say: ‘sometimes assisted with the operations and had the task of caring for the patients after the operations’. Now, was it or was it not your duty to care for these patients after the operations?

Answer: I understood it to be my duty and hoped to be able to help here as a woman too, because I saw a chance that the women would be pardoned, and I thought I could help here as a woman.

Were you then asked by the girls, why they were being prepared for an operation?

No, I did not ask them that. I was told by Prof. Gebhardt, as I have already said in my direct interrogation, that it had been ordered on the highest level, that the state had ordered it, and that it was legal and, in any case, that the experiments were not supposed to be dangerous, and besides, that they were Poles who had been sentenced to death. They lived in the most strictly treated block and they were not allowed to go to work outside the camp, and when they came to me they never put up any resistance, so I assumed that everything was legal.

Did you inform the girls before the operation, Miss Oberheuser, that they would be pardoned if their operation was successful?

No, I had nothing to do with that.

Now, you know the case of the two girls, Miss Kutschek [meaning Kluczek or Kulczyk] and Miss Peruska [probably meaning Piotrowska or Piasecka], do you not?

I cannot remember precisely at the moment.

Well, in this case you postponed the execution of the two girls because another X-ray image of them was needed.

I do not think that is true; because X-rays were not my concern, Dr Stumpfegger did that himself. He did his experiments himself. He also took the plaster casts off himself and also took the X-ray images himself and I knew nothing at all about it.



Dr. Herta Oberheuser, Nürnberg 1946.
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of
Hedwig Wachenheimer Epstein.

The two girls who were now executed had both undergone experiments though, isn't that so?

Yes, I presume so.

Now, would it not have been your duty to see to it that these two girls' punishments would be reduced and that the camp authorities, as well as that Prof. Gebhardt and Dr Fischer, would keep their word and insist that the execution be stayed?

I did not know anything about it at first. Then I would also like to say that my position was that of a subaltern [subordinate] assistant doctor, and a specialist at that. I had no disciplinary power. I was the complete opposite of the SS. I had no wishes to express, I did not know anything about it either. The only thing was to help the individual patient in the case of illness. I could do nothing more than that.

Did you not know then, that the sulphonamides experiments caused considerable pain to the subjects?

The way they were carried out, I do not believe that the patients suffered that much; because they never expressed any kind of disagreement, either with the treatment by Professor Gebhardt, or by Dr Fischer. I myself never had any difficulties, but always believed that they were pleased with my care, and moreover they had a chance of being pardoned.

Now, Doctor, these girls, after they were operated on, did they walk around smiling and saying: 'I'm glad that Dr Fischer operated on me?'

It wasn't quite like that: but I never heard anything to the contrary; it was never the case that they expressed any hatred towards me. To be precise, they were always glad if I was there when their bandages were changed.

Did you ever consider that this pain and inability to walk could have been the cause of possible mental depression, particularly for the girls in the control group?

Could I ask you to repeat the question? I did not understand it.

Did you ever consider, Dr Oberheuser, that these girls might potentially suffer serious mental depression, because of the pain they had to go through during the experiments, and the fact that, in later life, they were no longer able to walk?

I am sure that they suffered serious mental distress; but that was probably before, because after all, they were expecting to be executed, because they lived in the block where people lived when they had been sentenced to death, and where they saw a chance of a reprieve in precisely this operation, and in any case only a few of them were seriously injured because the others healed very quickly and the disease pattern was actually just that of a boil. [...]

In your capacity as a doctor, how many people did you see die during the tests before the fatalities of these five or six girls?

I don't remember five or six experimental subjects, no, I only remember three, and I can no longer tell you how many people I saw die; but I had four years' hospital experience behind me.

How many people did you kill with injections of petroleum ether in the Ravensbrück camp before these fatalities arose as a result of the sulphonamide experiments?

I killed nobody.

How many people did you help with this so-called mercy killing, before the deaths of these girls, who were subjected to the experiments, took place?

What I did was not mercy killing. It was medical help for suffering patients in their death throes.

What injections did you give to these patients to minimise their suffering?

I gave morphine and then I got another mixture from the ward doctor. I don't know exactly what it contained.

This mixture contained petroleum ether, did it not?

I cannot say. It only happened like this; in an interrogation I was told by the interrogating gentleman: 'But that must have been petroleum ether, that's the usual thing', and that's how I was pushed into it. I do not know myself precisely what it was. I got it from the garrison doctor.

Do you mean to tell me that you could not tell if you were carrying out a petroleum ether injection on a person or not? Could you not smell the petroleum ether?

I gave the garrison doctor the syringe and he drew up the liquid, and I do not know.

In your affidavit, you made the following statement: 'It was not unusual in Ravensbrück, for people already close to death to be killed by injections. I myself gave about five or six injections.' It emerges from the overwhelming number of witness statements and investigations that you administered many more. Are you now ready to admit, here, under oath, that you administered more than five or six lethal injections in the concentration camp?

No.

So you limit yourself to five or six?

But I can no longer remember the exact number. It could equally have been four or five. [...]

I never kicked them [the patients], because I had a four-year hospital training ahead of me and I had role models in my senior doctors, and good role models at that, that I held to, and after my time at Ravensbrück I went back to a hospital. I spent those nine months trying to get a change of position. I do not believe that I could change either as a person or as a doctor in that time. I can



Dr. Herta Oberheuser, um 1938.
Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf, Sign. V11609.

only say that I always rejected this conduct, and that I couldn't have done it, and I have also said that the SS environment there didn't suit me and I couldn't bear it there any more after eighteen months. I would like to say that I only believed things were done properly there for perhaps a very short time. But then I told myself that I just had to help the sick, and after those eighteen months I made up my mind and then, because I had been called up and could not leave, I tried at the first opportunity that arose to ask Prof. Gebhardt to help me. [...]"

Source: Angelika Ebbinghaus/Klaus Dörner (Eds.), Vernichten und Heilen. Der Nürnberger Ärzteprozess und seine Folgen, Berlin 2001.