

Respecting the Mother of a Man Killed in Auschwitz (1946)

*John Q. Barrett**

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When the international trial of the Nazi arch-criminals began in Nuremberg in November 1945, Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Höß (in English, Hoess) was known to have been the commandant of the Nazi concentration camp located near Oświęcim—a place Germans had long called Auschwitz—in what had been, before the Nazis invaded and conquered it in September 1939, Poland. Hoess had, people were alleging, gassed millions, mostly Jews, at Auschwitz. But as the Nuremberg trial began, he was missing, at least a fugitive, perhaps dead.

Almost four months later, in March 1946, soldiers in the United Kingdom zone of occupation captured Hoess near what had been Germany's border with Denmark. They interrogated him. He confessed that he had, as Auschwitz commandant, on orders from Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler (who had killed himself in May 1945), gassed two million people.

Hoess then was transported to Nuremberg for further interrogation. The four Allied nations by that time had finished presenting their prosecution cases against the defendants. But Hoess's evidence was potentially relevant to their cross-examinations and rebuttals, and perhaps to future trials. He was interrogated, thoroughly and repeatedly, by United States personnel. He continued to confess, in expanding detail, what he and his personnel had done at Auschwitz. His confession was put in affidavit form, which he and United States assistant trial counsel Lieutenant Colonel Smith W. Brookhardt, Jr. (IGD), each signed on April 5, 1946.¹

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For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which include document images or photographs, visit <http://thejacksonlist.com>. This essay is posted there as a PDF file with "live" hyperlinks.

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¹ See XXXIII TRIAL OF THE MAJOR WAR CRIMINALS BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL MILITARY TRIBUNAL, NUREMBERG, DOCUMENTS IN EVIDENCE 3729 PS – 3993 PS ("The Blue Series") at 275-79 (Document 3868-PS).

Hoess's capture and his presence in Nuremberg were made known to defense counsel. On April 6, British prosecutor David Maxwell Fye applied to the International Military Tribunal (IMT), on behalf of defendant Ernst Kaltenbrunner, for a new "witness called Hoess, who was former Commander of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. My Lord, there is no objection on the part of the Prosecution to that."² The IMT, determining that other defense counsel either concurred or did not object, granted permission.³

On April 15, Kaltenbrunner's lawyer called Hoess as a witness. He testified that he had been commandant of Auschwitz for its first three years, and that he had reported to and received his instructions directly from Himmler's subordinate Adolf Eichmann (who then was believed to be dead). This was Hoess's key testimony, from the defendant's perspective:

Defense counsel Dr. Kurt Kauffmann: Did the Defendant Kaltenbrunner ever inspect the [Auschwitz] camp?

Hoess: No.

Dr. Kauffmann: Did you ever talk with Kaltenbrunner with reference to your task?

Hoess: No, never.⁴

U.S. Army Colonel John Harlan Amen, a senior member of U.S. Chief of Counsel Robert H. Jackson's staff, then cross-examined Hoess. The examination tracked his horrific affidavit. It confessed publicly, without remorse, the enormous, deliberate, exterminationist evil of Auschwitz.

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² X TRIAL OF THE MAJOR WAR CRIMINALS BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL MILITARY TRIBUNAL, NUREMBERG, 25 MARCH – 6 APRIL 1946 at 648.

³ See XI TRIAL OF THE MAJOR WAR CRIMINALS BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL MILITARY TRIBUNAL, NUREMBERG, 8 APRIL – 17 APRIL 1946 at 378-79.

⁴ *Id.* at 401-02.

RESPECTING THE MOTHER OF A MAN KILLED IN AUSCHWITZ (1946)

On the day of Hoess's trial testimony, U.S. chief prosecutor Robert Jackson was in Allied-occupied Vienna for diplomatic, military liaison, and other coordination meetings.

The next day, an Austrian woman, Helene Zacchiri, hurriedly typed a letter in quite-rough German. She then managed, somehow, to get it delivered to Justice Jackson. She obviously knew that he was in the Vienna, that he was the chief prosecutor in Nuremberg, and that Hoess had just testified there. She had been told years earlier that her son had died in Auschwitz. She had tried to learn more about his fate but had failed. Now she was asking Jackson for help.

16 4 46

Herrn Vorsitzenden Dr Robert H Jackson

Betrifft Einvernahme des Kommandanten von Auschwitz
Hösch

Ich habe in der Zeitung gelesen dass die Verhandlung
gegen Kommandanten Hösch demnächst in Nürnberg stattfindet
Daher ersuche herrn Vorsitzenden in Angelegenheit meines Sohnes
denselben einzuvernehmen

Mein Sohn Demeter Odner geb Wien am 10 Juni 1901 Maschinen-
techniker wurde von der Gestappo Wien am 29 Mai 1941 nach Auschw
Auschwitz überstellt Am 10 December hat mir der Kommandant
eine Todeserklärung geschickt Nun bin ich nach Berlin gefahren
und habe dort erfahren dass mein Sohn nur Tod erklärt wurde
Nachdem hier und in Auschwitz alle akte verbrant sind kann ich
über das schiksal meines Sohnes Nichts erfahren

Ich ersuche daher höflichst Hösch einzuvernehmen ob mein Sohn
getödet wurde in Auschwitz oder verschickt Ich war drei mal
in Auschwitz Herr Vorsitzender und habe im Ort erfahren wie
diese armen Menschen dort auf Befehl des Kommandanten als auf
Auftrag des Schirach dort mishandelt wurden und getödet Ersuche
mich schriftlich von der Einvernahme zu verständigen dann es
ist für eine Mutter furchbar nicht zu wissen fünf Jahre wo mein
Sohn ist

Hochachtungsvoll
Helene Zacchiri

Wien 4 Mühlgasse 20 12

Jackson, who did not read or speak German, had an interpreter with him in Vienna. The interpreter shared with Jackson these words from Mrs. Zacchiri:

16 4 46

[April 16, 1946]

Herrn Vorsitzenden Dr Robert H Jakson

[Mr. Chairman Robert H. Jackson]

Ich habe in der Zeitung gelesen das die Verhandlung gegen Kommandaten Hosch demnächst in Nurnberg stattfindet[.] Daher ersuche herrn Vorsitzen in engelegenheit meines Sohnes denselben einzuvernehmen[.]

[I have read in the newspaper that the hearing against Commandant Hosch [Rudolf Hoess] is taking place in Nuremberg. Therefore, I ask you to please question him about the fate of my son.]

Mein son Demeter Odnega geb Wien am 10 Juni 1901[.] Maschinen techniker wurde von der Gestappo Wien am 29 Mai 1941 nach Auschwitz uberstellt[.] Am 10 December hat mir der Kommandant eine Todeserklarung geschickt[.] Nun bin ich nach Berlin gefahren und habe dort erfahren dass main Son nur Tod erklahrt wurde[.] Nachdem hier unde in Auschwitz alle akte verbrant sind kann ich uber das schiksal meines Sohnes Nicht erfahren[.]

[My son Demeter Odnega, born in Vienna on 10 June 1901, is a mechanic. The Gestapo in Vienna sent him to Auschwitz on 29 May 1941. On 10 December [1941?], the Commandant sent me a death certificate. I went to Berlin and all that I could learn there is that my son is declared dead. Because all the files in Auschwitz were destroyed, I cannot learn about the fate of my son.]

Ich ersuche daher hoflichst Hosch einzuvernnehmen ob mein Sohn getodet wurde in Auschwitz oder verschickt[.] Ich war drei mal in Auschwitz Herr Vorsitzender[.] und habe im Ort erfahren wie diese armen Menschen dort auf Befehl des Kommandanten als auf Auftrag des Schirach dort mishandelt wurden und getodet[.] Ersuche mich schriftlich von der Einvernahme zu verstandigen denn es ist fur eine Mutter furchbar nicht zu wissen funf Jahre wo mein Sohn ist[.]

[Therefore please ask Hosch [Hoess] whether my son was killed in Auschwitz or transferred to some other place. I was in Auschwitz three times, Mr. Chairman. I learned how the poor people there were mistreated on the orders of the Commandant, on behalf of [Baldur von] Schirach[, Nazi Gauleiter on Vienna and now a Nuremberg defendant]. Please write back to me what you learn through interrogation. It is awful for a mother not to know for five years where her son is.]

*Hochachtungsvoll
Helene Zacchiri
Wien 4 Muhl-gasse 20 12*

[Sincerely
Helene Zacchiri
Vienna [Austria] 4 Muhl-gasse 20 12]⁵

* * *

⁵ Letter from Helene Zacchiri to Robert H. Jackson, Apr. 16, 1946 (original), in Records Group 238, Box 17, PI-21, Entry 51, file "Complaints," National Archives & Records Administration, College Park, MD. The other documents pictured here also are in this file.

RESPECTING THE MOTHER OF A MAN KILLED IN AUSCHWITZ (1946)

In Justice Jackson's position—he was the important chief of a very large, high profile, high stakes international project in a theater of post-war military occupation, being asked by an unimportant person to seek information that almost surely would not exist—many people would do little or nothing.

Jackson brought Mrs. Zacchiri's letter back from Vienna to Nuremberg. He gave it to his secretary Elsie Douglas. He told her what it said, and that it likely was a futile request. But he told her to send it to his chief interrogator, Colonel Amen.

Mrs. Douglas sent the Zacchiri letter to Amen, with a cover note that was less than an order from Jackson to do something but not discouraging of action:

Supreme Court of the United States.
Memorandum.
----- April 23 -----, 1946

Col. Amen,
Rm. 194

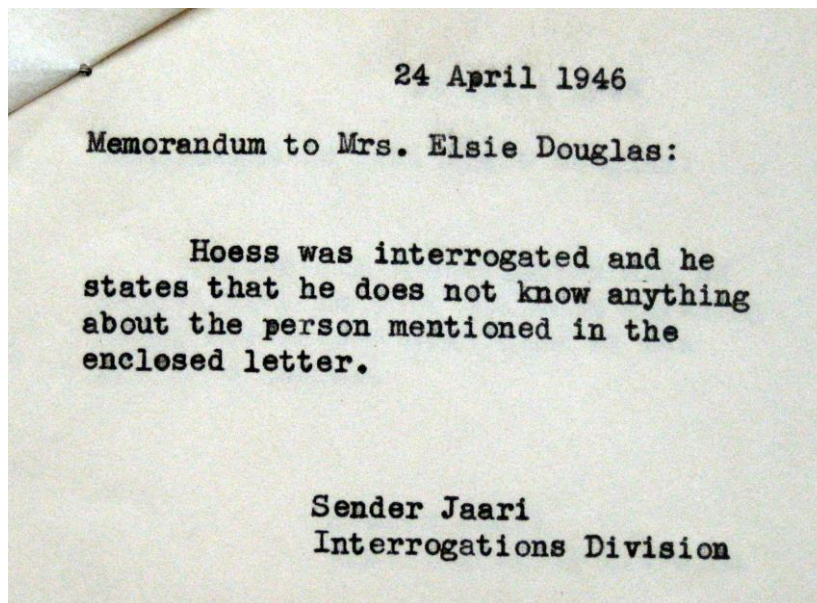
This letter was handed to the Justice at Vienna last week and, according to the interpreter he had there, it states that the writer's youngest son was a prisoner at Auschwitz and has not been heard from ^{since} his imprisonment. She seems to think that the witness Hoesch could give some information as to his whereabouts and begs that he be interrogated. The Justice thinks it is very doubtful that Hoesch would remember any one prisoner by name, but if you care to do anything about this he has no objection.

E.D.

RESPECTING THE MOTHER OF A MAN KILLED IN AUSCHWITZ (1946)

Amen passed the letter along to Sender Jaari, one of his Interrogation Division personnel who had been deeply involved in interrogating Hoess.

Jaari asked the imprisoned Hoess about Mrs. Zacchiri's son's fate. Hoess replied that he had no information. Jaari reported that back to Mrs. Douglas:



24 April 1946

Memorandum to Mrs. Elsie Douglas:

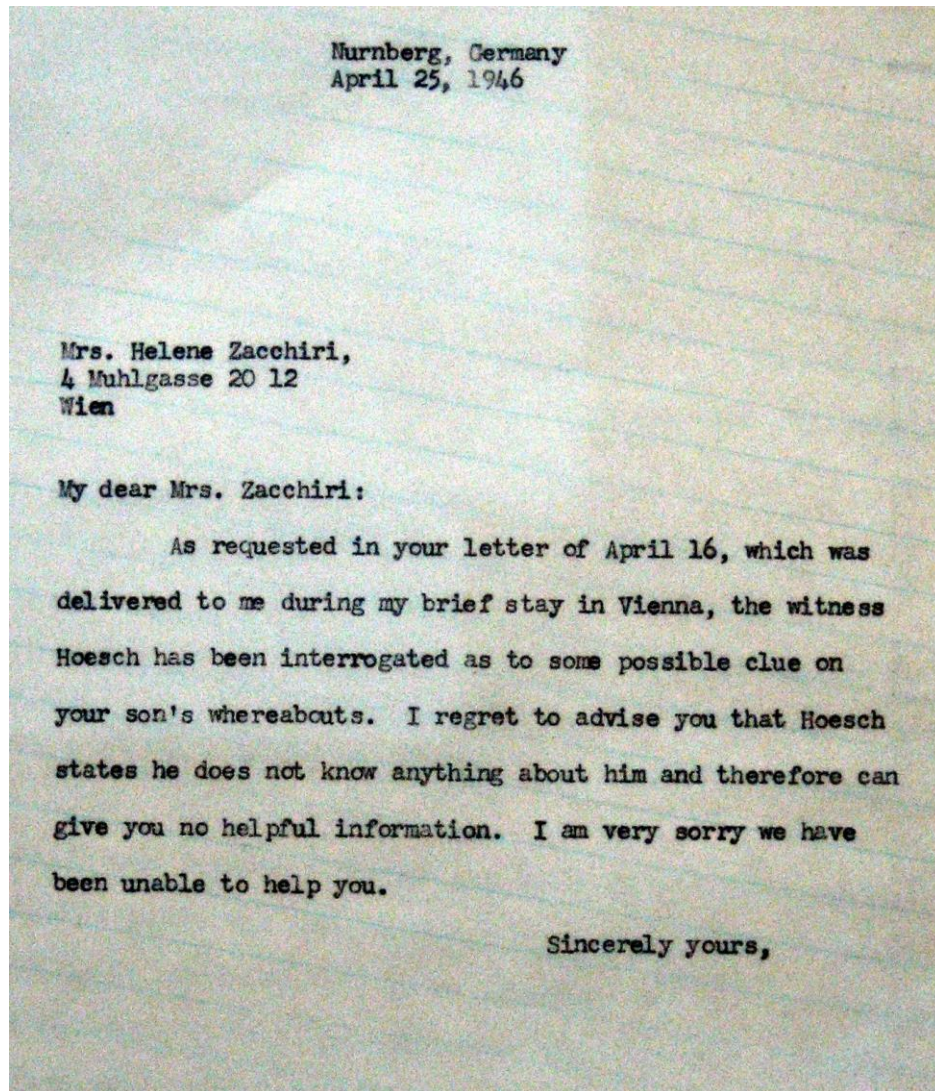
Hoess was interrogated and he states that he does not know anything about the person mentioned in the enclosed letter.

Sender Jaari
Interrogations Division

Mrs. Douglas reported to Jackson what Hoess had said.

RESPECTING THE MOTHER OF A MAN KILLED IN AUSCHWITZ (1946)

Jackson then sent a letter back to Mrs. Zacchiri in Vienna:



We know, as Mrs. Zacchiri was told in December 1941 and continued to believe, crushingly, in 1946, that her son Demeter Odnega was a Holocaust victim, murdered in Auschwitz—[click here](#) for his record in the International Tracing Service database.

I hope that she received Justice Jackson's letter, and that she felt its humanity.