

Auschwitz Survivor Ernest W. Michel

"My Interview with Göring"

Holocaust survivor Ernest W. Michel went from writing death certificates at Auschwitz to reporting on the Nuremberg trials. There, he signed his articles with his Auschwitz prisoner number. And was invited to an interview with top Nazi Hermann Göring.



Monika Zucht / DER SPIEGEL

Ernest W. Michel worked as a reporter after surviving Auschwitz. His byline: 104995.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Michel, what are your impressions of the beginning of the World War II?

Michel: It was Sept. 2, 1939 and an SS man appeared in the doorway. He looked at me and asked: "Ernst Michel?" I nodded and he then said: "Be at the train station tomorrow morning at six o'clock." I tried to ask a question, but he just said: "Shut up." That evening was the last time I ever saw my parents. The next morning I was taken to my first camp, Fürstenwalde, to work on the potato harvest. Later I was taken to another camp in Paderborn.

SPIEGEL: What did you have to do there?

Michel: All kinds of things: I collected garbage, cleaned streets. We weren't treated so badly there. At least not compared to how we were treated in Auschwitz later. We just had to work very hard. After about nine months I was then taken to Auschwitz in a cattle train. The journey lasted four days and five nights. I had never heard of

Auschwitz before, so I didn't know what being taken there meant. There was such a strange smell in the air.

SPIEGEL: You have said in the past that you don't really like talking about Auschwitz.

Michel: Oh, you know, in a private conversation it isn't so bad. But I really don't like discussing it publicly. Auschwitz was quite simply hell. To this day I still don't know how I managed to survive it.

SPIEGEL: Which part of Auschwitz did they bring you to?

Michel: To Monowitz, which is where they built Buna, the factory for making synthetic rubber. One day I was hit over the head by a member of the SS, the wound got infected and started to fester. So I was forced to go to the camp hospital, which normally you would avoid at all costs, as being there was incredibly dangerous. But I didn't have any choice. While I was in the hospital a well-dressed gentleman turned up looking for people who had very good handwriting, which I did.

SPIEGEL: What did you have to do?

Michel: I had to write documents and fill out death certificates. Of course the reason for death we had to give was never "the gas chamber." We wrote "physical weakness" or "heart failure" ...

SPIEGEL: Although that was also responsible for killing many prisoners.

Michel: Of course. My best friend, Walter, died like that in the camp hospital right before my eyes. I knew him from Mannheim. Whenever I talk about Auschwitz today, it's partly because I swore to myself that his suffering should never be forgotten.

SPIEGEL: After the war you covered the Nuremberg trials for a news agency. Did you ever let on to your readers that you yourself had been in Auschwitz?

Michel: Yes. The by-line which I used on my articles was "Special Correspondent Ernst Michel. Auschwitz number 104995." I left it up to the newspapers to decide whether they wanted to use it or not. Some editors left it in, and of course others decided not to.

SPIEGEL: A reporter's coverage should be as objective as possible, and free of personal emotions. Was that even possible for you?

Michel: It's true that it was very, very difficult. But I did it. I had to. You know, they all sat just meters away from me: Göring, Hess, Keitel, Kaltenbrunner, Streicher. There were times when I wanted nothing more than to jump up and grab them all by the throat. I kept asking myself: How could you do this to me? What did my father, my mother or my friend Walter ever do to you? But then one day Göring's lawyer suddenly came up to me during a trial recess, and said that Göring wanted to personally meet this Auschwitz prisoner, Ernst Michel, whose articles kept appearing in the paper.

SPIEGEL: Were you even allowed to interview one of the accused?

Michel: No, of course not. The lawyer had me promise that I would not write one line about this meeting. So we went to Göring's cell and the door opened. Göring smiled, came up to me and wanted to shake my hand. At that moment I suddenly froze. I couldn't move. I looked at his hand, his face, and then his hand again -- and then just turned round. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't speak to this man. Not one single word.

SPIEGEL: Did you later regret not having spoken to him?

Michel: No. It was a completely normal reaction. This man was the highest-ranking Nazi still alive. But I can still remember the astonished expression on Göring's face when I walked out of the cell. A military policeman led me back outside. So that was my interview with Göring -- I bet no one's told you a story like that before, have they?

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