

'They Really Do Smell Like Blood'**Among Hitler's Executioners on the Eastern Front**

As a young woman, Annette Schücking-Homeyer served as a Red Cross volunteer on the Eastern Front in Ukraine. In an interview with SPIEGEL, the retired judge discusses the horrors committed against the Jews there, how everyone knew about them and why, even after the war, most people just wanted to forget.

SPIEGEL: After World War II, most Germans denied having known about the Holocaust. From 1941 to 1943, you were a volunteer with the German Red Cross behind the lines on the Eastern Front. When did you discover that Jews were being murdered?

Annette Schücking-Homeyer: In the train on the way to the front. It was October 1941. I had been sent with another nurse to run a so-called soldiers' home in Zwiabel, a small city 200 kilometers (125 miles) west of Kiev. After Brest-Litovsk, two soldiers joined us in our compartment, but I don't remember whether they were with the SS or just regular soldiers. All of a sudden, one of them told us how he had been ordered to shoot a woman in Brest. He said the woman had begged for mercy, pleading that she had to take care of her handicapped sister. He had someone get the sister, and then he shot them both. We were horrified, but we didn't say anything.

SPIEGEL: Was the man trying to show off?

Schücking-Homeyer: I don't know.

SPIEGEL: Before you arrived in Zwiabel, the city's Jewish community -- which had numbered in the thousands -- was annihilated. When did you learn of this?

Schücking-Homeyer: On the day we got there, an older officer told us that there weren't any more Jews, that they were all dead and that their houses were empty.

SPIEGEL: Did the man tell you this in private?

Schücking-Homeyer: No, he told us at the dinner table. I described it in a letter I sent to my parents soon thereafter. I also wrote that other nurses had told me that I had shouted in my sleep: "But that's impossible, it's completely impossible, it's against all international laws."

SPIEGEL: What did the town look like?

Schücking-Homeyer: The houses that had belonged to the Jews were ransacked, and you could often find Hebrew texts lying in the dirt on the floors. We were told that we could find nice Jewish candlesticks there. One of the officers took one home with him.

SPIEGEL: Did you see any mass graves?

Schücking-Homeyer: One day, the director of the combat engineering staff offered to show us the historic fortifications of Zwiabel. He pointed to a spot on the bank of the Sluch River and said that 450 Jewish men, women and children were buried there. I didn't say anything in response.

SPIEGEL: Do you know how many people were killed in Zwiabel?

Schücking-Homeyer: A few local Ukrainian girls helped us out in the soldiers' home; they said 10,000 people had been murdered. In any case, it was a large number, as I realized a few weeks later when the National Socialist People's Welfare (NSV) opened a huge clothing warehouse in Zwiabel. Since our Ukrainian helpers always had so little to wear, one of the officers asked me if they wanted to have any of the clothes. So I went there with the girls. There was a lot of children's

clothing. Some of our girls didn't want to take anything; others said "Heil Hitler" when thanking the soldiers. I wrote to my mother about it and immediately informed her nurses in Hamburg that under no circumstances should they take any clothing from the NSV -- because it was coming from murdered Jews.

SPIEGEL: Did you ever witness any of these crimes with your own eyes?

Schücking-Homeyer: No. But it almost happened once. Every week, I would travel to Rivne, about 100 kilometers away, to pick up food and beer for the soldiers' home. There was a large ghetto there. One day -- it was in July 1942 -- the brewery where many Jews had worked was closed for business. Then we drove through the ghetto, but it was deserted. It had apparently been cleared just a short time before. And then we saw German soldiers herding together women and children who had apparently been hiding. There was no doubt that they were about to be shot. When I got back to Zwiabel, I was still crying. All I wanted to do was go home.

SPIEGEL: Rivne saw several waves of murder, and thousands were killed. Do you know anything about the circumstances?

Schücking-Homeyer: I would often go to the office of the military administration in Rivne to pick up ration coupon books. The soldiers discussed the resettlements so nonchalantly that I had to ask. "What's this resettlement all about?" I would ask. "When do they find out about it..."

SPIEGEL: At that point, had you already figured out that "resettlement" was just a polite way of saying "murdering Jews"?

Schücking-Homeyer: Yes, but I don't remember exactly when and how I found out. At any rate, the people at the military administration in Rivne said: "We are notified on the evening before it happens that a resettlement is going to take place at a specific location, and that it could get violent. The locally stationed troops aren't supposed to worry about it or get involved." Today, we know that special task forces and police officers carried out the shootings.

SPIEGEL: Did you also talk to any of these men in the soldiers' home?

Schücking-Homeyer: I can't say. They were all wearing uniforms and did everything that normal soldiers do.

'Oh, What an Enormous Slaughterhouse the World Is'

SPIEGEL: On Nov. 5, 1941, you wrote to your parents: "What Papa says is true: people with no moral inhibitions exude a strange odor. I can now pick out these people, and many of them really do smell like blood. Oh, what an enormous slaughterhouse the world is." Did you think you could detect the murderers?

Schücking-Homeyer: Yes, at least I thought so at the time. If you are a master over life and death, you behave and move differently than other people do. You give off the impression that you are the one making all the decisions.

SPIEGEL: Did you avoid these men?

Schücking-Homeyer: Well, you could at least choose the people you wanted to talk to.

SPIEGEL: Your letters contain many passages like "But the Jews, who ran most of the shops, are all dead" or "There aren't any more Jews here in Zwiabel." You write nothing about killing or murder. Were you afraid you might be censored?

Schücking-Homeyer: Of course. You know, I was an anxious girl. I wrote to my mother -- who was completely different from me -- that she wouldn't have lasted there a day. And I'm sure she would've found a way to get away from there. By staying there, you were basically supporting the system. But I didn't know what reason I could give for wanting to leave, and I needed a permit to go back to Germany.

SPIEGEL: Do you think your family got your hints?

Schücking-Homeyer: Of course.

SPIEGEL: Could you talk about these things with the other nurses?

Schücking-Homeyer: No, we didn't discuss such things.

SPIEGEL: But did everyone know what was going on?

Schücking-Homeyer: I can't say for sure whether soldiers at the front knew. But everyone behind the lines -- and especially those who'd been there for a while -- knew about it.

SPIEGEL: What makes you so sure?

Schücking-Homeyer: Because, in conversation, it was always assumed that everyone knew. I haven't told you yet, but one day I was in a car with a sergeant named Frank. He said he was from Münster and that he was going to be part of a major campaign in the coming weeks in which people would be executed by firing squad. He said he was doing it because he wanted a promotion. I told him not to do it, that he wouldn't be able to sleep afterwards.

SPIEGEL: And?

Schücking-Homeyer: He did it anyway, and later he complained to me about not being able to sleep and about how bad he felt. "I told you so," I replied.

SPIEGEL: Why do you think he confided in you?

Schücking-Homeyer: Oftentimes, conversations with soldiers got personal fast. They were all men who hadn't been around women for a long time. There were the Ukrainian women, of course, but they couldn't talk to them -- and they all had an intense need to talk. On another occasion, I was riding in a truck when, all of a sudden, the driver started telling me that in Kasatin, a village southwest of Kiev, they had allowed several hundred Jews to go hungry for two days before shooting them to death because the firing squads had been busy working somewhere else.

SPIEGEL: And that was just something he said to you in private?

Schücking-Homeyer: Yes. But there was another story that everyone knew about. German farmers controlled the Zwiabel area, one of whom was a certain Mr. Nägel from Hesse. There was an oft-told story about how one time, when a group of Jews was being herded past the house, his housekeeper - - who was also a Jew -- laughed. He reportedly then pushed her into the line with the other Jews. It didn't take long for me to figure out that I was dealing with criminals.

SPIEGEL: You wrote to your mother: "Soon, I'll get to the point where I'm past all the justified outrage, and then it'll be much easier for me to process things. Even the most decent people here have already reached that point. Once you don't have to see everything -- and, in general, things are already over here -- you can forget. But I still get terribly upset when I see a child and know that it'll be dead in 2-3 days." It reads as if you were searching for a way to deal with the horrible things that were happening.

Schücking-Homeyer: I don't remember exactly. I might have also written that to mislead the censors.

SPIEGEL: Of course, your letters also contain passages that lead one to believe that you let yourself be infected by your surroundings.

Schücking-Homeyer: No. My father had been an attorney, but he had been barred from practicing since 1933, so I was very afraid of censorship. I was never an anti-Semite. On the contrary, on several occasions later in the war, we helped out persecuted Jews.

'Former Nazis Were Everywhere'

SPIEGEL: After the war, what did you do with your knowledge about what had happened in Zwiahel?

Schücking-Homeyer: I had concluded that soldiers would file legal complaints, but then I didn't hear anything about it. And so, in 1945, I suggested to the public prosecutor in Münster -- who had trained me in 1943 and was the senior public prosecutor by then -- that he should take legal steps to prevent evidence from being destroyed. After all, at the time, the facts were all still available, including information about which units ... were stationed there. But he responded that we should leave it up to the English. I suppose he was too cowardly. Three or four weeks later, I informed the Jewish community in Dortmund, where I was living at the time, but no one there was interested, either.

SPIEGEL: And later?

Schücking-Homeyer: It was impossible to talk about it openly in the court system with any colleagues who had been in the East. Former Nazis were everywhere. It wasn't until a few years before I retired that the subject of Zwiahel came up again. In 1974, I was a judge at a social welfare court in Detmold. I was handed a retirement pension insurance case that had to do with an ethnic German who wanted credit for his service in 1941 with the German police in Zwiahel. He had been part of the so-called Ukrainian protective team, which I assumed had taken part in the so-called resettlements. I wrote to him that I knew exactly what had happened in Zwiahel in October 1941 and that it would be better for him to file a challenge against my taking the case on the grounds that I was biased. He did so right away. My substitute gave him the credit, as the law unfortunately required.

SPIEGEL: You didn't report the man to the police?

Schücking-Homeyer: No, he was just a little cog in the wheel. But then I contacted the central office in Ludwigsburg to find out whether it had investigated the murders in Zwiahel yet (*ed's note: The Central Office of the State Justice Administration for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes has been located in this southwestern German city since 1958*). Then, when I testified, I told them everything I knew. Still, as a witness, I could only testify against Sergeant Frank. But he couldn't be located.

Interview conducted by Martin Doerry and Klaus Wiegrefe

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