

Hermann Voss, anatomist (1894-1987)

The following selected excerpts from his wartime diary give insight into Voss' mindset during his time in Poland (Aly G. 1994. The Posen diaries of the anatomist Hermann Voss. In: Aly G., Chroust P., Pross C. 1994: Cleansing the fatherland. Nazi medicine and racial hygiene. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 121-145):

“Posen, April 25, 1941: [...] I am sitting in the director's office of my institute. We set up this room and the library next to it yesterday and today.[...] My 'bedroom' is quite nicely furnished, the bed somewhat too short and hard, but otherwise very clean and neat.[...] The door to my room did not shut, and only Poles live in the institute. Then there were my overtaxed nerves. In short, before going to bed in the evening I pushed my wardrobe against the door.[...] I quite like the city of Posen; one would only have to get rid of the Poles for it to be very pleasant here. Provisions are much better here than in Germany proper. You can get bread and roles without any ration coupons! [...]

[...]

Sunday, April 27 1941: This morning was the inauguration of the Reich University of Posen. Many more or less good speeches were made. At any rate, medicine is the stepchild of the university. This afternoon there will be a banquet, to which I, as a so-called professor at this wonderful university, have not received an invitation! That is simply ridiculous! In fact, my 'reception' in general by this pseudo-university is just wonderful. One is treated like a shoeshine boy. But I have definitely decided that I will take every opportunity that offers itself to speak frankly.

[...]

Sunday evening, May 24, 1941: [...] Here in the basement of the institute building, there is a crematorium for bodies. It now serves the Gestapo exclusively. The Poles they shoot are brought there at night and cremated. If one could only incinerate the whole Polish pack! The Polish people must be exterminated, or there will be no peace here in the East. It is terrible that we are still dependent on Polish labor here at the institute.

[...]

Whit Monday, June 2, 1941: [...] The Poles are becoming quite impudent.[...] I think one should look at this Polish question without emotion, purely biologically. We must exterminate them, otherwise they will exterminate us. And that is why I am glad for every Pole who is no longer alive.

[...]

Sunday, June 15, 1941: Yesterday I viewed the cellar for corpses and the cremation oven that is also located in the cellar. This oven was built to eliminate parts of bodies left over from dissection exercises. Now it serves to incinerate executed Poles. The grey cars with the grey men- that is, SS men from the Gestapo- comes almost daily with material for the oven. [...] The Poles are quite impudent at the moment, and thus our oven has a great deal to do. How nice it would be if we could drive the whole pack through such ovens! Then there would be finally peace for the German people. [...] Today I wrote to Prof. Schoen in Göttingen and reminded him of my existence, in case they need an anatomist

there. It won't do any good, but I want to take advantage of even the tiniest possibility of getting away from here.

[...]

Tuesday, September 30, 1941: Today I had a very interesting discussion with the chief prosecutor Dr. Heise, about obtaining corpses for the anatomical institute. Königsberg and Breslau also get corpses from here. So many people are executed here that there are enough for all three institutes.

[...]

Thursday, October 30, 1941: [...] Tomorrow the anatomical institute will get its first bodies. Eleven Poles are being executed; I will take five of them, the others will be cremated.

[...]

Posen, April 15, 1942: ... The day I returned, the rector informed me that he wanted to appoint me dean of the Medical Department, and asked me if I were agreeable. I answered yes. This means, thank God, no more of this ridiculous 'supervisor' of the department, which I have been until now. But if I had not put up a fight, they would have let me play that part a lot longer.[...]

[...]

Monday, April 27 1942: After lunch today, I sat upstairs for three-quarters of an hour right under the roof on our 'bone whitener' [*Knochenbleiche*, place to expose bones to sunlight to bleach them], soaking up the sun. To my right and left, Polish bones lay bleaching, occasionally giving off a slight snapping sound. This evening our air raid warden was here, to give me the pleasant news that night watches must now be set up in the building. They are expecting air raids on Posen. That's great. But in the end it doesn't matter where one croaks. ...

Tuesday, May 19, 1942: On Sunday, Herr von H[irschheydt, his senior technician] told me he had gotten lice on Saturday from a louse-ridden Jewish corpse. He has been making plaster casts of Jewish heads for the Vienna anthropological museum. That was wonderful news, since the Jewish corpses delivered here often died of typhus [typhoid fever¹]. Because I was already in low spirits [English in the original] that day, as the English say, this had quite an effect on me. I thereupon decided to go home for Pentecost to see my family again. You never know when it will be the last time. [...]

Monday, June 8, 1942: We just buried Herr von Hirschheydt. It all happened as I predicted three weeks ago. When I arrived at the institute on the morning of the 29th of May I was greeted with the news that Herr v.H. had become ill. I knew right away. It was good that Eva [his daughter] was here. I suffered through terrible hours. Our nerves are so on edge. These incidents don't

¹ Aly's translator uses here the term "typhoid fever". However, von Hirschheydt died of *Fleckfieber*, correctly translated as typhus. Typhus is an infection with *Rickettsia prowazekii* transmitted e.g. by louse bites, while typhoid fever, confusingly called *Typhus* in German, is transmitted via oral infection of *Salmonella typhi* contaminated food. Charles G. Roland (Roland, 1992, p120) has pointed to this common confusion of the two terms in English and German (the author thanks Bill Seidelman for this information).

seem to end.[...] Tomorrow Eva is returning home. Then I will be alone again with all my worries. What a miserable life.

[...]

Tuesday, June 30, 1942: [...] In L[eipzig] I received great news: The Medical Department hadn't even mentioned me on its nomination list. I never seriously expected to be Clara's successor there, but they could at least have put me on the list *honoris causa*. That is the thanks I get for 15 years of loyal service. But even this slap in the face will not knock me down; it will simply make me stronger.[...] Thank God I am now even with Clara. I was in his debt for Posen, which was not at all pleasant to me. But that is now settled. If he had wanted to, he could have brought me to L. [...] His friend de Crinis in the Ministry does anything he wants.[...] Here in Posen my motto is victory or death. There can be nothing else. A slap in the face can often be quite a motivating force.

Sunday, July 5, 1942: Yesterday there was a medical students' party. I had to make another speech. Then there was fish and potato salad, and afterwards all sorts of performances by the students. It was revealed to me in a lovely poem that I am called "Papa Voss" by the students. Nice and friendly in its way [...] An anatomy guessing game was a very nice idea, with ten awards, consisting of bones that I contributed. The first prize was a very nice skull, the tenth was two small sesamoid bones.[...]"