

# Who was the pharmacist of Auschwitz?

In this article, **Edzard Ernst** recounts the chilling details he found out about Victor Capesius, a pharmacist convicted of Nazi war crimes

of Farbwerke Bayer-Leverkusen in Romania. Interestingly, Capesius had been reprimanded by his superior during this time for his anti-Jewish attitude and behaviour.

Around 7,000 members of the SS were based in Auschwitz's main camp and its 40 or so subsidiary installations, one of which (Birkenau) was entirely dedicated to killing the (mostly Jewish) inmates. Several hundred thousand individuals were murdered there. One of the camp doctors was the notorious Josef Mengele, who conducted unspeakably cruel

Mary Evans/Weimar archive

experiments on twins. Mengele and Capesius knew each other well — documents repeatedly mention that they had an association.

## After the war

When Auschwitz was evacuated in 1945, Capesius managed to escape. He was caught by the British but released in June 1946. He lived, under his real name, in Stuttgart, only to be again imprisoned in 1946, having been recognised by an ex-inmate of Auschwitz. But, once more, he avoided prosecution. He was freed in 1947 and took employment as a pharmacist in Stuttgart. On 5 October 1950, Capesius opened his own pharmacy in Göppingen. His business (to which he also added a beauty salon) thrived, producing an average yearly turnover of DM400,000.

On 4 December 1959, Capesius was re-imprisoned and charged as one of the 22 defendants in the now famous Auschwitz trials. These trials are, today, regarded as a watershed in German legal history. It was the first serious attempt by Germans to bring to justice those who violated human rights during the Nazi era. The trials lasted from 20 December 1963 until 19 August 1965 and 211 Auschwitz prisoners were called as witnesses. Several individuals remembered Capesius well and some even knew him personally from Romania.

The sentences turned out to be less severe than many observers had expected. Six defendants received life sentences and 11 were sentenced to imprisonment between three and a half and 14 years. Capesius received a sentence of nine years' imprisonment. During his imprisonment, the business was run by his wife who, according to Capesius, was half Jewish. When he was released in 1968 (10 and a half months prematurely), he stated that he intended to stay with his wife in Göppingen.

Some reports mention that Capesius died in 1985 in Germany but, according to the

BBC Radio 4 programme, he returned to Romania where he established a successful homoeopathic business. I found no evidence for this latter information.

## Acting as a selector

Capesius was one of the few pharmacists convicted of crimes against humanity during the Nazi era. But what exactly had he done? Several inmates recognised Capesius "selecting at the ramp". This task involved particularly gruesome life and death decisions over prisoners as they arrived by train. After long journeys, caged like cattle, many suffered from ill health on arrival. The selectors had to decide who was strong enough to endure the hardships of the camp and enforced labour. Those who were too frail were immediately sent to Birkenau to be gassed. The decisions were made as the prisoners walked past the selectors in rows of five. Several witnesses told the court how particularly cruel Capesius had been in executing this task. Others who had personally known Capesius from Romania reported how cynically he behaved when directing inmates to either forced labour or the gas chambers.

Capesius denied these and other charges. The defence insisted that his was a "particularly tragic" case, because he had only tried to help, always acted upon orders and eventually became a victim himself. It was also alleged that many witnesses had been less than objective in their statements about him, not least because they knew of the death sentence Capesius had already received, in his absence, in Romania. However, other witnesses reported that they owed their survival in Auschwitz to Capesius.

Capesius was found guilty of assisting the murder of at least 8,000 individuals. Other charges against him were assisting in the gas chambers, supervising the liquidation of the gypsy camp and administering phenol used to kill prisoners but, because of lack of proof, these were dropped. Some witnesses alleged that Capesius had committed other crimes as well; it was suggested that he had enriched himself by taking prisoners' possessions or that he had participated in cruel "medical" experiments on inmates. No hard evidence was, however, found for these allegations.

The story of Victor Capesius is chilling to say the least. In revisiting it, we should honour those who perished through the most horrendous atrocities in the history of medicine. This memory could help prevent similar barbarities from happening again. As Zoe Polanska Palmer said: "I want to make sure people remember what happened to people like me when I was a child in Auschwitz. I was just one of thousands of children treated in this way. But I was one of the few lucky ones who managed to survive".

## The gates to Auschwitz

In a recent BBC Radio 4 programme, Zoe Polanska Palmer told the gripping story of her survival in the Auschwitz concentration camp, where she was held as a 13-year old during the Third Reich. She talked about her quest for an apology from Bayer — she believes she was forced to take pills for Bayer by the "doctor" who experimented on her. Ms Polanska Palmer experienced multiple health problems ever since and, now in her early 70s, still suffers from the trauma. A spokesperson for Bayer said that "between 1925 and 1952, no company named Bayer existed". All Ms Polanska Palmer received, therefore, was around £2,000 from the German compensation fund. The "doctor" who committed these crimes was Victor Capesius. Having had an interest for many years in the history of "Nazi medicine", I was puzzled: I had never come across an Auschwitz doctor by this name. Therefore, I decided to do a bit of research, using the internet as well as my own collection of files.

Victor (several sources wrongly spell his first name Viktor) Capesius was born as the son of a doctor of German descent in 1907, in a part of Romania which then belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He studied in Romania and Vienna where, in 1933, he completed his doctorate in pharmacy. In 1943, Capesius was drafted into the German Wehrmacht where he initially served as an "SS pharmacist" in Warsaw. Later, he was transferred to Dachau and on 12 February 1944 he arrived in Auschwitz concentration camp, first as a locum but soon taking the position of camp pharmacist.

There are no well-documented links associating Capesius with the pharmaceutical industry during this time, but some documents refer to him as the "Bayer pharmacist in Auschwitz". The reason for this could be that, in the 1930s, he was the official representative