

'The Zone of Interest' in Forgiveness

The Zone of Interest won two Oscars this year. It is a highly stylized dissection of the character of Rudolph Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz.

In his cozy home, with a wall separating his family from the horrors of the extermination camp, Höss was the kindly father of five children. On the other side, he was responsible for the deaths of three million people, mostly Jews and Poles.

The film ends after he discovers that he is going to be responsible for exterminating 430,000 Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz. Himmler has even named this logistical challenge after him –“Operation Höss”. Höss is honoured. The news puts a spring in his step – although something deep within him is revolted and he vomits as he fades out of the film.

If anyone was evil, it was Rudolph Höss. He was a monster. What he did was unspeakable and unforgivable.

But we can learn more from Höss's life than man's capacity for surrendering to the darkest forms of evil. That's a lesson that we all need to learn by heart.

But [the real-life story](#) is also, amazingly, a lesson in mercy.

Höss was raised in a stern Catholic family, but he drifted away from religion in his teens. In 1922 he formally abjured his Catholic faith and ended up as a Nazi fanatic. He became an expert at running concentration camps, not only Auschwitz, but also the hellish prisons of Dachau, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück. At the end of the war, he disappeared into the chaos and found work as a gardener. He was eventually tracked down by the British. They handed him over to the Poles,

because the worst of his crimes had been committed on Polish territory. He was tried in a Polish court and sentenced to death.

Höss was almost unique amongst the upper echelons of the Nazis. With some equivocation, he admitted that he was responsible for killing three million people. As he awaited execution he wrote an autobiography in which he expresses his remorse.

He wrote a letter to the state prosecutor four days before his execution in which he said:

My conscience compels me to make the following declaration. In the solitude of my prison cell I have come to the bitter recognition that I have sinned gravely against humanity. As Commandant of Auschwitz I was responsible for carrying out part of the cruel plans of the 'Third Reich' for human destruction. In so doing I have inflicted terrible wounds on humanity. I caused unspeakable suffering for the Polish people in particular. I am to pay for this with my life. May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done.

I ask the Polish people for forgiveness. In Polish prisons I experienced for the first time what human kindness is. Despite all that has happened I have experienced humane treatment which I could never have expected, and which has deeply shamed me. May the facts which are now coming out about the horrible crimes against humanity make the repetition of such cruel acts impossible for all time.

A week or so before his execution, Höss insisted on seeing a priest. The authorities had some difficulty in finding one who could speak German. Eventually the head of the Jesuits in Poland, who spoke it fluently, came see him. They spoke for several hours. Höss formally returned to the faith of his childhood and made his confession. The next day, he received the sacrament of Holy Communion.

He was hanged at Auschwitz on April 16, 1947.

There's something disturbing about a God who could forgive Rudolph Höss. He was the worst of monsters – a sane monster who knew what he was doing was evil, but immersed himself in it, embraced it, luxuriated in it. His cold-blooded, rational brutality is terrifying.

Yet Christians believe that God was ready to forgive him if he repented. Of all of Christianity's unsettling beliefs, this may be the hardest to accept. It seems unjust that a man who killed three million people could be embraced as a prodigal son.

Of course, forgiveness is only extended to those who are truly repentant. Sceptics might object that Höss was feigning contrition as a balm for his wounded self-esteem, or that he was sorry that the Nazis lost, or that he was sorry that he had been caught. They might even be right. But the Christian God would forgive him if he repented. Along with Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and all the other bywords for evil in our history. We don't know, of course, if they repented.

If Höss did escape hell, Catholics believe that he would have expiate his monstrous deeds in Purgatory, perhaps suffering there until the end of the world. But eventually he would be admitted to heaven.

The Zone of Interest won its Oscars in the middle of Lent, when Christians prepare to commemorate the death of Jesus on Good Friday. Pastors of all Christian denominations are probably preparing sermons about the incredible mercy, the "amazing grace" of the Redeemer. Is there anyone who illustrates this shocking doctrine better than Rudolph Höss?

–

This [article](#) was originally published on *Mercator* under a Creative Commons license ([CC BY-NC-ND 3.0](#)).

Image credit: [YouTube](#)