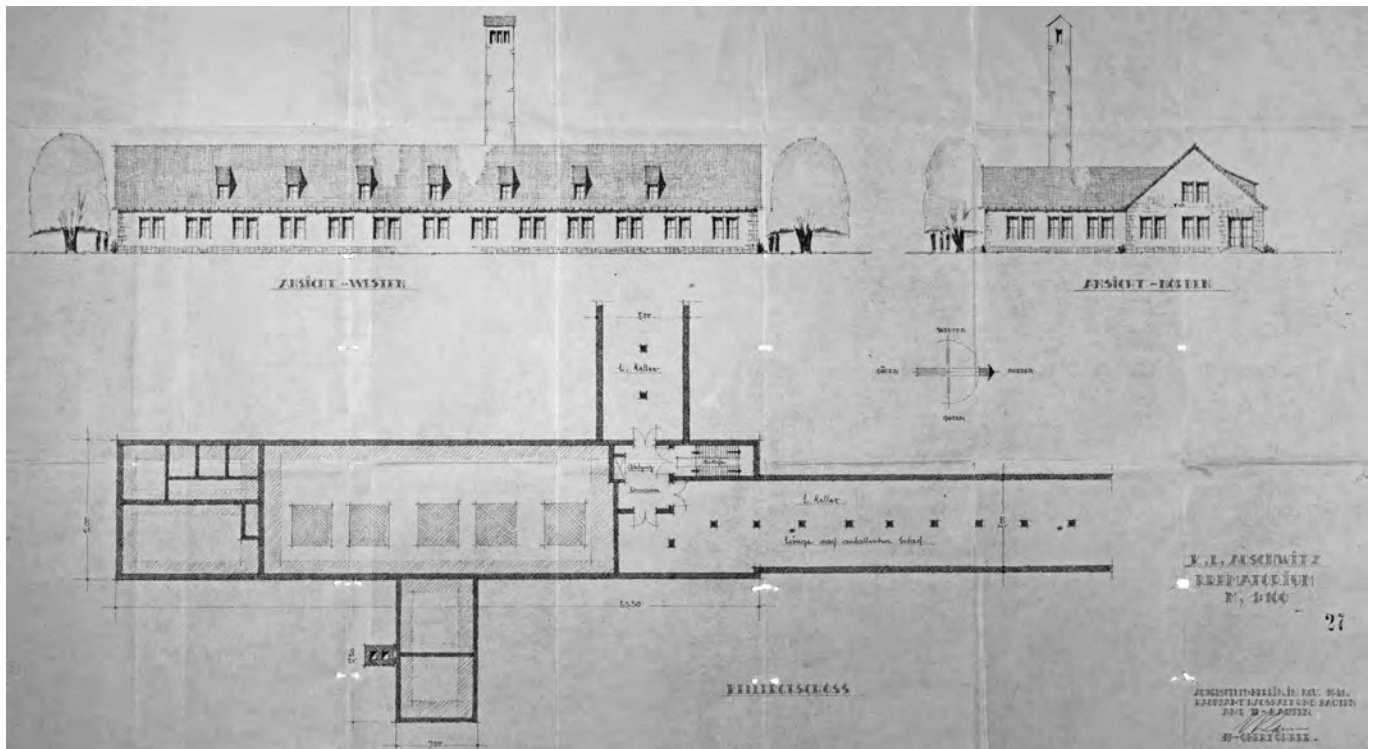


ARCHITECTURE OF MURDER

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Blueprints



An early blueprint of crematorium II, dated November 1941, showing two elevations and the basement. Designed to be built in Auschwitz, this incineration installation with 15 ovens and a daily capacity of 1,440 corpses was to accommodate the “normal” mortality of the Auschwitz complex. When in July 1942 Himmler took the decision to transform the Auschwitz complex into an extermination camp, the SS decided to build in Birkenau two of these crematoria (numbered II and III), and to transform the spaces that were intended as morgues or corpse cellars (indicated in the basement plan as *[Leichen]-Keller*), into an undressing room and a gas chamber. In addition, the SS built also two smaller crematoria equipped with gas chambers (number IV and V).

Yad Vashem Archives Collection, Donated by Axel Springer AG, Kai Diekmann, Chief Editor of “Bild”.

The evolution of the Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps is captured in hundreds of architectural plans the Germans forgot to destroy and the Poles and the Soviets preserved in archives in Oswiecim and in Moscow. These drawings have been studied since the mid 1980s, and have been published in various journal articles and books.¹ This collection of 28 drawings, discovered in 2008 in a Berlin apartment, bought by the Bild newspaper, and donated to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, augment the body of archival evidence on the construction of the Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau camps.

A unique historical source, most of these materials were created in the architect’s office that built the camps: the *Zentralbauleitung der Waffen SS und Polizei, Auschwitz O/S* (Central Building Authority of the Waffen SS and the Police, Auschwitz in Upper Silesia). Multiple copies of many documents survive with the comments and signatures of the individual bureaucrats or businessmen to whom they were sent. The Central Building Authority generated a wide paper trail: plans, budgets, letters, telegrams, contractors’ bids, financial negotiations, work site labor reports, requests for material allocations, minutes of meetings, and photos recording the progress of construction. These documents elucidate the possibilities the SS considered and the options they chose, their ambition as well as its outcome.

To understand the drawings it is useful to recapitulate the history of Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In September 1939 Germany conquered West and Central Poland. In April 1940 Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler decided to transform a former Polish military base, located in the Zasole suburb of Oswiecim (known in German as Auschwitz) into a concentration camp. He appointed Rudolf Höss as Kommandant. On 14 June the new concentration camp received a first transport of 728 Polish prisoners. The camp grew rapidly; by year end 7,879 inmates had been registered. Mortality was high: within six months, almost 1,900 men had died from exhaustion, deprivation, beatings, and execution. The high mortality at Auschwitz called for a crematorium to dispose of corpses.

The former ammunition depot served. In the summer of 1940 the SS took delivery of one double-muffle oven manufactured by the Topf company in Erfurt. Its official incineration capacity of over 100 corpses per day proved insufficient, and in fall 1940, the Auschwitz SS ordered a second double-muffle oven. A third (summer 1941) brought the official daily cremation capacity to 340 corpses. Clearly, the SS perceived death to be a growth industry in Auschwitz.

While many of the dead were registered inmates, the camp also functioned (from November 1940) as an execution site for prisoners of the Gestapo office in Kattowitz, the provincial capital of Upper Silesia. These people were transported to Auschwitz for court-martial and summary execution by means of a neck shot in the courtyard of Block 11, the camp prison. They were not registered into the camp. In providing an execution facility for outsiders, the Auschwitz SS

established a practice which, in 1941, would lead to the use of the camp as an execution place for Soviet prisoners of war, for Upper Silesian Jews who had become superfluous for the forced labor program run by Albrecht Schmelt and, from the summer of 1942 to the fall of 1942, for Jews sent from all over Europe by Adolf Eichmann.

In the fall of 1940 the camp acquired two economic functions: to provide prisoners to work in the adjacent gravel pits owned and exploited by the SS company DEST, and to serve Himmler's policy of ethnic cleansing. Poles living in the rural areas immediately south of Auschwitz were targeted for deportation, and ethnic Germans from Romania were to move into the area. In order to provide practical support to help the new arrivals establish economically viable farms, Himmler aimed to make the concentration camp the center of a huge agricultural experiment estate. The camp claimed ever-larger territories for its new role as a scientific farm: by the middle of 1941 the SS controlled a forty-square-kilometer *Interessengebiet* (Zone of Interests)—a forbidden zone that later facilitated the operation of the camp as a killing center. The exhibition contains a drawing labeled *Plan vom Interessengebiet des K.L. Auschwitz*, originally drawn up in February 1941, that shows the northern end of this Zone of Interests. Much labor was needed to create drainage canals to improve the land, build dikes along the Vistula, and clean the large fishponds. By August 1941, some 20,000 inmates had been admitted into the camp. Of these, only 12,000 were still alive.

Himmler needed an enormous influx of money and building materials to develop this zone, and he therefore sought to generate income by attracting the huge chemical conglomerate IG Farben to Auschwitz. The terms of the bargain were that the camp would grow to 30,000 inmates to supply labor to construct Farben's synthetic rubber ("Buna") plant. Various plans were developed. The exhibition contains a drawing labeled *K.L. Auschwitz: Skizze zum General-Bebauungsplan* (Concentration camp Auschwitz: Sketch belonging to the General Construction Plan) that shows how Auschwitz expanded to 30,000 inmates, with many new barracks, camp workshops, a hospital, a prison, a prisoner reception building, and headquarters (marked in red). Construction following this plan began in 1942, and continued up to the fall of 1944, when all construction stopped as the result of the worsening military situation. Around 35 percent of the project drawn in the *Skizze* was completed.

Construction activity did not limit itself to expanding the existing concentration camp. A new satellite to the concentration camp, Birkenau, to be populated initially by 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war (a number increased to 125,000 in the fall of 1941), was to provide labor to transform the town of Auschwitz into a handsome, German city of 60,000—worthy of an IG Farben enterprise and exemplary of Himmler's ambitions in the East. In return, IG Farben was to finance the expansion of the concentration camp and the construction of an idyllic village for the SS guards. On 7 October 1941, the SS sketched the first plan for the Birkenau camp. Three weeks later the chief architect of the SS, Hans Kammler, submitted this plan to Himmler for approval. This version identifies the camp as a *Kriegsgefangenenlager* (prisoner of war camp). As the drawing shows, Himmler signed off on the project. On 11 November 1941, the SS architects sketched a modified version of Birkenau into the existing plan of the Zone of Interests drawn up ten months earlier. This drawing shows that they intended now to connect Birkenau to the railway line that connected Vienna to Cracow and that ran between Auschwitz and Birkenau. The decision to create a railway spur in the camp forced them to design a new gate that would accommodate a train. This gate was completed and expanded into a symmetrical building in 1943. It became the icon of Birkenau as the deadly terminus of one million Jews.

The SS expected many deaths from endemic and epidemic disease in Birkenau, with its targeted population of 125,000 Soviet POWs, and in the main camp located in a suburb of Auschwitz called Zasole, where 30,000 Polish prisoners were to be interned. The existing crematorium capacity of 340 corpses per day was deemed insufficient. The SS commissioned (fall 1941) a very large crematorium that could manage by means of five triple-muffle ovens no fewer than 1,440 corpses per day. The initial design was worked out between the chief of the Auschwitz Zentralbauleitung Karl Bischoff, Topf engineer Kurt Prüfer, and architect Georg Werkmann, who was employed in SS headquarters in Berlin. The main features of their plan were a large incineration hall with five triple-muffle ovens above ground, and two large corpse cellars (*Leichen Keller* or *L-Keller*) below ground (shown in the drawing). The smaller of these morgues was to be equipped with a special ventilation system with ducts located in the walls. The main access to the morgues was by means of a corpse-slide—a feature that had become standard in concentration camp underground morgues. A corpse elevator was to provide the connection between the basement morgues and the ground-floor incineration room.

The crematorium was to be built in the main camp, right next to the existing crematorium, but to service both the main camp and Birkenau. The staggering cremation capacity of 1,440 corpses per day was considered appropriate to cope with the anticipated "normal" mortality of the 155,000 slave laborers to be worked to death. Given the rapidity with which the 9,890 Soviet prisoners of war who had been brought to Auschwitz since October had died, the dimensions of the crematorium did not seem out of place. When this crematorium, and one that was a mirror image of it, were completed, at a different location, each contained a homicidal gas chamber in the smaller of the two morgues. But nothing in the original conceptual sketch of the crematorium nor in the worked-out blueprints, which date from January 1942, suggest the intention to equip this building (or its mirror-image copy) with a gas chamber. In both cases the gas chamber was, quite literally, an afterthought.

Nevertheless, at the time that Georg Werkmann drew the first plan of the new crematorium, some experimental gassings had taken place in the camp. In the summer of 1941, SS headquarters had sent to Auschwitz, and other camps, Soviet POWs they considered "commissars" for the purpose of execution. Initially these men were executed by rifle and machine-gun in the DEST gravel pits. However, some members of the Auschwitz SS were considering less traditional means of killing. Karl Fritsch decided on an experiment with Zyklon-B, a cyanide product used for delousing garments, blankets and barracks and available in Auschwitz in large quantities, as a means of killing humans in Block 11. All the victims of the first gassing were Soviet POWs. Zyklon-B proved to be an effective poison, but killing in Block 11 presented various problems. The basement was ordinarily used as a prison, and the space was difficult to ventilate. The SS therefore decided to move the killing operation to the crematorium by transforming the morgue adjacent to the room with the ovens into a Zyklon-B gas chamber.

The 78-square-meter morgue in the crematorium of the main camp had already been used for some time for the execution by shooting of people convicted by the Gestapo summary court from Kattowitz, and so the precedent for killing people in the morgue had been established. It was not difficult to transform the Auschwitz crematorium into what became a small but efficient "factory of death", with killing and incineration facilities under one roof.

The gas chamber in the crematorium, which was to be known as Crematorium 1 after the completion of four crematoria in Birkenau, was not meant to operate on a continuous basis. It was too visible. Located right next to the main camp, neither the building nor the

arrival of victims to be killed inside its gas chambers were screened or hidden. The evolution of Auschwitz from a particularly deadly concentration camp, which had a gas chamber as one of many tools of execution, into an extermination camp in which gas chambers killed almost all of those to be murdered, occurred in two phases: the first one stretched from January to August 1942, and the second from September 1942 to May 1943. The catalyst in this evolution was Hermann Göring's decision to divert Soviet POWs from Auschwitz to German armament factories (6 January 1942). Himmler had planned on using Soviet POWs as slave laborers to create a racial utopia in Auschwitz. He now turned to the use of Jewish slave laborers instead of Soviet POWs.

At the Wannsee Conference (20 January 1942), Heydrich secured for Himmler the power he needed to negotiate with German and foreign civilian authorities for the transfer of Jews to his SS empire. Himmler decided in the wake of the conference that, instead of Soviet POWs, Jews would be sent to Auschwitz. After negotiations with the Slovak government, it became clear that the Jews who would take the place of the Soviet POWs would be of Slovak origin. The Slovak government, concerned that the SS would only take Jews who were young and fit, leaving children, the sick and the old as a burden on the Slovak state, convinced the SS to take all Jews, sweetening the deal by offering a cash payment for every Jew taken.

As Himmler pondered the pros and cons of the arrangement, he dispatched SS Construction chief Hans Kammler to Auschwitz (February 1942). Kammler toured Birkenau, and in a meeting that followed he ordered that the large crematorium then in design for the main camp was to be erected in Birkenau. A siteplan of Birkenau drawn shortly after this meeting shows the initial location of the crematorium to be adjacent to the place where, a month later, the SS transformed a peasant cottage into a gas chamber. This gas chamber was to be known as "The Little Red House" or the "Bunker".

The Bunker consisted of two rooms with a surface area of 50 square meters, which allowed for the simultaneous killing of between 250 and 500 people, dependent on age and size. Zyklon-B was introduced into the room through a couple of small openings close to the ceiling. These openings were equipped with wooden gas-tight shutters that could be opened and closed from the outside. After the killing, the gas was evacuated by opening the gas-tight doors and shutters. A narrow-gauge railway track connected the building to burial pits. The Bunker was brought into operation on 20 March 1942.

The first victims of the Bunker were Jews from the Auschwitz area and ill inmates. As the gas chamber created to cope with the deportation of the Slovakian Jews was already in full use before any Slovak transport with "unfit" Jews had arrived, the SS decided to convert a second peasant house into a killing installation. The "Little White House" or "Bunker 2" had gas chambers with a total surface area of 65 square meters, allowing for the simultaneous killing of between 320 and 600 people, depending on age and size. The first transport of Jews from Slovakia that included children and old people arrived on 4 July 1942. The old people, children, mothers with children, and pregnant women were loaded onto trucks and brought to Bunker 2 where they were killed.

With the arrival of the Slovak Jews the annihilation of Jews at Auschwitz morphed from "incidental" into "continuing" practice. But it had not yet become policy. The bunkers were still a particular solution to a situation created by the collision of Slovak unwillingness to provide for old and very young Jews, and SS greed for labor and money.

The turning point in the history of Auschwitz as an annihilation camp came when Himmler acquired responsibility (around mid-July 1942) for German settlement in Russia. He had coveted that authority for more than a year, and he now turned his attention to

the vast possibilities that it promised. The development of the city and region of Auschwitz into a racial utopia was no longer of interest to him. The camp could be used for the systematic killing of Jews. Practice became policy. Coordinated by Eichmann, transports from ever-farther destinations began to leave for Auschwitz. Regular trains began to arrive from France in June, from Holland in July, and from Belgium and Yugoslavia in August. Throughout the summer an average of 1,000 deportees arrived every day at the Judenrampe, a railway platform located between Auschwitz and Birkenau. A quick selection by a cadre of SS physicians found most of them "unfit for work". Loaded on to trucks and brought to Bunkers 1 and 2, they were forced to undress, and they were killed.

The architects at Auschwitz got to work to expand the killing installations. In addition to building the large crematorium, commissioned in late 1941 for the main camp and which Kammler had ordered to be built in Birkenau, they were to add its mirror image in Birkenau. But both crematoria, to be known as Crematorium 2 and Crematorium 3 (the crematorium in the Stammlager was now called Crematorium 1) were to be erected away from the originally intended site of Crematorium 2 near Bunker 1. Instead they were to build the crematoria close to the planned railway station within Birkenau, shown in the drawing of the Zone of Interests as modified on 11 November 1941. It was now abundantly clear that the two crematoria were to primarily serve the killing of arriving transports.

The original design of the crematorium, sketched in October 1941, shown in the exhibition, did not show gas chambers. In the fall of 1942, when the two crematoria were under construction, the design team moved to include homicidal gas chambers. Architect Walther Dejaco transformed the basement plan, adding new stairs that allowed for easy access below, and removing the corpse-slide. He changed the larger of the two underground morgues into an undressing room, and the smaller, which already was planned to have a powerful ventilation system in its wall and ceiling, into a gas chamber which could hold up to 2,000 victims at one time. He reversed the swing of the chamber door to open outwards, not inwards, to allow access to the room after a gassing. He also equipped each gas chamber with four so-called gas columns. These wire mesh columns allowed not only for the easy introduction of the cyanide-soaked calcium sulfate pellets into the crowded room, but also for the quick removal of the still degassing pellets when all the victims had died twenty minutes later. This removal was crucial for a smooth continuous operation of the killing installations: because Zyklon-B had been developed as a pest-killer, it had been designed to degas the cyanide for a 24-hour period. Lice nits were difficult to kill, and needed a long exposure to the cyanide. Human beings died quickly, and with transports arriving day after day, the SS insisted on being able to enter the gas chambers shortly after all the victims had died. The architects must have reasoned that removal of the still degassing pellets would facilitate the cleaning operation: once the pellets were removed and the ventilators turned on, the gas was cleared from the room in half an hour, allowing for corpse cremation in the fifteen large ovens to begin without delay. In this manner, one "load" of victims could be killed and cremated in a 24-hour period. This streamlined murder system facilitated a regular daily schedule of arrivals, selections, and killings.

The camp administration's experience with the bunkers had shown that these primitive gas chambers worked very efficiently, but that corpse disposal was the problem. The camp architects developed a design for a smaller crematorium with an incineration capacity of 768 corpses per day, an undressing room that also could function as a morgue, and three above-ground gas chambers. They were to become known as Crematoria 4 and 5.

Bunkers 1 and 2 continued to kill arriving Jews on a daily basis and sick and exhausted inmates on a monthly basis, while Crematoria 2,

3, 4 and 5 were under construction. In the late winter and early spring of 1943, when the killing reached an average 800 people per day, the four new crematoria in Birkenau came into operation. With so many new crematoria, the SS had no reason to hold on to Crematorium 1, and they closed it down. In their final form, all these four crematoria provided for both murder and corpse disposal. People walked in, and exited the building as smoke through the chimneys and ashes that were dumped in the nearby Vistula river. This sentence does not, of course, cover even a fraction of the suffering of the victims.

The official total incineration capacity of the four large crematoria in Birkenau was 4,416 corpses per day. The Auschwitz gas chambers had been developed in 1941 to kill Soviet POWs, and in the first year they were used to kill, from time to time, non-Jewish prisoners who had been selected in the camp for execution. But at the end of 1942 non-Jewish prisoners ceased to be subject to selections. As a result, by the time the four new crematoria had been completed, the gas chambers became primarily a tool for murdering Jews—the major exceptions to this rule being a couple of hundred Polish men and women, convicted in 1944 by the Gestapo office in Kattowitz, and almost 5,500 Roma and Sinti, in March 1943 and in August 1944.

By the end of 1943 the Germans closed down the death camps built specifically for annihilation: Chelmno, Sobibor, Belzec, and Treblinka. They had served their purpose in killing the great bulk of European Jewry. Auschwitz remained to mop-up the remnants of the Jewish communities of Poland, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and the rest of occupied Europe. In 1944 more than half a million Jews were killed in Auschwitz, most of them Hungarians. By that time, information about the role of Auschwitz as an annihilation center was available as the result of the successful escape of two young Slovak Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzlar. With a lot of planning and even more luck, Vrba and Wetzlar managed to slip out of Auschwitz on 10 April 1944. They had been imprisoned for

two years, and they fled to Slovakia in the hope of warning the Jews of Hungary, the last large community of Jews. The Jewish underground debriefed them, and their information yielded the first substantial report on the use of Auschwitz as a death factory.

In the fall of 1944 a number of Jewish and gentile prisoners began to prepare a general uprising in the camp. But the planned general uprising went awry. The slave workers of Crematorium 4 heard that they were going to be gassed, and they revolted sooner than anticipated, on 7 October. They killed three SS men, wounded twelve, blew up Crematorium 4, and attempted to break out. Some made it as far as a barn in nearby Rajsko. But none escaped, and in total 451 members of the special squads that worked in the crematoria were killed. Nevertheless gassings came to an end. Himmler knew Germany had lost the war, but he believed that he could have an honorable future in Germany after military collapse. He ordered the SS to cease gassings in Auschwitz and to dismantle the gas chambers and ovens in the crematoria (October 1944).

The Red Army began its winter offensive on 10 January 1945, and Russian artillery could be heard in Auschwitz. On 17 January, the SS held a last roll call. They counted a little over 67,000 inmates in Auschwitz, Birkenau, and the various satellite camps. A day later the death march began. On 26 January an SS squad blew up Crematorium 5, the last remaining incineration facility in Birkenau. The next day, units of the Red Army liberated the Auschwitz camps.

Between 1 and 1.1 million victims were murdered in Auschwitz, the great majority of whom were Jews. By the end of the war, Auschwitz had become the most lethal death camp. Today it is the symbol of the Holocaust.²

*Consultant: ©Robert Jan van Pelt
University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada*

¹ Jean-Claude Pressac, “Étude et réalisation des Krematorien IV et V d’Auschwitz-Birkenau”, in François Furet (ed.), *L’Allemagne nazie et le génocide juif* (Paris: Gallimard and Le Seuil, 1985), 539–586; Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (New York: The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989), 540f.; Jean-Claude Pressac with Robert Jan van Pelt, “The Machinery of Mass Murder at Auschwitz”, in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 183–245; Robert-Jan van Pelt, “A Site in Search of a Mission”, in Gutman and Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 93–156; Robert-Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996); Robert-Jan van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).

² The text of this essay is based on Robert-Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the Present* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), and Debórah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, “Auschwitz”, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd edition, 20 vols (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006), vol. 2, 661–673.



Irish Architectural Archive, 45 Merrion Square, Dublin 2 | 19th November-17th December 2010 Tues-Fri 10am-5pm

KINDLY SUPPORTED BY DUBLIN MACCABI CHARITABLE TRUST AND PROF. ROBERT JAN VAN PELT, UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO, CANADA