

Himmler called it 'one of the few things that give me pleasure' and Hitler kept a troop of figurines to hand out to favourites ... Travelling the world to research the story of porcelain, the ceramicist and writer **Edmund de Waal** stopped off at Dachau to delve into the dark history of the Porzellan Manufaktur Allach

# The white stuff

In June this year I found myself sitting in the office of a small apartment in a suburban street of a dormitory town close to Munich. The owner was a large man and he could barely squeeze behind his desk. It was a very orderly space - family photographs arrayed carefully, a bookcase of tabulated journals and files. A glass case stretched along the whole wall containing models of deer and dogs and figurines, 18th-century soldiers, a shelf of vessels, vases and bowls, a chess set. They were made a mile away and this man was a collector and dealer. He sells this Allach Porzellan, he says, to Russians and Americans.

There is a serious market for porcelain made by slave labour in the Dachau concentration camp.

He was particularly proud of the chess set that had belonged to Heinrich Himmler. Its gilding was finer than any he had encountered before. It is not for sale. But I could buy the porcelain model of the fresh-faced Hitler Youth banging his drum, eyes on the future, noisy. Or the alsatian dog, or the plate celebrating the winter solstice inscribed with words of exhortation, crocuses pushing upwards through snowy earth, or the medallions for SS sports competitions.

He likes this porcelain, he tells me, because it is very well made. Porcelain is a very good German material. It has history. Above all, he repeats to me, it is pure.

I had not expected a journey to discover what porcelain meant to me - my midlife attempt to work out why I had been working with it for 30 years - to bring me to this place. I had mapped out my pilgrimage to the white hills of China, where the raw materials were first found, and the hills of Saxony, where the secrets of porcelain were uncovered by a philosopher and an alchemist in the early 18th century. And to the hills of the south-west of England, where a Quaker apothecary

worked out the arcanum by himself and changed the landscape of Cornwall.

I thought that I understood the purity of porcelain and its attraction for so many people - to the point of obsession - for a thousand years. Porcelain comes from China. It was so rare, so arcane in medieval Europe, that to drink from porcelain was supposed to prevent poison. The story of its travels, of its trade, is one of desire. There are very few materials in the world that embody such a strong transformational pull from earth to something that is so light, translucent, so fine that it rings as clear as a bell. It is alchemy.

But there is nothing simple about simplicity. Desire and power, in conjunction with purity, comes at a great cost.

On my voyage into porcelain, I come across a reference to one of my favourite designers from the Bauhaus and his work for the Allach porcelain factory. As I don't know it - there is a plenitude of German factories - I'm intrigued and buy a book on this Allach Porzellan. It arrives a week later, a small black hardback with a photo of a porcelain statue of Athena on the front. It is in English, published by Tony L. Oliver, from a suburban street in Egham, Surrey, in 1970.

"The unique circumstances that prevailed in Germany ... made it possible for the very best artists, designers, potters, and all persons associated with the manufacture of fine porcelain, to be taken from the many world-famous factories that existed in Germany at that time, such as Dresden, Berlin, Rosenthal etc, and employed at the previously unknown factory at Allach. It was this unique concentration of talent made available for its production that enabled Allach porcelain to be of such a high quality, and consequently highly desirable ..."

The back flap lists books and colour



▼ A belling stag, designed by Professor Kärner; a large bivouac bowl and its box, below right

postcards of uniforms of the SS.

I open it up and illustration No 1 is a photograph of Hitler and Reichsführer-SS H Himmler "examining, with apparent approval, a selection of Allach porcelain figures" in 1943. The figures look like 18th-century Meissen. Hitler is smiling, avid.

Concentration of talent is a hard phrase. They were made in the camp at Dachau.

The story began in 1935 at Lindenstrasse 8 in Allach, a suburb to the north west of Munich, with three committed members of the SS: the painter Franz Nagy, a sculptor, Theodor Kärner, and an artist, Karl Diebitsch. They built a small factory attached to a suburban villa. The plan was to create porcelain worthy of the Nazi party.

The plan quickly came to the notice of Himmler, who arranged for a substantial capital infusion of 45,000 Reichsmarks from his personal office. The PMA, the Porzellan Manufaktur Allach, was founded. Himmler believed in art for every German home, but "first of all in the homes of my SS men". Having his own porcelain factory would

give him control, allow him to show off his cultural reach, raise money for the causes he held dear. One of these, the "German Winter Relief", the official NSDAP charity founded by Hitler after he was appointed chancellor, had enormous kudos in the party.

The slogan for 1938 was "20 million porcelain soldiers on the march", as Allach sold porcelain soldiers and little porcelain badges with soldiers on them to raise money for impoverished loyal citizens of the Reich. It was the week of the Anschluss, when German soldiers marched across the border into Austria to be met by delirious crowds.

Having your own porcelain factory allowed you to give gifts. In Himmler's SS there were interminable rites of gift giving. Alfred Rosenberg, the theoretician of the party, was hard at work creating new rituals, new arcana to embed the people in their culture. Christmas became Julfest, an ersatz Nordic winter celebration, with sacred fire and candles and music. So Allach made *Julleuchter* - yule lanterns - to sit on the festive tables and glow as the family celebrated the new year, the new start for their country.

Birthdays and weddings and the birth of a child to SS members all warranted presents of Allach porcelain. And there were porcelain bowls for presentation at the party rallies at Nuremberg, sporting medals, plaques to celebrate the Anschluss, a presentation vase to Hitler for his 50th birthday in 1939, huge white vases for the niches of the Chancellery. Who could have foreseen such demand for porcelain?

The factory in Allach became too small, and at the end of 1940 it moved to Dachau concentration camp. There were many advantages of having the factory here. There was the immediate gain of using the prisoners. The Allach porcelain company - as with the porcelain manufactory in Meissen - was losing skilled workers to the eastern front, and here they could draw on the talents of inmates. The few prisoners brought in from the camp in 1941 grew to over a hundred by 1943. And so Himmler had his own factory that he could bring his fellow SS officers to, walk along the benches, peer over the prisoners' shoulders and inquire and inspect. When they visited Dachau, the factory was the first place on the tour. There was a visitors' book. And there were photographs.

There they all are, picking up figurines, comparing things.

They turn them over, and underneath

is the mark that says Allach, and the symbol is the double-lightning insignia of the SS. Cleverly, it is also the Meissen mark of the two swords transposed.

It was a company that was run with precision. The accounts were accurate. The numbers of the figures are filed meticulously. Himmler took 45% of the output of the factory. And in 1942, when there was a typhoid epidemic among the prisoners in Dachau, Himmler asked for payment for those who died.

Himmler wanted his Allach to make objects that were *künstlerisch wertvolle* - artistically worthwhile - not degenerating into kitsch. *Deutsch sein heisst klar sein*, said Hitler. "To be German is to be clear."

To be clear is to be skilled and to tell stories well, not to obfuscate. Degenerate art is unskilled, merely sketched, inept. It is unclear. Hitler knew what he wanted. He wanted to see skill. So Allach created a porcelain stallion, leaping upwards, tail flowing, powerful and independent, a leader. And Hitler, having seen what Allach was capable of, ordered the special production of a hundred figures of Frederick the Great on horseback. He kept one in his office in the Chancellery. He gave the others to those who had impressed him with their dedication to the purity of the Reich.

Look at the modelling on the porcelain bears, the stags and does and fawns, the fox cubs, dachshunds and alsatians. The puppies are so expressive. The Reclining Stag by Professor T Kärner is wary, every muscle quivering to take flight. This is a German bestiary with animals to cosset or animals to hunt. There were stags of this splendour in the deer park on the southern border of the Dachau camp, just beyond the barbed wire fences and watchtowers, carefully corralled to be shot from the lodge, after dinner with the commandant.

And then there are the statues of the young and perfect; maidens after the bath, mothers with children, champions, striding female nudes, a member of the League of German Girls, with pigtailed framing her face, left foot forward. There is a run of flying officers in full uniform with swords, and a figurine of a pilot, straight from the cockpit, nonchalant, and an SS rider and an SS standard bearer. "The standard bearer wears a nicely detailed SA-SS gorget," says a book for collectors. The standard bearer was not on display in the stores and was the personal gift of Himmler.

And then there is the SS storm-trooper.

Count von Ribbentrop, the German ambassador to London, bought these to give to those in society he felt understood the complexity of the Reich. An Allach porcelain stormtrooper ended up on the mantelpiece of the earl of Londonderry's house at Mount Stewart in Northern Ireland. It is still there.

The most desired of all these figures was *Die Fechter* - The Fencer - a muscled youth, shirtless, leaning on his *épée*. It was given only to the elite in the party. And I find a formal portrait of Reinhard Heydrich, who Hitler called "the man with the iron heart", responsible for the *Einsatzgruppen*, the death squads that killed a million Jews. He was a fencer. *Die Fechter* sits on a table next to him, a white trophy.

Das Schwarze Korps, the SS newspaper, recorded the opening of the new Allach

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“ Birthdays, weddings and an SS birth all warranted gifts of Allach porcelain. There was a vase for Hitler on his 50th ”





store in Berlin at Leipziger Strasse 13 on 1 April 1939. It quoted Hitler. He had proclaimed, as he saw these porcelains: "No people live longer than the document of their culture."

The new store was very smart, with a pair of huge windows flanking the entrance and wall sconces to light it up at night. Das Schwarze Korps for the following week took you inside, where there were vitrines to the right with spotlight figures. The photograph shows Himmler as he walks past these glass cases, hands behind his back, reviewing his dragooners. And in 1941 and 1942, as the army pushed east, stores for Allach were opened in the new cities of the Reich: Warsaw, Poznań and Lwów, rechristened Lemberg.

The Julfest plate for 1943, sent to leading members of the SS, shows pink crocuses emerging from a snowy earth. On the back is a facsimile of Oswald Pohl's signature surrounded by a circlet of runes. On 14 January 1943, Himmler wrote to Pohl that he had visited the Allach store in Poznań: "In Allach we had a very pretty eagle in clay, matt. And now I see this eagle in the store in Poznan glazed! It looks disgraceful. I request that this is changed immediately." It can't be too difficult, surely, to send him the first porcelain sample produced and ask his opinion. And the staff are too young. They shouldn't work in such visible positions during the war. "I really don't wish to get annoyed about one of the few things that give me pleasure."

Details mattered to Himmler. On 6 February, Pohl sent him, as requested, an inventory of the materials taken from Jews in Auschwitz: 155,000 women's coats, 132,000 men's shirts, 11,000 boys' jackets, 6,600lb of women's hair.

Most of the figures were white.

This was at Himmler's request. They were either white glazed or unglazed bisque ware. Production numbers of white porcelain far outweighed coloured porcelain. "White porcelain is the embodiment of the German soul," says the first catalogue for Allach.

The whiteness of the skin of this porcelain was the whiteness of marble surfaces, the perfection of the Greek statues in the museums in Berlin and

Munich. The Pergamon Museum, holding the greatest sculpture of the classical world, was the whitest building in the Reich. Allach's porcelain figures obeyed the strictures of Germany's great art critic Johann Winckelmann: "Since white is the colour that reflects the most rays of light, and thus is most easily perceived, a beautiful body will be all the more beautiful the whiter it is."

Here was the cult of the body, the fetishised smoothness and correct proportions, the cleanliness, the asexuality. This was porcelain to pick up and hold, to collect. You could buy the nudes. Or you could get an SS printing set and show the accuracy of the details of the insignia to your fellow officers as you relaxed after fulfilling your duties.

I remember Susan Sontag writing about the films of Leni Riefenstahl and "the contrast between the clean and the impure, the incorruptible and the defiled, the physical and the mental, the joyful and the critical". White searches out degeneracy.

I go to Dachau to find out what happened. It is early autumn and there is low mist. Pumpkins and squashes are stacked up outside the houses by the side of the road. Each pile has an honesty box.

It is so grey and humid that everything seems caught. I notice the perimeter fence, the watchtowers, the ground where the punishments took place, the walls for the executions and I think this a journey I shouldn't be making.

The archivist meets me. There is a long table, a library of research books and files. A woman is sitting quietly, whitely, looking at photographs. She makes very small pencil marks in her notebook.

The archivist has been here for 15 years. He knows the intricacies of the SS sub camps, how prisoners were detailed to work in particular factories, the terrible realities of the granite quarries, the manifests, the trains, the death marches. And he is kind. He brings out the documents I need to see. In the manner of archives, the first sheet of paper is a letter of thanks to Himmler. It comes from Brigadeführer Friedrich Uebelhoer and profusely thanks the

Reichsführer for his gift of a porcelain standard bearer and the card, and the recognition of his support for the work he's doing in building a new Germany in the east. Uebelhoer is the governor of Łódź, and is building the ghetto.

The second letter is from Frau Himmler to Frau ER, which says she is very sorry to cause trouble, but has "little Ekhart" received his Allach candlestick as a gift from his godfather, the Reichsführer, yet? "Also whether Sigrid and Irmtraut have received their candles as well." Frau Himmler sends condolences for the bombing.

The third letter, dated 15 January 1945, is from Dr Hopfner to an unknown recipient, stating that the *Julleuchter* - the SS lantern for the solstice celebrations - should no longer be produced, but the production of the plates with SS phrases on the bottom should be increased. The texts can be uplifting in "the coming difficult months" to those who use them.

There is to be no more coal for the crematorium in Dachau, but supplies will continue to be delivered to fire the Allach kilns.

But there is one testimony that is central, says the archivist, and he tells me about Hans Landauer, who worked in the factory and spent his life after the war speaking about what happened. His home was Vienna, but he came here often.

I ask him if, by any chance, Herr Landauer can still be visited?

And he gestures to his office, where there is a photograph of a large, open-faced, smiling man above his desk. Landauer died last week, he says. He was a great man.

Hans Landauer was an Austrian socialist who had joined the International Brigade at 16 and was arrested fighting against Franco in the Spanish civil war. He was deported to the French camp at Gurs and arrived in Dachau on 6 June 1941.

The archivist gives me the context for his story. It is May 1941 and a note is circulated at Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Gross-Rosen and

#### Hitler admires a birthday gift of Allach figurines given to him by Himmler, centre, in Berlin on 20 April 1944

Sachsenhausen: "Due to various civil workers having to go to war, the running of the porcelain factory in Allach cannot be kept up ... the order has been made that the possibility to use useful prisoners for this command has to be considered. This concerns modellers, kiln-firers, formers and ceramicists. There has to be an immediate check up on forces in the concentration camps to find who has already been working in the area of ceramics and who is capable of working here."

Ten days later, there is a list of names. They have located one Jew, four ASR - anti-social prisoners - one Bib-F - a Jehovah's Witness - and 12 political prisoners. Six days after this, Buchenwald says they can't find any workers for the kilns, or modelling, but they have 14 people for forming porcelain, one person to work a mill, one person to paint and one person to throw porcelain. These include one Jew and one labelled only as "ill".

On 5 July 1941, 13 prisoners arrive in Allach to make porcelain. This group contained no kiln specialists, so an Austrian and a Spanish fighter, Franz Pinker and Karl Soldan, both communists, were selected to work on the firings in the factory.

These men in turn select Landauer, their comrade newly arrived from a French camp. Initially, he is to work on the railway, pulling coal from the station at Dachau to the porcelain factory, "in

the way that boats were pulled on the Volga". This, writes Landauer, in his memoirs, is *ein Glücksfall* - a piece of luck.

Sitting in the archive, Landauer's memoirs make this contingent moment, this *Glücksfall*, seem incredibly close. This is the moment when, while he was unloading coal in the courtyard at the factory, he was asked if he could draw. He said yes, and drew a small sketch.

This sketch takes him from the cruelty of dragging the coal wagons outside over the threshold and into Allach. It was the first step for him in the "direction of surviving hell". He starts work on the candleholders, and then he works on the figurines and becomes "irreplaceable" when he works on the horse riders that Hitler and Himmler so value.

"I only had to look out of the basement window from my desk, when the emaciated figures of the gravel quarry stumbled while pushing carts full of dead prisoners, or those not capable of walking any more, back into the camp ..."

He records how strange it was that this group of workers in the Allach porcelain factory, from so many different nations, were the people who had to produce the cult symbol of the party, the *Julleuchter*, and that making this product could give him and his fellow prisoners a higher chance of surviving the camp.

Landauer is an extraordinary witness. He recalls seeing the closed carriages arriving from France, full of the dead and dying. He recalls his fellow workers, Franz Okroy, Herbert Hartmann, Franz Schmierer. There were two more Polish prisoners, whose names he can't remember, who worked on the small figurines. One was a professor from Krakow, who killed himself in 1942 or 1943 by running into the electric fence. There was Erwin Zapf, and the porcelain painter Gustav Krippner. There was Karl Schwendemann, who after an argument with an SS modeller, was taken out of the factory and back to Dachau main camp.

Reading these names is salutary. I read them again.

I need air and go outside for 10 minutes. When I return, the archivist explains that a local collector of Nazi memorabilia has died and his daughter has given a box to the archives. He brings in a grey plastic washing basket filled with Nazi objects in plastic bags and wrapped in newspaper. There is Allach porcelain, he says, but on top there is a belt, some buttons, a chart of the 38 divisions of the SS and magazines. He puts them on the table.

Then he unwraps the first object. It is Bambi.

Following that, there is a sleeping dachshund, another standing up looking mournful, and then a deer lying down, legs tucked underneath its body. I'd expected a storm trooper, something white. But I'm faced with Bambi, liquid-eyed, spindly legs, head tilted, carefully glazed. I pick it up and look underneath, as you always should do, and there is the cartouche with Allach and TH Kärner and the SS runes.

I thank the archivist and wrap up the porcelain again and put it back in the laundry basket. I walk down across the ground, down the long avenue between the barracks, all the way to the perimeter fence.

On the way back to the airport, I make a detour to the first Allach factory, on the outskirts of Munich. It is a safe jigsaw of small streets, kids on bicycles, a dog walker, trimmed hedges. The road says dead end, and unexpectedly there is an industrial site, prewar factories, something big alongside the road.

The taxi stops at No 8. The street has been renamed. It is now Reinhard von Frank Strasse. No 8 is a high gabled house, six steps up to a front door, a workshop running to the right behind a high tangled hedge. It is derelict. The windows are broken and the gate is padlocked. It looks exactly like the workshop I was apprenticed in.

This is where it began, a suburban street in nowhere special. Keep Out, warns the notice.

Edmund de Waal's *The White Road: A Pilgrimage of Sorts* is published by Chatto & Windus.

