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World at War

December 18, 2014

Children at Auschwitz

Auschwitz concentration camp was the largest camp established by the Nazis. The camp was in fact three main camps with different functions but with one main purpose: to force the prisoners to work. This well-known camp's construction started in May of 1940 in Poland, which was annexed in 1939. Auschwitz would eventually be separated into three separate camps, Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II (Auschwitz-Birkenau) and lastly Auschwitz III (Auschwitz-Monowitz).¹

Auschwitz I, the main camp, was only 15 square miles. It housed German prisoners and Polish political prisoners. Another purpose of the camp was to keep potential enemies of the Nazi party and German authorities in Poland confined, have a ready supply of laborers and to kill small amounts of people pre-determined by Nazi Germany. Auschwitz, like many other camps had a gas chamber and crematorium. However, the camp would eventually need a larger gas

¹ "Auschwitz." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. June 20, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2014. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189>.

chamber which was build outside the compound. It was here that many medical experiments were carried out on infants, twins, and dwarfs.²

Auschwitz II was in the surrounding town of Brzezinka in 1941. It was this part of the Auschwitz camps that held the largest amount of prisoners. It was protected by electric barbed-wire fences. It was here that they transformed two farmhouses, in close proximity, into gas chambers. They would continue to use this camp as a kill center until November 1944, when they combined the camps.³

There are only partially preserved documents on the amount of children that were prisoners during World War II. The information that we have now is only in fragments, especially for the Auschwitz camps. However, there are records that indicate that in April of 1944 there were 2,864 male children in the main camp. Later, on August 21st there were 779 boys under the age of 14. At the camp in Birkenau, in October, there were 2,510 children, both female and male. Upon liberation, there were 940 kids from both sexes that were in the camp hat were under the age of 14.⁴

There were normally five ways a child's life could go upon being 'captured' by Germans. The first way to be killed upon arrival of a camp. The second way a child's fate could go would be to be killed after birth, if they were born inside a camp. The third, which is closely related to the second, would be for the child to be hidden. Children over the age of 12 were able to be

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Israel Gutman, and Michael Berenbaum. *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*. Bloomington: Published in Association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. by Indiana UP, 1994, 413.

laborers and at some points used as subjects in medical experiments. The last option for children was to be killed during these operations or experiments.⁵

There became a special block, in Birkenau, specially to educate children. The beginnings of this block took place in September of 1943. Block 31, as it was called would function as a social-educational treatment facility. The kids that were placed here received better foods, including more nourished soups, and even meat! While there is not documentation as to the number of children in the block, there are some basis of existing material that shows as many as 500 children were in the block on any given day. Here children were able to wonder around and visit family. The teachers would use their own life as examples, no matter what subject was being taught. With time, the children had limited to no contact with the outside prisoners. This block allowed for a sense of normalcy in the kids' lives, which their parents greatly appreciated. Sadly, liquidation of this block started in March of 1944. The first step was for all prisoners that came after September 1943 be gassed. Slowly more children were added to the block, only for more to be gassed.⁶

Pregnant women were especially doomed. Upon arrival they were either killed. However, if they were far along in their pregnancy they were forced to have an abortion as a part of medical experiments. If a child was born though, they were either drowned in buckets of water or in some cases killed by injection of phenol.⁷⁸ If the children were not killed in this manner they died of malnutrition, disease or cold.⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gutman, 431-440.

⁷ Ibid., 405.

⁸ Phenol is a type of acidic chemical synthesis used in disinfectant. "Phenol, N." : Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 2014. Web. 18 Dec. 2014.

⁹ Gutman, 421.

Gypsy women were the first to be granted the privilege of keeping any newborn babies. The children that were allowed to survive were often classified as suitable for Germanization. If this was the case, they would be separated from their mother. In the event that the child lived, but was not classified as suitable for Germanization, they would be registered as new arrivals to the camp and given a serial number. Sadly, they were not spared the marking. They were tattooed on either their buttocks or thighs.¹⁰

The living conditions for children were not much different from the men and women living among them. The boys were forced to work demanding jobs, either as coal miners, road construction workers, or in removing rubble. They were worked like men and sometimes harder since they were younger. Both boys and girls were often malnourished and pushed beyond their limits.¹¹

The children in Auschwitz were often fed the same as the adults. They were given “black coffee or a herb extract, black bread with margarine, turnip soup, and unpeeled boiled potatoes.”¹² Eva Schloss gives her account of starvation in her book by telling her reader that prisoners were given a single piece of bread and one of every five prisoners were given a cup of coffee. The coffee was to be shared between the holder of the cup and four other people. She quickly learned that control of the cup was necessary if she wanted to have anything to drink that day. On her first morning at Auschwitz she did not know that they gave the prisoners all the food for the day at once, so she quickly ate all that she was given.¹³ Young children were given white

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 422.

¹² Ibid., 423.

¹³ Eva Schloss and Evelyn Julia. Kent. *Eva's Story: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988, 67.

bread and butter instead. The infants were often not given milk, which often caused death by malnourishment.¹⁴

Children were some of the most popular prisoners to do experiments on. Jewish girls were often sterilized while the boys were castrated. Other experiments included putting unknown drops of liquid in their eyes. These experiments could cause redness, swelling, and fester. However, there were extreme cases where the liquid would cause blindness. One an SS doctor, Kurt Heissmeyer, used Jewish children as guinea pigs to test tuberculosis. Once he was done with his tests, he had them hanged.¹⁵

Some of the most known studies during World War II were done on twins. Dr. Josef Mengele, known later as Dr. Auschwitz, was obsessed with doing experiments on twins. The study was done mainly on children. Dr. Mengele would allow the children to keep all their clothes, as well as allow them to not cut their hair. Mengele even had twins have special tattoos stating that they were twins. In some cases he would even allow the mother of twin girls to stay in the same block as them. The older of the twins, or “twin father” was put in charge of the block that they lived in. While Mengele was fascinated by all twins, he was especially drawn to identical twins. They were often measured twice a week, while they were naked. Because Dr. Mengele valued them so much, he would often have them die in the best procedure he could do medically. They were often injected with chloroform, which was uncommon, as they normally used phelon. Upon their deaths they would immediately be dissected.¹⁶

Dr. Mengele often would allow the children to have toys and sweets, as long as they were not Jewish. They in return called him good uncle and trusted him. During his work with twins,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gutman, 311-313.

Mengele ordered the building of a kindergarten in the barracks for all children who were in the experiments he did. The children would receive better food, and special privileges. There is no found documents that tell us the number of children that were under Mengele's care. Without knowing what was happening to their children, and only seeing what good was happening, mothers would often give up their children so that the studies could be done on them.¹⁷

Throughout the Holocaust it is estimated that 1.5 million children were killed. This number includes not only Jewish children, but also Gypsy children, German children with either physical or mental disabilities, polish kids, and occupied Soviet Union children. If a child was over the age of 12 they had a greater chance at living, because they could be used for labor. This number is not strictly for those that were in Auschwitz. Specifically for Auschwitz, children were sent directly to the gas chambers. Some were even shot at the edge of mass graves.¹⁸

In Auschwitz, children were prone to diseases. Some of the more common diseases the kids were stricken with included pneumonia, starvation-induced diarrhea, extensive ulceration, scabies, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and measles. Schloss gives her account of being sick in the camp She tells the reader that she was sick and had very bad diarrhea. She begged the Kappo (person assigned by the SS Guards to supervise the laborers) to allow her to go to the bathroom. The kappo refused her saying that it wasn't her turn. She resorted to going to the bathroom at the corner of the yard by her barrack. The Kappo followed her outside and then, in front of all of the other prisoners in her barrack she beat Eva to let her be an example of what happened to Jews that don't listen.¹⁹ For some however, they also got typhoid fever, typhus and tuberculosis.

¹⁷ Ibid., 320-326.

¹⁸ "Children during the Holocaust." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. June 20, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2014. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005142>.

¹⁹ Schloss, 69.

There were cases that patients with certain diseases would be forced to live together so that doctors could perform more experiments.²⁰

While disease and starvation took many lives of children, it was mass execution that took the most. Most of the deaths came from gas chambers. It was mostly Jewish prisoners were the ones to face this death. Children were often chosen to be gassed. They were picked on account of their health as well as height and degree of scrawniness. After November of 1944 though, death of gassing was discontinued, and the Germans had to find other means of killing for not only children, but adults as well. Other means of execution were, of course, the phenol injections that were injected straight into a child's heart. This type of death was often used for children who were part of experiments as well.²¹

Once the camp was liberated, exams were done on nearly 180 children. It was determined that most contracted diseases while at the camp. Over half of the children had vitamin deficiencies as well as being extremely emaciated. Another 40 percent of the children suffered from tuberculosis.²²

Elie Wiesel describes his time in Auschwitz like this:

“The infants thrown into fiery ditches... I did not say that they *were alive*, but that was what I thought. But then I convinced myself: no, they were dead, otherwise I surely would have lost my mind. And yet fellow inmates also saw them; they *were alive* when

²⁰ Gutman, 423.

²¹ Ibid., 424.

²² Ibid.

they were thrown into the flames. Historians among them, Telford Taylor, confirmed it. And yet somehow I did not lose my mind.”²³

Wiesel was fifteen when his family and he went into Auschwitz. There he saw some horrifying things. In his book, Wiesel talks about having a friend seeing infants used as targets by being tossed in the air.²⁴ Later, he talks about his father dying, and he could do nothing. Once he dad dies, he is to be moved into a children’s block. There his block is told to go line up because they are to be shot, execution style.²⁵

January 27, 1945 was the day Auschwitz camp was liberated by Soviet soldiers. They were able to free nearly 7000 prisoners. Prior to liberation though, Auschwitz was home to nearly a million prisoners.²⁶ The question then became what would happen to the survivors.

“Nearly all the young inmates chose to remain together with their family or friends, or lacking such intimate ties, to form new companionships. For the great majority of Jewish youths in the slave labor camps of Nazi-occupied Europe, close relationships were extremely important. We have seen for instance, how Alexander Ehrmann and his brother decided, ‘number one: the two of us always will stay together.’”²⁷

Nearly 8 to 90 percent of the survivors of Auschwitz had no family to return to. They travelled to Israel in hopes of making a new life for themselves. One psychological problem that many faced was the feeling of guilt. They were still alive while most, if not all, of their families

²³ Elie Wiesel, and Marion Wiesel. *Night*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006, 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁶ "Auschwitz." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

²⁷ Deborah Dwork. *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991, 242.

had perished. This brought the Auschwitz survivors sleep disturbances, anxiety as well as nightmares. Some faced depression and dysphoria as well, which were the main psychological symptoms that were experienced. Most of the survivors of this horrific event have found individual ways to deal with the guilt, the hate, and the deep traumatic wounds that this tragedy left them with. There have been few studies done on the children that survived this though.²⁸

²⁸ Gutman, 478-481.

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