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Articles

Coping with an Impossible Reality: The Jewish Sonderkommando of Auschwitz-Birkenau

By Jennifer Weed

Abstract: Despite the vast amount of western scholarly work on the Holocaust, there are issues that remain under-analyzed which would help nuance our understanding of this historical event. One of these issues is the experiences of groups who challenge our conceptual frameworks and present opportunities for developing different analytical methods. The testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando, or forced crematorium workers, of Auschwitz-Birkenau present such an opportunity by defying the categories used to describe victims and perpetrators, and by forcing us to reconsider how humans survive when conditions are extreme and violent. This paper argues that the testimonies of the Sonderkommando demonstrate that the conditions of their incarceration necessitated the construction of unique, situational system of personal morality and humanity and that their post-Holocaust lives are marred by extreme difficulty in attempts to construct usable narratives about their experiences. Using published testimony and interviews as a source base, the paper endeavors to open up a space in which the coping strategies of the Sonderkommando can be analyzed. To do so, it proposes two particular frames of analysis: the equivocal psyche (a mechanism that, in the absence of cultural, moral, and emotional guidance, constructs an ethical continuum, allowing for a range of mental responses to trauma), and usable narratives (the construction of a personal story of Holocaust trauma that can adequately convey the gravity of the situation and explain one's actions in that period in a way that does not offend the beliefs of the survivor and their post-Holocaust context).

Preface

Auschwitz, the largest and most prolific of the Nazi death camps, maintains a notorious reputation to this day for good reason: the unspeakable death and privation that occurred between 1939 and 1945 was on a level and scale that remains unparalleled in human history. The estimates of the number murdered in the camp and its surrounding auxiliaries vary widely (from one to four million), with the official count resting around 1.3 million. Regardless of this variance, it is clear that millions of people perished in what some have called the *anus mundi*¹, a small strip of Poland. The majority of Jewish prisoners were murdered soon after their arrival to Auschwitz-Birkenau, especially at the height of the industrialized mass murder operations in Auschwitz II from 1943-1944.² Those who were not killed immediately were tattooed with an identification number, shaved bald, and assigned to brutal work details in an effort to effectively dehumanize them and exploit their labor.

While much is known in Western discourse about the general ideology and conditions of Auschwitz, there are subsections of the prisoner population that remain obscured outside of scholarly circles, despite their integral positions both within Auschwitz and after liberation as witnesses (if they survived to

¹ This term, though used by scholars, actually originates with SS Doctor Johann Paul Kremer, who described Auschwitz as such in his personal diary. See Walter Laquer's "Forward" in: Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle: 1939-1945* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1990), xvi.

² The main complex of concentration camps known collectively as Auschwitz-Birkenau consisted of Auschwitz I (*Stammlager*, or main camp), Birkenau (Auschwitz II), and Monowitz-Buna (Auschwitz III). Construction on Auschwitz I began in 1940; it was originally intended to imprison and terrorize local Poles. The presence of a major railway juncture in the nearby town of Oświęcim and overcrowding in the *Stammlager* motivated the construction of Birkenau in 1941. Birkenau came to function as an extermination camp by 1942, with expansion of the infrastructure of gas chambers and crematoria occurring into 1943, and was thus the locus of the vast majority of the industrialized mass murder that took place in the complex, especially of Jewish prisoners. Auschwitz III, or Monowitz-Buna, was a slave labor camp utilized by the chemical manufacturing firm I.G. Farben. See Israel Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Indiana University Press, 1994); Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945: The Years of Extermination* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008); Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1996).

testify). The prime examples of people in such a position are the men of the *Sonderkommando*, or "special squad," which were teams of largely Jewish men who worked in the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz I and Birkenau. The tasks they were forced to perform exemplify the extreme outer boundaries of mental suffering, and the damage the few survivors carried out of Auschwitz-Birkenau remains difficult to conceive. Since they were the bearers of incredible Nazi secrets, the SS made a point to exterminate the members regularly, which accounts for the mere handful of testimonies that exist today.

Introduction

Once imprisoned, the Jewish men of the *Sonderkommando* were expressly prohibited from practicing their religious traditions and found that the mores and social norms they had previously followed were irrelevant. The conditions of their imprisonment as Jews and the struggle to survive necessitated the ability to discard moralistic notions that could prove dangerous. Thus, these men were bereft of the moral compasses that would have guided their actions in the outside world. Thus, the Nazi's crimes against humanity were more personal than transgressions against the human race as a whole: their actions also created crises of humanity and morality for the men who labored forcefully in the special squads. These crises remain extant in their memories. As such, the conditions of the *Sonderkommando's* incarceration necessitated the construction of unique, situational systems of personal morality and humanity and the testimonies of survivors demonstrate that their post-Holocaust lives are marred by extreme difficulty in attempts to construct usable narratives about their experiences.

***Arbeit Macht Frei*³**

In the world of Auschwitz-Birkenau, where work supervisors were encouraged to use deadly force without provocation and the dead were hardly distinguishable from the living, previously held sensibilities were of little use. However, in the unprecedented

³ "Work makes one free."

world of the *Sonderkommando*, where human beings were referred to as *Stücke* (pieces) and bodies were burned using their own melted fat as accelerant, reliance on the social mores and emotional responses of their lives before Auschwitz could prove fatal. This concept is best understood in the context of the work that these men were forced to perform on a daily basis.

Upon arrival to the railway ramp at Auschwitz, new prisoners were selected for one of two fates: forced labor and starvation or immediate death in the gas chambers. Those chosen for execution were herded into a large room where they disrobed (the *Auskleideraum*, or Undressing Hall) in anticipation of a disinfection shower. In fact, the room with the showerheads was merely a ruse, as it actually functioned as a hermetically sealed gas chamber. While in the *Auskleideraum*, men of the *Sonderkommando* were tasked with patrolling the anxious, hungry crowd and promising them that if they hurried up and showered, they would be given food and drink before being assigned to work teams. These promises were blatant lies, but to deviate from this script meant a cruel, immediate death for any special squad member who exposed the truth.⁴

After the naked, helpless people were herded into the gas chamber, it was sealed and deadly Zyklon-B crystals were poured into ventilated shafts that allowed the poisonous vapors to penetrate the room.⁵ Amidst the distinct screaming and coughing of the dying, the men of the special squad then gathered up the belongings left behind in the *Auskleideraum* and sent them away for sorting. Once all in the gas chamber were confirmed dead by the SS, fans dispersed the remaining gas and the door was opened to reveal a scene of unimaginable suffering. Bodies were piled in heaps, discolored, covered in blood and excrement, and tangled in a sickening mass of flesh as evidence of a traumatic collective death throes. Amongst the dead were people of advanced age, the

⁴ *Sonderkommando* survivor Filip Müller notes that a member who did just this was pushed into a crematorium oven alive as punishment. See *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 80.

⁵ The actual act of pouring the Zyklon-B into the gas chamber was always reserved for SS men. This is one step in the process from which the *Sonderkommando* were explicitly excluded. See Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*, 15; Jeremy Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: A New Look at the Eichmann Trial* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 201.

physically disabled, infants, and pregnant women, “some of whom had expressed the head of their bab[ies] just before they died.”⁶ The men of the *Sonderkommando* untangled the knot of corpses, sheared off the hair of the females, ripped out any gold or false teeth with pliers, and examined body orifices for any hidden valuables. The bodies were then dragged to an elevator, where they were transported in groups to the crematoriums on the floor above.

Once the elevator was unloaded upstairs, the next team arranged the bodies according to a pattern that would allow for the most efficient burning, often in groups of three or four, with the bodies of two or three men cremated alongside the body of a woman and/or child, as the body fat of the latter would facilitate the burning of the thinner corpses.⁷ The groups were loaded onto a metal stretcher of sorts, which was pushed into the raging heat of the oven and pulled back out empty as the bodies were held in place with a metal pole or pitchfork wielded by a *Sonderkommando* member. Approximately one half hour later, the process was repeated. Despite the heat, some larger bones like the pelvis remained unburned and were ground to dust and mixed with the ashes this procedure produced. The ashes were generally dumped into the River Vistula or one of its tributaries by *Sonderkommando* members under heavy guard. Rarely, the ashes were buried in large pits, some of which were later excavated by the men of the special squads.⁸

In Birkenau, the scale and scope of the operations were much larger than in Auschwitz I, which necessitated strategies and facilities that were decidedly different. Small cottages leftover from the previous town of Brzezinka were used as gas chambers and pits were dug for mass cremations before the Birkenau crematoria were constructed and later when the volume of corpses overwhelmed them. The pits macabre but efficient, thanks to their

⁶ Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 117.

⁷ Testimony of Shaul Chazan. Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 273. This is also noted in the testimony of other survivors of the special squads, such as Filip Müller, who were involved in or witness to this part of the process. See *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 99.

⁸ This process is recounted in numerous testimonies by *Sonderkommando* survivors, including Filip Müller, Shlomo Venezia, Morris Eisenstein, Saul Chasan, Ya'akov Silberberg.

meticulous design by SS Hauptsharführer Otto Moll (known to the men of the *Sonderkommando* as a notorious sadist⁹), who devised a channel in the center of each pit's floor which sloped toward pans on both ends. In these receptacles melted human fat was collected and poured by the *Sonderkommando* over the burning mass of bodies to further accelerate the flames. As explained in detail by survivor Filip Müller:

As the heap of bodies settled no air was able to get in from outside. This meant that we stokers had constantly to pour oil or wood alcohol on the burning corpses, in addition to human fat, large quantities of which had collected and was boiling in the two collecting pans on either side of the pit. The sizzling fat was scooped out with buckets on a long curved rod and poured all over the pit causing flames to leap up amid much crackling and hissing. Dense smoke and fumes rose incessantly. The air reeked of oil, fat, benzole and burnt flesh.¹⁰

When faced with such testimony, it becomes clear that the experiences of the *Sonderkommando* were so extreme that their ability to function after Auschwitz is remarkable. In addition to such trauma, these men bore an enormous responsibility as witnesses to explain the depth, scope, and methods of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" and to elucidate the last moments of the innumerable victims who died upon its implementation. Still, their experiences as witnesses are arguably exceeded by the reality of their positions—that their work constituted active participation, however forced, in a process that destroyed the remains of millions of their fellow Jews. The men of the *Sonderkommando* had only two choices when designated for the squad: perform the work and live (at least temporarily) or refuse the work and die immediately. Nevertheless, to opt for life inside the crematoria and gas chambers of Auschwitz was to enter into an agreement that exacted a toll on the mind and soul. The resulting

⁹ Müller, 130; Greif, 203.

¹⁰ Müller, 136. This process is validated by the memoirs of Camp Kommandant Rudolf Höss, who describes it in similar detail. See Rudolf Höss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, ed. by Steven Paskuly, trans. by Andrew Pollinger (New York: De Capo Press, 1992), 160.

survival strategy was a simultaneous destruction and preservation of oneself as it kept one's physical life force intact, but doomed the person to an existence that cannot be clearly defined as perpetrator or victim.

The Grey Zone

The internal conflict of the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz-Birkenau was created by the conditions of their imprisonment. The sheer scale of the camp's operation, which adapted modern industrial techniques to the destruction of human beings en masse, necessitated a system of factory-style workers and overseers that were plucked from the pool of prisoners. It was sensible, according to the ideologies of the SS, to place particularly cruel Gentile prisoners in positions with a certain modicum of power, because they reinforced their policies of extremity, forced labor, and nonsensical killing. Such ideals and the labor requirements of the massive system gave rise to an entire network of prisoner-functionaries such as *Kapos* (squad foremen) and *Blockälteste* (block supervisors). These were usually non-Jewish political prisoners who obtained something of a privileged status and often abused it, much to the delight of the camp's Nazi administration.

The prisoner-functionary system was not limited to Gentiles in positions of power, however. The members of the *Sonderkommando* were in positions that afforded them a type of power that was less concrete and did not extend over other prisoners, but the nature of their work pushed them closer to complicity and collaboration with their Nazi oppressors than any "regular" Jewish prisoner. Complex issues such as these are rife with misjudgments and confusion, as people in prisoner-functionary positions seem to inhabit two spaces at once, that of oppressor and oppressed, while also failing to fully inhabit either space correctly or completely. The very name assigned to the prisoner-functionary category belies the duality and contradiction it encompassed, which explains why such people were inhabitants of what Holocaust scholar and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi calls the "Grey Zone."

The Grey Zone describes the area between the two extremes of the camp inhabitants, namely SS officers and guards versus their defenseless victims. According to Levi, there exists no clear boundary between these two categories, and the indistinct

area that occupies the space instead is “studded with obscene or pathetic figures,” some of whom “possess both [these] qualities simultaneously.”¹¹ The figures he describes are torn in two directions, being neither victims nor perpetrators in the truest sense, and the incongruity of their existences is one of the most disconcerting aspects of life in Auschwitz. The *Sonderkommando*, with an exceedingly ambiguous position that made them neither fully innocent nor fully guilty, are utilized by Levi as the supreme example of Grey Zone. The work these men performed indicated a level of complicity and collaboration with the Nazi program of Jewish destruction, but the fact that murder was not *de rigueur* as per their “job descriptions” leaves them a rather indefinable group in the Auschwitz hierarchy.

Levi maintains that the Nazi system of using prisoners as functionaries and administrators faced inherent problems, as they were, “collaborators who originate[d] in the adversary group, ex-enemies” who were “untrustworthy by definition.”¹² The best way to overcome this problem and trust these enemies of the state, he claims, was to bind them to the Nazi regime by “burden[ing] them with guilt, cover[ing] them with blood, compromis[ing] them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back.”¹³ Whereas such a policy likely grew out of twisted ideals about efficiency and the utilization of free labor, the special squad seems to take this both literally and a step further, to a degree that Levi deems that their inception was “National Socialism’s most demonic crime.”¹⁴ Rather than simply utilizing slave labor in the crematoriums, where work was both mentally and physically taxing to an enormous degree, he argues that one can hear “satanic laughter” and chilling implications behind the plan to use Jewish prisoners in such a fashion:

[I]t is consummated, we have succeeded, you no longer are the other race, the anti-race, the prime enemy of the millennial Reich; you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with

¹¹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 40.

¹² Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

us. You are like us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother.¹⁵

Further, Levi declares that, "the existence of the squads had a meaning, a message: 'We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if we so wish, and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours.'"¹⁶

The Equivocal Psyche

Primo Levi's beliefs about the inception of the *Sonderkommando* indicate why he chose them as the flagship example of the Grey Zone and its complexity, but it is useful to apply his logic about this *institution* to the men of the squads *themselves* in ways that he likely never considered. This amorphous zone, with its blurred boundaries and blending of the areas which surround it, can be used to understand and analyze the individual mental processes of *Sonderkommando* members. As stated, these men were denied their culture: their beliefs, morals, and humanity. With no substitute systems available to fill the void, they were forced to create their own systems on an individual basis. These creations were necessary to allow them to exist and survive in unprecedented situations. Without these constructs, the men of the *Sonderkommando* could not have conceivably withstood the inhumanity of their positions.

Shlomo Venezia, a survivor of the special squad, documents an instance early in his tenure where a man in his mid-twenties was carrying corpses to the burning pits in Birkenau and stopped his work suddenly and inexplicably. Despite urgings from his fellow squad members and screams from an enraged Otto Moll (the aforementioned sadistic *Hauptsturmführer*), the worker stared into the distance for a long period of time, entirely impassive.

[Moll] started lashing him with his whip. But the man just stood there, motionless, as if nothing could affect him anymore; he didn't even attempt to avoid

¹⁵ Ibid., 55.

¹⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

the blows. In my opinion, he'd completely lost his wits; his mind was no longer of this world. He no longer seemed to feel pain or fear. The German, furious at the offense committed and the lack of any reaction to his blows, pulled a pistol from his belt. [...] We saw him take aim and fire from a distance of a few yards. But, as if the bullet hadn't hit him, the man continued to stand there, motionless. [...] The German, increasingly agitated, fired a second shot from the same pistol. But still no reaction; the bullets, the noise, the fear -- nothing seemed to affect him.¹⁷

The young man was finally killed by a third shot from a larger-caliber weapon in Moll's possession.¹⁸ This poor man's inaction, even through whipping and bullet wounds, is indicative of a paralyzing mental break that was not followed by the necessary construction of a psychological Grey Zone of sorts, which would have allowed him to function in this unimaginable world of horror and atrocity.

This mental Grey Zone is a situation-based system of morals and humanity that I call the *equivocal psyche*. In the absence of cultural, moral, and emotional guidance, the equivocal psyche constructs an ethical continuum, allowing for a range of mental responses to trauma. At the bottom boundary of this zone, one can entirely surrender their humanity and behave in a way that is devoid of humane hallmark emotions such as grief, empathy, or mercy. This allows the person to become indifferent to suffering, a quality that was often paramount to the survival of *Sonderkommando* members. A temporary increase in sympathy or humane emotion was not an indication of the equivocal psyche's disappearance; rather, it was a sign that a shift on the continuum had taken place. Such is the nature of equivocation, as it is difficult to define such a state and the reaction is subject to the individual's interpretation of their surroundings and circumstances.

Morality also plays an important role in the equivocal psyche. For the *Sonderkommando*, previously-held systems of morality bore no utility inside Auschwitz-Birkenau. On the

¹⁷ Shlomo Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 60-61.

¹⁸ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 61.

contrary, such ideologies were inherently dangerous as hesitation was tantamount to a death sentence. Out of necessity, these beliefs were discarded and replaced by a system that would render otherwise unbearable circumstances virtually unmoving. For example, in their pre-Holocaust existences, the men of the special squad would surely have felt a moral obligation to warn people that they were about to be murdered if they knew that was undoubtedly the case. To be forced to lie to these people and stand by as they died would certainly have caused internal conflicts severe enough to permanently traumatize, leaving the men crippled with guilt and regret. Instead, their equivocal psyches constructed a morality which rationalized such approaches as lying and inaction, allowing the murders to proceed unquestioned. This construction told the men of the *Sonderkommando* that it was better for these people to die hopeful than needlessly terrified, and that it was morally sound to lie in order to preserve order and, by extension, one's own life.

An extreme example of the equivocal psyche at work is contained in the straightforward words of Tadeusz Borowski, a Polish Gentile Auschwitz survivor who volunteered to help the *Sonderkommando* working at the railway ramp for a day. Borowski wrote about his experiences in a way that conveyed the disjointed, senseless horror of the camp and the special squad, and his words are profoundly disturbing. While herding new arrivals out of cattle cars and collecting their belongings for the Germans, Borowski is repeatedly asked about what the future holds for the fresh prisoners. When asked politely, "Sir, what's going to happen to us?," Borowski responds with a bold lie: "I don't know, I don't understand Polish."¹⁹ He justifies this transgression by stating that such a response is "the camp law: people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. *This is the only permissible form of charity.*"²⁰ Surely, Borowski's pre-Holocaust self could never have understood that herding unsuspecting victims to their deaths with lies was tantamount to charity. His equivocal psyche, which functioned only within the context of Auschwitz and the time he spent with the *Sonderkommando*, allowed him to rationalize such

¹⁹ Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Translated by Barbara Vedder (1959 in Polish. Reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37. Emphasis added.

an act as permissible, even merciful, when the outcome of such situations was always the same - the people died regardless, and exposing the truth would only serve to send them to their deaths afraid when that need not be the case. Such an approach is a quintessential example of the ambiguity of the Grey Zone and the flexibility of the equivocal psyche, and it masterfully displays how these systems operated to make the unbelievable quite acceptable.

Filip Müller exemplifies this convergence in his written testimony, which records his understanding of the very same situation:

Would anything have been changed in the course of events if any of us had stepped out and, facing the crowd, had shouted: "Do not be deceived, men and women, you are taking your last walk, a terrible death in the gas chamber awaits you!" The majority would not have believed us because it was too terrible to be believed. On the other hand a warning like this would have led to a panic, ending in a bloody massacre and our certain death. Did we have the right to take such a risk and, in taking it, to gamble away our chance to go on living for the time being? What, at that moment, was more important: a few hundred men and women, still alive but facing imminent death from which there was no saving them, or a handful of eyewitnesses, one or two of whom might, at the price of suffering and denial of self, survive to bear witness against the murderers some day?²¹

Müller's anguished fatalism explains this unique rationale within the context of accepting responsibility for bearing witness to the atrocities. In allowing these people to die without raising dissent, he is justifying their deaths in the interest of leaving eyewitnesses behind. The compliance of the *Sonderkommando* with this process, upon which their own survival was contingent, placed them squarely within the Grey Zone, but their ability to rationalize such behavior is a working example of the equivocal psyche.

²¹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 37.

The equivocal psyche is somewhat similar to what Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer calls the impromptu self.²² Langer describes a situation in which there is "a kind of annihilation, a totally paradoxical killing of the self by the self in order to keep the self alive."²³ The annihilated self was that which guided the survivor's actions before the Holocaust. Despite its name, the annihilated self was not entirely destroyed, but it was reduced to tatters in such a way that it was rendered unrecoverable as a whole entity. Once the annihilated self was sufficiently shattered, the new creation, the impromptu self, held primacy "during the ordeal of survival."²⁴ While the impromptu self helps explain some of the problems *Sonderkommando* survivors encountered with memory when the time came to testify (which will be discussed later), it is only part of the answer to the question of how men in the special squads survived and coped with their Auschwitz-Birkenau experiences in real time. It does not delineate the complex mental processes which allowed them to participate in the destruction of their own people and witness unimaginable atrocity without losing their sanity. This is because the impromptu self is an analytical tool for understanding Holocaust survivor testimony *in general*; the unique situation of the men of the Jewish *Sonderkommando* requires a more comprehensive explanation of how such unprecedented extremity was survived both physically and mentally.

It is the marrying of the impromptu self and the equivocal psyche that provides the construction of an inclusive analytical framework with which the testimony of *Sonderkommando* members can be adequately examined. Their personalities were altered to a degree that a new "self," the impromptu self, emerged to take control of a situation for which the annihilated self had no tools to cope. However, these men also lost the ability to utilize cultural and humane norms and markers for guidance. While the impromptu self was employed by all manner of Auschwitz prisoners, their ability to hold onto some semblance of their culture (as evidenced by their version of trading markets, the tendency to create substitute families, and the capacity to maintain hope of

²² Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 126.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

liberation²⁵) meant they did not require such a dramatic reorganization of their psyches. The men of the *Sonderkommando*, on the other hand, were in a situation that necessitated a drastic change taking place at an alarming speed.

The emergence of the situational system of morality and humanity that is the equivocal psyche was an incredibly swift process. It goes against common logic that the life-long process of enculturation could be negated and replaced in a matter of hours. However, the gravity of the situation in which the *Sonderkommando* found themselves necessitated an incredibly rapid response. There were cases in which conventional logic ruled and a person was unable to withstand the drastic change—Shlomo Venezia's story of the young man whose mind and body stopped functioning serves as an example of such a case. Those that were able to surrender themselves to the shift in a way that he could not were able to survive, in some cases until the end of the war, and their ability to change their worldviews so quickly was absolutely essential in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination complexes. Though the SS could not and surely did not consider the moral conundrums men on the special squads would face, they undoubtedly organized the work to separate the weak from the strong, in both the physical and mental senses. Integral to this process was a rite common to all secret societies and exclusive institutions: the initiation.

Initiation

We had a gut feeling [on the first day in the *Sonderkommando*] that we couldn't identify. We didn't know a thing. On the one hand, I saw the bodies down there [in the mass burning pits]; on the other hand, the Kapo and the SS men were beating me and cursing at me all the time, to the accompaniment of barking dogs. It was hell on earth. If there's a hell after death, I think it must look like that.²⁶

²⁵ Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*.

²⁶ Testimony of Saul Chazan. Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 266-267.

Like most initiations, the first day on a Special Squad was intended to give new members a grasp of the fundamentals of their new position. Indeed, narratives that include the sight of tangled masses of fresh corpses and the machinery conceived to burn them into oblivion on the very first day are near-universal amongst *Sonderkommando* survivors, despite the fact that every initiation was surely unique by virtue of differing circumstances and personalities. However, the extremity of the extended *Sonderkommando* experience is foreshadowed in this opening ritual, which seems designed to shock members into submission. In general, it stands to reason that the large majority of the men who entered the crematoria as workers had never before seen piles of dead bodies, and the initial confrontation with such overwhelming, unnatural death incited a level of fear and horror that paralyzed all into compliance.

Just as universal was the result of the initiation process: the inability to resist or react to what these men observed. Knowing that their very lives depended upon their ability to perform such horrifying work as handling and cremating the dead bodies of men, women, and children, the men of the *Sonderkommando* had to find a way to minimize the psychological damage of their experiences. The response was incredibly rapid, as was necessary, and as intense as the conditions of their incarceration: these men dramatically restructured their internal systems of morality and humanity, creating new systems that were individual and contextual. These constructs, their equivocal psyches, were much like personal Grey Zones that gave them a gradient on which to judge their own actions as moral, humane, right, or wrong.

Though this was a drastic step, many of those in the squads are unable to articulate exactly how such a shift occurred, as it seems that this process was undertaken outside the conscious mind. Survivor Ya'akov Silberberg describes the horror of his first day in the crematorium, when his personal friend and Kapo of his new squad, Shlomo Kirchenbaum, insisted, “the first night is really hard but you get used to it.”²⁷ His response gives unique insight to the struggle which raged within him at the time: “How can a person get used to it? Look, I’m not human anymore!”²⁸ The requirement that Silberberg dispose of his previous moral compass and become totally inured to suffering made him feel as though he had lost his

²⁷Testimony of Ya'akov Silberberg. Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 317.

²⁸Ibid.

humanity. In reality, his initiation had forced him to begin the establishment of his equivocal psyche, which would render useless the sensibilities of the outside world and allow him to perform his task in Auschwitz with impunity.

The struggle to grasp such a reality was compounded by disorientation and the ever-present threat of violence posed by the SS. As intended, the initiation was usually successful in bringing the new *Sonderkommando* members into immediate, unquestioning obedience. Filip Müller describes his first few hours on the squad by stating: "I was like one hypnotized and obeyed each order implicitly. Fear of more blows, the ghastly sight of piled-up corpses, the biting smoke, the humming of fans and the flickering of flames, the whole infernal chaos had paralysed [*sic*] my sense of orientation as well as my ability to think."²⁹ This unique combination of fear, horror, and confusion stunned Müller and his fellow squad members to a degree that is inconceivable to anyone who was not in Auschwitz-Birkenau working alongside them. The startling revelation of one's new reality and that escape from this horrific existence was impossible, made mental adaptation not only plausible, but urgently crucial. Shlomo Venezia explains: "It's difficult to imagine now, but we didn't think of anything - we couldn't exchange a single word. Not because it was forbidden, but because we were terror-struck. We had turned into robots, obeying orders while trying not to think, so we could survive for a few hours longer."³⁰

The term "robot" to describe the mental state of *Sonderkommando* members is recurrent in their testimony, as is the similar term "automaton."³¹ Both express the feelings of dehumanization that accompanied their loss of cultural and moral guidance and the use of terms that are devoid of human emotion and entirely mechanical to describe themselves is an indication that their equivocal psyches were created outside of their conscious minds. Since they had no control over the processes that created these mental constructs, they may feel ill-at-ease with the way in which they coped with such horror. This discomfort is evidenced by the words of Jakov Silberberg, who distances himself from the idea of coping by condemning himself as something less than human: "From the first day I entered another world. I didn't know

²⁹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 12.

³⁰ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 59.

³¹ See Müller, 88; Greif, 103, 266, 299.

where on earth I was. I ceased to be a human being. I couldn't tell who I was and what I was doing."³² While Silberberg did not entirely cease to be human, his reflection on his past behavior likely presented him with a person he did not recognize, whose behaviors he could no longer comprehend (the problems of memory with regard to survivors like Ya'akov Silberberg will be addressed later in this analysis). In all, it seems a great deal of disassociation was imbued in the equivocal psyche and its processes, and this disconnect with humanity was vital to the long-term mental survival of *Sonderkommando* members.

Maintenance

To maintain their sanity in a such a situation, the men of the Auschwitz-Birkenau *Sonderkommando* had to create emotional distance between themselves and the victims whose destruction was the reason for their survival. The same men who were horrified by the idea of handling corpses on the first day found themselves decidedly unmoved by even the most incredible scenes of suffering and death only a short time later. According to Shlomo Venezia:

Your only choice was to get used to it. Very quickly, too. On the first days, I wasn't even able to swallow my bread when I thought of all the corpses my hands had touched. But what could you do? A person had to eat.... After a week or two, you got used to it. You got used to everything. The same way that I'd gotten used to the sickening smell. After a while, you stopped registering it.³³

Ya'akov Silberberg's testimony is strikingly similar, stating:

I definitely became indifferent [to the bodies]. You lose your ability to feel. The bodies no longer had any value for me. Gradually, I stopped having human emotions about the bodies. I no longer related to them as I would to human bodies.

³² Testimony of Josef Sackar. Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 93.

³³ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 102-103.

Sometimes they were covered in blood and feces. You get so used to sights like these that during breaks or whenever people got hungry, they sat down on the bodies and ate [...] as if it were in another world.³⁴

In fact, the revelation that *Sonderkommando* men were able to eat and drink in the presence of (or even on top of) corpses is quite common in survivor testimony, as is the idea that they "got used to it" in order to survive. The use of such examples seems to be more than simply relating common experiences; their utility lies in the conveyance of the horror these men experienced and the true depth of the ensuing trauma. The image of an average young man who can eat with filthy hands while actually *seated* upon the corpses of his own people conjures up more than simple shock, as was likely the intention: it is a visual representation of the Grey Zone and the equivocal psyche. Only within the contradictory Grey Zone can one fathom such behavior, and only with the moral guidance and disassociation of the equivocal psyche can such conduct be properly explained. Whereas previously-held sensibilities and the cultural context of one's upbringing would likely dictate that this is abnormal, even psychopathic behavior, the equivocal psyche of the *Sonderkommando* member proclaims such actions as acceptable, even commonplace, and undeserving of recrimination because of the situation that originated them.

Due to the situational nature of the equivocal psyche, it is a flexible mechanism that allows for a range of responses to changing circumstances. Whereas the initiation provoked the reaction of robotic compliance and disbelief, the men of the *Sonderkommando* were able to shift to a different point on the continuum as they spent more time in the crematoria. No longer acting out of simple fear of violence, they came to accept actions that would have been unimaginable only days or weeks earlier when they arrived at the complexes of death. In this lies the most important feature of the equivocal psyche – it maintains the ability to adapt to a wide range of circumstances.

That their psyches were adaptable is not to say that the trauma of the *Sonderkommando* experience was free of extensive mental damage. While sanity was preserved, disconnection with

³⁴ Testimony of Ya'akov Silberberg. Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 322.

the ideas of morality and emotion extant in the outside world was disconcerting and harmful for the men of the special squads. In their testimonies, they recognize their descent into inhumanity and express distress about the process.

Shaul Chazan: I'd stopped being human [after a few days]. If I'd been human, I couldn't have endured it for even one minute. We kept going because we'd lost our humanity.³⁵ As time passed, we got particularly depressed. We didn't feel like thinking people anymore. We just worked, ate, and slept, like automatons.³⁶

Ya'akov Gabai: Reality proves that people are crueler than animals. Yeah, we were animals. We didn't have emotions. Sometimes we doubted whether we were still human.³⁷

Leon Cohen: During that time we had no emotions. We were totally drained. We blocked up our hearts; we were dehumanized. We worked like machines. We were human beings devoid of human emotion. We were really animals, not people. It's frightening, but that's how it was - a tragedy.³⁸

Dehumanized and victimized to a degree that can be difficult to understand, these men arguably suffered from a sense of identity that was severely damaged. While it is impossible to quantitatively measure such a condition, such damage seems a plausible consequence of their experiences, and accounts for the common feelings of depression, disassociation, and emotional deficit.

³⁵ Testimony of Shaul Chazan. Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 273.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 305.

The Buried Diaries of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando

The overwhelming majority of *Sonderkommando* members did not survive to give testimony. Their positions afforded them a level of knowledge about the processes of mass murder that made their survival dangerous for the Nazi regime. The SS was careful to minimize the survival rate of these men (who could conceivably testify against them with alarming accuracy if allowed to survive), so the overwhelming majority of the men of the *Sonderkommando* died long before liberation. To accomplish this goal of attrition, the SS subjected the squads to regular selections and liquidations, and sheer luck kept a member of the special squad alive for more than six months.³⁹ Extraordinary luck and quick thinking were required to see liberation, as was the ability to cope with the reality of the special squad and its work. Most of the men of the *Sonderkommando* were not lucky enough to experience all of these conditions at the correct time, but even those who died in the camp found the drive to testify so powerful that they wrote invaluable testimonies from the inside - primary, real-time documents which they wrote by hand and buried in various receptacles on the grounds of the crematorium.⁴⁰ They accepted that it was incumbent upon them, as eyewitnesses who might not survive, to record an unparalleled account of the destruction of European Jewry within Auschwitz.

Several of these manuscripts have been unearthed thus far, and the words of these brutalized men haunt from beyond the grave with juxtaposed emotions: urgency and futility, shame and pride, responsibility and hopelessness. Knowing that they would die, men like Zalman Gradowski, Leyb Langfus, and Zalman Lewenthal secretly recorded their terrible knowledge in the shadow of the crematoria, giving us the only documents discovered thus far of the Auschwitz experience written on the inside. In these words, we hear the voices of the murdered begging for justice not for their

³⁹ There are notable exceptions to this rule, however. Those with certain training, such as stokers and mechanics, were often spared during selections because of their specialized skills. See Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle: 1939-1945*, 278.

⁴⁰ See the edited volume: Bezwinska, Jadwiga, and Danuta Czech, eds, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Prisoners in Crematorium Squads Found at Auschwitz* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1992).

own truncated lives, but for that of the multitudes whose slaughter they witnessed in the last days of their lives:

Dear finder, search everywhere, in every inch of soil. Tens of documents are buried under it, mine and those of other persons, which will throw light on everything that was happening here. Great quantities of teeth are also buried here. It was we, the Kommando workers, who expressly have strewn them all over the terrain, as many as we could, so that the world should find material traces of the millions of murdered people. We ourselves have lost hope of being able to live to see the moment of liberation. [...] I am writing these words in a moment of the greatest danger and excitement. May the future judge us on the base of my notes and may the world see in them, if only one drop, the minimum, of this tragic world amidst which we had lived.⁴¹

Zalman Gradowski wrote these words in a letter dated September 6, 1944 and buried it along with 81 other pages of writing in a corked glass bottle near the Birkenau crematoria.⁴² Gradowski was one of the main organizers of the famous *Sonderkommando* uprising on October 7, 1944, which took the lives of three SS men and resulted in the death of 450 squad members (250 in the fighting itself and 200 executed afterward by the SS).⁴³ For orchestrating the only uprising in Auschwitz history that was carried out, Gradowski was hanged the following day after suffering incredibly cruel torture that included the crushing of his skull.⁴⁴ The manner of his death was something he anticipated because of his intention to lead the revolt, and he told his friend and fellow inmate Ya'akov Freimark that "he would someday wipe out his sins and those of his comrades with his blood."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Bezwinska, Jadwiga, and Danuta Czech, eds, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 75-76.

⁴² Gutman, Yisrael, and Michael Berenbaum, eds, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 523-524.

⁴³ Czech, 726.

⁴⁴ Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 523.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 527. There are variations on this story in other sources, but the overall effect of the story remains unchanged.

Found buried in a glass jar in 1962, the deteriorated manuscript of Zalman Leventhal, Gradowski's contemporary, provides evidence of the equivocal psyche at work from the unique perspective of one still within the camp, as Leventhal did not survive the special squad either.⁴⁶ He describes the mental state of his fellow *Sonderkommando* members, noting conditions in words that are remarkably similar to those of the survivor's in their own testimonies:

I must speak the truth here, that some of that group have in the course of time so entirely lost themselves that we ourselves were simply ashamed. They simply forgot what they were doing [...] and with time [...] they got so used to it that it was even strange [that no one wanted] to weep and to complain; that [...] such normal, average [...] simple and unassuming men [...] of necessity get used to everything so that these happenings make no more impression on them. Day after day they stand and look on how tens of thousands of people are perishing and [do] nothing.⁴⁷

The way in which Leventhal describes the *Sonderkommando* "getting used to" their position and its ghastly work is identical to that of nearly all special squad survivors who reflected on their experiences after liberation. As well, his depiction of men "look[ing] on how tens of thousands of people are perishing and doing nothing" is a clear and definitive example of the type of disassociation typified by the situational, Auschwitz-specific equivocal psyche. It seems that such a coping mechanism was incredibly common amongst men of the special squad, which indicates its import to their mental survival.

Elsewhere in his haunting manuscript, Leventhal demonstrates incredible foresight and analytical sophistication

⁴⁶ Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 527.

⁴⁷ Bezwinska and Czech, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 139. Areas in square brackets and ellipses indicate sections of missing writing, as the dampness degraded the document to a degree that portions of it are illegible, and writing in the brackets indicates words inserted by the editors.

when he fatalistically discusses the way in which he and his comrades will be studied:

No one can imagine the events that occurred, because it is unimaginable to exactly recount our experiences.... However, we - the small group of grey people - will present the historian with quite a task, as well as the psychologist interested in learning of man's mental condition while practicing such terrible, dirty work. Who knows whether these researchers will ever get to the truth, whether anyone will ever be able to.⁴⁸

One can only hope that someone will at least come close to explaining the truth of Leventhal's and his fellow squad members' experiences.

The buried writings of the *Sonderkommando* serve to validate the words of the lucky few who survived via their corroboration of testimony that is difficult for some to believe and accept.⁴⁹ As well, they open a window into one of the largest crimes in history from a point of view that is extremely rare: one of a prisoner while he was incarcerated in a Nazi death camp, witnessing the unbelievable, instead of reflection after the fact. As such, it is important to remember that these are not survivor testimonies. Rather, they are the furtive and desperate last will and testament for several men who felt that history deserved to know the truth, even if it cost them their lives.

Aftermath

Life [was destroyed in me]. Since then I've never had a normal life. I've never been able to pretend that everything was all right and go off dancing, like others, without a care in the world.... Everything takes me back to the camp. Whatever I do, whatever I see, my mind keeps harking back to the

⁴⁸ Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 373.

⁴⁹ The testimonies of *Sonderkommando* survivors (especially that of Filip Müller) have been used by Holocaust deniers as counterfactual evidence against its occurrence. See the Institute for Historical Revisionism website for published pamphlets and articles on the *Sonderkommando*, <http://www.ihr.org>.

same place. It's as if the "work" I was forced to do there never really left my head. *Nobody ever really gets out of the crematorium.*⁵⁰

Shlomo Venezia's simple declaration that one can never truly escape the horror of the Auschwitz-Birkenau crematoria appears to be unfortunately true. In the end, there were only two kinds of *Sonderkommando* members: those who died in the camp and those precious few who lived forever after liberation in the dark shadow of the crematoria. The trauma experienced by the men of the *Sonderkommando* who survived can never truly be healed, and many find simply leading normal lives post-Holocaust to be too great a challenge—one for which they are seriously ill-equipped. Many express the feeling of being broken or irreparably altered by their experiences, and such feelings spring from a convergence of several situations: the loss of most or all of one's family, the inability to properly function in a world of humane emotions, the transition out of the equivocal psyche, and the problems of reflection on horrendous memories.

The most immediate, pressing problem upon liberation from Auschwitz, outside of physical disability and disease, was confronting the decimation of one's family. Many prisoners entered the camp as vivacious sons, brothers, and husbands, only to leave as homeless, damaged orphans, aged well beyond their years.⁵¹ In some cases, this made liberation seem decidedly anticlimactic: it brought long-desired freedom, but what do with that freedom was unclear. Without homes to which they could return or families to connect, liberation represented a moment in which there was freedom to choose but a lack of viable choices. As such, with this freedom came an emptiness that one is hard-pressed to fill as an uprooted, tortured individual with no supportive network.

The men of the Auschwitz-Birkenau *Sonderkommando* had the added pain of intimate knowledge regarding the actual processes that constituted the destruction of humans in Auschwitz. They could hold no illusions about how their beloved family members died as they had seen the death factories with their own

⁵⁰ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 155. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ The exclusion of women in Auschwitz is not to diminish their importance or the gravity of their experiences. As this study focuses on the *Sonderkommando*, which were exclusively male, it is helpful to keep the scope of the analysis focused on men.

eyes. This knowledge carried the added sting of deep shame, as these actions were committed by their brethren, the *Sonderkommando*. Survivors of the squad had to contend with the fact that they themselves had done the very same to the families of innumerable others. The scar of this fact is deep in these men, as evidenced by their post-Holocaust psychological states. Josef Sackar claims, "I don't sleep at night. I sleep two or three hours, that's all. I've been that way for years. Because of the memories."⁵² Ya'akov Silberberg describes his mental anguish as suffering that he endures constantly, and, as a result, "I cannot cry anymore. All emotions of a human being, of crying, have died in me. [...] I think I'm no longer a person."⁵³ These men need not imagine how the end of their loved one's lives played out: they had clear and distinct memories of the screams, the tangled corpses, and the cremation process.

Bearing these mental scars, *Sonderkommando* survivors faced issues of adjustment regarding their equivocal psyches and impromptu selves, which had served them well but posed a threat to their post-Holocaust survival. Once outside the unique system of Auschwitz-Birkenau, these coping mechanisms were no longer required and actually posed as potential hindrances to their reunion with civilization. They had to resurrect the tatters of their annihilated, pre-trauma selves and use them to construct personalities relevant to the postwar world, with the added problems of horrific memories and shame over the terms of their survival. Langer describes this new incarnation as the integrated self, as it is something of an amalgam that takes several perspectives into account when constructing the post-disaster identity.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the post-Auschwitz self had to drastically reorganize its inner systems of morality and humanity, much in the same fashion as the pre-Auschwitz self was required to do upon entrance into the camp. The result of the first shift, the equivocal psyche, was not an experiential lens compatible with the world outside of Auschwitz-Birkenau, as evidenced by its ability to allow *Sonderkommando* members to eat their meals whilst seated upon corpses. Such sensibilities were drastically inconsistent with the mores of postwar society, and had to be discarded.

⁵² Testimony of Josef Sackar. Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 121.

⁵³ Testimony of Ya'akov Silberberg. *Ibid.*, 334.

⁵⁴ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 133.

Alongside issues of maladjustment that the *Sonderkommando* experienced in the absence of familial support and the shift away from their contradictory Auschwitz selves, was their difficulty transitioning back into the postwar world of "normal" emotion and attachment. When the moral guidance of their upbringing was discarded in favor of their flexible, situational equivocal psyches, the prewar moral structure of these men, in some cases beyond all repair. It is for this reason that Shlomo Venezia reports difficulty in raising his own children - he was spiritually damaged, broken even, and likely found his capacity for nurturance severely hampered by the shame of his all-encompassing victimization. Having experienced this shift, Venezia found himself unable to enjoy idyllic family experiences, and instead was decidedly uncomfortable and found them incompatible with his mental state:

I knew that I couldn't behave like a normal father who helps his children to do their homework and merrily plays with them. I was lucky to have a very intelligent wife who was able to manage that side of things.⁵⁵

Venezia's words explain his complicated position as both a father and a *Sonderkommando* survivor. He could not conceive of how to be a "normal father" in light of what he had done while in Auschwitz. This deep shame over his own actions and his memories darkened even the most joyous of occasions and caused Venezia to avoid interaction with his family on even a basic emotional level. Ya'akov Silberberg echoes this pain when describing his life after Auschwitz:

I was depressed. I ran away from myself. I had only two things in my life: work and sleep - to escape from the memories. I didn't raise my children; they grew up only thanks to my wife. She took care of them. I couldn't. [...] The nights were long and agonizing. They were torture. [...] I was ashamed [of his work on the special squad]. Ashamed of myself, of the things a man was

⁵⁵ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 155.

capable of. That's why my wife and children didn't know [about his work].⁵⁶

Though these men may have been unaware of why they could not handle raising their children, one facet of the problem seems to be that they found it impossible to reconcile the intense shame of their victimization with their roles as fathers, which pinned on them the responsibility of parenthood. In light of their experiences, they found it difficult to conceive of themselves as authority figures. This was compounded by their disrupted sense of self, which made functioning in the post-Holocaust world difficult. Realizing this issue brings up difficult questions about one's social and cultural identity, the quality of their existence, and their capacity to be comfortable in the world.

Finally, one exceedingly difficult aspect of *Sonderkommando* survival is reflection, which requires the men to remember the crimes they witnessed and the behaviors they exhibited while in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Such reflection is undertaken while the survivor is trying to make their way in a post-Holocaust world, and one in which their integrated self is in control. Since their equivocal psyches have been discarded, it becomes difficult for these men to justify some of their actions, even if they were in the interest of survival. As Langer states, "the situation-based ethics of the camp led to a way of behaving for which we do not have - and probably never will have - a systematic analytic approach."⁵⁷ The closest we can get to an analytical framework of the *Sonderkommando* experiences are Levi's Grey Zone and the equivocal psyche, that provide an admittedly imperfect framework to incite further research into the contextualization of the Auschwitz experience.

As difficult as it is for the reader to analyze these testimonies without a working framework, it is even more problematic for the survivors themselves to construct what I call *usable narratives*. When attempting to explain atrocity and privation, many survivors find that the vocabulary required to convey the gravity of the situation simply did not exist. However, the issue of constructing usable narratives consists of far more than vocabulary deficits - it strikes at the heart of *Sonderkommando*

⁵⁶ Testimony of Ya'akov Silberberg. Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 333.

⁵⁷ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 122.

testimonies and examines how they told their stories of inhumanity while inhabiting post-Holocaust societies.

Tainted Memory

When analyzing the testimonies of the Auschwitz-Birkenau *Sonderkommando*, it is important to take into account that these were reflections on a past that is immeasurably different from the present in which they speak. It is likely that these men were somewhat comfortable with their equivocal psyches while in Auschwitz-Birkenau because of its necessity for survival, but find the idea takes on a much more distressing tone when viewed in retrospect. The mechanism of their memories betrays this conflict, resulting in what Langer terms "tainted memory." As Langer explains, "memory sacrifices purity of vision in the process of recounting, resulting in what I call tainted memory, a narrative stained by the disapproval of the witness's own present moral sensibility, as well as by some of the incidents it relates."⁵⁸ Thus, the special squad members' narratives of their actions in Auschwitz are colored by their inhabitation (at the time of such reflection) in a moral, post-Auschwitz world, which they navigate as their integrated selves. The integrated self does its best to reconcile memories with the prevalent sensibilities and morals existing after the event, thus their tainted memory affects what they choose to expose, what they choose to conceal, and how they tell their stories overall. Their narratives are predicated on the stains their integrated selves place on their experiences, and where the stains are placed either obscures or distorts their memories and influences the overall outcome of their testimonies.

The idea of tainted memory and its effect on constructing usable narratives can be analyzed in a way that illuminates sources of inconsistency. For example, many *Sonderkommando* survivors have documented that these men were allotted extra food rations and allowed to supplement their diets with perishables left behind by those who were killed.⁵⁹ Their living quarters were usually located above the crematoria, where they had individual beds with something akin to linens; the heat from the horrific activities below kept their living area warm in the winter. Filip Müller, on the

⁵⁸ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 122.

⁵⁹ For a small sampling, see Greif, 106, 276, 304.

other hand, mentions certain comparative privileges that the *Sonderkommando* had access to by virtue of their position only in brief passing, and he entirely omits discussion of their comparatively comfortable living quarters. Obviously, his tainted memory has affected his story, concealing certain details in the interest of satisfying his post-Auschwitz moral sensibilities.

Consider that Müller declares early in his written memoirs that, as a regular prisoner, he had come to appreciate the “thin and far from appetizing soup” that kept him barely alive, and that “any prisoner considered himself very lucky if now and then he managed to wangle a second helping.”⁶⁰ However, when he is incarcerated in a cell with a few other *Sonderkommando* members at the beginning of his tenure on the squad, he states that “during the next few days, [their] cell door was opened three times a day at meal times.”⁶¹ While there is no mention of what the food consisted of, the concept of *three* daily mealtimes was totally foreign to the rest of the camp. This would have been a significant increase in Müller’s food intake. As well, he mentions the ability of the *Sonderkommando* resistance members to *organize*⁶² valuables from the possessions of the dead in order to purchase black market arms and ammunition rather than precious black market edibles. As he explains, they were already “amply supplied with Hungarian salami, goose dripping, jam and cigarettes,”⁶³ presumably from the same source as the valuables. Throughout the whole of his written and video recorded testimony, Müller glosses over the extra food he received, which was a substantial privilege in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and never discusses his superior living conditions because his tainted memory seems to have changed the narrative of his experience and made these facts irrelevant.

Such inconsistencies are not restricted to memories about working in the special squad itself. *Sonderkommando* survivor Daniel Bennahmias states that during his traumatic boxcar transport to Auschwitz that he recalls almost nothing, and feels he has “blocked out” the memory of whether or not a receptacle existed in his car in which the prisoners were to relieve

⁶⁰ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶² Camp slang for stealing. For example of use, see Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*.

⁶³ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 140.

themselves.⁶⁴ Later on in his testimony, Bennahmias seemed to recover some of this "blocked" information and notes that a receptacle existed, but claims he cannot remember whether it was a pail of some sort or a small barrel.⁶⁵ Though such distinction, especially in contrast to the clear, concise memories he retained of what occurred during his tenure on the special squad, may seem inconsequential, it is a classic indication of tainted memory in operation as the stain on the particular event has altered his perception, and thus denied Bennahmias the ability to adequately reflect on his past.

Müller, Bennahmias, and other *Sonderkommando* survivors are likely attempting to derive a sense of dignity from their decidedly dehumanizing experiences as a way to heal themselves while bearing witness. This is indicative of humane reflection on an inhumane existence, which causes them to struggle with the construction of usable narratives. Historian Timothy Pytell noted a similar attempt in his study of Holocaust survivors Bruno Bettelheim and Victor Frankl. His argument was that these men were "working through their victimization to recover some sense [of] dignity."⁶⁶ Such a statement is applicable to the *Sonderkommando* and may help further explain the processes behind divergences in their testimony. Filip Müller may find it perverse to discuss privilege in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where others suffered such unspeakable privation, and thus avoids delineating what may be construed as undignified collaboration. Daniel Bennahmias surely feels that being forced to relieve himself in the open while his family must do the same was an admission that they had been successfully reduced to the lowest indignity by their Nazi oppressors. In failing to definitively admit to such conditions, he allows himself to reclaim a bit of his lost dignity and does the same for his mother and father, who did not survive to reclaim their own.

The Special Case of Filip Müller

Filip Müller presents a unique analytical opportunity as a multi-faceted special squad case study. His testimony in several

⁶⁴ Fromer, *The Holocaust Odyssey of Daniel Bennahmias*, 4.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 n2.

⁶⁶ Timothy E. Pytell, "Extreme Experience, Psychological Insight, and Holocaust Perception: Reflections on Bettelheim and Frankl," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 24, no. 4 (2007): 652.

mediums allows one to view tainted memory in action as his story shifts at times. His recollections are rife with examples of disassociation, the Grey Zone, and the equivocal psyche. Müller arrived in Auschwitz on one of the earliest transports in April 1942. Only twenty years of age, Müller was assigned prisoner number 29236 - for contrast, the number assigned to writer and Holocaust scholar Primo Levi upon his entrance just under two years later in February 1944 was 174517.⁶⁷ Prior to his imprisonment, Müller was a good student and a promising violinist in his small hometown of Sered, Czechoslovakia, which lies approximately 40 miles from the Slovak capital of Bratislava. His parents and brother died during the Holocaust, and he was the sole survivor of his birth family. Müller's residency amongst the "average" prisoners of Auschwitz was short-lived as he was sent to work with the *Sonderkommando* as punishment for stealing few mouthfuls of tea only a month after his arrival.

Müller formally published his memoirs in the 1970's under the title *Sonderbehandlung. Drei Jahre in den Krematorien und Gaskammern von Auschwitz* (published in English as *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*), though a summary of the material was included in a 1946 Czech publication authored by Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka that was released in English in 1966 under the title *The Death Factory*.⁶⁸ Müller testified against the Nazi criminals of Auschwitz in person several times: at a 1963 trial in Prague, at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials in 1964, and on film to French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann for his documentary *Shoah* in the 1970's. His statements in Frankfurt are vital to understanding his post-war years and his perception of his experience. Compelled to testify against Auschwitz perpetrators like SS Unterscharführer Stark, Müller took the stand and stated the paradox of his past and present:

"I have my job, my children and I wanted to forget what it was [Auschwitz]. It interested me, everything that was written about the concentration camps and such, but I did want to

⁶⁷ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 27. The numbering system in Auschwitz-Birkenau was sequential; this difference indicates that over 145,000 people were assigned prisoner numbers in this two year interval.

⁶⁸ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, x.

forget, even if that is not possible - we cannot forget that."⁶⁹

When one compares Müller's book, his verbal testimonies in the documentary *Shoah*, and his words on the stand in Frankfurt, there is much that will give a researcher pause. First, Müller's testimony to Lanzmann is so similar to that of his written memoirs that he seems oddly consistent, even rehearsed, lacking much of the differences in language use and reflective pauses that usually distinguish a Holocaust survivor's written and spoken narratives. Filip Müller is consistent to an enormous degree across multiple mediums, using strikingly similar language in his testimony in *Shoah* as that of his written work. It seems that his tainted memory is extant in both mediums, and that his integrated self is working to keep his impromptu self and its differing memories sufficiently subsumed.

Further issues arise when Müller's testimony on the stand at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial of 1964 is taken into consideration. When asked specific questions, his answers are far less composed and homogenous, and his mastery of German seems rather rusty in comparison to his smooth use of the language with Claude Lanzmann. Beyond his lack of composure are the contradictions his testimony in Frankfurt illuminates, which are considerable. The timeline of events Müller explains on the stand seriously conflicts with that of his memoirs, written at least in summary in 1946, nearly 20 years before the trial, and his verbal account to Lanzmann, over a decade after the trial. The largest and most curious of these conflicts takes the form of a story regarding his position within Auschwitz-Birkenau from mid-1942 to mid-1943.

In Frankfurt, Müller testified that he literally bought his way out of the *Sonderkommando* temporarily in late June 1942, after spending only six weeks working in the Auschwitz crematorium. He states that while being transported with a group from the crematorium to a holding cell in Block 11 (within the camp proper), a work supervisor (*Arbeitsdienst*) offered to, in

⁶⁹ Filip Müller, Witness Testimony at Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, October 1964. Veronique Chevillon. "Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt: Deposition of Filip Müller." *Sonderkommando.info*. In French, translated with Google Translate. <http://www.sonderkommando.info/proces/francfort/temoins/muller/index.html>. (Accessed 24 March 2010).

Müller's words "get [him] out of there" if he was paid "many dollars."⁷⁰ After Müller brought the man "a large bundle of US dollars," he was secretly taken to Block 14 (a non-*Sonderkommando* unit), and began working with those prisoners until the group was moved to Monowitz-Buna, a subcamp of Auschwitz that was entirely a work camp (*Arbeitslager*).⁷¹

Müller explains that he remained in Monowitz-Buna until the spring of 1943. At some point while working there, he was seriously injured when a large piece of metal fell on his right thigh, and the ensuing abscess sent him to the sickbay (*Krankenbau*). From there he was moved to Birkenau, where he found two old friends, one of whom was a doctor, who sheltered him, gave him medicine, and even operated on his leg. Afterward he was assigned "sitting light work,"⁷² which amounted to peeling potatoes, and in July 1943, he was recognized while engaged in this task by SS officers Schwartzhuber and Aumeier, who were in charge of the *Sonderkommando*. Müller was immediately removed from the hospital crew and taken to Block 13 in Birkenau, where he rejoined the special squad and began working in the newly constructed complex of crematoria.⁷³ His absence from the *Sonderkommando* for such a long period shielded him from some of the selections that liquidated the squads on a fairly regular basis. He seems to have simple luck to credit for escaping the last two selections that took place before the evacuation of the majority of the Auschwitz prisoners on January 18, 1945.

Yet the most surprising thing about the Monowitz-Buna story is not Müller's exceptional luck, but the fact that it is *entirely absent* from his other testimony, and is directly contradicted by the timeline in his written work. The very title of his book, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, can be called into question as he spent nearly an entire year working outside the *Sonderkommando* based upon his Frankfurt testimony. In addition, Müller's writing describes events that cause serious conflict with his testimony on the stand about his whereabouts from June 1942 to July 1943. If he was in Monowitz-Buna until the spring of 1943, how could not have been on a crew in mid-December of 1942 that removed the bodies of liquidated *Sonderkommando*

⁷⁰ Müller, Testimony at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, October 1964.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

members from the gas chamber in Auschwitz, as described in his book⁷⁴ Further, his written work depicts his transfer to Block 13 in Birkenau as a relief "after almost fourteen months of isolation in Block 11."⁷⁵ It is unclear whether he spent nearly a year and a half in a cell in Block 11, or bought his way into Buna after only six weeks in the Auschwitz crematorium and spent nearly a year living as a non-*Sonderkommando*.

It is inconsistencies such as these, when coupled with his near-unbelievable memories of Nazi atrocity that make Müller popular fodder for fervent Holocaust deniers. While a complete denunciation of his testimony because of these conflicts is unfair and likely incorrect, these are serious discrepancies. What they say about Müller is that he certainly suffers from the effects of tainted memory and when caught unprepared on the witness stand, his impromptu self was allowed primacy over his integrated self and his memories, removing the filter that his integrated self utilized when writing and speaking to Claude Lanzmann.

Misconceptions

Such inconsistencies as those of Filip Müller are explainable in the context of analytical frameworks like tainted memory and the equivocal psyche, but they are still dangerous to the credibility of survivors in an age when Holocaust denial vies for validation through nitpicking and misrepresentation. When the moral conundrums encompassed by the men of the *Sonderkommando* are examined by those who fail to understand the psychological bases for their behavior, grievous errors can be made that harm their overall image and further damage their already delicate psyches.

A prominent example of this type of erroneous reporting on the men of the *Sonderkommando* is contained in German political theorist Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, first published in 1963. In her provocative approach to analyzing the trial of the man considered the "architect of the Holocaust," SS *Untersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann, Arendt uses the actions of the *Sonderkommando* to validate her argument that people under a totalitarian regime can and do behave in a way that appears evil to save their own skin. The problem

⁷⁴ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 50.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

with her analysis are the fallacious and misleading examples that she uses, which run counter to the evidence in existence today, and the seemingly copious use Auschwitz Kommandant Rudolf Höss' memoirs as the basis of her assertions.⁷⁶

Arendt correctly designates the men of the *Sonderkommando* as collaborators, but fails to contextualize their level of collaboration and its significance when she states that they "had everywhere been employed in the actual killing process, they had committed criminal acts 'in order to save themselves from the danger of immediate death.'"⁷⁷ Perhaps because Arendt herself was Jewish, she seems particularly disgusted by the Jewish war-time institutions such as the *Sonderkommando*, the *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils), and certain Jewish leaders who either failed to act or acted in a fashion that seemed "criminal" or complicit. Several times, Arendt makes clear her belief that the men of the special squads were the true murderers of the Jews, but her statements are unsupported, and woefully incorrect.⁷⁸

For example, Arendt has constructed a wildly misleading account of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* revolt of 1944. She claims:

In Auschwitz, many Greek Jews were employed in the so-called death commandos, which operated the gas chambers and the crematoria, and they were still alive in 1944, when the Hungarian Jews were exterminated and the Łódź ghetto was liquidated. At the end of that summer, when rumor had it that the gassing would soon be terminated and the installations dismantled, one of the very few revolts in any of the camps broke out; the death commandos were certain that now they, too, would be killed. The revolt was a complete disaster--only one survivor remained to tell the story.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, 336 n167.

⁷⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 91.

⁷⁸ Admittedly, Arendt's access to sources was limited by the period in which she wrote. Most memoirs and testimonies of the *Sonderkommando* were published well after her study was written, and Soviet archives were unavailable to Western researchers.

⁷⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 189.

While it is true that the men of the special squad actually came to rely on a steady influx of prisoners to be executed, nowhere in *Sonderkommando* survivor testimonies nor the buried Auschwitz manuscripts is it stated that the uprising was staged in protest of the lessening transports, as Arendt implies. On the contrary, the revolt had been in planning stages for quite a long time, but the non-*Sonderkommando* prisoners in the resistance movement kept delaying in hopes that liberation was imminent.⁸⁰ The men of the *Sonderkommando* knew all too well that liberation was not in their future—based upon the precedent of murdering squads regularly, they likely assumed that the Nazis would liquidate them before that occurred. Thus, they were motivated by a sense of futility, desperation, and a strong desire to destroy as much of the machinery of death as possible before their inevitable deaths. It is no secret that escape was a part of the plan,⁸¹ but the overarching goal was to hinder the ability to continue extermination on such a massive, mechanized scale. It is true that the slowing transports were a factor in creating a sense of imminent death and danger amongst the squad members, but Arendt is alluding to a much more sinister intention on their part, and she pins on them a level of responsibility that is undeserved.

It seems that Arendt did not have a clear grasp of the real work of the Auschwitz-Birkenau *Sonderkommando* nor their mental status and motivation. When one is faced with a choice between immediate, violent death and acceptance of revolting, inhumane work, it is remiss to say that their actions in this context after the decision was made are considered wholly "criminal." Arendt cannot claim to understand why or how these men processed these dreadful decisions, and her judgment of them is unjustly harsh, especially considering that she never endured the intense victimization and debasement of the Nazi death camps. It is because of incorrect assessments such as hers, without the contextualization of victimization, that Primo Levi asks that "we meditate on the story of 'the crematorium ravens' with pity and

⁸⁰ See the Manuscript of Zalman Gradowski in Bezwinska and Czech, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 76 and the Manuscript of Zalman Leventhal in the same volume, 154-155; Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 306 (testimony of Leon Cohen).

⁸¹ See Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 152-155 and Fromer, *The Holocaust Odyssey of Daniel Bennis*, 64-65.

rigor, but that judgment of them be suspended."⁸² Furthermore, Arendt's conclusions are drawn on untruths such as: "in the death camps it was usually the inmates and the victims who had actually wielded '*the fatal instrument with their own hands*,'"⁸³ "when a trainload of Jews arrived at a center, the strong among them were selected for work, often *operating* the extermination machinery, all others were immediately killed,"⁸⁴ and "the well-known fact that the actual work of killing in the extermination centers was usually in the hands of Jewish commandos."⁸⁵

While the men of the Jewish *Sonderkommando* were certainly not wholly innocent victims because of the actions they performed, Arendt does them an enormous disservice in claiming that they were the actual murderers in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In fact, she serves to bring the original goal Primo Levi deduced (making them perform tasks that shifted the onus of guilt from entirely on the Nazis to partially on the shoulders of the Jews themselves) to fruition, and completes their twisted circle of shifting the burden of blame and shaming through intense and spiritually detrimental victimization. Had Arendt been aware of her serious miscalculations and the true state of the *Sonderkommando* situation, especially with regard to mental damage, it stands to reason that she may have reevaluated her original assumptions.

Conclusion

The extreme experiences of the men the Auschwitz-Birkenau require the creation of analytical frameworks that are as unique and unprecedented as their position in history. For this reason, these men came to personify analyses created by Holocaust scholars Primo Levi and Lawrence Langer. However, *Sonderkommando* survivor testimony necessitates the further application of the equivocal psyche and struggle to produce usable narratives in order to understand the reasons and consequences of their survival. It is also important to keep in mind that, as with the analysis of any Holocaust testimony, one walks a fine line when explaining the special squads' situations and their choices. They were not

⁸² Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 60.

⁸³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 246. Emphasis added.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Emphasis added.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

perpetrators, but they still ended many days with blood on their hands. When understanding this and the myriad other moral conundrums encompassed, it is important to stress that these men were still victims of the Nazi terror.

Faced with such unspeakable atrocity, the Jewish *Sonderkommando* chose to live as long as possible, but at an immense cost. Burdened with memories that no one else can endeavor to understand, they were robbed of what Primo Levi calls the “solace of innocence,” leaving them in an interminable limbo between victim and perpetrator.⁸⁶ A handful miraculously survived to tell their incredible tales, for which history and humanity are indebted. However, a vital part of each died in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is impossible to know if the outcome was worth the price they paid.

⁸⁶ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 53.

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