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“I HELD ON AT ANY PRICE”: VICTIM SELF-PRESERVATION IN THE
SONDERKOMMANDO IN AUSCHWITZ AND TREBLINKA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Jessica Christina Foster
August 2022

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Many Holocaust victims have expressed uneasiness or even shame regarding the actions they took to stay alive in the death camps. These acts of self-preservation were usually humiliating and often came at the expense of their fellow victims. This comes out most clearly in the testimonies of the members of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz and Treblinka. Writers such as Filip Müller, Zalmen Gradowski, and Richard Glazar recount how they survived the lethal environment of the camp by appropriating the food, clothing, and valuables of the people murdered in the gas chambers. Although most scholars have interpreted these testimonies, and the acts of self-preservation they describe, as a form of resistance, I argue that the writings reflect an awareness of enslavement to the body and the imperative of self-preservation, which Arthur Schopenhauer calls the “will-to-live.” For the victims are not only lamenting the degrading things they had to do to preserve their lives; they are also questioning self-preservation itself. By reducing the victim to little more than a body, which never ceases in its physical demands until death, the death camp cruelly exploited the human enslavement to the will-to-live. The writers of these testimonies are critical of their own servitude to the imperative to survive at all costs and tend to admire, perhaps even envy, their fellow inmates who have the courage to resist the Nazis or commit suicide, which they view as the only true liberation from their bondage to the will-to-live.

DEDICATION

To my grandparents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Michael Meng. I think I can say without exaggeration that this thesis would not exist, or would at least look vastly different, without your guidance and support. You showed a genuine interest in my topic, which made the otherwise lonely task of writing less solitary. You patiently answered my numerous texts, emails, and phone calls. You generously read my drafts, always pushing me to go deeper (and to be more precise!) in my analysis and kindly steering me away from irrelevancies. I am especially grateful to you for introducing me to a philosophical view of history, which has prepared me well for doctoral work and will enable me to contribute unique, compelling scholarship in my field. I look forward to continuing my intellectual journey with you and the great thinkers—Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Arendt, Foucault—who now enrich and inform my work.

I would also like to thank Dr. Steven Marks, Dr. Stephanie Barczewski, and Dr. Johannes Schmidt for their time and support while serving on my thesis committee. Dr. Schmidt, your enthusiasm is infectious, and I hope that we will have many insightful discussions in the future.

I am also grateful for the support of my classmates, who have become dear friends to me in such a short time, and of the rest of the faculty in the History Department, who have embraced me in unexpected ways. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, whose unfailing love and encouragement have sustained me through the many ups and downs of my academic career. This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, whose memory I will cherish forever.

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INTRODUCTION

Many Holocaust victims have expressed a sense of shame regarding the actions they took to survive in the camps. These acts of survival were usually humiliating and sometimes came at the expense of their fellow victims. This was the case particularly for the Sonderkommando (“special unit”) in death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka. Comprised entirely of Jewish prisoners, who were often the sole survivors of their transports, these work squads were forced to perform some of the most degrading tasks in the camp. In their testimonies, members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando describe how they assisted the victims in the undressing rooms, collected their clothing and possessions, pulled the corpses from the gas chambers, cut off their hair and extracted gold teeth, and cremated the bodies in open-air pits or ovens. They admit that they performed these tasks because they wanted to live; refusal to cooperate meant death. They also had access to many items unavailable to the average prisoner, such as extra food, clean clothes, money and valuables, and religious articles, all of which helped them to prolong their lives and even stage an uprising. Survivors of the Treblinka death camp tell a similar story in their memoirs. They recount how, as part of a small labor force spared from immediate gassing, they had to sort the property of hundreds of thousands of murdered Jews. Like the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, these men became involved in the extermination process through material enrichment, as they appropriated the food, clothing, and valuables of the dead in order to improve their desperate living conditions. In fact, they depended on the arrival of new transports of victims to justify their continued existence to the SS, who needed their labor. Survival at all costs governed their

actions. Like the Auschwitz Sonderkommando uprising, the Treblinka revolt occurred as late as it did in part because it was only then, facing imminent extermination as their usefulness to the SS came to an end, that the prisoners were able to overcome their fear of death and their attachment to an otherwise miserable, humiliating life.

Scholars who have written on such sources tend to view the testimonies as a form of resistance against the Nazis. In their studies of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando, Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams insist that many of these prisoners' activities, especially their writing, "can be conceived of as kinds of rebellion against Nazi oppression."¹ They believe that the Sonderkommando manuscripts "should be understood as active rather than passive artefacts" because the writings supposedly "involve a conscious effort to bear witness to Nazi atrocity."² According to Chare and Williams, "each word the Sonderkommando authors committed to paper, each character, as a sign of life, life writing, resisted Nazi efforts at destruction."³ Chare and Williams claim that the Sonderkommando members "knowingly exploited language's capacity for maintaining something of their life after death. Writing...promised posthumous escape and a substantial victory over Nazi efforts to erase all traces of their crimes."⁴ Moreover, Williams argues that "the knowledge that members of the SK gained by 'adapting', or 'getting used', to their situation was experienced as moral contamination, but also gave

¹ Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, introduction to *Testimonies of Resistance: Representations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando*, eds. Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 20, Kindle.

² *Ibid.*, 28.

³ Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, *Matters of Testimony: Interpreting the Scrolls of Auschwitz* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

some possibility of moral action, as their own words testify.”⁵ Conforming to one’s environment “makes actions within that environment possible.”⁶ Thus, Williams claims, the Sonderkommando’s daily proximity to the SS “provide[d] them with knowledge that could be used, at times, to attempt to make a difference.”⁷ While the Sonderkommando members expressed self-accusation in their testimonies, they also felt they were in a position to take revenge on the Nazis and ease the suffering of the victims. Williams does not believe that this is merely “an excuse,” although he admits that “many moral compromises are made in this form.”⁸

Like Chare and Williams, Israeli historian Gideon Greif argues that, even in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Sonderkommando prisoners “had some room for moral action.”⁹ Greif notes that many members of the Sonderkommando continued to practice their Jewish faith, which was forbidden in the death camp. He believes that the Sonderkommando’s religious observance “is the most compelling proof that they managed to remain human under the most inhumane conditions.”¹⁰ For example, religious members such as Leib Langfus avoided direct contact with corpses in order to

⁵ Dominic Williams, “What Makes the Grey Zone Grey? Blurring Moral and Factual Judgements of the Sonderkommando,” in *Testimonies of Resistance: Representations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando*, eds. Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 101, Kindle.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁹ Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 67.

¹⁰ Gideon Greif, “The Religious Life of Sonderkommando Members inside the Killing Installations in Auschwitz-Birkenau,” in *Testimonies of Resistance: Representations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando*, eds. Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 194, Kindle.

maintain ritual cleanliness according to the Torah.¹¹ The Sonderkommando obtained prayer shawls, phylacteries (*tefillin*), and other religious items from the possessions of the gas chamber victims so that they could perform the daily prayers and conduct Shabbat services.¹² On Passover, they “organized” flour to bake unleavened bread (*matzah*). On Sukkot, they built a temporary dwelling (*sukkah*) outside the crematorium.¹³ Greif describes these acts of religious appropriation without any sense of irony, insisting that the Sonderkommando “derived a special will to survive” from Judaism, which was “a strong source of hope...because it enabled prisoners to set something against their German tormentors.”¹⁴ This faith helped the prisoners “to distance themselves from the brutal reality of daily life in the camp and enabled them to maintain some sort of autonomy against the brutal regime of the camp.”¹⁵ On the other hand, he notes that, for the nonreligious members of the Sonderkommando, the practices “seemed cynical due to the daily confrontation with mass murder and their own role in it.”¹⁶ There were also some religious prisoners who believed in the principle of *Kiddush haShem* (“sanctification of the Name”), according to which Jews must sacrifice their own lives before transgressing God’s commandments. These prisoners preferred to commit suicide rather than carry out the work in the crematoria. Greif admits that “the daily life of the SK could be interpreted as such a great sin,” but he does not accept this interpretation.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid., 199.

¹² Ibid., 195.

¹³ Ibid., 199.

¹⁴ Ibid., 200-201.

¹⁵ Ibid., 205.

¹⁶ Ibid., 197.

¹⁷ Ibid., 201-202.

In fact, a rabbi in the Warsaw Ghetto had developed a different principle called *Kiddush haChayyim* (“sanctification of life”), which “emphasized the physical life as a holy thing and proclaimed the sustainment of life as the highest principle.”¹⁸ In other words, Jews glorified God by staying alive and resisting Hitler’s plan of extermination. Some prisoners agreed with this principle, while others began to doubt their faith and lost “their individuality and emotionality.” When that happened, suicide was the only “option left in order to escape the brutal life of the camp.”¹⁹

In his analysis of Richard Glazar’s memoir, linguist Peter Davies recognizes the corrupting effect that Treblinka had on the prisoners but sees Glazar’s narrative as one of “self-assertion, survival, and resistance.”²⁰ According to Davies, Glazar’s memoir contains “a specific political narrative of increasing solidarity and unity, overcoming differences and crossing cultural boundaries in order to create the conditions for resistance and revolt.”²¹ For example, Glazar could not use his native German “as a resource for resistance” because it was “compromised by its closeness to the language of the perpetrators.” Therefore, he resorted to irony, which “expresses a striving for distance without being able to achieve it.”²² While Davies recognizes the sarcasm of the Jewish prisoners as “self-aware, an active response to a situation...where there is no space for uncorrupted speech,” he also believes that it was a “deliberate undermining and parody of

¹⁸ Ibid., 202.

¹⁹ Ibid., 203.

²⁰ Peter Davies, “Linguistic Diversity and Political Solidarity in Richard Glazar’s Treblinka Memoir *Die Falle mit dem grünen Zaun*,” *The Modern Language Review* 113, no. 4 (October 2018): 795, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.113.4.0794>.

²¹ Ibid., 797.

²² Ibid., 801.

the language and gestures of the SS.”²³ In fact, the SS unwittingly created the figures that mocked them. The so-called *Scheißkapo* (“shit kapo”) was such a figure. Dressed “in a grotesque parody of a synagogue cantor,” he ensured that his fellow prisoners spent no more than two minutes in the latrines.²⁴ Although it is unclear how the *Scheißkapo* mocked the SS rather than the Jews, Davies insists that the prisoners “exploit[ed] the oppressive, defining gaze of the SS as a way of developing resistance strategies. They perform[ed] in ways that the SS expect[ed] of them; in order to survive, they adopt[ed] the characteristics of anti-Semitic caricature.” For instance, Hans Freund “play[ed] the obsequious Jewish shopkeeper, exaggerating his Prague accent and servile manners.”²⁵ Davies considers Freund to be “a negative foil for Glazar’s autobiographical narrator,” since Glazar supposedly did not share Freund’s “cynicism and self-hatred.”²⁶ Davies mentions the fact that Freund fell into despair after the murder of his family and longed for death, which he found during the uprising. Ignoring Glazar’s own despair throughout the memoir, Davies argues that Freund “represents the side of Glazar that has to die so that Glazar can find a way of living.”²⁷ Finally, Davies claims that Glazar “re-establishes a sense of identity and agency” after liberation, in spite of the fact that Glazar offers no such redemptive outlook.²⁸

Although most scholars have interpreted these testimonies, and the acts of self-preservation they describe, as a form of resistance, I argue that the writings reflect an

²³ Ibid., 804.

²⁴ Ibid., 805-806.

²⁵ Ibid., 806.

²⁶ Ibid., 809.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 810.

awareness of enslavement to the body and the imperative of self-preservation, which Arthur Schopenhauer calls the “will-to-live.” For the victims are not only lamenting the degrading things they had to do to preserve their lives; they are also questioning self-preservation itself. By reducing the victim to little more than a body, which never ceases in its physical demands until death, the death camp cruelly exploited the human enslavement to the will-to-live. The writers of these testimonies are critical of their own servitude to the imperative to survive at all costs and tend to admire, perhaps even envy, their fellow inmates who have the courage to resist the Nazis or commit suicide, which they view as the only true liberation from their bondage to the will-to-live.

Hannah Arendt discussed this issue in her early postwar writings. Arendt believed that the reduction of the human being to “a specimen of the animal-species man” was the primary aim of the death camps, which otherwise had no utilitarian purpose. To achieve its goal of the “total domination of man,” the Nazi regime had to transform “the human person, who somehow is always a specific mixture of spontaneity and being conditioned,...into a completely conditioned being whose reactions can be calculated even when he is led to certain death.”²⁹ The camps served as “laboratories in training people to become bundles of reactions, in making them behave like Pavlov’s dog, in eliminating from the human psychology every trace of spontaneity.”³⁰ The camps were designed “to manipulate the human body—with its infinite possibilities of suffering—in

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” *Jewish Social Studies* 12, no. 1 (January 1950): 60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4464856>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

such a way as to make it destroy the human person as inexorably as do certain mental diseases or organic origin.”³¹

According to Arendt, the “total domination of man” occurred in three stages: first came the annihilation of the juridical person, then the murder of the moral person, and finally the destruction of the individual. After depriving the juridical person of all rights, the Nazis destroyed the moral person by making martyrdom impossible.³² In the camps, death was anonymous and meaningless, and victims were often faced with the “hopeless dilemma” of whether to send their family members to death, or to assist in the extermination of their fellow victims. In this way, “the distinguishing line between persecutor and persecuted, between murderer and victim, is constantly blurred.”³³ While a person’s conscience might still have opposed this assault on morality, the regime rendered “decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal.” Self-sacrifice and even suicide could result in the death of others.³⁴ In the final stage, the Nazis attempted to destroy the individual through the elimination of spontaneity, which Arendt defined as “man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events.”³⁵ With the

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1968), 453.

³² *Ibid.*, 451.

³³ *Ibid.*, 453.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 452.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 455. Arendt revised her definition of human spontaneity in her later writings. In the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, she writes that free will “can be assumed on the strength, or, rather, the weakness, or interior experience, but it cannot be proved.” The truth is that “we seldom start a new series” without any preceding causes (Vol. 2, 32). She mentions “Kant’s embarrassment ‘in dealing with... a power of spontaneously beginning a series of things or states,’” “which ‘occurring in the world can have only a relatively first beginning,’” but is still “‘an absolutely first beginning not in time but in causality.’” Arendt finds “the freedom of a *relatively* absolute spontaneity...no more embarrassing to human reason than the fact that men are *born*—newcomers again and again in a world that preceded them in time. The freedom of

loss of spontaneity, humans become “ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov’s experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react.”³⁶

As Israeli scholar Michal Aharony points out, Arendt did not state unequivocally whether she believed that the Nazis had ever achieved “total domination” in the camps.³⁷ In her 1950 essay, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” Arendt wrote that “we can only guess” to what degree it is possible to eliminate human spontaneity, although she feared that “the terrible docility with which all people went to their certain death under camp conditions as well as the surprising small percentage of suicides” indicated that the Nazis had carried their experiment in total domination “to the limits of the possible.”³⁸ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published one year later, Arendt stated that the death camp “is the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely.”³⁹ However, she also argued that “spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated, insofar as it is connected not only with human freedom but with life itself, in the sense of simply keeping alive.”⁴⁰ Likewise, in a 1953 speech entitled “Mankind and Terror,” Arendt said that it is not possible to achieve total domination “even under the conditions of totalitarian terror. Spontaneity can never be entirely

spontaneity is part and parcel of the human condition. Its mental organ is the Will” (Vol. 2, 110). Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, combined 2 vols., ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt, 1981).

³⁶ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455.

³⁷ Michal Aharony, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Total Domination: The Holocaust, Plurality, and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 104, <https://doi-org.libproxy.clemson.edu/10.4324/9780203795668>.

³⁸ Arendt, “Social Science Techniques,” 63.

³⁹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 456.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 438.

eradicated, because life as such, and surely human life, is dependent on it. In concentration camps, however, spontaneity can be eradicated to a great extent; or, at any rate, the most careful attention and effort is expended there on experiments for that purpose.”⁴¹ For Arendt, then, the success of the Nazi experiment was less important than the mere fact that it had been undertaken, with horrific results. Even if the Nazis did not (and perhaps could not) succeed in eliminating human spontaneity, Arendt could not otherwise explain at the time “why millions of human beings allowed themselves to be marched unresistingly into the gas chambers,” or why so few prisoners committed suicide or revolted against the SS.⁴²

Although Arendt’s description of prisoners as conditioned, bestial organisms finds echoes in victim testimonies, the destruction of “spontaneity” does not adequately explain the prisoners’ reduction to this state. As I will show in the following, the Nazis did not want to dominate the camp inmates in a total manner, as Arendt suggests, but to exploit the prisoners’ will-to-live. It was not primarily the destruction of their individual spontaneity that prevented the victims from resisting Nazi extermination or committing suicide, but the desire to live and the underlying fear of death.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is one of the few scholars who has identified self-preservation as the key to understanding why many Jewish victims became involved in the process of their own destruction. In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, he

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, “Mankind and Terror,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), 304.

⁴² Arendt, “Social Science Techniques,” 63; Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455.

describes the Nazi regime as a “*modern, rational, bureaucratically organized power.*”⁴³ In emphasizing the rational nature of the Nazi regime, Bauman rejects the idea of the Holocaust as “the failure of civilization (i.e. of human purposive, reason-guided activity) to solve the “Hobbesian problem,” that is, “to contain the morbid natural predilections of whatever has been left of nature in man.”⁴⁴ “The Holocaust was not an irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residues of pre-modern barbarity,” he argues. “It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house.”⁴⁵ In fact, the Holocaust is “unthinkable” without modern civilization.⁴⁶ As a product of modern bureaucratic procedures, the Final Solution did not come into conflict with the principles of rationality on which such procedures are based. The behavior of the perpetrators and the victims of the Holocaust originated within the Western civilizing process, which “subordinate[d] the use of violence to rational calculus” and emancipated rationality from the “interference of ethical norms and moral inhibitions.”⁴⁷ “Except for the moral repulsiveness of its goal,” he writes, the extermination of the Jews “did not differ in any formal sense...from all other organized activities designed, monitored and supervised by ‘ordinary’ administrative and economic sections.”⁴⁸ In this sense, there was nothing unusual about the way the bureaucracy of genocide incorporated the victims themselves “into an integral part of the chain of

⁴³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 122. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

command, an area subject to the strictly disciplinary rules and freed from moral judgment.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the cooperation of the victims was “an indispensable part of the total operation and a crucial condition of its success.”⁵⁰

According to Bauman, the Nazis successfully enlisted the cooperation of their Jewish victims because modern society had already elevated rationality to the most important criterion for action. As “rational beings,” the Jews could be relied upon to follow “the same behavioural principles as those promoted by their bureaucratic gaolers: efficiency, higher gain, less expense.”⁵¹ This made the victims’ behavior “predictable and hence manipulable and controllable.”⁵² In the Hobbesian world of the ghettos and camps, the most rational action was the calculative one that increased one’s chances of remaining alive, and the Nazis made the Jews believe that the best chance for survival was *obedience*. Thus, “everything the Jews did to serve their own interest brought the Nazi objective somewhat nearer to full success.”⁵³ Rational people, who have just emerged from a long journey in a suffocating cattle car, “will go quietly, meekly, joyously into a gas chamber, if only they are allowed to believe it is a bathroom.”⁵⁴ They will also allow their friends and neighbors to be sacrificed, if only they can live a little longer. “Once self-preservation had been chosen as the supreme criterion of action,” Bauman writes, “its price could be gradually yet relentlessly increased—until all other considerations have been devalued, all moral or religious inhibitions broken, all scruples disavowed and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 122.

⁵¹ Ibid., 128-129.

⁵² Ibid., 130.

⁵³ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 203.

disallowed.”⁵⁵ As “moral insensitivity and callousness” increased, the victims turned “more and more into a company of accomplices to murder,” and “all brakes that normally constrain the pressure of the naked instinct of self-preservation” were eroded.⁵⁶ Bauman notes that the “irresistible compulsion to live pushed aside moral scruples and, with them, human dignity. Amidst the universal scramble for survival, the value of self-preservation was enthroned as an uncontested legitimation of choice. Everything that served the self-preservation was right.”⁵⁷

Like Arendt in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Bauman cites the *Judenräte* as a prime example of moral compromise. The Nazis tasked the ghetto leaders with drawing up lists for “resettlement in the East,” which meant deciding who among the ghetto population should be sacrificed so that the others might live. It was “rational” to amputate a limb to save the body. There was always “the comforting thought that it is not my turn yet, thank God: by lying low, I can still escape.”⁵⁸ According to Bauman, the tragedy of the ghettos illustrates that, in “a situation that does not contain a good choice, or renders such a good choice very costly,” most people will “argue themselves away from the issue of moral duty (or fail to argue themselves towards it), adopting instead the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation.”⁵⁹ While Bauman believes that “No one can be proclaimed guilty for the sheer fact of breaking down under such pressure,” he also argues that “no one can be excused from moral self-deprecation for such surrender.”

⁵⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

For Bauman, “putting self-preservation above moral duty is in no way predetermined, inevitable and inescapable.” Evil can be resisted. “The testimony of the few who did resist shatters the authority of the logic of self-preservation. It shows it for what it is in the end—a *choice*.”⁶⁰ For example, ghetto leaders Adam Czerniakow in Warsaw and Dr. Bergman in Rovno, as well as the entire *Judenrat* of Bereza Kartuska, committed suicide, which Bauman considers a “dignified departure.”⁶¹ On the other hand, those “cowardly enough or bold enough to live...badly needed an answer; an excuse, a justification, a moral or rational argument” for staying alive. Most settled for the latter.⁶²

Bauman’s discussion of self-preservation in the Holocaust is helpful because it challenges the Hobbesian view of reason as a tool to aid in one’s survival. According to Hobbes, modern society originated from the desire of individuals to avoid the “continual fear and danger of violent death” that they would face “without a common power to keep them all in awe.” Such a condition “is called war, and such a war as is of every man against every man.” In this state of nature, human life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁶³ Hobbes believed that passions such as “fear of death, desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living, and a hope by their industry to obtain them,” inclined human beings to seek peace. Reason then revealed to them “convenient articles of peace”: laws of nature which placed limitations on one’s natural right to use any

⁶⁰ Ibid., 206, 207.

⁶¹ Ibid., 141.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 76. Although Hobbes considered conflict to be the natural state of man, he did not believe in the historical existence of a war of all against all. For Hobbes, the constant threat of war, which deprives humans of any security, was more important: “the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is PEACE.” Ibid.

means necessary to preserve one's life.⁶⁴ Significantly, Hobbes defined a law of nature as "a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may best be preserved."⁶⁵ According to this rule, it is irrational and foolish to commit suicide or to put one's life at risk in a situation other than self-defense.

As Thomas F. Tierney points out, "for Hobbes there was never a good reason to abandon one's life."⁶⁶ For example, Hobbes believed that if a Christian subject can obey their sovereign's command without forfeiting eternal salvation, then it would be "unjust" for them not to do so. On the other hand, if the sovereign issues a command that "cannot be obeyed without being damned to eternal death, then it were madness to obey it." Yet Christian subjects must be "taught to distinguish well between what is and what is not necessary to eternal salvation." And all that is necessary for salvation, according to Hobbes, is to have faith in Christ and to obey laws.⁶⁷ Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect Christian subjects to risk their lives in defiance of earthly laws, for the "laws of God...are none but the laws of nature, whereof the principal is that we should not violate our faith, that is, a commandment to obey our civil sovereigns, which we constituted over us by mutual pact one with another."⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid., 78-79. The first law of nature is to seek peace as far as possible, but, failing that, to defend oneself by any means. The second law is to be willing to give up as much of one's liberty as other people are willing to give up of theirs. Ibid., 80.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁶ Thomas F. Tierney, "Suicidal Thoughts: Hobbes, Foucault and the Right to Die," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 32, no. 5 (July 2006): 613, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0191453706064899>.

⁶⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 398.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 399.

While Hobbes's "stance toward death as something fearsome, which should be deferred as long as possible, marks a crucial divergence" from the philosophical and religious traditions of the West, Tierney notes that Hobbes's "position on martyrdom, like his concern with health and longevity, has left its mark on modern western subjects."⁶⁹ In fact, Tierney argues, "the Hobbesian subject is perfectly suited, if not a prerequisite, for the exercise of bio-power in a system of governmentality."⁷⁰ French philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term "biopower" to describe a new, modern form of power in which "the ancient right [of the sovereign] to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death."⁷¹ Although Foucault dismissed Hobbes as "at best a classical theorist of sovereignty who was on the way toward governmentality, and...at worst an opponent of the warlike conception of power that was developed by other early-modern theorists," Tierney finds Hobbes "most illuminating" precisely in the

⁶⁹ Tierney, "Suicidal Thoughts," 616, 617.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 611.

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 138. Beginning in the seventeenth century, argues Foucault, "death was ceasing to torment life so directly" due to economic developments and "an increase in productivity and resources." At the same time, "the development of the different fields of knowledge concerned with life in general, the improvement of agricultural techniques, and the observations and measures relative to man's life and survival contributed to this relaxation: a relative control over life averted some of the imminent risks of death." In this way, "methods of power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes and undertook to control and modify them...For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence...Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself." *Ibid.*, 142. According to Foucault, "this power over life evolved in two basic forms." The first was "an *anatomo-politics of the human body*," which "centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls," all of which "characterized the *disciplines*" such as schools, barracks, workshops, and the sciences. The second form was "a series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*," which "focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary." *Ibid.*, 139.

context of Foucault's theory of how relations of subjugation can manufacture subjects.⁷²

"For such Hobbesian subjects," argues Tierney, "could be counted upon to take whatever steps were required to defer death and prolong their lives, and were precisely the sort of individuals who were fit for the exercise of bio-power."⁷³

While Tierney does not connect this idea to the Holocaust, he would likely agree with Bauman that the Nazis would not have achieved such efficiency in the extermination process without being able to rely on the victims as Hobbesian subjects: reasonable people who would not risk their lives unnecessarily. Prior to their extermination, the victims also resembled Foucault's "docile bodies," human beings which "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" through modern disciplinary methods of "uninterrupted, constant coercion."⁷⁴ It is important to note here that Foucault did not believe that the achievement of docility required the "costly and violent" appropriation of bodies through slavery or physical punishment. Modern discipline "was directed not only at the growth of [the body's] skills, nor at the intensification of [the body's] subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes [the body] more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely."⁷⁵ In other words, modern relations of power "defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines."⁷⁶ In the case of the Holocaust, the

⁷² Tierney, "Suicidal Thoughts," 611.

⁷³ Ibid., 614.

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 136, 137.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 137-138.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 138.

Nazis wanted their victims to obediently participate in the process of their own destruction. However, while some of this “training” in docility may have occurred in the “laboratories” of the camps, as Arendt posited, Bauman shows that the victims already lived in a Hobbesian society based on self-interest, which the Nazis could exploit for their own purposes.

For Bauman, the Holocaust revealed the fragility of the Hobbesian society; it showed that self-interest leads to servile, cowardly acts and has a corrosive effect on a community. Yet while Bauman points out the moral consequences of the Hobbesian view of self-preservation as rational and calculative, he does not otherwise question or think about it. To clarify this issue, let us now turn to one of the most interesting thinkers of self-preservation in Western history: Arthur Schopenhauer.

In his book *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argues that all biological life is governed by an irrational, groundless will, which he calls the “will-to-live.” He characterizes this will as “a blind, irresistible urge,” an endless “craving for life and existence.”⁷⁷ In humans, the will-to-live “appears as a living body with the iron command to nourish it.” Consequently, the human is “the most necessitous of all beings. He is concrete willing and needing through and through; he is a concretion of a thousand wants and needs.” Concern for the maintenance of one’s existence occupies all of human

⁷⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, vol. 1 (1958; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 275; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, vol. 2 (1958; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 468. While Schopenhauer considered the will-to-live to be irresistible, his later discussion of the denial of the will-to-live contradicts this notion. Suicide also presents an issue for Schopenhauer as, his objections notwithstanding, it represents a way for the human being to resist the will-to-live.

life.⁷⁸ However, Schopenhauer emphasizes that our “boundless attachment to life” has nothing to do with “any *objective* knowledge of the value of life,” which is doubtful at best.⁷⁹ On the contrary, this attachment “is irrational and blind,” based less on the love of life than the fear of death.⁸⁰ As the embodiment of the will-to-live, every individual believes that they are the whole will and that all other things are mere representations of their will. Thus, it appears to them that their will (the “I” or ego) perishes with the phenomenon (their body) and this fills the will “with horror, because it is contrary to its original nature, which is a blind craving for existence.”⁸¹ This explains why the human being “loves above everything else an existence which is full of want, misery, trouble, pain, anxiety, and then again full of boredom...and that he fears above everything else the end of this existence.”⁸² When one views one’s own death “as if in this single phenomenon the whole world were to be annihilated for ever,” life appears “as the highest good, however embittered, short, and uncertain it may be,” while death seems the “greatest of evils, the worst thing that can threaten anywhere.”⁸³ Therefore, the human being is prepared “to sacrifice everything else; he is ready to annihilate the world, in order to maintain his own self, that drop in the ocean, a little longer.”⁸⁴

Schopenhauer notes that humans are often not aware of their bondage to the will-to-live. Due to the free, groundless nature of the will itself, the individual does not realize

⁷⁸ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 312.

⁷⁹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 465, 352.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 465-466.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 498.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 359.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 350-351, 465-466.

⁸⁴ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 332.

that they are but a single phenomenon of this will, which necessitates all their actions. A person therefore “considers himself *a priori* quite free,” and “imagines he can at any moment enter upon a different way of life, which is equivalent to saying that he can become a different person.” However, through experience the individual discovers “that he is not free, but liable to necessity; that notwithstanding all his resolutions and reflections he does not change his conduct, and that from the beginning to the end of his life he must bear the same character that he himself condemns.”⁸⁵ Prior to the knowledge we acquire through experience, “we are all innocent,” for “neither we nor others know the evil of our own nature.” Unfortunately, we often come to the alarming realization that we are “quite different from what *a priori* we considered ourselves to be.”⁸⁶ It is painful and humiliating to be reminded of one’s weaknesses. Therefore, we often conceal our desires and fears from our intellect, “since the good opinion we have of ourselves would inevitably suffer thereby.”⁸⁷ As Schopenhauer aptly remarks, “The prayer, ‘Lead me not into temptation’ means ‘Let me not see who I am.’”⁸⁸

According to Schopenhauer, the greatest humiliation comes from giving oneself up wholly to the will-to-live. This would not be so if life were good, but knowledge reveals “life’s worthlessness” and thus the foolishness of clinging to it unconditionally. Thus, we praise the person in whom knowledge triumphs “over the blind will-to-live which is nevertheless the kernel of our own inner being,” who “accordingly faces death

⁸⁵ Ibid., 113-114.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 296.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 305-306; Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 209-210.

⁸⁸ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 367.

courageously and calmly.” On the other hand, “we despise him in whom knowledge is defeated in that conflict, who therefore clings unconditionally to life, struggles to the utmost against approaching death, and receives it with despair.” Indeed, almost every religion regards “the boundless love of life and the endeavour to maintain it in every way as long as possible...as base and contemptible.”⁸⁹ We call a person “*bad*” who “not only affirms the will-to-live as it appears in his own body, but in this affirmation goes so far as to deny the will that appears in other individuals.”⁹⁰ Such a person seeks to alleviate their own suffering by witnessing or causing the suffering of others, who appear “wholly foreign to him, separated from [him] by a wide gulf.” At the same time, however, such intense willing is “a constant source of suffering,” for all willing is based on “need, lack, and hence pain,” and “the will is much more often crossed than satisfied.”⁹¹ The inner torment of a particularly “vehement” will can even lead to disinterested pleasure in the suffering of others: “this is *wickedness* proper, and rises to the pitch of *cruelty*,” where “the suffering of another is no longer a means for attaining the ends of its own will, but an end in itself.”⁹²

Schopenhauer believes that only the knowledge that we are all phenomena of the same will can liberate us from our bondage to the will-to-live. This knowledge opens our eyes to the universality of suffering. The individual who “no longer makes the egoistical distinction between himself and the person of others, but takes as much interest in the

⁸⁹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 466.

⁹⁰ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 362.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 363, 312.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 363.

sufferings of other individuals as in his own,” will not only exhibit benevolence and charity, but will “even [be] ready to sacrifice his own individuality whenever several others can be saved thereby.”⁹³ Whoever “knows the whole” of earthly existence, “comprehends its inner nature, and finds it involved in constant passing away, a vain striving, an inward conflict, and a continual suffering.”⁹⁴ Such knowledge then “becomes the *quieter* of all and every willing. The will now turns away from life; it shudders at the pleasures in which it recognizes the affirmation of life. Man attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete willlessness.”⁹⁵ The denial of the will-to-live reaches its highest degree in the ascetic person, who does not obey the impulse for propagation (chastity), relinquishes all their possessions (poverty), and provides their body with only minimal nourishment (fasting), even to the point of deliberate starvation, all in order to break the will-to-live in themselves.⁹⁶ Moreover, such

⁹³ Ibid., 378-379.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 379.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ As Dale Jacquette points out in his essay, “Schopenhauer on the Ethics of Suicide,” Schopenhauer’s praise of the ascetic’s suicide by starvation leads him into a contradiction. In Schopenhauer’s view, such a death is not an affirmation of the will-to-live as suicide usually is, because here the ascetic denies nourishment to the body “neither as an expression of the will to life nor of the will to die, but with an absolute indifference to any type of individual willing whatsoever” (53). Indeed, this kind of death is only acceptable for Schopenhauer if the ascetic does not “deliberately choose death by any method, including starvation, as a philosophical answer to the problem of willing or as a philosophically justifiable way of ending the struggles and suffering of individual willing.” The suicide must occur “as an unwilled but equally unresisted outcome of the unqualified indifference of will toward the superficial phenomena of life and death” (53). However, Jacquette wonders: if the act of suicide is not the result of a conscious decision, “then in what sense can it be meaningfully attributed to the character of the saint?” Furthermore, if a person should not “choose suicide as a bad faith affirmation of the will to life in an abject effort to avoid suffering,” if, on the contrary, suffering brings sanctification, “then it must be wrong to avoid, let alone willfully avoid, the vicissitudes of the will to life no matter how pleasant.” Yet Schopenhauer sees death “as preferable to the willful continuation of life,” which produces suffering, even though “for a subject to have any sort of preference about living or dying contradicts what is supposed to be the saint’s absolute indifference to life and death” (54). Dale Jacquette, “Schopenhauer on the Ethics of Suicide,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 33 (January 2000): 43-58, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010080014855>.

a person will not resist when someone denies their will (i.e., wrongs them) because they have already denied their own will. “Therefore, every suffering that comes to him from outside through chance or the wickedness of others is welcome to him; every injury, every ignominy, every outrage.”⁹⁷ While asceticism involves the “*deliberate* breaking of the will...the voluntarily chosen way of life of penance and self-chastisement, for the constant mortification of the will,” there is also another, more common way of achieving denial of the will-to-live. For most people, “the will must be broken by the greatest personal suffering before its self-denial appears.” Yet even here, complete resignation often does not occur until “the approach of death.” Only after being “brought to the verge of despair” does the individual “know himself and the world, change his whole nature, rise above himself and above all suffering...willingly renounce everything he formerly desired with the greatest vehemence, and gladly welcome death.”⁹⁸

As we will see, however, the fear of death remains a formidable barrier even for those to whom personal suffering has revealed earthly life as utterly worthless and degrading. The Sonderkommando prisoners in Auschwitz and Treblinka asked themselves—just as many of their fellow victims and, later, scholars asked of them—how they kept living and working in such horrible conditions in the gas chambers and crematoria. There are various motives that these men gave or could have given for their actions, or that historians would like to ascribe to them. But ultimately we cannot explain the force that compels us and them to live at all costs. “We ourselves are the will-to-live,”

⁹⁷ Ibid., 382.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 392.

says Schopenhauer; “hence we must live, well or badly.”⁹⁹ We cling to life not because it is good, but because we are the will-to-live itself, which wills life and “struggles with all its might” against death.¹⁰⁰ As Schopenhauer notes, we would like to quiet this will, “deprive desires of their sting, close the entry to all suffering, purify and sanctify ourselves by complete and final resignation.” But the egoistic illusion that privileges our individual life above everything else “soon ensnares us again, and its motives set the will in motion once more; we cannot tear ourselves free. The allurements of hope, the flattery of the present, the sweetness of pleasures, the well-being that falls to the lot of our person amid the lamentations of a suffering world governed by chance and error, all these draw us back to it, and rivet the bonds anew.”¹⁰¹ In the death camps, these allurements came in the form of surviving the next selection, acquiring an extra ration of food, or cherishing the hope of getting revenge on the Nazis.

The Nazis exploited this attachment to life to facilitate the extermination process. They also despised it as stereotypically “Jewish.” By conscripting Jews to assist in the destruction of their own people, the Nazis mocked what they considered to be the “Jewish” pursuit of survival at all costs. The fact that few members of the Sonderkommando resisted or committed suicide seemed to confirm them as worthy of contempt in the eyes of the Nazis. Chapter One explores the intellectual origins of the Nazi stereotype of “Jewish” self-preservation by situating it historically within the broader tradition of German nihilism. In his first treatise in *On the Genealogy of*

⁹⁹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 240.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 468.

¹⁰¹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 379.

Morality, Friedrich Nietzsche argues that Jews seek power and revenge by imposing upon society their own values of security, survival, and self-preservation. Nietzsche laments the enervating effect of such values on the noble “Aryan” warrior who is naturally reckless and cruel. Adolf Hitler draws on Nietzsche in *Mein Kampf*, depicting “Jewish” egoism as a parasitical disease responsible for the collapse of Germany at the end of the First World War. Like Nietzsche, Hitler praises the “Aryan” as the epitome of self-sacrifice, but he also calls for the physical and spiritual extermination of the “Jewish” servitude to the will-to-live, which has corrupted the German *Volk*.¹⁰² In his speech to SS

¹⁰² It is important to note here that Hitler draws not only from Nietzsche, but also from Schopenhauer to support his anti-Jewish statements in *Mein Kampf*. As Robert Wicks explains in *The Palgrave Schopenhauer Handbook*, Schopenhauer’s anti-Judaism centers around his threefold disagreement with Genesis. First of all, Schopenhauer rejects the story that God created the world and declared it to be good. According to Schopenhauer, the world cannot be intrinsically good, nor can God be good, if there is evil and suffering. In fact, such a world should not exist at all. It is the creation not of God but of a blind will, which must be abolished in order to end the cycle of suffering. However, Judaism is an “optimistic” religion, which not only regards the world as inherently good but anticipates a better world to come. In focusing on the material world, Judaism lacks the most essential element in a religion: a doctrine of immortality. Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 579-584, 621, 623. See also Schopenhauer’s *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, trans. E.F.J. Payne, vol. 1 (New York: Clarendon Press, 2000), 126n. C.f. Hitler’s remark about Judaism’s lack of a belief in the afterlife (an essential element in “Aryan” religion) in *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 305-306. On the other hand, Schopenhauer criticizes Christianity for its doctrine of immortality, because he believes that the preservation of individual consciousness after death is neither plausible nor desirable. Not only is this doctrine inconsistent with creation *ex nihilo*, it teaches humans to desire the perpetuation of an error—individual existence—and to fear death as an evil, when it is in fact “the great reprimand” to the egoism of the will-to-live. Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 507. See also *ibid.*, 491-492, 501, 504, 506. Secondly, Schopenhauer opposes the belief that God gave humans dominion over animals, which seems to permit us to use animals indiscriminately without regard to their suffering. Schopenhauer opposes this view because he recognizes physiological continuity between humans and animals. One of the main tenets of his ethics is compassion for all living things as phenomena of a single will. Humans cause suffering to their fellow beings due to the egoistic distinction between themselves and others. Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (1995; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 175. Thirdly, Schopenhauer rejects the belief that God gave humans free will, which Schopenhauer regards as illusory since he believes that all our actions are determined. We will return to this topic in Chapter Three. Robert Wicks, “Schopenhauer and Judaism,” in *The Palgrave Schopenhauer Handbook*, Palgrave Handbooks in German Idealism, ed. Sandra Shapshay (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 324-349, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62947-6>.

Another key aspect to Schopenhauer’s anti-Judaism, which Wicks does not discuss, is his view of Judaism as affirming the primacy of the will-to-live. For example, Schopenhauer argues that “it is only the monotheistic, which is to say, Jewish religions whose confessors regard suicide as a crime.” He suspects

leaders on 4 October 1943 in Posen, Heinrich Himmler acknowledges that some SS men have succumbed to the disease of “Jewish” self-interest, taking for themselves some of the confiscated property of the murdered Jews, but he states unequivocally that these men will be executed to prevent the spread of the contagion.

Chapters Two and Three focus on the testimonies of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz and Treblinka. Some writers, such as Zalman Lewental and Zalmen Gradowski, were killed during or after the uprising of 7 October 1944. They are the authors of the so-called “scrolls of Auschwitz,” manuscripts which they composed secretly in Yiddish and buried near the crematoria. Scholars have been able to transcribe and translate much of the text, but there are also illegible sections where the manuscripts have been damaged. Other members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando, such as Filip Müller and Shlomo Venezia, survived until liberation. A Slovakian Jew, Müller wrote his memoir in German. It was later published in English as *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*. Venezia was an Italian Jew from Greece. His memoir was published in English as *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz*. In the case of Treblinka, the only survivors were those who escaped before or during the camp uprising. Richard Glazar and Samuel Willenberg both participated in

that “the clergy of monotheistic religions” oppose suicide so zealously because “the voluntary giving up of life is a poor compliment” to a God who declared His creation “good.” Schopenhauer, “On Suicide,” in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 276, 279. Schopenhauer believes that we must free ourselves from the will-to-live, but one can only do that by relinquishing one’s attachment to life. And, to do that, one must relinquish morality and, concomitantly, one’s fear of death, since morals, rules, and laws, which offer protection and security, are all based on the fear of death. Aside from Buddhism and Hinduism, Schopenhauer considers Christianity (purified of Jewish elements) to have the most potential for producing asceticism, or the denial of the will-to-live, through its virtues of love, patience, poverty, and chastity. Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 386-89.

the revolt of 2 August 1943 and managed to survive until liberation. A Czech Jew, Glazar wrote his memoir in German as *Die Falle mit dem grünen Zaun*, which was later translated into English as *Trap with a Green Fence*. Willenberg's memoir *Revolt in Treblinka* was first published in his native Polish.

Chapter Two explores the Sonderkommando prisoners' perception of their enslavement to the will-to-live. They loathed their work escorting the victims to death, lying to them about their fate, collecting and sorting their possessions, and handling their corpses as though they really were the waste products the Nazis considered them to be. But the writers are also quite honest about the fear of death that kept them chained to such a miserable life and prevented them from rising up against the Nazis.

Chapter Three examines the issue of suicide, which was rare in the Sonderkommando and among death camp prisoners in general. Many testimony writers express the wish that they had the courage to end their lives by joining the victims in the gas chambers or attacking the SS guards in a desperate act of resistance. They view suicide as the only true liberation from their enslavement to the body and the will-to-live. However, such a "dignified" death remained elusive, for every act of self-preservation merely confirmed one's enslavement, and the Nazis delighted in finding new ways to expose the depths of "Jewish" degradation.

CHAPTER ONE

“WE WILL BURN IT OUT TOGETHER”: THE NAZI MOCKERY OF SELF-PRESERVATION AS “JEWISH”

The Nazis’ mockery and exploitation of their Jewish victims’ will-to-live in the death camps was part of a broader, nihilistic assault on the self-interest they saw as the core of modern society. As Leo Strauss explains in his 1941 lecture on German nihilism, the Nazis desired the destruction of modern civilization, which, they believed, aimed to create an amoral society “in which everyone would be happy and satisfied...a world in which no great heart could beat and no great soul could breathe, a world without real, unmetaphoric, sacrifice.” They saw this prospect not as man’s dream fulfilled, but “as the greatest debasement of humanity, as the coming of the end of humanity, as the arrival of” of Nietzsche’s last man.¹⁰³ For the Nazis, the only truly “moral” society was one that “is constantly confronted with, and basically oriented toward, the *Ernstfall*, the serious moment, M-day, *war*. Only life in such a *tense* atmosphere, only a life which is based on constant awareness of the *sacrifices* to which it owes its existence, and of the necessity, the *duty* of sacrifice of life and all worldly goods, is truly human.”¹⁰⁴ Rejecting the idea that “self-interest, however enlightened” is morally good, the Nazis insisted on the difference between “the noble and the useful, between duty and self-interest.” This difference was “*most* visible” in the case of courage, which is “the ability to bear any

¹⁰³ Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 360.
<https://ia801005.us.archive.org/29/items/LeoStraussGermanNihilismIntegral1941/Leo%20Strauss%20-%20%27%27German%20Nihilism%27%27%20%5BIntegral%2C%201941%5D.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 358.

physical pain, the virtue of the red Indian.” Every other virtue may be rewarded, but the courage of self-sacrifice “is *never* rewarded.” For the Nazis, courage was “the only unambiguously unutilitarian virtue,” and indeed, “the only virtue *left*” in a corrupt civilization.¹⁰⁵ However, Strauss fails to note that the Nazis tended to describe the opposing concepts of self-preservation and self-sacrifice in terms of “Jewish” and “Aryan,” respectively.

Few scholars have addressed the Nazi mockery of the allegedly Jewish primacy of self-interest and self-preservation. In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman astutely observes that the elevation of the rationality of self-preservation during the Holocaust

acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. The Jews were first proclaimed immoral and unscrupulous, selfish and greedy detractors of values, who used their ostensible cult of humanism as a convenient cover for naked self-interest; they were then forced into an inhuman condition where the definition promoted by propaganda could become true. The cameramen of Goebbels’s ministry had many a field day recording the beggars dying of famine in front of luxurious restaurants [in the ghettos].¹⁰⁶

Unfortunately, Bauman does not elaborate on this point. More recently, David Nirenberg explores the issue in his book, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. He argues that “the Holocaust was *inconceivable and is unexplainable*” without the historical encoding of “the threat of Judaism into some of the basic concepts of Western thought.”¹⁰⁷ According to Nirenberg, “Judaism” is not only a religion, “but also a category, a set of ideas and attributes with which non-Jews can make sense of and criticize their world. Nor is ‘anti-Judaism’ simply an attitude toward Jews and their religion, but a way of critically

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 371, 370.

¹⁰⁶ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 147-148.

¹⁰⁷ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 460.

engaging the world.”¹⁰⁸ One of the ways that non-Jews, beginning with the early Christians, engaged with their world was through dualisms such as human and animal, love (or self-sacrifice) and self-interest, spirit and matter, freedom and slavery, and life and death. In their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, the Jews became for the early Christians “emblematic of the particular, of stubborn adherence to the conditions of the flesh, enemies of the spirit, and of God.”¹⁰⁹ Paul was especially influential in this regard. Although the apostle was “a moderate dualist,” he did believe “that misplaced attention to the world of law, letter, and flesh was exceedingly, even lethally, dangerous.”¹¹⁰ He identified such “excessive attention to the ‘flesh’” with “Judaism” and “Jewishness,” which became “a key term of epistemological and ontological critique.”¹¹¹ Paul’s followers magnified this association, using Judaism “to make the flesh and its tools appear in their most dangerous, most infectious...and most explicitly stigmatized guise.”¹¹² Over the course of the first four centuries of Christianity, “hypocrisy, carnality, literalism, and enmity were strategically distilled into the figure of the Jew.”¹¹³

As Nirenberg makes clear, the development of these concepts did not require contact with real, living Jews. However, it did affect the existence of those Jews living in Christendom. As “hyper-carnal” beings, Jews were “channeled” into particular functions in society, such as money lending and tax collecting, which Christians considered to be sinful and inappropriate for believers to practice. Christians were not supposed to profit

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 61.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 60.

¹¹² Ibid., 84.

¹¹³ Ibid., 119.

from lending money to fellow believers; nor were they to act like the tax collectors depicted in the Gospels who enriched themselves at the expense of hard-working citizens. Over the centuries, these occupations “came to be associated with Jews, and even thought of as ‘Jewish,’ although Jews rarely predominated in them, and then only for short periods of time.”¹¹⁴ At the same time, allegedly condemned to wander the earth like Cain (a view put forward by Augustine), Jews had the political status of slaves, the property of Christian rulers who tolerated their presence in certain economic functions and physical spaces.¹¹⁵ This toleration had its limits. Some early political thinkers feared the loss of Christian sovereignty to the “tyrannical materialism” of Jewish financiers and sought to purify their communities through the exile, forced conversion, and killing of Jews.¹¹⁶ “Jewishness” also became a potent weapon of religious reform. Martin Luther portrayed his Catholic opponents as even more “Jewish”—that is, more venal, hypocritical, and legalistic—than the Jews, who clung infuriatingly to their laws and traditions. As for the Jews themselves, Luther judged them to be “a useless, indeed a polluting, waste product.”¹¹⁷ In one of his later polemics, he called for the destruction of Jewish homes and synagogues, the concentration of Jews into one place, the confiscation of their wealth and religious books, the prohibition of their teaching and money lending, forced manual labor for young Jews, and, as a last resort, their extermination. Nirenberg notes that Luther’s words provoked the expulsion of Jews from many parts of Germany.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 197.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 129, 131, 193.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 203, 213-215.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 255.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 262.

The association of Jews with materialism continued into the Enlightenment and beyond. For example, Immanuel Kant distinguished between “Jewish ‘slavery’ based on fear of the law, self-love, and formal ritual, and a Christian ‘freedom’ based on love of God and neighbor and an inner yearning for morality.”¹¹⁹ For Kant, the empiricist dogma of Judaism made the human being subject to the laws of nature, “a slave to necessity,” “a mere creature, eking out existence within a deterministic universe.” His “critique of pure reason” was intended to liberate human reason from “this bondage to the material world.”¹²⁰ At the same time, the opponents of the Enlightenment “saw in Jews and Judaism the source and most horrific example of the hyperrationality, self-interest, atheism, and stubborn materialism with which they believed the Enlightenment threatened the world.”¹²¹ With the rise of industrialization and urbanization in the nineteenth century, many philosophers “worried that the result would be an egoistic, materialistic world of self-love and self-interest in which only the desire for property and the circulation of money linked man to man.”¹²² They imagined this threat as Jewish. For example, Karl Marx believed that human beings—both Jews and Christians—had become alienated from the products of their labor and from their fellow humans through the Judaization of modern society. This occurred because “the worldly basis of Judaism” was “practical need, individual utility”; the “worldly cult of the Jew” was “haggling,” and the worldly Jewish god was money. In fact, Jewish “emancipation” had actually resulted

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 358.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 395, 392.

¹²¹ Ibid., 342.

¹²² Ibid., 422.

in enslavement: through the Jew, “money has risen to world power and the practical Jewish spirit has become the practical spirit of the Christian peoples.” Thus, for Marx, the question was not how to achieve the emancipation of the Jews, but how to liberate society from Judaism.¹²³

While Nirenberg’s treatment of the long Western tradition of condemning “Jewish” self-interest and materialism is quite thorough, his discussion suffers from two major lacunae. First of all, he scarcely mentions Friedrich Nietzsche, who, Strauss argues, “exercised a greater influence on postwar German thought” and “was more responsible for the emergence of German nihilism” than any other philosopher.¹²⁴

Nirenberg also leaves out the leader of the Nazi movement, Adolf Hitler, who was influenced by Nietzsche. This chapter seeks to correct this omission by contextualizing the Nazi assault on “Jewish” self-preservation within the broader tradition of German nihilism. It begins with an analysis of Nietzsche’s first treatise in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, followed by a discussion of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and of Himmler’s speech to SS leaders in Posen on 4 October 1943. Through an examination of these sources, the intellectual basis of the Nazis’ contempt for their Jewish victims in the death camps will become clear. In the eyes of the Nazis, the individual who sought to preserve their life at all costs and cowered in the face of death exhibited the contemptible egoism of the Jewish “parasite” and did not deserve to live. By contrast, the one who sacrificed their self-interest and even their life for the sake of the *Volk*, who endured all physical

¹²³ Karl Marx, quoted in Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 435-437.

¹²⁴ Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 372. See also 361-362.

suffering with equanimity, demonstrated the highest virtue, the courage of Nietzsche's Aryan warrior.

In the first treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche tells the myth of the Jewish "slave revolt," in which "that priestly people," the Jews, gained political power over the aristocratic warrior class. Nietzsche recalls the noble races of the past such as the "Roman, Arab, Germanic, Japanese nobility, Homeric heroes, Scandinavian Vikings," and especially the Aryan: "the splendid *blond beast* who roams about lusting after booty and victory."¹²⁵ He praises the boldness of these races, "their indifference and contempt toward all security, body, life, comfort; their appalling light heartedness and depth of desire in all destruction, in all the delights of victory and of cruelty."¹²⁶ By contrast, the Jewish priests were "*unhealthy*" people who maintained strict purity laws regarding hygiene, sexual intercourse, and diet; as those "turned away from action," who had no taste for blood or war.¹²⁷ As the least powerful caste, the Jewish priests developed an intense hatred for the aristocratic warrior class, whose values included "a powerful physicality, a blossoming, rich, even overflowing health, together with that which is required for its preservation: war, adventure, the hunt, dance, athletic contests, and in general everything which includes strong, free, cheerful-hearted activity."¹²⁸ This priestly hatred grew "into something enormous and uncanny, into something most spiritual and most poisonous."¹²⁹ Due to their political weakness, however, the Jews "were only able

¹²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 22.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

to obtain satisfaction from their enemies and conquerors through a radical reevaluation of their values, that is, through an act of *spiritual revenge*.”¹³⁰ According to Nietzsche, the Jews achieved this revenge through the invention of Christianity, which declared: “the miserable alone are the good; the poor, powerless, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly are also the only pious, the only blessed in God...whereas you, you noble and powerful ones, you are in all eternity the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless, you will eternally be the wretched, accursed, and damned!”¹³¹ Thus, argues Nietzsche, the Christian “Gospel of Love” grew “out of the trunk of that tree of revenge and hate, Jewish hate” and reached out “for victory, for booty, for seduction,” even as its roots “sunk themselves ever more thoroughly and greedily down into everything that had depth and was evil.” The Jews seduced the world through Jesus Christ, who promised “blessedness and victory to the poor, the sick, the sinners.”¹³²

According to Nietzsche, the Jews used Christianity to replace the values of the aristocratic warrior class with their own values of security, survival, and self-preservation. Like all powerless and oppressed peoples, the Jews had become “*more prudent* than any noble race” and honored prudence “as a primary condition of existence.”¹³³ Therefore, they displayed the shrewdness of lambs who declare that their predators, because they prey on them, are evil, while they themselves, because they are victims, are good. They said to themselves: “let us be different from the evil ones,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., 17.

¹³³ Ibid., 20.

namely good! And good is what everyone is who does not do violence, who injures no one, who doesn't attack, who doesn't retaliate, who leaves vengeance to God, who keeps himself concealed, as we do, who avoids all evil, and in general demands very little of life, like us, the patient, humble, righteous."¹³⁴ In this way, the Jewish "lambs" elevated their natural weakness, which is a "unique, unavoidable, undetachable reality," into "a voluntary achievement, something willed, something chosen, a *deed*, a *merit*." They also gained the right to hold their predators "*accountable*" for acting according to their nature.¹³⁵ In a fictional dialogue, Nietzsche derisively enumerates the new Christian ideals:

Weakness is to be lied into a *merit*...and the powerlessness that does not retaliate into kindness; fearful baseness into 'humility'; subjection to those whom one hates into 'obedience' (namely to one whom they say orders this subjection—they call him God). The inoffensiveness of the weak one, cowardice itself, which he possesses in abundance, his standing-at-the-door, his unavoidable having-to-wait, acquires good names here, such as 'patience,' it is even called virtue *itself*; not being able to avenge oneself is called not wanting to avenge oneself, perhaps even forgiveness.¹³⁶

Not only do Christians think that they are "better than the powerful, the lords of the earth, whose saliva they must lick," they also think they are "'better off,' at least will be better off one day."¹³⁷ For someday "*their* 'kingdom' too shall come," but to experience it "they need to live long, beyond death—indeed they need eternal life so that in the 'kingdom of God' they can also recover eternally the losses incurred during that earth-life 'in faith, in love, in hope.'"¹³⁸ Christianity became successful "because it made possible for the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 25-26.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 27.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 31.

majority of mortals, the weak and oppressed of every kind, that sublime self-deception of interpreting weakness itself as freedom, of interpreting their being-such-and-such as a *merit*.”¹³⁹ With the enshrinement of weakness and suffering in modern society, argues Nietzsche, the once-noble human being has become sickeningly “more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more apathetic.”¹⁴⁰

The influence of Nietzsche’s profound contempt for “Jewish” self-preservation can be seen in Adolf Hitler’s memoir *Mein Kampf*. In the book, Hitler asserts that “All human culture, all the results of art, science, and technology that we see before us today, are almost exclusively the creative product of the Aryan.”¹⁴¹ The Aryan “alone was the founder of all higher humanity, therefore representing the prototype of all that we understand by the word ‘man.’”¹⁴² For Hitler, the “genius” of the Aryan lies not in his intellectual gifts, but in the expression of his instinct of self-preservation. “The will to live,” he writes, “is everywhere equal and different only in the form of its actual expression.” For example, in the most primitive organisms, “the instinct of self-preservation does not go beyond concern for their own ego.”¹⁴³ Such an animal “lives only for itself, seeks food only for its present hunger, and fights only for its own life.”¹⁴⁴ The formation of a family or community requires the extension of the instinct of self-preservation to others and the development of a sense of self-sacrifice. While the “lowest

¹³⁹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 288. For the original German text, I consulted *Hitler, Mein Kampf – eine kritische Edition*, eds. Christian Hartmann, Thomas Vordermayer, Othmar Plöckinger, and Roman Töppel (Munich: Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 2016).

¹⁴² Ibid., 290.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 296.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 297. My translation.

peoples of the earth” rarely exhibit this quality, the Aryan exemplifies the “self-sacrificing will to give one’s personal labor and if necessary one’s own life for others.” In the Aryan, “the instinct of self-preservation has reached the noblest form, since he willingly subordinates his own ego to the life of the community and, if the hour demands, even sacrifices it.”¹⁴⁵ Hitler uses the term “idealism” to refer to “the individual’s capacity to make sacrifices for the community, for his fellow men.”¹⁴⁶ According to Hitler, idealism brought forth the concept of “man” and elevated the Aryan race to the highest level.¹⁴⁷ He notes that the Aryan does not use the word work (*Arbeit* in German) to describe “an activity for maintaining life in itself, but exclusively a creative effort that does not conflict with the interests of the community.” Any human activity that “serves the instinct of self-preservation without consideration for his fellow men,” the Aryan instead calls “theft, usury, robbery, burglary, etc.” Even more admirable than work is the sacrifice of “giving one’s own life for the existence of the community,” which is described “magnificently” by the German word *Pflichterfüllung* (fulfillment of duty).¹⁴⁸

In contrast to the Aryan, Hitler believed that the instinct of self-preservation appears in its lowest expression in the Jew. In fact, the so-called solidarity of the Jewish people “is based on the very primitive herd instinct that is seen in many other living creatures in this world. It is a noteworthy fact that the herd instinct leads to mutual support only as long as a common danger makes this seem useful or inevitable.”¹⁴⁹ As

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 298.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 299.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 301.

examples Hitler mentions the wolfpack which disperses after the individual wolves have satisfied their hunger, and the horses which come together for mutual protection “but scatter again as soon as the danger is past.”¹⁵⁰ Likewise, Hitler says, the Jew’s “sense of sacrifice is only apparent.” His description of what happens when this solidarity breaks down is worth quoting at length, as it resembles the scenario the SS later attempted to create in the death camps:

The Jew is only united when a common danger forces him to be or a common booty entices him; if these two grounds are lacking, the qualities of the crassest egoism come into their own, and in the twinkling of an eye the united people turns into a horde of rats, fighting bloodily among themselves.

If the Jews were alone in this world, they would stifle in filth and offal; they would try to get ahead of one another in hate-filled struggle and exterminate one another, in so far as the absolute absence of all sense of self-sacrifice, expressing itself in their cowardice, did not turn battle into comedy here too.¹⁵¹

Hitler insists that the fact that the Jews “stand together in struggle, or, better expressed, in the plundering of their fellow men,” does not indicate that they possess “any ideal sense of sacrifice.” On the contrary, the Jew is always “led by nothing but the naked egoism of the individual.”¹⁵²

Hitler believed that Jewish egoism is particularly apparent in the parasitical nature of the race. Lacking idealism, which is “the most essential requirement for a cultured people,” the Jew has always been “a *parasite* in the body of other peoples.”¹⁵³ The Jew is “a sponger who like a noxious bacillus keeps spreading as soon as a favorable medium

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 302.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 301, 304-305.

invites him. And the effect of his existence is also like that of spongers: wherever he appears, the host people dies out after a shorter or longer period.”¹⁵⁴ In order to preserve his parasitic existence, the Jew must “lie perpetually.” Denying his inner nature, he must convince the host people that he “is really a Frenchman or an Englishman, a German or an Italian, though of a special religious faith.” This is a great lie, says Hitler, because it is not possible for the Jew to have a religion, “if for no other reason because he lacks idealism in any form, and hence belief in a hereafter is absolutely foreign to him. And a religion in the Aryan sense cannot be imagined which lacks the conviction of survival after death in some form.” Indeed, the Jewish Talmud “is not a book to prepare a man for the hereafter, but only for a practical and profitable life in this world.”¹⁵⁵ “The Jewish religious doctrine consists primarily in prescriptions for keeping the blood of Jewry pure,” which is a form of self-preservation, “and for regulating the relation of Jews among themselves, but even more with the rest of the world.”¹⁵⁶ Like Nietzsche, Hitler believes that the Jew regards religion as “nothing but an instrument for his business existence.” Unlike the philosopher, however, Hitler sees otherworldly salvation not as a tool of Jewish revenge on the aristocratic warrior class, but as a defining feature of Aryan religion which distinguishes it from Judaism. Thus, he presents Christ as an opponent of the Jews. When Christ drove “this adversary of all humanity” from the Temple, the Jews took revenge by nailing him to the cross.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 305.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 305, 306. See note 102 above on Schopenhauer.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 306.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 307.

Hitler attributed the collapse of Germany at the end of the First World War to the insidious influence of Jewish egoism. The military defeat was only “the first consequence, catastrophic and visible to all, of an ethical and moral poisoning, of a diminution in the instinct of [national] self-preservation and its preconditions, which for many years had begun to undermine the foundations of the people and the Reich.”¹⁵⁸ According to Hitler, this poisoning took many forms: greed, servility, physical weakness, cowardice, and half-heartedness. He witnessed its consequences in himself and others during the war. As a soldier in the trenches, he

struggle[d] between the instinct for self-preservation and the admonitions of duty...Always when Death was on the hunt, a vague something tried to revolt, strove to represent itself to the weak body as reason, yet it was only cowardice, which in such disguises tried to ensnare the individual. A grave tugging and warning set in, and often it was only the last remnant of conscience which decided the issue.¹⁵⁹

However, it supposedly took only until the winter of 1915-16 for him to win this internal battle. “At last my will was undisputed master,” he writes proudly. “I was now calm and determined. And this was enduring. Now Fate could bring on the ultimate tests without my nerves shattering or my reason failing.” While most of the army underwent a similar transformation from “young volunteers” to “old soldiers,” there were some men “who could not stand up under the storm” and “were broken.”¹⁶⁰

The situation was different on the home front. When Hitler was wounded in October 1916 and sent back to Germany, he heard for the first time “men bragging about

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 231.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 165.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

their own cowardice!” He admits that the soldiers at the front complained about their lot, but such “beefing” was “never an incitement to shirk duty or a glorification of the coward.” The coward was held in contempt just as the “real hero” was admired. At the hospital, however, “the most unscrupulous agitators” made fun of “the decent soldiers” and held up “the spineless coward as an example.”¹⁶¹ In fact, “to be a slacker passed almost as a sign of higher wisdom, while loyal steadfastness was considered a symptom of inner weakness and narrow-mindedness.” He noticed that the Jews seemed to have taken all the safe jobs, far away from the front lines. “The offices were filled with Jews. Nearly every clerk was a Jew and nearly every Jew was a clerk. I was amazed at this plethora of warriors of the chosen people and could not help but compare them with their rare representatives at the front.”¹⁶² The Jews were not only unwilling to sacrifice their lives for the Fatherland, they were actively enriching themselves at the expense of the nation. In the economic sphere, “the Jewish people had become really ‘indispensable.’ The spider was slowly beginning to suck the blood out of the people’s pores.” Hitler claims that by 1916-17, “nearly the whole of production was under the control of Jewish finance.”¹⁶³

Hitler saw a great danger not only in the spread of “Jewish” self-interest and cowardice, but also in the government’s failure to root out the “Jewish” doctrine of Marxism. Hitler detested Marxism as a form of collective egoism, in that it appealed to and affirmed material satisfaction as the basic aim of human life. He also considered

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 191-192.

¹⁶² Ibid., 193.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Marxism to be a Jewish plot to exploit the resentments of the lower classes to gain political power. While the Jew “organizes capitalistic methods of human exploitation to their ultimate consequence, he approaches the very victims of his spirit and his activity and in a short time becomes the leader of their struggle against himself.”¹⁶⁴ The Jew pretends to sympathize with the worker’s fate, and even displays “indignation at his lot of misery and poverty, thus gaining his confidence.” “With infinite shrewdness,” the Jew “fans the need for social justice, somehow slumbering in every Aryan man, into hatred against those who have been better favored by fortune.” In this way, the Jew “establishes the Marxist doctrine.”¹⁶⁵ This movement “of manual workers under Jewish leadership” claims to want “to improve the situation of the worker,” but in fact it plans “the enslavement and with it the destruction of all non-Jewish peoples.”¹⁶⁶ Slavery was abhorrent to Hitler. “Any man who wants to be a cowardly slave can have no honor,” he writes in an earlier chapter. “[G]enerations of rabble without honor deserve no freedom”; the loss of their independence “is only the result of a higher justice.” He reiterates: “The most unbeautiful thing there can be in human life is and remains the yoke of slavery.”¹⁶⁷ Only “a racially pure people which is conscious of its blood” can avoid such enslavement.¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the German nation “sin[ned] against the will of eternal Providence” by losing its racial purity, which is “the sole right which gives life in this world.”¹⁶⁹ Failing to recognize the Jewish “inner enemy,” Germany entered the First

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 318.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 319.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 320.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 177-178.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 325.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 327.

World War only out of fear due to “the progressing pacifist-Marxist paralysis of our national body.” As a result, “Providence did not bestow her reward on the victorious sword, but followed the law of eternal retribution.”¹⁷⁰

In Hitler’s opinion, Marxism was an existential threat that warranted the most extreme measures. “All the elements of military power should have been ruthlessly used for the extermination of this pestilence,” he writes. “The parties should have been dissolved, the Reichstag brought to its senses, with bayonets if necessary, but, best of all, dissolved at once...For the life and death of a whole nation was at stake!”¹⁷¹ However, he warns against attempting to eradicate a doctrine like Marxism through the application of force alone, “without the impetus of a basic spiritual idea as the starting point.” Such an effort “can never lead to the destruction of an idea and its dissemination, except in the form of a complete extermination of even the very last exponent of the idea and the destruction of the last tradition.” While this process of extermination may eventually succeed, it will drain “all the truly valuable blood” out of the people.¹⁷² The successful use of naked force against an inimical idea such as Judeo-Bolshevism requires “steady and constant application,” but this persistence must “always and only arise from a definite spiritual conviction. Any violence which does not spring from a firm, spiritual base, will be wavering and uncertain. It lacks the stability which can only rest in a fanatical outlook.”¹⁷³ Indeed, “The fight against a spiritual power with methods of

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 329.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 169-170.

¹⁷² Ibid., 170.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 171.

violence remains defensive...until the sword becomes the support, the herald and disseminator, of a new spiritual doctrine.”¹⁷⁴

Hitler intended the Nazi ideology to be such a spiritual doctrine. As Strauss notes in his lecture, this doctrine was founded on the principle of military virtue, which the Nazis believed was the only virtue left in modern civilization. In Hitler’s eyes, the army represented the last hope for the nation because it “trained men in personal courage in an age when cowardice threatened to become a raging disease and the spirit of sacrifice, the willingness to give oneself for the general welfare, was looked on almost as stupidity, and the only man regarded as intelligent was the one who best knew how to indulge and advance his own ego.”¹⁷⁵ Thus, the new National Socialist state would be founded on the military virtues of “*Loyalty, spirit of sacrifice, discretion.*”¹⁷⁶ As for “the cowardly egotist, who in the hour of his people’s distress sets his own life higher than that of the totality,” Hitler states emphatically that there is only one way to deal with such a “spineless weakling.” Since the coward “at all times naturally shuns nothing so much as death,” he “*must know that his desertion brings with it the very thing that he wants to escape. At the front a man **can** die, as a deserter he **must** die.*”¹⁷⁷

Speaking to a group of SS officers in Posen twenty years later, on 4 October 1943, Heinrich Himmler echoes his Führer’s words. He notes that it is a simple matter to talk about the extermination [*Ausrottung*] of the Jews, but much more difficult to carry it

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 172.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 280.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 416.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 524.

out. Most Germans are reluctant to accept the necessity of annihilation, for “each one has his decent Jew. They say: all the others are swine, but here is a first-class Jew.” But “none of them has seen it, has endured it,” as have the SS officers in Himmler’s audience. They have been on the front lines of the Final Solution. The elite men of the SS “know what it means when 100 bodies lie together, when 500 are there or when there are 1000. And...to have seen this through and—with the exception of human weakness—to have remained decent [*anständig*], has made us hard and is a page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned.”¹⁷⁸ However, some SS men have disobeyed Himmler’s order concerning the “riches” of the Jews: that “he who takes even one Mark of this is a dead man.”¹⁷⁹ There are only a few offenders, Himmler says, but “they will be dead men—WITHOUT MERCY [*GNADELOS*]!” he shouts. “We have the moral right, we had the duty to our people to do it, to kill this people who would kill us. We however do not have the right to enrich ourselves with even one fur, with one Mark, with one cigarette, with one watch, with anything.” This is because, as Hitler emphasized in *Mein Kampf*, self-interest is a parasitic, “Jewish” disease that can infect anyone, even the “Aryan,” and it is fatal. Himmler explains:

...we don’t want, at the end of all this, to get sick and die from the same bacillus [*Bazillus*] that we have exterminated. I will never see it happen that even one...bit of putrefaction [*Fäulnisstelle*] comes in contact with us, or takes root in us. On the contrary, where it might try to take root, we will burn it out together. But altogether we can say: We have carried out this most difficult task for the love of

¹⁷⁸ Heinrich Himmler, “Extermination” (speech, Posen [now Poznań], Poland, 4 October 1943), trans. Stephane Bruchfeld, Gordon McFee, Dr. Ulrich Rössler, et al., The Nizkor Project, <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/h/himmler-heinrich/posen/oct-04-43/ausrottung-transl-nizkor.html>. For the German transcript, see: <http://nizkor.com/hweb/people/h/himmler-heinrich/posen/oct-04-43/ausrottung-transc-nizkor.html>.

¹⁷⁹ Here Himmler uses the ominous, if archaic, phrase “des Todes sein,” which means “to be doomed to die.”

our people. And we have suffered no defect [*keinen Schaden*] within us, in our soul, or in our character.¹⁸⁰

Like Hitler, Himmler condemns acts of self-interest as symptoms of a spiritual, specifically “Jewish” disease. It was not enough to exterminate millions of real Jews for being the alleged carriers of this dangerous “bacillus.” The SS had to aggressively combat this highly contagious disease within their own bodies and minds.

In the foregoing analysis, I have traced the development of the Nazi stereotype of Jewish self-preservation and the Nazi attempt to eliminate its “spiritual” root. A close reading of Nietzsche’s first treatise in *On the Genealogy of Morality* reveals the “spiritual” aspect of this view within the larger tradition of German nihilism. In his hatred of Jewish “slave morality,” which elevates servitude to the will-to-live above the courage of the aristocratic “beast of prey,” Nietzsche anticipates Hitler’s contempt for Jewish self-preservation and egoism compared to the self-sacrificing “idealism” of the Aryan. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler agrees with Nietzsche that such “Jewish” egoism has produced an enervating, indeed a poisonous effect on the Aryan warrior, who frequently became a “slacker” and deserter in the First World War. However, Hitler goes further than Nietzsche, declaring that the national body of the German people must be physically and spiritually purged of this “Jewish” disease. On the surface, this effort appeared to be successful. By the time Himmler addressed his SS officers in Posen on 4 October 1943, the Nazis had already murdered millions of European Jews. Yet, as Himmler’s speech

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

reveals, even the elite SS had not always kept themselves clean of the “bacillus” of Jewish self-interest.

We will see in the next chapter that this fact had tragic consequences for Jewish prisoners in the death camps. As if out of revenge for their own enslavement to the imperative of self-preservation, the Nazis mocked and exploited the will-to-live in their Jewish victims. They derived a certain pleasure from exposing the supposedly boundless selfishness of the Jews by placing them in situations where they had to perform the most humiliating activities in order to survive. Since the Jews allegedly valued their lives above all, the Nazis believed they could be made to do anything, even to assist in the extermination of their own people, just to live a little longer. In a vicious cycle of degradation, the Jewish victims felt themselves becoming the very creatures that their oppressors despised. The tragedy was that the concern for self-preservation was not a “Jewish” trait at all, but a human weakness. The Nazis cruelly punished in the Jews what they hated in themselves.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE MASTER OF YOUR EGO AND THE OWNER OF YOUR SOUL”: VICTIM PERCEPTIONS OF ENSLAVEMENT TO THE WILL-TO-LIVE

A common theme in Holocaust testimonies is the victim's feeling that the death camp has reduced them to nothing but a body, which never ceases in its physical demands until death. They perceive themselves as enslaved to their own body, forced to privilege its needs above all thoughts of resistance and escape. They describe themselves as beings who consume their food like animals; perform their work robotically; do not resist when they or their fellow victims are beaten or killed; and no longer exhibit human emotions. As we saw in the Introduction, Hannah Arendt believed that the primary aim of the camps was to transform human beings into precisely such “bundles of reactions that behave in exactly the same way,” into “marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity.”¹⁸¹ Although Arendt was unsure whether the Nazis ever achieved “total domination” in the camps, most scholars accept her view that such domination could never occur under “normal” circumstances. In other words, they agree with Arendt that the kind of enslavement that Holocaust victims describe in their testimonies is the result of a specific historical system. Yet in order for the Nazis to have achieved any measure of domination *inside* the camps, there must have been something that existed *outside* and *prior to* the victim's entry into the camp system that the Nazis could use as “raw material” for their experiment. Domination requires successful exploitation of one or more of a victim's vulnerabilities. This chapter argues that the primary vulnerability of

¹⁸¹ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 456, 457.

the prisoners was what Schopenhauer calls the “will-to-live,” or the imperative of self-preservation. The camp system could not have functioned in all its horrific cruelty without this enslavement to the will-to-live.

Although she does not explicitly identify the will-to-live as an object of Nazi exploitation, Michal Aharony takes some important steps in this direction in her book, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Total Domination*. Aharony agrees with Arendt and sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky that the camps “created an environment aimed at reducing prisoners to automatons functioning blindly as part of a herd, while simultaneously isolating them from their families, neighbors, and friends.” Elements of this environment, such as the daily roll call, which could last for hours in all kinds of weather; the nerve-wracking selections; the arbitrary and absurd camp rules; the grueling forced labor; and especially the lack of food and water and the poor sanitary conditions, combined “to terrorize the prisoners, strip them of their human characters, destabilize their sense of control, and *confront them with the weakness and ineptitude of their physical body to withstand the conditions*” (emphasis added).¹⁸² I have called attention to the final part of this passage because it shows that Aharony recognizes the vulnerability of the human body as a significant aspect of victim suffering in the camps. Indeed, she writes, the testimonies reveal that “the prisoners’ confrontation and preoccupation with the physical body intensified in direct proportion to the denial of their most basic human needs.”¹⁸³ Hunger was “one of the most difficult torments to cope with in Auschwitz,” as well as “a

¹⁸² Aharony, *Limits of Total Domination*, 104.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 92.

main source of humiliation for the prisoners,” while thirst could be “even more agonizing.”¹⁸⁴

In identifying hunger as a significant source of humiliation, Aharony makes an important connection between self-preservation and shame. She notes that, in oral interviews, survivors are often reluctant to talk about their experience of starvation. She suspects that it is difficult for them not only because it requires them to “re-live” such an extreme sensation, but also because of their “feelings of shame and guilt, as prisoners’ attempt to overcome hunger, the will to survive and the struggle to remain alive sometimes drove them to a certain behavior that involved very difficult dilemmas of conscience.”¹⁸⁵ Here she has in mind an inmate’s stealing bread from a fellow prisoner, which “was a violation of an unwritten law of block comradeship.” According to inmate moral codes, “bread theft was the equivalent of murder” and those found guilty were invariably beaten, sometimes to death.¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, she looks more favorably on “organizing,” which was “the camp slang for stealing, buying, exchanging, or somehow getting hold of some article necessary for survival from persons other than prisoners.”¹⁸⁷ Although “organizing” was not considered theft because it “meant acquiring something that was needed without wronging another prisoner,” Aharony does not mention the fact

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 106. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi writes: “hunger obeys the nerves, grants remission, can be temporarily obliterated by an emotion, a pain, a fear...not so with thirst, which does not give respite. Hunger exhausts, thirst enrages.” Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 79.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 143, 107.

that those she calls “persons other than prisoners” were not always the SS or civilian workers, but often fellow Jews who had been murdered in the gas chambers.

This was particularly the case with the Sonderkommando. Aharony notes that the members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando “did not suffer from hunger” like the majority of inmates because they “had access to the various articles of food that were found in the victims’ clothing.”¹⁸⁸ While these prisoners “acted in different ways with regard to the belongings of the murdered victims,” most of the survivors “testify without any reservations that they ate the food belonging to the victims.”¹⁸⁹ However, like Primo Levi, Aharony does not believe that one should pass moral judgment on the Sonderkommando members for these acts of survival. “In my own view,” she writes, “confusing between the victims who were forced to do what they must do in order to survive with the Nazis who had designed the imposition of the situation of the camp is both morally and analytically problematic.”¹⁹⁰ Following Gideon Greif, Aharony asserts that “many of the Sonderkommando inmates retained their sanity and continued to act as moral human beings,” particularly in their maintenance of religious life in the crematoria.¹⁹¹ While some of the prisoners’ “actions would be considered ethically questionable” according to ordinary moral standards, “the fact that the inmates struggled with their implications suggests that they were able to retain their sense of morality.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 170.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 186.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 185-186.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 169.

¹⁹² Ibid., 200.

In examining the Sonderkommando testimonies, Aharony makes the astute observation that “the most human common denominator was the will to survive, the instinct of preserving one’s life.”¹⁹³ However, in keeping with previous scholarship, she does not see the prisoners’ will-to-live as a potential vulnerability, but as a source of resistance. She asserts that “any conscious choice by prisoners to live must be considered an act of resistance.”¹⁹⁴ She argues that each of the prisoners’ acts of survival “was a manifestation of one’s dignity, that is, an exercise of one’s will.” Although some of these actions involved “highly complicated moral dilemmas,” they allowed the prisoners “to change, albeit minimally or symbolically, the reality in which they lived; *they were all part of an arsenal of individual and collective defenses and thus elements of resistance*” (emphasis in original).¹⁹⁵ Thus, in spite of acknowledging the primacy of the will-to-live in determining victim behavior, Aharony views the prisoners’ attempts at self-preservation as expressions of “spontaneity” or free will. Equating biological life with freedom, she asserts that “freedom cannot be extinguished, even in extreme circumstances, unless a person is physically on the verge of death. To be alive—even in the concentration camps—was to be free, to have choices, to have the potential capacity to behave spontaneously.”¹⁹⁶ We will return to the issue of free will in Chapter Three, but for now it is sufficient to note that Aharony’s argument reflects the scholarly consensus that self-preservation represents agency rather than servitude. However, a close reading

¹⁹³ Ibid., 178.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 131, 206.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 156; see also 133.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 221.

of the Sonderkommando testimonies indicates that many victims perceived the imperative to preserve their lives not as liberating, but as enslaving.

Before turning to the testimonies, it will be helpful to revisit Schopenhauer's view of self-preservation, which finds an echo in many of the victim accounts. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argues that all life is governed by a single will, which blindly and incessantly craves life and existence. This will objectifies itself in the world as various phenomena, such as plants, animals, and human beings. The phenomenal world is thus "the mirror, the objectivity, of the will." Since "what the will wills is always life," Schopenhauer uses the term "will-to-live" instead of simply "will."¹⁹⁷ In its constant striving, the will-to-live is at variance with itself, for each of its phenomena "keeps up a permanent struggle" against the others, and its higher grades of objectification strive to subjugate the lower ones.¹⁹⁸ Thus, humans must consume plants and animals to stay alive, and "every animal can maintain its own existence only by the incessant elimination of another's." In this way, the will "generally feasts on itself, and is in different forms its own nourishment, till finally the human race, because it subdues all the others, regards nature as manufactured for its own use."¹⁹⁹ The will must feed on itself because "nothing exists besides it, and it is a hungry will. Hence arise pursuit, hunting, anxiety, and suffering."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 275.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

This struggle also occurs within the human body itself, which, as the highest objectification of the will-to-live, strives against the “lower” physical and chemical forces that have a prior claim to it. The body experiences a “comfortable feeling of health” when it is victorious over these forces. However, “this comfortable feeling is often interrupted, and in fact is always accompanied by a greater or lesser amount of discomfort, resulting from the resistance of those forces; through such discomfort the vegetative part of our life is constantly associated with a slight pain.” This explains “the burden of physical life, the necessity of sleep, and ultimately of death.” Death occurs when “those subdued forces of nature win back from the organism, wearied even by constant victory, the matter snatched from them, and attain to the unimpeded expression of their being.”²⁰¹ Thus, human existence is nothing but “a constantly prevented dying, an ever-deferred death...Every breath we draw wards off the death that constantly impinges on us. In this way, we struggle with it every second, and again at longer intervals through every meal we eat, every sleep we take, every time we warm ourselves, and so on.”²⁰² While Schopenhauer is clearly speaking of everyday life in this passage, he would likely agree that we usually do not become acutely aware of the fragility of our existence until the approach of our own death reveals it to us. To paraphrase Aharony, the death camp confronted the prisoners with the vulnerability of the human body, which the security and comfort of ordinary life conceals from us. Faced with their own nakedness in the face of death, which in the camp threatened from every direction, the inmates seized every scrap

²⁰¹ Ibid., 146.

²⁰² Ibid., 311.

of food and every article of clothing as a defense against that death, even if they could only obtain those items at the expense of others.

Although the maintenance of one's existence is a "wearisome," losing battle, what enables us to endure it is the overwhelming fear of death.²⁰³ Since we are the objectified will-to-live itself, death appears to us not merely as the extinction of an individual phenomenon, but as the annihilation of the entire world. This explains our "boundless attachment" to "an existence which is full of want, misery, trouble, pain, anxiety, and then again full of boredom."²⁰⁴ To the human being, who is the embodiment of the will-to-live, life appears "as the highest good, however embittered, short, and uncertain it may be," while death seems the "greatest of evils, the worst thing that can threaten anywhere."²⁰⁵ Hence the individual's "awful alarm and wild rebellion" when death approaches "with distinct consciousness"; "the entire inner nature of a living being thus threatened is at once transformed into the most desperate struggle against, and resistance to, death."²⁰⁶ Indeed, the individual is willing "to sacrifice everything else; he is ready to annihilate the world, in order to maintain his own self, that drop in the ocean, a little longer."²⁰⁷ As Schopenhauer notes, "We see not only how everyone tries to snatch from another what he himself wants, but how one often even destroys another's whole happiness in life, in order to increase by an insignificant amount his own well-being."²⁰⁸ Thus, the affirmation of the will-to-live in one individual "very easily goes beyond this

²⁰³ Ibid., 312-313.

²⁰⁴ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 465, 359.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 350-351; 465-466.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 350-351.

²⁰⁷ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 332.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 333.

affirmation to the *denial* of the same will appearing in another” and “either destroys or injures this other body itself, or compels the powers of that other body to serve *his* will.”²⁰⁹ Viewed in the context of the Holocaust, the Nazis affirmed their own will-to-live through the denial of the same will in the prisoners, some of whom then denied the will-to-live in their fellow victims.

Due to the fear of death, human beings can become enslaved to the imperative of self-preservation, or, as Schopenhauer calls it, the body’s “the iron command to nourish it.”²¹⁰ Schopenhauer emphasizes the humiliation that one feels for clinging to such a worthless, miserable existence as though it were “the highest good.” For the Sonderkommando prisoners in Auschwitz and Treblinka, this humiliation was particularly acute. In order to preserve their lives, they had to assist in the extermination process of their own people. They participated in the deception of the gas chamber victims and helped them to undress for the “showers.” Afterwards, they removed the corpses from the gas chambers, cut the women’s hair and extracted any gold teeth, and burned the bodies in ovens or outdoor cremation pits. In order to stay alive, they had to treat the bodies of their fellow Jews like so much waste matter to be incinerated. Their own existence depended directly on the continuous arrival of transports of victims to be murdered. They could ward off death from starvation, disease, or exposure only by appropriating the food, clothing, and valuables of the dead. Schopenhauer notes—and the Sonderkommando testimonies confirm—the extreme difficulty of denying the will-to-live

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

in ourselves. Whenever we try to break free, various “allurements,” such as temporary relief from pain, or our hopes for the future, enslave us to it again.²¹¹ In the death camps, the Nazis mocked and exploited the will-to-live of the Sonderkommando prisoners, forcing them to perform increasingly degrading tasks to stay alive.

The Nazis particularly exploited the body’s need for nourishment. Most conscripts arrived in the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz or Treblinka already malnourished from the long train journey and their time in the ghettos or other camps. It was therefore nearly impossible for such hungry men to resist the enticement of better rations in their new “assignment.” In one of the manuscripts that he wrote during his time in the Sonderkommando, Zalmen Gradowski describes the hunger that tormented him and the other deportees when they arrived in Auschwitz on 8 December 1942. “Our enemy of the spirit has come to life,” he writes. “Hunger has begun to plague us. And men grow weak in the face of their greatest internal enemy, who will leave you no peace, will not let you think, until you pay him his due.” When the new prisoners received some food, they experienced “momentary relief. They have partly assuaged their bodily needs.”²¹² However, hunger continued to dominate the lives of the prisoners. After their first day of forced labor in Auschwitz:

Hunger takes the broken-spirited, exhausted men in its grip. Hunger, the tormenter, the pitiless enemy, who is immune to sorrow. [— —] always demands his due [— —] The ruthless stomach [— —] takes no account of grief and sorrow.

²¹¹ Ibid., 379.

²¹² Zalmen Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell: Manuscripts of a Sonderkommando Prisoner, Found in Auschwitz*, trans. Berry Smerin and Janina Wurbs (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2017), 60, Kindle. See also Zalmen Gradowski, “Writings,” in Ber Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, trans. Sharon Neemani (Tel Aviv: Am ‘Oved Publishing House, 1985), 198.

[— —] if you want to go on living, whether in pleasure or in pain, then [you must] pay the tribute to your ruler. [— —] to able to think, whether of life, joy and happiness, or [— —] gruesome thoughts of death and destruction [— —] be obedient and not torture your stomach too much. [Your master] can wait, but not for long. He can [— —] the moment of reckoning. But remember, if you [— —] and if you treat him lightly, he will break you. He will sink his claws into you and you will have to find a way to be either with him or against him. You will become his slave. Your brain will think of nothing else, only of him and how to satisfy him. You will have to put your whole intellectual apparatus at his command. Nothing else will exist for you. He will be the master of your ego and the owner of your soul. You will have to do everything, find a way to make peace with him, or else bid farewell to the world, end everything and break with everything. And disappear into eternity.²¹³

In this passage Gradowski personifies the stomach as a slave master, a merciless tyrant who demands tribute (food). The prisoner can ignore his “master” only at his own peril. It is an illusion that one can hold out against the demands of the stomach. In fact, not taking hunger seriously will only result in one’s further enslavement to it. Gradowski perceived hunger as an obsession to which all thoughts become subordinated. The starving man thinks only of food.

Slovakian survivor Filip Müller begins his memoir with a description of the hunger he experienced in Auschwitz prior to being transferred to the Sonderkommando. One Sunday, in May 1942, the prisoners were forced to watch some of their fellow inmates participate in exhausting physical exercises called *Sport*, but the arrival of the midday meal quickly made them forget the “harassment, torture and violent death” of the victims. “All our senses were concentrated on the muck in the cauldrons, a mess of mangel-wurzel and overcooked rotting potatoes,” writes Müller. “...Soup was our elixir

²¹³ Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 68-69. For an alternate translation of this passage, see Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 203.

of life: and any prisoner considered himself very lucky if now and then he managed to wangle a second helping.”²¹⁴ When, “[t]rembling with hunger,” Müller finally received his helping of soup, he “did not bother about a spoon, but drank my soup slowly and noisily, savouring each mouthful. I could feel my vital energy being restored. My greedy tongue searched the bowl for every last drop.”²¹⁵ But he was still thirsty. “Crazed with thirst,” Filip and his block mate Maurice decided to drink the tea that had been left in the yard for later in the day. Müller says that he “drank, greedily, slowly, rapturously, the tepid refreshing tea. I came up for air briefly, then I propped my hands on the rim and drank and drank.”²¹⁶ Unfortunately, the *Kapo* caught them and tried to drown them in the vats of tea. As punishment for this “theft,” which they likely saw as a blatant example of “Jewish” servitude to self-preservation, the SS transferred Filip and Maurice to the Sonderkommando.

In the oven room of the crematorium, Filip, Maurice, and several other new Sonderkommando conscripts encountered a scene of unimaginable carnage: countless human corpses lay strewn all over the floor. The people had evidently died recently, but Müller could not figure out how so many had been killed at once. The SS ordered the prisoners to strip the clothes off the corpses.²¹⁷ Still in shock, they did not think of refusing. “I was like one hypnotized and obeyed each order implicitly,” Müller writes.

²¹⁴ Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, literary collaboration by Helmut Freitag, ed. and trans. Susanne Flatauer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 7.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 9.

²¹⁷ At this early date, the Nazis did not yet send all their victims naked into the gas chambers. Müller reports that the SS realized it would be more “efficient” for the victims to undress first so that the Sonderkommando could collect the clothing separately.

“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 my sense of orientation as well as my ability to think.”²¹⁸ Müller admits that he could not keep up with the frenetic pace. Due to his stay in Auschwitz he “was weakened by starvation, my feet were swollen and the soles raw from wearing rough wooden clogs.” He snatched a moment of rest when the SS supervisor, Stark, went into another room. It was then that Müller made a fateful discovery:

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a half-open suit-case containing food. Pretending to be busy undressing a corpse with one hand, I ransacked the suit-case with the other. Keeping one eye on the door in case Stark returned suddenly I hastily grabbed a few triangles of cheese and a poppyseed cake. With my filthy, blood-stained fingers I broke off pieces of cake and devoured them ravenously. I had only just time to pocket a piece of bread when Stark returned.²¹⁹

Driven by hunger, Müller did not immediately make the connection between the suitcases and the corpses; he did not realize that the food belonged to human beings who had been alive only a short time ago. The realization came suddenly and shockingly. Seizing another chance when Stark was not looking, Müller found a suitcase with “a round box of cheese and several boxes of matches with Slovakian labels.” However, “as I looked a little more closely at the faces of the dead, I recoiled with horror when I discovered among them a girl who had been at school with me. Her name was Yolana Weis.” He

²¹⁸ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 12; Zalman Lewental describes his first day in the Sonderkommando in similar terms. He and the other conscripts “ran while being chased with the raised clubs of the SS guards who guarded us, until we were totally confused; none of us knew what he was doing, who was doing it and what was happening with him. We completely lost our senses. We were like dead men, like robots, when they rushed us; we did not know where we were to run, why, and what was to be done. [No one] looked at anyone else. I know for a fact that none of us was alive at that time, none of us thought nor contemplated. That is what they did to us until --- consciousness began to return --- who is being dragged to cremation, what happened here.” Lewental, “Writings,” in Ber Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 219.

²¹⁹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 12-13.

also recognized another woman who had been his family's neighbor in their hometown of Sered'.²²⁰ But the discovery of his murdered neighbors was not enough to overcome Müller's will-to-live. When Stark ordered the prisoners to shove the naked corpses, including Yolana's, into the blazing ovens, Müller obeyed. "At that moment," he recalls, "I had only one chance to stay alive, even if only for a few hours or days. I had to convince Stark that I could do anything he expected from a crematorium worker. And thus I carried out all his orders like a robot."²²¹

Greek survivor Shlomo Venezia also recalls that hunger played a significant role in his adaptation to the work of the Sonderkommando. Upon his arrival in Auschwitz on 11 April 1944, Venezia, his brother, and his cousins were confined for three weeks in the quarantine area of the men's camp. He had known hunger as a boy in Salonika, but by the time his transport reached Auschwitz, he had endured eleven days on the train with very little food and water. Therefore, he devoured the camp rations (tea, soup, and black bread with margarine or *Blutwurst*), regardless of the taste.²²² Once, in order to receive a double ration of soup, Venezia volunteered to do some "extra" work for the *Kapo*. To his horror, this work turned out to involve transporting decomposing corpses from the quarantine sector to the crematorium to be burned. "If I'd known that our 'extra' work was going to consist of bringing those bodies out and taking them to the Crematorium," says Venezia, "I'd rather have died of hunger. But by the time I realized, it was already too late."²²³

²²⁰ Ibid., 13

²²¹ Ibid., 14.

²²² Shlomo Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz*, collaboration with Béatrice Prasquier, ed. Jean Mouttapa, trans. Andrew Brown (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), 44-45.

²²³ Ibid., 50.

However, Venezia made the same mistake soon afterwards. When some SS officers came to the quarantine barracks in search of “workers,” Venezia claimed to be a hairdresser. “I thought that I’d join the prisoners working in the *Zentralsauna*,” he recalls. “I saw that the work wasn’t too difficult and one was warm there.”²²⁴ Entering the men’s camp the next day, Venezia “saw a prisoner, by himself, who seemed to be waiting for us.” This man, who Venezia later discovered was Sonderkommando member Abraham Dragon, asked the young Greek where he was from and if he was hungry. “Of course I was hungry!” says Venezia. “I’d always been familiar with hunger, but this was now an obsession, an illness. So he went to get me some food and came back with a big hunk of white bread and some jam. There was enough bread for me to share it with my brother and my cousins. For us, it was like eating caviar; an unimaginable luxury in this hell.”²²⁵ Dragon then asked Venezia if he knew what kind of work he would be doing. “I replied that I didn’t much care. As far as I was concerned, the main thing was being able to eat and so survive. He told me that wouldn’t be a problem—there’d be enough to eat.” When Venezia wondered how there could be “enough” to eat in Auschwitz, Dragon “explained that, in addition to the food we received in the normal course of affairs, there would be other things. But he didn’t tell me what, or how.”²²⁶ In the course of their conversation, Dragon revealed why this work detail was “special” (*sonder*): “Because you have to work in the Crematorium...where the people are burned.” Venezia was not dismayed. “As far

²²⁴ Ibid., 52.

²²⁵ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 53. For Dragon’s account of his time in the Sonderkommando, see Gideon Greif, “Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together—in Despair and in Hope,’” in *We Wept without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 122-180.

²²⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

as I was concerned,” he recalls, “one job was the same as any other; I’d already got used to camp life. But at no time did he tell me that the corpses to be burned were those of people who were still alive when they entered the Crematorium...”²²⁷

The SS initiated Venezia and the other Sonderkommando conscripts gradually into the work. On the first day, they did not enter the crematorium building until the afternoon. While they caught a horrifying glimpse of a pile of bodies waiting to be cremated, they initially did not have direct contact with the dead. They simply collected the clothing the victims had left behind in the undressing room.²²⁸ In the evening, however, they were forced to witness the gassing of a transport of Polish Jews in Bunker 2, also called “the white house.” Then the SS ordered the prisoners to carry the bodies to large outdoor pits for cremation. “It’s difficult to imagine now,” recalls Venezia, “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.”²²⁹ The cremation work continued non-stop for twenty-four hours. Though exhausted, Venezia could not sleep that night. The next day, the *Kapo* gave Venezia a pair of tailor’s scissors and instructed him to cut the hair of the women’s corpses before they were cremated. His

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

²²⁸ Zalman Lewental writes similarly that the prisoners’ lack of direct contact with living victims was “An important factor in the adaptation process.” At first the SS men “did everything themselves”: herding the victims into the undressing room, ordering them to strip, and forcing them naked into the gas chambers. The Sonderkommando would then “come in the morning and find bunkers full of people who had been killed by gas and barracks full of used objects, but they never saw a living man. The psychological effect of this was to reduce the impression of tragedy.” See Lewental, “Writings,” in Ber Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 221.

²²⁹ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 59.

friend Leon Cohen, who had claimed to be a dentist, had to extract any gold teeth found in the victims' mouths.²³⁰

Venezia seems to have had more difficulty than Müller in adapting to life in the Sonderkommando. At first, the horror of what he witnessed in the crematorium dampened Venezia's appetite. "During the first days," he recalls, "in spite of the hunger that was tormenting my belly, I found it hard to touch the hunk of bread we were given. The stench stuck to my hands; I felt sullied by those deaths." Over time, however, he and his comrades got used to the work. "It became a kind of routine that we couldn't think about."²³¹ "Your only choice was to get used to it," Venezia repeats later in the memoir. "Very quickly, too. On the first days, I wasn't even able to swallow my bread when I thought of all those 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."²³² On the other hand, Müller remembers that, even on the first day, the sight and smell of food was enough to make the prisoners forget about the horrible work they were doing. Although their hands were "filthy with blood and excrement," Müller and his fellow conscripts devoured their bread rations. "I broke off small pieces, holding them in my mouth until they were soaked with saliva. Then I chewed them slowly and deliberately as though savouring a great delicacy."²³³

Hunger was also a driving force for the Sonderkommando prisoners in the Treblinka death camp. In his memoir, *Trap with a Green Fence*, Richard Glazar recounts

²³⁰ Ibid., 62. For Cohen's account of his time in the Sonderkommando, see Gideon Greif, "Leon Cohen: 'We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,'" in *We Wept without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 286-309.

²³¹ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 65.

²³² Ibid., 102-103.

²³³ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 20.

what happened when his transport arrived in Treblinka from Theresienstadt on 10 October 1942. Glazar and about twenty other Czech Jews were taken out from the group of naked men and ordered to get dressed again. They were sent to work in a barracks, sorting clothing. In his confusion, Glazar approached the foreman and asked in German, “what’s going on here? Where are all the others, the naked people?” The foreman replied: “Deead, all deead—maybe not yet, but real soon, in a couple of minutes. This is a death camp. Jews are killed here, and we’ve been selected to help them get their work done.”²³⁴ In the bustle of the work, amid the yelling and cracks of the whip, Glazar did not immediately comprehend the horrible meaning of the foreman’s words.²³⁵ But then he recalled a scene when the train passed by an open field as it entered the forest. In the field was a farm boy tending cattle, and one of the passengers had called out to him in a vain attempt to learn what would happen to them. In response, the boy had “grabbed his neck with both hands, aped strangulation, rolled his wide-open eyes back, and stuck out his tongue—the way boys play their games.”²³⁶ Now Glazar realized that the boy was not just playing a game, but conveying an awful truth to them: Treblinka was a trap.

However, as with Müller in Auschwitz, the horrifying realization that most of his fellow deportees had been murdered could not overcome Glazar’s immediate concern for

²³⁴ Richard Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence: Survival in Treblinka*, trans. Roslyn Theobald (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 7.

²³⁵ In an interview with Gitta Sereny, Glazar says, “You understand, there was no time, not a moment between the instant we were taken in there and put to work, to talk to anyone, to take stock of what was happening...and of course, never forget that we had no idea at all what this whole installation was for. One saw these stacks of clothing—I suppose the thought must have entered our minds, where do they come from, what are they? We *must* have connected them with the clothes all of us had just taken off outside...but I cannot remember doing that. I only starting work at once making bundles...” Richard Glazar, quoted in Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 177.

²³⁶ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 8.

his own physical needs. He asked the foreman where the prisoners would sleep and what they would eat. ““The way things are now,”” said the foreman, ““you could drown in the food. After two, three days, if you’re still alive and finally come to, then you’ll know that Treblinka has everything—everything but life.””²³⁷ In the evening the prisoners were given some bread and a bowl of ersatz coffee. Like Venezia, Glazar had difficulty eating at first. In an interview with Gitta Sereny, he remembers, “That night I wasn’t hungry. I mean, there *was* food—there was always food after the arrival of ‘rich’ [Western] transports—but I couldn’t eat. I was terribly terribly thirsty, a thirst that continued all evening, all night...”²³⁸ In his memoir, Glazar also mentions that, overcome with “terrible thirst,” he “greedily” drank the coffee. “I can’t tear myself away from the bowl,” he recalls bitterly. He wondered if thirst was the reason why “my head is so empty, leached so dry.”²³⁹ No, he thought to himself, it was because the Nazis now had control over him, like a puppet, because they knew that he wanted to live at all costs. He felt as if his head had “been pierced by a beam, a rod, and if they pick up the rod by both ends, they can lift me up until my feet are dangling in the air; they can shove me to the ground, twist me back and forth.”²⁴⁰

Samuel Willenberg describes a similar experience in his memoir *Revolt in Treblinka*. He arrived in Treblinka with a transport of 6,500 Polish Jews from the recently liquidated Opatów ghetto on 20 October 1942, ten days after Glazar. Like Glazar, he was

²³⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

²³⁸ Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 180.

²³⁹ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 9.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

one of the few selected for work, ordered to sort the property left behind by thousands of murdered Jews. “There I stood,” he recalls, “the only one in clothes, the only man not to have been beaten. I had left only my shoes in the yard.”²⁴¹ His childhood friend Alfred Boehm, who had arrived in Treblinka before him, entered the barracks and explained the situation to him: ““You see, Samek, you were privileged in being taken out of the transport. Everyone else marched to the gas chambers on a path the Germans call the *Himmelstrasse*—the “Road to Heaven”. We call it Death Avenue. That’s how it is, Samek. Now we’ve got to try to hold on.”” Immediately Boehm introduced Willenberg to what “holding on” meant: appropriating the property of the dead for one’s own survival. “From under the blankets he pulled out a pair of large boots, which I laced over my bare feet, and we walked out.”²⁴² Like Glazar, Willenberg mentions his first meal at Treblinka as a significant experience. “Lunch,” he recalls, was “a thick soup, well-cooked and delicious. Astoundingly, Treblinka’s food was better than that available to us in the ghetto.”²⁴³ At the time, he was unaware that he was eating the food brought by the gas chamber victims. Yet this knowledge taints the memory: “I raised a spoonful of egg barley which had undoubtedly been prepared by a worried Jewish housewife, perhaps with her few last coins. Rich in oil and eggs, it had a high caloric value. Someone was

²⁴¹ Samuel Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka* (Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2008), 20.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 22. Glazar writes that the Polish phrase “*Trzymaj się*” (“hold on, tough it out”) was the prisoners’ motto: “Yes, that’s it—hold on—upright—endure—assume the proper bearing! But not the way you would outside in life. Here, put on the green Manchester coat with the light brown jodhpurs! Wear this, an orange silk neckerchief! Somehow this seems to impress them. They don’t whip you when you’re dressed like this. If your clothes get dirty or torn today, put on something more fashionable tomorrow.” Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 18.

²⁴³ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 23.

supposed to have used this nourishment to hold out a little longer somewhere in the East, where it was thought he was going.”²⁴⁴

It did not take long for the Sonderkommando’s appropriation of the victims’ belongings to go beyond mere subsistence. Once they had given in to the will-to-live out of sheer hunger, they began to seek more ways to meet its demands. As Schopenhauer explains, the will-to-live “is a hungry will,” characterized by an endless striving.²⁴⁵ Müller reports that, after a few days of working in the crematoria, the prisoners no longer “ravenously attack[ed]” their camp rations, but instead feasted on the items they had “organized” from the belongings of the gas chamber victims. “One after the other we laid bread, sugar, saccharine, tobacco and other goodies in front of our foreman,” Fischl, who distributed them evenly to the prisoners.²⁴⁶ “Almost every prisoner in the *Sonderkommando* spent a great deal of energy on *organizing*,” recalls Müller, “partly because it helped alleviate the harsh living conditions, but also because it drew our minds off the horrors around us.”²⁴⁷ Venezia writes similarly that “organizing” helped the prisoners to “salvage various things and not suffer too much from hunger. We also took advantage of the situation to change our clothes when they got too ragged. We just had to throw the old ones onto the pile of clothes to be sent to the *Kanada* and then to help ourselves, discreetly, from the heap left by the victims.”²⁴⁸ While prisoners like Müller and Venezia were aware of the moral implications of appropriation, they learned in

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 154.

²⁴⁶ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 34.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 62.

²⁴⁸ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 96.

Auschwitz that the living took precedence over the dead. “Every day,” says Müller, prisoners from the main camp visited “their business partners in the *Sonderkommando* with cigarettes and alcohol in exchange for diamonds, dollars, watches, gold teeth and other valuables *organized* after gassings. There developed an illegal trade of undreamed-of dimensions where anyone who still had hopes of staying alive bartered anything that would sustain life.” Müller acknowledges that these items “had been the property of those who, in their innocent credulity, had undressed for the last time in the crematorium’s changing rooms,” but their belongings were now needed by “others who were determined to survive.”²⁴⁹

Prisoners in Treblinka also helped themselves to the food and clothing of the murdered Jews. With the continuous flow of “rich” transports coming in from the West, the *Sonderkommando* discarded the camp rations in favor of food packages from the trains.²⁵⁰ “When I start to get hungry,” writes Glazar, “I wait for the right moment, and then, with a bundle on my back, I run behind a pile of foodstuffs and jam my mouth full. Never in these past two years of war has my mouth been so full of butter, chocolate, sugar. From another pile I take a shirt, every day a clean one, every day a shirt from another dead man.”²⁵¹ It was forbidden for prisoners to take things from the sorting piles.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. The *Sonderkommando* also took advantage of the medicines that the gas chamber victims brought with them. “In addition to the few drugs and medicines available in the camp,” recalls Müller, the prisoners found a wide variety of “pharmaceutical products which in this place were worth their weight in gold. The people who had brought them here no longer needed them, because Zyklon B gas had cured all their pains and diseases.” While the *Sonderkommando* prisoners benefited directly from these medicines, they also traded them to other prisoners in the camp. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 64.

²⁵⁰ “[T]here was so much food around,” Glazar tells Sereny, “we used to throw the soup and bread away. There was a huge mountain of mouldy camp bread around... We only drank the coffee.” Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 191.

²⁵¹ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 17.

A prisoner caught in the act faced severe punishment, possibly execution. “But it doesn’t always have to be like this,” says Glazar. “It depends on which one of the SS catches you, what mood he’s in, or whether by chance he’s not alone.”²⁵² One night, Glazar noticed that his silk pajamas were “covered with spots of blood from all the fleas. Maybe I’ll find another pair tomorrow,” he muses. “Maybe my next pair of pajamas hasn’t arrived in Treblinka yet; maybe it’s still in transit. Maybe I won’t need any pajamas tomorrow. No—if I do everything correctly and well, I don’t have to be afraid that some SS officer is simply going to have me for lunch.”²⁵³ “One never had to wash his clothes in Treblinka,” recalls Willenberg; “you just picked up some more from the limitless supply in the yard.”²⁵⁴ “Prisoners’ attire in general was very eclectic,” he writes; “each man picked what he needed out of the clothing he had sorted, and each was dressed differently. To fend off the cold, most wore high-cut shoes and various and sundry caps.”²⁵⁵ For example, one day in late autumn 1942, Willenberg “felt the cold wind cut me to the bone.” In one of the piles of clothing he found “a genuine Russian hat of karakul—Persian lamb’s wool—which had come in some transport from the east.” The Cossack-style hat earned Willenberg the nickname “Katzap” (Polish slang for a Russian). “Even here, we wanted to look right,” he admits. He and his friend Alfred “dressed in

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid., 27. Glazar tells Sereny: “I’d wear a pair of pyjamas for two nights or so and then they’d be full of bloodspots where I had killed bugs that crawled up on us in the night, and I’d think to myself, ‘Tomorrow I must get new ones; hope they are nice silk ones; they are still on the way now.’ That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? Well, that is how one became.” Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 197.

²⁵⁴ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 28.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 50.

warm, clean clothes; we were apprehensive about getting sick in a camp where even a common cold represented mortal peril. Just the same, we tried not to be flashy.”²⁵⁶

In Auschwitz, though less so in Treblinka, some members of the Sonderkommando appropriated the religious articles of the dead. These observant Jews were determined to obey God’s commandments even in the crematoria. For example, Fischl, the foreman of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando, did not have the necessary *tefillin* (phylacteries) to perform the daily prayers. For a while, he mimed the ritual of putting the leather straps around his hands and forehead. Müller thought it was “sheer madness to pray in Auschwitz, and absurd to believe in God in this place...But here, on the border-line between life and death, we obediently followed his example, possibly because we had nothing else left or because we felt strengthened by his faith.”²⁵⁷ One day, while the prisoners were sorting the belongings of the victims, Fischl “organized” a velvet bag of *tefillin* from the “large mound” of religious articles.²⁵⁸ Fischl was very satisfied with his find. “The Lord Adonai had hearkened to him,” says Müller sarcastically; “now he owned a prayer-book in Hebrew and a set of Tephillim...He prayed so fervently and humbly that God—if He existed—must surely have heard his voice; for it rose from a place where men and women, who like himself believed in the Eternal One and who adored the Almighty Lord, were daily slaughtered like cattle.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Ibid. On the other hand, Glazar recalls that he and his fellow Czech Jews “dressed extremely well. After all, there was no shortage of clothes. I usually wore jodhpurs, a velvet jacket, brown boots, a shirt, a silk cravat and, when it was cool, a sweater. In hot months I wore light trousers, shirt and a jacket at night. I shone my boots once or twice every day until you could see yourself in them, like in a mirror. I changed shirts every day and of course underclothes.” Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 197.

²⁵⁷ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 29.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 34.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 35.

Müller marveled that Fischl had “never once in his innermost soul renounced the faith of his fathers.” At the time, Müller mused, Fischl must have been the only Jew on earth who “praise[d] God’s name in a place where that name was desecrated in the vilest possible manner. To me Fischl seemed a creature from another world, a world solely ruled and embodied by a God whom I sought in vain to comprehend in Auschwitz.”²⁶⁰

There was also a group of fifteen “strictly Orthodox Jews” in the Auschwitz Sonderkommando who avoided contact with the dead. Instead, they worked solely at cleaning and drying the hair cut from the women’s corpses, which the Germans “used in the manufacture of industrial felts and threads.” According to Müller, these prisoners “devoted their entire free time to prayers for the dead and to the study of Jewish religious writings.” Although they “shunned the habits of the place and were not prepared to pay the tribute customary here in order to survive,” they still benefited from the property of the victims. As Müller notes bitterly, “Their books once belonged to fellow Jews who, like themselves, had believed in the justice of God before they were herded into the gas chambers.”²⁶¹ He recalls that this “small group of pious people...were generally treated with respect,” but “They had no influence in the *Sonderkommando* for the simple reason that they had nothing to offer for survival but God. And that was not enough.”²⁶²

In describing their appropriation of the victims’ belongings, the authors of the Sonderkommando testimonies waver between the desire to acknowledge their humiliating enslavement to the will-to-live and the need to rationalize their affirmation of

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 65-66.

²⁶² Ibid., 67.

that will. Müller writes that the fight for survival had corrupted the majority of the Sonderkommando members.

The way we lived gave only the present any meaning, the past meant nothing and the future not much either. This appalling, detestable and brutal life had already dulled the emotions of many prisoners to such a degree that they were growing more and more indifferent to the crimes which were committed all around them day after day. The camp made people vicious and selfish. Anybody who did not know how to use his elbows sank like a stone. The sight of people suffering, sick, tortured and murdered had become commonplace and scarcely any longer moved anybody.²⁶³

Over time, some of the prisoners came to resemble the SS. For example, there was a practice known as “*Auschwitz fashion*,” where “many members of the *Sonderkommando* attempted to blind themselves to their desperate situation. In order to make themselves look more like human beings they imitated their torturers by aping their way of dressing.”²⁶⁴ Like the SS men, who were greedy for “gold, diamonds and dollars,” the prisoners went through the victims’ clothing “with the agility of pickpockets.”²⁶⁵ However, Müller argues that the prisoners “needed to steal in order to survive.”²⁶⁶ Indeed, the “organizing” of valuables was “absolutely vital” for the revolt. “Without valuables,” he explains, “it would have been impossible to plan an uprising, support the Resistance, corrupt the SS, get more arms and ammunition, and many other things.” Moreover, their leaders needed to make “contingency plans” in the event the uprising failed. They wanted to preserve the memory of the victims and of their own suffering as witnesses to Nazi atrocities. They also hoped that the SS perpetrators could one day be

²⁶³ Ibid., 64.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 62.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 140, 143.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 140.

brought to justice. Using writing materials they found in the victims' luggage, a few men "prepared a handwritten account of the *Sonderkommando* which was placed in tins and buried."²⁶⁷

Venezia felt a similar need to defend the "organizing" activities of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando. He notes that "some people were jealous of the fact we sometimes got extra. Others held us partly responsible for what happened in the Crematorium. But that's completely wrong," he insists; "only the Germans killed. We were forced, whereas collaborators, in general, are volunteers. It's important to write that we had no choice. Those who refused were immediately killed with a bullet through the back of the neck." If the threat of execution was not enough, he says, there was the imperative of self-preservation, which could not be disobeyed: "For us, we had to survive, get enough to eat...there was no other possibility. Not for anybody." He admits that the Sonderkommando prisoners "may have had better conditions of day-to-day survival; we weren't as cold, we had more to eat, suffered less violence," but that could not compensate for the fact that "we had seen the worst, we were in it all day long, at the heart of hell."²⁶⁸ Nevertheless, it is telling that, when asked whether he would have traded places with another prisoner in the camp if given the chance, Venezia replies, "Immediately—like a shot! Even though I realized that, in that instance, I might not have enough to eat. I'd have done it immediately, without hesitating for a second, at the risk of suffering a slow death. And yet," he admits, "I know how terrible it is to be hungry and

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 142-143.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 103.

the appalling pain it involves, but never mind.” Ultimately, he felt “relieved” when he left Auschwitz during the death march in January 1945 and “suffered like the other prisoners” in several concentration camps in Germany.²⁶⁹

Like Müller, Glazar notes that the line between “masters” and “slaves” often became blurred in Treblinka. “Everyone,” he writes, “has been besotted by growing piles of belongings and valuables left behind by hundreds of thousands of people. Everyone plunders and speculates. The masters of the SS and the guards are most interested in gold, jewelry, money, fur coats...The slaves grab for food and valuables too, just in case that one and only chance might arise.”²⁷⁰ As a member of the camp underground, however, Glazar’s acts of appropriation acquired a deeper meaning than sheer personal enrichment. He and his comrades were not simply trying to survive but preparing for an escape—an act of resistance. Unlike the Polish Jews, who were still in their home country, the Czech Jews were at a disadvantage, being far from home and unable to speak the language. It was thus more difficult for them to escape Treblinka. “We find ourselves in a completely unknown land,” writes Glazar, “in an alien world. The ones from Warsaw, or other places in Poland, still have some slight chance. The rest of us will simply have to endure and play for time. That means we’ll have to do a damned good job of it, to get to know the SS and the guards and the leaders within our group. We will also have to become entirely familiar with the camp, all the while collecting gold and valuables.”²⁷¹ As part of this plan, Glazar’s group put on an impressive outward show for the SS by dressing in the

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 103-104.

²⁷⁰ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 45.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 25.

finest clothes of the dead: “[b]lack boots made from highly polished fine leather, jodhpurs, belts around our short jackets, silk scarves around our necks, and the caps on our heads worn at a rakish angle...Fashionable young men from the realm of death and decay,” Glazar remarks sarcastically.²⁷² Due to their dress and demeanor, the Czech Jews became well-known in the camp, but this “elite” status made Glazar uncomfortable, as it was not always clear whether their actions signified accommodation or resistance.

In spite of their rationalization of their acts of self-preservation, the deterioration of living conditions in the camp quickly reminded the Sonderkommando prisoners of their enslavement to the will-to-live. Tragically, their existence depended upon the death of others. The SS were aware of this fact and used it to their advantage. While transports arrived regularly, the members of the Sonderkommando had the luxury to contemplate escape and resistance. Venezia notes perceptively in his memoir that, unlike the majority of inmates in Auschwitz, the Sonderkommando “could indulge in solidarity” because they did not have to compete with each other for food.²⁷³ Müller writes similarly that, since the Sonderkommando prisoners had plenty of food from the transports (“we were amply supplied with Hungarian salami, goose dripping, jam and cigarettes”), they could use the

²⁷² Ibid. “One was very concerned with the way one *looked*,” Glazar tells Sereny; “it was immensely important to look clean on roll call...And yet, this was one of the most torturing uncertainties; one never knew how the mood of the Germans ‘ran’—whether, if one was *seen* shaving or cleaning one’s boots, that wouldn’t get one killed. It was an incredible daily roulette; you see, one SS might consider a man looking after himself in this way as making himself ‘conspicuous’—the cardinal sin—and then another might not. The *effect* of being clean always helped—it even created a *kind* of respect in them. But to be seen doing it might be considered showing off, or toadying, and provoke punishment, or death. We finally understood that the maximum safety lay in looking much—but not *too* much—like the SS themselves and the significance of this went even beyond the question of ‘safety.’” Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 197-198.

²⁷³ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 101.

valuables they “organized” to buy weapons and ammunition for the upcoming revolt.²⁷⁴ However, there came a time when the number of transports dwindled. In late summer 1944, the SS began to carry out selections of Sonderkommando prisoners, who were no longer needed in such large numbers. The fear of liquidation filled the men with “despair and despondency,” recalls Müller. “What would happen to us now that fewer and fewer transports were arriving on the ramp? As long as the death factories were still working flat out we did not have to fear for our lives. But now no one was certain any longer whether tomorrow might not bring another selection.”²⁷⁵ Another selection did occur on 7 October, but this time the SS asked the *Kapos* to make the decision: they were to draw up a list of three hundred prisoners, ostensibly for a “rubble clearance team” in a bombed-out town in Upper Silesia. As we will see in the next chapter, the fear of death in this instance was strong enough to prompt the doomed men to rise up against their executioners. However, Müller and Venezia, who were not selected, did not participate directly in the ill-fated revolt of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando. They survived to see the final transports arrive from Theresienstadt and Slovakia. Müller learned that he was the sole survivor of his family.²⁷⁶ After the final gassing took place in November 1944, he and Venezia assisted in the cremation of the remaining corpses and the dismantling of the extermination facilities, all the while subject to further selections.

During this period, the living conditions of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando “deteriorated steadily,” recalls Müller. “As, with no more transports arriving, we were

²⁷⁴ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 140.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

totally dependent on the meagre fare of the camp kitchen, we were forced to use our small hoards of diamonds, gold and the odd dollar note to barter for foodstuffs and cigarettes until we had nothing left to offer.” To obtain food, Müller and a friend manufactured fake gold teeth out of brass and exchanged them with an unwitting SS guard for “bread, sausage, and cigarettes.”²⁷⁷ Likewise, Venezia recalls that “We on our side didn’t have much left, since the convoys had stopped arriving and we couldn’t put aside enough food.” He and Shaul Chazan, another Greek Jew from Salonika, searched for valuables that other Sonderkommando members had buried in the ground around the crematoria. Finding a bag of gold teeth, they periodically exchanged a tooth for a piece of bread.²⁷⁸ Some of the prisoners, including Venezia’s brother, were hungry enough to eat an SS guard’s dog that had strayed too close to the electrified barbed-wire fence. One day, while demolishing the dog’s kennel, Venezia discovered “a magnificent gold cigarette case” under the brick floor.²⁷⁹ He exchanged it “for two bread rolls, a piece of sausage, and—that was all. That tells you how expensive a bit of food was in the camp... At least that enabled us to survive for a few days longer.”²⁸⁰

When the number of transports to Treblinka diminished in the winter of 1942-43, Glazar and his fellow inmates found themselves struggling with cold, hunger, and typhus.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 163.

²⁷⁸ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 123. Venezia gave some of the gold teeth to a prisoner in the women’s camp who he thought was his sister Rachel. “I really wanted to help her so she’d have enough to eat and hence enough strength not to get sick,” he writes on p. 125. Even though he later learned that she was not his sister, he was still “happy I was able to help that woman; she certainly needed it just as much as my sister.” Ibid., 106. For Chazan’s account of his time in the Sonderkommando, see Gideon Greif, “‘Life Didn’t Matter Anymore, Death Was Too Close’” in *We Wept without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 257-285.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 124.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 125.

The prisoners were always disappointed to see the arrival of “miserably poor” trains of Polish Jews. “Not a single suitcase or real backpack—just bags, bundles, and sacks with cords sewn on so they can be carried on one’s back,” recalls Glazar. Instead of helping themselves to food packages, the prisoners had to remove hundreds of frozen corpses and collect filthy, lice-ridden clothing.²⁸¹ On a frosty night illumined by the glow of the cremation pyres, Glazar stood in line at the mess to receive the camp rations he had once despised. “In my cracked bowl, two unpeeled potatoes and some peelings are floating around in about a half liter of thickened liquid. The bowl burns my fingers. I walk away carefully to avoid the crush of bodies. Good God,” he prays, “just don’t let this bowl be knocked out of my hands now. You are everything I have, you are all I have to lay out on my bunk, you, my life...”²⁸² The prisoners struggled to fight both the lice and the cold at the same time. It was an insoluble dilemma. “The more clothes we wear to protect ourselves against the winter cold,” Glazar explains, “the more lice we hatch. The fewer clothes we wear, the more we feel the bite of the winter frost.”²⁸³ The famine in the camp continued into March 1943. “Things went from bad to worse that month of March,” Glazar says in his interview with Sereny.

There were no transports—in February just a few, remnants from here and there, then a few hundred gypsies—they were really poor; they brought nothing. In the storehouses everything had been packed up and shipped...And suddenly, everything...went, and one day there was nothing left. You can’t imagine what we felt when there was nothing there. You see, the *things* were our justification

²⁸¹ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 63. “The [Eastern] Polish Jews; they were people from a different world,” Glazar tells Sereny. “They were filthy. They knew nothing. It was impossible to feel any compassion, any solidarity with them. Of course, I am not talking about the Warsaw or Cracow intellectuals; they were no different from us. I am talking about the Byelorussian Jews, or those from the extreme east of Poland.” Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 198.

²⁸² Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 59.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

for being alive. If there were no *things* to administer, why would they let us stay alive? On top of that we were, for the first time, hungry. We were eating the camp food now, and it was terrible and, of course, totally inadequate [300 grammes of coarse black bread and one plate of thin soup a day]. In the six weeks of almost no transports, all of us had lost an incredible amount of weight and energy. And many had already succumbed to all kinds of illness—especially typhus. It was the strain of anxiety which increased with every day, the lack of food, and the constant fear of the Germans who appeared to us to be getting as panic-stricken as we were.²⁸⁴

It was then, when Glazar and his comrades “had reached the lowest ebb in our morale,” that a rich transport arrived to “save” them. One evening towards the end of March, Deputy Commandant Kurt Franz walked into the barracks with “a wide grin on his face.

‘As of tomorrow,’ he said, ‘transports will be rolling again.’ And do you know what we did? We shouted, ‘Hurrah, hurrah.’ It seems impossible now. Every time I think of it I die a small death; but it’s the truth. That is what we did; that is where we had got to. And sure enough, the next morning they arrived. We had spent all of the preceding evening in an excited, expectant mood; it meant life—you see, don’t you?—safety and life. The fact that it was their death, whoever they were, which meant our life, was no longer relevant; we had been through this over and over and over. The main question in our minds was, where were they from? Would they be rich or poor? Would there be food or not?²⁸⁵

The transport turned out to consist of 24,000 Bulgarians from Salonika. The next morning, when Glazar ran out to the platform to assist with the unloading, he could not believe his eyes:

I am suddenly overcome with an enormous, dazzling spectacle. The dream, the passionate, inescapable dream of an incessantly hungry man here in Treblinka is unfolding before me on the arrival ramp. But no, no—not one of us could have imagined it, not in his hungriest fantasies: only about half of the cars had carried passengers; the other half was packed full of boxes, chests, sacks, huge balls sewn together from blankets. The Blues are carrying cases full of marmalade down to the supply depot. Someone bumps into them, and a box breaks open—it had been

²⁸⁴ Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 212.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 212-213.

helped along—and they fall down, delighted and overjoyed, into the stick dark red morass. They get up slowly, mouths full. They swallow, and the whips are cracking over their heads until the dark red goo is enriched with the blood from their faces.²⁸⁶

At the sight of all this food, Glazar and his hungry comrades could not control themselves:

Meat—huge pieces of dried, pale-colored meat are lying on the platform, falling out of the cars along with any number of packs so full that they burst open upon hitting the ground. The black cinder surface is covered with countless small yellow cookies that are crushed underfoot as the men go back and forth to the platform. Like a pale yellow streusel they cover the nearby luggage, the leather suitcases, the pots of marmalade, the scattered pillows with their intricate needlepoint. I return for the second time and immediately cram my mouth full of the thick little golden squares—a wonder, an unimaginable delight at the first swallow.²⁸⁷

At lunchtime, the prisoners' soup bowls once again sat in discarded stacks by the mess, and the uneaten gruel was dumped into the latrine.²⁸⁸ That night in the barracks, the prisoners celebrated their deliverance from hunger. It was a raucous scene: "Exuberant screams. Laughter, satisfied expressions everywhere. People are stuffed, hot, and glistening with sweat and fat. Over there someone is shoveling out plum butter with one cookie after another. Nearby, a hand can be seen holding a piece of cornbread piled high with cheese."²⁸⁹ Echoing Glazar, Willenberg recalls that "the camp warehouses were replenished and enriched with mutton, large quantities of oil, preserved meat and fish,

²⁸⁶ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 91.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 94. It took three or four days to "process" this transport and about two weeks to sort, bundle, and pack up all the property for shipment to the Reich. *Ibid.*, 96-97. "Imagine," Glazar tells Sereny, "at fifty kilograms a person—that's what each was 'allowed' to bring for this 'resettlement'—there were 720,000 kilograms of *things*; incredible, how the machine proved itself in those ten days." Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 214.

sardines, wine, top-grade cigarettes and many other rare commodities of extremely high quality.” The SS men “walked about in glee, faces aglow. They were so uplifted that they pounded us on the shoulder. The bad times in the camp had finally come to an end, they said; henceforth we would know no more hunger. Best of all, there were many such transports still to come.”²⁹⁰

While the arrival of a wealthy transport in Treblinka evoked excitement in the SS and the Sonderkommando prisoners for different reasons, the similarity of their reactions revealed the extent to which the Nazis had successfully exploited the will-to-live of the inmates. Kurt Franz and the other SS men could smile and clap the prisoners on the shoulder in mock camaraderie because they knew that the prisoners were too hungry not to partake of the “feast.” Although the SS forbade the prisoners from stealing “Reich property,” the inadequacy of the camp rations virtually ensured that the prisoners would have to appropriate the food of the gas chamber victims. By forcing the prisoners to consume the food surreptitiously, the prohibition merely emphasized the shamefulness of such “Jewish” acts of self-preservation. The prisoners were painfully aware of their servitude to the will-to-live. As Gradowski warned his readers, hunger was the prisoner’s true master in the camp: “He will sink his claws into you...You will become his slave. Your brain will think of nothing else, only of him and how to satisfy him...He will be the master of your ego and the owner of your soul.”²⁹¹ For Glazar, the depths to which he and the other prisoners had fallen became clear the night they cheered at the news of the

²⁹⁰ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 130.

²⁹¹ Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 68.

Balkan transport. The mere recollection was a kind of spiritual death for him, for it signified the victory of hunger—of the blind, irrational will-to-live, which always wills life—over moral standards: “[I]t meant life—you see, don’t you?—safety and life. The fact that it was their death, whoever they were, which meant our life, was no longer relevant; we had been through this over and over and over.”²⁹²

The next chapter will explore the Sonderkommando prisoners’ attempts to overcome the will-to-live through resistance and suicide. Many scholars have praised the Sonderkommando uprisings in Auschwitz and Treblinka as courageous acts of resistance in an environment of nearly total SS domination. If they discuss the obstacles that the prisoners faced in planning and carrying out the revolts, they focus primarily on internal conflicts among the inmates, the difficulty of obtaining weapons, or the constant threat of selections. Rarely do they mention the strong attachment to life, or, conversely, the fear of death, that the prisoners had to overcome to execute their plans. With such a low probability of surviving an uprising, it was tempting for the prisoners to “hold on,” as they said in Treblinka, and wait until a more favorable moment, such as an attack by the partisans outside the camp or the arrival of the Russian army. When Glazar called Treblinka a “trap,” he meant it in a physical and psychological sense. Ultimately, the threat of liquidation and the desire to break the bonds of their servitude—to die with “dignity” instead of clinging to one’s own individual life—combined to spur the prisoners into collective action. But this action came after many instances of individual

²⁹² Glazar, quoted in Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 213.

hesitation and accommodation. The SS depended on and mocked the prisoners' inability to resist the will-to-live.

It was perhaps even more difficult for a prisoner to commit suicide, to deliberately destroy the life to which human beings cling so fervently. For most prisoners, suicide represented an act that required extraordinary courage—or, depending on one's perspective, profound despair—to carry out. As the testimonies show, the imperative of self-preservation, as well as the allurements of material enrichment and the faintest hope of survival, kept the prisoners bound to a humiliating, animalistic existence. Even the destruction of their entire families and hometowns and the annihilation of thousands of their fellow Jews often could not break their will-to-live. While scholars admire the prisoners' determination to survive, the prisoners themselves tended to envy the inmate who dared to put an end to his life rather than continue to exist at the expense of others. On the other hand, as we will see in the case of Filip Müller, suicide attempts were not always successful. A prisoner's fellow victims might push him back onto the path of life, while the SS brutally punished anyone who tried to decide how he would die.

CHAPTER THREE

“CAPTIVE OF A STRONG DESIRE TO LIVE”: RESISTANCE AND SUICIDE IN THE SONDERKOMMANDO

Conscious of their enslavement to the body and the will-to-live, some members of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz and Treblinka attempted to liberate themselves

through acts of resistance or suicide. When these efforts failed to succeed or, in many cases, even materialize, the prisoners felt ashamed of their apparent weakness and searched for the reasons for their continuing servitude. Indeed, this is one of the most significant questions of the Holocaust: why did so few victims offer resistance to the Nazis or take their own lives? The Sonderkommando prisoners asked this not only of themselves, but also of the masses of their fellow Jews who walked into the gas chambers every day, for months and years on end.

Scholars have also investigated this question in the decades following the Holocaust. As discussed in the Introduction, Hannah Arendt attributed the infrequency of resistance and suicide in the camps to the Nazis' elimination of human spontaneity.²⁹³ Although she later revised her definition of spontaneity, she correctly noted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the Nazis "made every attempt" to prevent "spontaneous acts" among the prisoners, such as taking one's own life, which challenged the tyranny of fear that the Nazis hoped to establish in the camps.²⁹⁴ In her study of Arendt's theory of total domination, Michal Aharony describes suicide in similar terms as "an expression of individual will," of which even the smallest act constituted resistance under totalitarian conditions.²⁹⁵ Echoing Arendt, Aharony notes that "Committing suicide was strictly prohibited in the concentration camps. The SS showed extreme irritation when prisoners attempted to take their own lives and often acted to prevent it." As an act of self-determination, suicide "was a threat to the SS," who viewed it as "equal to an escape: one

²⁹³ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 455n.

²⁹⁵ Aharony, *Limits of Total Domination*, 23.

chose to escape his or her fate, to penetrate the reality in which he or she was entangled and thus to break the rules of the camp.” She mentions the case of Mala Zimetbaum, the first woman to escape Auschwitz, who slashed her wrists with a razor and slapped the face of the SS man escorting her to the gallows. She also recounts the story of the dancer from Warsaw who shot and killed SS-*Oberscharführer* Josef Schillinger in the undressing room at Birkenau.²⁹⁶ Likewise, in a later chapter, she describes the Sonderkommando uprising as the desperate attempt of prisoners—subject to perhaps the most intense SS effort of moral degradation and dehumanization—“to take revenge and determine how they would die.”²⁹⁷ Aharony believes that such acts of suicide “indicate the ability of the prisoners to resist by changing and reframing the reality in which they were caught, if only minimally. Suicide in these cases becomes a means by which the individual prisoner was able to affirm his or her dignity and humanity. Even under the most extreme conditions, these prisoners retained the freedom to choose the meaning of their own death.”²⁹⁸

However, like Arendt, Aharony notes that most victims who committed suicide did so before they arrived in the camp.²⁹⁹ Those who took their own lives as prisoners did so “shortly after arrival,” and in the case of the Sonderkommando, “very soon after their conscription” into the unit.³⁰⁰ Aharony acknowledges that these incidents “may be perceived as compulsive acts of despair stemming from grief and an inability to adapt to

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 134. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455n.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 135, 177.

the conditions of the camp,” but she believes that they still constitute “an exercise of a decision or will, though less conscious or controlled.”³⁰¹ A prisoner’s ability to overcome the “initial shock” of camp life was crucial. “As time in the camps lengthened,” Aharony explains, “suicidal tendencies gradually gave way to either a reviving will to live or to the condition of the *Muselmann*.” For those who recovered their will to live, “death lost its terror...and became a familiar feature of everyday life in the camp. Surrounded by constant death and brutality, the prospect of voluntary death lost much of its attraction.”³⁰² However, Aharony notes that the majority of prisoners “were not able to adapt and survive.”³⁰³ “Numerous prisoners could not resist; unable to adapt to camp conditions, they submitted to their fate. Many became *Muslemänner* [sic] and perished.”³⁰⁴

While Aharony’s characterization of suicide as an act of free will finds resonance in victim testimonies, her parallel view—that *not* committing suicide is also an expression of will—is more problematic. Aharony argues that, since the goal of the death camp was “to exterminate the prisoners within a certain length of time while erasing their humanity,” it was “an act of resistance” and “an expression of individual will” for a prisoner not to commit suicide.³⁰⁵ Thus, in contradiction to Arendt, Aharony regards the

³⁰¹ Ibid., 135-136. Here Aharony is imprecise. To admit a lack of consciousness or control is to undermine the freedom that she attaches to suicide. Her confusion is also evident in paradoxical phrases such as “spontaneous reactions” and “spontaneous human reactions” in *ibid.*, 127, 140, 202. By definition, a reaction is not spontaneous. Nor can an act of resistance be spontaneous: one can only resist in reaction to something else.

³⁰² Ibid., 134.

³⁰³ Ibid., 127.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 207.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 131, 206, 23.

low suicide rate in the camps not as an indication of the prisoners' *lack* of will, but as evidence of the *strength* of their will to survive.³⁰⁶ However, her argument is inconsistent. On the one hand, she recognizes the primacy of the will-to-live in driving victim behavior. While many prisoners wanted to survive for a particular reason, such as bearing witness, taking revenge, or reuniting with family, Aharony finds that "the most human common denominator" was sheer self-preservation, "the instinct of preserving one's life."³⁰⁷ On the other hand, she attributes a certain agency to the will-to-live—as though the prisoners made a deliberate choice to stay alive—that does not find as much support in the testimonies.

Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi spoke for many victims when he said that staying alive in the camps was not the result of a conscious choice or an effort of will. In his book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, he recalls that he and his fellow prisoners "had lived for months and years at an animal level: our days had been encumbered from dawn to dusk by hunger, fatigue, cold, and fear, and any space for reflection, reasoning, experiencing emotions was wiped out... We had not only forgotten our country and our culture, but also our family, our past, the future we had imagined for ourselves, because, like animals, we were confined to the present moment."³⁰⁸ Levi emphasizes that the inmates continued to live in such horrific conditions not by choice, as an expression of free will, but due to an irrational impulse to survive. In Auschwitz, "people lived

³⁰⁶ "Though committing suicide is in most cases an act of self-determination, testimonies of other prisoners suggest that the small number of prisoner suicides in the camps should be understood not in terms of lack of spontaneity but as an expression of the will to live." Ibid., 207.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 177, 178.

³⁰⁸ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 75.

precisely like enslaved animals that sometimes let themselves die but do not kill themselves.”³⁰⁹ For suicide is “a meditated act, a noninstinctive, unnatural choice.” As such, it is the act of a human being, not an animal.³¹⁰ But in the camp, he says, “we are wholly devoid of free will, as our every action is, in time and place, the only conceivable one.”³¹¹

Camp conditions certainly lent credence to the view that free will is an illusion. In his *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*, Schopenhauer explains that an individual appears to be free to take any of several actions at a given moment because of “the fact that in his imagination only *one* picture at a time can be present and that for the moment it excludes everything else.” When he imagines a particular motive, “he feels immediately its effect on his will, which is thereby solicited.” It becomes a wish. Then he thinks that he can easily transform the wish into a volition, “that he can perform the proposed action. However, this is a delusion. For soon sober realization would set in and remind him of motives which pull in other directions or are contrary to the original one. And he would see that the action does not take place.”³¹² Schopenhauer gives the example of “a person who, holding a loaded pistol in his hand, thinks that he can shoot himself with it.” However, the motive to commit suicide must be “exceedingly strong...to outweigh the love of life, or, more correctly, the fear of death,” which is the strongest of all motives. “Only after such a motive has entered in can he really shoot himself, and must do so,”

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 76.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 98.

³¹² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*, trans. Konstantin Kolenda (1960; repub., Garden City, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 43-44.

because what one wills follows the motive with absolute necessity.³¹³ Thus, a person “can *wish* two opposing actions, but *will* only one of them. Only the act reveals to his self-consciousness which of the two he wills.”³¹⁴ To put it another way, ““You can do what you will, but in any given moment of your life you can *will* only one definite thing and absolutely nothing other than that one thing.””³¹⁵

Schopenhauer notes that every human being reacts differently to the same motives. No one can know how they will act in a specific situation until they have been in it, and this experience reveals their character, which is inborn and unchangeable.³¹⁶ “[I]n any difficult choice,” writes Schopenhauer, “our own resolve, like that of another person, remains a mystery to us until the choice has been actually made.” The process of deliberation “produces the illusion of the will’s freedom,” but it “yields in reality nothing but the very frequently distressing conflict of motives, which is dominated by indecision and has the whole soul and consciousness of man as its battlefield.” In the end, “the decidedly strongest motive drives the others from the field and determines the will. This outcome is called resolve, and it takes place with complete necessity as the result of the

³¹³ Ibid., 44-45, 5. Schopenhauer regarded suicide not as the denial, but as the *affirmation* of the will-to-live. “For denial has its essential nature in the fact that the pleasures of life, not its sorrows, are shunned. The suicide wills life, and is dissatisfied merely with the conditions on which it has come to him. Therefore he gives up by no means the will-to-live, but merely life, since he destroys the individual phenomenon.” In other words, the will-to-live so vehemently wills life and “revolts against what hinders it, namely suffering,” that the individual phenomenon prefers to destroy itself “rather than that suffering should break the will.” Schopenhauer believed that only knowledge could lead the will to abolish itself “and thus end the suffering that is inseparable from its phenomenon. This, however, is not possible through physical force, such as the destruction of the seed or germ, the killing of the new-born child, or suicide.” Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 398-400.

³¹⁴ Schopenhauer, *Freedom of the Will*, 17.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

struggle.”³¹⁷ Unfortunately, “the choice often turns out quite differently” than we expected, and therefore “we are often disappointed with ourselves, as we are with others, when we discover that we do not have this or that quality, like justice, selflessness, or courage, in as high a degree as we most indulgently supposed.”³¹⁸ As Schopenhauer writes in *The World as Will and Representation*, “we are all innocent to begin with” because “neither we nor others know the evil of our own nature.” We only become acquainted with our true character through experience, “and then we are often alarmed at ourselves.”³¹⁹

For the Sonderkommando prisoners, life in the camp consisted of many such moments of disillusionment, in which each man searched inwardly for the expected resistance, but found only the will-to-live, which rendered him mute and passive in the face of others’ suffering. At times the prisoners experienced this will-to-live as a positive force, which kept them from losing hope. However, they also saw how it chained them to their own body, which struggled with all its might against annihilation, even when suicide or a “heroic” death in an uprising promised to liberate them from their servile existence. The power of the will-to-live made it extremely difficult for the prisoners to carry out the acts of resistance which they imagined and planned. Yet the fact remains that the Sonderkommando prisoners *did* confront the force that enslaved them. Although Schopenhauer’s theory of the will-to-live helps us to understand why it is so difficult for human beings to risk their lives, even in such a repugnant environment as the death camp,

³¹⁷ Ibid., 50, 37.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 296.

he has trouble accounting for the fact that revolts and suicides do occur, which proves that the will-to-live can be resisted. Therefore, before examining the testimonies, let us turn to a philosopher who has written extensively on power relations: Michel Foucault.

Foucault challenges Arendt's theory of "total domination," as well as Schopenhauer's view of the will-to-live as natural and irresistible. For Foucault, there is no such thing as absolute power. "Power is not a substance," he argues. "Neither is it a mysterious property whose origin must be delved into. Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals...The characteristic feature of power is that some men can more or less entirely determine other men's conduct—but never exhaustively or coercively."³²⁰ While power "does not exclude the use of violence," the latter does not "constitute the principle or basic nature of power." A relationship of violence "forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys, or it closes off all possibilities. Its opposite pole can only be passivity, and if it comes up against any resistance it has no other option but to try to break it down." Of course, power "can produce as much acceptance as may be wished for: it can pile up the dead and shelter itself behind whatever threats it can imagine." However, the exercise of power is essentially "a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being

³²⁰ Michel Foucault, "'Omnes et Singulatim': Toward a Critique of Political Reason," in *Essential Works of Foucault: 1954-1984*, Vol. 3: *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2001), 324.

capable of action.”³²¹ In other words, “Power is exercised only over free subjects...who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available.” Thus, there is no power relationship in slavery when the slave is “in chains, only when he has some possible mobility, even a chance of escape.”³²² Likewise, a person “who is chained up and beaten is subject to force being exerted over him, not power. But”—and this is crucial—“if he can be induced to speak, when his ultimate recourse could have been to hold his tongue, preferring death, then he has been caused to behave in a certain way.”³²³

That is the danger facing the subject of power. Indeed, we have seen its tragic results in the Sonderkommando prisoners, whose will-to-live the Nazis exploited to elicit their cooperation in the extermination process. However, Foucault emphasizes that the very precondition of power—the freedom of the subject—can also subvert it. “If an individual can remain free,” he writes, “however little his freedom may be, power can subject him to government. There is no power without potential refusal or revolt.”³²⁴ “At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism,” he argues, “it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’—of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle.”³²⁵ Foucault stresses that “there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power

³²¹ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Essential Works of Foucault: 1954-1984*, Vol. 3: *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2001), 340-341.

³²² *Ibid.*, 342.

³²³ Foucault, “‘Omnes et Singulatim,’” 324.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 342.

relationship implies, at least in potentia, a strategy of struggle.”³²⁶ Power relations cannot exist “without points of insubordination that, by definition, are means of escape.

Accordingly, every intensification or extension of power relations intended to wholly suppress these points of insubordination can only bring the exercise of power up against its outer limits.”³²⁷

For modern biopower, which seeks to dominate every aspect of human life, the outer limit is death, “the moment that escapes it.”³²⁸ Even in a “completely unbalanced” power relationship, such as that between the SS and the camp inmates, “a power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter still has the possibility of committing suicide, of jumping out of the window or of killing the other.”³²⁹ In an article on the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, Foucault marveled at “[t]he impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, ‘I will no longer obey,’ and throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust.” Such an impulse is “irreducible,” he says, “because no authority is capable of making it utterly impossible,” not even the Nazis who attempted to obliterate the Warsaw Ghetto during the uprising. The individual who rebels is “inexplicable” to the authority attempting to dominate them, because “it takes a wrenching-away that interrupts the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to be able, ‘really,’ to prefer the risk of death to

³²⁶ Ibid., 346.

³²⁷ Ibid., 347.

³²⁸ Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” 138.

³²⁹ Michel Foucault, “The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984,” in *The Final Foucault*, eds. James W. Bernauer and David M. Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 12.

the certainty of having to obey.”³³⁰ Therefore, “the power that one man exerts over another is always perilous,” because it cannot preclude “the possibility of that moment when life can no longer be bought, when the authorities can no longer do anything, and when, facing the gallows and the machine guns, people revolt.”³³¹ It is a testament to human courage that the Sonderkommando prisoners recognized and seized this moment for themselves after a long internal struggle.

As noted above, the longer a prisoner stayed in camp, the more difficult it was for them to overcome the will-to-live. The initial period in the Sonderkommando was crucial. For example, Zalman Lewental had survived several weeks in Auschwitz and the Buna subcamp before being transferred to the Sonderkommando on 25 January 1943. Like most of the other conscripts, he did not yet know what had happened to his family until he encountered the gas chambers and the crematoria. “[T]he tragedy began” when the men returned to the barracks after work. “Everyone began to believe the dream that had been revealed to him the previous night, that [his] family, his dear ones were no longer alive, that he would never see them again, never, for he with his own hands had burned them,” writes Lewental.³³² The men faced a decision. If their families had been murdered, “why go on living, what reason could there be for life.” In this case he does not believe that “food and drink” mattered, for even an animal, “a beast bereft of its descendants or future descendants or those which grew up with it, when they cause it suffering, it

³³⁰ Michel Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?”, in *Essential Works of Foucault: 1954-1984*, Vol. 3: *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2001), 449.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 452, 449-450.

³³² Lewental, “Writings,” in Mark, *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 219.

protests by refusing [to eat] or drink.” In the same way, the prisoners had lost their appetite.³³³ Lewental mentions that people are usually able to endure “all troubles” in the hope of finding a living relative, but in the case of this “unparalleled tragedy, there were no survivors. Everyone wanted “to tear his eyes out with his own fingernails” when he imagined “the pain, the sorrow, the torture” that his loved ones had experienced.³³⁴ Lewental wishes that he had died then. “I would have been eternally grateful,” he writes. “How good it would have been to have died a sweet death, with tears on my lips,” for “now there is no more life,” “no trace” of his mother and father.³³⁵

In spite of their despair, however, Lewental and the other prisoners did not commit suicide. “[Lacking] the courage to end our lives --- no one did it then --- why? --- the question remains, and it is hard to answer now.” He wonders this especially because “there were many people who later, after we had recovered, at the first opportunity such as illness or an [unusual] event which shocked us a little, hurried to put an end to their lives.” Yet why did the murder of the families not lead them to suicide? According to psychologists, says Lewental, “a man who has lost all hope, every chance, can no longer react or respond to even the smallest event, for he is like a dead man. Man is capable, energetic and possessed of initiative as long as he believes that by doing a bold deed he will attain his wish. But when his last hope, his last chance are lost, he is no longer --- he begins to contemplate suicide.”³³⁶ However, only “the strongest, the bravest among us”

³³³ Ibid., 219-220.

³³⁴ Ibid., 220.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid., 220-221.

ended their lives; they were the ones “who broke as soon as we were brought here.”³³⁷

Later in the manuscript Lewental writes that when the prisoners “began to look around, to see with whom we had remained, who had lived and was no longer alive,” they found that “those who had remained were those of the second class, the inferior, the simple people. The more refined, tender and modest had gone; they had not the strength to hold on ---”³³⁸

In answer to his own question, Lewental believes that the prisoners did not commit suicide because “our intelligence is subconsciously influenced by the wonderful will to live, by the impulse to remain alive.” Behind all the reasons one can give for staying alive, there is simply the blind attachment to life:

you try to convince yourself, as if you do not care about your own life, but want only the general good, to go through with all of this for this and that cause, for this and that reason; you find hundreds of excuses, but the truth is that you want to live at any price. You desire to live, because you are alive, because the whole world continues to live, and everything that is pleasant, everything to which you are attached, is first and foremost attached to life itself. Without life --- that is the real truth. And therefore, in short and clearly, should someone ask you why --- I will answer him --- this is because --- insist, I myself an [sic] weak, captive of a strong desire to live...³³⁹

Though writing at the time of the event, Lewental anticipated the questions that others would ask of the Sonderkommando and that they would ask of themselves: “why do you do [such] unsuitable labor, how do you live, what is the purpose of your life, what is your will --- what more do you want to achieve in your life --- here hides the weak point,” which is the will-to-live. He admits that more than one of the Sonderkommando prisoners

³³⁷ Ibid., 221.

³³⁸ Ibid., 222.

³³⁹ Ibid., 221.

“lost his human image in the passage of time; you become ashamed of yourself; they have simply forgotten what they do, the nature of their work.” These were “normal, average --- simple, modest people,” yet they adapted to the extermination process. The sight of mass murder became routine: “one gets used to everything, and whatever happens no longer makes an impression; someone screams, people look on indifferently, as at an everyday matter, how tens of thousands of people are being wiped out.”³⁴⁰ The process of accommodation “involved much eating and drinking, things the whole camp could only dream about --- but never see.”³⁴¹ There were a few prisoners, such as the Orthodox Jews under the leadership of the rabbinical judge from Maków Mazowiecki, “who refused at any price to play the game of live-today-and-die-tomorrow.” Lewental remarks that these religious men had “very little influence” within the Sonderkommando. Unlike them, admits Lewental, “I held on at any price.”³⁴²

Like Lewental, Treblinka survivor Richard Glazar knew the importance of one’s first days in the camp. Glazar liked to watch the new prisoners to see how they adjusted. One day, a Slovakian Jew named Zelo Bloch was selected from one of the transports and joined Glazar’s group at the evening meal. Glazar waited for Zelo “to suddenly scream, turn his hands into claws, explode, attack, tearing their flesh from their bones, roaring with rage”—in other words, to resist. To Glazar’s relief, Zelo did nothing. “Well,” Glazar recalls thinking to himself, “he’s a poor shit just like me, like all of us here...Okay, come on, come along. You’re one of us...If everyone is like this, if we are all like this, then

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 224.

³⁴² Ibid., 221.

maybe we're not such shits after all..."³⁴³ As long as Zelo did not hang himself during the night, he would become one of them. While he was dressed in his own clothes now, "[b]y tomorrow he will be wearing a *kurtka*—a short Polish jacket, a pair of elegant jodhpurs, and shiny leather boots" from the piles of the victims' clothing.³⁴⁴ As we shall see, however, Glazar had good reason to regard Zelo's arrival as "the first spark...that will set Treblinka ablaze."³⁴⁵

In his memoir, Filip Müller admits that his first day of work in the Auschwitz Sonderkommando was grueling and shocking, but he was not ready to die. Three of the other conscripts, however, refused to go on. The SS supervisor, Stark, chased them around the room, whipping them furiously. Eventually they threw themselves to the floor and begged Stark to shoot them, which he did later that day. Meanwhile, Müller and his comrades continued to strip the clothes off the gas chamber victims as ordered. He found the three prisoners among the corpses. "Although they were still breathing," he recalls, "they were lying quite still, all their physical energy and the spiritual will to live drained out of them. They had given up."³⁴⁶ Yet Müller himself

had not yet reached that point of despair. Of course, I had no illusions: I knew with certainty that a dreadful end awaited me. But I was not yet ready to capitulate. The more menacing death grew, the stronger grew my will to survive. My every thought, every fibre of my being, was concentrated on only one thing: to stay alive, one minute, one hour, one day, one week. But not to die. I was still young, after all. The memory of my parents, my family and my early youth in my home town had faded. I was obsessed and dominated by the determination that I must not die.³⁴⁷

³⁴³ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 23.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁴⁶ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 17.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The manner in which the gas chamber victims died and the way their bodies were treated after death particularly disgusted Müller. “[N]ot to have to lie under a heap of dead bodies; not to be pushed into the oven, prodded with an iron fork and, ultimately, changed into smoke and ashes. Anything but that!” he cried. He knew that there was little chance of coming out of the Sonderkommando alive, but he was determined to live all the same. And to do that he had to “submit and carry out every single order. It was only by adopting this attitude that a man was able to carry on his ghastly trade in the crematorium of Auschwitz.”³⁴⁸

The morning after Müller’s arrival in the Sonderkommando, the SS brought the prisoners back out to the mass grave into which they had thrown the naked corpses the previous night. SS men in high rubber boots were working to pump out water from the pit. Müller remembers that he and his companions “looked at each other with fear in our eyes.” They were certain that the SS had brought them there to execute them. “There was every likelihood that we might wind up as the top layer in the pit” as soon as the draining operations were complete.³⁴⁹ At that moment Müller “was seized by a feeling of uncontrollable fear,” which resembles the “awful alarm and wild rebellion” that Schopenhauer describes as occurring in any living being when it faces imminent death.³⁵⁰ In such a situation, rational thoughts fail to overcome the blind rage of the will-to-live. “I tried to recall exemplary men and women down the centuries who were put to death,” Müller writes. “I remembered that we must all die. Death, I told myself, was, after all,

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 24.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 24. Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 2: 350-351.

part of our lives and we would have to face it sooner or later. Needless to say these considerations were quite futile and failed lamentably either to stifle or to dismiss my fears.”³⁵¹ But the SS did not intend to murder the Sonderkommando prisoners that day. They had a more horrible task in store for them: they ordered the prisoners to climb down into the “sticky, slimy” mud of the pit and drag the corpses into a heap in the middle. Under a rain of blows, the prisoners obeyed, but they constantly slipped and got stuck in the slime, particularly as the water started rising again. It took all their strength to move the slippery bodies. When two prisoners collapsed from exhaustion, the SS killed them with a shot to the head.³⁵² After several hours, there was a grotesque pyramid of bodies in the center of the pit. Then the prisoners sprinkled chlorinated lime over the corpses. “The wind blew the powder into our faces so that we could scarcely keep our burning eyes open,” Müller recalls. “But we dared not stop. One moment’s pause would have meant certain death, so much was clear to everyone listening to the SS men’s hysterical yelling.” As the prisoners worked at a breakneck pace to shovel clay onto the pile of bodies, the SS mocked them. ““It’s quite obvious that none of you Yids has ever done a proper job of work,”” shouted the deputy camp commandant, Hans Aumeier. ““But now there’ll be no more haggling for any of you.””³⁵³

As Müller’s account illustrates, the frenetic pace of the work ensured that the Sonderkommando prisoners had little time to consider “disobedient” acts like suicide. In an environment of incessant threats and blows, confronted with death at every turn, most

³⁵¹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 24.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 24-25.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 26.

of the prisoners chose the simplest path forward, which was to obey orders robotically and evade death. Indeed, the SS counted on and encouraged such cooperation, while also mocking the lengths to which the prisoners would go to preserve their lives. For example, Müller recalls that when SS-*Hauptscharführer* Otto Moll found several dollar bills on the person of a young prisoner, he took the boy

to one of the [cremation] pits where the top layer of ashes was still red-hot. At the edge of the pit Mill drew his pistol and remarked cynically, ‘I ought to shoot you, you fucking Yid. But I’m not like that, I’ll give you a chance. I’ll let you go if you run barefoot across the pit twice.’ Hoping desperately to save his life, the boy took off his shoes and leapt into the pit. In vain he tried to run for his life: as he collapsed into the red-hot embers Moll gave him the *coup de grâce*.³⁵⁴

According to Müller, the sadistic Moll would also entertain himself by forcing prisoners to play “swim-frog,” where the victims had to swim around in one of the pools near the crematoria “croaking like frogs until they drowned from exhaustion.” Moll and his SS comrades enjoyed watching the “death struggle” of the victims and threatened to shoot them any time they came near the edge of the pool.³⁵⁵ It is important to note that SS men like Moll could not have carried out such torture if they had not been able to rely on the strong will-to-live of their victims.

Like Müller, Greek survivor Shlomo Venezia obeyed the orders of the SS without thinking. On his first day in the Sonderkommando, he was forced to carry the corpses of gas chamber victims to the large outdoor pits for cremation. When a young prisoner “completely lost his wits” and suddenly stood still, Moll shot him to death. Moll ordered Venezia and another prisoner to undress the dead man and carry his naked body into the

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 140.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 141.

burning ditch. Venezia recoiled from the task, “But of course, I had no choice if I was to avoid the same fate as this poor man.”³⁵⁶ This mechanical performance of one’s tasks continued beyond the initiation period, so that the prisoners seemed to resemble Arendt’s depiction of “ghastly marionettes with human faces...which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death.”³⁵⁷ For instance, Venezia says that, although the prisoners feared selections, they did not wonder if a trip to the *Zentralsauna* for a shower would be their last. “Some people asked me if it wouldn’t be better to get it over with,” he recalls. “Perhaps—or even certainly. But I didn’t think of it; we had to keep on going, day by day, without asking ourselves any questions: keep on living, even if it was terrible.” Venezia did not remember any suicides in the Sonderkommando. On the contrary, some men “said they wanted to live at any price. Personally, I think I’d rather have died. But each time, some words of my mother’s used to come to my mind: ‘While there’s life, there’s hope.’”³⁵⁸

The feeling that there was always hope, always a chance that they might survive, enabled the Sonderkommando prisoners to carry on in the lethal environment of the death camp. At the same time, this stubborn hope made them hesitant to act against the camp regime, and every instance of hesitation made future resistance that much more difficult. For example, the members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando debated whether to risk death in order to tell the gas chamber victims the truth about their fate. It seemed a futile gesture. “We stood rooted against the wall,” writes Müller, “paralysed by a feeling of

³⁵⁶ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 61.

³⁵⁷ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 455.

³⁵⁸ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 87-88.

impotence and the certainty of their and our inexorable fate. Alas, there was no power on earth which could have saved these poor innocent wretches.”³⁵⁹ After all, it would not have made any difference “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!’”³⁶⁰ The majority of the victims would not have believed them anyway. “For death is always inconceivable,” even when one is standing naked in a gas chamber.³⁶¹ In fact, says Müller, “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?” Weighing the narrow possibility of their own survival against the clear impossibility of saving the people destined for the gas chambers, the Sonderkommando prisoners decided that it was more important to preserve themselves as “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.”³⁶² Thus, it was better not to cause the victims unnecessary suffering and “to regard anybody arriving at the crematorium as doomed to die.”³⁶³

The Sonderkommando prisoners adopted this “cynical attitude” towards the gas chamber victims based on experience. At one time, they reasoned that they might be able to stage a revolt with the help of the victims. Echoing Schopenhauer, Müller notes that in

³⁵⁹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 36-37.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 74.

the face of imminent death “men are determined to do anything and capable of achieving the impossible, the more so when they reckon that there is a chance of survival.” The Sonderkommando believed that “in the face of inexorable and brutal death by gassing, their instinct of self-preservation would make people defend their lives tooth and nail to their dying breath.”³⁶⁴ Accordingly, when a transport arrived from the Białystok ghetto in the summer of 1943, one of the members of the Sonderkommando found a woman he knew and revealed the truth to her. The young woman became hysterical and tried to tell the others that they were about to be gassed and cremated. At first few people believed her, thinking she was insane, but gradually her words took effect. The crowd began to press towards the door of the undressing room. After their initial alarm, the SS regrouped and calmed the people with lies and a display of weapons and vicious dogs. Müller reports that this show of force was successful. The people wanted so badly to continue living that they believed that they were really being sent to work. Out of fear, they were “willing to do whatever was demanded of them; indeed they would even take that shower if they must, as long as they were given a pledge that they would stay alive.”³⁶⁵ Watching this scene in the undressing room, Müller wondered whether he and his comrades should have “asked the people to resist and then, together, ended this detestable life honourably?” He turned to a former Greek army officer, who was also a member of the Resistance, but the man “rejected my suggestion as utterly absurd, arguing that dying heroically and honourably together with our fellows would help no one: we must be

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 74-75.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 78-79.

patient and bide our time.” The man’s words “checked my desire for action.” While Müller sympathized with the victims, he “realized the futility of resistance.” Evidently, he felt guilty as a bystander, but the sight of “the SS men and their excited dogs” brought him “back to reality. Of all the places in the whole wide world this must surely be the very one where any attempt at saving human lives was a senseless undertaking.”³⁶⁶

The members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando struggled to resist even when the lives of their own comrades were at stake. In one of his manuscripts, Zalmen Gradowski describes the selection that took place on 24 February 1944, which resulted in the extermination of more than half of the Sonderkommando. At first the prisoners were

united in our fear and trembling... We could feel, could sense that these fifteen months of living together and this terrible, horrifying, tragic work had bound us together, molded us into a unified, closely-knit group of comrades, an inseparable, indivisible family of brothers. And so we would remain until our final moments. All for one and one for all! Each man feels in his heart and soul our common pain, our common sorrow. Each man senses the anguish of the suffering to come.³⁶⁷

Because of this solidarity, Gradowski and his comrades were certain that the selection “would not go smoothly” for the SS. “At the first attempt to break up our family, we, the brothers of the *Sonderkommando* would show them what we could do.” Having witnessed the thousands of laborers deported to Birkenau from the munitions factories, “we would not be tricked into believing that they were putting us to work at a task that only we and no one else could accomplish... These bandits, these smooth, experienced swindlers would never make us believe that we were needed for work elsewhere. No!!

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 79.

³⁶⁷ Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 86-87.

We would not be tricked.”³⁶⁸ The moment the SS “laid their barbaric hands on our solidified organism,” the prisoners “would all rise as one, spring up like a wounded animal and throw ourselves at them, the murderers and criminals who had massacred our innocent people. That would be the decisive moment; then we would speak our final word. Like lava erupting from the depths of a seething volcano, our vengeance would break forth.”³⁶⁹ Gradowski writes that the Sonderkommando prisoners “hoped, deeply believed” that the threat of imminent death would make them “sober up; that the tragic reality would show itself in all its naked truth and all our hopes and dreams would be revealed to have been nothing but empty fantasies, founded on illusions we had willingly believed in order to avert our eyes from the tragic danger looming over us.” At that moment, he thought,

The long-amassed rage and hatred would merge with the pain and suffering left behind by these horrible months of tragic work which had forged the seething desire for revenge within us. All this, mixed with the pressing threat of losing our lives and our general desire to wreak revenge and to survive, would inflame, enrage, stir up our very being—and explode. Each of us, without exception, irrespective of his physical force or individual qualities, would be possessed by the hellish fire of revenge.³⁷⁰

Thus, “on the brink of our downfall,” the Sonderkommando would finally give their answer to the question of “why and for what purpose we had lived and existed in the heart of hell, why we had breathed this air of death and annihilation of own people—this is what we believed.”³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 89.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 89-90.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

However, as the selection progressed, and some were chosen for life and others for death, the solidarity of the Sonderkommando prisoners began to disintegrate.

“Gradually, invisibly, imperceptibly, the abyss widened between us and them,” writes Gradowski.

The strands which had bound us together began to unravel. The brotherly thread, the familial bond was broken. And all the weakness and nakedness of this being called man began to show. The survival instinct smoldering deep inside each man was transformed into an opiate which imperceptibly, invisibly took possession of the human being, the comrade, the brother, banishing all fear and apprehension.³⁷²

Each man who was spared (registered for work in the crematorium) became “intoxicated by the opium” of separation. “The hope, the certainty that ‘for now’ they were calling a number that was not his, consoled him, renewed his courage, and a feeling of estrangement began to grow in the place where love had been. Each number called became a silent explosive charge, blowing the bridges that connected us.”³⁷³ Gradowski writes bitterly that the SS were cunning: they “had detected, pinpointed, guessed and grasped our common thought. They had burrowed into the deepest caverns of our souls and glimpsed their nudity.” They knew man’s weakness: “the unwillingness to expose himself to the danger of losing his life, even if it was a dead life.” In this way, the SS “had torn our family apart, split the common danger and transferred it to a single group, that of the ‘unregistered.’ And as soon as those registered for the crematorium were given an opportunity to elude the danger—the threat of their removal from this ostensible and

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid., 87-88.

temporary ‘safe place’—at that moment, a great rift opened up in our common thoughts and aspirations.”³⁷⁴

On the one hand, the spared men no longer wanted to fight. “Their ingrained instinct for survival checked their deep urge for revenge and self-defense.” On the other hand, they expected the doomed men to be the first to rise up against the SS. “All glances were fixed on those rows. They had but to make the slightest move, and everyone would follow their example.”³⁷⁵ Yet the SS had succeeded there as well. It seemed to the doomed men “as though an iron wall had sprung up between us and them; they felt abandoned and alone, as if there were nothing binding us anymore. And this mistake misled us all.” If just one of the Sonderkommando prisoners had “been able to free his mind from the intoxicating opium of separation with which the bandits had intentionally inebriated our paralyzed hearts and throw himself into battle, the miracle would have come to pass. His willpower would have given us wings; his momentum would have spiraled into a storm, and the deeply smoldering spark which still persisted in all of us would have burst into an infernal blaze.”³⁷⁶ “There had been a chance,” laments Gradowski, “there had been a moment, we had felt the labor pains, the pangs of revenge, the birth pains of a hero,” but instead was born “the child of cowardice.”³⁷⁷

Like their counterparts in Auschwitz, the Sonderkommando prisoners in Treblinka imagined themselves carrying out heroic acts of resistance but struggled to

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 90-91.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 92.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

overcome the will-to-live. One day, when a Czech transport arrived from Theresienstadt, an SS officer ordered Richard Glazar to escort an elderly woman to the *Lazarett* (“infirmary”), where the old, the sick, and the pregnant women from the transports were shot into a smoldering pit. Glazar answered the woman’s questions with lies, assuring her that she would simply receive a physical examination. He loathed having to participate in this deception and feared the moment when she discovered the truth. “I’ll have to take her all the way in, and she’ll know what’s going to happen...and she’ll look at me. At the edge of the pit I’ll have to tear her clothes off, maybe hold her hand, support her.”³⁷⁸ Then he tried to imagine himself attacking the SS officer inside the *Lazarett*, grabbing his pistol and shooting him. But he knew that he would not be able to get close enough; he would be killed in the attempt.³⁷⁹ His courage faded. What was the point of resistance if it simply meant that two would die instead of one? When Glazar and the woman arrived at the *Lazarett*, he tried to leave, but she held onto him, “resting on the arm of my fine dark blue jacket, the one I found this morning and put on immediately. The silk invites her to hold on more tightly.” He was suddenly ashamed to be wearing a dead man’s clothes. When the woman said she heard gunshots, Glazar lied again: “No, no, it’s just my friends throwing the luggage around.”³⁸⁰ He accompanied the woman part of the way into the narrow alley that led into the *Lazarett*, but once she turned the corner, he ran out, “as if seized by some alien force.”³⁸¹ At that moment he heard a shot from the inside. He tried

³⁷⁸ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 32.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

to escape to the sorting barracks, but the guards forced him back out onto the platform to finish removing the luggage from the train. Glazar cursed himself for his cowardice, for accommodating himself to the death camp regime and valuing the “privileges” of Treblinka over resistance:

You have wormed your way out. You fled—from the old woman and from the action you intended to take. So keep on enjoying what Treblinka has to offer—grub, whippings, the ‘infirmary’... What did you tell her when she asked for water? Just wait a little while, and very soon you will... No, I didn’t tell her that. No, but you thought it. Admit it, it was something like that: In just a little while, you will have enough of everything. You damned bastard—what would you do if you had to accompany your own grandmother? Maybe she’s already there, has already made her way through, already over there, and just now...³⁸²

Another time, Glazar imagined himself attacking an SS man but could not bring himself to go through with it. The SS often came to the sorting barracks where Glazar worked to pick out something “nice” from the clothing of the murdered Jews. One day, SS Sergeant Karl Seidel walked in. “If you can come up with a nice winter coat...” he asked quietly, using informal address in German. Glazar fantasized about attacking Seidel, but once again decided against it:

Damn it all, why don’t I just kick him in the balls, why don’t I tighten this belt around his neck until his eyes pop out, just like the two guys who were hauled off to the mess to be hung upside down by their feet? And what would you achieve by doing that? What would you be helping? Everyone else would just watch without moving a muscle. You’d have to finish yourself off too, if you didn’t want them to get you... So, so fantasize a little more while talking yourself out of it, dig around in this pile and look.³⁸³

Ashamed of his cowardice, Glazar recalled a Polish Jew named Berliner who had “gathered everything he still had in him and jumped one of the death’s heads with a

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid., 50.

knife.” It had happened early in the camp’s existence, before Glazar arrived. He suspected that Berliner was “probably that strong and courageous because he had just returned to Poland, his home country, after having spent several years abroad.” In other words, he had not succumbed to the corruption of Treblinka. But what reward did he get for his heroism? The guards “beat him to death on the spot.”³⁸⁴

Other “heroes” of Treblinka received similar treatment. When the SS found two prisoners hidden in the undercarriage of one of the freight cars, they forced them to undress and then dragged them “by a rope tied around their necks, beating their naked bodies all the way down to the mess. There the men are hung by their feet, heads down, from a beam fastened between two trees.”³⁸⁵ Eating their evening meal, Glazar and the other prisoners could not ignore the horrible image of the two hanged men, which “intrude[d]” into the steam rising from their bowls. Suddenly one of the men, still alive, cried out accusingly, “What do you think you’re doing! Spit that garbage out! Take revenge!”³⁸⁶ He urged the prisoners to resist the SS instead of being content with surviving off the transports of murdered Jews, but his comrades were slow to respond. After two more escapees were discovered and hanged publicly, Glazar’s group began formulating a plan for a breakout. However, two days later, seven prisoners were shot for trying to escape. Deputy Commandant Kurt Franz announced a new policy: “From today on, I am making every Kapo and every foreman directly liable, with their own lives, for their people. For every one person who escapes, or tries to escape, ten men will be shot—

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 54-55.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 41.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

for one, ten others!”³⁸⁷ Now resistance would come at a greater cost: a prisoner risked not just his own life, but the lives of ten of his comrades.

In addition to the faint hope that they might survive, the belief that they could end their lives at any time prevented many Sonderkommando prisoners from carrying out seemingly futile acts of resistance. The Auschwitz Sonderkommando was critical not only of their own hesitancy, but also of the unwillingness of the camp Resistance to proceed with a general uprising. In his letter of 6 September 1944, Zalmen Gradowski writes that the men of the Sonderkommando “have long wanted to put an end to the terrible work forced upon us on pain of death. We wanted to perform a great deed. The men of the camp, some of them Jews, Russians and Poles, have held us back with all their might and forced us to postpone the date of the uprising.”³⁸⁸ Filip Müller recalls that it was not easy to convince the other prisoners in the camp to rise up “because so far their lives were not directly threatened while their chance of survival appeared to increase with every day that passed,” particularly with “the brisk advance of the Red Army.”³⁸⁹ Likewise, Zalman Lewental criticized the members of the Resistance for not being prepared to undertake a revolt. What was worse, they were “not even prepared in thought. They are not capable of grasping these things. Putting it simply, [there is] still a will to live. To die, he says, I will always have time.” While the Resistance “always claimed that we are the weak ones, the cowards,” events proved otherwise.³⁹⁰ The real cowards are

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 44.

³⁸⁸ Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 180. See also Gradowski, “Writings,” in Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 205.

³⁸⁹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 91.

³⁹⁰ Lewental, “Writings,” 233.

“Those who fear death, those who long to live another day, those to whom one hour of life is very important,” who think they have “all the time to wait --- to achieve something.” Finally, when the Sonderkommando “saw that we had nothing more to expect, that all the promises they had been giving us all the time were only empty phrases founded on lies and false[hood], we decided and made up our minds: enough.” Although the Sonderkommando “may have had a bit of a better chance than others in the camp, nevertheless they had the courage to go with full consciousness to death.”³⁹¹

The Sonderkommando prisoners in Treblinka battled similar illusions. In an attempt to control their fate, Samuel Willenberg and his friend Alfred Boehm obtained cyanide capsules from among the pharmaceutical products collected from the gas chamber victims. Willenberg recalls: “The knowledge that we owned the poison was a boon to our self-confidence: we could take our lives whenever we chose. The Germans would not kill us! If ever we reached the conclusion that we had no further chance of staying alive, we would commit suicide.”³⁹² However, one of the doctors, a Polish Jew from Warsaw named Chorążycki, warned Willenberg about the difficulty of putting an end to one’s own life.

‘You should know that we have cyanide pills which were in the possession of self-confident, big-mouthed prisoners like you, Katzap. The fact that you can take the pill out of your pocket and use it whenever you want makes you more self-assured. It’s easier to survive here when you feel you’re in charge of your life. But you should know that people who had pills like these, and who intended using them at the critical moment, refused to believe what was waiting them to the very end. As they ran stark naked down Death Avenue to the gas chambers, with SS-

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Samuel Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka* (Warsaw: Jewish Historical Institute, 2008), 93.

men prodding them along, the pills stayed in their clothes in the yard. They didn't have the strength—or the courage—to use the poison.”³⁹³

Speaking frankly, Dr. Chorążycki admitted that he was unsure if he would ““have the strength or the courage to use the poison at the right moment. When I think of myself, I'm afraid I'll crack and won't be able to do it. To swallow poison of your own free will takes extraordinary courage. You always hope that perhaps, everything notwithstanding, you'll survive this hell.”” While Willenberg pondered the doctor's words, Chorążycki gazed at him, “as if wishing to reach a final diagnosis in my case, as if wanting to ascertain the condition of my body and, above all, my soul.”³⁹⁴

For the Sonderkommando prisoners in both Auschwitz and Treblinka, the time came when their resolve was put to the ultimate test. The selection in February 1944 had “caused wide-spread alarm” among the members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando. They feared they would not live to see liberation. “It stood to reason,” writes Müller, “that the perpetrators of daily mass murders would not allow a single witness of their crimes to stay alive and to testify against them. We had therefore come to the conviction that only a mass escape could save us.”³⁹⁵ By chance Müller learned that the so-called Czech family camp in Birkenau would be liquidated in March 1944. He informed his comrades, who agreed that “we must at all costs warn the people and try to convince

³⁹³ Ibid., 95. Gradowski writes similarly of the victim “who had a dreadful premonition from the outset,” but “kept those death pills to the last minute, and does not know that he is lost.” Now, Gradowski and his fellow inmates wish that they had been as clear-sighted. “Oh, how good it would be, how happy we would all feel, if we had such good, precious death pills on us now. We would swallow them greedily, and how happy we would be to find our final rest in sweet, eternal sleep, and be borne on waves of wonderful dreams to the place where our dear families are, and be united with them forever.” Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 63. See also Gradowski, “Writings,” in Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 200.

³⁹⁴ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 95.

³⁹⁵ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 91.

them that their one chance of survival lay in offering resistance.”³⁹⁶ The Sonderkommando would join them in the revolt. Unfortunately, the inmates of the family camp “did not want to know about the peril in which they found themselves. Since their arrival in Birkenau they had enjoyed so many privileges that the idea that they might be gassed seemed absurd.”³⁹⁷ Although they “had seen the crematorium chimneys belching smoke and fumes day after day after day” for six months, they clung to the belief that the Nazis would not kill them, if only because they were under the protection of the International Red Cross.³⁹⁸ Therefore, many thought that the news of the liquidation was “an unreliable rumour, while others looked upon it as some kind of deliberate attempt to cause panic, with the aim of getting them involved in a hazardous attempt to escape.”³⁹⁹ And even if they were to be killed, they preferred to die together in the gas chambers than to witness the slaughter of their wives and children in a failed revolt. To make matters worse, the camp Resistance was unwilling to help the Sonderkommando organize an uprising. The advance of the Red Army “led them to hope, with good reason, that they had a genuine chance of survival, a chance which was increasing daily.” It seemed senseless for them to risk their lives in a desperate and perilous struggle for a few thousand Czech Jews and 200 prisoners of the *Sonderkommando*.⁴⁰⁰ Nevertheless, Gradowski writes, the Sonderkommando held out hope that the inmates of the family camp “would raise the flags of battle and together, hand in hand, we would enter this

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 101.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 103.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 107.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 106.

unequal battle” and “make a heroic end of this dark life.” However, while the victims bravely cursed their murderers and sang patriotic songs such as Hatikvah and the Czech national anthem, they did not rise up. “[I]nstead of throwing themselves at us and them like wild beasts,” says Gradowski, “most of them descended calmly and sedately from the trucks; with arms hanging and heads bowed in resignation, they filed silently into the grave.”⁴⁰¹

Watching these “heart-rending” scenes through the half-open door of the undressing room, Müller felt drawn to the victims through “ties of a common past, a common language, religion and culture.”⁴⁰² The bearing of his fellow Czechoslovakians “seemed an exemplary gesture of national honour and national pride which stirred my soul. I proudly identified with them.” The way they “walk[ed] into the gas chamber, brave, proud and determined,” made him realize the senselessness of “clinging to my hopeless existence.” What was he holding on for? There was little chance of escaping any time soon, but even “in the unlikely event of my getting out of the camp alive,” what sort of life would await him? Material possessions were replaceable, “[b]ut who could replace my parents, my brother, or the rest of my family, of whom I was the sole survivor? And what of friends, teachers, and the many members of our Jewish community?” Without them, his hometown of Sered’ would be “soulless and dead.” And what if he ran into the Hlinka guards or Slovakian SS “who had sucked their Jewish fellow citizens dry before their deportation and stolen their worldly belongings?” There would be strangers in his

⁴⁰¹ Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 169.

⁴⁰² Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 107-108.

family's house and silence in the Jewish school. The synagogue had likely been looted and turned into a secular building. It would be impossible, he concluded, to "pick up the threads of my former happy and carefree life."⁴⁰³

In that moment, the scales fell from Müller's eyes, and he recognized the worthlessness of his existence in the death camp. As Schopenhauer notes, such knowledge has the power to become "a *quieter*" of the will-to-live, "silencing and suppressing all willing."⁴⁰⁴ One can see its effect in the fact that Müller "felt quite free from that tormenting fear of death which had often almost overwhelmed me before. I had never yet contemplated the possibility of taking my own life, but now I was determined to share the fate of my countrymen."⁴⁰⁵ Resolved to die with them, he slipped into the crowd being driven into gas chamber and hid behind one of the concrete pillars in the back. "I was overcome by a feeling of indifference: everything had become meaningless," Müller recalls. "Even the thought of a painful death from Zyklon B gas [sic], whose effect I of all people knew only too well, no longer filled me with fear and horror. I faced my fate with composure."⁴⁰⁶ Müller's experience resembles what Schopenhauer refers to as the "*denial of the will-to-live*," which occurs when an individual comes to understand the "inner nature" of earthly existence "and finds it involved in constant passing away, a vain striving, an inward conflict, and a continual suffering."⁴⁰⁷ Confronted with this knowledge, the will-to-live "now turns away from

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁰⁴ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 307-308.

⁴⁰⁵ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 111.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 111-112.

⁴⁰⁷ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 383, 379.

life; it shudders at the pleasures in which it recognizes the affirmation of life. Man attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete willlessness.”⁴⁰⁸ However, Schopenhauer notes that most people do not reach this state of complete resignation until they have experienced “the greatest personal suffering” and are about to die. Only then does the individual “willingly renounce everything he formerly desired with the greatest vehemence, and gladly welcome death.”⁴⁰⁹ Although Müller did not face imminent execution like the gas chamber victims, the physical and mental suffering he had experienced during his time in the Sonderkommando evidently led him to reject the will-to-live.

Müller was not permitted to carry out his act of self-sacrifice. A group of young Czech girls, “naked and in the full bloom of youth,” approached him in the gas chamber. One of them said:

‘We understand that you have chosen to die with us of your own free will, and we have come to tell you that we think your decision pointless: for it helps no one.’ She went on: ‘We must die, but you still have a chance to save your life. You have to return to the camp and tell everybody about our last hours,’ she commanded. ‘You have to explain to them that they must free themselves from any illusions. They ought to fight, that’s better than dying here helplessly. It’ll be easier for them, since they have no children. As for you, perhaps you’ll survive this terrible tragedy and then you must tell everybody what happened to you.’⁴¹⁰

The girl’s words caught him off guard. Before he could answer, “the girls took hold of me and dragged me protesting to the door of the gas chamber. There they gave me a last push which made me land bang in the middle of the group of SS men.” *SS-Sturmmann*

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 379.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 392.

⁴¹⁰ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 113.

Albert Kurschus beat Müller with his truncheon and then with his fist when he tried to get up. Finally, he yelled: ““You bloody shit, get it into your stupid head: *we* decide how long you stay alive and when you die, and not you. Now piss off, to the ovens!’ Then he socked me viciously in the face so that I reeled against the lift door.”⁴¹¹

Upstairs in the crematorium, Müller’s head was spinning. *Kapo* Kaminski came in and “tried to make me understand that my nerves had got the better of me and that anything like that, even though he had full understanding for it, must not happen again.” Kaminski told him that he would only “please our tormentors...by dying without putting up a fight.” He reminded Müller that the Sonderkommando needed him for their resistance efforts: ““You are still young: it is vital that you should see everything, experience everything, go through everything and consciously record everything in your mind. Maybe you are one of those who one day will be free.”” As he resumed working, Müller pondered Kaminski’s words, which “had comforted and encouraged me. Once again I was determined to go on fighting for my life. Perhaps there would be a miracle, perhaps one day I would be free.”⁴¹² He also remembered that he “had promised to obtain pieces of evidence, such as the labels on the tins containing Zyklon B gas [sic]” for the men planning an escape. “By now I had come back to reality. I hoped that perhaps I might be of use to the Resistance, although I was still very young and without much experience of life. Thus, within a few hours, I had come to the conviction that each

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 113-114.

⁴¹² Ibid., 114.

minute, each hour and each day I could interpose between the day of my death was a gift from heaven.”⁴¹³

Although the Auschwitz Sonderkommando had failed so far in most of their attempts at resistance, the expansion of extermination operations in the spring of 1944 brought them close to the breaking point. In preparation for the extermination of the Jews of Hungary, the SS conscripted hundreds of prisoners and civilian workers to enlarge the camp railway system and increase the number and capacity of the gas chambers, ovens, and cremation pits. Müller writes that the rumors of the impending murder of the Hungarian Jews “came as a devastating blow” to the Sonderkommando. “Were we once more to stand by and watch while more hundreds upon thousands were done away with? Once again we pressed the camp Resistance to give the signal for an uprising. However, they still refused to run risks.”⁴¹⁴ The Resistance urged the Sonderkommando to wait for the advancing Red Army to come closer to the camp. For the Sonderkommando, however, waiting meant that “we would yet again be forced to cremate hundreds of thousands of people.”⁴¹⁵ Lewental writes similarly that “We, who had already had enough, and more than enough, for a long time, our hands would now be forced to be dipped in the blood of the Jews of Hungary.” This situation was intolerable, and “the entire commando, regardless of class differences, even the most corrupt of us furiously

⁴¹³ Ibid., 115. Müller kept his promise: he supplied fellow Slovaks Alfred Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba with Zyklon B labels, plans of the crematoria and gas chambers, a list of names of the SS men who worked there, and notes on the transports gassed in Crematoria IV and V. Wetzler and Vrba escaped on 10 April 1944 and submitted the evidence, known as the Wetzler-Vrba report, to the Allies.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

demanded to put an end to this game, to stop this labor and even to end our lives.”⁴¹⁶ Yet the members of the Sonderkommando felt they were too isolated to carry out a revolt on their own. “Thus,” says Müller, “we had no choice but to grit our teeth and wait for things to happen.”⁴¹⁷ Once again, the Sonderkommando yielded to the will-to-live, which Müller frames as SS coercion: “we had to yield to force and participate in the building of places which were to make possible the worst and most cruel mass murder yet at Auschwitz.”⁴¹⁸ Although “steeped in despair and despondency,” “[o]utraged and depressed,” Müller and his comrades obediently dug five new cremation pits behind Crematorium V in only one week. Their new master, *SS-Hauptscharführer* Otto Moll, “ruled us with a rod of iron.” The prisoners felt “helpless in the face of SS power. Any refusal to work, even the merest hint, would have meant certain death without the slightest effect on the course of events.”⁴¹⁹ By the beginning of May 1944, the extermination facilities at Birkenau were ready to receive the first transports of Jews from Hungary.

Over the next several weeks, the Sonderkommando prisoners toiled day and night in the inferno of Birkenau, as hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were systematically gassed and cremated. Then, when alarming rumors reached the Sonderkommando of the liquidation of all prisoners in the event of a surprise offensive by the Red Army, they joined forces with the Resistance to plan an uprising for mid-June.

⁴¹⁶ Lewental, “Writings,” in Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 225.

⁴¹⁷ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 124.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128, 130.

On the day of the revolt, however, the Resistance inexplicably called it off, leaving the Sonderkommando “absolutely stunned.”⁴²⁰ Meanwhile, Moll moved the Sonderkommando to quarters inside the crematoria buildings, temporarily cutting off their contact with the camp Resistance until they could establish new lines of communication. The Sonderkommando continued to plot their escape even as they were forced to cremate the bodies not only of Hungarian Jews, but also of Polish and Greek Jews and of prisoners from the Gypsy Camp. In the midst of this slaughter, the Sonderkommando received another “severe blow”: the SS shot *Kapo* Kaminski for allegedly planning to assassinate SS-*Oberscharführer* Muhsfeld. The loss of their leader left the prisoners “[d]azed and panic-stricken,” but they concluded that the SS had not discovered their escape plans.⁴²¹ Time was running out, however. The number of transports decreased towards the end of summer. Then Moll was transferred, his “expertise” no longer needed. In late September 1944, the SS carried out a selection of 200 members of the Sonderkommando and, for the first time ever, cremated the corpses themselves. Facing the end of their usefulness to the SS, the men of the Sonderkommando were filled with “despair and despondency.”⁴²²

The next selection came on 7 October 1944. This time, the SS placed the *Kapos* in the “desperate and hopeless position” of deciding life and death. “After prolonged discussions and a sleepless night,” the *Kapos* delivered to the SS the list of three hundred

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 146.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 152.

⁴²² Ibid., 153.

“workers” for a rubble clearance team in Upper Silesia.⁴²³ However, the selected men informed the other prisoners that they would not allow themselves to “be slaughtered without resistance. They thought the time for the planned rebellion was now” and were determined to rise up, with or without the support of the Sonderkommando and the rest of the camp. The camp Resistance and the Sonderkommando replied that they would not participate in any uprising, which “might have disastrous consequences for the whole camp.”⁴²⁴ In other words, the resisters would have to go it alone. The next day, around noon, the SS assembled the prisoners for the selection. However, at least a dozen men on the list did not report when their names were called. When the SS started to look for them, they were suddenly pelted with stones from the group of selected prisoners. By then Crematorium IV was on fire, “the roof was blazing in several places, flames leaping out and clouds of smoke rising into the sky. Within five minutes of the start of the fighting the camp siren began to wail. Shortly afterwards several trucks arrived, and steel-helmeted SS guards, many of them still in their vests, spilled out: swiftly they surrounded the yard and set up their machine-guns.”⁴²⁵ To escape the “shower of bullets,” Müller hid in the flue leading from the ovens to the chimney in Crematorium IV. The fire raging in the building would deter any guards from getting too close. There he stayed until the next morning, when he discovered that 450 of his comrades had perished in the uprising.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 155-156.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 156-158.

It seems that when the prisoners who had not been selected saw the fire and heard the shots, they too feared for their lives. They also saw this moment as an opportunity to redeem themselves for their former hesitancy. “We had to make one last attempt,” says Venezia. “Even if the hope was in vain, we were all convinced that it would be better to act and get killed rather than die without having made any attempt.” He recalls that they were hoping “not so much to survive as to do something, to rise up, so as not to keep on as we were. It was obvious that some of us would perish in the attempt. But whether we died or not, revolt was imperative. Nobody wondered whether it was really going to work or not; the important thing was to do something!”⁴²⁷ Although Müller and Venezia did not take part directly in the uprising, they admired the courage of their comrades who did. “But these 450 men,” writes Müller, “had fought bravely and died honourably, refusing to resign themselves meekly to their fate. They had been ready to defend their lives to their last breath, a unique event in the history of Auschwitz.”⁴²⁸ Lewental likewise praises “our heroic brothers,” whom the cowardly SS murdered with machine-guns. “Who can evaluate the bravery and devotion of the individuals among our comrades, three of whom remained in the crematorium to blow it up, sacrificing themselves deliberately.”⁴²⁹

The self-sacrifice of the three men in Crematorium IV seems to have deeply moved Lewental. As we have seen, he understood human weakness due to the fear of death. He knew the danger “When [hope] finally steals into the heart” and one begins to cling to life again. The prisoners feared that “perhaps in spite of everything” the rebels

⁴²⁷ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 115.

⁴²⁸ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 160.

⁴²⁹ Lewental, “Writings,” in Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 232.

would not go through with their plans. Therefore, their actions signify the “deliberate sacrifice of their lives, with a whole heart, self-sacrifice, for no one forced them at that moment. Indeed, they could have escaped with everyone else, and yet they did not do so. On the contrary, who can correctly evaluate the greatness of our comrades, their heroism? Indeed, the best of us fell there, the best, the dearest, the chosen elements, --- with dignity to life and to death.”⁴³⁰ For Lewental, these men are noteworthy because they rejected the privileges of life in the Sonderkommando and in doing so liberated themselves from enslavement to the will-to-live. “[D]espite the fact that they still had a chance to continue living and even in good conditions, that there is no lack of food and drink and smoking necessities --- and nevertheless to decide to put an end to your [own] life with bravery, that should be commended, noted in our history.” Addressing these “loyal friends worth their weight in gold, you who are no longer with us, you who have carried out your duty,” Lewental assures them “that we too, who are still alive, walking over the tragic [grave],” will not forget their sacrifice.⁴³¹ Lewental was likely killed shortly after writing these words.

Like the Auschwitz Sonderkommando, the Sonderkommando in Treblinka suffered several setbacks in their plans for an uprising. One of the most significant was the loss of their leader, Zelo Bloch. One winter day in 1942, SS First Sergeant Küttner discovered seventy-three bundles of men’s shirts missing from the sorting barracks. Glazar remarks that hunger and fever likely drove the prisoners to take chances. Since

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 232.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 232-233.

few good shirts were coming in due to the decline in transports, some of the prisoners “started speculating with the ones that had already been sorted. They opened bundles that had already been processed and traded these goods for an extra portion of bread, or for a few cubes of sugar from down at the workshops, from the kitchen.”⁴³² While Glazar understood the men’s desperation to survive, he worried that their selfishness had ruined the whole group’s chances to escape. “Idiots,” he thought angrily, “they were waiting for the next transports to arrive, for new supplies, so they could catch up again and bring everything back into line. In the meantime they’ve messed up everything, even duping Zelo and Adasch.”⁴³³ As punishment, Küttner transferred *Kapo* Zelo Bloch, *Vorarbeiter* Adasch, and several other prisoners to the extermination area of the camp, where they would work clearing the gas chambers and transporting corpses to the pits. Losing Zelo was a cruel blow to the planned uprising. “He’ll be dead to us,” Glazar remembers thinking. “It’s over for him, for us, for our plan, everything.”⁴³⁴ Watching Küttner humiliate his leader, Glazar again wanted to rebel and held out a faint hope that his comrades would take action. “So, now something has to happen. Yell, scream, attack, everyone—well, then roar and go charging out of the ranks, you first, out front.”⁴³⁵ But they did nothing.

The next spring, the prisoners lost two more leaders, Dr. Chorążycki and *Kapo* Rakowski. Deputy Commandant Kurt Franz, nicknamed “Lalka” (Doll), caught Dr.

⁴³² Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 80.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81. For Willenberg’s account of this incident, see *Revolt in Treblinka*, 157-158.

⁴³⁵ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 81.

Chorażycki with the 750,000 zlotys the prisoners had given him to buy weapons for the uprising. But the doctor did not give up without a fight. Although he was twice as old as the SS man, he threw Franz out of the *Revierstube* and “pounded Lalka with his fists. Suddenly the doctor’s body went slack. His hands dropped, his head sagged, his legs buckled,” and he collapsed at the feet of Franz, who “began to kick him with sadistic cruelty. But he no longer had an opponent, for the doctor had lost consciousness and lay on the ground, dead to the world,” recalls Willenberg.⁴³⁶ The Ukrainian guards ran to fetch pails of water, which Franz poured down the doctor’s throat, while one of the guards stepped on his stomach. “The physician had obviously taken poison; Lalka was trying to force him back to consciousness by flushing out his stomach.”⁴³⁷ The guards delivered the doctor in a bloody bundle to the roll call area. In front of the assembled prisoners, Franz whipped Dr. Chorażycki almost to death and then ordered him to be taken to the *Lazarett* to be shot. Although the prisoners’ plan had failed, “the image of the magnificent Dr. Chorażycki would live on in our memories forever as a constant source of inspiration.” Willenberg remembered the doctor’s words: “‘Katzap, don’t think you’re strong enough just because you have poison. Cyanide in your pocket isn’t enough. Even then one needs lots of courage to swallow it at the right moment. The people we inherited it from hadn’t had the strength to use it, and they went to the gas chambers.’ Late that night I pondered his words. Yes, to his good fortune and ours, our beloved doctor from

⁴³⁶ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 173. For Glazar’s account of this incident, see *Trap with a Green Fence*, 101.

⁴³⁷ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 173-174.

Warsaw had had that courage.”⁴³⁸ Later, the SS shot *Kapo* Rakowski after finding money and gold in his bunk. Rakowski’s execution was another hard blow for the prisoners, recalls Glazar, because “we, in our never-ending game, had pinned many of our hopes on him.”⁴³⁹ Seeing the bravery of such men, Glazar wondered why he kept working for the SS instead of taking up arms against them: “How much longer—back and forth—really, how much longer? Even you are waiting, just waiting. You’re dead anyway, but somehow you just can’t die. Choronycki [sic], he was able to die honorably, and the man who stabbed Max Biala, the SS officer. What are you afraid of anyway? Of the moment when I am naked. There, you see, you’ve been here too long, you’ve been waiting too long, seen too much...”⁴⁴⁰

It took the arrival of a special group of transports in May 1943 to finally spur Glazar and his comrades into action. At first glance, the transports were extremely disappointing for the hungry prisoners. “They are the most miserable of all the transports that have ever arrived in Treblinka,” says Glazar. “No baggage whatsoever. Tatters and rags instead of clothing. More dead and half dead in the cattle cars than ever before. Only a few who stir at all.”⁴⁴¹ But these cars carried an important legacy: the survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In spite of the poor condition of the passengers, the SS selected a few men for the workforce, and the prisoners listened, spellbound, to their tale of resistance: “The Jews rose up. They all knew they had nothing but Treblinka before them.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 175.

⁴³⁹ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 113.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 114.

So the few who had escaped from Treblinka had succeeded, at least there, in letting the world know. In the end the Germans had been forced to bring in tanks and heavy guns to put down the uprising, which included women, the elderly, and children.”⁴⁴² Glazar notes that these transports brought nothing material that the prisoners could use, but something much more valuable:

Nothing moved from hand to hand, not one slice of bread, not one pair of pants, not one chunk of soap. But from mouth to mouth, from one mind to another, the legacy was passed on: You who are faithful out of conviction as well as practice, Talmudists as well as nonbelievers, businessmen as well as tradesmen, craftsmen as well as shopkeepers, brokers, hustlers, crooks, and thieves—each of you, cast off the last remnants of this life, give up hoping that you will be the last to escape this naked death. Show the world and yourselves...⁴⁴³

Willenberg likewise recalls that the news of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising “struck our ears like thunder.”⁴⁴⁴ Here were Jews “heroically fighting the Germans,” fighting “heroic battles in which women and children joined.” They were not going passively to their deaths like sheep to the slaughter. This image “warmed our hearts, infused us with new strength and led to new decisions. Our spines stiffened; we wanted to act; we would not let them claim our lives easily...An overwhelming desire to act at any price seized us. As time passed, the plan began to develop form and substance. We would conquer and destroy Treblinka in a general mass uprising, weapons in hand, against the German and Ukrainian murderers.”⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 114-115.

⁴⁴⁴ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 161.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 162.

Finally, on 2 August 1943, the prisoners broke out of the trap of Treblinka. The revolt took place on a summer day, quivering from the heat and the anticipation. Many of the SS were on leave that day, recalls Glazar. “And it is very hot. The ground, the grass, and the trees are parched, and not even the morning brings relief. As the afternoon progresses and the temperature rises, fatigue settles over the camp. But it is masking an almost electric tension.”⁴⁴⁶ Willenberg remembers the second of August as “a singular and unique day, one which we anticipated and hoped for. Our hearts pounded with the hope that maybe, just maybe our long-nurtured dream would come true. We harbored no thoughts of ourselves and our lives. Our only desire was to obliterate the death factory which had become our home.”⁴⁴⁷ They got up that morning “excited, tense, anticipating. Thousands of thoughts raced and collided in our heads.” When the morning sunlight “revealed the full horror of our humiliation and misery in the depths of the abyss named Treblinka,” the prisoners did not realize that “that accursed hell, hidden deep within the wilderness, would present a different face” by the end of the day. “Neither did we imagine that we were perhaps standing at our last prisoners’ roll call and that we were about to face our last day of toil and enslavement.”⁴⁴⁸

The prisoners decided to launch their attack the moment the SS made “the slightest move” to kill a prisoner in the *Lazarett* or elsewhere. “Not one more man is going to die that way,” they resolved.⁴⁴⁹ Around four o’clock, word spread that Küttner

⁴⁴⁶ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 138.

⁴⁴⁷ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 180.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

⁴⁴⁹ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 140.

had caught someone and was taking him to the *Lazarett*. “Out front,” recalls Glazar, “somewhere in the vicinity of our living quarters, a shot rings out. Afterward silence. Then the first hand grenade explodes, followed immediately by the second. I see the third one detonate on the asphalt lane.” The uprising had begun. “‘Hurrah!’ You hear it here and there, timidly at first. It sticks in my chest and catches in my throat until I can finally scream: ‘Hurrah!’ The yelling gets louder and rises over the entire Treblinka complex.”⁴⁵⁰ Glazar and his friend Karl Unger ran across the camp in the delirium of self-liberation. “We’re both laughing like mad, running next to each other. I scream, and I hear myself continuing to scream in wild celebration.”⁴⁵¹ With comrades running and falling all around them, they reached the perimeter of the camp and made their way through the woods, pursued by guards with rifles and barking dogs. They sought shelter in a small pond and remained there until dawn the next day. As Glazar and Unger crawled up out of the water, they saw “an immense fire over Treblinka, larger and of a different color than on all those previous nights when the flames had been fed by the large incineration grates.”⁴⁵² Meanwhile, Willenberg’s friend Alfred Boehm fell in the fighting and Willenberg himself suffered a gunshot wound to the leg. When he reached the boundary of the camp, he had to climb over “thick masses of human bodies,” many of which “stood erect like tombstones” against the tank obstacles and the barbed-wire fences.⁴⁵³ Bleeding from the leg, Willenberg made his way across the railway tracks,

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁵³ Willenberg, *Revolt in Treblinka*, 183.

through forest and swamp. “Hell is burnt to the ground! Hell is burnt to the ground!” he screamed at a girl from a nearby village, who stared at him as if he were a ghost.⁴⁵⁴ With the help of several Polish peasants, he managed to elude the SS manhunt. He reunited with his father in Rembertów, where they assumed the identities of Christian Poles, and later fought in the Warsaw Uprising (August-October 1944). Strangers in Poland, Glazar and Unger made their way to Mannheim, Germany, where they worked as “Aryan” Czech laborers in a factory until the end of the war.

While the previous chapter described the relatively “privileged” existence of the Sonderkommando prisoners in Auschwitz and Treblinka, the present chapter illustrates the tragic consequences of their accommodation to the death camp regime. The prisoners discovered that the will-to-live became stronger with every act of self-preservation. The threat of death rendered it nearly irresistible. Even writing from within the “heart of hell,” as Lewental and Gradowski did, the prisoners recognized the power of the will-to-live, which held them back from ending their lives alone or in a collective attack against their SS masters. Under the illusion that they could give up their lives at any time, the prisoners allowed many opportunities for resistance to slip through their fingers. Ashamed, they cursed themselves for their weakness and resolved to seize the next chance, but they faltered once again in the same uncertainty. Forced to witness the extermination of hundreds of thousands of their own people, including their fellow prisoners, the Sonderkommando cherished every second of life. The price of one’s self-preservation was extremely high, but for a long time the Sonderkommando justified it in

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 184.

terms of the small comfort they could bring to the victims and the evidence they could preserve of the Nazis' crimes. In quiet moments, however, they had to admit to themselves with Lewental: "the truth is that you want to live at any price. You desire to live, because you are alive, because the whole world continues to live, and everything that is pleasant, everything to which you are attached, is first and foremost attached to life itself."⁴⁵⁵

Filip Müller's unsuccessful attempt to die with the gas chamber victims represents one of the few instances of what Schopenhauer calls the "denial of the will-to-live." Another is the decision of the three men to sacrifice themselves in the destruction of Crematorium IV during the uprising. On the whole, however, the Sonderkommando prisoners struggled to break the bonds of their servitude to the will-to-live, and, as Müller's experience shows, unexpected events could quickly bring a prisoner back into the grip of that will. Although his rescue by the Czech girls inspired Müller to further acts of resistance, such as helping to supply the evidence for the Wetzler-Vrba report, his survival meant that he remained enslaved to the will-to-live, dependent on the death of the gas chamber victims. The uprising did not relieve his predicament; in fact, living conditions worsened with the decline of extermination operations in Birkenau. Both Müller and Venezia held on until the evacuation of Auschwitz in January 1945, but, as we will see in the concluding chapter, their struggles did not abate. After surviving the perilous journey into the Reich, they encountered the Hobbesian world of the concentration camps, where hunger, disease, and hard labor reduced the inmates to an

⁴⁵⁵ Lewental, "Writings," in Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 221.

animal level. With nearly two years of war ahead of them, the survivors of the Treblinka uprising faced an even greater challenge. While Willenberg found some redemption as a fighter in the Warsaw Uprising, the memories of his humiliating imprisonment in Treblinka haunted him for the rest of his life. Likewise, Glazar discovered that physically escaping from Treblinka did not necessarily result in freedom from the corrupting mentality of the death camp. Finally, we will conclude our examination of self-preservation in the Sonderkommando with Schopenhauer's vision of how one can liberate oneself from the will-to-live.

CONCLUSION

For the Sonderkommando prisoners in Auschwitz and Treblinka, the day came at last when they were no longer members of the hated "special squad," forced to live like vultures off the material remains of the dead. Many of the Treblinka prisoners gained temporary freedom in the uprising of 2 August 1943. A few dozen, including Richard Glazar and Samuel Willenberg, managed to elude the SS manhunt and lived out the rest

of the war under assumed identities. Fifteen months later, on 18 January 1945, Filip Müller, Shlomo Venezia, and the other survivors of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando joined the thousands of inmates being evacuated from the camp. As *Geheimnisträger* (“bearers of the secret”), they knew that the SS would not permit them to live. Thus, they decided to take their chances on the “death march,” slipping into the long columns heading towards an unknown destination within the Reich. Although they were aware of the hardships ahead, the survivors of the Sonderkommando felt some relief in sharing the common suffering of the victims, which might perhaps atone for their formerly “privileged” existence. They also looked forward to the defeat of the Nazis, which would mean the end of this seemingly interminable nightmare. To their dismay, however, they discovered that neither time nor physical distance could completely liberate them from their enslavement to the will-to-live.

The conditions of the death march quickly reminded the Auschwitz Sonderkommando survivors of their servitude to self-preservation. “It was midwinter,” recalls Venezia; “outside, everything was frozen or covered in snow. It was beastly cold.” Marching in a column of five or six thousand, Venezia walked “for days on end, always five by five, through that icy cold.” At night, they stopped in a village or cowshed and slept for a few hours. Many prisoners froze to death during the night or suffered from frostbite. “We were dragging our feet, we were thirsty, cold, hungry...but we had to march, march, and keep on marching,” because the SS shot anyone who fell behind.⁴⁵⁶ At

⁴⁵⁶ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 126. For Müller’s account of the death march, see *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 166.

Loslau (Wodzisław Śląski), the SS herded the prisoners into open rail cars, in which they had to stand tightly packed together in the driving snow, without food or water. When the SS allowed some prisoners to leave the train to relieve themselves, a few attempted to escape. For Venezia, however, self-preservation was paramount, and an escape attempt seemed an unnecessary risk. “I didn’t try anything myself,” he says, “since I was sincerely convinced that they’d leave us out in the open countryside so they could get away more quickly from the advancing Soviet troops...I didn’t want to risk being shot at by attempting to escape, and dying before the Germans left us, free.” Unfortunately, he admits, “that time never came and I spent another four months in the camps.”⁴⁵⁷ Although Venezia tried to help others during the journey, the will-to-live continued to govern his actions. When a Yugoslavian prisoner died standing between Venezia and his brother on the train, Venezia admits that “My first reflex was to rummage round in his pockets, with the absurd idea in mind that he might have kept something edible in there. All I found was a wooden crucifix.” Venezia kept it, thinking that the Christian symbol might help him to conceal his Jewish identity among the local peasants if he ever escaped. As for the dead man, Venezia and his brother laid the corpse down on the floor so they could sit on it.⁴⁵⁸

After the long train journey, the prisoners arrived at Mauthausen in Lower Austria, where they were processed before being transferred to the subcamp of Melk. There, the prisoners lived in conditions resembling the Hobbesian state of nature. Space

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 129.

was limited in the barracks. Since none of the current prisoners would agree to share his place, the new arrivals had to fight for a bed. “You had to find a place somewhere in the system, even if this meant elbowing your way in,” explains Venezia.⁴⁵⁹ The struggle began anew every night after work. “You had to be strong to push others out of the way and take their place. That’s why I say that solidarity did not exist. We slept on a sort of straw mattress, without undressing. If we’d taken off any item of clothing whatsoever, even our shoes, they’d have been stolen. And in order to get them back, we’d have had to pay a ration of bread.”⁴⁶⁰ At Melk, the prisoners worked at digging tunnels (Venezia calls them “galleries”) into the mountains to accommodate local production plants. “The work was hard and strenuous,” recalls Müller, “and working conditions arduous and fraught with danger owing to the total absence of safety precautions.” There was also the problem of insufficient rations. “Day by day I could feel myself growing weaker,” he writes, “and I worried how much longer I would be able to stand this heavy labour.”⁴⁶¹ Although Müller found easier work as an electrician in a Messerschmidt factory, by April his hunger was so great that he was “driven to eating lubricating jelly, grass, and even the heavy, rich soil.”⁴⁶²

Hunger also drove Venezia to commit humiliating acts. One of the worst memories he had of Melk was the day he lied in order to get an extra ration of soup. Venezia knew that the Hungarian *Kapo* “doled out much more soup to his compatriots,”

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 168.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

so he pretended he was Hungarian. “As I came up, I said to him ‘*Magyar!*’ ‘Hungarian.’ But he easily recognized from my accent that I was lying. Instead of giving me more, he served me only water. As I stared into my tin bowl, which contained nothing substantial, I felt a great anger rising inside myself. ‘How could I have managed to fall so low?’ The idea of having to wait another twenty-four hours before eating drove me mad.”⁴⁶³ So Venezia “discreetly tried to slip back into the queue to get another portion.” But the other prisoners noticed and pointed him out. Another *Kapo*, an “Aryan” Pole who enjoyed killing prisoners, grabbed a spade and began to beat Venezia across the shoulders. “I tried to protect my head with my hands. He gave me another great thwack. If he’d stuck to the side, he’d have smashed my skull. I was left gasping for breath, filled with both pain and rage.” When the *Kapo* lifted the spade to strike him again, Venezia dodged the blow and ran away as fast as he could. “That day,” Venezia admits, “I wept. I’d never wept in the Sonderkommando, but all my rage welled up at just this moment. I wasn’t weeping from pain or sadness (as I did after the war, when I saw my sister again for the first time), but from anger, bitterness, frustration...”⁴⁶⁴

Venezia’s struggle with hunger continued at Ebensee, another subcamp of Mauthausen. One day, he found himself in a group with five Russian prisoners when bread was being distributed. Although he normally shared the bread “very fairly” with his brother or his friends, he saw that the Russians intended to cheat him. When there were two pieces left, one for Venezia and one for his Russian bunkmate, the Russians took

⁴⁶³ Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers*, 135-136.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

advantage of a lapse of attention on Venezia's part and took both pieces. He looked at the piece of bread in his bunkmate's hands. "What could I do? Not eating was unbearable. So, quick as a flash, I took his piece and swallowed it in a mouthful." Stealing another prisoner's bread was a mortal sin according to the camp code. Although the Russians had stolen Venezia's bread first, they denounced him to the *Kapo*, who started to beat him. "I tried to protect my face, but he hit me all over," Venezia recalls. "In spite of the force of his blows, I didn't feel any pain. My sole thought was for the bit of bread that I'd managed to get into my belly and that nobody would ever manage to deprive me of! This idea was enough to lessen the pain of the blows."⁴⁶⁵ After the Allies liberated the camp, the *Kapo* tried to escape, but some French prisoners caught him and beat him almost to death. Then one of the Frenchmen stabbed him with a dagger twice in the chest. Venezia caught the "Aryan" Polish *Kapo* trying to slip away as well. "When I saw him," says Venezia, "the blood rushed to my head. The scene in which he'd almost killed me flashed before my eyes. I seized a big stick that was lying on the ground and, with my last remaining strength, I hit him hard on the head. He tried to protect his head with his hands, as I had done when he hit me." Some Russian prisoners came over. When Venezia pointed out the *Kapo* to them, they jumped on him, beating the man severely. Venezia did not regret the assault. "He didn't experience freedom and for me that was a great source of satisfaction, since he didn't deserve any better."⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 139-140.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 144-145.

In his memoir, Venezia acknowledges the corrosive effects of the struggle for life and death in which he participated at Auschwitz and the other camps. He speaks of “a nagging pain that never leaves me. Everything’s going fine and then, all of a sudden, I’m in despair. As soon as I feel a little joy, something inside me closes up immediately. It’s like an inner flaw; I call it ‘the survivors’ disease.’” Unlike an ordinary disease such as typhus or tuberculosis, this one “gnaws away at us from within and destroys any feeling of joy. I have been dragging it about with me ever since I spent that time suffering in the camp. This disease never leaves me a moment of joy or carefree happiness; it’s a mood that forever erodes my strength.”⁴⁶⁷ His experience in the Sonderkommando destroyed “normal life” for Venezia. “I’ve never been able to pretend that everything was all right and go off dancing, like others, without a care in the world,” he says. “Everything takes me back to the camp. Whatever I do, whatever I see, my mind keeps harking back to the same place. It’s as if the ‘work’ I was forced to do there had never really left my head...Nobody ever really gets out of the Crematorium,” he concludes.⁴⁶⁸

Richard Glazar came to a similar realization after his escape from Treblinka. Posing as “Aryan” Czech laborers, he and his friend Karl Unger made their way across Poland to Germany, where they found work in a factory in Mannheim. It seemed that they were safe, but several incidents reminded them of the corrupting power that Treblinka still held over them. For example, Glazar and Unger initially lived with the other foreign laborers in a dormitory in the village of Seckenheim, but their friend Otto

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 155.

informed them that, as Czechs, they were entitled to private accommodations. ““Only the Ukrainians and the Poles, or anyone else from one of the lesser races, are required to live in the camp,”” he said.⁴⁶⁹ So Glazar and Unger decided to take advantage of this “privilege” and rent a room in a house belonging to a German couple. Once again, Glazar and Unger found themselves elevated to the status of “better guests.” As in Treblinka, they attempted to justify their preferential treatment: ““Yes, he’s right,’ we tell ourselves later. ‘We are loyal Czechs, and we have a right to live on our own and to get our own food coupons. Good God, we’re not going to let ourselves be suckered. We’re going to get what we’re entitled to. And women aren’t off limits for loyal Czechs either...’”⁴⁷⁰

Although the German civilians he encountered in Mannheim were not victims in the same sense as the Jews, Glazar’s deception concerning his identity, which resulted in his undeserved elevation in the Nazi racial hierarchy, reminded him of his position relative to the deportees in Treblinka. He imagined his landlady, Frau K., in another time and place: “If her hair were already gray, and what’s even more absurd, if the skin underneath had turned into dry little scales, then she’d be ready, just like that other one and... Well, Frau K., why don’t you just take my arm, and I’ll walk with you—to the doctor, to the infirmary...”⁴⁷¹ In this fantasy his guilt for deceiving the elderly Czech woman in Treblinka mingled with his vengeful desire to make the Germans suffer the same fate as their Jewish victims. Many months later, when American forces arrived in Mannheim, a group of German civilians asked Glazar and Unger what would happen to

⁴⁶⁹ Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence*, 170.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

them now. Seeing the Germans huddled in a room out of fear of the Americans, Glazar reflexively thought of telling them the same lies the SS had told the Jews as they sealed them inside the gas chambers: “So what’s going to happen to them is just what we say is going to happen: ‘Nothing, nothing is going to happen to you, as long as you sit there quietly until we say...’ Nothing is going to happen to you, but a little disinfectant will be sprayed into this chamber through the air vents in the ceiling. That’s the thought that comes to mind.”⁴⁷²

Another incident confirmed Glazar’s fear that he still acted according to the mentality of Treblinka. One night, two American soldiers came up to the apartment where Glazar and Unger were staying with a Czech worker named Heinrich and his German girlfriend Annemarie. While one of the Americans held the Czechs at gunpoint in the room, the other raped Annemarie in the stairway. Like so many times before, Glazar had surrendered to the fear of death and stood by while another human being suffered. He was ashamed, but Unger was defiant. “Well, what did happen? Nothing...Did anyone cut off her tits, the way they did back there—in the ghettos? Did they slaughter her mother, father, and brother, one after the other—as they did mine? Why should I worry about her? Why should I worry about any of them?”⁴⁷³ Even Heinrich agreed that it would be “absurd” for (presumably) the only two survivors of Treblinka to “die at the hands of their liberators, trying to defend the honor of a woman from the enemy camp.”⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷² Ibid., 187.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 191.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 191.

Like Venezia's ambivalence concerning his acts of self-preservation and revenge in Auschwitz and other camps, Glazar's inability to overcome the mentality of Treblinka after liberation reflects the fact that the power of the will-to-live extends far beyond the death camp. Camps such as Auschwitz and Treblinka revealed but did not create the human enslavement to the will-to-live. Similarly, the survivors found that the survival strategies they had employed in the camps were inadequate to break the bonds of their servitude. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer offers an explanation for why human beings struggle to liberate themselves from the will-to-live, as well as a vision for how we might do so.

According to Schopenhauer, our bondage to the will-to-live originates in the illusion that we are the whole will and that all other things are mere representations of our will. "Therefore," writes Schopenhauer, "everyone wants everything for himself, wants to possess, or at least control, everything, and would like to destroy whatever opposes him." The world outside the individual appears to be "dependent on his own inner being and existence. With his consciousness the world also necessarily ceases to exist for him." As the embodiment of the will-to-live, the individual "makes himself the centre of the world, and considers his own existence and well-being before everything else." Convinced that the will itself perishes with the phenomenon (the body), the individual "is ready for this to sacrifice everything else; he is ready to annihilate the world, in order to maintain his own self, that drop in the ocean, a little longer. This disposition is *egoism*, which is essential to everything in nature."⁴⁷⁵ Egoism explains why "Everyone looks on his own

⁴⁷⁵ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 332. See also *ibid.*, 334.

death as the end of the world, whereas he hears about the death of his acquaintances as a matter of comparative indifference, unless he is in some way personally concerned in it.”⁴⁷⁶ Egoism also accounts for the fact that the “*self-affirmation* of one’s own body...very easily goes beyond this affirmation to the *denial* of the same will appearing in another individual,” which can be seen in acts of theft, injury, murder, and enslavement.⁴⁷⁷ At the same time, such intense willing is “a constant source of suffering,” because all willing comes from “need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin it is therefore destined to pain.”⁴⁷⁸ Schopenhauer describes willing as “an unquenchable thirst,” for every satisfaction of the will “is always merely the starting-point of a fresh striving”; any gratification “can never be more than deliverance from a pain, from a want.”⁴⁷⁹ The endlessness of the will’s striving means that “there is no measure or end of suffering.” Indeed, Schopenhauer concludes, “*all life is suffering*.”⁴⁸⁰ If the conditions of ordinary life concealed this fact from the Sonderkommando prisoners, the death camp revealed it with startling clarity.

Schopenhauer believed that we can only break the vicious cycle of willing and suffering through the knowledge that we are all phenomena of the same will. Failing to recognize itself in other beings, the will “turns its weapons against itself, and, by seeking increased well-being in one of its phenomena, imposes the greatest suffering on another.” Thus, “in the fierceness and intensity of its desire,” the will “buries its teeth in its own

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 332-333.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 334.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 363, 312.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 312, 309, 319.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 309, 310.

flesh, not knowing that it always injures only itself.”⁴⁸¹ Even the bad or wicked person has “the secret presentiment” that “however much time and space separate him from other individuals and the innumerable miseries they suffer, indeed suffer through him; however much time and space present these as quite foreign to him, yet...it is the one will-to-live appearing in them all.”⁴⁸² The realization that one is “not only the tormentor but also the tormented” produces “that obscurely felt but inconsolable misery called the pangs of conscience.”⁴⁸³ Through this knowledge, the individual comes to understand “the vehemence of his own will,...the strength with which he has grasped life and attached himself firmly to it, this very life whose terrible side he sees before him in the misery of those he oppresses, and with which he is nevertheless so firmly entwined that, precisely in this way, the most terrible things come from himself as a means to the fuller affirmation of his own will.”⁴⁸⁴ Although few of the Sonderkommando prisoners can be called bad or wicked, their testimonies nevertheless reflect an awareness that their survival came at the expense of their fellow victims.

The knowledge that we are all phenomena of the same will leads not only to a deeper understanding of oneself and the world, but also to acts of compassion and love, and ultimately, to the denial of the will-to-live. Schopenhauer notes that the distinction between oneself and others “is in the eyes of many so great, that the suffering of another is a direct pleasure for the wicked, and a welcome means to their own wellbeing for the

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 354.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 365.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 366.

unjust. The merely just person is content not to cause it; and generally most people know and are acquainted with innumerable sufferings of others in their vicinity, but do not decide to alleviate them, because to do so they would have to undergo some privation.”⁴⁸⁵ On the other hand, the truly good person “*makes less distinction than is usually made between himself and others,*” because he perceives that this distinction, “which to the wicked man is so great a gulf, belongs only to a fleeting, deceptive phenomenon. He recognizes immediately, and without reasons or arguments,” that his own will-to-live is the same will “which constitutes the inner nature of everything, and lives in all; in fact, he recognizes that this extends even to the animals and to the whole of nature; he will therefore not cause suffering even to an animal.”⁴⁸⁶ The person in whom this realization dawns “is now just as little able to let others starve, while he himself has enough and to spare, as anyone would one day be on short commons, in order on the following day to have more than he can enjoy.”⁴⁸⁷ On the contrary, the good person readily “denies himself pleasures, undergoes privations, in order alleviate another’s suffering.”⁴⁸⁸ At the highest level of goodness and magnanimity, an individual sacrifices their own well-being and even their life for others. This person “voluntarily and consciously goes to certain death for his friends, or for his native land,” or “willingly takes suffering and death upon himself for the maintenance of what conduces and rightfully belongs to the welfare of all

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 372.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 373.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 372.

mankind, in other words, for universal, important truths, and for the eradication of great errors.”⁴⁸⁹

The denial of the will-to-live also leads to the quieting of revenge. Schopenhauer notes how difficult it can be to let go of one’s resentments. From a superficial perspective, there seems to be no eternal justice in the world. “[T]he wicked man, after misdeeds and cruelties of every kind,” appears to “live a life of pleasure, and quit the world undisturbed,” while “the oppressed person drag[s] out to the end a life full of suffering without the appearance of an avenger of vindicator.”⁴⁹⁰ The Sonderkommando prisoners expressed such a view in their testimonies. They longed for deliverance for themselves and the innocent people they witnessed being herded into the gas chambers. They did not understand why the rest of the world allowed the Jews to be slaughtered, when, as Müller notes, “Hitler and his henchmen had never made a secret of their attitude to the Jews nor of their avowed intention to exterminate them like vermin. The whole world knew it, and knowing it remained silent; was not their silence equivalent to consent?”⁴⁹¹ Even with the Red Army only a few hundred kilometers away, the Nazis continued to transport hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews to the gas chambers and crematoria of Birkenau. There seemed to be no end to the humiliating existence of the Sonderkommando.

Understandably, the survivors bore a deep hatred for the entire system that had persecuted them. They loathed SS men such as Otto Moll and Kurt Franz, who mocked,

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 375.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 353-354.

⁴⁹¹ Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, 36.

humiliated, and tortured them. They resented prisoner functionaries such as the *Kapos*, who terrorized them in the barracks and work squads, and sometimes even regarded the gas chamber victims as beyond their help and sympathy. Nor did they pity the German civilians huddling together in the bombed-out cities of the Reich. Like most people who have suffered, they demanded that the perpetrators “atone for all those sufferings by an equal amount of pain.”⁴⁹² Thus, Venezia beat the *Kapo* who had beaten him, delivering him up to the wrath of the Russian prisoners, while Glazar fantasized about the deaths of his German neighbors and did not try to stop the American soldiers who raped Annemarie. Like their fellow prisoners, Venezia and Glazar did not realize that the tormented and the tormentor are one, that the same will “suffers both in the oppressed and in the oppressor.”⁴⁹³ “If the eyes of both were opened,” writes Schopenhauer, “the inflictor of the suffering would recognize that he lives in everything that suffers pain in the whole wide world.” Likewise, the victim “would see that all the wickedness that is or ever was perpetrated in the world proceeds from that will which constitutes also *his* own inner being, and appears also in *him*.”⁴⁹⁴ If an individual “denies the will that appears in his own person, he will not resist when another does the same thing, in other words, inflicts wrong on him.” Such a person “endures such ignominy and suffering with

⁴⁹² Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 1: 358. For an alternate view of revenge, see Jean Améry, “Resentments,” in *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella R. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 62-81.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 354.

inexhaustible patience and gentleness, returns good for all evil without ostentation, and allows the fire of anger to rise again with him as little as he does the fire of desires.”⁴⁹⁵

Schopenhauer admits that this way of life can go beyond virtue to asceticism, where an individual no longer finds it sufficient “to love others like himself, and to do as much for them as for himself,” but develops such an aversion to the will-to-live that he displays “the greatest indifference to everything,” including his own bodily needs.⁴⁹⁶ In fact, Schopenhauer praises such asceticism as the only path to salvation, that is, the only means by which the will-to-live can abolish itself and end the suffering of the world.

While we should question the ethicality of showing such indifference to the suffering of others, especially one’s fellow victims, Schopenhauer’s vision of the compassionate life nevertheless offers the potential for liberation from the mutually destructive relationship in which humans often become entangled. For the very virtues that Schopenhauer attributes to the denial of the will-to-live are the same ones that Nietzsche and his successors despised as “slave morality.” Of course, Nietzsche’s story of Christianity as a Jewish plot is a fantasy, as is Hitler’s narrative of Jewish parasitism in the body of the German nation. Yet Nietzsche was correct on one important point: the virtues of forgiveness, love, humility, patience, and compassion are definitely *subversive*

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 382. Both Western and Eastern systems of ethics extol such virtues. For example, the New Testament in Christianity commands “love for our neighbour as for ourselves, returning of hatred with love and good actions, patience, meekness, [and] endurance of all possible affronts and injuries without resistance.” Ibid., 386. Similarly, the religious texts of Hinduism command “love of one’s neighbour with complete denial of all self-love; love in general, not limited to the human race, but embracing all that lives; charitableness even to the giving away of one’s hard-won daily earnings; boundless patience towards all offenders; return of all evil, however bad it may be, with goodness and love; [and] voluntary and cheerful endurance of every insult and ignominy.” Ibid., 388.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 380.

to power. If he mistook these virtues as the disingenuous devices of the weak to conquer the strong, it was because he, like Hitler, believed that power is the common denominator of human relations. Thus, he assumed that even those who claim not to desire power are deceiving themselves and others. In one sense, Schopenhauer would agree with him, for he believed that the will-to-live, which Nietzsche called the “will to power,” engages in a ceaseless striving for higher degrees of objectification. On the other hand, the above virtues provide a way for human beings to break this cycle of striving. The victim subverts the will of their oppressor by reducing and even eliminating the vulnerability which the latter exploits to coerce them: the will-to-live.

Quieting one’s will-to-live challenges the domination of one’s oppressor. Without the will-to-live of the victims, the death camp would not have functioned with such horrifying efficiency. The Nazis would still have tried to murder as many Jews and other “undesirables” as possible, but they would not have been able to depend on the ghetto leaders to draw up deportation lists; on the *Kapos* and other prisoner functionaries to mete out punishments; on the thousands of camp inmates to obey the orders of a few SS men; or on the Sonderkommando to sort the belongings and cremate the bodies of their fellow Jews. Likewise, if the victims had not clung so fiercely to life, they would not have fought each other for every scrap of food and clothing; allowed the SS to select hundreds or even thousands of their fellow inmates for death; watched their leaders be beaten and executed; or walked into the gas chambers without protest. In short, they would have refused to conform to Hitler’s fantasy of the Jews as “rats” fighting amongst themselves. Yet the fact remains that some victims did suppress their will-to-live long

enough to give their meager rations to the starving, their precious medicine to the sick, and their sparse clothing to the naked. A few confronted their fear of death and sacrificed their lives for the sake of their beliefs in God, freedom, or humanity. This Schopenhauerian interpretation of the Holocaust offers a sympathetic and hopeful response to the victims whose voices still cry out from the testimonies in despair and self-reproach. While almost all of the survivors have found liberation by now in death, it remains for us, the living, to reflect on the will-to-live that made this nightmare possible.

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