



## Arbeit Macht Frei

*"Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work Brings Freedom) was the sign over the gates of Auschwitz. It was placed there by Major Rudolf Höss, commandant of the camp.*

He seems not to have intended it as a mockery, nor even to have intended it literally, as a false promise that those who worked to exhaustion would eventually be released, but rather as a kind of mystical declaration that self-sacrifice in the form of endless labor does in itself bring a kind of spiritual freedom.

*- Friedrich, **The Kingdom of Auschwitz**, pp. 2-3*



Photo Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Instytut Pamięci Narodowej

**View of the entrance to the main camp of Auschwitz (Auschwitz I). The gate bears the motto "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work makes one free).**



## Block 10

*Block 10 was the medical experimentation block in Auschwitz. German doctors, most of whom also participated in selections applied for permission to come work in Block 10 at Auschwitz with human subjects.*

*Block 10 was a balance of horrors. Being an experimental subject could prolong life, or end it immediately. An inmate assigned here might undergo skin testing for reaction to relatively benign substances, or receive a phenol injection to the heart for immediate dissection. Doctor Mengele, the most evil man in Auschwitz, reigned here; Dr. Ernst B. protected and saved many inmates here.*

*Block 10 was in the men's camp, but most inmates were women. Prostitutes were also housed here, for the benefit of "elite" prisoners (mostly Germans).*

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### ***Dr. Clauberg--sterilization by injection***

His method was to inject a caustic substance into the cervix in order to obstruct the fallopian tubes. He chose as experimental subjects married women between the ages of twenty and forty, preferably those who had borne children... He had experimented with different substances, but was very secretive about the exact nature of the one he used, probably intent upon protecting any medical discovery from research competitors...

Dr. Clauberg ordered me to lie down on the gynecological table... Dr. Clauberg used this needle to give me an injection in my womb. I had the feeling that my stomach would burst with the pain. I began to scream so that I could be heard through the whole block.

*- Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, pp. 271-278*



*Clauberg was imprisoned in the Soviet Union, then repatriated to Germany, where he returned to medical practice, proudly claiming "to have perfected an absolutely new method of sterilization" which would be "of great use today in certain cases." Due to an outcry by survivor groups, he was arrested in 1955 and died mysteriously in his cell in 1957.*

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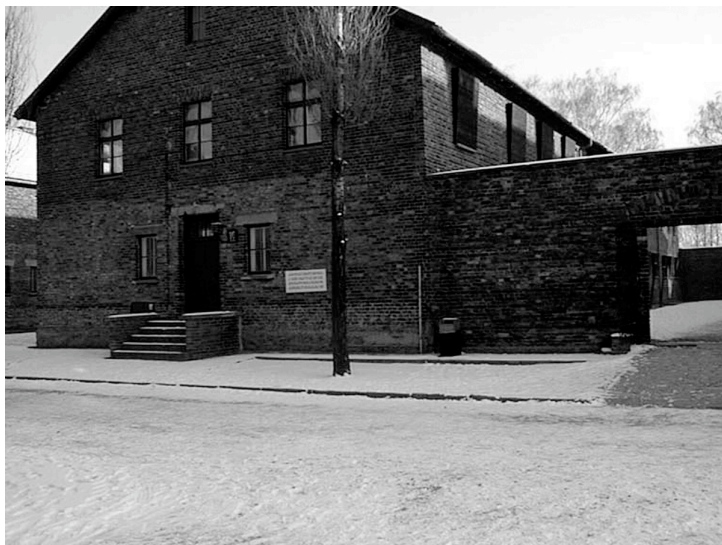


Photo © Ryszard Domasik

**Block 10**

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### ***Horst Schumann--castration***

*Schumann performed the X-ray experiments described elsewhere in this book.*

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### ***SS Captain Dr. August Hirt—Murder for The Racial Museum***

*Hirt selected thirty-nine women for their racial characteristics:*

[They] were given a sham physical examination for reassurance, then gassed... the corpses were immediately transported to the anatomy pavilion of the Strasbourg University Hospital. A French inmate, who had to assist the project's director... told how "preservation began immediately," with the arrival of bodies that

were "still warm, the eyes... wide open and shining." There were two subsequent shipments of men, from each of whom the left testicle had been removed and sent to Hirt's anatomy lab.

Hirt was captured at Strasbourg by French troops, who found "many wholly unprocessed corpses, many partly processed corpses", and a few that had been "defleshed... late in 1944," and their heads burned to avoid any possibility of identification...

Hirt killed himself shortly after.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, pp. 284-287

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### ***Culture media***

*When animal meat became a rarity, human flesh was used as culture media:*

"Since the SS stole the meat used to produce the culture media, the chief SS physician found it very simple to replace it with human flesh"... In Auschwitz, then, human flesh was more expendable than valuable animal meat...

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p.289

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### ***Exports***

*The supply of victims at Auschwitz was so plentiful, they were exported anywhere else experimental subjects were needed:*

Eight prisoners from Auschwitz sent to Sachsenhausen for experiments with epidemic hepatitis... twenty Jewish children, ages five to twelve, transferred from Auschwitz to Neuengamme in Hamburg, where they were subject to injections of virulent tubercular serum and to other experiments, until they were removed from Neuengamme and secretly murdered just before the arrival of Allied troops.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p.301

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## Clothing and Nakedness

...Two groups of strange individuals emerged into the light of the lamps. They walked in squads, in rows of three, with an odd, embarrassed step, head dangling in front, arms rigid. On their heads, they wore comic berets and were all dressed in long striped overcoats, which even by night and from a distance looked filthy and in rags. They walked in a large circle around us; never drawing near, and in silence began to busy themselves with our luggage and to climb in and out of the empty wagons.

We looked at each other without a word. It was all incomprehensible and mad, but one thing we had understood. This was the metamorphosis that awaited us. Tomorrow we would be like them.

- Levi, *Survival*, p. 20

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One entered the Lager naked... the day in the Lager was studded with innumerable harsh strippings--checking for lice, searching one's clothes, examining for scabies and then the morning wash-up-- as well as for the periodic selections, during which a "commission" decided who was still fit for work, and who, on the contrary, was marked for elimination. Now, a naked and barefoot man feels that all his nerves and tendons are severed: he is helpless prey. Clothes, even the foul clothes distributed, even the crude clogs with their wooden soles, are a tenuous but indispensable defense. Anyone who does not have them no longer perceives himself as a human being but rather as a worm: naked, slow, ignoble, prone on the ground. He knows that he can be crushed at any moment.

- Levi, *Drowned*, pp. 113-114

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*An artist who was enlisted to prepare medical drawings for a Nazi doctor was saved by him when the rest of the Czech-Jewish family camp was selected for the gas chambers:*

[W]hen the prisoners were forced to march naked before the SS doctors, much to Eva C.'s humiliation (all the more so because she knew them): "I [could] catch a glimpse of [Konig's] eyes looking straight in my eyes and no place else, and I was very grateful for that." She sensed that he was reassuring her "that things would be all right, that he was a friend": "I felt he cared."

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 233

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*Inmate Olga Lengyel:*

I badly needed a waistband to hold up my drawers... At the garbage dump, by a wonderful stroke of luck, I found three fragments of twine which could be pieced together for the purpose... I felt that I had become a rich woman in the camp.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, p. 43

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Photo Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Lydia Chagoll

**A warehouse full of shoes and clothing confiscated from the prisoners and deportees gassed upon their arrival. The Germans shipped these goods to Germany.**

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## Doctors

*Doctors played a crucial role at Auschwitz. They participated in virtually all selections, decided on life and death among the patients in the medical blocks (executing the weakest with phenol injections), and in fact thronged to sign up at Auschwitz because of the plentiful human experimental material available in Block 10. These German doctors saved the lives of many prisoner doctors, typically not out of mercy but to enlist them as collaborators in their human experiments.*

*The story of Auschwitz is summed up by the lives, actions and experiences of two physicians who worked there, Dr. Josef Mengele and Dr. Ernst B.*

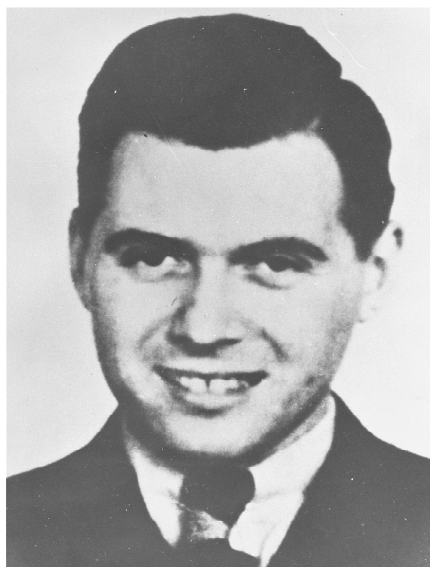


Photo Credit: USHMM - National Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau

**Portrait of Dr. Josef Mengele**

*Born 1911, he was the eldest of 3 sons of Karl Mengele, manufacturer. Refined, intelligent, and popular in his town, Josef*

*studied philosophy at Munich and medicine at Frankfurt am Main.*

*In 1931, he joined a paramilitary group; in 1935, his dissertation dealt with racial differences in the structure of the lower jaw. In 1937, he joined the Nazi party; in 1938, the SS.*

*In 1942, he was wounded at the Russian front and pronounced unfit for service. The following year, he volunteered for assignment to the concentration camps and was sent to Auschwitz.*

*Mengele began his research on twins, and haunted every arriving convoy in search of these subjects. Twins had a special destiny in Auschwitz: they escaped the gas but became the subjects of horrendous experiments which many did not survive. Mengele had many of his subjects killed for dissection, or disposed of them when they weakened or he no longer needed them. Mengele was obsessed with the nurture v. nature controversy: he wished to demonstrate that heredity counted for everything, environment nothing. Among his interests were eye color, blood type, and noma, the disease that left gaping holes in the cheeks of Gypsy children inmates.*

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***Dr. Jancu Veckler:***

*In September 1943, I arrived at the Birkenau Gypsy camp. There I saw a wooden table with eyeballs laying on it. All of them were tagged with numbers and little notes. They were pale yellow, pale blue, green and violet.*

*- Gutman, Yisrael, Berenbaum, **Anatomy**, p. 326*

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*Former prisoner Hani Schick, a mother of twins who was subjected to experiments together with her children, testified that on July 4, 1944, on Mengele's instructions, blood samples were collected from her children in such quantities that the procedure ended in the death of both son and daughter.*

*- Gutman, Yisrael, Berenbaum, **Anatomy**, p. 324*

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In [a] case in which a mother did not want to be separated from her thirteen- or fourteen-year-old daughter, and bit and scratched the face of the SS man who tried to force her to her assigned line, Mengele drew his gun and shot both the woman and the child. As a blanket punishment, he then sent to the gas all people from that transport who had previously been selected for work, with the comment: "Away with this shit!"

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 343

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Prisoners would "march before him with their arms in the air," Dr. Lengyel tells us, "while he continued to whistle his Wagner"--or it might be Verdi or Johann Strauss. It was a mannered detachment...

More overtly, there are many stories of his striking people with his long riding crop, in one case running it over tattoos on the bosoms of Russian women, as a Polish woman survivor described, "then striking them there", while "not at all excited but... casual,... just playing around a little as though it were a little funny."

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 344

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Mengele's passion for cleanliness and perfection carried over into a selections aesthetic; he would send people with skin blemishes to the gas chamber or those with small abscesses or even old appendectomy scars. "My two cousins were sent in front of my eyes by Mengele to their deaths because they had small wounds on their bodies," was the way one survivor put it.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 345

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Mengele fed his legend by dramatizing murderous policies, such as his drawing a line on the wall of the children's block between 150 and 156 centimeters (about 5 feet or 5 feet 2 inches) from the floor, and sending those whose heads could not reach the line to the gas chamber.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 346



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Mengele could also kill directly. He was observed to perform phenol injections, always with a correct medical demeanor... Mengele also shot a number of prisoners and was reported to have killed at least one by pressing his foot on a woman's body.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 347

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This duality,--a confusing combination of affection and violence-- was constantly described to me. The Polish woman survivor, for example, described him as "impulsive... [with] a choleric temper," but "in his attitude to children [twins]... as gentle as a father..." ...Twin children frequently called him "Uncle Pepi", and other twins told how Mengele would bring them sweets and invite them for a ride in his car, which turned out to be "a little drive with Uncle Pepi, to the gas chamber." Simon J. put it most succinctly: "He could be friendly but kill."

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 355

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On January 18, 1945, as the Soviet Army arrived, Mengele fled Auschwitz. Captured in June, he spent time in two U.S.-run prison camps, where he was not identified as a war criminal. Eventually, he escaped and made his way to Argentina. He lived in hiding there, in Paraguay and in Brazil, until January 24, 1979, when he drowned while swimming in the ocean in Bertoga, Brazil.

- Gutman, Yisrael, Berenbaum, *Anatomy*, pp. 329-331

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### ***Dr. Ernst B.***

*This anonymous doctor, interviewed extensively by Lifton, refused to participate in selections, performed no harmful experiments, and saved the lives of many patients and inmates. After the war, he was acquitted of war crimes and staunchly defended by ex-inmates, some of whom even refused to identify him for the authorities.*

*He was a young general practitioner in 1939, when the war began. He joined the SS and was eventually sent to Auschwitz in mid-1943. Knowing little about the camps, he brought his wife.*

*When he expressed horror at the sight of emaciated prisoners, a good friend, Dr. Bruno Weber, told him to send his wife home, but that if he stayed, he could function independently of the SS hierarchy in the camp.*

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Weber then laid out to B. "almost with irony" the central Auschwitz truth, invoking the official term the "Final Solution of the Jewish question": "He [Weber] said, 'If you want to see how it works, go look out of the window. You will see... two large smokestacks... The normal kind of production of this machine... is a thousand men in twenty-four hours.'"

*- Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, p. 305*

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### ***B. searches for a Jewish friend***

A former prisoner physician, Michael Z., told me how taken aback he was when Ernst B. burst into the laboratory "look[ing] for a Jewish friend. He asked me, speaking quite loud... : 'Do you know Cohen?' I told him, '[Please] be quiet, you do not have the right to speak like that.'" Dr. Z. explained why he felt it necessary to protect Dr. B. by quieting him down and, by implication, to protect himself as well... But at the same time Z. was deeply moved by [the] SS doctor's quest: "I understood that he was indeed a man who had a different kind of mind... that he was capable of human feelings... Yes, it did impress me... because it was unheard of to see an SS pronounce the name of a Jewish friend."

*- Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, p. 306*

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### ***He refuses to perform selections***

But B., when repeatedly approached by Wirths, gave a series of reasons for refusing: that he had too much work, found it

incompatible with his assignment, and simply could not--was psychologically unable to--do it.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 308

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### *He protects and saves prisoners*

Once over his selections crisis, Dr. B. had no major difficulties in Auschwitz. He consolidated a remarkable set of relationships with prisoner doctors... When they were sick he made provisions for their medications and general care and visited them himself. He helped them send messages to, and arrange visits with, wives and friends in other parts of the camp. He contributed to their survival by keeping them closely informed about various Auschwitz currents and plans. And he directly saved lives in additional ways: by protecting prisoner doctors from selections, by finding them and rescuing them from the gas chamber when they had been selected, and by the benign experiments...

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 315

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### *His friendship with Mengele*

Dr. B. remembered Mengele as "helpful," "a really fine comrade"... and admirable in his open expression of "outspoken antipathies and sympathies..."

When I brought up the question of Mengele's human experiments, B. sprang to the defense of his friend: human experiments were "a relatively minor matter" in Auschwitz; children (who made up most of the twins Mengele studied) had little chance to survive in Auschwitz, but Mengele made certain they were well fed and taken care of...

And when I asked B. whether he would change his views if I presented him with extensive evidence of Mengele's practice of occasionally sending one or both twins to the gas chamber, B. answered unhesitatingly in the negative "because under the conditions of Auschwitz one must always say that Mengele's experiments were not forms of cruelty."

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 321

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***Evacuated to Dachau, he gives a gun to Jewish doctors***

With Allied armies approaching, he discussed with prisoner doctors possible arrangements for their escape from Nazi control, including the idea of providing them with SS uniforms. He then shook hands with them and "said goodbye in a very friendly way", and as a last act took a pistol out of his drawer and gave it to one of them for their protection.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 326

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***Yet he is nevertheless a Nazi***

At the end of the interview, when comparing Nazi times with the present, he said that, despite the "full liberalization" today, there is an absence of "ideals for youth", a "lack of commitment", which leads to "chaotic conditions" and the absence of "a coherent community". The Nazis "overdid it" in the opposite direction, he acknowledged, but in Hitler's admittedly "primitive methods" there was "something right", something that "was good with the Nazis."

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 330

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## Escape

*Escape was extremely rare at Auschwitz, but was not unknown.*

The most famous case was that of Mala Zimetbaum and her Polish lover, Edek Galinski. She was a Lauferin, or runner, in the camp, able to move about on errands and carrying messages. Both had been members of anti-Nazi undergrounds, he in Poland, she in Belgium. He obtained an SS uniform, she "organized" a pass, and they left the camp together in the guise of an SS man transporting a prisoner. Many Auschwitz survivors remember them, for they inspired everyone with tremendous hope, but the accounts differ on details as to the distance they got before being arrested and returned to the camp. Some survivors remember them getting as far as Krakow. Back in Auschwitz, both were tortured and then led to the gallows for public execution. Mala slashed her wrist with a razor blade she had concealed, was beaten to the ground and loaded onto the crematorium truck without ever being hanged. Across the camp, Edek leaped into the noose and kicked away the bench before the death sentence was read; the SS rescued and re-hanged him.

There were six hundred other cases of escape from Auschwitz. Almost four hundred were captured. When an escape was detected, all prisoners in the camp stood at attention for hours on end, while the fugitive was hunted outside the camp; once captured, the escapee was tortured, then paraded around the camp with a sign saying "Hurrah, I'm back," and then was hanged in front of the rest of the camp.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, pp. 58-60

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*Primo Levi, in his chapter on "Stereotypes", remarks that he was often asked why he did not escape from Auschwitz:*

(T)here existed... several million foreigners in a condition of slavery, overworked, despised, undernourished, badly clothed, and badly cared for, cut off from all contact with their native land. They were not 'typical prisoners', they did not have integrity, on the contrary they were demoralized and depleted... For them escape was difficult and extremely dangerous; besides being demoralized, they had been weakened by hunger and maltreatment; they were and knew they were considered worth less than beasts of burden. Their heads were shaved, their filthy clothes were immediately recognizable, their wooden clogs made a swift and silent step impossible. If they were foreigners, they had neither acquaintances nor viable places of refuge in the surroundings... The particular, but numerically imposing, case of the Jews was the most tragic... In what direction could they flee? To whom could they turn for shelter? They were outside the world, men and women made of air.

- Levi, *Drowned*, pp. 153-154



Photo © 2004 Mark Lanyon

**Watchtowers of Auschwitz**

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## Filth and Cleanliness

In this place it is practically pointless to wash every day in the turbid water of the filthy washbasins for purposes of cleanliness and health; but it is most important as a symbol of remaining vitality, and necessary as an instrument of moral survival.

I must confess it: after only one week of prison, the instinct for cleanliness disappeared in me. I wander aimlessly around the washroom when I suddenly see Steinlauf, my friend aged almost fifty, with nude torso, scrub his neck and shoulders with little success (he has no soap) but great energy. Steinlauf sees me and greets me, and with great energy asks me why I do not wash. Why should I wash? Would I be better off than I am? Would I please someone more? Would I live a day, an hour longer? I would probably live a shorter time, because to wash is an effort, a waste of energy and warmth. Does not Steinlauf know that after half an hour with the coal sacks every difference between him and me will have disappeared?... But this was the sense, not forgotten either then or later: that precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization. We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last--the power to refuse our consent. So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets.

- Levi, *Survival*, pp. 40-41





## God

*Where was God in Auschwitz?*

Never should I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.

- *Wiesel, Night*



Photo © 2004 Mark Lanyon

***Entrance to Auschwitz***

The horror of Auschwitz is a stark challenge to many of the more conventional ideas of God. The remote God of the philosophers... becomes intolerable. Many Jews can no longer subscribe to the biblical idea of God who manifests himself in history, who, they say with Wiesel, died in Auschwitz. The idea of a personal God, like one of us writ large, is fraught with difficulty. If this God is omnipotent, he could have prevented the Holocaust. If he was unable to stop it, he is impotent and useless; if he could have stopped it and chose not to, he is a monster. Jews are not the only people who believe that the Holocaust put an end to conventional theology.

- *Karen Armstrong, A History of God, (Ballantine Books, 1993)*



## Hope

*The hope that kills.*

Despite the madness of war, we lived for a world that would be different. For a better world to come when all this is over. And perhaps even our being here is a step towards that world. Do you really think that, without the hope that such a world is possible, that the rights of man will be restored again, we could stand the concentration camp even for one day? It is that very hope that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into numb inactivity. It is hope that breaks down family ties, makes mothers renounce their children, or wives sell their bodies for bread, or husbands kill. It is hope that compels man to hold on to one more day of life, because that day may be the day of liberation. Ah, and not even the hope for a different, better world, but simply for life, a life of peace and rest. Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers.

- Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, pp. 121-122

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## *Self-deceptions*

For purposes of defense, reality can be distorted not only in memory but in the very act of taking place. Throughout the year of my imprisonment in Auschwitz I had Alberto D. as a fraternal friend: he was a robust, courageous young man, more clear-sighted than the average and therefore very critical of the many who fabricated for themselves, and reciprocally administered to each other, consolatory illusions ("The war will be over in two weeks", "There will be no more selections", "The English have landed in Greece", "The Polish Partisans are about to liberate the camp," and so on, rumors heard nearly every day and punctually given the lie by reality). Alberto had been deported together with

his forty-five year old father. In the imminence of the great selection of October 1944, Alberto and I had commented on this event with fright, impotent rage, rebellion, resignation, but without seeking refuge in comforting truths. The selection came, Alberto's "old" father was chosen for the gas, and in the space of a few hours, Alberto changed. He had heard rumors that seemed to him worthy of belief: the Russians are close by, the Germans would no longer dare persist in this slaughter, that was not a selection like the others, it was not for the gas chamber, but had been made to choose the weakened but salvageable prisoners, in fact like his father, who was very tired but not ill; indeed, he even knew where they would be sent, to Jaworzno, not far away, to a special camp for convalescents fit only for light labor.

Naturally, his father was never seen again, and Alberto himself vanished during the evacuation march from the camp, in January 1945.

- Levi, *Drowned*, pp. 33-34



Image ©2005 L.E. Caro

**"Speranza Morente" (Dying Hope)**

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*The hope that sustains*

Let me see your arm... Hmm... Your number starts with seventeen. In Hebrew, that's "K'Minyan Tov". Seventeen is a very good omen...

(He was a priest. He wasn't Jewish--but very intelligent!)

It ends with 13, the day a Jewish boy becomes a man... And look! Added together it totals 18. That's "Chai", the Hebrew number of life.

I can't know if I'll survive this hell, but I'm certain you'll come through all this alive!

(I started to believe. I tell you, he put another life in me. And whenever it was very bad I looked and said: "Yes. The priest was right! It totals eighteen.")

- Art Spiegelman, *Maus II*, p. 28

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## Injections

The most medical of all Auschwitz killing methods was the phenol injection, which was institutionalized during the relatively early phases of Auschwitz. A *patient* was brought to a *treatment room* and there administered a *drug* by a physician or (in most cases) his assistant, who wore a white coat and used a syringe and needle for the injection.

In camp jargon, there were the active verb *spritzen* (to "inject, squirt, spray"), the passive verb *abgespritzt* ("to be injected off", or killed) and equivalent noun forms meaning "syringing" and "phenoling".

Initially, phenol was injected into a victim's vein, maximizing the medical aura of the entire procedure... Before long, the technique was changed to injecting the phenol directly into the heart. Some witnesses thought that the change was made because the veins were sometimes hard to locate, but the real reason seems to have been the greater killing efficiency of a direct cardiac injection. Patients injected by vein might linger for minutes or even an hour or more... The "concentrated aqueous solution of phenol" that was developed proved "inexpensive, easy to use, and absolutely effective when introduced into the heart ventricle", so that an injection of ten to fifteen milliliters into the heart caused death within fifteen seconds.

*Phenol injections were given in Block 20:*

At that point two Jewish prisoner assistants brought a victim into the room (sometimes victims were brought in two at a time) and positioned him or her on a footstool, usually so that the right arm covered the victim's eyes and the left arm was raised sideways in a horizontal position... The idea was for the victim's chest to be thrust out so that the cardiac area was maximally accessible for the lethal injection, and for him or her to be unable to see what was happening...

The person giving the injection--most often the SDG Josef Klehr--filled his syringe from the bottle and then thrust the needle directly into the heart of the seated prisoner and emptied the contents of the syringe.

Thus, an average of two minutes and 22 seconds sufficed to murder one prisoner.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, pp. 254-259



***Phenol Injection Position***

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## The Judge

One of the greatest ironies to come out of Auschwitz: at one point the SS sent an administrative judge, Dr. Konrad Morgen, to investigate corruption there. Obviously, the problem was not that people were being murdered at the camp; it was that the work of the camp--murder-- was not being carried out according to SS standards. All goods seized from the inmates and victims of the gas chambers were supposed to be shipped back to Berlin, to the government; instead, a barracks known as "Canada" had been stacked high with booty, and the camp Commander, Rudolf Höss and SS men in charge were benefiting by it. In addition, at least two men at the camp--Höss and Lieutenant Maximilian Grabner--were having affairs with inmates. Morgen had earlier obtained the execution of the commandant of Buchenwald on similar charges. Morgen had Grabner arrested and brought back to Berlin for questioning; he was ultimately sentenced by Nazi justice to twelve years in prison for crimes including some of the killings which had taken place at the "Black Wall" between Block 10 and Block 11.



Photo © Ryszard Domasik

*The Black Wall*



In the complicated web of SS regulations as applied by Morgen, the shooting of prisoners at the Black Wall was illegal, while their murder inside Block 11 by phenol injection was perfectly legal, as were the gas chambers.

Höss, after tiring of his mistress, Eleanor Hodys, had ordered her murdered, but Morgen rescued her and sent her to Berlin (where the SS killed her anyway, toward the end of the war).

Morgen testified at Nuremberg and practiced law again in Germany after the war.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, pp. 25-27, 51

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, pp. 138-139, 387

- Conot, *Justice at Nuremberg*, p. 297

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## Krematoria

Himmler inspected Auschwitz on March 1, 1941, and ordered that a POW camp be built... Among other projects, the plan provided for the construction of a crematorium capable of incinerating 1,440 bodies in 24 hours. It was projected to consist of five three-retort ovens for burning bodies, one oven for burning refuse, and one underground mortuary. The site was to be in the main camp at Auschwitz.

In consideration of the ongoing preparations for the extermination of Jews, it was decided to adapt the installation for mass killing by constructing a gas chamber next to it, in an underground facility also dedicated as a mortuary. The second room was to serve as a "dressing room". Both were to be ventilated mechanically.

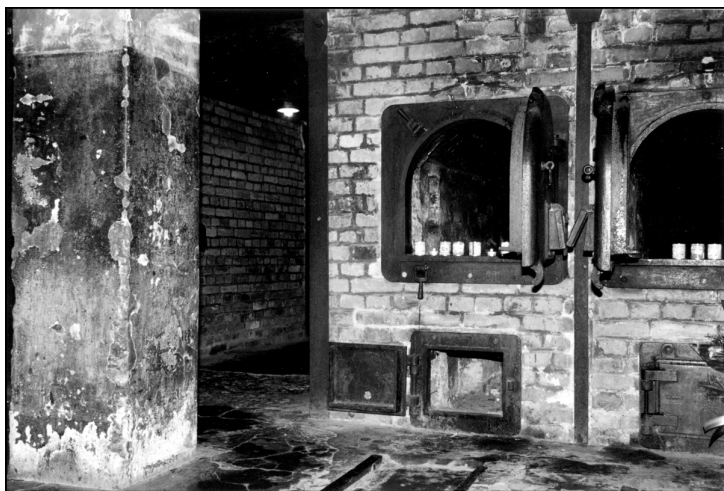


Photo © 2001 Scott Comins

*The Ovens*

An order placed with the firm Topf and Sons of Erfurt on October 22, 1941, stressed the urgency of the entire undertaking, demanding fast delivery: two weeks for technical drawings of the foundations and three months for parts of the ovens... However,

before the construction work began, Heinz Kammler, chief of Group C of the SS Economic-Administrative Main Office and one of the closest associates of Himmler, arrived at Auschwitz on February 27, 1942 and ordered that the five-oven crematorium projected for Auschwitz be constructed at Birkenau.

Despite the hectic pace of work, which went on day and night, the approved deadlines for launching the crematoria failed to be met. The camp administration did not take delivery of the crematoria and gas chambers until the spring and summer of 1943.

A letter from the Zentralbauleitung to Group C of June 28, 1943 indicates that the capacity for a 24-hour period was estimated at 340 bodies for crematorium I; 1,440 each for crematoria II and III; and 768 each for crematoria IV and V. Thus the five crematoria could incinerate 4,765 bodies each day...



Photo © Ryszard Domasik

***Krematoria and Gas Chamber***

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The furnace room occupied the largest interior space on the ground floor of the crematorium. It housed five furnaces, each with three retorts (about 2m long, 80 cm wide, and 1m high) that were used to push the bodies into the furnace. There were two

generators of coke gas on the opposite side. The fumes were funneled to a single chimney through flues under the floor. Initially, the furnaces of crematorium II were equipped with a forced-draft installation. The draft was produced by three intake ventilators situated between the furnaces and the chimney. Within a short time, however, they burned out...

In addition, crematoria II and III were equipped with special furnaces for incinerating less-valuable articles, such as personal papers, women's purses, books, and toys that were found in the luggage of the murdered victims... The disinfected hair of gassed women was dried in the attic...



Photo © <http://holocaust-info.dk>

***Ruins of Gas Chamber in Krematoria III***

In the gas chamber's anteroom, the bodies were relieved of spectacles and artificial limbs, and the women's hair was cut off. Thereupon the corpses were loaded on the elevator platform and lifted to the ground floor. Some of the corpses were dragged directly to the oven area. Others were moved to the corpse storage room opposite the elevator, which also served as a site of executions by shooting.

Just before incineration, Sonderkommando prisoners removed jewelry, which they tossed into a special numbered crate. Teeth with metal fillings, crowns, and bridges made of gold or other precious metals were extracted from the mouths of the gassed victims and deposited in a crate marked "Zahnstation" (dental station)...

It took about four hours to empty the gas chamber. Initially, the corpses were delivered to the furnaces on small trolleys that ran on rails, as was done in the main camp. The trolleys also served to load the corpses into the furnace retorts. This arrangement, however, did not last long. On the initiative of the **Kapo** August Bruck, special corpse stretchers, which could be rolled into the retorts, were introduced.

To facilitate the loading, the corpse stretchers were lubricated with soapy water. Methods of loading the corpses varied; each team servicing the furnaces had its own technique. For example, H. Tauber's team would put two corpses into one retort two times, then add as many children's corpses as possible to the second load.

It took about 20 minutes to cremate three corpses in one retort. However, in their efforts to reduce the number of loadings, prisoners cremated four to five corpses at one time, and extended the cremation time to about 25 to 30 minutes. When the time was up, the next load would be put into the retort, regardless of the degree of incineration of the preceding load.

The incompletely incinerated bones fell through the grill into the ash pit, were ground with wooden mortars along with the ashes, then poured into pits near the crematorium. Next they were removed from the pits and poured into the Vistula River or nearby ponds. Sometimes they were used to prepare compost; other times they were used directly to fertilize the fields of the camp farms.

- Gutman, Yisrael, Berenbaum, *Anatomy*, pp. 164-170

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Photo © <http://holocaust-info.dk>

***Pond Where Ashes Were Poured***

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Great columns of smoke rise from the crematoria and merge up above into a huge black river which very slowly floats across the sky over Birkenau and disappears beyond the forests in the direction of Trzebinia. The "Sosnowiec-Bedzin" transport is already burning.

- *Borowski, This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, p. 49*

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## Language

*Many commentators have noted that in order to murder their victims, the Nazis had to murder the German language first, associated as it was with high culture, rationality, and philosophical thought. A new, degraded form of German came into being, first in Germany itself, then in the camps, where it found its most brutal expression.*

I did not realize--I realized this only much later--that the Lager's German was a language apart: to say it precisely in German, it was *Orts- und zeitgebunden*, "tied to the place and time." It was a variant, particularly barbarized, of what a German Jewish philologist, Klemperer, had called *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the language of the Third Reich, actually proposing for it the acronym LTI with an ironic analogy to the hundred other acronyms (NSDAP, SS, SA, SD, KZ, RKPA, WVHA, RSHA, BDM, etc.) dear to the Germany of that time.

About LTI, and its Italian equivalent, much has already been written, also by linguists. It is an obvious observation that where violence is inflicted on man, it is also inflicted on language.

*- Levi, **Drowned**, p. 97*

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### *Some of the language of the camps:*

- **Fressen:** To eat, a term applied only to animals in polite German (Levi, **Drowned**, p. 99)
- **Haftlinge:** Prisoners. When a young *kapo* referred to his charges as men rather than *haftlinge*, he was corrected. (Levi, **Drowned**, p. 92)
- **Muselmann:** See *Musselmann*.
- **Spritzen, abgespritzt:** To kill or be killed by phenol injection.



- *Schmutzstuck*, *schmuckstuck*: A woman weakened to the point of death, the female equivalent of a Muselmann; literally "garbage" and "jewel", respectively. (Levi, **Drowned**, p. 99)



Photo Credit: USHMM, courtesy of National Archives

**Women in the barracks of the newly liberated Auschwitz concentration camp. (*Schmutzstuck*)**

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We immediately realized, from our very first contacts with the contemptuous men with the black patches, that knowing or not knowing German was a watershed.

Those who understood them and answered in an articulate manner could establish the semblance of a human relationship. To those who did not understand them the black men reacted in a manner that astonished and frightened us: an order that had been pronounced in the calm voice of a man who knows he will be obeyed was repeated word for word in a loud, angry voice, then screamed at the top of his lungs as if he were addressing a deaf person or indeed a domestic animal, more responsive to the tone than the content of the message.

If anyone hesitated (everyone hesitated because they did not understand and were terrorized) the blows fell, and it was obvious that they were a variant of the same language: use of the word to communicate thought, this necessary and sufficient

mechanism for man to be man, had fallen into disuse. This was a signal: for those people we were no longer men.

- Levi, *Drowned*, p. 91

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What allowed... the degeneration of German speech, over the length of a half century, from the rich, imbricated, responsible pursuit of truth into the garbled, vulgarized German authorized and distributed by the Nazi press, Nazi literature, and official bureaucratic speech [?]

Such an inquiry would be illuminating, but ultimately ineffectual, since the debasement of language and the traducing of the psyche, dependent as it is upon the organ of speech, is a process observable in varying degrees in all western language. The case of the German language is only an example of more so... one notes in advanced capitalist societies that the command of nuanced and subtle language in public discourse has all but disappeared. The debasement of language, the stripping of its shading and moral intensity began in the West long before Hitler and continues after he is gone. It will help us to explain a kind of cauterization of conscience by the use of metaphor and euphemism; to understand that in official Nazi language the extermination of Jews was precisely that-- the disinfectant of lice, the burning of garbage, the incineration of trash, and hence language never had to say exactly what acts its words commanded: kill, burn, murder that old Jew, that middle-aged Jew, that child Jew.

- Cohen, *The Tremendum*, pp.7-8

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## Musselmanner

*Musselmanner (Moslems) was Auschwitz slang for people near death from starvation and privation. (Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, p.38; Levi, **Survival**, p.88). The exact derivation of the phrase is not known, but it was common to all concentration camps.*

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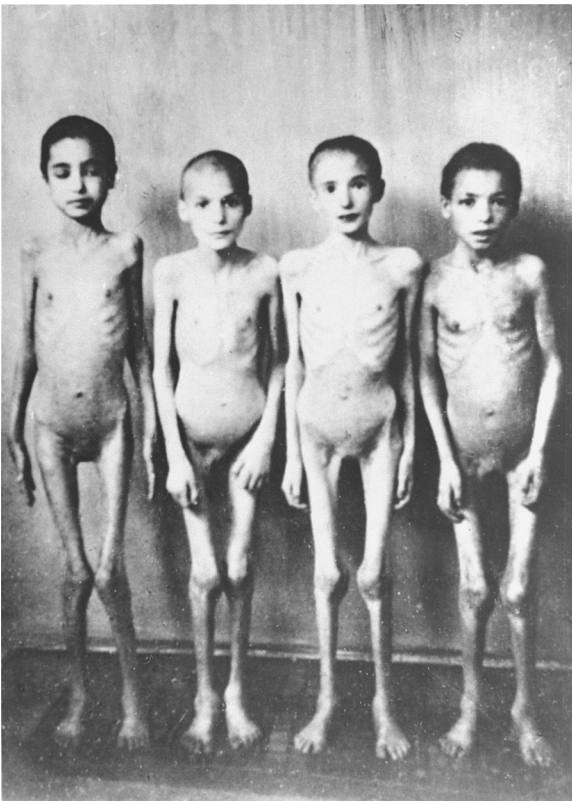


Photo Credit: National Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau - USHMM

**Victims of Dr. Josef Mengele's medical experiments at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland, 1944.**

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## Nutrition

Theoretically, each prisoner was entitled to a daily ration of 350 grams of bread, half a liter of ersatz coffee for breakfast, and one liter of turnip and potato soup for lunch. Also, four times a week each prisoner was to receive a soup ration of 20 grams of meat, but in practice soup rarely reached the bowls from which the prisoners ate. The official daily value of food for prisoners employed in light work stood at 1,700 calories and for prisoners doing strenuous work, 2,150 calories. An analysis done after the war of the actual food content ranged from 1,300 calories for light-work prisoners to 1,700 calories for prisoners performing hard labor. The difference was caused by plunder of food by SS personnel and functionary-prisoners. Inequality pervaded the food distribution system. The kapo, or the prisoner entrusted with larding out the soup, made sure that the thicker, more nourishing contents from the bottom would reach "proper" prisoners, whereas the others had to content themselves with a watery substance from the top of the pot...

Under these conditions, supplementary food was tantamount to survival... The bread ration thus served as a currency of sorts. The functionaries, who made up perhaps 3 to 5 percent of the prisoner population, exchanged their supplementary bread and soup for higher-quality and tastier victuals.

Prisoners condemned to subsist on the official ration lost weight rapidly, and their survival odds diminished accordingly.

- Gutman, Yisrael, Berenbaum, *Anatomy*, pp. 24-25

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### *During an air-raid*

Near the kitchen, two cauldrons of steaming hot soup had been left, half full. Two cauldrons of soup, right in the middle of the path, with no one guarding them!...

Suddenly, we saw the door of Block 37 open imperceptibly. A man appeared, crawling like a worm in the direction of the cauldrons.

Hundreds of eyes followed his movements. Hundreds of men crawled with him, scraping their knees with his on the gravel. Every heart trembled, but with envy above all. This man had dared.

He reached the first cauldron. Hearts raced: he had succeeded. Jealousy consumed us, burned us up like straw. We never thought for a moment of admiring him. Poor hero, committing suicide for a ration of soup! In our thoughts, we were murdering him.

Stretched out by the cauldron, he was now trying to raise himself up to the edge. Either from weakness or fear, he stayed there, trying, no doubt, to muster up the last of his strength. At last he succeeded in hoisting himself onto the edge of the pot. For a moment, he seemed to be looking at himself, seeking his ghost-like reflection in the soup. Then, for no apparent reason, he let out a terrible cry, a rattle such as I had never heard before, and, his mouth open, thrust his head toward the still steaming liquid. We jumped at the explosion. Falling back onto the ground, his face stained with soup, the man writhed for a few seconds at the foot of the cauldron, then he moved no more.

- Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 56-57

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We have learnt the value of food; now we also diligently scrape the bottom of the bowl after the ration and we hold it under our chins when we eat bread so as not to lose the crumbs. We, too, know it is not the same thing to be given a ladleful of soup from the top or from the bottom of the vat, and we are already able to judge, according to the capacity of the various vats, what is the most suitable place to try and reach in the queue when we line up...

Here I am, then, on the bottom. One learns quickly enough to wipe out the past and the future when one is forced to. A fortnight after my arrival I already had the prescribed hunger,

that chronic hunger unknown to free men, which makes one dream at night, and settles in all the limbs of one's body...

The Market is always very active... Here scores of prisoners driven desperate by hunger prowled around, with lips half-open and eyes gleaming, lured by a deceptive instinct to where the merchandise shown makes the gnawing of their stomachs more acute and their salvation more assiduous. In the best cases they possess a miserable half-ration of bread which, with painful effort, they have saved since the morning, in the senseless hope of a chance to make an advantageous bargain with some ingenuous person, unaware of the prices of the moment. Some of these, with savage patience, acquire with their half-ration two pints of soup which, once in their possession, they subject to a methodical examination with a view to extracting the few pieces of potato lying at the bottom; this done, they exchange it for bread, and the bread for another two pints to denaturalize, and so on, until their nerves are exhausted, or until some victim, catching them in the act, inflicts on them a severe lesson, exposing them to public derision.

- Levi, *Survival*, pp. 33, 36, 37, 78

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(T)he average diet in Auschwitz permitted a prisoner to remain alive no more than three months, after which time symptoms of emaciation and "hunger disease" set in; and the early hospital blocks served as places "where the people suffering from the hunger disease could spend the time from the beginning of the sickness until their death."

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 187

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## Ordnungsdienst

*The Ordnungsdienst or order police were Jewish police forces mobilized by the Germans to control the fenced-off Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe, keeping order until the populace could be shipped to death camps such as Auschwitz.*



Photo: USHMM courtesy of Benjamin (Miedzyrzecki) Meed

***Jewish police stand with a group of laborers in front of a large pile [of food?] in the Lodz ghetto.***

As a ghetto institution, the uniformed Jewish police exemplified the dynamics of degeneration that the Germans set in motion.

The Jewish police was an institution improvised by the Germans when they locked the Jews into ghettos. Initially police functions were to regulate the flow of pedestrian and vehicular traffic inside the ghettos and to maintain law and order...

[M]ost recruits were not motivated by a sense of communal responsibility. Those who enrolled did so of their own volition and for their own advantage. The requirements for the police force were few: young, able-bodied men were wanted, preferably

with military training. Few recruits had a record of communal service, in part because of their relative youthfulness...

Charged with enforcing the isolation of the ghetto, the Jewish police at ghetto gates had to check people entering and leaving, examine their identity papers and permits, and search their persons and belongings for contraband. They were supervised by Polish guards and armed German police to ensure that they performed their tasks correctly and with appropriate strictness.

- Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, p. 234

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## Perpetrators

*Adolf Eichmann was the bureaucrat in charge of Jewish emigration from pre-war Germany and, later, of the logistics of collecting the Jews and shipping them to concentration camps. In the former role, he had worked closely with the leadership of Jewish communities. He was kidnapped in Argentina by Israeli forces in 1960 and taken to Israel, where he was put on trial, convicted and hanged. Eichmann visited Auschwitz on a number of occasions, and told the following story to his Israeli interrogator:*

Now and then, the comedy breaks into the horror itself, and results in stories, presumably true enough, whose macabre humor surpasses that of any Surrealist invention. Such was the story told by Eichmann during the police examination about the unlucky Kommerzialrat Storfer of Vienna, one of the representatives of the Jewish community. Eichmann had received a telegram from Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz, telling him that Storfer had arrived and had urgently requested to see Eichmann. "I said to myself: OK, this man has always behaved well, that is worth my while... I'll go there myself and see what is the matter with him. And I go to Ebner [chief of the Gestapo in Vienna], and Ebner says--I remember it only vaguely--'If only he had not been so clumsy; he went into hiding and tried to escape,' something of the sort. And the police arrested him and sent him to the concentration camp, and, according to the orders of the Reichsführer [Himmler], no one could get out once he was in. Nothing could be done, neither Dr. Ebner nor I, nor anybody else could do anything about it. I went to Auschwitz and asked Höss to see Storfer. 'Yes, yes, [Höss said], he is in one of the labor gangs.' With Storfer afterward, it was normal and human, we had a normal, human encounter. He told me all his grief and sorrow: I said: 'Well, my dear old friend [Ja, mein lieber guter Storfer], we certainly got it! What rotten luck!' And I also said, 'Look, I really cannot help you, because according to orders from the Reichsführer nobody can get out. I can't get you out. Dr. Ebner can't get you out... And then I asked him how he was. And he said, yes, he wondered if he

couldn't be let off work, it was heavy work. And then I said to Höss: 'Work--Storfer won't have to work!' But Höss said: 'Everyone works here.' So I said, 'OK,' I said, 'I'll make out a chit to the effect that Storfer has to keep the gravel paths in order with a broom,' there were little gravel paths there, 'and that he has the right to sit down with his broom on one of the benches.' [To Storfer] I said: 'Will that be all right, Mr. Storfer? Will that suit you?' Whereupon he was very pleased, and we shook hands, and then he was given the broom, and sat down on his bench. It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years, and that we could speak with each other.' Six weeks after this normal human encounter, Storfer was dead--not gassed, apparently, but shot.

- *Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 50-51



Photo Credit: USHMM

**Portrait of Adolf Eichmann**

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*It is not clear which were the gravel paths which Storfer was appointed to sweep; but Primo Levi says that the paths in the*

*S.S. village adjoining the camp were spread with human ashes and bits of bone from the crematoria.*

*- Levi, **Drowned**, p. 125*

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*Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski was an Einsatzgruppen general in the East responsible for the shooting of hundreds of thousands of Jews. (About two million of the war's six million Jewish victims were killed in this manner.) During a visit during which Himmler witnessed the murder of one hundred Jews, Bach-Zelewski told him:*

Look at the eyes of the men in this Kommando, how deeply shaken they are! These men are finished (fertig) for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages!

*In 1942, Bach-Zelewski had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized for "psychic exhaustion" and "hallucinations connected with the shootings of Jews". However, he recovered and went back to killing.*

*- Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, pp. 159, 437*

Bach-Zelewski's fate after the war makes an interesting footnote. He was tried in 1961 for his part in the murders of the S.A., the rival German military arm, in 1934, and sentenced to three and one half years; he was then tried again in 1962 for the murder of six Communists in 1933, and sentenced to life. Neither indictment mentioned his Einsatzgruppen activities. Arendt says: "He was also the only one in this category who in 1952 had denounced himself publicly for mass murder, but he was never prosecuted for it".

*- p. 16*

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*What is Bach-Zelewski's relevance to Auschwitz? His difficulties were the inspiration for the decision to use gas as the means of murder. Höss, the Auschwitz kommandant, wrote:*

I had heard Eichmann's description of Jews being mown down by the **Einsatzkommandos** armed with machine guns and machine pistols. Many gruesome scenes are said to have taken place, people running away after being shot, the finishing off of the wounded and particularly of the women and the children. Many members of the **Einsatzkommandos**, unable to endure wading through blood any longer, had committed suicide. Some had even gone mad. Most of the members of these **Kommandos** had to rely on alcohol when carrying out their horrible work.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 159



Photo: USHMM, courtesy of Instytut Pamięci Narodowej

**German police and auxiliaries in civilian clothes look on as a group of Jewish women are forced to undress before their execution.**

*Höss, the architect and creator of the most prominent of death camps, began the search that resulted in the selection of Zyklon B as the agent of killing.*

*Höss wrote his memoirs in 1947, shortly before he was hung for his role in the murder of the victims of Auschwitz. He may be the prototypical Nazi. He was raised religious and had participated in pilgrimages to Lourdes and other shrines. He entered the military and then became involved with the Nazis at the very beginning. In 1923, he participated in beating a suspected informer to death and was sent to prison, where he went mad:*

Then I would sink exhausted onto the bed and fall asleep, only to wake again after a short time bathed in sweat from my nightmares. In these confused dreams, I was always being pursued and killed, or falling over a precipice.

*Freed in an amnesty in 1928, he later joined the SS under Himmler and was assigned to construct a camp in the Polish town of Oswiecim (Auschwitz to the Germans) in 1940. He had already served at Dachau, where he was uncomfortably thrilled the first time he saw a prisoner flogged: "I went hot and cold all over... I am unable to give an explanation of this."*

*Contrast his view of his religious upbringing:*

I was taught that my highest duty was to help those in need. It was constantly impressed on me in forceful terms that I must obey promptly the wishes and commands of my parents, teachers and priests...

*Or his views on work:*

All my life I have thoroughly enjoyed working. I have done plenty of hard, physical work, under the severest physical conditions, in the coalmines, in oil refineries, and in brickyards... Work in prison [is] a means of training for those prisoners who are fundamentally unstable and who need to learn the meaning of endurance and perseverance...

*Höss, of course, was responsible for placing the slogan Arbeit Macht Frei over the camp's gate.*

*In his memoirs, Höss claimed to exemplify leadership, setting the example for his men: "When reveille sounded for the SS men in the ranks, I too must get out of bed..."*

*In 1941, Himmler summoned Höss to Berlin, and told him secretly to transform Auschwitz into an extermination camp. According to Höss, Himmler said:*

The Fuhrer has ordered that the Jewish question be solved once and for all... I have now decided to entrust this task to you. It is difficult and onerous and calls for complete devotion notwith-

standing the difficulties that may arise... You will treat this order as absolutely secret, even from your superiors... The Jews are the sworn enemies of the German people and must be eradicated. Every Jew that we can lay our hands on is to be destroyed now during the war, without exception.

*Himmler's emissary to Höss to discuss the details was Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann revealed his plan for the shipment of Jews to Auschwitz, first from Poland, then Czechoslovakia, then Western Europe. The men walked the fields looking for a suitable location for a gas chamber until they found an abandoned farmhouse which was "most suitable":*

It was isolated and screened by woods and hedges, and it was also not far from the railroad... We calculated that after gas proofing the premises then available, it would be possible to kill about eight hundred people simultaneously with a suitable gas.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, pp. 2-19

*Höss stole food from the prisoner's supplies for his family, and had prisoners build his furniture; he lived a life of such comfort that his wife was said to have remarked, "I will live here until I die." However, he took a non-Jewish camp inmate, Eleanor Hodys, as mistress, got her pregnant, then tried to have her murdered. She was rescued by the SS Judge investigating corruption in the camp, and taken to Munich, where the SS killed her at the end of the war.*

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, pp. 50-51

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*After listening to Höss testify at Nuremberg, one of the defense attorneys said:*

It rained blood, one breathed ashes, the smell of burned corpses poisoned the atmosphere.

- Conot, *Justice at Nuremberg*, p. 376

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*It is easy to forget about them when focusing on figures like Eichmann or Höss, but the industrialists who were eager to create factories at Auschwitz were perpetrators of the horror too:*

Many prominent German corporations--among them Krupp, Siemens and Bayer--were interested in what might be negotiated. Auschwitz began developing a network of outlying subcamps, thirty-four in all. The prisoners worked at a cement plant... a coal mine... a steel factory... a shoe factory... The biggest of these Auschwitz subcamps was the I.G. Farben plant... The plant was known as Buna because its principal purpose was to produce synthetic rubber; its other main installation was a hydrogenation plant designed to convert coal into oil... The Auschwitz factories [were] the largest in the Farben empire.

Conditions at [Buna] were much like those at Auschwitz--the dawn roll calls, the starvation rations, the labor gangs sent out for twelve hours at a time, forced to work at the double, beaten by guards, harried by giant dogs. The prisoners who died of overwork--dozens of them every day--had to be hauled back to camp at nightfall so that they could be propped up and counted at the next morning's roll call. About 25,000 people, ultimately, were killed in the construction of the I.G. Farben plant... One of the enduring mysteries of Auschwitz is that this plant, built at such cost and such suffering, never actually produced one ounce of synthetic rubber.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, pp. 41-42

*After the initial Nuremberg trial, a trial was held of the I.G. Farben industrialists responsible for Buna. "[T]welve were found not guilty, five received sentences of one to four years, and six of five to eight years."*

- Conot, *Justice at Nuremberg*, p. 517

*There was also a commerce in the clothes, glasses, and hair of the murdered. Primo Levi wrote:*

I myself found in Katowitz, after the liberation, innumerable packages of forms by which the heads of German families were authorized to draw clothes and shoes **for adults and for children** from the Auschwitz warehouses; did no-one ask himself where so many children's shoes were coming from?

- Levi, *Drowned*, pp. 179-180



## The Question

The Frankfurt judge, who had heard endless protestations about irresistible orders from higher authorities, was amazed by Dr. Lingens' testimony. "Do you wish to say," he asked, "that everyone could decide for himself to be either good or evil in Auschwitz?"

"That is exactly what I wish to say," Dr. Lingens answered.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, p. 23



Photo Credit: USHMM

*The arrival of Jews from Carpathian Ruthenia to Auschwitz-Birkenau.*





## Resistance

Resistance was almost impossible in Auschwitz, where disobedience meant torture and death, for one's peers as well as oneself. Nevertheless, it occurred. The most notable instance was that of the Sonderkommando that seized a crematorium.

Just months before the liberation of the camp, when it was already known that the Russian army was approaching, the SS caught wind of the fact that the last of the Sonderkommando--the squads of Jewish prisoners formed to shepherd their fellows to the gas chamber--were planning an uprising. They determined to eliminate them all.



*Remains of Oven Fixtures - Krematoria IV*

On October 7, 1944, as the SS were forming a detail of three hundred members of the Sonderkommando for some outside work (this was thought to be a ruse to separate and execute them) the Sonderkommando began pelting the SS with stones and drove them off. They packed crematorium IV with explosives they had "organized" or stolen, and blew it up. Eighty to one hundred trucks of SS men arrived and the Sonderkommando fought them

with stolen machine guns and grenades they had been stockpiling; the SS responded in kind and by unleashing fifty attack dogs.

Sonderkommando in other units rose up too; some seized crematorium II and threw an SS man and a kapo into the furnace alive. Some men cut holes in the barbed wire and fled, but in the wrong direction, remaining within the larger confines of the extended camp. The SS trapped some in a barn and set fire to it, and hunted others down in the woods; by the end of the day, hundreds of members of the Sonderkommando had been burned or shot to death.

After the revolt was put down, the remaining two hundred members of the Sonderkommando were executed, some with flamethrowers.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, pp. 80-85



Photo © 2004 Mark Lanyon

***Ruins of Krematoria II***

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## Selections

Selections for the gas chamber were made upon arrival at Auschwitz, and then periodically afterwards to cull the Muselmann as they weakened. The doctors of Auschwitz were intimately involved in the selection process.

Many accounts tell of arriving trainloads being met by Dr. Mengele at the ramp, impeccably dressed, whistling to himself as he gestured to the right (for life) and to the left (for death.) Children, their mothers, the aged, all those too weak to work were sent to the gas at Auschwitz.

Selections in the camp occurred at roll calls. Prisoners were forced to stand naked in the cold, often for hours at a time, while doctors and SS men examined them to determine who would live and who would die. Inmates knew to jog in place, show any energy they could, to avoid being sent to die.



Photo Credit: USHMM

***A selection at Auschwitz-Birkenau.***

## *Selections at the ramp*

The heaps grow. Suitcases, bundles, blankets, coats, handbags that open as they fall, spilling coins, gold, watches; mountains of bread pile up at the exits, heaps of marmalade, jams, masses of meat, sausages; sugar spills on the gravel. Trucks, loaded with people, start up with a deafening roar and drive off amidst the wailing and screaming of the women separated from their children, and the stupefied silence of the men left behind. They are the ones who had been ordered to step to the right--the healthy and the young who will go to the camp. In the end, they too will not escape death, but first they must work...

Here is a woman--she walks quickly, but tries to appear calm. A small child with a pink cherub's face runs after her, and, unable to keep up, stretches out his little arms and cries: 'Mama! Mama!'

'Pick up your child, woman!'

'Its not mine, sir, not mine!' she shouts hysterically and runs on, covering her face with her hands. She wants to hide, she wants to reach those who will not ride the trucks, those who will go on foot, those who will stay alive. She is young, healthy, good-looking, she wants to live...

Andrei, a sailor from Sevastopol, grabs hold of her. His eyes are glassy from vodka and the heat. With one powerful blow he knocks her off her feet, then, as she falls, takes her by the hair and pulls her up again...

'Ah, you bloody Jewess! So you're running from your own child! I'll show you, you whore!' His huge hand chokes her, he lifts her in the air and heaves her on to the truck like a sack of grain.

'Here! And take this with you, bitch!' and he throws the child at her feet...

Several other men are carrying a small girl with only one leg. They hold her by the arms and the one leg. Tears are running

down her face and she whispers faintly: 'Sir, it hurts, it hurts...' They throw her on the truck on top of the corpses. She will burn alive along with them.

- Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, pp.38-46

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A vast platform appeared before us, lit up by reflectors. A little beyond it, a row of lorries... We had to climb down with our luggage and deposit it alongside the train. In a moment, the platform was swarming with shadows...

A dozen SS men stood around, legs akimbo, with an indifferent air. At a certain moment they moved among us, and in a subdued tone of voice, with faces of stone, began to interrogate us rapidly... 'How old? Healthy or ill?' And on the basis of the reply they pointed in two different directions.

Everything was silent as an aquarium, or as in certain dream sequences. We had expected something more apocalyptic: they seemed simple police agents. It was disconcerting and disarming. Someone dared to ask for his luggage: they replied 'luggage afterwards'. Someone else did not want to leave his wife: they said, 'together again afterwards.' Many mothers did not want to be separated from their children: they said 'good, good, stay with child.'...

In less than ten minutes all the fit men had been collected together in a group. What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old men, we could establish neither then or later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply. Today, however, we know that in that rapid and summary choice each one of us had been judged capable or not of working usefully for the Reich; we know that of our convoy no more than ninety-six men and twenty-nine women entered the respective camps of Monowitz-Buna and Birkenau, and that of all the others, more than five hundred in number, none was living two days later.

- Levi, *Survival*, pp. 19-20

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## *Mengele at the ramp*

Some described a quality of playfulness in his detachment, his "walking back and forth... [with a] cheerful expression on his face... almost like he had fun... routine fun... He was very playful."

[P]risoners were struck by the contrast between what he looked like and what he was. One survivor described him as "good-looking... very cultivated", declared that "he really didn't look like a murderer," but immediately added, "He hit my father with his stick on his neck and sent him in a certain direction [to the gas chambers]." Or, "he was brutal, but in a gentlemanly, depraved way." For Mengele's studied detachment could be interrupted by outbreaks of rage and violence, especially when encountering resistance to his sense of the Auschwitz rules. For instance, an arriving teenager, directed by Mengele to the right while her mother and younger sisters were sent to the left, "begged and wept" because she did not want to be separated from them: "[Mengele then] grabbed me by the hair, dragged me on the ground, and beat me. When my mother also tried to beg him, he beat her with his cane"...

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 343

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## *Selections in the camp*

One feels the selections arriving. "Selekcja": the hybrid Latin and Polish word is heard once, twice, many times, interpolated in foreign conversations; at first we cannot distinguish it, then it forces itself on our attention, and in the end it persecutes us...

Yet the result is hardly a wave of despondency: our collective morale is too inarticulate and flat to be unstable. The fight against hunger, cold and work leaves little margin for thought, even for this thought. Everybody reacts in his own way, but hardly anyone with those attitudes which would seem the most plausible as the most realistic, that is with resignation or despair.

All those able to find a way out, try to take it: but they are the minority because it is very difficult to escape from a selection. The Germans apply themselves to these things with great skill and diligence.

Whoever is unable to prepare for it materially, seeks defense elsewhere. In the latrines, in the washroom, we show each other our chests, our buttocks, our thighs, and our comrades reassure us: "You are all right, it will certainly not be your turn this time,... du bist kein Muselmann..."

Our **Blockaltester** knows his business. He has made sure that we have all entered, he has the door locked, he has given everyone his card with his number, name, profession and nationality and he has ordered everyone to undress completely, except for shoes. We wait like this, naked, with the cards in our hands, for the commission to reach our hut. We are hut 48, but one can never tell if they are going to begin at hut 1 or hut 60...

The **Blockaltester** and his helpers, starting at the end of the dormitory, drive the flock of frightened, naked people in front of them and cram them in the **Tagesraum**... a room seven yards by four: when the drive is over, a warm and compact human mass is jammed into the **Tagesraum**, perfectly filling all the corners, exercising such a pressure on the wooden walls as to make them creak...

Here, in front of the two doors, stands the arbiter of our fate, an SS subaltern... Each one of us, as he comes naked out of the **Tagesraum** into the cold October air, has to run the few steps between the two doors, give the card to the SS man and enter the dormitory door. The SS man, in the fraction of a second between two successive crossings, with a glance at one's back and front, judges everyone's fate, and in turn gives the card to the man on his right or on his left, and this is the life or death of each of us...

Nobody yet knows with certainty his own fate, it has first of all to be established whether the condemned cards were those on the right or the left. By now there is no longer any point in sparing each other's feelings with superstitious scruples. Everybody crowds around the oldest, the most wasted-away and most

"Muselmann"; if their cards went to the left, the left is certainly the side of the condemned...

A double ration will be given to those selected. I have never discovered if this was a ridiculously charitable initiative of the **Blockaltester**, or an explicit disposition of the SS, but in fact, in the interval of two or three days (sometimes even much longer) between the selection and the departure, the victims at Monowitz-Auschwitz enjoyed this privilege...

Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen.

Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow... Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn?... If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer.

- *Levi, Survival*, pp. 123-130

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## Tomorrow Morning

*"Tomorrow morning" was Auschwitz slang for "never".*

*- Levi, **Survival**, p. 133*



Photo © 2001 Scott Comins

*Inside the Gas Chamber*



## United States

Jews living in the United States today--even those paranoid about anti-Semitism and quick to believe that any country they live in can turn on them--generally see the U.S. as the country most friendly to the Jews in the world both currently, and in history. Most Americans also believe their own country cares more about human rights than any other.

No observer of the current scene--watching this country fail to act on Bosnia--should be too perplexed at the U.S.'s failure to act on behalf of the European Jews during the Nazi era. Yet it is very hard to understand why, even after war was declared, no thought was given to military actions, such as bombing railroad lines, that might have retarded the flow of victims to camps such as Auschwitz.

Of course, the Second World War was not fought to rescue the Jews. Raul Hilberg tells how Gerhart Riegner, an official of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland, sent a telegram to the U.S. government in 1942, warning that the Jews of Europe were going to be annihilated by gas. He asked that copies of the message be sent to Jewish leaders in the Allied countries, including Rabbi Stephen Wise in New York:

[T]wo officials in the State Department, looking over the document, expressed unease. Paul Culbertsen, Assistant Chief of the European Division in the department, could not see why the American legation in Bern had sent the telegram, but at the same time was concerned that Wise would discover the contents sooner or later on his own and that then the Jewish leader would "react". Accordingly, he drafted a note to Wise. It was crossed out by his chief, Elbridge Dubrow, with the instruction, "Do not send, ED." Dubrow then wrote a memorandum explaining that passing on the message was undesirable in view of the "fantastic nature of the allegation" and the "impossibility of being of any assistance."

- Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, pp. 238-239; 253

*Hilberg, after relating other instances of denial and avoidance of the facts, lists a number of actions, such as bombing the railroad tracks to Auschwitz, that would have been militarily possible, which were suggested at the time by Jewish organizations and even by U.S. government figures, but which were never done. He concludes:*

The Western Allies did not want the war to be perceived by their own populations as an effort for the deliverance of Jewry. There was to be no hint or implication that allied soldiers were mercenaries in a Jewish cause.

- Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, p. 255

*Job said to God: "You will look for me in the morning, and I shall not be."*



Photo Public Domain - Library of Congress

**Portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1933**

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## Victims

*The entire gypsy camp at Auschwitz, of 4000 people, was exterminated on August 1, 1944:*

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Photo Credit: USHMM, courtesy of National Archives

***Funeral of inmates who could not be saved or who were killed by the SS before the liberation of Auschwitz.***

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Set up as a family camp, the Gypsy unit rapidly deteriorated and became extraordinarily filthy and unhygienic even for Auschwitz, a place of starving babies, children and adults. B. insisted that there were "sufficient rations... delivered to the camp for all of them to survive", but that certain adult Gypsies of high standing kept most of the food, thus denying it to all others, including hungry children. The Auschwitz leaders, "shocked" by the situation, came to the conclusion that it was virtually impossible to change it and that the only solution was to "gas the entire camp."

According to B., Mengele strongly opposed that decision, made several trips to Berlin to try and get it reversed, and went so far as to declare to other Auschwitz authorities that annihilating the Gypsy camp would be "a crime."

*[Most other sources agree that Mengele was in favor of killing the Gypsies.]*

Prisoner doctors who had worked there at the time told me that Mengele seemed to be all over the camp at once that day, actively supervising arrangements for getting the Gypsies to the gas chamber. He had been close to some of the Gypsy children--bringing them food and candy, sometimes little toys, and taking them for brief outings. Whenever he appeared, they would greet him warmly with the cry, "Onkel ['Uncle'] Mengele!" But that day, the children were frightened. Dr. Alexander O. described the scene and one child's plea to Mengele:

*Mengele arrived at around eight o'clock or seven-thirty. It was daylight. He came, and then the children... A Gypsy girl of eleven, twelve,... the oldest [child] of a whole family--maybe thirteen, with malnutrition sometimes they grow less. " Onkel Mengele [she calls], my little brother cries himself to death. We do not know where our mother is. He cries himself to death, Onkel Mengele!" Where did she go to complain? To Mengele--to the one she loves and knows she is loved by, because he loved them. His answer: "Willst du die Schnauze halten!" He said it in a common, vulgar way... but... with a sort of tenderness... "Why don't you shut your little trap!"*

Others told how Mengele combed the blocks, tracking down Gypsy children who had hidden, and how he himself transported a group of those children in a car to the gas chamber--drawing upon their trust for him and speaking tenderly and reassuringly to them until the end.

*- Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, pp. 323; 185-186*

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I went out again and went to the block where my children were. They were only skin and bone, unrecognizable. They lay there, one can say, already dying. And so I said to my father, bring the children to the sick bay, bring the children in, I said, I will see what I can do. Had they come in there earlier, it might have made a difference.

And so my father brought in the eldest the next day, she was ten. And when I saw her, she could not speak a word anymore. She only lay there, her eyes open, and not a word. Could only lie there, was more dead than... only breathed. So I spoke to her... then she died. They simply threw her there, with the other corpses. My own child.

And so one after the other. The one, she was six, was already dead when I came there. I did not see her anymore. Not long after, the other one died too. They were only skin and bones. Skin and bones, nothing else, one could count the ribs. The eyes so deep in the head. The children were dead, all three.

- *Testimony of a Gypsy woman survivor of the Gypsy family camp, Anatomy, p. 452*



Photo Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Mark Chizanowski

***The corpses of prisoners killed just prior to the evacuation of Auschwitz - Birkenau tumble out of a shed into the snow when it is opened after the liberation.***

This is the reason why three-year-old Emilia died: the historical necessity of killing the children of Jews was self-demonstrative to the Germans. Emilia, daughter of Aldo Levi of Milan, was a curious, ambitious, cheerful, intelligent child; her parents had succeeded in washing her during the journey in the packed car in a tub with tepid water which the degenerate German engineer had allowed them to draw from the engine that was dragging us all to death.

Thus, in an instant, our women, our parents, our children disappeared. We saw them for a short while as an obscure mass at the other end of the platform; then we saw nothing more.

- *Levi, Survival*, p. 20

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The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. "Long live liberty!" cried the two adults. But the child was silent.

"Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over...

Then the march past began.

The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive...

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is He? Here He is--He is hanging here on this gallows..."

That night the soup tasted of corpses.

- *Wiesel, Night*, p. 72

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The number of people murdered at Auschwitz is an open question. The best estimate is that 1.1 million died there, 90% of them Jews.

Immediately after the war, Soviet and Polish commissions reported four million victims of the camp; Camp Commandant Rudolf Höss testified that three million died there.

It is impossible to ascertain exactly how many people were at Auschwitz for two reasons. First of all, no records were kept of people murdered after selections at the train station; they were never assigned numbers or entered into camp records but vanished into what the Nazis themselves called "night and fog" ("nacht und nebel"). Secondly, the Nazis destroyed many records before abandoning Auschwitz.

Scholars such as Franciszek Piper, writing in **Anatomy**, pp. 61-76, arrive at their estimates by looking at the more accurate records of people deported to Auschwitz from various countries, and then subtracting the number of people known to have been transferred to other camps or to have survived the war.

Based on these calculations (1,300,000 deportees minus 200,000 survivors), at least 1,100,000 persons were killed or died in the camp.

- Gutman, Yisrael, Berenbaum, **Anatomy**, p. 71

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Franciszek Gajnowiczek... is a stooped, gray-haired man who has survived Auschwitz to testify that when he was selected at random for execution one day in 1941, a Franciscan priest named Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward and volunteered to take his place, and did take his place and did die. (The Vatican in due time proclaimed Kolbe to be beatified and well on the way to sainthood.)

- Friedrich, **The Kingdom of Auschwitz**, p. 102

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### ***Plaque at Auschwitz Today***



**For ever let this place be a cry of despair  
and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered  
about one and a half million men, women, and children,  
mainly Jews from various countries of Europe.**

**Auschwitz – Birkenau  
1940 – 1945**

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## Why

Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand's reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. "Warum?" I asked him in my poor German. "Hier ist kein warum," (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.

- Levi, *Survival*, p. 29



Image © 2005 L.E. Caro

*"Icicles"*



## X-rays

*Among the medical experiments carried out on Block 10 was one involving the sterilization of unknowing prisoners by x-rays. These were conducted by Horst Schumann, a Nazi doctor who had previously been involved in euthanasia killings in Germany and who came to Auschwitz in 1941:*

Experimental subjects--relatively healthy young men and women in their late teens or early twenties, who had been obtained by a previous day's order from the camps--were lined up in a waiting room and brought in one by one, often completely ignorant of what was to be done to them. Women were put between plates that pressed against abdomen and back; men placed penis and scrotum on a special plate. Schumann himself turned on the machine, which hummed loudly... many of the women emerged with what Marie L. called "substantial burns", which could become infected and take a long time to heal; and many quickly developed symptoms of peritonitis, including fever and severe pain and vomiting. Not long after the x-rays, the women's ovaries were removed surgically, often in two separate operations...

*- Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, p. 281*

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Among the women, there were pleurisies, suppurations, aggravations of pulmonary tuberculosis, and death. As for the men, after the x-rays, sperm was collected ("their prostates [were] brutally massaged with pieces of wood inserted into the rectum") and sooner or later one or both testicles were surgically removed, with resulting hemorrhages, septicemia, and death.

*- Lifton, **The Nazi Doctors**, p. 282*

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A Greek-Jewish woman described her terror as she saw in a reflection "the blood pouring out as they opened my belly"; and then, after the two operations, "pus--like a pit from an infected wound, and a high temperature... pneumonia. My body swelled

up, and there were marks when I pressed my arm [edema]. They gave me medicine. I was paralyzed... I couldn't move. My whole body was swollen up." In addition: "we knew we were like a tree without fruit... The experiment was that they were destroying our organs... We would cry together about this"; and "They took us because they didn't have rabbits."

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 282

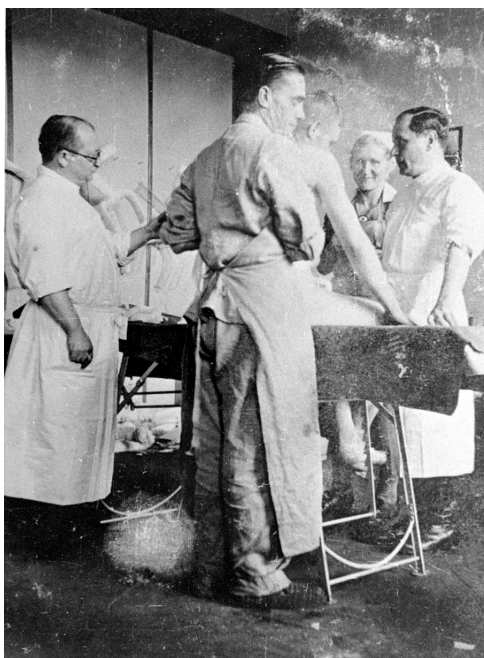


Photo Credit: USHMM - Instytut Pamięci Narodowej

**Nazi physician Carl Clauberg (at left), who performed medical experiments on prisoners in Block 10 of the Auschwitz camp in Poland, between 1941 and 1944.**

After the war, Dr. Schumann fled to Africa, where, remarkably, he worked tirelessly in remote areas saving victims of sleeping sickness and described himself as "having found the serenity and the calm necessary for the moral balance of a human being." He was repatriated to Germany in 1966, where in a greatly weakened condition after several years in custody, he was released without standing trial. In custody, he alternated between statements such as "It was terrible what we did," and other statements defending or denying his actions. He died in 1983.

- Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, p. 284



## Yesterday and Today

How often when we talk about genocide, in World War II or in Bosnia or Rwanda today, do we acknowledge that our country, the United States of America (under the same Constitution, with its Bill of Rights, that we honor today), was founded on genocide?

The following is an eyewitness account of the Sand Creek massacre of 1864, when 105 Cheyenne women and children were mutilated and murdered by U.S. troops under Colonel J.M. Chivington:

There seemed to be indiscriminate slaughter of men, women, children. There were some thirty or forty squaws collected in a hole for protection; they sent out a little girl about six years old with a white flag on a stick; she had not proceeded but a few steps when she was shot and killed. All the squaws in that hole were afterward killed, and four or five bucks outside. The squaws offered no resistance. Everyone I saw dead was scalped. I saw one squaw cut open with an unborn child, as I thought, lying by her side... I saw quite a number of infants in arms killed with their mothers.

Another witness:

I also heard of numerous instances in which men had cut out the private parts of females and stretched them over the saddlebows and wore them over their hats while riding in the ranks.

Colonel Chivington, at a speech not long before the massacre, advocated the killing and scalping of all Indians, even infants: "Nits make lice!"

- Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*  
(Washington Square Press, 1981), pp. 88-89

In 1948, the Israelis committed genocide at Deir Yassin. The villagers resisted the 120 Jewish attackers, as they had a right to, and a heavy machine gun and a mortar were brought up to end the battle. Then the raiding party entered the village and started behaving like a Nazi Einsatzkommando. Twenty-three men were led off to a quarry and executed in cold blood, and between 90 and 230 others were shot down in the village.

Menachem Begin's statement afterwards:

Accept my congratulations on this splendid act of conquest...

News of Deir Yassin spread quickly and was influential in causing much of the Arab population to flee the borders of the newly declared Israeli state. Israel, of course, has built a whole structure of ownership based on the "abandonment" of their houses and lands, as well as arguing ceaselessly that those who fled in 1948 did so needlessly and do not deserve to come back.

- Source for the Deir Yassin information: Paul Johnson,  
*A History of the Jews* (Harper Perennial, 1987).

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Americans committed genocide in Vietnam and were never punished:

The mass executions had occurred in stages--principally at the main trail leading into the village and later at the irrigation ditch. One of those taken to the trail site was Truong Thi Le, aged 30, who lost nine members of her immediate family, including her husband, mother, three brothers, and a 17 year old daughter... she was rounded up with her 6-year-old son... when the shooting began, she pushed him into the paddy field beside the trail and lay on top of his body, pressing him down, urging him not to cry... Two corpses were on top of her and when she raised her head slightly as the shooting stopped she could see soldiers still moving. They appeared to be pointing toward people on the ground. They began shooting those who were alive all over again.

- Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*,  
(Penguin, 1992), pp. 157-158

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*Genocide is with us today and we are doing nothing about it:*

Then, she says, Mr. Viskovic forced them out of the apartment. Outside, he pointed his weapon at Mrs. Sestovic and made her lie down on the road. Then he ordered her to crawl along the road as he kicked her repeatedly. Finally, she and the two teenagers were pushed into a small bus filled with Muslims and taken to the Susica camp.

Conditions at the camp, where a former Serbian guard has said up to 3,000 Muslims were killed over four months, were appalling.

Mrs. Sestovic is particularly haunted by the memory of seeing two men--Durmo Handzic and Izmet Dedic--beaten to death, by recurrent nightmares about another Muslim whose ear was progressively sliced off on four consecutive nights by Serbian guards and by the recollection of the commander of the camp, Dragan Nikolic, holding up a cigarette butt and saying, "This is now worth more than all of your Muslim lives put together."

- Excerpt from an article in the December 31, 1994  
**New York Times.**

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*Let no-one think that the Holocaust was a unique event in human history: it exceeded other genocides only in efficiency and numbers, but was not different in kind.*

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## Zyklon B

The search for a suitable gas took Höss to the other death camps that were now being built... the inhabitants of the Lodz ghetto were loaded onto trucks that had been specially equipped so that the exhaust fumes could be piped up into the rear compartment. By the time the trucks arrived at a burial ground in the surrounding forest, the prisoners in the back were dead. The system had its flaws, however. The trucks could not handle large numbers of prisoners, and the gas from the exhaust pipes flowed in so unevenly that some of the victims were still gasping with life when the trucks reached the burial ground...



Photo © Ryszard Domasik

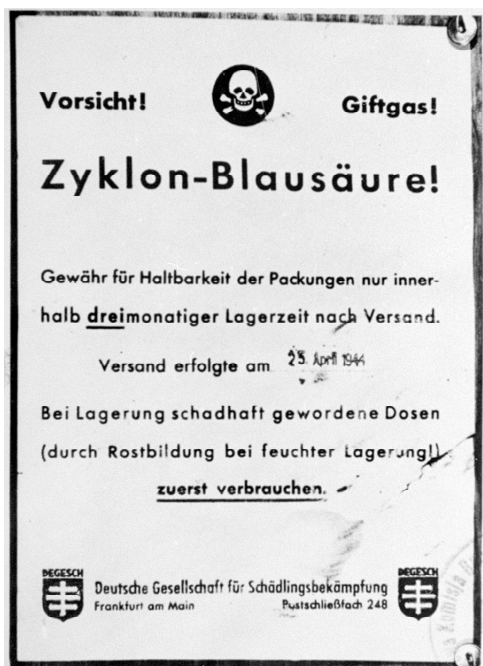
**Zyklon-B Canisters**

Höss apparently was not aware, nor was Eichmann, that the suitable gas was already available. It was called Zyklon B, a commercial form of hydrocyanic acid, which became active on contact with air.



It was manufactured by a firm called Degesch, which was largely owned by I.G. Farben, and it had been brought to Auschwitz in the summer of 1941 as a vermin-killer and disinfectant.

- Friedrich, *The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, p. 17



*A manufacturer's warning about the effects of Zyklon-B.*

### *Höss speaks:*

“The door would now be quickly screwed up and the gas discharged by the waiting disinfectors through vents in the ceilings of the gas chambers, down a shaft that led to the floor. This insured the rapid distribution of the gas. It could be observed through the peephole in the door that those who were standing nearest to the induction vents were killed at once. It can be said that about one-third died straightaway.”

“The remainder staggered about and began to scream and struggle for air. The screaming, however, soon changed to the

death rattle and in a few minutes all lay still... The door was opened half an hour after the induction of the gas, and the ventilation switched on... The special detachment now set about removing the gold teeth and cutting the hair from the women.”

“After this, the bodies were taken up by elevator and laid in front of the ovens, which had meanwhile been stoked up. Depending on the size of the bodies, up to three corpses could be put into one oven at the same time.”

“The time required for cremation... took twenty minutes.”

- *Friedrich, The Kingdom of Auschwitz*, p. 32

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## Epitaph

...in this war morality, national solidarity, patriotism and the ideals of freedom, justice and human dignity had all slid off man like a rotten rag. We said that there is no crime that a man will not commit in order to save himself. And, having saved himself, he will commit crimes for increasingly trivial reasons; he will commit them first out of duty, then from habit, and finally--for pleasure.

- Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, p. 168

*Tadeusz Borowski killed himself in 1951, at age 29, after having become an agent of the Communist government and author of hate literature.*

It can happen, and it can happen everywhere. I do not intend to nor can I say that it will happen... it is not very probable that all the factors that unleashed the Nazi madness will again occur simultaneously but precursory signs loom before us... It only awaits its new buffoon (there is no dearth of candidates) to organize it, legalize it, declare it necessary and mandatory, and so contaminate the world.

- Levi, *Drowned*, pp. 199-200

*Primo Levi died in 1987, age 68, in a fall down the stairs of his Turin apartment house. This is thought but not known to have been suicide.*



## What I Learned From Auschwitz

A non-Jewish physician who spotted me reading a book on Nuremberg said, "When I read about the Holocaust, I become clinically depressed." He was right. Holocaust literature must be sampled, interspersed with other reading. If you dive into it for several months at a time, you wind up wanting to kill yourself.

In his novel **Jurgen**, James Branch Cabell relates how Merlin sent Jurgen to a Druid who had promised to reveal the truth about life. Merlin apparently was afraid to accept the invitation himself. Jurgen, after having received the revelation, remarked that it was rather unpleasant. To which the Druid replied: "Merlin would have died, and Merlin would have died without regret, if Merlin had seen what you have seen, because Merlin receives facts reasonably."

Nevertheless, in compiling *An Auschwitz Alphabet*, I learned a few things.

### *God after Auschwitz*

Ever since Auschwitz, theologians have had to go through major contortions to hold onto an image of a personal, interventive God. It is unbearable to believe either that God caused the destruction of the Jews, the Gypsies and the other victims, or that God does not care.

The idea that entire groups of people may be indicted based on race or other identity is unacceptable to anyone who believes in equality and justice. And it makes God out to be a mass murderer. On the other hand, if God does not care, why believe in Him? An uncaring God is either a cruel and negligent one, or, even worse, a God who is unaware of humans and their plight. This latter--the God of Spinoza and of Freud's psychotic Dr. Schreber--is a metaphysical formulation bearing little relationship to the popular idea of God as a being who intervenes in human history.

Another widespread idea is that God suffered over Auschwitz, but could not intervene, due to His commitment to

allowing humans to exercise free will. This idea seems to break down in an age of increasing technological power. When a single human becomes able to wield a bomb that can destroy all life on earth, is his free will really more important than the continued existence of the planet and all life upon it?

The approach which probably has sustained most believers since Auschwitz is to shut up and stop asking questions. Interestingly, this is the message not of God but the devil to the knight in Bergman's **The Seventh Seal**. This approach is not acceptable to those who believe that there is no area off-limits to human questioning.

The absence of an interventive God may be seen, counter intuitively, as a catalyst to moral growth and the assumption of personal responsibility. If there is no one else available to do the job for us, then all compassion and all hatred in the human universe is ours. We are on our own.

### *Surviving Auschwitz was not an ennobling experience*

It would be very easy to believe that anyone who survived Auschwitz must be a saint. This does not bear examination. Auschwitz was an extermination camp. A saint in Auschwitz likely died on the day of arrival. A saint who survived did so in spite of sainthood, not because of it. Those who survived did so because they had and exploited some advantage over the others. Doctors survived because early on the Nazis made a decision to spare them and enlist them in the administrative life of the camp, including human experimentation. Skilled workmen survived because their skills were needed. Polish prostitutes were spared for the brothel block. Hustlers, who made themselves indispensable to the camp authorities, survived.

Art Spiegelman in **Maus** tells the story of how his father, an entrepreneur, survived in Auschwitz. He persuaded the man in charge of his block that he was a shoemaker. He taught himself how to make simple repairs. When handed a pair of boots far beyond his skills to fix, Mr. Spiegelman found a shoemaker in one of the other blocks and subcontracted the work. Mr. Spiegelman survived in part because of this man's labor, but the shoemaker's fate is not recorded.

I do not remember the source of another story. Every morning, the inhabitants of each block turned out for roll call. Despite the chaos of the camp, the daily murders and deaths from disease and overwork, the neat German penchant for bureaucracy meant that the numbers must be monitored and that roll call would take place every day. Anyone found at roll call without his shoes would be sent to the gas chamber--but a moment of inattention and any personal effects could be stolen.

A teenager who survived Auschwitz related how he was raped in his bunk one night by another inmate. The next morning, he realized the rapist had stolen his shoes, to ensure his elimination. So he simply took a pair from someone who was still sleeping, assuring the other's destruction instead of his own.

Primo Levi survived because he was young, relatively strong, and a chemist. Here are his words on the survivors of Auschwitz:

There remained only the doctors, tailors, shoemakers, musicians, cooks, young attractive homosexuals, friends or compatriots of some authority in the camp; or they were particularly pitiless, vigorous and inhuman individuals... or, finally, those who, without fulfilling particular functions, had always succeeded through their astuteness and energy in successfully organizing, gaining in this way, besides material advantages and reputation, the indulgence and esteem of the powerful people in the camp... [All others] followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea.

*Levi, Survival In Auschwitz, p. 89*

### ***Auschwitz is not a credit card***

In high school, I had a friend who was Lebanese. We had a very full friendship; we could talk to each other about almost anything. She once was cruel to a boy who liked her, and when I criticized her, responded, "I wouldn't treat you like that." We were very highly attracted to each other, but nothing could ever happen because of the Arab-Jewish thing, which was the one topic on which communication always broke down.

The school was in a Jewish neighborhood, and most of our teachers were Jewish. She did not deny that the Holocaust had happened, but she believed that our teachers, when they taught it every year, used it as a kind of blank check for present-day Jewish interests--an accusation that made me crazy with anger at the time but which I take more seriously today. Later, I met another woman, part American Indian, who added her own theory: we should not claim any consideration for anything which has not happened to us personally. What happened to your people before you were born does not give you any special moral standing.

Our high school teachers were fond of writing on the board the quote from Santayana that says if we do not remember the past, we will be condemned to repeat it. This is the most important reason to remember Auschwitz--a message which frequently is lost in the way it is delivered, for example, when the Nazis are presented as demonic "others" entirely dissimilar to us. I will pick up this theme below. The point here is that, whenever someone speaks about Auschwitz, it is worth asking what the subtext is of the speech. If it is ever in aid of an agenda like support of a particular country or the betterment of a single group, those who died there are being insulted. If the speech is in support of self-examination, an end to hatred and becoming better human beings, it should be heard.

### *There are different types of remembering*

It is not enough merely to remember the past; one must remember the truth, analyze it, derive rules from it and desire to act. But this is not what we usually do. Most of our remembering, in fact, does the opposite: it is a preparatory step for the final ejection of the truth from public consciousness. This style of remembering is similar to the process by which an oyster creates a pearl by coating an impurity. The movie **Schindler's List** is an example; it sends you from the theater hopeful and relieved, that a hero arose to handle the Holocaust. In so doing, it tells the wrong story. The main themes of the Holocaust were not rescue or hope, but despair and murder. Of all the books I have read on Auschwitz, none mention Oskar Schindler or relate the episode shown in the movie of his rescue of the "Schindlerjuden" from Auschwitz. Instead, most agree that there was no rescue from Ausch-

witz. According to Hannah Arendt in **Eichmann in Jerusalem**, Adolf Eichmann testified that even he could not rescue a "favorite" Jew from Auschwitz.

How do you remember a truth that will cause clinical depression? A truth that will cause a man or woman who "receives facts reasonably" to want to die? You steel yourself and remember it, that's all. The only hope you can derive from such a truth, clearly seen, is the resolve to act differently and to do your small part to make the world different than it is.

### *The Nazis are not so different from us*

I was born in 1954, and most of what I know about life I learned at the movies. Movie Nazis are swaggering villains and fools, revealed in films like **The Dirty Dozen** and **Operation Crossbow**. You can read **The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich**, or any book on the Nuremberg trials, and find that the people at the top--Hitler, Goering, Goebbels, et al.--behaved like movie villains. But behind them were a multitude of ordinary people, following their leaders. Some did it with enthusiasm, while others got along by going along. As do we. For every Dr. Mengele, every sadist who enjoyed killing, there were 100 or 1000 Eichmanns, bureaucrats dealing with questions of finding the railroad capacity to take the Jews to the east, or the supplies of Zyklon-B necessary to gas them. Responsibility for the events was so thoroughly diffused throughout the bureaucracy, throughout society, that the people who enjoyed killing did it and everyone else was sheltered from it. The only difference between our society, any society, and Nazi Germany, is the charismatic leader who tells us killing is all right. And there is nothing in our society to prevent him from coming to power-- in fact, it has already happened to us in several variations.

I n a n e s s a y a t  
<http://www.spectacle.org/295/ordinary.html>, I compared two books, **Ordinary Men**, about a group of middle-aged German policemen put to work executing Jews, and **Band of Brothers**, about a platoon of paratroopers in the American invasion of Europe. The humanity and the evil in both groups of men radiate from the pages of these books. There is no doubt that if the Germans had not been ordered to kill, they would have been much



happier, and if the Americans had been ordered to shoot down defenseless German women and children, most would have done so.

In those same high school years--the years in which I was morally formed--I was very perplexed by alternating news reports. In some incidents, reminiscent of the notorious killing of Kitty Genovese, groups of people stood by while someone was assaulted or killed. In others, a group of people would go to a victim's aid, perform a rescue and hold the assailant for the police. I helped chase a couple of thieves in the street myself, and realized the explanation. I was running because someone else had shouted, "Stop thief!", and started off down the street. When crowds rescue a victim, someone has acted first, and others followed. When crowds stand by, no one has taken the initiative. Most people are probably poised precariously on the edge between action and inaction, between good and evil. Everything depends on the one who steps forward.

One of the most poignant quotes I found in reading about Auschwitz is also one of the most famous, and was spoken by Himmler in a petulant speech to SS generals when he was besieged with petitions to spare individual Jews:

And then there come eighty million worthy Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. Of course, the others are vermin, but this one is an A-1 Jew.

And he went on to say that we must resist these weak, compassionate impulses, in order to be great:

Most of you must know what it means when a hundred corpses are lying side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck it out and at the same time remained decent fellows, that is what has made us so hard.

It is all there: the pathology of the leadership, the kernel of compassion in the breast of 80 million Germans, and even the delusion of having remained decent. We are no different.

*Genocide is always with us*

Auschwitz was not unique in kind, but only in degree. In every era of history, human beings have committed genocide, from the battles between competing varieties of prehistoric man, to the "ethnic cleansings" of the 1990's in Bosnia and Rwanda, or today in the Sudan.

Just as each of eighty million loyal Germans had his favorite Jew, each of us has his favorite genocide, the one genocide that is an exception, that was only self-defense, or a regrettable but understandable act of war, or an act of heroism, or an exercise of a God-given right to claim a birthright. There are Israelis today who think the Israeli gunman shooting worshippers in the mosque was a patriot and hero, Serbs who think the NATO response to ethnic cleansing was an overreaction, and millions of Americans who do not realize that the United States itself was built on a genocide.

If you say that yes, but that was in another century, and things were different, and Americans have changed since then, think about the heap of corpses at Mylai, women and children murdered by American soldiers under orders from Lieutenant William Calley.

I know I sound dangerously close to saying that genocide is inevitable, that humans will always kill humans for land or for power, so lets get on with it. I am not saying that at all. Humans never flew until they flew. The fact that something has always been a certain way does not mean it must continue.

As long as we are taught that genocide is something that can only be committed by a demonic "other", that we are good people and the desire to commit genocide could never come to us, we will perpetuate genocide, for it is precisely (as Santayana said) those who deny who perpetuate the evils and disasters of the past. Gibbon said that history is nothing but the record of the follies and misfortunes of mankind: it is not however graven in stone that we are eternally doomed to commit the same crimes and mistakes until we expire on this earth. There is a way out.

***Our hearts are prone to disease, which can be resisted***

Our moral hearts, like our physical ones, are weak and prone to disease. If we acknowledge this and determine to exercise them, we have a chance to live. If we deny it and insist our hearts are failure-proof, we let the disease in at the door.

Like fragments of a hologram, each of us contains an image of the whole of our species; each of us participates in all of the beauty and all the evil of being human. We all participate in the music of Mozart and the murderousness of Mengele. If, in the morning, you look in the mirror and you say, "I have the face of a murderer," you have placed yourself in a position to begin the work that needs to be done. It involves drawing up a daily balance sheet, asking yourself each night what you have done that day to deny that murderer. Whatever other people do, whether they too are doing that work or not, you will have done your part to see that Auschwitz may never happen again.

## **An Excerpt from the Passover Service**

### ***Leader:***

I lift up the cup of deliverance and call upon the Name of God.

### ***Group:***

We will praise our God forever.

### ***Leader:***

Out of the depths, I called upon God! Who answered me, with great deliverance.

### ***Group:***

We will not die, but live...

### ***Leader:***

I shall walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

### ***Group:***

We will not die, but live...

### ***Leader:***

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

### ***Group:***

We will not die, but live...

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## **Bibliography II**

### **Links to Holocaust Resources on the Net**

Ken McVay, who nobly devotes his time to fighting Holocaust denial on the Net, has a clearinghouse for all Holocaust information, **The Nizkor Project**. ([www.nizkor.org](http://www.nizkor.org))

A really detailed and beautiful site is Michael Declan Dunn's **Cybrary of the Holocaust**. ([www.remember.org](http://www.remember.org))

The **United States Holocaust Museum** - America's national institution for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history, and serves as this country's memorial to the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust. ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org))

Reader Ari Frankel notified me about a **Primo Levi** interview on his Web pages. ([www.inch.com/~ari/levi1.html](http://www.inch.com/~ari/levi1.html))

There is now an official **Anne Frank web site**. However, I'm potentially uncomfortable with the Anne Frank museum, which runs it. A year ago, a really great unofficial Anne Frank website was driven off the air by copyright threats, and I think--but do not know--that these are the folks who did it. If so, they may be running this a bit too much as a business. ([www.annefrank.com](http://www.annefrank.com))

**David's Holocaust Awareness Project** was compiled by an 11 year old boy. ([members.aol.com/dhs11/remember.html](http://members.aol.com/dhs11/remember.html))

**Brave New Web** hosts IDEA, a Webzine dedicated to studying genocide, autocracy and abuse of power. A collection of contemporary photographs of Auschwitz is available here as well. ([www.bravenewweb.com](http://www.bravenewweb.com))

**Holocaust-Info** - this site was made by Mikkel Andersson, a Danish IT-professional and amateur Holocaust-researcher. It began in 1997 as a result of his involvement in the countering of Holocaust-deniers on the Internet. Mikkel is credited with several photos in this book. ([holocaust-info.dk](http://holocaust-info.dk))