

was, however, also a risk which some individuals were prepared to take: a few SS men refused camp or killing duties, and some were indeed sent to the front. Most guards and officers discharged their duties efficiently, and some with gleeful, inventive cruelty. Again, given the variability of both circumstance and conduct, each case must be assessed individually, but in view of the demonstrated existence of choice, each individual must be regarded as responsible for the choice he or she made.

The *Sonderkommando*, the men, nearly all of them Jews, whose labour kept the crematoria working, who were involved consistently and most intimately in the killing of Jews, and who lived high on the pickings of their doomed fellows, require separate consideration.

These men are rarely talked about in the literature. These are the men from whom the humanist Levi recoils. He calls them 'crematorium ravens'. He believed that their moral being had been extinguished from their first moment of co-operation with their masters, however savagely that co-operation had been won, and that their submission represented the foulest and most complete triumph of the Nazi system by the full implication of the victims in the crime being committed against them: 'it must be the Jews who put the Jews into the ovens, it must be shown that the Jews, the sub-race, the sub-men, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves.'⁷

I want to explore the situation of the men of the *Sonderkommandos* in the man-made infernos of the death camps, so that we may retrieve some part of their experience.

IN THE ZONE OF FIRE: THE AUSCHWITZ SONDERKOMMANDO

Primo Levi had spent his year as a prisoner at Monowitz, part of the Auschwitz complex seven kilometres from the Birkenau extermination plant. While he usually wrote only of people and situations he had experienced directly, he broke that rule for the *Sonderkommando* because he considered the squads to have a peculiar significance: they were, he said, 'National Socialism's most demonic crime'. While he pitied the prisoners 'flung inside the walls of an indecipherable inferno', he believed that their acceptance of their filthy work fully enmeshed them in the crimes of their tormentors. For Levi the 'cremato-

rium ravens' had become as evil as their masters. Knowing the *Sonderkommando* to be lavishly supplied with alcohol, he imagined them as being 'in a permanent state of complete prostration and debasement'.⁸ They, along with their controllers, fall outside the wide embrace of his compassion and curiosity.

I think Levi's characterization is mistaken. However terrible their circumstances, the men of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* did not live in a state of 'prostration'. Both the demands of their work and substantial evidence from the men themselves preclude that interpretation. Of necessity they were physically tough. Whether selected on the ramp or from within the camp population, they had already endured the traumas of arrival. They were then projected into a world of Boschian horrors; where the air was not air but a choking, reeking vapour, where vision was clouded by smoke, where naked human bodies, tangled, contorted, smeared with blood and excrement lay all around them.^{*}

In that place of nightmare they enjoyed none of the dreamer's physical immunity. From the first moment blows thudded on backs, arms and heads as they were forced to grapple with fouled, slithering corpses. One of them remembered:

We were running under the threat of the clubs of the SS men who supervised us. We lost ourselves to such a degree that none of us knew what he was doing, and how, and whatever was happening to him. Driven on we ran like automatons, not knowing whether we were running, what for and what we were doing . . . I know that not one of us was fully conscious, did not think, did not reflect. They reduced us to such a state that we became like [illegible] when we came to our senses somewhat [we saw] who was being dragged to be burnt and what was going on around us.

The beaten men ran and tugged and heaved, because even in that world 'the truth is one wants to live at any cost, one wants to live because one lives, because the whole world lives'.⁹

* Compare Hell – a place restricted to wilful sinners – as described in the 'retreat' sermon in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: 'Hell is a strait and dark and foulsmelling prison, an abode of demons and lost souls, filled with fire and smoke . . . The prisoners are heaped together in their awful prison . . . the fire of hell is a never-ending storm of darkness . . . amidst which the bodies are heaped one upon the other without even a glimpse of air . . . The horror of this strait and dark prison is increased by its awful stench . . . [Imagine this sickening stench] from the fetid carcasses massed together in the reeking darkness, a huge and rotting human fungus.'

This is the voice of Salmen Lewenthal. It is also a voice from the grave. It was SS policy to execute the men of the Special Squad every few months, presumably because they learnt too much of officially secret matters. The men knew that they were doomed. But even in that place some secretly wrote of what was being done there. Few of the thousands who worked in the special squads survived: from Belzec two, Chelmno four, Sobibor fifty, and from Treblinka perhaps sixty out of the thousand working there.¹⁰ Lewenthal's diary was unearthed almost twenty years after he had buried it near the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This man, bereft of a personal past and all personal ties, immersed in daily horrors, in the knowledge of his own imminent death, still retained sufficient faith in his fellow humans to record what was being done in that place in the hope that one day we would read his words.

The ferocious breaking-in was standard policy. The SS men knew that new recruits had to be driven like beasts through their first hours because if allowed time to 'collect themselves' they would balk, and the whole weary business would have to be done again. A few managed to withstand panic long enough to refuse and to be rewarded with death. Others collapsed, and if beatings failed to move them were shot where they lay. Most stumbled on, worked and lived. Can we blame them for that?

At first the men worked exclusively with the bodies of the dead. In times of peace the tender handling of corpses is taken as a sure measure of respect for the living, and so of 'civility'. For religious Jews respect for the cadaver is of particular importance, both by tradition and Jewish theology's hope for a corporal resurrection. The Nazis must have relished the infliction of that additional insult. (In the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* the processing of murdered womens' hair was malevolently assigned to a group of ultra-Orthodox Jews.) It was also during those first days that recruits were most likely to find the bodies of wives, children, parents or friends among the tangled dead, and to know themselves alone in their desolation – a knowledge others would have to endure only at liberation.

We all know how quickly habituation breeds callousness. Operating theatres, where bodies no more than mimic death, are notorious for gallows humour. And some of those thrust into these duties were already hardened. Young Simon Srebnik was unmoved by what he saw

at Chelmno extermination camp because he was already a graduate of the starving ghetto at Lodz: 'When I saw all this, it didn't affect me . . . I was only thirteen, and all I'd ever seen until then were dead bodies . . . In the ghetto at Lodz I saw that as soon as anyone took a step, he fell dead . . . I thought that's the way things had to be, that it was normal.'¹¹

Reward was inextricably implicated in the horror. Filip Müller of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* recalls how on his first day, still dazed, still nauseated, he was struggling to strip a corpse when he saw a half-opened suitcase. In it was bread and poppy-seed cake. In an instant he had them: 'With my filthy, blood-stained fingers I broke off pieces of cake and devoured them ravenously.'¹² The unholy compact was struck: food and a cessation of beating in exchange for back-breaking, degrading labour. N.B.

Saul Friedländer has urged that attention given the 'political decisions and administrative decisions' of the perpetrators should not blind us to the 'concreteness of despair and death' of the victims, reminding us that 'the *Alltagsgeschichte* [the 'everyday life'] of German society had as its necessary shadow 'the *Alltagsgeschichte* of its victims'.¹³ This is a useful reminder, especially when Germany and the victim societies they were systematically draining of life were geographically distant.

Understanding the relationship between the two becomes a major challenge when the societies of perpetrators and of victims are brought face to face, as occurred in confrontations between local Jewish communities and the German Order Police in Poland, subsequently analysed by Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen. The work of these scholars has vastly extended our understanding of the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the Order Police abroad, yet the intensity of their inquiries into the actions of the perpetrators preclude more than a gesture towards the experience of the victims, despite transparent concern for their sufferings. Interaction between police and victims was also typically brief, and violent. The concentration camps present a different situation, because there we find an *Alltagsgeschichte* of near-continuous contact within a society at once highly artificial and highly interactive. As we will be shown, camp authorities evolved a number of strategies to minimize any softening effects of that enforced proximity.

on Belzec + Treblinka

There was, however, one situation in which the two groups met and mingled in intimate interaction: the weird *Alltagsgeschichte* of the crematoria and the killing facilities, where the strong male prisoners of the *Sonderkommando* worked alongside their SS directors at one demanding job: the creation and destruction of corpses.

The work in the crematoria was physically tough: tugging, lugging, heaving, shoving, in choking heat, always at a furious pace, with the pace quickening whenever the trains banked up. Joshua Rosenblum, a member of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* from March 1944 to the closing of the killing centres in October of that year, remembered how during those months the squads had to deal with so many bodies that, even though squad numbers had increased to 180 or more men, each squad with four SS supervisors, they were still working twelve to sixteen hours at a stretch.¹⁴ Four hundred thousand Hungarian Jews died in the course of that long summer.

The selection of workers to handle living victims was more cautious. Only seasoned men were allowed to work in the ante-chambers, easing each new intake through the business of preparing for the 'showers'; leading them, like Judas sheep, into the gas chambers.¹⁵ They were instructed to keep the people reassured and docile, and by and large they followed their instructions. Ought they have done otherwise? On the few documented occasions when victims were warned and comprehended the warning, the scene ended as planned, but with far more blood and terror.

Filip Müller sometimes played that Judas role, but most of the time he worked as a stoker: a stoker of bodies. Once the furnaces were kindled the main fuel relied on was human fat, so an effective burn depended on intelligent selection as well as artful stacking. Müller had been transferred to Birkenau from the Auschwitz I crematorium in April 1943, and what he later remembered about his first Birkenau year was its relative easiness. In those early days there were only about 200 men in the *Sonderkommando* divided in four squads of fifty, each division with its four regular SS overseers. For the prisoners this was an enclosed community, and scarcely less so for the SS, given their long working hours. While there were some Russians, Salonika Greeks and a few Czechs, most of the workers were Polish or German Jews, and nearly all could converse with their fellows.¹⁶

Fifty is a good number for a work group, large enough to accom-

modate individual quirks, small enough for the development of *esprit de corps*, especially if the teams are male, the work physical, the bosses reasonably benevolent, and there are other teams with whom to compete. After his experiences in the Auschwitz squad, where savage beatings and abuse had been commonplace, Müller was amazed by the easygoing ways of his first Birkenau *Kapo*, a young Pole 'leaning on his stick without either goading or beating us', who would talk about news from the front – until the arrival of an SS officer sent him leaping into a flurry of pantomimed activity. Another Polish *Kapo* notorious in Auschwitz I for his 'uncontrollable' temper (he had killed several men in his rages) after transferral to Birkenau was transformed into an image of remote calm.¹⁷

The *Kapo's* actorish composure was presumably modelled on the local SS style, which was notably 'cool'. Relations between supervisors and workers were commonly easy, and once the frenetic initiations were over, beatings were rare. They happened. Müller reports that his block senior was given twenty-five strokes on the buttocks for allowing too many of his subordinates to report sick. The senior in turn pummelled the French-trained doctor in charge of the infirmary and abused him: 'Listen, you bloody academic idiot,' he yelled, 'you're not at the Sorbonne now, you bastard.'¹⁸ Twenty-five strokes is no trifle, but compared to the arbitrariness, the viciousness and the mechanical impersonality of the punishments inflicted in Auschwitz I, these exchanges are at least recognizably human.

Outside working hours the living was easy. Unlike ordinary prisoners, the men of the *Sonderkommando* were not in competition with each other for necessities. For most of the time food, clothing and bedding, some of the finest quality, were in abundant supply. A doctor attached to the unit remembers silk coverlets and cushions on the individual wooden bunks, a tiled shower room for the two compulsory showers daily, and the men as being in prime physical condition – although suffering from 'acute nervous depression, and often neurasthenia'.¹⁹

Easy access to goods allowed trade with the rest of the camp. That trade could only occur with the co-operation of the *Kapos* and the guards outside the extermination sector, and the indulgence of at least some of the *Sonderkommando's* SS bosses. Forbidden even to touch the bodies themselves, the SS had to rely on their underlings for access