

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

WITNESS AND COMPLICITY: THE SCROLLS OF AUSCHWITZ AND THE  
SONDERKOMMANDO

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## Introduction

Dear finder of these notes, I have one request of you, which is, in fact, the practical objective for my writing . . . that my days of Hell, that my hopeless tomorrow will find a purpose in the future. I am transmitting only a part of what happened in the Birkenau-Auschwitz Hell. You will realize what reality looked like . . . From all this you will have a picture of how our people perished.<sup>1</sup>

After the Nazis abandoned Auschwitz in January 1945, they left a mess of burned documents, destroyed buildings, sunken corpses, and broken people. Buried among this tragic landscape were documents that members of the camp's Sonderkommando, the men who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria, wrote and buried. Sonderkommando prisoners Zalmen Gradowski, Zalmen Lewenthal, Leyb Langfus, Chaim Herman, and Marcel Nadjary recorded their experiences working in the gas chambers and crematoria. They risked their lives by writing and burying these manuscripts in the hopes that the world would one day know the reality of what was happening in the camp. Each author's manuscript is unique. Some record transports, deaths, and experiences in the gas chambers, while some are simply the thoughts of the author or threats of vengeance. Above all, they are lamentations for their families, their friends, their people, and themselves. Though these authors died in Auschwitz, their manuscripts were never discovered by the Nazis and remained there after the guards left the camp.

In the days after the Nazis evacuated Auschwitz, citizens of the surrounding Polish countryside rummaged through the camp looking for all of the riches that the Jews were rumored to have hoarded.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, due to their scavenging, many of the buried manuscripts were

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Totten, ed., *Last Lectures on the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, *Matters of Testimony: Interpreting the Scrolls of Auschwitz* (London: Berghahn Books, 2016), 1-2.

discarded upon discovery as they had no value to the Polish citizens. Gradowski wrote that “dozens of documents that shed light on everything that happened here . . . are buried there” – in the crematorium yards.<sup>3</sup> Many of those manuscripts are lost to history. At the same time, there were a few discoverers who understood the importance of these documents and kept them. A Polish Red Cross doctor discovered the first manuscript in early 1945 among a pile of ashes.<sup>4</sup> Others discovered a few other manuscripts in 1945 but, unfortunately, as the world was reeling from World War II and dealing with its aftermath, the discoveries remained somewhat unknown and unimportant to most people.

These manuscripts and others discovered before the Auschwitz State Museum was fully established passed through many hands and some were even lost. In 1970, a citizen of Oswiecim, the town surrounding Auschwitz, brought manuscripts to the museum that he had found in his attic. His brother discovered them in the ruins of the camp in 1945 and put them in the attic where they remained untouched for two decades.<sup>5</sup> In 1980 researchers discovered the last manuscript unearthed to date and it went straight to the museum. Further problems existed with the manuscripts. Many were damaged from the elements and some portions were unreadable. Though the authors did their best to protect the manuscripts, they had limited resources and some documents were ruined from the weather. It was a great undertaking to not only translate the documents, which ranged from Yiddish, French, to Greek, but also to simply make out what they said due to the damage.

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<sup>3</sup> Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989), 110.

The first person to take on the task of translating and publishing these manuscripts was Bernard Mark, who began the project in the 1960s as the director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland. His work included four of the manuscripts found in the crematorium yards at Auschwitz – one manuscript by Zalman Gradowski, two by Zalman Lewenthal, and one by Leyb Langfus. After Mark's death in 1966, his wife finished the book for him. It was titled *the Scrolls of Auschwitz*, which is what the manuscripts are collectively called today, and Mark's work was published in Israel in 1977.<sup>6</sup> It was not published in English until 1985. Though Mark's work is one of the foundational works on the Scrolls of Auschwitz, it was incomplete. In addition, though his translations were incredibly beneficial to studying the scrolls, there has been more progress in further translating the manuscripts. Mark's work is important, but much progress has been made in the study of the manuscripts since it was published.

The Auschwitz State Museum published its own translation of the same manuscripts as Mark as well as a manuscript by Chaim Herman in 1971. In 1973, they published another version of this book that included the manuscript that the Oswiecim man found in his attic. They attributed this work to Leyb Langfus. The English version of their work, titled *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, did not appear until 1992.<sup>7</sup> Even still, the museum's publication is incomplete as it does not include all of the manuscripts. The book contains helpful commentary on the extermination process at Auschwitz, information on the discovery of each manuscript, and the background of its author; however, it offers no analysis of the manuscripts themselves and what they mean beyond the literal translation. My thesis goes beyond this by addressing what the manuscripts mean in a broader context such as what they say about the Sonderkommando as a

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz* (Tel Aviv: Am `Oved Pub. House, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Jadwiga Bezwińska, and Danuta Czech, *Amidst A Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Members of Sonderkommando* (Oswiecim, Poland: Publications of State Museum at Oswiecim, 1973).

whole and how they point to their innocence rather than complicity in the Nazi's crimes at Auschwitz.

The final major work on the Scrolls of Auschwitz is *Matters of Testimony* by Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams.<sup>8</sup> This book, published in England in 2016, is by far the most comprehensive and useful source on the topic as it is the only work in English that examines the writings of all five authors. Importantly, unlike the other two works, this book has a clear thesis and analyzes the manuscripts in depth. Their thesis is, "What recurs in the discussions of the [Sonderkommando], therefore, is the idea that they could not reflect on their situation, or serve independently as witnesses. In this book, we want to argue that this is exactly what they could do. We will argue that the Scrolls are an important, and under-read archive of Holocaust writing."<sup>9</sup> Their thesis provides the foundation for this research.

Four of the Scroll authors, Gradowski, Langfus, Lewenthal, and Herman, were similar in many aspects. All of them arrived at Auschwitz in late 1942 or early 1943. All four of them were dead by the end of 1944 with the exception of Lewenthal, whose exact date of death is unknown.<sup>10</sup> Gradowski, Langfus, and Lewenthal are particularly linked because it is certain that they knew each other from working in the crematoria at the same time and planning the Sonderkommando Uprising of 1944.<sup>11</sup> Gradowski and Langfus even slept in the same bunk.<sup>12</sup> Gradowski, Langfus, and Lewenthal were also likely closely connected as they were all Polish while Herman was French and Nadjary was Greek. Nadjary is unique in this group as he did not

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<sup>8</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Brown, *Judging "Privileged" Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation, and the "Gray Zone"* (New York: Berghan Books, 2013), 235.

<sup>11</sup> Zalman Lowenthal, "Diary," in Bernard Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz* (Tel Aviv: Am `Oved Pub. House, 1985), 235.

<sup>12</sup> "Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: 'Together – in Despair and Hope'," in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 165.

join Auschwitz's Sonderkommando until May 1944.<sup>13</sup> He is also the only writer to survive Auschwitz; however, little is known about his life.<sup>14</sup>

The physical existence of these letters is important because these authors had to go to great lengths to write them. They took on a great risk as it was a serious breach of camp rules for prisoners to have pens and paper.<sup>15</sup> The authors often had to have help from other prisoners to have access to writing instruments and paper or to hide the writings. Eliezer Eisenschmidt testified that Gradowski and Langfus hid their writings in bottles that they had found in the trash and sealed them with wax. He stated, "We knew we had to keep every bit of wax that we found in the trash and bring it to the Maggid [Langfus] or to Gradowski."<sup>16</sup> Shlomo Dragon, who worked in the Sonderkommando but was on barrack room duty, was vital to Gradowski. Dragon let him keep the writings and helped to hide them. Dragon also "arranged a bed for him next to a window so that he'd have enough light to write by."<sup>17</sup> The effort that these authors and their fellow workers went through to create and preserve these writings speaks to their integrity and to the manuscripts' importance.

Though each individual Sonderkommando prisoner had his own unique experience in Auschwitz, there was a general day to day process for the Sonderkommando. The process outlined here focuses on the Sonderkommando units that existed after Auschwitz reached its peak killing capabilities in 1942. The early Sonderkommando was a loose affiliation of different

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<sup>13</sup> Marcel Nadjary, "Marcel Nadjary Auschwitz Testimony," trans. the German-Canadian Centre for Innovation and Research, <https://www.scribd.com/document/361899530/Marcel-Nadjary-Auschwitz-testimony>, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Nadjary, *Χρονικό 1941-1945* (Ιδρυμα Ετσ - Αχαΐ'μ, Thessaloniki, 1991). Though Nadjary did write a memoir, it was written in his first language of Greek and it has never been translated into English.

<sup>15</sup> Lilli Zamir, "Written in Auschwitz Case Study: Works Written in Auschwitz by Sonderkommando Participants, Polish Political Prisoners and Lili Kasticher," *IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities* 5, vol. 2 (2018), 40.

<sup>16</sup> "Eliezer Eisenschmidt: 'Thanks to One Polish Family . . .'," in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 247.

<sup>17</sup> "Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: 'Together – in Despair and Hope'," 165.

kommandos, each with a different name and job from the fire stokers to the corpse haulers.<sup>18</sup> The German Schutzstaffel (SS) did not make this one cohesive commando under the name Sonderkommando until September 1942.<sup>19</sup>

The Nazis transported the victims to the camp on trains, typically in cattle cars. Officers met the people on the ramp and ordered them off the trains. They were then lined up for the selections – the process in which the Nazis decided who would go to the gas chambers immediately and who would go to work in the camp.<sup>20</sup> The women were more likely to be sent to the gas chambers upon arrival than the men, especially if they were pregnant or had young children.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to note that generally the Nazis only gassed the Jews (with the exception of some smaller transports and gypsies) and usually gave non-Jewish people “special treatment” by shooting them.<sup>22</sup>

After being herded into one of the crematoria buildings, the victims found themselves in a “dressing room” with the Sonderkommando men and SS officers. They had to completely undress and leave their clothes in piles so that they could go on to “disinfection.” To add to the illusion, the SS sometimes gave people soap and towels. It generally took half an hour to an hour for all of the victims to undress.<sup>23</sup> It was the Sonderkommando prisoner’s job to help the people undress and keep the process moving. They also had the unfortunate job of lying to their own people even though the Sonderkommando men knew that many of the victims understood their fate. Josef Sackar recalled that though the people knew what was happening he told them “No,

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<sup>18</sup> Adrian T. Meyers, “Portable Material Culture and Death Factory Auschwitz,” *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, vol. 18 (2007), 65.

<sup>19</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> “Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together – in Despair and Hope’,” 189.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>22</sup> Wetzler and Vrba, “Auschwitz Protocols,” in *the Third Reich Sourcebook* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 801.

<sup>23</sup> “Josef Sackar: ‘To Survive, so the Truth Would Come Out’,” in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 100.



no, you're just going to take a shower, and afterwards you'll go to work."<sup>24</sup> Another Sonderkommando prisoner wrote of watching a naked mother cradling her teenage daughter and mourning her because she knew that her daughter would soon be dead.<sup>25</sup> The Sonderkommando watched their own people face slaughter at the hands of their oppressors.

The victims then crowded into the gas chambers disguised as showers, and the Sonderkommando men knew that they were looking at people who would soon be dead. Usually, there was standing room only because so many people were in the chamber. Dario Gabbai recalled that the gas chambers were made to hold only around 500 people but they would put in 2,500.<sup>26</sup> As many victims as possible had to be killed at one time for efficiency. The workers then shut the doors and bolted them. Then, at the order of the SS doctor, members of the SS poured the poison into the ventilation system. They used Zyklon B which had the label "for use against vermin" on the can.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, the Nazis transported the poison to the gas chambers in a Red Cross van.<sup>28</sup> Once the gas was in the ventilation system the victims began suffocating. It generally took about 10 to 15 minutes for the screaming and pounding on the doors and walls to stop.<sup>29</sup> By then, almost all the victims were usually dead.

While this was happening, the Sonderkommando men were in the dressing room, working and listening. They gathered together the clothing and other items that the victims left behind. They were able to clearly hear what was transpiring in the gas chamber. One Sonderkommando worker recalled, "We heard loud screaming. Everyone screamed in the gas

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>25</sup> Zalmen Gradowski, "The Czech Transport," in *the Third Reich Sourcebook*, 805.

<sup>26</sup> USC Shoah Foundation, "Auschwitz II Birkenau Sonderkommando Testimony Clips," YouTube Video, 24:13, Posted [January 23, 2009], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SoTJ9cv028>.

<sup>27</sup> Wetzler and Vrba, "Auschwitz Protocols," 801.

<sup>28</sup> "Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: 'Together – in Despair and Hope'," 155.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 156.

chamber, since they were totally desperate.”<sup>30</sup> Another said that he remembered many of the victims prayed as they were dying.<sup>31</sup> After the screaming stopped, members of the SS checked through a window in the door to make sure everyone was dead. Around 15 to 30 minutes after the induction of the gas, the SS opened the door and turned on the ventilation system to air out the gas chamber.<sup>32</sup>

Once the gas chamber had aired out, the Sonderkommando prisoners had to drag the bodies out of the chamber. Because there were so many people in the chambers, many of the bodies near the door fell out “like a pile.”<sup>33</sup> People were also packed in so tightly that many died standing up and stood “like statues.”<sup>34</sup> One worker described the victims as “contorted, knotted together like a ball of yarn.”<sup>35</sup> The gas chambers were also filthy with human excrement from when many victims “lost control of their bowels out of sheer fright.”<sup>36</sup> Some workers grabbed the bodies by the neck to drag them out while others dragged them by the limbs. Some Sonderkommando men had canes at their disposal to hook around the neck and drag them out. Some of victims were hard to pull out because the gas has caused their bodies to tighten.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, the longer that the bodies went unmoved, the colder and, therefore, harder they got. The skin on some bodies even started to disintegrate because of the heat and came apart as the workers dragged the bodies out of the chamber.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots’,” in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 298.

<sup>31</sup> “Shaul Chazan: ‘Life Didn’t Matter Anymore, Death was Too Close’,” In Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 272.

<sup>32</sup> Piper, “Gas Chambers and Crematoria,” 170.

<sup>33</sup> USC Shoah Foundation, “Auschwitz II Birkenau Sonderkommando Testimony Clips.”

<sup>34</sup> “Shaul Chazan: ‘Life Didn’t Matter Anymore, Death was Too Close’,” 272.

<sup>35</sup> Zalmen Gradowski, “The Czech Transport,” 812.

<sup>36</sup> “Shaul Chazan: ‘Life Didn’t Matter Anymore, Death was Too Close’,” 272.

<sup>37</sup> USC Shoah Foundation, “Auschwitz II Birkenau Sonderkommando Testimony Clips.”

<sup>38</sup> “Josef Sackar: ‘To Survive, so the Truth Would Come Out’,” 113.

Sonderkommando workers then had to strip the body of anything that the Nazis considered useful. They cut all of the hair from each body and put it into sacks. They also had to remove any gold teeth to be sent to Germany. Since the jaws of the corpses had often tightened by this point, it took a great deal of force to pry them open. One Sonderkommando worker recalled that he used a pair of pliers to open the mouth and another to rip out the teeth.<sup>39</sup> The Sonderkommando prisoners also removed any remaining jewelry, glasses, or false teeth. Sometime around this point in the process, the workers washed the bodies using hoses and organized them into groups for the other workers to take to the furnaces.<sup>40</sup>

The Sonderkommando prisoners then moved the bodies to the crematoria. In crematoria II and III, there were Sonderkommando workers at the elevators. There were some at the bottom to shove bodies into the elevator and some at the top to take them out and put them on stretchers.<sup>41</sup> In crematoria IV and V, the gas chambers and furnaces were on the same level; therefore, they did not use an elevator in the process. One Sonderkommando worker said that they arranged three bodies on a stretcher made of iron and dumped the bodies into the furnace.<sup>42</sup> He also said that while they were loading the third body onto the stretcher, part of the first two bodies were usually already on fire and that “their hands and feet shriveled and their limbs lurched upward and contracted quickly.”<sup>43</sup> Another worker testified that in his crematoria, they took the bodies one by one from the elevator, placed them on the stretcher, and pushed the body into the fire with a pitchfork.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,’” in Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 301.

<sup>40</sup> “Ya’akov Gabai: ‘I’ll Get Out of Here!’,” in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 195-96.

<sup>41</sup> “Josef Sackar: ‘To Survive, so the Truth Would Come Out,’” 114.

<sup>42</sup> “Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together – in Despair and Hope,’” 156-57.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>44</sup> “Josef Sackar: ‘To Survive, so the Truth Would Come Out,’” 115.

Burning the bodies was one of the most important parts of the process because if it slowed down, bodies would begin to pile up and the whole “production line” slowed. If the production line decelerated, it slowed down the extermination of new transports. The fires in the furnaces burned twenty-four hours a day unless there were no transports. Ya’akov Silberberg said that, “Sadly, it didn’t take long. We were really professional. It was all over within five minutes.”<sup>45</sup> The Germans even developed particular procedures so burning the bodies moved along as efficiently as possible. One of these methods was cremating a man, a woman, and a child at one time which was more effective because the men were usually thinner, the women plumper, and the children chubby.<sup>46</sup> This was also more efficient because the fat from the larger victims helped keep the fire burning longer. The Germans even called the children “Zulage” which means “bonus” or “addition”.<sup>47</sup> In other words, because of their efficient methods they were able to burn a “bonus” body to help the process move faster.

The Sonderkommando men then had to dispose of the ashes. They gathered the ashes from the furnaces, but bones, such as the pelvic bones, skulls, and knee caps, usually did not cremate completely; therefore, they had to use tools to pulverize the bones until they resembled the ash as well. In some crematoria, they broke the bones after they took them outside. They then put the ashes in a cart and took them to the crematorium yard. One worker said that “there was a pile of ashes as big as a hill.”<sup>48</sup> Once the pile was large enough, the Germans transported the ashes to the nearby Sola River in a truck.<sup>49</sup> Once there, with the help of some other Sonderkommando workers, they dumped the ashes into the water (the Germans sarcastically

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<sup>45</sup> “Ya’akov Silberberg: ‘One Day in the Crematorium Felt Like a Year’,” in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 321.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>48</sup> “Ya’akov Gabai: ‘I’ll Get Out of Here!’,” 197.

<sup>49</sup> “Eliezer Eisenschmidt: ‘Thanks to One Polish Family . . .’,” in Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 231.

called these ashes “fish food”) effectively erasing what little was left of what had been a human being not long before.

In other German camps, the lives and work of Sonderkommando remains somewhat ambiguous. As early as January 1942, the Nazis began selecting prisoners from the Lodz ghetto deportations to be in the Sonderkommando at Chelmno.<sup>50</sup> In Chelmno, the Nazis only used gassing vans. When the prisoners arrived, a Nazi told them that they were going to Germany to work as slave laborers, but before they could go, they had to take a shower. The Germans directed them to take off all their clothes and then gave them a bar of soap and a towel. They led them to the “washroom” which turned out to be a gassing van. The vans drove around in the nearby forest while the exhaust fumes, redirected into the back of the van, suffocated the victims (usually around ninety per van).<sup>51</sup> The Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners (not to be confused with the SS-Sonderkommando stationed at Chelmno) had to remove corpses from the van and bury them in mass graves. In Chelmno, these men were often referred to as the *Waldkommando*, while another group, called the *Hauskommando*, sorted the victim’s belongings.<sup>52</sup>

Except for a brief time in 1944, Chelmno was only operational until the end of 1942. During the last six months of 1942 and during its operations in 1944, the work of the *Waldkommando*, or Sonderkommando, centered around digging up corpses and burning them as part of *Aktion 1005*. This operation began in June 1942 as an attempt by the Nazis to more thoroughly conceal their crimes.<sup>53</sup> The workers first had to dig up the mass graves and remove

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<sup>50</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Chelmno,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/chelmno>.

<sup>51</sup> Doris L. Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Lowman & Littlefield Publishers), 183; and Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination: 1939 – 1945* (London: Orion Publishing, 2014), 234.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick Montague, *Chelmno and the Holocaust: The History of Hitler's First Death Camp* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 60.

<sup>53</sup> Yad Vashem, “Aktion 1005,” Shoah Resource Center, 1, [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205721.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205721.pdf).

the bodies. Then, “They built pyres made out of long wooden beams, soaked them with flammable liquid, arranged the corpses in layers between the beams, and burnt them. When this was finished, the area was flattened out, plowed, and replanted. After the work was done, the prisoners who had participated were themselves murdered in order to keep the operation secret.”<sup>54</sup> In September 1942, Rudolf Hoss, commandant of Auschwitz, traveled to Chelmno to learn this methodology and he soon implemented it at Auschwitz to clear the pits full of corpses. Interestingly, September 1942 was the same month that the term “Sonderkommando” was first used to describe the Jewish crematoria workers at Auschwitz.<sup>55</sup> Auschwitz was the only place that officially referred to Jewish crematoria workers as Sonderkommando.<sup>56</sup>

The Jewish Sonderkommando also existed in the Operation Reinhard Camps: Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Belzec began operations on March 17, 1942 and was equipped with stationary gassing facilities that used diesel fumes. To get the victims into the gas chamber, the SS made them undress, go down the “tube” (and enclosed path), to what they were told were the showers. Once they were in, the officers sealed the doors and turned on an engine outside that directed carbon monoxide into the chamber.<sup>57</sup> It took a little over thirty minutes for all of the victims in the chamber to die.<sup>58</sup> In Belzec, the Sonderkommando removed bodies after they had been gassed and buried them in graves; however, they also took part in *Aktion 1005* and had to dig up and burn these bodies.<sup>59</sup> The gassing facilities only operated until the end of 1942 and the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>55</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 186.

<sup>59</sup> “Belzec,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005191>.

camp was dismantled in the spring of 1943.<sup>60</sup> After this, the Nazis shot all of the Jewish workers or sent them to Sobibor to gas them. only one inmate of the camp survived beyond the war.<sup>61</sup>

The second killing center opened as part of Operation Reinhard was Sobibor. Because its purpose was for it to act as a killing center, it only held a small prisoner population made up of Sonderkommando prisoners and others to help maintain the camp.<sup>62</sup> Their work was relatively the same as the Sonderkommando in Belzec. Gassing operations officially began in April 1942 and continued normally until October 1943 when the workers of the camp organized an uprising. The arrival of victims had slowed significantly and word that Belzec and all of its workers had been liquidated inspired many to fight for their lives. On October 14, the Sobibor workers enacted their plan to escape. In the process, they killed twelve officers of the camp and 300 of the 600 workers remaining in the camp escaped; however, 100 of them were captured and many of the others did not live beyond the end of the war.<sup>63</sup> Soon after, the Germans dismantled the camp and killed the remaining prisoners. They had the prisoners lay face down on the railroad tracks and shot them in the back of the neck to remove “the last Jewish witnesses of the crimes committed at Sobibor.”<sup>64</sup>

The third and final Operation Reinhard killing center opened was Treblinka II. Treblinka I was a labor camp opened in November 1942. Treblinka II, built solely for the purpose of mass murder, began operations in July 1942. The only prisoners in Treblinka II were the Sonderkommando. Everyone else was killed on arrival. Because it was located along the

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<sup>60</sup> Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of the European Jewry: 1932-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 357; and Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 185.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> “Sobibor,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005192>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Bryant, *Eyewitness to Genocide: The Operation Reinhard Death Camp Trials, 1955-1966* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 153.

Malkinia-Siedlce railway, transports of fifty to sixty cars of people stopped at the Malkinia station. From there, a secondary rail line going directly to Treblinka II took twenty cars at a time to the killing center.<sup>65</sup> Once they arrived at the killing center, the victims got off into the “reception area” that was made to look like a railway station so as to make the victims believe that they were at a transit camp.<sup>66</sup> Adolf Eichmann even praised the camp for making the fake station look “exactly like a railway station in Germany.”<sup>67</sup>

Leading directly from the “reception area” to the killing center was a fenced in path called the “tube,” the “hose,” the “funnel,” or the “way to heaven.”<sup>68</sup> The victims had to run naked along this path to what they thought were the showers. Four hundred people were squeezed into the gas chambers. One eyewitness attested that the officers at the chambers had to prod the last victims with a bayonet to go in because they had realized what was happening and tried to resist.<sup>69</sup> Like the Belzec and Sobibor killing centers, Treblinka II used an engine that funneled carbon monoxide into the gas chamber. As the victims died, two Germans stood and listened until the gas chamber grew silent at which point they said, “They’re all asleep.”<sup>70</sup> The Jewish Sonderkommando’s work was similar to the work of the Sonderkommando in Belzec and Sobibor; however, when victims were too weak to reach the gas chambers, the Sonderkommando had to carry them to an area camouflaged as a Red Cross hospital where the SS shot the victims.<sup>71</sup> Treblinka II continued operations until November 1943 when the Nazis dismantled it and shot the remaining prisoners.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>65</sup> “Treblinka,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005193>.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Yahil, *The Holocaust: the Fate of the European Jewry*, 361.

<sup>68</sup> Bergen, *War & Genocide*, 188.

<sup>69</sup> Yahil, *The Holocaust: the Fate of the European Jewry*, 361.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>71</sup> Treblinka,” Holocaust Encyclopedia.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



Beginning in June of 1943, as a part of *Aktion 1005*, the Nazis also created Sonderkommando units that worked in the east to dig up and burn the bodies of the victims of massacres in Poland, the Soviet Union, Belorussia, Yugoslavia, and the Baltic States. As *Aktion 1005* was highly secretive, no orders or reports were written down. Rather, the Nazis passed them on verbally and no German documents exist on the operation in the east.<sup>73</sup> Because of this, the exact number of forced Jewish labor and the number of corpses they burned is unknown. One Jewish Sonderkommando worker testified that, “Our task was to burn 800 corpses a day. . . The *Trager* (porters) carried the bodies to the wooden pyre. There the figures were piled up in rows one on top of the other. When one layer was stacked, spruce branches were put on top . . . A pyramid was considered ready when it contained 3,500 corpses, a pyramid usually burned for three days. . .”<sup>74</sup> He went on to recount the terrible reality that far too many of these men had to face, “The men were mostly from Vilnius, and there was not one of them who did not find his family among the corpses.”<sup>75</sup> As in all the other locations, the Nazis shot all of the forced laborers when they finished their tasks. The only survivors were those few who escaped.

The story of the Sonderkommando men in places outside of Auschwitz only reinforces the importance of the Scrolls. Auschwitz’s operations continued later into the war, and due to the death marches and the fact that Auschwitz continued as a forced labor camp after the dismantling of the crematoria, some Sonderkommando men were able to escape or assimilate into the prisoner population. In addition, the larger scale of the camp allowed the authors of the Scrolls, with the help of their fellow inmates, to slowly compile their story.<sup>76</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau’s

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<sup>73</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 355.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Zamir, “Written in Auschwitz Case Study,” 39.

major killing operations came later than Chelmno and the Operation Reinhard camps. Auschwitz did not facilitate consistent, large scale killings until 1942, and it did not reach its peak killing period until the spring of 1944.<sup>77</sup> For a short time, they did bury victims of the camp, all of which were later dug up and burned; however, they quickly moved to incinerating pits, though those were not used for long either. Within months of the beginning of *Aktion 1005*, Auschwitz-Birkenau had four crematoria with furnaces that could together burn 4,736 bodies every twenty-four hours.<sup>78</sup>

Discussing the Sonderkommando leads one to a place of moral ambiguity. Auschwitz had no precedence in history, and nothing like it has existed since. Indeed, it “constituted a reality that had never before existed and had never been known, let alone experienced.”<sup>79</sup> The Sonderkommando are, perhaps, the most extreme case of this reality. Anna Heilman, who helped supply gun powder for the 1944 Sonderkommando Uprising, gives one of the most explanatory responses to the questions of morality in the camps. She said,

You tell me to what point are you ready to compromise those things that are against your conscience and sense of self ethics, that you would jeopardize your standing in the community, your job, your salary. When do you keep quiet when you shouldn't? what price do you give to squealing when you shouldn't, when if there were a risk, your livelihood, not your life never mind. Let me ask you, when do you compromise – when your life is threatened. I don't know. Do you? I don't know. I only know the price was too high.<sup>80</sup>

The Sonderkommando especially lived in a world of extremes. They saw their own people slaughtered in front of their eyes, yet their very existence depended on the deaths of others. Their

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<sup>77</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Killing Centers,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007327>.

<sup>78</sup> Raul Hilberg, “Auschwitz and the Final Solution,” in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 87-88.

<sup>79</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 53.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Berenbaum, “Sonderkommando: Testimony from Evidence,” in Jonathan Petropoulos and John Roth, ed. *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 65.

lives were a “tragic paradox” that often leads one to the feelings of sympathy or hatred toward them.<sup>81</sup> However, as with many topics pertaining to the Holocaust, there must be as much balance as possible when discussing these men. One cannot say definitively when, what, and how they should have compromised, if at all, but it is important to study their words, their work, and their actions to better understand the phenomenon that was the Sonderkommando.

The Scrolls of Auschwitz provide a voice not only for the men who had to work in Auschwitz-Birkenau, but also for those who worked in other camps and locations – almost none of whom survived. Because there were more survivors and more information on the Sonderkommando of Birkenau, these men and their testimony have become the foundation on which the scholarship on the Sonderkommando has been built; therefore, as the only writings by Sonderkommando men known to have survived their time in the camps, the Scrolls lie at the center of this topic. Gideon Greif notes that these writings “allow us to contemplate the affective and moral world that the Sonderkommando members inhabited under the terms of this reality.”<sup>82</sup> Though there will never be perfect clarity on the ethics and morality of what happened in the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Scrolls of Auschwitz, compared to eyewitness testimony and coinciding with acts of resistance, show most Sonderkommando resisting their situations and exemplify their ability to act as witnesses to the destruction of the European Jewry.

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<sup>81</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 53, 86.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

Chapter 1:  
Questions of Complicity and Witness: The Scrolls of Auschwitz and Its Authors

We, the wretched victims of our people, were mobilized to serve at the front of the struggle, against our own brothers and sisters, our very selves, our very flesh. Ours is to be the first line, on which the victims may fling themselves . . . In a little while we will be witnesses, with our own Jewish eyes. We will have to observe our own destruction and see how five thousand human beings, five thousand Jews, five thousand strong, vibrant, budding lives . . . how under the pressure of the accursed criminals, with the participation of the rifle, the hand grenade, and the machine gun . . . will immediately pursue, shove, and beat them murderously to confuse and abuse them, and how they will race . . . into the arms of death. What is more, we, their brethren, their very selves and flesh, will have to assist in this . . . to help escort them, absolutely ready, to help escort them into a bunker – into the grave – of death.<sup>83</sup>

In an interview, former Sonderkommando prisoner Henryk Mandelbaum stated that the only reason he survived Auschwitz was because he escaped as the Nazis evacuated the camp.<sup>84</sup> They killed all the other Sonderkommando prisoners to hide the truth. He went on to state, “who can tell you more about it than I? From a book, from the press, the radio [you can find out that] something happened,” but, “to live through something like that, well it’s really hard, [its surprising] one isn’t in a lunatic asylum today.”<sup>85</sup> Mandelbaum’s words speak to the importance of the Sonderkommando prisoners’ testimony in understanding their world. Though it was characterized by moral ambiguity, Susan Pentlin rightly argues that, “Only from the voices from the gray zone can we fully understand the Holocaust.”<sup>86</sup> The Scrolls of Auschwitz are

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<sup>83</sup> Zalman Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell: Manuscripts of a Sonderkommando Prisoner, Found in Auschwitz* (Oswiecim, Poland: Publications of State Museum at Oswiecim, 2017), 46.

<sup>84</sup> Jan Poludniak, *Sonder: An Interview with Sonderkommando Member Henryk Mandelbaum* (Oswiecim, Poland: Frap Books, 2009), 75.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Susan Pentlin, “Holocaust Victims of Privilege,” in H. J. Cargas, *Problems Unique to the Holocaust* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 39.

manuscripts written directly in the gray zone, and they give a voice to the thousands of Sonderkommando prisoners who fell victim to the Nazi slaughterhouse that was Auschwitz.

Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, created the term “the Grey Zone” to describe the world in which the Sonderkommando lived.<sup>87</sup> Gideon Greif described the region as “between sanity and insanity”<sup>88</sup>; however, the Scrolls of Auschwitz draw the reader into the mind of the Sonderkommando worker himself. This is significant because historians estimate that only approximately 110 Sonderkommando men survived the Holocaust out of the thousands chosen for this work.<sup>89</sup> These manuscripts remain the only known works that the Sonderkommando wrote while working in Birkenau, or any other camp, that survived beyond the life of its author. As workers in the gas chambers and crematoria, they have been accused of apathy, betrayal, and even complicity in the murder of their own people.<sup>90</sup> The Scrolls, however, show that the Sonderkommando could act as witnesses to and were not complicit in the murder of the European Jews.

The most well-known of the manuscripts is Zalmen Gradowski’s. On March 5, 1945, a fellow Sonderkommando worker, named Shlomo Dragon, dug up Gradowski’s manuscripts, which contained a notebook, written in 1943, and a letter dated September 6, 1944, and gave them to the Soviet Extraordinary Commission for the Investigation of German Fascist Crimes.<sup>91</sup> Gradowski had placed the documents in an aluminum canteen and buried them in the ashes in the crematorium yard; however, he moved them again when Nazis began moving the pile.<sup>92</sup> Another

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<sup>87</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (Detroit: Summit Books, 1988);

<sup>88</sup> Gideon Greif, “Between Sanity and Insanity: Spheres of Everyday Life in the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz-Birkenau,” Yad Vashem, [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org).

<sup>89</sup> Gideon Greif and Andreas Kilian, “Sonderkommando, Jewish,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 19. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 13.

<sup>90</sup> Greif, “Between Sanity and Insanity,” 7.

<sup>91</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

individual found and sold an additional manuscript that Gradowski wrote and buried in the yard. The first discovery is now held in St. Petersburg while the second is owned by Yad Vashem.

Gradowski was born in Suwałki, Poland in either 1908 or 1910. He settled with his wife, Sonia, in Lunna, a town near Grodno. He was a pious Jew who worked as a clerk and had strong literary inclinations. In 1941, the Nazis set up a ghetto in his city and he served on the *Judenrat*, a Jewish administrative group created by the Nazis in the ghettos. In November 1942, he and his entire family were deported to Kielbasin and, soon after, they arrived at Auschwitz where his entire family died almost immediately.<sup>93</sup> He dedicated his writings to “my wife Sonia, my mother Sarah, my sister Esther-Rachel, my sister Luba, my father-in-law Rafael, my brother-in-law Wolf” who were “burned in Auschwitz-Birkenau.”<sup>94</sup> The day after the murder of his family, guards selected him for work in the Sonderkommando where he worked in crematorium IV. Kazimierz Adamczyk notes that, “Gradowski surely was not a typical Sonderkommando functionary. He was a deeply religious person, and a trained humanist. His account is filled with empathy for the victims and other inmates. That deep empathy triggered pathetic words brimming with emotions.”<sup>95</sup> Gradowski’s work, therefore, is one of the best examples of the Sonderkommando’s innocence as he was one of the few willing and able to transcribe the events and raw emotions of their work.

Gradowski’s letter accompanying the St. Petersburg manuscript is very telling. The St. Petersburg letter is an addendum to the notebook buried with it. In the letter he stated, “These writings and many others I wanted to leave behind as an everlasting testimonial for the days of

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<sup>93</sup> Bernard Mark, “Remarks on the Manuscript of Salmen Gradowski,” in Bezwińska, and Czech, *Amidst A Nightmare of Crime*, 73.

<sup>94</sup> Zalman Gradowski, “Writings,” in Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 173.

<sup>95</sup> Kazimierz Adamczyk, “Report and Lament – Zalman Gradowski’s Notes from Auschwitz,” *Folia Litteraria Polonica* 8, no. 46 (2017): 189.

peace in the future, so that the world may know what was happening here.”<sup>96</sup> He goes on to explain that he had buried the notebook in ashes, but because the guards were dumping them into the nearby Vistula River, he had to rebury it. After explaining these movements, he addressed the reader directly, a common practice in his writings. He stated, “Dear Finder – search all the grounds,” because he and other Sonderkommando had buried multiple documents as well as teeth, “so that evidence might be found of the millions murdered in this place.”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, prayer books and shawls, phylacteries, tufts of hair, and teeth were found buried near the Sonderkommando manuscripts.<sup>98</sup>

This letter’s contents continue in their importance. Gradowski believed that he and the other Sonderkommando would not live to see liberation. He went on to say, “We, the Sonderkommandos, have wanted for a long time to put an end to our terrible labor, forced upon us on pain of death. We wanted to do a great deed.”<sup>99</sup> Here he alluded to the Sonderkommando Uprising, which took place a month later. Gradowski, who became a leader of the Uprising, wanted the reader to know that the Sonderkommando were not complicit in the murder of the Jews and did try to stop it. In addition, he ended the letter stating that he knew that the world would someday judge the Sonderkommando for their assigned role in the Holocaust. He said, “The future will judge us based on these writings. The world will learn from them, though it be only the smallest testimony, of the tragic world in which we live.”<sup>100</sup> From within the camp, Gradowski knew that there was and would be an ethical controversy about the role of the Sonderkommando in the Holocaust. Indeed, this offered an important purpose to Gradowski’s

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<sup>96</sup> Gradowski, “Writings,” 204.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 205; the workers buried teeth as physical evidence of the murder of the Jews as their bodies were burned and their bones crushed. The workers who had to remove teeth likely hid some of them while working to bury later on. They also hid clothing, photos, and other items, but teeth were an important direct link to murder.

<sup>98</sup> Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*. 155.

<sup>99</sup> Gradowski, “Writings,” 205.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

writings as they were “supposed to offer material for passing a just judgement.”<sup>101</sup> In this letter alone, Gradowski made a compelling case for the Sonderkommando’s innocence.

The St. Petersburg manuscript itself speaks to the Sonderkommando’s innocence. This document outlines Gradowski’s journey from the ghetto to Kielbasin, the transport’s arrival at Auschwitz, his assignment to the Sonderkommando, and his first days working there. He discussed their initial emotions as he and the other Sonderkommando prisoners were unaware of what their new assignment entailed: “Oh . . . how happy we would be, if we had those death pills. We would gladly swallow them.”<sup>102</sup> Many had come to the conclusion that their families were dead and hoped only to die as well. He went on to wonder, “What is the nature of the labor assignment in store for us? Who knows how much sorrow and suffering we will absorb before we [reach] the final solution. Who knows?”<sup>103</sup>

The next day he discovered what was in store as he had to dig pits for the open burning of bodies. Speaking in third person, as he was a new arrival, he stated, “The new arrivals bowed their heads deep, dug their shovels deep into the earth, and the tears flow incessantly.”<sup>104</sup> He then walked the reader through the emotions of wondering if his loved ones had been burned there the day before and realizing the thick smoke above the camps contained the ashes of his people.<sup>105</sup> This notebook ends abruptly with the conclusion of his first day in the Sonderkommando. Importantly, he began the manuscript with the note, “Take interest in this document; it contains important material for historians” and he ended it with the address of his uncle in New York with the hope that the world would know exactly what happened.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Adamczyk, “Report and Lament,” 190.

<sup>102</sup> Gradowski, “Writings,” 200.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*. 157.



The Yad Vashem manuscript also exemplifies innocence. The manuscript is divided into three sections and each has its own introduction, implying that they were meant to function separately or that they should be able to maintain their significance even if they were separated upon burial or discovery.<sup>107</sup> The section that speaks most to the Sonderkommando's witness and innocence is "The Czech Transport" in which Gradowski chronicles the murder of Czech Jews who had been in Auschwitz for seven months and knew what being "transferred" meant; therefore, the Germans had to come up with elaborate means to coax these people into the gas chambers.<sup>108</sup> These circumstances are likely why Gradowski chose to write about this group's journey to death after witnessing the death of thousands over his months in Birkenau.

The introduction to this work is very telling as Gradowski spoke directly to the reader. Once again, he was convinced that he would not live to see liberation and said, "It may be that these, the lines that I am now writing, will be the sole witnesses to what was my life."<sup>109</sup> He also told the reader that he wrote other things concerning what happened in Birkenau; however, he focused more on his family and death itself. He asked the reader to find out who he was from the address he gave of family in New York and to get a picture of him and his wife and publish it in a book with his writings in hopes that he can "immortalize the dear, beloved names of those for whom, at this moment, I cannot even expend a tear! For I live in an inferno of death, where it is impossible to measure my great losses."<sup>110</sup> He implored the reader to shed a tear for his family, who he also dedicated this writing to, because he could not. At the same time, he was aware of his own impending death, and he once again stated that he desired vengeance: "in the moment

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<sup>107</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 74.

<sup>108</sup> David Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 518.

<sup>109</sup> Zalmen Gradowski, "The Czech Transport: A Chronicle of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando," in Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction*, 548.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

left me I cannot rest: Live, live for revenge!”<sup>111</sup> In this introduction, Gradowski spends most of his time trying to lament and avenge the loss of his family and his people not because of his complicity, but rather because of the guilt that came with being one who survived.

The manuscript itself also indicates the innocence of the Sonderkommando. One example is Gradowski’s lamentation that thousands of Jews, particularly healthy ones, went to their deaths “like sheep to slaughter” and “none of them ever tried to revolt or to go down resisting . . .” with the exception of two instances in which a young man and young woman each physically revolted against the SS guards which he called “courageous” and “heroic.”<sup>112</sup> He hoped that this would happen so that the Sonderkommando could join in, yet he understood the terror and “overwhelming sorrow” that came in these moments that left many “inert, resigned, shattered” and kept them from resisting.<sup>113</sup> The young man was shot while trying to flee the gas chambers while the young woman, who succeeded in killing the registrar of the camp Josef Schhillinger, was shot in the dressing room.<sup>114</sup> Gradowski repeatedly discussed his desire for some form of rebellion in his writing, the culmination of which was the Sonderkommando Uprising that cost him his life.

Parallel to Gradowski’s desire for rebellion, he deeply related to the victims of the gas chambers. He referred to the destruction of *our* people rather than *their* people.<sup>115</sup> He also referred to the victims in familial terms saying, “We, the most wretched victims of our nation, were placed in the combat line against our own sisters and brothers. We are supposed to be the first line, onto which the victims will pounce in a camp with their whole families.”<sup>116</sup> This raises

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 549.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 549.

<sup>113</sup> Adamczyk, “Report and Lament,” 196; and Gradowski, “The Czech Transport,” 551.

<sup>114</sup> “Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together – in Despair and Hope’,” 162-163.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>116</sup> Gradowski, “The Czech Transport,” 550.

an interesting dynamic as Gradowski showed the internal dilemma of the Sonderkommando as they lamented both their own position and the victimization of their people at the same time. Another Sonderkommando survivor, Ya'kov Silberberg, testified later in his life that there were dueling feelings of guilt for his role in the deaths of these people but also a lamentation of his own lost life. He stated, "Maybe I was the sinner," referring to his time in the gas chambers; however, he followed it up by saying, "Why me of all people? Was it not enough that I was in the Auschwitz camp, did I also have to be on the edge of hell, or in hell?"<sup>117</sup> They related to the people in the gas chambers as their people and as victims, but they still struggled with their own involuntary role in their people's deaths.

Gradowski made it clear that the Sonderkommando did feel immense guilt. When he recounted his part in leading Czech women to the gas chambers he stated, "We suffer and bleed along with them, and we feel that each step that we make is a further step from life, and approaches death."<sup>118</sup> He also discussed dragging the body of a young woman out of the crematoria and laying her on her back with "her eyes fixed in a stare that seems to ask, 'What are you going to do with me, brother?'"<sup>119</sup> Gradowski humanized the bodies by referring to them as "whole worlds" and lamenting the life that they had and the future they would never experience.<sup>120</sup> Gradowski also mourned for these people physically as another worker testified that Gradowski would put on Tallit (a prayer shawl) and Tefillin (phylacteries) and "say kaddish for the dead, crying out that he was a sinful man."<sup>121</sup> Gideon Greif notes that these manuscripts

<sup>117</sup> "Ya'akov Silberberg: 'One Day in the Crematorium Felt Like a Year'," 321.

<sup>118</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 76.

<sup>119</sup> Gradowski, "The Czech Transport," 560.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 564.

<sup>121</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 63.

exemplify that the Sonderkommando experienced an “emotional and passionate response to the all-pervasive death and the loss of their brethren.”<sup>122</sup>

At the same time, however, Gradowski expressed frustration at not being able to mourn his people’s deaths. One of the largest components of adaption to life in the crematoria was repressing emotions and becoming numb. Many entered a mechanical state of simply going through the motions of their job. Leon Cohen said, “During that time we had no emotions. We were totally drained. We blocked up our hearts; we were dehumanized. We worked like machines.”<sup>123</sup> One can imagine that if the Sonderkommando did not experience numbness, the emotions that they experienced while seeing innocent people murdered everyday would be incredibly overwhelming if not unbearable. Yet Gradowski lamented his own numbness at no longer being able to mourn after living there for some time. He gave an incredibly poignant explanation of state of the Sonderkommando’s emotions:

Even now, here in my hell, I cannot weep at all, because every day I drown in a sea, a sea of blood. One wave rises over the other. Not for a moment can you retreat into a corner of your own and sit down there to weep, to weep over the devastation. The continual systematic death, the only life of every-one who lives here, deafens, confuses, and dulls your senses. You cannot feel, sense even the greatest sufferings. The personal destruction is swallowed up in the general one. And sometimes the heart is torn, the soul is riven—why am I sitting here quietly instead of lamenting, weeping over my tragedy, and why instead are we frozen, numb, drained of all emotion?<sup>124</sup>

It is apparent from Gradowski’s words that there was, at times, anger that one could not feel any emotions. Greif notes that an example of the manuscript’s credibility is that the authors “did not attempt to blur or prettify the reality and did not refrain from presenting the negative aspects of

<sup>122</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 47

<sup>123</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,’” 305.

<sup>124</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 84.

their daily lives.”<sup>125</sup> Gradowski was incredibly honest about the frustrating fact that he could not even feel any emotion despite seeing the deaths of thousands of his people.

The third section of the Yad Vashem manuscript, “The Parting,” is also an important indicator of the Sonderkommando’s innocence. In this section, Gradowski discussed the execution of 200 Sonderkommando workers in September of 1944. Gradowski had hoped that “We, the brothers of the Sonderkommando” would be able to rebel that day; however, those men went to their deaths and Gradowski and the other survivors found that they could hardly look at each other.<sup>126</sup> One former member of the Sonderkommando said that usually men were in the unit for six months to a year before the Nazis killed them and replaced them with new workers.<sup>127</sup> Day in and day out, they were forced to watch the deaths of their people knowing that, soon enough, they too would die in the gas chambers, burn in the furnaces, and be thrown in the river to erase their existence. This instance was particularly crippling for Gradowski as he felt that he no longer had hope as he had to kill his own “brothers,” while staring into the abyss of his own death.

Gradowski’s manuscripts are among the most important Holocaust documents as they are some of the few written in the gas chambers and crematoria. When asked why Gradowski kept these notebooks, Shlomo Dragon recalled, “He told us that the events in the camp had to be documented so that the whole world would know about it. By the time he began writing, we’d already figured out that our chances of survival were virtually nil. . . no one knew if anyone who’d be able to testify about what happened to us would survive.”<sup>128</sup> Because of his consciousness of its importance, Gradowski’s work stands as a testament to what happened to in

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>126</sup> Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 89.

<sup>127</sup> “Ya’akov Silberberg: “One Day in the Crematorium Felt Like a Year’,” 327.

<sup>128</sup> “Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together – in Despair and Hope’, ” 160.

the gas chambers and crematoria. The rebellion that he so strongly desired came to fruition on October 7, 1944. As one of the organizers of this uprising, he helped destroy crematorium IV. Unfortunately, the SS killed 450 prisoners in response, including Gradowski.<sup>129</sup> SS officers severely beat Gradowski before hanging him on October 8, 1944.<sup>130</sup>

Another author of the Scrolls of Auschwitz was Leyb Langfus. Various people uncovered his manuscripts in 1945, 1952, and 1962. At the end of his 1952 manuscript, he wrote that he buried “various boxes and jars in the courtyard of Crematorium 2” while one work “lies in a pit of bones at Crematorium 1” and another “lies among bones strewn on the south-west side of the same courtyard” which he later reburied by the ash in the Crematorium II yard.<sup>131</sup> Some authorities, such as the Auschwitz State Museum, attributed the 1952 and 1962 manuscripts to “an unknown author”; however, Bernard and Esther Mark’s research found that the 1952 manuscript was Langfus’s because the handwriting matches the 1945 manuscript (known to be Langfus’s work), details in it refer to the 1945 manuscript’s title, “The Deportation”, and they decoded the acronym signed at the bottom of these two manuscripts to match Langfus’s first name in Hebrew.<sup>132</sup> More recent research done by Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, some of the leading experts on the Scrolls, agree that all three manuscripts were the work of Leyb Langfus.<sup>133</sup>

Langfus was born in Warsaw in 1910. He had a traditional yeshiva education and eventually moved to the town of Makow Mazowiecki located outside of Warsaw.<sup>134</sup> He married a woman named Devora in 1933 or 1934 and soon after had a son. His wife was the daughter of

<sup>129</sup> Adamczyk, “Report and Lament,” 189.

<sup>130</sup> Nathan Cohen, “Diaries of the Sonderkommando,” in Gutman and Berenbaum eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 523.

<sup>131</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 93.

<sup>132</sup> Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 159-160; and Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 94-96.

<sup>133</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 96.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

the town's rabbinic judge and after he moved to Warsaw in 1939, Langfus took over this position.<sup>135</sup> Like Gradowski, Langfus was on the *Judenrat* in his town and eyewitnesses attested that he was concerned about the Nazis from the beginning of their rise to power as he thought that "all the Nazis' efforts were directed toward the liquidation of the Jews;" however, the Jews "looked at him as a madman" for this as they thought he was exaggerating the danger.<sup>136</sup> In November of 1942, the Nazis deported Langfus, his wife and child, and all his town's Jews to Auschwitz. His wife and son died quickly after their arrival, and guards conscripted him into the Sonderkommando soon after.<sup>137</sup> Importantly, other Sonderkommando often only referred to him in their testimony as the dayan, rabbinic judge, rather than by name as he remained staunchly religious in Birkenau.<sup>138</sup>

Langfus titled the first manuscript that he wrote, which was the first discovered in 1945, "The Deportation." While no complete English translation of this document exists, Dominic Williams and Nicholas Chare have translated sections of it to English. In this document Langfus details the persecution and deportation of the Jews in his town Makow Mazowiecki. Langfus recounts the words his son said to him as the persecution grew fiercer: "Daddy, I want to live, do everything you can so that I can stay alive. What can be done – I want to live so much."<sup>139</sup> He stood over his son's bed as he slept, and described his emotions: "An unquenchable pain and deepest hopelessness took hold of me and I embodied my great, terrible tragedy in one slow, broken sound, interrupted by deep sighs, of one single word that contained the entire horror of my fate: 'Shmuel, my little Shmuel' . . . ." <sup>140</sup> It is likely that Langfus wrote these words while in

<sup>135</sup> Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 168.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Cohen, "Diaries of the Sonderkommando," in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 531.

<sup>138</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 97.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

Auschwitz, placing them after the death of his wife and son. Like Gradowski, Langfus lamented his losses before moving on to recount the events that he was recording.

The most important part of this manuscript that speaks to the Sonderkommando's witness and innocence is the small section that Langfus included about the murder of the Jews from his town. It is not clear whether Langfus directly witnessed this, or if he used imagery from his time in the crematoria and learned details from the other workers. He described his dead neighbors after the gassing as "blue under the effect of the gas, and some completely fresh, as if sleeping."<sup>141</sup> Importantly, he noted that guards held some of the transport in a nearby bunker to die the next day and that they heard and understood what was happening. He said that this caused them "the greatest pain," and finished the paragraph with the sentence, "As I later found out, my wife and son were among <them>."<sup>142</sup> Langfus did not focus on his own pain, but on the pain of his people. Importantly, in ending this narrative, he struggled with the words to write: "The murderer washed his bloody hands. ~~The fire~~ The frying and roasting of people . . . ~~xxx~~ made the air in the entire area ~~xxx~~ greasy . . ."<sup>143</sup> Chare and Williams, who translated from the original document, note that there is nothing in the entire manuscript that he marked out so forcefully than words in this sentence and that "at this moment, he demonstrates a moral responsibility towards those he is writing about . . ."<sup>144</sup> Langfus understood the gravity of what he was writing and chose his words carefully as he felt an obligation to convey them properly.

Langfus's second manuscript, made up of two sections titled "The 3000 Naked Women" and "The 600 Boys" were found in 1962. "The 3000 Naked Women" is a ten page narrative of

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.



women who the Nazis held in Birkenau for ten days before murdering them. He recounted an interesting event that happened in the undressing room before the women's deaths:

They examined our faces looking for an expression of sympathy. One stood in the corner and looked deep into the depths of these poor, helpless souls. He could no longer control himself and burst out crying. 'Ah! I have been privileged to see before I die an expression of sorrow, a tear of sympathy at our sad fate, in this camp of murderers, in which so many are tortured, beaten and killed, in which people see so many murders and interminable horrors, in the camp where our senses become dull and petrified at the sight of the worst horrors, where every human emotion dies to the extent that you can see your brother or sister fall and not even sigh. Yes, here, can there be a man who will feel our disaster who will weep for our fate? Oh! What a wonderful vision, how unnatural! The tear of a live Jew will go with me to my death, the sight of a sensitive man. There is still someone who will mourn us [and I] had thought that we would leave this world like miserable orphans' . . . she turned away from us leaning her head against the wall and from the depths of her heart came quiet, bitter tears.<sup>145</sup>

Langfus noted a remarkable moment where a Sonderkommando lost control at the sight of the deaths of these women. This moment is so important because it shows that the Sonderkommando not only *saw* what happened, but they also *felt* what happened. Williams and Chare note that these women needed more than witnesses, they needed someone to mourn for them.<sup>146</sup>

A very important aspect of Langfus's testimony comes at the end of "The 3000 Naked Women." When the guards ordered the Sonderkommando to move the women into the gas chambers, Langfus left. He wrote, "I did not want to see the rest of the events for on principle I was never present when the Jews were being rushed to their death."<sup>147</sup> He said he did this because he was afraid that "the SS would force me to carry out their murderous purposes in the crematorium."<sup>148</sup> This account is supported by Dr. Miklos Nyiszli who worked directly with the Sonderkommando and often treated them. Nyiszli stated that Langfus actually did his best to

<sup>145</sup> Lieb Langfus, "The Horrors of Murder," in Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 213.

<sup>146</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 111.

<sup>147</sup> Langfus, "The Horrors of Murder," 214.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

remain kosher in the camp by eating only bread, margarine, and onions.<sup>149</sup> Langfus was originally assigned to the cremation kommando, but because of his “religious fanaticism” Nyiszli convinced the *Ober* to move Langfus to the crematorium yard, where he burned refuse, on the merit that Langfus was too weak from his diet and too slow in the crematorium because he prayed over each body he came across.<sup>150</sup> By doing this, Langfus controlled his own witness by distancing himself from the crimes of the crematoria as much as possible not because he was trying to avoid a responsibility for the murders, but because he was refusing a certain way of observing that, in his mind, was part of the crime.<sup>151</sup>

The third Langfus manuscript, unearthed in 1952, is called “Particulars.” It is a compilation of stories about his time in the gas chambers and crematoria that are in no discernable order and do not necessarily involve him. They are somewhat impersonal but have striking detail, making them important for understanding the innocence and witness of the Sonderkommando. One story recounts the prelude to the deaths of Hungarian Jews, two of whom wanted to recite *Vidduy* (confession of sins) and toast *lekhaim* (literally “to life” - a traditional Jewish toast) with a Sonderkommando worker.<sup>152</sup> They told him, “You must revenge our blood, you must live, therefore – ‘your health’ – we understand you.”<sup>153</sup> These men understood the complex position of the Sonderkommando and encouraged him to live on to tell the story because they knew they could not. The worker became overwhelmed with emotion and “violently burst into tears” later telling the other Sonderkommando, “We have waited too long comrades, a sufficient number of Jews have been burnt, let us demolish everything and die for

<sup>149</sup> Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* (New York: MJF Books, 2011), 195.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-96.

<sup>151</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 110.

<sup>152</sup> “Unknown Author: The Manuscript,” in Bezwińska, and Czech, *Amidst A Nightmare of Crime*, 112.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

our faith!”<sup>154</sup> Here, he alluded to the Sonderkommando Uprising, which Langfus was also a leader of, showing that many Sonderkommando sincerely yearned to take action.

One of the most important testaments of the Sonderkommando’s innocence comes at the end of this manuscript. He wrote, “We are now going to the ‘sauna’, the 170 remaining men. We are convinced that they are taking us to our death . . . today is 26 November 1944.”<sup>155</sup> The Nazis periodically liquidated the Sonderkommando. Nyiszli said that “the first job of every Sonderkommando crew was the cremation of its predecessor.”<sup>156</sup> This was Langfus’s fate. Both Nyiszli and Filip Muller, a fellow Sonderkommando selected to survive, attested that Langfus gave a speech before he went to his death, saying that this was God’s will and they should “go to meet death bravely and with dignity!”<sup>157</sup> The Sonderkommando were the tools that the Germans used to erase the evidence of their crimes. They were therefore known as “Geheimnisträger” – “bearer of the secret.”<sup>158</sup> Langfus and the other authors of the Scrolls of Auschwitz ultimately defied this by writing their manuscripts and acting as innocent witnesses to their own murders and the murders of their people.

The third manuscript author was Zalman Lewenthal. Searchers found his first manuscript in 1961, accompanied by a diary from the Lodz ghetto that he had likely saved from the belongings of a victim of the crematorium.<sup>159</sup> Unfortunately, this manuscript was irreparably damaged from its time in the ground, and only small parts of it are decipherable; therefore, this manuscript’s content will not be included here as it requires too much conjecture on the part of

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Langfus, “The Horrors of Murder,” 211.

<sup>156</sup> Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 71.

<sup>157</sup> Filip Muller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 162; and Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 196-197.

<sup>158</sup> Gideon Grief, “Between Sanity and Insanity: Spheres of Everyday Life in the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz-Birkenau,” 9.

<sup>159</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 126.

the reader. His second manuscript was found in a glass jar in 1962 along with some of Langfus's writings. It was also damaged by water and the pages were out of order; however, this manuscript is more legible and actually offers the most comprehensive account of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz known to exist.<sup>160</sup>

Lewenthal was also a Polish Jew who was from the town of Tschechanov. He was born in 1918, making him much younger than Gradowski and Langfus. He studied yeshiva in Warsaw but returned home at the beginning of World War II. In November of 1942, the Nazis liquidated the Jews of Tschechanov, and Lewenthal and his family arrived in Auschwitz on December 10.<sup>161</sup> He lost his family to the crematoria the day of their arrival. The SS did not immediately conscript Lewenthal into the Sonderkommando, but they moved him there after they liquidated the Sonderkommando in January of 1943.<sup>162</sup> Like Gradowski and Langfus, Lewenthal was a part of the Auschwitz underground that planned the Sonderkommando Uprising of 1944.

One of the first decipherable accounts Lewenthal gives is the liquidation of his town's Jews. Though he was not yet in the Sonderkommando, he recounted the story of men from his town that the SS placed in the Sonderkommando the night of the liquidation. When they set to work on December 10, 1942, "many recognized members of their families among the dead . . ." <sup>163</sup> He then moved on to say that he was not far behind his friends, and the SS soon recruited him into the Sonderkommando as well. He recounted being rushed and running "while being chased with the raised clubs of the SS guards . . ." and then "we completely lost our senses. We were like dead men, like robots . . . we did not know where we were to run, why, and what was

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>161</sup> Cohen, "Diaries of the Sonderkommando," 527.

<sup>162</sup> Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 161.

<sup>163</sup> Zalman Lowenthal, "Diary," 218.

to be done.”<sup>164</sup> Saul Chazan recalled having a similar experience. He said, “We had a gut feeling that we couldn’t identify. We didn’t know a thing. . . It was hell on earth.”<sup>165</sup> This is important because these testimonies corroborate the fact that the Sonderkommando men did not understand the work that they were going to have to do in the crematoria. Some unknowingly volunteered, while the guards forced others, such as Lewenthal, to join the kommando.<sup>166</sup>

One of Lewenthal’s most important passages is his writing on the psychology, guilt, and responsibility of the Sonderkommando. He described the Sonderkommando’s feelings as “disaster,” saying that they were too humiliated to even look each other in the eyes because “our eyes were swollen from sorrow and shame.”<sup>167</sup> In a damaged section he went on to ask why they did not end their lives. He said, “why? --- the question remains, and it is hard to answer now.”<sup>168</sup> Here, he expressed feelings of guilt for even being alive. That was the Sonderkommando’s weakness, he said, the simple desire to live and inability to commit suicide in solidarity with their people.<sup>169</sup> Ota Kraus notes that some did do this: “some would walk voluntarily into the gas chamber or past the SS guards so as to get themselves shot.”<sup>170</sup> He also notes that the Commandant of the crematoria would throw Sonderkommando who attempted suicide and survived directly into the furnace, sometimes holding them half in and half out.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>165</sup> “Shaul Chazan: ‘Life Didn’t Matter Anymore, Death was Too Close’,” 266.

<sup>166</sup> Some men thought they were volunteering for skilled jobs. Cousins Dario Gabbai and Morris Venezia raised their hands when asked if anyone had experience as barbers, but they were assigned by the SS to shear the hair off of dead bodies as part of the Sonderkommando. Generally, the SS conducted a selection for the Sonderkommando in which the prisoners had no choice.

<sup>167</sup> Zalman Lewenthal, “Diary,” 220.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>170</sup> Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, *The Death Factory: Document on Auschwitz* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1996), 152.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 152-153.

Lewenthal's discussion raises the pivotal and most controversial question about the Sonderkommando: were they complicit? Lewenthal noted that he would not defend the fact that some of the Sonderkommando lost all feeling, but, he said, "I must state the truth, that more than one of them lost his human image in the passage of time; you become ashamed of yourself . . . [in the course of time] they adapted . . ." <sup>172</sup> Many entered a mechanical state of simply going through the motions. Leon Cohen said, "During that time we had no emotions. . . We blocked up our hearts; we were dehumanized." <sup>173</sup> Therefore, the question arises, should they be blamed for their adaptation? Lewenthal himself did not know the answer. <sup>174</sup> Gideon Greif argues that being in the Sonderkommando offered only choiceless choices: work with your murderers for a small chance of survival, or die; however, he also points out that the world should not see them just as paralyzed machines, but also as the "heroic fighters" of the Uprising and as those, like Lewenthal, who took the risk to write down what happened. <sup>175</sup> Gunther Anders, a German Jewish poet, wrote that "we remain untested" in the things the Sonderkommando experienced and that the only question that can be asked about this topic is: "What would you have done?" <sup>176</sup>

Lewenthal ended his manuscript with a promise that points directly to his and his comrade's innocence and witness. He says, "We will continue to do our part, we [will attempt] everything . . . to hide in the ground." <sup>177</sup> In a damaged passage, he tells the reader, "then you will find more --- of the courtyard under the crem[atorium] . . . you will find many --- because we must up to now, until --- events --- in a chronological historic manner, to expose everything to

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<sup>172</sup> Zalman Lowenthal, "Diary," 221.

<sup>173</sup> "Leon Cohen: 'We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots'," 305.

<sup>174</sup> Zalman Lowenthal, "Diary," 221.

<sup>175</sup> Gideon Greif, "Between Sanity and Insanity: Spheres of Everyday Life in the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz-Birkenau," in Petropoulos and Roth, ed. *Gray Zones*, 57.

<sup>176</sup> Adam Brown, *Judging "Privileged" Jews*, 202.

<sup>177</sup> Zalman Lowenthal, "Diary," 234.

the world. From now on we will bury everything in the earth.”<sup>178</sup> He then dedicated his writing to his fellow workers who planned the Sonderkommando Uprising and had since died, including Gradowski and Langfus. He said that the Sonderkommando had thought of their own work, and how the world would view it, but his focus remained on telling the story of Jews who the Nazis murdered immediately in the crematoria.<sup>179</sup> Lewenthal understood his position as a member of the Sonderkommando and worked to preserve this dark period in the history of the Jews. He was a witness and a rebel who worked to tell the story of his people. Unfortunately, his exact date and manner of death remains unknown.

The last two Scrolls of Auschwitz, written by Chaim Herman and Marcel Nadjary, take on very different forms from the previous manuscripts as they are both short letters written to particular people. A Red Cross worker unearthed Herman’s manuscript soon after liberation. Herman wrote the letter on graph paper, folded it as a letter, and actually addressed it to the Red Cross on the outside.<sup>180</sup> Inside, he placed the name and address of his wife. Herman was the oldest of the Scroll authors as he was born in Warsaw in 1901. He was married and had a daughter named Simone. The Nazis deported him to Auschwitz from a French internment camp on March 4, 1943.

Herman did not write his letter for future generations, rather, he wrote it to give closure to his wife and daughter as he knew he was going to die. Even still, it gives important insights. Herman had spent twenty months in the Sonderkommando at the time of this letter, and he told his wife that “it seems a whole century to me, it is a wholly impossible thing to give you proof in

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 234-235.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>180</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 154.

writing of everything that I have experienced here.”<sup>181</sup> He went on to tell her that she would read about the work of the Sonderkommando, but he asked her “I beg you, don’t ever have a bad opinion of me” as he told her he did the best he could to help others.<sup>182</sup> He went on to lament that they ever fought and told her that sometimes he said their daughter’s name and listened to it echo off of the walls. Still, Herman did not go into much detail as he tried to keep his own emotions in check to protect his wife and daughter from feeling too much pain.<sup>183</sup> This letter is important, as it shows the range of emotions that the Sonderkommando felt. He lastly asked for vengeance for his “brothers and sisters” who died in the crematoria “for no guilt of theirs.”<sup>184</sup> Even in this touching final letter to his wife, he did not forget those who the Nazis murdered which he could have easily left out if he were complicit. It is believed that he died in November of 1944 during a Sonderkommando liquidation.<sup>185</sup>

The last Scroll, written by Nadjary, was not found until 1980 when a group of students doing maintenance discovered it buried in a thermos in the yard of Crematorium III, where Nadjary worked.<sup>186</sup> No one published Nadjary’s letter until 2013 when it was released in Russian and there was no English translation until late 2017. Little is known about Nadjary’s life. He was from Thessaloniki, Greece and probably born around 1918. He arrived in Auschwitz on April 11, 1944 and spent a month in quarantine before the SS moved him to the Sonderkommando.<sup>187</sup> Unlike Herman’s letter, Nadjary gave more documentary detail about his time in the crematoria.

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<sup>181</sup> Chaim Herman, “Letter of Chaim Herman,” in Bezwińska, and Czech, *Amidst A Nightmare of Crime*, 184.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 162.

<sup>184</sup> Chaim Herman, “Letter of Chaim Herman,” 190.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 190n11.

<sup>186</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 3.

<sup>187</sup> Marcel Nadjary, “Marcel Nadjary Auschwitz Testimony,” trans. the German-Canadian Centre for Innovation and Research, <https://www.scribd.com/document/361899530/Marcel-Nadjary-Auschwitz-testimony>, 2.



Nadjary wrote his letter to his friends and family, but he still recounted the work he did in the Sonderkommando. He described the gas chambers and crematorium, and he walked them through the process that the Sonderkommando had to take with each transport. Nadjary also addressed the questions that he knew would come about why he did the things he had to in the Sonderkommando. He said, “My dearests, when you are reading what work I have done, you will say: how could I, Manolis, or anybody else, do this work and burn fellow believers.”<sup>188</sup> He said that he used to wonder the same thing, often contemplating suicide by joining his people as they burned; however, he said, “the thing that kept me from doing so was revenge; I wanted and I want to live, to revenge the deaths of Dad and Mum, and that of my beloved little sister Nelli.”<sup>189</sup> Nadjary expressed that he knew it was the Nazis’ will for him and all the Sonderkommando to die; therefore, living, and especially writing, acted as a form of revenge for him and the other Sonderkommando writers.

Nadjary was the only Scroll writer to survive the war. He was also only one of four Sonderkommando men to publish his memoirs on his time in the crematoria, though it is only available in Greek.<sup>190</sup> He died in 1971 in New York and never mentioned the buried manuscripts in his memoir.<sup>191</sup> In his letter, he wrote, “The dramas my eyes have seen are indescribable.”<sup>192</sup> Yet he still wrote and tried to convey what happened. This action, Chare and Williams note, showed how important Nadjary, and the other authors, “felt bearing witness to be as an activity, both during and subsequent to the events at Birkenau.”<sup>193</sup> Even though his letter was short, it

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>190</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 171.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>192</sup> Nadjary, “Marcel Nadjary Auschwitz Testimony,” 3.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

provides invaluable witness to the murders carried out in the crematoria while showing the complex nuances of the Sonderkommando and their innocence.

The Scrolls of Auschwitz remain some of the most important documents concerning the Holocaust. They were, for a time, ignored, just as the Sonderkommando was, because of the controversy about complicity and the debate on whether anyone in the camps, particularly the crematoria, could actively act as a witness from within the brutal world in which they lived. However, as Dan Stone points out, the Scrolls show that “it was possible for the Nazis’ victims to take some cognizance of what was happening to them, even in the last circle of Hell and even without the benefit of having an overview of the ‘Final Solution’ as a whole.”<sup>194</sup> There have been more recent moves away from the idea that the Holocaust is unexplainable. Peter Hayes said that, “to say that the subject is incomprehensible is to despair, to give up, to admit to being too lazy to make the long effort, and worst of all to duck the challenge to our most cherished illusions about ourselves and each other that looking into the abyss of this subject entails.”<sup>195</sup> Though the emotions are not comprehensible, the facts are. The world of the Sonderkommando was incredibly dark and complex, but it is important to try to understand for the sake of those killed and tormented there and for the sake of the future.

It was for that exact purpose that Zalman Gradowski, Leyb Langfus, Zalman Lewenthal, Chaim Herman, and Marcel Nadjary wrote. The writing exemplify that it was possible to act as a witness despite the circumstances of their authors; therefore, it is time that they come out of the shadows of Holocaust historiography. These works speak to the murder, pain, confusion, anger, numbness, and hope of the Sonderkommando and add immense value to the world’s

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<sup>194</sup> Dan Stone, “The Harmony of Barbarism: Locating the Scrolls of Auschwitz in Holocaust Historiography,” in Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, eds., *Representing Auschwitz: At the Margins of Testimony* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 26.

<sup>195</sup> Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017), 324.

understanding of the Holocaust and its representability. The authors of these letters implored the world to find the evidence they left and to disseminate it. Langfus even directly asked the reader to compile his works under the title “The Horrors of Murder.”<sup>196</sup> Williams notes that the authors give responsibility to the readers of the texts: “they – we – are asked to find the different parts, bring them together, establish an order for them, and to help disseminate them. His readers are asked to participate in the process of authorship.”<sup>197</sup> Indeed, there is an inherent responsibility that accompanies the Scrolls of Auschwitz. The authors did not write so that the Scrolls could sit in silence. It is important to study them and to show that they exemplify the witness and innocence of the Sonderkommando.

The Scrolls of Auschwitz act as proof that the Sonderkommando were able to be witnesses to the crimes committed in the gas chambers and crematoria and were not complicit in these crimes. Each author exemplified this in his own unique way, but they all added immense value to both the story of the Sonderkommando and the study of the Holocaust as a whole. Cognizant of their situation, these men had the foresight to write down what they experienced so that others would have a first-hand source to try to understand them from. Many recorded their thoughts, emotions, and reactions to the twisted world in which they had to live. More than anything, however, they wanted to give a testament of what happened to their brothers and sisters in Auschwitz-Birkenau. They told the stories of their people’s last moments, recorded transports and deaths, and humanized the people that the Nazis had stripped of all life and disposed of as if they were nothing. These five men boldly defied their oppressors, and their

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<sup>196</sup> Langfus, “The Horrors of Murder,” 211.

<sup>197</sup> Dominic Williams. “‘The Dead Are My Teachers’: The Scrolls of Auschwitz in Jerome Rothenburg’s *Khurban*,” in Chare and Williams, *Representing Auschwitz*, 81.

voices reach beyond the grave to act as witnesses to their own innocence and the murder of their people.

Chapter 2  
Moral Complexities and Culpability: Eyewitnesses, the Scrolls of Auschwitz, and the  
Sonderkommando

In the faces of those who were for the first time employed in the Sonderkommando you could notice a very specific expression, for some time they stood out from everyone else with their external appearance and behavior. The shock, suppressed of course, and the glazed look in the eyes. Then they got used to it and started looking normal again . . .<sup>198</sup>

The members of the Sonderkommando lived in isolation from the rest of the camp. The SS made them live apart from everyone else to keep what was happening in the crematoria as much of a secret as possible. They were even forbidden from simply speaking to other inmates.<sup>199</sup> Though the SS tried to keep the Sonderkommando separated from the rest of the prisoners in Auschwitz, they did not escape observation from their fellow inmates and some did find ways to communicate with other prisoners. Even if they did not directly observe the Sonderkommando, most other prisoners in the camp at least knew about them. Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, wrote that, “information, possibly incomplete or distorted, had a tremendous power of penetration, and some of it always does filter through.”<sup>200</sup> He went on to note that, “concerning these squads, vague and mangled rumors already circulated among us during our imprisonment.”<sup>201</sup> Though the Sonderkommando lived as the *Geheimnisträger* – “bearer of the secret,” their existence was, inevitably, not secret and the morally ambiguous position that they were thrust into led many to form strong opinions about the special squad.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Poludniak, *Sonder*, 62-63.

<sup>199</sup> Shlomo Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 45.

<sup>200</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 52.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> Greif, “Between Sanity and Insanity,” 7.

The Scrolls of Auschwitz, by their nature, give exceptional insight into how the Sonderkommando men saw themselves and their work. In addition, they provide a document with which to compare and contrast others' viewpoints on the Sonderkommando. The writers recognized that their position was morally ambiguous. Zalman Lewenthal wrote that the squad was "of such ill fame."<sup>203</sup> It is important to compare other inmate eyewitness testimony with the Scrolls to show that the Sonderkommando were not collaborators. How others saw and treated the Sonderkommando plays a significant role in the interpretation of the Scrolls as well as their importance in Holocaust Studies. Many especially negative views of the Sonderkommando, when placed in the right context, can be refuted; however, some do reflect the complex nature of the Sonderkommando and need to be contextualized upon interpretation. Eyewitness testimony gives incredible insight into the Sonderkommando while also raising some of the most important questions and arguments concerning their culpability, which, in the end, points to the fact that most were not complicit in the murder of Europe's Jews.

In the Scrolls, the authors record some instances of confrontation that they had with victims outside of the gas chambers. In 1943, Leib Langfus described a situation that happened in the dressing room with children who had just arrived from Lithuania. He wrote that after the *Kommandoführer*, the SS man who supervised their labor detail, sent the Sonderkommando to undress the children, a young girl, who was undressing her one-year old brother, shouted at a Sonderkommando prisoner who tried to take the boy's clothes off – "Be gone, you Jewish murderer! Don't lay your hand, dripping with Jewish blood, upon my brother! I am his good mummy, he will die in my arms, together with me."<sup>204</sup> He wrote that, following this, a young boy also spoke up saying, "Why, you are a Jew and you lead such dear children to the gas – only in

<sup>203</sup> Lewenthal, "The Manuscript," 142.

<sup>204</sup> "Unknown Author: The Manuscript," in Bezwińska and Czech, *Amidst A Nightmare of Crime*, 119.

order to live? Is your life among the band of murderers really dearer to you than the lives of so many Jewish victims?"<sup>205</sup>

The words of these young children represent a common perspective of many prisoners in the camps and victims of the gas chambers at the time. Before going to her death, an unknown authoress wrote poems that exemplify this perspective. She wrote, "But he who has seen the slain Writhing in final pain Under the blood-drenched sword, He knows of better realms."<sup>206</sup> She went on to write that she knew she was "small and pitiful," but she would "rather die, Your spittle in my eye, Rather die a coward, Than have blood on my hands."<sup>207</sup> Many had the perspective that men, such as those in the Sonderkommando, should commit suicide or die rebelling rather than live and work in the gas chambers; however, this is an unfair opinion, as suicide in Judaism is considered a serious offense, particularly for Orthodox Jews.<sup>208</sup> In his manuscript, Zalman Lewenthal wrote about suicide. He said, "Lacking . . .the courage to end our lives . . . no one did it then . . . why . . . the question remains, and it is hard to answer now."<sup>209</sup> His language is very important here, as he used the word courage to describe what it would take to commit suicide. He went on to say "I myself [am] weak, captive of a strong desire to live . . ." <sup>210</sup> They saw in themselves weakness and cowardice for not committing suicide and this idea was reinforced by the perspective of other victims.

At the same time, they were also confronted by victims who urged them to live and tell the story of what happened to them. Langfus recorded a conversation between two young men in the dressing room and a Sonderkommando prisoner. They told the worker that, "You must

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Kraus and Kulka, *The Death Factory*, 212.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Kalman J. Kaplan and Matthew B. Schwartz, ed., *Jewish Approaches to Suicide, Martyrdom, and Euthanasia* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1998), 61-75.

<sup>209</sup> Zalman Lewenthal, "Diary," 220.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

revenge our blood, you must live . . .” before toasting to his health.<sup>211</sup> Filip Muller, a Sonderkommando survivor, recounted that one night in the dressing room, he began to recite the Jewish national anthem, and others in the room united with him. He decided that night that he was going to go into the gas chambers with his people; however, a woman told him, “So you want to die. But that’s senseless. Your death won’t give us back our lives. That’s no way. You must get out of here and you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us.”<sup>212</sup> There was no consensus among those who came through the dressing room about the Sonderkommando, nor was there a consensus among the Sonderkommando themselves about the morality of living or dying. Some did commit suicide, often by running toward the fence knowing they would be shot.<sup>213</sup> Many, however, chose to live because suicide “was too easy a solution” and “the force of life is greater than the pull of suicide. Suicide isn’t smart. More than anything else, I wanted to see the Germans get their comeuppance. From that moment on I made every effort to overcome . . . I wanted to live, pure and simple.”<sup>214</sup>

Langfus recorded another account with similar undertones. Before the gassing of a group of Poles and Dutch Jews, a young Polish woman gave a speech. She condemned the SS men who were present, then, she turned to the Sonderkommando and told them, “Remember that it is incumbent on you to follow your sacred duty of revenging us, the guilty. Tell our brothers, our nation, that we went to meet our death in full consciousness and with pride.”<sup>215</sup> Langfus then noted that they all took their last breaths singing the Polish national anthem and the *Hatikva*. Though Langfus never gave his reaction to these situations, Gradowski speaks directly to this

<sup>211</sup> “Unknown Author: The Manuscript,” 112.

<sup>212</sup> Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 165.

<sup>213</sup> “Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together – in Despair and Hope’,” 168.

<sup>214</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots’,” 295; and “Ya’akov Silberberg: ‘One Day in the Crematorium Felt Like a Year’,” 318.

<sup>215</sup> “Unknown Author: The Manuscript,” 115.



idea. He directly addresses the reader of his manuscripts telling them that he wrote them so that people would know how the Jews perished, “and the revenge that you should take, at least on their behalf but also on ours . . .”<sup>216</sup> He also said that the goal of his writings was to “stir your emotions and to plant a spark of revenge” so that “those who made an ocean of blood of my people drown in an ocean of blood.”<sup>217</sup> Both Gradowski and some other victims were acutely aware of the Sonderkommando’s ability to act as witnesses of their own demise to the rest of the world.

There were many other victims, however, who did not share this opinion. Two survivors wrote that the members of the Sonderkommando “appeared brutalized” over time.<sup>218</sup> Others described them as being inhuman and possessing “tense, insane faces.”<sup>219</sup> Unfortunately, many Sonderkommando men did struggle to maintain their humanity. Ya’akov Silberberg remembered, “You lose your ability to feel. The bodies no longer had any value for me. Gradually, I stopped having human emotions about the bodies.”<sup>220</sup> Rather than simply becoming numb as a coping mechanism, there were some Sonderkommando who did become insensitive to the nightmare around them over time.<sup>221</sup> Lewenthal actually lamented this in a self-criticism of the Sonderkommando. He wrote:

Why are you doing <such> unbecoming work, how do you live, what is the purpose of your life, what do you want? . . . Here lies the <weak point> of our Kommando, one that I do not intend to defend at all. However, I must tell the truth: more than one has lost his humanness with the passage of time. You are ashamed of yourself, they have simply forgotten what they are doing, the nature of their work. They adjusted over time, until it leaves you totally bewildered.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 82.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Kraus and Kulka, *The Death Factory*, 152.

<sup>219</sup> Danuta Czech, “The Auschwitz Prisoner Administration,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 374.

<sup>220</sup> Ya’akov Silberberg: “One Day in the Crematorium Felt Like a Year’,” 322.

<sup>221</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 50.

<sup>222</sup> Lewenthal, “Diary,” 221-222.

Silberberg notes in his interview that not everyone fell into the same pattern. He said, “We didn’t all think alike. There were different kinds of people among us.”<sup>223</sup> Even still, he and Gideon Greif note that there were some who lost their “moral compass” in the Sonderkommando.<sup>224</sup> The confusing and muddled definition of what was moral and what was not in Auschwitz finds more ambiguity among the camp’s victims. Both Lewenthal and Silberberg’s testimony show where a negative view of the Sonderkommando may have come from. They also exemplify that, just as any other group in the camps, the Sonderkommando was not without its blemishes.

Some other victims also projected the crimes of the SS onto the Sonderkommando. Alfred Fiderkiewicz, a former Polish prisoner in Auschwitz, had particularly harsh recollections of the Sonderkommando. He stated, “The Sonderkommando men, equipped with their truncheons, drove the doomed person into the gas chamber.”<sup>225</sup> Greif points out that one cannot unequivocally state some Sonderkommando men did not act violently; however, there is little to no evidence that this was a common occurrence, and even in Fiderkiewicz’s testimony he notes that it happened under order of the SS guards with the threat of death.<sup>226</sup> It also stands in contrast to the writings of the Sonderkommando prisoners. Gradowski wrote, “The pain splits our hearts. We literally fell, experience the agonies of the transition from life to death . . . Our hearts overflow in commiseration with their suffering. Oh, if we could sacrifice entire chunks of our lives for them . . . how happy we would be.”<sup>227</sup> Gradowski’s words allude to an unimaginable depth of pain, and while it is likely that not all Sonderkommando men felt this way, there is no evidence that they were, as a whole, brutal, callous, and cruel to other victims.

<sup>223</sup> Silberberg: “‘One Day in the Crematorium Felt Like a Year’,” 322.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 54.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 54-57.

<sup>227</sup> Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 59.

This does bring to light a complexity of the Sonderkommando: that they were diverse in not only their emotional reactions to things, but also in their morals and ethics. Though she maintained a harsher view of the Sonderkommando overall, Seweryna Szmaglewska highlights this complexity. She wrote,

The Sonderkommando – the drunken Jews that treated their dying brother Jews in the same manner as the SS men treat them – are a desperate example of a man lost in the flaming jungle of Birkenau. And at the same time the workers of that same Sonderkommando sometimes will rush to the wires, endangering their own lives to bring the Jewish men and women in the camp the last greeting sent from the crematory. Sometimes they bring small souvenirs, photographs or a letter as a farewell from their dying family. . . Birkenau becomes a jungle where you may easily go astray.<sup>228</sup>

She followed this up by saying that these sacrificial acts were rare, yet the harsh example she gave was the callousness of a member of the *Kanada* commando, the prisoners who had to sort through victims items in a warehouse, and not the Sonderkommando.<sup>229</sup> In addition, there are many other eyewitness testimonies that support the Sonderkommando helping other people. Irmentraud Durfee’s father was arrested and killed in the camp. A neighbor survived his time in the Sonderkommando and saw her father go into the gas chambers. Before he died, her father gave the neighbor his wedding ring. After the war, the neighbor brought it back to her mother. Durfee said, “And he cried, and he apologized to my mother. My mother was very upset . . . ‘how could you do that to your own people?’ and he says, ‘they were going to shoot me.’”<sup>230</sup> Even still, Durfee understood the man. She stated, “There’s very few [that] would say all right come on and shoot me, you know? Everybody’s life . . . they want to live, and that’s what he did.”<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Seweryna Szmaglewska, *Smoke Over Birkenau*, trans. Jadwiga Rynas (New York: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015), 109.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Oral history interview with Irmentraud Durfee (Fall River, Massachusetts: The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, 2017).

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

Many eyewitness testimonies described the Sonderkommando harshly but alluded to the complexities of their position. Dr. Charles Bendel, who worked as a doctor in Birkenau, described the Sonderkommando dragging bodies out of the gas chambers. He said, “They drag the corpses by their wrists in furious haste. People who had faces before, I cannot recognize again. They are like devils . . . they are no longer human beings;”<sup>232</sup> however, he adds that this was because, “even during their work, blows from sticks and rubber truncheons are being showered over them.”<sup>233</sup> This is an important caveat that must be taken into consideration when looking at eyewitness testimony concerning the Sonderkommando. Lewenthal’s manuscript corroborates this account. He wrote, “we were running under the threat of the clubs of the SS men who supervised us. . . we lost ourselves so much that we were as if lifeless. Driven on we ran like automatons . . .”<sup>234</sup> The Sonderkommando men never shy away from admitting their struggle to maintain their human emotions; however, when this is not put into the context of the fact that they were forced under threat of death to do this job, it is possible to see them as heartless collaborators.

Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz from 1941 to 1943, also spoke of the Sonderkommando quite harshly. In one account, he discussed the issue that Sonderkommando men often saw or found people they knew in the undressing room or in the gas chambers. One man found his wife among the dead. Höss said that the man stopped and looked shocked but kept going. He wrote, “Was he really able to hide his feelings so completely, or had he become so hardened that something like this didn’t bother him?”<sup>235</sup> He also calls the Sonderkommando’s

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<sup>232</sup> Robert Jan Van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 235.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Zalmen Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” in *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 138.

<sup>235</sup> Steven Paskuly, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012), 161.

inability or unwillingness to commit suicide weak, and said he was puzzled by their behavior saying that they did these jobs “with an indifferent coolness, just as if this was an everyday affair.”<sup>236</sup> Indeed, many did find their friends or family among the dead;<sup>237</sup> however, it is important to note with Höss’s and other perpetrators’ testimony that they observed the Sonderkommando and other prisoners with a cold distance. Gideon Greif points out that “His intention is not to comprehend the victims’ actions but to justify the victims overall situation” and therefore his description is “cynical and vicious,” and far from objective.<sup>238</sup>

Though the day to day life in the crematorium did become routine for the Sonderkommando, callous testimonies such as Höss’s also generalize the Sonderkommando and leave no room for the deep complexities that characterized their mental and emotional state. Lewenthal corroborated that many Sonderkommando found people they loved among the dead, but he also said that each man in the Sonderkommando was “ready [...] to scratch out his eyes with his own fingernails [...]”<sup>239</sup> Höss’s testimony also discounts situations where the Sonderkommando did react to finding their family among the dead or the condemned. One Sonderkommando worker found his mother among those who were about to go to the gas chambers. When she asked what the burning smell was he told her it was rags, and when she asked where they were going, he told her they were going to the shower.<sup>240</sup> Then, “the son handed the towel and the soap to his mother and both went inside. They disappeared into the hell of the chimney.”<sup>241</sup> Olga Gunbaum testified that a young man found his father among the dead one day. She said, “he had to put his own father into the oven . . . he was screaming for days in

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>237</sup> Zalman Lowenthal, “Diary,” 218.

<sup>238</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 59.

<sup>239</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 137.

<sup>240</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 61.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

that barrack, we could hear him . . . he went crazy.”<sup>242</sup> Soon after, the SS killed him. Some also did cry when witnessing their people standing on the threshold of death.<sup>243</sup> One cannot say that the Sonderkommando, as a whole, were cold, callous, and indifferent to the deaths of their friends, family, and neighbors.

A common accusation that has been made against the Sonderkommando is that they were collaborators in the sense that they lied to the people going to the gas chambers or did not tell them what was happening, and therefore deceived their own people. Höss said that the Sonderkommando “tried everything to fool them . . . It was interesting to see how the Sonderkommando lied to them and how they emphasized these lies with convincing words . . .”<sup>244</sup> Josef Sackar testified that many already knew what was coming. He said, “they knew, the word had spread.”<sup>245</sup> Gradowski concurred, writing, “The victims saw the real truth now: they were being led to death. . . they stand confused, unarmed, and submissive.”<sup>246</sup> Gradowski gives a more poetic and symbolic view of the Sonderkommando’s job. He wrote, “they fall, as if swooning like harvested sheaves, straight into our arms . . . We walk in mute silence step by step, our hearts pounding in rhythm. We suffer and bleed just as they do . . .”<sup>247</sup> Sackar described it more directly, saying that they did lie even though the people knew what was happening; however, he notes that the SS, the Kapo, and the foreman ordered them to do that and that the Sonderkommando were not allowed to talk to the people other than to tell them they were going to the showers.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Oral history interview with Olga Grunbaum, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, 1990.

<sup>243</sup> Langfus, “The Horrors of Murder,” 213; and “Unknown Author: The Manuscript,” 112.

<sup>244</sup> Paskuly, *Death Dealer*, 158.

<sup>245</sup> “Josef Sackar: ‘To Survive, so the Truth Would Come Out,’” 100.

<sup>246</sup> Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 52.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>248</sup> “Josef Sackar: ‘To Survive, so the Truth Would Come Out,’” 100, 102.

Even still, some Sonderkommando men felt compelled to try to tell the victims what was going to happen to them. When getting off of the trains, Paula S. Biren testified that when she and others asked them where they were going, the Sonderkommando responded, “to mishpitt.”<sup>249</sup> She explained that *mishpitt* meant “the judgment, day of judgment, the judgment day. In Hebrew, mishpitt. So it was clear what they were saying.”<sup>250</sup> Eliezer Eisenschmidt, a Sonderkommando survivor, did try once to tell the rabbi of a community that he and his congregation were going to be murdered. He told the rabbi to “say *viddui* [the final confession in Jewish liturgy] with your congregation;” however, the rabbi refused, saying, “God will help us.”<sup>251</sup> Though many men did not take the chance of telling the victims what was happening to them, Rudolf Reder testified that, “when the barracks were locked for the night and the lights were out once could hear a whisper of prayers for the dead, the Kaddish [the Jewish prayer for the dead], and then there was silence.”<sup>252</sup>

Many also fail to understand the repercussions of the Sonderkommando telling people that they were going to be gassed. One worker did tell a woman that he recognized that they were going to be gassed. She began screaming and the SS pulled her aside while they gassed the other people in her group. One survivor testified that the SS “knew that somebody had to tell her [this]. They tortured her until she pointed to the man who told her, she wanted the torture to stop, she couldn’t take the physical pain . . . they took the man and threw him into the burning oven without even killing him first, alive.”<sup>253</sup> Telling people what was going to happen often caused

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<sup>249</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Oral History Interview with Paula S. Biren, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, 2005.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Michael Berenbaum, “Sonderkommando: Testimony From Evidence,” in Jonathan Petropoulos and John Roth, ed. *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 63.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>253</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “When God Looked Down and Wept,” Alex Sharf Oral Testimony, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.

unnecessary chaos and did not save anyone's life. Leon Cohen said, "How could I tell people that they were about to be murdered? . . . What could we have changed even if we had warned the people?"<sup>254</sup> Gradowski asserted that starting an uprising in the dressing room was not possible, as even the "young energetic masses that were ready for struggle, remained seated, motionless, spent, disillusioned, and broken."<sup>255</sup> The Nazis had condemned these people to immediate death, and their knowledge of what was to come would not change their fate.

The Sonderkommando did, at times, try to help new arrivals. On the ramps they would sometimes whisper to people telling them to say that they had a usable skill. Upon his arrival at Treblinka, a Sonderkommando saved Samuel Willenberg's life by telling him to say he was a bricklayer.<sup>256</sup> Freda Wineman, a survivor of Auschwitz, testified that the Sonderkommando "had told the young mothers to hand over their babies because the only chance they had of surviving the initial selection was to appear in front of the SS doctor without their children."<sup>257</sup> Olga Grunbaum said this happened when she arrived at Auschwitz as well. She said that whoever was carrying a baby automatically went to the left side, the "wrong" side.<sup>258</sup> The men did this because they knew the SS rarely tried to separate mothers from their children for fear of causing commotion. Though there was no guarantee that this would save a person's life because the people who received this information had to decide whether to listen to it or not, and they were always at the mercy of the Nazis' decisions concerning them.<sup>259</sup>

The Sonderkommando are also often blamed for not rebelling against the SS. Krystyna Zywulska, a survivor of Auschwitz, wrote about a conversation she had with a Sonderkommando

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<sup>254</sup> "Leon Cohen: 'We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots'," 296.

<sup>255</sup> Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 89.

<sup>256</sup> Laurence Reese, *The Holocaust: A New History* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 307.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, XV.

<sup>258</sup> Holocaust Memorial Museum, Interview with Olga Grunbaum.

<sup>259</sup> Hayes, *Why?*, 196.



man, asking him how he did his job and why they did not resist. He said, “Do you think I’m doing this of my own free will? . . . And why don’t you organize an uprising? Only because your group sits in an office? . . . and the thousands in the camps, why don’t the rebel?”<sup>260</sup> He finished by saying, “You think that those working in the Sonderkommandos are monsters? I’m telling you, they’re like the rest, just much more unhappy.”<sup>261</sup> There has been a tendency to place higher expectations upon the Sonderkommando than any other prisoner, yet, in truth, to expect anyone in the camps to resist is unfair. Furthermore, the Sonderkommando are some of the only prisoners who did rebel in the camps. Jacob Robinson explains, “The fact is that in three out of the six extermination camps – in Sobibor, in Treblinka, in Auschwitz – there were revolts of the special units.”<sup>262</sup> The difficulty and sacrifice that the Sonderkommando experienced in uprising is important; however, to demand or even expect it of anyone in the camps is to completely ignore the sheer struggle of their day to day lives.

An important but often overlooked view of the Sonderkommando is that of their loved ones. Many Sonderkommando prisoners were the only members of their family to survive Auschwitz; however, some workers’ families lived in the camps as well. Leon Zetley’s father and uncle were chosen for the Sonderkommando while he and his brother lived in Birkenau (his mother and sister died in the gas chambers). He and his brother were able to go to a fence at night and talk to his father through it.<sup>263</sup> His father would throw bread and sometimes other items to them. For a long time, Zetley did not understand what his father was doing; however, he eventually figured it out. He said it was “a horrible experience” when he found out, but “I

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<sup>260</sup> Czech, “The Auschwitz Prisoner Administration,” 374; and Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 69.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 58.

<sup>263</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Oral History Interview with Leon Zetley, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, 1986.

couldn't tell my brother that I knew it and I couldn't tell my father that I know what he is doing. I had to leave something to him, that he's trying to help his children with giving them a piece of bread or even an extra shirt, or another jacket to keep you warm, that he is doing some kind of work that he can help us."<sup>264</sup> Zetley never spoke on the morality of what was happening, but he said he never told his father that he knew what he was doing because he did not want to hurt him even more, alluding to the fact that his job in the Sonderkommando likely hurt his father.<sup>265</sup>

Olga Grunbaum also met with a Sonderkommando through the cracks in the fences. The Sonderkommando barracks were not far from hers, and a young, Polish Jew became her boyfriend and gave her food over the fence as he had "very sad access" to food.<sup>266</sup> Concerning their work, she stated that, "It wasn't their fault, they were just working there. They were doing what they were told."<sup>267</sup> Grunbaum and the man exchanged addresses so that they could find each other after the war and marry; however, he died in Auschwitz. Someone passed his last message on to her. He said, "tell Olga that she won't see me anymore."<sup>268</sup> She found out that, "They took the Sonderkommando and did something to them. They killed them. They weren't allowed to stay alive. Because they knew too much, they saw too much, they went through too much. . ."<sup>269</sup> Though the eyewitness testimonies of loved ones come with personal bias, they show the human side of the Sonderkommando that is often lost when analyzing the twisted reality that they lived in.

Perhaps the most well known and influential viewpoint on the Sonderkommando comes from Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz. Levi focuses primarily on the moral ambiguity of the

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Holocaust Memorial Museum, Interview with Olga Grunbaum.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

Sonderkommando. One important point that Levi makes is that the Sonderkommando was “National Socialism’s most demonic crime.” He said that the Sonderkommando represented “an attempt to shift onto others – specifically the victims – the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.”<sup>270</sup> Unfortunately, the Nazis were successful in doing this as Lewenthal wrote, “We were ashamed of one another and we dared not look one another in the face. Our eyes swollen with pain, shame, tears and lamentations, each of us burrowed into a hole to avoid meeting the other.”<sup>271</sup> Levi astutely puts the Sonderkommando in the context that the German’s saw them in, thus lending a deeper understanding to their purpose for the Nazis and why their position was so morally complex.

Levi takes a largely sympathetic view of the Sonderkommando. He describes them as “wretches” and “miserable manual laborers of the slaughter.”<sup>272</sup> However, Levi is almost too sympathetic and completely undermines the ability of the Sonderkommando to act as witnesses. He said that they were “in a permanent state of complete debasement and prostration.”<sup>273</sup> Though their time in the gas chambers and crematoria were brutal, this generalization is dangerous as it portrays the Sonderkommando as wholly pathetic figures. This particularly ignores the brave men who orchestrated the uprising and chose to “demolish everything and die for our faith!”<sup>274</sup> He went on to say that one could not expect a clear or literal account from the Sonderkommando, but rather, it would be “a lament, a curse, an expiation, an attempt to justify and rehabilitate oneself: a liberating outburst rather than a Medusa-faced truth.”<sup>275</sup> Interestingly, Levi alludes to the Scrolls of Auschwitz, but gives no inclination that he ever read them.<sup>276</sup> The very nature of

<sup>270</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 55.

<sup>271</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 136.

<sup>272</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 53, 59.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>274</sup> “Unknown Author: The Manuscript,” 112.

<sup>275</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 53.

<sup>276</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 8.

the Scrolls do echo the lamentations of the Sonderkommando; however, they also exemplify that these men could act as witnesses to the crimes of the gas chambers and crematoria.<sup>277</sup> Their time there was incredibly degrading and affected them in many negative ways, but they did not lose all and the Scrolls show that these men were cognizant and morally aware enough to record the stories of the gas chambers and crematoria.

In the end, Levi suspends judgment of the Sonderkommando. He wrote, “I believe that no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not.”<sup>278</sup> Even still, there is a “telling tension” in Levi’s essay as he struggled to reconcile his sympathy and repulsion for the Sonderkommando.<sup>279</sup> Directly preceding his suspension of judgment, he wrote that the Sonderkommando were those who “preferred a few more weeks of life (what a life) to immediate death . . .” and he described them as being on the “borderline of collaboration.”<sup>280</sup> Levi’s work is an important discussion on the questions of morality concerning the Sonderkommando; however, “his own representation of those he argues should not be judged reveals that he himself struggles to abstain from judgement.”<sup>281</sup> Levi’s effort to understand the Sonderkommando is significant, but his conclusions and language seem to be contradictory at times. He calls on others to suspend moral judgments of the Sonderkommando and to mediate on their story with “pity and rigor,” yet he still refers to them as collaborators.<sup>282</sup> Levi’s work shows that there is both an “impossibility and

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<sup>277</sup> Refer to Chapter 1.

<sup>278</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 59.

<sup>279</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 8.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>281</sup> Adam Brown, “Beyond ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’: Breaking Down Binary Oppositions in Holocaust Representations of ‘Privileged’ Jews,” *History Compass* 8, no. 5 (May 2010), 411.

<sup>282</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 52, 60.

inevitability of judgement” – a paradoxical bind that entangles anyone, including Levi, who studies the Sonderkommando.<sup>283</sup>

In his work, Levi recounts a story of the Sonderkommando playing soccer with the SS guards. Levi did not witness this first hand, but got the story from Dr. Miklos Nyiszli. In this “SS versus SK game,” Nyiszli wrote, “Sonorous laughter filled the courtyard. The spectators became excited and shouted encouragement at the players, as if this were the playing field of some peaceful town.”<sup>284</sup> Levi wrote that in the veterans of the Sonderkommando, those who had been there for more than a few weeks, the SS “recognized to some extent colleagues, by now as inhuman as themselves, hitched to the same cart, bound together by the foul link of imposed complicity.”<sup>285</sup> Interpretations of this event vary based on individual moral judgments. Nyiszli, who is reported to have had civil relations with Dr. Mengele and assisted him with autopsies, was “stupefied” by this event while Levi was obviously repulsed and saw it as a representation of the Nazis moral triumph over the Jews.<sup>286</sup> Inga Clendennin, however, while recognizing this viewpoint, interpreted it as “men being allowed to recognize each other, however briefly, as fellow humans.”<sup>287</sup> This account thrusts the Sonderkommando into the most ambiguous parts of the Gray Zone, leaving the morality of the match dependent on the readers’ interpretation; however, Debarati Sanyal was correct in saying that this match is “emblematic of a maddening coexistence of incommensurate realities, in which the temporality of soccer somehow unfolds alongside the temporality of extermination.”<sup>288</sup>

<sup>283</sup> Brown, *Judging “Privileged” Jews*, 202.

<sup>284</sup> Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 68.

<sup>285</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 54.

<sup>286</sup> Brown, “Beyond ‘Good’ and ‘Evil,’” 415; and Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 68.

<sup>287</sup> Inga Clendennin, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>288</sup> Debarati Sanyal, “A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Culpability in Holocaust Criticism,” *Representations* 79, no. 1 (Summer 2002), 2-3.

The testimony of concentration camp victims and the Sonderkommando must also be put into the context of the camps themselves. Lawrence Langer wrote that life in the camps “cannot be viewed through the same lens we used to view normal human behavior since the rules of law and morality and the choices available for human decisions were not permitted in these camps for extermination.”<sup>289</sup> Concerning concentration camp prisoners Jan Rozanski recalled, “Their eyes lived a separate life. All the time on the alert, seeking, examining, founding, analyzing, guarding, testing, and thinking.”<sup>290</sup> The Nazis had stripped everyone in the camps, including the Sonderkommando, of their most basic human tendencies and needs. The goal was survival, and it is arguable that the entire camp system is a Gray Zone, not just the Sonderkommando’s world. The Sonderkommando lived in a world of choiceless choices, but so did many others. Langer points out that choices in the camps were not between life and death, but between “two forms of humiliation.”<sup>291</sup> Indeed, the Sonderkommando lived with the “choice” of being murdered instead of working in the gas chambers and crematoria or killing themselves. Understandably, both options posed extensive forms of humiliation for these men, leaving them to live with their “choice” and the judgment that came with each option.

Eyewitness testimony raises some of the most important critiques and questions concerning the Sonderkommando’s culpability; however, it also points to the fact that most were not complicit in the Holocaust. Many negative views of the Sonderkommando are misinterpretations or rumors; some, however, do have a basis in the behavior of the Sonderkommando, but they must be contextualized and interpreted with care. These views

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<sup>289</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, *Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves Nat., 2017), 501.

<sup>290</sup> “In Your Blood I Live,” RG-02.079.01, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, D.C., 114.

<sup>291</sup> Lawrence Langer, “The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps,” *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 228-229.

highlight the complex nature of the Sonderkommando as many men dealt with and reacted to their time in the squad differently. When addressing the Sonderkommando, it is hard to suspend one's personal bias toward them and each eyewitness carried his own prejudices. Even still, eyewitness testimony lends an invaluable addition to the study of the Sonderkommando and the Scrolls of Auschwitz as it reaches beyond what the Sonderkommando thought of themselves and broadens the understanding of their physical position in the camps and their moral position within the Holocaust.

Chapter 3:  
The Sonderkommando and Acts of Resistance: Treblinka and Sobibor, the Sonderkommando  
Photographs, and the Sonderkommando Uprising

We hoped, we believed, that it would happen today, that today would be the day that our fate would be sealed, the day that we, too, had been awaiting with bated breath, the day on which...the event would happen, the day...on which the despairing masses, on the lip of the grave, would raise the banner of struggle and embark together with us, hand in hand, on a struggle between unequal forces. We would then ignore the question of whether it was hopeless, whether we could obtain our freedom or our lives by doing it. The greatest opportunity for us would be the chance to bring this dismal life to a heroic end. These tragic, horrifying matters had to come to an end.<sup>292</sup>

Writing the Scrolls of Auschwitz was an act of dangerous rebellion. The authors stood to lose their lives, which was all that they had left, to make a record of what happened to Europe's Jews; however, this was not their only act of rebellion. Three of the Scrolls authors, Lewenthal, Langfus, and Gradowski, were directly involved in the planning and implementation of the Sonderkommando Uprising that took place on October 7, 1944, while Nadjary and Herman are believed to have also been active participants. Though there had been some small-scale rebellions from other prisoners, this was the first and only armed resistance ever executed in Auschwitz.<sup>293</sup> The Sonderkommando received weapons and supplies over time through the underground resistance in Auschwitz, but on the day of the uprising, they acted alone.<sup>294</sup> Though not all Sonderkommando workers were involved, hundreds were part of the uprising and lost their lives as a result, including Langfus and Gradowski. Just as they made the choice to record the manuscripts, many men in the Sonderkommando chose to rebel knowing they would lose

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<sup>292</sup> Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 87.

<sup>293</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 40.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*



their lives in the process. Though the uprising was not executed according to the plan, the Sonderkommando succeeded in destroying crematorium IV.<sup>295</sup>

Importantly, the Sonderkommando were also involved in other acts of physical resistance such as the Sonderkommando Photographs, pictures that the Sonderkommando clandestinely took in 1944 of the extermination process and smuggled out of the camps, as well as the Sobibór and Treblinka Uprisings. Of course, the Sonderkommando was made up of myriads of people with varying backgrounds and therefore cannot be completely generalized; however, these acts of resistance show that though they were hurt by the world they were forced to live in, the Sonderkommando were not pathetic figures incapable of serving as witnesses to the Nazi's crimes and acting against them.<sup>296</sup> The authors of the Scrolls give evidence of this in their writings as they discussed both the planning and aftermath of the Uprising. The Sonderkommando Uprising, as well as other physical acts of resistance, reinforces the evidence in the Scrolls which shows that most men of the Sonderkommando were not willing participants in the Holocaust and, in fact, actively resisted when they could.

Before the Sonderkommando photographs and uprising in Auschwitz, there were uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibór. In discussing the Sonderkommando, these revolts are often left out and the special squads in these camps receive little to no criticism for their jobs in the camps compared to the heated controversy that surrounds the Auschwitz Sonderkommando. In documentation, the Sonderkommando in Treblinka are often referred to as *Leichenträger* or simply inmate workers.<sup>297</sup> As they were the only inmates kept in the camp, except for a small number who sorted through the victim's possessions, there is usually not a clear distinction given

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<sup>295</sup> Thomas V. Maher, "Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action: The Cases of Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz," *American Sociological Review* 75 no. 2 (April 2010), 266.

<sup>296</sup> Greif, "Between Sanity and Insanity," in *Gray Zones*, 57.

<sup>297</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 8.

to them such as the Sonderkommando. In Sobibór, they are often referred to as *Arbeitshäftlinge*, which simply translates to inmate worker; however, the distinction here is more important as there was a small population of prisoners kept in the camp who did not work with bodies that are also referred to by the same name.<sup>298</sup> Unlike Auschwitz's diverse population, Sobibor and Treblinka's demographics were largely Jewish, and Jews were more likely to hold grueling jobs, making the special squads there mainly Jewish.<sup>299</sup>

In Treblinka, the men selected to work among the condemned and the dead had similar experiences to those in Auschwitz. Richard Glazar recalled that there was an initial shock for most men, but it only lasted a day or two before they adjusted; however, he noted that "There were some who didn't survive this shock. There were the following cases: hung themselves, took medication. At that time there were so many transports that there was also lots of medication. So, they simply poisoned themselves."<sup>300</sup> There were also some men who asked the SS to be gassed as their wives and children had been. He also noted that at one point, an inmate worker yelled to a new transport on the ramp saying, "You're all going to your death. Defend yourselves, do something! You're all going to your death," but the people only "looked at him as if he were a madman."<sup>301</sup> He said that at that point, "we knew, back then already, that you couldn't do anything with the people arriving."<sup>302</sup> This statement echoes Gradowski's writings as he lamented that the people coming into the camp could not or would not revolt. After this realization, Glazar states that they began planning a revolt. In addition, the survivors of the

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<sup>298</sup> Jules Schelvis, *Sobibor: A History of a Nazi Death Camp* (New York: Oxford International Publishers, Ltd., 2007), 83.

<sup>299</sup> Maher, "Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action," 257.

<sup>300</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Richard Glazar – Treblinka, Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection, 1979.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, who arrived at the camp in May 1943, also helped these men resolve that they would not be “led to [their] death stunned, submissive, and helpless.”<sup>303</sup>

On August 2, 1943, a group of prisoners revolted in Treblinka. They used a key that they had duplicated to get into the SS’s weapons storehouse and opened fire on the SS and Ukrainian guards.<sup>304</sup> They had also procured some grenades from the storeroom and stole flammable liquid that they used to set the barracks, gas chambers, and SS barracks on fire. Under fire from the guards, the rebels helped other inmates escape and cut the barbed wire fences to flee. Many inmates tried to flee through the main gate, but were shot down by guards. Yankel Wierkink recalled, “Our objective was to reach the woods . . . We ran across swamps, meadows and ditches, with bullets pursuing us fast and furious. Every second counted. All that mattered was to reach the woods . . .”<sup>305</sup> Approximately 300 prisoners escaped initially, but many of them were massacred by the Germans in their pursuit of the rebels. It is estimated that only 100 escapees survived.<sup>306</sup> The surviving prisoners had to dismantle the camp and were subsequently shot.

In Sobibór, the spark that pushed many toward revolt was the murder of Belzec’s workers. When Belzec closed in late 1942, the inmate workers were forced to dig up and burn the bodies of the people murdered there. They were then told that they were going to be transferred to another camp. In order to try to keep them calm, the Germans gave them bread, vodka, and canned food on the way.<sup>307</sup> Nevertheless, the workers understood what was happening, and resolved to die attempting to escape rather than being gassed. At the same time,

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<sup>303</sup> Samuel Willenberg, “I Survived Treblinka,” in Alexander Donat, *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 209.

<sup>304</sup> Witold Chrostowski, *Extermination Camp Treblinka* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2004), 92.

<sup>305</sup> Yankel Wierkink, *A Year in Treblinka* (New York: American Representation of the General Jewish Workers' Union of Poland, 1949), 45.

<sup>306</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 345.

<sup>307</sup> Maher, “Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action,” 260.

the SS had kept almost all the workers of Sobibór in their barracks that day, most likely to keep them from speaking with the Belzec prisoners. Philip Bialowitz recalled that, “When they step down from the train cars, the prisoners all throw themselves upon the guards in the unloading area . . . we can hear chaotic shouts and gun shots . . .”<sup>308</sup> In these men’s clothing, the Sobibor workers found notes from the Belzec workers that explained what happened to them. One note ended with the statement, “We see that we will meet the same fate as our brothers and sisters. You too will be killed. Do not be fooled as we were! Take vengeance! Take vengeance!”<sup>309</sup> This, along with rumors that Sobibór was also to be liquidated, led many inmate workers in Sobibor to rebel. One said, “If I am to die, I would rather it be while trying to escape, and get shot in the back.”<sup>310</sup>

On October 14, 1943, prisoners in Sobibór revolted. The prisoners lured individual SS and Ukrainian guards into different storehouses on false pretenses. There, the rebels killed them with axes or knives. They succeeded in killing the acting commandant of the camp and the commander of the Ukrainian guards as well as cutting the telephone and electricity wires in the camp to prevent the guards calling for back up.<sup>311</sup> As news of the revolt slowly began to spread, some inmates began citing the *Kaddish* – the Jewish prayer for the dead, as “They could not envisage their salvation, even outside Sobibór, and they prayed for the dead—for themselves.”<sup>312</sup> At the evening roll call, things became more chaotic when a group killed a Ukrainian guard. A soldier witnessed this and began shooting at them.<sup>313</sup> Some prisoners escaped through the main gate, but it was soon cut off by bullets from the guards. Many prisoners still fled but died in the

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<sup>308</sup> Philip Bialowitz, *A Promise at Sobibor* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 97.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> Schelvis, *Sobibor*, 146.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>312</sup> Thomas Toivi Blatt, *Sobibór, The Forgotten Revolt: A Survivor’s Report* (Issaquah, WA: H.E.P., 1998),

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<sup>313</sup> Schelvis, *Sobibor*, 164-65.

minefields surrounding the camp. Three hundred of the approximately 600 prisoners in the camp at the time escaped, around 100 were captured by the pursuing Nazis or turned in by surrounding Polish citizens. 200 escapees were able to survive at least for a time, but only 50 survived the war.<sup>314</sup> The few prisoners that were left were shot, while the SS and Ukrainian guards dismantled the camp.

Though the uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibór were not executed only by Sonderkommando workers, and there is no distinction between the part that Sonderkommando workers and other prisoners played in the revolt, a large number were involved as “the prisoners’ primary function in the camp was handling the people and property that arrived on the transports.”<sup>315</sup> There was not one, cohesive Sonderkommando in the camps that was kept from everyone else as in Auschwitz. Even still, their rebellions are important as they refute the assertions that the men who were forced to do these jobs were complicit or unwilling to rebel against the SS. They were involved in the only major revolts in three of the six extermination camps and executed some of the other most risky forms of rebellion by recording their experiences and hiding them as well as taking photographs of the killing process in Auschwitz.<sup>316</sup> In addition, their rebellions helped to hasten the end of both camps.

Before discussing the Sonderkommando Uprising in Auschwitz, it is important to distinguish between the two numbering systems of the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In counting the gas chambers, most historians refer to the first crematorium located in Auschwitz as Crematorium 1.<sup>317</sup> However, as Auschwitz shifted to becoming an extermination camp, the Nazis built gas chambers in Birkenau. The Wannsee Conference, held on January 20, 1942, formally

<sup>314</sup> Maher, “Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action,” 261.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>316</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 58.

<sup>317</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, ix.

outlined the plan for the Final Solution. After the conference, the extermination of the Jews was hastened, therefore, so was the construction of the extermination camps.<sup>318</sup> By 1943, Birkenau had four operational crematoria that, including the old crematorium in Auschwitz, were capable of burning 4,736 bodies every 24 hours.<sup>319</sup> The old crematorium became known as Crematorium I while the new crematoria in Birkenau were known as Crematoria II, III, IV, and V. It is important to note, however, that the Sonderkommando men only counted the four crematoria in Birkenau. In their writings and testimony, the Sonderkommando refer to Crematorium IV, the crematorium destroyed in the uprisings, as Crematorium III in their writings.<sup>320</sup>

Planning for the revolt began long before October 7, 1944. Within the camp, there was a group of Polish nationals known as the Union of Military Organizations or Auschwitz Combat Group, referred to here as the ZOW. This group was founded by Witold Pilecki, a Polish Army officer who allowed himself to be captured in a street round up in Warsaw. He intentionally went to Auschwitz to gather intelligence on the camp and establish the ZOW for the Polish Home Army.<sup>321</sup> The goals of the ZOW were, “keeping up the morale among fellow inmates and supplying them with news from the outside, providing extra food and distributing clothing among organization members, and preparing our detachments to take over the camp in the eventuality of the dropping of arms or of a live force [i.e., paratroops].”<sup>322</sup> This resistance group

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<sup>318</sup> Christian Gerlach, “The Wansee Conference, the Fate of the German Jews, and Hitler’s Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews,” Omer Bartov, in *the Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 132.

<sup>319</sup> Hilberg, “Auschwitz and the Final Solution,” 87-88.

<sup>320</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, ix.

<sup>321</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Auschwitz Volunteer: Captain Witold Pilecki,” International Holocaust Remembrance Day, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/international-holocaust-remembrance-day/the-auschwitz-volunteer-pilecki>.

<sup>322</sup> Jozef Garlinski, *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp* (New York: Julian Friedman Publishers, 1975), 54.

and the larger Home Army were not partisans, they were an extension of the Polish Army and worked under the direction of the exiled Polish government.<sup>323</sup>

As the camp grew and became more diverse, so did the underground movement and ethnic or political sub groups formed within the underground. There was also Jewish section of the Auschwitz underground. The ZOW had tried for some time to acquire the Home Army's help in supporting a revolt to no avail.<sup>324</sup> The Sonderkommando had hoped for some time that the transports coming into the camp would revolt and then they could join in. Gradowski wrote, "Hundreds of thousands of strong, healthy lives had already filed past out eyes more than once . . . They knew they were being taken here to die but none of them ever tried to revolt or to go down resisting."<sup>325</sup> He wishfully wrote that they hoped each day that it would be the day when "the despairing masses, on the lip of the grave, would raise the banner of struggle and embark together with us, hand in hand, on a struggle between unequal forces."<sup>326</sup> With only a couple exceptions, small acts of rebellion which were quickly quelled, this never came to fruition and the Sonderkommando continued hoping.

The collaboration between the Sonderkommando and the underground largely began after the Sonderkommando discovered that they were to receive a Hungarian transport of approximately 100,000 people. The news of this exceptionally large transport "led every member of the detail, no matter what class or walk of life, and even the worst people, to urge that this game be stopped at last."<sup>327</sup> Indeed, Lewenthal corroborates this. He wrote, "This made us lose heart for good."<sup>328</sup> He continued, "this caused that simply the whole Kommando, without

<sup>323</sup> Maher, "Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action," 266-65.

<sup>324</sup> Maher, "Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action," 265.

<sup>325</sup> Gradowski, "The Czech Transport," 549.

<sup>326</sup> Gradowski, *From the Heart of Hell*, 87.

<sup>327</sup> Hermann Langbein, *Against All Hope: Resistance in the Concentration Camps*, trans., H. Zohn, (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 285.

<sup>328</sup> Lewenthal, "The Manuscript," 154.

distinction to what stratum or class of society one belonged, not excepting the worst ones, all began to insist to put a stop at last to that game . . . and [if need be] sacrifice oneself and give one's own life."<sup>329</sup> These testaments indicate that a large number of the Sonderkommando were not complicit in the murders taking place in the gas chambers. The men did not hold hopes of surviving this revolt, and this large scale transport seemed to push many to their breaking point, They were prepared to die before they had to "sully" their hands with "the blood of Hungarian Jews."<sup>330</sup> Though there was some talk of a revolt with the underground before the Sonderkommando knew about the transport, it was a defining factor for the collaboration between the Auschwitz underground and the Sonderkommando in making a plan for a camp revolt.

In order to stage the uprising, the rebels had to procure weapons. To do this, they enlisted the help of the women in the Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke factory, which was a munitions factory outside of Birkenau and close to Auschwitz I; however, the women lived in the women's camp in Birkenau. One of these women, who survived the war, stated that part of their motivation for doing this was that there were "rumors that at the last moment, as the front approaches the camp, the SS may want to annihilate everybody by blowing up the camp."<sup>331</sup> Young Jewish women, such as Ester Wajcblum, Ella Gärtner, Hanka Wajcblum, and Regina Safirsztain were recruited by two young men, Israel Gutman and Jehuda Laufer who were also assigned to the munitions factory, but they were ultimately convinced to smuggle items by Roza Robata, a twenty three year old Jewish woman who worked in the clothing commando in the

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Human Tragedy* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2014), 743.



women's camp in Birkenau.<sup>332</sup> These women smuggled gunpowder in small amounts out of the factory by hiding it in cloth or paper and took it back to Birkenau.<sup>333</sup> They underwent nerve-racking daily inspection by the SS when they left the factory, but were never caught with the gunpowder.

Once the women were back in Birkenau, Robota intercepted the gunpowder from them and passed the explosives on to the Sonderkommando workers when they delivered the clothes from recent transports to Robota's commando.<sup>334</sup> Another way that the women smuggled gun powder out of the factory was by hiding it in bread or mess tins and passing it on to Gutman and Laufer who then gave it to the resistance members in the main camp.<sup>335</sup> Thereafter, someone in the Sonderkommando, likely a Russian POW, many of which played a large part in the Sonderkommando Uprising, fashioned crude hand grenades with the gun powder so that they were "small lead containers, filled with powder, small stones, crumbled bricks, and a fuse."<sup>336</sup> The Sonderkommando hid these weapons in hand trucks and in the walls of the crematoria, moving them multiple times to keep them secret from the SS.<sup>337</sup>

From the beginning, there were tensions between the Polish underground and the Sonderkommando. The ZOW communicated with the Home Army through Polish prisoners of war that were released from the camp, civilians that the SS employed, inhabitants of

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<sup>332</sup> The clothing commando sorted through the clothing that victims had either brought to the camp with them or taken off before entering the gas chambers. The Sonderkommando generally delivered these items, opening a line of contact between Robota and the Sonderkommando.

<sup>333</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Prisoner Revolt at Auschwitz-Birkenau," Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1942-1945/auschwitz-revolt>.

<sup>334</sup> Lore Shelley, ed., *The Union Kommando in Auschwitz: the Auschwitz Munition Factory Through The Eyes Of Its Former Slave Laborers, Studies in the Shoah*, Vol. 13 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2008), 302.

<sup>335</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 41.

<sup>336</sup> Hermann Langbienn, "The Auschwitz Underground," in *Anatomy of Auschwitz Death Camp*, 500.

<sup>337</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 41.

Oświęcim<sup>338</sup>, or members of the Home Army stationed in the periphery of the camp.<sup>339</sup> Importantly, they also got information out by staging escapes for ZOW members. the Sonderkommando often gave them supplies in order to stage these escapes from the camp, Lewenthal wrote that in response to the supplies the Sonderkommando gave them for this, the Poles repaid them with, “a complete Anti-Semitism with which we met at every step.”<sup>340</sup> Much of Lewenthal’s frustration here likely comes from the Poles urging them to delay the uprising.

The camp resistance relied on outside help, and they urged the Sonderkommando to wait for the approaching Red Army to get closer before revolting. They also counselled delay because the Nazis had begun deporting many Poles to other camps in Germany, giving them hope that they would not be liquidated.<sup>341</sup> The Home Army knew more about the larger state of the war, and the Polish deportations along with the proximity of the Red Army gave them hope that they would be liberated. This, however, only increased the Sonderkommando and other Jews’ chances of liquidation by the SS. In addition, the Polish government, in exile in London, urged that no Poles in the camp revolt unless there was an immediate threat of liquidation.<sup>342</sup> This exemplifies the largest disparity between the two groups: the non-Jewish resistance believed they were right for delaying, “especially because they did not feel they were in immediate danger of being exterminated”; however, the Sonderkommando, who was regularly liquidated, always lived under this threat.<sup>343</sup> This was likely interpreted by Lewenthal as Anti-Semitism. The

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<sup>338</sup> Oświęcim, or Auschwitz in German, was the Polish town that surrounded the Auschwitz camp.

<sup>339</sup> Adam Cyra, “Polish Military Resistance Movement At Auschwitz,” Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum: Online Exhibition, <http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/polish-military-resistance-movement-at-auschwitz-new-exhibition-in-the-google-cultural-institute-,1153.html>.

<sup>340</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 151.

<sup>341</sup> Maher, “Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action,” 265.

<sup>342</sup> Nechama Tec, “Facts, Omissions, and Distortions,” in ed., Patrick Henry, *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2014), 57.

<sup>343</sup> Langbein, *Against All Hope*, 285.

underground's inclination toward revolt waned, while the growing threat for the Sonderkommando loomed larger every day.

During this time, the Sonderkommando were executing another dangerous act of rebellion. In August, a Sonderkommando worker took four photographs around Crematorium V. Two of these photographs portray bodies burning in an incineration pit, which were likely taken from a doorway in Crematorium V; the third photograph shows a group of women outside on their way to the gas chamber; and the last photo shows birch trees.<sup>344</sup> These photographs are attributed to a Greek Jew named Alex, and he was helped by at least four other Sonderkommando members: Abraham and Shlomo Dragon, Alter Fajnzylberg (also known as Stanislaw Janowski), and David Szmulewski.<sup>345</sup> Though Alex, whose last name is unknown, took these photographs, the Sonderkommando men created a collective look out so that he was able to take them. This rebellion required a mutual risk and urgency to give evidence of what was happening among the men.

They developed careful plans for taking the photographs. Some men intentionally damaged Crematorium V's roof so that the SS would send Sonderkommando men to repair it.<sup>346</sup> From the roof, Szmulewski observed the crematorium yard, particularly the SS guards. A Sonderkommando hid the camera in a bucket and passed it on to Alex, who was located near the incineration pits.<sup>347</sup> How the Sonderkommando were able to obtain a camera and film is

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<sup>344</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 183-184.

<sup>345</sup> Dan Stone, "The Sonderkommando Photographs," *Jewish Social Studies* 7, no. 3 (Spring-Summer 2001): 132.

<sup>346</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

unknown, but some assert that members of the *Kanada* commando<sup>348</sup> were able to smuggle some cameras out of their area.<sup>349</sup> Fajnzylberg described the day that the photographs were taken:

On the day on which the pictures were taken . . . we allocated tasks. Some of us were to guard the person taking the pictures. In other words, we were to keep a careful watch for the approach of anyone who did not know the secret, and above all for any SS men moving about in the area. At last the moment came. We all gathered at the western entrance leading from the outside to the gas-chamber of Crematorium V: we could not see any SS men in the watchtower overlooking the door from the barbed wire, nor near the place where the pictures were to be taken. Alex, the Greek Jew, quickly took out his camera, pointed it towards a heap of burning bodies, and pressed the shutter. This is why the photograph shows prisoners from the Sonderkommando working at the heap. One of the SS was standing beside them, but his back was turned towards the crematorium building. Another picture was taken from the other side of the building, where women and men were undressing among the trees.<sup>350</sup>

To take the first two images, Alex seems to have stood back in the gas chambers to remain out of sight. The second photo is clearer and less blurry than the first, “as though the fear had disappeared for an instant in the face of necessity.”<sup>351</sup> The last two pictures, taken more boldly outside, are more blurry and angled, suggesting that Alex took them in haste while walking or moving while holding the camera at his hip.<sup>352</sup> Taking the camera outside was a great risk as it brought Alex out of the cover of the gas chambers and left him exposed to the many guards outside.

After taking the photographs, Alex returned the camera to Szmulewski on the roof. He took the film out, and it was smuggled through the underground to Helena Danton, who worked in the SS canteen. She then smuggled it to the resistance outside the camp in a tube of

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<sup>348</sup> The *Kanada* commando sorted through the items that victims brought with them to the camp, giving them access to items such as cameras and film.

<sup>349</sup> Kraus and Kulka, *The Death Factory*, 152.

<sup>350</sup> Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I.B. Tauris., 2004), 114-15

<sup>351</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 13.

<sup>352</sup> Stone, “The Sonderkommando Photographs,” 137.

toothpaste.<sup>353</sup> In addition to the photographs, it included a note that stated, “Urgent. Send two metal rolls of film for 6x9 as fast as possible. Have possibility of taking photos. Sending you photos of Birkenau showing prisoners sent to gas chambers.”<sup>354</sup> It then went on to describe the photos and asked again for film. In Krakow, the Polish Resistance cropped the photos and made copies of them, but there is no evidence that they ever reached any Allied countries. In addition, the original, uncropped photographs were not seen by the Auschwitz State Museum, and most people, until they were donated to the museum 1985.<sup>355</sup> Most people were unaware that the photographs being distributed were cropped and retouched.

These photographs are invaluable evidence of both the Holocaust and the Sonderkommando’s ability to rebel and witness. Dan Stone wrote that these photographs, alongside the Scrolls of Auschwitz, “are among the most astonishing of the various artifacts to have emerged from Auschwitz.”<sup>356</sup> Fajnzylberg noted that though only Alex took the photographs, there was a collective action in taking them. He said, “one can say the pictures were taken by all of us.”<sup>357</sup> Just like the Scrolls and the uprising, these photos were a collective act of resistance that came as a result of some Sonderkommando men’s conscious choice to risk their lives in order to bear witness. Franziska Reiniger noted that the importance of these pictures “is in what they depict – they are an extract of the actual extermination of Jews – and in the actual act of taking the pictures – in comparison to other Auschwitz photographs, these actually show the danger and the resistance in the act of taking a photograph.”<sup>358</sup> Though the photographs are a different way of resisting than the Scrolls, they are a resistance nonetheless. The makeup of

<sup>353</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 16.

<sup>354</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 114.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>356</sup> Stone, “The Sonderkommando Photographs,” 132.

<sup>357</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 115.

<sup>358</sup> Franziska Reiniger, “Inside the Epicenter of the Horror – Photographs of the Sonderkommando,” Yad Vashem, <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/epicenter-horror-photographs-sonderkommando.html>.

the Sonderkommando was varied, but the Scrolls of Auschwitz and these photographs exemplify that many of the men “shared in the striving to resist” and acted upon it despite the risk to their lives.<sup>359</sup>

Around the time the Sonderkommando took the photographs, disparities between the Sonderkommando and the underground in planning the revolt only grew; therefore, the Sonderkommando moved toward staging a revolt of their own. Lewenthal wrote, “All our Kommando had always been of the opinion that we were in a much greater danger than all the other prisoners in the camp . . . therefore we saw no chance for us in the approaching front; on the contrary, we came to the conclusion that we had to carry out our action earlier . . .”<sup>360</sup> By early July 1944 the Red Army had captured Minsk, and by the end of the month they were at the outskirts of Warsaw; however, this only signaled impending liquidation for the Sonderkommando. In addition, by July, the Hungarian transports that the Sonderkommando had hoped to stop had already been liquidated. Between May and July of 1944, approximately 437,402 Hungarian Jews came to Auschwitz in 147 trains.<sup>361</sup> A large majority of these people died in the gas chambers upon arrival as approximately 12,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered and burned each day.<sup>362</sup> This only strengthened the Sonderkommando’s resolve to revolt as this only made their work more unbearable.

Lewenthal went on to chronicle the failed plans and delays. The first date set was August 19, but it was moved forward to August 15. It was then delayed when one of the leaders of the revolt, a *Kapo*, was murdered.<sup>363</sup> In addition, some of the non-Jewish resistance told the

<sup>359</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 204.

<sup>360</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 154-55.

<sup>361</sup> Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of The Holocaust As Told In The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005), 110.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>363</sup> Steven Bowman, “Greek Responses to the Nazis,” in ed., Patrick Henry, *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis*, 179.

Sonderkommando to hold off because “the Russians are at the gate.”<sup>364</sup> Beyond the disagreements between the groups and the coming transport, the Sonderkommando also had other factors that led them to press for a revolt sooner rather than later. The men began noticing that their numbers were shrinking. The SS moved the Sonderkommando’s living quarters to a more isolated area, and in late September two hundred Sonderkommando were liquidated.<sup>365</sup>

Soon after, the Sonderkommando received news that three hundred more men, the men of Crematorium IV, were going to be relocated. Lewenthal noted, “everybody knew what dismissal from the Kommando meant: a dismissal to the other world.”<sup>366</sup> In addition, the names of the three hundred prisoners were listed, causing them and some other Sonderkommando to urge for immediate action; however, there was a rift within the Sonderkommando at this time as some encouraged patience in acting.<sup>367</sup> Lewenthal wrote that, “chaos reigned with us. Men from our Kommando wanted to begin the action at once, that self-same evening. It was with the utmost difficulty that we managed to keep them from doing it.”<sup>368</sup> This did not last long, however, as on the day of the uprising, the Nazis announced that the men of Crematorium IV were going to be removed and transferred “to a different Kommando” and had to gather for a head count for the transfer, but the men soon discovered that they were set to be liquidated that afternoon.<sup>369</sup> Leon Cohen remembered, “we knew what that meant: they were going to murder them. We figured that it was time for action.”<sup>370</sup>

The Sonderkommando saw the time left on their lives quickly waning; however, though they were responding to their own liquidation, it is important to remember that the

<sup>364</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,’” 305.

<sup>365</sup> Mark, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, 228-229; and Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 42.

<sup>366</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 166.

<sup>367</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 43.

<sup>368</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 166.

<sup>369</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 42.

<sup>370</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,’” 306.

Sonderkommando began planning the revolt long before that. Filip Muller testified that the Sonderkommando had begun planning an armed revolt in the fall of 1943.<sup>371</sup> By the summer of 1944, the four crematoriums in Birkenau “were burning day and night, smoke and fire belching out.”<sup>372</sup> This revolt was not purely reactionary and based on survival. It began because the men of the Sonderkommando could no longer stand to do the work the SS forced them to do and the incoming liquidation was the catalyst that made the men realize they could not wait any longer. This led these men to say, “Enough. If the Resistance Movement won’t join us, we won’t be driven to the slaughterhouse. We will fight to the last man.”<sup>373</sup> Tzipora Halivni points out that this uprising “must be seen as the outcome of protracted planning, and not as the begging of the question . . .”<sup>374</sup> This revolt was not simply a knee jerk based on primal self-preservation, it was, at its core, a long desired and planned stand against the Nazis.

Accounts of the Sonderkommando Uprising of October 7, 1944 vary and the exact details of the event died with the rebels. Some sources say that a *Kapo* walked in on the Sonderkommando who were planning their meeting, while others, including survivors, assert that the Sonderkommando acted on a prearranged signal.<sup>375</sup> There is a consensus, however, that the uprising began in Crematorium IV. Shlomo Dragon said that the SS took the Sonderkommando men from Crematorium IV to the yard and began a selection.<sup>376</sup> The Sonderkommando men attacked the SS with makeshift weapons such as knives, hammers, and poles. They killed three

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<sup>371</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Filip Mueller – Auschwitz Sonderkommando Interview,” Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection, Spring 1979.

<sup>372</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Oral history interview with Anna Wajcblum Heilman,” The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, August 10, 1994.

<sup>373</sup> Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Filip Mueller – Auschwitz Sonderkommando Interview.”

<sup>374</sup> Tzipora Halivni, “The Birkenau Revolt: Poles Prevent a Timely Insurrection,” *Jewish Social Studies* 41, No. 2 (Spring, 1979), 123.

<sup>375</sup> Maher, “Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action,” 266; and Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 43.

<sup>376</sup> “Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together – in Despair and Hope’,” 172.



guards and injured twelve.<sup>377</sup> Chaos ensued as some Sonderkommando cut the barbed wire around the crematoria in order to escape while others set Crematorium IV on fire. At the same time, the Germans fired their automatic weapons at the men. Marcel Nadjari, one of the authors of the *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, is credited as one of the men who helped set Crematorium IV ablaze.<sup>378</sup> Upon seeing Crematorium IV in flames, the men of Crematorium II threw their Kapo into a furnace and ran away.<sup>379</sup> The men in Crematorium II did not participate further in the uprising as they had never received instructions on how to act in the event.

The men of Crematorium II ran some miles from Auschwitz and hid in a granary, but the SS tracked them down and set the granary on fire with the men still inside, killing approximately 250 Sonderkommando.<sup>380</sup> The alarms went off in the camp and within minutes of the beginning of the revolt SS guards “came with trucks, cars and made a . . . cordon around Crematorium 4 . . . the machine guns were crackling, the bullets were whizzing by,” Filip Muller attested.<sup>381</sup> He went on to say that he looked around and “I saw, that my comrades were falling like rabbits, just as at a rabbit hunt.”<sup>382</sup> He hid in a crematorium chimney and fell asleep, saving his life. In the yard, the SS killed approximately 200 Sonderkommando men. In all, 451 Sonderkommando men out of approximately 700 died as a result of the uprising.<sup>383</sup> Almost all of the leaders of the uprising, including Gradowski and Langfus, died either during the fight or soon after. More Sonderkommando died as a result of the SS investigations into the uprising.<sup>384</sup> The camp underground sent a coded message on October 9 which stated, “the SS are now openly

<sup>377</sup> Halivni, “The Birkenau Revolt,” 143.

<sup>378</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,’” 307.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 43; and Halivni, “The Birkenau Revolt,” 143.

<sup>381</sup> Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Filip Muller – Auschwitz Sonderkommando Interview.”

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Maher, “Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action,” 258, 266.

<sup>384</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 44.

threatening gory reprisals on all prisoners, calling it an unheard of crime that the unhappy prisoners should have refused to be gassed. . . .<sup>385</sup> In their investigation, the SS found and arrested four women, Roza Robota, Ester Wajcblum, Ella Gärtner, and Regina Safir. Even under severe torture the women did not give the names of anyone involved in the uprising or underground, and they were hanged on January 6, 1945.<sup>386</sup>

Lewenthal, who was in Crematorium II, did not physically participate in the actual uprising, though he was involved in the planning. He spent an extensive amount of time discussing the planning process of the revolt, including all of the failed plans. Chare and Williams point out, “This element shows more clearly that they were resisting . . . although the planning comes to nothing, the planning itself is a form of resistance, as is the recording of it.”<sup>387</sup> Just like writing the manuscripts, even discussing a revolt was dangerous. Importantly, a large number of Sonderkommando took part of this revolt and acted without the help of their underground allies in the camp (save the women in the munitions factory). Lewenthal did chronicle the revolt, but this account is largely based on later statements from others as he was not involved in the battle.<sup>388</sup> He did reflect on the importance of the revolt. He wrote, “the whole time we were accused of being weak, of being cowards, who are afraid of death, who would like to live if only one day longer . . . we decided to put a stop to it, we told ourselves: enough. . . though they had the chance to live a little longer . . . they were strong enough to go, consciously . . .”<sup>389</sup> The Sonderkommando’s initiative in revolting stands in contrast to the accusation that they were all apathetic men who betrayed their people for a little more life and bread.

<sup>385</sup> Bezwinska and Czech, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 171.

<sup>386</sup> Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 44.

<sup>387</sup> Chare and Williams, *Matters of Testimony*, 141.

<sup>388</sup> Bezwinska and Czech, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 168, n.87.

<sup>389</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 174.

Filip Mueller, who was also a Sonderkommando during the uprising, reflected on what the Sonderkommando's actions of rebellion exemplified. He stated,

Robots. Yes, I don't think that was the case. It came to this, that those who came to the Sonderkommando in the first days and were confronted with these, with these atrocities, who saw this whole inferno suddenly, and until the shock of the situation was mastered, until then, people was robots. That fits because they had been driven there by the SS with clubs, to carry out this work by force. So, until that time, I would say, they were like robots. All of them. But when they had lived there for some time, and if they were able to give their lives some meaning, as I explained before, they thought like normal people, about which there is plenty of evidence. Look at the proof in the notes of Zalman Lewenthal, if you take that, what he...let's say, the revolt, about which we have yet to talk, which was carried out by the Sonderkommando, after all...about other activities, in which the Sonderkommando was involved, so that the world would know at some point, what kind of atrocities took place here. All those are proof, that these were normal, thinking people, even then, people who had already overcome the shock, who were focused on the fact of somehow surviving day to day in any way possible, yes, and how this, and then to be able, to able to inform the world what happened there. Even in the Sonderkommando were members, who were, let's say, who were never involved in the resistance. Yes. But the majority of the Sonderkommando were normal, thinking people. They were human beings, fathers... They were very simple people, who had been pulled out of their civilian life and ended up on the ramp of Birkenau, where they had been selected, where no one asked them, where they arrived, and suddenly they ended up in the buildings of death in the extermination camps. They were confronted with the most terrible conditions, which human beings had conjured up.<sup>390</sup>

Mueller's testimony exemplifies the direct relation between writing the Scrolls of Auschwitz, rebelling, and eyewitness testimony of the Sonderkommando. Just like Lewenthal, he concedes that some men did become apathetic, and "didn't care what they did," but he notes that they were a small group.<sup>391</sup> This group exemplified the rumors that so many survivors had heard; however, a large number of these men were ordinary people, forced into a job that seemed more like a nightmare than reality.<sup>392</sup> These men, who were accused of cowardice, were some of the only people to rebel in the camps and made the conscious choice to rebel knowing that they would

<sup>390</sup> Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Filip Mueller – Auschwitz Sonderkommando Interview."

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> "Eliezer Eisenschmidt: 'Thanks To One Polish Family . . .,'" 223.

most likely die. The manuscripts were not isolated acts of rebellion executed by individuals working alone. They directly coincided with the cohesive and fatal rebellion of hundreds of men, which only further exemplifies their overall lack of complicity in the murder's that took place in the camp.

The uprising signaled the coming end of Auschwitz. In the aftermath of the uprising, a “skeleton crew” of approximately 198 men continued to work in Crematoria II, III, and V.<sup>393</sup> Leon Cohen attested that, after the revolt, the SS made the remaining Sonderkommando cremate the bodies of their comrades that died in the rebellion.<sup>394</sup> Lewenthal, whose date of death is unknown, dedicated the last portion of his writing to one of the camp's last transports. He detailed the murder of 1,000 boys on October 20.<sup>395</sup> Despite all they had seen, the Sonderkommando still “stood aghast as if paralyzed” by the “mournful weeping” of these boys.<sup>396</sup> In late October transports to the camp, which had already slowed down before the uprising, stopped. After that, the only bodies burned in the crematoria were victims who died or were murdered in the camp.<sup>397</sup> On November 25, Himmler ordered that Auschwitz's gas chambers and crematoria be dismantled.<sup>398</sup> It is possible that the destruction of Crematorium IV and the loss of so many Sonderkommando crippled Auschwitz's killing capabilities and further slowed transports. It did save some lives, however, as Alice Lok Cahana testified. She was in the gas chambers of Crematorium V when the uprising began. Due to the chaos, the SS emptied this gas chamber and Cahana survived the war.<sup>399</sup> Interestingly, she was part of the large transports of

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<sup>393</sup> Garlinkski, *Fighting Auschwitz*, 249.

<sup>394</sup> “Leon Cohen: ‘We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,’” 307.

<sup>395</sup> Bezswinska and Czech, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, 177 n98.

<sup>396</sup> Lewenthal, “The Manuscript,” 178.

<sup>397</sup> Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: ‘Together – in Despair and Hope’,” 173.

<sup>398</sup> Franciszek Piper, “Gas Chambers and Crematoria,” Gutman and Berenbaum, in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 174.

<sup>399</sup> Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: A New History* (New York: Perseus Books, 2005) 257.

Hungarians that had helped inspire the Sonderkommando men to rebel. The task of dismantling the camp largely fell to the Sonderkommando, who had to take apart much of the crematoria by hand. They also had to prepare the buildings for demolition by digging pits for dynamite for the SS to blow up the crematoria, and they had to stack the bricks that were left behind.<sup>400</sup>

Altogether, only around 110 men who were in the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz survived, which is incredibly significant because not one of them were meant to live.<sup>401</sup> The number of men who were in similar Sonderkommando units in other camps who survived the war is unknown. One of the characteristics of the Sonderkommando was the fact that they were the bearers of the Third Reich's greatest secret. They were among the few who were direct eyewitnesses to the crimes the Nazis committed in the gas chambers and crematoria. Because of that, the Nazis could not allow them to survive. That is why, after having the men tear apart the crematoria, the Nazis sought the men of the Sonderkommando out when evacuating the camp in early 1945.<sup>402</sup> The Sonderkommando men always eventually faced liquidation, and the men knew that this instance especially would be no exception; therefore, they made use of the chaos that began when the Nazis started evacuating the camp and mixed in with the other prisoners. Shaul Chazan noted that, by that point, they had begun losing weight due a lack of rations, making them indistinguishable from other inmates, and they wore their caps in a manner that helped cover their faces so that the SS guards would not recognize them.<sup>403</sup> In addition, they made sure that they never mentioned to anyone that they had been members of the Sonderkommando, particularly since the Nazis sought them out over the entire march.<sup>404</sup> Others,

<sup>400</sup> "Leon Cohen: 'We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots,'" 307.

<sup>401</sup> Greif and Kilian, "Sonderkommando, Jewish," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

<sup>402</sup> USC Shoah Foundation, "Auschwitz II Birkenau Sonderkommando Testimony Clips."

<sup>403</sup> "Shaul Chazan: 'Life Didn't Matter Anymore Death Was Too Close,'" 281.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid*.

such as Eliezer Eisenschmidt and Shlomo Dragon, were able to escape while on the march out of the camp.<sup>405</sup>

The Sonderkommando's physical acts of rebellion support the Scrolls of Auschwitz in showing that the men in this group were not willingly a part of the killing process in the camps and were more than pathetic figures who could not rebel. Outside of Auschwitz, the Sonderkommando equivalent in Treblinka and Sobibór were among the inmates to stage rebellions in these camps. Some of them were able to escape to tell the truth of what happened in these camps despite the risk to their lives. Amid planning for the Sonderkommando Uprising in Auschwitz, a group of Sonderkommando men planned and executed a daring act of rebellion by taking photographs of the killing process at Auschwitz. This group collectively chose to risk their lives in order to give witness to the murders taking place in the camp. Finally, the only armed revolt in Auschwitz was solely executed by the men of the Sonderkommando. They carefully spent months planning this uprising and, importantly, hundreds of Sonderkommando men took part in this rebellion. These acts of rebellion were not isolated incidents by a small, unique few in the Sonderkommando. They were cohesive and organized acts of rebellion put together by a large number of the special squad in defense of themselves and the victims of the Nazis.

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<sup>405</sup> "Eliezer Eisenschmidt: 'Thanks To One Polish Family . . .,'" 262; and "Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: 'Together – in Despair and Hope,'" 176.

### Conclusion

Did you make sure to scrape the ashes of friends and relatives from the furnace?  
 And did you haul the cart in the snow  
 To the heap of ashes of those cremated before them?  
 Were the words "You'll certainly live as long as the furnaces send smoke aloft,  
 because you're needed," directed at you?  
 And when you were covered with those ashes, did your mouths report what had  
 happened in the language of the barracks?  
 That extra soup, is it the price of the labor of your spade  
 And the double ration-the price of the sweat that you gave forth?  
 And was it to you that the words "Only some time later, at an unknown time,  
 After the coal, the miner of the coal also comes" were directed?  
 Not you, not me! We were not put to that ordeal!  
 You may scrape furnaces every night  
 And push the cart to its side in your dreams.  
 But to have the slightest inkling of what happened in that man's heart, you cannot.  
 Rather, from time to time you may turn your eyes heavenward, as if reflecting,  
 "And what would you have done?"<sup>406</sup>  
 - Günther Anders

Though there will always be some gray areas in the ethics and morality of the study of the Sonderkommando's role in the gas chambers and crematoria, the Scrolls of Auschwitz, along with eyewitness testimony and acts of rebellion, show that the Sonderkommando were not complicit in the Nazi's Final Solution and indeed acted as witnesses to the murders that took place in the extermination camps. As the only surviving documents that the Sonderkommando wrote in the middle of their jobs in the gas chambers and crematoria, the Scrolls of Auschwitz serve as some of the most important evidence in Holocaust research. They are vital to the study of the Sonderkommando as they address the inner struggles of the special squad, their interactions with other victims, and acts of rebellion. They give a voice to the thousands of men who served in this role in both Auschwitz and other camps, most of whom did not survive. They give the opportunity to contemplate both the physical and ethical world that the

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<sup>406</sup> Brown, *Judging "Privileged" Jews*, 202.

Sonderkommando inhabited and bring to light many important controversies about these men that must be addressed.

In their writing, each author of the Scrolls of Auschwitz gives proof that the Sonderkommando were not complicit in the murders that took place in the gas chambers and that, despite their circumstances, they could act as witnesses to the crimes being committed around them every day. Zalmen Gradowski showed cognizance of the fact there would be controversy surrounding the Sonderkommando and their work, and he wrote his manuscripts for posterity. He explained, “The future will judge us based on these writings. The world will learn from them, though it be only the smallest testimony, of the tragic world in which we live.”<sup>407</sup> He also wrote because he wanted the world to know how his people, including his family, perished. He chronicled the last moments of many victims, such as the young man and woman who rebelled against the SS, and he continually asked the reader of his manuscripts to remember his family. Gradowski gave voice to the lamentations, guilt, and actions of the Sonderkommando while also telling the story of the people who lost their lives in the gas chambers.

In his writing, Leyb Langfus exemplified a strong moral responsibility toward the victims of the gas chambers. He wrote their stories with care and was even able to control his own witness to a certain extent. This can especially be seen in his manuscript titled “the 3000 Naked Women” when he recounted the moment when a Sonderkommando cried at the sight of these women, and he recorded one of the women’s reactions. She said, “There is still someone who will mourn us [and I] had thought that we would leave this world like miserable orphans . . .”<sup>408</sup> He then left the area and tried to distance himself from the crimes. Like Gradowski, he chronicled the desire for and the lead up to the Sonderkommando Uprising. One example is the

<sup>407</sup> Gradowski, “Writings,” 205.

<sup>408</sup> Langfus, “The Horrors of Murder,” 213.



story he recorded of the man who could not bear to see more people go to the gas chambers and called for the Sonderkommando to “demolish everything and die for our faith!”<sup>409</sup> He also gave a final voice to the Sonderkommando and carefully told the stories of victim’s last moments.

In his work, Zalmen Lewenthal gave one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Sonderkommando known to exist. He chronicled their story from the beginning, when they were chosen and physically forced to take part in the work of the gas chambers and crematoria, to the end, when he told the story of the Sonderkommando Uprising. He also addresses many of the moral complexities that plague the memory of the Sonderkommando. He showed awareness that these issues would come to light and did not shy away from admitting the Sonderkommando’s shortcomings. He wrote, “I must state the truth, that more than one of them lost his human image in the passage of time; you become ashamed of yourself . . . [in the course of time] they adapted . . .”<sup>410</sup> Even still, his writings show that the Sonderkommando could be reliable witnesses and were not willing participants in the work of the gas chambers and crematoria. He wrote, “We will continue to do our part, we [will attempt] everything . . . to hide in the ground . . . then you will find more --- of the courtyard under the crem[atorium] . . . because we must up to now, until --- events --- in a chronological historic manner, to expose everything to the world. From now on we will bury everything in the earth.”<sup>411</sup> Lewenthal’s writings show an urgency among the Sonderkommando to let the world know what happened in the crematoria.

In a letter to his wife and daughter, Chaim Herman made sure to ask his wife to seek revenge for the people who died in the gas chambers. He wrote that he wanted vengeance for his “brothers and sisters” who died in the gas chambers “for no guilt of theirs.”<sup>412</sup> He showed the

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Lowenthal, “Diary,” 221.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 234-235.

<sup>412</sup> Herman, “Letter of Chaim Herman,” 190.

guilt, pain, and fear the Sonderkommando lived with when he asked his wife not to have a bad opinion of him as he tried to help others with his position. More than anything, however, he made sure that the people who died in the gas chambers were remembered.<sup>413</sup>

Nadjary's letter to his family made similar points. Nadjary addressed the questions he knew would come about why and how he did the work of the special squad. He wrote, "My dearests, when you are reading what work I have done, you will say: how could I, Manolis, or anybody else, do this work and burn fellow believers."<sup>414</sup> He showed the inner struggle of the Sonderkommando by saying that he did contemplate suicide to get out of this job, but admitted that he too wanted revenge for his people and that is why he kept going.

Reading and contextualizing these men's work is critical because the Scrolls are the only work that gives insight into the actions, thoughts, and emotions of the Sonderkommando as they were happening. These men took great risk in chronicling the destruction of Europe's Jews for the sake of the future. Furthermore, by doing this, they provide a foundation for the study of the Sonderkommando. These works address some of the most important questions and controversies concerning the Sonderkommando and their work. The authors of the Scrolls were entirely cognizant of the issues that would arise when the world looked at their work, and they provided evidence to give themselves a chance at fair judgement. That is why it is important to compare the Scrolls with eyewitness testimony and to contextualize how others viewed the Sonderkommando.

Eyewitness testimony helps to give a deeper understanding of the Sonderkommando, but it also highlights many controversies and questions surrounding the special squad and their culpability. In the end, however, it still largely points to the fact that the Sonderkommando were

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 3.

not complicit in the murders that took place in the gas chambers and crematoria. The Sonderkommando were not always received well, and the authors of the Scrolls, particularly Lewenthal and Langfus, did not shy away from recording difficult interactions with victims in the dressing room. This led many Sonderkommando to go back to the ever present question of why they did not commit suicide. On the other hand, many victims who came through the gas chambers asked the Sonderkommando to either take revenge for them or to live and tell what happened. One example of this was the women spoke to Filip Muller before she died and said, “So you want to die. But that’s senseless. Your death won’t give us back our lives. That’s no way. You must get out of here and you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us.”<sup>415</sup> Many victims saw the Sonderkommando as their last witnesses.

Many people characterized the Sonderkommando as inhuman and unfeeling with “tense, insane faces.”<sup>416</sup> This indeed was something the Sonderkommando struggled with, and Lewenthal even conceded that some Sonderkommando men did lose their sense of morality in the crematoria showing that, just as any other group in the camp, the individual Sonderkommando were imperfect. There is also the unfortunate misunderstanding of survivors assigning actions committed by the SS to the Sonderkommando. Though a few Sonderkommando willingly committed these acts, there is no evidence to support that they were regular occurrences and they were not part of the Sonderkommando’s character overall. Many that judge them harshly also discount or do not understand that the Sonderkommando worked under the threat of death, brutal beatings, and torture. They did not choose their work, nor was it gratuitous. Eyewitness testimony from men such as Rudolf Höss must be carefully

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<sup>415</sup> Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 165.

<sup>416</sup> Czech, “The Auschwitz Prisoner Administration.”

contextualized, because his testimony and that of other SS men was not motivated by a search for the truth. It is overgeneralized, exceptionally biased, and incomplete.

Many people also accuse the Sonderkommando of deception as they often lied to the people going into the gas chambers about their future; however, many fail to understand the immense risk that it was for the Sonderkommando to even talk to the victims (other than giving directions). In addition, those that did tell the victims what was happening were generally met with disbelief or panic such as the Sonderkommando who told a woman what was happening which caused her to scream and panic. In turn, the SS tortured her until she gave up the name of the person who told her, which resulted in that Sonderkommando workers' murder.<sup>417</sup> Telling people what was happening to them never saved their lives. People also accuse them of cowardice for not rebelling, but the Sonderkommando was the only group to stage an armed revolt in Auschwitz and was part of the uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibor. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect anyone in the environment of the camps to rebel and it demeans the struggle that they experienced to live from day to day.

Perhaps the most influential discourse on the Sonderkommando are Primo Levi's writings. He gives excellent insight into how the SS viewed the Sonderkommando and why this squad was such an evil invention. He shrewdly stated that the creation of the Sonderkommando was "an attempt to shift onto others – specifically the victims – the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence."<sup>418</sup> Unfortunately, Levi does, at times, display the Sonderkommando as pathetic figures incapable of acting or witnessing. He also undermines the writings and testimony of the Sonderkommando men saying that they could do nothing but have

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<sup>417</sup> United States Holocaust Museum, "When God Looked Down and Wept."

<sup>418</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 55.

“a liberating outburst rather than a Medusa-faced truth.”<sup>419</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the contents of the Scrolls of Auschwitz which the authors carefully wrote. Indeed, they are lamentations, but they also recorded victim’s stories, lists and numbers of transports, and their own history in order to give witness to what happened in the gas chambers. Though Levi, suspends judgement of them, his language still hints at disdain. However, in his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi recounts the dehumanization process that all inmates went through in Auschwitz. He wrote,

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term ‘extermination camp,’ and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: ‘to lie on the bottom.’<sup>420</sup>

Despite his experience, Levi’s struggled to understand the Sonderkommando, but this is an issue that any scholar who broaches the subject encounters. In the end, however, it is vital to study the Sonderkommando in order to gain a complete picture of the gas chambers and crematoria.

Finally, in addition to eyewitness testimony, physical acts of rebellion such as the Sonderkommando Uprising and Sonderkommando Photographs reinforce the evidence in the Scrolls of Auschwitz that shows that the Sonderkommando made a point to resist when they could. The uprisings in Treblinka and Sobibor also constitute an important piece of evidence because the largest population of prisoners in the camp were workers equivalent to Auschwitz’s Sonderkommando. They were undoubtedly part of these revolts, putting them behind the only three major uprisings that took place in the six extermination camps. Even in other camps, they

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<sup>419</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 53.

<sup>420</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone Publishing, 1986), 27.

took great risk to their lives to escape the Nazis – an act that would have been entirely futile if they were complicit in the Nazi's crimes.

The Sonderkommando Photographs, taken while the Sonderkommando Uprising was being planned, also refute the assertion that the Sonderkommando were complicit in the Nazi's crimes and that they could not act as witnesses to these crimes. The small group of men taking the photos took great risk in the extensive planning that it took to not only get the camera and film, but to make sure they were actually able to use it. It was a collective choice to pave the way for these photos to be taken so that they would have evidence of what was happening in Birkenau. The photographs that Alex took serve as some of the most important and concrete pieces of evidence that came out of the gas chambers and crematoria as the crimes were being committed. These photos show not only the crimes being committed, but they also show the risk that these men took, particularly when Alex made the choice to take the camera outside and when the men took the risk of smuggling the photos to the underground. These photos only reinforce the fact that many of the Sonderkommando men shared a desire to both rebel against and act as witnesses to the murders of their people.

The Sonderkommando Uprising served as the culmination of the building desire to rebel. The Scrolls of Auschwitz and the Sonderkommando Uprising are particularly connected because all of the authors were involved in the uprising in some way. These men risked their lives in almost every way possible in order to stand against the Nazis and bear witness. The unfortunate disagreements and differing motives between the Polish underground and the Sonderkommando resulted in the special squad acting alone on the day of rebellion. As the Nazis began tightening the noose around the neck of the Sonderkommando, the men felt that they had to fight for their lives alone. Even still, this uprising was more than a knee jerk reaction to their coming

liquidation. Rather, this uprising was a long desired and planned revolt rooted in the hope of stopping the killing in Auschwitz.

Though the uprising did not go as planned, the men succeeded in destroying Crematorium IV and successfully disrupted the Nazi's work in Auschwitz.<sup>421</sup> The Sonderkommando men took the initiative to revolt on their own, knowing that many of them would not survive and few held hope of escaping. This action refutes the assertion that they betrayed their people for a little more life and bread. Though not all Sonderkommando men rebelled, a large number of them did. In addition, the Sonderkommando executed multiple forms of rebellion: writing, taking photographs, and armed uprising. They were not, as a whole, apathetic and inhuman figures who caved in to the Nazis; they were, instead, involuntarily brutalized men who chose to rebel against their oppressors and record what happened to them and their people for posterity. As Phillip Mueller explained, the Sonderkommando were normal, thinking men who were thrust into a brutal world who looked to acts of rebellion to give their lives in the hell that was Birkenau an active purpose.<sup>422</sup>

The evidence in the Scrolls of Auschwitz and other acts of rebellion and an analysis of eyewitness testimony of the Sonderkommando shows that the Sonderkommando were not, as a whole, apathetic men who could not act as witness and were not complicit in the Nazi's crimes. Indeed, they have a complex and, at times, puzzling makeup, but their actions tell a distinct story that gives voice to the thousands of ordinary men who were forced into this job. They were husbands, fathers, brothers, cousins, and most importantly, human beings who were subjected to one of the most unique forms of torture ever conjured up by mankind. Though there will never be perfect clarity on the morality of their time in the gas chambers and crematoria, it is apparent

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<sup>421</sup> Maher, "Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action," 266.

<sup>422</sup> Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Filip Mueller – Auschwitz Sonderkommando Interview."

that they did not willingly participate. Though this job did paralyze some men, it did not numb them all and they were able to write, lament, photograph, record, plan, and fight against their torturers and their people's murderers.

Unfortunately, the historiography of the Scrolls of Auschwitz is scarce. There are only three books in English, *the Scrolls of Auschwitz*, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, and *Matters of Testimony*, that examine the manuscripts in depth. In addition, *Matters of Testimony* is the only work that analyzes manuscripts by all five authors. This project adds to the historiography of the Scrolls because it not only examines the manuscripts of all five authors, but it also places these works in the larger context of the Sonderkommando. It also uses these manuscripts to address some of the most important questions regarding the Sonderkommando such as their witness and culpability. This project uses the larger context to connect other acts of resistance executed by the Sonderkommando to the Scrolls in order to reinforce the assertion that the Sonderkommando could act as witnesses despite their position and that they were not complicit in the murders that took place in the gas chambers. This work acts as an additional building block in the historiography of both the Scrolls of Auschwitz and the Sonderkommando.



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