
CONCENTRATION CAMPS

The Limits of Representing History

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The SS Concentration Camps and the Limits of Representing History

One day in 1944, deep down the abyss that was Auschwitz-Birkenau, several Jewish women, recently deported from Hungary, discussed an essential question: if they were to survive their suffering, how could they describe it? How could they explain Auschwitz to anyone who had not experienced it? One woman suggested a film about an inmate's passage to the crematorium. Another added that the viewers should be forced to line up outside the cinema at night, and stand to attention for hours without warm clothes, food, and drink, just like inmates during roll call. That way, she said, the audience could get "a real feeling for our situation." But even this, the women realized, ultimately would be in vain, as viewers never would feel what the prisoners had felt. The women's conversation drew to a halt. Silence spread as they contemplated the "unimaginable reality of Auschwitz," as one of them later put it.¹

Historians have wrestled with problems of representation since the liberation of Auschwitz and other SS camps. This effort is a necessary one. The camps stood at the heart of terror and embodied the obsessions of Nazi leaders as did no other institution in the Third Reich. We cannot leave their history to cranks and deniers. But historians face a complex task. There is no clear-cut way of describing crimes that seem to defeat language and defy reason, as I learned myself when writing a general history of the Nazi camps.²

At the beginning of any new project, historians make far-reaching decisions about scope and scale. Nazi Germany was a land of camps – with tens of thousands of individual sites, among

them labor camps, youth custody camps, penal camps, transit camps, police camps, and many more – and it would have been impossible for me to cover all of them in a single volume.³ I decided to limit my study to SS concentration camps under the authority of Heinrich Himmler. The aim was to show how this system emerged and developed, from the capture of power in 1933 to final defeat in 1945, from the first provisional camps on German soil, such as Dachau, set up to destroy the domestic political opposition, to the vast network of terror across occupied Europe. However, the decision to focus on concentration camps had a heavy cost, because other places of mass detention and murder – including ghettos such as Theresienstadt and extermination camps such as Treblinka – were pushed towards the margins.⁴ In fact, it was not even feasible to cover every SS concentration camp. The system was so big – with more than two dozen main concentration camps and over 1,100 attached satellite camps – that it would have been impossible to include every site in the narrative.⁵ This posed further problems of selection, as some camps had to be prioritized over others. In the end, Dachau, as the birthplace of the SS concentration camps, figures far more prominently than some main camps set up later on, while many smaller satellite camps do not feature at all.

Another key decision for historians is about perspective. In the case of the concentration camp, most studies have been written from either the position of the authorities or from that of the prisoners. My goal was to use multiple perspectives, telling the story from the vantage point of those who planned, built, and ran the camps: those who suffered them and those who viewed them from further away. The aim, in other words, was an “integrated history,” as Saul Friedländer called it, an approach that tries to connect “the policies of the perpetrators, the attitudes of surrounding society, and the world of the victims.”⁶

The challenges of writing such an integrated history of the camps are the topic of this paper, focusing on perpetrators and victims. Of course, the question of how to capture Nazi terror and the Holocaust has occupied scholars for decades – one only has to think of the important essay collection *Probing the Limits of Representation*, which appeared some 25 years ago.⁷ But where that study was primarily concerned with theoretical issues, such as the challenge of postmodernism, this paper will deal with more practical problems. I will examine the process

of writing about the camps, going from the printed page back to the empty one, to highlight some of the difficulties we encounter when trying to fix the camps on paper.

Perpetrators

Any integrated history must use sources created by the perpetrators. We cannot understand the development of the SS camp system, its changing face and function, without documents and testimonies by the perpetrators. But there are major problems with perpetrator testimony. For a start, few top Camp SS officials testified after the war. The undisputed mastermind, SS leader Heinrich Himmler, killed himself before he could be properly interrogated. Himmler's first Inspector of Concentration Camps, Theodor Eicke, the man who had formed the camp system before the war, died on the Eastern Front. His successor Richard Glücks, who managed the camp system during the war, died in spring 1945. The most senior Camp SS official to testify in the postwar period was Oswald Pohl, whose SS Economic and Administration Main Office had supervised the camps from 1942. But Pohl was a highly unreliable witness at Nuremberg. Hoping to save his life, he lied about the camps and his past. Just before he was hanged, Pohl insisted that he had been only a "professional soldier" doing his duty. The same yarn was spun by other SS staff on trial. Some denied even the most basic truths; among those perpetrators was one-time Auschwitz commandant Arthur Liebehenschel, who claimed ignorance of gassings in his camp.⁸

This is not to say that perpetrator testimony is useless. Read against the grain, even the most dishonest statements can provide key information. Also, a few perpetrators spoke more openly, sometimes despite themselves. For example, the recollections of Auschwitz' first commandant, Rudolf Höss, written in Polish captivity before his execution in 1947, give invaluable insights into the development of the camp system as well as into the mentalities and everyday lives of the Camp SS.⁹ Some junior SS men also delivered telling accounts, among them a lengthy report by Pery Broad, a former member of the Auschwitz political office. Though Broad was careful not to implicate himself – indeed, he erased himself from the grim story he told – he describes SS actions and motives with often remarkable frankness. SS men standing by the bodies of murdered Jews at the Birkenau gas chambers, Broad

explains, had believed that it was right to kill: “They simply did not see a Jew as a human being.”¹⁰

Ego-documents can complicate the received picture of perpetrators. In the early postwar years, Camp SS men and women often were described as monsters. But things were obviously more complicated. More recent studies of Nazi perpetrators have been less concerned with mental disorders than with ideological and situational factors.¹¹ Following Christopher Browning’s pioneering study of Police Battalion 101, scholars of the Holocaust have drawn on the insights of social psychology to explain how “ordinary people become mass murderers,” pointing to group pressure, alcohol and careerism, among other factors.¹²

Important as these works are, they cannot fully uncover perpetrator motivations. Take Rudolf Höss. Clearly, situational forces shaped his behavior. For example, he often acted with exaggerated force because the SS code branded compassion for prisoners as weak and unmanly. “I wanted to become notorious for being hard,” he wrote in his memoirs, “so that I would not be considered soft.”¹³ But Höss also tormented prisoners because he hated them. His memoirs reveal a man full of fear and loathing of Jews, Russians, Sinti and Roma, criminals, homosexuals and others; he was, in his own words, a “fanatical National Socialist.”¹⁴ So what was the exact balance between ideological and situational drivers in the case of Höss?

To reconstruct perpetrator actions, historians also need to draw on SS records. In popular memory, the camps often are synonymous with arbitrary terror. This image of limitless SS violence reflects the nature of postwar testimony: extreme acts of violence were etched into the minds of survivors and figured prominently in postwar memoirs and judicial proceedings. But foregrounding extraordinary violence obscures the everyday operation of terror, with all its “ordinary” violations. Each main camp had an elaborate bureaucracy of repression, with departments staffed by managers and clerks, secretaries and drivers. There were regulations and directives, schedules and rosters. Every day reports were drafted, transport lists written, forms filled in, telexes sent, statistics calculated. So while SS actions might appear unrestrained on the surface, there was order behind the terror.¹⁵

As a result, the Camp SS created veritable mountains of documentation of their crimes. However, much of what would have constituted a vast paper trail no longer exists; before the war ended, SS officials systematically destroyed their files. What remains is fragmentary, and is dispersed across archives around the world. Anyone who wants to consult original SS materials from Auschwitz needs to visit archives in Poland, Germany, Russia, Britain, Israel and the US, and in other countries. But even if every SS record had been perfectly preserved, historians would not gain full knowledge. Many documents are misleading. Often this was deliberate, camouflaging crimes. Interrogated after the war about the Wannsee Conference official minutes he had produced back in 1942, Adolf Eichmann explained that the participants had talked “in very blunt terms” about the murder of the Jews, quite different from the “language that I had to use in the minutes.”¹⁶

Also, many important instructions about the camps never were recorded in the first place, having been issued in face-to-face meetings and telephone calls. This is true, not least, for encounters between Hitler and Himmler. Here we have, at best, a few keywords scribbled by Himmler. To be sure, we know that Hitler received crucial information and that he made some key decisions about the camps.¹⁷ But the full nature of Hitler’s involvement is unclear. Himmler, by contrast, left many fingerprints. One can try to trace them back to Hitler, following Christopher Browning’s dictum that if one wants to know “what Hitler is thinking, one should look at what Himmler is doing.”¹⁸ But this still leaves plenty of uncertainty, which is why Hitler remains a more peripheral figure in histories of the camps than does Himmler.

We would know even less about the SS perpetrators had it not been for prisoners in administrative positions. Some of these risked their lives by copying or hiding official SS documents. They made records of orders, transport lists, death certificates and more. In Sachsenhausen, a prisoner with access to confidential SS documents in the Political Department copied details onto pieces of wafer-thin paper and hid them in his glasses case.¹⁹ In Buchenwald, a prisoner saved the SS journal of the typhus experimental station from destruction.²⁰ And in Mauthausen, inmates hid negatives of compromising SS photos, preserving graphic evidence of everyday humiliation and murder.²¹ Similar acts of bravery occurred in other camps, too, pointing to the role of prisoners in recording their own fate.

Victims

Following Saul Friedländer, contemporaneous records by the victims are central for an integrated history. They wrote without knowledge of what would become of them and of the Nazi regime, reporting what they saw, heard and felt at the time, recording their immediate reaction to “moments of shock, of amazement, of denial.”²² But such records are unusual in case of the camps. The very nature of the camps – the relentless drill, violence, slave labor, hunger and illness – made writing in secret almost impossible, even if prisoners had access to pen, paper and hiding places. Still, some prisoners tried.

Several privileged inmates kept secret diaries. Taking advantage of his sheltered office job in Dachau, the German political prisoner Edgar Kupfer wrote hundreds of pages between 1942 and 1945.²³ Others sent secret messages to their loved ones outside. The young Polish prisoner Janusz Pogonowski sent several letters from Auschwitz to his family in 1942 and 1943. In the last one, written on 21 April 1943, just three months before he was hanged in the main camp, he pleaded for parcels “because my current food provision is very poor.”²⁴

Even Jews from the Birkenau *Sonderkommando*, forced to work at the gas chambers and crematoria, buried notes and letters on the camp grounds. They recorded the daily routine of mass extermination. They recorded moments of fear, defiance and resistance by the doomed, moments that otherwise would have been lost to history. And they recorded their own reactions to their desperate dilemma: having to assist in the killing of others to keep on living for another day. Not all notes by men from the Sonderkommando were found after the war. And new discoveries still are being made. Only recently were historians able to read large sections of a letter written in autumn 1944 by the Greek prisoner Marcel Nadjari. The letter had been discovered in Birkenau in 1980, inside a flask wrapped in a leather bag; but after more than three decades underground, only around 10 percent of the text could be deciphered. Thanks to an IT-specialist we now can read some 90 percent, including a passage in which Nadjari expresses his conviction that the SS will murder the Sonderkommando men “because we know so much about the unbelievable methods of their abuses....”²⁵

Contemporaneous sources such as these are invaluable. But they remain rare. Once Nazi victims disappeared into the camps, their voice tended to disappear with them. Think of Anne Frank, whose diary breaks off when she was discovered in hiding in Amsterdam in August 1944, before her deportation to Auschwitz and her death in Bergen-Belsen.

To fill this silence, historians of the camps have to draw on postwar survivor testimony. Not everyone could speak. Jorge Semprun, who survived Buchenwald as a Spanish political prisoner, later said “For a time, for fifteen years, I had to remain silent to survive.”²⁶ But there was no such thing as collective silence. On the contrary, many survivors were impatient to testify. During their unbearable suffering they had drawn strength from the prospect of bearing witness, and they spoke as soon as they could, sometimes still inside the camps. It is striking just how many survivors raised their voices immediately after the war. In 1945 and 1946 alone, thousands of accounts were given to prosecutors and NGOs, published in newspapers, pamphlets and books. Many more testimonies have followed since, in courtrooms, in books and on video. In the collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum an online search for oral histories about Auschwitz yields more than 16,000 results.²⁷

All this material raises further questions for historians of the camps. The most pressing is which testimonies to select? No historian can study them all. One answer is to identify testimonies that are representative of the wider prisoner population, in terms of nationality, religion, ethnicity, class, politics, age and gender. But even such a broad approach cannot hope to cover the whole range of prisoner experiences; some perspectives cannot be recovered. This is true for the “drowned,” as Primo Levi called them, who left behind no accounts. Among those are the Jews murdered in the Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chambers on arrival, and of the *Muselmänner*, who were so sick and starved that they were barely alive even before they died.²⁸ It also is true for those who lived, but who had no voice or were not heard. Few Soviet survivors, one of the largest prisoner groups in wartime, testified in the early decades after liberation. They said little or nothing because they often found themselves under suspicion from the Soviet authorities; some had been liberated from Nazi camps only to be dragged to the Gulag. As for German social outsiders, such as beggars, prostitutes and petty criminals, who had made up the largest inmate group just before the outbreak of World War II, their social stigma remained after liberation; as a consequence they spoke out only

very rarely. All this brings to mind a fundamental question posed by the literary scholar Philippe Carrard: “How do you include the testimony of those who have not been invited to testify?”²⁹

Many silences will remain. Many gaps can never be bridged. Still, new sources occasionally can bring back voices that seemed to have been lost. Let me illustrate this by the case of Moritz Choinowski. My study of the camps begins with a snapshot of Dachau on the day of liberation in April 1945, before moving back in time to Dachau in 1939 and 1933. The aim was to signal, right at the start, just how much the camps changed during the Nazi dictatorship. It seemed fitting to return to the liberation of Dachau once more in the final chapter, to bring the story full circle. A key source here is the aforementioned diary of Edgar Kupfer, written just after the events. One particular moment caught my eye. Here Kupfer describes how Choinowski a Jewish comrade of his who had survived Buchenwald and Auschwitz, visits him in the infirmary. “Is this possible?” Choinowski sobbed, as he hugged and kissed Kupfer. “And he cries,” Kupfer writes in his diary, “and I think about how he has suffered, and I cannot hold back my tears.”³⁰

This might seem like an appropriate ending, encapsulating the elation and the suffering of liberated prisoners. But it would have been wrong to end the book here. I wanted to add an epilogue on the bitter legacy of the camps, to counter the impression that liberation marked some kind of happy end for survivors. It was necessary to describe their enduring injuries and heart-breaking memories, their desperate attempts to rebuild their lives, their often demeaning struggle for compensation and also the indifference of wider society. Rather than tell this as an abstract tale, I wanted to make it concrete by returning to Moritz Choinowski. But he appeared to have vanished from the historical record – there were no memoirs, no video recordings, and no court testimonies. So what had happened after his tearful encounter with Edgar Kupfer on the day of liberation?

The first clue came in a local publication about Nazi terror in Magdeburg (where Choinowski once had owned a thriving tailor’s store and workshop); that book contained a brief article about his daughter and her fiancé.³¹ The author put me in touch with Choinowski’s granddaughter. In her possession were some private letters that offered the first glimpses into

his postwar life. They also revealed that he had made claims for compensation. And it turned out that these claims had been archived in the Bavarian State Reparations Office in Munich.³² Further material about Choinowski emerged from the archives of the International Tracing Service of the International Committee of the Red Cross. This included a letter from his daughter, who had believed for years that her father had perished.³³ On the basis of all this documentation, it now was possible to chart Choinowski's life after Dachau, his years of destitution in postwar Germany, and his emigration to the USA, from where in 1957 he pleaded with the Bavarian authorities to settle his case for reparations to "save me from my hardship."³⁴ He died ten years later.

Of course, even when we can reconstruct the outline of a survivor's path, many gaps remain – because former prisoners did not, or could not, discuss particular experiences, or because no one had asked them. Also, the meaning of testimonies can be distorted by misunderstandings, mistranslations and lapses of memory.³⁵ Essential as survivor testimonies are, they must be subject to source criticism, and this can reveal inaccuracies and contradictions. For example, individual memories sometimes become superimposed with collective ones. As the Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele gained in notoriety after the war, he appeared in more recollections by prisoners who had never encountered him: over a dozen survivors of the Starachowice slave labor camp, testifying decades later about their summer 1944 deportation to Auschwitz, placed Mengele at the Birkenau ramp during their selection – even though their transport had not undergone any selection on arrival.³⁶

Other testimonies prove impossible to reconcile. We know that witnesses often describe the same events differently – one only has to think of Akira Kurusawa's masterpiece *Rashômon* (1950) to be reminded of this basic truth – and survivor testimonies about the camps are no exception.³⁷ If anything, the unrelenting SS terror and the prisoners' inability to fix their experiences on paper magnified discrepancies between their later recollections. Take the case of a young woman publicly executed in Majdanek in 1943. When survivors testified about this murder many years later, as part of the Düsseldorf Majdanek trial (1975-81), they give conflicting accounts of the guards' actions and the prisoner's death. Some Polish survivors remembered that the woman had shouted "Long live Poland" before she was hanged. But a Jewish survivor flatly contradicted this version: "As a Jew, she could not say that. After all,

the Poles helped to exterminate us.” Instead, this witness recalled, the doomed woman had exclaimed: “Take revenge! Death to the Germans, the SS!” Yet another witness remembered the victim’s last words as having been far more personal: “I wanted to live, don’t forget me.”³⁸ Clearly, the witnesses’ individual beliefs, as well as the passage of time, shaped their memories of murder in Majdanek.

But even when testimonies fully align, their significance can remain elusive. This can be illustrated with an example from Dachau. As in other camps, inmates here had to march to roll call in silence. When the prisoner Paul Hussarek carried on talking one day, the camp elder Karl Kapp came up from behind and hit him hard on the neck. Some Dachau inmates saw this as typical behavior for Kapp, a political prisoner known for beating fellow prisoners. After the war, they testified against him, accusing him of being a sadist and murderer. But not all Dachau survivors agreed. Others had understood Kapp’s violent acts as attempts to keep the SS at bay. Even some of his former victims defended him. Paul Hussarek, the man who had been hit on the neck, stated in court that he was “still grateful to Kapp for this punch,” certain that he had been saved from a far worse fate at the hands of the SS.³⁹ In the case of Kapp and many other Kapos, there can be no moral certainty. As Primo Levi wrote in his famous essay on the “gray zone,” reflecting on prisoners who had collaborated with the camp authorities: they may have committed serious offenses, “but I know of no human tribunal to which one could delegate the judgment.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

How should we write about Nazi terror? So far, I have dealt only with practical problems related to sources and their interpretation. But what about the actual process of writing? What tone should we use to describe extreme suffering? How often can we use words such as “unbearable” or “heart-breaking” – words that I have used in this paper – before they lose their power? How to put hunger and pain into writing? In short, how can we ever hope to bridge the “abyss between language and experience”?⁴¹

The first to struggle with the limits of language were prisoners themselves, secretly writing inside the camps. “The language is exhausted,” the Sachsenhausen inmate Odd Nansen wrote

in his diary on February 12, 1945. “I’ve exhausted it myself. There are no words left to describe the horrors I’ve seen with my own eyes.”⁴² This anguish was echoed by survivors after the war. “One cannot speak about everything; one cannot make everything imaginable, understandable. It’s just not possible,” Jorge Semprun said in conversation with Elie Wiesel, who replied: “Silence is forbidden, speaking is impossible.”⁴³

So how can we attempt the “impossible”? There is no simple formula, no perfect solution. Still, some approaches seem more appropriate than others. We should allow readers to develop their own responses, rather than forcing emotions onto them. We should resist the temptation to smooth out complexities and contradictions. We should be open about the limits of representation. We should appeal not just to the mind, but also to the senses, evoking the sights, smells and sounds that made up the camps. Above all, we should integrate the voices of those who suffered the camps. To quote Saul Friedländer for one last time, it is necessary to let “the victims speak for themselves, take over the narration, and disrupt here and there the readers’ ‘foreshadowing’ of the course of events.”⁴⁴

NOTES

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⁴³ Semprun, Wiesel, *Schweigen*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Friedländer, “Reply to Hayden White,” p. 85.

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