

Sonderkommando essay



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Sonderkommandos http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/58/Auschwitz_Resistance_280_cropped.jpg/555px-Auschwitz_Resistance_280_cropped.jpg Table of contents

Introduction³ The need of sonderkommandos⁴ Politics⁴ gas chamber⁵ The

work of the sonderkommandos⁸ Revolts within the camps¹⁰ Survivors¹²

Resources¹⁶ Introduction When one thinks of concentration camps, the link

to the gas chambers will be made without difficulties. However, do people

really know how they worked and who where needed to let these killing

machines function?

The answer is no, some can still tell how the gas chambers worked, but

barely anyone knows who worked inside them and that they had to abide the

most horrific events that took place in the second world war. This paper is

dedicated to those who we don't know about, the ones we would rather know

nothing of, the ones who can never be forgotten. In order to understand

what really happened inside these sonderkommandos and their highly

unusual workplace, it is vital to obtain some knowledge about the Nazis and

their ' final solution' first.

This paper will try to give a clear overview of the road towards the

implementation of the gas chambers, the life of the people that lived inside

of these sonderkommandos, the uprising that took place within the

sonderkommando of Auschwitz Birkenau, known survivors from

sonderkommandos, and the aftermath. There is barely any information

available about this topic, I tried to use as many different sources as

possible. There are some testimonies made about some of the survivors

filmed by the SHOAH foundation, which can be found on Youtube.

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Some other survivors have written down their story in books, and others drew pictures of the events that they witnessed. All of these sources were extremely important in the creation of this paper because the Nazis never documented anything of these events that took place within the gas chambers. Their primary goal was to extinguish all evidence created around their 'final solution' of the non Aryans. This paper will mostly be focused on Auschwitz and its sonderkommando, since most information available is from this camp. The need for sonderkommandos

Before explaining what the sonderkommandos did and how they operated it is necessary to explain why they were needed. There will be an explanation from the political point of view as well as the invention of the gas chamber.

Politics After the first world war, Germany was forced to oblige to the Versailles treaty. This treaty stated that Germany and its allies were fully responsible for the damage and losses during the first world war. This resulted in paying a high sum of money namely, 132 billion marks for reparations, it lost around 20 percent of its territory and it had to minimize the army.

The German population was devastated by this treaty but they never saw it as official. During the Weimar government Germany experienced hyperinflation which was the effect of the Versailles treaty, this was the first time that Hitler tried to get the power in Germany in November 1923, however, it failed but it made him and his party the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei) known with the public. Hitler got arrested for his attempt and was sentenced to 5 years in prison, he got out within one year.

While he was in jail he wrote his infamous book 'Mein Kampf', in this book he describes his view on the Versailles treaty, the Jews and other minorities, the superiority of the Aryan race, and that Germany needs more territory for the Aryans. Hitler on the cover of his book, Mein Kampf http://www.nazi.org.uk/hitler-racial-state_files/image004.jpg During the elections of 1932 the NSDAP won a significant amount of seats in the Reichstag, it rose from 107 to 230, and it became the largest political party with 37, 4 percent of Germany.

Hitler became chancellor on the 30th of January 1933 from a government that was quite divided, even though the NSDAP was the largest party the SPD and KPD were also represented in the Reichstag. In this government there were only two ministers from the last named parties whereas all the other ministers were members from the NSDAP, Hitler almost took over all power within one year after the elections. The NSDAP made the 'enabling act' which basically gave the parliament the power to make laws without consulting the Reichstag.

When President von Hindenburg died on the second of August 1934, Hitler became president due to a law that passed one day before. This law stated that the office of president would no longer exist and that the powers of the president would merge with those of the chancellor. Hitler now had all power in Germany and he was able to implement his vision of Germany without any resistance. The Final Solution can be divided in three phases. The first phase was between 1933 and 1939, it affected Jews within the borders of the German empire.

As Hitler described in his book, Germany needed more space for the Aryans to live in and that the German race should be purified, this meant that the non Aryans had to leave. At first mass immigration sounded like the solution, it would be the easiest and cheapest option, however, the non Aryans would not just leave their homes and mother country for no reason, most of these families lived in Germany for generations. Therefore the NSDAP came up with a boycott of Jewish stores on the first of April 1933, this had barely any effect on Germany.

Some Jews tried to leave Germany but foreign countries were not eager to let them in, emigration was not an option. The Nuremberg laws was the next step, these laws were written in 1935 and are also known as ? the laws for protection of German blood and German honor?. These laws had a large impact on the life of the Jews. The Jews were deprived from their citizenship, they were not allowed to marry or to have an Aryan, that marriages and relationships between Jews and Germans were prohibited, Jews were not allowed to show the national flag or the national colors.

Besides these new rules, the Nuremberg laws also stated who was considered to be a Jew. Half Jews were considered to be full Jews and were only allowed to marry a full Jew or another half Jew, whereas a quarter Jew was only allowed to marry an Aryan. After the murder on Vom Rath, a member of the Nazi party, by a 17 year old Jewish boy, on the 7th of November 1938. The Nazi? s retaliated on the Jews by destroying Jewish property on the 10th of November, such as stores and synagogue, this night became known as Kristallnacht. Besides the demolition, 91 Jews were killed, and an estimated 30. 00 Jews were sent to concentration camps. After

this event the majority of the Jewish population tried to emigrate away from Europe's mainland, but again, like a couple of years before, other countries were not willing to let them in and most were deported back to Europe. Gas chambers As said before, Hitler wanted to free Germany from the non Aryans, when it became clear that mass emigration did not work, other options had to be considered. The Nazis had started with the compulsory sterilization of disabled people since 1933, an estimated 360.00 persons were sterilized between 1933 and 1939. When Aktion T4 started in 1939 it began by killing children with a shot of phenol, who suffered from the down syndrome or another non curable illnesses. The second step was to murder adults with a range of different diseases such as: dementia, syphilis, epilepsy, and others. A lethal injection was a not very effective method because it was time consuming and too expensive. It was Hitler who recommended to use carbon monoxide on adults, the first test with gassing people took place in January 1940.

The results were satisfying for the people who were concerned and it was applied to multiple euthanasia centers across Germany. Aktion T4 made 70.273 victims and was shut down in 1941. Before the Jews and other non Aryans were sent to the gas chambers they were murdered by special SS groups. These SS groups also known as Sonderkommandos, when working on German territory or Einsatzgruppen, when working on foreign ground, performed killings by shooting entire Jewish populations to death. These mass murdering started from 1941 in the western part of Russia as well as in Ukraine, Bulgaria, and other eastern European countries.

All victims had to undress themselves and they would be shot or killed by a gas van. The estimated amount of deaths that these SS groups are accountable for is around 2 million, which is 25 to 30 percent of the deaths on non Aryans made by Nazi Germany (approximately 6 million). These large scaled murders were quite hard for the SS men to deal with, the SS soldiers that were selected for these task were not able to keep on doing this without experiencing mental problems. Himmler himself had witnessed the work of one of the Einsatzgruppen in Minsk where a 100 Jews were shot.

According to Karl Wolff, his face turned green and vomited after witnessing the event. Killing all Jews by guns was not doable mentally and economically, since gassing disabled people was a 'success' during Aktion T4, camps were designed with the implementation of gas chambers. When Germany took over Poland in 1939 all Jews were forced to live together in ghettos in big cities, that were easily accessible by railroads. By having all Jews together in large ghettos it will make it easier for the Nazis to deport them to concentration or death camps.

Concentration camps were around since 1933, Dachau was the first official one to open, they were build to house political prisoners of the Nazi regime, they were forced to do intense labor, the living conditions were miserable. Around December 1941, Hitler decided that all the European Jews had to be exterminated, Hitler putted Himmler in charge of his 'final solution' which stated that the Jews were forced to work till death and the weak, old and disabled would be killed immediately. The code name of this project was operation Reinhart, and it's sole purpose was to create extermination camps that could kill all the Polish Jews.

Multiple death camps were build such as: Chelmno, Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor, even though Auschwitz and Madjanek are considered to be death camps too, they were also functioning as labor camps. Death camps in occupied Poland <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d0/WW2-Holocaust-Poland.PNG>

The death camps that were designed and build during operation Reinhart all had overall the same layout and were all located near a rail line, this was important in order to get the victims easy in to the camp. Chelmno used gas vans and had no crematoria, the bodies were burned in pits in the woods.

Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka all had gas chambers that worked on diesel engines, Auschwitz and Madjanek both used Zyklon B to gas the victims. The first test with Zyklon B took place in Auschwitz in the infamous block 11 on Russian prisoners of war, Zyklon B was previously used to disinfect clothes. These tests with this gas were very effective, it was less time consuming than using gas chambers operating with diesel engines and it was less expensive. The work of the sonderkommando When a train would arrive in Auschwitz, a selection was made between the ones who were fit to work and the ones who were assumed not to be able to work.

The group of people who did not pass the selection would be sent to the gas chambers. Once arriving in the crematorium, they were told by the SS guards to undress themselves and to proceed to the showers. To make the process faster the victims were told that after the shower they would be provided with a meal. Within the undressing rooms there were little hooks which were intended to hang clothes on, the SS guards would tell the people to remember their number so that they would be able to find their clothes

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back after the shower. When entering in the gas chamber it didn't look that suspicious since showerheads were placed on the ceiling.

When the whole selected transport was inside the gas chamber, the door would be locked and an SS guard would pour the Zyklon B gas from the roof into the gas chamber through a little opening. It took a couple of minutes before the gas started to work, it would spread from the bottom to the top of the room, after 20 minutes all the persons inside the room were dead. Once the gas chamber was cleared from the corpses, the whole room had to be cleaned and repainted in order not to look suspicious for the next victims. The bodies were sent up to the furnace area, in which they were cremated.

The whole process of arriving till death took place within 3 hours, multiple transports per crematorium would be processed during a day. The members of the sonderkommando were forced to participate throughout this whole process, their job consisted out of different tasks. A few would assist in the undressing room where they helped people to undress and to get into the gas chambers, if a member would speak the language of the people who were about to be murdered, he would translate the orders from the SS guard in order to make the process go faster.

Two members of the sonderkommando were needed on the roof of the gas chamber where they had to lift off the heavy lid to the opening for the Zyklon B crystals. After the people were deceased, an air ventilator would be switched on to refresh the air, the door to the gas chamber would be opened, after which the members from the sonderkommando had to drag every victim out by using a cane or a string of fabric. The Zyklon B gas had a

weird effect on the dead bodies, a person would get rid of all its body fluids when the gas started to work.

This meant that all the bodies were covered in urine, blood, vomit and feces. Once the bodies came out of the gas chamber, the members of the sonderkommando had to place the bodies on a small elevator which would bring the bodies up to the furnace area. Up in the crematorium other members had to put the corpses on a metal stretcher and throw them into the ovens. Once the bodies were cremated, the large pieces of bones would be crushed by some members in a huge grinder, all the ashes would be collected and dumped in a river close by.

Besides working inside the gas chambers, the members of the sonderkommando also had to burn people in massive pits, the crematoriums could not always handle the amount of corpses that needed to be cremated. Another task that they sometimes had to perform was to walk a victim, mostly elderly, up a stair where a SS guard was hiding, who would shoot the victim in the neck. These people were not able to go in to the gas chamber and therefore were murdered in a different way. The members of the sonderkommando were not allowed to communicate with other prisoners within the camp.

Their standards of living were higher than in the rest of the camp, they all had a bed and the food supply was better due to what they could find in the victims possessions. Even though they had a bit more advantages from other prisoners, the Nazis did everything possible to make their live harder and more complicated. A member of the sonderkommando dragging people out

of the gas chamber, drawn by David Olere [http://1. bp. blogspot. com/-GwK8gwHiSn0/TdLwHbiBY5I/AAAAAAAAABfo/o5dL0rdbRas/s1600/Sonderkomm ando. JPG](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-GwK8gwHiSn0/TdLwHbiBY5I/AAAAAAAAABfo/o5dL0rdbRas/s1600/Sonderkommando.JPG)

In the Jewish faith it is not appropriate to touch a body when it is not clean, this is just one example of the methods the Nazis used to make the lives of the Jews inside these sonderkommandos more miserable. Besides witnessing the horrors of their job there was another factor that was a threat to them, the Nazis tried to replace the members of the sonderkommando regularly, they did not want to have survivors who could testify what they had seen and witnessed. In Auschwitz there were approximately 1200 workers imprisoned in the different sonderkommandos spread over the five different crematoriums.

Revolts within the camps After news of the revolt in the ghetto of Warsaw and the losses of the German Army in Stalingrad and north Africa, the Jewish prisoners within the death camps got a little more faith in surviving their ordeals. Multiple uprisings against the Nazis took place within the camps. Treblinka After the last transport came into the camp in the beginning of 1943, the Treblinka prisoners were participating in clearing all the evidence from the Treblinka site.

Mass graves were opened and all corpses had to be burned, when this work was almost completed, the Jews noticed that once the work was finished they would be killed to erase the last trace of evidence. On the second of August 1943 they revolted against the Nazis by attending a mass escape. Their plan was to take over control of the camp, however it failed, all

prisoners stormed to the main gate and around 300 were able to escape.

Most of the camp of Treblinka was burned down during the revolt. Sobibor

When the prisoners realized that less transports were coming in, like in

Treblinka, they decided to take matters into their own hands.

Individual escapes were not a good option, since the SS would retaliate against the remaining prisoners, a plan had to be created that could get the whole prisoner population out. When a transport with Russian prisoners of war came in everything changed, one of these inmates was Sasja Petsjerski. He and a Jewish inmate created a plan where the SS guards and Ukrainians would be killed, telephone cords would be cut, and the whole camp population would escape at once. The revolt took place on the 14th of October 1943, from the 600 camp population, 300 made it out of the gates alive.

The estimated number of survivors is around 50 to 70 people. The 100 members of the sonderkommando of Sobibor did not participate in this uprising and were all murdered the next day. Sobibor closed down after this revolt. Auschwitz Within Auschwitz the plan of revolting against the Germans already existed for a longer period of time, there was contact between the Polish underground and members of the sonderkommando. Even though members of the sonderkommando were not allowed to communicate with other prisoners, they established contact when picking up the soup in the kitchen in the women's camp.

Besides exchanging information, gun powder which was taken by female prisoners, was given to members of the sonderkommando. When the

incoming transports were reducing rapidly in the fall of 1944, the revolt was planned, which was executed on the 7th of October 1944. The plan was that all crematoriums would escape at the same time, however, it started in crematorium IV by accident. The members of the sonderkommando used the gunpowder that was smuggled in to blow up the crematorium. Members of the sonderkommando of crematorium II and IV tried to escape through the fences into the woods.

Inside crematorium III the kapo decided that it would be better not to attend the revolt and to remain inside. The men from the two other crematoriums were either killed in the revolt, or killed after they were captured again. After this event crematorium IV and crematorium III were not in function anymore and they were demolished, the members of the remaining sonderkommando were given instructions to tear down the gas chambers, they were the only ones who were allowed down there. The outer part of the buildings were taken down by normal prisoners.

After the revolt the members of the sonderkommando slept in a small building in the men's camp of Birkenau. When the death marches started in January 1945, the members of the sonderkommando blended themselves into groups of other prisoners who were leaving the camp with these marches. After they mingled with other prisoners it was impossible for the SS to find the members back. These survivors have been important in order to understand how the final solution took place. Survivors of sonderkommandos
Known survivor Treblinka: Martin Gray 27-4-1922-

Born in Warsaw, he was able to escape from Treblinka, after the war he married a Dutch woman and got four children together, whom all died in a forest fire in 1970. He remarried and is still lecturing all over the world.

Known survivor Chelmno: Michal Podchlebnik Worked in Chelmno in the waldkommando, his job was to bury the victims of the Chelmno gas trucks, he also tidied up the changing rooms after the people were gassed. He heard how the people were gassed. He was able to escape from Chelmno in 1942.

Known survivors sonderkommando Auschwitz: The highest amount of survivors is from Auschwitz as described in the previous chapter.

The list created below, is putted together with the use of multiple websites and books. There are more survivors but some were not willing to share their stories and never wanted to speak their ordeals ever again. Israel Gutman 1923- Born in Warsaw, participated in the Warsaw revolt. He was send to several camps afterwards, he was one of the creators of the sonderkommando revolt. After the war he testified in the Eichmann process.

Milton Buki 1909-1988 Prisoner number: 80312 Morris kesselman Prisoner number: 11900 Yosef sackar Prisoner number: 182739 Avraham Dragon 1919-2007 Prisoner number: 80360 Szlamo Dragon Prisoner number: 80359

Brother of Avraham Dragon Daniel Behnnamias 1923-1994 Prisoner number: 182477 Greek Jew with Italian nationality who after the war, wrote a book called the holocaust odyssey of Daniel Behnnamias, he died in Oakland, United States. Alter Fajnzylberg 23/10/1910-? Prisoner number: 27675

Arrived in Auschwitz on the 27th of March 1942, he witnessed the gassing of the gypsies. Shlomo Venezia 29/12/1923-1/10/2012 Prisoner number: 182727 Wrote a book about his experiences in Auschwitz called ' inside the

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gas chambers'. After the war he found his older sister Rachel back, his mom and two little sister were murdered on arrival.

Morris Venezia 2/1921-? Prisoner number: 182728 A Greek Jew with Italian nationality, he is the older brother of Shlomo Venezia. Dario Gabbai 1922-? Prisoner number: 182568 A Jew from Greece, he was in the same transport as a lot of other survivors. After the war he shared his story with many others, he believed that his testimony is important to picture the complete story of the horrors that took place. Dario Gabbai, Shlomo and Morris Venezia went back to Auschwitz to participate in a documentary called: Auschwitz, the final witness. Jakov Gabbai 1912-1993 Prisoner number: 182569 The older brother of Dario Gabbai.

Henryk Tauber 8/7/1917-? Prisoner number: 90124 A Polish Jew who arrived in Auschwitz at 19th of January 1943, he had a few different jobs in the camp before he was selected for the sonderkommando. After the war he testified for a Polish court. Filip Muller 1922- Prisoner number: 29236 Fillip Muller, born in Czechoslovakia, worked for almost 3 years in the sonderkommando, this is an extremely long time whereas most others would not work longer than 3 months to a half a year inside the crematoriums. After the war he wrote a book about his ordeal called ' eyewitness Auschwitz: three years in the gas chambers' Henryk Mandelbaum 5/12/1922-17/6/2008 Prisoner number: 181970 After the war, Henryk dedicated himself to teach others about his own experiences of being a member of the sonderkommando. He always kept his tattoo to remind himself what he went through. Leon Cohen 1910-1989 Prisoner number: 182492 Wrote a book from Greece to Birkenau, which is dedicated to the uprising in the crematoriums. While he was

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working in the sonderkommando, he carried out a job as a dentist, he had to pull out the golden teeth from the deceased in crematorium III. David Olere
19/01/1902-2/8/1985

Prisoner number: 106144 David Olere was transported from transition camp Drancy in France to Auschwitz on the 49th transport on the second of March 1943. He worked as a member of the sonderkommando his entire stay in Auschwitz. On the 19th of January he was evacuated from the camp by participating in a death march which led him to Ebensee in Austria, he got liberated on the 6th of May 1945 by the American army. After the war, David Olere used his painting skills to create an image of what happened inside the crematoriums and gas chambers of Auschwitz.

No pictures or video material of the gas chambers and the crematoriums was ever shot, therefore his drawings and paintings are considered valuable.

Miklos Nyiszli 16/6/1901-5/5/1956 Prisoner number: A8450 Miklos Nyiszli was deported to Auschwitz in June 1944 with his wife and daughter, at arrival he told the staff he was a doctor. He was forced to work as Mengele's assistant and to perform autopsies in the crematorium. After he got liberated from the Donau camp on may 5th 1945 by the U. S. Army he found his wife and daughter back. He died of a heart attack in 1956. Resources

The need for sonderkommandos <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/languages/dutch/encyclopedia/19.asp>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mein_Kampf

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg_Laws

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http://www.duitslandweb.org/wiki/Adolf_Hitler
<http://www.naslagwerk/Geschiedenis/Derde+Rijk+tot+1939/Machtigingswet+en+gelijkschakeling.html>
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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinrich_Himmler
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Reinhard
<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/sonderevolt.html>
http://cohen.gr/newsite/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2278:-2&catid=69:2011-03-21-15-02-30&Itemid=78
<http://www.sobiborinterviews.nl/en/the-revolt/the-revolt>
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<http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/ARTS/DOBIO/DOarts.HTM>
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<http://sonderkommando.info/proces/cracovie/temoins/feinsilber/index.html>
<http://www.schoah.org/shoah/holocaust/greif-0.htm>
<http://www.martingray.eu/>

Books used:
Sonderkommando Auschwitz Shlomo Venezia
ISBN: 9789026321016 Europe reborn Harold James ISBN: 0-582-21533-1

Ooggetuigen van Sobibor Jules Schelvis ISBN: 9789026323140

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----- [1]. Official number from the Nazi party, however, the number of deaths is probably much higher. [2]. Reichsführer of the SS, he formed the SS einsatzgruppen and created the extermination camps. He is accountable for the deaths of millions of Jews. [3]. SS gruppenführer, and Himmler's ' ears and eyes' within Hitler's headquarters. [4]. First death camp build. [5]. Might contain errors, since no real official lists exist.