

## Weeping Without Tears

Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando From Auschwitz* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1999.

Reviewed by  
Michael Berenbaum

For thirteen years, Gideon Greif met and interviewed surviving members of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, but, surprisingly, he first came upon the subject by accident. Appearing on a Holocaust Remembrance Day radio program, he was interviewed with a Jew from Salonika who had been a member of the Sonderkommando. These were the special units that had worked in the vicinity of the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Like many, Greif had thought that all the Sonderkommando members were dead. After all, they were the most dangerous of all witnesses to the slaughter of the Jews.

Meeting this Jew from Salonika marked the beginning of Greif's quest. He dedicated the next years to interviewing these men one by one and time and again. This book is the result of those interviews: his questions, their answers, his introduction and their voices.

There is a debate among historians as to the value of oral history. How reliable is the testimony of survivors taken decades after the event they witnessed? The debate peaked in respect to the controversies surrounding the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which amassed a collection of more than 50,000 testimonies in thirty-two languages in fifty-seven countries. Some questioned the competence of the interviewers and the duration of the interviews. Elsewhere I have written that I thought these critics shortsighted and that the magnitude of the testimonies [will allow cross referencing.]<sup>1</sup> Historians must be willing to learn from this source of

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<sup>1</sup>See Michael Berenbaum "The Case for the Shoah Foundation," in Michael Signer, ed., *Humanity At Its Limits: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

information, and much can be learned not only about historical events, but also about the ethos of the experience. Even if not all the recollections or every detail in each testimony are accurate, much can be learned about memory itself. The Shoah Foundation, Yad Vashem, and other institutions use video interviews, although their foci and depth vary. Historians and other scholars must be prepared to learn from the visual communications as well. In the case of the interviews in this book, we have the printed and, I presume, edited text of oral interviews, so visual clues are missing.

This particular subset of interviews cannot be subject to the criticism leveled at other forms of oral history. Greif is clearly an expert in his field. It is fair to say that he knows more about the Sonderkommando than the people he interviewed, yet he is willing to learn from those who were there and is respectful of the truth that they have to tell. He engages them in conversation; he seldom corrects or contradicts, but he does probe. He spoke with many of these interviewees in an ongoing conversation, not in the pressure-packed situation of a one-time interview in which everything had to be said at once or it was to be left unsaid. The ongoing relationship between the interviewer and the subject is not without its problems for the information that is sought. As Greif is clear to tell us, an ongoing relationship makes the interviewer reluctant to cause pain; perhaps it restrains him in his questioning. As certainly as it increases the trust between the two, it diminishes the tensions of the moment, tensions that sometimes induce a wall of silence but that can, on occasion, provoke unexpected outbursts that may reveal explosive truths. In what must rank as the most powerful moment of a most powerful film, Shoah, Claude Lanzmann was certainly not reluctant to cause pain to his subjects. He pushed Treblinka barber Abraham Bomba into confronting and revealing a domain of his experience that he would have much preferred to repress.

Yet even a good, well-prepared non-expert interviewer can often conduct an interesting interview by using his/her own curiosity and desire to learn as a tool to engage the interviewee and the intended audience. Expert as he is, Greif did not use code words, but gave ample room for the Sonderkommando to tell their story.

Oral history is certainly not the only means of learning about this subject. In his introduction Greif relies not only on what he hears but also on what he knows from other sources – German documents, illustrations of the camps, photographs of the times and, of course, the diaries that were written contemporaneously and buried in the vicinity of the gas chamber in the hope that they would be discovered and bear witness. He cites again and again the diary of Zalman Gradowski, which is about to be published in a thoroughly reliable Hebrew translation of the Yiddish original. Naturally, diaries written at the time are a trusted source of historical information, even though their authors worked under extraordinary pressure and had only very limited information by which to make their assessments. Greif has read all the important works. Most, if not all, are cited in his well-documented notes.

Greif correctly understands and respects the singularity of his subject's experience. The Sonderkommando were intimate with the act of killing. They observed the murderers directly, closely, and over a long period of time. They were in the presence of the condemned in their last moments, when they entered the undressing room, when they lined up to go into the gas chambers, and moments after they were gassed, when their bodies were removed from the chambers and they were processed. Gold teeth were pulled, inner cavities were searched for hidden valuables, wedding and other rings were removed from fingers, and hair was shorn and bundled. They were with the remains of the victims as they were burned either in open pits or in the ovens of the crematoria. They were with the victims' remains as bones that had not been burned were crushed; the ashes were accumulated and then brought to the Sola River, where they were deposited in the river to flow downstream and be scattered. One can only contrast their experience with traditional Jewish burial practice. The body of the deceased is washed and placed in shrouds; near the body the pious recite Psalms and study appropriate holy texts; the deceased is placed into a kever yisrael, a Jewish grave, as El Maleh Rahamim ("Oh Lord full of compassion," the memorial prayer recited at a funeral) and the Kaddish are recited by the mourners, who do not leave the cemetery until the earth fills the grave.

Greif informs us in his seventy-eight-page introductory chapter (expanded from the German edition [1998] of the book) on the history, image, and self-image of the Sonderkommando, that one member of the Sonderkommando served on a Chevra Kadisha (Burial Society) after the war. The contrast is astounding. Burial as a sacred act is a universe apart from the body disposal practiced by the Sonderkommando.

At the beginning of his important work, *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton recounts a conversation he had with a survivor who he later identified as Elie Wiesel. Wiesel asked: “Were they beasts when they did what they did? Or were they human beings?” Lifton answered: “They were and are men, which is my justification for studying them; and their behavior...” Wiesel answered: “It is demonic that they were not demonic.”<sup>2</sup>

When Greif asked his eight former Sonderkommando interviewees how, as human beings, they could witness what they witnessed, their response was immediate and almost identical: “We were not humans,” one said. The words they used were “automatons,” “robots,” “machines” (pp. 123, 306, 339, 358).

“Did you cry,” Joseph Sachar, a Greek Jew who arrived in Auschwitz in 1944, was asked. His answer was poetic “Yes, but without tears” (p. 123). Yaacov Silberberg answered: “Were we normal? A man who can’t cry is not a man” (p. 362). Silberberg then added, regarding the person who emerged from Auschwitz: “Much is missing. It is not me” (363).

If Lifton was suggesting an interpretation of Silberberg’s few words, he would write of “doubling,” the creation of an Auschwitz-self and a non-Auschwitz-self. So would Lawrence Langer, who has written so compellingly on survivors’ testimonies. The earliest image I used to understand the Holocaust was the void—absence where presence had been.<sup>3</sup>

The tasks of the Sonderkommando varied. Some were specialized, “barbers” or “dentists.” Others performed multiple functions. Certain tasks were restricted to the Germans, and these witnesses make clear time and

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Jay Lifton, “Doubling: The Acts of the Second Self,” in Michael Berenbaum, ed. *A Mosaic of Victims* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), pp. 216-222; Michael Berenbaum, *The Vision of the Void: Theological Reflections on the Work of Elie Wiesel* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1979); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

again that the Germans alone were engaged in killing. They alone decided who shall live and who shall die. They alone placed the gas in the chambers. They alone declared the dead, dead.

The Sonderkommando worked in the vicinity of the crematoria. They were responsible for “before.” They cleaned up “after.” They were in the undressing room during the last moments of Jews who arrived from the four corners of Europe. They spoke with these Jews but moments before they were gassed. Some they knew from before the war; the vast majority were strangers yet kinsmen. They removed the bodies from the gas chambers. The bodies piled one on top of another was the universal recollection. “Like statues,” is the description one witness used. Their color was normal was repeated again and again. Sonderkommando loaded the bodies into the elevator. They inspected for gold teeth and removed them. They placed the bodies in the ovens, three to five at a time, for burning. Before the ovens came on line, or when the ovens could not handle the load, they were burned with a layer of wood in pits. Bones that did not disintegrate in burning were crushed, and ashes were brought to the river for dispersal.

The hours were long. Twelve-hour shifts were the norm, as described by these Sonderkommando. They were without illusions. They were as certain as a person can be that the Germans were killers engaged in massive killing operations, the scope of which defied description. Their personal situation was paradoxical, perhaps compromised, as Greif understands so well. As long as transports continued to arrive, the Sonderkommando were needed. As long as they were needed, they would be kept alive; but when they were no longer needed, they would be among the first to die, because they were the most dangerous eyewitnesses to the killing process.

In his introductory chapter, Greif deals well with the question of their self-image, the guilt that most bore for their work. In their testimony, the Sonderkommando make clear again and again, testimony after testimony, the limits of their power and the fact that the Germans did the killing. Had they not facilitated the killing process, others would have, and it would have continued uninterrupted. Reiteration of these points is more than a defense; it is a

protest against those who would hold them responsible—as many Israelis did after the war.

Because they dealt with death, it was inevitable that religious questions were raised. Death pushes toward the absolute – toward God, or away from God. We learn intriguing details of religious life among the Sonderkommando, just enough to be curious, just enough to trigger the imagination, but not enough to satisfy it. The Sonderkommado gathered for prayers on Yom Kippur in 1944-5704. They had scavenged everything that was needed, including prayer books and Torah scrolls (in plural in the interviews). They were left alone to pray Kol Nidrei and the Yom Kippur evening prayers, which they did. One wonders how one addressed God in such a situation, how one confessed sin, how they asked God to hear their voices. Certainly one could say part of the liturgy with absolute devotion: “What are we? What are our lives? What are deeds? What are we to say before you?” But how does one speak to and of God the merciful father?

Early the next morning, the Germans gave the Sonderkommando their response to such prayers. Consciously or subconsciously, the SS played God. At 5:00 A.M., 2,000 Jews were brought to the slaughter. The Germans were mindful of the solemnity of the day. Yaakov Gabbai commented to a friend: “This is their gift for Yom Kippur.... See what a gift they are giving us, these dogs” (p.227). Repentance, prayer, and acts of charity did not annul the severity of the decree.

Similarly, the Sonderkommando observed a Passover Seder. Matzot were baked in the oven. One of the Dragon brothers had worked in a bakery before Passover and knew the requirements. Since no wine could be obtained, the Dayan of Makow, Leib Langfus, proclaimed: “Let us bless [say Kiddush] on the tea” (p. 279). He is incorrectly called a maggid (preacher) by two Sonderkommando, Dragon and Silberberg. Greif, rightly so, does not correct this mistake, because, while mistakes should be noted, the responsibility of one who publishes the transcripts of such interviews is to present faithfully what has been said by the witnesses. Correction is the task of the notes. It is important to remind ourselves that, although a witness may be telling the truth, even the whole truth, not everything that is being said is true. Human memory

is fallible. Historians, therefore, must assess and weigh what has been said against all sources of information. And so, in reality, Langfus was a dayan, a judge.

Greif does not ask for – and the interviewees do not volunteer – a description of that Seder. Surely, in the long and turbulent history of the Jewish people, this was the strangest place to remember the liberation from Egypt and the miracles of the plagues. How does one speak of liberation from bondage in the epicenter of the kingdom of night?

Only once does an interview with a Sonderkommando touch the theological. Yaakov Silberberg arrived at Birkenau as a religious Jew. A Cohen, a descendant of the priestly sons of Aaron, he was commanded by the Torah not to come into contact with the dead—not even to enter a cemetery, except for the burial of a member of his immediate family. Upon arrival, he sought advice from a fellow Sonderkommando who suggested that he speak with the above-mentioned “maggid” (dayan) from Makow.

As Silberberg relates it, the maggid said: “Don’t worry, we are here as God’s messengers and we must work as commanded. This is God’s will and we cannot change God’s will.” “This is the way,” Langfus said, “that Jews will come in some manner to burial” (p. 354). Silberberg said: “It satisfied me then. People need to believe in something larger than themselves.”

The dayan then went on to offer a theological explanation for the suffering – the Jews had sinned, and this was divine punishment. And what about the children, the infants, Silberberg asks? What was their sin? The dayan’s reported response: “They had imbibed their mother’s sins” (pp. 354-355).

Had Irving Greenberg not established the principle of authenticity after the Holocaust “that no statement theological or otherwise should be made that cannot be made in the presence of burning children,” it should have emerged from this testimony. Later, but not that much later, Langfus’s “Justification of the Decree” was to cost Silberberg his faith and perhaps more, much more.

Silberberg said: “I came to the conclusion that I must decide to live and to be at peace with myself...Simply, I wanted to live. I wanted to live” (p. 355). Silberberg’s drive to live is echoed in one way or another by virtually every one of the interviewees. It is offered as an explanation, as an apology. The

urge for living endured in these men. While surely it could not assure their survival, it is not unrelated to it.

At points the testimony becomes poignant, perhaps even poetic, the simple poetry of ordinary men, attempting to articulate their intimacy with mass murder. Greif asked Silberberg: “Did you look into the oven?” He replied:

“When we opened the door of the oven, we saw the fire and the body forms. The bones of the people... started to sway from the heat, as if they were beginning to live, as if they were arising from the dead. The bones changed character. If you bury a person who has died he doesn’t feel a thing. In the oven it is as if he feels something because of the fire and the heat. The form changes. It is not like a log... It starts to make movements” (p. 360).

Unlike ordinary prisoners in Auschwitz, the Sonderkommando did not suffer from hunger. Their food was ordinary concentration-camp provisions, but it was supplemented by the food that they could scavenge from newly arrived transports. Arriving prisoners brought with them food on the trains, food that reflected what was eaten in their native lands. Thus, Polish Sonderkommando ate olives and dates when the Greek Jews arrived. Some Jews arriving on the eve of Passover even brought matzot. Transports of Polish Jews arrived without provisions we are told – ghettoized Polish Jews were already starving before deportation. Sonderkommando slept on mattresses in heated bunks built above the ovens. They wore civilian clothes. Some carried knives, as they were not searched. Although they had roll calls and had to follow a rigorous routine, the Germans seem to have left them mostly alone. Some participated in the resistance.

Historians and general readers will learn certain details about the resistance. They will learn of the tension between the timing of the non-Jewish resistance at Auschwitz and the Sonderkommando, who were fearful that they would be put to death once the transports ceased coming. The tensions were inevitable, as Jews were more desperate than non-Jews, and the Sonderkommando were the most desperate when the killing slowed.



Hungarian deportations stopped after July 8. Deportations from Lodz took place in August 1944. By September, and surely by October, work had slowed, and the Sonderkommando were in danger. Resistance was often a final act of desperation, a decision about how to die, not how to live.

Historians will again note what the public does not know, that Crematorium II was not blown up by hand-grenades and dynamite, but set aflame by mattresses. This is despite the famous story about the four women who participated in the resistance by smuggling dynamite, which would lead one to imagine that the crematoria was blown up.

Concentration-camp memoirs establish a certain sequence of arrival in the camp. Evacuation from the ghetto, the long slow train trip, dark and cold in the winter, hot and stifling in the summer. Arrival, selection, tattooing, the shearing of hair, grasping the reality of the camps. These are often described as the worst moments of the concentration-camp ordeal until the death marches.

For many Sonderkommando, the early arrival scenes pale in importance to what they were about to witness. After their initial arrival, they were given a work assignment. The orientation was stark. For some it was the empty barracks, which seemed to have been abandoned in haste by their predecessors, because their food was still there. Those before them had been killed, and these men, too, had walked into a death trap and quickly learned of their masters' expectations. For others, veteran Sonderkommandos were there upon their arrival to guide them. Newly selected for this horrific task, most report that they responded with shock, considered suicide, and then adjusted. The witnesses speak of only one case of suicide, yet many contemplated it. They adjusted by shutting down part of themselves.

"Each of us was shocked. We looked at one another and were silent. A picture like this we never saw," said one of the interviewees (p. 156). Others reiterated his description. "We didn't think," is the way one witness put it. "What could we think about?"

How did people behave in the moments before their death? Josef Sacher, who arrived in Auschwitz on the eve of Passover in 1944, reports: "Children behaved like children looking for their parents' hand. Parents embraced their children. Children didn't know anything" (p. 121).

Later in the interview, when asked what did people say, he answered: “I don’t know. I didn’t want to listen” (p. 132).

Probing even more deeply with the Dragon brothers about Polish Jews who arrived in Auschwitz in December 1942, Greif asked: “Did you hear voices? What did people say inside the gas chambers?” Shlomo Dragon said: “People called one another by name. Mothers called their children, children, their mothers and fathers. Sometimes we could hear Sh’ma Yisrael” (p. 164).

The Germans were in charge. In the undressing room they presided. They told the incoming Jews that they were going to the shower and then to work. They instructed them to remember the hook upon which they hung their clothing so that they could retrieve the garments afterward. A SS man would drop the gas. A German doctor would come by after the gassing and pronounce the words: “Everything is finished.” He would then leave in a Red Cross vehicle.

Death took on a routine character, the humdrum of a daily assignment. And yet specific deaths are recalled precisely when they were individualized. Two Sonderkommando told the story of an elegantly dressed woman who arrived with her daughter. She refused to get completely undressed and remained in her underwear. The SS man Schillinger turned to her and screamed. “No, no! Get completely undressed!” and pointed his revolver at her bra. She opened her bra and flung it at his face. It hit his shoulder, and the pistol dropped. She picked it up and shot him. The Germans took all the people out of the undressing room and shot her. Only then did they permit the Sonderkommando to return. One commented that when they saw her body and Schillinger’s together, “We had genuine joy at his death” (p. 189). Greif asked, “What did you tell them?”

Sonderkommando stood face to face with the condemned. Once in a while they would even encounter a relative. One witness described telling his cousins where to stand in the gas chamber so that they would suffer less pain and die more quickly (219). Another Sonderkommando described feeding his cousin so he would not die on an empty stomach (p. 257). Another told of not wanting to lie to a beautiful woman and yet still tried to reassure and comfort her (p. 121). One even recalled a moral debate when an eighteen-year-old-

virgin, sensing that the end was near, said that she did not want to die without experiencing a man. Was it right? (p. 280). In the undressing room people asked where to go after the showers. What were the Germans' plans for them? "Ordinary questions, always the same questions," is the way one witness described it. Another got annoyed when asked: "What did you say?" "What could we say?" he answered sharply.

Some of the victims understood what was about to happen. Others went to death not knowing, still not comprehending the destructive process that was unfolding. One feels the abject powerlessness of the Sonderkommando in these situations. They knew, and there was nothing they could do.

The experience of the Sonderkommando in Israel mirrors the encounter between the survivors and the Israelis. Most were reticent to speak because they would not be understood. They would be considered an instrument of destruction, the enemy, even worse than the Judenrat. Some witnesses did not tell their family until much later, until they, in fact, bore witness to Greif. Bearing witness now seemed to offer a justification of survival. Some saw justification for their survival in what they had achieved in their postwar lives. Some found solace for their survival in the testimony that they have given.

One might be tempted to dismiss testimony as a *raison d'être*, yet Sonderkommando kept diaries during the Holocaust. They buried notes in the area around the crematoria hoping that the story that they had witnessed would be told. From my many encounters with survivors, I have come to believe that the accident of one's survival is given meaning and endowed with a purpose by what the survivor does with the fact of his/her survival. Bearing witness is an act of self-revelation, self-purification, self-justification.

Greif did not ask every question that this reader would have liked to have been asked. How could he? Not every question he asked was answered. How could they be? It is in the intersection between the said and the unsaid, between what is told and what cannot be told that much of the power of oral history is to be found.

The book is illustrated with maps and diagrams at the beginning and with documentary art drawn after the war by David Olere, himself a

Sonderkommando survivor. His illustrations carry a unique power and are his form of testimony: eloquent and brief, searing and powerful.

This is a book that must be read by all who dare draw close to the killing, those who dare to come close – as close as non-survivors can come – to the inferno. Already published in a German translation, and now in Hebrew, the language of the witnesses, it must appear in English, as I am sure it soon will.

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