The Daily Life of Auschwitz Prisoners

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“...Those residing on this planet did not have names; they did not have parents or children. They did not dress the way we dress here. They were not born and did not beget. They breathed according to different laws of nature. They did not live and die according to the laws of the world here...”


From the testimonies of the survivors, the Auschwitz camp is depicted as a complex and multifaceted place in which the prisoners’ lives moved along parallel yet different paths, paths that did not intersect, despite their being there at the same time and in the same place. Moreover, the name “Auschwitz,” which has become a symbol of the crimes committed by Nazi Germany against the Jewish people and against humanity, is perceived by many – and is also often described as such in many pieces of writing – through a one-dimensional, narrow-scoped prism that does not reflect the numerous facets and realities created by the fabric of the camp. The abundance of testimonies that we have, both from Jewish and non-Jewish sources, makes it possible to sketch out a more realistic picture of the camp, including of the daily life of its prisoners, demonstrating that there was not one, single “Auschwitz,” but rather many different places that were Auschwitz. Rather than a single pattern of daily life, there were numerous lifestyles. The “planet” Auschwitz, in addition to being a place of torture, dehumanization, humiliation, starvation, brutal punishment, robbery, mass murder, was for many, for thousands of others, also prisoners, at the same time a place of wealth, pleasure and the unprecedented satisfaction of passions. One day in Auschwitz, which for one prisoner was hell on earth, could pass fairly pleasantly for another, one more privileged, able to satisfy his passions and desires to his heart’s content. This was because daily life in the camp was subject to a wide variety of factors, leading to a situation in which prisoners in the camp led entirely different lifestyles at exactly the same time and within the same ideological and administrative framework imposed by the Germans on the camp.

What was the source of the multifaceted reality in the lives of the prisoners? It stemmed primarily from the fact that Auschwitz was in fact a collective name for a conglomerate of 40 subcamps all subordinate to the commandant of the mother camp, each of which had its own
unique character, regime and prisoner conditions. The geographic location of the subcamps, the personality of their commandants and the type of jobs the prisoners in them were required to carry out were among the factors that affected their daily lives. Sometimes, even within the same camp or subcamp itself, at a range of just a few meters away, one could observe extreme differences in the lives of the prisoners in the different sectors. If we examine Birkenau, the largest and most important subcamp of Auschwitz, we can easily find an obvious example of this reality by comparing the lives of the prisoners of the “Canada Commando” to those of the “penal squad.” The former never knew a day of hunger and were able to furnish themselves with items of comfort and luxury. They worked indoors all day in a warm, dry environment, while the others were forced to do hard labor outside, exposed to the elements, were subject to never-ending brutal, physical punishments, starvation and humiliation, and suffered from inhumane living and hygienic conditions. The survival chances of the Canada commando were relatively good, whereas the prisoners of the penal squads died one after another, with almost no exceptions.

There were crucial differences between the Jewish and non-Jewish prisoner populations in Auschwitz from the beginning of its existence. The Jewish prisoners were doomed in all of the Auschwitz camps and at all periods to most extreme suffering, abuse and humiliation, to the most cruel and inhumane treatment in comparison to their non-Jewish counterparts. This reality is borne out by both Jewish and non-Jewish testimonies, including the memoirs of SS guards that served in the camp. This was also true of the Jewish prisoners that were included as part of the specifically designated prisoner groups that were sentenced to imprisonment in Auschwitz for varying reasons: Although they were designated as “criminal prisoners,” “political prisoners,” “asocial prisoner,” homosexuals or any of the other categories into which the prisoner population was classified, the Jewish prisoners were treated much worse and the conditions of their lives were far harsher compared to the non-Jewish prisoners in these groups.

A common practice in the various Nazi camps was the appointment of prisoners to carry out various functions, in order to increase the internal strife among the prisoners, step up the level of suspicion and exploit the ancient yet effective principal of divide and conquer. The various functionaries, both Jews and non-Jews, created a privileged class in Auschwitz that benefited from additional rights and prerogatives; they led a lifestyle that was intensely different from that of the “ordinary” prisoners. The division between these prisoners and the functionaries and privileged prisoners – known as “prominents” – affected the nature of those prisoners lives, such as those that filled the position of Blockälteste or block elder, who was placed in charge of a barrack; the Stubedienst, or block janitor; the kapo, who was a prisoner placed in charged of a work squad; the Blockschreiber, or block clerk; and Vorarbeiter or senior
worker. Over time, many of these “prisoner-functionaries” underwent a terrible metamorphosis, and gradually began to resemble the SS guards that were in charge of them. Some were even crueler and more sadistic towards the prisoners under them than the Germans themselves. They were rewarded for their blind obedience with various perks and privileges that enabled them to create small domains of their own based on absolute corruption and unbridled cruelty. Whereas the ordinary prisoners were preoccupied with the most basic survival struggle, the “prominents” were involved in attempts to increase their wealth and better their conditions and the conditions of those close to them. Although not all the functionaries behaved this way, this reality of “prominents” reflects the vast majority of the functionaries among the prisoner population. Among the Jews, who were appointed to serve in functions such as block elder or kapos, there were those, both men and women, who were also infected by the German spirit in the camp, and testimonies describe some as systematically abusing their fellow prisoners. Particularly notorious for the cruel beatings they meted out to the prisoners in their block were the Jewish Slovakian women prisoners given the position of “block elders.”

Another crucial factor in the shaping of the lives of the Auschwitz prisoner was the date when he or she arrived in the camp. A prisoner whose number tattooed on his arm indicated an early arrival date was considered “veteran,” a factor that was of value in itself among the prisoner population. Longtime prisoners were well versed in the ins and outs of the camp’s unwritten internal laws, which enabled them to identify the weak points among the assorted prohibitions and restrictions practiced in the camp, an advantage that significantly increased their chances of survival.

The living conditions of the prisoners in the camp also underwent significant changes during the years of its existence, and one cannot speak of the conditions being identical in each of the different years. The chances of survival and living conditions frequently changed in accordance with the expansion of the functions of the Auschwitz camp. After it was turned into the principal place where the “Final solution of the Jewish question,” would be implemented, new prisoner functions were created in Auschwitz and especially in Birkenau, which were filled by Jews – for example, the Sonderkommando unit. Among the transports that arrived in the camp, the Jewish prisoners were sorted and separated and sent to the mother camp and the various subcamps; their fate could be significantly different. Female Jewish prisoners and Jewish twins were sent to be used in pseudo-medical experiments; other Jewish prisoners were selected to play music in the camp orchestra, while yet other prisoners were selected to do slave labor in the Buna subcamp – different fates in the different sectors of the same camp.
The non-Jewish prisoners were also divided up by the camp authorities into different categories in order to break up any solidarity on the part of the prisoner community and prevent any kind of possible cohesion that could be turned against the Germans. In addition to the categories already mentioned, there were additional large identity groups in the camp: Soviet prisoners of war, Gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other groups. Each such group had its own characteristic status.

Consequently, in order to provide a realistic description of daily life in Auschwitz, one must first precisely define the exact section of the camp about which one is speaking, the year and month, the specific group a prisoner belonged to and the function that prisoner fulfilled in the camp. This will enable us to get to know the real conditions in the place that was at the same time a “factory of death,” a huge prison, an industrial conglomerate that enslaved thousand, a laboratory that conducted experiments on human guinea pigs, a confiscation and organized robbery center of the prisoners’ and murder victims’ property, but also a place that contained entertainment centers – a cinema, swimming pool, casino, performance center and brothel – whose existence alongside all that is mentioned here is incomprehensible.

All this does not contradict the average routine in the camp shared by both the ordinary and privileged prisoners, by both Jews and non-Jews – a routine that embodied within it the Nazi conceptual world of which the concentration camp was one of its most distinct expressions.

The leading principle was the total worthlessness of the prisoner and the complete negation of his or her personality, entitlement to basic human rights and property, alongside the emphasis on the superiority of the German oppressor, who had the right to do whatever he liked. The direct outcome of this was that most prisoners were condemned to inhumane living conditions, the purpose of which was to further maltreat and humiliate the prisoners while hastening their deaths. Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, writes in this context that in Auschwitz, there was “unnecessary, pointless cruelty, the creation of pain that was deliberately planned, pain that had no purpose of its own.” This mindless cruelty was a major factor in the prisoner’s day from the moment he awakened until he went to sleep in his bunk in the barrack.”

The appel or roll call held every morning immediately after the brutal awaking of the prisoners became the central axis in the routine of all the residents of the camp. From a simple act whose seeming purpose was to count the prisoners in order to make sure that none had escaped during the night or were missing, the roll call was turned into an arena of abuse and humiliation, public punishment and execution, the purpose of which was to inspire terror and fear and deter the prisoners from making any attempt to flee the camp. The roll call, which began moments after the dawn, became a daily nightmare for all those forced to participate in
it. Sometimes, it lasted for many hours, especially in those cases when there was a suspicion that a prisoner might have escaped or was missing. These prolonged roll calls cost lives. They were held outside in all weather and were accompanied by routine abuse and public punishment, especially hangings. Two roll calls were typically held in each 24-hour period, in the morning and evening. However, in the later periods of the camp, only one a day was held.

“A four o’clock,” writes Sinai Adler, “we had to line up in the area in front of our barracks, each barrack and its people, in long rows, one after another, and then the counting began. Those in charge of us did exercises of “attention” and “at ease” and taught us how to remove our caps all at the same time [...] The one responsible for each barrack gave the number, and they began to recount all the prisoners. They counted and recounted until all the numbers matched what they had in their records.”

The various functionaries were generally exempted from having to stand at roll call with all the other prisoners, sparing them much suffering, humiliation and abuse.

The prisoners were given very little time to take care of their needs and wash. In 1942-1943, there were no toilets or showers at all in Birkenau. The prisoners attended to their needs in primitive field latrines and in order to wash, they were randomly brought to the central “sauna.”

From 1943 on, sheds with showers and toilets were built, which were also used as additional means of abuse and humiliation due to the lack of any privacy in them: In the toilets, the prisoners sat on low cement structures with holes in them, with no partitions between them, toilet paper or running water. The time given to the prisoners was limited. For most of the hours during the day, the prisoners were forbidden to use the toilets when they needed them, permitted to enter them only at the times arbitrarily decided on by the kapos and other supervisors.

Immediately after the roll call, the prisoners hastily drank the half-liter of coffee substitute or herbal tea they were given. This was their “breakfast.” The food provided to the prisoners of Auschwitz was meager both in the amount given as well as its nutritional content. It contained only a small part of the calories required to maintain the continued existence of an adult human being. Prisoners doing easy work were supposed to receive 1,700 calories a day, those employed in hard labor – 2,150. In fact, the former received only 1,300 calories and the latter, 1,700. Some of the functionaries would steal the more valuable food, such as bread, sugar, meat and margarine, leaving the prisoners with the rotten and nutritionally worthless food.

“Lunch” consisted of 1 liter of soup made of turnips and potatoes, which was often dirty and stank. Occasionally, there were pieces of meat in the soup too. In the evening, the prisoners received a quarter loaf of bread (about 300 grams) and a piece of margarine (one-tenth or one-
twelfth of a package) and on the days no margarine was distributed, they received 30 grams of sausage. Twice a week, they received a teaspoon of beet jam. The extra portions of bread and sausage, which were supposed to be distributed twice a week, were not always given. The inevitable result of this malnutrition was the prisoner’s preoccupation – both in his thoughts as well as his actions – with the idea of obtaining food to assuage the constant hunger pangs. For the prisoners that were forced to subsist on the official rations alone, those that had no special status or pull of any kind, the hunger and its repercussions were an overwhelming obsession that had the power to cause people to lose their human dignity. The worst was when Auschwitz’s starved prisoners reached the “Muselman” stage. Ka Tzetnik describes this in “Salamander”:

“People who weigh as much as their bones, whose intestines are as flimsy as cobweb. The Muselman no longer feels hunger and can no longer eat. And that is the most outstanding sign: When someone was seen carrying two portions of bread, we knew that this rich man was already a Muselman. It was not that he had suddenly come into this great fortune, but just the contrary: He would soon leave it to others.

If the Muselman as much as swallowed something, he immediately got diarrhea, which is why the Muselmen spend most of their time in the latrines, their trousers always filthy with mucoid feces; in one hand they grasped the portion of bread with all their might, and with the other wiped away their diarrhea. Mucous dripped from their mouth and nose, pouring from their eyes and from every orifice in the body. One had to repeat things a few times before they reached the Muselman’s brain. But he continued to hold on to his bread for dear life. His subconscious, that special Auschwitzian survival instinct from before they reached the Muselman stage was still awake inside him, telling him to guard that portion of bread lest it be stolen. Even though he had not yet eaten yesterday’s portion and would never eat it.

Until the selection day.

From Ka-Tzetnik, Salamandra: The Story of a Jewish Family in the Twentieth Century (Heb.), Tel Aviv, Levin-Epstein-Modan, 1975, p. 152.
additional food was perceived as a way of assuring continued life, at least temporarily. Those unable to “organize” food because they were unfortunate enough not to work in the kitchen and had no connections in that attractive workplace were forced to make do with dreams and fantasies of their previous world, when they were not hungry. Yitzhak Burla wrote:

Hunger! The word is charged with so much torment. I have been tortured by hunger for months now. I recall a few hours in the afternoon on Saturday and Sunday. I could see the political prisoners on the bunks opposite me, or the Polish, German and Czech prisoners. They received packages from home; they sliced white bread, sausages, cheese and bacon. I stared for a moment and then covered my head with my blanket and tried to divert my attention from what I had seen.


The roll call was not the only framework in which the prisoners were forced to stand for an entire day to be counted or punished in front of their comrades. The Germans frequently conducted “selections” among specific groups of prisoners to find pregnant women or those ill with contagious diseases, to decrease the prisoner quotas or to choose new prisoners for various jobs in the camp. The “selections” were carried out without warning and new methods were constantly invented in direct proportion to the degree of cruelty and inventiveness of the organizer of the “selection”:

An order was given – all the boys were to go to the football field…Suddenly a shudder passed over the entire ground as if we had been struck by an electric shock. The “Angel of Death” appeared…Dr. Mengele appeared, riding his bicycle…[he] lifted his hand so that his gaze could take in the entire field. Then his glance fell on a small boy, about fifteen years old, possible fourteen…Mengele came up to him and asked him: “How old are you?” The boy was shaking and said: “I am eighteen years old.” I saw immediately that Dr. Mengele was very angry and he began shouting: “I’ll show you!” Then he started shouting: Bring me a hammer, nails and a “Leiste” – a sort of narrow plank. Somebody ran off right away and we stood there, looking at him in absolute silence. The silence of death prevailed on the field…Mengele went up to one of the boys…stood him against one of the goal-posts and gave orders to knock this plank at a height above the boy’s head… we already understood that the smaller ones, whose height did not reach the plank, were
destined to die...All of us began stretching ourselves...I also tried to stretch myself a little but I soon gave up in despair, for I saw that even boys taller than I was failed to reach the required height...My brother was standing next to me...I was scarcely worried about him, for he was one of the taller boys...Suddenly my brother whispered to me, saying: “Don’t you want to live? Do something!” I woke up, as from a dream and began searching for a way of saving myself...I bent down without being noticed and seized some handfuls of pebbles. I untied the laces of my shoes and began stuffing pebbles into my shoes...I filled my shoes with pebbles under my heels and I gained two centimeters. I thought that, perhaps, this would be sufficient. Meanwhile I felt that I was unable to remain standing at attention with the pebbles in my shoes...I told my brother I was going to throw the stones away...He gave me a hat. I tore the hat into two pieces and I began inserting rages from the hat into my shoes, so that it would be softer for me...Ultimately my brother looked at me and said: “That is not high enough”...So I began looking for a way to escape and get to the taller ones who had already passed the plank, the selection...I stole my way into the taller ones – nobody noticed me. Thus the selection ended. About one thousand out of the two thousand did not reach the required height...They kept them locked up in the two huts until two days after Yom Kippur ...they were transferred to the gas chambers – they were exterminated in the gas chambers.”


(Testimony of Josef Kleinman).

The roll calls and selections were just some of the various forms of abuse and torture the prisoners were forced to undergo during the day. Physical punishments for the slightest of infractions or for no infraction at all, food deprivation and repeated demonstrations of sadism and brutality were routine matters. In addition, many of the jobs given to the prisoners – some of which were hard labor – were accompanied by abuse and physical punishment. A great deal of suffering was caused to the prisoners not only because of the constant physical abuse, but also because of the emotional abuse, which took the form of systematic humiliation.
A central aspect in the lives of the prisoners was the need to contend with the harsh humiliation meted out by the Germans, which was intended to strip the prisoners of their dignity and mortify them before themselves and others. One of the most common and vicious means was to force the prisoners to stand stark naked for various medical examinations and selections. “A constantly repeated situation, typical and significant,” as Primo Levi wrote in “The Drowned and the Saved:”

This too was a violence with some roots in necessity (clearly one must undress for a shower or a medical examination), but offensive because of its useless redundancy. The day in the Lager was studded with innumerable harsh strippings – checking for lice, searching one’s clothes, examining for scabies and then the morning wash-up – as well as for the periodic selections, during which a “commission” decided who was still fit for work and who, on the contrary, was marked for elimination. Now a naked and barefoot man feels that all his nerves and tendons are severed: He is helpless prey. Clothes, even the foul clothes distributed, even the crude clogs with their wooden soles, are a tenuous but indispensable defense. Anyone who does not have them no longer perceives himself as a human being but rather as a worm: naked, slow, ignoble, prone on the ground. He knows that he can be crushed at any moment.

From Primo Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, Tel Aviv, Am Oved, p. 88

The prisoner’s workday was very long – in the summer it lasted at least 12 hours, in the winter, slightly less. If the time spent walking to the job, which often took a long time too, is added to the work hours, it may be seen that the prisoners’ workday lasted from dawn until dusk. The basic framework for the prisoner’s work was the work commando that often included up to two thousand prisoners. These work squads, of which the kapos – who were in turn supervised by the oberkapos (the chief kapos) – were in charge, worked both inside the camp and outside it. Most of the more desirable and easier jobs, such as the laundry, kitchen and various warehouses, were within the boundaries of the camp. In these jobs, the prisoners worked indoors and often received extra food. The most desirable job was to be part of Commando Canada, because of the prisoners’ ability to lay their hands on all manner of good things for themselves. The members of this commando, who removed the property of the people that arrived in the transports from the trains and brought it to huge warehouses for sorting, were known as the richest prisoners in the camp and they conducted a lively trade in the valuables they pocketed with the other prisoners as well as with the SS guards in the camp. Many of the members of this commando, mostly Jews, became corrupt and lost all
restraint. Some became indifferent and hardened to the impending tragedy awaiting those brought for extermination:

“The Canada men, weighed down under a load of bread, marmalade and sugar, and smelling of perfume and fresh linen, line up to go. For several days, the entire camp will live off this transport. For several days, the entire camp will talk about ‘Sosnowiec-Będzin.’ That was a good, rich transport.”

This chilling description is offered by Tadeusz Borowski, a non-Jewish Polish writer in his book, “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen”.

The large work crews outside the camp toiled at digging trenches, draining swamps building sewage systems, dismantling damaged planes, paving roads. Others worked in the large farms around Birkenau. Thousands of prisoners were employed in the armaments and ammunition factories established near Auschwitz, such as the Union plants. In the Auschwitz III subcamp, German conglomerates such as Krupp, Siemens and I.G. Farben set up large factories for the manufacture of synthetic rubber and gasoline. As a result of the cruel treatment the prisoners received there – they were exploited for the little strength they had left until they were completely debilitated, given neither sufficient nutrition nor medical treatment, in addition to the sadistic physical cruelty they were dealt – thousands died in these factories. In this way, the work in Auschwitz served as yet another means of mass murdering the prisoners. It was extermination through work. Most of the jobs given to Auschwitz prisoners were in fact nothing but slave labor.

It should be noted that the Nazis did not make do with the hard labor and physical torture; they sadistically and maliciously added emotional torture in the form of the orchestras that played at the camp gates. The melodies and marches the musicians played as the work commandos left for work in the morning and when they returned in the evening carrying their dead and sick were intended to torment the prisoners, deride them and rub salt in their wounds.

All these regular daily and routine activities required superhuman strength from the prisoners. They were forced to contend with situations they had never encountered before and face dilemmas that no human society had very experienced. They were compelled to overcome a never-ending torrent of edicts and obstacles deliberately and maliciously imposed in order to undermine their emotional and physical strength and turn them into human machines. The Germans took from the prisoners their human identity, their self, from the moment they entered the camp. One of the first things they did was to take away the prisoner’s name and
replace it with a number they tattooed on his left forearm. Haya Kroin, a survivor of Birkenau and Budy, a subcamp of Auschwitz, wrote in her memoirs:

> From the moment we entered the camp, we lost our “selfness.” The self became nothing. We became a collective entity in the most oppressive and offensive sense of the word. When our hair was shaved, we went through yet another phase in the loss of our selfness. Our individual self was shaved, almost completely gone. We all became one. We underwent identical experiences, we were required to function as a single body, and our individual consciousness became increasingly blurred. Only the survival instinct continued to pulsate within us, in each one in accordance with her strength. [...] I could barely read my number – 27342, but it was engraved in my blood. From that moment on our names were erased.


*The prisoners were also required to contend with their bereavement and grief and assimilate the fact that they had remained all alone in the world. If they wanted to continue to live, they had to forget the previous world from which they came, the home of their father and mother, brothers and sisters, their children and all their other relatives. Sliding into despair and the loss of the desire to live were a definite stage on the way to the gas chambers. However, there were other prisoners who without their reservoir of memories would have lost their last spark of life. Tadeusz Stabholz, a young doctor from Warsaw who arrived in Auschwitz from Majdanek wrote:*

> Letters… I do not envy any of those people that receive letters. For what do I in fact live? What awaits me after my liberation? I have not a relative left. No one will greet me, no one will rejoice at my liberation and no one will mourn my death. In fact, who will know that number 126604 has joined the ranks of the angels? That is what I think to myself bitterly. The only thing that remains to me are the memories: Mother, Father, Fredia and the warm, beloved family home.

Many of the religiously observant Jewish prisoners risked their lives in order to observe the kosher dietary laws, observe the Yom Kippur fast properly and preserve the sanctity of the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Obviously, the camp conditions did not allow for the observance of the religious commandments, and to the general suffering that was the fate of all the prisoners was added the additional suffering of the religious prisoners at not being able to observe the commandments of their faith. In the context of the prisoners’ attempts to hold on and be strong, the spiritual struggle is especially noteworthy. It found expression in cultural and artistic activities, literary and musical works – all in order to maintain the human dignity that the Germans tried to extinguish. The clandestine activities of Jews and non-Jews, whose high point was the establishment of an international underground group and the uprising of the Sonderkommando on October 7, 1944, prove that the spark of hope and optimism did not die out among many Auschwitz prisoners, both Jews and non-Jews.

An inseparable part of the daily life of the prisoners was the Sisyphean struggle against a wide variety types of illnesses and contagious diseases. The prisoners’ shaky health was further undermined by the deficient nutrition, lack of basic hygienic conditions and physical abuse. Epidemic of typhus, dysentery, edema, vitamin deficiency syndromes, various infections and other diseases were rife. In fact, there was not a single prisoner in Auschwitz who was completely healthy. Most of the prisoners preferred to continue working rather than show up for a medical examination or check themselves into the central prisoners’ “hospital” located in the Bllf sector. They knew from experience that a stay there was not only unlikely to contribute to their recovery, but in view of the lack of medication and proper medical care, it was more likely speed up their arrival in the gas chambers. Any resemblance between what we would call a medical institution and the hospital barracks at Auschwitz is entirely coincidental. In addition, it was staffed by a number of SS doctors that had no compunctions about conducting criminal pseudo-medical experimentation on the bodies of thousands of female and male prisoners, both Jews and non-Jews. These experiments, which were conducted under inhuman conditions, and usually without any anesthetic, included sterilizations, castrations, x-rays, amputations, transplants of tissues infected with various diseases and more. Jewish doctors and nurses were also forced to work in the laboratories and clinics of these SS doctors (the most notorious among them were Mengele, Schumann, Clauberg, Tilo and Dehring), but they tried to do their best to alleviate the suffering of the experiment victims. Especially noteworthy in this respect was the Jewish Dr. Samuel, who worked in Block 10 of the mother camp, where he successfully sabotaged the sterilization operations of Jewish women and thereby made it possible for them to become pregnant after their liberation.
In the camp were certain groups of prisoners that suffered in particular from poor health and a high mortality rate. Among the most outstanding in this respect were the Gypsies, especially their children, and the Jews of Greece and Holland. These groups were unable to withstand the inhuman conditions or to become accustomed to the hellish conditions they found themselves in. The Greek Jews, especially those from Salonika, were the most miserable and wretched in the camp. Unable to adjust to the harsh Polish winters, they suffered terribly from the cold and in addition, spoke languages that few knew in the camp, such as Ladino, French and Greek. Many of the Greek Jewish girls became victims of the pseudo-medical experiments.

Particular terrible was the fate of the children in the camp. Only in rare cases did a child manage to cross the threshold of Auschwitz, a camp designated only for adults, whose strength could be exploited to do hard labor before being sent to the crematoria. Nevertheless, there were children of varying ages in Auschwitz, and some even survived. One case involved the child Otto Dov Kulka, whose father Erich Kulka, enjoyed a special status in the camp thanks to his seniority and his profession, and he succeeded in protecting his son until the evacuation from the camp. The child Otto Dov is today a professor of history in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Special selections in search of children were periodically carried out in Auschwitz. Many children served as pipeljs or servants to the privileged prisoners, such as the kapos and block elders. These “prominents” exploited these children mercilessly in possible every way. The “children’s block” in the “family camp,” which was considered a miracle, a marvel in the reality of Auschwitz and all its camps, existed only for a limited time. The vast majority of those children were murdered in the gas chambers together with their dedicated teachers. It is only thanks to the few survivors of that wondrous educational saga that we have been able to recreate the story of Block 31, which had no parallel in the history of the entire Auschwitz camp.

“Among the groups whose suffering was truly unbearable was that of the female prisoners, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were abused by the SS women no less cruel than were the men. Our women friends starved to death before our eyes. The 17-year-old Pela asked one day to remain in the block during the work hours. She knew that by doing so she was signing her death warrant with her own hands, but death appeared to her to be a release. And indeed, she was taken that day to Block 25. We, the stronger women, who desired to live, continued to fight for our lives, for every day, every minute.

Meanwhile, we were forced to get used to different kinds of changes, to the loss of our monthly periods… each cup of tea, each plate of soup contained bromine, a sedative that suppresses the emotions and halts the female biological functioning.
But there were women among those with special functions that had a different fate. We lined up in fives in alphabetical order and approached the “Gestapo woman,” as we called her. She was in fact a Slovakian Jewish woman who after two years and more in the camp resembled a full-blooded German.”

From *Bear Me in Your Heart*

At the end of the workday, curfew was declared in the camp and the prisoners were closed into their barracks. They took their places on the crowded bunks, on which each person was allocated a very narrow, overcrowded area. They lay down wearing the louse-infested clothing and filthy underwear, which they had not been able to change for months. The hundreds of prisoners that filled the barracks, including some who were ill with contagious diseases, and who coughed and groaned, kept each other awake and turned the nights into a tormented nightmare. Those that needed to use the toilet during the night had to make do with a number of buckets that quickly filled to overflowing and flooded the floor of the barracks. During the cold winters, the prisoners suffered from the cold in the barracks, which usually had no heating. Their thin blankets and ragged clothing were insufficient to warm their emaciated bodies in the freezing Polish temperatures.

Nevertheless, the nights were the only time during the entire day when the prisoners could spend time with themselves, free of the cruelty of the SS guards and the helpers. During these nighttime hours, each of the prisoners tried to salve his spirits, lick his wounds and enlist the physical and emotional strength needed to continue the daily struggle for survival. At the front of the barracks, in his own private room, the block elder was probably occupied with counting the items he had stolen that day and the portions of food he had taken from the prisoners. Together with his assistant, the clerk, he was apparently plotting his acts of corruption and thievery for the next day.

And there was also a group of prisoners that during those hours in the dark of the night were working in the middle of their night shift: Surrounded by corpses and ashes, crushed bones, and gold teeth that had been pulled out of dead mouths and human hair shaved from heads, the Jewish Sonderkommando were busy carrying out the most horrific of tasks that any Auschwitz prisoner was forced to carry out. They were the forced laborers of the Auschwitz “death factory,” certainly the most miserable and despair-filled prisoners of all the prisoners in the camp. The clandestine writings they left behind for the coming generations are among the most moving and authentic documents of the history of Auschwitz and the entire Holocaust. They, who witnessed the “Final Solution,” represent the essence of the tragedy of the Jewish people during the Holocaust.