Introduction
The killing installations in the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau functioned according to the patterns of industrial plants, with all the regular functions of a common factory, known to everybody: machines, production lines, workers, simple managers, senior managers, general director etc. Only two major differences exist between every regular factory and a Nazi death camp: the raw materials in the Nazi camps were human beings, and the one and only end product in those factories was human ashes. The workers in the death factories were in most cases Jewish prisoners. In Auschwitz-Birkenau they were unofficially called "The Sonderkommando".
They did the "black work of the Holocaust", as Yaakov Gabai, one of the Sonderkommando survivors, defined it. The killing action itself, namely the pouring of the gas crystals inside the gas chamber, was exclusively and always done by the Germans.

There are various reasons for the creation of a Jewish Battalion of death factory workers. The explanation given by Primo Levy in his brilliant book "The drowned and the Saved" stresses one of the crucial motives:
"Behind the pragmatic aspect (to economize on able men, to impose on others the most atrocious task) other moral subtle
aspects can be perceived. This institution represented an attempt to shift onto others - specifically, the victims - the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence."²

The Germans decided to create the group in order to share the responsibility of the crimes they were committing in Auschwitz-Birkenau between the real criminals - they themselves, and their victims, mainly the Jews. The Jews not only had to be murdered, but also had to become part of the perpetrators of the murder, according to this way of thinking.

This explanation reflects the typical distorted Nazi way of thinking and acting towards the Jews: breaking all kinds of existing barriers between perpetrators and victims, between good an evil, between morality and immorality, between civilization and havoc.

Regarding the variety of obligations, those Jewish prisoners had to fulfill in the Crematoria, it seems that such a “profession” has never been practiced by a human being, anywhere, anytime. The six extermination camps had no precedence in mankind history and can be considered as a purely nazi invention.

The Germans based their confidence that Jewish prisoners would be capable of doing everything needed in the killing installations on the assumption, that they had the techniques of breaking the spirits of every human being and could achieve by terror every goal through their slaves. Once confronted with the horrible reality at the killing site, those prisoners would undergo a "shock treatment" and break mentally, and subsequently they would fulfill their tasks obediently. This aim of the Germans was realized.
Rudolf Hoess states in his memories:
"...it was all done in such a matter-of-course manner that they (the Sonderkommando prisoners) might themselves have been the exterminators." 3

Survivors of the Sonderkommando describe, that the first encounter with the heaps of twisted corpses shocked and traumatized them so severely, that most of them – according to their own testimonies – started acting like "robots" (Gabai), unable to respond, like passive "machines" (Cohen). Some survivors, like Chazan for instance, also testify, that they "stopped being human by then" (this aspect will be dealt in detail later on).

In many sources, including the historical ones written at that time4, this kind of characterization, referring to the Sonderkommando men as emotionless, heartless, rude, beastly, brutal and apathetic people, is very common and widespread. The sources contain such an image of the Sonderkommando people:
"They are described as crude, repulsive, frightening sights...(they) became even more nauseated at their own condition". 5

This reality, where on one hand an installation for a mass killing is functioning like a "normal" plant, but on the other, the workers are more like robots, already creates an odd and bizarre atmosphere, resembling a bit to a science-fiction story. Generally speaking, while reading the testimonies of the Sonderkommando, and especially the chilling small, technical details of the “production line”, the reader gets the impression that he is amidst a nightmare. The two channels – on one hand the purely technical operation
and on the other hand, the extreme crime committed there – scarcely can be combined into one entity.

Naturally, in an environment of daily mass murder, where gas chambers, suffocating cries, corpses, ashes are all around, it is exaggerated to expect from people, who work in this place for a long period of time, to act fully in the patterns they used to act before. Everybody had to adapt himself to the rules of this odd factory, if he wanted to survive. Several Sonderkommando members worked in the crematoria for more than two years, like the brothers Abraham and Shlomo Dragon, and it is hard to believe that such a long period would pass by without leaving deep scars in the souls of the Sonderkommando prisoners. Every member of the unit must have gone through some metamorphose of his soul, because of the nature of his work, which had no precedence in his previous life.

The personality of each member must have been reshaped and remodeled, in order to enable the individual to fulfill his day-by-day missions, of which each contradicted the values and laws, used and respected by the civilized world.

The aim of this paper is first to present the two spheres of the crematoria reality: the sane and the insane. Secondly, our aim is to test the assumption, that all Sonderkommando members indeed had turned into living machines, losing contact with the real world fully, and to explain their ability to retain their sanity and continue to act as human beings in the midst of the inferno in the crematoria.
The *Sonderkommando* and its Environment

Many sources speak about the trauma, which was inflicted upon the *Sonderkommando* prisoners as a result of their duties inside the killing centers. The pictures they had seen in the gas chambers and crematoria ovens were unendurable. Yet, most of them managed to overcome the first immediate shock and gradually got “used” to the work with the corpses, and remained in the job for days, weeks and even years. The work became routine, the tears dried up over time, the mind had grown numb, cries of the murdered were ignored, the corpses became like pieces of wood.

When a new transport arrived, the most significant factor was less its human cargo, but more the food and possible valuables for exchange that these doomed people would bring into crematoria compound. Sometimes, when people were called back again to work, the Kapo encouraged them by shouting: “A French transport has arrived with nice things from the Champs Elysée”.

The gruesome daily work in such a place of death was destructive to the mind. Against these factors it seems surprising that so few considered suicide at all (see chapter below).

Primo Levi correctly defines the invention of the *Sonderkommando* as “the most demonic crime of the NS regime”. The *Sonderkommando* represents the most evil and distorted aspect of the National Socialist mind. The Germans intentionally forced the Jewish prisoners to assist them in running the operation that aimed at exterminating all traces of their brethren. Seemingly the Jewish “Vorabeiter” (foremen), “Kapos” and “Oberkapos” were giving
orders to the hundreds of their subordinates. The killing factory was directed by the victims of the crimes: this indeed was the goal of the real murderers – to put the burden of blame on the Jews. A foreigner who would have come to the crematoria building would have never guessed, that all the many workers, running, making efforts and sweating are not more than puppets on a wing, marionettes. In reality they were just slaves, the slaves of the death factory Auschwitz-Birkenau.

It is painful that the German mind could create scenes, in which a Jew has to cremate the body of his wife or child, in which a Jew has to pull out corps of his beloved ones from the gas chamber, in which a Jew has to ignore the questions of other Jews in the undressing room presented to him. This was a climax of such a tragedy, never happened before in the history of humankind.

The members of the commando were locked in a blind alley. Refusing to continue working meant automatically death, continuing to work was being in the hell. Sanity and insanity could be easily mixed in that situation. Such crazy atmosphere was intensified by the fact, that the commando was isolated from other prisoners, and its members were doomed to be murdered after they would have finished their obligations. They knew that they were living on a borrowed time. Every day could be decisive for their life.

“Bearers of the Secret”

“The Final Solution”, the plan to exterminate completely the Jewish people, was not supposed to become known. The Germans were aware that they were doing something criminal the world would not forgive them. That is why all traces of the crime had to be
eliminated: the ashes were supposed to be dumped into the river; the gold teeth of the victims should be molten into ingots and stored in the German treasury; and especially those victims, who had worked at the site of the mass murder, had to be killed. The prisoners of the *Sonderkommando* were considered as "Geheimnisträger" (bearer of the secret), since they were privy to the most closely guarded secret of the Third Reich. This was the "formula" for which the prisoners of that "special squad" were destined.

Being sent to the *Sonderkommando* spelled the death sentence on the prisoners. They had to live in total isolation from the other camp inmates, with the absolute certainty that after a couple of months they themselves would be killed. They had to cry for the vanished Jewish people without tears.

Apart from the fact that they were considered as "bearers of the secret" and the isolation of their unit, there are more aspects that mark the *Sonderkommando* as unique in the context of the death camps. A smooth operation of the crematoria was important to the Germans, who handled the operation of the killing installations like an industrial and commercial enterprise. The definition of "industrial production" for itself contradicts the idea of murder and death. For the Germans, this was nothing problematic: killing is something precise and accurate, something scientific and technical.

**The Idea and its Implementation**

The Germans, who tried to create a new world based on new rules and a new ideology, regarded the gas chambers and crematoria
ovens as a necessity. The crematoria itself is the peak of the de-humanization process of the victims. In a reality, which is aimed to wipe out the "Untermenschen" (subhuman being) - the only "treatment" which such creatures deserve, mass-killing installations are irreplaceable ingredients. The gas Cyclon B fits perfectly into this ideology: in order to get rid of the "Ungeziefer" (vermin), we usually use poison. We clean the world and liquidate the unwanted parasites. "Race theory" had paved the way to a crime against humanity, endorsed and encouraged by scientists, physicians, biologists and genetics.9

The Nazi regime introduced constantly patterns of thought, behavior, morality and culture, which distorted, ruined and liquidated the already existing values of civilization.

In this context we should see the invention of an extermination camp and the Sonderkommando as tools through which the revolutionary new ideas of the Nazis could be perfectly implemented. In other words: the invention of the death camps and the way, death was conducted, correspond to the world of the National Socialist "Weltanschauung" (world outlook).

Since the Sonderkommando prisoners were involved in this killing process, they were not meant to become "Muselmaenner" (people on the verge of death from lack of food and exhaustion), at least not too quickly. Apart from their daily rations, which were similar to those of the other camp inmates, they were allowed to resort to significant amounts of food that the gassed victims had brought into the crematoria compound. This is a part of the insanity: the Jews sentenced to death, who have to kill other Jews sentenced to
death, must be fed properly in order to be capable of fulfilling the murderous action.

Valuables, which they found in the cloths of the victims, gave them opportunities to exchange them into good quality food, even fancy foods. In the context of the camp life, the area, where over a million of people were murdered, served also as a place of commerce and exchange. A kind of a “Persian Market” existed in the heart of the killing houses, in-between the gas chambers and crematoria halls.

**Between Benefits and Death Penalty**

These aspects of the *Sonderkommando* reflect a dual reality in the daily life of the prisoners: on one level there was the “Final Solution”, the full-scale genocide – corpses, ashes, cries, despair; but another life continued as if all this did not happen, in a normal, routine manner, providing “benefits”, supplying enough nutrition and refraining from brutality and bodily punishments.

Indeed, one may assume, that the *Sonderkommando* prisoners lived a “double life”. They were based on foundations, they had been accustomed from the prewar times. This world included professional habits, physical work, hours of work and hours of leisure. The other world was artificial, created by the Germans. In this world the Jews had nothing to say. In this world, murdering thousands of innocent victims was legitimate and a huge crime was taking place under the cover of an industry.

The *Sonderkommando*, of course, were victims too. They can easily be defined as the most miserable of the miserable. The workers of the death factory had to witness day by day the
extermination of their own people. There was nothing they could do about it. Their heart and soul were broken by sorrow and despair.

In the undressing room they were forced to be part of the system of deceit and misinformation, about the real purpose of the "disinfections". Not succumbing totally to that kind of work routine, any lack of obedience was immediately punished with death. There are testimonies about cases where Sonderkommando prisoners had to push their own families into the furnaces or had to rip gold teeth out of their own mothers' mouths.

About such a horrified case, there is a description in the memoirs of Rudolf Hoess, the commander of Auschwitz:

"It often happened that Jews from the Sonderkommando discovered close relatives among the bodies and even those who went into the gas chambers. Although they were visibly affected there never was any kind of incident.

This incident I witnessed myself: As the bodies were being pulled out of one of the gas chambers, one member of the Sonderkommando suddenly stopped and stood for a moment as if thunderstruck. He then pulled the body along, helping his comrades. I asked the Kapo what was wrong with him. He found out that the startled Jew had discovered his wife among the bodies. I watched him for a while after this without noticing anything different about him. He just kept dragging his share of bodies. After a while I again happened on this work party. He was sitting with the others and eating as if nothing had happened. Was he really able to hide his feelings so completely or had he become so hardened that something like this didn't bother him?"
A Mental Metamorphosis: From Shock to Adaptation
When looking more specifically at their mental conditions and responses, one can see that many Sonderkommando prisoners went through a kind of metamorphosis: from shock and paralysis to getting accustomed to the permanent horrors surrounding them, sometimes even enjoying the luxuries donated to them by the crematoria stuff. Questioned about their feelings on their first day in the Sonderkommando, indeed all survivors report on a nameless jolt:

"How did I react? I was confused. I thought I was going insane. I told myself 'This is the end'" 11 recalls Joseph Sackar and Leon Cohen says: "What can I tell you? It was terrifying. I can’t describe it in words. Just terrible." 12

These two statements correspond to the memories of Shaul Chazan, also a former member of the Sonderkommando, who tells:

"We had a gut feeling that we couldn’t identify. We didn’t know a thing. On the one hand, I saw the bodies down there; on the other hand, the Kapo and the SS men were beating me and cursing at me all that time, to the accompaniment of barking dogs. It was hell on earth. If there’s a hell after death, I think it must look like that. It was hell, real hell. There it wasn’t a question of whether to believe or not." 13

A detailed report on the experiences and feelings of the first day in the Sonderkommando, on which the "normal" prisoner crossed the line between sanity and insanity by becoming a member of this doomed unit can, be found in the testimony of Eliezer Eisenschmidt:
"They led us into the yard and opened the door of the building that was used as a gas chamber, and we were overwhelmed with grief. We were in absolute shock. We'd never seen anything like this in our worst nightmares. To this day, I can see in my mind's eye what we saw behind the doors as they opened. A dead woman stood there, naked, her body doubled up. We froze. We couldn't grasp what was happening there. We saw the bodies in the gas chamber. When we began to remove the bodies, we saw how they'd become a single mass."  

Eisenschmidt belonged to that group that had to load the dead bodies onto the wheelbarrows. When he received this order for the first time, he was "stung to the quick... for a few minutes, I was too revolted to touch a body. Such a thing never happened to me. Obviously I wasn't the only one in the group who felt revulsion. I couldn't work until someone hit me hard on the back with a rod."  

Shlomo Dragon, who was just 17 years old, when he was forced to join the Sonderkommando, reports on resembling feelings, when he remembers Moll, the crematoria chief, beginning to explain what they were supposed to do:

"You have to remove the dead people from the house. There are corpses there, and you have to take them out in wheelbarrows, throw them into these big pits, and incinerate them."  

Subsequently Moll opened the door. Shlomo Dragon recalls:

"We smelled gas. We saw corpses of both sexes. The whole place was full of naked people on top of each other, falling out... almost all of us went into shock. We stared at each other without uttering
a sound and fell silent. We were too terrified to make a sound. We were like that for a couple of days and then we pulled ourselves together again. We'd never seen anything like it before." 17

But despite their inconceivable activity, most of the members of the Sonderkommando eventually got used to their work within a short period of time. Yaakov Gabai remembers:

"For the first few days, it was just terrible. But I told myself, ‘You mustn’t lose your sanity.’ I knew from then on I’d have to see these sights day in, day out. This would be our job, so we’d better get used to it. A tough job, but get used to it." 18

Finally, the service for the death industry became partly a technical task. Accordingly Lemke states:

"Sometimes one could believe it was a common workplace and not a Crematoria". 19 He goes on explaining: “We took nothing to seriously. Nothing could move us anymore. When we wanted to eat our bread, then you were sitting on a body and eating the bread. You got used to the place so much, you thought it was always your home. I could see a lot of corpses and nothing moved in my heart. Here in the Kibbutz, were I live (today), when I see a dead person, I’m shivering. Even crying with tears. In the camp when I saw corpses, I thought to myself: ‘Today the other man is dead. Tomorrow you’ll be dead.’ You get used to everything. We had to sit somewhere when we were eating and the floor was full with bodies. The process of getting used was very quick and began immediately. Only one person, whom I knew, ‘went to the fence’. Only one person. All the others wanted to live. Working in the crematoria I didn’t feel as I were working insight a nightmare.
We accepted the reality as it was. Life was that this is a place were people are killed. That was life. For this reason I could go on working there." 20

The numbing of the prisoners' feelings, the mental repression, was in this context a self-protection mechanism against the horrible reality around them. The process of becoming an "automaton"21 happened rather quickly - in the case of Leon Cohen took it only two days. In order to turn the prisoners into marionettes, they were taken at the beginning to a big collection of corpses, which were awaiting to be cremated (as Eisenschmidt tells above). For young people, who have never seen a dead body in their life, this is a real shock treatment.
Two or three days later, when the sights of death increased, the prisoners mentally succumbed, they were paralyzed and grew numb. The inner change was inevitable.

Getting used and the only Alternative
The mind of every human person has, however, its limits. The minute, the new Sonderkommando prisoners felt the real nature of the work they were forced to do - some of them saw only one outlet: suicide. Shaul Chazan remembers "a Greek Jew from the Sonderkommando who jumped into the fire. He saw what was going on and leaped into the pit." 22
Shlomo Dragon also testified on suicides:
"There were several cases where people among us would "run to the fence" in the morning. But not often." 23

This statement accords with Lemke, adding to his remarks above:
"...After a few days we got used to the situation. Those who got depressed went to the fence (and committed suicide). Yet, there were also those who, even later, never got used to the situation."  

For several psychological reasons, very few chose this alternative. Those who did, committed suicide in a very early stage of their "service" in the commando. They understood it would beyond their power to bear the distorted, insane reality to which they had been brought. The shock was too sharp, too monstrous, too huge to be tolerated by a man, who had just arrived from a "normal" world. The psychological switch that all other members of the Sonderkommando must have made in order to survive and not to get crazy- must have been tremendously big. The minority, which decided to put an end to its life, had supposedly understood, what kind of crime was being made in the crematoria and what kind of participation in this crime was expected from them.

For the majority that however succeeded in getting used to the situation there was one main principle: the gruesome tasks had to be executed meticulously. The orders, however, did not come directly from the Germans. The Jewish "prominence" - the "Vorarbeiter" and the "Kapo" - got them from the SS staff and passed them on to their workers. It sounds bizarre, but the death plant functioned well even without the presence of the SS men. The Jewish workers were experienced professionals, knew exactly what they were expected to do and worked with efficiency and know-how. Each shift arrived on time, and the slight technical problems were not serious enough to sabotage such an important undertaking as the liquidation of the Jewish people.
The common "madhouse" is usually characterized with a bitter sarcasm. The same mood prevailed in the crematoria, a place which the German killers liked. The crime of genocide against the Jewish people was always accompanied by irony, cynicism, humor, and laughter — even when the gas Cyclon B was poured into the chambers. Eliezer Eisenschmidt recalls such a scene: "After the room filled up with people, the doors were closed. Next, an SS man came over with the Cyclon gas in his hand. He put on a gas mask, opened the canister of gas, and threw the contents in. Shortly after the gas was thrown in, the people began to smell it and then we heard them shout "Sh'ma Yisrael..." from the interior of the gas chamber. The German called out to his comrades scornfully "They're calling "schmeiss rein, schmeiss rein" — "throw it in, throw it in..."." 26

The perpetrators had lost their sense of humanity. But did the same happen to the Sonderkommando prisoners? Did indeed all their emotional and human sentiment vanish too? A closer look at the testimonies reveals a different aspect of their daily life.

**Keeping the Human Manners**

The many hundreds of Sonderkommando prisoners were not a homogenous group and many different prisoners displayed very different patterns of behavior. Indeed, many of them lost the capacity of human sensitivity and developed a cold emotionless attitude. Others were different. These men tried to retain their former selves, and the severe crisis, in which they had been put in Auschwitz, did not change them essentially. Actually, Auschwitz
did not create new characters. It strengthened existing character lines and sharpened others. Such were, for instance, religious Jews in the Sonderkommando, who became instructors and advisors for many members of the Sonderkommando, who felt lost and desperate. Leading figures in the Commando were ultra orthodox Jews like Zalman Gradowski, Leib Langfuss, Zalman Lewental and others. Yaakov Silberberg reports on a consultation he once had with one Rabbi, who did not stop spiritual life even as a prisoner in the camp:

"I had a problem with myself. I was confused, didn't know what to do, how to behave. Personally I had a big problem: I belong to a "Cohen" family, the priests, and at that time, I was religious! I am a priest and, according to the Jewish religion, a "Cohen" has to be outside of the grave, far away from the dead, in order not to get impure...Shlomo Kirszenbaum told me, that in one of the big crematoria I - II, there was the Dayan of Makow (religious judge) and it was worthwhile talking to him." 27

So Silberberg went to the Dayan, who responded: "Don't worry, we are here, in order to fulfill the Mission of god. He wants it this way and we have to act exactly as he orders us to do, this is god's will."28 Silberberg goes on: "Then he also told me, that what we do here, would be – out of his point of view – a Mitzwa (commandment), because by this way the Jews received some kind of burial."29

Despite the routine and the numbness in the death factory, there are many accounts of how Sonderkommando prisoners paid their respect to the victims, how they mourned the dead around them.
One proof for still having a sense of sympathy is Gradowski writing in his unpublished manuscript:

"Here are lying now again two (bodies)...Young beautiful women who once were extremely beautiful. They have filled two complete worlds on this earth. They have given so much happiness and pleasure. Each smile was a comfort, each look was happiness, each word was a heavenly and charming poetry. Everywhere, where they have only put their foot, they have brought with them happiness and contentment. Many hearts loved them. And now the two are lying on a plate made of iron and soon the crater will be opened and within minutes there will be nothing left of them." 30

The Sonderkommando men are tremendously saddened when they realize how many young lives are going to be eliminated:

"No remnant and no memory will be left of all those who are standing here, all those who filled complete cities. They had a place in the world and soon they will be wiped out together with their roots. As if they have never been borne. Our hearts are tearing out of pain. We are feeling, we are undergoing in reality their agony of transition from life to death." 31

The Sonderkommando people documented their life in the crematoria with the intention to leave evidence for posterity. In fact, many testimonies reveal that a prime factor helping them to retain their will to survive was the motivation to give evidence and by that to take revenge on the Germans.

The members of the Sonderkommando also assisted other prisoners to escape from the camp in order to distribute the truth
about the real nature of Birkenau in the free world. There were two couples of Jewish escapees, Alfred Wetzler and Rudolf Vrba (Walter Rosenberg) as well as Czeslaw Mordowicz and Arnost Rosin, that managed to escape in mid 1944 after having got important information from members of the Sonderkommando.  

Unique was also the group that founded the underground movement in the Sonderkommando. This group initiated the uprising on October 7 1944, the only armed uprising in the history of Auschwitz, in the course of which they destroyed the crematorium building No. IV, attempted a mass escape and killed and wounded several SS men.

There was a sense of solidarity among the members of the Sonderkommando. Cases of betrayal and treason are unknown. Concerning the usage of belongings taken from the murdered, the Sonderkommando members acted in different ways: some became greedy and corrupt, while others did not take anything from the luggage of the dead Jews. Joseph Sackar, a Jew from Greece, told this with pride in his testimony. The intention of the Germans to ruin the soul of the Sonderkommando prisoners failed - they did not quite succeed in pulling their victims with them into the abyss.

Auschwitz - the site, where death, destruction and extermination reigned supreme - also allowed some space where a pseudo-normal “working relationship” between the SS personal and the Sonderkommando prisoners emerged.
One of the most intriguing aspects in this research regards the encounter between the prisoners and their masters.

Undermining the Borders – Working together in the Crematoria

As mentioned, one aspect peculiar to the *Sonderkommando* was the relative proximity of the prisoners to their SS guards. Normal camp inmates did not necessarily see much of the SS. The SS-man was somebody from whom the prisoner ran away already, even when the SS-man was still at a distance. Whenever an SS-guard approached a prisoner it was almost always for reasons of torturing or punishing etc.

Prisoner life was, as it is known, largely run and supervised through the system of prisoner functionaries, the “Kapos”, block seniors, etc. This distance between the SS and most of the inmates was intentional and should prevent any softening effect the encounter with victims might have on some SS guards. Distancing was part of the dehumanizing techniques that made the starving and dying people appear like a mass of anonymous “Untermenschen”.

The pictorial guideline book of the SS (instruction book) describes precisely in how far the SS should be kept separate from single prisoners.\(^{35}\)

In Comparison to the whole camp, the situation in the crematoria was special. There, only a handful of SS men were usually guarding and supervising the *Sonderkommando* during their work in relative proximity and over prolonged periods. More senior SS showed up whenever new transports arrived and when people
were gassed. Those visits were made for purpose of robbery and amusement. But for most part during their shifts, the Sonderkommando men worked in the vicinity of few SS guards. Hence, in the crematoria compound the distancing effect and the concomitant dehumanization of the prisoners was somewhat reduced. To the SS, the well fed Sonderkommando people in proper clothing must have indeed appeared more like human beings than the emaciated and dying prisoners in the camp, who disgusted and frightened them.

In “Reading the Holocaust” Inga Clendinnen rightly points out, that the Sonderkommando squads of around 50 members were small enough to develop some kind of esprit de corps:

“...some small sense of community and some recognition of the other as a comrade seems to have bloomed in that unlikely place, and that blooming lightened one corner of the darkness that was Auschwitz.” 36

In this context it seems worthwhile to shed some light on the range of interaction between Sonderkommando people and their SS oppressors.

**Forms of Interaction**

The same system of prisoner functionaries like in the camp also structured life in the Sonderkommando. It was mainly the prisoner functionaries, i.e. the “Kapos” or the “Vorarbeiter”, who had contact with the SS. They received the orders and passed them on to the Sonderkommando people (via the “Vorarbeiter”, etc.). 37

The common Sonderkommando worker actually did not interact with any of the SS. Survivors recall that they were mortally afraid
of even getting near them. Georg van Ryk, also a former member of the Sonderkommando, said once:

"The SS were like Gods. We did not even dare to look at the SS, otherwise they would have started to beat us immediately." 38

The SS were unsurpassed in their cruelty and sadism. Names like Otto Moll39, Friedrich Stiewitz, Walter Quackernack, Johann Gorges, Josef Schillinger, Josef Hustek, Kurschuss and Scheinmetz (first name of the two last persons is unknown) stand for most despicable murderers who not only executed orders, but took great pleasure in their position as "Gods of the crematoria", who could maltreat, torture and kill at will. No rules and boundaries restricted the barbarism of these people.

The era of Auschwitz was the era of the simple low sank people in the society. This was their great chance: the baker, the gardener, the waiter, the little clerk – all those "nobodies" suddenly became important, mighty figures, responsible for life and death. Their mind became fruitful and creative with new ideas, which were derived from the depth of their dark hollow souls.

Thus, the "insane" ideas came to world and were translated into a practical level, since the camps allowed the most extreme idea to be practiced, even those ideas, that in any normal society before the Nazi time were considered as totally insane.

Accordingly, the camps were laboratories for the practice of cruelty, where the extremity had no border. The tendency of acceptance and adaptation to the most barbarous crime was wide spread. This can be seen in many scenes, which are described, for instance, in "Seven Departments of Hell" written by Tadeusz Stabholz, a Jewish physician and survivor of three extermination
camps: Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz. Such scenes are, for instance, the killing of the prisoner Fink\textsuperscript{40}, the cruelty of chief physician Zentkeller\textsuperscript{41}, the slaughter of the Jews of Block 7 who tried to defend themselves before being gassed\textsuperscript{42} and the running of the naked Jewish women to the gas chamber\textsuperscript{43}. All those scenes are characterized with beastly cruelty, which is aimed at humiliating and hurting the Jews and causing to them the utmost suffering.

**Moll – The Spawn of Sanity**

The cruel “Nazi Spirit” in its best manifestation belongs to Otto Moll, the Crematoria manager, who was zealous to perfect the killing methods in Birkenau to the highest climax. The obsession, in which he treated the project of building big pits near crematoria V in order to speed up the corps’ burning, is typical to the borderless, insane atmosphere, prevailing in the camps: the more extreme the innovation of cruelty was, the more the killers enjoyed it. Moll recruits the people from the Sonderkommando and accompanies them to the excavation site. As long as his plans are not realized in a perfect manner, he won’t be satisfied. The following citations taken from Mueller’s memories portray this bizarre mixture between the “normal” and the “crazy”:

“*Even before work began Moll paced nervously up and down the site. He inspected the area, going from place to place, consulting a large drawing which he had unfolded and comparing it with smaller drawings of the pits as well as of the rest of the extermination installations.*” \textsuperscript{44}

Indeed Moll was very excited and wanted the trench to be dug as fast and as good as possible.
When the two big pits were finally finished – both 40 to 50 meters long, about 8 meters wide and 2 meters deep – they weren’t ready for use yet, since “there followed the realization of the refinements thought up by the arch-exterminator’s warped ingenuity.”

And Moll really took care about this subject: together with his assistant, Eckardt, he climbed down into the pit and marked out a strip to be dug, “running lengthways down the middle from end to end”. This channel, which sloped to either side from the middle, was thought to catch the human fat exuding from the burning corpses in two collecting pans. In his memories Mueller comments:

“The whole concept seemed quite inconceivable: a drain channel to catch human fat which in turn was to be used as fuel in order to obliterate as fast as possible all traces of these murderous deeds.”

But Moll was fascinated by this idea, which could mean a paramount improvement considering the effectiveness of one of his main tasks: the burning of the corpses.

So after all refinements were done, Moll excitedly ordered two buckets of water in order to test if the channel would work. But, before reaching the collecting pan, the water slopped back and stopped. As Mueller recalls, Moll was shocked:

“When he realized that something was wrong with the fall of the channel he grabbed the empty bucket and brought it down to the heads of any prisoners unfortunate enough to be standing within reach…Moll too flung himself on the wretched prisoners in the pit who were cowering together with fright and kicked them viciously, shouting at the top of his voice: ‘You stupid shits, what’s the matter with you, can’t you even manage a simple job like that?’”
Finally Moll – the manager of the crematoria himself - climbed down into the pit, dressed in a blue overall, and supervised the alterations. Having finished, he ordered again the buckets of water and splashed them. This time the water drained completely. When Moll noticed the success, he relaxed, and as Mueller remembers: “His face showed satisfaction and round his lips hovered something like a fleeting smile. He was obviously relieved, and convinced that he had taken a big step forward on the road towards a solution of his task.”

According to Mueller, Moll didn’t leave the scene immediately. Still standing at the pits he relished his success but, simultaneously, thought about possible problems, which could prevent his system from working (like the viscosity of the human fat, e.g.).

Gabai also witnessed Moll enjoying the sphere of insanity. He reports:
“A large transport from Lodz came in August 1944 (30th of August) and that month 250 Polish ‘Muselmänner’ were sent from several camps on the outskirts of Auschwitz. By that time, they were unable to move. Right then the commander of the crematorium, Moll of the SS, came and said, “Don’t send these ones to the gas.” He wanted to butcher them personally. First he beat them with the metal rod that he used to shatter the remaining bones of people who had died. Afterwards, he came down and asked one of the soldiers to give him a rifle and some bullets. He began to shoot. After he shot four or five of them, one of the “Muselmänner” called out, “Commander!” and Moll, who was a brutal sadist, answered, “Yes?”

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"I've got a request."

"What do you want?"

"As you shoot my friends, I want to sing the Blue Danube Waltz."

"Be my guest! How jolly! It's even better to shoot with musical accompaniment," Moll answered. So the man sang—la-la-la—and Moll shot them all until it was the singer's turn. The last bullet hit him and finished him off."⁵⁰

Scene of Amusement and Surrealism

The border between sanity and insanity is also demonstrated by the shocking fact that the crematoria building and the gas chambers also served as a site of entertainment and amusement. Senior SS people and high-rank Nazi officials were attracted by this place. In deed, the testimonies tell us, that from time to time delegations arrived, wishing to be present in the dreadful killing of the Jews. The peep-hole in the door of the gas chamber enabled the dignified V.I.P. guests to watch "live", how the pour victims chocked and died inside. Actually the guests were pleased and enjoyed the "show". As we see, the killing centers were not only places of painful death but also a scene of circus and theater, like a cabaret stage – an insane mixture of crime, murder and barbarism with laughter, satisfaction and good-mood. This contradiction between cruel death and enjoyment is very similar to the bloody fights of the gladiators in the Roman amphitheaters, in which the crazy reality reached its climax.

An excellent example for the mixture of sanity and insanity concerning the relation between the SS men and the prisoners is the existence of some Lithuanian SS men, who fluently spoke
Yiddish\textsuperscript{51} - the language, in which millions of Jews all over Europe communicated and in which they expressed all their sentiments, sorrows and dreams.

Besides, the diction, which the SS men chose while speaking about their actions, reveals a mixture of a "normal" and a "crazy" world: considering the language, the murdered are never defined as living human beings. They are referred to as "Stuecke" (pieces), sometimes as "Dreck" (dirt), have to be "bearbeitet" (processed) and are laughed and mocked at during the gassing.

This knowledge we should always keep in mind, especially when we move on now to attempt a description of the almost surreal kind of proximity that existed between some Sonderkommando people and the SS guards in the crematoria.

**Convergence between the Perpetrators and the Victims**

Conversations between SS guards and Sonderkommando members were not uncommon. Lemke Pliszko relates that SS men would usually start conversations. There was little time to talk during the hard work, but sometimes during lunch breaks an SS guard would sit together with the prisoners.\textsuperscript{52}

In his testimonies, Lemke Pliszko describes an atmosphere, which reflects an office in any common place. If we did not know the identity of this place, we would assume we were dealing with a friendly, polite place of hospitality. Pliszko describes:

"We were sitting with the Germans round one table in the crematoria building. We were talking about several topics, including the work we were doing. Especially good mood
prevailed, when only one German was sitting with us. He himself
did not murder Jews. He did not pour the gas inside the chambers.
As long as he was alone – he was even friendly. The minute a
second German came – he changed his attitude immediately.
Being alone he spoke totally different."\textsuperscript{53}

But although the prisoners used to sit together with the SS men as,
even on one table, there was always a certain feeling of insecurity:
"When they came in the morning, they said "Good Morning!" to us.
On the other Hand, the same man who said "Good Morning" also
could beat us, when he was ordered to. Usually we did not get
beatings, but sometimes we did get with a stick. One of the
Germans was even sending us to bring the stick to him."\textsuperscript{54}

Pliszko describes that one particular SS guard even stressed, he
would regret what he does, and that he was forced to do it. "Almost
everybody said that, at least those that were good, not the evil
bastards, of course."\textsuperscript{55}

It seems like the usual statement from an SS man, heard a
thousand times over in the Auschwitz trial, but in the immediate
context of the encounter between the prisoner and the SS, such
talk – and already the fact that they talked to each other at all, in a
relatively normal, human manner – seems extremely surprising,
although not beyond imagination.
Describing this "human manner", Lemke Pliszko points out that
"mainly the SS men with lower ranks hinted to the
Sonderkommando prisoners from time to time, that they were
dissatisfied."\textsuperscript{56}
There are other examples: Morris Kesselman describes that, naturally, he distrusted most of the SS, except for one guard from Holland, with whom he even talked in a more personal manner, about their families, where they came from, etc. By bribing him with alcohol, this SS man even assisted Morris in smuggling food from the Sonderkommando to other camp inmates. Kesselman's statement complies with Gabai's illustration, pointing out that they interacted with their guards quite well:

"They were with us all the time and they were really OK. We had no problems at all with them. One of the guards was from Holland, a good guy, really fine. We always asked ourselves how this Dutchman could possibly be an SS man."  

Gabai goes on talking about this specific SS guard:

"The SS man from the Netherlands...was still a boy - twenty-two, twenty-three at the most... He never said a bad word to anyone. A friend, a buddy. He even gave me his weapon and said, 'Take it. You may play with it.'"  

This Dutch SS is often mentioned, with several nuances of appreciation, by survivors of the Sonderkommando. Such statements also accord with Miklos Nyiszli, the Jewish doctor who worked in the crematoria and who writes in his memoirs:

"Taken individually, these low rank SS guards in the crematoria could be bought".

This feeling about the vulnerability of almost every SS man to bribery is shared by other survivors too. Indeed, there was some kind of familiarity as Nyiszli stresses in a different context:
“Three months in the same camp and in the same milieu had created, in spite of everything, a certain intimacy between us (Nyiszli and Muhsfeld, SS-Oberscharfuehrer). Besides, the Germans generally appreciate capable people, and, as long as they need them, respect them to a certain extent, even in the KZ.”

This “intimacy” even encouraged Nyiszli to ask Oberscharfuehrer Muhsfeld for saving the life of a young girl, which had amazingly survived the gassing in the gas chamber (see below). The special kind of familiarity between the SS guards and the Sonderkommando prisoners is also well expressed by Lemke Pliszko testifying:

“The Germans who worked with us, new our first names... The Germans called me Lemke and I called him with his rank. He knew the names of everybody... The relations with the Germans were normal like in normal factories. When one of them wanted to call me, he said: ‘Lemke, komm her!’ (Lemke, come here!).”

In this context one should mention, that the Sonderkommando prisoners actually invented nicknames for the guarding SS men – although Eliezer Eisenschmidt stresses, that “giving nicknames didn’t mean we felt closer or more confident with them.”

The prisoners and the SS men met almost daily, worked physically close to each other and therefore, knew each other quite well. Those nicknames – mostly relating to the physiognomy of the Germans (“The Small One”, “The Big One” and “Roiter” because of his red face) – were aimed at warning or alarming before an expected appearance of a dangerous, brutal SS man. As Morris Kesselman explains, it was thereby also possible to speak about
the SS men, even behind their back, without that they would realize. Besides, it was a kind of relaxation from the heavy, constant pressure, which ruled over the work in the crematoria. In a way, the nicknames enabled the prisoners to undermine the power and authority of their tormentors.

Taking into consideration, that a phenomenon, which is typical to the social relations between people in normal times, was also adapted inside the killing centers, one can also come to the conclusion, that giving nicknames was part of a psychological self-defense in order to survive. Even in the darkest room of the crematoria, the sense of humor did not disappear.

As already mentioned above, as long as the (almost low ranked) SS men were alone with the Sonderkommando, relationships would seem quite relaxed. The moment other guards or higher ranking officers showed up the atmosphere changed swiftly. The plane on which this kind of more intimate interaction occurred was brittle and could switch back at any instant.

Again Lemke Pliszko describes relatively personal encounters with on SS man from Lithuania:

"We (the Sonderkommando) did not have any bad intentions, neither did he (the Lithuanian SS). But we were also careful with those that were not too dangerous to us. Because one slip, one wrong word could still mean your death."

Walking on this thin red line - working "together" with the SS men for months (in the case of Dragon brothers even for years), even talking to them but also fearing the death, which could appear on every day – illustrates the paradox mixture of normality an
abnormality and demonstrates the grotesque figure of insanity which the prisoners experienced in the Crematoria.

Usually, most of the members of the Sonderkommando were afraid of approaching SS men. Therefore, they were even more surprised when the SS people then acted in an unexpected human manner. Nyiszli remembers such a situation in the crematoria dormitory after a “social” evening with alcohol and talk, when SS men making a round stopped and reminded the prisoners it was time to go to bed. Normally such reminding was delivered with punishment (like beating). Here it almost seems to be a polite request to finally switch off the lights. 66

Lemke Pliszko reports on a similar experience:
“In 1944 once a German came to our block and he wished us all the best. So the “Blockaelteste” (the elderly of the block) answered: 'We wish you the same as you wished us.'” 67

This “friendly” treatment did not occur by accident. Apart from the constant reign of terror, the SS certainly also had an interest in playing “good guys” vis-à-vis the Sonderkommando prisoners (on a personal level to be able to enrich themselves; and more generally to keep the Sonderkommando operations running smoothly without any disturbances).

This twisted intention also shines through in the following scenario, mentioned by Yehuda Bacon. He recalls:
“Prisoners, block seniors and the SS used to play football and ping-pong together in the Gypsy Camp, when they were off-duty on Sundays”. 68

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Levi also refers to this unusual event and writes:

"Nyiszli tells how during a ‘work’ pause he attended a soccer game between the SS and the Sonderkommando, that is to say, between a group representing the SS on guard at the crematorium and a group representing the Special Squad. Other men of the SS and the rest of the Squad are present at the game. They take sides, bet, applaud, urge the players on as if, rather than at the gates of hell, the game were taking place on the village green." 69

The image of the SS and Jews playing football in the vicinity of the gas chambers and ovens in Auschwitz-Birkenau cannot but appear to us as a totally insane and sick world.

Also the following scene illustrates the grotesque coexistence of annihilation and a totally normal appearing social contact between the perpetrators and the victims.

Gabai, who was forced to work as a "Heizer" (stoker) and who was accordingly ordered to burn the corpses in the ovens, recalls:

"Once they brought a girl from Hungary who had a two-day-old baby. She knew she was about to be murdered. We had nothing to do that night. We sat around idly and offered her a chair to sit down, some food, and cigarettes. She told us that she was a singer and talked for about half an hour. We sat in front of the furnaces. Next to us sat a Dutch SS man (the one mentioned above), a rather nice, likeable guy. He also listened in. When the story was over, he stood up and said, ‘Very well, we can’t sit here like this forever; now it’s death’s turn.’ She was asked what she preferred, that we kill the baby first or her. She said, ‘Me first. I don’t want to see my child dead.’ Then the Dutchman stood up,
brought over the rifle, shot her, and threw her into the furnace. Then he picked up the baby, bang-bang, and that was that."  

This horrible story contains the seeds of insanity that prevailed in the undressing rooms and gas chambers. We find in it the quick charge between politeness and bestiality, the ability of the SS man to be human and murderous almost at the same time, the mixture and duality of life and death, in one place.

Considering the more exceptional and extreme statements, where Sonderkommando survivors talk about a "relaxed" attitude, and show even some kind of "solidarity" and understanding vis-à-vis the SS, one should bear in mind that such "talking good" on your tormentors is a very common occurrence in reminiscences of victims. Filip Mueller, for example, writes in his memoirs:  

“We prisoners and (the SS man) Starck were worlds apart… [But] I often wondered how it was possible for this young man, scarcely older than myself, to be so cruel… He was no doubt a victim of the Nazi propaganda.”  

The partial identification with the tormentor, the portrayal of both (oneself and one’s tormentor) as victims, all of these are ways to ease the trauma, and to make sense of the crime and the suffering. Psychologists have examined such phenomenon (the Stockholm syndrome, to mention but one name). Nevertheless, Mueller’s statement is exceptional – all other Sonderkommando survivors do not share his attempt to find some kind of understanding towards the German perpetrators and their testimonies should be considered reliable.
Yet, in depicting instances of human interaction between the SS and the Sonderkommando, we intend to point at an apparent paradox. In the very center of the inferno, in the crematorium compound, there also existed a certain margin, which helped the prisoners to deny and repress to some degree the unimaginably horrible acts they were forced to participate in.

In fact, this seemingly paradoxical aspect also extends to the ways in which the Sonderkommando prisoners related to each other. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, on the one hand the survivors recall themselves as having vegetated like human machines, shell-shocked, traumatized, unable to act or do something about their situation. On the other hand, they also tell of scenes that appear in stark contrast to that of the human robot - moments of friendship and mutual solidarity, evenings with social gatherings and songs, and, of course, the underground activities leading up to the uprising in the Sonderkommando.

We shall now map out these human spaces inside the inferno, which helped the Sonderkommando prisoners to retain their sanity, to keep their strength and ultimately, to survive in the end.

**Relationships within the Sonderkommando**
Survivors’ testimonies about their daily routine in the Sonderkommando show the immense pressure that lasted on the prisoners during their work shifts. It was sheer physical toil under the most traumatic and gruesome conditions that one can imagine. Gabai remembers:
“We worked like robots there. I had to stay strong in order to survive and relate everything that had happened in this hell. Reality proves that people are crueler than animals. Yeah, we were animals. We didn’t have emotions. Sometimes we doubted whether we were still human”.”\textsuperscript{73}

Chazan recalls the same experience:
„I’d stopped being human by then. If I’d been human, I couldn’t have endured it for even one minute. We kept going because we’d lost our humanity.”\textsuperscript{74}

And also Leon Cohen arguments a similar way saying:
“During that time we had no emotions. We were totally drained. We blocked up our hearts; we were dehumanized. We worked like machines. We were human beings devoid of human emotion. We were really animals, not people…” Finally Cohen concludes: “We’d become robots.”\textsuperscript{75}

Yet, time and again their accounts also reveal aspects about the every-day life in the crematoria, where the Sonderkommando people did not quite feel like numb and passive human ghosts. Even when acting like machines and repressing the inner feelings, the death, which ruled over the scene, was covering all. The pain, sorrow and grief were certainly penetrating into the prisoner’s hearts.

Those prisoners on day shift duty were after the evening roll call principally free and could do in their barrack whatever they wanted. We would expect them to be depressed, broken, on the edge of insanity. Yet, there were also times when they had conversations, when they talked about their past lives, when they sought some
consolation in the solidarity that existed among them. They were not totally alone in this horror.

**A Sense of Solidarity and Familiarity**

Describing the sense of solidarity among the *Sonderkommando* prisoners Lemke Pliszko recalls: 

"I knew everyone in our block, we were together like a family".\(^7^6\)

This is illustrated by the fact, that prisoners usually addressed each other personally by their names, as Kesselman remembers.\(^7^7\)

The survivors generally confirm that the camaraderie among the *Sonderkommando* prisoners was greater than in other units of the camp. Because they were so isolated and shared the same fate: the verdict of death.

People in the *Sonderkommando* gathered in small groups, often people from the same town or area, who had a similar background and knew that they could trust each other. Yet, the sense of solidarity very much emerged from the feeling that they were all together in this traumatic inferno, and also, in a way, from the certainty that none of them would survive – although this awareness was mostly suppressed.

The *Sonderkommando* was, however, not a homogenous unit. Rather it consisted of people from many different countries and backgrounds. Whenever conflicts occurred, it was usually between such groups, and cases of concrete violence among prisoners are described mainly between Jewish prisoners and the small group of Poles in the *Sonderkommando*, who held the position of "Vorarbeiter".
Jewish prisoners, though coming from different countries, could generally talk Yiddish with each other. The only exception was the large group of the Jews from Greece, who spoke only Greek or Ladino, with whom the others could initially hardly communicate. The Greeks were a relatively closed group and mostly kept to each other, due to language and mentality differences.

Yet, despite such difficulties with communication, the relations between groups from different countries are described as relaxed and friendly. Despite all the different backgrounds, people somehow found their accepted places in the Sonderkommando, as Abraham Dragon confirms:

“We got along fine with all the people from different countries. We communicated (with the Greeks) largely by using gestures. They could do as much physically demanding work like us, because they had suffered at home and had become hardened. People from Germany or France could not work as hard, and the Capo arranged for them to work as hair cutters or sorting clothes, things that did not involve hard physically labor.” 78

“Social Evenings”

As already mentioned, after work hours the prisoners were mostly so exhausted that they just had something to eat and went to sleep. One would converse mainly with the people in the neighboring bunks. Nevertheless, Joseph Sackar states:

“One cannot say, we had lived like robots.” 79

After having finished work, the Sonderkommando prisoner could sit together and talk and think about their situation, their work in the
crematoria, about their experiences and what was done to them.\textsuperscript{60} So there was space to think about what happened to them - and the prisoners actually did reflect on their fate. Those were moments of self-awareness and self-reflection.

In an Interview, Eisenschmidt reports on a feeling of sadness, which creped back in, when he saw groups walking towards the crematoria building since they reminded him of his family.\textsuperscript{81}

The existence of religious life in the killing center also contradicts the picture of passive human machines. Gradowski reports in his clandestine scripts, that the religious Jews insisted on going on with the tradition and make a “Minyan” three times a day in one of the crematoria buildings.\textsuperscript{82}

It seems, that the description about the “robot like” routine would mainly refer to the actual working process, where emotions had to be oppressed in order to be able to stand the work between all the corpses. In the evening, after the work, some prisoners tried to abandon their “robot behavior”.

Sometimes there were also social occasions where prisoners would come together and sing, as Yehuda Bacon recalls, “\textit{mainly sentimental songs, about our previous lives and about freedom}”.\textsuperscript{83} Many other survivors highlight the regular singing of the Greek groups in the evenings after work, where even some of the German SS was present. Lemke Pliszko confirms among others: “\textit{The Germans often stood at the door and listened when the Greeks were singing}.”\textsuperscript{84}

He goes on recalling: “\textit{After duty in our barrack, we were singing Yiddish songs. The Greek prisoners were singing and dancing until late at night. They knew how to sing. They sang for many hours.}”.\textsuperscript{85}
Nevertheless, from time to time the members of the Sonderkommando who had got used to their work in the crematoria, were reminded to their former life, to the life outside of the crematoria, when prisoners from other units appeared. Indeed, the link between the “normal” and the unique world of the Sonderkommando people is embodied by the few prisoners, who succeeded in entering the barrack of the Sonderkommando. Yehuda Bacon, Mordechai Ciechanower, Stanley Glogover and the other curious, naïve youngsters were mainly interested in the food but also in the human warmth, the Sonderkommando prisoners could donate. As Bacon remembers, it was very dangerous for members of the Sonderkommando to be in contact with other prisoners, due to their knowledge of every detail of the killing process.86

Despite this, the contact between the Sonderkommando and other prisoners continued.

Children working at the nearby “Canada”, like the 14 years old Yehuda Bacon, sometimes got the permission from the guarding Sonderkommando prisoner to enter the Sonderkommando block. Although some prisoners were unwilling to speak about their work in the crematoria, he got information about what was going on there. A few people told him about their experiences and even about their feelings at this unique place, where sanity and insanity are so close to each other, that it is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other.
The gap between sanity and insanity is well demonstrated by the astonishing and rare case of a young girl, which survived the gas chambers. When the gas was thrown inside the chamber, she fell on the floor and, by chance, was not poisoned. As after the gassing, the Sonderkommando prisoners started taking the death bodies to the ovens, they suddenly discovered that the girl was still breathing. One has to imagine: between all those dead bodies, under all the corpses, the prisoners had indeed found a still living person. All of the members of the Sonderkommando were shocked – this definitely was the first time that something like this happened. The chief of the gas chamber commando ran to Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, a physician, who was also a member of the Sonderkommando but simultaneously Mengele's pathological expert. He gave the girl injections and after a few minutes she got her consciousness back. Of course she was confused, since she could not grasp what had happened to her. Nyiszli asked her only a few questions, but learned that she was from Transylvania and was 16 years old. Immediately the question came up, what to do with her. It was clear that a girl could not stay in the crematoria's Sonderkommando. Suddenly SS-Oberscharfuehrer Muhsfeld appeared supervising the work and saw the gathered prisoners. When he entered the room he also noticed the girl. Nyiszli knew there was almost no chance to save the live of the girl, but since he felt respected by Muhsfeld because of his work as a physician, he tried to explain the situation. Having finished he asked Muhsfeld to do something for the child. When the SS man asked him what he proposed to do, Nyiszli pointed out the possibility to put her in front of the crematoria gate, where a commando of women always
worked. Nyiszli suggested, it wouldn’t be hard for her then, to disappear in the big crowd.
But Muhsfeld was convinced, that a girl of 16 year’s wouldn’t understand the circumstances of her survival and would immediately start telling where she just had come from and what she had experienced in the gas chambers. Finally Muhsfeld concluded: “There’s no way of getting round it. The child will have to die.” Half an hour later the girl was shot dead.

Epilogue

“It must sound terrible and it’s hard to understand how we lived together with our murderers. But anything was possible in Auschwitz.”

Those words of Yaakov Gabai are a concise description of the problem, which stands in the center of this article.

The extermination camps were sites in which the Nazi spirit flourished and bloomed in its most extreme way: the camps were the essence of the Nazi regime and Nazi ideology and the crimes committed there against Jews and other victims were a compulsory outcome of this ideological belief. The creation of the death factories commandos, the Sonderkommando, serving as workers, has to be considered as one of the worst crimes perpetrated by the Nazis, as Primo Levi justifiably wrote. Every minute in the daily activity of those Sonderkommando prisoners was a combination of normality and abnormality. The decision to eliminate all Jews in the world was insane for itself. The
practical way of executing this intention was a direct continuation of this distorted mind.

In the above text we have been dealing with the several manifestations of this phenomenon. The borderline between normal and abnormal is often very thin. By implementing the crazy idea of the "Final Solution", the Germans even topped the insanity of the theoretical idea per se.

The statements about the seemingly ongoing everyday life in the crematoria, and especially about the relations between some Sonderkommando people and the SS, are surprising.

For a deeper understanding of the reality of the Sonderkommando, it is important to consider not only those aspects that describe how these innocent people were turned into paralyzed human machines. One should also link this image of the Sonderkommando to that of the heroic fighters who organized the uprising in the crematoria, or that of the Sonderkommando prisoners who assisted others to escape, or those who wrote down all the horrors with persistence, to deliver to the next generations what happened.

Simultaneously, they also were interested in documenting the history of the "Final Solution" in Auschwitz-Birkenau in order to leave an eternal memorial for the murdered Jews.

Survivors frequently claim that those who did not go through the same horror will never be able to understand what they have experienced in the camps. The case with the Sonderkommando is even more difficult to comprehend.

The technical aspect of the death factories is rather perceivable, but what lies beyond our empiric abilities of understanding is,
however, how the *Sonderkommando* people could persevere their fate. It seems impossible to grasp how a human being could have been able to work for months and even for years in the death factory.

Nevertheless, we must make an effort and try to shed light onto each of these unprecedented phenomena that happened in the Shoah. The few survivors of the *Sonderkommando* are unique Auschwitz survivors, and through their testimonies we get a deeper insight into the Shoah, into ourselves, into the world in which we live.

2 Primo Levi, „The Drowned and the Saved“, New York, 1988, p. 53
3 State Museum in Oswieicim, “KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS”, Warsaw 1991, p.77
4 Some members of the *Sonderkommando* wrote clandestine notes, which they buried in the ground of Birkenau. Those notes were partly discovered after the war. Among the main chronicles were Zalman Gradowski, Leib Langfuss and Zalman Lewental.
5 Ber Mark, “The Scrolls of Auschwitz”, Tel Aviv 1985, p. 125
7 Yehuda Bacon, Interview with Gideon Greif (G.G.), Jerusalem, 2003-05-30
8 Primo Levi, „The Drowned and the Saved“, New York, 1988, p. 53
12 Ibid, p. 341
13 Ibid, p. 303/304
14 Ibid, p. 244
15 Ibid, p. 245
16 Ibid, p. 123
17 Ibid, p. 124
18 Ibid, p. 196
19 Interview with G.G., Kibbutz Givat Ha Shlosha, 2003-11-21
20 Interview with G.G., 2004-05-21
22 Ibid, p. 303
23 Ibid, p. 171
24 Interview with G.G., Kibbutz Givat HaShlosha, 2000-07-25

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26 Ibid, p. 247
28 Ibid, p. 354
29 Ibid, p. 354
30 Ibid, p. 83 / 84
31 Ibid, p. 58
35 The original is at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum archive, MPMAB, section “Hoess Trial”.
36 Inga Clendinnen, “Reading the Holocaust”, Cambridge, 1999, p. 74
37 On the functionaries in Auschwitz see: Herman Langbein, “People in Auschwitz”, North Carolina, 2004, chapter “The Prominent” and “Jewish Camp Prominence”
38 Interview with G.G. and Andreas Kilian, Amsterdam, 1996-05-08
39 For a biographical sketch see: State Museum in Oswiecim, “KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS”, Warsaw 1991, p. 245 - 246
41 Ibid, p. 146
42 Ibid, p. 149-150
43 Ibid, p. 150
45 Ibid, p. 130
46 Ibid, p. 130
47 Ibid, p. 130
48 Ibid, p. 131
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