THE PRIVATE LIVES OF THE AUSCHWITZ SS

After the war, as historians attempted to understand the reasons for the exceptionally brutal behavior of SS men toward concentration camp prisoners, they put forward the most varied causes. Above all, there was the prolonged ideological training, the "Dachau – Eicke school" of brainwashing, that extirpated all human emotions and inculcated hatred for the "enemies of the Reich." Furthermore, historians argued, SS men in the concentration camp garrisons were not required to be particularly intelligent.[1] Other authors dug deeper, seeking the root cause of the evil in the murky recesses of the "German soul."[2] These hypotheses were supported almost exclu-

[1] Eugen Kogon called them a "negative elite" in *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (New York, 1998), p. 6, but Raul Hilberg notes that there were also intellectuals among the SS, although rather in the Einsatzkommandos, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945* (London, 1993), pp. 43, 44.

[2] In reference to the SS men involved in the process of extermination and mass murder, opinions include Hannah Arendt's "mendacity has become an integral part of the German national character" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 2006) p. 52; Anna Pawełczyńska wrote that "in the name of national megalomania, a significant part of German society proved capable of accepting these increasingly harsh dictates sanctioned by force and state power. The authority of brutal force took the place of moral authority" in *Wartości a przemoc* (Warsaw, 1995), p. 14. Over the course of time such a vast literature sprang up around these issues that it is difficult to cite here in its entirety. It is nevertheless worth noting the great interest in this problem among Polish psychiatrists in *Przegląd Lekarski Oświęcim*: A. Jakubik, "Zbrodnia ludobójstwa a psychologia poczucia winy" (1962), pp. 21–33; A. Kępiński, "Niektóre zagadnienia psychosocjologiczne masowych zbrodni hitlerowskich II wojny światowej" (1962), pp. 81–83; A. Kępiński and M. Orwid, "Z psychopatologii 'nadludzi'. Uwagi na marginesie autobiografii Rudolfa Hössa" (1962), pp. 83–89; K. Gondorowski, "Uwagi

sively by excerpts from testimony by the SS men themselves, or by concentration camp prisoners, in the transcripts of the trials in the late 1940s. Later, in the mid-1960s, approximately the same opinions were formulated on the basis of testimony at the Frankfurt trials.

Discussions of the subject were revived after the publication of the well-known book by Daniel Goldhagen,[3] which analyzed the motivations and psychological aspects of the actions of policemen sent to carry out mass executions, a task that usually belonged to the SS. Although Goldhagen's major theses later came under criticism,[4] the highly charged discussion in the press once again made it plain that there is a considerable degree of public interest in the subject, and in explaining the reasons why so many apparently ordinary Germans jettisoned clear moral norms and became brutes and criminals.

Further research in this direction yielded fairly promising results; nevertheless, it continued to be based on two main types of sources: statements by prisoners who survived the concentration camps, and testimony by SS men who belonged to the garrisons of those camps.[5] The selective use of these sources to confirm *a priori* hypotheses—in search of impressive quotations or to show off one's erudition—sometimes led the authors of these studies astray.

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o psychopatologii tyranii hitlerowskiej" (1974), pp. 93–102; T. Bilikiewicz, "Z rozważań nad psychologią ludobójstwa" (1966), pp. 14–20.

[3] *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996), and the far less emotional and more objective study by Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1993).

[4] For example by Norbert Frey in the article "A People of 'Final Solutionists'? Daniel Goldhagen Dresses an Old Thesis in New Robes" in Robert R. Shandley, ed., *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate* (Minneapolis, 1998), p. 35.

[5] An exception here is the work of Aleksander Lasik (as in his recently published, extensive monograph, *Sztafety Ochronne w systemie niemieckich obozów koncentracyjnych. Rozwój organizacyjny, ewolucja zadań i struktur oraz socjologiczny obraz obozowych załóg SS* [Oświęcim, 2007]), in which he makes use of numerous statistics that portray the educational background of the SS men and their age, social origins, denomination, and so on. The data cited by Lasik, as opposed to the accounts that constitute the basic sources of the studies noted above, are verifiable and can at least serve as a concrete point of reference.

So it is that, along with the numerous insightful observations in Wolfgang Sofski's popular works,[6] we also come across a series of dubious conclusions that result above all (it would seem) from the nature of the material he uses. He writes, for example, that Eicke attempted to inculcate a spirit of fellowship among commissioned officers and NCOs as well. This was supposed to be fostered by encouraging the use of the more familiar *Du* form (instead of the formal *Sie*) and the abolishing of separate messes. The resulting looser discipline led to the delegation of disciplinary prerogatives to a lower level of decision-making, as a result of which "the *Blockführer* held more authority in his hands than a regimental commander in the regular army."[7]

There very well may have been such an idea, but it came to nothing in confrontation with the realities of life and service in the concentration camps. As we know from other accounts, the officers had no opportunity to attain authority over their subordinates by standing out in combat, and tried instead to acquire it by applying the harsh, tried-and-true form of Prussian drill—making their subordinates stand at attention on any and all pretexts—and also by distinguishing themselves from the NCOs by their spit-shined boots, pressed trousers, and so on. Almost from the beginning of Auschwitz, NCOs ate in the kitchen barracks while the luxuriously furnished rooms of the SS-*Führerheim* were designated for the officers. Evening icebreakers featuring sausages and beer were indeed held for all ranks of the camp SS (*Kameradschaften*), but the officers who attended only waited for a moment when they could discreetly slip away and go home.[8] In the photographs from the Höcker album the officers are seen talking, smoking cigarettes, and drinking vodka exclusively among themselves.[9] The only group photograph in an informal setting is clearly posed, and even here the officers are seen standing in the front row with the subalterns modestly lining up behind them.[10] As a causal factor in the brutality shown to prisoners in

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6 Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, 1999).

7 Ibid., p. 104.

8 Höss remembers these evenings as an unpleasant obligation; *Autobiografia Rudolfa Hössa, komendanta obozu oświęcimskiego* (Warsaw, 1989), p. 110.

9 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Photo Archive, neg. #34797, #34754, #34759, #34786, #34781 et al.

10 USHMM Photo Archive, neg. # 34739.

Auschwitz, the concept of "relaxed discipline" in the SS is therefore inaccurate.

Furthermore, Sofsky overrates the impact of the administrative division of the camp into departments, which supposedly generated interdepartmental conflicts;[11] he forgets that this is a natural characteristic of the majority of complex bureaucratic structures, where there is a struggle over staffing, funding, influence, and so on. One way or another, it was the commandant of the camp, who at the same time commanded the garrison, who in practice cast the deciding vote when decisions were made. Höss did indeed mention his disapproval of certain things that Grabner, the director of the Political Department, did. However, he said that this did not result from the lack of prerogatives, but rather from the fact that Höss simply had too little free time and too many obligations to keep an eye on everything.[12]

Without going too deeply into this kind of investigation, it is worth noting that the ambiguity of the source material is often an important obstacle to obtaining a clear image of the relations among the SS men in Auschwitz. In their postwar testimony (which accounts for most of the documentation at our disposal) the SS men try to portray themselves in the most favorable light; former prisoners, on the other hand, paint them almost exclusively in dark colors. For instance, SS men maintained that in general they were not to blame for anything and did nothing wrong while they were at Auschwitz. They left their quarters for work in the morning, packing their lunches in their briefcases, and then spent the day at the office before returning home to their wives and children in the afternoon.[13] Former prisoners, in contrast, tended, as was justifiable in the circumstances, to attach blame in an equal degree to all or almost all the SS men they described in their accounts. In the search for the objective truth and disposing of material so difficult to assess, the historian willingly turns to accounts by third parties who were not so emotionally engaged in the events in question.

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[11] Sofsky, op. cit., p. 108.

[12] *Autobiografia*, p. 246.

[13] Of course the majority of the SS men who made up the core of the concentration camp garrisons returned to barracks, where at best they could talk with their comrades, play cards, or indulge in other unedifying pastimes.

In 1974 Maria Jędrysik, who worked in the research department of the State Museum in Oświęcim, interviewed women who, as young girls, had been assigned during the war to work in the homes of SS officers and NCOs from the Auschwitz garrison.

Under the laws in force at the time, young people were obliged from the time they turned 14 to take any job specified by the occupation authorities. Girls this age were thus assigned to the families of local Germans, above all SS officers and NCOs from the camp garrison. They did the washing, cooking, and shopping, scrubbed the floors, and looked after the children. The ladies of the house usually regarded it as obvious that "these little Polish girls" should do the boring, unrewarding everyday tasks. Some treated them badly and others with grudging decency, while others still developed something like an attachment to them over time and gave them small presents, second-hand dresses, or a pair of shoes.

Although these girls were still very young and in some cases rather naïve, they were acute observers of the family lives and interpersonal relations in the homes of their employers. Being Poles, they all had an attitude of aversion or hostility to Germans. However, because they did not see how the breadwinners behaved in the camp or treated the prisoners there, they could not become more strongly prejudiced against them. All the more so, therefore, the image of the "behind-the-scenes" life of the SS men and their families that emerges from the accounts by the Polish girls can be regarded as objective and approximating reality.

As early as the mid-1970s, the value of the accounts collected by Maria Jędrysik was appreciated. There were plans for publication, which came to nothing. We are now returning to that idea in the belief that, despite the passage of time, these accounts may prove of interest to readers today. The publication is enriched by two accounts each from former Auschwitz prisoners and from adult women who worked in the home of the camp commandant, Rudolf Höss.

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