The term "Sonderkommando" (Germ. special detail) refers to a number of phenomena related to the extermination of European Jews as part of "the final solution of the Jewish question," planned and executed by German Nazis in 1941–1944.

It has been used in reference to some extermination centers (SS-Sonderkommando Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibór), SS police units (Sonderkommando Bloobel, Sonderkommando 1005) massacring Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and obliterating the traces of the crimes committed by the SS and police units (the so-called Einsatzgruppen), groups of officials and officers assigned to special tasks in occupied Europe (Sonderkommando Eichmann, responsible for deportations of Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz), as well as prisoners forced by the SS to burn the bodies of people murdered in extermination camps. The term is commonly understood as referring to Jewish prisoners of Auschwitz, forced to work in the crematoria and murdered as "Geheimnisträger" (bearers of secrets) after bigger extermination actions.

The story of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando is one of the darkest episodes in the history of the camp in particular and the Holocaust in general. An exception-ally pernicious plan coined by the criminals bearing the SS emblem to force young and strong Jews selected from newly arrived transports to work at removing the bodies of those murdered in the gas chambers, to pull out from their jaws dental products made of precious metals, to burn the bodies in open pits, pyres and in crematoria, and finally to liquidate the witnesses of those crimes themselves, was ruthlessly executed almost to the successful end. Almost, because the SS men did not manage to kill all eyewitnesses of the Holocaust.

Sonderkommando in Auschwitz had been linked with the camp's exterminatory function from its very inception. Starting in the summer of 1940, Crematorium I was staffed by a few Polish political prisoners. Orderlies from the camp hospital were forced to remove from the basement of the so-called Death Block the bodies of 600 Soviet POWs and 250 Polish political prisoners killed with Zyklon B during the experimental extermination action in the autumn of 1941.

The SS men employed the prisoners also at removing bodies from the morgue at Crematorium I, which had been converted to a makeshift gas chamber and where Soviet POWs and, starting in 1942, Jews deported to Auschwitz were killed. Those extermination actions, still perceived as experimental by the SS at the time, were witnessed on numerous occasions by prisoners employed at the SS hospital located opposite the crematorium. From hiding, they would observe groups of POWs and entire Jewish families undressing in the crematorium yard and SS men throwing Zyklon B through chutes made in the gas chamber's ceiling.

That was also the place where the last extermination action in the Auschwitz I was conducted in December 1942, when the SS men gassed more than 400 Jewish prisoners of the first Sonderkommando as witnesses of the crimes committed in the make-shift gas chambers (the so-called Little Red and White Houses). Visiting the camp in the of autumn 1942, Adolf Eichmann learned about numerous dead fish found in the SS-run breeding ponds. Having linked the fact with dead bodies deposited in the ground and penetration of poisonous substances into the ground waters, he or-dered the corpses to be immediately exhumed and burned in open pits and pyres – officially in order to pre-vent any possible epidemics. In fact, the order was aimed also at obliterating the traces of crimes already committed at Auschwitz on more than 100,000 Jews and prisoners of other nationalities. Forced to dig out and burn the corpses were inmates of the first Sonderkommando.

The starting of four huge gas chambers and crematoria in Birkenau in the spring and summer of 1943 marked a new chapter in the history of the genocide – a bureaucratized, dehumanized mass murder executed on an industrial scale. Designed and installed by the company Topf & Söhne of Erfurt in the crematorias built by the Katowice branch of Hoch & Tiefbau AG, the crematorium furnaces were field tested during their official commissioning. The maximum performance capability of all the crematoria was determined to be 4,756 bodies burnt a day, but the figure was signifi-cantly higher, particularly in the summer of 1944 during the biggest extermination actions.

Always isolated from other inmates, Sonderkommando prisoners were accommodated in the crematorium build-ings in Auschwitz II-Birkenau in 1944. This was where they worked and lived, and where they would ultimately be murdered. The daily contact with death led some of the Sonderkommando prisoners to insanity and suicide. Following the initial shock at realizing what their role in Auschwitz was to be about, they would collapse into emotional torpor, in which state they would often remain until their death. When liquidating a Sonderkommando, SS men were as cautious as they could possibly be. They would resort to various ruses in an effort to put the prisoners off guard, most often by announcing their relocation to another camp. The SS men knew perfectly well that they were dealing with people who in dire situation were capable of just about anything.

Sonderkommando prisoners were aware of the role their German torturers set for them – the role of involun-
Auschwitz – the largest German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp in occupied Poland, a symbol of the Holocaust and the downfall of civilization, established in the spring of 1940 on the outskirts of Oświęcim. Initially meant for Poles, mainly political prisoners, it gradually evolved into the main center for the extermination of European Jews. Also murdered in the camp were the Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, and members of other national, social, and religious groups – priests of various religions, Jehovah’s Witnesses as well as political prisoners from many European countries.

The Auschwitz camps were simultaneously instruments of terror in the Nazi occupation policy in Poland, aimed against Poland’s ruling elite, as well as a source of cheap labor for Germany’s armaments industry. From 1942, Auschwitz functioned also as a center for the mass extermination of Jews and as a concentration camp used in the Nazis’ racist policy to destroy entire nations and eliminate potential opponents of the Nazi regime in conquered countries across Europe.

The Sonderkommando in Auschwitz originated from a group of a few Polish political prisoners (Jan Agrestowski, Władysław Biskup, Józef Ilczuk, Wacław Lipka, Mieczysław Morawa) ordered by the camp Gestapo in late summer of 1940 to work at Crematorium I burning the bodies of prisoners who had been murdered or died of starvation, diseases or exhaustion. In the autumn of 1941 that group was used in first attempts to murder people with Zyklon B in the basement of the so-called Death Block. During the liquidation of the camp, those prisoners were transferred to Mauthausen in January 1945 and executed there.

Throughout the existence of Auschwitz, the SS formed several groups referred to as Sonderkommando, all of them composed mainly of Jewish prisoners. They were officially entered into the camp’s records as “stokers” (Germ. Heizer). Sonderkommando’s headcount ranged from a few dozen to a few hundred inmates. During the largest extermination action in Auschwitz, the so-called Hungarian action, in 1944, the crematoria employed a total of 870 “stokers” at a time. Under Eichmann’s order to liquidate Sonderkommando members after each bigger extermination action (after some 2–3 months on average), only specialists – stokers, mechanics and prisoner functionaries – were to be left alive.

Of some 2,000 prisoners forced to work in Sonderkommandos in 1942–1944, only very few survived Auschwitz. They used the chaos that ensued during liquidation of the camp to leave it among other prisoners being evacuated into the Reich. Some of them escaped during the “death march” in January 1945, finding refuge at Polish homes in Upper Silesia. Others – unrecognized as members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando – survived successive camps and lived to see liberation and the end of the war. None of them returned home. Rather than that, they started new lives, often in another country, sometimes under changed names.

Reconstruction of the sites, structures and events related to mass extermination in Auschwitz as well as understanding the plight of Sonderkommando prisoners was made possible by those prisoners themselves, as it happened through finding, near the crematorium ruins, notes written by the prisoners who lived “amidst a nightmare of crime”...

This book is another piece of “jigsaw puzzle,” that along with other books in the “Episodes from Auschwitz” series, will present a more complete picture of the extremely complex history of Auschwitz.

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Introduction

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This book is another piece of "jigsaw puzzle," that along with other books in the "Episodes from Auschwitz" series, will present a more complete picture of the extremely complex history of Auschwitz.
The revolt of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz is an example of the Jewish resistance during the Second World War. The act is sometimes compared to the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto or the mutiny and escape of prisoners of Sobibór.

According to the Nazi doctrine, the concentration camp system allowed no objection from the prisoners against the SS. While resistance of political prisoners at concentration camps was unthinkable, any resistance of Jewish inmates, particularly in extermination camps, simply went far beyond anyone’s imagination. Despite that, the prisoners put up resistance, often in organized forms.

Jews in Auschwitz had very limited possibilities to operate in the organized resistance movement. There were several reasons for that – first of all, the majority of Jews deported to Auschwitz were murdered in the gas chambers shortly after their arrival at the camp. Newly arrived inmates who were registered as fit for work would find themselves at the very bottom of the camp hierarchy, and lived under a constant threat from selections regularly conducted by SS doctors until almost the very end of the camp’s existence. Treated with extreme brutality by SS men and prisoner functionaries, maltreated and often killed at work in the toughest Kommandos, they had neither chances nor time to organize themselves in groups that could openly and effectively stand up to the camp’s SS personnel.

Collaboration between Jewish prisoners and non-Jewish political inmates, to give the Sonderkommando revolt as an example, is another issue. The talks regarding possible cooperation with the resistance movement in and outside of the camp apparently failed to produce any arrangements. Indeed, they were unlikely to produce anything, for the Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners and political inmates were in very different situations. The Jews could not wait forever for Allied aid, which was what the political prisoners opted for in the face of the approaching Eastern Front.

The reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the Sonderkommando revolt on October 7, 1944, as shown in this book, is a resultant of accounts by the survivors, notes written by the Sonderkommando inmates and found after the war near the crematorium ruins, testimonies of former SS personnel at Auschwitz and historical findings. In addition, this comic book links several facts that might have affected the preparations to the revolt or directly led to its outbreak – the Allied aerial bombings in the summer and autumn of 1944, information on extermination actions in Auschwitz that was reaching the West through diplomatic channels, protests voiced by certain governments and organizations against those actions, appeals to stop the deportations and bomb transport routes and extermination facilities. All this can be found in the storyline of the “Bearers of Secrets.”

It proved very difficult to construct the main characters of this story. While quite a lot is known about the leaders of the revolt and people who played important roles in the preparations, it was impossible to find a single historical figure who had been employed at all extermination facilities operating between the spring and autumn of 1944. The character of Joshua combines biographies of a few prisoners and is somewhat a projection of the plight of each member of the Sonderkommando. The authors intended Joshua to be a tribute to anonymous Sonderkommando inmates forced to work at the very bottom of “the Auschwitz hell.”

Editors

Afterword

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