

Remembering the Holocaust, Part 1

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This year marks the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II. Many nations are commemorating this historic dénouement in public ceremonies. In private moments, individuals are pausing to recall personal memories. The liberation of the Nazi death camps—especially for the victims and for those who witnessed their emancipation—is a vivid memory even now. I first saw the films of the death camps in 1945, while I was still in the US Army at Fort Meade, Maryland. I thought about my distant relatives who had probably perished in such a place. My family never heard from them again after 1940. Then, about 15 years later, I visited Dachau as a civilian.

I often thought about discussing this subject, but found it difficult to do so. Recently, I heard from Tomáš Radil-Weiss, a survivor of the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp and now professor and head, Section of Neurophysiology, Institute of Physiology, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, Prague. He suggested that I write an essay on the Holocaust and its reflection in the scientific literature. After considerable hesitation, I decided to attempt this; however, I soon realized that I could not give this important subject the treatment it deserved. After all, I had never been a prisoner in a concentration camp. How could I describe an era and a circumstance that survivors themselves call “beyond description”?

I learned that Radil-Weiss himself had written a description of the physiological and psychological aspects of captivity in a Nazi concentration camp. After I read his remarkable article, I felt that there was nothing I could add to his gripping eyewitness account. Radil-Weiss speaks of his experience at Auschwitz in the measured words of a scientist and objectively describes the conditions at the camp and their effects on himself and his fellow victims. His article, “Men in extreme conditions: some medical and psychological aspects of the Auschwitz concentration camp,” was published originally in the journal *Psychiatry* in 1983.¹ It is reprinted here with the permission of both the author and the publisher, the William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, Inc., Washington, DC.

In Part 2 of this essay, we will reprint an article by Kristine Moe, science reporter for the *San Diego Union*. Her article, originally published in 1984 in the *Hastings Center Report*,² raises the ethical question of whether or not the published records of so-called experiments that the Nazis conducted on their victims should be cited. I say “so-called” because the word “experiment” is an obnoxious euphemism that is sometimes used to describe the torture and murder carried out by camp physicians. The Nazis compounded their crimes (if that is possible) by dressing up their atrocities

in the guise of legitimate scientific inquiry. They even published the "results" in German medical journals.

In Part 2 we will also supply three select bibliographies concerning the psychological and physiological effects of the Nazi concentration-camp experience on survivors; medicine in Nazi Germany and "experimentation" on concentration-camp victims; and science and scientists under the Third Reich. I hope that these two reprints and the bibliographies will partially fulfill Radil-Weiss's request and give *Current Contents*[®] (CC[®]) readers an idea of the extent to which the Holocaust is reflected in the scientific literature.

As the years go by, the Holocaust increasingly passes from living memory into historical memory. Indeed, only one-quarter of today's world population was alive at the end of World War II. Those who witnessed the Holocaust years have a special obligation to teach the follow-

ing generations how, in that place and time, humanity went awry. We have autobiographical accounts, historical records, trial proceedings, and, thanks to modern technology, films and photographs of the Holocaust to serve as permanent reminders. There is an irony in this pictorial record of the Nazi atrocities. Some Orthodox Jews believe it is forbidden to take photographs, strictly interpreting the commandment that says "Thou shalt not make graven images." Yet this photographic record serves as some of the most vivid documentation of the Nazi crimes.

The mere possession of these words and images, however, will not suffice. We must commit ourselves to using these records to keep the memory of the Holocaust and its victims alive and to teach those who were not witness to that time the necessity of safeguarding the sanctity of all human life in every era.

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Men in Extreme Conditions: Some Medical and Psychological Aspects of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp

Tomáš Radil-Weiss

The second world war ended many years ago. Most of those who survived the stay at the German concentration camp at Auschwitz have already died of the consequences of their imprisonment; those still alive are already in the last third of their lives. Is there any point in returning to the experiences of those days? Consideration of the mental hygiene of former prisoners cautions us that perhaps we should not do it. But consideration of the general interest holds that we are not entitled to ignore any knowledge that can contribute to social development—including medicine and psychology—even if acquired under unspeakably awful conditions. In addition, since the war new generations have grown up that play an increasingly significant role in various spheres of life but have little concrete information about those events; they can neither rationally nor emotionally understand how the horrors connected with fascism and the war could have happened. In a sense it is encouraging that they cannot grasp such inhuman behavior; nevertheless, we must adhere to the following motto: "Nothing

Tomáš Radil-Weiss, MD, DSc, is Professor of Psychology and Head, Section of Neurophysiology, Institute of Physiology, Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 142 20 Praha 4-KRC, Vítězská 1083, Czechoslovakia.

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must be forgotten, nobody will be forgotten." We owe it to those millions who did not survive—both the victims of the Holocaust and those who fought against it.

These are arguments in favor of returning to the facts that are ineffaceably recorded somewhere in our memories. In doing so, however, we must remember that at times we are revisiting experiences of a boy of 14 as recalled by a 50-year-old man. The material below, examining the medical as well as psychological aspects of imprisonment of Auschwitz, is based on my own memories, as an adolescent imprisoned at Auschwitz. I have tried to move from this individual account to more general statements, although the methodological apparatus on which scientific analysis is usually based is absent.

Bodily Health

The goal of the fascists was to liquidate the prisoners in a short time. Auschwitz-Birkenau was an extermination camp. The children and old people from the transports coming from all of occupied Europe were killed by gas immediately after their arrival. Some of those who were capable of work were soon transported to Germany to the so-called work camps. Others—tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands—waited indefinitely, either for transport elsewhere or for death after postponement; as they waited, many died or came close to death from starvation and severe living conditions, gradually growing thinner and weaker and developing complete cachexia.

Our medical concepts are not appropriate for accurately describing the situation. Is it indeed possible to speak in terms of the bodily "health" of an overwhelming majority of prisoners undergoing starvation and vegetating in a state of extreme stress? The term "health" could perhaps be used for those undergoing a certain transitory state in the course of which the adaptive mechanisms were still able to respond to the stress to some extent and the afflicted person did not suffer from any disease. This adaptive reserve depended on several circumstances.

The most significant factor was probably age. The young survived better than the old. However, in this special situation, the young were those between 15 and 20 years of age and the old included almost everyone above 30. In a sense, a regression to the biology of the man of primeval ages or of his prehuman predecessors took place. The adaptations connected with civilization—including, among others, long life span—disappeared, and the ability of the group to reproduce was limited because the menstrual cycle of many women ceased. Theoretically, from the point of view of population biology, the decrease of the number of individuals competing for limited resources, and the narrowing of the age spectrum to those having the greatest

probability of survival, increased the chances that the group could outlast the crisis, save the genetic fund, and under favorable external conditions reproduce again. For those of us who survived, it is comforting to think that this might be a possibility. But under the given conditions, not even these ancient, prehuman, genetic adaptive mechanisms that emerged under the influence of inhuman external conditions could save most of those who were imprisoned. Nevertheless, not even the maximum inhuman environment, threatening the biological existence of man, led to his dehumanization. *Homo sapiens*, whose behavior has great social determinants, still bears somewhere in the depths of his nervous and genetic programs the information important for preserving not only the individual but also the group or species.

Inter-individual differences in adaptive reserve varied in both expected and unexpected ways. The evident physical form—i.e., the bodily structure, the quantity of muscular mass, the level of training, etc.—is an important factor but not the most significant one. Expert athletes sometimes quickly deteriorated and died. Personality, social relations, experience, and psychic functioning all played a role in reactions to the stress. An isolated individual tended to survive less well than those entrenched in social networks. Generally, the less well educated and those whose lives were in some sense simpler survived better than the intellectuals. Men of strong will, convinced of the importance of the principles they consistently followed, and imbued with a unified world conception, endured better than persons who vacillated in their points of view. Judging by survival patterns of parents and children exposed to similar conditions, a genetic factor involving resistance to stress may also be important. Under these exceptional conditions, where the stress was maximum and the reserves were subject to maximum depletion, it was more apparent than under normal circumstances to what an extent the neural and neurohumoral regulation of internal pro-

cesses in the organism depends on the psychic processes. Presumably these variable adaptive reserves are themselves related in some way to unknown physiological processes, not only in men but probably in all mammals, that could be of considerable importance even for resistance against pathogenic and other harmful external influences. Animal experimentation would be worthwhile in this area.

One might even speculate that the differentiated adaptive reserves in part function, in an extreme emergency, as a kind of biological regulation that reduces the number of individuals in a group representing a particular mammalian species in a specified biotope. I must of course stress that this kind of dispassionate physiological and biological reasoning—deductions from the experiences of the prisoners in the concentration camp—must be distinguished from the morally abominable “scientific” atrocities committed at Auschwitz, where the fascists used people as guinea pigs. After the liberation of the concentration camp by the Soviet army, I remember seeing around Cracow numerous twins and men with growth defects who were on their way back home to different parts of Europe after having been subjected to such “medical” experimentation by fascist “doctors.” Such activity must be explicitly condemned as an absolutely amoral crime.¹ In contrast, the attempt of the victims or potential victims to come to scientific conclusions from what has happened, perhaps to find something of general scientific significance in these tragic events, is certainly justifiable and in accordance with medical ethics.

The tragic phenomenon of practically irreversible, often terminal disintegration of internal regulatory processes emphasized the connection between psychic functioning and the preservation of strength. The syndrome characterized by overall cachexia was so common that the afflicted persons were for uncertain reasons called by a special term, *Muselman* (muslim). Such persons developed complete physical decrepitude, apathy, slowing of movements, and gradual disintegration of personality, including loss of the capacity for rational reasoning, of the system of values, and sometimes even of moral inhibitions. It was possible to get into such a state as a result of disease or of the gradual exhaustion of reserves, but the condition sometimes seemed to be of largely psychic origin. In many cases death followed merely if somebody ceased clinging actively to life—

that is, if life ceased to interest him and he gave up hope. Observations of this kind lead to speculations that active physiological processes related to the process of dying may result from certain mental states. Why one person became a *Muselman* and another under identical conditions did not, what determined how long the *Muselman* survived, and how these phenomena might be related to the timing of death under more familiar clinical conditions, are all legitimate scientific questions for which as yet we have not answers. Here I am not thinking about death as the natural and somewhat “automatic” conclusion of growing old—about which there are many altogether unsatisfying explanatory theories—but about dying as a phenomenon in which active physiological processes take part.

While a minority somehow preserved sufficient adaptive reserves so as to retain some degree of relative health, the majority died. Although death was often the result of general weakness, sometimes it was accelerated by specific pathological factors that affected the debilitated population more severely than usual. Death could even result from a small abrasion. Lacking any sterile solutions, the afflicted person usually rinsed in the urine of his fellow prisoners and had the wound dressed at the emergency ward with crepe paper. It often developed infection that ended in sepsis.

One of the most direct ways to the other world led through the camp hospital. Whatever the reason for the hospitalization, it was often accompanied by dysentery that within a few days could wreck a relatively strong man. Cardiacs, diabetics, and sufferers from other severe illnesses died soon after arrival because of the lack of medication.

Malnutrition was severe, usually connected with a deficiency in various vitamins. Many suffered from scurvy to a degree not seen since before the discovery of vitamin C, and then only under specific conditions. Dermatic affections and affections of mucous membrane appearing as a result of avitaminosis were quite common. Food rations were low and part of those meager rations was stolen by prisoners who served as functionaries in the camp hierarchy. The menu included: black coffee substitute, distributed early in the morning; its caloric value was minimal and its only attraction was that it was at least lukewarm. At noon the so-called *Eintopf*—one pot—was served; almost always, it was about a half-liter of some soup, a substantial part of which was boiled

turnip. In the evening, the main meal was distributed, bread and margarine; supposedly everybody received a quarter of a kilogram of bread, but it was actually much less.

Many men reduced their chances to survive by useless economy with this minimum quantity of food. They divided their ration into small helpings in order to make it last longer, but that meant that more calories were consumed in ingesting and processing the food, decreasing the quantity of energy available for maintenance of the organism. But most of them instinctively followed the regime of intermittent starving—i.e., they immediately ate everything given to them, and then did not eat at all for long periods. The effect of spreading out the taking of nourishment over a longer period of time was, of course, not scientifically ascertained until much later.

Any disease increased the probability that the afflicted person would be judged unfit during the next selection—that is, condemned to die by gas. This procedure also served as an epidemiological “preventive measure” against the spread of contagious diseases. *Sonderbehandlung*—special treatment—was a specific name for physical liquidation, which was evidently supposed to prevent epidemics of spotted fever.

Scabies was frequent, and was treated by several days in the hospital (with its usual risk) and the use of a special ointment. To prevent lice, external examinations of naked prisoners were periodically held at the roll calls. From time to time the prisoners were driven into shower rooms, after which they had to wait naked outside regardless of the weather and the season until they were dry and their clothes had been disinfected.

With respect to clothing, after arrival each prisoner had been allowed to keep only his own shoes and belt; other clothing consisted of the flimsy, striped prison uniform, a cap, and civilian underwear. I do not remember that the underwear was ever changed during the entire summer of 1944. The prisoners had to wash themselves in cold water, and at times were forced by beating to do so. Latrines were not open at night; instead the prisoners had to use tubs near the barracks. Every day the dead were thrown onto carts that the prisoners then dragged away to one of the crematories.

The prisoners slept in wooden barracks originally meant as stables. The flooring was of concrete; there was no furniture. Instead of beds, the prisoners slept on boards, without blankets. Since there were not

enough boards for all the prisoners, some slept on the floor, at times in places wet from dripping. In the summer of 1944 there were so many prisoners that they could not lie down side by side. They had to sit down in lines, with their legs parted and another man sitting in between each pair of legs. The upper part of the body of the prisoner in front was put on the abdomen of the prisoner behind. The whole line had to lie down at once.

Before or soon after sunrise, the prisoners were driven away from the barracks. Because even in summer it was cold and the prisoners were not adequately dressed, they used a specific collective adaptive measure for thermoregulation. Tens and even hundreds of men clung together; those who were at the periphery, and those not protected, periodically changed places with those in the center.

In spite of all those stressful circumstances, there were few sick prisoners. First, the young population selected as workers was endowed with considerable physical endurance. Second, almost every disease progressed and ended quickly, from lack of treatment, weakened resistance, exacerbation in the hospital, or deliberate extermination of afflicted persons. Under these circumstances, the instinct of self-preservation commanded the prisoners not to be ill. Not only did a “wisdom of the body” of unknown physiological origin seem to assert itself, but also almost everybody was aware that there was virtually no middle ground between disease and death and did his best to behave accordingly.

What I have thus far described could lead to a false notion that life under these conditions consisted only of the gradual deterioration of physiological functions, of the imperfect adaptation to stressful situations, and of negative emotions. However, positive emotions were also manifested, at times in an extraordinary intensity that is seldom found under normal circumstances. To undergo the selection process and to find oneself one of those remaining alive, or even to eat to full satiation—e.g., some turnip from the fields or baked potato peels—such experiences were connected with strong positive feelings. Interpersonal relations, too, were sometimes the source of positive emotions. Here again, though scientific measurements and explanations are lacking, it seems safe to say that the positive emotions were markedly correlated with better psychic and bodily resistance. One might postulate that cause and effect could go in either or both direc-

tions, but under these extreme conditions, the factor of positive feelings, which in normal life might have been overshadowed by other factors, put itself forward quite insistently as a possible health promoter. One could call it figuratively a "release" or "antistress" factor, although we cannot of course assume that it is conditioned by nervous and humoral actions that counteract those produced by stress. The accentuation of such a physiological antagonism is possible, however, in the sense that some active mechanism ensuring the maximal adaptation to any positive changes in the environment might conceivably produce neurohumoral components resulting in a corresponding release from stress. This phenomenon might be related to current investigations of the body's production of endorphins under certain conditions—such as exercise or laughter. The complex and unknown structure of the regulation of vegetative and endocrine processes leaves room for such possibilities—one of the many speculations arising out of these circumstances that might usefully be investigated experimentally.

Mental Health

Although I have already mentioned the close relations between psychic and somatic factors, I have heretofore been concentrating on the preservation of physical health. Here I shall emphasize psychological factors.

The physical liquidation that was the goal was made easier by psychological manipulations that were supposed to crush the prisoners' will to resist, reducing them to an obedient herd that would both work without grumbling until a state of complete exhaustion and offer no resistance when sent to death.

Initial arrival at the camp introduced an apocalyptic horror. It usually took place at night, with the prisoners driven from freight cars by the SS under strong searchlights. In the midst of a terrible uproar, assaulted by beatings, the prisoners were deprived of everything they had brought with them, divided according to sex, and classified as capable or incapable of work. Families were torn asunder, children were lost, and old people, babies, and the sick were immediately condemned to death, sent to gas chambers disguised as showers. Many perished because during this selection they supported older or sick persons. Some women were saved only because the prisoners who assisted at the arrival of the transport forcibly tore

their small children from their arms and gave them to older persons who they knew were condemned to death. The shocking effect of the combined tragedies was part of a devilish scheme, a well-organized evocation of mass psychosis, in which the separation of individuals from all family and social connections, the withholding of all information about the future, and the constant additional stress of beatings, orders, screams and crying, and haste reduced, at least temporarily, the possibility of rational responses and therefore of resistance.

Those capable of work underwent still another psychological manipulation when their heads and bodies were shaved at the same time that they were deprived of their personal clothing (except shoes and belts) and given the prison uniform. Deprived of their own clothes and personal belongings, many men in a sense lost part of their identity. Civilized man stripped naked under these conditions becomes a defenseless creature; his dignity, initiative, self-assurance, and will to resist are decreased. This phenomenon was frequently exploited through roll calls (*Appells*) of naked men in which a small number of guards could terrorize thousands of prisoners. Physical fatigue and lack of sleep also weakened resistance, since the prisoners' routine included beating and various exercises—e.g., knee bends—to the point of exhaustion, and frequently they were awakened at night by beatings.

An important means in the effort to demoralize the prisoners was the evocation of fear of any kind: of hunger, beating, torture, death, and so forth. While the newcomers were kept in the dark as to what would happen to them, which enabled their keepers to carry out the liquidation with traditional German organization and order, the camp prisoners were constantly and intentionally threatened with a similar fate. As the prisoners vegetated several hundred meters from the crematories, the black smoke coming from the chimneys constantly reminded them of their cremated fellow prisoners and of what was probably in store for them. The Germans' intention was to create a general and total fear. The fear did not arise because the individual had violated absurd camp regulations, and therefore he could not rid himself of the fear by obedience. The intent was to demoralize and gradually dehumanize everyone by insurmountable fear. But in spite of the "successful" mass slaughters and psychological manipulations, the fascists never reached their goal of complete demoralization of the prisoners.

They certainly did succeed in demoralizing many, and consequently in inducing some of the prisoners to act amorally with respect to their fellows. The prison administration succeeded in establishing a hierarchy among the prisoners, in which some of them busily and carefully executed German orders in exchange for certain rights and privileges. The majority of the camp functionaries were chosen from among German criminals—some of whom had been imprisoned as sadists—but others were chosen from among the Jews and political prisoners. They functioned as commanders of barracks called blocks, and were the heads of groups known as the "Kapos." It is striking how quickly the "quisling" hierarchy from among the prisoners was established. Within a few days, some "capable" prisoners who behaved morally under normal living conditions were able to reorient themselves and to find others who were also willing to change their values under these circumstances. Using power delegated to them, the prisoner-commanders created a system characterized by exact relations of subordination and superiority and by special social roles, which they used largely to terrorize the prisoners and rob them.

The formation of such exploitative groups unfortunately usually progressed more quickly than the formation of self-defense groups striving for collective survival. If any change affected the structure of the quisling hierarchy—e.g., if any were drafted for labor transport to the Reich, or even condemned to death—they reformed themselves again with extraordinary speed. Similar external shocks were followed by the rapid and matter-of-fact adaptation of the hierarchy, just as a new figure in a kaleidoscope is formed, with new relations among its elements, if we shake it. Social relations seemed to be formed most quickly among these cunning "wheelers and dealers," who were not numerous but who seemed to know each other according to some special signs visible only to themselves.

Groups of new prisoners who had passed the admitting procedure found themselves in the hands of this hierarchy. Sometimes they were directed to a special barracks where several corpses had been left to intimidate them; there they were forced by beatings to give away everything precious they might have succeeded in smuggling through the entry control, on or in their bodies. A considerable proportion of the prisoners' food fell prey to the members of similar "mafias" and their favorites and relatives. The robbing

of the prisoners by their fellow prisoners was done with the full knowledge and sanction of the Germans, who saw the prison hierarchy as a part of the grandiose fascist scheme for the liquidation of those hundreds of thousands deemed undesirable for the "millenary Reich." In this diabolical scheme even the shortcomings and weaknesses of some of the prisoners were taken into consideration.

The chances of survival depended to a considerable extent on the prisoners' individual capacity for psychological adaptation, which, as indicated, was closely connected with physiological adaptation. Although psychological adaptive reserve was important, social and sociopsychological factors were also significant. A substantial part of the psychic adaptation of the individual was based on the formation of relationships with other prisoners. If relatives, acquaintances, or countrymen were not among the fellow prisoners, the development of such relationships required time and appropriate circumstances.

At the beginning—and later under special conditions—the prisoners were assembled as a mass under circumstances in which mutual relations were minimum, and they reacted according to a simple ethological scheme familiar in primitive behavior of the gregarious type. They seldom adapted another conceivable strategy under similar circumstances—"run to avoid a beating." Their tendency was to stay somewhere in the middle of the group, to try to be neither the first nor the last; being first or last exposed the individual to a more extreme degree of potential risk and offered minimal protection and potential gain. One was never sure from which side the Kapo or another chieftain would approach and begin routine beatings with a stick or a truncheon, or when he would select prisoners for a special work detail exposed to danger. To be conspicuous through even a mere look or expression could conceivably result in a prisoner's being selected for something that would help him, but it was more likely that it would result in something that would make it more difficult for him to reach his basic goal—survival.

Recognizing the basic social antagonism in the concentration camp between the organized suppressing and murdering fascists and their toadies on the one hand and the exploited and doomed prisoners on the other, the prisoners soon started spontaneously to form small groups where they rendered each other at least some psychological and moral support and sometimes even material sup-

port. Such social structuralization of the mass of prisoners was of extraordinary importance for their psychic power of resistance and evidently, through it, for their physiological resistance as well.

The basic principle of the social relations within the framework of these small social groups was solidarity, manifested in the consistent observance of principles of equality, justice and unanimity. In the confrontation with the provisions and regulations instituted by a regime guilty of crimes against mankind, the prisoners created their own unwritten law, although an overwhelming majority of them at that time would have been unable to formulate it. That any individual observed this law and did not violate it, even under the most cruel conditions, cannot be regarded as heroism, for tens and hundreds of thousands behaved in this way. Perhaps a few thousand prisoners violated these unspoken rules of their coexistence.

The unwritten law seemed to have three parts. The first: Thou shalt not steal from your fellow prisoners; everything you have is less than the minimum; if you steal bread from your fellow prisoner, you are killing him and you side with the fascists. The second part: Thou shalt not harm your fellow prisoner, whether or not you might have some reason to do so. The third part, based on a similar altruistic approach to the others, cannot be formulated in such a biblically simple way. It included the idea of helping if you could and if you did not harm yourself; it also included loyalty toward the others and toward the collective—the opposite of what is usually called treachery. It also involved some individual discipline in the collective.

These "Three Commandments" seem sparse, but we must not forget that the prisoners were in a border area of human existence. To observe even these rules was no easy matter. There was little that was positive about the concentration camp, but there were certainly these ethical principles, and they enabled the prisoners to remain human beings even under inhuman conditions.

An important part of the psychic adaptation, speeded up by life in the collective, was the formation of a new system of values for living. Older people, with entrenched values based on previous experience, had more difficulty than the young in recognizing that very few things are essential in life. Only one categorical need was essential in the concentration camp: to survive, but not at the cost of exposing some other person's life to danger. Material values and money, social

standing, honors, origin, knowledge, talent, intelligence—all that became secondary, and accentuation of any of it was ridiculous. I remember how amused I was when an old man (certainly not more than 40) presented me with his tenement house in Vienna, which was worthless; but I greatly enjoyed a second present from him—a hand machine with which to give hair cuts, which could be exchanged for bread. Everything that benefited the categorical need to survive was allowed, proper and moral; everything that obstructed it was objectively hostile and subjectively immoral and required active countermeasures.

To steal from an inmate was an unpardonable crime; to get anything in any other way was desirable. A new term was even coined for that—"to organize"; it meant any complicated activity, including stealing from the German state, bringing concrete advantage and not harming fellow prisoners. On the other hand, to do more than necessary during the slave labor was a sin. Any contact with the fascists that could help them in any way was also a crime. The social polarization was complete. The antagonism between the prisoners and the fascists was primary and absolute, a question of life and death. The opposition between the majority of the prisoners who observed the laws of coexistence and the minority who violated them was secondary and relative. The wrongdoing could thus be scaled.

The relativity of the validity of moral principles—that is, their dependence on conditions determined by social factors—was also evident under other circumstances. To steal a potato from somebody was a severe offense if done by a normal prisoner, but it was not judged so severely if done by a *Muselman*. Even a certain moral disintegration of these human wrecks was rightly considered as the consequence of the fascists' influence. Particular acts of the fascists that from an *a priori* point of view might be seen as fair were not evaluated as the acts of just men under the given conditions. To give a concrete example: A pair of shoes was stolen from the stock by a member of one of the groups and was taken from him by a passing SS man, who gave them to a foreign prisoner whose shoes were worn out. The foreign prisoner accepted the shoes and exchanged them immediately with another prisoner for something he desired. The situation was now complicated, but under the given circumstances the prisoners' judgment was unanimous. The fascist continued to be the crim-

inal although his act superficially seemed fair. The rascal continued to be the rascal in spite of his partial "good" turn; like it or not, bad deeds at this level of evil were more important for an overall appraisal of men than the good ones, and these bad deeds could not be outweighed by the good. The shoes had been "organized" from the stock—i.e., they had been gained honorably and at considerable risk. They represented a great prize for the relevant collective. The prisoner who was given the present was not to blame for what the SS man had done, but he should have given the shoes back to the prisoner from whom the SS man had taken them.

Small social groups varied in size from two to several members; the number of members was limited by the external organizational conditions in the camp and mainly by the fact that social closeness did not develop unless all knew one another well and spent the greater part of their time together—i.e., within one another's sight. If anyone had to be absent frequently or for a protracted time, the group did not necessarily react with distrust but did manifest a certain disadvantageous estrangement. Although every collective had a leading spirit, he usually had no special privileges as compared with the others. In contrast to the strictly hierarchical cliques of exploitative prisoner-aides, the internal organization of prisoner collectives was extraordinarily democratic. Equality was manifested particularly in relation to the satisfaction of the basic necessity of life—i.e., to the distribution of both the rationed food and the "organized" food. Here the principle "one finds, another divides" was applied, which in this instance produced a just division.

Getting something extra for the group without expecting privileges as a reward for procurement initiative was routine rather than heroic behavior, although it was often associated with considerable danger. I remember, for example, that in the winter of 1944 I stole coal from the stock and hid from the Kapo behind a round pillar; as he went around the pillar, I had to shift to the opposite side on tiptoe. If he had caught me he might have killed me; I knew it, but I was more exhilarated than afraid. Service for the collective could under certain conditions be the reward itself, outweighing risks and sacrifices.

The distribution of food and eating were acts that became somewhat ritualized—not in the sense of a religion, of course, but from the ethological point of view. As this some-

what amorphous human mass began to display structure in the form of small social groups functioning under the given extreme conditions, sociobiological regularities belonging to the genetic fund of primates appeared that seem under normal conditions to be superimposed by developments and modified in terms of human and environmental specificities. But in addition to this hereditary basis for grouping, the relations in the prisoner groups had their own concrete and quite specific social and psychological contents, and different groups had specific systems of opinions, characterized by conspicuous ideological aspects. These social factors were of determining importance for the behavior of the members of the groups, with biological and ethological factors only secondary.

Higher and more active forms of social organization asserted themselves as circumstances changed. I saw that myself when about ten days before liberation, the prisoners' organization took over the management of the Auschwitz concentration camp, ensuring distribution of supplies, and so forth. Previously the rumored existence of such an organization had been an immense moral stimulus for the prisoners. I was assigned such tasks as guarding the camp, caring for sick inmates and "pilfering" for them from the SS stocks, and carrying supplies from the German stockpiles to hiding places for the needs of the Soviet army. All that seemed to me at the time to be natural, easy, and interesting; only later did I realize that it was dangerous. Stimuli that under conditions of peace would have been considered as fear-inducing did not evoke such reactions if they were connected with strong positive emotions. Positive feelings could be associated not only with solidarity and altruistic service to the collective, but also with anything that harmed the Germans. The air raids, during which bombs fell without choosing their victims, were a kind of all-camp folk festivity. I remember feeling mostly happy when once during an air raid a group of us were forced back to the camp by an SS riding a bike, even though I could not run any more, my lungs were bursting, and it was really a matter of life and death.

Still another organizational form that occasionally appeared involved prisoners with imagination, enterprise, organizational capacities, and, usually, a tendency to gloss over ethical objections to particular kinds of activities. Such hustlers successfully invented needless work, hired other prisoners for a

small share in the profits, and themselves only directed and organized the projects—i.e., did nothing. For example, they would suggest the needless digging of drain ducts that never worked, the senseless decoration of barracks blocks, or the planting of small flower gardens. The main "merit" of such ideas was that the person who approved the work—the block manager or Kapo—usually paid in bread and other foodstuffs stolen from other prisoners.

Another such "work" operation—bringing the prisoners to a near-by meadow for "bricks" of sod to be used for lawn decoration—was actually a grandiose camouflaged prostitution scheme of the prisoner functionaries; with the participation of some of the SS, women prisoners were brought to the same meadow.

The pseudo-work not only yielded some reward but also protected the prisoners somewhat against real work. The prisoner doing something with any tool appeared to be somehow protected by a special psychic shield; he was more inconspicuous and he less easily triggered aggressive reactions from the fascists and their assistants. Evidently a psychological regularity familiar in wars applied here: reportedly, by carrying a stepladder or pail, people have succeeded in getting through the frontlines of belligerents facing each other. But parasitic organizational forms of this kind occurred in the camp only under exceptional conditions and were of only peripheral importance.

The prisoners were also able to exploit other partial psychological regularities. For example, when two prisoners went together to get rations, if one of them talked to the food distributors, who usually belonged to the clique of thieves, and thereby distracted his attention, the other could return unobserved for a second portion.

Other behavior in response to partial psychological law involved learning what expressions, postures and movements would prevent a prisoner from being attacked by sadistic guards and Kapos. Unconsciously, they learned useful kinds of nonverbal communication, so important for higher creatures.

Individual rebellion that was objectively useless and was the manifestation of an acute neurotic reaction—a kind of short-circuited action resulting from the collapse of psychic resistance—was often manifested through the loss of such psychological mimicry. I remember a prisoner who usually behaved rather inconspicuously but who suddenly, in

the winter of 1944, refused to obey the order of an SS to take off his spectacles. He was dragged off behind the gate of the potato stock and shot; an SS Alsatian licked his blood running under the gate.

Another manifestation of an acute neurotic reaction was hallucinations. On my 14th birthday, in November 1944, I thought I heard my father, who was in Dachau, whistling our family signal. I remember at Christmas 1944 that one of the prisoners cried inarticulately for hours, "Hitler, Hitler!" Like the somatic diseases, psychic disorders usually led to a quick exitus.

I also saw various abnormal psychic reactions related to the separation of prisoners who were to be executed from those who for the time being were allowed to live. Even for young people, the process produced extreme psychic stress. One of these selection procedures, for example, involved a horizontal bar placed between the goalposts of a football field. Anyone who was tall enough so that his head reached the bar remained alive; the rest went to the gas chamber. I barely succeeded in reaching it.

At one time I was selected for the group scheduled to die and spent three days with several hundreds of other prisoners in the block for those condemned to death. Some reacted hysterically; some sang funeral songs to themselves; some waited indifferently and looked like catatonics; some tried desperately, despite their weakened physiques, to jump up to the small ventilation window in the ceiling; and one or two somehow escaped and melted into the crowd of other prisoners. But most of them behaved surprisingly quietly—one could say courageously—and passed their time in agreeable discussions and in singing well-known songs. And of course all knew quite well what was ahead. Strangely, the proximity of one's own end caused less horror than the unseen—such as that on a night in 1944 when for several hours only desperate screams, the roar of the SS, and the droning of trucks told us that the fascists were liquidating the entire sector of the camp where there were thousands of German Gypsies and their families.

When the day came for our condemned group to leave the block, it was raining; the SS, in black capes, surrounded us with sub-machine guns and dogs and headed us toward the near-by crematory, from the chimney of which the smoke was pouring just as it had been throughout the summer and autumn of 1944. On the way we met an SS officer riding a bike. He stopped the

marching group, brought it to a neighboring block, and took several of the prisoners out of the "death" group. I was among them. Why me and not the others? I believe that it was not only because of my physique but also because my desperate desire to stay alive was evidently manifested in my conduct: unlike most of the others, whose attitude conveyed that they had given up, I had never lost hope or the desire to live. This seems to be an example of a situation where nonverbal communication played a role, although the participants were not fully aware of it. When I by chance escaped from certain death, I experienced positive emotions in an extreme intensity, far beyond anything experienced under normal conditions. I felt the same emotions when the Soviet army came to the concentration camp.

Conclusion

On January 27, 1945, before noon, I was on duty, hidden not far from the camp entrance, which bore the well-known and ironic motto, "*Arbeit macht frei*" (Labor gives freedom). About noon I saw the last German running away, dragging his rifle behind him in the snow. About an hour later the Red Army soldiers had arrived, infantry men with submachine guns on horse-drawn

vehicles, plus several tanks. In several places they pulled down the barbed-wire fences. They looked around for fascists, but found none. They put up a field kitchen and started to cook for everyone.

In these reflections on some medical and psychological aspects of the imprisonment in the Auschwitz concentration camp I have tried to be objective. I have tried to be accurate in my recollections, and I have tried to find a more general validity in my individual experiences. It was impossible, however, to separate my subjective reactions completely from the more objective ones.

The main theme that I have deduced from these recollections is that even the most cruel, most antihuman and most reactionary regime, applying the most drastic methods, cannot succeed in depriving men of their humanity, in breaking down their morale completely and preventing social functioning. Men pass through hard and unwelcome trials and become more enlightened, more experienced, and more steeled—tightly twisted—against adversity. They can exploit even such experiences to their benefit and to the benefit of mankind. In my own case, my special professional interests may have been influenced by my experiences. Above all, survivors recognize life in peace as one of the highest human values.

1. Lifton R J. Medicalized killing in Auschwitz. *Psychiatry* 45:283-97, 1982.