

Non-Jewish Victims in the Concentration Camps

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The concentration camp system employed organized abuse as the means of solving a variety of real and imagined problems. The Nazis and their collaborators targeted many groups for a range of special abuses as they sought to impose several types of solutions—temporary, partial, haphazard as well as a total, systematized, Final Solution.

The Holocaust, the Final Solution to the Jewish problem, marked all Jews for extinction. Yet the Nazis were determined to solve within the concentration camp system other irritating, threatening, or distasteful problems by targeting other groups for carefully conceived solutions that always included suffering, dehumanization, degradation, and, more often than not, death.

The systematic annihilation of a group of six million people crossing all country boundaries quickly became a demanding, multinational program. It depended on controlled organizational culture and shared behavior molded into a comprehensive structure welded together by the authoritarian power of a state. As an evolutionary experiment, the Final Solution was far more complex than Hitler's other solutions. The Jews were always at risk; they were exterminated everywhere the Nazis came to power. A majority of Jews spent time in ghetto or transient camps. Many of them starved there. Einsatzgruppen shot another large group in eastern Europe. During his last moments on earth, Hitler reaffirmed the unique, singular place the Jews occupied in his life, his wars, and all of his solutions. In his last statement, he wrote not against the Poles or the Gypsies, but against the Jews: "Centuries will pass . . . but our hate will ever be renewed toward the people who are in the final analysis responsible, whom we have to thank for all this: international Jewry; . . . which is actually to blame for this murderous battle."

The solutions imposed by the Nazis relentlessly eliminated Germany's effective and imagined enemies at home and wherever the Nazis moved. Non-Jews were killed everywhere throughout the system. Clearly, important differences existed among the groups, particularly in the rules legislated for them and the proper behavior demanded of them. The means of death differed among the groups the Nazis targeted. Thus, some groups could hope to survive while others lived under a sentence of death. Choice mattered. Some victims were targeted because of what they did; others because of what they were. The Nazis' objective toward the different groups varied from political reeducation to subservience, from behavioral modification to genocide. Efforts to struggle, fight, and be strong could have an impact on the fate of some victim groups but not on all. It mattered if the Nazis wanted to kill one's mind, spirit, soul, and integrity before the victim was murdered.

The final and partial solutions to the Nazis' perceived problems involved much more than mere death. The system was in a constant state of expansion and flux. It seemed always on the move, striving to catch up. It was forced to evolve from a primitive incarceration project to a vast, unprecedented network for the suppression, containment, exploitation, and extermination of millions of people of various nationalities designated as enemies of the state or as members of subhuman, inferior, or irritating groups.

No one knows exactly how many camps existed, but they numbered in the thousands. The sheer enormity, complexity, constant movement, and, at times, chaos of the multinational system precludes a precise determination of the number of victims. We know that at least eighteen million Europeans passed through the system, that at least eleven million died in it, and that at least four million died at Auschwitz/Birkenau alone. We know that the Nazis murdered approximately six million Jews. The Nazis also purposefully and systematically murdered at least another five million non-Jews. More than a million children were murdered, many of them tiny or newborn or unborn infants.

The system included major and official camps and hundreds of subsidiary camps and *Kommandos*, each with its central mother camps, stretched like giant spiderwebs over the whole of Europe. The *modus operandi* changed; the aims conflicted; the categories and purposes of the camps and the characteristics of the impacted groups differed as did the degrees of abuse.

Who were these groups? Picture a cattle car. The Jews emerge first. Most are selected for instant extermination, others to contribute their

bodies for labor and medical experimentation before inevitable death, interrupted only by chance or a rare kindness. Out of the second car spill the Gypsy families, an array of bright colors standing in sharp contrast to the gray surroundings, with faces filled with confusion and bewilderment. They move off in a group to the family camp—to recover, they think, from their journey, but in truth to spend their days idly until the proper night when the gas chambers and crematoria are freed to erase the entire conclave.

The doors of the third car open and the homosexuals spill forth, males only, because as Himmler concluded, "lesbians can give birth." The taunting, jeers, and blows of the guards stun the men. They will stay a night and then be rerouted to Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald to be with their kind. The pink triangle they will soon wear is a result of a judgment that they have broken Article 175A, by sexual act, by kissing, by embracing, by fantasy and thought. Some will be given an opportunity to recant by successfully completing sexual activity with a woman in the camp brothel. Most others will find themselves tormented from all sides as they struggle to avoid being assaulted, raped, worked, and beaten to death.

Out of a fourth car step recalcitrant clergy; priests, nuns, congregants of all Christian faiths—there because of some act of affirmation, some deed of decency—whose fate differs: some shall be given favored treatment; others shall rise to martyrdom; others are to be spit upon and worked to death. They are joined in line by the prisoners of conscience—the Jehovah's Witnesses, who reaffirm the supremacy of their Bible over the ideology of the Third Reich, and whose fate varies from death to eventual release.

From car five stumble the Russian POWs, whose brutal treatment in the camps violates every standard of warfare. Out of car six come those the Nazis deemed subhuman—Poles, Slavs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Russians. They will contribute their labor to the war effort if they do not die in the process. The next car contains the politicals—primarily Communists and Socialists whose fate will depend on whim, chance, will, and the camp of ultimate destination. They are followed by resistance fighters from every nation, caught in acts against the Nazis, who have lived through torture and avoided the firing squad. Where possible, both groups formed the internal core of camp resistance.

From the eighth car emerge the physically disabled, including hunchbacks and dwarfs who will be killed, their bodies stripped, and their

skeletons subjected to careful analysis by Nazi anatomists. Those with skulls of unusual shape will also be killed, their skulls deftly separated from their bodies and studied. Twins will be examined, tested, and operated on by Dr. Mengele in his favorite research project.

The ninth car, slyly termed the *medical center*, disgorges those the euthanasia program missed: older women and men and a coughing, stumbling mass of ill people—sick from the full range of human diseases—as well as a disoriented assortment of mentally ill patients. The crippled with crutches, wheelchairs, missing limbs, and the widest variety of artificial limbs fall off the train. The ramp selectors quickly move the entire group to the gas chamber line for immediate extermination. The Sonderkommando later collects all the crutches, artificial limbs, prostheses, and wheelchairs and stores them in barracks.

Those alighting from the next car are deaf, dumb, or blind. From car eleven step a conglomeration of notables, common criminals, and those people whom an individual Nazi simply did not like. Out of the last car, car twelve, come a stunningly large group of women, the many pregnant women, and children. These women and children are of all nationalities, languages, religions, joined together by their sex or merely because they are mothers of young children or pregnant.

This then is the concentration camp universe. Every one of these humans can anticipate brutal treatment, starvation, torture, overwork, disease—at the very least. The distinctions are blurred as they move down the mud paths to the disinfection rooms and their barracks—where the moments of shared truth await.

The Holocaust is an experience of intended total extermination for all Jews. It is best to leave the Holocaust to them. Hitler had several other deadly solutions in mind for a variety of problems. They may not have been final or total, but once those camp gates clanged shut, all prisoners, whatever distinctions they had among themselves, were united by the obscene systematic abuse they suffered. As a survivor of Flossenbürg noted:

You don't die of anything
except death.
Suffering doesn't kill you.
Only death.¹

The Poles The Polish nation, caught as it was in a vicious vise between Russia and Germany, experienced both the wrath and the disdain of Hitler

and the terror of Stalin. The German occupation lasted longer in Poland than in most other countries and was by far the most severe. Hitler intended to clear large areas of Poland for Germany's expanding population. He designated the General Government, which already contained 45 percent of the Polish populations, as the gathering place for Poles and Jews—a reservoir of slave labor, a dumping ground for undesirables, and an extermination reservation with the two huge labor/extermination complexes, Majdanek and Auschwitz. Hitler moved in two million Poles from the incorporated territories.

Hitler harbored a great distaste for the Poles and outlined specific steps he would take in Poland when the war ended. Poles for whom Aryanization was either impossible or undesirable were to be reduced to an animal state. In several regions, Hitler would halt Polish education.

Stutthof near the Baltic coast became the wartime site of one of the strictest and most primitive of the official concentration camps. It was the first camp established on Polish territory and the last in occupied Europe to be liberated. About 120,000 prisoners passed through its gates, citizens of many European countries. Stutthof played a major role in the extermination and incarceration of the Polish people.² First came the Polish activists, then the POWs, the postmen, railroad employees, firemen, soldiers, famous professors, journalists, writers, judges, mayors, and 250 priests. When Hitler invaded additional countries, Norwegian policemen, Danish Communists, Lithuanian and Ukrainian officials and intellectuals, and Russian POWs arrived. The most serious feature of Stutthof was labor; most inmates died of work, starvation, and disease, in addition to being beaten, tortured to death. Because the Poles did not starve fast enough, the SS hanged them from trees, drowned them in the mud, and burned them alive in wood furnaces.³

In Sachsenhausen, considered an easy camp, the SS punished and harassed the Polish prisoners ceaselessly, as they did in Buchenwald, the "Little Camp." In Buchenwald, considered a moderate camp, most prisoners simply died. Polish and French prisoners lived in tents. Wet, dirty, exhausted, sick, and starving, they fought to remain alive in the impossible conditions. Inmates referred to Buchenwald as the "camp of slow death."⁴

The "Hangman of Buchenwald," Martin Sommer, did not like Poles, and he forced the men to immerse their testicles in ice-cold or boiling water, then painted them with iodine as their skin came off in strips. "He chained seven young Poles to their cots with a diet of saltwater and pickles.

They perished after the entire camp heard their screams and moans for several days."⁵

When the Nazis took over Poland, Himmler's document, *Reflections on the Treatment of Peoples of Alien Races in the East*, directed the SS to select from that conglomeration of inferior people living in the General Government the racially valuable and bring them to Germany for assimilation. The Nazis initiated an extensive program of kidnapping foreign children with good racial and physical characteristics and sending them to Germany to special camps. Himmler's directive was as follows: "The conditions in which these people live . . . are a matter of complete indifference to us. They interest me only to the extent that we need them as slaves for our culture."⁶

In eastern Europe, the Germans hunted for their future little Germans throughout the playgrounds and orphanages, among adopted and illegitimate children, children with Polish guardians, children of mixed marriages and of divorced, deported, or banished parents, children born in camps, and children who happened to be walking down the street. The Germans kidnapped an estimated 200,000 Polish children. "The boys with whom the Nazi indoctrination methods succeeded were to become SS mercenaries. Many smaller girls brought to Germany and selected as slaves were sterilized at the age of four, five, six, or seven; the young boys were castrated. Young girls between eight and twelve were placed in medical centers and given hormone injections to accelerate puberty, and then selected to breed. After bearing three or four children in SS maternity homes, they would be given an injection and simply cease to exist."⁷

One Polish child survivor of the kidnapping system wrote that many children went out of their minds:

Children who wetted their beds were sent to Block 8, which had no doors or windows. The children were given blankets that were as thin as spiders' webs, . . . and during the night they froze. Next morning we had to use picks to cut the stiff bodies away from the plank beds.

. . . We flung them into a mass grave, threw lime over them and covered them with earth. Sometimes they were not quite dead. When they began to suffocate through lack of air, the earth over the grave moved like a cornfield in the wind. . . . On an average day, 120 of the 3,000 or 4,000 children died.⁸

In spite of the approaching end of the war and the advancing Allied armies, the Germans continued to gather Polish children, stuff them into boxcars without food or blankets, and try to ship them to Germany. The

cars of Polish children, referred to as death trains, were filled with babies who died en route. Only about 20,000 Polish children were returned to their country after the war.⁹

The Gypsies The Nazis were determined to exterminate the Gypsies, based on the law of 1935: "In Europe generally only Jews and Gypsies are of foreign blood." By a December 1942 decree, the Nazis were to deport all German Gypsies to Auschwitz, regardless of age or sex. On March 29, 1943, the order was given to deport all Dutch Gypsies to Austria. The Nazis then destroyed the European Gypsy communities and deported many to Jewish ghettos and the camps. Gypsy names appear on the death lists throughout the system.¹⁰

The Nazis sent convoys of Gypsy families from all over central Europe to Birkenau. About 21,000 Gypsies passed through the camp. Birkenau overflowed with Gypsy children. When Himmler visited, he saw the Gypsy children, ravaged by filth and starvation, with grotesquely twisted bodies, their faces without noses, and teeth protruding through skinless cheeks. He took pity and ordered everyone in the Gypsy compound to be gassed.¹¹

In Sachsenhausen the Germans performed experiments on Gypsies in an attempt to show they had different blood from Germans.¹² The first transport arrived in 1939 at Ravensbrück—Gypsy children with their mothers. Later Dr. Clauberg sterilized all the Gypsy women and their young daughters between the ages of five and eight. After sterilization, the Gypsy children "used to come out crying, asking their mothers what had been done to them."¹³

Buchenwald had a special section created for Gypsies. In the spring of 1939, a Gypsy tried to escape. After recapturing him,

Commandant Koch had him placed in a wooden box, one side covered by chicken wire. The box was only large enough to permit the prisoner to crouch. He then had large nails driven through the boards, piercing the victim's flesh at the slightest movement. The Gypsy . . . was kept in the roll call area for two days and three nights, without food. His dreadful screams had long since lost any semblance of humanity.¹⁴

One Gypsy told of the death of her sister and niece:

First the girl was forced to dig a ditch, while her mother, seven months pregnant, was left tied to a tree. With a knife they opened the belly of the mother, took out the baby and threw it in the ditch. Then they threw in the mother and the girl, after rapping her. They covered them with earth while they were still alive.¹⁵

The Nazi Gypsy Solution killed three-quarters of the German and one-half of the Austrian Gypsies. By 1945, the Nazis had murdered at least 220,000 of the estimated 700,000 European Gypsies.¹⁶

Accused Homosexuals When Himmler opened his war against homosexuality in 1933, he estimated the number of homosexually inclined men in Germany at one million, or 10 percent of male Germans. He thought it impossible to lock up and reeducate millions; therefore he preached their eradication. No one has a final count of the accused homosexuals killed in the camps, but the Nazis categorized as the worst subhumans Jews, homosexuals, and Gypsies. They were the scum of humanity who had no right to live and who suffered most frequently and severely from tortures, beating, and every medical examination that could be performed on humans—and animals.¹⁷

The Nazis collected Germany's homosexuals, threw them into jails and camps, and labeled them with pink triangles on their camp uniforms. Many camps had homosexual inmates but Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald housed the largest numbers, in their "queer blocks"—for "back-breaking labor, murder, hunger, and torture."¹⁸

We know how the SS brutally assaulted and sexually abused the Sachsenhausen homosexuals, calling them "filthy queers."¹⁹ As one survivor recalled: "I was the only available target on whom everyone was free to vent his aggressions." Another survivor described an ordinary death of a young healthy homosexual. The guards beat him to a pulp, calling him a pervert, and then put him in an icy shower. Thoroughly drenched, he was forced to stand outside in the bitter cold night:

When morning came, his breathing had become an audible rattle. Before he died, he was again beaten and kicked. Then he was tied to a post and placed under an arc lamp until he began to sweat, again put under a cold shower and so on. He died toward evening.²⁰

When demands for labor by essential industries reached a hysterical level, the Nazis allowed some of the Sachsenhausen homosexuals to be rehabilitated and released as civilian laborers. Rehabilitation took two forms. If a candidate performed "properly" with a prostitute, he might be released as cured. If he failed and agreed to castration, he might be released for heavy labor.²¹

The Recalcitrant Clergy, Christians, and Prisoners of Conscience In 1940, Himmler designated Dachau for the incarceration of all clergy scattered throughout the system. It became a meeting place for the clergy of all nations, of different creeds—a majority of whom were Poles.²² In 1960 on the day of the dedication of the Monument of Atonement in Dachau, a thousand Catholic young men walked from Munich carrying a heavy cross followed by a hundred priests wearing white robes, priests who as inmates had marched on the camp street in stripped uniforms. Former prisoner Archbishop Adam Kozłowiecki celebrated the pontifical mass, and the congregants joined in a special atonement for the particularly bitter persecution of the Jews and the hatred shown to other races. In the sermon, the bishop grappled with the symbol of Dachau: "Here inhumanity became the law of man. It is fatal to fall into the hands of man."²³

The Jehovah's Witnesses or the "Bible students, Bible-worms, bible-bees," as they were called, refused to acknowledge the supremacy of the nation over God or to sign a statement repudiating their religion. The abuse experienced by those prisoners of conscience ranged from extremely mild abuse to torture and murder. Martin Gilbert reminds us that the Nazis murdered the Witnesses at Mauthausen along with the Jews and homosexuals. But at Auschwitz, Commandant Hoess blindly wrote of the women as "contented with their lot":

They hoped that, by suffering in captivity for Jehovah's sake, they would be given good positions in His kingdom, which they expected to enter very soon.

. . . I have always regarded Jehovah's Witnesses as poor, misguided creatures, who were nevertheless happy in their way.²⁴

The Russian POWs Commandant Hoess wrote about the cruel extermination of the Soviet POWs, of whom only a very few survived. He witnessed the gassing of 900 Russian POWs at Auschwitz. The commandant of Gross-Rosen killed 65,000 Russian inmates in six months by feeding them soup made of grass, water, and quantities of salt followed by quantities of cold water.²⁵ In Flossenburg, the SS burned the Russian POWs alive, and in Majdanek, they shot them into trenches.

In 1945, in Mauthausen, the SS determined to kill 1,700 new arrivals—predominantly Russians and Poles. They sent them outside nude. That night the temperature dropped below freezing. The prisoners stood in the square for four hours as they were sprayed alternately with hot water.

Icicles formed all over their bodies. One remarkable prisoner, the Russian general Karbychev, walked among them, giving them comfort. He promised to set an example by dying on his feet. "At the next shower of water he leaned against the wall and immediately thick ice formed a coffin around him."²⁶

Euthanasia Euthanasia: The Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases, 1933, provided that "anyone who is suffering from a hereditary disease can be sterilized by a surgical operation." A German medical economist in 1943 lamented the high cost of caring for deaf-mutes, cripples, mentally ill, or deficient persons. He objected that the state spent far more for the existence of these actually worthless compatriots than for the salary of a healthy man. It was no surprise that the first category of victims were the *Ausschusskinder*, or "garbage children," previously institutionalized or sterilized. By 1940 with the liquidation of children well under way, the Nazis turned to the adults—the insane, feebleminded, epileptic, crippled, old, ill—with all the activity used as a training ground for methods and personnel in the subsequent Hitlerian solutions.²⁷

Gross-Rosen became a major Polish camp active in the euthanasia program and in Hitler's subjugation of the Polish people. Many inmates were the undesirables for whom the final solution was euthanasia. Gross-Rosen participated in the project more actively than any other camp. The purpose was to eliminate the "useless eaters," drawn from every German mental institution and hospital for crippled and old, and from the groups of mentally and bodily deficient children, insane Russians and Poles, and those with arteriosclerosis, tuberculosis, and cancer—persons no longer of any value to the state.²⁸

The Oddities Clearly to be different in Nazi Germany and wartime Europe was to be placed in extreme peril. Particularly dangerous was tattooed skin. A Czech doctor, Franz Blaha, testified before the Nuremberg Tribunal that in Dachau he had flayed the skin off bodies, after which it was chemically treated and placed in the sun to dry. He then used it for a variety of leather merchandise.²⁹ Tattooed skin was big business in Sachsenhausen, and the pathology department kept its eyes open for richly tattooed prisoners. The Mauthausen doctors also operated a thriving skin business. They skinned bodies of prisoners with interesting tattoos and sent the skin to processing for book covers, gloves, luggage, and lamp shades.³⁰

In Buchenwald, "the SS immediately cataloged every tattooed prisoner on entering the camp, and when his order came up, the doctors called him to the dispensary and killed him by injection." The doctors sent some skin to the tattoo collection at a special museum in Berlin. They also found that the skin made excellent lamp shades, several of which were expressly fitted for Frau Koch, wife of the commandant. Decorators pleaded for tattooed skins for their customers.³¹

The Sachsenhausen pathology department supplied universities and anatomical institutes with skulls, skeletons, and organs, and murdered patients who aroused their strange medical interests. In Natzweiler, professors from Strasbourg selected from the prisoners who died there, whom had been pickled in pits, those with the most unusual heads; they placed the bodies in trucks and took them to the Strasbourg medical school.³²

The Buchenwald researchers collected and prepared human skins, heads, and skulls for the SS. The medical chief of Department D of the WVHA, Dr. Loeling, wrote several times to the pathological section director in Buchenwald: "I need immediately ten entire skeletons, twelve skulls, or individual parts of the body, or we need some interesting bullet wounds." Hunchbacks or other persons whose physiognomy was of medical interest "excited the anatomical and macabre avarice of half-crazed doctors who were not averse to killing to obtain the skeletons to incorporate into the collections of the SS doctors or the display in the SS Medical Academy at Graz." A clerk in the pathology department testified that one day the camp physician pointed at a passing inmate and told the clerk that he wanted that skull on his desk the next day. "The next day he [the inmate] was on my autopsy table and the skull was taken apart, and it was turned over."³³ One former inmate, who worked in medical experimentation areas, told me it was like being confined to a zoo—surrounded by skulls, bones, and bottles of organs.

The SS spent much time on the selection platforms hunting for the twins and dwarfs of Europe. In Dr. Mengele's secret lab in Auschwitz, he murdered twins, dwarfs, and hunchbacks to provide the Berlin Institute of Anthropology with human organs and to discover the secrets of multiple birth.

Women of All Races In general the Nazis declared all Aryan men superior to all women, but Aryan women could bear the vital next generation of Aryan men. The non-Aryan could not. The Nazis therefore developed a

program aimed at destroying non-Aryans and eliminating and suppressing ethnic groups and national characteristics. They implemented their program by kidnapping children, by forcing women to have abortions, by taking away the infants of eastern workers, by severely punishing them for sexual intercourse with Germans, by preventing mixed marriages, by hampering reproduction of enemy nationals.

The Nazis' motto was, "Aryan women out of the factories, non-Aryan women in." While the Aryan woman left the factory for the home, the non-Aryan woman left her home for the labor squads and the factories if she was fortunate, for the camps and the gas chambers if not. Aryan babies and children were cherished; non-Aryan babies were destroyed at birth or aborted during pregnancy. In many instances the non-Aryan's pregnancy was considered such an audacity that the SS killed two birds with one stone by throwing the pregnant woman into the gas chamber. Non-Aryan children suffered and died or were experimented on, or worked and died.

In the camps, Commandant Hoess wrote:

Everything was much more difficult, harsher and more depressing for the women, since general living conditions in the women's camp were incomparably worse. . . . The sanitary and hygienic conditions were notably inferior. . . . The general congestion was far greater than in the men's camp.

[In Birkenau,] from every point of view, and at all times, the worst conditions prevailed in the women's camp. This was so even at the very beginning, when it still formed part of the base camp. . . . the survival of a Jewess in Birkenau was twice as improbable as the survival of non-Jewish prisoners—improbable as that was too.³⁴

Ravensbrück, the only major camp for women, contained a great mixture of cultures, including Polish and French women, almost all female Jehovah's Witnesses, resisters, politicals, Jews, and, of course, always the children. One hundred thirty thousand women and children passed through, 90,000 to their death.

A Polish woman who had escaped the Ravensbrück gas chamber told what happened to her countrywomen:

During the winter, the SS on one day nailed shut the windows of their block's washroom, crammed in as many women as possible, and locked the doors. After a few days they decided to see how the experiment had worked—by setting up a motion-picture camera to film the emerging survivors. These prisoners had torn away the chimney bricks to try to get air and had ripped off all their clothing; several had died or were unconscious, others had evidently gone mad.³⁵

After filming the scene, the SS sent all the women to the crematorium.

Medical experiments on women were especially frequent, gruesome, and interventionist. In Auschwitz a hospital orderly wrote of his assignment one day to a corpse removal squad:

On the left lay about seven exceptionally beautiful dead women. The breasts of the dead women had been cut off, as had been the flesh from many parts of their bodies—the sides, for example. The yard sloped steeply and the drains were clogged with blood. We waded in blood over our ankles.³⁶

The Rabbit Guinea Pigs—a strange group drawn together as the female subjects of Ravensbrück's experimental operations—were subject to one of the most horrifying crimes in the concentration camp system. The experiments used primarily young, healthy Polish women like rabbits in a laboratory, infecting them with various diseases and performing on them the most disfiguring, disgusting, and bizarre of all surgical operations in the long history of the Third Reich's experimental medical program. The sadistic experiments included infectious operations on limbs; regeneration testing on bones (breaking, removal, grafting), on muscles (removal, grafting), on nerves; amputation of limbs and bone transplantation; and sterilization with surgery, X-rays, chemotherapy into the uterus.³⁷ The Nazis sought to develop an inexpensive, unobtrusive and rapid method of sterilization that could be used to wipe out Russians, Poles, Jews, and other people. At Auschwitz, Dr. Clauberg sterilized several thousand Jewish and Gypsy women by injecting inflammatory liquid into the uterus.

The operations on a special group of feebleminded or mentally ill women in Ravensbrück concerned the removal of certain limbs. The doctors amputated the lower extremities with a disarticulation in the hip joint. They performed the same operation on the upper extremities, with the elimination of the shoulder. To see if bones could be transplanted to German soldiers, they sent the amputated limbs, wrapped in operating sheets, to the military hospital.³⁸

What was it like to be pregnant in Birkenau, or to bear a child? What happened to women who brought children with them? For Aryan women, the treatment was sometimes different than for non-Aryans, but for both it was inhuman. A midwife in the Aryan hospital recalled that about three thousand children were born with her help. "All newborn babies until 1943 were drowned in a small barrel. After each delivery, loud gurgles and the splashing of water could be heard in the next room. Later the new mother

would see her baby's body thrown outside and torn apart by rats."³⁹ Of the three thousand babies born in the midwife's section, only thirty survived after 1943.

The Children of All Nations Historians estimate the number of murdered young people below the age of eighteen at one million. The concentration camp system of organized abuse evidenced its greatest antipathy toward the group called children. The SS separated thousands of children from their parents and sent them to Buchenwald. Most were Jewish and Polish children or the children of executed partisans. Only nine hundred survived. In the fall of 1944 the SS suddenly herded together all the Jewish and Gypsy youngsters and shipped the "screaming, sobbing children" to the Auschwitz gas chambers. When a convoy of Polish parents and their children arrived at Gusen, a team of *Kapos* killed many of the children in a mass axing orgy. The screams carried through the camp.

The SS took special care of the large group of inmate children in the Auschwitz/Birkenau complex: special brutality, cruelty, and experimentation, beyond even the ability of the hardened prisoners, so used to death, to watch and tolerate. When the gas chambers were full of adults, the SS dug pits and threw many children into them alive. A guard would grab a child's arms and legs, and hurl the baby through the air. They also laughed as they threw live children into the pond next to the crematorium. Witnesses testified at the Nuremberg trials that several thousand children were burned alive in Birkenau in 1944. When an SS man felt pity toward children, "he took the child and beat the head against a stone first before putting it on the pile of firewood, so that the child lost consciousness."⁴⁰

When the Gypsy children died of starvation, they were thrown in heaps. One witness testified, "I saw a mountain of children's corpses. And scurrying among them the rats." Other witnesses remembered seeing SS men killing children by bending them over their knees like sticks of wood and breaking their spines. Often, when the Sonderkommando pulled the dead from the chambers, the hearts of some children were still beating. The conditions for children led one woman to make this pledge: "Together we will endure death. Even life."⁴¹

The Nazis usually did not allow children to be born at Birkenau. Pregnant Jewish women went to the gas chambers; any children were killed. In 1943 Aryan children born in the camp could remain alive with the unofficial consent of the SS. After they were entered in the camp register, their camp

numbers had to be tattooed on the behinds or thighs because their little arms were too tiny. Most died within a week. The Soviets found only 156 children when they evacuated Birkenau.

Many children lived in Ravensbrück. They came in transports with their mothers or by themselves. Undernourished and with threadbare clothes, they were miserable creatures, little ragged skeletons. Eight hundred sixty children were born in Ravensbrück between 1943 and 1945. Without nourishment, diapers, or water, most babies died within a few days of birth by "natural" means. Also, the midwives drowned or smothered them.⁴²

In Auschwitz, Polish prisoner Maria Zarebinska-Broniewska came in touch with the tragedy of children of all nationalities. Initially, as a mother who left her daughter behind, she believed like other inmates that children would survive the selections and the murders. But it was not to be. On one occasion, for example,

the children were given some milk soup with sugar as their supper, and a few hours later they started to pick them up for the crematorium. All crematoria were in use, but it became clear that the number of ovens was not sufficient. Therefore they ordered large pits to be dug, and there they burned the children in large piles. I saw hundreds of children, who climbed out of the trains and went to their deaths. Now that I am writing this, I am myself surprised, that as a mother, who loves not only her child, but all children of this world, I did not go crazy."⁴³

Obscenity and Abuse as Public Policy Although the Nazis designed the camps, psychologically and technically, to destroy the inmates' basic humanity, it has always been clear that the camps were to be centers for dying. Except for the killing centers, the two major tasks of the camps' prisoners were to work and to die. Often they managed the dying alone; but the SS carefully planned the work in cooperation with Germany's major industrial firms. For the non-Jewish prisoners, however, the situation was far more complex. The goals for them varied from time to time, because the Nazis could not seem to arrive at a consensus. Yet the exploitation of prisoner labor to advance the war effort was a major and primary short-term goal for all non-Jewish inmates, simply working them to death and replenishing the labor supply from the always available pool. For a small number of prisoners, the task was to have a "change of heart" and a "fright" before being released back to polite society. At the very least, no one in the hierarchy ever objected to the "accidental" death of any prisoner, not even of notables.

Hitler attacked the old, the sick, the mentally ill, the deaf, the dumb, the blind, and the crippled. He sought to kill all Jews and most Gypsies. He classified as subhumans, persecuted, and murdered Poles, Russians, Slavs, and Soviet prisoners of war. He also attacked those he presumed were odd, including the physically unusual or unacceptable, twins, hunchbacks, those with unusual tattoos, skulls, or skeletons. He similarly targeted the politicals including Socialists and Communists, and he attacked prisoners of conscience and recalcitrant Christians including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, Catholics, priests and ministers, male homosexuals, resistance fighters, women, and children.

In Elie Wiesel's *The Oath*, an old wanderer, Azriel, implores: "There is no beautiful death. Nor is there a just death. Every death is absurd. Useless. And ugly. . . . All you get in return is a corpse. And corpses stink."⁴⁴

NOTES

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