

The Cut That Always Bleeds

The Sonderkommando were explicitly forced to take part in the genocide of their own people, trapping them in an unimaginable moral position. Josef Sackar, a Sonderkommando at Auschwitz-Birkenau, describes how, in his 10 months at the camp, he refused to have meaningful interaction with the victims. He neglected to make eye-contact, speak beyond Nazi ordered speech, and even vowed to forget the faces of those he led to death in the gas chambers. In "*Survival in Auschwitz*", Primo Levi describes "The Gray Zone" as a newly required moral weighing ground, where the distinctions between good and bad shift because survival in the camps demanded moral compromise. Sackar's aversion to personal interaction with victims was a psychological wall he built against the pressing forces of unbearable guilt. The erection of this wall was necessary for his own survival. As evident in the light of Levi's reflections, though, survival does not equate relief, survival of the Holocaust was defined by the persistence of guilt and suffering long past liberation.

When asked about his attitude and behavior towards the victims in the undressing rooms, Sackar remarked "I avoided looking them in the eye. I always tried hard not to look them straight in the eye, so they wouldn't sense anything."¹ Sackar intentionally distanced himself from the victims he interacted with on a physical level through this act. As a deeply human form of connection, eye contact fosters recognition and attachment. By refusing it, Sackar sought to sever any trace of personal connection, shielding himself from the unbearable weight of acknowledgment.

In a similar manner, Sackar refused to mentally register the faces of the victims, claiming, "I may have looked them in the face. It was a very difficult moment. But I don't remember

¹ Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz*, 109

anything about it. Also, I didn't want to remember the faces."² Erasing their faces from his memory allowed Sackar to shield himself from the weight of recognizing each person as an individual with a life, a past, and a future being erased. Holding onto that awareness would make survival impossible. Forgetting was not just avoidance but a way to keep going.

It is evident, though, that Sackar's behavior was not driven by cruelty or ignorance. He says "It wasn't a pleasant feeling to be in the middle with them all. But what could I do?"³ The language he uses here and throughout the interview conveys a sense of helplessness and order-following rather than cruelty or indifference.

Other Sonderkommandos beat victims that did not undress fast enough, Sacktar asserts that he never did this and, further, expresses disgust for those who did. Other Sonderkommandos stole valuables and clothing from the victims, while Sacktar would only allow himself to take food.⁴ In addition, It was well known among the Sonderkommandos that unnecessary communication and/or outward expressions of emotion were punished with death. Sacktar acted with as much kindness as his position allowed, holding onto whatever morality he could in a place where morality was all but erased. His refusal of acknowledgment was not malice but the manifestation of a psychological coping mechanism meant to make unimaginable circumstances survivable.

Primo Levi remarks on this idea throughout his book in an explicit manner, saying things like "To sink is the easiest of matters; it is enough to carry out orders without thinking, to refrain from seeing, to refrain from understanding."⁵ Levi acknowledges that detachment was not just about fear but about survival. Thinking too much and consequently feeling too much could be fatal. It was imperative for survival to follow orders without a second thought, further, neglect to

² Ibid, 109

³ Ibid, 103

⁴ Ibid, 103

⁵ Levi, *Survival In Auschwitz*, 90

think about the consequences of the orders and the actions they facilitated. Sackar's testimony confirms this : "We had no time to think. Thinking was a complicated matter. We blocked everything out." ⁶He goes further to say, "We couldn't think at all. We'd become robots, machines. That's what we became." ⁷

Primo Levi writes about Elias, a prisoner with a skewed morality who survived only because he had adapted to live without conscience. ⁸ Levi uses him as an example of the "Grey Zone", saying among prisoners, there were no criminals nor mad men. ⁹ The hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary is born of the need to adapt to an inhuman environment. But the oppressor remains guilty, and the oppressed remains so to the extent that they accept this role. Levi emphasizes that while Sonderkommando and other camp prisoners like Sackar and Elias were victims of the Nazi system, survival demanded choices that left an enduring moral weight.

Sackar and Levi did not remain robots forever. Both married, built families, and reclaimed lives beyond the camps. Sackar created a home filled with love and security ¹⁰, yet the past never fully released its grip. "I don't sleep at night. I sleep two or three hours, that's all. I've been that way for years, because of the memories." ¹¹ His trauma lingered, surfacing in sleepless nights and a mind that could never truly disengage. The detachment that once allowed him to endure did not spare him from suffering; it only delayed it.

Primo Levi's reflections on the "gray zone" are a reminder that the Holocaust did not simply divide the world into victims and oppressors. It created impossible moral dilemmas where survival meant accepting a degree of complicity. Sackar, like so many others, was forced to navigate this ethical wasteland, constructing psychological walls to shield himself from the

⁶ Greif, 113

⁷ Ibid, 103

⁸ Levi, 98

⁹ Levi, 98

¹⁰ Greif 87

¹¹ Greif, 121

unbearable truth of his role. Yet, as Levi shows, survival was not the same as freedom. The past did not end with liberation. Sackar's sleepless nights reflect the burden carried by all who lived through the camps, proof that suffering does not dissolve with time but instead lingers, reshaping the lives of those who endured. In this way, Auschwitz never fully left its survivors, even the act of emotional withdrawal could not shield men like Josef Sackar from the lasting burden of what they endured. The moral weight of survival is a scar that cannot heal, a cut that always bleeds.

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