

Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers Study Guide

Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers by Filip Müller

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Plot Summary

Muller, a Slovakian Jew, was born in Sered, Czechoslovakia, in 1922. In April, 1942 he was forcibly evacuated to Auschwitz I concentration camp with thousands of other Jews. Muller, like many others, was used as forced labor for about a one month period during which his health declined. One day he and his bunkmate, afflicted by thirst, sneaked to a feeding area and illicitly stole several drinks of tea. Caught in the act, the two men were beaten by Nazi guards and then assigned to Auschwitz's Sonderkommando, a group of inmates forced to work at corpse disposal through burial or, much more commonly, cremation. From May, 1942, until the evacuation of Auschwitz Muller worked as a Sonderkommando. His first assignment was to strip corpses of their clothing. The Nazis soon discovered that a more-efficient method of genocide required the victims to strip naked prior to being gassed. For several weeks thereafter, Muller worked collecting, sorting, and transporting belongings.

Muller's assignments eventually ran the gamut of the Sonderkommando and it appears that most of his time was forcibly devoted to corpse disposal by incineration. He would transport corpses to crematoria ovens, load corpses onto carts, and feed them into the ovens. During other periods, he worked disposing of bodies in open-pit cremation. He was on most occasions apparently spared the terrible duty of ash removal. An eyewitness to the operations at Auschwitz, Muller witnessed the mass executions of perhaps as many as a quarter of a million people and was present in the camp for the mass executions of over one million people. Obviously possessed of great strength and a nearly supernatural constitution, Muller survived numerous hardships, tortures, and selections for the next many months and eventually participated in the dismantling of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau crematoria in a Nazi attempt to hide the evidence of their monstrous crimes. In January, 1945, Muller and others were evacuated from Auschwitz in front of the Soviet army's advance. In May, 1945, Muller was liberated from Nazi enslavement by the advancing American army. Further autobiographic details are not offered in the text.



Chapter 1, No Return

Chapter 1, No Return Summary and Analysis

The fairly short introductory chapter introduces Muller into Auschwitz I as a typical slave laborer, one of many. Much of the book's general setting is developed in these introductory pages. Muller served in the capacity of slave laborer for about six weeks before being selected to work in a crematorium, the subject of the remaining chapters of the autobiography. Filip Müller was forcibly transported from Slovakia to the Auschwitz death camp in April, 1942. He performed forced labor for several weeks until being selected as a member of the Sonderkommando, an assignment from which there was no release. He subsequently worked in the crematoria of Auschwitz I and later Auschwitz II-Birkenau until c. November, 1944, when mass murder by gassing ceased. Müller survived the forced evacuation of Auschwitz and was ultimately liberated, being one of the very, very few eyewitnesses to survive nearly the entire period of operations at Auschwitz.

Filip Müller was born 1922 in Sered, Czechoslovakia, approximately 200 miles from the then-future site of Auschwitz. A Slovakian Jew, he was, at the age of 20, transported to Auschwitz I in April, 1942, and forced into slave labor. The autobiographical work begins with a Sunday in May, 1942, when Vacek, a fellow inmate, one promoted to a position of minor responsibility, is using a repetitive drill to select out individuals to be murdered. Of the approximately 500 assembled men, thirty-four are eventually selected. They are murdered by Vacek and his assistants by being beaten with truncheons while the survivors watch, glad to have escaped for another day. Some of the newer arrivals still hold the mistaken belief that the hazing, torture, and murder are perpetrated solely by inmate overseers—and that such acts have simply escaped the notice of the camp's professional guards—members of the Nazi Schutzstaffel, or SS. Thus, when an SS officer arrives to inspect the row of bloodied corpses a man from Muller's home town steps forward and registers an official complaint about Vacek's treatment. Upon the SS officer's command, Vacek uses his truncheon to beat the objector to death. Muller explains that men like Vacek received preferential treatment, clothes, and food in return for working as Nazi collaborators in the camp's functioning—they were nevertheless still prisoners and most were eventually executed.

To compensate for the complainant's outburst, Vacek causes most of the food and water intended for the work detail to be dumped out into the mud. Later that day the prisoners return to their barracks and sleep two to a bunk, sharing a single thin blanket. Muller's bunkmate is named Maurice, and they communicate only slowly because they do not share a common language. Yet it becomes apparent that Maurice, like Muller, is suffering severely from dehydration. The two evolve a plan and sneak out of the barracks to the food preparation area, where they drink weak tea directly from huge barrels. They are discovered by Vacek, and Schlage, an SS officer, and are nearly drown when their heads are held inside the barrels of tea. As he recovers, Muller imagines that surely they will be tortured and murdered. Instead, they are placed

against a wall and kept waiting for a long time. In many ways, Muller's fate is worse than torture and death.



Chapter 2, Into the Crematorium

Chapter 2, Into the Crematorium Summary and Analysis

Muller and Maurice are taken to the Auschwitz I crematorium and put to work stripping the clothing from hundreds of corpses. The work is difficult and the overseers are brutal—Muller feels his meager strength failing and knows that to collapse means death. He is repulsed by the piles of massed, intertwined bodies but also discovers that many of them have food hidden in pockets or suitcases. Thus, while they work, Maurice and Muller begin to eat the food of the dead. After they have stripped several hundred corpses they are put on a labor team with other men and begin to load the naked bodies onto carts and feed them into cremation ovens. Muller describes the operation of the crematorium and its physical layout in considerable detail—it is similar to the schematic offered for crematorium 3 in the appendix but is a different structure. The crematorium has six ovens that accommodate three corpses at a time or eighteen corpses in total. The cremation is fueled by coke and runs through a twenty-minute cycle. During the cycle, Muller uses a large metal fork to stir the partially burned corpses and hasten cremation. The crematorium can incinerate about 54 bodies per hour or 1,296 bodies per day. While the work is going on, three of the workers simply refuse to work any longer. At first they lie among the naked bodies in the gas chamber as the Nazis beat them. Finally, they are shot, stripped, and burned. Muller obviously understands that failure to work will bring the same fate.

Even working at full capacity the ovens are incapable of disposing of corpses faster than they are created. Thus in the morning a huge truck backs up to the crematorium and Muller and other men pile it high with bodies. They then climb into a small space at the back of the truck's bed, the entire truck bed is covered with tarpaulins, and the truck drives off. Almost immediately the bodies shift and bury the workers in an avalanche of the dead. When the truck finally stops the Nazis unload enough corpses to free the workers. They then unload many bodies into a huge pit. Finally the ordeal is over and Muller and the other men are returned to Auschwitz I where they are billeted in a windowless, locked room in Block 11. Hours and days pass without further work, and they are provided food which is greater in quantity and of superior quality than that to which Muller had been previously accustomed. Later, the men haul hundreds and hundreds of more corpses to the pit which has begun to fill with groundwater. The men are forced down into the muddy pit where they arrange slimy, decomposing corpses into piles near the center of the pit. Some men refuse to perform the work and are shot and flung into the pit. A pump runs, spewing water and oily residue out of the pit. After many hours the men are returned to Auschwitz I and allowed to wash before again being locked up in Block 11.

Over the next few days Muller learns that he has been assigned to the Sonderkommando, a special work detail from whence there is no release other than



death. Workers on the team are responsible for operating and maintaining the crematoria and gas chambers. As the Nazis believe they can keep their genocide secret, crematoria workers are isolated from the remainder of the camps. Muller is assigned to a work team lead by a kapo named Fischl, a twenty-something man of great strength and resolute determination. Fischl's immediate supervisor is a violent tyrant kapo named Meitek, who is viciously anti-Semite. All crematoria kapos report to Unterscharfuhrer Stark, a violent and brutal Nazi who demands ruthless efficiency. As Muller reports for work day after day, he learns how the gas chambers and crematoria work. Several hundred prisoners, mostly Jews, arrive in trains or trucks and are driven into the gas chamber by truncheon-wielding SS guards. There, they are murdered with Zyklon B—poison gas developed as a pesticide. About 600 to 3,000 people are gassed at once, and the poison kills the group in something like twenty minutes. Muller's job is to strip the clothing from the corpses and clear the reception yard of belongings. These are then sent to a portion of the camp, euphemistically called Canada, where they are sorted. As the Fischl team retrieves the belongings they are in a unique position to simply steal valuable objects, such as food and money. Fischl himself takes a Tephillim. Eventually the Nazis force the people to strip naked before entering the gas chamber. This frees up the workers to concentrate on incineration rather than disrobing corpses, but does cause the people to balk. Muller states that when less than about 200 people were to be killed at one time, gas was not used and instead the people were lined up and then waited their turn to be shot. The Nazis used a small-bore, silenced rifle to keep the doomed people from rioting. Even so, Muller was often surprised at the near complete lack of resistance. In addition to those killed at the crematorium, daily deliveries of corpses occurs. Many have died of starvation or disease, others are the victims of cruel medical experiments or outright torture or various types of murder. Frequently various 'scientists' arrive to harvest various body parts from the recently killed for various obscene experiments.

Because the brutalization approach leads to difficulty in moving the naked people through the process, the Nazis come up with a pretext to calm the doomed people's fears. The camp leaders, composed of SS elite including Aumeier, Grabner, and Untersturmfuhrer Hössler, tell the arriving people that they will shortly be passed through a disinfectant process that begins with a shower. Fake shower heads are installed on the gas chamber walls, and people are handed small cakes of soap and towels. Speeches are made promising good food and work opportunities, available only once the disinfectant bath is completed. Because this is what the arrivals want to hear, it is surprisingly effective. Once proved out, the technique is used ever more and over the next many months nearly one million people go to their death in the gas chamber believing they are about to receive a disinfecting shower. The largely believe, Muller asserts, because they want to believe. Genocide is senseless while delousing and forced labor are sensible, if wrong.

The Sonderbehandlug, or special handling of Jews, continues from the end of May 1942 to nearly the end of the war. During late autumn 1942 Stark vanishes from the camp—rumors circulate but nothing is known. At the end of the summer 1942 Fischl dies from typhus and Muller's group is folded into the leadership of the brutal Kapo Mietek. During 1942 Muller learns that his father has arrived in Auschwitz I. Mr. Muller had been



deported in February 1942 and is Muller's sole surviving relative. They meet a few times over the next months, usually because Muller bribes guards. He never tells his father what he is doing, and instead allows him to believe he plays in the camp orchestra. Then Mr. Muller dies of typhus and appears in a delivery of corpses. Muller prepares his body and slips it into the furnace while a fellow worker recites the Kaddish.



Chapter 3, The New Death Factories

Chapter 3, The New Death Factories Summary and Analysis

The chapter title refers to the new crematoria of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. By autumn of 1942 the original Auschwitz crematorium is in a state of disrepair and is employed far more than its design intended. Often nonfunctional, it requires constant repair to operate. Therefore the Nazis begin to use two old farmhouses—renamed Bunker 1 and Bunker 2, near Auschwitz II-Birkenau as extemporized gas chambers. Thousands are gassed in the buildings and then buried in mass graves nearby. The summer heat, however, causes the mass graves to swell and deliquescing corpses frequently break the surface. The vast decomposition also contaminates the groundwater, angering the citizens of the nearby town. A special contingent of Sonderkommando is organized to exhume the mass graves and incinerate the decomposing corpses in great, open pit fires. From time to time Muller is sent to supplement these work details and he describes how those crushing the ash and remnants suffer the most from the heat, often going blind from cinders in the eyes. Any no longer able to work are shot and flung into the pit. Muller reports that after the exhumation work has been completed, the entire special Sonderkommando arrive as corpses in trucks to be incinerated at the crematoria.

By mid July, 1943, four new crematoria have been completed at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. The old crematorium at Auschwitz I is shut down and the Sonderkommando is increased to about two hundred men. After fourteen months at Auschwitz I, Muller is transferred to Auschwitz II-Birkenau, camp B2D, Block 13, and assigned to crematorium 3. He describes the construction of the new, larger crematoria, and schematics of them are supplied in the appendix of the book. The new crematoria are capable of incinerating 3,000 corpses each day, and a normal day sees 3,000 prisoners gassed at one time and burned throughout the ensuing 24 hours. Muller notes that his work detail was still assigned to Mietek. Much of the chapter is devoted to a detailed description of the process of genocide; how the Nazis handled shipments of people, how they were processed through the receiving areas, into the disrobing rooms, into the gas chambers, and murdered. How their belongings were then sorted and disposed of; how the female corpses' hair was shorn and dried for industrial use. How gold teeth were wrenched from mouths and the fillings melted down and accumulated to produce 5-10 kilograms of gold each day. Muller describes how the Sonderkommando became experts at locating and stealing food and valuables. The valuables were later traded for more food, special privileges, or access to women inmates for sex.

Life in the new camp is not as isolated as life in the old camp, but the Sonderkommando are still isolated from the larger camp. They hear rumors of forced labor and forced industrial labor programs, but have little direct contact with such things. In the anti-logic of the camp, Sonderkommando who were too weak to work were killed while those who



became sick or injured were sent to a special hospital, established in Spring of 1943, and operated by Dr. Jacques Pach. The hospital had a surprising amount of drugs and medical supplies, harvested from the hundreds of thousands of victims of the gas chambers. Muller recounts a fairly lengthy conversation between two inmates, Dajan and Avroham, who argue the existence of God and the meaning of religion in a place such as Auschwitz. Indeed, like Muller, most find their faith untenable while some few are strengthened by their experiences.

Much of Chapter 3 is devoted to graphic descriptions of particular events. Muller describes several mass gassings and recounts several scenes of shootings, and one time noting that hundreds of men were lined up against a wall five at a time and shot one by one—without any resistance. Muller recognizes some people—old neighbors or distant relatives—either as they arrive or as he feeds their corpses into the ovens. Muller ponders why there was so little resistance. On one occasion thousands of obviously rich Germans appear. They have purchased the right to leave Germany and have obtained entry permits for Paraguay. Having extorted all of their wealth, the Nazis then send these dissenting citizens to Auschwitz to be murdered. Informed of their imminent fate by the Sonderkommando workers, they refuse to believe it until they are driven into the gas chamber by truncheons. Only one of them—a young woman—resists. When ordered to undress she begins a voluptuous striptease act and captures the attention of some guards. As they leer at her nude body she smashes her high-heel shoe into one's face and grabs his pistol from his hand. She manages to kill him and injure one other guard before a general riot erupts. The Nazis open fire with strategically-placed machine guns and the minor incident of resistance is soon over. Watching this transpire, Muller quickly realizes that there is literally no escape from genocide. Once one has arrived at Auschwitz, one has forfeited any chance of survival.



Chapter 4, The Tragedy of the Family Camp

Chapter 4, The Tragedy of the Family Camp Summary and Analysis

Within Auschwitz II-Birkenau is a special camp-within-a-camp area known colloquially as the Family Camp. This area contains about 5,000 Jews deported from Theresienstadt during September of 1943. These inmates receive special treatment—they are housed as family units, they are apparently immune to selection or most forced labor, they receive more and better food, and they are allowed many other minor conveniences. Rumors circulate about the rationale, but Muller concludes that the Nazis use the Family Camp as a sort of propaganda tool, filming the area and then showing the outside world this sanitized view of the death camp. After several months, however, the Nazis have no further use for the special inmates and determine that they should all be murdered at the same time. By happenstance, Muller sees orders to the crematoria director instructing him to prepare to soon receive the 5,000 Family Camp people.

Mass murder continues and spreads to the Sonderkommando. The Nazis use various techniques to attempt to mask the executions among the Sonderkommando, but their attempts are fairly inept. The entire camp has an organized resistance that constantly plans various uprisings, but they are never ready to actually order the action. The Sonderkommando are also organized but rely upon the larger camp resistance movement for orders. Muller quickly communicates the information regarding the Family Camp, and the Sonderkommando feel that the time is right for a large uprising. Kapo Kaminski, the Sonderkommando resistance organizer, communicates the information to the main camp resistance. The main resistance leaders disagree, however. Muller speculates about the resistance's reticence to a general uprising—in any case, a general camp uprising is always felt to be imminent but one never occurs. Kaminski communicates directly with the Family Camp leaders and they disregard his warning as improbable and fantastic. Over the next days the crematoria perform "express" work—basically, an overloading of the ovens with extra corpses to entirely clear the backlog of the dead to be burned.

The Nazi leaders transport the 5,000 Jews from the Family Camp to the gas chambers in trucks in two main shipments. They liberally spread the illusion of disinfectant showers by handing out cakes of soap and towels and posting signs. Fearing some resistance, they also set up many machine guns. At first the Family Camp inmates are tractable but faced with entering the crematoria they begin to balk. The Nazis react by beating them with truncheons, shooting some, and occasionally machine gunning an entire family. The Jews are driven into the walled area by force but still resist. Then Unterfuhrer Voss takes a megaphone and addresses the panicked crowd. He candidly confesses that they are all to be killed and there is no hope of escape; he states they



can resist and be beaten to death in front of their children, or they can make their last few minutes peaceful by an orderly procession into the execution rooms. His words calm the crowds and they begin to sing in solidarity as they undress and prepare to die. Faced with the overwhelming situation and despondent after months of watching hundreds of thousands of people being murdered and cremated, Muller decides that his life has become untenable. As the crowds are entering the gas chamber, he joins them and walks to the back of the room where he plans to die with many of his comrades.

After a few minutes he is approached by two young, slim women—one is named Yana and she is naked except for a thin necklace. Yana states that she must die but that Muller need not die—in fact, she argues, he has a duty to survive if he can, a duty to bear witness. His survival, if possible, must occur so that he can stand as a testament to the Nazi atrocity—the great holocaust. Muller is disoriented and suffering from a nervous collapse. Yana gives him an order—she will die at a particular spot, and Muller is to recover the necklace from her corpse and deliver it to Sasha—her lover—in the camp bakery. She and her companion then pull Muller to the front of the gas chamber and push him out. The Nazi guard berates him for attempting suicide, noting that the Nazis will decide if and when Muller will die. A second convoy then arrives and the people are driven into the gas chamber where 1,500 Jews, including Yana, are murdered. Muller stands despondently while the infamous Dr. Mengele looks through a peep-hole into the gas chamber and medically authorizes the massed bodies deceased. The doors are opened and the Sonderkommando begin to pull apart the massed, tangled bodies packed against the doors. Muller staggers into the chamber and witnesses the horror of the mass execution—babies and women are strewn about. Pregnant women have partially expressed their fetuses. Hundreds of bodies are covered in excrement and blood. He locates Yana and takes the necklace from her body. Later he finds Sasha and delivers the necklace and the message. Overcome with despair, Muller continues to survive.



Chapter 5, The Inferno

Chapter 5, The Inferno Summary and Analysis

On April 7, 1944, Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg-Vrba, two Jewish inmates of Auschwitz II-Birkenau, escaped from the death camp. They took camp drawings, crematoria construction details, and a label from a Zyklon B container which had been obtained by Muller. The escape was sanctioned by the camp resistance, and the two men carried their information to the outside world in an attempt to stop the mass execution of Jews. Their successful escape led to the hope of immediate change but, seemingly, nothing changed. Muller reports that most camp inmates surmised that the pair were either captured or were deemed insane upon reporting to the outside world. During May, 1944, Czeslaw Mordowicz and Arnost Rosin also escape on a similar mission.

The death camp continues to grow and an endless supply of people arrives to be murdered. They bring all-season clothing and other supplies indicating they believe they will be relocated rather than murdered. As early as April, 1944, rumors circulate that soon all the Jews of Hungary will arrive and be gassed. In support of the rumors, workers from the private industrial companies constructing the ovens for the crematoria appear and run tests on the ovens' incineration rates. The tests are fueled using various combinations of corpses, as the workers take careful notes of burn times. Throughout, the resistance leaders waffle.

In May Oberscharfuhrer Voss is replaced by Hauptscharfuhrer Moll. Voss, an alcoholic, was greedy and easily bribed, and exhibited little zeal for mass murder. Moll was short, thickset, chubby, with freckles and gingery-blond hair. He had a glass eye and was cruel, brutal, and unscrupulous. Moll viewed Jews as sub-human Rassenfeind, and was a sadistic, callous, and blood-thirsty murderer. Moll reorganizes the camp command structure and oversees the construction of nine vast pits near crematorium 5. The pits have special grading so that liquid flows to the ends of the pits where it collects into cisterns. Alongside the pits fuel depots are constructed and fuels are stockpiled. The preparations are regarded as critical. The Sonderkommand swells to 450 men and then to nearly 900 men, including three Slovakian Jews—one of which is Muller. Huge camouflage screens are then erected, dividing the camp into several visually obscured areas. Trainloads of Hungarian Jews then arrive. All of the gas chambers are used, as is the obsolescent Bunker 5, and over the course of a few weeks more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews arrive in about 100 train loads. They are immediately gassed and their corpses are burned in the crematoria and the nine open pits. The special grading of the pits causes the vast amount of human fat rendered by the constant fire to flow into the cisterns, where Sonderkommando use buckets on long poles to scoop up the fat and oil and disperse it back onto the burning bodies—saving fuel for future pyres. Muller briefly notes that the Nazi's war effort suffered because of the diversion of trains and other supplies to the genocide.



Muller discusses the operation of the open pit incineration at some detail. Between 1,200 and 2,500 corpses are placed in a single pit at one time. The bodies are usually layered three deep and interspersed with large amounts of fir branches and rags soaked in alcohol. The fires are then started and fueled with additional alcohol and rendered human fat. As the bodies burn, they writhe, twist, and rise up in a mockery of life. When the cremation is advanced, special teams descend into the ash pits to collect and remove ash. Remaining pieces of bodies are collected and re-burned. Bones and large fragments are crushed on concrete pads. The ash is then sieved through screens and large pieces are further crushed. Sonderkommando who refuse the work are usually flung into the fiery pits and burned alive. Moll takes special pleasure in torturing young, naked women at the edge of the pit—Muller believes Moll derives sexual pleasure from throwing the living, tortured girls into the conflagration. Several brutal and disturbing scenes of torture and murder are reported in considerable detail. Muller notes that while most Jews prayed prior to gassing the occasional gypsy arrivals would typically have sexual intercourse in their last moments of life.

Through this period the resistance formulates plans but takes no action. Then kapo Kaminski is shot. After most of the Hungarian Jews have been murdered and burned Moll is transferred away during September, 1944. Coincident with the end of the Hungarian Jew train transports, the Sonderkommando undergo various selections to reduce their numbers—the men are no longer needed to burn the hundreds of thousands of corpses. The Sonderkommando know only too well what their fate will be and they implore the larger camp resistance to take some immediate action, but they decline. On October 7, 1944, hundreds of Sonderkommando are scheduled for execution and they begin an uprising, killing some guards. The reaction is predictable and violent, and hundreds of Sonderkommando are executed. During this tumultuous few hours Muller hides in the cold cremation oven. He leaves hours later and discovers that the Nazis have not only executed the rebellious Sonderkommando but have taken reprisals upon the survivors. Once again, Muller has survived largely by chance.

The last mass gassings occur in November, 1944. The Nazi war effort collapsing, the Sonderkommando dismantle the crematoria and camp and attempt to hide the evidence of genocide. The huge ash pits are covered with turf. Food becomes increasingly scarce. Without new arrivals of prisoners, the Sonderkommando are not only cut off from their unique influx of food but also from the influx of valuables used to buy food on the black market. Many suffer and are killed. Muller joins with another inmate, a dental technician, and runs a scheme whereby the brass bases of light bulbs are collected and passed off as gold extracted from teeth. They use this scheme to buy food and are fortunately never discovered. On January 18, 1945, Muller is evacuated with most of the remaining camp inmates in front of the Soviet advance. He is evacuated on foot to Loslau, and many collapse and are killed along the way. He is then evacuated by rail to Mauthausen where he works briefly constructing airplanes. He is then evacuated again by foot to Wels where the entire contingent of prisoners collapses. Many die but the Nazi guards simply flee as a body. Muller manages to survive a few more days and then the American army enters the area. He has survived, and finds the end of the war anticlimax.



Characters

Philip Muller

Philip Muller is the author of the text and the primary participant in many of the situations described by the book; he was also an eyewitness to nearly all of the genocide perpetrated at Auschwitz during the Nazi holocaust. Muller, a Slovakian Jew, was born in Sered, Czechoslovakia, in 1922. In April, 1942, he was forcibly evacuated to Auschwitz I concentration camp with thousands of other Jews. Muller, like many others, was used as forced labor for about a one month period during which his health declined. One day he and his bunkmate, afflicted by thirst, sneaked to a feeding area and illicitly stole several drinks of tea. Caught in the act, the two men were beaten by Nazi guards and then assigned to Auschwitz's Sonderkommando, a group of inmates forced to work at corpse disposal through burial or, much more commonly, cremation. From May, 1942, until the evacuation of Auschwitz Muller worked as a Sonderkommando. His first assignment was to strip corpses of their clothing. The Nazis soon discovered that a more-efficient method of genocide required the victims to strip naked prior to being gassed. For several weeks thereafter, Muller worked collecting, sorting, and transporting belongings.

Muller's assignments eventually ran the gamut of the Sonderkommando and it appears that most of his time was forcibly devoted to corpse disposal by incineration. He would transport corpses to crematoria ovens, load corpses onto carts, and feed them into the ovens. During other periods, he worked disposing of bodies in open-pit cremation. He was on most occasions apparently spared the terrible duty of ash removal. An eyewitness to the operations at Auschwitz, Muller witnessed the mass executions of perhaps as many as a quarter of a million people and was present in the camp for the mass executions of over one million people. Obviously possessed of great strength and a nearly supernatural constitution, Muller survived numerous hardships, tortures, and selections for the next many months and eventually participated in the dismantling of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau crematoria in a Nazi attempt to hide the evidence of their monstrous crimes. In January, 1945, Muller and others were evacuated from Auschwitz in front of the Soviet army's advance. In May, 1945, Muller was liberated from Nazi enslavement by the advancing American army. Further autobiographic details are not offered in the text.

Mr. Muller

Mr. Muller is the author's father. In February 1942 he had volunteered for deportation believing that he would be relocated early and thereby he would hasten his family's reestablishment after deportation. Obviously, the Nazis could not be trusted and Mr. Muller ended up performing forced labor. Several months later he was transferred to Auschwitz I where he worked as a bricklayer. The author and Mr. Muller meet a few times and the author allows Mr. Muller to believe he plays in the camp orchestra. Mr.



Muller dies of typhus several weeks later, and his son prepares and incinerates his corpse at the crematorium of Auschwitz I.

Vacek

Vacek was an inmate of Auschwitz but not a Jew—prior to incarceration he had been a professional criminal and thus wore a green star, which gave him a considerable measure of authority over Jewish inmates. Vacek was incarcerated in Auschwitz since nearly the founding of the camp and was appointed as a Funktionshäftling; in other words, a prisoner with special rank and treatment. The autobiography's opening scenes portray Vacek in a murderous rampage, selecting thirty-five prisoners from a work detail and subsequently beating them to death with a truncheon—such selections and executions were part of his regular behavior.

Fischl

Fischl is a member of the Sonderkommando and is Muller's first kapo, or prisoner-overseer. Fischl is a kind man, but is also enormous and hugely strong. While Muller loses his faith in God, Fischl's grows stronger—he insists that only a belief in God separates humanity from animals. While the other inmates steal diamonds and gold from the corpses they strip, Fischl takes a Tephillim and observes his daily religious obligations. Most of the workers draw great strength from Fischl, even as they argue about religion. Fischl often sings and recites prayers and scripture until his death of typhus during the summer of 1942. Muller realizes how much Fischl protected his team only after the kapo is replaced by the violent Mietek.

Untersharfuhrer (platoon sergeant) Stark

Untersharfuhrer Stark is the Nazi member of the SS who directs the operations of the crematorium at Auschwitz I; he selects Muller to work as a Sonderkommando and over the next weeks and months murders many workers who do not perform to his satisfaction. Stark has a violent temper and is a brutal task-master, liberally plying his truncheon and often employing his pistol. During the autumn of 1942 Stark simply vanishes—a welcome surprise that spawns many rumors but no certainty. In any event, the men of the crematorium are glad to see him gone. Stark effectively is replaced by Voss at Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

Mietek

Mietek is a kapo, or inmate-overseer, of the crematorium at Auschwitz I and, later of the crematoria at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Prior to being incarcerated by the Nazis he was a political criminal, which gives him prestige and standing in the death camps. Mietek was deported to Auschwitz during autumn of 1940 and is therefore intimately familiar with the camp and many of the guards. Not Jewish, Mietek is favored by many of the guards



and calls a few of them by familiar nicknames. He is a dandy and hates Jews, blaming them for all of his problems. He is brutal, arrogant, and often beats other inmates to death, killing perhaps one or two each week with a truncheon. Even so, Mietek often weeps when a non-Jewish prisoner is gassed; he blames the Jews for the tragedy and feels the Nazis have been compelled to genocide. Mietek is obviously verging on insane and represents the worst aspects of humanity given free reign by the atmosphere of the death camps.

Yana and Sasha

Yana is a youngish, slim woman of perhaps twenty who meets Muller literally inside the gas chamber at Auschwitz. Yana and her friend approach Muller, who is attempting suicide by hiding in the gas chamber while a mass gassing is being organized. Because Muller is still clothed, he is fairly obvious within the gas chamber. Yana thus approaches him and quickly determines that he is bent upon suicide. She effectively rescues him from death by stating that she feels it his responsibility to survive and bear witness of the Nazi holocaust. Muller, though deeply depressed, is moved by Yana's reasoning. Yana wears only a light necklace, and she requests that Muller recover it after her death and convey it to Sasha. Yana then pushes Muller out of the gas chamber and, with hundreds of other Jews, is murdered.

Muller recovers Yana's necklace and delivers it some days later to Sasha, Yana's lover. Sasha weeps for her death and thanks Muller for the news and gesture. Sasha is otherwise only briefly discussed in the text—he works in the camp bakery.

Oberscharfuhrer (platoon sergeant) Voss

Voss, a member of the SS, is entrusted with the operation of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau crematoria and Sonderkommando until about April, 1944, when he is replaced by Moll. Voss is an alcoholic and is frequently staggering about in a drunken stupor. He is a very greedy man and is easily bribed. Muller describes how inmates would sew diamonds into the lining of a coat, and then call after Voss as he head into town, notifying him that he has 'forgotten his coat.' By this stratagem, Voss was bribed without danger to himself should the bribery be discovered. Voss was a willing executioner but found little pleasure in genocide, remarking occasionally that he was simply following orders. He may thus be categorized as a willing but not zealous mass murderer. Although Voss gave free reign to the sadism of his inferiors, he does not appear to have perpetrated much personal violence upon the tens of thousands whose murder he orchestrated.

Hauptscharfuhrer (sergeant major) Moll

Moll, a member of the SS, replaced Voss as the man in charge of the operation of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau crematoria and Sonderkommando from April, 1944, through September of that year. During that time, Moll oversaw the murder and cremation of more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews in addition to the typical thousands of Auschwitz



victims killed during everyday operations—making Moll one of the most grotesque and evil mass murderers of all time.

Moll was short, thickset, and chubby, with gingery-blond hair and many freckles. He was missing one eye and wore a glass eye, earning him the whispered nickname of 'cyclops' among the camp inmates. Muller condemns him in vituperative terms, describing his character as cruel, brutal, unscrupulous, sadistic, callous, and blood-thirsty.

Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg-Vrba

Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg-Vrba were Jewish prisoners of Auschwitz who escaped April 7, 1944. Their escape was planned and assisted by the camp resistance leaders. Wetzler and Rosenberg-Vrba carried with them a large amount of written information about the holocaust being perpetrated at Auschwitz, including schematics of the crematoria and drawings of the camp layout. The men also carried a label from a can of Zyklon B; the label was obtained by Muller. Both men also attempted to memorize huge amounts of data regarding the genocide taking place. Their escape, it was hoped, would notify the outside world of the Nazi holocaust and hasten the destruction of Auschwitz. Although they were received and believed by the outside world, their message did not have the immediate and widespread results the camp resistance had so hoped for. When Auschwitz continued operating months after their escape, most camp inmates came to believe the two men had either been recaptured and executed or, worse, had been believed insane by the outside world and subsequently incarcerated in a mental facility. In fact, their report did have a substantial impact on the halting of the genocide and spared the lives of perhaps over 100,000 Hungarian Jews. Two other prisoners, Czeslaw Mordowicz and Arnost Rosin, escaped in May, 1944, with similar information and goals.



Objects/Places

Auschwitz I

Auschwitz I was the original concentration camp in the area of Oświęcim, Poland, and served as the administrative center for the entire complex that was eventually constructed. Auschwitz I was primarily a forced labor camp and was from February 1942 the site of approximately 70,000 state-sanctioned murders. The camp had multiple crematoria of an initial design that proved unsatisfactory. The camp was evacuated in January, 1945. A map of Auschwitz I is included in the appendix.

Auschwitz II-Birkenau

Auschwitz II-Birkenau was a vast extermination camp built nearby the existing Auschwitz I concentration camp. Although the Nazi's operated many extermination camps, Auschwitz II-Birkenau was the largest. The camp's construction began in October, 1941, and continued until the entire area was evacuated. As early as March, 1942, several gas chambers had been extemporized and by early 1943 purpose-built crematoria and gassing chambers were in operation; by June, 1943, all four purpose-built crematoria were in operation. It is estimated that approximately 1.1 millions of people, mostly Jews, were murdered at Auschwitz II-Birkenau; about 450,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered from April through June, 1944. The camp was evacuated in January, 1945. A map of Auschwitz II-Birkenau is included in the appendix.

Crematoria

Both Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau featured crematoria, or great ovens in which the corpses of the murdered were burned to ash. Most of Muller's incarceration was devoted to stoking the crematoria with corpses and coke and evacuating the resultant ash and cinder, which was typically trucked away and thrown into rivers. As the purpose-built crematoria proved insufficient during period of mass murder, open pit cremation techniques were developed. Most of the crematoria were destroyed in November, 1945, in a Nazi attempt to cover up the scale of the holocaust. Schemata of two crematoria are included in the appendix.

Zyklon B

Zyklon B, also offered as Zyclon B in the book, was the trade name of an insecticide used by Nazi Germany to perform mass murder by gassing. The compound was a cyanide-based poison consisting of prussic acid and other compounds formed into pellets about the size of a pea. It was stored in airtight canisters and when exposed to air generated poisonous hydrogen cyanide gas. Muller notes that Zyklon B was less effective if in contact with water or even in rooms with wet surfaces. Approximately one



million Jews were gassed with Zyklon B at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Within the gas chambers, Zyklon B killed within about 20 minutes.

Truncheons and Small-bore, Silenced Rifles

Muller records that numerous executions were carried out in methods other than gassing with Zyklon B. The Nazis favored two methods—beating to death with truncheon or execution with point-blank shots delivered from small-bore, silenced rifles. The silenced rifles were used to avoid causing panic in large groups of people awaiting death by being shot. Truncheons were used openly, and Muller records watching dozens of people being beaten to death on numerous occasions—a daily if not hourly occurrence at Auschwitz.

Medical Experimentation

The Nazi physicians stationed at Auschwitz performed a variety of bizarre tortures upon inmates under the guise of scientific experimentation. Many of these processes were attempted mass sterilization techniques. Muller mentions cremating many corpses that had been mutilated in some way as a result of medical experimentation; in other words, all medical experiments proved painfully and horribly fatal to the subjects.

Canada

Canada was a colloquial name bestowed upon that part of Auschwitz II-Birkenau used to receive, sort, and package all materials taken from inmates upon arrival. It was so named because the inmates apparently believed that Canada was a land of vast wealth. The Nazis referred to this area of the camp as B2g.

Mexico

Mexico was a colloquial name bestowed upon that part of Auschwitz II-Birkenau which was never fully constructed or inhabited. It was so named apparently because many inmates were naked except for a blanket which was subsequently worn as a poncho. Even though the structures were not completed, the camp was heavily used. The Nazis referred to this area of the camp as B3.

Sonderkommando

The sonderkommando were work units of death camp inmates forced to participate in the genocidal processes of the holocaust; Muller was a sonderkommando. The term is German for 'special unit'. Members did not directly participate in mass killings, but were instead used to dispose of corpses, most frequently by cremation. Although the work was exceptionally heavy, the sonderkommando had additional foodstuffs at their



disposal because they were also responsible for collecting and organizing the belongings of the murdered inmates, many arriving directly from various ghettos. Of the many thousands used as sonderkommando, only about twenty survived the war.

Yana's Necklace

At one point Muller had become suicidal and decided to join a group of Czechoslovakian Jews in the gas chamber. To this end he hid in the chamber and waited for the doors to be sealed. Yana, a young woman shortly to be murdered, argued that because he could survive he must survive to bear witness. She also gave him a necklace and requested that he give it to her boyfriend in another part of the camp. Muller left the gas chamber and delivered the necklace, preserving his own life in the process.



Themes

Holocaust

The central theme and dominant feature of the text is the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust, the genocide of Jews and other minority groups of Europe and North Africa. The most commonly cited figure for the number of Jewish victims murdered is six millions, though estimates range from five to seven millions. Muller estimates that Auschwitz killed about 1.1 million people during his incarceration, over 400,000 of whom were Hungarian Jews. In addition, other minorities were also murdered—Muller mentions gypsies, Soviet soldiers, political prisoners, and discontented German citizens. The Holocaust is sometimes defined as limited to the genocide of the Jews but many consider it to include the mass genocide of all targeted groups. Thus the most inclusive definition places the total number of Holocaust victims at nine to eleven millions with some estimates as high as twenty-six millions. Muller presents this as eyewitness testimony.

The Holocaust was characterized by the systematic attempt to efficiently assemble and murder as many people as possible. All of the resources and technologies of the Nazi regime were used to accomplish this vile purpose. Various methods of execution were used as the Holocaust developed, ranging from massed shootings through imprisonment to starvation to mass gassing and cremation. In addition to murder, Holocaust victims were routinely subjected to cruel and inhumane practices including starvation, torture, and enforced physical labor—a policy known as 'extermination through work'. Children were singled out for rapid execution. Muller chronicles examples of all these types of evil practices.

For many, death came inside of concentration camps such as Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and Mauthausen. Conditions within the camps were characterized by starvation, rampant disease, beatings, torture, and forced labor. The situation was so dire that many inmates welcomed death as a release—for example, the three *sonderkommand* workers who refused to work knowing that it meant their death. As allied armies would approach various concentration camps the Nazis would evacuate them and force the few surviving inmates on death marches for hundreds of miles, often through winter conditions—which happened at least twice with Muller. The Holocaust is usually understood to encompass the entire period of genocide from roughly November 1938 through the end of the war in 1945.

Survival

The author was one of a relative handful of people believed to have survived incarceration in Auschwitz. Most survivors entered the death camp only months before its evacuation—Muller is nearly unique in his lengthy incarceration and survival. He relates surviving near starvation, constant dehydration, constant and repeated beatings, torture, a suicide attempt, and forced marches. He is usually in the company of other



sonderkommando team members who themselves seek to survive through nearly any means necessary. Muller subtly argues that survival alone is insufficient, however; one must not only survive, but one must bear witness of the holocaust. This theme is developed in numerous ways in the book beyond Muller's personal survival. He relates how many people strove to survive, how many minor acts of kindness aided in the survival of others, and how many people sought to forge personal connections even within the holocaust of Auschwitz. The book demonstrates convincingly and conclusively that the spark of life is inexhaustible, even when set against a backdrop of horrific mass murder.

Non-Resistance

Muller spends a great deal of time in the autobiography speculating on the process of the destruction of the human being before the destruction of the physical body. For many millions, forcible deportation to the concentration camps meant murder and cremation; this was not the case for Muller. He was deemed capable of physical labor and instead of being instantly murdered he was assigned to a forced labor as a sonderkommando, participating in the cremation of hundreds of thousands of corpses. The sonderkommando was composed of young men in excellent physical condition who could perform extended and demanding physical labor in horrific working conditions. Even given their initial healthy state, most sonderkommando soon succumbed.

Muller's incarceration was filled with psychological attacks on dignity and demands upon normal morality which could never be satisfied. The entire camp experience was designed to ridicule, belittle, and degrade. Inmates were shaved, clothed in rags, starved, beaten, housed in impossible conditions, and subjected to frequent capricious violence. Even an entire vocabulary and methodology of treatment was evolved to isolate and destroy the individual personality. This brutal program was so successful that inmates often ceased mental defiance months before their eventual physical destruction. Muller comments that such men—referred to as *Musselman*—existed in a state that could properly not be called living. Muller contemplates this and offers it as a plausible explanation of why so many hundreds of thousands could be murdered with relatively no resistance. The acts of resistance mentioned in the book are remarkable primarily because they occurred so infrequently, and the non-resistance of the victims forms one of the basic themes of the book, and is surely a theme that haunts the author.

Style

Perspective

The book is related from the first-person perspective and is constructed as a memoir. Muller was forcibly deported to Auschwitz in April, 1942. He was deemed suitable for forced labor and in May, 1942, was assigned to the Sonderkommando, a team that helped build and then operate the gas chambers and crematoria of the extermination camp. He was evacuated in January, 1945, before the advancing Russian army. Muller subsequently survived additional hardships before being freed in May, 1945, after nearly three years as a Nazi prisoner.

Muller, clearly uniquely positioned to describe survival in Auschwitz, offers his reason for writing the autobiography as the moral requirement to bear witness to Nazi atrocities—a feeling implicit in the book's title. He does not attempt to offer a psychological critique or overarching history, but instead confines his observations to a personal nature: indeed, however, he saw more than enough. Thus, the dominant themes of the text include the great insanity of Nazi Germany, the struggle for survival, and the process whereby many people purposefully were destroyed in personality long before their anonymous death.

Tone

The tone of the autobiographical work is often cited as its most startling aspect. Muller does not condone, but neither does he abjectly condemn his experiences in Auschwitz. He states the obvious with authority—the Holocaust was evil; many Germans were complicit in genocide; millions were murdered—but he does not dwell on these aspects of his experience. Instead, Muller focuses on the day-to-day events that comprised his life. How the crematoria were constructed; how they operated to incinerate hundreds of thousands of corpses; how the Sonderkommando were isolated within the camps.

Another startling aspect of the narrative is Muller's ability to remove himself from the hatred and sheer horror encompassed by the holocaust; he stands as an effective eyewitness because he is able to illustrate events that force their own conclusions irrespective of commentary. Thus, the tone of the autobiography is not only not poisonous, it is in fact one of its strongest elements. The tone is engaging and allows the reader to access the text quickly; it does not, however, prevent the material from developing fully its themes and it does not interfere with the terrible impact of the narrative.

Structure

The 180-page book is divided into five named and enumerated chapters, and also includes a foreword, an appendix with five illustrations, and a concise glossary. The

illustrations are schematics showing the geographic layout of Auschwitz; the buildings layout of Auschwitz I; the buildings layout of Auschwitz II-Birkenau; the physical layout of Crematorium 3; and the physical layout of Crematorium 5. The glossary includes mostly German-language terms preserved without translation in the text, or terms specific to Auschwitz. The narrative is presented in chronological format, such that most events are presented in an obvious order. This is not to say that events follow a logical progression, because survival in Auschwitz was not subject to any logical sequence. Indeed, most events critical to Muller's survival appear to be the result of random chance or coincidence. For example, he notes surviving several selections simply because of chance.

The book has a confusing publication history, in that it was initially published in German yet this first edition was itself a translation from the original language of writing. The English-language version currently in publication was translated from the German by Susanne Flatauer, who is also listed in the library of Congress cataloging-in-publication data as an editor, with Helmut Freitag as a literary collaborator. The English-language edition includes a concise foreword by Yehuda Bauer. The book includes an unfortunate number of typographic and grammatical errors.



Quotes

It was a Sunday in May 1942. Struggling through the early morning mist, a fitful spring sun shone on the yard of Block 11 where some 500 prisoners had lined up in rows of ten so that they might enjoy their Sunday rest according to established Auschwitz tradition. The sound of a hoarse voice barking orders rang across the yard: it belonged to Vacek, the block clerk, who was standing at the top flight of stairs. From this vantage point he was able to survey every corner of the yard below and bellow out his commands: 'Shun! Caps on! Caps off! Get a move on!' According to the green triangle on his uniform Vacek was a former professional criminal: in this microcosm of absolute evil he ruled supreme.

With eagle eyes he watched to see that his orders were carried out meticulously. At the command 'Caps off!' we whipped our flat caps from our shaven heads and slapped them against our right thighs with the flat of our hands. Unless this produced the whip-cracking sound envisaged by Vacek, the exercise would be repeated until he was satisfied. On this occasion it had already been repeated more than a hundred times. At first glance this tedious drill, not unlike the drilling of army recruits, might appear to be perfectly harmless and nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, it merely served to provide Vacek with the desired pretext for putting prisoners to death. (p. 1)

I now began to realize the dangerous position in which I found myself. At that moment I had only one chance to stay alive, even if only for a few hours or days. I had to convince Stark that I could do anything he expected from a crematorium worker. And thus I carried out all his orders like a robot. (p. 14)

Before we set out to work the Kapos of the different work teams ran round their groups straightening their lines and painstakingly counting the prisoners to make sure the number of their 'sheep' tallied with that of the SS man in charge. The camp orchestra struck up and to the sound of military music the working teams left for their place of work led by their Kapo who reported work assignment and number of prisoners in his column to the Arbeitsdienst leader. Team after team thus marched through the main gate of the camp in rank and file, an array of thousands of slaves in striped prison uniforms. Their forced labour had been organized in such a way that, directly or indirectly, it contributed towards their own destruction. (p. 40)

To the sound of the camp orchestra playing a sentimental folk song we marched off to work through the main gate. A few metres behind the gate our team reformed into three independent groups. The first, turning to the left, marched towards the crematoria 4 and 5. A few metres behind walked the demolition team. The third group to which I belonged turned to the right. I noticed Kapo Mietek in the front rank, and my heart sank. I wondered if he would be as brutal and callous as he had been at Auschwitz. (p. 58)

Meanwhile Voss, the executioner, was circling round mother and child looking for a spot on the child's little body at which to aim his gun. When the distracted mother noticed this she began to twist and turn to the left and to the right, back and forth, anything to take



her child out of his field of fire. Suddenly three shots cracked through the silence. The little girl was hit in the side of the chest. Her mother feeling her child's blood flowing down her body lost all self-control and flung her daughter straight at her murderer's head while he was already aiming the barrel of his gun at her. Obersharführer Voss grew very pale and stood there petrified. When he felt the warm blood on his cheek he dropped his gun and wiped his face with his hand. A few seconds went by before SS-Sturmann Kurschuss grasped that his chief was no longer master of the situation. Then he hurriedly took hold of Voss' arm. Gorges picked up the murder weapon. 'Carry on, Rottenführer!' stammered his unnerved chief, 'I've had enough for today. When the execution was over, fifty naked bodies were lying on the ground behind the wall. A few were still breathing stertorously, their limbs moving feebly while they sought to raise their blood-stained heads; their eyes were wide open: the victims were not quite dead because the bullets had missed their mark by a fraction. Gorges went to examine each one and administered the coup de grace into the heart or they eye to all who still gave signs of life. (pp. 72-73)

Presently more than half the people were behind the great door of the gas chamber. It seemed that the others still in the changing room were trying to gain time. Time for what, though? The crematorium was surrounded by armed SS men. None of us prisoners was willing to join them in what would be a senseless attempt to get away. Nor was there any chance of telling the people that they were about to be gassed. This might have persuaded them that it was more honourable to die fighting than meekly inside the gas chamber. However, every phase, from their arrival on the ramp to the moment when they were hustled into the gas chamber was deliberately carried out in a tearing hurry leaving the victims no time to think or take decisions. (p. 86)

Our working day began early in the morning when we lined up in the fenced barrack yard, ready to march off to the death factories. There the next twelve hours were completely taken up with hard labour. The generators had to be declinkered; the dead dragged to the ovens for cremation, having first had their gold teeth wrenched out and the women their hair cut off; coke had to be brought in; ashes had to be raked out, and finally the crematorium had to be cleaned and disinfected. For our tormentors all this was hard but perfectly normal work; as for us, while we were in the crematorium, we lost all sense of reality. It was not until the late afternoon when we assembled in the yard of the death factory ready to return to camp that life came back to our numbed minds. Birds were singing in the copse near by, fellow prisoners were walking about, the orchestra was playing a rousing march as we entered the camp, sufficient proof that there was a life which went on, even if next morning human bodies in their thousands would once more be turned to dust and ashes. (p. 100)

I could hear trucks driving into the yard: the second convoy had arrived. Again SS men were shouting, again dogs were barking. Try though I might not to think of what was at that moment happening in the gas chamber, my thoughts kept returning there. In my mind's eye I again saw Yana with her long black hair. Her regular features, her slim body, her passionate eyes flashing with righteous indignation; her instinctively well-chosen words, had made a deep impression on me. I realized that I had no idea who



she was. Perhaps Sasha, her lover, who worked in the breadstore would tell me. For a brief moment I thought of him. How would he take it when he heard about the death of his beloved Yana? Then my thoughts wandered to some of my companions in the camp who were preparing their escape and for whom I had promised to obtain pieces of evidence, such as the labels on the tins containing Zyklon B gas. By now I had come back to reality. I hoped that perhaps I might be of use to the Resistance, although I was still very young and without much experience of life. Thus, within a few hours, I had come to the conviction that each minute, each hour and each day I could interpose between the day of my death was a gift from heaven. (p. 115)

We could not understand why the civilized world allowed the death mills of Auschwitz to turn faster and faster without any discernible reaction, while the military overthrow of the Third Reich was agreed to by every right-thinking person. Almost a month had passed since the flight of Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg-Vrba, and there was no sign that they had reached any of their goals. Had the Nazis and their artful Propaganda Minister managed once again to deceive the rest of the world, we wondered. Could it be possible that their accounts were not believed because the crimes they had described were so ghastly as to be unbelievable? The two might even have been declared mentally ill and rushed into a psychiatric hospital, for had they not asserted that hundreds of thousands of human beings had been and were being murdered by means of a chemical compounds used for pest control, merely because they were Jews? (p. 129)

Since the previous night 10,000 people had perished in the three gas chambers of crematorium 5 alone, while on the site of bunker 5 with its four gas chambers corpses were burnt in four pits. In addition, in crematoria 2, 3, and 4 with a total of five gas chambers and thirty-eight ovens work went on at full speed. Taking this kind of 'plant capacity' into consideration it will be readily understood how it was possible to exterminate about 400,000 Hungarian Jews within a few weeks. (p. 143)

I thought it advisable to go back to my hiding place and wait until the coast was quite clear. I considered what I ought to do now. True, I had escaped the massacre in the yard but how on earth was I to get out of here? I thought about this for a long time, and then decided to wait until it was dark outside. Then I intended to overpower the SS guard of a small gate leading to the general store-room. Next to this gate was a small door which was never locked and through it I could get into the store-room. First I would have to put on the overpowered SS guard's uniform, before disposing of the second SS guard on the further side of the store-room. After that it would be an easy matter to get away under cover of darkness. It was most important not to make a noise while I dealt with the two SS guards which meant that I would have to put them out of action with a single well-aimed blow from behind. My weapon was to be one of the crow-bars used to declinker the oven gratings. (p. 157)

It was, incredibly, a complete anti-climax. This moment, on which all my thought and secret wishes had been concentrated for three years, evoked neither gladness nor, for that matter, any other feelings inside me. I let myself drop down from my rafter and crawled on all fours to the door. Outside I struggled along a little further, but then I



simply stretched out on a woodland ground and fell fast asleep. I awoke to the monotonous noise of vehicles rumbling past. Walking across to the near by road I saw a long column of American tanks clanking along in the direction of Wels. As I stared after the convoy of steel giants I realized that the hideous Nazi terror had ended at last. (p. 171)

Topics for Discussion

Why do you think that, today, some people seek to deny the historicity of the Holocaust?

What can we learn from studying the Holocaust? Can such inhuman genocides still take place in the modern world?

In the opening chapter of the book, Muller notes that he was caught stealing tea and as punishment was assigned to the sonderkommando. Consider the change in living conditions from being a slave laborer under the brutal Vacek to being a sonderkommando laborer under the kapo Fischl. In an ironic way, do you think that Muller's punishment saved his life?

Muller relates many scenes of horror, including one execution where a despondent mother threw her baby's corpse at the head of the executioner. Faced with such scenes of naked evil, how do you think that witnesses such as Muller continued to function?

Muller notes that many inmates of Auschwitz chose suicide rather than continuing in the struggle for existence. One common form of suicide was 'to go to the fence', a euphemism for dashing toward the electrified fence through no-man's land. If the guards did not shoot the person, they would be electrified by the fence. Given the situation in Auschwitz, do you find it remarkable that anyone strove to survive beyond the first few days? Discuss.

Muller notes that even as Nazi Germany's war efforts were hobbled by insufficient transport and resources such as fuel, the trains kept rolling into Auschwitz on schedule and much coke and alcohol was used to cremate bodies. Nazi Germany's great insanity was such that it helped seal the ideology's downfall. In what other ways does Muller present the great evil of the Holocaust?

Do you think you would have survived Auschwitz?