

*Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, edited by Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvi + 638pp. \$39.95

This is a flawed, but nevertheless indispensable, reference work that will be used for many years by Holocaust students at all levels. Its twenty-nine essays explore the history of Auschwitz, its machinery of mass murder, inmates, problems of resistance, and reactions by the outside world.

It is composed of the work of twenty-four scholars from several disciplines and nine countries; although none of the contributors is German, Polish researchers are well represented, including six historians attached to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Variations in quality are inevitable in such a collection. Some essays are massively documented, whereas others dispense with notation altogether. A few essays, perhaps by necessity, only scratch the surface of formidable topics, as in Shmuel Krakowski's exploration of the Auschwitz satellite camps and Aleksander Lasik's analysis of postwar prosecutions of Auschwitz SS men. The anthology is, on the whole, distinguished by high levels of scholarship and editing.

Among the new research findings that will be of particular interest to scholars is a judicious reassessment by Franciszek Piper of the numbers murdered at Auschwitz. He and his Polish colleagues knew for many years before the fall of Communism that the official figures advanced by their government -- as high as four million -- were gross exaggerations. So, too, were estimates made by Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss in his postwar testimony and accepted by many western scholars. Piper's careful calculations of arrivals and departures show that between 1.1 and 1.5 million victims died in the camp. In disagreement with a previous study by the French scholar Georges Wellers, Piper inclines toward the smaller figure, arguing that Wellers underestimated

the numbers of inmates deported from Auschwitz to other camps. Although there were too few prisoner escapes to make much difference in the overall figures, Henryk Swiebocki shows that there were more of them than previously thought.

Naturally, escape was almost always easier for Polish political prisoners, who knew the language and had friends and relatives not too far away, than for Jews and Soviet POWs. Swiebocki argues that aid was extended to all escapees by the Polish underground and Polish peasants who lived in the Area, a point that is likely to be disputed by others in the case of Jewish fugitives.

New perspectives on the early years of Auschwitz are advanced by Canadian architectural historian Robert-Jan van Pelt and the French independent scholar Jean-Claude Pressac. Van Pelt's research into the first plans for the camp and its surroundings shows that the SS was as interested in founding a model settlement for the master race as it was in establishing an outpost of hell for subhumans. Making the town into a Germanic paradise was linked in Himmler's mind to the "*Drang nach Osten*" tradition of Germans cleaning up the mess made by the Slavs. Indeed, the camp was originally intended to supply the labor and construction needs of hardy German pioneers in the town and then the rest of eastern upper Silesia. Widening of the war delayed implementing this vision and the establishment of Birkenau to hold Soviet POWs produced what van Pelt calls, in a memorable phrase, "secretory catastrophe." What has been called "excremental assault," a sanitary situation deliberately contrived to destroy prisoners' sense of self-worth, at Birkenau was the result of miscalculation: the designers assumed that many more workers would be employed outside the camp than ever was the case. Van Pelt's reconstruction of plans for building the first crematorium at Birkenau inclines him to place the transition to the Holocaust there in March 1942, not summer 1941, favored by Raul Hilberg and Franciszek Piper in their

contributions to this anthology. Pressac suggests an even later date in an abridged English version of his controversial book *Les Crematoires d'Auschwitz*. His research in German records in Soviet archives, also concentrating on crematorium designs and construction plans, leads him to conclude that Birkenau was not considered for genocide before June 1942. Both he and van Pelt attempt to discredit Höss's recollection that Himmler told him in the summer of 1941 to prepare Auschwitz for the mass murder of the Jews, and it must be conceded that the camp commandant's memory for dates was not particularly reliable. This argument is certain to fuel debate for years to come. On the other hand, Pressac's detailed description of the construction and operation of the gas chambers and crematoria will inspire only praise. One is left with the impression with all the vaunted technological sophistication and efficiency of planned mass murder at Auschwitz, the record is one of astonishing frequent trouble, improvisation, and breakdown.

By the spring of 1944, the system had been made more efficient, and it was ready to deal with truly massive numbers of victims. As Raul Hilberg's contribution reminds us, Auschwitz reached the peak of its killing capacity after the other death camps had been shut down. Randolph Braham's essay on the Hungarian Jews outlines careful preparations at Birkenau for the arrival of hundreds of thousands of victims. Even at that, the gas chambers and crematoria were overwhelmed and some Jews were hurled into the burning pits alive. The camp's unique spacial dimensions, too, are set down clearly. As is often thought of one place was, of course, three distinct camps as well as a multitude of labor camps, some of them far away in Germany and Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, several essays show that Auschwitz was absolutely typical of the Nazi concentration camp universe in that it

dehumanized everyone it touched, including the SS and inmate functionaries.

Essays by Danuta Czech and Nathan Cohen deserve special praise for their sensitivity to the plight of Kapos, block elders, and Sonderkommando members who were forced to help run the camp and the crematoria.

Aleksander Lasik summarizes the findings of his recent doctoral dissertation on the SS guard and administrative personnel at Auschwitz. Using the card index and other records of the approximately 7,000 SS men and women assigned to the camp at one time or other, Lasik has reconstructed a sociological profile that finds his subjects unexceptional in such key categories as educational levels and occupational structure. They were, he concludes, rather like the society from which they were drawn, not unlike the "ordinary men" in Christopher Browning's study of Police Battalion 101.

But Lasik's subjects, after all, were SS men, and he may underestimate the importance of ideological conditioning. Lasik does note the overrepresentation of ethnic Germans from Poland, Yugoslavia, and Romania among the guards; discriminated against and held in contempt by the Reich Germans in the administration, they often took out their frustrations on the inmates. He might have added that the *Volksdeutsche* also wanted desperately to belong and could be expected to seize every opportunity to prove themselves worthy of their elite calling. A second essay by Lasik ably summarized the career of commandant Höss. The story is fairly well known, and there are no surprises here. Better even than Adolf Eichmann, Höss exemplifies the "banality of evil."

Most of the essays summarize previous research rather than advance new findings or interpretations. The best of these place their topics in fresh or uncommon perspectives. The contribution by Robert Lifton and Amy Hackett on the Nazi doctors unexpectedly says nothing of the controversial "doubling"

theory advanced earlier by Lifton. Instead it underlines the continuity between Auschwitz and earlier Nazi eugenics policies stretching back to the 1933 law requiring sterilization of those thought to be genetically flawed.

The key link between the "T-4" euthanasia program of 1939-1941 and the Holocaust, they point out, was the 14f13 project of 1941 extending the elimination by doctors of "life unworthy of life" to the concentration camps.

The same ideological imperative drove the doctors' experiments and research at Auschwitz. This larger vision of the Nazi racial utopia also informs Helena Kubica's extremely interesting discussion of children in Auschwitz. Whereas Jewish children brought to the camp or born there were doomed (except, temporarily, for those housed in the Family Camp established to fool possible Red Cross visitors), young Slavic children were sometimes subjected to rigorous examinations to determine their racial worth. Those deemed worthy were delivered to the Lebensborn Foundation for adoption by German families.

Andrzej Strzelecki makes a similar point in his essay on the plunder taken from victims and their corpses. In addition to enriching the Reichsbank and various SS institutions, much of it was turned over to Germans settling the territories cleansed of Jews and Slavs. In the Nazis' Manichean view of the universe, everything about the exploitation and death of "subhumans" ought to serve the future of *Deutschtum* in Eastern Europe. According to Strzelecki's reckoning, each prisoner profited the Nazis 1,631 RM, not counting the value of the victim's bones. It is to be hoped that Strzelecki's essay, and Michael Berenbaum's introductory remarks, will also finally set to rest the saponification myth. Human fat was collected and used to fuel the fires of the open pits at Birkenau, not to make soap.

Historiographical disputes are played down in this volume, but well-informed readers will sense them close at hand. Auschwitz survivor

Yisrael Gutman's introductory essay opposes the influential view, associated most closely with the late Torrence Des Pres, that significant numbers of prisoners were able to help one another and create social structures that kept themselves alive and morally aware. The Nazis, Gutman avers, atomized their victims so successfully that only a rare few established close ties to others. Doubtful that any general rules of survival can be gleaned from the holocaust experience, he concludes that staying alive depended mostly on luck. On the other hand, Irena Strzclecka suggests that close personal bonds and mutual aid were often decisive to the survival of women, who made up about thirty percent of Auschwitz prisoners. Essays by Martin Gilbert and Miroslav Karny ably document the slow leakage of information about Auschwitz to the outside world, culminating in the Vrba/Wetzler report of April 1944. And yet, as Walter Laqueur has pointed out, knowledge of genocide was one thing, but assimilating that knowledge was quite another. Even if the facts had been internalized, there is reason to doubt that it would have made any considerable difference David Wyman repeats his charge that Auschwitz was not bombed because of callous indifference to the Jews camouflaged as putting military considerations first. This somewhat ahistorical argument has gone virtually unchallenged for more than a decade. At the very least it ought to be clear that the Nazis had alternative methods of genocide available to them in case of need. It is difficult to reconcile the belief that they were determined to kill as many Jews as possible in mid-1944 with the notion that a few well-placed bombs would have stopped them in their tracks.

No topic represented in this anthology has been more neglected than the treatment of the Gypsies. Yehuda Bauer's essay on the subject argues that muddled Nazi thinking about the Gypsies kept more of them alive than would have been the case had they been categorized along with the Jews. Pure

Gypsies were considered more valuable than those of mixed blood, and yet even the former were considered "asocials" and hence concentration camp material.

Bauer also notes the Nazi distinction between the sedentary (and hence relatively benign) Gypsy minority and the undesirable nomadic majority. He concludes (in disagreement with other historians who have explored the subject) that the erratic treatment of the Gypsies at Auschwitz implies the lack of any clear plan for them, but he also concedes the relatively primitive state of research on the subject. A Gypsy culture unfriendly to self-generated histories and memoirs of this event makes it all the more important for the rest of us to address this subject. Only then are we ever likely to learn if the remaining Gypsies were merely being given a reprieve while the more dangerous enemy, the Jews, went first.

Two things are puzzling in a volume aspiring to (and largely attaining) the status of standard work. It contains overall sketches of the designs of the main camp and Birkenau as they evolved from concentration camps to centers of genocide, as well as aerial photographs taken from American bombers in 1944, but there are no precise diagrams of the camps locating the various sectors and structures mentioned throughout the book. Moreover, anyone using this anthology as a reference tool should be warned that it holds a far richer pool of information than has been filed in the index.

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