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# Work, Violence and Cruelty

## An Everyday Historical Perspective on Perpetrators in Nazi Concentration Camps

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*In her recently published Ph.D. research project «Workaday Violence: Female Guards at Lublin-Majdanek (1942-1944)» she examines the structures, mechanisms and dynamics of violence in this concentration and extermination camp. This study reconstructs the personal trajectories of twenty-eight female guards and analyzes the social composition of the guard corps with a crossed perspective on the male camp guards, thereby filling a gap in the historical record in regard to Nazi female perpetrators.*

### Introduction: Facing concentration camp violence<sup>1</sup>

In her testimony, the French ethnologist Germaine Tillion reported a scene that a close friend of hers had secretly observed through a crack in the wooden floor in the prison section of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Called the “Bunker,” the SS-*Aufseherinnen* in charge used this room to carry out official corporal punishment (*körperliche Züchtigung*). For women, the Ravensbrück camp regulation prescribed five to twenty-five blows on the naked backside and the thighs.<sup>2</sup> In practice the responsible female guards gave fifty, sometimes seventy-five, which for the inmate meant certain death. After one of these beatings Tillion’s incarcerated friend ventured to peep through the hatch and had a chance to see the assistant chief guard, Dorothea Binz, in action.

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2. Dienstvorschrift für das Fr. K. L. Ravensbrück (Lagerordnung Ravensbrück), National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), RG 549, 000-50-11 Box 522, Folder #3, p. 42. This camp regulation served as a model for all the other camps with female inmates.

*The execution of the punishment was already over; the victim lay on the floor, half-naked, with her face on the ground, apparently unconscious, covered with blood from her ankles to her waist. Binz examined her, tread silently on her bloody calves – her heels on one, her tiptoes on the other – starting to sway back and forth by shifting her body weight. The woman was maybe dead, in any case had passed out solidly, because she had no reaction at all. After a while, Binz walked away, her two boots covered with blood.<sup>3</sup>*

There is some debate among scholars whether we should expect this kind of gratuitous violence from the Holocaust. In 2006, a presentation on the topic of physical violence in the Nazi concentration camps at the Centre for Advanced Holocaust Studies elicited a strong statement from a colleague. The violence perpetrated in the camps, he argued, is self-evident and therefore requires no further explanation. Indeed, many theoretical and historical studies on the concentration and extermination camps understand the perpetration of violence merely as a “logical” consequence of Nazi ideology and policies. Such studies scrutinize the political, economic and cultural background of the establishment and evolution of the camp system, posing structural and organisational questions. The voluminous research on Nazi concentration and extermination camps has rarely broached the issue of violence in depth.<sup>4</sup> This does not detract from the quality of these studies, which is undisputed. I only wish to point out the discrepancy between the mention of terms such as “violence” and “terror”, and the lack of inquiry into this phenomenon as a question in its own right. Though SS-personnel in the camps perpetrated physical violence on a daily basis, its character, causes, consequences and dynamics are generally not discussed as self-standing topics.

There are some recent exceptions. In the early 1990s Wolfgang Kirstein proposed a historical analysis of violence in concentration camps and Wolfgang Amanski a cultural one.<sup>5</sup> They both showed the importance of the institutional setting as well as of the social dynamics for the understanding of violence. Christian Dürr’s philosophical approaches analyze the prisoner’s compulsory society through imprisonment (*Zwangsgesellschaft*), concentrating exclusively on the rela-

3. Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück* (Paris: Seuil, 1988 [1973]) p. 139. Translation EMK.

4. Cf. Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, Christoph Dieckmann, eds., *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager – Entwicklung und Struktur*, 2 vol. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1997); Wolfgang Benz, Barbara Distel, eds., *Terror ohne System. Die ersten Konzentrationslager im Nationalsozialismus 1933-1935, Geschichte der Konzentrationslager 1933-1945*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Metropol, 2001); Idem, *Herrschaft und Gewalt. Frühe Konzentrationslager 1933-1939*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Metropol, 2002); Idem, *Instrumentarium der Macht. Frühe Konzentrationslager 1933-1937, Geschichte der Konzentrationslager 1933-1945*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Metropol, 2003); cf. also the book series edited by Benz and Distel, *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Organisation des Terrors*, vol. 1–7 (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005-2008). An excellent, new overview of the recent scholarship on concentration camps represents Jane Caplan, Nikolaus Wachsmann, eds., *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany. The New Histories* (London: Routledge, 2010).

5. Cf. Wolfgang Kirstein, *Das Konzentrationslager als Institution totalen Terrors. Das Beispiel Natzweiler* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992); Gerhard Amanski, *Maschinen des Terrors: das Lager (KZ und GULAG) in der Moderne* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1993).

tionship between victim and perpetrator.<sup>6</sup> The tremendous violence in the camps may not surprise, because like any total institution – such as prisons, mental hospitals, military camps etc. – concentration camps harbour a great potential for abuse of power and brutality. Also for the German sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky, the violence perpetrated by the SS stemmed not so much from ideological beliefs as the very structure of the camps. They were organised such that power was not confined but, on the contrary, set free and transformed into absolute terror.<sup>7</sup> The flood of regulations and the paramilitary framework of the camps did not single-handedly instigate coercion, he asserts, but rather defined a margin of maneuverer (*Handlungsraum*). While Sofsky recognizes the social foundations of violence, he rejects the possible impact of individual as well as cultural practices. Like Sofsky, Armanski, Dürr and Kirstein also place primary emphasis on institutional setting. And with the exception of Kirstein, who carries out an empirical study of the camp Natzweiler, their work is concerned with ideal types, dealing with “sample” or “model” camps that, historically speaking, never actually existed.

It is precisely in the specific historical situations of everyday life in actual camps, however, that violence exceeded expectations. Historians are confronted with a significant gap between official guidelines and everyday practices in the Nazi camps in terms of both the quantity and the quality of violence. It compels us to investigate more closely the agency of the perpetrators, framed within a microhistory of social and cultural dynamics in those particular settings. To what extent did the camp personnel on duty “make” *concentrational violence*? What were the inner dynamic and cultural meanings associated with these violent practices? Which purposes did physical violence serve from the perpetrator’s perspective? As the French sociologist Jacques Sémelin points out, research on violence requires, above all, that one be interested in the moment of violence itself – in the “violent act.”<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, precisely this attention to historical acts of terrorizing is still absent from the scholarship of the camps<sup>9</sup>, with some exceptions. In a recently published article the social psychologist Johannes Lang explores the theoretical and empirical limits of the concept of *dehumanisation*. By analyzing the killer victim interaction, he seeks violence as a play to extend the perpetrator’s sense of power over another human being rather than as the aim to efface the victim’s hu-

6. Christian Dürr, *Jenseits der Disziplin. Eine Analyse der Machtordnung in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern* (Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2004).

7. Wolfgang Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt-Main: Fischer, 1993), p. 136.

8. Jacques Sémelin, “Introduction: Violences extrêmes: peut-on comprendre?,” *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 147, 2002, pp. 479–481, p. 481.

9. Goldhagen did a first try for the death marches. By now we have more well-founded research on that matter: Cf. Daniel J. Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996); Daniel Blatman, *Les marches de la mort. La dernière étape du génocide nazi, été 1944 – printemps 1945*, (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

man appearance. And it is precisely the *human* and intersubjective quality of the interaction that provides the violence with much of its meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Physical violence is of course experienced physically; it is exercised directly on human bodies or on objects. It comprises a large spectrum of actions and experiences and ranges from a threatening gesture, to actual injury, and finally to killing. As the German scholar Jan Philipp Reemtsma puts it, “Violence is action and violence is suffering.”<sup>11</sup> For those who endured it in the Nazi concentration camps, violence caused pain and fear. For those who exercised and performed it, violence brought a feeling of power and, in many cases, lust.<sup>12</sup>

This paper will frame the study of individual violent acts on the part of the SS guards in terms of the everyday culture and society of the concentration camp. Following Alf Lüdtke, the benefit of focusing on everyday life, as both an analytical concept and methodological approach, is that it allows the historian to reconstruct human experiences and social practices. By centering on the actions of everyday, ordinary people, the history of everyday life allows the historian to observe the process by which individuals appropriate norms, discourses and practices in order to array themselves as subjects in wider sociopolitical landscapes.<sup>13</sup> *Alltagsgeschichte* is thus ideally suited for the problem at hand: for we will be able to make sense of concentrational violence only if we understand its situational function for its perpetrator: the simple camp guards.<sup>14</sup>

Methodologically, the aim of *Alltagsgeschichte* is to gain some insight into the experience of everyday life by triangulation, as it were, on the basis of the different types of sources available to us. From the first-person testimony of guards or survivors, we get mostly self-representations and – presentations. With the aid of photographs and documentary evidence, we can reconstruct the materiality of living and working conditions, the organisation of space and time, hygiene and nutrition, and so on. With reports by SS officers or simple guards we can trace

10. Johannes Lang, “Questioning Dehumanization: Intersubjective Dimensions of Violence in the Nazi Concentration and Death Camps”, in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2010), pp. 225–246.

11. Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Vertrauen und Gewalt. Versuch über eine besondere Konstellation der Moderne* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2008), p. 124.

12. Alf Lüdtke, “War as work. Aspects of Soldering in twentieth-century Wars”, in Alf Lüdtke, Bernd Weisbrod, eds., *No Man’s Land of Violence. Extreme Wars in the twentieth century* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), pp. 127–151; Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in twentieth century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Elaine Scarry, *The body in pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

13. The concept of appropriation implies a versatile, formative, and sensual interpretation of social norms, discourses, practices and coercions by the agents. Cf. Alf Lüdtke, “Introduction: What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practitioners?,” in idem, *The history of everyday life: reconstructing historical experiences and ways of life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995 [German 1989]), pp. 3–40.

14. Cf. “Everyday life in Nazi Germany. A Forum” moderated by Andrew Stuart Bergerson (University of Missouri-Kansas City), panelists: Elissa Mailänder Koslov (Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen), Gideon Reuveni (University of Melbourne), Paul Steege (Villanova University), and Dennis Sweeney (University of Alberta), *German History*, 27 (2009) 4, pp. 560–579.

often quite raucous interpersonal interactions in the workplace as well as relations between the sexes. Foregrounded are the conditions of housing, clothing and eating habits of the camp personal, their quarrels and cooperation, their expectations, anxieties and hopes for the future.

Yet the experience of genocide and violence for perpetrators as well as for victims is challenging to reconstruct, since we have very limited testimonies of personal experience. For the victims, “experience” in this context must be understood as survival first and foremost, even before we can begin to determine the many forms of suffering, surveillance, and of course dying that characterised everyday life under the SS. As for the camp guards, it is very difficult to get at their experiences of violence. The only moments they spoke – were forced to speak – about their camp experience was in the context of post-war trials, at which point, whenever it came to the question of violence, they wrapped themselves in silence or engaged an “exculpatory discourse”. Since the testimonies on violence from the perpetrator’s side are fragmentary, survivor testimony is precious, especially coming from those who worked close to the SS and had so to speak a role as “participant observers.” With their descriptions we can certainly obtain insight into practices of violence. However, to take into account only the experience of the victims – as camp research usually does – is a one-way street. Violence cannot be understood exclusively from the perspective of its target but must also be analyzed from the perspective of its executors.

Historians thus get only glimpses of these experiences of the violence and mass killing in the camps by reading carefully between the lines and crossing the perpetrator’s statements with other sources. Here domains that, at first sight, seem unrelated to violence – such as leisure, personal or family life – matter precisely because, at the everyday level, they constantly intersected with killing. Even in the camps, there is no clear cut between the spheres of everyday life and the non-everyday. Also, in the face of a notable lack of testimony as to perpetrators’ experience of violence, the theoretical indispensability of attention to everyday social and cultural practices becomes all too apparent. The daily praxis and concrete experiences of violence cannot be separated from the social and cultural *context* of their genesis and impact.<sup>15</sup>

*Alltagsgeschichte* offers precisely this kind of tool set. Writing the everyday-life history of the camp guards does not entail the restoration of missing historical subjects but rather a rethinking of their nature. Research into everyday historical realities explores the “inner perspective” of the acquisition and exercise of power by the simple SS guards. This paper opens a window onto three different, certainly not exhaustive, but nevertheless exemplary forms of concentrational and genocidal violence: extermination, physical ill treatment and cruelty. In the light

15. Lüdtke, “Introduction,” op cit., p. 4.

of such inquiry, the gaping distance between rulers and ruled is reduced, putting forward a “web of social relations.”<sup>16</sup> In its turn to the everyday operations of violence and power, the history of everyday life parallels the analytical shift undertaken by Michel Foucault with his insistence that power be addressed not only as a question of legal or institutional legitimacy, but also as a microphysics that “applies itself to immediate everyday life.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the emphasis on the everyday poses the issue of the historicity of subjecthood itself, of how individuals become “legible” subjects, social actors who enter into a set of power relations. The Foucauldian concept of power posits not a mere deflection of centralised power, but rather something which inheres in and emanates from the varied relations among people. It brings into play relations *between* individuals and groups. Foucault defines power as an exertion of influence, namely as “an action upon an action.”<sup>18</sup> Power distinguishes itself from violence, which acts upon a body or things, “it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys.”<sup>19</sup> Power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus. As Foucault has pointed out, violence-based relations do not acknowledge the opponent as a subject; violence is all about forcing, bending, breaking and degrading the other. But in practice, and especially in the camps, both constantly intermingle. While I consider the Foucauldian power-relation concept very enlightening for analysis of the intracamp dynamics of “SS-society” – because it allows us to conceive of the guards as both the subjects and objects of power – it cannot be applied to the relationship between guard and prisoner, because it designates relations “between partners.”<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, dealing with concentration-camp violence necessitates a distinction between different forms and levels of violence, and moreover with an eye to their cultural meaning. Especially excessive violence claims for the decoding of the gesture-based language of violence. The SS used the bodies of the inmates to send messages. As the Archaeologist Maud Gleason states referring to Josephus’ writing and the Jewish War, body language and gesture constitute a non-verbal form of communication. It demands the understanding of the semiotic context, “of the ways the human body functioned as a signifier in that time and place”<sup>21</sup>. The gestural repertory of violence and especially so-called excessive violence is

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16. Ibid.

17. Michel Foucault, “Afterword”, in Hubert L. Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, eds., *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 208–219, p. 212.

18. Ibid, p. 220.

19. Ibid.

20. Foucault, “Afterword”, op. cit., p. 217.

21. Maud Gleason, “Mutilated Messengers: body language in Josephus”, in: Simon Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome. Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Developecment of Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 50–85, p. 50.

rich and polysemous, because it is impossible for the perpetrators to control the meaning of their violent gestures.

Following the French anthropologist Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, I prefer the concept of cruelty.<sup>22</sup> Nahoum-Grappe defines cruelty as a specific form of violence that is distinguished by its intensity and motivation. Violence causes different grades of pain, but cruelty has not only the explicit aim to inflict pain and suffering upon the victim, but also to bring degradation. It can only be implemented in the context of an asymmetrical power relation. By ill-treating and killing a concentration camp prisoner, by humiliation, camp guards, both female and male, experienced and expressed their *overwhelming* dominance. Considering Elias Canetti's theory of power, the cruel act can be seen to have provided the perpetrator with a vital and lustful exercise of power.<sup>23</sup>

This article interrogates the situational context, the social dynamics and the cultural meaning of practices of concentrational and genocidal violence. It concentrates on the SS-personnel of the concentration and extermination camp Majdanek in occupied Poland. In summer 1941, Heinrich Himmler planned to set up a camp in the outskirts of Lublin in occupied eastern Poland.<sup>24</sup> It was right at the moment when the dream of the conquest of "the East" seemed to come into immediate reach; the war with the Soviet Union still looked promising. And Himmler had ambitious goals for the region, which was to become a German stronghold.<sup>25</sup> In order to facilitate the execution of this imposing plan for the camp as well as for the city of Lublin, Majdanek was utilised at the outset as a camp for Soviet prisoners of war and as a work camp for Jews.<sup>26</sup> But the war plans did not work out as expected, and Majdanek never left a provisional stage of multiple functions. Majdanek was a prisoner-of-war camp for Soviet soldiers; a work camp for Jews and Poles; a camp for Polish and Soviet civilians, mostly from the rural population; a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners; and between summer 1942 and fall 1943 an extermination camp for European Jews. Between October 1942 and April 1944 it also had a female concentration camp section, and in spring-summer 1943, Majdanek served as a camp for Jewish children. The multiple functions of this concentration and extermination camp

22. Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, "L'usage politique de la cruauté: L'épuration ethnique (ex-Yougoslavie, 1991-1995)", in Françoise Héritier ed., *De la violence* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1996), pp. 275–323; Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, "Anthropologie de la violence extrême: le crime de profanation", in *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 147, 2002, pp. 601–609.

23. Elias Canetti, *Masse und Macht* (Frankfurt-Main: Fischer, 1999 [1960]), p. 267.

24. Tomasz Kranz, "Das KL Lublin – zwischen Planung und Realisierung," in Herbert et al., op cit. pp. 363–389.

25. Cf. Elissa Mailänder Koslov, "'Going east': colonial experiences and practices of violence among female and male Majdanek camp guards (1941-44)", *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10 (2008) 4, pp. 563–582.

26. Barbara Schwindt, *Das Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager Majdanek. Funktionswandel im Kontext der "Endlösung"* (Würzburg: Koenighausen & Neumann, 2005), pp. 74–76.



challenges us to focus not only on genocidal extermination against the Jewish prisoners but to consider also other forms of violence perpetrated by the guards as well, which makes this camp an excellent case study.

Therefore the first part of this article focuses on “official” genocidal violence, showing how the head of the Majdanek crematorium conceived of extermination as day-to-day “work.” In order to understand the mass killing in the camps, it is crucial to take a closer look at how the extermination of European Jews and other groups of prisoners was arranged and how it actually functioned in practice. The second part takes into account individual and unofficial forms of violence. It places the violent act and the guards in a microsocial context showing the communicative character of this violence. In so doing, it takes into account not only the message the SS addresses to the inmates, but also the subtle intern communication between SS-colleagues, thus illustrating complex power relations between SS-guards and inmates as well as within perpetrator society. The third and last part investigates those practices of violence that seem the most incomprehensible because of their “surplus” of violence. It will show that extremely cruel acts, when seen from the perpetrator’s perspective, appear as a constructive and empowering form of self-cultivation.

This article argues that physical violence in the concentration camps is neither evident nor self-explanatory but rather the result of a complex interplay between ideology, institutional setting and social dynamics. The physical violence which the subaltern SS-staff daily exercised in the Nazi camps was not so much ordered from above but rather represented a social and cultural practice by which members of the camp’s “SS-society” organised their cohabitation and regulated power relations among themselves. It was through their excessive violence that these career-oriented men and women appropriated the roles of SS-guard for themselves.

### **Exterminatory violence as a work ethic: destruction as “work”**

For Majdanek we do not have such detailed research as for Auschwitz-Birkenau,<sup>27</sup> but we can assume that the killing was organised and carried out in a similar way. The complex work of mass murder involved a multitude of actors and was divided into different steps: selecting people to kill; killing by injections, gas or shooting; dealing with the corpses; and so on. Mass murder required the labour and organisational skills of many; it was *hard work*.

Before the killing, the victims were selected. Selections were carried out in Majdanek by SS guards and the medical SS-staff in the camp’s prisoner infirma-

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27. Cf. Eric Friedler, Barbara Siebert, Andreas Kilian, *Zeugen aus der Todeszone. Das jüdische Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*, (München: dtv 2005, (2002)); Richard Glazar, *Die Falle mit dem grünen Zaun: Überleben in Treblinka*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1992); Gideon Greif, “Wir weinten tränenlos. Augenzeugenberichte des jüdischen ‘Sonderkommandos’ in Auschwitz”, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2001 (1995)).

ries (*Revier*).<sup>28</sup> The main targets of these selections were Jewish prisoners, who were all affected. To a lesser extent ill inmates of all prisoner categories were selected in the camp and killed on a regular basis, in accordance with the extended euthanasia program of 1941. The extermination was divided into different steps and organised in a complex and professionalised working process, involving a multitude of actors. Most of these professional killers were men, but women were also involved as they were in charge of the selections of female prisoners and children. Even those who were not directly implicated in the extermination process, one should note, could see, hear, and smell it during their day-to-day labour.

The process of killing and disposal, however, involved only male SS and prisoners. In the camps official extermination and organised killing were exclusively male “working domains.” Male SS, guards and men from the *Wachbataillon*, carried out the actual killing. They shot prisoners in the surrounding woods, while the paramedic SS-staff (*Sanitäter*) operated the gas chambers. Before the murder in the gas chambers, SS-guards forced the prisoners to undress and then searched their bodies, appointing other inmates to sort through their clothes and personal belongings. After the killing, these inmates were forced to pull the wedged dead bodies out of the chambers, to cut the hair from them, and to remove their gold teeth. At the same time prisoners had to rid the gas chamber of blood, excrement and vomit.<sup>29</sup> Finally the corpses had to be disposed of. Therefore the dead bodies were transported to the crematoria or buried outside the camp. Prisoners in special commandos, composed mainly of Jewish inmates and Soviet POWs, carried out most of these tasks under the strict supervision of Austrian and German SS-guards or prisoner functionaries (*Funktionshäftlinge*).

A task of great importance in the whole process of extermination was the “disposal” of the corpses, both for hygienic reasons, in order to avoid epidemics, and for political reasons, i.e. in order to destroy evidence of the mass killings. At Majdanek, as in other camps, a special commando took care of that, run by *Oberscharführer* Erich Muhsfeldt and his assistant, *Unterscharführer* Robert S. According to their own statements, Muhsfeldt came to Majdanek on 15 November 1941, while S. arrived by year’s end or early in 1942. Soon after Muhsfeldt’s arrival, the commander of the Majdanek camp, Karl-Otto Koch, appointed him as head of the burial commando, a task that he assumed only reluctantly, as he stated in a post-war interrogation.<sup>30</sup> Between November 1941 and June 1942, the cadavers were buried in mass graves at a site behind the camp.<sup>31</sup> A special

28. Cf. Elissa Mailänder Koslov, *Gewalt im Dienstalltag. Die SS-Aufseherinnen des Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslagers Majdanek 1942-1944*, (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2009), p. 287–339.

29. Friedler, Siebert, Kilian, op. cit; Glazar, op. cit; Greif, op. cit.

30. Cf. Interrogation of Erich Muhsfeldt, 14.8.1947 in Krakow, Hauptstaatsarchiv (HStA) Düsseldorf, Gerichte Republik (Ger. Rep.) 432 no. 204, p. 96. Translation EMK.

31. Ibid.

commando made up of Polish-Jewish POWs completed the transport and disposed of the corpses, as Muhsfeldt stated at the Auschwitz trial in 1947.<sup>32</sup> In June 1942, the first crematorium was established at Majdanek. At that time, a new crew was assigned, comprising six Soviet POWs, as Muhsfeldt's assistant declared in a post-war hearing.<sup>33</sup>

Let me elaborate on Muhsfeldt's testimonies for a moment because it shows how extermination was framed as a work with a specific "work ethic". The former chief of the crematorium could not remember how many corpses had been buried in that manner at Majdanek per day, but at the Krakow Auschwitz trial in 1947, he remembered that he had been sent to cremation training (*Verbrennungslehrgang*) at Sachsenhausen: "There I stayed a whole week and learned the operation of the ovens from the local *Kommandoführer* of the crematorium, *Hauptscharführer* K."<sup>34</sup> In Krakow, he gave a very detailed description of the crematorium site as well as the entire cremation procedure. The crematorium, built by the Berlin-based company Kori, was made up of two ferric ovens outfitted with firebricks on the inside.<sup>35</sup> Each oven worked separately with its own chimney and ran on oil. Each crematorium oven had one cremation chamber that could accommodate between two and five corpses. With a twenty-four hour operation, up to one hundred bodies could be burned per day. This first crematorium ran from June to October 1942, and during this period Muhsfeldt burned approximately 5,000 corpses, as he stated in the trial. Not only the disposal process in itself reminds a work process based on division of labour. Also Muhsfeldt himself used explicitly the words 'workplace' and 'work' in the interrogations to describe his activities.

But, as he elaborated, quite soon the SS-administration of the camp was confronted with a problem. They ran out of oil. The administration had to shut down the crematorium in November 1942.<sup>36</sup> According to Muhsfeldt, the crew went back to their old methods of burying the corpses. If we accept his estimates, until January 1943 the commando hastily buried 2,000 bodies in the nearby woods of Krepiecki. SS-men transported the corpses by motor truck. The commando, composed of twenty French and German Jews and three Russian POWs,

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32. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

33. Interrogation of Robert S., 17.3.1965 in Liedolsheim, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 266, p. 140. Translation EMK.

34. Interrogation of Erich Muhsfeldt, 14.8.1947 in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 204, p. 99-100. Translation EMK.

35. The concept of appropriation implies a versatile, formative, and sensual interpretation of social norms, discourses, practices and coercions by the agents. Cf. Alf Lüdtke, "Introduction: What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practitioners?," in *idem*, *The history of everyday life: reconstructing historical experiences and ways of life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995 [German 1989]), pp. 3-40.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

did the actual digging, supervised by a German prisoner functionary.<sup>37</sup> But this was only an interim solution; soon he was challenged with new cremation duties.

On February 19th, Muhsfeldt was sent to another training course, this time at Birkenau, where he learned how to burn corpses in open ditches. Immediately after his return to Majdanek, the commando began the exhumation of the buried cadavers in the woods and in the ditches next to the camp. In compliance with Muhsfeldt's instructions the prisoners burned the already decomposing bodies.<sup>38</sup> As his assistant stated in an interrogation, the cremation site was in the middle of the woods where they had built a grill with train rails, using oil as fuel.<sup>39</sup> Muhsfeldt explained his signature technique at the Krakow trial, stating, not without pride, that it was thanks to this personal knack for efficiency that his crew managed to burn all the corpses in the woods and the ditches behind the camp by the end of October 1943.<sup>40</sup> On Muhsfeldt's reckoning, he and his crew thus buried up to 6,000 bodies from the woods and 3,000 from the pits.

When on November 3th 1943, the SS and the SD massacred 18,000 Jews from the camp and the Lublin area at Majdanek,<sup>41</sup> Muhsfeldt was commissioned with disposal of the corpses. He had to face his "biggest task" under time constraints and hurried working conditions. Here again, the crematorium technique he had learned in Auschwitz and personally perfected was of great use. As he recalled:

*On November 4th, I assembled wood and planks, and on the fifth I began to burn the bodies. Since the side of the ditch where the victims had entered was not filled with corpses, I filled it up with earth, so that the ditch became flatter and therefore had a better drain. On the ground I built a kind of grill out of wood, where the prisoners from my commando layered the corpses. Once a pile of bodies was stacked, it was doused with methanol and set on fire.<sup>42</sup>*

Despite the division of labour, Muhsfeldt had more than just managerial functions. On this occasion, the chief SS-officer himself had to pitch in and get his hands dirty. At the Krakow trial Muhsfeldt pointed out the efficiency of his

37. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

38. Cf. Interrogation of Adam C., 9.8.1944 by the Russian-polish commission, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432, no. 274, p. 114–118; interrogation Kazimierz G., 9.8.1944, *ibid.*, p. 119-120.

39. Interrogation of Robert S., 5.12.1961 in Karlsruhe, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 266, p. 85-86. Translation EMK.

40. Interrogation of Erich Muhsfeldt, 14.8.1947 in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 204, p. 101-102. Translation EMK; cf. interrogation of Robert S., 17.3.1965 in Liedolsheim, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 266, p. 141.

41. Cf. Tomasz Kranz, "Das Konzentrationslager Majdanek und die 'Aktion Reinhardt'", Bogdan Musial ed., *"Aktion Reinhardt". Der Völkermord an den Juden im Generalgouvernement 1941-1944*, (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2004), pp. 233–255.

42. The ashes were used as dung in the camp's farms. Interrogation of Erich Muhsfeldt, 16.8.1947 in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 204, p. 108. Translation EMK.

procedure: "Before Christmas 1943 I completed the cremation of the 17,000 Jews killed on November 3, 1943."<sup>43</sup> Thereupon the ditches were filled up with earth and bulldozed on the surface. The mission was accomplished; no traces of mass murder were left. At this very moment, Muhsfeldt was at the height of his service capability and professional performance.

In the meantime, the construction work for a new crematorium had begun in September 1943, and by January 1944, when Muhsfeldt had accomplished his task, the facility was ready for use. This new crematorium, also from the company Kori, had five combustion chambers and a much bigger capacity than the old one, and since it was run with coke it was also more economical than the old, fuel-powered model. In May 1944, Muhsfeldt was transferred to Auschwitz, a move he regretted: "By that time [at Majdanek, EMK] there were fewer cadavers, which meant that I could no longer test the full capacity of the crematorium developed at Majdanek."<sup>44</sup>

The post-war testimony of the former head of the crematorium is disturbing and interesting for several reasons. It shows the tremendous effort and energy that the Nazis invested to dispose of the bodies of the murdered, on an individual as well as an organisational basis. Following Muhsfeldt's estimates, he and his crew buried and burned over 33,000 corpses in two-and-a-half years.<sup>45</sup> Taking care of the "task" and catching up with this quota required not only organisation and work discipline but also know-how and inventiveness. Moreover, both the considerable physical force involved and logistics had to be applied in a very "sensitive" and "creative" fashion. As Muhsfeldt's testimony demonstrates, he developed different techniques the crematorium crew used depending on the situation. The SS delegated the principal work, hard and dirty, to the prisoners of the special commandos, who were then periodically killed. As chief of the crematorium, Muhsfeldt had to organize the whole cremation process. His business routine also required him to handle its various kinks and breakdowns.

Muhsfeldt's speech reveals a special feeling of pride and even passion for his "accomplished work" and "manual dexterity." He tested the performance of the new crematorium with a professional curiosity. All of this shows that his exterminatory tasks – the disposal of the mass-murdered – were linked to wider patterns

43. Interrogation of Erich Muhsfeldt, 16.8.1947 in Krakow, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 204, p. 110. Translation EMK. Today the estimations of the scholars are 18,000 persons. Cf. Kranz, "Das Konzentrationslager Majdanek und die 'Aktion Reinhardt'", op. cit.

44. Ibid.

45. Estimates on the number of dead range as high of 250,000 people to a low of 78,000 people, thereof 59,000 Jews. Tomasz Kranz, director of the scientific department of the State Museum at Majdanek, has recently compiled this estimate. Edward Gryn, Zofia Murawska eds., *Das Konzentrationslager Majdanek* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubielskie, 1966); Anna Wisniewska, Czeslan Rajca, *Majdanek. Das Lubliner Konzentrationslager* (Lublin: Panstowe Muzeum na Mjdaneken, 1997); Tomasz Kranz, "Ewidencja Zgonow i Smiertelnosc Wiezow KL Lublin," *Zeszyty Majdanka*, vol. XXIII, 2005, pp. 7–53.

of work association. Similar processes of “professionalisation” have been observed amongst the personnel who operated the gas chambers in Treblinka, in the units of the auxiliary police and the *Einsatzgruppen*.<sup>46</sup> The challenge and passion bound up with the performance of a “good” job were fundamentally linked to Muhsfeldt’s involvement in the extermination operations. In line with Alf Lüdtke’s diagnosis of former socialist German workers in the armaments industry, this specific work ethic allowed Muhsfeldt not only to participate but to conceive of his tasks as an “ultimate fulfilment of *German quality work*.”<sup>47</sup> This self-evaluation and specific “work ethic” were important preconditions for his being able to continue to carry out his job over the years. At ground level it served as an incentive and at the same time as a justification. In this sense it is important to consider the camps as a working space and career experience. Selecting, killing and disposing of the cadavers were all jobs that made perfect sense, so to speak, and could even be motivating, not only because they were officially ordered and sanctioned but also because they carried an emotional charge at the individual level. Muhsfeldt, and most probably as well the SS men who carried out the actual killing, felt a sense of elation and satisfaction from doing his work of murder. “Doing a good and solid job,” in other words, framed the way these crimes were understood and carried out in terms of social relations among camp guards.

### Violence as social practice

But if mass killing constituted an official and highly appreciated “work”, individual acts of violence and personal abuses of prisoners were not. As it might seem astonishing, the use of physical violence in the camps was strictly regulated and limited to official acts of punishment, e.g. imprisonment in the camp prisons, corporal punishment, and hangings, as well as forms of mass killing, for example shooting, death by lethal injection, gas or carbon monoxide. While this exterminatory violence was supported by the central camp administration in Berlin (the *Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt* WVHA and former *Inspektion der Konzentrationslager* IFK), official guidelines explicitly prohibited any individual

46. Alf Lüdtke, “Der Bann der Worte: ‘Todesfabriken’. Vom Reden über den NS-Völkermord – das auch ein Verschweigen ist,” *WerkstattGeschichte* 13, 1996, pp. 5–18; Christopher R. Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Christian Ingrao, *Croire et détruire. Les intellectuels dans les services de renseignement de la SS*, (Paris: Fayard 2010); Christian Ingrao, *Les chasseurs noirs. La brigade Dirlewanger* (Paris: Payot 2006); Christian Ingrao, “Violence de guerre, violence génocide: les Einsatzgruppen,” in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, Christian Ingrao, Henry Rousso, eds., *La Violence de guerre 1914-1945. Approches comparées des deux conflits mondiaux*, (Bruxelles: Complexe, 2002), pp. 219–241.

47. Alf Lüdtke, “German Work and German Workers: The Impact of Symbols on Exclusion of Jews in Nazi-Germany,” in David Bankier ed., *Probing the depths of German Antisemitism, 1933-1941* (Yad Vashem-Jerusalem-New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), pp. 296–311, p. 311.

maltreatment of the inmates. For simple concentration-camp guards, the use of physical violence was meticulously regulated and expressly limited to official acts of punishment and mass killing. Any individual assault on prisoners was formally forbidden. As commander of Dachau, Theodor Eicke had elaborated a camp regulation in 1933 that subsequently became a role model for all other camps. According to this regulation, the primary function of the male – and later, in 1939, the female SS-guards too – was to supervise the inmates, not to punish or kill them. Despite these regulations, however, the SS-personnel exercised, as we all know, their tasks in a violent and bloody way.

Certain practices of violence were particularly frequent in the Nazi concentration camps. Lola G.,<sup>48</sup> who was deported to Majdanek in May 1943, described one guard's behaviour during the Majdanek trial in Düsseldorf:

*“Kobyla” was tall. She kicked the prisoners and literally walked over people. “Kobyla” kicked me, and I still bear the scars. That happened more than once. She walked through the barracks or the field [the women’s camp on field V,<sup>49</sup> EMK]. If someone was in her way, she lifted her foot and kicked. I met her in the field and did not manage to get out of her way in time. She kicked me so hard that I fell. As I was lying on the ground, she kept kicking. While I was standing, she kicked me in my back, causing me to fall. Even then, she continued kicking me, then walked away and left me there.<sup>50</sup>*

Hermine Braunsteiner's hallmark was this kind of kick, which earned her the nickname “mare” (*kobyla*). Like many camp guards, she used her leather boots as a weapon. This detail warrants scrutiny. The boots protected her from direct contact with the prisoner's body – and blood. At the same time, it also intensified her physical force. Braunsteiner accurately aimed her kicks at body parts, like the back, that were both sensitive and vulnerable. On a symbolic level these kicks signified the degradation of the victim as a disdainful gesture. Usually one kick, if at all, an animal. The crucial point about physical violence is the reduction of the inmate to his or her bodily entity.

As viewed from a Foucauldian perspective, Braunsteiner's kicks address themselves not only to the ill-treated woman but seek also to intimidate the spectators. Insults, slaps, kicks delivered to one person generally served the purpose of breaking, dominating and intimidating all of the inmates. As Lang stated, the victim's experiences and emotions remain significant for the perpetrator as a relational

48. Only the names of public persons, survivors who have published autobiographical testimonies and former SS personnel who convicted in a trial are cited by their full name. All other names are made anonymous.

49. The Majdanek camp consisted in 5 fields, each served as a separate section for different prisoner groups. The female inmates were first held in October 1942 on a former airport, outside the camp. In April 1943, the female camp was moved to field V. In September 1943, the female camp was transferred on field I.

50. Lola G., 14.12.1978, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 283, p. 2-3. Translation EMK.

counterpart.<sup>51</sup> But is not only about perpetrator victim relation, Braunsteiner likewise showed her colleagues how severe and tough she was. The perpetration of physical violence upon prisoners, in short, was thus also – I would even say primarily – a means of constant negotiation of power between colleagues. Violence was an attempt to impress, to show off, and to gain respect and consideration among co-workers. And one violent act usually led to new ones, because everybody had to “prove” his or her power and courage to his or her fellow guards. On the SS-staff everybody was affected by this negotiation of power relations because a place outside this set of social relations was not possible.

Within the SS hierarchy, *Aufseherinnen* like Braunsteiner occupied an intermediate status. While they were hired as SS-guards, they did not hold actual membership in the SS as did the wives and daughters of officers (*SS-Führer*). Instead, they were classified as women auxiliaries (*weibliches Gefolge*) of the Waffen-SS. The women guards wore uniforms and carried pistols while on duty, and once a week they received regular arms training as well as ideological education. Furthermore, women SS-guards were employed only in concentration camps, not in extermination camps. If women guards also happened to be present at Majdanek and Auschwitz, that fact reflected the dual function of those camps. As noted, women guards participated in the selection of prisoners for extermination, on the basis of physical fitness, but they were not involved in the killing process, nor were they present at mass shootings or charged with servicing the gas chambers. This means that the *Aufseherinnen* had a very restricted right to use their guns for self-defence, the mass killing and shooting was an exclusively “male” sphere.

In the concentration camps, with the exception of Ravensbrück, a small minority of female guards worked alongside a far larger number of male SS-guards.<sup>52</sup> At Majdanek, for example, the number of *SS-Aufseherinnen* on the spot did not exceed twenty. These female guards worked alongside 1,200 SS-men, amounting to a very modest minority in a paramilitary, male-dominated social matrix. To attribute them a status of being male-dominated, however, does not correspond to the social reality in the camp. Female SS-guards used frequently physical violence alike their male colleagues.

Here, conflicts over aspects of power and social distinction were also gender-related. Indeed, the former Ravensbrück prisoner Gemaine Tillion observed a self-propelled dynamic: male and female guards accelerated and intensified their violent and cruel acts against prisoners whenever colleagues of the other sex were watching.<sup>53</sup> Hanna N.-J. attested to one of many such incidents at the Majdanek

51. Lang, op cit., p. 236.

52. Cf. Bernhard Strel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück. Geschichte eines Lagerkomplexes*, (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003); Simone Erpel ed., “*Im Gefolge der SS: Aufseherinnen des Frauen-Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück. Begleitband zur Ausstellung* (Berlin: Metropol, 2007).

53. Tillion, op. cit. p. 141.



trial: “Once, they found a 25-year-old inmate hiding beet. Therefore she had to be punished with twenty-five blows on a stool during the roll call. An SS-man started to carry out the punishment. After he had struck her six or seven times, Lächert jumped in, took over with a whip and began to beat her. Apparently, the SS-man had not beaten hard enough for Frau Lächert.”<sup>54</sup> Here, the *Aufseherin* wanted to prove to her male colleague that she was tougher and more severe than him, precisely because she was not considerate of the inmate’s gender. In other situations, it was the SS-men who showed off. SS men watching the *Aufseherinnen* perpetrating violence or the other way around had always a particularly acceleratory impact and, if we reason through Tillion’s interpretation further, even a flirtatious touch. But the female guards also wanted to impress their fellow *Aufseherinnen*, as well as the SS men had to negotiate their aptitude and masculinity before a male audience. In both cases – in an intra- as well as intergender relationship – violence served as an instrument for the communication of power, therefore social and gender relations cannot be separated. Physical violence in the Nazi camps was a social and cultural practice by which camp SS-personnel organised their cohabitation and regulated power relations among themselves. Though this does not automatically mean that violent guards had automatically a positive reputation within SS-society. But it does show that being violent was important for the social consideration.

Both female and male SS guards used violence to show off, to impress, to make a statement. The bodies of their victims were the objects of their self-cultivation in their career as guards. Violence and especially cruelty can become a way to “*personalize oneself*”<sup>55</sup>. As Lang explicates, social identity and homogenisation of the brutal behaviour are a central element of the psychology of violence. But at some point, the perpetrators risk having their individuality dispersed and diluted; “the *somebody* risks to become an *anyone*”. As Lang concludes, extreme or outstanding violence sometimes represent the perpetrator’s attempt to re-establish or enhance his or her personal identity, it is through his violent initiative, the perpetrator establishes himself as an exemplary member of the community.<sup>56</sup>

SS-guards, however, did not all behave the same; we can detect some slight differences. As Majdanek survivors and former female and male SS-guards reported in their testimonies, low-ranking camp personnel generally resorted more readily to physical violence, such as beatings and severe ill-treatment. Gender of course matters here too, but what is more decisive is the fact of having a low rank. Violence therefore is a form of self-assertion, proving oneself and the colleagues to offset the stigma or burden of having a subordinate social position. Higher-

54. Ibid., pp. 51-52.

55. Lang, op. cit., p. 239.

56. Ibid.

ranking SS-officers, as well as the female chief guard, distinguished themselves from ordinary female and male guards by using physical violence more selectively. The Polish survivor Jan Novak remembered the SS-officer Hermann Hackmann, *Schutzhaftlagerführer* and second-in-command after the camp commander Koch:

*Hackmann struck me as a miserable figure. He was at the time a young man in his thirties, elegant, wearing white gloves. I remember that he held the morning roll call in front of block one. Those left from the big group of Soviet POWs, approximately thirty-five persons, were standing in rags, tattered Russian caps and uniform coats, in front of him, the elegant one. This contrast was devastating and depressing at the same time. It was at the end of February 1942. During that roll call he approached the POWs and flicked their military caps. I mean with a dog - or horsewhip. It was not a beating or a mistreatment; it was a disdainful gesture.<sup>57</sup>*

Here again, the meaning of the gesture matters: Hackmann did not even touch the prisoners with his own hands but limited himself to a disdainful gesture. Lashing the Soviet soldiers with a whip normally reserved for animals represented, in a military context, a double humiliation. The relative *non-violence*, the effortlessness of his performance, amplified his disdain for the prisoners. With this highly symbolic performance, the high-ranking SS-officer (*Schutzhaftlagerführer*) demonstrated his degradation of the Soviet prisoners.<sup>58</sup> Also his impeccable uniform contrasted with the shabby outfits of the POWs. This visual contrast allowed him personally to experience victory and superiority over military as well as ideological and racial enemies of the Reich. Similarly to Hackmann's elegant outfit and contemptuous gesture, the chief female guard, Else Ehrich, appeared to former female inmates as well as her female colleagues as a person whose stately appearance and gestures set her apart from other SS-*Aufseherinnen*. As Henryka O. reported, "*Oberaufseherin* Ehrich always had a birch switch with her that she used to slide into her boots."<sup>59</sup> Other female guards also employed riding crops, but, as Hanna N.-J. stated, Ehrich was "severe, meticulously dressed and of military bearing." Additionally, her violent gestures differed from those of her subalterns because "she slapped with full intention, sharp and quick, and used insulting and degrading words to humiliate us."<sup>60</sup> Yet despite the fact that Ehrich was remembered as particularly severe and sometimes especially violent, the former inmates recalled her as having been relatively mild compared to the other *Aufseherinnen*. Like Hackmann, the *Oberaufseherin* was carefully dressed and armed with a riding crop, an attribute that symbolically refers to noblesse, the possession of a horse or the ability to ride. Like Hackmann, it was not the military attributes

57. Jan Novak, 20.4.1977, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 285, pp. 16-17. Translation EMK.

58. Cf. Mailänder Koslov, op cit.

59. Henryka O. 1.6.1977, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 285, p. 149. Translation EMK.

60. Hanna N.-J. 26.4.1977, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 285, p. 51. Translation EMK.

of her appearance alone, but also the particular way in which she hit the prisoners which apparently imparted a martial note to her demeanour. It was precisely her gestures and habitus that made such an impression. Ehrich's and Hackmann's nonchalant gestures indicated their social superiority to the prisoners but also to their subordinates whom they demonstrated that they did not need to prove their authority and superiority by means of the perpetration of violence. They thereby signalled to their colleagues and subalterns, and also to inmates, their powerful position. As we have already seen, they used violence to negotiate complex hierarchies of power with the other members of this "camp society" of the SS.

### **Cruelty as cultivation of the self**

From the everyday-life perspective, the concentration camp appears not as a static institution but rather as a dynamic arena in which a variety of agents negotiated norms of expected violent behaviour. The guards appropriated official rules in everyday situations, in the process enforcing, modifying, and even creating new codes of conduct. Investigating the microphysics of power as identified by Foucault helps us to understand the everyday foundations of violence. The camp SS worked in a closed society and carried out the majority of their actions for prisoners and colleagues to see. Violence therefore served as an instrument with which perpetrators could test the power relations within SS-society; it was twice demonstrative, performed vis-à-vis both prisoners and one's colleagues. Defining physical violence as a social practice and form of communication gives us the opportunity to study the guards not only at the moment they were active agents of violence, but also when they were bystanders. Reinterpreting these alleged passive ways of being as active forms of doing shows that even though camp guards who stood by did not always actively participate in the violent deed, they nevertheless encouraged their colleagues by the very act of their watching as we have seen before.

The Polish prisoner Jan Novak several times became a witness to the excessive violence of the field commander (*Feldführer*) and SS Heinz Villain. "In three cases I saw how Villain placed himself with one foot on the throat of a prisoner lying on the ground,"<sup>61</sup> he reported in the Majdanek trial. "And I saw that the prisoner in question did not get up after that." Let us consider this form of violence, the act of cruelty that exceed common forms of violence, in detail. The scene takes place in the middle of Field III, where male Jewish prisoners were incarcerated. A man lies defenceless on the ground and the SS-officer tortures him publicly. Villain was known in the camp as particularly and excessively violent and did not necessarily enjoy the great esteem of his colleagues. For that matter not all of the

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61. Jan Novak, 17.5.1972, HStA Düsseldorf, Ger. Rep. 432 no. 296, p. 7f. Translation EMK.

female guards admired or approved the cruel acts perpetrated by their colleagues; in fact, unusually cruel male and female guards were quite unpopular, and colleagues sometimes tried to avoid them. Yet although there were bystanders, nobody protested or interfered while Villain brutally strangled the prisoner.

The *conditio sine qua non* for such acts is twofold: firstly, an asymmetrical power relations between perpetrator and victim; and secondly, a context of silent toleration within perpetrator society. If both are not present, the cruel act becomes obsolete.<sup>62</sup> There is a subtle dynamic interplay between the microsocial context and the cruel act: by their passive behaviour the bystanders indeed contributed actively to the cruelty because it empowered the perpetrators and therefore influenced the frequency and intensity of the cruel acts. And the wider the social *margin of manoeuvre* of the perpetrator, the more possible and even probable became the debauched excess of violence.

Yet camp guards do not only perform violence in public but also secretly, as we saw earlier with the excessively violent *Aufseherin* Binz in Ravensbrück. And even though there were no spectators, this secret and private act of cruelty would not have been possible apart from its specific microsocial context of consensus, which guaranteed impunity. Here also the fundamentally active role played by ostensibly passive colleagues is of great importance, since it promised implicit approval of these actions. Because Binz, as Tillion reported, had the reputation of a star (*vedette*) who had fomented “a wave of terror.”<sup>63</sup> This means that her colleagues knew about her excessive violence, which they silently tolerated. As Michael Wildt points out in his recent book *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung*, “bystanders” played a constitutive active role in the social dynamic of antisemitic violence during the 1930s.<sup>64</sup>

But the cruel act in the *Bunker* raises many more questions. What sense does such behaviour make? There were no spectators to impress. The observer was in a cell upstairs and Binz most probably could not have known that she was being watched. The guard was basically alone with the victim and thought herself unobserved. Why did the *Aufseherin* torture and humiliate a victim who in all likelihood did not feel anything anymore, being in the grip of agony or even already dead? Should this type of violence really be considered gratuitous?

To the tortured victims, such an “excess” of violence may indeed seem to be without motive, but we cannot understand it from the victim’s perspective alone. In order to decode its meanings and inner logic, we must also uncover its *ration-*

62. Nahoum-Grappe, *L'usage politique de la cruauté*, op cit. p. 297.

63. Tillion, op cit. p. 139.

64. Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung. Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2007)

*ale* as well as its *irrationality* from the perpetrator's point of view.<sup>65</sup> For that, we must go back to the question of why Binz chose to torture her agonised victim. Here we have to take into account the cultural meaning of these behaviours. The guard who causes pain must be seen in a social and cultural relationship to the victim who suffers pain. Binz took advantage of the female prisoner by using her blood-covered body, her calves, as a sort of swing, destroying and abusing the already ill-treated body in a meaningful way. Cruelty distinguishes itself from violence by the semantics of its gesture: to cause pain and degradation always demands a higher degree of "clear-sightedness," as Nahoum-Grappe points out.<sup>66</sup>

Another point is that physical violence has a communicative aspect even without bystanders. Binz inscribed herself into the body of her victim. Through her mutilated body that the guard becomes what she imagines herself. By means of the cruel act, she made clear to herself who she was, or better, who she *wanted* to be.<sup>67</sup> If violence is not limitless in its abhorrence but ends with the victim's death, as the German sociologist Heinrich Popitz has pointed out,<sup>68</sup> cruelty does not cease with the victim's death. Vituperation far exceeds mere physical violence in both its motives and its meanings. The "feedback" of the ill-treated is therefore not needed, because the cruel gesture does not need an adversary who is capable of re-acting. As Nahoum-Grappe asserts, the quantitative and qualitative "overdose" of cruel acts adds to the expected physical pain the anguish of degradation and vilification.<sup>69</sup> It is this interplay between powerlessness and power, the victim being at the perpetrators mercy that is empowering for guards. The fact that Binz tortured a body in agony or a corpse only intensified the vilification of the victim and the powerful experience of herself.

Cruelty does not seek an equal adversary. On the contrary, the weaker the object of cruelty, the greater the power of the perpetrator and his or her transgression of moral boundaries. Therefore, even after their death, the prisoners became targets of humiliating acts. In the camps, children, old, and sick prisoners as well as pregnant women were favourite targets of cruelty. The infliction of indignities on an unconscious body no longer seemed gratuitous. It offered the perpetrator guard an intoxicating opportunity to experience his or her power and mastery, the rush of transgression and humiliation. Indeed, from the perpetrator's perspective, it was an empowering act and a form of intimate dialogue with his or her victim, as well as a solipsistic monologue with her - or himself.

65. Jacques Sémelin, "Du massacre au processus génocidaire", in *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 147, 2002, pp. 483–492, p. 487.

66. Cf. Nahoum-Grappe, *L'usage politique de la cruauté*, op cit.

67. Reemtsma, op cit. p. 107ff

68. Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 2004), pp. 52-53.

69. Cf. Nahoum-Grappe, *Anthropologie de la violence extrême*, op cit; Wildt, op. cit., p. 215

## Conclusions

The massive violence in the Nazi camps cannot be explained solely by the politics of persecution, by ideology (anti-Semitism, anti-Bolshevism, the quest for *Lebensraum*) or by the institutional setting afforded by the concentration camp. Decisive for the destructive potential of the camps, and in that sense their “efficiency,” were the concrete forms of behaviour of the camp guards. A concentration camp was no static “institution” but rather a very dynamic arena with a multitude of agents. Viewed from a microsocial perspective, the agents appear in constant interaction, active at different hierarchical levels, in pursuit of diverse aims, impulses and stimuli. By looking more closely at everyday practices, one is compelled to acknowledge that human forms of behaviour are not always coherent but complex and shifting.

As we have seen, different forms of violence distinguish themselves on the basis of their intended victims, their motivation, and the practices involved. Through a microsocial lens violence can be seen as a complex form of communication between perpetrators and their victims. At the same time, perpetrators, through their violent behaviour, also acknowledge those colleagues who stand by, communicating and testing power relations within the “camp society” of the SS by recourse to physical violence. The actions of the agents are meaningful and have many referents; but this does not mean that the agents have to be fully aware or in control of the impact and effects of their actions. As demonstrated in the above cases, and especially with regard to cruelty, it is the manner in which such violence was perpetrated that is important, because both body language and gestures bear meaning. This means of course taking into account the ambivalences and multiple meanings of violent actions.

It is accordingly useful not only to ask about motivations, but also to face the materiality of physical violence by analyzing the practices themselves. Physical violence involves the body and as such can be called an embodied discourse. In that sense, the violent and cruel acts in the camps are a multifunctional phenomenon that possesses its own dynamic, a conjunction of social practices, the production of meaning, and symbolic attributions. Certainly, from the victims’ perspective, violence is destructive. Yet from the perpetrator’s perspective, violence is also attractive and innovative. It is a medium or instrument with which to gain prestige, to perform before an audience of colleagues, to realize oneself. The everyday historical approach shows indeed that the guards appropriated “the camps” and their work environment while simultaneously transforming them. Here it is important to acknowledge that for the guards in the camps, the murderous violence did become an attractive option of behaviour. This is where individuals emerge as actors on the social stage.

To be sure, we have to link these microdynamics back to the institutional and political context. The institutional setting matters as a structuring frame for violence but this structure is at the same time also a product of microsocial dynamics on the ground. Moreover, the camp institution with its regulations and rules did not only mark limits of action, they simultaneously represent possibilities for action open to the guards. Even though senior administrators in Berlin considered the massive violence conducted individually but systematically by the guards to be both *counter-productive*, insofar as it created chaos where they wanted disciplined employees who killed when it was necessary and as ordered. But at the same time it was as well *productive* insofar as the obstinate violence in everyday life had also a motivating and selfempowering function on the ground. Violence somehow made the camps running and produced terror in the larger civil society.

Nobody denies the influence of the designers and administrators of the camps in Berlin who set up and organised the camp system. But to privilege the agents on the ground and their social practices shows how the guards thus balanced two influences: on the one hand, *prohibitions* of violence as handed down from the central camp administration in Berlin; and on the other, mid level instructions from camp commanders whose violent ideology was exacerbated by the practical problems they faced in this living and working environment. Again, the physical violence in the camps was not so much ordered by the guidelines but due to microsocial dynamics, above all specific *appropriations* of the official rules and the individual practices of violence by camp staff. Such critical attention to the gap between official guidelines and everyday practices shows that one should not overstress organisational setting nor assume any binary structure, with “orders” on one side and “obedience” on the other. The communicative and performative character of violence, especially excessive violence, is crucial, clearly showing that it was the guards on the ground, so to speak, those embedded in social dynamics which they constantly recreated, who “made” camp violence.

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines individual violent acts of female and male SS-personnel at the concentration and extermination camp Majdanek (1941-1944) in occupied Poland in a history of everyday live-perspective. It provides insight into three different exemplary forms of concentrational and genocidal violence – extermination, physical ill-treatment and cruelty – interrogating the situational context, social dynamics and cultural meaning in terms of the everyday culture and society of the concentration camp. The first part analyzes “official” genocidal violence, showing how the head of the Majdanek crematorium, Erich Muhsfeldt, conceived extermination as day-to-day “work.” This understanding of extermination as everyday work constituted a normalizing or legitimizing and motivating frame for his tasks and formed the basis of his “work ethic.” The second part focuses on individual and unofficial acts of violence placing the guards’ most frequent forms of violence in a microsocial context. This shows the communicative character of these violences. The third part illuminates practices of violence that seem the most incomprehensible, because of their “surplus” of violence: a type of cruelty which, when seen from the perpetrator’s perspective, appears as a constructive and empowering form of self-cultivation. The article argues that the*

physical violence which the subaltern SS-staff daily exercised in the Nazi camps was not so much ordered from above but rather an appropriation of the work and living context by actors on the ground. Also, daily violence revolved not only around the perpetrator-victim relation but first and foremost around the complex relations within the perpetrators' "society." It finally states that cruelty figured as an important performance of the self.

### **Résumé**

Cet article étudie, dans une perspective d'histoire du quotidien, les actes de violence individuels commis par le personnel SS masculin et féminin au camp de concentration et d'extermination de Majdanek (1941-1944), dans la Pologne occupée. Il donne un aperçu de trois formes exemplaires de la violence concentrationnaire et génocidaire – l'extermination, les mauvais traitements physiques et la cruauté – et s'interroge sur le contexte situationnel, les dynamiques sociales et les significations culturelles en termes de culture et société du quotidien, dans le camp de concentration. La première partie analyse la violence génocidaire « officielle », montrant comment le chef du crématorium de Majdanek, Erich Muhsfeldt, a conçu l'extermination comme un « travail » quotidien. La compréhension de l'extermination comme un travail quotidien a constitué un cadre normalisant ou légitimisant, et motivant pour la réalisation de ces tâches, et a formé la base de cette « éthique de travail ». La deuxième partie se concentre sur les actes de violence individuels et non officiels, en plaçant les formes les plus fréquentes de violence utilisées par les gardiens dans un contexte microsocial. Ceci montre le caractère communicatif de ces violences. La troisième partie éclaire les pratiques de violence qui semblent les plus incompréhensibles, en raison de leur « surplus » de violence : un type de cruauté qui, quand il est vu dans la perspective de ses auteurs, apparaît comme une forme d'autoapprentissage qui permet de se construire et de s'assumer. Cet article considère que la violence physique qu'exercèrent de façon quotidienne les équipes SS subalternes dans les camps nazis n'était pas ordonnée d'en haut, mais était plutôt le fait d'une appropriation d'un contexte de travail et de vie par les acteurs sur le terrain. De même, la violence quotidienne ne tourne pas seulement autour de la relation entre auteurs et victimes, mais d'abord et surtout autour des relations complexes à l'intérieur de la « société » des auteurs de violences. L'article considère finalement que la cruauté était considérée comme une importante représentation de soi-même.