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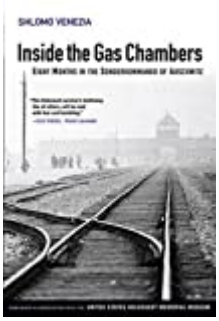

Shlomo Venezia. *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz.* In collaboration with Béatrice Prasquier. Cambridge: Polity, 2009. xv + 202 pp. $22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-4383-0.

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"Nobody ever really gets out of the Crematorium"

Between April 13 and May 21, 2006, BÃ©atrice Prasquier conducted a series of interviews with Shlomo Venezia, a survivor of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando. These sessions form the extraordinary core of the somewhat strangely packaged volume under review. *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* centers on Venezia's chilling recollection of his life at the National Socialist death camp. His discussion highlights the incomparable, day-to-day brutality of the extermination camp system. Even more interestingly, he wrestles with his own conscience: did his activities in the crematorium constitute a type of collaboration with the Germans? Venezia's recollections are extremely powerful and thought-provoking; however, two historical essays curiously tacked on to conclude the volume fail to measure up to the survivor's tale.

The book opens with Venezia's detailed reminiscences about his life before Auschwitz. Descended from the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain during the late fifteenth century, Venezia's ancestors passed through Italy, where they stayed for a time, before settling in Greece. In Italy, his family picked up an Italian name as well as Italian citizenship, a status that initially provided him with some protection during the Axis occupation of Greece. The link to Italy meant that his family benefited from Mussolini's attempt to export the virtues of fascism during the 1930s. Venezia writes of attending Italian schools instead of Jewish ones, and there, he and his peers "got everything free, we didn't have to pay for our books, we could eat in the canteen ... we wore really smart uniforms" (p. 4). Though his family was plagued by poverty and hunger, Venezia visited Italy twice and received new shoes from the Italian consulate. Despite this Italian heritage, Venezia's mother spoke Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language of Sephardic Jews, while he spoke Greek when out in society. His discussion of this time period provides further evidence of the multicultural mosaic that existed in eastern and southeastern Europe even after the accelerated construction of national states following the First World War. In recent years, historians have emphasized the cultural plurality of states such as Poland, Yugoslavia, and Ukraine

when investigating the impact of German occupation and the Holocaust; as Venezia's discussion shows, such issues should also be considered during any such examination of Greece.

Venezia moves on to discuss life under Axis occupation, but the bulk of the volume covers his time in Auschwitz. He emphasizes several important themes. First, he reconstructs in graphic detail the violence and cruelty endemic to the extermination camp system. From his very first introduction to the camp when "our captors started hitting people as soon as we arrived" (p. 35) to the first shower where a "young German ... amuse[d] himself at our expense ... quickly chang[ing] from scalding hot to freezing cold water" (p. 41), German brutality was on display. Even when Jews were waiting nervously in the gas chamber, not knowing what to expect, a German guard would flicker the lights to pass the time until the Zyklon-B pellets were dropped into the room; this was done purely to torment the Jews during their last few moments of life. Venezia identified two related causes for such behavior. On the one hand, the guards' continuous exposure to the camp system combined with their ideological beliefs to create a mindset in which "they'd lost all respect for the human person" (p. 58). In a later passage, he tellingly notes that in the eyes of the Germans, the prisoners "were merely *StÃ¼cke*" (p. 83); the constant dehumanization of Jews by the Nazis had led the guards to seen them as mere "pieces" without a shred of humanity. On the other hand, this attitude was part of a concerted effort by the Germans to terrorize the Jews into submission. Describing the SS men at Auschwitz as "vicious animals," Venezia stated that "they killed without compunction. They created a huge chaos to frighten people and disorient them ... nobody knew how to react other than by keeping in line" (pp. 87-88).

The ability to transform such individual cruelty into a comprehensive system of brutality marked the Nazi camp system. The Germans came extremely close to perfecting the mass murder of whole groups of people and this attention to detail permeated the entire machinery of destruction. Degradation was purposefully built into the system, a fact that the establishment of Sonderkommando units made particularly clear. The Sonderkommando units were comprised of Jews who cleaned up the gas chambers after a group of prisoners had been murdered. After its personnel dragged the corpses out of the chamber–as Venezia states, this in and of itself was an extremely disturbing process, as it was initially difficult to disentangle the bodies–the room had to be cleaned. All traces of blood and excrement had to be washed away in order to present a clean, sterile, and hence worry-free environment to the next batch of victims. After completing this task, the men of the Sonderkommando then moved through the corpses, clipping hair or pulling out gold teeth before disposing of the bodies in industrial furnaces. The expertise that the Germans acquired in carrying out mass murder was soon passed on to the men manning the Sonderkommando units. In one particularly disturbing passage, Venezia noted that the more experienced men collected the fat from the burned corpses in a basin and then poured it on the flames when they began to wane. The Sonderkommando men also learned that cold water needed to be poured onto the metal stretcher before sliding a corpse into the furnace. Failure to do so resulted in the bodies burning onto the stretcher, and removing leftover pieces of skin and flesh proved quite time consuming. Any delay, of course, was interpreted by the Germans as sabotage, so the men of the Sonderkommando were forced to master their "jobs" in order to survive.

The issue of survival also plays a prominent role in the volume. In general, the men who filled out the ranks of the Sonderkommando led short lives. The Germans, not wanting their genocidal activities to become common knowledge, routinely murdered entire Sonderkommando units and refilled them with new prisoners. Venezia survived only due to the chaotic evacuation of Auschwitz in January 1945. He recalled that during the forced evacuation to Austria, SS troopers periodically wandered through the marching prisoners asking whether anyone had worked at Auschwitz in the Sonderkommando. He wisely kept silent, knowing that he would be shot immediately if identified. Common sense and tough-minded attitude, according to Venezia, allowed one to survive in the camp. He believed that his hardscrabble youth gave him the required skills at dissembling and labor necessary for survival. He also points to another trait he believed necessary to emerge from the camps: selfishness. Venezia emphasizes the breakdown of social solidarity of prisoners in the naked game of survival. He declares that "for those who didn't have enough to eat, solidarity was no longer an option. So even when you had to take something from someone in order to survive, many people did so" (p. 101).

While physical survival was nearly impossible, Venezia faced an even more challenging obstacle: how to remain human while carrying out the task of continuously disposing of murdered human beings. He acknowledges that his own humanity was endangered by his position. At first, he was "constantly stunned by the enor-

mity of the crime," and he could not eat as he felt "sullied by those deaths" (p. 65). "Little by little," however, he became accustomed working in the crematoria; as it became "a kind of a routine," he no longer had to focus on it (p. 65). In other words: "quite simply, you stopped thinking!" (p. 103). At several different places in the text, Venezia refers to himself as a "robot" (pp. 59, 62, 102). His discussion of this term is interesting as he notes "we had turned into robots, obeying orders while trying not to think, so we could survive a few hours longer" (p. 59).

Venezia's attempts to completely divorce himself from the process, however, proved impossible, and his knowledge of what he was doing sparked an inner conflict around the dirtiest word to emerge from the wreckage of war and genocide: collaboration. The word pops up at various points throughout the volume. In one instance, Venezia states that members of the Sonderkommando actually lifted the cement door on the ceiling of the gas chamber so the SS man could drop in the Zyklon-B pellets, adding, "this is painful to admit" (p. 68). He also describes how he sometimes comforted people as they undressed in the hallway outside of the gas chamber. Realizing that attempts to calm people corresponded exactly to the Nazi's objective of a methodical and orderly industrial murder, he wrestled with his action: "I don't know whether we can call it 'collaboration' when we were trying to reduce, to however small a degree, the suffering of people who were about to die" (p. 74). The idea of the members of the Sonderkommando as collaborators was, according to Venezia, common in the camps. Unlike his previous mentions of the term–which are brief and rather open-ended–he vigorously refutes this charge, correctly arguing that "only the Germans killed. We were forced, whereas collaborators, in general, are volunteers" (p. 101). Surrounded by constant death and misery and plagued by his own inner demons, Venezia came to believe that "the dead were perhaps luckier than the living; they were no longer forced to endure this hell on earth, to see the cruelty of men" (p. 62).

Venezia's own account concludes with a brief examination of the revolt of the Sonderkommando (in which his unit did not participate), evacuation from Auschwitz to various camps in Austria, and eventual liberation. His description of these chaotic events provides a fitting coda to the terror he experienced at Auschwitz. In what appears to be an attempt at providing context to Venezia's story, however, the publishers have attached two essays at the end of the volume. The first, by Marcello Pezzetti, provides a thirteen-page overview of the Holocaust before devoting seventeen pages to Auschwitz and its Sonderkommando units. The contribution is too short to provide anything more than the most cursory of examinations and important details are omitted. For example, Pezzetti makes it seem as if ghettoization was part of a well-conceived, orderly process that emanated from the top, when in fact it began as a local development in response to events on the ground. While the essay could be a starting point for an undergraduate class, it certainly does not provide any real insight. The second essay, by Umberto Gentiloni, is ostensibly about "Italy in Greece: A Short History of a Major Failure." While the essay is indeed short–a total of eight pages–instead of examining Italian policy in Greece (a subject which, outside of Mark Mazower's magisterial *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experiences of Occupation 1941-44* [2001] has been quite neglected in English-language historiography), it focuses on the anti-Jewish policies of Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria during their occupations of Greece. More thorough editing would also have helped, as the essay states that "two thousand, five hundred [*sic*] people died as the result of the occupation of Greek territory" (p. 196), when the actual number is closer to 300,000.

In short, while the two concluding essays are disappointing, the body of the volume based on Venezia's experiences during the war is at once both fascinating and disturbing. His description of prewar Salonika and his complicated ethnic/national background certainly help illuminate our picture of the multicultural societies of Europe that the Second World War nearly completely eliminated. He also captures the violence and brutality of Auschwitz in a very readable fashion. His descriptions of the inhumanity of the camp will remain with me for quite some time. Finally, he agonizingly details the effects on the individual of living in such a setting. Though Venezia married after the war and had three children, the experiences of those eight months in Auschwitz marked him forever. He describes its impact as "a disease that gnaws away at [me] from within and destroys any feeling of joy. I have been dragging it about with me ever since I spent that time suffering in the camp. This disease never leaves me a moment of joy or carefree happiness; it's a mood that forever erodes my strength" (p. 154). Venezia ends the interview by simply stating "nobody ever really gets out of the Crematorium" (p. 155). This statement effectively captures the pain of this book.

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