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Extra

Auschwitz: 2. Children

Greg Wilkinson 

Nazi Germany and its collaborators killed about 1.5 million Jewish children and tens of thousands of ‘Gypsy’ children, 5000–7000 German children with physical and mental disabilities living in institutions, as well as many Polish children and children residing in the German-occupied Soviet Union: adolescents had a greater chance of survival – in forced labour.^a

Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau and other camps, the vast majority of young Jewish children were sent directly to the gas chambers. According to Dr Janina Kościuszkowa / 36319 (1897–1974), the children of Auschwitz concentration camp were divided into four groups: burned to death immediately on arrival; killed in their mothers’ wombs or as soon as they were born; born in the camp and allowed to live; deported to the camp as prisoners.

There appear to be few medical accounts of children’s mental states in Auschwitz. Robert Waitz / 157261 (1900–1978), professor in the faculty of medicine at Strasbourg, contributed two contrasting portraits^b in *Témoignages Strasbourgeois* (1947).

As can be seen in the adults, some children collapse morally and present themselves dirty, very pale, with a vague and anxious look, hardly responding to questions asked of them. Others, on the contrary, keep their equilibrium, stay clean, polite, affectionate.

May I be allowed to give examples of two children’s behaviour.

One of these children is a young Luxemburger, arrived aged 13½ years, with his father and his brothers from Treblinka, one of the extermination camps in the Lublin area. For 3 months they were assigned to the Sonderkommando, charged with transporting bodies from the gas chambers to the crematorium. From morning to evening, the sole function of this child consisted of exploring the vagina of female bodies in order to search for jewels, gems that might have been hidden there. After 3 months of this occupation, he volunteers for one of the worst mines in Poland. His father and his brothers refuse to leave with him and, a few days after his departure, were gassed as per usual. A year later, saved on a number of occasions by miracle, he presents with quite marked decline, sleeplessness with nightmares, and convulsive seizures. Analysis of his mental and nervous equilibrium by a psychiatrist would have been of great interest.

The other boy, aged 14 years, was arrested at Lyon with his parents. The father was killed in Lyon prison, the mother deported with him was separated on their arrival. He refused to work in any form for the Germans. There would be time, he explains to me, looking at me with a keen eye and a determined look, to learn a job on returning to France, because, at this time, he will be responsible for a young brother, aged 8 years, that the Gestapo had not found.

The Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel / A-7713, entered Auschwitz aged 15 with his family. He said that he survived because his father was alive: ‘And I knew that if I died, he would die’.

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^a Data from US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

^b Translated by Greg Wilkinson.