The Holocaust: Concentration Camp Experiences

The first processing barrack contained a row of wooden benches. We sat down to have our hair shaved off and our mouths and fingers searched for gold. Female soldiers did the shaving while the man collected jewellery in a large glass jar. Those with gold crowns on their teeth were ordered into a corner where another woman in uniform removed the gold with what looked like a pair of pliers. The screaming testified to the pain...

Further shouted orders told us to undress, leave our clothes at the door and proceed in a single line to the next barrack. As we walked naked between two rows of armed soldiers, a man in a white coat ordered some to step to one side, to select and separate the frail and emaciated from those who still had some muscles.

Mother and I passed this selection for life or death.

Halina Wagowska, The Testimony, 2012, p. 44

Source 1 – Arriving at Auschwitz (Halina’s family was sent to Auschwitz after four years in a ghetto)

A goods train travelled directly into the camp of Belzec, the freight cars were opened and Jews whom I believe were from the area of Romania or Hungary were unloaded. The cars were crammed fairly full. There were men, women and children of every age. They were ordered to get into line and then had to proceed to an assembly area and take off their shoes...

After the Jews had removed their shoes they were separated by sex. The women went together with the children into a hut. There their hair was shorn and they had to get undressed...The men went into another hut, where they received the same treatment. I saw what happened in the women’s hut with my own eyes. After they had undressed, the whole procedure went fairly quickly. They ran naked from the hut through a hedge into the actual extermination centre. The whole extermination centre looked just like a normal delousing institution. In front of the building there were pots of geraniums and a sign saying “Hackenholt Foundation”, above which there was a star of David. The building was brightly and pleasantly painted so as not to suggest people would be killed here...

Inside the buildings, the Jews had to enter chambers into which was channelled the exhaust of a [100(?)-HP] engine, located in the same building. In it there were six such extermination chambers. They were windowless, had electric lights and two doors. One door led outside so that the bodies could be removed. People were led from a corridor into the chambers through an ordinary air-tight door with bolts. There was a glass peep-holder, as I recall, next to the door in the wall. Through this window one could watch what was happening inside the room but only when it was not too full of people. After a short time the glass became steamed up. When the people had been locked in the room the motor was switched on and then I suppose the stop-valves or vents to the chambers opened...

It is possible that the pipe led directly to the chambers. Once the engine was running, the light in the chambers was switched off. This was followed by palpable disquiet in the chamber. In my view it was only then that the people sensed something else was in store for them. It seemed to me that behind the thick walls and door they were praying and shouting for help.

Source 2 – The testimony of Professor Wilhelm Pfannenstiel, a Waffen-SS hygienist, an a gassing at Belzec

Activity

1. Read sources 1 & 2
   a. How do the two accounts reinforce each other, even though they are about different camps?
   b. How are the two accounts different from each other?
2. Do the similarities between the two accounts make the differences more or less believable? Why?