

AUSCHWITZ: AN EYE WITNESS ACCOUNT

Read the testimony below for information on:

1. The selection process.
2. Mengele experiments on twins.
3. "Progress:" More efficient killing.
4. An orchestra made up of prisoners.

Extract from Evidence Given at the Nuremberg Trials on the Auschwitz Extermination Camp*

M. Dubost: What do you know about the Jewish transport that arrived from Romainville about the same time as you?

Vallant-Couturier: When we left Romainville, the Jewish women who were together with us remained behind. They were sent to Drancy, and finally arrived in Auschwitz, where we saw them again three weeks later. Of 1,200 who left, only 125 arrived in the camp. The rest were taken to the gas chambers immediately, and of the 125, not a single one was left by the end of the month.

The transports were carried out as follows: At the beginning when we arrived, when a Jewish transport came there was a "selection." First the old women, the mothers and the children. They were told to get on trucks, together with the sick and people who looked weak. They kept only young girls, young women and young men; the latter were sent to the men's camp.

In general, it was rare for more than 250 out of a transport of 1,000 to 1,500 to reach the camp, and that was the maximum; the others were sent to the gas chambers straight away.

At this "selection" healthy women between 20 and 30 years old were also chosen, and sent to the Experimental Block. Girls and women, who were a little older or not chosen for this purpose, were sent to the camp and, like us, had their heads shaved and they were tattooed.

In the spring of 1944 there was also a block for twins. That was at the time of the immense transport of Hungarian Jews, about 700,000** persons. Dr. Mengele, who was carrying out the experiments, kept back the twin children from all transports, as well as twins of any age, so long as both twins were there. Both children and adults slept on the floor in this block. I don't know what experiments were made apart from blood tests and measurements.

M. Dubost: Did you actually see the "selection" when transports arrived?

Vaillant-Couturier: Yes, because when we were working in the Sewing Block in 1944, the block in which we lived was situated just opposite the place where the trains arrived. The whole process had been improved: Instead of carrying out the “selection” where the trains arrived, a siding took the carriages practically to the gas chamber, and the train stopped about 100 m. from the gas chamber. That was right in front of our block, but of course there were two rows of barbed wire between. Then we saw how the seals were taken off the trucks and how women, men and children were pulled out of the trucks by soldiers. We were present at the most terrible scenes when old couples were separated. Mothers had to leave their daughters, because they were taken to the camp, while the mothers and children went to the gas chambers. All these people knew nothing of the fate that awaited them. They were only confused because they were being separated from each other, but they did not know that they were going to their death.

To make the reception pleasanter, there was then – in June and July 1944, that is – an orchestra made up of prisoners, girls in white blouses and dark blue skirts, all of them pretty and young, who played gay tunes when the trains arrived, the “Merry Widow,” the Barcarolle from the “Tales of Hoffmann,” etc. They were told it was a labor camp, and as they never entered the camp they saw nothing but the small platform decorated with greenery, where the orchestra played. They could not know what awaited them.

Those who were taken to the gas chambers – that is, the old people, children and others – were taken to a red brick building.

M. Dubost: Then they were not registered?

Vaillant-Couturier: No.

Dubost: They were not tattooed?

Vaillant-Couturier: No, they were not even counted.

Dubost: Were you yourself tattooed?

Vaillant-Couturier: Yes.

(The witness shows her arm)

They were taken to a red brick building with a sign that said Baths. They were told to get undressed and given a towel before they were taken to the so-called shower room. Later, at the time of the large transports from Hungary, there was no time left for any degree of concealment. They were undressed brutally. I know of these particulars because I was acquainted with a little Jewess from France, who had lived on the Place de la Republique
...

Dubost: In Paris?

Vaillant-Couturier: In Paris, she was known as “little Marie” and was the only survivor of a family of nine. Her mother and her seven sisters and brothers had been taken to the gas chambers as soon as they arrived. When I got to know her she worked on undressing the small children before they were taken into the gas chamber.

After the people were undressed, they were taken into a room that looked like a shower room, and the capsules were thrown down into the room through a hole in the ceiling. An SS man observed the effect through a spy-hole. After about 5 to 7 minutes, when the gas had done its job, he gave a signal for the opening of the doors. Men with gas masks, these were prisoners too, came in and took the bodies out. They told us that the prisoners must have suffered before they died, because they clung together in bunches like grapes so that it was difficult to separate them.

Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg 14 November 1945 – 1 October 1946, VI, Nuremberg, 1947, pp. 214-216.

* From the evidence of a Frenchwoman, Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, who was a prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp, where she arrived on January 1, 1943.

** The correct number of Hungarian Jews sent to Auschwitz was about 430,000.

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

You will need a strong stomach for this, but go to the following link and read about Dr. Mengele and his experiments on twins:

<http://history1900s.about.com/library/holocaust/aa112397.htm>

1. What do you think? Did Dr. Mengele believe there was scientific value in experimenting on twins? He thought so!
2. There was more than one orchestra at Auschwitz. The musicians not only played to “calm down” the prisoners, but occasionally, on Sundays, concerts were held for the SS officers. Can you gain insight into the mentality of the Nazi killers from this?