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A MATTER OF SURVIVAL: SOCIAL HIERARCHIES AND UNDERGROUND ECONOMIES IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS OF THE THIRD REICH

by

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A graduating essay submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in The Faculty of Arts Department of History

We accept this essay as conforming to the required standard:

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Introduction

In his 1776 magnum opus The Wealth of Nations, the renowned political economist Adam Smith proposed that there is “a certain propensity in human nature… to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.” Smith’s notion is of course self-evident in daily life; all members of society engage in such acts to maintain their well-being. But Smith suggests much more than the simple fact of economic transactions. For Smith, “trucking, bartering, and exchanging” is very deeply ingrained behaviour. The economic behaviour of human beings remains unchanged regardless of spatial or temporal setting. Smith’s proposition is a fitting starting point for this discussion, for understanding that wherever there are humans there is economic behaviour leads us to recognize economic behaviour in unlikely places, and in situations not usually considered in economic terms.

One such “unlikely” situation arose behind the barbed wire of the Nazi concentration camps. The unique concentrationary system fashioned by the National Socialist regime between 1933 and 1945 was unprecedented in both its vision and its sheer magnitude. Crucial to this vision was the plan that prisoners be destined first to an emotional death and then to physical death. The captors carefully plotted their victims’ starvation, torture, and terrorization to ensure the death of spirit before body. The only reprieve from this dual sentence occurred when the Schutzstaffel (SS) deemed that it could make temporary use of a prisoner’s slave labour. Most did not last long under the torturous working conditions that were the norm.

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Policies of extreme physical and psychological torture and an indecipherable web of conflicting rules and regulations dominated the prisoners’ daily lives. For instance, the regulations generally forbade a prisoner any food aside from his official daily ration, but the caloric value of that ration was so low that he would certainly starve on it alone. Prisoners had to have nicely greased boots, but grease was rarely distributed. A prisoner had to have all the buttons for his shirt, but they were sewed on poorly and it was easy to lose them. A prisoner was forced to work on his knees all day, yet if he had a hole in his pants at an inspection, he might be shot. Wearing pants one size too large could be tantamount to a death sentence: if he had oversize pants the prisoner had to use his hands to hold them up, but how could he work with a single hand? The problems were many and complicated, but the outcome was relatively simple: those who adapted increased their chances of survival, and those who did not usually died.

Skill at manoeuvring around conflicting rules was therefore essential for survival, and those who endured long periods in the camps learned how to “truck, barter, and exchange” for goods and services. Did a prisoner have a hole in his pants? He could buy a patch of cloth on the black market. Did the prisoner not know how to sew, or did he not own a needle and thread? These services were available as well. Were a prisoner’s pants too large? The black market could provide a replacement pair, or perhaps some string for a makeshift belt. The larger story of the camps is not one of triumph, for there was certainly mass starvation and inconceivable suffering; yet within these despairing realities prisoners gained small triumphs through economic exchange.

Inside the camps there existed a pernicious social hierarchy, and every prisoner fell into a rigid category that ranged from the highly powerful “ethnic” German
“professional criminals” and “politics” to the pitiful and usually powerless Jews. For every prisoner who managed to obtain extra food through economic exchange, untold thousands lacked the power to do so. It was this socio-economic hierarchy that maintained the disparity between classes of prisoners, and formed the framework for a hegemonic economic system dominated by a core of elite prisoners.

Many concentration camp survivors insist that the central element in avoiding death in the camp was purely the factor of luck. However, I contend that no simple explanation can account for the complex phenomenon of survival. Aside from luck, there were other crucial dynamics at play. Discussions of luck and survival in the camps often cite the example of the periodic Selektions. Although the sickest prisoners were usually those selected for Sonderbehandlung, an element of randomness nevertheless prevailed at these proceedings. There are many stories of what seemed to be arbitrary decisions made by rushed SS examiners. While there was a certain arbitrariness to the Selektions, the events also served a specific purpose for the SS, that of eliminating the weakest prisoners. While the Selektion was at times used by the SS as an expeditious way to settle a personal vendetta or to eliminate a troublemaker, it was principally the wretched “walking dead” Musulmänner who had their numbers recorded for later removal. It was the Musulmänner who most feared the Selektions, for it was they who were most often

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3 Selektion, “selection.” The inspection (and subsequent separation) of prisoners to determine who would be sent to the gas chambers.

4 Sonderbehandlung, “special treatment.” Euphemism for execution.

5 Musulmänner, “muslims.” Camp slang for prisoners who were on the brink of death, or had lost the will to live. Their distinctive features and mannerisms were instantly recognizable.
selected. While it is true that survival often hinged on luck, it is also true that survival was not always entirely random. This paper will account for survival in the concentration camps by making clear that many survived owing to factors other than simple luck.

Historical inquiry faces many difficulties. Chief among these is the selection and interpretation of sources. While the volume of official documentation left intact after the fall of the Nazi regime offers historians an incredibly detailed picture of the implementation of the Nazi genocide, such documents tell us little about the social relationships inside the concentration camps. Indeed, they tell us even less about those activities that the prisoners and SS guards strove to keep secret, such as black marketing. For exploring the society of the prisoners, first-hand testimony of the events is therefore crucial.

But if first-hand testimony is crucial, it is not without complications. It is vital to explore why people wrote about their experiences in particular ways, and even why they wrote them at all. How does the writing of testimony serve the author? Why might an author choose to include, or omit, particular themes? Theorist James E. Young wonders:

[W]hat shall we do with the living memory of survivors? How will it enter (or not enter) the historical record?... Will it always be regarded as so overly laden with pathos as to make it unreliable as documentary evidence? Or is there a place for the understanding of the witness, as subjective and skewed as it may be, for our larger historical understanding of events? 6

Young’s final question rings almost rhetorical, for the answer can only be a resounding “yes.” Michael Marrus suggests that while there are many problems inherent in our sources, historical writing still must be “faithful to the events themselves, or at least as

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faithful as we can possibly make it. Some have to be counted on for historical accuracy, for generalizations that match the evidence, and for a balanced view.”

Historical writing rises or falls on its ability to grapple with specific interpretive challenges. One such challenge is the establishment of what lies between events and the text. One factor between the events and the text is time. If reality diminishes further as the years widen between the events and the recording of those events, then the reliability of a diary will compare favourably against that of a memoir, and a memoir written soon after the events compares favourably against one written many years later. Unfortunately, the reality of the camp experience generally precluded the possibility of diary writing. Although people did manage to write diaries in the ghetto-like camp of Theresienstadt, diaries are understandably almost nonexistent in the literature of the extermination and labour camps. Another context where diary writing was possible is that of the ghettos; due to the relative freedom in the ghettos, many diaries survive from this pre-camp context.

One critical tool for establishing reliability is corroboration, or triangulation. In essence, this method attempts a “thick” description of events; when considering and presenting evidence, drawing from multiple sources is the key. Putting this method to use requires the examiner to ask: “How many sources agree on this fact?” The aim is to present only evidence that several sources corroborate.

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8 There is, however, one collection of manuscripts that survives. Five inmates wrote surreptitiously and buried their writings at Auschwitz-II Birkenau. Recovered after the war, the legible fragments of the manuscripts were published in 1992. See Jadwiga Bezwinska and Danuta Czech, eds., *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Prisoners in Crematorium Squads Found at Auschwitz* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1992).
The problems of textual interpretation are present for all historical writing, but the nature of this project calls for certain distinctive considerations. Marrus’ call for “generalizations that match the evidence” is particularly important but also particularly problematic for this project. Just as we cannot speak of a single coherent Holocaust experience, we also cannot speak of a single coherent concentration camp experience. Not only did the conditions of internment vary widely from one camp to another, they also varied widely within each distinct camp. Depending on the function of the camp, the location of the camp, the stage of the war, the status of supplies, the number of inmates, the prevalence of diseases, the disposition of the camp Kommandant and other factors, conditions varied drastically. Additionally, for a camp to be relevant to this investigation it not only has to have had a relatively long-term population base, but it also has to have had enough survivors to produce a written history. In the case of certain extermination camps, there was no constant prisoner population. Therefore, this project of examining socio-economic relationships within “the” concentration camps is, more precisely, a project of examining socio-economic relationships in those camps where economic exchanges were even possible.

For the purposes of this thesis, two concentration camps in particular meet the criteria of reliable testimony, long term population, and sufficient number of survivors: Buchenwald and Auschwitz. Buchenwald, near Weimar in central Germany, was a labour camp that mainly held long-term political prisoners. Largely run by the prisoners themselves, it is representative of the political internment camps. The infamous Auschwitz complex near Krakow, Poland, is representative of the labour/extermination camps of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe.
In a larger sense this thesis seeks to better understand how humans respond rationally in the midst of highly irrational situations. I attempt to achieve this aim by first addressing the black market as an independent economic concept (included is a systematic discussion of the theory that explains black marketing), then by closely examining the two aforementioned camps. I also contextualize this sampling with examples from other camps and other relevant situations.

The concentration camps made for a social phenomenon imbued with ethical questions of unprecedented complexity. As Gideon Greif aptly states, “[n]ever before in history had people been forced to cope with moral situations as complicated and muddled as those in the concentration and extermination camps.”

Difficult questions remain about why certain people survived, and others did not, and these questions deservedly remain a sensitive subject matter. Even so, historians must attempt to make sense of the past. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi stated that “[p]rivileged prisoners were a minority within the Lager population, nevertheless they represent a potent majority among survivors.” While he may be almost the only theorist to have stated this fact so clearly, we find evidence in support of this assertion in every memoir of the concentration camp experience.

The vast majority of those subjected to the concentration camps perished. Of the relatively few who survived, the questions for our reflection are “how?” and even “why?” I believe that survival hinged on more than random luck or capriciousness. My thesis examines the intricacies of the camp economies with a view to demonstrating that

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9 Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2005) 53.

10 Lager, “camp.” Abbreviation of the German Konzentrationslager, “concentration camp.”

material advantages—goods and services—played a very large role in the outcome of who lived to tell and who did not.

To present a thesis concerning the nature of certain socio-economic relationships that occurred over 60 years ago is a daunting task. But if the simple distance in time makes the task challenging, the distance in comprehension is more challenging still. An unfathomably large gap in experience and knowledge exists between those who actually lived through Hitler’s concentration camps and those who did not. The unanswerable questions and the despair of the story itself might easily lead to the question “why bother?” But if we can accept that total understanding is unattainable, and if we can rise above the despair, historical inquiry will prove inspiring. Accepting that we will never fully understand the Holocaust experience forces us to continue to challenge ourselves, to always search for a deeper understanding of the events. The historical problems of the Holocaust will never be “solved,” but the millions of distinct stories we group together and call the Holocaust will not be put to rest, and for the hope of enlightenment must not be put to rest.
Chapter One – The Wartime Black Market in Context

Economists refer to the underground economy as the “irregular economy, the shadow or parallel economy, the subterranean or illicit economy, the hidden economy and the informal economy.”¹ One simple term that is missing from this list is of course “black market,” yet this is the expression that is most appropriate for the context of this paper. Through the 1930s and 1940s the term was ubiquitous. The highest governmental official and the lowliest concentration camp prisoner used it equally, irrespective of nationality: the French, marché noir; the Germans, Schwarzmarkt; the Poles, czarny rynek; the Italians, mercato nero; the Greeks, mavri agora. Everyone—from government officials to concentration camp prisoners–knew well the expression and its implications.

Black marketing is an illicit trade in officially controlled or scarce commodities.² I highlight a key idea: the notion of “officially controlled.” While black marketing is always “illicit,” and while it often deals in “scarce” commodities, these two attributes are in effect both functions of the fact that a commodity is officially controlled. If a commodity was not officially controlled, it would not be illegal, and because of the self-rectifying nature of a free market, it would probably not be scarce. Thus, the key prerequisite for the existence of a black market is the imposition of official controls, or regulations, on the free market. Indeed, a black market can only arise out of a regulated market. In a free market situation, black marketing simply cannot occur because a free market regulates nothing. In this hypothetical situation there is no need for a black market.

The regulation of a market can arise for myriad reasons. While the most common regulation is the simple and age-old practice of taxation, there are many other types of regulatory measures. There are two main categories of limitations on a market: restrictions and prohibitions. Some contemporary examples of market restrictions in Canada are requiring a gun licence to purchase a firearm, regulating the price of prescription drugs, and limiting the purchase of alcohol to those 19 years and older. Some contemporary examples of prohibitions in Canada are the ban on fully automatic weapons, the illegality of soliciting prostitution, and the outlawing of drugs such as cocaine. The imposition of each of these market limitations creates a raison d’être for a black market. However, one limitation in particular is most pertinent to the European economies of the Second World War: price regulation, or what economists call “price control.”

“Price control” occurs when a government sets an artificial maximum price for a commodity. Wartime governments take such measures to protect citizens from inflation and supply shortages, and the measures usually go hand in hand with the institution of rationing. Historian Paul Sanders succinctly sums up the two forces behind any wartime black market: “Scarcity, and the attempt by government to resolve this problem through a regulation of the free market.” However, when many consumers face a limited supply of a certain commodity, and especially if the price of that commodity is set artificially low, there will always be some consumers willing to pay above the regulated price to acquire that commodity. Consumers unable to satisfy their needs in the legal market will turn to the black market.

I introduced this paper with Adam Smith’s maxim, which professes the ubiquity of economic behaviour: Wherever one finds humans, there one will also find economic behaviour. We can now add a second maxim to the first: *Wherever a power adds a control to regulate a market, a black market will arise.* Though governments devote massive resources to curtail black market activity, simple economics (and experience) tells us that if the legal market cannot satisfy demand, a black market will develop.  

Economist John Butterworth reminds us that although powers have used black market penalties since “the Rome of Diocletian,” the penalties are rarely an adequate countermeasure to the profits. We need look no further than the former Soviet Union, where black market activities occurred on a massive scale despite the prospect of the death penalty for those caught.  

* * *

Just as a black market will arise wherever a power places a control on a free market, the amount of black market activity corresponds to the amount of control. Any increase in control will result in an increase in black market activity. The expanding Nazi regime of the late 1930s and early 1940s established some of the most severe restrictions of the modern era. The economic measures implemented by the Nazis in defeated lands were nothing short of draconian; the conquerors instituted rigid controls over every aspect of the economy, including the economics of daily life. The circumstances of Nazi-occupied Europe inform the more specific discussion of the concentration camps. For this reason, before we look at the camps we must consider other wartime situations.

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After invading Poland in September 1939, the Nazis lost no time realizing a program of ruthless pillage of land and industry. “Most of Poland’s farm produce—fruit, vegetables, grain, and livestock—went directly to Germany;” Polish citizens, punished for their allegedly inferior Slavic status, were “[s]everely rationed to a substandard diet” and quite simply “left to starve to death slowly.” The Poles were in a desperate situation, and they conducted their black marketing with a sense of urgency.

One former resident of Łódź recalled that when the German authorities took charge, daily life fell apart: “There was a scarcity of food, and we began to look and buy food on the black market already. The money was devalued, and in order to get some food you needed much, much more money than before the occupation.” In Warsaw, “[d]espite all attempts to preserve order and discipline… basic foodstuffs disappeared from the stores, prices soared, and bread lines began to form at the entrance of bakeries.”

The Polish black market thrived as it “was economically advantageous to farmers to sell their products surreptitiously, and the rest of the population needed the foodstuffs they sold.” However, the risk for both buyers and sellers could not have been greater as the only penalty for those caught was death by immediate execution.

The situation under the collaborationist Vichy regime in France, although not as acute as in Poland, was also dire. The amount of food allotted per person under the rationing and price controls in France was also at starvation level. According to J. Debû-Bridel, “[l]egally, officially, every French person was condemned to a 1000 calorie daily

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8 Sara Grossman-Weil, oral history conducted by Dwork and van Pelt, Holocaust, 202-203.
10 Dwork and van Pelt, Holocaust, 151.
11 Dwork and van Pelt, Holocaust, 151.
deficit, to a slow death by starvation.” Debû-Bridel tells us plainly that “to conform was to die slowly of inanimateness.” In such a situation, black marketing was essential to survival. Ironically, it was Vichy’s own legislation that provided a powerful impetus for the development of a booming French black market. However, the simple need for additional food is not the only explanation for this thriving marché noir. The black marketing of the French also held a deeper meaning. It was a black marketing of insubordination, done in a spirit of defiance of their occupiers: “Cheating, tricking, was a sign of patriotism, violating the law was the first step towards insurrection!”

* * *

The level of control over the market increased again in the context of the forced Jewish ghettos, and in response this again increased the inhabitants’ reliance on the black market. While in occupied Poland and France black marketing supplemented starvation level rations, in the ghettos of Eastern Europe, black marketing nearly replaced those rations. The French and the Poles were legislated onto what has been called a path to slow starvation, but the Jewish residents of the ghettos were legislated onto a path to fast starvation. In the ghettos, “[f]rom the very beginning, the greatest concern and most damaging factor was the shortage of food.” Accounts vary as to the total calories of the official daily food allotment. Nevertheless, even the highest estimates are far below the caloric intake required for basic survival. While estimates of the daily ghetto allotment range from 184 calories to 800 calories per person, the National Academy of Sciences

13 Debû-Bridel, Histoire du Marché Noir, 43.
15 Debû-Bridel, Histoire du Marché Noir, 44.
16 Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 66.
17 Levi suggests an average of 800 calories per day. Gutman cites the lower 184 calories per day. For these and other estimates see Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, 63; Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 66;
today recommends a daily intake of between 1,625 and 3,720 calories.\textsuperscript{18} Kiryl Sosnowski is right to suggest that the ghetto “allowance covered, at the most, 10 per cent of basic requirements.”\textsuperscript{19} Whatever the actual caloric value was, it is a certainty that one could not live long on the official rations; to survive longer than a few months it was imperative to have more food.

Smuggling, underground manufacturing, and black marketing were pervasive forces in the ghettos. The myriad regulations imposed by the Nazis and enforced by the \textit{Judenräte}\textsuperscript{20} and the Jewish Police—not least the constraints on official rations—dictated the vital necessity of these illicit activities. Yisrael Gutman stated that

\begin{quote}
[i]t seemed that everything was prohibited by the Nazi regulations: purchasing food, engaging in various types of commerce, keeping money, owning property, working without the knowledge of the authorities, changing one’s place of residence.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

And in the words of Terrence Des Pres:

\begin{quote}
Trade was illegal, procuring medicines was illegal, schooling the children was illegal. So were things like meetings, movement outside the ghetto, and travelling the streets after curfew. The punishment was death, and yet all of these activities were necessary to life and had to be carried on covertly, at constant risk.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

The fact that tens of thousands of residents survived months and years within the walls of the ghettos attests not only to the perseverance of the ghetto residents, but also to the ubiquitous influence of the ghetto black marketers. Chaim Kaplan noted in his diary that

\begin{quote}
Kiryl Sosnowski, \textit{The Tragedy of Children under Nazi Rule} (Poznan: Western Press Agency, 1962) 113.\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Judenräte}, “Jewish Councils.” Groups of influential Jews appointed by the Nazis as representatives of the local Jewish population.\textsuperscript{21}
Gutman, \textit{Jews of Warsaw}, 35.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}
“wherever there is a prohibition against supply, smuggling goes on; and it is thanks to this smuggling that we exist.”

Two main types of smuggling occurred. One was the work of lone smugglers, who sneaked in small amounts of food to feed themselves and their families. The second was “organized and carried out by groups who engaged in smuggling as a profession and operated on a large scale.” Smuggling “proceeded daily on both individual and organized levels, and as death by starvation increased, it grew to heroic proportions.”

Although both methods were important, for only by both means did the supply to the ghetto continue, only the large-scale smuggling has been the subject of ethical debate.

Small-scale smuggling by individuals proved crucial for countless families. Many families relied on the smuggling of just one person, who had either a legitimate or a secret way to get across the ghetto wall. Usually adults would legitimately cross to the “Aryan” side (often on the strength of a work card), but would return hiding traded goods in their clothes. Children proved to be clever smugglers. They were “particularly adept” and “would find cracks or openings in the wall known only to them.” Once on the “Aryan” side, they snatched what food they could from street markets and surreptitiously returned to give these treasures to their parents. While with the children smugglers the guards sometimes looked the other way, with adults they usually followed their official mandate of summarily executing anyone caught.

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23 Chaim Kaplan cited by Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 71.
24 Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 67.
25 Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 67.
28 Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 69.
A second type of smuggling was that of the large-scale organized smuggling rings. These operations relied on complex planning, an organized work force and division of labour, code words and secret hiding spots, and most importantly, collusion with Nazi officials of all levels; the larger the operation, the higher the official that needed bribing. The smugglers willingly paid the bribes, as the commerce proved to be highly profitable. Smuggling went on daily without pause; the methods employed were limited only by the inventiveness and daring of the smuggler. Survivor Bernard Goldstein illustrated the complexity of the Warsaw Ghetto smuggling:

Each branch of the smuggling operation developed its own technicians and specialists who constantly devised new methods and opened new channels as the old were shut off… Even death was made to serve life. Four undertaking establishments operating little hand carts tried constantly to keep pace with the death rate. The carts plied back and forth all day to and from the Jewish cemetery on Okopova Street outside the ghetto. Often the coffins would come back packed with food, transferred to the smuggler-undertakers through a Christian cemetery which bordered the Jewish.  

Sacks of grain travelled in the hollowed out floors of street cars, potatoes under secret trap doors on wagons, and livestock walked across temporary ramps over the walls. The smugglers even transferred milk by pouring it through a system of pipes that led to waiting receptacles on the “inside.” “Smuggling, previously illegal and unrespectable, remained illegal but became heroic;” it was a “necessary fact of the ghetto world.”

The two types of smuggling together provided most of the ghetto residents’ food. However, even though the large-scale operations kept many people alive, the legacy of the organized smugglers is nevertheless contentious. Some call them “profiteers,” and to be sure, many of them were criminal figures who, with the establishment of the ghettos,

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easily branched out into the fields of smuggling and black marketing. Many of these smugglers made fortunes off of their work and were not afraid to show off their wealth. The smugglers, and especially those at the top of the ‘profession,’ were also the patrons of the expensive restaurants and coffee houses of the ghetto. They would often appear with Germans and Jewish policemen, who were partners in their transactions. They sought after the good life and lived by the dictum ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!’

The heads of the smuggling rings joined the ranks of the ghettos’ upper classes. They lived well while thousands starved. However, one survivor reminds us of how “those same vulgar figures are deserving of mercy. Without them the ghetto would simply have been sentenced to starvation.”

Another aspect of ghetto life that led to both an increase in the general well-being of average ghetto residents, as well as to the enrichment of a select few kingpins, was the illicit manufacturing sector. The ghetto manufacturing concerns filled two areas of need: one inside the ghetto walls, the other outside. While some of the manufactured goods ended up on the ghetto black markets (for example prohibited items such as soap and candles), the driving force behind the ghetto manufacturing sector were the customers on the “Aryan” side. The ghettos had thousands of desperately unemployed men and women eager to take any job available. This surplus meant that there was an abundant supply of cheap, and often highly skilled, labour. Primary materials were smuggled into the ghetto, underground manufacturers worked the raw materials into saleable products, and the finished goods were smuggled back out of the ghetto.

While the process of smuggling twice may seem absurd, the two distinctive elements of ghetto labour—its low cost, and its high quality—made the method worthwhile.

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31 Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 69.  
32 Szymkowicz cited by Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 69.  
33 Goldstein, Stars Bear Witness, 40.
Manufacturing was profitable, and secret factories were widespread. In Warsaw “[t]here existed hundreds of small soap factories,” and a “clandestine milling industry employed hundreds of workers.”34 Weaving workshops (busy with tricot and socks manufacture), leather-tanning plants, tobacco-processing plants, and tire vulcanization workshops were also operating. There was even a centralized office for coordinating the smuggling. “The Center for Exporting” in Warsaw dealt exclusively with the complex requirements involved in supplying the “Aryan market” with ghetto-made goods.35

Since the official daily ration was much too low to support life, each person and each family had to somehow obtain extra food. Starvation was an ever-present threat “staved off by a slice of stale bread, a bowl of thin soup, a potato bought with money laboriously earned.”36 In the closed society of the ghettos food quickly became the most precious commodity, and erstwhile valuables—gold, jewels, and foreign currencies—became relatively less important, and therefore less expensive (this phenomenon of devaluation intensifies again in the concentration camps). But while untold thousands balanced perilously on the edge of starvation, others, for whom food was in relatively abundant supply, stood to amass fortunes from this reversal in relative worth. The meeting place of these two disparate groups was the ghetto black market.

Two central arenas supplied the ghetto black market, the previously discussed smuggling operations and the manufacturing concerns. However, a third source supplying the black market was the collective mass of personal belongings owned by the incarcerated Jews. Those who had the means could, for a time, live off of what the Nazis

35 Kermish, Selected Documents, 583.
36 Dwork and van Pelt, Holocaust, 218.
had not confiscated. The “sell-off began with valuables, and continued with furniture, springs of mattresses, and finally pots and pans.”\textsuperscript{37} In the earlier months, some ghetto residents still had plenty to sell, and they all knew where to go with it. In the Warsaw Ghetto, the focal point of this type of barter was on Lubecki Street:

Everyday the place swarms with people and is noisy like a big fair. Crowds of people stand with objects placed on their hands, shoulders and backs, while other crowds pass by as on a parade, looking at the objects, handling and examining them, haggling and buying.\textsuperscript{38}

As the weeks stretched into months, and the months into years, few families maintained their more valuable assets. Once these were gone, the sell-off continued with any truck that had even miniscule value. A document of unknown authorship from Emmanuel Ringelblum’s \textit{Oneg Shabbat} archive, dated June 1942, laments that

\begin{quote}
[t]his trading in one’s movables, the fruit of one’s work of many years and one’s blood and sweat is one of the silent and most painful chapters of the great, universal tragedy of the Jewish community and of the Warsaw Ghetto.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

Obviously the circumstances were heart-wrenching. Even so, these comments were recorded before the first major deportation initiative, and the beginnings of unimaginably larger suffering for the Jews of Warsaw.\textsuperscript{40}

The ghetto black market was the medium for exchange for everything from the most basic life-sustaining necessities, to fortunes in gold and jewels. Aside from the bustling trade in “anything that could be exchanged for a crust of bread,”\textsuperscript{41} black marketers engaged in brisk business in many other commodities. Medicine, candles, matches, soap, clothing, and household goods were in high demand by those who could

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Lewin cited by Hilberg, \textit{Destruction of the European Jews}, 168.
\item Kermish, \textit{Selected Documents}, 549.
\item Kermish, \textit{Selected Documents}, 548.
\item In fact, the mass deportation of the residents of the Warsaw Ghetto began approximately one month after the document was written. The first of the mass deportations was on 22 July 1942. See Gutman, \textit{Jews of Warsaw}, 197-227.
\item Gutman, \textit{Jews of Warsaw}, 107.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
afford such luxuries. For the wealthy and well connected, false papers, work permits, and other forged documents were prized items. As the following anecdote illustrates, the ghetto black market was nothing short of all-encompassing:

Sanitation squads would descend on tenements in which illness had been reported, terrorize the inhabitants, ‘disinfect’ the clothing in such fashion that it could never be used again, remove whatever valuables caught their eye, and then march the people to the bathhouses, leaving them to wait naked in the street… after which they received a slip of paper certifying that they had been through the regular preventive procedure. Since these certificates were useful for avoiding a second round of brutal ‘preventive medicine,’ a brisk trade in forged sanitation certificates was soon developed.

Anything and everything was available on the black market; if one knew whom to talk to, this could even mean getting out of a transport destined for Auschwitz. The price: three loaves of bread, half a kilogram of margarine, and one pound of sugar.

Prices on the black market fluctuated dramatically on a daily, and sometimes even hourly, basis. People would come and go checking on the prices to see if they had fallen in their absence.

Peretz Opoczynski, a contributor to Oneg Shabbat wrote that

[y]ou never know if the afternoon prices will be the same as the morning prices. This you can tell only when they lower the supplies through the windows. In the courage of the first smuggler who carries off his bags of flour, of the porter and the boundary men, the entire alley senses the change on the bourse and, like a sudden wind across a wheat field on a hot summer day, a murmur gusts through the street: ‘Higher.’

Although the pricing did follow the fundamental law of supply and demand, there was invariably higher demand than supply. Hence, it was the average ghetto resident, faced

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42 See Goldstein, Stars Bear Witness, 70 and 110; Dwork and van Pelt, Holocaust, 339.
43 Goldstein, Stars Bear Witness, 72-73.
44 Dwork and van Pelt, Holocaust, 257.
46 Peretz Opoczynski, “Noon Rest in Koźla Alley,” reproduced in Dawidowicz, Holocaust Reader, 207. On fluctuating prices see also Goldstein, Stars Bear Witness, 76; Dawidowicz, Holocaust Reader, 198.
with volatile and often rising prices, who had the most to lose. The large-scale smugglers, however, had much to gain.

With the emergence of powerful smuggling rings and manufacturing concerns, we begin to see the pattern of socio-economic stratification that epitomized the ghetto experience. Smugglers sold their goods for between 20 to 50 percent above cost. While this was simply the price of smuggling, as it was a very dangerous business, nevertheless some smugglers became exceedingly wealthy. Some were surely worthy of the disparaging moniker “profiteer.”

The upper rung of the ghetto social ladder was made up of three main categories of people: those who had somehow maintained their wealth from before their incarceration, those who had connections and power (such as the members of the Judenräte), and those who had made their fortunes since their incarceration (one diarist calls them “the up-and-coming”). “Nouveau riche millionaires sprang up in the ghetto,” and these people dressed and ate well; in Warsaw they frequented the ghetto’s 61 restaurants and nightspots. Zygmunt Bauman aptly comments that the “distance between classes was the distance between life and death.”

The economic disparity in the ghettos worked according to a new set of rules, different from those before the ghettos and before the war. Socio-economic difference “had acquired a new meaning” as it was

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47 Gutman, Jews of Warsaw, 72.
49 Kermish, Selected Documents, 537.
50 Emmanuel Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto (New York: Schocken, 1974) 146.
no longer a time-honored measurement of attainment, but a telling indicator on a scale of vulnerabilities. Now the upper strata consisted of people who had gained or retained advantages with which to endure the German assault.\footnote{Hilberg, \textit{Destruction of the European Jews}, 159.}

The chances for survival were uneven. The fundamental disparity between these ghetto “prominents” and the general population was immediately perceptible, and the irony of the situation was not lost on ghetto residents. In the Warsaw Ghetto streets, the residents recited the popular poem \textit{Prexy Czerniaków}:\footnote{\textit{Prexy Czerniaków}, “President Czerniaków.”}

\begin{verbatim}
Prexy Czerniaków, the fat pot,
Eats his chicken soup hot.
How so? Just dough!
Money is a dandy thing.

Mme. Czerniaków likes to get her hair done.
She drinks her tea with sugar and bun.
How so? Just dough!
Money is a dandy thing.

The Jewish policeman is a ruffian thug,
Goes out in the street and hauls you off to the jug.
How so? Just dough!
Money is a dandy thing. \footnote{Author unknown. Reproduced in Dawidowicz, \textit{Holocaust Reader}, 258.}
\end{verbatim}

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For the establishment of their “model” ghetto, the Nazis chose Terezín, a walled fortress town on the outskirts of Prague. Though the primary idea was to have one ghetto open for inspection by the Red Cross, it was also a convenient location for the filming of Nazi propaganda. The Nazis renamed the town Theresienstadt, and though they officially classified it as a ghetto Theresienstadt exhibited many characteristics of a concentration camp. Not only was Theresienstadt in a distinctively rural setting, but also the level of control over the lives of those interned was higher than in the ghettos. Many aspects of
my description of the economics in the ghettos apply equally to Theresienstadt. In both settings there was widespread smuggling and black marketing, as well as the existence of an entrenched social hierarchy.

As in the ghettos, Theresienstadt’s severely insufficient rations necessitated widespread smuggling. The large-scale smuggling rings conducted much trade, but Theresienstadt also had its share of small-scale smugglers. One survivor, Eva Roubíčková, was assigned to work in the vegetable fields outside of the camp walls. Whenever the guards were out of sight, she reverted to picking cherries from a nearby tree, and at the end of the day she smuggled them back into the town.\(^\text{55}\) As part of the project of deceiving the Red Cross and the world media, the Nazis encouraged the “citizens” of Theresienstadt to organize cultural activities. One inhabitant planned a full orchestra; in need of instruments, the man found them through connections outside of the camp. He even had a double bass successfully smuggled in.\(^\text{56}\)

In Theresienstadt a job in the right place could provide valuable opportunities. For example, a kitchen job was highly prized. Not only could a kitchen worker steal food for herself, but she could also provide for close friends. Roubíčková stated that during food distribution any friend of the cooks received triple or quadruple the regular portion.\(^\text{57}\) In Theresienstadt conditions allowed for an occasional shower, but one had to have an official “shower ticket.” Desperate for a chance to wash, many prisoners would trade their bowl of soup or a portion of their bread ration for a shower ticket (indeed,


\(^{57}\) Roubíčková, *We’re Alive*, 34.
“[e]verything’s used for trade”\textsuperscript{58}. However, a job at the Zentrallbad, the community showers, provided the added defence of unlimited showers. Conversely, having no job was a dangerous proposition. An inmate with no job not only received a reduced ration, but was also more susceptible to deportation.\textsuperscript{59}

Theresienstadt shared many characteristics with the ghettos of Poland; however, certain key features are certainly more reminiscent of the concentration camps. One of these was the appropriation of the belongings of new arrivals by the SS. In Theresienstadt, as with the camps, “virtually everything not expressly allowed was forbidden.”\textsuperscript{60} Corruption among the workers in the intake center, nicknamed “the sluice-gate,” was nothing short of rampant; they stole at will from the suitcases of new arrivals. Theft by the postal workers, charged with inspecting incoming packages, was also common. Such stolen goods would often subsequently appear on the Theresienstadt black market.

Theresienstadt had an entrenched social hierarchy that dictated who held power, and who enjoyed privilege. As in the ghettos, those with money and connections, the Prominenten, lived on a higher plane than the regular unprivileged residents. The privileges of the highest class in Theresienstadt ranged from better housing accommodations and better food to exemption from deportation. Residents joked grimly that vitamin “B” and vitamin “P” were the two most important things for surviving the camp; “B” for Beziehung, or “connection,” and “P” for Protektion, or “pull.”\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} Roubíčková, \textit{We’re Alive}, 108.
\textsuperscript{60} Berkley, \textit{Hitler’s Gift}, 84.
\textsuperscript{61} Berkley, \textit{Hitler’s Gift}, 104.
Chapter Two - “Hier ist Kein Warum:” Extremity in the Konzentrationslager

Paul Sanders states perceptively: “The black market is a double-faced and permanently mutating phenomenon, accommodating itself to all circumstances.”¹ Black marketing only increases with an increase in control. This is precisely why the most persistent black marketing occurred inside the concentration camps, for the camps were, in a sense, a situation of extreme government price control. This price control took shape in a sweeping prohibition of all goods: the camps were the last stage in a steep progression of restrictions and prohibitions. Chapter One outlined how the black market first supplemented the meagre rations in the rigidly controlled occupied territories, and then nearly replaced them under the severity of the ghettos and Theresienstadt. But the truest test of the malleability and perseverance of the black market are the conditions of the concentration camps.

In the camps control entered the sphere of what theorist Terrence Des Pres calls “extremity.”² The notion of the extremity of the camps is a difficult one. Des Pres’ “extremity” describes a complex web of factors, never experienced together before, that influenced every facet of life in the camps. Collectively, these factors, and how each individual responded to them, shaped the way the inmates lived and died. The black marketing of the concentration camps developed and thrived under the conditions of extremity.

* * *

After a long and cruel ride, with people inhumanly packed together with little or no food or water, and with the stench of humans and of death hanging heavily in the air,

¹ Sanders, Histoire du Marché Noir, 7.
² See Des Pres, The Survivor.
the cattle cars pulled into the dead-end station. The tortured cargo clamoured for water, air, and for the doors to open. These were the last few seconds of relative calm before the maelstrom of activity that awaited them. In the words of Levi:

    The climax came suddenly. The door opened with a crash, and the dark echoed with outlandish orders in that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to a millennial anger. A vast platform appeared before us, lit up by reflectors.  

Everything happened very quickly then: “[K]icks and punches right away, often in the face; an orgy of orders screamed with true or simulated rage; complete nakedness after being stripped; the shaving off of all one’s hair; the outfitting in rags.” The sheer force and speed of this process made reasoned response impossible, especially since nobody gave any explanation, nobody told the new arrivals what they could and could not do; nowhere were any rules of behaviour displayed.

    Thrust into this hopeless situation, these newcomers, or Zugänge, had to adapt fast. Levi wrote that while most from his transport went straight to the Kremo, each man standing with him had been deemed useful to the Reich. They were thrown into a hell on earth, but they had at least received a chance at life. After their violent separation from friends and family, Levi and these other men were crowded into a large empty room:

    We have a terrible thirst. The weak gurgle of the water in the radiators makes us ferocious; we have had nothing to drink for four days. But there is also a tap—and above it a card which says that it is forbidden to drink as the water is dirty… Wassertrinken Verboten.

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3 Primo Levi, If This is a Man: Remembering Auschwitz (New York: Summit, 1986) 9.
5 Des Pres, The Survivor, 77.
7 Zugänge, an abstract term which means “arrivals.” Plural of Zugang, camp slang for a neophyte prisoner.
8 Kremo, camp slang for “crematorium.” Abbreviation of the German Krematorium.
9 Levi, If This is a Man, 10.
A huge empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, with a tap which drips while we cannot drink the water.  

Some time later, Levi seized an opportunity to relieve his parched body:

I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hand’s reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. ‘Warum?’ I asked him in my poor German. ‘Hier ist kein warum’ (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.

Newly-arrived prisoner Rudolf Vrba met an inmate willing to talk: “[W]hen he told us that he had been five months in Auschwitz, we looked at him with respect, for here was a man who knew how to survive.”

The Lagerordnung, “camp regulations,” were an inextricable clutter of rules and contradicting counter-rules, what theorist and survivor Eugen Kogon described as “a jungle of punishable offences.” Extremity put the prisoners in a hopeless situation, indeed a hopeless paradox. Unthinking obedience was required of all prisoners, and those who did not understand, or were slow to catch on, were beaten or killed on the spot.

However, the rules were so fanatical and self-destructive that if a prisoner were to obey all the camp rules he would be dead in a matter of weeks. In Buchenwald, badly shined shoes were a sign of laziness and uncleanness, while well shined shoes indicated that the offender was “shirking work.”

Language also served as an important component of the SS’ imposition of extremity. While it was the carefully crafted language of Nazi totalitarianism that

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10 Levi, If This is a Man, 12.
11 Levi, If This is a Man, 17.
14 Sofsky, Order of Terror, 113.
15 Kraus and Kulka, Death Factory, 26.
16 Des Pres, The Survivor, 104
propagandized the average German citizen, it was something even more insidious that assaulted the prisoners incarcerated in the camps. The German of the camps was not the German of Goethe; it was a brutish and jargon filled argot that survivor Tadeusz Borowski called “crematorium Esperanto,” but Lagersprache, or “camp speech” was its customary name. Lagersprache German was the vernacular of bare necessity; its vocabulary reduced to the words that were relevant to daily survival in a concentration camp. A combination of German and scraps of a dozen other languages, Lagersprache developed out of the struggle for survival, as it was the prisoners’ added burden to swiftly learn to understand their SS captors.

The confusion of languages is a fundamental component of the manner of living here: one is surrounded by a perpetual Babel, in which everyone shouts orders and threats in languages never heard before, and woe betide whoever fails to grasp the meaning.

For a prisoner to survive in the camps, it was imperative that he learn at least basic communication with his masters very quickly. Among the group admitted with Levi, most of the prisoners who did not comprehend the SS’ German died within a few weeks of their arrival: “[A]t first glance, from hunger, cold, fatigue, and disease; but after a more attentive examination, due to insufficient information.” Language itself became part of the extremity, and yet another means to murder.

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20 Levi, If This is a Man, 25.
21 Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, 93.
Figure 2.1 Auschwitz-I: electrified fence
(Photograph: Adrian Myers, 2004)
Figure 2.2 Auschwitz-I: brick barracks  
(Photograph: Adrian Myers, 2004)
Very soon after arrival in the Lager the SS had the new prisoners strip naked, and then had them shaved. Survivor Elie Wiesel stated that “[w]ithin a few seconds, we had ceased to be men;” survivor Viktor Frankl stated that “all we possessed, literally, was our naked existence.” Next the SS issued each prisoner a filthy, tattered, almost comical zebra-striped costume, a “uniform of rags.” In the words of survivor Daniel Jacobs, thus traumatized and starved, the prisoners “looked to be the inhuman, useless creatures the Nazis had characterized [them] as being.” Nevertheless, the pathetic prisoner clothing offered a certain level of protection from the extremity of nakedness: As Levi suggests, “[c]lothes, even the foul clothes distributed, even the crude clogs with their wooden soles, are a tenuous but indispensable defense.”

A prisoner who adjusted quickly to this initial assault did so only to face numerous other crises. Chief among these was a chronic lack of food. There was a persistent need to supplement the substandard official ration, and the desire for food thus became the primary thought of every prisoner. Death by starvation was not only an ever-present threat; it was the average prisoner’s certain fate.

The Nazi conception of “Enemy of the State” and that state’s severe labour shortage were a perfect match, for the camps were not only tools of terror but also tools of the war economy of the Third Reich.

22 Elie Wiesel, Night (New York: Bantam, 1982) 34.
24 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 19.
27 For an analysis of the SS’ economic project see Michael Thad Allen, The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 2002). For an in-depth look at the industrial giant that typified the collaboration between German industry
The Nazis perceived a problem—too many people of an undesirable type and a need for labor in a state whose destiny spelled expansion—and they moved to solve it expeditiously… Ultimately, working people to death, coupled with outright extermination, provided the most efficient Final Solution.  

Two distinct economies emerged out of the concentration camps: the SS’ corralling of slave labourers to feed the Nazi war machine, and the prisoners’ own micro-economies of trade in goods and services. While the prisoners worked as little as possible for the SS’ large-scale economic project, they worked feverishly on their own micro-economies of survival.

Survivor testimony at times suggests a spirit of cooperation against a common enemy, the notion that the only way to survive was to work as a group. Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, new arrivals in Auschwitz, stated that “[our] experience of other concentration camps had taught us the vital need to live collectively.” Des Pres cautiously agrees that “[n]obody survived without help. Life in the camps was savage, and yet there was also a web of mutual aid and encouragement.” Frankl hints that the mutual aid was reserved for close friends only: “[I]t was an unrelenting struggle for daily bread and for life itself, for one’s own sake or for that of a good friend.”

Notwithstanding that survivor testimony commonly includes mention of small deeds of mutual care, the central fact of camp life was not one of camaraderie. Rather, it was one of hard competition. In the words of Des Pres: “[I]n the larger picture, the image of viciousness and death grows to such enormous intensity that all else—any sign of

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31 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 2.
elementary humanness—pales to insignificance.”32 Levi agreed: The “principal rule” was that “you take care of yourself first of all.”33 Another inmate proclaimed, “[h]ow did I keep alive in Auschwitz? My principle is: myself first, second, and third. Then nothing. Then myself again—and then all the others.”34 Frankl was equally blunt: “On the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who… had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft, and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves.”35 Sofsky suggests that the most experienced prisoners were identifiable by their ability to recognize opportunity, and to seize it instantly.36 Prisoners were embroiled in a competitive and uphill battle; the winner’s prize was one more day of life.

The system of human relationships inside the camps was not simple; it cannot be reduced to two blocs of victims and persecutors.37 Acutely reinforcing the general atmosphere of competition in the camps was a rigid social stratification. The Nazi project of co-opting prisoners to work for the SS, essentially to have the prisoners run the camps in their stead, fostered the development of this complex prisoner social hierarchy. Sofsky describes it as

a system of glaring differences and extreme inequality. Although countless prisoners starved in misery, a small number led a life of veritable luxury. Although many were literally worked to death, others did not need to work at all. Although most lived in constant fear of violence, others could torment and murder with impunity. 38
The taxonomy pigeonholed every prisoner into an inflexible social category, and created a framework that controlled the distribution of power, prestige, and food.  

At the top of the hierarchy were the “ethnic” German criminals and political prisoners, and it was these same prisoners who most often held the powerful Kapo positions. These prisoner-functionaries performed duties that helped keep the “technical, bureaucratic, and economic aspects of camp life functioning smoothly.” Frankl wrote that while ordinary prisoners had little or nothing to eat, the Kapos were never hungry; indeed, many of the Kapos fared better in the concentration camp than they had in their entire lives.

The positions ranged from the powerful and usually violent Oberkapo and Kapo down to a range of much humbler positions: “sweepers, kettle washers, night watchmen, bed smoothers… checkers of lice and scabies, messengers, interpreters, [and] assistants’ assistants.” Although these latter positions were lowly, working for the SS in the camps—even the lowliest job—was highly desirable; Frankl commented that “[i]t was everyone’s wish to have such a lifesaving piece of luck.” Kraus and Kulka agree: It “would be true to say that we owed our lives to our employment at Birkenau as locksmiths.” Levi suggested that low-level functionaries such as these “were rarely violent, but they tended to develop a typically corporate mentality and energetically

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40 Kapo, possibly from the Italian capo for “chief.” A prisoner-functionary appointed by the SS to oversee other prisoners. The prisoner-functionary ranks from highest to lowest: Oberkapo, Kapo, Unterkapo, Vorarbeiter, Blockshreiber, Stubendienst.
41 Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 52.
42 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 1-2.
44 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 45.
defended their ‘job’ against anyone from below or above who might covet it.”

It became not only desirable but even necessary to work with the SS. Those who did not find a position for themselves were much more likely to perish.

Power in the camps was rooted in a combination of the functionary position held, and access to food and trade goods. As Borowski plainly stated, in the camps “whoever has grub, has power.” Prisoners had to find a niche for themselves; a job that they could succeed at. This was imperative, as a common work slave of the SS simply could not endure long. Jews unequivocally began, and usually stayed, at the bottom of the hierarchy. However, upward social mobility was possible even for them. While relatively few Jews became Kapos, many gained social and economic power through their access to food and trade goods, as many Jews laboured on special work Kommandos that gave them access to food.

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In the camp, “every circumstance conspires to make the prisoner lose hold;” and as Des Pres writes, “simply continuing to do one’s job as part of the human community becomes difficult to the point of heroism.” The prisoners faced the assault of the SS, both physical and psychological, and they reacted to the initial terrorization with disbelief and bewilderment. Levi stated that “arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also

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47 Borowski, *This Way for the Gas*, 31.
49 I refer here to the Kanadakommando and the Sonderkommando. See Chapter Three.
50 Gordon W. Allport, preface to Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, xi.
inside.” 52 If a prisoner survived those first few crucial weeks, he next faced the assault of a severe lack of food, and an irrational labour policy for which “Arbeit Macht Frei was the slogan” but “Vernichtung durch Arbeit, ‘annihilation by work,’ was the reality.” 53

The prisoners also faced the competition of their peers. “One entered hoping at least for the solidarity of one’s companions in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle;” 54 the camp “was an intricate and stratified microcosm.” 55 It was an aggressive and competitive atmosphere where everything was automatically stolen the moment attention was relaxed. 56 It was also a society where, while countless starved, as we will see the “elite were living on a scale far higher than most people in Europe.” 57

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56 Levi, If This is a Man, 21.
57 Vrba, I Cannot Forgive, 136.
Chapter Three – In the Camps: Procurement

In her 1979 work, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, sociologist Anna Pawełczyńska suggested that the central element in avoiding death in the camps was the factor of “luck.” After a lengthy discussion of the various dynamics that affected chances for survival, Pawełczyńska puzzlingly stated the following: “[N]o matter what effect the situations we have just considered had on the increase or decrease of a prisoner’s chances for survival, whether he survived or perished was purely a matter of luck.”¹ The idea of “luck” is an uncomplicated way to account for survival. Memoirists, historians, and theorists employ the notion of “luck” to forego the thorny questions about who survived and why.

No single explanation can account for the complex phenomenon of survival, and while the element of chance did play a role, surviving the camps was much more contingent on human choices. Indeed, what we call “luck” was only one of a host of factors that influenced whether one would survive the extremity of the camps. Theorists such as Pawełczyńska take their cue from the testimony of the survivors themselves. The prisoners of the camps were not equals; the nature of the organization of the camps provided the framework for a stratification of power and privilege. Nevertheless, out of the compendium of survivor testimonies, there are few examples of former prisoners who attempt to decipher the issue of their own privilege.

About halfway through his 1995 memoir *The Dentist of Auschwitz*, survivor Benjamin Jacobs interrupts his narrative to categorically state: “I must add that survival,

all else aside, was primarily luck.” Those who did not live through the camps can never appreciate just how utterly random life and death must have seemed; we must treat with respect the recollections of Jacobs and all other survivors. At the same time, however, we must subject their recollections to critical analysis. Jacobs seems not to recognize a powerful reason–beyond randomness–for his own survival. In fact it was his position as a dentist to the SS that allowed him many benefits and made him one of the “privileged” prisoners.

Although Jacobs’ service (as with all prisoner labour) was officially unrecompensed slave labour, individual SS officers would reward him for his work. Jacobs stated that “the guards who came to me… brought me bread, sausages, and cigarettes.” The black market payments Jacobs received were abundant enough that he could even pass on some of the benefits to his friends and family; the “offerings went a long way toward helping me, my brother, and a number of other inmates.” In the extreme situation of the camps, the line between life and death was very thin, and bread, sausages, and cigarettes were not negligible advantages.

While survivors tend to follow the tone and reasoning exemplified here by Jacobs, there are a few key exceptions. One of these is Italian survivor Primo Levi, whose testimony informs this thesis’ larger debate. Levi stated that

[a]t a distance of years one can today definitely affirm that the history of the Lagers has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension.  

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2 Jacobs, Dentist of Auschwitz, 121.
3 Jacobs, Dentist of Auschwitz, 148.
4 Jacobs, Dentist of Auschwitz, 148.
Levi is notable for his keen analysis of his own survival and his candour in dealing with even the most delicate subjects.

A second important exception is the Polish poet and writer Tadeusz Borowski. In his work *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, he candidly addressed his experience as a privileged prisoner. Borowski was a *Vorarbeiter*, and a deputy Kapo. In what has been called an “acceptance of mutual responsibility,” Borowski tacitly acknowledged that he survived due to this privileged position. Written in his characteristic, eerily dispassionate style, Borowski expressed the reality of those who were privileged and those who were not:

Henri slices the bread, he makes a tomato salad. It tastes good with the commissary mustard. Below us, naked, sweat-drenched men crowd the narrow barracks aisles or lie packed in eights and tens in the lower bunks.

Survival did not hinge on luck alone. Because they were not “ethnic” Germans, Jacobs, Levi, and Borowski had no chance of rising to the top of the camp hierarchy; however, they were nowhere near the bottom of it. They had little reason to fear that they might become *Musulmänner*, and hence had little reason to fear the *Selektions*.

The dynamics of an entrenched social hierarchy together with a complex economic system resulted in sufficient means for some to avoid death (albeit with a one-day-at-a-time mentality) until the end of the war and liberation. The mere existence of the *Musulmänner* shows that those who did not have the social leverage required to benefit from this system were much more likely to die. Gideon Greif states that to “survive

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6 *Vorarbeiter*, “work foreman.” A low ranking prisoner-functionary; see Chapter Two, footnote 40.

7 Jan Kott, introduction to Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way For the Gas*, 21.

8 Borowski, *This Way For the Gas*, 31.
Auschwitz, one had to act and think differently,” and that “[p]risoners had to adapt.”

Through quick thinking, adaptability, industriousness, and skilful black marketing, the prisoner might gain that extra crust of bread, cup of soup, or bit of sausage, or he might work as a dentist, or even get the coveted job as assistant Kapo.

Evidenced by the testimony of survivors such as Jacobs, Borowski, and others, the advantage of having a job—the more specialized the better—was not negligible. A job was a decisive factor influencing social standing, and hence survival. Having a job meant access to opportunities that led to privilege. Exactly what opportunities and what privileges presented themselves depended on the job one had; certainly some were more desirable than others. The better posts offered shelter from the elements, protection from casual violence, mobility within the camp or between multiple camps, and crucially, access to food and trade goods. For some, work could even

become a defense, as it was for the few in the Lager who were made to exercise their own trade: tailors, cobblers, carpenters, blacksmiths, bricklayers. Such people, resuming their customary activities, recovered at the same time, to some extent, their human dignity.

Many camp jobs provided physical advantages, but a prisoner who could recover his “human dignity” by working his own trade also held a powerful psychological advantage in a world of irrationality and futility.

The best jobs were those inside the camps, and even better were those jobs that were indoors. In Buchenwald, an experienced prisoner cautioned a newcomer: “Whatever you do, try everything to stay in the camp.” The warning was sound, for a prisoner assigned to an Außenkommando, an “outside unit,” was much more likely to perish at

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9 Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 53.
heavy labour. Even menial indoor jobs could make a marked difference in a prisoner’s standard of living. A job such as assistant to a *Kapo*, which entailed cleaning and running errands, was rewarded with favouritism during the daily distribution of soup. The Auschwitz hospital was the scene of a profitable side business: “[I]t is the nurses themselves who send back on the market, at low prices, the clothes and shoes of the dead.”¹² In every camp, for obvious reasons, a job in the kitchen was highly desirable. In fact, prisoners sought any job where they might come in contact with food. In Buchenwald, “many a starving prisoner took advantage of every chance to work in the dog mess, hoping to garner some of the animals’ food.”¹³

While menial jobs provided added opportunity, more prominent jobs offered higher levels of privilege and protection. A *Stubendienst*, or “orderly,” was a room supervisor who undertook the administrative duties concerning his block.¹⁴ A *Stubendienst* was in a favourable position, as he dealt with the paperwork that controlled the destinies of many men. Since bribing was a matter of course in the camps, a *Stubendienst* might receive valuable goods in exchange for the stroke of a pen. Kraus and Kulka, the Auschwitz locksmiths, were each issued a *Passierschein*, a pass that allowed free access to the massive Auschwitz complex: “[W]ith these we were able to go outside the camp and also to visit the other camps at Birkenau, including the women’s camps,

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¹² Levi, *If This is a Man*, 63.
¹³ Kogon, *Theory and Practice of Hell*, 120.
¹⁴ Block, a single barracks building in the concentration camp; see Figures 2.2 and 3.1.
Figure 3.1 Auschwitz-II Birkenau: wood barracks
(Photograph: Adrian Myers, 2004)
the disinfection block, and the crematoria."¹⁵ One advantage of having a Passierschein was in the potential for smuggling. Borowski wrote of a camp electrician with similar privileges; the man was going to the FKL¹⁶ from Auschwitz-I: “[He] loads up on sausage, sugar, and lingerie, and slides a stack of letters somewhere in his shoe."¹⁷

Working in the camp hospital also had its privileges. Elie Cohen, a doctor, explained why:

Where I live at present a doctor gets a cake sent to him after he’s done a confinement. And the same sort of thing happened there as well. If I had someone admitted or said, ‘You must report here every morning to have your bandages done,’ I would at times get a bit of margarine or a chunk of sausage given to me.¹⁸

The best jobs offered a definite profit, and the longer a prisoner survived in the camps the better the job he could get. Kogon noted that “there were few long-time concentration-camp inmates who did not in the course of time rise to more favourable, if not comfortable, working conditions. Those who failed in this endeavour simply perished.”¹⁹

A good job offered refuge from the elements and the guards, but a great job also offered opportunities for acquiring food and goods through bribery, graft, and smuggling. Material goods played a large role in the outcome of who lived and who did not; everything had value to an inmate. A scrap of paper, cloth, metal, wire, or string, if not of immediate use to the owner, was useful to another, and hence held trade value. Levi stated that “[w]e have learnt that everything is useful: the wire to tie up our shoes, the

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¹⁵ Kraus and Kulka, Death Factory, 2.
¹⁶ FKL, camp slang for the women’s camp at Birkenau. Abbreviation of Frauenkonzentrationslager. Also sometimes abbreviated Frauenlager.
¹⁷ Borowski, This Way For the Gas, 134.
¹⁹ Kogon, Theory and Practice of Hell, 86.
rags to wrap around our feet, waste paper to (illegally) pad out our jacket against the
cold.”  

Levi continued:

I have already learned not to let myself be robbed, and in fact if I find a spoon
lying around, a piece of string, a button which I can acquire without danger of
punishment, I pocket them and consider them mine by full right.

The prisoners worked to profit from their jobs, but as Des Pres suggests, they also
“became expert scavengers, forever on the lookout for anything at all… with which to
transact ‘business.’”

The resourcefulness of the prisoners sometimes allowed them privileges denied
even to free Germans. The Nazis were acutely aware of primary resource shortages, and
while they publicly burned some books in the early years of the regime, the thousands of
impounded private libraries were in fact recycled. Some of the books found their way into
the camps as toilet paper. Kogon detailed how the prisoners retrieved “what was of
value:”

It was even possible to conduct salvage right there in the privies, though the
collector had to provide an immediate substitute, to quell any incipient revolt
from his fellows. This was not easy, for paper was extremely scarce.

Once the precious books were saved from their unmentionable fate, “[w]hat an
experience it was to sit quietly… delving into the pages of Plato’s Dialogues,
Galsworthy’s Swan Song, or the works of Heine, Klabund, Mehring!”

* * *

Prisoners supplemented the severely deficient food ration by dealing on the black
market, and it was the smuggling of goods into the living area of the camps that kept the

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20 Levi, If This is a Man, 21.
21 Levi, If This is a Man, 23.
22 Des Pres, The Survivor, 114.
23 Kogon, Theory and Practice of Hell, 140.
24 Kogon, Theory and Practice of Hell, 140.
black market in business. There were even special words to denote the process of acquiring and smuggling; in Auschwitz it was “organize.” One survivor stated, “‘organize’ was the most important word in the Auschwitz language. It meant: to steal, buy, exchange, get hold of.” Survivor and historian W. Glicksman stated that every achievement and every improvement in personal life was accompanied by the remark: ‘The main thing is organization.’ Conversely, every failure led to the complaint: ‘It all comes from a lack of organization.’

In Buchenwald the word was “Abkochen” (to scrounge) which, in the words of survivor Christopher Burney, meant “the obtaining of any article by wheedling, menacing, cajoling, chicanery, or plain bluff, and can be honest or dishonest, honourable or dishonourable according to its variety.”

Kraus and Kulka had enviable jobs as camp locksmiths. However, what they did not have were any tools with which to practice their trade. Nevertheless, the two managed to set themselves up.

We started work in 1942, with empty hands. We had no official permission, no tools and no workshop. Within a year, by dint of skilful ‘organising,’ we had a workshop which under camp conditions could be considered magnificently equipped.

A good “organizer” could thrive in the camps. A good organizer could keep alive for much longer than the prisoner’s usual fate of just a few months of life.

A job on an Außenkommando was often a dangerous proposition because of the severity of the labour, but it nevertheless sometimes afforded valuable opportunities. If a Kommando’s Kapo was not around for a few minutes, an astute prisoner could trade with a local farmer. Borowski, the privileged Vorarbeiter, detailed an encounter with a local

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26 Glicksman, “Social Differentiation,” 129.
27 Burney, *Dungeon Democracy*, 22.
woman where he actually turned down an offer of food: “I’m not hungry. I have enough to eat.” Others, however, surely would have taken that opportunity. Prisoners who worked alongside civilians in factories traded constantly; Levi stated that “[t]raffic with civilians [was] a characteristic element of the Arbeitslager.” Although the SS often searched the Außenkommandos on re-entry, as evidenced by countless successful operations many smugglers were adept at hiding goods on their persons.

The contents of packages sent to inmates also supplied the black market, either through the prisoners who received them or the SS guards and mail room clerks who stole from them. “The life led by the parcel robbers may be imagined. They took what they pleased, especially the articles in greatest demand, such as tobacco, chocolate, bacon and tea.” Some testimony also refers to prisoners receiving unmolested packages. Kazik, a friend of Borowski, invited him to share a treat: “[C]ome with me. I’ve got a wonderful apple cake at my place, straight from home.” Nevertheless, in every camp, the rules regarding packages could change at any time. At times the SS forbade packages altogether, and always there were restriction on who could receive them. In Auschwitz, German and Polish prisoners could, while Russians and Jews could not.

Sometimes working together to dupe their superiors, the prisoners and Kapos stole all they could from areas such as kitchens, offices, hospitals, supply rooms, and prisoner canteens. Auschwitz survivor Rudolf Vrba worked under the brazen Kapo Franz in the SS’ private food store:

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29 Borowski, *This Way for the Gas*, 51-53.
30 Levi, *If This is a Man*, 61. *Arbeitslager*, “work camp.”
31 Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 78; Borowski, *This Way for the Gas*, 78
33 Borowski, *This Way for the Gas*, 80-81.
34 Borowski, *This Way for the Gas*, 31.
Josef and I were inside the wagon, manhandling the crates to the doors. Franz strolled up, watched us keenly for a moment, then muttered: ‘Drop it, you stupid idiots!’ For a moment we hesitated. Then we heaved. The crate splintered on the platform and, as the tins of ham rolled around his feet, he shook his head in mock anger and said: ‘Those bloody army clowns! Every week they send us a broken crate!’ … I jumped down. As I passed him, he thrust a huge tin into my hands and muttered: ‘Slip that between the lemonade crates.’

On another occasion Franz demonstrated his skill and ingenuity at smuggling. Vrba asked “how the hell are you going to get the stuff past the sentries?”

Franz was in his element now. He picked up a box of marmalade, balanced it on the tips of his fingers, and said: ‘Just watch me, boy!’ He walked calmly to the door, carrying the marmalade high, like a waiter carries a tray through a crowded restaurant. At the door he raised the other arm just as high and said: ‘Search me fast, please, gentlemen. I’m in a hurry.’ The sentries swept their hands down his clothing, patting the pockets feeling the legs of his trousers. They sent him on his way with a jerk of their heads.

Astute prisoners found opportunity in nearly any situation, and these skilful organizers supplied the black market through small-scale graft and smuggling. However, it was an exclusive group of prisoners that supplied the bulk of goods that made it on to the black market. These were the prisoners who worked at three special locations in the camp: the disembarkation platform, the Effektenkammer sorting warehouses, and the crematoria.

* * *

The most infamous train station in the world is on the outskirts of Oświęcim, Poland. At one time the rails came to a stop, inside the barbed wire of Auschwitz-II Birkenau, in front of an expansive wooden disembarkation platform. “This is where they load[ed] freight for Birkenau: supplies for the construction of the camp, and people for the gas chambers.” Known as the Judenrampe or simply “the ramp,” this was where the incoming victims and future prisoners left the cattle cars and entered the camp. But here

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35 Vrba, I Cannot Forgive, 93.
36 Vrba, I Cannot Forgive, 100-101.
37 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 33-34.
we focus our attention not on the new arrivals, the Zugänge, but rather on those experienced prisoners who worked on “the ramp.” Borowski describes the arrival of a transport:

The bolts crack, the doors open. A wave of fresh air rushes inside the train. People… inhumanly crammed, buried under incredible heaps of luggage, suitcases, trunks, packages, crates, bundles of every description (everything that had been their past and was to start their future).  

Frankl describes how the ramp workers first cleared the trains of the arrivals:

The carriage doors were flung open, and a small detachment of prisoners stormed inside. They wore stripped uniforms, their heads were shaved, but they looked well fed. They spoke in every possible European tongue, and all with a certain amount of humor.

And in Wiesel’s words:

Some odd-looking characters, dressed in striped shirts and black trousers leapt into the wagon. They held electric torches and truncheons. They began to strike out to right and left, shouting.

As Levi stated, “[t]here is not a prisoner who does not remember… his amazement at the time: the first threats, the first insults, the first blows came not from the SS but from other prisoners.”

Once the human cargo was out of the way, the ramp workers began the work of clearing the cars of the detritus inside. They climbed in and out of the empty wagons, busying themselves with the luggage. The cars, ramp, and rails were in complete disarray, swelling with unimaginable piles of goods of every kind:

The heaps grow. Suitcases, bundles, blankets, coats, handbags that open as they fall, spilling coins, gold, watches; mountains of bread pile up at the exits, heaps of marmalade, jams, masses of meat, sausages; sugar spills on the gravel… suits,
shirts, books drop out on the ground… I pick up a small, heavy package. I unwrap it—gold, about two handfuls, bracelets, rings, brooches, diamonds… ‘Gib Hier,’ an S.S. man says calmly, holding up his briefcase already full of gold and colourful foreign currency. 43

The ramp Kommando worked swiftly to unload the belongings left in the train, but worked just as hard watching for opportunities for eating and smuggling. The SS allowed them to eat as much as they wanted; however, they were forbidden to keep anything of value to the Reich. On Borowski’s first day as a ramp worker an SS man warned:

“Whoever takes gold, or anything else besides food, will be shot for stealing Reich property… Verstanden?” 44

Despite the harshest possible penalties, the workers secreted food and goods of every kind in their clothing: The men, “weighed down under a load of bread, marmalade and sugar, and smelling of perfume and fresh linen, line up to go.” 45 The men of the ramp became expert smugglers and traders; they lived in relative luxury. Frankl, a new arrival, noticed their healthy demeanour:

[T]he sight of the red cheeks and round faces of those prisoners was a great encouragement. Little did we know then that they formed a specially chosen elite, who for years had been the receiving squad for new transports as they rolled into the station day after day. 46

The smuggling from the ramp affected the whole camp, for the ramp men stole more than they could eat themselves: “For several days the entire camp will live off this transport. For several days the entire camp will talk about ‘Sosnowiec-Będzin.’ ‘Sosnowiec-Będzin was a good, rich, transport.’” 47

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43 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 38 and 42.
44 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 36-37.
45 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 49.
46 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 8.
47 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 49.
Obtaining “extra nourishment required a privilege—large or small, granted or conquered, astute or violent, licit or illicit—whatever it took to lift oneself above the norm.” ⁴⁸ One significant privilege was a job on the *Kanadakommando*, the work crew assigned to sorting through the “loot” collected by the ramp workers. The *Kanadakommando* worked in a special area of Birkenau, a fenced-off row of blocks next to the crematoria. It contained thirty barracks, filled with the possessions taken from the victims of the gas chambers.⁴⁹ Everyone lucky enough to work there could steal food and trade goods that gave them a significant advantage in the struggle for life.

Officially called the *Effektenkammer*,⁵⁰ the prisoners renamed the area *Kanada*; as it “represented life, luxury, and salvation; it was a Garden of Eden in Hell.”⁵¹ Vrba stated that it was “where hundreds of prisoners worked frantically to sort, segregate and classify the clothes and the food and the valuables of those whose bodies were still burning, whose ashes would soon be used as fertiliser.”⁵² The workers’ task was to organize the possessions of those recently murdered in the gas chambers. Separating valuables, such as gold and jewels, from the everyday items, such as clothes and cooking utensils, the former went to the *Reichsbank* in Berlin and the latter was distributed to war-ravaged German civilians.⁵³

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⁴⁹ Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 51. See Figure 3.2.
⁵⁰ *Effektenkammer*, “Chamber of Personal Effects.”
Figure 3.2 Auschwitz-II Birkenau: the Kanada warehouses today
(Photograph: Adrian Myers, 2004)
Before loading the shipments, however, the prisoners and the SS alike stole prodigious amounts of food, valuables, and everyday items good for trade. “An immense amount of property was stolen by members of the SS and by the police, and also by prisoners, civilian employees and railway personnel.”\(^{54}\) Although summarily executed if caught, both prisoners and SS personnel took their chances. When survivor Vrba first started working at _Kanada_, the potential for such punishment scared him: “I began to wonder whether Canada was worth the risk.”\(^{55}\) However, the guarantee of benefits quickly overshadowed the chance of punishment: “As I looked around me at the old hands, however, my doubts vanished.”\(^{56}\) These “old hands” were “unloading their loot which somehow they had managed to smuggle through a double screening.”\(^{57}\)

One had six tins of sardines, another, two pounds of figs. Shirts and fruit and soap, salami, sausages and ham appeared until the barracks began to look like a well-stocked grocery. \(^{58}\)

While most prisoners fought over “organized” scraps, the _Kanadakommando_ workers enjoyed relative luxury by living off of the suitcases they worked with daily. Vrba stated, “I found that the longer I survived, the nearer I drew to the hard core who had learned not only to live, but to prosper.”\(^{59}\) Another inmate worried that the shipments of Jews would one day stop: “[T]hey can’t run out of people, or we’ll starve to death in this blasted camp. All of us live on what they bring.”\(^{60}\)

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\(^{54}\) Höss, _Commandant of Auschwitz_, 194.

\(^{55}\) Vrba, _I Cannot Forgive_, 132.

\(^{56}\) Vrba, _I Cannot Forgive_, 132.

\(^{57}\) Vrba, _I Cannot Forgive_, 132.

\(^{58}\) Vrba, _I Cannot Forgive_, 132.

\(^{59}\) Vrba, _I Cannot Forgive_, 133.

\(^{60}\) Borowski, _This Way for the Gas_, 31.
As with the smuggling of the ramp men, the smuggling of the *Kanadakommando* affected the camp as a whole. Most of their smuggled goods ended up on the black market, and the buyers included the kitchen workers.

The treasures of Canada reached even the poorest Musulmen for food taken from Jewish transports was sent to the kitchen and thrown into the pots. The camp soups became thicker, but one had to look out, for sometimes a razor blade, an old button, or a five-dollar gold piece might be found in the bowl.  

The camp became dependent on the suitcases of the murdered; dependent on the smuggling from, in Borowski’s words, “Canada, our Canada, which smells not of Maple forests but of French perfume.”

*Sonderkommando,* or “special commando,” is the vague euphemism the SS used to denote the squad of mostly Jewish prisoners whose job it was to operate the crematoria, most famously at Auschwitz-II Birkenau, but also at other extermination camps. These men were charged with first ushering the victims underground, then having them disrobe and enter the gas chambers, and finally with clearing and disposing of the corpses. After searching the bodies for hidden valuables, the workers burned them in the crematoria. Since these men were privy to the sordid details of National Socialism’s biggest secret, a job on the squad was tantamount to an eventual death sentence. The SS even had a name for these men; they were designated *Geheimnisträger,* the “bearers of secrets.” At Auschwitz, fourteen squads followed one after the other, each operating only for a few months; “as its initiation, the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors.”

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62 Borowski, *This Way for the Gas,* 30.
The incentive for the Sonderkommando workers was that, even though their fate was likely sealed, while they lived they lived well. Sofsky suggests that the SS kept the Sonderkommando workers submissive by keeping them privileged. Apart from the grisly work in the crematoria, the living conditions for the Sonderkommando workers were far superior to those of the average prisoner. They had spacious bunks in private living blocks, and had relative freedom with their time off. They did not attend roll-calls, and were not subjected to the daily torments of life in the common area of the camps.

The largest privilege was certainly the food and alcohol that the SS tacitly allowed them, as well as the items that they stole and smuggled. Borowski described the scene as a Sonderkommando filed past him:

Black with smoke, looking fat and prosperous, the men were loaded down with heavy sacks. There is no limit to what they may take; anything except gold, but this is what they smuggle the most of.

Kraus and Kulka agreed; the Sonderkommando “had plenty of food, cigarettes and other necessities, for the victims of the gas chambers left a rich legacy behind them.”

Precisely “because it had access to the riches at the crematoria,” the Sonderkommando was “a tremendously influential group in the camp.” In the camps there was a way around every rule, and although these Geheimnisträger were supposed to remain isolated from the other prisoners, they nevertheless managed to buy and sell their organized goods: At “the block of the Sonderkommando in the men’s camp in Birkenau, there was a brisk trade on the bartering market.” The “Sonderkommando members were

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65 Sofsky, Order of Terror, 273.
66 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 141.
67 Kraus and Kulka, Death Factory, 152.
68 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 147.
69 Sofsky, Order of Terror, 271.
both envied and despised by the other prisoners,\textsuperscript{70} for as with the *Kanadakommando* members, their privileged lifestyle was dependent on the continued arrival of fresh transports.

\textsuperscript{70} Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, 271.
Chapter Four – In the Camps: Exchange

The high status of the prisoner’s bowl and spoon demonstrates the primacy of material objects in the camps. Without a bowl, a prisoner had no way to receive his daily ration. Although sometimes the inmates used their caps instead of bowls, this system had obvious problems when it came to the distribution of soup, the standard daily fare. A bowl was a “precious receptacle.” A spoon was also a critical piece of hardware, for “[w]ithout a spoon, the daily soup could not be consumed in any other way than by lapping it up, as dogs do;” it was only

after many days of apprenticeship [that] one discovered that there were spoons in the camp but that one had to buy them on the black market with soup or bread; usually a spoon cost half a bread ration or a liter of soup, but inexperienced newcomers were always asked for much more.

When Wiesel’s father realised he had been selected for the Kremo, he gave his son his “inheritance:” a knife, and a spoon. It is one more irony of the concentration camps that when Auschwitz was liberated, tens of thousands of plastic, aluminium, steel, and silver spoons were found in storage.

The bowl and the spoon were critical first acquisitions, but all prisoners were wise to further explore the ways of exchange on the camp black market, for there they would find other aids in their struggle against extremity. One prisoner found a piece of rubber which would do to sole a shoe, and traded it for half a ration of bread. The privileged Borowski had a watch he “was fond of”—it reminded him of a watch his father used to

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1 Kraus and Kulka, Death Factory, 33.
4 Wiesel, Night, 71.
6 Wiesel, Night, 69.
own–which he bought for a packet of figs.\footnote{Borowski, \textit{This Way for the Gas}, 59.} Borowski also had a silk shirt, which cost him a pound of tomatoes,\footnote{Borowski, \textit{This Way for the Gas}, 64.} and shoes so nice that an SS guard took notice: “‘[Y]ou get shoes like that? Just look at what I’ve got to wear…’ cracked boots with a patch on the right toe. I nod sympathetically.”\footnote{Borowski, \textit{This Way for the Gas}, 64.} Shoes were of much consequence in the camps, for “[d]eath begins with the shoes; for most of us, they show themselves to be instruments of torture, which after a few hours of marching cause painful sores which, become infected.”\footnote{Levi, \textit{If This is a Man}, 21-22.} The prisoner with a bad pair of shoes “arrives last everywhere, and everywhere he receives blows.”\footnote{Levi, \textit{If This is a Man}, 22.} Infected feet and regular “blows” was certainly enough to kill.

One inmate, while working on an \textit{Außenkommando}, secretly busied himself collecting twigs; with those twigs he would later make a crude broom and exchange it for bread or soup.\footnote{Borowski, \textit{This Way for the Gas}, 74.} In Auschwitz no one drank the fetid water. Instead, they hydrated themselves through the daily soup and an \textit{Ersatz} coffee drink. Fresh water was available, but the price was so high that a single bottle could cost as much as an entire loaf of bread.\footnote{Kraus and Kulka, \textit{Death Factory}, 44.} In the camp, lemons were hard currency due to their high vitamin content.\footnote{Vrba, \textit{I Cannot Forgive}, 95.} However, as Levi described, bread remained the primary currency:

[1]In the few minutes which elapse between its distribution and consumption, the Block resounds with claims, quarrels and scuffles. It is the creditors of yesterday who are claiming payment in the brief moment in which the debtor is solvent.\footnote{Levi, \textit{If This is a Man}, 26.}

Borowski was with a well-connected friend one afternoon in Auschwitz-I. The friend was
searching for men whom he has helped in the past and who he now expects will help him... characters come and go, their clean-shaven faces smiling compassionately. From the pockets of their tightly fitted jackets they pull out a piece of margarine, some white hospital bread, a slice of sausage, or a few cigarettes. 17

Anything that could help lessen the extremity of the camps was acceptable currency for exchange: grease to ensure well-shined shoes, buttons to ensure a smart uniform, bread, soup, and sausage for nourishment, Mahorca (a low grade Ersatz tobacco) for a smoke, and gold for trading or hoarding.

A document issued by the SS in May 1943 decreed the institution of a system of bonuses and preferential treatment for the more diligent workers among the prisoners. 18 The bonuses were in the form of extra food portions, cigarettes, visitation rights to the camp brothel, as well as special coupons that were valid at the canteen. After May 1943, the camps in fact had a “legitimate” currency in the form of these coupons, known as Geldprämien. 19 By rewarding exemplary prisoners with “money” that they could spend in the canteen and brothel, the SS aimed to raise the productivity of their apathetic slave labourers. However, while it brought a certain degree of relief for some prisoners, 20 the system quickly became corrupted and nepotistic, and only served to reinforce the power of those already privileged.

Frankl details his experience with Geldprämien: “[M]y job was to dig a tunnel, without help, for a water main under a road. This feat did not go unrewarded; just before Christmas 1944, I was presented with a gift of so-called ‘premium coupons.’” 21

17 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 105.
19 Geldprämien, variably translated as “vouchers,” “bonus vouchers,” “coupons,” “bonus coupons,” “premiums,” “premium coupons,” “tokens,” and “bonus points.”
20 Sofsky, Order of Terror, 170.
21 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 6.
The coupons… could be exchanged for six cigarettes, often weeks later, although they sometimes lost their validity. I became the proud owner of a token worth twelve cigarettes. But more important, the cigarettes could be exchanged for twelve soups.  

Jacobs, however, was not as pleased with the system:

I.G. Farben introduced bonus points, which could be redeemed at an I.G. Farben stand. Jewish workers, however, were limited to a maximum of four points, which got them very little. Nonetheless, the Kapos were pleased, since they got most bonuses and could use them to enjoy the company of Nazi-coerced prostitutes.  

It is something similar to Jacobs’ version which proves the most common experience. Kogon confirms Jacobs’ cynical view: “If the purpose was to get more work out of the prisoners, it failed dismally.” The coupons were distributed “in small amounts and at utterly capricious ratios… there was no rhyme nor reason.” In Auschwitz, “the greatest number of the coupons end[ed] up… in the hands of the Kapos and the prominents.”  

The situation in Theresienstadt also informs this discussion. Although the camp had food and clothing stores, the “monetary system was a grand facade, geared towards impressing the Red Cross and other foreign visitors frequenting the Ghetto.”  

Roubíčková recorded the following in her diary:

Shops have opened. All Theresienstadt is laughing. The displays are full of the most gorgeous things: groceries, clothes, shoes, paper, household utensils, perfumes, and finery. Everything they took from everybody else is on exhibit here.  

The Geldprämien system only reinforced the already entrenched social stratification. Roubíčková continues: “Of course the entire purchase turned out to be a horrible fraud”  

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22 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 6.  
23 Jacobs, Dentist of Auschwitz, 153.  
24 Kogon, Theory and Practice of Hell, 126.  
25 Kogon, Theory and Practice of Hell, 126.  
26 Levi, If This is a Man, 59.  
28 Roubíčková, We’re Alive, 43.
because you have “to take whatever they give you;” those “who have connections get more and decent things. People who don’t have connections get turnip juice, ginger powder, and other such nonsense.”

While Theresienstadt’s “elaborately engraved paper money was fundamentally worthless,” in Auschwitz and Buchenwald the influence of the coupons was not insignificant. Although their exchange value fluctuated based on what was available in the canteen, and even on which women were working in the brothel, the black market trade in Geldprämien—the camps’ only truly legal tender—remained brisk.

While black market exchange occurred at any opportune time or place, at Auschwitz-II Birkenau much of the trading transpired in one specific area of the camp. The prisoners named the north-east corner of Birkenau the “Exchange Market.” It was always very active, and “was permanently occupied by a tumultuous throng.” The Market was the meeting place of the “professional merchants… each one in his normal corner,” and the “scores of prisoners driven desperate by hunger… lured by a deceptive instinct to where the merchandise [was] shown.” At the “Market,” the result of the day’s organizing (“bottles of Clos Vougeot, caviar, packs of Lucky Strike”) from the Ramp, Kanada, the Kremo, and elsewhere were for sale; the prices prescribed by the timeless law of supply and demand.

Economist S.K. Ray states, “[b]lack marketing, it has to be appreciated, is no freshman’s job.” Dealing on the black market, he continues, “require[s] considerable

29 Roubičková, We’re Alive, 43.
31 Levi, If This is a Man, 58.
32 Levi, If This is a Man, 58.
34 Ray, Economics of the Black Market, 9.
skill and understanding of the market situation, in relation to both credit and liquidity as also supply and demand.”³⁵ One survivor stated that “[p]rices were determined by the scarcity of commodities, the inadequacy of rations, and, of course, by the risks in securing the article.”³⁶ Des Pres agrees: The market “took advantage of privation and thrived on scarcity.”³⁷ Just as astute investment bankers manoeuvre on the New York Stock Exchange, so did astute prisoners buy low and sell high on the Birkenau Market.

The wild and complex trade in Mahorca tobacco and Geldprämien is illustrative of the volatility of the Birkenau Market. Prisoners purchased Mahorca with Geldprämien at the camp canteen, so the value of each of these commodities was relative to the other.

There have been periods in which the prize-coupon was worth one ration of bread, then one and a quarter, even one and a third; one day it was quoted at one and a half ration, but then the supply of Mahorca to the canteen failed, so that, lacking a coverage, the money collapsed at once to a quarter of a ration.³⁸

The Geldprämien, however, soon recovered their lost value. Since the coupons were also valid for payment in the brothel, a “boom period occurred” with “the arrival of a fresh contingent of robust Polish girls in place of the old inmates of the Frauenblock.”³⁹ The most successful traders watched the market conditions keenly, noting the state of supply to the canteen, changes in the distribution of rations, and “the diligence and corruptibility of the guards.”⁴⁰

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While Mahorca and Geldprämien were versatile portable currencies, the buying and selling of services was an equally important aspect of the camp economy. A prisoner

³⁵ Ray, Economics of the Black Market, 9.
³⁸ Levi, If This is a Man, 59.
³⁹ Levi, If This is a Man, 59. Frauenblock, “women’s block.” The barracks that housed the brothel; not to be confused with Frauenlager, the women’s camp.
⁴⁰ Levi, If This is a Man, 59.
with a unique skill could exchange his services for material goods. Some of the services that were in high demand were sewing, shoe repair, and medical care. One survivor was appointed to work in the hospital, but she had to provide her own uniform: “I paid eight days’ ration of bread for a piece of cloth to make a nurse’s blouse. I also had to pay three soups to have it sewn.” Access to a scarce tool also held trade value; a sewing needle or a hammer could be rented, and any prisoner with a knife received a portion of the food it was used to cut.

In the extremity of the camps making beds, Bettenbauen, “was a sacral operation to be performed according to iron rules.” The acutely short time between reveille and roll-call allowed for the finicky task was crucial, for having a bed with covers minutely misaligned warranted severe reprimand. However, the black market in services offered a way out: Whoever could not cope with making his bed could hire a ‘‘bed specialist,’ whose services were paid for with bread, soup, or money.”

Frankl stated that in the camps, “the sexual urge was generally absent… [e]ven in his dreams the prisoner did not seem to concern himself with sex.” The medical doctor Cohen concurred: “[S]ex was one of the first functions to come to an end. Only hunger remains. If you’re really hungry, sex doesn’t count anymore.” However, if there was no sexual urge in the camps, how then do we account for the concentration camp brothels? While I do not deal here with the larger story of sex and prostitution in the camps, the

41 Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 78-79.
42 Levi, The Drowned and the Saved, 117.
43 Sofsky, Order of Terror, 69.
44 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 31.
45 Cohen, Abyss, 99.
existence of camp brothels is widely reported in survivor testimony.\textsuperscript{46} Borowski declared that “[s]ince time began, never has there been such an easy market for human flesh.”\textsuperscript{47}

Kogon was correct that in most prisoners the “sexual urge” was absent, and Cohen was right to suggest that it was severe hunger that stifled that urge. However, the sexual urge was not absent in every prisoner, for not every prisoner was burdened with severe hunger. While a lack of minimum levels of nutrition drained most prisoners to the point of complete physical and mental exhaustion, those prisoners at the top of the social hierarchy remained physically and mentally capable of sexual activity. It was the camp elite who frequented the brothels: the “ethnic” German prisoners, the Kapos, and anyone else who could afford the necessary bribes. The Auschwitz Puff\textsuperscript{48} was “for ever surrounded by the most important citizens of the camp.”\textsuperscript{49}

Even those prominent enough to visit the brothels were further subdivided into categories of wealth and power. In Buchenwald, for those “without ‘pull,’ the duration of a visit to the brothel was twenty minutes;” but men “with good sources of supply, strapping Prisoner Foremen with lingerie, brassieres, shoes and the like, were able to spend hours.”\textsuperscript{50} The brothel was certainly tied in to the camp economy since visitors might have to bribe the guards and the madam (the “Puffmutter”\textsuperscript{51}), and give gifts to the women. At Auschwitz, officially one could only enter the Puff with a pass issued by the camp’s “clerical office;” this predictably resulted in a thriving black market in passes.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{47} Borowski, \textit{This Way for the Gas}, 93.

\textsuperscript{48} Puff, “brothel” or “bordello.”

\textsuperscript{49} Borowski, \textit{This Way for the Gas}, 106.

\textsuperscript{50} Kogon, \textit{Theory and Practice of Hell}, 136.

\textsuperscript{51} Kraus and Kulka, \textit{Death Factory}, 121.

\textsuperscript{52} Borowski, \textit{This Way for the Gas}, 108.
The widespread graft, smuggling, and black marketing of the camps were possible only through the cooperation between the elite prisoners and the SS. While the SS continued to persecute prisoners for infractions of the convoluted Lagerordnung, they did so selectively; inevitably they targeted those prisoners lacking the right connections, those without “pull.” In any case, a prisoner with means could often buy his way out of a tight situation. The corruption in the ranks of the SS was widespread and deep rooted. Lingens-Reiner stated that large-scale theft was possible only because the SS “who were supposed to supervise the prisoners at their work… stole themselves, in competition and accord with the prisoners.”

Lingens-Reiner’s notion of the SS’ corruption “in competition and accord” with the prisoners is accurate. Not only did the SS steal and smuggle on their own, they also enlisted the help of prisoners. Such alliances were symbiotic, for be it food, favouritism, or protection, the cooperating prisoner received something for his trouble. In Kanada especially, partnerships were formed between the prisoners and the SS; “the former carried out valuables… the latter guarded him and shared the loot.” Kraus and Kulka, who had become expert smugglers, stated, “[o]ur services were required not only by… prisoners… but also by the SS who relied on us to ‘organize’ for them.” The SS men were “infected by the frenzy for loot and easy riches,” and “they stole, every one of them… corruption among the S.S. was past imagination.” The anti-Semitic Rudolf Höss

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53 Lingens-Reiner, Prisoners of Fear, 48.
54 Garliński, Fighting Auschwitz, 92.
55 Kraus and Kulka, Death Factory, 3.
56 Garliński, Fighting Auschwitz, 92.
57 Lingens-Reiner, Prisoners of Fear, 48.
acknowledged that his men were corrupt, but deflected the blame: “Jewish gold,” he stated, “was a catastrophe for the camp.”

Those prisoners who rose to the very top of the prisoner social hierarchy did so with approval of the SS, whether outright or tacit. The most powerful prisoners and the camp SS worked in tenuous cooperation, “in competition and accord” with each other. Although life was still in the balance, the “privileged” who had reserves of capital, both economic (assets), and social (“pull”), all had a safety net. However, ultimately it was the SS who controlled the life and death of every prisoner; the powerful prisoner fell when his “crime” was bigger than his “bank account.”

Sociologist Sofsky posits that to acquire and maintain prestige, “it is not enough to be powerful and wealthy. Power and possessions must also be flaunted.” The “Prominents” built up entourages of toady assistants, each fighting for his share of the prestige.

The higher their status, the larger the band of servants responsible for the personal welfare of the prominent prisoners. [They] had themselves regularly groomed and massaged. Their clothes were tailor-made, their shoes polished to a gleam every morning. Their meals were served, their rooms cleaned.

Jacobs described the way of life of the most privileged: “They had cigarettes, vodka, and real leather shoes. Some had separate rooms with furniture—even real beds.”

Block kapo Michael Eschmann’s room was the best example. The walls, alternately, were painted blue, strawberry red, canary yellow, and kelly green. The ceiling was purple, and the floor was a high-gloss pink. The room looked so perverse that I have never forgotten its appearance.

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58 Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz, 196.
59 Testimony variably employs the following terms to denote the class of powerful prisoners: “The Privileged,” “The Aristocracy,” “The Prominents,” “The Notables,” “The Ruling Class,” and “The Elite.”
60 Sofsky, Order of Terror, 149.
61 Sofsky, Order of Terror, 151.
62 Jacobs, Dentist of Auschwitz, 140.
63 Jacobs, Dentist of Auschwitz, 140.
At the Frauenlager, the Auschwitz women’s camp, the Hut Seniors were “queens” with private staffs of five to ten women. One who “had won a privileged position for herself then had to defend it with efficiency, vitality and an iron will.”

Frankl stated that the privileged of the camp “did not as a rule feel degraded at all, like the majority of prisoners, but on the contrary–promoted! Some even developed miniature delusions of grandeur.” Their status “spelled the difference between life and death: extra food, better clothes and quarters, less work and more rest.” Indeed, the most privileged in the camps, despite their bleak surroundings, lived in veritable luxury.

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64 Lingens-Reiner, Prisoners of Fear, 87 and 103.
65 Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 62-63.
Conclusion

Minutes after his arrival in Auschwitz Primo Levi stood among men who, like him, had been granted a reprieve. Their first sight was a Kommando of prisoner-functionaries assigned to deal with them and their belongings: jaded ramp workers in their grotesque striped tunics and floppy berets. The Kommando men marched up, in step and with a peculiar gait, and then busied themselves with suitcases bound for the Reich and the Birkenau Exchange Market. Bewildered by what they saw, Levi and the other uninitiated men, the Zugänge, silently looked at each other: “It was all incomprehensible and mad, but one thing we had understood. This was the metamorphosis that awaited us. Tomorrow we would be like them.”

The SS’ concentrationary system put ordinary people into extraordinary circumstances: rational human beings thrust into irrationality. The new prisoners left the realm of reason behind to enter its antithesis, a world of uncertainty, a realm of unreason. The SS masters intended the eventual death of every prisoner, and the power of the SS was such that in most circumstances, they would not be denied their vision of “Vernichtung durch Arbeit.” Many prisoners—indeed, the vast majority—did not withstand this assault. However, some prisoners, assaulted nevertheless with the perverted Lagersprache, the frenetic Bettenbau, the twisted Lagerordnung, and all the incessant problems of extremity, continued to think and act for survival. All prisoners faced an attack of illogic bordering the fantastic, but only some of those prisoners found the strength to fend off the attack, one day at a time, until their liberation in the spring of 1945. These prisoners managed to regain a level of their former “human dignity” by acting in ways reminiscent of their lives before the camps.

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1 Levi, If This is a Man, 11.
Survivor Tadeusz Borowski once commented on how former “Auschwitzers” might document their experiences. He cautioned that the reader of such testimony will always ask: “[H]ow did it happen that you survived?” The question of why some survived, while countless perished, indeed remains with us today. Luck was one factor; the utter randomness that sometimes prevailed cannot be denied. However, rational action played large in the final outcome of who survived and who did not. As Viktor Frankl wrote, “[a]t times lightning decisions had to be made;” those who survived maintained their control over such instant reasoning. But not all decisions were quick ones; other reasoning was carefully thought out and applied daily. Elie Cohen even had a philosophy on how to get the best serving of soup: “The soup had to be stirred, but you can stir it vertically and you can stir it horizontally. The fat was on the top and the thick lumps underneath.”

Some prisoners “went too far,” and used the economic system of the camps to take advantage of their supposed peers. But can we truly know what constituted going “too far?” Certainly there was a grey area between “organizing” for bare survival and “organizing” for comfort and protection. Every prisoner could succumb to extremity; hence, it was practical to build up as large a reserve of “capital” as possible. But what about “organizing” for luxury and self-aggrandizement? While these questions are murky and ambiguous, one fact remains certain: the majority of survivors came from the ranks of the “privileged” prisoners. In 1948 Ella Lingens-Reiner suggested that those privileged were “the only ones who can still give a comprehensive report on the camps.”

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3 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 56.
Levi agreed: “[T]he ‘normal’ prisoners, those not privileged… were the majority in the Lager, but an exiguous minority among the survivors.”

To reiterate here a fact stated at the outset of this study, never before in history had people been forced to cope with moral situations as complicated and muddled as those in the camps. In the concentration camp, every situation, every action, every trade, was morally ambiguous. No one survived long by keeping to himself—through passivity—thus steering clear of any moral dilemmas. Survivors were by necessity active, prominent members of the concentration camp society. Survivors “organized.” They “trucked, bartered and exchanged,” and they also stole, smuggled, and secreted.

Terrence Des Pres cites seventeenth-century ethicist Baruch Spinoza when he states that “[e]ach thing… insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persevere in its being.”

Every inmate issued a “uniform of rags” on that first day was granted a temporary stay of execution. Some did not withstand the initial assault of extremity. Of those who did, many succumbed in the following crucial weeks and months. Still others persisted. What qualities did such “persisting” inmates have, that others did not? Survivor Richard Glazar suggested that “it wasn’t ruthlessness that enabled an individual to survive—it was an intangible quality, not particular to educated or sophisticated individuals. Anyone might have it. It is perhaps best described as an overriding thirst—perhaps, too, a talent for life, and a faith in life.”

Such prisoners found it within themselves to unremittingly counter irrationality with rationality, and unreason with reason; such prisoners gained privilege, and by gaining privilege, secured a spot among the small rank of survivors.

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The now infamous motto *Arbeit Macht Frei*, “Work Makes Free,” although created with a specific locality in mind, grew to epitomize the fraudulence of the larger project of National Socialism. As the SS intended it, the motto is bereft of any reality: “There are no words to describe the cynicism, the arrogance and the deceit of that slogan.” However, there was a sliver of unintended truth behind this slogan of trickery and ridicule. No prisoners were ever “made free” through slave labour for the Reich—but by “working” for themselves, by working through social and economic connections, some prisoners did find ways to survive, and were eventually “made free.”

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9 Glicksman, *Social Differentiation*, 124.
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