Overview/Who was Dario Gabbai

I chose to write about Dario Gabbai. Gabbai was Sonderkommando at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Gabbai was a Sonderkommando for many months at Auschwitz. Dario Gabbai was a Greek Jew who came to Auschwitz in 1944 and worked in the crematoria until the evacuation of Auschwitz in 1945. For 9 months Gabbai did the macabre work of moving newly executed prisoners from the gas chamber to the crematoria. Gabbai’s survival to tell the tale is unusual because 97% of the Sonderkommando were killed every three (Muller, 1981) to six months (Beyette, 1999) months.

Gabbai’s story is powerful. The Sonderkommandos helped to complete manual labor tasks for the Nazi SS. They provided muscle to enable the holocaust. If they did not do as they were told, they were executed on the spot. Most of the Sonderkommandos had no choice. They either helped or they were shot.

You can access Gabbai’s story at the URL below. I wrote about speaker one from the fifth video from the left: http://dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/segmentsfortheclassroom/

I learned much through the process of studying the holocaust through the prism of the Sonderkommando. The Sonderkommando’s suffering at Auschwitz was unique. In the letter that follows, I will write to Dario Gabbai to discuss what I have learned in the proceeding assignments, what new insights I gained in watching his video, how that understanding and insights have changed me, and what I got out of exploring Auschwitz as a data set.
Personal Letter

Dear Dario Gabbai,

I am honored to write to you today. I took great strength and courage from watching your video available at USC’s Shoah Foundation Institute. Your story prompted me to write to you today. I have been studying the Sonderkommandos of Auschwitz for a doctoral level class in organizational theory. Today, I would like to share some of what I learned about Auschwitz and the Sonderkommandos.

I learned that to be a Sonderkommando took incredible strength, courage, and the ability to disconnect yourself from your actions. I read Filip Muller’s autobiography Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three years in the gas chambers and two other books for our assignments. Those readings and your interview underscored to me how fragile your existence is. It took great strength to negotiate that uncertainty. Knowing that any moment might be your last depending on the actions of the guards required tremendous personal strength. In the private sector, if you don’t like your job, you can quit. In public education, educators often lament having to accept the vision and leadership of leaders that we don’t respect. I can’t imagine the 9 months of work that you completed in the crematoria of Auschwitz. The things that you saw required great strength to witness and to continue to tolerate.

I learned that one had to have courage to be a Sonderkommando. In addition to obvious strength, you needed bravery - especially if you were a Sonderkommando involved in the resistive act of generating diaries, letters, and historical records. Many Sonderkommandos buried such writings on the grounds of Auschwitz. I have a lot of questions about that process. Although you didn’t mention it in your interview, I’m wondering if you wrote or kept any records at Auschwitz. If so, what did you do with them? Did you witness other Sonderkommandos writing? Were there Sonderkommandos who were much more closely aligned with the SS in your unit? What would have happened if one of those Sonderkommandos would have caught another Sonderkommando writing in a diary?

Obviously, no other act underscores the courage and bravery of the Sonderkommando more than October 1944 uprising. Those Sonderkommandos who worked in crematoria one and two knew they were going to the gas chamber, so they revolted and destroyed the crematoria. The Sonderkommandos of the other crematoria (three, four, five, and six) were punished as a group because of the uprising. The SS group punishment was a form of an ancient Roman punishment. When ancient Roman legions did not follow orders or demonstrated cowardice in battle, there legion would engage in a punishment called decimation. In decimation, every tenth legionnaire is chosen to be beaten to death. The captains of the legions would
pick out then men. The nine who were not chosen had to beat the tenth to death. When the Sonderkommando revolt was put down, all the prisoners in crematoria one and two (all 400) were recaptured and shot. Those who were actively resisting were killed. Those in crematoria one and two were punished by the Nazi’s killing every third one of you? What were you thinking as you lie there in the yard of the gas chamber? Were you resigned to your fate? Did you expect to die? Were you still able to do anything to live? Those moments sound like they would have been a horrible punishment. Was there something at Auschwitz that was worse than those moments? If so, what was it?

You spoke in your interview about your disconnection from yourself. In case you weren’t aware, I wanted to point out to you that your impression of that disconnection and your actual words are ones that I had ran across before in my scholarship of the Sonderkommandos of Auschwitz. Filip Muller describes the same phenomenon in his autobiography. He describes picturing himself outside of his body. Many others have also described this phenomenon of almost constructing a split personality.

In addition to those big picture insights, I also found three other new facts in your interview that gave me new insight into Auschwitz and the day-to-day life of the Sonderkommando: 1) That when the gas chamber was emptied, that often the corpses stood upright because they were so tightly packed into the gas chamber, 2) that the revolt was not well coordinated and planned, but rather much more an impromptu endeavor, 3) I often wondered how the Sonderkommandos who lived had escaped their barracks and managed to blend in with the other prisoners. Your interview and the interview of the other Sonderkommandos described how you all infiltrated other barracks and by joining ordinary laborers escaped your death sentence. Any Sonderkommandos who didn’t escape and blend in were the last to be killed at Auschwitz.

**Final Personal Thoughts about Auschwitz Data**

Dario, last semester in a research class one of my professors, Dr. Kearney, stated that as a researcher becomes more familiar with a topic, that researcher should be able to answer their initial questions about a subject and that through the process of answering those questions the researcher should be confronted with additional questions that are harder to answer. As I typed this letter, I reflected upon that wisdom. My initial questions were:

- What was it like to be a Sonderkommando?
- How did Sonderkommandos live with themselves?
- Were Sonderkommandos collaborators to be despised or were they victims?
As I answered those three questions, I was filled with all the questions that I asked you in this letter. Truly, the more I’ve come to know about the Sonderkommandos, the more respect I have for many of them, and the more I have questions to ask of those who are still able to answer.

The writings of Muller, Kelman & Hamilton, Venezia all helped to answer those questions. Muller’s Sonderkommando autobiography answered the first two questions. The writings of thinkers and authors like Primo Levi and Kelman & Hamilton answered the third question. For many years after the war, the tale of the Sonderkommandos was dismissed, reviled, and finally accepted and forgiven by everyone but themselves.

Initially, Sonderkommandos were dismissed. The conventional wisdom was that all Sonderkommandos had been killed. Then when a few grudgingly came forward they were reviled as collaborators. As more scholars explored these conditions, it became painfully obvious to all that many had been deceived into working and all continued to do the macabre work in the crematoria under extreme duress in the form of immediate execution for failure to comply. Finally, scholars like Primo Levi and others forgave and embraced the Sonderkommandos.

Dario, you must forgive yourself. I have a gift. That gift is an ability to quickly realize a “big picture” worldview. In my scholarship, I ran across two things that caused me concern. The first was an interview that you gave to the Los Angeles Times in 1999. In that interview, you said that holocaust survivor guilt is unique, “The guilty feel innocent and the innocent feel guilty.” There’s a tremendous amount of survivor guilt. And no non-survivor can fully understand what the circumstances were. Our categories of guilt and innocence are from a different universe.”

I agree – no non-survivor can fully understand. Hence, I will leave you with the sagacious words of Filip Muller who survived for three years as a Sonderkommando at Auschwitz. Filip is a big picture thinker who survived what you survived. In Filip’s autobiography he wrote:

Would anything have been changed in the course of events if any of us had stepped out and, facing the crowd, had shouted: “do not be deceived, men and women, you are taking your last walk, a terrible death in the gas chamber awaits you!” The majority would not have believed us because it was too terrible to be believed. On the other hand a warning like this would have led to a panic, ending in a bloody massacre and our certain death. Did we have the right to take such as risk and, in taking it, to gamble away our chance to go on living for the time being? What, at that moment, was more important: a few hundred men and women, still alive but facing imminent death from which there was no saving them, or a
handful of eyewitnesses, one or two of whom might, at the price of suffering and denial of self, survive to bear witness against the murderers some day?