Interview with Holocaust Historian Gideon Greif

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Professor Gideon Greif is well-known for his pioneering research on the *Sonderkommandos*, prisoners who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. Some of them moved to Israel afterwards. In 1986, when he realized that the matter had received very little attention until then, Greif began collecting interviews of these tormented men and managed to gather a unique collection of testimonies that conveys the voices of these unlikely survivors. Indeed, as “bearers of secrets” (*Geheimnisträger*) from the Nazi perpetrators, the men were not supposed to live and share their story. Last year, Gideon Greif and Itamar Levin published *Aufstand in Auschwitz* (2015), a study about the revolt of the *Sonderkommandos* in Birkenau on 7 October 1944 – an unexplored event. It was one of the numerous acts of resistance against the Nazis that the Jewish people undertook in occupied Europe.

→ By Frédéric Crahay

INTERVIEW WITH HOLOCAUST HISTORIAN GIDEON GREIF

Gideon Greif, you decided a long time ago to dedicate your scientific career to the history of the Holocaust. Was your family personally involved in the genocide of the Jewish people in Europe during the Second World War?

Professor Gideon Greif: Yes, my family was involved in the horrors of the Holocaust. My grandfather, Dr Karl Danziger, was a Jewish physician in Hindenburg (Upper Silesia). He was arrested on 9 November 1938, the beginning of *Kristallnacht*, and deported to Buchenwald concentration camp. There he was a prisoner for more than five months. He suffered tremendously and came home a broken person. He changed so drastically during his imprisonment in Buchenwald that my aunt, Ilse-Lore, could not identify her own father when she went to the train station to welcome him after his release from the camp.

A few days later, my grandfather left Germany with his family: my grandmother, Dr Elfriede Danziger, my mother Beatrice, and my aunt Ilse-Lore. I have to emphasize that my grandfather never recovered from the horrors he underwent in Buchenwald. He carried them with him until his death in Tel Aviv.

The sister of my grandmother, Gertrude (Trude) Goldmann, could have left Germany in time and saved herself, but she decided to stay with her elderly mother until she passed away. It was then too late to leave Germany; Gertrude was deported to Auschwitz in 1943 and gassed there. Three other sisters of my grandmother found refuge in Shanghai, the only place in the world that did not demand a visa for entering, and stayed there until the end of the war.

You obtained your PhD at the University of Vienna in Austria. How do you remember those years of study,

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and what did they mean for your career as a Holocaust historian?

The decision to obtain my PhD was in a way spontaneous, not the result of any particular intention of mine. One day I met Professor Gerhard Jagschitz at Yad Vashem, we became friends and he offered to be my *Doktorvater* at the University of Vienna where he was teaching. Studying in Vienna was a special experience for me, since my father Samuel “Miro” Greif was born in Vienna, and I felt immediately “at home”. Besides, I met very nice scholars there and was surrounded by real friends with whom I am still in touch today. The years I spent as a student in Vienna were among the happiest of my life. Always when I am in Vienna, mostly for lecture tours, I feel nostalgic about those years.

Also, Vienna was a very important Jewish spiritual centre for generations. Therefore, I find it symbolical that I did my PhD in this important city and at this dignified and old university.

Since 2013, you have been Chief Historian at the Shem Olam Institute for Education, Documentation and Research on Faith and the Holocaust in Israel. How valuable is this position to you?

The work at Shem Olam opened up new dimensions for my scientific work. The institute researches and documents the individual aspects of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust – a resistance that manifested itself in various ways: religious, spiritual, moral and others. For many years, Jewish historiography on the Holocaust emphasized armed resistance, uprisings with weapon in hand, as a symbol for Jewish active resistance against the Germans and their collaborators. Shem Olam states that the masses of Jews, who did not have the privilege of being armed and who had no military experience, fought bravely for their life as well. Mothers, fathers and children were fighting their own battles for one extra hour of survival, for one extra day of living. This individual resistance is just as heroic as any other and should be praised as much as the armed resistance.

I am very proud to be Chief Historian of this institute, which is considered one of the most excellent Holocaust Memorials in Israel where thousands of students, both from Israel and abroad, learn about new aspects of the Holocaust.

You conducted very important research based on interviews with former *Sonderkommando* members. The results were published in the book *We Wept without Tears* (2005). How did the world feel about the *Sonderkom-* ●●●

... *mando* members back then, and today? Has our attitude towards them changed? Primo Levi, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, considers them akin to collaborators. That must have influenced the reception of their testimonies.

My goal, by initiating the *Sonderkommando* project in 1986, was primarily to document the testimonies of the few survivors of the *Sonderkommando* before they died, and to preserve and document their important stories. The *Sonderkommando* survivors are the only ones who witnessed the nitty-gritty of the process of industrial murder in Auschwitz, from the beginning until the end. I was lucky: I had the rare opportunity to interview all thirty living survivors of the *Sonderkommando* all over the world. This resulted in a precious and unparalleled collection. Only one survivor refused to be interviewed, although he corresponded with me and sent me his testimony by post: it was Filip Müller.

My second goal, which was equally successful, was to counter the negative image of the *Sonderkommando* prisoners. In numerous testimonies by Auschwitz survivors, Jews and non-Jews alike, the *Sonderkommando* members were described in very dark colours, sometimes they were even accused of being murderers. From the very beginning, I felt that these accusations were unjust: the men of the *Sonderkommando* were victims, not perpetrators. In fact, they were the most miserable among the miserable. I was determined to salvage their reputation by telling the truth about them. In my research, I have shown that they did everything in their power to save the honour and humanity of the Jews who were sentenced to death by the Nazis, to treat them with dignity and mercy and to make their final minutes somewhat bearable. As an example I would mention what Josef Sackar, a Greek survivor, told me: whenever a Jewish woman at the undressing hall undressed, he looked the other way in order to minimise her feeling of shame and embarrassment.

I am proud to say that, thanks to this kind of research, public opinion on the *Sonderkommando* has significantly changed. Nobody would call them traitors, collaborators or murderers anymore. Even Primo Levi, who is one of the most remarkable writers on Auschwitz, did not understand the complexity of their situation at the time.

Last year, director László Nemes released his film *Son of Saul*. It tells the story of a fictional member of the *Sonderkommando* at Birkenau, Saul Ausländer, who wants

to salvage the body of a boy he takes for his son and bury it properly. What are your thoughts on the film?

I met László Nemes in Tel Aviv for intensive talks two years ago, before he started to shoot *Son of Saul*. He promised me to make every effort not to repeat the horrible outcome of a previous film on the *Sonderkommando*, *The Grey Zone* (2001). When I watched Nemes' production, I was relieved. He had kept his promise and protected the dignity of the *Sonderkommando* prisoners, unlike *The Grey Zone* which had made me furious when I saw it. I almost got a heart attack watching that film for the first time... I am aware that a Hollywood film does not have to be a hundred per cent accurate – after all, it is not a documentary – but it should honour the dignity of its heroes. The members of the *Sonderkommando* deserve to be treated better than they were in *The Grey Zone*.

Nemes on the other hand is a great director. He is sensitive, understands the historical background, and his actors were well prepared for their sensitive roles. So yes, I like *Son of Saul* and I am very glad the film has won so many prestigious prizes. Praise to László Nemes: he created a visual memory of the *Sonderkommando*, finally!

In the film we see the uprising of the *Sonderkommando* of *Krematorium IV* on 7 October 1944 in Birkenau. László Nemes read your study *We Wept without Tears* before making *Son of Saul*. I take it you appreciate the result?

Yes, Nemes did a brilliant job. I am very pleased that my book inspired him to make such an excellent film. Nemes is one of those directors who spend much time on research for their script before they start shooting. When we met in Israel, he asked me hundreds of questions relating to the smallest details. His curiosity was absolutely impressive. This was not the case with the producers of *The Grey Zone*: they ignored my criticism, which I communicated to them before the film was completed, and the result is therefore horrible. László Nemes is young, but extremely gifted and open to new ideas. During our meeting, I immediately got the impression that he understood the gravity of the topic. He tested several ideas with me which he included in the film, and I am very grateful for his sensitivity. The subject of the *Sonderkommando* squads is the most delicate and the most complex in the entire history of the Holocaust.

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As a leading researcher in Holocaust studies, which fields remain underexposed in your view?

A very important, yet largely unexplored field is the inner world and soul of the German murderers. We still do not have a thorough picture of the motives of the men and women who conducted the crime against the Jewish people – who humiliated, tortured and murdered millions of Jews. I am thinking of an interdisciplinary study, since you would have to investigate the psychological and sociological aspects as well. Such a study, which I believe should be launched by German researchers, could improve our understanding of human nature, and perhaps prevent a second Holocaust in the future.

In addition, we lack monographies on important ghettos, and also on many concentration camps. One particular extermination camp, Majdanek, has been neglected in historiographic research. This is going to be one of my next projects: Majdanek through the eyes of its Jewish prisoners. I have already collected dozens of interviews of Majdanek survivors.

In international politics today, there is debate about the need to “deradicalize” certain youngsters involved with radical Islam. The Holocaust can prove to be a very sensitive and difficult subject to address at school in this context. But I understand that you gave Holocaust lectures in Germany for an exclusive Muslim audience, as a way of moving beyond these stereotypes. Can you tell us a little more about this experience?

My experience with Muslim students and teachers was indeed promising: they listened carefully, asked many questions. It seemed to me that they grasped the essence of the Holocaust, and they were empathic with the murdered Jews. I would like to continue my lectures before a Muslim audience because of the value I attach to educational projects. They have to know more about the Holocaust. I have developed a specific didactic method for these occasions, which works very well. For me, teaching Muslims about the Holocaust is one of the most important challenges in my field.

You have just finished a study on the *Sonderkommando* uprising. Besides Majdanek, which new projects will you be working on in the future?

I am indeed writing a book on the Majdanek extermination camp, but also one on the Greek Jews in Auschwitz, and another one on the first deportations from Slovakia to Auschwitz. My most important project, however, is a comprehensive history of the *Sonderkommando*, which I am writing with my German friend and colleague Christian Carlsen. I have many more ideas but they are a little premature; I feel it is too early to publish at this moment. I can conclude by saying that the Holocaust needs thousands of more years before being fully researched. ■

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◆ *The Grey Zone*, director Tim Blake Nelson, Lionsgate Entertainment, 2001, 108 min.

→ Learn more

◆ Greif and Levin's book *Aufstand in Auschwitz* is currently being translated in French and Dutch by the Auschwitz Foundation, and will be published shortly.