

## On 'Auschwitz':

reflecting on the meaning of absolute death

DAN DINER (HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM)

### RESUMO

O texto contém uma reflexão a respeito de significados distintos da ideia e da experiência da morte, a partir da referência a fato ocorrido durante o bombardeio da cidade de Dresden fevereiro de 1945. Trata-se do contraste entre a morte ocorrida em cenários de distinção e reconhecimento pessoal - na qual o "reflexo antropológico do reconhecimento" está presente e a morte coletiva perpetrada pelo extermínio. O texto põe em relevo a necessidade de atenção analítica e histórica às formas da morte, em suas modalidades opostas: o extermínio imposto a coletividades "externas" e o assassinato individual, ocorrido no interior de um "corpo político regulado e qualificado".

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Morte, Formas de Morte, Morte Coletiva, Morte Individual

### ABSTRACT

The text contains a reflection on the different meanings of the idea and experience of death, based on the reference to an event that occurred during the February 1945 bombing of the city of Dresden. It is the contrast between death that occurred in scenarios of distinction and personal recognition - in which the "anthropological reflection of recognition" is present - and collective death perpetrated by extermination. The text highlights the need for analytical and historical attention to the forms of death, in their opposite modalities: extermination imposed on "external" collectivities and individual death, which occurs within a "regulated and qualified political body".

### KEYWORDS

Death, Forms of Death, Collective Death, Individual Killing

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DAN DINER (HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM)

The story, I am about to tell, is true; it really happened. And yet it has the ring of a parable – a parable about the difference between death and... death. The story unfolds in the town of Oederan, about 30 miles southwest of Dresden, where a sub-camp of the Flossenbürg concentration camp was set up in late 1944. About one thousand female prisoners were brought there – all of them Jews from the Lodz ghetto, from Theresienstadt, and from Auschwitz. The prisoners were forced to work as slaves for the armaments manufacturer "Freia Ltd.," which supplied the Messerschmitt Aircraft Works.

The event at the heart of this tale transpired on the night of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 1945. That was the very night when the gorgeous Baroque city on the Elbe was reduced to rubble in an infernal firestorm, unleashed by swarms of Allied bombers.

In the sub-camp's dimly lit service building, a female prisoner – 19-year-old Liselotte Z. from Prague – was busy preparing a thin beet soup in a large cauldron. This meager soup was a meal for the female slave laborers, due back from the night shift at 2 a.m., as usual.<sup>1</sup>

Liselotte Z. had been transferred to Oederan from Auschwitz in November, along with about 500 other female prisoners. These Jewish women had been spared death in the extermination camp by sheer accident. Liselotte's parents, her husband – whom she had married while they were in Theresienstadt – and her brother, had all been previously gassed to death. She herself had already been on the way, together with other female prisoners, marching to the extermination site and certain death, when suddenly their column, in rows of six, was ordered to halt. After a long wait, they were commanded to turn around and go back to their barracks.

They soon learned the reason for this extraordinary about-face: The incinerators had once again been pushed beyond their capacity. The heat of the crematorium, the burning of an endless stream of corpses, delivered to the furnaces from the gas chambers, threatened to damage the ovens beyond repair. The disposal of the corpses had hit a technical snag, postponing the collective death intended for Liselotte Z. and the other Jewish women accompanying her onto the gas-chambers. It wasn't long before they found themselves, together again, now in the Flossenbürg sub-camp of Oederan.

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1. Alfred Landecker Memorial Conference (Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University, 3/2/2021).

Liselotte Z. was not alone in the camp's service building that night, as she stood over the large cauldron, busy preparing the thin beet soup. A female SS guard had been posted alongside her, a Walther pistol strapped into her holster. Between prisoner and overseer a paralyzing silence prevailed. The silence sprang from the estranging distance so peculiar for the camp-world of total submission, attended by a constantly looming threat of death.

The stillness of the nocturnal work was broken by the haunting howl of the sirens at 9:45 p.m., the air raid alarm which heralded the fateful night of February 13 to 14. Even before the bombers arrived over their intended target – the greater Dresden area – a sense of mounting anxiety had begun to take hold. Those fears had been stirred by strange vibrations in the air. The humming was caused by the whirl of the engines of British Lancaster bombers, generated by the immense horsepower that drove the Allied squadrons forward. At 10:13 p.m., the moment the first bombs and incendiaries began to rain over Dresden, an inferno erupted.

The lights went out in Oederan, too. Darkness had already engulfed the service building by the time the second wave of bombers reached Dresden at 1:23 a.m., releasing their destructive load. The first attack had knocked out the Dresden central alarm facility – preventing advance warning of the new approaching attack. This attack brought twice as many planes sweeping overhead. In the distance, muffled explosions could be heard coming from the main targets. As a celestial ambience to the horrifying event, the nightly sky over the city on the Elbe turned blood-red.

While the hellish scene of the second attack unfolded, a window of exception opened in the world of the camp, which was to last throughout the second raid. Intertwined in this exceptional situation, the SS guard and the female prisoner would encounter each other as equals, their sparse exchange of words providing a lasting impression of the human psyche's almost instinctive ability to distinguish between death and... death.

And prior to this encounter a series of events would intervene, from which some remarkable dialectics of recognition were to evolve, welling up through the sheer fear of death under the hail of bombs.

The developing scene speaks volumes: The guard trembling, her entire body shaking – she addressed Liselotte Z., her voice imploring proximity: "Please, come closer" (*Bitte, komm näher*), she whispered, employing the informal address. Given the gloomy mood of intensifying threat, a sense of recognition reverberated in the overseer's next sentence to the female prisoner, ratifying in that moment their equal value. It became evident in the audible shift as the second person pronoun was employed. The derogative, informal "Du," or "you" – the familiar pronoun, commonly used in the camp world to mark the relation of subjugation – was supplanted by the respectful "Sie". The frightened SS woman whispered: "Please sit by me". "*Bitte setzen Sie sich zu mir*".

The metamorphosis that then occurred, indicated by the sudden pronominal shift from the derogative "Du" to the respectful "Sie", is impressive. In the eye of the

SS overseer, the torrent of fire pouring down from the skies had transformed Liselotte Z., elevated her with immediate effect to a fellow human, deserving of reverence and respect. The virtue of the anthropological reflex of recognition, springing from the state of angst, while restoring to the prisoner her human face, previously stolen, could be witnessed in a state of birth.

By virtue of the anthropological reflex of recognition that springs from the state of angst, the human face of the prisoner, previously stolen, could now be witnessed in a state of birth.

But more than this: From the female prisoner, who just a moment before had been bereft of her humanity – something akin to power seemed to emanate now a power within whose protective aura the guard now thought to find shelter.

That remarkable encounter holds further meaning in store, which can be gathered from the brief dialogue, consisting of just two sentences, exchanged between the guard and her subservient prisoner. That exchange, highly significant in its meaning, reveals the distinction between death and...death. The SS woman, fearing her demise in a hail of bombs, asks Liselotte Z.: “Do you think that *we* (!) are really going to die?” (“Glauben Sie, dass *wir* (!) wirklich sterben werden?” The Jewish prisoner answers: “Yes, I really think so (“*Ich glaube es wirklich*”). The undertone in her response is tinged with triumph, springing from a sense of inner satisfaction. It could scarcely be concealed.

What existential constellation underpins such a deviation of reaction in the face of an anticipated, feared – and possibly shared – death? The answer may well lie in the distinctive nature of the very different collective death by extermination which still loomed over the temporarily spared Jewish prisoner: a death by extermination mandated by the Nazis over *all* Jews and *everywhere* – certain death just because and by dint of origin; a meaningless death, so to say, a death devoid of reason, rendered as a rule; a death, that Liselotte Z. was soon meant to suffer, but which, due to the unforeseen circumstances of the overheated crematoria, had been contingently avoided.

Indeed: In face of certain, of mandated, of a systematic *collective* death, it may have appeared consoling to suffer an *individual* death, seemingly incidental by comparison; a death due to the cruel conditions of war and the myriad of risks it held – by being at the wrong time, in the wrong place. For the person directly affected to suffer a death caused by hails of bombs, such a death is a horrible death, but a death essentially caused by fortuity; and that such an eventuality might take down your tormentors as well could even make such a death easier to accept.

The death of ‘Auschwitz’ was a collectively mandated, absolute death. Survival was owed to pure chance, to exception. This phenomenon of survival by mere chance was philosophically reflected upon, among others, by Max Horkheimer, the precursor of *Critical Theory* and, together with Theodor W. Adorno, co-author of the iconic text *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In his more remote, highly personal writings, Horkheimer engages with the existentially unbearable contingency of having – against the back-

drop of systematic, regularized and collectively sustained murder – survived solely by mere chance.

In his “Eclipse of Reason“, Horkheimer pointed out the pathway to take when thinking about ‘Auschwitz’. This thinking advances the inconceivable comprehension from the vantage point of the victims: namely that what occurred there was a universally valid *rupture of civilization*, a rupture that goes against anthropologically anticipated certainties; a fundamental denial of presupposed assumptions regarding human behavior and action. By virtue: A genuine epistemological crisis.

That comprehension holds true for the ubiquitously valid premise that humans act according to instinctive requirements for self-preservation – an unavoidable and rationally guided intent of the perpetrators to prevail. Even the most extreme criminal – so the assumption – could be induced to spare his victim, if the criminal’s material demands and libidinal desires are satisfied.

That indeed was the rationally guided strategy for survival, ventured by the *Judenräte*, the Jewish Councils in the Ghettos, which made the offer to the Nazis to organize the deployment of labor by captive Jews, apparently much-needed for the German war-effort. This strategy of attempting to confine the Nazis in a shell of rationality, made material in the form of labor, finally turned out to be ineffective in view of the ideologically guided intention of total annihilation. In the victim’s perception such an action was reflected as entirely counter-rational, evoking a reaction of utter disbelief. Such a pointless murder was perceived as so improbable, and insofar so outrageous, that the victims were almost driven out of their minds on the brink of their industrially implemented extermination.

The refutation of fundamental assumptions of reason and self-preservation is downright rejected by the mind. It literally rolls off consciousness. That was the case in the Ghettos and camps, and that was the mental reality prevailing in Auschwitz. The victims, as far as they had been given any time at all to reflect on the conditions they were being thrown into, could not allow the meaning of the unfolding doom approach them.

Mind’s resistance to ‘Auschwitz’ is obstinate, its rationalizations multilayered. It may appear in varying form and shape: As a universalized icon of human suffering – generalized, detached from its concrete, historically exceptional, unprecedented appearance; or as an event wrapped in particular garbs, reflecting deep-seated layers of belief and memory, while constantly revolving around one and the same query: the never ending discourse around the Holocaust’s ostensible uniqueness – or in reverse: insisting on its supposedly self-evident comparability, yes: its equation with other mass crimes committed through history.

This extraordinary tense, highly agitated, fevered discourse, tightly conducted around the topoi of uniqueness and comparability, however, evokes features of argumentation, which have been traditionally passed down, reaching back onto a previous theological form of ancestral Christian-Jewish controversies, medieval disputations,

so to say, anchored in the imago of a supposedly claimed Election of the Jews – apparently challenging the universal entitlement of an all embracing humanity.

How are theological pitfalls to be avoided? How is the quagmire of politico-theological distortions to be averted: that distant echo of the sacred, reverberating in the secular discourse on the Holocaust – an unconscious creeping of a culturally prevalent anti-Judaic animus?

As a first step, I plead for ignoring the fact, that the main victims of the systematic, industrial extermination executed by the Nazis were Jews. In contrast, I propose to focus solely on the mode of death to which they were subjected. As a matter of fact, it is the very manner of death inflicted that informs us of the actual nature of the crime that was committed.

The underlying thesis is as follows: The distinction between death and .... death becomes a difficult undertaking when crimes committed or suffered collectively: whether in the form of a massacre executed by soldiers going berserk; of genocidal acts for reasons of ethnic cleansing; or the annihilation of an entire people, *wherever* its members may be found – an ultimate genocide, a holocaust, so to say.

In contrast to such collective acts of murder directed primarily *outward*, against another collective, individual killings mostly committed *inside* a body politic have been accurately qualified and regulated since time immemorial. In fact, distinctions between death and .... death, such as those between murder and homicide, between voluntary and involuntary manslaughter, and further qualifications of killing, are presupposed and self-evidently recognized. Popular culture, such as criminal novels and corresponding films put the distinction between death and .... death at the center of their narrative enfolding, drawing the audience under their spell.

What helps us to distinguish between different forms of killing and dying, of death and .... death, is a close historical gaze on particular events within the Holocaust. While, for example, the Holocaust in Romania could still be compared to a more familiar form of brutal collective violence, like pogroms and ethnic cleansing, this depiction does not apply – say – to the persecution and extermination of the few Jews of Norway, who were sought out with considerable, meticulous bureaucratic effort and deported to Auschwitz. Or the deportation of the Jews from the Dodecanese Islands – essentially from Rhodes, probably then the most remote location of German rule in Europe – and that in July 1944, a point at which the Holocaust in Hungary, the last major extermination project in the heart of Europe, had already been stopped.

After an exhausting trip by sea from the archipelago to Athens, the Jews of Rhodes were loaded onto the last deportation train from Greece to Auschwitz: a fourteen-day journey in cattle cars, more than a thousand miles, in the sweltering heat of August, the sole purpose being their murder in the gas chambers of Birkenau.

Their death as such could have been accomplished differently. A year earlier, in September 1943 – after Italy capitulated to the Allies by armistice – units of a German Mountain Infantry Division had machine-gunned thousands of Italian prisoners,

former members of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division *Acqui* who had initially refused to be disarmed by their former allies, on the Ionian island of Cephallonia.

Is there a fundamental difference between those modes of killing and dying: the massacre of the Italian prisoners of war right on the spot, and the transport of Jews from the Dodecanes to Auschwitz and the gas chambers – requiring considerable expenditure of time and effort? And if they differ, what makes the difference? Is it merely a question of logistics and other technicalities? Or is the specific variety of death an expression of a particular intent? And if so: of what kind?

Let's leave those questions unanswered, and turn our gaze again to the service building in the Flossenbürg satellite camp, Oederan. What we discover doesn't come as a surprise. The Allied attack on Dresden had hardly abated when the temporal window of exception slammed tightly back shut. The camp reality resumed as if without transition, and this also ended the recognition of Liselotte Z. as an equal. The change that had occurred became quickly manifest in the tone of the guard's voice and conduct. The briefly utilized respectful German 'Sie' gave way again to the derogatory 'Du' when addressing the prisoner. The rude tone of the relation of coercion and subjugation prevailed.

In the meantime, the night shift of workers had arrived to take their meal in the service building. Amid the sound of clattering dishes, the thin beet soup was dished out. The camp routine had been restored – as if nothing had happened. The guard's brief flicker of recognition of the Jewish prisoner in the night of firebombing was rendered 'undone', extinguished. Both of them – the SS overseer and the female prisoner – avoided any further eye contact. Visual contact would have signaled eyeball to eyeball communication, would have evoked the previous nightly encounter as equals – with possibly lethal consequences for the prisoner Liselotte Z.

Gradually the front drew closer. Chances of survival, once slim, increased with each passing day. Then the prisoners were transferred; the sub-camp evacuated on April 14<sup>th</sup>. After a long odyssey in closed cattle cars, the woman finally arrived in the vicinity of Theresienstadt. In the ghetto there, they were to be handed over to the representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross waiting to receive them. With every step closer to the perimeter of Theresienstadt, the conduct of the SS personnel accompanying the prisoners had altered. Their tone became increasingly servile until they were pleading with the prisoners: They hadn't meant it, a regrettable misunderstanding to be apologized for. The Jewish women gazed on past their tormentors. They said nothing.

Within sight of Theresienstadt, the SS guards had already scattered, dropping their weapons, shedding their uniforms and disappearing into the tangled undergrowth. Forgetting had begun. The starving women, who had arrived in Theresienstadt and finally were given food, were unable to resist: They stuffed themselves to bursting – and then died in agony. ●