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“Working Girl”: Sex Discrimination in Auschwitz

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Captured in a rare photograph, Commandant Richard Baer and former commandant Rudolf Höss strode away from the dedication of an SS hospital in Auschwitz in late 1944. Following behind them, are officers of lesser note, and behind them- in the background- a few nurses. Mostly hidden behind these men, head down, glove in gloved hand is Maria Mandel, the chief overseer of the women’s camp. She is the most powerful, important woman in Auschwitz and yet she barely makes the shot.¹ Mandel walks alone, not accompanied by her fellow *Aufseherinnen* subordinates. She is not in front with her colleagues of equal rank, nor is she at the back with the nurses who share her gender. Instead, Maria Mandel occupies a space of her own: an awkward, middle area that lacks a conceptual framework. Though her job was identical to that of a man’s, her gender kept her from being “one of the boys.” And though she was a woman, her job prohibited her from being “one of the girls.” In this photo, in the camp system, and in Germany, the women of the SS failed to “fit in.” They were not the mothers and nurses performing traditional women’s work in service of the Reich. The state asked them to do a man’s job, yet as shown in the above image, these women were not admitted to a partnership of equality in their workplace. Within this system of discrimination and inequality, women devised strategies to conform to the prevailing gender norms that governed camp culture and their employment.

Created by SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler to save manpower for more important war work, the women’s branch of the SS was charged with guarding female prisoners within the concentration camp system. Some women volunteered, others were conscripted, all had to pass a background check,

¹ This is one of the only existing photos of Mandel. Photograph found at http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/ssalbum/auschwitz_album/

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entrance exam, and a medical examination in order to be admitted to the corps. Most of these state employees came from blue collar or agricultural backgrounds, most served without distinction, and most returned to normal life after the war.² The SS *Aufseherinnen* were ordinary women in what would appear to be a very unusual job, yet the more closely we look at the details of their employment the more ordinary it becomes.

As was then, and would be the case in later decades in numerous fields, the introduction of women into dominantly male occupations was greeted with skepticism and often hostility; and it is important to consider within the context of the implementation of the “Final Solution”- the German plan to murder all of Europe’s Jews. Even though the priority was to execute the Final Solution smoothly and to maintain order within the system of camps, that goal was not so important that it overrode a typical and commonplace response by men to an influx of women into a field where they were thought not to belong.

Throughout World War II only 3500 women served in this organization, thousands fewer than their male SS colleagues. Consequently, the *Aufseherinnen* were in the minority. For example in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest and most efficient branch of the “Holocaust corporation,” the prisoner population peaked at around 100,000- 70,000 men guarded by 4481 male guards and 30,000 women guarded by 71 female guards. Though women prisoners made up roughly 30 percent of the total Birkenau population, female guards comprised less than 1 percent of the overall guard staff.³

²Though overall a small percentage of both SS women and men were brought to trial postwar, those women who faced trial were convicted and executed at rates equal to their male colleagues.

³ Długoborski Waclaw and Franciszek Piper, eds. *Auschwitz 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp, Volume II*. Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000, 175-180.

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Nevertheless, their minimal presence was treated as an insult and a disruption to the male, military culture that characterized their place of employment. For many men, particularly those in positions of power such as the commandant Rudolf Höss, an appointment to Auschwitz was a mark of achievement. However, the *Aufseherinnen* simply by virtue of their arrival to this workplace, lessened the prestige of the posting. Höss resented their placement in positions of authority and deemed their job performance sub-par.⁴

This lack of support from the top management created greater difficulties in the workplace of Auschwitz. Not only was this handful of women charged with maintaining order in a chaotic situation that required the guarding thousands of prisoners, but they also lacked the confidence and support of their bosses. If we employ this business model, it is easy to compare the SS high command in Berlin to executives at corporate headquarters. On the one hand, as executives they instituted the policy of bringing women into the force in order to free up men for more important work. On the other hand, they did not consider how this would be received by those working in field- a not uncommon disconnect between executives and middle-management.

This same unwelcoming attitude was expressed by lower echelon SS men. One Polish survivor, who served as a waiter in the SS dining room, recalls one night shortly after the introduction of the women to the Auschwitz staff.

4 *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2006.

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There was singing, drinking, slapping on the back, and all kinds of alcohol. I poured wine in their glasses and there was one SS woman, who when I poured her wine, started pulling my arm. She said to me, “Darling...”, and everyone started looking at me. The situation for me was very dangerous and I almost spilt the wine, but luckily some SS man yelled at her, “Shut your mouth, you whore!” and she let go.⁵

Perhaps the *Aufseherin*, a little tipsy, meant to flirt with the waiter, as she might have done in civilian life. Perhaps she did not realize (or remember) that waiters there were prisoners, not the social equals of the village girls the SS women had been shortly before. But in any case, the SS man’s reaction was indicative of the *Aufseherin*’s inferior status. He felt free to berate her publicly for her violation of camp discipline and for behaving in a “forward,” unwomanly, manner, using an explicitly gendered term of abuse. His disrespectful treatment demonstrates that he did not consider her to be either a fellow military officer or a lady. The SS man countermanded her implied instructions to Rybacki, putting her, rather than him, in the wrong. Such treatment by their male colleagues in front of prisoners undermined their authority and placed them at an authoritative disadvantage.

The same prisoner waiter claimed that later that night an SS woman made sexual advances toward him and other waiters. “Some drunk, big woman was walking and swaying, going most probably to the toilet, and she saw us standing and she started making gestures to us suggestive of sexual intercourse. Our faces were stonelike and we were whispering to one another, ‘what does she want, that bitch?’”⁶ His reaction is one of disgust and annoyance, and perhaps caution, but the feeling of fear is strikingly absent. No female prisoner would have reacted in such a manner if faced with similar attention from a male guard.

⁵ Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: A New History*, New York: Public Affairs, 2005, 105.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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Given this disadvantage, and the desire to prove themselves to their male colleagues, it is not surprising that these women felt pressure to conform to the code of male code of behavior that permeated the camp, a military code that valued discipline and punishment, and decried weakness.⁷ Numerous survivor accounts note the changed behavior of women guards in the presence of their male colleagues.

Survivor Corrie Ten Boom recalls such an occurrence. Her sister Betsie, elderly and starving, was leveling ground inside the camp wall on a work detail. Unable to lift much dirt, Betsie attracted the attention of their overseer. The *Aufseherin* screamed at Betsie to move faster and carry more dirt, then began to mock her, “‘Look what Madame Baroness is carrying! Surely she will over-exert herself!’ The other guards and even some of the prisoners laughed. Encouraged, the guard threw herself into a parody of Betsie’s faltering walk. A male guard was with our detail today and in the presence of a man the women guards were always animated.”⁸ This scene of ridicule became cruel when Betsie attempted to play along, “That’s me alright, but you’d better let me totter along with my little spoonful, or I’ll have to stop altogether.”⁹ Embarrassed by her own game, the guard declared that she would be the one who “decides who’s to stop” and hit Betsie on the neck and chest with a leather crop.

⁷ Conformity to gender norms of contemporary masculinity has been used to explain the participation of men in killing operations on the Eastern Front, see Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men*. While these perpetrators cite the desire to appear “manly” to their comrades as a reason for participating in the killing, the SS women actively reject the norms of their gender for the same reasons- to conform to a masculine ideal.

⁸ Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1971), 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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In another case a survivor testified that the guard Juana Bormann was often seen with a large black dog that she would occasionally use to attack prisoners. “At first she egged the dog on and it pulled at the woman’s clothes; then she was not satisfied with that and made the dog go for her throat.”¹⁰ Hoping to win the approval and respect of her male colleagues, Bormann proudly pointed to the woman’s body and said to an SS man “It is my work.”¹¹

One focus of daily difficulty and violence was the twice daily roll call. *Appelle* could last for hours, during which time prisoners were often beaten and sometimes died. For a variety of reasons *appell* of the women’s camp was often longer and more disorderly. The shortcomings of the SS women in this capacity were noticed by the camp administration. Commandant Rudolf Höss complained of counting discrepancies, inefficiency, and a lack of pride their work. He noted “the supervisors ran hither and thither... like a lot of flustered hens, and had no idea what to do.”¹² His imagery of the *Aufseherinnen* as “flustered hens” again exemplifies the gendered manner in which the men of the camp chose to deride these women employees. Though their weaknesses were noted by their boss, there was little attempt to aid them to improve their job performance or to make the operations of camp run more smoothly.

10 Raymond Phillips, ed. *The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others*, London: William Hodge & Co. 1949, 84.

11 Ibid., 86.

12 *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, 62-63.

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Instead, the SS women devised their own solutions to cope with the challenges of their job. One method was to employ the assistance of prisoners whose education and managerial skills were superior to that of their SS overseers. Such prisoner functionaries' assistance improved the guards' performance, and the overall efficiency of the camp. The needed skills they lacked the SS women learned to find in prisoners and use to their advantage to meet the needs of their job. Far from exhibiting indifference to their work, these women actively sought methods to accommodate their weaknesses and improve their job performance.¹³

This clever adaptation was lost on the men of the administration. Despite their improvement, Höss remained convinced that these women would rather return to Ravensbrück where he considered the work to be lighter and thus more suited to what he considered their abilities. When confronted by *Aufseherinnen* about the poor conditions and difficulties of their job, Höss' only solution was to hope the war ended soon.¹⁴ He and the administration did not believe the situation was fixable, so they did not attempt to give the SS women the tools to succeed. Women had better luck turning to prisoners for assistance, than to their male colleagues and bosses.

In order to understand the actions of these women- especially the violence used against prisoners- their overall position within the world of the camp must be considered. The image of these women in the postwar world has been both shaped and misinformed by accounts such as Höss' and those of survivors given without context. Looking closer, we find that these women were not omnipotent

¹³ Mattäus, Jürgen, ed., *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and its Transformations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 134.

¹⁴ *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, 61.

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monsters driven by cruelty or madness, nor were they incompetent. Rather, they were perpetrators, who exercised choice in the way they acted, while at the same time being subjected to gender discrimination and stereotyping. Thus, they never received the full measure of respect accorded to the SS and their role in running the camps was never fully recognized by the male administration.

Such recognition of their labors came only at the end of the war; and at a moment least personally beneficial to them. Though never granted equality by the Nazis, the Allies had no trouble seeing that these women bore equal responsibility for the running of the camps and the crimes committed within them. When the war ended and the war trials began, SS women and men were tried, sentenced, and in some cases, executed side by side. Remarkably, when asked about their role in camps and specifics of their work, few women shrank from disclosure. They did not shift blame to those above, but rather attempted to explain the details of their employment.

Though admitting and seizing responsibility cost some their lives, they grabbed it. For it was in the moment of postwar justice that the women of the SS were admitted to full equality and full punishment accordingly. What their own bosses could not see, the Allied powers that prosecuted them unhesitatingly acknowledged.

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