Benedikt Kautsky's Description of the Concentration Camp Hierarchy (Retrospective Account, 1961)

Abstract

In general terms, the actual purpose of concentration camps was not to rehabilitate inmates, but to punish them through humiliation, torture, and economic exploitation. The standardized brutality of the guards meant that a camp stay often became a death sentence for inmates, whose allegedly hostile political, racial, sexual, religious, or social attributes made them unfit for the general population. The SS created a cruel hierarchy within the camps, assigning inmates to groups of greater or lesser prestige, thereby stoking the competition for internal survival. By pitting various groups against each other, the SS created an extremely effective system whereby inmates controlled and regulated themselves. Colored triangles sewn onto camp uniforms identified inmates by their respective "offenses." Political inmates, for example, wore red triangles and were referred to as "Reds." Criminals wore green, Jews wore yellow, homosexuals wore pink. Sinti, Roma, and "asocials" wore black, and Jehovah's Witnesses wore purple.

The following text by former camp prisoner Benedikt Kautsky (1894–1960) makes clear that an inmate's chances for survival depended to a large extent on his (or her) ranking within the camp hierarchy. As a Socialist, Kautsky numbered among the political prisoners.

Source

The "Top People"

This term was used by the camp to describe the aristocracy. It contained various ranks. There were the camp leaders [*Lagerältesten*], the office capo, the capos of the work details, of the storerooms (personal effects, clothing, tools), the mail room, and the cashier's office. The kitchen and the canteen (both the ones for the prisoners and the ones for the SS), the men responsible for the sick bay, those from the commandant's office (political department, photography department), then a few "great" block leaders and capos, above all those in charge of particular workshops and work details, but also a few people who were well-regarded, such as officers' lackeys, sometimes also hairdressers and tailors. All these people, who owed their rank to the most varied causes, constituted a very diverse society. In some cases it really was due to their efficiency, in others it was their ability to curry favor with the SS or with prisoners who had already gone up in the world which proved decisive. There were extremely hard-working and efficient people alongside lazy and incompetent ones. Some shamelessly exploited their office at the expense of their fellow prisoners; others showed complete integrity.

In every camp there was a bitter struggle going on among these people. Since the majority of prisoners continued to have absolutely no influence, these struggles took the form of palace revolutions. The most despicable intrigues were sometimes launched, in which people did not shrink from involving the SS. There were also numerous occasions on which the SS cliques fought out their own battles with the aid, and at the expense, of the prisoners.

The struggles were particularly tough and ruthless where the Reds and the Greens were fighting for supremacy. The Greens were naturally absolutely unscrupulous in using the most vicious methods. They were particularly fond of doing down their opponents [*platzen lassen*], i.e. they reported alleged or real offences to the SS and got them to intervene. The Reds naturally had to respond in kind, although they mainly relied on their superior efficiency and honesty. But their opponents liked playing the trump card

of accusing them of political unreliability and that worked on more than one occasion.

The prize for the winner was a big one. In the first place, it took a material form: better food, better accommodation, better clothing, more freedom at work, the realization of cultural aspirations even against the background of the most acute need. Many found that attractive. But even more attractive was the social aspect. Power and status had an enormous impact, particularly in these surroundings which were designed to oppress people. Naturally, one could not feel free, but one felt the lack of freedom much less keenly if one could give orders to others. The power that one exercised was incredibly great and the social distinction between this upper class of the top people and the dregs of the prisoners was more blatant than that between bourgeoisie and proletariat in a democratic state.

Thus, it was understandable that people for whom these values were important strove to acquire such positions. But it was also understandable that political prisoners who felt that they were up to holding these positions claimed this power not for themselves, but for the prisoners as a whole. If they had not done so, then the life in many camps would have been even less bearable than it was already. Thus, it was definitely in the interests of the prisoners for the politicals to get these positions. However, getting involved in this web of intrigue represented a major threat to one's personal integrity and it required remarkable strength of character not to let oneself be corrupted by either the power or the material advantages. It must be said that a number of Communist functionaries in Buchenwald and a number of Jewish functionaries in Auschwitz-Buna deserve this accolade. However, alongside these shining examples of the triumph which the human spirit could achieve in overcoming the most difficult conditions, there were also phenomena which showed how far people of absolute personal integrity could go astray when they believed it served their cause. […]

The same phenomena which occurred in the highest ranks of the top people were also present among the rest of the camp aristocracy and, if less intensively, then more generally. These included the remainder of the block leaders as well as most of the capos, a few important foremen and authoritative functionaries in the offices and workshops, the sick bay, etc. Here too there were continual intrigues going on. But since they had less access to the SS, the place of the SS was taken by the top ranks of the prisoners. That made the intrigues somewhat less tense and dangerous but, since the group involved was much larger, the number of possible combinations was much higher.

It was by no means unusual for people to fall from the heights of being top people to the deepest depths of the punishment company and punishment details. But it was usually not irrevocable. I saw many fall and rise again, and do so more than once, without the fall being considered dishonorable any more than the inflicted punishments. Most people experienced these ups and downs; there were of course others who remained in the same positions for years so that they were considered part of the furniture, like the watch towers or the bunker. But they were well advised to watch out and not rely on their ability to hang on—on the contrary. When, on one occasion, such a prisoner responded to his removal from office by referring to his years of service in this function, he was told: "then it's high time that you picked up a shovel and went out on a work detail."

Right up until the end of the war, the top rank of the top people was almost exclusively German; in Auschwitz the Poles played a major role for a time. The Germans also dominated the remainder of the camp aristocracy, although here a considerable number of nationals from other countries played a part, as towards the end of the war Jews also did in increasing numbers.

The "Middle Class"

Beneath the top people there was a fairly broad layer which we can call the middle class. They were the room leaders, the foremen, the workers in the workshops and the lower-level clerks and functionaries in the offices, the nurses, clerks, and other functionaries in the sick bay, but one could also add the "junior"

capos and block leaders. This group was very numerous. In Buchenwald, even before the great influx of foreigners, it consisted of 2,000–3,000 prisoners out of a total prisoner population of 10,000. Even in Auschwitz-Buna, where there were no significant workshops, there were around 1,000 out of a total of 10,000.

This group had far less power and prestige than the top people but also less responsibility. The material advantages were quite varied—cooks naturally had enough to eat, the prisoners in the clothing store were well clothed, whereas many foremen only had few advantages compared to the men in their work details. Nevertheless, this group was quite distinct from the mass. This resulted from the type of work they did. Either these prisoners worked in the workshops—that is, indoors—and were employed in their own trades, or as foremen, they did not have to do physical work, or they worked in offices or in the sick bay—also indoors—were seldom supervised and could have long breaks.

In the early years German "Aryans" were given priority. But, after the influx of the foreigners, they too secured numerous positions and, in the final period, as the distinctions began to disappear, even the Jews did, although only the specialists and the long-term prisoners. A knowledge of German was not absolutely necessary, whereas in the case of the top people, it was more or less required for all posts.

In view of the general camp conditions, the life of the middle class can be described as comfortable. Even if a post did not itself give access to more food—as in the kitchen, the sick bay, or office—then working for the SS, contacts with food sources or civilians, and opportunities for barter and deals on the side, all made it possible to get "rations through the back door." The work was sometimes hard—for example, the nurses often had a hard time and in some workshops there was a lot to do—but that was more than compensated by the fact that the SS almost never kept track of this work and could not keep track of it, so that this group did not have too much mental stress.

The very fact that the SS had less ability to keep track of them prompted many middle-class people seriously to neglect their duties. That in turn had an impact on the camp as a whole. Apart from the cases of actual theft from comrades, such as the purloining of food from the kitchen or linen from the clothing store, it was not a matter of indifference for the great mass of ordinary prisoners whether the barrack-room cleaners kept the block clean and used all the available opportunities to acquire fresh linen or shoes or whether the nurses in the sick bay looked after the sick properly; it was also important how many pairs of shoes one's colleagues in the shoe workshop repaired each day and whether the laundry met the camp's needs.

All this depended on the top people performing their duty of supervision. In this connection one can give the Buchenwald prisoners in the camp leadership the highest praise. The laundry, for example, can be described as a model operation, which performed the task for which it was responsible right to the end, despite apparently insuperable difficulties. Also the development of the sick bay in Buchenwald was remarkable, as indeed the Auschwitz sick bay, in the most difficult times, was made from nothing into something very respectable. In both cases this was entirely the prisoners' achievement.

The "Great Mass"

The large number of remaining prisoners lived under the "normal conditions" of the camp. This meant in general: normal rations, work in the open air, and continual supervision by higher-ranking prisoners and SS. In the course of time, however, marked differences emerged, in that workers were selected for armaments plants.

There were major differences in the types of work. These existed even before the war. The question of whether one worked in the quarry or in a building detail could in certain circumstances be a matter of life or death. It was not only the question of how heavy the work was but also its social status. There were heavy types of work, such as, for example, working in the Buchenwald haulage column, which were

highly regarded socially, and there were much heavier types, such as carrying rocks or pulling carts in the quarry, which were considered low-status.

In general the law of the camp was: to him that hath shall be given and from him that hath not shall be taken. The heaviest and dirtiest jobs were given to the weakest, who, as compensation, got the least rest and the smallest number of perks. The lightest and socially most highly regarded jobs were done by the strongest prisoners who, in addition, had bonuses and the opportunity of getting extra rations by the back door. We should also bear in mind that youth was considered a definite advantage and age was mostly regarded as a crime […] hence, in the camps, we can see "master morality" [*Herrenmoral*] in its pure form.

However strange it may sound, there was a justification for this morality. Nietzsche's saying, "whatever is falling should also be pushed," contains a truth even for normal circumstances. In the camp it was almost entirely valid. When applied to conditions there, it meant that in the camp only a few have a chance of coming out alive and those are the strongest ones. Everybody who is old, weak and sick is condemned to death. The possibilities of helping anyone are minimal; whatever I give to anyone I am taking away from someone else. If I give to a weak person then I will be keeping him alive for a bit longer, but in the end I can't save him; at the same time, I am taking away from a strong person and thus weakening him so that he too will become weak and ill. The upshot is that I will plunge both of these people into misfortune.

One can hardly object to this kind of logic. However, who was to judge the ability and, above all, the worthiness of the people being considered? In reality, youth was not a definite advantage, not even in a physical let alone a moral sense. In my experience, people in early middle age with a healthy constitution and firm nerves, with a broad experience of life and strong ties to wife and children had much better chances of coming through than physically strong young men whose nerves were no stronger than their moral views and who had nothing to tie them to normal life outside in freedom.

The point of view expressed in the camp along the lines of: "old boy you've had your day; we young ones want to have something from life after this is all over" sounded much more logical than it was; and if one considers that selection among prisoners was placed in the hands of people who judged based on personal feelings—often the basest kind—and material motives, one can easily work out how distorted the "selection of the fittest" turned out to be.

This explains how such a variety of people survived the camp—valuable politicals as well as scum and nonentities. Chance and arbitrary factors played the main role in this connection as in every other.

Before the war, the majority of the lower class consisted of Jews and Germans of inferior status, mainly the Blacks [according to the camp color code], with the bulk of the heavy and despised jobs being placed on the shoulders of Jews. They remained the pariahs of the camp during the war as well, while foreigners replaced the lower status Germans, particularly from those nations which had larger numbers of prisoners and who, because of their lack of German, played a less significant role in running the camp. "Vitamin B," as personal contacts [*Beziehungen*] were called in Hitler's Germany, was vital in the camp as well and the lack of it was extremely disadvantageous for Russians, Poles and the French. Otherwise, a number of factors determined which nations belonged to the lowest classes in the individual camps.

If one combines the fact that Jews and large groups of foreigners had to do the heaviest work with the fact that they were most exposed to organized theft and that they had to live in the worst accommodation, then one can envisage the gap which existed between them and the top people. In the same period in which the Jews and foreigners were dying within four to six months in the temporary accommodation, the death rate among the upper class was nil and in the middle class, not much above the norm for these age groups.

Within a few weeks, hunger, overwork and having to live in impossible conditions produced a discrete group among the lower class, the:

“Moslems”

I am unable to explain why this name was chosen in Auschwitz or why in Buchenwald, where they were much less common, they were given the name “tired sheikhs” until the Auschwitz expression was adopted there too.

The Moslem [*Muselmann*] was on the lowest level to which a prisoner could sink. The sight of the daily marches in and out of Auschwitz, when thousands of these miserable wretches dragged themselves off to work in the morning only in many cases to be dragged back home in the evening, was appalling. Tired, hungry, morose, filthy, and in rags—that is how one saw them march past the fat camp leader who took the parade all dressed up with his hair smarmed down, smelling of good soap—from “Kanada,” well-fed and complacent, ready at any moment to make a few patronizing remarks and play the camp father or, just as easily, to dole out the most brutal kicks and blows if some poor human wretch aroused his disgust. He was, which in the case of Auschwitz it is unnecessary to mention, invariably a Green. Even the richest tycoon or the most powerful statesman in a democratic state is not so far superior to an unemployed person, who has to sleep on a bench in the open air covered with a newspaper and perhaps has not eaten for days, as this man was to a Moslem. For the rich and powerful can let the poor starve or die; they can rob them of their freedom; they can enjoy everything while he goes miserably to the dogs. But the camp leader in Auschwitz-Buna could do all that and more: he could eat and drink to his heart’s content; he had his own cook and what the camp kitchen did not have was supplied by “Kanada” or the “black exchange” in Buna. Clothes, linen, shoes—as many and as nice ones as he liked, for why else were the Jews dying in the gas chambers of Birkenau? Women—the camp brothel or the thousands of girls in Buna supplied every type that he desired. Art—the camp orchestra with first-class musicians: the leader of the orchestra of the Berlin State Opera, graduates of the Vienna Conservatory were at his disposal. Painters and draughtsmen fulfilled his every wish. In his own sphere he could realize his architectural fantasies just as well as Hitler. The camp supplied personal poets of every quality desired, both for the physical and for the spiritual realms. The fact that he had a troupe of actors at his disposal was just as much a matter of course as the fact that he could order any books he wanted. He had specialists from every country at his disposal to treat his real and imaginary ailments—a Polish surgeon, a French internist, a Hungarian eye doctor and a German ear specialist. It is true that he could only move in a restricted sphere, though not confined to the camp, and of course under supervision. But his escort would have hardly cramped his style any more than personal detectives restrict millionaires or politicians. But what they could not do, he could and did: when he had the urge—and this was not infrequently—he could express his sadistic impulses and beat or kill without any compunction and with impunity, until he had fully satisfied his urges.

And if one wants to object that the camp leader was after all dependent on the SS and could be brought down by them—well, even the most powerful dictator is dependent on somebody and the Auschwitz camp leaders, whom I saw overthrown, landed very softly in comparison to other dictators. They disappeared into a satellite camp and, even if they did not play the same role there, nevertheless, as members of the German master race, they were still top people.

A concentration camp was in reality a world, a world full of contradictions and pitfalls, with a hierarchy which was admittedly shaky, but which could always be defined and in which everybody had his place. He could rise or fall depending on luck and ability, but at any one time he had to take up the position allotted to him and to respect that of others.

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