The Gypsies

The next largest contingent in the camp were the Gypsies. Long before the war the Gypsies were rounded up and put into concentration camps during the campaign against the asocials. One branch of the Federal Criminal Police was solely concerned with supervision of the Gypsies. There were continuous investigations in the Gypsy camps to uncover those who were not true Gypsies; those who had merely drifted in with them. These persons were then delivered to the concentration camps as work dodgers or asocials. Furthermore, the Gypsy camps were continuously checked for biological reasons. Himmler wanted to preserve the two main tribes of Gypsies, the names of which I have forgotten, at all costs. Himmler believed they were direct descendents of the Indo-Germanic aborigines and had preserved their customs and culture pure and intact. For research purposes they were all gathered together, accurately registered, and put under state protection as an historical treasure. Later they were to be assembled from all over Europe and granted a limited reservation.

In 1937–38 all wandering Gypsies were brought together in so-called living camps near large cities, so that the police could watch them. In 1942 the order came that all Gypsies, including those with Gypsy blood living in Germany proper, were to be arrested and transported to Auschwitz regardless of sex or age. The only exceptions were those who were officially recognized as pure Gypsies of the two main tribes. These were to be settled in the district of Ödenburg on Lake Neusiedler. Those transported to Auschwitz were to be housed in a family camp for the duration of the war.

The guidelines by which the arrests were carried out had not been precise enough. The various police departments interpreted them in different ways and thereby arrested persons who could not possibly have been considered Gypsies. In many cases highly decorated soldiers who had been wounded several times were arrested while on leave from the front because their fathers, mothers, grandparents, or other relatives were either Gypsies or of Gypsy blood. Even a very early member of the Nazi Party whose grandfather had settled in Leipzig was among them. He had a large business
in Leipzig and was a World War I veteran who was decorated several times. A female university student who was a group leader of the Berlin League of Nazi Girls was also found to be among them. Many more such cases happened. I reported these matters to the Federal Criminal Police Headquarters. This resulted in continual checking in the Gypsy camp, and many were released. Because of the size of the prison population, it was hardly noticeable.

I can no longer recall how many Gypsies, or those with mixed blood, were in Auschwitz.\(^1\) I only know they completely filled the section of the camp designated for ten thousand prisoners. However, the general conditions were suited for everything but a family camp. Every condition was lacking, even if the intention was to keep these Gypsies only for the duration of the war. It was almost impossible to feed the children properly, even though for a time I was able to cheat my way through the Nutrition Supply Office by referring to the Himmler order, so that I could get suitable food for the infants. However, soon even this source dried up since the Nutrition Center vetoed any kind of special food for children in the concentration camps.

Then came Himmler’s visit in July 1942. I showed him every aspect of the Gypsy camp. He inspected everything thoroughly. He saw the overcrowded barracks, the inadequate hygienic conditions, the overflowing infirmaries, and the sick in the isolation ward. He also saw the cancer-like illness in children called “Noma,” which always gave me a chill because this illness reminded me of the lepers I had seen in Palestine a long time before. The emaciated bodies of children had huge holes in their cheeks, big enough for a person to look through; this slow rotting of the flesh of the living made me shudder.

Himmler learned about the death rate, which, compared to the whole camp, was still relatively low, even though the death rate among the children was exceptionally high. I do not believe that many of the newborns survived the first weeks. Himmler saw everything in detail, as it really was. Then he ordered me to gas them. Those who were still able to work were to be selected, just as was done with the Jews.

I pointed out to him that the types of people being sent did not really correspond with what he had planned for Auschwitz. He then issued the order that the Federal Criminal Police Office was to begin screening the Gypsies as quickly as possible. This took two years. The Gypsies able to work were transferred to other camps. By August 1944 there were only about four thousand gypsies left, and these had to go into the gas chambers. Until that time they did not know what fate was in store for them. Only as they were marched barrack after barrack to Crematory I did they figure out what was going on. It was not easy to get them into the gas chamber. I personally did not witness this. Schwarzhuber told me that no previous extermination of the Jews had been as difficult as this. It had been especially hard for him because he knew almost every one of them and had a good relationship with them. By nature the Gypsies were as trusting as children.

In spite of the adverse conditions, the majority of the Gypsies, as far as I could tell, had not suffered psychologically very much because of the confinement; if one overlooks the fact that they could not travel around anymore as they were accustomed to doing. Their previous primitive lifestyle had accustomed them to close living quarters, poor hygienic conditions, and poor nourishment. Even illness and the high death rate were not taken seriously by them. In fact, for the most part they still behaved like children. They were still spontaneous in their thinking and behavior. They loved to play even during work, which they never took seriously. They were able to see humor even in the most difficult situations. They were optimists.

I have never seen a scowl or a hate-filled expression on a Gypsy’s face. Whenever I arrived in their camp, they immediately ran out of their barracks, played their instruments, let their children dance, and performed their usual tricks. There was a large playground where the children could frolic to their heart’s desire with every kind of toy. When I talked to them, they were open and trusting in their answers and made all sorts of requests. It always seemed to me that they really didn’t understand that they were imprisoned.

There was fierce feuding among them. Their hot blood and quarrelsome natures made this inevitable because the many different tribes and clans were forced to live in close association. Within their clans, however, they stuck together as if they were glued and they were very devoted to one another. When the selection of the able-bodied workers began, it was necessary to separate and tear apart the clans. There were many emotional scenes, much sorrow and many tears.

We were able to calm and console them somewhat by telling them that they would all soon be together again. For a while we kept the working Gypsies in Auschwitz proper. They did everything possible to see their clans again, even though it was only from a distance. Oftentimes we had to search for the younger ones after roll call because they had sneaked back to their clans by using all kinds of tricks, because they were homesick.

In fact, when I was in Oranienburg with Camp Inspector Glücks, I was often approached by Gypsies who recognized me from Auschwitz. They always asked for news of their clan members, even though they had been gassed long before. It was difficult for me to evade their questions.

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\(^1\) There were sixteen thousand Gypsies registered in Birkenau in the spring of 1943. The Auschwitz Museum reports that from the beginning of 1943 a total of 20,943 Gypsies were registered. From this number seven thousand died by September 1943. Lucie Adelsberger, *Auschwitz: A Factual Report*, Broszat, p. 104.
because they were so trusting.

Even though they caused me a great deal of aggravation when I was Kommandant of Auschwitz, they were my favorite prisoners, if one could say something like that.

They simply could not stick to one job for a long period of time. They loved to “Gypsy around” everywhere. The job they wanted the most was the transport Kommando because it allowed them to move around everywhere and satisfy their curiosity and also get a chance to steal. This urge to steal and to roam around is born into them and cannot be stamped out. Also, they have an entirely different moral viewpoint. They do not believe that stealing is absolutely bad. They cannot understand why a man should be punished for it. I am talking about the majority of those in prison, of the true, restless, wandering Gypsies who constantly move about and also those of mixed Gypsy blood who have adapted to this lifestyle. I am not referring to those who settled in the cities. They have already adopted too much from civilization, even though it wasn’t always the best part.

It would have been interesting to observe their lifestyle and their activities, if I didn’t know all the horror that lay ahead for them, namely the extermination order. In Auschwitz only the doctors and I knew about this order until the middle of 1944. The doctors had the order from Himmler to separate the sick, especially the children, without making it noticeable. It was the children who had the most trust in the doctors. Surely nothing is more difficult than to have to go through all this, to be cold, without mercy, and without compassion.