



Working As An Interpreter Between A Monolingual Perpetrator And Multilingual Detainees In Auschwitz: An Account From Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man*

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Abstract: The Nazis constructed Auschwitz by the end of 1943. Originally designed as an extermination camp, the leadership's decision to utilise all human resources available, including Jews, transformed it into a labour camp. The camps classified the detainees into categories that encompassed all ages, conditions, origins, languages, cultures, and traditions. Deported from various European countries, these detainees spoke up to forty different languages, creating an extraordinarily polyglot society. However, the official language, or a wide range of sociolinguistic terms, was German. The detainees struggled with the German language, as all the signs were in German, which they didn't know or understand. This presented them with a multitude of challenges. They were required to complete everything exclusively in German. When they tried to communicate in their native language, they faced physical abuse and humiliation. The SS guards often used interpreters to translate their orders to detainees. These interpreters played an important part in the concentration camps' linguistic confusion. This paper seeks to highlight the circumstances of interpreters in a multilingual concentration camp, emphasising the similarity of their fate to that of other detainees through an account from Primo Levi's masterpiece literary work *If This is a Man*.

Keywords: Interpreters, Auschwitz, Multilingualism, Nazi Concentration Camps, Auschwitz

A brief introduction to concentration camps

The Nazi concentration camps were a symbol of the state's destructive power. The SS-operated concentration camps forcefully detained, incarcerated, mistreated, and executed millions of innocent individuals. The detainees endured humiliation, degradation, unsanitary conditions, illness, fear, malnutrition, strict discipline, and unpredictable acts of violence. The regime subjected the detainees to forced work and systematic mass killings. Auschwitz, the biggest and deadliest SS concentration camp, killed two million people, including one million Jews, during the Third Reich's 12-year rule.

The establishment of concentration camps, such as Auschwitz, was an integral part of the Nazi political system. They detained government opponents before World War II. Dissident prisoners were isolated, "re-educated," and terrorized. After the war, the governing ideology used the camps to exterminate anti-Nazi resistance members, entire national groups deemed racially hostile or inferior, and individuals who opposed the German conquering and occupation machinery (Piper, 1994). One of the main centres of the Holocaust, Auschwitz (Oswiecim in Polish), refers to a network of German concentration camps in eastern Poland. Auschwitz was the one place where the largest number of Jews were killed during the Holocaust. Auschwitz has come to represent the Nazi will to exterminate the Jews because its victims came from across Europe and it was in operation longer than any other killing camp (Krome, 2013). The SS was the most feared security police force under the Nazi state. The SS (Schutzstaffel) means "defence corps" in German.

Initially, the Nazi paramilitary SA (Sturmabteilung, or storm troopers) controlled the SS, which first protected Adolf Hitler. Later, the SS became both a police force and an army within the regular army, and the Waffen SS administered the concentration camps. The SS originated in the 1920s, and under Heinrich Hitler's direction, the force became a lethal killing machine for Nazi racial policies (Horvitz & Catherwood, 2006).

The SS guards made “selections” on a railroad siding ramp outside Birkenau Camp. Without any specific criteria, the SS guards selected numerous individuals, including children, the elderly, the sick, and both men and women, and sent them into gas chambers for execution. Upon entering as prisoners, the camp prioritized labor for those who arrived by other transports and were physically fit. Upon their arrival, the camp exterminated over a million Jews in gas chambers and cremated them in its crematories without tally (Gutman, 1994).

In the first chapter of *If This is a Man*, "The Journey," Primo Levi discusses such random selection. Fossoli, the main internment camp near the town of Modena, Emilia, imprisoned Levi. Italian authorities had previously run Fossoli, but on February 9th, 1944, the SS took control of the camp and immediately started organising deportation trains. Along with Levi, six hundred and fifty prisoners were on the freight train bound for Auschwitz. They reached their destination four days later. As soon as the deportees stepped off the train, they conducted the first selection. "In less than ten minutes, we had collected all the fit men in a group." What happened to the others—to the women, to the children, to the old men—we could establish neither then nor later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply." (Levi, 1959, p. 11) The rest of the deportees were mainly men who were useful for work in camps. A truck loaded them up and transported them to Auschwitz. After twenty minutes, the truck stopped in front of a large gate; above it, a sign brightly illuminated: “Arbeit macht frei” (Work makes us free).

The Nazi forces had constructed Auschwitz by the end of 1943. It was supposed to be an extermination camp, but it became a labour camp by accident when the shortage of workers in German industry became so severe that the leadership decided to employ all human resources available, including Jews. The Auschwitz camp documented approximately 400,000 individuals as prisoners, with only a small fraction, amounting to a few thousand, managing to survive.

Levi refers to Auschwitz as a hybrid camp—in fact, an empire of camps that both exploited and exterminated prisoners. Levi gave the clearest overview of its organisational system, as Cicioni describes this scenario:

There was not one camp at Auschwitz: there were thirty-nine of them. There was the town of Auschwitz and inside it there was a camp, which was Auschwitz proper the capital of the system. Two kilometres further down there was Birkenau, Auschwitz II, where the gas chambers were. This was a huge camp, subdivided into four – six adjoining camps. Further up there was the factory, and by the factory there was Monowitz, or Auschwitz III. That is where I was. This camp belonged to the factory, which had financed it. [...] In my camp there were about 10,000 of us; in Auschwitz I there were 15 or 20,000; in Birkenau many more, 70 or 80,000... the camps' central Administration was in Auschwitz I, and the death camp was Birkenau. The system in Auschwitz resulted from the experience gained in all the other camps with regard to both forced labour and the extermination of the prisoners (Camon, 1987 as cited in Cicioni, 1995, p.21).

Categories of prisoners

The camps divided their prisoners into distinct categories. In the second chapter titled “On the Bottom” in *If This is a Man*, Levi talks about being called a *Haftlinge* and writes about the three categories of prisoners: “We soon learned that the guests of the Lager are divided into three categories: criminals, political, and Jews. All are dressed in stripes; all are *Haftlinge*, but the criminals wear a green triangle next to the number sewn on their jacket; the political prisoners wear a red triangle; and the Jews, who form the large majority, wear the Jewish star, red and yellow” (Levi, 1959, p. 29).

Surviving was the toughest task amid hunger, cold, beatings, exploitation, and exhaustion, especially when you had lost everything that belonged to you. Only by quickly adapting to Lager's norms and life could one survive. The Nazis established Lager, also known as the concentration camp, as an experimental location

where they confined several captives, varying in age, physical state, nationality, language, culture, and traditions, behind a fence of barbed wire. The SS imposed strict regulations and control over these detainees' lives. Here, one must struggle constantly without any respite and is desperately and ferociously alone. "If one doesn't know how to become an Organiser, kombinator, Prominent, soon becomes a Muselmann and there is no other way for survival" (Ibid., pp. 102–3).

Levi's description reveals that the Lager, also known as the concentration camp, functioned like a machine, transforming a man into an animal. The animal strives to survive and will go to any lengths when its own life is in jeopardy. The inmates not only endured beatings, starvation, humiliations, and cold conditions, but also faced silence due to their lack of German language skills. The prisoners, deported from a variety of European nations and speaking a wide variety of European languages, found it difficult to bond over their shared experiences of loss and suffering.

Multilingualism in Nazi concentration camp

In a single camp, the detainees spoke up to forty distinct languages, making camp culture an exceptionally polyglot civilization. The official language, or a high variety in sociolinguistic terminology, was German. The camp staff used German as their official language for administrative purposes, while detainees of many nationalities employed it as a means of communication (Heidi Aschenberg, 2016). The detainees started facing difficulties with the German language with their admission to the concentration camp. All the signage was in German, a language they don't know or comprehend. This led to numerous problems for the inmates.

Hitler's German security personnel, especially the SS, were truly uneducated, as they didn't clearly distinguish between people who didn't understand their language and people who did not understand anything. They enforced the use of German exclusively. If someone tried to express himself or herself in another foreign language, he or she was beaten into silence and shown his or her place. They were not considered human beings. Even the Kapo, who led squads of workers, communicated with each other and gave commands only in German. When classifying prisoners, the Nazis considered German language skills to be just as important as "race." German guards, who gave all commands in German, beat prisoners if they disobeyed. Those inmates who did not learn the language, or at least the essential words used in camp, had a far lower chance of surviving and rising in the convict hierarchy (Czech, 1994).

In the fourth chapter, titled "Communicating" in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi explains how understanding the orders received, prohibitions, and following the regulations were crucial for one's survival in camp. When two people communicate, they produce information, and one cannot live without it. Primo Levi writes (2017):

Most of the prisoners who did not know German- almost all the Italians, in other words died within the first ten to fifteen days of their arrival: at the first sight, from starvation, exposure, exhaustion, or disease; but on closer examination from insufficient information. If they had been able to communicate with more senior prisoners, they would have had an easier time getting their bearing. They would have learned more quickly how to procure clothes, shoes, and illegal food; to avoid the toughest jobs and the often-deadly encounters with the SS; and to manage the inevitable diseases without making fatal errors (p.78).

Primo Levi was intelligent enough and understood the importance of communication. Luckily, he had studied and learned some German in his school days to better understand physics and chemistry. Knowing German in a concentration camp meant life. Some Alsatians were bilingual and knew German or Yiddish to some extent. Levi convinced one of them to provide him with a private and accelerated course. Levi offered him pieces of bread as payment, as there was no other currency. This Alsatian taught him the meaning of kapo.

Interpreters in concentration camps

Interpreters played a crucial role in the babel of languages in the concentration camps. There were typically three types of interpreters working in Nazi concentration camps. First, there were SS personnel; many of them were Volksdeutsche who spoke Polish or Czech well, or other personnel with a working understanding

of languages. There was a separate team of official translators (Lagerdolmetscher) who had to translate welcoming speeches upon the arrival of new detainees and during punishments inflicted upon someone. Among their many roles within the jail, policing was a common one for these so-called prisoner functionaries. Most so-called "interpreters" were in fact impromptu language mediators who helped their fellow inmates communicate and, in many instances, sought to lessen their ordeal (Tyruk et al., 2015). Prisoners primarily served as interpreters in the concentration camps, using their linguistic proficiency to translate for both the perpetrators and their fellow prisoners. This placed them in a position where they had no choice but to make judgements on loyalty and survival, and the act of mediating went beyond the typical modern beliefs about interpreting and translating (Wolf, 2016).

There were a wide variety of language pairs for which interpreters were required. During interrogations of the Polish, Slovakian, and Hungarian detainees, as well as Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war, a group of young multilingual Jewish girls translated largely from German into Polish. The other language combinations were German into French, German into Italian, German into Czech, and German into Russian. The interpreters' responsibilities ranged from helping during the trials to addressing incoming inmates, explaining the terms of their confinement, and interpreting for them during interrogations (Tyruk, 2011).

Working as interpreters in concentration camps did not provide an improved quality of life, an increase in rations, or a means to avoid execution. However, this employment delayed their selection for the gas chambers, forcing the interpreter to side with the criminal.

Primo Levi's encounter with the interpreter

Upon their arrival at the concentration camp, Levi and the other detainees had a mandatory disinfection shower. To be completely clean and free of infections, it was normal for all newly arrived inmates in the concentration camp to leave their clothing behind, get their heads and beards shaved, and have a shower in the main hall using a mixture of water and medication. Levi discusses a certain narrative. In the second chapter of *If This is a Man*, titled "On the Bottom," Levi describes his first interaction with an interpreter while waiting for instructions from other newly arrived convicts after taking a shower. The convicts discover themselves in a spacious chamber completely submerged in frigid water, rendering it impossible for anyone to sit down. The circumstances force them to stand and wait. They are experiencing frustration due to the delay. Levi writes (1959):

We are not dead. The door is opened, and an SS man enters, smoking. He looks at us slowly and asks, "Wer kann Deutsch?" One of us whom I have never seen, named Flesch, moves forward; he will be our interpreter. The SS man makes a long calm speech; the interpreter translates [...] I had never seen old men naked. Mr. Bergmann wore a truss and asked the interpreter if he should take it off, and the interpreter hesitated. But the German understood and spoke seriously to the interpreter pointing to someone. We saw the interpreter swallow and then he said: "The officer says, take off the truss, and you will be given that of Mr. Coen." One could see the words coming bitterly out of Flesch's mouth; this was the German manner of laughing (p.16).

Primo Levi provides an account of Flesch, a prisoner who steps forward to translate the words of a German commander, offering valuable insight into the role of camp interpreters. His attitude clearly indicates that he is not doing it willingly, since he has a precise understanding of the meaning of those lines in the German language. Flesch is only doing his duty. He must repeat the harsh remarks of the German commander, regardless of personal preference. The inmates often felt a sense of optimism upon seeing a compatriot serving as an official translator in Auschwitz. However, this view quickly changed when the interpreter began translating from German into other languages. Detainees questioned most of the translators, but they simply relayed the information they received as instructions. At times, the interpreters understood that answering every question the detainees asked would be pointless, as the camp's primary function was to issue commands rather than provide answers. Interpreters had to do this even if they didn't want to, as part of the terrible prison camp system.

Conclusion

An interpreter is often a facilitator of communication between two individuals, serving as a bridge to the information gap. However, the Nazi government exploited this noble purpose by using interpreters to explain its statements, which caused dread, despair, and horror among the captives. The Nazis obligated the

interpreters to witness and document their abhorrent actions against innocent prisoners. Serving as an interpreter provided the inmates with a somewhat extended lifespan and protected them from immediate and arbitrary physical abuse. However, the appalling circumstances their compatriots endured emotionally devastated them. The Nazis coerced the interpreters into complicity in their atrocities. Like other prisoners, the concentration administration could kill the interpreters if they proved ineffective.

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