

Jewish Faith and Identity in the Center of Nazi Mass Murder – The Sonderkommando-Prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau

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The Yiddish testimonies I will focus on were written by the Polish-Jewish prisoners Leyb Langfus, Zalmen Lewental, and Zalmen Gradowski during their forced labor in the Sonderkommando in the crematoria and gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau from the beginning of 1943 until autumn 1944. Many of the events in the Yiddish memoirs took place in the area of the gas chambers, so the reader witnesses the victims' last moments through the eye of the writer. As it is described in one text passage, the Jewish victims choose to sing songs like 'HaTikvah' as a group, which can be interpreted as it united them in their hope, their belief in a Jewish spirit, and their Yidishkayt. Furthermore, it was the last moment of calling for resistance, as physical or spiritual resistance, like calling the 'Shma Yisrael' by a Rabbi in the undressing room in another text passage. Even while knowing that they are part of the destruction of Jewish communities in Europe, they did not give up hope in the future of the Jewish people. These passages describe acts of reassurance of the victims' Jewish identity, reclaiming their humanness and dignity.

The Yiddish testimonies of the Sonderkommando are less well researched until now, due to the original language and often contextualized in the frame of other testimonies. My study of these testimonies aims to fill this gap. My hypothesis for the research is that these Yiddish testimonies are unique in their Jewish perspective, which was shaped by the authors' Yidishkayt and their characteristic as firsthand eyewitnesses of the mass murders. My research focusses on the traces of Jewish identity of the authors and described victims, their beliefs as well as their worldviews.