

JUST A GLASS: An Analysis of the Role of Alcohol in *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz-Birkenau

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While the role of alcohol amongst perpetrators of the Holocaust has received some scholarly attention, little focus has been paid to its use within the Nazi concentration camp system specifically. Using Auschwitz-Birkenau as a case study, this paper draws on accounts from survivors, perpetrators, and civilians to demonstrate the presence of alcohol in various contexts of camp life and explore both who used it and for what purposes, from prisoners to guards and from barter good to accompaniment to the perpetration of violence. This paper both demonstrates the value of studying the role of alcohol within the camp and argues for the need to address this gap in the scholarship so as to better understand the lived experiences of those who composed the camp's population and the perpetration of the Holocaust more generally, as well as identifying some specific areas likely warranting future research.

Introduction

In his account of the nearly five years he spent in *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz-Birkenau, *Anus Mundi*, Wiesław Kielar details an interaction between Edward “Edek” Galiński—his friend and an accomplice in attempting to escape—and the *Blockführer* Pestek:¹ “Just a glass, Herr Blockführer. A little glassful won’t hurt you. No one will notice, because everybody drinks.”² The SS guard accepts, sharing a glass and conversation with Edek and Kielar. While it may come as a surprise, this is not the only documented instance of such an event occurring within the camp.³ Although likely not as ubiquitous as Galiński’s comment might suggest, the selection of sources concerning Auschwitz-Birkenau consulted for this paper indicates that alcohol was present in several different aspects of camp life—appearing in other contexts as seemingly unlikely as a shared drink between prisoners and an SS guard. Given alcohol’s presence in different facets of life inside the camp—some of which will be explored throughout this paper—it warrants examination as a subject of historical inquiry to contextualize and address its relative absence in the analyses of camp life and, in turn, the history of the camp and those who experienced it more generally. As historian Edward B. Westermann argues, despite what he terms the “ubiquity” of its presence, “there has been little scholarly analysis concerning the use of alcohol or its role in the process of mass murder” during the Holocaust.⁴ The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value of analyzing the use of alcohol within the camp as a unique

¹ *Blockführer*, or block leaders, were Schutzstaffel (SS) men in charge of prisoner barracks. For more information, see: Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: FSG Books, 2015), 112, index 834.

² Wiesław Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, trans. Susanne Flatauer (New York: Times Books, 1980), 198.

³ Piotr Setkiewicz, ed., *Voices of Memory 13: The SS Garrison in KL Auschwitz*, trans. William Brand (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2018), 149, 150.

⁴ Edward B. Westermann, “Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 30, no. 1 (April 15, 2016): 1.

phenomenon—as well as identify some areas warranting future research and inquiry—by identifying the roles played by alcohol in Auschwitz-Birkenau across certain cross-sections of its population.

Source Base Limitations

It is important to note that the number of sources consulted for this paper does not begin to address what is available in the form of memoirs, camp records, photographs, and other sources—especially regarding those yet to be translated into English. Nor is this selection intended as a representative sample. The primary sources consulted consist predominantly of accounts from eyewitnesses in the form of either memoirs or given testimony, including the voices of civilians, the SS garrison, and survivors, in translation if not originally published in English.

Perhaps most important to note is that we simply do not have the majority of victim’s voices. We do not hear from those who did not speak or write about their experiences, nor those that did not survive; those voices that are extant and available to us belong disproportionately to what Primo Levi—himself a survivor of Auschwitz—has described as a “privileged” group, “a minority within the Lager [camp] population [who] nevertheless ... represent a potent majority among survivors.”⁵ The reader should remain aware of this limitation, as it likely colors even this limited sample; in short, any conclusions drawn are tentative and require further research.

In terms of secondary scholarship, Westermann’s conclusion regarding the relative lack of scholarship in this area as one of the seemingly few scholars focusing specifically on the role of alcohol during the Holocaust appears to hold true in the context of the concentration camp system. Alcohol is mentioned by historians of the Holocaust, but often only obliquely and is rarely featured as the focus of analysis; more often than not it is mentioned primarily in the context of its use by perpetrators rather than the prisoner population or other groups. Indeed, while a seminal text in the study of perpetrators of the Holocaust published as far back as 1992, Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, does raise the role of alcohol in the East and explores its use by perpetrators as a coping mechanism—opening the door for historians to begin to analyze this phenomena—very few scholars apart from Westermann seem to have adopted the role of alcohol during the Holocaust as the focus of their analyses.⁶ In the context of research for this paper, no English-language scholarship was located that specifically addresses the role of alcohol within the camp system to any degree of depth; rather, when mentioned, it is primarily either passed over without comment or discussed only briefly.

Alcohol in Auschwitz-Birkenau

The role which alcohol played throughout the camp for those that had access to it varied across different contexts. For some, it was a means by which to cope with the intense psychological stress of camp life. For others, it functioned as a currency to curry favor and special privileges or acquire needed material goods. In the case of some members of the SS garrison, alcohol was also likely a coping mechanism, as

⁵ Carolina Franzen, “Holocaust Survivors’ Memoirs - Difficult Questions,” in *The More I Know, The Less I Understand: Young Researchers’ Essays on Witnessing Auschwitz*, ed. Bożena Karwowska and Anja Nowak (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2017), 131; Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 40.

⁶ Edward B. Westermann, “Chapter 2: ‘Ordinary Drinkers’ and Ordinary ‘Males’? Alcohol, Masculinity, and Atrocity in the Holocaust,” in *Beyond “Ordinary Men”: Christopher R. Browning and Holocaust Historiography* (Leiden, Nederlande: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019), 30.

well as a factor in the perpetration of violence—it was surely present during a number of documented instances. Furthermore, for those that did have access to alcohol, it could fulfill more than one of these roles—currency, coping mechanism, or potential factor in the perpetration of violence.

Camp Population

Within the population of Auschwitz-Birkenau, individuals belonging to four main categories are documented in consulted source materials as having used alcohol.⁷ Firstly, there was the SS garrison.⁸ It was divided into roughly two main groups: the guard troop battalion and the commandant staff, with the latter composing the camp's administration.⁹ Of these two groups, the guard troop made up the majority, accounting for 72-82% of total SS camp personnel in the years 1940-1942.¹⁰ While the SS garrison was predominantly male, a small number of women did serve in three different formations, tasked respectively with duties in the hospital for SS men, the office of the commandant, and the women's camp. Nurses and German Red Cross sisters composed the first group, with so-called *SS-Helferinnen* constituting the second—working as telephone, radio operators, and the like. The last group were female overseers either in the women's camp or tasked with supervising external work details.¹¹ While the majority of the garrison were Germans holding German citizenship, known as *Reichsdeutsche*, a significant portion—approximately 46% of those who served in the camp—came from outside the Reich's pre-1939 borders, some of whom did not have German as their mother tongue; termed *Volksdeutsche*, the ideology of National Socialism considered them ethnic Germans and therefore suitable to serve within the ranks of the SS, with countries of origin including Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia.¹²

Secondly, there were the prisoners. In an attempt to erase evidence of the genocide they had perpetrated, the destruction of much of the relevant documentation by the SS in January 1945 precludes a determining of the exact demographics of Auschwitz-Birkenau; however, the extant camp records do provide some insight into the makeup of the prisoner population.¹³ While the prisoner population was predominantly Polish when the camp was established in 1940, from 1943 onwards Jewish prisoners of various nationalities constituted the majority.¹⁴ As historian Franciszek Piper writes, “Jewish citizens of almost all of the countries of Europe, and

⁷ It is worth noting that some prisoners—primarily those of Auschwitz III Monowitz—did have limited contact with English prisoners of war, who themselves form a potential fifth group. They are omitted here due to a lack of explicit references to their use of alcohol in the sources consulted. However, it is known that alcohol was present in the English prisoner of war camp and that English POWs did provide “a great deal of help even though any contact with [inmates] was strictly forbidden,” as per: Hermann Langbein, *People in Auschwitz* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), 462; Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (London: Folio Society, 2009), 203.

⁸ For a detailed accounting of the organization, duties, equipment, and other particulars of the SS garrison, see Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 7-35.

⁹ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 10, 15.

¹⁰ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 10.

¹¹ While the female overseers were often mistakenly referred to as “SS women”, they were, at least in formal terms, “civilian private contractors.” Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 26-27.

¹² Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 32; for an exploration of the concept of “*Volksdeutsche*” within National Socialist ideology, see Doris L. Bergen, “The Nazi Concept of ‘*Volksdeutsche*’ and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939-45,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (1994): 569-82.

¹³ Waclaw Długoborski and Franciszek Piper, eds., *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp*, vol. 2 (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000), 39.

¹⁴ Długoborski and Piper, *Auschwitz, 1940-1945*, 2:40.

even from other continents, were in the transports to Auschwitz.”¹⁵ A handwritten report produced in 1944 by the camp resistance movement and drawn from SS records lists Jewish prisoners of German, Polish, Hungarian, Slovak, Czech, Croatian, Dutch, Belgian, Italian, Greek, French, and Norwegian nationality across Auschwitz I, II, and III.¹⁶ During the same period, the second largest group of prisoners was composed of what the SS termed political prisoners, also from numerous countries.¹⁷ In addition, there are records of Jehovah’s Witnesses, priests, and Russian prisoners of war—amongst still other categories used by the SS to classify prisoners: “Asocial,” “Gypsies” (Sinti and Roma), “Homosexuals,” and those in “Probationary Custody” or “Reeducation.”¹⁸

Thirdly, there were the *Kapos*.¹⁹ In his work *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi defines *Kapos* as “those who occupied commanding positions: the chiefs ... of the labor squads, the barracks chiefs, the clerks, all the way to the world ... of the prisoners who performed diverse at most times delicate duties in the camps’ administrative offices, the Political Section ... the Labor Service, and the punishment cells.”²⁰ They occupied a space within the camp which Levi terms the grey zone; Stef Craps summarizes this concept as encompassing:

Victims who compromise and collaborate with their oppressors to varying degrees and with varying degrees of freedom of choice in exchange for preferential treatment. Levi insists that one should refrain from passing easy judgment on these morally ambiguous privileged prisoners, who found themselves flung into an infernal environment and who, moreover, did not constitute a monolithic group but came in many different shades of grey, with different levels of culpability.²¹

Lastly, there were civilians who were not prisoners within the camp. These included individuals—often German civilians—hired by German companies to do specialized work inside the camp, sometimes alongside prisoners; furthermore, local Poles also came into contact with prisoners, primarily when the latter were tasked with labor outside of the confines of the camp.²² Within the limited scope of this paper, primary focus will be placed on the former two groups of the camp population—the SS garrison and prisoners—as the sources consulted provide the most information for said groups, allowing for the most potentially representative picture.

Alcohol and the SS

For the men composing the SS garrison at Auschwitz-Birkenau, sources indicate that alcohol played a role for at least some. First and foremost, it is essential to note that they were the sole group explicitly permitted alcohol by camp authorities. Indeed, the SS leadership attempted to use alcohol as “both a literal and metaphorical lubricant

¹⁵ Franciszek Piper, “Auschwitz Concentration Camp: How It Was Used in the Nazi System of Terror and Genocide and in the Economy of the Third Reich,” in *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, by U. S. Holocaust Memorial Committee and Walter Z. Bacharach, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 375.

¹⁶ Długoborski and Piper, *Auschwitz, 1940-1945*, 2:42.

¹⁷ Nationalities of political prisoners in said document are listed as German, Polish, Czech, Dutch, Rumanian [*sic*], French, Russian, and Yugoslavian. Długoborski and Piper, 2:42.

¹⁸ Długoborski and Piper, *Auschwitz, 1940-1945*, 2:40-42.

¹⁹ For more information on the role of *Kapos*, see the former for a more general history of *Kapos* in the entire camp system and the latter for Auschwitz-Birkenau specifically: Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, 512-27; Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 143-77.

²⁰ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 45.

²¹ Stef Craps, “The Grey Zone,” *Témoigner. Entre Histoire et Mémoire. Revue Pluridisciplinaire de La Fondation Auschwitz*, no. 118 (October 1, 2014): 203.

²² Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 449-68.

for creating camaraderie” within the garrison, especially as a means to bridge the social gap between officers and enlisted men.²³ Evening socials—events which were quickly made mandatory for all personnel—featured beer, although “vodka played the leading role,” according to one SS man.²⁴ An SS officers’ club was also established at the onset of the camp’s operation, with a contemporary account attesting to the sounds of revelry which emanated from it, continuing late into the night along with instances of property destruction which occurred as a result of the drunken behavior of SS men upon leaving.²⁵ The free beer provided on at least certain occasions may have helped to fuel this behavior.²⁶

Based on the accounts of the Polish women and girls who were forced to work in the homes of SS families living within the vicinity of the camp, it is evident that drinking parties not officially organized by camp authorities were also a regular staple of social life for some members of the garrison, including officers. It is worth noting that when a family did not engage in this practice, it was deemed worthy of note as an exception to the norm by the Polish domestic workers who provided testimony—potentially indicating its prevalence.²⁷ Additionally, these testimonies mention the consumption of alcohol by women married to SS men, both with their husbands and independently, indicating that its consumption was not a strictly gendered endeavor.²⁸

The legal supply of alcohol available to members of the SS provided them with an item in demand on the camp’s black market; while much of the camp was cognizant of the fact that incoming transports of prisoners “frequently carried property of significant value,” it was “the SS men ... who grew rich,” forcing prisoners to steal on their behalf, at times paying for jewelry and other valuable items stolen from victims with that which was available to them: vodka, a good the SS men had far readier access to than most prisoners.²⁹ While such trade was illegal, it was nevertheless present.

Furthermore, punishment records kept by the garrison reflect that intoxication was a part of numerous breaches of discipline on the part of the camp’s guards. Instances range from the failure to salute a superior officer and sharing alcohol with a prisoner or *Kapo* to getting into brawls and becoming so intoxicated so as to fail to appear for duty the following day.³⁰ These findings indicate a continued trend within camps operated by the SS, with “drunkenness” being listed as one of the most common reasons for punishment at Dachau as far back as 1937.³¹ Further research is needed to determine whether this is indicative of a high prevalence of consumption within SS guard troops, limited tolerance of excessive or conspicuous consumption by the SS, or some combination of the two, as well as how alcohol’s role amongst the garrison at Auschwitz-Birkenau contrasted with other camps and the SS more generally.

²³ Edward B. Westermann, “Drinking Rituals, Masculinity, and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany,” *Central European History* 51, no. 3 (September 2018): 367; Piotr Setkiewicz, ed., *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*, trans. William Brand (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2017), 7; Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 29-30.

²⁴ Setkiewicz, *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*, 7; Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 29, 66.

²⁵ Setkiewicz, *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*, 37.

²⁶ Constantine FitzGibbon and Krystyna Michalik, trans., *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS* (Oświęcim, Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2012), 166.

²⁷ Setkiewicz, *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*, 18-19, 27, 57.

²⁸ Setkiewicz, *The Private Lives of the Auschwitz SS*, 39, 76.

²⁹ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 9; Janusz Nel Siedlecki, Krystyn Olszewski, and Tadeusz Borowski, *We Were in Auschwitz* (New York: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2000), 14.

³⁰ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 145, 149-50, 160.

³¹ Christopher Dillon, *Dachau and the SS: A Schooling in Violence, Dachau and the SS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 65.

In addition to consumption while off-duty, at least some members of the garrison consumed substantial amounts of alcohol while actively fulfilling their roles and duties in the camp's operation. Accounts from both prisoners and members of the garrison themselves attest to this.³² In her work *Hope is the Last to Die*, survivor Halina Birenbaum repeatedly relates the intoxication of the SS men who guarded her—even referring to their state at times as being “dead-drunk.”³³ Another example comes from the memoir of Wladimir Bilan, an SS man who served in the political department of the camp. Writing in 1944, he describes this period of camp life as being:

truly a vodka-fueled time, because vodka was drunk all day and everywhere. Soldiers could be seen carrying vodka in their briefcases, in their pockets, it could be seen in almost all vehicles, in offices, [cells], etc. In the evening, the pandemonium could be heard through the blocks. Drunken SS men staggered around, emptying their stomachs in the corridors ... There was nothing strange about this because the state of lawlessness could corrupt even the best person.³⁴

While camp authorities did encourage the use of alcohol in certain instances, these reported cases of excessive usage and ubiquity outside of official sanction—even while on-duty—had both causes and consequences.

SS Garrison Alcohol Usage as Coping Mechanism

Another telling post-war testimony comes from former SS non-commissioned officer Oswald Kaduk and gives some idea as to why at least some SS men might have drunk to such an extent. When asked about how at his post-war trial he had mentioned that “after arriving in Auschwitz [he] began to drink” Kaduk replied:

I would like to state that never in my life did I drink such quantities of alcohol as in Auschwitz. This might seem laughable to you, but sometimes from the very morning, before reporting to the boss, and before giving the block directors their duty assignments—I drank alcohol. The boss knew about it, but I never got in trouble, I didn't stagger.³⁵

When asked for the reason behind such behavior, he stated, referring to the treatment of prisoners and conditions within the camp: “I simply couldn't look at it all.”³⁶ Toward the end of the camp's operation, with the end of the war and the potential for the discovery of the atrocities perpetrated by the SS in sight, SS man *Oberscharführer* Mussfeld is described by survivor Miklós Nyiszli in the following manner: “For days at a time he remained locked in his room, drinking, with an apparently unquenchable thirst, to forget both the past and the darkly looming future.”³⁷ Sources such as these suggest that members of the SS garrison may have relied on alcohol to cope with what they did, saw, experienced, and perpetrated in the camp. Lending credence to this notion is the known role of alcohol in another related context, the so-called “Holocaust by Bullets”—the mass murder of primarily Jewish victims in Eastern Europe by death squads composed of SS forces, police units, elements of the *Wehrmacht* (regular armed forces), and local auxiliaries.³⁸ Sources reference the inability of some SS men

³² Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 26; Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 65-66, 75-78.

³³ Halina Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age Under Nazi Terror*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 140, 142.

³⁴ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 65.

³⁵ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory*, 75.

³⁶ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory*, 75.

³⁷ Miklós Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* (New York: Arcade Pub, 2011), 35.

³⁸ For more information concerning the role of alcohol in the East, as well as some observations about its use within National Socialism, the SS/SA, police, and the concentration camp system more generally, see the work of Edward B. Westermann, including: “Drinking Rituals, Masculinity, and Mass Murder in

to “cope with the demands made on them,” many of whom “abandoned themselves to alcohol.”³⁹ The “abuse ... [of] alcohol in the wake of mass killings” seems to have been one means by which SS perpetrators attempted to “lessen [their] feelings of guilt and ‘to find some way to cope’ with [their] actions.”⁴⁰ While it is important to recognize the differences between these two contexts, these related instances may provide some insight into the potential usage of alcohol as a coping mechanism by some SS men at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Camp authorities seem to at least some extent have also seen the potential role of alcohol as a coping mechanism. Whether they approved or not, for at least some of the camp’s operation those SS men who were tasked with overseeing crematoria operations were provided with alcohol for the so-called “hardship work” they undertook—in short, the murder of men, women, and children.⁴¹ The aforementioned Wladimir Bilan relates in his testimony that “vodka was given out in the *Kremas* [crematoria] in great quantities ... It is therefore hardly strange that I almost never saw the *Krema* bosses [SS overseers] sober ... In a word, this was a time of ‘drowning the conscience’ at Oświęcim [the Polish name for Auschwitz], while the victims were being annihilated without interruption.”⁴² This usage of alcohol does not seem to have been solely restricted to the lower ranks as in addition to the aforementioned SS officer’s club the longest-serving commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolph Höss, recounts in his autobiography how on many occasions he too “tried to ward off [an] impending bad mood with alcohol,” after which he became “garrulous and cheerful, even merry” and agreed to “many concessions [which] were wheedled out of [him] in this mood that [he] would’ve never agreed to when sober.”⁴³

Alcohol and the Enabling of Violence

Sources also indicate the presence of alcohol in numerous instances of the perpetration of violence against prisoners by SS men. From testimonies of both prisoners and SS men alike, it is evident that some guards did commit brutal acts while intoxicated on duty. Some individuals are described as being in a near-constant state of intoxication, including SS man *Oberscharführer* Schillinger, who “was continuously drunk and ill-treated the prisoners at every opportunity.”⁴⁴ Other SS men who had served in the crematoria are described by survivor Henryk Mandelbaum as often having “went around under the influence of alcohol and were aggressive for no reason.”⁴⁵

The presence of alcohol in these situations raises the question of what role it played in the perpetration of violence by the SS within the camp and whether it affected the nature and extent of said violence. Historian Edward B. Westermann argues that “during the Third Reich, alcohol ... contribut[ed] to acts of violence and atrocity by the men of ... the Schutzstaffel (SS) ... and [that] its use and abuse among the perpetrators has been documented extensively in the historical record.”⁴⁶

Nazi Germany.” *Central European History* 51, no. 3 (2018): 367-389. and *Hitler’s Police Battalions: Enforcing Racial War in the East*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005.

³⁹ Westermann, “Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust,” 13.

⁴⁰ Westermann, “Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust,” 2, 7.

⁴¹ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 66.

⁴² Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory*, 65-66.

⁴³ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory*, 40-41.

⁴⁴ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 141.

⁴⁵ Henryk Mandelbaum, Igor Bartosik, and Adam Willma, *I Was at the Auschwitz Crematorium: A Conversation with Henryk Mandelbaum, Former Prisoner and Member of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz*, trans. William Brand (Oświęcim, Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2011), 64.

⁴⁶ Westermann, “Drinking Rituals, Masculinity, and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany,” 367.

Continuing, he also writes that “the requirement for everyone to participate in the ritual of drinking and toasting to mass murder bound the perpetrators to the act—and to each other.”⁴⁷ This establishes a precedent for the link between alcohol’s usage within the SS and the perpetration of violence.

Research by Westermann in another context of the Holocaust examines the relationship between alcohol and the perpetration of violence during the aforementioned mass killings in Eastern Europe. While it is important to keep in mind that Auschwitz-Birkenau was its own unique context with different factors at play, Westermann establishes “the connection between the abuse of alcohol ... and the frequency of violent crime” more generally, citing numerous findings which indicate the often high correlation between alcohol and violence.⁴⁸ In the context of the perpetration of genocide in the East, he argues that alcohol was often available at “murder sites” and that numerous testimonies record that “the killers were intoxicated,” with alcohol even acting as a “catalyst” for some instances of violence.⁴⁹ These findings suggest another potential role played by alcohol for some SS men within the camp and point to the need for further research in this area.

There is also the issue of culpability and responsibility. To term alcohol a catalyst for violence could be read as an implicit relocating of blame from the perpetrator to something external, ignoring the inherently genocidal system and ideology upon which the camp’s existence and operation was predicated—as well as the perpetrator’s own culpability. While the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence within the camp specifically will be addressed in a following section, informative parallels can be made to interdisciplinary research done regarding the link between alcohol and the perpetration of sexual violence. As Diana Scully argues about the usage of alcohol as an excuse for sexual violence, it is just that—an excuse—and cannot be used as a justification for the perpetration of violence.⁵⁰ Perpetrators often turn to “minimizing strategies,” creating “narratives [which] appear to be framed to reduce culpability (e.g. by blaming alcohol ...)” by means of “externalizing blame onto situational factors.”⁵¹ This can provide a social function, with alcohol consumption acting as an excuse by which the perpetrator can attempt to “explain themselves in socially acceptable terms” so as to avoid ostracization, judgement, or being found responsible.⁵² Additionally, it can allow the perpetrator to see their own behavior as somehow not representative of their “true” self, insulating them from the effects of their actions.⁵³ Given that exaggerating the role of alcohol in one’s time in the camp may have been advantageous for perpetrators recounting their experiences post-war, it is especially important in this context to approach these sources with a critical eye. While an in-depth discussion of the relationship between complicity and alcohol consumption is beyond the scope of this paper, it is essential to note that while

⁴⁷ Westermann, “Drinking Rituals, Masculinity, and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany,” 378.

⁴⁸ Westermann, “Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust,” 2-3.

⁴⁹ Westermann, “Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust,” 1, 5.

⁵⁰ Diana Scully, *Understanding Sexual Violence: A Study of Convicted Rapists* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 166-67.

⁵¹ Nicole K. Jeffrey and Paula C. Barata, “‘She Didn’t Want To ... and I’d Obviously Insist’: Canadian University Men’s Normalization of Their Sexual Violence Against Intimate Partners,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 94-95; Carolyn L. Brennan et al., “A Qualitative Analysis of Offenders’ Emotional Responses to Perpetrating Sexual Assault,” *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, September 2, 2016, 406, 401.

⁵² Jeffrey and Barata, “‘She Didn’t Want To ... and I’d Obviously Insist,’” 98; Brennan et al., “A Qualitative Analysis of Offenders’ Emotional Responses to Perpetrating Sexual Assault,” 406.

⁵³ Scully, *Understanding Sexual Violence*, 134.

alcohol may have helped perpetrators cope and even been a factor in their committing of acts of violence and genocide, they were nevertheless just that: perpetrators.

Alcohol and Prisoners

It is evident from available sources that alcohol was a part of the camp experience for at least some prisoners. For example, in the literary collection of short stories by survivor Tadeusz Borowski describing life in the camp, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, alcohol is featured eleven times.⁵⁴ Although alcohol was not nearly as common among the general prisoner population of Auschwitz-Birkenau as the SS garrison, this did not stop some prisoners from “organizing” their own supply—camp slang for the process of trading and stealing to acquire something. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some turned to the substance to cope.⁵⁵ Indeed, having celebrated his birthday with “booze”, Wieslaw Kielar described the pleasure of feeling as if “[he] was floating on air ... [which] was most agreeable and life in the camp appeared to be less frightful.”⁵⁶ Further speaking to alcohol’s potential utility as a coping mechanism, survivor Miklós Nyiszli, who worked as a prisoner doctor within the camp, described his experience:

I drink tea with rum. After a few glasses my internal tensions subside completely. My mind is purged, liberated from its tormenting thoughts, my whole body becomes enlivened. A pleasing warmth flows through me. I am drunk. I can feel the alcohol’s intoxicating work. Its effect is like a mother’s caressing hand, as if benevolence is raining down upon me.⁵⁷

When Ya’akov Silberberg, survivor of the Sonderkommando,⁵⁸ was asked if “you men [referring to members of the *Sonderkommando*] wanted to get drunk,” he replied to the interviewer’s question: “No. How should I put it? We wanted to forget what was on our minds.”⁵⁹ On Silberberg’s first night, filled with thoughts of suicide and unsure of how he could possibly carry out the work assigned to him, his *Kapo* took him aside:

[The *Kapo*] gave me some-thing strong to drink, some whiskey or alcohol, one drink, then another. “Listen,” he said. “When I first got here, I spoke just like you and I got used to it. And I’m still working. I think that you’ll also be one of those who gets used to it and who works.” After I drank, I slept all night long. When I woke up, I began to think in a totally different way.⁶⁰

Instances such as this suggest that alcohol may have allowed some prisoners to push through moments which to them felt completely impossible to endure—and played a role for some of those who existed in the aforementioned grey zone.

Some prisoners recognized alcohol’s worth and attempted to exchange it for often-essential food to supplement the starvation rations or to find favor with SS guards, *Kapos*, or privileged prisoners in positions of power.⁶¹ Similar to cigarettes,

⁵⁴ Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 30, 34, 43, 46, 54, 65, 108-9, 123, 169, 172.

⁵⁵ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 43, 56-60, 171, 195-96.

⁵⁶ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 43.

⁵⁷ Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 37.

⁵⁸ As described by Primo Levi, the Sonderkommando were “the group of prisoners entrusted with running the crematoria. It was their task to maintain order among the new arrivals ... who were to be sent into the gas chambers, to extract the corpses from the chambers, to pull gold teeth from jaws, to cut women’s hair, to sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the contents of the luggage, to transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens, to extract and eliminate the ashes.”; Levi, 50.

⁵⁹ Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 327, JSTOR.

⁶⁰ Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 317.

⁶¹ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 182-83, 192; Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory 13*, 76, 150.

alcohol functioned at times as a form of currency and barter good on the camp black market.⁶² Indeed, the aforementioned Ya'akov Silberberg even speaks of “schnapps” as the most sought-after commodity, referencing the desire to “forget what was on our minds” by means of its consumption.⁶³ Lastly, despite—or perhaps in part because of—the harshness of camp life, for some prisoners alcohol still managed to play a social role, however rarely, with it being given as a gift between friends, or to reconcile disagreements.⁶⁴ Wieslaw Kielar recounts in *Anus Mundi* how alcohol’s usage for the latter quickly led to an entire prisoner barrack engaging in a drinking bout together; following a fight with one of the Russian POWs, his former opponent:

pulled a bottle [from under his blanket], knocked out the cork with a deft movement and indicated with his finger the level down to which [Kielar] was allowed to drink. Handing [Kielar] the bottle, he said: ‘Drink ... to our reconciliation...’ With difficulty [Kielar] reached the level indicated ... otherwise, the drink ‘to our reconciliation’ would not have been valid ... Once more [they] shook hands, and only then did the others join [them]. A drinking bout began. Somebody was always bringing more liquor ... After this incident there were no more misunderstandings between the Russians and [Kielar]. After that time they trusted [him].⁶⁵

Sources and Privilege

From the sources consulted, it is clear that alcohol found its way into many aspects of camp life—sometimes in surprising ways. It was not necessarily restricted solely to the garrison or privileged prisoners. However, although there is insufficient research to determine what percentage of prisoners might have had ready access to alcohol, it is clear—given the nature of camp life alone—that access to alcohol among prisoners was likely a very rare exception and far from the norm. It is important to note that while it may have been an everyday commodity for a limited few, the reality of the camp for the vast majority of prisoners would suggest that alcohol was effectively completely beyond their reach. The basis for the exceptions to this general rule and how they came to be is an important question and one that must be answered in order to obtain a fuller understanding of camp life—therefore warranting further research.

Various factors affected whether a prisoner had access to alcohol or would have been able to consume it—especially with any degree of regularity. Certain work *Kommandos* did grant increased access to alcohol, for example.⁶⁶ Those working in the *Kanada Kommando*, tasked with sorting the personal possessions of those who had been murdered by the SS, were one such group.⁶⁷ Describing the female prisoners assigned to *Kanada*, Halina Birenbaum recounts that “they were always well fed and well dressed; they did not want for cigarettes or even vodka.”⁶⁸ Work dismantling downed and damaged aircraft in the *Mexico Kommando* was also purportedly sought after by Russian POWs, with the “main attraction [being] alcohol, which could be found in various parts of the airplane and which was smuggled into the camp in large quantities inside ... water bottles.”⁶⁹ Work which enabled contact with civilian workers, who were at times willing to trade or wished to help the prisoners, also provided increased chances of sourcing alcohol; SS man Wladimir Bilan characterized the situation as “true black market trading with the civilians working in the camp

⁶² Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 65.

⁶³ Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 327.

⁶⁴ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 171, 194.

⁶⁵ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 195-6.

⁶⁶ *Kommando*, roughly translatable to “work detail”, was the German term for the primary unit for the organization of prisoner forced labor detachments within Auschwitz-Birkenau.

⁶⁷ Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, 139, 141.

⁶⁸ Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die*, 99.

⁶⁹ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 192.

area,” and that “various brands of ... vodka ... could be seen in every section of the camp.”⁷⁰ SS men also added to the supply of alcohol on the black market within the camp as part of the trading between the guards and those with access to prisoners’ belongings: “bought with vodka ... [SS men] sent their families hundreds of thousands of marks and foreign currency, scores of watches, kilos of gold, and dozens of diamonds ... [stolen from] people who had been gassed.”⁷¹ One account even recorded an instance of prisoners assigned to a work commando in a lab producing their own alcohol, a “brew ... disgusting, tepid but strong.”⁷²

Opportunities to consume any alcohol that was acquired, however, were likely extremely limited, and apart from instances in which prisoners managed to find some private and secluded place or ensure the compliance of a guard or *Kapo*, its consumption was likely primarily circumspect. While privilege did not guarantee access to alcohol, it is important to note that in the sources consulted, the presence of alcohol was most often correlated with other instances of privilege—however relative or miniscule—and that regular alcohol consumption without repercussions would have only been possible for a very select few. An example of such an exception and how those with certain privileges were not always in an enviable position in every regard, *Sonderkommando* survivor Ya’akov Gabai speaks in his testimony of the “permission to drink alcoholic beverages, anything [*Sonderkommando* members] wanted.”⁷³ In return for “lots of cash and gold ... found in the undressing room [of the gas chambers],” members of the *Sonderkommando* were given “sausage and drinks for dinner.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, Gabai relates, that “at night they let us sing ... We sang along with the Germans. We ate and drank together ... We didn’t have political discussions ... It must sound terrible and it’s hard to understand how we lived together with our murderers. But anything was possible in Auschwitz.”⁷⁵ While this was likely far from the norm, it is worth noting that such things do seem to have taken place—with alcohol likely playing a role. However, this state of affairs may not have been uniform within the *Sonderkommando*; when interviewed, Henryk Mandelbaum—another survivor of the *Sonderkommando*—spoke unequivocally of how he “never” drank in the camp and that only “a block boss or a *Kapo* could do that. In any case, no would have risked getting drunk while working.”⁷⁶ In the words of historian and *Sonderkommando* expert Igor Bartosik, “generalization is impossible” in the context of alcohol’s role in the *Sonderkommando*.⁷⁷

Alcohol and Gender

In the sources consulted, the consumption of alcohol is portrayed as primarily a masculine endeavor, with only a relatively small number of instances recorded involving female prisoners.⁷⁸ However, this should not be seen as representative or reflective of the reality for female prisoners within the camp—first and foremost because of the very limited nature of said source base. A more representative sample of survivor’s memoirs and other available documentation would have to be consulted before any conclusions could be drawn about the role of alcohol for women

⁷⁰ Setkiewicz, *Voices of Memory* 13, 65.

⁷¹ Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 198, 302, 374.

⁷² Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 43.

⁷³ Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 199.

⁷⁴ Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 198.

⁷⁵ Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 205.

⁷⁶ Mandelbaum, Bartosik, and Willma, *I Was at the Auschwitz Crematorium*, 64.

⁷⁷ Mandelbaum, Bartosik, and Willma, *I Was at the Auschwitz Crematorium*, 64.

⁷⁸ Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die*, 101, 103.

within the camp. Exploring thus-far underutilized memoirs could valuably center women’s experiences within the camp and the role of alcohol in that context.

Research in this vein is especially important given the historical lack of gendered approaches to the history of the Holocaust in mainstream scholarship. Historian Marion Kaplan argues that recent “social and women’s histories include women but are not consciously about gender,” posing the question: “if we approached topics in a gendered way, might it change our narratives?”; she also observes that “historians—especially male historians—rarely ask how women experienced aspects of the Holocaust differently from men or how this might change our understandings.”⁷⁹ As she points out, it was not until 1983 that “the first large-scale research impetus” to look at the experience of Jewish women of the Holocaust using the lens of gender occurred—providing Jewish women with “a voice long denied them and ... a perspective long denied.”⁸⁰ Indeed, historian Zoë Waxman argues that “the continued failure of most mainstream scholars to account for gender in their studies of the Nazi destruction of European Jewry has impoverished our understanding, silencing women, and also distorting the lived experience of victims.”⁸¹ In order to avoid perpetuating this issue, a gendered approach to the role of alcohol in the camp is therefore essential to obtaining a full understanding of conditions there.

While further research is needed to determine whether male prisoners were also targets, the source base consulted records the additional danger to female prisoners of the perpetration of sexual violence by the SS—acts which were, at times, accompanied by intoxication on the part of the perpetrators. Edward B. Westermann describes “the consumption of alcohol” by SS men as a “key ingredient in acts of ‘performative masculinity,’ a type of masculinity expressly linked to acts of physical and sexual violence,” providing one frame for understanding the possible relationship between SS men perpetrating sexual violence in conjunction with the consumption of alcohol.⁸² Recounting her time working in *Kanada*, Halina Birenbaum describes the “Storm Troopers [SS guards] prowling around the warehouses, gorged with food and mostly drunk [and who] drunkenly importuned women prisoners.”⁸³ Said prisoners faced sexual humiliation even during their dinner break, as she and her fellow prisoners were “very often forced ... into the shower baths in ‘Canada’ [*sic*]; [the SS guards] enjoyed themselves and laughed uproariously.”⁸⁴ Another instance of drunken SS men inflicting sexual humiliation on female prisoners is described by a Jewish physician imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Olga Lengyel; forced to undergo a “thorough examination in the Nazi manner”—involving internal cavity searches—she speaks of the “presence of drunken soldiers who sat around the table [upon which the women were forced to lie], chuckling obscenely.”⁸⁵

Alcohol is also mentioned during instances of rape of female prisoners by SS guards.⁸⁶ Wiesław Kielar describes how a friend—a female prisoner named Sylvia, seventeen years of age—“had been ordered to the outpatients’ department” along with

⁷⁹ Marion Kaplan, “Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?,” *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 43.

⁸⁰ Kaplan, “Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?,” 38-39.

⁸¹ Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

⁸² Westermann, “Drinking Rituals, Masculinity, and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany,” 368.

⁸³ Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die*, 142.

⁸⁴ Birenbaum, *Hope Is the Last to Die*, 142.

⁸⁵ Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 88.

⁸⁶ Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 92-93.

“many other young, healthy, pretty girls” where “some drunken SS men had arranged an orgy.”⁸⁷ Survivor Ruth Elias describes similar acts of perpetration:

Drunken SS men sometimes made unexpected appearances in our blocks; the door would suddenly be flung open, and they would roar in on their motorcycles. Then the orchestra was ordered to play, and the SS men would sing along while they continued to drink, their mood getting ever more boisterous. Young Jewish women would be pulled from their bunks, taken away somewhere, and raped. Raping Jewish women wasn't considered *Rassenschande* (race defilement) therefore it was allowed ... I cannot describe the pitiable state of these poor women when they came back to the barracks.⁸⁸

Conclusion

It is clear that alcohol was present in *Konzentrationslager* Auschwitz-Birkenau and that its usage played varying roles among different segments of the camp's population. Documentation exists which elucidates the usage of alcohol as a coping mechanism, as a bartering tool, and as a factor in the perpetration of violence. The nature of the presence of alcohol in this initial small sample of sources consulted suggests that a thorough and detailed analysis of a broader and more representative selection of sources is warranted so as to help better understand the different roles and functions of alcohol in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Such an analysis would help provide new insight into the history of the camp and the lived experiences of those who composed its population.

Areas for potential future research are numerous, especially concerning the usage of alcohol by female prisoners and alcohol's role in the perpetration of violence within the camp. It would be worthwhile to determine, however imprecisely, what the rates of alcohol consumption may have been amongst the various segments of the camp population, how these fluctuated over the course of the camp's operation, and how various forms of privilege factored into alcohol's availability and consumption. It would also be of interest to determine how factors such as malnutrition and starvation affected prisoner's usage of alcohol—including whether it was ever seen as an additional source of calories.

The actualities of alcohol in the camp also raise questions concerning individual, systematic, and institutional culpability; while not erasing individual accountability, the systematic manner in which camp authorities introduced alcohol into the population of Auschwitz-Birkenau may have led to or exacerbated the violence perpetrated by both the SS and *Kapos*. Further exploration of the relationship between said introduction and the perpetration of violence could help to address questions surrounding the culpability of those potentially complicit in the violence perpetrated within the camp given their administrative duties. Drawing from existing scholarship in related contexts of violence perpetrated in conjunction with the consumption of alcohol could help foster the development of a body of scholarship addressing questions related to said culpability.

⁸⁷ Kielar, *Anus Mundi*, 140.

⁸⁸ Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 93.

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