

THE SCROLLS OF AUSCHWITZ

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MATTERS OF TESTIMONY

Interpreting the Scrolls of Auschwitz

Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams

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We Wept Without Tears



Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz

Gideon Greif

Yankel Silberberg

Shlomo Kirshenbaum told me that the “*dayan* [rabbinical judge] from Makow”¹⁹ was at one of the large crematoria, I [II] or II [III], and that I ought to speak with him.

I went to the *dayan* and asked his advice. There was a *hevra kadisha* [burial society] and the Jews involved in it did this work for God’s sake only. But we hadn’t come to Auschwitz to make a living and I couldn’t have anything to do with such a thing because I’m a *kohen*. So I was torn. The work I had to do was contrary to everything I’d believed in all my life.

So you felt it was important to receive an answer from a rabbinical authority.

Yes. I also asked him lots of other questions about these matters.

Had you known the dayan previously? Was he famous?

Definitely.

What did he tell you?

He said, “Don’t worry. We are here to do God’s mission. God wants it this way, and we have to take this action because it’s a *mitzva* [religious imperative]. It is the Creator’s will. It’s not within our power to change His will, just as we have no control over His decisions.” He also told me in that, in his

opinion, what we were doing was a *mitzva* because in this manner the Jews were given some form of burial. . . .

Were you satisfied with his explanation?

I must have been satisfied at the time. A person tends to trust someone who is greater than him, who is authoritative, who can understand, and who can tell good from evil.

What else did you ask the dayan?

I asked him, “What about the little children who are being murdered here, what are they guilty of? They don’t know a thing! . . . They’ve barely even taken a breath in this world!”

The *dayan* told me, “The children have sinned, too. Little children, even the newborns, are tainted from their mothers’ milk. They have inherited their mothers’ sins.”

Did the rabbi, the dayan, really say that? That little children who had hardly had a chance to breathe were tainted with sin and therefore doomed to die, to be murdered?

Yes. It steered me to the decision I had to make: to live, to be at peace with myself, and to speak with the other survivors and tell them how much suffering a person must endure to be worthy of life.

When you came away from the rabbi, had you decided to accept his approach?

I was still devout back then! I wanted to live; I just wanted to live.

Where did this conversation take place?