

# **FEMALE SS GUARDS AND WORKADAY VIOLENCE**

**The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944**



**By Elissa Mailänder / Translated by Patricia Szobar**

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sorted the clothing and other possessions after they had been removed. Afterward, the members of the *Sonderkommando* removed the bodies of the dead from the gas chamber, including any bodies that were stuck and thus difficult to extract. They aired out the gas chambers, and cleaned the bodies of excrement, blood, and vomit. Other prisoners cut the hair of the victims, and pulled their gold teeth. Finally, the corpses were loaded onto wooden carts and brought to the location where they would be buried or burned. There, other prisoners dug mass graves or burned the corpses in ovens.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, the focus will be on the steps within this process of annihilation—or what Jacques Sémelin has described more aptly as destruction—that were carried out by the camp SS. I will consider a number of representative examples of the process of selection, killing, and disposal of the bodies.

## Selection

The first step in the killing process was the selection of the prisoners who would be killed. The criteria used to determine who would live and who would die were the inmate's (apparent) health, and his or her capacity for work.

### SELECTIONS IN THE INFIRMARY

One place where selections took place on a regular basis was the infirmary (*Krankenbau*), as it was called. In spring 1942, a provisional, poorly equipped infirmary for sick, wounded, or exhausted prisoners was established on Field I. In the words of Hermann Hackmann, physicians were “removed” from the inmate population to staff the infirmary: “The prisoner-physicians took care of the sick, under the direction of a physician who held the rank of *Sturmbannführer*, within the limits of what was possible at the time.”<sup>2</sup> However, these possibilities were, in reality, extremely limited. The prisoner-physicians had little food or medication to give the prisoners, and no surgical facilities. For this reason, Jan Novak, a prisoner-physician from Poland, called the infirmary a “terminal ward”—a place where inmates were sent to die:

The infirmary barracks were equipped with wood pallets and with two ovens—coal ovens made of iron—a table for the doctor, and drains for the planned toilets. The infirmary had room for about 200 people, including the spots for the nurse-orderlies. . . . Our job was helping maintain their blood pressure and fighting diarrhea and pneumonia. There was only enough medication for a few people.<sup>3</sup>

Officially, the SS orderlies were responsible for making all decisions as to how long prisoners remained in the infirmary and when they were released. SS orderlies also

determined which prisoners were to be killed. German and Austrian prisoner-functionaries were then responsible for carrying out the orders of the SS. They had authority over the prisoner-physicians and the prisoner-orderlies, most of whom were Polish (see figure 2). Despite this racial hierarchy, the prisoner-physicians did have authority over the SS orderlies when it came to medical decisions; according to Novak, the SS orderlies were permitted to give administrative but not medical orders to the prisoner-physicians.<sup>4</sup> This gave the prisoner-physicians some scope for independent decision-making, which they could exploit for the benefit of the inmates. For example, a prisoner-physician might enter influenza rather than typhoid or other serious illness as the diagnosis in the patient records, a deception that saved many inmates' lives.

As physicians . . . we employed various strategies to try to argue that they could be cured in order to reduce the number of inmates who were classified as unable to work. The German physician [on duty] would speak with me about sick inmates in my block. . . . The German physician spoke with me only about general medical matters.<sup>5</sup>

Given the overcrowding in the infirmary and the constant pressure to refer patients for extermination, there was relatively little the physician-prisoners could do to help. At all times, it was the SS physicians who had the final say when it came to judging a patient's health and capacity to work. For that reason, the majority of inmates in the infirmary were at risk of being deemed incapable of work by the SS and, ultimately, being killed.

Until fall 1943, the infirmary capacity increased in conjunction with the rising inmate population, and a corresponding increase in cases of typhus, paratyphoid, and dysentery. Between late April and mid-May 1943, when many transports from Białystok and the Warsaw ghetto arrived at Majdanek, the camp reached its highest number of prisoners. As Novak described to the court, as the camp grew ever more crowded and epidemics continued to spread, the selection of sick inmates in the infirmary became increasingly radical:

Those who could no longer rise out of bed were taken away. Each time, the prisoner-physician was asked if the patient could be cured or not. . . . Over time, the process grew even more brutal. Anyone who couldn't walk was assigned to the group that would be gassed. Decisions were made on the fly by the Kapo and the SDG [*Sanitätsdienstgrad*, an SS rank for nurse-orderlies]. The SS physicians were always there in the infirmary at the beginning and then they left, leaving the work for the Kapo or SDG.<sup>6</sup>

In Novak's memory, by September 1943, the entire left side of Field I had been turned into an infirmary. The Russian POWs had their own infirmary on Field II.<sup>7</sup> There

were also additional infirmaries on Fields III and IV. The women's camp on Field V had its own separate infirmary, staffed by female physicians.

According to Novak's testimony, regular selections took place in the infirmary "whenever the number of new patients led to overcrowding, and there was no more room for new patients. In that case, a group of SS members would appear unannounced. The group included an SS physician, some SS orderlies and an infirmary Kapo."<sup>8</sup> Novak further explained to the Düsseldorf court that Heinrich Schmidt, an SS physician who held the rank of *Hauptsturmführer*, was the ranking physician at Majdanek and also the physician for the troops. In addition, he was the official responsible for the overall coordination of selections, and for subsequent killings. Within the individual infirmaries, selections were carried out by SS orderlies, particularly Unterscharführer Günther Konietzny and Unterscharführer Wilhelm Reinartz, who were assisted by Ludwig Benden, a German prisoner-orderly. According to Novak, the SS physicians did not take an active part in the selections but, rather, were a passive presence. For the SS physicians, the presence of the prisoner-physicians was a source of shame that forced them to confront a professional and ethical dilemma:

They were ashamed there in the presence of a prisoner who was also doctor and someone with whom they otherwise discussed issues related to medical care in the camp, and whose (negative) opinion on the topic of selections was something of which they were, of course, well aware. I would say, however, that these physicians also took note of those individuals who attempted to defend the honor of the medical profession, especially in such situations where a physician was urgently needed.<sup>9</sup>

For their part, the lower-ranking SS orderlies also varied in the rigor with which they carried out their duties, as Josef Ochlewski, a prisoner-scribe, later described:

Reinartz and Konietzny did not carry out selections in the same way. Konietzny was "cold" and carried out the selections with a great degree of cynicism, but Reinartz—in my opinion—had a much harder time with his role. He was often hesitant when carrying out the selections and he was often drunk, so I felt and I believe that he was acting against his will. He took the opinions of Dr. Wieliczanski [a prisoner-physician] into account, when the physician said that he thought the prisoner in question might still "recover."<sup>10</sup>

In the infirmary, Ochlewski had the opportunity to observe the SS staff more closely:

One evening on Christmas Eve or sometime during the Christmas holidays, Reinartz came to us in the infirmary and asked me and Dr. Wieliczanski to join him at the table. Then he got out a bottle of wine, loosened the cap with his revolver, threw it in the corner, and said to us, "I want to drink with you as a colleague and as a person." Then he spent an hour telling us about his family and his life.<sup>11</sup>

While prisoner-orderly Ludwig Benden and SS orderly Günther Konietzny were universally remembered as brutal individuals<sup>12</sup> whom the prisoners feared, Reinartz was described by Polish survivors who worked in the infirmary as a person who struggled with remorse and seemed to have a troubled conscience. Novak recalled Reinartz as having a somewhat “humane attitude,”<sup>13</sup> and said that Reinartz sometimes smuggled small packages and other items into the camp for the prisoners:<sup>14</sup>

Reinartz took part in a few selections, but he always tried to hang behind his colleagues from the SS infirmary. . . . I remember that he once used words like “this is all shit,” that he seemed to feel he had blood on his hands. That was probably after one of the executions that had been ordered.<sup>15</sup>

Novak, who apparently was on good terms with Reinartz, also said that he was willing to ask Reinartz questions about specific incidents in the camp, which he wouldn’t have dared to ask any of the other SS orderlies.<sup>16</sup>

#### SELECTIONS IN THE PRISONERS’ CAMP

More and more often, as overcrowding increased and epidemics became frequent, selections were also carried out in the prisoners’ camp. SS physicians, assisted by field and block leaders in the men’s camp and the female guards in the women’s camp, selected for killing prisoners who were sick or deemed unfit for work. According to Hermann Hackmann, the former first camp compound leader, the commandant would assemble the SS physicians “at preset times” and issue his “directives,”<sup>17</sup> meaning he would instruct them as to how many prisoners deemed sick or unfit for work were to be selected from each field. In the women’s camp, the *Aufseherinnen* carried out the selections under the direction of Chief Guard Else Ehrich during the daily roll call.

The survivors vividly recall the selections carried out by Field Leader Hermine Braunsteiner:

She could even select during roll call. If she didn’t like the look of someone, if they were too weak, or too thin—then she was liable to say [survivor imitates a gesture, and a wave of the hand]: “Away!”<sup>18</sup>

Dora Abend described to the court how *Aufseherin* Hildegard Lächert, called “Brigida” by the prisoners, carried out this task:

In the women’s field, selections took place almost every day—even on Sunday. At roll call, “Brigida” would appear with several SS men, who would point their fingers at certain women. “Brigida” would fetch them from the rows, yanking by the shoulders, or by their hair or ears. About ten to twenty women were pulled out

from each block. “Brigida” always had a smile on her face as she did her work. She used to always have a dog with her, and she struck our heads and faces in a dreadful manner with her thick, long whip.<sup>19</sup>

For their part, the female guards varied widely in their testimony. For example, Erna Pfanstiel recalled in a postwar interrogation:

I believe it was twice that I saw the chief guard [Else Ehrich] and *Aufseherin* Braunsteiner walk through the rows of assembled prisoners on the roll-call grounds of Field V. They pointed at the prisoners, the women, with their finger or with a stick they were carrying, to pick them out from the rest. The women then had to stand over to the side. . . . Then I saw Ehrich and Braunsteiner bring the women they had chosen away. They said they were bringing them to the bath. . . . But I knew the women would not be returning from the bath, because they were being taken next door to the gas chamber. Then we had to calm them down. We had to talk to them, and with hand gestures calm them down. Some of the women spoke German.<sup>20</sup>

Pfanstiel did not describe in any greater detail what she meant by “hand gestures.” However, based on Dora Abend’s description, it is likely these “hand gestures” were, in fact, slaps, blows, and other like gestures.<sup>21</sup>

#### SELECTIONS DURING INCOMING TRANSPORTS

Between fall 1942 and spring 1944, when transports of Jews including women and children arrived at Majdanek, the female guards also took part in the “incoming selections.” These selections generally took place outside the camp, in front of the prisoners’ bath and the disinfection chamber (the latter of which doubled as the gas chamber) (see figure 12). “On arrival at the camp, they selected the younger women, the older ones, and the women with children.” The SS women included the *Aufseherin* “Brigida” (Hildegard Lächert) and “Mutti” (Emilie Macha),<sup>22</sup> as survivor Chela Apelbaum described in her testimony before the court. “During the arrival selection, ‘Brigida’ tore the struggling children away from their mothers, threw them to the floor, and kicked them. When a mother came over, ‘Brigida’ would kick her in the back of the head.”<sup>23</sup> Although selections always involved violence toward prisoners on the part of the female guards and SS men, some *Aufseherinnen* and male guards were remembered for their particular zeal.<sup>24</sup>

In their interrogations, the former *Aufseherinnen* generally denied taking part in selections, and assigned all responsibility to the higher SS leadership, SS physicians and orderlies, and prisoner-functionaries.<sup>25</sup> The testimony of survivors, however, clearly documents the participation of the female guards. Because they had a duty rotation, it is likely that all the *Aufseherinnen* who served as block, field, and roll-call leaders took part, at times, in selections.

The selections in the camp affected all inmate groups, but to varying degrees. For example, from summer 1942 to spring 1943, Jewish prisoners were particularly affected. Because they were at the bottom rung of the prisoner hierarchy, they had the most grueling labor assignments, the poorest quality food, and were most vulnerable to disease; they were also most likely to suffer violence at the hands of the SS.<sup>26</sup> Selections among Polish and Soviet prisoners, and prisoners of other nationalities, were carried out on a more irregular basis, and typically targeted the elderly, children, and inmates who were ill and weak. For Jewish inmates, however, selections were a near-daily event, and the Final Solution meant that all Jewish inmates were affected. Beginning in spring 1943, Jewish prisoners at Majdanek were systematically killed.<sup>27</sup>

## **Killing**

The following is a description of the methods used to kill men, women, and children at Majdanek.

### **DEATH BY LETHAL INJECTION**

Inmates in the infirmary were killed by lethal injection, using phenol, gasoline, or evipan. SS physicians generally delegated the actual injections to the SS orderlies. Prisoners were told that the injections were part of a "vaccine program,"<sup>28</sup> probably as a means to maintain calm.

In August or September 1942, Georg Gröner, a German prisoner-functionary, witnessed such a killing by lethal injection when he spent several weeks as a patient in the infirmary:

Another prisoner, a fairly burly man whose name I didn't know, was in the same room as me. SS orderly Reinartz gave him an injection. It was in his left arm, if I'm not mistaken. I didn't attach much importance to it at the time. But I remember that, a few hours later, he was carried out of the room dead. I don't know whether he might have been injected with "evipan." But I do remember that I was very surprised at his sudden death. As far as I could tell, he wasn't that sick—I thought he would recover and leave the infirmary, much as I expected to.<sup>29</sup>

However, lethal injections were not a suitable method of killing during epidemics, when inmates were killed in larger numbers.

### **DEATH BY SHOOTING**

Until the gas chambers went into operation in October 1942,<sup>30</sup> when larger groups of inmates were to be killed they were shot at the edge of the camp grounds, or in