

**Written in Auschwitz**  
**Case Study: Works Written in Auschwitz by Sonderkommando Participants,**  
**Polish Political Prisoners and Lili Kasticher**

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**Abstract**

This study focuses on the works of three different groups of writers who dared to write in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where anyone caught with a piece of paper or a pencil stub was immediately sentenced to death. Accordingly, inmates produced virtually no written material (Shik, 2012), with certain rare exceptions: (1) The *Sonderkommando*, who documented everyday life at the camp, concealing their records in jars that they buried near the crematoria in the hope that someone would find them after the war, as indeed occurred. (2) Certain Polish political prisoners, who kept records in Auschwitz and managed to save their works. (3) Lili Kasticher, the only woman known to have written at Birkenau who did not belong to any organization; all her writings thus constituted her own private heroic initiative. She risked her life by stealing pieces of paper and pencil stubs to write poetry and encouraged her friends to do so, offering them a prize, a portion of her bread ration. Her writings were concealed on her person until her liberation in spring 1945.

**Keywords:** *Sonderkommando*, political prisoner, Auschwitz-Birkenau, death camp, writing

## Introduction

Three unique and precious written sources created in Auschwitz-Birkenau constitute the core subject matter of this paper: The first and most detailed source consists of the writings of the *Sonderkommando*, who documented everyday life at the camp, concealing their records in jars that they buried near the crematoria in the hope that someone would find them after the war, as indeed occurred.<sup>1</sup> The second comprises works by Polish political prisoners. This well-organized group had the benefit of being Polish in a camp built on Polish soil and conducting its everyday operations in its native language and culture. Most had the additional advantage of being non-Jewish.<sup>2</sup> Third are the poems and social manifesto<sup>3</sup> written by Lili Kasticher, who may well be the only individual inmate who had written in Auschwitz-Birkenau, knowing that she was risking her life, as the possession of a piece of paper or pencil was forbidden in Birkenau. Anyone caught with such contraband was immediately sentenced to death.

Jewish inmates were ordered by the Germans to write postcards to their relatives, describing the “decent” living conditions in their “new place of residence” (O. D. Kulka, 2013, 10).<sup>4</sup> In *Moments of Reprieve*, Primo Levi describes a love letter that a gypsy inmate asked him to write, indicating that he endangered both their lives doing so, just to gain half a portion of bread.<sup>5</sup> This type of writing in Auschwitz, however, was ordered by the Nazis and consequently is not the subject of this study.

## The Writings of the *Sonderkommando*

The *Sonderkommando* who wrote in Auschwitz-Birkenau despite the risks, left rare and precious documentary material that details the lives and daily routine of the prisoners who did the most horrifying work of all at Auschwitz: Accompanying the victims to the gas chambers, searching their bodies after their extermination, transporting corpses to the crematoria and grinding the bones that were not entirely burned. They even photographed the transport of the victims to the gas chambers, collecting the bodies, examining them, cutting off the women’s hair, extracting teeth and dental gold, bringing bodies to the crematorium and handling the ashes. They documented everything, at imminent risk to their lives. Officially, it was a serious infraction to possess paper and writing implements. Nevertheless, these intrepid men persisted, realizing that they were the last witnesses to tell the story of the annihilation of

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the *Sonderkommando* used those same jars to conceal poetry or diaries, such as the diary of Zalman Gradowski that was discovered among the Auschwitz crematorium ruins. These *Sonderkommando*, who faced certain death as a consequence of their documentation, were also members of the Underground that planned the revolt.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the information about the Polish political prisoners’ writings was kindly contributed by Dr. Wojciech Polosa, Archives Director at the State Museum in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oswiecim, June 22, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Known as *The Rules of Behavior*.

<sup>4</sup> These postcards included cryptic references warning their addressees not to believe the ostensibly optimistic messages. For example, they might say: “Every day, we welcome Uncle Hlad (Czech: Starvation) or Uncle Mavet (Hebrew: Death).” The cards were sent by inmates of a Birkenau camp populated by families dispatched there from Theresienstadt. They were dated March 25, but the people who wrote them were annihilated on March 7, over two weeks earlier. The entire family camp was wiped out in July 1944.

<sup>5</sup> Postcards were given only to those who could write German. Primo Levi knew German well but the gypsy did not, so Levi took a chance and wrote a postcard that was not his own.

European Jewry and knowing that in any case, they would eventually be slaughtered along with the rest, except those with jobs that required professional knowledge and skills, such as oven tenders, expert mechanics and “room service” providers.<sup>6</sup> Every few months, it was necessary to annihilate them and keep their dark secret, because they were witnesses and partners to all particulars of the Final Solution. The *Sonderkommando* acquired their writing equipment from *Kommando Kanada*, that was in charge of handling the possessions of the victims and sorting them before shipment to Germany. In his testimony, Shlomo Dragon,<sup>7</sup> a “room service” provider,<sup>8</sup> reported that as part of his job, he made sure that Zalman Gradowski<sup>9</sup> had a particularly well-lit pallet, so he could devote himself to documentation after working hours, as well as thermos bottles in which he could hide the written material.<sup>10</sup> Gradowski was one of five *Sonderkommando* participants<sup>11</sup> who understood the historic mission imposed on them. Documentation of their work was of particular significance because of the horrifying tasks they performed at the crematoria. They documented their lives before Auschwitz, the ghetto from which they were dispatched, the precarious and dreadful journey to Auschwitz and the horrors that had become routine.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, when addressing the bold records kept by the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz we refer primarily to the first three: Gradowski, Leventhal and Langfus, who was also called the *Maggid* (Hebrew: Preacher), who worked in Crematoria I and II, where the living conditions were slightly more bearable, explaining their moral and physical strength to concentrate on writing despite their labors in the crematoria. The three received considerable assistance from their comrades, such as better pallets and brighter living space, paper, ink, a camera and regular updates on all that was happening. Furthermore, some of their comrades kept watch while the three were writing, as they would surely be executed if caught (Gradowski, 2012, p. 266). The three belonged to the Underground, that launched the well-known revolt on October 7, 1944. Gradowski, a leader of the revolt, was captured during the fighting and hanged, but not before the Nazis tortured him and smashed his skull, as Shlomo Dragon reported, having witnessed it with his own eyes. Dragon also attested how people like David Nenzel<sup>13</sup> smuggled paper to Gradowski and his associates so that they could continue writing. Nenzel, for his part, risked his life by tearing strips of paper from cement sacks and concealing them on his person.

Zalman Gradowski, born in 1910 in Suwalki. In November 1942, he and his family were deported to the Kielbasin Transit Camp near Grodno and from there, in cattle cars, with sojourns in Treblinka and Warsaw, they arrived in Auschwitz on December 7-8, 1942.

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<sup>6</sup> The *Sonderkommando* unit responsible for the German quarters, their regular maintenance, including food service, upkeep and the like (as Rudolf Hess attested at his trial in Warsaw). For more extensive information, see Gutman & Berenbaum (2002).

<sup>7</sup> Shlomo Dragon’s testimony is discussed at length in Greif (2004, pp. 195-199).

<sup>8</sup> An assignment that saved his life because he was not sent to the gas chambers like his comrades after a few months.

<sup>9</sup> Who was in charge of writing and documentation and was among the planners of the October 7, 1944 revolt.

<sup>10</sup> Gradowski told Dragon where he hid the material. Right after the war, Dragon recalled the location and pointed it out to the Red Army liberators, who excavated near the crematorium, under Dragon’s instructions, until they found what they were looking for. Shlomo was assisted by his brother Avraham, who was also among the few *Sonderkommando* participants who survived.

<sup>11</sup> The five were Zalman Gradowski, Zalman Leventhal, Dayan (Rabbinic Judge) Leyb Langfus, French Jew Chaim Herman and Greek Jew Marcel Nadjari, who survived and provided testimony following his liberation (Gradowski, 2012, p. 265).

<sup>12</sup> For a more extensive description by Nathan Cohen, see Gutman & Berenbaum (2002, pp. 551-565).

<sup>13</sup> See Nenzel’s testimony, Yad Vashem 03/6014.

Following “selection”, his entire family was annihilated. Then, on December 9, after elimination of the previous *Sonderkommando* group, Gradowski was assigned to the new group being formed. To his good fortune, he did not have to become involved with the murder of his family, that had been sent to the gas chambers a day earlier. First, he worked with a subgroup called *Schreiber* [German: Writer, scribe], responsible for clerical work at Crematorium I. Subsequently, he was transferred to Crematorium IV at Birkenau, where he transported the victims to the gas chambers and then brought the bodies to the crematoria, where he would make sure to enwrap every corpse he “handled” in a *tallit* (prayer shawl) and recite the Mourner’s *Kaddish* prayer.<sup>14</sup>

Gradowski began writing in 1943. Six of his diaries were discovered near the crematoria in Birkenau between 1945 and 1970. Gradowski’s poetically styled Yiddish texts provide more testimony than mere documentation: “At least a minimum of truth will reach the world and then you, O world, will exact revenge, revenge for everything ... If we cannot weep for them (his slaughtered family), then at least a foreign eye may shed a tear for our loved ones” (Gradowski, 2012, p. 108).

Gradowski’s first manuscript was found on March 5, 1945 near the Birkenau crematoria by a delegation of the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission; it was stored in a German canteen sealed with a metal lid. Each page comprised 20-30 densely handwritten lines, along with a letter that Gradowski wrote in September 1944. The manuscript describes deportation to Kielbasin, then to Auschwitz via Treblinka, selection at Auschwitz and parting from his family, whom he discovered later had been sent to the gas chambers that same day. He also described the joy experienced by those who, like him, were chosen to live and assigned to living quarters. Gradowski’s imagery-rich language, said Nathan Cohen, reminds one of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, a work that the writer must have known well (Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 553). On the first page of the notebook, Gradowski wrote in Polish, Russian, German and French “Read this document. It has a rich supply of material for historians” (Ber, 1978, p. 145). Concluding his notes, Gradowski asks readers to “study his writings intensively before they judge the *Sonderkommando*.”

In summer 1945, Chaim Wallerman was searching among the remnants of the ovens when a Pole offered him a canteen. Wallerman bought the canteen from the Pole and was amazed to find that Gradowski’s writings were inside. This is Gradowski’s second manuscript, published by Wallerman in 1977, in Yiddish, calling it *In Hartz fun Gehennom* [last letter unclear in original – English: In the Heart of Hell]. It was divided into three chapters: *White Night*, *The Czech Transport* and *Departure* (order determined by Wallerman; for a more extensive description, see Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 554 and note 7 on page 563).

First, Gradowski appeals to the moon with complaints against the bitter fate of the Jewish People that he saw and experienced, accusing it of indifference, wondering how it can shine above Auschwitz without getting involved in the destiny of the people put to death there below. He concludes this chapter by declaring that the dark night is his friend, weeping is his

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<sup>14</sup> Testimony by Lemke Plisko, in an interview with Gideon Greif, August 9, 1993, Givat Hashlosha, filed in Greif’s private archive.

song, the sacrificial fire his light, the smell of death his fragrance and Hell his home (Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 555; original Yiddish version, p. 24).

In the second chapter, Gradowski bewails the annihilation of the first group deported from Theresienstadt in September 1943, relocated at the family camp at Birkenau and eventually exterminated in March 1944, but not before the victims were ordered to write postcards<sup>15</sup> to their loved ones in which they described their good life in their new location. In December of that year, a second group of Jews arrived, only to be annihilated six months thereafter. Their records bore the abbreviation SB6 (*Sonderbehandlung* (“special treatment”) [after] 6 months). Then another two groups came, each allotted six months to live, as indicated by the “SB6” next to their names (Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, pp. 427-428). This “special treatment” is described as well: Gradowski notes that once the six-month period was over, it took less than 20 minutes to move people from the family camp to the death camp, where they were summarily annihilated. Gradowski wondered about the Czech Jews quietly walking to their deaths and their indifference to a cruel fate that was known in advance.

*Parting*, the third and final chapter of the manuscript, describes the life of the *Sonderkommando*, Gradowski’s disappointment with their silence when 200 of their comrades were sent to their deaths and the clear realization that they are living on borrowed time. He expresses amazement at the psychological barrier that prevents him and his comrades from taking steps and committing suicide, for which they excuse themselves, calling the taking of one’s own life a mortal sin.

Zalman Leventhal was born in 1918 in Ciechanów, Poland, from which he was deported with his entire family on December 10, 1942. On January 10, 1943, he was assigned to the *Sonderkommando*, following elimination of the previous group. His manuscript was discovered in 1962 in a glass jar hidden near Crematorium III. There were more than a hundred unnumbered pages, but unfortunately most were illegible because moisture penetrated the jar and destroyed the paper and ink.

Leventhal asks how much time is required for a person to accept the fate of his loved ones. He attested that he and his comrades were “too weak to struggle for the will to exist” (Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 557), explaining how they could perform the horrible tasks to which they were assigned. In the same breath, however, he indicates that there were those who behaved differently, like Gradowski or Langfus, who kept their traditions and humanity in spite of all and expressed severe opposition to the Polish and Russian inmates who belonged to the International Resistance but delayed the revolt, claiming that the war would soon be over and they would be liberated.

On October 7, 1943, Leventhal was detained at Crematorium III and was not present at the revolt. Hence one may assume that from that day, his reports are no longer as precise as they had been. His manuscript is signed October 10, 1944. The date and circumstances of his death are unknown.

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<sup>15</sup> The cards were dated March 25, two weeks after the writers had already been slaughtered.

The third person in this group of writers is Warsaw-born Dayan Leyb Langfus,<sup>16</sup> Langfus worked at decontaminating women's hair and preparing it for shipment to Germany – a job that was considered “easy” on the *Sonderkommando* scale. He was an intelligent man, admired by his friends, who appreciated his assertiveness and prestige as a religious adjudicator and ritual leader, according him relatively convenient conditions for writing. Like Leventhal and Gradowski, he was active in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Underground and did not support passive acceptance of one's fate of annihilation. Along with this, however, as a religious man, he believed that one should not challenge God's will and people should go silently to their deaths in fulfillment of Divine justice. Langfus began writing his Yiddish-language diary in Auschwitz in 1943 and completed it on November 26, 1944 in Belzec. The diary was discovered by a search party dispatched by a Polish political party in the area of Crematorium III in 1942. One part of the manuscript describes events that the writer witnessed with his own eyes, written in a dry, journalistic style, only occasionally expressing a personal opinion. The final part was his will, written in the first person.

Langfus wrote another three documents – two of them reports on the extermination of 600 children and 3,000 women and the third a list of names of inmates gassed to death between October 9 and October 24, 1944 at Crematoria II, III and V. In his descriptions of selection, there is great similarity between his writings and Gradowski's.<sup>17</sup> Langfus describes events that took place in the infamous “locker room,” such as his description of the wife of the Rebbe of Stropkov, who asked God to forgive the Rebbe of Belz who calmed and misled the Jews of Hungary at the time that he himself and his followers escaped to Palestine. Another description relates to a group of Hassidim from Hungary who recited the confessional prayer before entering the gas chambers and invited the *Sonderkommando* to join them in drinking *Lechaim*. The incident so shocked one of the *Sonderkommando* participants that he murmured: “That's enough! We have incinerated Jews. Let us destroy this accursed place and die as martyrs” (Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 561; Ber, 1978, p. 223).

Langfus described the arrival of a group of children from Šiauliai in November 1943 that shocked the *Sonderkommando*, who had ostensibly already seen and heard anything. This was when one of the children asked one of the *Sonderkommando* people how he, as a Jew, could send other Jews to their death, in collaboration with the murderers, just to save his own life (Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 561; Ber, 1978, p. 222).

The principal and last composition, including testimony from Belzec, was written on November 26, 1944. It included a description of the dismantling of the ovens in Belzec to send them to Germany. Post facto, we are aware that they were sent to Sachsenhausen and Mauthausen. At the end of his diary he wrote that he is being taken along with another 170 *Sonderkommando* members to the gas chambers, referred to as the “showers” by the murderers to conceal their true purpose.

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<sup>16</sup> Langfus lived in Maków Mazowiecki and married the daughter of the local *Dayan*, from whom he inherited the title. His friends also called him the *Magid* because he was a prayer leader and rabbinic judge.

<sup>17</sup> Apparently attempting to ensure that their testimony would be precise and reliable, Nathan Cohen claims that they may have compared versions (Gutman & Berenbaum, 2002, p. 558).

## The Writings of the Polish Political Prisoners

In a letter to the Director of the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum dated June 22, 2016, Dr. Wojciech Polosa indicates that the Archives include documentation of the writings of a minuscule number of political prisoners, most of them Poles, that were written in Auschwitz. First among them is Wincenty Gawron, inmate no. 11237, a Polish political prisoner who arrived in Auschwitz after his arrest in April 1941 for clandestine activity. He managed to obtain paper and pencils from other Underground members and produced black and white drawings and caricatures of camp life for inmates. Thanks to his connections with the Underground, he escaped Auschwitz in May 1942 and smuggled his works out with him.

Another Polish political prisoner, Jerzy Pozimski, was given the serial number 1099-work, meaning he was assigned to the section responsible for classifying inmates according to the various types of work they are able to perform at Auschwitz. This is how he was able to obtain paper and writing implements and to document realities at Auschwitz in his typed diary from June 24 to December 31, 1940. Pozimski used his connections with various inmates and with *Kommando Kanada* to obtain food and at times even medicines for other prisoners. On January 18, 1945, he was transferred to Mauthausen-Melk and released on May 5, 1945, but wrote in no camp other than Auschwitz, where his connections with other political prisoners of Polish origin apparently helped him (according to Document No. 997209, based on a report by the Claims Committee, the ITS Archives and the Red Cross). In 1989, Jerzy Pozimski was awarded a posthumous Righteous Among the Nations medal by Yad Vashem, in a touching ceremony attended by several of the people who survived the Holocaust thanks to him.

A third Polish political prisoner, perhaps the best known of all among those who wrote in Auschwitz (according to Dr. Polosa's report dated June 26, 2016), was Tadeusz Borowski, inmate no. 119198, who was arrested on February 24, 1943. Borowski was forced to work on the ramp at Auschwitz, where his job was to direct the Jews to their death. Despite the difficult assignment and his precarious emotional and physical states, however, Borowski was a political prisoner whose conditions were far better than those of the camp's Jewish inmates. For example, he was allowed to write to his family (in German, of course, with every word subject to strict censorship) and even to receive postcards and packages from them. As he requested in his postcards, the packages contained food and bars of soap (Drewnowski, 2000, pp. 17-30). Like Pozimski, Borowski was in contact with other political prisoners and when he was sent to the Birkenau infirmary in autumn 1943 with a case of pneumonia, he used the infirmary's typewriter to compose his poem *Tango Teskonty* (Tango Longings), that was handed over to his friend Mieczysław Szymkowiak, who hid the text until liberation by the Red Army on January 27, 1945.<sup>18</sup>

While Borowski was hospitalized, he sent letters to his fiancée Maria Rundo, a political prisoner of assimilated Jewish origin who was incarcerated in the women's camp at Birkenau. Both of them were connected with Underground members and other political prisoners who provided them with the supplies needed for writing and also transferred letters back and

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<sup>18</sup> The original Polish text is at the Auschwitz Archives.

forth.<sup>19</sup> This correspondence was not preserved in its original format, but reconstructed almost entirely by Borowski following liberation. Signs of his attempts to contact his beloved and receive signs of life from her are evident in Borowski's letter to his mother, dated March 5, 1944.

By late 1944, Borowski had been transferred to Dautmargen and from there to Struthof, from which he was dispatched to Dachau in a roofless cattle car. Even in Dachau, he managed to write, as is evident from the content of his first letter to Toshka, his love, from Munich, dated January 12, 1946 (Drewnowski, 2000, pp. 91-92). Borowski was liberated from Dachau by the Americans on May 1, 1945. Following liberation, he worked as a journalist and writer and processed the traumas he experienced into literary works (see Bibliography). He married Maria on December 18, 1946. In July 1951, they had a daughter, but the traumas of the past never left him and he took his own life by inhaling toxic gas only three days after she was born.

A letter from Dr. Polosa mentions that the Auschwitz Archives include two handwritten poems of unknown authorship. The first, in Polish, discovered in 1958 at Auschwitz Camp no. 1 during maintenance work, is very brief, while the second, in Russian and somewhat longer, was found at the same camp around the time of liberation in 1945. Neither poem bears a date, signature or other means of identifying their authors.

### **The Auschwitz writings of Lili Kasticher**

Lili Kasticher was born in 1923 in Petrovaselo, Yugoslavia and subsequently lived in Novi Sad.<sup>20</sup> She was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1944 and had the K. C. number 8965 tattooed on her arm. From there, she was assigned to Gross-Rosen, where she worked at the Lorenz factory until liberation in May 1945. In December 1948, she immigrated to Israel, where she remained until her death in November 1973.

In Auschwitz,<sup>21</sup> Lili wrote five poems with date-bearing headings and two – *The Song of The Camp* and *Where Is Our Homeland* – whose headings mentioned only the location: Auschwitz. *The Song of the Camp* describes the women's yearning for the landscape of the Danube and their "homeland," whereas *Where Is Our Homeland* opens with the eponymous question and concludes with a prayer for success in finding that homeland, where they will be free and where "mother is waiting to be hugged and kissed." The two poems appear to have been written about the same time, as their themes are similar and no mention is made of the camp and its hardships.

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<sup>19</sup> Some of the reconstructed letters are at the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature, Warsaw, thanks to the generous intervention of Dr. Wojciech Polosa, Director of the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

<sup>20</sup> (annexed by Hungary in 1941).

<sup>21</sup> In spite of the severe prohibition against possession of writing utensils and paper scraps in Birkenau (Shik, 2012), Lili insisted on writing and even encouraged her fellow inmates to do so as a means of maintaining a last shred of human dignity.

Her first poem, *One Night in Birkenau*, was written on May 31, 1944, not long after Lili's arrival, on a piece of paper filched from the office with German writing on the other side. The poem's content expresses the tortures of life in the *Lager* (camp), with all its terror, loneliness and hopelessness. The inmates lived with their nightmares, in which they see their children asking for a cup of chocolate milk. Then, the alarm signals the start of the work day and the reality of being separated from their children, who were slaughtered in the gas chambers. To the left of the poem is a miniature illustration of the muddy camp and its wooden barracks.

The second poem, *To the Doctor at Auschwitz*, was written on June 15, 1944 in the same manner – in pencil on a piece of used paper, with a miniature sketch in the upper left-hand corner depicting tiny women raising their hands towards heaven. The poem was dedicated to a Jewish woman doctor who risked her life by tearing a piece of cloth from her smock to bandage a wounded inmate. The poem describes the inmates' physical and mental torture and their yearning for words of encouragement:

Stand strong! We shall overcome ...

Lili's third poem, *The Parade is on the Way* (July 30, 1944), describes the women's marching repertoire, fulfilling the Germans' order that inmates, men and women alike, must sing on the way to and from work. It was sung to the tune of a well-known march, *Mariska*, describing the inmates' lives with much humor and irony:

The parade is on its way, out of the gate  
Whoever stays in place gets a kiss on "the place" ...  
Oh, how wonderful is our fortune of plenty

This poem includes a miniature illustration of marching women at its upper left corner.

The fourth poem, *The Women of the Camp* (November 11, 1944) expresses joy that another week has passed and all are still alive. It tells us of the horrifying starvation that the inmates suffer, yearning for bread as they listen to the sounds coming from their empty stomachs.

*Spring 1940* (December 3, 1944) was Lili's fifth and probably last poem written at Auschwitz. Unlike all the others, it describes the horrible historical events of Spring 1940 that she had witnessed, in which people killed one another as the Danube flowed peacefully through the beautiful green forests typical of springtime in Europe. Lili's postwar notes call the poem *Dreaming of Novi Sad 1940*. Its most remarkable feature is the absence of any reference to the misery of Auschwitz, focusing instead on Lili's account of the Third Hungarian Army's butchering of Serbs and Jews as it passed through the region. This event preceded the mass shootings along the Danube in winter 1942, known in Serbian history as "the Cold Days."

*The Rules of Behavior*,<sup>22</sup> a guidebook influenced by Lili's socialist views, is a piece of undated prose in which she declares that the only way to survive the hell of Birkenau is to act

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<sup>22</sup> A handwritten manuscript found in Lili's diary. Lili's granddaughter recalled her mother's informing her that *Rules of Behavior* was written in Birkenau (Sela Ben-Ami, personal communication 2007).

as a mutually supportive group that adheres to the moral values on which its members were raised: “Here, there is no longer “I,” there is only “we.” And as “we,” we will be saved if we behave sincerely, sacrificing ourselves for others, displaying good will, never bearing grudges or reporting others. Only thus can we maintain human dignity,” concludes Lili (Kasticher, 1951), illuminating her personality as a socialist leader and revealing the true purpose of her writing initiative: to preserve a modicum of humanity, for herself and her friends.

Another piece of information left by Lili is a poem dedicated to Berta, describing hunger. It bears no name, date nor signature, but its content and handwriting indicate that it was most likely written by Lili. It begins with the verses: “I feel ashamed/but I am hungry / I should have been given more food.”

Lili’s Auschwitz works reflect starvation, humiliation, beatings, hard labor, crowding, fear of death and uncertainty, but also expressed hope for a much better life in Israel after liberation, as exemplified by the final lines of *Homeland*:

Those who suffered  
Will rejoice again one day.

## Conclusion

This study indicates that the common feature among the three groups is writing at the risk of one’s life, with the intention of leaving traces behind on the one hand and remaining human beings whose spirits have not been subjugated by the Nazis on the other.

*Sonderkommando* documentation, including photographs, constitutes one of the most important and detailed non-German sources we have today regarding what took place in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The materials were written bravely and coherently, their writers all too aware that they would not survive and hoping that after the war, several Jews might remain in the world who must be told what happened to their brethren and who might perhaps seek revenge on the Nazis.

The conditions under which the Polish political prisoners’ heroic writing was produced were the least harsh of all. These works surrounded a concept and ideology that helped them not only with practical organization work but also with emotional necessities. Thus they remained united, loyal to one another and functioning well on their own soil in their own language.

Lili Kasticher, by contrast, was alone. She too acted in fulfilment of an ideology and upheld freedom of thought, even though it was clear to her that at any moment she was liable to get caught and pay for her writing with her life. But for her, life without meaning was not worth living in any case. While the *Sonderkommando* and the political prisoners had connections that provided them with a supply of paper and writing utensils, Lili found a unique way of obtaining these materials. She read the palm of a *Kapo* who rewarded her by ordering office supplies, including pencils and writing paper.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In an interview published in the Hungarian-language Israeli newspaper Uj Kelet (New East) on February 23, 1951, Lili explained how she stayed alive, revealing the ways she obtained pencils and crayons in Birkenau. She

Those who wrote in Auschwitz-Birkenau mentioned in this article constitute proof that the human spirit and freedom of thought were more important than life itself and more powerful than any oppressor's decree.

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had once read a book on palmistry and would read palms for the inmates. One day, she was approached by the Kapo, who asked to have her palm read. Excited by Lili's reading, the Kapo asked her to analyze letters from her boyfriend at the front, wanting to know if he really missed her. Subsequently, the Kapo asked Lili to write and illustrate her letters to her boyfriend. That is how Lili obtained writing implements.

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