

“Jungle law reigned among the prisoners”: the meaning of cannibalism in the testimonies of Nazi concentration camps’ survivors¹

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Published 10 May 2023

Abstract

What do Holocaust survivors do when they refer to cannibalism in their testimonies? This piece argues that they do not merely describe what they have witnessed or heard of, but also ponder the boundaries of humanity. For centuries, Europeans have made references to cannibalism in various depictions for drawing the line between “civilized” and “uncivilized.” In accordance with studies that examine cannibalism in other historical contexts, I argue that in attempting to express a sense of the radical dehumanization in the Nazi camps and convey its horror, some survivors’ accounts reconstruct the appalling reality of the camps as parallels to familiar, older stories of cannibalism that take place in remote, brutal places deprived of civilization.

Key Words

Cannibalism, Civilization, Concentration Camps, Holocaust, Meaning

On March 31, 2016, the British press reported the discovery of “shocking new records” in the National Archives. A letter written by the “only British survivor of Belsen,” stated that “Nazi victims were reduced to ‘rampant cannibalism’” during the concentration camp’s final days.² The sense of revelation in these newspaper articles, however, cannot be explained by historical ignorance regarding cannibalism in Nazi camps. British and American newspapers had already reported in the immediate postwar years on such cases in Bergen-Belsen and other camps³ while liberating troops mentioned it in interviews and written accounts of their experiences (Abzug 1985: 83; Flanagan and Bloxham 2005; Celinscak 2015: 60, 67). Moreover,

the existence of cannibalism across various fronts of the war is well-known to historians and has been documented specifically in relation to the Leningrad siege and the Nazi brutality toward Soviet Prisoners of War (Beevor 2012; Bidlack and Lomagin 2012: 314–323; Linne 2010). And yet, the journalists’ sense of discovery is not entirely unjustified, as no scholarly or popular work has so far examined in depth cannibalism during the Holocaust.

Rather than delving into the existing evidence on cannibalism during the Holocaust, scholars address it as an uncomfortable revelation. Some completely ignore the issue, question its very existence among Holocaust victims, or stress that it was an absolute rarity (e.g.,

¹ I would like to thank Zuzanna Dziuban for her helpful comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

² The letter was sent in the 1960s as part of a request for compensation. The headline of James Cox’s *The Sun* article was: Nazi Victims Were Reduced to ‘Rampant Cannibalism’ in Belsen Concentration Camp, Shocking New Records Reveal, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/1107727/nazi-victims-were-reduced-to-rampant-cannibalism-in-belsen-concentration-camp-shocking-new-records-reveal/> (14 March 2018).

³ See, for instance Cannibalism in Prison Camp: British Medical Officer Visit to ‘Most Horrible Place’, in: *The Guardian*, 19 April 1945, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1945/apr/19/secondworldwar.fromthearchive> (14 March 2018); Cannibalism Cases in Belsen Related: Dresden Physician, a Prisoner and First German Witness, Tells of Slashed Bodies, in: *New York Times*, 29 September 1945, 9.

Sofsky 1997: 162; Dobosiewicz 2007: 239–240; Stone 2015: 4, 103). More often, scholars who encounter evidence for cannibalism during the Holocaust, give only a very brief reference to this phenomenon when describing the dreadful conditions in the camps and ghettos. Such references usually take the form of a single sentence, stating that “some inmates became so desperate they resorted to cannibalism” (Wachsmann 2015: 282) or “there were even cases of cannibalism” (Kogon 2006 [1946]: 116). Formulations of this kind are rarely followed by either detailed descriptions or analysis. Therefore, by stopping after the mention of cannibalism, these scholars mark it as a limit phenomenon, a border that one does not cross.

Likewise, when cannibalism is mentioned in survivors’ testimonies, it is often used to indicate the most extreme expression of the Holocaust and simultaneously to articulate the impossibility of speech. Even though diaries written during the Holocaust and testimonies given after the event express their authors’ wish to record the horrific details of their persecution, they also include certain silences, especially in relation to the repellent living conditions and aspects of one’s behavior that may appear morally problematic or “distasteful” (Pentlin 1999; Lang 2004; Brown 2010). Michael Nutkiewicz (2003: 21) recorded such a moment in an interview he made with a Holocaust survivor:

MN: Isn’t testimony done to let the world know the full horror of what was done to people?

SB: I don’t know. If I had been involved in cannibalism (which I did witness) I would not have talked about it on tape.

MN: Why not?

SB: It’s inhuman. It’s way beyond...

Again, the survivor describes cannibalism as the most extreme occasion and as the point in which he must stop her narrative. Yet this brief reference also gives a clue as to the essence of this boundary. It views cannibalism as a fundamental transgression of what it means to be human.

A similar insight into this boundary also emerges when survivors express an interest in delving into their experiences of cannibalism but their audience proves incapable of hearing about it. Lawrence Langer (1991) introduces the case of a survivor who addressed cannibalism while recalling being in severe hunger, looking for “anything to eat.” Following an Allied bombing in the area of Mauthausen concentration camp, a bomb fell on the camp itself. As can be reconstructed from other testimonies, too, the explosion led to the scattering of human body parts, which caused some of the starved inmates to feed upon them.⁴

MOSES S.: So we got up, and we found a hand from the bombing. [...] A human hand.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, a human hand.

MOSES S.: Five of us. Divided. And we were eating it. [...]

MOSES S.’S WIFE: Excuse me, I think we have to finish. Too much already.

MOSES S.: Human flesh.

Langer writes of the “general disquietude and consternation among the members of Moses S.’s audience” and calls this part of the testimony “a monologue that invites no dialogue” (Langer 1991: 117). In an attempt to explain the listeners’ inability to engage with this information, Langer adds: “We lack terms of discourse for such human situations, preferring to call them inhuman and banish them from civilized consciousness” (Langer 1991: 118).

Existing evidence points to the occurrence of cases of cannibalism in ghettos, various Nazi camps, as well as on death marches and transports.⁵ While it appears that many survivors did not witness cannibalism during the Holocaust, those who refer to it in their testimonies, do not merely describe what they have seen or heard of, but also ponder the boundaries of civilization and humanity. Such reflection is not restricted to the Holocaust. For centuries, Europeans have made references to cannibalism as narrative instruments for drawing the line between “civilized” and “uncivilized,” and demonizing the Other (Arens 1979; King 2000). In so doing, they also produced an aesthetic of horror (Moser 2005: 35). The very mentioning of cannibalism awakens images and tales that arouse both disgust and fear – two elements that define what we call horror (Carroll 1990). I therefore argue that in attempting to express a sense of the radical dehumanization in the Nazi camps and convey its horror to their audience, some survivors’ accounts reconstruct the appalling reality of the camps as parallels to familiar stories set in remote, barbaric places fraught with atrocity and devoid of civilization.

“Jungle law reigned among the prisoners; at night you killed or were killed; by day cannibalism was rampant.” It was this quote from the letter of a Bergen-Belsen survivor that stirred the British press, as outlined in this article’s opening paragraph. Notably, the terror in this description is not associated with the cruelty of the SS and the author does not project the inhumanity on to the Nazi perpetrators. Moreover, this account does not describe starving inmates resorting to eating the flesh of the many corpses, who were strewn throughout the camp. Rather, it expresses grave fear of being attacked and killed to be eaten by one’s fellow-prisoners. A similar fear was recorded during the

4 See, for instance Archiv der KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen (AMM), Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project (MSDP), OH/ZP1/52, Interview with Mordechai Eldar. Interviewer: Keren Harazi (23 April 2002). For the particularly severe conditions in the Mauthausen concentration camp during the war’s final months, see Eckstein (1984: 255–261).

5 See, in addition to the above-mentioned evidence, also Kassow (2007: 213); Hansen, Kabalek (forthcoming).

Leningrad siege (1941–1943), as rumors that gangs of cannibals were roaming the city aroused widespread panic. Leningraders dreaded to leave their children unattended or walk alone in dark alleys, although NKVD reports indicate that only one such case took place (Kirschenbaum 2006: 238–242; Reid 2012: 280–292). It seems, therefore, that the origin of this terror lies less in the actual prevalence of cases of cannibalistic murder and more in experiencing a state of utter chaos, when humans abandon social rules and values and instead follow primal, animalistic instincts.

A sense of chaos is apparent, especially in the testimonies of survivors who spent the war's final months in the camps that were liberated last. With the advance of the Red Army in late 1944 and the evacuation of the Auschwitz complex in January 1945, countless inmates were sent on death marches, trucks, or trains, to overcrowded concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau and Mauthausen, or to provisional camps that were constructed in a hurry (Blatman 2011; Hördler 2015). Numerous inmates died on the way, while those who reached their unknown destinations faced a reality that many describe as significantly more severe than the one they had known before. Although people nowadays have become accustomed to considering Auschwitz as the most dreadful place imaginable, many survivors – and especially those who had some privileged status that allowed them to maintain the hope of making it to the end of the war – depict leaving Auschwitz as a turn for the worse.⁶ This is evident, for instance, in an interview with Richard van Dam, a Dutch Jew, which was summarized as follows:

At the beginning of 1945 Mr. van Dam and a lot of co-prisoners were put aboard a ship (barge) and transported via the Donau [Danube] from Melk to Ebensee. This was the worst camp he had come to. Here chaos was complete. The prisoners [received] hardly any food at all. There was cannibalism.⁷

Cannibalism is thus used here to articulate and demonstrate the absolute anarchy in the camp and the worst conceivable conditions. In an interview given decades later, Jacob Maestro, a Jew from Salonika, described the deteriorating situation after leaving Auschwitz in a similar fashion:

We were transported from [Auschwitz to Mauthausen and then to Melk and from] Melk to Wels. In Wels there were hardly any barracks. It was in a forest. We walked freely [in the camp], without food, without anything. And there I heard that Ebensee is even worse. Ebensee is eating corpses. [long pause]⁸

These accounts describe the incremental increases in distance to what their authors seem to conceive as civilization. This remoteness is expressed in terms of spatiality, as each subsequent camp is worse than the previous one and the distance from human settlements grows (“It was in a forest”), but also in relation to the lack of minimal conditions and provisions (no food rations, hardly any barracks). Here, even the routine that characterized the camps one knew before, which included roll-calls, harsh discipline, and slave labor, is missing (“We walked freely”). The occurrences of cannibalism in these places thus mark the greatest detachment from “civilization” and familiar social order. This depiction corresponds with an ancient view of cannibalism, which locates it, both geographically and symbolically, at the farthest point from civilized humanity, at the peripheries of the world (Moser 2005: 7–10). There, governed by a state of complete anarchy, where nature is untamed, the cannibal is prominent (Avramescu 2009: 8–14).

Cannibalism played a figurative role in many depictions that emerged during the Second World War. Writing in the Warsaw Ghetto, Emanuel Ringelblum (1974: 15) defined regimes that rule by force and anarchy, for instance Hitlerism, as constituting “modern cannibalism” while Soviet propaganda frequently labelled the Nazis as cannibals (Berkhoff 2012: 127, 155, 175, 181). These images were embedded in a broader wartime discourse that presented the Second World War as a moral struggle that would decide the future of humanity. Thus, the Allies’ propaganda expressed a deep “fear that civilisation was now confronted by barbarism, order by chaos, good by evil” (Overy 1997: 357) and the same fear also appears in Jews’ ghetto diaries (Garbarini 2006: 26–57). Cases of cannibalism were not very common and did not characterize the Nazi camps throughout the war years. But when cannibalism did transpire, it confronted inmates with a metaphor that became reality and thus with the absolute, most terrifying, proof that they had left human civilized society and truly sank to barbarism.

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6 See, for example, Stroumsa (1996). On the references to this period as “the worst” see Kabalek (2015).

7 Richard van Dam, *As Medical Orderly in Auschwitz* (received in January 1958). Yad Vashem Archive, Wiener Library Collection, O.2. File 637.

8 AMM MSDP OH/ZP1/299, Interview with Jacob Maestro. Interviewer: Keren Harazi (2002/2003).

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