

MISZELLE

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**Re-Lektüre – Kautsky, Light and Shadow: Reading Benedikt Kautsky in 2018**

I was looking for Benedikt Kautsky, or someone similar, when I found him somewhere in the later stages of my doctoral research. Up to that point, my work on the material culture of prisoners in Auschwitz had mainly dealt with theoretical and methodological subjects predicated by scarcity. I was familiar with depictions of the prisoner aristocracy by former prisoners, among them accounts by Primo Levi, Rudolf Vrba, and Hermann Langbein, which document the wide-ranging sartorial latitude which prisoner functionaries had enjoyed.<sup>1</sup> But I was searching for information about the subject of the prisoner self-government; that was how I came across Kautsky's book *Teufel und Verdammte* (1946).<sup>2</sup> I believe I must have arrived very quickly, via his table of contents, at a three-page section entitled 'clothing.' It was here that I first met an assertion that indeed there was such a thing as fashion even in Auschwitz.<sup>3</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of, my previous knowledge and socialization, Kautsky's use of the word fashion (*Mode*), caught me by surprise. The passage is worth quoting in full:

"In Auschwitz the clothing store lived off 'Canada' [the storehouses for property of the murdered Jews]. There were hardly any real prisoners' clothes, but almost only heirlooms of the gassed [Jews], among them, from time to time, outstanding objects. As in everything else, here too there were the starkest differences between the Muselmann, who was left to walk around even in winter without underwear, with tattered socks and shredded shoes, having to wait three to four months for the 'laundry-exchange,' and the 'slammer squire' [*Knastkavalier*], prominent [prisoners] dressed after the newest camp fashion [*Mode*].

For indeed there was a fashion that suddenly prescribed wide pants, so that one had flares [*Keile*] stitched-in, had the waist of one's jacket and coat worked over, and wore black cloth caps, or striped shirts with collars – and above all boots, the longing of every good German, who then looked at least halfway like a soldier. If you caught sight of a prisoner with boots in the camp, you could bet that he was a room-orderly [*Stubendienst*] or a barber, someone who never had to stand in the mud, or at least a *Capo* or a foreman in a ditch commando. But the working prisoners, whose shoes were overflowed with water and mud, never got any –

<sup>1</sup> Levi, Primo: *If This is a Man*, New York 1959, pp. 107-109; Vrba, Rudolf: *I Escaped from Auschwitz*, Cornwall 2002, pp. 135-144; Langbein, Hermann: *Menschen in Auschwitz*, Vienna 1995, pp. 112-113.

<sup>2</sup> Kautsky, Benedikt: *Teufel und Verdammte. Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse aus sieben Jahren in deutschen Konzentrationslagern*, Zürich 1946. From my notes it seems I came across him in: Adler, Hans Günther: *Selbstverwaltung und Widerstand in den Konzentrationslagern der SS*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 8 (1960), pp. 221-236.

<sup>3</sup> Although nearly every survivor memoir includes some passages about this phenomenon, most survivors do not explicitly call it 'fashion'. Nonetheless, this term can also be found in: Müller, Filip: *Eyewitness Auschwitz. Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, Chicago 1979, p. 62.

following the Law of the Lager: “To him that hath shall be given, from him who hath not, shall be taken away.”<sup>4</sup>

As in so many other passages, Kautsky’s style, which some scholars call apodictic, is certainly characterized by satire and a degree of aplomb (‘slammer squires’), which sets it apart from other accounts written by survivors. Perhaps, to follow historian Lars Fischer, the closest thing Kautsky presently has to a biographer, this tone was also at variance with Kautsky’s internal experience. Fischer’s perspective on Kautsky, set out in two recent articles, seems to be in flux: while in his earlier work Kautsky figures as someone who “fundamentally failed to grasp what the Shoah was about,”<sup>5</sup> in his later article Kautsky appears more as a survivor himself, fundamentally torn by the impossibility and necessity of coming to terms with the past.<sup>6</sup> According to Fischer’s second article, behind the cold tone and unbroken façade of a staunch communist lay the guilt-stricken consciousness of a son whose Jewish mother had remained in Holland, where the family had fled after his arrest, in order to maintain contact with him; she died in Auschwitz (see below).<sup>7</sup>

Kautsky’s contrast between the Knastkavlier and the Muselmann is characteristic of his eye for details, particularly those highlighting the polarization of prisoner society, and his attempt to explain these details by generalizations approximating to social laws. Some of these generalizations are presumably his own, while others may have been prevalent in prisoner society, of which Kautsky was, after all, a seven-year veteran. Perhaps the prime example is what he calls ‘the Law of the Lager.’ A similar generalization, uncited by Kautsky, was put forward by Ludwig Wörl (1906-1967), Lagerältester of the hospital barracks in Birkenau who was later recognized as righteous among the nations. At the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, Wörl stated that “In Auschwitz the basic law held that Jews must, Poles should, and Germans can – die.”<sup>8</sup> Such statements express social facts about the camps: they show us how prisoners understood their social world in real-time. However, such generalizations are often imprecise and may reproduce biases present in their formation. Thus, they have explanative power, but should also be treated critically.

Kautsky’s passage on fashion led me to undertake a more serious study of the material culture of the prisoner elite, in which his account is one element which must be weighed alongside others.<sup>9</sup> In saying this we return to the basic need to explain Kautsky’s text. The fashion passage is integrally connected to Kautsky’s main thesis highlighting the social division between prisoners, and its disastrous consequences for their inability to successfully resist the SS. In one of the key passages in his introduction – stricken entirely

<sup>4</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, Zürich, 1946, pp. 259-260. My translation.

<sup>5</sup> Fischer, Lars: *A Tale of Two Books*. Benedikt Kautsky’s *Teufel und Verdammte* and Gustav Mayer’s *Erinnerungen*, in: Fritz, Regina/Kovacs, Eva/Rasky, Bela (eds.): *Als der Holocaust noch keinen Namen hatte. Zur frühen Aufarbeitung des NS-Massenmordes an den Juden*, Vienna 2016, pp. 299-315, here p. 303.

<sup>6</sup> Fischer, Lars: *It Could All Have Been Much Worse*. Benedikt Kautsky’s Post-War Response to the Shoah, in: Seymour, David M./Camino, Mercedes (eds.): *The Holocaust in the Twenty-First Century. Contesting/Contested Memories*, New York 2017, pp. 245-262.

<sup>7</sup> Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, pp. 252-254, and p. 261 footnote 40. Kautsky’s *Teufel und Verdammte* is dedicated to Luise Kautsky. Immediately after the war, a commemorative book in her memory was published: Hertz, Paul (ed.): *Luise Kautsky zum Gedenken*, New York 1945. Kautsky also edited her manuscript of letters by Rosa Luxemburg, which was only published after his death as: Luxemburg, Rosa: *Briefe an Freunde*, Frankfurt/Main 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Langbein, Hermann: *Der Auschwitz-Prozess. Eine Dokumentation*, Bd. 1, Frankfurt/Main 1965, p. 67. My translation.

<sup>9</sup> Benninga, Noah: *The Bricolage of Death. Jewish Possessions and the Fashioning of the Prisoner Elite in Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1942-1945*, in: Auslander, Leora/Zahra, Tara (eds.): *Objects of War*, Ithaca 2018, pp. 252-287. I would like to thank the Saul Kagan Claims’ Fellowship for supporting the extension of this research.

from the 1960 English translation – Kautsky puts it the following way: “Die ‘sozialen’ Gegensätze in einem Lager waren ebenso krass wie die von Häftlingen an Häftlingen begangenen Verbrechen, und das heute meist als seine Hölle für alle Insassen erscheinende Lager bot vielen von ihnen die Möglichkeit zu einem bessern Leben, als sie es sich in der Freiheit erträumen konnten.”<sup>10</sup> In my copy of the text, bearing the ex libris of the late Israeli Holocaust historian, Shaul Ash, these lines are underlined in red, and the page is dog-eared with a red handwritten ‘1.’<sup>11</sup> If this is indeed Kautsky’s leitmotif, how are we to take it today? The question hinges to a high degree on Kautsky’s person.

Approaching Kautsky is not simple. The road is made more difficult by the fact that a full-length biography is still lacking, and that his writing, which took place in the immediate aftermath of the events, attempts a systematic perspective based mostly on his own experience. Moreover, he does not always indicate to which period of his seven-year experience an event belongs. Above all, the early date of his account means that he wrote without recourse to subsequent secondary accounts, particularly the Nuremberg trials. In this, Kautsky resembles Eugen Kogon, whose *Der SS-Stadt* came out the same year.<sup>12</sup> Though both accounts belong to the very first attempts to account for the Nazi concentration camps, Kogon went on to become the early *Standardwerk* in Western Germany, while Kautsky, despite having a certain importance to the German and Austrian readers, receded from the historical limelight.<sup>13</sup>

In 1948, Hannah Arendt’s essay on the concentration camps suggested a tripartite division of accounts on the camps: those which merely reflect the inmates’ experience of suffering; recollections of survivors that are “products of assimilated recollection”; and the “fearful anticipation of those who dread the concentration camp as a possibility for the future.”<sup>14</sup> Championing her own, third, approach, Arendt stated that works in the first category are “numerous... but leave the reader cold”, while works in the second category – namely, Eugen Kogon and David Rousset – though “indispensable” for understanding the concentration camps, “become useless and dangerous as soon as they attempt a positive interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> In short, she establishes a hierarchy in which nearly all survivors are at the bottom, while she, the external viewer, is at the top. Kautsky is not mentioned.

Today, after decades of relative obscurity, there are some signs that scholarly interest in Kautsky might be rising. Aside from the recent work by Fischer mentioned above, it is

<sup>10</sup> “The social oppositions in a camp were as stark as the crimes committed by prisoners against prisoners. The camp, which today appears as a hell for all its inmates, offered many of them possibilities of a better life than what they could have dreamed of in freedom,” Kautsky, *Teufel*, 1946, p. 9. It is difficult to imagine that Kautsky gave his consent to this truncated translation which appeared the year of his death, bound in a colourful paper binding in the style of the Stalag literature, upon which the publisher had stamped “the authentic history of Hell!” See: Kautsky, Benedikt: *Devils and the Damned*, transl. Kenneth Case, London 1960.

<sup>11</sup> From book reviews left inside the book, it seems Ash must have been reading Kautsky in 1967, a year before his own untimely death. This would seem to indicate that Ash found this statement by Kautsky to be highly significant. To the best of my knowledge Ash did not publish his reading of Kautsky before his death.

<sup>12</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, who critically reviewed both books, seems nonetheless to present some of Kautsky’s insights as his own. See: Bettelheim, Bruno: *The Concentration Camp as a Class State*, in: *Modern Review* 1 (1947), pp. 628-637.

<sup>13</sup> Fischer plausibly suggests that Kautsky’s impeccable anti-Fascist credentials were convenient for less pristine members of the Austrian center-right. They were happy to have an account perceived as saying little about the Jews, and what was said was negative, while dismissing the SS as stupid and lazy, thereby downplaying the role of ideology. Moreover, through no fault of his own, Kautsky’s account was distorted by Holocaust deniers, (see note 24, below). Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 254.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, Hannah: *The Concentration Camps*, in: *Partisan Review* 15 (1948), pp. 743-764, here pp. 743-4.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *Camps*, 1948, p. 744.

noteworthy that Nicolaus Wachsmann's *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (2015), cites Kautsky no less than 24 times.<sup>16</sup> However, the manner in which Wachsmann cites Kautsky is symptomatic of the doubt historians have cast on reports by political prisoners (red triangles), as favoring their perspective and criminalizing their in-camp rivals, the 'professional criminals' (green triangles) and the 'asocials' (black triangles). Karen Orth, who popularized this criticism, names Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein and Benedikt Kautsky as originators of a Red-centric historiography that falsely depicted the Red prisoner-government as beneficial to all prisoners while criminalizing 'green' and the 'black' prisoners.<sup>17</sup> Kautsky's unsparing criticism of these groups, as well as the Jews, of whom he is also critical, will be discussed below.

In any case, in the 15 years between his liberation and his death, Kautsky did not become a sociologist or historian of the Nazi concentration camps. As Fischer puts it: *Teufel und Verdammte* was not Kautsky's first word on the subject, but rather his last.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the extreme temporal proximity between the act of writing, completed by November 1945, and the experience of the camps, as well as Kautsky's social analyses and attention to detail, make this a necessary text for anyone interested in the life of the prisoners of the camps. To read Kautsky using Arendt's method of throwing out all positive interpretations seems extreme. At the same time, it must be recognized that Kautsky sheds not only light on his subject matter but also shadow. There is hope, therefore, that a sufficient understanding of Kautsky's person and circumstances will enable separating his biases – the undeniably political and personal intentions behind his writing, which included posturing for position in the post-war world, and attempting to rid himself of the past in the form of a book – from his analysis and reportage.

Kautsky was the youngest son of the leading theoretician of the Socialist Second International, Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), and Luise Kautsky née Ronsperger (1864-1944), a friend of Rosa Luxemburg. He obtained his doctorate in economics in Berlin in 1921, and lived in Vienna, where he worked as a publisher, the secretary of the Vienna worker's committee, and as an aid to the Austrian Social Democrat Otto Bauer. After the Anschluss, Kautsky was arrested, though not, it seems, in the roundup of leading communists (as he would have liked to portray himself), but rather in the attempt by local authorities to complete their quota by arresting second tier communist and even non-political Jews.<sup>19</sup> From his arrest in May 1938 and until five months after his transfer from Buchenwald to Auschwitz in October 1942, Kautsky bore the double red-yellow triangles, forming the Star of David.

<sup>16</sup> Wachsmann, Nikolaus: *KL. A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, New York 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Orth, Karin: *Gab es ein Lagergesellschaft? 'Kriminelle' und politische Häftlinge im Konzentrationslager*, in: Frei, Norbert/Steinbacher, Sybille/Wagner, Bernd C. (eds.): *Ausbeutung, Vernichtung, Öffentlichkeit. Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Lagerpolitik*, München 2000, pp. 109-133, here p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> In a letter to former fellow prisoner Otto Binder, Kautsky, who completed the book in three months, writes that in finishing the book he was also (he hoped, or tried to convey) "finished with this issue itself"; "fortunately", he writes, with the same sanguinity, "one cannot be an eternal prisoner." Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 246.

<sup>19</sup> Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 248.

Then, in the spring of 1943, Kautsky was ‘Aryanized’ – a procedure to which he credits his survival, but claims was common.<sup>20</sup> After liberation, Kautsky worked as a journalist in Zurich, eventually returning to Austria, where he became head of the trade union academy in Gratz. In 1954, he obtained his *Habilitation* and was ultimately given a student-less chair at the university in Vienna.<sup>21</sup> In 1957, he became the deputy director of the Creditanstalt-Bankverein in Vienna, and in 1958 he took part in the redrafting of the Austrian Social Democratic Party’s platform (SPÖ), effectively cleansing it of socialist content and furthering the party’s merge into the Austrian mainstream.<sup>22</sup>

To ask how we are to take Kautsky’s book is to bring up the related questions: How was his account received by his contemporaries, and how was it used after his death? As noted above, a complete answer unfortunately includes both Holocaust historians and Holocaust deniers. The later have embraced Kautsky in a bear-hug through no fault of his own, but also because his account’s cool and distanced tone may have been convenient for them. In the passage seized upon by deniers, Kautsky speaks briefly about the gas chambers: “Though I did not see them myself, they have been described to me by so many trustworthy people that I have no hesitation in reproducing their testimony.”<sup>23</sup> In the hands of the deniers, this became a testimony about not seeing the gas chambers.<sup>24</sup>

Though in fact Kautsky’s text is severely manipulated here, it is true that his account, while mentioning the murder of the Jews and their suffering in numerous passages, does not highlight this aspect and treats it from an outside perspective.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Kautsky’s own losses were of an entirely different order than those of most people labelled as Jews: though his mother was murdered in Auschwitz, she died an extremely rare ‘clean’ death in the camp hospital through undernourishment.<sup>26</sup> She was over 80 when deported on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, 1944, and passed in December.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, 1946, p. 46 and p. 195. I am unfamiliar with any other cases and the matter bears further research. Fischer, pointing out that Kautsky himself used this event as a sign of the inconsistency of the Nazi worldview, suggests that Kautsky’s file may have been lost in the transfer between Buchenwald and Auschwitz, and that, not being circumcised, he was able to pass as a non-Jewish political prisoner. Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 249. To me, this event, alongside his mother’s death in Auschwitz, and the fact that Kautsky was able to remain in postal contact with her until her arrest, seems indicative of activity by the camp underground, which had strong ties to Vienna (Luise Kautsky’s hometown) in the form of Hermann Langbein. On the postal contact between Luise and Benedikt during the war see: Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 261, footnote 40.

<sup>21</sup> Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 246; Fleck, Christian: *Soziologie in Österreich nach 1945*, unpublished working paper (2016), p. 11. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304623812\\_Soziologie\\_in\\_Osterreich\\_nach\\_1945](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304623812_Soziologie_in_Osterreich_nach_1945) [01.08.2018].

<sup>22</sup> Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 246

<sup>23</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, Zürich, 1946, p. 272-273.

<sup>24</sup> Dawidowicz, Lucy S.: *Lies About the Holocaust*, in: *Commentary* 70 (1980) pp. 31-37, here p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> This position, which could be called an internal external-observer, might be contrasted with Arendt’s favouring of a completely external viewer (compare note 14 above).

<sup>26</sup> According to Langbein, the lethal injection of sick Jewish patients with phenol in the camp hospital was discontinued as a result of his own influence on SS camp doctor Wirth. Langbein, *Menschen*, 1995, pp. 537-566.

<sup>27</sup> Waterford, Helen H.: *Commitment to the Dead*, Fredrick 1987, p. 54.

Kautsky, who could not see her at this time, was later wracked with guilt over her death, and in an argument with his brothers, seems to have convinced himself at least that this was the best realistic outcome, considering the alternatives.<sup>28</sup> Holocaust deniers would later use this case to strengthen claim that Auschwitz was, after all, only a camp like those established by other nations, and not an extermination camp.<sup>29</sup>

One of the models guiding my own thought on Auschwitz is a division between a 'Clean Auschwitz' – where the official Nazi order ruled and created a society of 'total terror' and total order – and a 'Dirty Auschwitz,' which was ruled by actions considered illegal by the SS themselves. For example, while official SS rules required any form of corporal punishment to be approved by the SS-WVHA in Berlin (Clean Auschwitz), the camp was in fact rife with 'illegal' murder, which was written up retroactively as 'attempted escape,' or performed through 'non-corporal' forms of punishment, including the infamous standing cells.<sup>30</sup> Or, to take another example, though the rape of Jewish women was forbidden by Nazi racial law (Clean Auschwitz), in fact, as we learn from the buried Sonderkommando scrolls, Jewish women were sexually harassed by SS guards at the entrance to the gas chambers, presumably because they thought there would be no one left to tell these stories (Dirty Auschwitz).<sup>31</sup>

To take another example, although the SS were supposed to be the ideological soldiers of the regime (Clean Auschwitz), the murder of the Jews at Auschwitz led to endemic corruption of the guards and command, resulting in the arrival of an investigation committee headed by SS judge Konrad Morgen. Morgen's report, sparked by a large chunk of molten dental gold posted by a medical orderly stationed in Auschwitz, unearthed a bizarre array of corrupt behaviors by the guards, which included, alongside theft of valuables, also the use of Jewish women as "oriental serving maids" in the SS barracks, and what appears to be the ritualistic use of freshly slaughtered bull's testicles (Dirty Auschwitz).<sup>32</sup>

But the prime difference between 'clean' and 'dirty' lay in the gas chambers. Not only did these provide a physically unclean death, in comparison, for example, with the T4 'euthanasia' killings, but their victims were never registered, leaving the German records 'clean.' Aryanization, political privilege, and his mother's 'clean' death, point to Kautsky as one of the relatively lucky to be a resident of 'Clean Auschwitz.' He was not oblivious to

<sup>28</sup> Fischer, *Much Worse*, 2017, p. 254. Although Fischer seems to find this hard to fathom, Kautsky's thinking may be compared to Mark Edelman's anecdote about a nurse in the Warsaw Ghetto who became a heroine for using her private cyanide to painlessly kill a group of orphaned children in the hospital, saving them from the ravages of Treblinka. At a time when most medical personnel in the ghetto were keeping their cyanide for their own relatives, she was perceived as having acted selflessly. See: Krall, Hanna: *Shielding the Flame. An Intimate Conversation with Dr. Marek Edelman*, New York 1977, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> For an example of a reference by a Holocaust denier to Kautsky's mother in: Jürgen Graf, *Holocaust or Hoax*, Historical Revisionism Press, chapter 14. Online at: <http://www.vho.org/GB/Books/hoh/chap14.html> [01.08.2018]. See also note 24 above.

<sup>30</sup> The lethal nature of this torture lay in the fact that prisoners were effectively deprived of sleep during the night and forced to continue working as slave laborers during the day; additionally, poor air-supply in the cells meant there was a real risk of asphyxiation. Strzelecka, Irena: *Punishment and Torture*, in: Iwaszko, Tadeusz/Kubica, Helena/Piper, Franciszek/Strzelecka, Irena/Strzelecki, Andrezej (eds.): *Auschwitz 1940-1945, Vol. 2, Oswiecim 2000*, pp. 371-398. See also: Westermann, Edward B.: *Shot While Trying to Escape. Procedural Legality and State-Sanctioned Killing in Nazi Germany*, in: *Dapim, Studies on the Holocaust*, 32 (2018), pp. 93-111.

<sup>31</sup> See Leib Langfuss's account in: *Mar, Ber: The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, Tel-Aviv 1985, p. 209.

<sup>32</sup> Langbein, *Menschen*, 1995, pp. 438-439.

the pressures and corruption of other prisoners, indeed he documents them and tries to explain their mechanisms. Nevertheless, he did not share in them equally.

If deniers have embraced Kautsky, historians have been very guarded with him, and not only for his involuntary adoption by the other side, but due to his harsh criticism of 'green' and 'black' prisoners and the unflattering picture he paints of the Jews in the camp. These are delicate and complicated issues, but for the sake of brevity, if not clarity, we must try and broach them directly.

Kautsky's treatment of the Jews is, in fact, rather more extensive than might be believed from reading about him. In (presumably) Shaul Ash's copy of the text, a handwritten index written on the back flap, labeled 'Jews/antisemitism,' references on no less than 60 passages, some several pages long. However, the problem is one of nuances. Fischer, at any rate, concentrates on two passages as the most problematic concerning the Jews. The first is a long passage in Kautsky's introduction, where he states that the Jews – as the lowest rank in the camp – were abused not only by the SS but also by the prisoners.<sup>33</sup> This statement is followed by a complex passage in which Kautsky differentiates the antisemitism of his fellow Red prisoners, which he claims stemmed from class conflict, from the sturdy (handfesten) antisemitism of the Green and Black prisoners. Kautsky then explains that an astounding number of Jews belonged to "the criminal elements, above all the representatives of the Bourgeoisie and the free professions (lawyers, doctors, etc.) [sic.]," and that class conflict continued behind the barbed-wire.<sup>34</sup> He adds that many Jews were involved in bribery in the camp, which Red prisoners (supposedly) frowned upon, and states that Jewish prisoners had tried to influence guards by having their free relatives deliver ransom to the guards' families.<sup>35</sup>

Fischer, and others, have read this almost as a form of auto-antisemitism.<sup>36</sup> Kautsky's attempt to provide moral cover for the complicity of the Red hierarchy seems politically motivated – to exonerate his political cadre and cement his own post-war standing. This is even more true of the second passage highlighted by Fischer, in which Kautsky states that, presumably in contrast to himself and the other political prisoners, the Jews understood their deportation to Auschwitz solely as a disaster. "During seven years [of imprisonment], I have spoken to literally thousands of Jews exactly about this point", Kautsky writes, portraying himself as a sociologist who had somehow happened into the camp. "The thought that imprisonment fulfilled a political goal, and as such could have a positive meaning, gave those prisoners who were able to bring themselves to it an intense political strength; the Jews, who perceived only the negative aspects of their imprisonment, were denied this source of strength."<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere he adds, "There was little evidence of an all-Jewish comradeship; to the extent that there was any comradeship at all, it was limited almost exclusively to the various countries [of origin]."<sup>38</sup>

These passages sound harsh, and reveal little understanding for the suffering of Jews, many of whom had just lost their entire families only to expect a similar fate. Yet

<sup>33</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, 1946, pp. 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, 1946, p. 10. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, 1946, p. 10, and p. 193.

<sup>36</sup> Werner, Alfred: *Teufel und Verdammte / Der SS-Staat*, in: *Commentary* 5 (1980), pp. 284-286, here p. 285.

<sup>37</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, 1946, p. 155; Compare Fischer, *Much Worse*, p. 247.

<sup>38</sup> Kautsky, *Teufel*, 1946, p. 194.

Kautsky's motivation seems transparently political: as a communist, he is attempting to show the failure of religion as a cohesive element fomenting revolution. In fact, a closer investigation of these passages reveals Kautsky's own shortcomings. His point on the ineffectiveness of the Jewish religion as a source of resistance is belied by the Sonderkommando uprising, which was led by Jews from a number of countries, and variety of backgrounds; Kautsky does not ascribe much importance to this event, which the general camp resistance, led by the political prisoners, did not support.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Kautsky had a dead ear for religious redemption. As a non-Yiddish speaking inmate of Buna-Monowitz, he would likely not have heard of the activities of Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Meisels from Weitzen (1902-1974), religious caregiver to an ill-fated transport of some 2,800 Hungarian youths in Birkenau. Meisels risked death to blow the *shofar* for the children as they awaited their last moments on Yom Kippur, 1944, providing them with the hope of redemption and union with their loved ones.<sup>40</sup>

Still, this does not mean the details described by Kautsky are necessarily wrong, only that the causative weight ascribed to them may be misplaced, or that they may need balancing by counterpoints. What about his generalizations regarding prisoner categories? According to Falk Pingel, still the most nuanced study of prisoner society, camp stereotypes had a reifying effect on prisoner behavior, leading prisoners to adopt behaviors which were expected of them by their category. Those prisoners who were not antisemitic from the outset could use antisemitic codes to improve their lot in the camp; for example, ingratiating themselves with the SS by showing harshness to Jewish prisoners, purloining their goods, or using antisemitism to justify their own privilege. Of course, those who arrive already as active antisemites easily found a common language with the camp SS.<sup>41</sup> According to Pingel, many prisoners categorized by the SS as criminals indeed ended up acting as such in the camp, and were responsible for theft, murder, extortion, beatings, betraying political organizations and mistreating Jews.<sup>42</sup> This would seem to support Kautsky's depiction, while offering a more nuanced analysis as to the question of guilt.

Kautsky's own Jewish identity, or lack thereof, should also be addressed. Fischer's earlier article focuses on a case where Kautsky, the champion of the complete emancipation of Jews from Judaism, attempts to force this perspective on Gustav Mayer in his capacity as editor.<sup>43</sup> According to Fischer, Kautsky only began publicly stressing he had been incarcerated as a Jew in 1957, when he was attacked for anti-Zionism.<sup>44</sup> Though

<sup>39</sup> The general uprising supported by the Sonderkommando, who knew they were about to be liquidated, conflicted with the interests of the camp resistance, who thought it would provide the SS an excuse to liquidate the entire camp, see: Zalman Loewenthal's account in: Mar, Scrolls, 1985, pp. 216-235. See also: Greif, Gideon and Karlsen, Christian: Zalman Gradowsky. His Contribution to the Secret Manuscripts, his Underground Activity and his Part in the Planning and Execution of the Sonderkommando Uprising in Auschwitz, in: Gradowsky, Zalman: In the Heart of Gehenna [Hebrew], translated by Avichai Zur, pp. 237-294, here pp. 280-292.

<sup>40</sup> Farbstein, Ester: Hidden in Thunder. Perspectives on Faith, Theology and Leadership during the Holocaust [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2013, pp. 505-508.

<sup>41</sup> This was, according to Pingel, particularly true of members of the conservative Polish intelligence. However, even many of those who did not hold pre-war antisemitic views were nonetheless willing to act in this way in the camp as part of what he calls an "angelernten Zwangsverhaltens" (forced-behaviour learned through practice). Pingel, Falk: Häftlinge unter SS-Herrschaft. Widerstand, Selbstbehauptung und Vernichtung im Konzentrationslager, Hamburg 1978, pp. 169-170.

<sup>42</sup> Pingel, Häftlinge, 1978, p. 170.

<sup>43</sup> Fischer, Two Books, 2016, pp. 307-315.

<sup>44</sup> Fischer, Two Books, 2016, p. 307.



Kautsky may have held anti-Zionist ideas, it would be wrong to picture him as an ‘auto-antisemite,’ also on the basis of his actions in the camp. During his long incarceration he acted as mentor to Bert Linder (1924-2010), an Austrian-Jewish youth, who in his 1995 memoir calls Kautsky “my best friend and mentor, Bendl is the man to whom I truly owe my life.”<sup>45</sup> As far as we know, Kautsky never publicized this relationship, even when under attack; Linder’s testimony on Kautsky remains relatively unknown.<sup>46</sup>

The question remains whether Red antisemitism was as bad as Green antisemitism. The political prisoners – above all Hermann Langbein and Eugen Kogon, but also figures like Erich Kulka, Israel Gutman, and Benedikt Kautsky wrote the post-war history, and spared no ink vilifying the ‘green,’ and to a lesser extent the black-triangle prisoners. Wachsmann, following Orth’s criticism noted above, points out that though many prisoners, among them Primo Levi, considered particularly the ‘greens’ to be made up of convicted killers and rapists, felons were in fact sent to prisons in the penal justice system, and most of concentration camp ‘green’ and black-triangle prisoners had been incarcerated for minor property violations.<sup>47</sup> Wachsmann is nonetheless familiar with the many detailed personal accounts ascribing atrocities to these prisoners. He does not argue against this positive evidence, but instead affirms Pingel’s point: though these prisoners were not ‘natural-born killers,’ the camp had turned them into such.<sup>48</sup> He then mitigates this further by adding that “many ‘greens’ acted in a comradely fashion and took great risks to save fellow inmates, including Jews, from certain death,” and pointing to the original 30 founding prisoners of Auschwitz; though were labelled as criminals, only some chose to brutally abuse their power while others did not. Finally, he points out that many non-‘greens,’ including communist prisoners and Jewish Capos, also abused their power.<sup>49</sup> Yet was this abuse the same?

The crucial point seems to be not so much the details of the Red reports, but their use of undifferentiated generalization to obfuscate their own inextricable involvement in life and death in the camps. The life and death competition between groups in the camp, as well as the desire to join in shaping post-war society, surely influenced Kautsky, among others, to ascribe guilt to the proximate instead of the ultimate cause. However, political prisoners are not consistently undifferentiated and biased. Discussing the ascription of guilt, Langbein, who was far more central than Kautsky both in the camp resistance and in the creation of its historiography, recounts an incident when, as the work commandos were marching out, Karl Fritzsch, the Auschwitz camp commander, demanded of a ‘green’ Capo to report how many Jews he had in his company. Fritzsch then ordered him to “report to me that your unit is *Judenrein* by Saturday, understood?” Langbein then asks if it “is indeed justified to claim that the Capo and his helpers were those guilty of this massacre?”<sup>50</sup> Langbein says the same regarding Jewish Capos, who were expected by the

<sup>45</sup> Linder, Bert: *Condemned Without Judgement*, New York 1995, p. 311.

<sup>46</sup> On Linder see: Feinstein, Margarete Myers: *Absent Fathers, Present Mothers. Images of Parenthood in Holocaust Survivor Narratives*, in: *Nashim. A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 13 (2007), pp. 155-182.

<sup>47</sup> Wachsmann, KL, 2015, pp. 522-523.

<sup>48</sup> Wachsmann, KL, 2015, pp. 523.

<sup>49</sup> Wachsmann, KL, 2015, pp. 522.

<sup>50</sup> Langbein, Hermann: *The Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp. Its Characteristics and Background*, in: *The Nazi Concentration Camps [Hebrew]*, Gutman, Israel/Minbar, Rachel (eds.), Jerusalem 1984, pp. 217-231, here p. 219.

SS to be 'soft' on other Jews, and therefore had to prove themselves even more through cruelty to them.<sup>51</sup> Was there, nonetheless, a difference between the nature and degree to which these groups abused their power? Moreover, how exact are Kautsky's depictions?

Although more than 70 years have passed since the publication of Kautsky's book, more research is necessary to answer these questions. Any weighing of one testimony against another must consider the prisoners' pre-war dispositions, the expectations of the SS concerning their prisoner group, and the specific social constellation in which they acted in real-time and later testified or wrote. Although Kautsky's account, like all accounts, has its limits and inherent imbalances, and despite his at times overly decisive tone and politically motivated statements, his book remains an important, underutilized resource for the study of the concentration camps.

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<sup>51</sup> Langbein, *Menschen*, 1995, pp. 253-265.