

Jewish artist Yehuda Bacon was born in 1929 in Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia. He witnessed the Nazi deportation of Jews from his home town, and was himself sent to the Czech ghetto Theresienstadt in 1942, on the orders of Adolf Eichmann.

A year later, Mr Bacon and his family were transported to Auschwitz concentration camp. The artist's account and drawings of his experiences were used in evidence against Eichmann.

“In 1959 I gave a testimony to the holocaust museum Yad Vashem. They asked people who had been in the camps to tell their story. They recorded me on tape and when they transcribed it, there were about 78 pages. These pages were in the archive and when they caught Eichmann, they went through the archive and looked for people who could be useful for the trial.

When they found my account they asked me to be a witness.”

The Disappeared

“I told my story—how I came to Theresienstadt, what happened before, what was the daily life, what happened to the children and my meetings with Jacob Edelstein [the Jewish elder of the ghetto]. They were very interested to know at the trial if I knew how Edelstein was later killed.

We came to Auschwitz at the end of 1943 when they created the so-called ‘family camps’ Before then there were no children or old people in Auschwitz, and the reason this camp was created was because the Germans thought the International Red Cross [IRC] would like to see what happened to all these people who disappeared.

After six months we knew exactly which day we would be killed, but we were given a paper when we arrived stamped SB: Sonderbehandlung or “special treatment for six months”. In the language of Auschwitz this meant we should have been killed only after six months.

The IRC came and they were so impressed because Germany put on such a wonderful show for them and everything was beautiful—music and so on. Of course everything was a great theatre and lie—after six months we knew exactly which day we would be killed.

But at the last minute they chose from the boys a group of about 90 children. They were selected most probably in case the IRC asked what had happened to the children. From this group only a few survived.

I tried to remember everything I saw. The children had to do all kinds of jobs. In the crematoria, there were wooden huge logs which were actually for burning people, but we took these logs for heating into the different camps.

When we were in the crematoria and nobody was there, late in the autumn when it was rather cold the Kapo said: ‘Children, you have finished your jobs and nobody’s in the gas chamber so if you are cold you can warm yourself there.’

I was a curious child—I went there and I tried to remember everything I saw.”

Cannibalism

“I asked the people who worked in the crematoria as prisoners what it was and they explained it to me. I remembered it very well and in 1945 I made drawings of it all. The last time these were used was at the [David] Irving trial in London.

Another job was to take the ashes from the crematoria in colder months and throw it on the frozen paths so that people wouldn’t slip so easily—I was asked about that in the Eichmann trial. I was also asked about when we were evacuated from Auschwitz to the other concentration camp Mauthausen—the so-called ‘death marches’—and the cannibalism I witnessed at Mauthausen.”

Duty

“I never had any special interest in the trial—I was only interested in art. But the people from the crematoria had told me a story they didn’t want to tell.

‘Why do you need it? Nobody will be able to come out of here,’ they said.

But I told them, ‘You never know, maybe one day I will be free and I will tell about you.’

‘Tremendous evil’

“So I felt obliged to tell their stories—I thought it was my duty. Of course I was very tense. I observed Eichmann and even made a drawing of him in one of the sessions, but I didn’t have any special feelings for him.

I hoped that by telling this story some good things would happen. My question is, ‘What can you do? How can you avoid this tremendous evil?’ And my answer is through education, through personal relationships and through hoping it will not occur again.”

Yehuda Bacon
Eichmann’s trial, 1961

