FLANDERS LITERATURE

Ide Leib Kartuz

A Tailor in Auschwitz

David Van Turnhout and Dirk Verhofstadt

An extract pp (15-20; 171-208)

Original title Ide Leib Kartuz, kleermaker in Auschwitz
Publisher Houtekiet, 2019
Translation Dutch into English
Translator Kristien De Wulf

p 15-20

Prologue

Meidl

(...)

I did not continue selling diamonds, the financial crisis in 2008 put an end to that. Anyway, the diamond business in Antwerpen was already waning. The trade moved to the East, and the future of the diamond industry was no longer in our hands. In 2017, after some professional wandering, I became a freelance copywriter. But I wanted to publish my own political and philosophical ideas as well as commercial texts. By spending time with like-minded people, reading a lot and forming opinions, I came in contact with Dirk Verhofstadt. After a reading about his new book, I told him that I was a writer looking for channels through which to distribute my opinion pieces.
"Send me a sample. Here's my email address."

No sooner said than done. I sat down and wrote an opinion piece in response to a debate on gender reassignment. To my surprise, he had little criticism but recommended I add a few details. I then sent it to broadcaster vrt and the next day, the opinion was published online. Since I regularly published new opinion pieces, I became a member of Liberales, an independent, liberal think-tank. My contact with Dirk and the group became closer. We also often exchanged book tips. Towards the end of June 2018, Dirk recommended I read the book *Galicische Wetten*, a whopping four hundred pages. In it, Philip Sands describes the creation of the legal terms 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity', two terms which came into existence during the Nuremberg trials. These days, they are firmly embedded in international criminal law. They are aimed at punishing large-scale war crimes against civilians and were first used to describe the monstrous violence that the Nazis had committed all over Europe. The book made a lasting impression on me. In particular, the moral ease with which Jews in Eastern Europe were wiped off the map between 1940 and 1945, stuck in my mind.

When Dirk asked me what I thought of the book, I told the story of Ide for the first time in ages.
"My father was a Polish Jew. He survived Auschwitz because he was a tailor."
Dirk emailed me immediately. "When did he come to Belgium? When was he detained? What happened to his family? Tailor? That's unusual!"

I was able to answer most of the questions, thanks to the information from the Dossin Barracks, but I had no real details. The only thing I knew was that he was forced to make uniforms for the Nazis.

Dirk did not let it go. "The quickest way to find out is to get in touch with your biological father. Would you be prepared to do that?"

Benno replied to my Messenger message quite quickly. He suggested having dinner together somewhere in Brussels, where he now lived. The last time we met had been more than ten years previously. Sitting at a pavement café, he told me the story, most of which I already knew, again. Ide Leib Kartuz was a tailor from Poland, who was forced to make uniforms in Auschwitz, for the Germans. In the process, he was kicked and beaten and lost his wife and two children. I had hoped to learn more about Papa's first wife and children, but because he had told Benno very little about his life before the war, I did not discover very much more. He did give us the name of his mother, Josephine, who had died a few years earlier. Ellen too, Benno's older sister, about whom I had seldom heard people speak, had died in 2008 from a brain tumour. She could have told us a lot, since she was often with her father. In the last years of his life, she had visited him regularly in the rest home for war victims. After a bad fall, it was clear that Ide could no longer live alone, and he moved to Saint-Ode, which was a good distance away.

It turned out I had cousins too. Ellen had three children whom I quickly traced on Facebook: Cathy, Nadine and Danny. I sent all three of them a message through Messenger and went mad with impatience the rest of that weekend. "Do they still have his papers? Will they want to get in touch with me? Are they interested in their grandfather's past?"
Breaking my mother's cardinal rule of not having any contact with the Kartuz family also caused me stress. Nevertheless, Mama was also an important witness. She knew Ide well and was on the same wavelength. I once found a card from him, in her box of family photos, for her birthday. On the envelope, it said:

'Villa Leopold'
Greta de Voeght
Leopoldslei 112
2130 Brasschaat

We never lived in a villa when I was small. Ide just liked to let his thoughts take fun side-roads. Little side-roads that made people smile. I laid his card aside to save it.
It got lost later when I moved house, and I curse about that to this day. Inside the card was a lovely, handwritten text addressed to 'meidl' which is Yiddish for 'little girl'.

Mama said: "Papa was such a sweet man. He was kind and gentle and wouldn't hurt a fly. Every now and then he would talk a little about the camps, but we didn't speak of it often. One day, his guards wakened him. They said it was a holiday, a festival with all the trimmings. When the prisoners went outside, they saw that their friends had been hanged. Those sadists made them look at them. Papa took care of his fellow prisoners and shared his bread with them."
She also told me the same thing Benno had told me. That the guards had stamped on his stomach and that he had had problems with his stomach for the rest of his life.
My youngest sister turned out to know some things too. One evening, he had confided in her that the guards had shot at him. He tried to save himself by falling down and pretending to be dead. The Nazis had laughed, saying: "You might as well get up, stupid. We know you haven't been hit."

In the meantime, my new cousins had responded. All three, Danny, Nadine and Cathy were astounded. Understandable, when you suddenly get a message from someone who claims to be related, after 36 years, by way of a secret relationship your married uncle had. I met Danny first. When he was small, Grandpa Kartuz used to whisper to him, just before he went to sleep, that people are not always kind and can do the most awful things to each other. Since Danny had spent most of his childhood with his father, he didn't know that much about Ide's war story. Danny knew Papa mostly as a loving grandfather, small in stature but with a very big heart.
A week later, shortly after I had visited the Fort of Breendonk with Benno, I met with Nadine. It was already quite late, so she made me a salad with tomato and mozzarella.
"After all, we're family", she said.
As I ate, she told me with tears in her eyes about the death of her mother, Ide's daughter Ellen. She died in 2008 of a brain tumour. Personally, I had never known or seen her. Nadine showed me photos of her. She was a beautiful, elegant woman and Nadine resembled her. They both looked slightly Jewish, just as Benno and I do. Nadine's testimony was important. Not only had she kept a box of books and photos in the attic, but she also referred me to other witnesses who might know more and who were probably still alive. She never went up to the attic, because of the pain in her hip. So I climbed the little ladder alone.
"Which box is it?"
"It's a banana box! And there's another one next to it, but I'm not sure if there's anything important in that one. Mainly books, I think."
To be on the safe side, I dragged them both down with me and had to be really careful not to fall. Compared to my size 44 shoes, the rungs of the ladder were just narrow strips.
The heavier of the two boxes contained mainly old books. Every single one was about the Holocaust, but there was also a copy of *Mein Kampf* by Adolph Hitler. It wasn't clear whether they belonged to Ide or Ellen. Maybe Ide was even mentioned in them somewhere. He had told Nadine once that one of his fellow prisoners in Auschwitz had written a book. When that man was made to clean out a cesspool, he had fallen in and drowned. No-one knew what had happened to the manuscript. Benno also told me about a journalist who used to visit their house regularly. He was said to have written down my grandfather's stories.
Without a clue, it was impossible to get started. Dirk and I delved deep into the books, but we could find no concrete trail or link. When I left, Nadine gave me an old photo album of Ide's. The photos showed a young Benno, Ellen and Mama Josephine looking happy. They were gallivanting around Nice, Monaco or Koksijde and often posing in front of their large car, a Goliath.
Ide looked very good too. In almost all the photos, he wore a lovely suit, his hair was slicked back, and he was accompanied by his beautiful Josephine, twenty years younger than he. They looked so carefree, with their many friends and their shiny new car.
But in one photo, taken in Nice, Ide is wearing a short-sleeved shirt for once and you can vaguely see his camp registration number from hell. I found a close-up of it in Ellen's journal, which was also in the box: 61979.

State Archives

"Grandpa always made *matsebrei* in separate little pans." Dirk and I are listening to Nadine's testimony, which I had recorded on my smartphone. My mother and Benno also referred in their testimony to Papa's ubiquitous *matsebrei*. He never made anything else, only that. The dish is eaten during Passover (Pesach), a Jewish holiday which celebrates the exodus from Egypt. You make it by soaking *matses*, flat unleavened bread, in water. Then you knead it a little and add it to an omelette. I decided to make it. It was another way of getting closer to my grandfather, besides searching for photos and official documents. I bought *matses* at the Jewish bakery and got to work. It tasted like egg with an extra something, but I ate it as though it were sacred. Maybe his father,

his mother or one of his grandparents had made it for him too. It was a plateful of Jewish history which I had brought back to life.

Number 61979 was also in the list from the Dossin Barracks, along with references to files in the State Archives. In the hope of discovering more there, I made an appointment with Filip Strubbe, an archivist who loves his work. So it was a surprise not to see him at the reception desk of the State Archive. However, he had prepared a file for us to look at. I had never held such an old archive file in my hands, and I carried it like a priceless treasure to the reading table. The corner of the archivist's mouth showed disdain. Obviously, I had no experience with archives, that much was clear. But this could be the holy grail that would finally be able to tell us the whole story.

As I opened the cover, Ide looked straight up at me from the photo, a copy of which Dossin had sent me. It was part of a foreigner's fiche. The document contained the names of his parents and his birthplace in Poland. All the address said was Pławno. I noticed the staples in the file. They were rusted through but still determinedly holding the photo in place, after 89 years. I was in a hurry, because I was working for a client that day and I had promised to go back for a follow-up meeting. I didn't have time to go through it all thoroughly, so I started photographing the bulging file as fast as I could, with my smartphone. After an hour, I wasn't even halfway through. Two hours later, I was finished.
I phoned Dirk from the train.
"We've struck lucky! The archive is full of details. He was even in the Resistance, in 1942!"
We did indeed manage to learn an awful lot from the photos, but we still couldn't reconstruct the whole story. Why did he come to Belgium? Was he here alone? Where were his parents and the rest of his family? We didn't find the answers to those questions in the State Archives, but where else could we look?
"We need to go to Poland."

---

p 171-208

Auschwitz

Convoy V

On 25 August 1942 the fifth convoy left the Kazerne Dossin (Dossin Barracks) in Mechelen for Auschwitz. Ide left very little information about this hellish train journey to the east that lasted several days. In the State Archives we found a short questionnaire which he completed on 29 March 1951. It describes the circumstances of his arrest and deportation. In it he states that he sat in a third-class passenger train with sealed windows for three days. The occupiers used third-class carriages in the first months of the deportations from Belgium, the Netherlands and France. This contrasted sharply with the transports from the east which usually took place in freight trains. After the twentieth convoy on 19 April 1943, freight trains with locked doors were used for deportations from Belgium.

The travel conditions in the fifth convoy were fairly good compared to the transports that followed later. Ide stated that there were no guards in the carriage, that the wagon offered enough space for the deportees and that there was a separate room to relieve themselves. Asked what the food arrangements were like, Ide replied that he had brought a "parcel from home" but no drinks. "We had nothing to drink. German women offered us water despite it not being allowed by the supervisors." He doesn't mention his wife and children, but a deportation list from the Kazerne Dossin does show that they were in the same transport in a different wagon. Ide also says very little about his first days in Auschwitz. He briefly talks about two selection processes that were carried out immediately on arrival at the camp. The first was for those "who were unable to go on foot" and who were therefore transported by truck. The second was based on "age and signs of aging", and also "on occupation." He did not provide more information in writing. However, after the war he stated in various documents that his wife and children were gassed immediately upon arrival and that he worked there as a tailor.

To gain a better insight into his deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau, we visited Laurence Schram, a historian and senior researcher at the Memorial, Museum and Documentation Center on Holocaust and Human Rights in Mechelen. In 2015 she presented a doctoral dissertation at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) on the Kazerne Dossin in the years 1942 to 1944. In it she elaborately describes how the different convoys were organised, their dead and their survivors. Schram has her office across the street, above the Memorial. This is located in the original barracks where the victims of the persecution of the Jews in Belgium are commemorated. Next to it train tracks can still be seen. On these tracks, wagons carried the dehumanized prisoners like cattle to the east. Schram shows us the Mechelen-Auschwitz 1942-1944 book series in which, together with Maxime Steinberg and Ward Adriaens, she describes the history of the transit camp. She opens the book on page 250 and points to the description of the fifth convoy. The fifth transport contained 996 people, 486 of whom were men and 510 were women.[1] Half of them had complied with a summons order from the Association of Jews of Belgium (VJB). On behalf of the SS they encouraged Jews to voluntarily report to the Mechelen assembly camp. From there they would go to Germany or another country for forced labour. The summoned Jews had to bring food for 14 days - only food that does not spoil - a pair of sturdy work shoes, two pairs of socks, two shirts, two underpants, a work suit or work dress, two woollen blankets, two bed covers, a food bowl, a drinking cup, a spoon and a pullover, food and clothing coupons, an identity card and other papers. Finally, the forced labour order issued the following warning: "If you do not report to the assembly camp at the specified time, you will be arrested and dispatched to a concentration camp in Germany and all your possessions will be confiscated."[2] The first Jews registered at the Kazerne Dossin on 27 July 1942. In the weeks that followed three thousand voluntary workers registered. Distrust increased though and many Jews went into hiding. About half of convoy V consisted of Jews who, like Ide, were arrested during raids in Antwerp and Brussels from 22 July 1942 onwards. The train arrived on 27 August 1942. Seventy-eight percent of the passengers were immediately gassed, including Ide's wife and two children. In the following weeks and months another 188 victims of convoy V died. In the end, only 27 men survived the camp, including Ide. We can only keep guessing what his journey to the camp was like and how he spent his first few days there.

Hoping to find testimonials about the transport, we go over the names of the other survivors with Laurence Schram. After some searching, we strike it lucky. Simon Majzels, the son of a Jewish tailor from Warsaw who had fled to Belgium and was deported as a seventeen-year-old with convoy V. Next to his name is written his profession: "tailor". We are very happy when we find a short

[1] Maxime Steinberg and Laurence Schram, Mecheln-Auschwitz, 1942-1944, Part 1, VUB Press, 2009.
[2] Ludo Abicht, De Joden van Antwerpen, Vrijdag, 2018, p. 44.

testimony by him on the website of the USA Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (USHMM). In it he talks about his arrest and deportation. The testimony of Simon Majzels dates from 1997 and was recorded by the Musée de l'Holocaust Montréal in Canada. To obtain the full testimony, however, we need permission from a direct relative of his. By googling the name Majzels, we arrive at Robert Majzels, a 68-year-old Jewish writer, poet and professor at the University of Calgary in Canada. His year of birth, 1950, corresponds with our estimate that a possible child of Simon who survived the camp must have been born relatively shortly after the war. We send him an e-mail and wait in excitement. After a nail-biting two days, we finally get an answer. Robert Majzels is indeed Simon's son. He has never heard of Ide Leib Kartuz. He grants us permission to request the testimony via email.

101 tailors

Having paid for the copy and shipping costs, one week later we receive a DVD with the full testimony of Simon Majzels. More than half a century after his liberation, he testified about his youth in pre-war Antwerp, where he arrived with his parents in 1925. His father worked there as a tailor, his mother as a housewife. They had a good life until the Germans occupied Belgium. In 1941 young Simon was no longer allowed to go to school, later he had to wear a Star of David and be home before curfew. Just like Ide, he was active in the communist resistance. He helped out with the underground press, distributed flyers and sabotaged German trucks by sprinkling sugar in the petrol tanks. During the first raid in Antwerp on 22 July 1942, German *Feldgendarmen*, men in black clothing, picked him off the street and led him to the Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen. He stayed there for over a month with his parents. They had been arrested at home. On 25 August 1942, however, they were brutally separated and about a thousand Jews boarded a passenger train that took them to an unknown destination. They did not receive any food or drink, only those who had volunteered to work in the east brought food and drink. They shared it with the others. "After a journey of a few days and nights, we arrived in Auschwitz in the afternoon. German SS men beat up everyone. "Raus, raus, raus," they shouted. The elderly and women with babies had to go and stand on the left at the instruction of the infamous army doctor and *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Josef Mengele and were sent straight to the gas chambers. A group of 101 men was led to the main camp under the guidance of SS soldiers. "I had to work in a furniture factory," said Majzels.

Majzels' testimony gives us a first-hand picture of what Ide must have experienced when he arrived at the camp. But there are mistakes in his story. For example, he says that on arrival he was subjected to a selection by Mengele. It is a statement of someone whose memories are clouded by subsequent knowledge. Mengele was indeed active in Auschwitz, but only from 30 May 1943 in Block 10 in the main camp, and therefore not when the Belgian Jews arrived on 27 August 1942. The selection was probably done by another SS doctor. For greater certainty we try to find another survivor from the list. With the help of our researcher, Wendy De Poorter, we come upon a testimony from David Mandelbaum. He was born on 31 August 1922 in Oberhausen, Germany. In the 1990s he gave a testimony for the Belgian Auschwitz Foundation. It was established in 1980 to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and the Nazi terror. Her offices and archives are in Brussels and we make an appointment to watch the video. On the screen we see an old man with big black sunglasses. He is blind. In a very serene way, he talks about convoy V and his ordeal on the way to and in Auschwitz. It was the first time he had talked about this. He hadn't even talked about it in this way with his wife and children. His father left Poland in 1917 because he did not want to serve as a Jew in the army and went to Germany with his wife to start a bakery. In 1924 the family moved with two-year-old David first to Charleroi and later to Saint-Gilles near Brussels. They had little money and his mother earned some extra money as a *finisseuse* in a tailor shop. David left school at the age of fourteen and learned the craft of tailoring. His father and mother had communist

sympathies. They were horrified to hear the news about *Kristallnacht* in Germany in 1938. A refugee from Germany, who had been in a concentration camp as a communist, visited them and recounted his terrible experiences to the family. The stories encouraged young Mandelbaum to join the Independent Front in 1940, after the Germans invaded Belgium.

But in the summer of 1942 things went wrong. Members of the Gestapo arrested resistance fighter Mandelbaum. He was illtreated by his interrogators in the Gestapo building on Avenue Louise in Brussels. Afterwards they took him to Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen. There he saw the third and fourth convoy leave for the east. On 25 August 1942 it was his turn to join convoy V along with 993 other Jews. Mandelbaum remembered many details about the journey in the third-class carriage. The train first stopped in Leuven. Some people got out to buy some food and drink at the station buffet. Everyone simply returned to the train. "I could have escaped," says Mandelbaum, but neither he nor the others did.[3] It is possible that Ide briefly saw his wife and children. Maybe he bought them something to eat or drink. The next day the train stopped again near a village. Again, some were allowed to disembark, but as soon as they heard the train whistle, they all returned voluntarily. The carriages were packed with men and women of all ages. There were also a lot of children. "They were anxious," says Mandelbaum, "but they had a kind of expectation that they would work in the east." Nobody knew what was about to happen, but everyone must have had an image in their minds of life there. The children must have asked their mother where they were going. What are we going to do, mommy? Will we be going to school there? "

These were questions Chaja could not answer because she herself did not know what happened in the "labor camps". Maybe she replied that the children would go to school when she went to work. Maybe she thought she could be with the children every night after work. Maybe, like Ide and so many others on that train, she still had blind hope that it would be better than expected. Two days later they stopped in Auschwitz. Mandelbaum: "The train pulled in very slowly between two and three in the afternoon. The weather was nice and we saw people in striped prisoner uniforms. When the train stopped, we all had to get out quickly. They shouted: "Fast, fast, leave your luggage in the carriage". When everyone had got off the train, the *triage* of people started. They asked us what profession we had. I said I was a tailor and they put me to one side. The others were put on a truck and taken away; I don't know where. When we were 100 tailors, they divided us up into rows. The person who carried out the selection came from Brussels and was also a tailor. That made us 101. Then we walked to Auschwitz." Like Majzels, Mandelbaum speaks about that group of 101 selected people in his testimony but he explicitly states that they were all tailors. "I was one of a hundred tailors hand-picked to work but the others were taken away and gassed. We walked to Auschwitz, the main camp, and the rest to Birkenau, the gas chambers. " The testimonies of Mandelbaum and Majzels and Ide's written answers correspond on specific points. The train ride in a third-class carriage, the lack of drink and food, the arrival in Auschwitz, the immediate selections, and especially the composition of a unit of 101 people. An additional and very important confirmation of that number can also be found in the reference work Kalendarz wydarzeń W KL Auschwitz by the Polish researcher Danuta Czech. She made an overview of what happened day after day in Auschwitz. Dated 27 August 1942 she says: "After the selection, 101 prisoners were sent to the camp. They were given camp numbers 61938 through 62038. "[4]

[3] David Mandelbaum, Foundation Auschwitz, 9 December 1992, DVD No. 1/1.
[4] Danura Czech, *Kalendarz Wydarzeń W KL Auschwitz*, 1992, p. 238.

It is strange that so many tailors were on that train. That is why we ask Laurence Schram for the complete list of Jewish deportees in convoy V. The Germans kept a careful record of everything and next to each name they wrote the date of birth, the place of birth and in a final column the occupation of those involved. On the list we find fifty-six tailors (*Schneider*), seventeen leatherworkers (*Lederschneider*), thirteen furriers (*Pelzarbeiter*), eleven skinners (*Kürschner*), ten shoemakers (*Schuhmacher*), five hat and bonnet makers (*Hut & Mützenmacher*), two shirt makers (*Hemdenschneider*), two glove makers (*Handschuhmacher*) and a raincoat maker (*Regenmäntelarbeiter*). A total of one hundred and seventeen men who were involved with tailoring in one way or another. Apparently sixteen of them were not selected and were immediately removed. Perhaps because they were sick, weak or simply too old - such as those born in the nineteenth century. In addition to the 101 men, 114 women were also found suitable by the SS to work in the concentration camp or in one of the sister camps. And amongst this group too there are a striking number of tailors, furriers, seamstresses and needlewomen (*Schneiderin, Pelznäherin, Ledernäherin, Blusenschneider, Konfektionnäherin, Kürschnerin, Seidenweberin)*, a total of 83 out of 114 women. Ultimately, of the 215 people who passed the selections, only 27 men will survive the camp. Not a single woman survived the horror.

Judenrampe

It is late when we arrive in Auschwitz after a long drive. Our hotel Olecki is located directly opposite the *Stammlager*, the Auschwitz I base camp. From the window in our rooms we have a direct view over the gigantic, empty car park. It is already dark, but we decide to take a look anyway. The place has an air of menace and mystery. Nobody visits Auschwitz in the dark. Except the prisoners. Maybe it gives us a better idea of how it must have felt here at the time. We wander around the car park and see a giant sign above a kiosk saying: 'Snacks'. "That would not have been here at the time," we both point out. A bit further on we arrive at a steel wire fence. We see the entrance, but can only get a glimpse of the buildings and the camp itself.

It is foggy when we get up the next morning. We cross the street and look for the guide we have agreed to meet at nine o'clock. Yesterday's desolate car park has turned into a sea of buses and tourists. In the spacious entrance hall large groups of people of different nationalities come and go. Dutch, Spaniards, French, Americans, Japanese, Chinese and many others. We also recognize many Israelis with their blue and white flags. There are many young people as well as senior citizens, supported by volunteers, sometimes in wheelchairs. They have all come to see hell on earth. Most of them spend the night in trendy Krakow, where there are plenty of hotels and restaurants. Dozens of guides come and go to find their group. In the hall are old posters with aerial photos of the camp, close-ups of barbed wire and other montages that are meant to reflect the horror of the place. To the right of one such poster we see a counter with another 'Snacks' sign. While we are waiting at the entrance, we hear Sunday church bells ringing in the distance. Sunday or not, it is always extremely busy in Auschwitz. We join the crowd which moves very slowly because in a similar way to airport checks-ins, every visitor has to walk through a metal detector that is strictly monitored by a private security team. Keys, jewellery, cell phones, belts and money must be placed in a separate container, and then, one by one, we shuffle through the gate with the alarm system. We see groups leaving in the direction of the widely known entrance gate. With headphones and the amplified voice of a guide, the crowd shuffles into the Stammlager underneath the words: "Arbeit macht frei". Our Polish guide, Dorota Kuczyńska, speaks excellent French and gives us a private tour. She tells us that she wants to show us something special and takes us back to the car park. "It is wrong to go straight into the camp," she says, "we must start at the place where the Jews arrived by train." We get into her car and drive around the camp in a big circle. We arrive

at a remote place with some detached houses. Apart from that there is nobody here, no tourists at all. A train track with two old freight wagons appears out of the fog. "This is the *Judenrampe*."

"Because of photos and films, many people think that all Jews entered Auschwitz via the well-known train gate in the second camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. But that's not right. That was only later in 1944. From the summer of 1942, hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over Europe arrived at this *Judenrampe*," says Dorota. Victor Vrba, who managed to escape from the camp in 1944, wrote about this in his book *I escaped from Auschwitz*: "The platform! A gigantic, bare platform that lay between Birkenau and the mother camp and where transports arrived from all over Europe, crammed with Jews who still believed they were going to a labour camp. "[5] Vrba saw three hundred transports arrive there over eight months. Today there is hardly anything left of the platform, but in the past, there was a vast railway yard with the name *Bahnhof West*. "It was built at the same time as Birkenau", says Dorota. In his book *Auschwitz, De Judenrampe* the Dutch writer, artist and grandson of an Auschwitz-survivor, Hans Citroen, describes this dilapidated station. "The Jewish platform [was] a 500-meter-long wooden platform built at the beginning of 1942, with tracks on both sides along which in 1942/1943 transit tracks for the supply and disposal [of Jews] were subsequently built as well as sidings for the storage of unused wagons.[6] With the help of military aerial photos of the site and eye witness reports, Citroen establishes that the *Rampe* was 35 meters wide with tracks on both sides. The original tracks were enlarged to 18 separate tracks to accommodate not only the incoming transports with prisoners but also the equipment and soldiers. Every day one or more trains arrived here, sometimes they were 1,000 meters long. The wagons contained human cargo. As there were sometimes so many arrivals, trains often had to wait for hours and even days. The crowded, confined conditions in which the Jews found themselves must have been unbearable on very hot or cold days. "On the sidings long rows of freight wagons with thousands of people packed like sardines often stood there for days on end without food, drinks or sanitary facilities. They cried out for water."[7]

Eventually the wagons were opened. "Here the deportees had to get out into a complete unknown world to them. But the spotlights and yelling guards with dogs must have immediately scared them," according to Dorota. "After throwing the doors open SS men and a number of prisoners in striped uniforms drove the Jews off the train. To speed things up they yelled and pushed and hit those who hesitated to step off the train. People were kicked and beaten but the guards did not usually go further than that. Restraint and feigned friendliness were usually better ways of deceiving the victims into behaving in an orderly and docile way."[8] The Jews had to get onto the wooden platform as quickly as possible and stand in rows next to the railway track. Immediately afterwards selections started. Trucks waited near the stopping place. "The bodies of the people who had not survived the train journey were loaded in the first trucks. The remaining trucks were for the disabled and the senior citizens.[9] Women with babies and children were also removed with the trucks. The other selected Jews had to line up, were no longer allowed to speak and had to leave for the main camp on foot. A gravel road that led to Birkenau was approximately one km long. A different road of about a km and a half led to the main camp in Auschwitz. The original place of arrival no longer exists. Instead a rather symbolic monument has been erected. "The current *Judenrampe* with the two freight wagons was built in 2005 as a reminder of the place where more than 600,000 Jews arrived until 1944," says Dorota. From the spring of 1944 the train tracks were

[5] Rudolf Vrba, *I escaped from Auschwitz*, Barricade Books Inc., 2002
[6] Hans Citroen, *Auschwitz – de Judenrampe*, Verbum Uitgeverij, 2014, p. 54.
[7] Idem, p.48.
[8] Nicolaus Wachsmann, *KL. A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, Little Brown Book Group, 2015
[9] Hans Citroen, *Auschwitz – de Judenrampe*, Verbum Uitgeverij, 2014, p.32

extended inside the Birkenau camp to one hundred meters from the gas chambers and crematoria. That image in particular is what most people associate with Auschwitz. Another half a million Jews arrived through this gate from April 1944, mainly victims of the Hungarian Holocaust.

We look bewildered at the tracks and the two wagons. This is the place where Ide got off the train on 27 August 1942, where his life took a dramatic turn and where his wife and children would disappear from his life forever. It must have been difficult for them too. We know from photos and testimonials that they still had a relatively good life during the war. Maybe they didn't have much, but they could at least count on the warmth and coziness of their family. They were not used to the violence on the *Judenrampe*. We can only guess how Chaja, Charles Victor and Simone felt when they were shouted at to get off the train. They must certainly have been extremely anxious and confused. Would they have cried? Did they see their dad? We can only hope that they did not suffer too much. That they didn't get too many beatings and that they were allowed to stay together. That the warm hugs of Aunt Ushkele was the last thing the children were allowed to feel when they were crammed into the gas chambers with hundreds of other naked people.

"The wagons on the *Judenrampe* have no windows. Could it have been third-class carriages with at least two access doors?" "Yes, that is quite possible, "says Dorota. From wealthy countries such as Belgium, France and the Netherlands, they arrived with such carriages in 1942. With this she confirms the information of Laurence Schram. At the front of the Judenrampe we see the gravel road. This road now starts next to a villa with a garden with toys for children. Along this road Chaja left with the children, by truck or on foot, towards the gas chambers. According to Dorota, the gassing took place the same day in the Little Red House on the outside of Birkenau. The farm was about two and a half kilometers from the Judenrampe and was built from red bricks. The building had four rooms. In March 1942, prisoners of war knocked down the interior walls, bricked up the windows and converted the rooms into two gas chambers, each with a hermetically sealed door.[10] At the top there was a hatch through which an SS soldier could sprinkle the Zyklon B and then close it with a lid. Each room had a maximum capacity of 400 people. This allowed the Nazis to gas 800 prisoners in one go. Members of the *Sonderkommando* opened the rooms and dragged the dead bodies out. They took the corpses to mass graves on the edge of a nearby forest via a narrow track and with carts. From August the corpses were also burned. Today there is nothing left of the Little Red House. The building has been demolished. On a small fenced piece of pasture stand three black tombstones to commemorate this terrible place and the mass murders that took place here seventy-eight years ago.

While his wife and children were being deported, Ide was selected to work. He lined up with a hundred others in a row next to the Judenrampe. When asked whether this could have been a Sonderkommando (work unit) for tailors, Dorota answered in the affirmative. "That Sonderkommando went on foot to the main camp under SS surveillance. The road to it runs in the opposite direction from the gravel road to Birkenau. " Thus, the testimony of Majzels and Mandelbaum about the selection of 101 tailors appears to be correct. The subsequent events after the arrival also gradually become clear. Mandelbaum explains in his testimony that he marched with the group under the surveillance of SS soldiers for about a mile and a half further to the

[10] Robert Jan van Pelt and Deborah Dwork, *Auschwitz*. Stad, fabriek, vernietigingskamp, Verbum Uitgeverij, 2018, p. 392.

Stammlager Auschwitz. Then they arrived at a gate with the cast-iron text Arbeit Macht Frei, a statement that camp commander Höss had chosen himself.

The paths and blocks were neat. “I thought: how beautiful is that. We walked along a wide avenue with flowers on the side. Then along a building without floors with a chimney. I wondered what that was. But then I saw at least seven dead bodies on the side of the road. ”[11] Only then did he realize that they had ended up in a horrific concentration camp. Ide must also have realized this when he marched into the camp with the other selected tailors.

Mandelbaum continues that at the end of the avenue with the beautiful flowers they had to walk to the right, between two buildings and completely undress. Then four prisoners pushed a cart with clothes towards them. Some items of clothing were completely bloodstained. The prisoners did not talk to the newcomers. The latter were also not allowed to talk to them. The newcomers did not fully understand what was about to happen to them. “First, they completely shaved us, everywhere. Then, they made us take a cold shower without soap, without a towel. We walked past prisoners holding a water container that smelled of petroleum. They rubbed us under the arms and between the legs to disinfect us.” Majzels also talks about having to take off all their clothes and getting shaved everywhere. “They shaved us with one knife for the 101 remaining people. It was done in a very brutal way. That knife quickly became blunt, you can imagine what the fiftieth or sixtieth must have felt. Then they sprayed us with a disinfection product.”[12] Mandelbaum continues talking about being tattooed with their serial number, a time-consuming activity that lasted until the evening. On his left arm he got camp number 61997 with an inverted triangle underneath, as a symbol for ”Jew”. Ide must have stood slightly in front of him, because he was tattooed with camp number 61979 with the same inverted triangle. Majzels stood twelve places behind Kartuz and six places in front of Mandelbaum. He was given camp number 61991, again with an inverted triangle. After being administered with their animal tattoo, the prisoners were given a pair of trousers and a jacket with blue-grey stripes, but also some sort of primitive clogs. These could only be tied to the feet with a piece of string. “We received a uniform that was covered in clotted dry blood. Completely covered. The cap was also stiff with blood,” Majzels testifies. Apparently, he was quickly separated from the other tailors. He had declared that profession, but that was wrong. The Germans then sent him to Block 18, where he stayed with 200 people in one room and had to work as a carpenter. The others, including Selig Kurs (camp number 61981), Szmul Topor (camp number 62021), Kartuz and Mandelbaum had to go to Block 1. Mandelbaum confirms the latter in his testimony and that is of great importance for our further research. “We were located in Block 1, a building with one floor. They led us to a room with three level bunk beds. I was allowed to choose a bed and climbed on the top one. We still didn’t get any food or drink. The lights went out. The fleas jumped on us,” says Mandelbaum.[13]

Block 1

We are standing with our guide Dorota in front of Block 1 in the main camp of Auschwitz, but the building is closed. Until 2015, there were archives here from the city of Oświęcim, but these have since been moved to a building outside the camp. Now it is empty and may not be visited for security reasons. We can look through the windows and see approximately the same layout as

[11] David Mandelbaum, Foundation Auschwitz, 9 December, 1992, DVD No. 1/1.
[12] Simon Majzels, USC Shoah Foundation, The Institute for Visual History and Education, Interview Code 29228, May 21, 1997, Disc I, Part II, 00'30”.
[13] David Mandelbaum, Foundation Auschwitz, 9 December 1992, DVD No. 1/1.

found in most other blocks. Those also have a lower floor, an upper floor and an attic space under the roof. In addition to the group of 101 tailors, there were probably more prisoners living in the block. Mentioning the first day after his arrival, Mandelbaum testifies the following: "The next day [28 August, 1942] at five o'clock in the morning we had to attend a roll call after which we had to go and work in the tailors' *Sonderkommando*. We went to the village of Auschwitz, and after 3 to 4 kilometers we arrived at a hangar that was furnished as a workshop. Here we had to repair SS uniforms. " Purchasing clothes, making and repairing uniforms, suits, shoes, belts, gloves and other items of clothing were important activities in Auschwitz. To get an idea of the various units and buildings involved, we have an appointment with Krzysztof Antończyk, head of the digital archive at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum. His office is located in the former Blok 24, near the entrance gate to the main camp. It feels particularly strange to find our way to an operational office in between the barracks. The building has a bell and various nameplates. Shortly after we press the button with his name, we are buzzed in. We push the door open. For the people who work there, the building may feel very normal, but for us it is as if we are entering a sort of sanctuary, like archaeologists discovering an old site. It is surreal to walk around in a place with so much history. It was like going for a coffee in the pyramids of Luxor.

Krzysztof radiates tranquility. After a short introduction he retrieves a staff map. It shows the area around the camp, with details and names of all buildings. On the right is the *Stammlager Auschwitz* in Oświęcim, on the left are the barracks and grounds of the *Vernichtungslager Birkenau* in Brezinka. Between them is the *Judenrampe*, which according to the plan was almost a kilometer long. Antończyk points his finger at the *Schutzhaftlager* E sub-camp. It was about three hundred meters outside the main camp and consisted of twenty buildings. According to him there was a *Schneiderei* in one of those buildings. There is a photo of an attic space in this sub-camp. It shows dozens of sewing machines that are placed together, like in a storage room. According to controversial French Holocaust denier Jean-Claude Pressac, these were machines brought by the deported Jewish seamstresses to work with in Auschwitz. According to him, that was proof that the women were actually doing well. In this way he tried to minimize the atrocities in the camp. But that is a lie. The countless photos of deported and later gassed Jewish women do not show one woman with a sewing machine carrying a sewing machine on her back or in her hands. The only thing they were allowed to bring was a suitcase with some clothes and food. The sewing machines were anyway far too heavy to be carried. They were Singers with a cast-iron pedestal and a large flywheel, which had to be operated manually. It is much more likely that the Germans had seized these sewing machines from one of the many Jewish tailors and sewing workshops in the ghettos. Especially in Lodz, many Jews worked in the clothing industry. The photograph, which dates from 1945, shows the sewing machines that were brought together from the various tailors in the attic of building E. after the war. They formed a lot for a public sale.

Mandelbaum was clearly not talking about this sub-camp as he was talking about a hangar a few kilometers away from the main camp. Antończyk pauses. He then points at building G. This is located in an industrial zone, at the top right of the map, in the south of Oświęcim. The building served as a tannery and later became a *Bekleidungswerkstätte* under the name *Lederfabrik*. It consisted of various departments such as a tailor shop, a shoe maker, a workshop for leather goods, a forge, and so on. Not only were the Jews' suitcases brought here for processing, but also their clothing, shoes and even their hair. After the war, the Soviets found 7,000 kilograms of human hair from around 140,000 women. From 1942, between 500 and 800 prisoners worked in this building. This is probably the workshop that Mandelbaum talked about. In this production unit, clothes were made and repaired on a large scale, mostly for the SS guards, but also for their relatives. This unit was headed by professional criminal Erich Grönke (camp number 11), one of the first 30 prisoners. Most of them were criminals who were transferred from Sachsenhausen to Auschwitz in 1940

where they were in charge of the various work units in which the Polish and Jewish prisoners had to work. After his release in 1941, Grönke continued to work for the SS as an ordinary citizen and he was in charge of the factory that ran on forced labour from the concentration camp. After the war he was tried for the murder of at least 212 prisoners. The fact that camp prisoners were at work in the *Lederfabrik* is evidenced by, among other things, the testimony of the Polish prisoner Władysław Czajkowski (camp number 9239), who was an early prisoner in Auschwitz. "In 1941 I worked in the *Bekleidungswerkstatte Commando*, starting in the tannery. There were also departments for shoemakers, tailors, and other fields related to clothing. Over the course of 1942 I transported goods from *the Kanada* warehouses that were located next to the railway line. They consisted of suitcases, clothes, shoes and other belongings from the gassed Jews."[14] Upon arrival at the *Judenrampe*, the Jews had to leave all their belongings beside the train. These were then collected and transferred to the *Lederfabrik* and other tailors' departments as well as to Block 1 in the main camp of Auschwitz. There were also tailors in Birkenau. In the BIIB sector there were not only the hangars where clothing from the gassed Jews were sorted and stored by the *Kanada Kommando*, but also a large *Schneiderei* with female Jewish tailors. Almost all the tailors had to repair the zebra clothes of the prisoners, and some also the uniforms of the SS guards.

(...)

State Museum

We ask Antończyk for more information about the tailors in and around Auschwitz-Birkenau, but he cannot help us with that. He calls his colleague Szymon Kowalski, deputy head of the archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum who works in the same building. He is immediately willing to see us. Kowalski speaks excellent English and listens carefully to our questions about Ides' arrival in Auschwitz, the selection of the 101 tailors, the kapo of this unit, and the infamous Block 1. He types in Ide's camp number on his computer and immediately finds his *Häftlingekarte*, number 61979. It not only shows his name and pre-war address, but also the names of his wife and parents. Next to *Rasse* it says "Jüd" and the card mentions schooling up to *3 Kl. poln. Volksschule*. Kowalski explains that he probably went to school until he was 14 years old. He spoke Polish, French, Flemish and German, it says, although he also knew Yiddish, but presumably he withheld that information. The card also contains information about his appearance. Unlike the information from the Belgian state archive, he measured 1 meter 55 according to this card. Perhaps the prisoners in Auschwitz were measured in a rushed and casual way. He had a "normal nose", dark blond hair, a stocky shape, a normal mouth, no beard, an oval face, oval ears, grey eyes, and three missing teeth. The usual three-part photos were not taken of him, although this was regularly done before with other prisoners. Due to the enormous influx of prisoners they stopped taking three-part photos of everyone.

The archivist takes us to a reading room with two steel cabinets. In those cabinets the museum holds more than 150 volumes with thousands of testimonies from prisoners who survived the camp. Because the museum is going to close, we only have an hour and a half to do searches today. We start immediately and enter the keyword "Kartuz" on the computer. No useful information comes up. We then try the keyword "Schneiderei" and get seven results. We dive into the volumes and open the books on the pages where that word appears. But all documents are written in Polish. We ask Kowalski if we can take photos of the documents for our own use. He nods, but emphasizes that we are only allowed to use documents that we have officially requested for publication. He gives us

[14] Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, Testimonies, Wladyslaw Czajkowski, Volume 32, p. 12.

a form which we can use for these requests and leaves the room. We start immediately. We find a system whereby one of us searches for the document numbers and the other digs through the files in the cabinet. One book after another follows at a phenomenal pace. It seems as if we have never done anything else. In the meantime, we hope someone can translate our findings, because most of the testimonials are in Polish. Within an hour and a half, the job is done and we walk freely, with very valuable information, out of the gate with the words *Arbeit macht frei.*

A few months later, just after the *International Holocaust Remembrance Day* on 27 January 2019, we find ourselves again at hotel Olecki in Oświęcim in Poland. The camp and the surrounding area are covered with some twenty centimeters of snow and it is very cold. We can imagine what it must have been like for the prisoners, skinny and scantily dressed. Some kept themselves warm with paper or cardboard from a cement bag under their prison uniform, but, if they caught you, you were beaten in the best-case scenario and killed in the worst case. Although it depends how you look at it. Many prisoners preferred to commit suicide than to continue living in the world's most inhumane place. In the hotel we meet German architect Peter Siebers from Cologne who, together with Gideon Greif, published the monumental book *Todesfabrik Auschwitz: Das Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager Auschwitz 1940-1945*.[15] Peter worked for fifteen years on the many detailed plans of the buildings, barracks, crematoriums and gas chambers. The book is the best antidote for negationists and other Holocaust deniers. Moreover, he also knows the history of the development and expansion of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buna-Monowitz very well, and explains how it evolved over the years from an old Polish military base to the most famous concentration and extermination camp in the world. On a few sheets of paper he draws with firm hand and precision how Block 1 and Block 2 were connected to an intermediate building, the old laundry. He is currently working hard on a new book entitled KL Auschwitz 1940-45 that will appear in 2020. It is late when we say goodbye and agree that we will stay in touch.

At the entrance to the camp we meet Kamila Sokalska, a Polish student who works in one of the museum's bookshops. Because we were looking for someone who lived nearby and could translate documents for us, we asked her if she could help. In the end she agreed and, together with us, dug out the archives again. We do not want to overlook any information. Kamila will translate for us for the next three days. We are once again welcomed by the helpful and experienced archivist Kowalski and now look much more thoroughly for testimonies about the tailors' *Sonderkommando.* Kamila goes over the Polish statements and points out what could be important. It is a success. We find five testimonials from former prisoners who speak specifically about the tailors' *Sonderkommando* in Block 1. The building was located in a corner of the camp and was separated from the *Kommandantur* by high and double barbed wire. It was only a few dozen meters from the villa of camp commander Rudolf Höss.

The first testimony is from the Polish Jew Marian Gnyp from Radom with camp number 62692. He arrived in Auschwitz on 1 September 1942, four days after Ide. There are three camp photos of him. At first Gnyp was in a different tough outdoor work unit where people had to work with gravel and cement in rain and wind. He fell ill, ended up in hospital, and realised that to survive he had to find other, less demanding work. During a roll call, Gnyp stood next to a prisoner who said he would help him. "One day they asked for tailors. A Jewish man who stood beside me and was a tailor, raised his hand and hissed at me that I had to do the same. He would help me if we were selected because I had almost no experience with tailoring. I did have a brother who was a tailor, and as a child I had been watching his work. Anyway, we were both admitted to the *Schneiderei*

[15] Gideon Greif, Peter Siebers, *Todesfabrik* Auschwitz: *Das Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager Auschwitz 1940-1945*, Emons Verlag, 2016.

Sonderkommando. It was in the fall of 1942. I don't remember the exact date. As a result, I moved from Block 7a to Block 1a [the first floor of Block 1, t/n], where all the imprisoned tailors were. The sewing room itself was in the attic of Block 1. Around twenty sewing machines were installed there. Nothing was made in the workshop; only camp clothing was repaired. The tailors were almost all Jews of different nationalities."[16] Gnyp was unable to keep up with the pace at first, but luckily the sub-kapo let him stay. That way he got the hang of the work. In his testimony it says that he did have bad experiences with *Blockschreiber* Michael Smutny, who violently beat him and other prisoners. But he made another interesting statement. "In February 1943, SS soldiers took ten young tailors to Block 30 in Birkenau where they had to undress and be exposed to X-rays. They were then returned to Block 1 in the main camp." Apparently Gnyp was one of them. Ide has not mentioned this. He was indeed a lot older than the other prisoners. But Mandelbaum did talk about such selections for experiments on humans. Gnyp survived the camp and the medical experiment, but was no longer able to have children.

The second witness who talked about the tailors in Block 1 is Polish Stanisław Dorosiewicz from Warsaw, with camp number 18379. He ended up in the tailors' Sonderkommando in November 1942. "In November 1942 I was in the *Kommando Häflingsschneiderei* on the first floor of Block 1. The Kapo was Ignac Szołtsyk, a German from Bytom in Silesia. He had a red triangle. Head of the tailors was Netzlar Tadeusz from Włochy near Warsaw. He gave me a job in this Kommando. "[17] Szołtsyk was an ethnic German who lived abroad, a miner who was convicted of treason on 14 December, 1936 for his communist sympathies. He was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen concentration camp and deported from there to Auschwitz. He had camp number 25351. Dorosiewicz worked in the Sonderkommando until March or April 1943. A little further in his statement he explained what he had to do there. "I was now a tailor and repaired and sewed prisoners' clothing. We also ripped up the civilian clothing that remained after the prisoners were gassed. The clothing often contained large quantities of valuable items such as bank notes and jewellery. I personally handed these over to camp leader Hans Aumeier. In exchange for the gold and the valuables that we gave to him exclusively, we received sugar, bread and margarine. The Kommando was under the supervision of the head of the *Effektenkammer* [this was a sort of warehouse housed in Block 26 where the most important possessions of the gassed prisoners were kept,e.d.]. "[18] Aumeier was the *Schutzhaftlagerführer*, the second in rank after camp commander Rudolf Höss. From January 1942 he worked in Auschwitz. We google Aumeier's name and discover that on 18 August 1943, he was found guilty by the SS leaders of stealing gold from Holocaust victims. He was exposed and transferred to the Baltic states. After the war, he was sentenced to death and hanged by the Polish Supreme Court during the Auschwitz trial in Krakow for mass murder.

The testimonies of Gnyp and Dorosiewicz give us a better picture of the layout of the tailors' block. The tailors slept in bunk beds on the first floor and worked in the attic with their machines. Maybe there were no longer a hundred of them. According to Gnyp there were only about twenty machines. In addition to the presence of other prisoners, there must also have been a certain turnover of people who were transferred to other sub-camps or work units, such as the *Lederfabrik* and the *Bekleidungskammer*. Others, on the other hand, were physically no longer able to keep going due to lack of food or became ill and died. Others were simply killed by the SS. New prisoners were

[16] Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, Testimonies, Marian Gnyp, Volume 111, p. 116-117.
[17] Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, Testimonies, Stanislaw Dorosiewicz, Volume 126, p. 132.
[18] Idem, p. 132.

regularly added to the tailors' Kommando. Newcomers such as Gnyp for example, or older prisoners such as Dorosiewicz. Both were 'lucky' enough to end up in the tailors' Sonderkommando. Their testimonies indicate that it was better in this work unit than in others. After all, the prisoners worked inside, protected from the cold and the heat. They could hide extra clothes for themselves or trade them with other prisoners for food or other necessities. The testimonials show that they could even do business with some SS guards. Particularly interesting is Dorosiewick's testimony about the behavior of some SS men towards the Kommando in Block 1. "The Kommando was only allowed to repair the prisoners' clothing. SS men were not allowed to come here according to the camp rules. Still, they often came here illegally to have uniforms and civilian clothes made for themselves and their family."[19] According to three different, independent testimonials, Ide even had to make lingerie for the wife or mistress of an SS officer. "He had never done this before. He got some fabric and had to make a bra with it, without having seen the woman or having taken her measurements. He was afraid he would be punished if it didn't fit. (...) He got some extra bread for that, broke it in two and kept a piece for the next day, because it was never certain that people would get bread the next day, "he told his son Benno.[20] He once told his granddaughter Nadine: "I was lucky that I was a tailor. I had to repair officers' uniforms and even had to make a bra. Then I got some extra bread that I shared with fellow prisoners who really needed it."[21] Greta De Voeght [the mother of David Van Turnhout, ed] also mentioned the fact that garments were made for German officers. In one of Ide's conversations with her, he told her the following: "The Germans asked if I could also make shoes. I could not, but I said yes. In the end I made shoes and they were satisfied. I sometimes got an extra piece of bread for that. I shared that with camp mates who needed it. Some went completely crazy. They even ate toothpaste, Meidl."

(...)

Racketeering

It is surprising that the SS guards, and probably also their officers, placed orders with the tailors of Block 1, especially since they had the *Bekleidungswerkstätte* in the *Lederfabrik*. There they could simply order such items and comply with the rules. However, there they had to pay for the mending of a suit, a shirt, shoes or something for their wives and children. In the archive we looked at files that show that they had to make an official request for new and additional clothing, after which production could begin. There were four forms for this. The first form was a question "An die Verwaltung des KL Auschwitz". On it the order was written down: a suit, a cloak, a shirt, a dress, children's clothing, shoes ... The second form was an official order form for the relevant *Werkstätte*. The third mentioned the material and where it came from. For example, on one such form "rolls of silk" is written for making a cloak and a woman's jacket. The fourth form was the invoice. A suit cost 25 RM (*Reichsmark*), an alteration 10 RM, a cloak 25 RM, the woman's jacket 16 RM, and a dress 8 RM. Bending the camp rules, for example by ordering a suit or something else directly from the work unit, probably cost them only some bread and sausage. This did not happen directly in consultation with the tailor involved, but via the kapo who then took his share of the food and passed on the rest to whomever made the item. Such facts highlight the important position of the kapo and the vulnerability of the tailors. Anyone who could make a good suit or dress benefited from the goodwill of the kapos, as long as the commissioning SS was satisfied. The others risked a transfer to another Block and in the worst case to an outside Kommando. The chances of survival were much lower there. Not only did the SS soldiers who ordered something against the rules run

[19] Idem, p. 133.
[20] Interview with Benno Kartuz, 25 July, 2019.
[21] Testimony Nadine, 19 August, 2018.

the risk of being sanctioned, but also the kapo who was involved. There was the possibility that that kapo in turn was protected by a higher-ranking SS. It proves that “racketeering” was endemic in the camp. Everyone worked for their own benefit, which led to a lot of corruption.

"Racketeering" was common practice in all concentration camps. Prisoners and guards tried to turn the situation to their advantage, often at the expense of others. Stealing, smuggling, extortion, making contacts, acquiring favours ... Those prisoners who were best suited to "racketeering" were more likely to survive. Guards on the other hand were able to make a good profit from it. It was a continuous search for things with sufficient value to trade or sell. For example, banknotes and jewellery from the clothing of every new load of prisoners were often traded. It was customary for the Jews to have their valuable jewels, banknotes, money rolls, and gold sewn into their clothing with a view to their deportation. It was the only option for them to bring in valuables for use when needed. It shows how unaware they were of their fate. They had no idea they would be asked to undress and would be gassed. Even those who were not gassed had to give up their clothes and wear a striped prison uniform. The clothing from those who were gassed in Birkenau ended up in the Kanada Kommando. There, female Jewish prisoners had to search the luggage for money, jewellery and other valuables. They collected everything into sealed boxes that were sent by train to Germany, up to 20 wagons every day.[22] But also the clothing itself, along with all other personal belongings, was sorted, stored, packed and transported by train to Berlin for the badly affected German population. The Polish-British-Jewish Kitty Hart-Moxon (camp number 39934) worked in the *Kanada Kommando* from April to November 1944 and testified the following: “The suitcases were collected from the platform and placed in large heaps. We girls were divided into various groups. I was on the night shift in the eight months I was there and my first job was searching the men's jackets. So, I was put in front of a large pile of men's coats that I had to search, I had to put them all on a trestle table and feel if there was anything in the pockets. Very often we also had to unstitch the hems and when we found something, we had to take it out. Very often at the end of the shift we had a bucket full of jewels or banknotes or whatever was hidden in those jackets. ”[23]

Despite severe sanctions, quite a few SS men and even female prisoners managed to keep valuables for themselves. After the war survivors of this Kommando testified about the number of risks they took to steal money and jewellery, and then to exchange them in the camp for food, alcohol, cigarettes and shoes. Some even differed in appearance to the others because they looked well-fed. In turn, they were extorted by individual SS-guards. The entire camp was steeped in a culture of theft and corruption. After an internal investigation, even camp commander Rudolf Höss was reprimanded and moved for corruption at the end of December 1943. From July 1942 large numbers of Jews arrived on the *Judenrampe*. They had to leave their bags there. To reassure the deportees, they had to write their names on them. The Auschwitz museum keeps an inventory of the suitcases that were recovered. The majority, however, were processed for their leather or other raw materials. Most of the prisoners were deported to Birkenau, but some were selected for the work units in the *Stammlager* or another sub-camp of Auschwitz. Their clothing was taken away, after which they had to put on the prison uniform. Part of this removed clothing ended up in Block 1.

The latter appears from the testimony of the third witness, the Polish-Jewish survivor Antoni Słapiński (camp number 93750) from Tarnów near Krakow. He joined the 100 other tailors of the

[22] Rudolf Höss, *Commander of Auschwitz*, Kruseman The Hague, 1960, p. 196.
[23] Lyn Smith, Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust, Ebury Publishing, 2006,

Kommando in Block 1 on 25 January, 1943. He also came from another work unit. "Thanks to the help of a friend, I was transferred from the *Postpaketstelle* to the *Häftlingsschneiderei.* The Kommando worked on the first floor of Block 1 opposite Block 12 and also lived on this floor. We sewed socks. From civilian clothing, which was delivered to Block 1 from the warehouses with the belongings of the people who were gassed, we cut out rectangular holes in which we then sewed pieces of camp uniforms. The civilian clothing was often torn and the lining removed. It was just a thorough search of the clothing to see if it contained banknotes, securities or other valuable items. In the *Häftlingsschneiderei*, besides the kapo, an SS officer also supervised our work. We had to give him everything we found. And there was a lot hidden in the clothes. After checking the clothes and sewing in camp signs, everything was loaded into bundles in trucks. That was then driven to the *Häftlingsbekleidungskammer* in the Birkenau camp. Here the clothing was given to the prisoners. Apparently, this clothing was also supplied to other concentration camps in the Third Reich. (...) About 100 prisoners worked in the Schneiderei."[24]

The fourth witness, Adam Jerzy Brandhuber (camp number 87112), was a non-Jewish painter from Krakow who worked in the *Bekleidungskammer Kommando.* In his statement after the war he refers indirectly and very briefly to Block 1. He saw the striped clothing of his murdered fellow prisoners. "In Block 1 where the tailors were, there were pieces of fabric with camp numbers and triangles. The tailors worked upstairs. "[25] Brandhuber himself also had to use such pieces of fabric to put them on the clothing of other prisoners, hence his reference to Block 1. No matter how brief his testimony is, it is yet further proof that the tailors' Kommando worked there upstairs.

We know with certainty that the Jews in Block 1 lived on the first floor and worked in the attic. But what happened on the ground floor? There is a fifth testimony about this, from the German political prisoner Kurt Scholz (camp number 92367), born in Breslau. He too mentions valuable things about the newly arrived Jews and other prisoners. After working in an outdoor work unit, he ended up in the *Alte Wäscherei* (Old laundry) that was located between Block 1 and Block 2. It was a wooden building that was set up between the two stone barracks for washing prison clothes. There were about 25 to 30 prisoners working there who had to boil, scrub, rinse and dry the striped prisoner clothes in hot water. Scholz testifies: "In Block 1 there was a decontamination room. Whoever worked there was given milk. Block 1 also had drying rooms, where we dried the clothes. Upstairs there was the Kommando of the tailors led by kapo Ignac. There they searched for valuable items (jewellery and diamonds) in the clothing of the newly arrived prisoners (civilian clothes). Those items were exchanged for bread and sausage, for example. Once we got a whole sausage. We cut it open and baked it with potatoes. It was a wonderful feast. The laundry existed until October 1944. Then it closed. There was a new laundry in the *Lederfabrik."*[26] Here too, valuables were kept behind by the tailors and their kapo to trade. For food, drink and cigarettes, and perhaps also for bribery or getting a favour, although the prisoners were of course always treading on dangerous ground with the guards.

The testimonials give us a more complete picture of Block 1. Clothing was washed in the wooden building between the first two blocks, then disinfected in the first room of Block 1 and then dried in the second room on the ground floor. Then Ide and the other prisoners repaired the camp clothes upstairs and in the attic after which they went back into circulation. In between or after their day's

[24] Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, Testimonies, Antoni Slapinski, Volume 49, p. 15.
[25] Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, Testimonies, Adam Jerzy Brandhuber, Volume 76, p. 111.
[26] Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, Testimonies, Volume 151, p. 267, Kurt Scholz, No. 92367, Relacja b.więźnia KL Auschwitz, 18.1.1988, p. 3.

work, the tailors carried out special orders from SS guards and even SS officers, for which they received extra food, alcohol, cigarettes and other benefits.