

Panel 3: Scopes of Action: Medical Professionals

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**Depictions in Shades of Gray: (Self-)Perceptions of Jewish Prisoner-Physicians in Nazi
Camps**

As “prisoner-functionaries,” Jewish prisoner-physicians served at the behest of Nazi administrators or forced labor profiteers. Depending on the camp and the timing, their assigned tasks could be in line with adherence to the Hippocratic Oath. In other contexts, however, following orders—and attempting to live another day—could be in clear opposition to their pledge never to do harm to their patients. Consequently, the notions of collaboration and resistance were frequently in flux, as were their strategies to navigate the potentially perilous space delineated and monitored by the SS and/or the companies that utilized forced laborers.

This paper examines testimonies of Jewish prisoner-physicians themselves and those who encountered them, in order to identify how survivors assessed these individuals’ behavior. Do the sources—memoirs, correspondence, depositions, and video testimonies—reveal a tendency to characterize actions in the Manichaean terms of collaboration and resistance, or in a more nuanced manner with sensitivity to context? Taking each judgment as a point of departure, it explores the Jewish prisoner-physicians’ activities with particular focus on timing (i.e., which point in the evolution of Nazi policy) and where (i.e., which type of camp). Examples come from various stages and numerous camps—including the often neglected *Zwangsarbeitslager für Juden* (especially in 1941 and 1942) and *Aussenlager* in expansive networks administered by central *Konzentrationslager* (especially in 1944 and 1945). It will demonstrate that any rigid categorization of the Jewish prisoner-physicians’ behavior is flawed, as the conditions in which the doctors found themselves was fluid and, in response, so was their conduct.

Dr. Gisella Perl offers one pertinent example that foregrounds changes in Nazi policy in Birkenau. In her memoir *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (1948), she writes of resisting the Nazi practice of killing pregnant women and women with newborns by terminating pregnancies and

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“Between Resistance and Collaboration”

killing babies—all in the name of saving the life of the mother.¹ When Nazi doctors suspended that convention, Perl stopped the aforementioned activities.² Doing so, however, inadvertently sentenced the visibly pregnant women to death as soon as the decision was reversed. She points to the Nazis’ cruelty and inconsistency, but there is no evidence that she condemns herself as a collaborator in the death of 292 women.³

The postwar investigation of the *Staatsanwaltschaft bei dem Landgericht Hannover* into the activities of Dr. Leon Feiler provides another relevant case. The witness statements reveal disparate perceptions of this doctor; some individuals portray him as a collaborator, while others present him as a savior. The former witnessed Feiler’s administering lethal injections to incapacitated Hannover-Ahlem inmates.⁴ The latter benefitted from Feiler’s advice to avoid the prisoner hospital, as this was where they were likely to be murdered ahead of the liquidation of this Neuengamme subcamp.⁵ In reading the documents, it becomes evident that Feiler does not deserve the simple characterization of collaborator or resister. Instead Feiler emerges as someone who engaged in both activities (although, compared to “collaboration,” “coercion” is a better characterization of his involvement in murder).

This focus on Jewish prisoner-physicians’ varying conduct and the evolving circumstances that often precipitated such behavioral shifts is central to my dissertation project “Between Coercion and Resistance: Jewish Prisoner-Physicians in Nazi Camps, 1938-1945.” As the title reveals, I place their activities on a coercion-resistance spectrum, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of their surroundings and the subsequent changes in their actions. Given the attention to specific situations and changes over time, I conceive of the use of the coercion-resistance spectrum model as “historicizing the gray zone.” This overarching message provides the backdrop against which I will explore the Nazis’ and private enterprises’ use of Jewish prisoner-physicians and that group’s activities in different categories of camps within the Greater

¹ Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (New York: International Universities Press, 1948), 80-84.

² *Ibid.*, 84.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See, for example, *Staatsanwaltschaft bei dem Landgericht Hannover*, “Verfügung,” Hannover, November 18, 1975, Ermittlungsverfahren gegen Dr. med. Leon F. wegen Beihilfe zum Mord, Nds. 721 Hannover, Acc. 90/99 Nr. 196/3 [unpaginated], Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover, Hannover.

⁵ See, for example, Statement of Landau, Protokollnotizen zum Termin vom 22. September 1975, Ermittlungsverfahren gegen Dr. med. Leon F. wegen Beihilfe zum Mord, Nds. 721 Hannover, Acc. 90/99 Nr. 196/3, p. 38, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover, Hannover.

21st Workshop on the History and Memory of National Socialist Camps and Extermination Sites:
“Between Resistance and Collaboration”

German Reich. In doing so, I shed light on the evolution of the Nazis’ policies towards Jews (since Jewish prisoner-physicians—their assignments and the status of their supplies—provide insight into the value the Nazis and private enterprises put on Jewish lives) and of the camp systems themselves.