The Auschwitz Sonderkommando (special squads) were forced labourers in the gas chambers of Birkenau, compelled to handle and dispose of the bodies of those who were murdered. Often branded as collaborators by other prisoners, the Sonderkommando were central eyewitnesses to the process of mass killing, even able to record what they witnessed and to represent their experience in photographs, documents and writings that they smuggled outside the camp or buried in the grounds of the crematoria.

The experience and history of the Sonderkommando have been central to a number of crucial topics in post-war debates about the Shoah. Their proximity to the extermination process conferred a singular status to their testimonies. They are also key figures referred to in discussions of both collaboration and resistance, especially the conceptualization of what Primo Levi called the ‘grey zone’.

Yet the Sonderkommando have mostly met with a reluctance to think through their significance. Apart from the ground-breaking earlier work of a handful of historians, it is only in the last few years that scholars have begun to engage with their writings in any depth. A number of significant works of art on them have also been made recently, including the film Son of Saul (2015).

In this context of rising interest, this conference aims at:

• fostering discussions of the Sonderkommando manuscripts and the ways they have been edited, exhibited, translated and interpreted.
• responding to the Sonderkommando’s challenge to conceptions of Holocaust testimony in history, philosophy and arts.
• considering the larger corpus of testimonies, historical studies and works of art on the Sonderkommando.
THURSDAY, 12/04/2018

Venue: Centre Marc Bloch (Friedrichstraße 191, 10117 Berlin, Conference Room Germaine Tillion)

9:00
MARKUS MESSLING: Welcoming words

9:10 – 9:30
AURÉLIA KALISKY and DOMINIC WILLIAMS: Introduction

9:30 – 10:30
I. Juridical Testimony from the Sonderkommando: Morality, History, Agency (Chair: Guillaume Mouralis)

PETER DAVIES: What Can We Learn from Trial Testimony? Filip Müller’s Sonderkommando Testimony to the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial

ANDREA RUDORFF: Early Testimony from Feinsilber, Dragon and Tauber. Moral Dimensions

11:00 – 12:30
II. Questioning Paradigms (Chair: Sonja Knopp)

MICHAL AHARONY: Resisting Dehumanization in Auschwitz – the Case of the Sonderkommando

DAWN SKORCZEWSKI: Sonderkommando Testimonies in the Intersubjective Field

FLORINE MARMIGÈRE: From a Post-war Memorialization to a Later Memorability: the Rehabilitative Turning Point of the 1990s

13:30 – 15:00
III. The Histories of the Sonderkommando: New Approaches (Chair: Katrin Stoll)

GIDEON GREIF: Cases of Solidarity and Noble Deeds Within the Sonderkommando Inner Life

IGOR BARTOSIK: New Perspectives from SS Documents

TOM LAWSON: The Sonderkommando and Cultural History

15:15 – 16:45
IV. Responding to the Sonderkommando’s Writings (Chair: Christin Zühlke)

ORIETTA OMBROSI: Silence of the witnesses. For a Philosophy of Testimony

AVICHAI ZUR: Zalmen Gradowzki’s Diary: A Literary-Theological Analysis

PHILIPPE MESNARD: Reading the Sonderkommando: Writing beyond Oneself

17:15 – 18:15
V. Microhistories of the Sonderkommando (Chair: Dagi Knellessen)

BART NAUTA: A Microhistory of Dutch Men in the Sonderkommando and the Waffen-SS at the Crematoria of Auschwitz

ANDREAS KILIAN: Individual and Member of the Resistance in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando: Marcel Nadjar in the Testimony of his Contemporaries

18:30– 19:45
Roundtable 1: Editing the Sonderkommando (Anchor: DOMINIC WILLIAMS, with participants to include PAVEL POLIAN, ZSOMBOR HUNYADI, AVICHAI ZUR)

10:45 – 12:45
Roundtable 2: Translating Zalmen Gradowski (Anchor: JANINA WURBS, with ALEKSAANDRA POLIAN, ALMUT SEIFFERT, MIRIAM TRINH, ZSOMBOR HUNYADI. Some remarks of BATIA BAUM, MAGDALENA RUTA and AVICHAI ZUR will be read.

14:30 – 15:30
VII. Representing Extermination (Chair: Dominic Williams)

DAVID DICKSON: The Fictional Representation of the Sonderkommando Beyond the Third Wave of Holocaust Commemoration

SAMANTHA MITSCHKE: Do we weep with them? Empathy and the Sonderkommando onstage

15:45 – 17:15
VIII. Son of Saul (Chair: Aurélia Kalisky)


ISABEL WOLLASTON: ›Half-victim, half-hangman‹? Representing the Auschwitz Sonderkommando in The Grey Zone (2001) and Son of Saul (2015)

JEFF WALLEN: Facing the Sonderkommando: Son of Saul and the Dynamics of Witnessing

18:15 – 21:30
IX. Screening of Son of Saul (2015) followed by its discussion with LUDGER SCHWARTE and CLARA ROYER

(Registration is required for the screening and the following discussion until 9th of April: kreuzpaintner@zfl-berlin.org)

FRIDAY, 13/04/2018

Venue: Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung (Schützenstr. 18, 10117 Berlin, Trajekte Conference Room)

9:00 – 10:30
VI. Reading Traces. Materialities of Things Past (Chair: Katrin Stoll)

NOAH BENNINGA: The Materiality of Writing in Auschwitz: the Sonderkommando Scrolls as Inscriptions of Life and Death

MARTA ZAWODNA-STEPHAN: Scrolls hidden under the ashes. Thoughts about the relationship between material witnesses