

The Kingdom of Auschwitz

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In a remote corner of southern Poland, in a marshy valley where the Sola River flows into the Vistula about thirty miles west of Krakow, Heinrich Himmler decided in the spring of 1940 to build a new prison camp. The site chosen by some of his underlings had little to recommend it. Outside a bleak little town named Oswiecim, there stood an abandoned Austrian artillery barracks, a collection of about twenty single-story brick buildings, most of them dark and dirty. The surrounding countryside, in the foothills of the Carpathians, was beautiful, a mosaic of meadows speckled with wild flowers, but a committee of Himmler's adjutants reported back to Berlin that the prospects for a large prison camp were forbidding. The water supply was polluted, there were mosquitoes everywhere, and the barracks themselves were virtually useless.

Himmler was undaunted. In this first year of the subjugation of Poland, the need for new detention camps to help establish German law and order in the east was overwhelming. One of Himmler's most dedicated subordinates, SS Major Rudolf Hoess, commandant of the "protective custody camp" at Sachsenhausen, disagreed with his skeptical colleagues. He reported to Berlin that hard work could transform the marshes along the Vistula into a valuable outpost of the Reich. The place had two important qualities: it had good railroad connections, but it was isolated from outside observation. Himmler promptly assigned Hoess to take charge of the project. On April 29, 1940, Hoess and five other SS officers from Sachsenhausen descended from the Breslau train and surveyed the prospect before them. "It was far away, in the back of

beyond, in Poland," Hoess later recalled, in the memoir that he wrote shortly before he was hanged in 1947. The Germans had their own name for the place: Auschwitz.

Hoess was a remarkable man, as anyone who confesses to personal responsibility for the death of more than 2.5 million people presumably must be. (Nobody knows, even to the nearest hundred thousand, how many people died at Auschwitz. Hoess said in his memoir that he got the figure of 2.5 million from Adolf Eichmann, but he said that it seemed to him "far too high." Scholarly estimates range from 1 to 4 million.) It was Hoess, apparently, who devised the famous iron sign that mockingly welcomed the trainloads of prisoners to Auschwitz: Arbeit macht Frei. "Work makes you free." He seems not to have intended it as a mockery, nor even to have intended it literally-a false promise that those who worked to exhaustion would eventually be released-but, rather, as a kind of mystical declaration that self-sacrifice in the form of endless labor does in itself brings a kind of spiritual freedom. "All my life I have thoroughly enjoyed working," Hoess wrote on the eve of his hanging. "I have done plenty of hard, physical work, under the severest conditions,- in the coal mines, in oil refineries, and in brickyards. . . . Work in prison (is) a means of training for those prisoners who are fundamentally unstable and who need to learn the meaning of endurance and perseverance."

He was not a mere brute. One of the few surviving photographs shows a man with a high forehead, large, searching eyes, a full-lipped and rather prissy mouth. His devout parents had been determined that he should become a priest. His father and his grandfather had been soldiers, and though the father retired from the army to become a salesman in Baden-Baden, he passed on to his only son his belief in military discipline. And piety: he took his son on pilgrimages to shrines as far away as Einsiedeln and Lourdes. "I was taught," Hoess wrote, "that my highest

duty was to help those in need. It was constantly impressed on me in forceful terms that I must obey promptly the wishes and commands of my parents, teachers, and priests."

Such commands sometimes conflicted. Shortly after Hoess's father died, World War I broke out, and despite his mother's pleadings that he continue his studies, he lied about his age and managed to enlist at sixteen in the 21st Regiment of Dragoons. He was sent to Turkey, then to the Iraqi front, then to Palestine. At eighteen, he was already the commander of a cavalry unit. When the war ended, he refused to surrender and marched his troops home through Turkey, Bulgaria, and Rumania to Austria. He found his mother dead, his household dispersed. He took up arms again in one of the Freikorps units that fought in the Baltic States, and when the Freikorps became violently involved in the domestic battles of the Weimar Republic, Hoess took part in an absurd political murder. He and a band of his comrades got drunk and beat to death a schoolteacher whom they falsely suspected of having informed on another nationalist. Hoess was surprised to find himself arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to life imprisonment. He had nightmares in prison of "always being pursued and killed, or falling over a precipice."

Freed by an amnesty after five years, Hoess passionately wanted to become a farmer. He discovered a right-wing group called the League of Artamanen, which was establishing a network of agricultural communes. He found a girl who shared his views, and they got married and worked the land and had three children (there were ultimately to be five). One of the leaders of the Artamanen was Heinrich Himmler, scarcely thirty, a thoughtful young man who wore pince-nez, loved birds and flowers, held a degree in agronomy, and owned a chicken farm outside Munich. With the rise to power of Hitler, Himmler became the commander of the Fuhrer's private guard - the Schutzstaffeln, or SS-and when Himmler called for recruits, Hoess

answered the call. He claims to have had "many doubts and hesitations" about leaving the farm, claims to have known almost nothing about the concentration camps that Hitler was building. "To me it was just a question of being an active soldier again, of resuming my military career," he wrote. "I went to Dachau."

Hoess's memoirs provide a remarkable illustration of the process of self-delusion. Having joined the SS for a quasi-military career, Hoess seems to have been surprised and strangely thrilled, at Dachau, the first time he saw a prisoner flogged. "When the man began to scream," he recalled, "I went hot and cold all over. . . . I am unable to give an explanation of this." Hoess dutifully regarded the prisoners as enemies of the state, regarded their forced labor as a justified punishment, regarded all the beatings and torments as a proper enforcement of discipline. He claims, nonetheless, to have had misgivings, and to have suppressed them. "I should have gone to [Himmler] and explained that I was not suited to concentration camp service, because I felt too much sympathy for the prisoners. I was unable to find the courage to do this. . . . I did not wish to reveal my weakness. . . . I became reconciled to my lot."

Hoess worked hard, enforced orders, won promotions, first at Dachau, then at Sachsenhausen. Then came the war, and the lightning conquest of Poland. Himmler, who by now gloried in the title of Reichsführer SS, recognized Hoess's extraordinary dedication and ordered him to create the first concentration camp beyond the original frontiers of the Reich. Hoess sensed from the start that he was being assigned to a project of unprecedented dimensions. At the outbreak of the war, there had been six concentration camps in Germany, containing about 25,000 prisoners. The first was Dachau, just northwest of Munich, built in the spring of 1933, Hitler's first year. The others were Buchenwald, near Weimar, Sachsenhausen, north of Berlin;

Mauthausen, near Linz; Flossenburg, in the Sudetenland, and Ravensbrück, the women's prison, also north of Berlin. Himmler told Hoess that he was to build, in the valley of the Vistula, a camp for 10,000 prisoners, and that would be only the beginning. There might someday be 50,000 prisoners, or even more. At Auschwitz, however, there was no camp, only a few dilapidated barracks and stables. On May 20, 1940, a month after Hoess's arrival, an SS officer named Gerhard Pallitzsch, who held the title of Rapportführer, and thus was responsible for camp discipline, brought to Hoess thirty German criminals whom he had selected from Sachsenhausen. These thirty men were to start the building of the camp, and Pallitzsch had chosen them partly for their various technical skills. They were also destined to become the camp's first "kapos," or trustees, the men who carried out the orders of the SS and thus became not only the Nazis' representatives but in some cases the worst of oppressors.

The town council of Oswiecim cooperated by ordering a roundup of 200 local Jews and assigning them to start work on the new camp. The SS office in Kraków sent fifteen cavalrymen to guard the prisoners as they worked. The project had barely begun when the police headquarters in Breslau sent a message to ask when the camp would be ready to take in prisoners. Before the message had even been answered, a passenger train arrived with 728 Polish political prisoners. The date was June 14, 1940. Most of these first prisoners were young men who had been caught trying to escape across the border into Hungary. There were also a few priests and schoolteachers and Jews. They were assigned to some buildings near the camp that had formerly belonged to the Polish Tobacco Monopoly and then ordered to join in the building of the camp.

The first snow fell in early October mists from the Vistula seeped through the unfinished barracks at Auschwitz. SS men with clubs drove the half-starved prisoners to work. Yet Hoess nourished grand plans to make his camp a kind of Utopia. As early as January of 1941, he decided to organize an Auschwitz symphony orchestra. Himmler, the former chicken farmer, indulged in similarly benign fantasies about his outpost on the Vistula. "Auschwitz was to become the agricultural research station for the eastern territories," Hoess recalled Himmler saying at a meeting in Berlin. "Opportunities were opened up to us, which we had never before had in Germany. Sufficient labor was available. All essential agricultural research must be carried out there. Huge laboratories and plant nurseries were to be set out. All kinds of stock-breeding was to be pursued there."

Sufficient labor was available. In that one sentence, that euphemism for the herds of emaciated prisoners in their tattered blue and white stripes, Hoess illuminated the most seductive element of Auschwitz in its first phase. It had been founded as a detention camp, a place to confine undesirable people-Polish army officers, dissidents and heretics of all sorts, people who had to be prevented from infecting the new order that the Nazis were trying to build in the disorganized east. But once these thousands of people were stripped of their possessions and confined behind barbed wire, they represented a resource that Himmler was just beginning to appreciate: labor. That basic unit of human value was now available for any use to which the Reichsfuhrer SS might choose to put it, whether an agricultural research laboratory or a symphony orchestra or an armaments factory. "In Auschwitz," Hoess observed, "everything was possible."

Though the "sufficient labor" at Auschwitz could never really be sufficient for Himmler's fantasies, his primary imperative was to protect and enlarge this new resource. When he paid his first visit to the year-old camp on March 1, 1941, he told Hoess that the facilities he was building were to contain not 10,000 or 50,000 prisoners, as previously agreed, **but 100,000**. In fact, Auschwitz was too small. A new camp, Auschwitz II, would have to be built in the birch woods outside what had once been the village of Brzezinka, two miles west of Auschwitz. The Germans called it Birkenau. This expansion was not mere SS imperialism, Himmler told Hoess, but a contribution to the war effort. He had brought with him several executives of I.G. Farben, the great chemical cartel, which was proposing to **build a synthetic rubber factory near Auschwitz in order to use the prisoners** to make truck tires for the victorious Wehrmacht.

Hoess was appalled, not by the vastness of Himmler's plans but by the lack of means to carry them out. He had been officially warned in advance against reporting anything "disagreeable" to Himmler, but he could not refrain from an outpouring of bureaucratic protest. Auschwitz was already overcrowded by the trainloads of prisoners that kept rolling in, and there were no materials with which to build a new camp at Birkenau. The whole region lacked sufficient fresh water and drainage. There was a serious danger of disease. Himmler was unmoved. He told Hoess: "I do not appreciate the difficulties in Auschwitz. It is up to you to manage somehow."

Hoess did manage. I.G. Farben began building its synthetic rubber factory in April in the nearby town of Dwory, and gangs of prisoners trudged there every morning to play their part in the war effort, but that summer changed the whole nature of the war, and therefore of the camp at Auschwitz. On the night of June 22, one of the prisoners first heard on an illicit radio that Hitler's

Panzer divisions were streaming across the Russian frontier. For a few days, the prisoners were jubilant, for they thought that the widened war and the now alliance among Hitler's enemies would inevitably lead to their liberation. But as the Wehrmacht swept across western Russia, the prisoners saw their future darken. Then came the first Russian captives, thousands and thousands of them. "They had been given hardly any food on the march," Hoess wrote, "being simply turned out into the nearest fields during halts on the way and there told to 'graze' like cattle on anything edible they could find. In the Lamsdorf camp there must have been about 200,000 Russian prisoners of war. . . . Most of them huddled as best they could in earth hovels they had built themselves. . . . It was with these prisoners, many of whom could hardly stand, that I was now supposed to build the Birkenau prisoner-of-war camp."

Hoess ascribed the Russians' fate to their own weakness, or to a larger destiny. "They died like flies from general physical exhaustion," he recalled, "or from the most trifling maladies which their debilitated constitutions could no longer resist. I saw countless Russians die while in the act of swallowing root vegetables or potatoes. . . . Overcome by the crudest instinct of self-preservation, they came to care nothing for one another, and in their selfishness now thought only of themselves. Cases of cannibalism were not rare in Birkenau. I myself came across a Russian lying between piles of bricks, whose body had been ripped open and the liver removed. They would beat each other to death for food. . . . They were no longer human beings." Hoess seems to have persuaded himself that this process occurred all by itself, but one of his subordinates, Pery Broad, an SS man of Brazilian parentage, wrote out for the trial of twenty-two Auschwitz officials in Frankfurt in 1964 a vivid account of how the Russians were finally dispatched. "Thousands of prisoners of war were shot in a copse near Birkenau and buried in mass graves," Broad recalled. "The graves were about 150-200 feet long, 15 feet deep, and

perhaps just as wide. The camp administration had solved the Russian problem to its satisfaction. Then . . . the fisheries began to complain that the fish in the ponds in the vicinity of Birkenau were dying. Experts said this was due to the pollution of the ground water through cadaveric poisoning. But that was not all. The summer sun was beating down on Birkenau, the bodies, which had not yet decomposed but had only rotted, started to swell up, and a dark red mass began to seep through the cracks of the earth, spreading an indescribable stench throughout. Something had to be done quickly. . . . SS Sergeant Franz Hössler was ordered to dig up the bodies in all possible secrecy and have them burned." Of the 12,000 Russians sent to build Birkenau in the fall of 1941, only about 150 were still alive the following summer. "Those who did remain were the best," said Hoess. "They were splendid workers."

While the authorities at Auschwitz were killing Russians, the authorities in Berlin were making new plans. In the summer of 1941--the exact date is unknown--Himmler summoned Hoess to Berlin for a secret meeting. Not even Himmler's adjutant was present. "The Führer has ordered that the Jewish question be solved once and for all," Himmler said, according to Hoess "and that we, the SS, are to implement that order." Himmler had considered using various camps in the east, he said, and only Auschwitz would serve as the center of destruction, only Auschwitz was sufficiently big, sufficiently isolated, sufficiently organized, to carry out Himmler's plan. "I have now decided to entrust this task to you," Himmler said. "It is difficult and onerous and calls for complete devotion, notwithstanding the difficulties that may arise. . . . You will treat this order as absolutely secret, even from your superiors. . . . The Jews are the sworn enemies of the German people and must be eradicated. Every Jew that we can lay our hands on is to be destroyed now during the war, without exception."

Hoess, the onetime pilgrim to Lourdes, seems to have reached such a state of official docility by then that he **did not even question this incredible order, much less dispute it**. The only question in his mind, apparently, was how such a gigantic enterprise could be carried out. And since no official record of Himmler's order was kept, it is only by sifting through the surviving memoirs and trial testimony of both the SS officials and their victims that we can piece together the story of what Auschwitz was. **Himmler did not explain his orders**. He said he would send Hoess an emissary, Major Adolf Eichmann, head of Section B-4 of Bureau IV of the Reich Security Office (RSHA), to discuss the details. Shortly afterward, Eichmann arrived in Auschwitz--a lean, wiry man with a sharp nose and a nervous manner. He and Hoess seemed to recognize something in each other that made them friends. Eichmann already had a plan, a geographic sequence for the shipment of Jews to Auschwitz: first those from the eastern part of Upper Silesia then those from the neighboring Polish areas now under German rule, then those from Czechoslovakia, then a great sweep of western Europe.

But the two officials seemed **unable to decide on the most fundamental question: how to kill the victims**. The first Einsatzgruppen (special action groups) that had prowled through eastern Europe in the wake of the advancing German army had simply shot any Jews they had found, but this was an **inefficient way of carrying out mass executions. It was expensive. It was also bad for the morale of the executioners**. This may seem a minor aspect of the problem, but the Germans gave it a certain amount of consideration. "It would have placed too heavy a burden on the SS men who had to carry it out," said Hoess, "especially because of the women and children among the victims."

Eichmann and Hoess agreed that poison gas was the solution, but the technology of gasing was only beginning to be explored. As early as 1939, the Nazis had started a series of experiments on the most feared and despised of all minorities, the mentally defective and the insane. In a dozen mental institutions in various parts of Germany, the Nazis built fake shower rooms into which they could pipe carbon monoxide. Over the course of a year or more, they killed about 50,000 mental patients in this way, but the technique was generally regarded as unsatisfactory. There were constant breakdowns in the gassing machinery, and the disposal of the corpses caused unpleasant rumors in the surrounding towns.

There were also economic problems in applying such techniques on the grand scale envisaged at Auschwitz. Carbon monoxide sprays "would necessitate too many buildings," as Hoess put it, "and it was also very doubtful whether the supply of gas for such a vast number of people would be available." The question was left open. Eichmann told Hoess that he would try to find a poisonous gas that was both cheap and plentiful, and then they would meet again. In the meantime, they strolled together through the idle farmlands that had been expropriated in the village of Brzezinka. They were looking for a place where the gas, once it was found, might be applied. They finally saw an abandoned farmhouse that they considered, as Hoess said, "most suitable." It was near the northern corner of the still-expanding camp. "It was isolated and screened by woods and hedges," Hoess wrote, "and it was also not far from the railroad. The bodies could be placed in the long deep pits in the nearby meadows. . . . We calculated that after gas-proofing the premises then available, it would be possible to kill about ___ people simultaneously with a suitable gas."

The search for a suitable gas took Hoess to the other death camps that were now being built. There were five smaller ones put into operation in Poland between December of 1941 and the middle of 1942- Chelmno (Kulmhof), Belzec, Sobibór, Majdanek, and Treblinka. At Chelmno, about 150 miles north of Auschwitz, the inhabitants of the Łódź ghetto were herded into a crumbling chateau known as "the palace," then loaded onto trucks that had been specially equipped so that the exhaust fumes could be piped up into the backs of the trucks. By the time the trucks arrived at a burial ground in the surrounding forest, the prisoners in the back were dead.

This system had its flaws, however. The trucks could not handle large numbers of prisoners, and the gas from the exhaust pipes flowed in so unevenly that some of the victims were still gasping with life when the trucks reached the burial ground. Hoess moved on to Treblinka, near Bialystok, where the plan was to park the trucks outside three small gas chambers, each about fifteen feet square, and to pipe the exhaust fumes in among the prisoners assembled there. Hoess was still dissatisfied. All these methods were too unreliable, too small in scale.

Hoess apparently was not then aware, nor was Eichmann, that the suitable gas was already available. It was called Zyklon B, a commercial form of hydrocyanic acid, which became active on contact with air. (The term "Zyklon" comes from the first letters of the German names for the three main ingredients, cyanide, chlorine, and nitrogen.) It was manufactured by a firm called Degesch, which was largely owned by I.G. Farben, and it had been brought to Auschwitz in the summer of 1941 as a vermin killer and disinfectant. It was very dangerous. Two civilians came from Hamburg with their gas masks to show the Auschwitz authorities how to use the

poison. Prisoners who worked in the munitions plant had to hang up their vermin-infested clothes; then the barracks were sealed, and the gas containers were pried open.

On September 3, 1941, while Hoess was away on business, Deputy Commandant Karl Fritsch decided, apparently on his own authority, to experiment in using Zyklon B on 600 Russian prisoners of war and 250 tubercular patients in the Auschwitz hospital. He sealed up some of the underground bunkers of Block 11, headquarters of the Gestapo's Politische Abteilung, or "political department." There he packed in the prisoners, then put on a gas mask and flung one of the disinfectant containers into the midst of the victims. Within a few minutes, they were all dead. "Those who were propped against the door leaned with a curious stiffness and then fell right at our feet, striking their faces hard against the concrete floor," recalled a Pole named Zenon Rozanski, who served in the penal detail assigned to clear out the bunker. "Corpses! Corpses standing bolt upright and filling the entire corridor of the bunker, till they were packed so tight it was impossible for more to fall."

The Final Solution lurched into existence. It was perfectly clear in Himmler's meeting with Hoess in the summer of 1941, but there were endless details to be worked out, regulations to be drafted and distributed, meetings and elaborations. The most important of these was the secret Wannsee conference convened in January, 1942. by Himmler's alter ego, Reinhard Heydrich, at a villa in the beautiful lakeside suburb on the southwestern edge of Berlin. Lunch and drinks were served. There were thirteen officials representing the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Polish occupation authorities, and all the main departments of the German government and the Nazi party. Heydrich spoke at length of **"the coming final solution of the Jewish question."** Everything was explained. Eichmann kept the minutes.

Yet there were still further delays. It was not until August 3, 1942, that the working plans for the four great crematoria at Birkenau, which could take in as many as 10,000 prisoners a day, were approved by the Auschwitz authorities and the engineers at Toepf A.G. in Erfurt. In January and February of 1943, there were still complaints of work delayed by freezing weather, and not until March 13 was Crematorium 11 finally ready to operate. Until then, as Himmler had ordered, it was up to Hoess "to manage somehow." Hoess managed with the farmhouse that he and Eichmann had discovered. There and in an abandoned barn, about 300 prisoners a day could be gassed. Hundreds more were killed by lethal injections of phenol, or by simple shooting. Throughout the confusions of 1942 the impossible orders kept pouring in, and Hoess kept improvising. "I cannot say," he wrote in his memoir, "on what date the extermination of the Jews began."

The first Transport Juden, consisting of 999 Jewish women from Slovakia, arrived on March 26, 1942, at the Auschwitz railroad station. "A cheerful little station," as a prisoner named Tadeusz Borowski later wrote, "very much like any other provincial railway stop: a small square framed by tall chestnuts and paved with yellow gravel." Since the Birkenau gas chambers had not yet been built, the women were stripped, their heads were shaved, and they were confined in Blocks I to 10 of the main camp, separated by a high fence from the men's barracks. They were made to stand for hours at roll call, and beaten, and then sent out in work gangs, and beaten again. At the little station with the chestnut trees, the trains kept arriving. On April 17, 1942, a shipment of 973 Slovakian Jews appeared at Auschwitz, and on April 19, another 464. The SS men and their snarling guard dogs met them at the railroad ramp. Prisoner Borowski, who was a poet of incandescent talent, appeared at the ramp occasionally to watch the arrivals. (Borowski survived three years in Auschwitz. Three collections of his stories and a volume of poetry were

published after the war. He committed suicide in 1951 at the age of twenty-nine.) "The ramp has become increasingly alive with activity, increasingly noisy," he wrote. "The crews are being divided into those who will open and unload the arriving cattle cars and those who will be posted by the wooden steps. . . . Motorcycles drive up, delivering SS officers, bemedaled, glittering with brass, beefy men with highly polished boots and shiny, brutal faces. Some have brought their briefcases, others hold thin, flexible whips. . . . Some stroll majestically on the ramp, the silver squares on their collars glitter, the gravel crunches under their boots, their bamboo whips snap impatiently. . . . The train rolls slowly alongside the ramp. In the tiny barred windows appear pale, wilted, exhausted human faces, terror-stricken women with tangled hair, unshaven men. They gaze at the station in silence. And then, suddenly, there is a stir inside the cars, and a pounding against the wooden boards. "Water! Air!"

The SS men routed the starving and terrified prisoners out of the freight cars, ordered them to abandon all their possessions, and then whipped them into line to prepare for the process known as "selection." Two SS doctors had been assigned by rotation to choose a few of the hardest prisoners to be preserved for the Auschwitz labor commands. These doctors (the most notable was Josef Mengele, now a fugitive in Paraguay, who liked to wear white gloves and to whistle themes from Wagner's operas as he worked) surveyed each newcomer for a few seconds and then waved him on in one direction or another. A wave to the left-though most of the newcomers did not realize it-meant survival, an assignment to hard labor in the construction gangs. A wave to the right meant the gas chamber. Anyone more than about forty years of age was waved to the right. Most women went to the right. Almost all children under fifteen went to the right. Families that asked to stay together were reunited and sent to the right. Only about 10

percent of each transport, on the average, went to the left-sometimes more, sometimes less, according to the whim of the SS doctors.

The May 12 transport that brought 1,500 Jews from Sosnowiec marked a turning point in the short history of Auschwitz, for this was the first trainload of Jews who were not imprisoned, not shorn, not sent out in work gangs, not beaten or shot. This time, there was no selection on the ramp at the railroad station, no division of families, no separation of those who were fit to work from the old and the sick and the children. **These 1,500 Jews from Sosnowiec were the first to be sent directly to the gas chambers-all of them.** And with that, Auschwitz finally became what it had always been destined to become: not just a prisoner-of-war camp, not just a slave-labor camp, but a Vernichtungslager, an **"extermination camp."** Vernichtung means more than that. It means to make something into nothing. **Annihilation.**

That summer of 1942, the trains to Auschwitz began bringing the Jews from France, Belgium, Holland, and Croatia. In November came the Jews of Norway. In March of 1943, when the great crematoria finally began operating, came the first of the Jews of Greece, from Macedonia and Thrace. That same spring, after the destruction of the rebellious Warsaw ghetto, the SS began the systematic liquidation of all the remaining Polish ghettos. Warsaw was one of the first, then Bialystok. In September, the ghettos of Minsk and Vilna were destroyed. In October, Auschwitz received the Jews of southern France and Rome, in December, the Jews of northern Italy; then, early in 1944, the Jews of Athens. "What for Hitler . . . was among the war's main objectives . . . and what for Eichmann was a job . . .," Hannah Arendt wrote in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, **"was for the Jews quite literally the end of the world."**

Despite the annihilation of the 1,500 Jews from Sosnowiec, the selections on the ramp continued, for there was never a consistent policy on anything at Auschwitz, not even on killing. The basic orders from Berlin were completely contradictory. Eichmann and his cohorts at police headquarters-the RSHA-continually demanded more killings, but the SS administrative offices-the WVHA-demanded just as adamantly that the prisoners be made to work for the war effort. So the Auschwitz authorities carried out their orders, murdering or sparing their victims, by a strange mixture of bureaucracy and impulse. "We were all tormented by secret doubts," said Hoess, " [but] I myself dared not admit to such doubts. . . . Often at night, I would walk through the stables and seek relief among my beloved animals."

Some people made their own ways. Even at Auschwitz, Dr. Ella Lingens, a prisoner, recalled at the Frankfurt trial, there was one "island of peace"-at the Babice subcamp, because of an officer named Flacke. "How he did it, I don't know," she testified. "His camp was clean and the food also." The Frankfurt judge, who had heard endless protestations that orders had to be obeyed, was amazed. "Do you wish to say," he asked, "that everyone could decide for himself to be either good or evil in Auschwitz!" "That is exactly what I wish to say," she answered.

Auschwitz was a society of extraordinary complexity. It had its own soccer stadium, its own library, its own photographic lab, and its own symphony orchestra. It had its own Polish nationalist underground and its own Polish Communist underground-not to mention separate Russian, Slovakian, French, and Austrian resistance groups-whose members fought and sometimes killed each other. It also had its underground religious services, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. There was no reason that a death camp should have a hospital at all, and yet the one at Auschwitz grew to considerable size, with about sixty doctors and more than 300 nurses. It

had a surgical department and an operating theater, and special sections for infectious diseases, internal injuries, and dentistry. Auschwitz even had its own brothel, known as "the puff," which favored prisoners could enter by earning chits for good behavior. Crafty veterans of the camp would gather at the office where the chits were handed out, and if any model prisoner failed to claim his due, one of the old-timers would quickly step forward to claim it for him.

"Concentration-camp existence . . . taught us that the whole world is really like a concentration camp," wrote Tadeusz Borowski. "The weak work for the strong, and if they have no strength or will to work-then let them steal, or let them die. . . . There is no crime that a man will not commit in order to save himself. And, having saved himself, he will commit crimes for increasingly trivial reasons; he will commit them first out of duty, then from habit, and finally-for pleasure. . . . The world is ruled by neither justice nor morality; crime is not punished nor virtue rewarded, one is forgotten as quickly as the other. The world is ruled by power."

The trip to Auschwitz served as a kind of initiation. The freight cars, each carrying about 100 people, came from as far as Bordeaux and Rome and Salonika, voyages of a week or more, stifling in summer, arctic in winter. Sometimes the trains were shunted onto sidings for days on end, nights on end. The prisoners' cries for food and water went unheeded. When they banged their fists on the doors, their guards usually ignored them. Occasionally, they answered by banging the outsides of the doors with their gun butts. Sometimes, by the time the sealed trains finally reached southern Poland, the dead outnumbered the living. (The trip from Corfu took twenty-seven days in all, and when the train came to a stop, no survivors emerged.)

To arrive at the unknown town of Auschwitz, then, seemed a kind of liberation.

"A huge, multicolored wave of people loaded down with luggage pours from the train," Borowski continued in his description of the scene on the ramp, "like a blind, mad river trying to find a new bed. But before they have a chance to recover before they can draw a breath of fresh air and look at the sky, bundles are snatched from their hands, coats ripped off their backs, their purses and umbrellas taken away. . . . Verboten! one of us barks." The arrival on the ramp was a chaos of screams and shouts, barking guard dogs, pandemonium: the Begrüssung ("welcome"), the Nazis called it. Few prisoners protested their treatment. Most were numb with shock and exhaustion and terror. In one instance, though, a woman saw that one of the SS guards was eyeing her, so she began flirting with him, then reached down and threw a handful of gravel in his face. That made him drop his pistol. The woman pounced on it and shot him several times in the abdomen before the other guards clubbed her to the ground. Sergeant Josef Schillinger lay face down on the ramp, dying, his fingers clawing in the gravel. "O Gott, mein Gott, " he groaned, "wus hub' ich getun dasss ich so leiden muss?" "Oh God, my God, what have I done that I must suffer so?"

Once the selection was finished, the prisoners chosen for the gas chambers were taken by truck to two neat little farmhouses, with thatched roofs and whitewashed walls, surrounded by fruit trees and shrubbery. Teams of Jewish prisoners who had been assigned to the Sonderkommando, or "special command," shepherded the victims onward, urging them to move along quietly into the shower rooms and to take off all their clothes.

Here, and later in the four new crematoria at Birkenau, the Final Solution took place. What happened can best be described in the detached words of Rudolf Hoess, who was in

command of all this: "The door would now be quickly screwed up and the gas discharged by the waiting disinfectors through vents in the ceilings of the gas chambers, down a shaft that led to the floor. This insured the rapid distribution of the gas. It could be observed through the peephole in the door that those who were standing nearest to the induction vents were killed at once. It can be said that about one-third died straight away. The remainder staggered about and begin to scream and struggle for air. The screaming, however, soon changed to the death rattle and in a few minutes all lay still. . . . The door was opened half an hour after the induction of the gas. and the ventilation switched on. . . . The special detachment now set about removing the gold teeth and cutting the hair from the women. After this, the bodies were taken up by elevator and laid in front of the ovens, which had meanwhile been stoked up. Depending on the size of the bodies, up to three corpus could be put into one oven at the same time. The time required for cremation . . . took twenty minutes. As previously stated I and II could cremate about 2,000 bodies in twenty-four hours, but a higher number was not possible without causing damage to the installations."

There were some prisoners who cherished the idea that Hoess had somehow exceeded his orders and begun these massacres on his own, and that if the authorities in Berlin know what was really happening. they would stop it. Such speculations ended with Heinrich Himmler's visits to Auschwitz in July, 1942 and January, 1943.

On his last trip, Himmler arrived at Auschwitz at 8 A.M. and by 8:45 one of the gas chambers was packed with victims so that the Reichsfurer SS could watch a gassing at 9 o'clock sharp. At 8:55, however, a telephone rang, and the executioners learned that Himmler and Hoess were still having breakfast. "Inside the chamber itself," according to the recollections of a Czech prisoner named Rudolf Vrba, "frantic men and women, who knew by that time what a shower in

Auschwitz meant, began shooting, screaming, and pounding weakly on the door. . . . " Nobody paid any attention. The SS men waited for orders. At 10 A.M., they were told to wait some more. At 11 A.M. an official car finally arrived, bringing Himmler and Hoess, who paused to chat with the senior officers present. Hoess invited Himmler to observe through a peephole the naked man sealed inside the gas chamber. Himmler obliged. Then the gassing began. "Hoess courteously invited his guest to have another peep through the observation window," Vrba recalled. "For some minutes, Himmler peered into the death chamber, obviously impressed. . . . What he had seen seemed to have satisfied him and put him in good humor. Though he rarely smoked, he accepted a cigarette from an officer, and, as he puffed at it rather clumsily, he laughed and joked."

Those happy few who survived the selections on the ramp were marched off to the quarantine barracks, where they were initiated into a series of rituals designed to destroy their identities and their personalities and thus their capacity for resistance. First they were taken to the yard between Blocks 15 and 16 and ordered to strip off their clothes. All their hair was shaved off.

Then they had to run to a nearby bathhouse and take a cold shower. Then they had to run to another yard, where they were provided with ill-fitting blue-and- white-striped prison uniforms and wooden clogs. Their uniforms bore triangles of different colors according to the categories of prisoner-green for professional criminals, red for political opposition, yellow for Jews, black for prostitutes and other "asocials" pink for homosexuals, purple for "exponents of the Bible" (Jehovah's Witnesses and other Christian fundamentalists). Jews who fitted into any of the other categories had their yellow triangle superimposed on the first triangle to form a Star of

David. Finally, the prisoners had their Auschwitz numbers tattooed on their left forearms. Henceforth, they were told, they were to be known only by this number, not by name. This whole procedure normally took all day, but if the prisoners had arrived in the afternoon, it took all night. Throughout it, they were given no food or water.

Just as the arrival in Auschwitz seemed a relief after days in the crowded freight cars, the arrival in the quarantine barracks seemed a relief after the process of selection and registration. It was however, a new kind of ordeal, designed to test whether the SS doctors on the ramp had been correct in their choice of survivors. Roll call was at 4:30 A.K, and sometimes the prisoners had to stand in formation all day long. They were drilled in camp routine, trained to form ranks of five, to take off their caps on command. to perform such drudgery as digging ditches and moving rocks, and to take part in 'physical training." This physical training, also known as 'sport," consisted of running in position until a kapo ordered the prisoners to drop to the ground and start hopping like frogs; then a kapo ordered the prisoners to get up and start running again. "Sport" is a fairly common form of gymnastic drill, but the Auschwitz version lasted for hours, and anyone who faltered was kicked and beaten. After a fifteen-minute break for lunch, the SS training continued with, for example, singing classes. Jews were taught to sing an anti-Semitic song; prisoners of all kinds were taught a song in praise of their own imprisonment. At 3 P.M, the "sport" resumed, and continued until 6:30. Then came another roll call, sometimes lasting two hours. Those who failed to satisfy their guards had to stand at attention all night long. Lager Führer Fritsch, the man who had first tried out Zyklon B on the Russian prisoners, liked to tell the newcomers: "You have come to a concentration camp, not to a sanatorium, and there is only one way out-through the chimney. Anyone who does not like it can trying hanging himself on the wires [an Auschwitz slang phrase that described the most easily available form of suicide: the

electrified wire that surrounded the camp carried a current of. If there are Jews in this shipment, they have no right to live longer than a fortnight; if there are priests, their period is one month—the rest, three months."

After four to eight weeks in quarantine, the prisoners came to believe that life might be better if they could only reach the main camp. **Once again, they were deluded. Auschwitz was designed, just as Fritzscher warned, to work its victims to death. More than 1,000 prisoners were herded into brick barracks built for 400,** according to a plan designed by one of the prisoners in the Auschwitz building office. They slept in three-tiered wooden bunks, half-a-dozen prisoners to a bunk, often with no mattresses or blankets. There was little heat and less ventilation. The place stank. The prisoners' only consolation was that Birkenau was even worse. Instead of overcrowded brick barracks, there were overcrowded wooden huts, with leaking roofs and dirt floors that turned to mud. Auschwitz proper had yellowish running water and a primitive sewage system. Birkenau had only a few privies; at night, the only facilities were some overflowing buckets. At least half of the prisoners—and often two thirds or more—suffered the miseries and humiliation of chronic diarrhea. Many succumbed to typhus. And the rats were everywhere. When someone died during the night, according to a prisoner named Judith Sternberg Newman, the rats "would get at the body before it was cold, and eat the flesh in such a way that it was unrecognizable before morning."

In both camps, the first ordeal of the day was, as in quarantine, the Appell, **or roll call, which began at about 4:30,** somewhat before dawn, rain or shine, frost or snow. Everyone had to stand in line, in rows of five, while the counting began. No exceptions or excuses were permitted. The sick were dragged from their bunks to take part. **Even those who had died during**

the night had to be carried out and propped up in position so that they could be counted. As the dawn brightened, the kapos sauntered up and down the ranks of the prisoners, counting, and hitting anyone they felt like hitting. Sometimes they insisted that the shortest prisoners fill the ranks at the front; sometimes the positions were reversed, with the shortest prisoners in the back. Anyone who didn't move quickly enough was clubbed. And there were always the dogs, snarling and straining at their leashes. At any interruption or disturbance, any break or error in the counting, the process began all over again. The roll call generally lasted three or four hours (punitive roll calls lasted much longer) and not until about 8 o'clock did the SS officers arrive to review the roll-call numbers and send the prisoners out to work.

To work. Arbeit Macht Frei. The prisoners marched off to the booming accompaniment of the Auschwitz band, but without food, or with only the food they had saved from the previous night's ration, or bought or bartered or stolen during the night. Officially, the prisoners were given just enough food to survive. The rations provided for a breakfast of one half-liter of grain coffee or herb tea. The main meal at noon theoretically consisted of one liter of meat soup four times a week and vegetable soup three times a week. The ingredients were carefully listed in the regulations: The meat soup was supposed to contain 150 grams of potatoes, 150 grams of cabbage, kale, or beetroot, 20 grams of meat. At night the ration was 300 grams of black bread, sometimes with a sliver of margarine or a dab of beet-sugar jam. In fact, the prisoners never got more than a fraction of their rations. The authorities who bought the supplies regularly saved money by acquiring rotten meat and spoiled vegetables. The guards and cooks took the best share for themselves, to eat or to trade. What the prisoners actually received was a bread made partly of sawdust and a soup made of thistles, or worse. Sometimes, according to Olga Lengyel, a prisoner-nurse in the Auschwitz hospital, it was simply called "surprise soup," because it

contained such unexpected ingredients as buttons, keys, tufts of hair, dead mice, and, on one occasion, a small metal sewing kit complete with needles and thread.

Awful as the food was, the prisoners fought over their shares, and even over the crude bowls from which to eat. Among the 1,500 women in Mrs. Lengyel's barracks, the Nazis distributed just twenty bowls, each of which would hold about two liters, and one pail. "The barracks chief ... immediately commandeered the pail as a chamber pot," Mrs. Lengyel recalled. "Her cronies quickly snatched the other bowls for the same use. What could the rest of us do? It seemed as though the Germans constantly sought to pit us against each other, to make us competitive, spiteful, and hateful. In the morning, we had to be content with rinsing the bowls as well as we could before we put in our minute rations.... The first days our stomachs rose at the thought of what were actually chamber pots at night. But hunger drives, and we were so starved that we were ready to eat any food."

An average man needs about 4000 calories per day to perform heavy labor, about 3,600 calories for ordinary work. The average Auschwitz prisoner, by official post-war estimates that remain uncertain, received about 1,500. Many often got no more -than half that amount. Apart from calories, of course, there were gross shortages of vitamins and minerals. Scurvy and skin diseases soon became commonplace. Starving children suffered strange afflictions such as noma, a gangrenous ulceration that creates gaping holes through the cheek. "I saw diseases which you find only in textbooks," Dr. Lingens testified at the Frankfurt trial. She had been sent to Auschwitz in 1943 for helping Jews to escape from Vienna. "I never thought I'd see any of them- for example, pemphigus, a very rare disease, in which large areas of the skin become detached and the patient dies within a few days."

The basic effect of starvation, though, is simply emaciation and exhaustion. The body feeds on itself, first on the fat and then on the muscles, which become soft and waste away. "The face looked like a mask," said J. Olbrycht, a professor of nutrition who testified on the condition of these prisoners at Hoess's trial in Kraków, with a faraway look in the eyes and the pupils unnaturally enlarged. There was apathy and sleepiness, the slowing down and weakening of all life processes." The Auschwitz prisoners easily recognized these marks of coming death, and with the stinging acerbity of the death camps, they likened the numbed victims to the starving beggars of India and named them *Musel7ncitsner* ("Moslems"). "Such sick people saw and heard badly," Dr. Olbrycht's testimony continued, "perception, thinking, and all reactions were slowed down . . . hence, also, lethargy in carrying out instructions, wrongly interpreted as evidence of passive resistance." What Dr. Olbrycht meant was that the starving "Moslems" couldn't carry out or even understand the orders barked at them by their guardians, and so they were frequently punished for insubordination and beaten to death.

To work as a self-contained universe, Auschwitz required and provided work of every sort. The camp had its own bakery, tannery, and tin smithy. Most of the work, however, was simply brute labor, devoted to the constant expansion of the camp for the constant acquisition of new prisoners. The building went on unremittingly until the very end; a new set of barracks, known as "Mexico," was still under construction when the SS dynamited the camp and departed. "We work beneath the earth and above it," Borowski wrote, "under a roof and in the rain, with the spade, the pickaxes and the crowbar. We carry huge sacks of cement, lay bricks, put down rails, spread gravel, trample the earth. . . . We are laying the foundation for some new, monstrous civilization. . . ."

Under the new order such labor could be sold. Many prominent German corporations- among them Krupp, Siemens, and Bayer-were interested in what might be negotiated. Auschwitz began developing a network of outlying subcamps, thirty-four in all. The prisoners worked at a cement plant in Golesow, a coal mine in Wesola, a steel factory in Gliwice, a shoe factory in Cheimek. In the subcamp called Tschechowitz I, the prisoners' main occupation was to remove the fuses from bombs that had failed to explode during Allied air raids.

The biggest of these Auschwitz subcamps was the I. G. Farben plant, started at Dwory with headquarters established later in Monowitz. The plant was known by its principal product: Buna, or synthetic rubber. Its other main installation was a hydrogenation plant designed to convert coal into oil at a rate of nearly 80,000 tons a month. The Farben directors were so impressed with the possibilities of their Auschwitz factories-particularly when they contemplated the victorious end of the war and the whole East European market lying open before them-that they insisted on turning aside all government grants and financing the Auschwitz plants themselves. They committed \$250 million to the project, which made the Auschwitz factories as largest in the Farben empire. The SS agreed to provide all necessary labor, for a modest fee. It charged Farben four marks (\$1) a day for each skilled worker, three marks for each unskilled one. Later in the war, the SS agreed to provide-child laborers for one and a half marks.

Conditions at Monowitz were much like those at Auschwitz-the dawn roll calls the starvation rations, and the labor gangs sent out for twelve hours at a time, forced to work at the double, beaten by guards, and harried by giant dog. The prisoners who died of overwork- dozens of them every day- had to be hauled back to camp at nightfall w that they could be propped up and counted at the next morning's roll call. About 25,000 people, ultimately, were killed in the

construction of the I. G. Farben plant. Although one section of the plant started producing synthetic gasoline early in 1944, it was knocked out by a U.S. air raid that summer. One of the enduring ironies of Auschwitz is that the rubber plant at Monowitz, built at such cost and with such suffering, never made one ounce of synthetic rubber.

Of the three or four marks paid daily to the SS for a prisoner's labor, the prisoner, of course, never received a pfennig. The stripped and plundered Auschwitz prisoners were not allowed to own anything. And, inevitably, the desire to possess things became a passion exceeded only by the desire to eat and the desire to be safe. They saw a vast black market known as "Canada," a row of thirty barracks where the SS stored the plunder confiscated from prisoners arriving on the ramp. "Canada" had everything: not just the basic supplies of food and clothing but diamonds, tapestries, silk underwear, the finest cognac. In the last days of Auschwitz, in January of 1945, the SS men who were evacuating the camp set "Canada" afire and burned all but six of the barracks, but even in that charred ruin the Russians found an almost incredible quantity of things that had once belonged to the dead: 836,255 women's outfits, 38,000 pairs of men's shoes, 13,964 carpets. Since the SS men were corrupt, and the kapos were corrupt, and the prisoners who had survived would do almost anything to go on surviving, everything was for sale-to be traded in the currency of food or clothes or services of all kinds. Even the gold bars melted down from the teeth of the victims of the crematoria, supposedly destined for the national bank in Berlin, often came on the black market. But the chief black-market areas were the latrines and the garbage dump, where prisoners bargained over pieces of stale bread.

Since the official rations, reduced by thievery, condemned every prisoner to eventual death by starvation, survival depended on a prisoner's ability to "organize" extra supplies for himself and to find himself a sanctuary in the hospital or the kitchens or in some other relatively

protected quarter. 'NO Prisoner who came to Auschwitz before the summer of 1944 survived unless he held a special job,' Dr. Lingens testified.

Out of this struggle for survival, therefore, a prison hierarchy emerged. a hierarchy in which men and women who lived on the brink of death managed to postpone their fate by edging past other prisoners. The hierarchy expressed itself in symbols, all designed to contradict the symbolism of the SS. Just as the SS degraded the prisoners by ordering them to wear shapeless rags, the most resilient and imaginative prisoners fought back by commissioning captive tailors to dress them in the most beautifully fitted prison costumes. Among the women, similarly, prestige attended anyone whose shaven skull began to grow hair again. or who appeared at work in a handsome skirt. All these self-assertions were forbidden, of course, and therefore anyone who appeared in full-grown hair or attractive clothing was assumed to be under someone's protection, a member of the hierarchy.

Fania Fenelon, a French girl who played in the women's orchestra at Birkenau, has described an extraordinary night on which the prostitutes, who dominated the prisoner hierarchy in the women's camp, gave a big party for themselves. They hired the whole orchestra to play dance music in exchange for leftover sausages and sauerkraut. Some of the women, Mlle. Fenelon recalled, had arrayed themselves in their Berlin street finery, black lace underwear and transparent blouses, while others had dressed up as men, sporting silk pajamas. They danced and drank and pawed at each other. "Everywhere women were hugging, kissing, and caressing," she wrote, "lying flat out on tables sliding to the floor. .."

The hierarchy extended from such privileged prisoners upward through the bellicose block seniors and barracks overseers and on the mighty kapos, who had once been, most of them,

common criminals. "These kapos . . . were the aristocrats of the camps" recalled one Auschwitz prisoner, Rudolf Vrba "They had their own rooms in each barracks and there they entertained their friends to splendid meals. They cooked steak and chips on their stoves while the smell wafted through thin partitions to starving prisoners and they washed it down occasionally with slivovitz stolen from victims of the gas chambers."

The kapos were never safe, however, from the ferocity of the SS. If one of them faltered, he could be instantly reduced to the rank of common prisoner, and he knew very well what revenge awaited him in the barracks at night ("We . . . dragged him onto the cement floor under the stove," Borowski wrote of one such retribution, "where the entire block, grunting and growling, trampled him to death.") In the eyes of the Nazis, the kapos, who strutted about in their clubs, remained no more than criminals, useful in performing disciplinary chores in whatever way best suited the camp's reigning aristocracy: the SS.

The SS were the self-proclaimed elite not only of Auschwitz but of Nazi Germany and thus of all Europe. Founded in 1925 as a kind of bodyguard for Hitler, the SS had only 280 members when Himmler took it over in 1929. He emphasized its supposedly privileged status, its preference for blond and blue-eyed recruits, its exotic black uniforms. "I swear to you, Adolf Hitler, loyalty and valor," each of the SS men vowed. "I pledge to you . . . obedience unto death, so help me God." By the time the war began, Himmler had created a private army of 250,000 men, including more than a few of the petty criminals he professed to despise. The SS forces at Auschwitz were never large-about 3,000 men to oversee a prison camp of nearly 150,000-but their immaculate uniforms, their guns and whips, and their guard dog gave them an aura of invincibility.

To the SS men themselves, duty at Auschwitz was chiefly an unpleasant assignment that kept them from far more unpleasant combat on the Russian front. In the East, one could get killed; at Auschwitz, one got extra rations—one-fifth of a liter of vodka, five cigarettes, 100 grams of sausage—for taking part in one of the gassings known as "special actions." At more elevated levels of the SS hierarchy, the rewards were even more generous. Dr. Johann Paul Kremer, a professor of anatomy at the University of Münster, kept a diary of his service in Poland in the fall of 1942, devoting only a few sentences to his role in the "special actions," but savoring the good life at Auschwitz, particularly the food served at the Waffen SS Club. Thus: "Sept. 6, 1942: Today an excellent Sunday dinner: tomato soup, one half of chicken with potatoes and red cabbage, and magnificent vanilla ice cream Sept. 17: Have ordered a casual coat from Berlin Sept. 20- This Sunday afternoon I listened from 3 P.M. till 6 P.M. to a concert of the prisoners' band in glorious sunshine; the bandmaster was a conductor of the state opera from Warsaw. Eighty musicians. Roast pork for dinner. . . ." The isolation of the SS men, who lived above and beyond all the rules of survival that governed the starving prisoners, enabled them to act on whim, to decide questions of life and death on impulse. Thus the strange salvation of Sim Kessel, a French boxer, who had been consigned to the gas chambers. "Now we were ordered to take off our clothes and lay them neatly folded along the wall," Kessel later recalled. "We did so. There we skeletons stood barefoot in the snow." A detachment of SS men roared up on motorcycles, simply to oversee the shipment of these walking corpses to the gas chambers. The naked prisoners stood in the snow and waited. Then Kessel noticed that one of the SS men, a noncom, had a broken nose, and ridges of scars tissue over the eyes, and all the other marks of the ring. "I hesitated for a second and then thought, Oh, what the hell! Naked and shivering, I walked up to him [and] simply blurted out in German: 'Boxer?' 'Boxer? Ja.1" "He didn't wait for

me to explain. He understood. I too had a broken nose." The SS man asked Kessel where he had fought, and Kessel named a series of second-rate plains: Pacra, Central, Delbor, Japy. The SS man gave a quick smile of recognition, then ordered Kessel to climb aboard his motorcycle so that he could drive him to the sanctuary of the hospital. "It must have been a weird and unforgettable sight," Kessel observed, "the pathetic nude prisoner riding behind an SS on the back seat of a motorcycle, running right through the center of Auschwitz... I never saw him again." At the top of the hierarchy was commandant Hoess, who lived with his wife, Hedwig, and their five children in a tree-shaded stucco house known as Villa Hoess. It stood just outside the southern corner of the camp, separated from the neighboring barracks by a concrete wall high enough so that nothing inside the camp could actually be seen by Hoess's family. Near the wall, Frau Hoess grew rose hedges, and begonias in blue flower boxes. "My wife's garden was a paradise of flowers," the commandant recalled. "No former prisoner can ever say that he was in any way or at any time badly treated in our house. My wife's greatest pleasure would have been to give a present to every prisoner who was in any way connected with our household. The children were perpetually begging me for cigarettes for the prisoners . . . The children always kept animals in the garden, creatures the prisoners were forever bringing them. Tortoises, martens, cats, lizards . . . Their greatest joy was when Daddy bathed with them (in the swimming pool. He had, however, so little time for all these childish pleasures."

The image of the Villa Hoess as a plantation tended by devoted prisoners is about as accurate as Hoess's image of himself as a sternly incorruptible soldier. Stanislaw Dubiel, who somehow managed to remain a gardener to the rulers of Auschwitz from 1940 to 45, testified that the Hoesses limited themselves neither to their rations nor to their income but rather extorted everything they wanted from the SS hierarchy. "I took from the [prisoners' food] magazine for

the Hoess household: sugar, flour, margarine, various baking powders, condiments for soup, macaroni, oat-flakes, cocoa, cinnamon, cream of wheat, peas and other foodstuffs. Frau Hoess never had enough of themFrau Hoess would very often also demand creamThe equipment and furnishings of the Hoess home were of similar origin. Everything was made by prisoners from camp materials. . . . Hoess settled down in such a well appointed and magnificent home that his wife remarked, 'Hier will ich leben und sterben.' " "I want to live here till I die." (In 1964, Frau Hoess testified briefly at the Frankfurt trial. She was living in quiet retirement, in Ludvigsburg, West Germany.) Hoess's self-portrait as a devoted paterfamilias is also exaggerated. He had an affair with an Italian prisoner named Eleonore Hodys, who worked for several months in the Villa Hoess. He then tried to get rid of her by assigning her to the penal company, in which death within a few weeks from overwork, and mistreatment was taken for granted. Then she was mysteriously transferred to the stifling dungeons of Block 11. There Hoess secretly visited her. There she became pregnant. When Hoess heard of her pregnancy, he ordered her gassed. "Into the chimney with her," he commanded, according to a witness at the Frankfurt trial. But the chief of Block 11, Max Grabner, who was already being investigated for having an affair with a prisoner, became interested in Eleonore Hodys and informed on Hoess to the same judge who was pursuing Grabner's own case The judge apparently rescued Eleonore Hodys from Auschwitz, and sent her to Munich, but the SS killed her in the last days of the war.

Hoess's children, to whom the servile prisoners brought presents, understood their father and the world he ruled. A French prisoner named Charlotte Delbo caught a glimpse of that understanding and recorded a matchless image of the commandant's sons at play. She saw two boys, aged about eleven and seven, both blond and blue-eyed. The older one had a sword in his belt, and he screwed an imaginary monocle into his eye as he ordered the younger one, who

represented all the prisoners in the camp, to march faster and faster. "Soon the prisoners to whom these orders are addressed can no longer follow. They stumble on the ground, lose their footing. Their commandant is pale with rage. With his switch, he strikes, strikes, strikes. He screams in rage: 'Schnell! Schneller!'... The little boy staggers, spins around, and falls flat on the grass. The commandant looks at the prisoner whom he has knocked to the ground with contempt, saliva on his lips. And his fury subsides. He feels only disgust. He kicks him—a fake kick, he is barefoot and he's just playing. But the little boy knows the game. The kick turns him over like a limp bag. He lies there, mouth open, eyes glazed over. Then the big boy, with a sign of the stick to the invisible prisoners that surround him, commands: 'Zum Krematorium' and moves on. Stiff, satisfied, and disgusted."

In theory, there were no children the of fifteen in Auschwitz. All of them were supposed to be singled out on the railroad ramp, judged unfit for hard labor, and sent directly to the gas chambers. Some survived that process, for various reasons but eventually the proms was almost certain to catch them. The first Auschwitz prisoner to testify at Frankfurt, Dr. Otto Wolken, a general practitioner in Vienna, told of having encountered a boy in the dispensary and of having asked him, "Well boy, how are you? Are you afraid?" The boy answered, "I am not afraid. Everything here is so terrible it can only be better up there." Then Wolken told of having heard an SS man talking to a boy of about ten through a barbed-wire barrier. The SS man said, "Well, my boy, you know a lot for your age." The boy answered, "I know that I know a lot, and I also know that I won't learn any more. Then Wolken told of a group of ninety children who arrived in Auschwitz and were placed in quarantine for several days and then were loaded onto trucks to go to the gas chambers.

"There was one boy, a little older than the rest," Wolken testified, "who called out to

them when they resisted: 'Climb into the car, don't scream. You saw how your parents and grandparents were gassed. We'll see them again up there.' And then he turned to the SS men and shouted: 'But don't think you'll get away with it. You'll die the way you let us die.' He was a brave boy. In this moment he said what he had to say."

The gas chamber was, in a sense, the easiest fate. Life ended quickly there, whereas the various punishments devised by the SS achieved the same end more slowly and more painfully. Aside from the routine starvation and mistreatment, the most standard of these punishments was public flogging, usually a minimum of twenty-five blows on the bared buttocks with a whip or a wooden club. The victim was sometimes forced to count each blow aloud, and if he failed to keep count, the flogging started again from the beginning. When the ordeal ended, the prisoner was often unconscious, and the bruises on his thighs were frequently so severe that he never recovered.

Even flogging might be considered preferable to the torments inflicted in Block 11. The Gestapo had endless questions to ask, about the camp underground, about escape attempts, about links to the Resistance movement, and it accepted no pleas of ignorance. Deputy Chief Friedrich Wilhelm Boger's favorite method involved the so-called Boger swing, a device of his own invention. "Mytalking machine will make you talk," he used to tell the prisoners. The swing consisted of a steel bar to which the prisoner was tied by his wrists and ankles. As Boger lunged at him with his club, usually aiming for the genitals, the prisoner swung head over heels, round and round. One prisoner named Breiden, who came to testify at the Frankfurt trial, burst into tears on the witness stand when he saw a replica of the machine to which he had once been bound. 'Murderer!' he shouted at Boger. "Terrible cries could be heard," said another witness, Maryla Rosenthal, who had to work in an adjoining room. "After in hour or more the victims

would be carried out on a stretcher. They no longer looked human. I could not recognize them."

One reasonably typical victim was a prisoner from Munich named Gustl Berger. He and another prisoner named Rohmann were accused of having acquired some alcohol from the SS canteen. Rohmann was confined to one of the Stehzelle, or "standing cells." These were vertical tubes, about three feet by three feet & crow, in which the prisoner could neither sit nor lie. Nor was he fed. "The door never opened," said a Polish prisoner named Josef Kral, who actually survived the standing cells. "One could shout and curse Hitler and everybody else. Nobody would come- Death from hunger is not an easy death. . . . The prisoners screamed, begged, pleaded, licked the walls..."

Rohmann lasted nineteen days, according to the testimony of a Munich businessman named Paul Leo Scheidel, and then he "starved to death, finis, gone." But from Berger, the Gestapo wanted to know how the alcohol had been obtained, and so he was tied to the Boger swing. After forty-five minutes, according to Scheidel's testimony, "the skin on his hands was gone, his buttocks were ripped open, his face was smeared with blood." After his interrogation, Berger was led out into the yard outside Block 11, where the Nazis had built a wall of black cork as the background for thousands of summary executions. In front of the wall lay a bed of sand to soak up the blood that gushed from the victims. "You murderers. You criminals!" Berger shouted. Then Boger shot him.

It might seem that nothing could be worse than Block 11, but Block 10 may have been worse. This was where the SS doctors assembled the prisoners who had been selected for various medical experiments. There seems to have been very little purpose or coherence to these experiments. Anyone in Germany who had some queasy-scientific proposal that might benefit

the state could send his suggestion to Himmler's headquarters in Berlin, and in due time authorizations of one sort or another would be issued. Some of these proposals were relatively innocuous, and so we find the pharmaceutical firm of Bayer asking for "a number of women in connection with our intended experiments with a new sleeping drug."

Other schemes were both lethal and utterly pointless like the request from a Professor Hirt of the University of Strasbourg that the heads of 150 'Jewish-Bolshevist commissars, who embody a repulsive but characteristic subhumanity," be cut off and sent to Strasbourg for study. Or like Dr. Josef Mengele's obsessive efforts to explore the mysteries of twins. Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian prisoner who served as Mengele's pathologist, reported that "several hundred sets of twins" turned up in Auschwitz. Mengele, who seems to have thought that he was seeking methods to increase the German birthrate, ordered each pair carefully examined and then killed. Since twins do not ordinarily die simultaneously, Mengele considered himself blessed with a rare research opportunity, and he rushed the results of all the autopsies to the Institute of Biological, Racial, and Evolutionary Research in Berlin.

The main medical experiments in Auschwitz dealt with sterilization. Officially, the plan was to refine the program of genocide by sterilizing the members of "inferior races" and then putting them to work, rather than simply killing them. As early as March 28, 1941, before the Final Solution was decreed, an SS official named Viktor Brack was urging Himmler to have all able-bodied Jews sterilized by X-rays. Brack's theory was that the unwitting victims should be made to line up at a counter. "There," he wrote, "they would be asked questions or handed a form to fill in, keeping them at the counter for two or three minutes. The clerk behind the counter would . . . start an X-ray apparatus with two tubes to irradiate the persons at the counter." At

Auschwitz, as Hoess said, everything was possible. Dr. Horst Schumann of Berlin exposed a batch of several hundred Dutch and Greek Jews to fifteen minutes of radiation of the genital area at a rate of thirty prisoners a day. Many victims suffered severe burns. After three months, Dr. Schumann removed parts of the women's sexual organs to be sent to Berlin for analysis. The men were castrated. Records of these experiments were partially destroyed, but one surviving report from one day in the surgical ward, December 16, 1943, records ninety castrations.

Himmler had meanwhile met Professor Carl Clauberg of the University of Königsberg, who ran a clinic for the treatment of sterile women. Himmler asked Dr. Clauberg whether he could turn his knowledge to the opposite side of the problem and devise a technique of mass sterilization. Clauberg was delighted with the prospect of official support for his research and unlimited numbers of patients to work on. When he arrived at Auschwitz in the spring of 1943, more than 200 women were installed in Block 10 and placed at his disposal. Clauberg injected various chemicals into their fallopian tubes. His formulas were kept secret, but the main ingredient was apparently a formalin solution. This stopped the women's menstruation. Clauberg pronounced his system a great success. He boasted to Himmler that his method would enable one skilled physician with ten assistants to sterilize several hundred women a day. After the completion of one of Clauberg's experiments, the subjects were generally sent to the gas chambers.

The worst crime that a prisoner could commit at Auschwitz, and therefore the crime most sternly punished, was to attempt an escape. There were more than 600 cases. Once the roll call disclosed that someone was missing, the sirens began wailing, and everything stopped. The prisoners had to stand at attention for hours while detachments of SS men set forth with their

dogs to hunt for the fugitive. For as long as three days, the hunt would continue through all the fields and marshes that surrounded Auschwitz. About two thirds of the time, the pursuers soon found their prey. After torturing him to make him confess who had helped him escape, the SS made him parade around the camp with a sign that said.- "Hurrah! I'm back!" Then they gathered all the other prisoners to watch W punishment, and they hanged him.

There was a remarkable girl in Birkenau named Mala Zimetbaum, aged twenty-four, tattooed with the number 19880. She was Polish by birth, but her family migrated to Belgium, to Antwerp, and there, after her father went blind, she dropped out of school to help support him and the four other children. When the Germans overran Belgium, she joined the Resistance; she was soon arrested and shipped to Auschwitz. There she became a Läuferin, or "runner," someone who carried messages and ran errands all over the camp. That enabled her to do favors and to tip off the prisoners whenever a selection was planned. Everybody loved her for her courage and independence for a spirit that even the SS men respected.

Mala fell in love with a young Pole named Edek Galinski, also a member of the Resistance, and Edek came up with a scheme to escape from Auschwitz. He found a way to steal an SS uniform, but he needed an SS pass, which only Mala making bar rounds of the camp, could find and acquire. Mala was perfectly willing to get him the pass but pleaded with him to take her along. He agreed.

On June 24, 1944 Edek Galinski marched out of Auschwitz in the uniform of an SS man. At the gate, he displayed documents declaring that he was authorized to take with him the female prisoner who was in his custody. Having performed this impossible feat, Mala and Edek seem to have lost all sense of who and where they were. Accounts of their wanderings differ, but they appear to have stopped in the nearby town of Oswiecim, which still harbored a few shops

and cafés and an illusory sense of tranquility, and there found themselves a room and made love. They apparently thought that their SS papers made them invisible, or immune to the laws of Auschwitz. For several weeks, they arrived in this absurd defiance, then an SS man accosted them in a café, asked to see their papers and refused to adopt the faked papers that they offered him.

So the prisoners were assembled on August 22 to watch the bruised and bloodied Mala go to the gallows. She refused to carry the sign rejoicing in her recapture. But the commander of the Birkenau women's camp, Marie Mandel, looked triumphant as she began reading out the death sentence. While she read, Mala suddenly produced a razor blade and slashed her own wrist. An SS man named Ritters grabbed her arm and tried to stop her. Mala managed to strike one last blow in her defense she smashed the SS man in the face with her bloody fist.

"Murderers! Mala cried out 'You will soon pay for our suffering! Don't be afraid. Girls! Their end is near. I am certain of that. I know. I was free!' A half-dozen SS men threw themselves on Mala, clubbed her to the ground, kicked her prostrate body, and flung her into a waiting truck, which took her to the crematorium.

On the other side of the camp, a similar Ceremony awaited Fdek Galinski. He was bloodied almost beyond recognition by the Gestapo men in Block 11, but in the middle of the reading of the death sentence, he leaped onto a bench, thrust his head into the waiting room, and then kicked over the bench. His last words were an unfinished cry of defiance "Long live the Po-

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It may seem absurd to report that life in hell could gradually improve, but there is much testimony to confirm that conditions in Auschwitz did get somewhat better during 1943 and early 1944. "At the beginning, beating and killing were the rule, but later this became only sporadic," Borowski wrote as he listed the new comforts. "At first you had to sleep on the floor lying on your side because of the lack of space, and could turn over only on command; later you slept in bunks, or wherever you wished, sometimes even in bed. Originally, you had to stand at roll call for as long as two days at a time, later only until the second gang, until nine o'clock. In the early years packages were forbidden, later you could receive 500 grams, and finally as much as you wanted."

One reason for the change may be that Rudolf Hoess won a promotion in November of 1943 and was summoned back to Berlin to become inspector of concentration camps. SS Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Liebehenschel a rather small, pudgy man with bulging eyes stepped into his place as commandant of Auschwitz and initiated a series of modest changes and reforms. Another reason for the less-stringent discipline may be that a German victory, on which the Final Solution was predicated, no longer seemed so certain. The retreat from Russia following the surrender of Stalingrad on January 31, 1943 was irreversible. At the other end of Hitler's empire the Americans and the British had invaded Morocco in November of 1942 and conquered all of North Africa by the following May, then invaded Sicily in July. Such events forced even the most dedicated of SS officers to wonder about their own future. The changing fortunes of war did not by any means bring a modification of the Final Solution, however. On the contrary, the difficulties inspired the SS officers in command of the annihilation to "w to finish their assignment before they could be prevented from carrying it out. What this meant at Auschwitz was that life got better for the camp inmates because about three quarters of the inmates were

gentiles, and after June of 1943, the Nazis stopped gassing gentiles. They could still be shot of course, for any number of offences from attempting escape to stealing a piece of bread. But the SS now concentrated its efforts on the destruction of the Jews.

For this, Auschwitz was reorganized again. In May of 1944, Hoess resumed command of the camp he had created, but he exercised only a general supervision. Direct command over Auschwitz was delegated to Richard Baer, and over Birkenau to Josef Kramer, two killers worthy of the task ahead. The next step was to renovate the giant crematoria, to repair all cracks in the brickwork, to reinforce the chimneys with steel bands, to repaint the "changing rooms," to prepare all the machinery for maximum use. The railroad line was extended into Birkenau, so that prisoners could be unloaded within 200 yards of the crematoria rather than be trucked over from the main camp at Auschwitz. The culmination of the Holocaust the annihilation of the Jews of Hungary, was about to begin. Until the last year of the war, Hungary provided a kind of haven for the Jews of Eastern Europe. The septuagenarian Mikls Horthy, who had served since 1920 as admiral of Hungary's nonexistent Navy and as regent for its nonexistent monarchy, joined the war on Hitler's side mainly in order to expand Hungary's sovereignty over territories to its east. In contrast to Poland during the roundups, Hungary offered some hope of sanctuary to any fugitive who could slip across its borders, and the Jewish population consequently increased from about 500,000 at the start of the war to more than 800,000 (there were also about 150,000 converted Jews, whose status as Christians was recognized by the Catholic Church and disputed by the Nazis.) They lived in a state of constant fear, but they lived.

By March of 1944, when the Red Army was only a few days' march from the Hungarian border, the Hungarians began talking of surrender. The Nazis sent troops into Budapest. By

March 19, Adolf Eichmann had already established his headquarters at the Majestic Hotel. He invited the Jewish leaders of Budapest to establish a Judenrat, or "Jewish council" that ugly institution by which the Germans assigned the Jews to organize themselves for the execution of orders from Berlin, assigned them to decide for themselves who should be the first to be deported and who should be spared until the next order came. "Do you know what I am?" Eichmann asked at his first meeting with the Jewish Council of Hungary on March 31, "I am a bloodhound."

On May 15, the deportations to Auschwitz began. It was an operation in which Eichmann took considerable pride. In the middle of a major military campaign-in the middle, in fact, of a catastrophic retreat from the battlefields of the East-Eichmann managed to bargain and negotiate for enough trains to ship half a million Hungarian Jews to their death. "It was ten o'clock one morning that the first of the trains were unloaded," recalled Kitty Hart, a teenage Polish girl who worked among the mountains of confiscated goods in "Canada." "From the distance we could see masses of people standing, waiting. . . . Their column stretched as far as the eye could see. It seemed as though they were disposing of the whole of Europe."

Very few selections were made now. The SS men and their dogs herded the prisoners along a cinder path, surrounded by neatly mowed lawns, toward a concrete stairway. A down steps led downward to the brightly lit "changing room." Each of these rooms in the four new crematoria was some 300 square yards in size and could accommodate as many as 1,000 people at a time. There were signs in German, French, Greek, and Hungarian, all saying, "Baths and Disinfecting Room." Other signs warned of diseases: "Cleanliness brings freedom," and "One louse can kill you." There were wooden benches along the walls, and above these benches were

pegs and coat hangers. Move sips told the prisoners to hang up their clothes, and to tie their shoes together by the laces. The pep were numbered, and the signs told the prisoners to remember their numbers so that they could retrieve their clothes after the baths. Once the prisoners had undressed, they were herded into another large room, also brightly lit. When they were " inside, the doors were bolted shut, and the lights were switched off. Some of the prisoners embraced each other as they waited. Some simply waited, numb.

The gas had a smell of something burning. "Twenty minutes later, the electric ventilators were set going in order to activate the gas," Dr. Nyiszli, Mengele's pathologist and a medical witness to these scenes recalled in the memoir he wrote in 1946. "The doors opened... The bodies were not lying here and there throughout the room but piled in a mass to the ceiling. The reason for this was that the gas first inundated the lower layers of air and row but slowly toward the ceiling. This forced the victims to trample one another in a frantic effort to escape the gas... I noticed that the bodies of the women, the children, and the aged were at the bottom of the pile; at the top, the strongest Their bodies, which were covered with scratches and bruises from the struggle which had set them against each other, were often interlaced. Blood oozed from their noses and mouths; their faces, bloated and blue, were so deformed as to be almost unrecognizable.... The Sonderkommando squad, outfitted with large rubber boots, lined up around the hill of bodies and flooded it with powerful jets of water. This was necessary because the final act of those who die by drowning or by gas is an involuntary defecation. Each body was befouled and had to be washed. Once the 'bathing' of the dead was finished ... they knotted thongs around the wrists . . . and with these thongs they dragged the slippery bodies to the elevators in the next room."

Even the most elaborate plans proved insufficient for the liquidation of the Hungarians that summer. Though the crematoria worked night and day, there were still too many bodies to be destroyed (the highest number actually gassed within twenty-four hours, Hoess estimated, was 9,000). The Nazis had to resort once again to the more primitive means that they had previously abandoned. In the fields of wild flowers that were now blooming behind the crematoria, Hoess ordered nine gigantic pits dug. There he had thousand more bodies dumped in and set afire. It is not easy to burn bodies particularly emaciated bodies. The first attempts, long before the crematoria were built, had used up a lot of scarce coke. The Nazis had therefore conducted a series of experiments to find out how to save fuel. They soon found that if a fit man was burned along with a thin one, the fat man's fat would serve as fuel to consume the thin one. In due time, they discovered a still more efficient combination: a fat man and a thin woman (or vice versa) and a child. By the time of the slaughter of the Jews of Hungary, they had reached even higher levels of efficiency. The pits to be filled with corpses, up to 2,000 at a time, had been dug with slanted bottoms so that the fat could flow into containers and be scooped up and poured back over the burning bodies.

"The corpus in the pit looked as if they had been chained together," according to Filip Muller, a Czech Jew who worked in the Sondercommando. "Tongues of a thousand tiny blue-red flames were licking at them. . . . Blisters which had formed on their skin burst one by one. Almost every corpse was covered with black scorch marks and glistened as if it had been greased. The searing heat had burst open their bellies: There was the violent hissing and sputtering of frying in great heat . . . Fanned by the wind, the flames, dark red before, now took

on a fiery white hue. . . . The process of incineration took five to six hours. What was left barely filled a third of the pit. The shiny whitish-gray surface was strewn with countless skulls. . . ."

While these fires were burning in the summer of 1944-fires that could be seen from as far as thirty miles away-the advancing Allied armies finally came within bombing range of the railroad lines from Budapest to Auschwitz and, for that matter, within range of Auschwitz itself. Specifically, the U.S. Eighth Air Force, based in Britain, and the Fifteenth Air Force, based in southern Italy, were already beginning to bomb military targets in Poland. On April 4, 1944, U.S. reconnaissance planes flying over Auschwitz took some remarkably clear photographs (hidden in the CIA archives until 1979) that show all the essential evidence- the gas chambers and crematoria, the prisoners standing in line-yet even the experts trained to interpret such photographic evidence apparently saw nothing but a large prison camp.

What was happening at Auschwitz could not be imagined and therefore could not be believed, not even when photographed; could not be believed even when reported in detail by escaping prisoners, could not be believed, and therefore could not be stopped. There certainly was nothing secret about the existence of Hitler's concentration camps. The Nazis almost boasted of them. The Final Solution, however, was officially a state secret, and the SS went to considerable effort to keep it a secret. Even though it was widely known that deportation to the East meant great hardship and often death, anyone who spoke of the Auschwitz crematoria faced severe punishment.

The prisoners tried, at great risk and sacrifice, to tell the world. As early as November of 1940, a brave Polish officer named Witold Pilecki, who voluntarily got himself sent to Auschwitz in order to organize a resistance movement there, smuggled out a message describing

the appalling conditions at the camp. Appalling conditions are not the same as systematic extermination, however. By the summer of 1942, the Allied capitals had received reports of mass slaughters, from the camps themselves, from neutral observers, even from anti-Nazi Germans. In the spring of 1944, finally, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler escaped from Auschwitz, reached Czechoslovakia, and produced a sixty-page report on the gassing and burning at Birkenau, a report that managed to get to the White House, the Vatican, the Red Cross, and the Jewish community leaders in Budapest. Allied leaders, preoccupied with military strategy, remained skeptical. There was a certain amount of anti-Semitism in Washington, and in the United States at large (not to mention Britain and Russia), and those who heard the recurrent reports from Poland tended to regard them as propaganda, wildly exaggerated. Even those who were inclined to intervene on behalf of the Jews feared being accused of diverting resources from the overall war effort.

In January of 1944, President Roosevelt did establish a War Refugee Board (WRE), which was supposed to "take all measures within its power to rescue the victims of enemy oppression," but it had very little power to take any such measures. Proposals for military action against the Hungarian deportations attracted little attention or support. A War Department statement of policy said: "it is not contemplated that units or individuals of the armed forces will be employed for the purpose of rescuing victims of enemy oppression unless such rescues are the direct result of military operations."

In late June, when the killing of the Hungarian's had been going on for more than a month, the U.S. legation in Bern reported that both the Jewish deportations and some considerable German troop movements followed five specific railroad lines. "It is urged by all

sources of this information . . ." the Bern cable said, "that vital sections of these lines, especially bridges along one, be bombed as the only possible means of slowing down or stopping future deportations." John W. Pehle, executive director of the War Refugee Board, sent a copy of this message to John J. McCloy at the War Department. On July 4, after most Hungarian deportations had already ended in the Auschwitz gas chambers, McCloy sent Pehle a message saying that the War Department was opposed to any raid on the railroad lines to Auschwitz. "it could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations and would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not amount to a practical project." As it happened, U.S. bombers actually did raid Auschwitz, in August and again in September, aiming at the synthetic oil Plant affiliated with the camp. They accidentally dropped a few bombs on Auschwitz itself, and killed fifteen German soldiers.

Though the Allies refused to strike at the gas chambers of Auschwitz, this was one of the rare occasions when strong-words partially made up for the lack of action. The first protest came from the papal nuncio to Budapest, Angelo Rotta, who warned the Hungarian government on the day that the first train left for Auschwitz: "The whole world knows what the deportations mean in practice." The Hungarian bishops complained too, partly because Eichmann's forces were making no distinctions between Orthodox Jews and those who had converted to Christianity. Finally, Monsignor Rotta delivered a gentle protest from Pope Pius XII. The next day, June 25, the aged Admiral Horthy issued instructions that the deportations were to end. Horthy's authority, particularly over the Germans, was limited. Eichmann's roundups continued. U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull delivered a note via the Swiss legation on June 26 threatening reprisals and President Roosevelt publicly warned that "Hungary's fate will not be like any other

civilization . . . unless deportations are stopped." Sweden sent Raoul Wallenberg as a special envoy to Budapest, authorized to issue thousands of Swedish visas to the threatened Jews, and the Swiss and Portuguese joined in establishing shelters where Jews could find haven.

Hungary itself stood at the edge of collapse. The Red Army was at its frontiers, and the various authorities in Budapest issued contradictory orders. Premier Dome Sztjaj assured the papal nuncio on July 8 that all transports to Auschwitz had stopped. Eichmann still commanded a unit of 150 men, and he sent them to round up another 1,4W Jews on July 14 and pack them aboard a train. An order from Horthy stopped the train before it left Hungary, but two more of Eichmann's trains carried more than 2,000 Jews to Auschwitz on July 19 and 24. They were the last. By now, the Nazi regime itself was crumbling. When a Polish resistance group seized control of the Majdanek death camp on July 24 and turned it over to the advancing Russians, Allied war correspondents got their first look at gas chambers, crematoria, and piles of human bones. Still Hitler shouted that all Germans would fight on to the death.

At Auschwitz the halting of the trains from Budapest did not halt the gassings, not yet. The apparatus of extermination appeared to be running on its own momentum, and the camp was crowded with prisoners ready to be W into the machinery. First came the destruction of the so-called Family Camp, originally at Theresienstadt, where distinguished prisoners who couldn't simply be made to disappear had been interned. When the now orders decreed the extermination of the Family Camp, the victims couldn't believe it. Even inside the changing room, they shouted their disbelief- "We want to live! We want to work!" The SS men, with their truncheons and their police dogs herded them toward the gas chambers There, according to Filip M?ller, who watched as a member of the Sonderkommando, one group sang first the Czechoslovak national

anthem and then the Hebrew song "Hatikvah." Four thousand people from the Family Camp were killed on March 9, the last 4,000 on July 12.

Hoess turned over his command to Richard Baer on July 29 and returned to Berlin, but the gassing went on. Next came the turn of the gypsies. Himmler had originally rounded them up and sent them to Auschwitz not for extermination but for scientific examination. He had been fascinated for years by the imagery of prehistoric Germany, its Nordic gods and runic inscriptions, its legends of unconquerable Goths and Vandals, and he somehow imagined that the mysterious gypsies were the descendants of these lost tribes.

Many of them were shot and beaten in the course of the roundups, but when they finally reached Auschwitz, they were isolated and observed and encouraged to carry on their folk traditions. The men were not required to work. An orchestra was formed, and everybody danced. The women tended the children, and the children clambered all over each other. They too felt themselves immune. Nobody was immune. As that last summer wore on, Himmler lost interest in the gypsies and decreed their annihilation. On the night of August 2, all of them, some 4,000, went to the gas chambers.

As the Nazi defeat became inevitable, Auschwitz swarmed with rumors that the SS would end by killing everyone in the camp. This prospect seemed particularly ominous to one group of prisoners, the Sonderkommando. Its whole function, its whole existence depended on the crematoria, and each new squad began by taking part in an essential ritual, the killing of its predecessors. For performing their degrading work in the gas chambers, the men of the Sonderkommando were remarkably well treated. They lived in special quarters in the crematoria buildings, and all the plunder of "Canada" was theirs. "The table awaiting us," one of the few

survivors later wrote of his arrival at the Sonderkommando barracks, "was covered with a heavy &ilk brocade tablecloth; fine initialed porcelain dishes; and place settings of silver. . . . all sorts of preserves, bacon, jellies, several kinds of salami, cakes and chocolate." They drank fine cognac until they could no longer stand up, and then they fell into bed on linen sheets. Some members of the Sonderkommando went mad, and some committed suicide, but most of them struggled on for three months or so, and then they ended as they had begun, in a ritual of replacement. Their successors, on orders from the SS, steered them, unprotesting, willing and perhaps even eager to die, into the gas chambers.

The last of the Sonderkommando, however, were not ready to die. The prospect of their imminent annihilation in the final days of the camp suddenly filled them with a passion to rebel. This Sonderkommando had been expanded, in order to deal with the Hungarians, from about 200 men to 700, and as these men realized that they themselves were doomed, they began to arm. By theft and bribery, and with infinite stealth, they smuggled into their luxurious quarters, one by one, a pistol, then a grenade, then more grenades. As early as June, the Sonderkommando planned a full-scale uprising. The prisoners would attack their SS guards, seize their weapons and uniforms, then bluff their way past the sentries, escape into the woods, and join forces with Polish partisan units.

On October 7, Polish underground agents in the Auschwitz administrative office sent word to the Sonderkommando that the SS had decided on their liquidation, and that it might come at any moment. The ringleaders gathered inside Crematorium IV to decide what to do. That same day, an SS officer named Busch had told the kapos of Crematorium IV that he needed 3W men from the

Sonderkommando to go and clear rubble in a town in Upper Silesia. The kapos suspected that this was a ruse that would lead to their death. Filip Muller, who was one of the prisoners standing at roll call in the yard, noted that some prisoners didn't answer when their numbers were called. Busch sent several guards into the crematorium to look for them. "The guards were just leaving," Muller recalled, "when quite suddenly from out of the ranks of selected prisoners they were pelted with a hail of stones. Some SS men were wounded, but others managed to dodge the stones and were drawing their guns and starting to shoot wildly into the crowd of prisoners. Two more SS men had managed to get away to the camp street where they grabbed two bicycles leaning against the camouflage fence and sped off."

Inside the crematorium itself, the assembled ringleaders had been surprised by a kapo who was not in on the plot, and so they killed him. Then they packed the hated crematorium with their precious store of explosives and some oil-soaked rags, and blew it up. The explosion signaled to the Sonderkommando in the other installations that the revolt had begun. In Crematorium 11, the rebels quickly seized control. They threw one SS man and one German kapo into the furnace and burned them alive. They also beat one German soldier to death. Then they poured out into the prison yard, cut holes in the surrounding fence, and fled toward the woods. But they ran in the wrong direction, not northeast toward the Vistula but southwest toward the Rajsko subcamp. That kept them within the confines of the camp's outer fences.

In fact, the Sonderkommando did almost everything wrong. The uprising had originally been planned for the night but started in broad daylight. All the crematoria were supposed to rebel at once, and in silence, so that the rebels could secretly organize a mass escape, but the shooting at Crematorium IV warned the SS men of trouble, and they quickly secured the three

other crematoria. And since the uprising had not been coordinated with the Polish underground, there were no partisan units to help anyone who escaped. When the hunt was over, more than SW of the Sonderkommando had been killed. The SS casualties: three dead, twelve wounded. The remnants of the Sonderkommando, 198 men, still hoped that they could somehow survive. The SS had other plans. At about two o'clock in the afternoon of November 17, they were all marched to Crematorium 11, and the doors were locked behind them. They were not ordered to undress, for there was no need for any pretense of showers. They "knew they were going to die, and they attempted neither protest nor revolt. As they stood silently awaiting their execution, they suddenly heard the voice of a man whom they knew only as "the dayyan" ('judge.' in Hebrew). He was a thin, bespectacled Pole of about thirty, who devoted himself to the study of Scripture. The Nazis often amused themselves by assigning such people to the most degrading work in the camp, particularly the latrine-cleaning detail, known as the Scheisskommando, but this dayyan, assigned to the crematoria, absolutely refused to take any part in the mutilation and burning of the corpses. He also rejected the luxuries of the Sonderkommando, eating only the bread rations of the ordinary prisoners. Such insubordination should have led quickly to his execution, but there was something about this unworldly dayyan that prompted the Nazis to spare him. He was assigned to a detail that sorted out the hair shaved from the dead, and even here he spent his time arguing with prisoners who raged at the God who had consigned them to such a fate. "Listen, Dayyan, not once have I felt even a breath of divine justice here," one twenty-year-old youth named Menachem charged. "Absolutely everything that you stuffed into my head in school is just nonsense. There is no God, and if there is one, he is an ox and a bastard!" The SS men guffawed at such disputations, according to Filip Muller, who recorded this one, but the dayyan did his best to uphold the faith even in these disastrous circumstances.

"If the Haggadah commands man in each generation to look at himself as if he himself had migrated from Egypt," he said, "the brothers who perhaps by a miracle will manage to survive will read the Haggadah, made whole by their experiences in Auschwitz."

Now, sealed into their underground tomb, the last of the Sonderkommando heard once again the voice of the dayyan. "Brothers!" he called out. 'Fellow Jews. . . . Fate has allotted us the cruelest of tasks, that of participating in our own destruction, of witnessing our own disappearance, down to the very ashes to which we are reduced. . . . We must accept, resignedly, as sons of Israel should, that this is the way things must be. God has so ordained it. Why? It is not for us, miserable humans, to seek the answer. This is the fate that has befallen us. Do not be afraid of death. What is life worth, even if, by some strange miracle, we should manage to remain alive? We would return to our cities and towns to find cold and pillaged homes. . . . We would wander like the restless, shuffling shadows of our former selves, of our completed pasts, finding nowhere any peace or rest."

A few minutes after this impassioned sermon in the underground mausoleum, three SS men with machine guns opened the door and ordered all doctors to return to their quarters to await further assignment, and that was how Dr. Nyiszli, one of three doctors who emerged into the sunlight, survived to record this scene. The next time he saw the last of the Sonderkommando, they were charred beyond recognition. The SS had taken them out into the fields outside the camp and turned flamethrowers on them. At some point during the early Fall of 1944 probably between mid-September and mid-October-Himmler decided to end the gassings. He seems to have hoped that he could somehow replace Hitler and negotiate a truce with the onrushing Allies. The killings did not end immediately, for the machinery was not easy to stop,

but on October 28 when 1,700 Jews from Theresienstadt were crowded into the gas chambers and put to death, they became the last transport to be put to death with Zyklon B. On November 26, an order from Himmler declared. "The crematoria at Auschwitz are to be dismantled." He memo to have deluded himself that all evidence of what had happened at Auschwitz and the other Polish death camps could be destroyed.

The last spasms of killing were relentlessly lethal. On January 6, 1945, when the camp was covered with a heavy blanket of snow, the prisoners in the women's camp at Birkenau were assembled to watch a hanging. The SS had been working for three months to discover who had provided the explosives used in the revolt of the Sonderkommando, and after subjecting certain suspects to torture, they had identified four young Jewish girls who worked at I. G. Farben's Union munitions factory. These four were there upon convicted of smuggling and sentenced to death. Two of them were marched up to a specially erected gallows. "They were wearing their regular clothes, except that they did not have their coats on," recalled Judith Sternberg Newman, an eyewitness and a good friend of one of the victims, Aline Gartner. "They walked calmly, their faces composed. An SS man bound their hands behind their backs . . . Aline was then pulled up on the table, and her last words were "You'll pay for this. I shall die now, but your turn will come soon." The executioner fixed the noose around her neck, and she was pulled up by the rope. Now a noose was put around the other girl's neck. All she said when they lifted her up on the table was. "I hope all my comrades will get their freedom. "They hung there like two marionettes, turning in the breeze."

The second girl, a Pole, had a younger sister who was also among the condemned, but her hanging had been delayed. "She had been left behind in her block, for she had suffered a

complete nervous breakdown," Mrs. Newman reported. "Her wild screams could be heard from afar." The execution was not delayed for long. Just after dark, that same night, the mad girl and the fourth prisoner were taken out to the gallows and hanged. Those were the last official executions at Auschwitz.

The Red Army, which had been stalled for weeks within about fifty miles of Auschwitz, finally launched a surprise offensive on January 12, 1945. Within a week, its artillery was pounding the outskirts of the camp, and shortly after midnight on January 18, the Nazis ordered a general evacuation. They dynamited the brick walls of Crematorium V, the last one still standing. They set fire to "Canada." It was about 10 degrees below zero when the SS began routing the ragged prisoners out onto the snow-covered fields and bullying them into the customary ranks of five. Even then, there were long delays, roll calls, shouts and confusion. Several thousand prisoners in the camp hospital argued about whether to join the evacuation, and those who wanted to flee fought over the few pairs of wooden clogs that the authorities had left them to use in going to the latrines. Among the SS, too, there were arguments about whether to kill everyone who couldn't march. There had been various plans drawn up for the complete annihilation of the camp and all remaining prisoners, but nobody had ever formally issued the orders to carry out this final massacre. By now, the SS men were thinking mainly of flight from the dreaded Russians, so they decided simply to leave the sick and injured behind. Or perhaps no one decided anything, and the sick were just abandoned in the chaos of the four-day evacuation.

At 3 P.M. on January 27, 1945, more than a week after the SS evacuation, some white-caped reconnaissance scouts for the First Ukrainian Front emerged from the woods and saw the rows of barracks, the miles of barbed wire, the empty guard posts. Inside the camp, they found

some 7,650 of those half-dead prisoners whom the SS had judged too feeble to be worth evacuating. (This number, like so many Auschwitz statistics, is hardly more than an official approximation. Indeed, the total number of Auschwitz survivors is almost as cloudy as the number of dead. The estimates generally run around 30,000, which means that of all the prisoners shipped to Auschwitz, fewer than one percent lived.) "There was a mad rush to shake them by the hand and shout out our gratitude," said one of the survivors, Karel Ornstein. "Several prisoners waved red scarves. The shouts of joy [could] have gone on forever."

The 60,000 prisoners who were marched off into the snow and darkness had been issued only one day's ration of bread. Most of them had no coats or blankets. They were heading vaguely toward the Gross-Rosen camp, some 150 miles to the west, but most of the prisoners did not know where they were going, and many of their guards did not know how to get there.

As the first dawn broke, Dr. Nvyiszli's unit had gone about ten miles from Auschwitz. "All along the way I noticed pots and blankets and wooden shoes that had been abandoned by a convoy of women who had preceded us. A few miles farther on we came upon a much sadder sight: every forty or fifty yards, a bloody body lay in a ditch beside the road. For miles and miles it was the same story: bodies everywhere. Exhausted, they had been unable to walk any farther: when they had strayed from the ranks an SS man had dispatched them with a bullet in the back."

In the opposite direction came, of all people, Rudolf Hoess, the creator of Auschwitz, now frantic and enraged at this spectacle of disorderly flight. Since Himmler had by now issued stern orders against the wanton killing of prisoners, Hoess claimed that he too had become an upholder of the law. When he heard a pistol shot, he stopped his car and accosted a German sergeant who had just killed a prisoner. "I shouted at him asking him what he thought he was

doing, and what harm the prisoner had done him. He laughed impertinently in my face and asked me what I proposed to do about it. I drew my pistol and shot him."

About one third of the prisoners who marched west from Auschwitz died along the way. And for the survivors, survival meant to arrive, starving and frozen and exhausted, at some destination such as Mauthausen, a hilltop fortress near Linz, where tens of thousands of prisoners had been worked to death in the nearby granite quarries. Yet, in a way, the 8,000 Auschwitz prisoners who reached Mauthausen were lucky. Most of them got some food and new clothing and were then shipped to smaller camps in the area. A far worse fate awaited the largest contingent of evacuees, perhaps 10,000 in all, which finally arrived at Bergen-Belsen.

Bergen-Belsen, near the old Hanseatic town of Hanover, was once a Wehrmacht camp for wounded prisoners of war. It was quite small, designed for men, who lived in a series of neat little buildings connected by neat little pathways. Not until 1943 did the SS get control of half the camp, and even then it remained, relatively, a model" camp. But in the spring of 1945, its population suddenly increased to 50,000. There was absolutely no food, and almost no water, and there were just a few latrines. Within weeks, typhus and dysentery were everywhere, and so were rats. Thousands of prisoners simply starved to death. The rest, who knew the war was almost over, ambled about or sat in a stupor, waiting for someone to rescue them.

The first man from the outside world to enter this inferno was a British psychological-warfare officer, Captain Derek Sington, who had been ordered to negotiate the takeover of the camp. He could hardly believe what he saw. Along with 28,000 women and 12,000 men, all haggard and emaciated, there were 13,000 unburied corpses, some stacked in piles like pieces of firewood, many just lying around wherever they had fallen. (Among the dead was Anne Frank,

who succumbed here during the last weeks of the war.) The half-mad commandant, Josef Kramer, proved to be "genial and friendly," said Sington. He described his prisoners to the British as "habitual criminals, felons, and homosexuals." He accompanied Sington on a tour of the camp in a British armored car, and the British repeatedly announced through bullhorns that the camp was now liberated. The prisoners, too, could hardly believe what they saw. Many of them simply stared numbly at their liberators. Some of the women began sobbing. A few ceremoniously scattered twigs and leaves in the path of the armored car. Kramer became alarmed. "Now the tumult is beginning," he said to Sington. The orderly camp had been "disrupted." Behind him, Sington heard the sound of gunfire as the Germans attempted even after their surrender to enforce their authority. Sington strode up to a Wehrmacht officer who was firing just over the heads of some prisoners and ordered him at gunpoint to stop. Sington then told Kramer that if any prisoners were shot for any reason whatever, the British would immediately shoot an equal number of SS men. Kramer grudgingly acquiesced.

"Feed the living and bury the dead," the Marquis of Pombal had proposed as his prescription for healing the ravages of the Lisbon earthquake. The British did just that. As gently as soldiers could, they fed and cared for the starving prisoners and brought most of them back to life. Many of them, however, were beyond all help. It is estimated that 10,000 inmates liberated at Bergen-Belsen died shortly after their liberation. As for the mountains of decaying corpses, the British simply brought in bulldozers to push the bodies into vast pits and covered them with lime. Then they bulldozed the rest of the camp - everything. All that is left of Bergen-Belsen today is a series of swollen graves, covered with grass.

Auschwitz remains. It is a Museum now, and marshy grass grows tall alongside the rusting railroad tracks that end at the haunted ramp of Birkenau. The Poles wanted to keep everything just as it was-"a Monument of the martyrdom of the Polish nation," according to the official decree, "and of other nations"-and so they left the giant brick crematoria in ruins, just as the SS men had left them in their frenzy to escape. At the same time, the Poles wanted to preserve and demonstrate and explain, and so they repaired and repainted some of the grimmest barracks and filled them with educational exhibitions.

Here, in Block 4, is a "Hall of Nations," outfitted with the flags of all the occupied lands that gave up their citizens to Auschwitz; here an artfully constructed model of the destroyed gas chambers; and here a mountain of the hair cut from the women who were murdered. The Soviet troops who liberated Auschwitz found more than 15,000 pounds of this hair awaiting shipment back to Germany for use as pillow stuffing. And here, in Block 5, is a display case containing the artificial arms and legs dozens and dozens of them that were stripped from crippled prisoners before their execution. Here, in Block 6, is another glass case, in which the tattered rags of the prisoners are neatly hung up for observation, like the costumes of a tribe that has long since vanished. And here, forever preserved, is the daily food ration that so many prisoners never got: the bowl of soup, the chunk of bread, the dab of margarine, the shriveled slice of sausages. Here, in Block 7, are the three-tiered human bunks, neat and clean now, and empty. In the collar of Block 11, the "standing cells" all available for inspection, and the benches on which prisoners were flogged, and the clubs that were used to flog them. And here, next to the camp kitchen, is the long wooden gallows, where Rudolf Hoess, having confessed and testified and explained, was brought back to be hanged. "I, too, must now be destroyed," he had written. "The world demands it." At Birkenau, a rough stone pathway leads past a series of plaques that attempt to

commemorate the dead. "Four million people suffered and died here," they say in a score of languages, "at the hands of the Nazi murderers between the years 1940 and 1945."

It is a great place for wreaths, for official visits by statesmen bearing wreaths. They pause to write worthy sentiments in the official visitors' book. West German Foreign Minister Walter Scheel, who was a Luftwaffe navigator during World War II, was the first German cabinet minister to make the pilgrimage and deposit a wreath. "It will be our task to preserve these highest values-dignity of man, peace amongst people," he wrote in the visitors' book. Gerald Ford was the first American President to come, and two U.S. Marines deposited his wreath of red and white carnations. "This monument . . ." he wrote in the official book, "inspires us further to the dedicated pursuit of Peace, cooperation and security for all peoples."

The first Polish Pope, John Paul II, who was studying in his seminary during most of the Auschwitz years, arrived at the camp by means of a white helicopter and then a limousine, its path strewn with flowers. He fell to his knees in prayer. "Peace!" he cried. "Only peace! Only peace!" A reporter who watched the scene was impressed by the TV cables strung along the barbed wire, the souvenir postcards and soft drinks being offered for sale, the way the trees had flourished in the desecrated earth. "The poplars planted by the Nazis to screen the crematoria have grown enormously tall and graceful," he wrote.

The Polish purpose in all this commemoration is to make sure that the world remembers what happened at Auschwitz and that it learns the lesson of what happened. To Polish officials Josef Cyrankiewicz, who became premier in 1947, had been a prisoner at Auschwitz from 1941 to 1945-what happened and what it meant appeared perfectly clear. That is evident in the plaque mourning "the martyrdom of the Polish nation" and warning against "international fascism."

To others, neither the meaning of the event nor the lesson to be learned from it is quite so obvious. None of us can approach Auschwitz-neither the museum standing in the ruins nor the very idea of the great death camp on the Vistula-without all the intellectual and spiritual burdens that we carry with us. We see Auschwitz and we judge Auschwitz according to the way we see and judge the human race, and life, and God.

Auschwitz was a world unlike any other because it was created and governed according to the principles of absolute evil. Its only function was death. The first question, then, is whether we see Auschwitz as the epitome of life itself, in incarnation of the darkest expectations of Machiavelli and Hobbes, or whether we see it as a mirror image of the true life, a Satanic version of some divine plan that we have not yet discovered. From that central enigma flow all the lesser contradictions that still bedevil anyone who seeks to understand the mystery of Auschwitz. Did it represent the ultimate evil of the German nation, and was that the evil of German rationality or of German irrationality? Or did it represent, conversely, the apotheosis of Jewish suffering? And was that suffering simply the result of centuries of anti-Semitism, or was it part of the fulfillment of the prophecy that the tormented Jews would someday return to Palestine; return, as Ezekiel had written, to "the land that is restored from the ravages of the sword, where people are gathered out of many nations upon the mountains of Israel"?

It can be argued that Auschwitz proves there is no God, not for the Jews nor for the Catholics nor for the Jehovah's Witnesses, who died as bravely as any others. "If all this was possible," wrote one Hungarian survivor, Eugene Heimler, "if men could be herded like beasts toward annihilation, then all that I had believed in before must have been a lie. There was not, there could not be a God, for he could not condone such godlessness." But such declarations

have been made at every moment of extreme crisis by those who see God, for only in success and happiness. Since all efforts to prove or explain God's purposes demonstrate only the futile diligence of worker ants attempting to prove the existence of Mozart. Auschwitz can just as well prove a merciful God, an indifferent God, or, perhaps best, an unknowable God. William Styron, in *Sophie's Choice* suggested the answer as a riddle: "At Auschwitz, tell me, where was God?" The answer is only another question: "Where was man?"

The evidence of Auschwitz has demonstrated many things about humanity. It has demonstrated that men (and women) are capable of committing every evil the mind can conceive, that there is no natural or unwritten law that says of any atrocity whatsoever: This shall not be done. It has demonstrated that men can also bear and accept every evil, and that they will do so in order to survive. To survive, even just from one day to the next they will kill and let kill, they will rob and betray their friends, steal food rations from the dying, inform on neighbors, do anything at all. The evidence of Auschwitz has demonstrated just as conclusively that men will sacrifice themselves for others. Franciszek Gajnowiczek, for example, is a stooped, gray-haired man, who survived Auschwitz to testify that when he was selected at random for execution one day in 1941, a Franciscan priest named Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward and volunteered to take his place and did take his place and did die. The evidence has demonstrated, moreover, that those who are ready to sacrifice themselves for one another, those who share a commitment to some political or spiritual purpose, are as likely to survive as those who make survival their only goal. The evidence, in other words, is as contradictory as human nature itself. "The truth about Auschwitz?" Josef Cyrankiewicz once reflected. "There is no person who could tell the whole truth about Auschwitz."

Elie Wiesel, who managed to survive being sent to Auschwitz as a boy, remembered the place as hellish, but when he returned in 1979, he was overwhelmed by its beauty. "The low clouds, the dense forest, the calm solemnity of the scenery,' he wrote. "The silence is peaceful, soothing." When Wiesel tried to decipher the meaning of that serene graveyard, he was helpless. "How was it possible?" he wrote. "We shall never understand. Even if we manage somehow to learn every aspect of that insane project, we will never understand it. . . . I think I must have read the books-memoirs, documents, scholarly essays and testimonies written on the subject. I understand it less and less." That is the survivor's message on the mystery of survival, but the nameless dayyan may have been preaching a richer variation of the same message when he urged the men of the last Sonderkommando not to be afraid but simply to accept the fulfillment of God's incomprehensible will. Otto Friedrich, a senior writer for Time magazine, is at work on a book. *The End of the World*. His account of Auschwitz is based primarily on books written by survivors.