

from

A Generation of Wrath

BY ELIO ROMANO

The first concentration camp was opened at Dachau shortly after Hitler came to power. The camp and its immediate successors were used to imprison Hitler's opponents in Germany. The Nazis eventually moved to interning all Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals. These camps provided slave labor for various industries, and the ever-increasing number of Jews being interned helped fuel the expansion of Germany's war machine. In April, 1940, a town in East Upper Silesia in Poland was chosen for a new concentration camp, to be known as Auschwitz. Elio Romano was born in the town of Auschwitz in 1923. In 1940 he was forced to become a slave laborer by the Germans, eventually being sent to eleven different concentration camps. He survived and after the war wrote A Generation of Wrath: A Story of Embattlement, Survival, and Deliverance during the Holocaust of World War II. The following selection describes the building of the camp at Auschwitz.

A jail is a place where criminals and other temporary outcasts of society are locked up, I always thought. Being imprisoned was, of course, harsh punishment. In the town of Auschwitz, formerly the orderly and peaceful Oswiecim, the only people ever to land in the two jail cells located in the yard of the town hall, next to the police guardroom, were drunks who made a nuisance of themselves and insulted the town's **imperious**¹ police constable. Occasionally, socialist and communist **agitators**² during first-of-May³ demonstrations had been temporarily "re-educated" there, before being sent away to bigger and more frightful installations in the capital. However, since the Germans had arrived, Auschwitz had neither drunks nor radicals. And so the jail block remained empty, until some twenty-five Jews filled its cells.

I was among those locked up and so was my mother. So were the others, either participants of the illegal escapade, parents or organizers. Yossel M was also among us. We never found out who put the finger on us, but betrayed we had been. That much we knew.

The minute the two German border guards took us back to their village post they boasted that they had known we were going to cross the border at a given point. All they had to do, they said, was trap us at the right time.

"You were sold out, you poor saps," the head of the border post, a middle-aged sergeant, told us after we were brought in by the patrol. Knowing the German invaders, we expected to be roughed up, beaten and interrogated, but nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, we were given food and hot tea with rum, as if we were guests instead of prisoners.

¹ **imperious**—haughty or arrogant.

² **agitator**—someone who stirs up public feelings for or against something, often for political reasons.

³ first-of-May—In some parts of the world, labor parades and meetings are held on May Day (May 1).

Were these soldiers really Germans, I wondered? They were indeed, but not Wehrmacht **conscripts**,⁴ only old border policemen, transferred from the Reich to do noncombatant duty along the new frontier. Old foxes they would be called by some, professionals who had wives and children back home and who apparently were glad to serve in an isolated post, away from the political Nazi Party goons who would see that the ideology of the "New Order" was scrupulously adhered to.

"You should be glad you were caught by us and not by the Gestapo," the sergeant said. We knew what he meant and appreciated his frankness. We hadn't eaten all day and the long march in the mountains froze our bones.

"What will happen to us?" I asked, after we had all been through a preliminary interrogation.

The sergeant shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose," he answered. "You'll go back home tomorrow. After all, you're still under age."

We were glad to hear that, but we knew that our adventure would cause **repercussions**,⁵ once we got back to Auschwitz. The German authorities there wouldn't be as lenient as these old timers, veterans of Kaiser Wilhelm's⁶ reign.

"Why couldn't you have let us cross the border?" I asked. "We only wanted to go to Palestine and we were told the Reich was glad to see us go."

"If it were up to me, I would have let you pass," the man answered, "but we received a tip about your intended crossing. You had no valid emigration permits, so we had to stop it. We do have martial law,⁷ you know."

⁴ **conscripts**—members of the military.

⁵ **repercussion**—indirect influences or reactions from an event.

⁶ Kaiser Wilhelm—last emperor of Germany, from 1888 until he abdicated the throne in 1918.

⁷ **martial law**—rule by the army or militia with special military courts instead of the usual civil authorities. Martial law is declared during a time of trouble or war.

It was incredible. These Germans were of a different breed from those we had encountered until now. Had they, however, not been so duty conscious we would already have been in Slovakia. The next morning all eleven of us were given travel orders and train tickets to take us back to Auschwitz. We went all by ourselves.

Our adventure was rather short-lived. At home we had to put the armbands back on and keep a low profile. The meetings with Yossel M had been suspended, but we reported our experiences at a Jewish Council meeting, with our former mentor also present. Nobody could figure out who had given the scheme away. It didn't matter anyway. Youth emigration was dead and buried! But the belated after effects of our journey were soon to be felt.

Only three days after our return home we were called to the German police station and individually interrogated. This time we had to deal with professionals, but still they were only members of the *Schutzpolizei*, regular police constables and officers who went by the book. They, too, bore no grudges against Jews in particular, but had to prosecute a clear offense against their laws. In January 1940, the long arm of the Gestapo and the SS, about whom we had heard from previous Jewish refugees from Germany, had not yet reached Auschwitz.

I actually wondered why they had to grill us so much. They knew everything about our abortive escapade and the part Yossel M played in it. Anyway, I claimed ignorance. I just heard about the planned journey and simply joined in, I maintained. Of the organizers I knew nothing, I insisted. After all, I was only a youngster and still under age.

Again we were released and sent back home, but only temporarily. Within the next few days the German police and the Polish guard of the jail rounded up all the youngsters who had participated in the escape attempt, as well as all the parents they could find. I was thrown

into a cell with the males and my mother joined the few females. Since we received no rations, our relatives were obliged to feed us. They were allowed to come once a day, during our fifteen minute walks in the yard, and give us our provisions. My mother and I were visited in the jail by my girl cousin, Hessa, who was about my age and our comforting angel then.

Since we never appeared before a court, we also didn't know how long we would be imprisoned. Yossel M reflected on past events in Europe.

"We have been fools all along," he told us. "In 1938, before the war started, Jabotinsky warned us about our fate, in the wake of Nazi expansionism, and urged us to leave Europe, but we didn't believe him. We were too complacent, too deeply rooted in our age-old habits to risk a change. Now, in 1940, our activities and movements are drastically curtailed and our resources limited. I am afraid that after our latest fiasco the Jewish Council will be unwilling to underwrite any further organized emigration or escapes. From now on every one of you is on his own. That is if we ever get out of this jail and the Germans don't ship us to one of their concentration camps."

Ever since the Nazi rise to power in Germany, in 1933, and from subsequent refugees, we all knew about the existence of such camps in Dachau, in Buchenwald . . . The people who were incarcerated there had been in jails first.

After seventeen days in the cell block we were released and allowed to go back home. That February the Germans weren't yet too preoccupied with Jews. To judge by their newspapers they still hoped Great Britain and France would opt for peace and approve the Reich's territorial gains. After all it was almost six months since the war began and yet all was quiet on the Western front. The game seemed to have been a wait-and-see

proposition. It applied to us just as much as to the rest of the world.

Our economic situation however, had worsened. I went to work every day to supplement the family's income. The Maccabean⁸ group had been disbanded, but I had been meeting my friends individually and often consulted with Julian and my cousin Jacob. The times weren't conducive to much cultural activity or social life. All we could do was talk about politics and survival.

In March the first SS man arrived in town. He was just a *Scharführer*, a corporal, but an arrogant thug whose sole purpose seemed to be to intimidate us. He arrived one morning in front of the office of the Jewish Council demanding one hundred workers for his command. Since the Council had other requirements to fill for the German Wehrmacht and police, the SS man got only fifty men that day. I was among them.

We were marched off to the former Polish barracks, across the river. The place had seen Jewish slave labor before, when we had had to remove all traces left by the previous occupants, the Polish artillery. This time, the SS man said, he would be in charge and we would be doing some "real work." We were going to be his work team, or *Kommando*, as he called it. Even then this martial term evoked in me a feeling of *ominous*⁹ menace.

As soon as we reached the compound the SS man lined us up in columns of three abreast and had us stand at attention. It looked like some kind of army drill and we didn't know what to make of it. We didn't have to wait long for an explanation. With a horse whip in his hand to make him feel masterly, the *Scharführer* posted himself in front of us and started to give us a lecture.

⁸ Maccabean—reference to Judas Maccabaeus, the leader of a successful Jewish revolt in 166 BC against Syrian rule of Palestine.

⁹ *ominous*—unfavorable; threatening.

"Listen carefully, you pigheaded scum! I came here to teach you obedience and subservience. We Germans will make you pay dearly for slandering the Reich and our Fuehrer."

While he looked us over carefully, this conglomerate of shabbily dressed youngsters and middle-aged men, he continued to spill his venom. We were terror-stricken.

"You miserable gang of poor-Johns may not be the real culprits, but the American **plutocrats**¹⁰ and their Jews are. They forced the war upon us. And so you *Schweinehunde* will suffer for their crimes. All of you are warmongers!"

I stood there petrified. What the man said was hideous and the most terrible slander the Nazis could use against us. Yet we didn't dare to contradict him.

"You see," the SS goon continued in triumph, "your silence proves that I am right. I have seen your crooked kind before, back home, in the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen. Mark that in your cowardly brains!"

So, that was it. The black plague had finally come to Auschwitz. If one SS man came, others were bound to follow. What sinister plans were they hatching?

I had no time to speculate further because the *Scharführer* made us do punishing exercises and push-ups.

"This will circulate your rotten blood," he laughed viciously. "After that you'll be fit for honest work."

Following the drill period we were assigned to work. All the buildings had to be emptied of furniture and all the rubble burned on an empty plot. We started with the first of some 20 one- and two-story brick buildings spread over the entire compound.

From that first day, the Jewish Council allocated higher pay for all the workers who went out on the barracks detail. It was a case of hardship, but many of our

¹⁰ **plutocrats**—people who have power or influence because of wealth.

people needed the income, myself included. In about a month all the buildings had been cleared. In the meantime Polish masons and carpenters had been hired by the Germans and a few of the better-kept buildings were renovated. Also, strings of barbed-wire fences had been laid all around the compound and watchtowers built. There was no doubt in our minds that the former barracks would become some sort of prison camp. As time went on our work detail swelled to between two to three hundred men. At first, the SS man had us do the push-up ritual daily, but he soon got tired of it himself and relented. The workday became routine.

Some time in April a troop of about fifteen more SS men, headed by an officer named Höss, arrived in Auschwitz and took up quarters in one of the refurbished buildings. With them German "Aryan" concentration-camp prisoners in striped uniforms, some thirty men in all, also came. We found out that they were from Sachsenhausen, near Berlin. They, too, occupied one of the blocks, but behind barbed wire. Clean-up and restructuring work had then been going on in full swing. We realized with horror that the SS were building another one of their sordid camps, but this time on our own soil! Most ominous, however, was the disinfection process the Germans devised.

As a self-proclaimed superior race, the Germans always held the opinion that other peoples were not hygienic enough, according to their own standards, and therefore their dwellings must surely be infested by vermin. To make the old Polish buildings "habitable" they had to be disinfected. This was done by **hermetically**¹¹ sealing a building first, sticking mud into all roof crevices and plastering adhesive tape around door and window frames, and then fumigating the interior. The disinfecting agent was a crystalline chemical in tin cans

¹¹ **hermetically**—airtight.

which, when evaporating, had that cleansing effect. The used-up containers were discarded and, like all other rubbish, landed on a big dump which was periodically set on fire. I once looked at one of the empty cans. It was a sinister, deathbearing vessel and its chemical contents was called Zyklon-B.¹² Had the can not been so bulky, I would have taken it home with me, as I had been pocketing labels which came with various shipments we had to unpack and handle before the items were delivered to their designated places. In all instances the slips said, *Konzentrationslager Auschwitz*, making them valid souvenirs for the collector I was. The tin can was more than that. As I held it in my hands, an awesome, inexplicable premonition struck me that this poisonous chemical could also be used to "disinfect" people. The thought was so morbid that I became distressed and threw the *macabre*¹³ item on to the burning fire.

That day the camp's loudspeakers blared martial music. It was Saturday, the 20th of April 1940. Hitler's birthday.

Little by little the new concentration camp took shape. The compound was a beehive of activity. Several hundred Jews and Poles worked there daily under the supervision of German civilians, while the German prisoners from Sachsenhausen were preparing quarters for more inmates and the SS guards walked around the new installation like peacocks, drinking mineral water at all conceivable hours. At the time, I thought this was some sort of ritual which I could never comprehend. Only later, a friendly German supervisor offered a plausible explanation. Mineral water purified body and mind, according to Himmler,¹⁴ and his SS men were ordered to drink it.

¹² Zyklon-B—a cyanide-based gas manufactured by a pest control company during World War II.

¹³ *macabre*—gruesome; horrible; ghastly.

¹⁴ Himmler, Heinrich—director of Nazi propaganda from 1926-1930. He eventually became head of all German police forces.

In May, a transport of some forty Polish prisoners arrived from Dachau. They were to become the so-called *Stammhäftlinge*, the basic inmates of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Although they were quartered in a compound behind barbed wire, I had a chance to talk to them. Some of them were Jews from Warsaw. They had been taken to Dachau not as Jews, but as part of a raid on Polish *intelligentsia*.¹⁵ One of them told me that they were to become the camp's administrators, cooks and book-keepers, with the German prisoners from Sachsenhausen, a mixed conglomerate of men, the camp's future "Capos."

"Capos?!" I asked.

"The sons-of-bitches are our supervisors," the gentle-looking Jewish prisoner answered. "The Germans plan to imprison thousands of people here. I hope you won't be one of them."

I was frightened out of my wits. "What can I do for you?" I asked the prisoner. "Do you have relatives?"

"We are allowed to write home, once a month," he answered, "but the food here is poor."

While nobody was looking, I slipped the sandwich I had brought for lunch through the barbed wire. He took it furtively and left. In the days to follow, I could see some of my comrades from the Jewish work detail do the same. We supported the prisoners as much as we could. Bread was the one commodity we could still spare. After all it was heartbreaking to see fellow human beings caged in behind barbed wire. Life in such a spine-chilling camp was anything but recreation, we knew. It was indeed a hell on earth.

Our work detail in the camp lasted till some time in June, after which no Jew from the town of Auschwitz

¹⁵ *intelligentsia*—persons representing the superior intelligence or enlightened opinion of a country; the intellectuals.

was allowed anywhere near the perimeter of the concentration camp. Occasionally, columns of prisoners marched through town, on the way to their places of work. I saw hundreds of them, flanked by SS guards, while those with armbands designating them as Capos headed the various details.

It was truly a dispiriting sight.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How were the officers who caught the narrator during his botched escape attempt different from the SS officers who were in command of setting up the camp?
2. Which images in this account are most memorable and haunting for you?
3. The narrator's sister asks, "What is a concentration camp?" Based on this selection, how would you answer her question?

The Wannsee Conference

BY MARTIN GILBERT

Throughout 1940 the Nazi leadership struggled with what they termed the "Jewish Problem." The maintenance of the ghettos and work camps was a logistical nightmare. As the German army prepared for the invasion of Russia in 1941, the SS created a series of special killing squads, the *einsatzgruppen*. These groups were given orders to shoot captured Russian Jews. The creation of these killing squads marked the beginning of the Nazi's purposeful plan to annihilate the Jews. The success of the SS groups led to the creation of police battalions that carried on the same work in the occupied territories in eastern Europe. Throughout 1941, large numbers of western Jews were being deported to the ghettos of the east. The overcrowding led to various experiments with killing masses of people. In September, at Auschwitz, nine hundred people were gassed to death in a bunker and gassing in mobile vans began at Chelmno shortly thereafter. Early in 1942, Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's deputy in charge of what was termed the "Final Solution to the Jewish problem," convened a conference at Wannsee, near Berlin, to implement a deliberate plan of genocide.