"I jumped up from my seat and hid in a corner of the infirmary. The women did not want to die. They tore themselves out of the grip of the SS men and started to run away. Then the dogs were set on them. Their deaths were completely different from the deaths of the first batch of women who went to their deaths unknowing. Who knows which death was more difficult, but the first group seemed to die more peacefully.

"At fifteen hours the *Leichenauto* showed up, and an hour later the entire operation was completed. Up to the very last minute we were not certain that Mengele was not going to send us, the witnesses of that bloody happening, to the gas. Mengele left, calm, and with a smile he put down the sick card he had been holding. 'Herzanfall [heart attack],' he said."

Mrs. Helena finished her terrible tale. We did not utter a word. After a long pause she resumed: "I still don't know whether we should have told the women about the death that was waiting for them. What do you think?"

None of us said anything.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why did Mrs. Helena originally decide not to tell the girls what was going to happen to them?
2. How does Mrs. Helena feel about her role in the deaths of the girls? What was she afraid would happen as a result of her witnessing these deaths?
3. At the end of her story, Mrs. Helena says, "I still don't know whether we should have told the women about the death that was waiting for them. What do you think?" How would you answer this question?

from

A Man for Others

BY PATRICIA TREECE

Raymond Kolbe (1894–1941) was born near Lodz in Poland. In 1910, he joined the Franciscan order of the Catholic Church, taking the name Maximilian. Kolbe was famed for his kindliness, self-command, and his dedication to the Franciscan beliefs in poverty, preaching, and missionary work. When the Germans occupied Poland in 1939, Kolbe began to write about the atrocities he saw being perpetrated. He was harassed and arrested, and, finally in 1941, sent to Auschwitz. Kolbe suffered from tuberculosis, but as a Christian, he was used as a slave laborer rather than sent to the gas chambers. In Auschwitz, attempts at escape were discouraged by the execution of a group of people from the cell block of any escapee. Kolbe volunteered to take the place of a man chosen for death in such a reprisal. He and the others chosen were sealed in a cell, naked, and left to starve to death. Still not dead after two weeks, Kolbe was killed by lethal injection. In 1982, the Catholic Church made Kolbe an official saint.

As July came to an end, the next feast of the Mother of God, that of her assumption into heaven, lay fifteen days away. With harvest season in full swing, one prisoner assigned to swell the farm details began dreaming of escape through the open fields. Joseph Sobolewski, who arrived at Auschwitz in August 1940 as number 2,877 in the first Warsaw transport, recalls that there had already been two prisoners that summer who successfully fled that way. But the Nazis made sure such events were no occasion for rejoicing among those left behind. It took a certain kind of desperation to run away, knowing what others would pay. On almost the last day of July, the dreamer had become that desperate. Francis Mleczko remembers:

> We were working digging gravel (to be used in building more Blocks) outside the camp when suddenly, about three in the afternoon, the sirens began to wail and shriek. That was a terrible sign. It meant there had been an escape. At once the German sentries lifted their guns, counted us, and began to keep an extra strict watch. Besides scrutinizing our every movement, the guards were also alert for any sign of the escapee who might be hiding, for all they knew, in a field, a tree, on a floor, inside a vehicle, or any one of a thousand places.
>
> The siren's crescendo not only alerted the SS[1] and capos[2] outside the camp, it even reached the villages outside the fifteen-mile penal zone, warning the police to set up roadblocks and watch for the poor fugitive. The thoughts of all of us were not on him, however, but ourselves; for if the escapee was from our Block, we knew ten to twenty of us would die in **reprisal.**[3] So I prayed, and I imagine everyone else was doing the same: "Oh please don't let him be from my Block. Let him be from Block 3 or Block 8 but not from 14. . . ."

To the assembled, fear-stricken eyes looking directly at him because they have no choice, Fritsch barks, "The fugitive has not been found. In reprisal for your comrade's escape, ten of you will die by starvation. Next time, it will be twenty." Immediately the selection begins. Palitsch and a prisoner-secretary precede him with pad and pencil to take down the numbers of the condemned; Fritsch walks down the first row of identically garbed, nameless men. He meanders slowly to prolong their terror. Perhaps he is even so sick that he enjoys the feeling that each life is momentarily his to dangle helplessly before its owner before setting it down or shattering it forever. He scrutinizes faces. Then, with a gesture, he chooses his first victim from the front row. This does not mean the rest in that line are safe, however. He might take another. Even when the tenth man is chosen, the SS had been known to go on and take eleven, twelve, thirteen—as many as eighteen. After the first row is inspected, the order is given: "Three paces forward." They move up, leaving an alley between them and the second row so the arrogant Fritsch can one by one, stare each of these hapless souls straight in the face, while musing with leisurely care on his fate. . . .

Finally the grisly selection is complete. Fritsch turns to Palitsch, the noncommissioned officer who likes to brag about the numbers he has shot at the execution wall by Block 11. Together the SS officers check the secretary's list against the numbers on the condemned. As their German passion for accuracy occupies them, one

[1] SS— Nazis who served as Hitler's bodyguard and as a policing unit of the German army.

[2] capos—commanders.

[3] **reprisal**—injury done in return for injury.

of the victims is sobbing, "My wife and my children!" It is Francis Gajowniczek. The SS ignore him.

Suddenly, there is movement in the still ranks. A prisoner several rows back has broken out and is pushing his way toward the front. The SS guards watching this Block raise their automatic rifles, while the dogs at their heels tense for the order to spring. Fritsch and Palitsch too reach toward their holsters. The prisoner steps past the first row.

It is Kolbe. His step is firm, his face peaceful. Angrily, the Block capo shouts at him to stop or be shot. Kolbe answers calmly, "I want to talk to the commander," and keeps on walking while the capo, oddly enough, neither shoots nor clubs him. Then, still at a respectful distance, Kolbe stops, his cap in his hands. Standing at attention like an officer of some sort himself, he looks Fritsch straight in the eye.

"Herr Kommandant, I wish to make a request, please," he says politely in flawless German.

Survivors will later say it is a miracle that no one shoots him. Instead, Fritsch asks, "What do you want?"

"I want to die in place of this prisoner," and Kolbe points toward the sobbing Gajowniczek. He presents this **audacious**[4] request without a stammer. Fritsch looks stupefied, irritated. Everyone notes how the German lord of life and death, suddenly nervous, actually steps back a pace.

The prisoner explains coolly, as if they were discussing some everyday matter, that the man over there has a family.

"I have no wife or children. Besides, I'm old and not good for anything. He's in better condition," he adds, adroitly playing on the Nazi line that only the fit should live.

"Who are you?" Fritsch croaks.

"A Catholic priest."

[4] **audacious**—bold.

Fritsch is silent. The stunned Block, audience to this drama, expect him in usual Auschwitz fashion to show no mercy but sneer, "Well, since you're so eager, we'll just let you come along too," and take both men. Instead, after a moment, the deputy-commander snaps, "Request granted." As if he needs to expel some fury, he kicks Gajowniczek, snarling, "Back to ranks, you!"

Prisoners in ranks are never allowed to speak. Gajowniczek says:

> I could only try to thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it: I, the condemned, am to live and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me—a stranger. Is this some dream or reality? . . .

Now the order is given for the condemned to march and then the Block is dismissed. Brother Ladislaus says:

> The ten victims walked in front of me and I saw that Father Kolbe was staggering under the weight of one of the others as he upheld this man who could not walk with his own strength.

Some of his buddies rush over to Ted Wotjkowski, who is still dazed, benumbed by his own near death-sentence and by the sacrifice he has just seen. "C'mon, let's forget it," they urge, but Ted stands there as if paralyzed still. He is thinking, "I've just seen a saint made."

* * *

The heart of every Catholic institution is the chapel with its tabernacle housing the living God. From there, believers feel powerful, sweet radiations.

Auschwitz, too, had a spiritual heart from which radiated agony, despair, and death. This was the prison

within the prison, the penal Block called the bunker, where in the basement the SS "interrogated" prisoners with unspeakable cruelty. In one of these cells, made airtight for the occasion, the first gassings would be done on hapless hospital patients, Jews and Russian prisoners of war.

It was here Kolbe entered like a sliver of light into a black pit. He who without prudery was so modest was naked. The SS guard had snarled, "Strip," while they were still outside the Block. No sense in his having to carry their garments up the stairs. Then it was in the door of the innocent-looking brick building and descent into the dark, **fetid**[5] basement where they were shoved into one of the rank-smelling cells.

"You'll dry up like tulips," their jailer sneered as he slammed the door.

How do we know? Former SS men do not exactly come forward in droves to testify to their heartlessness. Their victims are dead.

There were, however, prisoner secretary-interpreters even in this infamous Block 11. To ensure their silence on what went on there, these men were liquidated from time to time like the later crematorium workers.

By some act of God, the prisoner-interpreter who would watch Kolbe's last days came out of Auschwitz alive. Number 1,192, Bruno Borgowiec was a Pole from Silesia, the rich, coal-mining region whose ownership has changed hands among several countries, including Germany and Poland. He worked with the other earliest prisoners building the camp; then, because of his perfect German, he was given the very dangerous job of interpreter in the penal Block. One can only imagine the things he was forced to see, to hear. Suffice it to say Bruno Borgowiec died on the Monday after Easter in 1947, when he was only about forty years old. But not

[5] **fetid**—having a heavy offensive smell.

before he had written Niepokalanow on December 27, 1945, with many details of what he had seen and left two notarized, sworn statements, one brief, the other more detailed, of the last days of the man he considered "a hero and a saint."

It is Borgowiec who provides the details of what those who know Kolbe would suspect: The starvation cell, far from defeating him, would become a tabernacle in this cruelest part of Auschwitz, as if—hidden in the heart of the humble Franciscan—God had snuck into Hell.

Borgowiec explains why he could repeat even the SS man's cruel jest as he locked the victims into their death cell, where only a tiny window high up against the basement ceiling let in a little light. In spite of thousands having died in that bunker, he remembered even such isolated details about Father Kolbe's last days "with absolute clarity," he maintained, "because of the absolutely extraordinary behavior with which the noble Father faced death." I combine Borgowiec's various reports:

> The naked victims were in one cell near those [dying in reprisal because] of the two previous escapes. The foul air was horrible, the cell floor cement. There was no furniture whatsoever, except for a bucket for relieving themselves.
>
> You could say Father Kolbe's presence in the bunker was necessary for the others. They were in a frenzy over the thoughts of never returning to their homes and families, screaming in despair and cursing. He pacified them and they [began to] resign themselves. With his gift of consolation, he prolonged the lives of the condemned who were usually so psychologically destroyed that they succumbed in just a few days.

To keep up their spirits, he encouraged them that the escapee might still be found and they would be released. [Koscielniak talked to the German Streiberg and the bunker chief, who told him Kolbe was hearing the victims' confessions and preparing them to die.] So they could join him, he prayed aloud. The cell doors were made of oak. Because of the silence and acoustics, the voice of Father Kolbe in prayer was diffused to the other cells, where it could be heard well. These prisoners joined in.

From then on, every day from the cell where these poor souls were joined by the adjoining cells, one heard the recitation of prayers, the rosary, and hymns. Father Kolbe led while the others responded as a group. As these fervent prayers and hymns resounded in all corners of the bunker, I had the impression I was in a church.

Outside the penal Block, Francis Mleczko recalls that the prisoners were keeping a kind of prayer vigil in their free hours, walking past the tiny window where only the top of a head could be seen. Szweda had even rashly gone to the death Block to inquire. He was growled at by a prisoner who worked there, "You fool, don't you know better than to ask questions like that? Do you want to end up here too? Run away fast before someone sees you."

Borgowiec continues:

Once a day the SS men in charge of the penal Block inspected the cells, ordering me to carry away the corpses of those who had died during the night. I also always had to be present for these inspections because, as secretary-interpreter, it was my job to write down the numbers

of the dead and also to translate from Polish into German any conversation or questions asked by the condemned.

Sometimes Father Kolbe's group was so deeply absorbed in prayer that they didn't notice the SS opening the door. It took loud shouts to get their attention. When they saw the cell door was opened, the poor wretches, weeping, would loudly beg for a crust of bread and some water, which they never obtained. If one of those who still had the strength approached the door, right away the SS would kick the poor man in the stomach so [hard] that falling back on the cement floor he would die or, if not, they would shoot him.

Father Kolbe never asked for anything and he never complained.

He looked directly and intently into the eyes of those entering the cell. Those eyes of his were always strangely penetrating. The SS men couldn't stand his glance, and used to yell at him, "Schau auf die Erde, nicht auf uns!" ("Look at the ground, not at us.")

Physician Francis Wlodarski was also told by a Nazi patient, the penal bunker chief, with whom he maintained good relations in order to get news, that Kolbe was "a psychic trauma, a shock" for the SS men who had to bear his look—a look that hungered (not that the penal chief put it this way) not for bread but to liberate them from evil. This Nazi's evaluation of Kolbe: "An extremely courageous man, really a superhuman hero." Borgowiec continues:

I overheard the SS talking about him among themselves. They were admiring his courage and behavior. One of them said, "So einen wie

diesen Pfarrer haben wir hier noch nicht gehabt. Das muss ein ganz aussergewöhnlicher Mensch sein." ("We've never had a priest here like this one. He must be a wholly exceptional man.")

While the SS men were absent, I used to go down and console my countrymen. [Through the keyhole or the hinged observation window, Borgowiec also passed Kolbe's group vitamin C, which he got from friends in the hospital; after awhile he desisted, realizing that if he were extending their lives, he was only prolonging their agony.]

What kind of martyrdom these men were enduring can be imagined from the fact that the urine bucket was always dry. In their dreadful thirst, they must have drunk its contents.

As the prisoners became weaker, the prayers continued, but in whispers. But even when during each inspection the others were always found lying on the cement, Father Kolbe was still standing or kneeling, his face serene.

In this way, two weeks went by. The prisoners were dying one after the other, and by this time only four were left, among them Father Kolbe, who was still conscious. The SS decided things were taking too long. . . . One day they sent for the German criminal Bock from the hospital to give the prisoners injections of carbolic acid. After the needle prick in the vein of the left arm, you could follow the instant swelling as it moved up the arm toward the chest. When it reached the heart, the victim would fall dead. Between injection and death was a little more than ten seconds.

When Bock got there, I had to accompany them to the cell. I saw Father Kolbe, with a prayer, himself hold out his arm to the executioner. I couldn't bear it. With the excuse that I had some work to do, I left. But as soon as the SS and their executioner were gone, I returned.

The other naked, begrimed corpses were lying on the floor, their faces betraying signs of their sufferings. Father Kolbe was sitting upright, leaning against the far wall. His body was not dirty like the others, but clean and bright. The head was tilted somewhat to one side. His eyes were open. Serene and pure, his face was radiant.

Anybody would have noticed and thought this was some saint.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What offer does Kolbe make? What surprises the other prisoners about Kolbe's offer and the commander's reaction to it?
2. How does Father Kolbe help the men who are sentenced to die of starvation?
3. What effect does Kolbe have on the entire camp?