

was no longer any beauty or ugliness, for they all were yellow from the gas. There were no longer any rich or poor, for they all were equal before God's throne. And why all this? I keep asking myself that question. My life is hard, very hard. But I must live on to tell the world about all this barbarism.

As soon as the gassing was over, Ivan and Nicholas inspected the results, moved over to the other side, opened the door leading to the platform, and proceeded to heave out the corpses. It was our task to carry the corpses to the ditches. We were dead tired from working all day at the construction site, but we had no recourse and had no choice but to obey. We could have refused, but that would have meant a whipping or death in the same manner or even worse; so we obeyed without grumbling.

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What factors prompted Wiernik to write his account?  
How does he feel about this task?
2. What is the dictionary meaning of the word *resettlement*?  
What did resettlement mean to the Jews?
3. How were so many Jews lured unsuspecting to their deaths?

## The Verdict

BY SARA NOMBERG-PRZYTYK

*A fifth death camp was built in the spring of 1942 at Auschwitz in Upper East Silesia. Auschwitz was already a functioning labor camp when the decision was made to build the gas chambers; the new camp at Auschwitz was known as Birkenau. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk was a Polish Jew born in 1915. After the German invasion, she lived in a ghetto and was sent to Auschwitz in 1943. She survived the camp and in the 1960s wrote a series of stories about her experiences. Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land tells the story of a young woman in a series of interconnected stories. "The Verdict" explores the issue of morality and survival in an inhuman situation.*

In October 1944 the whole hospital was moved to camp "C," the old gypsy camp. That is when I met Mrs. Helena. She had been doing the same job I was doing, except that she was a clerk in the infirmary for non-Jewish prisoners. In the new block, the separate infirmaries were liquidated and combined into one. The new infirmary was located in a separate barrack. In addition to the reception room there was a beautiful



room containing three bunk beds. Five of the beds were occupied by the workers in the infirmary: Helena and I, the clerks; Mancy and Frieda, the two doctors; and nurse Marusia. The sixth bed was taken by Kwieta, who worked in the *Leichenkomando*.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Helena stuck out oddly in our group of five. Perhaps because she was older than we were, we felt very inhibited in her presence. She maintained a constant silence and seemed always to be steeped in her own thoughts. She lived her own life and said nothing to anyone. We did not even know how she had gotten to Auschwitz. She was slim, light-haired and had an *inscrutable*<sup>2</sup> face. She did not take part in our discussions, and she never judged anybody. She eavesdropped on our gossiping and seemed to be saying, "I would like to see how you would behave in a similar situation."

One evening, while we were discussing conscious and unconscious death, we were surprised to hear Helena break heatedly into our discussion:

"Listen to the story I am going to tell you about the death of 156 girls from Krakow, and then you can tell me what you think of the way I behaved." We all stopped talking, and complete silence descended on our cell.

"We were just finishing receiving the sick," Mrs. Helena started quietly. "While Mengele<sup>3</sup> was looking over the women who had been admitted to the area, we had but one thought in our minds: we hoped he would leave soon. I remember that it was a scorching July day. The atmosphere in the infirmary was almost unbearable. The last sick woman moved through the line, passing in front of the German doctor. We heaved a sigh of relief. Mengele got up slowly, buttoned his

uniform, stood facing me, and said: 'At fifteen hours the *Leichenauto*<sup>4</sup> will come; I will come at fourteen hours.' We looked at one another in dumb amazement. Why the *Leichenauto* at fifteen hours? Usually, the car came to pick up the dead after darkness had fallen. What was Mengele planning to do here at fourteen hours? We couldn't speak. We were all sure that the *Leichenauto* was coming for us, to take us to the crematorium. We had to start cleaning up, but you can believe that everything kept dropping out of our hands, and that the hours dragged on without end. It's not easy to wait for the worst. After all, I don't have to tell you about that.

"At thirteen hours two young girls came to the infirmary, Poles from Krakow. They told us that the *blokowa*<sup>5</sup> had ordered them to report here because they had to leave for work in Germany and Mengele was going to examine them. I was so frightened by what I heard that I almost fainted. 'Is it only you the *blokowa* sent?' I asked in a quivering voice.

"Not just us," they answered. "There will be a lot more of us here. The rest will be coming soon. We came in first because we are in a hurry to join the transport that is leaving Auschwitz."

"Quite a large number of women were now gathering in front of the infirmary, most of them young. They were happy to be leaving Auschwitz. They were talking loudly, laughing, never dreaming that they had been horribly deceived and that the *Leichenauto* was coming for them in about an hour. For us it was all clear; those Poles were condemned to death, and the sentence was going to be carried out in the infirmary. 'What to do?' I thought feverishly. Maybe I should tell them why they had been summoned here. Perhaps I should shout it out to them: 'Calm down! Don't laugh. You are living corpses,

<sup>1</sup> *Leichenkomando*—corpse squad, those responsible for transporting the bodies of the dead.

<sup>2</sup> *inscrutable*—cannot be understood; so mysterious or obscure that one cannot make out its meaning.

<sup>3</sup> Mengele—also known as the "Angel of Death," Josef Mengele did medical experiments on the inmates at Auschwitz.

<sup>4</sup> *Leichenauto*—vehicle used to transport corpses.

<sup>5</sup> *blokowa*—prisoner head of a women's barrack.



and in a few hours nothing will be left of you but ashes!' Then what? Then we attendants would go to the gas chambers and the women would die anyway. The women might run and scatter all over the camp, but in the end they would get caught. Their numbers have been recorded. There is no place for them to run.

"Believe me, we quietly took counsel, trying to decide what to do. We didn't tell them the terrible truth, not out of fear for our own lives, but because we truly did not know what would be the least painful way for the young women to die. Now they didn't know anything, they were carefree, and death would be upon them before they knew it. If we told them what was in store for them, then a struggle for life would ensue. In their attempt to run from death they would find only loneliness, because their friends, seeking to preserve their own lives, would refuse to help them. There were more than 150 women in front of the infirmary. They stood in rows of five, as at roll call, and waited for the doctor to examine them. Still, we did not know what to do. All our reasoning told us to say nothing. Today I know that it was fear for our own lives that made us reason this way, that induced us to believe that sudden, unexpected death is preferable to a death that makes itself known to your full and open consciousness.

"Precisely at fourteen hours, Mengele arrived, accompanied by an orderly named Kler. He looked at the lines of women standing there and then at us in such a way as to make us partners in the crimes that he was about to commit. At that moment I knew that we had made a mistake in not telling the young women what was awaiting them. Whether dying is supposed to be easy or difficult, I suppose every individual has to decide for herself. But it was our duty to inform the young women what awaited them.

"'Bring them in for a checkup,' shouted Mengele. The first girl walked in, the one who was in a hurry to leave Auschwitz. She stood in front of me; I did not say anything. By filling out her hospital card, I was taking part in this deception that was making it easy for Mengele to execute his victim. She walked in without suspecting anything. Then I heard the crashing sound of a falling body; later, the second; then the third, the tenth, the twentieth. Always the same: the card, the squeaking of the door, the crash of a falling body. The corpses were thrown out into the waiting room, which was located behind the reception room. An SS man with a dog kept order in front of the infirmary. Calm and trusting, the women kept going in. I lowered my head so they wouldn't see my face. All I would see each time was a hand stretched out to receive a card. I really did not understand why they were so calm. Weren't they surprised not to see the other women coming out of the infirmary after they had been examined? I looked for some sign of anxiety in those stretched out hands, but to no avail. I had given out about a hundred cards when it started.

"One of the girls asked the SS man why the other women weren't coming out after having been examined. Instead of answering her he hit her over the head with his rifle butt. Then I heard one of the girls yell, 'We are not going in there. They will give us an injection of phenol.'<sup>6</sup> A terrible outcry started. The girls really refused to enter the infirmary. When one of them tried to run away the SS man shot her. At the sound of a shot a whole troop of SS men and dogs ran in. The young women were completely surrounded. Each girl, having first been beaten, was dragged screaming, by two SS men, into the presence of Mengele. I didn't give out any more cards. It was no longer necessary.

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<sup>6</sup> phenol—carbolic acid.



"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 kindness, 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.