

Goodnight, Auschwitz



Touching, original stories of five concentration camp survivors

“Here one lives three months at most”, is what the characters of *Goodnight, Auschwitz* hear when they cross the gate with the *Arbeit macht frei* inscription. The gate leads to hell, and as the book by Aleksandra Wójcik and Maciej Zdziarski shows, stretches to its very bottom, to Auschwitz, the Nazi German concentration and extermination camp in occupied Poland during the Second World War. Children who cry are risking their lives. Hunger and diseases transform prisoners such that even their family or friends do not recognise them. Here death is not a disaster but the norm. The crematorium smokes. The heroes of the reportage are five prisoners who survived the Nazi German Auschwitz camp. Józef Paczyński, Marcei Godlewski, Lidia Maksymowicz, Karol Tendera and Stefan Lipniak. They differ in age, length of stay in the camp and forms of terror they experienced. But they have one thing in common – they were at the bottom of a terrible hell. In the pages of the book, they create a picture of an unimaginable world. Lydia was three years old. She mastered the practice

of hiding from Dr. Mengele, who carried out medical experiments on children. The book contains plenty of such harrowing stories, but they do not overdo the brutality. Drastic descriptions are presented very neutrally. Coldly. Without emotions. As a result, they are even more moving. “About two thousand people can be killed in a gas chamber in a dozen or so minutes”; “People are enslaved like plasticine. You can do anything with them”. But experiences from the Nazi German camp are one thing, and life after liberation is another. The heroes live to old age. They live the need to bear witness. They rave in illnesses, returning to their camp memories. A few of them die before the book appears in bookstores. Their stories, however, live and are a warning to us.

We must read this book so that we never forget what the effects of human hatred are.

Sylwia Krasnodębska, translated by Katarzyna Popowicz

The deepest place in memory

How did he end up in a concentration camp? he is asked at every meeting. “Through stupidity!”

He escaped from Germany, escaped from Wrocław, even scarpered off from his father’s house when the Germans tracked him down. But he had no chance of escaping from the shop on Tomasz Street when he went to visit a friend.

The Gestapo visit the shop.

“Is Karol Tendera here?” asks a man in a coat.

“No,” answers Stanislaw, the shop assistant.

And at that moment Karol enters. He opens the door and holds the door open for the man who wants to know. Stasiu, his mate from the shop, seemed not to understand what was happening. He says aloud: “Karol, this gentleman’s looking for you.”

That was enough. It was all over.

“Gestapo, please follow me.”

The car sets off for the prison on Montelupich Street.

Plasticine

After a month of interrogation, they transport him from Krakow to the camp in a pickup truck. February, fifteen degrees below zero. In the cab: three Germans, the driver and two SS-men. And two at the back as well. In the back: fifteen prisoners kneeling down. Hungry, freezing. They keep each other warm. They don’t know what’s in store for them.

They finally drive up to the gate with the inscription *Arbeit macht frei*. By means of a welcome the guards hit the newcomers with rubber hoses full of sand. Karol tries to avoid the beating – he hides behind the backs of older, taller men.

Chased into the camp bathhouse they receive a lump of grey soap with the inscription RIF. His friends decipher the abbreviation. *Reines Jüdische Fett*, or ‘pure Jewish fat’, but Karol isn’t certain if it really stood for something so horrifying. The kapos responsible for the procedure of washing the prisoners run streams of hot water. First, they shout: “Raus! Raus! Raus!”, then in Polish:

“Get out! Get out.”

They don’t receive towels after washing. They go straight into the yard from the bathhouse. They stand up to their knees in the snow, shaking from the cold. Half of them die of pneumonia in the first few weeks. The strongest, the most hardened survive, ruthlessly fighting for their lives.

“An enslaved person,” Karol will say years later, “is like plasticine in a child’s hands. You can do what you like with them.”

Protection

Karol is sent to work building railway lines. Eight to ten prisoners transport rails attached to slings. They

screw the sections onto wooden sleepers. Undernourished, young, weak. Rivers of sweat pour off them. Some of them faint.

After a few days, one of his companions – his name is Michał, he’s taciturn, introverted – cracks. He says to Karol:

“I have to have a drink or at least splash myself down.”

Excerpt translated by David French



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**ALEKSANDRA
WÓJCİK**

Born 1987



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**MACIEJ
ZDZIARSKI**

Born 1979

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