

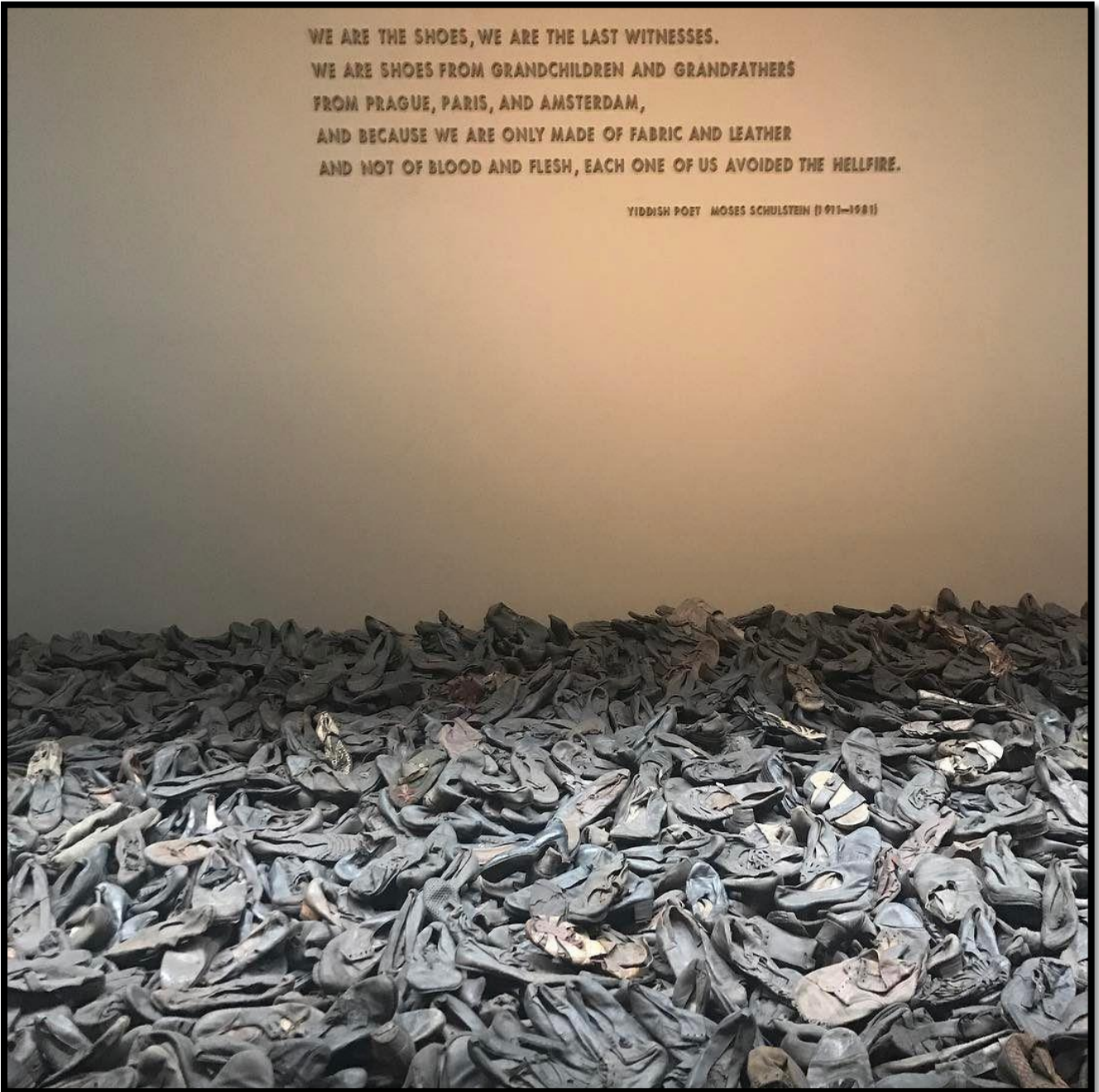
# This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen

Tadeusz Borowski

*Translated by Barbara Vedder*

WE ARE THE SHOES, WE ARE THE LAST WITNESSES.  
WE ARE SHOES FROM GRANDCHILDREN AND GRANDFATHERS  
FROM PRAGUE, PARIS, AND AMSTERDAM,  
AND BECAUSE WE ARE ONLY MADE OF FABRIC AND LEATHER  
AND NOT OF BLOOD AND FLESH, EACH ONE OF US AVOIDED THE HELLFIRE.

YIDDISH POET MOSES SCHULSTEIN (1911-1981)



All of us walk around naked. The delousing is finally over and our striped suits are back from the tanks of Cyclone B solution,<sup>1</sup> an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers. Only the inmates in the blocks cut off from ours by the “Spanish goats”<sup>2</sup> still have nothing to wear. But all the same, all of us walk around naked: the heat is unbearable. The camp has been sealed off tight. Not a single prisoner, not one solitary louse, can sneak through the gate. The labor Kommandos have stopped working. All day, thousands of naked men shuffle up and down the roads, cluster around the squares, or lie against the walls and on top of the roofs. We have been sleeping on plain boards, since our mattresses and blankets are still being disinfected. From the rear blockhouses we have a view of the F.K.L.—*Frauen Konzentration Lager*;<sup>3</sup> there too the delousing is in full swing. Twenty-eight thousand women have been stripped naked and driven out of the barracks. Now they swarm around the large yard between the blockhouses.

The heat rises, the hours are endless. We are without even our usual diversion: the wide roads leading to the crematoria are empty. For several days now, no new transports have come in. Part of “Canada”<sup>4</sup> has been liquidated and detailed to a labor Kommando—one of the very toughest—at Harmenz. For there exists in the camp a special brand of justice based on envy: when the rich and mighty fall, their friends see to it that they fall to the very bottom. And Canada, our Canada, which smells not of maple forests but of French perfume, has fortunes in diamonds and currency from all over Europe.

Several of us sit on the top bunk, our legs dangling over the edge. We slice the neat loaves of crisp, crunchy bread. It is a bit coarse to the taste, the kind that stays fresh for days. Sent all the way from Warsaw—only a week ago my mother held this white loaf in her hands . . . dear Lord, dear Lord . . .

We unwrap the bacon, the onion, we open a can of evaporated milk. Henri, the fat Frenchman, dreams aloud of the French wine brought by the transports from Strasbourg, Paris, Marseille . . . Sweat streams down his body.

“Listen, mon ami, next time we go up on the loading ramp, I’ll bring you real champagne. You haven’t tried it before, eh?”

“No. But you’ll never be able to smuggle it through the gate, so stop teasing. Why not try and ‘organize’ some shoes for me instead—you know, the perforated kind, with a double sole, and what about that shirt you promised me long ago?”

“Patience, patience. When the new transports come, I’ll bring all you want. We’ll be going on the ramp again!”

“And what if there aren’t any more ‘cremo’ transports?” I say spitefully. “Can’t you see how much easier life is becoming around here: no limit on packages, no more beatings? You even write letters home . . . One hears all kind of talk, and, dammit, they’ll run out of people!”

“Stop talking nonsense.” Henri’s serious fat face moves rhythmically, his mouth is full of sardines. We have been friends for a long time, but I do not even know his last name. “Stop talking nonsense,” he repeats, swallowing with effort. “They can’t run out of people, or we’ll starve to death in this blasted camp. All of us live on what they bring.”

“All? We have our packages . . .”

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<sup>1</sup> *Cyclone B solution* — Hydrogen cyanide — In German, this is *Zyklon B*, a pesticide developed in the 1920s. It was produced in crystal form, as blue pellets. These pellets turned into a highly poisonous gas (hydrocyanic or prussic acid) when exposed to air. This is the gas used by the Germans in their gas chambers.

<sup>2</sup> *Spanish goats* — Crossed wooden beams wrapped in barbed wire.

<sup>3</sup> *Frauen Konzentration Lager* — Women’s concentration camp.

<sup>4</sup> *Canada* — Many Europeans immigrated to Canada before the war, and the prisoners thought of it as a land of peace and plenty. Within the camp, it referred to a work detail where prisoners helped to unload the incoming transports of people destined for the gas chambers, and the men who were assigned to that labor gang (*Kommando*).

“Sure, you and your friend, and ten other friends of yours. Some of you Poles get packages. But what about us, and the Jews, and the Russkis? And what if we had no food, no ‘organization’ from the transports, do you think you’d be eating those packages of yours in peace? We wouldn’t let you!”

“You would, you’d starve to death like the Greeks. Around here, whoever has grub, has power.”

“Anyway, you have enough, we have enough, so why argue?”

Right, why argue? They have enough, I have enough, we eat together and we sleep on the same bunks. Henri slices the bread, he makes a tomato salad. It tastes good with the commissary mustard.

Below us, naked, sweat-drenched men crowd the narrow barracks aisles or lie packed in eights and tens in the lower bunks. Their nude, withered bodies stink of sweat and excrement; their cheeks are hollow. Directly beneath me, in the bottom bunk, lies a rabbi. He has covered his head with a piece of rag torn off a blanket and reads from a Hebrew prayer book (there is no shortage of this type of literature at the camp), wailing loudly, monotonously.

“Can’t somebody shut him up? He’s been raving as if he’d caught God himself by the feet.”

“I don’t feel like moving. Let him rave. They’ll take him to the oven that much sooner.”

“Religion is the opium of the people,” Henri, who is a Communist and a *rentier*,<sup>5</sup> says sententiously. “If they didn’t believe in God and eternal life, they’d have smashed the crematoria long ago.”

“Why haven’t you done it then?”

The question is rhetorical; the Frenchman ignores it. “Idiot,” he says simply, and stuffs a tomato in his mouth.

Just as we finish our snack, there is a sudden commotion at the door. The Muslims<sup>6</sup> scurry in fright to the safety of their bunks, a messenger runs into the Block Elder’s<sup>7</sup> shack. The Elder, his face solemn, steps out at once.

“Canada! *Antreten!* But fast! There’s a transport coming!” “Great God!” yells Henri, jumping off the bunk. He swallows the rest of his tomato, snatches his coat, screams “*Raus!*” at the men below, and in a flash is at the door. We can hear a scramble in the other bunks. Canada is leaving for the ramp.

“Henri, the shoes!” I call after him.

“*Keine Angst!*”<sup>8</sup> he shouts back, already outside.

I proceed to put away the food. I tie a piece of rope around the suitcase where the onions and the tomatoes from my father’s garden in Warsaw mingle with Portuguese sardines, bacon from Lublin (that’s from my brother), and authentic sweetmeats from Salonica. I tie it all up, pull on my trousers, and slide off the bunk.

“*Platz!*” I yell, pushing my way through the Greeks. They step aside. At the door I bump into Henri.

“*Was ist los?*”<sup>9</sup>

“Want to come with us on the ramp?”

“Sure, why not?”

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<sup>5</sup> *rentier* — Someone whose income derives from rents, interest on investments, and the like.

<sup>6</sup> *Muslim* — The camp name for a prisoner who had been destroyed physically and spiritually, and who had neither the strength nor the will to go on living—a man ripe for the gas chamber.

<sup>7</sup> *Block Elder* — A prisoner who was assigned by the S.S. guards to maintain order and discipline in the block. The distributed food and kept records on the prisoners. They had almost unlimited power over the prisoners, which usually took the form of continually hurrying, beating them, and imposing arbitrary punishments.

<sup>8</sup> *Keine Angst* — “No fear!” or “Don’t worry about them!”

<sup>9</sup> *Was ist los?* — “What’s up?”

“Come along then, grab your coat! We’re short of a few men. I’ve already told the Kapo,”<sup>10</sup> and he shoves me out of the barracks door.

We line up. Someone has marked down our numbers, someone up ahead yells, “March, March,” and now we are running towards the gate, accompanied by the shouts of a multilingual throng that is already being pushed back to the barracks. Not everybody is lucky enough to be going on the ramp . . . We have almost reached the gate. *Links, zwei, drei, vier! Mützen ab!*<sup>11</sup> Erect, arms stretched stiffly along our hips, we march past the gate briskly, smartly, almost gracefully. A sleepy S.S. man with a large pad in his hand checks us off, waving us ahead in groups of five.

“*Hundert!*” he calls after we have all passed.

“*Stimmt!*” comes a hoarse answer from out front.

We march fast, almost at a run. There are guards all around, young men with automatics. We pass Camp II B,<sup>12</sup> then some deserted barracks and a clump of unfamiliar green—apple and pear trees. We cross the circle of watchtowers and, running, burst on to the highway. We have arrived. Just a few more yards. There, surrounded by trees, is the ramp.

A cheerful little station, very much like any other provincial railway stop: a small square framed by tall chestnuts and paved with yellow gravel. Not far off, beside the road, squats a tiny wooden shed, uglier and more flimsy than the ugliest and flimsiest railway shack; farther along lie stacks of old rails, heaps of wooden beams, barracks parts, bricks, paving stones. This is where they load freight for Birkenau: supplies for the construction of the camp, and people for the gas chambers. Trucks drive around, load up lumber, cement, people—a regular daily routine.

And now the guards are being posted along the rails, across the beams, in the green shade of the Silesian chestnuts, to form a tight circle around the ramp. They wipe the sweat from their faces and sip out of their canteens. It is unbearably hot; the sun stands motionless at its zenith.

“Fall out!”

We sit down in the narrow streaks of shade along the stacked rails. The hungry Greeks (several of them managed to come along, God only knows how) rummage underneath the rails. One of them finds some pieces of mildewed bread, another a few half-rotten sardines. They eat.

“*Schweinedreck,*”<sup>13</sup> spits a young, tall guard with corn-colored hair and dreamy blue eyes.

“For God’s sake, any minute you’ll have so much food to stuff down your guts, you’ll bust!” He adjusts his gun, wipes his face with a handkerchief.

“Hey you, fatsol!” His boot lightly touches Henri’s shoulder. “*Pass mal auf,*”<sup>14</sup> want a drink?”

“Sure, but I haven’t got any marks,” replies the Frenchman with a professional air.

“*Schade,* too bad.”

“Come, come, Herr Posten, isn’t my word good enough any more? Haven’t we done business before? How much?”

“One hundred. *Gemacht?*”<sup>15</sup>

“*Gemacht.*”

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<sup>10</sup> *Kapo* — A prisoner who was assigned by the S.S. guards to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks.

<sup>11</sup> *Links, zwei, drei, vier! Mützen ab* — “Left, two, three four! Hats off!”

<sup>12</sup> *Camp II B* — This is Auschwitz II-Birkenau, constructed when the Auschwitz camp couldn’t handle all the people sent there. It was designed to hold 125,000 prisoners at a time.

<sup>13</sup> *Schweinedreck* — Pig shit

<sup>14</sup> *Pass mal auf* — “Watch out!”

<sup>15</sup> *Gemacht?* — “Done?” — asking if the deal can be made.

We drink the water, lukewarm and tasteless. It will be paid for by the people who have not yet arrived.

“Now you be careful,” says Henri, turning to me. He tosses away the empty bottle. It strikes the rails and bursts into tiny fragments. “Don’t take any money, they might be checking. Anyway, who the hell needs money? You’ve got enough to eat. Don’t take suits, either, or they’ll think you’re planning to escape. Just get a shirt, silk only, with a collar. And a vest. And if you find something to drink, don’t bother calling me. I know how to shift for myself, but you watch your step or they’ll let you have it.”

“Do they beat you up here?”

“Naturally. You’ve got to have eyes in your ass. *Arschaugen*.”<sup>16</sup>

Around us sit the Greeks, their jaws working greedily, like huge human insects. They munch on stale lumps of bread. They are restless, wondering what will happen next. The sight of the large beams and the stacks of rails has them worried. They dislike carrying heavy loads.

“*Was wir arbeiten?*”<sup>17</sup> they ask.

“*Niks. Transport kommen, alles Krematorium, compris?*”<sup>18</sup>

“*Alles verstehen,*” they answer in crematorium Esperanto. All is well—they will not have to move the heavy rails or carry the beams.

In the meantime, the ramp has become increasingly alive with activity, increasingly noisy. 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. They receive instructions on how to proceed most efficiently. Motorcycles drive up, delivering S.S. officers, bemedalled, glittering with brass, beefy men with highly polished boots and shiny, brutal faces. Some have brought their briefcases, others hold thin, flexible whips. This gives them an air of military readiness and agility. They walk in and out of the commissary—for the miserable little shack by the road serves as their commissary, where in the summertime they drink mineral water, *Studentenquelle*, and where in winter they can warm up with a glass of hot wine. They greet each other in the state-approved way, raising an arm Roman fashion, then shake hands cordially, exchange warm smiles, discuss mail from home, their children, their families. Some stroll majestically on the ramp. The silver squares on their collars glitter, the gravel crunches under their boots, their bamboo whips snap impatiently.

We lie against the rails in the narrow streaks of shade, breathe unevenly, occasionally exchange a few words in our various tongues, and gaze listlessly at the majestic men in green uniforms, at the green trees, and at the church steeple of a distant village.

“The transport is coming,” somebody says. We spring to our feet, all eyes turn in one direction. Around the bend, one after another, the cattle cars begin rolling in. The train backs into the station, a conductor leans out, waves his hand, blows a whistle. The locomotive whistles back with a shrieking noise, puffs, 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!”—weary, desperate cries.

Heads push through the windows, mouths gasp frantically for air. They draw a few breaths, then disappear; others come in their place, then also disappear. The cries and moans grow louder.

A man in a green uniform covered with more glitter than any of the others jerks his head impatiently, his lips twist in annoyance. He inhales deeply, then with a rapid gesture throws his cigarette away and signals to the guard. The guard removes the automatic from his shoulder, aims, sends a series of shots along the train. All is

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<sup>16</sup> *Arschaugen* — literally “ass eyes.”

<sup>17</sup> *Was wir arbeiten?* — “What is the work?”

<sup>18</sup> *Niks. Transport kommen, alles Krematorium, compris?* — “Nothing. Transport coming in, all for the crematorium, understand?”

quiet now. Meanwhile, the trucks have arrived, steps are being drawn up, and the Canada men stand ready at their posts by the train doors. The S.S. officer with the briefcase raises his hand.

“Whoever takes gold, or anything at all besides food, will be shot for stealing Reich property. Understand? *Verstanden?*”

“*Jawohl!*” we answer eagerly.

“*Also los! Begin!*”

The bolts crack, the doors fall open. A wave of fresh air rushes inside the train. People . . . inhumanly crammed, buried under incredible heaps of luggage, suitcases, trunks, packages, crates, bundles of every description (everything that had been their past and was to start their future). Monstrously squeezed together, they have fainted from heat, suffocated, crushed one another. Now they push towards the opened doors, breathing like fish cast out on the sand.

“Attention! Out, and take your luggage with you! Take out everything. Pile all your stuff near the exits. Yes, your coats too. It is summer. March to the left. Understand?”

“Sir, what’s going to happen to us?” They jump from the train on to the gravel, anxious, worn-out.

“Where are you people from?”

“*Sosnowiec-Bedzin*. Sir, what’s going to happen to us?” They repeat the question stubbornly, gazing into our tired eyes.

“I don’t know, I don’t understand Polish.”

It is the camp law: people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. This is the only permissible form of charity. The heat is tremendous. The sun hangs directly over our heads, the white, hot sky quivers, the air vibrates, an occasional breeze feels like a sizzling blast from a furnace. Our lips are parched, the mouth fills with the salty taste of blood, the body is weak and heavy from lying in the sun. Water!

A huge, multicolored wave of people loaded down with luggage pours from the train 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.

“But please, sir, it’s for the sun, I cannot . . .”

“*Verboten!*” one of us barks through clenched teeth. There is an S.S. man standing behind your back, calm, efficient, watchful.

“*Meine Herrschaften*, this way, ladies and gentlemen, try not to throw your things around, please. Show some goodwill,” he says courteously, his restless hands playing with the slender whip.

“Of course, of course,” they answer as they pass, and now they walk alongside the train somewhat more cheerfully. A woman reaches down quickly to pick up her handbag. The whip flies, the woman screams, stumbles, and falls under the feet of the surging crowd. Behind her, a child cries in a thin little voice “*Mamele!*”—a very small girl with tangled black curls.

The heaps grow. Suitcases, bundles, blankets, coats, handbags that open as they fall, spilling coins, gold, watches; mountains of bread pile up at the exits, heaps of marmalade, jams, masses of meat, sausages; sugar spills on the gravel. Trucks, loaded with people, start up with a deafening roar and drive off amidst the wailing and screaming of the women separated from their children, and the stupefied silence of the men left behind. They are the ones who had been ordered to step to the right—the healthy and the young who will go to the camp. In the end, they too will not escape death, but first they must work.

Trucks leave and return, without interruption, as on a monstrous conveyor belt. A Red Cross van drives back and forth, back and forth, incessantly: it transports the gas that will kill these people. The enormous cross on the hood, red as blood, seems to dissolve in the sun.

The Canada men at the trucks cannot stop for a single moment, even to catch their breath. They shove the people up the steps, pack them in tightly, sixty per truck, more or less. Nearby stands a young, clean-shaven “gentleman,” an S.S. officer with a notebook in his hand. For each departing truck he enters a mark; sixteen gone means one thousand people, more or less. The gentleman is calm, precise. No truck can leave without a signal from him, or a mark in his notebook: *Ordnung muss sein*.<sup>19</sup> The marks swell into thousands, the thousands into whole transports, which afterwards we shall simply call “from Salonica,” “from Strasbourg,” “from Rotterdam.” This one will be called “Sosnowiec-Bedzin.” The new prisoners from Sosnowiec-Bedzin will receive serial numbers 131-2—thousand, of course, though afterwards we shall simply say 131-2, for short.

The transports swell into weeks, months, years. When the war is over, they will count up the marks in their notebooks—all four and a half million of them. The bloodiest battle of the war, the greatest victory of the strong, united Germany. *Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer*<sup>20</sup> — and four crematoria.

The train has been emptied. A thin, pock-marked S.S. man peers inside, shakes his head in disgust and motions to our group, pointing his finger at the door.

“*Rein*. Clean it up!”

We climb inside. In the corners amid human excrement and abandoned wrist-watches lie squashed, trampled infants, naked little monsters with enormous heads and bloated bellies. We carry them out like chickens, holding several in each hand.

“Don’t take them to the trucks, pass them on to the women,” says the S.S. man, lighting a cigarette. His cigarette lighter is not working properly; he examines it carefully.

“Take them, for God’s sake!” I explode as the women run from me in horror, covering their eyes.

The name of God sounds strangely pointless, since the women and the infants will go on the trucks, every one of them, without exception. We all know what this means, and we look at each other with hate and horror.

“What, you don’t want to take them?” asks the pock-marked S.S. man with a note of surprise and reproach in his voice, and reaches for his revolver.

“You mustn’t shoot, I’ll carry them.” A tall, grey-haired woman takes the little corpses out of my hands and for an instant gazes straight into my eyes.

“My poor boy,” she whispers and smiles at me. Then she walks away, staggering along the path. I lean against the side of the train. I am terribly tired. Someone pulls at my sleeve.

“*En avant*, to the rails, come on!”

I look up, but the face swims before my eyes, dissolves, huge and transparent, melts into the motionless trees and the sea of people . . . I blink rapidly: Henri.

“Listen, Henri, are we good people?”

“That’s stupid. Why do you ask?”

“You see, my friend, you see, I don’t know why, but I am furious, simply furious with these people—furious because I must be here because of them. I feel no pity. I am not sorry they’re going to the gas chamber. Damn them all! I could throw myself at them, beat them with my fists. It must be pathological, I just can’t understand . . .”

“Ah, on the contrary, it is natural, predictable, calculated. The ramp exhausts you, you rebel—and the easiest way to relieve your hate is to turn against someone weaker. Why, I’d even call it healthy. It’s simple logic, *compris*?” He props himself up comfortably against the heap of rails. “Look at the Greeks, they know how to make

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<sup>19</sup> *Ordnung muss sein* — “Order must be maintained.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer* — “One Empire, one Nation, one Leader”

the best of it! They stuff their bellies with anything they find. One of them has just devoured a full jar of marmalade.”

“Pigs! Tomorrow half of them will die of the shits.”

“Pigs? You’ve been hungry.”

“Pigs!” I repeat furiously. I close my eyes. The air is filled with ghastly cries, the earth trembles beneath me, I can feel sticky moisture on my eyelids. My throat is completely dry.

The morbid procession streams on and on—trucks growl like mad dogs. I shut my eyes tight, but I can still see corpses dragged from the train, trampled infants, cripples piled on top of the dead, wave after wave . . . freight cars roll in, the heaps of clothing, suitcases and bundles grow, people climb out, look at the sun, take a few breaths, beg for water, get into the trucks, drive away. And again freight cars roll in, again people . . . The scenes become confused in my mind—I am not sure if all of this is actually happening, or if I am dreaming. There is a humming inside my head; I feel that I must vomit.

Henri tugs at my arm.

“Don’t sleep, we’re off to load up the loot.”

All the people are gone. In the distance, the last few trucks roll along the road in clouds of dust, the train has left, several S.S. officers promenaded up and down the ramp. The silver glitters on their collars. Their boots shine, their red, beefy faces shine. Among them there is a woman—only now I realize she has been here all along—withered, flat-chested, bony, her thin, colorless hair pulled back and tied in a “Nordic” knot; her hands are in the pockets of her wide skirt. With a rat-like, resolute smile glued on her thin lips she sniffs around the corners of the ramp. She detests feminine beauty with the hatred of a woman who is herself repulsive, and knows it. Yes, I have seen her many times before and I know her well: she is the commandant of the F.K.L.<sup>21</sup> She has come to look over the new crop of women, for some of them, instead of going on the trucks, will go on foot—to the concentration camp. There our boys, the barbers from Zauna,<sup>22</sup> will shave their heads and will have a good laugh at their “outside world” modesty.

We proceed to load the loot. We lift huge trunks, heave them on to the trucks. There they are arranged in stacks, packed tightly. Occasionally somebody slashes one open with a knife, for pleasure or in search of vodka and perfume. One of the crates falls open; suits, shirts, books drop out on the ground . . . I pick up a small, heavy package. I unwrap it—gold, about two handfuls, bracelets, rings, brooches, diamonds . . .

“*Gib hier,*” an S.S. man says calmly, holding up his briefcase already full of gold and colorful foreign currency. He locks the case, hands it to an officer, takes another, an empty one, and stands by the next truck, waiting. The gold will go to the Reich.

It is hot, terribly hot. Our throats are dry, each word hurts. Anything for a sip of water! Faster, faster, so that it is over, so that we may rest. At last we are done, all the trucks have gone. Now we swiftly clean up the remaining dirt: there must be “no trace left of the *Schweinerei*.” But just as the last truck disappears behind the trees and we walk, finally, to rest in the shade, a shrill whistle sounds around the bend. Slowly, terribly slowly, a train rolls in, the engine whistles back with a deafening shriek. Again weary, pale faces at the windows, flat as though cut out of paper, with huge, feverishly burning eyes. Already trucks are pulling up, already the composed gentleman with the notebook is at his post, and the S.S. men emerge from the commissary carrying briefcases for the gold and money. We unseal the train doors.

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<sup>21</sup> *commandant of the F.K.L.* — see note on p. 1 — Women’s camps were supervised by a so-called SS female overseer (*SS-Aufseherin*). Women could not be members of the SS; female overseers worked as private civilian contractors for the SS.

<sup>22</sup> *Zauna* — The Sauna. Incoming prisoners who were deemed fit for work were “sanitized” and sent here, where they were disinfected, shaved, and stripped of their clothing and valuables. They were then given a camp uniform and tattooed with a number to replace their name.

It is impossible to control oneself any longer. Brutally we tear suitcases from their hands, impatiently pull off their coats. Go on, go on, vanish! They go, they vanish. Men, women, children. Some of them know.

Here is a woman—she walks quickly, but tries to appear calm. A small child with a pink cherub's face runs after her and, unable to keep up, stretches out his little arms and cries:

“Mama! Mama!”

“Pick up your child, woman!”

“It's not mine, sir, not mine!” she shouts hysterically and runs on, covering her face with her hands. She wants to hide, she wants to reach those who will not ride the trucks, those who will go on foot, those who will stay alive. She is young, healthy, good-looking, she wants to live.

But the child runs after her, wailing loudly: “Mama, mama, don't leave me!”

“It's not mine, not mine, no!”

Andrei, a sailor from Sevastopol, grabs hold of her. His eyes are glassy from vodka and the heat. With one powerful blow he knocks her off her feet, then, as she falls, takes her by the hair and pulls her up again. His face twitches with rage.

“Ah, you bloody Jewess. So you're running from your own child! I'll show you, you whore!” His huge hand chokes her, he lifts her in the air and heaves her on to the truck like a heavy sack of grain.

“Here! And take this with you, bitch!” and he throws the child at her feet.

“*Gut gemacht*, good work. That's the way to deal with degenerate mothers,” says the S.S. man standing at the foot of the truck. “*Gut, gut, Russki.*”

“Shut your mouth,” growls Andrei through clenched teeth, and walks away. From under a pile of rags he pulls out a canteen, unscrews the cork, takes a few deep swallows, passes it to me. The strong vodka burns the throat. My head swims, my legs are shaky, again I feel like throwing up.

And suddenly, above the teeming crowd pushing forward like a river driven by an unseen power, a girl appears. She descends lightly from the train, hops on to the gravel, looks around inquiringly, as if somewhat surprised. Her soft, blonde hair has fallen on her shoulders in a torrent, she throws it back impatiently. With a natural gesture she runs her hands down her blouse, casually straightens her skirt. She stands like this for an instant, gazing at the crowd, then turns and with a gliding look examines our faces, as though searching for someone. Unknowingly, I continue to stare at her, until our eyes meet.

“Listen, tell me, where are they taking us?”

I look at her without saying a word. Here, standing before me, is a girl, a girl with enchanting blonde hair, with beautiful breasts, wearing a little cotton blouse, a girl with a wise, mature look in her eyes. Here she stands, gazing straight into my face, waiting. And over there is the gas chamber: communal death, disgusting and ugly. And over in the other direction is the concentration camp: the shaved head, the heavy Soviet trousers in sweltering heat, the sickening, stale odor of dirty, damp female bodies, the animal hunger, the inhuman labor, and later the same gas chamber, only an even more hideous, more terrible death . . .

Why did she bring it? I think to myself, noticing a lovely gold watch on her delicate wrist. They'll take it away from her anyway.

“Listen, tell me,” she repeats.

I remain silent. Her lips tighten.

“I know,” she says with a shade of proud contempt in her voice, tossing her head. She walks off resolutely in the direction of the trucks. Someone tries to stop her; she boldly pushes him aside and runs up the steps. In the distance I can only catch a glimpse of her blonde hair flying in the breeze.

I go back inside the train; I carry out dead infants; I unload luggage. I touch corpses, but I cannot overcome the mounting, uncontrollable terror. I try to escape from the corpses, but they are everywhere: lined up on the gravel, on the cement edge of the ramp, inside the cattle cars. Babies, hideous naked women, men twisted by convulsions. I run off as far as I can go, but immediately a whip slashes across my back. Out of the corner of my eye I see an S.S. man, swearing profusely. I stagger forward and run, lose myself in the Canada group. Now, at last, I can once more rest against the stack of rails. The sun has leaned low over the horizon and illuminates the ramp with a reddish glow; the shadows of the trees have become elongated, ghostlike. In the silence that settles over nature at this time of day, the human cries seem to rise all the way to the sky.

Only from this distance does one have a full view of the inferno on the teeming ramp. I see a pair of human beings who have fallen to the ground locked in a last desperate embrace. The man has dug his fingers into the woman's flesh and has caught her clothing with his teeth. She screams hysterically, swears, cries, until at last a large boot comes down over her throat and she is silent. They are pulled apart and dragged like cattle to the truck. I see four Canada men lugging a corpse: a huge, swollen female corpse. Cursing, dripping wet from the strain, they kick out of their way some stray children who have been running all over the ramp, howling like dogs. The men pick them up by the collars, heads, arms, and toss them inside the trucks, on top of the heaps. The four men have trouble lifting the fat corpse on to the car, they call others for help, and all together they hoist up the mound of meat. Big, swollen, puffed-up corpses are being collected from all over the ramp; on top of them are piled the invalids, the smothered, the sick, the unconscious. The heap seethes, howls, groans. The driver starts the motor, the truck begins rolling.

"Halt! Halt!" an S.S. man yells after them. "Stop, damn you!"

They are dragging to the truck an old man wearing tails and a band around his arm. His head knocks against the gravel and pavement; he moans and wails in an uninterrupted monotone: "*Ich will mit dem Herrn Kommandanten sprechen*—I wish to speak with the commandant . . ." With senile stubbornness he keeps repeating these words all the way. Thrown on the truck, trampled by others, choked, he still wails: "*Ich will mit dem . . .*"

"Look here, old man!" a young S.S. man calls, laughing jovially. "In half an hour you'll be talking with the top commandant! Only don't forget to greet him with a Heil Hitler!"

Several other men are carrying a small girl with only one leg. They hold her by the arms and the one leg. Tears are running down her face and she whispers faintly: "Sir, it hurts, it hurts . . ." They throw her on the truck on top of the corpses. She will burn alive along with them.

The evening has come, cool and clear. The stars are out. We lie against the rails. It is incredibly quiet. Anemic bulbs hang from the top of the high lamp-posts; beyond the circle of light stretches an impenetrable darkness. Just one step, and a man could vanish forever. But the guards are watching, their automatics ready.

"Did you get the shoes?" asks Henri.

"No."

"Why?"

"My God, man, I am finished, absolutely finished!"

"So soon? After only two transports? Just look at me, I . . . since Christmas, at least a million people have passed through my hands. The worst of all are the transports from around Paris—one is always bumping into friends."

"And what do you say to them?"

"That first they will have a bath, and later we'll meet at the camp. What would you say?"

I do not answer. We drink coffee with vodka; somebody opens a tin of cocoa and mixes it with sugar. We scoop it up by the handful, the cocoa sticks to the lips. Again coffee, again vodka.

"Henri, what are we waiting for?"

“There’ll be another transport.”

“I’m not going to unload it! I can’t take any more.”

“So, it’s got you down? Canada is nice, eh?” Henri grins indulgently and disappears into the darkness. In a moment he is back again.

“All right. Just sit here quietly and don’t let an S.S. man see you. I’ll try to find you your shoes.”

“Just leave me alone. Never mind the shoes.” I want to sleep. It is very late.

Another whistle, another transport. Freight cars emerge out of the darkness, pass under the lamp-posts, and again vanish in the night. The ramp is small, but the circle of lights is smaller. The unloading will have to be done gradually. Somewhere the trucks are growling. They back up against the steps, black, ghostlike, their searchlights flash across the trees. *Wasser! Luft!* The same all over again, like a late showing of the same film: a volley of shots, the train falls silent. Only this time a little girl pushes herself halfway through the small window and, losing her balance, falls out onto the gravel. Stunned, she lies still for a moment, then stands up and begins walking around in a circle, faster and faster, waving her rigid arms in the air, breathing loudly and spasmodically, whining in a faint voice. Her mind has given way in the inferno inside the train. The whining is hard on the nerves: an S.S. man approaches calmly, his heavy boot strikes between her shoulders. She falls. Holding her down with his foot, he draws his revolver, fires once, then again. She remains face down, kicking the gravel with her feet, until she stiffens. They proceed to unseal the train.

I am back on the ramp, standing by the doors. A warm, sickening smell gushes from inside. The mountain of people filling the car almost halfway up to the ceiling is motionless, horribly tangled, but still steaming.

“*Ausladen!*” comes the command. An S.S. man steps out from the darkness. Across his chest hangs a portable searchlight. He throws a stream of light inside.

“Why are you standing about like sheep? Start unloading!”

His whip flies and falls across our backs. I seize a corpse by the hand; the fingers close tightly around mine. I pull back with a shriek and stagger away. My heart pounds, jumps up to my throat. I can no longer control the nausea. Hunched under the train I begin to vomit. Then, like a drunk, I weave over to the stack of rails.

I lie against the cool, kind metal and dream about returning to the camp, about my bunk, on which there is no mattress, about sleep among comrades who are not going to the gas tonight. Suddenly I see the camp as a haven of peace. It is true, others may be dying, but one is somehow still alive, one has enough food, enough strength to work . . .

The lights on the ramp flicker with a spectral glow, the wave of people—feverish, agitated, stupefied people—flows on and on, endlessly. They think that now they will have to face a new life in the camp, and they prepare themselves emotionally for the hard struggle ahead. They do not know that in just a few moments they will die, that the gold, money, and diamonds which they have so prudently hidden in their clothing and on their bodies are now useless to them. Experienced professionals will probe into every recess of their flesh, will pull the gold from under the tongue and the diamonds from the uterus and the colon. They will rip out gold teeth. In tightly sealed crates they will ship them to Berlin.

The S.S. men’s black figures move about, dignified, businesslike. The gentleman with the notebook puts down his final marks, rounds out the figures: fifteen thousand.

Many, very many, trucks have been driven to the crematoria today.

It is almost over. The dead are being cleared off the ramp and piled into the last truck. The Canada men, weighed down under a load of bread, marmalade and sugar, and smelling of perfume and fresh linen, line up to go. For several days the entire camp will live off this transport. For several days the entire camp will talk about “Sosnowiec-Bedzin.”

“Sosnowiec-Bedzin” was a good, rich transport.

The stars are already beginning to pale as we walk back to the camp. The sky grows translucent and opens high above our heads—it is getting light.

Great columns of smoke rise from the crematoria and merge up above into a huge black river which very slowly floats across the sky over Birkenau and disappears beyond the forests in the direction of Trzebinia.<sup>23</sup> The “Sosnowiec-Bedzin” transport is already burning.

We pass a heavily armed S.S. detachment on its way to change guard. The men march briskly, in step, shoulder to shoulder, one mass, one will.

“*Und morgen die ganze Welt . . .*”<sup>24</sup> they sing at the top of their lungs.

“*Rechts ran!* To the right march!” snaps a command from up front. We move out of their way.

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<sup>23</sup> *Trzebinia* — A small town about 11 miles northeast of Auschwitz II-Birkenau and about 25 miles west of Kraków, the former capital of Poland.

<sup>24</sup> *Und morgen die ganze Welt* — “And tomorrow the whole world” — A line from a popular Nazi song, “*Es zittern die morschen Knochen.*” It’s part of a repeating couplet: “Today Germany belongs to us / And tomorrow the whole world.”