

**THIS WAY FOR THE GAS,
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN**

T A D E U S Z B O R O W S K I

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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'Ah, it's you! Want to buy anything? If you've got some apples ...'

'No, I haven't any apples for you,' I replied affectionately. 'So, you're still alive, Abbie? And what's new with you?'

'Not much. Just gassed up a Czech transport.'

'That I know. I mean personally?'

'Personally? What sort of "personally" is there for me? The oven, the barracks, back to the oven... Have I got anybody around here? Well, if you really want to know what "personally"—we've figured out a new way to burn people. Want to hear about it?'

I indicated polite interest.

'Well then, you take four little kids with plenty of hair on their heads, then stick the heads together and light the hair. The rest burns by itself and in no time at all the whole business is *gemacht*.'

'Congratulations,' I said drily and with very little enthusiasm.

He burst out laughing and with a strange expression looked right into my eyes.

'Listen, doctor, here in Auschwitz we must entertain ourselves in every way we can. Otherwise, who could stand it?'

And putting his hands in his pockets he walked away without saying goodbye.

But this is a monstrous lie, a grotesque lie, like the whole camp, like the whole world.

The Death of Schillinger

Until 1943, First Sergeant Schillinger performed the duties of Lagerführer, or chief commanding officer of labour sector 'D' at Birkenau, which was part of the enormous complex of large and small concentration camps, centrally administered from Auschwitz, but scattered throughout Upper Silesia.

Schillinger was a short, stocky man. He had a full, round face and very light blond hair, brushed flat against his head. His eyes were blue, always slightly narrowed, his lips tight, and his face was usually set in an impatient grimace. He cared little about personal appearance, and I have never heard of an incident involving his being bribed by any of the camp 'bigwigs'.

Schillinger reigned over sector 'D' with an iron hand. Never resting for a moment, he bicycled up and down the camp roads, always popping up unexpectedly where he was least wanted.

His arm could strike a blow as hard as a metal bar; he

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could crack a jaw or crush the life out of a man with no apparent effort.

His vigilance was untiring. Each of his frequent visits to the other sectors of Birkenau spread panic among the women, the gypsies, or the 'aristocracy' of the *Effektenkammer*, Birkenau's wealthiest section, where the riches taken from the gas victims were stored. He also supervised the Kommandos working within the great circle of the watch-towers, and without warning he would inspect the prisoners' suits, the Kapos' shoes, or the S.S. guards' sacks. Furthermore, he visited the crematoria regularly and liked to watch people being shoved into the gas chambers. His name was usually linked with the names of Palitsch, Krankenmann, and many other Auschwitz murderers who boasted that they had personally succeeded in killing with the fist, the club, or the revolver, at least ten thousand people each.

In August 1943, we heard the news that Schillinger had died suddenly in some very unusual circumstances. Various allegedly truthful but in fact conflicting versions of the incident circulated around the camp. I myself was inclined to believe the *Sonderkommando* foreman who, sitting on my bunk one afternoon while waiting for a shipment of evaporated milk to come in from the gypsy camp warehouses, told me the following story about the death of First Sergeant Schillinger:

'On Sunday, after the midday roll-call, Schillinger came to the cremo courtyard to visit our chief. The chief was busy, as the first truckloads of the Będzin transport had just been brought over from the loading ramp.

'Surely you realize, my friend, that to unload a transport, to see that everyone gets undressed and then to drive them inside the gas chamber, is hard work that requires, if I may say so, a great deal of tact. Anybody knows that until the people are safely inside, with the doors bolted, you

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mustn't gape at their junk, or rummage through it, or much less paw the nude women. The very fact, you see, that the women are made to strip naked alongside the men is a considerable shock to the new arrivals. Therefore you work with systematic haste, emphasizing the pressure of duties which supposedly must be performed inside the false bath-houses. And, in fact, you really do have to make it snappy if you're to gas one transport and clean away the corpses before the next one arrives.'

The foreman raised himself a bit, propped a pillow under his rear-end, threw his legs over the side of the bunk, and lighting a cigarette went on:

'So, if you get the picture, my friend, we had the Będzin transport on our hands. These Jews, they knew very well what was coming. The *Sonderkommando* boys were pretty nervous too; some of them came from those parts. There have been cases of meeting relatives or friends. I myself had ...'

'I didn't know you came from around there ... Can't tell by the way you talk.'

'I once took a teacher's training course in Warsaw. About fifteen years ago, I reckon. Then I taught at the Będzin school. I had an offer to go abroad, but I didn't want to go. Family and all that. So there you are ...'

'So there you are.'

'It was a restless transport—these weren't the traders from Holland or France who only thought of how they'd start doing business with the Auschwitz rich. Our Polish Jews knew what was up. And so the whole place swarmed with S.S., and Schillinger, seeing what was going on, drew his revolver. But everything would have gone smoothly except that Schillinger had taken a fancy to a certain body—and, indeed, she had a classic figure. That's what he had come to see the chief about, I suppose. So he walked up to the woman and took her by the hand. But the naked

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woman bent down suddenly, scooped up a handful of gravel and threw it in his face, and when Schillinger cried out in pain and dropped his revolver, the woman snatched it up and fired several shots into his abdomen. The whole place went wild. The naked crowd turned on us, screaming. The woman fired once again, this time at the chief, wounding his face. Then the chief as well as the S.S. men made off, leaving us quite alone. But we managed, thank God. We drove them all right into the chamber with clubs, bolted the doors and called the S.S. to administer Cyclone B. After all, we've had time to acquire some experience.'

'Well, *ja*, naturally.'

'Schillinger was lying face down, clawing the dirt in pain with his fingers. We lifted him off the ground and carried him—not too gently—to a car. On the way he kept groaning through clenched teeth: "*O Gott, mein Gott, was hab' ich getan, dass ich so leiden muss?*", which means—O God, my God, what have I done to deserve such suffering?'

'That man didn't understand even to the very end,' I said, shaking my head. 'What strange irony of fate.'

'What strange irony of fate,' repeated the foreman thoughtfully.

True, what strange irony of fate. When, shortly before the camp was evacuated, the same *Sonderkommando*, anticipating liquidation, staged a revolt in the crematoria, set fire to the buildings and, snipping the barbed-wire, ran for the open fields, several S.S. guards turned the machine guns on them and killed every one—without exception.

The Man with the Package

Our *Schreiber* was a Jew from Lublin who came to Auschwitz an already experienced prisoner with a few years at Majdanek behind him. Finding a close friend in the *Sonderkommando* (a tremendously influential group in the camp because it had access to the riches at the crematoria), he immediately started playing sick and had no trouble at all getting into the *K.B. zwei*—our name for Birkenau's hospital section, an abbreviation of *Krankenbau II*, and there he obtained the excellent position of *Schreiber*. A *Schreiber*, instead of bending over a spade all day, or hauling sacks of cement on an empty stomach, did clerical work. He was the object of everybody's envy and his job was competed for by the 'bigwigs' who were always trying to secure good spots for their own people. A *Schreiber* escorted patients in and out of the hospital, supervised the block's roll-call, kept the patients' records, and took part indirectly in the selection of the Jews destined for the gas chamber, which in the autumn of 1943 took place

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approximately once every two weeks in all the sections of our camp. For a *Schreiber*, assisted by the orderlies, led the patients to the *Waschraum*, and from there they were driven at night to one of the four crematoria which at that time still operated in shifts. Then, some time in November, our *Schreiber* suddenly went down with a fever and, if I am not mistaken, a bad case of the flu, and, being the only Jew in the block, he was marked in the first selection *zur besonderen Behandlung*, that is, for the gas chamber.

Right after the selection, our senior orderly, whom we politely addressed as 'Block Elder', went to Block 14, which was occupied almost entirely by Jewish patients, to arrange for our *Schreiber* to be delivered there first, so sparing us the unpleasant duty of having to escort him separately to the *Waschraum*.

'We are transferring him to fourteen, Doctor, *verstehen?*' he said, when he returned, turning to the head doctor who sat at the table with his stethoscope hanging from his ears, carefully examining a newly arrived patient, and slowly, laboriously, writing the data on his medical card. The doctor shrugged without interrupting his work.

Our *Schreiber*, squatting in the upper bunk, was carefully tying a string around a cardboard box in which he kept his Czech boots, laced to the knee, a spoon, a knife and a pencil, as well as some bacon, a few rolls and fruit that he had received from the patients in exchange for various favours rendered. Actually this was a fairly common practice among the Jewish doctors and orderlies at the K.B., since, after all, unlike the Poles, they could not receive packages. In fact, the Poles at the K.B., though they did have help from home, also took tobacco and food from the patients.

In the bunk next to the *Schreiber's*, an elderly major of the Polish army was playing a solitary game of chess, his thumbs over his ears; he had been kept in the hospital for

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almost five months, God only knows why. Below him, the nightwatchman lazily urinated into a bedpan and immediately dived back under the blanket. Coughs and wheezing could be heard from the other rooms; bacon sizzled on the little stove; it was stifflingly hot and very humid, as always towards evening.

The *Schreiber* scrambled off the bunk holding his package in his hand. The Block Elder quickly threw him a blanket and told him to put on his sandals. They left the barracks. From our window we saw that in front of No. 14 the Block Elder pulled off the *Schreiber's* blanket, took away his sandals and patted him on the back. Then our *Schreiber*—now wearing nothing but his nightshirt that billowed out in the wind—walked into Block 14, escorted by another orderly.

It was late evening, long after the patients had received their rations, their tea and their packages, when the orderlies finally started leading the Muslims out of the block, lining them up by the door five in a row, and pulling off their blankets and sandals. The S.S. man on duty appeared and told the orderlies to form a chain by the *Waschraum* to make certain nobody escaped.

From the window we saw our *Schreiber* come out of No. 14 holding his package in his hand; he found his place in line and, urged on by the shouts of the orderlies, shuffled with the others to the bath-house.

'*Schauen Sie mal, Doktor*, look!' I called. The doctor removed his stethoscope, walked heavily to the window and put his hand on my shoulder. 'He could show a little more good sense, don't you think?' I asked.

It was turning dark outside; you could only distinguish the white nightshirts moving against the blockhouses; the men's faces looked blurred. They turned to the left and disappeared from view. I noticed that the lamps went on over the barbed-wire fence.

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'He knows perfectly well—an old timer like him—' I went on, 'that within an hour or two he will go to the gas chamber, naked, without his shirt, and without his package. What an extraordinary attachment to the last bit of property! After all, he could have given it to someone. I know that I'd never ...'

'You think so, yes?' said the doctor indifferently. He took his hand off my shoulder, his jaws working as if he were sucking at a bad tooth.

'Forgive me, Doctor, but I feel certain that you too ...' I added.

The doctor came from Berlin, had a daughter and a wife in Argentina, and he would sometimes speak of himself as *wir Preussen*, with a smile that combined the bitterness of a Jew with the pride of a former Prussian officer.

'I don't know. I don't know what I would do if I were going to the gas chamber. I might also want to take along my package.'

He turned towards me with a shy smile. I noticed that he was very tired and looked as if he had not slept for days.

'I think that even if I was being led to the oven, I would still believe that something would surely happen along the way. Holding a package would be a little like holding somebody's hand, you see.'

He turned from the window, sat down behind the table, and asked that the next patient be brought in. He was preparing a shipment of 'cureds' to be sent back to camp the following day.

The sick Jews filled the *Waschraum* with shrieks and moans, and wanted to set fire to the buildings, but not one of them dared to touch the S.S. sanitation officer who was seated in the corner with his eyes closed, either pretending to be asleep or actually sleeping. A little later, heavy crematorium trucks drove up; several S.S. men entered and told the Jews to leave everything in the *Waschraum*. Then

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the orderlies began to shove them naked into the trucks until they were completely packed with huge masses of people. They were driven off in the glare of the floodlights, weeping and cursing their fate and desperately holding on to each other to keep from falling off.

I do not know why, but it was said later around the camp that the Jews who were driven to the gas chamber sang some soul-stirring Hebrew song which nobody could understand.