

## HOLOCAUST MEMOIR DIGEST

**Author:** Rudolf Vrba, with Alan Bestic

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**Title:** I Cannot Forgive

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Originally published in 1963, the result of a series of five articles published in March 1961 in the "Daily Herald", in London, England, published by Sidgwick and Jackson and Anthony Gibbs and Phillips. Editions also in German, French, Dutch, and Czech.

On writing the newspaper articles: "I was pleased to see that Bestic wrote shorthand faster than I spoke. He transcribed it on his old rickety typewriter. It sounded like machine gun fire. . . ." On the book: " It was probably the first book on this subject in England addressed to the general public rather than to specialists."

### **Focus:**

A young Slovak survives Majdanek, and Auschwitz, escaping with the news that the "unknown destination in the east" was in reality a death factory, Auschwitz; the Vrba-Wetzler report was the first to reach the West; the events described take place from March 1942 to September 1944.

### **Features:**

- Foreword Author's Preface, written by Rudolf Vrba, 22 September 1997.  
Preface written by Alan Bestic, October 1963.
- Photographs Photograph of Senior Sergeant Rudolf Vrba of the Czechoslovak Army Partisan Units, 1945, front cover.
- Documents Appendix One: Rudolf Vrba's deposition at the Adolf Eichmann Trial, 16 July 1961, pages 270-3.  
Appendix Two: Quotations from a report by SS Captain Kurt Gerstein on a gassing at Belzec, with introductory remarks by Rudolf Vrba, pages 274-8.  
Appendix Three: "The Extermination Camps of Auschwitz (Osweicim) and Birkenau in Upper Silesia" The statement given by Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler in Zilina, Slovakia, 25 April 1944, pages 279-317.
- Maps Martin Gilbert map of the Vrba/Wetzler escape route from Auschwitz to Slovakia, April 1944, page 392 and back cover.
- Afterword Epilogue written by Rudolf Vrba, pages 262-9.  
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"The Significance of the Vrba - Wetzler Report on Auschwitz-Birkenau" article written by John S. Conway, Professor of History, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B. C., Canada, pages 397-431.
- Appendix Appendix Four: "Major Post-War Trials of Auschwitz SS Officers" written by Rudolf Vrba, pages 318-21.  
Appendix Five: "The Role of the Holocaust in German Economy and Military Strategy During 1941-1945" article written by Rudolf Vrba, pages 323-33.  
Appendix Six: "The Preparations for the Holocaust in Hungary: An Eyewitness Account" article written by Rudolf Vrba, pages 335-91.

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#### **The coming of war**

(21-2) The Protectorate of Slovakia follows the Nazi laws: ". . . the laws curtailing our rights were introduced discreetly, falling almost imperceptibly around us, like gentle snow." The Jews are removed from schools, from better jobs, moved into ghettos, forced to wear the yellow star, then, deported.

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### **The coming of war**

(23-8) Early March 1942, Rudi leaves home to escape to England, makes it as far as Budapest, but without the ability to get false documents, he is told to return home and wait for the documents to be brought to him: "I realized then that I was dealing with men who were not only patient but courageous, too."

(28-33) Caught returning home from Budapest, he is beaten by the Hungarian border guards as a spy, then arrested by the Slovak border guards as a Jew: "I told them the truth. The guard who had picked me out of the mud frowned and said: 'So you don't want to go to a resettlement area. You don't want to work. You dirty, bloody, Yid, I should beat you so your mother wouldn't recognise you. But that's been done already!' "

(41-4) In Topolcany he is questioned by a gendarme who had noticed him wearing an extra pair of socks: "I stared at him, unable to speak. To me at that moment, he was not just a gendarme in a country town. He was the Hungarian frontier guards with their rifle butts. He was Novaky in all its dismal squallor. He was a train that had come from God knows where and was going to God knows where." Rudi is arrested and returned to Novaky.

### **Resistance, ghetto revolts, individual acts of courage and defiance**

(54-5) Coded messages sent to relatives: "In some were references to people who were dead or to events which could not possibly have happened; and it was these little nonsenses that made people worry and wonder. . . . The letters were written in Auschwitz at pistol point shortly before the writers died. They were written in order to inspire confidence among those yet to be transported, for the Nazis knew that the slightest resistance, created by fear of what lay ahead, could ruin the whole scheme. Sometimes, however, someone managed to slip in a concealed warning by stating the impossible, a tiny act of defiance that took courage; and the tragedy was that those who received these carefully phrased letters invariably managed to explain away discrepancies . . . perhaps because they wanted to believe in the resettlement areas."

(99) Rudi recognizes his seventeen-year-old cousin Eva from Topolcany at Auschwitz and calls out to her: "Her head turned and she gazed, puzzled, unbelieving at me. I saw her frown and then I saw her eyes flood with recognition and life flow into her taut, thin face. 'Rudi!' A whip rose and fell but Eva did not falter. I raised my hand and she raised hers in a gesture of splendid defiance; and, as she passed only ten yards away from me, she shouted once more. 'Good-bye, Rudi. Good-bye.' Again the whip, but it might as well have been a fly swat, for this was no ordinary girl. Her voice was not strong but it sang with courage. Here was no whine, no plea for pity. Here was the spirit of resistance, still smouldering on the edge of death."

(116) Sundays in Auschwitz: "Religious services of all kinds were forbidden. Those found celebrating them were put to death; yet, in spite of this, many brave priests, mostly Poles, held secret Masses for their faithful, and never lacked a congregation."

(142-4) In the Auschwitz hospital, among the patients: ". . . peaks of courage and islands of incredible dignity in this hell of sickness." And among the doctors: ". . . I remember feeling, not merely gratitude, but admiration for them, for even among the degradations of Auschwitz, most of them managed to retain their humanity and their professional integrity." Among those facing selection: "Some sagged, certain already that they were going to die; yet again I could sense their spirit, their dignity, their courage."

(161) While Josef Farber cures Rudi's typhus, Rudi learns: "Here in Auschwitz was an underground, a network, a striking force that had even the deputy kapos on its rolls!"

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### **Resistance, ghetto revolts, individual acts of courage and defiance**

(168-70) Fifteen members of Canada command are sent to the punishment block under suspicion of stealing valuables, among them are members of the underground: "The leaders of the underground were fully aware of the danger and took swift evasive action. They smuggled poison into Block Eleven and within a few hours the men in Block Eleven were dead. Rather than risk revealing the names of their comrades, they had committed suicide."

(170-2, 181) Transferred with the Canada command to Birkenau, Rudi meets resistance leaders Doctor Andreas Milar: "A man who could have evaded Auschwitz, had he kept his wallet open and his mouth shut.", deputy Block Senior of Block Twenty-seven David Schmulewski: "Yet still he was only thirty, tall, dark haired, strong and remarkably unscarred for a man who had been at war all his life.", and Fred Wetzler: "He was from my home town Trnava; and, though I had never spoken to him, for he was six years older than I was, I had always admired him . . ."

(175-6) Lubomir Bastar from Brno helps Rudi rise in the resistance ranks: ". . . soon I found I was being invited to Lubomir's private room, where the cream of the camp's Czech intellectuals gathered sometimes for supper. . . . These men could have had almost anything they liked, for the traffic in food was brisk. It was clear to me, however, that it would go against their grain to feast while others starved outside."

(176-7) The June 1943 typhus selection causes some reorganization at Birkenau, Rudi becomes an assistant Registrar: "It was essential for the underground . . . to have someone in the new camp who could act as a go-between; and, as Registrar, I would have to move from one camp to the other as part of my regular duties."

(184-7) The organization of resistance among the Czech Family Camp in anticipation of 7 March 1944: ". . . slowly I realized that only by fighting had any of them a chance to survive; then it would depend on how much support they got from other prisoners. How strong was the underground? And how willing? . . . Would these hardened prisoners, who had seen a million die in their time, risk everything for the sake of 4,000 Czechs?"

(189-93) Schmulewski gives Rudi the orders to pass on to the Czech Family Camp resistance: " 'Tell them we'll fight, if they fight, but that they must start it and start it well. Then call in Fredy and him the role he must play.' "

(258-60) Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel whom Rudi meets in Bratislava: "I had heard strange, romantic stories . . . how, single handed and under the noses of the Nazis, he had saved hundreds of Jews from deportation; how he was . . . a rare symbol of resistance."

### **Partisan activity**

(260-1) June 1944: "I went to members of the underground . . . 'My friends, I need a pistol. Some day a bright SS man is going to see through my false papers; and, when that happens, I don't want the argument to be one sided.' To my amazement and fury, they said sternly: 'We don't issue pistols to lads like you.' They grinned and added: 'We issue sub-machine guns!' " Rudi fights with the partisans under Sergeant Milan Uher in a successful attack on the SS in Stara Tura.

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### Deportation

(22) "It was only when the deportation laws were passed by the Government that I suddenly rebelled. . . . by State decree I became overnight a Jew, rather than a Slovak. . . . Young, able-bodied men would be the first to go . . . . It was only later, of course, that we learned the real motive was to remove the core of potential resistance."

(40-1) The Jews of Topolcany, his birthplace, prepare for deportation: "In the front garden there was furniture. Here were people about to be deported and as soon as they were gone, the authorities would auction the furniture for peppercorn prices and buy another Quisling by handing him over the house."

(45-6) Their train reaches the Slovak/Polish border: "There the Slovak Hlinka guards left us and the SS took over." Eighty people in their waggon: "They were all imprisoned mentally by unanswerable questions. How had it happened? Why had it happened? What was going to happen to them and to those they had left behind? And, of course, where were they going? Snatched from civilization, yet still attached to it by the umbilical cord of domesticity, they worried, too, about trifles. Had they turned off the gas at the mains? Had they locked the back door? Had they remembered to cancel the milk and the newspapers?"

(51-4) Thirst on the train and the difficulty of having someone at a station get them water: "Looking back, of course, I can understand his attitude. There was an order that any civilian who helped those on the transports would be shot and the SS did not hesitate to carry it out. A bullet in the back is a high price to pay for filling a tin mug."

(57-9) 16 June 1942, just past Lublin, the males aged 16 to 45 are taken from the deportation train from Novaky, and marched to Majdanek. The train, with the women, children, and older people continues on: "I did not know that they were on their way to a place called Belzec . . . . There they would be gassed with the fumes of exhaust pipes. There their bodies would be burned in open trenches, for crematoria were still in the blue-print stage."

(72-4) Late June 1942, transported by train from Majdanek to Auschwitz: "By the time we had been travelling twenty-four hours, all the food was gone; but that was not our main worry. All the water was gone, too, and, in the stifling heat of that packed waggon, thirst became a torment; nor was there any hope of getting a drink at a station because the security precautions were so stringent that we always stopped well outside them and had to watch the SS men drinking from their water bottles, as we were being counted. In fact the journey lasted two and a half days."

(250-1) Despite their report given to members of the Jewish Council, late April 1944, the deportation of the Hungarians begins: "'They're passing through Zilina in cattle trucks.'"

### Specific escapes

(36-9) Spring 1942, he prepares for and escapes from Novaky with his friend Josef Knapp: "There was no sign of the patrolling guard. Knapp and I went under the wire and three minutes later were sliding down the high banks of a stream that trickled down from the nearby forests."

(164) In the back of his mind, he thinks about escape: "While on the ramp, I had kept a careful mental note of each transport that arrived and the numbers on board in the hope that sooner or later I would be able to tell the free world about these terrible figures. . . . With the aid of a school atlas I had found . . . in Canada, I had been able to pinpoint our geographic position fairly exactly. I knew the layout of the mother camp and the strength of its defences; and I was determined to find out whether Birkenau was fortified equally strongly." Fall 1942.

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### **Specific escapes**

(202) As Registrar in Birkenau, Rudi plans an escape: ". . . I began what was to be my first scientific study: the technique of escape. I began to study every unsuccessful escape attempt, to analyse its flaws and to correct them."

(203-5) Captain Dmitri Volkov, captured as a Russian prisoner of war, escapes from Sachsenhausen near Berlin, is recaptured near Kiev, gives Rudi advice in Auschwitz; "He filled in my manual of What Every Escaper Should Know."

(206-8) ". . . if there ever was a man who seemed indestructible, it was Fero Langer." Yet his planned escape from Auschwitz fails: "It was, it seemed, a simple case of betrayal." His friend and confidant SS Dobrovolny had revealed the plan.

(209-15) Charles Unglick's foiled attempt to escape from Auschwitz: ". . . we watched the men who normally dragged naked bodies through the mud carry away Charles Unglick with something very like reverence."

(216-18) Different possibilities for escape are cut off, yet: ". . . I believed that I would escape and I cannot remember ever relinquishing that faith, not even when I saw attempt after attempt end in failure and humiliating death."

(219-20) SS Unterscharführer Pestek offers to smuggle Fred Wetzler or Rudi out; he succeeds in smuggling Lederer to Prague. He returns to smuggle out one of the girls in the Czech camp: "It was a crazy idea, doomed to failure, for by that time he was a wanted man."

(221-4) Slovak friend Sandor Eisenbach and three others try to escape after hiding in the woodpile. Two French Jews also try to escape, they are captured and hung. The four others are captured but do not reveal the woodpile hiding place.

(225-8) Rudi and Fred Wetzler have a perilous journey to escape to the woodpile: ". . . we had organized two Poles who would replace the planks over our heads as soon as we slid into the hole."

(229-34) "The search was on. The long, meticulous, painstaking search that would continue for three days until every inch of Birkenau had been examined, every known hiding place upended." Their three days hiding in the woodpile ended 10 April 1944.

(234-8) The first twenty-four hours after leaving their woodpile hideout: ". . . we wriggled along on our bellies, making use of every hollow, every dip, every ditch we could find." The first five days of their journey: "Though Volkov's advice was useful constantly, he had never managed, however, to teach me how to see in the dark . . . ."

(241-2) The two escape a German patrol and cross a stream: "Twice I fell and submerged; but at last we made it, hauled ourselves up the bank and lumbered on, gasping for breath, through snow that sometimes reached our waists. We reached the friendly shelter of the trees before the Germans had breasted the hill and now the advantage was with us."

### **Stories of individuals, including family members**

(9, 12) "Yankel Meisel died because three buttons were missing from his striped, prisoner's tunic. It was probably the first and certainly the last time he had ever been untidy in his life. . . . His Block Senior spotted the gaping neck of his tunic. Quickly he was clubbed to death and swept, so to speak, beneath the carpet only minutes before the master arrived to inspect the household." Heinrich Himmler's 17 July 1942 visit to Auschwitz.

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### **Stories of individuals, including family members**

(20, 22, 255) "My mother was a strong-minded, self-reliant woman, who had built up a small dress-making business from more or less nothing." In March 1942 she says good-bye to her seventeen-year-old son: "Her face showed little emotion and all she said was: 'Take care of yourself. And don't forget to change your socks.' "

(44) Rudi is arrested in Topolcany to be returned to Novaky: ". . . just as we were about to enter the station, a little, blonde-haired girl darted forward and thrust a parcel into my hands, tears streaming down her face. It was my little cousin, Lici, then only about thirteen. Years later I learned that someone had told her that her Cousin Rudi was being taken away by the police. She dashed into a shop with her few pennies and bought me all that she could afford - cherries."

(45, 205) Fero Langer: "He had been conscripted into the Jewish forced labour detachments of the Slovak Army and had used his uniform to bluff his way into Novaky to help a relative who was being transported. 'Trouble was,' he said with his huge grin, 'they posted me as a deserter.' " He spends four days locked with Rudi at Novaky. He is reunited with Rudi in Birkenau in January 1943.

(47-48, 57) The Tomasovs, from his hometown, find Rudi on the deportation train, announce they are newlywed. A party is created: "The Tomasovs, indeed, softened the shell which people had built around themselves for protection; and, after the wedding party, a new, rough courtesy developed, in spite of the fact that we were living under conditions liable to . . . set neighbour against neighbour."

(49-50) Companions on the deportation train tell of their betrayal: Isaac Rabinowic from Bratislava, Mrs. Polanska from a village in central Slovakia, Janko Sokol, Mr. Ringwald from Zvolen: "We listened to these tales with interest. We did not know that they were going to be repeated a million times all over Europe."

(55-6) Izak Moskovic, on the train, foresees future: " 'You're fools, if you think you're going to resettlement areas. We are all going to die!' . . . Soon, in fact, he was forgotten, though later his words were remembered."

(61-2) Kapo Vrbicky in Majdanek: "I knew him well back home. So did everyone in Trnava, for Vrbicky was a character, a man who some liked, some despised and some avoided . . . He was about twenty-six, a lorry driver with a somewhat haphazard approach to life. . . . The respectable Jewish community disliked him because he drank too much and was careless about his wedding vows. The less orthodox - myself among them - could not help liking him. . . . And now suddenly I saw him wielding a whip with all the savage skill of an SS man."

(62-3) Just at the gate to section five in Majdanek: ". . . there I saw Erwin Eisler. The long-faced Erwin, whose burly, slow-moving frame held the heart of a keen, if ponderous student. My mind went back to Trnava, to the days when Erwin used to blush when we teased him about girls and always made excuses when we asked him to come for a drink in a cafe." Together they had shared a chemistry book after being forced to turn in all their educational materials; at Majdanek, Erwin tries to warn Rudi to "expect the worst. . . . I never saw Erwin again and it is certain that he died in Majdanek."

(64) Friend Ignatz Geyer from Trnava, nicknamed "Nazi", enters Majdanek with Rudi, tries to find humour in their situation: "He, too, was sure that he was going to die and, indeed, he was right, for they killed him soon afterwards; but he was determined to die with dignity. He was not going to let them degrade him."

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### **Stories of individuals, including family members**

(66-7) Rudi finds his brother Sammy in Majdanek, they arrange to meet: ". . . although it was nearly dusk, I recognized my brother, the tall, dark Sammy, who was ten years older than I was. He saw me almost simultaneously and we raised our arms in a brief salute." Kapos break up the meeting before it happens. "Next day I was told that Sammy had been moved to another section and I never saw him again. I learned, however, that he had managed to survive as long as Majdanek survived; but when Majdanek died, everyone in it, Sammy included, died with it."

(68-70) Czech Kapo Milan offers Rudi a kitchen job, Majdanek: "He had been a member of the Sokol movement, a quasi-military organization which had been violently anti-Nazi, and had been arrested in 1939. Since then he had seen the inside of Dachau and Sachsenhausen before being sent to Majdanek as a kapo; and though he wanted to keep his soft job, there was still a bright spark of patriotism burning within him."

(73, 89, 96-7, 154-8) On the transport with Rudi from Majdanek to Auschwitz: "Suddenly I spotted a familiar face - Josef Erdelyi who had been with me in Novaky. Not only had we been friends there, . . . I had been to school with his girlfriend." Josef keeps his family photos: "How had they survived when they stripped him, entering Majdanek and again when he left and a third time when he arrived in Auschwitz? What happened to those pathetic pictures when they pummelled him in and out of the showers in both camps?" His death, on his way to Dr. Klehr's phenol shot with other typhus patients: " 'He fought the kapos and made a break for the wires. They shot him just as he got there.' "

(79, 89, 115, 117-18) Ipi Müller: ". . . an elderly man who had travelled in the waggon with me from Majdanek. At least to me he seemed elderly, but he could not have been more than forty-five . . . I remembered thinking what a fine man Ipi was, a poor Slovak tailor, who paid for his son's violin lessons and, even in that filthy waggon, thought only of him, rather than of himself." His death: "He died in his bunk and I was glad that a man of his calibre was not despatched by beating or shooting or any of the routine degradations of Auschwitz."

(82-3) Otto Pressburger and Ariel Engel in Auschwitz: " 'We came in a batch of six hundred from Trnava . . . There are only ten of us left . ' . . . Just four months earlier, big, burly Otto, with the dark eyes and the moon face, and I, had been to a dance together, competing with each other for the local girls. Now the flesh had melted from that moon face, making it seem much longer and his massive frame was thin. The change in Ariel Engel, however, was even more frightening. . . . The eyes that once had laughed and danced to his own music looked back at me and I saw they were dull with the shadow of death."

(117-18) Ipi and Philip Müller: ". . . the tough, grey-haired sensitive tailor and the artistic son who was thin, but still vibrant with life . . . sweeping away the present, delving into the past, planning a future which Philip knew his father would never see." Philip cleans up after the dead, lies to his father about playing in the orchestra: " 'But I'd like him to die, thinking I'm up there on that bloody platform by the gate, playing first fiddle.' "

(124-5, 131, 158-60) Fellow Slovak Laco Fischer, a dentist from Nove Mesto, gets Josef and Rudi work in "Canada": ". . . when he told us he had been five months in Auschwitz, we looked at him with respect, for here was a man who knew how to survive . . ." Laco smuggles Rudi into Canada for three days to recuperate from typhus, then gets medication for him.

(134-41, 157, 159) The courtship of kapos Bruno and Hermione in "Canada", and its consequences for Rudi.

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### **Stories of individuals, including family members**

(142-4, 146) Rudi's bunk-mates in the Auschwitz hospital, Monek from Mlawa and his young friend who dies: " 'Would you mind if we left him in the bunk until the gong sounds? Would you mind ... if we didn't kick him out, like the others?' "

(149) The fate of a young Czech boy working on the ramp at Auschwitz, who tries to warn a woman on a Prague transport of her destination: "He had been taken behind the waggons by two SS men and shot with an air pistol that made no noise and disturbed nobody, except, of course, the prisoner."

(156, 161, 168-70) Ernst Burger: ". . . the quiet, gentlemanly Registrar of Block 4." " 'He's one of us.' " In fact, he was the leader of the underground.

(161-2) Josef Farber, Slovak fighter with the International Brigade in Spain, and with the Auschwitz underground. He gives Rudi injections to combat his typhus, and oversees his recovery.

(182, 190, 192) Fredy Hirsch, in charge of the children's dormitory for the Czech Family Camp at Birkenau, September 1943. Chosen to lead the resistance, March 1944, he commits suicide: "I looked down at Fredy Hirsch, the German whose heart was too big, who could not bear to see little children suffer; and I realized that I had asked him to do too much."

(183, 187-8, 194-5) From the Czech Family Camp, twenty-two year-old Alice Munk meets Rudi from across the wire at Birkenau: "We talked of the future, as if there surely was going to be one and all the time I kept my eyes averted from the chimney stack which knew only hearts that were still."

(184, 186-7, 193-6) Helena and Vera Rezek, two sisters from Prague, friends with Alice: "All three were members of the family camp underground . . ." Their deaths reported by Philip Müller: " 'Three girls made a fight of it and had to be beaten in.' . . . I wondered who they might have been; but I asked Philip no more questions."

(209, 214-15) French Army Captain, Charles Unglick, Block Senior in the Quarantine Camp at Auschwitz: "Charles Unglick made a terrible enemy, but a fine friend." He is betrayed attempting escape, and is shot.

### **In hiding, including Hidden Children**

(252-4) Playing the part of students, Fred and Rudi are sent to Liptovsky Svaty Mikulas to hide out from arrest, May 1944: "We were in fact apprentices in the art of living because for so long we had thought only of survival. We did not fit smoothly and suavely into the world at first, not even into the little world of the train that brought us to our new home."

(255-6) Rudi returns to Trnava to see his mother: " 'You're a dreadful boy,' she said at last. 'You know you never wrote to me once. You never even sent me your address.' 'I'm sorry, Momma,' I said. 'It was a bit difficult. You see we were ... very busy all the time.' "

### **Righteous Gentiles**

(33) March 1942, Rudi is arrested crossing into Slovakia from Hungary, and is jailed: "Through the bars fell some cigarettes and some food. News that a Jew had been picked up somewhere along the frontier, it seems, had travelled fast through that Slovak village; and somewhere a Christian woman had thought of him lying alone and maybe hungry."

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### **Righteous Gentiles**

(87-91) Viennese political prisoner Kapo Franz, Auschwitz: "To the passing SS men he looked and sounded a splendid kapo, heartless, brutal, efficient; yet never once did he hit us. In fact, all the time I knew him, I never saw him strike a prisoner and that in Auschwitz was quite a record."

(98) Rudi avoids the spotted typhus epidemic: "Once again I owed my life to Franz, for, had he not selected me for the food store, I would have been as dirty as the rest of them. Instead I was able to keep myself scrupulously clean because in the store there was plenty of soap and water to ensure that hands which touched the SS food were thoroughly sterilised."

(100-05) Kapo Franz steals a box of marmalade to feed a group of starving girls, Auschwitz: "I saw him walk calmly towards the wire, turn and, with a backward flip of the wrist, send the marmalade flying towards a group of Slovak girls. It shattered at their feet. For a second they gazed at it in amazement, this gold that fell from heaven; and then they fell on their knees and ate it. That marmalade disappeared in less than a quarter of a minute." Franz survives his punishment, and: "He survived the camp and today in his native Vienna, where he owns a hotel, he is known still as Franz Marmalade."

(219-21) Unterscharführer Pestek smuggles Lederer out of Auschwitz; returns to smuggle again and is caught: ". . . the only honourable SS man I ever met . . . a man who had not been brainwashed, who saw the vileness that lay beneath those smart, green uniforms and had the courage to strike against it."

(239-41) In the village of Pisarovice, a Polish woman and her daughter give Rudi and Fred food, shelter, and advice: "'The mountains are quite far from here,' she said. 'To reach them you must cross open country which is watched constantly by the Germans because there are partisans in the area. If you attempt to cross those open spaces by day, you will be caught; you must stay here until it is dark.'"

(242-5) Another Polish woman, her grandson, and a partisan sympathizer help them and get them to the border: "Shoving the gun into his pocket, he said: 'You're from a concentration camp, all right. Only really hungry men could eat like that.'"

(246-7) Near Skalite, they meet the Slovak Canecky: "He looked us up and down and grinned. Then he said: 'You'd better come to my place first because you're not going to get far in those clothes.' " He takes them to the town of Cadca, to meet the Jewish leader Doctor Pollak, and he gives them money: "'Poverty's no disgrace I know, but it can be uncomfortable!' "

(256-7) Rudi meets with the Papal Nuncio in Slovakia: "The Papal Nuncio took my report to Geneva. From there it went to Pope Pius XII, to Prime Minister Winston Churchill and to President Roosevelt."

(257-8) "On June 25th 1944, exactly two calendar months after I had dictated my report in Zilina, Monsignor Angelo Rotta, Papal Nuncio in Hungary, handed a letter from Pope Pius to Admiral Horthy, the Regent. . . . it was undoubtedly a protest against the deportation of Hungarian Jews. . . . The Pope's letter was followed the following day by a note from Mr. Cordell Hull, the U. S. Secretary of State, who threatened reprisals against those responsible for the deportations. The King of Sweden offered to help the Hungarian Jews to emigrate; and on July 5th, Professor Karl Burckhardt, President of the International Red Cross, made a personal appeal to Horthy. . . . On July 7th, Mr. Anthony Eden, Britain's Foreign Secretary announced in the House of Commons . . . . By that time, too, the Swiss Government had raised its censorship of the subject in its newspapers; and the world knew at last about Auschwitz."

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### **Witness to mass murder**

(16-19) January 1943, Himmler witnesses a gassing at Auschwitz: "Commandant Hoess, anxious to display his new toy at its most efficient, had arranged for a special transport of 3,000 Polish Jews to be present for slaughter in the modern German way. . . . For some minutes Himmler peered into the death chamber, obviously impressed . . . and, when everyone inside was dead, he took a keen interest in the procedure that followed. . . . Himmler waited until the smoke began to thicken over the chimneys and then he glanced at his watch. It was one o'clock. Lunch time, in fact."

(65-6) Roll call, Majdanek: "Not only were the living counted, but the dead, too. They were piled up neatly behind us, a pathetic heap of corpses, some scraggy with starvation, some blood-stained from beating and some who had died simply because they no longer had the will to live. . . . Starvation was a major killer. German scientists reckoned that the rations were sufficient to keep a man alive for three months, but for once they were inaccurate. Beatings and shootings ensured that the death rate remained high, and so did dysentery. It affected many of the newcomers and they were liquidated immediately because they could not work."

(67-8) At Majdanek: "I had noticed that people disappeared from our section, but presumed at first they had been transferred elsewhere. I had watched the daily caravan from the hospital, a pathetic column of the sick and the old and the dying, making their stumbling way to a building some distance away; a building with a tall chimney. Some were able to walk; some had to be helped by those a little stronger; some went in wheelbarrows. I had noticed that they never came back. . . . I learned the truth only when I overheard a kapo give a casual order to a prisoner. He said: 'Take those bricks over to the crematorium.' . . . Then I knew why those fragments of humanity from the hospital never came back."

(70-1) SS Erich Mussfeldt's description of the liquidation of Majdanek, the "Harvest Festival", which he witnessed: "The camp ended on November 3, 1943. . . . That day 17,000 people of both sexes were executed at Majdanek. Only three hundred women were left to sort and dispatch the camp property; and three hundred men from Special Detachment 1005 to take the bodies from the graves and burn them. One SS man told me that the Jews from this detachment tried to escape and, as a result, the survivors had to work with chains on their legs.' "

(76) SS Oberscharführer Jacob Fries: ". . . one of the most brutal men ever spawned by Auschwitz, mother of so many murderers. For me, Fries was Auschwitz and always will be." His post-war Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz sentences are cited.

(79, 141, 146) "Those who could not work, I was soon to learn, were killed, either in the gas chamber or by an injection of phenol in the heart, an operation performed by a member of the SS 'Sanitary Service', Josef Klehr." Auschwitz, early July 1942.

(80-3) The first day at Auschwitz, Rudi watches a cart being filled with corpses: "We newcomers, we to whom work was going to bring freedom, stared at the cart, hypnotised by what we had seen. Two hundred bodies were packed together and the whole operation had taken no more than fifteen minutes. . . . standing there in our civilian clothes, we felt completely divorced from the scene. This is something which happened to others, to men who came from some other world. We were not hunks of meat. We were people. Our minds were on the run, scattering before a truth which had yet to catch up with us."

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### **Witness to mass murder**

(89-90) Kapo Franz saves Rudi from "agricultural work", Auschwitz: "There were 107,000 bodies buried near the camp, including 20,000 Russian prisoners of war who had been murdered. This evidence of mass murder had to be removed, not merely to cover up the crime, but because it was a danger to health; and therefore a special labour force of 1,400 men had been collected to get rid of it. . . . Of the 1,400, only three hundred were alive when the last body was burned; and these, too, were executed."

(91) "These were the living dead, known for some strange reason as 'Muselmanns,' Moslems, the men whose eyes were empty, whose flesh had fled, whose blood was near to water. Off they straggled . . . for they knew the alternative was hospitalization which meant a dose of phenol in the heart and death." Auschwitz.

(113-15) Returning to Auschwitz after the day at Buna: ". . . in each group of a hundred, dragging its way along that fine concrete road, there were at least ten limp, lifeless forms. . . . the journey back to Auschwitz began, with the dead and the dying held upright against the sides of the waggon by the weight of those who had survived another day in Buna. . . . Up to Block 18, where we stacked our dead neatly. The block registrar was waiting with his notebook to check them. Wearily . . . he lifted arm after arm, glanced at the number by the light of a match, crossed it off his list and moved on to the next pile . . . ."

(117-18, 175, 195-7) Philip Müller "cleans up" after Unterscharführer Palitsch's murders in the punishment block: " 'No matter what way it's done, my job is always the same: to get rid of the body and clean the blood off the floor before the next customer arrives.' " His job in Birkenau: "Philip stoked the furnaces in the crematorium. By the amount of fuel made available, he could reckon how many bodies were to be burned because the SS never wasted fuel by overloading their fires." He witnesses the deaths of the Czech Family Camp, 7 March 1944.

(150) A transport of French Jews glimpse their fate at the Auschwitz ramp as a truck overloaded with dead comes into view: ". . . simultaneously from those 3,000 men, women and children, rose a thin, hopeless wail that swept from one end of the orderly queue to the other, an almost inhuman cry of despair that neither threats, nor blows, nor bullets could silence. . . . the lorry cleared the tracks, disappearing out of the arc lights, into the darkness; and then there was silence, absolute and all-embracing. For three seconds, four at the most, those French people had glimpsed the true horror of Auschwitz; but now it was gone and they could not believe what their eyes had told them. Already their minds, untrained to mass murder, had rejected the existence of that lorry; and with that they marched quietly towards the gas chambers which claimed them half an hour later."

(151-3) January 1943, transport of Dutch Jewish mental patients and their nurses: "The SS men were frantic for here was something they could not understand. Something that knew no order, no discipline, no obedience, no fear of violence or death. . . . and everywhere the nurses. Still working. . . . They fought to bring order out of chaos, using medicines and blankets, gentleness and quiet heroism instead of guns or sticks or snarling dogs. . . . In unemotional groups they stood around the lorries, waiting for permission to join their patients. . . . The nurses climbed up after their patients. The lorry engines roared and off they swayed to the gas chambers."

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### **Witness to mass murder**

(163-6) A December day in Birkenau, 1942: ". . . I saw at least ten thousand naked women, lined up in neat, silent rows. . . . 'It's a typhus inspection. If they don't die of exposure, half of them will die in the gas chambers!' . . . The air, despite the frost, was slightly warm . . . . Stretching all around us were ditches vast enough to hold a row of houses, the ditches that spawned that red glow I could see in the sky from the mother camp; great, gaping sores in the forest, not blazing now, but still smouldering. I moved to the edge of one and gazed in. The heat struck my face and at the bottom of this great open oven I could see bones; small bones. The bones of children."

(167-8) 1942, pre-Christmas typhus selection: ". . . we had to strip in the fierce cold, plunge into hot showers, then dash out into the open air again. As a result, many of those who survived the typhus test contracted pneumonia and died anyway. For two days we were left naked and without food, an ordeal which weeded out a few more."

(173-4) Fred Wetzler, registrar of the mortuary at Birkenau: "One man glanced at an arm and called the tattooed number out to Fred who jotted it down. Another opened the dead mouth with a pair of pliers, hauled out a few gold teeth and dumped them with a clank into a tin can beside him. The remaining two picked up the corpse and sent it whirling through the door towards the lorry."

(175) At Birkenau: ". . . I was able to see what until then I had only imagined. . . . Every night I unloaded the waggons and watched the human cargoes line up for selection . . . . Often I arrived back in camp in time to see them being herded towards the innocent grey building with its mock washrooms, all but a few still believing that they were travelling another section of the road that would bring them to a new life. Here the statistics I had been gathering so carefully, the numbers I held in my head, suddenly became men, women and children, the living, only inches away from death."

(195-6) The destruction of the Czech Family Camp at Birkenau, 7 March 1944: "Philip Müller had been working all night. . . . 'They sang the Czech and Jewish National Anthems all the time and they just walked straight into the chambers.' 'No resistance?' 'We were waiting for it, but it never came. Had they started a fight we would have joined them. I suppose they were thinking of the children.' "

(248-9) April 1944, Rudi and Fred reach Zilina: "The following day, April 25th, Fred and I were sipping sherry at the Zilina headquarters of the Jewish Council and telling our story to Doctor Oscar Neumann, spokesman for all Slovakia's Jews, Oscar Krasnansky, Erwin Steiner, and a man called Hexner. . . . For hours I dictated my testimony. I gave them detailed statistics of the deaths. I described every step of the awful confidence trick by which 1,760,000 in my time in the camp alone had been lured to the gas chambers. I explained the machinery of the extermination factory and its commercial side, the vast profits that were reaped from the robbery of gold, jewellery, money, clothes, artificial limbs, spectacles, prams, and human hair which was used to caulk torpedo heads. I told them how even the ashes were used as fertiliser."

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### **Witness to mass murder**

(256) Rudi meets with the Papal Nuncio in Slovakia in Svaty Jur near Bratislava: ". . . I saw that he had a copy of my report in his hand. . . . He went through the report line by line, page by page, returning time after time to various points until he was satisfied that I was neither lying nor exaggerating; and, by the time we had finished dissecting the horrors about which I had written, he was weeping. 'Mr. Vrba,' he said at last, 'I shall carry your report to the International Red Cross in Geneva. They will take action and see that it reaches the proper hands.' "

### **Transit camps**

(34-5) June 1942, in Novaky: "I learned that Novaky was divided into two camps, one the transit section which held those awaiting transport to Poland and the other a labour camp, where the more favoured Jews were supposed to work for the good of the Slovak Government."

### **Slave labour camps and factories**

(106-8) Sixteen hundred prisoners march out of Auschwitz for the Buna Command: "No longer was it simply a question of surviving. It was a question of surviving today without thinking too much about tomorrow."

(109-12) The work at Buna: "Someone dumped a bag of cement on my back. I ran. At the door a kapo thumped me over the kidneys with his club. I stumbled but kept on running. Ten yards farther on a deputy kapo lashed at me. Ahead of me a man went down and a club smashed his skull. I tripped over his body, somehow kept my feet, and dumped my bag by a mixing machine and a bewildering net work of heavy wire that soon would be covered in concrete. Josef panted behind me and then we were running back for more cement, more abuse, more blows, in a frantic, nightmare race against a clock we could never beat."

(118) Josef and Rudi at Buna: "Perhaps because of our French protector, perhaps because we were strong and still living off the fat of the SS food store, we stood the pace better than most. In fact, by the fifth week, we were the sole survivors of the sixteen hundred which by chance we had joined on that first day after the fall of Franz."

(119) Why Krupps and I. G. Farben located factories in the Auschwitz region: "In the first place the Silesian coal mines were at their disposal. Secondly, there was plenty of water; and, finally, there was a more than adequate and exceptionally cheap labour force neatly located behind the high voltage wires of the camp."

### **Concentration camps**

(60-1) Marched into Majdanek: "The theory of concentration camps was not new to me. For years sinister whispers had been seeping through Czechoslovakia, through Europe, indeed; rumours of ugly, self-contained worlds, where the rule of gun and club and whip prevailed; where the majority died from beating or hunger or shooting; where the emaciated survivors for a day or a week or a month gazed hopelessly at a horizon of barbed wire, while flamingo-legged watch towers hovered over them. Yet the reality, the first sight of a camp in action, shocked me, even though my mind was prepared for it."

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### **Concentration camps**

(63-4) First impressions of Majdanek: "There were barracks all around me, squalid, wooden affairs. Barracks, barbed wire and beyond that, nothing. . . . It was depressing, but not nearly so depressing as the sound effects. From the other sections we could hear cries and the sound of beating and occasionally a shot. We could catch glimpses of prisoners scurrying about frantically, one jump ahead of a stick or a bullet . . . ."

(69-70) At Majdanek, Rudi volunteers for "farm work": "I was one of the first of about a thousand who volunteered; and I was one of the lucky four hundred chosen. . . . Nobody who stayed in Majdanek survived. In fact, from those who went from Majdanek to Auschwitz, I am the only one still alive."

(71-2) Twelve days after his arrival in Majdanek, the four hundred are marched out: "I was elated; and I was sad. Somewhere in that sprawling, soulless camp that grew smaller behind me as I marched, was my brother, Sammy. In my heart I knew he could never survive."

### **Auschwitz-Birkenau**

(9-15) 17 July 1942, Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler's visit to Auschwitz: "In fact he was far from satisfied with what he had seen, but it was not the appalling conditions which worried him. It was the grossly inefficient methods which were being used to exterminate the Jews who were beginning to arrive in their thousands from all parts of Europe. . . . The burning of the bodies in open trenches wasted valuable fuel . . . . And so he gave orders for the greatest, most efficient extermination factory the world has ever known. For the modern concrete gas chambers and the vast crematoria that could absorb as many as 12,000 bodies in twenty-four hours and, in fact, did so."

(15-16) January 1943, Himmler's second visit to Auschwitz: "This time I was glad to see him arrive, though not because I still nursed any faint hope that he would improve our lot through benevolence or any sense of justice. His presence was welcome to us all merely because it meant that for one day there would be no unscheduled beatings or killings."

(75-9) 30 June 1942, entrance into Auschwitz: "What were they guarding in this strange camp, with its clean concrete roads and its uplifting slogans, its dogs and its thugs and its double lethal fences? What treasure was stored here, for surely all this vast anti-escape machinery was not designed to corral a few thousand insignificant Jews? . . . The security precautions, however, were for us insignificant prisoners. Himmler had ruled that nobody must escape. The world must never know of this place, his most efficient death factory."

(84-5) Upon entering Auschwitz, two prisoners: ". . . one, a Frenchman, known throughout the camp as Leo, the tattooist, the other a Slovak, called Eisenberg. They were cheerful fellows, who joked about the whole business, asking the cattle politely where they would like their numbers branded - on the left arm or the right, underneath or on top. There was something strangely comical, being given a choice in circumstances such as these; it was rather like asking a man which side he would like his hair parted, before his head was cut off. Anyway, for the record, I chose the top of my left forearm and bear my brand to this day." (#44070)

(86-8) Rudi is chosen by kapo Franz for a work detail: "I followed him, apprehensive of the unknown, but glad in a way for obviously he had singled me out for my health and strength. What I did not know . . . was that the new kapo with the slap-happy manner was in fact saving my life. Neither did I know that he had bought me from my block senior for a lemon. At that time I knew nothing of the vast black market in the camp. . . ."

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### **Auschwitz-Birkenau**

(92-5) Work in the SS food store: "Everywhere I looked I saw food. Mountains of it. . . . Acres of food and luxuries at that, drawn from all parts of the world and assembled here in the hell hole of Auschwitz."

(116) Sundays: "Health-Through-Joy" day: "Our masters, it seemed, felt that we might grow soft and flabby, lazing around in the sun . . . it attracted a substantial audience even from the upper echelons of the SS, who stood around, smiling tolerantly while the sick and the starving, the weak and the dying presented their grotesque pantomime in honour of physical culture."

(120-4) Rudi and Josef survive the 29 August 1942 run which tested for spotted typhus : "Never in my life have I felt less like running. I had been up for twenty-four hours and slaving at Buna for eight of them. For another four hours I had been either marching or almost suffocating in an overcrowded cattle truck; and I had eaten nothing since soup had been dished out in Buna at noon. . . . We had not been able to run properly because we were starved and exhausted; but Jacob Fries had diagnosed spotted typhus. With a flick of his thumb he had sentenced us both to death and thousands of others, too." But a kapo, Josef's friend, moves the two to the other group. To combat the spotted typhus epidemic, " . . . half the camp's population had been murdered."

(124-8) Assigned to "Canada": "From what they did not say, I realised that soon I was to learn yet another of Auschwitz's secrets and I had an uneasy feeling that somehow the knowledge was going to be dangerous. . . . we marched into Canada, the commercial heart of Auschwitz, warehouse of the body snatchers where hundreds of prisoners worked frantically to sort, segregate and classify the clothes and the food and the valuables of those whose bodies were still burning, whose ashes would soon be used as fertiliser."

(129-32) The Canada work routine: "We dumped out trunks and cases and rucksacks on a huge blanket in the store. Immediately they were ripped open or burst open with a sledgehammer and food, clothes, toilet equipment, valuables, documents, pathetic family pictures were emptied out. Specialists fell upon them segregating them, pitching men's clothes to another blanket, women's to another, children's to a third until half a dozen blankets were piled high. The suitcases and trunks were whisked away and burned with all documents. More porters descended on the blankets and carried them away to the women who would classify them by quality and pack them away in the warehouses; and all the time . . . Graff and Koenig were beating, searching, punishing and bellowing . . . ."

(132-3) "One week in Canada taught me more about the real purpose of Auschwitz . . . . It was a sickening lesson, not so much because of the sadism or the brutality or the sporadic deaths, but because of the cold-blooded commercialism of the place. . . . I was in a death factory; an extermination centre where thousands upon thousands of men, women and children were gassed and burned, not so much because they were Jewish, though that was the primary thought in the sick mind of the Führer, but because in death they made a contribution to Germany's war effort."

(145) Surviving a selection at the hospital, Auschwitz: "I tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, not too erect, yet not slouching; not too smart, yet not sloppy; not too proud, yet not too servile, for I knew that those who are different died in Auschwitz, while the anonymous, the faceless ones, survived."

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### **Auschwitz-Birkenau**

(147-8) Fall 1942, Rudi works the next eight months on the ramp, helps to unload three hundred transports: "The ramp, symbol of Auschwitz for millions because they saw little else except the gas chambers. A huge, bare platform that lay between Birkenau and the mother camp and to which transports rolled from all parts of Europe, bringing Jews who still believed in labour camps. Scene of the infamous selections, where a handful of workers were sent to the right and the rest, the old, the very young, the unfit, were sent to the left, to the lorries, to the crematoria, still believing that somewhere ahead lay a resettlement area."

(177-9) Three criminal Block Seniors at Birkenau: ". . . a man called Albert Hammerle, but known throughout the camp as Ivan, the Terrible. . . . 'Monkey' Tyn . . . a man with the strength and physique of a gorilla; Mietek Katerzynski . . . would while away their time, seeing who would be the first man to kill a prisoner with one blow of his fist."

(180-2, 184) 7 September 1943, the arrival to Birkenau Camp B of 4,000 deportees from Theresienstadt: ". . . men, women and children, dressed in ordinary civilian clothes, their heads unshaven, their faces bewildered, but plump and unravaged. The grown-ups carried their luggage, the children their dolls and their teddy bears; and the men of Camp A, the Zebra men who were only numbers, simply stood and stared, wondering who had tilted the world, spilling a segment of it on top of them." In December they are joined by four thousand more.

(197-8) 1944, ". . . in January, new railway tracks began edging their way up the broad road that lay between Birkenau 1 and Birkenau 2. . . . The ramp, it seemed, was to become obsolete. . . . Here there would be no selections, no weeding out of the young and fit; just a direct line to death." And from Philip Müller: "The old trenches, where the bodies were burned before the crematoria were built, were being made ready for action again. New trenches were being dug." The intended victims: "It was the Hungarians whom most of us had thought were reasonably safe."

(199-201) The July 1942 hanging in Auschwitz of two Polish escapees, captured, Oberscharführer Jakob Fries: " '. . . under their tunics they were found to be wearing civilian shirts. . . . Any man found planning an escape will be punished by death on the gallows as these two prisoners are about to be punished now.' "

### **Post-war life and career**

(270-3) Presented a deposition at the Israeli Embassy, London, for submission at the trial of Adolf Eichmann, 16 July 1961.

(323-91) Published two major historical papers based on his experiences, included as Appendices Five and Six.

(393) Professor of Pharmacology, University of British Columbia, has authored more than fifty scientific research papers.

(394) He has been involved with the production of four Holocaust related films: "(1) 'Genocide' (in the 'World at War' series; directed by Jeremy Issacs, BBC, London, 1973); (2) 'Auschwitz and the Allies' (directed by Rex Bloomstein, in collaboration with Martin Gilbert; BBC, London, 1982); (3) 'Shoah' (directed by Claude Lanzmann, Paris, 1985); (4) 'Witness to Auschwitz' (directed by Robert Taylor, CBC, Toronto, 1990)"; and has been involved with the bringing to justice of Nazi war criminals and sympathizers.

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### Personal reflections

(Author's Preface, ix) "I thought I should concentrate upon choosing from my recollection those pieces which in their totality would enable even my honest old milkman to understand the principles used by the Germans to make the unthinkable and unspeakable machinery of Auschwitz a reality."

(77) Auschwitz: "Everywhere I saw neatness and order and strength, the iron fist beneath the antiseptic rubber glove."

(109) "In Buna there were only two types of workers - the quick and the dead."

(133) ". . . life in Canada, indeed, was similar in many ways to life in other places. It was not so important what you were, but who you knew."

(171) ". . . no man in Auschwitz ever thought in terms of living. He thought merely of living a little longer."

(201) At a hanging after the first week, Auschwitz: "I remember thinking: 'When I get out and tell people about this, they probably won't believe me!'"

(254) Within weeks of their escape: "Inevitably, perhaps, there were times when we wondered whether we would ever be happy again or whether Auschwitz, scene of so much death, was immortal and would live in our minds until we, too, died and then live on to haunt those who understood."

(261) ". . . ever since my childhood . . . when I was being taught to understand the Scriptures. I remember reading: 'It is evil to assent actively or passively to evil, as its instrument, as its observer or as its victim ...'"

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