

AN AUSCHWITZ DOCTOR'S EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

An Auschwitz Doctor's Eyewitness Account

The Bestselling Tall Tales of
Dr. Mengele's Assistant Analyzed

Carlo Mattogno, Miklós Nyiszli



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An Auschwitz Doctor's Eyewitness Account:

The Bestselling Tall Tales of Dr. Mengele's Assistant Analyzed

Translated from the Italian and Hungarian by the author, by Kladderadatsch,
and by Germar Rudolf

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Introduction

In spring of 1946, the Jewish Hungarian physician Miklós Nyiszli privately published a book of memoirs entitled *Dr. Mengele boncolórovosa voltam az Auschwitz-i krematóriumban* (*I Was Dr. Mengele's Forensic Pathologist in the Auschwitz Crematorium*).¹ The next year this text was republished by the Budapest daily *Világ* (*World*) in forty-one installments between February 16 and April 6,² before being published in book form under the paper's imprint later that year.

At the beginning of 1951, extracts from this book, translated into French by Tibère Kremer, appeared in a two-part article in the French review *Les Temps Modernes* under the title “*S.S. Obersturmführer docteur Mengele: Journal d'un médecin déporté au crématorium d'Auschwitz.*”³ The complete⁴ text in French translation appeared in book form ten years later in 1961 with the title *Médecin à Auschwitz: Souvenirs d'un médecin déporté*. That same year, Nyiszli's memoir also saw the light in German translation, serialized in numbers 3-11 of the Munich magazine *Quick* under the title “*Auschwitz: Tagebuch eines Lagerarztes.*”

These publications attracted the attention of Paul Rassinier, founder of Holocaust revisionism, as well as that of his friend Albert Paraz, who alerted him to the first remarks in the French press regarding the articles in *Les Temps Modernes*. Rassinier contacted Nyiszli (see Chapter 2.3.), and he later devoted a few pages to the doctor's memoir, particularly in his books *Ulysse trahi par les siens* and *Le Drame des juifs européens*. Rassinier's criticisms, at least in part, were well founded and pertinent; they concentrated on obviously false or

¹ The various texts authored by Nyiszli are listed with all pertinent bibliographic information in the first part of the Bibliography in the Appendix.

² For details of serial publication, see György 1987, p. 294.

³ In the title of the French text “*Obersturmführer*” is spelled incorrectly, without an umlaut.

⁴ Or rather, substantially complete. The Julliard edition omits Chapter XXIV of the original text.

absurd declarations by Nyiszli, but also highlighted various contradictions between the translations then available.

In the 1980s, in turn, the theme aroused my interest, and I decided to write a critical study on Nyiszli's testimony. Thus was born my book *'Medico ad Auschwitz': Anatomia di un falso*, based on the Italian translation of the 1961 French edition,⁵ but with an attentive eye on the latter as well.

The work, characterized by the late Charles D. Provan in 2001 as "a wonderful treatment, exhaustive and extremely thorough" (Provan 2001) was subdivided into two parts. The first contained the historical-critical analysis proper, broken down in the following chapters:

- I – Arrival of Nyiszli at Birkenau
- II – Geographical errors
- III – Topographical errors (Birkenau camp)
- IV – History of the Birkenau crematoria
- V – The Birkenau crematoria: furnaces and cremation capacity
- VI – Technique of the "extermination": the "gas chambers"
- VII – The "gassings"
- VIII – The end of the "gassings"
- IX – Technique of the "extermination": the pyres
- X – Balance sheet of the "extermination"
- XI – The *Sonderkommando*
- XII – Internal contradictions
- XIII – Chronological contradictions
- XIV – Chronological errors
- XV – More falsifications, errors and incongruities

The second part was a text-critical comparison of the principal translations then available, that is, the French and German versions mentioned above plus the English translation titled *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*.⁶

In the course of that comparison I uncovered more than 70 divergences and omissions of various kinds among these translations, so I concluded at last that, in order to know what Nyiszli really wrote, the only solution was to have recourse to the original text itself.

I thus dedicated myself to the study of Hungarian, procured a copy of the first edition of Nyiszli's book and translated it into Italian. During that period, I also examined other important texts, like the appendix to the 1964 Hungarian re-edition of Nyiszli's book – *Orvos voltam Auschwitzban* – and the series of articles by Nyiszli titled "*Tanú voltam Nürnbergben*" (I was a witness at Nu-

⁵ For bibliographic details on the principal editions and translations of Miklós Nyiszli's book see the third part of the Bibliography in the Appendix.

⁶ Translated by Tibère Kremer and Richard Seaver. Although it preceded the "complete" 1961 French edition published by Julliard in order of publication, this English edition is in fact a re-translation of Kremer's French version, adapted (rather freely in places) by Seaver.

remberg) which saw the light of day in the Budapest daily *Világ* (*World*) in 1948 and upon which I will elaborate in Chapter 2.2. of the current study.

Nyiszli's "testimony" was quickly taken up by the nascent historiography of the Holocaust as a decisive testimonial proof of the Auschwitz "gas chambers," starting with Gerald Reitlinger's 1953 *The Final Solution* (p. 151), and then appearing in other books such as Adler/Langbein/Lingens-Reiner's *Auschwitz: Zeugnisse und Berichte* (pp. 64-73), Poliakov's *Auschwitz* (pp. 46-48, 62-65), the first French edition of *The Auschwitz Album* (Freyer *et al.* 1983, p. 94), the collective Polish work *Auschwitz: Nazi Extermination Camp* (Rada... 1978, p. 124) and Heiner Lichtenstein's *Warum Auschwitz nicht bombardiert wurde* (pp. 78-81), to name a few.

This success was all the more strange given that Nyiszli appeared as a witness at neither the Belsen Trial (September-November 1945), nor the Tesch Trial (March 1946), nor the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (November 1945-October 1946), nor the trial of Rudolf Höss in Warsaw (March 1947), nor the so-called Auschwitz Garrison Trial in Krakow (November-December 1947). Moreover, at those trials held after his death in 1956 – notably, the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem (April 1961-May 1962) and the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (December 1963-August 1965) – Nyiszli's testimony was not accepted into evidence. On the matter of his supposed "testimony" at the I.G. Farben Trial (August 1947-July 1948) I will have more to say below (see Chapter 2.2.).

The remarkable documentation on Auschwitz published by Jean-Claude Pressac in 1989 signaled the end, in principle if not in practice, of Nyiszli as an eyewitness to the gas chambers of this camp, because despite assurances to the contrary by the French researcher (as we shall see, he held Nyiszli to be "an authentic witness"), the documents themselves resoundingly refute Nyiszli's claims. In fact, in the single chapter from Nyiszli's text which Pressac subjected to critical examination (Chapter VII), he counted at least 25 "errors" and one "multiplier" – which even he finds incomprehensible – by which Nyiszli routinely inflates numbers by a factor of four (Pressac 1989, pp. 474-475). I will return to Pressac's rather too casual commentary in Chapter 5.2.

As a matter of firmly established practice, the Auschwitz Museum authorities avoid critical analysis of any witness testimony, and Nyiszli's is no exception: they still consider it fundamental despite the grave contradictions it presents with respect to the documentation in their own possession. Indeed, at times they cover up such contradictions with an all-too-evident complicity (see Chapter 5.1.).

Other researchers, such as Raul Hilberg, do without Nyiszli's testimony almost completely; Robert Jan van Pelt limits himself to a brief reference void of significance (van Pelt 2002, p. 445).

Worthy of particular mention here is Charles D. Provan, “a revisionist who believes in the gas chambers,” as Ernst Zündel once described him, who passed away at a young age in 2007. Provan was one of the rare few who were researching Nyiszli in those days, and he made his results public in an article titled “New Light on Dr. Miklos Nyiszli and His Auschwitz Book.”⁷ I will consider him as well in Part 5 of this study.

But if, since the publication of Pressac’s work, Nyiszli’s fortunes have inevitably been in decline in relation to the gas chambers, they have risen in the eyes of other Holocaust historians, who trot him out as witness *par excellence* to the presumed nefarious crimes of Dr. Josef Mengele. The cue for this development was furnished in 1986 by Gerald L. Posner and John Ware, authors of the book *Mengele: The Complete Story*. In the second chapter of their book, “Auschwitz: May 1943-January 1945” (*ibid.*, pp. 19-58), they essentially rely on Nyiszli, citing him at least fourteen times, despite having various documents such as Dr. Mengele’s diary, autobiography and letters at their disposal (*ibid.*, p. 354).

Franciszek Piper, in a paper entitled “Gas Chambers and Crematoria” which appeared in 1994 in the anthology *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Gutman/Berenbaum 1994, pp. 157-182), mentions Nyiszli solely as a physician who performed dissections of twins at the orders of Dr. Mengele and as a witness to the presence of a gold smeltery in Crematorium II (*ibid.*, p. 168). A year later, in the third volume (“Extermination”) of the anthology *Auschwitz, 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp* (Długoborski/Piper 1995/1999/2000), Piper cited Nyiszli’s memoir a number of times, but without ever revealing the profound contradictions that exist between his claims and those of the other witnesses who remained in Auschwitz until the arrival of the Soviets (see Chapter 5.1.).

Helena Kubica, a researcher at the Auschwitz State Museum, subsequently confirmed Nyiszli’s new function as “eyewitness” to Mengele, making him a central figure of her 1997 article “*Dr. Mengele und seine Verbrechen im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau*” (“Dr. Mengele and his crimes in Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp”).

This aspect of Nyiszli’s memoir, though it has become predominant over the years, interests us here only marginally, particularly because I have demonstrated elsewhere the complete documentary vacuity of the accusations laid against Dr. Mengele, promoted to the rank of “Angel of Death” for the occasion (Mattogno 2008; see the updated translation in the Appendix).

In this context, no mainstream historian has taken into consideration the following fact which, from the perspective of orthodox Holocaust historiography, should appear rather extraordinary. In the “Declaration” with which he begins his book, Nyiszli writes:

⁷ The anecdote about Zündel is related by Provan himself on p. 20 of his 2001 article.

“As chief physician of the crematoria of Auschwitz, I drew up innumerable autopsy and forensic medical reports and signed them with my tattoo number. These documents were countersigned by my superior, Dr. Mengele, and then shipped by me to the address of the Institut für rassenbiologische und anthropologische Forschungen in Berlin-Dahlem, one of the world’s most illustrious medical centers. They should still be discoverable to this day in the archives of that great research institute”

Returning to the subject in Chapter VIII, he adds:

“I sent countless such packages [i.e., of autopsy specimens] to Berlin-Dahlem during the course of my activity in the crematorium, and I received replies about them with exhaustive scientific commentary or instructions. I set up a separate dossier to keep the correspondence. In their letters to Dr. Mengele they always expressed their grateful appreciation for the rare material sent to them.”

On the basis of the descriptions in the book, it appears that Nyiszli would have performed at least 170 autopsies while at Auschwitz. The extraordinary fact, then, is simply that despite the “countless” autopsy reports written and signed by Nyiszli and the “countless” packages of biological material sent by him to the “*Institut für rassenbiologische und anthropologische Forschungen in Berlin-Dahlem*” (as he calls it in his “Declaration”),⁸ there does not exist a single piece of paper in the documentary record bearing Nyiszli’s signature!

But there is another fact, no less extraordinary, which also is continually passed over in silence by orthodox Holocaust historians. At the Belsen trial in late 1945, the Romanian Jewish physician Charles Sigismund Bendel claimed, just as Nyiszli would claim a few months later with the first publication of his book, to have been *the* doctor of the *Sonderkommando* for the Birkenau crematoria, starting, in his case, in August 1944.⁹ Since Nyiszli, according to the account in his book as we shall see, was himself at the crematoria from May 1944 to January 1945, this means that the two doctors spent at least four months together in the same place, where they presumably saw the same things and lived through the same events, yet not only are they ignorant of one another, but they produced completely contradictory testimony with regard to these matters. I will address this question in detail in Chapter 4.2.

⁸ Later on, in Chapter VIII, Nyiszli speaks of “the Institute for Racial and Developmental Biology in Berlin-Dahlem,” with “developmental” (*fejlődéstani*) replacing “anthropological” (*anthropologische*) in his translation of the German name as presented in the “Declaration.” Both names, however, are wrong: the institute in question in fact was called the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik* (The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics). Curiously, given his implied complicity in Mengele’s alleged crimes, Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer, director the institute from 1942 onward, was not the subject of any judicial action, Allied or German, in the postwar period.

⁹ Phillips 1949, pp. 130ff. It is not clear from Bendel’s Belsen testimony when he left the crematoria, but later statements indicate that he remained there until the evacuation of the camp on January 17, 1945. See Section 4.2.2.

A brief explanation may be in order here. After the arrival of the Soviets at Auschwitz, the prisoners remaining at the camp lived indiscriminately for more than three months beneath a propaganda bombardment from two official “investigations” – one Soviet, the other Polish – into the presumed extermination in the “gas chambers.”¹⁰ In particular, the “eyewitnesses” remaining at the camp were able not only to consult with each other, but to examine locations, ruins and even building plans and other German documents, thus absorbing the official version of events which was then developing.

On the other hand, those prisoners evacuated from the camp ahead of time took with them the propaganda stories invented by the various resistance movements of the camp, without being able to benefit from these final “updates.” This helps to explain the substantial differences which exist between the statements of the first category of prisoners – those, to be clear, who were subjected to interrogation first by the Soviets and then by Judge Jan Sehn – and the statements of the second category, in which Nyiszli and Bendel found themselves. Because the propaganda stories which circulated at Auschwitz were numerous and multifarious, and because none of them was able to impose itself as official “truth,”¹¹ each witness drew literary elements from the various strands available – a circumstance which in turn helps explain the fact that the testimonies of Nyiszli and Bendel are in complete mutual contradiction.

Very few books have struck the collective Holocaust imagination quite like Nyiszli's, as is attested to by its considerable publishing success: translations and reprints have followed one another, and continue to follow one another at an ever-increasing pace. In the Bibliography to this study, I present an overview of this publishing history, without any pretense of completeness, merely to demonstrate the amplitude of this remarkable phenomenon: apart from various re-editions of the Hungarian text, there abound translations into Italian, French, English, Dutch, Czech, Polish, Croatian, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, Arabic, Sinhalese and Romanian.

Nyiszli's book has also inspired two films, Tim Blake Nelson's *The Grey Zone* (2001) and László Nemes's *Saul fia* (Son of Saul, 2015).

With regard to translations made directly from the Hungarian original, one of the best undoubtedly is the 1992 German translation *Im Jenseits der Menschlichkeit: Ein Gerichtsmediziner in Auschwitz* (Beyond humanity: a forensic doctor in Auschwitz), which is supplemented by explanatory notes and an interesting appendix. Also worth mentioning is the 1996 Polish translation

¹⁰ The two investigations resulted, respectively, in the so-called Extraordinary State Commission report on Auschwitz, entered into evidence as Document 008-USSR (often cited as USSR-8) at the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg (*IMT*, Vol. XXXIX, pp. 241-262; in German) and Polish investigating judge Jan Sehn's report (Sehn 1946). The former is available in English translation in: Soviet... 1946, pp. 283-300.

¹¹ I have presented an overview of these various literary strands in Mattogno 2018.

Bylem asysyentem doktora Mengele: Wspomnienia lekarza z Oświęcimia (I was Dr. Mengele's assistant: memories of a doctor at Auschwitz), though more for the annotations by Franciszek Piper than for any fidelity to the Hungarian text.

Practically all of the more important translations of Nyiszli's book made directly from the original text contain omissions and manipulations here and there. It is not the purpose of this study to make a systematic comparison, but in the translation of the book which follows I underline certain passages omitted from the "classic" translation of Tibère Kremer.¹² Here it will suffice perhaps to mention, by way of example, a passage invariably omitted in all the translations that I've examined:¹³

"Three great men form and shape the character of the peoples of the world and ensure their future: Stalin! the genius leader of the Russian people, Roosevelt Franklin Delano, wise president of the United States, and Churchill, the British lion."

I will provide further details on this theme in Chapter 5.1.

The translations in question also allow themselves all too ample liberties in correcting, to a certain extent, Nyiszli's peculiar technical terminology, especially regarding the Birkenau crematoria. This question will be analyzed further in Section 3.2.1.

The documentation on Auschwitz has grown enormously since I published my original study of Nyiszli's book in 1988, and now allows his testimony to be evaluated in a more thorough manner.

That said, his invented "testimony" at the I.G. Farben Trial, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 2.2., is already more than sufficient to get a quite clear and precise idea of the seriousness and reliability of this "eyewitness."

* * *

In the translation of *Dr. Mengele boncolóorvosa voltam az Auschwitz-i krematóriumban* which follows, I have indicated in square brackets the original Hungarian text in various places where Nyiszli's choice of words is particularly significant, and I have also let stand the innumerable question marks and exclamation marks with which the book is littered. Nyiszli's prose abounds in elliptical expressions, which I have supplemented above all in those cases where the sense would otherwise be unclear, as well as in indeterminate subjects and sudden switches between tenses and singular and plural forms. To the extent that they do not impair comprehensibility, however, such

¹² In their French and English translations, respectively, Kremer and Seaver suppressed Nyiszli's Chapter XXIV altogether; Seaver moreover merged Chapter XVI with XVII (making for 39 and 38 chapters respectively, instead of Nyiszli's 40).

¹³ Nyiszli 1946, p. 166. The various versions examined handle the passage as follows: *Médecin à Auschwitz* (1961a), p. 242, omission not indicated; *Im Jenseits der Menschlichkeit* (1992/2005), p. 151/153, omission indicated with ellipsis; *Bylem asysyentem doktora Mengele* (1996), p. 168, omission not indicated.

apparent “blemishes” have been faithfully reproduced in the translation below. No attempt has been made to polish Nyiszli’s text; rather the goal at all times has been to reflect its true character, both in style and content, as accurately as possible, without omission or alteration.¹⁴

Wherever linguistic explanation is required for German terminology used by Nyiszli, I refer the reader to an apposite footnote. Terms and expressions in German and Latin are reproduced in the form, sometimes erroneous, in which they appear in the original text. As an aid to recognition, however, such foreign terms are printed in italics in the translation, a practice which Nyiszli does *not* follow in his book.

The translation is provided with essential explanatory notes only; all necessary additional analysis will be presented in the later parts of this study, Part Three in particular. It will at all events be helpful for the reader to keep in mind that Nyiszli’s numbering of the Birkenau crematoria from I to IV, while not an error as such,¹⁵ differs from the more familiar practice of numbering them from II to V (reserving I as the designation for the crematorium at the Auschwitz Main Camp).

¹⁴ Translator’s remark: In preparing the English version of Nyiszli’s book below, the translator has consulted the original Hungarian text throughout to ensure that no inaccuracies creep into the translation as a result of working at a linguistic second remove. While following Mattogno’s Italian version in its strict concern for accuracy, the English version thus is not a mere retranslation, but is in effect a first-order translation in its own right, rigorously checked against the source material. The object, at all times, has been to reflect the content and character of Nyiszli’s writing as closely as possible. The same principle of consulting original texts is followed, wherever feasible, in the translation of other quoted material in later parts of the study as well.

¹⁵ After the decommissioning of the original crematorium (I) in the Auschwitz Main Camp in July 1943, the newly built Birkenau crematoria (II-V) were in practice renamed with numbers I through IV, a fact reflected in various testimonies of the immediate postwar period. Modern scholarly practice, on the other hand, generally restores the original numbering. See Nyiszli 1992, p. 164, Note 28.

Part 1:

Miklós Nyiszli's Book

I Was Dr. Mengele's Forensic Pathologist in the Auschwitz Crematorium

By Dr. Miklós Nyiszli¹⁶

Declaration

I, the undersigned Nyiszli Miklós,¹⁷ M.D., ex-prisoner of the K.Z., bearer of tattoo number A-8450, hereby declare that in the work now published, the creation of my own hand, a work which contains within it the darkest pages in the history of humanity, free from all emotion and in strict conformity with the truth, and without the slightest exaggeration or embellishment, I write as the direct spectator of, and participant in, the activity of the crematoria and cremation pyres of Auschwitz, into whose flames vanished millions of fathers, mothers and children.

As chief physician of the crematoria of Auschwitz, I drew up innumerable autopsy and forensic medical reports and signed them with my tattoo number. These documents were countersigned by my superior, Dr. Mengele, and then shipped by me to the address of the *Institut für rassenbiologische und anthropologische Forschungen*¹⁸ in Berlin-Dahlem, one of the world's most illustrious medical centers. They should still be discoverable to this day in the archives of that great research institute.

In writing this work I do not aim at literary success. I was a doctor, not a writer, when I experienced these horrors exceeding all imagination, and as I undertake now to describe them, I write with the pen of a doctor, not a reporter.¹⁹

At Oradea-Nagyvárad, in the month of March, 1946

Dr. Nyiszli Miklós

Chapter I

In a late afternoon in May, in a closed freight car with windows covered with barbed wire, the smell of ninety dirty people crammed together is unbearable

¹⁶ The book's original Hungarian title is: *Dr. Mengele boncolóorvosa voltam az Auschwitz-i krematóriumban.*

¹⁷ In Hungarian the family name precedes the given name.

¹⁸ "Institute for Racial-Biological and Anthropological Studies." In German in the original. The institute's correct full name was *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik*, or The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics.

¹⁹ In English in the original [*reporter*].

enough already, let alone the stench of the buckets of excrement filled to the brim.

It is a train for deportees, a train made up of forty wagons like this one; already it is the fourth day it has been traveling, kilometer after kilometer, first through Slovak territory, then through the *Generalgouvernement*,²⁰ bearing us within it toward a still-unknown destination. In the convoy is the first group of the million [*egymillió*] Hungarian Jews condemned to extermination. The Tatra Mountains are behind us. We race at full speed toward Lublin, then comes Krakau.²¹ During the war, both cities became centers of concentration, that is, centers of extermination [*megsemmisítőhelye*] for the anti-Nazi citizens of Europe, whom the representatives of the new European order dragged here from the territories they occupied.

Leaving Krakau, our train runs along for give or take an hour before coming to a stop at an imposing station. A sign in gothic lettering declares the name of the station: Auschwitz. To us it is merely a name. We have never heard of it, whether in connection with the railways, or in any other regard.

Around our train, as I watch through the cracks, there is a great coming and going. Our previous SS guards get off. A new group takes their post. In the same way, the railway personnel for the trip depart as well. As I gather from snatches of conversation, we are almost at the final destination of our voyage.

The train sets off again, and after a run of some twenty minutes it once more comes to a stop with a long blast of its whistle.

I find a crack from which I can look outside again. All around is a plain of yellow clay, an arid terrain, as the land of eastern Silesia generally is. Only an occasional leafy thicket and the twisting course of the Vistula River break the monotony here and there. The area that opens out before me is enclosed in pillars of reinforced concrete placed in regular files, along which are strung numerous lines of barbed wire. Porcelain insulators and signs placed at frequent intervals reveal that the wires are carrying a high-voltage current. The concrete pillars form a quadrangle within which there are hundreds of barracks with tarpaper roofs, painted green, which form long straight streets.

Inside the fences I see figures in the striped uniforms of prisoners. They are carrying rough-sawn planks. Another group of men marches in regular files with shovels on their shoulders. Further in the distance, large bales are being loaded onto trucks. Along the fences, at a distance of 30-40 meters from each other, elevated towers reveal the character of the place. Guard towers! On each of them, a soldier in a green uniform rests his elbows on a machine gun mounted on a tripod. This is the Concentration Camp Auschwitz, or as the

²⁰ In German in the original.

²¹ In German spelling in the original.

Germans say – they love to abbreviate everything – K.Z., pronounced “Kacett”!²²

The knowledge is not reassuring, but the for the moment nervous curiosity overwhelms the sense of fear.

I look around me at my companions in the wagon. Our group is made up of 26 doctors, 8 pharmacists, our wives, our children, a few older people, men and women, parents of our colleagues. Seated on baggage or on the floor, they stare into empty space with weary, anxious faces. Perhaps they are gripped by a terrible presentiment, but in the bustle of arrival even this does not cause them to stir. Some of the children are sleeping, others are eating scraps of left-over food, for the most part bread. Those who lack even this comfort pass dry tongues helplessly over lips chapped with hunger and thirst.

The sand outside squeaks beneath heavy footsteps. Loud orders break the monotony of waiting. The padlocks on the wagons are opened. The door slides open on one side and immediately the order sounds out: *Leave the large baggage inside, everyone down off the train with their own hand luggage!* We reach our children and our wives down in our arms from the meter-and-a-half-high wagon. Soon we are lined up before the train.

Before us stands a young SS officer with glossy black boots and a gold rosette. Clearly he is in charge, the soldiers waiting on his commands. I don't know SS ranks, but from the caduceus badge on his arm, I presume that he is a doctor.

Later I learn that he is an SS *Hauptsturmführer*.²³ His name is Doctor Mengele, and he is the chief physician of Concentration Camp Auschwitz [*az Auschwitzi koncentrációs tábor első orvosa*]. He is present on the ramp at the arrival of every train. He is the doctor who makes the selections. In a few short minutes we will discover what a selection is at Auschwitz. The other phases of the process we only get to know later, each according to his fate.

And now it begins! Hurriedly the SS guards separate the men from the women, and the children under 14. The latter remain with their mothers.

In this manner the long formation in front of the wagons divides into two parts. We are suddenly separated from our families. The guards respond to our anxious questions in a reassuring tone. “It's nothing,” they say. “We're taking you to have a shower at the disinfection area, that's the rule here, and then everyone will see their family again.”

Until the selection of the group, four thousand people strong, is completed, I have time to look around myself. In the light of the fading day, the landscape I saw from inside the wagon now leaps to life. Here there is much more to see.

²² Phonetic Hungarian transcription of the German *Kazett* which in turn is the German pronunciation for the letter names K and Z. “K.Z.” itself is an abbreviation for *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camp).

²³ Nyiszli here uses *főrohamvezető*, the literal Hungarian equivalent of the German *Hauptsturmführer* (“head storm leader”). The rank is equivalent to that of captain in traditional armies.

The first thing that draws my attention – rivets it, so to speak – is a gigantic square chimney, tapering toward the top and built of red bricks, which emerges from the top of a factory-like, two-story building, also built of red bricks.

It's a strange shape for a factory chimney, but what is really impressive is the column of fire 8-10 meters high [*a 8-10 méteres lángoszlop*] which gushes from its mouth between the lightning rods at its four corners. I try to imagine what kind of hellish kitchen it could be to need such a fire. Then it comes to me. I am in Germany, the land of crematoria, where I spent ten years as a student and doctor. I know that every last little German city has its crematorium.

So it is a crematorium! Not far from it is another, and beyond, in a grove [*egy lugasban*] which partly hides it, I spot a third similar building, all with the same fire-spewing chimneys [*ugyanolyan tűzokádó kéményekkel*].

A gentle breeze carries the smoke toward us. A nauseating stench of burning flesh and singed hair strikes my nostrils. A familiar smell! Burning human flesh emits an acrid smell just like that of church candles made of carrion tallow.

There's much to reflect on in that, but already the second phase of selection is underway. Men, women and children parade in single file before the selection committee. At a gesture of the selecting physician – I will call him now by his name, Dr. Mengele – we form ranks again, to the left or to the right. Now we find ourselves in two groups, one on the left and one on the right. In the group on the left, I notice, are mostly the old, the crippled, the sickly, and women with children under fourteen. In the group on the right, those able to work. Among them I see my wife and my fourteen-year-old daughter. We have no chance to exchange words now. We wave to one another.

Those unable to walk, the sick, the old, the mad, are loaded onto Red Cross trucks. A few of my older doctor colleagues ask to go with them as well. The trucks set off first. Then the group on the left, in lines five abreast, at a slow pace and under an escort of SS guards. In a few minutes, they disappear from our view beneath the trees of a small woodlot. The group on the right stays put. Dr. Mengele orders the doctors to form a group to one side. When this is done, he approaches the group, about fifty doctors in all, and calls on any doctors who did their studies at a German university, are thoroughly versed in pathological anatomy, and who also practice forensic medicine to step forward.

“But it would be best that you take care,” he adds, “to comply with these prerequisites, because...” And then follows a menacing, meaningful gesture. I look at my colleagues to my left and right. Perhaps there are no specialists among us? Or are they frightened by the threat? No one steps forward. No matter, I have decided! I leave the line, stand before Mengele and introduce myself. He interrogates me thoroughly. He asks me where I did my university studies, where, and with what professors I studied pathological anatomy,

where I have practiced forensic medicine, how long I have worked in that field, and so on. I must have satisfied him with the precision of my answers. He orders my colleagues to return to the group on the right, and these now set off marching along the right-hand way, the way to life, toward the camp... for now I can reveal what I still did not then know. The group on the left, only minutes after its departure, had passed through the doors of one of the crematoria. And from there there was no return.

Chapter II

As soon as I am alone, my thoughts turn to fate and to Germany, the land where I spent so many years, the best years of my youth!

Above my head the stars are already out in the sky. High above my head I see the Big Dipper, just as it is at home in Hungary. The cool air of the evening breeze might even be refreshing, if only it were not blowing toward me the acrid stench of burning corpses from the crematoria of the Third Reich.²⁴

From the concrete pillars, hundreds of arc lamps send out a dazzling light. Beyond the chain of lights, however, it is as if the air has become condensed. It covers the camp like a heavy shroud and one can barely discern the silhouettes of the K.Z. barracks.

The ramp is now deserted, only a few inmates in prison stripes are stirring here and there, loading the baggage left in the wagons onto trucks. In the darkness, the forty empty wagons, bearers of our destiny, merge ever more into the gloom of the landscape and the objects around us.

Dr. Mengele gives some last instructions to the SS soldiers still waiting there, then gets into the driver's seat of his Opel car and motions for me to get in behind. The back seat is already occupied. Beside me sits an SS enlisted man. We set off.

Our car is tossed about on the camp's bumpy, clay roads, which are much worn by the spring rains. The brilliant arc lamps along the fences flash swiftly past us. We stop before a closed iron gate. From the guardhouse, an SS enlisted man rushes to open the way for Dr. Mengele's familiar car. We proceed for a few hundred more meters along the camp's main street between barracks lined up on either side, then come to a stop before a rather more-elegant building.

Dr. Mengele gets out of the car. I get out after him. "Camp Office" [*Táboriroda*] I hastily read on a sign posted at the entrance. We go inside. Several intelligent-looking individuals in prison clothes are sitting at desks. They all leap to their feet and stand stiffly to attention without speaking at their places.

²⁴ Nyiszli never uses the German expression *Drittes Reich* but rather always the Hungarian translation *III. Birodalom*.

Dr. Mengele calls over a close-shaved inmate in prison uniform of about fifty years old. I stand quietly a few meters behind them. I cannot catch what they are saying. Dr. Sentkeller – for that is his name, as I later learn – head doctor of Camp Hospital “F,” nods understanding. He calls me to him and accompanies me to the desk of another inmate worker. There, the clerk draws out some pre-printed cards. He asks me for my personal data and records them in a large volume. He passes the completed cards to an SS escort. We go outside. I bow my head before Dr. Mengele as we pass, at which Sentkeller, more ironically than angrily, barks at me not to play at social niceties here, but rather get used to the fact, and fast, that this is a concentration camp!

I proceed to the third barracks, alone with my escort. There the sign reads “Bath and Disinfection” [*fürdő és fertőtlenítő*]. My escort hands me over to his colleague there, along with my card. Two inmates in prison uniforms approach me. They take away my little doctor’s bag. They search my pockets and then ask me to undress. A barber arrives. He crops my hair close, shaves me all over and then sends me under a shower. They wash my head with a solution of calcium chloride. My eyes burn so badly that it takes several minutes before I can reopen them. In another room I receive a grey jacket and a pair of striped black trousers in place of the clothes I handed over earlier. My shoes they return to me, after having immersed them in a tub full of calcium chloride solution. I put on the clothes. They fit me well, as if they had been tailor-made for me! Who knows what companion in misfortune once wore them! An inmate rolls up the left sleeve of my jacket, reads the number found on my card, and with practiced speed lays down along my arm innumerable needle pricks with a little device filled with ink. Where the needle punctures an indistinct blue stain begins to form. The prisoner reassures me. The skin may be a little inflamed for now, but that passes in a week or so and the numbers become clearly visible. So I too am tattooed, I, Dr. Nyiszli Miklós; I cease to exist under my own name and become a mere number, A-8450, a prisoner of the K.Z.

Suddenly the memory of another formal act of inscription comes to mind. Fifteen years earlier the Dean of Medicine of the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Breslau had shaken my hand and, wishing me good luck and a prosperous future, conferred upon me my doctor’s diploma, *cum laude*.

Chapter III

I am left in a strange state of inner turmoil, but I have never been one to give in to empty despair. No matter! I must adapt myself to whatever my situation brings. I must not despair! I must not become sentimental! I must neither see too much, nor yet be too sober! And yet I am indeed clearly sober, for I am saying such things to myself.

My situation for now is not the worst it could be! Dr. Mengele wants to give me a medical job. Probably I’ll be taking the place, at least in part, of a

German pathologist or forensic specialist from an institute in some German town who's been drafted into the army. I am also encouraged by the fact that, presumably on Dr. Mengele's orders, I have been given not a prisoner's uniform but rather an excellent civilian suit. It follows that the position reserved for me is one that requires a neat appearance. But this is just speculation. We shall see.

From the bath building, accompanied by a new escort who carries my card in his hand, I pass into the barracks which stands opposite and which bears the number 12 on its front. It's a building around 100 meters long. The interior forms a large hall. Along both sides of the hall run lines of three-tier bunks made of rough-sawn beams and planks, divided into compartments crowded with patients. I am in Camp "F," Hospital Barracks 12.

My SS escort hands my card to an inmate, a chubby-faced older man who hurriedly stands to attention to receive it. My escort departs, and we two shake hands. We introduce ourselves. He is the supervisor of Barracks 12. He makes me comfortable in a small room off the big hall and tells me the story of his life, as prisoners always do.

He is a German from the Reich²⁵ [*birodalmi*]. He is fifty years old and by profession, in civilian life, a bank robber. He explains that he always worked alone. His last job was a bank robbery in grand style. He robbed one of the main banks of Düsseldorf in broad daylight. He lived for three years on the money until he was denounced by his wife, who had separated from him. He did a ten-year sentence in the Moabit Prison.²⁶ Upon his release, the political SS were waiting for him as he came out the prison gates, and he next became a prisoner of K.Z. Auschwitz. He has been in custody here for five years now.

On the breast of his striped shirt, just above his heart, he wears a badge with a green number on a white background. A green badge in the K.Z. is the insignia for a professional criminal. He explains the other prisoner insignia to me: a red badge is for political prisoners, while brown is for Jehovah's Witnesses, Sabbatarians and Baptists. The notoriously work-averse and prostitutes are blue. A black badge is for homosexuals charged under paragraph 175. A white letter "A" embroidered on a black ribbon on the sleeve stands for *Arzt*,²⁷ or doctor, but there are few of these since only imprisoned doctors actually holding the position of doctor in the K.Z. receive them.

It is already past midnight, but curiosity keeps fatigue at bay. I listen intently to every word of the barracks supervisor. He knows the complex organization of the K.Z. He knows by name the commanding SS officers for every part of the camp. He knows the prominent prisoners²⁸ who have a position

²⁵ That is, a German from Germany proper, as opposed to Germans from other German-speaking countries or areas.

²⁶ A famous prison in the "Moabit" area of Berlin.

²⁷ In German in the original.

²⁸ Nyiszli uses the German term *Prominente*, rendered in Hungarian as *prominens*.

here. I discover that K.Z. Auschwitz is the largest extermination camp [*megsemmisítő tábora*] of the Third Reich and not a labor camp! He speaks of the selections,²⁹ which take place every week in the hospitals and the barracks of the camp, when they load hundreds of selected prisoners onto trucks and carry them to the crematoria situated a few hundred meters away.

From his stories I learn about life in the barracks, where 800 to 1000 people are massed together in cramped, cagelike, comfortless boxes.³⁰ The feet of one rest on the head of another, or on a neck or a chest, they lie lengthwise and crosswise and back-to-front on their miserable pallets. Deprived of any trace of humanity, they punch and kick and bite one another to secure a space of just a few centimeters [more] for their brief sleep.

Indeed, the night's sleep is finished already by three in the morning. The work-detail bosses,³¹ cudgels in hand, drive the men from their beds. They pour outside, jostling each other at the door of the barrack, and are soon standing in lines. And now begins the most dehumanizing song and dance in the whole K.Z. repertoire: *Appel*,³² or "roll call" [*sorakozó*]. The inmates stand in five rows. They begin to put themselves in order. The barracks clerk places the taller ones in the front row, the shorter ones behind. Another "prominent" arrives, the room duty leader.³³ Raining blows heavily down with his fists he drives the tall prisoners to the back and brings the short ones to the front again. Finally the barracks supervisor himself emerges from the barracks, well fed and well dressed. Striped uniform freshly washed and pressed, he strikes a Napoleonic pose before the formation, inspects the front line, does he not observe a fault somewhere? He most certainly does. He launches himself at some men wearing glasses in the front row, slugs them on the chin with his fists and sends them to the back. Why? No one knows! No one even thinks about it. This is the K.Z. and no one expects a rhyme or reason for anything.

And so it goes for hours. Fifteen times the roll is counted, this way then that way, forwards and backwards along the rows. If a line is not straight, the entire barrack must squat for half an hour with their arms raised. Soon everyone's legs are shaking with exhaustion. Even in summer the dawn hours at Auschwitz are cold. The light, striped material of the uniforms protects neither from the rain nor from the chill, yet roll call always begins at first light and continues until 7 a.m., when the SS enlisted man arrives.

²⁹ Nyiszli does not directly use the German term *Selektion*, but rather always the Hungarian *szelektálás*.

³⁰ Thus in the original: *bokszokban*, from *bokszok-*, plural of *boksz* ("box") and the locative case ending *-ban*. The expression as a whole presumably refers to the three-tier bunks mentioned earlier.

³¹ Nyiszli here uses the Hungarian *felvigyázók* ("bosses" or "overseers"), presumably as a translation of the camp slang term *Kapo*, or work-team leader.

³² In German in the original, correctly *Appell*.

³³ Nyiszli here uses a Hungarian translation [*szobaszolgáltatás*] of the German *Stubendienst* ("room duty"), the name for a prisoner in charge of ensuring that barracks are kept clean and orderly.