

Tape

Auschwitz and Belsen come to mind, I seldom think of Cracow. Most of my memories are so deeply repressed apparently that I have forgotten about them and I haven't thought of them. Two things reminded me in these past few days that I may have been more impressed than I thought during the two months I spent in Cracow. The first was that in my free association when I thought of going down in an escalator in Europe a picture emerged as if it had surfaced from a deep, of a day or several days I spent digging trenches on a work detail in Cracow. The other thing that I thought of recently is that when I think of Michelangelo's David in the Florence museum and the next thing that came to my mind was the picture of a man that I saw in Cracow at one time.

Cracow was different from Auschwitz in many respects. First of all, it was not an extermination camp. I don't think it had any gas chambers or incinerators, which doesn't mean that one could not have been killed there. There were rumors of executions by gunshot, one could be killed or disappeared. But it was not a mass production.

But there were other differences, too. Auschwitz was unrelievedly evil, there was nothing about it that was not ugly even in its physical layout. It was flat and gloomy and hellish. There was nothing ever to relieve the unrelenting evil, ugliness, and despair.

Cracow looked different, and it had a different atmosphere even though many things were hellish about that too. First, there was the looks, the layout of the camp, which was in a valley surrounded by hills. Aall during the day whenever one was at work,

one was in the surrounding hills overlooking the countryside, overlooking the city, which is one of the beautiful cities in eastern Europe. There was some grandeur to this, which is not easily communicated. A painter could paint it. It had some plastic aspects, not plastic, some aspects of art, some aesthetic aspects to this place, which is very difficult to put into words to explain. It could be much easier for a talented painter to paint it. One thing was the morning and the evening just after the morning Zählappel and just before the evening Zählappel.

But now a word has to be said about the Zählappel. Zählappel is a German word, a complex word, zählen means to count, appel means a parade, Appelplatz is a parade ground. In the middle was a parade ground. Divided and facing each other were the men and the women. I have no way of estimating, I would say there could have been as many as five to ten thousand people. Every morning and every evening each block would have a separate column, each block must have contained a couple of hundred people. One side of the camp was a men's camp, the other side a women's. In the morning there would be a parade, I don't know if I can call it a parade. In the morning you came out and you stood in rows of five and then the SS men and women would come and count you. And this was a particularly hellish ordeal because it took hours, it started in the darkness of morning, it took several hours until the numbers tallied and came out right. If they didn't count right or if someone was missing, then you would have to stand there until they found the missing person, or whatever happened. Standing was not always the case, sometimes you had to kneel. This was rain or shine, winter

or summer. Actually in Cracow, I was there in the summer months, of 1944, from the end of June until the end of August, and it was a warm summer, though still cold in the morning when one came out of the block. Then we would break ranks and march out to work.

The work in Cracow was nothing that was in any way useful to anybody, except for several days when volunteers were asked to go to dig trenches. And about fifty of us, I was one of the volunteers because, and this is another story, I felt in that year very strong, stronger than anybody, so that when strong women were called upon I volunteered. We were quite a ways, we had to walk about five miles to get there, and what we had to do was to dig trenches, for the army, I suppose. I didn't know it at the time, but during the summer of 1944 the Russians were approaching, and in fact, in August when we left the camp of Cracow and were taken back to Auschwitz, apparently the Russians were not far away, but as I said we didn't know that at the time.

It was very hard work, and it was one of the days.... The days, there were two kinds of days, bad days and worse days. But I knew on the worst days, on those days when things were so bad that I didn't think I could stand another one, but I also knew that the next day will be better, because on the very worst days, the following day was always somehow more bearable. So that on the days when it was so very bad it was just almost impossible to even think of enduring another day, I knew that this is the day that one has to live through and tomorrow will be better, and it was, usually. Perhaps always.

The rest of the time, aside from those few days I spent digging the trenches, I don't remember doing any kind of useful work, that would have been any kind of a war effort or in any way necessary for anything. It was just busy work, and a form of torture. One was carrying stones, large ones, very large ones, for distances, and putting them down. The next day picking them up and taking them back again to where we got them from. Other days it was cement. Sometimes we had to do it in a kind of a relay fashion, one person handed it to the other one.

At noon, some of us had to go get the food, the only food during the day and the only food, aside from the portion of bread that was given us at night. This food consisted of a soup, of sorts, nobody ever knew what was in it but we christened it Christmas Tree soup because it seemed to us there were some evergreens floating in it. I think it was made of beets mostly, but they were a kind of beets not fed to people but to hogs and cows. And various other unrecognizable bits and pieces were in it. It must have had some kind of a nutritional value. It tasted in such a way that it took some time before one could eat it, drink it really, we had to drink it, there were no spoons, there was some kind of a container that one drank it out of. But I intended to survive, and even on the first day when it was given to me I was going to drink it because that was going to keep me alive. I held my nose and I drank it down, because it was terrible stuff. Later on, it was not difficult. But one had to be very hungry before it was at all bearable. But when we went to get the food in those big garbage-can-like containers on a stand of some sort it took six people, six women, to carry it and the strong woman had

to be in the middle because it was put into some kind of a frame and the person in the middle had two pieces of wood to hold on to and to carry it with both hands, and she had to carry the majority of the weight, and then next to her two other women were holding with one hand, and the same in the back, and I always was carrying it in the middle because I felt that I was stronger than anybody else.

I felt very strong, the only time in my life that I felt strong was when I was in German concentration camp, which is an amazing thing to say and I don't know how to explain it. I felt very strong physically, emotionally, very strong, capable of enduring almost anything, physically and emotionally. And I knew that I would survive, just as I knew when my father went into the bedroom, a perfectly healthy 38-year old man, went into the bedroom saying he doesn't feel good, he didn't feel good, and I knew he was going to die. And when I was in concentration camp I knew I was going to survive. And my faith in that fact was just as strong when people were dying all around me and all the people who were just as young and healthy in the beginning were dying, even then, not just in the beginning when I started out healthy, but even at the end, I knew that I would survive.

What I didn't know, parenthetically, was that it was not going to be worth it.

So there I was carrying it in the middle, but to go back to the aesthetic aspect of Cracow, at the end of the workday when we were again lined up in rows of five marching back, long long rows of men and women marching back to the Appelplatz. And when you were on top of the hill you already saw the thousands of people standing

already, those who already arrived, and the long line in a curving line, a serpentine curving line on its way down to the valley. And it was summer, the sky was blue, and the hills were green, and the people in their striped clothes, singing marches in German songs, going down the valley, and there was some operatic aspect to this which I could never explain except by thinking of Wagner. There was some beauty to this misery, there was some moving aspect to this, there was some dreamlike aspect to this, there was an unreality to this, that was just not, that is impossible to describe and yet it was beautiful, and the feeling of unreality, of suffering, of hunger, yet of belonging somehow because one was still with one's friends from home.

I was still with Lily and Anci and Audrey(?) and Vera and Judith. They were my friends at home, some I worked with, some I went to school with, and we shared things. We found, for instance, a toothbrush. This was a great treasure because we had nothing except one inconceivable dress, a big ugly dress that didn't fit us, that was like an old woman's dress, that just hung on us, and no underwear, and nothing at all. And some shoes that were not shoes, they were those Dutch shoes, wooden shoes, that were painful to walk in. Somebody found, one of us found somewhere a toothbrush, God only knows whose toothbrush, one would never think of in normal life using somebody's toothbrush or sharing toothbrushes with your best friends, not even your family members, but that was a treasure, because we could brush our teeth, we shared it, there were five of us. We always stood in the same line, five abreast. Lily was my best friend from home, and she's one who survived, and I've

been in Hungary three times, and I've never really attempted to find her, which is a sign of something also, but I just digress always.

So there it was, this aspect of going down the hill, this aesthetic aspect to Cracow. Another scene, which I haven't thought of in so many so many years, another picture, until recently when I was trying to think of something beautiful, something pleasant, something other than death and dying and destruction and hell, so I thought of Michelangelo's David. That was the one good thing I have done, enjoyable, pleasant thing, that trip we took to Europe, that week in Italy. When I was thinking of Michelangelo's David, I remembered, like it floated up from the deep, this one picture of a man, in a red sweatshirt, in a red t-shirt, who was wielding an axe in the process of breaking up a big stone with an axe into smaller pieces, and he was a muscular man and it was a tight t-shirt on him which showed all his muscles and somehow his movement and his body was beautiful and reminded me of a statue at the time, and at the time I enjoyed it as an aesthetically satisfying view, scene. When I looked at Michelangelo's David, it didn't occur to me, I didn't think of this, only when I was free associating, and perhaps that gasp that I involuntarily made when I saw David had something to do with my memory then. Now that I remember this, in fact. The fact was, in Cracow, maybe there wasn't a hopelessness, because it was a transient camp, and people were there when they first arrived, from their normal background, and people were not emaciated yet, unlike in Auschwitz, unlike in Belsen, especially in Belsen. So that there were muscular and good-looking men and women there. Although there was a dreamlike aspect to this place, a very unreal aspect,

there was the promise of awakening. It lacked the hopelessness that
Auschwitz and Belsen had.

Cracow: A Fragment

written September, 1978

The K. Z. lager at Cracow was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz. It did not have any gas chambers or crematoria. There were rumors of firing squads, shots rang out throughout the nights, people often disappeared, but it was not a mass production.

One must keep in mind that the prisoners of Auschwitz or any other concentration camp (at least those who came from Hungary) knew nothing about them when they arrived. It was a totally new and utterly unbelievable world. ("The world of German concentration camps was different from any other known to civilized men": so begins a term paper I wrote for a Modern European History course.) On the day of my arrival and every day thereafter for a whole year I thought: "This cannot be real. If it is then my whole previous life must have been a dream."

I arrived at Auschwitz on June 6, 1944 (D-Day, but I didn't know it then), went through the ordeal of the first day which is a long story I can not deal with here except that I lost my belongings, my clothes, my hair and all feelings of certainty, received a ragged dress that must have belonged to an old, fat charwoman and a pair of Dutch wooden slippers. The next day I met my sister Magda who preceded me by a week (because I escaped from the ghetto, was caught and jailed and deported with a subsequent transport. But that's another story.) Auschwitz consisted of dozens of camps separated by barbed wire fences. Magda was in the next camp and we spoke across the fence and were to meet again the following day.

She came, but I was no longer there. That morning our transport was led to the train station and we began another journey.

From Auschwitz to Cracow one can travel by train in about an hour in normal times. It took us about a day and a half to get there. Most of the time we were on a side line letting other trains go past and there was a great deal of going forwards and backwards, so that when we finally arrived we had no way of knowing how far we had travelled. Part of the horror of the trip, or the whole year for that matter, was that one never knew what was going to happen next. (Other parts of the horror: 80 people to a box car; we had to take turns to sit; no food or water; a bucket for elimination.) However, throughout the initial trauma and throughout the summer I was together with my friends from home: Lily, my best friend, Anci with whom I had worked in the hospital, and Vera and Judith, former classmates of mine. That made the disorientation easier for me to bear, and I know that I was a great help to them.

Cracow differed from Auschwitz in many ways. Auschwitz was unspeakably ugly, desolate, unrelentingly evil, where there was no relief from despair. I was there only a day and a half before leaving for Cracow but I was to return there at the end of August and remain until the last day of the year. In Auschwitz it was impossible to believe that there was a way back to the world we used to inhabit. We were on another planet and no space travel existed.

Cracow, too, was surrounded by electrified barbed wire, daily life was just as difficult, the S.S. guards were just as cruel as their counterparts in other camps, the food about the same, yet, one did not feel totally removed from life. Perhaps, that is why, when I

think about that year, I think of Auschwitz and Belsen and almost never of Cracow.

But in the past few days two pictures emerged, as if surfaced from a deeply repressed part of my unconscious mind, both of them involving episodes in Cracow.

Cracow had an aspect that is very difficult to describe. A painter of genius could depict not only its physical characteristics but convey also its emotional impact. The camp consisted of a large clearing in a valley, surrounded by a ring of "blocks" (large wooden buildings housing the prisoners) which were half-way up the hills and during the day the prisoners worked at the top of the hills all around. The clearing in the valley served as the *Appelplatz* (literally: parade-ground), the site of the morning and evening *Zählappel*, the most excruciating part of every day in every camp. At dawn, hours before daybreak, the inmates of each block stood in a column, five abreast, waiting for the SS guards to come and count them. *Zählappel* was over in 2 or 3 hours if everything went well and the numbers tallied, but it would last five or six hours on occasion. One had to stand or kneel in all kinds of weather, rain or shine, winter or summer. In Cracow, however, it was summer, though quite chilly at dawn in the northern foothills of the Carpathians, and no underwear under the loose old-lady dress, nor hair to protect and warm one's head.

There were two kinds of days during that year: bad days and unbearable days. On the bad days everything was "normal": one was hungry, tired, always fearing a blow but everything was routine. The unbearable days were when one was compelled to run with dogs

at one's heels, the soup at noon did not arrive, and the work was beyond one's strength. It seemed that two unbearable days in succession would have been beyond endurance. For me, there was one saving grace about the unbearable days. Because I knew that I would survive, I knew, with certainty, that an unbearable day would be followed by a better day, that is, one that was merely bad. And it was, always.

The first day I dug trenches was such an unbearable day. We had to go out of the camp about five miles to do this and we had to run all the way. (It is difficult to run in wooden clogs.) And I volunteered for that work! They asked for strong women to do some work out of the camp. One of the peculiarities of that year was my feeling that I was stronger, physically and emotionally, than anyone else. So that when they wanted strong volunteers, I was there.

I don't remember the details of those days. Just the running downhill, terrified that if I should fall the dogs would attack me. And shovelling the dirt high up in line with my shoulders. The whole episode was totally out of my conscious mind for thirty years. But the other day, when I was thinking of the difficulty I had going down those steep escalators of the underground stations in London, then I thought of the time I went down the subway escalator in Budapest in October 1976, and the next thought that came to mind was the day I was digging the trenches in Cracow.

In Cracow there were, in fact, many more "normal" days than unbearable days. Most of the people were relatively new in camp, still looking healthy and strong, not as emaciated as they were to become later. We had lighthearted moments, made fun of our looks

(Lily took to calling me Zoli--the nickname of my brother, Zoltan--without hair I looked just like him, she said). We had, of course, no mirrors.

Poem by Margaret Atwood, printed in October 1978 issue of *Ms.*: "To live in prison is to live without mirrors/ To live without mirrors is to live without to[one's?] self."

We joked about our "attire", planned seven course meals, sang Hungarian folk songs, and I recited poetry endlessly. For the culture of the German concentration camps turned out to be an oral one. For the whole year, there was no trace of a printed word! As if all the books, newspapers, magazines, indeed paper and pen had disappeared from the face of the earth. For someone who had read avidly from the age of three and a half, this was at first as hard to take as the lack of food. Fortunately, I had a large body of Hungarian poetry stored in my head. It came in handy all that year and it kept the five of us going on many of the unbearable days that summer.

The other Cracow episode that I remembered this week also surfaced by "free association". In a deliberate effort to get away from the morbid memories to something pleasant and enjoyable, I thought about our recent trip to Florence, the experience of seeing Michelangelo's David. That brought to mind a man I saw during work in the hills of Cracow. He was a muscular young man in a tight red T-shirt, wielding an axe with a circular motion of his arm, hitting a rock with the blunt end of the axe trying to break it into pieces. It was like looking at a magnificent statue, an aesthetically satisfying sight. ()

For, if reading material was missing, there was, in fact, an aesthetic aspect in Cracow, and that, more than anything else, made it so very different from Auschwitz and Belsen. I will attempt to convey this by describing the late afternoon and evening ritual of the camp.

Work stopped about four or five in the afternoon (we never knew the exact time since our watches were taken from us on arrival), and we left the workplace to return to the *Appelplatz*. There was always a great deal of apprehension connected with the evening *Zählappel*. It lasted longer than in the morning, and the possibility of someone missing and the count not tallying was greater. The resulting punishment that could be in store for the already exhausted prisoners consisted of denying the bread ration, or kneeling half of the night, or worse. But for me, and I imagine for some others, superimposed on all this was a conscious aesthetic enjoyment of a thing of beauty. For it was summer and the sky was often blue, and the hills were always green and, on clear days, in the distance illuminated by an orange glow of the sunset one could see the city of Cracow on the banks of the Vistula river, one of the most beautiful cities of eastern Europe. This sounds trite, but I can still see it that way. The orangeness was accentuated by the yellow ochre of mitteleuropean buildings. We were marching down toward the *Appelplatz* in the valley where thousands of people were already lined up, men and women divided by a wide artery, facing each other. A long, meandering column of a ragged army, men in striped prison clothes, women in their rags, singing, marching down the hill in the growing dusk, to join the rest in the valley. There was an

operatic aspect to this; it made me think of overtures to Wagner operas. I was a participant in this scene and, at the same time, its detached observer. The participant was hungry, exhausted, fearful. The observer took in and appreciated the aesthetic qualities of the scene. Perhaps a film could express this dual aspect: a juxtaposition of the large scene of operatic beauty with closeups of individual misery. Throughout the year, but especially in Cracow, I had this split personality. The whole scene had an unreality, a dream-like quality, and because it was so much like a dream, there was a promise of awakening. Cracow lacked the hopelessness of Auschwitz or Belsen.

Letter to Julia, undated, early 1980s?: "The Crakow paper is a rough draft. Someday I want to write a full account of certain years of my life...."