

NYT. 6/25/74

Auschwitz

By William Styron

ROXBURY, Conn. — Springtime at Auschwitz. The phrase itself has the echo of a bad and tasteless joke, but spring still arrives in the depths of southern Poland, even at Auschwitz. Just beyond the once-electrified fences, still standing, the forsythia puts forth its yellow buds in gently rolling pastures where sheep now graze. The early songbirds chatter even here, on the nearly unending grounds of this Godforsaken place in the remote hinterland of the country. At Birkenau, that sector of the Auschwitz complex that was the extermination camp for millions, one is staggered by the sheer vastness of the enterprise stretching out acre upon acre in all directions.

The wooden barracks were long ago



destroyed, but dozens of the hideous brick stable-like buildings that accommodated the numberless damned are still there, sturdily impervious, made to endure a thousand years.

Last April, as this visitor stood near "Crematorium II," now flattened yet preserved in broken-backed rubble, his gaze turned and lingered upon the huge pits where the overflow of the bodies from the ovens was burned; the pits were choked with weeds but among the muck and the brambles there were wildflowers beginning to bloom. He reflected that forsythia was one of two loan-words from Western languages that he recognized amid his meager command of Polish. The other word, from the French, was *cauchemar*—"nightmare." At the beginning of spring, the two images mingle almost unbearably in this place.

At Auschwitz itself, in the original camp nearby, there is still the infamous slogan over the main gate—*Arbeit Macht Frei*—and only yards away, unbelievably, a small hotel. (What does the guest really order for breakfast? A room with which view does one request?) It is hardly a major world tourist attraction but Auschwitz is not unfrequented. Many of the visitors are Germans, festooned with Leicas and Hasselblads, whose presence does not seem inappropriate amid the *echt*-German archi-

ture These grim warrens, too, were built to last the Hitler millennium. Hulking and Teutonic in their dun-colored brick, the rows of barracks where hundreds of thousands perished of disease and starvation, or were tortured and hanged or shot to death, now shelter the principal museum exhibits: the mountains of human hair, the piles of clothes, the wretched suitcases with crudely or neatly painted names like Stein and Mendelson, the braces and crutches, the heaps of toys and dolls and teddy bears—all of the heart-destroying detritus of the Holocaust from which one stumbles out of into the blinding afternoon as if from the clutch of death itself. Even thus in repose—arrested in time, rendered a frozen memorial, purified of its seething mass murder—Auschwitz must remain the one place on earth most unyielding to meaning or definition.

I was unable to attend the recent symposium on Auschwitz at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City, but many of the aspects of the proceedings there, at least as reported, troubled and puzzled me, especially because of the overwhelming emphasis on anti-Semitism and Christian guilt.

My interest in the meeting was deep, since although I am nominally a Christian my four children are half-Jewish and I claim perhaps a more personal concern with the idea of genocide than do most gentiles.

There can be no doubt that Jewish genocide became the main business of Auschwitz; the wrecked crematoriums at Birkenau are graphic testimony to the horrible and efficient way in which the Nazis exterminated two and a half million Jews—mass homicide on such a stupefying scale that one understands how the event might justify speculation among theologians that it signaled the death of God.

The Holocaust is so incomprehensible and so awesomely central to our present-day consciousness — Jewish and gentile—that one almost physically shrinks with reticence from attempting to point out again what was barely touched on in certain reports on the symposium: that at Auschwitz not only the Jews perished but at least one million souls who were not Jews.

Of many origins but mainly Slavs—Poles, Russians, Slovaks, other—they came from a despised people who almost certainly were fated to be butchered with the same genocidal ruthlessness as were the Jews, had Hitler won the war, and they contained among them hundreds of thousands of Christians who went to their despairing deaths in the belief that their God, the Prince of Peace, was as dead as the God of Abraham and Moses.

Or there were the few ravaged survivors, like the once devoutly Catholic Polish girl I knew many years ago, the memory of whom impelled my visit to Auschwitz. It was she who, having lost father, husband and

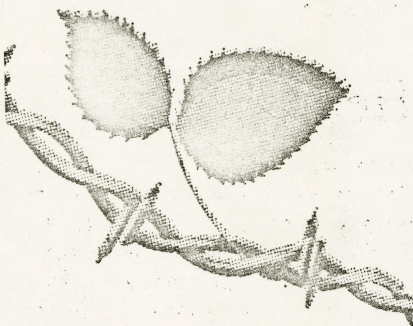
s Message

two children to the gas chambers, paid no longer any attention to religion since she was certain, she told me, that Christ had turned His face away from her, as He had from all mankind.

Because of this I cannot accept anti-Semitism as the sole touchstone by which we examine the monstrous paradigm that Auschwitz has become. Nor can I regard with anything but puzzled mistrust the chorus of *mea culpas* from the Christian theologians at the symposium, rising along with the oddly self-lacerating assertion of some of them that the Holocaust came about as the result of the anti-Semitism embedded in Christian doctrine.

I am speaking as a writer whose work has often been harshly critical of Christian pretensions, hypocrisies and delusions. Certainly one would not quarrel with the premise that Christian thought has often contained much that was anti-Semitic, but to place all the blame on Christian theology is to ignore the complex secular roots of anti-Semitism as well.

The outrages presently being perpetrated against the Jews by the



Raoul del Rio

secular, "enlightened," and anti-Christian Soviet Union should be evidence of the dark and mysterious discord that still hinders our full understanding of the reasons for this ancient animosity.

To take such a narrow view of the evil of Nazi totalitarianism is also to ignore the ecumenical nature of that evil. For although the unparalleled tragedy of the Jews may have been its most terrible single handiwork, its threat to humanity transcended even this. If it was anti-Semitic it was also anti-Christian. And it attempted to be more final than that, for its ultimate depravity lay in the fact that it was anti-human. Anti-life.

This message was plainly written in the spring dusk at Auschwitz only short weeks ago for one observer, who fled before the setting of the sun. To linger in Auschwitz after nightfall would be unthinkable.

William Styron is author of "The Confessions of Nat Turner."