

Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land Study Guide

Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land by Sara Nomberg-Przytyk

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Plot Summary

Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land was written by Sara Nomberg-Przytyk though this was not clear to the editor for years after the manuscript was discovered. The typescript was written in 1966 and Roslyn Hirsch did not even know the author was still alive when he began translation in 1981. While the horrors of Auschwitz have been covered many times, the manuscript that comprises this book has a unique capacity for character portraits and effectively illustrates how the horrors of Auschwitz affected real individuals.

Roslyn Hirsch eventually tracked down the author, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, who was born September 10th, 1915 in Lublin, Poland, who was raised Hasidic and became a political radical at a young age. Thus Sara was a political prisoner long before she was a Jewish prisoner. From 1941 to 1943, Sara survived in the Bialystok Ghetto and in August 1943 she was taken to Sutthof and from there to Auschwitz.

The book covers Sara's shipment to Auschwitz, the year she spent there and her eventual escape and return to Lublin. It is composed of forty short entries, some only a page or two long. The first several chapters tell the story of Sara's arrival at Auschwitz and her terrible struggles as a member of the "zugang" or new arrivals at Auschwitz. Because of her political connections, she was able to get a job working at the camp infirmary, which was headed by the infamous Dr. Mengele, whose person and sadistic acts of slaughter feature prominently in the book.

The subsequent chapters introduce a number of characters nearly all of whom are women and most of whom are Jewish. Sara was isolated to the female part of the camp and was restricted to a Jewish block for some time. There she meets many women, some of whom are clerks at the infirmary, others nurses and others are the horrifying Jewish cell block leaders who have betrayed their people to serve the SS and receive the privileges associated with it. Other chapters describe Mengele's horrific and maniacal torturing and murdering of the elderly, children, gypsies, midgets, and Jews.

The last chapters reach the end of 1944 when the Russians closed in on Poland and Auschwitz had to be evacuated. Sara is taken into Germany when she is eventually released by an Auschwitz soldier and escapes to a small town and a train station. The book ends when she returns to Lublin. The book then contains an editor's afterword, written by Eli Prefferkorn and David Hirsch, which gives a literary analysis of Sara's writings.



Chapters 1 - 6, Alienation, Exchange, New Arrivals, Without Pity, Death of the Zugang, Salvation

Chapters 1 - 6, Alienation, Exchange, New Arrivals, Without Pity, Death of the Zugang, Salvation Summary and Analysis

The book opens with Sara lying on her mattress in a three-decker bed in Stutthof, a World War II concentration camp located three hundred miles north of Auschwitz that opened in 1939. She hoped to survive the war there, which consoled her after having been brought to camp through a terrible three day trip without food or water. The first drop of water she had was wonderful.

Sara's group was the first Jewish transport to arrive in Stutthof and they received little sympathy from the other prisoners. They felt alienated and it was the isolation that hurt Sara most of all. When Sara was in the Bialystok prison prior to Stutthof, she had the same experience. A block elder was appointed for them, Ania, a Jewish woman from Bialystok. There were two hundred women of varying ages in their block. Despite feeling some solidarity, their fight for food was terrible. However, the fights over bread gave Sara hope because they indicated that the women still had the energy to fight for their lives and that they had not given up.

One night the bread thief was caught, a Ukrainian girl living in the next block. She justified her crime by saying that they would soon be going to gas chambers, so they didn't need it. When Christmas arrived, the women were eventually told that they would be taken away from Stutthof in January.

In January, the women were inspected but they didn't know why. Rumors abounded. For two months the women lived in isolation from the other prisoners. An empty train came and they boarded it. On the way, they received food that was much better than what they had in Stutthof. Sara found her way into another compartment to hear what others were saying about where they were going. Some speculated that they were to be taken to a prisoner exchange, which Sara thought was naïve.

The next day the women received a full day's food ration and the trip wore on. The women still knew nothing. Their captors had been somewhat nice to them, but Sara realized that they were delighted at where the women were going; the men knew that the women were going to their deaths and were nice to them to toy with them. That night a girl, Genia, escaped from the train but the Germans were still delighted to take the women to the next camps. Eventually they were booted off the train at the entrance to Auschwitz—Oswiecim.



New arrivals at Auschwitz were at the bottom of the social ladder and were treated horribly by the other prisoners. They made themselves look absurd trying to defend their dignity. Room elders would often deliberately degrade them. On January 13th, 1944, Sara became a zugang. She and the other women were inspected naked by SS men. The women were shaved of all hair, head and body. No modesty was permitted. They were then forced to wash in ice water and dry with old rags. Afterward, they were pushed into a barrack.

After the first week, Sara had eaten very little. The stronger took more food for themselves. Her cellmate Karola shared food with her. The days of January 1944 were extremely cold. Sara then describes various members of the camp, many of whom she found beautiful. They all struggled to wash themselves, even with snow, as a sign of their humanity.

The German Jews separated themselves from the rest of the prisoners, disliking Eastern European Jews. They still thought that the Germans would eventually remove them from camp. Sara had no idea why the German Jews had any pride over this. The Slovakian Jewish women ruled the blocks and, horribly, had a sense of pride at having built the camp. They despised the zugangen. The SS men gave them privileges so they would rule over the zugangen; the women obeyed because of the amenities they knew they would lose.

Following the first week, Sara found that she was reaching the brink of what she could endure. She was hungry and felt the need to struggle to survive. At first, she decided to commit suicide. But those who did were dragged naked through the mud like animal corpses, humiliated. When an old fellow prisoner named Sonia Rozawska appeared, she decided to fight on. The two women were political prisoners in Fordonia and then taught in the Bialystok school and later were prisoners in the Bialystok Ghetto. Sonia had been in Auschwitz for a year by that time.

Sonia was member of an anti-Hitler organization in the camp that had some means to help her. Now she was someone with protectors.

Later Sara had to go to "selection" where the women were stripped down, washed and then inspected by Dr. Mengele and his men. Those who were condemned were sent to their deaths. Some tried to run but were mercilessly beaten. A little Greek girl that had rashes and who knew Sara was killed.

The next day Sara met with a friend of Sonia's, Eva, who took her to the back of the bath house. The women of her block returned to the block and looked terrible, and some of them were condemned to death. Sara was ashamed to live and saw many women suffering horribly at the thought of their forthcoming deaths. Sara briefly tells some of their stories. Eventually lunch came, as did a woman asking for her. She was Masza Zyskinol, a woman she had went to school with a long time ago. Masza told Sara that they would get her out of there soon.



Chapters 7 - 12, The Roar of the Beast, The Infirmary, What Kind of a Person Was Orli Reichert?, The Fight for Masha's Life, A Plate of Soup, Erika's Red Triangle

Chapters 7 - 12, The Roar of the Beast, The Infirmary, What Kind of a Person Was Orli Reichert?, The Fight for Masha's Life, A Plate of Soup, Erika's Red Triangle Summary and Analysis

Eva belonged to the elite of the camp. She seemed angelic to Sara, though she had been in Auschwitz since 1942. She eventually discovered a resistance movement in the camp and finally discovered them. While she was in the Gestapo hierarchy, she went rogue when viewing their brutality. During this time she met Sonia and started organizing with her.

The text transitions into a series of questions about why the Jews allowed themselves to be rounded up and taken away. The problem is that they simply couldn't believe that they would be treated like animals. Two women named Bubi and Cyla were German Jews who ended up enforcing the SS's without doing any work.

In the next entry, the reader finds that Sara has been in the infirmary for three days. Many of the sick surrounded her and a Czech Jew nurse, Marusia, and Czech doctor, Mancy, attended to them. They asked Sara to be a clerk for them. Officially Sara was sick but in fact she worked in the infirmary. She then met two very religious Slovak Jews that were clerks as well, Rachel and Ada.

Orli Reichert is introduced. She was a member of several anti-Fascist organizations and had been in German concentration camps since Hitler came to power in 1933, when she was eighteen. In 1938 she refused to cooperate with the Gestapo and was sent to Auschwitz. Orli impressed Sara with her individualism and Sara felt unfit to judge her, though she was defiant and cruel to the prisoners at the same time.

Orli saved Masha's life in 1943, however. Masha had typhus and continued to work. She was to be taken to the gas chambers but Orli made Mengele take Mash off the death list.



Sonia came from the Ural Mountains and had been in Auschwitz since 1943. She was Russian and had fought on their side. Orli respected her and she made an effort to help those who suffered. But Sonia was saddened by Orli's violence.

Erika Schneider was German and was one of the earliest groups of prisoners at Auschwitz. She had a red triangle on her arm to signify that she was an ardent Communist. In 1944 she was 40. Erika disliked Orli and her brand of communism, but she disliked Orli most because she had aided Mengele in killing several camp members.



Chapters 13 - 18, A Peculiar Roll Call, The Block of Death, Morituri te Salutant, Marie and Odette, Esther's First Born, Old Words—New Meanings

Chapters 13 - 18, A Peculiar Roll Call, The Block of Death, Morituri te Salutant, Marie and Odette, Esther's First Born, Old Words—New Meanings Summary and Analysis

In Sara's new area, there were no roll calls though there were elsewhere. But when they were to have a roll call one day it scared them, as any change did. One of the blokowe assembled them and instead told them that a complaint was made about Orli and sent to Mengele. They wanted to know who wrote the complaint and no one answered.

Rapportfuhrer SS man Taube was well known in Auschwitz for his ability to kill people quickly. He was responsible for appointing Cyla to lead of the death block, Number 25. Taube may have seen something terrible in her but in fact, some of the girls argued, he saw that she was young and could be molded. After taking her away for a few days, she came back brainwashed and is capable of murder, participating in selections, which were routine. When Mengele assigned some for the gas chambers, Cyla followed orders. Cyla would also confiscate their food and belongings.

Cyla often visited the infirmary and seemed happy and self-satisfied. Sara feared her greatly but asked her how should could act that way. She said that she put her own mother in the gas, and afterwards there was nothing so terrible she could not do it. When prisoners were evacuated from Auschwitz, Sara did not see Cyla.

Sara met Lisette in Auschwitz in 1944 as well. That summer was filled with death and new prisoners, many of whom went straight to the gas chamber. Yet Lisette remained happy because her husband had escaped and is free. However, in the summer of '44 Lisette stopped smiling for her husband had arrived at Auschwitz from France.

Lisette's husband Karol wrote her letters of the horrors he saw and decided to commit suicide. Lisette, however, told him to organize a group from his block and blow up the crematorium with her organization's help. They were successful. The SS killed them all. Lisette then committed suicide.

Odette was French, brought to Auschwitz in January 1944, about fifteen years old. She and her mother Marie were from Paris. Marie was sick and got worse; she would not



survive. Odette came to the infirmary to visit her and Marie died the next morning. Her naked corpse was then dragged out to rot in the mud.

Sara tried to hide the corpse from Odette but could not find a place. Odette then saw her mother and broke down. Later it turned out that Odette was one of the four girls who blew up the crematorium. She was hung near the gate of the camp.

On a warm day in April, Esther came to the infirmary. Sara knew her from the Bialystok Ghetto. Esther and her family hid in Sara's bunker in her apartment. Eventually she was separated from her family and was alone in Auschwitz. She was pregnant and asked Sara for help.

Sara did not know what Mengele did with children, but found out that he sent them to death with their parents, for which he gave a sick "humanitarian" justification. Esther eventually gave birth in secret and Mancy and others aimed to kill the baby and hide it from Esther, later telling her the baby was born dead. Only in this way could Esther be allowed to live. When Esther gave birth, she kept her baby alive and Mengele saw her in a selection with her baby. Esther died in the gas chamber with her baby.

In "Old Words - New Meanings," Sara reflected on the symbolic aspect taken on by the term "Auschwitz." It came to represent the devastation that the camp created in the minds of those who lived and died there. Everyone was drawn into a criminal, amoral logic. And many words took on their own meanings through the same process that the term "Auschwitz" did.

Sara saw the change of words illustrated by a woman from Cracow named Fela. In January 1944, Sara and Fela were both inmates. Fela was alone in the camp and did not talk much. Fela quickly came to speak about the sick and persecuted with contempt. Fela decided to do some "organizing," which meant stealing bread from the sick, but told Sara that she "earned" it. Sara felt that the horrors of Auschwitz were so intense that she was in no position to evaluate Fela's behavior. Fela used the bread to secure herself a cushy position with the Nazis.

By Fall, Fela returned to Sara's block, horrified by the brutality and insanity she had seen. She got pneumonia and Mengele decided to send her to the gas but Fela escaped. She was able to replace a woman who had died in secret on the rolls. Fela later organized an opportunity to leave and Sara never saw her again.



Chapters 19 - 24, Children, A Living Torch, The Little Gypsy, Taut as a String, The Extermination of Midgets, Natasha's Triumph

Chapters 19 - 24, Children, A Living Torch, The Little Gypsy, Taut as a String, The Extermination of Midgets, Natasha's Triumph Summary and Analysis

The worst time in Auschwitz was the summer of 1944, as the death factory was working frantically. Trainloads of people were dying each day. People of all ages were being killed, twenty thousand by the end of the summer. Sara and the other camp members were inundated with seas of blood and the choking stench of burning human flesh. Sara is not clear how she handled it. Living children were burned like torches.

One day Mengele came to the infirmary with a little gypsy boy, dressed elaborately. Mengele then had him sing and dance for them. He paraded him around camp the whole summer. He was one of a gypsy camp of 25,000 who were all killed in the fall of 1944—20,000 of which died in a single night. Mengele pushed the boy into the gas chamber with his own hands.

Karola was a registered nurse. She rarely revealed details about her life and often was lost in thought. One day she heard that her sister and two children had been brought to Auschwitz. That night Dr. Koenig had her register her children. A few months went by with Karola trying to hide her son's infirmities. Sara and some of the others were able to hide him and he lived through Auschwitz.

One day in the infirmary, Sara and the others found a family of midgets and children and spouses of midgets. They had been circus actors in Budapest. Mengele singled them out as he did all not created "in God's image." He would toy with them and later kill them. When he came to the infirmary, he demanded to know how the midget and his normal sized wife had sex in front of their children, but the wife refused. A few days later Mengele took their three year old boy into the hospital to torture him with insane experiments. He died that night. A few days later, the husband midget would try to escape to his wife and an SS guard would shoot him. Bubi, a German prisoner and lesbian, laughed uncontrollably.

Mengele eventually decided to create a separate ward for mentally disturbed women. One day, a woman named Natasha was brought into the infirmary. She was from Leningrad. Mengele arrived the next day to see her and other women who had come.



Natasha deliberately provoked Mengele, telling him that the Nazis were dying like mad dogs at Stalingrad.

Mengele left Natasha's room without saying anything. She continued to verbally provoke him. Mengele then told Sara and the others to keep her in the infirmary. He was preparing an agonizing death for her. The next day he returned and she started to attack him again, singing Russia's praises. Mengele simply sat there, hanging his head on his chest. Sara cannot understand his behavior to the day of her writing. Mengele continued to return.

Later Sara began to get to know Natasha. She was pretending to be mentally ill so she could insult the Germans and tell her what she thinks of them. She was not afraid of death. Dr. Koenig came the next day and shot her.



Chapters 25 - 30, The Price of Life, The Lovers of Auschwitz, The Dance of the Rabbis, Revenge of a Dancer, The Verdict, Friendly Meetings

Chapters 25 - 30, The Price of Life, The Lovers of Auschwitz, The Dance of the Rabbis, Revenge of a Dancer, The Verdict, Friendly Meetings Summary and Analysis

Sara wonders how one can put a price on life. Some in Auschwitz do. When their life has infinite value to them, they will sacrifice even their own life to save it. Everyone in Auschwitz wanted to live and there were few suicides. Many believed that after Germany was defeated the world would begin anew. Sara also wonders if it is better for a human being to know she is about to die. Magna thought that depriving them of this knowledge was to deprive them of their dignity as human beings.

In the fall of 1944, the sirens in Auschwitz sounded. The sirens always brought good news, for they indicated either that someone had escaped or that enemy bombers were near. It turned out that Mala, a Jewish woman from Belgium, had escaped, as had her boyfriend. They hoped Mala would spread the word about what was happening there. Everyone in the camp knew her, and she and her boyfriend Tadeusz were on the run but free.

At the end of October, Mala and her boyfriend had been caught, terribly beaten and returned. The SS then tortured them to find out who had helped them, but they resisted for days. Mala was then brought out in ceremonial fashion by the SS to be killed and then Mala pulled out a razor and tried to slit her wrists, defying the SS. The razor was removed from her hands and while Mala had cut her wrists, the infirmary workers were forced to save her. When it was clear they could not save her, the SS rushed her off in a wheelbarrow to the gas chamber to kill her with gas before she could bleed out. The SS later hung Tadeusz's corpse on the gate. It turned out that the SS man did not throw Mala in the oven, but instead shot her with his own hands.

There came a day when Mengele brought about one hundred rabbis to Auschwitz dressed in their ceremonial garb. These Hungarian rabbis then spread out into a large circle and started to dance, refusing to listen to Mengele's orders. They then started to sing the Kol Nidrei prayer.

In the summer of 1944, transports brought people in at night and in the day. Atrocities were committed at night which kept many from sleeping. A French woman was brought



to the infirmary one night. She and five hundred others were told they were being taken east to work and had not believed those on the ride over who told them that they were to be killed. She related to Sara and Masha the story of a dancer who refused to undress for the SS men, stealing one of their pistols and shooting herself. Then a German soldier grabbed the French woman telling the story and saved her life. Magda admired the dancer's death.

In October 1944, the whole hospital was moved to camp "C," where the gypsies had been. Sara met Mrs. Helena there, another clerk in the infirmary. She was much older than the other infirmary workers and very quiet. One day she told them the story of how 156 girls from Krakow died. When the girls arrived at Mrs. Helena's post, she wanted to tell them that they were all about to be killed but did not. She and her co-workers did not know whether to tell them or not. When Mengele came to take the girls away, Mrs. Helena wished she had told the girls; she argued that it was her duty to give them the choice of how to handle their deaths.

Mengele ordered Mrs. Helena to take notes and she felt like she was taking part in Mengele's deception. With each card she filled out, Mengele killed another girl. The women kept calmly going in and Mrs. Helena could not understand it. Finally one of the girls refused to go in and ran away, but then the SS man shot her. Then each girl was dragged in, kicking and screaming, and killed by Mengele. Mrs. Helena left her seat and hid. She did not know which group's deaths were more difficult. After finishing her story, Mrs. Helena asked Sara and the others what they thought and no one said a word.

In Chapter 30, Sara introduces Irena, an actress from Poland who lived in Paris for some time before being sent to Auschwitz. She often organized dances for the women, encouraging the women to try to get some joy out of life. Some of the women were moving corpses one day and started singing a merry German song. Sara asked them how they could do so, and they told her she'd get used to it. They said that if they didn't get used to it, they'd drop dead.

After eight months in Auschwitz, Sara got used to it and stopped paying attention to the corpses. She laughed at jokes and told them herself. She had internalized the terror of Auschwitz and wondered whether her ability to adapt was good or bad.

While the women were singing one day—in their respective languages—Hitler appeared in the infirmary and knelt before Sara, suggesting that she might like to trade places with him. Everyone started to laugh; it was Irena in a costume. Orli then took some of the girls, including Sara, outside. There they saw a number of emaciated Russians who could no longer work being taken to the gas chamber. Orli suggested that they not tell the girls anything. It would spoil their fun since one could not get used to everything.



Chapters 31 - 36, Old Women, Ilya Ehrenburg Addresses Us, The New Year's Celebration, The Bewitched Sleigh, The Camp Blanket, In Pursuit of Life

Chapters 31 - 36, Old Women, Ilya Ehrenburg Addresses Us, The New Year's Celebration, The Bewitched Sleigh, The Camp Blanket, In Pursuit of Life Summary and Analysis

Russian planes began to fly over and bomb Auschwitz more frequently as 1944 came to an end, which gave Sara and the other infirmary workers a sense of hope, despite the fact that some prisoners were being killed by the raids. They received packages of food which kept them well-fed. One afternoon in November, Mengele brought a number of extremely old and infirm women into the hospital, at first apparently not to kill them. One of the old ladies praised Mengele for his kindness and he then ordered all the old women killed with Phenol injections.

In late 1944, the resistance arranged for Hans, an Austrian comrade, to work near the infirmary on the train ramp. He was to inform the new prisoners what awaited them. Hans also brought news; the Red Army had crossed into Prussia and was fighting on German soil. The gassing had stopped in Auschwitz because the Russians threatened that Germans would suffer the same fate if it did not cease. This is why Mengele stopped.

On another day, Orli gave the ladies a copy of Goebbels's newspaper where a speech by Ilya Ehrenburg is reprinted. The speech was addressed to Russian soldiers. It said that the Russians should take revenge for everything they suffered and to resist all pity for the Germans. The camp members of Auschwitz started to yearn for revenge as well.

The New Year approaches as December rolled along. The prisoners hoped for Germany's defeat and the destruction of Auschwitz. The infirmary workers decorated the infirmary. On previous New Year's Eve's the open spaces in the camp were full of signing and drunk Germans, but no one was there now. This year the prisoners celebrated. The SS soldiers in the camp knew that Hitler had lost the war. At midnight camp members started to sing the Internationale.

Two weeks later the infirmary workers were awoken by the sounds of rifle butts banging on the gates. Dr. Koenig and a few SS men came into the infirmary dressed for a trip.



They wanted all hospital documents. They said they wouldn't leave the worked for the Bolsheviks. The day was January 17th, 1945 and they were full of hope. Orli said that the Germans would probably blow up the camp or move the prisoners to other concentration camps. Witnesses to their crimes would be destroyed.

On the 18th, the SS gave the signal to march; sick and exhausted men were dragged along and were shot when they could not keep up. Eventually they were chased into a village to rest. The next day Sara could barely walk because her feet were raw. An SS man forced her along but she refused; he then pointed to a sleigh driven by a peasant and Sara was taken away. She thought she was dreaming. Marusia and Kwieta had rescued her. After hours of riding, she was taken to housing with the gendarmes, who were evacuating. However, when the transport reached them, Sara rejoined her friends in the march.

Walking continued for a few more days; the walk was terrible and news came that the Bolsheviks were closing in. The Russian command sent soldiers to liberate Auschwitz. Eventually they were forced on a train; a woman tried to escape and was trampled to death. No one seemed to care. Sara saw that many had been desensitized to death. Sara fell asleep in the cold and risked freezing to death; someone she had saved gave her a blanket. The person wanted her name but she did not respond.

The next afternoon, the prisoners came to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp in Eastern Germany. It was here that the Nazis tried to finish their attempted genocide. Sara looked for acquaintances but could find none. People were already talking about moving to another camp. Sara eventually found some of her friends and they stole soup. Sara was able to find work in Ravensbruck and was able to stay there, waiting for the Russians. They had already liberated Auschwitz. Sara was left by the other women, alone, but freedom was closer.

The days passed in Ravensbruck, for three weeks. Eventually an SS man told her and the others to leave. Sara boarded a transport despite having the chance to escape. She did not care for her life.



Chapters 37 - 40, The Plagues of Egypt, Without the Escorts, The First Days of Freedom, The Road Back

Chapters 37 - 40, The Plagues of Egypt, Without the Escorts, The First Days of Freedom, The Road Back Summary and Analysis

Sara's transport reached a military airport with underground hangars; it was in Rostock, Germany. SS men were there, as were Auschwitz functionaries. They made the barracks look like a model camp a week before. They got lice there and the women were helpless to stop them, despite struggling to destroy them.

Sara and the others did not have to work, but some cleaned the camp to have something to do. They wanted food and cared little for freedom. Sara did not want to be evacuated and was able to wash her emaciated body. It was April 1945 and the camp was often awakened by sirens and bombs, filling the prisoners with overwhelming joy. One day, the bombing did not cease until sundown. Bombers dropped millions of leaflets but the SS did not allow them to read them. They did anyway and said that the prisoners would be freed in a few days and explained where the Allied forces were located. The prisoners had no place to go; the Russians, British and Americans were on their way.

A few days later, Wierka, a young, happy Ukrainian girl, reported that they would receive food from the Red Cross until they were free. The end of April 1945 was coming; the women only had to survive hunger and lice. The SS ignored them, as did the blokowe. The women in fact received their packages and could barely stop themselves from eating, though their digestive systems rebelled because they could not process fats and sugar.

The next day on April 30th the SS decided to evacuate them; Sara took her chance to stay behind. The road she found her way to was full of fleeing Germans, with all their belongings. The women were to melt into the crowd in pairs but were still watched. Sara crouched with some Germans cooking potatoes and dragged her partner Klara with her. They were then sent to the hay stacks to hide. The stack was full of prisoners and they rejoiced to see Germans fleeing, running as the prisoners once ran before.

The first few months of 1945 were full of odd events for Sara. By May 1st, Sara was between Rostock and Rostock. A number of women were with her, most of whom were survivors. They were ransacking the countryside for goods out of revenge. Sasha, a tall blond Russian man, toasted the Red Army. They all replied. Irene then led the singing of the Internationale.



However, despite their joy they found out that Germans and Russians would be fighting in their area and that it would be dangerous to stay in the haystacks. Each person left individually. Trucks of soldiers were arriving and the Germans blew up the bridge. They seemed trapped, but eventually Russian soldiers surrounded them; they eventually let them go free. A Russian captain asked them how they survived and he found a pig for them. They burned their clothes and we free from lice.

Sara was not happy but she did not know why. She was sad though lying in a German bed. She felt alone; no one was waiting for her and she had nothing to go back to. She did not know how to handle freedom. On May 9th the Germans surrendered and Sara lived in a village close to the front when they were told. Sara had lived through Auschwitz and would return to Lublin.

Sara was to return to Poland the new "People's Poland." Sara found herself eager to get out of the little German town she was in. She took her possessions with her. On the 21st of May she found her way to a train station and got on a train bound for Russia that would pass through Poland. She was shocked that her life was returning to tranquility.

When a Russian soldier tried to remove them from the train, Sara shouted that she was a Communist and that she was going back to Poland to build a Socialist state. The Russian left her alone and smiled at her. At one of the stations two Polish soldiers boarded the train and told her she was in Poland; Sara was full of joy. But they told her not to say she was a Communist; there was gangs killing people in Poland; little peace was there.

Sara got off the train at Bydgoszcz in north central Poland. She and some of her friends traveled to the city but felt ignored by everyone around them. After lunch, Sara boarded a civilian train by herself. The train went to Lodz but no train yet went to Lublin. Sara would get there but didn't know what she would do once she arrived as her whole family died in April 1942. The conductor of the train then gave her some food. Sara could barely talk and was very sick.

Sara made her way to another train and a packed car. A man expressed his determination to fight against Soviet Socialism in Poland and feared Russian rule. He hoped that the English army would free them. Sara was afraid to share the fact that she was a Red. Sara fell asleep and the next day at noon the train arrived in Lublin. She was greeted by an Easter procession. She knew that the fight had not really ended, however.

Editors' Afterword

Editors' Afterword Summary and Analysis

The editor claims that the Holocaust not only raised questions for Western civilization as a whole but also represented a major test of Jewish tradition and the Jewish people. A number of Jews have struggled with the history of the Holocaust, such as Elie Wiesel. Holocaust witnesses had a great troubled telling the story as it "happened" without the distortions inevitably caused by psychological trauma. Concentration camp prisoners were brutally denied the ability to organize their lives and so had no appropriate psychological props, relying instead on the imaginative and threatening credibility as a result.

Like the other survivors, Sara decided to draw on her disturbing memories to try and make the reality of Auschwitz believable. However, she displays a particular interest in characters as methods of expressing the death-camp reality. All are embedded in the description of Holocaust life.

Sara writes in the tradition of the Yiddish folktale. Her stories are simply told but they still stimulate the reader to think on complex issues. She also reintroduces herself as narrator and reflector on the one hand and character on the other and registers a traditional value system threatened by the Nazis. Others adjusted their value systems.

The story of Fela is particularly illustrative; it is a "story within the story" that illustrates in microcosm the effect of the story as a whole. Fela's values were corrupted by Auschwitz but the horror of it eventually broke her. The editor then discusses how a number of other character descriptions have similar functions.



Characters

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk

Born in Lublin, Poland on September 10th September 1915, Sara Nomberg was raised a Hasidic Jew whose grandfather was a widely renowned Talmud scholar and the headmaster of a prominent yeshiva in Warsaw and was later a rabbi for a community near Lublin. Sara lived in poverty at an early age and her experience watching children die from malnutrition led her to become politically active, as did her experience with Polish antisemitism. Her activities were associated with the communist movement and she abandoned the religion of her upbringing.

Sara's political activities led her to be imprisoned for five years, from 1934 to 1939. When Germany conquered Poland in 1939, Sara ran to Soviet-run Bialystok. After Germany attacked the Soviets in mid-June 1941, Sara and the other Jews of Bialystok were confined to a ghetto there until August 1943 when the ghetto was destroyed. On January 13th, 1944, Sara was sent from Stutthof where she was imprisoned to Auschwitz. The trip from Stutthof is where the book begins.

Nomberg's political connections helped her to get a job as a clerk in the Auschwitz infirmary where she made a number of friends and came to know Josef Mengele. A year after her imprisonment, as the Russians approached, she was transferred to a German concentration camp in Ravensbruck via death march and then to Rostock. She was released on May 1st, 1945. She then returned to Lublin and wrote her memoirs of Auschwitz in the mid sixties.

Josef Mengele

Born March 16th, 1911 in Bavaria, Mengele grew up to become one of the head doctors of Auschwitz, after first running the Gypsy camp where he had all of the inmates gassed in August 1944. At Birkenau, he became the Chief Medical Officer at the infirmary where Sara worked. Mengele was in Auschwitz for twenty-one months and came to be called the "Angel of Death" for his incredibly gruesome and murderous treatment of inmates. He was responsible for inspecting prisoners and sending tens of thousands of them to the gas chambers where they would be killed and cremated en masse.

Mengele kept many of his "patients" alive, however, and experimented on them, particularly on twins. While there he engaged in a series of slipshod experimentation on human heredity which involved painful experiments on twins along with killing them and dissecting them afterward. Mengele was also interested in physical abnormalities particularly in dwarfism and a Draft family, the Ovitz's, who Sara reports he strung along until he had them killed. Mengele is thought to have killed all but 26 pairs of 3,000 twins that passed through Auschwitz.



In the book, Sara sees Mengele not as interested in science but as a pure, murderous sadist. She often describes how Mengele would toy with his prisoners, letting them think he would not kill them and even liked them, such as when he paraded a gypsy boy around camp and had him sing and dance for camp members. On other occasions, he demonstrates a disposition to rationalize his monstrosities as humane or scientifically necessary.

The Zugangi

New arrivals to Auschwitz.

The Blokowa

Prisoners that are leaders of the prisoner cell blocks.

SS Soldiers

Members of Hitler's most personal armed guard, the SS soldiers were responsible for running Auschwitz.

Sonia

An Auschwitz prisoner that Sara had been imprisoned with for political activity in previous years who helped her get a job as an infirmary worker.

Eva

An Auschwitz prisoner and political prisoner who helped Sara get to the infirmary.

Bubi

A lesbian chief of a work battalion feared by camp members.

Cyla

The blokowa of Block 25 where Sara was staying.



Orli Reichert

Orli was a Lagerälteste, the highest rank that could be attained by a prisoner and a close associate of the SS despite being Jewish. She was widely known for being ruthless though Sara did not feel that she could judge her.

Masha

A friend of Sara's who was saved from Mengele by Orli.

Marusia

A friend of Sara's and a Czech Jew who was an infirmary nurse.

Magda

A beautiful Slovak girl and friend of Sara's.

Rapportfuhrer Taube

A non-commissioned officer in charge of roll call in Auschwitz who was associated with Orli.

Mala and Tadeusz

A couple who blew up a crematorium and were killed.

Fela

A young woman from Cracow who was corrupted by Auschwitz and became an aid to the SS but eventually broke down due to the brutality she witnessed. Her story is in many ways representative of the psychology of prisoners at Auschwitz as a whole.

Gypsies

Gypsies were also on Hitler's list of races to be exterminated. Mengele was head of the gypsy camp until he had them all killed. Sara believed 20,000 were killed, but current numbers suggest that around 6,000 were in Mengele's camp.



Midget Family

The Ovitz family of dwarfs that Mengele was fascinated with. He experimented upon and killed one of their sons and had the rest shot or killed in some other manner.

Natasha

A Russian communist who insulted Mengele and taunted him but who he mysteriously let survive. He would often sit with his head hung in front of her and take her insults. Ultimately Dr. Koenig shot her.

Dr. Koenig

Another ruthless and brutal infirmary doctor.

The Red Army

The Russian Army who Sara and other prisoners saw as liberators.



Objects/Places

Lublin, Poland

Sara's home town and where she returned after her release from Auschwitz.

Auschwitz

The infamous Polish concentration camp where over one million prisoners were killed, over 90 percent of whom were Jews.

Selection

The process where camp members were inspected by Mengele and his staff and often sent to the gas chamber.

The Gas Chamber

Showers where gas was pumped in to kill thousands of Auschwitz prisoners a day.

Crematorium

Where the bodies of the Auschwitz dead were cremated.

Mass Graves

Many thousands of bodies were piled into mass graves in Auschwitz.

The Internationale

A famous socialist tune known by many camp members and sung in times of despair and hope.

Food

Food was incredibly scarce in Auschwitz and prisoners often fought viciously over what was given to them.



The Death Block

The block where prisoners were stationed who were to be killed.

Registration Numbers

Each Auschwitz prisoner had a registration number.

The Infirmary

The part of Auschwitz ostensibly responsible for treating the sick but was often used for Mengele's horrific experiments.

Ravensbruck, Germany

A concentration camp in Germany where Auschwitz prisoners were taken in early 1945 when the Russians took control of Poland from the Nazis.

Lice

Lice where a constant presence at Ravensbruck.

Rostock, Germany

The location in Germany of a barracks where some Auschwitz prisoners were kept.



Themes

Inhuman Horror and Wickedness

Obviously any book about Auschwitz is going to be full of the nightmarish reality of the concentration camps where 1.1 million people were killed. Many will be familiar with Auschwitz's gas chambers, crematoria, mass graves, and emaciated prisoners. Others will have heard of Dr. Josef Mengele's horrific experiments and his general sadism and cowardice. However, without reading Sara Nomberg's account, few will see the horror of Auschwitz as experienced by a prisoner.

Sara's work illustrates the complexity of trying to survive in the Hell of Auschwitz. She sees mass graves, children being shot, the weak and old being singled out because they are weak and old, thousands of people going to be gassed that do not know their fates, thousands of people going to be gassed that do, and wondering which is worse. Sara also sees the pressure that others feel to become part of the Nazi Establishment simply to survive, ultimately giving their souls away to the horror just to live another day.

Perhaps the most painful accounts of the wickedness of Auschwitz are displayed by Dr. Mengele's running of the infirmary. In fact the very idea of an infirmary at a death camp like Auschwitz is a cruel irony, but the fact that it was an experimentation center adds an additional level of nightmare. Mengele's sadism is on full display in his fascination with midgets and gypsies, whereas his cowardice is represented by his fear of the Russians and his inability to handle Natasha.

Human Adaptability

Because Auschwitz was so full of human brutality and cruelty, normal humans could not psychologically handle the trauma of life in the camp. As a result, they had to choose between adapting to their environment or dying. One common method of coping was deadening one's self to the reality of death, not only to seeing people go to their deaths on a regular basis but of being surrounded by corpses and blood stained grounds. Others coped by committing suicide to avoid not only seeing the horror of Auschwitz but participating in it.

Some coped by becoming heroes. Mala and Tadeusz, for instance, organized to blow up a crematorium, to help thousands survive if only for another day. For this they gave their lives, though they did so gladly and with a sense of purpose. Others in Auschwitz resistance coped by saving those they could, for instance, by finding them jobs. Sara was saved by resistance members with this coping strategy, Sonia and Eva.

However, many coped by cooperating with the SS and Dr. Mengele. The *blokowa* of the camp were often Jewish, and thus helped to further the extermination of their own people. They did this to acquire the advantages the SS soldiers offered them and to learn to laugh at and even enjoy the terrors of Auschwitz rather than suffer through



them. For this, to survive, they gave up their own souls, like Orli, while others tried but broke down from the stress of becoming evil, such as Fela.

Hope and Despair

The first two themes generate the third. The inhuman horror and wickedness of Auschwitz forced prisoners to adapt in frightful ways. They were pushed to the edges of human virtue and vice, some into selfless caretakers, heroic resisters and courageous day-to-day survivors, and others to total vice, stealing from the starving, being arbitrarily cruel to new camp members, and cooperating with the SS and even participating in the killing in the camp.

Such actions, along with external news events, generated a world of alternating hope and despair. For instance, when some betrayed their people, a sense of despair over the inhumanity of the camp fills those who knew the defector. Whereas when some give their lives to fight for life, others are inspired. Acts of selflessness bring hope and acts of selfishness bring despair. Signs of life in human individuals bring hope, whereas signs of acquiescence bring despair.

External news events, however, have an important role in the story of Auschwitz. Many prisoners cope by being glad their families are not prisoners with them. Their only hope is that their loved ones survive. Sara describes a number of individuals in the camp whose dreams are dashed when their families come to the camp and given the death sentence. However, the prisoners are heartened when they hear that the Red Army is on the march, only weeks away from liberating them.



Style

Perspective

The perspective of *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land* is two-fold that of the translator and the editors and that of the author, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk. The translator has a forward and the editors have an afterward, the first of which comments on how the translator tracked down the author and the history of the text, whereas the latter engages in literary criticism of the text.

Sara Nomberg was born in Lublin, Poland on September 10th 1915; she was raised a Hasidic Jew and her grandfather was known across Poland as an important scholar of the Talmud, who also ran an important Yeshiva and rabbi in a community near Lublin. Sara grew up in poverty and watched children die from starvation. These experiences, along with enduring Polish antisemitism led her to become political active as a member of the communist party and as an atheist.

Sara was imprisoned for her political activities starting in 1939 and spent the next six years in one or another prisoner camp. In 1944 she was transferred to Auschwitz and later wrote of her experiences there. Her initially time in the camp was spent enduring incredibly suffering but her connections with the resistance in the camp helped her attain a clerking position in the Auschwitz infirmary where she made friends but also endured working for Josef Mengele. As the Russians approached, Sara was moved to Ravensbruck and the Rostock before she was released and returned to Lublin.

Tone

The tone of *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land* is what one might expect from a real-life account of imprisonment at Auschwitz. First, the tone often expresses a strong sense of despair. Sara Nomberg is surrounded by suffering, terror, death, torture and brutality. She watches good people turn into monsters just to eat regularly, not only stealing from one another but often betraying their own people by becoming *blokowa*. The tone is therefore dark, and saddened in a way that is hard to compare to.

On occasion, Nomberg expresses a hesitance to judge even those who become cruel in the camp, such as Orli Reichert, because the circumstances are so horrible. Thus the tone is often one of understanding and psychological insight in the face of the terror of Auschwitz. The tone is also often one of admiration when Sara is discussing those who not only survive Auschwitz with their character intact but who rise to acts of selflessness and heroism in the face of death and torture.

One constant theme throughout the tone of the book is of disgust and revulsion. First, Sara expresses revulsion at the sight of rotting corpses, the blood-soaked ground and the constant smell of burning flesh. She is revolted by the filthiness of the camp, by



rats, lice, and disease. She is also full of revulsion at the acts that Dr. Mengele perpetrates on his patients, particularly those among his most sadistic.

The tone occasionally turns to a desperate sort of hopefulness in the face of escape and news that the Red Army is closing in on the camp.

Structure

Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land was written by Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, whose manuscript was discovered by the translator and editors years after the manuscript was declined for publication. The reader learns in the translator's preface that the typescript was written in 1966 and was started to be translated in 1981. The manuscript the composes most of the book is about Auschwitz but focuses mostly on character analysis and showing how different individuals handled the stress and horror of imprisonment.

The book begins when Sara is sent to Auschwitz from Stutthof. She spends a year there and then escapes to return to Lublin. The book has forty short entries or chapters, but many are only a page or two in length. The first couple of chapters explain how Sara came to Auschwitz and the suffering she endured as a "zugang" or new Auschwitz prisoner. Sara's political connections allowed her find work at the camp infirmary as a clerk, but the infirmary was run by Dr. Josef Mengele. She both made friends and witnessed horrors beyond her imagination.

Later chapters often focus on a single character, most of which are Jewish women. Sara was kept in the female areas of the camp and often to Jewish-only areas as well. She admires many of the women she meets and finds many beautiful. Her friends are often infirmary clerks, nurses and doctors and she fears the Jewish *blokowa* and the SS. Some chapters explain Mengele's treatment of prisoners and his murdering the elderly, gypsies, rabbits, midgets and the sick, among others.

The final chapters of the book occur during late 1944 as the Russians came nearer to Poland. Auschwitz was moved to Ravensbruck and then to Rostock in Germany. Sara is eventually let go by a soldier and left for the train station where she took a train to Lublin. Here the main part of the book ends. The afterword was written by the editors and engages in literary criticism of Sara's writings.



Quotes

"We were alienated. We felt that no one wanted us there." (Chapter 1, Alienation, 3)

"We have reached the border, all right, the border of Hell." (Chapter 2, Exchange, 12)

"We were shown that here in Auschwitz we were just numbers, without faces or souls." (Chapter 3, New Arrivals, 15)

"Why did the Jews go so quietly? Why did they let themselves be taken to the gas chambers without protest? (Chapter 7, 33-4)

"You probably know that I put my own mother in the car that took her to the gas. You should understand that there remains for me nothing so terrible that I could not do it. The world is a terrible place. This is how I take my revenge on it." (Chapter 14, The Block of Death, 57)

"No one with a normal mind could comprehend this Hell." (Chapter 15, 59)

"The imagination can conceive no penance that would atone for the bestial crimes that the Fascists perpetrated on innocent individuals." (Chapter 19, 80)

"What are you afraid of, coward, you who can murder women and children? Come here. We will discuss your Hitler's crimes. Maybe you want to discuss Stalingrad, where you are dying like mad dogs." (Chapter 24, 95)

"Calm down! Don't laugh. You are living corpses, and in a few hours nothing will be left of you but ashes!" (Chapter 29, 111)

"Maybe you would like to change places with me." (Chapter 30, 116)

"Why are you blessing me before you know me?" (Chapter 31, 119)

"Soldiers of the Red Army ... Take revenge for everything" (Chapter 32, 122)

"My life in paradise is over." (Chapter 34, 130)

"The war is ending. You will be free in a few days." (Chapter 37, 145)

"Vengeance is a joy of the Gods." (Chapter 39, 149)

"I lived through Auschwitz!" (Chapter 40, 154)

"The fight had not ended. A fight takes time." (Chapter 41, 161)



Topics for Discussion

Why did the translator and editors have so much trouble tracking down Sara?

Why are the Zugangi treated so badly?

Explain Sara's psychological analysis of the Jewish *blokowa*.

Some see Fela's story in *Old Words—New Meanings* as representing in microcosm the theme of the book as a whole. Why might someone say this? Would she be right or wrong?

What is Sara's analysis of the development and alteration of language in Auschwitz?

How did Sara hang on to her humanity in Auschwitz?

What psychological conclusions can one draw about Josef Mengele from Sara's descriptions of him? Be sure to describe more than the obvious evil and sadism.

Why did Sara get special treatment in the camp?

How did Sara view the Russians and the Red Army? What did Communism represent to her while living under Fascism?

What does the Editors' Afterword add to the book?